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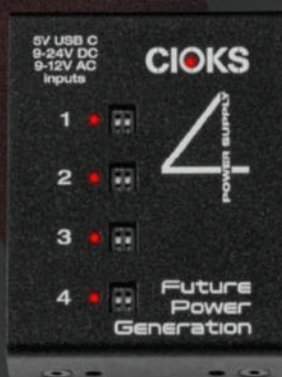
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TRIPLE MASTERS

MUSICAL VIRTUOSITY IS a theme we can never explore enough in these pages. This month we speak with three virtuoso guitarists, each from a different generation, who ply their talents in uncommon ways within their respective genres.

Brian Setzer remains one of the most audacious and talented guitarists of the past 40 years. When he arrived on the U.S. scene with the Stray Cats in the early 1980s, his rockabilly revivalism in the era of punk and new wave got more press than his fearsome guitar chops. The shift came over the next two decades as he pursued a solo career in the mid to late 1980s before bursting out of the gate with the Brian Setzer Orchestra in the 1990s. His big band's success was astounding, not the least because of his timing, having made a significant blast in the musical landscape just as the grunge era was ascendant. But even more impressive were his newly minted swing and jump-blues guitar skills, evidence that he'd been doing more than a little woodshedding — or possibly making a deal with the devil. Perhaps there's a clue to that in the title of Brian's latest rockabilly rave-up, *The Devil Always Collects*.

Frankly, I find Brian Setzer to be among the most inspiring guitarists and musicians of the modern era, if only for the fact that he goes his own way, against the grain of the current trends, and succeeds completely. Veteran music scribe Gary Graff went looking for the driving force behind Brian's nonconformist approach in this month's interview and came back with some fascinating answers — as well as a few tips from the man himself about how we can all pursue our own musical growth.

John McLaughlin is another marvelous guitarist whose virtuosity has inspired players for decades, dating back to his late-1960s adventures with Tony Williams' Lifetime and Miles Davis, and his brilliant 1970s fusion efforts with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. The maestro recently regrouped Shakti, his mid-1970s Indian classical fusion group, creating a welcome opportunity for us to enjoy yet another fascinating interview with him. Frets editor Jimmy Leslie did the honors and presents us with a deep discussion with John about harmony, rhythm and the power of improvisation.

Finally, we speak with Matteo Mancuso, the youngest of this issue's virtuosos. Just 26, the fingerstyle fusion guitarist has already drawn raves from fellow guitar wizards ranging from Steve Vai to Al Di Meola and Joe Bonamassa. I should add that we've received a number of letters from readers in recent months asking us to profile Matteo, an uncommon occurrence that demonstrates the persuasive powers of his talents. The arrival of his debut album, *The Journey*, proved the perfect opportunity for writer Bill Milkowski to talk with Matteo, who sheds light on both his background and his impressive improvisation talents.

I hope you find these interviews as insightful and inspiring as I have. Enjoy the issue, and as always, thanks for reading.

Chris Scapelliti

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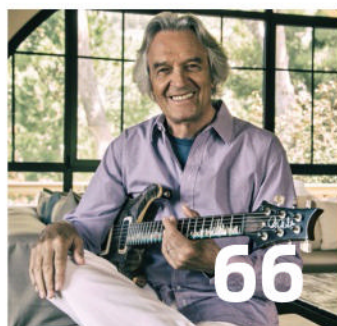
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ON THE COVER

Brian Setzer, photographed
by Tony Nelson, July 25, 2023



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PAUL MAY (BIRCHWOOD); PAOLO TERLIZZI (MANCUSO); BEAT PFÄNDLER (McLAUGHLIN); DEREK MCCABE (HOT TUNA); TONY NELSON (SETZER)



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POSTWAR BOOM

Fender's '48 Dual Professional combo lives again in a near-original reissue, courtesy of Mr. Joe Bonamassa.

BY ART THOMPSON

FENDER'S RECENT RELEASE of the reissue Dual Professional guitar amplifier — a late-'40s combo designed for use in larger venues — began with a request by Joe Bonamassa to re-create his original '48 model, a prized piece in his vast collection that is so intact it's like a time capsule from

Fender's past. "I bought it 15 years ago from a guy in San Francisco, who also sold me a '54 Strat and a mint-condition tweed Deluxe," the guitarist tells *Guitar Player*. "When I got the Dual Pro, it was just for the collection. And then I plugged into it, and I was like, 'Holy shit, is this thing good!'

"So I told Stan Cotey [Fender's VP of Product Development] about it and said, 'Can you replicate the tone?'" Stan took the amp and worked on it for about a year. We tried different caps, different speakers and all these things, and then Fender built the cabinet, which has, like, 11 pieces of the tweed cloth on it that came from the same vendor they used in 1948. So it's as close as you possibly can get. The new ones are a little bit louder and more efficient, but that's because everything on the original one is 74 years old. You have to take some artistic liberties with these things, because the components don't exist anymore. But we got it 98 percent to the original."

The Dual Pro is a beauty, with its solid-pine, split-baffle V-front cabinet,

chromed divider strip, nailed-on logo plate and neatly applied white tweed covering. The chrome-plated top panel is the epitome of simplicity, featuring three knobs (instrument volume, mic volume and tone), a quartet of input jacks (two instrument, mic and low gain), and an on/off

toggle switch and jeweled pilot light. The rear side of the open-back cabinet is where you can see the two EF806S preamp tubes and 12AU7 phase inverter, and the 5U4GB rectifier and pair of 6L6 power tubes that reside within a steel cage

that's removable, if you so desire. The old-style, tube-location label that's glued to the inside of the cabinet is a nice touch.

Undo six screws that hold the shielded rear cover in place, and the hand-wired circuitry is revealed. Here's where you get to see a phenolic board holding the caps and

carbon-comp resistors, the neatly routed leads and the chassis-mounted jacks, pots, switches and tube sockets. The workmanship is top-notch and the whole affair looks rugged and easy to service. Even the power cord goes straight into the chassis instead of a modern

IEC socket. My review amp tipped the scales at 37 pounds and is fairly compact at 22.38 inches wide, 19.75 inches high and a little under 10 inches deep.

Bonamassa personally auditioned the custom-made Mercury Magnetics power and output transformers to find

the most original-sounding ones, and the speakers are signature 10-inch Celestion JB35s, wired in parallel for a total load of four ohms. Bonamassa says he went with the Celestions because he liked the darker midrange of the ceramic magnets. "To me, they sounded the more accurate," he explains.

"SOME OF THE EARLIER '50S AMPS WERE SOMETIMES A LITTLE ANEMIC, BUT THE DUAL PRO'S SOUND WAS FULLY REALIZED IN THE LATE '40S"

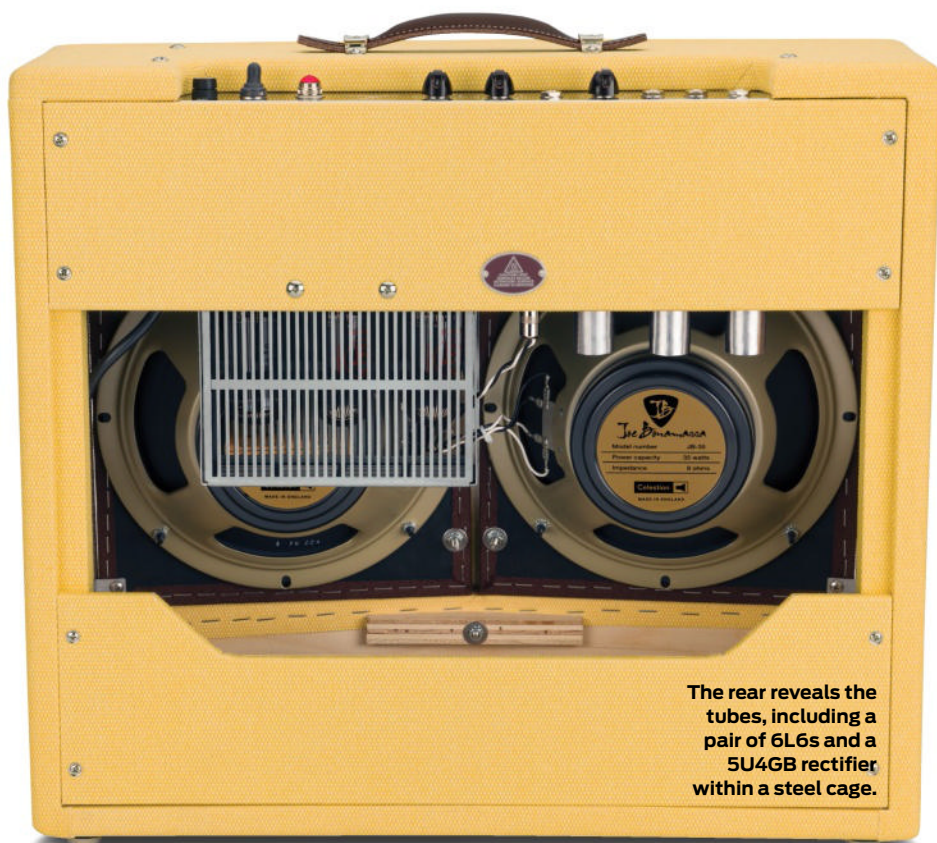
It's an amazing thing to check out a brand-new amp that has been so painstakingly constructed to be close as possible to something Fender built back when Harry Truman was president. "When Joe loaned me his amp, the first things I did were to draw a schematic, measure all the various voltages and go through it component by component and note their values," Cotey says. "Interestingly, most of the components were within 10 percent of their original design values, which is crazy because caps and resistors would have been more like 20 percent tolerance back then. Then the guys at the Fender design center built a cabinet and a chassis, and I made as close a copy as I could, which meant using new-old-stock octal pentode tubes for the preamp section. It was a proof of concept for Joe to play and see whether it was going to be worthwhile, and he really liked it."

After realizing that sourcing enough non-microphonic new-old-stock octal tubes was going to be difficult at best, a decision was made to try and find a suitable modern pentode tube. "Pentodes distort very differently than triodes" Cotey explains. "They stay clean a lot longer and then dip into distortion more suddenly. That transfer character was important, so we wanted to keep the front end all pentode."

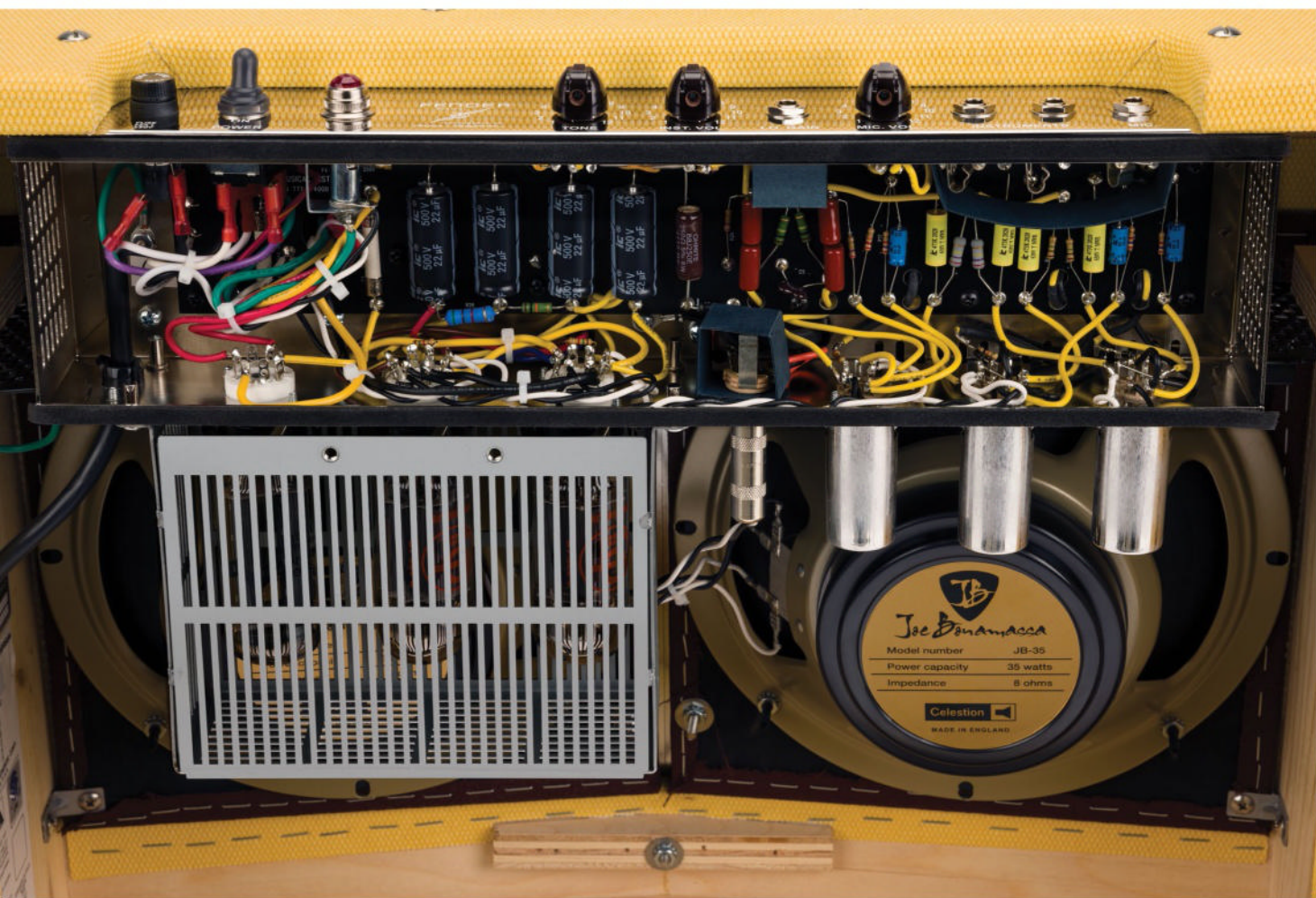
"But what do you do when there aren't many modern pentodes being made? The EF86 is a likely candidate, but I always have a hard time finding non-microphonic ones. I found that JJ Electronic made one called an EF806 that works great and has very low microphonics, so it was an easy substitution. The original amp also used an octal 6N7 for the phase inverter, but since they're not findable anymore, I used a 12AU7 as a close enough substitute. It's a single gain stage with another gain stage that's set up to be just an inverter. It's simple and it works great."

