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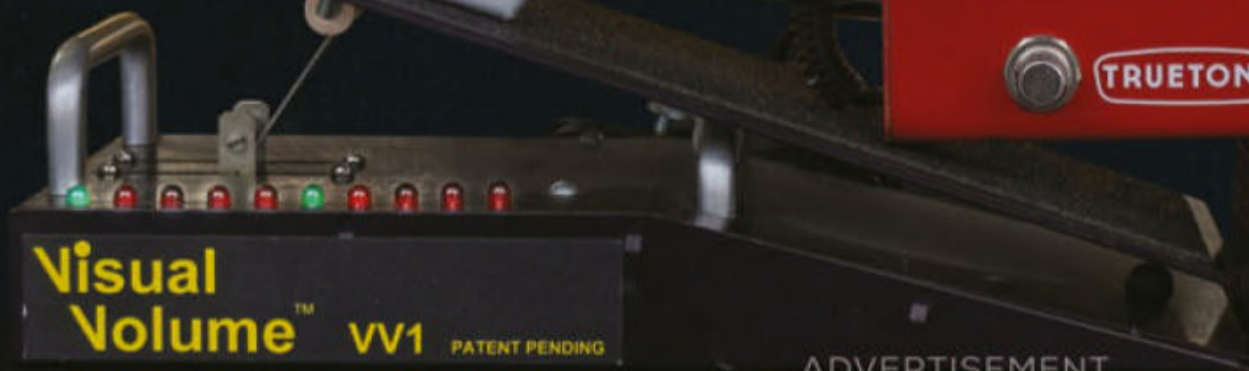
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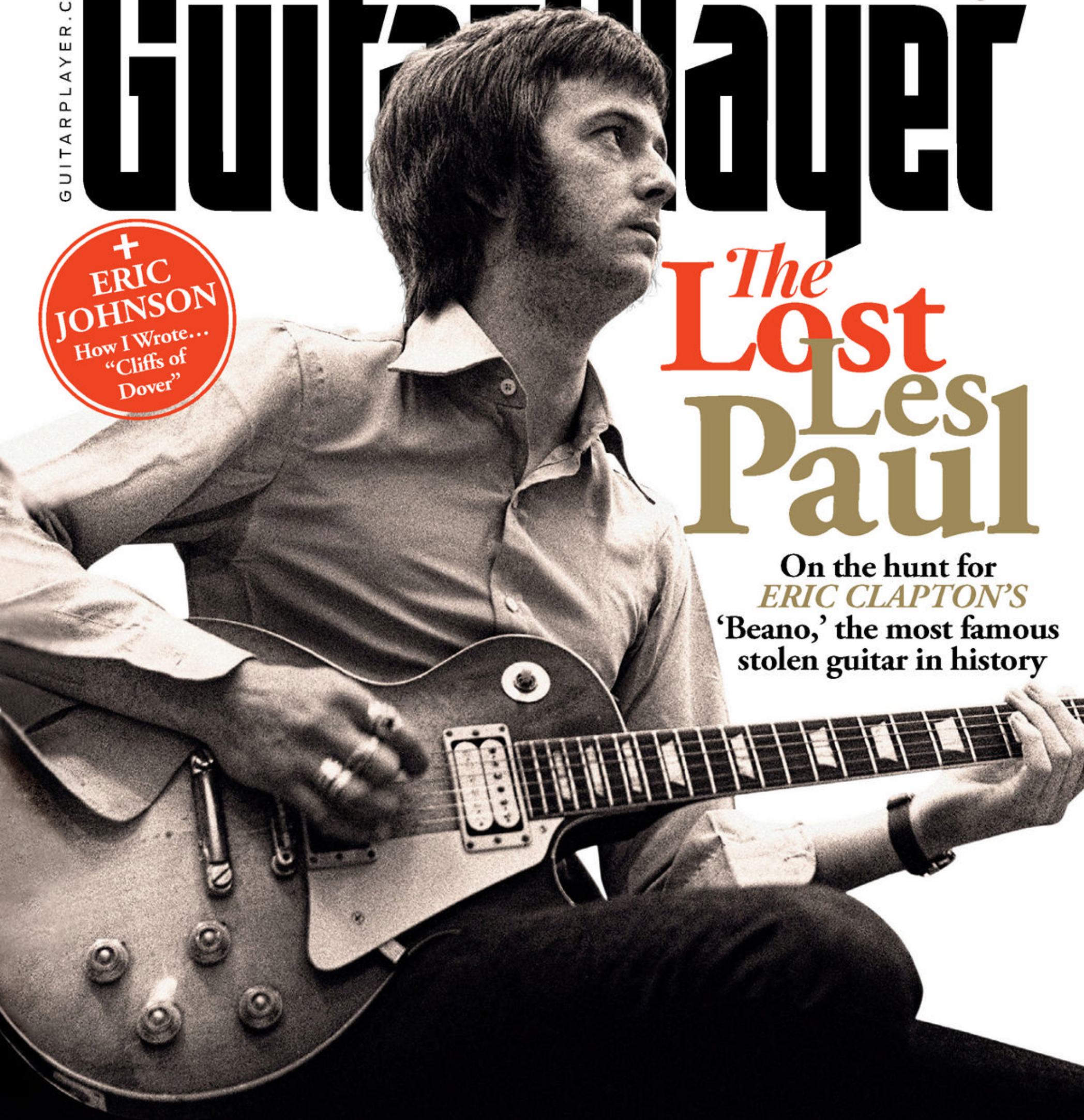
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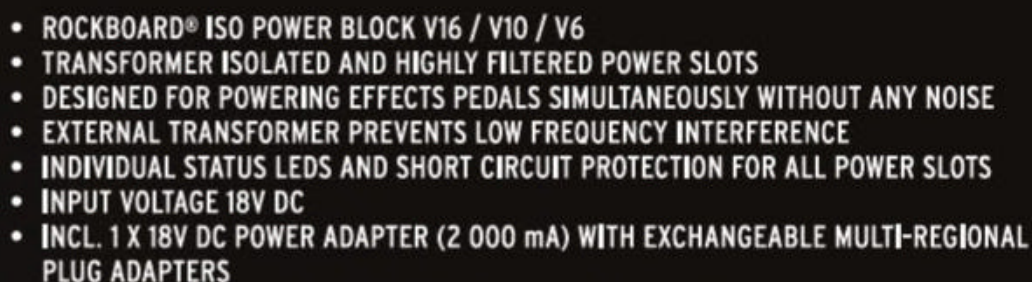
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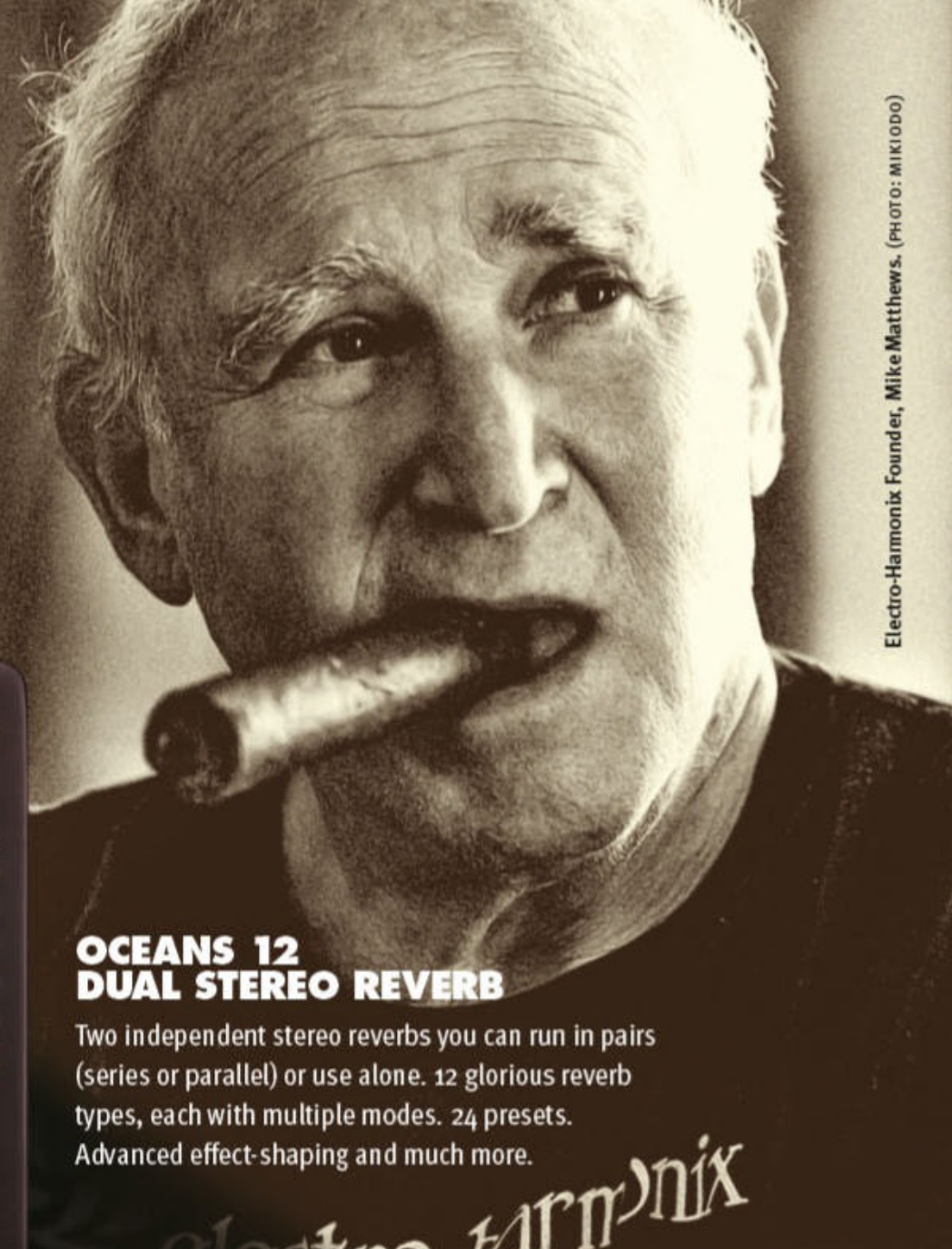
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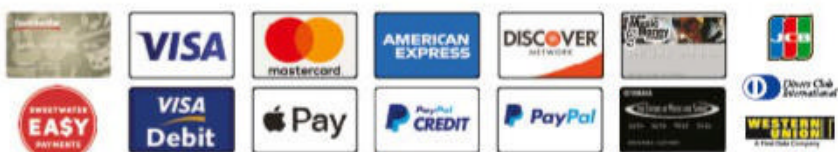
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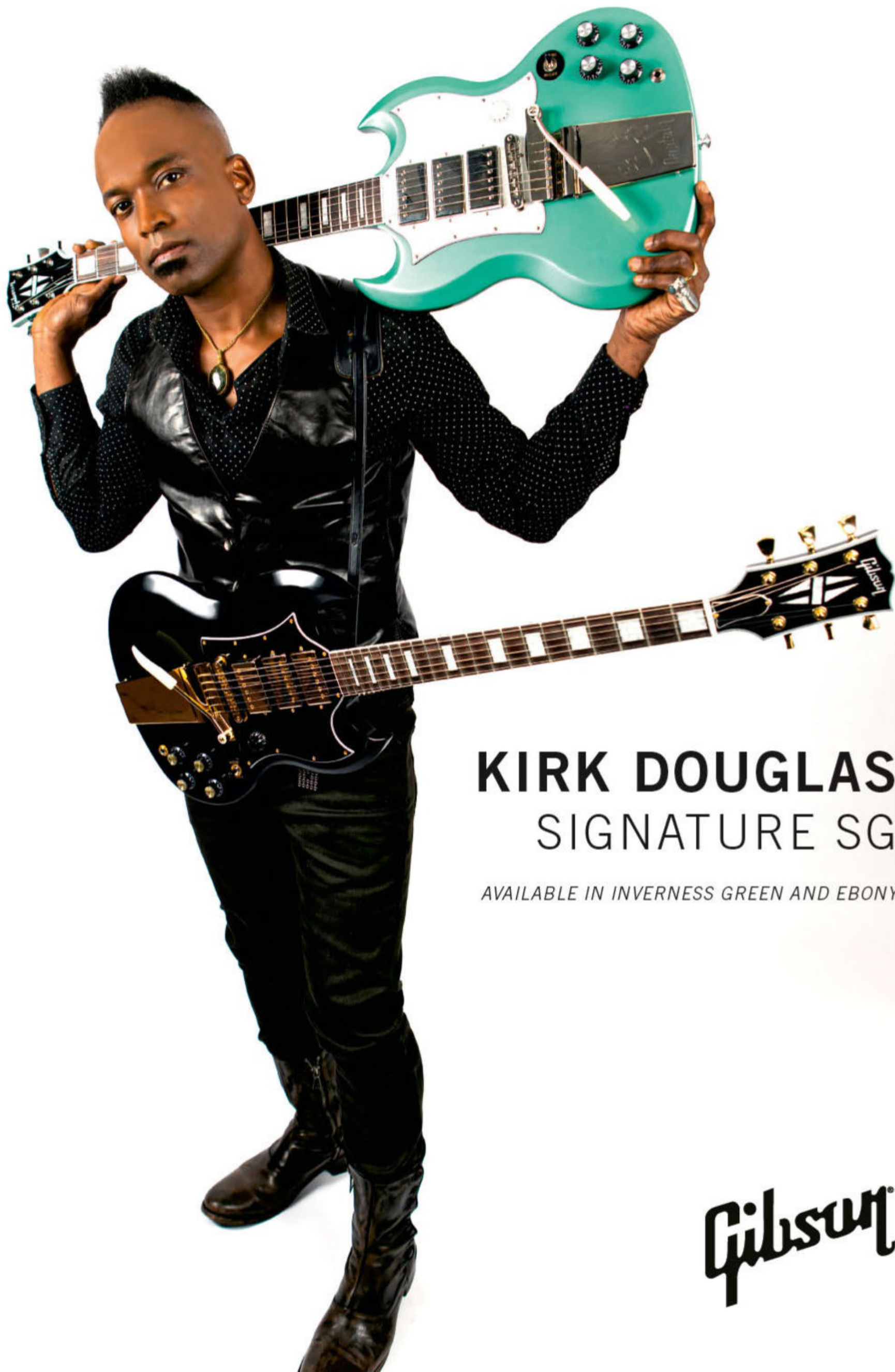


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{ From the Editor }

Lost and Found

FOR MORE THAN five decades, the whereabouts of Eric Clapton's Les Paul 'Burst has been a mystery. As most fans are aware, the instrument is the one he used on John Mayall's *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton*. Known as the Beano album, after the comic Clapton is seen reading on its cover, the disc furthered the guitarist's fame and, more importantly, helped establish the legend of the 'Burst and its fabled tone. As for the guitar, it was stolen in

1966 while Clapton was rehearsing with Cream and has since become as mythic as the Holy Grail.

In this month's issue, Tony Bacon pulls together clues to the guitar's provenance and history, and the mystery of its disappearance. Reading the tale reminded me of another guitar that went missing in the 1960s, John Lennon's Gibson J-160E, and how a magazine inadvertently helped find it.

For its spring 2012 issue, the now-defunct *Guitar Aficionado* ran a cover feature about George Harrison's most significant guitars, which were among the instruments featured in the then-new iPad app *The Guitar Collection: George Harrison*. I was managing editor of *Guitar Aficionado* at the time, and one of the guitars we included in our story was George's Gibson J-160E acoustic-electric. He and Lennon had each purchased that model in September 1962 at a Liverpool music store called Rushworth's. It's these guitars you hear on early Beatles cuts like "Love Me Do" and "P.S. I Love You," and Lennon's guitar is most likely the one he used to write many of the group's early hits, including "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "Please Please Me." Oddly, at some point after purchasing the guitars, Lennon and Harrison swapped them with one another, either intentionally or perhaps accidentally, as they looked, for all intents and purposes, identical. Either way, it was Lennon's instrument that went missing, presumed stolen, in December 1963, following the Beatles' Christmas performances at the Astoria Cinema in Finsbury Park.

The guitar's fate remained a mystery for the next 50 years. But in 2014, a U.S. guitarist named John McCaw spotted the *Guitar Aficionado* issue with the Harrison collection sitting on a pile of magazines. Curious, he opened it and read about Harrison's J-160E, noting that its serial number was only four away from that of the J-160E he'd purchased from a friend in 1969 for \$175. He also noticed, in a photo of Lennon's guitar, a few telltale spots similar to the wear and tear on his instrument. Using a video of the Beatles performing "I Want to Hold Your Hand," in which Lennon plays his J-160E, McCaw compared the guitars and noticed the pickguards had a similar pattern, leading him to contact Beatles gear expert Andy Babiuk. With a little further sleuthing, McCaw learned that he was in fact the owner of John Lennon's long-lost guitar, making it one of the most substantial gear finds in rock and roll history. The Gibson went on to sell at auction for \$2.4 million, with a portion of the proceeds going to Spirit Foundations Inc, a charity organization founded by Yoko Ono and John Lennon to help battle cervical cancer.

As a Beatles fan, I was thrilled to know our magazine had played a small role in solving the mystery of Lennon's missing guitar. And I admit I can't help feeling a twinge of excitement at the possibility that Tony's story in this issue might help uncover Clapton's missing 'Burst more than 50 years on.

Chris Scapelliti

Guitar Player

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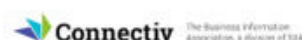
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A full-page photograph of Travis Adams, a member of the band Tracii Guns, performing on stage. He is wearing a black tank top and has long brown hair and a beard. He is holding a black Kramer electric guitar and making the rock-on hand gesture with his right hand. His left arm is heavily tattooed. In the background, there is a large banner with the band's name 'TRACII GUNS' in a stylized font, a skull graphic, and a phoenix. Stage monitors are visible behind him.

TRACII GUNS

TRACII GUNS GUNSTAR VOYAGER

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2020 Guitarist of the Year

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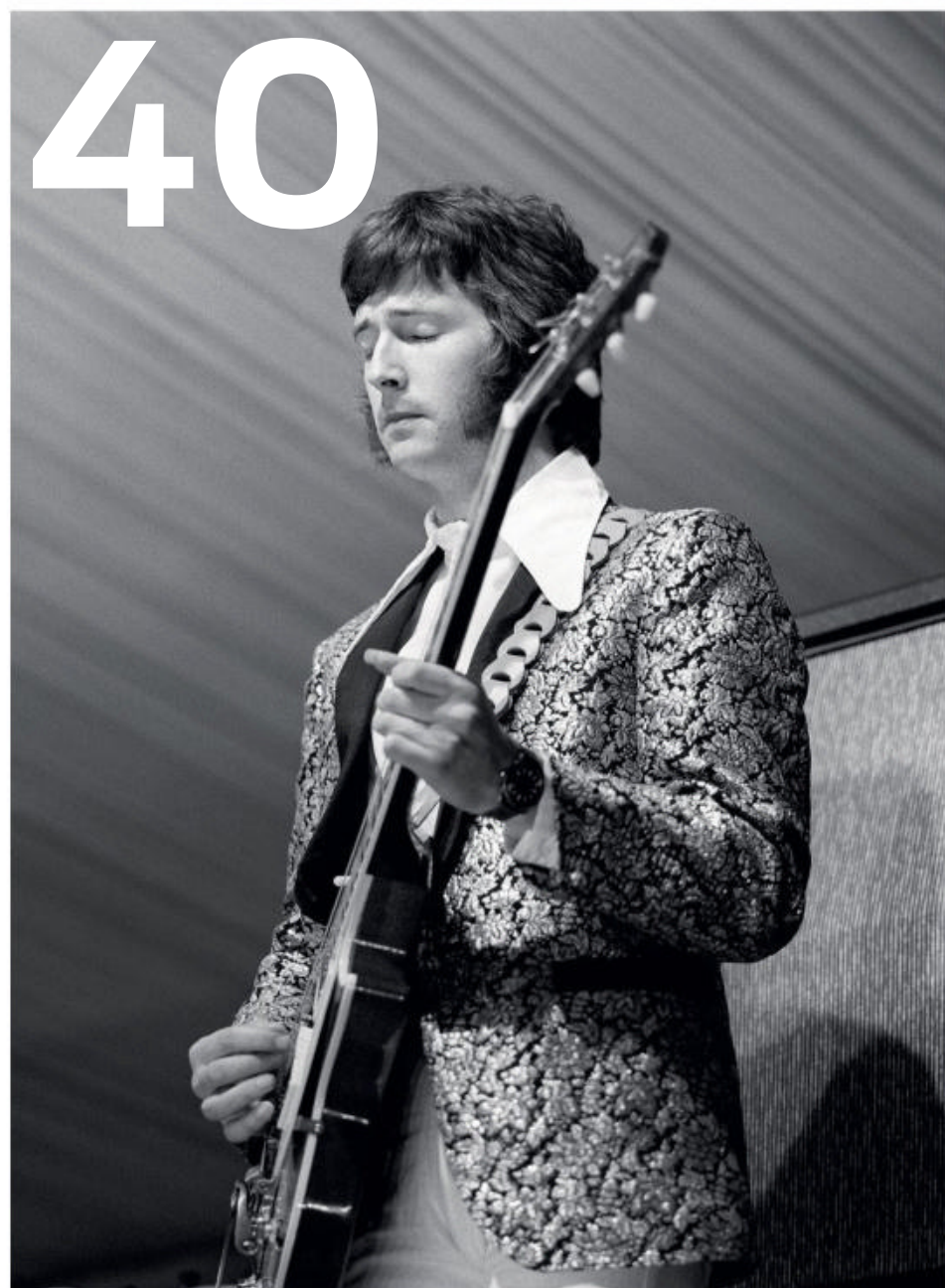
ON THE COVER

Eric Clapton,

By David Wedgby, 1966

Cropped detail of NPG X47345

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A full-page photograph of Charlie Parra, a guitarist with long, curly brown hair and multiple tattoos on his arms. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a graphic, grey jeans, and black sneakers with white soles. He is playing a red and white Kramer electric guitar, which has a distinctive pointed body shape. The background is a dark stage with several spotlights creating beams of light. The overall mood is energetic and rock-and-roll.

CHARLIE PARRA

CHARLIE PARRA VANGUARD



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EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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A full-page photograph of Snake Sabo Baretta. He is a man with long, wavy brown hair and a goatee, wearing a dark denim jacket over a black shirt and blue jeans. He is pointing his right index finger directly at the camera. He is holding a bright green Kramer electric guitar with a detailed snake skin graphic on the body. The guitar has a black pickguard and a black pickup. The background is dark with some out-of-focus lights.

Snake Sabo

SNAKE SABO BARETTA



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Lockdown Loaded

I've spent the past eight months playing more guitar than I have in the past eight years combined. I hate to say it's "thanks" to Covid-19, but it's definitely because of it. When I saw Steve Vai announcing "How I Survived 2020" [January 2021], I knew the answer right away — he survived by playing guitar, just like me and probably most of your readers. When I hear that the gear manufacturers have had a banner year because of the pandemic, I'm not surprised. I've already bought two new guitars worth about \$4,300 combined, in addition to five effects pedals, a practice combo and a ton of plug-ins for my recording DAW. And I'm not done yet. —GEORGE SIPPLE

I've been blown away by the recent covers — Clapton, Stones, Page, EVH... The January issue was especially great with all the insights into the guitarists who have been sidelined by the pandemic. Steve Vai's comments on our current situation made for a welcome and calming read. And it was nice to learn Tommy Emmanuel and Steve Lukather have new albums coming. I learned it here! Keep up the great work.

—STEPHEN ROBINSON, PHOENIX, AZ

Best issue for a long time, maybe the early '90s. Coverage of fresh guitarists with respect for real music is most welcome. Keep it up. Artists worth covering will be easy to find!

—BRYAN BOWMAN

Kudos to Steve Vai for offering such a positive perspective on these challenging times for musicians. Overall an informative and entertaining read. —ART LUCAS

Kick Out the Jams

Thanks for the article about Santana's *Abraxas* [January 2021]. I was lucky enough to catch Santana in concert a few times back in the day. When Carlos mentioned that Bill Graham criticized the band's "ass jams" songwriting style, I remembered that I noticed a change in the group's performances around the time they released *Abraxas*. All of the sudden they were tighter and less jammy. I've got to wonder if Graham's comment had anything to do with it. Either way, the original Santana group was phenomenal. Long may Carlos reign.

—BOB COURTNEY

King Rules

I'm a huge Kaki King fan and was thrilled to see her in the January [2021] issue. Between her talents as a guitarist and her theatrical skills, she's blazing an exciting path for guitarists who want to take performance to the next level. She's our Bowie! Mind-blowing stuff.

—STEPHANIE DEMILLE

Jazz It Up

Lionel Loueke, Oz Noy and Nels Cline [January 2021]. Nice to see you haven't forgotten jazz at *Guitar Player*. Please keep it coming. —DENNIS KRUSE

First Kurt Rosenwinkel [December 2020], and now not one but *three* interviews with jazz guitarists in your January issue! What is this world coming to? Seriously — thank you!

—BEN VOETBERG

CORRECTION

We misidentified the Les Paul model in the photo of Carlos Santana on page 65 of our January 2021 issue. It's a Standard, not a Custom.



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CONTEST



We Are the Champions

They competed against hundreds of guitarists from around the world to claim top honors. Ladies and gentlemen, we present the 2020 Guitarists of the Year.

BY JOE BOSSO

LAST YEAR WAS notable for a lot of what we didn't have. There was no 2020 Olympics, no Boston or New York City marathons. Wimbledon was canceled, as was the Masters Tournament. Even the Scripps National Spelling Bee was called off, marking the first time the event hasn't been held since 1945.

But not even the Covid pandemic could stop *Guitar Player's* and *Guitar World's* search for 2020's Guitarist of the Year. Nor did it deter heaps of talented guitarists from responding to the call. In fact, we noticed a dramatic increase in the number of entries we received, and they came from all parts of the world: Japan, Australia, Finland, Switzerland, Italy, France, the U.S. and the U.K. If we can draw any conclusions from the response, it's this: While people's leisure options were limited in 2020, they clearly spent more time than ever playing guitar.

The 2020 Guitarist of the Year competition was sponsored by PRS Guitars. As in past years, categories included Electric Guitarist, Acoustic Guitarist, Young Guitarist (age 17 and under) and Bass Guitarist. This year, however, we added a new category: Guitar Teacher of the Year.

The editors of *Guitar Player*, *Guitar World* and *Bass Player* whittled the mountain of entries down to five finalists for each category, assessing the players' technical ability, originality, musicality and feel. Finalists in certain categories had three celebrity judges: John Petrucci, John 5 and Nita Strauss for Electric; Molly Tuttle, Kaki King and Christie Lenée for Acoustic; and Tosin Abasi, Matt Heafy and Lzzy Hale for the Young category. Tracy Wormworth judged the Bass category, and editors and online readers cast votes in each category as well. In addition, the

editors selected Teacher of the Year based on testimonials presented with their entries.

In addition to generous prizes supplied by PRS Guitars, winners can count on seeing the numbers of clicks their online videos receive spiking considerably. Over the past two years, clips of the finals have generated more than four million views. And who knows? Greater fame could be right around the corner: Past Guitarist of the Year winners include Dave Kilminster (Roger Waters, Steven Wilson) and Guthrie Govan.

So without further ado, we present to you the 2020 Guitarists of the Year.

ELECTRIC GUITARIST: IGOR PASPALJ

Igor Paspalj was thrilled to be among the five finalists in the Electric Guitar category, but when he heard the news that he bagged top honors, he could barely contain his excitement. "I'm over the moon. It's just the most incredible news ever," says the Dubai-based musician, who works as both a guitar teacher and studio musician.

Paspalj's winning video entry, a performance of his original song "Into the Blue," is a jaw-dropping marvel of compositional excellence, bravura improvisation and breathtaking technical precision. In what amounts to a mini guitar clinic, he dispatches bluesy clean leads, then blitzes through a shred-fest of sweep and alternate picking and bends. His style is a seamless mix of his main influences — which includes Yngwie Malmsteen, Paul Gilbert, Vinnie Moore, Steve Morse, Steve Vai and Joe Satriani — and members of the "new guard," such as Guthrie Govan, Mateus Asato, Tom Quayle and Feodor Dosumov.



Juho Ranta-Maunus



Igor Paspalj

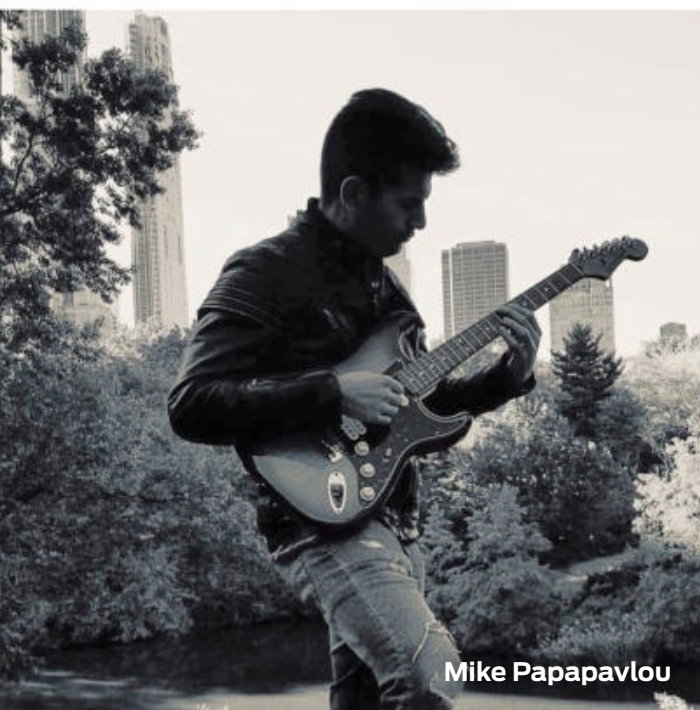
After picking up guitar at age 13 and learning chords, scales and simple riffs, Paspalj's world changed dramatically when a friend gave him an audio cassette of guitar lessons, which also included recordings of Van Halen's "Eruption" and Yngwie Malmsteen's "Far Beyond the Sun." "Both of those songs were so different from anything I'd heard before," he says. "The sound, the energy. They had everything!"

Paspalj taught himself to play both tracks, and he devoured as many VHS guitar lesson videos as possible. He later enrolled in music school and earned a master's degree in music theory. "During this period, I was also greatly influenced by classical music," he explains. "I also developed my own style of phrasing, and while it might not be revolutionary, I'm still working on it. It's a never-ending journey."

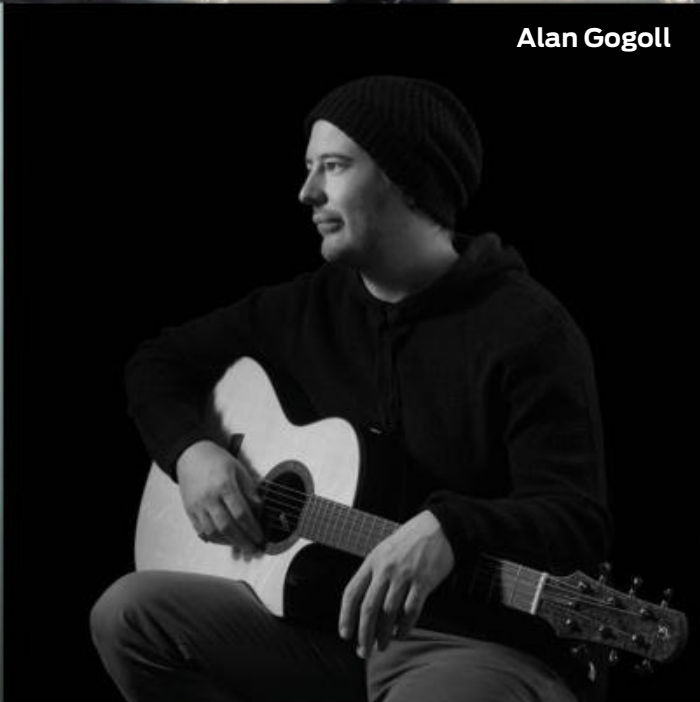
ACOUSTIC GUITARIST: ALAN GOGOLL

In the past two years, acoustic guitarist Alan Gogoll won first place in the 2019 Furch Guitar International Guitar Competition and bagged the top spot in the 2020 Magic Guitars International Guitar Competition. One

IGOR PASPALJ (PASPALJ); JUKKA RANTA-MAUNUS (RANTA-MAUNUS)



Mike Papapavlou



Alan Gogoll

might think the Australian native has become jaded by all the acclaim, but Gogoll, who took the crown for 2020 Acoustic Guitarist of the Year, quickly lays such a notion to rest. “The full impact of winning hasn’t really sunk in yet,” he says. “I’m very grateful to have had the chance to compete, and I want to thank everybody who voted for me, especially the judges who made the final decision. To receive that level of recognition from other professionals is really very special.”

Gogoll’s winning entry, a whimsical and transportive original composition called “Otter Rain,” is a star-turn performance in which he displays his dazzling, innovative “bell harmonic” technique. Playing an Åstrand Å-OMC guitar (handcrafted in Sweden), he utilizes both hands to simultaneously pluck radiant, bell-like tones from the strings. He punctuates this technique with spirited, rhythmic raps on the guitar’s body, thus dispensing with the need for an accompanist. “I wrote ‘Otter Rain’ last summer in France, so it’s quite a recent piece,” Gogoll explains. “Like pretty much every song of mine, it came about through practice and working on technique, not

actively sitting down and trying to write something.”

Having started on guitar at the age of five, the mostly self-taught Gogoll discovered his love of harmonics when he was nine. “They unlocked this magical, beautiful side of the guitar,” he says. “Perfecting how to use them was both challenging and rewarding.”

Gogoll has released a number of albums like 2014’s *Whimsical Toad*, 2017’s *Mulberry Mouse* and last year’s *Moonlight Lantern*. Thanks to his heavy presence on social media, he’s toured internationally and is looking forward to a post-Covid world in which he can perform live again. “Until then,” he says, “I’m going to focus on practicing and working on a few albums of ideas.”

