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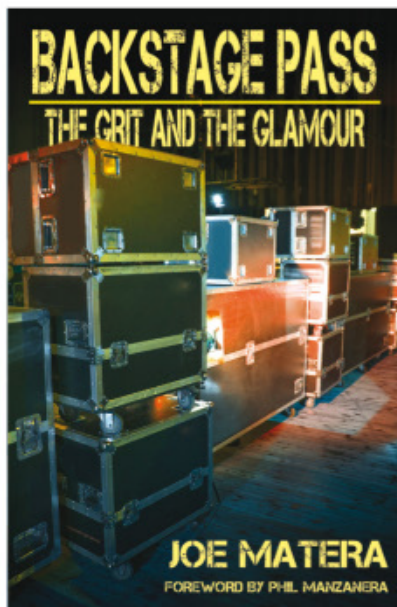
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NEW BOOK OFFERS BACKSTAGE PASS TO THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Australian guitarist and music journalist Joe Matera has just released *Backstage Pass: The Grit and the Glamour*, an uncompromising, behind-the-scenes look at the touring lives of working musicians. Originally released in the UK last year, it's now available locally in Australian bookstores and online. The book traces not only the reality of touring, but also the realities of reporting on music. "The aim of this book is to take you behind the scenes on my journey as a journalist and artist on tour," Matera writes in the book's opening pages, "It's a glimpse into a world that is far from the public perception."



So who can you expect to meet within the pages of *Backstage Pass*? Artists ranging from Lemmy to Pink are featured, but in addition to contact with some of the biggest names in music, Matera's book

also captures the mystique-laden – and often surprisingly banal – conditions that working musicians experience on the road. Likewise, Matera demystifies the working life of the journalist. "To most people the perception of the life of a music journalist is one of hanging out at parties with rock stars, partying until the early hours of the morning, jetting off to far away locations and indulging in all the glamorous benefits that come with hanging with that sort of crowd," so reads the book's blurb. "This perception couldn't be further from the truth."

Hear, hear. *Backstage Pass: The Grit and the Glamour* is out now in Australia, and published by Empire Publications. **Words by Shaun Prescott**



BREEDLOVE GUITARS ARE NOW AVAILABLE IN AUSTRALIA

If you've been keen to get your hands on a Breedlove acoustic, here's good news: the beloved acoustic brand with a focus on sustainable materials now has an Australian distributor in Amber Technology. That means, rather than import these beautiful items at immense cost, you can now walk into select Australian music retailers and simply pick one up.

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RUMOURS OF BLINK-182 DELONGE RETURN HEAT UP

Mark Hoppus has once again discussed Tom DeLonge's rumoured return to Blink-182, with the bass guitar hero refusing to rule out the possibility that Blink's founding guitarist may reunite with his former bandmates in the future.

Rumors of DeLonge's return gathered steam in August, when the electric guitar star posted a photo of himself alongside his classic era Blink-182 bandmates, Hoppus and drummer Travis Barker.

The photo was accompanied by a profile bio update, too, in which DeLonge stated, "I make music [in] Blink-182 and Angels & Airwaves". Pretty convincing evidence, if you ask us, and it's no surprise that fans quickly got excited.

Alas, such excitement was short-lived, when Hoppus came out and shot down the speculation. "There is no news to share. There is no announcement," he said. "If and when Blink has any announcement about anything, you will hear it from the official Blink-182 outlets."

However, Hoppus has now seemingly left the door to a DeLonge return wide open, revealing he is "open to whatever the next phase of Blink is".

Speaking to People earlier this week, Hoppus once again denied DeLonge had returned to the lineup, but revealed he and Barker recently met up with the guitarist while Hoppus was battling cancer.

In fact, according to Hoppus, the trio's meeting was "actually better than it used to be."

"It was the first time that all three of us were in the same room in like five years," he commented. "There was no agenda. There were no lingering grudges. It felt very back to what it should be: three friends sitting in a room."

To this end, Hoppus revealed he is "hopeful" for what the future holds, and has left the door open for a potential reunion.

"I keep writing music, and I'm open to whatever the next phase of Blink is," Hoppus continued. "I'm hopeful for the future. I'm just damn glad to be here." **Words by Matt Owen**

AUSTRALIAN guitar™



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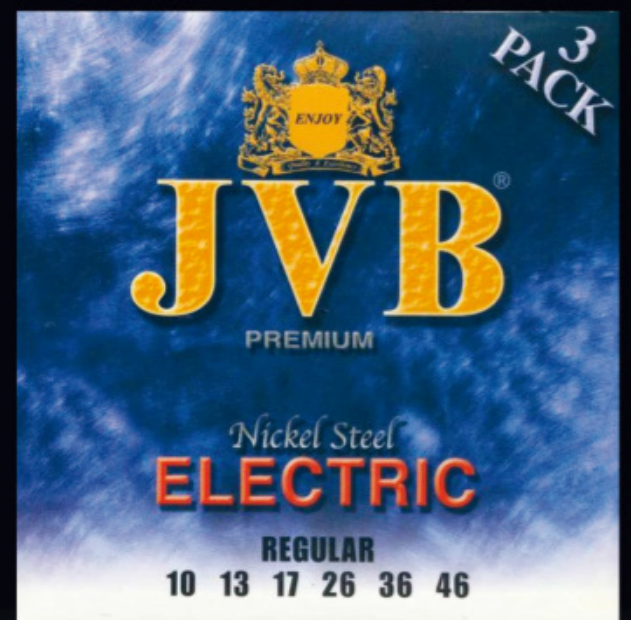
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ADAM NEWLING

HE IS A second-gen Greek-Australian with the spirit of a weathered Nashville country-rocker, fusing his love for steely twang and sizzling melancholy with his proven penchant for indie-rock (when he's not jamming up a storm on his own accord, Newling plays in Ruby Fields' band).

KINDA LIKE Andy Golledge, Buck Meek and Molly Burch.

CHECK OUT Newling's stirring second EP, *Half Cut And Dangerous* (which at eight tracks spanning 32 minutes, feels much more like an album), on which he embodies a vivid rawness with his battered and emotive singing, and a rich soundscape that seeks – and never fails to find – the beauty in minimalism.

Photo by David Herrington



COLOURBLIND

THEY ARE A quartet of nostalgic alt-rockers on Kurna land (Adelaide) turning their lingering teen angst into cathartic emo anthems begging to be screamed along to. The band have shared local stages with acts like Dear Seattle, Bugs and Cry Club, but they're fast becoming national favourites in their own right.

KINDA LIKE Ceres, Trophy Eyes, Title Fight and Microwave.

CHECK OUT Their gut-punching second EP, *Semaphore*. Like its striking cover (painted by local luminary Christina Lauren), the record hides pain behind its beauty, luring the listener in with gentle noodling and poised melodies before they're shown no mercy in a beating of sharp and stormy emotion.

Photo by Samuel Graves



KAT EDWARDS

SHE IS A soulful singer-songwriter taking her equally playful and poignant indie-pop from nipaluna (Hobart) to the world. She debuted in 2017 with an EP of acoustic folk titled *Sunk* – which, mind you, was a fantastic record – but has since come into her own with an evolved sense of self and a newly coloured-in musicality steered by driving synthpop soundscapes and breezy guitars.

KINDA LIKE Gretta Ray, Clairo, Girl In Red.

CHECK OUT Her sizzly second EP, *Best Bad News*, which arrived in mid-August and hasn't left our minds for a minute since. On it, Edwards soars from the dreamy ('Pretty Dancer') to the dour ('Growing Pains'), with some damn fine grooves in-between ('Best Bad News'). She's a marvel to see live, too.

Photo by James Morris



SUNSICK DAISY

THEY ARE A quartet of sonically ambitious high-schoolers on Kurna land (Adelaide) doling out what they describe as “sour candy dream-pop”. Fittingly so, their tunes are sweet and breezy, echoing the all-time greats of shoegaze with a tasteful hint of surf-rock energy. It's truly wild to think they've been around for less than a year.

KINDA LIKE Sweater Curse, Slowdive, Cocteau Twins.

CHECK OUT Their soaring debut single 'Someone Like You', which earned the band a spot as finalists in this year's Triple J Unearthed High contest. They're also fast becoming staples of Kurna's live circuit – you can catch them playing next with Teenage Joans on Friday October 14th.

Photo by Evie Wonder



TRACES

THEY ARE A trio of mosh-fiending mates from Tamworth (the country music capital of Australia), who – quite defiantly – opted out of lap steels and akoubras in favour of soul-thrashing breakdowns and brain-tickling glitches. They deal in technicolour chaos.

KINDA LIKE Northlane, Spiritbox, Invent Animate, Volumes.

CHECK OUT 'Soul Killer' and 'Crown Of Thorns', the first tastes of their convulsive and charged debut album, *Red* (which is sadly *not* an electro-core reimagining of Taylor Swift's iconic 2012 LP). A release date for the record is yet to be locked in, though leader Jack Pallett tells *Australian Guitar* that it's in the bag and *will* be out this year; keep your ears to the ground around November.

Photo by Jack Pallett



TWO KNIVES

THEY ARE A quintet of Novocastrian sad-jammers (including frontperson Rachel Maria Cox, who's been featured in many an issue of *Australian Guitar*) “brought together by a mutual love of *Simpsons* references and emo music”. The former sadly isn't featured in their output – *yet, at least* – but they certainly come through on the emo front, belting out some of the sharpest, most heartrending anthems this side of 2003.

KINDA LIKE The Lazy Susans, Luca Brasi, Sunny Day Real Estate.

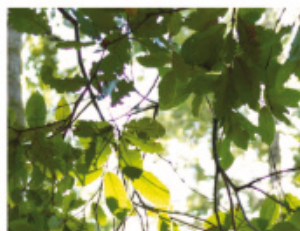
CHECK OUT Their eponymous debut EP, which burns brightly with a gritty rawness that may stem from its DIY recording, but feels just as suited to its poignant themes of heartbreak, trauma and internal reckoning.

Photo by James Rooker



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Photo: Jamie Bosanko

BEC SANDRIDGE

HAILS FROM DHARAWAL LAND/ILLAWARRA, NSW
PLAYS SOLO
SOUNDS LIKE FUZZ-FILLED GLITTER-POP, CIRCA 1984
LATEST DROP *LOST DOG* (EP OUT OCTOBER 7TH INDEPENDENTLY)

What's your current go-to guitar?

A blue Yamaha Revstar – it's just a real wee pocket rocket and gets the job done. Also looks pretty slick.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?

Before this gal, I was a Tele person all the way. The Revstar is super versatile. I can kinda fling through my entire set with this gal with no problems – from the cleaner, more '80s tracks, to the fuzzier numbers. My first ever guitar was a shitty blue acoustic I bought off eBay. I remember bidding on it, hoping that I'd win. It was a no-brand piece of garbage, but I just fell in love with it...

What inspires you as a player?

I love Leslie Feist's playing. I think she's so underrated. She manages to play really beautiful lines on parlour guitars and make them gross, which I love. And a lot of the time, she plays lead and rhythm simultaneously, which is something I try to do a lot of the time live.

Are you much of a gear nerd?

I am to be honest. Especially during lockdown, I acquired so much stuff. I'm really into this Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron pedal I got. It's great for squashed, rubbery disco guitars... But it's huge, so I haven't found room for it on my pedalboard. It's more for at-home recording and "playing" about, I guess... Something I've also revisited is my Frantone Cream Puff fuzz pedal – so cute looking, but tough as guts. My Aleks K Hot Ice is getting a rinsing, too. It's like a classic '70s cock-rock pedal, hand-made in Canada. I first heard it on Haim's record and fell in love with it. So many things!

Do you have any 'white whales'?

I'd love a Flying V.

What would your signature model look like?

Flying V, P-90s, black with fluorescent yellow racing stripes.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...

Feist – 'My Moon My Man'.



Photo: Otis Bennie

TOM ELLIOTT + JOEL MARTORANA

HAIL FROM NAARM/MELBOURNE, VIC
PLAY IN PEACE RITUAL
SOUNDS LIKE SOARING POP-ROCK WITH A TASTEFUL CRUNCH
LATEST DROP *PEACE RITUAL* (EP OUT NOW VIA LAST RIDE / BRICK + MORTAR)

What's your current go-to guitar?

Tom: My current go-to guitar is my Squier Jazzmaster. I bought it for a very low price, from a kid in my hometown, a few years ago. It's my only guitar with a tremolo arm, which has become an important part of the Peace Ritual sound, so it's the one I reach for the most when I'm writing at home.

Joel: My one and only guitar – ever – is my Fender Paramount acoustic. I picked it up in 2018 to try and learn a handful of chords to help with my songwriting and singing. I love how easy it feels to use and it makes learning basic songs less daunting for a beginner like myself!

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?

Tom: I was always surrounded by rock music growing up. My dad had an old Les Paul copy laying around that he never really learned to play, but some of my earliest memories of noodling were on that guitar. Years later, I destroyed the same guitar for a project in film school.

What inspires you as a player?

Tom: Jonny Greenwood. I think his style is super unique and unconventional, and it's a big inspiration to me.

Are you much of a gear nerd?

Tom: I love my Marshall JCM900. It's definitely a misunderstood amp that is capable of producing some amazing, sparkly clean and crunchy tones.

Joel: Everything about Peace Ritual and our songwriting process makes me want to become a gear nerd. I'd love to play with vocal and loop pedals, and incorporate other (more electronic) sounds and gear components into our live shows. That's something we will step into more in the future.

Do you have any 'white whales'?

Tom: I've been searching for a Yamaha SPX90 and Alesis MIDIVERB II, which were both famously used by Kevin Shields to create his signature reverse reverb sound.

What would your signature model look like?

Tom: I'd love to see a modern reimaging of the original 1980's Fender Bullet, which is kind of like a shrunk Stratocaster mixed with a Mustang. They're super rare and not always in the best condition, but I really love the feel of the three-quarter scale, low-profile neck.



KATE MCGUIRE

HAILS FROM MEANJIN/BRISBANE, QLD
PLAYS IN VOID

SOUNDS LIKE THRASHY, WHITE-HOT DIVE-BAR PUNK

LATEST DROP 'LEXAPRO' (SINGLE OUT NOW VIA DAMAGED)

What's your current go-to guitar?

Hands down a Fender Jazzmaster – preferably one that I've covered in a variety of cheap stickers, like the ones you buy from dollar stores. Sonic Youth is without a doubt one of my favourite bands in the whole world, so I fell in love with the Jazzmaster through them, and adjacent bands that played Jazzmasters like Dinosaur Jr. It's just the coolest looking guitar ever and sounds like nothing else I've played.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?

My first guitar was a cheap dark blue/green Ashton, which I was gifted on my sixth birthday and still have at my house. I fell in love with the guitar when I first watched *School Of Rock*, and from there I really just couldn't stop obsessing. When I was a kid I would climb on top of my dad's trailer and pretend to be Billie Joe Armstrong. I even wrote, in a third-grade questionnaire, that I wanted to be a guitarist when I grow up. I don't know, I guess it's just something I could never separate from myself, and I never wanted to.

What inspires you as a player?

When it comes to playing live, one of my biggest influences is Billie Joe Armstrong. Ever since I was a little kid. His power stance is something I always took with me when I started playing live – to me it's just the coolest looking way to play guitar. I'm also really inspired by Kim Gordon and the way she takes up space on a stage. Her presence is so captivating and emotive. Thurston Moore, as well, with the way he attacks his guitar. I get so bored watching people play guitar without any emotion or movement, I guess they're doing what they want but that's just not for me. Anyway, there's so many people. I could go on about people I look up to forever.

Are you much of a gear nerd?

Not really. I love gear but I barely know anything when it comes down to the technicalities. But give me a JCM800 and a Big Muff and I'll be sweet.

Do you have any 'white whales'?

Not particularly, I just want to be like Kevin Shields [of My Bloody Valentine] and own like 20 Jazzmasters.

What would your signature model look like?

An offset, obviously, and it would be cool if it had stickers inside the paint job. That'd be epic.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...

Kurt Cobain. I have no idea what we'd play – we'd probably just jam a bunch of Breeders songs.



MATT PREEN

HAILS FROM KOOMBANA/BUNBURY, WA

PLAYS IN GREAT GABLE

SOUNDS LIKE SUMMERY, GROOVE-FLECKED INDIE-ROCK

LATEST DROP *ON THE WALL IN THE MORNING LIGHT*

(LP OUT NOW VIA RAINBOW VALLEY / WARNER)

What's your current go-to guitar?

My current guitar has been my go-to for a long time – it's an American Deluxe Telecaster in aged cherry burst finish. I got it around 2013 during a family trip to America. I wanted that particular guitar in butterscotch, because I was obsessed with Jeff Buckley at the time, but I couldn't find it anywhere. It's so versatile and sturdy, I've never had any problems with it and it sounds great through practically anything.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?

I originally started on acoustic guitar because I loved Jack Johnson, so all I wanted to play was his stuff. The first guitar I got from my parents was this Yamaha acoustic thing, I still have it to this day and it's usually missing a string at all times.

What inspires you as a player?

I'll treat the guitar like its own voice as much as I can without taking away from the songs, because it's important for it all to compliment each other. I also make sure to treat the guitar as not just a lead instrument – I'm also thinking about rhythm stuff all the time.

Are you much of a gear nerd?

I wouldn't consider myself much of a gear nerd, but I do love some music gear. I like the idea of building a little studio filled with vintage gear. For the time being, I'm very happy with my Tele and Vox amp combo, you can't go wrong with that.

Do you have any 'white whales'?

Maybe something like a 12-string Rickenbacker, or George Harrison's guitar. Otherwise it would probably have to be some nice vintage recording stuff.

What would your signature model look like?

It would have the body of a Tele but a bit bigger, and a maple fretboard. Vintage Tele bridge, hand-wound soapbar P-90 pickups. A single-ply parchment pickguard, nickel hardware. One volume and tone knob and a toggle switch... Something like that.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...

George Harrison, and I'd be happy just to have a silly blues jam or something.

GANG OF YOUTHS

MIDDLE KIDS + GRETTA RAY

WHERE ROD LAVER ARENA NAARM/MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

WHEN FRIDAY AUGUST 12TH, 2022

REVIEW ELLIE ROBINSON

PHOTOS JESS GLEESON



Between all the heavy subject matter, kaleidoscopic soundscapes and ambitious sonic detours it presented, *Angel In Realtime* – Gang Of Youths’ statement-making third album, which arrived back in February – can’t be authentically represented live anywhere smaller than an arena. The Sydney-native, London-based quintet have played a few intimate shows off the back of it – most in clubs around their new stomping grounds – and footage from those show the songs translating well, but notably so in a much different light to

their studio-mixed counterparts. This stately run of arena shows, though, promised a genuine reflection of the grandeur captured on *Angel In Realtime*: grandeur that Gang Of Youths have proved they’re more than capable of.

Before they presented it, Dave Le’aupepe and co. had some close friends warm us up. The first was hometown hero Gretta Ray, who was palpably stoked to be commanding the stage at Melbourne’s 15,000-capacity Rod Laver Arena. This, she pointed out, was the site of her first-ever concert, Alicia Keys in December 2008, which sent her spiralling down the rabbithole that led her to the very same stage. Her elation was

channelled into an enrapturing performance, where every note she sung soared and struck with zealous intent, and every move she made seemed like it was directed by Hollywood's best.

Her sultry, soulful vocals gave a unique richness to a cover of Billy Joel's 'Vienna', while an as-yet-unreleased cut titled 'Can't Keep It Casual' saw her lean into the buzz and buoyancy of schlocky '80s synthpop. The only real downside to Ray's set was how depressingly little it utilised the skills of guitarist Hamish Patrick. He stole the show with his clean and crisp fretting on 'Drive', but with the rest of the show drawing from Ray's synth-driven debut album, last year's *Begin To Look Around*, Patrick's efforts were largely buried in the mix. Nevertheless, Ray and her three-piece backing unit kicked the night off with infectious energy and striking radiance.

Unlike Ray and themselves, Gangs' fellow Sydneysiders in Middle Kids are decidedly anti-spectacle. Their musical gravitas is instead depicted onstage with a loose (but very keyed-in) jaminess that allows the band's chemistry, homely and affectionate, to shine as the focal point. That was true even here, on this swanky stage in this massive arena (replete with a catwalk!), where Hannah Joy strummed and sang with the same honey-sweetened warmth she does in theatres. Her tan Strat rang out with just the right balance of dust and twang, accented by the tasteful wailing of Middle Kids' Tele-armed touring member, Miles Elkington.

However ill-fitting it seemed in this setting, the band's ten-song showcase (split equally between 2018's *Lost Friends* and last year's *Today We're The Greatest*) was undeniably fun and left us grinning from ear to ear. It also ended with the revelation that Le'aupepe was integral in Middle Kids releasing their breakout single, 'Edge Of Town', in 2016 – a note echoing Ray's declaration that Gangs were the first band to show their support when she released 'Drive' the same year. It felt even more special, then, that Middle Kids and Gretta Ray were the two acts enlisted

to support this show, proving the devotion that Gangs have to uplifting and continuing to champion the scene they cut their teeth in.

"Melbourne was the first city in Australia that gave a shit about us," Le'aupepe said in the first of many quip-laden chunks of banter he doled across Gangs' two-hour set. He could've said that in every city on this run, for all we know – after all, every crowd a band plays to is "the best crowd we've ever seen," etcetera – but we'd be remiss to argue; with the visceral, impassioned devotion they poured into every last beat and chord, Gangs performed as if tonight's show was the last they'd ever play. It's a shame, then, that their mix was so muddy. For much of the set, Le'aupepe's vocals were almost entirely inaudible, while Jung Kim's intricate fretwork and the sizzling whistle of Tom Hobden's violin were buried under the bass and poorly situated synth tracks.

When their efforts *could* be discerned, it was doubtless that each member played a crucial role in recreating the opulent breadth of *Angel In Realtime*, and all nine of them – the core outfit of Le'aupepe, Kim, Hobden, bassist Max Dunn and drummer Donnie Borzestowski, plus four touring members – served their role as if their lives depended on it. Ray appeared alongside Simon Matafai as a backing vocalist, and though neither could be heard in that role, the former left concertgoers stunned when she took over Le'aupepe to sing lead on 'The Deepest Sighs, The Frankest Shadows', and the latter shone as a pianist with his impromptu run of 'Bohemian Rhapsody'.

On ancillary percussion were Louis Giannamore and James Larter, with the former also juggling guitar and piano duties, and the latter tasked with perhaps the most pressing of instrumental roles: the glittering marimba parts that add a pastel punch to much of the *Angel* cuts. Of course, none of the soundscape works without Le'aupepe crooning atop it. Even when his words were indiscernible by proxy of the poor mix, the frontman's voice compelled, as if every syllable he

intoned had been personally blessed by St. Cecilia.

He yelled with fiery passion on 'What Can I Do If The Fire Goes Out?' and 'The Heart Is A Muscle', sunk into his leather-jacket cool on 'Let Me Down Easy' (which he restarted thrice in disgust for the crowd's lack of energy) and hit the high notes on 'In The Wake Of Your Leave' with soul-battering aplomb. Worth marvelling at too was Le'aupepe's near-Shakespearean theatricality, as he strutted down the catwalk like a natural-born model, singled punters out to join him in belting along to particularly poignant lyrics, and broke the tension between songs with swear-laden tangents that show he could easily moonlight as a comic.

The setlist, admittedly, left much to be desired: in performing all but two songs from *Angel In Realtime*, Gangs' first two albums – *The Positions* (2015) and *Go Farther In Lightness* (2017) – were unfairly neglected, and 2016's *Let Me Be Clear* EP was ignored altogether. Those aforementioned *Lightness* cuts earned the most emphatic responses from the sold-out audience (and rightfully so), while the biggest highlight of the entire set came at the hand of 'Magnolia', which was the only *Positions* cut Gangs played. Under normal circumstances, this would have severely marred the overall experience. But this show wasn't played under normal circumstances.

See, *Angel In Realtime* is a concept album about family identity, the power of grief and the malleable concept of "legacy", intrinsically tied to Le'aupepe's late father Teleso and his labyrinthine life story. To authentically do it justice – on this particular tour, at least – almost every song on it was a pivotal inclusion in the setlist, with those few slivers of Gangs' extended catalogue serving as the peaks to those more emotive and cerebral songs' valleys. As a whole, the show served as a loving ode to Teleso – and though all we know of him is what Le'aupepe offers on *Angel In Realtime*, we're certain he'd've been damn proud of the show his son and all his mates put on for him. 



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SHORT STACK

BETWEEN YOU AND ME + THOSE WHO DREAM

WHERE THE CROXTON BANDROOM, NAARM/MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

WHEN FRIDAY JULY 8TH, 2022

REVIEW ELLIE ROBINSON

PHOTOS DARCY GOSS

Almost two and a half years after it was first announced, Short Stack finally hit the road for their “comeback” tour in the middle of June. We headed along to one of three shows at Melbourne’s revered Croxton Bandroom, sprinting as fast as possible down High Street to make it in time for the last few songs of the first set, from Perth alt-pop duo Those Who Dream. Turns out we didn’t need to worry – thanks to technical difficulties, the venue opened up over an

hour late. We were ultimately relieved, if a little miffed that we did all that running for nothing.

Wielding ultra-tight, energised pop songs heavy on production and atmospheric effects, Those Who Dream made an easy case for themselves as Australia’s answer to Twenty One Pilots. There were times in the set where if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Those Who Dream fell head-over-heels for their American counterparts – some moments, like the choreographed handshake and dual bass drum-off, were lifted directly from Twenty One Pilots’ own playbook – but when they dared to be original, the

sibling duo stunned without a hitch.

Armed with a Les Paul-esque semi-hollow, Josh Meyer’s fretwork was crisp and gelled beautifully with the bassy, glitch-inflected backing tracks; some distortion would not have gone astray, but even without it, his tonal palette was rich and colourful. And although this is a guitar magazine, we’d be remiss not to gush over Cooper’s downright hypnotising prowess with a pair of drumsticks. The siblings bounced off each other with radiant aplomb, leaving not a second of dead air in their wake as they reeled through hit after hit.

In comparison to *Those Who Dream*, *Between You & Me* missed the mark by a few kilometres. The local pop-punkers came with a brilliant setlist in clutch, showcasing more than half of last year's *Armageddon* record; but while those songs shine on record with sharp and considered performances, they were played here with a looseness that often blunted their impact. When it came to the banter weaved around songs and the quintet's infectiously buoyant chemistry, that looseness was their saving

grace – there just wasn't the necessary balance between the fun and fastidious when it came to the songs themselves.

Altogether, with shows like this – and especially in the wake of the pandemic – it's important to keep expectations in check. When you spend two and a half years being hyped for a gig, your excitement can mutate to a point where no matter how great the artist's performance is, it'll never live up to the grandiose, Hollywood-perfect version

you've conjured up in your mind. So as *Short Stack* sauntered out to their buzzy electronic intro, we had to ground ourselves in reality. The band typically prioritise energy over proficiency, so bung notes and missed beats were to be expected. They have near-flawless chemistry onstage, though, so they'd lose one star from our review for every minute we spent bored. And although they have a litany of hits in their arsenal, this was, after all, a celebration of their new album, so we couldn't expect a start-to-end showcase of "the classics".

The first chunk of the set went exactly as expected – new cuts 'Burn You Down' and 'Dance With Me' were punchy and played with adequate fervour (and the immediate contrast between the former's fierceness and the latter's buoyancy made our ears prick up with delight), but they didn't have an ounce of the power that old-school staple 'Princess' did when they played it next. "*This in-cen-tive rep-re-sents this dim-ly lit room, just a min-ute in*" – it's admittedly super cheesy, but this opening line – and the sticky, pseudo-gothic swagger that frontman Shaun Diviney chants it with – will always trigger an emphatic response from a room full of elder emos. It's like audible crack. And goddamn, did we dive straight for the pipe.

Try as they might to play the roles of dumb schoolmates that never outgrew their pop-punk phase, Diviney and his bandmates – bassist (and onstage love interest) Andy Clemmensen and drummer Bradie Webb – are all pretty switched-on blokes: they knew better than we did that all we really wanted was to feel like teenagers again. So their setlist was veritably stacked with those gloriously gaudy two-chord gems, including half of the tracklist from their timeless 2009 debut, *Stack Is The New Black*. But the way these songs were punctuated with and twined around choice cuts from *Maybe There's No Heaven* – a key instance being a curtailed run of 'Live4' snapping into the meteoric 'Ladies And Gentlemen' – made this set much more than a simple nostalgia trip.

As predicted, the band's chemistry was immediately captivating. Diviney commanded the crowd with all his might, belting anthemic refrains like his life depended on it, shredding up a storm and leading his crowd in the compulsory clap- and chant-alongs, all the while laying waste to his stage and hamming it up with Clemmensen. The latter's handiwork was equally striking, every bouncy groove and plucky jut adding a wallop of colour to the mix. And Webb, as always, proved to be secret to *Short Stack's* winning formula. Towards the end of the set, Diviney and Clemmensen took a breather for Webb to play a hectic, convulsive drum solo set to Knife Party's 'Centipede'.

Though he handled most of the lead lines himself, Diviney was flanked by touring guitarist Luke Lukess, who stood awkwardly at the back left-hand corner of the stage, hidden from its otherwise extravagant lighting setup. Something about this felt... *Off*. He delivered some of the night's most striking passages, fleshing out the songs with crisp and crunchy shredding that made them feel truly explosive – not to mention the way his backing vocals helped Diviney's leads soar. He was the unsung hero of the night, and should have been given just as much of the spotlight as the core *Short Stack* trio.

Bar that one nitpick, *Short Stack* delivered a nigh-on perfect set, honouring their storied history while celebrating the present and making them collide in mesmerising ways. Was it worth a two-and-a-half year wait? Absolutely – just so long as we don't have to wait nearly as long for the next show... 🎸





RISING FROM THE ASHES

DARKER STILL ALMOST KILLED **PARKWAY DRIVE**, BUT IT ALSO MADE THEM STRONGER THAN EVER. LEAD SHREDDER JEFF LING TELLS AUSTRALIAN GUITAR EXACTLY HOW THE BAND'S SEVENTH ALBUM HAS SUCH EMPYREAL POWER.

WORDS BY **ANNA ROSE**. PHOTO BY **DAVE LEPAGE**.

Coming to us live from his home studio – or as he'd rather call it, his "little underground doomsday bunker" – Parkway Drive's Jeff Ling says with a forced chuckle, trying (and immediately failing) to shelter his anxiety: "Honestly, I'm scared of this room. I spent a lot of time in here over the last few years, so now I only come here when I need to escape the noises of my kids and everyone else upstairs. I call it the 'trainwreck studio' because I've got two young children, and life has just been so busy that it hasn't been vacuumed in like five years, so there's stuff stuck to the walls and all over the floor... It looks really sad in here – but it gets the job done!"

It's in this place of chaotic privacy that Ling – and the rest of the high-on iconic Byron Bay crew – have completed their latest job, mastering the art of brutalising metal on their seventh studio album, *Darker Still*. The album has it all, running the full gamut of metal from Southern to thrash, all the way

to glam. It also offers hints of Floydian prog and brooding industrial like Nine Inch Nails, popping up on songs that frontman Winston McCall says the group has never had the courage, time or understanding to attempt... Until now, of course.

Reaching musical seventh heaven is an achievement in which the band have placed immense pride – and rightly so. Arguably, *Darker Still* marks a type of ascension for the metalcore outfit. When Parkway announced the album, McCall said that when the group started out some 19 years ago, they "were trying to push ourselves to do more than we possibly could".

"What you hear on *Darker Still*," he continued, "is the final fulfilment of our ability to learn and grow catching up with the imagination that we have always had." The past two decades have been one hell of a ride, to say the least – but seven albums, an EP, three films and a book later, *Darker Still* shows that Parkway

still have it in them to evolve. For all its in-studio turbulence, it marks a landing on solid ground – for Parkway and for the fans who've invested in them for all these years.

As a guitarist, what were some of those ambitions you were finally able to realise?

One of the few good things that came out of this whole thing with COVID, with bands not being able to go on tour, was that we had more time to focus on writing an album than we ever have before. And that sort of translated to refinement, because we could try some more challenging things due to all the extra time we had. There's a song in there that is a proper ballad – the title track, 'Darker Still' – and we've always sort of nudged towards that on our previous albums, but they've never quite been proper ballads. But this one's a proper ballad – it took a long time and a lot of head scratching, and a lot of f***ing around to get that

song to where it is now. It was hard work – and new territory – but I think we pulled it off!

Your part in that definitely stands out with that very bluesy, almost prog-esque fingerpicking. Was that a cool thing to experiment with?

Yeah. I mean, as a musician, I just can't sit still with my legs crossed. I probably really annoy a lot of our fans with it, but an idea pops into my head and I just sort of latch onto it, and I have to put it to the tape. And I never plan for it to end up on an album, but then the guys end up liking it, and I end up liking it... It is, weirdly, still within the confines of what Parkway can do – but at the same time, kind of stretching it. We have a thing where we go, "If it feels good, let's do it." That's kind of our mantra – it doesn't matter how strange it is, or what genre it sounds like, if we're all feeling it, and we're into it, we're gonna track it.

We'd be remiss not to talk about 'If A God Can Bleed', too, because your playing on that track is unlike anything we'd ever heard.

That's an interesting one because a lot of that direction came from Winston. He's like, super arty. He has these crazy ideas that, you know, they always end up so cool, but they're hard to grasp onto at first. That song really took shape in the studio, when we were all getting really creative with it. It feels like a trailer to some wild TV series or something like that. It's one of the most out-there, but like, cool-in-its-own-way tracks that we've ever done. It's fun to listen to – that's my view on it [*laughs*].

But yeah, there's a couple of really odd things in there. I used a talk box – I don't know if you can hear it, but over the chorus, that's what I'm using to get that guitar effect. And it's not like I'm overly familiar with them, I was just like, "Oh, those things are kind of cool, I wonder what it would sound like here?" And I basically played the chorus melody with the talk box, and it actually adds to it, you know? It has this strangely lounge, smoky, kind of atmospheric sound.

But then there's 'Soul Bleach', which feels very much like old-school Parkway Drive. Was that intentional?

Yeah, definitely. You know, we always like to touch on our sounds as well, because we obviously know it so well. We don't tend to do *too many* tracks like that anymore, because in our minds, we kind of mastered it to best of our ability back then, and we don't feel as confident with that sound as we did in those days. That's the heaviest track on the record, for sure.

Does it get harder to keep pushing yourselves creatively, when each album is a step up in ambition?

That's a really good question, because... Yes, it does. You're putting pressure on yourself because you genuinely want to create something that everyone perceives as bigger and better, but then you have the pressure of, "Well, how's it *actually* gonna be received?" If you spend years of your life working on something, it can be pretty crushing to get ridiculed online all the time. But at the same time, thankfully, we play these songs live, and they absolutely *demolish* our old songs.

It's a little bit of "a proof in the pudding" scenario there, because if a song sounds super huge live and you see everyone singing along to it, and you feel that energy lift – which is what happens with those new songs – then you know, "Well, that worked." But you're taking that risk, and you're teasing the mold, and it's scary. There's a little bit of heartache with

some of the comments we see – which, obviously, I have to have thick skin about these days, because that's all a part of it.

To be totally honest, because of all the extra time we had, I was a lot more involved with this record. I don't usually have that much time to work on my side of the writing, but I did [with this record] – so trying to juggle all the crazy stuff that was happening – COVID, floods, families and such – with the process of writing an album... I'm still so drained from it. We tracked the last song on January 12th or something like that, and I'm still absolutely fried by it. I've never been so fried from a record. I'm really proud of it, for sure, but yeah, it killed me. I don't know how I'm gonna do another one, to be honest.

I want to bring up that quote from Winston, where he talks about this album being "the final fulfilment of [Parkway Drive's] ability to learn and grow". Is he implying that this might well be your last album?