"This amp does a really good job of being very clean and will get gradually more distorted all the way, until it's rippin'. It's really fun to play, because there's lots of tones on just the volume knob. It's weird to think how some of the earlier '50s amps were sometimes a little anemic, but the Dual Pro's sound was fully realized in the late '40s."

Tested with a newer Fender Strat, a Gibson Historic '59 Les Paul and a PRS Myles Kennedy signature T-style [see review, page



The rear reveals the tubes, including a pair of 6L6s and a 5U4GB rectifier within a steel cage.



80], the Dual Pro proved a fierce little beast that had no problem hanging with loud bass and drums. The amp comes with a dummy plug that increases gain and brightness when inserted in the right-hand “Instruments” bore. I started without it, and the sound was clear and glassy with the volume set at five and the guitar volume on the low side. It transitioned smoothly into distortion when turned up, becoming increasingly grinding until fully cranked, where the tone was round and saturated, and great for lead and grinding rhythm work.

With the dummy plug inserted, the amp indeed sounded brighter and gainier, delivering gnarly, saturated tones that were dynamically responsive to the guitar’s volume knob and covered the gamut from clean to dirty rhythm to lead. The mic input is another option for a higher gain response, but the tone control is less effective in that mode because it was intended for microphones.

The Dual Pro responds well with pedals, and for small stages the amp’s volume could be backed off to yield both awesome cleans and killer distortion when fired up with either

a TS-808 or a TWA Scott Henderson SH9. Playing this amp is an amazing experience because of the way it dynamically goes from being almost impossibly clean to being really round and super distorted, and you get it all from the guitar volume and your playing touch. It feels more like playing an instrument than just an amplifier, and it’s one of many things that make the Dual Pro so lovable.

“It takes Fender guitars really well, it takes humbucking pickups really well, and it records great,” Bonamassa says. “You put a mic in front of it and it’s like, ‘Oh God, it’s larger than life!’ It’s not loud enough for me live” — JB uses two 1987 Marshall Silver Jubilees, two Fender reissue High-Powered Twins and three Dumbles onstage — “but it would be good in a lower-volume situation. It’s really a session amp, where you plug in a reverb or tremolo pedal and it just works. In 1948, Leo Fender had put out the Deluxe and maybe the Princeton. But the Dual Pro was the first amplifier that he would give to people in professional bands.” Seventy-five years later, it continues to stand the test of time. **B**

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BLUES KEEP CALLING

Selwyn Birchwood plays like a man possessed. On *Exorcist*, he proves he's firmly in command of his talents.

BY VINNIE DEMASI

SELWYN BIRCHWOOD CAN recall exactly when he committed himself to the blues. "When I first heard Jimi Hendrix as a kid, it sounded to me like I was hearing music from another galaxy," the Florida-based guitarist/vocalist/lap-steel player explains. "I started reading a biography about him to find out what possessed someone to make sounds like that, and it was there I first came across the name Buddy Guy. Coincidentally, Buddy happened to be playing in town that same week, so I bought a ticket, not knowing what to expect.

"Now, anyone who's seen Buddy live knows what an incredible showman he is, and it was then and there I said to myself, Whatever this music is, this is what I want to learn, and this is what I want to do."

Birchwood's devotion to the blues quickly took root. While still in his teens, he was asked to join Sonny Rhodes' band. In 2013 he snagged the Blues Foundation's Albert King award for Guitarist of the Year, which led to a deal with the legendary Alligator Records label. Now 38, Birchwood has established himself as one of the preeminent voices in contemporary blues. His smoky baritone vocals blend seamlessly with his fiery and emotive electric and lap-steel lead lines, and his original compositions cleverly blend elements of traditional blues, cool jazz, funk, Stax-flavored R&B and psychedelic rock into a cohesive and compelling artistic statement.

With his latest release, *Exorcist* (Alligator Records), Birchwood feels he's come

full-circle in some ways. "I still have the ticket stub from that Buddy Guy concert — it was September 2002," he reveals. "Now it's 20 years later and not only have I had the chance to perform with Buddy onstage, I got to work with Tom Hambridge, who won a Grammy for producing Buddy."

The 13 tunes on *Exorcist* are a masterfully produced, arranged and executed sonic tour de force, from the funky headline-inspired

tongue-in-cheek "Florida Man" to the autobiographical "Underdog" and the expansive and cathartic title track.

It seems as if lap steel is becoming increasingly popular in blues music.

What inspired you to start playing one?

When I was 19, I was hired to be in Sonny Rhodes' band. He became a mentor to me, and he was the first person I saw and heard



PAUL MAY

“I DON’T THINK OTHER BANDS SOUND LIKE WE DO. AND ON THIS ALBUM, WE’VE FOUND OUR SOUND”



play a lap steel in person. During my first tour with him, I decided I was going to save up my money and buy one as soon as I could, because I was so blown away by the sound.

What kind of lap steel do you currently play and how often do you use it?

I currently have a couple of Gibson lap steels from the '50s that I keep in E tuning [*low to high, E, B, E, G#, B, E*]. On the new album I play

lap steel on “Swim at Your Own Risk” and “Underdog.” During a typical show I’ll alternate between guitar in standard tuning, slide guitar in open tunings and lap steel. I usually bring the lap steel out toward the end of the set, because people really seem to dig on that.

What slide tunings do you normally use?

It depends on the song, but for example, “Florida Man” is in open D tuning — D, G, D, G, B, D. I’ll also use open E and open D [*low to high, D, A, D, F#, A, D*]. Lately I’ve been using these Ernie Ball Comfort Slides that have silicone inside, because it fits pretty snugly to my finger and gives me more control.

You pose with two Gibson semi-hollowbodies on the cover of *Exorcist*. Are those your main guitars?

Yes. I’m very partial to hollowbodies and semi-hollowbodies. The cover shows my Gibson ES-345 and ES-335, which was the prize when I won the Albert King award at the 2013 International Blues Challenge. You can see the International Blues Foundation Logo on it. I also use an ES-135 that I like to play at home, and a smaller-bodied ES Les Paul that I take on the road with me. They only made that guitar between 2014 and 2016. I guess people didn’t like them, but I love mine.

What’s the rest of your signal chain?

First off, I only use Mogami cables. When you A/B them against other cables, it’s amazing how clear they are. For amps, I use a 1980s Peavey Bandit that Kingfish Ingram and Mr. Sipp turned me on to for recording solos. For everything else, including live performances, I use a 1x12 Fender Deluxe Reverb reissue. For effects, I just use a Dunlop Cry Baby Mini Wah and an Ibanez Tube Screamer Mini. I figure if I can’t do it with a wah and a Tube Screamer, I can’t do it. I’m also concerned about stuff failing live, so I like to keep it simple. We’re often doing these festivals where there’s a 10-minute changeover between acts, so I like to travel light.

Can you talk a little bit about your approach to improvisation?

For me, it’s mostly about having your ears



RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Exorcist

“Swim at Your Own Risk,” “Underdog,” “Florida Man,” “Done Crying,” “Exorcist”

open and responding to what the band is doing. I’ll try to listen for what’s not there and play what I hear. I’m not a highly schooled musician, so I just try to match my playing to the feeling in the song. It’s not based on what techniques I know as much as on what I think will make the song better.

You have a real ensemble approach to your arrangements. The guitar certainly cuts through but it doesn’t dominate.

I’ve always been drawn to music where there was interplay between instruments, and stuff can breathe. I think it makes the music more interesting if you let the other colors through. I didn’t put a guitar solo on some songs, because I felt they simply didn’t need them.

Regi Oliver’s baritone sax often plays a song’s riffs. When did you decide to incorporate that unique sound into your band lineups?

When I first got my group together, I didn’t have a keyboardist and Regi was playing tenor sax. He switched over to bari because he felt he could comp behind the guitar better with it, and over time it just grew into our sound. With the addition of keyboards, it gives the music a lot of heft and it’s allowed me to write with that in mind. I don’t think there are other bands out there that sound like we do, and I feel like on this album we’ve really found our sound.

Is there a song on *Exorcist* that you feel best encompasses your sound?

If I had to choose one, I’d say it’s the title track. I try to take the things that I enjoy listening to and put them into my own music. I feel like that song really has a lot of these elements — arrangement, emotional content and storytelling. The instrumentation included extra percussion, female background vocalists and the whole horn section. You can even hear us hitting an anvil with a piece of metal in the background. There’s a lot going on in there, and it all builds into this big, intense cacophony of musical sounds. I figure that people don’t normally gloss over the title track, and when we got done recording it, I said, “Man this has to be the title of the record!” ■

TIP SHEET

What makes
Alex Skolnick a
consummate guitarist?
These five tips have
a lot to do with it.

BY JOE BOSSO

IN TERMS OF VERSATILITY, few guitarists have anything on Alex Skolnick. When he's not slaying audiences with blizzing riffs and solos with thrash-metal titans Testament, he's blending bebop and rock with his own jazz group, the Alex Skolnick Trio.

Clearly, he's learned a thing or two about what to play and when, but as Skolnick points out, his evolution on the guitar is ongoing. "I've constantly got my ear out for good tips, and I'm always trying to improve my playing," he reveals to *Guitar Player*. "I notice that about my favorite players — they don't stop. Even when they get into their 60s and 70s, they're as passionate about learning as they were when they started."

One might assume Skolnick's level of proficiency requires maximum thought at all times, but somewhat surprisingly, he notes that he's aspiring to reach a place where he doesn't have to think at all. "That's kind of a crazy goal I have — to be able to play a piece of music as easily as I would use a fork. I want it to be as automatic as that," he says. "There are things I play that are effortless, but it's certainly not everything. There's a level of musicianship I have in my head. We'll see if I get there."

If you're looking to take your playing somewhere new, get started by checking out Skolnick's top five tips.

1. BE HONEST, ACCEPTING AND REALISTIC ABOUT YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF PLAYING

"This is very hard for many people to wrap their heads around. To be able to improve as a guitarist, you need to be honest with yourself about what you've got under your fingertips. Let's face it: We all want to be great

guitarists and play at a high level. There's the aspirational side of it, but the reality can be something different. You must learn to accept where you are currently to be able to focus on the things you need to work on, and that takes humility and maturity — two traits not always common to guitarists.

"How many times have you seen a friend say, 'I can do that' after they hear some insane guitar solo? Well, maybe they can't do that yet, and that's okay. But they'll never be able to do it if they're not honest about the work they need to put in.

"You might be the best guitarist in your household, or maybe you're the best on your block. But go to a big city, and guess what? You won't be the best. There are tons of people better than you. That's okay, too. Accept it and put in the time to practice."

2. ENJOY THE PROCESS OF WORKING TO IMPROVE

"Years ago, when I was just starting to play, I came across this giant guitar instructional book that had far too much information for me to process at the time. There was every imaginable scale, mode, fingering and chord in this thing. I had no idea what to do with it. I thought, Oh, my God. I have to absorb all this stuff? It seemed impossible.

"Then I heard 'Day Tripper' by the Beatles. It had that cool riff that sounded like surf guitar, and I thought, I think I can play that. I picked up the guitar and played it really close to the bridge of the guitar so I got that twangy sound. I had fun with it, and I felt inspired. Then I played the 'James Bond Theme,' with the same kind of surf guitar sound. I had a great time just playing music. It made me feel good about myself and the progress I was making. And as a result, the idea of taking a look at that instructional book didn't seem so overwhelming to me. Those little steps made the big steps seem reachable."





Alex Skolnick
plays his custom
ESP USA Eclipse.

3. DON'T TRY TO BE SOMEBODY YOU'RE NOT

"It's easy to be swayed by the crowd. Sometimes a guitarist comes along that everybody seems to talk about, and you might be tempted to copy that player. It's one thing to appreciate a guitarist, but if they have such a unique style, maybe it's best to steer clear of adopting it.

"I remember when I was taking lessons from Joe Satriani. At the time, everybody was going crazy about Yngwie Malmsteen, and I liked what he was doing, too. Joe kind of told me, 'That's fine, but don't get too into him. Don't try to sound like him, because in a few years there will be somebody else who's the hot guy.' Which is funny, because a few years later Joe was the guy everybody was talking about. People were learning everything on *Surfing With the Alien*, but I tried to keep my distance, because I remembered what Joe had told me. It was kind of funny, really. Joe

was a great teacher and a huge influence on me, but I knew I shouldn't try to sound like him. He was doing his thing, but it wasn't supposed to be my thing."

4. DON'T LET NEGATIVITY BRING YOU DOWN

"It's easy to get depressed about your musicianship. As I said about going to other cities and hearing great players, you might go, 'Oh, man, I thought I was good, but I suck!' You don't even have to go to a big city; all you have to do is scroll on your phone and you'll hear amazing guitarists. But it's important to stay positive. Don't beat yourself up. It's one thing to be realistic, but that doesn't have to turn into negativity.

"Negativity takes on many forms. I know plenty of amazing players who don't get press or awards. They could easily focus on what they don't have, but they don't because it won't get them anywhere. They're out there doing it. They love playing music, and that's what really matters.

"I'm a weird mutant. I love metal, but I identify as jazz. I've gotten recognition, but I see fans online say things like, 'Why don't people talk about Alex Skolnick more?' I never think of it that way. I'm actually pretty happy about the recognition I've received. To me, it's about what happens when I play and what I offer to the world. Sammy Hagar has seven Ferraris — I don't have one Ferrari. If I wanted one, I could go into some other business and get one. But I enjoy what I do. I wouldn't change anything."