YOUNG GUITARIST: JUHO RANTA-MAUNUS

As the saying goes, some people are just born with it. Such appears to be the case with 14-year-old Finnish prodigy Juho Ranta-Maunus, whose preternatural skills allowed him to edge out the other exceptionally talented entrants in the hotly contested Young Guitarist division.

Juho worked for three months creating the prize-winning video for his prog-tinged original composition “Diversity.” As he explains, “Because of the three-minute time limit for the competition, I tried to include the most compelling and technical parts of the song.” That he did. Along with showcasing his keen sense of melody, the video is a brilliant display of the guitarist’s fluid sweeps, tasteful phrasing, impeccable tone and masterful vibrato. (Anyone who wants to check out the full version of “Diversity” can do so on Juho’s YouTube channel, and it’s also available on Spotify, iTunes and other streaming platforms.)

Juho, who lives in the western Finland city Seinäjoki, was inspired to play guitar at the age of eight after seeing his school band perform. He cites John Petrucci as his biggest influence and has become enamored of Australian guitarist Plini and Megadeth’s Kiko Loureiro. His main guitar is a PRS SE Custom 24 M-SB Limited, which he plays through a

Blackstar HT20-RH MKII amp. As for the immediate future, he says he’ll continue to study, but dreams of turning pro once he leaves college. “I want to play in a band and tour,” he says. “I express my emotions through the guitar, and I think my voice on the instrument has grown over the years because of all the hard work I put into it.”

GUITAR TEACHER: MIKE PAPAPAVLOU

Mike Papapavlou won’t have to look too far to thank the people who voted him 2020 Guitar Teacher of the Year. The Manhattan-based instructor can extend his appreciation personally to his own students, who sent in glowing video testimonials on his behalf.

There’s David Arnstein, who said, “I picked up the guitar again after 30 years of not playing. I was nervous about how rusty I was and wondered if I could ever play again. Mike is a wonderfully gifted teacher who has really helped me along the way.” Mei Hui enthused, “Mike is the best guitar teacher because he is passionate about teaching and making an impact on people’s lives.” And Arianna Taylor summed it up succinctly: “He really believes in me, and I get confidence from him.”

Papapavlou was overcome by the heartfelt messages from his students, but attempts to put the award in context. “It’s the greatest feeling in the world to hear all the

glowing words of praise, and I thank everybody who voted for me,” he says. “People don’t care how much you know until they know you care about them, and this award proves that my students realize that

WHILE PEOPLE’S LEISURE OPTIONS WERE LIMITED IN 2020, THEY CLEARLY SPENT MORE TIME THAN EVER PLAYING GUITAR

I’m really invested in what they’re doing.”

Born in Cyprus, Papapavlou started playing guitar as a kid and in his early 20s emigrated to New York, where he received his master’s degree in jazz guitar at the Allen Copeland School of Music. He teaches an average of 30 students and stresses a highly individualized approach tailored to each student’s needs. Says Papapavlou, “Some progress faster than others, but that’s okay. I’m here to work with them and bring them along. The fact that they appreciate what I do is the greatest gift I can get from what I do.” 🎸



Axes Bold as Love

The Jimi Hendrix 1967 SG Custom and 1969 Flying V are heartfelt tributes from the Gibson Custom Shop.

BY DAVE HUNTER

IF WE'RE SEEKING a definition for the term *cool* that bookends the title of this monthly feature, we could do far worse than hold up a pair of detail-precise re-creations of Jimi Hendrix's guitars. Unveiled by the Gibson Custom Shop at the tail end of 2020, the Jimi Hendrix 1967 SG Custom and 1969 Flying V will be produced in just 150 examples of each model, including 25 left-handed Vs. Together, they deliver a heady trip some 50-odd years back in time.

The SG Custom got national TV coverage when Hendrix played it on *The Dick Cavett Show* on September 9, 1969, and it made plenty of other live dates with the guitarist as well. The Flying V was custom-ordered direct from Gibson in a left-handed configuration, to replace a restrung right-handed 1967 Flying V with post-factory psychedelic paintwork that Hendrix had played with the Experience in late '67. The '69 model entered into rock history when, among other appearances, it hit the stage with Hendrix at the Isle of Wight Festival in England on August 31, 1970, just two and a half weeks before his death.

The chance to recreate these two iconic models came about courtesy of the guitarist's sister, Janie, who is also president and CEO of Experience Hendrix LLC and Authentic Hendrix LLC. "Having the opportunity to release Jimi's 1969 Gibson Flying V and 1967 Gibson SG Custom is an amazing opportunity that comes with an obligation for all of us at



Gibson to pay tribute to Jimi," says Cesar Gueikian, Gibson's chief merchant officer. "He left this world way too early, but the legacy and influence he left behind is unparalleled."

In addition to the use of historically accurate construction details and components throughout, each guitar has been finished and hand aged in Gibson's Murphy Labs, a special division established last year and headed by Tom Murphy, the acclaimed master of applying realistic artificial wear to paint and parts. All include special accompanying documents, including archival photos of Hendrix bundled with Certificates of Authenticity.

Opening the case on the '67 SG Custom, I felt like I'd encountered a shift in the time-space continuum. The case is itself a period-correct form-fit hardshell stenciled with *J.H. Exp.* and *Handle with Care*. Inside, a section of fabric that re-creates clothing Hendrix wore while playing his SG Custom on Cavett's show quilts the accessories pocket. As for the SG Custom, it looks and feels so much like a '60s SG Custom that it's uncanny. The finish checking and patina on the hardware and pickup covers are extremely realistic, the only possible "miss" being the lack of aging on the oddly bright heads of the gold-plated pickguard screws.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIBSON GUITARS



The SlimTaper neck profile does a good job of representing the somewhat fuller but flattish neck shapes Gibson returned to later in the '60s after the super-slim speed necks that the Les Paul/SG was born with in '61, and this one's easy to grapple with and a pleasure to play. Strapped on, there's a little neck dive, of course — hey, it's an SG — and the guitar is a little on the heavy side for an SG in general, at around 7.8 pounds. But with the long Maestro lyre vibrola and third pickup, it's carrying a lot of hardware, too.

Other details among the accurate appointments include Kluson waffle-back tuners with tulip buttons, an ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge with nylon saddles (often a partner to a vibrato) and a nylon nut. The three pickups are what Gibson calls '68 Custom Buckers, wound to represent the early T-tops that a '67 would have carried and appropriately pitched at around 6.75k-ohms in each position. As per the originals, the SG Custom is wired so that the three-way switch selects neck pickup, middle and bridge, and bridge, with the latter's volume and tone controls also governing the middle pickup when it's in circuit.

Distinguishing its presentation somewhat, the 1969 Flying V's rectangular case is stenciled *Band of Gypsies* and *Handle With Care*, while inside, the lid of the accessories pocket is covered in repro fabric from Hendrix's Isle of Wight Festival garb. The guitar itself is a rendition of what the Flying V had evolved into in the late '60s after returning to the catalog following the deletion of the original

'58-'60 Korina model. The circa '67-'69 version, with mahogany body and neck, enlarged pickguard and some other changed-up features, actually has more of a pedigree in rock, late-'50s Vs being so utterly rare.

The aging of the Murphy Labs finish on this one is a little less apparent, given its ebony hue, and the entire guitar again feels like it could have been a lucky-day pawnshop find. (As on the SG, some overly bright gold-plated pickguard screws are the sole exception.) Accurate late-'60s Flying V construction makes for a narrow neck by Gibson standards, with a nut width of just 1.60 inches. The comfortably rounded profile, with just a bit of fullness in the palm and a depth of .85 inches at the first fret, helps fill out in that dimension what the other might lack. Tuners are single-line Klusons with tulip buttons, the nut is Corian, and the ABR-1 bridge again carries nylon saddles to ease the strings' movement when the short Maestro vibrola is in action. The pickups on

this one are Custom Buckers, wound to a slightly punchier 7.81k-ohms in the neck position and 7.76k-ohms in the bridge, wired through a traditional three-way switch, individual

volume controls and a master tone.

I tested both guitars through a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo and a Friedman Small Box head and 2x12 cab. The SG Custom



displayed a predominantly bright, wiry plugged-in tone, yet one with decent girth behind it. The guitar is surprisingly adept at jangly clean chord work, and hides a lot of sting in cranked-up lead playing. The 1969 Flying V definitely expresses a sound and amped-up playing feel all its own. A light, slim-bodied guitar, its core tone is balanced and open, and the Custom Buckers in this guitar find it pushing the front of the amp just a little harder than the SG did, too.

At the end of the day, the Jimi Hendrix 1967 SG Custom and 1969 Flying V are extremely hip, evocative and lovable creations from the Gibson Custom Shop. Both admirably evoke that time-machine feeling that an aged, limited-edition artist guitar should deliver, and are simply a real joy to behold. And I'll be holding them as long as I can. Or at least until the big brown truck shows up later today with a pair of return labels. 📦

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PRICE \$9,999 each

BOTH EVOKE THAT TIME-MACHINE FEELING A LIMITED-EDITION ARTIST GUITAR SHOULD DELIVER



MEET YOUR
MAKER

Kramer Comeback

Gibson launches a revitalized Kramer lineup for 2021.

BY ART THOMPSON

IN LATE 2020, Gibson announced the relaunch of the Kramer brand with the Original and Modern Collections that re-create the specs of the legendary models from the '80s. The Original Collection consists of the Baretta, Focus, Icon, Pacer and SM-1 guitars, while the Modern Collection includes the Assault, Striker, Nite-V bass and three new signature models: the Charlie Parra Vanguard, Tracii Guns Gunstar Voyager and the Snake-Baretta, named for Dave "Snake" Sabo. Promising more to come in 2021, Kramer says the collections will feature everything from "entry-level and intermediate guitars to professional offerings across our entire line, including the USA-assembled Custom Graphic Collection, hand-painted by legendary Kramer graphic artists."

Kramer was founded in the late '70s by Dennis Berardi and Gary Kramer, a friend and associate of Travis Bean. The company started out building aluminum-neck guitars that featured a distinctive pitchfork-style

headstock and differed from Bean's creations by having strips of mahogany, maple or koa embedded along the entire length of neck to give it a more woody feel. Berardi and Kramer were joined by Peter LaPlaca (a vice president of Norlin, the parent company of Gibson in the mid '70s) and an investor named Henry Vaccaro to open a factory in Neptune, New Jersey. Gary Kramer subsequently moved to Southern California, thus ending his association with the brand.

In 1981, Kramer switched to wood necks, which had the benefits of reducing production costs and making them more appealing to traditional players, and began producing the guitars in East Asia, with necks from Japan and final assembly and finishing done in New Jersey. At the time, Kramer used

a locking tremolo invented by Helmut Rockinger, which was dubbed the EVH Trem after Eddie Van Halen became a Kramer endorser. The Floyd Rose system was adopted in '83, and Kramer changed the headstock to the signature "banana" design and added both DiMarzio and Seymour Duncan pickups in 1985.

Kramer became the best-selling guitar brand that year with an A-list of endorsers that included George Lynch, Vivian Campbell, and Richie Sambora. The company ruled hard rock and metal during the late '80s, but fortunes turn quickly in the music business, and some financial missteps led to Kramer declaring bankruptcy in 1990.

Gibson has owned Kramer since 1996 (interestingly, it followed Michael Jackson's unsuccessful attempt to acquire Kramer out of bankruptcy several years earlier). While the Nashville-based company also eventually floundered and had to be rescued by a coalition of new owners, Gibson is on a huge roll again and ready and willing to take on new challenges, the latest being Kramer, which is ready to rock again under the guidance of a dedicated team led by CMO Cesar Gueikian and Epiphone/Kramer brand director Krista Gilley.

Was it always the intention of Gibson's new owners to bring Kramer back?

Cesar Gueikian Yes. When we ended up taking over and buying Gibson, we decided that Kramer was going to be one of our key brands. We were going to bring it back and reposition it as it originally was in the glory days of the '80s, and we brought Krista in to lead it. Our approach has been to think of Kramer as our only brand, and make decisions about what we would be doing differently if all we had was Kramer.



From Kramer's Original Series: (from left) Baretta, Pacer, Focus VT-211S, Baretta Special, Jersey Star, NightSwan, The 84 and SM-1



Tracii Guns
Gunstar Voyager



Krista, what excites you about Kramer, and what will we see this year?

Krista Gilley It's a perfect marriage of this great brand and the artists that represent that fast-and-loud rule-breaker mentality, because It shows audiences what Kramer stands for and what it can mean for them. So we are paying homage to Kramer's history in the Original Collection, and you'll see further expansion there with historic Kramer models that were real showstoppers back in the day. We'll also be growing the Modern Collection with guitars that have appointments that are designed for different types of players. So in 2021, you'll see both collections growing simultaneously.

It sounds like the people who are designing and building Kramer guitars



Assault Plus in Bengal Burst and Trans Purple Burst



Charlie Parra Vanguard



Snake-Baretta



Assault 220 in White, D-1 in Pearl White and Nite-V Plus in Alpine White

are really vested in seeing the brand evolve and succeed.

Gilley Absolutely. Our product team behind Kramer is extremely passionate about both its history and making it current, and we welcome a new audience of players who may not have even been around in the '80s. I think it's a great starting point that we have the Snake-Baretta, Charlie Parra Vanguard and the Gunstar Voyager guitars ready to go right now, and we're excited about the other artist models our product team will be developing.

With so many other great guitars available from Gibson and Epiphone, is it a challenge to get people interested in playing Kramers again?

Gilley Well, we're lucky that it's hard to find a guitar player that has just one guitar, so by having all of these brands we can offer instruments that suit their attitudes and tonal preferences. Players like Tracii Guns and Snake Sabo are into what Kramer offers, and there are plenty of other artists that have crossed over from Epiphone and Gibson.

Cesar, how do you see the path for Kramer going forward?

Gueikian The concept of relaunching the brand came from what I read while going through the original Kramer archives and marketing materials of the '80s. And we didn't need to reinvent that, because Kramer was conceived as a brand that was made to rock hard. So we're going to supercharge Kramer to take back what it once owned. I think we have a great opportunity here to become the number-one brand in hard rock and metal.

With Tracii Guns, we started with the Voyager, and clearly we're going to be doing a lot more with him. And Charlie Parra is just an insane musician and guitarist who has been carrying the torch for Kramer. The artists that are working with us today are a great start and have energized the Kramer brand, and you're going to see Krista bringing more major artists into the fold. It's an exciting time for Kramer and everyone involved with it, and I think guitarists will enjoy what will be coming out. 🎸



Stringed Victory

Jim Campilongo and Luca Benedetti jettison drums and bass for *Two Guitars*.

BY MICHAEL MOLEND A

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK BRULL

IT WAS A record born from surprise — not the good kind — and struggle. In fact, the whole concept of *Two Guitars* (Blue Hen Records) wasn't inspired by the great guitar-duo collaborations of the past, such as *Chester & Lester*. It was instigated by necessity. When wicked weather forced their drummer and bassist to go MIA from a gig at New York City's 55 Bar, guitarists Jim Campilongo and Luca Benedetti decided to press on without a rhythm section.

"We said, 'Let's just play,'" remembers Campilongo, "and we stumbled along, trying to recreate a full band sound with just the two of us. Eventually, we relaxed and didn't worry about filling everything in — you know, playing *ching, ching, ching, ching* in a Django Reinhardt style — or keeping a strict tempo going. In those moments, we had a revelation about the creative freedom of a duo. We definitely

knew we had something going when Luca's wife told us after the gig, 'I noticed when you guys would take chances — that's when it got real good.'"

The road to *Two Guitars* didn't get all that much easier when the duo decamped to Brooklyn's The Bunker Studio in mid 2019 to record the album. Campilongo was sick during the sessions, and he didn't know how sick until later. He had pneumonia.

"We decided to sit down and play, and not have any expectations about the outcome," Campilongo says. "We

didn't talk about it much, and the tracks ended up sounding pretty wonderful, despite my not feeling my best. Luca and I respect each other, and we have good chemistry, and that certainly helped."

"WE RELAXED AND DIDN'T WORRY ABOUT FILLING EVERYTHING IN OR KEEPING A STRICT TEMPO GOING. IN THOSE MOMENTS, WE HAD A REVELATION ABOUT THE CREATIVE FREEDOM OF A DUO"

But even excellent chemistry couldn't transform one of the album's final surprises into a welcome one. "After already playing for seven hours in the studio, Luca drops on me that we should try 'Mood Indigo' by Duke Ellington," Campilongo says. "I was tired, and I didn't feel like learning anything, so I had a shitty attitude for a few

minutes. But Luca is super kind, and he just said, 'Let's try it. I bet you could reimagine the horn parts as volume swells.' That idea immediately appealed to me, because I've found the best-case scenario for me is often discovering a song as the tape is rolling. It's like falling off a log, and when we can find the magic in the moment like that, then we're going to be able to compete with really fine music."

Although Campilongo and Benedetti are enormously accomplished players with massive creative palettes from which they can draw inspiration, they didn't exactly have an easy time forging the arrangements and musical interplay.

"The minute we started playing as a duo, it took some adjustment," Benedetti says. "All of a sudden, the strong, driving rhythmic thing that a drummer provides was gone, and we'd notice something would drop out from time to time. Also, neither of us wanted to strum chords constantly for an obvious timing reference, so one of us would take a solo, and we'd go, 'Um. Ah. Oops.' The recording exemplifies Jim and I working that aspect out, and it wasn't totally painless or effortless. Everyone has their own sense of time, and I had to trust Jim being there for me, and me being there for him. In the beginning, we didn't have our different rhythmic approaches dialed in, so that had to be developed between us. I'd think, This is where I'm feeling it, and I'm just going to keep going, because right now I'm a little confused as to where we are."

"But we were workhorses," Campilongo adds. "The more Luca and I played, the more we started reacting, interacting and honing in on how we could communicate effectively, and what we wanted this duo to sound like. One of the things I learned from producer Russ Titelman [Steve Winwood, Eric Clapton, Cyndi Lauper] was that he always wanted everyone to keep playing, keep playing, keep playing. If the musicians are really listening to each other, a special language emerges."

Another in the ongoing series of surprises during the project was that Campilongo was thwarted from playing the guitar he wanted — a 1958 Gibson ES-225. "I brought that guitar to all three sessions for the album, and each time something was broken on it," he says. "It was frustrating, because I'm someone who always gets his guitars and amps worked on before I do anything. Even if



TRACEY YARAD

Luca Benedetti (left) and Jim Campilongo

I'm just doing a favor for a friend, I make sure my gear is serviced, because the most important thing to have at a session is a guitar that's perfectly in tune. One of the bummers about living in New York is the weather is constantly changing. I get a setup, and a week later, the guitar is a mess. Similarly, no level of preparation mattered with the ES-225. It kept breaking every time I went near the studio. You can see why I'm a little boring with gear and don't bring five guitars to sessions. In the end, I used my '59 Fender Telecaster and Princeton amp on *Two Guitars*."

Although Benedetti didn't have to suffer through any equipment tragedies, he still kept his rig pretty sparse. ("Too many factors can mess up a take," he says.) He mainly used his "parts-caster" based on an old Telecaster and a 1962 Fender Deluxe amp. For some tracks, he opted for a 1953 Gibson ES-175 with a single P-90 pickup, or a 1966 Epiphone Riviera with mini humbuckers. He also changed things up by plugging into a 1960 Supro Coronado amp when he wanted a more clean and direct sound. "The Deluxe doesn't have reverb, but there's a really nice tremolo on it," Benedetti says. "I just add a reverb pedal, and I could get away with that setup for the rest of my life. I was excited to play the ES-175 on the record, because I had bought it a week before the session. It was so

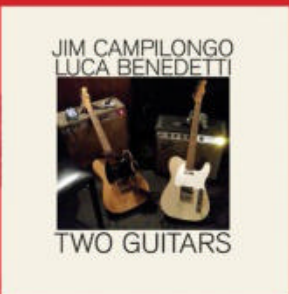
easy to play, and it sounded great. When you hear the melody on 'Mona Lisa,' that's the 175. The best example of the Riviera is my solo on 'Nice Dress.' Jim swears it's the 175 on that tune, but I swear he's wrong [laughs]."

One of the many delights of *Two Guitars* is that you can hear the rapport of the two guitarists unfold right before you on every track. It's an authentic testimony, as well. You can hear bits of amp hum, fingertips dragging across string winds, and the near-psychic velocity of ideas being tossed back and forth during improvisational sections. It's a record forged in shared aspirations, experience, respect and heart.

"Jim has this unique ability to always be on task," Benedetti offers. "I'll sometimes get distracted by something in the room, and my

mind can wander. Not Jim. I feel like he's always there — 110 percent — and he keeps me focused along with him. I really treasure that. My best playing happens when we play together."

"We care about each other, and we care about the music," Campilongo says. "Luca is always thinking about what the music needs, and he brings it. There's no autopilot with him. As a result, when I listened to a test pressing of *Two Guitars*, I was so emotionally involved, I was almost holding my breath at times. And I thought, Oh, we did it. We really did it." 🎸



**JIM CAMPILONGO
LUCA BENEDETTI**

TWO GUITARS

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Two Guitars

"Mona Lisa," "Mood Indigo," "Minute Waltz," "Tears Waiting Inside," "Nice Dress"



By Her Lights

Britain's **Gwenifer Raymond** puts her own spin on American primitive with *Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain*.

BY TOM BEAUJOUR

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM RANFT

ALTHOUGH THE CLASSIFICATION seems odd for an artist who was born and raised in Wales, has a PhD in astrophysics and holds down a day job as a video-game coder, Gwenifer Raymond begrudgingly embraces the “American primitive” label with which her hypnotic and often unsettling brand of acoustic fingerstyle guitar has been stamped. “A label is the easiest way to describe a thing, and I think ‘American primitive’ is probably the easiest way to describe what I do,” she says from her home in Brighton, U.K. The term, which acoustic guitarist John Fahey coined in the late '50s to describe his own music, was always intended to somehow convey an ineffable and ever-evolving amalgam of influences. “Fahey himself invented the term because he couldn't think of what it was he did, right?” Raymond asks. “So in and of itself, the moniker is kind of representative of the

idea that I don't really know what it is I do, I just play instrumental guitar that has some influences from American folk music — and then a bunch of other shit thrown in there.”

For Raymond, not all of these influences are folk-based. The guitarist, now 35, cut her teeth playing in punk and alternative bands and cites groups like the Pixies, the Fall, Gang of Four and the Butthole Surfers as particular favorites. “I just liked the screeching-feedback mad shit that they would play,” she says of the latter. Raymond also credits another '90s alternative-rock behemoth, Nirvana, not only with inspiring her to pick up the guitar but also with introducing her to the world of

acoustic blues. “Just after Kurt Cobain died, my mum bought me a cassette tape of *Nevermind* and that blew my little preteen brain right out. I immediately asked for a guitar and got a cherry-red Squier Strat,” she

says. “Then I got Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York* album, which had them doing the cover of Lead Belly's ‘Where Did You Sleep Last Night?’ and investigated that. I was also discovering people, like Dylan and the Velvet

Underground, who were equally influenced by early pre-war American blues music, so I started looking into that stuff as well.”

Raymond found a local guitar and banjo instructor well versed in the traditional genres

**“FAHEY HIMSELF
INVENTED THE TERM
BECAUSE HE COULDN'T
THINK OF WHAT IT
WAS HE DID”**

she was developing, and with his help began developing her clawhammer technique — a right-hand approach that combines a downward thumb movement for the bass note with an upward two-fingered “claw” that sounds the melody notes on the upper strings. “I’ve turned my right hand into an autonomous engine at this point,” she says. “I used to watch movies and play the same riff for an hour and a half.”

Central to Raymond’s practice regimen were the seminal recordings of country-blues legend Mississippi John Hurt. “You just slowly get the boom-boom of the bass notes going, and then you introduce the melody notes and eventually learn to do it on the beat, and then the offbeat, and then you put a triplet in, and you can speed it up,” she says. “Once you learn a few tricks, you’ve taught your hand to do all those things and it becomes a very offline process.”

Raymond’s clawhammer drives both her 2015 debut, *Sometimes There’s Blood*, and its follow-up, 2018’s *You Never Were Much of a Dancer*. But on her latest release, the expansive *Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain* (Tompkins Square), the guitarist applies her technique and favored open tunings of G, D and C minor to songs that embrace nerve-jangling dissonance and often completely eschew standard folk structures in favor of a more through-composed feel. Raymond attributes this evolution to her having been commissioned to score the 1907 French silent horror short film *The Red Spectre*. “I had to write a seven- or eight-minute-long track that followed the emotional arc of the movie, so it wasn’t like a verse-chorus style thing,” she says. “That just immediately sparked me into wanting to write more compositional songs with movements and more complicated musical arcs in them.”

That Raymond was hired to compose music for a film about a magician who performs a demonic ritual is not accidental. In interviews, she often references the folk horror genre, which includes films, like 1971’s *Blood on Satan’s Claw* and 1973’s *The Wicker Man*, that invoke ancient pastoral themes and pagan legends. *Strange Lights* song titles like “Incantation” and “Hell for Certain” also hint at a proclivity for the mystical. According to Raymond, when growing up in Wales, which is steeped in Celtic pre-Christian mythology, such affinities are par for the course. “When



JOHN J. JONES

you’re Welsh, this stuff is just part of life,” she says. “There are festivals that are super pagan, but yet it’s also Christian, like they can’t disentangle the two aspects. I was just telling some people about the Mari Lwyd today, which is a New Year’s tradition of putting a big horse’s skull on a stick underneath a cape or a shawl and roving around the village knocking on people’s doors. Then you would have what is essentially a Welsh rap battle, which is having a chat-off until someone’s announced the winner. Then you drink a bunch of beer.”

Like so many other artists affected by the pandemic, Raymond had studio time booked to record her new album but had to abruptly change her plans when the U.K. went into quarantine. “I eventually ended up recording and mixing the entire record on my own in my flat in Brighton,” she says. “I miked the guitar with an AKG C414 XLS between the 12th fret and the sound hole and then used a pair of matched Rode NT5 small-diaphragm condenser mics for extra dimension. Everything ran into a Focusrite Clarett 4Pre USB interface.”

Raymond, who favors small-bodied guitars over larger dreadnoughts, tracked all of *Strange Lights* with a Waterloo WL-14 LTR with ladder bracing. “You can get that guitar with X bracing or ladder, but as I understand it, there’s less interference with the sound in the body of the guitar with the ladder bracing. They generally have a nice, warmer, fuller tone,” she says. “The X brace is better for the neck, and so back in the days before truss rods, the necks wouldn’t pull forward

as much as a result. But obviously, on a modern guitar, that’s not really an issue.” Raymond uses a plastic thumb pick and standard steel-nickel finger picks by Dunlop, and after much experimentation has settled on Martin Retro strings that employ a monel nickel/copper alloy. “When I’m trying guitar strings, I ask myself, How long do you have to break them in before you get that nice, ideal tone? And then how many gigs will that last? The monels are half the price of some other acoustic guitar strings, so it’s okay that I have to change them every two or three gigs. And they break in almost immediately, so I don’t have to play my guitar for an hour or two before a show to make them sound not insane.”

Given that Raymond’s instrument is her primary means of connecting with her audience, her close attention to tone is not surprising. To the guitarist, communicating with sound is often more effective than doing

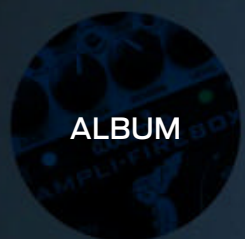
so with words. “Talking is hard, as I often discover during interviews,” she says. “In conversation, if you’re trying to get something across but you can’t quite find the words for it, you just make a noise and a gesture. In many ways, that’s what instrumental music does. It’s creating the mood of a concept in a nonrepresentative way. And it can do that because the words might not even really exist. Or maybe they exist, but not in the language that you speak, because there are plenty of words in different languages that don’t exist in others. So it’s the nonverbal grunting that you do when you can’t quite get an idea across. But prettier.” ■



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain

“Eulogy for a Dead French Composer,”
“Ruben’s Song,”
“Hell for Certain,”
“Incantation”



The Many Instruments of Sierra Hull

She made her name on mandolin in the bluegrass scene, but her six-string skills have been there the whole time.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

PHOTOGRAPH BY GINA BINKLEY

Sierra Hull playing her Rono Workingman's Special five-string baritone guitar

SAYING SIERRA HULL is only a mandolin player is selling the 29-year-old singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist short. But it probably wouldn't hurt her feelings. After all, mandolin is the instrument that brought her to the Grand Ole Opry stage at the age of 10 and Carnegie Hall two years later, and helped her land a record deal before she could drive a car.

However, mandolin is only part of the story. Guitar, especially, has been in the mix on songs like the multi-instrument workout "Hullarious" on her Rounder Records debut, *Secrets*, released in 2008 when she was 16. But as Hull evolved from straight bluegrass with her Grammy-nominated Bela Fleck-produced 2016 release, *Weighted Mind*, she adopted a more experimental approach that showcased her mandolin playing and songwriting with little additional accompaniment.

"It was an amazing experience to strip everything back and be in this totally exposed setting as a musician," Hull says. "I knew I didn't want to make the same record again, and I was excited about the idea of incorporating more things back into the aesthetic of the music."

On *25 Trips*, her new album, Hull reconnects with her six-string acoustic on tracks like "Ceiling to the Floor" and "Everybody's Talking."

When she brings in the full band, however, Hull's experiments with instruments like tenor guitar, mandola, and baritone and octave mandolin take flight, as session players — including Ron Block

from Alison Krauss's band, and flatpicker Bryan Sutton — fill in on guitar. Like bluegrass musicians taking turns at the mic, stepping aside is part of the process.

"The exciting thing about recording like that is you can sit around and dream up what you think something's going to be like," she says. "But when you're inviting someone else into that experience, they're inevitably going to bring things that you never thought of. You never know what somebody else is going to bring to the table. That's exciting."

Like most working musicians, Hull has been off the road due to the pandemic. And as *Guitar Player* discovered, during her downtime she's been reaching for her guitars more than ever.

You're an accomplished multi-instrumentalist. Where did you begin?

I always say mandolin was my first instrument, though I was actually given a fiddle for Christmas right before that. I was really tiny at the time, and I couldn't reach very far with my left hand. So Dad showed me my first tune on the mandolin, and I just fell in love. It was almost like an immediate connection. I picked up guitar about a year later. I never had lessons on guitar, but I was around guitar players at jams, so it felt like a natural thing to pick up a guitar, as well. I think a lot of the techniques are similar between flatpicking guitar and mandolin.

How has playing mandolin influenced your approach to guitar?

I think that as you develop certain personalities within music, it inevitably shifts over. I've spent years studying mandolin players, learning from heroes. But I also spent a lot of time learning Tony Rice's stuff on guitar when I was kid, or from guitar players like Ron Block and Bryan Sutton. I think you learn some of the vocabulary through

studying great players. But just the general technique of left- and right-hand facility, in terms of pick hold and tone, are pretty interchangeable from mandolin to guitar.

Coming from the mandolin, what is

"A LOT OF THAT GUITAR-SHREDDER STUFF HAS SO MUCH IN COMMON WITH BLUEGRASS AND THE THINGS I GREW UP LOVING"

your picking technique? Do you anchor or play with a closed fist?

That's interesting, because when I picked up the mandolin and learned my first tune, I didn't anchor at all. I started taking a few mandolin lessons, and the teacher would anchor with his pinkie and ring finger and have his hand up the neck a little bit so he's getting more of a mellow tone. And then you watch somebody like Tony Rice play, and he anchors.

When I started working on more crosspicking things, I would get tired when I would anchor with my pinkie because you use a little more of your upper arm when you anchor like that, as opposed to playing close-handed and having your hand in a fist. At some point, without realizing it, I would switch to a closed-handed position just for a couple of songs in a set. Before I knew it, I actually started playing more and more stuff that way. And I find with guitar I can go back to that anchored position more often than not. It's been really fun to get back into guitar in the last couple of years and realize how some of my techniques have changed since I was younger.

For *Weighted Mind*, you took more of solo approach. How did you move forward to work with a band on *25 Trips*?

Weighted Mind felt like a very singer-songwriter-forward album to me, but it also ended up being maybe the most instrumentally forward album that I've done. There was more musical responsibility in some ways, or a different kind of a responsibility, than when you're playing in a band setting, where other instruments are filling out certain sonic space. That record opened me up to explore the idea of how to create the illusion of more: How can you get more music out of one instrument than just playing rhythm through the whole thing? And also how to incorporate some of my own bass lines into my playing and be able to play rhythmic-sounding stuff while also making sure that the coloration feels full in the song. I feel like that carried over to *25 Trips*.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

25 Trips

"Ceiling to the Floor,"
"Everybody's Talking,"
"How Long," "The Last Minute," "Escape"



On *25 Trips*, you roam among guitar and mandolin, tenor guitar, octave mandolin and mandola. What makes you lean toward those variations?

I love the inspiration of picking up a different instrument. A few days ago, I pulled out an archtop guitar I have, and it was in an open tuning. I started messing with tuning the E string down, and it broke, but I played it anyway. And as silly as it sounds, it was really fun to have this different, five-string musical experience. Sometimes things like that happen where you didn't necessarily plan to use a particular instrument, but you have it in your hand at the moment that some idea or creative energy hits.

You've been posting videos pretty regularly, including a short guitar piece called "Unfamiliar Times." Was that inspired by the pandemic?

Yes. I played my last show on March 12, I think. The next day I came home and realized I was going to be there a while. My record came out right at the beginning of all this, so my album release tour was canceled. I went from thinking I was going to not be home at all for the next couple of months to suddenly being home, and there was both a sadness and a beauty in it — a sadness for all the things that were happening and all the people's lives who had been negatively affected, but also a strange opportunity to just be home, and I think there has been beauty in that. "Unfamiliar Times" just kind of fell out the next day. I think

sometimes our circumstances inspire something almost immediately like that. It definitely was how I was feeling in that moment.

Have you been playing more guitar since you've been home?

I have, yeah. I got a Bourgeois guitar early last year. It's a smaller guitar called an L-DBO. I've spent a lot of time playing that particular guitar since I've been home. I grew up playing dreadnoughts, which I still love, but it's been really fun to have this smaller singer-songwriter guitar. It's got a big sound for a smaller instrument. It holds up well no matter what you play on it. I think sometimes you can get a new instrument like that and it ends up being really inspiring.

