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TONY IOMMI

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INTERVIEWED: The Hard-Ons, Small Town Romance, Pixies, The Jesus Lizard, Ceres, Semantics, Chimers & more

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CONTENTS

INTERVIEWS

- 06 The Hard-Ons
- 10 Small Town Romance
- 11 Semantics
- 12 The Jesus Lizard
- 14 Sarah Carroll
- 16 Kristin Hersh
- 17 Chimers
- 16 Ceres
- 54 Pixies

FEATURES

- 20 Tony Iommi
- 36 King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard
- 42 The Smashing Pumpkins
- 48 Slipknot
- 56 Gretsch Duo Jets

REGULARS

- 04 News
- 78 Hot Gear
- 83 Studio Tips
- 98 Power Tools

LESSONS

- 64 Technique: '70s funk
- 60 Linkin Park
- 64 U2

REVIEWS

- | | |
|---|--|
| 87 Shure SM4 Home Recording Microphone | 93 Katoh Hispania |
| 88 Fender American Ultra II Stratocaster | 94 Epiphone USA Collection Coronet |
| 90 Yamaha Revstar Element | 95 Line 6 Pod Express |
| 91 Cort Modern Black & Abstract Delta | 96 Vox V846 and Real McCoy Wah pedals |
| 92 Gretsch Electromatic Pristine Ltd Jet Single-Cut with Bigsby | 96 Laney Black Country Customs Ironheart-LoudPedal & Lionheart-LoudPedal |





CORT TAKES A LEAF OUT OF STRANDBERG'S BOOK AND BEGINS ITS TRUE TEMPERAMENT EXPERIMENTS WITH THE KX700 TT

Cort Guitars has tapped into the magic of True Temperament fret design with its latest electric guitar, the KX700 TT.

Having previously featured on Strandberg guitars at the request of Aussie maestro Plini, True Temperament frets work by fine-tuning the intonation of every note without impacting its playability. As a result, you get wavy, Salvador Dali-esque frets that, like a piano, are tuned one note at a time.

Crafted with Swedish stainless steel for rugged resistance to wear and tear, the wonky frets sit atop a five-piece roasted maple and walnut neck. Navigating the fretboard is made easier thanks to Luminlay side dots. The neck pairs with a sleek and dramatically contoured mahogany body, while an ash top adds some visual appeal and a little more brightness to its full, resonant tone.

As is becoming commonplace on many Cort guitars – like its Sleep-Token-on-a-budget-KX508M – active Fishman Fluence Modern humbuckers deliver a versatile tonal palette thanks to its multi-voiced system. That, says Cort, delivers “delicately crisp cleans to powerfully overdriven sounds.” Additional coil-splitting comes via a toggle switch.

Other choice specs include a Schaller Hannes six-saddle bridge to further assist in the guitar's laser-accurate intonation. Cort-branded locking tuners look to ensure there are no tuning slippages while this thing is shredded into the stratosphere. Check out cortguitars.com for more info.

Words by Phil Weller

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JOHN FRUSCIANTE'S FIRST-EVER FENDER SIGNATURE GUITAR IS HERE – AND IT'S A \$20K CUSTOM SHOP REPLICA OF HIS ICONIC 1962 STRATOCASTER

Fender has painstakingly replicated John Frusciante's legendary 1962 Stratocaster for its latest Limited Edition Masterbuilt Custom Shop signature guitar drop. There have been plenty of iconic Strats across the decades – Gilmour's Black Strat, Eric Clapton's “Blackie”, and Rory Gallagher's own 1961 model, to name just a few – and Froosh's own heavy relic'd sunburst model is comfortably up there with the lot.

Perhaps the main electric guitar from his entire collection, the '62 has been afor tracking – and bringing to the stage – a huge assortment of the band's biggest hits. A foundational aspect of both Frusciante's heralded guitar tone and the wider RHCP sound, the 1962 model has become deeply synonymous with its influential owner – and now, at long last, it's been reproduced by Fender.

You may recall that rumours of a Frusciante signature Strat began circulating in May last year, after Frusciante was spotted playing a replica of his original model. More than a year later, a hugely anticipated signature version of the Strat – which marks Frusciante's first-ever signature Fender – has finally dropped, but this isn't your regular US-made signature, nor is it a more affordable Ensenada-made spin-off.

This is very much a top-of-the-line Custom Shop replica created by Senior Masterbuilder Paul Waller. As such, it commands a hefty price tag: US \$20,000, to be precise. That expense is reflected in the level of detail that's been applied to this replica. As Fender stresses, it “spared no expense” in recreating every detail of the source material, from the dings and dents on the headstock and neck, to the heavy aging of the sunburst finish. For more info, visit fendercustomshop.com. Words by Matt Owen

KNOTFEST RETURNS TO AUSTRALIA IN 2025 WITH SLIPKNOT, A DAY TO REMEMBER, POLARIS AND MORE

Slipknot will headline the Australian leg of Knotfest when the festival returns in February, alongside heavyhitters Babymetal, Polaris, Slaughter To Prevail and A Day To Remember, among others. The tour will stop in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. Other acts include Within Temptation, Enter Shikari, Hatebreed, In Hearts Wake, HEALTH, Miss May I, Vended and Sunami.

Slipknot's headline slot is part of the group's 25th Anniversary Tour, which is billed as “a unique set drawing heavily from their 1999 debut”. Guitarist Jim Root told us in August that he's been dusting off older guitars for the tour. “I have these guitars that I used back around the time we were playing on and touring the first album,” he said. “I still have a few lying around that I haven't gotten rid of. It's fun to do since we're kind of doing this throwback thing, so I said, ‘I might bring some of these guitars with me.’”

The 2025 Knotfest will also see the return of the Knotfest museum, which is described as “an immersive exhibit from throughout Slipknot storied history complete with instruments, memorabilia, wardrobe and personal never seen before items.” No sideshows have been announced, but if the 2024 Knotfest is any indication, we'll see a few pop up early next year. In the meantime, tickets will be available at knotfest.com/pages/australia.

Words by Shaun Prescott



#161

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ENERGY AND IRREVERENCE FOR EVER

HAILING FROM PUNCHBOWL NSW, LEGENDARY SYDNEY PUNKERS **THE HARD-ONS** CELEBRATE THEIR 40TH ANNIVERSARY THIS YEAR WITH THEIR 15TH STUDIO ALBUM - THE THIRD WITH YOU AM I FRONTMAN TIM ROGERS AT THE MIC. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR CAUGHT UP WITH FOUNDING MEMBER PETER BLACK TO TALK HISTORY AND SGS.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** PHOTO BY **JO FORSTER**

Currently powering through their 40th year as a live act on the back of their 15th studio album and their own band documentary, while including Prime Minister Albanese as one of their fans and Henry Rollins as a past collaborator, the Hard-Ons haven't wavered from their punk rock ethos of musical energy and creative independence. *I Like You A Lot Getting Older* is their latest release, and their third album to feature current lead singer and longtime H.O.'s fan Tim Rogers of You Am I fame.

Rogers was chosen in 2021 by co-founding bassist Ray Ahn in a successful attempt to highlight the poppy melodies intrinsic to the group's approach. Some of the album's sweeter singles, such as 'Buzz Buzz Buzz' and 'Ride To The Station' hark back to their iconic 'Motörhead meets The Beach Boys' sound - a journalistic phrase from 1987. At the same time we're reminded of their muscular rhythmic interplay with songs like 'These Days Are Long', which sounds like a suburban Aussie take on Norwegian black metal, while 'Doesn't Look Like Me At All' is a one-minute blast of classic hardcore. Musical variety is an important creative factor for the Hard-Ons. Their

insanely prolific songwriter, co-founding guitarist and former lead singer Peter Black, AKA 'Blackie', is fond of bands whose unpredictable albums take their listeners on a journey, and the Hard-Ons try to do the same with theirs.

Around the time of their debut show at the Vulcan Hotel in Ultimo in 1984, the rock acts whose records had left indelible marks on the adolescent minds of Ahn and Black included The Sex Pistols, KISS, and The Beatles. They had met their co-founding former lead singer-drummer Keish DeSilva two years prior. First joining the Hard-Ons in 1982, DeSilva went on to be an integral part of the band for eleven years while singing behind his kit, before the group's four year hiatus from 1994-1998 (he rejoined between 2016 and 2021). Front End Loader's Peter Kostic was their drummer from 2002-2011, before current drummer Murray Ruse joined the group in 2021.

Ahn and Black are of Korean and Croatian descent, respectively; DeSilva is Sri Lankan. As Ahn and Black explain in the trailer of director Jonathan Sequeira's *Hard-Ons: The Most Australian Band Ever* documentary, their ethnicities often caused extreme

racial problems for them in Sydney's metropolitan pub punk scene, to which they toured from their suburban home of Punchbowl. "From the first gig, everyone's like 'I can see you...you're not like us'", Ahn explains. "Fuck off back to the west and take your fucken flanno with ya", Black declares, mimicking the type of the reactions the Hard-Ons used to receive in Sydney's CBD. In a current age that's a bit more progressive, it's great to know that the Hard-Ons have now sold over a quarter of a million albums, with their latest clocking in at #5 on the ARIA new releases chart. A string of 17 consecutive #1 hits comprise the rest of their current ARIA history as one of the most successful indie bands from Australia, one with a worldwide fanbase gained after years of relentless touring. Australian Guitar had a reflective chat with Black.

40 years of the Hard-Ons is a pretty big milestone.

Yeah, it's pretty cool.

You still have the same band name you guys

chose when you were teenagers. How long did you see the group running for when you started in 1982?

I always thought I was going to do it forever, because I love music that much. I'm not really the type of guy to plan things and think, 'I want to be around 40 years later'. I just wanted to go, go, go. No planning. With the name, we were maybe 15 or 16 years old when we came up with it, so it's childish. We went to a boys school, so we were pathetic at communicating with women. We were pretty much taking the piss out of ourselves. We were punks. We never thought we were going to make it in the mainstream. For us, it didn't matter what we were called, as long as we were amused by it, and we thought our parents would be shocked by it.

It's great that you guys are still finding ways to challenge your listeners expectations. Do you consciously think about how you're going to push boundaries with new songs, or does it happen organically?

Very organically. We're still active music lovers. We didn't stop buying records, so we've always had a taste that's veered from Motown to Pig Destroyer. I love it all - a lot of prog rock, disco even. I'm re-discovering some of the stuff that I was really snotty about when I was a kid. With whatever idea I get, I gotta respect it, and give it a listen in my head. I'll fool around on a guitar if I think it's worthy, or hum it into my dictaphone. If I listen to it a couple of days later and I still dig it, then I'll go into my mini studio and start fooling around on a guitar. We're definitely not out to challenge our listeners, but at the same time there are some bands that do the same record 20 times. I guess we're just trying to be exciting and valid, in our own way. It's a cool thing to put a record on and think, 'I'm on a journey'.

This is the third Hard-Ons album with Tim Rogers in the fold. With his background in You Am I, who are more of a pop-rock band, do you think that continuing to co-write with him has changed the sound of the Hard-Ons at all?

We always thought we were a pop band with extreme punk leanings, hardcore and metal every now and then, but not too often because that's [my other band] Nunchukka Superfly's territory. Because Tim's voice is so strong, when we do the pop stuff it's way more emphasised, because it's performed way better. As far as being more consciously pop, that's quite possible, because you always want to work with the band's strength. Tim's harmonies, melodic ideas and flourishes are fucking nuts.

When you start to write a new song, seeing as you have three different outlets you could put new songs into - Hard-Ons, Nunchukka Superfly and your solo career - when do you realise that a song you're writing is a Hard-Ons song or a solo song? Do they have a certain quality about them?

It usually tells me straight away where it wants to go. When I'm coming up with ideas in my head, they're already finished. A lot of times, I visualise myself already up on stage, smashing it out. While I'm fantasising about the stage, I look around and go, 'oh, it's John, I guess this is a Nunchukka song'. Other times, I'll sort of think about it and go, 'fuck, I wanted to do this solo, but I should give it to the Hard-Ons'. It's normally really obvious.

So you actually visualise yourself playing the finished song on stage with a band?

Sometimes, in a way. It seems to help. We can't jam as much as we want to anymore, because of work and families. A lot of times, I'll have to mesh the songs up in my head. It does help if you get a little bit visual. It helps the audio component of it come out. You get images that come with you, as your brain goes non-stop.

This latest Hard-Ons album is another collaboration with Lachlan Mitchell from The Parliament Studios in Leichhardt, where you guys worked on a few of your previous albums as well. What is it about the space and working with Lachlan that keeps drawing you guys back to do new Hard-Ons albums?

I just think he's awesome. He's really quick. Because we always have the tightest budget, we go in massively rehearsed, and we don't dilly-dally. We normally finish a record in five to eight



"WE'RE DEFINITELY NOT OUT TO CHALLENGE OUR LISTENERS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME THERE ARE SOME BANDS THAT DO THE SAME RECORD 20 TIMES. I GUESS WE'RE JUST TRYING TO BE EXCITING AND VALID, IN OUR OWN WAY."

days. His drum sounds are sick, as well as the separation [between instruments]. When you're on a good thing, you stick to it.

It's good to hear The Hard-Ons are still coming up with heavy moments. With 'These Days Are Long', who wanted to do that as a black metal track with blast beats?

Probably Murray's. I gave the guys four short, sharp, fast tracks, and Murray liked that one the most. It was Tim that did the black metal harmonies on the chorus. A good group effort.

You have 'Doesn't Look Like Me At All', a one minute hardcore song, then you've got 'Pushover', which is like six minutes of shoegaze. It's a mixed bag, that's for sure.

That's one thing I think of when I think of the Hard-Ons - variety.

The bands we grew up with were doing the same kind of thing, for the most part. Obviously there were bands like the Ramones and Motörhead who kept one kind of flavour, but did that really well. Bands that we really dug, like The Beatles, had albums that went all over the shop, and I love that. Being called the Hard-Ons and not being mainstream has made us never have to think about what people want from us.

The way the new album lines up with the documentary and the tour is a special thing to be happening in the year of the Hard-Ons' 40th anniversary. People have tried to make films about the Hard-Ons before, but Jonathan Sequiera succeeded not long after his Radio Birdman film.

I really like Johnno's work. I love the Birdman doco, so I think we're in good hands.

I'm sure a lot of things about touring have changed since the early days. Do you still get ready for a tour in roughly the same way that you used to?

Yeah, rehearsing the shit out of it, while always wanting to play new shit. I hate going out on a tour with an old set list - it's dull. At the same time, I'm conscious of people coming to see the band that might have a few old favourites, so you mix it up. When we were younger, we didn't have as many responsibilities, and we could tour for months. I remember a couple of tours for which I put my shit into storage, lent someone my car and fucked off overseas. Nowadays the tours are always really short. Rarely longer than three and a half weeks.

You're a Gibson SG guy. Is that your main recording and touring guitar still?

I've got three SGs. I use two constantly, and they're both beautiful guitars. For acoustics, I've got a Maton. It's beautiful. It sounds like honey.

Why do you love SGs?

Well, Ed Kuepper from The Saints had one, Brian James from The Damned had one as well. Obviously, Angus Young. There were loads of bands I loved that had SGs. When I started playing one, it was the tone, the versatility, the feel. An SG through a [Marshall] JCM800 just sounds incredible. A classic rock 'n' roll sound.

So when we look at old Hard-Ons albums, like Dickcheese, is there a lot of SG stuff on those albums?

Yeah, it would've been.

So it was from early on.

Very early on. I reckon I bought my main SG around '87-'88.

You should get an endorsement, Blackie.

I wish. It's getting harder these days.

I can imagine.

If anyone's out there listening, and they're authorised to do that, hit me up. 📞

The Hard-Ons' I Like You A Lot Getting Older is out now. The documentary The Most Australian Band Ever is directed by Jonathan J. Sequiera.

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POSTCARDS MADE PUBLIC

WITH THEIR NEW ALBUM *HOME FIRES*, TWO KIDS, AND TWO NOMINATIONS FOR TAMWORTH'S GOLDEN GUITAR AWARDS AS NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS, **SMALL TOWN ROMANCE** ARE EVOKING SUBURBAN FAMILY LIFE THROUGH AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY-FOLK MUSIC. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR JOINED THEM FOR AN AFTERNOON CHAT.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **EM JENSEN**

A chance meeting and a surprise gig booking were the motivation that Small Town Romance needed to establish their foundations back in 2013. First emerging out of Melbourne's acoustic folk and bluegrass scenes as a cover band, their decision to adopt a country sound sprung from an urge to showcase the Telecaster talents of a guitarist friend from Texas. It wasn't long before Flora Smith and Jim Arneman wrote the nine original songs that made up their 2016 self-titled debut, which paved the way for an evolution in songwriting that can now be heard on *Home Fires*, eight years later.

Existing as a loose concept album about the current realities of Smith and Arneman's shared life as married parents, *Home Fires* is bookended by its title track and 'Ordinary Life', a direct recognition of domestic responsibility. It's also peppered with snapshot stories of restless souls, such as the young thrill seekers in 'Wild Boys' and the hedonist examined in 'Piss Fit'n Boogie'.

Musically, the album traverses a generous array of styles, from sparse acoustic numbers such as 'Festival Town' to the full band honky-tonk of 'Piece By Piece', by way of the subdued, sunny Tex-Mex of 'Cut & Run', enhanced by Smith's button accordion playing.

These are songs that echo the long miles and changing landscapes of their outlooks on life - a refined songwriting style reminiscent of the work of Arneman's famous grandparents, Slim Dusty and Joy McKean, along with his mother, fellow country singer-songwriter Anne Kirkpatrick. Recorded at Brunswick's Union Street Studios by producer-drummer Roger Bergodaz (The Cruel Sea, Neil Murray), an important ethic of not overcooking songs helped to guide the project and keep lyrical impact undiluted. Australian Guitar discussed origins, instruments and the zen of songwriting with Small Town Romance.

How did you meet?

Flora Smith: Not until our mid-20s.

Jim Arneman: Yeah, mid-20s. I moved from Sydney to Melbourne, and was trying to start a band in Melbourne. That's when we crossed paths. Flora was in

a folk duo, and I was in a folky bluegrass band. We saw each other's gigs and met that way. A few years later, we started Small Town Romance.

So you met and became friends, then decided to write some songs together, and made the 2016 debut?

FS: Well actually, we had a friend of ours who kept saying - because we'd sing together and play songs, but we had separate musical projects - 'you guys should do something together'. Then she said, 'I've booked you a gig'.

JA: 'Come up with a band name, you're playing next Saturday'. That's the start of this band. We were given a gig.

FS: But to be honest, we both work well to a high pressure deadline. We're procrastinators. That also explains why it took us eight years to get to our second record.

JA: Our first gig was in September 2013 [in Melbourne]. Since then, the band's been through -

FS: - A lot of iterations in terms of lineup and music. We're the only two people left.

I heard you guys are married, and there are references to parenthood in your new album's last song, 'Ordinary Life'. You're parents now?

FS: We had two kids in between the first and second album, which goes some way in explaining the delay between albums. In opening with 'Home Fires' and closing with 'Ordinary Life', there's a lot of restlessness in the songs, but with 'Ordinary Life', there's also resignation, acceptance and appreciation. That's the trajectory of the album, and of the big shift in life that we've had in the last ten years or so. We wanted 'Ordinary Life' to close the album, because although there are all these flights of fantasy and portraits of people who are a bit unsettled - especially in some of the songs that Jim brought in, like 'Festival Town' and 'Piss Fit'n Boogie', 'Ordinary Life' is a kind of acceptance of how lucky you are.

JA: I haven't thought about it like that. It's a concept record.

I noticed a nice lead solo on 'Piece By Piece', which sounds a bit like Luther Perkins or Duane Eddy. Who was responsible for that?

JA: Michael Hubbard, who's a producer in his own right. He can pull a tone that's very reminiscent of a particular genre or player. For a lot of the stuff he's playing with us, he's on a Strat, but he's able to pull a lot of different tones for different songs. In 'Wild Boys', he got the baritone out. He's a restrained player.

There are pieces like 'Cut & Run' and 'Festival Town' that have more of a zydeco feel with your button accordion, Flora.

FS: Yeah, absolutely. That Tex-Mex style of accordion. I started playing accordion when I was living in Texas for a short time. It's a really great instrument with a live band, because it can act as a rhythm and a lead instrument and it's got a lot of energy. It's a versatile instrument.

This album also has more pedal steel in it than on the debut.

FS: We've got both Shane Reilly and Ben Franz.

JA: Shane's -

FS: - more orchestral.

JA: Yeah, he's [from] the Sun Ra, sonic freakout [school], so he always comes at a song with an interesting take.

FS: He's a great arranger. He also uses different registers of the instrument to great effect.

What guitar were you playing in the recording of this, Jim?

JA: Just acoustic guitars on this record. If I wanted a lighter rhythm, I've got a 1973 D-25 Guild, which has some super light strings on it. That's good for strumming when you want texture, but if you want something a bit more meaty for fingerpicking, I was on a Gallagher. I've also got a 1966 D-35, which is a go-to as well, for fingerpicking.

Do you play guitar as well, Flora?

FS: A little bit. I've got a 1927 Martin tenor that a friend found at a garage sale, and spent some money on, fixing it up.

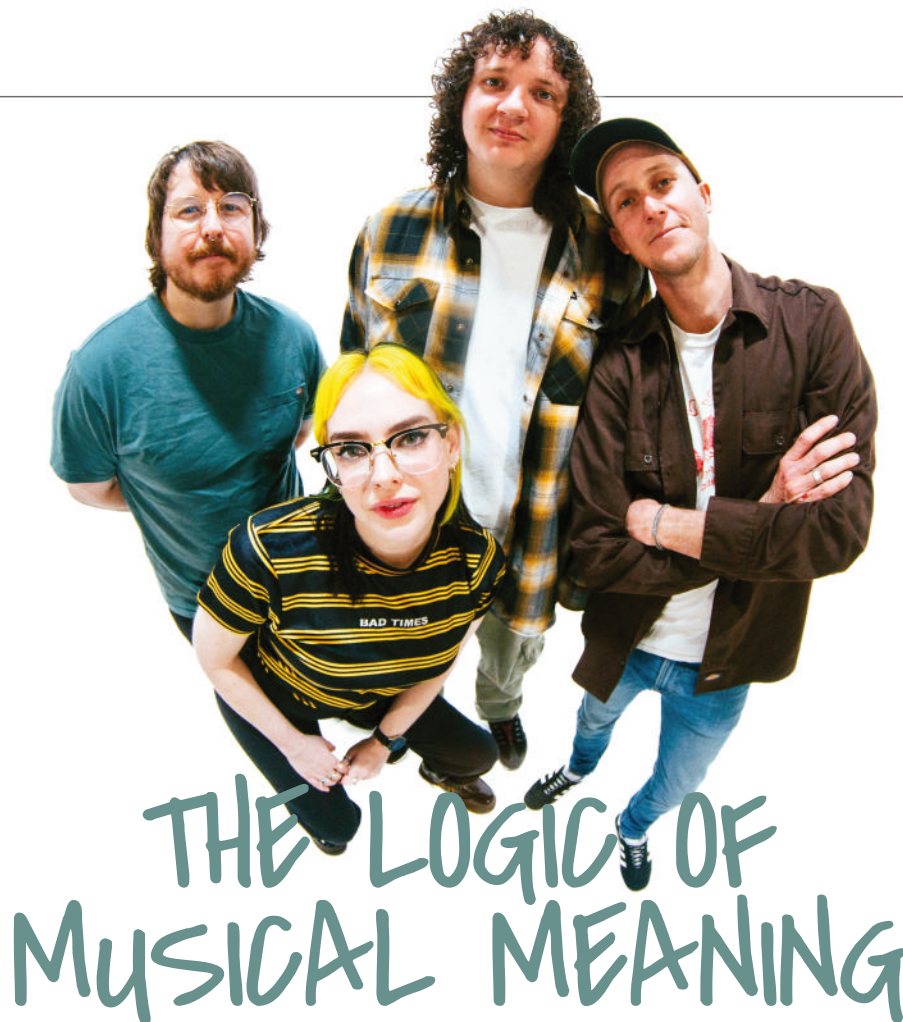
Did you ever talk to your grandparents, Slim Dusty and Joy McKean or your mum, Anne Kirkpatrick, about music, Jim?

JA: Yeah, endlessly. Always talking about music, listening to music. I just love songwriting. Slim had pretty broad tastes, he listened to a lot of American country music. Stylistically, he took a lot of cues from American country acts through the different eras. He introduced me to Buck Owens, Waylon Jennings and George Jones from his record collection, when he used to live in St Ives in Sydney. Mum introduced me to country rock like The Flying Burrito Brothers and '70s singer-songwriters like Jackson Browne. The foundation was Australian bush balladry. Another big thing that came from my grandparents was a love of poetry and verse. Slim would often just recite something out of the blue. He had this amazing head for lyrics.

FS: Slim passed away before I met Jim, but Joy was an incredible craftsman in terms of how she wrote songs. She had incredible rigour in everything she did. From Joy I really learnt that you have to keep editing, as songs can usually be better.

JA: Any sort of good writing takes time. You need time to reflect after a first draft. That's really important. 🗣️

Small Town Romance's *Home Fires* is out now.



ENHANCED BY PASSIONATE PLAYING AND SHARP SONGWRITING, BRISBANE INDIE-ROCKERS **SEMANTICS'** SECOND ALBUM *I FEEL IT ALL AT ONCE* MAINTAINS THE PUNKY POWER THAT PUT THEM ON STAGES WITH BEDDY RAYS AND LUCA BRASI. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR LAUNCHED AN EXAMINATION.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **HARLEY JONES**

It took Brisbane punk quartet Semantics four recording sessions to finish their sophomore LP *I Feel It All At Once*, so it's no surprise they're stoked and relieved. They were similarly stoked after the release of their 2022 debut album, *Paint Me Blue*, but as lead singer-guitarist Callum Robinson and guitarist-vocalist Zac Robertson tell Australian Guitar, the production of the songs didn't quite measure up to how it sounded in their heads.

In order for the group to find the right sound of the album on their second LP – the one they'd envisioned for the first – they decided to take matters entirely into their own hands. After setting up, recording and editing everything themselves at Robinson's Twin Sound Studios, Semantics then sent the digital stems of vocals and instruments down to Press Club's Greg Rietwyk for mixing in Melbourne and further on to America, where the songs were mastered in Oregon by Kristofer Crummett (Sleeping With Sirens, Dance Gavin Dance). Their efforts paid off: this album sounds huge. It draws its lyrical inspiration from good and bad times, with strong themes of yearning for life changes, motivation, and new adventures. Robinson and Robertson explained the antics of Semantics with Australian Guitar.

All tracks on the new album are credited to Semantics. Did the band write all the tracks together?

Zac Robertson: Yep. There were ones where the seeds of songs would start from an individual, but it's always been a team exercise. We got pretty good at it by the

end, learning how to work together and make some cool art together.

Were people bringing in various lyrical fragments and melodies as well?

CR: Yeah, lyrics are the hardest part.

ZR: Lyrics and melodies come right after all the drums and bass and guitars have been put down. We need that foundation. We evoke what we're trying to say musically first, then we bring in the words later.

There are some pretty noticeable themes emerging through these tracks. 'Brown Snake Blues' and 'Lake Arragan' both signal a yearning to get away, to find new places. It's a pretty cathartic album. Would you agree with that?

ZR: For sure. We all really love Brisbane, and we've been here a long time, but it can definitely feel like a small place at times. We've all had those moments where we've wanted to get away and reset, then come back and fall in love with it again.

CR: Even though it sounds like it's localised, lyrically and thematically, like a Brisbane vibe, it's not just that. On a poetry or art level, the point of those types of songs transcends geography. They're more about the idea that no matter where you are in the world, you've probably had a period where you lived somewhere and had enough of it.

To touch on guitars, do you have some new axes in your arsenal?

ZR: Yeah. At the moment, I've pretty much only been

playing a DeluxeTone Cosmopolitan. They're these boutique guitars built by a guy up on the Sunshine Coast [Lake MacDonald]. I knew him in high school; he was a biology teacher there. Then he went into guitar building. They're amazing handcrafted, hand-wound guitars. They're his own designs, made out of Paulownia wood. I can't recommend them enough. It was my guitar on the album.

CR: They weigh nothing, but they sound huge. I was playing a '50s-style Les Paul Standard from 2020. It has Grover's PAF pickups. Just a solid piece of mahogany. That's what I did most of the recording on. I've been pairing that with my 2009 Mexican Jazzmaster. Those are my two guitars. The Les Paul is doing all the rock and roll, dad rock, power chord stuff. The Jazzmaster is doing the more nuanced kind of stuff on the album.

Honing in on the album, when did the writing start and how long did it take?

CR: We started two or three years ago, technically. It began with demos that were works in progress when we were making the first album. This went right up until we were recording. It was a constant process the whole time.

ZR: Yeah. It took us a few tries making this. We recorded it four times.

Wow.

ZR: We were really critical of ourselves in terms of how we were amping or mic'ing things.

CR: We hired in three different drum kits.

ZR: It was a real challenge to finally get it done. There's an overwhelming sense of relief in this room, now it's done and we're actually getting to talk about it. We put everything into it.

CR: I was hell-bent. I'd set a goal post. Did you hear the album *New Ruin* by The Flatliners? It's a recording and mixing masterpiece. It's what rock music should sound like. Sonically, it's perfect. It set the bar very high. When we heard *Paint Me Blue*, we loved that album so much, but we had kind of imagined the songs being a bit bigger. That was a production thing – us not going into enough detail, in my opinion. So, I just went down this rabbit hole of not stopping until we had the correct sound.

When did the fourth recording session occur and how long did it take?

ZR: The end of January. Well, we all went through the previous sessions making this. We were doing it, like, two days a week or a couple of weekends whenever we could fit it in with work. That obviously wasn't the recipe for success because if the album wasn't happening, it wasn't getting finished. So we all blocked off two and a half weeks away from work. We came here every day from sunrise till midnight and did nothing else. It was awesome, but also hell at the same time.

CR: First week was fun. Second week was not fun.

ZR: We've got a very small control room, but it's great, and we had something really awesome at the end of it. That's the main thing.

When you're recording, are you all live in the one room looking at each other?

CR: It's dubbed. We'll do live demos and rehearsal demos. We get tempos correct to make sure the click track feels right for every instrument, then it's a process of layering. First, we do the drums, then the guitar stems, and then the bass. After that, we add the proper guitars, then vocals. Finally, we include the tambourines, the acoustics, all that other stuff.

ZR: We dialed in a triangle on this album.

CR: Don't think it made the cut.

ZR: Took us ages to get it. 🐢

Semantics' I Feel It All At Once is out now.



CRAWLING TO THE LIGHT

IN ONE OF THE MOST SURPRISING COMEBACK STORIES OF THE YEAR, **THE JESUS LIZARD** RELEASED A NEW ALBUM, **RACK**, AFTER A QUARTER-CENTURY OF SILENCE. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR GOT SPUN OUT.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** PHOTO BY **JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS**

After nearly 30 years out of the spotlight, avant-garde hard rockers The Jesus Lizard released their seventh album *Rack* in September. Their last studio album *Blue* released 26 years ago, at a time when COVID-19 and AI technology were 20 years ahead. In other words: it's been a long time between drinks.

Grown from riffs gathered over the past several years and enhanced by the unpredictable vocal catharsis of savage frontman David Yow, *Rack* proves that time has added more idiosyncrasy to The Jesus Lizard's performance style. What Yow calls the "stupidly disgusting and equally hilarious" American political climate over the past eight years has given him sufficient creative ammunition for stoking a handful of *Rack*'s new songs - songs created in the age of Donald Trump, whereas *Blue* was recorded when Bill Clinton was president.

Back in the Reaganite landscape of 1987, the Jesus Lizard were undergoing their earliest evolutions out of the DIY punk scene of Austin, Texas, home to the Butthole Surfers and M.D.C. Yow and David Wm. Sims, The Jesus Lizard's longtime bassist, both came from the ashes of Scratch Acid, a wild rock quartet initially active from 1982-1987. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Austin, classically-trained guitarist Duane Denison (who has since intermittently worked with Mike Patton's Tomahawk) had asked Yow if he wanted to play bass on some songs he wanted to record, before Yow suggested Sims as a bassist, cementing The Jesus Lizard's origins as a trio. Like Big Black and The Mark Of Cain, The Jesus Lizard's first beats were provided by a drum machine on their debut release, the *Pure* EP, before Mac McNeilly was recruited on kit in 1989 to first showcase his hard-hitting abilities on their debut album *Head*. In September 1990, after moving from Austin to Chicago to keep working with producer Steve Albini (Big Black, Shellac), The Jesus Lizard recorded a sophomore effort which many fans believe to be their crowning achievement - *Goat*.

