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[Next Story](#)

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Amping up the sounds of yore

Today's Philly sound comes through on Matthew Manhire's handmade amps.

Maker



ANDREW THAYER / Staff Photographer

Rootbeer Audio's Matt Manhire working on an amp in his workshop in Fishtown.

Matthew Manhire, 29, of Rootbeer Audio in Fishtown.

Product

Handmade, vacuum-tube amplifiers with a sound inspired by the 1960s Fender models popular among the city's indie musicians, but updated with high-end modern components.

His start

Manhire learned some electronics in college, and began building guitar effects pedals (he currently plays in three different bands, in addition to putting out his own music). After he graduated, he tried to get an internship with Jess Oliver, a legendary amp builder who designed the Ampeg B-15, used in many classic Motown recordings. Oliver directed him to Fuchs Audio in New Jersey, where he learned the ropes, and was later hired. In 2009, he moved to Philadelphia and started the custom amplifier business.

Sonic inspiration

Manhire's goal is to create what he says is the current Philly sound — as favored by his amp-repair clients, including Kurt Vile and the War on Drugs. "Of the amp repairs I do here, 80 percent are old Fender vintage amps. The Fender blackface is considered the quintessential clean, Beach Boys type of sound. So I'm reproducing that sound, but improving it and making it more reliable."

Process

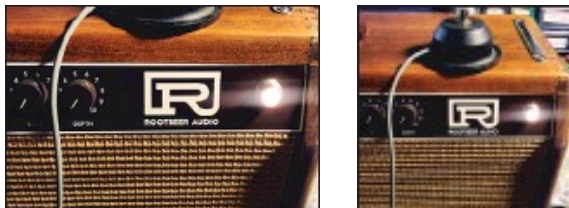
How an amp sounds depends partly on components, but also on the layout, Manhire explained. So, he

spends a lot of time experimenting with design tweaks that result in subtle sonic differences. Once the design work is done, each amp

takes about 20 hours to build.

On amp-building

Manhire teaches audio electronics classes at the University of the Arts and the Art Institute of Philadelphia, where students are often eager to learn how to build guitar pedals. Not many people are building high-quality amps — though lots of cheap ones are made overseas — but there’s growing interest, he said.



“When people come to my house for amp repairs, I think they usually expect to see a 65-year-old guy,” he said. “But I think it’s coming back. It’s almost a parallel to vinyl five years ago, when people would be, like, ‘Why do you want those records?’ ”

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