You throw curve balls not only in the instruments you use but also in the material you adapt to them. You covered Polyphia's "40oz," which was recorded on multiple guitars, using just an electric mandolin.

Yeah, it's wicked hard to play, probably either way. It's mostly hard because of the shifts you have to do when playing it out of fifths, and also those guys use the sweep-picking technique, which I've never really attempted. Growing up playing bluegrass, I've always had more of an alternate-picking technique, so that's what I was using. A lot of that guitar-shredder metal stuff has so much in common with bluegrass and the things that I grew up loving, such as the energy and the forwardness of the timing. Though they're very different in a lot of ways, they also feel really connected to me, so it's cool to work on something like that and feel like it somehow makes so much sense. 🎸



Cosmic Career

Daniel Donato combines spacey country guitar with a grounded business sense.

BY MICHAEL ROSS

YOU SAY YOU want to be a successful guitarist in the modern music economy? It's simple, but not easy. First be a virtuoso, then tour relentlessly, and along the way master social media in all its forms. In other words, be like Daniel Donato.

Donato's six-string mastery was forged through years of playing four nights a week, four hours a night, in the crucible of Nashville's Broadway, beginning at age 17. The guitarist then toured America and Europe developing a brand of music he calls "Cosmic Country," until he was selling out shows in both places. Along the way, he garnered tens of thousands of followers on Instagram, YouTube and Facebook.

All of this has led to a rapid rise for his latest record, the Robben Ford-produced *A Young Man's Country* (Cosmic Country Music). "Our record is one of the top-four promoted releases across the entire folk category on Spotify," he says.

If Donato sometimes talks as much like a marketing director as a musician, he seems genuinely comfortable in both roles. "I post content at least three times a week and make sure I have a distinct way of communicating," he explains. "I always listen to my fan base."

He has learned the crucial differences between the various platforms through experience. Though the songs on his new record have, to date, garnered more than 500,000 plays on Spotify, the three accompanying videos have fewer than



Daniel Donato with his Seafoam Green Fender Telecaster

23,000 views combined. "Artists assume if they like something, the fans are going to like it too," he says. "But often, the fans do not care. My fans preferred a video of me hanging out with Joe Bonamassa, playing Telecasters. So we try to create incentive-based opportunities for everybody who joins the Cosmic Country Club, so we can keep bringing more people into our circle."

Switching to his artist hat, Donato talks just as effortlessly about having guitarist Robben Ford as a producer. "He wasn't involved in the vocals and harmonies but rather in ways that featured his strengths as a guitar player," Donato says. "He gave me an idea to play on one song's verse. Other times

it was just, 'Okay, let's go on to the next one,' or 'Let's slow this down.' He knows when a take is good and has energy, so it was his judgment as to which one we used. We did four takes of each song, and sometimes the first take was the one. I would

ask, 'Are you sure?' 'Absolutely, I'm very sure,' would be Robben's response. He is very confident in his production style. He also allowed the character of the record to shine."

Ford's years of experience recording great guitar tones certainly came into play. He lent Donato his legendary Dumble amplifier, which became the main amp for the project, along with a Fender Vibrolux. Ford also advised the young player on effects and studio techniques.

"We put multiple microphones close to the amplifiers, and a microphone in the back of the room that was crushed with parallel compression, so anything that hit it had a nice overdriven sound," Donato says. "We mixed those tones for a crisp clean layer, with a tube-driven distortion and overdrive from the far mic blended in. It's a more analog sound than just using an overdrive pedal to simulate tube saturation. We recorded to tape and did it all with outboard hardware. It's a real Robben Ford production. It's almost like the guitar sounds came from a different era."

In the studio, Donato used his road band, which included rhythm guitarist Nicholas Fry, allowing rhythm and lead guitar to go down

"IT'S A REAL ROBBERN FORD PRODUCTION. IT'S ALMOST LIKE THE GUITAR SOUNDS CAME FROM A DIFFERENT ERA"

live. “The rhythm needs to have a soul, just like the lead playing,” Donato explains. “The way Nick played rhythm guitar was crucial to the process. He understands where I want to take things dynamically and harmonically. He communicates that to the rest of the band in a way I can’t when I’m soloing.”

Though there is a jam component to the music, Donato’s songs have distinct arrangements, with precise hits and tempo shifts. These were worked up on the road in advance of recording. “We went in after more than 100 shows last year,” he explains. The road also taught the bandleader what his audience likes. “It’s most fun for us to play when the audience is most receptive. We left some songs off the record that haven’t consistently gotten a great response live.”

Older readers may recall the Cosmic Country of New Riders of the Purple Sage and the Flying Burrito Brothers. Donato has his own definition. “Cosmic means it’s inconceivably vast,” he explains. “Cosmic Country is jam-band country music. I don’t like gigs where I know everything that’s going to happen. I’m always trying to approach music with a sense of exploration and not as a thing I arrive at.”

You can’t talk about jam bands without raising the specter of Jerry Garcia, and on tunes like “Fire on the Mountain” and “Meet Me in Dallas,” the guitarist nails the Grateful Dead icon’s sound. “Growing up when I did, I could listen to every Dead show and watch every YouTube video to understand where and how Jerry was using all those tones and try to apply them to my musical approach,” Donato says. “I use .010 to .046 or .052 Ernie Ball Cobalt strings and acrylic Gravity guitar picks. The Jerry sound is about running a clean, compressed tone and an envelope follower like the EHX Q-Tron. The way I set my Fender amps is bass at two and treble at three. I don’t use any amp reverb and set the volume at four when we’re recording. On ‘Fire on the Mountain’ and ‘Meet Me in Dallas,’ I’m using a Paul Reed Smith Special 22, which is such a Jerry Garcia–sounding guitar. It’s basically one model short of what John



MICKEY BERNAL/GETTY IMAGES

Performing in Paul Cauthen’s Big Velvet Review at the Basement East in Nashville, September 12, 2018

Mayer uses in Dead & Company. For the others, I use my Seafoam Green Fender Telecaster that I’ve been playing for years.”

The phase-shifter effect that was a staple of ’70s country guitar, and has been making a comeback lately, features heavily on *A Young Man’s Country*. “I use the Seymour Duncan Polaron Analog Phase Shifter pedal,” Donato reveals. “It doesn’t have a Small Stone or MXR sound. It seems to have its own.”

Turning out a slamming, guitar-filled record with catchy tunes and live energy is no guarantee of success in 2021, even with 90,000 Instagram and 10,000 YouTube followers. The question becomes, How do you turn those fans into 90,000 ticket or album buyers? Here Donato switches back into marketing mode.

“You put out content that works for the psyche of the user on each social media platform,” he explains. “My fans often go to Apple, YouTube or Spotify, so I make sure I

have a fantastic piece of Cosmic Country content they can consume on those platforms. For fans on TikTok, I have shorter, TikTok-style content. On YouTube, we do reaction or unboxing videos. On Spotify we have an album with lots of guitar notes and interesting tones, produced by Robben Ford. I try to take whatever Cosmic Country is and communicate that officially across all platforms, while being as honest and truthful to myself as I can.”

Unlike many musicians, who consider the marketing of their music a necessary evil, Donato

chooses to embrace that experience with the same gusto he brought to learning his instrument. “I’m into the concept of how the brain releases dopamine,” he says. “They do MRIs on people who are listening to radio, music, watching video of a show or listening to a podcast. Each of these different platforms gives us a different drug.”

Yes, he does a podcast as well. “Where there’s an audience that’s growing over 300 percent in one year, you would be insane to not throw your hat in the ring and bring value to consumers there,” he says. “We’re in a fantastic time where we don’t need to imagine where the audience is, because the numbers are available. I’ve always loved podcasts, and I talk so much that it’s a great platform for me.”

Not all platforms are equally suited to all artists. “It depends on who you are,” he says. “Joe Bonamassa’s biggest platform is Instagram or Facebook. For me Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and the podcast are important. But Instagram is definitely the biggest priority.”

Many artists have a staff that handles their social media but Donato does it all himself, which begs the question, Where does he find the time? “I just try to keep a cool head and work really hard,” he says.

Recent events have revealed just how difficult it is to predict the future, but Donato’s optimism and career track remain intact. “A couple of people I trust say we’re going to be touring by May or June of next year at small capacity,” he says. “I’m willing to accept that. I want to eventually sell out the [Nashville] Ryman Auditorium. I’m not sure when, but nobody can say I’m not a patient person, because I’ve had that same goal since I was 14, and I’m now 25.”



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

A Young Man’s Country

“Justice,” “Fire on the Mountain,” “Luck of the Draw,” “Forgotten Days”



TRACKS



Larry Carlton performing in Berlin, 2009

My Career in Five Songs

“Oh, yeah, I played on that.” **Larry Carlton** recalls his favorite sessions with the Crusaders, Joni Mitchell and Steely Dan.

BY JOE BOSSO

EVERY SO OFTEN — and, actually, more often than not — Larry Carlton will be out and about and he’ll hear... Larry Carlton. “I’ll be at the supermarket with my daughter, or maybe we’ll be at a shopping mall, and I’ll hear a song and go, ‘Oh, yeah. I played on that.’ It’s always a funny kind of feeling, but it’s nice, too, especially when the song sounds fresh.”

During the 1970s and into the ’80s, Carlton distinguished himself as one of the undisputed kings of the West Coast studio session scene. “I was the newcomer in town just as a lot of the Wrecking Crew players were moving on to other things,” he recalls. “I worked with a lot of them at the start of my career, but I never became part of the fold.”

In his time as a studio guitarist, Carlton logged 15 and sometimes 20 sessions a week, appearing on records by the likes of Steely

Dan, Joni Mitchell, Michael Jackson, Herb Alpert, Andy Williams, the Fifth Dimension, Linda Ronstadt — even the Partridge Family. And there were TV and film scores, too, such as his Grammy-winning performance on Mike Post’s “Theme from Hill Street Blues.” “I don’t know the exact number of records I played on,” he says. “We did an estimate of 3,000, and I’ll stick with that. I was very fortunate.”

Carlton credits his ability to keep a cool head and stay focused as one of the secrets to his success in the studio. But there was one session that rattled him. “Just as I was getting going, I was called in to play for Quincy Jones,” he

says. “This was when he was scoring *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. I was young and felt a little intimidated to be working with Quincy. I played my guitar part, and Quincy said, ‘Okay, take the flute part.’ He started redistributing everybody’s roles: ‘You play this guy’s part,’ and so on. I played the flute part, and I left the session with my tail between my legs. I didn’t think I did so well.”

Years later, Carlton ran into Jones and brought up the session. “I said, ‘Man, I don’t know how good a job I did for you.’ Quincy looked at me and said, ‘What are you talking about? I remember you did a good job.’ I was so focused on me at the

**“IT WAS BY INSTINCT
I THREW IN THAT G MAJOR
SEVENTH AFTER JONI
SANG THE FIRST LINE.
BUT IT REALLY WORKED”**

ENGELKE/JULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY

time, but Quincy was focused on the whole session. That was a learning experience for me: Never know what you're walking into. Expect the unexpected."

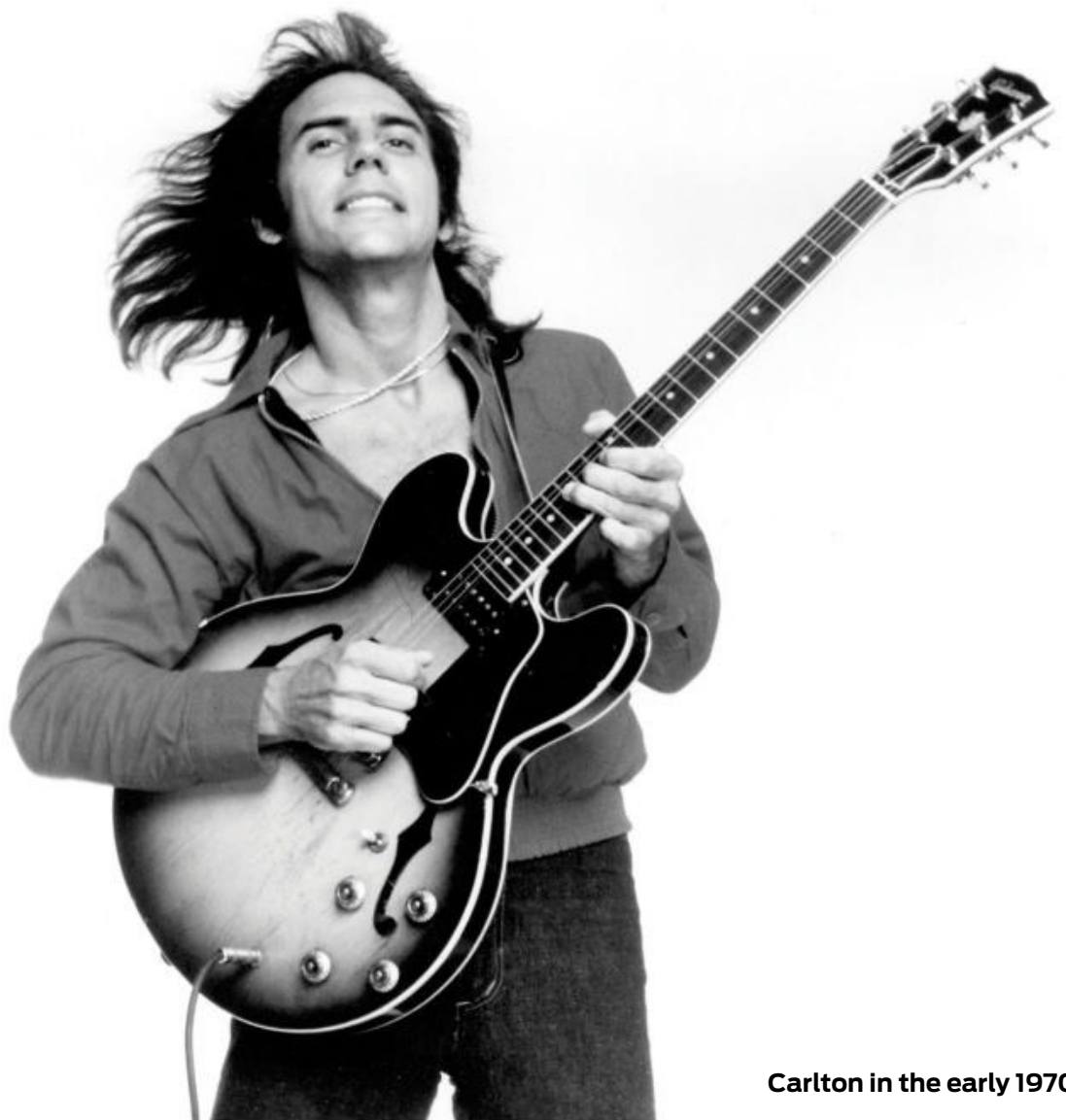
Throughout his celebrated career (which includes a two-decade tenure with the jazz-fusion group the Crusaders, as well as 33 solo recordings), Carlton has relied almost exclusively on the same Gibson ES-335 that he purchased in 1969. His long association with the instrument even earned him the nickname Mr. 335. "It's the crown jewel," he says of the guitar. "I bought it out of the blue, and it's been real good to me." In recent years, he's partnered with Sire Guitars and started his own line of signature models built to his exacting specifications. "They're great guitars, but they're also very affordable," he says. "A lot of guitarists can't pay \$5,000 for an instrument, so I thought it was important to offer them great guitars for under \$700. It's been very exciting for me, the idea of giving something back." Here, Carlton shares memories of five favorite sessions — a tiny portion of his massive catalog.

"SO FAR AWAY" THE CRUSADERS, CRUSADERS 1 (1972)

"I joined the Crusaders right before we did this. I got a call to do a Friday night session for Donovan, and when I showed up, Joe Sample, the Crusaders' keyboard player, was already there. I plugged in and joined Joe on a downbeat he played, and right away we had a moment of musical communication. Monday morning my phone rang, and it was the Crusaders' office saying, 'The guys are in the studio starting an album. Can you come in and join them for the next two weeks?'"

"They already had David T. Walker and Arthur Adams playing guitar on their sessions. I got there, and we recorded our version of Carole King's 'So Far Away.' Just by chance, I started to play parts using my volume pedal — I was just looking to fill the holes in an interesting way. The band loved it, and that sort of started my sound back then. I was a young guy, 23 years old. I loved jazz, but I was also a pop player. So there I was trying to play my jazz licks over some minor turnarounds and major-seventh chords. When I hear it now, I think I sound so young musically. But it was great. I locked in with the band, and we were off and running."

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



Carlton in the early 1970s

"HELP ME" JONI MITCHELL, COURT AND SPARK (1974)

"I was playing at [L.A. music venue] the Baked Potato with [saxophonist] Tom Scott, [drummer] John Guerin and [bassist] Max Bennett. Tom was friends with Joni Mitchell, and one night she came in to hang out. After she heard us, she told Tom, 'I'd like to go in the studio with you guys.' It was that simple — probably an experiment on her part, just to see what would happen."

"Joe Sample played on this cut and the album, too. Joni didn't have a complete demo

— just a cassette with her playing guitar and singing. Tom and I did takedowns as we listened to the cassette, and then everybody just grabbed a chord chart. Joni didn't offer directions, really; she let us develop our own parts."

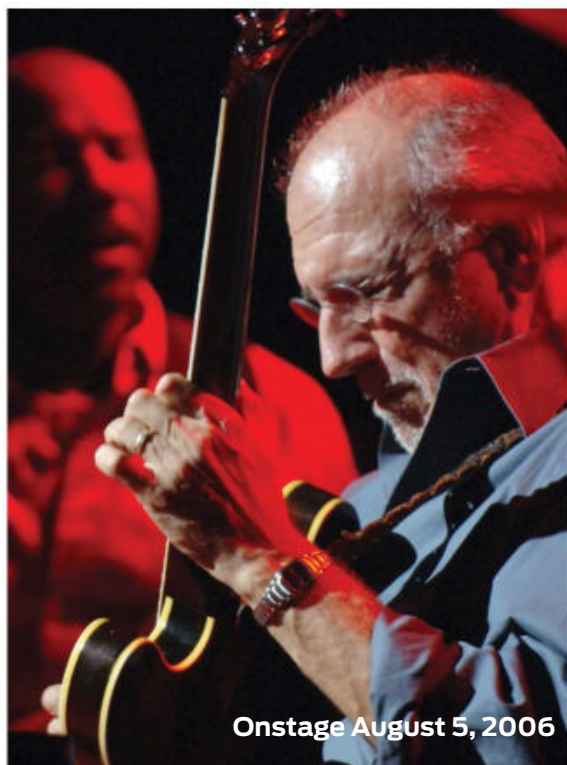
"We spent an hour or so getting the form of playing it, and pretty soon after we had a take. I used my 335 through a Princeton Reverb. It was by instinct that I threw in that G major seventh after she sang the first line. It just went *brrrring!* — very simple. Nobody commented on it at the time, but it really worked. I think I had matured and was already thinking like an arranger."

"KID CHARLEMAGNE" STEELY DAN, THE ROYAL SCAM (1976)

"I'm honored that people talk about this middle guitar solo so much. I thought it was good when I played it, but I didn't think, Yeah, I played the shit out of that tonight. When the record came out, there was a wonderful review of the tune in *Billboard* and they raved about the solo. I put the record on and listened to it with my wife, and at the end of it I said, 'I don't know. It just sounds like me.'"

"We had recorded the rhythm track a month before, so when I showed up to do overdubs, Walter [Becker] suggested I play a Strat instead of my 335. We tried it for a few takes, and then he said, 'No, go back to your guitar.' He never said why. Maybe he

JUN SATO/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES





thought I sounded more comfortable on the 335, more free, or maybe he just expected a different kind of sound.

"That was it as far as direction went. I think they liked to see what the guys might come up with before they started commenting. All they would really say was, 'Yeah, that's the right one. It's working man,' or 'Do another one.' I was pretty familiar with the tune, so I just improvised. People think I'm kidding when I say that, like I had worked the solo out beforehand, but I didn't. It was straight improv, and it worked."

**"I DON'T KNOW HOW
MANY RECORDS
I PLAYED ON. WE
ESTIMATED 3,000.
I'LL STICK WITH THAT"**

"ROOM 335"
LARRY CARLTON,
LARRY CARLTON (1978)

"A year before I did this song, I had played the rhythm parts on Steely Dan's 'Peg' for *Aja*. I did three sessions for 'Peg' with different drummers, but when they cut the master they used somebody else on guitar. But I loved the chord changes on that tune — D major 7th to C sharp minor seven plus five — so they were in my head. I was like, 'Wow, what a cool sound,' and that's what inspired me to write 'Room 335.' Neither Walter or Donald [*Fagen*] said anything to me about it.

"It was recorded live in my studio with [*bassist*] Abraham Laboriel, [*keyboardist*] Greg Mathieson and [*drummer*] Jeff Porcaro. We had been playing the tune at clubs in North Hollywood, so we were feeling like a really tight unit. I got a really good sound on this one. I used my 335 through a Mesa/Boogie amp that I had bought when I was with the Crusaders. A guy showed up backstage before soundcheck and said, 'I have this new amp that just came out. You want to try it?' I did, and I bought it on the spot. It was a very simple amp — three knobs — and I put my settings all at seven. It was easy to remember, and it sounded great. It became the sound I liked for my 335."



Photographed in England, June 17, 2015

OLLY CURTIS

**"SMILES AND
SMILES TO GO"**
LARRY CARLTON, *ALONE/
BUT NEVER ALONE* (1986)

"Until this record, I had never recorded an acoustic track. After four albums with Warner Bros., I was cut from their roster. One day I got a call from a producer I had worked with, Jimmy Bowen. He was starting a new MCA label out of Nashville with Tony Brown, and he said, 'We want to sign you. It's a musicians' label. Low budgets, but you can do whatever you want.' I said, 'Okay, Jimmy, but I don't know what kind of record to make.' He said, 'Well, have you ever done an acoustic guitar album?' I said, 'Well, no, but that's a thought.' It was that simple.

"I had been listening to a radio format that was big on the West Coast at the time quiet storm — they were integrating some

instrumental music with vocal music. So I got a feel for the programming and wrote a bunch of tunes with that kind of vibe.

"This song is a really fun one. I wrote it at the keyboard, but I'd never played guitar on it until the session. Ninety percent of the bass line is mine. I had some great guys on the session — Abe Laboriel, Rick Marotta on drums and Terry Trotter on keyboards. I gave them the charts and said, 'Guys, we need to take a few minutes. I haven't put a melody on top of it yet.' But Abe heard this single-note piano melody that I had, and he said, 'Larry, that's your melody.' I had never played it on guitar before, so we did a couple of takes and that was it. I used a custom-made Valley Arts acoustic that was designed after a Martin 00-28. I played that guitar for years and years. Martins could go out of tune, but that Valley Arts guitar never did." 🎸

VOX

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COLUMN

Special Delivery

Rare and revered, this 1977 Overdrive Special 1x12 combo exemplifies the genius of Alexander Dumble.

THERE'S NO NAME in the guitar-amp world that will command more hushed reverence, or a larger price tag, than Dumble. So rare and exalted are these creations that even the better efforts among a host of copies thereof have become highly acclaimed, while an encounter with the real thing is likely to make even the most stoic guitarist go weak in the knees. So what exactly is a Dumble, and why all the fuss? Let's take a look.

Alexander Dumble started repairing and modifying amplifiers in California in the 1960s, and built the first of his best-known model, the Overdrive Special, in 1972. The term *model* is something of a stretch, however, given that every one was custom made and slightly different from the ones before and after it. Each incorporated bespoke changes intended to suit the amplifier to the player who had ordered it, usually done after extensive reference by Dumble himself to the customer's playing style and sound.

Dumble applied layers of epoxy over his amp's internal components, either to hide his work from imitators or to cut down on vibration, and possibly for both reasons. To the extent that his designs can be examined, enthusiasts who have looked at the Overdrive Special's hallowed circuit have often declared the amp's foundation to be based on standard 50- and 100-watt Fender amps of the '60s. And there's likely a solid reason for that. According to Robben Ford, one of the most famous Dumble players of all time, the amp's maker was originally inspired to

"ALEXANDER USED TO HEAR ME PLAY THROUGH A BLACKFACE PIGGYBACK BASSMAN. THAT'S WHERE HE GOT THE IDEA"

— ROB BEN FORD

create the Overdrive Special after hearing Ford himself play through just such a Fender.

"Alexander told me later, after I'd already bought one of the amps from him, that he used to hear me play up in Santa Cruz in Northern California, and I was playing through a blackface piggyback Bassman," Ford told Reverb.com in 2017. "And he said that's where

he got the idea. He started modifying Fender Bassman heads and eventually got the idea for the Overdrive Special.

"I can play like myself and sound like myself through other amplifiers," Ford added. "But the last

thing I want to do is stand next to somebody else who has one!"

Other than the heavily ear-tweaked and custom-grade nature of the rest of the circuit, the most highly acclaimed part of the Overdrive Special is the overdrive stage that gives it its name. Not so much a separate lead channel, as found in so many channel-switching amps, the Overdrive is a foot switch-selectable stage that brings in another preamp tube, with a full two triodes of added gain, after the standard preamp stage that provides the amp's clean tones. Given this topology, it's a cascading-gain preamp — when switched into Overdrive — that involves four gain stages. As seen on the front panel of this 50-watt 1x12 combo from 1977 (rare in itself, given most were built as heads), level and ratio controls govern the



IMAGED BY HERITAGE AUCTIONS, HA.COM



firepower delivered by the stage, determining overall output and distortion level, respectively.

Sounds simple enough, right? Yet the combination of circuit stages — put together with what many acknowledge as Dumble's genius-level understanding of construction techniques and component selection — results in the kind of delectable, dripping, jaw-dropping tone that just can't be found elsewhere (or so most players, and owners, of the real thing would tell us). While Dumble's clean tones are considered to be very good, the real pay dirt comes when you switch to Overdrive, eliciting a thick, creamy, rich, yet clear and articulate lead tone that is also extremely dynamic and tactile.

In addition to Ford, Dumbles have been played by Larry Carlton, Jackson Browne, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Sonny Landreth and Carlos Santana, as well as ace studio and touring guitarist Todd Sharp, who is himself now a highly respected Nashville-based amp maker. Sharp once owned and traveled with two Overdrive Specials, and both were unusual 150-watt versions, no less.

The suede-covered 1977 combo featured here was that of the late Kim Davis of the southern-rock band Point Blank, which toured with ZZ Top and others before launching their own successful six-album career. Although the creation of Overdrive Specials spanned at least three decades, aficionados have noted an evolution of the circuit over the years, overlaid atop the fact that the amps were all one-offs in the first place.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- > 50 watts from two 6L6GC output tubes
- > Cascading four-gain-stage Overdrive section
- > Foot-switchable Clean and Overdrive stages
- > Custom-made, hand-wired circuit
- > Single 12-inch EVM-12L speaker

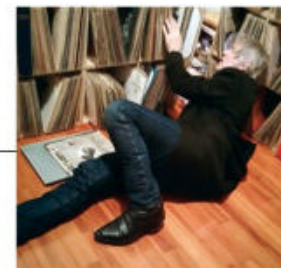


Without going into excessive inside baseball on the circuit specs, the amps from the '70s tend to be more raw sounding, while those of the '80s and '90s became a bit more refined, broadly speaking. Much of this had to do with changes in EQ circuits as much as anything else, as Dumble added or removed elements, such as the fabled Skyliner tone stack, or the HRM (for "Hot Rodded Marshall") tone stage cobbled onto the Overdrive stage on some later models, found in the form of internal trim-pot controls.

This amp, serial number 0077, boasts features that were standard for the era, including the bright, deep, guitar/mic and accent switches, and a passive effects loop on the back panel, and it has an added final

master-volume control on the rear panel that shoots right through the Dumble Amplifiers logo. Whether done by Dumble himself or a third-party tech is unknown, although Alexander's pre-purchase contract — required before you could even order one of his amps — generally stipulated that no one other than he be permitted to work on a Dumble.

It's difficult to discern whether Dumble is still making amps, and if he is, how much one would cost or how long it would take, or really even where he is to attempt to contact him to inquire. What is known, however, is that any existing Dumble that comes up for sale on the used market will cost you tens of thousands of dollars, and likely make you the envy of your local guitar scene. ■



Out of the Darkness

Undeservedly obscure today, Johnny Smith shines on *Moonlight in Vermont*.

I'M LUCKY TO have a group of inspired friends who retain a youthful exuberance for musical discovery. Recently, my friend Richard Julian texted me about an album he was excited about: *Moonlight in Vermont* by the Johnny Smith Quintet, featuring Stan Getz. His text reminded me how much I've studied and loved both this LP and Johnny Smith, who is one of my all-time favorite guitarists.

Released in 1956 on the Roost label, *Moonlight in Vermont* compiles two previously released 10-inch records: *Johnny Smith Quintet Jazz at NBC* and *Johnny Smith Quintet Featuring Stan Getz Jazz at NBC*. Along with Johnny's guitar work, Getz's tenor sax adds an equally outstanding voice on an album that sounds cohesive despite its origin as two separate records.

Born in 1922, Johnny Smith was a self-taught guitarist and learned to read music while in the military. This served him well, as he went on to become the staff studio guitarist and arranger for NBC before prioritizing his family in Colorado Springs. Smith stayed active and recorded a great legacy of fine records on the Roost label, among other notable ventures.

To me, *Moonlight in Vermont* is the quintessential Johnny Smith album, a showcase for his versatility and unique approach to the guitar. My guess is that he had a formidable left hand. His challenging wide-stretch chord voicings are very pianistic, exemplifying a high bar of musicality while covering a large section of real estate on the guitar neck. Johnny rarely plays the common grips we mere mortals gravitate



“Tabu,” shows his capacity to shred, while Getz and company throw the ball back and forth. When Johnny plays phrases that would challenge the likes of Jimmy Bryant, he still sounds as relaxed and in control as a Ferrari going 80 mph with a wealth of unused headroom. “Tenderly” is another great track here and sounds like the twin sister of “Moonlight in Vermont.” Both songs feature a perfect dialog between Stan and Johnny, and his chord choices are a wonder.

“Jaguar,” one of my faves, is another burner. Johnny swings while bassist Eddie Safranski and drummer Don Lamond groove hard and pianist Sanford Gold plays futuristic Monk-like fills in between the 64th-note unison lines. On the side-two opener, “Stars Fell on Alabama,” Johnny and Stan play

unison lines, and their teamwork is stellar. Their take on this track is surprisingly exotic and has an element of mystery. In fact, every track on *Moonlight in Vermont* is excellent, and it contains absolutely no filler.

In addition to being one of the jazz guitarists of the '50s and having a hit with “Moonlight in Vermont,” Smith has a sought-after signature guitar, wrote the Ventures hit “Walk Don't Run,” left a legacy of great records and was a *Guitar Player* columnist. So I always wonder why he doesn't come up more often in conversations about guitar. His music might lack the free-and-easy rollercoaster ride exhibited by the works of Wes Montgomery or Grant Green, but his chordal approach is groundbreaking, his single-note lines are hot, and the group arrangements are thrilling. He's one of the stand-out guitarists of the 20th century. Thanks again for the text, Richard! 🎸

Look for Jim Campilongo and Luca Benedetti's new release, *Two Guitars*, at cityhallrecords.com on CD and vinyl.

PLAYING PHRASES THAT WOULD CHALLENGE THE LIKES OF JIMMY BRYANT, SMITH SOUNDS RELAXED AND IN CONTROL

toward. This is illustrated wonderfully on the title track. The first three chords of Johnny's chord melody employ (from middle C, low to high) C - E - G - A, and (below middle C) A - C - E - G and G - A - C - E. I might suggest trying this at home, kind readers. You'll discover how deceptively effortless and introspective Johnny Smith sounds, when in actuality these chords are an athletic finger cruncher. That said, the bottom line is a lovely musical experience for all music fans, and the choices

he makes always sound inviting.

Chet Atkins called Johnny Smith his favorite jazz guitarist, which makes perfect sense to me. Johnny's approach is compositional and immersed with

intention and counterpoint strategy, but right when we might think every hair is in place, he'll play a flurry of 64th notes that make you sit up in your seat. The second track here,



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ART THOMPSON
Guitar Player Magazine



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The Strange Case of **THE MISSING BEANO**

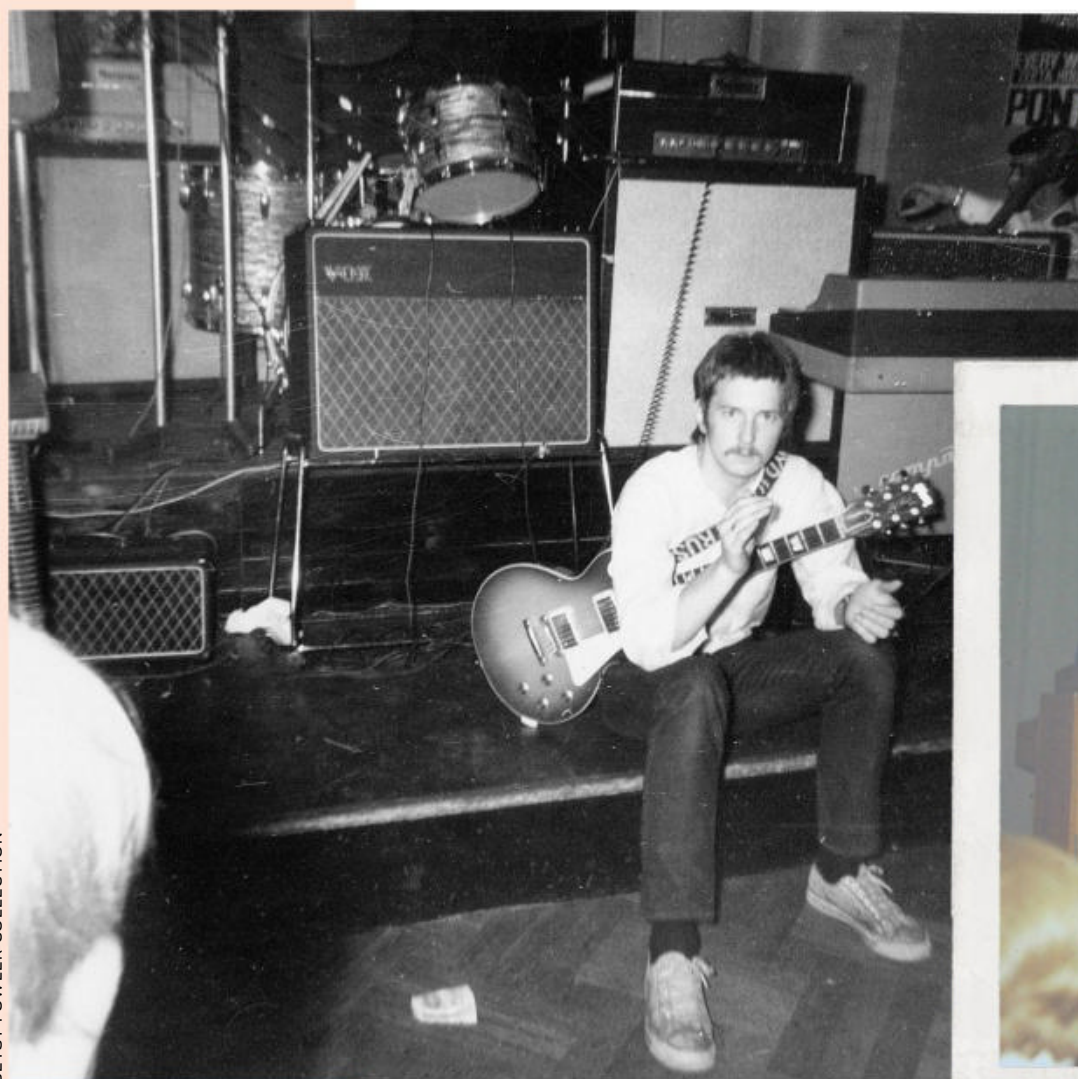
In the summer of 1966, as *Bluesbreakers With Eric Clapton* hit the record shops and the guitarist himself began rehearsals with his new band Cream, **Clapton's** beloved sunburst Les Paul was stolen from a church hall practice room. Gone but not forgotten, the guitar left behind a mystery that has never been solved. Here, we trace the lifetime of this legendary 'Burst and ponder the chances of it ever being discovered.