5. PRACTICE MATERIAL YOU HAVEN'T MASTERED, PERFORM MATERIAL YOU HAVE MASTERED, AND RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCE

"This is kind of a summary of a lot of what I've talked about. It's about accepting where you are on the guitar while understanding where you still want to be. It's important to take some chances live, but the stuff you play in front of people shouldn't take too much

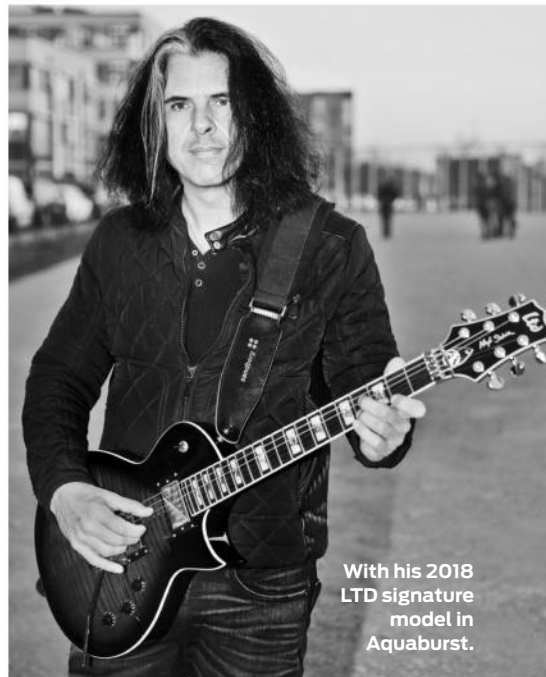
thought. The parts you play should be fully absorbed and feel fairly automatic. That way, you can have a great time interacting with the band and the audience. It should be a celebration of how far you've come. There's material that fits that comfort level.

"On the other hand, there's material that doesn't fall into that category — ideas you're working on and things you aspire to. This is the stuff you should keep private for the time being. Keep practicing it and working on it. One day you'll be able to present it to people.

"This might sound kind of obvious, but believe me, it's something I do in my own

life. There are things that I play live that I just don't need to practice anymore — I've got them down. However, there are things that you haven't heard me play yet because I'm working on them. That stuff is all delegated to

practice time. The key thing is, I want to have great performances onstage and productive practice sessions, and the two aren't the same. So don't get them mixed up. If it's not ready for prime time, save it until the time is right, and then all of your practice will feel worth it." 🎸



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MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

As he returns to the road after a fight with cancer, **Dave Alvin** reflects on the songs that defined his time with the Blasters.

BY JOE BOSSO

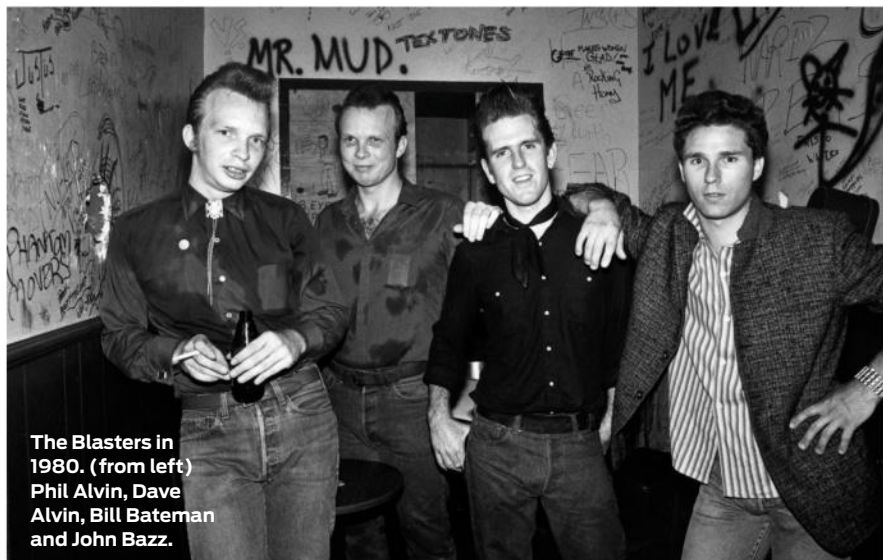
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRACY ANNE HART

DAVE ALVIN SAYS that he's playing the guitar pretty well these days, but the fact is, he's happy to be playing at all. And the larger fact is, he's pretty darn thrilled to even be here. Back in 2020, the singer-songwriter and guitarist was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Soon after, his doctors gave him worse news: He also had stage 4 colorectal cancer that spread to his liver. "Oh, and I've got this lung cancer that keeps returning," he adds.

Since then, Alvin — a legend in roots rock, country and punk, who founded his onetime band the Blasters in 1979 before embarking on an illustrious solo career — has endured a host of surgeries, and he now reports that he's in remission. "You learn so much when you go through this kind of thing," he says, "but one of the biggest things I've learned is you don't beat cancer — you just learn to live with it." He sighs. "It is what it is."

As part of his treatments, Alvin received rounds of radiation and chemotherapy. For a time, he suffered from neuropathy — nerve damage caused by chemo — and was unable to play guitar for seven months. "I couldn't even touch a guitar string because the pain was so bad," he says. "It was like touching razor blades." Eventually, the effects of neuropathy abated and Alvin was able to pick up the guitar again. Even so, it was rough going at first. "I had to re-establish the connection between the synapses in my brain and how they sent messages to my fingertips," he explains. "It was scary for a while, but I kept at it and each day it seemed to get a little easier."

Last year, Alvin felt well enough to begin playing shows again with his frequent collaborator Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and the pair were booked for concerts through this past summer, with more dates scheduled for fall. "The way I feel now is, I've got good days and bad days, and some days are in-between," Alvin says. "The shows have been great, so I can't complain. I'm really happy to be back out there."



The Blasters in 1980. (from left) Phil Alvin, Dave Alvin, Bill Bateman and John Bazz.

Alvin sat down with us to reflect on five notable songs from his Blasters past.

“AMERICAN MUSIC” THE BLASTERS — *AMERICAN MUSIC* (1980)



"The Blasters started as a blues R&B band. We were doing Howlin' Wolf and Junior Parker songs. People told us we'd never get a record deal if we didn't have original tunes, so at a band meeting my brother Phil said, 'Okay, everybody come in next week with two or three songs.' Come the next week, I had three songs and nobody else had anything. Suddenly, I was our songwriter. 'American Music' was the third song I wrote for the band. I was trying to find a way to simply state our mission without being too heavy handed. The message was, 'We're here to spread the joy of our homegrown music.'"

"At first it was scary bringing songs in. I didn't go to songwriting school, so for me it was all guesswork. All the guys in the Blasters

were older than me, and they had had a lot more experience playing music. Here I am bringing songs to them — 'Hey, I think we should play this.' I was intimidated. Gradually, I started to think, Some of these are pretty good. I knew this one was good.

"We made a nice recording of it. I don't know if my solo is good or great, but it got the job done. There's a little bit of Chuck Berry, a little bit of Tampa Red and some Cajun guitar in there. It's a mix-up of blues, rock and roll and folk music."

“MARIE MARIE” THE BLASTERS — *AMERICAN MUSIC* (1980)



"This was the fourth or fifth song that I wrote for the band. One night I was lying in bed bashing away on my '64 Fender Mustang, and all at once the melody came right to me. I didn't have lyrics, so the next day, about a half hour before rehearsal, I sat down at the kitchen table



Dave Alvin warms up backstage at the Heights Theater, in Houston.

“SHAKIN’ STEVENS HAD A HUGE INTERNATIONAL HIT WITH ‘MARIE MARIE.’ IT WAS CRAZY”

with a blank piece of paper and said, 'I know this song's good. The melody's really good. What's it about?'

"Then I remembered something I'd seen when I was about seven years old while riding in my parents' car. It was sunset and we were driving to see their friends. We had to go through this rural area, and we drove by an old farmhouse. There was a girl sitting and playing guitar on the front porch. I just remembered that image — it just stuck with me. By the time I left for rehearsal, I had the song written. The lyrics were vague, but they worked. I even had the backstory to it all.

"THE BLASTERS WERE FAMOUS FOR OUR FIGHTS, AND ONE OF OUR BIGGEST FIGHTS WAS OVER 'I'M SHAKIN'"

"Out of the blue, Shakin' Stevens covered this one. Not long before, I had quit my job as a fry cook. The Blasters were getting enough gigs in Hollywood, and I was making roughly as much as I did as a cook. I thought that was pretty cool. Then I got word that this guy Shakin' Stevens did 'Marie Marie.' He had a huge international hit with the song. It was crazy: One minute I'm a fry cook; the next thing you know I'm a BMI writer. [*Broadcast Music Inc. collects and distributes royalties to members whose works have been performed.*] Getting those checks was insane."

"I'M SHAKIN'" THE BLASTERS — *THE BLASTERS* (1981)



Statman [an A&R rep for Slash Records, the Blasters' label], was a big Little Willie John fan. She used to pester us about cutting it.

"The Blasters were famous for our fights, and one of our biggest fights was over 'I'm Shakin'.' I told Phil that on the original, the

drummer kept time on his hi-hat in the break — the timing is really odd. Phil thought I was crazy and said I didn't know how rhythm-and-blues worked. We had a huge fight over it.

"Years later, we were doing a Blasters reunion tour and I was introduced to a drummer who played on all the King Records sessions. I asked him if he played drums on 'I'm Shakin'' by Little Willie John, and he said yes. Then I asked, 'Did you keep time on the hi-hat in the breaks?' And he said, 'Of course I did.' I went to my brother and said, 'Phil, I want you to meet somebody...'"

"SO LONG BABY, GOODBYE" THE BLASTERS — *THE BLASTERS* (1981)



"I wrote this song in my car while driving on the Long Beach Freeway. I had been with this girl who never understood why I wanted to be a musician. More to the point, she just didn't like it. We had broken up and gotten back together a few times. Then came the final breakup. I went to her place, we broke up, and I drove to Hollywood to drink beer and hear some punk rock music. I knew we weren't getting back together.

"The song came to me while driving. I went through the whole thing — 'Am I doing the right thing? Am I free?' — all those thoughts you have. And I started driving faster and faster. As the song came to me, I was like, 'Yes.' I didn't even have to record it when I got back home. I knew I'd remember it.

"The late, great James Harman was a friend of mine. He was a brilliant harmonica player who couldn't play a note on the guitar. He had an amazing collection, though, and he loaned me a 1961 white Stratocaster that he swore once belonged to Magic Sam. Could it

have? Sure, why not. That's the guitar I used on this song. James also loaned me a '58 Les Paul. As a player, I was out of my league on both of those guitars at the time, but they sure recorded better than the Mustang."

"DARK NIGHT" THE BLASTERS — *HARD LINE* (1985)



"I was writing songs for the fourth Blasters album. At the time, whether it was on the news or stuff I heard in bars, it seemed like intolerance and the

threats of violence were increasing. It was surprising to me, because I had thought that all that stuff was starting to fade away, and now it was returning. This song was a reaction to that, like, 'Shit, do we have to go through this again?' Apparently, we do — constantly.

"For my guitar parts, I wanted a Pops Staples kind of sound. The song starts off with that heavy-tremolo Pops Staples Fender sound. At rehearsals, we'd goof around and play around with stuff. That's when the loud guitars came in. We had pretty strict rules that songs had to be a certain length, and guitars had to be played a certain way. We didn't want to sound like every other local blues band. For solos, the idea was that the guitar parts should be pre-1960. In our view, post-1960s guitar playing had been abused.

"The song was used in the movie *From Dusk Till Dawn*, which was friggin' great. The way they used it was pretty impressive. Usually my songs in movies are cues for somebody to walk into a bar or something, so this was really cool. I only wish that the movie had been a bigger hit. It did okay, but it wasn't like what *Pulp Fiction* did for Dick Dale and 'Misirlou.'" 🎸



Alvin, with drummer Lisa Pankratz, performs onstage in 2017.



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The Crowning Touch

First offered publicly in 1956, **Fender guitars** in custom color finishes command a king's ransom on today's vintage market.

BEAUTY MAY BE no more than skin deep, but that radiant, thin layer of paint on a Fender guitar that was sprayed at the factory in one of the official custom-color finishes of the late 1950s and '60s adds a level of desirability that runs right through the instrument. Not only does the look of a custom color appeal to many players and collectors, but the presence of this alternative finish — when original — adds considerable value to any vintage Fender that carries it.

And yet the concept of custom colors came along pretty casually at Fender. It was little more than a brief, almost throwaway mention at the bottom of Fender's 1956 sales sheet for the Stratocaster, which was then still relatively new: "Stratocaster guitars are available in Du-Pont Duco colors of the player's choice at an additional 5% cost." Prior to that, some artists had directly requested special colors, resulting in Bill Carson's Cimarron Red and Eldon Shamblin's Gold Stratocasters, both made in 1954 soon

after the model's introduction, but there was no official system prior to that time.

Leo Fender's longtime associate George Fullerton told author and guitar historian A.R. Duchossoir (as recounted in his book *The Fender Stratocaster*) that he initiated the idea of formally offering custom colors, and many accounts have similarly credited him. "One day, I went down to a local paint store and I started to explain to the man what I had in mind," Fullerton explained. "I had him mix some paint there on the spot, and finally we



A 1963 Jaguar in Sherwood Green



A 1963 Stratocaster in Shoreline Gold



Custom Color Jazzmaster reissues

WELL STRUNG GUITARS: KAITLYN CRISP (JAGUAR, BASS VI); WELL STRUNG GUITARS, MADDIE PATCH (STRAT, CHART); FENDER (JAZZMASTERS)

BY DAVE HUNTER

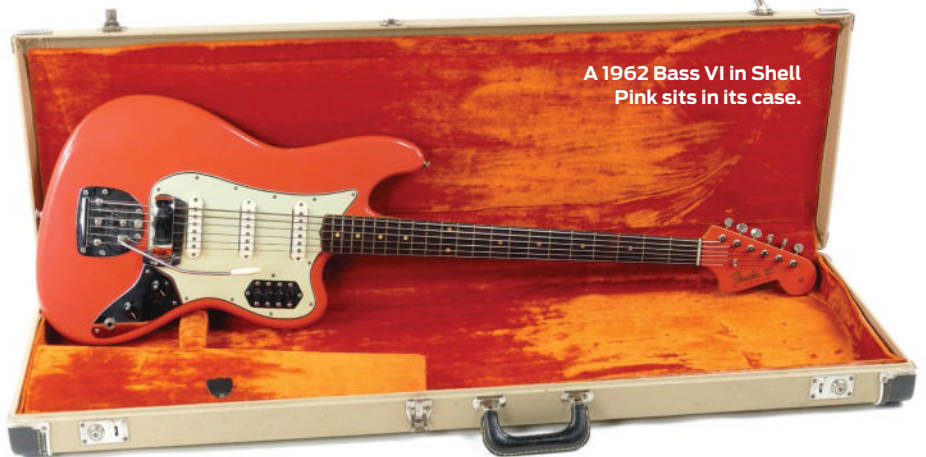


came up with a red color... Fiesta Red! I would say probably late 1957/early 1958. The custom colors came out about the time the Jazzmaster just came out. The reason I know that is because I had the color red put over one of the early manufactured Jazzmasters." It's worth pointing out that Fullerton didn't invent Fiesta Red; the color appeared by that name on official Ford color charts at least as early as 1956.

