



PLINI

The Aussie djent virtuoso talks dream collabs and **An Unnamable Desire**



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David Bowie

A decade gone, Bowie's guitar-slinging comrades-in-arms open up on collaborating with pop royalty

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FUTURE

A close-up photograph of a person's hands playing a Fender Telecaster guitar. The guitar has a shimmering, diamond-dust finish in a light blue or teal color. The pickguard is a light cream color with a marbled pattern. The player is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and a sheer, black, lace-trimmed sleeve. The background is dark and out of focus.

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PAULA LOBO / GETTY



Keith Urban on the lost art of the fade-out

The use of a fade-out to end a song has long divided opinion. While some view it as lazy – why not just come up with a proper ending? – others believe that the gradual volume drop can be an artform in itself. Sitting in the latter camp, it transpires, is Australian country-pop singer-songwriter Keith Urban. He recently flagged-up his love of the fade-out in an interview with Billboard as he promoted Flow State, his new album of yacht rock covers (plus one new song of his own).

Asked whether his intention was to remain faithful to the original versions or put his own stamp on the songs, Urban said that he was keen to uphold what he sees as a tradition of musicians freeing themselves up as they draw to a close.

“One of the areas I’ve always found that I like to go off script, if you will, is at the end of songs,” he says. “People who grew up in that era where there were fades know all about turning the volume up because this amazing thing happened right at the very end of the fade – you could just hear the guitarist do something that was so cool, because typically the session players figure, ‘We’re out by now, they’re not going to use all this, we’re just now playing for playing’s sake.’ That’s when all the cool stuff starts happening.”

This isn’t a new discovery for Urban, though – he says that he’s always encouraged his band members to cut loose at the end of songs, and has continued to embrace the fade-out as a result of that.

“I’ve found so many times on my records, the reason why [2006 single] Stupid Boy and some of those [songs] had these long outros is what the band would do at those periods was really cool, and I didn’t want it to not be heard,” he says. **BEN ROGERSON**

VENLA SHALIN / GETTY



Dave Mustaine on why he left Jackson Guitars... then tried to buy it

If there is an alternate history of electric guitar in which Megadeth frontman Dave Mustaine is the owner of Jackson Guitars, what might that look like? We have cause to wonder, because it nearly happened. At least, Mustaine, a former Jackson signature artist, tried to purchase the brand, only backing out after being “jerked around”.

In a recent YouTube interview with Reverb, Mustaine recalled the time when he was Jackson’s most high-profile signature artist, and why he made the decision to leave its roster. As he saw it, Jackson were handing out endorsements left, right and center, and it was devaluing the brand.

“It was cool at the beginning until they started giving their guitars out to everyone,” he says. “When you start giving your stuff out to everyone, it doesn’t matter any more. It’s like flooding the economy with dollars – inflation comes in.”

As the millennium dawned, things were not to Mustaine’s liking at Jackson. “I saw the girl that was working there. She was the A&R rep. She gave a guitar endorsement to a drummer, and I thought, ‘Man, this is not where I want to be.’ So I left,” says Mustaine.

Jackson is now part of Fender family of brands. It could have been part-owned by Mustaine. “I tried to buy Jackson,” he says. “I tried to buy Jackson with Cathy Duncan, from Seymour Duncan. I tried to buy it with a guy named Joe Ensor, and after [Jackson] had jerked me around for a couple of times, that was the other variable in me leaving. When you are spending money on attorneys and doing due diligence, and all this stuff, and it’s just a wank, that wasn’t cool.”

JONATHAN HORSLEY

Record industry bodies unite to introduce labelling program for generative AI

Leading music industry bodies such as the Record Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) have launched a joint labelling program to help make fans aware of when generative AI has been used in recorded music.

The project sets out a unified approach to voluntary track labelling, with a distinction between ‘AI-generated’ and ‘AI-assisted’ labels, which will be used across digital music services and other partners. This

announcement comes after the revelation in April that a concerning 44% of all new music uploaded to the streaming service Deezer is AI slop. Meanwhile, Apple Music has confirmed that over a third of its uploads are 100% AI.

“Fans want to know whether and how generative AI has been used in the music to which they listen,” said Vikki Oakley, IFPI CEO and Mitch Glazier, RIAA Chairman & CEO, in a joint statement.

FRED GARRATT-STANLEY

TUNE-UPS



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Plini

THE YOUNGER

The Australian virtuoso on dream collabs with John Mayer, high-BPM workouts, and what happened when he imagined “a cello player in a huge, empty concert hall playing this difficult arpeggio”.

WORDS BY GREGORY ADAMS

Plini's music is the perfect soundtrack for facing the wondrous Great Outdoors.

The Australian guitar virtuoso spent the early part of 2026 promoting *An Unnamable Desire* – the third staggering instrumental album to arrive under his mononym – through music videos that paired his djent and jazz-fusion-filled explorations with nature-set scenes of a woman crossing beach and forest vistas.

The visuals are filled with lush flora and awe-inspiring wildlife, kangaroos hopping off towards an untold horizon. Just before that, the Neural team sent him and guitarist John Connearn off on a one-day writing retreat at an idyllic Finnish cabin. The elegant back-and-forth runs they ripple into the resulting Helmi single – which was released on Valentine's Day – reflected the heart-swelling lakeside view.

And though Plini is just about to head out to catch an Intervals performance in Berlin when

we catch up with him to discuss the new album, he and an interpretive dancer spent the weekend filming a video for *An Unnamable Desire's* *The Time Will Pass Away* at a national park bordering Germany and the Czech Republic.

When asked why he's been taking in the scenery of late, he suggests that it's because adventure is around every corner out there.

“You go into a forest and you're like, ‘What am I going to see? What will be out here?’ That's the same thing that I try to put into the music, because you listen to it and you're like, ‘I don't really know what's gonna happen here, but I'm intrigued.’”

On certain levels, *An Unnamable Desire* still finds Plini expressing the whimsically progressive yet singable guitar style he brought to 2016's *Handmade Cities* and 2020's *Impulse Voices*, and the new album's most complex sections run wild with odd-metered



arpeggiation and selective picking finesse. But he also points out how the title track doesn't even have a solo, the guitarist often hanging onto a jazz-jangled chord amid swaggering synth-bass and sensual sax accents.

While minimal at times, Plini also consciously went into the sessions looking to push his abilities to the extreme. For album centerpiece *Now & Then*, for instance, he drops out of a quixotically djent-stuttered swing groove to perform a looping, selective-and-hybrid-picked quintuplet arpeggio that he admits was super hard to capture cleanly.

"I feel like with the last few records I've done, I've dabbled in some different techniques, or things that were out of my comfort zone, but nothing that wasn't just over the horizon," he explains,

adding that something he really wanted to level up was his metal chops. "There's a couple of tracks that are very fast and right-hand-y. I felt like I should not just try to write cool songs, but also improve as a guitarist."

Canyon is one such ripper that works Plini's rhythm-wrist to the bone, a relentless metalcore pace pushing the tempo as Plini power-chugs past the speed barrier. The blissfully melodic but blast-maniac *Manala* is another certified heater that got him sweatin'.

"*Manala* was hard to even get up to speed to play for the video, which was mimed," he says with a laugh. "Just to have the stamina to play 16th notes at 184 BPM... for a proper metal player it's probably fine, but for me it was like, 'This is exhausting!'"

Plini began writing *Manala* back in

2020, initially with the intention to bring a vocalist onto it. He ultimately opted to give the hyper-dense instrumental arrangement some breathing room. It's the album's oldest piece of music, and it faced a few other structural changes before arriving in its final form. He adds that the rest of *An Unnamable Desire* "definitely evolved two-or-three Pokémon stages from when I first [started] it."

While he's been getting the hang of playing outdoors – as evidenced by his collab with Connearn – Plini was crafting most of these songs at home in Sydney while recording onto his laptop. Plini cued up tones on his Quad Cortex while mainly running Neural DSP's John Petrucci and Mateus Asato plugins, though he specifies that he dialed up the Archetype: Gojira X when he wanted to go extra-heavy.

Some of this was later re-amped by Simon Grove, who co-produced the album with Plini, in addition to mixing, engineering and playing bass on the recordings.

Plini played his parts using his signature headless .strandberg*, which was loaded up with Fishmans ("I abused the single-coil bridge pickup sound quite a lot"). The Swedish guitar makers also loaned him a 7-string, which he plunged down to a low C sharp tuning – Grove routed the nut out to fit a heavier "million gauge" string.

While ultimately performed on guitar, a tension-building section through the record's closing *The Time Will Pass* Anyway had also been envisioned using a different thick-stringed instrument.

"I was imagining a cello player in a huge, empty concert hall playing this difficult arpeggio, and it's kind of like what you'd expect to hear in a sci-fi movie," he says of the vibe, adding of an imagined on-screen scenario, "I feel like it's something to do with being incredibly alone. Like, you wake up and everyone on the spaceship is dead."

On that point, Plini's name may be at the top of the marquee, but he proudly talks



“Just to have the stamina to play 16th notes at 184 BPM... for a proper metal player it’s probably fine, but for me it was like, ‘This is exhausting!’”

up the cast of collaborators he brought onto *An Unnamable Desire*. “Because this is the longest that I’ve spent on an album, it means it’s also the longest that anyone else spent on it,” he says regarding the record’s six-year journey, and the tweaks he made along the way with his “really sick band” and a few other guests.

The player pool on *An Unnamable Desire* features Polish fretboard-blazer Jakub Zytecki, who hit a soaring series of back-to-back runs with Plini on *Ciel*. Other contributors include drummer Chris Allison, keyboardist Dave Mackay,

saxophonist John Waugh, string arranger A.J. Minette, violinist Misha Vayman, cellist Yoshi Masuda and harpist Emily Hopkins.

In between his last two solo albums, Plini also delivered collaborative singles like his Helmi with Connearn, and 2025’s *In Captivity* track with Animals as Leaders’ Tosin Abasi.

Looking toward the future, when Plini’s asked who he desires to collab with next, he says Steve Vai, Joe Satriani and John Petrucci would all be amazing to go toe-to-toe with, even if just for a few bars. Then

Plini pauses for a few beats before coming up with another wondrous idea.

“I’d love to do something with John Mayer,” he says, citing how they could connect quite naturally via their mutual friends at Neural. “I think that would be really fun. My idea, John – if you’re reading this – would be to write an odd-time signature John Mayer song, and then he can make me do a backing vocal. We’d do a guitar trade. It’s still a sweet sort of bluesy, ballady song, but it’s in fives, or something.”

Between their respective approaches to guitar and Plini’s penchant for a picturesque music video, the sight and sound of that team-up should be stunning. 

■ *An Unnameable Desire* is out now.

Graeham Goble [third from left] with The Little River Band in 1970.



That Seventies Song

The Little River Band's *Reminiscing* took no more than half an hour to write, says guitarist Graeham Goble. It remains a popular favourite nearly 40 years later.

BY GARY GRAFF

It's not hard to get Little River Band guitarist Graeham Goble to reminisce about *Reminiscing*. The 1978 single was the Australian group's most successful in the U.S., peaking at number three on both the Billboard 200 and Cash Box charts.

It was named Australian Record of the Year at the 1978 King of Pop Awards and was honored by Broadcast Music International (BMI) for five million plays on American radio, the most for any Australian pop song up to that point. It was also, somewhat surprisingly, a

favorite of the late John Lennon during his affair with former assistant May Pang, which continued from the mid 1970s to the latter years of the decade.

"She wrote in her book, *Loving John*, that they would lay in bed listening to *Reminiscing*" Goble says, "and he was asking her to play it again and again and again. That was pretty amazing."

Originally released as the second single from LRB's fourth album, *Sleeper Catcher*, *Reminiscing* can be found on the new LRB compilation, *Ultimate Hits*. Still in Melbourne where the band was formed,

Goble has nothing but fond memories of *Reminiscing* and all that came in its wake.

"It was inspired by my love of the '30s, '40s and '50s musicals, 'cause I was 12 years of age when we got a black-and-white television in Adelaide," Goble explains. "The programs I immediately loved were all the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers, Rogers and Hammerstein musicals — all of that American romantic era. A lot of my songwriting, but particularly '*Reminiscing*,' was about the life I wished I had, putting myself into those situations I saw in the movies."

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY IMAGES



MARTIN PHILBEY / REDFERNS

The song arrived in April 1977, when the group was in Melbourne for a TV appearance. "We were in the green room, just playing our guitars," Goble says. "The lead guitarist, David Briggs, was showing me some jazz chords, one of which was a C9 chord, a shape I never knew about."

"When I came home after the television show, I picked up my Martin 000-18 acoustic and played that chord. Immediately, I had this melody and lyric, all at the same time, almost like it was a spiritual download that just flowed through me. In about a half an hour, the whole thing was finished, and I had this very different song with key changes and quite a lot of jazz chords — quite a sophisticated piece!"

As Goble recalls, the Little River Band made two attempts at recording the song before they struck gold. "The keyboard player I wanted for it was Peter Jones, and

he was not available," he says. "So I was forced to pick another player, and it didn't work. And then we did it with a second player and that didn't work out, either."

"Then I heard Peter Jones had come back into town. So under protest from some of the guys, mainly from [vocalist]

Glenn Shorrock, they reluctantly agreed to give it a third go. As soon as we sat down with Peter, the whole thing came together. Our guitarist Beeb [Birtles] played a syncopated riff from the third verse to the very end of the song, which I really loved. It was a lovely lift to the latter part of the record."

In addition to *Reminiscing*, *Sleeper Catcher* included *Lady*, another song with which the LRB would make their name in America. Although Goble and the band were convinced they'd recorded something special, their label, Capitol, had trouble hearing it. "We waited five weeks with no

response," Goble says.

"They eventually Telexed us and said, 'We think the album is great but we can't hear any singles' — and they had *Reminiscing* and *Lady*, our two biggest singles of all time!"

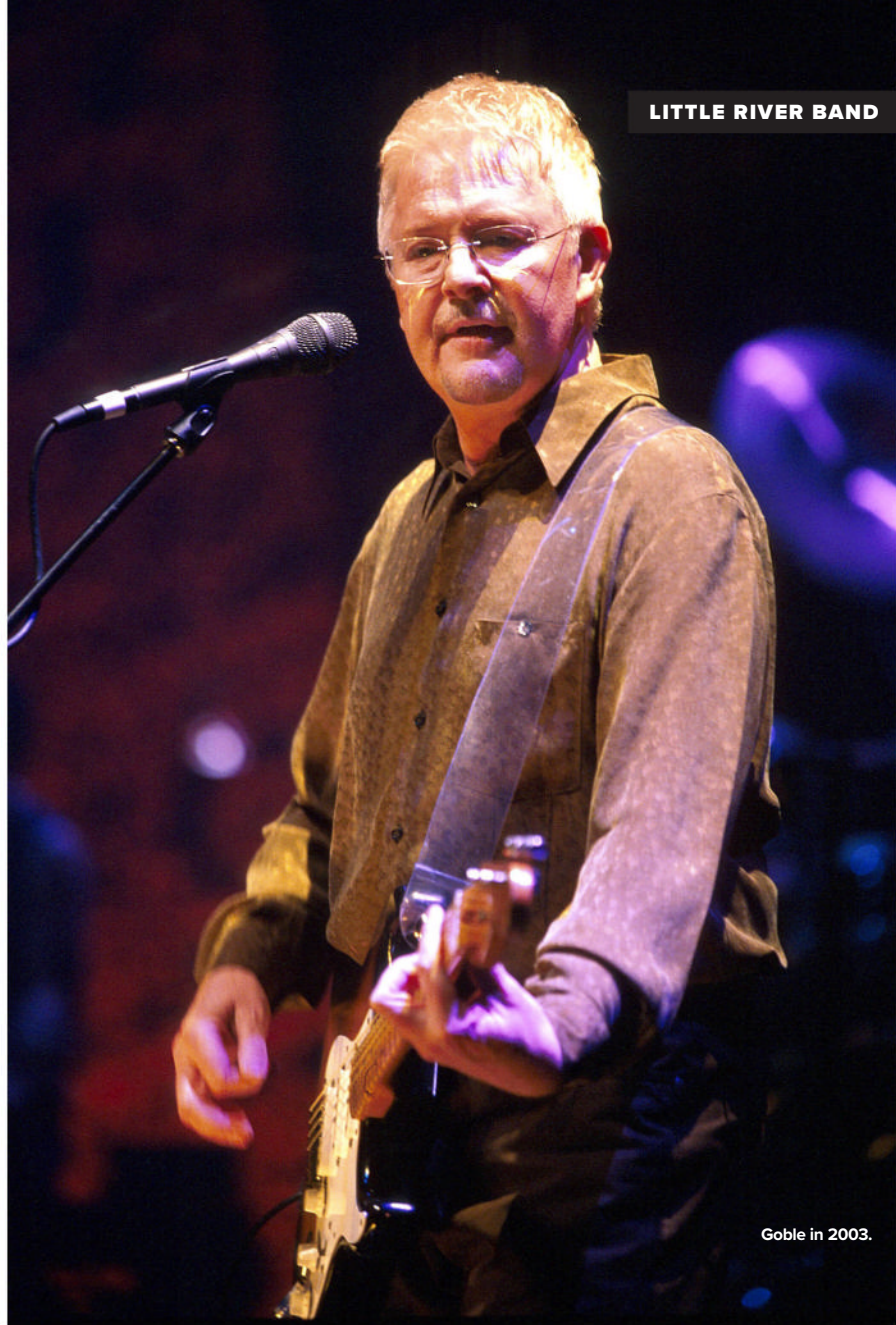
Eventually the label decided to take a chance on *Reminiscing*.

"They said, 'But we really don't know if it will connect at all.' Within a couple weeks it went ballistic, right to number one in New York and number three on Billboard."

Goble calls it "our pinnacle song. It's double any other song we've ever had in terms of listens. It's been in a lot of movies, and a lot

of soundtracks. Sinatra said he thought it was the best '70s song in the world, though he never recorded it."

"But when John Lennon calls your song one of his favorites, does that really matter?"



LITTLE RIVER BAND

Goble in 2003.

"The lead guitarist, David Briggs, was showing me some jazz chords, one of which was a C9 chord, a shape I never knew about."

Mike Campbell in action with the Dirty Knobs in Toronto last year



Ace of Hearts

Mike Campbell — the late Tom Petty's right-hand man and a former Fleetwood Mac hired gun — tells us about channeling the Beach Boys, snatching songs from his dreams and chasing joy over dollars

BY ANDREW DALY

After Tom Petty unexpectedly left us at age 66 in late 2017, Mike Campbell — Petty's longtime partner in guitar and songwriting — found himself at a loss. But since then, he's picked up the pieces and leaned heavily into his own band, the Dirty Knobs.

"I miss the Heartbreakers, and I miss my brother; that was very sad when that happened," Campbell says. "But I'd always had it in the back of my mind that if the Heartbreakers ever retired, I'd focus on the Dirty Knobs and make that my purpose."

Campbell continues to expand on that purpose with the Dirty Knobs' fourth album, *Mission of Mercy*. "I named the record that because I feel as though the Dirty Knobs are on a mission of mercy," he says. "We're trying to bring a little relief from the wicked world we all live in."

Songs like "I Remember," "Vicious

Hangover" and the title track do exactly that. But Campbell isn't reinventing the wheel. "I stick with what I'm comfortable with," he says. "I'll try a new guitar or amp, but if I'm recording and working on a record, I don't want to be bothered with too many choices. I want to focus on the song and the performance."

For the most part, as he did with the Heartbreakers, Campbell leans on his Fender Broadcaster and his goldtop Gibson Les Paul, with a hint of Rickenbacker 12-string thrown in. "It's whatever inspires you," he says. "I'll look at a guitar, and I'll think, 'I wonder what this chord would sound like on that guitar.'"

Gear aside, when it comes down to it, Campbell is grateful to still be out there doing what he loves. "The Dirty Knobs play these theaters; we have some rock 'n' roll soul healing together," he says. "That's the

only way to get that in your life, you know? It has to be through that. That's what I live for, and that's what makes me happy. I'm very grateful to be where I am. I survived [Petty's] death, moved on, and I keep making music."

Do you still always write on guitar?

It used to always start on guitar, but lately, since I've been writing on my own, sometimes it'll start with piano, or no instrument at all, and just in my head with some lyrics. I'll hear something, and it'll trigger something I heard in the Sixties or whatever. Next thing you know, I'm writing a song.

The first single, "I Remember," was written on piano, right?

Yes. That's an example of not writing on guitar. I'm not good at piano, but I can find chords. That song was just chords; on piano, you can have a bass line and then the melodies on top, so it's a little fuller than just a guitar chord. And then I wrote the rest of the song over that.

How did "Let Me Back in My Dream" come together?

I like that song a lot. I kind of dreamed that song up — no pun intended. [Laughs] A lot of times, you can have a dream,

COREY KELLY

and it might be a really good dream, and then you wake up, and you want to remember the dream and go back into it because you were enjoying it! But it just vaporizes, and it's gone if you don't grab the idea right away. So, that's what inspired that. The music was just quickly written, probably, within five minutes. It's just some loud chords and unique chord changes in the verse. It's mysterious.

How about the title track?

I had that song in my head for a while in my tape library. I'd forgotten about it and never pursued it because I thought it wasn't rock 'n' roll enough. It's a real homage to Brian Wilson. And so, when I was writing that song, it was with him in mind with those chord changes and the background vocals.

Is that style of music more ingrained in your songwriting than people realize?

I don't know what people realize, but it's certainly buried in my history of listening to music. I grew up on that stuff, but I like new music, too. I'm occasionally inspired by new music, but mostly I get frustrated with it because it all sounds computerized, and there's no magic in the songs like there was in the Sixties.

Is that to say that when it comes to your music, you're all analog?

No, I'm not all analog. I use Pro Tools, which I've used for a long time, or at least since they got the sounds together. With that, it's hard to tell if you're on tape or digital if you record it properly. But I don't do a lot of technical stuff with Pro Tools; I just use it to record, rewind, and play, like a tape recorder.

One of the more fun songs on the record is "Vicious Hangover."

That's a perfect example of spontaneity. The band was coming over that day, and right before they got into the studio, I thought of this idea, which was just real simple, and I threw the chords together with rock 'n' roll energy. But I didn't have it sussed out, so they came in, we changed the chords around and we were able to capture it in one take.

Chris Holt plays the song on that song, right?

Yeah, he did. It was all live, and the first time we played it through, I said, "Just go for it." He's that good and has just been a breath of fresh air for the band. He's so talented and brings amazing harmonies, doubles my voice, and can play strings and keyboards, too. He's also really easy to get along with.

What's your key to finding guitar tones?

Good question! I don't spend a lot of time looking for tones. I get an amp setup



Campbell with his namesake Fender Stories Collection Red Dog Telecaster

"I get an amp setup that I like, starting off with the gain that's right for the song, and then I try a couple of guitars. So, whichever guitar seems to fit, I start with that, and then if I get to a point where it needs to be beefed up, I might try a boost pedal or a wah."

that I like, starting off with the gain that's right for the song, and then I try a couple of guitars. So, whichever guitar seems to fit, I start with that, and then if I get to a point where it needs to be beefed up, I might try a boost pedal or a wah. But I don't do a lot of pedals. I like to get the tone from the guitar and amp if I can.

What was your main rig for this record?

For this record — and the last couple of records — I've reconnected with an old amp that I used early in the Heartbreakers, an Ampeg Rocket. I used it for the whole album, and Chris used a Fender Princeton. For guitars, I gravitate toward my [Fender] Broadcaster, my [Gibson] Les Paul and occasionally, a Rickenbacker 12-string.

What led you to reconnect with the Ampeg now?

It was just in my closet, and one day I pulled it out, turned it on and thought, "Wow, this is a sound I've been missing." It sounded really good, and I sort of stumbled back into the room, and there it was. [Laughs]

Do you put much stock into the so-called "connection" with a particular guitar or amp, or can you write on any guitar?

That's a deep question. If you get in touch with your instrument, and it speaks to you, it will tell you what it wants to play. If you're doodling around, there will just be certain things that sound good on this guitar, and you'll go back to it, and it will become a direction for a song. A

lot of times, the instrument — if you really get in tune with it — will speak to you.

Considering the years you spent with the Heartbreakers, what does the positive reception toward the Dirty Knobs mean to you?

Well, it's my life. It means a lot. The good thing about the Dirty Knobs is that we

started out playing in little bars, and now that we've done relatively well, we can play theaters. That was my goal, and we've gotten there. It's not a money-making thing, like the Heartbreakers, which was a big financial success. With this, I'm doing okay, but I'm doing what I love. Nothing makes me happier than taking this band into a theater with a group of people and having a moment. 🎸



Young Man Blues

Raiding the Foos' gear vault and jamming with the ghost of Gary Moore, roots master Jared James Nichols presents the rip-it-up new record that "I never had the guts to do before"

BY AMIT SHARMA

When guitar players hear the words "blues power," they'll usually cast their minds back to the late Sixties and early Seventies, when Albert King and Eric Clapton were using such terms to convey the emotional gravitas as well as the historic and humanistic weight within the music. All these years later, out of the younger generation, it's Jared James Nichols who is carrying on that legacy, telling stories and hitting people in the heart with every strum and bend. The singer/guitarist's latest album, *Louder Than Fate*, carries many of his trademarks, while also surprising listeners by exploring new sonic ground that crosses the line past Southern rock into country.

That's not the only way Nichols has stepped things up. Part of the album

was recorded at Studio 606, the creative hub owned by Foo Fighters, with super producer Jay Ruston (Corey Taylor, Anthrax, Steel Panther) bringing his years of expertise behind the desk. Then there are the external producers and songwriters that Nichols enlisted to help avoid the common pitfalls faced by almost every modern blues player. The result is a musical journey unlike anything he's taken us on before.

What did you learn from working with writers and producers like Roger Alan Nichols and Skip Black?

Brad Paisley said how guitar players often cater their songs toward the solos or riff. It's a hard habit to break, because you make a structure then play the shit out of it. I've been trying to prove myself

constantly, because when you get billed as some hotshot, people stand in front of you with their arms crossed as if to say, "Prove it". This time, I was rubbing elbows with people who worked with the world's greatest musicians. These people just want to write songs. They'd be like, "Oh yeah, another guitar player." They didn't care. Walking into those rooms gave me a completely different mindset.

This record feels like something of a learning curve for you.

Dude, I did a huge chunk of it at Studio 606. Our drummer was using Taylor Hawkins' kits. I was playing through Dave Grohl's cabinets. We were going through the Sound City board. There was such a vibe in there. I felt like I was getting schooled the whole time. One thing I learned is that you don't need as much gain as you think for riffing. I started playing with my gain decked, but when I walked into the control room, Jay was like, "Have you got a pedal on?" and told me to turn it off. I was a little scared at first, but when I did, I could hear more of an old-school vibe. If you listen to the classic stuff from the Sixties and Seventies, those plexis aren't as gainy as you might think. The tones are defined and muscular but not washed out with overdrive and reverb.

How did all that affect how you play?

I remember working on "Looks Like That Felt Good." Roger was the producer for that one; he kept hitting the spacebar, telling me to stop sliding into everything. Sometimes there are these things we do as players — sliding makes things sound slurred and bluesy, but some riffs need to hit straight. He told me to stop that and lose the vibrato. Again, I was unsure, but, lo and behold, his advice made sense. You learn things that go deeper than the big licks. It's the little stylistic elements that fly under the radar, but when you pay attention, you'll be glad you did.

"Bending Or Breaking," "Killing Time" and "Show Me" showcase a whole different side to you.

That's the thing about being in a room with people who aren't into what you're into. You learn more. It ended up being the perfect sauce. As an artist there comes a point where you have to let go of your insecurities. I did a lot of that on this record. It was like showing a whole other side of music that I love but never had the guts to do. Those dudes exist big-time in the country world and pushed me into finding my footing in stuff I wouldn't have taken on without them. We've been playing these songs in the set and it's great to see the change of pace. People have been like, "Damn, Jared's not just ripping my head off for 80 minutes."

But there are moments where you still do. "Let's Go" has some Richie Kotzen-style barred pentatonic ideas.

"I stuck to my guns, playing the music I love," Jared James Nichols says



I love Richie's playing. I was lucky enough to tour with him in the Winery Dogs, and we ended up hanging out. I remember listening to him when I was 20 and thinking, "What the fuck?!" It's the same with Paul Gilbert or Michael Schenker. When I tour with people like that, some of their licks end up in my playing. I can't help it. Even John 5, who I've done over 100 shows with, ended up creeping into my playing because it was like we were drinking the same water.

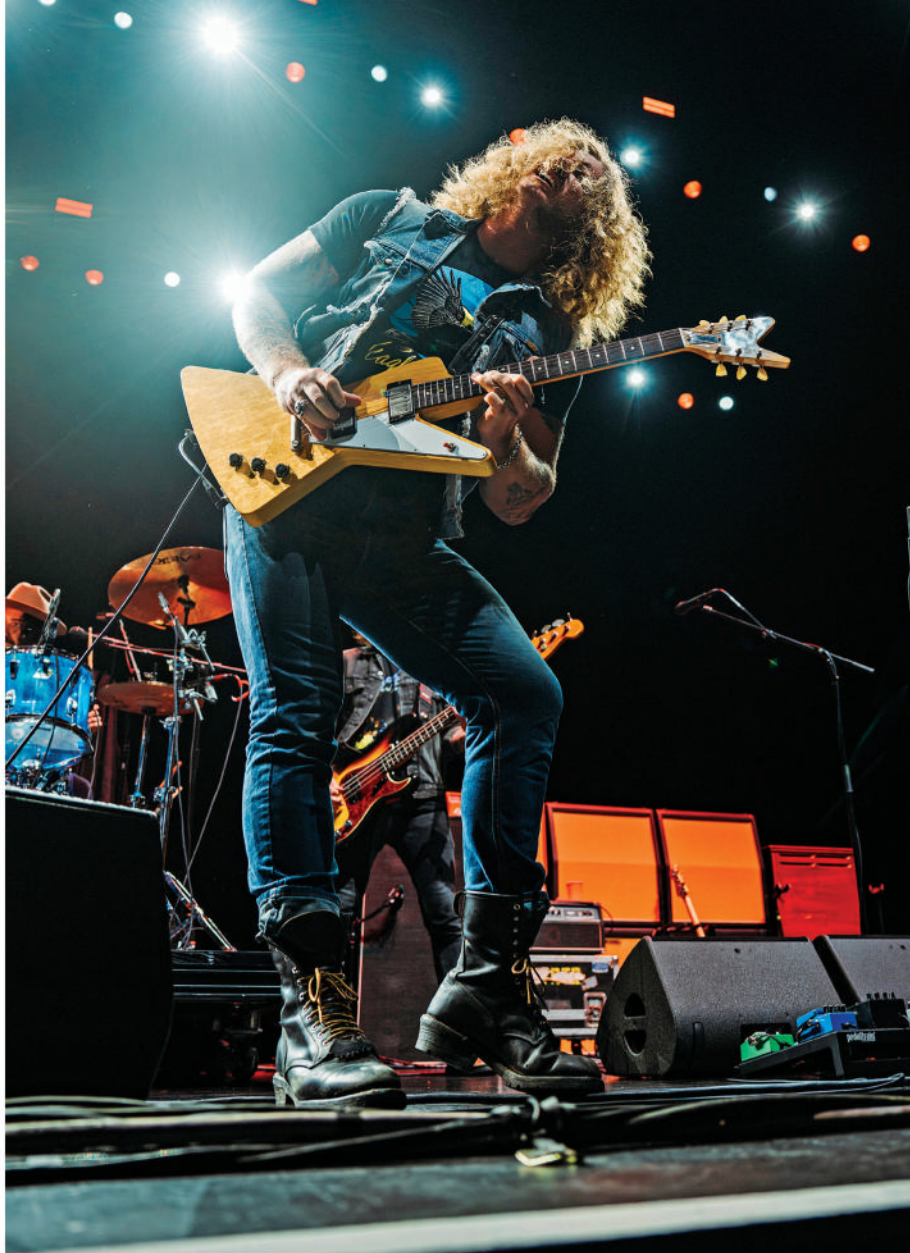
Which new solos are you most proud of?

Nothing was contrived; it was all still from a shoot-from-the-hip mindset. But "Killing Time" was a first pass. I was listening to the backing track the night before — it's this crescendo build in E minor. I started humming ideas that felt more like David Gilmour territory. In the end, I played it through a 1969 plexi with my Klon, using my Dorothy guitar, my really old goldtop from 1952. The Klon was on with zero gain, but I turned the amp volume all the way up. I love solos that have some composition, these little waves of writing, but also feel improvised. That's where this one lives. It has the fiery spitball of, "C'mon guys, let's play," but you can still hear how it follows the changes.

You tend to be minimal when it comes to gear...

It's not a long list beyond the cable. [Laughs] I had the plexi and this special amp from Blackstar that's a one-of-one, point-to-point handwired Series One. They'd made it for Jeff Beck but never got it to him. It's more aggressive than the plexi, like an old JCM800. I used my Tube Screamer and for "Runnin' Hot" I borrowed this [Electro-Harmonix Small Stone] big box phaser from the early Eighties. It gave some rhythms a bit more movement. The main guitars were Dorothy and this Korina Futura for all the big-ass humbucker parts. I didn't have to search when it came to tone. It's funny; I remember doing this track with Joe Bonamassa, and he brought his whole rig over, saying to use whatever I needed. I brought my Marshall head, Dorothy and my Klon and started

testing out tones with my stuff before asking him what I should try. His answer was, "I think you should stay there." That was it. I try not to overcomplicate things.



You recently went to Joe's house to film a video on Gary Moore's 1989 Soldano SLO-100 head, which he'd recently acquired...