BY TONY BACON

ERIC CLAPTON'S WORK on the 1966 John Mayall album *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton* inspired an entire generation of would-be blues guitarists as he defined the tone and expression that a great guitarist can achieve. And this particular great player found a great instrument to make his music: an original Gibson Les Paul with a sunburst finish. The cover of the record showed Clapton reading the *Beano* comic,

so it became known as the Beano album, and the instrument he used became known as the Beano guitar.

Many guitarists love Clapton's playing on the Beano album. One such musician is Billy Gibbons, who was, at the time of its release, a budding young guitar player in Texas. "The sound was just so fierce and so attractive," he says, "and the appeal drew everyone's curiosity to attempt to suss out where this sound was coming from. The



1

1
Clapton holds his treasured Les Paul Standard, which he may have bought from Lew Davis's shop on Charing Cross Road for the princely sum of 105 guineas — about \$308 in 1965.

2
Pictures taken at the Lynx Club, Borehamwood, on February 4, 1966, provide the only known color shots of Clapton with the Beano 'Burst.

THE STORIES SURROUNDING THE BEANO HAVE BEEN SWOLLEN WITH HEARSAY AND HALF-TRUTHS

photograph of Eric on the back cover was a clue. We said, 'Ah, look in the background. There's a Marshall, but it's not very big. And ah, look at that! They don't make those any more — but it's one of those Les Pauls!'"

The actual guitar Clapton used has since taken on an almost mythical quality, not least because it was stolen not long afterward and has never been seen since. It was the short-lived variant known today as the 'Burst, for its sunburst finish, produced by Gibson from 1958 until discontinued in 1960 and replaced by the new double-cutaway SG design. By the mid '60s, the original single-cut Les Pauls were being called the "old model."

The theft of the Beano 'Burst helped it pass into legend. And as with many legends, the stories surrounding it have been swollen with hearsay and half-truths ever since. Peter Green estimated the potential value of the lost Beano while talking to Neville Marten for *Guitarist* magazine in 1999. "Eric's Les Paul would go for 50 million [pounds] now," he said with admirable exaggeration. "It was a special one."

STEPPIN' OUT

Eric Clapton was 20 years old when he joined John Mayall's Bluesbreakers in April 1965. At first he played

a Telecaster, but soon he wanted something different. One of his favorite guitarists was Freddie King, who was pictured on the 1962

2



album *Let's Hide Away and Dance Away*, playing an old goldtop Les Paul. The picture on the jacket's front showed a guitar that looked more brown than gold — more like a sunburst finish than a gold one, perhaps. Clapton must have made a mental note.

Christopher Hjort, who researched and wrote about this period of the guitarist's career for his 2007 book, *Strange Brew*, pinpointed the time during 1965 when Clapton bought the Beano 'Burst. "The chronology starts with the last-known photograph of Eric with the Telecaster he used until then, a fan snapshot on Sunday 30 May," Hjort tells us, "when the Mayall band visited Kirklevington Country Club in Yorkshire. Five days later, on Friday 4 June, a local newspaper photographed Eric at the Ricky Tick club in the Plaza Ballroom in Guildford, Surrey, playing his newly acquired Les Paul. This pins down the acquisition to some point in the week between that Sunday and the Friday."

Clapton enjoyed visiting central London's guitar shops, like so many other musicians. That's where the best guitars were. A few years later, John Ford at *Beat Instrumental* magazine asked him about "those Les Pauls our top guitarists rave about." Clapton replied, "I bought my first one at Lew Davis's shop in Charing Cross Road. It's Selmer's now. He had a couple imported from the States, and I managed to get hold of one."

Two brothers, Ben and Lew Davis, ran two shops: Selmer at 114-116 Charing Cross Road and Lew Davis at 134. Clapton's mention of Selmer in that 1968 interview relates to the



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SELMER "NO. 10" BARITONE, in most excellent condition, with case	160 gns.	BEANO "BEANO" GUITAR, in new condition	45 gns.
MARTIN ALTO, latest model, most excellent condition, with case	88 gns.	BURNS "DOUBLE SIX" 12-STRING BASS GUITAR, as new, in immaculate condition, with case	125 gns.
SELMER "NO. 10" ALTO, completely overhauled and re-lacquered, in new condition, with case	95 gns.	MATON JUMBO GUITAR, De Armond pick-up, excellent condition	70 gns.
PENNSYLVANIA ALTO, excellent condition, complete with case	55 gns.	KATONS RAPHER GUITAR "HI-LO" Trem., complete with case	24 gns.
CONN ALTO, underslung, full artist model, excellent condition with case	65 gns.	HOFNER CLUB 40 GUITAR, Blonde, excellent condition	19 gns.
PENNSYLVANIA SPECIAL TENOR, complete with case	70 gns.	VOX "ACE" GUITAR, Highby, Trem., excellent condition	27 gns.
BUESCHER TENOR, completely overhauled and re-lacquered, Beano Pad	58 gns.	FENDER PRECISION BASS GUITAR, powder blue, excellent condition	89 gns.
SELMER ADOLPHE TENOR, completely overhauled, Beano Pad, case	70 gns.	EPHONIE "RIVOLI" SEMI-ACOUSTIC BASS GUITAR, with case, as new	135 gns.
MARTIN TENOR, FULL ARTIST MODEL, in excellent condition, with case	75 gns.	ROSETTI BASS GUITAR, Solid, 2 pick-up.	18 gns.
KING SYMPHONY "SUPER 30" SILVER-SOUND TRUMPET, complete with case	125 gns.	HOFNER PRESIDENT ELECTRIC GUITAR, 2 pick-up, Brunette, absolutely as new	44 gns.
OLDS AMBASSADOR TRUMPET, excellent condition, with case	78 gns.	GUILD "STARFIRE" GUITAR, in excellent condition, with case	118 gns.
OLDS RECORDING TROMBONE, used shop demonstration only, complete with case	140 gns.	GIBSON "SKYLINE" AMPLIFIER	12 gns.
REGENT TROMBONE, in excellent condition	15 gns.	SELMER "BASSMASTER 50" AMPLIFIER, in excellent condition	85 gns.
STERLING "VALVE" TROMBONE, a superb instrument, NEW	47 gns.	BABY BINGSON ECHO, latest model	65 gns.
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- 3 Clue-hunters take from this different angle of the Beano at the Lynx Club, 1966.
- 4 In June 1965, *Melody Maker* ran an ad for Selmer that listed the presumed Beano 'Burst.
- 5 The Stanley Lewis U.K. store catalog featured the Les Paul Standard, as shown, in probably 1960.

KEITH TURNER COLLECTION

closure of the Lew Davis shop in summer '67. When he said "it's Selmer's now," he probably meant that by the time of his *Beat* interview, only Selmer was left of the two shops.

Ray Smith was at Lew Davis in the '60s — he'd bought a Gibson ES-335 from the shop before he started working there in 1961 — and he recalls selling a Les Paul to Clapton. "We all thought he was great, but he was just one of the guys who came in the shop regularly," Smith says. "Lew Davis was a small shop, and Selmer had the fancy stuff. As you went into Lew Davis, on the right was the counter all the way along, with guitars hanging on the wall. Ahead was the manager's desk, a couple of guitars behind him, and then a staircase down to where we put the part-exchanges. But the good guitars were upstairs."

At the time Eric bought the Beano guitar in 1965, both shops advertised regularly in *Melody Maker* magazine, and the stock was considered interchangeable. Smith says, "Sometimes we'd say to Selmer, 'Oh, you've got a Gibson so-and-so down there, and we've just had a sale for it.' So we'd go down there and bring it to Lew Davis."

Lew Davis didn't advertise any Gibson Les Pauls during this period, but Selmer did. In an ad in early June [see above], this entry stands out: "Les Paul Standard, early model, with case, 105 gns." In other words, not the new SG style but an "early model" 1958 to 1960 'Burst. It's very possible this was the guitar Eric bought from Ray Smith at Lew Davis.

Sometimes, goods were priced in guineas ("gns"), usually to make them sound posh, and a

GIBSON GUITARS

The Les Paul Junior Guitar

This beautiful solid body Les Paul guitar incorporates many unusual Gibson features. Gold-finished carved maple top, mahogany body and neck with Les Paul name on peghead. Combination bridge and tailpiece is another Gibson first, tailpiece can be moved up or down to adjust tension. Tune-O-Matic bridge permits adjusting string action and individual string lengths. Graceful cutaway design with ivory binding around top. Bound, rosewood fingerboard with pearled inlays. Two, powerful humbucking pickups with individually adjustable polepieces. Separate tone and volume controls for each pickup which can be preset, three-way toggle switch to activate either or both pickups. Nickel-plated metal parts, individual machine heads with deluxe buttons. Padded leather strap included.

SPECIFICATIONS
12 3/4" wide, 17 1/4" long, 1 1/4" thick, 24 1/2" scale, 22 frets

STANLEY LEWIS LTD.

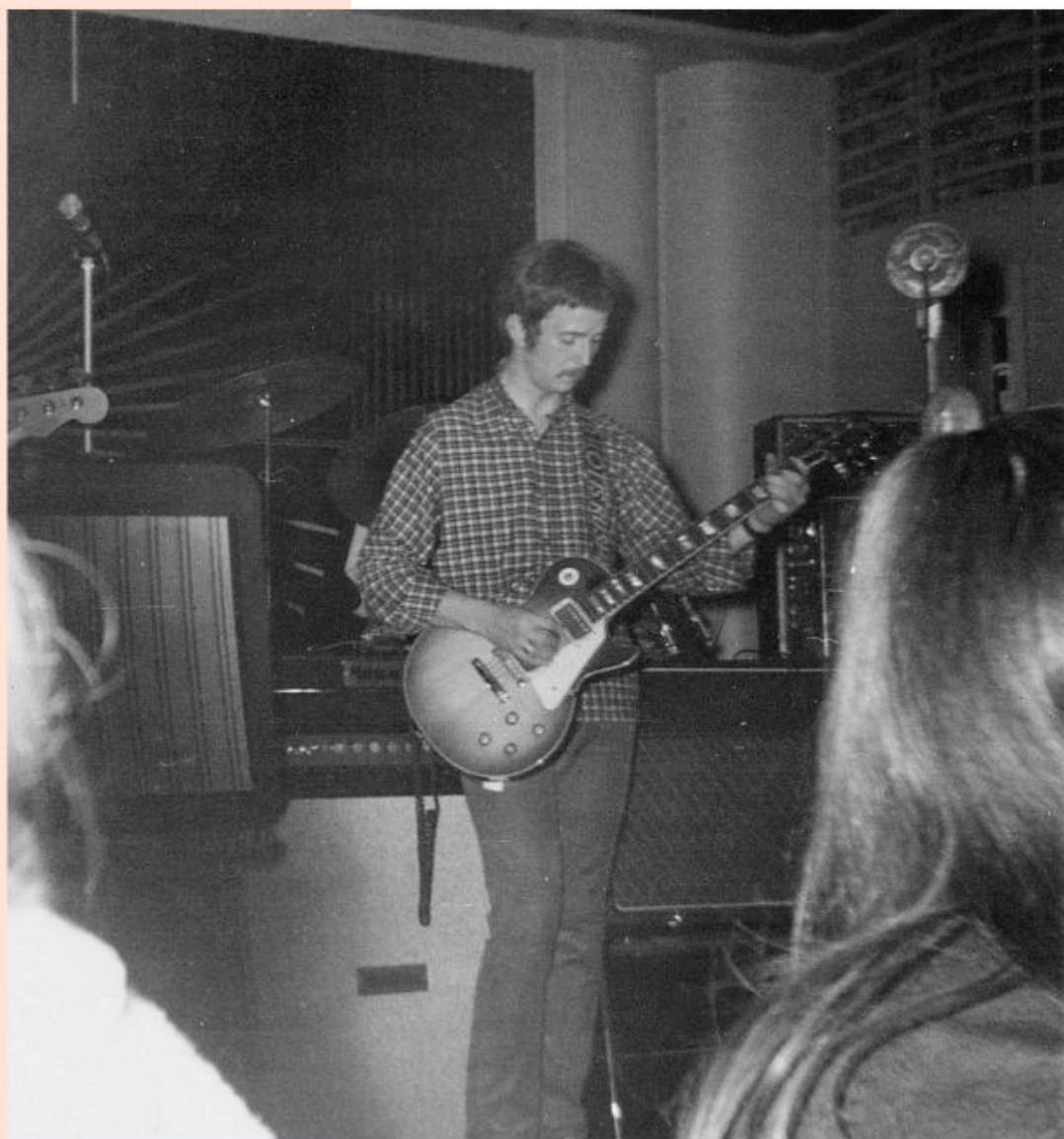
The Les Paul Junior Guitar

The Les Paul Jr. 1/2 is a solid body electric guitar with short-scale, narrow, short slim neck, and extra low string action for youngsters, or adults with small hands and fingers. Its beautiful redwood Finish, unbelievably easy playing action and brilliant tonal response combined with Gibson quality materials and workmanship have earned instant acceptance. Solid mahogany body with graceful cutaway design. Mahogany neck with Gibson Adjustable Truss Rod, rosewood fingerboard with pearl dot inlays. Bright nickel-plated metal parts, enclosed machine heads. New metal combination bridge and tailpiece, adjustable horizontally and vertically. Powerful pickup with individually adjustable polepieces located near bridge for clarity of tonal response. Separate tone and volume controls. Padded leather strap included.

SPECIFICATIONS
12 3/4" wide, 17 1/4" long, 1 1/4" deep, 22 1/2" scale, 19 frets

MARTIN KELLY COLLECTION

MARTIN KELLY COLLECTION



BETSY FOWLER COLLECTION

6

6
**Clapton plays his
now-legendary Les
Paul Standard at the
Pontiac Club, in Putney,
England, in 1965.**

guinea was equivalent to one pound and one shilling. That means the Beano Les Paul set Eric back £110/5/-, or £110.25 — roughly \$308 in June 1965. At the time, the average weekly wage in Britain was around £12, and Clapton probably made about £20 a week with the Bluesbreakers. A brand-new Gibson SG Standard or Fender Stratocaster would have set you back a little over £170 — about \$475.

Clapton fondly described the Beano guitar in a later interview as the best Les Paul he ever had. He told Dan Forte at *Guitar Player* in 1985 that it was “just a regular sunburst Les Paul” with humbucking pickups, that he bought it in London, and that it was “almost brand-new.” Maybe he meant Beano was a used guitar: not new, but in almost-new condition. Or maybe he meant it was a new guitar: “almost new” because it had been in stock a while.

Restrictions on imports of American guitars were lifted during the second half of 1959, and by the start of 1960, Selmer had the Gibson agency, selling new Gibson guitars in its stores and distributing them to others. That would have included a few of the last Les Paul 'Bursts: the

Stanley Lewis store in London published a brochure in 1959/1960 that included a 'Burst among U.K.-shot pictures of the newly available Gibson models. But that price of 105 guineas in 1965 for what we think was Clapton's 'Burst points to a used guitar. Stanley Lewis's price for a new one in '59 or '60 was £120, and Selmer's '61 list price for a new SG Standard was £147, so Clapton's 110 quid in '65 looks like the price of a premium used guitar.

Clapton, meanwhile, wouldn't have bothered about how new his guitar was. He didn't do very much to it apart from play it as much as possible, though it did have a couple of changes, which were made either by him or (more probably) a repairer. First, the original Kluson tuners were removed and a set of Grovers added. Second, toward the end of 1965, the metal covers of the pickups were removed, revealing the bobbins below: double-white at the neck, double-black at the bridge. “You've probably heard about me taking the covers off my pickups,” Clapton told *Beat Instrumental* in the early months of '66. “This is something I would definitely recommend for any guitarist. The improvement, sound-wise, is unbelievable.”

HAVE YOU HEARD

Many who heard Clapton play the Beano 'Burst live with Mayall's Bluesbreakers during 1965 and '66 heard a guitarist near the top of his game. “On his best nights,” Neil Slaven wrote in the *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton* sleeve notes, “Eric can make time stand still.” Today, we only have the few recordings he made with the guitar, including several singles: Mayall's “I'm Your Witch Doctor/Telephone Blues,” produced by Jimmy Page, Champion Jack Dupree's “Third Degree” and Mayall's “Bernard Jenkins.” But the main prize is that Beano album, recorded at Decca's studio in northwest London between 27 and 31 March 1966, right around Clapton's 21st birthday.

The record still has the ability to tingle the spine, not least for Clapton's combination of controlled distortion and feedback, his vibrato style and his melodic sense, all wrapped up in an enviable tone and natural sustain. “Have You Heard,” “Key to Love” and “Steppin' Out” are high spots, and the cover of Freddie King's “Hideaway” is a great moment for a guitar inspired by the album that includes Freddie's original of that tune. “I was very pleased with my sound while I was with John [Mayall],” Clapton said a few years later. “Those Gibsons have the perfect blues sound.”

DOUBLE-CROSSING TIME

By the time the Mayall Beano album was released in the summer of 1966, the restless Clapton was already rehearsing with his next band, which included bassist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker. The album reached a respectable Number Six on the U.K. charts, but soon died away, its reputation growing only in later years.

Cream, on the other hand, became superstars very quickly, though they could hardly have foreseen the scope and impact of that stardom in July, when they began rehearsals at a church hall in Brondesbury, northwest London. They quickly realized they had something special, but Clapton was hit by disaster. His beloved Les Paul was stolen during those rehearsals before he'd even had a chance to play it in public or in the studio with his new band.

News of the theft came in an interview with Richard Green for *Record Mirror*, published early that August. "Someone stole it at the rehearsal room," a dejected Clapton explained. "I wouldn't have sold it. It was worth about £400 to me. It was the only one I had and the one I always played. I'm borrowing guitars now. I'd like to get another Les Paul; there are only about six or seven in the country."

The *Mirror* journalist asked Eric for a description of the guitar to include in the piece "in the hope that someone sees it being used or hanging in a shop window." He wrote, "It's a Les Paul Standard, five or six years old, small and solid. It has one cutaway and is a red-gold color, with Grover machine heads. The back is very scratched and there are several cigarette burns on the front. The strap is a big, black leather belt with the names Buddy Guy, Big Maceo and Otis Rush carved on the inside."

That wasn't the end of the sorry tale. Among Cream's first gigs in the weeks following the rehearsals was one on August 2 at Klooks Kleeck, a club a few doors away from the Decca studio. "Someone stole the case at Klooks Kleeck," Clapton recalled. "That takes a lot of doing, to walk out of Klooks Kleeck with my guitar case. Whoever took the guitar must have come back for the case."

IT AIN'T RIGHT

Following the theft of the Beano 'Burst, Clapton borrowed a few guitars as he searched for a replacement. There was Keith Richards' Bigsby-equipped Les Paul, which he used for Cream's debut at a festival in Windsor on July 31 and a try-out in Manchester the night before. At the



KEITH TURNER COLLECTION

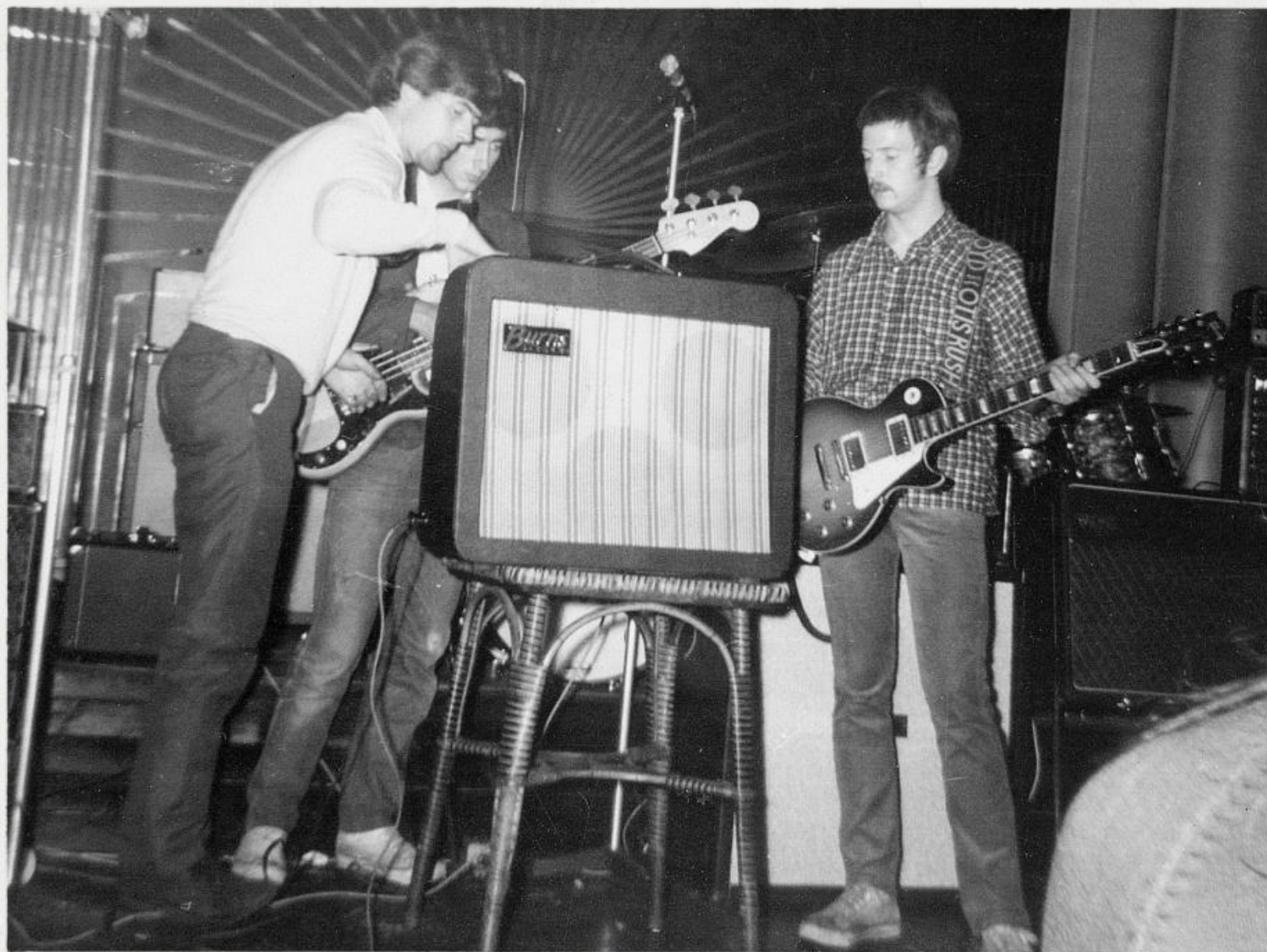
Marquee in London on August 16, Clapton played a cherry double-cut Les Paul Special borrowed from Denny Alexander, who played in the support group, the Clayton Squares.

Eventually, probably in late August 1966, Clapton bought a 'Burst from future Police guitarist Andy Summers, which he used for most of Cream's first album, *Fresh Cream*, as well as the single A-side "I Feel Free." That guitar suffered a headstock break in early 1967, probably in March. Clapton rejected the unsympathetically repaired guitar and moved to an SG Standard. Today, musician and dealer Drew Berlin owns the *Fresh Cream* 'Burst, complete with the Gibson-mandolin-style headstock, inscribed *Eric Clapton*, grafted on where its original had been.

Clapton got a third 'Burst while with Cream, a '58 model that he used occasionally onstage during the band's farewell tour in October and November 1968. But this, too, did not last long, going to Paul Kossoff in a trade when Free supported Clapton's new band, Blind Faith, the following summer. The guitar,

CLAPTON FONDLY DESCRIBED THE BEANO TO GUITAR PLAYER AS THE BEST LES PAUL GUITAR HE EVER HAD

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Another shot in the set taken at the Lynx Club in 1966 almost reveals a clear view of the guitar in color.



BETSY FOWLER COLLECTION

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Eric and Beano (right)
get together with
bassist John McVie
(middle) and John
Mayall (left) at a gig
at the Pontiac Club,
London, August 1965.

sometimes referred to as the Darkburst, is now owned by a collector in New York. Clapton later became a big fan of Stratocasters, although today he does own at least one 'Burst, a 1960 model.

HIDEAWAY

For any guitar-hound keen to sniff out the great lost Beano, one large problem looms. There is precious little evidence to prove that a particular guitar you have in front of you is the Beano 'Burst. No official paperwork or human memory survives to reveal its serial number. We're not

even sure what year it was made. 'Burst nuts will tell you that the colors of the Beano's pickup bobbins — double-white at the neck and double-black at the bridge — narrow it to a '59 or a '60. There is talk

of a slim neck, with little evidence, though some have taken this to narrow it further to a late '59 or early '60.

What about photographs? These days, we're used to multiple photos and videos of every single moment of this or that musician. Back in the '60s, it was very different. And anyway, during the period when Eric had the Beano guitar, he enjoyed limited and relatively local renown. It was only subsequently, with Cream and beyond, that his fame grew enormously. The upshot is only 20 or so photos survive of the Beano 'Burst. They can be seen among a swath of pictures at Michael Chaiken's archival resource for Clapton's so-called "god years" (1963 to '72) at [instagram.com/clapton_was_god](https://www.instagram.com/clapton_was_god). Most, inevitably, are low-quality fan snapshots.

When you want to match a photograph of a particular 'Burst with a guitar that claims to be that instrument, there are two main indicators. First is the figure in the wood, the specific pattern

THE PATTERN IN A
'BURST'S MAPLE TOP CAN
BE SOMETHING OF A
FINGERPRINT WHEN IT COMES
TO IDENTIFICATION

in a 'Burst's maple top. It can be something of a fingerprint when it comes to identification. Second is the pattern in the various mother-of-pearl fingerboard markers. These are unique, so they, too, can indicate that the guitar in a photograph is the one we're seeing today.

Subsidiary identification can come from unique marks and dings on the guitar, though these can be relatively easy to fake and so should not be considered alone. And even with the generally reliable patterns in figure and markers, there are factors that can play tricks with what you think you're seeing, such as the way light falls, the angle the guitar is held at and "confirmation bias" — the inclination to interpret information in a way that fits whatever you want to believe.

The best of the surviving photos are the professional black-and-white shots from a Beano recording session by David Wedgbury of the Decca publicity art department, some of which were used on the back of the original album cover (and for subsequent reissues).

However, Wedgbury's two best frames showing close-ups of the guitar are frustrating for identification purposes. There is little or no figure visible, implying that Beano had a relatively plain maple top. That's not unusual: Some 'Bursts have vibrant figure, others have none, and some sit somewhere in the middle. The shots do reveal some detail in a few of the fingerboard markers for the upper frets, and there seem to be spots and marks on the body front, though it's not clear if these are on the guitar or the negatives.

WHAT'D I SAY

Inevitably, rumors have circulated about where the Beano 'Burst might be — mostly since the rise of the internet and its suitability for spreading speculation as if it were fact. But there are no facts about the whereabouts of this guitar. And, naturally, that circles back to create yet more half-truths and conjecture.

A recent skirmish with the legend came in 2016 when Joe Bonamassa told *Guitarist* magazine that he knew Beano was in a collection on the East Coast of America. "That's all I can tell you — and that's all I will say," he told editor-in-chief Jamie Dickson. "It still exists and I haven't seen it, but I have it on good authority from people who have." However, he quickly retracted these comments when they originally appeared on musicradar.com.

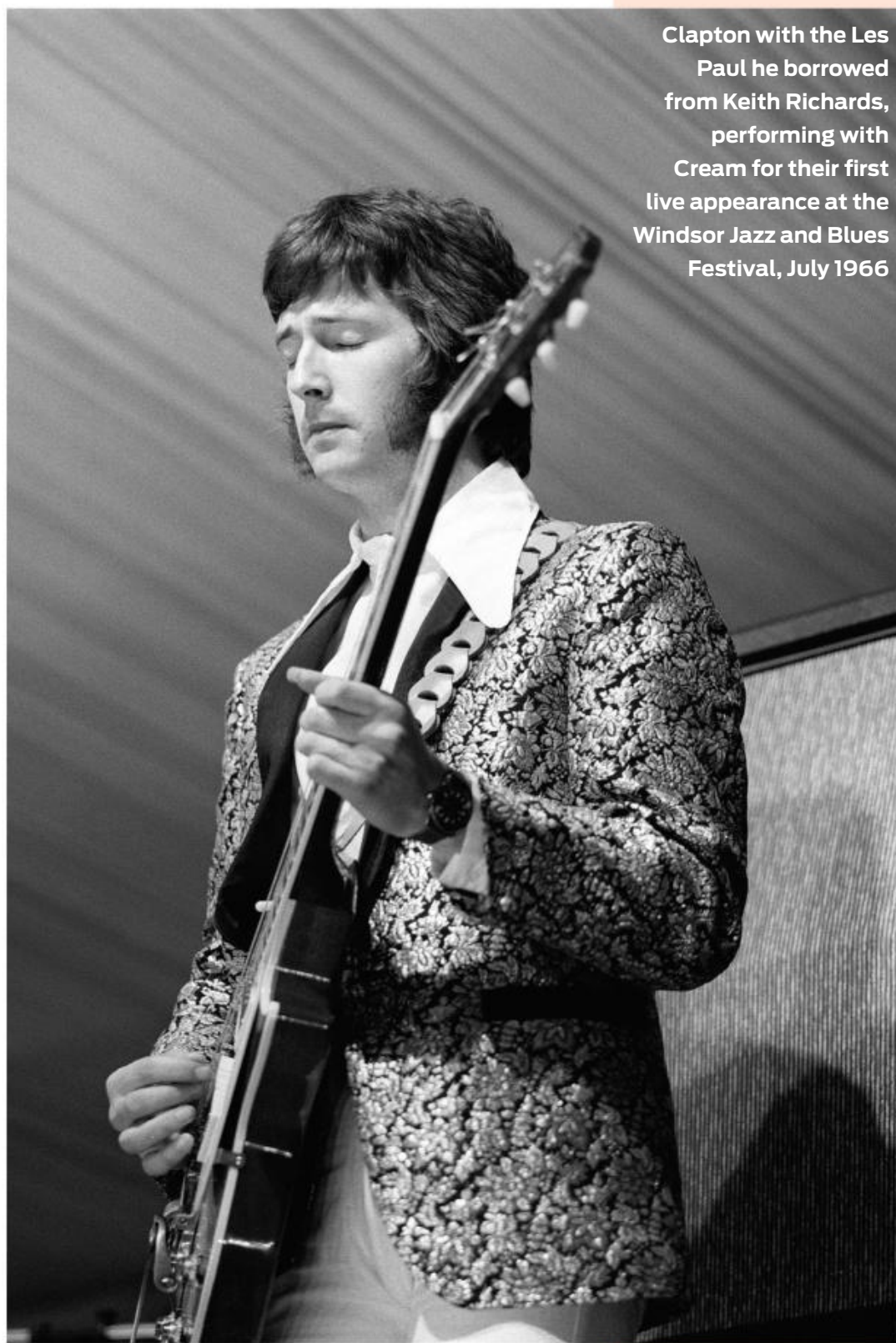
Bonomassa posted at lespaulforum.com, "Just so we are clear, it was a last-minute interview and I regret getting caught off guard... Given a second

PASSION PICTURES/ERIC CLAPTON: LIFE IN 12 BARS



John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers: (from left) Mayall, Hughie Flint, Clapton and McVie

DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Clapton with the Les Paul he borrowed from Keith Richards, performing with Cream for their first live appearance at the Windsor Jazz and Blues Festival, July 1966



shot, I would of [sic] passed on the question.” We did ask Bonamassa for a comment for this feature, but he declined, saying he had nothing to add or speculate about the Beano guitar.

Even if the guitar were to turn up today and somehow was authenticated, there is another issue. In the States, there is a statute of limitations that might prevent any legal action so long after the theft. In Britain, however, matters are more complicated.

Let’s say you are the original thief and you still have the guitar. If the police could prove you stole it, you could be prosecuted for the theft. It’s trickier, however, once the guitar is sold. A spokesman at New Scotland Yard told us there were so-called “open markets” in London at the time of the Beano theft. Sales there had to be made between dusk and dawn to allow the rightful owner to claim back their goods before sunrise. After sun-up, the sale could take place — and some big civil cases concerning transactions at these places resulted in the buyer keeping the goods.