The custom-color phenomenon picked up speed in the late '50s and into the '60s, when a range of finish options were presented in an official list, and even supported with a Fender color chart. Published in 1960, Fender's first formal custom-color chart included 14 official paint options: Lake Placid Blue Metallic, Daphne Blue, Sonic Blue, Shoreline Gold Metallic, Olympic White, Burgundy Mist Metallic, Black, Sherwood Green Metallic, Foam Green, Surf Green, Inca Silver Metallic, Fiesta Red, Dakota Red and Shell Pink. Each could be ordered through a Fender dealer at a five percent premium on the guitar's list price. (An additional option, not listed on the

"I HAD HIM MIX SOME PAINT THERE ON THE SPOT, AND FINALLY WE CAME UP WITH A RED COLOR... FIESTA RED!"

—GEORGE FULLERTON



A 1962 Bass VI in Shell Pink sits in its case.

chart but mentioned in its caption, was the blond finish that was otherwise standard on the Telecaster, and which was almost invariably applied over an ash body.)

In 1963, Shell Pink was dropped from the list and Candy Apple Red Metallic was added. Two years later, in 1965, Daphne Blue, Shoreline Gold Metallic, Burgundy Mist Metallic, Sherwood Green Metallic, Surf Green and Inca Silver Metallic were axed as well, replaced by Blue Ice Metallic, Firemist Gold Metallic, Charcoal Frost Metallic, Ocean Turquoise Metallic, Teal Green Metallic and Firemist Silver Metallic.

In what seemed quite a natural rock and roll tie-in, most of these colors equated to paints used by one or another Detroit automaker from the late '50s to the mid '60s, and Fender's custom-colored guitars could see their twins in cars made by Pontiac,

Chevrolet, Ford, Cadillac, Lincoln, Buick, Mercury, Oldsmobile and DeSoto. And because guitars weren't always built from the ground up with the custom-color option in mind, many were finished in standard sunburst before being shot with a custom-color coat and sent on their way. Over time, wear and tear would reveal the original finish.

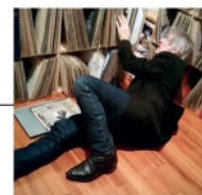
When the Fender Mustang was introduced in 1964, the company folded the custom-color phenomenon into the new student guitar's standard options, in a manner of speaking, by offering them in Red, White and Blue finishes that in later years have often been mistaken for Dakota Red, Olympic White and Daphne Blue. And while the introduction of the Competition Mustang series in 1969 seemed to bring with it guitars aligned to many metallic finishes on the custom-color chart, these were still given names like Competition Blue, Competition Red and Competition Orange, for example, along with the white racing stripes that helped to define them.

With pre-CBS Fender guitars in original standard finishes commanding ever-escalating prices, it seems obvious that the five-percent charge for custom colors was money well spent. A custom color on a pre-CBS Stratocaster will today add far more than five percent to its value, often something in the 25- to 30-percent range or even as much as a 50-percent premium for the particularly rare colors, as compared to standard-finish guitars from the same year and in similar condition. Not a bad



A detail of a Fender custom color chart from 1964.

BY JIM CAMPILONGO



No Ass-Kicking Allowed

Noel Boggs kills with kindness — and a kiss — on *Magic Steel Guitar*.

WHEN I PUT on Noel Boggs' *Magic Steel Guitar*, I feel content and where I'm supposed to be. It has no chest-pumping phrases, no jaw-dropping, lightning-fast virtuosity. But it's a mature ensemble work and a well-played record featuring craftsmanship. That's not to say Boggs doesn't speak through his instrument, or that his guitarist Neil LeVang isn't absolutely superb. But I think it's obvious the goal of these musicians was not to knock us over and kick our asses; I think it was more their intention to give us a kiss on the forehead. I dare say, we can all use a kiss on the forehead now and then.

Boggs was born in Oklahoma City in 1917 and started playing lap steel while in junior high. Within the short span of three years he joined and toured with the Radio Cowboys, the Western swing group of banjoist Hank Penny. Noel went on to play with Bob Wills and the infamous Spade Cooley, making a historical and significant musical contribution to both artists. Noel

was influenced by jazz guitar pioneer Charlie Christian and would woodshed by transcribing Christian's solos with fellow musicians Cameron Hill and the great Jimmy Wyble. His first steel guitar was a Rickenbacker, but while working with Spade Cooley, Noel met Leo Fender. Since Leo valued musicians' input into his creations, Noel played a role in Fender's first lap steel, which, as we know, was a prototype for the Telecaster guitar. If you play a Telecaster, Noel Boggs' long arms reach out to you.

And if you love steel guitar without a cowboy hat and boots, *Magic Steel Guitar* is



MAGIC STEEL GUITAR FINDS ITS WAY TO MY TURNTABLE MORE OFTEN THAN THE HERALDED WORKS OF HIGH ART

a record I'd recommend. Side one opens with the midtempo jazz swing number "Little Coquette." Noel plays a phrase that is answered by organist Ivan Ditmar's B3, while the band, consisting of LeVang and an uncredited drummer, swing elegantly. The classic standard "Tenderly" follows, with great accompaniment by Paul Smith on piano. Noel plays the melody with a gentle loveliness that

sounds almost like a human voice. "Steel Guitar Rag" follows, and while that's admittedly a "been there done that" track for me, Boggs and company breathe life into this well-trodden standard with clever arrangements and the

unlikely addition of bongos. Noel's single-note lines sing majestically on "Beautiful Ohio," and "Stealin' Home" is a Boggs original that sounds suspiciously familiar, yet has enough surprises to satisfy. "Magic Isle" closes side one neatly with a lovely after-hours jazz vibe.

A perky "Caravan" opens side two, followed by a swinging "Birth of the Blues" that has a tasty Neil LeVang guitar break.

I need to hear more Neil LeVang. He was a longtime member of the Lawrence Welk Band, and played for everyone from Glen Campbell to Frank Zappa and on TV shows, including *The Brady Bunch* and *The Monkees*. I urge you to check out his work. Up next, "September Song" has a haunting feel but is never overly dramatic. It's followed by "Perdido," "Paradise Isle" and the unlikely showstopper "Beer Barrel Polka," which is possibly the most stunning track on this LP. LeVang performs clever counterpoint lines and Boggs let's 'er rip, while the drummer plays an almost militaristic clave feel. The result is an amiably fantastic finale.

Noel Boggs' *Magic Steel Guitar* doesn't try to change the world, and while it's not a masterpiece, it finds its way to my turntable more often than the heralded works of high art in my collection. I love its easygoing nature, and I feel the camaraderie of musicians who never grandstand but seem to enjoy one another while playing music they love. What's not to like? It's nice. And sometimes all I want is nice. 

Jim Campilongo has 14 critically acclaimed instrumental records available on vinyl, CD and digital download at jimcampilongo.com.

BY TERRY CARLETON



Noble Prize

Rare and well made, this 1968 Teisco May Queen is a Japanese import worth a princely sum.

THERE ARE TEISCOS, and then there are Teiscos. The 1968 May Queen shown here is definitely in the latter category. Made for just one year, it's one of the rarest and most sought-after Japanese-made Teiscos, and with good reason: It's a proper guitar, not a knock-off made for department stores.

While the name May Queen brings to mind a certain British band and its celebrated guitarist, this model predates them both by some four or five years. In fact, the name refers to the young girl who leads the parade celebrating May Day, a mostly British holiday marking the start of spring and/or summer.

WEIRDO FACTOR

The shape is something akin to an artist's palette, or like a cross between a Vox teardrop and a Rickenbacker 360. Speaking of Vox, in 1967 the company made a limited run of Mando-guitars with this exact body shape. But other than the shape and a groovy "cat's-eye" f-hole, the quality of this guitar is on a level with Teisco's fabled Spectrum line. It's a guitar designed for players, not just beginners.

PLAYABILITY AND SOUND

Despite its semi-hollow body, the May Queen is most definitely not a jazz guitar. The tone is just too snarky. The two single-coil pickups are hot and musical, and great for surf and/or funk-style rhythm tones when run clean. But the real fun begins with overdrive or full-on distortion. Playing full chords through my Vox AC30 elicited the kind of distorted-but-defined sound of the early Kinks or '60s garage bands. Any resulting feedback could be easily molded, and musically so, just by changing my orientation to the amp. There are global tone and volume controls, and a three-way pickup toggle.

The May Queen's tremolo system is smooth and holds pitch well, and the bridge is fully adjustable and intonatable. The enclosed tuners are the fancy starfish-cased ones that I've only ever seen on the Spectrum line. With the combination of the zero fret, well-grooved nut and well-pitched headstock, the guitar has no need for the "towel rack" string retainer typically found on Teisco's cheaper builds. The bolt-on neck has an easily accessible truss rod and sports 22 nicely dressed thin frets set into a ¼-inch slab of Indian rosewood. The string scale is 24 ¾ inches, like a Gibson, but the slender mahogany neck is somewhere between a shallow C and D shape. And at 1 11⁄16ths, the nut width is also like that of the average Strat.

VALUE

The guitar's original \$160 MSRP was triple what most of Teisco's guitars sold for, yet about half the price of a Stratocaster. Vintage market prices for the May Queen currently range from \$600 to \$1,600. The Teisco-branded 1999 reissue used different pickups and bridge, and sells for anywhere from \$300 to \$1,400. Eastwood made a nice replica in the 2010s that retailed for \$800. And keep an eye out for 1968 models shipped into the U.S. under the Kimberly brand. They're identical to the Teisco, except for a sticker crudely placed over the Teisco logos.

WHY IT RULES

It looks unassuming, yet idiosyncratic, and sounds both unique and musical. And thanks to its semi-hollow build, it weighs about two pounds less than a Telecaster and three to five pounds lighter than a Les Paul. **B**

Thanks to Paul Connet for breathing new life into this one.

Got a whack job? Feel free to get in touch with me at rtcarleton@gmail.com. Who knows? Maybe I'll write about it!



QUEEN MAY YAM



HOT TUNA'S ELECTRIC FAREWELL

When **Jorma Kaukonen** and **Jack Casady** wrap this fall's tour, Hot Tuna's plugged-in performances will be a thing of the past.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