Honestly, we like to not put too much pressure on ourselves in that respect, or put our own expectations out there, because if you do that, you're instantly putting yourself in a hole to some extent. We write music because we really enjoy it, and we get a lot of fulfilment out of it. And we still love playing live shows, and we love the crowd element, so as long as we still enjoy writing music together and the crowds still appreciate what we're coming up with, we're probably going to keep going.

But at the same time, you know, if that enjoyment starts to drop off a bit, then yeah, who knows? I wouldn't guarantee either side, really. Because once this record was finished, we were all *really* burnt out as people. So we're starting to talk about ways that, if we do attempt something like this again in the future, we make it far less draining and more fun. If we do go again for another round, we'll have to figure out a different system.

As a creative person, you can't force greatness.

That's so true. We've had that pressure in the past, where a manager or label or someone has been like, "Right, we need a record on the 27th of August, blah, blah, blah – this exact timeframe..." And it's like, "Well, hold on – that's only possible if we, the creators, are feeling it." You know, if we're feeling inspired and

pumped on our material, yeah, I'm sure it's possible to rush it out and have it still be great. But what if your life gets turned upside down, and all this crazy stuff happens, and you can't mentally pull that off? And then you've got to deal with that pressure of, "Ah, am I letting my bandmates down? Am I letting our labels down? Am I letting the fans down?" There's all those pressure-cooking factors that you sort of have to keep at bay, if you can.

On a more positive note, let's talk guitars! What was the arsenal like for *Darker Still*?

We used quite a few guitars for different moments in the songs. For the majority of it, we still used Luke's and my signature guitars, with the usual [EMG 81 pickups] installed. We did, however, experiment with putting some of the Fishman Moderns in the bridge pickup area, and they were really cool – they just had a really nice, rich tune that sat in the mix really nicely. And then for the guitars, one of the most surprising ones I used was this Les Paul Personal... Have you heard of the Personal before?

I can't say I have.

That's right, no one has! But anyway, I tried this guitar, and I wasn't really that stoked with a lot of the other E standard guitars that we had for the song 'Darker Still', so we ended up switching out the pickups in this guy and putting in a Fishman Classic, and it just sounded so rich and smooth and amazing. Because that song is so exposed and open, any kind of tonal stuff is really noticeable. [The Personal is] a big beast – the resonance on it is amazing, and we used it for everything – we used it for solos, leads, rhythms, riffs... It was a real workhorse. So that did 'Darker Still', and then my Les Paul Custom was the other one that kind of surprised everyone.

Once again, I wasn't digging the sound of the traditional humbucker in it, so we ripped it out, put a Fishman Modern in it, and... It just *ripped*. It sounded a bit more raw and it was very prominent in the mix, compared to our other guitars with Fishmans in them. So this guitar sort of took the reins, really. It did a lot of the riffs, a lot of the rhythms and most of the breakdowns. And then I use my my signature guitar for all of the leads and solos, because it's just really creamy for some reason. 🎸



LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

THE KOOKS' NEW ALBUM IS BOTH THEIR MOST ELATED AND THEIR MOST EXPERIMENTAL. FRONTMAN LUKE PRITCHARD TELLS AUSTRALIAN GUITAR HOW THEY PULLED IT OFF.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**.
PHOTO BY **PAUL JOHNSON**.



In a hot second from now (early October, to be exact), The Kooks will touch down for their first shows on Aussie ground in almost four years. The trip comes as part of their belated celebrations for the 15th anniversary of *Inside In / Inside Out*, the Brighton pop-rockers' seminal 2006 debut. But the shows – pencilled in for Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney – won't *just* be a trip down memory lane: the trio too have a whole stack of new songs to premiere *Down Under*, having just unleashed unto the world their sixth studio album, *10 Tracks To Echo In The Dark*.

Deceptively titled, the album sports some of The Kooks' brightest material yet: something frontman Luke Pritchard credits to the recent milestones he'd reached in his personal life (ie. getting married, becoming a father, relocating to Berlin and discovering a love for minimalist electronica). That translated to more pop-centric, unapologetically *fun* songs, a fierce willingness to think outside the box and, as a result, a more interesting album overall.

It saw the band explore concepts they hadn't yet before – like key song passages without guitars, and the first collaborations in their entire discography ('Beautiful World' with Milky Chance and the NEIKED-assisted 'Without A Doubt') – and, perhaps most unexpectedly, it saw them take a very unconventional route in getting the songs out to fans. Instead of the usual timeline – three or four months of scattered singles, then one big album "drop" – The Kooks opted to stagger the release in three chunks: tracks 1-3 were released in January as the *Connection* EP, and tracks 4-6 in April as *Beautiful World*, before the full project – under the formal banner of *10 Tracks To Echo In The Dark* – arrived in July.

As Pritchard explains to *Australian Guitar*, not a lot has made sense over the past few years, and to an old-school fan of The Kooks, not a lot of this new album will, either. So it only made sense, paradoxically, if the strategy they took to release it was one people would never expect.

I think it was fitting to have a unique strategy for this album's release, because it is a very unique album for The Kooks. Was it exciting to explore a more colourful, diversified soundscape?

Yeah, I felt very inspired. Going into it, my goal was to kind of make something more minimal. Obviously, my biggest goal is always to make songs that sound really f***ing good, and hopefully have a good message. But on that musical level, yeah, it was really fun to do something different with the instrumentation.

You know, on the last two albums we made – *Let's Go Sunshine* [2018] and *Listen* [2014] – there's so much going on, so much instrumentation. And it was really fun to do that, but when I was in Berlin, I discovered a love for noise gates and got really into doing things like noise-gating drums.

Musically, too... I didn't grow up on much '80s music, so it was quite fun for me to kind of delve into that '80s indie-rock world as an adult. A lot of the modern music that I was liking had that kind of feel, so it definitely had an influence on me, to make a record with some kind of that *Stranger Things* inspiration. It's very new for us – there's a lot of synths, and there are things like choruses that have no guitar. We'd never done anything like that before, so it was really fun and inspiring.

Did that have much of an impact on the way you approached the guitar for this record?

Yeah, I think to a degree... I didn't think about it too much. I definitely feel that our guitar sound choices were very DIY. That was cool, because normally I would be getting a bunch of amps – and especially Hugh, you know, he's a total boffin; he's very knowledgeable about the guitars and guitar amps, and we would always go analogue and do it like Keith did it, you know? But I did quite a lot of work in Berlin, and a lot of it would be done at home, so all of a sudden I was like, "Oh, I should try getting this guitar sound with an amp simulator and try programming!"

I got really into production over the last few years. It started because I made an album with my wife and I did a lot of that stuff with her, so I've got quite into production then, but this was kind of like "the next level". And so yeah, it did inspire this [record's guitar] sound because when you've got these incredible massive synths, you have to have a guitar sound that complements them and sits right in the mix with them.

Do you see The Kooks following this path more in the future, or potentially even taking it further?

Yeah, I mean, I think we're on a journey here. I think this album was very creatively exciting to make, and it's been so fun to live in it, so I think we'll carry on down this path. But I never quite know what an album's going to be until I get into it, you know? I always kind of fall into making an album. I can't imagine a time when we wouldn't have any guitars – I think we are an indie guitar band, essentially, and I'm gonna grip onto that with my bare fingers... But I think we could go deeper. I think there's a whole world in

that production style that we're very new to, and I'm excited to see more of it!

How did that joint with Milky Chance come to life?

It was very natural. There's a lot of mutual love between us – we all like each other's music, and we'd been working with Tobias Kuhn, who worked on the last couple of Milky Chance records, so there was already a rapport going on. But how it came about: I'd written this song with Toby, and I was thinking about how with the chorus, when the bass comes in, it just felt so "Milky Chance". So I was like, "Either I've got to call them and ask for their permission to do this, or see if they want to get on the track." And they wanted to get on the track!

Unfortunately, we couldn't be in the same room [when their parts were recorded] because of *the thing we do not mention* – but it was amazing. It was great. And then we met up in Berlin and performed the song acoustically for the first time, and that was a really cool moment. I mean, collaborating is quite new for us – we'd never done a collaboration on an album before. But I think ['Beautiful World'] was the start of things to come. Because again, it's all about embracing the modern, and one of the best things about modern music is that a lot of people collaborate with each other. I'm into it.

I love your optimism. It really shines through on this record, too – what made you want to make this album so upbeat?

I'd slightly tweak that, in that I don't think it was something I wanted – I didn't go into [the writing process] being like, "I need to make a really positive record!" I just found myself in a very stable place in my life, and I think the best thing you can do as a songwriter is be authentic and honest, you know? I'd had a very tumultuous, up-and-down life up until the last few years. And it's been great – it's been quite wild, actually – it was like I turned a corner and all of a sudden I was married and had a kid. And I think when that happens, you know, your nihilism and your cynicism kind of disappear.

I look back on the album now and I'm realising that it's not even the lyrics that are necessarily so positive, but just the way I'm singing and everything, because it all comes from a very positive place, I think that rubs off [on the record]. I hope it does – I think that's a great thing, and I'm not shy of that. I don't think we have to be all doom and gloom all the time, you know?



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F*** YEAH!!!

AUSTRALIAN GUITAR DIVES HEADFIRST INTO THE MOSH-READY MADNESS OF **THE CHATS'** BALLS-TO-THE-WALL SECOND ALBUM, GET F***ED.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON.**

PHOTO BY **LUKE HENERY.**

Of all the timeless sayings in the Australian language, one is distinct for a multitude of reasons: “Get f***ed.” It can be utilised to reflect excitement (“50 percent off Shapes at Woolies!? Get f***ed!”), bewilderment (“Get f***ed, that kangaroo just crushed an entire keg of VB with its biceps”), disappointment (“Get f***ed, as if I’m paying \$2.10 a litre for E-10”), anger (“Look at this dickhead doing 60 in an 80 zone, get f***ed”) and even love (“You bought me this? Get f***ed, that’s so sweet”).

But perhaps its most apt utility is in expressing astonishment – every once in a blue moon, for example, you’ll hear an album so inconceivably wild, so off-chops and intense that the only words your mind can conjure in reaction are, of course, “Get f***ed.” The Chats’ second full-length effort – titled, you guessed it, *Get F***ed* – is one of those albums.

*Get F***ed* is about as unhinged as its title and cover art – a monochrome snap of The Chats, clad in shirts sporting beer brand logos, passionately flipping off their cameraman – imply. It’s a blistering, breakneck-paced ripper of an album, where only two of its 13 songs break three minutes, and absolutely none of them give the listener a chance to catch a breath. Part of that comes down to the inclusion of newcomer guitarist Josh Hardy, who replaced Josh “Pricey” Price a few months after The Chats released their debut album, *High Risk Behaviour*, in March of 2020.

That was, to say the least, a whirlwind time – for everybody. The COVID-19 pandemic had just taken hold, and the entire planet was thrust into a state of anxiety, uncertainty and general tumult. The Chats, too, had just released their first full-length effort, three years after their mainstream eruption, with all eyes set firmly on the Sunny Coast trio. Taking the reins as the most important member in The Chats at the most pivotal moment on their timeline (thus far, at least), Hardy – who also fronts The Unknowns – was flung into a position that sounds enticing as it does *absolutely terrifying*. But as he tells *Australian Guitar*, it wasn’t actually that big of a deal.

What was that experience like for you, joining The Chats in such a chaotic time for everyone involved?

Well musically, it was really easy because we all grew up with each other, and I was already real good mates with Eamon and Matt – and with Pricey, too, to an extent. But obviously, joining an already established band that was very popular, people outside it all had different opinions of me. I copped a lot of flak for it at first, but it was good – I just had to prove myself to all the real diehard fans. And everyone’s been saying that we’re sounding better than ever right now, so I’m f***ing stoked with that.

You have a bit of a rockabilly background, don’t



you? Eamon said you used to slick your hair back and everything.

Yeah, back in the day! I’ve always been a big fan of garage-rock, psych-rock, rockabilly – all that stuff. I loved The Cramps when I was growing up – you know, all those sort of bands that came from that scene in the ‘70s. They’re classics. My other band, The Unknowns, we started off as sort of like a psych-y, rockabilly-garage trio. That was my shtick, I guess, when I was 16.

That really shines through on a song like ‘Getting Better’, with that real surfy, ‘50s rock ‘n’ roll kind of vibe.

Oh yeah, for sure. That was one of the first songs that I brought to The Chats – I wrote it for myself but I was like, “Ah, this could be good for The Chats!” And if they didn’t want to use it, I would have used it for The Unknowns – but [The Chats] really liked the sound of it, so we just went all-in. It’s a bit different to the other stuff [on *Get F***ed*], which I was stoked with.

Your solos on this record are mental, too – was that something you focussed a lot of energy into?

I try not to think about it too much. I feel like playing lead guitar – especially in my position with the band, where it’s a three-piece and everything’s very straightforward – if you start to overthink things, it becomes easy to overcompensate. So I just tried to go in there and do what I do best – maybe smoke a joint or something beforehand, then just get in there, stand right in front of the amp and play whatever’s in my head. Because every single time I play a guitar solo – even in the older stuff, when we’re playing those songs live – I never play the same thing twice.

Were you doing much improv in the studio?

Yeah, completely. The whole album.

Just to capture that raw, live energy?

Yeah, exactly. I feel like that’s the best sort of rock ‘n’ roll there is, you know? It’s all about the spontaneity – it’s not always bang-on, but when you manage to get something solid down, it’s f***ing perfect. So all the solos that you hear on the record are the ones that I felt really worked. I did each one

a few times, and we just sort of picked the one that we all thought represented the song the best at that moment in time.

Was there a concerted effort to build on the sound of *High Risk Behaviour*?

Yeah, I think sonically it’s changed a bit because we’re a lot louder now. I’m a bit of a gear nerd – I love playing JCM800s, which are very loud, and [the songwriting is] probably just a little bit more sonically charged. And I feel like for a lot of punk fans – to fans of The Chats and people that know the music – they’ll agree it’s a pretty natural progression. I feel like it was a good direction to go in, you know, to have a bit more power. The early stuff had a bit more of a lo-fi, softer sort of sound, and then *High Risk Behaviour* was kind of like halfway there, and now *Get F***ed* is just completely in-your-face.

With a title as bold as *Get F*ed*, you need music that sounds fittingly intense.**

Exactly! And that was it, I think that’s how we all decided that would be a really good title. Because the title came after we’d recorded pretty much the whole thing. We probably all thought subconsciously that it was the most fitting title for it, considering how it sounded.

Let’s chat gear: what guitars were you tearing shit up on for this record?

I tracked the whole thing with a Gibson SG. It had two P-90 pickups, but I only used the bridge pickup. That was used for all the rhythm guitars, and then for the lead stuff, I used my 1965 Epiphone Olympia – it’s one of the ones with the Batman headstock and two single-coils. And then with the lead stuff, I just used a[n Ibanez] TS808 tubescreamer and the wah.

Simple, but effective.

That’s it! Especially with the lead parts, I just like to have that control over everything. And feedback-wise as well, I like that sound you get as soon as you hit the tubescreamer – it’s like a kettle boiling, you know? And then the wah sort of helped to cut through everything a bit. I really like that Stooges sort of wah sound, you know? 🎸

LIVING IN THE MOMENT

INSPIRED BY OLD-SCHOOL PUNK AND DESPERATION FOR THE STAGE, **THE BETHS**' THIRD ALBUM IS APTLY EXPLOSIVE. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR GOES BACKSTAGE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT IT.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **FRANCES CARTER**.

Having been largely unable to tour their second album, 2020's *Jump Rope Gazers*, The Beths were determined to make up for lost time with its follow-up. *Expert In A Dying Field* was written in the mind-numbing throes of the pandemic's peak – when the Kiwi power-pop outfit were truly *pinning* for their return to the stage – and as a result, almost every second of the record feels tailored to be belted out in front of an audience.

You can hear it in the tasteful crunch of the riffs on 'Head In The Clouds', and in the warbly, almost jittery lead passage on 'Best Left'. It's there on the pseudo-psychedelic wailing that steals the show on the back end of '2am', and in the luminous pop-punk vibe the band explore on 'A Passing Rain' – and, of course, in the absolute sonic calamity that is the tongue-in-cheek thrash-pop banger 'Silence Is Golden'. On that track in particular, frontwoman Liz Stokes tells *Australian Guitar* there's "a musical irony" to it, with "the tension and the loudness – a very controlled kind of chaos – coming from a place of actually wanting to be quiet and alone".

In addition to being the lead single from *Expert In A Dying Field*, 'Silence Is Golden' was the first song from it The Beths played live. "It's so cathartic to play something that fast and unhinged," Stokes says of the rush she gets when she and her bandmates – lead guitarist Jonathan Pearce, bassist Ben Sinclair and drummer Tristan Deck – get to whip it out in the set, pointing out that in the new record's gestational phase, the band were particularly enamoured by the similarly reckless energy of The Police's 1978 debut *Outlandos d'Amour*.

With the album finally out on shelves, and crowds starting to embark on the soul-warping sonic journey that is its live set, we sat down with Stokes and Pearce to tap a little deeper into what makes *Expert In A Dying Field* the best Beths album yet.

What made you really want to embrace that live energy for this record?

Stokes: When we say it's meant to be experienced live, we mean that it's meant for *us* to experience live [*laughs*]. Nah, it's for the audience as well – but we were just really missing being able to play songs. In the studio, you can make a beautiful album that's really subtle, but really complicated to recreate live. And we enjoy making music like that as well, but I think there was a part of us that just wanted to make a real straightforward live album. We still wanted subtlety and complexity, but we wanted to be able to play it and not feel like it was missing a lot.

Pearce: And then the other side of that coin is that when you make your first album, you make it by playing live. We've come to really acknowledge that kind of beauty, and how special that experience is, so we were trying to make something as if we were making it to play live, in the way that every band does when they make their first record. In that phase of your career, you're just writing songs to play them in clubs, you're not not really thinking about going straight to the studio.

So how did that reflect in the songwriting itself?

Stokes: It probably didn't change that much, because my songs tend to start off the same way – guitar and vocal, maybe some MIDI parts and a little riff-y type thing. I think a lot of it came in the kind of arrangements that we ended up going for. It's not like a huge concept album in that way, where it's like, "They must be easily playable live!" There are studio-y songs, and songs that took time to find their footing.

Pearce: I do remember times when you were thinking about your guitar playing, when you were writing songs, and you were intentionally trying to write more simple and repetitive things, as opposed to those detailed, maybe nerdy, studio-y guitar parts. Would you say that?

Stokes: Yeah, sure.

Guitar solos have always been an integral part of The Beths' flavour profile, but there's more on this record than ever before. Was that something you were excited to lean more into, Jon?

Pearce: I still kind of can't believe how many guitar solos I get away with. I get, like, a dozen moments in the set, whereas other lead guitarists might look forward to one or two moments like that in a show.

Stokes: Jon got COVID towards the end of our run in Europe, so we played the last three shows as a power-trio, and I had to just fiercely rearrange all the songs to work in that format. And I learned a bunch of Jon's solos, you know, in a way that sounded like a child playing solos they'd learned online. But I still got applause, and I was like, "Oh, I like this!"

Pearce: It's a good feeling! You get to put your biggest boost pedal on and be real loud...

Stokes: Why *are* there so many solos, though? I think it's just that in my mind, I'm like, "rock band" – you know, it's just always an option. You're like, "Well, what happens after the second chorus?" You've got a few things you can do – you can have an instrumental, you can have a bridge, or you can have a solo.

Pearce: That's why there's always solos in music, because it's always an option. And it's the most fun option, so it's the one we take the most often.

Was there a more enhanced spirit of

experimentation this time around, too?

Pearce: I think the answer to that has to be "yes", but we're also really nervous about letting that experimentation become self-indulgent. We try really hard not to be self-indulgent musicians – even though there's all these styles that we really like, and might want to use...

Stokes: It's nice to hear that it sounds more experiential. Because once again, it's one of those things where we feel like we're doing things that still feel like *us* – we don't feel like we've gone, "Oh, we're gonna do something completely different! It's gonna be so different!" We're just trying to push into the corners of our own little box. And we like the box!

It's just the spirit of guitar music, you know? And pop music as well – there's just so much of [those genres] to dive into, and there's so much of it that is so different, that you really can find a lot of ways to express two guitars, bass and drums while mining from a similar vein, and still, hopefully, explore different sounds and different expressions of that formula.

What guitars were y'all swinging in the studio?

Pearce: I almost always play my '70s Les Paul Deluxe, which has mini humbuckers in it. We were a little bit more adventurous with Liz's guitar choices in the studio, but I find a lot get a lot out of the Deluxe, you know, so I use that almost all the time.

Stokes: That's kind of your "sound".

Pearce: That's right. And I have it in the studio all the time – I record other bands as well, and I love to let other people use it and suggest it for certain guitar parts... But it almost never sticks. It's the only thing that's acceptable for The Beths, but it almost never works for other bands. It's got the Les Paul power – that kind of throaty midrange grunt – but then because it's got the mini humbuckers, it's like a tiny bit brighter, and maybe a bit more forgiving on the lower levels of distortion. I can play quieter while still sounding loud, and it just holds up and sounds great. And it's gold!

Stokes: I still played a fair bit of my G&L Fallout, which is the tribute one – the cheaper one – which I still love. It's got a humbucker and a P-90, so it's the most crucial sounding instrument that we have. So that's always a staple, and most of the time I play that in the middle position. We also came into a Rickenbacker for this album...

Pearce: Yeah, it was a six-string Rickenbacker – maybe a late '90s one, with the toaster-style humbuckers.

Stokes: That was a really beautiful-sounding guitar.

And then we also have this guitar on a long-term loan from a friend of ours – it's a Jerry Jones Neptune, which is like a U2-style Danelectro, and it's just a beautiful guitar to play. It's somehow always in tune, the neck feels amazing, and it's just got this nice, jangly sound, but with a good amount of sustain.

Pearce: It's got those lipstick pickups, and it just, like... Strumming along on that guitar just sounds immediately awesome. 🎸



A WHOLE NEW WORLD

WRITTEN ALL OVER THE COUNTRY IN A LABYRINTH OF MENTAL STATES, **STELLA DONNELLY'S FLOOD** IS AN AMBITIOUSLY DEEP LISTEN. SHE UNPACKS IT ALL FOR AUSTRALIAN GUITAR.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **EMMA DAISY**.

On the outset, Stella Donnelly's inclusion in *Australian Guitar* #150 might seem controversial – there's not a lot of guitar on her long-awaited second album, *Flood*. It's instead mostly steered by the sharp, glassy chords of a grand piano and the atmospheric flowerings of twinkly synth-work. We'll admit it was quite polarising to hear for the first time: 'til now, Donnelly has always been a shredder at heart, flourishing her records with passages of noodling that masterfully showed off her fretting dexterity.

Without guitars to navigate her course, though, Donnelly was freed to explore an expansive depth of new musicality. Over 11 kaleidoscopic cuts, *Flood* sees the Perthian songster truly embrace the pastel prettiness of dream-pop, the warming richness of a slow-burning piano ballad, and the mystifying gravitas of minimalist folk. And where Donnelly does utilise the guitar, she does so with enrapturing intent, with every tingly, twangy note cutting deep into the soul. If 2019's *Beware Of The Dogs* was Donnelly's introduction to the world, *Flood* is her notice of intent to take over it.

Part of its tonal breadth comes from the circumstances in which Donnelly wrote these songs, moving all around Australia throughout the pandemic. When all was said and done, she'd wound up with approximately 43 songs – a roundabout benefit, she explained in the press kit, of having “so many opportunities to write things in strange places”. On how that fed into the emotional weight of *Flood*, she continued: “There's no denying that not being able to access your family with border closures, it zooms in on those parts of your life you care about.”

Somewhere along the line, Donnelly wound up in the mid-northern New South Welsh town of Bellingen, where she'd escape the malaise of real life by traipsing through the rainforests and reconnecting with the natural world. In doing so, she said, “I was able to lose that feeling of anyone's reaction to me. I forgot who I was as a musician, which was a humbling experience of just being; being my small self.”

Having returned to the high-octane life of her Big Self, Stella Donnelly welcomed *Australian Guitar* to wade through the minutiae of her *Flood*.

So, what made you want to kick things off with the piano this time around?

It wasn't really something I *wanted* to do, it was just how it all happened, I guess. Where I lived at the start of lockdown, I had a piano in the kitchen, and it was just *there*. You know, it was just that kind of access. And you know what it's like being in lockdown: you just get so lazy, you don't even want to walk to the letterbox. So the idea of like getting my electric guitar, finding a lead, plugging it into the amp – I know that all sounds so simple, but when the piano was *sitting right there*, it was so much easier to just go for it.

And I know this is a guitar magazine, so I really want to say to the reader out there: please know that I still used guitar a whole lot on the record! I actually feel like I appreciated the guitar a lot more on the record, because I used it more as a tool than a necessity, and I used it in more interesting ways than I did on [*Beware Of The Dogs*]. It definitely pulled a lot more production out of me with the guitar.

Having always written on a guitar in the past, did it sort of keep you on your toes, creatively, having to adapt your techniques to a new instrument and not being able to rely on what you'd always known?

Yeah, I think that's how I wrote the songs in the first place. There was a while there where every time I picked up a guitar, I was just playing the same chord over and over again, and I was starting to drive myself a bit mad with it. And so when I sat down at the piano, it was just a whole new sound and a whole new colour of paint to work with, I guess. And you're right, I was a lot more vulnerable, because the piano is not my first instrument. So when we went into the studio, by the



time it was time to pick the guitar back up, I felt a lot more comfortable – it was really nice to come *back* to the guitar and allow it to tell the rest of the story I'd started telling on the piano.

That definitely comes across in the record with the way the guitar feels more... Intentional? Like when a guitar line pops up on this record, you know it's there because it needs to be there.

Yes! And I'm so glad it translated that way, because yeah, I definitely changed a lot of my approaches to the guitar sound on this record. I tried to steer away from the really up-high octave riffs, and I tried to follow Paul Kelly's more, you know, where it's more like a down-low guitar sound – it's mournful and nostalgic, and it has this kind of warmth to it, which I thinks works really well with a piano sound.

Especially on 'Lungs', the way everything gels together in that song is just magical.

Thank you! I got to use a fuzz pedal for the first time on that one. At the end of the song, we let loose a little bit and kind of go nuts.

Were you experimenting with a lot of cool gear in the studio?

Well the album was made across three studios, purely because of lockdowns and COVID, and needing to move around a lot during that time. The first studio we worked in was a very folk-y studio, and it had a lot of these amazing acoustic things. So I was like, “Let's just use what we've got in here!” I picked up a Nashville guitar, which really blew me away – I'd never used that Nashville tuning on a guitar before, so we used a lot of that to kind of texturise the songs.

We also found a lap steel, so I used that on ‘How Was Your Day?’ to make that Flaming Lips sort of sound – the big “*brrrrrrng!*” sound. I'd never played lap steel before, either, but I was like, “Yeah, let's just try it!” I used that on a lot of the songs as well. And then we went to a different studio, later in the process, and that's where I found my old [Analog Man] Sun Face pedal from the Boat Show days. I was like, “Alright, yeah, let's try to utilise this too.»

I also used my baritone a lot more on this record, and tried to really get those beautiful low notes out of it for a few of the songs. I love the baritone so much. The baritone feels like a piano to me – it's just so beautiful, with the frequencies that come out of a baritone guitar. It's like eating a really nice, really *rich* brownie.

Will you be playing a lap steel on tour?

No! No way! We've kind of “adapted” it, and used a bunch of reverb pedals and octave pedals to try and get that sound out in a live setting. I would love to play a lap steel more, but I just don't have one – I'm gonna have to get myself one at some point.

What about the piano? Will you be doing some sit-down, piano-and-microphone numbers?

Definitely! We're already starting to do that with ‘Flood’ and a few of the other songs. I definitely get a little bit Elton John, kick my leg out at some point... You know, why not?

So you wrote these songs in a bunch of different places. Do you find that the kind of atmosphere you're in can be a pretty significant source of inspiration?

Definitely. At the height of the lockdowns, I was the least productive I'd ever been, so I think going back to Fremantle – because WA wasn't in lockdown at all – that was when all of the songs really came out of me like a like a big vomit. I think you just need to feed the [creative] beast, and when you're stuck in the same house all day, every day, it is hard to do that. I take a lot of inspiration from humans interacting, and the various dynamics you see between people.

Is there a particular setting that just seems to unlock your inner genius?

Boredom. I think boredom is the *only* setting that does that, and that's why for me, touring and writing is just not a conducive combination. I think that's why it took me so long to do this record. And it's a balance, because lockdown was boring, but it was a different kind of boring. So going back to Perth, I worked in a shop and I was chatting to all sorts of people, and then I would go home and I would find refuge in my music, rather than have it be something I felt like I needed to turn up for. 🎧

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JACKLIN OF ALL TRADES

JULIA JACKLIN TAKES AUSTRALIAN GUITAR DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF HER DISTINCTLY COLOURFUL NEW RECORD, PRE PLEASURE.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON.**
PHOTO BY **NICK MCKK.**

Hell hath no fury like Julia Jacklin's determination to make you *feel things*. The Blue Mountains-born, Sydney-raised and Melbourne-based indie stalwart cut her teeth on songs like 'Pool Party' and 'Motherland', which in addition to being stellar tracks from her stellar debut, 2016's *Don't Let The Kids Win*, share the commonality of being gut-wrenching punches of raw, unrestrained emotion. Jacklin went even more intense on 2019's *Crushing*, an album baring her soul with such ardent poignancy that one front-to-back listen would straight-up kill one of the seven dwarves.

In the years since she gave us *Crushing*, Jacklin has done a fair bit of living: she's seen new places, met new people and, perhaps most importantly, felt new emotions. Her third full-length effort, *Pre Pleasure*, is reflective of that: it's a record of growth, Jacklin headstrong in her endeavour to mine from new sources of creativity. As she noted in a statement preceding the new album's release, "Making a record to me has always just been about the experience, a new experience in a new place with a new person at the desk, taking the plunge and just seeing what happens."

"For the first time I stepped away from the guitar and wrote a lot of the album on the Roland keyboard in my apartment in Montreal with its inbuilt band tracks. I blu-tacked reams of butcher paper to the walls, covered in lyrics and ideas, praying to the music gods that my brain would arrange everything in time."

By proxy of that process, *Pre Pleasure* is a distinctly colourful record, populated with songs as sonically intriguing as they are emotionally impactful. Lyrically, it sees Jacklin as sharp and stirring as ever, ruminating deeply on trauma, sex and religion – and how those motifs often intersect. Most enchanting about *Pre Pleasure* is how she melds that with her newly enriched musicality, exploring new sounds to match her new thoughts and feelings. So begs the question: how exactly did she go about embarking on the journey, and what did she find along the way? *Australian Guitar* hit Jacklin up to find out, and thankfully, she was more than happy to oblige.

So what drew you towards that trusty Roland?

There was just one in the apartment that I was renting when I made the record [*laughs*]. But initially, before that as well, I was just getting very stuck in my ways with guitar. I think a lot of people have this experience, where it can be pretty easy to plateau. I learnt how to play guitar maybe eight years ago, and I must have improved since then, but it doesn't necessarily *feel* like I've improved that much.

I've gotten to be a much better rhythm guitarist, for sure, but I tend to kind of get a bit stuck in my ways when I'm writing. So starting out with a different

instrument, I was trying to throw my songwriter mindset out of whack and just see what happens. And I can't play keys – like, I'm definitely not gonna play the Roland at a show, I couldn't subject anyone to that [*laughs*]. But it just has such a different quality to it. You don't get stuck in the same sort of routines because it's not rhythm-based in the same way that guitar is.

Did that lead you to think differently about how song ideas would form, and how you'd commit them to the tape?

Yeah, I think it was more psychological. I was picking up the guitar and kind of hating myself, because every time I picked it up, I would just play the same thing that I've been playing forever, and I would be disincentivised to keep going because I'd be like, "Oh, no one wants to hear this shit anymore. Come on, Julia..." And I think the songs I was writing [on the Roland] are in the same kind of style as my usual stuff – it was just more psychological in that, being on keys and having it feel so fresh, I wasn't cringing at myself as often. But I'm sure if I played keys for a really long time, the exact same same thing would happen. It's a vicious cycle [*laughs*].

So when you did pick the guitar back up, did you do so with a different perspective on the instrument?

Well, I think it's two things: One, yeah, quite a few of the songs that I wrote on the keyboard, I then just put to a guitar on the record. So it was more just about taking the guitar out of the *foundation* of the song, and then bringing it back in to reclaim its role in the overall party. And two, I think Will [Kidman], who plays guitar on this record, he had a lot to do with the guitar-iness of it. He's just a really beautiful guitar player, in a way that I haven't had before.

He's not, like, trained – he didn't go to the Conservatorium and dedicate his life to "the craft" or whatever – he's all about feel and comes at it from a bit more of an emotive place. And I think there were quite a few times on the record that I just wanted him to just, like, rock out: just do whatever he needed to do to put his personality on the album. And you can hear it on a few of those tracks where he's just wailing away.



'I Was Neon' comes to mind. I already know that's going to be a huge one in the live set.

Yeah, 100 percent. I mean, it's interesting with a lot of these songs because I've never played them live, you know, so I have no idea how that's going to translate. But that's one of the most exciting parts about touring! When you make your first record, you've already road-tested all the songs and you're just kind of putting down what you've already figured out works – but as you go on, a lot of the time, you're just writing in the studio and making records that no one's heard. So getting to see how people react to them the first time, at a big show with a whole bunch of people there... It's kind of scary, but it's just as exciting.

So yeah, I think it'll be fun. I initially wrote 'I Was Neon' for a band that I was playing in around 2019 – I was playing drums in that band, so I actually had my friend singing it. And that was kind of cool as well, because it came from more of a rhythm-based perspective, and then I came at it again from a different angle when I put on my own record.

Another couple of songs that really stick out for me are 'Moviegoer' and 'End Of A Friendship' – I feel like they both have a bit of a bluesy, almost "western film score" vibe to them.

That's interesting, because I'm always trying to write songs that sound like they'd play over the end credits on a film. That's the ultimate dream, you know, to write *those* songs. So I'm always imagining things in a cinematic way. And when I was a kid, too, I was obsessed with western films for some reason. Like, 'Moviegoer', I wanted that to sound like the *M*A*S*H* theme song – that was the main reference. I don't even know why, but that opening scene of *M*A*S*H* is just forever burnt into my creative mind, so that was where that came from.

And then 'End Of A Friendship'... I'm not sure if everybody loved this approach, but I kind of wanted the ending to just sound *huge*. Initially it was just the electric guitar, and then when we put the strings on it, Will was like, "Ah, maybe we should take the guitar out, it's probably too much at this point." And I was like, "No! I want them to coexist! I want it to go out with a huge bang!" It's just very spirited. 🎸

PREACHING TO A NEW CHOIR

ISABELLA MANFREDI'S DEBUT SOLO ALBUM – NAMED FOR HER GLITZY AND GLAMOROUS ALTER EGO, IZZI – LOOKS TO THE PAST IN ORDER TO FORCE A NEW PATH FORWARD. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR STROLLS DOWN IT WITH HER.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **MACLAY HERIOT**.

For 11 years, Isabella Manfredi was best known as the energised and effervescent, groove-riding force that fronted Sydney indie-pop outfit The Preatures. However short their tenure may have been, the quintet remain venerable icons in the realm of Australian pop – so when she split The Preatures up to embark on a solo career, Manfredi was eager not to shed what made them so great.

Her debut solo album is named for the alter ego she adopted in The Preatures – the “the chrome wheel-spinning character” known as Izzi – with Manfredi’s intent being “to capture her essence, but also create space for my true adult self to have longevity and move beyond her if I needed to”. As she declared bluntly in unveiling the record, “I am Izzi but she is not me.”