If the stolen guitar was sold elsewhere and the buyer did not pay a reasonable market price for it,

the courts in any civil action could rule that the buyer must have known something was suspect and that the item was, therefore, not theirs. This could result in it being returned to the original owner, where possible. If, however, the buyer bought the item in good faith and paid a reasonable market value — even if it was from someone who did not do so — then the courts might rule that the rights in the item are with that buyer.

KEY TO LOVE

There are still undiscovered ‘Bursts to be found, and Beano could be among them. Gibson logs show 434 Les Pauls shipped for 1958, 643 for 1959 and 635 for 1960, totaling 1,712. Crudely removing some from ‘58 (which includes the last of the goldtops) and from ‘60 (which has a small number of the first of the SG-style models) provides a rough total of 1,406 ‘Bursts made.

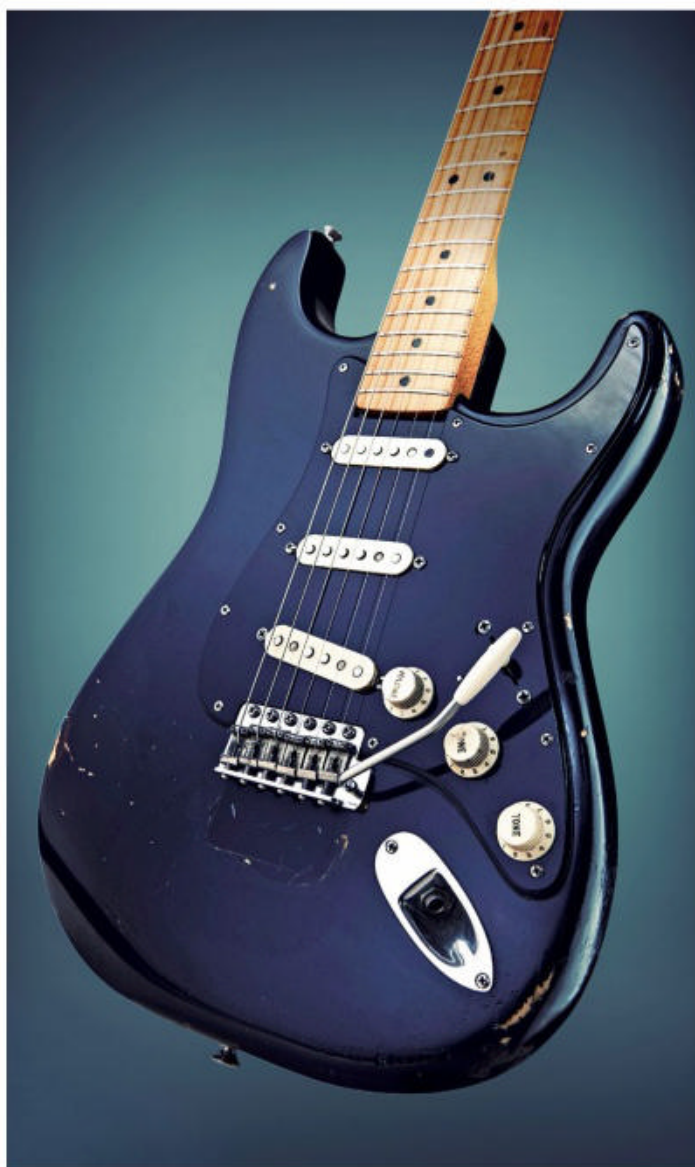
Julio Sanchez runs Burstserial.com, which gathers public information and contributions from collectors to create a database of ‘Burst material, serial numbers and pictures. At the time of this writing, Sanchez had 829 ‘Bursts logged by

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If the Beano ‘Burst were ever to be found and sold, it’s thought the guitar would overtake Gilmour’s Black Strat, shown here, which went for almost \$4 million at auction in 2019.

10

Bernie Marsden’s ‘59 ‘Burst (a.k.a. the Beast) and a copy of *The Beano* comic from May 7, 1966, the same edition Eric is reading on the cover of the *Blues Breakers* album.



9

10



BLUES BREAKERS
JOHN MAYALL
WITH ERIC CLAPTON



serial number. Considering the 436 1959 examples reported to him as a percentage of the known shipping for that year, and applying it to his data for the other two years, his estimate — “using our own experience on what’s been logged by the community in the last 20 years” — is that 1,146 ‘Bursts were made by Gibson.

With those two estimates in mind, it’s clear that many potential ‘Bursts are still out there that might just be the long-lost Beano guitar, even if some owners are secretive. “More and more,” Sanchez reports, “I get messages from owners willing to let me know about their ‘new’ ‘Burst — but frequently they are not ready to share it with the bigger audience and make it public. I would say we see no more than six to 12 ‘new’ ones per year.”

RAMBLIN’ ON MY MIND

How much would the Beano ‘Burst be worth if it ever resurfaced? This is another of the great imponderables surrounding the instrument. Author Vic DaPra got his first ‘Burst in 1972, and he’s published five *Burst Believers* books that profile Les Paul owners and their axes. “I think Beano has probably more mystique than any other ‘Burst,” he says. “When it was stolen, it was no Holy Grail guitar — nothing special, just a used guitar back then. Now, it would probably pull millions and millions of dollars. I’ve heard of crazy offers on Duane Allman’s ‘Burst and Mike Bloomfield’s ‘Burst, but I think the Beano would command the ultimate big-dollar price.”

Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay has a remarkable guitar collection that includes several high-end instruments previously owned by well-known players, such as David Gilmour, whose Black Strat Irsay secured at a Christie’s sale in 2019 for \$3,975,000. Would he be interested in the Beano ‘Burst if it ever showed up? “Sure,” he tells us. “It’s Eric, and it’s rare.” And how much might it be worth? “I don’t know what its value would be,” he says, “and I would prefer not to speculate.”

Drew Berlin of Drew Berlin’s Vintage Guitars specializes in ‘Bursts. He played his first one in 1969, trying out Jeff Beck’s when his band opened for the Jeff Beck Group. He believes the Beano ‘Burst would be worth “somewhere between five and 10 million [dollars]. I think, though, it would need Eric himself personally to sign off on it. I think the proper thing to do, if it did surface, and if Eric would verify it — and if he wasn’t interested in it himself — is that part of its sale would go to his [Crossroads Centre] charity. That



BETSY FOWLER COLLECTION

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way he’d still have an involvement, and it would do good for him and his cause.”

Berlin says the value in the Beano ‘Burst would revolve around its iconic status in the history of guitar music. “So many people, myself included, were influenced by the sound of that John Mayall *Blues Breakers* record. Even now, young guitarists coming up hear that record and they’re inspired to play guitar and to try to get that sound. I think the reason Beano is so sought after and still discussed today is because it marked a turning point in time, in music, that really changed things.”

Back in 1985, Clapton tried to explain to Dan Forte at *Guitar Player* what the old Beano guitar had been like. “The best Les Paul I ever had was stolen during rehearsals for Cream’s first gig,” he said. “It was...just magnificent. I never really found one as good as that. I do miss that one.”

MANY ‘BURSTS ARE OUT THERE THAT MIGHT BE THE LONG-LOST GUITAR, EVEN IF SOME OWNERS ARE SECRETIVE

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Clapton and McVie onstage at a Bluesbreakers gig. Note Clapton’s strap, on which the name Otis Rush is visible.

Tony Bacon would like to thank: Jim Avey, Drew Berlin, Sid Bishop, Michael Chaiken, Vic DaPra, Doug Ellis, Colin Falconer, Pat Foley, Betsy Fowler, Billy Gibbons, Dave Gregory, Mike Hickey, Christopher Hjort, Jim Irsay, J.P. James, Martin Kelly, Christian Larsen, Perry Margouleff, Bernie Marsden, Bill Puppelt, Julio Sanchez, Brinsley Schwarz, Ray Smith, Keith Turner and Edwin Wilson.





‘WATCH ME’

With a new album and signature Fender Strat, **Tash Sultana** is poised to be guitar’s hottest breakout artist of 2021.

BY JOE BOSSO

AT THE AGE of 18, Tash Sultana was given a high school assignment to list lifetime goals. As it turned out, the young Australian singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist had it all mapped out. “I want to get a record deal, and I want to headline music festivals around the world,” Sultana recalls writing. “And all of that happened by the time I turned 21.”



Before that, though, Sultana busked on the streets of Melbourne and played open-mic nights long past teenage curfews. But this was no solo folkie affair. Sultana — who identifies as nonbinary and uses the pronouns *they* and *them* — complemented their dramatically expressive voice with a penchant for gnashing, big-time electric guitar solos, and perfected a dazzlingly fresh approach to rock and R&B by using looping pedals to create hypnotic, guitar-based soundscapes. “I just wanted to rip through things with my own flair,” Sultana explains. “There’s no point trying to copy somebody, because it just wastes time. You’ve heard that all before. I was always set on the idea of being my authentic self, and I didn’t really need any other musicians to do my thing. My sound was my truth.”

That singular sound went viral in 2016 thanks to a couple of “live bedroom” videos of the original songs “Jungle” and “Notion” that showed off



**“THERE’S NO POINT
TRYING TO COPY
SOMEBODY, BECAUSE
IT JUST WASTES TIME.
YOU’VE HEARD THAT
ALL BEFORE”**

Sultana’s preternatural skills. Rather than simply performing the songs, the guitarist seemed to inhabit them — the fiery guitar solos and soulful vocals exploded from somewhere deep within — and one could almost feel the breakneck joy they got from making them. The videos racked up tens of millions of views, and it wasn’t long before the Sultana was making good on that high school assignment, headlining festivals and signing a deal with Mom + Pop Records.

On their first releases, 2016’s *Notion* EP and 2018’s full-length debut, *Flow*

State, Sultana proved to be a formidable talent, playing all of the instruments and serving as self-producer. On the just-released *Terra Firma* (Lonely Lands), they opened themselves up to collaborators, working with fellow Aussie singer-songwriter and New Zealand-based producer Dann Hume. “At first I was like, ‘I don’t need anyone to come in. I’m just going to take this as far as I can without anybody else’s influence,’” Sultana says. “Now that I’ve heard how it can sound with other

people involved, I’m like, ‘Oh, this is sick!’ I think I’m addicted to the collab now. You can still do your own thing, but it’s like you can get an added injection of inspiration into you.”

Terra Firma is a record that listeners can get lost in. Sultana’s sonic presentation is spread across a collection of deeply introspective songs that touch on soul, funk, pop, R&B and hip-hop. There are dashes of rock and even folk. It’s a deceptively crafty concoction that feels thoroughly organic and effortless.



Sultana with their new Fender
Tash Sultana Stratocaster



Intoxicating guitar loops on blissed-out tracks like “Pretty Lady” and “Sweet & Dandy” bury themselves into the thicket of one’s senses, and the cavernous soundscapes that form the musical beds of “Coma,” “Let the Light In” and “I Am Free” unfold like dreams. It’s all dynamic, head-turning stuff, and for a young artist so front-loaded with early acclaim — in Australia, Sultana has already won the prestigious Unearthed Triple J Award and been nominated for various Aria Awards, including Breakthrough Artist — it’s proof-positive that all the hoopla was warranted.

In addition to acclaim for their music, Sultana now has a Fender signature Stratocaster model. The guitar has an alder body, maple neck and fingerboard, two single-coil pickups in the neck and middle position, a humbucker in the bridge position and a vintage-style synchronized tremolo. Finished in Transparent Red and sporting gold hardware and a matching painted headstock, it’s an eye-catching instrument that celebrates Sultana’s long embrace of the Fender brand.

Had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic, Sultana would be on tour right now, and they’ve recently hired three session musicians for eventual live shows. “I don’t want any more sonic boundaries when I play the new stuff onstage,” the guitarist explains. “There are so many parts to these new songs, and I just thought, All right, I’ll put three other people up there with me. They’ll add to the loops and sounds.” However, the unplanned time off from the road turned out to be a blessing in

terms of finishing *Terra Firma*. “I’ve had a pretty hectic touring schedule, and to try to wedge this album between tours would have been impossible. So in a funny way, time off has been great. There’s the live era and there’s the recording era, and I was happy not to have to mix them up.”

T*erra Firma is a great guitar record, but it’s also a great mainstream-pop album.*

Really? Wow, I never thought of it that way, but I get you. I’ve been listening to heaps of Marvin Gaye, actually; that era has greatly inspired this record. To me, the record is a timestamp of all my experiences, past and present. It’s also a fusion of the music I love. This is where I’ve been trying to go. I progress, and I refine, refine... I’m just so keen to unleash this to people.

Let’s talk about your development as a guitar player. You started young, so would you say you put in the typical “10,000 hours”?

10,000 hours? Say what? *[laughs]*

It’s the theory that to achieve mastery of a particular skill, you need to put in 10,000 hours.

Well, I never thought about it, but I guess if wanted to be in the medical field, I could’ve put the hours in. But that’s not me — music’s my field. I put the time in constantly. I’d literally bail school, skate home and get blazed, and I’d get the guitar to see what I could write. There were people who weren’t

encouraging. They’d say, “You’re not going to get anywhere,” And I’d be like, “Watch me.” My teachers were on me about my attendance because I was out playing gigs. After school, I’d change out of my uniform and do open-mic nights.

You have a wonderful hybrid-picking technique. How did you develop it?

I just watched people and picked up on it. I liked the tone they got. But I saw them all keep their fingernails really long, or they used acrylic nails on their picking hand. I literally can’t stand to have long nails, and I cut them every single day. I developed a technique in which I pluck with my middle, ring and pinkie fingers, and then I use my index finger and thumb to hold the pick.

Did you have any horrible experiences doing open-mic nights or busking on the street?

Oh, hell yeah. I had someone throw a wine bottle at me. That was fun. There were drunken rows on the street between homeless people — more bottles getting smashed all over. You know, I came to play music and there’s all these people getting put in the back of a police van. Lots of crazy shit.

Did it take a while for you to build up your confidence to play in front of people?

I always felt confident. I always brought



a sense of relaxation to what I did. When I was busking, I would try to re-create the feeling of a lounge room. I'd lay out a rug and put up ornaments and stuff. I just wanted to create my own environment, no matter where I was.

Any equipment nightmares while busking?

Sure. I used to use a car battery for power, and I'd cram so much shit in my line, so the power would drain really quickly. I'd have a good crowd, and people would be throwing coins. Halfway through a song the power would die, and I'd be like, "Sorry, everyone. Battery's dead. Show's over."

You use distortion on your solos, but echo is also a big part of your sound.

Yeah, when I'm ripping solos, I love distortion, but echo, that's a sick sound. I'm a stereo freak, so everything's stereo galore. When I'm building a song, my rhythm tone is clean, wide and warm. Then I layer things on top, and that's when the effects come in. I like to stick behind the beat and put echo on my guitar. That space is beautiful — the mood, the movement, the percussion.

The songs "Musk" and "Crop Circles" are rooted in '70s soul...

Definitely. There's Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, the Isley Brothers...

Throughout much of those songs, you're content to vamp chords. It's almost about how much you don't play.

Absolutely. They say enough. "Musk" is a looping track, and that'll be the new entry to the live show. "Crop Circles" is an old thing that I used to warm up with in my dressing room. I wasn't even going to do anything with it, but I showed it to some other people and they were like, "What's that? What are you doing? Put that on the record!" So I did.



Speaking of older songs, it took you six years to write "Pretty Lady."

That was one of the old busking songs I used to whip out. It's got all these guitar parts. It's nuts.

The main guitar figure is very syncopated, but the vocal melody is languid and dreamy. Did you have a problem making the two fit together?

I don't know. I used to just beatbox over the top and put a bit of bass in there. I used it for freestyle about the current moment. I put it on the back burner and didn't really pay any mind to it, but then I was writing the record and I thought, I wonder if

any of these archival tunes are worth bringing to light? That was one of them. What complicated the writing was that the song is really too simple. I couldn't get my head around it. I needed other people to go, "I can hear the drums in this. I can hear this and that." And then it just glued itself together.

In "Coma," it sounds as if you're using two guitar loops that sort of play off each other and create a soundscape.

Yeah. I like a rhythm layer first, which is an electric guitar, and then I layer heaps of mandolin loops over the top. And then I do two different guitar solos, but

I play them as harmony parts. It all sounds pretty cool.

I hear you're a big fan of amp modeling.

Absolutely. I've got so many amps that I love, but they're such a pain in the ass. You cart them around and they blow fuses. With amp modeling, it's like I've got six, seven, eight, nine, 10 different amps with me at any time. It's all in my rack and I don't have to worry about it, and you don't get all the noise you get with actual amps.

You've played Jazzmasters, Strats and Teles. Are they all on the new album?

No, the new album is pretty much all Strats.

And now you have your own Fender signature model.

Which is nuts, right? [laughs] And I still have this Fender American Pro Series Strat. It's just an advanced approach to your typical Stratocaster. I really love that for rhythm. I play on the neck when I want something to be warm and wide. When I'm going to knock into a solo, I'll put it on the humbucker and just wail.

So when we were working out specs for my own guitar, it was a no-brainer to go off something that I really love and that other players love as well. We went through quite a few different colors, but it had to be red in the end — cherry red, matching headstock and gold hardware. I'm pretty happy with it. The prototype's on the album, and it sounds killer. I'm ready to play that thing out. 🎸



"MY TEACHERS WERE ON ME ABOUT MY ATTENDANCE. AFTER SCHOOL, I'D CHANGE OUT OF MY UNIFORM AND DO OPEN-MIC NIGHTS"



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Lee Ritenour with his Sadowsky SS-15



PLAYERS

SOLO FLIGHT

First came the house fire. Then heart surgery. Now Lee Ritenour bounces back with *Dreamcatcher*, the first solo guitar record of his long career.

BY MARK MCSTEA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX SOLCA

IN A CAREER that spans more than 50 years, Lee Ritenour has played on tracks recorded by some of music's biggest names. Aretha Franklin, Joe Henderson, Quincy Jones, Dizzy Gillespie, B.B. King, David "Fathead" Newman, George Benson, Pink Floyd — those are just some of the artists Ritenour has worked with. Along

the way, he launched his own solo career in 1976 with the album *First Course*, performed as a member of Barry White's Love Unlimited Orchestra, and recorded three chart-topping albums with the smooth-jazz group Fourplay. He's also become known for playing a red dot-neck Gibson ES-335 that he's used throughout his career.



Growing up in L.A. in the 1960s, Ritenour began playing guitar at age eight, and by about the age of 15 had cut what he calls his “first big one,” a demo session with the Mamas and the Papas. By his own estimation Ritenour has recorded approximately 45 albums, yet until the release of his new record, *Dreamcatcher* (Mascot Label Group), he had never recorded a true solo album, one created without input from other musicians or producers. Made at his home studio in Marina del Rey, California, during the Covid-19 pandemic, *Dreamcatcher* finds him, for once, flying on his own. “People have been telling me for years, ‘Rit, you gotta make a solo guitar record,’” he relates. “In the past, I’ve always been the band guy, the ensemble guy, the collaborative-guitar-player guy. So this was the one project I hadn’t done. And this year, I knew it was time.”

**“EVERYTHING WAS THERE:
ABOUT 40 TO 50 AMPS,
MAYBE A HUNDRED GUITARS,
MUSIC FROM SINCE
I WAS 12 YEARS OLD”**

It certainly was. Covid-19 wasn’t the only thing the 69-year-old has had to deal with. In 2018, the house and studio he and his wife owned in Malibu burnt down in one of the fires that has ravaged California. “About 100 of my guitars went up in the fire, plus 40 amps, lots of music, the history of my whole career, pretty much,” Ritenour says. One week after, he had surgery to replace a heart valve. Afterward, Ritenour picked himself up and delivered one of the best albums of his career. “Those incidents and the support from my family and friends absolutely went into this music,” he says. “Making this record was a lifesaver for me.”

How long had you been planning to record a solo album?

I was thinking about doing this solo project as far back as 2017, and I’d been putting it together in my head for several years. I’ve done so many albums, and I love working with a band. I’m a collaborative guy, and I love to work with great musicians, so I never thought of myself as a solo artist. I’ve been gradually expanding the solo part of my live show where it is just me, and a lot of people were encouraging me to do something on my own, so I finally decided the time was right. After the fire, I had to start over in a rental house in Marina del Rey, where I set up a recording room from scratch. It felt like the time to finally get down to making the album.

Was recording the album part of a healing process after your upheavals and problems?

I think so. Not only did I lose the house and everything that was connected with that, but I had also installed a new studio there one year earlier, and I’d moved everything from another location in the city. Everything was there: about 40 to 50 amps, maybe a hundred guitars, music from since I was 12 years old. A lot of emotion went into this record, and it was a healing process. This year, 2020, was not only an incredible year in general but it also marked 60 years since I started to play the guitar. So for me, there was a lot of personal imagery and feeling.

Had you been preparing material for the album prior to recording it?

I started collecting ideas over a long period. I’ll sometimes put little pieces of music together and maybe have as many as 30 ideas on my phone while riding around on my bicycle, listening to



With his Gibson Les Paul made by Mike McGuire

them, thinking about how to develop them. As I was getting into it heavily toward the end of 2019, everything was going well, and we had a big tour planned. My idea was to finish it in between tours, but in March, Covid canceled everything, and I found myself at home for the rest of the year like everybody else. For me at that time, there is only one album that I could have worked on anyway. I couldn't have done a band album during those restrictions. Even my engineer of 40 years, Don Murray, couldn't come over, so I was completely on my own. Once I finally got into it and I actually started recording, I started to have a vision of how things were going to be. I got excited, because it was like recording a first album. That was the most delightful part for me — the fact that I could get challenged in that way was a really cool feeling.

Was it liberating to be solely responsible for everything?

It was exactly that. Well put. *[laughs]* Furthermore, I didn't have some record company asking me what I was doing or when I was delivering the record. I had signed a deal with Mascot, which was a new relationship. I'd been very much aware of them because of players like

Steve Lukather. When they called, it was good timing, so I was able to license the album to them. Creatively, it was completely up to me, which was also a unique feeling. My old habits still kicked in, though. I ended up producing a record rather than just recording a solo guitar. There was no way I was going to put 12 songs on there with just one sound. *[laughs]*

You lost an astounding amount of equipment in the fire. Did you lose any of your iconic guitars, like the ES-335?

That day, I was in my car, and my wife was in her car, and we were waiting near the beach to see how things were going to pan out. It became clear that most of the people had vacated earlier. I kept going to the house to check on things, then back to the safe area near the beach, and it was getting worse. Finally, we thought, Okay, maybe we'd better get out of there. We didn't grab that much, just a few clothes and my basic computer. I wondered which guitars I should take, and I grabbed my '49 [Gibson] L-5, my 335, a Les Paul, my classical Ramírez and a thousand-dollar Yamaha guitar that I liked the feel of and I'd been using to compose on. I didn't even take the most expensive guitars. I actually left a great Les Paul,



With his Yamaha NCX5

another L-5 and my Burns of London guitar that I'd had since I was 12. I just pulled out what I thought was important on that day, but I didn't actually think the fire was going to burn the house down. I walked away thinking I'll be back tomorrow. All those guitars, amps and effects. There were paintings on the wall that were iconic album covers. The music that was inside me still came with me, though. Everybody was so nice after the fire. Fender replaced some amps for me, Xotic built me a new pedalboard. Taylor, Boss, Yamaha, Mesa — they were all incredible.

The album cover features seven guitars. Were they the ones used for the album or the ones that you rescued?

While I did pull seven guitars from the fire, by the time I made the record, Roger Sadowsky had built me a new jazz guitar, Taylor supplied a baritone acoustic, and Yamaha had given me another great guitar. When I did the album cover, I wanted to do this dreamcatcher metaphor, but it was coincidental that it turned out to be seven guitars used on the album and seven guitars that I rescued.

"Dreamcatcher," the opening track, seems to capture so many of your influences in one song as they subtly weave around each other. Jazz,

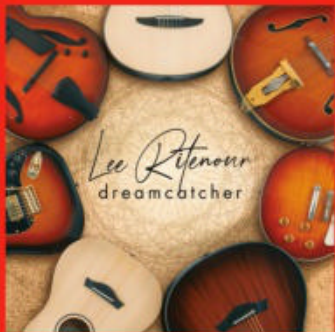
classical, blues and Brazilian music all make an appearance.

Yes, that's true. It wasn't the first song that I recorded for the album. I'd already done about six before I got to that. That was the first song, though, where I overdubbed another guitar part; the previous songs had all been exclusively one-guitar pieces. The original idea behind the whole album was to make it exclusively solo, with no overdubs. When I got to "Dreamcatcher," I started to come up with ideas, and it needed a second guitar part, which ended up being a lot of the melody. I used exactly the same sound on both guitar tracks. I played pretty sparsely, rather than overwhelming the song with layers of guitar.

The whole metaphor of the dreamcatcher was really very important for me. I was with Dave Grusin in Santa Fe at the end of 2019, where there's a lot of native American history, and there were a lot of dreamcatchers around. I got interested in the whole dreamcatcher idea, and I had this idea that the guitars were themselves the dreamcatchers.

"Charleston," the second track, builds on the feel of "Dreamcatcher," but it has a more traditional jazz guitar sound. The shifting pulses of the track with the propulsive riff and the straighter blues feel keeps the listener totally engaged.

THE GUITARS OF DREAMCATCHER



THE SEVEN GUITARS featured on the cover of *Dreamcatcher* each had a specific role to play in the album's sonic tapestry. While the Gibson L-5 and Les Paul were

rescued from the fire that took Ritenour's house, the other five guitars were new additions to his vastly depleted arsenal. Clockwise from the top, they are:

- Yamaha NCX5
- 1949 Gibson L-5: Bought for Lee by his father when Lee was a teenager.
- Gibson Les Paul: Made by Mike McGuire. "Mike and I go back to our teenage days, when we met and studied guitar with Duke Miller. Years later, he and Al Carness, also a student of Duke's, eventually took over Duke's store on Laurel Canyon in Studio City. That blossomed into their own store called Valley Arts and their own line of guitars. Mike went on to Gibson and made two incredible Les Pauls for me that I used on the [2010] *6 String Theory* record."
- Taylor Baritone acoustic
- Taylor acoustic high-strung
- Custom Xotic XSC-3 (with Roland MIDI pickup)
- Sadowsky SS-15



"Lighthouse" features some fantastic Wes Montgomery-style octave riffing.

He was a huge influence on me. The Lighthouse was a famous jazz club in California. It's still there, but it's called the Lighthouse Café, and they do a little more blues now. My dad would take me there to hear Wes when I was 13. I'd also hear people like Kenny Burrell, Freddie Hubbard and Cannonball Adderley. One day when I came up with the rhythmic pattern for "Lighthouse," I got out my '49 L-5 that my dad bought for me when I was 14, and it brought back all those elements. There is a Les Paul part on there, as well, which I recorded by D.I. through a Strymon Iridium [*Amp and IR Cab pedal*]. I also put two mics on the guitar strings, so there is a bit of rhythmic sound that you can hear as well, which took the Les Paul away from the traditional jazz sound. I was able to orchestrate it so that the two guitars were not competing with each other.

"I ONLY TOOK ONE LESSON WITH BARNEY KESSEL. HIS PERSONALITY WAS A LITTLE SCARY, BECAUSE HE WAS SO SERIOUS AND INTENSE"

Exactly. What went into the song were all those elements of great American rhythms of the U.S. South, even though there isn't really any blues in the song as such. I wanted to encapsulate everything that I loved best about all the different cultures of American music. Charleston is infamous for its connection to the beginnings of slavery. It isn't a city that I travel to very often, but I was there a few years ago. When I played there, it was my first visit in 20 years, and I was entranced by how mixed the audience was: Black and White, young and old. It was a very soulful crowd. Afterward, we went around the town, and to me it was the modern version of America. I'm sure I'd get some pushback on that from the people who live there. [laughs]



You revisited your old song “Morning Glory” on “Morning Glory Jam.” What made you choose it?

I wasn’t going to put any older material on the record, because five years ago I recorded *A Twist of Rit*, which was an album full of reworked songs from my career. I kept thinking about how one of my strengths — and something people remarked upon — was my rhythm-guitar playing. I love rhythm guitar, and it is quite an overlooked art. For some reason, “Morning Glory” came to mind, and I thought about ending the song with a straightforward kind of rhythm-guitar jam. There is no soloing at the end; it is just four rhythm guitars jamming together. It reminded me of what we used to do on the old Barry White sessions. On the final track, you would not be able to hear the guitars that clearly underneath the voice, the strings, the reverb and whatever, but they were such fun to record. There would be me, Jay Graydon, Dean Parks, David T. Walker and Ray Parker Jr., and we’d all be lined up in a row. Barry White would come up to each of us and sing what he wanted us to play. Some day someone should release those rhythm tracks, because they were really great.

“Abbot Kinney” really jolts the listener with its loud, distorted blues lines. It’s so unexpected after the tracks that preceded it.

When the pandemic happened and everything got shut down, you’d see pictures of deserted big-city streets. One day, I decided I was just going to go for a ride on my bicycle, and I rode over to Abbot Kinney Boulevard [*in Los Angeles*], and I was shocked by how empty it was, as it was such a popular busy street. I was sitting there on my bike having a break and a drink of water when I suddenly heard this loud electric guitar coming from a building. It just sounded like someone was really commenting on things, as if to say, “Fuck it,” you know? It just inspired me, and when I got back home, I couldn’t get the feeling out of my head, and I realized that I had never ever done a distortion solo-guitar piece. There’s a little more delay and reverb on this one, because I wanted to replicate the way that guitar sounded to me, bouncing across the street when I was sitting on my bike.

When you were young, your dad got you some lessons with Joe Pass and Barney Kessel. What kinds of things did you learn from them?

Even at 12 years old we had Wes, Howard Roberts and Joe Pass albums, you know? I said to my dad how cool it would be to get a lesson from Joe, and my dad just found his number in the book and called him up. [*laughs*] Back in those days, everybody was listed in the phone book. We went to his house a couple of times, and in fact he became a friend for many years. I asked Joe, “Mr. Pass, can you teach me to improvise like you?” He would tell me what scales would work over what chord. I’d say to him, “But Mr. Pass, you don’t sound like you’re thinking of scales when you play.” He said, “Well, I don’t, really. Watch me, and if there’s something you like, I’ll show you how to do it.” He wasn’t a teacher teacher; he was a brilliant guitarist.

Barney Kessel was very interesting. I only took one lesson with Barney. His personality was a little scary, because he was so serious and intense. [*laughs*] He said to me that he was too busy to teach, really, but it looked like I had some talent, so he said he’d recommend to me the best jazz guitar teacher in L.A., and that was Duke Miller. Duke was an incredible teacher. For example, we didn’t have chord books; he would have me write my own chord book. He’d teach me a triad, then he’d have me go home and write down every chord I could imagine from it. I’ve realized throughout my lifetime with the guitar what a great visionary and teacher Duke was.

As you say, you’ve been playing for 60 years. What do you think has changed and developed in your own playing? What is different from 20 or 30 years ago?

Well, I was this ubiquitous studio musician, and when I started out, stylistically, I could sound pretty much like any other guitarist and I could fit into any kind of music. When I started to make my own albums, I was really afraid, because I didn’t think I had my own style. After that very first album in 1976 [*First Course*], I went back and listened to it a few years later and realized the Lee Ritenour sound was already there. The variety that I loved — be it Brazilian music, rock, jazz, fusion, classical and blues — all factored into my playing.

I’ve been able to change with the times. If you want to be a professional musician, you want to be able to do it for a lifetime. That means you have to be able to have depth. If you are only able to do one thing, when that one thing goes out of style, it’s over. The key is to keep fresh, keep changing, and keep finding challenges. This solo album was a challenge for me.

“FOR 80 PERCENT OF THE SESSIONS THAT WE ALL WORKED ON, MOST OF THE MUSIC WASN’T VERY GOOD”



Given how many years you spent working as a first-call session guitarist, what was the secret to playing on tracks that you didn't particularly like very much?

You have to understand that for 80 percent of the sessions that we all worked on, most of the music wasn't very good. [laughs] When someone interviews a famous studio musician and they say they worked with Michael Jackson or Pink Floyd or whoever, they're the easy ones. There is a craft. It's a case of thinking, Let's see what I can do to find a way to make this song sound better and maybe make this artist sound better. If I was playing with a live rhythm section, most of the time they would all be great musicians, and so that was always a joy anyway.

The internet is full of people with great technical skills these days, but not necessarily with great musicality. What do you think someone should do to bring some soul to their playing? How does a musician find their own voice?

Anywhere in the world now, you can hear a five-year-old copying someone's astounding solo

perfectly, and they'll have a million views on YouTube. However, does that little kid who is copying a Jeff Beck solo know what Jeff did to get that? The depth that goes into creating your own style and your own voice is much, much harder to achieve. I think using the culture of where you come from is one key to finding a unique voice, drawing on whatever music is indigenous to where you are. The other important thing is to compose your own music. That is probably the best way to find out who you are and to make more of an identity for yourself.

I always say the genius is in the conception, not the execution.

Yes, very much so. It's like a lot of people say about things: "Well, that's not so hard!" [laughs] Not a single lick that I play on this album is that hard to play. Technically, it's not so hard compared to what a lot of people can play. However, creating 12 songs that can hold your attention and make an interesting statement, that maybe take you on an emotional journey — that's not easy. 🎸



TREASURE TROVE

On *Songs You Don't Know by Heart*, Jimmy Buffett returns to his folk roots to recut deep gems from his catalog.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE SKARRATT

JIMMY BUFFETT HAS amassed an impressive bounty of instruments over 50 years, and the legendary troubadour and buccaneer dug into his trove to render his latest acoustic endeavor, *Songs You Don't Know by Heart* (Mailboat). The title is a play on his ubiquitous greatest-hits collection, *Songs You Know by Heart*, an apt title for most listeners whether they're a Buffett denier or a true-blue Parrothead aware of his every tune. The guitarist's diehard fans voted for the nuggets on this latest album, which reimagines deep catalog cuts. *Songs You Don't Know by Heart* is the perfect album for every banana-bar minstrel who has sung "Margaritaville" or "Cheeseburger in Paradise" wishing they could turn the audience on to hipper choices from Buffett's catalog. It's also ideal for anyone who has dug Buffett's imaginative songwriting but lost touch with it over time as the musician became overshadowed by his island image.