The Jesus Lizard is back in the saddle again with an album that harks back to the rawness and simplicity of *Goat* and *Liar* and the focused clarity of 1996's *Shot*. *Rack* was released on September 13 through Mike Patton's Ipecac. It brings eleven tracks of energetic, eccentric rock, though not without its sparser, eerier moments. "We got lumped in with 'noise rock' but I never got that", Denison stated recently. "When we play songs, they have arrangements and lyrics, [but] there's a resurgence going on right now in aggressive, noisy rock music". Australian Guitar spoke to Denison about the recording of *Rack* and the sonic journeys of The Jesus Lizard.

What prompted the group to get together again?

We'd been playing shows intermittently since about 2009. We went around the world, we didn't come to Australia, but we'll have to fix that. We've played intermittently in 2017, 2018 and 2019. I just wanted to have some new songs to play. Sketches and ideas just sort of accumulate over time. We just started making demos and working on it, and next thing you know, we had an album.

Was the band bouncing ideas around online, or were you sitting down in person and fleshing things out?

A little bit of both. Mostly it's myself or David Sims, the bass player, coming up with basic riffs and ideas, and then we share it at our practices. Sometimes we'd make recordings first. In those days, we would make cassettes and say, 'hey, listen to this', then next time we'd get together, we'd start working on it. Then we'd be familiar with the key, the tempo and the vibe of the song. This was a little different. We're in a different era

of technology, so we send each other files, because we all live in different cities - New York, Nashville, Chicago, Los Angeles. We sent each other files and familiarised ourselves with things, then when we got together, we would work out the final arrangements and get some vocals going.

When you tracked *Rack* in November last year at Audio Eagle in Nashville, were you using big amps like Hiwatts, or something smaller, to get your tone?

We were using big live stuff. I used a smaller Hiwatt for a couple of things, a Little J, but Patrick Carney had an eye-popping assortment of gear. He had vintage Marshalls Plexis and Fender Bassman heads, then we'd run that into 4x12s, and they sounded incredible. With bass, there were various Ampeg and GK cabinets spread out. We used big, loud live stuff.

I think that comes through on the album. I've been digging tracks like 'Swan The Dog', 'Alexis Feels Sick' and 'Is That Your Hand?'. They definitely slam with as much impact as stuff from *Goat* and other earlier material. That volume translates well, I think.

I think there's something to be said for almost overloading a microphone in front of a speaker cabinet, that's cranked and moving air. You get a tone and it hits that diaphragm in a different way. Though, I did use a little bit of digital modeling here and there. I'm not a purist. I like tube amps and all that, but the digital stuff is pretty good too.

There's a really cool clean tone on one of the slower tracks that's a bit sparse, it almost sounds like chimes or a xylophone.

I think you're talking about the song 'What If'. It's a very atmospheric song. It started off with a straightforward, clean signal, then with a very wet optical tremolo, it switches. Then there's a brief section that's way distorted, where I used the Third Man Records + Mantic Flex Pedal, a Jack White pedal. Most of the sounds were from the good old Line 6 Helix. I've tweaked my bank of sounds to make them sound the way I want them to. I use that a lot, as well as a good old fashioned TC Electronic G-Force and the Third Man Mantic Flex.

So these are also used to get heavier tones?

For the heavier tones, most of what you're hearing is coming from the amps, maybe with a touch of an OCD-like pedal, or something similar.

I love how the bass is almost as prominent as a lead guitar part. I think bass has always been crucial to the sound of The Jesus Lizard.

Absolutely. There are some spots where the bass takes over a section of a song, and it goes back and forth. It's almost like a reduction of an orchestra, where you want the low end instruments to pull and push things along, maybe more so than in a traditional song based group, where the bass is just thumping along in the background.

What were the main axes you used to track *Rack*?

For several years, I've used these EGC guitars from The Electrical Guitar Company. Those are all aluminium, neck and body. I have my own model with them, called the Chessie. A lot of the album was with the Chessie. I also used a Fender Uptown Strat, part of their Parallel Universe series where they did different mash-ups of different things. The Uptown Strat is like a cross between a strat and a Les Paul. I used that on a couple of things. I also used a Taylor T5z acoustic-electric hybrid, to get more articulate, acoustic sounds on 'Swan The Dog'.

Those were the main three. Live lately, I've been playing a Powers Electric A-Type model. It's from a new company, a division of Taylor.

I suppose all the pedals you used on *Rack* were new. Were any used on the sessions for *Blue*?

No. When The Jesus Lizard first started, I was so broke, and the shows were often so chaotic, that I didn't use any pedals. For years, I just plugged straight in. I gradually started using TC Electronic pedals, then their 2290 Digital Delay system, and then their G-FORCE. The G-FORCE was a main thing for a long time. In Tomahawk I used that a lot, then I got turned onto the Line 6 Helix by Bill Kelliher from Mastodon. There's so much in the world of pedals now. If you spend all your time tweaking, you don't spend enough time writing or practicing. I think too many options in sound is worse than having too few, because you spend all your time tweaking, listening and second guessing yourself. To me with rock guitar, every period has its own sounds, but there are some that never seem to go away. That's kind of what I stick with, with occasional flashes of new colours here and there. I think too many sounds dilutes the message you're making.

You've worked with two very iconic vocalists in your time, David Yow and Mike Patton, but in what main ways do you think David's voice has noticeably changed, in the 25 year gap between recording *Rack* and *Blue*?

He almost sounds younger to me. Some of the stuff he did on this album reminds me of things he did in Scratch Acid. For some of the songs on this album, his pitch is quite high, which is unusual. Usually as vocalists age, their pitch goes down, and they can't hit high notes anymore. Well, he never hit them in the old days but now he can hit them. He's a bit more gravelly, but not much. He's done some different stuff over the past 25 years, but he hasn't worn his voice out because he wasn't a full time singer. For some of the people he worked with, he actually made it a point to try and study a little more and work on being in key, along with tuning and timing. His voice sounds great.

Did the band track *Rack* mainly live in the one room, or were you doing overdubs onto rhythm tracks?

We made that in pretty much the same way that we've done all the albums. We track together live guitar, bass and drums in one room, with the amps in different rooms, sealed off so that they don't bleed into the drum microphones. Some of the vocals were live as well. Some got kept, some weren't. Then we went back, listened to the takes and picked the take. We didn't do more than two or three versions of every song, then we picked the take that was the keeper. If anybody had to fix anything in the basic tracks, we'd do it right then while the same sound was dialled up, one or two little things, sometimes, or none. We did all the songs then focused on the final vocals and the final guitar overdubs, just like how we always did.

It's good to know you guys were recording in the room, because it sounds alive and vibrant. It jumps out of the speakers.

Thanks. Yes, it was a very organic process. It's funny, when we first started the producers had suggested that we use a click track and put everything to a put it on a grid. We went halfway through one song, but it felt like everyone was wearing a straightjacket. We didn't need to do it that way so we turned it off. We can maybe have a click set the tempo, and then shut it off. Mac will drive the bus from there, and we'll play just like we've always done. 🎧

The Jesus Lizard's *Rack* is out now.



GUTS, GROOVES & GRIT

SHE'S HUNG OUT WITH PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE, FROM TEXAN LEGEND KINKY FRIEDMAN TO OUTBACK INDIGENOUS KIDS, BUT LIFE'S CONSTANT CHANGES KEEPS **SARAH CARROLL** TRAVERSING NEW GROUND IN HER SONGWRITING, AS HEARD ON HER LATEST ALBUM, *NQR&B*. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR SHONE A LIGHT ON HER CAREER.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **LARS PEDERSEN**

Melbourne-coastal roots figure Sarah Carroll utilises her straightforward songwriting style to explore grief and change in her fifth solo album, *NQR&B*, released earlier this year. The first three letters of its title stand for 'not quite right'. This represents the way Carroll was feeling for five years after the death of her longtime life-music partner, renowned blues musician Chris Wilson (solo, Paul Kelly and the Coloured Girls) in early 2019. With the courage she gained through living through the effects of this massive change, Carroll's songwriting was emboldened with the strength to confront more tough issues head-on, while trying to see a lighter side at the same time.

After all, in her 30+ year experience as a musician with past experience as a teacher, mentor and carer, the ups and downs faced by Carroll have resulted in a generous selection of dark to light songs born from a recording career of nearly two decades - from 'Crying At Midnight' (2008) to 'Ukulele Bitchfight' (2011). Over the many years in which she's practiced her craft, Carroll has collaborated on records with Shannon Bourne (The Black Sorrows, Chris Wilson), Dan Warner (Weddings, Parties, Anything), and Marcel Borrack, a collaborator with David Thrussell from Snog. She also collaborates with her two son, Fenn Wilson - a solo artist in his own right, and George Wilson, who provided all the drums and bass on her previous album *Star Parade*. Notable new songs from *NQR&B* include 'Haunted Highway', inspired by a dream encounter with her late husband's spirit, and 'Try To Get It Right' - "a little song about big mistakes", as Carroll describes it.

When did you first start writing the material on *NQR&B*?

About ten years ago, maybe even longer.

Are there any songs on your latest album that almost didn't make the cut, or any that you saved?

I guess, yeah. There were a few songs I'd had around for a while. I hadn't decided on the approach I wanted to take with them in my previous albums. I felt like these albums all hung together really nicely, and served as an autobiographical collection from the last decade of my life. They encompass a lot of the ups and downs and the growth that I've done, and the confidence that I have now to say the things I probably wouldn't have had the guts to say in the past. The courage I've developed over the last few years has helped me to stand behind the songs that might not have made it onto previous records, because I felt they exposed me a little too much, or were a bit too raw still at the time. With others, I needed to actually have the experiences first to make the songs real. All the songs come from different experiences and have either filtered through different people's lenses, like collaborators, or have found their shape through being played live.

How long have you been playing live with your sons Fenn and George, and who first came up with the idea of playing and working together on stage?

Well, it goes back a ways. I think George first did a stage invasion at one of Chris's gigs at a festival that we'd played at for years. He was probably about

seven at the time. He'd been coming to that festival since he was a baby, and he'd been dying to get on stage as soon as he understood what was going on. So, he got up behind Chris and Shannon and was doing this skateboard trick act, unbeknownst to Chris and Shannon. Not long after that, he and Fenn started joining us on hand drums at little acoustic shows we'd do around town. Fenn started playing drums with Chris that way and later moved on to a full kit when he was still quite young. George and I started working together in earnest when he was 16. I'd asked him to come record my previous album, *Star Parade*, with me. Originally, I'd wanted him to play drums, but he ended up playing all the bass and a bunch of other instruments, too. He proved himself to be totally capable. Then he came on the road with me and we did a national tour on that album back in 2017. Fenn was involved in that as well. I would use Fenn on drums if I could, or another drummer, but Georgie played the bass on pretty much all those shows. This all happened in their mid-teens. We just asked them if they wanted to come and do it. If they hadn't wanted to, they would have been able to say no, but luckily, they were enthusiastic. Since then, Fenn played in a punk blues trio with Chris and Shannon, who played their last show in March 2018. When we were locked down in Victoria during COVID in 2020, the kids were here at home with me and we started doing videos of songs that we liked. We actually got some paid work out of it, and people started donating money to us. That was the first experience I had of playing with both the kids and singing with both of them. It was really fantastic.

So, with recording *NQR&B* at Big Fridge Studio near Geelong, was this your first time at Big Fridge, or had you been there before?

Yeah, I made an album in 2019 called *Medicine* there. That was my first experience working with Jasper Jolley at his studio. I made 'Haunted Highway' there in 2022, and I used that as a bonus track on this latest release. I'd released that song as a single a couple of years ago. The other technician involved is Isaac Barter, who mastered and did quite a lot of mixing on *NQR&B*. I recorded some vocals with him. Isaac's about the same age as Fenn—he's around 30—but he's already got heaps of amazing work under his belt. Those two young guys are great allies, really wonderful collaborators.

With your experience settling in as a drummer for Tin Stars - from being a front woman to being back in the rhythm section, how's that change of perspective been for you?

It's really cool. I love it. I play in a few bands where I'm not the lead. In fact, in most of the bands I play in, I'm one of several lead singers. I love the side-person role as much as the front-person role. Drumming, to me, is like being a goalkeeper in soccer. You're up the back, you can see everything, you're driving it, controlling it, but you're not the person being looking at. There's a certain kind of gleeful power about it to me. I've always loved drums, always wanted to play them. So I'm very grateful for the opportunity I've been given by Tin Stars to do this. It's been great fun. I actually just produced an EP for this band, and it's out now. I'm really proud of what we've all done on it. But I'm particularly proud of my drumming, because I really didn't know if I could do it. It's not perfect, but it's spirited, rocking, and appropriate. It's a great new adventure for me. 🥁

Sarah Carroll's *NQR&B* is out now.

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CULT AMERICAN MUSIC ICON **KRISTIN HERSH** RELEASED HER LATEST SOLO ALBUM *CLEAR POND ROAD* LAST SEPTEMBER, AND EARLY NEXT YEAR SHE'LL TOUR IT DOWN UNDER. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR ENTERED HER ORBIT.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **PETE MELLEKAS**

Born in Atlanta in 1966, Kristin Hersh started writing songs at age 12 when she formed her longest-running band, Throwing Muses. When she was 16, she began hearing music differently, after being hit by a car while riding her bike. Reflecting on her early days, Hersh described her accidental gift like so: "sounds would alter their sonic vocabulary until I was hearing syllables, and drums, then all these words would come".

She was first compelled to craft songs from mental fragments by taking apart pieces of songs that she heard in her mind. A while later, after these resulting songs had made up the debut self-titled 1986 release by Throwing Muses, she learnt that "inspiration is chaotic". With Hersh as primary songwriter and producer, Throwing Muses would go on to release nine more studio albums, while Hersh formed her noise rock band 50 Foot Wave in 2003 and wrote four memoirs between 2010 and 2021.

Hersh finished the latest Throwing Muses album on October 17, the same day she spoke to Australian Guitar from the US. As she explained, its "immature" tone contrasts with the "delicate" and "mature" sounds of *Clear Pond Road*, her latest and eleventh solo album, released in September last year. Hersh wrote its songs alone at night or in the early morning among a few 'palmetto bugs', AKA cockroaches, in her family's shotgun shack in New Orleans, before realising they didn't sound like 'shotgun roach songs'. The "mad scientisty" approach Hersh took to refine and deepen them later bore stellar new tracks like 'Palmetto' and 'Ms Haha', which will be re-explored live during her upcoming tour of Australia early next year. From a living room floor in America, Hersh's wisdom enlightened Australian Guitar.

I've heard you don't think about who might be listening to your songs. Is that still true for you?

Yeah. I liken [the music releasing process] to grief because you have to let go of that focus that reminds

you why you're here. That sounds really vague, but for me, it's everything. It's where I understand what life is, and how to make it beautiful. What happens immediately after you leave that music planet is the opposite of music. It's self-consciousness instead of selflessness. This is an industry that runs on vanity, and music is a soul practice. It's so hard to walk away from that world where everything can be made right and into this one, where it's colder. I'm really shy, so I'm not attached to anyone hearing it.

Do you come up with new songs on the daily?

Yeah, I could. It's a door that I open occasionally. It's so intense. When I started hearing music, I knew I didn't belong in the music industry. I just wanted to crawl into a van with my friends and make this noise I was compelled to make. They seemed to like it, and audiences seemed to like it. Eventually I ended up on Warner Brothers Records. That's a different world.

A process of energy conversion into songs—from glimpses of things you experience—ties deeply into your work. It's a really interesting way of writing, and it seems to give your songs a rich mood. At what point in your solo career did you start honing in on this process?

It was soon after I fought my way out of my corporate contract. I traded my first solo record [1994's *Hips And Makers*] for our contractual freedom from Warner Brothers. That escape gave us a new fiery energy. It was a party, because we were flipping off corporate America. I understand that marketing is effective in this population, which has been marketed to since they were toddlers. I realised I could shake off the beast that results from that kind of disrespect for the listener. It's so anachronistic and ridiculous. It took a while for me to shake off the impression it left: people hate each other. If you're gonna publish what you do, you should love somebody. Eventually, that's what happened. It was more fun.

With your latest solo album, *Clear Pond Road*, when did you realise you had a new album on the boil?

Most of the songs were written during COVID, which I spent in New Orleans. I lived through a hurricane down there and lived in a shotgun - a New Orleans house where it's just room after room, all in a row. It's called a shotgun because you could shoot someone in any room from the door. When we lived in this shotgun, I would get up in the middle of the night or really early in the morning and write songs in the kitchen. We have cockroaches in New Orleans, but we call them palmetto bugs so it sounds exotic. Nobody knows we have cockroaches. When I got back up to my studio in New England to record the songs, I realised they didn't sound like 'shotgun roach songs'. They sounded very mature, and delicate. They're bell-like. It needed balls. The songs have balls, so I had to reflect that in the tone. There's baritone guitar on it, and then optimised baritone, which is deeper than balls.

Seeing as you always produce your music yourself, this must give you lots of creative freedom, right?

It's very mad scientisty. Even on band records, it's all me just messing around all day. It's incredible that I have a lot of freedom, but music's a bitch goddess. I'm compelled to do this and it's maddening. Every juncture is a problem to be solved, and you never know if the next problem is unsolvable.

When a new Aussie tour comes up, do you look forward to it?

Coming down to see y'all is my favourite. You guys are the best. Yet, like I said, I'm really shy. I'm not really cut out for the performing part of what I do, except that I have total focus. That's what I offer. As far as the visual goes, I might as well be typing up there. I'm not a performer. I'd rather be working in the studio, building mad scientist instruments and hiding, but music's supposed to be given away.

Your fingerpicking is really intricate. When you suddenly switch to strumming, it's a surprising change of dynamics. I can hear all the practice you've put into that.

Yeah, the dynamics are big with me. People find it off-putting. Even the set itself is dynamic, given that I'll tell a stupid, funny story and then start screaming.

I take it you're happy with how *Clear Pond Road* turned out?

Yeah, I am. It's a little more adult than I am as a person. It sounds mature, like I said. I was very surprised. My new Throwing Muses record makes up for that, because it's really immature.

Then you can crank your amp up and let it rip when you're playing with 50 Foot Wave.

I've got all that stuff going on whenever I feel like it, which is nice. It's a different sonic spectrum, and it calls for different songs. When I'm in a moment of inspiration, I know which guitar to reach for. If it's the Les Paul or the SG, it's a 50 Foot Wave song. If it's a Collings, it's solo stuff. If it's Muses, it would be my Tele or my Strat.

It'd be cool to see you live in a band setting with electric guitars.

That's my home. 🎸

Kristin Hersh's *Clear Pond Road* is out now. Hersh will tour Australia in February and March 2025; tickets are available at troubadourpresents.com.

CHIMES OF FREEDOM

CHIMERS IS A GUITARIST-VOCALIST FROM KILKENNY AND A DRUMMER FROM WOLLONGONG. THEIR POST-PUNKY, SHOEGAZING GARAGE GOODNESS HAS REACHED A NEW EVOLUTIONARY STEP IN *THROUGH TODAY*, THEIR SECOND ALBUM. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR LIFTS ITS LID.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **PHOTO KATELYN SLYER**

Using the boredom of a locked-down nation as the impetus to push for exciting new directions in garage rock music, married couple Padraic Skehan and Binx took to their jam room and created Chimers from the humblest of beginnings in 2020. Riff-based and raw, their self-titled 2021 debut merely hinted at the collective power of Chimers' dual minds and eight limbs.

The tracks on their 2024 sophomore album *Through Today* were recorded in three days at Wollongong's Stranded Studios (owned by Party Dozen's Jonathan Boulet). Binx' drums and Skehan's guitars were recorded live along with half of the vocals, before guitar overdubs, more vocals and extra instruments (saxophone and violin) were laid on later. After pulling off their first arduous foray into playing live on a midweek half-capacity gig at Wollongong's La La La's with Space Boys - "people were sitting there eating sandwiches", Skehan explained - Chimers kept working the east coast circuit before picking up gigs with Mudhoney, The Mark Of Cain, Tumbleweed, Pist Idiots and the Hard-Ons. Looking back on Chimers' career arc, which has seen them evolve their band from bedroom recorders to the stage of The Metro, Skehan explains, "we didn't know what the hell we were doing...we just said, 'let's just keep going and see what happens'". Australian Guitar celebrated Chimers' surprising rise with Skehan.

Chimers was birthed in a Wollongong backyard in lockdown times, I believe. 2022 was it?

2020. Right in the thick of it. Because it was lockdown, we couldn't go to work. We were in two different bands at the time. I'm a drummer as well, technically. We were both at home. Playing music was something to do, apart from walking the dog and gardening. We're lucky enough to have a jam room. That was the start of it, and it got momentum quickly, for the two of us. We still had to go through that whole weird post-COVID gig stuff, you know—50% capacity, sitting down, all that, but with the two of us it felt easy and productive. We just wanted to do something that could happen quickly. We'd been jamming for a couple of months when we went and recorded our first seven-inch. We pressed that ourselves, did a lathe cut, and put it out. We had those for our first gig. We'd played half a dozen gigs by the time the album came out. It was not the usual way of doing things. This album is more of your tried and trusted path - playing a bunch of gigs, building up, then putting a record out. So this is kind of like our first album, in a way.

Was Chimers always going to be a duo from the get-go, or did you ever think of expanding the band?

No, because it had momentum. We don't have a WhatsApp group. We've got a jam room at home, so there's no outside coordination. We don't need to message anyone about anything. It means our album stuff, like mixing and artwork decisions, can happen almost instantaneously if we agree on stuff. Sound-wise, I've never really felt the need to expand with extra members or anything like that. It's all there. I enjoy working within those boundaries.

So, when you were coming up with the ten new songs that ended up on *Through Today*, being a drummer yourself, with Binx on the kit—how does that rhythmic understanding play into the

I don't really know exactly what I'm doing. I'm not trained or anything; I haven't had lessons. I guess it's just about what sounds good to me. With funny chords, it's literally just about putting my fingers somewhere. If it sounds good, I go from there. It's all standard tuning. I don't use alternate tunings. I rarely use barre chords because I feel they choke the guitar too much. I'm conscious of keeping things wider. I like blending heavy bass notes while ringing out the rest of the guitar.

If you've only got a melodic instrument and a percussive instrument in the band, then you can go anywhere on the neck.

Yeah, I mean, I remember having an absolute 'Guitar For Dummies' moment when I realised I don't actually need to be constrained. I can tune the bottom E to whatever I want. It actually doesn't matter because there's nothing else there.



Seeing as you don't have a bassist, do you bring up the low end EQ-wise on the amp, or do you ever split tone through a bass amp and a guitar amp?

I've never used a bass amp because I find that it gets too muddy. I like that tight bass sound, so I did have that '70s Bassman amp, but I got sick of how heavy it was. I sold it and bought one of those new Tone Master Super Reverbs. It's got the 4x10 speakers, so you get that really crisp bass sound. It's basically a combination of that and something that's running pretty hot, like a Hot Rod Deluxe. I've also got an old '60s Australian Vadis amp that I use, which breaks up really nicely. Most of the time

I can use a clean boost with those two, and that will do the job.

Is that kind of the same way you go about it live?
Yeah, 100%. I didn't change anything for recording.

What were the main axes you used to record *Through Today*?

I just have two that I rotate through, depending on the situation. I have a Gibson SG Junior. It's like a 2011 '61 reissue with a single P90, that I use the majority of the time. The other one is a '75 Greco. It's a TV-500. It's basically a Les Paul Jr. double cutaway. Same thing, single P90. I just wanted the same guitar twice, basically. They're interchangeable if I break a string at a gig or whatever. I haven't really gone into different guitars for different tones or anything like that yet. That's down the road, for sure.

Chimers' *Through Today* is out now.

creation of new music? Is it often a riff first and then the drums, or has she ever come up with a beat that you've found a riff for?

I'm trying to find that more, because I like it when Binx comes up with a drum pattern and I play off that. It feels more spontaneous. Most of the time, it's me coming in with a riff, and then we go from there. Sometimes, I've been playing it around the house for a week or two before it gets to the jam room, so Binx is already familiar with it. Then she's able to jump on right away. 'An Echo' might've been a beat-first song, but most of the time, it's riff-first.

One great thing I've noticed on the album is the contrast between chords, and the way you use dissonance. You'll put in a chord that's quite jarring, and then the tension resolves into a more uplifting chorus. How do you go about adding those odd or dissonant chords into your songwriting?



A SPRAWLING, DEEPLY PERSONAL WORK THAT TOOK FIVE YEARS TO COMPLETE, **CERES'** *MAGIC MOUNTAIN (1996-2022)* ARRIVED ON OCTOBER 5 TO RAVE REVIEWS. AS THE BAND PREPARE TO TOUR AUSTRALIA'S SOUTHEAST EARLY NEXT YEAR, AUSTRALIAN GUITAR CLIMBED THEIR CONCEPTUAL HEIGHTS WITH LEAD SONGWRITER TOM LANYON.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON** | PHOTO BY **DEATHPROOF**

Like their astronomical namesake caught between planetary orbits, Melbourne emo-rockers Ceres (pronounced 'series') were caught between the tiring tour cycle of their ARIA-charting third album *We Are A Team*, released in 2019, and the creation of their fourth. Despite never announcing a hiatus they slunk into the shadows, releasing no new music and refraining from gigs until this year. During this time their lead singer and second rhythm guitarist Tom Lanyon was nestled up in the Dandenong Ranges, trying to start a family with his partner in the same scenic bush that provided the backdrop to his childhood.

Driving his car down roads he used to cycle on as a boy in the early '90s, a wealth of memories came flooding back, leading to new songs. A memory from 1997, of overhearing a firefighter say that a bushfire was "coming over the top of magic mountain" became the inspiration for a new song, '1997', and the title of Ceres' new double album, *MAGIC MOUNTAIN (1996-2022)*.

The years noted in the album's title have a deeper meaning, as they signify the period of time between Lanyon's pivotal teenagehood to the year in which he finished writing the album. When Lanyon was about to sign off on a far-shorter, happier version of the album, he became wracked with anguish after his partner suffered a miscarriage. Shortly afterwards, he recorded 'Holly Hill [Store Est. 1920]' in one take. Its new tone commenced an exploration of grief, anger and confusion that informed the album's second half. Towards the end, '1996' emerges as a pep talk of sorts for Lanyon, before a resolution is reached with the lo-fi closer 'viv', named after and featuring the voice of the first child that he and his partner birthed. Now back in Melbourne, Lanyon revealed his soulful process in a candid chat with Australian Guitar.

You're based in Victoria - I believe the 'magic mountain' in question is in the Dandenong Ranges?

That's right.

So the fires on 'magic mountain' happened in 1997?

They did. That was the whole impetus of the record. I used to live up there with my mum and my brother when we were kids. We grew up there, then when I moved back, I had this memory when I was driving around three years ago, when I remembered how we got evacuated for these fires. I remembered seeing flames, a fire truck and a firey saying, 'oh, it's coming over the top of magic mountain'. I hadn't remembered that for 20 years. I ended up going home and writing '1997', which was all about the fires. That was the start of the first half of the record.

A funny coincidence happened when I heard '1997' - I was driving through Blackheath in the Blue Mountains listening to this song, one named after my birth year, when I saw a plume of smoke from a 340-hectare back burn in the next town. I stopped on a hill to take a photo and then kept driving. The next line I heard you sing was, "there's a fire top of magic mountain".

Wow. That's my dream, for you to listen to that record and have a transcendental moment.

I felt like I was living in the song.

That's sick. Sorry to jump straight into shit, but I always need a reason to write a record. I keep writing songs, but a theme of a record needs to come out, because for every record I've ever done, I don't know what it's going to be about. Originally '1997' was going to be called 'Magic Mountain'. That was the

song title, but then again, I feel like title tracks put too much pressure on songs. So I was like, 'maybe we'll call this '1997', but we'll call the record Magic Mountain. That encompasses my childhood and it was where I was living, so the record revealed itself. After that, heaps of songs were coming my way due to nostalgia in the place I grew up, because I was living there again. I had all these stories bubbling away that I hadn't thought about for 20 years. That's the first half of the record. Then some bad shit happened, but I kept writing.

Does the '1996-2022' in the album title represent the period of time between your childhood to the finalisation of these songs?

Nailed it. That's it. 1996's the year before the bad luck started, kind of thing. Then when you get to the end of the record and you hear the song '1996', it kind of loops back to the song '1997', near the start. I liked that circular notion, so I thought putting the dates in helped explain how vast the subject matter is. We Are A Team was a snapshot of 2018, whereas this is thinking about stuff when I was so young. I thought it was cool to have that date range in there.

There seems to be a thematic focus on thinking about a want for something versus a need for something, as referenced in the title of one of the singles. How did this theme become important?

The 'want' part was definitely about wanting a family and a child, for sure. I wanted that for my partner as well. There's a yearning there. In every Ceres record, I ask the universe rhetorical questions. Sometimes they're not rhetorical. In a verse of the new song '666', there's a line - "Who the fuck am I?" That's what I've been trying to figure out ever since I started the band. The music is a way for me to find answers. There's this constant want to figure things out and get answers to my questions, but I can only answer them myself—and I don't know the answers. There's this unspoken yearning in everything.

What are the main guitars that you're liking right now, to record our tour with?

I'm not a gear guy. I just play Telecasters, basically. A friend of mine, Rhys [Vleugel], who used to play in the band before leaving around 2016, makes all my guitars now. He has a small guitar company called OK Guitars. He makes amazing Fender-style guitars, mostly Telecasters and Jazz models. Every guitar I had up on the mountain was from OK Guitars. I have two Telecasters and one Jazz-shaped guitar, plus he made a bass for me. Before that, I was using a Cole Clark acoustic, which I love more than life itself, and a small Taylor Mini, which I write with. Previously I was just using Fender Telecasters. There's a Ceres sound that we realised Rhys puts in OK Guitars - for the pickups, there are two [Gibson] Dirty Fingers at the bottom, and there's no lighter, jangly version. It's this big heavy Ceres sound. We like it a bit crunchier, and I'm so bad with my gear. I'm breaking stuff all the time. There's just a volume pot—no tone control. I can barely tune a guitar. The simpler the better - less shit to break.

Was it a good experience to get back into the live scene after your time away?

It was really dope. I hadn't done it for so long. It felt like a different life. I hadn't sung into a microphone on a mic stand in five years. I couldn't remember how to play half the songs. After plugging my guitar back into my tuner and playing two songs, it felt amazing. It was so good to be back. Now I'm really excited. I can't wait to get out there. 



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WORDS BY
AMIT SHARMA

PHOTOS BY
OLLY CURTIS

LORD OF THIS WORLD

In a career now stretching close to six decades,
BLACK SABBATH mastermind

TONY IOMMI

has laid down the groundwork for all kinds of heavy sounds, ultimately changing the world one riff at a time. In this issue's cover story, he takes us through the unimpeachable majesty heard on Sabbath's first six records, his gear choices — old and new — and what he's been working on since Sabbath called it a day





**“AS FAR AS
NEW GEAR
GOES,
THE KEMPER
HAS BEEN
WORKING
VERY WELL
FOR ME
IN THE
STUDIO”**

HE'S BEEN GIVEN MANY NAMES OVER THE YEARS.

Some call him the Iron Man. Others see him as the Master of Reality or the Hand of Doom. One thing everyone seems to agree on, however, is that heavy metal was first conceived in the mind of Anthony Frank Iommi — the man who famously lost two fretting hand fingertips while working at a sheet-metal factory in Birmingham, England, and decided to carry on after hearing about gypsy jazz pioneer Django Reinhardt's road to recovery.

Iommi's innovations in Black Sabbath would not only prove to be influential on the sound of the genre in its most classic form, but would also spawn many of its offshoots and subgenres, from the doomy discordance of the self-titled track that opened their debut to the groove-metal thunder heard on the chromatic riffs of "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath" and the proto thrash of "Symptom of the Universe."

Then there's the more progressive side of his playing, exquisitely documented by lesser-known deep cuts like "Megalomania," "Spiral Architect" and "The Writ," where the bold stream of consciousness seemed to laugh in the face of musical boundaries and choose to follow no calling but its own. In that sense, his stature as the original and definitive metal riff lord often can feel like a double-edged sword; a well-intended acknowledgement doesn't quite do justice to the wide breadth of his genius in full. To put it bluntly, Iommi's influence on guitar playing and wider culture as a whole goes far beyond the obvious.

There's a famous quote attributed to punk rock icon Henry Rollins: "You can only trust yourself and the first six Sabbath albums." Some say the comment was made about the first four records (not the first six),

but either way, there's a comforting truth in such a notion. The Ronnie James Dio-fronted years were mesmerizing in their own way, and there were certainly creative victories on later conquests with Tony Martin, and an honorable mention definitely goes to *13* — the 2013 Ozzy Osbourne comeback that would serve as their artistic farewell — though between 1970 and 1975, Black Sabbath were quite simply untouchable. Iommi and his bandmates changed the face of music forever, to the point where even 56 years after their formation, you'd be hard pressed to find a heavy metal band that doesn't owe them a colossal sense of debt.