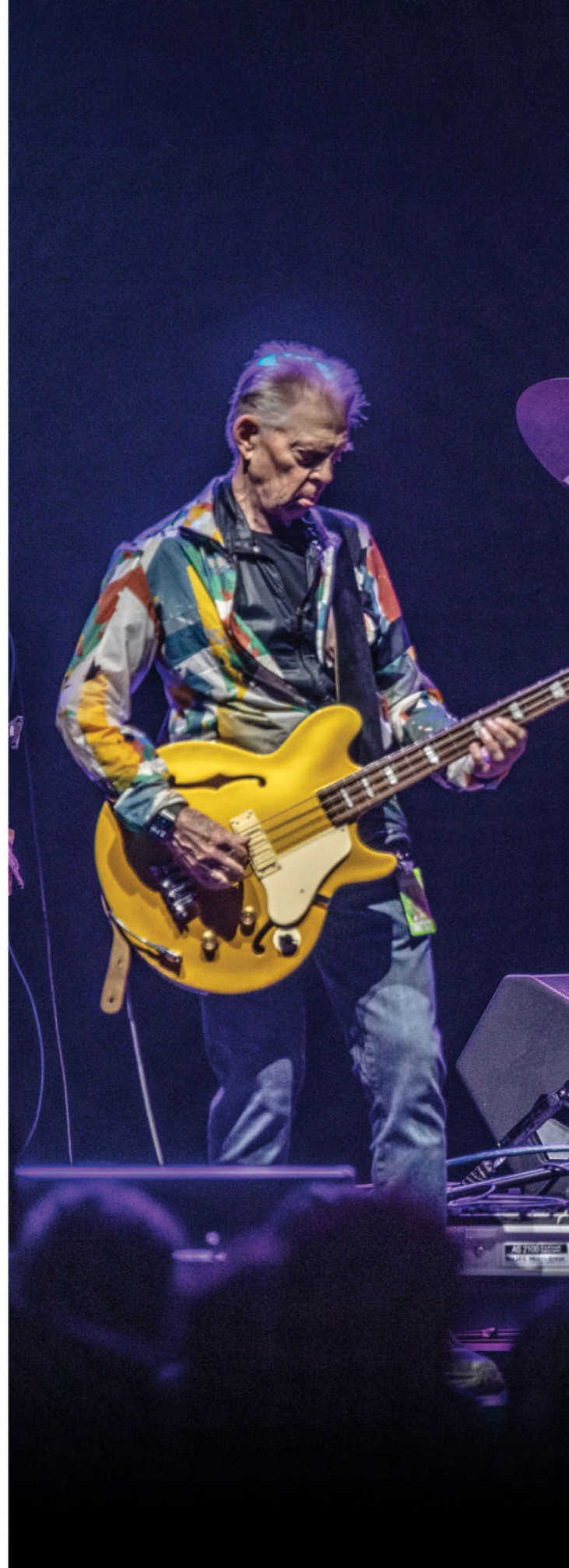
BY DEREK MCCABE

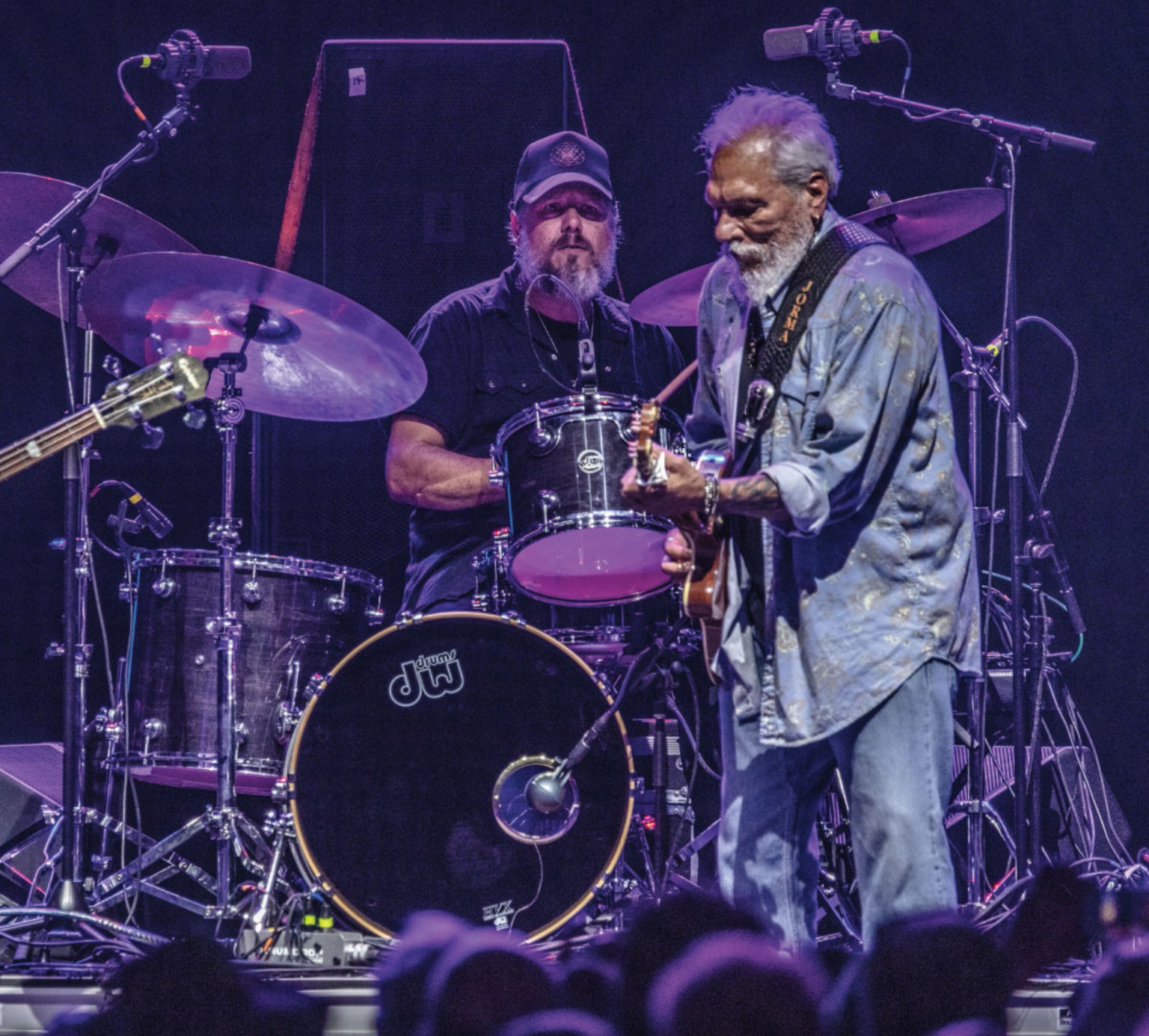
FEW GROUPS THAT formed in 1969 are still going strong with their founding members intact. Hot Tuna are an exception. Aside from a hiatus from 1978 to 1985, the band has been an ongoing collaboration between guitarist Jorma Kaukonen and bassist Jack Casady. Through all that time, they've been a hybrid act of sorts, performing in both electric and unplugged formats for their devoted fan base.

But this fall's 14-date tour will be the group's last time on the road playing electric. Beginning next year, the band's shows will be acoustic only. While no one is coming right out and saying it, those quieter, seated unplugged appearances are likely more to Kaukonen and Casady's liking, now that they are, respectively, 82 and 79. For that matter, Hot Tuna's electric days are already nearly a thing of the past, as is Kaukonen's regular use of electric guitars.

"Hot Tuna doesn't do that many electric shows, so I'm not as emotionally invested in guitars as I used to be," he tells *Guitar Player* when we catch up with him before a July 20 performance at Great South Bay Festival in Patchogue, New York, in the heart of Long Island. "And I'm not being dismissive of the electric guitars that will be used, because I love them dearly. But I don't handle them every day, as I do acoustic guitars."

It's been a long haul for the group, which Kaukonen and Casady formed while still members of Jefferson Airplane, during that band's heyday. As the story goes, Airplane singer Grace Slick was recuperating from vocal cord surgery, and her





bandmates — Kaukonen, Casady, guitarist Paul Kantner and drummer Joey Covington — were feeling restless. While Hot Tuna has had a fluid lineup over its history, Kaukonen and Casady have been its steady center, playing blues rock and Americana. In doing so, they've helped keep alive the music of country and blues artists such as Reverend Gary Davis, Jelly Roll Morton, Bo Carter and Blind Blake, introducing their timeless music to new generations of fans.

Affectionally known as the Captain, Kaukonen has been performing for over 58 years, during which time he's been a prolific collaborator and solo artist. A Grammy-winning American guitar player and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, he has a celebrated fingerstyle method rooted in blues, folk and Americana, and his career as an American rock legend has made him an influential figure and in-demand instructor. He operates his own guitar camp called Fur Peace Ranch, a 119-acre music and guitar camp in the hills of southeast Ohio, north of Pomeroy, complete with a 32-track studio.

Kaukonen was at the center of the new music scene that was starting to develop in San Francisco in the early 1960s, playing backup for Janis Joplin in local clubs before forming Jefferson Airplane in 1965. Amid the gradual breakup of Jefferson Airplane from 1971 to 1973, he and Casady went heavy electric with Hot Tuna, with ex-Airplane member Papa John Creach on violin joining them for a pair of celebrated albums: 1971's *First Pull Up, Then Pull Down*, and 1972's *Burgers*, which featured the FM radio hit "Ja Da (Keep on Truckin')."

Following Hot Tuna's breakup in 1978, Casady formed the new-wave band SVT, while Kaukonen went solo. Since reforming in 1986, Hot Tuna have toured continually with electric and acoustic performances, playing more than 100 shows annually for the past 20 years.



Jorma Kaukonen (right) and Jack Casady perform at the Great South Bay Festival, Patchogue, New York, July 20, 2023.

Kaukonen is known for using a number of electric guitars over the years, including a Gibson ES-345 with Jefferson Airplane, an Epiphone Riviera (the company issued his signature model Riviera in 2002), a Gibson Firebird V and a Chet Atkins SST acoustic-electric. He presently endorses Martin Guitars, which released the Martin M-30 Jorma Kaukonen Custom Artist Edition in 2010, and he plays Flammang Acoustic

Guitars, built in Iowa by David Flammang. In addition, he uses and endorses the Fishman Loudbox acoustic amplifier.

What guitars will you be taking out for this tour?

As this will be our last electric Hot Tuna tour, I've been giving a lot of thought to the gear, and my guitar choices will change depending on what setlist we're doing. When Hot Tuna did our reprisal of the *Burgers* album at Carnegie Hall last year [*the band commemorated the album's 50th anniversary at the venue on April 22, 2022*], I used my favorite Gibson 345 most of the time, because that's what I used as an electric guitar back in those days. It's not a guitar I would use all the time today, because it's stereo and I don't need all that stuff like I did in the Airplane. So on tour I'll be using a Gibson Firebird from

the early '90s. It's got Lindy pickups and custom caps and pots. That's the only thing I changed. Other than that, it's stock. That's probably going to be my main guitar, but I also have a special Gibson Custom Shop Les Paul called Beano. Susan Tedeschi has one. [*Tedeschi's belongs to her husband and bandmate, Derek Trucks, and was gifted to him by Eric Clapton, who also owns one.*] She let me play it, and I liked the guitar so much that I got one myself — and it wasn't cheap! That's going to be waiting in the wings for when I need something special.

I also use an Atkins SST for the fingerpicking Hot Tuna stuff. I've got a couple of them, but my favorite is a 1993 from the Custom Shop. It's just a really, really good guitar. And for the electric sets, I use a '67 Marshall "Plexi" that I've been using for a while. For the Firebird, I've been using a Lewis Electric custom amp. He's a builder from Northern New Jersey. I love all this stuff. Also, for the fingerpicking stuff, I'll be using a blackface Fender Pro that Jack gave me, with a single 15-inch speaker. It's an awesome old amp and completely stock.

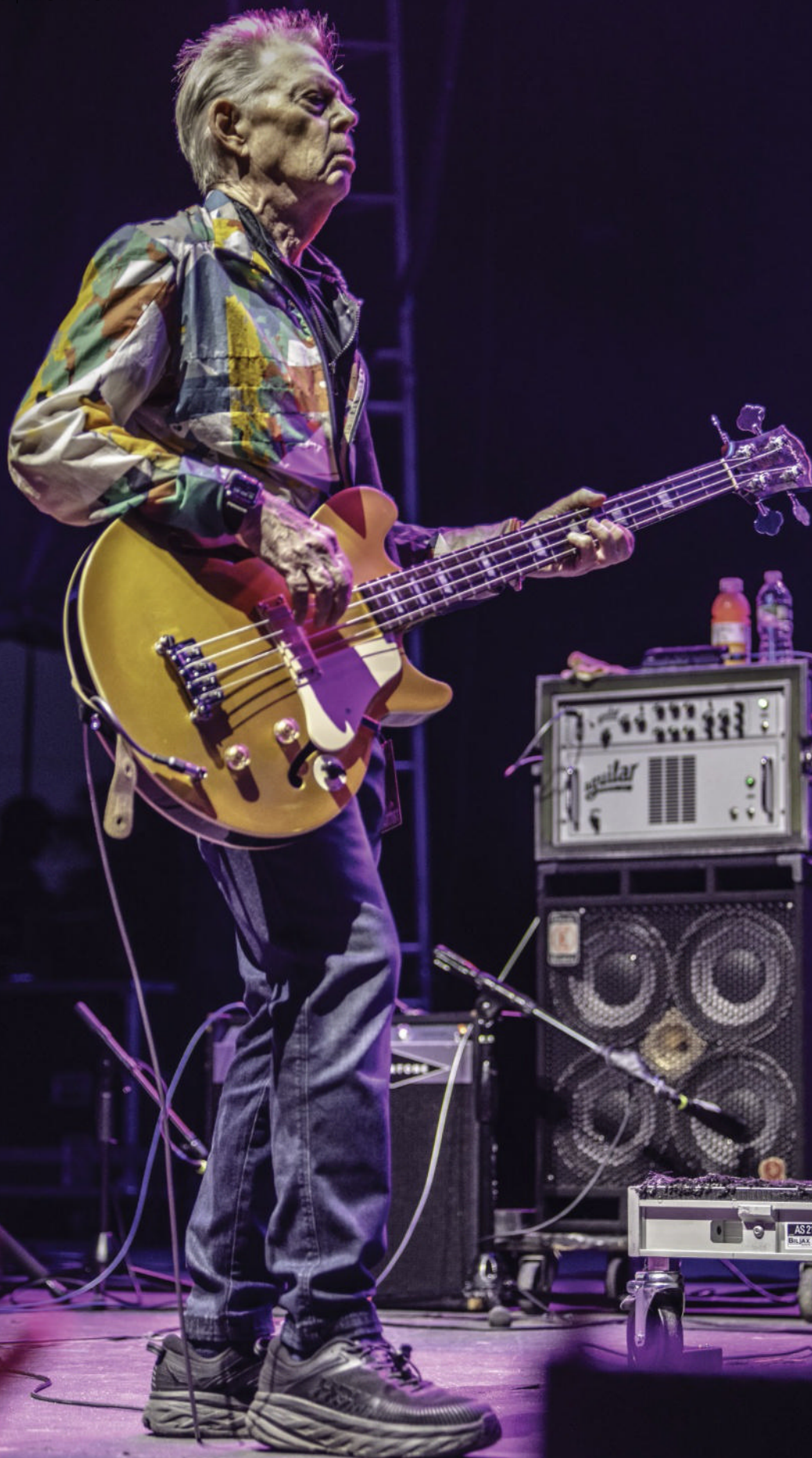
For pedals, I have an original Zendrive overdrive on the Atkins SST and the Gibson Firebird. I've also got a 1965 Thomas Organ Company [*wah*] pedal, the one I used with the Airplane. I always put the overdrive before the wah-wah pedal. That's important to me. Most of the time I don't really need any pedals, but sometimes it's just fun to make noises. I also have an Eventide

"I HAVE A GIBSON CUSTOM SHOP LES PAUL 'BEANO.' THAT'S GOING TO BE WAITING IN THE WINGS"

Kaukonen with his
early '90s Gibson
Firebird, which will
be his main electric
for this tour.



Casady with his signature Epiphone Bass. Although he has a Gibson signature model, he uses the Epiphone more.



Blackhole. It's a really neat reverb pedal. It's very complex, but it's got a lot of depth. Sometimes I'll throw that in the chain, just for texture, because most of the time I don't need anything at all.

Original Zendrive overdrive pedals are going for over \$1,000.

