



## Episode 2, 2012: Motown Amp

Steve Fishman: I'm Steve Fishman. I've been playing the bass for 30 years professionally. I have an amplifier that I believe belonged to the great James Jamerson. James Jamerson was to bass what Jimi Hendrix was to the guitar. I want to find out for sure that it was James' actual amp.

Eduardo Pagan: I'm Eduardo Pagan. James Jamerson may be the greatest bass player you've never heard of. During Motown Records golden era in Detroit, Jamerson was a member of the Funk Brothers, the largely anonymous in-house studio band. He laid the bass line for some of their most famous acts: Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Supremes, and Marvin Gay, playing on nearly all of Motown's 100- plus top ten hits. If this really is Jamerson's amp, it played a direct part in the musical revolution that was Motown.

This is fantastic. Well, where did you find this thing?

Steve: I got it from a gentleman who is an amp specialist. He told me that it had been neglected for many, many years. One day he pulls this in and says, "Look at this."

Eduardo: As soon as he saw the name James Jamerson, Steve knew this could be big.

Steve: Only insiders, producers, and other, other studio musicians knew his name. I didn't even know his name for many, many years. I just said, "That Motown guy. Who is that guy? He's like, he came out of the sky!" You know?

Eduardo: Does this produce sound still?

Steve: It sure does, it sounds great. Would you like to hear it?

Eduardo: Yeah, I'd love to!

Steve: Ok. *[Steve plays]*

Eduardo: Well, tell me a little bit about this amplifier.

Steve: The most important thing is that it is a tube amplifier. And tubes give a sense of warmth, in fact they're actually burning, they're on, they actually have fire in them. If you feel them, they're warm.

Eduardo: So would you characterize this as a kind of warmer sound?

Steve: Warm and sweet. But it can get pretty gritty.

Eduardo: Yeah.

Steve: And a lot of the stuff that they did, and, you know, James Jamerson did, was pretty gritty stuff, pretty hardcore.

Eduardo: Although two letters are missing, Steve says the amplifier is an Ampeg, an American made brand popular with bass players from the early days of Rock and Roll. Steve says it's the kind of sound Jamerson liked, but is this his amp? He's never been able to find a picture to prove it.

Now, how do we know that some entrepreneur somewhere found this amplifier consistent with what Jamerson used and decided to put his name on the side? I mean that's possible right?

Steve: Very possible.

Eduardo: I grew up listening to Motown and I'm very familiar with Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, and above all, Berry Gordy, the visionary who created the first African-American music label to hit it big with white America. Steve is right, there are plenty of pictures of Jamerson, but no clear shots of his amp. Many of the Detroit clubs where the Motown sound was first heard are now shuttered, but I got word that there's one spot I have to check out.

Hewitt's music store has been selling gear to motor city musicians since the 1920s, and I understand that James Jamerson was a former customer. So, I'm on my way there to see if they can help me out. I'm meeting music buffs and Motown fans Tim Hewitt and Ufuoma Wallace.

How you guys doing? I am doing some research on this amplifier and I hear that you are the two who can tell me about it.

Tim Hewitt: Don't believe everything you hear.

Eduardo: Did, uh, Jamerson ever come into the store?

Tim: He did, but I only heard stories from my grandfather because this was way before my time.

Eduardo: Yeah

Eduardo: Tim explains how the artists of Motown left their mark on Detroit and the world. During a time of civil unrest, they shattered race barriers and chart records, making African American music styles popular to the masses. And musicians like James Jamerson were vital to this revolutionary Motown Sound.

What can you tell me about this amp? Why was this the preferred amp of bass players?

Ufuoma Wallace: It had the 15 inch speakers, so you had that big round, full sound because the bass players were upright players and then in the 60s when the electronics came in they had to make that transfer over to the new electrical sound, but they were still trying to capture the upright tone through the electrical instruments. And James Jamerson did an excellent job of that.

Eduardo: Ufuoma says the Ampeg allowed bass players to still produce that upright sound, but with an amplified edge, and Jamerson took it to a whole new level.

