



# Whirlwind Rochester Series Effects Pedals

How a hot knife “soldering iron,” a surreal Beatle meeting, and a standing ovation brought a landmark line back from the past



Whirlwind CEO  
Michael Laiacona.

IT WAS THE STANDING OVATION that got him. Michael Laiacona spent years deflecting calls to create a new line of effects pedals. Though the requests came from respected employees, industry peers, and retailers, his heart kept telling him, “Been there, done that.” In mind, body, and spirit

Laiacona had moved on from MXR, the erstwhile giant of the stomp box market he’d co-founded 36 years ago, and was thoroughly dedicated to captaining his stellar “second act,” Whirlwind, one of the world’s leading cable manufacturers. When the inexorable effects pedal topic was raised yet again at a 2009

meeting of Whirlwind sales reps, Laiacona finally relented, proposing, “If I do this, I’m going to make the pedals the old-fashioned way, with no short-cuts, no circuit modernization—and they’re going to sound exactly the way they sounded when I first started making them.” The room erupted in applause, and the reps, all 50 or 60 of them, remained standing and applauding for a very long time.

Does the world need another line of stomp boxes? While acknowledging the crowded market, Laiacona contends that technical advances including modeling have failed to replicate the critical essence of his *original* MXR pedal designs, a criticism he levels even at later incarnations of MXR pedals of the ’70s. By the time Laiacona left MXR over differences in the company’s direction, its products’ design and workmanship had strayed significantly from the hand-wired, individually “tuned” stomp boxes he’d helped create. His new Rochester Series pedals revive it all—designs, original tone-matched components, fastidious U.S. manufacture, and proprietary tweaking to reproduce the complex, subtle, classic sounds of rock ’n’ roll. Aside from the addition of an LED, a direct bypass, and a nine-volt power input, Rochester is 100% true to its roots. Anything less—or more—would betray Laiacona’s original vision and unlikely path to success.

Laiacona’s parents weren’t thrilled about their son’s love of rock ’n’ roll. With no other resource available to him, at around ten or 11 years old he began scavenging the city dump for discarded radios and televisions, cannibalizing them for electronic components and speakers, and rebuilding them into working gear for himself and his bandmates.

Lacking relevant training, education—or even a soldering iron—Laiacona initially repaired found items by removing and reattaching components “that looked like they might be loose” with a knife heated on the kitchen stove. The first “Frankenstein” amps he produced, when they worked at all, often worked for only a few days before they “blew up” and he started the process again. But under the tutelage of a kindly repair shop technician he began sourcing proper parts, building more worthy amps, mixers, and speaker cabinets, and



Whirlwind's new Rochester Series effects pedals include the OrangeBox phaser, GoldBox distortion, and RedBox compressor.

repairing musical equipment for a growing number of local bands.

Laiacona continued playing in bands and building sound equipment into his college years. While working at an electronics supply store in his native Rochester, New York he was befriended by stereo repair shop owner Keith Barr.

The two began experimenting with audio circuitry in Barr's basement. Their first promising device was a combination octave divider/phase shifter.

One night Laiacona took the pedal out to a local nightclub and presented it to session great Jesse Ed Davis. Davis fell in love with it. When he asked for one

for himself plus two for unnamed players in England, it dawned on Laiacona and Barr that their hobby might have some commercial potential. They founded MXR in 1973.

Barr and Laiacona decided to make separate effects, the Phase 90 and the Blue Box octave divider. Laiacona took the pedals around to all the local bars, selling them for \$60 apiece to virtually every guitarist he met.

After exhausting the local club scene he began selling to music stores in ever wider circles from home, often sleeping in his car or on the couch of music store counter staff. Strong dealer response in Boston and New York City inspired the two to move the operation out of the basement and into a small rented warehouse space in Rochester.

MXR pedals were selling briskly all across the country, but it was during Laiacona's first trip to southern California that he knew his products had really "arrived." After a fruitful morning meeting at Guitar Center Laiacona paid a visit to his friend Jesse Ed Davis.

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While Davis was busy upstairs and Laiacona sat waiting on his couch, John Lennon—the John Lennon—strolled into the room from the kitchen. Laiacona, around 21 at the time, was too nervous to introduce himself, and the two spent several awkward moments in silence before Davis returned and said, “John, this is Michael, the kid who makes the effects pedals.” “Oh, Michael!” said Lennon, and the two hit it off, chatting about gear and music. On the same day Davis introduced Laiacona to Richie Furay and Timothy B. Schmit of Poco. Over the years MXR pedals gave Laiacona access to and even friendship with many of rock, pop, and country’s top guitarists.

Laiacona contends that the MXR Phase 90 was used on “more hit records—from the Rolling Stones and John Lennon to Van Halen and Santana—than any other stomp box.” From MXR’s inception in 1973 through its 1984 bankruptcy, it sold more than two million pedals. (MXR is now a registered trademark of Dunlop Manufacturing, Inc.)

In the ’80s and ’90s, Laiacona explains, the “all-in-one box” became more popular than single-function pedals, and digital circuitry and sound modeling overtook analog. Now analog is back in vogue, providing a ripe market for the Rochester Series. “Rochester boxes have a certain amount of inherent distortion,” he says, “but it’s a pleasing, musical, analog distortion. They’re going to capture a whole new audience with a sound that was lost over the last 20 years. I think the product is right for the time.” Used in combination, he adds, the OrangeBox phaser, GoldBox distortion, and RedBox compressor “can produce almost any guitar sound except for delay and wah-wah.”

Another incentive to rejoin the effects pedal fray, ironically, was the economic recession. For several years Whirlwind had been focusing on providing sophisticated digital audio solutions for large installations that required extensive R&D and were fairly expensive to consumers. “I wanted to make products for under \$100 dealer cost that more people can afford,” says Laiacona. The pedals’ reasonable price belies the fact that they are all hand-wired (using none of Whirlwind’s extensive robotic surface-

mount capabilities) and produced not overseas, but in the company’s factory in Rochester.

Although the Rochester Series marketing materials refer to its MXR connection, Laiacona doesn’t plan to focus on it. “I don’t want to live on the old MXR’s laurels,” he says. “I think I’ve done enough in the last 35 years at Whirlwind that I don’t have to prove myself all over again.” He trusts retailers to know a hit when they see one, and their initial response to the Rochester

Series pedals has been very promising. “Every single dealer who tested them,” he notes—“even the ones who were initially less than enthusiastic about stocking another stomp box—has said ‘Absolutely, yes.’ And today’s younger players are flipping out over them. They don’t all know that these sounds are on countless classic songs and albums, but they can hear their character, their human element, and they instantly know it’s the real deal.”

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