Joe must have balls of steel because the amp hadn't been serviced or even turned on. It literally just showed up in a shipping crate. It was like finding a classic muscle car, sticking some gas in and firing it up. Joe was cranking it right away with a 1959 Les Paul. In the video you can see the power sizzle down, shut off, then come back. It did that a few times. It's like we were feeling Gary Moore's spirit

in the room. I feel pretty spoiled when I think about all the cool shit I get to be around. I also did a video on Gary's JTM45 Bluesbreaker, which another

friend got at auction. I own Gary's original Guv'nor pedal, so we used that with a 1959 Les Paul. Here's the crazy shit — the power went out four times, which has never happened before. Then this horrible rainstorm came. I got the chills and remember saying, "Dude, I think Gary Moore's here."

You recently posted a photo of yourself as a teen gunslinger wearing a Sabbath Bloody Sabbath shirt. That kid has come a long way.

I wouldn't change a thing. Every time I screwed up or took a wrong turn, from bands breaking up to me getting depressed, it all led to this path of understanding. I'm still that kid in a Sabbath Bloody Sabbath shirt holding the Les Paul. If I was able to put in the work and get to where I am today, so can anyone. There were times I was crashing on floors, living on 10 bucks a week with no gigs booked. I'd walk around streets late at night listening out for bands to see if I could jam with them. It's easy to get discouraged. But it just comes down to how bad you want it. Are you prepared to go through all of the shit to come out the other side? I stuck to my guns, playing the music I love. 🎸



LOST CLASSICS

The Pretenders

Shattered by drugs and reeling from loss, 1984's *Learning to Crawl* saw the Pretenders come back swinging. Robbie McIntosh reflects on a modern classic that saw him cast as "the guy who ruined the band"

BY JOE BOSSO

The start of the 1980s saw the dazzling rise of the Pretenders. Led by American expat Chrissie Hynde, the dynamic British rock 'n' roll quartet issued a one-two punch of albums, *Pretenders* (1980) and *Pretenders II* (1981), that featured memorable hits such as "Stop Your Sobbing," "Brass in Pocket," "Kid" and "Talk of the Town." A former rock critic, Hynde quickly established herself as a crafty songwriter and a captivating singer, and she was aided by an ace band that included drummer Martin Chambers, bassist Pete Farndon and the immensely gifted guitarist, James Honeyman-Scott.

The band's rapid ascent came to a crashing halt in June 1982. First came the firing of Farndon (his increasing drug use had fractured relations within the group), and two days later, Honeyman-Scott died of heart failure caused by a cocaine overdose (a year later, Farndon succumbed to a heroin overdose as well).

"I was good friends with Jimmy, and his death was such a shock," says guitarist Robbie McIntosh. "I met him before he joined the Pretenders, and we had stayed in touch. He had actually talked to me about playing with the band. The idea was to flesh things out as the band was evolving. I hadn't said I'd definitely do it, but it would have been great. It's a shame it didn't happen that way."

Hynde and Chambers channeled their grief by recording a smashing double hit single, "Back on the Chain Gang" and "My City Was Gone," utilizing ex-Rockpile guitarist Billy Bremner and Big Country bassist Tony Butler. Because of his commitments to Big Country, Butler was unable to join the Pretenders, and in the case of Bremner, McIntosh says, "I don't think Chrissie saw him as the right fit. He's a great player, obviously, but he was more of a rockabilly guy."

McIntosh, who had played various bands throughout the late Seventies and early Eighties, shared Honeyman-Scott's musical tastes. "We were rock and pop guys," McIntosh says. "We loved Pete Townshend, the Kinks, the Beach Boys, the

[from left] The Pretenders' Malcolm Foster, Chrissie Hynde, Robbie McIntosh and Martin Chambers in May 1984



Beatles and the Rolling Stones. That might be a reason I got called up to audition for the band."

By the end of 1982, McIntosh was asked to join a new Pretenders lineup, which would also include bassist Malcolm Foster. Much was expected of the band — could they match the power and tunefulness of the first two albums? — and they came through like champs with 1984's *Learning to Crawl*. The record featured "Back on the Chain Gang" and "My City Was Gone," but it also packed forceful rockers like

"Time the Avengers" and "Watching the Clothes," along with two tracks that demonstrated Hynde's softer side, "Show Me" and the shimmering Christmas ballad "2000 Miles." The album burst out of the gate with the seismic single "Middle of the Road," on which McIntosh burned through a breakneck solo that ranks as a masterclass in kinetic excitement.

"I'm extremely proud of the album," says McIntosh, who stayed with the Pretenders until 1987. "It was a big jump for me, working with a famous band and with Chris Thomas, an established producer." He laughs. "I did get some bad reviews, though. Some people called me 'the guy who ruined the Pretenders.' But you can't take reviews seriously — good or bad ones. The album did extremely well; it went double platinum in America, so there was

"Chrissie Hynde played loud, but that didn't worry me. I was more concerned with how I could play off what she did"

ROBBIE MCINTOSH

DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS

that. I was young and confident, so I just plowed on."

Being that James Honeyman-Scott was a friend, did you have mixed feelings about auditioning?

Yeah, although I felt very lucky in one respect that I had been his friend. The fact that I did an audition meant I didn't walk straight into the gig. I mean, the band might not have liked what I did, but as it turned out, they did. For the first few songs we did, I thought things worked out pretty well.

Did you have any interactions with Chrissie Hynde before the audition?

No, I met her at the audition. That was the first time, and then she rang me a few days later and said, "Do you want to join the band?" Obviously, I said yes.

What did the audition entail? Were you given a list of songs to prepare?

No, we just jammed. I played for maybe 20 minutes with another guitar player, Mick Green, who I was sort of in awe of, and a bass player whose name I can't remember. Martin was playing drums. Chrissie and Dave Hill, the manager, sat in front of the stage. A few days later, I got the call from Chrissie and she said she wanted me in the band. I didn't have a clue that I'd passed the audition. The great thing about the Pretenders is that Chrissie is kind of garagey and punk — she's a great songwriter and lyricist, and she's got an individual voice — but it was embellished by Jimmy's musical style. He wasn't into punk at all, and neither was I.

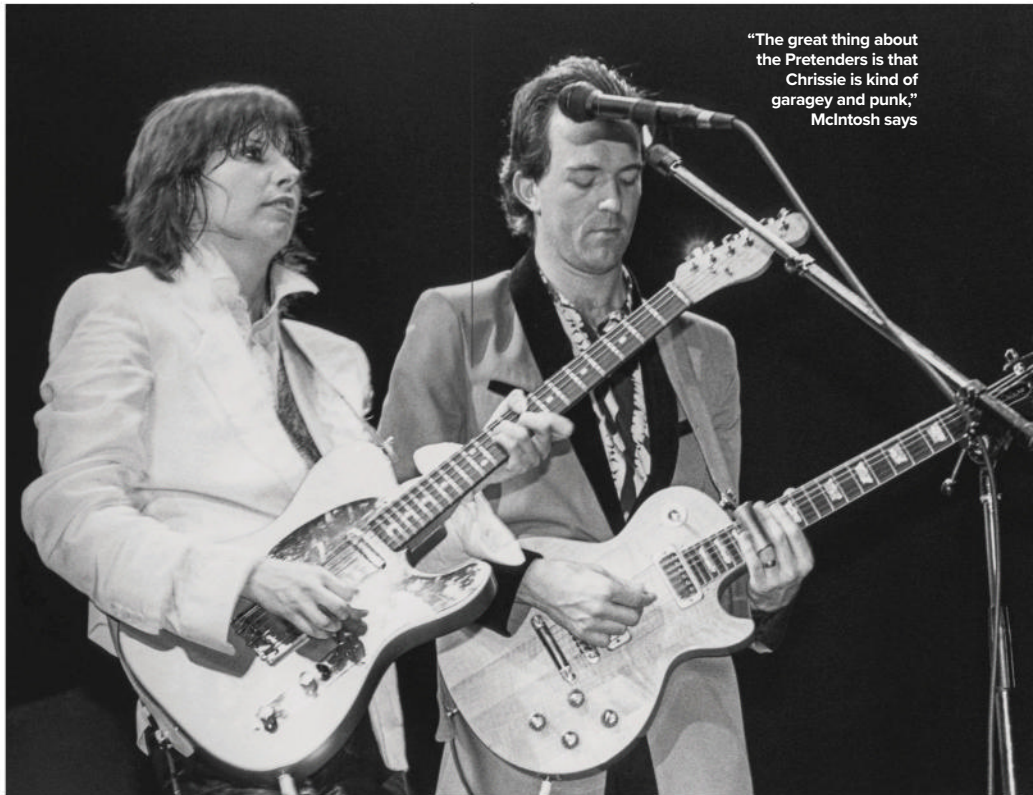
What was it like the first time you played in rehearsal with Chrissie?

I remember she played quite loud, but that didn't worry me. I was more concerned with how I could complement her and play off what she did. I can't remember whether the first thing we did was "2000 Miles" or "Middle of the Road." I think it was "Middle of the Road."

Okay, dude... that solo, I mean, come on. It's so electrifying and beautifully composed. How long did it take you to work it out?

Thanks so much. But no, I didn't work it out. Chrissie had the chords, kind of a Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels thing, and I came up with some ideas. I remember there was a growing riff part — I came up with that, and it seemed to work. In the studio I did maybe three or four solos, all different kinds of things, and Chris Thomas said, "I like that bit. We'll keep the first half." I think I dropped in the really fast bit on its own, and I did that thing with the delay at the end of the solo. We worked on it for maybe half an hour.

Which guitar did you use for that track?



My 1977 Fender Telecaster, which I still own. And my amp was a Marshall 20 head into a 2x10 cabinet. I had Marshall 100s as well, so maybe there was a bit of that in there. But the body of the sound was the Marshall 20, which is my favorite amp.

If Chrissie had any doubts about hiring you, they were put to rest with that solo.

[Laughs] It was a bit more aggressive and flashy than what Jimmy would've done. People always ask me about the picking on that solo. I just used my fingers, and the pick was inside my hand. Then if I needed the pick, I'd just pull it out. Chris Thomas always complimented me on the guitar playing on the album. I saw him a couple of years ago and he said the same thing. He said what a great time he had making that album. I was quite chuffed.

You mentioned "2000 Miles." Chrissie later said that she should have given you songwriting credit because of the riff you came up with.

Yeah, it was the same with "Middle of the Road," actually. Chrissie would come up with a very basic accompaniment, and then I'd come up with riffs that went over the top. It was the same later on with "Don't Get Me Wrong." That guitar part is very distinctive.

Did Chrissie demo anything, or did she just play what she had right in the room?

It was all done in rehearsal, and we just remembered it. It was old-school. We never recorded anything. If you came up with something great, you just hoped you'd remember it.

How much leeway did Chrissie give you in terms of coming up with guitar parts?

The big thing with Chrissie was, she would say, "Don't be too smooth." I mean, Larry Carlton never would have fit in her band, and I say that as someone who loves Larry Carlton. I hate to use the expression "dumb it down," but, to a certain degree, playing with Chrissie is about doing just that. She was into Mitch Ryder, Question Mark and the Mysterians and the Ramones, while I was into the Beatles and Bad Company. But you know, Chrissie is a great songwriter, and a lot of the greats, apart from people like Jimmy Webb, don't really have a clue about the mechanics and the rudiments of music. That's what makes them so good or so unique. 🎸

Man of Steel

Rescued from the vaults, this lost interview with Elliott Randall sheds new light on the “craziness” of Steely Dan’s first sessions — and the disaster behind his classic “Reelin’ In the Years” solo

BY JOE MATERA

“I’d never say they were difficult to work with, because we had a really good understanding of each other,” Elliott Randall told me during a recently rediscovered — and previously unpublished — 2003 interview. He was talking about working with Steely Dan’s co-founders, Walter Becker and Donald Fagen.

“Everybody’s got their own brand of craziness,” Randall said. “With Donald, Walter and me, we just realized we were a bunch of nutty guys, and — as long as we could get together on a level that we felt happy when creating music — what more could you ask for? Nobody could be more meticulous than those two. They were absolutely the top of the bill.”

Prior to working with Becker and Fagen on their Steely Dan outings, Randall first met the pair when they were doing time on the road as part of Jay and the Americans’ backing band and later while working on early pre-Steely Dan demos.

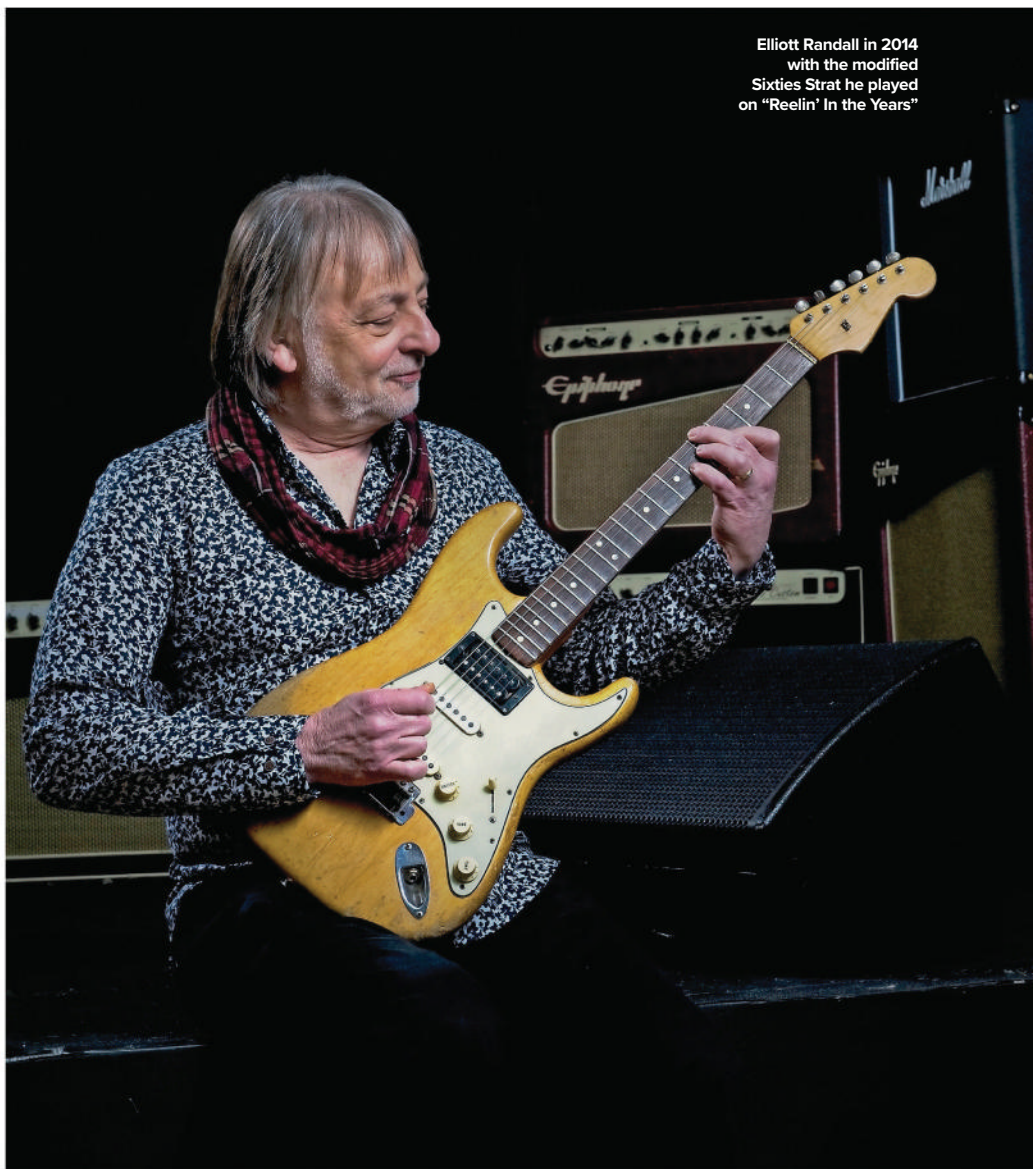
“We’d been friendly acquaintances for quite a while, and I was asked to do a bunch of their demos when they were trying to get themselves a deal in New York,” Randall said. “This was way before they got signed to ABC. Then in 1972, they moved to California. I moved there too [from New York], sort of part time to test the waters and see if I liked it. At that point

they asked me to join the group, but I had a funny feeling that I’d be better off just being friendly with the guys. I said, ‘I don’t want to join the group, but I’d be happy to make records with you. If you want me to come and do personal appearances, that’d be fine,

but I don’t want to be a full-time member of a group at this point in my life.’ That was met with a little bit of eyebrow raising.”

When Becker and Fagen finally began working on Steely Dan’s debut album, 1972’s *Can’t Buy a Thrill*, they asked Randall to contribute guitar to two tracks, “Kings” and “Reelin’ In the Years,” the latter of which would secure Randall’s reputation as one of the group’s go-to guitarists. His blistering solo is nothing short of iconic.

“That solo actually was the first thing that happened when they hit the red button,” Randall said. “I listened to it a couple of times and said, ‘Let’s roll the tape — let’s record.’ I just wacked it off from the very beginning to the very end, but it turned out that the tape operator hadn’t pressed the ‘record’ button. So we wound up doing another one, which is the one you hear on the record. [Because of] that incident, producer Gary Katz introduced a policy of where the minute somebody starts doing anything, he made sure you hit the red button so everything was recorded. You never know when you’ll get an accidental



Elliott Randall in 2014 with the modified Sixties Strat he played on “Reelin’ In the Years”



Randall [far right] at a Pat Benatar session in 1978

ROB MONK / BOBBY BANK/WIREIMAGE

“The ‘Reelin’ In the Years’ solo was the first thing that happened when they hit the red button”

piece of music.”

Randall used his usual workhorse, a Sixties Fender Strat, on the track. “I bought it in 1965, though it was two years old at the time,” he says. “It cost me a whopping \$175. While the body is ’63, the neck is ’65 [because] I had put it in the trunk of a friend’s sports car on the way to a gig. When we got there, the case had wiggled around so much that the neck got broken. But I was able to get a new neck right away. The guitar has been basically that ever since. It’s souped up in terms of the pickups and electronics. The front pickup is a Gibson PAF humbucker I [installed] in 1969.

There’s a wonderful guitarist from Toronto, Dominic Troyano. He had a Telecaster with two humbucking pickups, and I loved the sound of it. He said, ‘If you love it, let me take you to my friends, Barney Kessel’s Music World in L.A., and they’ll put one in for you.’ They totally warmed up the instrument. It’s really big and fat and very un-Strat-like.”

And then there’s that fiery, unrestrained solo on “Kings.”

“It’s a really out-to-lunch solo that goes from being very sort of within the changes to being dissonant and wacky,” Randall said. “It actually kind of spoke from my head state at the time. I was going through some serious life changes. I had a failed marriage — we just didn’t understand each other — and I was in the process of getting a divorce. I just played out my nuttiness in that song.”

The obscure lyrical content to Steely Dan’s music has confounded many fans, yet Becker and Fagen have consistently refrained from revealing much behind the songs’ meaning, preferring the subject matter to remain enigmatic.

“They were into combining elements of good literature along with their sophisticated musical knowledge,” Randall said. “They’d write a song like ‘Rikki Don’t Lose That Number,’ and there’d be a story behind it, but you play it for 10 different people and 10 different people will find 10 different stories. That’s the beauty of it. It’s almost like looking at certain kinds of paintings and how they will evoke different thoughts from different people. You can span the entire spectrum, and nobody’s wrong. And the painter’s having a good time because everybody’s enjoying the work in their own way.”



[from left] Barry Johnson
[also below], Chase
Knobbe and Matt Ebert

Joyce Manor

Killing the gain made the emo-punks’ new album kick harder than ever; now they’re hijacking the Billboard charts on their own terms

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

South Bay L.A.’s Joyce Manor have built a reputation for crafting short, spirited blasts of emo-punk, but there’s something different about their latest LP, *I Used to Go to This Bar*. And producer Brett Gurewitz has as much to do with it as the band themselves, according to frontman Barry Johnson.

For the first time, they didn’t double track the rhythm guitars, and they also eighty-sixed the high-gain amps. But instead of trashing the band’s energetic sound, the simplified production leveled up their performances and the guitar interplay between Johnson and co-guitarist Chase Knobbe.

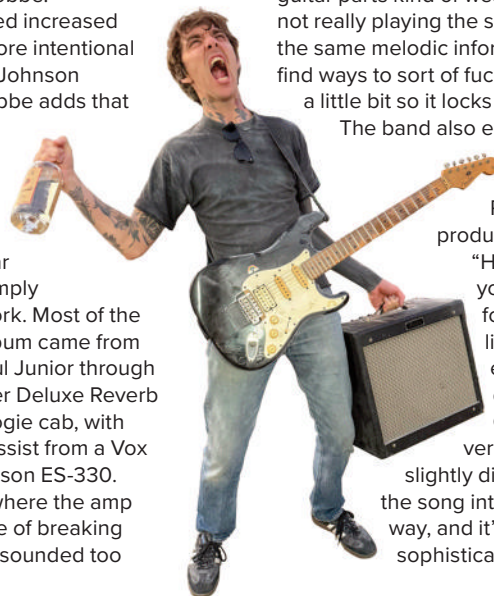
“The perceived increased fidelity is just more intentional guitar sounds,” Johnson says, while Knobbe adds that Bad Religion guitarist and Epitaph label head Gurewitz didn’t labor much over guitar sounds — he simply knew what’d work. Most of the tones on the album came from a Fifties Les Paul Junior through a vintage Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Mesa Boogie cab, with an occasional assist from a Vox AC30 and a Gibson ES-330. “We’d get it to where the amp was on the edge of breaking up,” he says. “It sounded too

clean to me, honestly, but when I heard it with everything else, it was amazing.”

That straightforward approach serves the songs well. The chord inversions on “All My Friends Are So Depressed,” which gave them their first Billboard hit seven albums in, wouldn’t work as well behind a wall of gain. Even barn-burner “I Know Where Mark Chen Lives” benefits from the restraint as Johnson and Knobbe build the tension before detonating a powder-keg on the chorus.

“The parts on this record are written very specifically,” Knobbe says. “We’ve gotten pretty obsessed with making the guitar parts kind of weave, where we’re not really playing the same parts. It’s all the same melodic information, but you find ways to sort of fuck up the rhythm a little bit so it locks in.”

The band also employed a “trick” they learned from producer Rob Schnapf, who produced 2016’s *Cody*. “He’s like, ‘When you do everything four times, the listener begins to expect what you did previously. On the second verse, do something slightly different.’ It keeps the song interesting in a way, and it’s just a bit more sophisticated.”



DAN MONICK, JARED SHAVELSON

ZIGGY

He also got a lot of amazing guitarists to play alongside him. Ten years after David Bowie left us, we ask Adrian Belew, Peter Frampton, Carlos Alomar, Eric Schermerhorn and other guitar-slinging comrades-in-arms to recall their high times alongside the master

BY JOEL McIVER

PLAYED

D AVID BOWIE, WHO left us on January 10, 2016, was a highly accomplished singer, songwriter, performer and actor, and a fine musician too, although he knew his limitations when it came to musical virtuosity. As he told *Guitar Player's* Joe Gore in 1997, "My guitar playing hasn't moved with the times at all. I use the same chords as always, but I do know a lot of them, and I'm able to put them together in interesting juxtapositions. Any time I did spend being disciplined was learning how chords work together."

Make no mistake, Bowie knew his way

around a fretboard, as a number of stellar guitarists explain to us below — but he had bigger goals in mind than being a virtuoso axeman. In his 54 years as a recording and performing artist, he managed to redefine the role of the theatrical musician, refining the art of the alter-ego, touring the world in several incarnations and making an impact on the worlds of cinema and finance (remember those 1990s Bowie Bonds?) along the way. To help him achieve those objectives, he recruited some of the most fiendishly talented guitar players in the world.

You'll already know most, if not all, of the names on the roster. For his first three

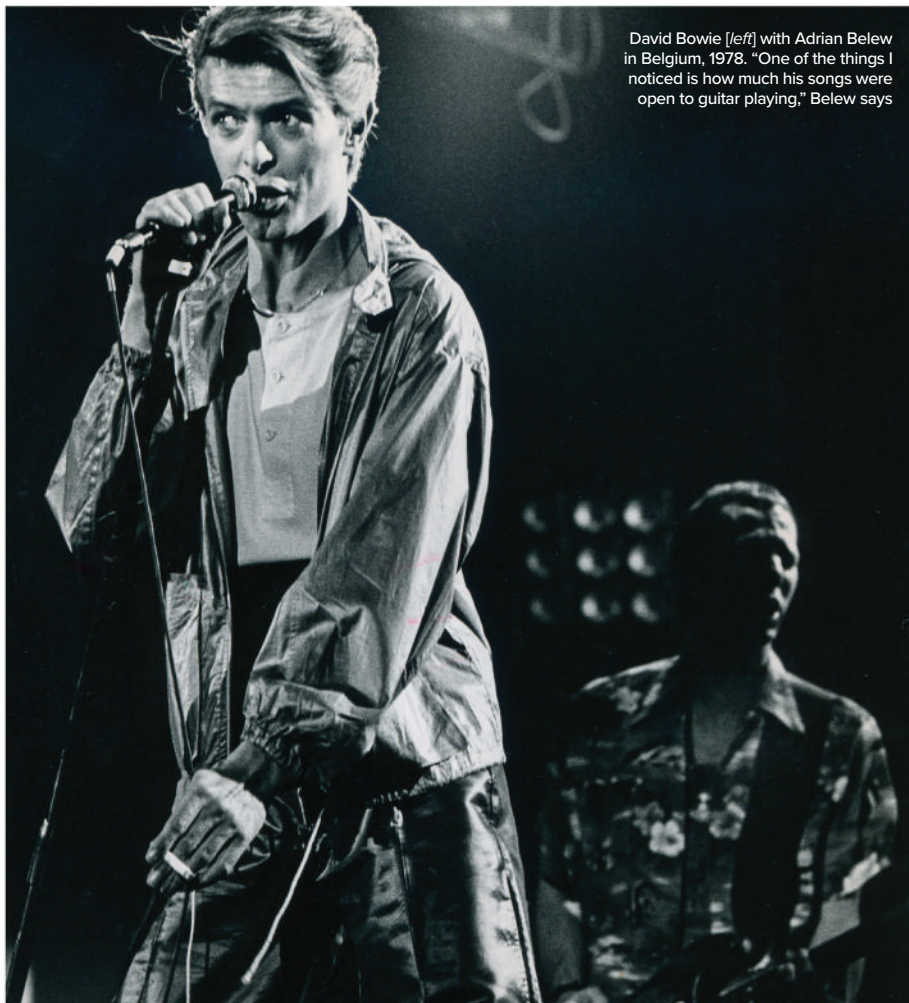
years as a bona fide star, after he blew the minds of a generation with 1970's *The Man Who Sold the World*, Bowie's guitar partner was **Mick Ronson**, who also played so memorably on *Hunky Dory* (1971), *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups* (both 1973), as well as performing on the Ziggy Stardust World Tour. Listen to the metallic solo on "The Width of a Circle," from *The Man...*, the acoustic textures on "Oh! You Pretty Things" from *Hunky Dory*, and the all-out wall of sound on "Suffragette City" for a taste of Ronson's magical approach. Sadly, he died in 1993 at age 46, or we'd be talking to him

GUITAR

DAVID BOWIE



LOUISE WILSON/GETTY IMAGES



David Bowie [left] with Adrian Belew in Belgium, 1978. "One of the things I noticed is how much his songs were open to guitar playing," Belew says

today about that unmatched early catalog.

After the unsung session hero **Alan Parker** helped out on 1974's *Diamond Dogs*, assisting Bowie on the unforgettable main riff of "Rebel Rebel," **Earl Slick** and **Carlos Alomar**, the latter Bowie's longest-serving guitarist by some distance, stepped up to the plate for his next five and 13 studio albums respectively. Both men recorded away from Bowie in extended breaks from his band, but they're the most prolific of his sidemen by a long shot. Where to start? Check Slick's performance on 1975's *Young Americans* and Alomar's sterling work on Bowie's Berlin-recorded landmark, *Low* (1977), which also featured the late **Ricky Gardiner**, or any of the early-2000s albums that kept Bowie in the millennial bloodstream.

Let's not forget the guitarists who played with Bowie's live band, of course, even if they didn't record album sessions; these include **Stacy Heydon**, who held it down on the *Isolar Tour* 1976; the great **Adrian Belew**, who graduated from Frank Zappa's band in time for the *Stage* live album in 1978 and returned 12 years later as musical director of the *Sound + Vision Tour*; and the equally great **Peter Dinklage**, who came alive on the *Glass Spider Tour* in '87.

It says much about Bowie that many of his guitar players were superstars themselves. Take King Crimson's **Robert Fripp**, who recorded Bowie's best-known lead line on "Heroes" in 1977; **Stevie Ray Vaughan**, who guested on *Let's Dance* in 1983; and **Nile Rodgers** of Chic, who played on and co-produced the same album. Lesser-known session stalwarts played their part, too, notably **Chuck Hammer**, who played guitar synth on *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* in 1980. That album also featured a notable guest slot by **Pete Townshend** of the Who.

In 1988 Bowie took a four-year sidestep off the main drag with Tin Machine, the heavy rock quartet in which **Reeves Gabrels** carried most of the weight, guitar-wise. Live, he was assisted by **Eric Schermerhorn**, who went on to work with Iggy Pop after Tin Machine called it quits; Gabrels later played on *Outside* (1995), *Earthling* (1997) and *Hours...*

"David had a kind of caveman instinct with the guitar, and he could play a mean riff, too"

GERRY LEONARD

(1999). In the 2000s, **Gerry Leonard** played textural guitar on *Heathen* (2002) and *Reality* (2003) and on the accompanying tours, joined on those albums by **Mark Plati**, also an acclaimed producer and multi-instrumentalist who had previously worked with Prince. Slick, Leonard, **David Torn**, producer **Tony Visconti** and Bowie himself recorded guitar for *The Next Day* in 2013, and for his valiant, multifaceted final curtain, 2016's still-astonishing *Blackstar*, jazz guitarist **Ben Monder** was recruited.

So what memories do these musicians have of their late employer — and what did they think of Bowie as a guitar player? Let's find out. Belew, Schermerhorn, Leonard, Plati, Frampton and Alomar are grilled on that subject below, and Fripp gave us such an expansive interview that we've given him his own feature on page 60. As for the much-missed Vaughan and Ronson, they've been jamming away in the sky since 1990 and 1993, respectively, but we'll raise our glasses to them in salute.

Was David Bowie a good guy to be around, generally speaking?

ADRIAN BELEW: Absolutely. David wasn't a person to say bad things. That would be left to someone around him. To me, he was always upbeat. He loved me, we loved each other, and we had a great time together, so there was nothing to be critical about. It was simple. If he didn't like something, he'd simply say, "I don't know about that," and that was as far as it would go. I never saw him angry. He was too sophisticated. He had so much interest in so many different things. That's one of the things I loved about him. He would always discover a new subject matter to start reading about. Once he got into something, man, he knew everything about it. That's what made him such an interesting person to be with.

ERIC SCHERMERHORN: His bunk was above mine on the bus, and he read books non-stop. I remember talking to him about Philip K. Dick. The best thing David did for me, which really shows his character, was after we played the Budokan at the end of the tour in 1992. I talked to him and he said, "We're done. The gig's over. What would you like to do in the future?" I heard Chrissie Hynde was looking for a guitar player, so I was like, "Well, Chrissie Hynde would be fun." I get back to New York, and two weeks later, his manager calls me and goes, "Chrissie wants to meet you in London." I went to London, hung out with her all day at her house, and she was great. She said, "David says you're really good. I need a guitar player." I had already sent Iggy Pop a tape, and he said, "Let's do something," and I said yes because he lived in New York, but I look back sometimes and

think, "I could have moved to London in 1992, and that would have been fun."

GERRY LEONARD: David was very perceptive and insightful — and he had this gift for reading a room. Everybody that was in his band was there for a very specific reason that he had in his mind. He had this knack of figuring out people's strengths and really leaning into those strengths. He was very good at pulling together all of those seemingly disparate elements into making art.

MARK PLATI: Aside from what a lot of people say about his curious nature, and how he was always trying to stretch his own musical and visual boundaries, he just really enjoyed doing it. He loved the process and had a lot of fun with it, and that was contagious to anybody in the room, which made these experiences a really wonderful adventure. Sometimes you didn't know where you were going, but boy, you had a good time getting there.

How did you first meet him?

BELEW: We first met when he appeared at a concert in Berlin, when I was playing with Frank Zappa. Two nights before that, Brian Eno had come to the show in Cologne, and Brian knew David was looking for a fresh guitar player, so he told him, "We've got to go see this guy that's with Zappa." There was a part of the show where Frank took an extended 10-minute solo, leaving just Terry Bozzio and Patrick O'Hearn on stage, and the rest of us were supposed to walk off the stage at that point. As I was doing that, I looked over at the monitor guy, and there was David Bowie and Iggy Pop standing there. So I walked over and shook David's hand and said, "I just want to really thank you for all your music. You've really inspired me. You've done so much amazing stuff." I didn't even have time to say anything to Iggy before David said, "Well, good. How'd you like to be in my band?" It was an amazing moment. It gave me shivers. Two weeks later, I was in David's rehearsal.

SCHERMERHORN: I met Reeves Gabrels in Boston in 1979. We played in different bands together, and we worked at the same music store. We were just guitar buddies, and we were into Robert Fripp and Adrian Belew as well as older guys like Jimi Hendrix. His wife, Sarah, worked for David as his publicist, so he got the Tin Machine gig around 1988 after she said to him, "Hey David, my husband's a guitar player" and gave him a cassette. When I was in Boston I was in a band called East Of Eden. We were on Capitol and we did a record with Roy Thomas Baker, opened for the Psychedelic Furs for a tour and then we broke up. I moved to New York in 1990, and Reeves calls me around April or May of 1991 and says, "Hey, do you want to come out to L.A. and audition? We need a guitar player

Tin Machine at Brixton Academy in 1991: [from left] Tony Sales, Eric Schermerhorn, Bowie and Reeves Gabrels



"Bowie had a fascination for guitar players. Songs like 'Heroes' are custom made for guitar"

ADRIAN BELEW

for Tin Machine." I was like, "Whoa... this is life-changing!" So I learned the records in every key, because you never know when you go to an audition; flew out to L.A. and played a couple of songs with the band. It was great, and at the end Reeves goes, "Hey, Eric, play [Jimi Hendrix's] 'Little Wing' for David," because he knew I could play that shit. So I did that, and as we're packing up, David comes up to me right there, shakes my hand, and goes, "I'm really looking forward to working with you."