The group called it a day in 2017 and are now spoken of in the past tense, though their fearless leader has soldiered on with ventures new. There's been a slew of reissues spanning each and every era of the band, not to mention a photo book and his own aftershave line with Italian company Xerjoff, where fragrances have been promoted by the release of a new track. The latest offering, "Deified," combines screaming wah-wah leads with gothic orchestration and medieval menace. Given how it would so easily sit on the soundtrack for a horror movie, it's very much business as usual for this metal master.

"Yeah, I agree, it would work nicely for a scary movie!"

he says, talking on a warm summer's day from his home in Poole on the south coast of England. "I do like that sort of stuff and always have. But I still feel like I'm experimenting and trying out new things. My approach to music has always been about venturing out a bit and pushing myself further."

That concept of pushing himself further also can be attributed to the gear he's used on these latest recordings, which includes the 2021 track "Scent of

Dark." For someone who has built a career out of plugging Gibson SGs into Laney amps, it comes as a surprise to hear the metal innovator talking about digital gear — proving that it really doesn't matter who you are, what you sound like or what generation you're from; the quality of amp simulation in the modern age is something that just can't be ignored.

"These latest songs were done in my studio," he says. "I either used my Jaydee guitar or my main Gibson SG, possibly both. The guitars were going through my Kemper Profiler. I've also got a Laney plugged in over there, so it could have been a mixture of the two. I have to say, I really like the Kemper. It was my producer Mike Exeter [*see sidebar*] who introduced me to it a while back, and I was very impressed. Especially because you didn't need to have all the speakers mic'd up; you could sit with it next to you in the control room. Mike sampled my Laney tone, and then we improved on that a little bit. I've found it to be very useful. And the sound quality is incredible; it can actually be quite hard to tell the difference between the Kemper and a real amp. Of course, I do like being in a room with a head and cabinet, just to get that bounce back from the speakers. But as far as new gear goes, the Kemper has been working very well for me in the studio."

How's the next solo album shaping up?

There's definitely something coming. When it will be here, I do not

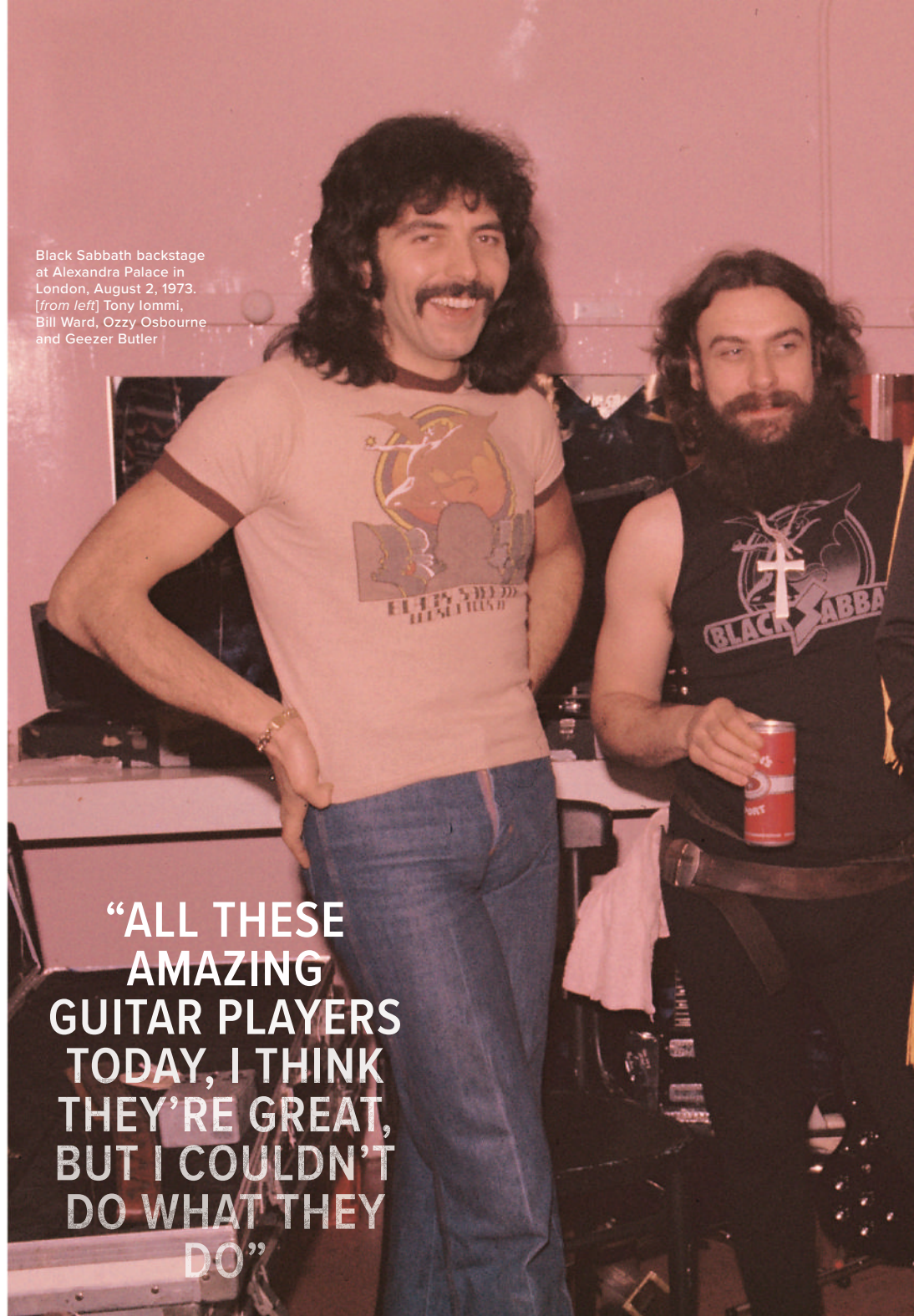
Tony Iommi, photographed at The Lygon Arms, a hotel in Worcestershire, England, January 7, 2020. "I still feel like I'm experimenting and trying out new things," he says

know. *[Laughs]* I won't put "Deified" and "Scent of Dark" on the next album. Those are separate things for me. The tracks I'm working on right now are a mixture of styles from acoustic to heavy stuff. There's a variety. I haven't picked out exactly what I'm going to do with the songs or who I'm going to use or whatever yet, but I've recorded quite a few ideas. A lot of them have been done at home. The next thing we're going to do is put some drums on, so it's coming along.

I'm just taking my time with it. I can only work on the new music on certain days because I've got other stuff on. I tend to work on a Monday and Tuesday with Mike Exeter. We'll go in and focus on a particular track while also fiddling around with sounds and whatnot for other stuff. It's been an interesting process, juggling lots of different ideas. My studio is at the house in *[West Midlands village]* Broadway. Here in Poole I don't have a studio. We're not down here enough to use one, really. We just come down for a few days and go back. Then I will pick things up at the beginning of the next week with Mike.

Other than the Kemper, what's the last piece of gear that impressed you?

Mike gets sent things for me to try, as did Mike Clement — my old guitar tech *[who passed away in 2022]*. Things would get brought over and I'd say, "Oh yeah, I like that one." But most of these things are very similar. I must have hundreds and hundreds of pedals at home. I'll try them and think they sound good but also realize they sound a lot like something else I've already got. Finding something unique is actually quite hard. There have been a couple that stood out, though. Anything I think is good gets to stay, and then there are boxes full of things that don't stay. Mike Exeter brought me an octave pedal, the Electro-Harmonix Nano POG, a while back. It sounded really great, and we ended up putting it in my rack. I'm always open to trying things; I love doing that. Recently there was a guy from Mustard Effects who tried to copy my original booster and called it the War Pig pedal. I thought it sounded good. There was one pedal I got sent that did a ghosting effect, a bit like



Black Sabbath backstage at Alexandra Palace in London, August 2, 1973. *[from left]* Tony Iommi, Bill Ward, Ozzy Osbourne and Geezer Butler

"ALL THESE AMAZING GUITAR PLAYERS TODAY, I THINK THEY'RE GREAT, BUT I COULDN'T DO WHAT THEY DO"

my old Laney amp. It was originally made by the cheap transformers and weird circuits in the heads, but this gadget — the Origin Effects Revival-DRIVE *[overdrive]* — recreates that effect really well. I've used it a bit here and there.

Your last major public appearance was at the opening of the London Gibson Garage alongside Brian May and Jimmy Page earlier this year. You and Brian see each other a lot; what was it like reconnecting with Jimmy?

I've seen Jimmy a few times over the years. We've gotten together here and there. He's a really nice guy, I like him a lot. It's fun to talk about what we're doing, stuff that we're working on — we're both from the same era and still creating. We come from the same sort of stable. I don't think either of us are into technical stuff; we stick to what we know, the things that work. The same goes for Brian.

You're all very multifaceted, mixing heavy riffs and aggressive blues with more psychedelic and acoustic influences. It made some headlines when you turned up together.

It is great to hook up with each other. We don't do it enough. Brian and I see each other all the time, but I



don't see Jimmy that much. When I do, we always have a great conversation and enjoy each other's company. It's rare to do that with the people from our generation because they're all popping off. [Laughs] That can make it difficult.

Let's go back to the beginning. You were 17 when you lost two fretting-hand fingertips in a factory accident and got told you wouldn't play again. That is undoubtedly every guitarist's worst nightmare.

Oh, it was awful. I just couldn't believe it, particularly as it happened

on the day I was going to leave the job, which is insane. I'd given my notice to leave so I could join a band and go to Germany. It was a good opportunity. I went in on the last day and that's what happened. It shocked me. I never had any idea something like that was going to happen. I was truly devastated.

And then somebody told you about Django Reinhardt, which must have felt like a ray of light given how much he accomplished after his injuries.

It really felt like that. It was actually the foreman at the factory I worked at. He came over to see me afterwards. He knew I had the accident and also knew the machine was wobbly and faulty. I shouldn't have been on it, really. So he came over with a Django record and said, "Have a listen to this." I was down at the time and didn't want

to listen to anything, but he got me to put it on and I went, "Yeah, it's brilliant." Then he told me the story [Reinhardt suffered extensive burns over half his body — including the ring and little fingers of his left hand — in late 1928], and I must admit it really did help and inspire me to work on a way to play with what I had left.

You were briefly a member of Jethro Tull. What did you learn from them?

That was a strange meeting. We did a gig with Jethro Tull and it was the night Mick Abrahams was either fired or left — I don't know what happened there. I saw them passing notes to each other on stage and thought it was weird. After the show, they asked if I'd be interested in joining, which was really surprising. On the way home in the van, I said to the other guys, "Tull asked if I wanted to join them," and they all told me to go for it. Then I had to come down to London and audition, because there were so many guitar players interested. I walked in and saw all these musicians waiting in line and thought, "Oh no, forget it." But one of the crew saw me and told me to go and sit in a cafe across the road. They fetched me when everyone was gone. I played and they told me I'd got the job. It was quite a different thing for me. A big step in them days. It was a big deal for me to even get out of Birmingham. That's how it all happened. And it certainly was a good experience for me, because I learned a lot about how they worked and how [founding frontman] Ian Anderson would run the band.

And how was that, exactly?

They would rehearse at a strict time every morning at nine o' clock or whatever it was and then break for lunch. It was a bit like going to work, really. In Black Sabbath, we never did that. We'd get together whenever, probably after midday. Those early morning starts were a bit of a shock. It was good to learn about how other people work. If you want a career in music, you've got to take it seriously. That's what I spoke to my guys about. After a couple of things with Tull, including *The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus*, I left

and said to the Sabbath guys, “Let’s get back together — but we’ve got to work at it and put everything we’ve got into it.” They agreed.

You’ve said Hank Marvin and Eric Clapton were your main influences early on. Was there anyone else?

I might have picked up other influences, but I didn’t tend to realize them. As you say, Hank Marvin was the original one, but his playing was worlds apart from what I would go on to do. That was the start for me, though. The Shadows were an instrumental band and I learned to play through their music. Then I went from there to Eric Clapton’s take on the blues and the John Mayall stuff, all of which I really liked. It kickstarted a whole genre of heavy blues players. Mayall put forward a lot of guitar legends, from Peter Green to Clapton to Mick Taylor. After that, I never thought much about influences. You get into the habit of doing it yourself. Everybody starts off by copying their favorite players and learning from them, and then you do your own thing and venture out. Well, some people. Others are happy copying things perfectly and exactly, because that’s what feels good for them.

Jeff Beck was another one of the early British blues heroes. Were you a fan of his work?

Oh yeah, Jeff was great. I met Jeff early on because we had the same manager. He was so different and unique. A truly great player who was just doing his own thing that was 100 percent him. It’s true what they said; nobody could play quite like Jeff.

“Black Sabbath” was born out of your fascination with the macabre. Much of its eeriness stems from that tritone interval. When did you first become aware of tritones — and how did you come up with that riff?

I’ve always been interested in horror films and that type of music. I’m into anything dramatic. We went into rehearsal one day, and Geezer [Butler, bass] was just playing around doing some [English classical composer] Gustav Holst stuff on his bass. I came up with this riff made out of three notes, the second being the same as the first but an octave up. But I didn’t know anything about

the last note being a tritone. I didn’t know what the term even represented, though I knew I liked the sound of it and the feel we got from it. The mood was like what you’d experience watching a horror film. That’s what I related it to while putting the song together.

The faster palm-muted riff toward the end is built off the Aeolian scale. How much were you aware of the modes at this point?

I knew nothing about the modes. I never read music and don’t know anything about that side of it. For me, it’s all about feel and what I come up with at the time. When we did that section, just like everything I’ve ever done, I started playing something and thought, “Oh, I like that.” If I like what I hear, I use it, and if I don’t like it, I won’t. That’s how “Black Sabbath” came about. I knew I wanted the end section to lift up into this galloping idea. I like tempo changes and felt it needed to go somewhere else. For some reason, that’s something that’s just embedded in me. One riff will take me so far, and then I will think about going into a chorus or another riff. It’s what I’ve been doing the whole time.

That galloping rhythm is associated with a lot of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal bands that followed.

Yeah! I can hear how the up-tempo stuff like the end of “Black Sabbath” and “Children of the Grave” affected what came next. It’s almost like this throbbing sort of rhythm. A lot of the bands that came after ended up looking up to Sabbath as an influence, because there were very few of us doing that in those early days. It was just Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and ourselves. The heavy groups that came after went back to the three of us and learned things.

“Sleeping Village” doesn’t get talked about enough.

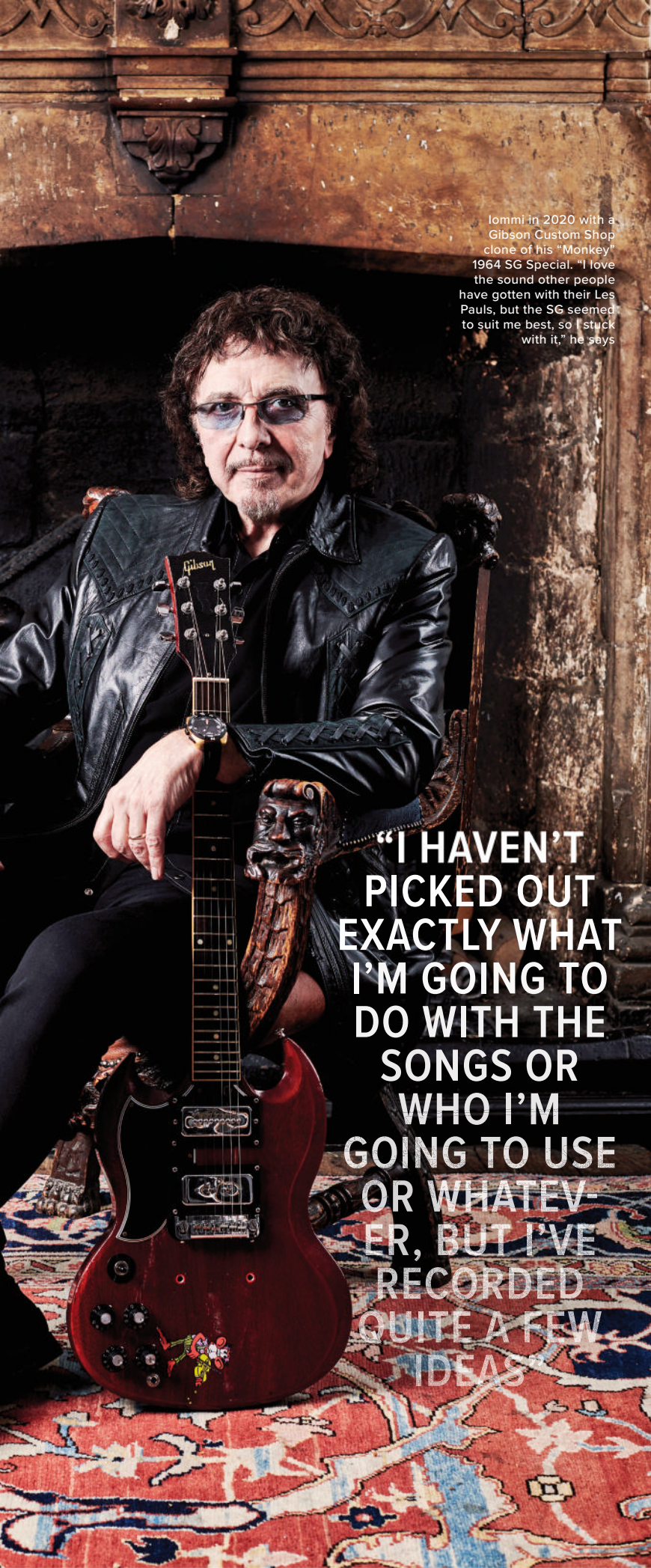
From the nylon-string intro to the meaty Dorian blues riffs and up-tempo layered solos, it’s very experimental — despite your all being very young at the time.

I like mixing different moods and styles. If you have a heavy song, it makes sense to have a bit of a rest and go into something more laid-back, like “Sleeping Village” or whatever. And then go back into something heavy again, just to give it a bit of light and shade. It’s more interesting than having an album stay heavy the whole way through. I like to mix these elements on the albums but also within actual songs, like “Sleeping Village” or “Die Young,” where we drop down to a quieter part. It’s an important part of the way I write.

From what you’ve told us in the past, that first album was made with your backup SG into a Laney LA100BL and a Dallas Arbiter Rangemaster boost. But “Wicked World” was recorded with your Strat, which had a pickup failure during the sessions.

That’s correct. When the Strat went, I couldn’t bloody well believe it. I’d worked on that guitar myself for a long time, getting the fretboard right, the frets down and the feel just how I like it. I needed to do all of that because of my accident. So we went in to make our first album and the guitar pickup went right at the beginning of the process. In those days, it was a big fiasco getting a pickup changed or fixed. It wasn’t like how it is now, where you can go into any guitar shop and someone will be able to





Lemmy in 2020 with a Gibson Custom Shop clone of his "Monkey" 1964 SG Special. "I love the sound other people have gotten with their Les Pauls, but the SG seemed to suit me best, so I stuck with it," he says

**"I HAVEN'T
PICKED OUT
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I'M GOING TO
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OR WHATEV-
ER, BUT I'VE
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QUITE A FEW
IDEAS"**

swap it. Not only that; we only had two days to make the album, one of which was for recording. I had to use my SG, which was the backup I kept on the side. I hadn't owned it long, so I'd never really used it. When the Strat pickup went, I had to pick up the SG. From that day on, I never looked back. I stuck with the SGs. But at the time, I'd only used my Strat in combination with my booster and the Laney. That's what I'd been using to create my sound, so it was quite scary having to improvise with something else.

As you say, you ended up sticking with SGs for your entire career. Why that instead of, say, a Les Paul?

I've always felt the SG is a comfortable guitar to hold. I really like the look of a Les Paul, but with my injuries from the accident, I always felt I couldn't get up to the top frets, almost like my fingers weren't long enough. It didn't feel as comfortable as the SG and it's very important as a player to feel comfortable. I did have a Les Paul later on but I never played it much. They look great and I love the sound other people have gotten with their Les Pauls, but the SG seemed to suit me best, so I stuck with it.

Have you ever been tempted to try out an ES-335, a Tele or maybe even a superstrat?

I think I tried a 335 at some point. But the problem was you couldn't get left-handed ones. I had to get a regular one and turn it upside down, playing it that way. But I never used them much. It was always back to the SG. The only other guitar I really liked was that original Strat, which I wish I'd kept. I can't believe I got rid of it. This was before I knew you could easily change pickups and things. I just thought the guitar had completely had it, so it was time to get rid of it. A big mistake.

How many guitars do you own in total, and which would you say are the most collectable?

I don't really know, but the figure is probably around 70. I've gotten rid of quite a few. Some have gone to the Hard Rock Cafe and places like that, or auctions that are raising money for charity. So in terms of what's left, it's probably around 70 or 80. I only use so many, to be honest. You can have all these guitars but you don't use them. Some might get pulled out now and again, but I tend to stick to about three or four that I use all the time. That's the Gibson SG, which is a replica of my original, and the Jaydees, which were great instruments built by John Diggins. He's passed on now, but he made me a guitar just before that happened, which was a great honor. I have the last guitar he ever made.

The Monkey Gibson SG is probably the guitar you're most associated with. Is that still with the Hard Rock Cafe?

Yeah. I did try and get it back, to be honest. The guy who used to buy memorabilia for the Hard Rock came to England and visited me. He wanted to buy some stuff and I said it should be fine. I'd retired the Monkey SG because it was too valuable to me; I didn't want to take it on the road and risk it getting damaged. He offered to buy it and it seemed like a good idea because the guitar could be displayed for people to see and kept safe, instead of sitting in a case somewhere in my storage. But the deal

was if I ever wanted it back, I could let him know and buy it back for the same price. It seemed fair enough, a good deal. Anyway, he passed away, so that was it. We tried to get in touch with Hard Rock to get it back and they knew nothing about the deal. But they allowed Gibson to go in and take the guitar in order to copy it exactly. They made the replicas; I think we did about 50 of them and I own two of those. I have to say they are exactly like that one I owned and they are what I use in the studio. They have the same knocks and bumps as the original, plus the little monkey sticker. It's the same guitar, basically.

The second album is loaded with hits. Even the lesser-known cuts like "Hand of Doom" and "Electric Funeral" are firm fan favorites. What are you most proud of from that album?

It's hard to pinpoint because I don't really think like that. Certainly, as far as riffs are concerned, there's a lot to like about "Iron Man." I'm proud of how all the different changes piece together in that song. To be honest, I'm very proud of *Paranoid* as a whole. There are a lot of good tracks on that.

The "Iron Man" riff uses power chords built off the natural minor scale. But perhaps the real magic lies in the drag of the tempo you chose to play it in. Maybe it wouldn't have had the same effect sped up. Funnily enough, when we used to play live, we'd slow it down even more. When we went into the studio to do that album, we were so hyped up we were actually playing it a little faster. Then you end up sticking to that tempo because that's what everyone hears on the album. But as we carried on playing it live over the years, it got slower and slower, just to give it more depth and power. That's what you do as a live band. And other songs would end up being faster when we played live. Bill [Ward, drums] would get carried away with the tempo — or I would.

The E Dorian runs in "Planet Caravan" are responsible for getting a lot of metalheads into jazz. How did you go about attacking that one, and what influences were you thinking of?

I've always listened to jazz and would say Joe Pass was one of my favorite players from that style. There's some blues stuff in the mix too. I was listening to the chord movement and thinking to myself, "What does this need and what leads would fit best?" And I'd still happily play in a jazzy style now if the song calls for it. I've always liked jazz. In fact, for some of the live shows in the past we used to do a bit of a jazzy bit. Bill really loved jazz drumming, so we'd incorporated some of that into our show. Even the debut album, "Wicked World" had a lot of jazz going on.

You've mainly stuck with the boost and wah over the years, but the "Paranoid" solo famously features a ring modulator effect.

I remember trying it out and thinking, "Oh, that could work here!" It's so easy to fall into the trap of not experimenting. It's nice to try things out and surprise yourself. If it works, I keep it.

Early songs like "Iron Man," "N.I.B." and "Fairies Wear Boots" have these really melodic vocal-like guitar leads higher up the neck.

I like that stuff because I don't see myself as a technically great player. I prefer to focus on the feel. All these amazing guitar players today, I think they're great, but I couldn't do what they do. It's just not my style. I like to improvise and feel it. What I play might not be technically that hard, but it's the sound I'm going for.

Who was the last guitarist that impressed you on a technical level?

The first one was Eddie Van Halen. When they toured with us early on in their career, I thought he was really good and had come up with something very different for its time. Nowadays you can see how all the technical players have learned from Eddie. The funny thing about him was, much like me, he didn't read music or anything. It was all from feel. He was inventing stuff just using his ears. Some of the guitar playing I hear these days is too technical. You have to be precise on this note or that note. I can't do that — if I do a solo on a record, it's never the same live. I can't reproduce what I did in the studio. I'll do something similar but not exact.

The respect was mutual. Eddie once said heavy metal wouldn't exist without you. It must've been incredible to see him so early on in his career, witnessing the changing of the guard first-hand.

He was great. We became really close friends on that tour, because we went out for eight months or something like that. He used to come round to my room in the hotel, because we'd often be staying at the same one, and we'd stay up for hours talking. It was lovely, and we stayed friends through the years until he passed. He was a great friend, such a nice guy who did so much for us guitar players. I really liked Eddie.

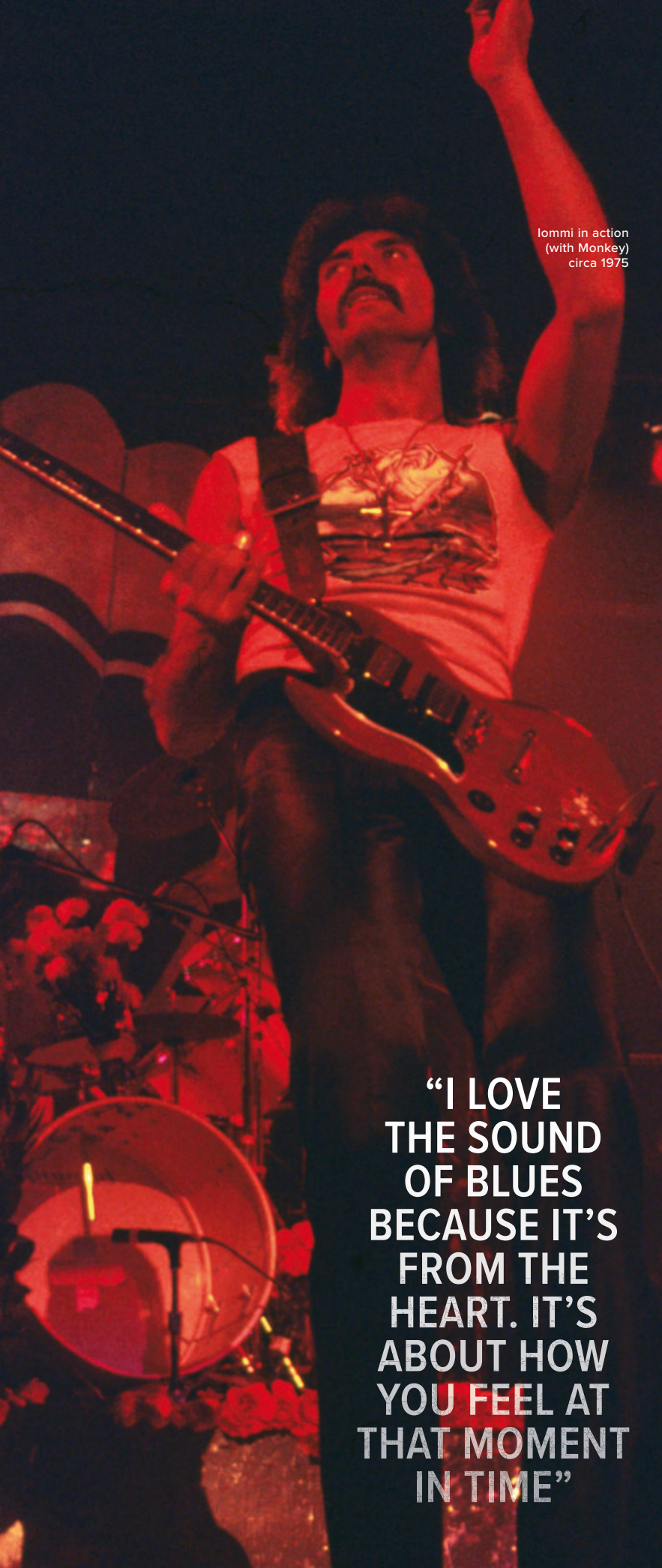
Did you ever get to jam together?

Yes, we did. Van Halen came over to play in England, so he got in touch with me. He was in Birmingham and wanted to meet, but we were rehearsing that day so I didn't think we'd get together. Then I suggested he came to rehearsal and he said he'd love to. So that's what he did. I picked him up at the hotel and we went by the guitar shop so he could bring one along and have a play. It was good. The other guys couldn't believe it — at the time it was the [Cross Purposes, 1994] lineup with Tony Martin, Bobby Rondinelli and Geezer. I turned up with Eddie and they were like, "What's going on?" We all ended up having a play together and it was a lot of fun.

Henry Rollins once described your tone on *Master of Reality* as like "hearing lava." You started tuning down to C# to get more of a sludgy feel, which in turn gave birth to a whole movement of stoner and doom metal.

It did! Again, it came out of experimentation. I've never gone by the book, thinking I have to do things a certain way. I always go with what I feel is right, and quite often that might involve stepping out of the regular thing I'm known to do. I've had such an ordeal with gear following my accident. I made up my own set of guitar strings because the regular sets were too heavy for me. So I got some banjo strings for the first and second, and then dropped the gauge down on a regular set in order to make it lighter for me. That way it wouldn't be so hard for me to





Jimmy Page in action
(with Led Zeppelin)
circa 1975

**“I LOVE
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press down. And then I went to companies asking if they could make me a light gauge set of strings, and they told me “Oh no, that will never sell — they won’t be good and they won’t work!” And I argued, “Well, they do work — I use them!” Of course, years later, you’d have things like [Ernie Ball] Super Slinkys and all sorts of stuff. It’s peculiar, because when I first approached these companies in the early days, they really didn’t want to know. It’s been the same all round for me, even with guitars.

How so?

I went to a company years ago and asked if they could make me a 24-fret guitar and got told they wouldn’t because nobody would use it. That’s why I invested in John Birch’s company. He was from Birmingham and had done a couple of repairs for me. When I asked him about making a 24-fret guitar, he said, “Let’s have a go!” You have to jump out of the box and try stuff. I used that 24-fret guitar for years and then, of course, what happens? Later on guitar companies started making them. That’s what it’s all about, though. You have to come out of the box, experiment and try things.

It’s funny you say that; it was around this period that you started introducing more acoustics and cleaner tracks like “Embryo,” “Orchid” and “Solitude.”

People were telling me you can’t put an acoustic track on a Black Sabbath album. And I would say, “Why not?” It’s like there was a law against it. The same people told me I couldn’t tune down on *Master of Reality* — but why? The reactions were very peculiar in those days. The only way to prove it was to do it, and then it would become acceptable later.

“After Forever” encapsulates the fantastic chemistry shared between you and Geezer, especially when he plays up high.

That’s the thing with myself and Geezer. We could always lock in together. It’s amazing how quickly he could pick onto stuff. I’d play him things and straight away he’d put something to it. I never ever questioned what Geezer did because I know he’d always play the right thing. He always knew how to accompany me, it’s almost like he knows what I’m going to play before I play it. I guess that came from us being together so long and creating that sound together.

“Wheels of Confusion” kicks off Vol. 4 with some heavy blues that sounds like Eric Clapton on steroids — arguably some of the best tones you’ve ever recorded.

It’s interesting — my rig never changed much. I’d always go in with my booster. To go back, I started off in the Sixties with this Rangemaster. I lived up in Carlisle with Bill, we’d joined a band up there [*the Rest*]. There was a guy who lived nearby that worked in electronics and he came up to me one day saying he could make my treble booster sound better. I said, “Oh, can you?” and he told me to hand it over and he’d bring it back in a couple of days. So he took it away, brought it back and I really liked what he’d done and how it worked in combination with the guitar and amp. I used the same booster right up to the [1980] *Heaven and Hell* album.