In the same breath, Manfredi described *Izzi* as both the “exploration and development of a new artist” and “the culmination of a decade’s vision”. Such rings undoubtedly true when you dive into the record: it’s bold, radiant and slathered in groove, just like the best of The Preatures’ material, but it’s also shiny and buoyant in ways that Manfredi couldn’t be with a full band in tow – it sees her fully embrace her unashamed love for cheesy ‘80s synthpop, while simultaneously staring determinedly into the future.

As she gears up to take the album on tour, Manfredi welcomed *Australian Guitar* into the weird and wonderful world of *Izzi*.

Do you see this record more as a transition between your work in The Preatures and your individual musicality, or between who you were once and who you are now?

That’s a really good question, because when ‘Jealousy’ came out, quite a few people said – both publicly and personally – «that sounds like The Preatures”. And I was like, “Yeah, it does.” It’s funny, that, isn’t it? It’s always been very easy for people to assume, being a frontwoman, that I was not the instrument of my own artistry or destiny in that role. And of course, The Preatures was the amalgamation of five very different, autonomous artists – that’s the beauty of being in a band. But at the heart of it, it was a collaboration that I had, as the main songwriter, four other musicians.

In that sense, I think this record is an extension of that – of what I was trying to achieve with The Preatures, but just couldn’t quite capture, for a number of reasons. And at the same time, it feels exciting to me, because I genuinely love working with other people. I find that it’s better for the songs, and that’s what brings me joy about making music: being in a room with people – or as it was with this record, being on the other side of the world, but having that exchange and feeling their life-force and energy come into the songs.

So I don’t think, musically, that’s a departure a departure. I think it’s just an elevation of what I’ve been banging on about for the last ten year – and that is, really, that I’m still searching for the heart of pop-rock. *I love* pop-rock. Everybody used to say to me, “What’s your vision for The Preatures? What do you want to do, musically?” And I’d just be like, “Pop-rock.” And they go, “Oh. Well, that’s... *Is that it?*” And I’m like, “Yeah, that’s it.”

There’s a reason pop-rock is such a cliché, though – because it’s f*ing good.**

Well pop-rock, to me, incorporates a lot of different elements. I’ve always been influenced by country music, and confessional folk, for example. Classic songcraft has been a big influence, too – even in the band, when we were doing instrumentals and jams, I always brought it back to to the songcraft. And you know, rock encompasses blues, funk, R&B, a bit of soul... so I’ve always gotten into that, and encouraged a very kaleidoscopic musical vision. But I also love pop-rock because, to me, it feels quite purist. It’s about simplifying complexity. And that’s



what I find really satisfying about writing a song – taking something that feels almost overwhelming, emotionally or conceptually, and refining it into something that is simple and communicable – that I can reach people with.

There’s not a lot of guitar on this record, but where there is, it feels *crucial*. Is it important for you to be really considered with the soundscape?

Absolutely. And the guitar is always going to be a big part of the way I make music. I was really sad to see it fall from grace in the last couple of years. But I wasn’t the guitarist onstage in The Preatures – I was surrounded by really accomplished, masterful players, who had a lot of their own personality – and for me, guitar has always been an instrument for songwriting. I struggled a lot with my confidence as a guitar player, and the best way for me to deal with that was to go and get the best guitarists I knew to play on this album.

The two main guitarists on the record and Kirin J Callinan and Jonathan Wilson. Kirin is such an anti-guitarist – he doesn’t play guitar in any conventional sense. I think what they both have in common – which I think is maybe what you’re getting at when you say there’s not a lot of guitar on the record – is that both of those players, they’re all about the songs. They’re slaves to the song. And the guitarists that I grew up loving, and that I have the most respect for, are always in service to the song. So yeah, the choices that I’ve made as a producer, particularly with guitar on this record, have been really considered.

And that benefits the impact of those parts where the guitar is prominent, because they hit harder than they would on a record packed with riffs.

Well I was very conscious, with this album, to leave a lot of space for my voice, and for the song, and for the storytelling. I mean, being a female vocalist in a rock band for so many years, my voice would sit right in the mids – right where the guitars would sit – so it felt like a constant battle. And this record didn’t feel like a battle, specifically because I was conscious to leave a lot of space. It means it’s less riff-heavy, which is, you know, a bit of a shame for that sense of energy and excitement and power. But I mean, I’ll do that again someday. That’s just not what this record is about. This record is about storytelling and songcraft.

I love how unapologetically ‘80s this album sounds. Where did that whole vibe come from?

It’s so funny, I have this running joke that I breathe and the ‘80s comes out – I just can’t f***ing help but make an ‘80s record [*laughs*]. And you know what’s so weird about that? When I was little, I went through a phase where I declared that I *hated* the 80s. What a decade to discard, right? My favorite period of music is that late-‘70s-to-early-‘80s period – it was such a fertile, wonderful period for creativity.

The best part of music in the ‘80s, to me, was this sort of supreme production. It was like the pinnacle of analogue and those traditional studio techniques, married with the songwriters that had come from the ‘70s and were then in their prime, making these amazing records with incredible studio musicians. There were so many great guitarists in that era, too, like Mark McEntee – I grew up just having such immense respect for him because he was an incredible, melodic and harmonic player, but again, always in service of the song. I love guitar when it appears on a record and feels like its own voice, but not in a way that goes against the song – like when Paul Kelly plays a guitar solo and it’s just the vocal melody. *Heaven.* 🎸



A WHALE OF A TIME

ALBUM #4 MIGHT SEE **DUNE RATS** PUT DOWN THE BONGS, BUT THEY STILL THROW ONE HELL OF A PARTY. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR HAS AN INVITE, TOO – LET’S MAKE OUR WAY IN...

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **DED NORMAN**.

Maturity has never been one of Dune Rats’ multitude of strengths – this is, after all, the band whose most iconic music video (for the self-titled album highlight ‘Red Light, Green Light’) was a one-take run of frontman Danny Beus and drummer BC Michaels ripping bongos. But alas, the Brisbane surf-punk trio – rounded out with bassist Brett Jansch – aren’t in their late teens and early twenties anymore, and although they haven’t shed a gram of their loveable looseness and penchant for partying, they’ve realised there’s (at least a bit) more to life than getting f***ed up and wreaking havoc.

Cue the Dunies’ game-changing fourth album, *Real Rare Whale* (say that five times in a row), which BC declared upon its announcement to be “a bit more of a sophisticated album”. He wasn’t lying: the ten-tracker builds on the Dunies’ well-established brand of edgy and playful punk-rock with a slew of new influences, filling out the soundscape with acoustic guitars and drum machines, a more ardent grasp on their melodic side and a willingness to experiment.

“We’ve grown up,” Beus added when the album was unveiled, “but we’re pretty fortunate that we haven’t grown apart. We’re now twelve years in, but I feel like we’re writing better tunes and finding that we’re getting to the core of who we all are, even though we’re still changing.”

Eager to learn more about how this *Real Rare Whale* came to life, *Australian Guitar* peeked behind the curtain, where Jansch was able to fill us in.

So what exactly led to *Real Rare Whale* being “a more sophisticated Dunies album”?

There was a bit of a talk that we had when we sort of bunkered down to write the songs. It was the height of pandemic, everyone was scared and stuff, and we didn’t want to reflect that worry of the world in our songs. We sort of had to dig deep and pull positivity out of what was a weird circumstance at that time. And I think that kind of led us to just not rely back on that ‘Scott Green’-y template – you know, going, “Chuck in a ‘f***!’ chuck in a drug reference!”

And we’re all stoked that we’ve managed to do it – the album doesn’t have much swearing, and I don’t think there’s a single drug reference on it. I think in that respect, it’s more sophisticated for us. We’ve sort of been able to fine-tune our songwriting, where we can still say what we want to say, but we’re able to cut

the dags off it and not cornhole Dunies into being a one-trick pony.

Did that keep the process feeling fresh or exciting for yourselves, too?

For sure. And I think that’s an important thing when you’re writing an album and you want to play the majority of it live every night – you’ve gotta back what you’ve made. We definitely back this album. You know, there’s a lot going on in the songs, both musically and lyrically. I think it’s cool for us, as we grow older, to talk about things that older people have going on in their life – but still sort of mediate that with having it not just be “old person’s music”, you know? And I think we’ve done that with this one – there’s still a lot of energy in there.

I guess ultimately, with the way that we write the songs... All three of us get together in a room, we chuck in a line each, and if a line irks us, we speak up about it. I think that’s just because we’re such close friends that we really can back it as a group, what the lyrics are about and what it all sound like. That’s a massive part of the Dunies’ vibe when we go in to record songs, too – we all go in with the same amount of gusto. It’s never like, “Ugh, I don’t want to sing this song that this dude wrote.”

This record pulls the Dunies’ sound in so many interesting directions. On the one hand, you’ve got a lot more of these big pop melodies, but you’ve also got some massive shredding. It’s like if Charli XCX had a baby with Bad Brains, it would grow up to make this album.

That’s not a bad pairing! I think that’s because we never want to go too gnarly-heavy on the music, because ultimately, we want to play it live and have it sound right. Our strength is that we can go pretty heavy on vocals – especially with the call-and-response that BC and I can do when Danny’s got a lead line – and that’s why it goes and turns into the sort of beast that it is. Even when we were recording it, we were thinking of new ways to kind of evolve with that.

We even recorded it in a different way to any album before, where each day we would just record an entire song. In the past, you know, one of us would clock in and do a week’s worth of tracking, and then we’d sit back on the couch and sort of tune out and

lose interest. But this was a way to really just keep us all in the pocket. And by the evening of those nights, we were chucking down synthesisers and all this stuff, painting it way too thick – and we were always like, “Oh my God, where are we taking this song!?”

We’d always pull it back, but some of those moments where we were all experimenting late at night, they did actually still end up on the record. And that made it like this new version of Dunies, where there’s keyboards and horns and stuff in the fabric of the music.

Do you still have those demos where you took it way too far?

I do have a couple of them, and they’re like... I’m not throwing any shade on The Galvatrons, but that’s the band that swings to mind – if the Galvatrons haircut was smoking a bong, that’s what the songs became during some of those late nights.

Let’s riff on the gear side – what kind of guitars were you tearing it up on in the studio for this record?

As much as I love my own P Bass, I’d always fall back on Scott’s American P Bass. There was a little bit of a knack that I’d always seem to have in the studio: I would do my stuff on a P Bass, and I’d try to play the chordal kind of things that I play live, but whenever I put them into a recording, my head just goes, “Nup, I hear out-of-tune-ness,” so I’d always fall back on that more root note-y kind of stuff. But [on this record], I’d lay down a Tele – just a really clean, crunchy Telecaster track of the same thing I did on the bass, just so we could get that chordal sort of sound more accurately.

And then Danny would come back over with his parts, which he mostly played on his Jimmy Eat World Telecaster as well – it’s a hollowbody kind of thing with P-90s. It just sort of feeds back really nicely. There was also this really old Jazzmaster with single-coils, which sounded really brittle – you know, you could really *hear* the strings. And then I also played an acoustic guitar in the same way I did with the Tele, just as a part of my rhythm playing on the record. I remember when we laid down the acoustic bit at the start of ‘Up’, it was like, “Oh wow, this is how the song sounds now!” You know, that really did add an extra little zazz to it, which was pretty cool. 🎸

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REDDY, STEADY, GO!

TOO MANY BANDS SWEAT THE LITTLE THINGS WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING THEIR DEBUT ALBUMS. BUT AS **BEDDY RAYS** TELL AUSTRALIAN GUITAR, THEY DIDN'T EVEN THINK TOO HARD ABOUT THE BIG ONES.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **LUKE DUNNING**.

With their earwormish slate of jaunty and sun-kissed indie-rock, Beddy Rays capture the lackadaisical, blithesome and free spirit of their stomping grounds: the coastal Queensland paradise of Redland Bay (better known to the locals, though, as Reddy Bay). It makes sense, then, that Beddy Rays are named after the town (albeit in spoonerism form), and that debut album would be a self-titled affair.

It's a testament to the very core of the quartet, as they declared in a statement: "We decided to go with a self-titled album for our debut because we believe this album *is* Beddy Rays, through and through." They explained that when the band was formed in the halcyon days of 2017, "all [they] wanted to do was play gigs, sink tins and chat to all the legends we'd meet along the way".

They'd never planned to wind up here with a full-length album, so when it finally came time to whip one up, Beddy Rays didn't lose themselves in the labyrinthine malaise of concepts, studio politics or murder-mystery pinboards – they just cranked up their amps, cracked open some tins and started jamming away like their lives depended on it. The band tracked it with local legend (and Bugs drummer) Brock Weston, and end result, they say, is like "a nice bag of mixed lollies".

Midway through their sprawling national tour in support of the it, frontman Jackson "Jacko" Van Issum and Lewis "Lewy" McKenna sat down with *Australian Guitar* to fill us in on how they made those lollies extra sweet.

So at its core, what makes this record the definitive reflection of who and what Beddy Rays are?

McKenna: I think the music does a lot of speaking for itself. It's all laid out in what the songs are about, you know, like mateship and checking in on your mates, all that sort of stuff.

Van Issum: It's just honest. It's not hidden in metaphors, and all the lyrics are pretty well laid out in front of you. We're just doing what we know – and we don't really know what we're doing [laughs]. We're just giving it a crack, we're not really thinking about it too much. It's not like we went in there going, "Let's sound like this!" We were just sort of like, "Alright, let's write some songs!" And even with that, it wasn't like, "Let's write a bunch of songs that can fit together on this special thing," it was just, "Yeah, these sound like pretty good songs, let's make an album out of them."

You guys have done a lot of really cool shit since the EP came out, you've played everywhere there is to play and you've linked up with a bunch of enormous legends... How much of that experience ended up shaping the sound of this record?

McKenna: Yeah, I think a lot of the songs are drawn



from our experiences of being in a band and stuff like that.

Van Issum: Yeah, there's a lot of situational things that you see between your friends, or experience with yourself or whatever, and you just can't help but write an honest song about it. I'm always writing in that first-person perspective, too, because I don't want to sing about someone else. And then even when I am, I'm doing it in first-person, so they'll never notice [laughs].

When someone pops this record on for the first time, especially if they're not super familiar with the band, what do you hope they get out of it?

McKenna: Well, hopefully they'll want to come out to a show! I don't know, I hope they enjoy the older stuff that's on there, and I hope they enjoy the newer stuff just as much. It's got a *little bit* of a different sound [to the EP].

Van Issum: I just hope that someone could put it on and have it make their day a little better – get a bit of a beat going in their step, a bit of a higher tempo cranking when they're driving to work or whatnot... I hope it makes you enjoy your day a bit more. That's what I love about music, you know, when you hear a song for the first time and you're like, "Ah yeah, this makes me feel good!"

Do you typically have the live show in mind when you're working on a song?

Van Issum: That's definitely one of the main things that we think about when we're writing a song. We're a live band, really – all the other bullshit in-between, like, you have to do it, but at the end of the day we just love going out and playing to as many people as we can. So we're always thinking about that in the songwriting process, going, "Ah, when we do this one live, we'll be able to slow this bit down, add this bit in

there, they can sing along to this bit..."

McKenna: If I'm stuck on a part or something like that, Jacko will usually be like, "Alright, well if you were at a festival and you were watching this song being performed live, what would you want to hear next?" And we'd sort of try to build off that. You know, it's a good starting point for a song.

What song(s) from this record do you think will pop off the hardest?

McKenna: Ooh, that's a hard one! I feel like 'Fotu' is really gonna go off. Just with what it's about and how fun it is, and how punky and fast it is, I think that'll go off super hard at a fezzie.

Van Issum: There's a song called 'Coffee Stops', too, which has a bit of a bigger sounding, more drawn-out chorus on it, so that could be right up there as well. I don't know, there's too many good songs [laughs].

What guitars were you tearing shit up on in the studio?

McKenna: So we've got our main music sticks: I've got a Performer Series Jazzmaster, and I did a lot of my parts on that, but then I've also got a white American Strat. Jacko, you've got your Gibson...

Van Issum: Yeah, I've got the Les Paul Junior. It's this yellow little beast. It's got a pretty thin neck on it, which I think is interesting – a lot of the other Juniors I've played have really thick necks on them. I just bought this one on the internet, from this dude in Ireland, and the whole time it took for it to come I was like, "F***, I hope it's not a shit guitar." But it goes okay – I've been playing it at every show since! So that made its way onto the record a lot, just for thickening up the choruses and whatnot.

And there was the 'snot guitar' – that's just a Tom DeLonge Strat, and that's on nearly every single song, just in the background, playing along with a high-gain amp just to thicken up choruses and stuff. And I've recently just got my hands on a Noventa Telecaster. It's just like my Les Paul Junior, it's got one P-90 in it, and I just wanted a sort of backup guitar with that style. I feel like you can throw it around a bit more – you can finish a show with it and... not *drop it*, but you know, you don't have to place it down really softly because it has a Gibson neck. It's like a more roadworthy version of the Les Paul.

McKenna: Our producer, Brock [Weston], he's got a couple of studio guitars as well. He's got this nice-as Paul Reed Smith that we used a lot for 'On My Own', And then he's got this new... It's like a Fender Telecaster Ultra Mega Deluxe, something or other – some expensive bit of kit [laughs]. But it's such a beautiful guitar and it just plays like butter, so we did quite a few parts on that as well. We used quite a few guitars on the record, I suppose!

THE EMO PHASE

BEHIND ITS SHIMMERY, SPACE-THEMED SHEEN, **BEACH BUNNY'S** SECOND ALBUM IS AN EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR TAKES A RIDE.

WORDS BY **ELLIE ROBINSON**. PHOTO BY **ALEC BASSE**.

In announcing *Emotional Creature*, the second full-length effort from Chicago power-pop outfit Beach Bunny, frontwoman Lili Trifilio – who started the band in 2015 as her solo bedroom “pop project” – explained that, over the course of the pandemic, she’d grown alongside her songs. “Some of [the tracks on *Emotional Creature*] were written in various stages of life,” she said, “and I think as we go through different experiences and hardships, you come out stronger.”

By proxy of its gestation across such a formative time in Trifilio’s life – the cerebral rollercoaster that is the transition from one’s early twenties, which is effectively just “being a teenager, but also being able to get sloshed”, into the soul-warping dredges of adulthood – *Emotional Creature* is much more introspective, contemplative and – for lack of a better term – “deeper” than its predecessor, 2020’s *Honeymoon*.

It certainly didn’t help that *Honeymoon* came out just a month before the pandemic took shape, of course. That record landed in February of 2020, when everything was coming up Beach Bunny. Over the year prior, they’d galvanised their lineup (with the addition of permanent bassist Anthony Vaccaro, joining Trifilio on vocals and rhythm guitar, Matt Henkels on lead and Jon Alvarado on drums), signed to revered indie label Mom + Pop, and won the hearts of a burgeoning new generation of power-pop fanatics. The pandemic, naturally, put a bright blue flame to Beach Bunny’s perfectly constructed house of cards.

In sorting through the wreckage, Trifilio learnt a lot about herself too. She discovered new ways to explore her creativity, new inspiration to mine from and new techniques to master. As we (very impatiently) wait for Beach Bunny to announce an Australian tour in support of *Emotional Creature*, *Australian Guitar* caught up with Trifilio to learn how all of the above went into making the record such a riveting listen.

How did you find that your emotional growth translated into your growth as a songwriter?

I think in general, most of my writing comes from personal experiences. So maybe part of it has to do with just growing up a little bit more – just being in my mid-20s and having *lived* more, where *Honeymoon* was still in my late teen years and early 20s. So just collecting new experiences, and finding a broader depth of topics to write about, rather than just sad breakup songs.

So in having written songs across these different formative moments, when you look at the record as one overarching body of work, do you feel connected to songs in different ways?

Yeah, I think so. I think now that it’s been so long between writing the album and actually putting it out, it feels... I don’t know, it kind of feels like I can *let go* of a lot of those experiences. It’s always interesting because when a song comes out, it becomes more like “the people’s song” than my song, because everyone’s going to interpret and apply songs to whatever they see fit. So yeah, the songs definitely

resonated with me a lot at certain points in life, but I’m happy to be on the other side of a lot of those experiences.

I’m curious, too, did any of that growth play into the way you approached the guitar on this record?

So over the pandemic, I guess my lockdown hobby was making little beats and stuff on the computer, which I hadn’t really done before. And so when it came to making this album, I definitely wanted to include some synths. I don’t think there had ever been anything like that on our other songs, so that was a cool learning curve, for sure.

‘Gravity’ is such a cool little interlude.

Yeah, that was definitely one of those things where I really wanted to include something like the beats I was making in lockdown – maybe as some kind of homage to that time, but it also fit the spacey theme.

There are more songs that really push that envelope, as far as what people expect Beach Bunny to sound like. After I listened to the album for the first time, I kept going back to ‘Scream’ – it’s such a musical plot-twist.

That one was very difficult to write [*laughs*]. It was very outside my comfort zone, in terms of song structure. I kind of just had the guitar part, and trying to build around that was quite a challenge.

Did you feel more confident in experimenting with stuff like that in the studio?

I think so. Maybe having the space to really step back and take that time to learn a new instrument, it made me feel more creative. I mean, there’s not really an audience in the studio, but I still had to play in front of my bandmates and the producer – and I felt like my skills were good enough that I wasn’t going to just, you know, mess up every note. So yeah, it was fun. It makes me want to try to experiment more and learn a

little bit more on the next record, too.

I was reading about how when you went into the studio with Sean [O’Keefe, producer], you developed this kind of “bigger is better” mindset. Was it exciting to explore a more expansive tonal palette?

Yeah, definitely. And Sean is just very great at what he does – he provides the space and the resources, and the freedom to do that. It just felt like a really good environment to try new things in.

What guitars were you shredding on for this one?

I play a Tele live, so I mostly used that, and there was also a Strat in the studio that got used a little bit. My bandmate Matt [Henkels], who plays guitar, I believe he used a Tele and... Maybe a Jazzmaster? Or a Jaguar? It was an offset! He also had a lot of pedals, as did our bassist [Anthony Vaccaro] – they both brought a lot of gear that we could use to filter sounds through and stuff like that. I myself am not the biggest gear expert, but luckily they fill in the gaps, and if I abstractly explain the idea of what I’m looking for, they usually get what I’m saying and can figure out how to make that happen.

What is it about that Tele that really pops your corn?

Okay so my Tele is pink, so aesthetically, it’s very cute [*laughs*]. But apart from that, I think as a mostly rhythm-based guitarist, I like it when all the chords sound really full. And with the Tele, when I go to play lead parts – both live and in the studio – it doesn’t feel like I do all these other things and make all these adjustments in the background to get it to sound level. And since most of the time I am singing and playing at the same time, it’s just a very comfortable and very reliable guitar.

Is there anything else the great guys, gals and non-binary pals out there oughta know about *Emotional Creature*?

Well, I recently listened to it again after not hearing it for a while, and I think the biggest takeaway I got from that experience was that, you know, we’re all human beings – we all feel the full spectrum of human emotions, in our own unique ways and forms. I feel like it’s easy to feel shame over having having those big emotions, but that’s just part of life. It’s okay to feel things. 🍷



Words and Music by **Bryan Adams** and **Jim Vallance**



* Doubled throughout

End Rhy. Fig. 1

Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 1 (3 times)

* Gtr. 2
(clean) Rhy. Fig. 2



mf
w/ chorus

End Rhy. Fig. 2

* Doubled throughout

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Gtr. 2: w/ Rhy. Fig. 2

D

A

Jim - my quit, Jo - dy got mar - ried. I should a known we'd nev - er get far.

Pre-Chorus

Bm

A

D

1. Oh, when I look back now, that sum - mer seemed to
2.,3. Stand - in' on your ma - ma's porch you told me that { you'd it'd

Gtr. 2

let ring

* 3rd time, Gtr. 4 doubles Gtr. 1 (next 10 meas.)

G

Bm

A

last for - ev - er. And if I had the choice,
wait } for - ev - er. Oh, and when you held my hand,

let ring

To Coda 1

To Coda 2

D

G

A

Bm

A

(1st time, cont. in notation)

yeah, I'd al - ways wan - na be there. } Those were the best days of my
I knew that it was now or nev - er. }

let ring

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

six - ty - nine. — Oh. —

Gtr. 4 (dist.)

f

X

Bridge

F B $\flat$ C B $\flat$ /D

Man, — we were kill - in' time. — We were young and rest - less, we need - ed to un - wind.

* Gtrs. 1 & 4

(cont. in slashes)

* Composite arrangement

Gtrs. 1 & 4

(Gtr. 4 cont. in notation)

I guess noth - in' can last — for - ev - er, for - ev - er. — No!

Gtr. 2

mp
let ring

1 1 1 3 3 1 3 3 3 5 5

Interlude

Gtrs. 1, 2 & 3: w/ Riffs A & A1 (2 times)

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

Yeah!

Gtr. 4

Rhy. Fig. 4

End Rhy. Fig. 4

7 7 5 2 2 0

Gtr. 4: w/ Rhy. Fig. 4

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

Verse

Gtrs. 1, 2 & 3: w/ Riffs A & A1 (2 times)
Gtr. 4: w/ Rhy. Fig. 4 (1st 2 meas.)

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

3. And — now the times are chang - in.' — Look at ev - 'ry - thing that's come and gone.

D.S. al Coda 2

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

Some - times — when I play that old six - string, — (I) think a - bout ya, won - der what went wrong.

Coda 2

Outro-Chorus

Gtrs. 1, 2 & 3: w/ Riffs A & A1 (till end)
Gtr. 4: w/ Rhy. Fig. 4 (till end)

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

life. Oh, — yeah. — Back in the sum - mer of

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

six - ty - nine. — Uh, huh. — It was the sum - mer of

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

six - ty - nine. — Oh, — yeah. — Me and my ba - by in a

Gtr. 5 (dist.)

f

7 9 9 (9) 11

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

six - ty - nine. _ Oh. _ _ _ _ _ Whoa!

(11) (11) 11 10 12 10 10 10 10 15 15 15

Dsus2 D Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

It was the summer, the summer, the summer of

Begin Fade

D Dsus2 Dsus4 D Dsus2 D Asus2 A Asus4 A Asus2 A

six - ty - nine. _ Yeah. _ Come on. Yeah.

19 (19) 19 19 19 19 19 19 17 17 17 17 17 17 19 17 15

1/2

[illegible]

Musical score for "The Sound of Silence" in D major. The score is written for guitar and bass. The guitar staff (top) shows chords: Dsus2, D, Dsus4, D, Dsus2, D, Asus2, A, Asus4, A, Asus2, and A. The bass staff (bottom) shows fret numbers: 15, 15, 15, 19, 19, 19, 17, 17, 19, 17, 17, 19, 17. The score ends with a "Fade Out" instruction.



Fretboard Matrix

An introduction to the highly useful workings of the CAGED System.

by Tom Kolb

If you've ever perused the web seeking guitar material, chances are you've run across a mysterious fretboard mapping theory called the CAGED System. Maybe you thought, What is this, a wire box that holds a bounty of chord voicings, or maybe a way of playing in solitary confinement? Well, it's no big mystery once you unlock the first key of the cage. Once understood, the CAGED System can be used to connect the fretboard in a network of interlocking and overlapping chord voicings, arpeggios and scales. In this lesson, we'll examine the fundamentals of the CAGED System,

how it applies to chords and lining them up along the fretboard, as well as systems for combining shapes for common chord progressions.

BASIC CAGED-SYSTEM CHORD VOICINGS

The CAGED System is founded upon five basic open-position chords: C (C, E, G), A (A, C[#], E), G (G, B, D), E (E, G[#], B) and D (D, F[#], A). (See Ex. 1) Well, would you look at that — the names of the chords spell C-A-G-E-D, providing us with an easy-to-remember acronym. But wait — there's much more!

THE HUMAN CAPO

It's possible to move these five

open-position chords up the neck to any key. All you need to do is use your fret-hand index finger as a human capo, as you do when forming barre chords. Look at the C chord shape in Ex. 2. Notice the unorthodox fret-hand fingering suggestions. As you'll see, this new fingering scheme frees up the index finger to barre across the strings in order to convert the chord into a movable shape. Slide each of your fretting fingers (4, 3 and 2) up one fret and press your index finger across the top-three strings (G, B and high E) at the 1st fret. This transposes the C chord up a half step to C[#] (C[#], E[#], G[#]; see Ex. 3). Once you understand this process, it's possible to slide this voicing to any key along the fretboard

Neil Godwin

by simply shifting the entire shape up one or more frets.

Let's tackle the other open-position chords in Ex. 2. The 2-3-4 fingering for the A chord similarly frees up the index finger for barring the top five strings (the A to the high E) to produce the B^b (B^b, D, F) barre chord shape illustrated in Ex. 3. Another common fingering is to instead barre the ring finger across the D, G and B strings.

For the next chord, the G-to-A^b chord conversion, it's only necessary to barre your index finger across the D, G and B strings. Don't bother trying to barre the finger across all six strings here, as doing so is unnecessary and only makes the grip cumbersome and arduous to form.

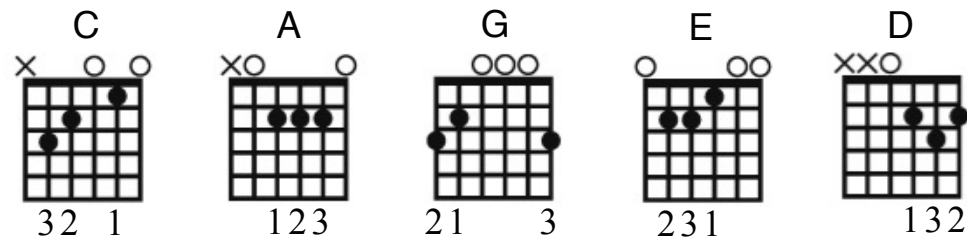
The E chord shape transforms into perhaps the most recognizable barre chord of them all, shown as an F chord in Ex. 3. This shape can be difficult to form at first, as it takes a good amount of index-finger pressure to cleanly barre across all six strings. The D-to-D[#] chord conversion may seem a little odd at first, but it doesn't require an index-finger barre. All you need to do here is fret the root note on the D string with the tip of the finger and avoid strumming the low E and A strings.

THE FIVE-PATTERN SYSTEM

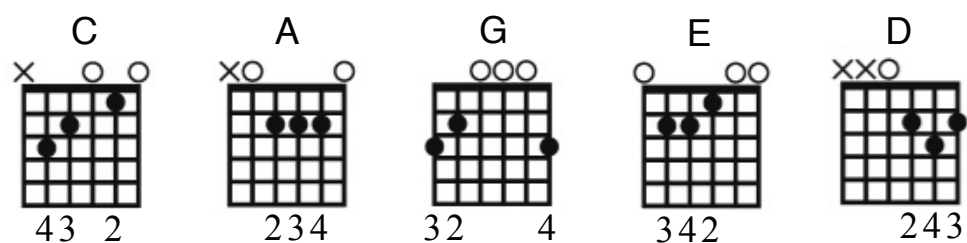
The chief benefit of the CAGED System is it enables you to connect any chord, scale or arpeggio along the entire fretboard using five patterns. The first step in utilizing the system is to recast the five open-position chords into movable shapes that can be shifted up and down the fretboard to different keys, as we've already done in Examples 2 and 3. Now let's take these movable shapes and apply them to the key of C.

Ex. 4 illustrates this process. Look at the horizontal neck diagram below the chord frames and notice the use of overlaid, overlapping boxes, with every other one having dashed lines. The first box encompasses the open-position C chord, which starts the procession of voicings. The two chord frames above this box represent both the standard open-position C chord and a variation on it that includes a high G note (the 5th of the chord) on the high E string's 3rd fret. The next

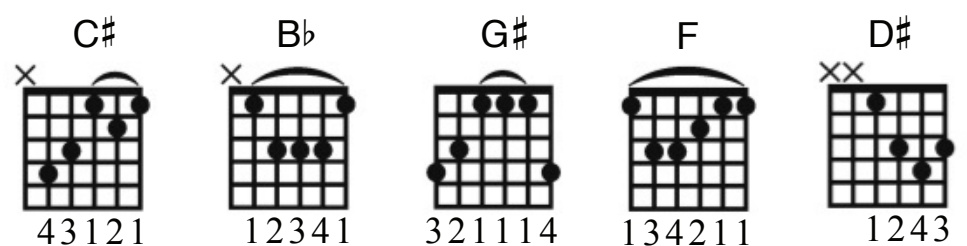
Ex. 1 Open-position chords



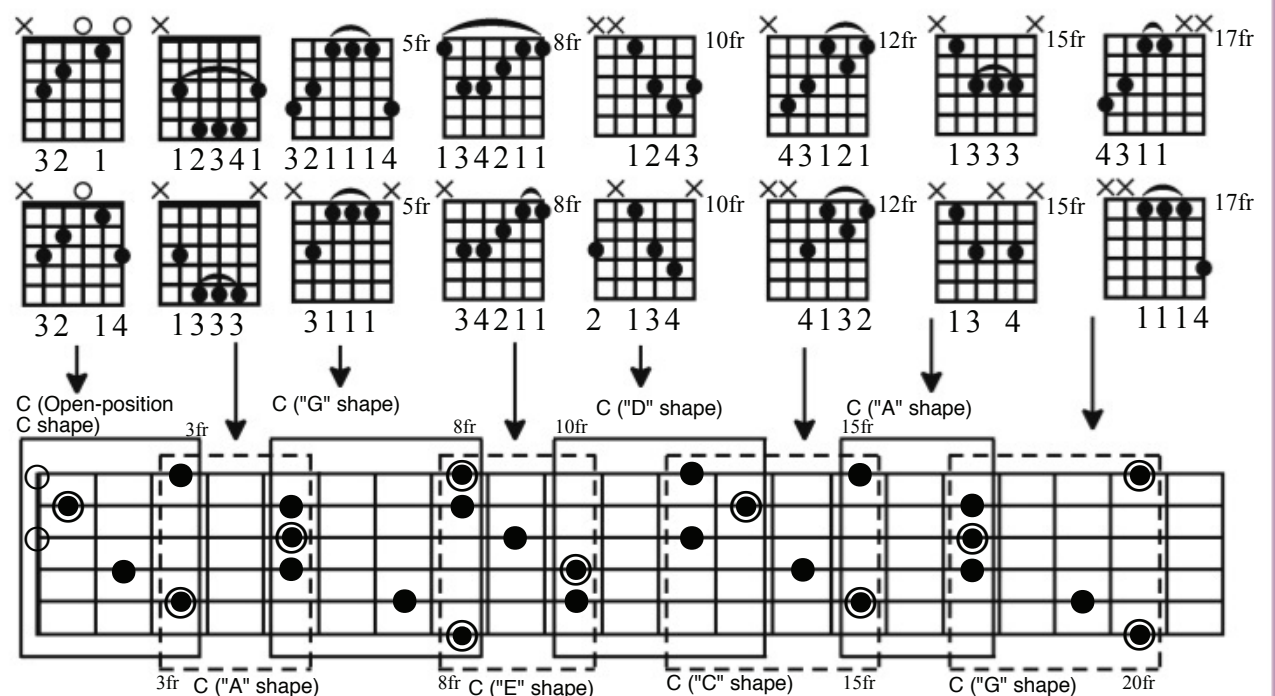
Ex. 2 Refingering open-position chords



Ex. 3 Movable chord voicings



Ex. 4 Caged System chords along the neck (key of C)



box (the first one with the dashed lines) houses the movable form of the open A chord shape, transposed to the key of C here, with the low C root note being on the 5th string's 3rd fret).

Moving to the right, the third box hosts the G-shape pattern of a C chord, with the low C root note being moved up to the 8th fret on the low E string. Box number four (dashed lines again) contains the E-shape voicing of a C chord, with the low C root again being at the 8th fret on the low E string. Box number five frames the D-shape pattern of a C chord, with the C root note now being on the D string's 10th fret. At box number six (dashed lines) we start over again with the C-shape pattern of a C chord, now 12 frets and one octave above the open-position starting point. This is then followed by the A-shape pattern again, and, finally, the G shape.