LEONARD: David was intrigued by my playing, I think. He came and saw me play live and then asked me to be part of it. I think he wanted somebody to cover the stuff Fripp had done, or Belew had done, or Eno had done, and that was right up my street, because I was a big fan of all those guys. I didn't study Fripp or anything, but people would tell me, "You sound like Fripp," and I would deliberately not listen to him when I heard that, because I didn't want to be a copyist. Of course, I've listened to Fripp since, and he's got a beautiful tone and a unique style.

PLATI: I worked with Prince before I worked with Bowie, which I guess is kind of an odd combo in that you don't expect one to follow the other in sequence, but that's David. I can think of a lot of other artists who would have been like, "He worked with Prince — that's really not up my street." Not David. If anything, he'd be like, "Wow, what's this guy about?" because he had an eternally curious nature. Were you a fan of his music before you played with him?

SCHERMERHORN: Absolutely. I bought Low

and "Heroes" in high school. Those records were so powerful. When I met David, I said to him, "Those records changed my life," and he said, "They changed my life, too!"

PLATI: My first experience with Bowie's music was "Space Oddity." I most likely heard that on the radio when I was, maybe, 12. If you were a musically aware teenager in the early Seventies, you got to grow with David's music and with his guitar players. *Station to Station* was the first big Bowie record for me that I was aware of as an album and on FM radio. All those tunes were on the radio, and the guitar playing from Carlos and Slick really stuck with me.

How did you approach the task of being Bowie's guitar player?

BELEW: He really had a fascination for guitar players, and one of the things I noticed is how much his songs were open to guitar playing. Songs like "Stay" or "Heroes" are custom made for guitar. I was his musical director in 1990, and that was a whole other level; it took me months of preparation. One of the main difficulties was that he wanted just a four-piece band, and yet he was doing a retrospective of all his career. So you had symphonies, you had saxophone sections, you had everything in there. Fortunately, this coincided with the first sampler coming out. Roland had the first couple of samplers and they sent them to me, so me and my engineer and the keyboard player Rick Fox sat for hours and tried to sample all this stuff. We kept buying more samplers, so in the end we had two huge racks of samplers. Most of the stuff was played live, but anything that was beyond our ability was Rick Fox just pressing a sampler button, and the stage would fill with beautiful orchestral sounds.

LEONARD: I tried not to be too intimidated by the lineage that had gone before me, because hats off, those guys are incredible voices on the guitar. But, you know, that was David's thing, too: he was very generous in that way,

Gerry Leonard with
a Supro David Bowie
Dual Tone in 2018



validating you when you couldn't do it for yourself. We need that as artists: at times, we need someone to say "Keep doing what you're doing, because it's going somewhere."

PLATI: When I met him, he was writing with Reeves Gabrels, and while they would both play guitar when they were composing, Reeves would go off and record the parts, and David was perfectly fine with that because he was always about the people he would bring into the story. He was always about letting them do what they do best.

CARLOS ALOMAR: I'm just fine all over the place, playing what we call rhythm-lead. Because in my world, there's no lead guitar player. You play a part, I play a part, and we switch off. And if I want to, I'll play your part too if I need to.

Did Bowie have specific requirements, or was he more about, "Hit me with what you've got"?"

PETER FRAMPTON: He never said a word apart from, "Just come and be you." It was such an honor and a relief that he trusted me, you know, and got me there because of what I do. So I wasn't on "Let's Dance," and I didn't sound like Stevie Ray Vaughan, but I quoted Stevie and all the other great guitar players. It was a thrill to be able to do that.

BELEW: I had just come from working with Frank Zappa for a year, and Frank was very directive. He wanted you to play consistently

and correctly, and he really didn't need you to come up with much of anything. The music was the way he already wanted it to be. David was entirely the opposite. He was just thrilled to have someone who could play wild and run around on stage with him. At one point he said, "You can be my Keith Richards!" He never really directed me about anything. He was a supporter more than anything else. He just got so excited if you did something really cool. There's a video of me playing "Stay" on the German television show *Musikladen*, and I launch into the first section where I can play a solo. He's standing across the stage with his arms crossed, with this big grin, looking at me the whole time. He's got this look on his face like, "That's my boy!"

SCHERMERHORN: I think his genius,

probably like Miles Davis, was to ask himself, "Who do I have around me?" Even if he had a guy who could only play two chords, then he'd write something using those two chords. His genius was hearing what you could do. **ALOMAR:** I always say this: if you had Jimi Hendrix as your guitar player, would you tell him what to play? Fuck no. I tried to be inspiring, and I tried to give him what my best was. We always asked ourselves, "What if?" like, "What if we take the amplifier and we put it in the hallway?" One time, Tony Visconti found a chandelier and threw a rope over it and then hoisted a microphone up there. These types of outlandish ideas, and that curiosity, will keep you young forever.

What did you think of Bowie as a guitar player?

BELEW: This is an interesting thing. All the time I worked with David, I actually never saw him play much of anything. Not piano, not guitar. When I was his musical director in 1990, I just about managed to talk him into playing saxophone for one song, just because I thought it would be a cool look for David. All those years I never thought about it, but when I ask myself when he sat down and wrote all these great songs, I don't know the answer. He must have done it privately.

SCHERMERHORN: I thought what was cool was he never did barre chords. He did the E shape and slid that up and down the neck. He was letting the other strings ring on the 12-string. That's how I remember him playing, and his timing was great.

LEONARD: David wasn't virtuosic or anything like that. He didn't have any aspirations in those ways. He had a kind of caveman instinct with the guitar of what he wanted to do in a broad sense. For instance, when we did *The Next Day*, he'd say, almost apologetically, "Do you mind

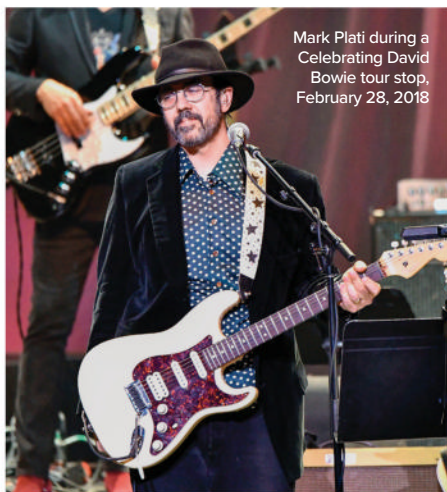


Bowie [left] on stage
in France with
Carlos Alomar, 1983

"He never said a word apart from 'Just be you.' It was such an honor that he trusted me"

PETER FRAMPTON

CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY IMAGES



Mark Plati during a Celebrating David Bowie tour stop, February 28, 2018

playing this part?" And he'd play me a part from the demo, which was a stabbing chord or something like that. It was great, so raw and punk rock. He'd say, "Take it and do what you want with it," so sometimes I would modify it, but I would always be very careful to try and keep the intention. So he got people to do the things that he wasn't able to do himself, but he had good instincts; he could write on the guitar and he could play a mean riff, too.

PLATI: In the Spiders, he was basically the second guitarist for a while and he had chops, but once he started incorporating two guitar players in the band, then he didn't have to be that any more; he became more of a frontperson.

ALOMAR: Bowie, like John Lennon, was a great rhythm, acoustic guitar player. Basically, they played triads, and they could play chords, but they couldn't play chords and bass-lines together in opposition, so the bass couldn't go down when the chord was going up. You always have to hit the root: you never hit an inversion. It's what we call metronome playing. They could keep the rhythm down for the whole song.

FRAMPTON: David played the riff on "Rebel Rebel," so we know he was a great guitarist, but I think he used guitar and keyboard in order to write. He was like me in the sense that I can play piano enough to write a song, but I'm not a piano player, whereas I am a guitar player.

When were you last face to face with Bowie?

BELEW: A long time ago. I don't know. He called me several times, though. One time he called and asked, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm out in my garden." He said, "You've got a garden?" I said, "Yeah, I've got a garden. You could have a garden, too, if you want. You're David Bowie!"

SCHERMERHORN: I ran into him a few times in New York, and he was always so nice to me.

ALOMAR: About a year or so before he died.

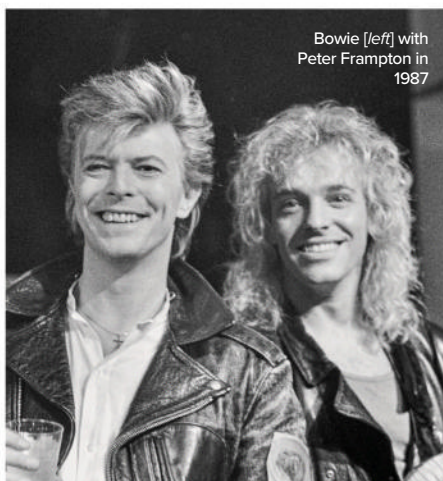
It was Tony Visconti's birthday, and he was there. I didn't know he was sick. He seemed a little pale and rather frail, but it was mostly just about renewing old times, tying up loose ends, and rededicating our passion and love for each other as well as celebrating Tony's good fortune and health. Later on, I found that it was more of a pleasant goodbye. But one of the things that we have in Buddhism is that we don't look at death as being death. It's like when you call somebody after a long period of time. You're just calling to see how they are, to make sure that they know that you remember them and cherish them. As a Buddhist, I feel that if I don't make that phone call to check up on you, then you're still having a good old time. I know you're fine.

What is your best memory of him?

BELEW: Oh, man. There were so many. I feel like I have my own private film in my mind of everything that went on. Maybe the Sound + Vision tour. That was 108 shows, and it went for a year, and we played in 26 countries. That's when I really got to know David and befriend him. I got to experience a side of him that few other people did, because I spent time with him at night in his room, just talking about things, or having dinners or whatever. We were pals, so everything comes out. All kinds of joyful things happen.

LEONARD: The whole experience was life changing, and I feel very lucky. It was a little bit of "right place, right time" for me.

ALOMAR: I love the *Scary Monsters...* album. We had this period where we were so locked in. We could do anything; we were flipping beats and doing split-rhythms, and it was just amazing. When we got together, our intent matched the level of our efficiency, so satisfaction was guaranteed. As a traveler in time, every one of us has that moment where you can hitch a ride to a star, and I think Bowie did a pretty good job of that. 🎸



Bowie [left] with Peter Frampton in 1987

MODERN LOVE MACHINES

IN 2016, THE STARS TOLD GUITAR PLAYER MAGAZINE'S MIKE MOLENDEN ABOUT THE GEAR THEY USED WITH MR. B.

ERIC SCHERMERHORN

1971 50-watt Marshall, black panel Fender Twin Reverb with vintage Celestion speakers, Fender Stratocaster with Telecaster neck, Bowie's Takamine 12-string

ADRIAN BELEW (1978 TOUR)

MXR Dyna Comp, A/DA Flanger, Electro-Harmonix Echo Flanger, Electro-Harmonix Big Muff run through an MXR 10-band graphic EQ, Electro-Harmonix Graphic Fuzz, Roland DC-30 Analog Chorus/Echo, Roland JC-120 amp, Fender Stratocaster

CARLOS ALOMAR Stereo

Alembic "Maverick" guitar

EARL SLICK 1965 Gibson

SG Junior, MXR Phase 45, late-Sixties Marshall half-stack, 1968 Gibson J-45

GERRY LEONARD 1969 Gibson

SG Custom, 1965 Gibson Firebird II, PRS Hollowbody II, Mesa Boogie Lonestar, Mesa Boogie TA30, TC G Force, Eventide H3000, Boss OD2, Lovetone Doppleganger, Lovetone Big Cheese, EMS Synthi Hi-Fi

BEN MONDER Ibanez AS-50

semi-hollowbody, Fernandes Strat with ESP neck and pre-CBS Fender pickups, 1965 Fender Deluxe Amp, 1967 Fender Princeton modded with a larger transformer, 6L6s and a 12" Electro-Voice speaker, Audio Upgrades-modded Lexicon LXP-1 reverb, MXR Carbon Copy Analog Delay, Ernie Ball volume pedal, Keeley-modified RAT, Walrus Mayflower overdrive, Walrus Deep Six compressor, Fulltone Deja Vibe, Strymon BlueSky reverb.

[from left] Robert Fripp,
Brian Eno and David
Bowie in Berlin, 1977



DR. ROBERT

When David Bowie needed a unique guitar voice for “Heroes,” he called Robert Fripp. Below, the King Crimson founder recalls those heady days “by the Wall”

BY JOEL McIVER

I MET DAVID socially in 1972 a couple of times. When we played the first King Crimson show at the Speakeasy in London in April 1969, I was told afterwards that David and [his then-wife] Angie Bowie were jiving. I also saw the Ziggy Stardust show at the Rainbow Theatre in Finchley when Roxy Music were in sup-

port. I was very impressed with the Ziggy show. It was one of the finest rock concerts I'd been to, which I mentioned to David in Berlin during “Heroes.” His comment was something like, ‘You saw what we were doing. You saw what was going on. You got it.’ It was a perfect show.

“When I got the phone call for the

“Heroes” session in 1977, I was in New York. I didn't view myself as a working player at that time, having just been in retreat for 10 months with no intention of going back to anything like that, so when David asked me to provide guitar, I said, ‘Well, I don't know, but if you're prepared to take a chance, so am I.’ I packed my Les Paul and

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

a pedalboard by Pete Cornish, which had a volume pedal, wah and fuzz box, and flew to Frankfurt, where I was transferring to Berlin. It was the first time I had flown first class, which was wonderful. Those were the days of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang, so going through German immigration and customs with this box of wires and wood was difficult. They had to go through all the pedals to make sure they worked and that everything was legitimate before I flew to Berlin.

"The person who was supposed to meet me at the airport didn't arrive, so I caught a cab to the hotel and then to Hansa Studios. I arrived about half past six in the evening, plugged in my guitar and we were away. One, two, three, four, and off we went. I don't remember any direction from anyone on "Heroes," although I'm not saying it didn't take place. The recording lasted three days, I believe, and it was very 'in the moment,' because it was spontaneous and really without thought. It was about immediacy, play and laughter, which are ideal working conditions for an improvising, creative person.

"At the same time, we were in a liminal zone, by which I mean an in-between space, whether in time, in people or in places. We were in a liminal space geographically within Berlin; although we were technically

"I asked David, 'Any suggestions?' He said, 'Think Ritchie Blackmore.' I didn't expect that, but I understood what he meant"

in West Berlin, it was an in-between zone between East and West Germany. In David's life, too, it was a time between what was happening and what was coming next, and as for me, I had just moved to New York, so it was a liminal period in my life. With Brian Eno, I think he was in between as well, because he was out of Roxy Music but not quite the Brian that we know today. So it was a liminal zone in time and place and persons.

"David was in New York toward the end of '77, and he invited me to his hotel, so I went along. He asked me to go on tour as his live guitarist, and I said, 'No. I've just come off the road after six years of touring.' He was very charismatic. That's the first word I'd use to describe him, but it wasn't right for me at the time. Would I have been a good live guitarist for David? I don't know. I think his live guitarist probably did a far better job of covering his catalog than I would have ever done.

"In 1980, I was invited to play on *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, and now I was on the other side of the liminal zone, so I was a working player and ready to go. I was a focused rock player and I recorded for two

nights, beginning at midnight, at Trident Studio at St. Anne's Court in London. I only had chord sheets, and the advantage of that is that you don't have to sit down with a manuscript book and listen through the songs a few times until you have the map. You have the map in broad outlines and you just go.

"I remember I asked David, 'Any suggestions?' because there's any number of ways you can go. He said, 'Think Ritchie Blackmore.' I didn't expect that, but I understood what he meant. Did I sound like Ritchie Blackmore? No. But I'd seen Ritchie in the Outlaws in Poole when I was 17, and his playing was phenomenal. He had all the moves. So I'd seen Ritchie, I'd heard Ritchie, and I wasn't going to play like Ritchie would, but I knew what David meant.

"How should we remember David Bowie? Simply as we knew him. Some people knew him personally, other people knew him through his work, and still other people will remember David as the person who said to them very directly, 'You have permission to be who you are.'" 



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Stevie Ray Vaughan goes wild in October 1983, six months after Bowie's *Let's Dance*

Nine not entirely obvious — yet definitely essential — David Bowie guitar tracks

ZIGS & ZAGS



“THE WIDTH OF A CIRCLE” THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD, 1970

With an ostensibly Buddhism-inspired, labyrinthine lyric that combines self-analysis with the occult, Nietzsche with Kahlil Gibran, surrealistic Lewis Carroll whimsy with evocative Dylan imagery, “The Width of a Circle” was originally meant to be an acoustic piece until guitarist Mick Ronson got hold of it and turned it into Bowie’s most unashamedly heavy recording of the Seventies — even bordering on metal. But it was in the live arena that it always took flight. During the Ziggy Stardust era, Bowie would disappear offstage for a cigarette break and costume change while Ronson would wig out, Jeff Beck style, for up to 15 minutes. At the dawn of the Seventies, everybody boogied, and Bowie was no exception. And no, we can’t move past *The Man Who Sold the World* without mentioning its fuzzed-out title track, the one that Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain would re-introduce to a new generation 24 years later. Ronson’s insistent motif, swaying in its brilliant weirdness, fuels Bowie’s mysterious lyrics, resulting in a perfect theme song for that secret noir film in your head.

HENRY YATES



“MOONAGE DAYDREAM” THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS, 1972

Pure glam swagger from the mythical age of guitar gods, a time when now-legendary names — Beck, Page, Allman, Blackmore, Winter, Iommi, Felder — were trying to outdo each other with each new release. And they succeeded. As *Guitar World* wrote about this song 10 years ago, Mick Ronson’s deafening bar-chord intro (“I’m an alligator...”) announces the introduction of Bowie’s most iconic creation. The song’s coda — a.k.a. its thrilling “freak out” — is supplied by an echo-drenched monolith of Ronson’s deeply emotive bends, proving that he was indeed Hull’s answer to Jeff Beck. As L.A. Guns’ Phil Lewis told us a few years back, “Ronson’s wailing guitar solo at the end of that song? It still gives me chills just thinking about it. The guy was a genius.”

DAMIAN FANELLI

“FAME” YOUNG AMERICANS, 1976

We’ll let Carlos Alomar take this one (from our 2024 interview): “The riff I came up with became the backbone of the song. It was



GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES

about creating something catchy yet intricate and continuing to follow the templates of funk. John Lennon laid down a simple guitar part; he was accommodating and didn't try to disturb the groove. Then David asked me if I wanted to go to dinner with them! I had a big "dilemma" moment; I was hearing certain [musical] things in my head, so I didn't wanna start talking to John and David and lose myself in the drinks or conversation. I decided to exclude myself and return to my guitar parts. When they came back, David heard what I did and was impressed that I'd done so much in such a short time. He said, "Let me just put down this one little guitar part." It was a perfect Bowie part, this distorted guitar that cut through all that funky clarity."

ANDREW DALY

"HEROES" "HEROES", 1977

It could be Bowie's crowning achievement, but "Heroes" wouldn't reach such lofty heights without Robert Fripp's subtle, yet essential, guitar work. Compared to the ornate Frippertronics or rapid-fire picking that define much of his catalog, the two-note phrase at this song's core might seem pedestrian by comparison. But it's hard to imagine a guitarist drawing out more emotion from those two notes — sustained bursts of tone that are as famous as Bowie's own vocal melody. And it's not like Fripp just tossed off his cameo; as producer Tony Visconti told *Sound on Sound*, he used a "fine science" to craft his part, measuring the distance between his guitar and the speaker to create a perfect feedback for each note he played.

RYAN REED



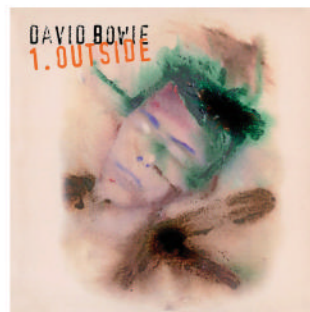
"SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS)" SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS), 1980

Briefly readopting the caricature cockney of his earliest Anthony Newley-inflected vocal incarnation, Bowie recounts the tale of a woman whose eyes "were blue but nobody home," touched by an insanity that manifests itself in "a horror of rooms." So far, so Dave. But what nudges *Scary Monsters'* title track from greatness to true genius is Fripp's truly astounding atonal guitar work, mirroring the lyric's madness, set against a bass riff that pumps along with Visconti's era-defining gated bass drum beat.

HENRY YATES

"CAT PEOPLE (PUTTING OUT THE FIRE)" LET'S DANCE, 1983

Let's Dance served as the world's introduction to Stevie Ray Vaughan, who, with Bowie, invented something new by adding Strat-fueled Texas swagger to contemporary, dance-based pop — raising eyebrows, expectations and bank accounts for everyone involved. Vaughan plays on several tracks, including "Let's Dance" and "China Girl," but the song that truly kicks collective



ass is the far less-celebrated "Cat People." Basically, it's got the album's healthiest serving of SRV; he solos in the middle, adds Albert King-style bends throughout and solos near the closeout. Bowie recorded two versions of this song in the early Eighties; just be sure to seek out the *Let's Dance* version. Of course, we'd be remiss to not suggest that you give SRV's dramatic "China Girl" solo another spin. Talk about a perfect introduction to his style.

DAMIAN FANELLI

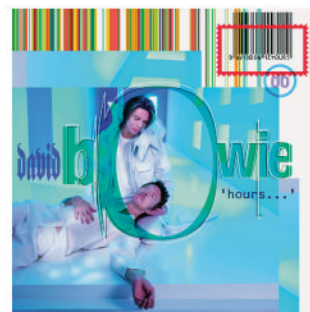
"HALLO SPACEBOY" OUTSIDE, 1995

With the spirit of Tin Machine proving hard to exorcise entirely, Bowie rekindled his relationship with old compatriot Brian Eno set to work with *Tin Machine/Outside* guitarist Reeves Gabrels on the latter's "Moondust," a hitherto instrumental composition that rapidly mutated into a pounding "this chaos is killing me" sound collage of wildly panning guitars, punishing drums and claustrophobic industrial-rock devices. On the U.S. leg of 1995's *Outside* tour, Bowie and his band would share the stage with Nine Inch Nails for "Hallo Spaceboy." As if his of-the-moment approximation of "the metal Doors" didn't sound cutting-edge enough, he then gave it to Neil Tennant for a Pet Shop Boys remix.

HENRY YATES

"THE PRETTY THINGS ARE GOING TO HELL" HOURS, 1999

This track is thematically pessimistic and, tragically, probably more pertinent to our unfolding future than it was at the dawn of the millennium. The pretty things of the song's



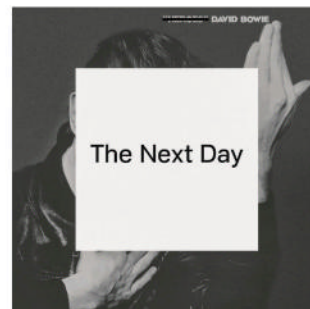
title are the spiritual progeny of Evelyn Waugh's "bright young things": carefree youth, the likes of which Bowie celebrated on *Hunky Dory*, yet that he now imagined were facing extinction in the "tough times" of the contemporary zeitgeist. Allied to an engaging Reeves Gabrels guitar hook and a propulsive, driving chug, "Pretty Things" sounds less like a requiem for doomed young dudes and more a brooding rock monster.

HENRY YATES

"DANCING OUT IN SPACE" THE NEXT DAY, 2013

Guitarist David Torn first performed on Bowie's 2003 album, *Reality*, where he was teamed up with Earl Slick. He was also featured on 2013's *The Next Day*, where he added ambient guitar work that, at times, recalled the lush wash of sound created by Fripp on "Heroes." "[Torn] comes with huge amounts of equipment... He creates these aural landscapes," Visconti said of Torn in a *Rolling Stone* interview about *The Next Day*. "He uses them in a rock context with all that ambient sound, and he's bending his tremolo arm and all that. It's just crazy, completely crazy sound on that track."

CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI



"These days, everybody expects you to record at home and engineer it yourself," Earl Slick says



STARMEN

"It's not a David Bowie tribute" — Earl Slick and Rob Fleming talk KillerStar, a killer band of (mostly) Bowie veterans who are most definitely doing their own thing

BY JOE BOSSO

OVER THE PAST decade, Earl Slick has been approached to play on numerous David Bowie-related projects, and he's turned down most of them. He did take part in a *Station to Station* tour in 2016, during which he and Rolling Stones backing vocalist Bernard Fowler performed the singer's epochal album to celebrate its 40th anniversary, but he agreed to it before Bowie's death. And even then, he checked in with the man he called "boss."

"I spoke with David about it the October before he died. I didn't know he was sick, but I wanted to give him the courtesy," Slick says. "I said, 'Boss, I want to do this.' The only thing he asked me was who was

singing. He didn't want a Brit Bowie-copy guy. I said, 'No problem there, because I got Bernard Fowler.' He was quite happy with that."

The venerable guitarist, who has the distinction as Bowie's longest-serving axeman, starting in 1974 for the *Diamond Dogs* tour and returning for multiple albums and tours over the next four decades, was thrilled when he was asked to join a

"It's got Robert's flavor, and I had to learn some of his weird chords when we recorded"

EARL SLICK

new band, KillerStar, led by the U.K.-based duo of singer-guitarist Rob Fleming and drummer James Sledge, that would also feature a group of Thin White Duke alumni (guitarist Mark Plati, pianist Mike Garson, backing vocalist Emm Gryner, saxophonist Donny McCaslin and bassists Gail Ann Dorsey and Tim Lefebvre). But what prompted him to sign on had as much to do with what the outfit was as what it wasn't.

"It's not a David Bowie tribute," he says, "though it's hard for people not to think of us as that, because look who we have. We're not doing David Bowie songs. We're doing Robert's stuff, which isn't Bowie. It's got Robert's flavor, and trust me, I had to learn some of his weird chords when we recorded. The [Bowie] stigma is there,

COURTESY OF EARL SLICK

Rob Fleming performs with KillerStar at the Cutting Room in NYC



whether we fucking like it or not. It's not a bad thing."

"It's more like flavors of Bowie," Fleming says. "He's one of many influences we have."

The group issued a self-titled full-length album in 2024 that blended atmospheric art rock and gritty classic rock-tinged tunes. There were no attempts at cloning the likes of "Heroes" or "Suffragette City," but one could easily conjure a Bowie aura floating over the proceedings. "You never know how something's going to land, but we were really happy with the reviews and feedback," Fleming says. "People from the Bowie community dug it, but there were quite a lot of people who got into it who aren't Bowie fans."

Buoyed by the response, Fleming and Sledge got the gang back together to record a follow-up. Well, most of them — bassists Dorsey and Lefebvre have been replaced by Plati. "Mark slotted in well when we did shows," Fleming says. "He joined the band for gigs in New York and London, and he played bass on those shows. It was natural to ask him to play bass on the new album."

Slick laid down his parts for the debut album remotely, but for the new record, titled *The Afterglow*, the New York-based guitarist recorded the majority of his tracks at London's RAK Studios with Fleming and Sledge overseeing. He prefers it old-school,

saying, "These days, everybody expects you to record at home and engineer it yourself. But I'm a guitar player. I can run Pro Tools well enough to do an overdub, but while I'm pissing around with a machine, all the vibe goes away."

The two guitarists didn't play together live in the studio, but Fleming, who recorded basics with Sledge before Slick came to the studio, says their parts seemed to bond in the most surprising ways.

"That's why I love Earl. That's the magic dust," he says. "The structure of the songs didn't change from the demos in terms of basic patterns and chords, but certain things change when Earl gets involved and adds melody parts. There are some songs we're both playing lead on, but Earl added things so unexpected, and they blended magically with what I already had."

The new album punches harder than its predecessor. "So Easy," driven by a simple yet spiky guitar riff, recalls glam rock's glory days, and "Proud" is a mean and

muscular piece of business with a surreal edge. Slick's echo-drenched slide playing dominates the ambient gem "There Has to Be a Reason," and, as he notes, it was all done in a moment of spontaneous splendor. "I didn't have any notion of playing slide on the song," he says. "Robert didn't even put a guide vocal on it. So I just decided to do whatever. I just picked up the slide and did it in one take. If you've done this long enough, you know where the verses and choruses are going to be."

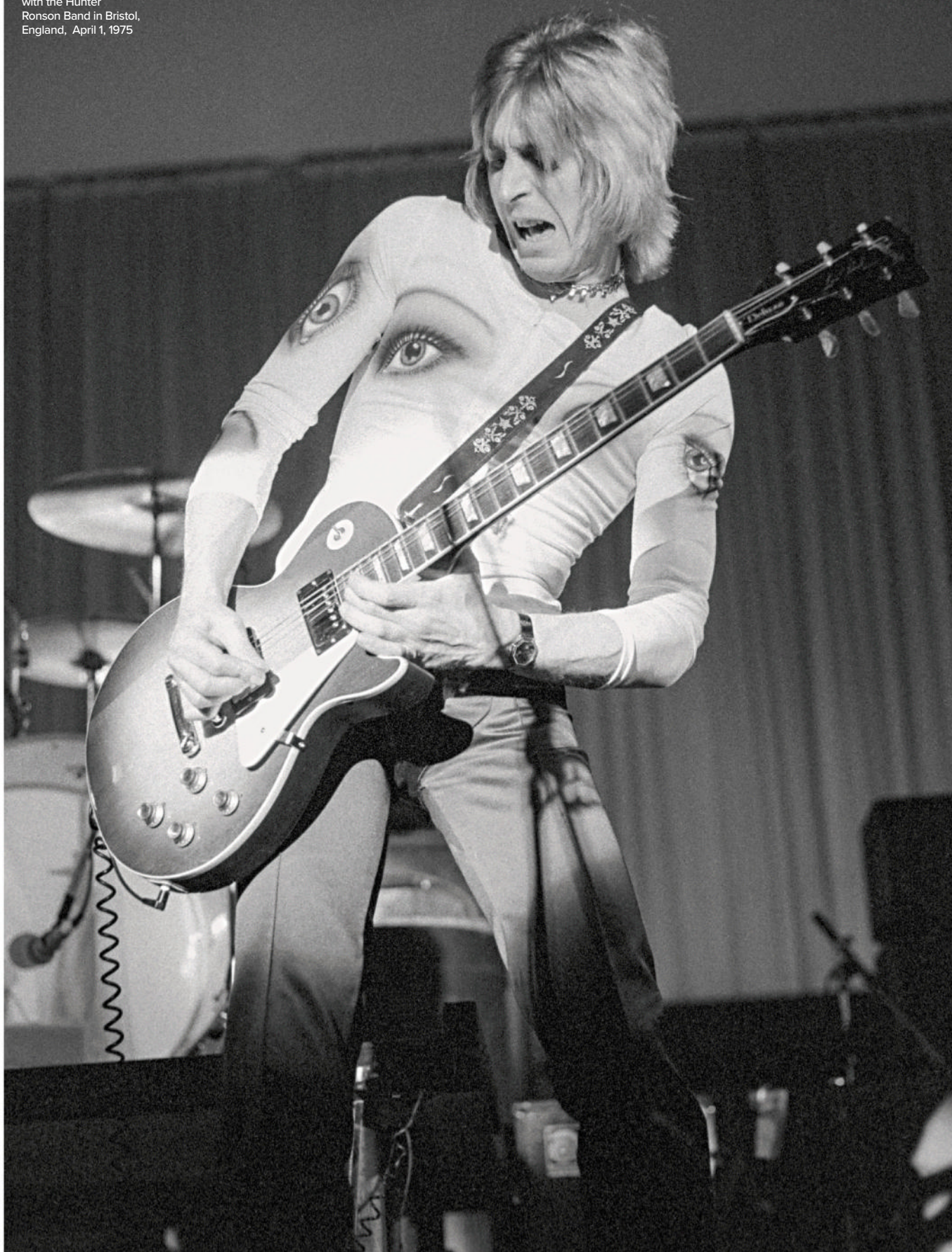
On their first go-round, KillerStar played three sold-out shows at London's 100 Club, and (as of this writing) they're booked to return to the venue to celebrate the release of *The Afterglow*. As to the possibility of playing more gigs, Fleming says the challenge lies in the logistics of getting the group together. "We just focused on getting this album out the door to see how people like it first," he says. "I'm sure there will be more shows."

For his part, Slick is gung-ho to play. He's especially keen to perform in the U.K. "I wouldn't mind playing the 100 Club and then maybe the Arts Centre in Norwich and a gig in Liverpool," he says. "I spend more time there than most of the other guys. I'm more than available to go there all the time. If I were younger, I'd be buying a place there." 🎸

"There are songs we're both playing lead on, but Earl added things so unexpected"

ROB FLEMING

Mick Ronson in action
with the Hunter
Ronson Band in Bristol,
England, April 1, 1975



IAN DICKSON/REDFERNS

THE RISE AND FALL OF MICK RONSON

In 1970, Mick Ronson changed the career of David Bowie and went on to work with Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, John Mellencamp, Morrissey and more. Meet rock 'n' roll's most quietly spoken guitar hero

BY MAX BELL

IN 1970, MICK Ronson changed the musical fortunes of David Bowie, a struggling singer-songwriter with two novelty hits behind him. Together, and with their band the Spiders from Mars, they reinvented Bowie musically and created some of glam-rock's best-loved albums: *Hunky Dory*, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*. Afterward, Ronson struggled to match that initial success, despite a catalog of collaborations that included some of rock's biggest names: Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Ian Hunter, Roger McGuinn, Morrissey, John Mellencamp and many others.

Although Ronson's career was defined by his time with Bowie, there was a significant before and after. In the 1960s, he played in various groups from his hometown of Hull, England, including the Mariners, who were advised by the Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman to change their name to the King Bees around the time Bowie was fronting a group called Davie Jones and the King Bees. He was also a member of the Rats, whose main claim to fame was the 1967 single "The Rise and Fall of Bernie Gripplestone."