Buffett has great affection for accomplished string slingers and is actually quite the guitar aficionado. Slide

master Sonny Landreth is often seen playing with Jimmy's Coral Reefer Band in New Orleans at Jazz Fest (he jokingly refers to himself as the band's unofficial mascot), and Buffett employs a pair of aces: Lead Reefer Peter Mayer and multi-instrumentalist Mac McAnally, both of whom have been in tow since 1989 and 1994, respectively, ripping salty licks and creating cool currents around Buffett's bedrock rhythms. Along with percussionist Eric Darken, they help transform full-band arrangements into compelling scaled-down renditions. McAnally produced the recording and plays a boatload of stringed things on it, including mandolin, ukulele and an Avante Gryphon 12-string terz guitar.

**"I ONLY KNEW THE
THREE CHORDS THAT
A COLLEGE ROOMMATE
TAUGHT ME, BUT I COULD
DRAW A CROWD AT
SORORITY PARTIES"**

ancient classical Martin. "Something So Feminine About a Mandolin" is simply delightful.

Vividly documenting player life has paid off handsomely for Jimmy Buffett.

Mayer tears up "Woman Goin' Crazy on Caroline Street" and drips with delicacy on "The Night I Painted the Sky." Buffett puts his own sea-worthy solo on "Tonight I Just Need My Guitar," a lovely tune inspired by an



Buffett plays his Martin 0000 made of sinker mahogany from Belize.

Today, he's a lifestyle brand, making it easy to forget that he paid his dues slugging it out as a folk singer in countless sweaty dive bars. Thanks to input from his rabid fans and the shepherding of this Covid-era jewel by his daughter, filmmaker Delaney Buffett, *Songs You Don't Know by Heart* is a welcome reminder of genuine Jimmy, unencumbered by "Margaritaville" marketing. Despite having an empire with his name emblazoned on everything from restaurants to vacation resorts, and having done four short runs of signature Martins, Buffett isn't constrained to a particular musical endorsement. He works with a wide variety of gear, including vintage acoustic instruments and a custom Benedetto archtop, and he



raves about modern marvels like the Fender Acoustasonic Telecaster and Kemper Profiler modeling amp. Think you already know all you need to know about Jimmy Buffett? Read on, player.

Can you provide some insights into your early playing days that inform your acoustic approach?

Well, I guess I'll use the F-word right off the bat and say that the whole thing started because I was in fact a folkie. There were great venues and bands where I grew up on the Gulf Coast. I set my sights on doing that, figuring it beat the hell out of anything else I had on the horizon. I only knew the three chords that a college roommate taught me, but I could draw a crowd at sorority parties.

The pure joy of learning those three chords and seeing that reaction, it was like solo flying as a pilot. You can hear about it, but you don't fully understand or appreciate it until you do it. I eventually became interested in electric guitar, but in those early years I was focused on improving my acoustic playing and the kind of guitar I played. The top of acoustic guitar heaven in 1967 was a Martin D-28. I'd see players in bands like the Journeymen playing beautiful-sounding D-28s at the Bayou Room in New Orleans, and I figured if I could achieve that, hell, I'd have made it. I started out on a Stella 12-string and then had a Goya that I played for a long time. I got my first Martin when I became a headliner at that same club

many years later. The D-28 was still out of my range. I bought a D-18 from Chappy's music store in Pascagoula, Mississippi, because it was \$20 cheaper there than at Werlein's in New Orleans.

So it was about getting a great guitar rather than actually becoming a great guitar player?

Playing folk music didn't require a ton of technique. The instrumental section may have been four bars, and I've always had better players cover that aspect, including my partner at the time. I focused on being a good rhythm player, which I needed to be in order to make people dance without a rhythm section. Listening to the simple but funky second-line stuff from street bands in



New Orleans as well as the jazz rhythm players there made a big impact. But I mostly wanted to use the guitar to write songs like Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell and Judy Collins. I was interested in the one- and two-finger versions of chords that can be found on the top few strings. I use them a lot in transitions from section to section. Fred Neil's "Everybody's Talkin'" is a good example. I remember finding a book and learning all those little D-chord variations. I also remember working out how to play the licks on Dylan's "She Belongs to Me," and I still play that one. I'll drop the pick and play a basic fingerstyle with my thumb and index finger when I want to use the thumb on little walk-downs like the one that starts off my new record on "I Have Found Me a Home."

Peter Mayer and Mac McAnally do an exquisite job handling the fancier licks with all sorts of interesting tones, and isn't it nice to incorporate such an arsenal of your own acoustic instruments on an album?

If you look at the long list of Coral

Reefer guitar players, I've found some great players. I didn't want to be a member of the band. I decided long ago that it was a better use of my talents to write songs, put shows together and run the band. I was able to do that because I was the only one with an account at the music store to buy the P.A. system. [laughs] I've been able to acquire quite a guitar collection as well. As a flyer, it's nice to have an arsenal. I think of them as wingmen.

Did you write most of your seminal stuff on a particular guitar?

Yeah, it's a Martin D-28, and I used it to play a couple of tracks on the new record. I've got a big collection, and in pandemic world I've been able to play everything, remembering stories of songs written on certain guitars in certain places. I remember exactly when that D-28 came into my life because it was 1969 when I moved to Nashville to make my claim to fame. I had a 12-string D-18 that was stolen out of the Holiday Inn parking lot the first night I got to town. Luckily, I had insurance, and I bought the D-28 [new] that we came to

call the "Rancho Deluxe" Martin because it has a painting by Russell Chatham on it. That came around the time of *Rancho Deluxe* [the 1975 movie starring Jeff Bridges and featuring a Buffett soundtrack], and there could have been some hallucinogens involved. I was looking for a painting of a mermaid, but it turned out looking more like the girl on the Herbal Essence shampoo bottle. I wrote "Margaritaville" on that guitar, as well as a lot of other songs leading up to *A White Sportcoat and a Pink Crustacean* and *Living and Dying in 3/4 Time*. It's still one of my favorite guitars to play.

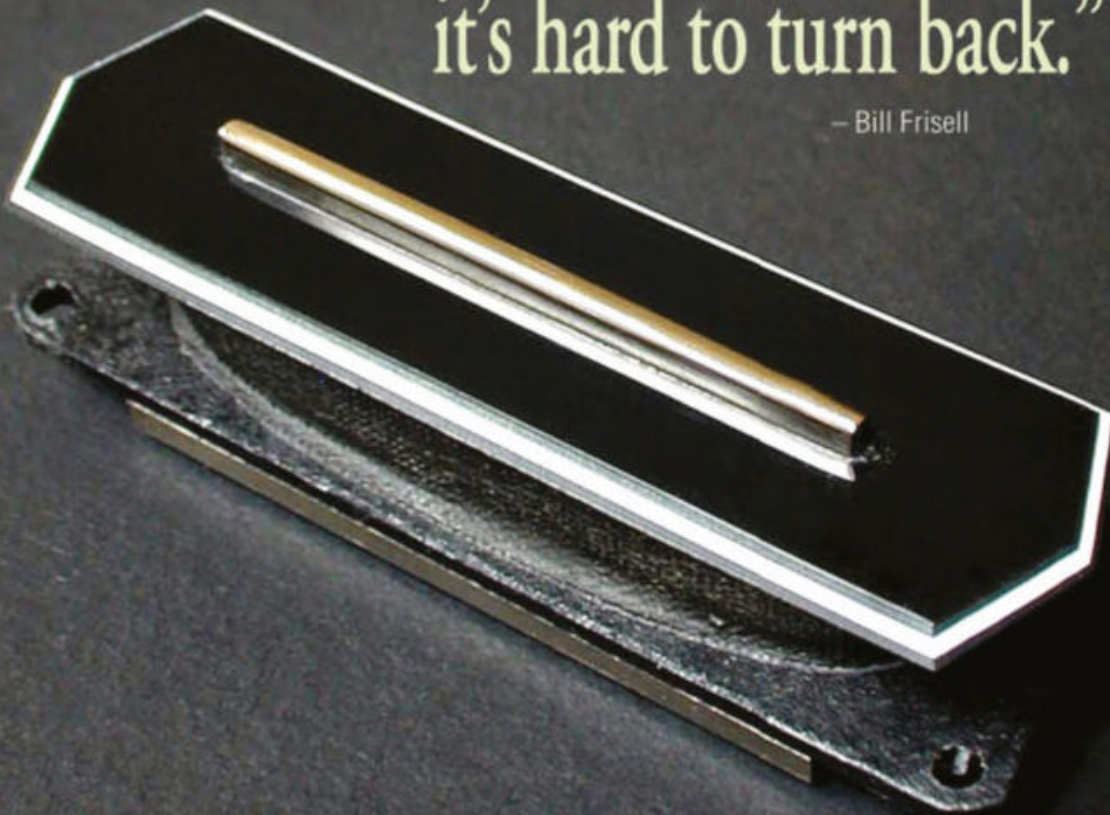
Can you remember which tracks you played it on for the current album?

There are studio videos we're going to post later, but it's hard for me to say now, because we set out a bunch of guitars and I grabbed whichever one was right, based on a sound or a story. For example, I've got an 1848 Martin gut-string guitar that pre-dates Pennsylvania, when Martin was in New York. It has violin-style friction tuners made of ivory. It's hard to keep in tune, but I used it on "Tonight I Just Need My

Lollar

“Once you’ve had a taste,
it’s hard to turn back.”

— Bill Frisell



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Guitar,” and that has one of my few-and-far-between guitar solos. The point of the song originally was that I’d just got that guitar and I knew I’d never take it on the road because it’s so valuable, but I wanted to play it in the studio. So Mac and I finished “Tonight I Just Need My Guitar” in order to play that Martin on it when we did the *Far Side of the World* album in Nashville [recorded in 2001].

I picked up a 1951 Martin D-18 in Paris eight or nine years ago from one of the stores on Rue de la Guitare and wrote a song afterwards. I had talked to Mark Knopfler, and one of his favorite guitars is a D-18 from the same era. Mark played the solo on his D-18 for the recording of “Rue de la Guitare” [on *Buffett’s 2013 release Songs From St. Somewhere*]. That song isn’t on this record, but the guitar is. I appreciate guitars that have stories, but I used the 1939 Gibson J-100 that Mac got me for my birthday because it sounds so good banging away on “Caroline Street.”

What’s the story of the ukulele you play on “Peanut Butter Conspiracy”?

That’s the rarest piece I have. It’s a Martin ukulele from the 1930s. I love to visit Martin just to look at the craftsmanship and be in that environment. The Martin Museum is one of the most amazing places a guitar player can visit and is truly worth the pilgrimage to Nazareth, PA. When I was there, they let me play the Konter Uke that went to the North Pole on the [1926] Admiral Byrd expedition, and mine is a soprano ukulele similar to that one. When I told them what I had, they told me to make sure and take good care because that’s a very expensive ukulele! [Read GP’s review of the Konter Ukulele replica in the May 2019 issue]. Right now I’m playing around with a new low-priced Fender ukulele.

Fender’s Fullerton uke just made our list of top gear from 2020. Is that the one you’re playing?

“I WROTE ‘MARGARITAVILLE’ ON THAT GUITAR. IT’S STILL ONE OF MY FAVORITES TO PLAY”

Yeah. Mine’s shaped like a Stratocaster, and I’m going to take it to film a segment for Anderson Cooper and Andy Cohen’s [2020] New Year’s Eve broadcast on CNN. It looks cool, and the pickup makes it sound great plugged in. Fender is doing imaginative things, and we have a good relationship where I do some consulting. Guitar builders have to do more than bend wood these days.

In the background of the video for “The Night I Painted the Sky,” there is a Fender Acoustasonic Telecaster. Are you using that in your live show?

Yeah, I love that guitar because I’ve always been a Telecaster guy, and it really does sound acoustic with the flip of a switch. The Acoustasonic is the best bargain out there in the guitar world when you consider everything it does. That’s what I’d go for if I were a solo performer these days. My main stage guitar is the latest signature model we did with Martin a few years ago, the black Jimmy Buffett Custom, with the palm tree on the headstock. The whole idea was to do something I would play onstage. I think they made about 100 of them that sold immediately, so there was never a marketing platform. My amp is

the Kemper Profiler. I make profiles using all those great guitars in my studio, and then use them with my stage guitars.

What’s your desert island guitar?

A Martin 00-18, because it’s small and sturdy and made of all mahogany, which doesn’t warp as easily as rosewood or spruce. A mahogany guitar goes with a boat. I actually had an old 00-18 on my first boat, and I wrote a lot of songs on that guitar, but it got stolen on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean. Dan Fogelberg was on the boat with me. We went into the harbor and somebody stole my guitar. Then we found a guitar maker on the island who was making funky guitars, and I bought one. Fogelberg and I wrote a song about that called “Domino College.”

You’ve certainly got the stories to back up your songs, and it’s refreshing to hear the deep cuts from your old albums in a new way.

It would have been easy enough to do “Margaritaville” using the guitar I wrote it on, but that wasn’t one of the requests for the songs you don’t know by heart. I had to go back and learn songs that I’d written, because I didn’t know them by heart. There was a whole lot of fun in the process of being challenged by my own fans to go back and play songs I hadn’t played onstage in 30 years. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARTIN GUITAR MUSEUM



Buffett’s Martin Guitar Museum display includes his 1997 HD-18JB, 2010 LX, 2003 000-JBP “Pollywog,” 2003 000-JBS “Shellback,” 1974 D-28 and a pair of 2017 HD-28V models.

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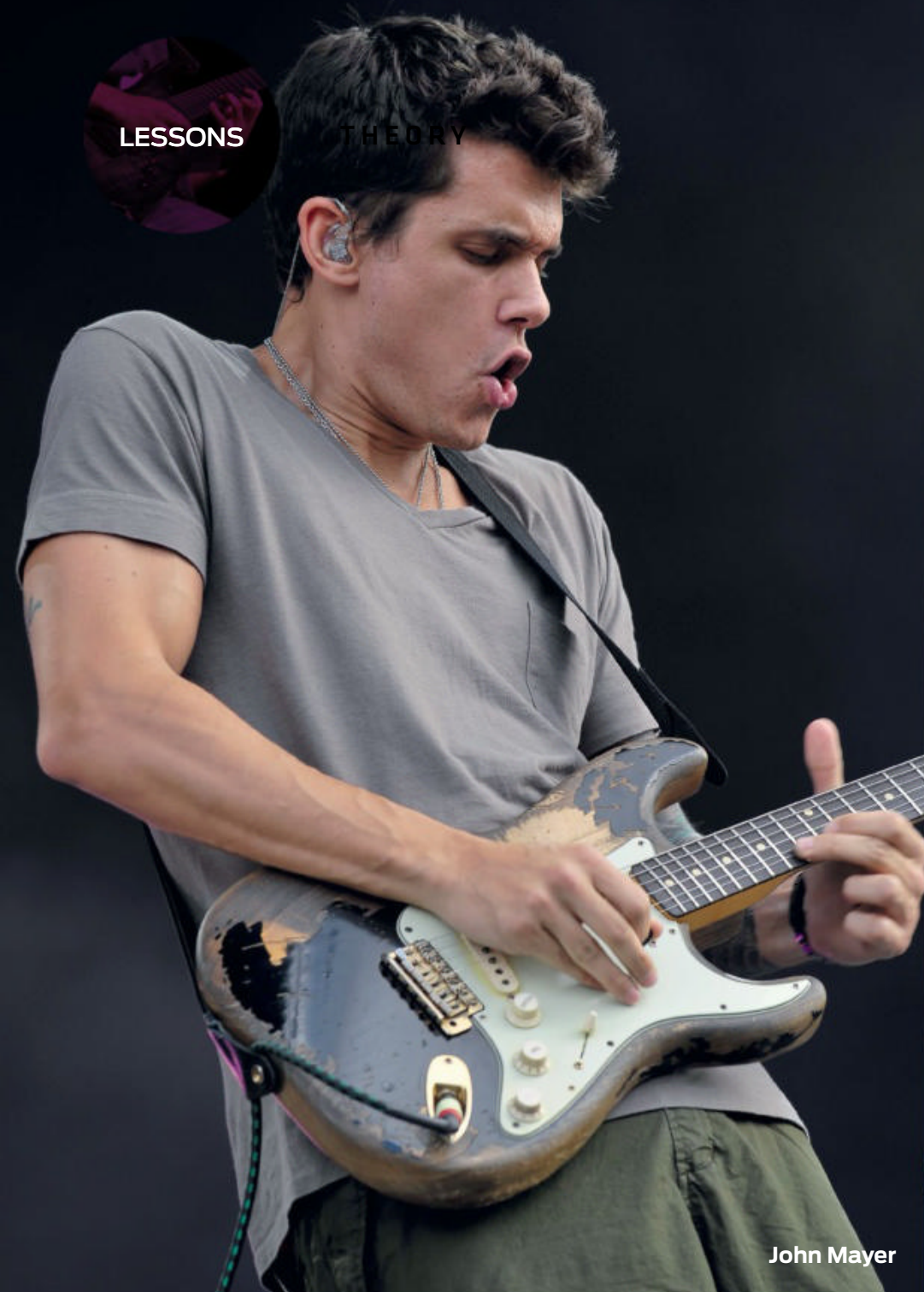


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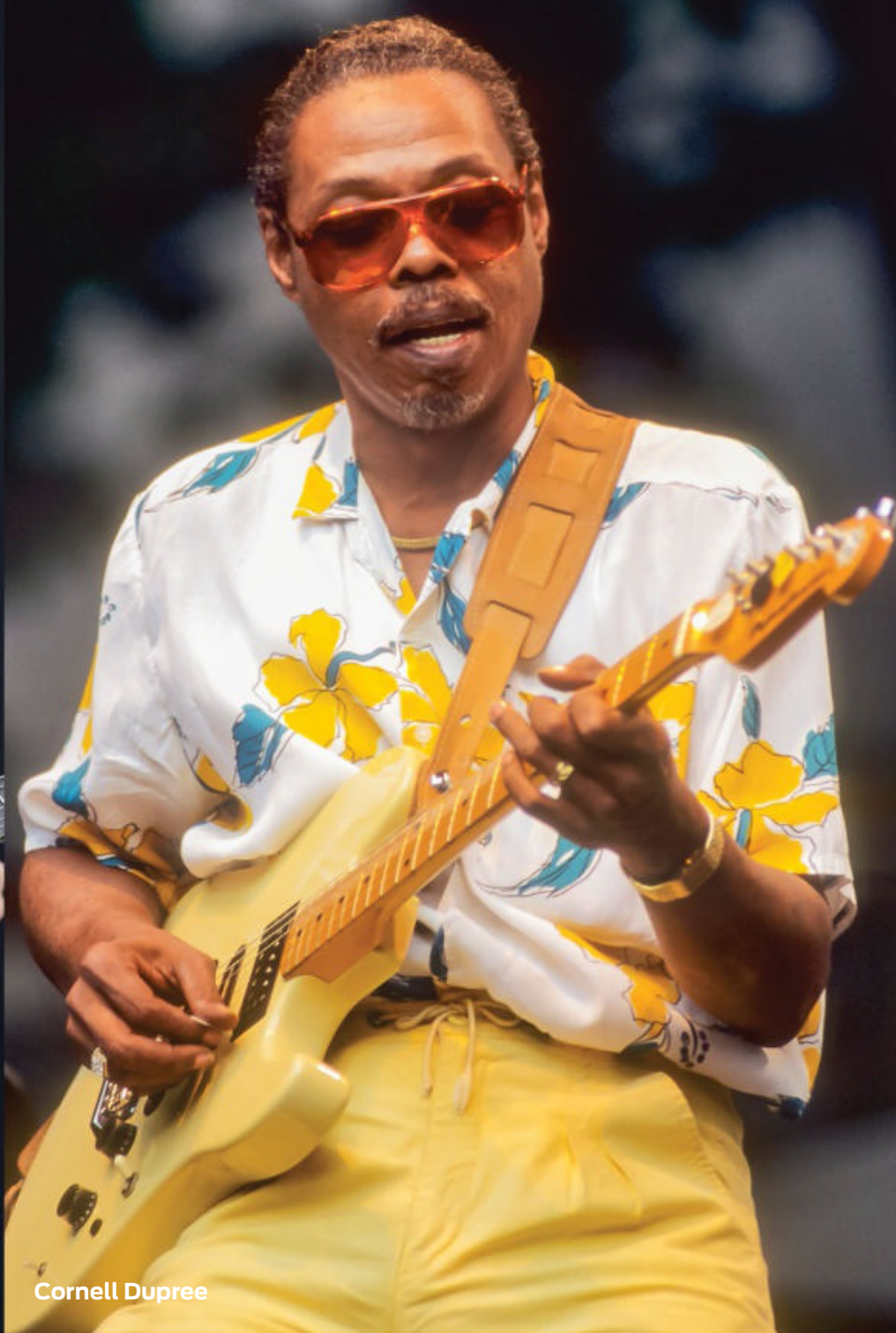
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Pentatonic Substitutions, Part 1

Learn some new and musically colorful applications of a familiar scale.

BY TOM KOLB

DID YOU KNOW that every major and natural minor scale contains within its structure six different pentatonic scales — three major and three minor? Once understood and utilized, this multi-pentatonic awareness can open up the fretboard in many convenient and inventive ways. For starters, it can help you break out of the uninspiring solitary-position-playing rut, sending your fingers to places on the fretboard you never thought they could go. It can also help you create unusual-sounding, “off the beaten path” phrases and easily

craft melodic and rhythmic motifs. It can even open the floodgates for “inside/outside” passages.

In this two-part lesson, I’ll explain and demonstrate how this can be done in appealing ways that will hopefully inspire you to take the musical ball and run with it in new and interesting directions. This first installment will cover the foundation of the overlapping interrelationships between pentatonic scales and major and natural minor scales, and include examples in the styles of various players. Next month, in

Part 2, we’ll look at some cool ways that pentatonic licks can be used to create colorful modal implications.

PENTATONIC PATTERNS

We’ll begin by surveying the fretboard patterns that will be used in this lesson. **Examples 1a-e** illustrate the five minor pentatonic “box” patterns, or shapes, each having two notes per string. The circled notes are the roots, or tonics. This visualization allows the patterns to be easily moved to any key on the fretboard. For the purposes of this

lesson, the patterns are named 1mi through 5mi. It's important to note that the five patterns line up along the fretboard to form a chain of overlapping shapes, with the "upper" notes — meaning those closest to the guitar body — overlaying the "lower" notes — those closest to the nut — of the next higher pattern, as you can see here.

Examples 2a-e depict the major pentatonic patterns. These are labeled 1MA through 5MA to distinguish them from their minor pentatonic counterparts.

Looking at these two sets of examples and rows of shapes, notice that each major pentatonic shape resembles that of the minor pentatonic one above and to the right of it, the only difference being the root-note orientation.

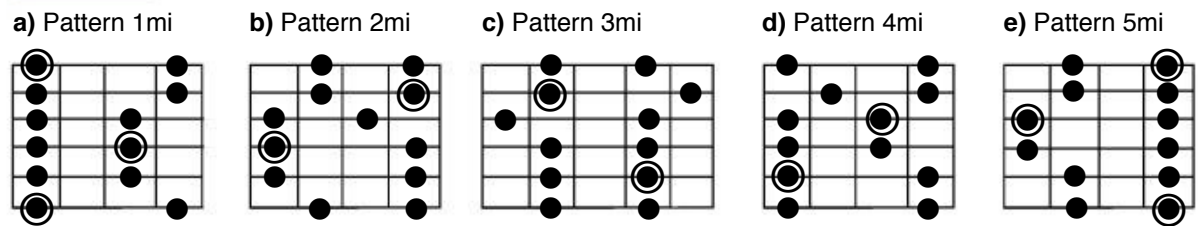
DIATONIC SUBSTITUTION THEORY

The basic principle of this lesson is that three minor pentatonic scales and three major pentatonic scales reside within every major scale and each of its modes. They all line up and correspond to the triad harmony of the first six steps of the major scale. Take the C major scale, for instance (C, D, E, F, G, A, B). The scale harmony is C (C, E, G), Dm (D, F, A), Em (E, G, B), F (F, A, C), G (G, B, D), Am (A, C, E), and Bdim (B, D, F). The pentatonic process comes into play in this manner: The major chords (I, IV and V: C, F and G, respectively) receive major pentatonics built from the root, and the minor chords (ii, iii and vi: Dm, Em and Am) align with minor pentatonic scales built from that root.

- I chord (C): C major pentatonic scale (C, D, E, G, A)
- ii chord (Dm): D minor pentatonic scale (D, F, G, A, C)
- iii chord (Em): E minor pentatonic scale (E, G, A, B, D)
- IV chord (F): F major pentatonic scale (F, G, A, C, D)
- V chord (G): G major pentatonic scale (G, A, B, D, E)
- vi chord (Am): A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G)
- vii chord (Bdim): B minor pentatonic with a flatted 5th (B, D, E, F, A)

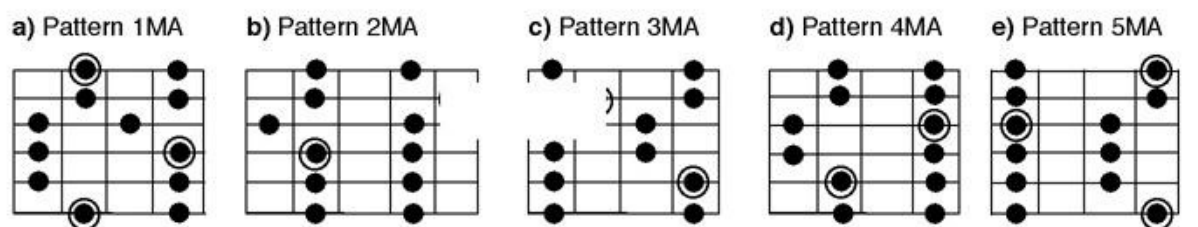
Ex. 1a-e

Minor Pentatonic Patterns



Ex. 2a-e

Major Pentatonic Patterns



Ex. 3

(neck single-coil pickup w/dist.)

♩ = 100

Am⁷

fret-hand fingering: 1 3 1 2 1 1 4 1 3 1 1 3 1 3 1 3

Viewing this same process from the perspective of the relative A natural minor scale (A, B, C, D, E, F, G), it stands to reason that there are also three minor pentatonics and three major pentatonics embedded within its structure:

- i chord (Am): A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G)
- iidim chord (Bdim): B minor pentatonic with a flatted 5th (B, D, E, F, A)
- bIII chord (C): C major pentatonic scale (C, D, E, G, A)
- iv chord (Dm): D minor pentatonic scale (D, F, G, A, C)
- v chord (Em): E minor pentatonic scale (E, G, A, B, D)
- bVI chord (F): F major pentatonic scale (F, G, A, C, D)
- bVII chord (G): G major pentatonic scale (G, A, B, D, E)

This again translates to the minor chords (i, iv and v) corresponding to minor pentatonic scales, the major chords (bIII, bVI and bVII) aligning with major pentatonics, and the oddball biidim can be enveloped with an "adjusted" minor pentatonic scale that flats the 5th degree (b5).

Okay, that was the hard and tedious part. Now let's take this scale theory off the drawing board and into the woodshed.

PENTATONIC SUBSTITUTION TACTICS FOR THE NATURAL MINOR SCALE

Let's get rolling with some blues-rock licks all crafted from "Pattern 1mi" pentatonic scale patterns. For the sake of clarity and continuity, we'll stick to A natural minor scale tonalities based on the principles discussed above.



Ex. 3 begins life high up the neck in Pattern 1mi of the A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G), transposes down a 4th to the same pattern of E minor pentatonic (E, G, A, B, D) and reaches fruition a whole step down in (you guessed it) Pattern 1mi of the D minor pentatonic scale (D, F, G, A, C). Look back over the example and notice that every note of the A natural minor scale has been incorporated into the lick. In reality, the entire melody can be played using a 17th-position A natural minor scale pattern, but somehow it doesn't have quite the same effect. Try it out and be the judge.

Ex. 4 takes an opposite approach, traveling up the fretboard, pattern by pattern, from A minor pentatonic at the 5th fret, to D and E minor pentatonic at the 10th and 12th frets, respectively, culminating at the 17th fret in A minor pentatonic. This passage is based on 6th intervals, which can be tricky to plot out along the fretboard in standard fashion. By comparison, using this pentatonic process, it becomes almost a no-brainer.

Ex. 5 is a double-stop-fueled riff that zips up the neck along the A-D-G string set. As in the previous example, the A string is used to segue from pattern to pattern. Be careful not to let the notes barred with the index finger ring beyond their prescribed duration. Rather, roll your finger across the fretted notes, pressing firmly against a string only when picking it.

Ex. 6 is a hard-rocking, "super-legato" run that incorporates all manner of hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides. Notice that this phrase stays within the confines of "neighboring patterns" (close in proximity) of D and E minor pentatonic. Make sure to follow the fret-hand fingerings at the bottom of the TAB staff for maximum precision, and try an all-downstroke attack for extra oomph.

Ex. 7 is a shape-oriented phrase based on an index-finger "roll-over" maneuver — from the 5th fret of the low E string to the 5th fret of the A string — that is replicated on different string sets in the subsequent patterns (the D and G strings at the 10th fret, and the G and B strings at the 12th fret). **Ex. 8** is another

Ex. 4

♩=92 (middle single-coil pickup w/dist.)

Am⁷

A minor penta Pattern 1mi | D minor penta Pattern 1mi | E minor penta Pattern 1mi | A minor penta Pattern 1mi

TAB: A 5 10 12 17; B 5-7 7-12 12-14 14-19

Fingerings: 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1

Ex. 5

♩=100 (bridge single-coil pickup w/dist.)

Am⁷

A minor penta Pattern 1mi | D minor penta Pattern 1mi | E minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi

TAB: A 5 5 5 7 5 10 10 10 12 12 12 14 12 12

Fingerings: 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1

Ex. 6

♩=110 (neck humbucker w/dist.)

Am⁷

E minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi | D minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi | E minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi

TAB: A 12-14-12 14-12 14-12 10-12 10-12 10-13 10 13-15-12 14-12 14-12 14-12

Fingerings: 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1

Ex. 7

♩=80 (neck single-coil pickup w/dist.)

Am⁷

A minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi | D minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi | E minor pentatonic Pattern 1mi

TAB: A 5 5 7 5 7-12 10 10-12 10-12 14 12 12-15 14

Fingerings: 1 1 3 1 1 3 3 1 1 3 1 3 1 1 4 3

Ex. 8

♩=70 (neck humbucker w/dist. & delay)

Am⁷

A minor penta Pattern 1mi | D minor penta Pattern 1mi | E minor penta Pat. 1mi | A minor penta Pat. 1mi

TAB: A 20 17 10 13 13 15 12 14 7 5 8

Fingerings: 4 3 1 3 4 1 3 1 4

Ex. 9♩=96 (bridge humbucker w/dist.)
Open strings are from E minor pentatonic open position Pat. 1mi

Am⁷

A minor penta Pat. 1mi | D minor penta Pat. 1mi | E minor penta Pat. 1mi

TAB: A 0-5-7 0-5-7 0-10-12 0-10-12 0-12-14

Fingerings: 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1

shape-oriented example. This one, however, stays put on the same string set (D-G-B) as it zigzags its way down the fretboard.

Ex. 9 is a flashy lick that couples a series of hammer-on maneuvers launched with open-string attacks. The hammer-ons lie within the Pattern 1mi boxes at the 5th, 10th and 12th frets. The launching pads are the “zero fret” notes of an open-position, E minor pentatonic “Pattern 1mi” box.

Wrapping up this A natural minor-based section, it’s important to note that, from a melodic aspect, the A minor pentatonic scale brings out the chord tones of an Am7 chord: the root (A), $\flat$ 3rd (C), 5th (E) and $\flat$ 7th (G), with the 4th, or 11th (D), serving as an added passing tone. The E minor pentatonic scale also contains the root, 5th, $\flat$ 7th and 4th of the Am7 chord but adds a 9th (B). The D minor pentatonic scale needs to be used with care here. Although it includes the strong chord tones of Am7, specifically the root, $\flat$ 3rd and $\flat$ 7th, it also houses the 4th and $\flat$ 6th (F), the latter of which can be the most “dangerous” chord tone to hang on in most situations and should be used with discretion.



Steve Cropper

MAJOR-SCALE APPLICATIONS

Let’s shift gears and explore some major tonality possibilities. **Ex. 10** is a sweet-sounding R&B-style offering that’s inspired by players such as Steve Cropper, Cornell Dupree and John Mayer

Ex. 10

$\text{♩} = 100$ (neck & bridge humbuckers w/overdrive)

E B/E A/E B/E E

E major pentatonic Pattern 1MA B major pentatonic Pattern 1MA A major pentatonic Pattern 1MA

12 12 14 12 12 14 13 8 7 7 9 7 8 6 5 7 5 5 7 5 7 6 4

1 3 1 3 2 2 1 3 1 2 2 1 2 1

Ex. 11

$\text{♩} = 104$ (neck humbucker w/dist.)

D A/C# Bm A

G major pentatonic Pattern 4MA D major pentatonic Pattern 1MA A major pentatonic Pattern 4MA Pattern 5MA

10 9 12 9 9 12 9 10 9 12 11 9 11 10 12 12 14 12 14 11 14 11 14 16 14 17 14 17

2 1 4 1 1 4 1 2 1 4 3 1 3 2 4 4 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 4 1 4

G Bm A D

(A major penta) (Pattern 5MA) Pat. 1MA Pat. 5MA Pat. 5MA Pat. 5MA Pat. 1MA

17 17 19 17 14 17 19 17 14 16 18 16 14 16 14 16 19 16

4 1 4 1 3 1 3 1 3 1

and features a chord progression based on the I (E), IV (A) and V (B) chords of the E major scale (E, F#, G#, A, B, C#, D#). The tonic (E) bass-note pedal tone reinforces the E major tonal center of the progression. The natural tendency is to start soloing with the complete E major scale, but the example opts for pentatonic substitution instead. As we witnessed with the previous minor pentatonic scales based on a minor key’s i, iv and v chords, this example employs the major pentatonics based on the I, IV and V chords of the major scale. In this case, we have E major pentatonic (E, F#, G#, B, C#), A major pentatonic (A, B, C#, E, F#) and B major pentatonic (B, C#, D#,

F#, G#). All the moves are molded from Pattern 1MA of each pentatonic scale (refer back to Ex. 2a).

