

The
Return
-of-
Real
Boutique

A CHAT WITH
Fran Blanche
of Frantone

Words by *Yoel Kreisler*



Fran Blanche is a name that evokes the essence of Americana; a downhome Midwestern secretary with a penchant for baking and collecting china dolls straight out of '50s nuclear America. While her designs do somewhat adhere to this aesthetic, Fran Blanche is anything but unassuming. Spearheading the boutique movement with her effects company Frantone in the mid-'90s alongside her contemporaries Zachary Vex, Bill Finnegan and James Demeter, Fran Blanche enjoyed cult success with her incredibly unique original designs, such as the Peachfuzz, Cream Puff, and The Sweet, to name a few.

"Any guitar forum will show that this is not a culture that women would create or really ever desire to be a part of – which is a major obstacle to diversity right at the front gate..." -FRAN BLANCHE

In addition to being in the boutique game almost longer than anyone who is in it today, Fran is also one of the only prominent women in the industry, and she has overcome some tremendous obstacles in the years she has been in business. Around 2008 she began to taper away, and by 2009 she had all but disappeared, making the prices of her pedals on the secondhand market surge. Now in 2016 with the help of Kickstarter, Fran is back in full swing with two of her flagship pedals, the Peachfuzz and the Cream Puff. Other than making the

author's stomach rumble, these effects embody Fran's dogma of "...only original analog effects and accessories with an emphasis on tonal quality, clarity, and rugged reliability."

We at *Tone Report* had a rare opportunity to sit down with this effects veteran and legend, to speak about her story, where she has been, where she's going, and what's next for the new Frantone.

TONE REPORT: *It's a pleasure to get to speak with you, thanks for giving us some of your time! Tell us a little bit about the current line of pedals you are offering.*

FRAN BLANCHE: Right now for the summer of 2016 I am making the Peachfuzz and Cream Puff as you know, both were brought back with successful Kickstarter campaigns earlier in the year. Now that Frantone has some traction I am self funding the re-release of The Sweet and a newly redesigned Vibutron and hopefully I can get all the parts issues ironed out in time for those to be added to the new line this fall.

TR: *When did you start to get into pedal building? Did you just sort of start tinkering or is it something you wanted to do from the beginning?*

FB: I talked about the long story of how this all started in a video of a lecture I did at the University of the Arts recently, but the short story is that I never had a plan to be a pedal maker. I did have a need for a pedal back in 1994 because I



was in a band at the time but I could not afford a new pedal, so I tinkered one together just for my own use. It was some time later that a set of opportunities came along that got me into doing it for a living. It took a year to get the first product out which put Frantone in the hole financially at the start, so after the Hep Cat was in production by late '95 I had to design other effects to create a line that would sustain Frantone.

TR: *Many pedals in today's market are based off of previous designs, usually tweaked to create something new to the builder's liking. Did your pedals start from previous designs or are they all original?*

FB: All original. The Sweet is based on some of the ideas I had that were rejected by EH for the Big Muff reissue that I thought would still make a great

pedal, and in that sense it is based on another design, but more to the point in that regard I copied myself.

My compressors were a completely new concept, and I had to design my own optocouplers and manufacture those components in-house to bring it all together. The Peachfuzz may have been the first fuzz pedal to not use diodes or under-biasing transistors to get the effect, I'm really not sure, but instead of using rectifiers or making transistors go non-linear I exploited some exotic properties of an op amp that I liked to achieve a natural distortion that would clean up with the guitar volume knob—much more like an amp overdrive turned to 11.

The Cream Puff was a concept that came to me very suddenly; I had one of those pink coconut Hostess snowballs in my hand and thought "man, wouldn't it be



great if I could plug in and play that?!" So I set out to make a tone that sounded like a snowball cake tastes. A lot of my pedal ideas come from food and candy.

TR: *How do you approach designing a pedal?*

FB: It starts with either an idea for a certain look to a pedal, like a particular graphic design, motif, or aesthetic, (like the Cream Puff) or a name (like the Sputnik and Sandwich) or a particular type of sound or effect I really want to have (like the Vibutron or Peachfuzz). So, sometimes a product is designed from the name down to circuit, sometimes the reverse, but it is always just something that I want to try for myself, something that I would like to see and hear in the real world. I figure that the best and only test is whether or not it excites me, and if I like it then others will too. That was

the case with the Cream Puff; when I came out with that the dealers all thought I was nuts. "Nobody will ever buy a pink pedal," they said . . . but it ended up being my biggest seller that year.