"Mick was the best guitarist in Hull, so when he left to head down south and join Bowie, I was pretty upset," recalled Benny Marshall, the Rats' lead singer and a close friend of Ronson's. "John Cambridge, our

drummer, had played with Bowie on *Space Oddity* [his second album, a.k.a. David Bowie]. He was the bloke who went back to Hull in January 1970 with the brief to find Ronson and bring him to London. He found Mick marking out the lines on the municipal football pitch."

Cambridge did as instructed, and Bowie and Ronson were introduced at the Marquee club, where Bowie was playing on February 3, 1970. Two days later, Ronson had learned the riffs and song arrangements well enough to back Bowie, Cambridge and bassist/producer Tony Visconti for a John Peel Radio 1 show live in concert at the Paris Theatre in London's Lower Regent Street. They played 15 songs, including a new number, "The Width of a Circle," and plenty of material from Bowie's recently released self-titled second album. Reaction was positive, and Ronson moved into Bowie's Haddon Hall apartment on Southend Road in Beckenham in South East London, becoming part of the family. The timing of his

"We knew he'd fit in, but we had no idea what was coming until he picked up his Les Paul and played"

TONY VISCONTI

arrival was perfect; Bowie wanted to make a hard-rock album. As Visconti said later, "We respected groups like Cream, but we didn't have that in us. We needed someone to be [that] important element, and that somebody was Mick Ronson."

In terms of his personality, Ronson was a good fit. Everyone loved Ronson's laconic Northern humor too, especially Bowie, whose father and mother came from Yorkshire and Lancashire, respectively. He'd tease Ronson and get just as good back. But it was, of course, his guitar playing that stunned them.

"He floored us," Visconti said. "When David and I met him, we knew he'd fit in looks-wise, but we had no idea what was coming until he picked up his Les Paul and played for us. He really didn't have to be taught the few songs we'd already worked up with John Cambridge. Mick watched our hands on the guitar and bass necks, and he just knew what to play, but he didn't say much. We thought he was just a cool, silent type. Later we found out that our apartment in Beckenham was very 'big time' for him, and he was simply overwhelmed."

Visconti insists Ronson came to Trident Studio in September 1969, when the *David Bowie/Space Oddity* album was being finalized. "Mick came to the mix of 'Wild-Eyed Boy from Freecloud' and was persuaded to play a little guitar line in the middle part

and joined in the handclaps on the same section," he said. But if he did, he isn't credited. Ronson's first recorded work with Bowie was on the remade and rocked-out single "Memory of a Free Festival Part 1/Part 2," recorded in September 1969 and released to zero chart success in June 1970.

In April, sessions began for *The Man Who Sold the World*, featuring the core band of Bowie, Ronson, Visconti and former Rats drummer Mick "Woody" Woodmansey. It was a brilliant album, full of Ronson's crunching heavy-metal attack allied to arcane Wagnerian, dystopian lyrics. His contributions to Bowie tracks such as "She Shook Me Cold," "Running Gun Blues" and the epic "The Width of a Circle" cemented his place in Bowie's orbit, leading the singer to call him, with a smug smile, "my Jeff Beck."

As it happened, both Bowie and Ronson were huge fans of Beck's *Truth* album. Marshall said, "[Mick] knew all the licks, except 'Beck's Boogie,' which he dissected but couldn't master. It infuriated him. In 1968, the Rats had supported Beck at the Cat Ballou in Grantham, and afterward Ronson asked him to show him the fast run at the beginning. So Beck plays it, and Mick says, 'No, play it slower.' Beck said, 'If I play it any slower, I'll stop!' But he was patient, and Mick learned that riff."

The Man Who Sold the World had not been a commercial breakthrough, but it added to Ronson's confidence. Visconti and Ronson had masterminded the sound and dashed off the arrangements, while Bowie canoodled with his new bride, Angie. "She Shook Me Cold," the dirtiest song he ever wrote, was directly about Mrs. Bowie, but it was Ronson who provided the Jimi Hendrix-style intro and the power-trio setting à la Cream. Later, Angie lamented the fact that Ronson didn't receive the publishing he deserved. "In terms of kudos and feeling that one is valued, it would have been nice for Mick Ronson to have had publishing credits," she said.

Visconti's departure from the group saw the arrival of bassist Trevor Bolder. It also gave Ronson his in. "[Visconti had] done all the string and piano arrangements, so it was my chance to fill the gap," Ronson said. "I'd never done it before, but I could read and write music, and I'd watched Tony at Haddon Hall, writing in the basement, saw how he did the charts, and I'd help out."

Ronson had already written a mini-score for four recorders, used in the break of "All the Madmen." It was a start. "I thought, Well, if you can do that then so can I," he said. "I went out for dinner with [singer] Dana Gillespie, who had tracks that needed strings, and David said, 'Oh, Mick'll do

that!' [Like Bowie and Ronson, Gillespie was managed by Tony Defries' MainMan company.] I never had, but it was great. David pushed me forward. That was his thing. He made stuff happen."

With Visconti gone, Bowie was now reliant on Ronson. His next album, 1971's *Hunky Dory*, saw the emergence of his new quartet, featuring Ronson, Bolder and Woodmansey, a taut group that gave his folkie tunes their strong rock underpinnings. Ronson finally got his credit as the arranger of its songs "Changes," "Life on Mars?," "Kooks," "Quicksand" and the Biff Rose cover "Fill Your Heart," which was copied virtually note for note from the original. In retrospect, many have noticed how similar the sound of *Hunky Dory* is to Michael Chapman's *Fully Qualified Survivor*, the 1970 album on which Ronson had made his debut.

"Mick's influence on *Transformer*, my best-produced album, was stronger than Bowie's"

LOU REED

Ronson's burgeoning role extended to instructing hired gun Rick Wakeman for his now iconic piano parts on "Life on Mars?" The Royal College of Music-trained keyboardist (and future Yes member) didn't mind the input. "He was a tremendous human being, with oodles of talent," Wakeman said.

Bowie producer/engineer Ken Scott pointed to "the great orchestral versions that Ronno put together. [They're] even more brilliant when you consider he had this habit of running out of time. I remember him rushing in 10 minutes before the session, running up to the bathroom and locking himself in so he could find the privacy to finish writing. He'd come out with a huge grin and a stack of charts."

By the time the band assembled for the follow-up, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Ronson's talents were in full bloom. On the epic "Five Years," his string section whipped up the hysteria, while on "Suffragette City," it was Ronson who came up with the funky, lurching ARP synthesizer sound that many mistake for saxophones.

But working with Bowie had its challenges for Ronson, a now-25-year-old who, until recently, had been a practicing Mormon. In January 1972, shortly before the Ziggy Stardust sessions were complete, Bowie told *Melody Maker* he was gay, or, more accurately, bisexual. Ronson admitted

he found it hard to deal with at first. "It embarrassed me," he said. "I wondered what people would say about me. I knew my family in Hull would get flak. I gave dad a car when I left for London, and people threw red paint over it." Aside from his own feelings about it, Ronson understood Bowie was playing with his image as a way to keep the media engaged. "Personally, it was a bit of a shock," he admitted, "but Bowie manipulated the media again and again."

Overall, Ronson approached the Ziggy Stardust project with slight suspicion. The explicitness of "Suffragette City" and the discarded track "Sweet Head" concerned him. "He worried about the lyrics," Angie said. "I told him, 'Look, all these people are waving their arms in freedom thanks to you. It may not be what you're used to in Hull, but accept it.' Then he'd simmer down and be happy."

If Ziggy Stardust was a Ronson *tour de force*, the follow-up, *Aladdin Sane*, was a mixed blessing for him. His contributions were immense, but so were those of recently arrived pianist Mike Garson, whom Ronson had auditioned and later advised to "make yourself indispensable. That's what David likes. Don't just be a session man."

Ronson lived up to that credo. His work on Lou Reed's *Transformer*, produced with Bowie the August after Ziggy Stardust, effectively rescued Reed's career after his debut solo album had bombed. "It was a good experience for me," Ronson said. "Lou's guitar was always out of tune, so I'd kneel in front of him and tune it properly. He didn't care, 'cause he was so laid-back." Without his contribution, *Transformer* might never have gotten off the ground. "It came out pretty well," Ronson said. "Though I didn't know what the hell Lou was talking about half the time. He'd say stuff like, 'Can you make it sound a bit more gray?'"

Fortunately the album was a success. "*Transformer* is easily my best-produced album," Reed said. "That has a lot to do with Mick Ronson. His influence was stronger than David's, but together, as a team, they're terrific."

By 1973, though, it seemed that Ronson had become dispensable, along with Woody Woodmansey and Trevor Bolder, both of whom had been dropped for having the gall to protest when they discovered that new arrival Garson was making 10 times their salary. The guitarist's relations with Bowie were frosty when, on October 20, 1973, Ronson played with Bowie onstage for the last time in that decade. Only 200 people saw the appearance in the flesh, shot for NBC's *The Midnight Special*. Dubbed "The 1980 Floor Show," the concert featured Bowie serenading French singer/actress/

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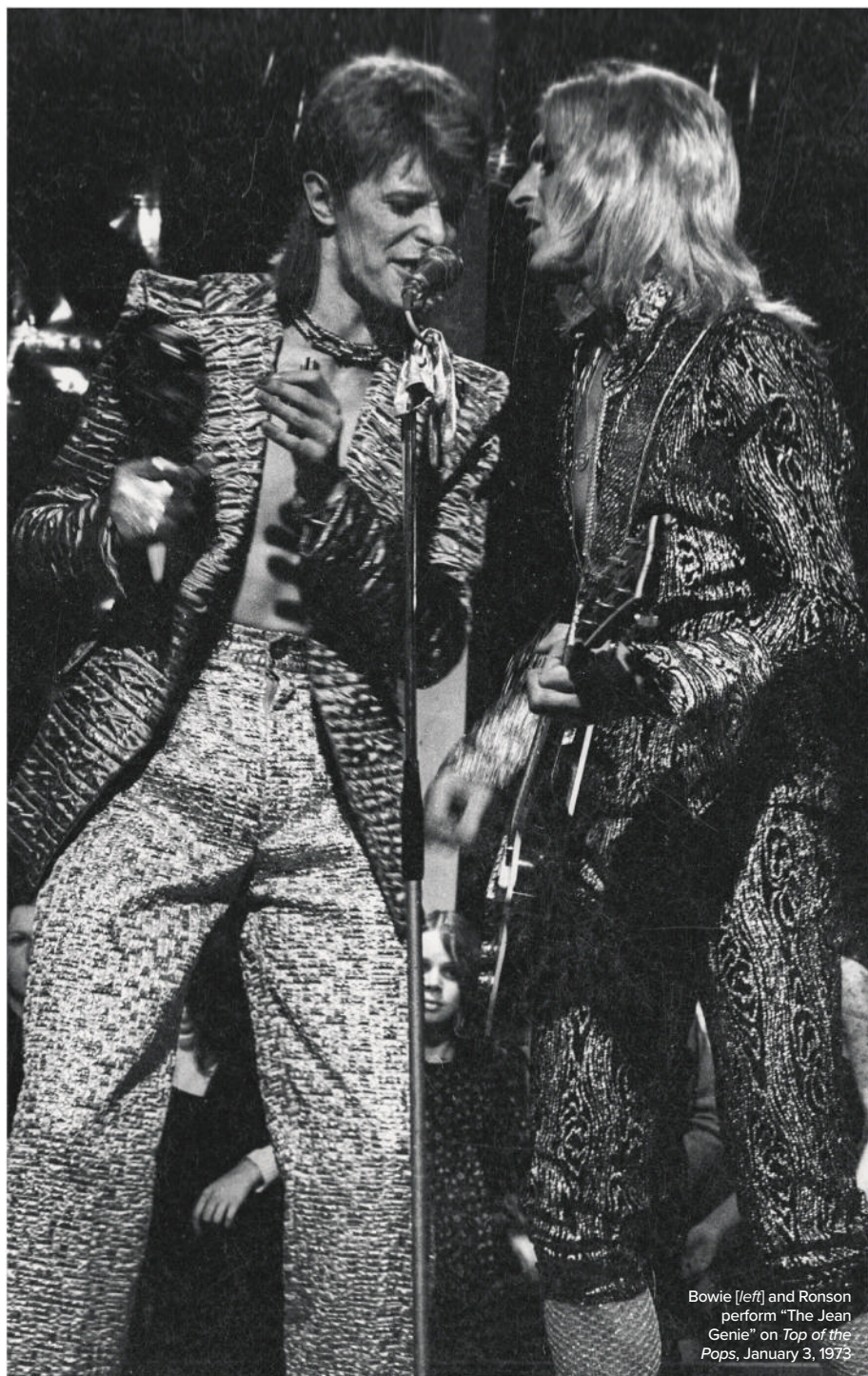
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Bowie [left] and Ronson perform "The Jean Genie" on *Top of the Pops*, January 3, 1973

model Amanda Lear with "Sorrow," a 1966 hit for the Merseys that Bowie would record for 1973's *Pin Ups*. He and singer Marianne Faithfull also duetted on Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe." But Bowie hated the end result, which he derided as "shot abysmally." This was the night Ziggy Stardust truly left the building, which might explain why a smiling Bowie ended each song with an affectionate pat on Ronson's white satin-clad back.

As the wingman was increasingly sidelined, MainMan, his and Bowie's mutual

management company, promised him the earth. He was to be the next superstar off the production line, said manager Tony Defries. In the summer of '73, having finished his sessions for *Pin Ups*, most of which he'd arranged, as usual, Ronson returned to the Château d'Hérouville studios outside Paris and made his solo debut album, *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. Bowie chipped in from a distance, gifting the songs "Growing Up and I'm Fine," "Pleasure Man/Hey Ma, Get Papa" and "Music Is Lethal." RCA wasn't overjoyed with what it heard, and the

album's release date was put back more than six months, to 1974.

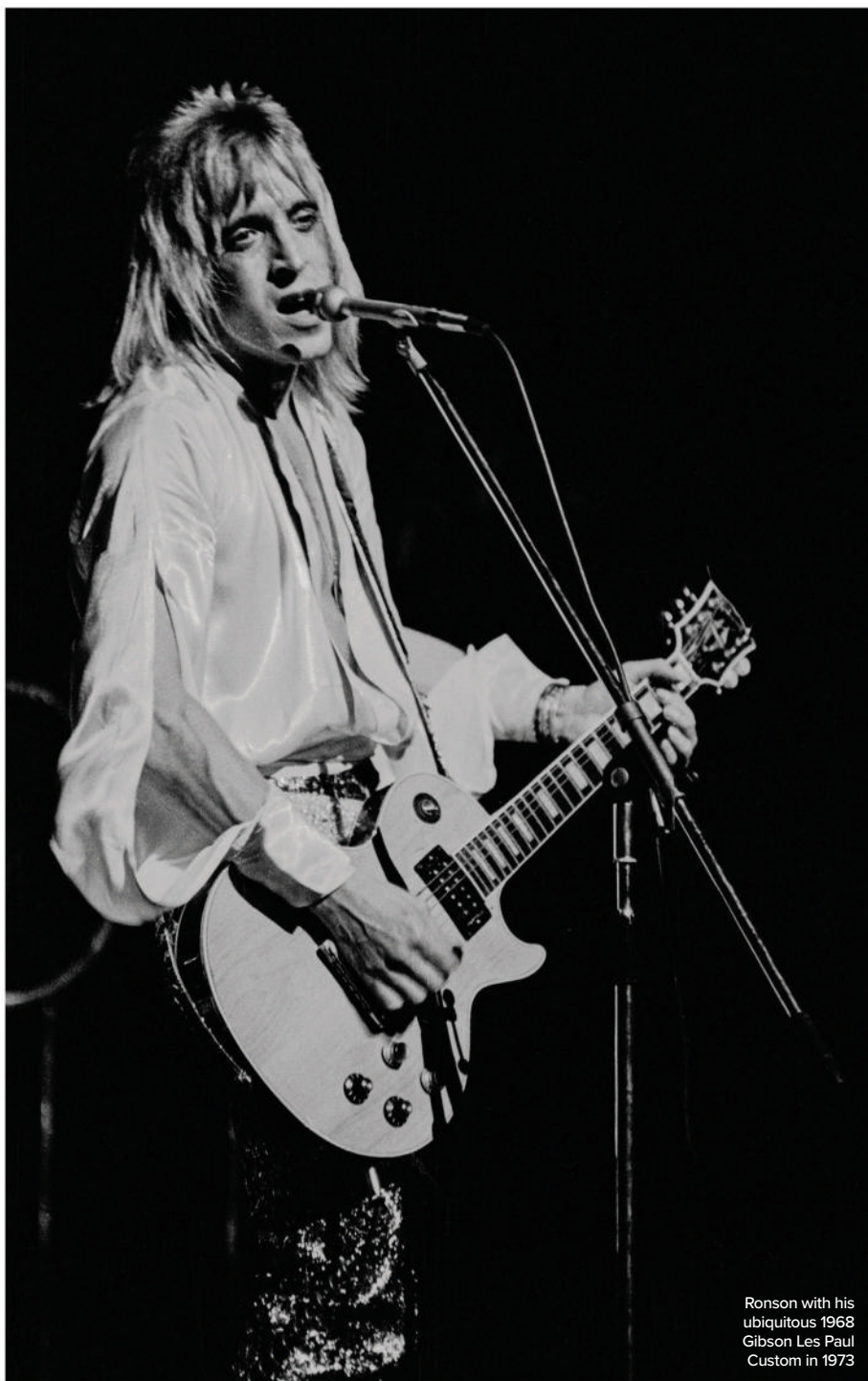
Within months, Ronson was in another band, joining Mott the Hoople for what would be their final single, "Saturday Gigs." Ronson and frontman Ian Hunter had bonded back when Mick had knocked out a string arrangement for Mott's "Sea Diver," but the other band members resented the arrival of this "rock star" in their midst, with MainMan and RCA sending limos for their boy while Mott traveled together in a bus. Tired of the conflict, Hunter split the band.

Ronson went back to his solo career. Bowie didn't take part in the follow-up album, *Play Don't Worry*, but he allowed Ronson to use the backing track from their cover of the Velvet Underground's "White Light/White Heat," which had been recorded for an American attempt at a *Pin Ups* album that was discarded soon after. *Play Don't Worry* was excellent in parts. Although he wasn't a natural songwriter, Ronson did himself proud on "Billy Porter," "Empty Bed" and versions of two songs by Pure Prairie League, whose 1972 album *Bustin' Out* featured his guitar and string arrangements.

While *Slaughter on 10th Avenue* was being mixed, Ronson returned to the studio with Bowie to create demos for the future *Diamond Dogs* tracks "1984" and "Dodo." His work wouldn't appear on the finished album, a creepy, avant-garde affair, but his trademark guitar style did in the shape of "Rebel Rebel," almost a *Spiders from Mars* pastiche riff, played now by Bowie. According to Ronson's wife, Suzi, "When Mick heard *Diamond Dogs*, he wasn't exactly depressed. He just thought, Oh, that's Dave going out on a limb. But he would have done that record like a shot."

Instead Ronson embarked on a brief solo tour, including a show at London's Rainbow Theatre in February 1974, where he had strings and woodwind sections and, on backing vocals, the Thunderhighs — Karen Friedman, Dari Lalou and Casey Synge — who appeared on Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" and Mott the Hoople's "Roll Away the Stone." Cast into the spotlight, Ronson didn't appear confident. The ultimate sideman was too modest to carry this off. Bowie watched on from the wings and offered words of encouragement during the intermission, but he decided against making a guest appearance.

After Bowie, where does one go? Ronson produced and played on Ian Hunter's self-titled 1975 debut solo album. That same year, he moved to New York City, rented a place on Hudson Street near the Meatpacking District and enjoyed NYC with his best friend, Hunter, who had provided safe haven via Mott the Hoople, Mott and



Ronson with his ubiquitous 1968 Gibson Les Paul Custom in 1973

the Hunter Ronson Band. This is where they met Bob Dylan, who invited Ronson to join his band of gypsies, the Rolling Thunder Revue, after a meet engineered by Dylan's main fixer, Bob Neuwirth. That evening began at the Bitter End on Bleecker Street.

"We weren't Dylan fans at all," Suzi Ronson said. "Mick thought he sounded like Yogi Bear. But Ian took us anyway, and Dylan played [his 1976] *Desire* album, and he was mesmerizing, better than David. Then we went to the Bottom Line, where Mick got thrown out three times for being drunk

and disorderly."

Back at the Bitter End, Hunter recalled "the whole place going insane 'cause Dylan was singing with Neuwirth and Ramblin' Jack Elliott. And Neuwirth [sees] Mick and says to Dylan, 'Go and ask him!'" In Ronson's version, "[Neuwirth] was with this guy," he recalled. "And I looked at this bloke he was with and thought, Wait a minute, I know you! Of course, it was Dylan. We talked, and he said, 'We're going on the road. Why don't you come with us?' I honestly thought it was a hoax. Then Dylan phoned me, said

the tour was going to happen and would I be there? Like a shot!"

"That tour rescued Mick's professional life," Suzi said.

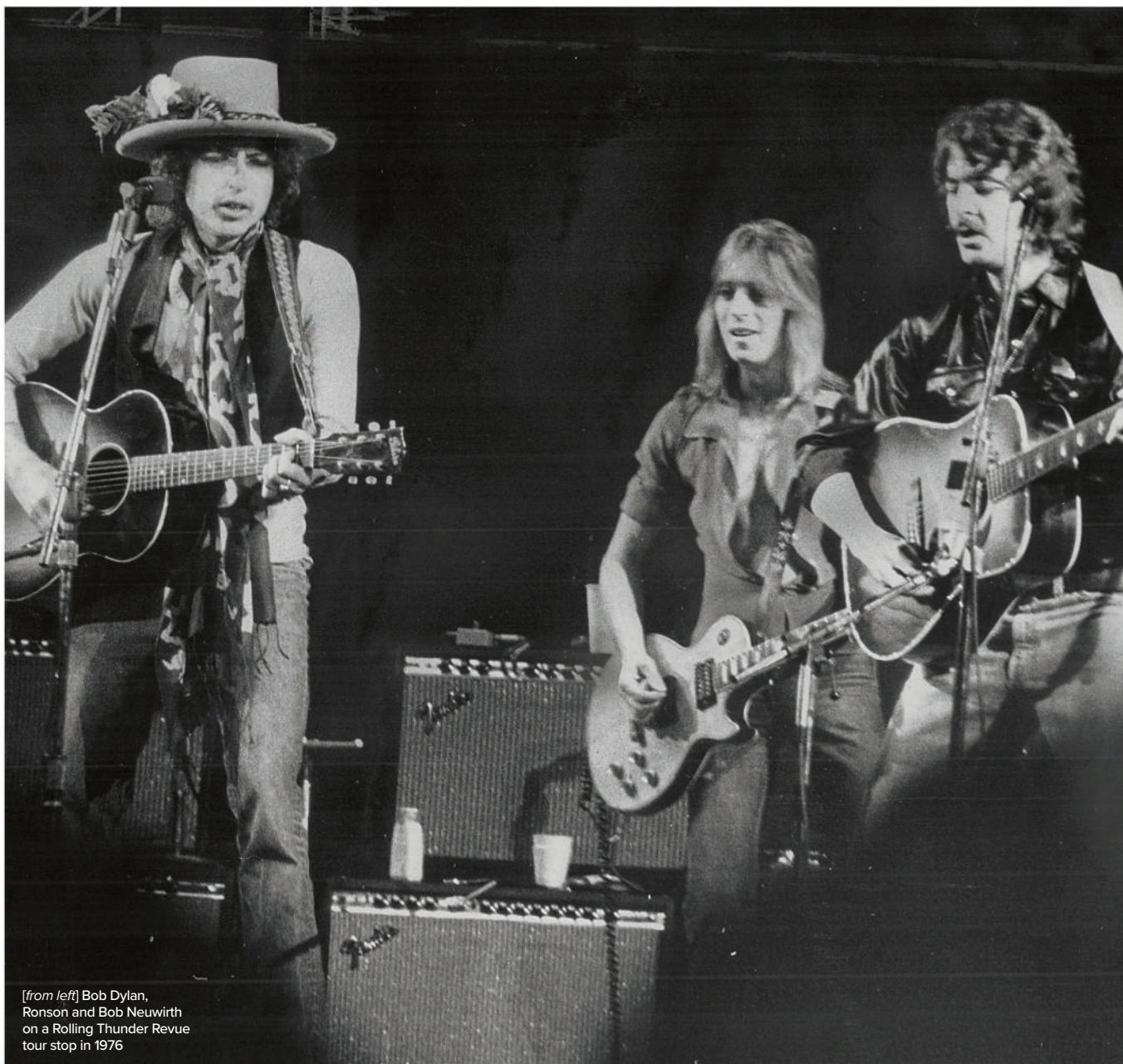
Ronson was soon back with Hunter, appearing on *You're Never Alone with a Schizophrenic* and *Welcome to the Club*. With his solo career on hold, he became a full-time producer. He worked with Van Morrison, John Mellencamp, Roger McGuinn and Meat Loaf backup singer Ellen Foley. He even contributed guitar to the title track from David Cassidy's 1976 album, *Getting It in the Street*. Despite his signature guitar style and tone, Ronson became engrossed in writing string arrangements.

"He lapsed into the language of strings," Hunter says, "but he was a bit lazy, 'cause if it was interesting he'd do it using 15 tracks and one guitar track. He wrote arrangements on Marlboro Light [cigarette] packets. But he could be persnickety and picky if he was involved. He could have matured into a world-famous musician again, but he'd meet people on the street and, next thing, he's doing a Mexican punk band.

"But he was great with fans. He'd invite them back for tea, he'd return their phone calls. Sometimes he could be the big guy and show off, so he wasn't perfect, gorgeous as he was. I considered him like family, so there were arguments. One time he disappeared to Sweden for a project when we were in the middle of something, so I had a go. And he just said, 'Look, I've done Bowie and I've done you, so I'm allowed to fuck up,' and we just collapsed into laughter."

In the late Eighties, Ronson's health began to cause concern. He was diagnosed with liver cancer, something he neither made a secret of nor chose to acknowledge as a serious threat. Instead, he threw himself into engaging projects such as Morrissey's heralded 1992 album, *Your Arsenal*. Speaking with *Classic Rock*, Morrissey said, "Mick told me that he alone wrote the main guitar hooks for 'Starman,' 'The Man Who Sold the World' and others — not just hooks, really, but grand choruses in themselves — but a share of publishing wasn't ever on offer for him. When you consider his guitar solos in 'Time' and 'Moonage Daydream,' then you can guess they were his own creations."

A fan of Ronson and Bowie, Morrissey was intrigued by letters Bowie sent to his old guitarist chum during the making of *Your Arsenal*. "One day at breakfast, I asked Mick why Bowie wrote so often," Morrissey recalled, "and he said, 'He keeps asking me what you're like in the studio,' and then he exploded with laughter. I have no idea why this was so hilarious. I think Bowie had interest in Mick only as much as it was in



[from left] Bob Dylan, Ronson and Bob Neuwirth on a Rolling Thunder Revue tour stop in 1976

his nature to like anyone.”

Certainly, Bowie was impressed by *Your Arsenal* enough that he invited Ronson to work with him on his 1993 studio album, *Black Tie White Noise*. He also kicked off a fine version of “All the Young Dudes” with Bowie and Hunter at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert at Wembley Stadium on Easter Monday, 1992, which was the last time his fans saw him onstage. One year later, on April 29, 1993, Ronson died of liver cancer at age 46. He spent his last hours in the company of Hunter, Suzi and sister Maggi at Tony Defries’ house on Hasker Street in West London.

Ronson didn’t die penniless, but he wasn’t wealthy by rock-star standards. “He bought the house in Woodstock on Glasco Turnpike [Ulster County, New York] because

he made money out of my records and Ellen Foley’s *Night Out*,” Hunter said. “His car was an old Toyota Corolla that sounded like a hair dryer.”

Hunter summed up the gloomy finale in his Ronson elegy “Michael Picasso,” from 1997’s *The Artful Dodger*: “You turned into a ghost surrounded by your pain/And the thing that I liked the least was sitting round Hasker Street, lying about the future.”

“He was so overlooked, and still is. He was by nature extremely humble — just happy to be there”

MORRISSEY

“What is remarkable is that he was so overlooked, and he still is,” Morrissey said of Ronson. “Has Mick ever been on the cover of a major British music magazine? Even when he died? He was by nature extremely humble. He was just happy to be there.”

Though he was the first of many great guitarists Bowie would adopt, champion and cast aside, Ronson continued to hold a place in his heart after their split, perhaps more than any other who followed him. “Mick was the perfect foil for the Ziggy character,” Bowie admitted years afterward. “He was very much a salt-of-the-earth type, the blunt northerner with a defiantly masculine personality, so what you got was the old-fashioned yin-and-yang thing. As a rock duo, I thought we were as good as Mick and Keith.”



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THEY ARE THE BUZZ BAND OF 2026 — A PERFECT STORM OF WACKY AND WEIRD, WITH A CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL FLAIR THAT NEEDS TO BE SEEN TO BE BELIEVED. IT'S ANGINE DE POITRINE'S WORLD; WE'RE JUST LIVING IN IT.

BY AMIT SHARMA

IT ALL STARTED with a video uploaded onto YouTube on February 5, which set off a chain of events nobody — not even Nostradamus himself — could have predicted.

Within the space of just a few months, mysterious Canadian unknowns Angine de Poitrine had somehow become the most talked-about band on the planet — the ultimate gateway drug into the weird and wonderful world of microtonal math rock.

As fate would have it, Seattle radio station KEXP were the ones responsible for documenting and sharing the duo's now-legendary live session, which took place in December 2025 as part of the annual Trans Musicales festival in the French city of Rennes. The band were showcasing a handful of tracks from their then-upcoming second studio album,

2026's *Vol. II*, alongside a choice offering from their 2024 debut. Once public, the footage quickly took the world by storm, dominating headlines, chat rooms and comment sections across the globe.

Here was a band who looked like they'd arrived from outer space, thanks to their oversized *papier-mâché* masks, oversized noses and polka dot costumes, drawing heavily from avant-garde and surrealist-adjacent art movements like absurdism and Dadaism. They even communicate like extra-terrestrials, as evidenced by their appearance on Canadian TV show *Tout Le Monde En Parle*, where the pair spoke in bleeps, grunts and gargles — noises that were carefully translated by subtitles and by their manager, Sébastien Collin, who sat next to them.

There is, of course, an interesting

backstory here. The group — Khn on guitar/bass and Klek on drums — half-jokingly claim to be 333-year-old time travelers inspired by the Nasal Quartet, a solemn choir of proboscis monkeys from the island of Borneo, who the duo once described as “the undisputed musical pinnacle of the galaxy.”

Another big talking point has been the double-neck bass/guitar hybrid in Khn's hands, fitted with extra frets to help facilitate their microtonal musings — providing access to notes and intervals outside the usual 12-tone equal temperament typically used in Western music. With seemingly endless opportunities for new sonic textures, harmonies and melodies, the usage of this tuning system has been hugely advantageous for the duo, helping them stand out from the norm and genuinely

Khn gets down to business at Strange Brew in Bristol, England, May 12



push the boundaries of creativity in the modern age. They're by no means the first musicians to attempt this — Radiohead, King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, Steve Vai and Jacob Collier are just a handful of the names who have experimented in such a manner — though at a time when accusations of AI slop and industry plants are rife, Angine de Poitrine have been rightfully described by many as a breath of fresh air.

None of this would mean a thing, however, if they didn't have the music or panache to back it up. Gimmicks are OK, but — without substance — things become subject to ridicule. This is not something Khn and Klek need to worry about; their largely instrumental music is infectious and played impossibly well, with layer upon layer added in real time live on stage. It's the kind of scenario that would make a lot of musicians crumble in fear, even without the visual impairment that comes from wearing masks.

Stylistically, there's a lot at play, from

the funky grooves of "Sarniezz" and the Eastern mysticism at the heart of "Mata Zyklek" to the math rock madness of "Sherpa." Some of it might remind you of the cosmos-cruising psychedelic exploits typified by artists like King Crimson, Frank Zappa and Gentle Giant, while other parts are more dissonant, jagged and angular, reminiscent of Voivod, Primus and Gong. In any case, this is not radio-friendly or crowd-pleasing music, at least not through intention. They even named themselves after the pain that comes from the heart not receiving enough oxygen-rich blood, officially termed by medical professionals as angina pectoris, or just plain ol' angina. In severe cases, this tightness and pressure can lead to a heart attack.

Perhaps it's the sheer audacity of it all — from the mystery surrounding their identities to the imagery and music — that's made them crash land into the zeitgeist as 2026's unlikely success story, winning them friends in high places such

as Dave Grohl and Lars Ulrich. There were even accusations of a copycat band selling themselves as the real deal in Russia, and an unofficial inspired-by signature model, the Microtonal Doubleneck 4/6 by Eastwood that got launched in May. Whatever they're doing, it's working.

In this interview (which took place via email), Khn talks us through his musical roots and the gear he relies on and offers advice on how to sound bigger when it's just the two of you.

Which musicians taught you the most, and exactly what did you learn from them?

The most important stuff came from a teacher I was studying with at the end of my high school years. The music school in town had this little venue called Le Ménestrel, where I'd go to watch concerts by students. I'd see these hedonist teenagers who were part of this stoner-speed-freak social microcosm known for its alcohol-induced-misdeeds. I eventually built a poetic narrative about how those

guys were leaning selflessly into this high-effort, low-payoff deal where you have to master technically difficult pieces on an unforgiving instrument — something that sounds pretty thin and would be of no interest to the vast majority of people.

That's an interesting way of looking at it.

The whole idea actually seemed appealing to me, so for my last high school year, I switched to the classical-guitar course and signed up for a program where you start school earlier in the morning in order to attend music lessons every afternoon. This meant getting a new guitar teacher — the kind of teacher a lot of kids would be a bit scared of. Someone who always looked mad and had quirky habits like keeping his tuner in an old Ziploc bag.