Look back over the boxes and you'll notice the order of chord shapes are C, A, G, E and D, which gives us our CAGED acronym. Also take note of the fact that each chord shape connects to its neighbor by at least one root note. (In some cases, there are several other overlapping chord tones.) The chord frames pictured in the top row above the horizontal neck diagram in Ex. 4 are there to help decipher the chord shapes residing within the boxes on the neck diagram. Of special interest are the second row of chord voicings. These are alternate voicings and inversions of the basic voicings above them.

Ex. 5 is a musical exercise that uses all these voicings in ascending order up the fretboard. Put it together slowly and it should help you to physically understand the connecting potential of the CAGED System.

TONIC OCTAVES

The "key" that will unlock the vast potential of the CAGED System lies in the keen awareness of where the roots, or tonic notes, are located within each of the five patterns. Look at the neck diagram in Ex. 6, which uses the very same system of overlapping boxes from Ex. 4. Here, all the notes of the C chords are omitted except for the C roots, or tonics. Notice that each box contains at least two notes: a lower C root and its higher octave. The G-shape and E-shape patterns both

Ex. 5

♩ = 80

Box 1: C (3 2 1), Box 2: C (3 2 1 4), Box 3: C (1 2 3 4 1), Box 4: C (1 3 3 3), Box 5: C (3 2 1 1 1 4), Box 6: C/E (3 1 1 1), Box 7: C (1 3 4 2 1 1), Box 8: C/G (3 4 2 1 1), Box 9: C (1 2 4 3), Box 10: C/E (2 1 3 4), Box 11: C/E (4 1 3 2), Box 12: C (4 3 1 2 1), Box 13: C (1 3 4), Box 14: C (1 3 3 3), Box 15: C (4 3 2 1 1), Box 16: C/G (1 1 1 4).

Ex. 6 Caged System octave locations (key of C)

3fr ("C" shape), 8fr ("G" shape), 10fr ("D" shape), 15fr ("A" shape), 3fr ("A" shape), 8fr ("E" shape), 15fr ("C" shape), 20fr ("G" shape).

Ex. 7 Octaves exercise (key of C)

♩ = 80

N.C. (C)

"C" shape, "A" shape, "G" shape, "E" shape, "D" shape, "C" shape.

let ring throughout

1 5 5 5 10 10 13 13

3 1 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 3 1 4 1 3

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contain a second octave, with three C notes. It's highly beneficial to commit these octave shapes to visual and finger memory. Here is a system you can use:

- C-shape pattern: ring finger on the A string; index on the B string.
- A-shape pattern: index finger on the A string; ring finger on the G string.
- G-shape pattern: ring finger on low E string; index finger on the G string; pinkie on the high E string.
- E-shape pattern: index finger on low E string; ring finger on the D string; index finger on high E string.
- D-shape pattern: index finger on the D string; pinkie on the B string.

Ex. 7 offers a musical exercise that may help to alleviate the tedious nature of the learning process.

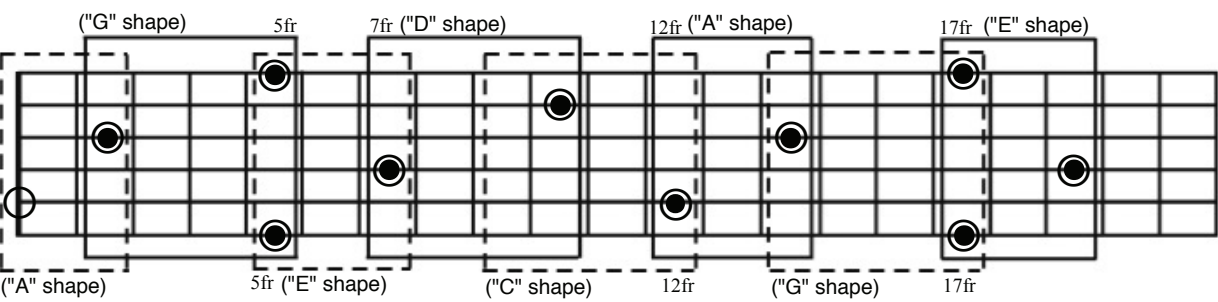
APPLYING THE SYSTEM TO OTHER KEYS

Now that we understand the octave shapes of the CAGED System as applied to the key of C, let's explore some other keys.

Ex. 8 is a horizontal neck diagram that illustrates the CAGED System octave shapes applied to the key of A. Notice that the octave system begins with the A-shape pattern, in the open position. Next is the G shape, followed by the E shape, D shape and C shape. Then, as happened with Ex. 4, the shapes eventually repeat themselves 12 frets and one octave higher. Notice anything familiar occurring on the fretboard? You guessed it! The order of pattern shapes remains constant. Even though we started with the A shape (second letter of the word *caged*), G came next, then E, D and C to complete the cycle. Again, here's a musical example (Ex. 9) to practice the octave shapes, this time in the key of A.

Ex. 10 continues the pattern connecting process, this time in the key of G. Again, notice that the boxes snap together in the same C-A-G-E-D order, but this time starting from the third letter name, G. The musical exercise in Ex. 11 combines octave practice with corresponding chord shapes.

Ex. 8 Caged System octave locations (key of A)

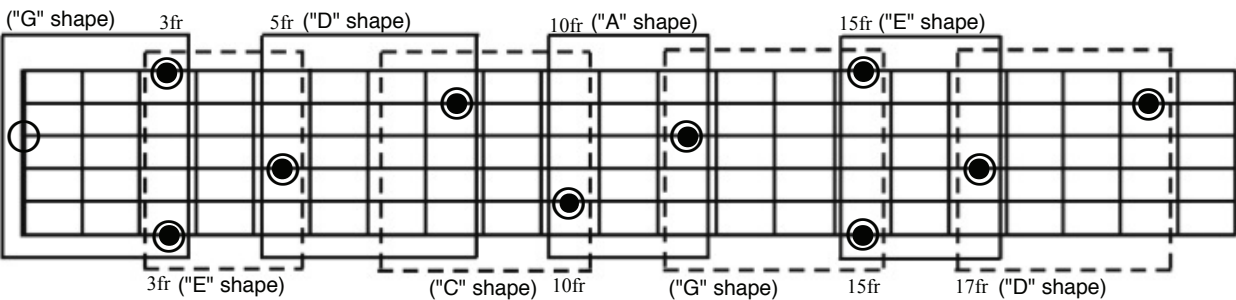


Ex. 9 Octaves exercise (key of A)

♩ = 92

N.C. (A)

Ex. 10 Caged System octave locations (key of G)



Ex. 11 Octave exercise (key of G)

♩ = 72

N.C. (G)

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So far, we've covered the keys of C, A and G. Let's continue the survey and hit the two remaining keys — E and D — which, as you know, are important guitar keys! Use **Ex. 12** to guide you through the octave shapes in the key of E in preparation for the hybrid-picking exercise in **Ex. 13**, which has you picking and plucking octave notes together.

Ex. 14 lays out the pattern order for the key of D, while **Ex. 15** offers a 16th-note strumming exercise that will help get you in shape for funky, octave riffing.

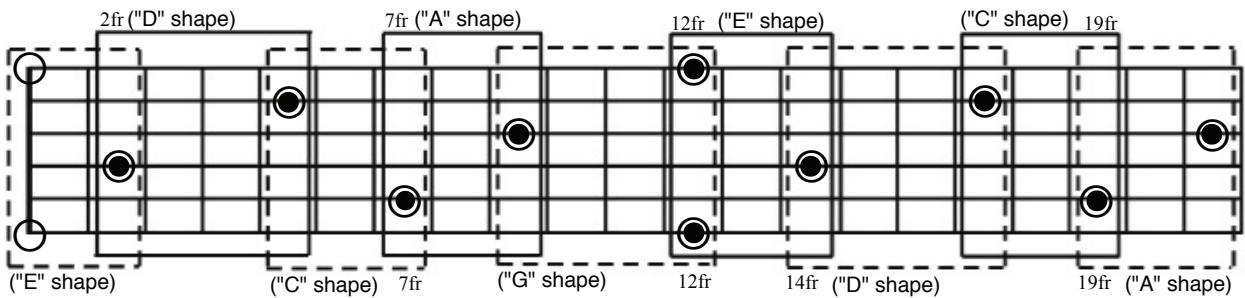
You've no doubt noticed that the five keys we've covered correspond to the five open-position chord voicings from which the CAGED System is derived. The intent was mainly for continuity. It's also possible to apply the five-pattern system to any key (B^b, E^b, F[#], etc.). In fact, I highly advise that you apply the octave shapes to all 12 keys. While you're at it, transpose some or all of the musical exercises presented thus far to other keys as well. Try to make the chord-voicing exercise in **Ex. 5** top priority!

CHORD PROGRESSION PRACTICE

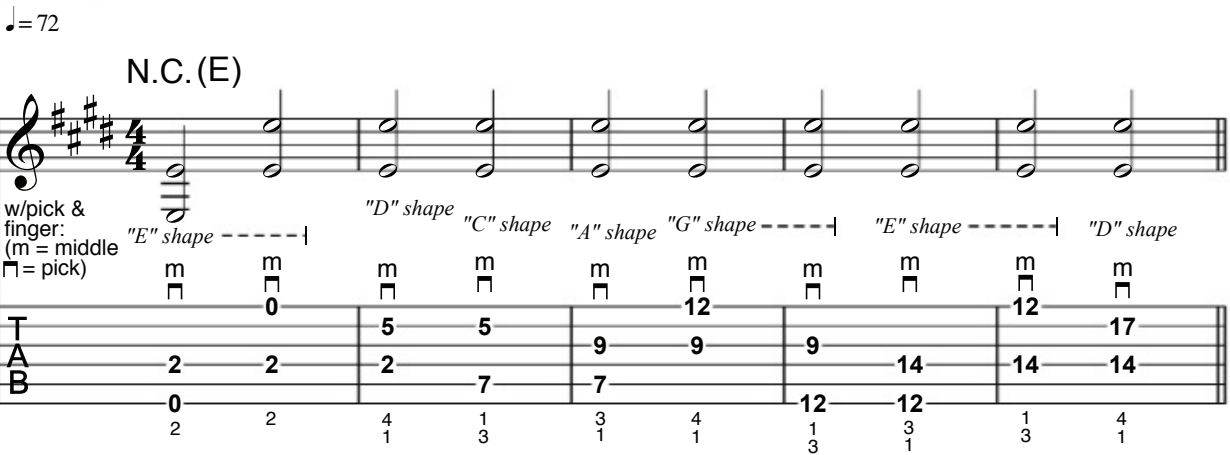
You can start to put the CAGED System to practical use by practicing short chord progressions using shapes derived from the system. One of the most common progressions is the I – IV – V (one – four – five) cadence. (C – F – G in the key of C; E – A – B in the key of E; etc.)

Ex. 16 is a challenging multi-part exercise derived from a one-bar I – IV – V progression in the key of G: G – C – D. Before launching into the example, look at the first chord in each bar. Bar 1 (**Ex. 16a**) starts with an open-position G chord. Bar 2 (**16b**) begins with an E-shape pattern of the G chord, which is the next pattern up the fretboard using the CAGED System connecting process. Bar 3 (**16c**) begins with a D-shape G chord (G/B is a 1st-inversion form of a G chord). Bar 4 (**16d**) starts with the C-shape form of the G chord, and bar 5 (**16e**) uses the A-shape form. Finally, bar 6 (**16f**) utilizes the G shape an octave up from the starting point. This succession of I-chord lineups follows the principles of the CAGED System method, but the IV and V chords in each bar correspond to the CAGED System process too.

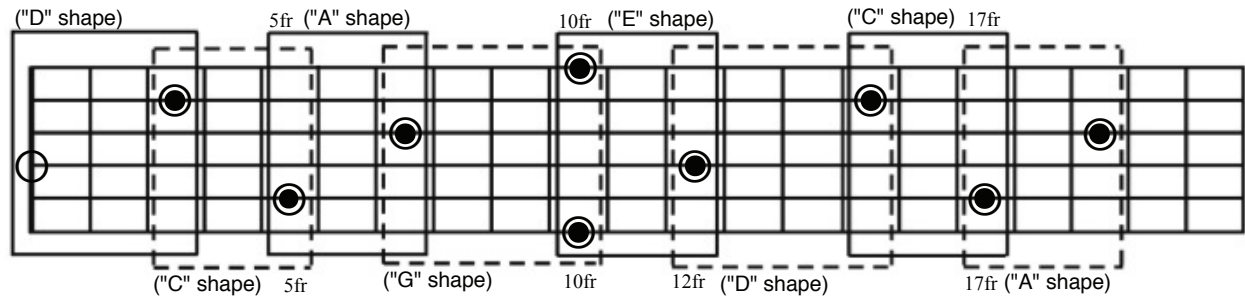
Ex. 12 Caged System octave locations (key of E)



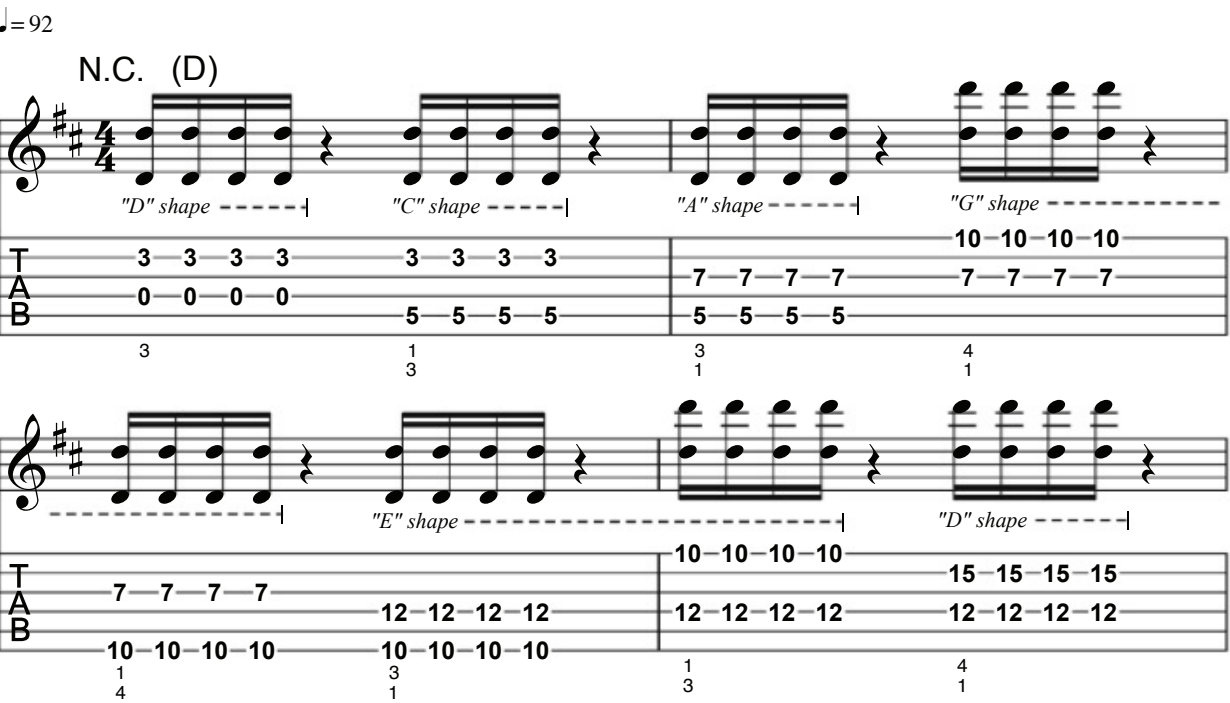
Ex. 13 Octaves exercise (key of E)



Ex. 14 Caged System octave locations (key of D)



Ex. 15 Octaves exercise (key of D)



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Notice that the C and D chords in each bar are played in the same general area of the fretboard as the initial G chord voicing. That's obvious if you look at the tablature and chord frames. Now follow the order of shapes used to create each C chord voicing, bar by bar — C shape, A shape, G shape, E shape, D shape, C shape. Next, analyze the shape sequence order for the D chords — D shape, C shape, A shape, G shape, E shape, D shape. The CAGED System is fueling the fretboard lineup of not only the I chord but also the IV and V chords!

Don't fret if you're not yet fully grasping all of the concepts brought forth in the previous paragraph. For now, just put this example together and use it as a daily practice routine. Once you have it down, try putting it together in other keys. The connections will sink in, and the payoff will be immense in many aspects, practically guaranteed!

MINOR KEYS

Although the CAGED System's basic principles are based on major chord voicings, the system may also be applied to minor chords. Remember that learning to see all the root-octave locations is the key to harnessing the usefulness of the CAGED System. Now look at the neck diagram in Ex. 17. This is the C minor counterpart to the C major diagram from Ex. 4. Whereas Ex. 4 depicted various shapes and voicings for a C major chord (C, E, G), Ex. 17 does the same for Cm (C, E^b, G). All of the roots and 5ths are the same in each of the diagrams; only the 3rds have been changed, from major (E) to minor (E^b).

Ex. 18 is a descending musical exercise using several Cm shapes. Inspired by Andy Summers' craftwork in early Police recordings, it ends on a colorful Cm11 (C, E^b, G, B^b, F) voicing. There you have it! Remember, this lesson serves as merely an introduction to the CAGED System. In a future lesson we will explore how it can be used to connect the fretboard for 7th chords, arpeggios, scales, licks and riffs. Until then, keep practicing!

Ex. 16 I - IV - V exercise (key of G)

Ex. 16 is a musical exercise in the key of G major, featuring I-IV-V chord progressions. It consists of six measures (a-f) with guitar shapes and tablature. The tempo is 100 bpm. The shapes used are: G (21 3), C (32 1), D (132), G (134211), C (1333), D (43121), G/B (2 134), C/E (3111), D (1333), G/B (4132), C/G (34211), D/A (1114), G (1333), C (1243), D (134211), G (43111), C (4312), D/F# (2 134). The tablature shows the fretting hand positions for each shape.

Ex. 17 Caged System chords along the neck (key of C minor)

Ex. 17 shows the CAGED System chords along the neck for C minor. It includes fretboard diagrams for Cm (Open-position C shape), Cm ("G" shape), Cm ("D" shape), Cm ("A" shape), Cm ("E" shape), Cm ("C" shape), Cm ("G" shape), and Cm ("A" shape). The fret positions are indicated: 3fr, 8fr, 10fr, 15fr, 20fr.

Ex. 18 Descending exercise (key of C minor) (bridge single-coil pickup with chorus and delay) Descending exercise (key of C minor)

Ex. 18 is a descending exercise in the key of C minor, featuring Cm shapes. It consists of five measures with guitar shapes and tablature. The shapes used are: Cm (4213), Cm (1342), Cm (134111), Cm/E^b (2114), Cm (13421), and Cm11 (31411). The tablature shows the fretting hand positions for each shape.

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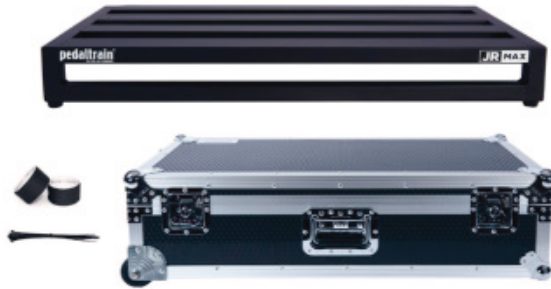
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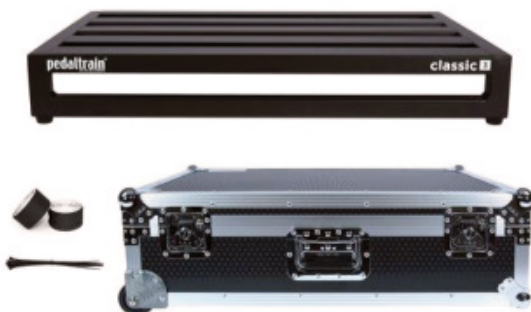
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Slipknot's Mick Thomson
[left] and Jim Root



"GUITARS WERE
DEPRESSING ME.
EVERYTHING WAS
DEPRESSING ME"
—JIM ROOT

ROLLING WITH THE CHAOS

Jim Root and **Mick Thomson** do a deep dive into the making of *The End, So Far* — the setbacks, the depression, the wild gear experiments, the whammy-bar hijinks and more

Words Jon Wiederhorn Photography by Anthony Scanga

For many bands that wrote albums during the pandemic lockdown, having extra time to compose and experiment was a bittersweet bonus. It allowed them to try new techniques, then revisit and fine-tune songs months after they were first tracked. Artists had the flexibility to upgrade their home studios and record in multiple locations. Fiddling while Rome burned provided a temporary escape from a decaying world and an outlet to funnel their anger and frustration. All good things in a tragic and frightening time.

Listening to Slipknot's seventh studio album, *The End, So Far*, suggests the nine-piece wrecking machine benefited from such a chance to explore a wide range of musical options, from moody and melodic elegies to vicious and chaotic tirades. Throughout the record, ambient, effect-laden sounds collide with chuggy, downtuned riffs and tempos reel from sluggish to torrential, often in the same song. Like their last album, 2019's *We Are Not Your Kind*, atmospheric interstitials are bookended by a schizophrenic hybrid of pop hooks, raging riffs and enough rhythmic variation to bewilder and enthrall.

"We're not just five guys up there playing metal songs like, say, Anthrax, Exodus or Testament. There's so much more going on," says guitarist Jim Root of Slipknot's sawed-off-shotgun-to-the-head approach. "There's orchestration going on with [keyboardist] Sid [Wilson] and [DJ and sampler] Craig [Jones]. There's melodic vocals and screaming and piano and samples and all these layers and music styles."

The End, So Far may not be Slipknot's most accessible album, but it's arguably their most eclectic and enduring, an inescapable, enigmatic nightmare of sound that alternately soothes, stomps and slashes. Many of the songs will instantly appeal to fans of the band's tribal death, thrash and new-American-metal classics like "Psychosocial," "People = Shit," and "Duality." However, hordes of "maggots" (the historic die-hards) will likely be dismayed by



some of the other tracks. Slipknot seem to take a perverse glee in this inevitability, which may explain why they open the album with "Adderall," a melancholy, cinematic cut redolent of Radiohead and Trent Reznor. Sampled choir snippets merge with layered atmospheric guitars, fraying the nerves without a single distorted power chord. Elsewhere, "Medicine for the Dead" blends warbling industrial noises into a melange of evocative arpeggios, clanking xylophones and palm-muted guitar chugs, and "De Sade" intertwines militant beats, a

honey-sweet chorus and glistening guitar shards with shreddy leads. *The End, So Far* includes bluesy bits, some soulful crooning and tons of swooshing, pulsing effects you definitely won't find on an Anthrax album.

"I don't think we intentionally did anything to piss anyone off," says second guitarist Mick Thomson. "But I know some people are gonna hate it, and I don't give a shit about what they have to say on the Internet about how much I suck. I don't even read anything on there that has to do with music [imitates blog post]: 'Fuck those guys! Fucking sell-outs!' [implies blasé response]: 'That's fine. That's wonderful. Have a great day. Oh, and your mom says you gotta fucking take the garbage out after your fucking homework's done.'"

Considering the intricate yet coherent results, what's most striking about *The End, So Far* is that Slipknot had neither an abundance of time to work on the album nor a surfeit of material to choose from. When they entered the studio with co-producer Joe Baressi, demos were half-formed, Root — usually one of the band's main songwriters — was almost too bummed out to pick up his guitar, and no one had rehearsed the chunks of music that were being considered.

"We were flying by the seat of our pants," Root says. "Someone would go, 'Okay, this is all we got. This is what we're gonna build from.' And we'd be off. I'd listen to something and go, 'This is what I want to play on.' I'd turn to Mick and go, 'Okay, we want two guitar parts here that are different. Do you want to take the low one or the high one?' And maybe he'd say, 'I like the low one.' And we'd play together until we came up with something."

The situation was a producer's second-worst nightmare. The only more stressful scenario is when everyone in a band is either constantly drunk, strung out on drugs or feeling left out of the creative process, as was the situation for Slipknot's 2008 album, *All Hope Is Gone*. Having mixed the last two Slipknot albums, however, Barresi was prepared for the unusual. He just wasn't completely ready for the avant-jazz-style sessions that went down at his home studio and at Henson Studios in Los Angeles. Equally unsure of the outcome, everyone entrenched themselves and started spitting ideas. And alchemy occurred.

In a series of revealing and fascinating conversations, Root and Thomson address the extemporaneous recording style that yielded one of Slipknot's most dizzying and cathartic albums, the setbacks that threatened to cripple their efforts, how they conjured mind-bending noises out of the ether and how they've made it through more than 25 years by adapting to, learning from and maximizing every bizarre scenario in which they find themselves.

I: THE ART OF RANDOM CHAOS

Your 2019 album, We Are Not Your Kind, was filled with experimental interludes and structured almost like an epic, conceptual piece. The End, So Far is just as creative and artistic, but it seems more like the product of an attention deficit-afflicted nation being bombarded with a vast array of stimuli. Was the goal to take contrasting clusters of noise and melody and stitch them together in a way that somehow holds up as resolutely as an AC/DC album?

MICK THOMSON: There's never a plan. I'm totally against the idea of following expected paths because even if you try to do that, it doesn't work out the way you thought it would. Even if you think you know what's going on, unexpected things always happen. Life always changes.

JIM ROOT: Our sound comes in part from constantly changing up the for-

mula. We're still trying to evolve as a band, and I am trying to evolve as a songwriter. And now we've got our new bassist Allesandro [Alex Venturella] (ex-Krokodil, Cry for Silence), and he's an amazing schooled musician. He was tech'ing for Brent Hinds of Mastodon, and he's a friend of mine. I said, "Hey, man, would you rather be onstage playing bass or helping Brent out?" He jumped at the opportunity. And then he brought some song ideas to the band, so that duty came off me a little bit.

Up until 2008's All Hope Is Gone, the late bassist Paul Gray and the late drummer Joey Jordison co-wrote much of the material. Has the band changed significantly with different writers at the helm?

THOMSON: We've always been the way we are. Every song has a different story and goes through all sorts of different processes to become what it is. No one writes something and goes, "Here, dude, check this out" and then there's a song. It's never worked that way with Paul and it doesn't work that way now. Paul could write a song, but when we were done with it you may not even recognize it anymore.

Do you feel different about the creation of The End, So Far than about your previous releases?

THOMSON: So much was going on the whole time that nothing seemed fucking real. Now that I'm thinking about things and what we just recorded, it's almost like a dream. That's the way everything has been for me ever since we couldn't tour anymore because of the pandemic.

ROOT: We were all crazed. We had zero time for pre-production and it was like we were learning and building and adding to this meal we were making as we were eating it. But we tend to work well under pressure and we got a great record out of it. The only thing I'm really bummed out about is that we were so unprepared, and it was the first time

we got to work with Joe Barresi as a co-producer. I wanted to come to Joe with our "A" game. I could sense a little frustration in him sometimes because we weren't well-rehearsed and ready to go. We were still writing and working on the songs.

Do you think The End, So Far is darker and more chaotic than much of your prior output because of the two-year horror show you experienced as you created it?

ROOT: Yeah, because no one had rehearsed together. If we were gonna rewrite parts of the demos it was gonna have to happen right there on the spot as we were recording it. We were lucky that we were in the position to come up with these parts because we were laying the record rather than playing it. It wasn't my favorite way to make a record, and [it's] not Joe's favorite way to make a record. But because of the circumstances with Covid and the fact that we all live so far away from each other, and we had a budget and a schedule we had to stick to, we had no choice.

It seems like you're trying to create a puzzle with 1,000 pieces, but the puzzle doesn't have a guide image to follow and the pieces don't all have compatible parts.

THOMSON: It's unglamorous, but yeah. There's all this talk about the vision for this record. In reality, a lot of it is taking a part and duct taping it onto some other part, and then doing it again. But it's not fucking throw-and-go. Something might start with a part someone demoed with Easy Drummer. Another thing could come from fucking riffs that were three years old that we jammed on. Everything filters through the band and gets rebuilt and constructed. But wherever it started, and whatever it goes through, it always turns into a Slipknot song.

If you took the material everyone contributed to the songs on The End, So Far and started working on them today, having never heard them before, would the album be pretty much the same?

THOMSON: No. It would be completely different. That's what a lot of fans don't understand. There's a nucleus point somewhere, and then the rest of the band comes in and all sorts of other parts change and morph and mature and grow and get cut and rearranged. Everything could be different at any time. Right now, in this situation, this is who we are. If you gave us six months to go record it again, it would sound radically different because it would be a

"IT'S ALWAYS THERAPUTIC FOR ME TO BE DOING SOMETHING WITH GUITARS. I'VE GOT PEDALS ALL OVER MY DINING ROOM TABLE"

MICK THOMSON

year and a half later. We're different people. We've had different experiences than what was happening when we did this record. We could have the same vision. We could try to put out the same thing, but it wouldn't even sound close.

There are some complex, multifaceted songs on the album, such as "Medicine for the Dead" or "Hivemind." Were those particularly hard to get your head around?

THOMSON: We're always dealing with multiple parts that come from totally different directions. That's just Slipknot. If we're stuck on a part that just isn't working, and you don't come up with something within a couple hours, you'll spend the next three days and then never have it. Sometimes it doesn't work and you gotta drop it entirely and sometimes you just need to walk away and look at it again later or kick it to [vocalist] Corey [Taylor] and let him write some words for what you've got. If there weren't words to it already and he comes up with something, that might trigger something else, and you completely rewrite it because of his lyrics. Sometimes we'll get stuff back that he did a demo vocal on, and then we'll be like, "Okay, that riff's gone now and this other thing moves to the front. Every song has got its own different kinda weirdness that it goes through and it's never really the same.

ROOT: I try not to get married to anything that I write. Let's say I write a full five-minute-long arrangement. I've layered it up with five guitars and synthesizer parts and put bass on it and programmed all the drums for it. I might have put 30, 40, 50 hours into one arrangement. When you sit up all night putting something together by yourself, you tend to feel close to it. But if I hand that to Corey and he says, "Hey, can you make this part longer?" Or, "Nah, I don't like this part," I don't get butt-hurt about it. And I don't take it personally because I know we both want the song to be great and if changing my parts around makes him come up with a better vocal line for this part, then I'll spend another five hours on it to get it to where he needs it.

Do you ever pick up your guitars and just jam to come up with a new part or find a segue to a part you've already written?

ROOT: That's the way Mick works. If we're in a room playing and he comes up with an idea, he'll play it over and over until somebody's like, "That's a fuckin' riff! We're gonna turn that into a song!" Or I'll show him something and say, "We need a part here." He comes up with a lot of stuff like that. Or he will be fucking

around with an effect and that will spark a song idea.

THOMSON: But that's why it was really fun to experiment in the studio this time. We'd have something and then I'd throw a bunch of other different amps up and go, "Okay, let's try this." I would double a riff but then change it a little. Next thing I knew, that doubled riff was the main part with a totally different amp sound and my normal tone had disappeared. It was just a bizarro process. It was almost a backwards fucking record from the way we've worked before.

Slipknot has always thrived on creative chaos. Does the band's aesthetic rest on the idea that control is an illusion?

THOMSON: I don't know if any band could ever have an entire vision for something and then achieve it. So we don't even try because everything is dependent on so many things. Every one of our records is different because they're reflective of all the people in the band and the input they have in the songs. And that input has a lot to do with who we are. We're all in different spots in our lives and every time we do stuff together, everything sounds a little different. Maybe one

"Most people think a Dinky is smaller than a Soloist, but it's not," Thomson says. "I'm always grabbing them when I'm just sitting around"





JIM ROOT

AMPS AND CABINETS:

- Bogner Helios Eclipse with "fat mod"
- Friedman BE-100 Deluxe
- Orange Rockerverb 100 MKIII
- Orange PPC412 cabinet with Celestion Vintage 30s

EFFECTS:

- Dunlop DCR2SR Cry Baby rack module
- Dunlop JH1D Jimi Hendrix Wah
- MXR Carbon Copy analog delay
- Electro-Harmonix Micro POG
- Dunlop Jimi Hendrix Octavio
- Boss NS-2 Noise Suppressor
- MXR Auto Q auto wah
- Maxon AF-9 Auto Filter
- Origin Effects Cali76 Compact Deluxe compressor
- Electro-Harmonix Small Stone Nano phaser
- Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail Nano reverb
- Eventide H9



MICK THOMSON

AMPS AND CABINETS:

- Omega Ampworks Obsidian (with KT66 power tubes)
- Omega Ampworks 4x12 FL Standard cabinet (with Eminence DV-77 Mick Thomson signature speakers)

EFFECTS:

- Boss GX-700 guitar effects processor
- Electro-Harmonix Bassballs envelope filter (vintage)
- (Dead)FX "I Can't Feel My Face" Super Fuzz
- MXR Dyna Comp
- Dunlop Billy Gibbons Siete Santos Octavio Fuzz
- Dunlop DCR2SR Cry Baby rack module
- Wampler Tumnus Deluxe overdrive
- Warm Audio Foxy Tone Box octave fuzz
- Stone Deaf FX Noise Reaper
- Line 6 HX Stomp (for reverb and delay)
- CIOKS DC7 power supplies

SWITCHING:

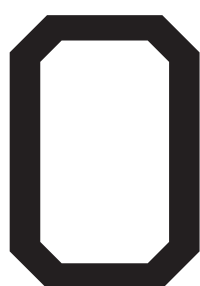
- Radial Engineering JX44
- KHE Audio ACS 4x2
- RJM Effect Gizmo
- RJM Mastermind GT/22 Controller
- MIDI Solutions T8 MIDI Thru box

OTHER:

- Furman P-1800 AR power conditioner
- Shure Axient wireless

THE AXOLOGY SO FAR

A guide to Jim Root and Mick Thomson's current gear, including backline amps, cabs, effects and more.



One of the reasons *The End, So Far* bristles with galvanic energy and impulsivity is that guitarists Jim Root and Mick Thomson

dove deep into the experimental wormhole with co-producer Joe Baressi. To create powerful songs, they experimented with so many combinations of amps, cabinets, guitars, pedals and other forms of sound modulation that they could barely recognize their attack tones and atmospheric flourishes, let alone recreate them.

On the road, however, whether they're playing new material or songs from their catalog, Slipknot meticulously keep track of what guitars they need to cut through the percussive clamor of the band and achieve maximal punch.

For a long time, Root has relied largely on Fender, a relationship he began in 2009 with the Jim Root Signature Telecaster. He immediately started using the instrument onstage to emphasize how the traditionally non-metal guitar could be ramped up to sound aggressively metal.

"I thought it was great," he says. "Everyone was using these seven-string guitars and stuff, and I'm playing this old-guy rock 'n' roll guitar. It shouldn't make sense in a metal band and it shouldn't be something that you do, yet there it is. I'm playing it and it works."

Root has three signature models for Fender: His Telecaster, a Strat and a Jazzmaster, and he used most of them on the band's last U.S. tour. For Slipknot's European jaunt, Root added some Telecasters to his rig, and when the band returns to the States for their next round of gigs, he'll proudly brandish his famed vintage Number 1 Telecaster.

"I was going to retire because it started getting pretty beat up, so I didn't take in on the last U.S. tour. But I think I want to get it more beat up, so I'm probably gonna bring it back out. I just think it's got battle scars and character, so I'm gonna let it do its thing."

Since Fender owns Charvel, the metal guitar giant recently launched



"SEEING THEM BRINGS ME BACK TO THE TIME IN THE NINETIES WHEN I WAS BROKE AND IN LOVE WITH THOSE GUITARS"

—MICK THOMSON



Root's Artist Series guitar, the Jim Root Signature Pro-Mod San Dimas Style 1 HH FR, which has seen plenty of live action.

"When I was growing up, I was playing a lot of Chavels," Root says. "I had a bunch of Model 5s and a Model 1. I used to play them a lot along with Jacksons. Then I got offered a signature Charvel without having to leave Fender, so I got real lucky. I don't know how lightning struck me in such a great way."