Then there was a guy who came to work for me who used to do Ritchie Blackmore’s stuff. We’d ordered six



Iommi [left] on stage with Ozzy in 1974. "Bloody hell, straight away the first riff I came up with was that one from 'Sabbath Bloody Sabbath,'" he says

Marshall amps, and he said he'd put an extra valve stage in them. We had a house in Miami back then and gave him his own room. He started rebuilding these amps for me and did a great job. One day I went in and asked, "Where's my booster, by the way?" and he said, "What booster?" When I told him which box it was, he said he'd thrown it away ages ago. I couldn't believe it and never saw that pedal again. Annoyingly, nobody ever saw what resistors or transistors or whatever else was in it, which means nobody has ever been able to reproduce it exactly for me, though we have tried. The guy who built it passed away. But I've stuck with the same concept for my

gear since forever — the SG into a Laney via a booster.

You chose to bring in a major third harmony to add color to the opening riff of "Supernaut."

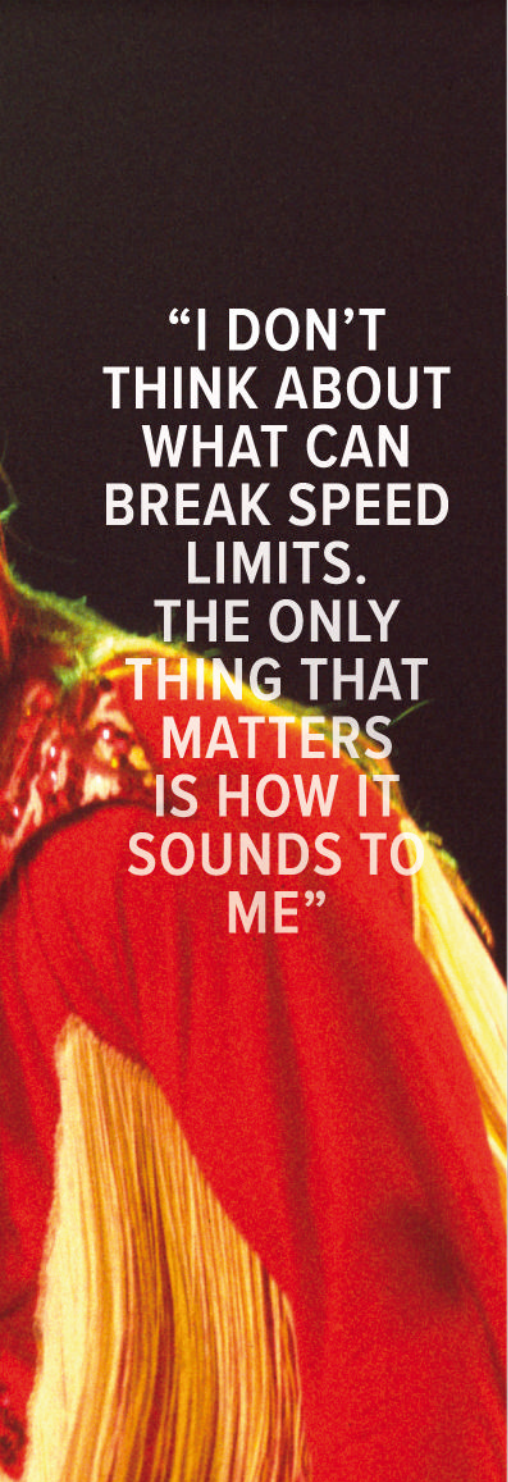
I realized what might work well there just through trying stuff. You have to remember, some things don't work out. But that one did, and it really added something to the riff.

"Sabbath Bloody Sabbath" could be your heaviest riff of them all, using power chords that snake their way around the second, third and fourth frets.

Before making that album, we went to L.A. to record and it never worked out. I got writer's block and just couldn't think of anything. I was a bit like, "Oh, shit!" Then we came back to England and had a couple of weeks off. I'd never had a creative block like that before. I was really worried because I just couldn't think of anything. So we decided to create a bit of atmosphere and hired Clear-

well Castle. We set our gear up in the dungeons. Bloody hell, straight away the first riff I came up with was that one from "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath." I knew I really liked the sound of it, and then we built it up from there. It ultimately comes down to the mood you're in, where you are, the atmosphere there and what you can create. Being in the dungeons of a castle clearly had the right effect on me.

The closing track on that album, "Spiral Architect," is like a love letter to progressive rock in terms of how it builds from a reverberated acoustic into the full band against



**"I DON'T
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an orchestral score. How'd that one come together?

It's another example of us trying out different approaches. People used to say we couldn't use orchestration in a band like Black Sabbath. But why not? Also in those days, the orchestras and classical musicians didn't look on us favorably. They looked down on bands like us. To have some people [*the Phantom Fiddlers*] come and accompany us was great. The fact that they enjoyed it was even better.

"Don't Start Too Late" is a solo performance where you use an acoustic with loud repeats. Brian May, Nuno Bettencourt, Yngwie Malmsteen and

Joe Bonamassa have done similar things with delay in the time since.

There are definitely a lot of similarities between Brian May and myself. We've been very close since the Seventies. It's funny, we've both been using the Rangemaster since early on. Mine were going into Laney's and his were into Vox AC30s. But it's the same principle. I used to rely on Brian a lot because I'd constantly have problems with people saying there was too much interference coming through my booster. And I'd have to explain, "I know, but that's part of my sound!" In them days, you'd pick up bloody taxis and everything. There was no isolation. Brian would back me up and say, "That's the sound — don't change it." Sometimes you'd get some boffin come along telling me, "I can get rid of that for you," and I'd say, "Oh, can you?" But it would always change the sound and I didn't want my sound to change. The only person who understood how I felt in those days was Brian, because he had the same problem. We both had a bit of noise but were ultimately getting the sound we wanted.

"Symptom of the Universe" would directly influence the thrash metal bands that arrived the following decade.

And it was nice to hear those thrash bands paying tribute to us. It's great how they were able to push it forward into something new and turn it into their own thing. I was just coming up with things I liked. So it was brilliant to hear about other musicians liking what I'd done, taking the same kind of idea and improving on it, evolving it into their own sound. Like Metallica, for instance, who probably learned things from us as well as other people. What they did with the metal sound, turning it into thrash, was fantastic. They've always been respectful toward us and they're lovely guys. I love their attitude toward things, the way they write and everything. It reminds us a lot of how we were — everyone in one room rehearsing together and taking it seriously.

"The Writ" and "Megalomania" are up there with the most leftfield tracks you've composed.

I have no idea how I came up with ideas like that, but I agree. To be

honest, I'm still doing it now. I've got hundreds of riffs at home. I'll put something down and then move onto something else, start working on that and something else comes up. It's always been that way. I seem to be able to come up with lots of riffs. It's probably the only thing I can do!

What kind of exercises helped you most on your guitar journey?

There weren't really any exercises. For me, the main thing was getting used to playing with thimbles. That was the difficult bit, that was the exercise, I guess, trying to move my fingers and hit the notes. And it's probably why I ended up using a lot of trills. Early on, I couldn't bend the strings that hard because it would hurt my fingers, so I came up with the idea of using trills. I do that a lot and it's probably become a bit of a trademark.

You are well-versed in the art of the blues. What's the secret to playing with heart, soul and authority?

I can only speak for my own playing, but I love the sound of blues because it's from the heart. It's about how you feel at that moment in time. Like I said earlier, I can't read music or play the same thing twice. It's all about how I feel right there and then, which is where the blues comes from, when you think about it. You have to believe in what you're doing and play it like you mean it, as opposed to performing the fastest guitar solo in the world or something exactly note-for-note. The guitar should be a part of you. By doing it more and more, you learn from yourself. If I sat down now and watched a video of someone shredding, I'd probably turn it off. I can't do that stuff, it's not how I play.

I remember doing an instructional video years ago, one of the first ones when they started doing those things. I was in L.A., and they were asking me to play my solos from the records — but slower. It wasn't natural for me. I can't play the same solo; it would always be slightly different. If someone's learning guitar, my best advice would be to use your ears and feel it in your heart. Sure, some people watch videos and copy things, and that's great. The technical players these days are brilliant. Even really young kids in their bedrooms are doing incredible things. But I always go back to the roots of the blues, looking deep inside myself and telling the truth. I don't think about what can impress people or break speed limits. The only thing that matters in my mind is how it sounds to me.

One final question. Will we ever see Black Sabbath on stage again? Bill recently said he'd love to join you.

Who knows? You can never say never, and we never have said never. It really depends on everybody's health and what we'd expect from each other now. Can we still play and sound the same together? I don't know because it's been such a long time. It's in the air. By the time it comes around, if it ever does, we'll have to see what state everybody is in and whether we can climb on stage. If we did, it would have to be good otherwise I wouldn't do it. There's no point in just getting up, what can you prove by doing that? If it's not right or as good as it was, then there's no point in doing it. In my eyes, it has to be as good or better. 

Yommi at work in
Rockfield Studios in
Monmouth, Wales,
July 25, 2007

**"I REMEMBER
BRIAN MAY
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GAVIN ROBERTS/FUTURE

EXETER STRATEGY

Producer **MIKE EXETER** — who has worked closely in the studio with Tony Iommi for nearly three decades — explains how he dials in the metal master's iconic Black Sabbath sound. BY AMIT SHARMA

GRAMMY-WINNING PRODUCER and engineer Mike Exeter is well known for his credits on releases that range from UB40, the Specials and Jeff Beck to Cradle of Filth and Judas Priest. However, it's the Englishman's work with Tony Iommi that has proved to be his most fruitful, he having initially stepped in for The 1996 DEP Sessions with Glenn Hughes and the Fused solo album of 2005, leading to the 2009 reunion with Ronnie James Dio as Heaven & Hell and Black Sabbath's final studio album, 2013's 13. Following the death of Iommi's long-serving tech, Mike Clement, in 2022, Exeter is undoubtedly the person best placed to provide insight into what Iommi is searching for.

"What's most important is that there needs to be some sort of response," says the producer after concluding another day of studio work at the Black Sabbath founder's home in Broadway, Worcestershire. "The music has to come out of the amp and hit him in the body and head. When he plays, there is no beginning or end. It's all chicken and egg. He goes into a zone where he's just expressing himself with no plan of what might happen, and that's when he starts getting the real ideas. It becomes this cyclical thing."

As anyone would expect, over the course of time the sound guru has learned how to tell whether his employer is happy with what he's hearing. It's all part and parcel of spending countless hours locked away together, listening to recordings and letting the creative process dictate where they go next. "Tony is very easy for me to read," Exeter says. "I know him so well, I can spot the facial expressions or body language. Sometimes it's what he plays, other times it's how he plays. If he does a certain trill, I know that means he's not getting enough sustain

from the amp. What he's looking for is, ultimately, an extension of himself."

That extension has arrived in different forms over the years, depending on the equipment and musicians in the room. The producer goes on to explain how the pair will listen to live footage from Paris in 1974 and compare it to the sound of the first two Black Sabbath albums, or the post-Ozzy years with Ronnie James Dio — which, as well as welcoming a new singer, saw them embracing the updated music technology of the time.

"When I listen to the first two Sabbath albums, they're incredibly fuzzy," Exeter says. "It's a classic Laney sound. But he wasn't using that in 1980 for the Dio albums. He'd switched to hotter Marshalls around that period. So there is no singular definitive sound for Tony, but he definitely has his own feel. I can pick him out from a mile off just because of the little things he does."

Bearing in mind the sonic evolution throughout the decades, Exeter



DEEP SABBATH

Together they forged the template for hard rock and heavy metal, but Black Sabbath and **DEEP PURPLE** have a lot more in common beyond that

AS LATE-SIXTIES pioneers of a new heavy sound, the cultural connections between Black Sabbath and Deep Purple are plentiful, and similarities often crossed over into personnel. Following Ozzy Osbourne's dismissal in 1979, two albums were made with Ronnie James Dio — who by that point had recorded three albums with Rainbow, the band formed by Ritchie Blackmore after leaving Deep Purple in the mid Seventies. Sabbath's next singer would be Ian Gillan of Deep Purple fame, who made only one studio appearance with the band on 1983's *Born Again*. For the album that followed, 1986's *Seventh Star*, the microphone was being held by another Purple legend — the voice of rock himself, Glenn Hughes.

"I've always liked Glenn," Iommi says. "We've been friends for many years and go way back. I've always loved his vocals. When they get older, most singers tend to lose their top range, but he can still do it. He can sing like there's no tomorrow... It's brilliant. And he's very creative. It was a good thing when we started writing together. I still like a lot of the songs we recorded together on *Seventh Star*. It was very different for Sabbath, just because of the way he would sing and approach stuff."

Hughes and Iommi would collaborate a decade later for *The 1996 DEP Sessions* and on 2005 Iommi release *Fused*, which serve as the latest reissues from the Sabbath guitarist's back catalog through BMG. "There's a solo album of mine we recorded together called *Fused*," he says. "Interestingly, *The 1996 DEP Sessions* were originally demos. The tapes got leaked and ended up as bootlegs. We didn't want that, so we thought we'd put them out officially in 2004. I think we wrote some great songs together. I'm especially proud of what we did on tracks like 'Gone' and 'Grace.' As far as I'm concerned, Glenn is one of the greatest singers of all time." — Amit Sharma

Glenn Hughes [left] with Tony Iommi. "I still like a lot of the songs we recorded together on *Seventh Star*," Iommi says

still has plenty of advice for those of us hoping to get into the rough ballpark of the legendary guitarist's tones. The early Black Sabbath albums were recorded with a 1965 SG Special — nicknamed the Monkey, thanks to the sticker at the base of the body — fitted with a pair of P90 pickups, which explains the rounded balance of body and bite on the classic-era recordings.

"To sound like Tony, you generally need P90s going into a thick, soupy sound," Exeter says. "It's broken up, almost like speaker distortion. You might not think he was dialing in much gain, but trust me, he was on 11 for everything, because in the old days they had single-channel amps. You had to crank the front, turn the treble, presence and mids down, turn the bass up and then stick a treble booster in front. It only sounds right blasting through a 4x12 at full volume and needs to be smooth. It's the tone of death if you're in front of his amp when it's not set properly."

Stacking gain is another core element of the tone, and though Iommi was heavily dependent on his modded Rangemaster for the first eight albums, in the years that followed he grew increasingly fond of having several different options at his feet.

"He wants the amp crunching past the edge of breakup, but also extra stages in front," the producer says. "I wouldn't use a Tube Screamer, particularly; instead I'd recommend things like the TC Electronic Spark. It's a stacked-gain thing he's looking for, one that cleans up easily. In the studio we'll often dial the gain in to suit the riff. If you don't do it right, you won't get the pick attack or clarity of the notes. Less gain can sound better because it's clearer, but ultimately it depends on the idea. There's definitely a fine line; you can find something that suits the artist, who might prefer more saturation, and the producer, who generally wants to back things down."

It would be safe to say Laney amps are without question Iommi's go-to, but as Exeter notes, some work better than others. The LA100BL may have been at the forefront of the Sabbath sound during their most celebrated years, but it's the guitarist's signature



6L6-powered TI100, launched in 2012, that Exeter considers to reign supreme as the ultimate weapon for nailing an entire career's worth of game-changing tones.

"The TI100 was like the golden goose for me," he says. "Tony actually went back to the LA100s for the final tour. But I remember Tony did an appearance with the Hollywood Vampires last year and we shot out a few amps. The TI100 through a single 4x12 won. For soundcheck, we put it on stage with a Roland SDE-3000 in the loop to thicken the sound with a short delay, and all the other roadies came over saying, 'Holy shit! What are you using?' Tony was really happy — I could tell because he started playing 'Lonely Is the Word.' He seemed really comfortable. Joe Perry was running close to 15 cabs on stage, and apparently he ended up asking Tony to turn down. It was only on 4." [Laughs]

As Iommi reveals in this month's



**“TO SOUND LIKE TONY, YOU
GENERALLY NEED P90S GOING
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IT’S BROKEN UP, ALMOST LIKE
SPEAKER DISTORTION”**

cover story, he’s amassed a sizable pedal collection over the years, but only a select few have been good enough to stay on the board. Exeter picks up the conversation by shedding light on the ones that stuck; beyond the boosts and drives, there have been chorus, phaser and octave units.

“Tony isn’t a gear hound at all,” Exeter says. “But one thing people don’t realize is that he does watch YouTube just to see what’s out there. His rig is generally straightforward. The most complicated it got was on the farewell tour, where he had an insane amount of stuff. He’s very particular about having a short delay when he plays live; in the Eighties it was a Korg rackmount. He likes to have a chorus around, and it’s usually the blue one by Analog Man. I think it’s the best chorus out there, especially for distorted guitars. The owner, Mike Piera, is brilliant, and we’ve got a King of Tone, too. Before the POG, we were using a DOD octave pedal. I actually liked the way it didn’t track properly! At the end of chords you’d get this weird digital breakup thing going on, which was fun. An MXR Phase 90 is another thing he likes to have; generally it’s the script ones.”

The Van Halen connection doesn’t end there, either. After a brief spell with Engl amps for the Exeter-produced Heaven & Hell debut of 2009, titled *The Devil You Know*, Iommi switched over to EVH 5150 III heads

and cabs. Eddie and his tech Matt Bruck, who now heads up EVH alongside Wolfgang Van Halen, were kind enough to help with getting the tones right for what would be Sabbath’s grand finale.

“Eddie and Matt were great while we were recording *13*,” Exeter says. “We were borrowing amps and cabs off Eddie during the whole writing process. From 2009 to 2013 it was a mixture of the EVH and TI100. That was the golden era of tone for me. We listened to some of the raw recordings later and Tony asked, ‘Bloody hell, that’s unreal, what were we using?’ And it was just the EVH with an Eventide H3000 for delay. He said, ‘That’s the sound I want,’ and I joked, ‘Well, you do today!’ But it was a big deal for Tony — getting a modern amp that had been designed by a player he respected. The confidence went a long way, because he knew Eddie would only give him something good. Things like that put you

at ease.”

And, as many of us know all too well, creative freedom and inspiration tends to strike when a guitar player is at his or her most comfortable. A good tone can go a very long way indeed.

“I remember Brian May visiting last year, and as soon as he said ‘There’s that sound,’ Tony instantly relaxed,” Exeter says. “He stopped worrying. The mutual respect between them is insane and it’s a real help when you hear you’re on the right track.”

“Being an engineer and producer is a bit like being a psychologist. You have to tell the artist they’re right when they complain the sound has changed, but also convince them that it’s still sounding great through the speakers, if that’s indeed the case. We can always re-amp things later. All I’m after is some smiles and for it to be a good day in the studio. The confidence will feed into the music.”



Words Jonathan Horsley Photos Maclay Heriot

“This is the music that we make when we just throw our guitars on and noodle around!”

No rock band on Earth is as prolific as **King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard**. On their 26th album in 15 years, they’ve captured the sound and the vibe of classic ’70s rock – but with cheap amps and zero pedals. As leader Stu Mackenzie says: “We were just going for the take that had the boogie!”

Just where should the uninitiated start with a band like King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard, who since forming in 2010 have already spawned 26 studio albums, and whose omnivorous stylistic appetites have led them by the nose through garage rock, psych-rock, synth-driven krautrock, microtonal avant-gardism, heavy metal and prog? This is the band with the creative audacity to conceive of a seven-suite concept album tied to Greek scalar modalities, and went into the studio to record it with little more than that idea in that Lizard Wizard brain of theirs and the determination to jam it out and make it happen.

Well, there’s always a strong case for starting at the beginning. But if you were to pick up their latest, *Flight b741*, you’d be all right, too, because this

recording boils the Gizzard down to its quintessence, a full-flavoured mother sauce offering a taste of exactly where they’re coming from. This is the sound of the Melbourne sextet returning to the musical womb, a band’s spirit restored to factory settings, playing the sort of ’70s rock and sun-kissed Americana that comes so naturally that it could well be something the central nervous system could take care of.

“We’ve made a lot of records where we’ve challenged ourselves to push outside of what we are comfortable with,” says Stu Mackenzie, the band’s leader, guitarist, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist. “I think we have made some of our most interesting music – the stuff I’m most proud of – in that mode, and that is sometimes the right thing to do. But sometimes the right thing to do is just shoot from the hip and do the gut instinct thing, and that is what this was. On a stylistic level, this is the music that we make when we are

warming up. This is the music that we make when we just throw our guitars on and noodle around. It is the music that we are probably jamming on when we are doing a soundcheck.”

If anything, *Flight b741* is an anti-concept record, six guys in the studio, arranging on the spot. What they had in the beginning was “napkin sketches, a couple of thoughts” and the requisite 10,000 hours or whatever of playing together. Once they had a part, they’d do a take and move on. Stu takes production and mixing credits, while regular front-of-house engineer Sam ‘Sammy’ Joseph engineered it and played pedal steel. There was no reason to overwork this. “All of the guitars on the thing is just the live take,” Stu says. “That’s just in the room. We could have done these takes a lot better, probably, perfected the performance better. But we were just going for the take that had the boogie! That was what was important.”

Everyone in the band is a multi-instrumentalist and there’s a musical agility that comes with that. Stu says their musical understanding is like the ability to finish one another’s sentences. Their approach to vocals on *Flight b741*, which saw everyone taking a turn on the mic before passing it on, gave everyone a voice – including Michael ‘Cavs’ Cavanagh, whom you’d typically find on the drums – and left

them with a rotating cast of lead vocalists throughout the record.

"We'd pass the mic on and get everyone to share their perspective on whatever the song was about," Stu says. "We did all the vocal recordings, all six of us standing around, two microphones, one person who is doing the lead and the other five standing around the other mic, and we were facing each other in a little semicircle. I think we did it for over a week. We just stood in front of each other with two mics and pieced together all the vocals. As we went, the people who would be doing backing vocals would be spurring the lead singer on. We had a lot of fun doing it and it gave the record a sound."

What they came up with was huge, insistent melodies and pop hooks to present what is essentially elemental rock 'n' roll on a higher plane. *Flight b741* harkens back to the creatively fertile 1970s, when rock would abut blues, country, funk, R&B, and dipping in and out was de rigueur.

With another treatment, or, let's get real, in lesser hands, some of these riffs might have sounded like reheats from a James Gang rehearsal session in '73, from boogie blues 101, and yet trampled under the Gizz's unique rhythmic footprint, and with those vocals foregrounding a melody – and the sentiment behind it – they make you feel like you are hearing this art form for the very first time. Some lead parts, like the reedy quasi-horn tones on *Antarctica*, sound as though they walked off a record by The Guess Who. You could hear all kinds of references – Steve Miller Band, The Band, The Byrds – and you would not be hallucinating. It's just that, if they are there pop-cultural touchstones, then they are there by osmosis, because making music like this is intimidating enough without thinking of the names and faces and history behind the sound.

"You are right about this type of music being intimidating," Stu smiles. "And that is why it has taken us this long, to album 26 or whatever it is, to do this – even though we love this kind of music. If you ask people what are the greatest songs ever written, a lot of them are in this style, and there is just a lot of great music out there in the world already that is kind of like this, and that has never been what we have intended to do."

SEXTUPLE THREAT

From left: Lucas Harwood, Joey Walker, Michael Cavanagh, Cook Craig, Ambrose Kenny-Smith and Stu Mackenzie



"WE HAD NO PEDALS ON THE RECORD, JUST AMPS LOUD ENOUGH TO SOUND NASTY!"
STU MACKENZIE

"Let's make music like all the great albums that we love! That's actually not what I want to do. That's not really the goal. I'd rather create something that I wish existed but doesn't exist yet. But sometimes you've just got to do what is right, and we have injected enough things into it to feel creatively jazzed."

Press play and the first stop is *Mirage City*; an elemental melody takes flight, extending its wings across the stereo spread. This is exactly what Stu is talking about. It could be a nursery rhyme, an old folk Americana tune, but it sounds like something you could soundtrack a New Hollywood movie with. It starts, stops and starts again. It is hopeful but bittersweet, its ebb and flow, tension and release, establishes the emotional cadence of the record.

As Stu sees it: "All music is tension and release. It's on the micro and the macro. I've learned to be a bit better with all that just from the shows being a little more improvised. We're doing

that live, in real time, with each other, and in an entirely improvised way, and that is something that we have all got a bit better at getting onto the record. That is what's going on in *Mirage City*. That intro was not really part of the song. It was just kind of like... played! 'Is that wrong? Where's that gone!?' Then we started the song and that intro turned into

the outro, which is also not part of the song... The song was originally just that middle part."

An out-of-tune piano and an old battered National KX-88 keyboard became essential, adding honky-tonk wonk and retro organ mojo to fill out the mix. The KX-88 occupies all the frequencies that the squirrely, wiry guitars miss, and it became this tonal emulsifier bringing everything together, appearing on every song. The Gizz have access to plenty of keys, but Stu doesn't think they've ever had anything like this. "It just had the hugest vibe," he says. "It's, like, out of tune! And it's just got this janky preset sounds on it, almost like every combination of the sounds on it sounded amazing."

The sounds and the combinations thereof are crucial in making this recording work. Every detail matters, even if said details were thrown down in the heat of the moment. Guitars are at the forefront but their mission

Photos Getty

LIZARD BRAIN
King Gizz
mastermind
Stu Mackenzie







"SOME OF THE TONES ARE PRETTY CRISPY, LIKE THE FIRST FEW BLACK SABBATH RECORDS" STU MACKENZIE

objectives on *Flight b741* were to support those vocal melodies and add some wild electric heat to the sound. "It needed to be dirty and fun and silly, and just feral," Stu says. "But also it needed to be melodic and beautiful, too. That was the line to walk. I'm not sure that we ever spoke about that, but that was just known." The guitars often sound toasted, broken, pushed to the point where it's hard to tell at times if it's a real guitar.

On the track *Sad Pilot*, which manages to be both a relaxed-tempo boogie number and a mental health epiphany, single notes issue forth like a skronky organ, chords a warm, muted scratch. *Raw Feel* has a riff that sounds like it was processed by a prototype fuzz pedal from the early '60s, but there were no pedals on this record besides a boost pedal. And for a record that sounds expensive – a testimony to Mackenzie's skills in mixing this down to a Tascam eight-track cassette – the guitar tones couldn't have come much cheaper. Stu used his Yamaha SG-2A and Hagstrom 12-string. Joey Walker and Cook Craig

shared the latter's Novo (Stu forgets the exact model). There were no vintage tube amps, no state-of-the-art modellers in the studio, just the cheapest practice amps Stu could find.

"I used to teach guitar. I used to teach kids and teenagers when I was a teenager myself," he says. "People would always come in with these tiny amps, just the classic thirty-dollar amps you can buy at the pawnshop. It's just the cheapest way to get started with electric guitar, and sometimes these things would sound amazing if you cranked them up loud enough. You crank them up to a place where they are not supposed to go, and they are distorting when they are on the clean channel... That is awesome to me. A lot of the time it's the speaker that's distorting, and there's something rattling that is not supposed to be rattling, but it's all harmonics and everything. I am hugely into that."

Stu needed lots of them, and would hit Cash Converters in downtown Melbourne in search of them. When you think about the architecture of these small solid-state combos, they are transistorised just like drive pedals, so it makes sense that something magic will happen when you make them clip.

That's how the hitherto unloved Peavey Decade become a must-have when it was revealed to be Josh Homme's secret weapon on Queens Of The Stone Age's 2002 classic *Songs For The Deaf*.

"I bought about six or eight, maybe," Stu says. "I didn't spend more than 20 or 30 bucks on any of them. They were just tiny, tiny little speakers. Sometimes they would have a little gain channel that was absolutely nasty, but usually we would have them on the clean channel and just crank them. We had no pedals on the record, just guitars, straight into the amp, turned up loud enough so that it sounds nasty."

"Some of the tones are pretty crispy, and pretty hot, pretty spicy, but in my mind it was like the first-couple-of-Black-Sabbath-records distortion. They weren't using tiny amps but that was the sound. It's different from stepping on a fuzz pedal. When you roll back the volume on your guitar you can really, really clean up in a way you can't do with pedals."

Hitting these little solid-state amps with an extra 6dB of clean boost pushed them over the edge. When rolling back the volume and tone controls on his guitar, Stu found a sound that's like Clapton's 'woman tone' through the looking glass, all "creamy bottom but with a nasty top-end that's just dying" – just throw a mic in front of it, press record, and you're good to go. There's your tone. 30 bucks, a little reverb in post. Done. Ready for takeoff... 🎵

***Flight b741* is out now**



[from left]
The Smashing
Pumpkins' James
Iha, Billy Corgan and
Jimmy
Chamberlin



ON *AGHORI MHORI MEI*, THEIR WELL-RECEIVED NEW ALBUM, **THE SMASHING PUMPKINS** RECAPTURE THE VIBE, FEEL AND TONES OF THEIR CLASSIC EARLY NINETIES LPs. BELOW, **BILLY CORGAN** EXPLAINS HOW, WHY — AND WHAT TOOK 'EM SO LONG

STORY BY ANDREW DALY
PHOTO BY JASON RENAUD

IN CASE YOU haven't been paying attention, everything Billy Corgan does or says has been making headlines lately. It comes with the territory of being in a mega band. And while that might sound somewhat frustrating, Corgan doesn't think so. "I'm at a point now where I don't even care," he says. "I don't care what people think. I don't care if they think I'm great; my focus is, I want people to enjoy the band. I want people to listen to our music and see us play."

People have been coming to see the Pumpkins play. They've got a new shredder in guitarist Kiki Wong, who Corgan says has been "putting in the work," and a new record in *Aghori Mhori Mei*, which harkens back to the Pumpkins' iconic Nineties sound. But the metal-leaning (and also headline-making) Wong and a decidedly heavy record hasn't stopped detractors.

"Our music has always gone from metal to alternative," Corgan says. "It gave us an advantage, but it caused problems because metal was 'stupid.' If you played a solo, it had to be ironic. We didn't give a shit about any of that; we just wanted to womp you over the head."

Corgan still aims to womp, and he hopes the fans are up for it. But *Agh-*

ori Mhori Mei isn't a nostalgia trip. "Maybe it won't sound like the music you wrote when you were 25," Corgan says. "But there's a lot of people who identify with the message because they see part of themselves in it."

At 57, Corgan is forever underrated and perpetually used as "clickbait." That's his lot, but it's not all bad. He's got a cache of iconic records, and despite the punches thrown, he's still standing. "I was the big bad Dracula who wouldn't let his friends play in the sandbox," Corgan says. "We were under tremendous pressure. We had a lot of success. Obviously, good or bad, our decisions that we've made have worked because we're still talking about that music, right?"

Right. While the Pumpkins' last few electronic-leaning records didn't capture imaginations quite like 1991's *Gish* or 1993's *Siamese Dream*, neither did 1998's *Adore*. Corgan has seen this movie before — and he's the leading man. But that doesn't mean he's okay with his pursuits being taken for granted.

"We should not be so blithe as to assume people who have made great musical contributions — just because they're at a certain point in their life — are no longer capable," he says. "Artists are sensitive people. If they feel a vibe that people aren't interested in, they think, 'Why bother?' I've just shut all that noise out. Trust me, I had people tell me, 'We don't care about your new music. We don't care what you do. We're just not interested. Please play *Siamese Dream* again.' That seems to have finally died away. It's great; we want to make music for another 20 years if we can. You can judge us however you want; we're an open book. But you'd be hard-pressed to look at us on stage right now and say, 'That's not a real band.'"

How did you avoid the nostalgia trap while putting together *Aghori Mhori Mei*?

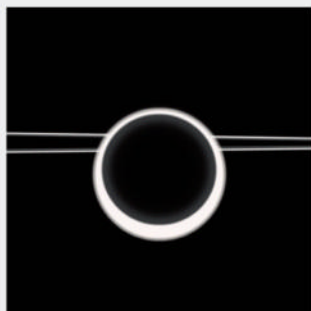
That's a fantastic question. I'm not sure I can do it justice, but I'll give it a quick try...

I have a feeling you can.

Thank you for that little bit of praise. When Jimmy [*Chamberlin*] and I had Zwan, our manager was Elliot Roberts, who famously managed Neil Young. Elliot had very strong opinions on nostalgia. He told us how nostalgia was the trap you could never escape from. He instilled in us that our future, if we had any future as musicians, would be navigating nostalgia. We stuck to our guns that it would work out, which was true. But there is another layer, if you want it...

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Hit me with it.

Here's the weird thing that you can never anticipate when you're in your 20s making, let's say, your seminal work that people will always identify you with. That's when they get to know you, right? Whether it's "Drown" in 1992, "Cherub Rock" in '93, "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" in '95 or "Everlasting Gaze" in 2000, you never imagine that someday, you'll be answering to the shadow you created in your youth.

You can never live up to that anyway because memory makes things seem grandiose.

You'll be standing on stage somewhere, or putting out a record years later, and the person in front of you, or sitting at home listening, has built an impression of you that's not accurate. It's accurate in their mind, and they expect you to live up to the accuracy of their impression. If I can be overly simplistic, the general impression of the fan is that this band is a guitar band that makes loud, alternative rock. Hence the, "Hey, are you the 'rat in a cage' [from "Bullet with Butterfly Wings"] guy?"

Some would answer to that, but you don't.

