

## Magnatone Super Fifty-Nine Review

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Les Paul clean with vibrato

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Magnatone Super Fifty-Nine

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Few amps boast the cult mystique of Magnatones. The models that the Los Angeles company created in the 1950s and '60s were never as popular as those made by Fender in nearby Fullerton, yet they've always boasted fanatical admirers, from players such as Buddy Holly, Lonnie Mack, and Pops Staples to today's collectors, who pay top dollar for once-affordable "Maggies."

Last year—four decades after the original company folded—industry veteran Ted Kornblum revived the storied brand with a line of high-end amps that borrow styling and some features from vintage Maggies. The flagship model of the company's upscale "Master Collection" is the Super Fifty-Nine, a U.S.-made head-plus-cabinet model that replaces the prototype combo introduced at NAMM 2013. That amp floored me, even amidst the toxic noise pollution of the trade show floor. (And for what it's worth, I'm a Magnatone geek who owns a funky old Melodier, a couple of mid-'60s suitcase models, and a stereo-vibrato 480, perhaps the most coveted of the vintage Maggies.)

The new version is equally impressive—though you should note up front its chief old-school Magnatone attributes are its vibrato and '50s-flavored look.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. Vibrato aside, original Magnatones are not that different from, say, the era's Valcos, Supros, and other mid-priced combos. They're not very loud, nor especially versatile—just cool and vibey. The Fifty-Nine, on the other hand, is more British in character, and it sounds bigger and ballsier than anything Magnatone made back in the day.

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It's a great sounding, beautifully built take on dual early EL-34 Marshalls . It reminds me a lot of a Matchless Chieftain (that's high praise), but with killer true vibrato and other nice extras.

Just one catch: This head and cab will set you back almost four grand (or more, if you choose the Celestion Gold speaker option).

### **World-Class Wobble**

Let's start with the vibrato, since that's the defining Magnatone feature for many of the brand's fans. Unlike Fender vibrato, which is actually tremolo, many vintage Maggie models offered true pitch-shift vibrato,

which modulates note frequency rather than volume. It's a beautiful sound, dreamy and hypnotic. (Check out Lonnie Mack's "Memphis" for a taste.) By the late 1950s, some dual-speaker Maggies offered a stereo version of the effect.

The Fifty-Nine's vibrato is strictly mono, but it's stunning—probably the best-sounding analog vibrato I've heard. To my ears it sounds better than my stereo 480. It's smooth, but not *too* smooth—it's definitely that slightly weird Magnatone wobble. Like original Maggies, the Fifty-Nine works its magic via variable resistors, or "varistors."

Old-stock varistors are almost impossible to find, and online sources insist that you can't get the right sound with new-production units. Bunk, I say—the Fifty-Nine uses new Silicon Carbide varistors, and its vibrato is second to none.

But wait—it gets better: Unlike vintage Maggies, the Super Fifty-Nine lets you switch between vibrato and tremolo, and the latter also sounds bitchin', if less unique. Additionally, a wah-style expression pedal (included) lets you control the trem/vibrato rate. Toe-down yields maximum speed, and heel-down bypasses the effect altogether.

Just one disappointment: Vibrato and reverb go together like cookies and milk. Got 'verb? Sadly, not here.

### Midcentury Chic

The Fifty-Nine's looks pay homage to late-'50s design, borrowing cool visual details from various Magnatone models. The trapezoidal speaker grille wraps around the amp's sides, a cool midcentury-modern touch. Pretty white piping offsets the attractive, wheat-colored grille cloth. The logo is backlit on both the head and the cabinet. (There's a dedicated cable that connects the components, powering the cabinet's lamp.) It's a sharp-dressed amp.

The parts and workmanship are excellent as well. Point-to-point wired on plated eyelet board, the circuit is crafted from high-quality parts, including a Magnetic Component power transformer and Heyboer output transformer. (The modulation and bias circuits, however, use some PCB components.) All pots and jacks are chassis-mounted. The Valve Arts EL34s in the review model sound great, as do the cabinet's WGS ET90 speakers. The black-leatherette-covered cabinetry feels stout without being needlessly heavy. The cab's rear panel is divided into three sections, one or two of which can be removed if you prefer the open-back sound. Everything feels solid and looks great.

### Loud and Lovely

From glistening clean tones to full-bore power-amp grind, the tones are simply glorious. Ultra-present yet never prickly, they possess the sort of impact that will get you heard onstage and in a mix. The gain controls transition gracefully from chimey to chunky, with many attractive nooks and crannies along the way.

The 4-band tone control is particularly wonderful, in a Matchless sort of

## Ratings

### Pros:

Fine sound. Drop-dead looks. Removable rear panels.

### Cons:

Not wired for stereo. Pricy.

### Tones:



### Ease of Use:



### Build/Design:



### Value:



### Street:

\$899 (cabinet as reviewed with WGS ET90 speakers)

**Magnatone Super Fifty-Nine 2x12**

[magnatoneusa.com](http://magnatoneusa.com)

## Ratings

### Pros:

Spectacular British-flavored tones. Excellent parts and workmanship. Sublimely voiced tone controls. Coolest

way. Their ranges are more restricted than on most vintage amps, but they touch *just* the right frequencies. You can add bite, fatten lows, contour the midrange—but no matter how you set the knobs, the sound is magnificent. There are literally no bad tones here. (And unlike the single-input Chieftain, the Fifty-Nine has two channels and four inputs, which means you can jumper the channels, vintage Marshall-style, for additional tonal shadings.)

It's a loud sucker, too. There's enough volume for any stage, even when playing with a ham-fisted drummer. Fortunately, the amp features an uncommonly good-sounding master volume circuit. Even power-amp-distortion snobs may have to admit that the Fifty-Nine delivers convincing crunch even at relatively restrained volumes.

### The Verdict

The Magnatone Fifty-Nine is something new under the sun: a bold and versatile British-voiced amp with classic California looks and a superb rendition of a superb vibrato circuit. It houses countless cool tones, and is a pleasure to play and behold. What's not to like?

Well, the cost. Nearly four grand is bit steep for a 45-watt amp and 2x12 cabinet. At that price, I find myself wishing for stellar spring reverb and true stereo vibrato. But even so, I will shed a bitter tear when this lovely amp returns to its manufacturer.



San Francisco-based Senior Editor Joe Gore has recorded with Tom Waits, PJ Harvey, Tracy Chapman, Courtney Love, Marianne Faithfull, Les Claypool, Flea, DJ Shadow, John Cale, and many other artists. His music appears in many films and TV shows, plus an incriminating number of jingles. Joe has written several thousand articles about music and musicians and has contributed to many musical products, including Apple's Logic and GarageBand programs. In his spare time Joe edits a geeky guitar blog ([tonefiend.com](http://tonefiend.com)) and builds couture stompboxes for friends, rock stars, and other deadbeats.

vibrato since The Dawn of Time.

### Cons:

No reverb. No stereo vibrato. Way spendy.

### Tones:



### Ease of Use:



### Build/Design:



### Value:



### Street:

\$2,999

### Magnatone Super Fifty-Nine

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