

THE BIRTH OF FIREBELLY AMPS

By Brian Berk

Here's a story sure to fire you up. And we can assure you of one thing: This is definitely the first time we've ever talked about practicing law, a toad, and amplifiers in the same story. Amazingly, there is a connection among the three.

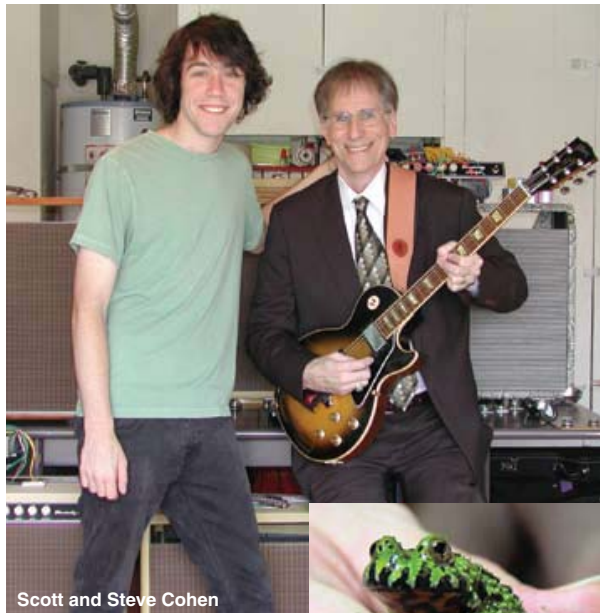
Steve Cohen is a litigator, arbitrator, and litigation consultant for the firm Cohen & Associates, Inc. As impressive as that is, the man armed with both juris doctor and master of business administration degrees, has a link to MI. Cohen devoted a lot of nights and weekends to building amplifiers. The end result is his founding of FireBelly Amplifiers.

Cohen, along with his 17-year-old son Scott, who has joined as a partner of the company, will be debuting four new amps at Summer NAMM in July, including a one-of-a-kind amp retailing for \$10,000. "I decided to make a dream amplifier. If money were not an object, what kind of amp would I like to produce?"

The other three amps will be slightly more affordable: "I chose three models of vintage amps based on the original Princeton Reverb. My amps are loosely designed based on those circuits," said Cohen.

"So I designed the Princeton, the Deluxe—which is the amp you'd want to have if you were trapped on a deserted island—and Vibraluxe. I based the amps off of those designs. I redesigned the amps and increased the capacitance so the amps are whisper-quiet. So we have a single-channel, 35-watt amp called PR, our DL model is a 22-watt tube channel amp, and the VB is the 35-watt two-channel amp. The suggested retail on the PR is \$2,295, the DL is \$2,395, and the VB is \$2,495."

But the big question is: Why would a successful attorney want to build amplifiers? "I have a dispute resolution practice," said Cohen. "I'm a mediator and an ar-



Scott and Steve Cohen

bitrator. I spend most of my legal life getting people out of litigation. It's a nice way to make a living, but most importantly, it gives me a lot of extra time because as opposed to someone who has to spend a lot of time in court, I pretty much sit in the judge's seat. I get to make my own schedule. So that's opened up time for me to do other things.

"I've been building amps since I was a teenager," added Cohen. "I wanted to find an amplifier that gave me the kind of tone I remembered when I went out and bought fine tube amps in the late '50s and early '60s. I couldn't locate one that was reasonably priced and had the kind of tone I remembered. Rather than keep searching, I decided to build one. I really had no intention of producing one. But it happens that friends hear your amp, or you jam with some people and they ask, 'Where did you get that?' It took off from there."

Cohen did admit, "For us to be really successful, we're going to have to sell a lot of amps. They're priced for the end consumer to get great amps without having to pay a custom shop price. I'm not



Firebelly toad

motivated by making money," he said. "I just wanted to make an amp that has that beautiful tone that I remembered. I started to produce the amps and lo and behold, people starting buying them. I put up a Web site and just said, 'Let me try it.' I got the tax IDs and everything you need to do to make it a legal corporation. After I put up the Web site, I figured I would give it six months. If it didn't work out, nothing was lost. I had a great amp for myself. We wound up making about 20 amplifiers. Then, I was contacted by a retail store in Colorado Springs. He asked if we were producing amps for the retail market. I said, 'No, I haven't even thought about that. But if you're interested, what would you like?' I decided to take the plunge and make three models, go to the NAMM Show, and see if the retail market would be interested.

"With all of the economic pressures everyone is under, we understand dealers must keep the lights on. They have to make

a living," said Cohen. "We want to work with them to make the same profit or a higher profit than other companies."

Cohen, his son, and one technician make the amps near their homes in Santa Monica, Calif. "We are not farming any work out," said Cohen. "We do everything. We order the parts. We put together everything piece-by-piece. We can't make that many. So I'm hoping that fact creates more demand for our products."

But what if demand does increase? How can Cohen meet the end users' needs with only three

employees? "I'm not concerned," he said. "If I need to bring in more technicians to work with us, it's fine. Of course, I need to oversee everything, but my schedule fortunately allows me to be flexible. It's my law firm. When I'm not in hearings, I can devote a lot of time to this. Also, I have a very understanding wife. I've been married for 27 years."

Cohen said he hasn't formulated a specific philosophy about whether he wants his amps sold in independent, chain stores, or both. However, he said he has been contacted thus far mainly by independent dealers. "I'm not sure where our path will take us," he said. "I go into music stores often and I know they have toned back how many amplifiers they are carrying in a particular range because they don't want to be inventory heavy these days. They can't be. Whereas before dealers might have carried 10 or 15 different versions of a 50-watt amp on the show floor, now they are carrying

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five or six different versions. And an independent store may only be carrying two or three. I hope we can be one of those [amps they do carry]. I don't know where destiny will take us."

Destiny awaits. Cohen has set out goals for his company. "I'd like to see us produce in excess of 100 amps a year. Maybe 200 amps a year. It's hard to say now, but I know what we can produce. The benchmark for success probably would be if FireBelly could make or distribute 100 amps to the retailers over a 12-month period. We could probably make more than that. But 100 amps is probably the guideline for me where I would say we have a successful business."

Other than this story and appearing at NAMM in two months, Cohen said the Internet is a major place where he will focus his marketing efforts. "I found that

when people put in 'vintage tube amplifiers' as a keyword search, we're coming up on the very first or second page. So whatever we're doing is working. When that happens, people see you. I'm getting calls every day."

Any Other Name Would Not Be as Sweet

That leaves us with one final topic to cover. Why call the company FireBelly Amps? "We love animals," said Cohen. "My son and I were thinking about different animals for which we liked the names of. My son came up with the Firebelly toad. We looked at the toad. It is very colorful and different. We said, 'Wow, that really encompasses what we would want in an amplifier name. The [toad] is colorful. It looks great. It has power. It gets you in the gut.' We said, 'FireBelly. Yes, that's our name.'" 