



Mike Matthews '58, Electro-Harmonix Founder, Creates Special Effects for the Guitar

Looking at him now, with his bushy beard and big cigar, it's hard to believe that Bronx Science graduate, Mike Matthews, started his career in the confines of the corporate culture that is IBM.

Mike grew up in the Bronx on 179th Street and Creston Avenue and attended PS 28 and Wade Junior High.

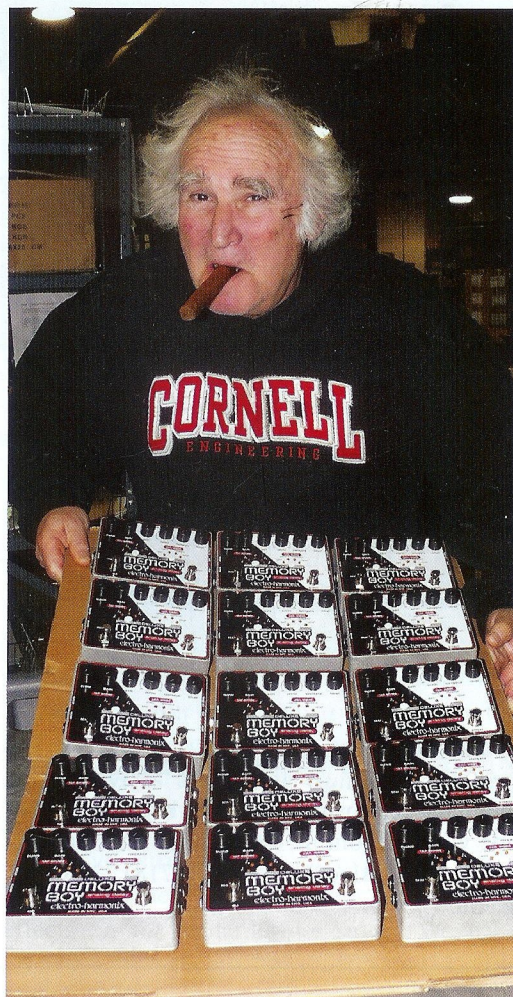
He says, "My dad was a salesman specializing in sales to big catalog houses. My mom was a stay-at-home mom for my sister and me until the tenth grade, when she became an art teacher."

He adds, "I liked the teaching style at Science, but did not participate in group sports or volunteer for any squads." However, it was in high school when Mike became interested in rock and roll and when he went to Cornell, he formed his own band.

A born entrepreneur, today Mike is the founder of Electro-Harmonix (EHX) a pioneer effects maker for the guitar, and can most often be found in a three-story building overlooking the banks of the East River. It is acknowledged in the industry that guitar effects made by Electro-Harmonix have shaped the sound of some of the world's greatest players, including Carlos Santana, David Gilmour, and his personal friend, the late Jimi Hendrix.

Mike graduated from Cornell in 1965 with a degree in electrical engineering, and also with a MBA. The engineering degree was a five-year degree and (twenty years later, Cornell sent him a diploma that was the equivalent of a Masters.) He took a job selling computers at IBM. Shortly afterwards, in partnership with Bill Berko, an audio repairman who claimed to have his own custom circuit for a fuzz pedal, he saw his chance to get into the music industry.

Because he now had a wife and needed to make a pile of cash, he saw this as a way to



Michael Matthews displays special effects products for the guitar.

quit IBM and go on the road to make it as a musician.

Mike says, "At this time there was a boom market for fuzz pedals and the company that made them couldn't keep up with the demand." So, he made a deal with a contract house in Queens, who would turn out a few hundred of these pedals a day, and Al Dronge, the founder of Guild Guitar Company, brought all of them.

He named them Foxy Ladies and they were an instant hit. In 1968, Mike was

introduced through IBM colleagues to Bell Labs electronic whiz Bob Myer and together they designed a distortion free sustain pedal to simulate the soaring lead tones that Jimi Hendrix achieved with cranked Marshall Stacks.

However, when he visited Myer to try out a prototype, another device caught his eye. It was a linear power booster, which is still sold by EHX today. Called the LPB-1 Linear Power Booster, it was a game changer and enabled Mike to go into the business full time.

Back in the 60s, Mike was also a concert promoter. His acts included the Isley Brothers, Drifters, Cadillac, Byrds, Shirelles, Young Rascals, and many others. He remembers that he booked Chuck Berry for two nights and was looking forward to this gig to play keyboards because Chuck traveled alone and the promoter had to get the back-up band. He says, "I decided to play keyboards and got some of my buddies to back up Chuck."