TR: *You were one of the spearheads of the boutique pedal movement back in the late '90s. What has changed in the industry since you began?*

FB: Oh—everything! And very little, it depends on what side of the coin you look at. Technically and from a manufacturing standpoint it is a completely different world. The industry that has sprung up around the DIY movement has brought about so many affordable options for anyone wanting to have a start-up, from PCB design software, to outsourced manufacturing, UV printing companies that can do your enclosures, vendors that can supply you

with easy-to-acquire parts, companies to do your artwork for you, or do your shipping and fulfillment, and more. These days, there is a company out there that will do any part of the process for you—for a cost—and if you have the means to farm it out then anyone can get in the pedal game regardless of skill level. That has been great for a lot of people to have a pedal of their own, and bad for an industry if you intend to make a living manufacturing effects pedals at scale.

In contrast, 20 years ago it was hard and expensive to be in electronics manufacturing on any level, and you had to have all kinds of heavy skills just to get in the game and play. I started designing my circuit boards with ink on paper in the mid-'90s and manufactured my own boards in house through the aughts but those technical skill boundaries no longer exist to anyone wanting to have a start up and make electronics today. It's cheap, quick, and easy now on all levels by comparison. Not that that's the way I do it! We still hand paint, hand screen, and hand assemble, and I design everything myself, but most everyone today can go the easy route to a product, and many do. Whether any of that is cool or not, that's another thing.

Culturally however the industry is much the same as always. I have talked pretty honestly about that part of it recently and received some kickback, but also a great deal of support and I think on the

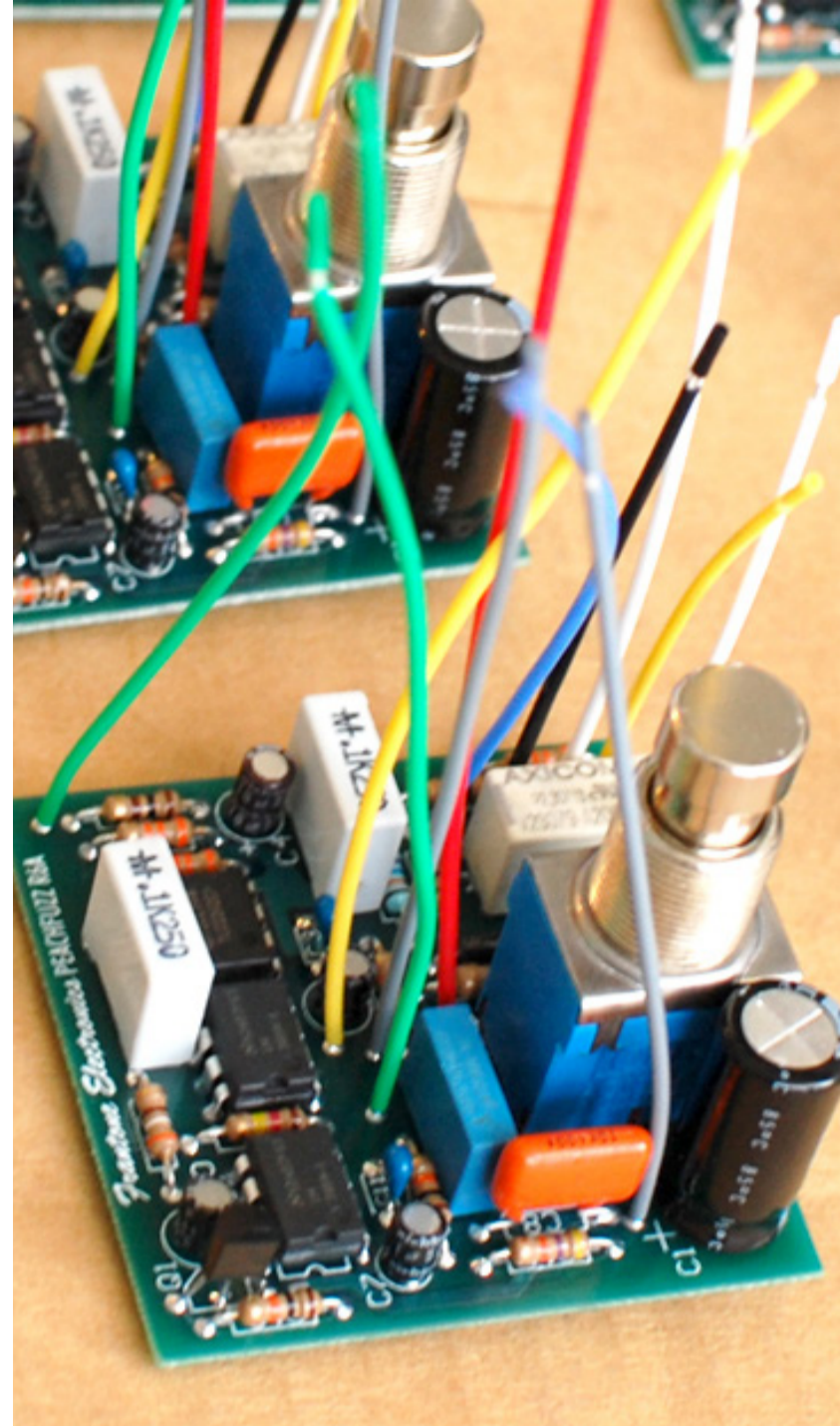
whole a recognition that the industry needs to get out of the locker room and invite diversity. I think that opening up the music manufacturing industry to designers and entrepreneurs who are not "a white guy" will mean a much different future and much more varied product designs, more original ideas, and ultimately new kinds of equipment and music, but in that regard much still has to change.