What was your first lesson like?

This short and highly strung man in cowboy boots lit a hand-rolled smoke in a little room, asking me to play something. He stopped me after 15 seconds, visibly irritated and disgusted by my shit, before grabbing my hand and filing down my nails to a good angle. He then proceeded to install an old taped-up metal ring to keep my right hand's pinky close to its neighbor. He made me play a variety of finger-picking patterns on open strings while heavy-handedly correcting my posture and bombarding me with information. I came out of that class with a strong feeling of mediocrity, which pushed me to practice a lot. Eventually, we had a very pleasant relationship. Those kinds of teachers will kick the living crap out of your ego if they feel like you don't push yourself, because they feel strongly about music. But when it becomes obvious that you're putting in the work and applying the principles being taught, they become the most generous teachers ever.

He sounds like an interesting character. What was his story?

That guy had toured all over Quebec playing bass in blues bands and was a huge Frank Zappa fan. He made simple arrangements of songs like "King Kong," "Son of Mr. Green Genes" and "My Guitar Wants to Kill Your Mama" and had us form bands to play those songs live in front of our parents. He made us improvise noisy, chaotic, atonal transitions between the songs, directing with hand signals. Someone passing down knowledge and sharing a passion with such generosity would be my definition of a guitar hero. He'd invite touring musicians to give masterclasses and booked our Zappa tribute to open for other bands or play in restaurants downtown. He told us stories about life on



"There are no pre-recorded guitar or bass lines. Every line has to be played live," Kinn says

the road in the Seventies. Outside of his school duties, he pushed us into our first gigs where we were getting paid to play to a real audience. It made us feel proud, but also self-conscious, opening for 50-year-old fellas with experience. I keep strong memories of those years.

There's a big prog- and math-rock influence in your music. Are bands like Rush and King Crimson relevant to the sound you make?

They were never really part of my day-to-day music consumption, except for a couple of King Crimson albums here and there. Klek and I did listen to a lot of old Seventies prog, though, just not much modern stuff. I grew up in a rural area with little to no internet connection, so I'd listen to whatever I could find, mostly in thrift shops or from the public library. I'd listen to the same records six million times. My first encounter with odd time signatures was the intro to "Zomby Woof" on Frank Zappa's *Cheap Thrills*. I remember the clerk at the record store being enthusiastic about a teenager buying that record. I still love that riff. Klek and myself were also huge Gentle Giant fans when we were young. I would go to his mother's place and we'd spend our time watching old Soft Machine, King Crimson, Genesis and Zappa videos on the Internet, but Gentle Giant had most of our attention.

They're definitely one of the more curious names from the Seventies British prog

"We always struggle and laugh at how ridiculous it all is. But it's a band. It's an act to make people smile"

scene. What about them did you find so inspiring?

We liked the fact that their whole proposition was kind of awkward and geeky. We thought it was hilarious, while also genuinely enjoying all the improbable and beautiful musical ideas in there. "Just the Same" would be a good example of how they'd keep things groovy in odd times. The guitar part and punches just before the two-minute mark, and the way that whole subsequent bridge comes along, sounds very tasty to me.

What are your three favorite guitar riffs of all time and why?

Everything in "Legs" by Massacre is like candy for my brain. It's the chord sequence and melody on top, plus the bass lines and tones. I would also say "Reptilia" by the Strokes. I've always had a thing for the sound of energetically strummed 10ths on an electric guitar. I'll also say the guitars in "Pin It Down" by Madison Cunningham. I've been massively enjoying her albums. I really like the tones, low tuning and subtlety of it all. You've gotta love anything that makes a bit of a chromatic enclosure around the major third. You gotta love a chorus with a seven feel that starts with a minor second wobbling in your ear like "vwoubvwoubvwoub." Do it justice — don't listen to it in your car while chatting with your buddy. Listen to it loud — it's great stuff.

How much do you think in terms of theory and scales when writing for Angine de Poitrine?

I think in terms of scales all the time. Or rather, intervals in a context. But it's just a harmless piece of information that sits there in the consciousness. A lot of people get this idea of someone playing

Khn [*le fi*] and Klek in May. "I have always dreamed of jamming with monkeys," Khn says



robotically with a straight face, thinking, "Now I should play this note, for this reason." Even among musicians, there is this myth of how knowledge might somehow end up hurting your creativity. If I say, "I think in terms of scales all the time," it does not mean, "the things that should be done according to a given set of rules will dictate all of my choices." It's not like I will only act creatively in a sterile and conscious effort to create only using these tools.

That's a very balanced way of looking at it. When I wander in that space, I have a compass and a map in my pocket. Some areas remain blurry to me since my knowledge is limited, but I can recognize and name some of the sounds and phenomena that I love. I can use them by choice if I'm looking for a specific taste, but I can also let things happen and analyze as I go or even after. Terminology matters to me. When someone uses the inappropriate term in a conversation, I become insanely irritated. I make a conscious effort not to bother people too much with that stuff, though. But when you play chords, intervals, melodies in a harmonic and rhythmic context, every aspect of what is happening has a name. Why on earth would someone make a

point out of not knowing the names of things? Terminology is our only hope at humanity. Without it, chaos awaits. Value terminology. Worship terminology. Or be a monkey. That being said, I have always dreamed of jamming with monkeys. [Laughs]

What about the odd-time signatures?

As far as time signatures go, rhythm tends to happen naturally. But for that reflex to happen, odd-time signatures had to become a natural part of my vocabulary at a certain point in my youth. I was driven by curiosity and forced that rhythmic vocabulary upon myself. Eventually that stuff becomes integrated and you can play it without much thought. We still use that stuff in a very square, classic rock 'n' roll kind of way.

We heard it was Quebec luthier Raphaël Le Breton who built the double-neck guitar you use — although Klek made your first

"For me, having the looper stop working is the equivalent of that classic nightmare where one goes to school naked"

microtonal instrument.

Klek made the first microtonal guitar we used. It was a single-neck electric, a cheap random Strat ripoff that he refretted and put together with parts scattered here and there. It was a personal project born out of curiosity. When he made me try it, it worked well. I fell in love with the new territory it opened, but I don't think I would've ever set foot in there if he hadn't brought that thing over. With the first double-neck guitar, the one I'm using at the moment, I had a hard time finding someone to build it. After failed attempts asking companies to customize existing double-neck models, I started buying parts. I had two Warmoth necks built, just slotted with no frets, so I asked a luthier back home to modify and fret the necks into quarter tones. Basically, I dumped a bunch of parts at his place and he was nice enough to do the strange project without judging. [Laughs] I had him cut and glue two cheap Chinese Strat and P-Bass bodies together, and he did a beautiful job with the fretting.

How do the extra frets allow you to create more freely?

I wouldn't say they bring more freedom. Arguably, it's quite the opposite. But they open the door to possibilities that are new

to me, which feels refreshing. I've also always had a thing for chromaticism and dissonance. Double the notes in an octave give you a lot of chromaticism and friction opportunities, which is great. I guess with time, a lot of companies are going to start offering microtonal guitar options because there's a bit of a growing trend with that sound in popular occidental music. I was actually surprised by how hard it was to get my hands on a professionally built microtonal neck in 2023.

Are there any other guitars in the Angine de Poitrine arsenal, and would you ever sign with a big guitar company?

There are no other guitars yet, but there might be something in the making.

Is it hard covering bass and guitar at the same time, especially given how many times you need to change tones or loop with your feet?

I play both but never at the same time. The double-neck just serves a purpose of facilitating frequent and quick switches between bass and guitar to loop short phrases. The looper pedal tap-dance, constant saturation level and volume management between the different guitar layers and overall physical handicap is what makes the activity very challenging as a whole. All the lines are rather playable, if you ask me.

Even with the masks?

Well, when you have this excellent idea of playing these lines in the dark with lights flashing in your face, no peripheral vision, dollar store acrylic paint all over your fingers, while having a heat stroke just for kicks, sure, it's very hard. We always struggle and laugh at how ridiculous it all is. But it's a band. It's an act to make people smile, to make people laugh, possibly while dancing. It wouldn't make much sense to do that if show business was strictly about music as [just sound].

Almost everything gets recorded into your Boss RC-600 looper. How do you make sure it all locks in with Klek?

Like with any looper, the length of a given loop will be dependent on the length of the first recorded loop, meaning it will be able to be of equal length, or double, triple or four times the length of that initial loop in a given song. With pretty much any standard looper, two layers or tracks will not be able to shift and become offset from one another. Meaning that if you want to use polyrhythmic effects, you'll have to loop a phrase long enough for that whole cycle to happen where two phrases shift apart from one another until both their beginnings meet again. Which means that if you play



"It took me nearly a decade of playing before I bought my first pedal," Khn says

like crap, the looper is going to play that crap back to the audience as is.

Performing everything on the fly like that looks like risky business.

There are no pre-recorded guitar or bass lines. Every line has to be played live; it's what this freak show is all about — making it ridiculous, hard and painful for the musicians, thus fun for the audience. If I start using one, two, three pre-recorded lines, where do I draw the line between that and putting the whole pre-recorded set on there? I would ditch the guitar, tweak on filters and effects, making it a DJ set. Which would be something else.

What happens when things don't go according to plan?

When I mess something up, I have to erase it before it plays back, while keeping on playing that phrase, while trying to physically signal to Klek that we have to stagnate for another block of four, eight or whatever bars into a given section before moving forward. For him that means holding back on a buildup and staying alert for that signal that says, "Okay, I got myself out of my mess — I'm ready to move forward." It's dangerous, it's imperfect, and

I'm guessing if it somehow becomes easy for us, we'll find a way to make it fun again.

What are the limitations of playing in a two-piece band, and what advice do you have for duos trying to sound bigger?

Obviously, playing in a duo imposes big limitations arrangement-wise, which can be frustrating. But it's not like you wake up in the morning and think, "Hey, let's start a duo." It just happens. There you are, playing with someone because you get along musically. No one else is around, so you adapt. Then the years go by, and time doesn't make it easier to find a perfect candidate to bring in, even if you ask yourself, "Wouldn't it be great to have a bass or saxophone doing this or that?" You get used to your workflow as a tight-knit unit. There's something pretty intimate about the creative space between two people, especially after 20-something years. It's not only about the music, but also sharing a common sense of humor and artistic vision. At some point, I guess you become scared of shaking and disturbing that space. We're a fossilized duo.

Splitting the signal must be imperative to create a deeper and richer wall of sound

as a duo. It has worked well for bands like **Royal Blood** and **Death from Above 1979**.

For a thicker and fuller sound in this kind of duo context, yes, the obvious strategy is splitting the signal for two different amps with an ABY switch. But when doing so, I place a lot of importance on the following principle: drive, fuzz or any kind of distorted sounds should get chained after the splitter. That gets sent to a guitar amp dealing with all the rich mid- and high-frequency harmonic content, thus keeping the other channel to send into a clean or almost clean bass amp, making for a very percussive, snappy and powerful sound when blended with good taste. With heavy music, it's tempting to drown all your sounds in heavy saturation, but that kills the snappiness and prevents finding common ground with the drums. It's good to use heavy-gauge strings at the bottom for high tension, then lighter-gauge strings at the top if you want to put some natural vibrato and a bit of expressiveness in there. But I don't apply that recipe at all with Angine at all, since I have the electric bass.

Let's talk about the rig. Usually there aren't any amps on stage behind you.

I work with no amps on stage most of the

time. We run the signals through DIs and rely entirely on simulators. It's convenient for our backs and van space, but it also reacts properly to the stacking of multiple layers and the obvious crescendo that happens in the process. I've never been much of a gearhead. As far as amps go, I've always used simple solid-state amps. Any Peavey rip-off bass amp from the early Eighties, paired with a Roland JC-120, has been my go-to for the past decade.

What pedals can't you live without?

The looper, definitely. I always carry a spare one that's kept on stage. For me, having the looper stop working entirely is the equivalent of that classic nightmare where one goes to school naked. Our music depends on the use of that system. But the answer is very project-specific. The funny thing is it took me nearly a decade of playing before I bought my

"Ultimately we're saying, 'You have the right to let your brain snap out of it for an hour — have a hotdog and go crazy'"

first pedal, which was the Unpleasant Surprise fuzz/gate by Fairfield Circuitry. I bought it to make scratch-like effects with a live band playing rock renditions of electronic compositions.

Finally, there can be no doubt you are the music industry's biggest success story of 2026. Why do you think that is?

It would be presumptuous to think that it's only about the music. Because, while we make an honest effort to create fun and original tunes, there's also an endless flow of amazing music being put out every day by people whose virtuosity knocks me out of my chair. Has the success of any rock band ever been only about the music? The music needs to be catchy, but it's also about how people relate to it. Angine confusingly celebrating while also satirizing some of rock 'n' roll's clichés — all in good fun — might be what a lot of people needed. In times where communication technologies bring a constant smell of fear and conflict, Angine invites everyone to knee-bend dance to weird, wonky rock 'n' roll, putting forward no specific message about human affairs. Ultimately we're saying, "You have the right to let your brain snap out of it for an hour — have a hotdog and go crazy." 🌭

Khñ de Poitrine performs during a concert part of the Nuits Botanique music festival in Brussels on May 28, 2026.



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MAKING A NAME

Some signature models are little more than a cash-in, but surprising amounts of R&D are invested in the best ones –making them truly advanced guitars

Words Charlie Wilkins



Mention the words 'signature guitar' and you will usually provoke one of two distinct reactions. Some see the ultimate expression of an artist's vision, an instrument shaped by years of touring and real-world experience. Others see little more than a standard production guitar with an inflated price tag and a famous name slapped on the headstock. The truth lies somewhere in the middle, split between two design philosophies: instruments built as faithful replicas, and instruments engineered to refine and innovate.

The first approach treats the guitar as a historical artefact. Faithfully replicated models such as Gibson's recent 'Greeny' Les Paul, cloned from the iconic 1959 'Burst shared by Peter Green, Gary Moore and Kirk Hammett, aren't trying to improve the original template. Their purpose is to preserve a frozen moment of rock history for a new generation. Conversely, the second philosophy looks forward, asking a practical engineering question: how can we make this guitar better? These instruments use an artist's experience to

refine ergonomics, hardware and electronics. Steve Vai's groundbreaking Ibanez JEM is the ultimate example. Its structural innovations solved real performance roadblocks, eventually trickling down into the mass-market RG series and permanently changing how modern guitars are built.

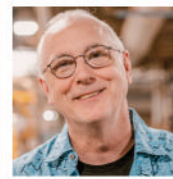
PROBLEM SOLVERS

The best signature guitars rarely begin as marketing ideas; they start with a player trying to solve a persistent problem. Fender chief product officer, Justin Norvell, explains that this collaborative spirit is part of the company's original DNA.

"It's an ongoing conversation we have with everybody," Norvell notes. "Leo wasn't a guitar player. It was Bill Carson, Freddie Tavares... all of these players that would just say, 'I like this. I don't like this. Can you put an extra pickup on there? Can you do this?'"

Artist-driven R&D existed long before formalised signature models did. Michael Schulz, Fender's head of Signature Artists, says that same spirit drives modern projects, though artists now arrive with highly specific insights from heavy

Opposite: The appeal of a signature guitar made for a specific artist often goes well beyond that player's original fanbase. This reissue Gibson Trini Lopez is a go-to instrument for Mirador guitarist Chris Turpin and was played on tour by Greta Van Fleet guitarist and Mirador bandmate, Jake Kiszka



1. The PRS McCarty Korina model (left) sits alongside the David Grissom Trem (DGT) model in 2008, a year after the model's NAMM launch

touring and recording.

"We're getting more information from artists saying, 'Hey, I've been doing this thing. I've been hearing this thing... let's R&D it.' So then, we'll try to figure out how to make it work."

In much the same way, the PRS DGT grew organically from a friendship starting in the mid-1980s between David Grissom and Paul Reed Smith. As they exchanged ideas, Grissom's road and studio experiences led to requests for a thicker mahogany body, revised pickups and player-focused changes. Those ideas first evolved into the PRS McCarty model, which Grissom initially declined to put his name on out of respect for Ted McCarty's legacy.

Grissom explains: "I was really at the point where... nobody knows who I am and I don't want my name on the guitar. A lot of the ideas that I was trying to translate into the PRS were really ideas that Ted McCarty had pioneered at Gibson, and I

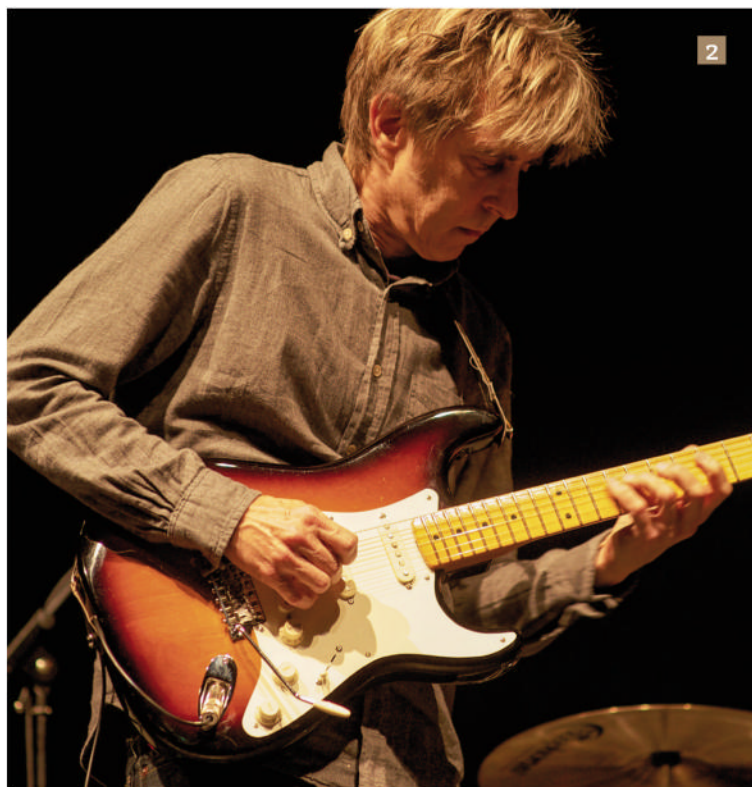
"Everything about that [PRS signature] guitar is spec'd out. It's not an accident. It's not left to chance" DAVID GRISSOM



thought it was extremely fitting and appropriate to recognise Ted for all his contributions."

Only after years of continued refinement did that platform become the DGT. As Grissom recalled: "We bounced ideas off each other for years and we would always come up with different stuff." As Grissom's session work increased, the guitar had to cover more ground. "We changed the control layout so the bridge pickup volume knob was closer to my little finger because I worked that constantly," he explains. "We worked on the neck profile quite a bit over several years with quite a few prototypes."

Norvell witnessed a similar level of microscopic detail when collaborating with Radiohead's Ed O'Brien, where tiny shifts in wood dimensions mattered. "I remember we were messing with different necks," Norvell recalled, "and Ed was feeling 10 thousandths of an inch on the



back shape of neck. 'Well, this one's a little bigger.' We'd get out the digital calipers and, sure enough, the neck was bigger."

The Eric Johnson Signature Stratocaster illustrated how demanding an artist can be when every detail affects performance. Norvell recalls that "Eric wasn't interested in changing a guitar simply for the sake of change; he was searching for a very specific feel and response. The project ultimately involved testing more than 60 pickup sets and developing Fender's first compound back-shape neck."

But the real takeaway was much bigger than any single component. It was about getting every element to vibe together perfectly. "We always reduce it to the components," Norvell says. "But, really, it was about designing a guitar that's optimised to be the best version of itself where all the components work together in harmony."

This same holistic approach defined the development of the PRS DGT, where Grissom focused heavily on achieving a seamless dynamic response across the entire fretboard. The pickups became a major focal point of the R&D process. Instead of settling

for high-gain performance or sterile vintage replication, he pushed for a balanced pickup voiced to deliver rich output and musical warmth without losing an ounce of single-coil-like openness and clarity. "I still felt like there was too much midrange, too much gain," he says, "but I didn't want it to be

"Eric wasn't interested in change for the sake of change; he was searching for a very specific feel and response"

JUSTIN NORVELL

sterile. I'm trying to get that sweet spot, where you do have mids, but you don't sacrifice the sweet top-end and the harmonic complexity."

Factory manufacturing methods, like pickup potting, became part of the discussion. Grissom questioned whether soaking them too long in wax killed the sound. "If you're letting them soak in a tub of wax for 10 minutes," he says, "you're killing all that air around them." The solution was subtle: "To this day, they just go in for a little bit, and we don't do the vacuum



2. Exacting artists such as Eric Johnson can really push companies building their signature model into deeper R&D. Over 60 pickup sets were trialled for his signature Strats

where it pulls the wax through."

That level of detail carried through the entire instrument, down to the fret bevels, spec'd for "maximum real estate, but with no sharp edges". He sums up the philosophy simply: "Everything about that guitar is spec'd out. It's not an accident. It's not left to chance."

TRIED & TESTED

Real-world testing is equally vital. Fender's Michael Schulz recalls sending Mike McCready an early Road Worn Strat prototype to play on stage with Pearl Jam. McCready came back with direct operational notes: "Hey, this sounds great, but I need this changed a little bit – I need this neck thing fixed right here a little bit." For Schulz, that was definitive proofing: "How much more R&D truth can you get than having this be played during *Yellow Ledbetter* and *Alive and Even Flow* live with Pearl Jam?"

Grissom describes the exact same idea from the player's side. His suggestions were "born out of thousands of gigs and hundreds of sessions", but success required "the ability to take those suggestions, put them into

3. Mike McCready of Pearl Jam took his Road Worn Strats out on tour with the band and the feedback on the prototype's performance came direct from the stage

A photograph of two electric guitars. On the left is a Gibson Les Paul Custom, finished in a natural wood tone with a white pickguard and two humbucker pickups. On the right is a Fender Stratocaster, finished in a vibrant red with a white pickguard and three single-coil pickups. Both guitars are positioned vertically against a dark red, textured background. The Les Paul has a 'Gibson Custom' badge on the pickguard. The Stratocaster has a 'Fender' logo on the pickguard. Both guitars are resting on a wooden surface.

The Mark Knopfler 1958 Les Paul directly replicates Mark's much-loved '58 'Burst. The model was launched in 2016 in a much sought-after (and pricey) Aged And Signed version and a more attainable VOS (Vintage Original Spec) variant. This example currently resides at Gas Station Guitars in Taunton

The US-built Mark Knopfler Stratocaster, made between 2003 and 2013, was not a direct replica of his famous '61 Strat but a blend of features chosen by Mark, including a 50s-style ash body and Texas Special pickups. Plus plenty of case candy, of course

A photograph of two electric guitars. On the left is a Gibson Les Paul Custom, finished in a natural wood tone with a white pickguard and two humbucker pickups. On the right is a Fender Stratocaster, finished in a vibrant red with a white pickguard and three single-coil pickups. Both guitars are positioned vertically against a dark red, textured background. The Les Paul has a 'Gibson Custom' badge on the pickguard. The Stratocaster has a 'Fender' logo on the pickguard. Both guitars are resting on a wooden surface.

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a guitar, and then hit the road, or go make a couple of records to see if they worked”.

Jared James Nichols' signature model evolved even more organically. Nichols took his own Les Paul, removed the neck pickup, stripped the controls and rewired it with a single bridge P-90 and one volume knob. The guitar became his main instrument long before a brand got involved. When Gibson approached him, Nichols says the development was remarkably collaborative. “They let me pick whatever components I wanted,” he recalls. Crucially, Nichols chose to build the guitar as an Epiphone, rather than a Gibson Custom Shop model, wanting something working musicians could realistically afford.

Perhaps no model better illustrates the power of artist-driven R&D than Steve Vai's collaboration with Ibanez. Rather than modifying an existing production model, Vai worked with engineers to build a guitar from scratch. The resulting JEM introduced innovations such as the Monkey Grip, enhanced upper-fret access, advanced switching and the

‘Bear Claw’ tremolo rout – all practical solutions to Vai's real playing challenges.

Meanwhile, Paul Reed Smith rejects the idea of a standard blueprint for signature guitars, noting every collaboration follows its own path. “It's all different,” Smith explains. “What I did

Perhaps no model better illustrates the power of artist-driven R&D than Steve Vai's collaboration with Ibanez

with Herman Li, what I did with David Grissom, what I did with Carlos Santana – all completely different stories.” In fact, Herman Li's model took nearly a decade because “he didn't just want a guitar. He initially wanted a synthesizer controller that would do things that most guitars won't do.” By contrast, “David wanted a McCarty guitar with a tremolo, he wanted everything right”. Ultimately, Smith says, “it's not a label-slapping moment where you just throw an artist's name on the back of a headstock. It's getting these people what they want and having their legacy and their

4. Not all artist models are designed as high-end exotica. Jared James Nichols chose a workmanlike spec for his single-pickup Epiphone signature models and uses them on tour extensively

pride involved.”

Together, these stories show that signature guitar R&D is multifaceted. Whether it is a long factory development cycle, a prototype tested on stage, or a guitarist stripping a Les Paul down to the essentials, the best examples all share one core idea: the artist brings the problem, the builder helps find the solution, and the guitar becomes stronger because both sides listen.

BACK TO BUSINESS

Behind every successful signature guitar is a massive investment of time, money and trust. Long before reaching a dealer's wall, manufacturers spend years refining prototypes alongside an artist. It is a major risk, with no upfront guarantee that the instrument will appeal beyond a core fanbase.

For some players, royalties from a successful signature guitar can provide long-term financial stability while cementing an artist's legacy. While David Grissom and Steve Vai both acknowledge the economic benefits, they insist that a guitar must ultimately stand on its own merits. Players buy an instrument because it performs, regardless of whose signature is on the headstock.

5. Steve Vai's input on the original Ibanez JEM – launched in 1987 and seen here in its early-model Loch Ness Green livery – stands as an example of how the needs of pioneering guitarists literally changed the shape, sound and boundaries of mainstream electric guitar design



PHOTO: GIBSON



PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

*At the ultra-premium end,
limited Custom Shop micro-
runs function less like tools
and more like fine art or
financial assets*

While the Ibanez JEM represents the uniquely original end of the signature model spectrum, high-end replicas such as this Gibson Paul Kossoff Les Paul Standard 2012 Lemon Burst from ATB Guitars are about painstaking homage



Fender's H.E.R. Strat, originally released in 2020, shows how the signature model continues to breathe fresh relevance into decades-old designs and engages new players with them



To make it all work, the guitar market has split into very distinct price points and tiers. At the ultra-premium end, limited Custom Shop micro-runs function less like tools and more like fine art or financial assets. The benchmark remains Gibson's 2004 Jimmy Page Les Paul. The 25 'Played and Signed' models originally retailed for US\$25,000 and now routinely command over US\$80,000 at auctions. Fender's 2006 clone of Eric Clapton's 'Blackie' retailed for US\$24,000 and sold out in hours. These instruments generate immediate, high-margin cash flow

Modern artist collaborations are explicitly engineered to introduce the guitar to younger, more diverse demographics

and can elevate a brand's entire catalogue.

This split highlights a brand-new approach to signature collaborations. As Fender's Justin Norvell and Michael Schulz reveal, modern collaborations look far beyond traditional rock heroes. High-profile releases like the Bruno Mars and H.E.R. Stratocasters are explicitly engineered to introduce the guitar to younger, more diverse demographics. When a partnership really clicks, it doesn't just sell gear, it builds a lasting legacy for the company and creates a classic instrument that keeps inspiring players long after the artist is gone.

MORE THAN A NAME

The ultimate compliment a signature guitar can receive is when players forget it's a signature model at all. The Gibson Les Paul is the absolute benchmark. While it carries the name of a true pioneer, most guitarists don't buy a Les Paul to sound like Les Paul; they buy it because it is one of the greatest electric instruments ever built. Somewhere along the way, the design simply became bigger than the signature.

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

A signature opens the door in a showroom, but the guitar has to do the rest. That's what separates truly great signature models

This Limited Edition John Lennon Epiphone Casino 1965 reissue currently resides at Gas Station Guitars. It comes with its original metal-backed silkscreen print portrait of the Beatles legend





PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER



PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

The same has happened with many of today's most successful artist models. The PRS DGT has earned a loyal following among players who appreciate its feel and versatility, regardless of whether they're familiar with David Grissom's music. Martin's 000-28EC followed a remarkably similar path. The guitar's initial spark came during Eric Clapton's legendary 1992 MTV *Unplugged* performance, where his stripped-down acoustic set gripped a global audience and put the short-scale Martin 000 back on the modern map. But while that landmark broadcast served as the ultimate

Every once in a while, a signature guitar does something much bigger. It changes the entire direction of the company

launchpad for his 1996 signature model, 30 years later, it remains a cornerstone of Martin's line-up because players discovered it is simply an outstanding, highly responsive acoustic instrument in its own right.

Even the Ibanez JEM tells a similar story. Steve Vai's ideas helped reshape the instrument,

6. Successful associations between artists and brand, such as that which exists between Brian Setzer and Gretsch, can literally bring companies back from the brink

7. Les Paul ushered the world's most famous single-cut into the world, but Slash gave it a vital second wind when Guns N' Roses shot to fame

but many of the innovations developed during the project eventually found their way into Ibanez's hugely successful RG series, extending far beyond the people who originally set out to buy a Steve Vai model.

A signature opens the door in a showroom, but the guitar has to do the rest. That's what separates the truly great signature models from the forgettable ones. The best ones endure because they became exceptional instruments in their own right.

THE GAME-CHANGERS

Most signature guitars are designed to solve problems, introduce new ideas or celebrate an artist's contribution. Every once in a while, a guitar does something much bigger. It changes the entire direction of the company.

Gretsch is one of the best examples. By the early 1980s, the company had all but disappeared from the conversation. Production had stopped, quality had suffered, and the brand had lost relevance. Then Brian Setzer stepped into the spotlight with the Stray Cats, proudly playing his well-worn Gretsch 6120. Suddenly, a new generation of

players rediscovered the brand, sparking renewed interest that eventually led to a successful line of signature models and playing a significant role in the company's resurgence.

Gibson experienced a similar revival in the late 1980s. At a time when pointy 'SuperStrats' dominated the hard-rock market, Slash walked on stage with a late-50s-style Les Paul and reminded an entire generation why the design had become a classic. Demand for Les Pauls surged, helping re-establish the model as Gibson's flagship guitar and laying the foundation for one of the company's most successful signature relationships.

Stories like these are rare, but they illustrate the extraordinary influence the right artist and the right guitar can have. The best signature models don't just sell well; occasionally, they revive forgotten designs, reshape public perception and help rewrite a company's future. 

With thanks to ATB Guitars in Melksham (www.atbguitars.com) and Gas Station Guitars in Taunton (www.gasstationguitars.com) for providing the stunning vintage guitars photographed for this feature

The ultimate compliment a signature guitar can receive is when players forget it's a signature model at all

The best signature guitars arguably blend time-proven platforms with artist-spec'd tweaks such as the Filter'Tron-style Lollar'Tron pickups on this Chris Cornell ES-335 from Gas Station Guitars



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SCREAMING

LIFE



From Soundgarden's chaotic birth to the shattering loss of Chris Cornell, Kim Thayil's new autobiography burns with conflicting emotions. The guitarist opens up to reflect on riffs, rifts — and the soon-to-be-released sessions with his late frontman

BY JON WIEDERHORN

DONALD KRAVITZ/GETTY IMAGES

WHEN CHRIS CORNELL took his life at age 52 in May 2017, the music world mourned the death of the Seattle music pioneer and frontman of Soundgarden, which Cornell co-formed with guitarist Kim Thayil and bassist Hiro Yamamoto in 1984. The tragedy was all the more trenchant since Soundgarden were on tour and working on the follow-up to their 2012 comeback album, *King Animal*.

"Strange is probably the best way to describe how I felt after Chris passed," writes guitarist Kim Thayil in his upcoming autobiography, *A Screaming Life: Into the Superunknown with Soundgarden and Beyond*, which came out June 9. "Everything turned dark when the band ended so suddenly, taking with it a creative partnership I hadn't fully understood until it was gone. Losing that left me in a constant, grim melancholy. It was a despondency so deep, it felt almost sublime. I wasn't just feeling it — I was watching myself feel it."

Thayil processed Cornell's death in private and avoided the press for 18 months. When he started talking to promote an MC5 50th-anniversary tour (for which he was playing guitar), he revealed that Soundgarden had started working on the follow-up to *King Animal* before Cornell died, and that there were unreleased multi-track demos that featured Cornell's vocals. Soon after, the band started working on a new album, including a song Thayil wrote tentatively called "X-Mas," which he says might have been the last thing Cornell ever recorded.

"I was thrilled, but it was also bittersweet," Thayil writes. "Hearing Chris's voice again, singing things I'd never heard before, was both joyful and emotional. It was like he was speaking to me from the past, reminding me of our work together. There was another surprise, too — an unheard alternate version of a song we had previously worked on, musically distinct from what he'd shared with us earlier. It was amazing."

To plug the book, Thayil sat down with us to talk about the Seattle music scene, how he altered his approach to guitar throughout the band's career, his unconventional leads, the sources of tension that led to Soundgarden's breakup in 1997 and the status of the band's swan song.

You were categorized as a metal band before "grunge" became part of the vernacular. Did you feel like a fish out of water?

Yeah, because we were navigating popular culture and rock themes, but we were giving them context in a way that didn't feel

like metal. There were political and social aspects to our music that seemed closely aligned with underground punk rock.

After Nirvana's *Nevermind* topped the charts, most major labels eliminated their metal departments, dumped their hair bands and entered a mad dash to sign any loud alternative groups that might belong in the same universe as Nirvana, Pearl Jam or Alice in Chains.

To be clear, they weren't dropping Metallica or Megadeth. They were dropping these glam-metal bands, but some of them were really damn good and wrote cool songs. It was unfortunate that record companies thought they had to stop promoting them and drop them. It's also unfortunate that the record labels were motivated by caprice and fads.

What kind of guitar tone were you after when you started out?