Ufuoma: He played with the syncopation that prior to him was not heard really in bass players. Because they play more root and the blues and that kind of stuff and he came and do (*sings a bass beat*). And that just amazed everybody and from that point on, bass started progressing, progressing, and progressing. And that's why all the bass players from Detroit, Detroit bass players have a definite sound, a definite style that they can even go anywhere in the world because of Jamerson.

Eduardo: Do you think it's possible that this was actually sold to James Jamerson?

Tim: We would not have the records because that would be like 50 years ago. Well, we couldn't say exactly. I do know that this is a model, a B15N, which my grandfather did sell him. And then he came back a couple of months later and we sold him an extension speaker. So actually we sold him two amps.

Eduardo: Without store records, there's no way to confirm that our amp was sold here, but Tim has a lead.

Tim: I didn't meet Senior, I met of course Junior, who I played with in the Funk Brothers.

Eduardo: Yea, really!?

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Eduardo: Do you think you still have his contact information?

Tim: Yes, you know, I really do and if you're good to me right now I'll give you his phone number, ok?

Eduardo: In the early 1960s, Motown was headquartered in downtown Detroit, where legendary producer Berry Gordy oversaw hit after hit. Inside, the basement studio was known as the "Snake Pit", where the up and coming stars of Motown were backed by the uncredited house bass player. James Jamerson died in 1983. I am meeting with James Jr., who literally got a child's eye view of the birth of Motown.

Eduardo: This is hallowed ground for, for some of us.

James Jamerson, Jr.: Oh, yeah. Well, this is the room I grew up in. From nine years old and it's, wow...

Eduardo: Yeah.

James: All of this history in here. I learned from all of those guys, all those guys were like my surrogate fathers, but there's only one dad.

Eduardo: Cause I'm thinking about my nine year old – he would have gotten bored and left after a while...

James: Oh, no, I was excited. You know, when they say funk – it got so funky in here.

Eduardo: Before Motown, James Jr. says the bass had taken a back seat in popular music.

James: You really didn't hear the bass. I mean you would just hear (James plays). And you didn't, you never heard the bass. You heard the guitars. You heard the pianos. And you heard the singers.

Eduardo: Give us a sense then, when your father comes along, what does he introduce? What's the sound that he gives us?

James: Well, he gives a very fat sound, very unique sound. (James plays again). And it became like, "Woah, what's that?" And it's like, "That's what we're looking for." He was very melodic in his playing, so he had a style.

Eduardo: Why do you think he was so unrecognized in his day?

James: It was Motown's little secret. Berry didn't want everybody having him because they was making too many hit records. You know, that was their little secret, like they – their little secret weapon. Like, "Hey, well, we've got something that you ain't got."

Eduardo: Well, I imagine you've seen a lot of your father's equipment, have you ever seen this before? James Jr. tells me in the early 1990s, one of his father's amplifiers was stolen from a storage locker. But he says this one is not that missing amp.

James: Too many knobs. It didn't have no two volume knobs – there was only one volume knob.

Eduardo: Well, I thought we had a sure thing. Your dad's name is right there...

James: I – I – I know it, and it looked, uh, very familiar.

Eduardo: Uh huh, so even with, even though your father's name is right here.

James: Even though it's there.

Eduardo: You're not convinced?

James: I'm not convinced.

Eduardo: I'm starting to suspect that we may have a fake on our hands. How do I know that this amp was just dressed up to look like 60s era Ampeg? I've asked amplifier expert Gregg Hopkins to take a closer look.

Gregg, this is the mystery. So I wonder if you can confirm for me first of all, this is an authentic Ampeg.

Gregg Hopkins: It's an Ambeg B-15.

Eduardo: And Gregg thinks he can pinpoint the year it was made. He first looks for the serial number plate, but it's missing. Fortunately, there are other clues to check.

Gregg: Inside on the, on the controls, uh, there's going to be some numbers on the inside that will tell what year they were manufactured. They're kind of hard to see. I do see what appears to be a "62." I can barely read it. Okay, I see a date of "62-13". 13 would be the week of that year.

Eduardo: So that means the amp is authentic to the right era.

Now, anything else jumps out at you, that could help me authenticate this to James Jamerson?

Gregg: It says James Jamerson on it.

Eduardo: *[laughs]* I know.