"When Chuck's booking agent called and said he needed a favor I was disappointed. He wanted me to hire Curtis Knight and the Squires who had an awesome guitar player named Jimmy James aka Jimi Hendrix. He was an overnight sensation. Jimi learned to sing and formed his own band, the Blue Flames, and we became close friends." He adds, "I went to see him at Café Au Go Go with Eric Clapton, who was with me, and said, 'I can't believe how good this guy is'".

After Jimi returned from England, he hung out with Mike who showed him a new device he was working on. It was a four-inch ceramic cased speaker that he screwed into the body of a guitar. It had small power amp so some portion of the guitar signal was bled into this little power amp and into the

Creates Special Effects for the Guitar

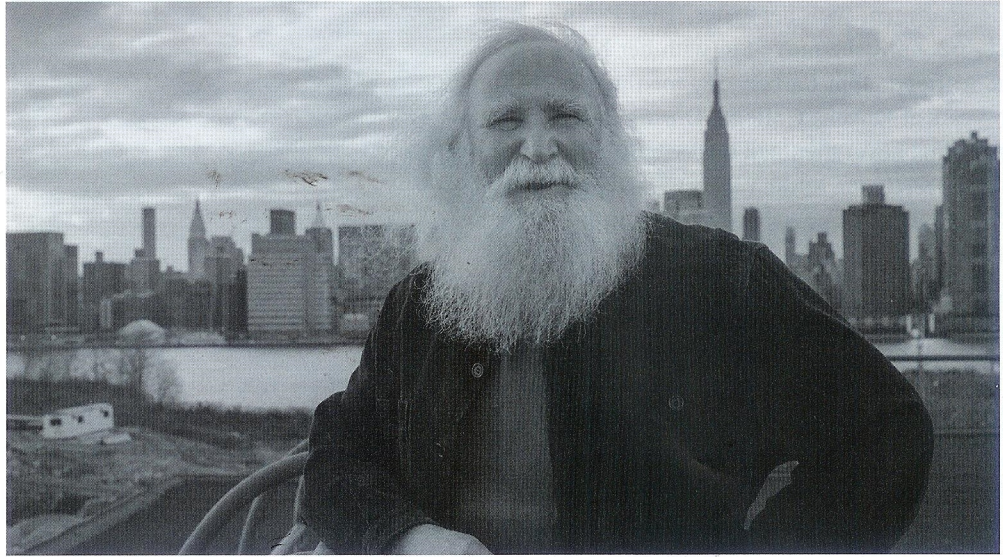
Continued from page 1

screwed-in speaker, which made the guitar vibrate and easily to get instant hot sustain. Mike says, "I asked Jimi what he thought of it and he said, 'The Big Muff is in my studio right now, plugged into my guitar and amp. Hey, Mike, I think you've got something here.'" Mike has been selling it ever since.

Several months ago, Electro-Harmonix, the company he founded forty-four years ago, came out with the Bass Big Muff. It is ideal for bass guitar, and is a hot seller as well.

The second new version is the Big Muff with Tone Wicker. Mike says, "I wanted to hear again what the Big Muff sounded like if I hadn't inserted those three roll off Capacitors. We put in a switch so that the user could have the option of taking them all out or leaving the Big Muff the way it was. The raspiness option sounded good to me and it helped a lot to open up natural, feedback between guitar and amp. Then I tried a second thing. We put in a switch to completely take out the strong tone control of the Big Muff. This gave a really wide sound."

He adds, "A movie came out several years ago called "It Might Get Loud" starring the three icons, Jack White, The Edge and Jimmy Page. Jack builds a one-string guitar and feeds the signal through a Big Muff, and then blares through an amp and gets loud and moves a cow in the pasture. I can imagine



Mike Matthews stands near his office overlooking the banks of the East River.

where this sound will step to when Jack tries this same thing through a Big Muff with Tone Wicker. He'll start a stampede."

In 1977 Mike was named Small Business Person of the Year by the Small Business Administration.

He also received awards from Cornell for bringing prestige and renown to the school, and was also elected innovator in electronic music devices to *Vintage Guitar* Magazine Hall of Fame.

Always striving for innovations, and looking for new ways to bring out special effects on the guitar, Mike says, "We try

to make devices which creative musicians can use to set new trends." He adds, "The musician has to express himself, and with our special effects, the musician can truly express his feelings."

The father of four gives thanks to Bronx Science for helping him realize that he wanted to major in electrical engineering at Cornell so he could combine his formal science education with his desire to find a place in the music world.

Susan Meadow Engel