

VIBRATONE

1967-1972

While not an electronic device *per se*, the Vibratone is to this day one of Fender's most useful effects. Taking the Leslie rotating speaker design (CBS owned the Leslie patents at the time) and applying it to a speaker system for guitar, Fender came up with a new item that has served guitar players noticeably better than the original.

Here are some reasons why:

First, the Vibratone was designed for use with a regular guitar amp. The Leslie usually came with a power amp, but no preamp, so the built-in amp was usually bypassed. The weight and expense of the Leslie's amp are negatives for something that won't be used.

Second, the Vibratone was built to be roadworthy—covered in Tolex, with metal corners. The Leslie was designed to be permanently installed in one's living room or church. When used in a rock 'n' roll environment, the beautiful wood cabinets quickly became chipped-up plywood, with rings in the finish from drinks set on the top.

Finally, the Vibratone used a guitar speaker, with a frequency range that guitarists were accustomed to. All but the smallest Leslies were two-way speaker systems, with a woofer, a high-frequency horn, and a crossover. This full-frequency system can sound harsh, as the highs that would normally not be reproduced come through loud and clear. Listen to a guitar plugged into a mixing console connected to full-range studio monitors and then plug it into a combo amp with a single 15" speaker. Get the picture? The two-way system also required two mics to get the full sound into a P.A. or recording console; the Vibratone needs only one. (Suggestion: try a mic on each side.)

To explain how a Leslie works, the Doppler effect must be defined. This is the perceived change in pitch as a source of sound is moved closer to (raising the pitch) or farther away from (lowering the pitch) the listener. A passing train or police siren is a good example.



(Courtesy Brian Fischer)