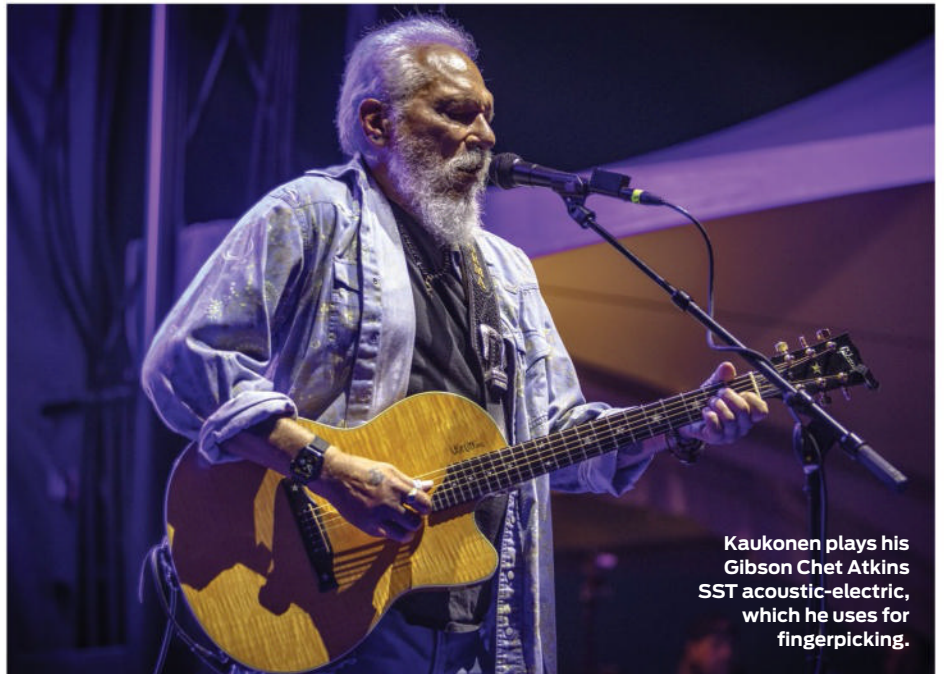
Robben Ford turned me on to those back in the mid 2000s, and I was very fortunate that I was able to get four or five of them direct from [Zendrive designer] Alfonso Hermida back in the days. They weren't cheap back then, but they were nothing like they are today. They're not vintage for me. They're just old because I bought them new.

Have you ever played with some of the newer digital modelers, like the Kemper or Fractal?

No, I have not. I find that stuff interesting, but I really don't have any interest in modeling. And if I need to read a manual for something, that's going to turn me off to a piece of gear immediately. I'm very fortunate because I've got a couple of really good amps, and I'm not a collector. If I had to fly by myself and sound like me at different venues without carrying a bunch of gear around, I would definitely be into it. But, lately, for Hot Tuna, we drive everywhere, so it's easier to carry our original gear to gigs.

Has the Fur Peace Ranch gone virtual since the pandemic?

Yeah. I'm not calling the blues here, but the pandemic changed everything for us, and we stopped doing in-person things. The cost of everything is going up, too, so we're doing some in-person things at the Ranch and some on the road. We did a couple weeks in Martha's Vineyard. We're going to do it next year as well. You can check out our website at furpeaceranch.com.



Kaukonen plays his Gibson Chet Atkins SST acoustic-electric, which he uses for fingerpicking.

Looking back over such an awesome distance, what would you say has been the highlight of your career so far?

I guess the real highlight of my career has been to turn a lot of people on to the music that the masters performed — you know, like Reverend Gary Davis and all that kind of stuff.

Thanks to the internet, people can find that stuff without me holding their

hand. But in the beginning, I was able to do that. And people went, "Oh, wow! Yeah, I love that song. You wrote 'Hesitation Blues'?" "No, I didn't write that song. Reverend Davis did, and you need to check him out." So being able to turn people on to

the music that I love is part of it.

I've got a 17-year-old daughter and a 25-year-old son, and I've been able to open a lot of doors for them, and they've had a lot of options to listen to stuff that they may or may not have had without me. And the flip side is they turned me on to a lot of music too.

Aside from this final electric tour, do you have anything else coming up with Hot Tuna or other projects?

My buddy John [Hurlbut] and I have a project called *Another Lifetime* on Culture

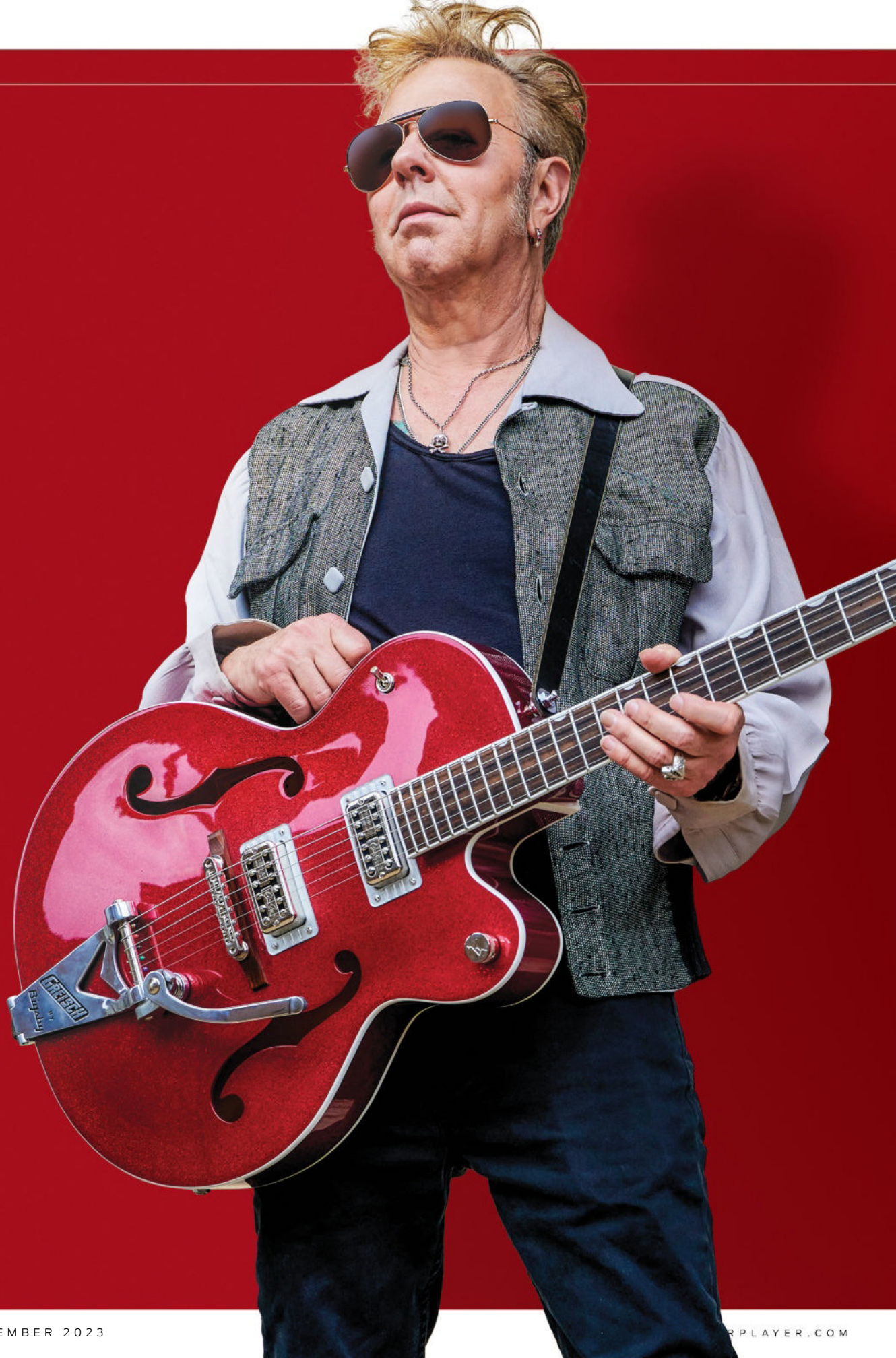
Factory, and it'll be out in the fall. I'm just performing on it as a lead guitarist. It takes such a burden off me, and it brings me back to what I was able to do with the *Airplane*, which is just serve the song. So I'm pretty excited about that project.

Who inspires you personally and musically?

Wow! I guess there's so many people that continue to inspire me over the years, and I could talk about my buddy Jack [Casady] or Reverend Davis forever. But I guess if I'm just thinking about today, you know, just because of all the stuff that's been going on, I guess one of my great inspirations today is [multi-instrumentalist] Larry Campbell. Outside of the fact that he's a dear friend, it's his ability — I mean, he's such a multi-talented guy, and he has a three-dimensional vision of music that most people, including myself, don't have. But he has this ability to always honestly serve the song and to work well with other people, and to just basically be a good human being. So I'll put Larry right up at the top of the list.

And I'm always excited about going out with Jack. You know, I just talked to him this morning. We're bringing back some old electric stuff we haven't played in a long time... Oh, I don't know, half a lifetime! And I don't want to spoil the surprise by letting the cat out of the bag now. 🐈

“THE HIGHLIGHT OF MY CAREER HAS BEEN TO TURN A LOT OF PEOPLE ON TO THE MASTERS — LIKE REVEREND GARY DAVIS”





A Devil for the Details

He made rockabilly cool again and revitalized big band in the era of grunge. As he drops his latest rockabilly rave-up, *The Devil Always Collects*, rock and roll maverick **Brian Setzer** reveals what drives his boundless creativity and shares a shedload of the guitar gear behind his music.

BY GARY GRAFF

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY NELSON

Brian Setzer is, as he once sang with the Stray Cats, built for speed. And you have to keep the pedal down just to keep up with him — especially when it comes to his music.

OVER THE PAST nearly 50 years — primarily with the Stray Cats and on his own — Setzer has puzzled and confounded listeners and been a master of doing what you'd least expect. Just sporting a pompadour and playing rockabilly during the AOR- and punk-dominated late '70s would have been nonconformist enough, but Setzer, now 64, has made a career out of keeping us guessing — and pleasing us far more often than not.

Born in Massapequa on Long Island, Setzer started out playing the euphonium in his school's jazz bands. He could be found, underage, at the Village Vanguard in New York City's Greenwich Village, but he was quickly making connections between the broad array of jazz he loved and contemporary rock. He was particularly drawn to rockabilly, gravitating toward body ink, pompadours and the big, open sound of the Gretsch 6120. He and his brother

Gary started a band called the Tomcats, which became the Stray Cats with the addition of Lee Rocker (*née* Drucker) on double bass and Slim Jim Phantom (McDonnell) on drums.

Long Island — and America, for that matter — was not a particularly inviting incubator for throwback cats, so Setzer, Rocker and Phantom found better fortunes over in London, where there was greater interest from fans and fellow musicians alike. Dave Edmunds took the Stray cats in from the cold, producing the group's self-titled 1981 debut album, a number 6 hit on the U.K. charts that launched Top 10 singles such as "Runaway Boys" and "Rock This Town." After issuing *Gonna Ball* later that year, the group compiled the two sets into *Built for Speed* and came back across the pond, where MTV was able to help translate the vision and turn the Stray Cats into a Gold-certified sensation at home, too.

Then things got really interesting for Setzer. The Stray Cats' first breakup, in 1984, sent him out into the world as a solo artist without parameters. Setzer played with Robert Plant's outfit the Honeydrippers, then surprised the world with his heartland rock-leaning solo debut *The Knife Feels Like Justice* in 1986. Four years later, he introduced the Brian Setzer Orchestra, an 18-piece big band that played jump blues (its rendition of Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail" soundtracked a Gap commercial), won a pair of Grammy Awards and launched an annual Christmas tour. For the past four decades he's mixed the BSO with Stray Cats reunions and solo albums — one of them, *Wolfgang's Big Night Out* in 2007, was filled with six-string interpretations of classical compositions and scored a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Crossover Album. His 2011 set *Setzer Goes Instru-Mental!*, another Grammy nominee, blended originals with trio covers of Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" and Ray Noble's "Cherokee," among others.

This fall, Setzer releases *The Devil Always Collects*, the follow-up to 2021's *Gotta Have the Rumble* and his second consecutive collaboration with producer



Brian plays his Candy Magenta Gretsch Hot Rod.



Brian performs with his Gretsch 6120 1959 Relic in Tropical Coral.

Julian Raymond. Like its predecessor, the 11-song set was recorded remotely, with Setzer and engineer Jason Orris working at the Terrarium in Minneapolis, where the guitarist resides, and sending files back and forth to Raymond in Nashville. Setzer and regular lyricist Mike Himmelstein collaborated on five of the tracks, and his wife, Julie, co-wrote one ("Psycho Suzie"). He also covers Del Reeves' "Girl on the Billboard" and Nick Lowe's "Play That Fast Thing (One More Time)." Those paying attention — and there are many who do — will note that the primary guitar this time out is a "Frankenstein" 1957/'58 Gretsch Duo Jet, which gives *The Devil Always Collects* a solidbody bite that's still true to the twang that's his stock in trade.

And perhaps best of all, Setzer is hitting the road again for the first time since the BSO's holiday tour of 2018 —

refreshed and, he says, ready to rumble once again.

You recorded *Gotta Have the Rumble* and *The Devil Always Collects* the same way, remotely. What appeals to you about that as a process?

First of all, it certainly is a pleasure to just go down the block, like you're going to a job, and then come back home at the end of the day. Something feels good about that. But, y'know, the old school of thought is you get

everybody in the room and you make a record. That's how it was done and the way I always thought it should be done, and this blows it out of the water. 'Cause if you think about it, even if you're all in the room, you're kind of in your own room. Even when I make records with the Stray Cats, or with the three-piece band, the bass player is acoustic, and

there's a lot of leakage, so we put him in the little vocal room. We call it the fish tank, because you can only see him through the glass. So he's not really in the same room. And then the drummer is partitioned, because he's so loud and you can't have leakage into your microphone. So when you're in different places like that, does it really matter if you're all in one place or in other parts of the country? These records really came out sounding good, even though we weren't "together."

So how did you know what you wanted this record to sound like?

I always let them be what they want to be. It always starts with the writing, whatever comes out. That's like turning on a faucet, I like to say. Once I start rolling, it just comes out that way. This record, to me, sounds a little more, for lack of a better word, *popabilly* or *psychobilly*. It has a little more edge to it. There's definitely ways you can go with rockabilly music. You can have a more country approach, for instance. This one

"I plugged in this Duo Jet I've got. Both Jason and I looked at each other and were like, 'Oh gosh, that's it!'"



1962 (front) and 1963 (behind)
Fender Reverb amps



1960 Gretsch 6169 Western
Cowboy tube amp



1956 Gretsch White Penguin
and 1958 White Falcon



1963 Fender Bassman amp
and Roland Space Echo



1958 Gretsch 6156 Playboy



Echo Fix EF-X3 Chorus Echo



The '57/'58 Blue Sparkle Duo Jet



1960 Gretsch 6120

seems to be a little more intense, and I just went with it.

Was there a first song or two that came along and put the album on its path?