Everybody talks about guitar tone now, but it wasn't much of a topic then. We were just going with a power chord sound. I wanted to be loud. Tone wasn't an objective.

What was your criteria for the guitars you played in the studio and on tour?

I just had to have a guitar that felt comfortable and did what I wanted. It's like, I want to play songs like the Ramones, and I want to play songs like Black Sabbath. Can this guitar do that? It can. Okay, cool. Being visceral was important to me. I wanted a guitar that felt responsive and a sound that leaped from the amp when I played. The way I approached the instrument always seemed more important than what actually came out. If I wanted to play a solo that was slashing and manic, I beat up the



Kim Thayil (left) and Chris Cornell in an outtake from GW's May 1994 cover shoot

guitar like I'm filled with that mania. On the song "Haunted Down" on *Screaming Life*, I wanted to be loose and wild and feel this careening sound. On other songs, I'd want a more mellow, warm, bluesy sound, so I'd hang onto the notes and play triplets I learned from listening to Rush and Kiss.

Did you have a go-to guitar in Soundgarden?

The Guild S100 was very versatile. I use a lot of other guitars — Gibsons, Fenders and Gretsches — but that Guild was a big part of the Soundgarden sound, especially for noise.

You often played a sturdy meat-and-potatoes riff and then countered it with an atonal, noisy lick or an interesting effect.

I didn't want to follow any particular scales, so I played whatever sounded right to me, whether it was crazy or kind of trippy. The pickups on that guitar were somewhat microphonic, so I could blow on the strings and it would feed back. I did that at the beginning of "Flower." But it wasn't a shrill, out-of-control noise. It was a weird hum. And the way I set my amps and used a chorus pedal gave me feedback that grew slowly and swirled around in a psychedelic way.

Can you trace your arc of evolution as a guitarist?

A lot of it was informed by whatever I was listening to. When I was young, I liked Kiss, Black Sabbath and Aerosmith, so I learned pentatonic scales. But I didn't like them. I was like, Oh, that's only five notes. What about the other two? Over time, my playing became a mish-mash of everything I loved, including MC5, Gang of Four, the no-wave compilation *No New York*, Ramones, Black Sabbath, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Frank Zappa and Pere Ubu.

Dropped tunings figured largely into your songs as well as those of Nirvana, Alice in Chains and Pearl Jam. When did you discover the technique?

I was in my young twenties and hanging out with Buzz Osborne from the Melvins. We started talking about Black Sabbath, and Buzz goes, "You know they did this thing called drop D." We said, "What's that?" And Buzz says, "You tune the E string down to D, and it sounds heavier." When I got home, I grabbed my guitar, tuned it down and immediately realized it was much easier to play chords, so I could play faster.

What was the first song you wrote in drop D?

"Nothing to Say." I showed it to everyone at practice and explained the drop D sound

and they loved it. The next song I did in drop D was "Flower," and then Chris wrote "Beyond the Wheel." When [bassist] Ben Shepherd joined us, he brought in other tunings, and [drummer] Matt Cameron does a drop D in G, which we called "digga digga." He wrote "Birth Ritual" with that. It was cool because we were all songwriters and always tried to turn each other on to new stuff and impress each other. Suddenly we didn't feel limited by the

"Everybody talks about tone now, but it wasn't much of a topic then. I just wanted to be loud"

intervals in which we tuned the guitar. We could do whatever we wanted.

Chris started out as a drummer and didn't take the stage with his guitar until after 1989. Did having him onstage change the way you played?

Yeah, and at first I was resistant to it. If I wanted to solo on songs like "Incessant Mace" or "Beyond the Wheel," having just the bass and drums behind me freed me up. But if Chris was playing chords, it framed the parameters in which I could play, which felt limiting. Also, I liked playing riffs on my bridge pickup and solos on my neck pickup. I liked the warm sound of that, which is the opposite of what most players do. When Chris was also playing,



Thayil at the 2025 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony in Los Angeles

I couldn't cut through, so I had to move to the bridge pickup.

Was that frustrating?

It was annoying, and he didn't know it at the time, but when he switched from a Les Paul with humbuckers to a Fender Stratocaster or Telecaster, I had to adjust my playing again because his single-coil pickups were brighter than the Les Paul pickups. That's when I started using the wah-wah.

In addition to cutting through the mix, the wah added a psychedelic splash to the songs.

It was a good addition to the sound. I wouldn't do a regular wah-wah sweep because that's been done to death. I wanted to be noisy, so I'd kick on the distortion and step on the wah. It was screechy and screamy, so now I've got this weird feedback and noise, and I can do some slashing stuff.

Did you get an equipment upgrade when you signed with A&M for *Louder Than Love*?

We got an endorsement deal with Peavey, and they gave us a bunch of cabinets and amps, which built up our stage gear for touring. A few years after that, we did a deal with Mesa Boogie. But each time we did a new deal, I'd get new heads and have to learn about their different features. The Mesa Boogie Rectifier had settings for "modern," "classic" and "standard." Some were bright and percussive, which would be great if you're playing like Metallica, but I had to scramble to set everything to "standard" or "classic" and try to make the amp sound warmer and more like an old Fender Tweed.

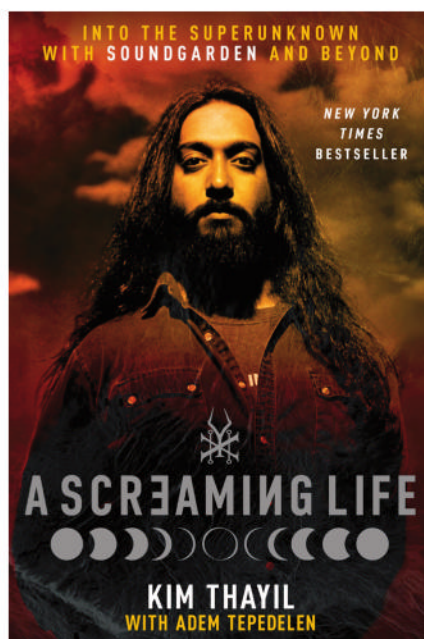
Badmotorfinger (1991) was more musically complex than *Louder Than Love*, yet "Jesus Christ Pose," "Outshined" and "Rusty Cage" were some of your biggest hits.

Chris was brilliant at taking what might seem like conventional formats and breaking them up in odd ways. "Outshined" is mostly in 7/4, but it was built around a great riff and had a memorable vocal line. And "Rusty Cage" was in drop B. The detuned string is a little looser, so it has a slightly different sound and little overtones. It sounded heavy and incredible. So, we kept going with that. On *Superunknown* [1994], "The Day I Tried to Live" is built on descending half steps, and it's in 7/4. And "Spoonman" switches between 7/4 and 4/4.

Was becoming a multi-platinum band a double-edged sword?

No, because being famous was never a goal, and we could always sleep at night know-

Thayil on stage with Soundgarden in Atlanta, May 3, 2017, 15 days before Chris Cornell's death



ing our songs were still weird. But being in the position we were in was definitely strange, and you don't know what it's going to be like until you're there.

You described the last album you did before your breakup, 1996's *Down on the Upside*, as somewhat similar to the Beatles' *White Album*, for which band members came to the table with finished songs that were recorded without much collaboration.

We were always coming in with our own ideas, but when we did that album, some people wanted their songs to sound just like their demos. It was like, "Well, we're not making four solo albums here, we're making a Soundgarden record." It bothered me a little because I write with Chris and Ben in mind, and I thought they should write with me in mind. That wasn't happening — partly because of success and partly because of arrogance.

On stage at The Trusts Arena on February 20, 2020 in Auckland, New Zealand.

"I didn't want to follow any particular scales, so I played whatever sounded right to me, whether it was crazy or kind of trippy"

Was *Down on the Upside* a misstep?

When you've got a number of cooks in the kitchen, there's always going to be a little friction. But I love the album. Every song on the record is there because the band wanted to learn it and perform it.

Were tensions mounting in the band before Ben stormed offstage during a show in Honolulu in 1997?

There were frustrations, but we were still moving forward. There have always been times when one of us might have a bad gig. We all just thought, 'Okay, now we'll get back on track and do the next show.'

Some have viewed that moment as the beginning of the end.

The narrative that's out there is incorrect. It was just a fucked-up show, and it happened to be the last show of the tour. We all thought we'd wait until the next tour and everything would be fine. Then, months later, Chris decided to quit the band.

Is there a general misconception about Soundgarden among people who only know you for "Spoonman" and "Black Hole Sun"?

Thematically, Soundgarden dealt with pretty big things. We didn't write about parties or cars, and we didn't write he said/she said love songs. They were slightly

grander and more psychedelic. They were about identity and orienting oneself in a creative, spiritual and social world.

You had a tremendous comeback with your reunion tour in 2011 and the studio album that followed, *King Animal*, in 2012. As you've documented in your book, *Soundgarden* were firing on all cylinders when Chris took his own life on May 18, 2017. In 2023, Chris's widow agreed to give you the vocal tracks he recorded between 2015 and 2017 for songs you were all working on. Matt Cameron has said you've already got eight songs for a new album. Is it difficult to work with recordings Chris made before he died?

It's emotionally draining and there are things about it that are sad and melancholic. But at the same time, it's exciting to finish the work that we started with Chris. It's a tribute to Soundgarden and a tribute to Chris. To not do this would be a great disservice to everyone, including the fans who knew we were in a writing cycle while we were touring.

Will fans recognize the album as Soundgarden?

I made an aphorism earlier about having too many cooks in the kitchen. Well, now we have one less. But we have these recordings Chris is on, and we all have

a strong understanding of Chris' identity within the band, so we are going to honor that completely, even though Chris isn't there to throw in his two cents. So, yes, it will definitely sound like Soundgarden and I'm going to sound like me.

Do you have a release date in mind?

It's too early to say. We're not making this with any set deadline, and we all have other things we're doing, so we're fitting it into our schedules when we can. The whole process is a little sideways and backward. We're not starting from scratch, we're rebuilding. It's forensic. We're taking things apart and seeing what we've got in there and what we need to add to flesh everything out. And we're planning to take our time with it.

Has age brought you wisdom or inner-peace?

Yeah, and with wisdom can come things like patience. But there was never any real major internal conflict. That wouldn't have worked. We wouldn't have made the records we did over a long period if it was no fun. We probably wouldn't have even stuck it out through [1987's] *Screaming Life*. We did something untraditional because it was fun, not because it was lucrative. 🎸

NINE LIVES

Brian Setzer feared he might never play again after a crippling autoimmune disease. Now, the restored Stray Cats frontman tells us about trading his Gretsch for a Flying V, the abuse of supporting SRV — and why shredders need the blues

BY JOE BOSSO

BRIAN SETZER IS looking forward to a summer full of motorcycle riding, and when he's not on his bike he's amped up to hit the road with the Stray Cats. While that might not sound exactly newsworthy, it was only a few months ago that the 67-year-old guitarist couldn't even tie his shoe, much less work a throttle or a vibrato bar.

Last October, Setzer was forced to cancel the Stray Cats' fall U.S. tour as a result of a debilitating autoimmune disease that left him unable to play guitar — or do much else. "It was the strangest thing," he says. "It started about two years ago, around the end of 2024, and before you knew it I was having trouble holding a toothbrush, a fork. I couldn't button my pants. There was no pain, but my hands just wouldn't work. Of

course, there was no way I could play the guitar, which was pretty scary."

The three-time Grammy-winning guitarist sought treatment at the Mayo Clinic — a block away from his home in Rochester, Minnesota. "When my doctor diagnosed my condition, he told me there was no real cure, so it wasn't a slam-dunk that I would see results," Setzer says. "But his plan A was to get me playing again."

As for plans B and C, he laughs and says, "I don't know what they were. I'm just glad plan A worked."

Treatment for Setzer's condition took nearly a year, during which time he received infusions at the Mayo Clinic. "It's easy to feel bad about yourself, but I remember lying in bed at the hospital and right next to me is a guy with cancer," he says. "At that moment, you realize how lucky you are, and you become pretty grateful. I didn't have

anything that bad. At least what I had was thought to be treatable."

Little by little, Setzer made progress, and his ability to play came back — so much so that he gave the go-ahead for the fall tour. Sober 14 years, he was curious about an energy drink called kratom that he saw in a smoke shop, so he tried one... and another. "Big mistake," he says. "I got hooked on it. They advertise it as safe, and yeah, it gives you a lot of energy. You feel like mowing the lawn that you've been putting off. But it totally messed up my immune disorder, and my hands went back to the bad state they were in. I was in a tailspin. I messed myself up and had to clean up."

He entered Minnesota's Hazelton Betty Ford Clinic and underwent a 30-day rehab program. "It's one of the best places around," he says. "If there's anybody out there dealing with similar problems,



SUZIE KAPLAN

[from left] Stray
Cats' Slim Jim
Phantom, Brian
Setzer and
Lee Rocker



I recommend it. So I took care of that demon, cleared everything out, and then fortunately the AI [autoimmune] went into remission. I feel 98 percent now. I don't want to say 100 percent because the darn autoimmune thing could strike again, but right now I'm feeling really good, and I'm playing as well as ever."

He laughs. "So let's talk about some other things!"

Ahead of the Stray Cats tour, the band is issuing a new single, "Stampede," and a cover of Eddie Cochran's "Teenage Heaven." When did you record those?

About three or four months ago. In this day and age, I think you need to go out on tour with a new song or two. Making albums now is hardly worthwhile; you're only making records for your fans and yourself.

Plenty of artists have already decided they're done making albums.

Yes. I can feel that way sometimes because when you're making a record, I mean, it's not for free, let's face it. So when you're just about break even paying it back, it's frustrating. It absolutely is. So I feel the only time to really make a record is to accompany a tour.

I love what you did with "Stampede." It's like a revved-up Bo Diddley.

"Except for me, I don't know anybody else who plays a Gretsch through a Bassman. That sound is unique"

Yeah! It's from an instrumental song by a band called the Scarlets. I heard the song and thought the guitarist was so good. I said, "I want to play that!" There wasn't enough of a song there, but I loved the riff, so I basically wrote a song around it. And the B-side is "Teenage Heaven," an older song by Eddie Cochran that's been covered a lot.

Your soloing on that song sounds just as fluid as ever.

I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

Let's talk about the band. You guys formed in the Seventies, and you kind of seemed like a real gang. What's it like being with the same guys as mature men in your 60s?

That's pretty interesting, and you're absolutely right. It starts off as a gang; you're all



three hanging out, and you're in the back of the van and you're looking for cool threads to wear. All of that changes. You grow up, you get married, you have children and you move apart. I think what it is now is just a longing, not to recapture the past, but to just keep the sound we have alive.

I'm telling you, when I get on stage and I hear that guitar sound no one else really plays... Except for me, I don't know anybody else who plays a Gretsch through a Fender Bassman. That sound is so unique, and I want to keep it alive. And then I turn around and I look at [drummer] Slim Jim Phantom over there, and he brightens my day. You know what I mean? It really makes the whole thing worthwhile, but at the same time, it changes.

The band had a pretty notable

breakup in the 1980s. Are all the troubles you guys had water under the bridge?

Oh, gosh, yeah. I mean, the kinds of things you go through in a band — it's like being in any kind of relationship. You have to learn how to deal with other people, and that takes time. Any rows we might have had are long gone. It could have been from drinking too much alcohol one night — who knows? There are so many things people fight over. They fight over nothing! So you learn to talk things out and get over it. The music is so good, and that's what's important.

You mentioned your Gretsch guitars. If you were somehow banned from using Gretsch 6120s, what would you play?

That's a great question because I want to

segue to this... I recently bought a '59 Flying V and a '59 Les Paul. I bought them because, fortunately, I had the money saved up, and I wanted to see what the fuss was all about. Now, the Les Paul is a beautifully built guitar, and it plays beautifully. I cannot fault it. The only thing is, it's not my tone. It's not my particular sound. I couldn't bring it on stage or even record with it. It's just not me, even though it's a joy to play.

But let me tell you about the Flying V. It sounds like the Gretsch. I kid you not, man! I played a Gretsch and then played the '59 Flying V, and I couldn't tell the difference. The only other guitar that could take the place of the Gretsch would be an older Flying V. It sounded so similar — I couldn't believe it. It had the balls, it had that twang. The Les Paul doesn't have it, but the old Flying V does. It's the weirdest thing.

No chance you're going to take the V on tour with you though, right?

I'm afraid to take it out. It's worth so much money.

Is there any new gear that has impressed you recently?

You know, I'm of the mind that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. The Bassmans have worked over the years so darn well. The only thing I do now is, I turn the cabinet around because I want the band to be the same volume. The Bassman is so loud. A lot of the tweed amps from the Fifties are too mushy sounding for me. When I fingerpick or do something complex, it just gets lost in the mush. But the Bassmans from the early Sixties, they've got those rectifier tubes, and they really tighten up the sound.

I do have a new echo unit that I'm really impressed with. It's an Echo Fix [EF-P2 Spring Reverb pedal]. The people who make these have copied the Roland Space Echo, so you can bring it out on tour without worrying about it breaking down. I'm really impressed with it, because they're copying a piece of machinery that actually worked.

Here's something I haven't seen you talk about. In 1989, the Stray Cats were on tour with Stevie Ray Vaughan. What do you recall about that experience?

I recall that the crowds hated us. [Laughs] They hated us! They were only there to see Stevie Ray, and they didn't give us a chance. It wasn't an easy tour for us, I can tell you that. I loved listening to him. I remember thinking, "How does he get that sound?" Only he get could get a Strat to sound like that. One night he called me on stage, and he handed me a Strat and put it over me. I thought, "Oh, great! I'm finally going to see what this is all about." There were rumors

that he had amps underneath the stage and he had them miked up in the basement — all sorts of stuff.

So I played it... and it sounded like me. I didn't sound like Stevie Ray. I mean, his guitar even felt like mine. The action was the same, the volume he played at, the amp he played through. I was like, "Well, this is interesting. Stevie sounds like he does because it's all in his hands." He was phenomenal. He was so fluid, and he played the blues differently every night. Besides us getting booed off the stage, it was a great show.

Did he ever come backstage and talk to you about the crowd reaction?

Not exactly, but I used to go back and see him all the time. I remember he flew in different kinds of exotic foods he liked. He was going through the throes of alcoholism, trying to keep off the booze. I know what that's like. It was a tough time for him, but he was a great guy and a great guitar player.

Are there any new, young guitar players you've noticed in the last couple years? Anybody in the rockabilly world who's impressed you lately? Who's rockabilly? I don't even know! I

"I don't laugh at shredders, but putting on a blues record wouldn't kill 'em!"

mean, rockabilly is really only alive for us. Where would you even go to hear rockabilly? There's not much around, right? You know how I hear new players? I go on YouTube and the Carter Vintage Guitars page. There's a guy named RJ Ronquillo. Fantastic player. Marcus King is another. Great player. He's a rockabilly guy.

It's interesting how the Stray Cats have dominated the rockabilly market all these years. Years ago, during the height of punk and new wave, did your friends and families think you guys were crazy to seek fame and fortune in England?

Oh, sure, especially when you consider that we were getting really popular around New York. My dad and Jim's dad came to a show and they said, "You want to go where? Why would you leave this?" We had the whole thing. We'd go into these towns, and we

had girls coming to the shows. We were making money.

Going to the U.K. was our real break. The music scene and the people we encountered understood what we were doing. I always said the British musicians wanted to be the American guys, and the American guys wanted to be British guys. In England, the guys want to be me. They want to be Scotty Moore. They want to be Cliff Gallup. Here in America, guitarists want to be Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck. It's just how it is.

Where does Jimi Hendrix fit into all this?

Oh, he's a unicorn. Jimi Hendrix is from Mars. He doesn't figure into any of these battles.

In a recent interview, Keith Richards said he "laughed his head off" at the Sunset Strip shred guitarists. What did you think of them?

I don't laugh at any guitar player. I mean, I have very varied tastes, and I like all styles of music. So no, I don't laugh at shredders, but it would be good for them to step outside the box and put on a blues record. It wouldn't kill 'em! 🎸



ROCK THE 80s!

In this feature Jon Bishop looks at the wonderful world of '80s guitar. Many of the decade's musical excesses are covered, and you'll also find four stylistically contrasting performance pieces to learn. Let's get ready to rock!

Welcome to our 1980s guitar extravaganza. The aim of this lesson is to take inspiration from the key guitar styles of some of the 1980s' biggest selling artists. Both rhythm and lead guitar ideas are covered, and we've notated each of these in the 14 stylistic examples. There are also four mini performance pieces to learn, and by the end of working with these, your '80s guitar trick bag should be fully topped up.

The 1980s was a decade of excess. Big shoulder pads, power dressing and expensive production values were to the fore. The '80s also ushered in the MTV era and music became even more consumable, with multiple formats available including the introduction of the CD, in addition to vinyl records, cassettes and VHS video.

Various advances in technology led to the advent of more convenient digital effects processors, so the classic '80s production values and guitar sounds are often drenched in chorus, compression and ambience. The decade was also synonymous with other advances in music production technology, such as the introduction of drum machines, and a range of great keyboard synthesisers.

The harmony in '80s pop music often had a fusion flavour. Sus and slash chords were very much in vogue and it wasn't uncommon for chart topping hits to feature complex chords and arrangements. Unlike today it was also commonplace for even the most mainstream of songs to feature a

guitar, harmonica, synth or sax solo.

The sights and sounds of the '80s have made a huge comeback in recent years. Styles like 'Synth Wave' have copied the production values of the '80s with titillating precision, adding new compositions for fans of the decade to enjoy. In fact many modern pop artists have adopted aspects of the '80s sound into their arrangements with great success (Katy Perry, The Weeknd, The Midnight, Taylor Swift etc). Also reboots of classic films (Blade Runner, Ghostbusters, Robocop) and TV series (Cobra Kai, Magnum PI) have become all the rage.

To get our studies going we have recorded seven clean guitar examples in the styles of some of the most popular '80s genres.

“The '80s was a decade of excess, with big shoulder pads, power dressing and expensive production values”

Guitar effects such as chorus, compression and ambience are suitably overused. We have also recorded seven overdriven examples using the same over-the-top 'more is more' ethos so prevalent at the time.

Our four performance pieces provide an opportunity to put many of the individual examples into musical context. The first is in the style of the classic '80s rock ballad. This was usually a heartfelt ditty that was often

Ability Rating Easy to Moderate

☆☆☆☆☆

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

Key Various **Tempo** Various

Will improve your...

- ✓ Timing and tone production
- ✓ Stylistic awareness
- ✓ Lead and rhythm techniques

also tied into a major Hollywood movie or two. This type of rock ballad also tended to stay at the top of the singles charts across the world, for most of the year.

The second is in the style of top 40-synth pop. A huge wave of new romantic bands such as Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet and Ultravox emerged, fusing together drum machines, synthesisers, funky rock guitar - and designer suits - to great effect.

The third is a fist pumping mid-tempo rock track featuring lots of palm muting technique (think big hair, make-up and spandex pants!)

To top off our studies we end with the classic up-tempo boogie. Artists as diverse as ZZ Top and Steely Dan through to Joe Satriani achieved great success with this style of chugging boogie stomper.

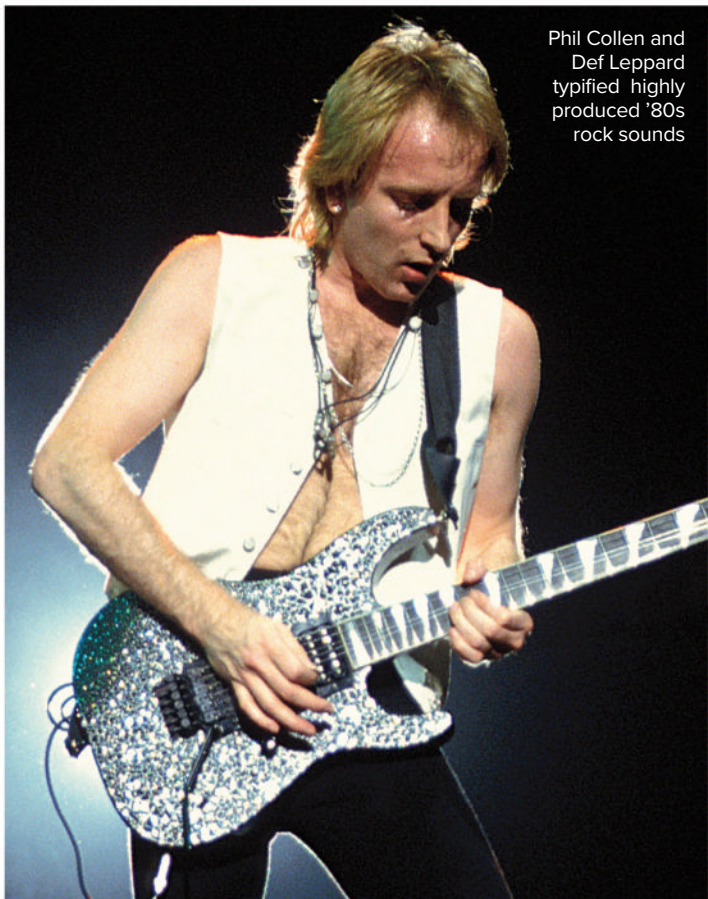
As usual you will find the notation and performance notes for all the tracks here. There are also backing tracks provided so you can play along. Hopefully you can find inspiration for your own playing or songs. 🎸

'80S SOUNDS

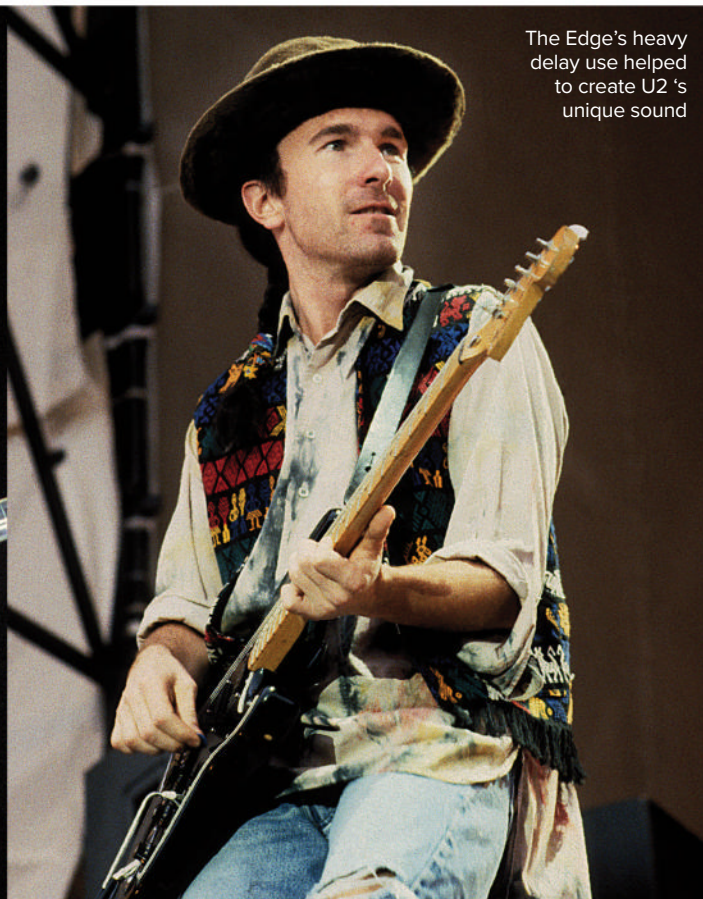
The use of effects and production techniques can really help to bring a track to life. For this article I used period correct hardware and recorded the parts in a similar way to that of the 1980s.

My 1989 Ibanez RG750 guitar was useful as a main axe of choice. For the clean examples I recorded this guitar direct into my Universal Audio preamp. This sounds the same as plugging the instrument straight into a recording console in the studio. Recording direct with no amp creates a super hi-fi tone that is precise and sounds very specific to the era. This clean tone can then be teamed up with heavy compression and lush chorus. Reverb and ambience effects were also heavily abused in the 1980s so these can be added liberally to drums, guitars and vocals. For the synth parts I used my Roland Juno keyboard and for the drum programming a gated reverb perfectly fitted the bill (think Phil Collins!).





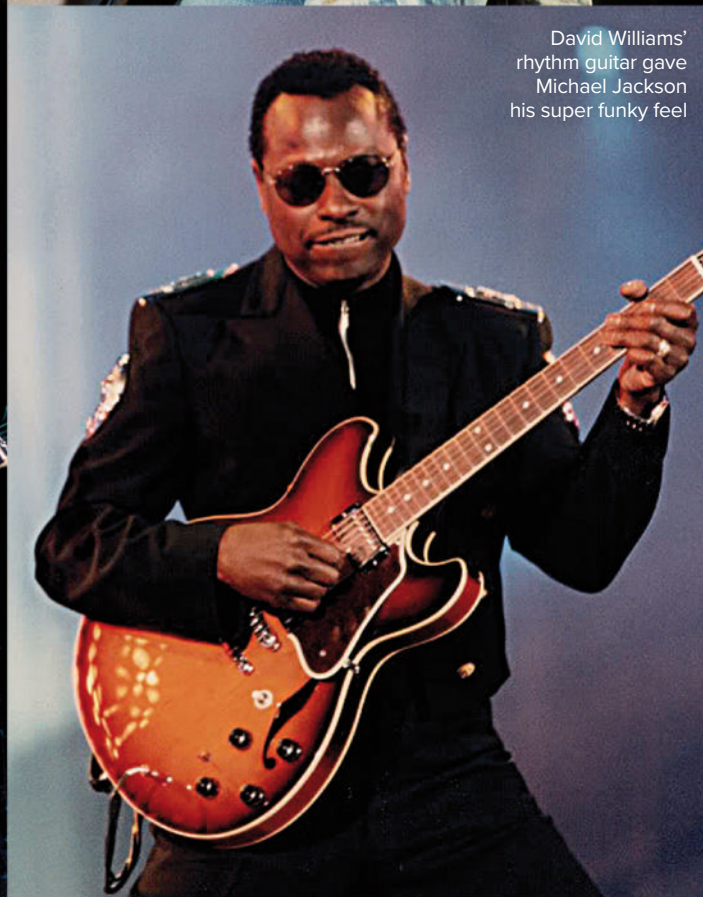
Phil Collen and Def Leppard typified highly produced '80s rock sounds



The Edge's heavy delay use helped to create U2's unique sound



James Hetfield's heavy riffs are the cornerstone of Metallica's sound



David Williams' rhythm guitar gave Michael Jackson his super funky feel



TRACK RECORD There are dozens of fantastic '80s recordings of rock, funk, post punk and pop songs that display the typical flavour of the decade. All of the artists featured in our examples will be good places to do some listening. But we'd suggest the compilation album entitled *The Best Air Guitar Album In The World Ever*, as it contains all the big hits and is singalong material from start to finish.

This first example combines snappy 16th-note rhythms with an '80s-style chorus effect. We have notated the strumming pattern for the chords. The chords are answered by bass

This example adds a volume swell effect (violining). The swell can be achieved with the guitar's volume control or a volume pedal. The trick here is to strum the chord slightly early

♩ = 120

COUNT IN

2

Bridge Pickup
Clean With Chorus
and Delay

2

E
B
G
D
A
E

6
6
8
8

5
6
8
8

1

Cm11

Cm13

vol

vol

Our next example highlights the trademark add9 chord fingerings as used by The Police's Andy Summers (first finger hops over from the sixth to third string). A little bit of

In '80s indie band The Smiths, the acknowledged maestro of jangly guitars, Johnny Marr also used natural harmonics to great effect. Simply place your

EXAMPLES CLEAN GUITAR

EXAMPLE 5 THE EDGE STYLE DELAY

U2 guitarist The Edge made his use of rhythmic delays a trademark sound. Simply set your delay to a dotted eighth-note (many modern delay pedals have this very function, which will be a great boon here). With this setting engaged and the level turned up, a syncopated delay

repeat is added in to fortify the part. The delay also helps with locking into the beat. You can experiment with striking the strings with a dimple grip pick (Herdin Pick) or a coin as this will increase the attack and accentuate the rhythmic effect.

EXAMPLE 5 THE EDGE STYLE DELAY

Bridge Pickup
Clean With Mod Delay
Set to Dotted 8th

Tempo: $\text{♩} = 120$

Chords: C, Csus4, C, F, Fsus4, F, C, Csus4, C, G, Gsus4, G

Count In: 2

Staff: E, B, G, D, A, E

Tab: 12-12-12-12-13-13-13-12, 13-13-13-13-13-13-13-13, 12-12-12-12-12-12-12-12, 5-5-5-5-6-6-6-5, 6-6-6-6-6-6-6-6, 12-12-12-12-13-13-13-12, 7-7-7-7-8-8-8-7

EXAMPLE 6 ALAN MURPHY STYLE SUSTAINING COMPRESSION

Alan Murphy was a legendary '80s session guitarist who played with Kate Bush, Haircut 100,

Go West and others. Here we are using compression for a synth pad effect. Strum hard, to provide plenty of level for the compressor to cut or boost.

EXAMPLE 6 ALAN MURPHY STYLE SUSTAINING COMPRESSION

Bridge Pickup
Clean With Chorus
and Compressor

Tempo: $\text{♩} = 120$

Chords: Cm11, Cm13

Count In: 2

Staff: E, B, G, D, A, E

Tab: 6, 6, 8, 8, 5, 6, 8, 8

EXAMPLE 7 DAVID WILLIAMS STYLE FUNKY POPPING

David Williams was a master of pop session guitar and his work on hit albums such as

Michael Jackson's Thriller is legendary. To play this popping line keep the fretting hand in contact with the string and only fret the notes when required.

EXAMPLE 7 DAVID WILLIAMS STYLE FUNKY POPPING

Bridge Pickup
Clean With Chorus
and Compressor

Tempo: $\text{♩} = 120$

Chords: Cm11, Cm13

Count In: 2

Staff: E, B, G, D, A, E

Tab: 5-X-X-5-X-5-X-5, 5-8, 5-X-X-5-X-5-X-8-10-12, 5-X-X-5-X-5-X-5, 5-8, 5-X-X-5-X-5, 6/8-6-4-5



EXAMPLES DISTORTED GUITAR

EXAMPLE 5 VAN HALEN STYLE NATURAL HARMONICS

The way EVH uses natural harmonics to punctuate riffs is another of his trademarks and has

become widely imitated. This example uses the same natural harmonics technique as we looked at in the Johnny Marr example.

