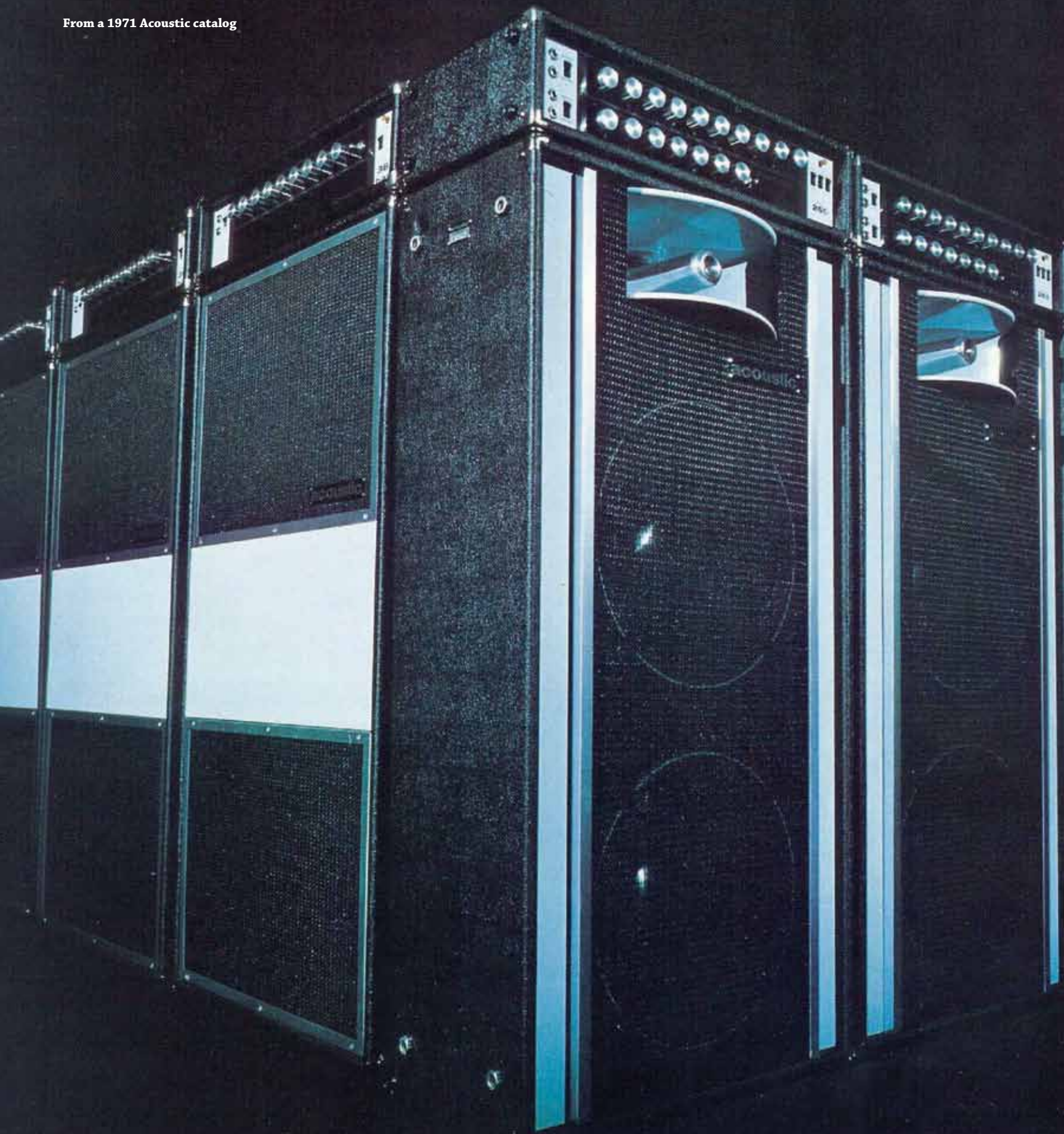



From a 1971 Acoustic catalog





ACOUSTIC 360 | 360 DEGREES
full circle
AHEAD OF THE

ON A WARM SUNDAY MORNING LAST OCTOBER, A DOZEN OR SO BASS GEEKS SAT IN A ROOM AT SIR REHEARSAL STUDIOS IN LOS ANGELES WAITING FOR A BASS PLAYER LIVE! EVENT TO BEGIN. IT WAS JUST BEFORE 11:00, AND ALTHOUGH MOST OF THEM WERE THERE TO ATTEND AN HOUR-LONG CLINIC DUE TO START ANY MINUTE, A FEW FOLKS HAD ARRIVED EARLY TO SCORE FRONT-ROW SEATS FOR THE 12 O’CLOCK BOOK SIGNING WITH DURAN DURAN’S JOHN TAYLOR.