I think the first song I wrote for it was “Rock Boys Rock.” I wasn’t getting the sound I wanted out of the 6120; it just was not matching how frantic the song had become. So I plugged in this Duo Jet I’ve got — it’s a Frankenstein, a ’57 [body], ’58 [neck] Duo Jet, and I just turned it up a little bit louder than I normally would. Jason and I looked at each other and were like, “Oh gosh, that’s it!” Little things like that inspire you to keep writing, to keep moving in a certain direction. On the last record it was this old reverb unit that got me to write songs. On this record it was the Duo Jet.

What’s the Duo Jet’s story?

I’ve had it for close to my entire life. I think it came from Canada originally, and it’s been worked on a lot; I’m not sure how much of a Duo Jet is really left in that guitar, really. I used it on my first *Rockabilly Riot* album [2005], when I did all the Sun [Records] sessions covers, and it sounded great, ’cause I wanted the old single-coil sound. But when I cranked it up a little more than I should this time, it became that kind of flange-monster thing. What a great-sounding guitar! I don’t know what it is about it. It’s almost Telecaster like, but not as mellow. It’s got more twang to it. So I used it on most of the record, and this is my first record where I didn’t play the 6120 that much.

You can hear the Duo Jet as an inspiration on something like “Black Leather Jacket,” which is kind of an outlier — almost metal, really — on the record.

Yeah. [sings the lick] It’s darker than the happy rockabilly songs. Maybe that was from being cooped up in the house for so long — I was getting a little aggravated, like everyone else. It got frustrating, so

maybe [the song] came out of that direction. These songs just develop, y’know? I don’t control them. I think they control me. “The Devil Always Collects” was like a little monster. That riff just killed me.

How did you become a Gretsch guy, and what keeps you one today?

Those things still bring me the most fun out of anything. Out of old motorcycles, old cars — it’s Gretsch guitars. I bought one [his 1959 orange 6120] in the late 1970s because I wanted to look like

Eddie Cochran.

I didn’t even know if they’d sound good. Back then, no one knew who Eddie Cochran was, so I found it in the local paper for 100 bucks. It’s such a special sound. People who

play solidbody guitars don’t have this happen, but the sound comes out of the amplifier, it goes back through the guitar, so you can control how much sustain you want, how much feedback you want, and the whole thing shakes. You feel it. It’s the best thing in the world, for me.

And the right amp?

Again, that’s just a matter of luck. I picked up a Fender Bassman. It’s from 1963. I got it because I had to beat Slim Jim on the drums. It’s a loud amp — just that combination. When I made some money and I came back from England, I thought, Now I’m going to buy what everyone else plays, and I got a Fender Stratocaster and a big Marshall amp. But I could never beat the Gretsch through the Bassman.

When *Ready to Rumble* came out, you talked about having some songs you wrote with Joe Strummer still around. Did you consider them for this album at all?

No. That was in a different style. I’ve got three or four [songs] around, but I like to think that I guard Joe. I don’t talk about him too much. We were close friends. I like to keep his memory the way I think he would like it. If those songs ever see

“I want to play some solo guitar stuff, just by myself. That’s something I’ve never done before”

the light of day, I'd probably run them past Lucinda, his widow — "Would it be all right if I did this?" — just because I have that much respect for him.

What was working with him like?

Joe and I were just kind of family-vacation friends, really. Back in the day Joe and his family would come out to California, where I was living at the time, and we'd spend the whole summer together, simply as friends. And then it might be, "Hey Joe, you have any lyrics you're writing with that band you got, the Clash?" [laughs] And he'd sit down and write some lyrics, and I'd write songs for them. A couple of them I used, and I've got these three or four I put away and forgot about.

So we'd do it just for fun, but we never spoke about our bands. We talked about everything but — about being friends, and Cadillacs. We'd drive down to the Mexican border. He was fascinated with American culture and always wanted to see what it was like. I remember, we stopped once 'cause there were cowboys playing poker in a field and he wanted to talk to them. I was like, "Joe, maybe you don't want to stop and talk to these guys," but he did. [laughs] I think they cut him some slack because they knew he was from somewhere else, 'cause he had a funny accent to them. And he loved that kind of stuff — crazy American stuff. We had a lot of fun together. He's like me, but he was British, right?

Do any of the new album's songs have some history from sitting around and waiting for their time, as it were?

No. I usually dig into what I have laying around; I start fresh. Sometimes I'll be digging through my old cassettes and something might jump out at me — a guitar lick or a song title. But not that often. And then even, it's just a starting point and I'll take it somewhere else.

You made a comment in announcing *The Devil Always Collects* that you'll be playing "some solo guitar and little things I've worked out by myself" at shows this year. Does this mean truly solo, as in "unaccompanied"?

Yeah, I want to play some solo guitar stuff, just by myself. That's something I've never done before. I just played some local shows here at a little pub down the block, just to see how things would go over and to see how everything sounded. I hadn't played in quite a while so I wanted to see how my ears work — how my brain works after the break. And I wanted to play some solo instrumental things. For instance, I have a version of "Georgia on My Mind" that I always wanted to do. I did "Cherokee" straight-up, almost kind of jazz. I did a bluegrass thing that inspired me from the past. I just played and it really went over well, I think because there's not many people that play like me, to be honest. People were very attentive, so I'm gonna keep doing it, plug it into the middle of the show or something.

Nobody plays like you — that's kind of the crux of the matter here. Where does that range you've explored all these years come from?

I just liked all kinds of music, and I felt that to limit yourself to just one style is like using three fingers when you have five. The first music I remember hearing was rockabilly music around the house, Elvis, and music to TV shows and cartoons. I mean, have you honestly ever listened to how good the theme to *Mannix* is, or the theme to *Rocky and Bullwinkle*? It's incredible! I was really influenced by all of that music that you just heard on everyday TV. It might



With his 1960 6120



*"This is my first
record where I
didn't play the
6120 that much"*

With his Green
Sparkle Hot Rod



Gretsch Glitz. (from left) The Green Sparkle Hot Rod, 1957/'58 Blue Sparkle Duo Jet, 1960 6120 and Candy Magenta Hot Rod

sound silly, but all of that music was written so well. I think the guys who wrote those things came from that era of big-band songwriting, and all those great movies with the scores. So that was my first taste of music, really, when you're home sick from school one day and you're watching some old cartoons, going, "Wow, what's that?" and absorbing all kinds of music. I can still hum those old songs. I think a lot of people can. It was written really well, and it inspired me.

What was the allure of rockabilly — and why do you think it's maintained its appeal for nearly 70 years now?

It's got the best energy. It's pure. It was the original spirit of rock and roll. Y'know what Jimmy Page said to Slim Jim? "Y'know, the second solo on [*Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps*'] 'Double Talkin' Baby' that Cliff Gallup did? I still play it. It's the most amazing thing." Rockabilly has that certain purity and energy about it. Why did that happen? I think a lot of guys were young and they came back

from the war and they had nothing to do. Or they picked up a trade, maybe, and all of a sudden they started tinkering with electronics, and that led to guitars. I don't know. It's fascinating, though: The original rockabillys, the guys from Virginia, played different than the guys from Kansas City. They had the radio. They didn't have computers. They didn't have different ways of hearing music. Whatever was being played [on radio] was what they were influenced by. In those days you had James Burton from Louisiana, who played a whole lot different from Cliff Gallup in Virginia. It was all so regional. And Cliff Gallup picked up a little bit of jazz coming from New York. You could hear the region in their playing.

The Rolling Stones were early Stray Cats adopters and even had you open for them.

What was that like?

When they first came in to see us, I knew maybe three songs by the Rolling Stones. I didn't know much about them. I know "Honky Tonk Women" and the hits. I was more infatuated with Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. I know it sounds kind of crazy, but I discovered [*the Stones*] after they discovered us. At one time I think they wanted to sign us to some sort of record label that they were going to start, but I don't think they ever did that.

You did largely get

the validation from your heroes. That had to feel good.

The original rockabilly guys I met were all so happy for us. They were just happy to hear the actual music back. That to me was the real excitement, when I got to meet those guys: "You're the guy that did 'Red Hot!'" That meant more to me than meeting the current people.

"Next time I want to play with the Stray Cats because that's the best rockabilly band. The best one"



Brian holds the Blue Sparkle Duo Jet, which has faded to a green hue. It has a '57 body and '58 neck and is the only Blue Sparkle Duo Jet Gretsch made.

You have a career that's generally gone against the grain — you played rockabilly when punk and new wave were popular, and big band when grunge ruled. Are you a natural nonconformist or a contrarian? [laughs] That's my mom, just her streak of stubbornness. I might have gotten a little of that. I'm sure it's worked against me. But I've been lucky enough to do what I've always wanted to do. And to play guitar and have anyone take notice of it, not to mention play the kind of music that lasted for a couple years in the '50s. I'm surprised it got out of my garage, man. I was very lucky that other people liked it. It'll never be this huge thing like country music or hard rock, but it's my thing.

Is there anything you've done that would surprise people who just know the Stray Cats or maybe the Orchestra?

I had a new wave band called the Bloodless Pharaohs. That was the first band that got me playing [New York City] punk rock clubs: CBGB, Max's. I didn't sing. It was like Roxy Music meets rock

and roll. You'd have to hear it. It was really interesting stuff. I was just going along with it all. One night I'd play with the Pharaohs, the other night I'd play with some cat band — the Bobcats, the Stray Cats... We'd change the name all the time. But, yeah, the Bloodless Pharaohs. We made a record, but I'm not sure you can find it anywhere.

From your elder-statesman stature now [Setzer laughs], what's your advice on how to develop a distinctive style?

Well, that's a good question. When I first started, I heard people on the radio and I really liked the way they had their own distinct sound. The first thing I thought, probably the most important thing, is, "I wanna get my own sound," and I somehow stumbled upon that Gretsch-Bassman combination. I was influenced by a lot of people, but I got my own sound going. Somehow you've got to find that. You've got to find that voice, with the guitar-and-amp combination or whatever. You don't need the crazy

Les Paul—through—the Marshall; you can get something that's unique. The other thing is to not be limited — put all sorts of music together. There are no rules. I say you follow rules all day; when you play guitar is the one chance you get to not have to follow rules. So a lot of it is just keep trying, and then all of a sudden you find your own sound. It can be done.

What would you advise as the best way to keep growing and continually improve — like you've strived to?

I think you have to keep a positive outlook in life. It's pretty easy to go down the dark avenues. I think keeping positive rises you above a lot of the chatter of negativity, especially on the internet. See, I didn't grow up with the internet. When opinion started to come out [online] without any responsibility being taken, it really shocked me at first. It really did. I think, especially as a young person today, you have to rise above it and not pay attention to it. Just be yourself, try and keep positive. Certainly, if people are telling you what to do, don't listen to them. Just keep doing it how you want to. That's the best piece of advice I can give.

Is there anything that you haven't done yet that you'd like to?

I just want to get back in the pool and play again, 'cause it's been a while. I'd like to do the trio aspect a little, then next time I want to play with the Stray Cats, because that's the best rockabilly band. The best one. So I'm probably gonna do that next summer.

I have two albums' worth of my own songs I want to play, so once I get that finished I'll get back and do the Stray Cats. It's got that chemistry. It's got magic that you can't put into words. That's what keeps you coming back. You want to capture that little piece of magic, 'cause we don't know why it happens and we want to figure it out. 🐾

Brian Setzer would like to thank Adam Meyer of Mill City Lutherie, in Minneapolis, who reset the necks on two of his 6120s, as well as Twin Cities luthier Wyatt Overman.

DARK GREEN

As Metallica hit the road in support of *72 Seasons*, **Kirk Hammett** tells us how Peter Green's famous "Greeny" '59 Les Paul has changed his thinking — and playing — since the guitar has been in his care.

BY JAMIE DICKSON

KIRK HAMMETT'S wiry, wah-scorched lead tones have been a core component of Metallica's sound since the band reshaped the landscape of metal in the early '80s. Now 60 years of age, Kirk's youthful looks mask the fact that he's been at the sharp end of one of the world's biggest acts for 40 years, after he replaced Dave Mustaine in the band in spring 1983.

And although Metallica's juggernaut touring and recording schedule has made extraordinary demands on the band's members, four decades of music making have also left Hammett with enough room to reflect on and

evolve his sound far more than some might know. You might think, for example, that he still builds his sound primarily around active pickups. But as our free-ranging conversation with the guitarist reveals, he's more likely to get his gain sounds with much older tech these days — PAFs mounted in a certain storied Les Paul formerly owned by Peter Green, of which he is the current owner and steward.

"There's so much Greeny on the new album," Hammett says, referring both to Green's Les Paul and Metallica's latest, *72 Seasons*. "I mean, when you hear a whammy bar, it's not Greeny," he adds with a laugh. "But I only played two guitars on

the album, whereas on others I played, like, 16. But on this one, it's only Greeny and my [ESP] Mummy. That's all I needed.

"When I put Greeny on the rhythm pickup, and I hear that neck tone, it's just so much the neck tone that you want to hear," he says. "I mean, it just takes me. And the bridge pickup has so much bite and so much presence, without being too trebly. It's amazing, because when I jam with other people and listen to the recordings afterwards, Greeny just stands out. Put three different guitars together and Greeny will just have more presence than any other guitar."

Kirk's conversion to a sound based on (an admittedly



“IT’S NEVER LOST ON ME THAT **IT WAS
GARY MOORE’S GUITAR AND PETER
GREEN’S GUITAR... IT’S A UNIQUE
GUITAR, A BLESSED PIECE OF WOOD”**

remarkable) vintage Les Paul has been a long road, however, and it began well before he took ownership of Greeny, as he explored how to evolve his playing and make it as fearless, direct and honest as possible.

We join him to talk about that journey, learn more about his feeling of connection to Greeny's music, and the burgeoning range of guitars inspired by Greeny that is now being built by Gibson, including the new USA model featured on page 52 and one we're not entirely sure we should know about yet.

How would you say Peter Green's music connects to your own musical world?

Well, Peter Green's guitar style, even when he was improvising, every note was so perfectly played. He was a very, very thoughtful player. Every note counted with him. There were no throwaway notes, and I love that about him. There's any number of guitar players out there who just kind of throw away notes. I have a whole condominium full of throwaway notes, you know, but with him, there were hardly any.