♩ = 120 COUNT IN 2

Bridge Pickup With Distortion and Delay

f NH w/bar

NH w/bar

1

EXAMPLE 6 TY TABOR (KINGS X) STYLE DROP D TUNING

For this example simply drop the sixth string a tone (two frets) to D. On a fixed bridge this

should be straightforward, but the change in tension on a floating vibrato bridge may require a little more trial and error to get the tuning right.

♩ = 120 COUNT IN 2

Bridge Pickup With Distortion

f Dsus2 D5 F5 D5 G5 F5 D5 Csus2 D5 F5 D5 G5 F5 D5

PM

Drop D Tuning - D, A, D, G, B, E

1

EXAMPLE 7 METALLICA STYLE USE OF THE DIMINISHED 5 IN RIFFS

For convenience we continue with drop D tuning (D-A-D-G-B-E). The ♭5 (here, A_b) works great

for heavy riffs and bands like Metallica have cashed in on the dark and menacing sound of the dissonant intervals like the ♭5 and ♭2.

♩ = 120 COUNT IN 2

Bridge Pickup With Distortion

f D5 F5 G5 F5 D5 F5 G5 F5 D5 A_b5 D5 G5 D5 F5 G5 F5 D5 F5 G5 F5 D5 E_b5

PM

Drop D Tuning - D, A, D, G, B, E

1

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PIECE1 BALLAD ROCK

VERSE [Bars 1-8] These intro chords are relatively easy to play and sound a whole lot more '80s with a bit of chorus added. In bar 7 a lead line is introduced and this can be brought to life with a bit of whammy bar wobble.

CHORUS [Bars 9-17] The solo starts with a scoop of the whammy bar to create an upward glissando. The ascending Minor Pentatonic (R-3-4-5-7) run in bar 13 will benefit from a light palm mute at the start.

VERSE

Am9 **D7sus4** **D7sus2** **G7sus4** **G** **Am9**

COUNT IN **Bridge Pickup Clean With Chorus** **f** **Let ring - - - -** **w/bar**

Am9 **D7sus4** **D7sus2** **G7sus4** **G** **Am9** **w/bar**

Bridge Pickup With Distortion and Delay **w/bar** **Bridge Pickup With Distortion and Delay** **w/bar**

CHORUS

Am9 **D7sus4** **D7sus2** **G7sus4** **G**

scoop **BU** **BU** **BU BD** **BU BD**

Am9 **D7sus4** **D7sus2** **G7sus4** **G** **Am9**

PM - - - - - **BU** **BU** **BU BD** **w/bar**

BU **BU BD** **w/bar**

PIECE 2 **TOP 40 SYNTH POP**

CHORUS 1 [Bars 1-8] Our synth jam provides an opportunity to put some of our clean examples into context. It starts with a slightly changed version of Ex1

VERSE [Bars 9-16] This section places the David Williams style popping idea we looked at in Example 7 into groovy musical context.

BRIDGE [Bars 17-24] Here we have added in a new breakdown section, where a palm mute is used to chug on a C note. The picking velocity can be increased and the palm mute removed to create a dynamic shift back into the final chorus.

CHORUS 2 [Bars 25-33] The chorus is repeated to end the track.

[illegible]

GUITAR SOLO [Bars 9-16] It's time for a rock guitar wig-out! For the solo the scale of choice is the C# Blues scale (C#-E-F#-G-G#-B); however it sounds good to pick out the B Major arpeggio (B-D#-F#) over the B5 chord in bar 13.

76  guitar

PIECE 4 **UPTEMPO SWING BOOGIE ROCKER**

To finish we have a fast paced boogie rocker. Keep the feel loose and dig in with the pick. To save space we've used sectional pointers; Dal Segno Al Coda means go back to the

'squiggle' sign, play the music again until the bar marked al Coda, then jump to the coda (circle with a cross in it at bar 17).

♩ = 190 Swung 8ths notes

COUNT IN 2

Bridge Pickup With Overdrive

A5 C5 D5 A5

1, 5, 13

1 To CODA 2 D5

D. al CODA

CODA

F5 G5 A5

C5 D5 A5

21

HOT GEAR

1

Fender 62' Deluxe Amplifier
RRP: \$4,599 • au.fender.com

One look at Fender's '62 Deluxe Amplifier and there's no mistaking the early 60s look. But the sound? Iconic as ever. The real magic is how that classic Fender character has been preserved yet somehow levelled up. You can expect touch-sensitive responsiveness that lets you be as expressive as you'd like, all while rewarding the nuances of your attack. It provides a great balance between two iconic eras: the mid-focussed crunch of Tweed amps and sparkly clean tone of 60s Black Panel amps. The 62' Deluxe is that middle sweet spot that delivers warmth but isn't afraid to get gritty, as well as creating depth to your bright cleans. Rich, dynamic and unmistakably Fender.



2

Gretsch Electromatic Premier Jet
RRP: \$1,399 • gretschguitars.com

No non-sense rock machine that lets your fingers do the talking. Wielding something this sleek, smooth and performance-ready, all while packing lots of tonal versatility and range – it seems almost unheard of – but that's just a reality for the Gretsch Premier Jet. It's unsurprisingly capable of hitting every flavour of rock imaginable. You name it, it's got the tone for it. Gretsch just knows how to make a modern rock guitar that sounds the part, feels the part and won't break the bank. Disclaimer: This one is seriously difficult to put down.





3

Cort Gold MC6
RRP: \$1,999 • dynamicmusic.com.au

The Cort Gold-MC6 Ovangkol is a premium all-solid acoustic guitar designed for players who demand exceptional tone, craftsmanship and performance. Featuring a torrefied solid Sitka spruce top paired with solid ovangkol back and sides, the Gold-MC6 delivers a rich, open and mature voice from the very first strum, with the warmth, depth and dynamic response that only improves over time. Its Modern Concert body shape offers outstanding comfort without sacrificing projection, making it equally at home on stage, in the studio or during long practice sessions. A hand-scalloped X-bracing pattern, dovetail neck joint and walnut-reinforced mahogany neck ensure outstanding resonance, stability and long-term reliability, while the satin Comfort C neck profile provides a fast, natural playing experience.

4

Cort SFX-AB
RRP: \$TBC • dynamicmusic.com.au

The Cort SFX-AB is a modern acoustic-electric guitar designed for players who value comfort, striking aesthetics and dependable performance. Featuring a stunning Ash Burl top, back and sides, the SFX-AB showcases one of nature's most distinctive wood grains, enhanced by an open-pore finish that lets the beauty of the timber shine while allowing the guitar to resonate more naturally. Its slim SFX body is lightweight and incredibly comfortable to play, making it ideal for long practice sessions, live performances and musicians transitioning from electric guitar. The Venetian cutaway provides effortless access to the upper frets, while Advanced X-Bracing delivers impressive clarity, balanced projection and a bright, articulate tone with focused midrange response.



5

Tone City Buzz Bee
RRP: \$125 • egm.net.au

Need a little extra volume for solos? The Buzz Bee provides a crystal-clear, transparent boost that enhances your sound without coloring your tone. Up to the 1 o'clock position, the boost remains clean and natural, making it perfect for lifting your guitar above the mix. Turn the Gain past 1 o'clock, and the Buzz Bee transforms into a powerful tone-shaping weapon. With up to 25 dB of available boost, it can drive your amplifier harder, push overdrive and distortion pedals into richer saturation, and unlock new levels of sustain, harmonics, and responsiveness.



6

Tone City Nashville
RRP: \$125 • egm.net.au

The Nashville Overdrive takes the beloved mid-gain overdrive formula and refines it for today's players. Inspired by the smooth, responsive character of classic TS-style overdrives, it retains the warmth and musical feel guitarists love while introducing a more open, articulate voice with slightly reduced mid-range emphasis and enhanced top-end clarity. The result is an overdrive that feels familiar yet refreshingly versatile. The Nashville Tone City pedal delivers rich, dynamic tones that sit perfectly in any mix without sounding congested or overly mid-focused.

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NEVER TEAR US APART

INXS keyboardist Andrew Farriss on how studio experimentation sealed the fate of the band's biggest hit

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How to record virtual and live instruments more smoothly by taking stock of your DAW's sample buffer

Latency on your plugins and audio recordings can derail a developing musical idea - but if you get a handle on managing your sample buffer you'll have a much smoother ride.

WORDS BY ROLAND SCHMIDT

The sample buffer is one of the dark arts of the digital audio domain. Ever got up to a microphone, started to record a vocal take, and found yourself hearing a delayed signal coming back at you? Or, perhaps you are playing a virtual instrument, with an impressive delay between the triggering of a note, and the sound emitting from your speakers.

Both of these scenarios relate to the sample buffer, but with some management, these issues can be improved or even eliminated!

The sample buffer is a setting which is controlled by the user, designed to influence the amount of time being set aside for your computer to process audio. It affects the signal as it enters your system, normally via some form of audio interface, before the processed audio is returned to you for your monitoring pleasure.

Your computer is doing an awful lot of processing while recording digitally. As your audio is inputted or processed, your computer is fighting furiously to crunch the signal into digits. This number-crunching takes a short amount of time, creating a delay to the signal which is described as latency. This can be managed, but regrettably, you are never going to completely eliminate latency from your system. You can also employ workarounds to achieve the best results.

The amount of induced delay in the signal is assigned via the 'sample buffer size' setting. You will find this setting in one of your DAW's settings or preference panes, described as something like 'I/O Buffer Size', with an accompanying drop-down menu relating to the number of samples being set aside for the processing buffering.

Most systems will offer you half a dozen or so numerics, ranging from 32 samples up to 1024 samples. The lower this number, the lower the amount of latency, whereas a higher number will induce large amounts of latency. In real terms, this means that the lower value is affording less time for the computer to process the data, whereas a larger number affords the computer more time.

So which option is best? It could be

tempting to choose the lowest buffer size value available, which will in theory generate the least amount of latency. That is undoubtedly the case, but in reality you are likely to experience instability. This could range from glitching in your audio, to your DAW exclaiming that it does not have enough processing power, before bringing your song to a shuddering halt. In the worst case scenario, the DAW might even crash! It is therefore in your interest to select a value which strikes a happy balance between latency, and giving your computer less reasons to grumble.

Knowing which buffer size to select depends on a couple of factors. The primary

meaning that there is more audio processing for your computer to undertake. So it makes sense to increase the buffer size at this stage, so that your computer can handle the increased processing of data. The short delay between hitting the 'play' button and hearing your track start, will be largely unnoticeable.

As we hinted earlier, there are also some workaround solutions which may help your cause. One of the most useful and effective relates to the recording of audio. When you purchased your audio interface, you were probably directed towards the company website to download the latest drivers for your product. As part of this process, you may have been advised to use a

software product alongside your DAW, which looks a little like a mixing desk.

Thanks to some clever software engineering, most companies have a solution which provides an exceptionally low latency signal path, working alongside your DAW. This means that you can monitor your live audio through the interface software, as you record, without the annoying delay coming back at you. You will however have to mute the 'live' channel in your DAW, otherwise you'll hear the signal twice!

Normally, the accompanying software just springs into life the moment you start work,

and it's a good idea to embrace this working practice, as you'll achieve better results using this 2-step solution.

Meanwhile, if you find yourself working with virtual instrument plugins, you are entirely at the mercy of the buffer size. This can be immensely annoying, particularly when working with larger orchestral sample libraries, which are renowned for inducing large amounts of latency, especially in complex legato string patches.

One trick-of-the-trade is to employ a keyboard which has an inbuilt sound engine. By engaging an internal sound from your keyboard (such as a basic piano) it will act as a musical counterbalance to your delayed sample, providing musical and aural feedback which makes tracking orchestral or latency-heavy patches far easier. It's not ideal, but it's a useful and workable solution! 



influences will be your package and the speed of your computer. More up-to-date/faster computers, will be able to cope with a lower buffer size, but before you rush to the computer store to purchase the most up-to-date machine you can afford, the size of your project will also affect how the buffering performs.

When you start a project, you are likely to spend most of your time tracking-on, either from audio or instruments in the software domain. It therefore makes sense to set your buffer size as small as your computer can handle, without interfering with your working practice.

As your project increases in size, and hopefully nears completion, you will likely enter the phase where you begin to think more about your mix. At this stage, you may add more plugs and effects to the project,



INXS

Never tear us apart

INXS keyboardist Andrew Farriss on how studio experimentation sealed the fate of the band's biggest hit

WORDS BY PAUL ELLIOTT

It happened 40 years ago, but Andrew Farriss, keyboard player and founding member of INXS, can still remember the moment when he and singer Michael Hutchence began working together on the most emotive hit song the band ever recorded.

Farriss says: "I wrote the music for it on a piano at home, and some time later Michael heard me playing it on someone else's piano at a friend's house. He said, 'I like that. When we get home to Sydney let's finish that.'

"So originally it was just a piano song with a vocal. A very simple song, really, in that sense. And Michael came up with a

lyric and called it Never Tear Us Apart."

There is, however, a third person whom Farriss acknowledges as a key collaborator on this song. English producer Chris Thomas had begun working with INXS on the 1985 album *Listen Like Thieves*. That album gave the band a major international profile outside of Australia, so Thomas was retained for the follow-up, *Kick*, which would yield five hit singles – *Need You Tonight*, *New Sensation*, *Mystify*, *Devil Inside* and *Never Tear Us Apart*.

Farriss recalls: "Chris Thomas and I had a conversation. We had a lot of them, actually, because we made three studio

albums with Chris as a producer.

"But with that song in particular, *Never Tear Us Apart*, I'll give a lot of credit to Chris Thomas, because we had recorded it first in a traditional rock style with mainly guitars. But Chris said to me, 'Can you play what you're playing on the keyboard with a string sound?' I said, 'Sure.' So I experimented a bit with different sounds and things, and the sound that I came up with is what you can hear on the record.

"So it was really Chris's suggestion as a record producer, and it was absolutely genius. Very clever."

Farriss admits that he wasn't entirely



words he sang in *Never Tear Us Apart* and confirmed the identity of the song's subject. "It's kinda personal," Hutchence said. "I don't make up love songs, so... That's definitely a song for a girl called Michele."

Referring to the title of the song, he added with a laugh: "She knows, but we're not together anymore, so it doesn't work, does it?"

The woman in question was Michele Bennett, an

Australian film producer, with whom Hutchence was in a relationship from 1982 to 1987. It was reported after Hutchence's death on 22 November 1997 that his last phone call had been to Bennett. Hutchence's sister Tina believed that had her brother lived, he and Bennett would eventually have married.

Reflecting on all of this, Andrew Farriss says: "I think it was a very important lyric for Michael. When we first met as school kids, Michael was much more interested in lyrics and poetry than in singing. I don't think he was that interested at all in singing, but he was very interested in

writing lyrics and poetry.

"At that time I was already in school bands. I was writing songs, I was writing lyrics. But I began to recognise with Michael that he really was passionate about writing lyrics. And he got so good at it as he went along."

Never Tear Us Apart was released as a single on 13 June 1988. Surprisingly it only reached No 14 on the ARIA singles chart, but

it was a top 10 hit in Canada, Netherlands, Belgium and the US. The song has been streamed more than half a billion times on Spotify alone.

On 27 November 1997, Hutchence's funeral at St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney ended with *Never Tear Us Apart* playing as the coffin was carried away by Farriss and the other members of INXS along with the singer's brother Rhett. Farriss says now: "One thing about Michael's

lyric writing, one of the things I think that really stood the test of time with a lot of INXS songs, is that his lyrics were very poignant. He didn't have to say very much, but you knew exactly what he was talking about." 🎧



sure of this new arrangement of the song when they had finished the recording. "It sounded like it was from outer space compared to what most bands were doing around that time," he says. "I told Chris, 'This song sounds nothing like the rest of our album.' The rest of *Kick* was quite funky, which I really liked. We all liked all that.

"I said, 'Never Tear Us Apart sounds like an old 1950s ballad with strings in the background. It really doesn't sound contemporary.' And Chris said, 'Yeah, but that's what makes it sound so great, mate!'" The drama in this arrangement was matched by the emotional depth in Hutchence's lyrics and lead vocal.

In 2019 – 22 years after Hutchence's suicide – the documentary *Mystify: Michael Hutchence* included an audio interview, the date unspecified, in which the singer discussed the

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KRK V4S5 studio monitors

Compact, stylish, very listenable: does it get any better?

Review by **Steve Henderson**

Founded by Keith R. Klawitter, KRK celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Back in 1986, film sound engineer Klawitter was frustrated with the lack of clarity in commercially available monitors and set out to build his own. He was soon building bespoke monitors for colleagues, and this developed into a business that has since produced industry standard products for all manner of monitoring applications. In 2011, KRK became part of the Gibson Brands (yes, that Gibson) but continues to produce high-quality monitors with their unique, immediately recognisable livery and simple, friendly interface style.

The KRK V4S5 is a full range nearfield reference monitor that delivers 85 Class D watts of pristine sound. It is a bi-amped, front ported bass reflex design with a 4-inch woven Kevlar woofer and a 1-inch Kevlar tweeter, 55 watts and 30 watts respectively, and a crossover frequency of 2.1kHz. It features 49 EQ presets driven by a DSP system accessed from the rear panel. They claim a frequency response of 58Hz to 19kHz, and my spectrum analyser and noise generator seem to confirm this.

At just 258mm tall, and with a 220mm x 165mm footprint, it takes up very little real estate in the control room, as you'd expect from KRK. Connectivity is very easy. On the rear panel there's a Neutrix XLR/jack combo input, a IEC socket and power switch, the EQ system selector switch/dial and colour LCD readout, and a USB-C service port. New to this series is an AES3 Thru port (XLR) for digital connectivity.

Accessing the EQ system via switch/dial: turn the dial for the program or parameter; push the centre to select. There's loads of options to explore, and it's one click to reset to the factory settings. Finding the right EQ settings for my own control room took about an hour, mostly because the V4S5 array of options allows you to challenge your own idea of what is "right." In the end, I located a setting that was great and gave up splitting hairs about another 3db of this or that, and then just got on with making some noise. Is an hour a problem? Well, once you've found your setting, it's done. Even better, their KRK Mesh function links to the KRK Audio Tools app so that any DSP adjustments can be made from your phone, and you don't have to fluff around behind the speakers trying to find just the right tweak. Very cool.

Using a variety of sources, this pair of S4V5 monitors delivered a hyper-accurate, full-range sound at levels all the way down to almost zero on the faders. From whisper quiet to stupid-loud, the KRKs offered a pristine image across the spectrum, with zero latency or sag, and no proprietary colour that some brands of monitors seem to display. Whether mixing pre-recorded tracks or simply DI-ing



“It is a bi-amped, front ported bass reflex design with a 4-inch woven Kevlar woofer and a 1-inch Kevlar tweeter, 55 watts and 30 watts respectively, and a crossover frequency of 2.1kHz.”

an acoustic guitar or a bass, these KRKs are, themselves, flat response but reproduce the input signal such that it can only be described as full and accurate. It's a three-dimensional image that places the engineer kind of "inside" the sound, where the harmonic series becomes more apparent and the original richness of the instruments is not suppressed or filtered out by the character of "normal" speaker and amplifier technology. Due to the 4" drivers and compact cab, you won't hear a thunderous low end. So, if you need that kind of sub-sonic rumble (death metal, anyone?) you may need a sub to augment the system. Having said that, the KRK's 58 cycles is still a respectable low-end response for most applications and the bass reproduction is excellent.

The S4V5s reproduce the input signal with a defined, uncluttered image, and there's a smooth transition from bass to mid to treble. Vocals, especially, present a presence and clarity that is unusual from a small monitor format. Vocals remain vibrant and expressive, with plenty of sweet treble but without the sibilance issues we so often encounter. And, when mixing band tracks, this small enclosure demonstrates surprising definition between the instruments.

Like all KRK products, the V4S5 is bullet proof. The front baffle is solid aluminium,

the driver grilles are robust but removeable, and there's even a generous pad of high-compression EVA foam covering the entire base surface. You'll also find, on the cabinet's base, two pre-threaded mounting ports to allow for more placement options – angled desk stands, wall brackets, isolation floor stands, etc.

With the V4S5, KRK have simplified the rear control surface by utilising an app, at the same time making the system easy to use but more fine-tunable when extra flexibility is required. Having grown up with studio monitors like Tannoy, Acoustic Research, and even Yamaha's dreaded, mid-focussed NS-10s, I'm still a little amazed at the broad, rich tones that today's compact-driver boxes can deliver. And the S4V5 is no exception. Even with their useful and quite comprehensive tunability, they are about as set-and-forget as a contemporary powered monitor can be. With a whole lot to enjoy and no downside, the clever folks at KRK have produced yet another winner. 🎧

Pros Solid build quality, superb sound reproduction, and professional features throughout.

Cons None

RRP \$TBC

Contact Jands

Web jands.com.au



Fender John Osborne Telecaster

The country-rock star's Tele tears up the template — and could be your fastest ticket to B-bender mayhem

Review by **Damian Fanelli**

Almost across the board, Fender's Artist Signature series Telecasters are unique creations that are truly deserving of their "signature" honorific. Take the psychedelic Jimmy Page Tele, the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink Brent Mason Tele or — to really drive home the point — the super-unconventional, "Huh?!?"-inducing Jack White Triplecaster. These are definitely not your father's — or your uncle's, niece's or cousin's — Telecasters. Unless you have Thanksgiving dinner at Jack White's house.

Anyway, it's safe to say that, with its new John Osborne Telecaster, Fender has stayed true to form; there is no mistaking this guitar — a faithful reproduction of Brothers Osborne fretboard acrobat John Osborne's heavily modified 1968 Tele — for someone else's signature model or, for that matter, any other Tele. Besides the unique visual appointments, which we'll get to soon enough, this puppy comes with a B-bender.

For those who need a refresher, a B-bender is a contraption that — with a downward push on the guitar's neck — literally pulls your guitar's B string up a perfect whole step. So, a B note suddenly becomes a C# (or a shaky C if you don't pull the string all the way). Some people say it makes a guitar sound like a pedal steel guitar, but that's a bit much. It makes your guitar sound like a guitar with a B-bender, and that's a truly magical thing to have in your arsenal. Anyone who's ever bent their way from a 3rd-position Csus2 chord on the top three strings — voiced C, D, G — to a perfectly in-tune C major triad (C, E, G) knows what we're talking about.

No, this is not the first B-bender to appear on a mass-produced Fender Tele. It is, however, the first Fender B-bender to be designed in-house; it has lovingly been named the "Fender B String Bender."

As soon as we opened the Osborne's

black hardshell case, our eyeballs didn't know where to go first. But — who are we kidding? — it's got to be the custom black pickguard that covers most of the body, making the guitar look like an obscure Cold War-era comic book hero who's about to get their own Marvel franchise. It's held on tight with 13 screws; the only part that isn't snug to the body is the thin, descending piece near the control panel, a place where it'd be impossible to fit a 14th screw. It doesn't get in the way, but we could see it getting knocked off during a particularly nasty roadhouse-gig rumble. Hey, it happens!

The neck pickup's exposed magnets — which give it a look similar to creations by Lollar, Fralin, Porter or TV Jones — lend the guitar a custom, aftermarket-enhanced look. Meanwhile, the dark, hand-oiled maple neck (especially the headstock) is stunning. It's like a stained — and now perfectly faded — piece of ancient living-room furniture that gets passed down from generation to generation.

The three-way toggle, which is more like what you'd find on a Jazzmaster or Les Paul, is nice and tight and devoid of wobbles and shakes; the same goes for the volume and tone knobs, which is a good sign. Speaking of knobs, Fender has turned an unassuming volume/tone knob into an important part of the bender mechanism. It sits to the right of the bridge (from the POV of the noodling guitarist), and — when you engage the bender with your fretting hand — you can watch as the repurposed knob swivels to the right, literally pulling the B string toward the bridge.

When you flip the guitar over, you can see the guts of the bender, thanks to a recessed, clear-plastic cover. It's like when you visited that chocolate factory on your fourth-grade class trip, and they suddenly took you into the kitchen to see how the chocolate is made. The bender looks, well, like a bender — similar to, yet completely different from the Gene Parsons-installed bender in our Palir Titan T-style. Hey, an Egyptian mongoose and a common dwarf mongoose look different from each other, but they both look like mongooses.

The body has your typical Road Worn finish with plenty of tiny craters here and there and a nice chunk of exposed wood right where your picking arm meets the body. Feel free to add your own.

The John Osborne Tele's "1968 C" neck feels particularly comfy. Fender could probably get away with calling it a "1968 U," although it also reminds us of the "Soft V" neck on our Jimmie Vaughan Tex-Mex Strat. Regardless of which uppercase letter you want to stick with, this neck melts into your hands. Its light, hand-oiled finish makes it easy to feel "at one with" the guitar. Corny but true.

The action on our test model was on the high side, but we lowered the bridge saddles a bit and were ready to go, even testing it over the course of a few gigs at the New Jersey Shore — a legendary Telecaster proving ground since the E Street Band were regulars at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park.

The B-bender functions, well, like a B-bender. That said, compared to other benders in our collection, we'd say this one has a shorter stroke, meaning there's not a lot of travel time (and/or space) between an un-bent B note and a bent/pulled C#. It gets you where you want to go, but — as Parsons explained to me a decade ago, long-stroke benders give you that — and I'm totally paraphrasing here — "sweet" Clarence White effect.

Despite a night's worth of bending (every fifth song or so), the B string stayed in tune after a few first-set adjustments. Which reminds us: all B-benders have a fine-tuning mechanism, and this one lives just below the all-important upper strap button, the one that moves up and down when you push down on the Tele's neck. The fine-tuning is done with a supplied $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch Allen wrench, which happens to be a common size in case you lose it, which we did.

The John Osborne Tele is as nicely balanced as any standard Tele — and the 7.9 lb. weight is reasonable too. We can hear you now: Given the added B-bender, how is this possible? Well, just think about the amount of wood that had to be removed from the body to make room for the bender.

At the aforementioned gigs, our setup with the John Osborne Tele shared the stage with an amplified acoustic guitar, an electric bass, drums and keyboards. We were plugged into our trusty Fender Tone Master Deluxe Reverb. With nothing but a touch of reverb courtesy of a J. Rockett Boing pedal, plus delay from a TC Electronic Plethora X5, we had zero trouble cutting through the mix. The bridge pickup is super bright, articulate and chimey, with what we'd swear is a touch of extra snap. The neck pickup is equally commanding, with what feels like an extra serving of fatness, just right for those moments when the band veers into Stevie Ray Vaughan territory.

That said, the middle position — where we usually feel most at home, even when soloing — faded a bit too easily into the mix. That familiar "quack" is still there, but, sadly, the middle position was relegated to rhythm at these gigs. On the bright side, this actually can be helpful when we need to sit back



and let other people do their thing — like that eternally loud keyboard guy!

Back home, now running the guitar through a tiny Vox MV50 Clean head and matching 1x12 Vox cab, followed by a Supro 1624T DualTone, we were finally able to appreciate the richness of the middle position. There's a distinctive ring to it, something you hear from chambered or semi-hollow Teles like the Fender American Elite Telecaster Thinline.

Meanwhile, the bridge pickup sounds exceedingly present and lively — obviously perfect for in-your-face country music, but

also just right for classic rock, blues and pretty much anything else. Using the neck pickup with the tone rolled way down opened the door to some convincing jazz tones, just with a slight quack or twang. Picture Charlie Christian in a cowboy hat.

To put it simply, this guitar sings its ass off and has off-the-charts stage presence, kinda like the country-rock duo that inspired it.

Verdict

If you've spent years (or hours) listening to Clarence White, Albert Lee, Brent Mason, Marty Stuart, Jimmy Page, Brad Paisley, Glenn Tilbrook and John Osborne pull magic out of their B-benders — and you've decided it's time to dip your toes into the B-bender wading pool — the Ensenada-built John Osborne Telecaster is an attractive, cost-effective way to get the job done. It's the Laphroaig 10 (a well-priced, "gateway" peated Islay single-malt) of B-benders. 🍷

Pros Fantastic value for a guitar with a pre-installed B-bender; Unique, custom, "aftermarket" looks; Extra-bright, lively and present pickups

Cons Its looks might be a step too far for traditionalists; Middle position can get "lost" in a live setting

RRP \$3,699

Contact Fender Australia

Web au.fender.com



Epiphone Futura RD Custom

Epiphone drags a Seventies cult classic kicking and screaming into the 21st century with a tight modern build

Review by **Daryl Robertson**

It's fair to say that the RD stands out as an odd duck among its more traditional Gibson electric-guitar siblings. With its quirky silhouette, which looks like someone tried to draw a Firebird or Explorer from memory, the RD made its debut in 1977, eventually catching the eyes of everyone from Jimmy Page to Dave Grohl and the Nameless Ghouls of Ghost. Over the decades, this off-kilter Gibson has earned cult status, but it has only recently made its way back into the Gibson lineup — this time with a modern twist as part of the Custom Series.

The RD's comeback was a hit, so much so that it even lured the Foo Fighters' frontman back to the shape after years away. No surprise, then, that Epiphone wanted to get in on the action, even if the Futura version heads down a contemporary path.

It rocks a 25.5-inch-scale mahogany neck with a super-fast Modern C profile and a compound-radius ebony fingerboard that shifts from 10 to 14 inches as you climb up for those high notes. Decked out with 22 stainless steel medium-jumbo frets and split-block inlays, lifted straight from the top-tier Gibson Super 400, the neck is crowned with a Kalamazoo headstock and Grover Rotomatic locking tuners.

The entire guitar is wrapped in a rather

eye-catching Chromashift finish that morphs through different hues depending on the light. Our review model arrived in the dazzling Twilight Shift, which glistens from deep navy blue to metallic purple as you move the guitar — something the listing pics online can't do justice to.

We're happy to report that our test example is seriously well put together, too. The finish is flawless, the stainless steel frets are expertly installed and polished to a mirror shine, with the ends rounded off so there's not a sharp edge in sight.

This RD is no lightweight; we're talking beefy Les Paul territory, tipping the scales at around 9 lbs. Compared to the Firebird and Explorer models we've encountered, it's got a lot more heft, but that's the deal with a solid slab of mahogany and a body this size. Even so, it's even heavier than some vintage RDs we've played.

Despite the body being rather big, the sculpted back and rounded edges do their part to keep things comfortable; the upper-fret access is pretty excellent. Thanks to the deep cutaway and small heel, hitting the 17th fret and beyond is a total breeze.

As for the neck itself, we think Epiphone's Modern C profile will be a real winner for the vast majority of players. It's slim enough for

fast runs and complex chord shapes but still has enough meat to anchor your thumb for big bends. The compound radius fingerboard (10 to 14 inches) is fairly subtle but noticeable enough to let you know this is a modern build, especially if you're jumping between rhythm and lead parts.

Pickups here are Epiphone's new ProBucker Ignite humbuckers. In keeping with this guitar's modern sensibilities, these pickups are designed with higher-gain amps in mind, promising more output and a sculpted frequency response ideal for face-melting riffage.

There's plenty of muscle in these pickups, but they aren't so hot that they'll turn off all those traditional PAF lovers. The sound is tight and focused, with a slightly hollowed-out mid-range that pairs really well with a cooking amp. The bottom end is noticeably tamed and taut, making the guitar sound polished and controlled, even when playing de-tuned open chugs with enough gain to level a small city.

Flip to the neck pickup, and the character shifts. Suddenly, we found a flood of low-end for a creamier, more rounded tone. Thankfully, it holds onto enough clarity that the notes never sound bloated.

Moving from a Soldano SLO 100 to a JC120-style amp model, a quick pull on the volume control engaged the RD's coil split, and while it certainly thinned out the tone somewhat, it didn't quite have the spank and dynamic response of a Strat.

The phase switch was a different story; we think it's genuinely useful. Flip the selector to the middle position, pull up on the tone knob and you're instantly in Peter Green territory. The tone becomes mid-focused and nasal, with a cutting quality that's perfect for slicing through a mix or adding character to a solo. It's one of those features you might not use all the time, but it's a handy secret weapon when you need a totally different sound.

Verdict

Gorgeously finished, flawlessly built and loaded with punchy pickups and player-friendly features, this contemporary take on the RD is perfect for those who crave something offbeat and inspiring. It's hefty and a bit quirky, but if you're looking for a six-string that stands out, this modern take on RD is the one. 🎸

Pros Build quality is a real showcase of Epiphone value; ProBucker Ignite pickups impress; The finish looks better and better the more you stare at it

Cons Pretty heavy; The Posi-Strap buttons look cool, but don't really give you extra security; The coil-split sounds aren't the best

RRP \$1,899

Contact Epiphone

Web gibson.com



Ibanez Iron Label AZ41B1

Ibanez's pitch-black metal machine is hiding a secret beneath its stealthy exterior

Review by **Matt McCracken**

This AZ41B1 is the first of Ibanez's unashamedly metal Iron Label instruments to take the form of an AZ guitar. That means some more modern features like the Super All Access Neck Joint and a much chunkier "Oval C" neck profile — what you'd typically expect to find on the more rock/fusion orientated models — meet the hardtail bridge, stainless steel frets and dual humbuckers.

The AZ41B1 has an S-style American basswood body, finished in a satin black. It has a roasted maple neck attached via four offset screws, with an ebony fretboard and 24 stainless steel frets. It's a 12-inch radius with a GraphTech nut at the top. Gotoh MG-T locking tuners adorn the headstock, while at the other end, an Ibanez F106 hardtail, strings through the body bridge, acts as the anchor point.

The two DiMarzio Fusion Edge humbuckers are controlled by a 5-way pickup selector and an alternate switch that unlocks Ibanez's "Power Tap" function, which allows bass frequencies to pass through both coils but limits the high frequencies to one, delivering better split-coil tones. You can apply these in each position, which gives you a total of 10 different pickup configurations. A single volume and tone control completes the electronics layout.