Root feels so comfortable with Charvels that he made sure to play a few of his favorites — along with a variety of other guitars Baressi handed him — when he was tracking solos for *The End, So Far*. "I have a great DK 24 with Full Shred pickups that I used," he says. "It's a wood-grain color with a roasted maple fretboard. I used a black one as well for a few of the guitar solos and a little bit of the third-guitar tracking."

Thomson joined Jackson's artist roster in 2016 with a Custom Double Rhoads and his first Soloist model. Onstage, Thomson plays his Pro Series USA Signature Mick Thomson Jackson Soloist SL2s and a Jackson prototype Dinky he hot-rodded with direct-mounted signature pickups.

"Seeing them brings me back to the time in the Nineties when I was broke and in love with those guitars," Thomson says. "They have bolt-on necks so they were more affordable than the Jackson Soloist. It has a totally different kind of sound when you hit the strings than you get with a neck-through. It's fun to play because I like to try something different, especially after playing the Soloist for a long time. It's like, 'I know the Soloist works great. What else works?'"

While Thomson rocks the Dinkys on the road, they have become his go-to guitar when he's noodling at home. "Most people think a Dinky is smaller than a Soloist, but it's not," he says. "I'm always grabbing them when I'm just sitting around. Right now, they're my favorite fucking things; they have the greatest necks. I've got a red one and a blood-red one, which I matched to my old B.C. Rich." —

JON WIEDERHORN

of us is burned out from playing something a certain way too many times, and maybe someone else wants a little more of another thing. So, now we're pushing in new directions we're not even aware of because we're processing it as you're doing it. It's like you let your gut direct you and then your brain doubles back later and tells you what your gut did.

Do you think your gut reaction to a musical passage is usually the right one?

THOMSON: I think you can overthink things until you don't know which way is up or if what you just did is any good. This album is looser and darker, but is it better? That's up to anyone's perception on any given day. There's days when I love a song and then another day I hate it. But that's what's cool about what we do. You've got all these conflicting factors and everything is the product of these different people involved, so we're always in a different spot.

Does rolling with the chaos make you rely on one another more instead of trying to be the main creative force?

ROOT: To me, everything feels a lot more collaborative now because, in some ways, we've grown up to be inquisitive children picking each other's brains. "Oh hey, what's that thing you're doing there? How did you do that? Will you show me?" Or I'll hear something Mick does and I'll go and grab a pedal to see if I can come up with something that will compliment his part. We've learned how to communicate and we're trying to understand where everyone else is coming from. I just wish some of these songs on this new record had the chance to evolve a little bit more. Now that we've been away from the recording process for a few months, I'm like, "Shit, man, I have such a better idea now for that part. I wish I could re-record that thing." Or "I have this riff that I think would fit better in that section. And that's when you see us play live — I tend to improvise a lot or add things into the songs."

If We Are Not Your Kind was like your twisted version of Pink Floyd's The Wall, with all the different interstitials leading into these epic songs, The End, So Far feels like a Pink Floyd record playing simultaneously with albums by Radiohead, Pantera, Slayer, Foreigner, Soundgarden, Ministry and Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross.

ROOT: It sounds like it's all over the place because our influences come from all over the place and we've evolved to the point where we can get that across in the

songs. This band is such a cornucopia of different personalities and musical styles and musicians in general. Me and Mick are basically self-taught metal dudes. Corey can sing anything. Alex is schooled in music, Clown came from a more indie rock world, and everyone else is very artistic in their own way and they bring their own approach to the songs as well.

Slipknot isn't easy listening, but, like some of the best albums by Mastodon, Tool, Lamb of God or even Yes and King Crimson, you have to earn the right to love it and understand it.

THOMSON: It shouldn't be too easy to digest or even categorize. When we did Vol. 3: *The Subliminal Verses*, I was listening to a burn of roughs in my car in Des Moines. The guys in the band Cephalic Carnage were playing in Des Moines that night, so I was playing the songs for one of the guys in the band and he didn't know what to say. He was like, "This is just so different. What is it? It's metal, but it's not metal. How do you define it?" And I said, "Stop trying to fucking nail it to a wall as something and just enjoy it as music." That's what I've learned as I've

Root with his new signature Charvel San Dimas



WHO'S PLAYING WHAT?

How to tell left from right with Jim Root and Mick Thomson

BY JON WIEDERHORN

On album and onstage, Slipknot guitarists Jim Root and Mick Thomson work together as a team. Both play rhythm and lead tracks, and both feed off the energy and excitement of the other's musicianship. They also equally enjoy a dizzying variety of textural passages and rib-kicking riffs.

So, amid the firestorm of barrelling beats, pummelling percussion, screeching samples, DJ scratching and vocal acrobatics, how can you tell if a guitar part you're hearing is coming from Root or Thomson? The easiest way is to pay attention to which direction the sound is coming from (this is easily accomplished with headphones). Root's parts are always in the left part of the stereo mix and Thomson's are always on the right. The same goes for their live shows.

But what if the listener is cranking the band's tunes on a mono Bluetooth speaker? Well, there are other ways to tell the differences between the two players.

"We're really different kinds of players, but we complement each other really well," Thomson says. "What isn't in my wheelhouse is in Jim's. He's more of a rock guy and I'm more of a technical metal player. He's got a great touch and plays legato, and I play some of the more offbeat stuff."

Can you describe your working relationship?

THOMSON: When you play with somebody for long enough, you develop a seventh sense. Me and Jim know each other well enough that without thinking about it consciously, he automatically adapts to playing along with whatever I'm doing. I guarantee he can anticipate when a note's gonna come out of me, just as I can with him.

What should listeners keep an ear out for to tell the two of you apart?

ROOT: I'm a liquid sort of organic guy and he's more like, "Here I am. I'm gonna lay it down and it's in your fucking face and it's gonna be powerful." I like to mix alternate picking with legato and I'm a little bit more fluid than Mick. But Mick understands theory and tries to put it in place a lot more than I do. I'm more of an instinct player. Even if I play something out of key, I don't care because some-

same guitar, I think his chug would be a little bigger and fatter just from the way he holds his pick. And it's funny 'cause he plays with a lot more gain than I do.

Did you pre-write the leads for The End, So Far?

ROOT: I have different phases of guitar playing that I go through. There's the woodshedding phase where your

muscle memory's really great around the fretboard. And then you have your writing mode. For me, that's when I throw all the woodshedding and muscle memory out the window and focus on the songs and the riffs. And that's the phase I was in when we were recording. I'm kind of bummed because I was really out of practice when we tracked the record. I was insecure about playing the guitar and doing the solos. I was just like, "Shit, why now?" If we had time, I'd like to go back and reapproach some of the solos. **THOMSON:** We didn't write any of the solos. What you hear on the record is what came out when I had a guitar in my hand and Joe said, "Okay, go." It wasn't a big, epic thing. If there were any bigger, more involved leads, I probably would have sat down, felt it out, built it and taken it someplace instead of recording a bunch of random, sporadic shit that came out of my brain once that afternoon and now has to stand the test of time.

It sounds like there's more whammy bar playing in the solos.

Which one of you brought that to the album?

THOMSON: That was me. I bought a couple of Jackson Dinky guitars with whamies on Reverb.com and brought them into the studio. I even got a fucking Jackson sustainer, so I went nuts with the wang bar on a bunch of spots 'cause I was having fun. I've only played hard-tails ever since we started recording. I literally drove to Simi Valley to pick up these guitars and then used them to record my solos.



Confusingly, Thomson [left] is always heard in the right speaker; Root [right] is always heard in the left!

times that shit works and creates something you wouldn't normally get.

There's a push-pull dynamic to Slipknot's guitar parts.

THOMSON: I tend to rush stuff a little bit. I can be really on top of shit and pushing it, and he'll lay back a little bit more. I have a more staccato, shorter, barky guitar attack and Jim's got a fatter, raw tone. His playing is a bit looser and mine's more tight. If we both played the

gotten older because I was one of those kids that went, “Well, I only like this kind of thing and fuck you.” So I understand how fans do that. But music is a huge thing. You don’t have to put yourself in a narrow type of pigeonhole. It’s an expression of who you are and what you do, and if you’re true to yourself it just comes out of you and it is what it is. That’s what I love about metal more than a lot of other music. You can draw from a lot more places. Punk always sounds like punk, but metal can go in a million different directions.

II: SINKING INTO THE DEPTHS

Jim, Did you play a substantial role in the songwriting for The End, So Far?

ROOT: Mostly, I helped shape and structure songs in the studio. But I didn’t write and bring in stuff the way I did before. I was majorly involved in the writing from Vol. 3: *The Subliminal Verses*. And then I got in a bit deeper on *All Hope Is Gone*. I wrote most of .5 *The Gray Chapter* and *We Are Not Your Kind*. But then the pandemic happened and nobody could be together. I was home alone and I got stressed out and depressed. So my contribution was minimal for this. It’s a good thing we had Alex stepping forward and picking up some of the slack along with [percussionist and artistic coordinator M. Shawn Crahan] Clown, who’s becoming a lot more involved in song arranging.

Did Alex’s ideas fit into the nebulous metal realm of Slipknot?

ROOT: When I first heard a lot of the arrangements, I thought, “Oh fuck, this doesn’t sound like Slipknot to me. We’ve got a lot of work to do.” I was kind of freaked out. What I heard was the symptom of having somebody that isn’t in our age group and wasn’t influenced by the same music. Alex was a Slipknot fan so he sounds like somebody that was influenced by Slipknot trying to write for Slipknot. But he had some good ideas, so we Frankensteined a couple of different parts between me, Alex and Clown, and things started to take shape. It was a huge group effort, but I was grateful Alex wrote the stuff he did because it taught me — not just about songwriting and arranging — but also about humanity, humility, ego and friendship.

Even if you weren’t able to write songs, did picking up the guitar during the pandemic help take your mind off the state of the world?

ROOT: No, guitars were depressing me. Everything was depressing me. It’s weird how the wires in your brain will cross up

and whereas previously the guitar was an outlet for me to escape stuff, this time when I looked at it, it just reminded me of all the things that I wasn’t able to do because of Covid. So, this positive force in my life turned into this negative thing, which would’ve been absolutely fucking horrifying if I hadn’t been able to pull myself out of it. Now I pick up a guitar and I’m like, “What would I do without this?” But back then, I was so far from that place. I was losing any sense of positivity. I had zero purpose at all. And I thought, “What difference does it make if I’m here or if I’m not here? What good is my existence? I’ve pretty much accom-

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JIM ROOT

plished everything in life that I’ve set out to accomplish. How do I set new goals and why should I bother?” That’s what was going through my head and it was scary.

Once you came out of your funk, were you able to write again?

ROOT: I tried to do some stuff. If I had felt a little more confident and positive, I would’ve said, “Oh, this is great. I’ve got all this downtime to sit and write and be creative.” I normally write in my house, but I had a bad leak and there was water damage so I had to try to find someplace different to set up my computer and write. It just didn’t feel right and gave me anxiety to try to work that way, which made me give up trying. I wasn’t in my comfort zone even being by myself. I was trapped in my head and I overthought everything. I was thinking about a bad relationship I was dealing with and trying to figure out the prob-

lem. “Am I the problem? Do I need to try harder?” I was questioning everything and coming up with no answers and getting more depressed. I got to the point where I was really struggling to even want to see the next day.

That’s bad. What did you do to regain some stability?

ROOT: Finally, I got depressed enough and dark enough and sick enough of my own shit that I reached out for help and started seeing a therapist. And that really helped. They say men only seek out therapy as a necessity. They won’t go unless it’s their last resort.

Did a doctor prescribe you antidepressants or anti-anxiety meds?

ROOT: I think that might have been part of the problem. I have a lot of social anxiety and I’m a pretty introverted person. Whenever I’ve talked to a doctor in the past, they’ve prescribed me [antidepressants] like Wellbutrin or Zoloft. I’ve tried taking those things, and after about a week or two they seem to make my anxiety even worse and I have massive panic attacks. So I don’t think those really jive with my chemistry at all. Instead, I was prescribed [the anxiety medication] Xanax. I felt like I needed to take something to level me out. I think I got too reliant on Xanax and that made me not care about anything at all.

What kind of therapy worked?

ROOT: I talked to this guy Connor Beaten, and he’s like a life coach. He has a really good podcast called “Man” and he helps men try to be masculine in a society that’s changing. There’s a term “toxic masculinity,” which is really damaging. We’re not toxic men. We have this shit called testosterone and it makes us fucking crazy and we have to have outlets. We have to have a purpose, a thing in life that gives us meaning. It’s not about women-hating at all. Connor has a really positive, good perspective and he does meetups with men. Everybody gets together and they go camping and chop wood and light fires and talk about their bullshit. They do yelling and screaming exercises. It’s a bit athletic, and it was good for me because as a man you need to have that man shit you do. I learned a lot about myself through his coaching. And I learned to deal with stress through breathing exercises, changing my diet, drinking more water and cutting Xanax out of my life.

Mick, were you also in a bad place?

THOMSON: Basically. Yeah. It seems like

every plausible metric is fucked currently. I was in a very bad place a lot of the time.

Were you angry and depressed?

THOMSON: Oh, I always am. When am I not? More than usual? Absolutely, sure. It's been like a fucking horror movie. It's the frog that doesn't know the water in the pot he's in is starting to boil. It's turning up and we're sitting in the fucking nearly-boiling water right now and we're going, "Oh, this kind of sucks." If you woke up *28 Days Later*-style, you'd say, "What the fuck happened to the world?!" It wouldn't seem real, but in incremental steps toward where we are, you somehow deal with it.

Was playing guitar therapeutic for you during the pandemic?

THOMSON: It's always therapeutic for me to be doing something with guitars. I've got pedals all over my dining room table. There's guitars all over the floor. I just work on shit and experiment and play. I'm always putting pickups in something or swapping out a bridge, just messing with stuff, adjusting the action and the intonation. And as soon as I'm done working on something, I'll plug in and play with it for hours. What's fun about it is that it'll feel like I'm fucking around with something different and testing it out. So there's an excitement about guitar because I'm being constructive. It's not, "Oh, look. Employment. Guitar." During quarantine, I spent hours and hours on that to get everything dialed in right. I played a bunch for sure, but my mental getaway comes from fixing shit and modifying stuff.

Jim, after you went through life coaching, was it easier to start writing again?

ROOT: A lot of my arrangements on *The End, So Far* were things I had been trying to do on my own, maybe for a solo album, around the time we did *The Gray Chapter* or *We Are Not Your Kind*. There were just a few songs I had written in the interim that I wasn't really in love with, and a bunch of sounds and effects and atmospheric parts I recorded. I also did some stuff that was real riffy, but not songs. I handed the hard drives to our engineer and Clown and I said, "Here's some stuff. See if you can do anything with these."

Did entering the studio get your creative juices flowing again?

ROOT: I went through weird phases. It was time to record the album, but I was still in songwriting mode. There was one idea I had [for "Acidic"] that was really bluesy and I experimented with key

changes, which I don't normally do. And I found myself going back to playing a lot of speed metal and thrash metal riffs, and we recorded a lot of those.

III: SALVATION THROUGH SOUND

You worked with Joe Baressi, who has entered the studio with many heavy bands, but never one as aggressive as Slipknot. Did you click right away or was there a learning curve?

THOMSON: It always takes some time to learn each other's style and build up that trust. But I wasn't worried because Joe's history with tones is unreal. Just the fact that he engineered the Kyuss records I always loved so much sold me on him. Joe has a certain openness to trying different things, which I loved. He got me to use a bunch of different passive pickups with great effect on a bunch of spots. So that's something I've reopened my mind to after 20 years. I play passives and stuff at home, but I wouldn't even consider taking a passive pickup guitar to go play metal in somebody's basement. But dialing that back a bit was fun because it forced me to really dig in. I've got a heavy right hand anyway, so it's not much work for me to dig in more to get more out of those strings.

ROOT: Joe is extremely knowledgeable about sounds. Fuck, listen to Tool [whose albums Baressi has engineered]. He knows how to get the best out of everyone. Working with him has made me go to my live rig, and me and my tech are reworking the sounds on my amps now. I'm gonna see if EMG can make me a passive style of pickup, like an HZ, which would have a different vibe from the compressed pickups I'm using now. I'd like to dive deeper into that world and go a bit back to the roots of everything — using an overdrive pedal to get that extra juice out of the amp instead of jamming the preamp gain — that kind of thing.

The new music isn't always a fist-in-face attack. Just as often, you seem to express a different kind of heaviness with ambient passages and experimental techniques. It's like you took a box of random effect pedals, connected them to an amp, and made crazy sounds for hours.

THOMSON: I had so much fun experimenting with all the fucking gear. There's so much going on that it's more in your mind than in the pedals, but there are all these soundscapes that you can create in all these different ways. This is the first time ever on a record that I didn't have one guitar sound as my attack tone.

Did you have go-to set-ups depending on

whether you wanted a crushing tone, a middle-of-the-road tone or an ambient tone?

THOMSON: I had a different amp on every song — multiple amps on every song. And then there were all these other layers; we played with radically different amp combos. Joe's got a bunch of stuff, which is like a toy chest. And I've got lots of my own stuff, too. The funnest thing was putting together non-metal things — different combinations that wouldn't necessarily be your first choice for a metal tone — and then just playing the living shit out of them.

Did you come up with any combinations that surprised you?

THOMSON: There were times when I'd be playing heavy parts with a passive pickup guitar with a fairly low output into a Marshall 800 with an overdrive. I'd be picking real fucking hard and it sounds like I have tons of gain on there but it felt damn near clean in my hands picking it. You have to beat the living shit out of it, and a lot of that translated in a great way.

How are you still making some of the most creative and powerful music of any heavy band more than 25 years after your self-release demo CD, Mate. Feed. Kill. Repeat.?

ROOT: We're getting to that point in our career where we're all in this together. We all want to do the best we can for the role we play in this band, and when that becomes the priority, that's when you put ego aside, put all that bullshit aside, and work together to make something great. I don't think you choose to do this for a living because you're the most well-adjusted human on the planet. It's just too hard to stay stable and your life is just too chaotic to have any sort of anchoring. **THOMSON:** We'd be stupid to keep doing this if we didn't love it. There's too much bullshit. I think the biggest problem that breaks up bands is when everyone comes in with fucking egos. When egos and bullshit start to make a person nutty, that's when problems happen and musicians start to hate each other. Fortunately, in the first few years after we blew up, nobody's ego got too far out of check. And that can happen real fuckin' easily. You take a bunch of fucking dork kids and apply money and fame. Someone's always got someone in their ear telling them shit about one thing or another. And most bands end up eating shit because they just can't personally navigate everything and manage to keep it together. I'm just glad we're all fucking able to deal with everything we've experienced. And that's because we all know we have our roles. There's no I, there's us. 🎸

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THE HISTORY OF ERNIE BALL

Sixty years ago, a man named **ERNIE BALL** forever revolutionized the guitar string industry – and the rest, as they say, is history...

word by
Chris Gill

photograph by
Michael Ochs archives





Ernie Ball plays
pedal steel guitar in
the late Fifties
Michael Ochs Archives/
Getty Images



WHAT PRODUCT IS heard on more recordings than anything else over the last 60 years? Many guitarists, musicians or even casual music fans would probably answer something like the Fender Stratocaster, Gibson Les Paul, Martin dreadnought or even the Fender Precision Bass. Those aren't bad guesses, but the answer is actually something that all of those choices have in common more often than not: **Ernie Ball strings.**

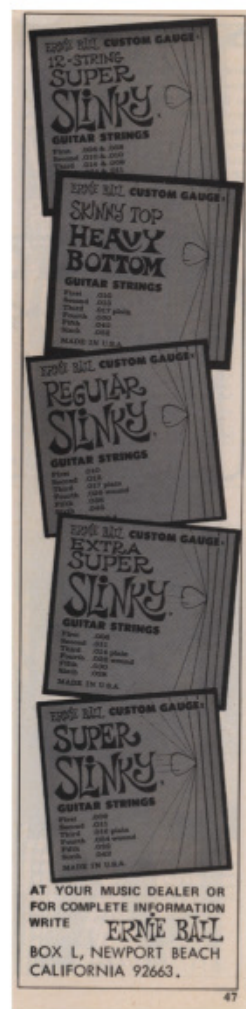
The success of Ernie Ball strings in and of itself is a remarkable, noteworthy achievement, but it's only one facet of the company's extraordinary history over the last 60 years, starting in 1962 when Ernie Ball first packaged his own branded custom light-gauge Rock N Roll string sets and sold them from his music retail stores in the greater Los Angeles area. Today, Ernie Ball strings and accessories, as well as the company's Music Man guitars and basses, are sold in 135 countries; the brands are internationally recognized icons; and their products are embraced by everyone from the world's best-selling artists to beginners just starting their musical journeys.

"I'm super proud of the company's 60-year history," says Ernie Ball/Music Man president Sterling Ball. "We've worked with a lot of great people, and a lot of great things happened. It all started with my father. My dad changed an industry. But I'm reluctant to lean on history, because it's too easy to use the past as a crutch. We're focused on the present, and we're thinking about the future. With my son Brian now running the company, we're making new history and continuing to change the industry. One of the main reasons for our success is that we figured out how to serve guitar players. We've consistently been determined to deliver what they want and need, and that is always changing and evolving. Everything is about the player."

Ernie Ball's dedication to guitarists was inspired by his own experiences as a player at first and later as a music retailer. After returning from service in the United States Air Force during the Korean War, he played pedal steel in various bands around Los Angeles before becoming a member of the house band on KTLA television's "Western Varieties" program and doing session work. Around this time he met Leo Fender, and the two became good friends, with Ball becoming an early Fender endorsee and product beta tester in 1953. Seeking a more reliable means of making a living, Ball opened a guitar teaching studio in 1954 and his first music retail store in 1957 in Tarzana, California, located in the San Fernando Valley northwest of downtown Los Angeles.

Ball's store was considered controversial by the traditional-minded music industry during that time because it quite possibly was the very first shop in the U.S. that sold only guitars exclusively, whereas typical music stores of the time also sold brass, woodwind, drums and orchestral instruments as well as pianos and organs. The store struggled at times, but eventually it became successful, and Ball opened additional locations in Canoga Park and Thousand Oaks.

"Guitarists knew my dad's store was the place to go," Sterling says. "My dad would set up all of the guitars that he sold. Players would come in from all over Southern California to buy Teles and Strats from us because of that. That's some-



Ernie Ball noticed that many of his young students struggled to bend strings, and he also knew that many pro guitarists were using lighter gauge strings on the recordings these kids were trying to imitate

thing we still insist on doing today. We spend at least 45 minutes meticulously setting up every Music Man guitar and bass so it performs at its best before we ship them out, which is a lot more effort than most other companies make."

Back then, electric guitars were typically shipped from the factory with .012-.052 or .013-.055 strings with a wound G, and replacement string sets were the same gauges or heavier. Ball noticed that many of his young students and customers struggled to bend strings, and he also knew that many pro guitarists were using lighter gauge strings on the recordings that these kids were trying to imitate. After Fender and Gibson rejected his suggestion of offering light gauge string sets, Ball started setting up the instruments he sold with lighter strings and putting together his own packages of custom light gauge string sets by discarding the low E string, changing the fifth through first strings into the sixth through second strings and using a banjo's light-gauge high D string for the high E string.

Ball introduced his first Ernie Ball-brand string sets in 1962. The packages featured eye-catching dayglo colors and bold logos and graphics designed by Rolly Crump. "My dad and Rolly were really good friends since high school," Sterling says. "Rolly worked for Disney, where he became one of Walt's top three art directors and designed the It's a Small World ride. I remember when I was 7, my dad called all of the neighborhood kids down to the store, which was about a block from our home. My dad had a stack of string wallet designs that said 'Rock N Roll' on them and were in different colors and black and white. He asked the kids to choose the ones they liked. The kids all loved the dayglo colors, so that's what he went with. That was how he did his market research."

Ernie Ball Rock N Roll string sets were offered in a variety of custom gauges, including skinny top/heavy



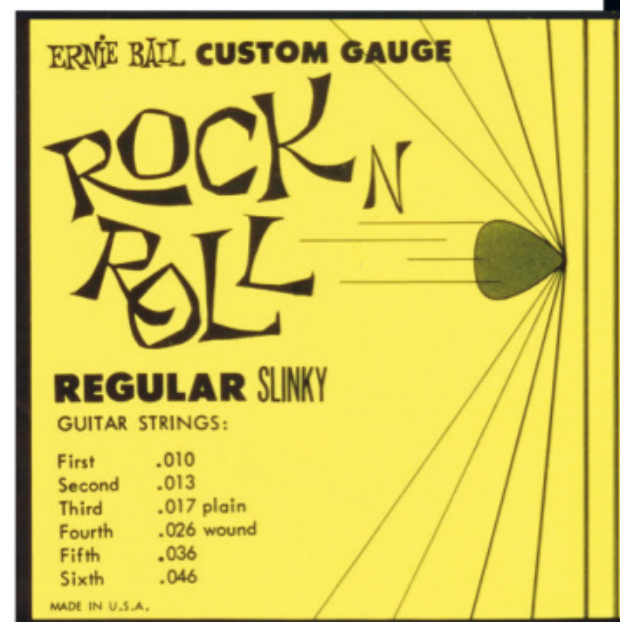
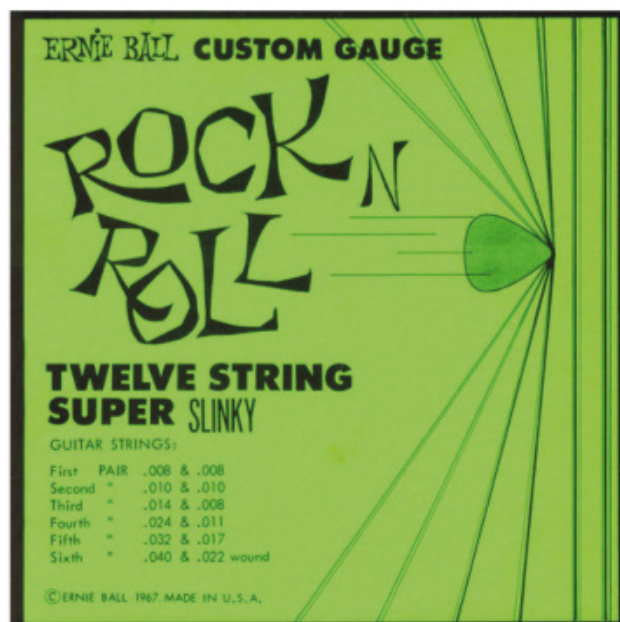
[right] Vintage Ernie Ball string packaging, including Slinky and Rock N Roll sets. “The kids all loved the dayglo colors, so that’s what [my dad] went with,” Sterling Ball says

[facing page] A vintage guitar-magazine ad for Slinky strings

bottom, rhythm guitar and “slinky.” Word about these strings — particularly the light Slinky sets — spread quickly as touring guitarists showed them to other players, and order requests came in from musicians and retailers across the country. Eventually the string production business eclipsed the retail stores’ income, and in 1967 Ernie Ball closed his stores and moved to Newport Beach to focus exclusively on making strings and accessories like personalized imprinted guitar picks, cables, straps and more. Another innovation that revolutionized the string industry was the company’s retailer packs of individual strings that were sold separately, enabling guitarists to put together their own custom sets.

The almost instant impact that Ernie Ball strings had on the sound of music recordings featuring the electric guitar cannot be overstated. In California during the early Sixties the company’s Slinky strings played a major role in the surf guitar phenomenon (the Ventures were among the store’s customers) and pop/rock records by bands like the Beach Boys and the Byrds, as well as the Bakersfield country sound of players like James Burton, Roy Nichols (Merle Haggard) and Don Rich (Buck Owens). Later in the mid-Sixties when British artists like the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Yardbirds and Cream toured in the U.S., they often returned home with Ernie Ball Slinky strings purchased by the case from music stores.

BY THE BEGINNING of the Seventies, Ernie Ball strings had become the brand of choice for most rock guitarists. But although the company had carved out its own unique niche for most of the Sixties, eventually numerous competitors — including Fender and Gibson, who had initially rejected Mr. Ball’s ideas — started to offer sets in the same .009–.038 and .010–.046 configurations popularized by Ernie Ball Slinky strings. The company responded to its growing competition by focusing on diver-



sification and innovation, expanding its selection of custom gauge electric string sets and making strings for a wider range of instruments, including bass and acoustic guitar.

Ernie Ball introduced its acoustic Earthwood brand in a literally big way in 1972. In addition to rolling out the new line of Earthwood acoustic guitar strings, the company also produced its very first instrument: the Earthwood acoustic-electric bass guitar. Based on the Mexican guitarrón but equipped with a fretted neck, the Earthwood bass’s revolutionary design included a 34-inch scale length and massive

body measuring 24 inches long and between 8 inches (first 1972 production run) and 6 5/8 inches (1973–1985) deep. Its natural acoustic tone was booming and powerful, but even more impressively, it was equipped with a Barcus Berry Hot Dot pickup that allowed it to be amplified. Ernie Ball built fewer than 600 Earthwood basses, but many of them landed in the hands of players like Freebo (Bonnie Raitt), John Entwistle and Brian Ritchie (Violent Femmes). The company also made a limited number of Earthwood acoustic guitars.

During this period the company



enjoyed an impressive spike in sales, thanks to the efforts of Ernie Ball's son Sterling, who was still a teenager. "I had worked for my dad on and off since I was 9, when I first ran the store's cash register," Sterling says. "I started working for the company as a road rep in 1973. My dad had this car in the factory parking lot that no one was using. One day I told the sales manager that I wanted to be a sales rep in South-

ern California, but he said he didn't need it. I offered to do it for 10 percent of the increase in sales. I took off in that car and visited every dealer I could find. By the end of the year I had set a new sales record for the business."

Somehow, Sterling found free time to play bass in various bands, and he also moonlighted for Leo Fender's first post-Fender venture,

Music Man. "I did beta testing for Leo, although we called it 'bandstanding' back then," he says. "Leo and Tommy Walker, who was a good friend of my dad and my godfather, had developed a prototype of the StingRay bass, and I'd play it at live gigs and show it to bass players to find out what they thought of it. Leo wasn't a musician, so I brought the player's perspective to the Sting-Ray's design." This collaboration would eventually lead to a major game-changing development for Ernie Ball during the next decade. Ernie Ball handed over the full-time responsibility of running the company to Sterling in 1975, and its sales and success continued to grow at a rapid pace. Soon the company outgrew the production capabilities of its facilities in Newport Beach. In 1979, Ernie Ball relocated to San Luis Obispo about 200 miles up the coast in central California, where its main headquarters are still located today.

IN 1984, AN event took place that was as important in Ernie Ball's history as the introduction of Slinky strings in the early Sixties — the company purchased Music Man. "Music Man was going under," Sterling says. "Leo had left a few years before to start G&L, and the partners were fighting with each other. I realized the company was prob-



[clockwise from facing page, bottom left] Sterling and Ernie Ball at one of the company's early NAMM shows; Ernie Ball's first music retail store in Tarzana, California (two photos); Sterling Ball on stage; the Ernie Ball booth at a vintage NAMM Show; an ad for the company's Earthwood bass

ably going to end up in the hands of their Japanese distributor, so I went to my dad and suggested we buy the company. It wasn't a very significant purchase — just some inventory, a warehouse and the small amount we paid for the trademarks. It was really more of an emotional decision than a business deal. When the deal closed, I realized we just bought a guitar company but we didn't have a factory. I needed to figure things out fast.

"I never once thought I was picking up where Leo left off," he continues. "It was all about a reverence for the guitar and trying to move it forward. The StingRay bass was our first instrument, because that was the only Music Man product that musicians still accepted at that time."

Every great guitar company needs a great guitar designer, and Sterling found exactly that when he hired Dudley Gimpel. The two first met in 1981 while Gimpel was working in the service department at Knut Koupee Music in Minneapolis and Sterling ordered custom Telecasters for himself and his dad. Gimpel soon moved to California to work for Valley Arts Guitar, and when he heard that Ernie Ball had bought Music Man, he asked Sterling to hire him. Sterling refused to steal an employee from an Ernie Ball dealer,

"GUITARISTS KNEW MY DAD'S STORE WAS THE PLACE TO GO. HE WOULD SET UP ALL OF THE GUITARS HE SOLD. PLAYERS WOULD COME IN FROM ALL OVER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA BECAUSE OF THAT" — STERLING BALL

so Gimpel quit before asking Sterling again. Gimpel, along with Sterling and Dan Norton, immediately went to work building and equipping the Music Man factory.

The first Ernie Ball/Music Man Sting-Ray bass hit the market in 1985, followed shortly afterwards by the Sabre bass. Two years later in 1987, Music Man officially introduced its first guitar model, the Silhouette, featuring numerous innovations and enhanced features like a truss rod wheel that adjusts without needing a special tool, a compact headstock with a 4x2 tuner configuration and Molex connectors that allowed guitarists to quickly and easily change pickup configurations by swapping out

pickguard assemblies.

"People laughed at the Silhouette at first," Sterling says. "Then Keith Richards started playing it and they called me a genius." Richards not only played the Silhouette; he famously said in a *Guitar Player* magazine interview that it "has the opportunity to become like the Stratocaster or Telecaster or Les Paul, one of the classic electric guitars."

Around the same time, Music Man also introduced its first artist signature guitar, the Steve Morse model. An eye-catching solidbody featuring a modernistic compact angular design called the Axis was often seen in the hands of Albert Lee during this time as well, although that guitar wasn't officially released until 1993 as the Albert Lee model.

With players like Lee, Morse and Richards enthusiastically supporting the brand, interest in Music Man guitars began to grow. However, the next artist to join the Music Man guitar roster — Eddie Van Halen — instantly transformed the response to the company from interested raised eyebrows to dropped-jaw, eyes-wide-open amazement. Although Van Halen famously endorsed Kramer guitars during the Eighties, Kramer never made a Van Halen signature model. The Music Man Edward Van Halen model introduced in



1991 was Van Halen's very first official signature model, which the guitarist designed in a close collaboration with Gimpel and Sterling Ball.

Demand for the Edward Van Halen signature model was so overwhelming that the company could have easily sold tens of thousands of units every year if the factory were able to produce that many. However, the company's emphasis on maintaining its highest standards throughout the production process — from the selection of

quality materials through the finest details of fit and finish — kept output somewhat limited, and as a result Van Halen eventually jumped ship in 1995 to Peavey, who was more willing to deliver the higher sales numbers the superstar guitarist started to demand.

Although Music Man's relationship with Van Halen was relatively short-lived, its "sterling" reputation, particularly with artists, continues to this day. Shortly after the Van Halen model made its debut, Steve Lukather collaborated with Music Man on his first of many Luke signature models, introduced in 1993, the same year the Albert Lee model finally made

its debut (with the Axis name later resurrected for the continuation of the Edward Van Halen model after Van Halen left), and both are still designing Music Man models today. John Petrucci, who first joined Music Man's roster in 2001, has been an especially prolific collaborator, contributing to the design of numerous JP and Majesty models (the latter co-designed by Music Man chief engineer Drew Montell) that include six-, seven- and eight-string versions.

"We don't have contracts with our artists," Sterling says. "I never wanted

a piece of paper to determine whether someone played our guitars or not. I wanted to make sure we always earned that privilege. Most of our artists have been with us a very long time. It's all about family."

Ernie Ball/Music Man has remained focused on meeting artists' needs both by working closely with well-known touring and recording musicians and supporting up-and-coming talent. In 1997 the company started sponsoring its battle of the bands on the Warped tour and has held this event on every Warped tour since then.

"When we started doing the battle of the bands, a lot of people in the industry were saying that the guitar was dead," Sterling says. "We got 32,000 tapes that proved they were wrong about that. The contest became even bigger when my son Brian got involved with it. We met a lot of musicians and gave them a chance to play on the Warped tour. That's where we first met James Valentine, whose band played there before he joined Maroon 5. Post Malone and Katy Perry are just a few of the better-known examples who played on our stages when they were starting out."

