

THE RAY BUTTS ECHOSONIC

By Dave Hunter

If you want to talk star-user ratio, the Ray Butts EchoSonic is near the top of the heap. Most accounts agree that fewer than 70 amps were ever made, yet owners among that modest number include Chet Atkins, Luther Perkins, Roy Orbison, Paul Yandell, Carl Perkins, and, the most celebrated in EchoSonic lore, Elvis Presley guitarist Scotty Moore. In short, in the mid '50s, Butts' baby made the sound of rock and roll – which has remained the sound of rockabilly, in particular, ever since – and at the dawn of this new musical genre, anyone who wanted to achieve it went to Ray Butts to get it.

The EchoSonic shown here, serial number 24, was originally sold to Paul Yandell, who played with the Louvin Brothers, Chet Atkins, Kitty Wells, and Jerry Reed. Scotty Moore bought it in the late '80s or early '90s as a backup for his original EchoSonic, and sold it only recently to guitarist Deke Dickerson, who still owns and uses it today. An illustrious history for one small, brown combo, but the EchoSonic's lineage takes us even deeper into the beating heart of rock and roll.

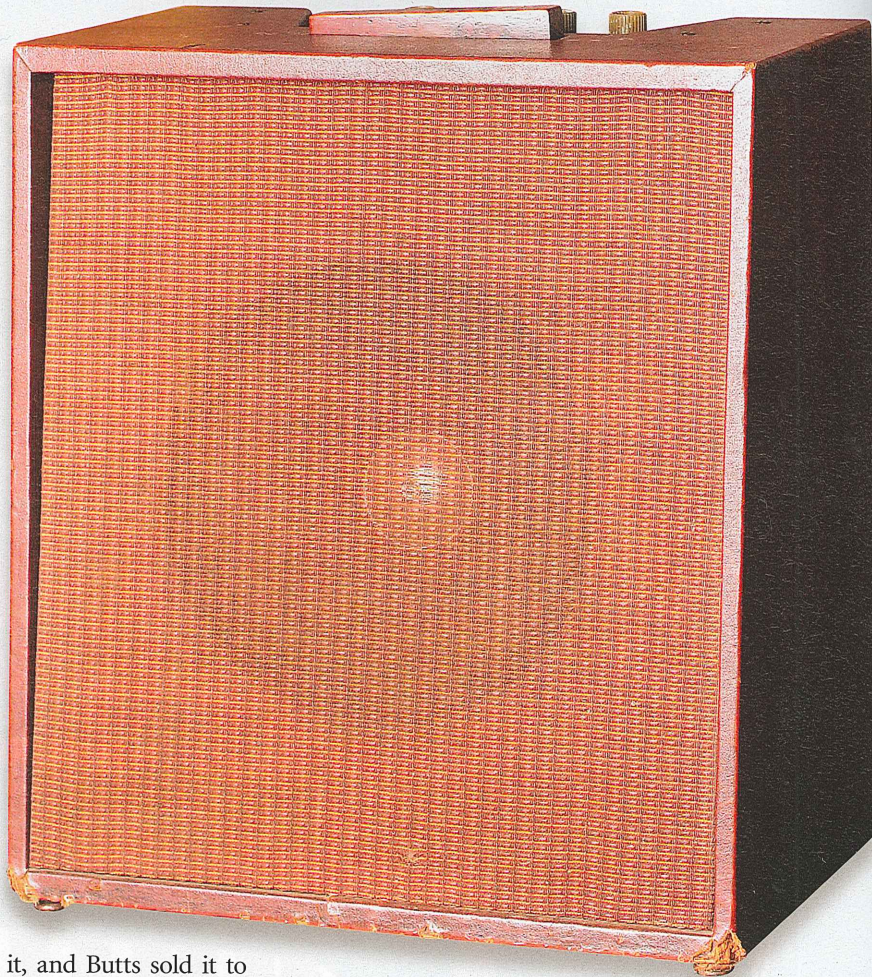
Even before the first EchoSonic was born on Butts' workbench, slapback echo was a key element of the rock-and-roll sound – and the early-'50s guitar sound

A circa-'56 EchoSonic.

in general – but prior to the creation of this amp, the sound was produced as a studio effect, one not easily transported to the performance stage. Butts, who owned a music store and repair shop in Cairo, Illinois, built the first EchoSonic for a local named Bill Gwaltney, who wanted to replicate Les Paul's slapback sound in live performance. Using a 15-watt Gibson amp based around a pair of 6V6 output tubes, Butts labored over various means of achieving built-in echo, finally abandoning a noisy wire recorder for a tape-loop design. Gwaltney's amp was completed, and successfully used, by '53, and Butts had an inkling he was on to something. He built a second EchoSonic, packed it in the car, and headed to Nashville, where he hoped to audition it for the premier name in electric guitar at that time. As Butts told VG in 1994, he simply looked up Chet Atkins in the phone book and gave him a call.

"He answered the phone and I told him what I had," Butts said. "He seemed kind of interested and told me he would be rehearsing for the Opry at the radio station and, if I wanted, I could bring the amp there and he'd try it out. I did. A bunch of them gathered around; they'd never heard anything like this before." Pretty soon, however, they, and others, were hearing it plenty.