Performing a close inspection of the guitar, the only thing we found aesthetically out of place was a slightly jagged cut where the pickguard meets the body on the bass side of the fretboard. It's absolutely tiny, though, and only visible with our nose pretty much up against the guitar.

On the back side of the body there are a few interesting flourishes. The low E-string ferrule is slightly further back than the rest, which helps those downtuning by ensuring that even if you've got the saddle pushed all the way to the back of the bridge, there's still a

break angle. There's also no cavity on the back for the main electronics, so to access these, you'd need to take the whole pickguard off along with the strings.

On a more positive note, the knobs offer a firm travel when turning, and the switches are all solidly applied, completing what is a very well put together instrument indeed.

The Oval C profile is a very comfortable all-rounder, with the rounded shoulders paying homage to the D profile of the Ibanez Wizard necks but feeling much fuller in our hand overall. Playing some power chords and open chords feels great, and the satin finish ensures that it's smooth when moving our hand up and down the fingerboard.

Plugging into a Fender '64 Princeton Reverb reissue tube amp, we were very surprised by the character of the humbuckers. It's not the super-compressed, surgical feel we expect from a modern metal machine; instead, we're greeted by very organic-sounding, sweet clean tones.

Starting in the neck position, there are bags of articulate clarity, although with the volume on 3 on the amp, we did need to roll off the volume knob on the guitar a touch to get it completely clean, as there's a fair bit of output. Moving to position 2, it was very much that SSS Strat type sound, bright and thin, but it never verges on brittle. Position 3 put both coils of both humbuckers on, which delivers a nice balance of spanky high end and low end warmth, without ever feeling overbearing on either side.

Position 4 delivered a similar sound to position 2, and ended up being our least favorite. It's smoother than position 2 and sounds great with open chords, but there was a touch of brittle high end when we dug in on lead work. Position 5 was a return to form though, delivering plenty of round warmth in the lows while still retaining clarity and cut

for lead work.

Switching to something a little better suited to this type of guitar, we brought out Nolly's Neural DSP plugin and its 5150 simulation to see how the AZ41B1 feels with a metal amp. Needless to say, it excelled in all departments. Digging in with open notes and alternating power chords sounds glorious, with a nice, tight bottom end, hefty midrange, and articulation in the highs.

It was chug city on the bridge humbucker, and there was some lovely extra warmth and thickness when we switched to the neck position for some lead work. Those in-between sounds? Not quite as nice with this much gain piled onto them, so we ended up skipping through those as we test each of the sounds.

The AZ41B1 also features five other pickup configurations accessed via the Alter Switch between the volume and tone knobs. These offered some interesting tone combos by mixing power-tapped coils with regular ones, giving a great variety of sounds.

Verdict

We expected to enjoy the tones of the Ibanez Iron Label AZ41B1 for heavier styles, but it caught us off guard with its versatility. If you like that style, it looks like the epitome of a metal guitar, but you could realistically take this to any kind of gig and it'd do the job. 

Pros Versatile DiMarzio Fusion Edge humbuckers; Alter switch opens up 5 extra pickup configurations; Build quality is flawless

Cons Some shredders won't like the thicker neck profile; The higher output jack placement on the body may cause issues

RRP \$1,899

Contact Ibanez

Web ibanez.com



PHIL BARKER



PRS SE Ed Sheeran Hollowbody I Piezo Baritone

One of the biggest names in pop delivers a first signature electric that bridges the gap between open chords and heavy metal chugs

Review by **Matt McCracken**

We can't imagine many people had an Ed Sheeran baritone guitar on their bingo cards after he hooked up with PRS back in 2019, but that's exactly what we're looking at here. It's Ed's first signature electric guitar ever — never mind his first with PRS — and it has certainly taken the guitar community by surprise.

As with every PRS SE guitar we've come across over the past few years, the build quality is close to faultless. A close inspection reveals a very small spec of black in the binding on the bass side where the neck meets the body, and on the treble side at the same point, there's what looks like some paint bleeding over onto the binding. That aside, we couldn't find anything out of place in terms of the aesthetic.

Our test model weighs in at 3kgs., which is what we'd expect for a baritone take on the Hollowbody, and on the lower cutaway there's some sculpting to help you get at the upper frets more easily, while on the reverse of the guitar, a very slight belly cut aids the comfort factor. The knobs are well applied, and the toggle switch moves with a firm and satisfying click through its three positions.

Looking at the output jack, unusually, there are two outputs, with one marked "mix/piezo" and the other marked "mag." Both are marked so that when you look at them from the playing position, the writing is the right way up, which is a nice touch. There's a compartment that houses a 9V battery which powers the preamp of the piezo system, although this is only engaged when plugged into the "mix/piezo" jack, so you can use it as an entirely passive instrument with the other output jack.

Trying out some lead work, we could get around pretty quickly, but the hefty neck is not quite slinky enough for proper shred stuff. Jumbo frets might have helped here,

allowing us to get around the fretboard a bit quicker, but as it is out of the box, we'd be hesitant to call this a "shredder" guitar as the marketing suggested, but lowering the stock string height (2mm from the low E) would help on our test example.

Changing the tuning to drop A and pulling out some Ashes of the Wake-era Lamb of God riffs, it was very satisfying indeed to play. The thicker neck profile made for a nice anchor when alternate picking and digging in with palm-muted riffs, and it was super satisfying to chug along with. Although the scale is comparatively long compared to a normal PRS, it doesn't feel ginormous, offering a nice balance between length and string tension with the 14-68 gauge strings that come on it from the factory.

Starting with just the piezo pickup engaged, it sounded great on the treble end of the fretboard, with very little of that "plink" you might expect from this kind of pickup. The low stuff wasn't quite as nice, though. It feels as though the piezo struggles to pick up the low string, which results in it getting drowned out when we picked some arpeggiated open chords.

Bringing in the magnetic pickup adds some more of the low-end back in, giving it a fuller sound overall. When we switched to the neck humbucker with the piezo and both volume knobs on full, it's an absolutely delightful tone blend of high-end from the piezo and warm tones from the neck humbucker that left us picking arpeggios for a long time. With some spring reverb and a gentle touch of tremolo from the amp, it's clean-tone heaven.

The tone control only affects the magnetic pickups, and rolling this off when combining with the piezo added huge versatility to the guitar. Switching back to just the neck humbucker made it feel almost

dull in comparison, but that's also partially because adding the piezo in also increases the overall volume of the guitar, and for the human ear, louder equals better.

Sticking our Joyo Klon clone in front of the amp and dialing up the volume, we found a very smooth lead tone from the humbuckers. Even with some drive applied to chords, they rung out very clearly. Turning up the gain on the amp and on our overdrive pedal, slow, doomy power chords sounded really powerful, and here adding in the piezo gave them some more "clank" that really suits that particular type of sound.

While the marketing speak of singer-songwriter to metalhead holds true to some degree, it's perhaps unsurprising that this baritone is not quite capable of super shreddy stuff, thanks to the neck profile. That said, for many styles, you'll find a sound here, and perhaps some truly unique ones once you start blending in that piezo pickup.

Verdict

From the typical quality PRS build to the added versatility of the piezo bridge, the PRS SE Ed Sheeran Hollowbody I Piezo Baritone can be a singer-songwriter's tool — or a guitar for classic chugging metal. **D**

Pros Versatile pickups can handle a huge variety of sounds; Piezo bridge adds extra flexibility and some unique tones; Hefty neck profile feels great for riffing and open chords; The usual excellent PRS build quality and attention to detail

Cons The neck profile makes it difficult to shred on; Doesn't quite handle super high-gain tones with low tunings

RRP \$2,599

Contact PRS

Web prsguitars.com

EVH 5150 III Hypersonic 6L6 2x12

EVH releases a digital combo version of the coveted 5150 amp, combining digital modeling and a real guitar cabinet

Review by **Pete Emery**

The original 5150 tube amp started production life in 1992 as a signature model built by Peavey for Eddie Van Halen. After moving on from Peavey in the early 2000s, he took the 5150 trademark with him to his own brand — EVH (Peavey continues to produce its take under the 6505 name).

Fast forward a few decades, and the 5150 III 6L6 has been brought into the modern era with the release of the EVH 5150 III Hypersonic 6L6 combos. The EVH Hypersonic series follows in the footsteps of parent company Fender's Tone Master range, turning to digital modeling technology for the amplifier but marrying it with a real guitar cabinet to create a digitally modeled combo amp.

Like parent company Fender's Tone Master range, this digital version of the 5150 III 6L6 should, on paper, have a lot in its favor when it comes to accuracy. First, all of the digital processing power is dedicated to recreating one amp well, rather than a collection of iconic amps and effects and fancy (but useful) routing in floorboards such as the Quad Cortex.

Second, utilizing a real cabinet bypasses digital cabinet emulation and puts the player directly in front of two 12" Celestion G12H speakers (a 1x12 model is also available), reducing the number of digital steps between the modeled tone and your ears. We should note here that there is cabinet emulation for a direct-to-desk sound on the amp, should you

need it.

Generally speaking, one of the biggest upsides of digital technology is increased portability, but this does not apply in quite the same way when you start making digital combos big enough to house two 12" speakers. Even considering this, the EVH 5150 III Hypersonic is pretty big at 27.5" x 11.8" x 24.4".

At 25.5 kg, it is also relatively heavy in the context of digital equipment (for example, the 2x12 Boss Katana Gen 3 is 19.5 kg.), but, when compared to the 85 lbs. of the tube equivalent, it is a significant, back-saving reduction.

Another benefit of digital technology is the ability to include some extra features, including a three-band EQ for each of the three channels (on the tube version, channels one and two share an EQ), a noise gate for each channel, and a speaker-emulated XLR out with two built-in Impulse Responses. For running a silent stage and utilizing just the XLR output, there is a mute switch around the back.

When we ran it squeaky clean, the Green channel was a little lacking in those harmonic overtones that make a clean tone feel lively. However, turning the Gain control up until it growled a bit, and there was a healthy, but not unpleasant, amount of high-end that was complemented by a tight low end, making for a very rewarding pushed clean tone.

Testing with both our Gibson SG and Music Man Silhouette Special, things got a little

muddy in the low mids when that gain is pushed beyond halfway, so be careful here.

Let's face it, most of us will be looking at this amp for its driven sounds. And it did not disappoint. The Blue channel immediately added a ton more gain, with the control ranging from a heavier crunch to all-out distortion in the first half of its travel, and then adding more than you would ever need as you push it further. What makes it so much fun to play is that it stays tight throughout. No flubby low end here, so use that neck pickup to your heart's content. On a bridge humbucker, it's perfect for the chuggy, high-gain, Eighties rock thing, with palm-mutes benefiting from that tightness.

The Red channel was similar to the Green but got into distortion territory even earlier and had a slightly more pronounced mid-range, whilst staying super tight in the low end. In short, the perfect high-gain lead.

The digital reverb is kept simple with just one control to adjust the amount, and is voiced with a controlled low end that keeps things mud-free even at higher settings. Being picky, we'd say it felt a little bit separate from the dry signal at lower settings, but not problematically so.

As previously mentioned, the XLR out on the back comes with two stock IRs. These are based on the EVH 5150 III cab and speaker, one with an off-axis SM57 and the second an on-axis SM7B. Both impressed us, but we preferred the on-axis SM7B as it was just a little rounder and has less of that digital fizz. In both cases, utilizing the high cut built into the IR Loader app was a good option for mitigating that.

The IR loader app allows users to load in their own IRs, too, so if these don't do it for you, you are covered. But with a little bit of that high cut, we would happily use the built-in IRs as a direct-to-desk solution.

Verdict

The EVH 5150 III Hypersonic 6L6 blends the benefits of a modeling amp with the feel of a real speaker cabinet. It plays like a real amp in a room, but with some of the upsides of digital technology, such as an IR-loaded XLR out and lower power modes. It's an ideal gigging solution for any high-gain player. **D**

Pros Lighter than the tube version; Real guitar speaker cabinet bypasses any chance of digital fizz; Fantastic 5150 distortion; Decent built-in IRs; XLR output can be run with the cab muted

Cons Heavy relative to other digital combos; The top half of the dual concentric controls gets in the way of the bottom half; Clean channel is a little lackluster

RRP \$2,329

Contact EVH

Web evhgear.com



PHIL BARKER



Cort GB-Short Scale

Cort may have re-defined versatility with this very playable instrument.

Review by **Steve Henderson**

I know what you're thinking. It looks like a full-sized bass, so why is it called "short"? But this Cort bass has a 30" scale, which you'd never know from its proportional appearance. Only the tone and feel have not been scaled down.

What we call a "short scale" bass has been around for a long time, much longer than you'd expect. Scale lengths of around 30" were standard until Fender's Precision came along in 1951 and changed not just the bass but the sound of modern music. Starting in the early 1930s, Audiovox produced their "Bass Fiddle": a fretted, 30 5/16" scale bass with neck-through construction. Gibson's original EB basses (1953) had a 30 1/2" scale, and this was their standard until 1963's Thunderbird, 1970's EB-OL, and 1973's fabulous (and thankfully ergonomic) Ripper and Grabber basses. Even Fender had their share of short scale basses, starting with the 1966 Mustang Bass (a 30" scale student bass built around a Mustang guitar body), through to the more recent Squier basses. But all short scale basses seem to be somewhat flawed: their "deep" tones aren't particularly deep and certainly lack definition, and their feel tends to be loose, even sloppy, compared to long scale instruments.

With their GB-Short Scale, Cort has

reinvented what a short scale bass can be. First seen, for most, at the wonderful Sydney Guitar Show in March this year, the Cort GB-Short Scale was a surprise attraction for many. At the Cort stand, I found an old mate, bassist Craig Calhoun, creating some cool moments with the GB-Short Scale. But then, Craig can make any bass sound fabulous.

The GB-Short Scale is quite a surprise. On the surface, the specs appear quite interesting: a matte roasted maple neck and fretboard with a 30" scale attached to a gloss light-weight poplar body, and fitted with a Music Man-style, large-pole, humbucking pickup with active electronics. The body is a slightly smaller off-set double cut design that is perfectly ergonomic, seated or on a strap. The look is simple, proportional, and terribly cool. But the good stuff is in the feel and tone.

First, the GB-Short Scale has a firm, controlled feel that generates fundamentals and harmonics like a long scale bass. It comes loaded with a 45 – 105 string set and they don't flap around or fizz out. There's plenty of string tension for your right hand (fingers or pick) and the strings snap back quickly. Acoustically, the Short Scale is lively and produces a clear tone all the way down to the low F and open

E. The neck is a Jazz Bass-style (1 1/2" nut) but with 22 medium jumbo frets and a very professional 15 3/4" radius. It's easy to navigate, the sculpted neck joint and deep treble cutaway provide complete access to the upper frets, and the satin finish offers a smooth feel with no resistance at all. For anyone, but especially those with smaller hands, it's a breeze to play.

The single humbucker is splittable, with sensible output options. The 3-way switch offers parallel, series, and single coil sounds. Parallel offers a warm and dynamic tone, suitable for most situations; series produces a touch more output, with a thick growl and plenty of punch; the single coil option has a thinner, more-vintage tone and, while this selection isn't humbucking, the noise factor is minimal and certainly lost in a band mix. Whichever you choose, the notes stay defined and sustained right along the neck, even in the high register.

The sound can then be sculpted by a MarkBass active 3-band tone set, each with a centre notch, providing an enormous range of tonal options. Playing through a MarkBass Little Marcus into a Hartke 410, there was such a variety of tones that I had to limit myself to just four or five. There's tone sculpting for days and finding favourite sounds was sooo easy. Select series, punch up the middle just a touch, and it cuts through a rock mix. Select parallel, scoop the mids, and there's that woody upright tone. I also plugged into a MarkBass 121 Black Line (12") combo and the new Cort CM150B Mk2 (12"). Both combos offered the defined lows and mids but with a little more treble presence than the larger rig.

The Cort GB-Short Scale is a thoroughly enjoyable instrument to play. It has a professional tone when the EQ is notched (flat) and the electronics simply broaden an already-satisfying palette. For those who want the feel of a longer scale but without the stretch, the GB-Short Scale is the perfect solution. Cort has clearly borrowed from Fender's J Bass (check out the neck shape) and Music Man's mighty StingRay (electronics) and then put their own spin on it. Even the truss rod has a MM-style spoke wheel truss rod nut for easy adjustment (every instrument should have this!).

Verdict

For the guitar player who needs to occasionally cover on bass, or the bassist who is sick of the lug, the GB-Short Scale is a great option. For the student just getting into it, especially younger folks, this is the one – add a gig bag and they'll have a very transportable, pro quality instrument. Schools should take note. If short scale basses had played and sounded this nice in the early 50s, maybe the long scale instruments would not have been seen as quite so revolutionary. 🎸

Pros Superb build quality, broad and professional tonal range, pro features all around, plays super well and is super comfy

Cons No gig bag

RRP \$799.00

Contact Dynamic Music

Web dynamicmusic.com.au

JBL BandBox Solo

The JBL BandBox Solo could be a game-changer for home practice.

Review by **Pete Emery**

The JBL BandBox Solo is essentially a little guitar amp and Bluetooth speaker, with the ability to separate stems from a piece of music. By this, I mean breaking a song down and taking instruments out, leaving only what you want to hear. It's great for isolating instruments for learning the parts, or removing them so you can play along with the song.

This, on its own, is nothing new. Apps like Moises and DAWs like Logic have been able to do stem separation for a while. What makes JBL's offering interesting is the ability to do this in real time over Bluetooth. Meaning, for example, you can load up a music streaming service on your mobile device, connect to the BandBox over Bluetooth, and it will separate stems for you as you stream.

That will perhaps be the most common use case, but any device that can connect to the JBL and transmit any audio over Bluetooth will be able to utilize its tech.

This live stem separation is the headline, but it's the additional utilities that make it a fully fledged practice tool. These include a metronome, drum machine, looper, pinhole microphone for singers, USB recording capability, and a tuner.

To facilitate this, we have a quarter-inch input for a guitar or bass, an eighth-inch headphone output for silent practice, a 2.25" speaker when you want a little volume, plus Bluetooth, and USB-C connectivity. That quarter-inch input can also be used for a mic if you have the right connection type.

Considering its diminutive size, the BandBox Solo is a hefty little thing, coming in at 543g. It's a plastic construction, which means it doesn't exactly have a premium feel, but the sides are thick, with protective rubber corners that round off what is a sturdy impression.

A rotary knob adorns the top panel, and there are four other buttons here to turn the device on and off, pair Bluetooth, access the

menu, and activate the Stem AI. The display consists of a white LED pixel screen that is integrated seamlessly into the top panel.

The stem separation operation is simple: turn the stem separation on and then tweak those faders to remove or isolate the guitar, vocal, or other instruments. Easy. It's worth reiterating here that the BandBox is not doing this with a pre-uploaded file - it's doing it almost in real time as I stream from Spotify.

I say almost in real time, as to facilitate this, the software introduces a slight offset of a few seconds to allow itself a chance to do that processing. So if you press play or pause on the mobile device you are using, there will be a little delay before that action is carried out.

However, the audio responds to the faders on the app immediately, which makes them feel smooth to use.

As for how well this all works, it's not perfect, but it is useful. Focusing primarily on the guitar, I start by attempting to remove the guitar parts from Audioslave's Show Me How To Live. It initially does a great job of leaving me with just bass, drums, and vocals. But, as the song plays, it's clear that the software is prone to tripping up a bit and briefly reducing the other instruments every few bars. It also sometimes takes a second to recognise new guitar parts as they come in and out. Solos, for example, will often briefly poke through before they are removed.

In a highly produced track, it tends to struggle more. Playing through Mr. Brightside, for example, and asking the BandBox Solo to remove both the vocal and guitar, the already highlighted issues were present, and additionally, at the climax of the song, it started periodically reducing cymbals and other aspects of the drums too. When isolating individual instruments to play on their own, the BandBox does it well enough that if there is a buried guitar line that is tricky to hear, the

isolation is helpful for figuring the part out.

It is a little compromised when doing this, in that it sounds like the audio is coming through a badly set noise gate, with the initial attack suppressed before being quickly faded in.

These issues are normal for stem separation tools. Moises, for example, also trips up in similar ways, but suffers from these problems marginally less than the JBL BandBox.

But again, we are not really comparing apples to apples here, as those apps generally need an uploaded file, whilst the BandBox Solo has the much harder task of doing this processing live.

Bearing in mind that the Bandbox is equipped with just a single 2.25" speaker and has an output of 30W RMS, it sports a decent amount of volume. Generally speaking, these types of devices make a compromise in bass response for the sake of portability, and this is the case here, but not as much as you might expect. Playing Franz Ferdinand's Take Me Out, that driving pulse on the low E is more present than it has any right to be on such a small unit.

It's missing a bit of beef in the low mids, and the highs aren't quite as defined as they would be on bigger devices, but for its size, it's an impressive little thing.

The JBL Bandbox Solo is an interesting bit of gear. The stem separation technology does not work perfectly; it's not the best-sounding speaker you will ever hear, and it is not the best guitar practice amp either. But, despite not being the best option in these individual aspects at this price point, the Bandbox still does all of these things to a decent standard.

And then, we have the mic input, metronome, drum machine, pitch shifter, recording capability, and more. It's when we consider this package as a whole that the price begins to make sense, as all of these things together make the JBL Bandbox an enticing proposition for all who would regularly use these tools whilst putting in the practice hours at home.

Verdict

In a world where streaming is king and few people own the music they listen to, the JBL BandBox Solo's ability to conduct stem separation from a streamed Bluetooth source is incredibly useful. Combine that with decent guitar sounds, an ability to take a mic input plus a host of other practice utilities, and it all adds up to what will be, for many, an invaluable practice tool. ▶

Pros Stem separation over Bluetooth without the need for a native file; Great sound for a small speaker

Cons Stem separation works well, but not perfectly; Other practice amps at this price point have better guitar sounds.

RRP \$399.95

Contact JBL

Web jbl.com.au





Electro-Harmonix Big Muff Pi 2

Long-lost circuitry featuring two op-amps is resurrected for the latest iteration of the classic Electro-Harmonix pedal

Review by **Trevor Curwen**

Electro-Harmonix has been doing a grand job of reissuing the different versions of its Big Muff Pi pedal, with all of the major circuit revisions now represented in the brand's roster. The Big Muff Pi 2 is the latest to hit the stores, but there's a twist with this one in that it was never available in the first place. This pedal is a dual op-amp version by designer Bob Myers that dates from the late 1970s. Its existence, as a hand-drawn schematic, only came to light when Josh

Scott of JHS Pedals was interviewing Bob for a book, *Made On Earth For Rising Stars: The Electro-Harmonix Story*. While EHX did produce an op-amp-based Big Muff in 1978 (also known as the IC or V4 Big Muff), celebrated for its use by Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins, this new one has a different clipping arrangement and an extra gain stage.

A nano-sized pedal that will fit snugly on any pedalboard, the Big Muff Pi 2 features

the familiar triumvirate of Volume, Tone and Sustain knobs, but, brilliantly, comes with a dual-action footswitch that – besides standard latching operation – can also be used momentarily for a burst of dirt for as long as you press and hold.

Plugging in, there's no doubt that this is part of the Big Muff family, but the differences from the usual four-transistor models are immediately apparent. There's a fuller midrange in place of the regular scooped sound and that fullness extends to the low frequencies with a bigger bottom-end grunt. There's plenty of variation via the Tone knob, with the sludgier stuff to the left, but we found our sweet spot at around the two o'clock mark and beyond where the upper mid presence makes itself apparent. There's also a nice clarity to the top-end, which, incidentally, doesn't get as fizzy as a standard Muff when the Tone knob is maxed. With a gritty textured edge to its fuzz/distortion, this is a pedal for big riffs and endless sustain.

Verdict

This dual op-amp version was never released back in the day as EHX boss Mike Matthews felt that it strayed from the traditional Big Muff voicing. But these days we positively embrace fuzz varieties across the board and the Big Muff Pi 2 is a valid choice, particularly for players who value something heavier and more aggressive. 🎸

Pros Compact size; a different Muff flavour; latching/momentary footswitching; battery and adaptor power

Cons It's not for those who like to use volume knob clean-up

RRP \$299

Contact Electro-Harmonix

Web www.ehx.com

“There’s plenty of variation via the Tone knob, with the sludgier stuff to the left, but we found our sweet spot at around the two o’clock mark and beyond where the upper mid presence makes itself apparent.”

Strymon Canoga Vintage Silicon Fuzz

The wizards of digital stompbox design conjure more analog magic with a two-knob fuzz box

Review by **Jonathan Horsley**

The Canoga is something completely different from DSP masters Strymon; an analog fuzz pedal inspired by a vintage Fuzz Face. Just two knobs and the truth, ma'am.

This fuzz does not reinvent the wheel-shaped original. But, says Strymon, it might just prove to be more than the sum of its parts. The Canoga is a simple pedal, but it is designed to perform both as a fuzz, and a drive-plus-distortion when you roll back the volume on your electric guitar.

As with all the pedals that come out of Strymon's U.S. facility, the build is impeccable. All of your connections on the top of the pedal. It's a simple affair, but you can unscrew the base plate to change how the pedal powers up — in bypass mode or engaged. But the Canoga is not about presenting players with all mod cons. Adjust the Drive and Level, and use the volume control on your guitar to roll off the gain.

This is one of those occasions where the instinct to dime a fuzz pedal's controls and work back makes sense. Strymon has designed this to be one of those fuzz boxes you set up on the floor but control with your guitar's volume knob — or indeed with how hard you hit the strings.

Unity gain was a little surprising. With our Fifties Telecaster into a clean tube amp, it came around two o'clock on the Level control but there is a whopping amount of output gain beyond that. The Canoga can hit your amp hard.

But just like a shot of tequila as your first drink of the night can be a bit much, the Canoga is best introduced when you've already got a little bit of breakup on the amp — that's where it sounds the sweetest. And it really does sound sweet, teasing out that harmonic content, adding a bit of sparkle and bloom to your chords and helping single notes to hang in the air just that extra bit longer.

Strymon is as good as its word here; the Canoga cleans up beautifully. Starting from our all-guns-blazing position of both dials maxed out, there's all the bestial woof you could want — especially when switching to a Jackson loaded with a Bare Knuckle Holy Diver humbucker, but notably also with both Tele pickups engaged in series, whereupon it came good for all those hairy Kyuss-style stoner tones.

Rolling back the volume brought us to almost clean, but with the Canoga just heating everything up. This is where your Jimi Hendrix-style triads might take flight. Who needs a blend control when a pedal sounds this good?

Sadly, we didn't have a Uni-Vibe to hand, but the disorientating throb from the CE-1 vibrato mode on our Boss Waza Craft Chorus pedal was surely lysergic enough to give some acid casualties a mean flashback to Monterey.

Stick it on your 'board and you'll surely open up pathways to all kinds of sounds.

There is the countrified scratch of its low-gain drive-stortion voicing. There is chewy Gary Moore blues-rock.

Just as the original fuzz pedals were deployed for quasi-horn tones, you can dime this, noodle on the upper registers on the neck pickup and the guitar transcends its anatomy as a stringed instrument.

Which is all to say that the Canoga is a great-sounding vintage-voiced fuzz, and that can be a much more versatile pedal than you might think, especially if you are comfortable working your volume pot during a show.

Verdict

Who would have thought in 2016 that the best Fuzz Face-inspired pedal of 2026 so far would've come from Strymon? The digital powerhouse has proved it has the appetite for adventures in analog, with the Canoga presenting as an old-school fuzz that can be equally effective as an all-purpose dirt pedal. 🎸

Pros Simple two-knob format; Brilliant, versatile sounds, and cleans up without losing any high-end information; Super-solid build and top-mounted jacks

Cons Some players might want a tone dial on the pedal

RRP \$359

Contact Strymon

Web strymon.net



POWER  TOOLS

Gibson L-00

1931-1945/1991-present

CATEGORY STEEL-STRING FLATTOP A

BY CHRIS GILL

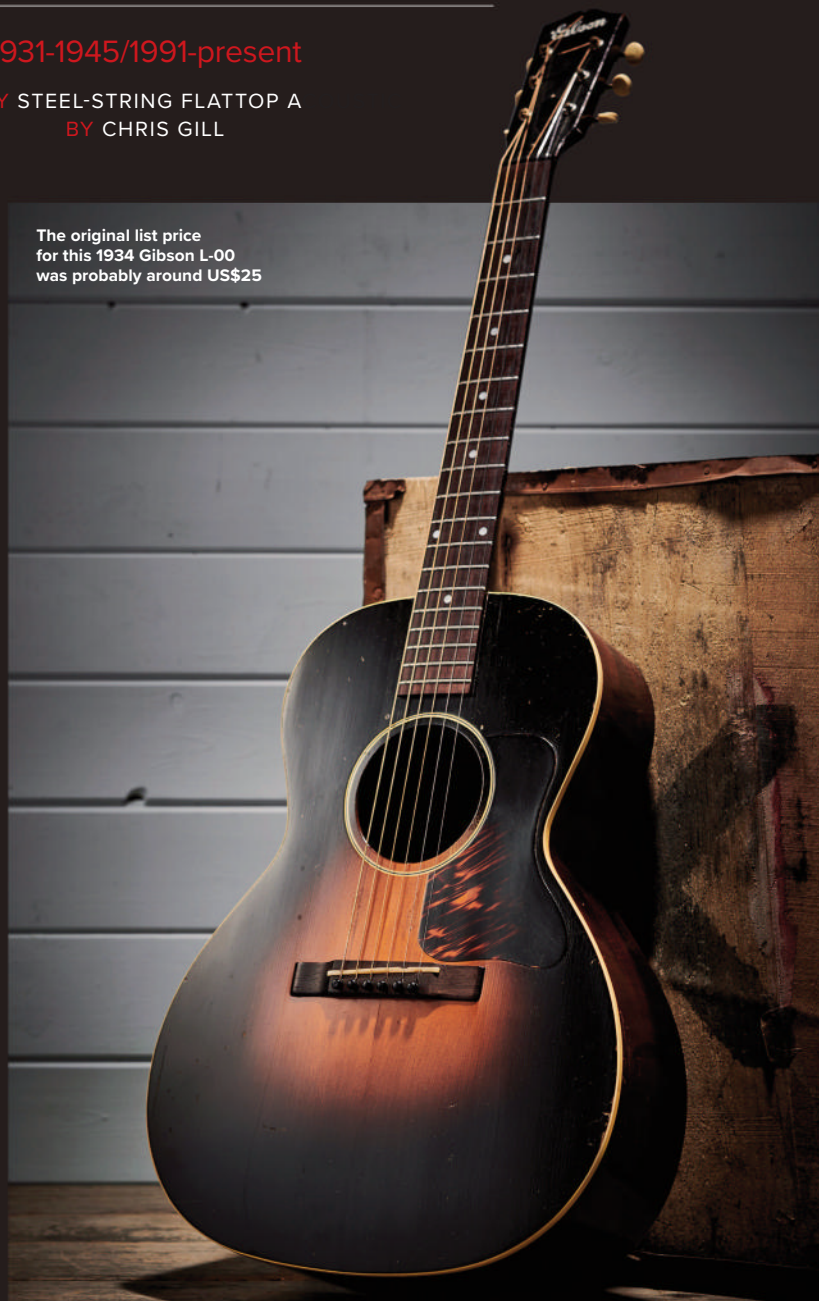
Rock players seeking an acoustic guitar usually follow the adage that bigger is better, since bigger guitars like dreadnought and jumbo models usually deliver higher volume output and more assertive bass and treble. However, choosing an ideal acoustic for playing blues — specifically fingerstyle and Delta-style blues — requires a different approach, as tighter bass, warm, round midrange and full-bodied, sustaining treble become prioritized over loud and aggressive tone.

One of the best flattop guitars for fingerstyle blues also happens to be one of the most affordable models made during the pre-war great depression era — the Gibson L-00. Gibson produced a variety of small-body flattop L series models before the L-00's later introduction, including the L-0 and L-1 introduced in 1926 and L-2 introduced in 1929. Specs changed considerably over the years, but by 1929 Gibson settled upon a consistent body style for these small-body L series flattops that measured 14.75 inches wide and had a less-rounded squared lower bout compared to rounder earlier models. The scale length is 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, which allows for a very comfortable transition for Gibson electric players switching to acoustic.

Probably due to guitarists' shrinking budgets during the depression years, the relatively stripped-down L-00 made its debut in 1931. Distinguishing features include binding surrounding the top only, a 3- or 4-piece spruce top, mahogany sides and a one-piece slab-sawn mahogany back. Initially, the L-00 came only with a black finish to hide the piecemeal top construction, although by 1933 Gibson started offering the model with a sunburst finish. The L-00's neck switched from a 12-fret to 14-fret configuration, and the x-braces were scalloped also starting that same year. In 1941, Gibson offered the L-00 with an optional natural finish at an additional expense due to its higher-quality materials.

Many players prefer the more modern 14-fret neck because it offers easier access to the higher frets. However, some discerning guitarists prefer the earlier 12-fret version for its bigger tone and more robust bass, thanks to the placement of the bridge further down the body, right in the center of the lower bout, which optimizes top vibration and dynamic responsiveness. Interestingly, the cheaper L-00 and L-0 models generally have a bolder, more focused tone than fancier similar models like the L-2, Nick Lucas and Century, which have more delicate construction and lighter braces that tend to enhance sparkling treble overtones.

The original list price for this 1934 Gibson L-00 was probably around US\$25



The L-00 was one of the most affordable models made during the pre-war great depression era

Gibson reissued the 14-fret L-00 as the L-00 Blues King, which was produced from 1991-2016. These are very good small-body flattop blues fingerstyle guitars, but the L-00 models Gibson has offered since 2017 are even better and built much closer to the originals. Today Gibson offers several L-00 flattop models in 12- and 14-fret versions and with a wide variety of classic and new finish options. With prices starting at \$4,500 they are considerably cheaper than an original vintage example with prices that start around \$9,000 for one in very good condition (a considerable increase from its original US\$25 list price in the early Thirties). 

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