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The Secrets of Success, Amp Guru Andy Marshall, by Monica Schuchard.

When Andy Marshall began his custom amplifier business in Seattle 11 years ago, he found himself in a bit of a quandary. He couldn't use his own name for his fledgling enterprise-Marshall Amps, after all, had been established in the 1960s. That left his first name, but who, he laughingly asks, is going to spend \$2,500 on an "Andy Amp?"

After much discussion, Marshall finally settled on THD, which at times stands for a standard industry term, Total Harmonic Distortion, and at others refers to the Three Hairy Dogs (Tobler, Truffles, and Piper) that he brings to work with him each day. "(Total harmonic distortion) is one of the ways that amplifiers are rated," says Marshall. "And in the hi-fi world, where people are quite conscious of total harmonic distortion, everybody goes for the lowest possible amount of distortion. In the guitar amp world, people tend to go for the most. So it was slightly tongue-in-cheek, but more of an inside joke."

A decade later, Marshall's success is no joke. The company's high-end vacuum tube amps are so popular that since the day THD was founded supply has never caught up with demand. "We had a lot of artists using our gear from Day 1," he says. "It was wonderful, and we have been back-ordered ever since. In 11 years, we have never been able to catch up on our orders."

A conservatory trained musician, Marshall began his career as a recording engineer. While working in Vienna, Austria, he found himself tweaking the amps of just about everyone who walked into the studio. "They'd come in and the amp would sound terrible," he says. "So I did a lot of amp work for people who were recording. I was never staff, but Polygram Records ended up buying everything I touched."

Marshall says a key to his early success was his utter lack of fear. Having grown up around celebrities (his father, Curtis Marshall, a well-known neurologist, scuba dived with Jacques Cousteau, his uncle is renowned children's author and songwriter Shel Silverstein, and his brother, Stephen St. Croix, worked as a studio musician with Stevie Wonder and Pink Floyd), he was not intimidated by the rock stars he came to work for. "A lot of people grow up afraid of stars. I'd go over to my brother's house and David Gilmour would be sitting in the living room. So I didn't have any fear of jumping in.

Marshall took the leap because he saw a gap in the marketplace. At the time, he says, very few companies were making high-end amplifiers. "At the low end of the amplifier industry were tons and tons of companies with a lot of money, and at the high end were a couple of little companies with no money at all," he explains. "What do you do?"

You compete with the people who are easy to compete with. I had no problem competing in terms of quality. But I couldn't go into a price war with anybody, so I went into the high end."

The 35-year-old Baltimore native is the company's president, CEO, and designer. He also tests every product that THD manufactures. "Nothing leaves here that I haven't played," he says. "I have to be 100 percent certain that what's leaving is right."

Marshall uses a few trusted guitars to test his amps, among them a Fender Stratocaster, a Telecaster, a Supro, and occasionally a borrowed Les Paul. His shop guitar is a Steinberger that he calls "indestructible." The graphite epoxy model was forced recently to live up to that description when Marshall's jumbled, below-ground shop flooded. The Steinberger survived.

THD's first product was a high-quality replica of a popular amplifier from the 1950s. In addition to vacuum tube guitar and bass amps, they now produce speaker cabinets, power attenuators, and adapters. And while THD is probably best known for its custom work, nearly 95 percent of its production is "good old normal stuff that you can walk into a store and buy." A lower powered stock amplifier runs from \$800 to \$1,000, and a higher powered (50 watts) combo amp will set you back about \$2,400. THD will also set up custom systems and provide maintenance and restoration services. Assuming, of course, they have the time.

"Well, people learn to be patient," laughs Marshall. "Rock stars are not generally known for their patience. They're accustomed to saying, 'Jump,' and having everybody ask, 'How high?' They call me and say, 'Jump,' and I put them on hold."

Again, lack of fear is helpful in these situations. "Some of them find it amusing, some get pissed off. Those who get pissed off don't call back. Those who can tolerate it I continue to work with."

There are many who put up with Marshall's hectic production schedule. He has sold equipment to several members of the Rolling Stones, Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, Vivian Campbell (Dio, Whitesnake, and currently Def Leppard), Charlie Daniels, Pete Anderson (Dwight Yoakam), and many, many others. "Everybody and their brother has rented (our merchandise) for sessions. I can't even begin to list all of those people," he says. "You name it, we really do cut across lines."

Marshall is hesitant to name-drop, choosing to forego the usual celebrity endorsements. "We do not have any official endorsers," he says. "If you're trying to sell to 14-year-old kids, endorsements are a big deal. Fourteen-year-old kids say, 'Oh, Yngwie Maimsteen's playing a Fender Strat, I want one.' When you're dealing with artists, they care more about what they see and what they hear than whether some guy who opened for them is playing one. So we just decided to stay out of that game."

Rock stars aren't the only musicians lining up to buy amps built by THD. There is a growing breed of guitarists whose performances are limited to suburban basements and living rooms. Though Marshall does discourage custom products for those who only dabble, he says there are many who don't even blink at spending thousands of dollars on a hobby. "There are an awful lot of very high end guitar builders these days, and we do

have the doctor, lawyer, dentist contingent who are in their 40s, and in their teens they had a Stratocaster or an old Fender amp, and they still can't find anything as good as that unless they go high end.

“So they'll buy a \$2,500 Tom Anderson guitar and a \$2,500 THD amp, and they'll put it in their living room. These are people who have a BMW and a nice house and want to surround themselves with nice things. And we give them that opportunity.”

So what is it about THD that makes the well known and well off such fans?

Simplicity.

“Many people use a lot of effects, like reverb, phase-shifting, flangers, wah wah pedals, which I've always seen as a way of masking the sound of a mediocre amplifier. I try to build amps that people don't feel the need to use effects with. I do have a lot of clients who are just die-hard effects fanatics and they'll use them regardless. But I've always preferred the sound of a great guitar, into a great amp, through a great speaker.”

Marshall's experience as a musician has been a big part of his success. Because he is a guitarist himself, he has a good idea of what other guitarists want in a custom amplifier. He knows how an amp should perform, and how it should not. “I have always imagined sort of a feedback loop,” he says. “You have an idea in your mind, it goes through your fingers, through the strings, the pickups, into the amplifier, out the speaker, back into your ear, and to your brain. Anything that gets in the way of that loop reduces your expression as a musician. I try to build products that enhance it instead of reduce it.”

Experience, courage, simplicity, office pets, a good name. There you have it. The secret to success.