Atkins used the amp at the Grand Ole Opry the very next night, decided to buy



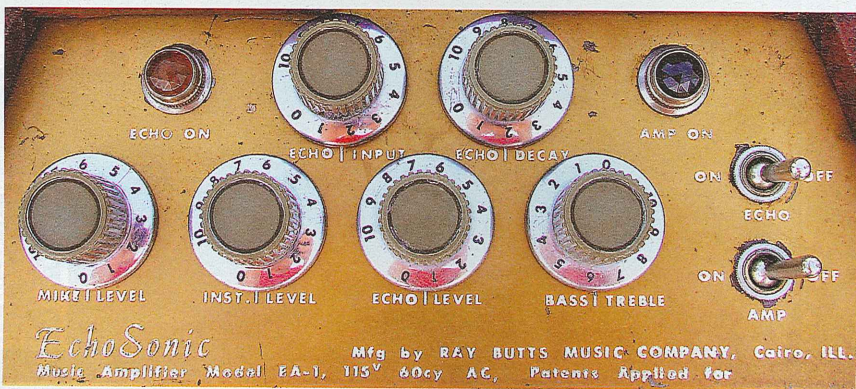
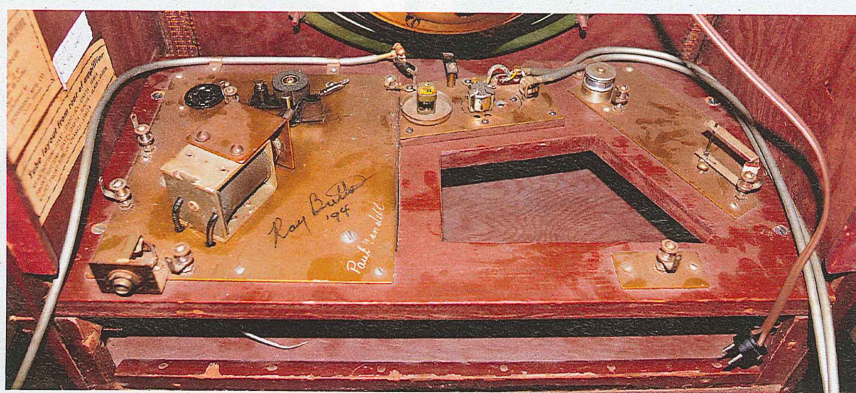
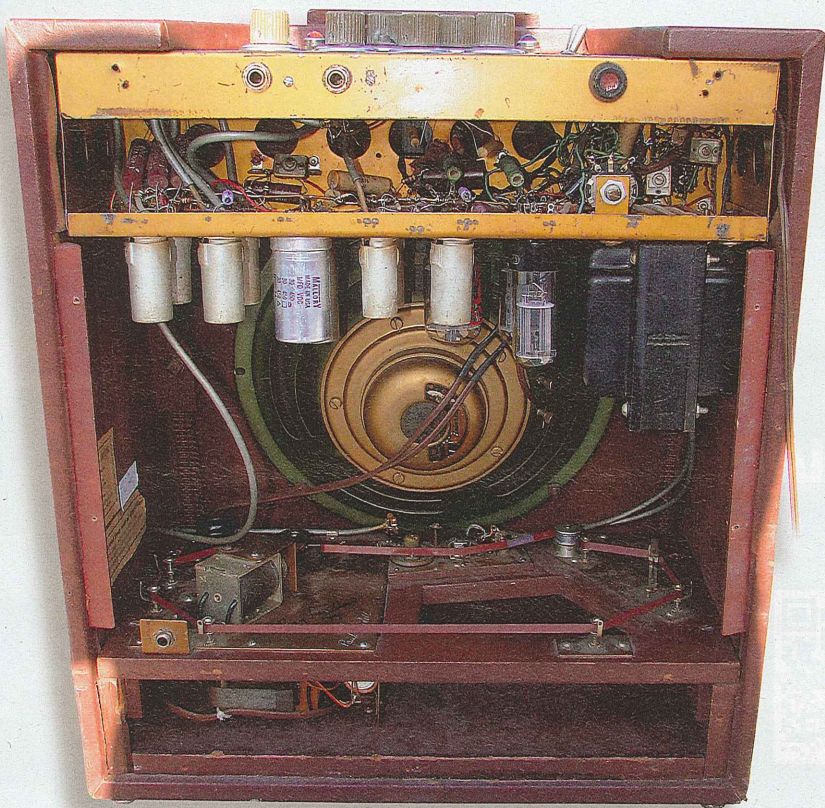
it, and Butts sold it to him that day for his newly established list price of \$495, minus \$100 for a Fender combo Atkins gave him on trade. This was a hefty price at the time, given that the new Fender Twin sold for \$239. But then, EchoSonic carried the desirable built-in echo and *were* made by hand. Atkins began using the amp straight away, employing the echo on several prominent recordings – his famous rendition of "Mister Sandman" among them – and the hip new cat in town was swiftly crawling out of the bag. As reported on his website, Moore heard an Atkins instrumental on the radio and chased down the source in order to achieve onstage the slapback Sam Phillips had been giving his guitar in the studio. He ordered his own EchoSonic in early '55, and took delivery in May.

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Preamp tubes: four 12AU7, two 12AY7, one 12AX7 (sub for original 12AD7), one 6C4
Output tubes: two 6L6
Rectifier: 5V4GA (or sub 5AR4 or 5U4)
Controls: Mic Level, Inst Level (dry volume), Echo Level (echo volume), Echo Decay (repeats), Echo Input Level, Tone
Speaker: 12" University UC-121
Output: approximately 25 watts RMS

In July, this most famous of EchoSonic hit the studio with Moore, Elvis and company, where it was used on the groundbreaking recording of "Mystery Train," among others.

The EchoSonic continued to be used on every recording Moore made with Presley up to, and including, the legend-



Photos courtesy of Deke Dickerson.