It doesn't matter. They have this impression in their mind of who you are. So, in a different generation, you're expected to live up to the pressure of their impression. Not the reality — but the impression. That impression extends down from

the media to the fans to radio stations. It doesn't take a genius to put a finger up in the wind and understand how the wind blows. And trust me — people will sit you down in boardrooms and say it nicely. Sometimes they won't say it nicely.

People assume how you *might* handle that. But how *do* you handle that?

They tell you, "It's in your best interest to make the music that is expected of you, not the music you feel." You can say, "It's never worked for anybody. Show me a band it's truly worked for." I used to say that, and I was right. But in the last 10 years, you can see bands from Gen X that never changed their script, and it does work. But we did [*go the other way*] in the Nineties, and you kind of can't go back so readily.

Why have you dialed back to your Nineties sound with *Aghori Mhori Mei*?

That's why it's so interesting about *Aghori Mhori Mei*; we decided — on our terms, in our own time, with a very organic feeling — that it was time to go back to this way of playing guitar and drums, and that we finally did what people wanted of us. You can see we're being rewarded for it, which is great. But it wasn't in our bones to become a Xerox of who we used to be, which gets down to questions of integrity, self-motivation and why we're even in this band.

People make assumptions; they'll say, "Billy Corgan. He plugs a Strat with Lace Sensor pickups into a Big Muff, and off he goes." But there must be more; otherwise, why carry on?

It gets down to a personal thing: my father passed away two and a half years ago; my father was my true idol. He was a really good guitar player; I learned a lot from watching him play. He explained a lot about how he saw music, and I absorbed a lot of that into my philosophical thinking. When my father passed away, this curious thing that happened — which anybody who has suffered loss can understand — where part of mourning is you feel things that you can only feel once you lose somebody. The thing that struck me — and I couldn't have expected it in a million years — was I only picked up guitar in the first place to impress my father.

So your initial reasons didn't stem from traditional watershed musical moments.

I didn't have a true desire to play guitar in the way that some great guitar players like Joe Bonamassa did. When I look



Billy Corgan on stage with the Smashing Pumpkins in London on June 8. "Most people don't even recognize my contributions as a guitar player," he says. "They don't even assume I'm the one playing a lot of the guitar"

at him or Billy Gibbons, I see pure guitar players; I'm not really a pure guitar player.

Does that impact the way you view the instrument?

I've had, at different times, a love/hate relationship with the guitar. I didn't realize until after my father passed away that my father was the reason I wanted to play the guitar. Once he was gone, I thought, "Well, gee, do I still even want to play the guitar?" Because he's not here anymore to impress, it was a very subliminal recognition.

I was nothing I'd ever considered. Once I let that run through me, I came out the other side, thinking, "Yeah, I still want to play the guitar. This is a great way to continue to honor my father. He gave me the gift of music and playing guitar." I got super motivated to play; it was a strange thing I could never have anticipated, but that's how I ended up here.

I understand what you mean when you say you're not a "pure guitar player," but you've also written riffs and solos that defined a generation.

Let's go at it from a couple of different points of view. Most people don't even recognize my contributions as a guitar player. They don't even assume I'm the one playing a lot of the guitar.

Which is crazy to think.

Well, yes. And then, you have these silly lists that come out about the greatest guitar players; I usually don't even make those lists. Or they'll put me behind somebody who I could play circles around. I don't mean to denigrate the person in front of me or the people in front of me, but come on, you know? I'm enough of a guitar player to know who's a great guitar player.

Dig into that for me.

I've played on stage with George Lynch and Uli Jon Roth, two of the greatest guitar players in history. I sat for hours across from Eddie Van Halen at 5150 with my jaw open, watching Eddie play, OK? My father was a great guitar player. I've got no problem acknowledging some of the greatest guitar players ever. I would never even put myself in their company.

EVH comparisons are futile, but there's no denying you're underrated.

Once you go beyond, let's call it "the Zakk Wyldes and Dimebag Darrells and the truly great Randy Rhoadses," there's a lot of people who pretend to play guitar. I cer-

tainly have no problem believing I'm better than a lot of them. Originally, I was a guitar player. That's all I wanted to be. I was sitting at home at 17 trying to play speed runs. I wanted to be Yngwie Malmsteen, Randy Rhoads and Eddie Van Halen.

What changed that?

I only became a singer because the guy in my first band told me, "I'm not singing your songs. If you want to write songs, you'll have to sing." My father rolled his eyes at my singing because my voice was strange. As you can imagine, in those early days, people would plug their ears at my voice, saying, "Your voice is way too weird." I have a letter from a major record company in my attic saying, "This band will never sell records because this guy's voice is too weird."

Tell that to Geddy Lee.

I wish I could sing as good as Geddy or as high. [Laughs] But I went through this weird — and again, it goes back to my father — almost guilt stage in my development as a musician. As I started to understand that my true gift was in composition, production, lyrics and melody, I almost felt guilty because the guitar took a back seat.

Again, I go back to the fact that your records are loaded with huge riffs, memorable solos and incredible tones.

Over time, it's balanced into what it is. I can be a guitar player when I need to. I can play a lead when I need to. But I'm not somebody who gets up every day and plays the guitar. I'm more likely to play the piano — and I'm totally cool with that. I wish I was a better guitar player than I am. I wish I'd put more time in than I did. But that's not the way it worked out.

Is that why people relegate you?

Perceived lack of time put in?

If I'm being frank about it — and maybe this isn't the best way to do it — but if I'm being frank, people have a hard time understanding that as it pertains to the Smashing Pumpkins, I'm writing the songs, lyrics, melodies, arrangements and playing most of the complicated guitar. And that I'm capable of doing a solo on top of that. I think that's hard for people to process.

Why is that?

I'm saying, "Yep, I am," and they don't want to believe one person can do all those things. And a decision we made as a band early in our history, I'm talking before *Gish*, was not to tell people how we worked. I've told the story a few times where it was [pro-



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ducer] Butch Vig who said, "Why doesn't this sound like the demos?" I said, "I'm the one playing on the demos." He said, "You're playing bass, all the guitars and the lead?" I said, "Yeah. I'm singing, too." Butch said, "I want that band," and I said, "Well, you're gonna have to tell the other people in the band because they're not gonna be happy." Butch sat the band down and said, "This is the way it's going to be." They said, "Okay."

So people relegate you because they incorrectly feel you've relegated your bandmates?

We knew that was going to be a problem. Eventually, when the story got out, it turned into this other thing: I was the evil guy who wasn't letting my band play on the records. But somehow, in the process of all that, people understood I was doing most of the work on the records, but they



Corgan [left] and Iha in action. "When you hear us play live, you can acutely hear how the way James and I play guitars together has to do with the band's success," Corgan says

didn't want to give me credit. Somehow, that persists.

Sure, you play most of the guitars on the records, but live, there's no denying that you and James Iha create unmistakable sounds. It's inclusive in that way.

Let me say something about my guitar mate, James. He and I started the band in my father's bedroom that he used to sell drugs out of, okay? I can still see us in that bedroom in 1988. James had his Johnny Marr haircut and Fender Telecaster, and somehow, we developed this swirly sound that people call the "Pumpkins sound." When you hear us play live, you can acutely hear how the way James and I play guitars together has to do with the band's success.

Does the public's perception of the Pumpkins bother you?

It's weird because I'm proud of the work

that I've done. At the same time, you'll never see me run around saying, "The other people didn't contribute or have anything to do with the success," because they had everything to do with it. It's weird; it is what it is.

Speaking of the "Pumpkins sound," as you assembled *Aghori Mhori Mei*, what were the keys to harnessing that tone?

When I worked with Tony Iommi in around 1998, I had this epiphany. I was in the studio, and I'm five feet away watching Tony, and I'm looking at his gear, and he sounded like Tony Iommi no matter what amp you've got him on. For guitar players, you always go back to the attack. If you look at Eddie Van Halen or Uli Jon Roth's attack, it's really in the picking.

Is gear important?

The gear is important. But a lot of guitar players place too much stress on the gear and not enough on the pick attack. I think it's just the way I play. I've been using these boutique Carsten amps in the studio, not exclusively, but predominantly. Brian Carstens, an amp builder out of Chicago, built me an amp called the Grace. We've since built another, the Empire, which is a metal-based amp.

You're still using real tube amps?

We're still moving air. Some of the guitar sounds you hear on the new record are us recording on one amp and then running it through the other amp and combining the two signals. I'd say 90 percent of this was straight into the amps, pure power.

Do you still break out any of your old Strats?

I'm using my signature Reverend models, the Z-One and the Drop Z. Those aren't modded guitars; those are off-the-wall, stock guitars. I had a relationship with Joe Naylor, who used to own Reverend and now does development for them. They approached me about doing a signature guitar in 2016, and that guitar [*the BC-1*] won awards at NAMM. Later, they approached me and said, "We don't want to change that guitar; it continues to sell. It does well for us. Can we do a different guitar? Is there anything you want?" I said, "I'd like a guitar that captures my Nineties sound." Joe and I worked on getting what I call the "Sabbath note," which is a lower octave when you play low riffs, but it's in the pickup sound. It's not something you get out of the amp. That guitar [*Drop Z*], which still has my Railhammer pickups, has been successful; that thing is just vicious, man.

And you've got an album to be proud of. That must be satisfying.

We're very encouraged that people are supporting our new music. It's been a hard case to make — in the music business for the last 10 years — that the band has a future as a recording act. Most of the energy has been focused on the live show because we can go out and sell tickets because of our catalog.

But you've also made headlines letting people know you're not relying on that catalog live.

If I had one meeting, I've had one hundred where I had to sit in an office and tell people, "Look, if I can't make new music, and I'm not engaged in new music, you're never going to get me to play these old songs." Some people, when they hear that, lose their minds. I got a bunch of clickbait headlines because I dared to say, "If I don't want to play an old song, I just don't play it."

Can you shed light on what you meant?

I have too much respect for the audience to fake my way through. That turned into, "He doesn't want to play his old songs." That's really stupid because I wrote them. I don't want to play the songs I wrote. No. I don't want to play songs I don't emotionally connect with. I don't want to turn into that type of artist in front of an audience.

You want to play the old songs; it just needs to be organic.

It's like the reverse [*of the headlines*]. If you see me playing an old song, I want to play it and share my experience with the audience. That's the most honorable thing I can think of. I wrote it, and here we are, years later, sharing it. It's an amazing feeling. I mean... are you kidding me? But we live in this stupid clickbait world.

So, what's your outlook?

If I can't make new music that people believe in, I'm announcing to the world that I'm a shadow of my former self. I'm not psychologically strong enough to stand up and think, "Yeah, I used to be better." I don't get that. Why are you still in the game if you don't believe in who you are today? Do something else. I still believe in the band and the power of music.

When I see fans interacting with our current music, it means we've crossed the generational divide. I'm not overstating it — we've seen many bands go way past what people assumed was their due date. The next step for the music business to come into the 21st century is to accept that any artist will always be able to contribute culturally with new music. 🍎

"It seems like yesterday, but it seems like forever ago at the same time," says Mick Thomson about the 25 years that've passed since Slipknot released their self-titled 1999 debut album





KNOT'S LANDING

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, A LITTLE-KNOWN DES MOINES, IOWA, BAND DROPPED AN ALBUM THAT WOULD FOREVER CHANGE THE LOOK AND SOUND OF HEAVY METAL. AHEAD OF KNOTFEST'S RETURN TO AUSTRALIA IN 2025, **SLIPKNOT'S MICK THOMSON** DISCUSSES THE MANIC RECORDING OF *SLIPKNOT*, HIS 1999 GEAR, THE ALBUM'S WEIRD DEARTH OF GUITAR SOLOS AND MORE

BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK

PHOTO: JONATHAN WEINER

IT WAS 25 years ago that Slipknot dropped their self-titled debut album on Roadrunner Records. And if the idea of a band made up of nine masked men in red jumpsuits playing a highly combustible and chaotic strain of heavy metal — one that mashed together everything from thrash and death, to punk and hardcore, to hip-hop and sampled sounds, all of it laced with a healthy dose of atmospheric weirdness and straight-up ear-bleeding noise — would not only still be around a quarter-century later, but also be a multi-platinum, arena-dwelling, festival-headlining behemoth sounded, well, crazy? You wouldn't be the only one to think so.

"Not a fucking chance," says guitarist Mick Thomson when asked if he thought major success was in the cards for the band. "We were just a bunch of stupid idiot kids." Nevertheless, those kids — Thomson, singer Corey Taylor, percussionists Shawn "Clown" Crahan and Chris Fehn, drummer Joey Jordison, bassist Paul Gray, turntablist Sid Wilson, sampler/keyboardist Craig Jones and guitarist Josh Brainard — created something that didn't just connect with a large audience, but also altered the very sound and look of heavy metal. In 2024, Slipknot may not be exactly the same unit — the masks and jumpsuits are still there, but the only members remaining from their debut album are Thomson, Crahan and Taylor (as well as guitarist Jim Root, who joined late in the process for *Slipknot* and remains an integral part of the band). But over the course of 25 years and seven studio albums, including their most recent, 2022's *The End, So Far*, they've built up one of the most impressive and influential catalogs in metal.

And it all began with *Slipknot*. Powered by two singles — the corrosive-yet-catchy "Wait and Bleed" and the rap-metal rager "Spit It Out" — as well as frantic and ferocious album anthems like "(sic)," "Surfacing" and "No Life," the songs hit with laser-focused precision while also sounding as if they were on the verge of devolving into complete cacophony. Credit this dichotomy at least in part to the presence of producer Ross Robinson, at the time celebrated for pulling raw, open-wound performances out of acts like Korn and Sepultura, who proved an ideal pairing for the band. "Ross let us loose in the studio, and we went nuts," Thomson says of the sessions at Indigo Ranch in Malibu, California. "He kept the intensity up. But, you know, he was just matching our level."

For some, it was levels previously unheard. "People didn't fucking know what to think or do with us early on," Thomson says. "But our thing always was, 'Fuck your labels — just listen to the shit. Do you like it?' You don't have to categorize it and this and that. Just ask yourself, 'Is it cool?'"

Thomson recently sat down with *Guitar World* to discuss the making of *Slipknot* and offer his thoughts on the landmark record 25 years on. He also dove into the streamlined and somewhat surprising gear he used for the sessions, named his favorite song from the album and got honest about how he feels about the lack of guitar solos on the record. "I wasn't super happy, but, you



Mick Thomson does his thing at Ozzfest 2001. [below] 1999's *Slipknot*, in all its glory. "You don't have to categorize it and this and that. Just ask yourself, 'Is it cool?'"

know, whatever," he says.

At the end of the day, it all worked out. "Everything had to happen the way it did," Thomson says. "It all had to be exactly that way. Because that's what made the record, and that record is what made us."

Let's get the obvious question out of the way: Does it feel like it's



Slipknot in action in Noblesville, Indiana, on August 6, opening night of the Here Comes the Pain tour, which celebrates 25 years of Slipknot. [below] The band's August 6 setlist

been 25 years since Slipknot?

I don't know, because I don't know what 25 years should feel like! [Laughs] It's so weird, because a normal person's passage of time is this sort of linear thing, but with us, we'll be on the road, and then we're off the road, and then we're on the road, and then we're off the road... It's like I have these, like, two different lives that pause each other. So it seems

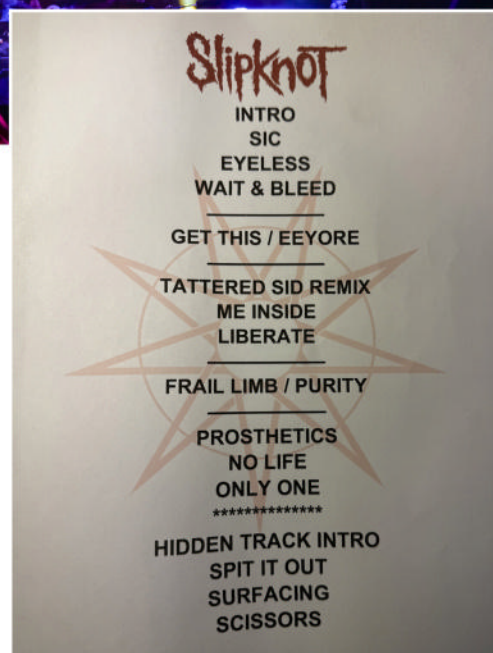


“INSTEAD OF JUST SITTING IN THE STUDIO AND PLAYING, WE RECORDED LIKE IT WAS A SHOW... WE WERE PLAYING OUR ASSES OFF”

like yesterday, but it seems like forever ago at the same time.

The Slipknot recording sessions at Indigo Ranch have taken on this mythology of having been really chaotic and intense. How would you describe them?

I think the way I see it is, it's not that it was so intense... it's that it was just us being us. We're intense, right? So it was us doing our thing. It's not like a bunch of innocent people were sitting there and some extreme whatever was shown at 'em. We were extreme. And when we went into the studio we kept that extremeness. Instead of just sitting in the studio and playing, we recorded like it was a show. So the intensity in the studio was that we were basically playing our asses off like we were playing a show. We were hitting hard. Joey's not trying to play perfect on his drums — he's bashing the shit out of them. Same with me. I was literally headbanging while tracking the record, to get the vibe, instead of sitting there like a machine. And I think that translated to a lot of seat-of-



your-pants, on-the-edge kinda shit.

Was Ross Robinson someone you really wanted to work with as a producer?

It was a dream for us. But also, he wanted to work with us. So it was very mutual. You know, I wasn't into the stuff he did before, but I appreciated him and his work and his sounds. So it was great to get to work with him. And I'm a totally different person, totally different player, just for having known him. It really changed a lot of my priorities and got me to see a lot of stuff about music and the guitar and myself differently. It was just an incredible learning experience. So I love the guy. He's seriously one of the greatest people on earth — one of the greatest you could ever meet.

You say you weren't really a fan of anything that Ross had produced prior to *Slipknot*. That being the case, what appealed to you about his work?

Vibe and tone. You listen to that Sepultura record [1996's *Roots*] he did, the thing's big and organic and raw and real. It's not processed. There's a vibe and there's a sound. And Korn's early stuff, there's a guitar sound, there's a vibe, there's a feel that's in it, you know?

How did you approach your guitar parts in the studio?

Well, it was funny because I get in there and Ross has a Marshall, I think it was a [JCM] 800, that was on the Sepultura record and whatever, and so I'm thinking, "Monster tone." But I plugged in and it just didn't feel like I wanted it to feel. So I ended up using my Rocktron Piranha [preamp]. My Rocktron Piranha with a dbx 31-band graphic EQ in the effects loop, into a [Mesa] Boogie 295 [power amplifier], into my Carvin cabinet with the 100-watt Eminence-made Carvin speakers that sound so goddamn good. And I mean, it's not a great guitar tone. It's whatever. But it was mine. It was what I had at the time. And it felt right. Would I love to go back and change it and make it into something that I would like now? Sure. But it was what it was. It's very organic and raw and shitty. [Laughs]

What was your main guitar?

My Jackson King V. Three-piece Eastern hard rock maple body, with swamp ash sides. Ebony board. EMG 81's. And I fixed the bridge. I put a screw in it, and then I let the sustain block just pull into that when you pull the string. So it had better sustain and was a little bit bigger sounding than stock. But I wasn't playing that guitar live, because it was a Custom Shop order and it took me a year to get it, and years of payments on a loan just to buy it. I didn't want to get it hurt. So I started playing Ibanez [RG]550s and 560s, because I could pick 'em up at pawn shops for 150 bucks. I'd get one of those, put EMGs in it, do a fret job and set it up, shim the bridge, and now I've got a monster guitar. That's why I was always telling people, "Man, these fucking Ibanezes are just the shit. You cannot do better. You can



"I ACTUALLY HAD SOME SOLOS IN SONGS, BUT THEY ALL GOT CUT OUT. BETWEEN ROSS AND JOEY, GUITAR SOLOS ARE STUPID NOW"

go spend a thousand dollars on a new guitar or spend \$150 on this used Ibanez." So that was what I played live early on. Because onstage I would take Clown damage or Sid damage... shit used to be nuts. I mean, Clown used to use, like, metal bars and shit. We were very unsafe. You break the headstock off a \$200 fucking used Ibanez it's one thing, but a Custom Shop Jackson King V is another.

Original Slipknot guitarist Josh Brainard left the band shortly after you finished recording the album. What was it like to work with him in the studio?

Josh is a great rhythm player. So it was pretty cool working with him. He was really tight, really efficient. Just fucking solid. Easy to work with. I remember his guitar sound on that record was a 100-watt Laney AOR, and he was going straight into the head. It was modded by my old guitar tech, a friend of mine, and that thing snarled. So we recorded the whole record together, and we had a really good symbiosis there for quite a while. But by the time we came back in to mix it, Josh had quit, and Jim [Root] was with us.

Was it a different sort of energy with Jim?

When Jim came in the record was already done. He played on "Purity," but that's because we did that one when we were mixing. But with Jim, we just had to show him the songs and go on tour. So it's tough to com-

Slipknot's Jim Root [left] and Mick Thomson in 2024, all jumpsuited up and ready to go





pare the dynamics. Like I said, Josh is a great rhythm player, but Jim's a way more complete player. There's a bigger palette of things to work with. So I'm really happy with the way it worked out.

Throughout *Slipknot* you use noise and effects to create an ominous atmosphere. It's one of the defining characteristics of the album from a guitar standpoint.

My weird effects shit! [Laughs] It's funny, because the Boss GX-700 [processor] that I used for all those weird sounds, I'm still a slave to it. I still have those in my rack, because it's the only thing that will make, like, the "Spit It Out" sound. It does this humanizer vowel sound, but it doesn't do it the same anymore. The way that the digital shit is structured is different. It doesn't act the same. So I have to use those old units. And these things are now 25 years old. Every time we turn one on I'm hoping I haven't lost all my presets. Like, "Is today the day the presets are gone?"

You could just write them down...

[Laughs] Yeah, right? You'd think I probably would have done that. As soon as I get off this call I think I'm gonna open up the fucking thing and start writing down parameters...

Another distinguishing guitar feature of the album is the absence of traditional solos.

Well, I actually had some solos in songs, but they all got cut out. Because between Ross and Joey, guitar solos are stupid now. So...

[Laughs]

Oh, any kind of technical guitar playing was mocked and frowned upon. So, yeah, leads were stripped out. The song "(sic)" used to be called "Slipknot," and there was a lead in that, and then there were solos in some other shit. But they were just massaged out. But as I said, I learned a lot from Ross, and that was one thing. I mean, we grew up in an era where you heard one to two guitar solos in every goddamn metal song. And it's like, "Why?" Just as a matter of course? It's like paint-by-numbers. "There's your template. There's where that solo goes." Ding!

As a guitar player, how did it make you feel to have your solo spots wiped?

I mean, I get it... but it sucked. Because it was one of those things where I'm like, "I've spent my whole life playing and now fucking here I am, and... nope! Never mind! It's all gone!" You know? Like, "Just take it all away from me. That's cool! Never mind that I sat in my room for years obsessing and trying to fucking do whatever, and then here I am and... nope!"

Did you try to fight against it?

No. What are you gonna do? Throw fits? Go, "I demand!..." If it works, it works.

Do you have a favorite song on *Slipknot*, or is there one that you feel really defines the record?

I don't know, really. There's so much stuff on there and there's so many different things. It's kind of all over the map. So it's different things for different people. For me, if I had to pick one song that I'd rather play, I'd proba-

bly play the hidden track, "Eeyore." The quick fucking grind thing. It's raw. It's on fire. It tells you to go fuck yourself.

I've always liked "Get This" for the same reason.

Yep. Absolutely! I was gonna say that one, too. That would probably be the other one I would choose.

At the other end of the spectrum, is there anything you would change about the record? Maybe something that seems dated to that specific era that you'd do differently now?

No, because everything has to happen the way it happens. One thing I think is funny is the way you can look back at something through the lens of today and people will be like, "Oh, that sounds really old..." I'm like, "Dude, that was so cutting-edge when that came out! People were shitting!" It's like when you watch a movie from the Eighties and the special effects, at the time it was the most amazing Steven Spielberg thing, but now it's just kind of cartoonish. But it had to exist. Because there is no "what-ever is happening today" without it. You know what I mean? So with the album, yeah, there's a few things that I'd get rid of, that are dated from the Nineties. But I won't say what!

Can you give one example?

Let's just say there's just some aspects of stuff that's on the first record that could not be there now. And I'd be fine with that. [Laughs]

Well one thing is for sure: *Slipknot* was, and still is, an extreme record. But one of the reasons we're still talking about it today is because, amazingly, it also achieved significant mainstream success. How surprised were you about that?

Utterly and completely. But I try not to think about it, because I don't wanna tempt the gods. You know what I mean? Like, "Oh, you questioned fate! Ha! Dick!" I don't wanna push my luck. It's like the Soup Nazi [on Seinfeld]; you just smile and be happy you've got your soup.

Say thank you and move on.

Exactly! Just smile and keep fucking moving. 🐾



Words Andrew Daly Portrait Liam Maxwell

“I DON’T THINK ANYONE ELSE IS DOING THIS. AND IF THEY ARE, THEY’D BE STUPID!”

Long ago, the **Pixies** blazed a trail for Nirvana and others to follow. But now, as before, there is no masterplan. As guitarist Joey Santiago says: “I still go by feel – and with my gut.”

Nirvana. Radiohead. Weezer. All have the Pixies’ weird-out/freak-out signature stamped across their foreheads. Formed in Boston, Massachusetts in 1986, Pixies changed the alt-rock game forever with the classic albums *Surfer Rosa* (1988), *Doolittle* (1990) and *Bossanova* (1990) with era-defining songs such as

Where Is My Mind?, *Here Comes Your Man* and *Debaser*.

The mad scientist behind the bulk of that indie rock splendour is guitarist and lead vocalist Charles Michael Kittridge Thompson IV, aka Frank Black, aka Black Francis. A lyrical savant and a master of loud/quiet dynamics, Francis set the template for ’90s rock, which has been copied endlessly across the years. But he couldn’t have done it without his trusted sidekick Joey Santiago, who injected gain-drenched, off-the-wall, shards-of-glass-meets-sticky-pop guitar goodness into the mix.

As Joey tells us, the Pixies’ approach has always been about “feel” in its purest sense. “I knew what was overdone,” he says. “And I knew what people could do better than I could, so I steered away. But now, I’m learning more theory, which has been interesting...”

Starting with the 2022 album *Doggerel*, Francis began to lean on Joey for not only guitars but also lyrics. Joey cautiously, if

GAME CHANGERS

Pixies (from left): David Lovering, Black Francis, Joey Santiago, Emma Richardson

not jokingly, attributes this to Francis’s “thinking the way I look at the world is interesting”. The results on *Doggerel* were strong, but even stronger on the band’s new album *The Night The Zombies Came*, with the classically-inspired *I Hear You Mary* being a Santiago-penned standout.

Joey admits that the Pixies’ earlier catalogue looms large. And he’s not about to proclaim that *The Night The Zombies Came* is their best yet. Sure, he’s happy with it, but he still yearns to complete a magnum opus.

As he puts it: “I want people to one day say about the post-break-up records, ‘These are great records, just as good as the earlier ones’. I want to make one definitive album where it’s like, ‘F*ck... okay, that’s it!’”

But for now, he’s got plenty to say about the new album, starting with his expanded role in the band...

You’re writing words for Black Francis to sing. Is that a pretty daunting task?

Going back to our heyday, nothing was really broken. I was quite happy doing what I was doing – and I’m still happy. If I don’t have to write again, I’ll be happy. The lyrical aspect is a great and fun exercise. But I consider Charles [Black Francis] one of the best lyricists. Music is one thing, but his lyrics are like, ‘What the f*ck?’ You know?

Why do you think Francis has asked you to contribute lyrics at this stage of the game?

I have no idea! Maybe he thinks the way I look at the world is quite entertaining. That’s the only reason that I can think of.



OLD SCHOOL

"There's something about the feeling of the amp behind you," Joey says

But I really don't know, man.

So how do you look at the world?

Oh, man... it's a f*cking goofy world. It really is. It's like this parade of people. It's just the weird way the world ended up.

How does the state of the world, combined with what's expected of the Pixies, inform how you approach making new records?

Once we're in the studio, it's all just whatever happens. Musically, I feel kind of trapped within the parameters and the rules of music. I navigate around that. I'm fortunate enough to have carved out this style that comes out naturally, and I'm aware of it. Sometimes I avoid it, and sometimes I embrace it. I don't know if I answered your question...

Let's try it this way: what are your default settings when you pick up the guitar while in Pixies mode?

I fool around with the guitar, and I've been fooling around with it a lot more. What comes to mind is that I like to make a story out of it. When I'm watching a TV programme with my wife, I tend to score the scenes. It's just exercising another part of my brain.

Would you say inspiration usually strikes randomly for you?

It comes out of the ether. Sometimes it's two notes that will start everything, and it will snowball from there. It will

come from the ether, and then, I'll be like, 'Okay, I want this to be like David Gilmour-ish', or whatever it is. Most of the time, it'll just come out of nowhere.

Digging into *The Night The Zombies Came*, as we understand it, *I Hear You Mary* came from an instrumental track that you put together which was inspired by classical guitar.

Is that correct?

During Covid, I bought a nice acoustic guitar and started to learn [1968 Mason Williams instrumental] *Classical Gas*. Along the way, this thing – *I Hear You Mary* – came along. I was listening to *Classical Gas*, and just the technique and the alternative picking were there. I kept fooling around with it, and this thing came along.

Your style is totally fearless. You're unafraid to go anywhere on guitar. But does it creep into your mind that injecting classical touches might alter your guitar identity?

That's a good question. Subconsciously, as far as my style goes, I've always been like, 'Okay, I don't think anyone else is doing this. And if they are, they'd be stupid – I just stuck to it'. And then, in my head, I was like, 'If I learn more, I'm gonna f*ck everything up!' I already knew a bunch of stuff as a kid. I knew all the scales and stuff and the pentatonics, but that was boring for me.

So it's a matter of merging your

idiosyncrasies with theory.

In a way, yes. When I'm learning it, there's some kind of theory, like modes, for instance. But what I've discovered is that I've been doing this already. I kind of already knew what I was doing and knew certain modes would provoke feelings, but – for me – I had to discover it naturally. In the end, it's all feeling anyway. I discovered these things by feel because sometimes there's a shortcut if you want a certain feeling. There's a shortcut to do that, but I've found that now I don't find that satisfying. But I'll still go by feel – and with my gut.

Which track from the new album would you pick as the blending of your quintessential vibe with your newfound chops?

The end of the *Chicken* solo is straight pentatonic, which I would have avoided in the past like the plague! But I like the pace of it. I got the David Gilmour pace.

Have you brought any new gear into the fray to support your new outlook?

I've had my Marshall JCM800 for a long time. It's a 50-watt, two-channel one. I like to use its natural distortion. But then I've had a blackface '64 Fender Vibrolux for a while now, too. That's the one that just punches through and gets the transience. The Marshall is just the wolf behind it.

Do you use the same gear live as in the studio?

Well, that's my setup for live. In the studio, I want to use the same gear so it will translate live.

So no amp modelling for you, then?

I haven't tried them. I do have one at home, but I don't know – there's something about the feeling of the amp behind you. We've played with bands that use modelling, and it sounds fine to me, but I just think the romance of real amps is there. Modelling is what it is, but without my amps there'd be nothing to model.

The Pixies have never been into following trends anyway...

"ONE SOLO IS STRAIGHT PENTATONIC, WHICH I WOULD HAVE AVOIDED LIKE THE PLAGUE IN THE PAST!"

We never listen to any of that outside stuff that influences you one way or another. When someone tells me, 'Have you listened to this band? They kind of sound like you guys' – I will avoid listening to that. We were never a trendy band. Deep down, we feel like outsiders. We never fit into a scene. When we were in Boston, I definitely felt like an outsider. I did go to a handful of parties where other musicians were, but I did not feel the vibe!

That's why your style is unlike anything else out there. It's all internal.

Internal, yes. When I listen to music, I listen for the mood. I'll get some sonic influences from it, but I don't trespass on people's style. I don't like when people do it. It's like, 'Oh, God, you sound like that guy. Why did you do that?' It's like, 'We've already seen that painting, don't do that. It's boring'.

Interestingly, a lot of bands from the '90s – and even today – have trespassed on the Pixies style.

Yeah, it's fine. It's bound to happen. Well, not bound to happen, but it just gets filtered out into something that nice. But hey, who knows? Sometimes it sounds like us. Some bands managed to make it a part of their own identity.

The Pixies' second act is now 20 years strong. What's the secret to that?

Just staying on the same page and staying creative. That's going to be the key to the band moving forward, just continuing on that way creatively. I can only speak for myself, but it's my desire to learn more.

Is the best yet to come?