Thanks to the efforts and dedication of Sterling's son Brian Ball, who started working for the company in 2000 and subsequently worked his way up the ranks through sales, mar-



[bottom left, facing page]
An Ernie Ball ad from the July 1985 *Guitar World* starring Steve Morse, Albert Lee and Allan Holdsworth

[top left, facing page] Eddie Van Halen in 1993 with his Ernie Ball/Music Man signature model, which the company produced from 1991 to 1995

Guitarists with their own Ernie Ball/Music Man signature models (and/or series) include [from left] Steve Morse, shown in 1992; John Petrucci, shown in 2011 with a JP-15; James Valentine, shown in 2020; and St. Vincent, shown in 2018



keting and artist relations to become CEO in 2019, Ernie Ball/Music Man has attracted new generations of players, developed remarkable new innovations and increased its sales exponentially. Brian was particularly instrumental in the development and design of the Mariposa (Omar Rodriguez-López of Mars Volta and At the Drive-In) guitar and Tim Comerford (Rage Against the Machine) and Joe Dart (Vulfpeck) bass artist signature models. Most recently he oversaw the creation of the Kai-zen, a seven-string multi-scale guitar with vibrato tailpiece co-designed with Tosin Abasi as well as the DarkRay bass featuring built-in distortion, EQ and preamp circuits designed by Darkglass Electronics.

In addition to those instruments,

SOMEHOW, STERLING BALL FOUND FREE TIME TO PLAY BASS IN VARIOUS BANDS, AND HE ALSO MOONLIGHTED FOR LEO FENDER'S FIRST POST-FENDER VENTURE, MUSIC MAN

Music Man currently offers signature models for a diverse and impressive group of players. Guitars include the Stephen Egerton, Dustin Kensrue, Jason Richardson, St. Vincent (Annie Clark) and Valentine (James Valentine of Maroon 5) models. Music Man also makes signature bass models for Mike Herrera (MxPx), John Myung (Dream Theater) and Cliff Williams (AC/DC). Production models like the Axis, Cutlass, Sabre, Silhouette and StingRay guitars and Bongo, Sterling and StingRay 4- and 5-string basses remain successful perennials. Although Sterling has handed over the reins to Brian over the years, he's remained involved with the co-design of numerous models, such as the St. Vincent (including the most recent Goldie model), Valentine, Majesty and Short-Scale StingRay.

Under Brian Ball's direction, Ernie Ball continues to be a leader in developing innovations in string technology. His contributions have included the high-output Cobalt and M-Steel electric strings, ultra-high-strength Paradigm acoustic and electric strings, revolutionary Aluminum Bronze acoustic strings and half-gauge sets featuring E strings measuring .0085, .0095 and .0105 that further expand players' options.

Ernie Ball/Music Man remains one of the few long-lived, successful, true

family businesses not only in the music industry but in the entire U.S. In addition to Brian, Sterling's son Scott is the company's vice president and oversees factory operations. "When most family businesses pass from one generation to the next, its chances of success and growth usually decline with each new generation," Sterling says. "With us it's been the opposite. The growth of this company under Brian has been phenomenal and has exceeded everyone's expectations. He has more than doubled our business since he took the wheel, and he's been the straw that stirs the drink.

"We're very proud of our heritage, and rightfully so, but it's not a pillow we sleep on," Sterling concludes. "We get up every day to support the products we make and to support our artists. We're also focused on feeding the families of our workers. Our primary goal is creating new tools for artists. Growth is a secondary goal. We've never been about growth for the sake of growth. We've grown because we've come up with better ideas and make products that musicians actually need or want as well as things that other companies may be overlooking. We still pay as much attention to making the best strings, picks, straps, cables and everything else as we do to making the best guitars and basses." 🎸

Words Jenna Scaramanga

“IT’S FULLY PLUGGED IN!”

Tash Sultana is an artist playing by their own rules. A new *Unplugged* album features plenty of acoustic guitars – but also a Strat, a Tele and a Whammy pedal

When Kurt Cobain turned up for Nirvana’s MTV *Unplugged* special in 1993, he had a Fender Twin and a Boss DS-2 distortion in tow. Purists were not impressed, but it’s now the most lauded performance from *Unplugged*’s original run. In 2021, Tash Sultana showed an even more flagrant disregard for the rules, appearing with such notably not-unplugged devices as a Stratocaster, a Telecaster, and a Whammy pedal. “I had people kicking off about the fact that I was gonna do it very much plugged in,” Tash recalls. “I just thought, ‘Nah, f*ck ‘em.’ I didn’t think about it being unplugged. I just thought this is a television broadcast and I’m gonna bring it.”

While it’s too early to say how history will remember Tash’s MTV *Unplugged: Live in Melbourne*, the early response has been hugely positive. The TV broadcast has been shown in 150 countries, the furthest reach of any Australian MTV concert to date, and when the album version was released in June, it racked up 2.5 million streams in 24 hours. “I’m really glad that I stuck to my guns,” Tash smiles. “I just knew I had crafted something that was worth the time.”

Sticking to their guns is central to Tash’s philosophy, shown in their response to MTV’s initial scepticism. “When other people try and get in the way of your creative vision then it’s not really yours anymore,” Tash says. “Why would I listen to the guy that’s in the office? You’re in the office, bro!” MTV were won over when Tash revealed the performance would show them in an entirely new light. Their performances to date have been solo affairs, with Tash

playing all instruments and creating loops on the fly. For *Unplugged*, Tash agreed to debut their live band. The addition of a drummer, keyboardist and bassist allow Tash’s guitar and vocals to take the spotlight. “It was a way that nobody had seen me perform before. For this new era I wanted to go beyond looping and have a couple of session players play the parts that I obviously can’t play at the same time,” they explain. MTV were convinced, agreeing to extend the programme to sixty minutes.

All Tash’s irreverent take has in common with past *Unplugged* performances is the intimacy: 150 fans in a tight space allows for a close connection with the artist. But there are plenty of acoustic guitars in evidence, and Tash’s 6- and 12-string Matons sound great. *Coma* features a cool open C5 tuning

because the tone on electric guitar thrashing it sounds like shit! Acoustic guitar has more dynamic to it because it’s an acoustic instrument, so when you put that weight into the guitar you’re getting the whole body of the guitar within that strum. When I play *Blackbird* I bash the shit out of the guitar, but then if I played things like *Coma* or *Crop Circles* I’m quite reserved. It’s about creating dynamics. I’ll use different sized picks as well. If I’m going to start digging in really hard but I want to keep the sound compressed and not ripping your face off, I’ll use a really light pick. If I’m playing harder I’ll use a softer pick and if I’m playing softer I’ll use a harder pick.”

Talk of “thrashing it” is not exaggerated. “I’ve cracked guitars in half on stage before. I had an Eric Johnson Stratocaster and I dropped that from head height onto the ground just out of excitement and the whole body cracked in half. We’ve repaired it and now it looks really sick. It’s got this really thick crack through it where it’s been glued back together.”

"ACOUSTIC GUITAR HAS MORE DYNAMIC TO IT"

(C-G-C-G-C-G) on a 12 string, capo’d at the 4th fret. Their approach to acoustic tone, though, is... not exactly what we were expecting. “The acoustic guitars are literally just plugged in and that’s that.” Seriously? “I do a bit of processing on them as well. I apply tape saturation to the guitars. The acoustic guitars are DI but I double it and triple it and then run it through a bunch of processing that makes it sound like it’s actually in front of a microphone in a room to get a bit of depth happening.” That sounds more like it. But, they insist, “I honestly really like the sound of a DI acoustic guitar and generally just go for that.”

There is, however, a clear difference in Tash’s approach to acoustic guitar. “I definitely play them heaps differently. On electric, even when I’m getting stuck into stuff I still try to hold back and be gentle

That Strat apparently still sounds great, but Tash is nervous about messing with their favourite gear. “I’ve been tossing up for ages if I want to put a Bigsby on my Ritchie Kotzen Telecaster but I don’t want to risk changing the sound.”

Tash also finds that Strats and Teles reward different ways of playing: “When I play the Strat I’ve got more of like a slinky approach to it. That’s where I do a lot of the reggae snaps. Those screechy solos, they’re all Strats. If I hit my Tele really hard versus my Strat, the Tele is way thicker. It’s got heaps more push and body behind it than the Strat. The Strat doesn’t want to be hit like that.”

“Playing gentle is really hard to do when you’re on stage because you’re really excited,” they continue. “When you are excited or if you’re nervous you just lose a bit ➔



THINKING AHEAD
 "I've already planned
 my next moves,"
 Tash says.



of your motor function. You get clunky instead of relaxed. When I'm about to get on stage I try to be really calm to the point where I could have a nap! When my body is relaxed I play better. I can create good dynamics in the show. When you want to go big and be rough and be loud it's more effective than coming out and doing that for the whole show. I try to be gentle so that the big bits stand out more."

The decision to include electric guitars in an unplugged set makes more sense if you know Tash's history. "When I was about 13 I'd saved up a bunch of money from a couple of years of birthdays and I bought a Fender acoustic. Then for years I didn't touch an electric guitar. I just kind of got stuck in acoustic world. I was listening to City And Colour, Dallas Green and Bon Iver. I started songwriting around that around that age. I was playing acoustic guitars at open mic nights and busking. When I would busk with the acoustic guitar I wouldn't turn a single head all day, so then I thought 'well f*ck, something's not really working here.' I took my electric guitar to the street and changed the game straight away. Now all of these

"PLAYING GENTLE IS REALLY HARD TO DO WHEN YOU'RE ON STAGE"

songs that I wrote acoustically when I was like 16, 17, 18 years old are the most popular songs that people want to hear, whereas back then no one had the time of day for them." The first single from *MTV Unplugged* is a prime example. "I wrote *Coma* when I was 17, and when I'd go and busk that song no one cared."

With the taping being such a success, Tash was set on mixing the audio themselves. "I've done a couple of TV performances but usually the audio is just lacking. It's a quick mix and they don't care. What's the point going on TV for your sound to be handled by somebody that has no idea who you are or what your sound actually is?" The perfectionism that saw Tash record hundreds of takes for 2021's *Terra Firma* returned in earnest. "It took me three months to do it. I probably did over 120 reference mixes in the end. During lockdown there was nothing else going on so I just

became obsessed with it."

Inevitably, such a gruelling mix process gave Tash ear fatigue. "You come back into the studio, listen to your mix and you're just like, 'what the f*ck!' As soon as you bring another person into the room it changes how you hear the

song. All of a sudden you've brought your mate in and you can finally hear that the guitar is too loud or the vocal's too quiet."

That dedication to retaining control has allowed Tash to make music on their own terms. "The music industry is run on people in the office," they say. "It's something I'm struggling with at the moment. It's obsessed with being the biggest artist in the world and they'll do whatever they have to do to get there. It comes down to not even really liking your music anymore. You're letting other people write it for you. If that works for you then it works for you, but I could never do that. If it's not mine then I can't connect."

By contrast, Tash is now released from all their earlier record deals, leaving them justifiably proud to be "fully, fully independent." They pause. "It's a really nice spot to be in because I've already planned my next moves." 🎸



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MUSTANG™ MICRO

PLUG IN. CUT LOOSE.



Words Stuart Williams

16 ACOUSTIC GIG TIPS

Going live with your acoustic? Follow our fully-costed tips to get the most out of your steel-string and make your live performances the best they can be!

SET UP YOUR GUITAR

Typically from \$120

Unlike electric guitars where the sound is mangled and processed through your entire signal chain, the most common objective when amplifying an acoustic guitar is for it to sound like an organic instrument – just louder. This means there's no hiding the annoying buzzes, rattles or any other noises that could ruin an otherwise great performance. You can breathe a lease of life into your guitar by getting it set up by a professional luthier or tech, leaving you with a comfortable action, perfect intonation and problem-free playing.



CHECK YOUR ELECTRONICS REGULARLY

From \$10

You know what can kill the intimate storytelling of a delicate acoustic performance? That intermittent burst of ear-splitting noise from the jack socket you “keep meaning to do something about”. If you don't want your audience looking back in anger, it pays to keep an eye on your guitar's electronics. Prices vary, but you can find new jack sockets and pots (potentiometers, i.e., volume knobs) for under a tenner. Ask a local guitar tech to replace them for you.

SET YOUR PHASE TO 'STRUM'

If you've ever wondered what the phase switch on your preamp is for, the answer might well be revealed the next time you experience a huge swell of low-end feedback on stage. By flipping the phase of your guitar, you'll throw it out of alignment with your amp and (hopefully) help to tame some of that uncontrollable wave.



FIGHT FEEDBACK FURTHER

From \$10

Your acoustic is a big, empty, resonant box of air, which can either sing sweetly or howl horribly if pushed into feedback. You can reduce this risk by literally stuffing the body with absorbent material (fabric) to stop some of the vibrations. Or, you could try a soundhole cover such as the D'Addario Screeching Halt PW-SH-01, or Martin FBR2. These block off the guitar's soundhole, breaking the chain of resonance to some degree and ensuring a feedback-free sound on stage.

LEARN ABOUT EQ

Your guitar might have a multi-band EQ on its preamp, which enables you to sculpt your plugged-in sound in greater detail than a simple tone control. It's worth setting your rig up as you intend to play it on stage and experiment with different EQ settings to work out what you prefer and what works best. If you want to get further into the weeds with it, a dedicated EQ pedal or preamp with detailed EQ settings can help you shape your tone, and eliminate feedback.



COMPRESS TO IMPRESS

From \$50

A compressor reduces the dynamic range of the signal that's plugged into it, and can be a versatile tool for acoustic guitars to help keep things consistent and remove wide fluctuations in dynamics that might cause feedback. As well as this, compression can emphasise attack, boost sustain and have a big effect on the response and feel of your guitar. It's great in a full band situation where you want a tight, present acoustic sound that won't get lost in the mix. Just like EQ, some preamps (see boxout) include compression.



PICK UP A PICKUP

Around \$120

How do you go about gigging if your guitar is totally acoustic, with no onboard preamp or pickup? A retrofit pickup is the solution to this problem and the good news is you can get yourself plugged in without breaking the bank. LR Baggs and Fishman are the big names in acoustic pickups, or, at around \$150, Seymour Duncan's passive (no battery required) Woody SA-3 HC magnetic humbucker is a great value unit to try if you want to experiment. It's a breeze to install and remove, with no permanent modifications to your guitar needed.



GREAT SOUND ON STAGE? IT'S IN EAR!

\$160

There's a lot of noise to battle on stage, and if you're going direct into a PA system with an acoustic guitar then your only hope of hearing it will be through a wedge monitor. Turn that up and it's pushing your guitar's sound directly up and into... you guessed it, your guitar, which as we've learned by now is going to cause feedback. In-ear monitors not only give you a much more detailed sonic picture of your guitar, but they help to keep the stage quieter, and they'll also block out ambient sound, protecting your hearing at the same time! You don't have to splurge on custom-moulded or wireless models, but consider some affordable in-ears



such as the Shure SE215 if you're struggling to hear yourself and the rest of the band. It'll be a revelation.



ANALYSE YOUR PLAYING

Your playing dynamics will have a massive influence over the way your guitar sounds. From the attack of the note to the projection of the guitar, you can control your tone simply by paying attention to the power of your strumming and picking. The harder you hit the string, the further you're activating the resonance of the top, back and sides you paid so much attention to when you bought the guitar. The key is knowing how and when to exploit your guitar's tonal qualities to best suit the playing situation. Which can be aided by our next point.

SELECT YOUR STRINGS

From around \$15

What strings do you play? We're guessing you'll answer that question with a brand and preferred gauge. But how much attention do you pay to the metallic make-up of your acoustic strings? From the bright and mid-scooped sound (albeit at an arguable lifespan cost) of 80/20 bronze, to the warmer response of phosphor bronze, to the reduced finger noise of flatwounds, there's a lot of tonal variation to be had from your strings. For longevity, try some coated strings. Such as Elixir Nanoweb, and don't forget that gauge can also play a big part in how your guitar projects as well as feels.



FIND THE PERFECT BLEND

Just as with the rest of your setup, it's worth spending some time figuring out how to get the best tone from your guitar. If you have an internal mic, magnetic pickup or both on your acoustic alongside the humble piezo, take some time to dial it in through your rig or PA. This way you'll get a feel for what works and what doesn't before you have to do it in front of an audience.



TAKE YOUR PICK!

\$1

An acoustic guitar has a huge dynamic and tonal range for us to manipulate, and you shouldn't overlook the building blocks – starting with what you're using to attack it. The great news is that a tenner will buy you a lot of plectrums, and will allow you to select the best type for your playing style/tonal goals. Thinner picks are more flexible and will give against the strings, perfect for laying a lighter strumming texture. Thicker picks will increase the attack of your notes which are great for helping you to cut through when needed. Don't forget the pick material, either. Go to your local guitar shop and p-p-pick up a selection of plectrums to experiment with.



CHOOSE YOUR CHORDS WISELY

This isn't only important in an acoustic/electric line-up where you're potentially battling against an electric guitar and rhythm section, but also applies to open-mics and multi-acoustic ensembles too. You want your guitar to be heard, so choose different chord inversions to what the other band members are playing. Open chords typically work well with acoustic parts, and will most likely help you to stay out of the way of your barre chord-wielding bandmates.



CAPO'D CRUSADER

From \$10

As we just mentioned, the lush, full sound of an acoustic guitar resonating with open chord shapes is a thing of beauty. But not all songs and keys lend themselves to this type of playing. That's where a capo comes in. As basic as a pencil and a rubber band (please don't!), or as flash as an aerospace-engineered precision vice, a decent capo will be your best friend when the key moves up the fretboard. Tighten it down neatly and evenly across your fretboard (make sure you buy one for a curved 'board, not a flat classical fingerboard), then train your brain into transposing open chord shapes, and you'll never have to choke your chords with a barre again.

SET, DON'T REGRET

With so much air moving around on stage, it's important to pay attention to where you place your amp, monitors and mics in relation to your acoustic guitar in order to avoid feedback. Where possible, avoid your amplified signal pumping directly back at you or your guitar and try to keep the on-stage volumes as low as possible to help eliminate the risk of squeal.

DON'T RULE OUT EFFECTS

You may think of your acoustic guitar signal chain as an un-soiled haven of purity. But while utilitarian pedals such as EQ, compression and volume might be your go-tos, there's room to try some other stuff too. A little reverb or even modulation goes a long way to adding dimension to the none-more-direct sound of an under-saddle piezo, and Nirvana's triumphant MTV Unplugged performance even featured some overdrive on Kurt's Martin D-18E. Give your pedals a try, and you might just discover a new angle to your acoustic sound! 🎸

LIVE, AND LET'S DI

Want greater control over your direct sound? Here are three acoustic preamp pedals for your bucket list



T-REX SOULMATE ACOUSTIC

\$699

The T-Rex Soulmate Acoustic is bursting with features for acoustic players including a compressor, chorus, delay and some pristine digital reverb algorithms. On the utility side there's a 3-band EQ, automatic feedback suppression, and a tuner. They've even bundled in a looper to boot.

LR BAGGS VENUE DI PEDAL

\$559

Essentially giving you a more detailed set of features as a well-stocked on-board preamp, the Venue DI from electro-acoustic know-it-alls LR Baggs features a five-band EQ with a feedback-busting, tuneable notch filter, phase switch and stage-ready tuner. Ideal if your acoustic features a passive pickup or if you just want the controls where you can see them.



FISHMAN AURA SPECTRUM DI

Around \$550

The Aura Spectrum DI makes use of Fishman's fantastic Aura acoustic imaging technology,

which allows you to blend some brilliantly modelled studio acoustic sounds alongside your direct signal. There's EQ, compression, feedback destroyer, a tuner, an effects loop and 16 preset slots, too.



Words Ellie Rogers Portraits Pooneh Ghana / El Hardwick

“I ALWAYS WANTED TO PLAY WITH OTHER PEOPLE AND BE IN BANDS”

How motherhood and lockdown inspired **The Big Moon** to write their most confident album yet

S

ince bursting onto London’s live music scene in 2014, The Big Moon have passed through several phases. First came *Love In The 4th Dimension* – the band’s irreverently Libertines-esque indie-rock debut that earned them a Mercury Prize nomination. Then, in 2020, the four-piece showed a softer side with the more spacious pop sensibilities of their “coming of age” record, *Walking Like We Do*. Now, they return with *Here Is Everything*

– a collection of 11 songs that were conceived amid the pandemic years, and during the pregnancy of frontwoman Juliette Jackson.

With its themes of birth, motherhood, excitement and fear, the life changing circumstances that inspired the album make it a decidedly more grown-up offering than anything The Big Moon has yet released. Still, it features all the astute lyricism and millennial wit that listeners have come to expect from Jackson’s writing, while doubling

down on harmony, texture and a sense of collaboration from the other members.

Lead guitarist Soph Nathan was responsible for cooking up the complementary riffs and intricate lead lines that adorn Jackson's songs. Having first picked up a guitar at seven years old, Nathan began fantasising about playing in bands in her early teens and then, at 16, made it a reality. She's been keeping the dream alive ever since and is now eight years deep into what she describes as a "marriage of four people" in The Big Moon – alongside Jackson, bassist Celia Archer and drummer Fern Ford.

Like many, her earliest musical memories were shaped by parental tastes and listening to mixed CDs on repeat on every car journey. She reminisces: "My mum loves guitar music. We listened to a lot of Motown, but

also the Eagles, Joni Mitchell, and Jefferson Airplane. We'd sing a lot in the car. On 'Hotel California' we'd always sing along with the solo – the one that's like 10 minutes long. That definitely influenced me."

A native Londoner, Nathan's burgeoning style was also influenced by coming of age amidst one of the most vibrant indie scenes on the planet. "I was probably spoiled for gigs because every band comes here," she explains. "I don't know if I necessarily thought about it, but now I recognise that being able to go and see bands was big. I grew up near Camden, so there was a lot of music around, which I'm so grateful for."

In fact, her very first band even rehearsed at The Roundhouse – the legendary Camden venue which had its walls shaken by the likes of The Doors, Pink Floyd and Jimi

Hendrix
back in the

1960s. By the

time Nathan and her friends were busily honing their craft in the adjacent rehearsal rooms, acts like Oasis, The Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Bob Dylan were headlining the main room.

Possessing a naturally collaborative spirit, the idea of spending hours practising in solitude never appealed to Nathan quite like making music with friends. "It was a strong pull. I always wanted to play with other people and be in bands," she says. "I actually don't play guitar by myself that much anymore, unless I'm making

GREEN FINGERS

The Big Moon, with guitarists Soph Nathan (centre right) and Julia Jackson (right).

something up. Fortunately, I get to play guitar a lot with other people. That's felt like the best way for me to get better and learn new things."

While she might have spent her youth air guitaring to Joe Walsh's incendiary solos in the back of her mum's car, her contribution to the band is measured, tasteful and full of thought for her sonic surroundings. "Jules also plays guitar in the band and we play so differently," she explains. "I've learnt a lot from playing with her. It's really cool to understand where someone else is coming from and to bounce off of each other."

As such, Nathan's guitar work on *Here Is Everything* feels like part of the very fabric of the songs, with plenty of echoes of Jackson's vocal melodies that blend in seamlessly. But restraint is something she's had to learn over time, after first suppressing an instinct shared by guitarists the world over. "When I first started playing, I thought I should be noodling over everything," she laughs. "But space is really important, and it means that there's more impact in the parts that are there. The way the songs are, and the way that the others give me the room to be creative, I don't ever feel like I have something to prove."

Now approaching a decade of playing together, it's safe to say the four band members know each other very well, musically and otherwise. "It's been a really long time and we've all grown and changed as people," explains Nathan. "This album has been the most collaborative we've done, and it had quite a long journey because we recorded it two weeks in lockdown in Suffolk, and then a load of life stuff happened. We came back nearly a year later and added four new songs." The "life stuff" that Nathan is referring to was predominantly the birth of Jackson's son, which inspired the addition of this latter batch of songs, including the lead single, *Wide Eyes*.

"I think it made us stronger," reflects Nathan. "I feel more confident in what I'm doing now because we all understand how the others operate."

Thinking back to the early days and how the band's sound has matured, she ponders: "We started out a bit more rocky, and our first record – because we'd played live so much – was just trying to capture that. Now it's more of a case of working to make a song sound like the perfect studio version. Then we take it and make it live."

Although these songs were largely fully-



formed prior to the recording session, Nathan still found room to add some spontaneous flair. "Often, Jules and I will make something up together while I'm playing," she explains. "That's what happened with the chorus of *Wide Eyes*. The first part, I had done, and she started singing the end bit. I love making stuff up together like that." Similarly, the pair developed the guitar solo at the end of *Trouble*, by singing and playing licks back and forth until they had the completed article. "That was a really nice moment," recalls Nathan.

When it comes to guitars and gear, she confesses to "always taking everything" whenever she heads into a studio. Normally, however, she finds she could have gotten away with travelling much lighter as she's really a one guitar woman. Referring to her trusty G&L ASAT Classic T-style, she laughs, "I've really tried to branch out, but I always end up going back to this. Obviously, some guitar parts need a different sound, so we'll try and shake it up sometimes, but I just really love it."

Tonally, she describes it as "much warmer than most other guitars" and cites its particularly "hot pickups" as the reason why, for her, it trumps most Fender Teles. "It resonates a bit more, and it's got a warmth that I struggle to find when I use other guitars."

As for effects, Nathan keeps it simple. "I mainly have distortion and delay pedals," she says matter-of-factly. This has always been the case, but their usage and density in The Big Moon's sound has morphed over time. She laughs: "Jules really didn't like delay when we started the band, and I only ever played with loads of it back then. Now, I feel like we're in the middle together with the amounts."

The most abundantly used pedal on *Here Is Everything* was a Strymon BigSky Multi Reverb, which Nathan used to provide "all that sprinkly, reverby goodness" that abounds. "It's got such amazing sounds in it," she enthuses. "I would like to explore more with pedals, but I'm quite comfortable with the ones I have. Creating it all live is all quite straight-forward."

Since joining the band, Nathan's used a Vox AC15, but she acquired a 1970s WEM Dominator combo during lockdown, and it's fast becoming her new go-to. "We used the WEM for recording," she explains. "I think Jules' guitars also went through it for most of it. It's just a really clean amp whereas my AC15 has less headroom and breaks up more."

With sights now set on resuming touring and showcasing *Here Is Everything* to live audiences, an autumn run of dates will culminate in a show at The Forum in Kentish Town, London. Geographically close to home (and just about a mile from those formative Roundhouse rehearsal rooms), it's an almost poetically important gig for Nathan: "In terms of where I grew up, it feels like such a big deal," she explains. "I feel more grateful than ever to be able to play live. We're really ready to make the most of it!"

"SPACE IS IMPORTANT, IT MEANS THAT THERE'S MORE IMPACT IN THE PARTS THAT ARE THERE"

Cort

G300 Pro

The G300 Pro is the new flagship model of the iconic G Series, a boutique-style guitar with modern enhancements that represents the best of what Cort can offer to meet the needs for superb playability, sonic versatility and aesthetic design.

Features include a top-grade American Basswood body with 6mm (1/4") maple top, roasted maple neck and fretboard with Luminlay side dot inlays, stainless steel frets, and two Seymour Duncan® humbuckers that are paired with our 5-way pickup selector for excellent versatility in tone making.

And for the first time ever for the G Series, the G300 Pro comes with full 24 frets, making it a truly modern guitar for the players enjoying soloing in the higher fret positions.



LAZY BONES

Your main gigging guitar needs to be in top condition. This might seem obvious, but **Dave Burrluck** wonders if we're all as diligent as we should be...

A pretty new but well-gigged PJD guitar that needs some TLC

Guitars, like cars, need regular maintenance otherwise they simply wouldn't be fit for work. Exactly how we guitar players let our instruments get

in such a state always surprises me, but I'll put my hands up and say, 'Guilty as charged!' We don't have well-paid techs to look after our guitars so it's something that can be easily forgotten.

I pulled out my main guitar when I was setting up for a gig recently, only to realise I'd not wiped it down after the previous gig; the strings felt horrible and the action seemed to be considerably higher than before. Had I given the guitar a simple maintenance check before the gig I'd have spotted the problems. Instead, the two-hour show was less fun than it should have been. I was struggling and it was all my fault.

Nevertheless, I don't think I'm the only one. A friend who's been doing a lot of recording over the past couple of years had resurrected a song that his old band performed and thought it'd be nice to ask the original guitarist to come over and lay down his guitar parts. "How did it go?" I asked a couple of days later. "Terrible. He was out of tune and even though I've spent ages putting the parts through Melodyne, I'm not sure how much, if any, I can use." I asked why he hadn't offered his out-of-tune guitarist one of his guitars. "My mate's left-handed, so it was his guitar or nothing."

I offered to take a look at his guitar and when I eventually got to it – a mid-90s Epiphone Les Paul Custom – apart from a little fretwear in the lower positions, there was nothing wrong with the instrument. But the condition of the strings, and the way in which he'd attached them to the tuners, was pretty appalling. I could barely tune it; mid-position chords were out by quite a margin and it felt awful. Little more than 20 minutes later, I'd cut off the old strings, cleaned up the guitar, buffed the frets back to a smooth sheen, given the fingerboard a little rub with fingerboard oil, restrung, checked the truss rod, tweaked the action and intonation,

1

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Vintage Workhorse

This now 'player's grade' 1969 Fender Telecaster has been a workhorse since the early 70s. It was used in anger during the punk and post-punk periods (which is when it lost its scratchplate and had its first refret). It was reinvented as a Keef-style five-string during the 90s loaded with a Seymour Duncan Quarter Pounder, which had replaced the original bridge pickup after it died in the 80s. Sid Poole refretted it properly and added compensated brass saddles, and it now has a set of Fender Custom Shop pickups. Aside from that, regular cleaning and the sort of simple maintenance I describe in this issue's column keep it gig-fit – just in case I get a call from The Stones!



Rub contact cleaner up and down each string. Watch the dirt come off! Then you're ready to check the neck relief



Holding the G string at the 1st and last fret, check the relief. I set this guitar with around 0.008-inch relief



I cut off the old strings and gave the fingerboard a rub with a cloth. You might also want to buff up the frets with a little metal polish

and swiftly put the guitar back into its ancient gigbag. Simple stuff...

Case Study: PJD Carey Standard

I've been using this particular guitar [pic 1] as my 'No 1' for many recent gigs, home recording and band practice sessions over the past few months, but when I last pulled it out of its gigbag, it was beginning to look like it's been on a long tour. Aside from string changes, I haven't touched a thing. For me, it's the epitome of 'workhorse' – it sounds and plays really well (at least it did!), it's lightweight, and it gets the job done with little fuss. The very light white nitro finish over the grained light ash body gets dirtier by the gig, and with no hard-shell protection the belt-buckle rash is now quite noticeable. But what's going on with the action?

Before I changed the strings I gave the neck a quick wipe down and cleaned up the strings with Servisol [pic 2] – a great 'quick fix' I learned from a studio producer some years ago. A quick check of the neck straightness revealed the problem: it had quite a forward bow with too much relief. A timely reminder that necks can move, even if they're quarter-sawn roasted maple such as this one. Thankfully, the truss-rod adjustment is behind the nut [pic 3], not vintage-style at the base of the neck, and a small tweak had the neck back to where it should be and back to normal. A quick plugged-in check that nothing else was wrong and I could remove the strings, give the neck and frets a bit of a buff with a microfibre cloth, dust off the bridge [pics 4 & 5] and it was ready to restring.

It's always worth checking the nut slots and – especially on an older guitar – whether there's any fretwear. In this case, all good. A quick check that any screws or nuts haven't loosened is worthwhile, too, and after restringing, string stretching [pic 6] and checking intonation, also check that those saddles haven't moved – a radius gauge is handy to for this purpose [pic 7].

Case Study 2: Any New Guitar!

Coming from another perspective, a brand-new guitar, especially of the budget type, is going to need a thorough check before you consider gigging it. "It's new, it should be perfect!" I hear you shout. Well, if you're lucky... but in reality *no* guitar – new, old or whatever – is ever going to play to its full potential if you don't get it fit for purpose and keep it there.

A brand-new or new-to-you guitar isn't necessarily going to feel 'right' straightaway. It might be a simple case of string gauge and setup, and while

“Hopefully, your workhorse guitar will get a lot of use, but lengthy gigs can take their toll”

we have our go-tos, I’ve become a firm believer in letting the guitar dictate what it needs. You might think you need to change parts, pickups, pots and so on, before the guitar will be ‘right’. But in many cases that’s really not necessary. Personally, I start with my usual strings (that’s 0.010s, irrespective of scale length), very slight relief and a string height of around 1.6mm (a 16th-of-an-inch in old money). These references mean I can then play the guitar, get used to it, possibly go up or down a string gauge, and lower the action or raise it slightly on the bass side. If I’m hearing any random fretbuzz, I like to check the frets are level – easily done with a StewMac Fret Rocker or similar.

Simple adjustments, such as pickup height can have a dramatic effect, and even if it’s a high-value instrument that’s gone through a detailed check in the factory, you might want something slightly different. It’s your guitar and you’re going to have to play it.

Fix The Faults

Hopefully, your workhorse guitar will get a lot of use, but in turn lengthy gigs can take their toll. Lower-priced instruments can be especially vulnerable with their necessarily lower-cost pots and switches. So if you start getting crackles from switches and/or pots and the like, the first aid is a squirt of contact cleaner. If that doesn’t fix it or the problem persists, don’t think it’ll go away on its own: fix it or get it fixed. Remember, irrespective of the quality of your instrument, its boutique pickups and convoluted finely tuned circuit, your guitar still needs care, especially if you’re gigging regularly.