BY E.E. BRADMAN

**MODEL 361****BASS AMPLIFIER**

440 Watts Peak

200 Watts RMS

1—18" Speaker in Front-Loaded,

Folded Horn

Features; High & Low Gain Inputs,
Bright Switch, Volume, Treble, Bass.Variamp Range & Effect, Fuzz Gain
& Attack, Electronic Tuning Fork

Top—6"H x 24"W x 12"D

Bottom—48"H x 24"W x 18"D

Total Shipping Weight, 185 lbs.

Acoustic's catalog listing for its 360 stack. (Officially, "Model 361" was the name of the cabinet.)

The online description of the clinic didn't say much, but it was a safe bet the attendees were at least a little familiar with some of the highlights of this particular clinician's resumé—his gigs with Sly Stone, Booker T., Billy Preston, Santana, and Etta James, perhaps, or the Tower Of Power tour in 2001 where he'd filled in for Rocco Prestia—as well as his off-the-wall style and seriously funky pick grooves. But the audience had a special surprise in store for them that day.

Finishing his setup and standing in front of the onstage mic, Bobby Vega pointed behind him to a tall, wide, black amp with a light blue panel. It was a far cry from the featherweight heads and chiropractor-approved cabs that were the main attraction down the hall. "This is where I started," he began. "This is what made me want to play. When I would close my eyes and fantasize about bands, when I visited Bay Area music stores as a 12-year-old, when I saw movies like *Woodstock*, and when I would go see bands at the Fillmore and Winterland, the guys who got my attention usually had an Acoustic 360 behind them."

Though rarely seen on stages today, the Acoustic Control Corporation's 360 stack—a 360 head and a 361 cab—was once the most desirable bass amp on earth. Unleashed right at the end of 1967, just as the first generation of electric guitar gods were learning to turn their Marshall stacks up to 11, the 200-watt, solid-state 360 was perfect for the new breed of bassists, who had been forced to choose between the Fender Dual Showman, which maxed out at 100 watts, and 300-watt Sunn Coliseum amps. The 360 might not have been as loud as the Coliseum, but with its rear-firing horn, 1x18 speaker, proprietary Variamp presets, and distinctive cabinet, it projected all the way to the back of the room with a warmth and a clarity that set it apart from every other amp.



George Grexa. Below, the new Acoustic 360

bringin' it back

THINKING OF RESURRECTING THAT ELUSIVE AMP

from the good old days? Get ready to drown in paperwork, search the universe for just the right parts, and manage intense anticipation from your online community.

As many Acoustic 360 fans know, George Grexa snagged the rights to the Acoustic name nearly seven years ago, and he's spent the last few years telling folks that a new 360 is on the way. What's taken so long?

First, a bit of company history: Russ Allee left Acoustic Control in 1980, and the Marks family sold the company a few years later; it wound up in the care of a Mexican distributor, and when he died in a plane crash, the brand languished in the vaults. Global music-instrument giant Samick bought the Acoustic brand sometime around 2001, just as Grexa and fellow Doors/Acoustic fanatic Mark Jamieson—already refurbishing old Acoustic cabs—decided to design their own versions. In 2006, after a three-year process, Grexa landed the rights to build and sell American-made Acoustics worldwide. Within a year, however, Samick had sold the Acoustic name (and Grexa's contract) to Guitar Center. Grexa's company, GPG/Acoustic USA (www.acousticbassusa.com), owns the rights to produce Acoustic products, and Guitar Center must approve anything GPG does with the name "Acoustic" on it.

How hard was it to go from being hardcore fans to actually making working versions of the 360 preamp, the 361 cabinet, and its more compact brother, the 1x15 361M? "Basically, it was like constructing a building from scratch with just a screwdriver," Jamieson says, chuckling. "But we knew that if we didn't do it, it wouldn't get done." Most challenging were the two-year process of UL certification and spending thousands of hours finding the exact parts they needed. "We tried to find the same parts used on the original 360, but unfortunately, it's not always clear where they came from or who made them. We spent months sorting through 15,000 handles, for example, to find the perfect one. We'd locate the right part and it'd be like Christmas—and then we'd remember that we still had 530 parts to go!"

Despite the difficulties, Grexa and Jamieson did have several strokes of serendipitous luck and lots of help from Gerst and Allee. "Those guys have put a lot into this, and we couldn't have done it without them," says Grexa. Jamieson concurs: "We've had a working prototype since 2007, but we've spent the last six years tweaking it and getting the details right. It's not worth doing if you don't do it right. Now we're ready."