TR: *You disappeared for a while and your pedals started to fetch ridiculous prices on the secondhand market. What was the catalyst for leaving the industry for a while, and what spurred this comeback?*

FB: That too is a long story that I have spoken about at length recently, but the short story there is that I got outed on the guitar forums as trans and pretty much became a laughingstock, and, virtually overnight, no one took me seriously anymore. My dealers clammed up, and sales stopped. Adding to that serendipity was the rise of a whole new army of startups and big companies alike getting into the pedal game all at the same time. Frantone just got washed away in the mire and I had to move on and do other things to make a living.

It was actually my friend Zack Vex that gave me some advice back then. When the crap hit the fan, he told me that the best option was for me to go out of business. He said just go out of business, wait five years, then come back. Zack was confident that after



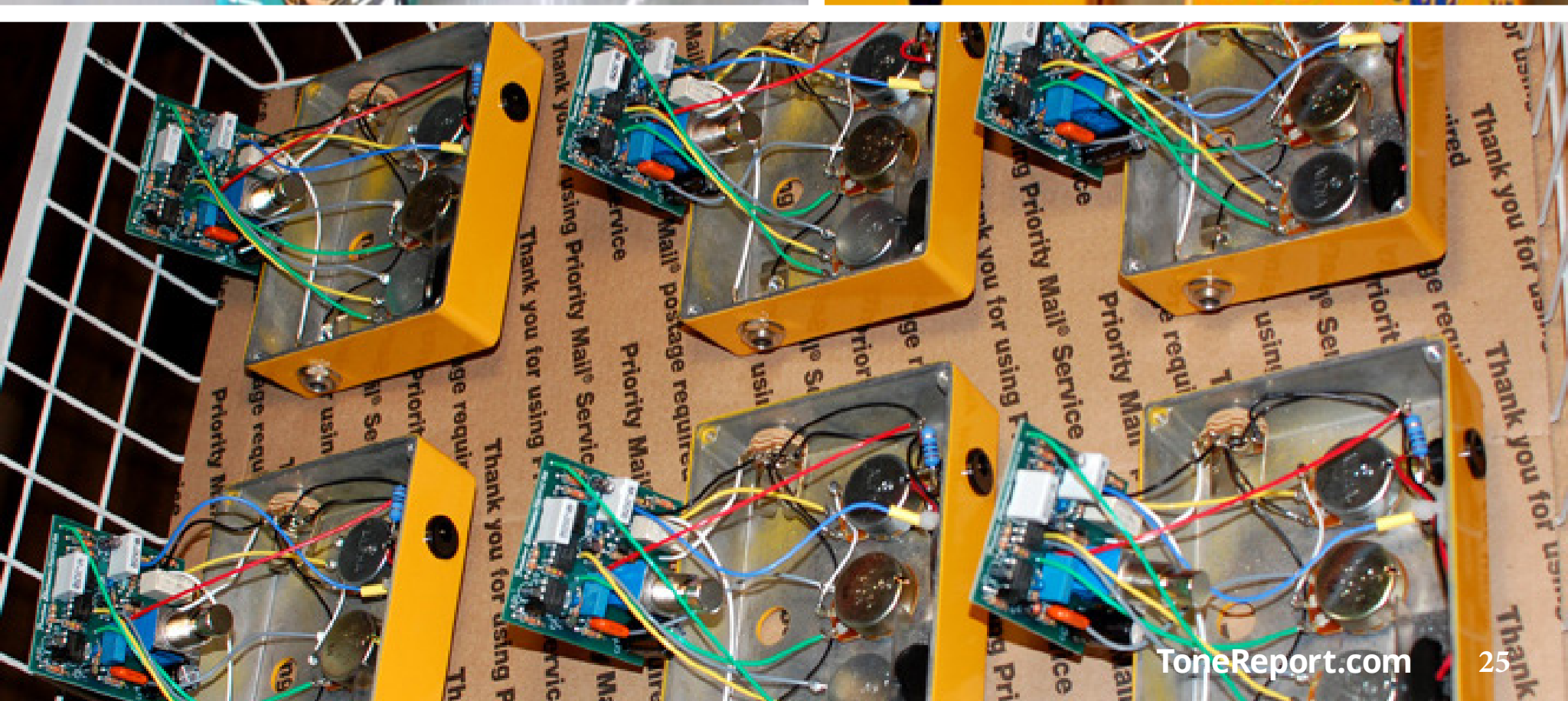


some time would pass that people would get over attacking me personally and want the product again. It took a bit longer than those five years to go full circle, but he was right. By the end of 2015 it was clear to me that people really did want the line back. There were some disappointments and hard knocks trying to get Frantone back into production, but crowdfunding is one of the greatest things to come about in recent years, and a hugely successful Kickstarter campaign in February brought Frantone back in earnest this year.

TR: *You are one of the only women in the pedal-building industry, which in*

my opinion is very commendable. Do you find that you are treated differently because of it? And how do you feel your gender affects your business if at all?

FB: I can only speak for myself, so truthfully I have no way of knowing if others are treated any differently, but it is and has always been a boys' club. So, in that sense, if everyone is treated equally, then inclusion means having to be another one of the guys. Any guitar forum will show that this is not a culture that women would create or really ever desire to be a part of, which is a major obstacle to diversity right at the front gate—it's perfectly tuned for attracting