Ex. 11 is a melodic rock example (think Eric Johnson, Neal Schon or Tom Scholz) that’s cast over an active chord progression harmonized from the D major scale (D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#). Here again, the I, IV and V major pentatonic scales — D major pentatonic (D, E, F#, A, B), G major pentatonic (G, A, B, D, E) and A major pentatonic (A, B, C#, E, F#) — are called into service. This is a carefully crafted passage that puts several patterns (1MA, 4MA and 5MA) into play. You can refer back to Examples 2a-e for visual aids to the patterns. ■



Open Country

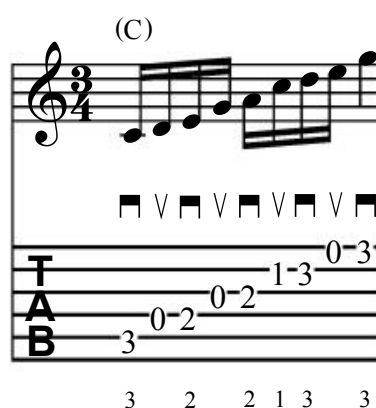
Harness the tonal power and fretless convenience of open strings in the style of country guitar greats like Vince Gill, Brent Mason and Albert Lee.

BY PATRICK BRENNAN

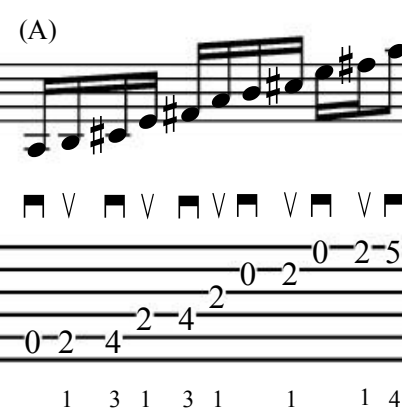
THE TASTEFUL APPLICATION of open-string licks is a cornerstone and hallmark of polished country lead-guitar playing, right up there with chicken pickin' and bending the strings of a Fender Telecaster. Every great country picker, from Chet Atkins to Brad Paisley, has a cache of open-string licks that they can employ at the drop of a hat in various guitar-friendly keys (namely the ones without "sharp" or "flat" in their name). Owing a considerable debt to the rolling banjos and cascading fiddles of bluegrass masters like Earl Scruggs and Kenny Baker, country guitar legends like James Burton and Albert Lee seamlessly wove open strings into the fabric of their technique, crafting blistering open-position runs and complexly layered melodies filled with chiming open notes. These cool-sounding techniques have influenced many other modern country lead guitarists, such as Brent Mason and Vince Gill, who have used them to create tastefully dazzling licks of their own.

In this lesson, we're going to dive into various approaches to harnessing open strings, including bluegrass-style 1st- and 2nd-position runs and the incorporation of open notes into patterns and shapes played past the 5th fret. Be sure to pay attention to the fret-hand and pick-hand fingerings indicated here, many of which are essential to performing the line as intended. Some exercises use basic flatpicking while others incorporate hybrid picking, in which certain notes are flatpicked and others are picked with the bare middle or ring finger, as indicated by the traditional Spanish abbreviations from classical guitar notation: m = middle finger, a = ring finger.

Ex. 1a



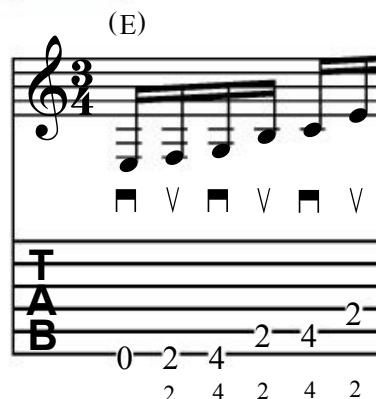
Ex. 1b



Ex. 1c



Ex. 1d



Ex. 1e



THE OPEN POSITION

Before we start learning licks, let's establish a solid foundation of open-string scale patterns, to better understand what makes the licks work musically and to give you the necessary point of reference and framework upon which to build your own country-style licks. We'll start with what many guitarists refer to as the "open position," which can be loosely defined as any fretboard shape or pattern that falls within the first four frets and includes the use of open strings. It's the bright and sparkly timbre of the open strings, paired with the nearly-as-bright-sound of notes played within the first few frets, that creates that signature bold, "twangy" tone that is so appealing to

many listeners' ears. Using your electric guitar's bridge pickup with a clean-ish amp tone, some reverb and compression is another contributing factor.

Examples 1a-e show a series of open-position major pentatonic scales in the keys of C, A, G, E, and D, using open strings wherever possible and closely overlapping the shapes of the corresponding open "cowboy chords" that are commonly associated with country music. The five-note major pentatonic scale is a subset of the seven-note major scale, as it includes the latter's 1st (root), 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th degrees. (The perfect 4th and major 7th are purposely omitted.) And the corresponding major chords, or triads, represent an even smaller subset of

notes, made up of just the 1st, 3rd and 5th scale degrees.

Country lead guitar, including acoustic bluegrass and electric playing, is as much about playing around the aforementioned major pentatonic scales, by adding chromatic passing tones, in the creation of smoothly contoured and memorable lines, similar to what you would also hear in jazz and blues.

Examples 2a-e take the five major pentatonic patterns presented previously and add tones commonly used by country guitarists to embellish them: namely, the 4th and minor, or “flatted,” 7th (♭7), which are derived from the Mixolydian mode (intervallically spelled 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ♭7), and the flatted 3rd (♭3) and flatted 5th (♭5) “blue notes” from the minor blues scale (1, ♭3, 4, ♭5, 5, ♭7). Each of these embellishing tones work well over another cornerstone of country music, the dominant 7th chord, which is intervallically spelled 1, 3, 5, ♭7. One scale that goes particularly well with a dominant 7th chord is the aforementioned Mixolydian mode, which, as you can see, includes all of the dominant 7th chord tones. And so, the C Mixolydian mode “works” over a C7 chord, G Mixolydian with G7, and so on.

In country lead guitar, as in blues, often the trick is to use the dominant 7th chord as a framework to build your phrasing around, adding chromatic tones to provide expressive melodic tension and resolving that tension by moving to the more stable chord tones. This type of sound is fundamental to country guitar, so you’ll be seeing it throughout the remaining exercises.

Ex. 3 is a thoughtfully contoured run that begins with a simple “C lick” that ascends the C major pentatonic scale (C, D, E, G, A) with the added ♭3, or #2, degree (D♯ in this case, which is the same note as E♭). That initial one-bar phrase is typically used to end a bluegrass tune in the key of C and melodically outlines the final C chord right before the whole ensemble plays it together in unison. But the run can also be found in countless electric country guitar solos, as a keen reference to country’s bluegrass roots. Bluegrass runs

Ex.2a

(C)

Ex.2b

(A)

Ex.2c

(G)

Ex. 2d

(E)

Ex. 2e

(D)

Ex. 3

(C7)

have many variations and can be played in any of the open major keys. There are numerous G runs, D runs, etc.

In bar 2, we perform a pair of half-step legato finger slides on the B string, from the 3rd fret to the 4th (the notes D and D♯), followed each time by the open high E string. Pitting the open

string against the fretted notes adds another half step to the chromatically ascending line and also creates an interesting tension when the open E note rings out against the fretted D♯, as the two notes briefly overlap and clash.

This tension continues in bar 3, as we pivot on the B string’s D♯ note before



sliding up to 6th position in bar 4, where we then descend what looks like an E $\flat$ major triad (E $\flat$, G, B $\flat$). But we're actually still implying a C7 sound here, with an added chromatic approach tone, D $\sharp$, preceding the open high E string. The lick ends after this with a slick, pedal-steel-style oblique bend on the G and high E strings. Although the B string is not played here, you'll want to barre your 4th finger across the top two strings, to ensure a solid "footing" for the high C note.

Ex. 4 is based around an E7 chord (E, G $\sharp$, B, D) and the embellished open E major pentatonic pattern from Ex. 2, additionally using notes from the parallel E Mixolydian mode (E, F $\sharp$, G $\sharp$, A, B, C $\sharp$, D) and E minor blues scale (E, G, A, B $\flat$, B, D). The first half of the phrase is a descending pattern that incorporates the use of hammer-ons and pull-offs to and from the open high E, B, G and D strings to frame and decorate the E7 chord sound, working our way down to the E root note on the D string's 2nd fret.

In bar 3, we repeat a three-note grouping, sliding from the 1st fret to the 2nd on the A string (A $\sharp$ to B) then playing the open D string. After this, we hammer-on from the low E string's 3rd fret to the 4th (G to G $\sharp$) then pull-off from E to D on the D string. The run concludes satisfyingly on the low E string, with a descending legato finger slide from G to F $\sharp$ followed by the open low E, which is picked.

Ex. 5 embellishes a G7 chord sound (G, B, D, F) with several chromatic inflections borrowed from the parallel G minor blues scale (G, B $\flat$, C, D $\flat$, D, F) and G major blues scale, which is G major pentatonic with the $\flat 3$ blue note added (G, A, B $\flat$, B, D, E), plus another "outside note," which we'll address momentarily. We begin by pivoting off the 5th of the chord, D, played on the B string's 3rd fret, which alternates with higher notes on the high E string (G, F and E). This is followed in beat 4 of bar 1 by a half-step-below approach to the D note, from the $\flat 5$, D $\flat$ (written here as C $\sharp$, the equivalent $\sharp 4$, to minimize the use of accidentals).

Bar 2 starts on that same D note, then drops down to B $\flat$ (the $\flat 3$) on the

Ex. 4

(E7)

Ex. 5

(G7)

3rd fret of the G string, after which we hammer-on from the open B string back up to D. After playing open high E, slide down the G string from B $\flat$ to A (3rd to 2nd fret) and pull-off to the open G note.

Bar 3 takes an interesting turn. As indicated, use your fret hand's 1st and 3rd fingers to fret a parallel, descending minor 3rd shape on the D and A strings, as you perform a chromatically descending arpeggio pattern that includes the open G string as a ringing common tone. Start by sliding from the 4th fret to the 5th on the A string to frame G7 using the notes D F and G. When you drop down a half step, you will play the notes C $\sharp$ E and G, briefly describing an A7 chord sound (A, C $\sharp$, E, G). In bar 4, we drop the two-finger shape another half step and add the 2nd finger on the 2nd fret of the G string to play the notes C, E $\flat$ and A, which imply a melancholy Cm6 sound (C, E $\flat$, G, A). We finish and resolve the line with an upward legato slide from A $\sharp$ to B on the A string (1st to 2nd fret), followed by the bright-sounding open G note.

These three exercises are indicative of the kinds of licks that work well in the open position. Use them to inform your explorations in this territory.

OPEN-STRING CASCADES

Now it's time to look beyond the open position. One of the most interesting and mind-blowing approaches to incorporating open strings into melodic licks and runs is the use of "cascading" open notes that ring out as you play fretted notes, bringing to mind the sound of a harp, or a piano with the sustain pedal engaged. This approach is difficult not only because it requires looking at the fretboard in a nonlinear way, but also because, most of the time, we guitarists are trying so hard to keep strings from ringing out that it feels almost counterintuitive to just let them ring out in our melodic phrasing. The best way to start working these ideas into your vocabulary is to integrate them into your scale routine.

Examples 6a-d depict a series of major scales – in the keys of C, G, D and A, respectively – with a bit of a twist. Each descending pattern is played with cascading open tones replacing fretted ones wherever possible. Notice in each one-bar example the use of hybrid picking when skipping strings, with the plectrum picking the fretted tones and the middle finger picking the open strings. Be sure to practice these scale

exercises slowly at first, making sure you let any open notes ring out as long as possible without inadvertently muting them. After you learn these patterns, feel free to experiment with substituting open strings for fretted notes in any other scale patterns you know.

Now let's look at some licks that explore these ideas. **Ex. 7** uses the C major scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) in an ascending pattern that starts out in 5th position with any available open note used. Notice, in bar 1, the appearance of the decorative chromatic approach tone D# (A string, 6th fret), which precedes the E note at the 7th fret.

In bar 2, we hold and arpeggiate the fretted notes D and F on the G and B strings' 7th and 6th frets, respectively, and let those notes ring with the open high E string, creating a tensely dissonant melodic cluster that resolves going into bar 3, as we let go of the F note on the B string and let the open B note ring as we slide from C to E on the G string (5th fret to 8th fret) and cap off the line by adding a high C note on the high E string's 8th fret.

This open-string "harp" technique works particularly well when applied to arpeggio-based patterns, as demonstrated in **Ex. 8**, which is based around an E7 arpeggio. Beginning in 7th position, we descend the arpeggio from its 5th, B, played on the 7th fret of the high E string, and proceed to move across the strings in a sort of zigzag pattern, using the open high E and B notes in place of their fretted counterparts and additionally adding the open G string as a chromatic $\flat 3$ -to-3 approach to the G# chord tone, played here on the 6th fret of the D string. The open notes give the phrase a richly textured, ringing sound that you can't quite match using only fretted notes.

From there, in bar 2, we descend the E Dorian mode (E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D) from the open G string, working in the open D and A strings before finally dropping down to 2nd position for a final G-to-G# note resolution on the 3rd and 4th frets of low E string that brings back the major-ness of the dominant-7th sound before ending on the E root.

Ex.6a

Ex.6b

Ex.7

Ex.8

Ex.9

Sweetly framing an A7 chord sound, **Ex. 9** is a bluesy lick that begins in 5th position. After starting on the A root

note on the high E string's 5th fret, we perform a half step pre-bend and release, from G to F#, on the 7th fret of the B

string before using the open high E as a pivot tone between a pair of chromatic hammer-ons played on the G string.

In bar 2, we use the open B and G strings in a mostly chromatic sequence that leads into a shift up to 7th position, where we describe an embellished D major chord (D, F#, A) in the melody, using the chromatic approach tone and lower-neighbor, F, before F# (8th fret to 9th on the A string) to add bluesy color. We then play octave D notes, using the open D string, before resolving to the A major chord tones A, C# and E in bar 3.

Our final offering, **Ex. 10**, revisits the key of G and features an interesting and technically challenging hybrid picking pattern that brings both the middle and ring fingers into play, along with flatpicked downstrokes and upstrokes, to perform a one-note-per-string pattern that's loosely based on what some refer to as a forward banjo roll. Again, note

Ex.10

(G7)

the incorporation of ringing open strings into the line, as well as chromatic approach tones and passing tones, which lend a bluesy quality to the melody while giving it a nice, smoothly rolling contour.

This is a common hybrid picking pattern employed by country guitarists. The twist here is that we're using our middle finger to pluck open strings throughout, and so each phrase begins

with two fretted tones played on descending adjacent strings. Again, be sure to let each string ring out as you move from one grouping to the next.

Practice each of these examples slowly at first and with a metronome to ensure rhythmic accuracy. Feel free to experiment and string various runs and melodic fragments together to fit over a single chord or chord changes. ■



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Pickup Pros and Cons

Understanding the two main types of acoustic pickups and how to amplify them.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

AS THE LINES between acoustic and electric guitars continue to blur, it's easy to get confused about pickup systems. Most players know that an acoustic with onboard electronics plugged into an electric guitar rig sounds bad, but relatively few players consider why. The following is a basic overview of the two main kinds of pickups relevant to acoustic players in need of amplification.

MAGNETIC SOUNDHOLE PRO/CON

The electromagnetic pickups commonly found on electric guitars can be used in the soundhole of an acoustic guitar, and they will sound pretty good through an electric-guitar amp because of the high impedance, low output and tight midrange focus. Use a direct box to convert a magnetic pickup to an appropriate level before sending it to a P.A. Active, battery-powered soundhole pickups can deliver more output and range than passive versions, but all magnetic pickups are generally designed with a middle focus. That focus, plus placement in the soundhole far from the bridge yields a tone that is more akin to the rhythm pickup on an electric.

Magnetic soundhole pickups usually add a distinct color to the sound. They don't capture soundboard vibrations, which are a huge factor in the hallmark of any acoustic instrument. Some players swear by the soundhole tone and appreciate how the attack starts softly

and blossoms, almost like striking a match. Others feel it lacks body and makes an acoustic sound like a cheap electric. Players who gig heavily like soundhole pickups because they're practically bulletproof, and it's a great idea to keep one in your gig bag.

One of the primary benefits or drawbacks, depending on how you look at it, has to do with installation. Soundhole pickups are rarely pre-installed on a guitar. You put it in when you need it, and take it out when you don't. Temporary installation can be a clunky affair, and leaves a cable dangling from the soundhole. Permanent installation is preferable for routine giggers, but that requires professional help and leaves you with a pickup blocking part of the soundhole, plus a heavier guitar. Audition a few before making that move.

UNDERSADDLE PIEZO PRO/CON

The piezoelectric pickup is ubiquitous on acoustic-electric guitars. It requires some form of preamp that, in the modern era, is usually onboard, features at least volume and tone controls, and is battery powered. The output jack is generally housed in the strap endpin. The transducer is most commonly a strip that's placed under the saddle, which is ideal for capturing the sound of all the strings transmitting vibrations into the bridge, which is set in the soundboard,

allowing a portion of those vibrations to transmit as well. All that information shooting into the bridge location yields a bright, forthright tone with a fast, in-your-face attack known to acoustic guitarists as the infamous piezo "quack." The sound is exaggerated when the player applies a significant attack, as the extra energy can overwhelm the pickup and result in audible signal compression.

A preamped piezo signal sounds fine when plugged straight into a P.A. because of its full-frequency range and appropriate level. Piezo pickups sound thin and tinny plugged into an electric-guitar rig because the amp isn't designed to handle its full-frequency range.

Piezo technology wasn't harnessed and applied to the acoustic guitar widely until the 1970s. Some of those early pickups sounded bad, but piezo pickup technology has grown by leaps and bounds, and these days even a relatively cheap undersaddle pickup can sound decent. High-end models tend to sound realistic, especially when coupled with good preamps and expanded upon in dual-systems that employ mics.

Whether you prefer the mellow, midfocused tone of a magnetic soundhole pickup or the bright, full-range tone of an undersaddle piezo, there's never been a more exciting time to be an acoustic-electric player, as a great range of options are available at all price points. ■

NEIL GODWIN



A Guild M-240E Troubadour acoustic fitted with a DeArmond Tone Boss soundhole pickup



PAF Repro Roundup

We tested five modern takes on the Holy Grail of humbuckers. Here's how they stacked up.

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

BELOVED FOR ITS dynamic touch sensitivity, clarity, openness, juicy harmonic richness, and an addictive blend of biting attack and forgiving compression, the original Gibson PAF — Patent Applied For — humbucker of the late 1950s has long been the Holy Grail of vintage pickups, and a challenge to reproduce. Several admirable re-creations have emerged in recent years, however, many of which are getting closer to cracking the code. We've rounded up several of these in the pages of *Guitar Player* in the past, usually logging a batch at a time every couple of years, and this issue brings us the latest such investigation.

Most makers today agree on the essential components and construction of the original PAFs, though some differ in the formulations of some of these parts. After all these years, there's still plenty of debate about which approach best achieves the desired PAF-like result. Do you source the most accurate components you can find, put them together in a way you determine to be closest to that used at Gibson in the late '50s, and trust that will get you there? Or do you let your ears guide you, and create "vintage-style" humbuckers that might not rigorously adhere to the recipe, but which are tuned by ear to sound like an acclaimed set of originals?



(clockwise from top left)
Bare Knuckles the Mule with aged nickel tops, Rocketfire Guitars 1959 set, ReWind Electric Creme Brûlée set, Cream T Pickups Super Scanner Series Billy F Gibbons Whiskerbuckers and Sunbear Pickups '59 SB-PAF Custom Hand-Aged set

This roundup evaluates pickups from makers that take both approaches. We should note that this is not intended as a shootout, as such, but as a roundup of products already deemed worthy of consideration, each of which likely offers characteristics that will prove best for some players out there.

All pickups below are priced as per a set of two, including covers, and were reviewed with two-conductor vintage-style wiring, though many makers offer four-conductor wiring where coil-splitting options are desired. Each of

these five sets falls broadly into what we might call the "medium-wind" category as regards DC resistance and relative output strength, although while that DCR measurement is given for all pickups, it is in no way an accurate indication of their power or sonic merits. All sets were tested in a 2019 Gibson Custom Shop 1958 Les Paul Reissue, with upgraded pots, tone caps and wiring, into a tweed-*Deluxe*-style 1x12 combo, a Friedman Small Box head and 2x12 cab, and a Fractal Axe-FX III into studio monitors.

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Bare Knuckle Pickups the Mule set

CONTACT bareknucklepickups.co.uk

PRICE \$340 street

REMARKS An appealing all-rounder with good balance and clarity, and enough harmonic hair around the notes to entice the ear.

BASED IN FALMOUTH, England, Bare Knuckle was formed by touring and studio guitarist Tim Mills back in 2003, and has risen to greater prominence in recent years as the company's reputation ascended. Bare Knuckle offers a wide range of pickups, but Mills tells us "the Mule humbuckers have been our best-selling humbuckers since I started the company. I modeled them on the best '59 PAFs I was able to play-test and analyze."

Period-correct construction details include a solid nickel-silver base plate and cover (lightly aged, in this case), nickel-plated slugs, Fillister-head #5 pole screws, sand-cast Alnico IV magnets, maple spacers, and butyrate bobbins wound with unequal turns of 42 AWG plain-enamel wire. The pickups are unpotted and measure 7.36k-ohms in the neck and 8.42k-ohms in the bridge. It's worth noting that Bare Knuckle also sells its own Custom Audio Taper CTS potentiometers, regarded by many as one of the better reproductions of vintage-taper pots available. The company supplied a set for our test guitar, and it delivered impressive results.

In use, the Mules presented an inspiring blend of clarity and thickness that was never



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dull or hazy, but put just a little fur around the note, while retaining plenty of bite in the attack. Their overall voice is certainly authentically "PAF-y," with perhaps a tweak toward a slightly euphonic creaminess that addresses what many players seek in a vintage-style humbucker, with that addictive slur in the transients that urges you to keep sliding and bending.

I found this set is pitched to perform well both clean and mean, without muddying up the former or lacking sting and aggression for the latter. Into overdrive, there's a tasty

enlivening of the harmonic spectrum, while other aspects of these pickups' clean personalities still shine through, with some added woodiness in the neck position, making it a lovely, expressive blues lead voice.

All in all, the Mules offer broad appeal, and one that most vintage-leaning players should find easy to like. Without implying they are a compromise in any way, they're simply a great snapshot of what many players seek when they go PAF hunting, with a musicality and touch sensitivity that makes it easy to forget the tone quest and just play.

Rocketfire Guitars 1959 set

CONTACT rocketfireguitars.com

PRICE \$385 street

REMARKS A tasty blend of compression and bite from both positions, with a particularly full, yet clear neck pickup and great marriage of personalities in the middle position.

NICK SORENSON FOUNDED Rocketfire Guitars in Missouri in 2004 mainly to build relic F-style guitars. He has arguably garnered even greater acclaim in recent years for his in-house pickups. Rocketfire Total '60s Strat pickups, as used in many popular Danocaster guitars and others, have long been a favorite of many players. Sorenson's PAF-style sets similarly capture magic for humbucker users.

"Our 1959 PAF-modeled pickups are not wax potted and are wound in a unique way



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that captures the wood and unplugged sound of the guitar,” Sorenson tells *GP*. “They have the same subtle compression that makes our Strat pickups sound the way they do. This is super important because it gives the highs crystal-clear definition without any harshness.” The test pickups have brushed-nickel covers and measure 7.85k-ohms in the neck and 8.58k-ohms in the bridge.

In addition to the list of period-correct components, Sorenson uses 42 AWG plain-enamel wire and both Alnico II and IV magnets. He’s particular about sourcing a variety of Alnico IV that avoids the anemic sound of some types while shunning what he hears as the harshness of some Alnico Vs.

“But I don’t divulge in what position I use each magnet,” he says. “There’s gotta be some mystery to all this.”

As per the premise, the 1959 set has that authentic PAF-like biting edge to the pick attack, but it’s couched in an overall blanket of slight compression that rounds off any potential ice-pickyness, and it’s enlivened by a very appealing harmonic swirl throughout. The bridge pickup is thick and muscular in the mids but with good sonic bloom and no hint of congestion, and just a little bit of creaminess without descending into mush.

Played clean, the neck is admirably tight even on the low E, yet with a succulent, throaty, three-dimensional quality that’s

delectably full. Into an overdriven amp, this translates to a guttural rumble that avoids mud or darkness, with enlivening sparkle amid the thickness. As a result, the middle position, through a clean amp, is a little richer and less hollow than some can be, and more an equal blend of bridge-position sting and neck-position warmth. It’s a super-versatile and a powerhouse setting where some humbucker sets can feel a little thin.

Overall, Rocketfire Guitars’ 1959 set displays a lot of personality and musicality, with a checklist of authentically PAF-like characteristics and appealing playability, aided by Sorenson’s nuanced blend of compression and bite.

Sunbear Pickups '59 SB-PAF Custom Hand-Aged set

CONTACT sunbearpickups.com

PRICE \$325 street

REMARKS Clarity forward with outstanding articulation from all positions, all while delivering appealing depth, body and harmonic sweetness.

A LONGTIME FRIEND and associate in the U.K. recently expressed his belief that Stuart Robson of the relatively newer maker Sunbear Pickups in Knebworth, England, was on to something special in the PAF department. On the strength of this '59 SB-PAF set, I'd say he wasn't wrong. Billed as “custom,” and including Robson’s tasty and realistic hand aging, this is what you’ll get if you request his current favorite take on an accurate 1959 PAF, with a neck pickup carrying an Alnico III magnet and wound to 7.24k-ohms, and an Alnico V bridge pickup wound to 8.32k-ohms, both unpotted. In addition to testing and selecting accurate components such as 1010 low-carbon steel for the pole screws and keeper bar, 1215 steel for the nonchamfered slug poles, brass bobbin mounting screws, low-charging rough-cast Alnico grades and other period-correct components, Robson has put a ton of thought and experimentation into coil winding.

“The winding of the coil is key to finding those PAF nuances,” he reveals. “Things like the vocal midrange ‘quack’ of the bridge pickup, the plummy lows and the airy, complex high-end seem intricately linked to the coil tension and the long internal lead wire that



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was a consistent quirk of PAFs, which creates an air gap at the center of the coil, and forces the first 500 or more turns of the coil into an unintentional scatter.”

To my ears, the Sunbear set had the most top-end sting of the bunch, with a slightly metallic “snick” from the highs at the front edge of the pick attack that’s characteristic of original PAFs. Folded into a round, balanced response overall, with tight bass and complex harmonic swirl through the midrange, this made for excellent clarity from both pickups into clean amps, and superb articulation into overdrive as well, putting bite at the front of lead runs and crispy sizzle into rhythm chords.

An extremely dynamic set, the Sunbear '59 SB-PAF pickups respond well to the guitar’s controls, easily rolling from aggressive upper-midrange snarl and meaty lower-midrange grunt when playing rock, to crystalline sparkle that shimmered over clean playing. Dialing down the bridge pickup’s tone control to seven or eight also opened up new depths in a warmer, rounder pickup that nailed yet another pleasing voice.

All told, the Sunbears are a great repro-PAF set that reminds us how many of the good vintage originals preface their juicy, plummy core with a lively, slicing attack that makes for attention-getting soloing.

Cream T Pickups Super Scanner Series

Billy F Gibbons Whiskerbuckers set

CONTACT creamtpickupsdirect.com

PRICE \$449 street

REMARKS Big, thick, delectable humbucker tones for those seeking the fatter end of the spectrum, yet still with excellent string articulation.

MANUFACTURED BY CREAM T pickups in Ormskirk, England, the BFG Whiskerbuckers are the first of the company's new Super Scanner series, produced following meticulous analysis of the original PAFs in — yes — Billy F. Gibbons' legendary 1959 Gibson Les Paul known as Pearly Gates, using Cream T's patented analog spectrum recorder. They ship in a deluxe presentation case that includes a Dunlop Rev. Willy Coricidin bottle-like slide, Rev. Willy strings and several picks. If your snake-oil alarm is going off already, bear with us. We had a thorough discussion of the process with its creator, Thomas Nilsen, and while it's too complex to go into here, suffice to say it produces an accurate electronic blueprint of the pickup's frequency response. That, along the impressive results, gives us no cause to doubt its veracity, and Nilsen's three-decade collaboration with Gibbons inspires further confidence.

"I created the Whiskerbuckers after I analyzed and got the whole frequency reading of the pickups in this particular guitar," Nilsen tells us. "And they sounded exactly the same when Billy did an A/B test. Analyzing the complete frequency range reveals unique dB in certain frequencies."

Given the aim of the Super Scanner process, Cream T isn't religiously vintage-correct about the pickups' build process,



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although most parts are appropriate to the period. Nilsen tells us Pearly Gates has different types and strengths of Alnico magnets in each of its pickups. "I can't give you the details on this matter, though," he explains. "It's recorded on special documents that are now locked in the bulletproof safe." Unlike most repro PAFs, the Whiskerbuckers are lightly potted within the bobbins only. They include bare nickel-silver covers (despite some early listings for aluminum), and the pickups measure 8.26k-ohms in the neck position and 8.21k-ohms in the bridge, matching the frequent imbalance of PAFs per position, as reflected in Pearly Gates' pickups.

The result of all this? The BFG Whiskerbuckers sound huge and, indeed, very much in line with Gibbons' own iconic tone,

while also being very authentic among the spectrum of fatter, juicier-sounding original PAFs. While it might at first seem a little unusual to have the neck pickup slightly outgunning the bridge pickup, you soon get used to working with that, and what a rich, meaty tone that neck position delivers, too. The bridge itself, though, is still delectably girthy, offering plenty of driven snarl and grind when you need it — along with good beefy twang into a clean amp — and it aces that cocked-wah lead sound with its tone control wound down a couple notches.

Put simply, the BFG Whiskerbuckers present an extremely satisfying blend of many of the tastiest characteristics of a slightly higher-wound PAF set, and sound massive in the process.

ReWind Electric Creme Brûlée set

CONTACT re-wind.net

PRICE \$520 street

REMARKS Impressively straddles the "clear and crisp" and "thick and creamy" tonalities, with meat and grunt from both positions, while never sacrificing articulation.

WHILE ALL THE better makers today have put a lot of thought into their PAF recipes, James Finnerty of ReWind Electric in Washington, Utah, has done enough research to write a book on the stuff. In fact, he and

co-author Mario Milan have done just that with their 2018 tome *The Gibson 'PAF' Humbucking Pickup: From Myth to Reality*.

"The Creme Brûlées are my favorite example of a long Alnico II-magnet, hotter-coils 1959 PAF," Finnerty says of the review set. "These capture what I was primarily after when I reluctantly started making my own pickups, chasing the sound and feel of many beautiful vintage examples that I got to experience through jobs working in studios and repair shops, and for collectors and dealers."

The use of period-correct components should go without saying, although while Gibson used a variety of magnet types — including Alnico II — in the originals, that choice here deserves a little explaining. "My custom Alnico II magnets have a bit more treble clarity and a less mushy low-end than most," Finnerty offers. "If someone has had bad experiences of Alnico IIs being dark and congested, they might enjoy mine in their rig, as they don't suffer from that problem. They do have the soft, chirpy compression in the upper mids, but the bass isn't flubby."



While \$520 per set might sound pretty expensive, it's worth noting that Finnerty puts a lot of effort into his custom-made nickel-silver covers, too, and an uncovered set is discounted to \$400. What's more, all parts are made in the USA to his custom alloys and formulations. The set's neck pickup reads 7.75k-ohms and the bridge 8.52k-ohms.

In use, the Creme Brûlées were bold and full, and also well balanced. A rich, thick humbucker in both positions, they never sacrifice clarity or string-to-string definition for the sake of luscious creaminess, which they deliver in abundance. The neck is throaty and warm, but without going woofy or dull, while the bridge presents a punchy quack with some sting in its attack and is another pickup that might even sound its best with the tone control wound down to seven or eight (again, a perfectly legitimate way to maximize a good PAF's potential). Together, they're a lush and versatile pairing in the middle position.



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Although they are a creamy, big-sounding version of the classic PAF, they also have plenty of crispness and top-end bite, which can be sharp and crystalline into a clean amp,

but which translates to a lot of complexity with some distortion applied. All in all, this is a classy, versatile and very authentically vintage-toned humbucker. 

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Electro-Harmonix

EDDY VIBRATO/CHORUS

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

I THINK WE can all agree Leo Fender is a god of the electric guitar world. Unfortunately, he's also something of a devil, having done more to sow confusion about vibrato and tremolo than any other human being.

To understand how, you need to know that tremolo is a fluctuation in volume, like rocking a volume pedal rapidly up and down, while vibrato is the fluctuation in pitch we recognize in singers, or Clapton's wiggling finger. Yet we often mix them up, largely because Leo regularly called the tremolo effect in his amps vibrato, and because the pitch-shifting, vibrato bar of a Fender Strat is still marketed as a tremolo system.

Vibrato was heard in the 1960s in the Magnatone 260 amps used by Lonnie Mack and Robert Ward. Boss released the effect in pedal form in 1982, but by then any popularity it had was history. Interest has increased in recent years, leading Boss to reissue it, as the VB-2W, and launching a variety of other vibrato pedals. The latest is the Electro-Harmonix Eddy, a bucket-brigade vibrato and chorus in a pedalboard-friendly package.

The Eddy features shape warping, which can transform the pedal's LFO modulator from

SPECIFICATIONS

Eddy Vibrato/Chorus

CONTACT ehx.com

PRICE \$99 street

CONTROLS Volume, shape, rate, depth, envelope and tone knobs. Vibrato/Chorus mode and rate/depth toggle switches

FEATURES Latching/momentary footswitch. Expression pedal input

BUILT Assembled in USA

KUDOS Lush, inspiring, analog vibrato and chorus sounds in a pedalboard-friendly package. Great price

CONCERNS None



a standard sine wave to something more asymmetric. As with most Electro-Harmonix effects, there are off-the-wall sounds on tap, but I found the classic sine-wave vibrato and chorus sounds are what this pedal does best.