Timely as it was, the new kid on the bass block also benefited from an unexpected publicity boost in early 1968. When Jim Morrison was arrested onstage in New Haven, Connecticut in December 1967, the Doors and their Acoustic amps got a full-page spread in the April 12, 1968 issue of *Life* magazine—the same one that featured recently slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on the cover. Word of the cool black and blue amps spread like wildfire, and the brand took off. Santana bassist David Brown rocked a couple 360 stacks at Woodstock. Larry Graham thumped a 360 with Sly & the Family Stone and later with Graham Central Station. Rick Grech of Blind Faith and Traffic played through one, as did Joe Cocker bassist Alan Spenner, Cold Blood's Rod Ellicot, Tim Bogert of Vanilla Fudge, Buddy Miles bassist David Hull, War's B.B. Dickerson, Rick Laird of Mahavishnu Orchestra, Foghat's Tony Stevens, and Larry Taylor of Canned Heat. Carl Radle backed up Eric Clapton and Leon Russell with a 360, John McVie powered Fleetwood Mac with two 360s, and John Paul Jones spent a big chunk of his time with Led Zeppelin (1969–1975) running a couple 360s onstage. And then, of course, there was Jaco Pastorius, whose revolutionary pyrotechnics would not have been the same without the twin 360 towers he bought in 1971 and used until the last few years of his life.

Back in his clinic, Bobby Vega used a handful of vintage Jazz Basses (with harmonics and an MXR Digital Delay) to conjure Jaco, Larry Graham with "Higher" and "Hair," and John Paul Jones with "Black Dog," thus paying homage to three very different players who laid down their heaviest licks through that fearsome Fender Jazz Bass/Acoustic 360 combination. The room filled to capacity and then overflowed as Bobby made the 360 grunt, coo, burp, and bark, blowing away the crowd and proving just how crucial that celebrated amp had been to the most important grooves of those iconic players. When it was over, even the boy-crazy Duran Duran fans had to applaud.

The Acoustic 360 was the brainchild of Harvey



Gerst and Russ Allee, two engineers with different backgrounds who shared a passion for innovation. Gerst, a sound engineer and producer who had co-written hit songs for the Byrds, was a longhaired guitarist who says that by 1967, he had picked up just enough technical know-how to make him dangerous. Allee was a clean-cut, UCLA-trained engineer from the hi-fi stereo world. The combination of

their perspectives and strengths made the 360 the highlight of the seven years they worked together at Acoustic.

Gerst left the company in 1974, a couple of years after designing Acoustic's fretless Black Widow bass. He went on to work for Fender, Morley, and Roland, eventually designing the ultra-collectible Delta Concept 1 guitar amp in the late '70s. Today,

he runs Indian Trail Recording Studios near Dallas with his son Alex Gerst. After Allee left Acoustic in 1980, he founded AMP bass amps, designed circuits for Eden, and freelanced for companies such as Alesis; his designs for Gibson gave birth to Thunderfunk amps, and his influence on former Acoustic and AMP employee Steve Rabe, founder of SWR and Raven Labs, is undeniable.

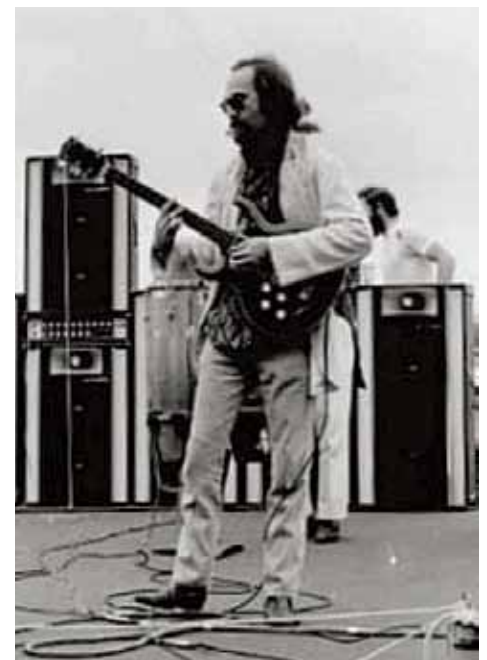
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Harvey Gerst soundchecks several Acoustic 260s onstage.

Almost 45 years after their most famous creation hit the streets, Gerst and Allee are proud to be involved in a reboot of the Acoustic 360 by George Grexa, a drummer, producer, and businessman who has spent decades refurbishing original 360s (see sidebar). The Acoustic USA 360, tweaked and updated by Allee, gives a new generation a chance to savor their legacy.

This, in their words, is the story.