We've made great records, don't get me wrong. But I want one where people go, 'God dammit!' Like, universally, I want one where people go, 'Holy sh*t, they did it!' That's what I want. We haven't gotten that yet.

Some would say you've already done that with *Surfer Rosa* and *Doolittle*.

There's a barrier we have to go through with those legacy albums where people are always going to be like, 'Yeah, that's it'. But I want history to show that these post-breakup albums we've done have people eventually going, 'You know what? We were wrong about those guys!' 🎸

The *Night The Zombies Came* is out now



"WE FEEL
LIKE
OUTSIDERS.
WE NEVER
FIT INTO
A SCENE"

Photo: Getty

GOLDEN AGE

GRETSCH DUO JETS

As solid-bodied models began taking the guitar world by storm in the early 50s, Gretsch joined the party with the revolutionary single-cut 6128 Duo Jet and its twangsomes DeArmond 'Dynasonic' single coils

Words Bob Wootton Photography Phil Barker

In the hagiography of rock 'n' roll, Gibson and Fender guitars have the throne. In country, and particularly rockabilly, the big orange boxes of Gretsch are challengers. So spare a thought for an astonishingly good bit player, the Gretsch Duo Jet, which first appeared in 1953.

The 50s were a time of extraordinary change and innovation in the musical instrument industry, with the electrification of guitars being the driving force. Earlier in the 1930s, the pioneering work of George Beauchamp, Adolf Rickenbacker and Paul Barth had led to the creation of Rickenbacker's 'Frying Pan' A-series lap steels, and by 1936 Gibson was putting pickups on its acoustic archtops with the ES-150 following on from the EH-150 lap steel of the previous year. Indeed, after Charlie Christian picked up his own Electric Spanish guitar in around 1937, he would go on to become the first electric guitar hero when he used the new instrument to solo like a horn with Benny Goodman's band in '39.

With volume, however, came feedback. The first recognisable solid-bodied 'Spanish' (namely, fretted) guitar

appeared in '48 when Paul Bigsby – Southern Californian inventor, engineer, motorcycle enthusiast and creator of the vibrato tailpiece – built it for noted country artist Merle Travis. Bigsby's one-offs for leading local performers paved the way for a radio repairman who, by '49, had prototyped his Broadcaster, forerunner to the legendary Telecaster and the daddy of

The 50s were a time of extraordinary change and innovation in the musical instrument industry

electric solidbodies: Leo Fender's success caused a frenzy among competitors.

Meanwhile, successful entertainer Les Paul had failed to curry favour in his 'Log' – archtop sides around a solid, electrified centre block – but suddenly Gibson embraced him, and the Les Paul model emerged in '52.

Not long after, Gretsch – also a big name of the time in drums and basses – joined the solidbody fray and launched its not dissimilarly shaped 6128 Duo Jet in 1953. Some people think its gloss black top was a response to Gibson's Les Paul Custom, but that didn't launch officially until '54, following its late-'53 prototypes... Perhaps Gretsch clocked one at a trade show.

Model Behaviour

The Les Paul was a solid block of mahogany, whereas the Duo Jet was routed or 'chambered', providing a question mark as to whether it should actually be referred to as a solidbody. It was also offered in other model incarnations, too, including the 6129 Silver Jet, which joined the ranks in 1954 with a showstopping silver sparkle finish.

As a key endorser of the Gretsch name, Atkins' relationship with the brand began in 1954 with the 6120, and that same year the 6130 Round-Up appeared, adorned with an orangey transparent wood finish and the 'G' brand that was used for Gretsch's Western-themed models; this model provided the basis for the Chet Atkins 6121. The Oriental Red-finished



Gretsch launched its 6128 Duo Jet in 1953. Some people think its gloss black top was a response to Gibson's Les Paul Custom

This Gretsch 6128 Duo Jet is slightly longer in the chambered body, and features a Bakelite archtop bridge support, 'G' tailpiece and 'Vuitton' case



1. There's a reassuring over-engineered feel and weight to Gretsch hardware

2. The thin mahogany-sheet back features three access hatches; the neck heel is capped with an ivory plate

3. Bone nut, oversized truss-rod cover and evergreen 'T-roof' legend (and some curious wear marks on face!)

6131 Jet Fire Bird was introduced in 1955, and a dark Cadillac Green gloss featured in small quantities in 1957.

The black, silver and likely red were first topped with Gretsch 'Nitron' laminate from the company's drum line, but paint finishes succeeded within a couple of years. Other colours from Gretsch's drum colour chart were reputedly offered, but only a single turquoise sparkle example supposedly exists. A model with the off-white finish, gold glitter binding, paddle headstock and gold-plated hardware of Gretsch's fancy White Falcon joined the catalogue in 1955; this was the rare 6134 White Penguin, now one of the most valuable Gretsch collectibles.

Charmingly, Gretsch changed specs incessantly, so we can date its guitars of this period by their features. From its inception in 1953, the first 150 or so Duo Jets had the older curly-script headstock logo, then came the square-script logo in 1954 (see picture 3) known as a 'T-roof'. Both are still in use.

A Bisgby vibrato tailpiece was optional. The fixed arm variant on a Duo Jet deserves special mention; it was in the way when not in use, but it adds a unique shimmer for roots, ambient or soundtrack work.





The early models all had twin DeArmond Model 2000 'Dynasonic' pickups, which were modest output single coils, brighter and less powerful than Gibson's P-90s (and therefore less popular with players looking to solo or drive their early amps), with a distinctive twang and bell-like gleam when combined in series in the middle position – a signature Gretsch sound. Since single coils are very sensitive to height, this writer has adjusted his models (pictured) with the excellent and easily installed TV Jones shims. Later models, specifically from 1958, feature Filter'Tron humbuckers, and Super'Tron units followed in the late 60s.

In 1957, Gretsch debuted its humbucking pickup, the Filter'Tron, at Chicago's Summer NAMM Show, the same year that Gibson introduced its Patent Applied For

(PAF) pickup. In electronics speak, 'buck' is the opposite of 'boost', describing how humbuckers literally 'buck the hum' from venue lights and other electricals that dogged players as they turned up. These pickups comprise two similar but reverse-wound coils with opposite magnetic polarity connected in series. Debate over whether Seth Lover or Ray Butts got there first rages on to this day, but the internal structures of the two makers' pickups yield markedly different sounds. The taller, narrower coil forms of Gretsch's Filter'Tron hold fewer turns of wire and have much lower DC resistance. A larger, stronger magnet than Gibson's partly compensates, and the pickup's narrower magnetic field gives a sound closer to single coils.

Gibson's humbucking pickups were much more popular at the time, but changing tastes and the advent of more sophisticated amplifiers, and a legion of boost and drive pedals that extract nuance from pickups, have led to resurgent interest in Filter'Trons. Crudely, they combine the warmth of humbuckers with the clarity of single coils. Versatile and articulate, they're *very* fussy about the guitar's circuit arrangement and component values. And they're also

4. Thick blue-ish chrome on the De Armond single coils with tortoiseshell riser rings, knurled metal selector switchtip and master volume

5. Open-back Waverley-style tuners with sturdy chromed buttons report for tuning duty



***In 1957, Gretsch
debuted its humbucking
pickup, the Filter'Tron,
at Chicago's Summer
NAMM Show***



Back-silvered pickguard and super-stylised Melita bridge – every bit as good as a tune-o-matic

fantastic on a Telecaster chassis in what's known as a Cabronita or 'little bastard'.

Early Duo Jet bridges were made by Sebastiano 'Johnny' Melita, and these were adjustable for overall position, height and individual string intonation like an over-engineered version of the tune-o-matic, which Gibson had begun introducing on top-end archtop models by '54. These effective, if sometimes brittle, cast metal units are now rather rare; they changed to a bar bridge in '57 and then to the Space Control design through '58/'59. Neither allowed string intonation.

And so to an important force at Gretsch throughout the 50s: Jimmie Webster was a professional New York musician, inventor, demonstrator and what we'd now call brand ambassador. In hindsight, his influence was not always entirely positive. He drove constant model evolutions with a bewildering, ever-changing array of bridges, string mutes, knobs and switches, some of which mute, muffle or duplicate functions. Some believe the less said of his 1966 'Floating Sound Unit', the better! Mercifully, the Duo Jet family escaped many of these excesses.

Fingerboard inlays were initially the large rectangular blocks shown on this example here (though the first 150

Gene Vincent & His Blues Caps guitarist Cliff Gallup was a Duo Jet user and inspired a young Jeff Beck

Duo Jets had no 1st fret marker). These became humped rectangles in '57 and then thumbnails on the bass side in '58.

Scarce left-handed examples often display thumbnails on both sides, indicating repurposed right-handed necks. (Contemporary Gibsons show similar disregard for lefties with headstock legend often upside down and dots on both sides of necks).

In this writer's experience, the construction of older Gretsches can make them feel less substantial than their Gibson counterparts – and their tone reflects this. The necks can be very good, though, and much like Gibsons, earlier examples have skinnier frets.

Golden-era Duo Jets quite typically need neck resets. *Guitarist* contributor Huw Price informs that their neck joints

deployed Martin's traditional dovetail but were not as well executed. A good reset shouldn't detract from value.

Changes continued with the introduction of an 'Action Flo' zero fret around '59. By '61, Gretsch had followed Gibson to double-cutaway bodies for better high-fret access, often with licenced vibrato units from the British Burns company. Both single- and double-cut shapes are arguably somewhat less elegant than Gibson's.

Gene Vincent & His Blues Caps guitarist Cliff Gallup was an early Duo Jet user and inspired a young Jeff Beck, who sported his own with typically astonishing effect and dedicated an album, 1993's *Crazy Legs*, to his hero and his guitar. Bo Diddley's 1959 *Go Bo Diddley* album cover featured a Red-finish 6131 Jet Fire Bird, not forgetting George Harrison's extensive use with early/middle-period Beatles, while the double-cuts were forever immortalised by AC/DC's Malcolm Young.

This writer traded a pretty but uninspiring '65 Tea Burst Gibson ES-330 to broaden his collection of 50s single cuts and got way, way more than he bargained for. A really great guitar with a distinct voice – one that can even get you through a loud blues jam! 🎸

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GET THE FUNK OUT!

Best Of The 70s

Jon Bishop enters a Boogie Wonderful where soul, pop, R&B, dance, groove, disco, and gospel combine to create one of modern music's most evocative styles.

ABILITY RATING

Moderate ★★☆☆☆

Info <https://bit.ly/3WLjVGr>

Key Various Tempo Various

Will improve your... ✓ Wah operating skills

✓ 16th-note strumming ✓ Popping guitar technique

Welcome to our 1970s based funk lesson, the aim of which is to arm you with the skills you'll need to create great 70s-style funk parts.

The first technique to examine is 16th-note strumming, which forms the basis of funk rhythm guitar and we have some easy drills to tighten up your strumming hand. The pattern consists of alternating down and up strums and, as the name suggests, you'll find 16 strums in a bar of 4/4.

Let's first establish the pattern of alternating down and up strokes. Lay the fingers of the fretting hand lightly on the strings to damp them. Our strumming pattern is counted 1-e-&-a, 2-e-&-a, 3-e-&-a, 4-e-&-a and starts on a down strum. Once we have established this framework we can mix up the

rhythms and start to create far more funky sounding parts. The easiest way is to finger a simple octave (Example 1). Keep the strumming hand going and only press the octave down when you want to hear them sound. Having all the muted strums in the part can be distracting, so the final stage is to remove some of these, and here's where the skill lies. Keep the strumming hand going up and down regardless, hovering over the strings to act as a metronome. Remember the pattern remains the same, it's just the

"The wah-wah pedal is synonymous with 70s funk, and is featured in the soundtrack of many a top cop show!"

omission of various muted strokes and the fingers fretting the octave that creates our rhythm.

Closely related is 16th-note popping. This is often just a single note that plays a funky muted riff. The riff can be spiced up with double-stops and unison bends as required. All these strumming and popping ideas can be augmented using a wah-wah pedal, as typified by Isaac Hayes' theme from Shaft.

The key ingredients of funk are Major and Minor Pentatonic scales and 7th chords, as you'll hear in this month's audio examples. Dominant 7ths can be augmented by 9th or 13th intervals, and more tension can be created by altering these extensions to form chords like the 7#9. Another trick is to create the classic Dominant 9sus4 sound by using a

Major triad with a bass note a tone above the root. So, to create D9sus4, play a C chord with a D note bass (also known as C/D).

This month's audio starts with five examples containing 16th-note rhythms, wah-wah, double-stops, unison bends and a mix of long and short 7th chords. Each four-bar idea is notated and our demo track has one bar of four clicks to separate the examples. These will not only provide variety but also essential components that are typical of classic funk vocabulary.

Following our technique primer we have five jam tracks that place some of the example ideas into functioning performance pieces. We have picked five iconic funk bands and guitarists for inspiration, and these are Chic (with Nile Rodgers who's still treading the boards with the band), Average White Band (featuring Hamish Stuart), Kool & The Gang (with Claydes Charles Smith), Earth Wind & Fire (with the incredible Al McKay), finishing with Parliament (and funkster extraordinaire, Eddie Hazel).

Lastly, don't mistake funk guitar as a niche subject, as all the techniques seen here can be applied to almost any other style. Now let's get your groove on! 🎸

TECHNIQUE FOCUS

Using A Wah Wah Pedal

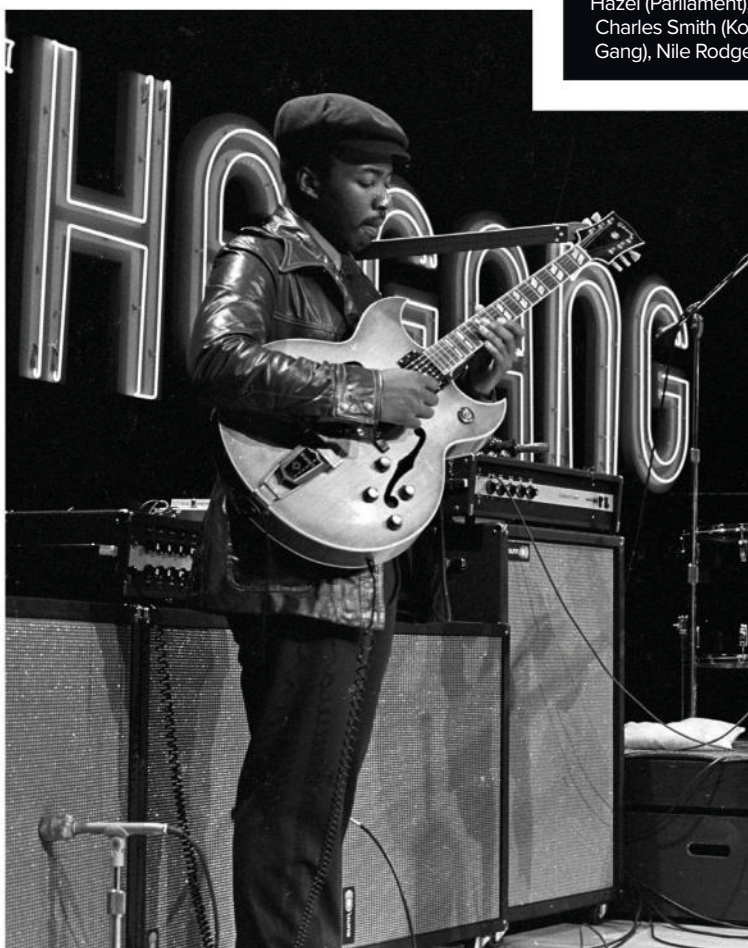
There have been many iconic funk tracks created using the wah-wah pedal. It's a great tool for adding percussive elements to funky rhythm work. Getting that classic 'whacka-chicka' sound may take a bit of practice, so we have notated when the treadle is forward and back in the tab so study this and take things slowly. Try strumming the muted bass strings with the treadle 'heel down'. You should hear a dark, honky sound. In contrast, strumming the muted top three strings with the treadle 'toe down' provides a bright, treble-orientated sound. Having two distinct sounds allows for a percussion style approach (think kick and snare of a full drum kit). Placing the wah-wah as the first pedal in the chain is common practice, but try your overdrive pedal in front for a super wah tone. Using delay and echo in conjunction with the wah-wah can provide some truly spacious filter-type effects.



TRACK RECORD Recordings that feature funk guitar cross over into disco, dance and pop. Check out Nile Rodgers on Chic (1977), C'est Chic (1978), Risque (1979), Sister Sledge's We Are Family (1979) and Diana Ross' Diana (1980). Then Kool & The Gang's Wild And Peaceful (1973); James Brown's Sex Machine (1970); EWF's Gratitude (1975); AWB's AWB (1974) and Parliament's Mothership Connection (1975).



Clockwise from top left:
AWB's Hamish Stuart, Eddie
Hazel (Parliament), Claydes
Charles Smith (Kool & The
Gang), Nile Rodgers (Chic)



PERFORMANCE JAM TRACKS

JAM TRACK 1 EARTH WIND & FIRE STYLE

Our first performance track is inspired by Earth Wind & Fire tracks like *Mighty Mighty*. Guitarist Al McKay was a master of mixing up 16th-note strumming with popping lines. The fingering we are using for the D9 chord makes

moving to the C/D chord (aka D9sus4) easy. Another key feature of this track is sliding into chords from a semitone below. This is a popular trick in many styles and really adds to the delivery.

♩ = 115

A D9 Cadd9/D

Clean middle pickup

f

10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 10 10 10-12

10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11

3

D9 Cadd9/D D9 Cadd9/D C#7 D7 C#7 D7 D9 Cadd9/D

10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 10 10 10-12 10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11 10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 10 10 10-12

5

D9 Cadd9/D D9 Cadd9/D D9 Cadd9/D **B** Eb9 Dbadd9/Eb

10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11 10 X 10 7 X 7 9 X 9 10 X 10 10 10 10-12 10 X 10 7 X 7 9 X 9 10 X 10 11 X 11 8 X 9 10 X 10 11 X 11 11 11-11-13

8

Eb9 Dbadd9/Eb Eb9 Dbadd9/Eb Eb9 Dbadd9/Eb D7 Eb7 Eb9

11 X 11 8 X 9 10 X 10 11 X 11 14 15 13 11 12 11 X 11 8 X 9 10 X 10 11 X 11 11 11-11-13 11 X 11 8 X 9 10 X 10 11 X 11 14 15 13 14 11 10

12

D9 Cadd9/D 1 D9 Cadd9/D 2 D9 Cadd9/D C#7 D7 D9

10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 10 10 10-12 10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11 10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11 10 X 10 7 X 8 9 X 9 10 X 10 13 14 12 10 12 10 11

15, 17

JAM TRACK 2 AVERAGE WHITE BAND STYLE

Hamish Stuart is a great rhythm guitarist (as is Onnie McIntyre) and our example is inspired by AWB tracks like *Cut The Cake* and *Pick Up The Pieces*. Again the double-stops are delivered with a finger slide from a semitone below. The

popping patterns are based around the E Minor Pentatonic scale, but can be augmented by adding chromatic notes. The E7#9 chord is a popular fingering for funk and funk-rock styles (for sonic reference think Hendrix's Purple Haze).

JAM TRACK 3 KOOL & THE GANG STYLE

Kool & The Gang achieved worldwide chart success in the 1980s. However their early 70s recordings had more of a hard-core funk flavour. Our example is inspired by Claydes Charles Smith and Dennis D T Thomas's funky rhythm work on tracks like Celebration and Ladies Night. There are three main guitar

elements that run through the track: a low popping line, funky octaves and 16th-note strumming with a double-stop stab. To give you a chance to try out all the ideas the tab features the parts that have been removed in the backing track. However you may prefer just to stick with one part for the whole of the piece.

$\text{♩} = 110$ Cm

Clean middle pickup

f

3

6

Cm7

9

Cm6 Cm7 Cm6

12 13, 15

17

JAM TRACK 4 CHIC/NILE RODGERS STYLE

Niles Rodgers is a bona fide hit maker (and even named his famous white Stratocaster as such), and has collaborated with a diverse collection of bands and artists right up to this day, including Duran Duran, Madonna, David Bowie, Stevie Winwood and Daft Punk. In the 1970s his main projects were

Chic and Sister Sledge, and our track is inspired by tracks like Le Freak and Thinking Of You. Experiment by alternating your strumming between the lower strings in the chord and the treble strings, to provide some variety. This is a great way to develop that signature Nile Rodgers 'bounce'.

Chic/Nile Rodgers Style Jam Track 4

Tempo: $\text{♩} = 105$

Chords: Fmaj7, Emaj7, Cmaj7, Bmaj7, D/E, Am, Asus4, G

Strumming: Clean neck pickup, f

Measure numbers: 3, 6, 9, 12, 15

JAM TRACK 5 PARLIAMENT STYLE

Our final track is a wah-wah pedal workout in the style of bands like Parliament and Funkadelic. The main riff is constructed using E Minor Pentatonic scale, and to get more mileage out of this idea we can take it up an octave.

a funk favourite and it's easy to move this up a semitone to F9 for some variety. There is an opportunity to play some simple funky lead lines in the final four bars, too. Again the scale of choice is E Minor Pentatonic.

♩ = 80

Clean middle pickup With Wah

N.C.

f

E9

N.C.

E9

E9

1

F9

2

B13

E9

F9

E9

15

The musical score is written for guitar in E minor pentatonic scale (E, G, B, D, A). It consists of five systems of music. The first system (measures 1-3) starts with a clean middle pickup with a wah pedal, followed by a full fretted riff (measures 4-6) and a lead line (measures 7-9). The second system (measures 10-12) continues the riff and lead line. The third system (measures 13-15) features a complex lead line with many bends and a final E9 chord. The fourth system (measures 16-18) shows a sequence of chords: E9, F9, and B13, each with a specific fretting pattern. The fifth system (measures 19-21) returns to a lead line with bends and a final E9 chord. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, bends, and fret numbers.

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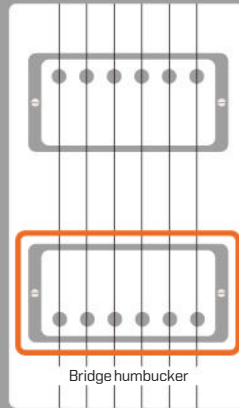


WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- ✓ Drop D tuning
- ✓ Octaves
- ✓ Powerchords

GET THE TONE

CHANNEL DISTORTION



Shinoda and Delson have been playing *The Emptiness Machine* on humbucker-loaded PRS guitars, and over the years they've been known to use Bogner, Mesa/Boogie, Engl and Orange amps. That means you'll need to dial in a modern high-gain tone. If you feel your amp doesn't have enough gain you can use an overdrive pedal to add more saturation, and this also helps to tighten the low end.

LINKIN PARK

The Emptiness Machine

L

ead single from the new album *From Zero*, *The Emptiness Machine* features this anthemic twin-guitar riff which has a powerchord part played by Mike

Shinoda and a melodic octave part from Brad Delson. The powerchords serve to outline a chord progression in the key of D minor.

In drop D tuning, play the three lowest open strings, then barre at the 5th, 8th, 3rd then 10th

frets. For the accompanying guitar part, use your first and third fingers (or first and fourth if it's more comfortable) to play the octave shapes on the third and fifth strings. Depending on the angle of your fretting hand, you should be able to mute out the idle strings by stubbing your fretting fingers against them. Get the muting just right and you should be able to strum the octaves without any open strings ringing out. Practise playing the octaves up and down the

neck within the D natural minor scale, and when you're comfortable with the notes, watch our slowed-down video to learn the melody.

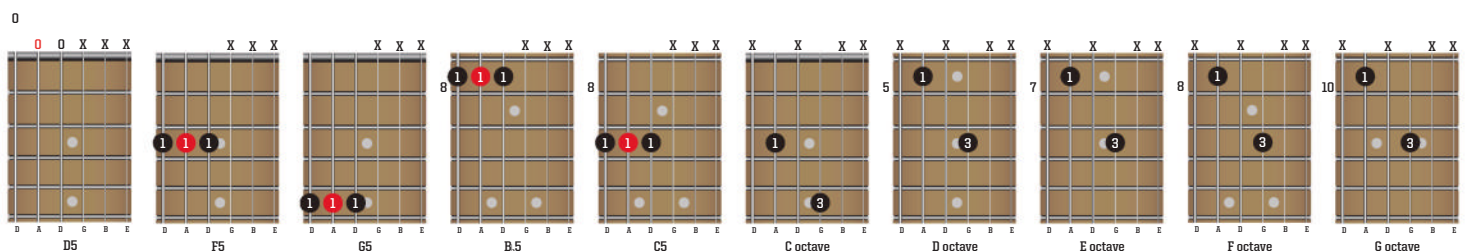
CHEAT SHEET...

Appears at: 2:13–3:35

Tempo: 184bpm

Key/scale: D minor

Main techniques: Strumming, string-muting, octaves



There are five powerchords played on the three bass strings: D5, F5, G5, B,5 and C5. Each powerchord is comprised of a root, 5th and octave and are all played with a first-finger

barre, except for the open D5 chord. The octave shapes move up and down the third and fifth strings spelling out the D natural minor scale (D E F G A B, C).

U2

Martin Cooper checks out the chiming pedal delay tones of this stadium-filling band from Dublin, Ireland, and guitarist The Edge.



The Edge playing his beloved 1976 Gibson Explorer Reissue

ABILITY RATING

★★★★★ Easy/Moderate

Info

Key: E Minor

Tempo: 150 bpm

<https://bit.ly/3WLjVGr>

Will improve your

✓ Double-stop riffs and lines

✓ Musical use of delay

✓ Playing for the song

The sound of early U2 is one of the most instantly recognisable of the past 40 years in music. It was the delay pedal of guitarist The Edge in particular, along with his clever approach to composing guitar parts that launched the band's career and a million copycats over the decades.

The band formed in 1976 when drummer Larry Mullen Jr posted an advert on the notice board at Temple Mount Comprehensive School in Dublin, and was subsequently joined by bass player Adam Clayton, guitarist David Evans (aka The Edge) and vocalist Paul Hewson, who is obviously known by the singular title Bono.

The band could barely play their instruments at the time, but the creative energy of being released to make music and learn their craft saw them go from total musical novices to signing a record deal with Island Records, and releasing their debut album four years later in 1980.

The Edge's guitar tone of the early years was simple, and born out of necessity. With limited technical ability and only three band members playing physical instruments, The Edge bought a delay pedal to fill the sound out around the drums and bass of Larry Mullen and Adam Clayton. Often employing open strings and natural harmonics to maximise the ambience of the notes, he managed to instantly create a sound that had previously not been heard. While he may not be spoken of in the hallowed tones of Hendrix and Van Halen, his innovation and creativity, while less overtly technical than some others, is no less important.

Influenced by 70s new wave and punk bands like The Velvet Underground and Sex Pistols, they were the antithesis of most rock bands of the era, not being influenced by the likes of Led Zeppelin, Hendrix or Deep Purple. It was only later in their career that The Edge began to draw on more blues based influences, and the Rattle & Hum album and film in the late 1980s saw them explore American music and work alongside legends such as BB King and Bob Dylan.

A true innovator, The Edge continues to push the envelope of sounds and guitar parts, and it's always the song that drives his playing and composition forwards. From the first rehearsal in school to the most recent venture playing 40 nights at The Sphere in Las Vegas, in what is truly one of the most innovative gig experiences ever attempted, U2 have worked tirelessly to produce music that has been built on creative and artistic integrity throughout their career.

Our track this month is classic early U2, built around a simple rock based progression in E Minor (E-F#-G-A-B-C-D). There are no Blues scale notes, no string bends, and little vibrato. It's all built around simple two-note doublestops, open strings and natural harmonics that follow the chordal harmony. And of course, that dotted 8th delay effect - for this track try a 200ms delay with a couple of repeats and a mix ratio around 70%.



TRACK RECORD The first three albums were Boy, October and War, and include classic such as I Will Follow, Gloria and Sunday Bloody Sunday respectively. In the mid to late 80s U2 became perhaps the biggest band in the world with hits like Pride (In The Name Of Love) from The Unforgettable Fire, and With Or Without You from 1987's The Joshua Tree. There are live and compilation albums from each era, too.

PLAYING NOTES

The chords in the opening eight bars feature string damping and a pronounced eighth-note dotted delay. There are no guitar overdubs so it's one part and the

delay tones to focus on. It's all built around eighth notes, but certain moments have a pronounced emphasis thanks to the delay effect.

$\text{♩} = 150$

Bridge pickup with dotted 8th note delay (300ms delay)

Em D Em D C G

Light PM

1

Em D Em G

Light PM

5

Em D Em D C G

9

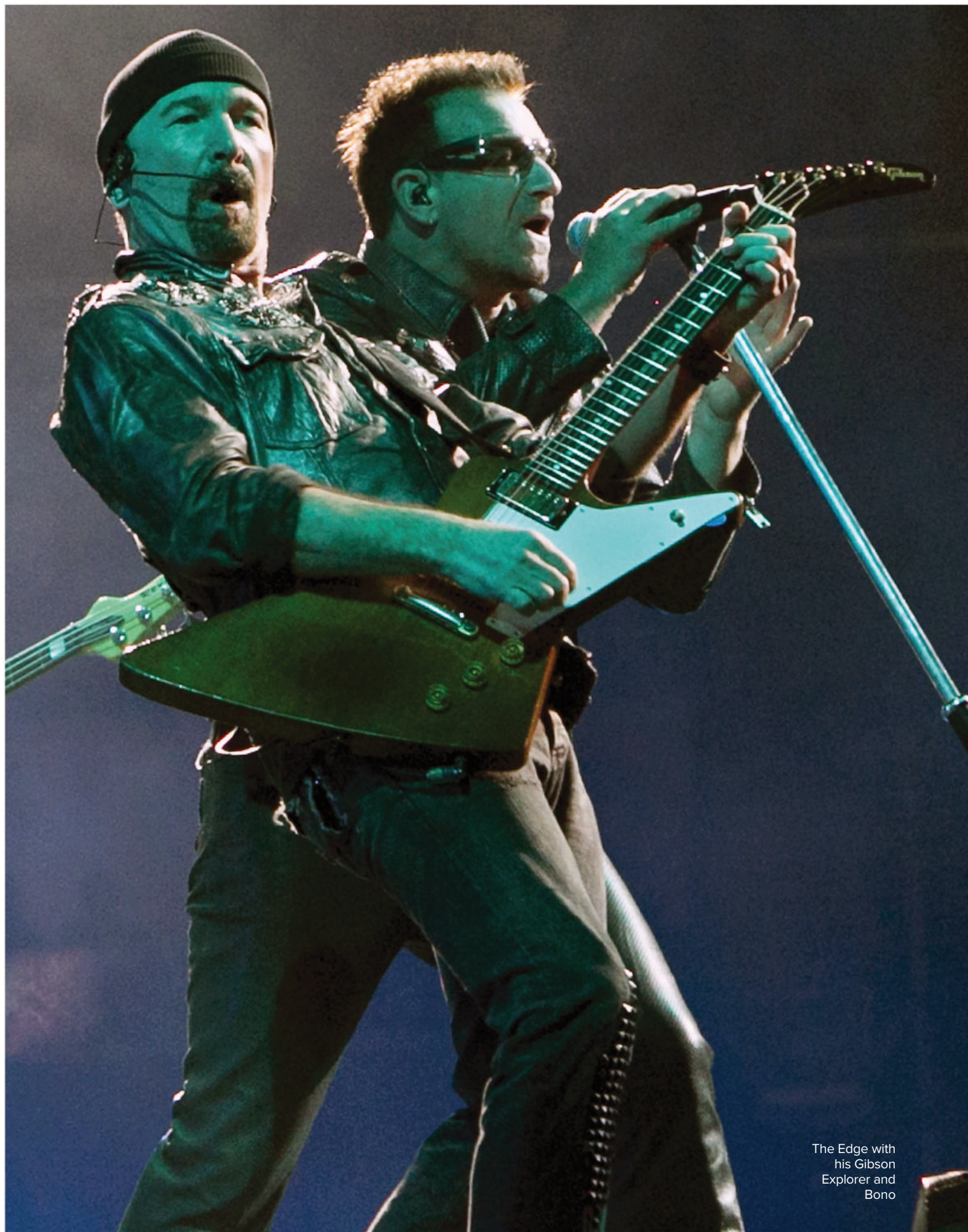
Em D Em G

13

Em D Em D

NH

17, 21



The Edge with
his Gibson
Explorer and
Bono

PLAYING NOTES

While The Edge rarely plays what we'd usually describe as solos, he does embellish his parts with catchy melodic movement. You'll see on the video that all the notes I played on the recording are downstrokes with the pick, with the exception of the highest natural harmonic on the second string in **bars 17-24**.

