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The past was
bright

...and the future is brighter.
As Orange celebrates its 40th
anniversary, Cliff Cooper is
still looking forwards

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Life begins...

As one of the highest profile UK MI brands out there, Orange has been flying the flag for British innovation since the late '60s. **Rob Power** finds out how it feels to hit 40...

1 968 was a difficult year by any standards; both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy fell to assassins' bullets in the States, and as student protests rocked the establishment across the globe, back in dear old Blighty Enoch Powell delivered his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech, setting the scene for years of racial unease. Even the Beatles had a difficult year, with the first cracks appearing in the Fab Four's foundations as they slowly collapsed under the weight of *The White Album*. Yet in the heart of London, in the basement of 3-4 New Compton Street, Clifford Cooper – a one time Joe Meek favoured rock and roller turned entrepreneur – was laying the foundations for what was to become one of the most recognisable and successful British MI brands ever: Orange.

"It appeared to be something of a cartel between the big names at the time, so we were forced to sell second hand instruments. We decided to design our own amplifier, and found a sub-contractor called Matamp that was based in the back of a shop called Radio Craft in Huddersfield to build the amps."

Placing his first orders with Matamp towards the end of 1968, the first 100-Watt, valve-driven Orange amps began to arrive back in London just in time for a couple of strokes of luck for the fledgling company. "The long and the short of it was that we had the amps built, and they started selling really well," continues Cooper. "One of my favourite players was Peter Green with Fleetwood Mac – I used to go and see them whenever I could, I was a big fan – he came in the shop one

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Orange began life as a shop, and no conventional one at that. Originally established by Cooper as an umbrella name for his various dabblings in the music industry, Orange wasn't intended to become an amplifier brand from the start – far from it. Orange Publishing, Orange Records, Orange Agency – all were part of the grand scheme that included a recording studio and a second hand instruments business. Taking his first tentative steps into the wonderful world of instrument retail, Cooper found himself hitting an immediate brick wall – no one would supply him with amplifiers to accompany the guitars lining the wall. "We started because I'd opened the Orange shop, but nobody would supply me with new stock," explains Cooper.

day, and I managed to ask him if he wanted to use our gear. Fleetwood Mac bought a complete set of equipment, and the first record they made with it was Albatross, which went straight to number one. We took out a full-page advert in *Melody Maker*, showing that Orange amps had gone to number one, and that was it.

"From there, we had another stroke of good fortune in that I secured a three-year deal to supply all the equipment for Midem, a festival in Cannes. They paid us a good amount every year, and in the first year there Stevie Wonder and a lot of the top American bands used our gear. Stevie Wonder bought three complete sets and even though I was prepared to give them to him at cost, he was prepared to pay full price."

The patronage of worldwide superstars – something of a recurring theme down the years for Orange – was all the striking little amplifiers needed to move on to the biggest stages in the world. "Stevie Wonder was someone I really hit it off with and it helped us in a big way," adds Cooper. "He was idolised by black and white musicians, everybody loved him, and when people like Ike and Tina Turner started using Orange we got very high profile because of it, and we were immediately backordered."

Thanks to ceaseless dedication from Cooper and his team, the establishment of an Orange factory in Bexleyheath and a commitment to moving the brand forward, the company saw a number of surprising innovations. "I spent a lot of time with the amplifiers making sure they were the best around, certainly in terms of build quality and components," says Cooper. "And because we put so much in, we had a lot of firsts – such as the first digital amplifier."

The OMEC Digital, launched in 1975, was the world's first patented, digitally programmable amplifier – light years ahead of its time, and long before any of Orange's many rivals had even dreamt of such a feat. Unfortunately, it was never destined to make it into the mainstream market. "It was programmable and digitally controlled," adds Cooper, "but we were unable to secure the funds from the bank needed to make it really successful."

As the 1970s drew to a close, things began to wind down for Orange, also. Retreating into his many other business ventures and keeping Orange as a strictly boutique enterprise, manufacturing a small number a year, it was not until the '90s and the dawn of Britpop that Orange was to rise once again to prominence among the players of the day.

"Things calmed down towards the end of the 70s and in the 80s," says Cooper. "Other companies were selling amps cheaper than we could make them, so we closed the factory and went into hibernation for a while, making two or three amps a week. In the early 90s I licensed the name to Gibson. They wanted the amps made in the UK, but after a few years it wasn't doing particularly well. After Gibson had the brand for five years, they decided they didn't want to continue so I took the name back, and redesigned the range from top to bottom."

Reinvigorated by the sounds of UK bands once again capturing the world's ears – Noel Gallagher used Orange amplifiers on the first two monumentally successful Oasis albums – and with Orange once again under the stewardship of its founding father, things began to snowball. "We spent quite a lot of time and money redesigning things, and the



amps soon started doing really well," adds Cooper. It was the late 1990s that saw the rebirth of Orange as we know it today.

"From 1997 onwards, things went really well," says Orange managing director Damon Waller. "There are products from that period we still make today. The AD series was introduced in 1999 and was the beginning of where we are now. It harked back to our classic amps, but moved us on to the next stage. The company has developed from there – working with players' needs and taking on board what the requirements of the market are."