Gregg: It's possible somebody could fake a thing like that. But, it looks like that's been on there for a long time.

Eduardo: The amp is from the early 1960s when Jamerson was almost completely unknown to a popular audience. He didn't really get full recognition for his music until long after his death, so would someone really fake a stencil at this point in his career. Or even a couple of decades later? If anyone could recognize whether this amp belonged to James Jamerson, it would be someone who played alongside him – like one of the Funk Brothers. I've gotten in touch with Dennis Coffey, another member of the Motown Records studio musicians.

Dennis Coffey: Usually there are about 12 of us in the studio and our job was to read the music, add some kind of feel, because you can't write the feel on paper. We had to add a great feel to it.

Eduardo: What was it like to play with James Jamerson?

Dennis: James to me was just the best bass player in the world. You could hear it.

Eduardo: Dennis found a recording for me. It's from a late 1960s Detroit club gig, which sat in his drawer for 25 years.

Dennis: You can hear Jamerson doing pure Jamerson.

*RECORDING STARTS: "Mr. James Jamerson – lets give Jamerson a big round of applause. Doing a beautiful job."*

Dennis: Always laying down the groove, but then he's stretch out. But he was always laying that pocket, that's what the guys at Motown were so good at. Was always about the feel and laying that pocket down, that's what drove those records I think.

Eduardo: The Motown musicians were in high demand. In the early 70s, Berry Gordy moved Motown from Detroit to LA where a select few of the guys worked harder than ever.

Dennis: I remember getting to the studio at 10 AM in the morning and bouncing on sessions up and down, up and down, and uh, I didn't get home till 4 AM the next day. So, that was my first day doing sessions and playing guitar at Motown.

Eduardo: I am trying to determine whether this amplifier, right here, belonged to James Jamerson. Can you tell me anything about this?

Dennis: Uh, the only thing that, uh, I can tell you about that stencil is if you look on my amplifier I have the same stencil.

Eduardo: Steve has got to hear what Dennis tells me next. Steve, how you doing?

Steve: Good, how are you?

Eduardo: It's good to see you. I got to tell you this has been one heck of an adventure. I explain that although a music store identified it as the same model Jamerson bought, his son certainly wasn't convicted that his amplifier had ever belonged to his dad.

Steve: Oh. Interesting.

Eduardo: I wasn't sure what I had, until Funk Brother Dennis Coffey came to my rescue. In Detroit, in an earlier era, musicians hauled their own instruments and gear. But Los Angeles was a much larger city and studios were further afield, so cartage companies transported the musicians' equipment around town.

Dennis: And they showed up with the trunk with my name on the outside of the trunk, and this amp had my name stenciled on it. They got to run in and instantly identify whose amp that is and look on their schedule and say, "Well OK, Dennis Coffey is over to this studio," and Jamerson might be at a different studio. I'm assuming this Royal Ink was probably maybe the warehouse or something, but Studio Instrument Rentals, uh, did that and if you notice it's the same type of stencil.

Eduardo: He believes that we may have uncovered a piece of music history.

Dennis: This is the amp I used out in LA and that's the one that Jamerson used in LA.

Eduardo: Take a look at that stenciling right there.

Steve: Very interesting.

Eduardo: Look at that, there's his name.

Steve: It's exact.

Eduardo: Right there, and it's a pretty good match.

Steve: That's pretty amazing.

Eduardo: It's not the smoking gun I'd love to be able to have, but it's pretty good. It's as close I can get.

Steve: That's close enough for Rock and Roll. That's pretty good enough for me.

Eduardo: I've got a surprise for you.

Steve: Oh, I love surprises.

Eduardo: I'm giving Steve a ride to a one of a kind jam session. Gentleman, this is Steve Fishman, he's an enormous fan of early Motown. Dennis Coffey and James Jamerson Jr.

James: How ya doing sir?

Steve: Nice to meet you.

Eduardo: Can we sit in?

James: Sure.

Dennis: Absolutely.

Eduardo: Alright, thank you. *[Jam Session]* In 2000, 17 years after his death, James Jamerson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and Steve plans to loan this amp to their collection.

Dennis, Eduardo, James, and Steve: *[laughing]*