Em D Em D

25

Em D Em D

29

Em D Em D

33

Em D Em D

37

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EarthQuaker Devices has introduced five new utility pedals, including the AB Box, ABY Box, Buffer Preamp, Buffer Splitter and Flexi Loops. A/B box is a simple tiny tool that lets you choose between two of pretty much anything; the ABY box is used to run a single input out to two destinations; the Buffer Preamp (with a 1 mohm input impedance) ensures tonal integrity and a dynamic signal, while Flexi Loops [pictured] uses high quality, soft touch momentary switches for durability and quick action to ensure a lifetime of switching enjoyment.

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THE ALBERT BROTHERS ON RECORDING HENDRIX, CLAPTON, THE ALLMAN BROTHERS – AND THAT LAYLA SESSION

Ron and Howard's innovative recording techniques became synonymous with the '70s – but the humble siblings say they were just lucky to get to work with the best

Words by **Andrew Daly**.

Since brothers Howard and Ron Albert transformed their Criteria Studios in Miami from a one-room recording booth into a premier destination for big artists, they've accumulated 40 gold and 30 platinum records. Or so Howard reckons. Their resume includes Jimi Hendrix, the Allman Brothers, Frank Zappa and more, which means he's probably right.

While their innovative multi-mic recording technique built their reputation, Ron says that's not the only thing that made Criteria Studios special. "What made it great was that we had several rooms," he says. "We had a lot of camaraderie between acts. Someone was in one room and they'd come into the next studio, sit in on something, maybe help to do a guitar part. It would happen on so many records. Because of that, I couldn't begin to tell you who played on what!"

While the Albert Brothers rubbed

elbows with Eric Clapton and Joe Walsh, the best of their work probably came via Dickey Betts and Duane Allman, resulting in records like *Eat a Peach* – which Ron holds dear. "That was finished after Duane died," he says. "Though he played on some of the tracks, Dickey went and learned the slide part for 'Melissa'. Everybody thinks, 'Oh, this is Duane.' But Duane wasn't there; it's Dickey Betts."

The Albert Brothers sold Criteria Studios in 1983 and retired; but in 1987 they formed Vision Studios and Audio Vision Studios, which today focus on hip-hop artists like Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Lil John

and Ludacris – a far cry from the guitar-drenched days of the '70s.

"We were sort of cheating the world because there were two of us," Howard says. "We had one standing in the control room while the other was moving mics. We could hear the change from location to location. We could get guitar sounds that no one else was getting then because we had two sets of ears."

How did Criteria Studios form?

Howard: "It was originally started by Mack Emerman. He was recording jazz records at his house in Coconut Grove. His father had a piece of land nearby on

"PEOPLE WILL STILL BEHAVE LIKE THEY'RE ON STAGE, AND PUT A MIC STRAIGHT ON A GUITAR - BUT IF YOU MOVE THE MIC SUDDENLY THE SOUND IS SO DIFFERENT"



which he was going to build a candy store. Mack convinced him to let him have the property, and we built the recording studio."

Ron: "It was a one-room facility."

Howard: "It kind of grew from there. When Ron and I started at Criteria, we started in that one room. It grew to a larger room called Studio A, and then there was Studio B, Studio C, Studio D and so on."

You were innovators in how you recorded sound.

Ron: "As technology improved, we'd work on our skills. We'd come in late – everybody else would go home at six o'clock. We came up with our multi-mic technique for recording drums: we'd go overhead, have one mic on the kick and mics on every cymbal. Part of getting a good guitar sound was knowing the instrument. People will still behave like they're on stage, and put a microphone straight on a guitar – but if you move the mic six inches to the left, or right, or down, suddenly the sound is so much different."

Early on, you worked with Jimi Hendrix, who's primarily known for working with Eddie Kramer. What was that like?

Ron: "Eddie was the chief engineer at Electric Lady, and I was the chief engineer at Criteria. We became friends. Eddie would stay at my house in Miami, and I would stay at his house if I was in New York. We were the Miami Pop Festival, which came before Woodstock – kind of a dry run. We had all our equipment in the truck, along with our custom console. Eddie came with Jimi; Jimi was on stage and Eddie came in the truck with us. Eddie says, 'You tape it,' because he didn't know our setup. We recorded him there, and that became part of our resume, due to Eddie. He's a good friend."

How did you become involved with Derek and the Dominos?

Howard: "We were doing a lot of Atlantic Records acts, and they were one of the acts that came through. It was amazing to work with them because they were such amazing players and musicians. It was like a big jam session – which was good because

we had a lot of good pieces to put together."

What was it like working with Eric Clapton and Duane Allman?

Ron: "Eric was in England when they started rehearsing, then he decided to come to Miami. When we started the sessions they didn't have a name, but it was a real band. I remember we set up Eric and Duane in the studio, so they were face-to-face about two feet apart. They could literally touch each other's guitars if they wanted to; and, like Howard said, it was a good jam session. Eric's playing was unbelievable because he was held up by Duane's playing, and Duane was held up by Eric. The rest is history."

Another big piece of your history is your relationship with the Allman Brothers Band.

Ron: "Duane, of course, gets all the credit – but there's no Allman Brothers without Dickey Betts. Dickey came up with all the harmonies, and Duane played 'em. Not unlike Eric and Duane, Dickey and Duane were on such a plane together. Dickey's style was so unique in his harmony parts. We'd sit in the studio for hours, rewinding the tape to play it back for him. We knew we already had the track, but he'd work for hours getting those harmony parts together. He would show them to Duane, he'd play them, and what came out was Jessica or In Memory

"ERIC'S PLAYING WAS UNBELIEVABLE BECAUSE HE WAS HELD UP BY DUANE'S PLAYING, AND DUANE WAS HELD UP BY ERIC. THE REST IS HISTORY"



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"ONE THING THAT STANDS OUT WAS WHEN WE CAME IN ONE DAY AND [THE ROLLING STONES] WERE HOPPING AROUND LIKE BUNNIES FOR THE WHOLE SESSION"

of Elizabeth Reed. That stuff doesn't happen without Dickey."

Howard: "Dickey had this way of playing; he matched what Duane did on slide, but he'd do it pretty much without a slide. It was pretty amazing what he'd come up with."

Ron: "Duane died when he was 24 years old; but the thing was that, without people knowing it, Dickey had stepped into the leadership role."

You also worked with Joe Walsh on *The Smoker You Drink, the Player You Get*.

Howard: "That was an awe-inspiring guitar moment for us. We did that record with Joe in Studio C, and we kind of had him set up in the hallway. We went through the intro; he was playing and he had no idea we were actually recording it. As he was getting ready to say, 'Okay, I'm ready,' we called him in and said, 'Now you're done.' Rocky Mountain Way was done in one take, so that was pretty good!"

What was it like working with the Rolling Stones on *Goat's Head Soup*?

Ron: "They were really great. They drove themselves to the studio in rented station wagons – they didn't come in limousines. When they arrived, they took their guitars out of the cases and tuned up themselves. They were just like regular people."

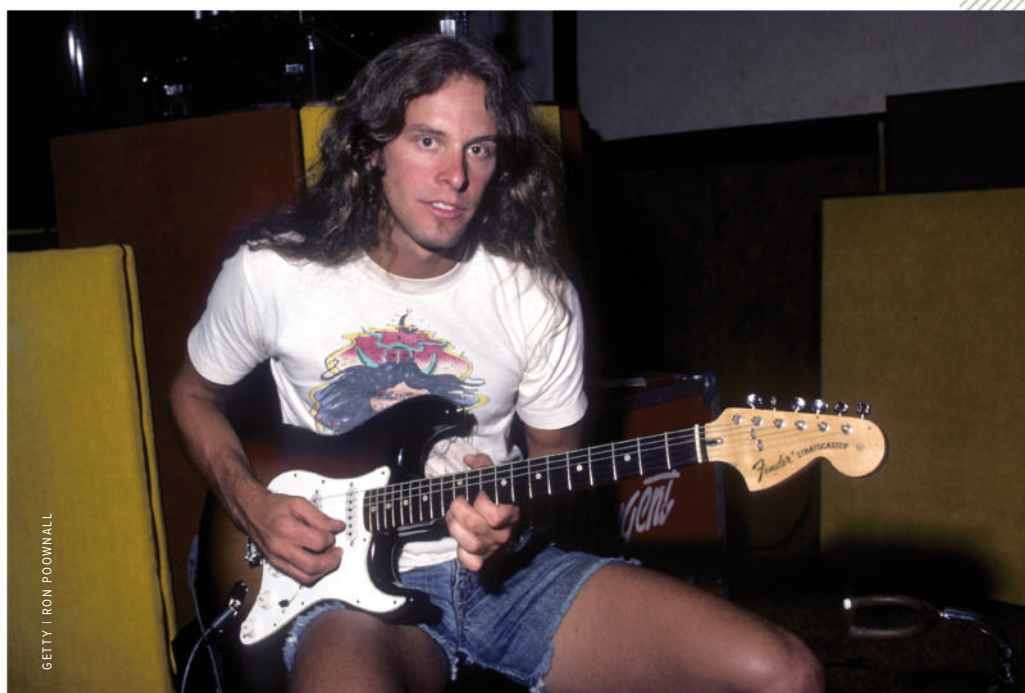
Keith Richards is a character, alright! But I think the one thing that stands out was when we came in one day, and they were hopping around like bunnies for the whole session!"

You also worked with Frank Zappa in the '70s.

Howard: "All these players come in with their own sound. Our job is to capture that sound. All these guys use Fender or Gibson guitars and whatever brand of amp, but Frank was a player with his own approach. I think that's what gave him the sound, along with the ideas. And our job was to capture that sound; and again, that comes down to knowing where to place a mic. We really needed to listen to what Frank was playing and then figure out how to get it all to tape."

You're renowned for your drum sounds, but you greatly impacted the guitar landscape too. What are you most proud of at that end?

Howard: "Well, I'm proud we lived through it! But I don't know... we were in the right place at the right time. We had some talent and knew what we were doing, and that came out in the records. But we had an extremely high caliber of people that we worked with, and that certainly helped make something that lasts." 🎧



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Shure SM4 Home Recording Microphone

An outstanding multi-purpose mic. Review by Chris Gill

RRP \$399 **CONTACT** Jands **WEB** jands.com.au

In the not too distant past when guitarists asked me what I would recommend as a first microphone purchase for their home studios, I would usually recommend a Shure SM57. It's a studio standard that remains relevant and useful as a studio gets upgraded to higher equipment standards, but perhaps its only setback is that it's ideal mainly for a limited variety of uses, such as miking amps and acoustic guitars, and is not the best budget vocal mic.

With the rapid growth of amp emulation software and awesome direct recording devices, it's no longer as important or a priority to start with a great mic for recording traditional amps as it used to be. To me, it's now better to begin with a much more versatile mic, particularly one that is great for recording vocals. There are a lot of good choices out there, but the new Shure SM4 may have an edge over the competition when it comes to capturing vivid vocals, great guitar tones and much more.

The Shure SM4 is a dual-diaphragm condenser microphone with a 1-inch brass capsule that provides a uniform cardioid (kidney- or heart-shape) polar pattern for effective isolation of centered sound sources and rejection of off-axis sounds. Its frequency response is relatively flat, with a slight upward bump of a few dB at 4kHz that dips to 0dB at 8kHz and bumps upwards again with a curve between 8 to 20kHz. This provides enhanced articulation for vocals and midrange instruments like guitars as well as a brilliant sensation of upper frequency presence and air. The

mic can handle maximum sound pressure levels (SPL) of 140dB, which is more than enough headroom for miking a fully cranked 100-watt guitar amp.

Beyond these impressive specs, several other features make the Shure SM4 stand out from similar competition in its price range. Most notable is its patent-pending internal woven-mesh Faraday cage that blocks RF noise from devices like mobile phones, laptop computers and wireless routers. The diaphragm is designed to reduce the bass emphasis of the proximity effect, and both internal and included detachable magnetic external pop filters plus an included shock mount keep plosives, rumbles and vibrations from ruining recordings.

The Shure SM4 is an outstanding multi-purpose microphone that sounds so good on a wide variety of instruments that you may not feel the need to acquire an additional mic for quite some time. With its large dual diaphragm design that maintains focus and clarity of bass and treble frequencies, it is particularly effective at capturing rich, natural-sounding vocals, especially when recording singers with strong bass resonance (are ya listenin', Barry White?).

I'm still mainly a dynamic mic purist when it comes to recording electric guitar amps, but the SM4 does a great job capturing bold midrange tones and it has an edge over my trusty SM57s when it comes to recording the full range of modern high-gain amps with more aggressive bass thump. Acoustic guitars fare equally well, although the bass can be more "hyped" without using a

high-pass filter to roll off lower frequencies (which I tend to do anyway). I had only one SM4 to test as an overhead on a drum kit, but the mic captured the full range of the kick, snare, toms and cymbals with excellent detail.

I tried to get the SM4 to capture interference by waving cell phones, iPads and laptop computers in the area around it, but the test recordings remained quiet. I have previously had an occasional recording ruined by interference from mobile device signals, but with the SM4 I no longer feel the need to enforce a "no cell phones" ban when other musicians are working with me.

Verdict

The Shure SM4 is certain to become a standard for home studio engineers seeking a very versatile first mic, but it's also recommended for users seeking a useful addition to their mic collections, thanks to its super-affordable price and value. 

PROS Affordable 1-inch condenser mic; built-in and external pop filters prevent plosive "pops;" internal wire-mesh Faraday cage blocks RF interference; excellent performance when recording vocals, guitar amps and other common instruments.

CONS Excellent bass response may be too aggressive for some instruments like acoustic guitars.



Fender American Ultra II Stratocaster

Building a better mouse trap. Review by Steve Henderson.

RRP \$3,799 **CONTACT** Fender Australia **PHONE** 02 8198 1300 **WEB** www.fender.com/en-au/

The Stratocaster was released in 1954, attributed to Leo Fender but certainly the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of his key personnel, like Freddie Tavares and Don Randall, as well as local players with whom Leo wisely consulted – there's no substitute for real world experience. To put things into a technological and cultural perspective, this was the year when television went colour; the jet age had begun but the beautiful Lockheed Super Constellation airliner was the new standard for travellers; space flight began this year but it would be another seven years before Yuri Gagarin's manned flight; and the FJ Holden hit the roads for the first time.

With the stratosphere on everyone's mind, Don Randall thought that "Stratocaster" was a suitably futuristic title. The design was radically new and intended as the replacement for the earlier, more utilitarian Telecaster – itself, a masterfully simple and practical design – and a worthy competitor for Gibson's recent Les Paul model. What is most remarkable is that the Strat has changed little in the 70 years since, thanks to its forward-looking design. In fact, a 1954 Strat is as relevant, and as readily useable, today as any contemporary version. The only significant difference would be the original's 3-way switch, changed permanently in the early-'80s for a 5-way that accessed the two "out-of-phase" tones we all love (and Leo disliked).

Certainly, the Strat has been refined over the years, and this new American Ultra II demonstrates that even the best design can be further fine-tuned to offer subtle but useful benefits. This particular Strat has been well-considered and, at its core, doesn't stray too far from the familiar formula: a maple neck on a sculptured alder body, with three single

coil-sized pickups and a vibrato bridge. Add to these an ebony fretboard (also available in maple) with a rolled edge and a compound radius (10"-14"), medium-jumbo frets, Fender's "Modern D" neck profile, a sculptured neck joint and neck plate, 2-post whammy, Fender's Noiseless pickups and S-1 switch... there's a lot of good stuff going on here.

Noiseless pickups (these are the vintage version) are actually stacked humbuckers that have Alnico V magnets in the top coil with a tuned lower coil that eliminates the hum. They work brilliantly, reacting organically to the pick attack – more than any stacked pickup I've ever tried. Played, variously, through a late-'60s Deluxe Reverb, a '63 Vibrolux, a Mesa TransAtlantic, and an old Marshall 50w combo, the Ultra presented all the character expected from a Strat and then some. The clean tones are Leo-approved classics, especially through the Deluxe and the Vibrolux. They have a spanky quack that is both reassuring and so-o-o much fun. Inserting a TS, a Zendrive, and a FluxDrive, each worked well with the guitar's electronics to deliver a smooth, even overdrive, without the unevenness that a lot of single coils exhibit when driven. And, if you're after some Blackmore or Gilmour inspired drive, you've come to the right place. Through the Marshall and the Mesa's crunch channel, the Ultra remained rich and expressive. The highs had a round warmth and the lows were woody and defined.

The S-1 switch is a cool inclusion and reflects an after-market mod that's been happening for a few decades. Rather than a crazy array of new sounds (that you'll probably never use), Fender has kept it simple. The S-1 simply adds the front pickup

to any 5-way selection to offer the outside pickups (sort of Tele-like) and all three (an even softer "out-of-phase" tone). Not really out of phase, they are in parallel, but this changes the harmonic content, making the tone less bold and perfect for rhythm. Fender have also included a treble bleed circuit so the brightness doesn't disappear as you wind down the volume pot – a simple device with a major benefit.

The neck is fabulous. The compound radius, the D shape, the satin finish, and the medium-jumbo frets...all of these features make for a great feel. It seems both new and familiar at the same time. The ebony fretboard is much denser than the more usual rosewood and has a smoother feel than rosewood but not nearly as slick as maple, the alternative choice for this range. Its density is much closer to maple so I doubt that there's any appreciable tonal difference between one or the other.

Along with those classic tones, the Ultra's refinements make this new model shine. I'm not sure that any of these are brand new ideas but, here they are, all gathered together to create a super-practical working instrument. The workmanship is superb – better than I've seen in other production guitars and way beyond what you'd find in a vintage instrument. Is there a negative? Well, the S-1 switching device itself (a push/push switch located in the centre of the volume knob) is a little hard to see – not the pot, just the status of the switch. This is a small price to pay for two extra sounds that are this good.

Verdict

The American Ultra II Stratocaster is a beautifully made instrument that feels great to play and delivers classic tones for the contemporary player. It also demonstrates how brilliant that original 1954 instrument really was: a guitar for the ages. 

PROS Beautifully made; Classic lines; Great tones and feel

CONS The S-1 switch design

Yamaha Revstar Element

Fluid playability and championship tone. Review by **Paul Riario**

RRP \$799.99 **CONTACT** Yamaha **WEB** au.yamaha.com

It's been nearly a decade since Yamaha released the Revstar series, and now it appears these guitars are becoming even more prevalent in the hands of today's most influential players. From the jaw-dropping virtuosity of Matteo Mancuso to the expressive blues stylings of Chris Buck, it's undeniable how impactful the Revstar line has become in the capable hands of a new generation of guitarists. And how could it not be? Revstar guitars combine the most elegant contours, familiar ergonomics and warmer tones of Fifties-era Les Pauls and Yamaha's own SG/SBG series of guitars in a triumphant new design that takes its styling cues from Japanese and British café racer motorcycles.

While I've had the pleasure of reviewing the Standard and Professional versions of the Revstar, this time I received the Revstar Element RSE20, a newer edition that launched a couple of years ago. It's every bit as refined as the others but arrives as an affordable version with little compromise. Similar to its siblings, the Revstar Element is completely stripped down to the bare essentials, all of which are revved up (no pun intended) for accelerated performance.

The Revstar Element sports a chambered mahogany body with precisely sculpted tone chambers that reduce weight but significantly promote the guitar's clear breath of hefty, solid-body tone. As always, I'm impressed that the Revstar's offset double cutaway frames the guitar with polished style and modern dimension. While this guitar came in standard Black,

it's also available in Swift Blue, Neon Yellow and Vintage White. Speaking of which, its back and top shine with a glossy finish, and the two racing stripes running down the center in brushed black subtly pop out, along with a 3-ply pickguard, all of which bestows the guitar with street-racer appeal. The Element's VH3 humbuckers feature Alnico V magnets and are controlled via a three-way blade selector and heavy-duty, knurled-chrome master volume and tone

controls. The tone control is a push/pull that engages Yamaha's proprietary "Dry Switch" — an innovative high-pass filter that tamps down the lower frequencies and channels in single coil tones without the hum or drop in volume. The guitar features a set-in mahogany neck with a rosewood fingerboard, an adjustable bridge with stopbar tailpiece, a 24 3/4-inch scale, a flat 12-inch fingerboard radius, 22 jumbo frets and die-cast Kluson-style tuners.

There's no overlooking the fact that the Element's combined contemporary and classic appointments are paired with an asymmetrical cutaway design that grants effortless access past the 15th fret. This makes this guitar a preferred choice for high-performance and agile playing styles, as evidenced by Yamaha's young-artist Revstar roster.

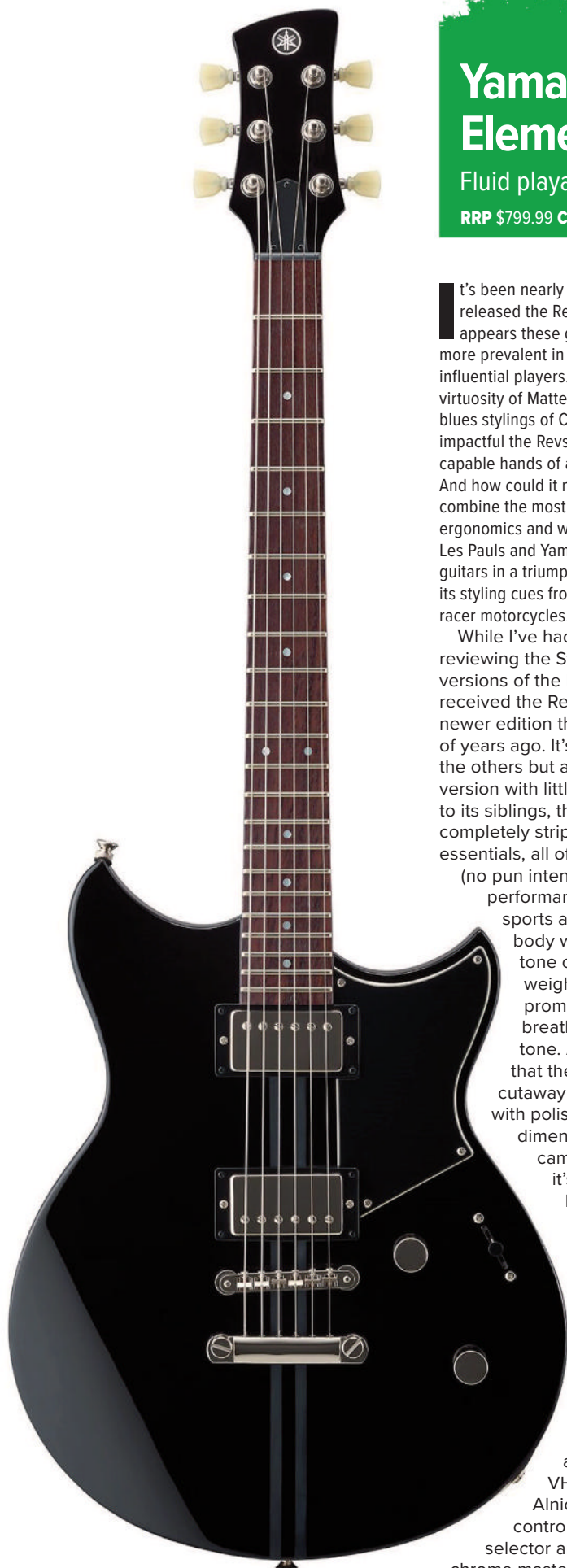
Overall, it's an undeniably sleek-feeling instrument that's well-balanced and hugs the body with a soft belly contour on the back and a slightly beveled top for prolonged arm relief when playing. The back of the neck features a matte black satin finish, allowing you to glide smoothly across the C-shaped neck curve, which is palm-filling yet comfortable. But whether you play the Element loud or softly, the real stunners are the vintage-output VH3 humbuckers, which can quickly shift gears to sound wonderfully polished for producing bell-like cleans and harmonically rich overtones when overdriven. These are warm-sounding humbuckers with plenty of sustain, plus the added versatility of the onboard "Dry Switch," which works well as a useful function to toggle between cleaner response and gut-punching power. Any Sherlock would agree that the Revstar Element is "elementary, my dear Watson."

Verdict

However you need to get from point A to point B, hopping onto the Yamaha Revstar Element puts you into an aero position of fluid playability and championship tone. 

PROS Café racer motorcycle-inspired finishes; chambered mahogany body for weight-relief and fuller sound; push/pull Dry Switch for brighter coil-splitting tones without volume drop; alnico V VH3 humbuckers offer warm, balanced tones.

CONS No case or gig bag included.





Cort Abstract Delta / Cort Modern Black

Two acoustic models from Cort's China-based workshop that couldn't be further apart in style, from the traditional overtones of the Abstract Delta, to the more contemporary Modern Black.

Review by **David Mead**

RRP Cort Abstract Delta TBA, Cort Modern Black \$1,999 **CONTACT** Dynamic Music **PHONE** 02 9939 1299 **WEB** www.dynamicmusic.com.au

Cort guitars are frequent flyers in this magazine, either in the guise of their excellent electric range or, as here, the acoustic wing of the company. Parent business Cortek is based in Indonesia and is, according to its website, responsible for releasing more than a million guitars into the wild each year, which is quite an achievement any way you look at it. Generally speaking, we've been mightily impressed with the models that have featured in these pages in the past, not only for their high standards where build quality is concerned but also for bang-for-your-buck value for money.

As we've said, the acoustic side of Cort's business hails from a state-of-the-art facility in China and that's precisely the birthplace of the two highly contrasting acoustics we're looking at here. The thing that binds them together, if you were curious enough to ask, is that they both come under the auspices of Cort's Masterpiece banner, reserved for the finest woods and highest grade of workmanship. But the prices here hint more at mid-range instruments: has Cort managed to square the circle and deliver custom-shop quality at an off-the-peg price point? Time to start opening cases...

As you can see from the accompanying photographs, this pair couldn't be more different if they tried. On the one hand we have the very traditional-looking Abstract Delta, which checks in as an OM – albeit with a deeper body than is standard for that particular designation – and then there's the Modern

Black, festooned with contemporary features such as armrest bevels and side ports.

Of the Abstract Delta, Cort tells us that it is "inspired by the Abstract Limited Edition that was introduced in 2018... [and] was developed in response to the growing demand for a follow-up model". Furthermore, Cort adds that "new design elements were developed using combinations of triangular shapes that form geometrical designs on the headstock and fretboard position markers". We have to say that the aforementioned decorations look very Art Nouveau to us and give the Abstract Delta a character of its own before we even pluck it from its case.

While we're dealing with first impressions, the Modern Black is exactly what it says it is: modern and black. The lack of a traditional soundhole and that cutaway both give off Ovation-like vibes. And, as for the side ports, they're huge! We'll see what effect that has when we have our first probing strum. But first, let's take each instrument individually and look at its sum of parts.

We may as well begin with the older design and the Abstract Delta ticks plenty of the OM boxes during its leap to freedom from the case. But let's deal with that 'deeper OM body' spec that Cort tells us about. A standard OM body tapers from around 104.8mm down to 82.5mm. Here, the rule tells us that we're dealing with a slight increase to the tune of 107mm down to 92mm. Not too much in it, then – although,

now we know, it does look a mite meatier in the body department.

The top is master-grade Sitka spruce and what a fine-looking piece of timber it is, too – lots of that ripple effect within the grain pattern as the light catches it. As for the decor on the top, the offset rosette may not be to everyone's taste, but it does sit nicely with the arty inlays to both headstock and fingerboard.

Back and sides are triple-A grade pau ferro (aka Santos or Bolivian rosewood). It's a body wood that has received some ill-deserved flak in the past – Fender using it as a substitute for Indian rosewood when CITES regulations were at their tightest certainly didn't help, for instance. Not a fully paid-up member of the rosewood species, pau ferro has generally been seen as a poor man's tone wood, and yet the Tonewood Data Source website states that "this wood is among the favourites for building an exceptional quality guitar". It certainly looks the part on the Abstract Delta, with much of the appearance of fine Indian rosewood but with more of a reddish hue, as opposed to the more familiar chocolate brown of the Indian. In any case, the body is bound in red padauk, which sets it off nicely. Another nice touch is that the body edges have been rolled, as has the fretboard, to remove any discomfort while playing, so everything hereabouts feels smooth.

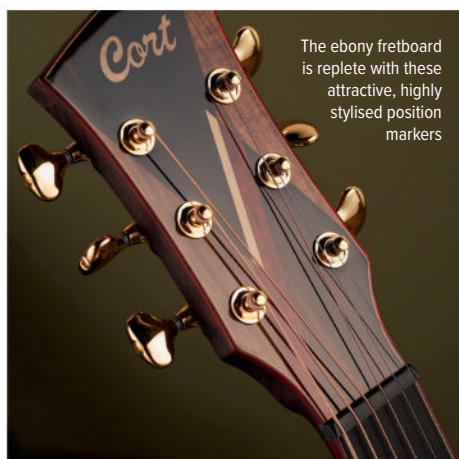
The neck is one-piece mahogany with a satin feel, as opposed to the body's high

gloss, and the separate low-profile heel looks classy, too. Tuners are gold-coloured Gotoh 510s, which make that Art Nouveau inspired headstock really sing, and the fixtures and fittings are completed by nut and saddles by Tusq and an LR Baggs Anthem for live work.

Switching over to Cort's Modern Black now, a glance at the accompanying spec sheet tells us that it was "inspired by the chic and sleek style of the modern jazz era, [and] boasts unique and bold design with a blend of elegance and composure". Based on the Grand Concert body shape, that sleek Venetian cutaway, none-more-black finish and the absence of a top-mounted soundhole tell us that Cort has picked up the traditional ball and is running with it, in terms of design at least. Those inlays in the fingerboard and the dark walnut binding all bring something to the body decor party, too. And we haven't even begun to talk about those oversized side-mounted soundports...

All but hidden under the sleek black finish (it's actually semi-transparent in bright light) is European spruce, partnered with mahogany for the back and sides. On the player's side of the upper and lower bouts we find the sound ports, which are aimed to angle the sound towards you – it's almost like having a built-in monitor. It's an interesting and original touch, and although side ports are not a new thing to the acoustic guitar world, we've certainly not seen any quite this big. The larger of the two measures in at 108mm by 67mm and the smaller 80mm by 65mm, and so that's quite a chunk out of the side of the guitar. It strikes us that, being your only soundhole, it might make mic'ing up a bit of a problem in a studio environment, and the open view to the inner workings of the instrument – braces, kerfing and so on – might take a while to get used to from a player's point of view. But we'll reserve judgement until we hear the Modern Black in action.

Apart from the shock of the new features to the body, the rest of the build follows that of the Abstract Delta: mahogany neck,



The ebony fretboard is replete with these attractive, highly stylised position markers



ebony 'board, Gotoh tuners and Tusq for the string saddle and nut. But an individual touch here is that the Modern Black's neck has an asymmetrical profile, meaning that the camber of the bass side changes as you travel up the fretboard. This is something we've seen on electric guitars in the past – Music Man was pioneering it way back in the 1990s – but it's a rare feature on an acoustic.

Those snazzy inlays really do have something to say from an artistic point of view and we can see what Cort means when it says that the jazz age was an inspiration here.

Feel & Sounds

Returning to the Abstract Delta, we don't know if it's purely psychological, but it seems that those extra few millimetres of body depth have transformed this OM into something altogether more bulky in the playing position. It feels like more of a significant lap-full from the word go. That's not a bad thing by any means; it merely pushes the OM status more towards the feel of a dreadnought. The neck is comfortable and those rolled fretboard edges make both casual chord strumming and more athletic single-note adventuring a comfortable experience.

The sound has a lot of depth, too. That pau ferro is really working overtime to produce

strident basses and powerful, sweet trebles.

The Modern Black is altogether more refined – surprisingly so, seeing as the sound is literally being projected straight towards us. But there's something altogether more slick going on here. That asymmetrical neck really does change the playing experience for the better. The overall sound is flatter, in a good way, and somehow more harmonious than on its more traditionally designed partner. It seems as though the daring side-port idea really is paying off.

Through an amp, both seem ideally partnered with their respective pickup systems, the Abstract Delta's LR Baggs Anthem reproducing the guitar's strident tones faithfully via our Boss Katana Artist Gen 3 set to Acoustic mode. The Modern Black suffers one potential drawback, however, in that the controls for the preamp, mounted inside the smaller of the two sound ports, are a bit fiddly to reach. Doubtless you could settle in with this after time and we really don't see that Cort had much of an alternative in terms of position. But it's worth noting, all the same. After a little orientation, though, we found that the Fishman did an excellent job in bringing the instrument to electric life.