In its current incarnation, Orange is among an elite band of amplifier manufacturers that have both heritage and the ability to capitalise on a rich history with a raft of much admired products that cater to the current market with aplomb. With Cooper still very much at the centre of things, it is also clear that there is still a lot for the company to achieve – especially in markets such as the mighty US of A. "The industry in the UK is a little bit down at the moment, although we're still finding it fairly buoyant for ourselves," says Waller. "We're not finding it as good as it was last year, obviously, but it's going quite well. The Sound Control issue affected everybody, although it could have been a lot worse for us. Internationally, things are really looking up. In America, for example, we're still only scratching the surface."

Clifford Cooper and Damon Waller (above) are proud of the Orange legacy, which has had many high profile users



Part of Orange's success thus far in the land of the free has been down to a canny strategy when it comes to choosing retail partners. Far from taking the obvious route and piling the Orange stacks high in the multiples, it has instead built a network of smaller dealers who can give Orange the time and commitment it needs to grow as a brand in what is still a relatively new market for it. "We made a conscious decision in America not to go with the big multiples," continues Waller. "We didn't go with Guitar Center, or Sam Ashe, or Musicians Friends, as we wanted to grow the business and work with independent retailers. Because of that, we are now in a great position in America.

"One of the problems with the multiples, and we may as well be candid here, is that if you aren't careful, they can crush you. You take the risk of them not being successful with the brand, and they sell the amps off cheap, and it can close you. I think it was the right decision to stay away from the multiples in America – in the beginning, it was difficult, and we lost money initially – but now we have a good network of shops throughout the United States and now Canada as well which have really stood us in good stead.

"We've had a company based in Atlanta for about five years now, with about 18 reps that cover North America. We doubled our turnover there last year, and things are really steaming for us. We're having a problem getting production big enough, but that's fine with me. The first time things blew up for Orange, I had trouble with over ordering, but this time I know what I'm doing. As more and more bands pick up our gear – the Lost Prophets have been very good for us in the States – our orders go up all the time. Wolfmother and Stone Sour have also helped through using our amps. We don't do much advertising in the States as it's so expensive, but it seems the orders are growing through word of mouth, which is the right way to grow. America is very exciting for us at present, and we're over there a lot."

It's not only in America that Orange's knack for doing the right things at retail level has been of benefit. In the wake of the recent Sound Control disaster, Orange was able to limit the damage to itself by simply staying on top of stock issues with all of its dealers.

"Obviously Sound Control got into trouble," says Cooper. "We did supply Sound Control, but we had limits on it, because it would upset other dealers if one multiple had excess stock, then got into trouble and started selling it off cheap. In a way, big chains are vulnerable, and if they get in trouble they will sell off your gear at low prices, which can really damage the brand. We have big chains approach us all the time, but we just feel that if we do



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eventually supply big multiples, here and in the States, it will be with specified shops, and it has to be on our terms – although you can't always dictate that. I firmly believe that if a multiple wants to bury a company, they can."

On home soil, things look set to continue being pretty rosy for Orange. Both players and dealers alike carry a fondness for the brand that is, after all, quintessentially English and the commitment made to them by the company is part and parcel of the success of the brand.

"We're certainly not seeing a drop off in the UK market by any means," adds Waller. "We've made quite a commitment to dealers as well, helping them keep their margins and helping them make money.

There are so many brands out there that it is very difficult to make money on nowadays, and Orange has been a brand that stores have been able to make money out of – that's helped them commit to us. It's the bigger amps that sell really well.

We have a commitment to helping dealers be profitable, and I think that's important – you hear ridiculous figures of dealers making five or six per cent, and you can't run a business like that. Reliability and quality are important as well – store owners want to know they aren't selling a product that's going to be back in for repairs the next week. It doesn't instill confidence – but Orange amps don't break or blow up, and people know that ours is a brand that you can rely on."

Ensuring retail can remain profitable is an important part of day-to-day operations at Orange, and the symbiotic nature of the relationship between Orange and its resellers is one that is mutually beneficial and set to continue for some time to come. "This year we've seen a sharp increase in repeat orders," says Cooper, "which means gear is moving through the shops. We're doing our best with advertising to help the shops. We spent 30 per cent more on advertising last year, and 30 per cent on the year before that."



Artists such as Madonna (above) and Andrew Stockdale of Wolfmother (left) add to the aspirational value of Orange products

If there is a key to Orange's success, however, it lies with its founder, the man who has driven the company through countless changes, spectacular ups and pretty gritty downs, yet has come out on top thanks to an overarching passion for the job in hand.

"In the last two or three years, things have really gone well," continues Cooper. "Damon came on board in 2002 – he came to work with us building up the exports again – and it suddenly took off. I've really come full circle – I take more of a back seat now with Damon as managing director, so he takes care of the day-to-day running of things, but I still like to know what's happening each day, and I still get very excited about things.

"I think if you play guitar, the thing is that when you get the right sound, when you hit a note just right and the sustain is there, you get that shiver that comes over you. That's what I always look for – you feel like you're at one with the amplifier. When it happens, everything vibrates in your body, and you're almost at one with the amp. If someone has an amplifier and gets that sound, it becomes like a love affair. I think a lot of brand loyalty comes from that, when people have an amp that becomes part of them. That's what we've been trying to do."

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