Harvey, what did you do prior to joining Acoustic?

GERST I had worked at JBL for eight years, doing customer service, designing the F-series guitar speakers, and working in quality control. I was also doing session work, so I was hanging out at studios and learning a lot about how frequencies shape sound.

What brought you to Acoustic Control?

GERST A friend of mine was a sales manager for Acoustic, so I went by to check out their amps



in 1966. I thought they were the worst amps I had ever seen. I went back three or four weeks later, and I told [Acoustic president] Steve Marks, "I don't think you understand just how bad these amps are." He asked me what I'd do, and that's when I began sketching out what would later become the 260 and the 261 guitar amps.

ALLEE I worked for Robert Marks, Steve's dad,

at Automata International Corporation in the early '60s, where we played around with some guitar amp ideas. When that company went belly up, Bob and Steve started Acoustic, and I went to work for them as a consultant. The first product I worked on with Harvey Gerst was the 260.

What did you do at Acoustic?

GERST I did PR and advertising, I wrote all the

manuals, and I went around to clubs, hung out at recording sessions, and flew around the country helping people with their Acoustic amps.

ALLEE I held a lot of jobs; I was executive vice president most of the time, and I did a lot of projects over the years. My last job was president. Harvey was more responsible for the company's success than anyone else, including the owners [laughs].

When you put out the 360 in 1967, who was your competition?

GERST The biggest things around for bass were Fender's Dual Showman, with a couple JBL speakers, and the Sunn amps.

ALLEE Ampeg had begun working on the SVT, but we weren't aware of it.

You were coming from different worlds.

How was your working relationship?

ALLEE We'd go back and forth on Harvey's ideas. Sometimes I hit it right on and sometimes I wouldn't, and I'd have to go look at other things in the marketplace.

GERST Russ and I would sometimes have pitched battles. He was coming from a hi-fi background, and I was coming from live and recorded music, two different philosophies. But once we understood each other, the magic happened.

What can you tell us about designing the 360's circuit?

GERST A year after I started at Acoustic, we had the 160 guitar amp, and then the 260 guitar amp. We needed a bass amp, so I sketched out a preamp design, and I was able to tell Russ what I wanted.

ALLEE Harvey defined the features of the 260, and then he and Steve worked out the appearance. I did the circuitry for them. For the 360, we took the 260 circuit boards, changed some of the features, and lowered some of those frequency points.

Gene Czerwinski of Cerwin-Vega was involved with designing the 361 cabinet, right?

ALLEE Yes. I asked Gene, as a favor, to come up with something good for a bass guitar amp. He gave me two raw plywood boxes, and one of them was this W-shaped cabinet. There were a lot of musicians in and out of the factory, so Steve Marks loaned that cabinet to a small rock & roll group, who took it out one weekend for a gig and wouldn't bring it back. We figured that was probably a good sign [laughs].

Why do you think the 360 sounds so musical?

GERST There's a range from 200 to 300 cycles that sounds like mud; if you crank up those frequencies, it just muddies everything. The Variamp was able to cut all that out.

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Bobby Vega

ALLEE I attribute a lot of the magic to the speaker and the cabinet, and Gene Czerwinski deserves a lot of credit. It's a unique tonality, and the amplifier circuitry has its own character, of course. The final result turns out to be very desirable.

How did you choose the color for the panel across the front?

GERST I made them light blue because most television cameras at the time were monochrome, and white would just blossom. Most announcers wore blue shirts that showed up white on black & white TV, so I made the colors light blue.

It's amazing how loud the 360 can be, especially at a distance.

GERST It really allowed bass players to keep up with Marshall stacks. The 360 wasn't that great for clubs, but boy ... If someone was playing an Acoustic and you were driving down the street outside the club, that's all you'd hear. That front-loaded folded

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“for the first time, people were asking bass players to turn down.” —Harvey Gerst

From left, Harvey Gerst and Russ Allee in 2009.

horn tends to get louder the farther away you are. For the first time, people were asking bass players to turn down.

ALLEE The horn-loading 18" speaker provides an efficiency that is much greater than direct-radiator loudspeakers, so although the original 360 put out only about 200 watts, it could play much louder than most things. And then the horn had a character of focusing the sound at a distance. Players would inevitably tell us, "I was in this big auditorium, and the guys in the back were getting pasted to the wall with bass."

Some players used the Acoustic 370, introduced in 1972, including

Stanley Clarke, Bootsy Collins, and John Deacon. How was it different from the 360?

ALLEE Over the years, musicians commented that they liked the 370, but they loved the 360. It wasn't that the 370 was bad—in fact, it could carry a two-ohm load. But the preamp was quite a bit different from the 360.