young guys, not so much for young women. For women that do get in the business though, their careers are a lot about putting up with marginalization and working twice as hard for a fraction of the pay. Those are realities that I really want to see change in my lifetime

TR: *Today's market is centered very much around the idea of open source; where many ideas and creations are free to share and collaborate upon. The conversation on intellectual property in all fields is rapidly changing, and how do you feel the changing nature of intellectual property is affecting your business and your designs?*

FB: It's a sticky issue. I think that the people who cry for an open-source world are absolutely not those in the physical manufacturing game. If you want ideas to be free for all, then the world would have to be made up of free ideas, but it is not. For those who have to make a living transforming ideas into tangible real world consumables, the fundamental truths of having some kind of ownership of intellectual property come into play. Manufacturing anything

is expensive and risky, and making anything of high quality with care is a very costly and painstaking affair. Without some protections, or without at least a cultural acceptance of the concept of ownership of a design or a product by a person or company that invents it, there can be no equal playing field in manufacturing. It would come down to an industry where only those companies with the muscle to litigate or the financial resources to simply not care about infringement would survive. Elon Musk loves open source for his designs, because he can afford to love it.

Don't get me wrong, I am all for anyone who wants to make a clone for their own pedal board, that's what DIY is all about – but if you manufacture a clone and sell it on eBay or Etsy or create a company around a knock off for a profit, then you are not DIY, you're basically part of what is killing the soul of the industry, and that is adding more copies and pushing out the inventors and designers. That's the big difference to be made in my view.

TR: *Thank you for your time!*

FB: You're most welcome, Yoel!