Verdict

What can we say? Each of these very different acoustics has considerable merit – both in terms of design, build quality and general performance. Of the two, the Modern Black is more daring and we would award it favourite status here. But hang on, look at the price tag: good looks, more than capable pickup system and a hard case for under two grand? That has to be an automatic add to your acoustic shopping list if you're in the running for a dare-to-be-different acoustic. The Abstract Delta holds its own in a more traditional way with bags of good, toneful power under the hood. Cort really is to be congratulated once again for delivering on its Masterpiece promise. 🎸



Very handsome sets of gold-coloured Gotoh tuners deck out both of our review instruments

Not one but two side ports direct the instrument's sound towards the player

PROS Great build; good value acoustic with tons of tone. Instant talking point in original design and very good sound and playability; player-friendly features

CONS Not your standard OM tone or playing experience, perhaps – but open-mindedness would be your friend here. Those sound ports might take some getting used to; the fiddly controls might be a deal-breaker for some



Gretsch Electromatic Pristine Ltd Jet Single-Cut with Bigsby

Always the 'Les Paul' of the Gretsch line since it first appeared back in the 50s, the Jet gets a snazzy Electromatic makeover. Style over substance? Let's plug in.... Review by **Dave Burrluck**

RRP \$1,299 **CONTACT** Fender Australia **PHONE** 02 8198 1300 **WEB** www.gretschguitars.com

There's always been a show-off element to Gretsch guitars and this new Pristine Jet is no exception. It comes in two blue metallics as well our rather classy top-edge bound White Gold, which looks like a 50s Cadillac cream. Look closely, however, or under different lighting, and you'll see fine gold-coloured metal flakes that tie in perfectly with the gold-plated hardware. Made in China, it tops the current Jet line-up in the Electromatic range and is the only one with that gold hardware, and the only non-signature in the Electromatic range that doesn't have an easy-to-forget model number.

It's also the only Jet with FT-5E Filter'Trons, which were added to the arsenal in 2022, it seems with the introduction of the Electromatic Classic Hollow Body models. Gretsch describes them as having "huge full-bodied punch, classic chime and enhanced presence, clarity and note definition". So, while they don't feature on any other Electromatic Jets, they do appear on guitars such as the large single-cut G5420T and the double-cut G5422T. Perhaps they're included here to provide a little more classic Filter'Tron vibe over the more contemporary-sounding Black Top Broad'Trons seen on the majority of the Electromatic Jet models.

In Gretsch terminology, the Jet falls into the 'Solid Body' category, although the body

here – a four-piece spread of mahogany topped with a solid carved maple top – is quite heavily chambered, as Gretsch states, with the back cut out to leave a centre section that stops just behind the licensed Bigsby B50. The body measures 340mm (13.4 inches) wide and 453mm (17.8 inches) long, and overall it's pretty Les Paul-like, with a depth of 60mm in the centre of the body and 48mm at the rim. The neck is three-piece with a heel stack and headstock splice augmenting the main one-piece shaft, while the light brown fingerboard is laurel with tidy single-ply binding, those Neo-Classic thumbnail inlays, and good fretting from a pretty big wire on the 305mm (12-inch) radius face. Typically, Gretsch quotes the scale length as 625mm (24.6 inches), which is more like the shorter Gibson scale than the true 629mm (24.75-inch) scale used by Epiphone, for example.

As ever, we get all the funky Gretsch hardware such as those distinct control knobs and strap buttons, although the unlogo'd tuners are more generic. Overall, and by design, it's quite a looker.

Feel & Sounds

At 3.7kg, our Jet feels more solidbody than hollowbody, but it's a good weight for the style, and with a slightly broader Les Paul-styled body it's considerably less bulky than those classic Gretsch hollowbodies. Gretsch

still calls the neck profile a 'thin U', which is a bit off-putting, as we've mentioned before, because it's actually a rather good palmful. A 'full C' might be a better description as it's not overly thin at all; it has a width of 43.9mm at the nut (with string spacing of 34mm) and a depth of 21.4mm at the 1st fret and 22.5mm by the 11th before it flows into the pretty classic, if slightly flat-faced, heel. Like a Les Paul, the single cutaway and that heel don't exactly make it a top-fret shredder, but with such a retro-aimed guitar that's of little consequence. Mind you, the fretwire is quite chunky, albeit not overly high (approximately 2.7mm wide by 1mm high), but it's well installed and very nicely polished.

The setup is good overall, but the tune-o-matic-style bridge in front of the Bigsby can cause some tuning snags. As you bend, the vibrato arm down by the bridge rocks slightly forwards, and to get things stable we needed a little saddle-notch filing and some lube. There was also a slightly tight D string nut groove that needed some similar minor fettling.

With all the controls full up there's little to dislike about the sounds we hear and quite a lot to applaud. There are three quite distinct Filter'Tron flavours, all well-balanced from the off. And with a simple clean amp, reverb and slapback, you can't blame the guitar if your rockabilly licks don't sound authentic. Add a little grit and, again, we have no complaints. It's a little more polite than our reference TV Jones Classic-equipped PRS S2 Semi-Hollow, although that's easily compensated for with a bit more level and a slight treble lift from our test amps.

The actual controls aren't as responsive as you might expect. The pickup volume tapers feel a bit slow, as does the tone, and while the same can be said for the master volume, it's that control that gets the most use since it's out of the way of the Bigsby and retains the bite as you pull it back. That said, keeping the master volume up full and just pulling back the pickup volumes does round the high-end subtly, which is handy with gainier amp voices.

Verdict

Here's a great-looking guitar that's just a few minor tweaks away from being as good as its style suggests. Should we have to do that with a new guitar? Well, perhaps that's a discussion for another day. In our experience, expecting any relatively low-end guitar to arrive out of its box perfectly set up to your tastes and tour-ready is a big ask. Conversely, some minor fettling (DIY or pro) can quickly transform the mediocre into special. And aside from being a looker, this guitar's construction and those FT-5E Filter'Tron humbuckers really are special. Welcome to the new Jet age. 

PROS Classy looks; tidy build; strong classic 'Tron voices; good weight, feel and playability

CONS Needed some saddle and nut fettling to maximise tuning stability; no gigbag



Katoh Hispania

A stage-ready classical for the rock player. Is that even possible?

Review by **Steve Henderson**

RRP \$899 **CONTACT** Dynamic Music **PHONE** 02 9939 1299 **WEB** www.dynamicmusic.com.au

Katoh Guitars are renowned for their hand-made classicals, using traditional timbers to produce outstanding tone. Less well-known are their instruments that feature slim bodies, radical cutaways, or both, that still produce great tone and are eminently playable. Their latest offering is rather special – an incredibly stylish nylon string guitar for the contemporary performer, but with some built-in surprises.

The Katoh Hispania may look like a solid body or chambered semi-solid but it is, in fact, a thinline acoustic/electric with a mahogany neck on a carved solid mahogany body with a gorgeous solid flamed maple top. It may not appear so, but there's a soundhole at the end of the neck and playing the Hispania unplugged is still a satisfying experience, even with the reduced acoustic output of its very shallow body. The figured maple soundboard is beautiful and surprisingly alive. The cutaway is quite radical but very useful when accessing the upper frets (all 24 of them!) on this wide neck.

The electronics is where the Hispania gets really interesting. There's a piezo pickup, as expected, and an internal microphone, each with a dedicated volume control. But that's not the clever stuff. On the backplate, you'll find independent EQ trim pots for the two

transducers: 3-band for the piezo, 2-band for the microphone (the online manual has that reversed). And that's not the clever stuff, either. There's also an on-board DSP system which, in this case, offers digital delay and reverb (tuned perfectly for the task) with a dedicated volume/function knob on the soundboard for dialling in just the right flavour. There's a regular jack output (on the edge of the lower bout), a 3.5mm phones jack (on the back panel) for personal practice or connecting to some other device, a USB-C port for charging the internal 18650 battery and for interfacing with recording software, and a status indicator LED. Now that's clever stuff!

"But, how does it feel, how does it sound?"...I hear you ask. No matter how electric a guitar might be, I always play it acoustically for a while – to get in touch with the resonance and general feel, without being distracted by the electric tones. The Hispania is a delight to play. The neck is not as wide as most classicals (48mm at the nut, instead of the standard 51/52mm) and this will suit players, like me, who spend most of their time on steel strings of some kind. The neck is comfy along its entire length; it doesn't bulk up towards the body, and the rosewood fingerboard is super smooth. The fingerboard and the neck's

gloss finish (polyurethane) create no drag at all and the neck shape, the 650mm scale, and the radiused fretboard (about 16") all feel very familiar.

Unplugged, the thinline body's limitations are in control but there's enough tone and volume emanating from that clever soundhole for personal practice or to annoy the person next to you watching a DVD. (Ask me how I know!) Amplified, the Hispania gets serious. The tone is rich and immediate; the solid maple top is resonant but never feeds back – that is to say, I couldn't get it to howl, even unnecessarily loud through a couple of Fishman Loudbox combos. The attack is bright but not harsh, with a warm bloom following. The general tone is great, especially from the internal microphone, which is surprising given the lack of body depth. Blending in the piezo element offers a nice bite to the attack, which is great when you want to cut through a live mix: Blend it in, blend it out... it delivers quite a variety of tonal options that are all very useful.

The digital effects are limited but excellent. There's a hall reverb and a digital delay, blend them in at will with knob 3 on the soundboard. And, really smartly, the reverb dials in first and then the delay is introduced. Adjustment on the fly – it's so convenient. Another option is to use the headphone output: send one side of stereo direct and the other side through your effects for a big stereo image through the PA or, better still, when recording. It's nice to have that option.

The radiused fingerboard is so nice to have under nylon strings. It's very comfortable and facilitates the little extra reach required with the wider string spacing. Strangely, radiused classical necks are not too common (Godin does it), and nobody seems to know why the flat fretboard tradition persists, except that it's, well, tradition. The edges of the fretboard are nicely rounded so there's no bulk to negotiate. It's a beautifully shaped neck.

Even with all the on-board facilities, the comfy shape, the classy look, the friendly feel... the best thing about the Hispania is the sound. Its outstanding amplified tone, through a combo or a PA, is a gift to the performer who wants to broaden their palette and creativity. It has warmth, resonance, and presence, with a low end that doesn't get woolly or undefined.

Verdict

The Katoh Hispania clearly respects its heritage but it is, even more clearly, a nylon string guitar for the 21st Century. 

PROS Beautifully made and presented; Great tone and feel; Road-ready gig bag (included); Outstanding value
CONS Nothing



Epiphone USA Collection Coronet

Serious vintage vibe and versatility. Review by **Dave Hunter**

RRP \$3,399 **CONTACT** Australis Music Group **WEB** australismusic.com.au

For the past few decades, Epiphone guitars have largely offered more affordable offshore-built alternatives to Gibson models, while generally being made with near-identical shapes and specs, in the broad sense at least. The new USA Collection Coronet, however, takes us back to the original premise of the late '50s and '60s, when Epiphones were manufactured right alongside Gibson guitars in Kalamazoo but were often given their own brand-specific model designs. Shift the production site to Nashville and dial your way-back machine to 1959, and that's largely what we're looking at with this instrument: a USA-made Epiphone Coronet that captures serious vintage vibe in a stripped-down yet unexpectedly versatile guitar.

While the Epiphone USA Collection Coronet appears to be authentic, it isn't a strict reissue, nor is it intended to be, although from the build and quality you wouldn't know it unless you're up on the finer points of the early Coronet model. The 1959 Coronet wore the headstock badge (nicknamed the "bikini" logo for obvious reasons) and pickguard shape seen here, and had a single Epiphone mini-humbucker in the bridge position. The 1960 Coronet swapped that for a P90 in a (usually white) dog-ear cover and featured a larger symmetrical "batwing" pickguard. A little later that year, the Coronet's body edges became more rounded, which approximately

coincided with the move to a black dog-ear pickup cover, and the guitar — like all Epiphone guitars and amplifiers — ditched the bikini badge for the more common Epiphone script logo well before the year's end. Otherwise, among the "modern improvements" are the slightly wider neck width at the nut (1.695 inches) and slimmer body (1.375 inches).

As per the '58-'60 Coronet, this USA Collection model has a symmetrical double-cutaway solid mahogany body with fairly squared-off edges front and back. The glued-in neck is also made from solid mahogany, with an unbound Indian rosewood fingerboard carrying 22 medium-jumbo frets. It's profiled to Gibson's long-running SlimTaper shape, which might feel a little flatter than expected to players seeking a '59-spec neck carve, although it's quite comfortable from nut to joint.

The Vintage Cherry finish on my review sample is one of three nitrocellulose lacquer options alongside Ebony and TV Yellow. Buffed to a high gloss, it looks great over some really superior-looking cuts of mahogany, which display lovely three-dimensional ribbon figuring through the translucent red of the body's top and back. There's just a little puckering where the fingerboard meets the edge of the neck around the upper eight frets or so, but that's no major concern. Otherwise, the overall aesthetic is nicely complemented by the white single-ply pickguard, white tuner buttons, gold-on-white bikini logo, and off-white antique radio pointer

knobs.

If the Coronet's shape makes you think of a double-cut Gibson Les Paul Junior, that's essentially correct. The '58-'60-era Coronet's symmetrical horns extend a little further than those of the Gibson, but it yields similar access to the 22nd medium-jumbo fret. Other stripped-down elements — from the single P90 to the wraparound bridge to the unbound fingerboard with dot inlays — strike the same chord.

The Coronet's build quality is excellent overall and displays the fit, finish and solid construction and components to sit perfectly well alongside its Gibson siblings, and even perhaps Juniors from the Custom Shop. The frets are smoothly crowned and neatly dressed, and the guitar plays easily all along the 'board, while ringing out with a rich, lively acoustic response that's clearly aided by the strong and unimpeded neck joint on this single-pickup model. Putting a long neck on a relatively lightweight body can lead to a little neck heaviness, but the guitar doesn't dive too severely, and I didn't find it a major issue overall.

Tested through a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo, a Vox-leaning 65amps London head and 2x12 cab, and several presets in my Fractal FM9 modeler, the Epiphone USA Collection Coronet proved a fun and exhilarating ride that was far more than what you might expect, given that it's often made out to be a stripped-down rock and roll machine. If you haven't played a great single-pickup guitar before, it can be easy to assume there just wouldn't be enough tonal variety available, but myriad shades can be found within these models. A slight twist of the volume or tone knob, or a shift in the picking position between the bridge and the end of the fingerboard reveals a surprising variety of moods, proving the Coronet is a versatile performer.

Lively and responsive, the guitar revels in that little bit of P90 grit and bite that many players love so much from this fat single-coil, yet with excellent string-to-string clarity and truly beautiful shimmer and chime when you dial the volume down a little to clean it up. In fact, the guitar cleans up very well using its volume control, whether into an amp on the edge of breakup or a cranked overdrive pedal, which extends its versatility even further. There's also something to be said for how having just one pickup frees you from making choices. Sure, there are occasions when a great neck-pickup tone is just the ticket, but when the guitar is this expressive and dynamic, I rarely miss it, and this Coronet easily goes there for me. It also shows an Epiphone company that's firing on all cylinders via these collaborations with its American parent company, which in this case earns it our highest praise. 

PROS A well-made reimagining of an early Epi classic, revealing surprising versatility, great tone, and excellent playability

CONS Slight neck-heaviness in some playing positions



LINE 6 POD Express

An excellent all-rounder for practice or performance.

Review by **Stuart Williams**

RRP \$339 **CONTACT** Yamaha **WEB** au.yamaha.com

It's been more than a quarter of a century since Line 6's unmistakable red, kidney bean-shaped modeler burst onto the scene and kickstarted a tonal revolution, laying the foundation for what is today a commonplace alternative to using an amp. The POD, of course, still exists, even if it's in the more conventional floorboard format. Line 6's latest release also falls into the POD family, and while it takes the shape of a stompbox, there are parallels to be drawn with its ancestors.

The POD Express comes loaded with HX-derived amp and effects models — seven amps, seven cabs and 16 effects, distilled into a compact-sized pedal. There's an onboard looper, a tuner, a tap-tempo switch and a USB-C audio

interface, plus you can hook up an external expression pedal, two foot switches, or a combination of expression and foot switch using a splitter cable. The battery power, plastic case and headphone jack suggest this is aimed at headphone practice, but it can also be chained into your rig like any other pedal, or used as your amp simulator into a PA or cab. In short, it's a jack of all trades.

That's all well and good, but we're hardly lacking for solutions when it comes to playing or recording our guitars in 2024, so the proof is in the tonal pudding. The POD Express works in either Preset mode (you can save 21 of your own) or Manual mode. The first is a good way of coming to grips with some of its capabilities,

but the fun starts when you build your own sounds. There's no display. Instead, everything is centered around the LED segments surrounding the amp control in the middle. The POD Express is laid out in five sections — Dist, Amp, Mod, Delay and Reverb — and the LED bezel displays the range for whichever control you're turning at that moment.

The controls serve double-duty when it comes to sound shaping, with amp gain, three-band EQ and channel volume all accessed by holding down the Alt switch. There's a lot going on, and the amps sound great, holding up that HX reputation nicely. The same goes for the effects. The modulations are deep and rich, the delays have an analog flavor, and the reverbs have depth and air. Basic operation is simple, but many new discoveries await, although unfortunately they require several combinations of button presses. There's no doubt the POD Express packs a lot of features, although other compact devices, such as the Positive Grid Spark GO and Boss Katana GO, offer "smart"

“The POD Express comes loaded with HX-derived amp and effects models — seven amps, seven cabs and 16 effects, distilled into a compact-sized pedal.”

features for practice and sound editing. In fact, a computer or mobile-based editor would make unlocking the POD's full potential very easy. That said, the POD Express has the added edge of being able to integrate into your existing rig, and not everyone wants to get their hands dirty with the details. Ultimately, it's an excellent all-rounder, even if it's not quite a master in any single area. 

PROS Feature-rich pedal for practice or performance, with great sounds you expect from bigger, more expensive options

CONS Some features require multiple button combinations





Vox V846 Vintage and Real McCoy Wah pedal

A quacker or a honker? Take your pick. Review by **Paul Riario**

RRP \$549 CONTACT CMI WEB CMI.com.au

The most pivotal guitar effect in 1967 was the Vox Clyde McCoy Wah-Wah pedal. Despite having nothing to do with the innovative design of his namesake wah, big-band trumpeter Clyde McCoy became the marketing face of a pedal intended for band and orchestra players because it emulated his “wah-wah” trumpet-mute technique. However, once guitar superstars like Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton popularized this now-famous wah through legendary songs and live performances, Vox quickly shifted the pedal toward guitarists by removing his name, revoicing it and calling it the V846 Vox Wah, and the rest, as they say, is history.

For their rarity and renowned voice, Vox has decided to recreate these two wahs by duplicating their revered circuits with the release of the Vox V846 Vintage and Real McCoy Wah pedals.

Both models are based on prime vintage examples from 1967 and are 3D-scanned to recreate the exact body mold (even the particular fonts and script were copied, as was the use of flathead screws on the bottom of the pedals). What makes the V846 Vintage and Real McCoy Wahs noteworthy is Vox’s meticulous attention to detail, which borders on obsessiveness. Opening up

the bottom of the pedals instantly reveals the seriousness of their build quality, tidy assembly and wiring. Component values and pinpoint tonal characteristics were measured to reproduce the same response and sweep. If any particular part or component wasn’t available, it was either updated, hand-selected from other premium sources or custom-designed to match or rival the original values. Of course, the soul of both wahs is the Halo inductors, which replicate the distinct nasally voice of the Real McCoy or the more assertive expressiveness of the V846 Vintage. I could continue with the exactness of the transistors, potentiometers, resistors and capacitors, but I’m confident you get the idea that Vox spared no expense in properly voicing these wahs. Both are battery-operated only, further matching their vintage build, and come with a Vox pedal bag.

Despite being brand new and looking identical save for the bottom faceplate, the V846 Vintage and Real McCoy feel heavy and substantial in your hand, and are undoubtedly built to last for decades. One of my go-to wah songs has been Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “The Needle and the Spoon,” where Allen Collins’ wah-drenched solo is the epitome of — to my ears — a Clyde McCoy wah (though that is unconfirmed). And here, the Real McCoy delivers an authentic replication of that wah tone. The Real McCoy has an overly pronounced quack and a sweetened mid-range sweep that gushes its wah sound with vocal-like precision. It is, by far, my favorite-sounding wah because, if you’re going to use a wah, it needs to poke out prominently. It’s unapologetic in producing a vintage-style quack that apes every classic wah song from Hendrix’s Experience to Cream. On the other hand, the V846 Vintage is a more refined wah that’s smoother-sounding with a more expressive sweep that shapes the honking frequencies powerfully rather than quacking its way through like the Real McCoy. I think most hard rock and metal players will find this the more appealing choice; they might even want to park the wah (the “cocked” wah sound) in a particular EQ curve (as a bandpass filter) for a throaty or nasally lead tone — think Michael Schenker or Mick Ronson. Still, both wahs sound fantastic, and it’ll come down to whether you dig a wah with a more vintage quack or an articulate sweep. Either wah is a win.

Verdict

Vox went above and beyond in terms of recreating two classic wahs with their Real McCoy and V846 Vintage Wahs. Whether you prefer a vintage quack or a powerfully expressive honk, one of these will certainly find its way to your rig. **D**

PROS Near-exact replicas of two classic Vox wahs; assertive and vocally expressive vintage-style wah tones; easy plug-in and play; premium quality audio-grade components and parts.

CONS Expensive. Battery powered only.



Laney Black Country Customs Ironheart-LoudPedal & Lionheart-LoudPedal

Line 6 puts all of the Helix effects into a box that will slot into any pedalboard. Review by **Trevor Curwen**

RRP \$799 each **CONTACT** Australasian Music Supplies **WEB** www.austmusic.com.au

Whether you like the traditional style of amp head and separate speaker cabinet or a more compact combo configuration, Laney has always had plenty of variety in its roster. These days, though, the pedalboard amp has become a thing as some players make a move to a more flexible and easily transportable rig, something that the company addressed last year with its Ironheart Foundry Series IRF-LoudPedal, a 60-watt amp in a twin-footswitch pedal format.

Moving into 2024, Laney has added two new LoudPedals into the mix under its Black Country Customs (BCC) banner. The BCC LoudPedal Ironheart and LoudPedal Lionheart are both designed to be the tone engine of a flexible pedalboard setup with a feature set that replicates the original amp. Both are signature pedals, designed in collaboration with guitarists Tom Quayle (Lionheart) and Martin Miller (Ironheart).

The two new LoudPedals are identical in their feature sets, apart from a different function being assigned to one of their mini-toggle switches. Each is a 60-watt two-channel amp with a central footswitch to toggle between the two channels, a footswitch for reverb and another one for boost. There's a single guitar input, a loudspeaker output to connect to a standard guitar cab, and an XLR DI output (complete with impulse response if desired) to connect to PA, FRFR cab or front-of-house mixing desk in a live situation, or to studio gear for recording. You also have

a headphone output if you want to use the LoudPedal for some silent practice, maybe playing along to any music that you care to bring in via the aux input.

The USB connection is multi-purpose, hooking up to a computer running Laney's LA-IR app so you can load your favourite IRs into the pedal, and it also functions as an audio output to connect to a DAW for recording, sending out two audio streams – one with and one without the cab emulation. The pedal is also equipped with MIDI sockets so the three footswitches can come under MIDI control or can be used to switch external devices. Further flexibility is provided by a send/return effects loop for adding other pedals into the signal chain.

On the top panel are the controls for Channels 1 and 2 as well as single knobs for turning up the reverb and the boost level. Both channels sport Volume and Gain knobs and a three-way toggle switch for Bright or Dark tone settings besides the neutral flat position, although on Channel 1 of the Ironheart that is replaced with a switch that offers three types of clipping. EQ options are set for the whole pedal (rather than per channel) and there's a Tone knob and more specific Bass, Middle and Treble controls.

The two pedals are solid-state versions of two valve amps that are mainstays of the Laney brand and are designed to exactly recreate their sounds. Although we weren't able to do

an A/B test with the amps, we can say that both sound really good and respond nicely to the push and pull of playing dynamics.

The Ironheart may have a reputation for being a modern high-gain amp suitable for metal players, but what you get here is actually surprisingly versatile, particularly with Channel 1's three clipping options. The Clean setting with its soft clipping can give you a really practical clean sound, plus some early break-up sounds further along the Gain knob's range. You also get symmetrical clipping for aggressive high-gain distortion, or Asymmetrical clipping for distortion that retains more clarity and dynamics.

Channel 2 gives you a full gain range, from clean to full-on distortion, that you can push even further by bringing the Boost in. The whole twin-channel setup gives you plenty of options for stage use with maybe one channel set for clean and the other for more driven sounds, plus the option of adding boost to either.

With all the same advantages conferred by the twin-channel setup, the Lionheart has more of a classic vintage vibe featuring two identical channels with great range, running from pristine glassy cleans through to fully saturated. There's loads of tonal variation available via the Bright/Dark switch in the first instance, the Tone knob putting the top-end presence in the right ballpark and the other three knobs for shading, while the Reverb (a spring emulation based on the Secret Path pedal) does a fine job in adding airiness.

If you're using the XLR output, the pair of IRs that come as standard with each pedal are nicely chosen to complement the amp section, but there's massive scope for sonic tailoring via the LA-IR app, which not only lets you load IRs of your choice but also provides powerful eight-band parametric EQ to precisely shape them. The effects send offers another way to use the pedal, too: in front of your amp as a boost and distortion stompbox, although it would have to be an always-on pedal as there'd be no option to bypass it unless it was in the loop of a switcher.

In general, a pedalboard amp has plenty going for it in terms of convenience and portability. These two certainly tick those boxes but also have a great deal of flexibility due to a feature set that offers a host of options for different methodologies in live work, recording and practice. What they don't have is the wide range of different amp sounds you might find in a modelling unit, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. There will be no option paralysis here and you'll have an amp that you'll quickly get to know inside out, allowing you to get the best out of it – all hands-on for quick tweaks with no menu-diving. What you will undoubtedly be getting is the classic British sound of a Laney amp, and if that's a sound that works with the music you play, one of these will be a solid, practical purchase. 🎸

PROS Real amp in pedal form; 60 watts of power; practical footswitching; speaker-simulated DI out; headphone and aux sockets for practice; USB recording

CONS No real problems, but you'll need to find somewhere to fit the power supply on your 'board

CATEGORY: **HOLLOWBODY ELECTRIC GUITAR**

1961-1970 EPIPHONE CASINO E230TD/TDV

BY CHRIS GILL

The epiphone casino deserves status as one of rock 'n' roll's most iconic electric guitars solely from its association with three of the four Beatles (John, Paul and George) who all often used a Casino to record timeless rhythms, riffs and solos. Notable examples include McCartney's "Taxman" guitar solo (recorded with a Casino plugged into a Fender Bassman), Lennon's piercing distorted tones on "Revolution" and Lennon and McCartney's parts on the three-way solo showdown on "The End."

One may take a quick glance at the Casino and ask, "Isn't it just a 335-style guitar with single-coil P90 pickups instead of humbuckers?" Au contraire, mon frère! There is much more of a difference than that. During 1961 when the Casino model made its debut, Epiphone guitars were built in Gibson's Kalamazoo, Michigan, factory. The Casino was based upon the design of the Gibson ES-330, which featured a fully hollow (not semi-hollow) thinline body design, dual P-90 pickups and a 22-fret neck that joined the body at the 16th fret. The Casino was basically identical to the ES-330 with the exception of a few cosmetic elements like the headstock shape.

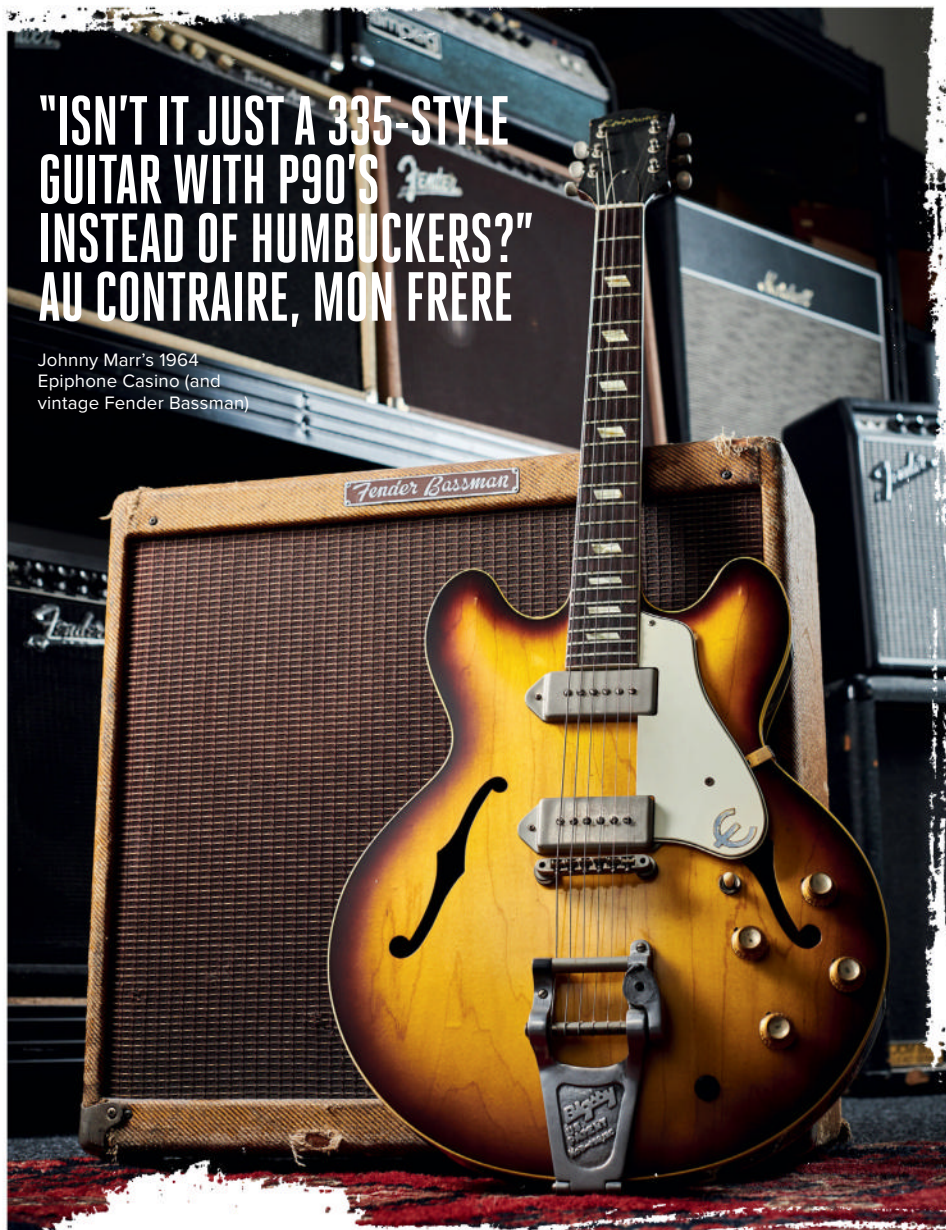
However, whereas the Gibson version eventually became available with a neck that joined the body at the 19th fret like its big brother 335/345/355 models, the Casino always retained its 16th fret junction. This neck design may have inhibited access to the uppermost frets, but the fact that more of the neck was within the body's resonant chamber along with the placement of the neck pickup and (particularly) the bridge pickup closer to the center of the body provided fatter, more lively tone with prominent honking midrange. The Casino can also provide sparkling clean tones that resemble an acoustic's jingle-jangle.

The Epiphone Casino was initially discontinued in 1970 when the Gibson factory stopped making Epiphone guitars. The brand's production was moved to the Matsumoku factory in Japan, which revived the Casino in 1975 after a five-year hiatus. Over the years the Casino has gone in and out of production, including a Japanese domestic-only run from 1987 to 1995, but it has remained available in the U.S. market continuously since 2005.

In addition to the standard model with

"ISN'T IT JUST A 335-STYLE GUITAR WITH P90'S INSTEAD OF HUMBUCKERS?"
AU CONTRAIRE, MON FRÈRE

Johnny Marr's 1964 Epiphone Casino (and vintage Fender Bassman)



trapeze, Bigsby or Tremotone Vibrola tailpieces, Epiphone has offered a variety of artist signature models over the years, including John Lennon, Gary Clark Jr. and the flashy Dwight Yoakam "Dwight Trash" Elitist models. The Beatles played a major role in inciting gear lust for the Casino during the mid Sixties, but the model was also seen in the hands of numerous other British Invasion players like Keith Richards and Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones and Dave Davies of the Kinks. Modern British mop top rockers like Noel Gallagher, Paul Weller and Johnny Marr

have also played Casinos, as have American Beatles-inspired roots rockers like Tom Petty and Jeff Tweedy.

With the exception of perhaps the heaviest metal, the Casino is a versatile guitar ideal for almost any style of music, particularly the blues, funk and Sixties/Seventies-style rock. Other notable Casino fans include Billy Corgan, the Edge, Richard Fortus, Josh Homme, Richard Lloyd, John Mayer, Leo Nocentelli, Ed O'Brien and Thom Yorke of Radiohead, Marc Ribot and Duke Robillard. 

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