How did you approach building a 360 for George Grexa?



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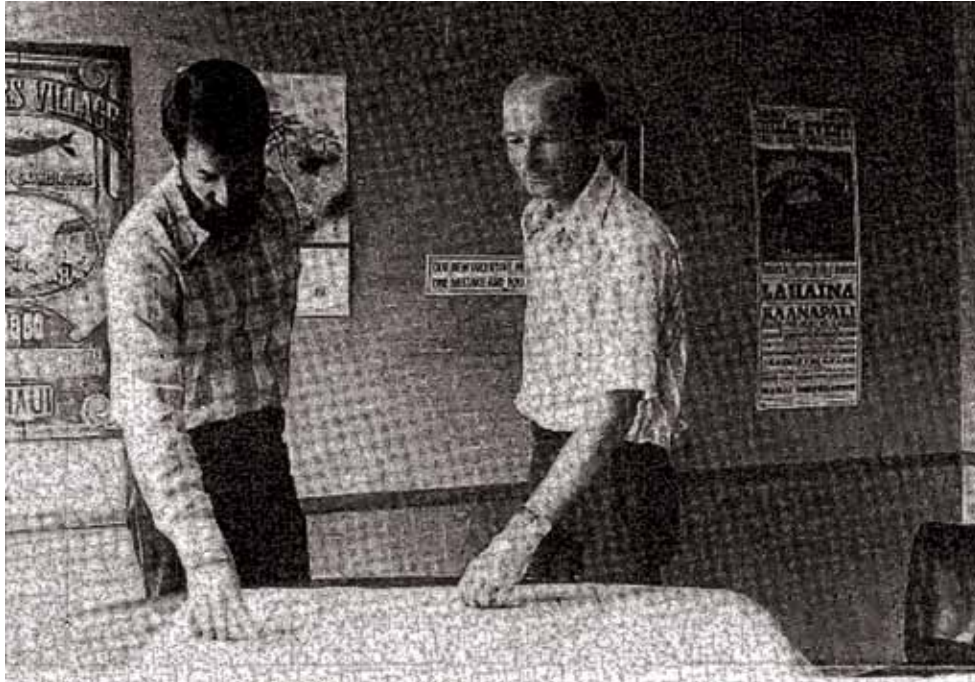


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From left, Steven Marks and Russ Allee in the early '70s

ALLEE When George called and said he wanted to reintroduce the 360, it had been 40 years since the original. We used more modern equipment and integrated circuitry for most of the stages, and I've learned a lot about what bass players like since we did the original 360. So the new 360 has a much more tailored response, and it's easier to manipulate. Probably the most important factor of a musical-sounding bass amp is a dip in the mids anywhere between 250Hz and 350Hz, so we've built that into the amp.

What else did you change?

ALLEE When we were building the first one, it was a new era of rock & roll. Everyone wanted very noticeable changes when they flipped switches, so on the early model, some things are just too much. There was a BRIGHT switch that boosted the upper frequencies, and it went too far. This time, we also incorporated a chip that does the compression and sets the gain, and we eliminated the tuning mechanism. The tone shaping is built in an internal, fixed manner. The new 360 also has a more conventional tone control that boosts and cuts treble and bass, which gives you more versatility. The new Variamp



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The new and the old.

has six positions instead of five and a better choice of frequencies. And the other thing is that on George's amp, we incorporated a minor bit of controlled distortion; on the faceplate, it's referred to as GROWL and GRIT.

Was there anything you had always wanted to fix?

GERST George has done something I would have done if I had continued with the company, which is to add some top end. The 360 was never boomy, but its top-end articulation could have been better.

ALLEE We decided to put in a high-frequency driver and a horn so that players would have something above the muffled 18" speaker. Most musicians don't want to hear a harsh horn on their bass amp, though, so I dropped the level substantially and brought it in mildly. It's switch-selectable, too.

Did players tell you how much they loved

the amp?

GERST I was at either a NAMM show or AES in Los Angeles once, and Jaco came up and told me he loved the Acoustic 360. I told him I loved his playing! Another time, I saw Jeff Berlin at the Zon booth at NAMM, and Jeff stopped everyone and said, "Here's the guy who designed the JBL F-series speakers that got us heard for the first time, as well as the Acoustic 360. If it weren't for him, we bass players would still be in the dark."

ALLEE I was looking at an online bass forum, and there was an ongoing conversation. I don't remember what it was about, but one of the guys ended his post by saying, "We owe so much to Russ Allee." I came across that unexpectedly, and here's a guy on the other side of the world saying that. My head swelled up to about three times the normal size [laughs]. **BP**

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