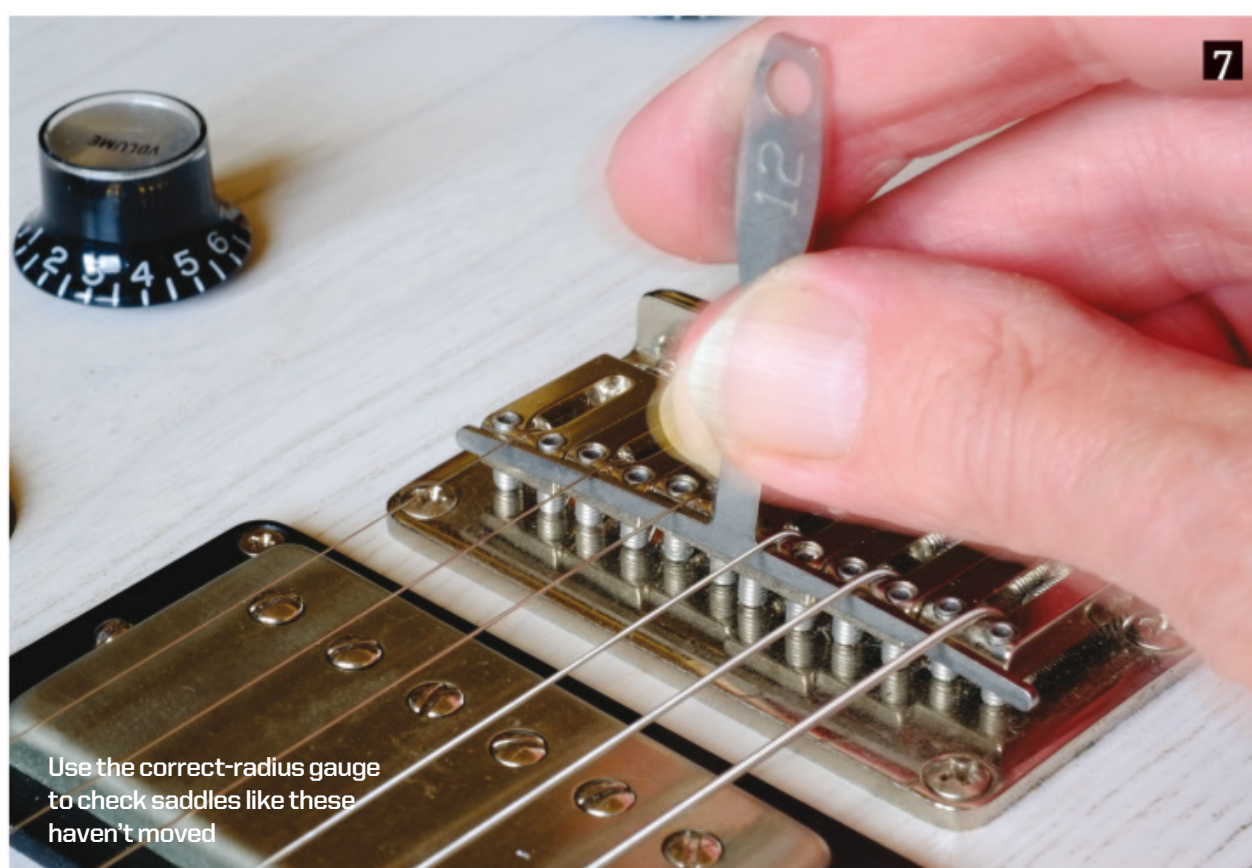
We’re all busy with family and day jobs – unless you’re lucky enough to do this music lark full-time – and treating your guitar to a bit of professional attention from time to time might be something to consider. In short, get any problems sorted and if you can’t do it yourself, call in the pros. In fact, with a couple of guitars that really need a refret, I’ve recently done exactly that. Remember, just because you can put petrol in a car, fill up the oil and water and pump up the tyres, it doesn’t make you a professional mechanic! 🛠️



A soft brush is always handy for removing dust over a bridge



It’s time to stretch the new strings. Squeeze each one along its length while pushing it down in front of the saddle



Use the correct-radius gauge to check saddles like these haven’t moved

HOT GEAR



FENDER PLAYER PLUS STRATOCASTER HSS

RRP: \$2,249 • fender.com

Fusing classic Fender design with player-centric features and exciting new finishes, the Player Plus Stratocaster HSS delivers superb playability and unmistakable style. The powerful Fireball humbucking pickup delivers the perfect balance of gain and definition, while the Player Plus Noiseless Strat pickups are bright and touch sensitive, offering classic Strat tone without hum. A push-pull tone controls activate coil-split mode for the humbucking pickup, delivering crystal-clear single-coil tones. The silky satin Modern “C” Player Plus Strat® neck fits your hand like a glove, with smooth rolled edges for supreme comfort.



CORT GB MODERN 4 BASS

RRP: \$2,099 • dynamicmusic.com.au

The GB Modern bass is developed for the J-Bass enthusiasts with a surprisingly lightweight design for greater comfort and enhanced playability while reducing fatigue. Also featured are top tier visual and spec enhancements such as roasted maple neck and fretboard, Hipshot Ultralite Tuners and Babicz FCH4 Bridge to reduce the weight even further, and an ultimate tone combination of Nordstrand Big Single Pickup Set paired with MarkBass MB Instrument Pre preamp system.

YAMAHA REVSTAR RSS20 STANDARD

RRP: \$1,599 • au.yamaha.com

Revstar Standard guitars feature chambered bodies designed to sculpt tone and reduce weight, with carbon reinforcement in the neck to improve vibration transfer. With the same 5-way switching as Revstar Professional, the subtle phase shift on positions 2 and 4 offers a fresh take on classic “in-between” sounds. The push/pull Tone control activates a passive boost with an effect similar to overwound pickups—darker highs, increased mids and lows, and an aggressive character.



FISHMAN FLUENCE RYAN “FLUFF” BRUCE CUSTOM SERIES PICKUP

RRP: \$TBA • dynamicmusic.com.au

Ryan “Fluff” Bruce knows what a great pickup should sound like. On YouTube, he is one of the most beloved authorities on guitar gear, with thousands of videos and followers to his credit. In his band Dragged Under, he has the unique perspective of putting that gear to the test in demanding live and studio environments. This Fluence pick-up features three voices: Modern Active High Output (the ideal active ceramic sound), Modern Passive Attack (Fluff’s favorite passive tone) and Slightly Overwound Single Coil (Muscular, beefy).



EXPANDED ERNIE BALL 3 PACK RANGE

RRP: From \$55.95 • cmcmusic.com.au

For over 60 years, Ernie Ball strings have been the premier choice for musicians around the world. Ernie Ball has now added 15 more of its most popular string offerings as convenient 3-packs. This includes Slinky, Classic Rock ‘n Roll, and Earthwood sets of various gauges. All 3-packs feature individually sealed sets for lasting protection and better storage. These packs provide a convenient, cost-effective solution for players buying multiple sets at the same time while ensuring each set stays as fresh as possible.



STERLING BY MUSIC MAN MARIPOSA

RRP: From \$1,795 • cmcmusic.com.au

The Sterling by Music Man Mariposa guitar is Music Man's 'accessible' take on the latest design collaboration between the award-winning Ernie Ball Music Man design team and celebrated Mars Volta/At the Drive-in composer/guitarist Omar Rodriguez-Lopez. The Mariposa's eye-catching offset body was designed in collaboration with Rodríguez-López, and features a roasted maple neck and locking tuners for maximum playability and tuning stability. Just like Omar's playing, the Mariposa's custom dual humbucking pickups are dynamic.



RECORDING KING G6 SERIES SOLID TOP GRAND AUDITORIUM CUTAWAY W/ FISHMAN EQ

RRP: \$899 • egm.net.au

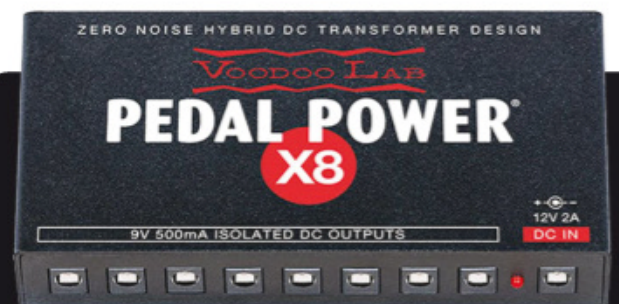
Every guitar in Recording King's G6 Series has been cheered as that rare beast: an elegant workhorse. With its distinctive tortoiseshell styling and world class construction, the G6 Grand Auditorium is a must-have guitar. With enough space to really move some air, the solid spruce top and fully scalloped X Bracing bring out shimmering highs and extraordinarily balanced lows and low-mids.



LINE 6 POD GO FIRMWARE UPDATE 1.40

RRP: \$1,199 (update free) • au.yamaha.com

Line 6 POD Go & POD Go Wireless just became even more desirable with the announcement of the new 1.40 firmware update, with a new amp, nine new effects including seven Line 6 originals and 18 Legacy effects. Among the latter include two distortions (Bronze Master and Killer Z) four modulation effects (Tape Eater, Warble-Matic, Random S&H and Sweeper) and ten pitch / synth effects including synth lead, string theory, buzz wave, rez synth and heaps more. This update is free to owners of the Line 6 Pod Go.



VOODOO LAB PEDAL POWER X8

RRP: \$439 • egm.com.au

Pedal Power X8 is an ultra-compact high current isolated international voltage power supply that delivers reliable, zero-noise performance for pedals of all types. Its innovative hybrid DC transformer design integrates exotic components, linear regulation, and computer optimized filtering to establish industry-leading audiophile-quality power. From vintage battery-operated stompboxes to modern high current DSP effects, Pedal Power X8 delivers the best power in the business to ensure pedals always sound and perform their best.

FENDER KINGFISH SIGNATURE TELE DELUXE

RRP: \$3,949 • fender.com

Recognized at a young age for his exceptional musical talent, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram's path has taken him from hometown hero to global star. Christone's raw and inspired guitar playing, soulful vocals and mature songwriting have captured the imagination of legions of new fans and fellow musicians alike, propelling him to become the face of a new generation of blues artists. The Kingfish Telecaster Deluxe features two custom humbucking pickups voiced for growling, overdriven blues-rock and an adjusto-matic bridge for perfect intonation.



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SCAN ME



NINE SIMPLE STEPS TO CREATING GUITAR ATMOSPHERE

An easy way to add texture to a composition – whether you’ve got a guitar or not!



1 There’s more than one route to creating a textured, ambient guitar bed. Jacking in our real guitar, and using Logic’s built-in amp and pedal designer, we start to create each element of a lush underbed in turn, beginning with a repeating chordal sequence.



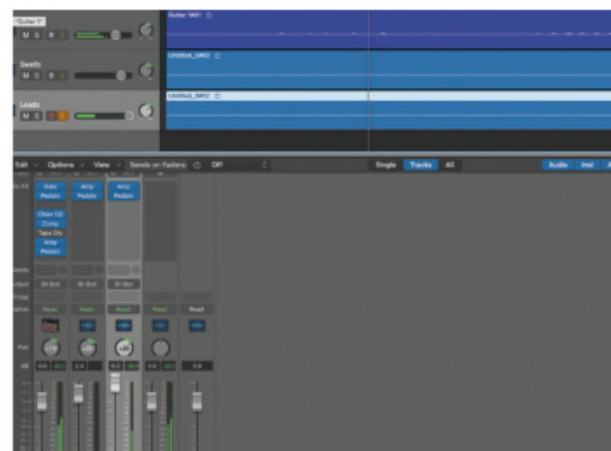
2 Our simple four-chord loop is a bit dry (though we’ve upped the reverb in our virtual amp) but an application of Heavenly Chorus and extra reverb have helped change the guitar’s tone into something more characterful. We reduce our tempo too, as our original BPM now sounds too strident.



3 We’ve got a foundational chordal loop, which we can use as the linchpin of our ethereal guitar part. We want to add some swelling chords too, to create a sense of gradually evolving movement. In a new track we record ourselves gradually raising the volume knob while hitting an alternative voicing of the same chords.



4 While our bed sounds lush with the extra element, we want to create some skating lead lines – though we don’t want them to be too ‘melodic’, these elements should accentuate the mood of the bed. Delay is a wonderful effect to play with for this purpose. We lay down some broken arpeggios with a heavy helping of delay, phaser and tremolo.



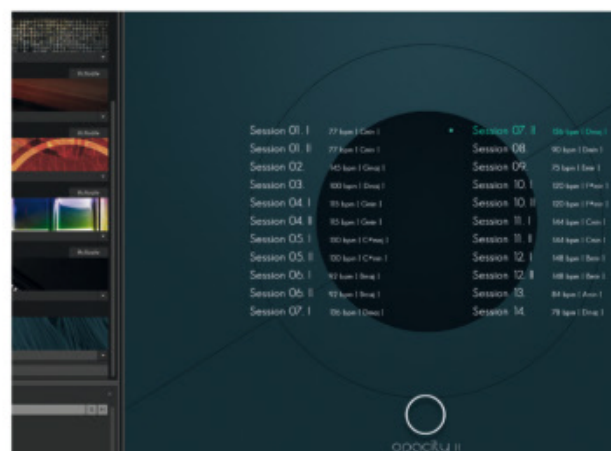
5 This combination is now sounding suitably soundscapey. In the ambient context we’re working in, it’s often an idea to keep the disparate guitar parts in a similar place in the stereo image. While recording ambient guitar manually can be a journey of discovery, it’s taken us a good hour to create this sound. There’s a much quicker way to achieve lush beds...



6 Audiomodern’s Opacity II allows you to create breathtaking guitar textures via your MIDI keyboard. These sounds were recorded with top tier guitars, effects and pedals and can be customisable in a range of different ways. We load up an instance in a new track and mute the guitar parts we’ve just recorded.



7 Using our MIDI keyboard, we seamlessly glide between pre-prepared phrases and melodic fragments. Adding a few more instances of Opacity II, we pepper our ever-growing new bed speedily. That being said, you’ll want to get to grips with the keyboard layout for each Session.



8 With a few tracks of Opacity II’s complementary sessions now laid down, we’ve weaved a superb guitar underbed for our track. Opacity II is just one such example of a time-saving, brilliant sounding suite; there are many more, like Spitfire’s Ambient Guitars. These astounding beds don’t mean you need to hang up your guitar just yet though....



9 A/B’ing our freshly recorded guitar bed and the one made in Opacity II leaves us in no doubt which sounds more pro. But, our track’s central riff is something that we want to add with our real guitar, and with our own playing style. So, here, rather than being a detriment to guitarists, software has sped up a crucial process and enabled us to get on with the fun of making music far quicker.

Mick Ronson [left] and David Bowie share a Les Paul during Bowie's final appearance as Ziggy Stardust — July 3, 1973, at the Hammersmith Odeon, London

STARDUST MEMORIES

Hunky Dory and Ziggy Stardust producer (and Beatles engineer) Ken Scott recalls the making of two of David Bowie and Mark Ronson's most iconic albums. **By Mark McStea**

David Bowie's *the Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* and the *Spiders from Mars*, to give it its full title, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. It's the record that cemented Bowie's status as an international superstar, selling more than 7 million copies, and it is second only to *Let's Dance* [1983] in terms of Bowie's most successful records. Key to Bowie's rise to prominence was the work of guitarist Mick Ronson, the perfect visual and sonic foil for Bowie's unique vision.

At the helm for *Ziggy* was producer Ken Scott, who'd engineered a couple of Bowie's albums

when Tony Visconti was producing. Scott's own story reads as the unlikeliest of tall tales. Applying for an apprenticeship in recording and engineering, his first job after leaving school was working as a trainee engineer with the Beatles. He went on to engineer most of their albums as well as work on countless legendary rock, pop and fusion records. These days, he's a visiting professor in the School of Film, Music and Performing Arts at Leeds Beckett University in the U.K.

You first worked as producer with Bowie on Hunky Dory before producing Ziggy with him. Tony Visconti produced the previous two albums

with you engineering. How'd you step into the producer's chair?

There's something in general that happens to a lot of engineers where you're sitting next to the producer and you'll make an "artistic" comment, which the producer will put to the band. If it works, it's always the producer's idea; if it doesn't, it's the engineer's idea. *[Laughs]* We tend to get fed up with that and I'd reached the point where I was having to think about the engineering process less and less; it had become second nature to me. I wanted to make the move and I happened to mention to David that I was planning to move into production. He said he'd just signed a new management deal and was about to go into

the studio and [asked] if I'd like to help him. That was *Hunky Dory* [1971], and we continued for another four albums.

Having worked as an engineer while Visconti was producing, did anything that he did inform your own process?

It did. I worked in a completely different way to Tony. On the first two albums he did with David, Tony was the bass player, the musical director, the arranger and the producer. My feeling about David, having worked on the first two albums, was that he was a really nice guy who obviously had a certain amount of talent, but it ended there because the albums weren't *his*. He wrote the material, of course, but the impression I had was that he had very little say. It became obvious, after David's time off from the first two albums, that he wanted to get things on track. He hadn't had any real success since *Space Oddity* [1969], which was very much focused on David's ideas. I learned my craft as a producer from George Martin and Gus Dudgeon. They always believed very much that the talent was in the studio and that their job was to create, and the producer's job was to enable that to happen. If something didn't seem to be working, I'd just encourage him to put all his ideas out there, whether they worked or not. Of course, I'd say they did work most of the time.

David was so good at putting together a team that could convey what he wanted; at that time it was Ronno [guitarist Mark Ronson], Trevor Boulder [bassist] and Woody Woodmansey [drummer]. Later he'd switch things around when he wanted to get more of an American sound and put together an incredible American team. What was interesting about David is that he didn't feel like he needed to control the team he'd put together because he knew what they were capable of and what they'd bring to a project.

Was he more confident in dealing with you than he was with Visconti at that time?

Yes, I think he felt I'd be more receptive and open to things. But I think when you say "confident," I don't think either David or I were confident in the least when we first sat down in the studio for *Hunky Dory*, but as things started to come together and we were thinking that things were really working, we started to gain in confidence. But we were both exceedingly nervous initially.

When David was preparing the songs for *Ziggy*, did you hear them in advance as demos?

The whole *Ziggy* thing was strange. The time that my feelings about David as a talent really increased was when he, his wife and his publisher came to my house and we started going through tapes of demos for our first album together. It became obvious that there was much more to him than I'd seen from the first two albums. I heard a lot of material and we narrowed it down to what became *Hunky Dory*. I may have also heard some of the *Ziggy* stuff at that time, but I don't remember. The thing is that we went on to *Ziggy* so quickly after *Hunky Dory*, maybe a matter of weeks, so there was no time to listen to material. A lot of the time David just came into the studio, talked the band through the song, played it on an acoustic guitar and then they went for it.

Was Bowie a quick worker?

We had to be. *Hunky* and *Ziggy* were recorded in two weeks each. Ninety percent of his vocals on the first four albums were first takes, beginning to end,

without anything else needing doing to them.

Did Mick come up with his own parts?

There was the occasional thing David might suggest, but more often than not, Ronno would just go down to the studio and lay down exactly what he thought was needed, and it nearly always worked. When it came to solos, he'd nail them on the first take all the way through. He may have worked on ideas away from the studio, like the harmonic ideas and fills, but when he was there he got straight down to business. He was still [using] that big, old Marshall and the stripped Les Paul, going through the Cry Baby. That was basically his live rig as well. He'd plug into the Cry Baby, slowly open it up from the bottom, find the sweet spot and just leave it there. That would be it for the song, and that was basically what he did for every track I saw him record.

You've worked with a lot of great guitarists. How do you rate Ronson?

I think he was very underrated. He was exceedingly important to David's success. David was so talented that I think he would've made it no matter what, but Ronno was a very important part of David's recorded sound and, of course, he looked great on stage with David. Ronno was initially a bit scared of the glam look and the makeup at the beginning, but eventually he came around to it when he realized it didn't stop him getting women. [Laughs]

Fifty years down the line, how do you think the album stands up?

It depends on my mood. [Laughs] Some days I love it, some days I hate it and I want to change the sounds on everything. I think with hindsight there are a lot of things I'd like to change, but I certainly wouldn't ever want to change any of David's performances. Same with Ronno's parts. I think, looking back, the drum sound is the main thing I'd change. Perhaps, though, if we'd done anything differently back then, maybe it wouldn't have turned out so well and we wouldn't

be here talking about it half a century later. It's a snapshot of its time. When I listened to it back then, it was an album every six months, and if people were still talking about the previous album by the time the next one came out, you'd done your job. The life of an album was under a year; nobody ever thought we'd still be listening to those songs 50 years later. Rock 'n' roll wasn't even that old when we recorded it. There are tracks on some of the other early Bowie albums that I think are better than some tracks on *Ziggy*, but that is definitely the album that holds together and works best as a cohesive collection of songs.

You've been involved in countless historic albums, including much of the Beatles' catalog. Were there times when you felt like a frustrated producer, thinking, "I'd do this differently from George Martin"?

No, never. I was learning how to be an engineer at that point, and I'm very much a believer that you need to focus on one thing and do it to the best of your ability and knowledge and take it as far as you can before moving on to the next thing. When I was engineering with the Beatles, I was just trying to learn what the hell I was supposed to be doing. I'd never even been behind a mixing console before I'd worked with them. It wasn't until just before *Hunky Dory* that I started to get fed up with "just engineering."

It must have been quite a shock to the system to start an apprenticeship in the recording industry with the biggest band in the world.

Starting out as an assistant engineer on the sessions — button pushers, as we were called — that feels great, but your job isn't that important, really. You're just loading tapes and hitting "play" or "record." But not long after that, to be actually sitting behind the mixing console helping to get the sounds was absolutely ridiculous, but luckily for me it worked. 🎧



Bowie (as Ziggy) onstage in Los Angeles in 1973. "Ziggy Stardust was recorded in two weeks," Ken Scott says. "Ninety percent of Bowie's vocals on the first four albums were first takes, beginning to end"

PRICE: \$359

KRK Rokit RP5 G4

Fabulous budget monitors with a lovely, detailed sound and extra features you might only find on much pricier models.

Review by Andy Jones

There are some great options on the budget studio monitor speaker market with lots of big name manufacturers vying for your (not so much) cash. KRK has the pedigree, and the Rokit RP5 G4 monitors reviewed here are one of the best options, thanks to some of the design elements and features of the company's more pro end models being packed into their diminutive form.

The KRK Rokit RP5 G4 (also known as the Rocket 5 G4) is the smallest in KRK's Rokit G4 family. Three other larger studio monitors (the Rokit 7 G4, 8 G4 and 10 G4) feature bigger drivers, the size of which is indicated by the name in inches. With that logic we get a 5-inch Kevlar woofer on the Rokit 5 G4, matched with a 1-inch tweeter in its bi-amped design. Kevlar is often used in driver designs as it is a stiff material, helping to instantly translate the transients of your music.



Unusually for a speaker of this price, you get an on-board DSP feature EQ with 25 different settings to help you match the speakers to your room. They are active speakers too – no external amps required – with class D amps delivering 35 and 20 watts to the bass and high frequency drivers respectively. That's enough to power small to medium set-ups. If you are mixing in a larger space, the bigger Rokit G4s deliver a power output from 145 to 300 watts, enough for much bigger studios.

The on-board DSP processing can be accessed around the back, alongside balanced TRS/XLR combination jack inputs, a Volume rotary and Power button. We do prefer the volume control at the front of our speakers – especially when using the monitors just for general music listening – but when mixing you can, of course, also control the output level by way of your DAW.

We do like the padding at the base of each speaker though; this will cut down vibrations and lessen the need for any other acoustic isolation. The driver cabinets also feel very rigid, which will also help cut down vibration. A front firing port completes this anti distortion hat trick, also helping to deliver extended and controlled bass frequencies.

Turning to how the speakers work in practice and they are very easy to set up - all standard stuff with the advantages of that combo input. However the on-board EQ DSP will be a new feature to most people and is one of the most intriguing aspects of the G4 series. You use the Volume rotary to access it with it indicating said volume at the top of the screen. Pressing the knob also accesses EQ and Settings

options, the latter of which allows you to access standby on/off, screen contrast and brightness, and whether or not you want the logo at the front of each speaker to illuminate. Yes, obviously!

In the main EQ section you get high- and low-end frequency options and several settings within these. Honestly, these will take some experimenting with to give you the best and most honest sound from the speakers, but you have two ways to do this. Traditionally, you can find the ideal EQ setup by putting well known tracks and your own (well produced!) mixes through the speakers and adjust the EQ accordingly. But KRK also has a free app, KRK Audio Tools, that helps you calibrate EQ settings according to your room, among other options. Overall it's a nice extra to have and easier than wrestling with the dip switches found on more expensive speakers.

As to the sound, the matched drivers really do seem to offer an even sound across the board. There's a surprising amount of detail in the high frequencies compared to other models in the price range but it's the joined up picture that impresses us, something you don't often get unless you add a mid range driver (and the cost that comes with it). The only drawback we found was power. These will deliver the goods up to a good volume for smaller rooms, and there's very little distortion as they do that, but you will need a bigger Rokit to fill a bigger studio. Add a great overall breadth of sound by way of good soundstage and wide sweet spot and the KRK Rokit RP5 G4s are a fantastic buy for the money.



► VERDICT

The KRK Rokit RP5 G4's are a killer pair of budget studio monitors for anyone with a slightly healthier looking budget. KRK, with one of the most highly reputable names in studio monitors, offers decent power and a sophisticated EQ response from the smallest Rokit edition.

► PROS

- Great joined up sound.
- On board DSP and app help you get an honest response.
- Some lovely extra 'pro' features.

► CONS

- ♥ Volume control around the back.
- ♥ You will need to consider a bigger Rokit G4 if you are producing in larger rooms.

► CONTACT

JANDS

Ph: (02) 96582 0909

Web: jands.com.au



 SCAN ME



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With premium materials, components and an all-new design that reflects over 30 years of speaker innovation, ROKIT G4 monitors are a significant advancement, bringing professional reference monitoring to everyone. All system elements are cohesively designed to work with the drivers made with Kevlar®, making your mixes precise and reliable no matter the genre of music. It's why KRK has been the number one reference monitor brand for decades. And it's why ROKIT G4 will take your music to new levels of professional sound.

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RP5G4
5" Powered
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RP8G4
8" Powered
Studio Monitor



RP103G4
8" Powered
Studio Monitor

PRICE: \$2,299

Fender JV Modified '50s Telecaster and '60s Stratocaster

40 years on from the launch of the Japanese-made JV series Strat and Tele, Fender revisits the range with 'modified' versions that claim to offer the best of the old and the new. **Review by Neville Marten**

When we first heard that Fender was bringing out JV reissues commemorating the release of the original Japanese-made series, we mistakenly believed we would be getting accurate remakes of those game-changing guitars that recreated Strats, Teles, Precision and Jazz basses from the company's golden pre-CBS era. The earliest ones had Fender in large script and a small 'Squier' on the bulbous headstock end, and these instruments staggered everyone who saw them with their brilliant build, stunning attention to detail, and authentic looks and feel.

However, after the slight disappointment of

discovering this was not to be the case, it turns out that what we have here are two interesting and versatile instruments that deserve their place in the middle ranks of Fender's all-encompassing range. The guitars have much in common, from their basswood bodies with gloss urethane finishes, to satin-finished maple necks with soft 'V' profile and modern 241mm (9.5-inch) slab maple 'boards sporting 21 medium-jumbo frets. They also have bone nuts, vintage-voiced single-coil pickups, and locking vintage-style tuners. Truss rod access is at the headstock end rather than at the body, making the necks that much easier to keep in shape, and

both guitars come strung with D'Addario 0.009 to 0.042 gauge strings.

As you would expect from instruments made in Japan, their build, fit and finish are exemplary. The finishes are flawless, fretting and fret finishing are as good as almost anything out there, and actions on both guitars are exactly as you'd want them – low enough for comfort but with enough clearance for buzz-free playing. We do take slight issue with the pickup heights, though. The Strat's especially are set way too low for our tastes, but a quick fettle with the cross-head screwdriver soon had that sorted.

However, what makes the whole JV Modified



range instruments most interesting is their pickup switching. Each guitar in the range features a pull switch on the tone control, designed to offer sounds not normally associated with these models. Our Tele's usual three-way pickup selector is instead a four-way, with position 4 (towards the neck) selecting both pickups in series for a lift in power and girth. Its push-pull pot puts either of the 'both pickups on' selections out of phase for a decidedly different 'honky' Tele tone. The Strat's push-pull pot, on the other hand, simply brings in the neck pickup when bridge, and middle and bridge are chosen, so we get neck and bridge together, or all three pickups on at once. It will be interesting to see how they fare when plugged in to our Matchless Lightning test amp and up against a couple of Custom Shop 'control' guitars.

As mentioned, the action on both guitars here is spot on. Their necks are profiled with what Fender calls a 'thick soft V' and we'd put it somewhere between a regular C shape and the more radical V of many early Strats and Teles. They are quite slender, though (21mm at the 1st fret and 23mm at the 12th). That's nothing like the chunky slabs of this reviewer's own Custom Shop Relics, but they really do suit the 0.009-gauge strings – heavy hawsers on a thin neck or thin wires on a big old baseball bat always seem rather at odds, we feel. String bending is a doddle, too, and adding wide vibrato to a tone bend at the 15th fret takes no effort at all. The guitars' lightweight basswood bodies also mean they feel great on straps, and the satin neck finishes provide a drag-free playing experience.

Auditioning the JV Modified Telecaster through our Matchless offers up an interesting variety of tones, some of which we'd never heard from any Tele we've played. Listening to the three 'normal' sounds first, they are all brighter and quieter than the same positions on our CS guitar. However, each setting has an extremely musical voice, with great clarity and string separation, and immediately recognisable as a good example of its species.

Where things get interesting is in the switching. Positions 1 to 3 are regular Tele fare – bridge, bridge and middle in parallel, and neck. Push the switch to its final position and we hear both pickups together in series. This is instantly fuller and louder than the 'in parallel' sound, and would suit fat bluesy solos or, with the tone knocked back somewhat, a bit of sleazy jazz. Pull up the tone control's knurled knob and the two 'both pickups on' settings get flipped out of phase. They are not at all Strat-y, though; the 'in series' sound is much closer to Peter Green's Les Paul (especially with some tone rolled off), while the 'in parallel' tone is a decidedly lighter honk, which we could imagine guitarists such as Joe Perry or Jimmy Page insinuating into a mix. This is an extremely cool mix of sounds that you really should explore for yourself.

Moving to the '60s Stratocaster, of course we have heard Strats or Strat-style guitars with neck and bridge pickups together, or all pickups on. Both are very usable sounds, the former a sort of full-fat Telecaster on its middle setting, and the latter a

strong funky tone that's great for clean riffs, clear arpeggios or indeed small chord funky strumming.

Again, next to our Custom Shop maple-neck Strat this one is quieter and clearer toned. Like the Tele, though, it's extremely pleasing and musical – in every position. And remember, clearer toned guitars are great with pedals as they seem to heighten chorus-style effects and work brilliantly with delay – and, of course, whack a good overdrive or distortion between it and the amp, and the world's your sonic oyster.

Admittedly, we were a little askance at these guitars on first realising they were not what we thought they'd be. But living with them for a few days has been a delightful experience. Whether or not you like the Tele's anodised pickguard and rather unusual White Blonde that's actually translucent grey, we suspect the guitar would quickly endear itself should you plug one in to a decent amp (as we were fortunate enough to be able to do).

Likewise the Strat, if you were looking for something with that Hendrix vibe, this would be an excellent place to start. And whether you like your Strat tones clean and funky, or filthy and fuzzed up, this one would comply with pretty much anything you wanted to do.

That both instruments have clever switching offering very usable extra tones is a great bonus. Particularly interesting are the Tele's two out-of-phase settings, neither of which we'd heard before (although they are available on other models), but the regular sounds are equally personable, too. Same with the Strat: those extra two tones – all pickups on, and neck and bridge together – offer new vistas for an instrument that's already one of the most versatile around.

Street price for both models looks to be a reasonable \$1,900 or so, and that seems modest for guitars this well made with such a broad and usable range of tones, and which play so effortlessly. 🎸



► VERDICT

We thought Fender may have missed the mark with these two, but having given them the benefit of the doubt they've completely turned our opinions around, to the extent that we'd rate them something of a mini triumph. In fact, we reckon these mods are two rather excellent rockers.

► PROS

- ▲ Amazing builds.
- ▲ Good price point.
- ▲ Great range of tones.

► CONS

- ▼ Pickups set too low on the Strat.
- ▼ Push-pull pot can be tricky on the Strat.
- ▼ Tele's White Blonde colour actually looks grey / blue.

► CONTACT

FENDER AUSTRALIA

Ph: 02 8198 1300

Web: fender.com/en-au/

PRICE: \$2,199 / \$1,799



Cort Flow-OC and Gold-A6 Bocote

A pair of contrasting all-solid wood electro-acoustics from Cort's Chinese workshop with a host of innovative features to their name. **Review by David Mead**

Regular readers will have spotted the Cort name cropping up quite frequently with its well-received electric models. But as you also may already know, the huge manufacturing machine behind the brand, Cor-Tek, also builds guitars for some of the world's leading brands, not least PRS's electrics (in Indonesia) and its acoustics and hollowbodies in China, as well as Manson's start-up models and many, many more.

Our two new models are representative of Cort's own extensive acoustic range – we counted 14 different series on the company's website, many of which have a number of different instruments on offer, adding up to a considerable list.

Aside from being new 2022, all-solid wood models, there's no theme linking the duo before us; both these guitars are standalone models and so we will be looking at them individually, and the Flow-OC seems a good place to start.

The OC is an OM-sized cutaway, fitted with an LR Baggs Anthem pickup for live use. It's a good-looker, with considerable kerb appeal fresh out of the box. A closer look reveals a cedar top with mahogany back and sides, which is, of course, a fairly standard combo in acoustic guitars. Cedar is a favourite among fingerstylists. It's slightly more sedate than spruce, with a seductive warm tone, and doesn't really demonstrate a settling in or 'opening up' period. It will mature over the course of time, but won't change quite as much in tonal character as the various forms of spruce. Mahogany is part of royalty

when it comes to guitar woods, bringing sweet highs, a punchy midrange and good rounded bass to the table.

So far so good, but it's in the profiling of the mahogany neck that we meet one of Cort's innovative features. If you cast your mind back to when Ernie Ball Music Man first introduced their Eddie Van Halen electric way back in the 1990s, you might remember that Eddie wanted the neck profile to feel 'worn in'. To this end, his signature guitar's neck was asymmetrical – there was almost an aircraft wing feel to it, with less roundedness on the treble side than on the bass. It's a similar idea with Cort's Ergo-A profiling, but the asymmetry changes as you proceed up the neck. This is a similar concept to compound radiusing where a fretboard's camber changes between the lower and upper parts of the 'board to facilitate easier bending. Only here, we're talking about the other side of the neck. Science aside, we'll see what difference this makes when we get a little more hands-on with the guitar, a bit later. There's an ebony fretboard with hand-rolled edges – another feature that gives the fretting hand a more comfortable ride and makes the fretboard feel like it's already seen some action. Ebony is used for the Flow-OC's bridge, string pins and tuning buttons, while maple and walnut make up the subtle rosette.

Walnut makes another cameo appearance as part of the neck reinforcement. Invisible to the eye, two strips of the wood lay either side of the truss rod. Another nice detail.

Turning to the OC's partner in crime, the Auditorium-shaped Gold-A6 is another good looker. One feature that hits us immediately is the highly figured back and sides – unusual at the instrument's sub-\$2.5k price ticket. The choice of timber is off the beaten path, too, as this is bocote, a wood found in Central America and North Amazon and from the same family as ziricote. Its use as a timber in guitar-making is relatively new, and a little bit of research on our part reveals bocote has a tap tone similar to rosewood and shares some of the tonal characteristics with that wood, too. Big basses, loads of power and good sustain is the general consensus. There's even a hint of similarity in tonal response to African blackwood – another highly sought after timber, revered for its tonal fingerprint.

The bocote has been paired with a torrefied Sitka spruce top, labelled by Cort as 'Aged To Vintage' (or ATV if acronyms are your thing). We're very familiar with the effects that heat treatment can bring to the sound picture of acoustic guitars, advancing as it does the opening-up period to produce a more played-in tone.

The top has also been treated with a very thin UV finish, which allows the wood to breathe and vibrate more freely. Obviously a lot of thought has gone into producing a guitar with great tonal potential here and we're looking forward to hearing it sing. Meanwhile, the rest of the construction details are a mahogany neck – again reinforced by strips of walnut inside – an ebony 'board with rolled edges



and a C-neck profile, symmetrical this time.

The Gold-A6's stage-readiness is embodied in the Fishman Flex Blend, which combines an under-saddle pickup with a microphone located inside the soundhole. Aside from the usual volume and tone controls, the Flex Blend also comes equipped with a



tuner, phase control and blend rotary.

Returning to the Flow-OC, its OM body immediately welcomes us. It's probably the default choice of fingerpickers – more manageable than a dreadnought and more projection than a parlour. It sits in that Goldilocks region: not too big, not too small. We can feel the asymmetrical neck immediately, but it only takes moments before we're comfortable with it and forget it's there.

Sound-wise, the balance between the three main tonal areas – basses, mids and trebles – is very good indeed, with no noticeable troughs or peaks in frequency. It's an easy guitar to play; passing it around the office gained nods of approval from all concerned – we were charmed, let's put it that way.

Switching to the Gold A-6, the bocote and spruce pairing – not to mention the slightly larger Auditorium body size – results in more volume than from the Flow-OC. It's a big sound, packed with sustain and a good range of harmonics, completely different to its OM counterpart, but not in a bad way. If we were to

compare the output of the two, we would say that the OM is polite, demure and generally well-behaved, the Gold-A6 is lively, extroverted and boisterous.

Both were subject to a similar workout – a bit of blues picking, some chordal strumming and a little melodic fingerstyle – and both had all boxes ticked. Their different pickups, the OM's LR Baggs and A6's Fishman, were easy to dial in and gave a good account of the acoustic nature of the individual guitars.