Using the pedal's tone control to set a darker vibrato conjured up visions of Mack and Ward. Whether paired with Strat single-coils or Les Paul P-90s, the Eddy made every guitar I plugged into a Supro Comet or Fender Blues Junior sound expressively vocal. The all-analog signal path created a lush warble that somehow sounded vintage and modern at the same time.

"EHX's long history in creating bucket-brigade-based pedals goes all the way back to the Electric Mistress Flanger, the Memory Man Analog Delay and the Clone Theory Chorus/Vibrato," Electro-Harmonix founder Mike Matthews says. Speaking of the Clone Theory, in Chorus mode, with the tone turned up, the Eddy bore more resemblance to the cool 1990s Small Clone sound of Kurt Cobain than the dated modulation of the 1980s Ibanez Session-Man chorus.

In addition to the usual rate and depth knobs, the Eddy features an envelope control that allows varying degrees of dynamic control over those parameters. Initially, I couldn't get much response from it unless I hit the guitar really hard with a P-90 bridge pickup. EHX was aware of this issue and recommended using a boost pedal to help trigger the envelope. Once boosted, the envelope offered subtle, expressive shifts of rate or depth. By the time this review comes out, the Eddy pedal will have a trim pot for an internal boost. As an alternative, you can just plug in an expression pedal to vary rate or depth.

Combining chorus and vibrato effects in one pedal is easy, since vibrato is essentially chorus with the direct signal removed. What isn't easy is making it sound this good. Once I turned the Eddy on, I found it difficult to turn it off. That was true regardless of which mode I used, but it was especially the case with Vibrato. Whether playing modern electronica-style music or getting my Lonnie Mack "Memphis" on, the Eddy was inspiring, which is the highest praise a pedal can earn. 🎸



Fender

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER AND AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II TELECASTER DELUXE

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

THE AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II series are the latest evolution of guitars that have been updated to suit the needs of today's players. The series comprises two Stratocasters (standard and HSS), the Telecaster and Telecaster Deluxe, the vibrato-equipped Jazzmaster and five basses. For this review, we're focusing on the Strat and Tele Deluxe models, which were tested with a reissue Fender Deluxe Reverb (with hardwired circuitry by George Alessandro), a Mesa/Boogie Mark Five: 25 1x10 combo, and a selection of boost and distortion pedals from Xotic, Fulltone and Hermida.

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER

Resplendent in its Sienna Sunburst finish and off-white pickguard with matching knobs and pickup covers, this nicely made guitar sports a maple neck that's carved with what Fender calls a Deep C profile. It's more rounded on the back and designed to be even more comfortable than the previous "American" neck. The new silky smooth Super-Natural finish adds to the terrific playing feel of this neck, and sitting atop it is a 25.5-inch scale maple fingerboard that has a 9.5-inch radius, rolled edges, a nicely worked bone nut and 22 polished Narrow Tall

frets. Another update is a contoured heel that makes it easier than ever to reach the high positions, and a spot-on factory setup brings it all together for an excellent playing experience. The action is nice and low, string buzz is practically nonexistent, and the intonation is well dialed-in and musically tuneful in all registers.

Fender die-cast tuners help keep the pitch stable when using the vibrato, itself an upgraded two-point unit that features vintage-style bent-steel saddles, a cold-rolled-steel inertia block and a push-in bar. Set to float with three springs attached, it's buttery smooth and returns to pitch reliably. Played acoustically, this lightweight guitar sounds resonant and has quite good sustain considering that the bridge isn't locked down.

Designed by Fender's Tim Shaw, the V-Mod II pickups reportedly yield more clarity and definition than the prior V-Mod units, while retaining vintage-style single-coil chime and sparkle. They feed a master volume and two tone controls: one for the neck and middle pickups, and the other for the bridge.

The latter tone knob is also a push-push pot that adds the neck pickup to the fourth (middle/bridge) position, and fifth (bridge) position. Adding these robust-sounding combinations is a smart way to increase the flexibility of a guitar that already delivers exactly what's needed from a Strat: Deep, clear neck-pickup tones; a fat middle-pickup sound with a touch of twanginess; a bright, ballsy bridge tone; and two distinct flavors of clucky chime in positions two and four. The well-voiced tone



controls enable even darker textures to sound clear and non-muddy when turned down, and the volume control doesn't shave off the highs when rolled down.

All considered, the American Professional II Stratocaster is a well-sorted guitar that successfully delivers Fullerton-era vibe with

SPECIFICATIONS

American Professional II Stratocaster

CONTACT fender.com

PRICE \$1,599, molded hardshell case included

NUT WIDTH 1.685", bone

NECK Maple, Deep C profile, contoured heel
FRETBOARD Maple, 25.5" scale with 9.5" radius

FRETS 22 Narrow Tall

TUNERS Fender Standard die-cast

BODY Alder

BRIDGE 2-Point Synchronized Tremolo with cold-rolled steel block

PICKUPS Three Fender V-Mod II single-coils (also available in HSS version with a bridge humbucker)

CONTROLS Master volume, tone, tone (with push-push to add neck pickup), 5-way blade switch

EXTRAS Available in 3-Color Sunburst, Dark Night, Miami Blue, Mystic Surf Green, Olympic White, and Roasted Pine. All with either rosewood or maple fingerboards

FACTORY STRINGS Fender USA 250L .009-.042

WEIGHT 7.32 lbs (as tested)

BUILT USA

KUDOS A great-sounding Strat with updated neck, hardware and pickups. Push-push tone adds neck pickup to fourth (bridge/middle) and fifth (bridge) positions.

CONCERNS None



modern playability and tone. It's a guitar that's well worth trying out if you simply want a great-performing Strat, with the option of an HSS version available, if you desire a bridge humbucker.

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II TELECASTER DELUXE

Originally introduced in 1973, this twisted Tele packed two Seth Lover–designed “Wide Range” humbucking pickups and a Gibson-style setup of dual volume and tone controls and a three-way toggle. Fast forward to late 2020 and Fender introduces its latest rendition of this classic in the guise of the American Professional II Telecaster Deluxe. Our review model is finished in Mercury, with a rosewood fretboard, and is available in a variety of color and fretboard options.

The neck on this model has the same specs as the American Professional II Stratocaster (25.5-inch scale, 9.5-inch radius

SPECIFICATIONS

American Professional II Telecaster Deluxe

CONTACT fender.com

PRICE \$1,549, molded hardshell case included

NUT WIDTH 1.685", bone

NECK Maple Deep C profile, contoured heel

FRETBOARD Rosewood, 25.5" scale with 9.5" radius

FRETS 22 Narrow Tall

TUNERS Fender Standard die-cast

BODY Alder

BRIDGE Top-Load/String-Through Cut Tele bridge with three compensated brass saddles

PICKUPS Fender V-Mod II Double-Tap humbuckers

CONTROLS Two volume, two tone (each with push-push split-coil function), 3-way selector

FACTORY STRINGS Fender USA 250L .009–.042

EXTRAS Available in Miami Blue, Mystic Surf Green and Olympic White (with maple fretboards); 3-Color Sunburst, Dark Night and Mercury (with rosewood fretboards);

WEIGHT 7.94 lbs (as tested)

BUILT USA

KUDOS A sweet playing Tele with lots of tonal range thanks to the independent controls and coil-splitting functions

CONCERNS None

and 22 Narrow Tall frets), albeit the Tele Deluxe has the traditional wide, '70-style headstock. Otherwise, the playability is similarly excellent and is enhanced by the contoured heel and Super-Natural finish.

One of the most significant features of the American Professional II Telecaster Deluxe is its Top-Load/String-Through Cut Tele bridge, which has three compensated brass saddles. This design allows the strings to be loaded from the back in standard fashion, or from the top through holes drilled in the shortened (or cut) base plate.

Top-loading the strings reduces string tension, which Fender says makes this guitar more accommodating for rock playing. It might affect the sustain a bit, too, since the strings aren't coupled as tightly to the body, but some may prefer the slightly looser playing feel that top-loading the strings provides. Either way, one of the coolest things about this bridge is how comfortable it is. You can lay your hand on it and not feel any sharp edges or exposed screw heads.

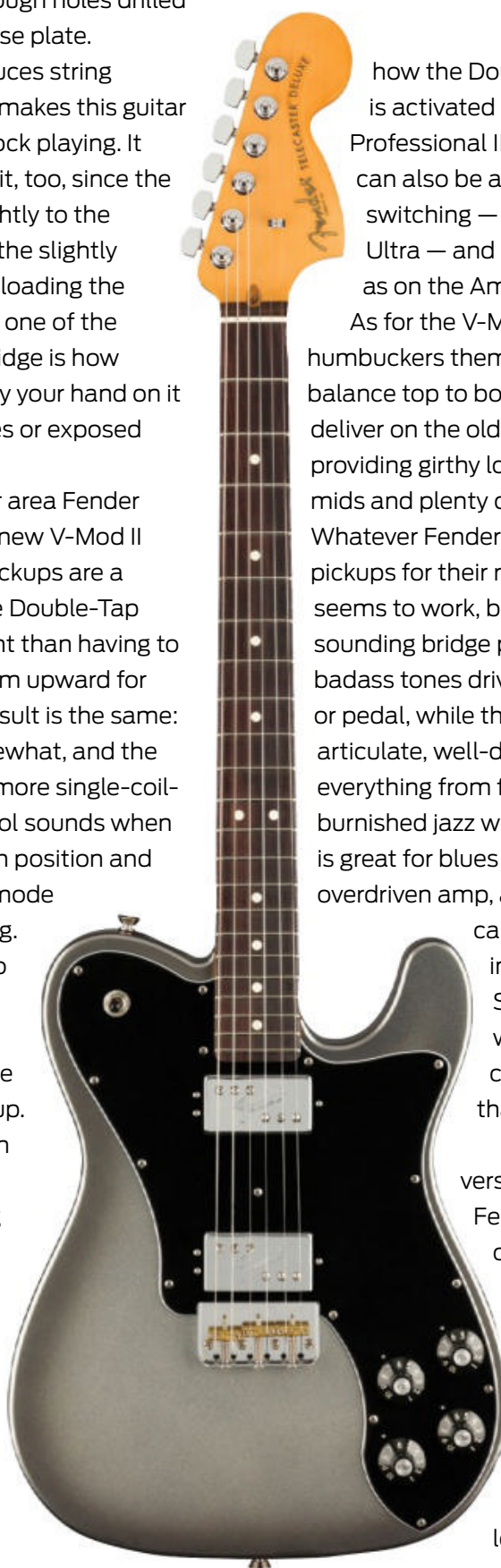
The pickups are another area Fender sought to improve, and the new V-Mod II Double-Tap Humbucking pickups are a completely new design. The Double-Tap switching is more convenient than having to grab the knobs and pull them upward for coil-splitting, but the end result is the same: The output is reduced somewhat, and the tone becomes thinner and more single-coil-like. This enables a lot of cool sounds when using, say, the middle switch position and running one pickup in split mode and other in full humbucking. And, of course, being able to independently adjust the volume and tone of each pickup is a real benefit of the Gibson-style four-knob setup. Fender points out that when the push-push knob is depressed, the humbucking pickup is indeed split into a single-coil, but is untapped to a higher output. The result is a single-coil that retains all its character and tone, and balances well with the other pickup. Also, while the push-push pot is



how the Double-Tap functionality is activated on the American Professional II guitars, this function can also be activated using S-1 switching — as on the American Ultra — and push-pull switching, as on the American Performer.

As for the V-Mod II Double-Tap humbuckers themselves, they have good balance top to bottom, and they certainly deliver on the old “Wide Range” promise, providing girthy lows, harmonically rich mids and plenty of high-end shimmer. Whatever Fender has done to tailor the pickups for their respective positions seems to work, because the fat-sounding bridge pickup delivers tight, badass tones driving a gained-up amp or pedal, while the neck pickup is articulate, well-defined and cool for everything from funky clean playing to burnished jazz work. Its PAF-like output is great for blues when pushing an overdriven amp, and in split-mode it can even do a reasonable impersonation of an SRV-style Strat tone when boosted with a cranked-up OD pedal that's set relatively clean.

It all underscores the versatility of this model. Fender's efforts to optimize its classics for modern players is fully realized by the American Professional II Telecaster Deluxe, which proves that an old dog can definitely learn some new tricks. 





GEAR

Breedlove

JEFF BRIDGES AMAZON CONCERT SUNBURST CE



TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

BREEDLOVE HAS TEAMED with actor/musician Jeff Bridges to create three ecology-conscious signature models. They include the American-made flagship Oregon Concerto Bourbon CE (\$2,699) and two additions to the Organic Collection that is developed stateside and crafted overseas: the Concert Copper E (\$699) and the Amazon Concert Sunburst CE on review here. All three are made of solid tonewoods from sustainably harvested forests (not clear cut) and feature the motto *All in this Together* inlaid on the fretboard. Being unfamiliar with the granadillo wood used for the guitar's back and sides, and

SPECIFICATIONS

Breedlove Jeff Bridges Amazon Concert Sunburst CE

CONTACT breedlovemusic.com**PRICE** \$999 street, with signature deluxe gig bag**NUT WIDTH** 1.69", bone**NECK** African mahogany**FRETBOARD** African ebony, 25.5" scale, plastic *All in this Together* inlay**FRETS** 20**TUNERS** Premium Breedlove chrome with black buttons**BODY** Solid granadillo back and sides, torried solid European spruce top**BRIDGE** African ebony with bone saddle**ELECTRONICS** Breedlove Natural Sound (Microsonic VT HD 2-AAA) with sound-hole flywheel volume and tone controls**FACTORY STRINGS** Olympia light (.012-.053)**WEIGHT** 5 lbs**BUILT** China**KUDOS** Attractive and ultimately playable with fine tone while being eco-aware and attainable**CONCERNS** None

always interested in attainably priced and ecologically sound instruments, I was very curious to give the Amazon Concert Sunburst CE a look and a play.

This is a stunningly attractive guitar. A unique tobacco sunburst radiates through a thin UV finish, showing off the tight grain of its torried solid Sitka spruce top, none of which is covered by a pickguard. The gold hardware, including the frets and tuners, adds elegance, and the pinless Delta bridge lends a classical element. As it turns out, granadillo is a lovely wood that looks to my eyes like a cross between walnut and cocobolo. The body binding is black walnut. You can't miss the fretboard inlay with the timely motto running its full length, or Bridges' signature inlay adorning the back of the headstock. I never would have guessed the inlays, including the headstock logo, are plastic and not mother-of-pearl.

The Amazon Concert Sunburst CE is ultimately playable. I had no trouble reaching notes anywhere and everywhere, which encouraged me to strive for chords and licks with complete confidence. In fact, the fingerboard flow is so smooth that it's easy to get carried away and start shredding. A soft cutaway facilitates access to the higher frets, where I spent more playing time than usual. Its 25.5-inch scale length contributes to a snappy string feel. As a vertically challenged dude with hands on the small side and repetitive stress injury to my arms and hands, I completely appreciate the slim neck profile and width as well as the guitar's easy factory action and relatively small body.



Breedlove's midsize concert is the brand's bread and butter. The Amazon Concert Sunburst CE doesn't sound as chunky as a flagship Oregon Concert, but that's hardly surprising considering the massive price difference. The Amazon is still a great option, because, for a third of the cost, it delivers a much higher percentage of Breedlove's best tone. Within its own ecosystem, the sound is well balanced, with great volume and projection. Notes and chords sing out with plenty of pop and presence. I plugged it into a Fender Acoustic Jr. Go, and while the amplified tone was more acceptable than awesome, it was also well balanced from string to string.

Kudos to Breedlove and Bridges for their good work making great guitars while keeping an eye on the big picture. The Breedlove Jeff Bridges signature All in this Together project benefits Amazon Conservation Team, which works with indigenous colleagues to protect rainforests and traditional culture. It's nice to know an instrument that feels so good in hand



The guitar's *All in This Together* fretboard inlay is actually plastic but looks like mother-of-pearl.

is also part of a feel-good plan, and that there's no worry when taking these woods across borders. I couldn't stop reaching for the Amazon Concert Sunburst CE and wound up walking around my home grounds, playing all sorts of cool chords and tricky licks that came so readily on the instrument. I proudly showed it off on my buddy's boat and at my neighbor's garage. He doesn't play, but he was so

knocked out by its looks that he wants one as a wall decoration. I'd recommend this guitar to practically anyone, particularly players with smaller hands or beginners in the market looking for an especially easy-playing instrument. For all it offers at a reasonable price, and without using clear-cut wood, Breedlove's Jeff Bridges Amazon Concert Sunburst CE earns an Editors' Pick Award. 🏆

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Soldano

SUPER LEAD OVERDRIVE 30

TESTED BY TOM BEAUJOUR



WHEN MICHAEL SOLDANO put the Super Lead Overdrive 100 into production in 1987, he could hardly have known it would become a benchmark of the amplifier industry that would remain in production more than 30 years later. What he did intuit correctly, however, was that guitarists seeking to dial in the high-gain lead sounds that were popular at the time were being woefully underserved by the larger amplifier manufacturers of the era, whose stock offerings required expensive (and often noisy) aftermarket modifications

SPECIFICATIONS

Soldano Super Lead Overdrive 30

CONTACT soldano.com

PRICE \$2,699 street

CHANNELS 2 (Normal and Overdrive)

CONTROLS Normal channel gain, Overdrive channel gain, bass, middle, treble, Normal master volume, Overdrive master volume, presence, depth, bright switch, channel select switch, Clean/Crunch mode switch (Normal channel)

POWER 30 watts

TUBES five 12AX7 preamp tubes, two 6L6 power tubes

EXTRAS Foot-switchable channels (foot switch included), post power-stage line output, tube-buffered effects loop

WEIGHT 30 lbs.

BUILT USA

KUDOS Impeccably built by hand. Sounds great at low volumes and capable of producing a wide range of top-shelf overdriven sounds as well as epochal high-gain distortion tones

CONCERNS None, but a foot-switchable effects loop would be nice at this price

to attain desired levels of sustain and drive. Soldano's SLO, on the other hand, offered gobs of gain right out of the box, and could do so at a sensible volume, since the amp's overdrive sound was generated entirely in the preamp section and therefore did not require ear-splitting power amp or output transformer saturation. Word of the SLO spread quickly, and early adopters included luminaries like Toto guitarist and session ace Steve Lukather, Lou Reed, Eric Clapton and, perhaps more crucial to the SLO's enduring legacy, a cohort of heavy metal shredders like Dokken's George Lynch, Ratt's Warren DeMartini and Steve Vai.

From the early 1990s, Soldano and a small team of employees handled all the company's production in his Seattle workshop, but in late 2018, Soldano announced he would sell his company to the larger Boutique Amps Distribution company. Manufacturing would shift to B.A.D.'s Huntington Park, California, headquarters, where they also hand-build amps for other high-end brands, like Friedman, Morgan, Synergy and Tone King. Soldano, meanwhile, would remain involved as an adviser and design new products for the line bearing his name.

After successfully bringing the flagship SLO-100 to market, the first fruit of this new arrangement is the Super Lead Overdrive 30, a more affordable "small box" version of the flagship SLO-100 (which B.A.D. initially collaborated on for the redesign). The 30 employs a five 12AX7-equipped preamp circuit identical to the 100's but is powered by a duet (versus the 100's quartet) of 5881 tubes, a power-plant profile more appropriate to recording studios, small stages and home users than its bigger brother's. Soldano notes that this lightened tube complement could well have yielded 50 watts, but he wanted to keep plate voltages across the power tubes

low enough to allow them to "give" a little at high-volume settings.

Although SLO-30s can be ordered with several cosmetic options, including bright purple and even snakeskin Tolex, our review amp was the base-model black variant with a matching metal grille. At 30 pounds, the head is a breeze to lift, and nary a grunt, sigh or whimper was emitted when I removed it from its shipping box and placed it atop a Celestion Vintage 30-equipped Bogner 4x12 cabinet. Front-panel controls include a trio of mini switches (a global bright switch, a Normal or Overdrive channel selector, and a switch to toggle between the Normal channel's Clean and Crunch modes), individual gain and master volume controls for each channel, and shared bass, middle and treble controls, as well as shared presence and depth controls that adjust, respectively, the amount of high and low frequencies being generated in the power section of the amp. Power and standby switches also reside on the front of the unit, a boon for studio owners who stack multiple heads in their control rooms.

A quick look at the rear of the SLO-30 reveals an impedance selector, two speaker outputs, a post-power section line-level out, a jack for the included channel foot switch, and send and returns for a tube-buffered effects loop. According to Soldano, this newly designed circuit replaces the SLO's original, more finicky loop and promises to play nicely with both instrument-level stomp boxes (it did so with my Catalinbread Topanga spring reverb and MXR Carbon Copy delay) and high-end line-level rack effects.

Plugging into the SLO-30 with a Whitfill Telecaster-style guitar with proprietary Onomac Windery pickups, I quickly realized why the Claptons and Reeds of the music world were enamored of the SLO. The Normal

channel (with the bright switch engaged, counterintuitively) yielded flattering, tight-bottomed, snappy clean sounds that were never shrill. Switching the Normal channel to Crunch mode produced a refined and inspiring range of ever-so-lightly (and forgivingly) compressed colors. From a smattering of Keef-esque growl to more aggressive hard-rock rhythm crunch, there's really no color in the overdrive rainbow that you can't conjure by correctly balancing the gain and tone controls and fine tuning the amp's character with the depth and presence knobs. Even with the Whitfill Tele-style, engaging the Overdrive channel unleashed a bounty of molten gain and sustain while conserving the *oomph* of every pick attack.

However, when confronted with a Jackson USA Soloist loaded with a Seymour Duncan JB bridge pickup, the SLO became a veritable sonic time machine, transporting me back to the 1980s glory days of the Sunset Strip and the hard rock it spawned. Maybe it's because

so many of the licks and riffs of the era were actually recorded using Soldanos, but this amp really has the sound. The low-end punch of low-E string pedal tones, the harmonic richness of staccato dyad riffs, the legato run and dive bomb—friendly sustain — it's all there. And due to the fact that Soldano now uses DC heaters on its preamp tubes, there was almost none of the extraneous noise or hiss endemic to most high-gain amps.

That said, a word of caution: This amp is not particularly well-suited to reproducing the mid-scooped thrash sounds that also rose to prominence in the late '80s. The frequency range and Q (width) of the midrange control

don't attenuate the correct frequencies, and the amp sounds hollow and diminished, not lean and mean, with it dialed down.

Given these times, I was not able to test the SLO-30 in performance, but I suspect its 30 watts would prove sufficient in almost any live situation, and probably even elicit the required, "Can you turn that down?" from your curmudgeonly front-of-house engineer. The good news is that rolling back the master volume will cost you virtually nothing in terms of tone. The SLO really does sound great at almost any volume, even bedroom-safe woodshedding levels. Sure, at \$2,699 street, it's expensive. But you only live once. 🍸



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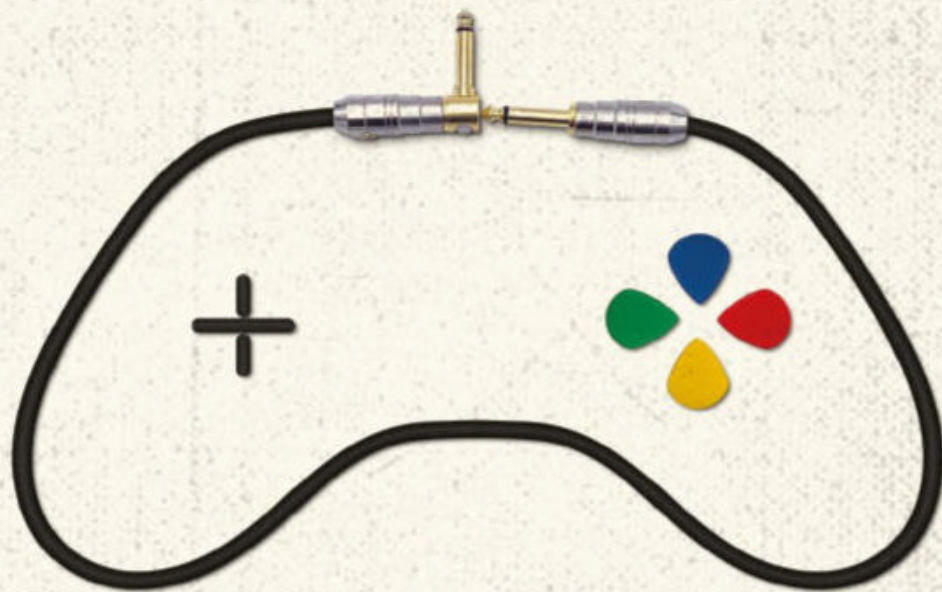
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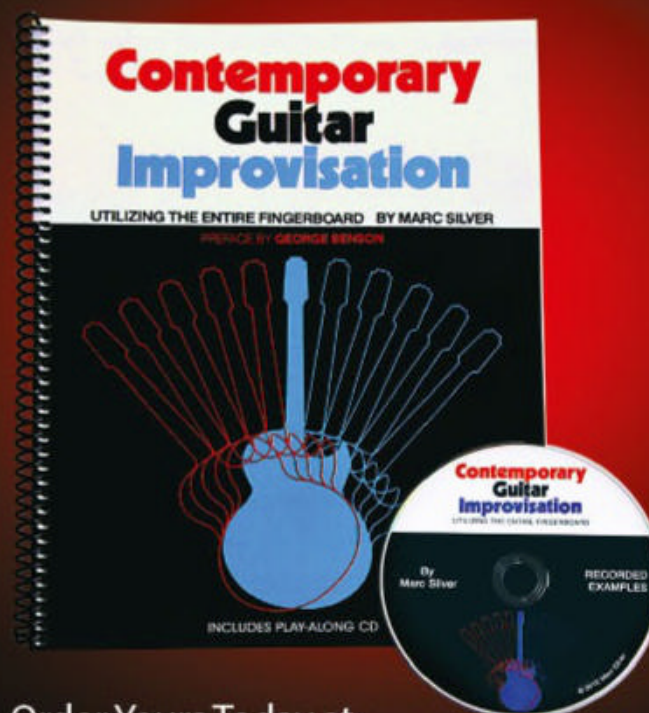
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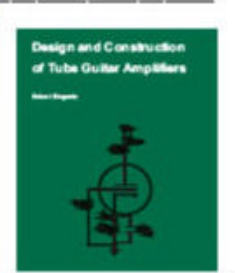
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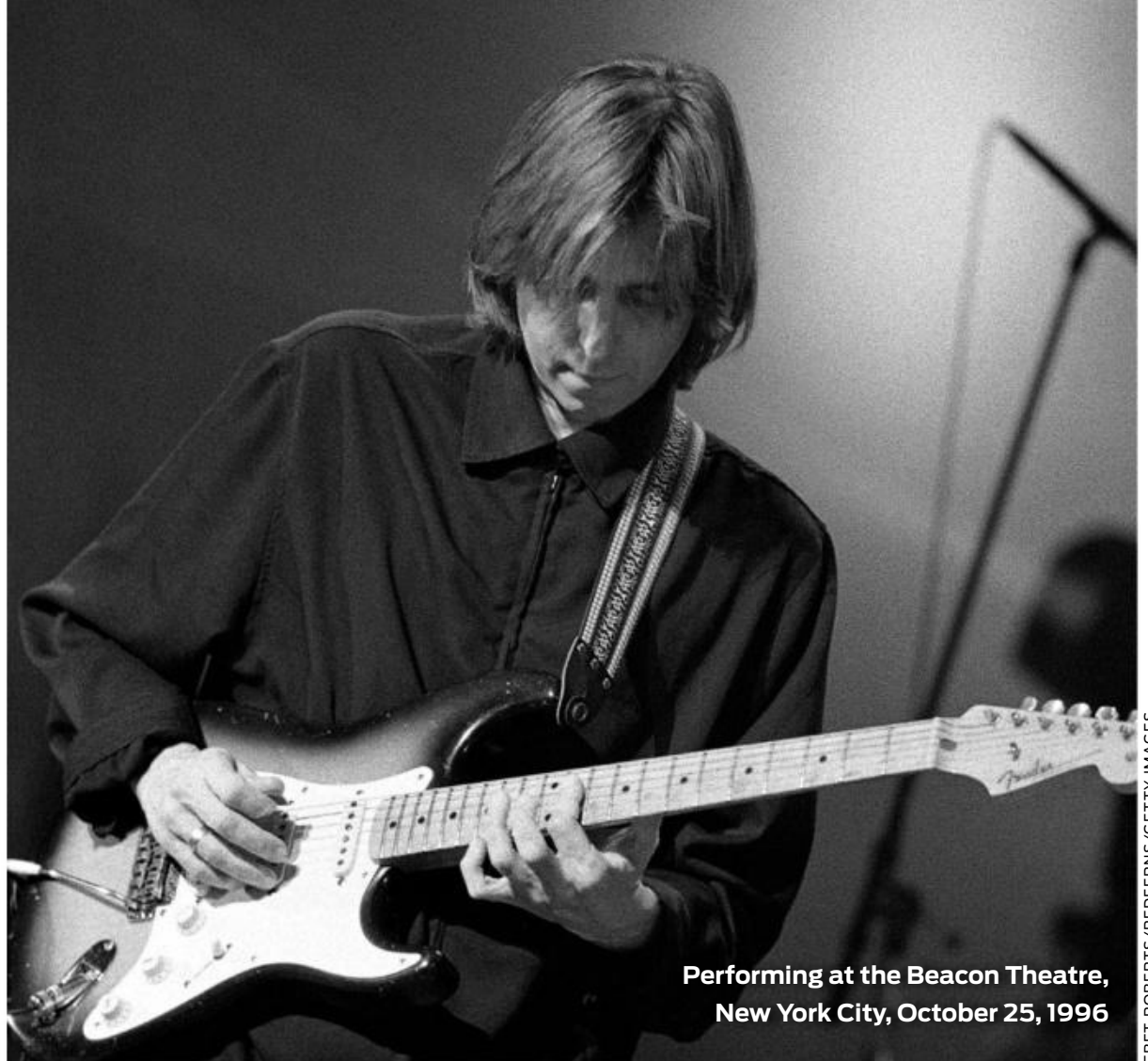


How I Wrote...

“Cliffs of Dover”

“It just came to me.”
Eric Johnson receives
his 1990 signature
guitar instrumental.

BY JOE BOSSO



Performing at the Beacon Theatre,
New York City, October 25, 1996

EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

“SOME SONGS TAKE forever to write. You labor over them for so long, and you start to wonder if there’s a point to continuing,” Eric Johnson explains. “Then there are those other songs that just come to you like magic. When that happens, it’s like you’ve just been sent a sort of gift from the universe.”

The Texas virtuoso puts “Cliffs of Dover” in the latter category. As guitar instrumentals go, it’s hard to beat — four minutes of cascading melodies that flood the senses and impart a sensation of total joy. It became Johnson’s signature song after propelling his second solo album, 1990’s *Ah Via Musicom*, to multi-Platinum status and a Grammy win for Best Rock Instrumental Performance.

But “Cliffs of Dover” almost didn’t see the light of day. As Johnson recalls, “I wrote it quite a few years before I recorded it, and I wanted to put it on my first album, *Tones*. But some of the people who were presiding over that record thought the song sounded like a game-show theme. I was like, Okay, whatever. I’ll just keep it in my arsenal.”

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

Before signing his first major-label deal, with Reprise Records, Johnson supported himself as a session and touring guitarist. In 1983, after coming off the road from backing up Carole King, he was between homes and moved in with his parents. “They had a music room, so I would use that to practice,” he says.

“One day, I started playing this descending-arpeggio pattern. It just came to me — right place, right time. I didn’t have to overthink it. My mom popped her head in and said, ‘That’s a good song. I really like that one.’”

The rest of the song came easily. “I was just having fun connecting the dots,” Johnson says. “In five minutes, I had the whole song down. If there was any craft involved, it came from this ethos of mine that I don’t want to play a bunch of notes; I want to play music. And this music was pure enjoyment.”

Calling his new song “Cliffs of Dover,” Johnson made a quick four-track demo and started playing it live. “It kind of stayed in my back pocket for a few years,” he says. “Audiences liked it, but I didn’t know if I would ever do anything with it.”

“THE SPIRIT IS THERE”

After signing with Capitol Records in 1989,

Johnson decided to finally record “Cliffs of Dover” in a studio. Before the main song, he included a freeform improv section that he had always played live.

“It varied every time I played it live,” he says. “In the studio, I tried a few versions until I got something that sounded right.”

His band blazed through two or three takes of the track before arriving at a keeper, but Johnson was unhappy with his guitar sound. As he explains, “I played it all the way through with my Strat, but the solo didn’t

sound as clear and elegant as I wanted, so I punched in an ES-335 for the main solo. Then it goes back to the Strat for the end. You can hear the tone difference, but that’s okay — the spirit is there.” Guitar effects were minimal: “It’s just an Echoplex into a Tube Driver, and that went into a 100-watt Marshall with a 4x12 cabinet.”

Johnson was ecstatic with the job mastering engineer Bernie Grundman did on the EQ (“He really got the track to sound perfect”), but he was dismayed at Capitol’s initial reaction. “They were like, ‘Whatever,’” he remembers. “They didn’t think the record would do anything.” However, one of the label’s promo men, Jeffrey Shane, loved *Ah Via Musicom* and thought “Cliffs of Dover” was a single. “Jeff worked it tirelessly. He wanted people to hear the song, and he did everything he could to make it a hit.”

“THEY REALLY LIKE ME”

Shane’s work paid off when “Cliffs of Dover” became one of the most-played rock instrumentals of its day, hitting No. 5 on *Billboard*’s Mainstream Rock Chart. Johnson took his newfound fame and Grammy nomination in stride. “I had been nominated a few times before and never won,” he says, “so when ‘Cliffs of Dover’ was nominated, I didn’t go to the show. I figured, All these other people are better known than me. I’m not going to win.”

He laughs. “And wouldn’t you know it — that’s the only time I won! It’s kind of funny. That’s always the way, isn’t it?” ■

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