As mentioned, we've been knocked for six by the guitars (and amp) we've recently seen bearing the Cort name, and these two acoustics are definitely an extra feather in an already festooned cap. If we were asked to do such a thing, it would be difficult to choose between the two, as they both multitask in their own way. In other words, they might display different tonal attributes, but both are equally able – they just handle things slightly differently. If pressed, we'd probably choose the Flow-OC but that would be down to personal preference in body size. 🎸

► VERDICT

If you're in the market for an acoustic guitar that might break your heart (without breaking the bank), don't overlook the Cort brand. You might be surprised at what you find.

► PROS

- The Flow-OC is packed with player friendly features.
- The Gold A6 Bocote has a loud 'n' proud sound.

► CONS

- ♥ Tone traditionalists may aver from the Gold A6 Bocote.

► CONTACT

DYNAMIC MUSIC

Ph: (02) 9938 2072

Web: dynamicmusic.com.au

RRP: \$1,650

Sterling By Music Man Cutlass CT50HSS

A popular Music Man design gets the Sterling treatment, with a little of the old and a little of the new. Review by **Peter Hodgson**

There are a lot of things to consider when designing a guitar that alludes to an established form. In the case of the Ernie Ball Music Man Cutlass and this licensed Sterling By Music Man version, we're looking at a guitar concept that Music Man co-founder Leo Fender refined throughout his career, and which continues to evolve according to the tastes and trends of the time. So while in some ways this looks like a guitar with its roots in the 1950s, it's also very much a 2022 instrument. Let's have a look at how these two eras work together in this guitar.

The Cutlass HSS says '1950s' in a whole bunch of ways. The pastel Pueblo Pink Satin of the review model looks straight out of '50s homewares for crying out loud! (Other colour options are Daphne Blue Satin, Rose Gold, Firemist Silver, Dropped Copper and Vintage Cream). The tremolo system isn't a wacky locking model, and there are no active pickups or rechargeable this and that. And yet this isn't just a Sterling version of something we've already seen. The double-cutaway body shape is slightly offset, giving the instrument its own distinctive outline that immediately sets it apart from a number of other guitars in this style. That tremolo system is a Music Man design with a two-point fulcrum design. There's a humbucker in the bridge position, and a simplified control layout.

Even the materials reflect current guitar trends. The body is made of poplar, a wood that at one time was associated with guitars at the lower end of the quality spectrum, but which has had a bit of a resurgence lately; a nice chunk of poplar can give you a snappy, punchy tone, and you'll find it in all sorts of high-end instruments. The neck is made of roasted maple, which has undergone a heat treatment process to extract moisture and make the wood more stable in the face of rapid temperature or humidity shifts.

The list of modern upgrades goes on and on. There are locking tuners to make string changes a breeze (and they feel super-stable in terms of tuning reliability too). The truss rod adjustment is at the body end of the neck, which is a convenient and elegant solution that Music Man mastered decades ago and which many other companies have adopted in recent years. And

the neck meets the body with the legendarily stable Music Man five-bolt pattern.

One particularly interesting feature is the oversized headstock. Oversized for a Music Man design, that is: typical Music Man headstocks are noticeably shorter than traditional headstocks, with a 4+2 tuner configuration. The Cutlass still has the 'four

on one side, two on the other' tuner configuration but the headstock is larger, adding extra mass back to this crucial area of the guitar and hinting back at its '50s ancestor. And while there are quite a few 'roasted maple neck, HSS, two-point tremolo' guitars out there right now, the majority of them seem to have compound radius fingerboards and jumbo frets that appeal to more modern playing techniques. The Cutlass CT50HSS has a single consistent 12 inch radius and medium sized frets. At every turn, the guitar seems to go from a vintage feature to a modern one to a vintage one again.

The electronics consist of a pair of Sterling-designed pickups (two single coils and a moderate-output humbucker), with a five-way pickup selector switch and master volume and tone pots. There's no way to switch the humbucker to single coil operation, which almost feels like an oversight on paper, but it makes sense when you plug in and realise just how perfectly these three pickups are balanced with each other. There's no dramatic volume dip switching from one extreme to the other, and that helps

the Cutlass to sound great through a clean rig. The single coils are nice and detailed, not too boomy on the low end and with a crisp attack, while the humbucker has that Steely Dan kind of warm-but-

not-woolly lead sound: very musical and sweet. It can handle high gain

tones easily, but it seems happiest in the 'overdrive' range rather than 'mega distortion.'

In terms of playability, the Cutlass isn't going to turn you into an instant speed demon. The neck is comfortable but not skinny, the frets are smoothly finished but not super shreddy and that 12 inch radius is rounder than guitars pitched at the widdly-widdly crowd. But that means that it feels like a modern version of a vintage guitar design, rather than a vintage-looking version of a modern one. If you're more of a traditional blues, rock or country player you're going to feel right at home on this instrument. (If you need something faster, there are plenty of other options in the Sterling catalog for you, and you would probably love the Jason Richardson RICHARDSON6 model, which has a similar outline to the Cutlass but with 24 jumbo frets, a 16 inch fingerboard radius, coil taps and a selectable 12dB boost).

This is a really fun guitar to play: built with a modern construction sensibility but presenting an earthy rather than overly slick playing experience, and with a selection of tones that excel in the clean-to-overdrive range. It looks great, it sounds great, and it feels like it can handle decades of heavy use in boozy clubs or in more posh circumstances. 🎸

► VERDICT

Marrying vintage aesthetic appeal with modern dressings, the Cutlass CT50HSS is fun to play, durable, and full of the modern upgrades you'd expect.

► PROS

- Well-balanced pickups.
- Comfortable all-rounder neck.
- Great tuning stability.

► CONS

- No coil split.
- Factory setup too high.
- A few odd colour options.

► CONTACT

CMC MUSIC

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RRP: \$599

Universal Audio UAFX Amp Emulators

Universal Audio's UAFX range expands with these 'one amp per box' emulators that capture the sounds of the world's greatest vintage amps.

Review by Trevor Curwen

Following last year's pedal debuts, Universal Audio's UAFX range continues to grow with these new Amp Emulators, which the company says emulate the best vintage guitar amps of all time. Each pedal represents one particular amp type: Woodrow '55 Instrument Amplifier is based on Fender tweed amps from the 50s; Dream '65 Reverb Amplifier represents the later black-panel Fenders with an emulation of the Deluxe Reverb; and Ruby '63 Top Boost Amplifier channels our homegrown Vox AC30.

Providing various stereo and mono options, each pedal offers the actual amp emulation plus a choice of six speaker cabinet emulations – you get three as shipped, but registering the pedal entitles you to another three. Each pedal also has three toggle-switched variations on the sound that only become active on turning the Boost switch from fully anticlockwise. A single preset can be instantly recalled with the right-hand footswitch, while the other footswitch accesses the Live mode, which gives you the sound determined by the current positions of knobs and switches. If you want to make

a preset that is an instant snapshot of the knobs and switches, you do it with a simple flick of the Store switch.

There is another source of presets via the UAFX Control mobile app for iPhone and Android, which lets you beam a preset into the pedal. There are a bunch of them out there already with meticulously dialled-in sounds to suit a range of musical scenarios. Some are factory presets, while some have been created by pro guitarists including Tim Pierce, Nels Cline and Cory Wong, among others. The app has other functions, too, like allowing you to configure different footswitch assignments, such as having a footswitch to turn vibrato on and off.

While the pedals are ideally placed to be a substitute for a real amp for recording or for sending a signal to FOH or an FRFR speaker for onstage use, they can also be used with your own amp. It's easy to disengage the cab simulation, and there's a setup that allows you to use the four-cable method whereby the pedal becomes an alternative preamp to your own amp – this lets you easily switch between your amp's preamp and two variations of

the pedal's sound.

Playing through all three pedals is a revelation as they react organically with all of the push-and-pull response of the nominated amp, as well as delivering its sound with exceptional accuracy. They are the closest emulations to the real thing that this reviewer has experienced. Things never sound dry and sterile as the Dream '65 has a superb spring reverb emulation, while the other two non-reverb amps get a Room knob that puts air around the sound with ambience derived from the UA Ox Amp Top Box for an authentic sense of space.

With no alternative functions for any of its knobs, the Woodrow has the simplest interface of the three pedals. It represents a two-channel amplifier so you get Instrument Volume and Mic Volume knobs that can be used individually or blended. EQ tasks are taken care of by a single Tone knob that tweaks the top-end, although prior to any of that, the choice of speaker has a massive influence on the tone on all three pedals. There's a choice of three types of boost: a stock clean preamp boost; one based on the preamp of a Korg SD3000 (beloved of The Edge); and that old favourite, the preamp from an Echoplex EP-3, which can really get things screaming. Yes, that Neil Young lead sound is entirely within your grasp.

Ruby '63 offers three channels, two of which are based on a '63 Top Boost amp. The Normal channel, however, is actually modelled on a non-TB '61 amp complete with a Rangemaster treble boost dialled in with the Boost knob in true Brian May and Rory Gallagher style, delivering some instantly familiar classic tones. Authentically for this channel, there's a Cut control for treble, but if you use either of the Top Boost channels you get the additional Treble and Bass knobs. The Brilliant channel comes with an EP-3 preamp to add some extra wallop, while the Vibrato channel gets clean boost and has Speed and Intensity controls for the tremolo to dial in some authentic vintage throb.

The Dream '65 Reverb Amplifier is the Vibrato channel of a black-panel Deluxe Reverb in a box, so you get Volume, Bass, Treble and Reverb knobs plus Speed and Intensity for the tremolo as Alt parameters. There are some solid clean tones here that make this an ideal partner for your pedals but plenty of targeted drive, too. The three options are for a stock amp with a clean preamp boost for the purists or a choice of two amp modifications. Lead offers more midrange warmth, and D-Tex, described as the SRV modification, is great if you want an extra bit of gain and singing midrange. The spring reverb really hits the spot here, and the speaker options are well chosen – we really liked the 4x10 option for a Fender Super vibe.

These are excellent pedals that not only sound exactly like the amp they are emulating but offer the tactile feel of playing through one. While other pedals may offer more amps, concentrating the DSP power on a single amp is completely justified if it offers this much attention to detail. That approach also facilitates an interface that mimics the original amp and makes it easy to dial in exactly what you need without diving into menus. 

► VERDICT

If you want a range of amps, then there are plenty of modellers around, but many guitarists rely on just one amp. So if your favoured type is represented here, one of these is absolutely the best way to get that sound and feel

► PROS

- Exemplary emulation of classic amps.
- Simple to use; one box = one amp.

► CONS

- ♥ No dedicated headphone feed.

► CONTACT

CMi MUSIC
Web: cmi.com.au

PRICE: \$4,599 / \$4,199

Jackson Concept Series Rhoads RR24 HS and Soloist SLAT7P HT MS

Jackson's Concept series supposedly dials everything up to eleven in the quality stakes. Is that promise too good to be true?

Review by Chris Gill

Earlier this year Jackson Guitars introduced its new Concept Series with the release of four new models: a pair of Soloist models (the SL Walnut HS and SLAT7P HT MS) and a pair of Rhoads models (the RR24-7 and RR24 HS). The overall "concept" behind this series seems to be rather loosely defined and open, but the overarching premise is premium hardware, pickups, finishes and other features usually found on Jackson's custom models but without the higher custom model price. Some of the models also offer compelling variations from Jackson's regular lineup, such as the 7-string Rhoads RR24-7 or the humbucker/single-coil pickup configuration of the Rhoads RR24 HS and Soloist SL Walnut HS, while the Soloist SLAT7P HT MS offers a more upscale alternative to Jackson's popular multi-scale Soloist models. We took a look at two Concept Series models: the Rhoads RR24 HS and the Soloist SLAT7P HT MS.

The Concept Series Rhoads RR24 HS features the iconic asymmetrical V-shaped Rhoads model body built with neck-through-body construction where alder body "wings" sandwich a three-piece maple neck. The ebony fretboard with pearloid sharkfin inlays, 25.5-inch scale length and 24 jumbo frets are also time-honored Rhoads features, as is the body's ivory white gloss finish with black pinstripe accents outlining the top bevels. Pro details abound, including Luminlay side dot markers, a 12-16-inch compound fretboard radius and gold-plated hardware, including the Floyd Rose Original double-locking tremolo system and Gotoh sealed tuners.

The pickup configuration is a key item of interest. Although it's described as "humbucker/single-coil," technically it's a pair of humbuckers, with a full-size Seymour Duncan JB TB-4 at the bridge and a single-coil-size Hot Rails Strat SHR-IN humbucker at the neck. Controls consist of a three-position pickup selector toggle and master volume and master tone knobs.

While the Rhoads RR24 HS tips its headstock to the beginnings of the Jackson brand, the Concept Series Soloist SLAT7P HT MS focuses on its future. This model marries the deep sweeping cutaway

body shape and sleek contours of the Soloist model to a 25.5-to-27-inch multi-scale 7-string neck. The neck-through-body design incorporates a five-piece maple (center and outer layers) and wenge (inner layers) neck with ash body wings and a satin-finished layer of burl poplar covering the entire top. Neck features include a bound ebony fingerboard with a 12-16-inch compound radius, 24 jumbo frets, Luminlay side dots and pearloid "piranha tooth" inlays.

The hardware is all top quality, consisting of a Hipshot 7 fixed bridge, black dome-style knobs and Gotoh tuners. The electronics include a pair of Fishman Fluence Modern PRF-MH8 humbuckers

(ceramic bridge, alnico neck) with master volume and master tone controls, the latter with push/pull switching to active voice 1 or 2. A three-position blade switch accesses the usual bridge/both/neck pickup settings.

Both Concept Series guitars are serious, pro-quality instruments with flawless construction and a smooth, sexy feel that delivers impressive playability. The Rhoads RR24 HS provides a bold, assertive hard rock voice with barking midrange. Because the Hot Rails neck pickup has a narrower magnetic field than a full-size humbucker, its overall tone is more focused and the pickup angle keeps the lower notes from sounding overly flabby or dark. The bridge pickup sounds bold and beastly, providing stellar definition and punch, and both pickups are dead quiet even when using a distortion pedal and high-gain amp setting. The only improvement I would have liked was a coil-splitting function, but users handy with a soldering iron can easily perform this mod, if desired.

The Soloist SLAT7P HT MS is sure to inspire the most technical lead shredders and heavy-handed aggressive rhythm players alike. Setting 1 on the Fluence pickups is more defined and crisp, making the bass exceptionally tight and round while treble notes exhibit shimmering metallic spark. Setting 2 boosts the output, making the overall tone more compressed, fat and full-bodied, ideal for single-note lines and solos or rhythm parts that fill the sonic soundscape rather than dominating a more focused range. The multi-scale neck with its slim, flat profile is outrageously comfortable to play, and the larger Soloist body shape is very well balanced and keeps the neck solidly in playing position. 

► VERDICT

Both of these Concept Series models deliver the superior construction, attention to detail and pro electronics/hardware of Jackson's custom models while also offering slightly different tonal character for players who prefer to stand out from the crowd.

► PROS

- ▲ Amazing build quality.
- ▲ Gorgeous sound.

► CONS

- ♥ None.

► CONTACT

FENDER AUSTRALIA

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Web: fender.com/en-au/



Fender Paramount Bluegrass Collection PR-180E Resonator and PM-180E Mandolin

Fender grows its Paramount Bluegrass Collection with two affordable acoustics for those with an Americana bent. **Review by Jimmy Leslie**

Fender introduced its Paramount Series for discriminating acoustic players at Winter NAMM 2016, and the company has been busy updating and augmenting it in 2022. Fender started off the year with three new steel-strings, and then — just in time for warm-weather back-porch pickin' — offered up the three instruments that make up the Paramount Bluegrass Collection: the PB-180E banjo, along with the PR-180E Resonator and PM-180E Mandolin on review here. The whole Paramount concept is about modern takes on vintage designs, and the Bluegrass Series takes it a step further, applying elements such as onboard electronics and modern neck profiles to old-time Americana instruments.

The PR-180E is an all-mahogany acoustic-electric round-neck resonator that comes in a nice hardshell case. It has a pair of small f-holes located in the upper bouts on either side of a neck that joins the body at the 12th fret. Aged-white binding is a nice complement to the dark-stained mahogany. Close examination of the border line along the fretboard revealed slight imperfections on this unit, but overall craftsmanship was super solid. The wood has an open-pore satin finish that sets it in soft contrast to the large spider resonator cone that dominates the front. Nickel hardware includes Grover open-back tuners that add a time-honored touch. It would be

nice if the script Fender logo and Paramount staff on the headstock were inlays instead of decals, but they still have a cool appearance. Overall, it's a fantastic-looking instrument.

The PR-180E has a small, soft V-shaped neck that gives you plenty to hold onto without being too much, and the width at the nut is a very common 1.75 inches, so it feels pretty much in line with a typical steel-string neck, especially given that the string gauges are also common to a typical light steel-string set. Playability out of the box is somewhat easy. This review unit arrived on a gig day for me, so I brought it along and had no trouble working it right into the set alongside the grand auditorium and concert steel-strings that were in the mix that night. It's clear that Fender designed this instrument with an eye to accommodating acoustic players of all stripes, not just resonator heads. The factory action is slightly on the high side compared to a standard steel-string, and that's certainly advantageous for an instrument that so easily lends itself to bottleneck Delta blues and lap-style slide playing. It's easily adjustable via the dual-action truss rod as well.

The PR-180E's tone is an interesting blend of wood and metal, warmth and clarity, attack and sustain, all with plenty of punchy volume. How it sounds depends a whole lot on your plucking approach. Since there are only 12 frets to the body, the feel is

more compact than on a 14-fret instrument, and your plucking hand naturally comes further across. I often found myself plucking over the neck right in-between the two F-holes, leading to a wooly, wooden sound. On the other hand, plucking with the heel placed right on the steel bridge cover brightens the tone considerably, and you can't help but want to play a few banjo-inspired rolls.

The articulation and sustain one achieves with this instrument is inspiring. Plucking aggressively in particular tunings occasionally yielded some extraneous rattle from the resonator cone, but that's not altogether unwelcome or surprising for an instrument of this affordability. The real surprise is how good it sounds amplified. The PR-180E comes equipped with a Fishman Nashville Series Pickup, which delivered a balmy, robust tone through a Fender Acoustic Junior GO. I actually preferred it to the pure acoustic tone. It's a passive pickup with no controls that simply sounds full and organic.

The Fender Paramount PM-180E Mandolin is an acoustic-electric instrument with a classic A-style teardrop shape. Typical of the Paramount line, it's not made of solid woods but rather of laminated mahogany back and sides, with a laminated spruce top. It also comes with a gig bag rather than a hard case. A pair of f-holes grace either side of the walnut bridge in the center. It sports a handsome aged Cognac Burst, finished in satin, and like its resonator cousin has complementary aged-white binding that offers a nice contrast. I noticed a few blemishes where the binding, the body and the neck all come together. Chrome hardware includes open-back tuners with pearloid buttons that add an old-time element, and the Paramount staff on the headstock caps it off nicely. It appears that the brand name and Paramount logo, consisting of a staff with a sort of diamond-shaped kite head on top, are silkscreened on the headstock. The overall aesthetic is down-home handsome, with a modern classic sensibility.

Snowflake inlays grace its walnut fingerboard on a soft V-shaped neck that feels instantly accommodating to hands used to holding an acoustic guitar. Playability on this review unit was easy enough right out of the box. My friend and I are both guitar players who dabble in mandolin, and we found it easy to transfer our guitar skills to this instrument. It facilitates everything from running scales to playing primary chords or stabbing out singular notes with good intonation and minimal fret splat, until you get into about the 10th position, where some dead spots start to occur. Some of the fret edges felt a bit sharp, but the craftsmanship is better than par for its price class.

The PM-180E features parallel tone-bar bracing, which Fender says is designed to deliver a bright, clear tone, and that's exactly how I'd describe the sound. This mandolin is loud and lively, and it does a bang-up job filling a small room with sound. It's equipped with a passive Fishman pickup that delivered a signal faithful to the acoustic tone to my Fender Acoustic Junior GO. Importantly, the level was well balanced from string to string. 

► VERDICT

Fender's Paramount Series offers options for players seeking authentic acoustic sounds on modest budgets. Both of these additions to the Paramount Bluegrass Collection will appeal to acoustic and electric guitar players who have come to love the Fender feel and want to expand their styles in an Americana direction.

► PROS

- ▲ Classic style.
- ▲ Good playability.
- ▲ Clear tone.

► CONS

- ▼ A few minor blemishes in the neck attachment region.

► CONTACT

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Blackstar St James 50 EL34 Combo

Blackstar claims its latest release is “the lightest 50-watt all-valve combo in the world”. Is this really the future for valve amplification?

Review by Nick Guppy

PRICE: \$1,759



There are actually two different flavours on offer within Blackstar’s St James amplifiers range, both available in combo and head format. One is a high-gain 6L6-powered circuit aimed at modern rock and metal, while the one we’re looking at here is the lower-gain, pedal-friendly EL34 version.

The St James amps are billed as the lightest 50-watt valve amps in the world, with a number of innovations making that possible, the most obvious being the lack of heavy mains transformer. Instead, we have a patent-pending switched-mode power supply piggybacked on the top of the main chassis, which is carefully folded for improved rigidity. Inside, miniature SMD components cohabit with heavy duty power resistors and capacitors on high-quality printed circuit boards. There are separate PCBs for the front and rear controls, the valve bases and a smaller board for Blackstar’s Cab Rig digital speaker emulation, all securely supported and joined by ribbon cables, terminated with robust Molex connectors.

There are a few cool features. In the middle of the main board there’s a reactive load device, which mimics the loudspeaker’s response for realistic silent recording. LED indicators next to the preset pots for output valve bias and balance take away the

guesswork, although high voltages and the complex nature of the St James’s layout mean bias adjustment is best left to the pros – it’s not really a DIY task.

Tucked away inside the candlenut plywood semi-closed back enclosure is a single Celestion Zephyr 12-inch loudspeaker, a lightweight driver that’s exclusive to Blackstar and marries the cone characteristics of the legendary Vintage 30 with a unique hi-tech ferrite (not neodymium) motor.

The St James is a two-channel design, featuring a high-headroom USA-flavoured clean channel that’s teamed with a low-to-medium gain overdrive channel based on classic early 60s British designs. There’s a volume control for the clean channel, and volume and gain controls for the overdrive channel, with a level control for the digital reverb and an overall master volume.

Behind the three EQ knobs, you’ll find dual-gang potentiometers controlling separate circuits for both channels. The clean channel EQ is a regular passive array, while the overdrive channel has passive interactive bass and treble controls with an active midrange that operates independently from the bass and treble, cutting or boosting frequencies. The overdrive channel also includes a footswitchable boost, with an alternative toggle switch on the control panel. Another toggle switch changes channels, while a third gives you a choice of power output settings, with a studio-friendly two-watt option or a full-on 50 watts for stage use. In between there’s a third choice called Sag, which is 50 watts but with a modified dynamic response to imitate a power supply being driven hard.

Rear-panel options (which point downward because of the top-facing control panel) include a series effects loop with switchable levels and a choice of extension loudspeaker sockets. There’s also a balanced XLR and TRS jack/headphones output for the St James’s integrated reactive load and Cab Rig speaker emulation, together with a USB socket for uploading Cab Rig presets and direct recording. A three-way switch accesses three onboard Cab Rig presets, with a practically infinite range of choices from Blackstar’s Architect app ready to edit and upload.

Overall, the St James looks the business, and boasts typically robust build quality, plus cool 60s-inspired boutique features including radiogram-style control knobs and an illuminated logo.

With the premium TAD Redbase EL34s warmed up, there’s practically no background noise, partly due to the lack of a conventional mains transformer. Both our Les Paul and Strat were dialled in within seconds, and while the St James sounds great with single coils, it really comes alive with the mid-rich tones of the Les Paul’s humbuckers. The black-panel influenced clean channel has the sweet treble and scooped mids needed to get that buttery ‘both



pickups on' rhythm tone, while the drive channel sits somewhere between JTM45 and AC30 and can be coaxed in either direction for truly stunning classic rock and blues sounds.

The drive channel is very touch-sensitive, cleaning up if you back off a little, or barking like a Doberman if you hit the strings hard. Activating the drive channel's boost function adds a healthy 10dB of gain. However, Strat owners with low-ish output pickups might find themselves wishing for a couple of decibels more.

The digital reverb adds a cool ambience that can be as subtle or forward as you like, while the Cab Rig simulated speaker outputs deliver authentic

mic'd up sounds direct into a desk for studio or live use. There's a choice of three presets on the amp, meanwhile the Architect partner software gives you a practically infinite choice of combinations, which can be uploaded to the St James or saved and stored offline. We like the Architect app's clean, minimalist page design, which includes a live bias status display for the St James's output valves. At the moment, the app only works when it's connected to an amp, which may be a slight annoyance for some as it stops you from browsing features, for which you don't always need an amp hooked up.

The St James handled our live gigs with ease sat next to a large enthusiastically played drum kit that

one felt as well as heard. There was plenty of power to spare, with the master volume staying well below the halfway mark. We also used the Sag power amp setting, which adds a subtle but effective dynamic compression to the output; single notes and chords breathe and bloom a little more.

In the studio the two-watt setting is perfect and you can combine real microphones with the Cab Rig virtual mic'd environments for extra versatility. Turning the standby switch to 'off' disconnects the loudspeaker. However, the entire amp signal is still routed through the St James's reactive load and the Cab Rig emulation, making the Blackstar ideal for quiet stage environments as well as loud ones. 

► VERDICT

This isn't the cheapest all-valve offering out there, you get what you pay for – and the weight saving alone will be a serious temptation for many of us. For professional players and serious amateurs who are after a compact and portable all-valve combo that doesn't compromise on tone, it's a superb choice.

► PROS

- ▲ Compact and portable.
- ▲ USA-inspired clean channel.
- ▲ Power to spare for live gigs.

► CONS

- ♥ Hardware output level control for Cab Rig outputs would be nice.
- ♥ Pricey.

► CONTACT

CMi

Web: cmi.com.au



Vox VH-Q1 headphones

Vox's noise-cancelling headphones have acoustic tricks up their sleeve for guitarists who want to shut it all out during practice. **Review by Jamie Dickson**

Headphones really have to earn their crust these days. Not only is great audio quality expected but wireless connectivity with your devices is pretty much standard today. Vox's VH-Q1 headphones are all of the above but also feature noise-cancelling technology that suppresses intrusive sounds from outside, such as engine noise on a long haul flight.

Pairing the VH-Q1s with a device is pretty simple; you just hold down the power button for five

seconds, after which they should be discoverable on Bluetooth-enabled phones or tablets. Once paired, the sound quality is impressive, balancing warmth and detail very pleasantly via the high-grade film diaphragms. The pillowy earpads are very comfortable and, at a little over 300g, the headphones are light enough to wear for long periods without discomfort, despite their robust metal frame. The VH-Q1s also pause playback when you lay them down, meaning you'll miss nothing if you have to slip the headphones off for a moment.

To test the noise-cancelling abilities of the VH-Q1s, we played the sound of a crowded room through studio monitors while we listened to a jazz trio on the headphones. With the Active Noise Cancelling at its highest setting and the streamed music at a moderate volume, we could hear very little of our simulated crowd, even when it was turned up to 'lively party' levels – impressive.

The unique selling point of the VH-Q1s, however, is the Ambient Sound Monitoring mode. The idea is that microphones in the headset amplify the sound of your acoustic (or quietly played electric) to a level that's at parity with streaming audio, thus letting you jam along to music in the headphones without having to play loud in the room. We did find that the resulting guitar sounds were quite strongly filtered, depending on which mic/EQ mode was selected, and the mics did pick up some ambient noise, too. As there is no in-built amp modelling, this Silent Session feature does seem a bit niche – but if you view the VH-Q1s as a set of high-quality, noise-cancelling headphones with some perks for musos, rather than a practice tool per se, then they really shine. 

► VERDICT

Sleek, high-quality noise-cancelling headphones with a unique 'Silent Session' feature that's a boon for practicing musos.

► PROS

- ▲ Lovely sound quality and build.
- ▲ Very comfortable to wear, with effective noise cancelling.

► CONS

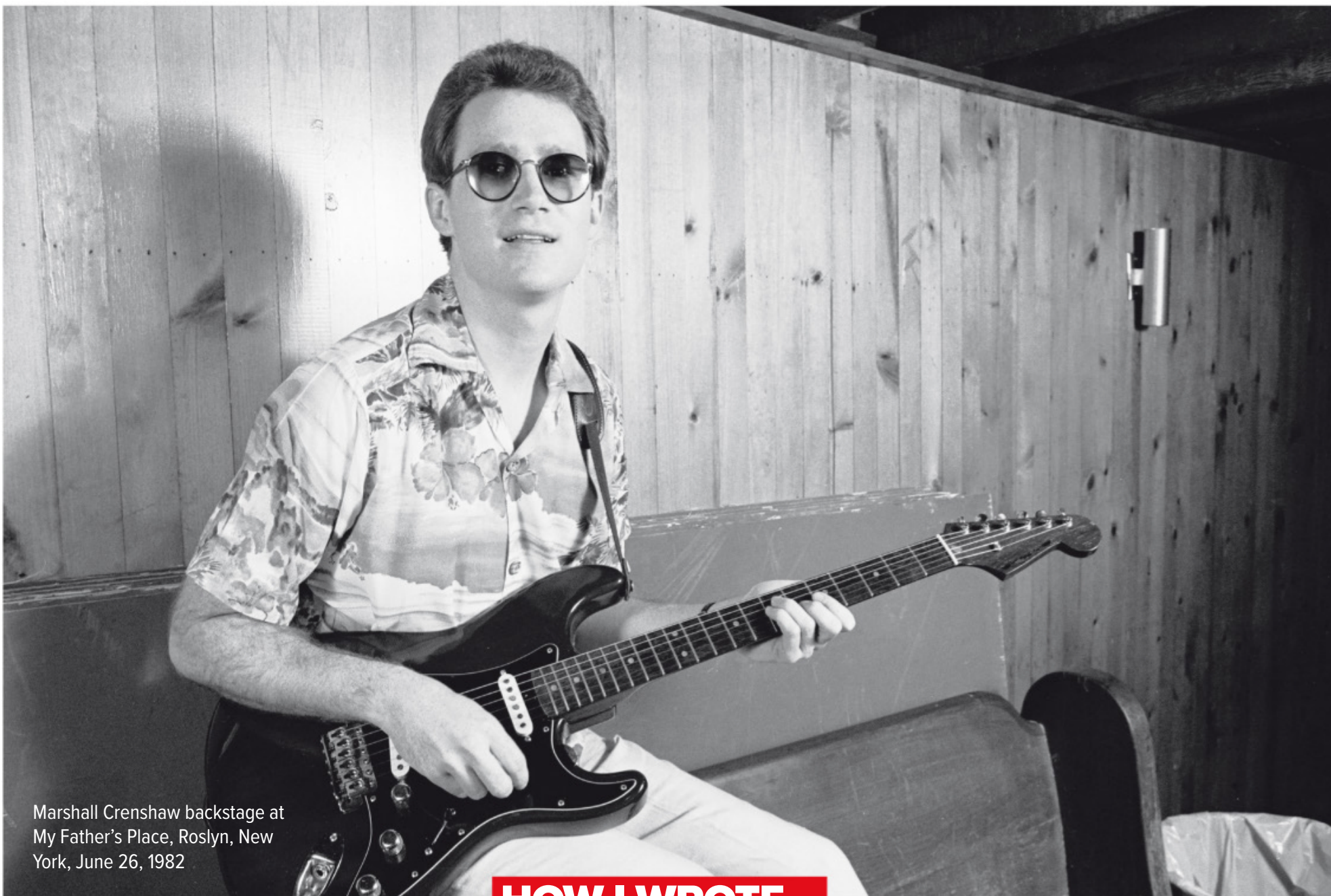
- ♥ Ambient Sound Monitoring tech is niche, but will suit acoustic players.

► CONTACT

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Marshall Crenshaw backstage at My Father's Place, Roslyn, New York, June 26, 1982

HOW I WROTE...

“SOMEDAY, SOMEWAY”

MARSHALL CRENSHAW REVEALS GENE VINCENT'S ROLE IN HIS 1982 SIGNATURE HIT.

BY JOE BOSSO

“I can knock certain songs of mine for one reason or another, but not this one,” Marshall Crenshaw says of “Someday, Someway,” the irresistibly catchy 1982 pop-rock gem that launched the Detroit-born musician’s career and is now considered his signature song by fans and critics alike. “It sounded good when I released it, and it still sounds good today. People want me to play it at every show, which is fine, because I happen to love it and I’m really proud of it.”

Phony Beatlemania

In February 1980, Crenshaw was in Boston for a four-week run of *Beatlemania*, the musical revue in which he’d portrayed John Lennon for three long years. “One night, the stage manager gave me a warning: ‘You’ve got to try harder. Look like you’re enjoying it,’” he recalls. “I quit the show the next day.”

While in Boston, Crenshaw began writing songs in earnest, a creative binge that was sparked by listening to the city’s FM rock station, WBCN. “They played a lot of punk and new wave tunes, and I found them very exciting and inspiring,” he says. “I was in my hotel room and I heard the Clash’s ‘London Calling’ for the first time. Those words ‘phony Beatlemania has bitten the dust’ spoke to me. It was, ‘Okay, that’s a message I’m getting.’”

At the same time, Crenshaw was channeling the spirit of ’50s rock and early ’60s girl groups in his writing. He was particularly taken with “Lotta Lovin’,”

a 1957 rockabilly hit by Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps. “I started with that same drum beat, and before I knew it a song came to me — the riff, the verse and chorus, the words,” he says. “Even the title, ‘Someday, Someway’ — it was ‘first thought, best thought.’ Right away, I knew I had something.”

Crenshaw dashed off a boom-box cassette demo of the song (which he soon recorded over), then headed to his home base of New York City and made a proper recording of the cut and other compositions at a rehearsal studio where his brother Robert worked. He shopped his tape around, even leaving a copy with the doorman of producer Richard Gottehrer. “From Richard, the tape got to Robert Gordon, who started recording some of my songs,” Crenshaw says. “He did a version of ‘Someway, Someway,’ and it became a nice hit for him. Then I made a single of it for this little label, Shake Records, and WNEW started playing it. That opened the floodgates, and all the labels wanted me.”

Take 28

Signed to Warner Bros., Crenshaw, with bassist Chris Donato and brother Robert on drums, set about recording his debut album, with Gottehrer producing, at Manhattan’s Record Plant Studios. “I was intimidated being in this fancy studio,” Crenshaw remembers.

“I struggled to get sounds I was happy with.” Gottehrer offered suggestions for arrangements on certain songs, but when it came to “Someday,

Someway,” the track pretty much stayed as it was.

“I did some cool guitar things on the song,” Crenshaw notes, “like I’m playing an E-string harmonic that drones throughout. But Richard had me record six rhythm acoustics, which I didn’t understand. They’re way down in the mix.” The guitarist doubled all of his electric parts, relying on his main sunburst 1966 Stratocaster that he played through a Fender Pro combo.

The basic tracks went smoothly, but even so, the group performed it 35 times to get the right feel. Crenshaw credits second engineer Jim Ball, with zeroing in on take 28 as the keeper. “Jim played it for us and said, ‘Listen to this one,’ and sure enough, it was there,” he says. “My brother really nailed it on the drums, and that’s something I keyed into.”

Don’t Change That Dial

Because “Someday, Someway” had enjoyed success from its earlier versions, Crenshaw balked at it being the lead single from his eponymous album. But Warner Bros. insisted, and he relented. “Thank goodness they talked me out of my stupidity,” he says. Released in May 1982, the song hit number 32 on *Billboard* and was hailed by critics as being one of the year’s best.

“It’s a really cool record,” Crenshaw says. “When it comes on the radio, I don’t change the station.” When asked to name a song of his that causes a different reaction, he laughs and says, “That’s a detail I’ll save.”

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