I love the way he wrote. "Oh Well I & II" — ever listen to "Part II"? Fucking darker than the first part. I mean, "Part II" sounds like a funeral dirge. It sounds like the end of the world. "Green Manalishi" — he wrote



Greeny was used extensively on Metallica's new album, *72 Seasons*, via Fractal Axe-Fx models of Kirk's Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier and Fortin Meathead amplifiers.

that sitting in his flat somewhere in London, right? It sounds like it was written in Mississippi, in a shack on the edge of a swamp at two o'clock in the morning. That song is so dark without relying on elements to make it dark, like heaviness or distorted guitar. Literally from the first E minor chord, oh my god, you're put in this frightening place. When I hear that kind of playing, that kind of composition, I instantly go, Wow! His mental makeup must have been really something for this kind of music to come out. Then I go to what he might have been experiencing, and there's a darkness. And I can relate to that, because there's some darkness in me and some darkness in how I compose music. I totally relate to Peter in those terms. Absolutely.

Greeny was obviously a pillar of Green's sound, and now it's become a pillar of yours. How does that feel?

It's never lost on me that it was Gary Moore's guitar and Peter Green's guitar — the guitar will not let me forget that. And so in the midst of playing it, I'll just get that impression, and all of a sudden I'm playing a Peter Green lick or a Gary Moore lick. It's kind of spontaneous, you know? The thing with Greeny, it's a unique guitar; it's a blessed piece of wood. That's all I can really say. Somehow it's blessed with an energy or vibration that's super unique. I've never really felt it in any other guitar.

You're often thought of as a player who's built their sound around active pickups. What's driven your move toward using Greeny, with its PAFs?

Well, old PAFs are so much more touch sensitive, and I've been trying to figure out for the last 10 years whether or not active



Hammett's taste in guitars is wide ranging, but he started out with Strat-style electric guitars, which he later modded with active humbuckers. These were a necessary tool early in his career with Metallica, he says, as seen here in this shot from the early 1980s.



pickups age well, because it's a bunch of circuitry. But your traditional pickups, with coils and magnets and wire, they age, and it's that aging factor that really makes PAF pickups individual. Even the newer type of pickups, with traditional coils, magnets and wires, even they will age. Like DiMarzio pickups: I put an old pair of DiMarzio pickups in a KH [Series S-style guitar] — maybe it was an LTD — and I was amazed at how good it sounded through my amp setup. I thought to myself, Maybe the age of active pickups is over.

I'll tell you what attracted me to active pickups in the '80s: It was the fact that they had a higher output — a battery-assisted higher output. They're

basically less microphonic, and higher output, which means lower noise. And that's what I needed back then for Metallica. We were all about distortion, being loud, high-gain...just a wall of sound.

But as I grew as a guitar player during the '90s, I started noticing PAF pickups. Man, that's the sound that I grew up hearing with all these British guitar players that I loved. Even Michael Schenker's Flying V had just stock Gibson pickups in it. Sometime in the '90s, I realized that you can push a PAF pickup — you can take an amp and fully gain it out. That PAF will just take it and take it. You really can't do that with a high-output active pickup. You turn up the gain and then you're lost, and it's

The new Gibson USA Kirk Hammett "Greeny" Les Paul Standard, reviewed on page 52, offers the famous out-of-phase sound that Hammett calls "Dragon Tone."

noisy. And then all the [tonal] distinction's gone, the harmonic distortion changes and it's not as touch sensitive. And you can get away with a lie, because it covers up a lot of your mistakes.

What I love about PAF pickups is the clarity of notes and the clarity in a succession of notes. The [nature of the] harmonic distortion protects sensitivity. And you can't really get away with a lot. You have to play well and you have to play with clarity. You have to hit every note. Something like legato, it's easier with active pickups — not so much with PAFs. But when you do legato [licks] with PAFs, it sounds so much better to me.

I still like that EMG active-pickup wall of sound, and it works for our older material. But there was a shift in me about 15 or 20 years ago where I realized that PAF pickups — and stock pickups in general — I think you can push them way more than you can push EMGs. And you could almost say I had it backward: I should have started with just a regular pickup, pushing that and going, "Okay, EMGs are the next level." But no, I was, like, next-level first and then went to the more subtle thing. And I've discovered that the more subtle thing actually works for me.

James [Hetfield] is the same way; he has the same opinion. He loves PAF pickups and thinks PAFs are great for lead. But, for him, the EMG active pickup sound is great for his rhythm sound, and he really, really likes that rhythm sound.

You're often associated with Superstrat-style electrics. How did your path to becoming a Les Paul player begin?

When I first started playing guitar, I was listening a lot to Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton.

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SHAKE YOUR MONEYMAKER

Following a pair of five-figure Custom versions, here's the everyman Greeny. But is it a valid introduction or a slightly pimped version of an existing Les Paul?

TESTED BY DAVE BURRLUCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL BARKER

FEW GUITARS COME with such a historic and evocative backstory as this one. Pretty much whatever your age or taste in music, at least one if not all of the players involved — Peter Green, Gary Moore, Kirk Hammett and let's not forget Les Paul himself — will be on your playlist. The appeal, the blanket publicity and the social media buzz mean that this guitar is a more than significant introduction. But what do we actually get for just shy of \$3,200?

It seems like a modded Les Paul Standard '50s, the cornerstone of the Original Series, which has remained unchanged since its introduction, under Gibson's new ownership, in late 2019. But thanks to its satin nitro finish, it's actually based on the Faded version that appeared last year.

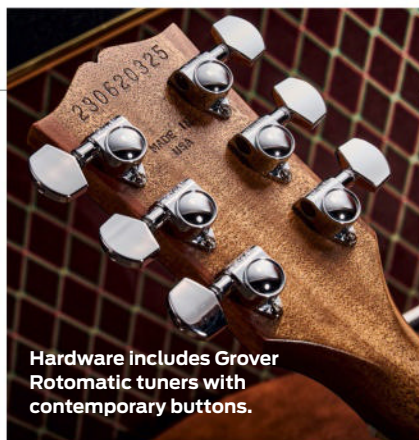
As for the pimps to its starting point, first off we get a maple top upgrade from AA to AAA. Then, reflecting the neck repairs of the original Greeny model, the headstock is left plain, with no "Les Paul Model" script or truss rod cover ID. The toggle switch ring is left plain, too, and the control knobs differ — a Gary Moore mod, we believe. The bridge pickup's pair has the gold top-hat knobs with silver reflectors of the current '60s models, while the neck pickup has the standard gold top-hat knobs of the '50s Standards.

The Greeny Burst finish is a slightly deeper-hued version of the Faded's Vintage Honey Burst and is applied just to the top. The rest is a mid-brown stain over the slightly open-pore feel of the lighter colored mahogany. We also get Grover Rotomatic tuners with "contemporary" Schaller-like knobs, not the vintage Kluson style of the current '50s guitars.

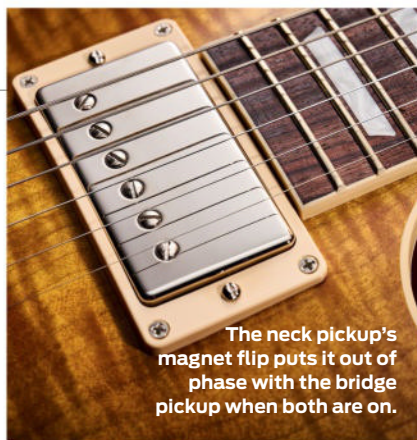
As for the pickups, the spec of the Custom Shop Greeny tells us it uses "Custom Greeny Buckers with Alnico II magnets," while the USA model's spec just calls them "Greenybuckers." On both, the bar magnet of the neck pickup is flipped, its polarity reversed, so when both pickups are on together they're out of phase. Also, the neck pickup is physically reversed, so the screw poles face the bridge, which really shouldn't make too much of a difference, even if the pickup coils are slightly unmatched, like the Burstbuckers, for example — and these appear to be wax potted.

Our advice is to forget the backstory and just enjoy the guitar. It's a cracker. There's no

This guitar is raw power personified, and that out-of-phase middle position provides another texture.



Hardware includes Grover Rotomatic tuners with contemporary buttons.



The neck pickup's magnet flip puts it out of phase with the bridge pickup when both are on.

weight relief and the guitar weighs a good-for-the-style 8.8 pounds, just slightly heavier than a Faded '50s I recently played. The neck is very slightly narrower than that '50s Faded, too: 1.695 inches at the nut and 2.0629 inches by the 12th, but identical in depth. The shape is a classic C, but it actually feels subtly asymmetrical, with slightly less shoulder on the treble side. Unfortunately, there are a lot of sharp edges, especially to the top edge of the body binding, and you can feel a slight line on the edge of the neck where it meets the binding, the same on the body. It's not a dealbreaker, but it does give a

rather unfinished feel to a \$3k-plus guitar — and with everything else being so ship-shape, we can't help but ask why?

Plugged in, Greeny is noticeably hotter than our reference Les Paul Classic with its retrofitted Burstbucker 1 and 2 — a little thicker, creamier, less polite. With both volumes full up, it sounds more Gary Moore than Peter Green, and when we select both pickups the sound drops in volume with its expected out-of-phase nasally, thinner voice. However, reducing either of the volumes a little creates a slightly out-of-phase sound that's a lot more useful: fuller, but still with

a little honk. Unlike the current Les Paul Classic, which has a pull-switch to engage a conventional out-of-phase sound if you want it, the magnet flip here means you don't have a choice.

So is this USA Greeny a good Les Paul? Yes, and it's one that would've been just as good copping Slash or the Pistols' Steve Jones as it is with more nuanced styles of Mr. Green. It's raw power personified, and while you are stuck with that out-of-phase middle position, it provides another texture that might prove as useful tracking parts on a recording as chasing Greeny's tone. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

Kirk Hammett "Greeny" Les Paul Standard

CONTACT gibson.com

PRICE \$3,199

NUT Graph Tech, 1.695" wide

NECK 1-piece mahogany, '50s Vintage profile, glued-in

FRETBOARD Single-bound rosewood, acrylic trapezoid inlays, 24.6" scale, 12" radius

FRETS 22, medium jumbo

TUNERS Grover Rotomatic tuners with contemporary buttons, nickel-plated

BODY 2-piece mahogany with carved AAA figured maple top

BRIDGE ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminum stopbar tailpiece

PICKUPS Covered Gibson Greenybucker with reversed magnet polarity (neck) and Greenybucker (bridge),

CONTROLS 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup

FINISH Satin nitrocellulose Greeny Burst

EXTRAS Original Series hardshell case, Gibson accessory kit

FACTORY STRINGS Gibson, .010–.046

WEIGHT 8.8 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS Workhorse Les Paul vibe with thin satin finish. Crisp, clean build with good weight and powerful PAF voice with musical out-of-phase sounds, especially if you use your volume controls

CONCERNS The magnet flip means you can't put the pickups in phase. Sharp binding edges give it an unfinished feel. Quite an uplift in price from the standard Faded model

UNDER THE HOOD

What's inside, and what's going on with those Greenybuckers?

Exactly how Peter Green's 'Burst ended up with its out-of-phase pickups is the subject of much conjecture. Some believe the magnet flip was a mistake in the original manufacturing; others think it was the result of a botched repair of its neck pickup, circa 1967, by the near mythical London guitar repairer Sam Li.

Whatever is the truth, the Greenybucker pickups — as approved by Kirk Hammett — cop the fabled tone. According to Gibson USA, "the pickups are wound with 42-gauge enamel magnet wire, use unpolished A-2 magnets, [and] the rhythm pickup has the magnet flipped to have the out-of-phase sound in the middle position." Gibson also notes that while all Greenybucker sets feature the same winding specs, magnets and so on, the Custom Shop version has aged nickel covers and screws, while the Custom Shop pickups are unpotted. The USA-made guitars will have potted new, shiny nickel hardware



but the same specs otherwise.

The Greenybuckers' DC resistances are 8.15k-ohms (neck) and 8.53k-ohms (bridge), not a million miles away from a Burstbucker 2 and 3 that I recently measured, which came in at 8k and 8.43k, respectively. Under the backplate, just like the '50s Faded model, we find CTS 500k pots with Gibson logos and and 022µF (223J) Orange Drop caps, wired modern style. The components are mounted on a metal grounding plate, but the cavity/cover isn't otherwise screened.

We hope Gibson will make the Greenybuckers available in its Pickup Shop, but quite a few pickup makers offer sets aimed to nail that sound, including Bare Knuckle, Monty's, Seymour Duncan and ThroBak, for starters. — Dave Burrluck

So I got a Strat. But when I got the Strat and plugged it in, it was clean. It wasn't full — it was that single-coil sound, and I was like, Why doesn't this sound like Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix? I realized it was the amp-pickup combination.

Once I figured that out, then I just needed a different type of guitar. I got a Flying V, and then I was good. But I always wanted a Les Paul. I'm looking at pictures of Jimmy Page where the Les Paul looks so amazing, and I would just stare at him. I'd look at Gary Moore's Les Paul — what a great guitar. I always wanted a Les Paul, but it didn't seem at the time to be the heavy metal [instrument] that I needed, which was a really fast guitar that was Strat-style, 24 frets, two humbuckers, but with a whammy bar, active pickups... You weren't going to find a Les Paul like that. And that's what I wanted at the time to play all those early Metallica songs.

But around, I would say, ...*And Justice for All* [1988] was when I actually started getting some disposable income, and I bought a tiger-stripe Les Paul. I started playing it onstage and just loved it. I was in friggin' heaven. I broke the neck on that, got it back and, all of a sudden, it sounded better. Then I was even more attached to it! And not long after that, I bought my first '59 Les Paul Standard, in about 1990. It just all kicked in for me. I love Les Pauls. I love Strats. I love Superstrats. I love Teles, I love 335s, I love Flying Vs. And that's about it.

What do you plug Greeny into when you're at home? Hard to believe it's a high-gain stack.

I have two of these Fenders [he points to two *Tweed Deluxe* combos]. These Voxes are also amazing [he holds up what appears to be two small

Greeny is no case queen these days. Hammett gigs with the guitar and says it is constantly by his side.

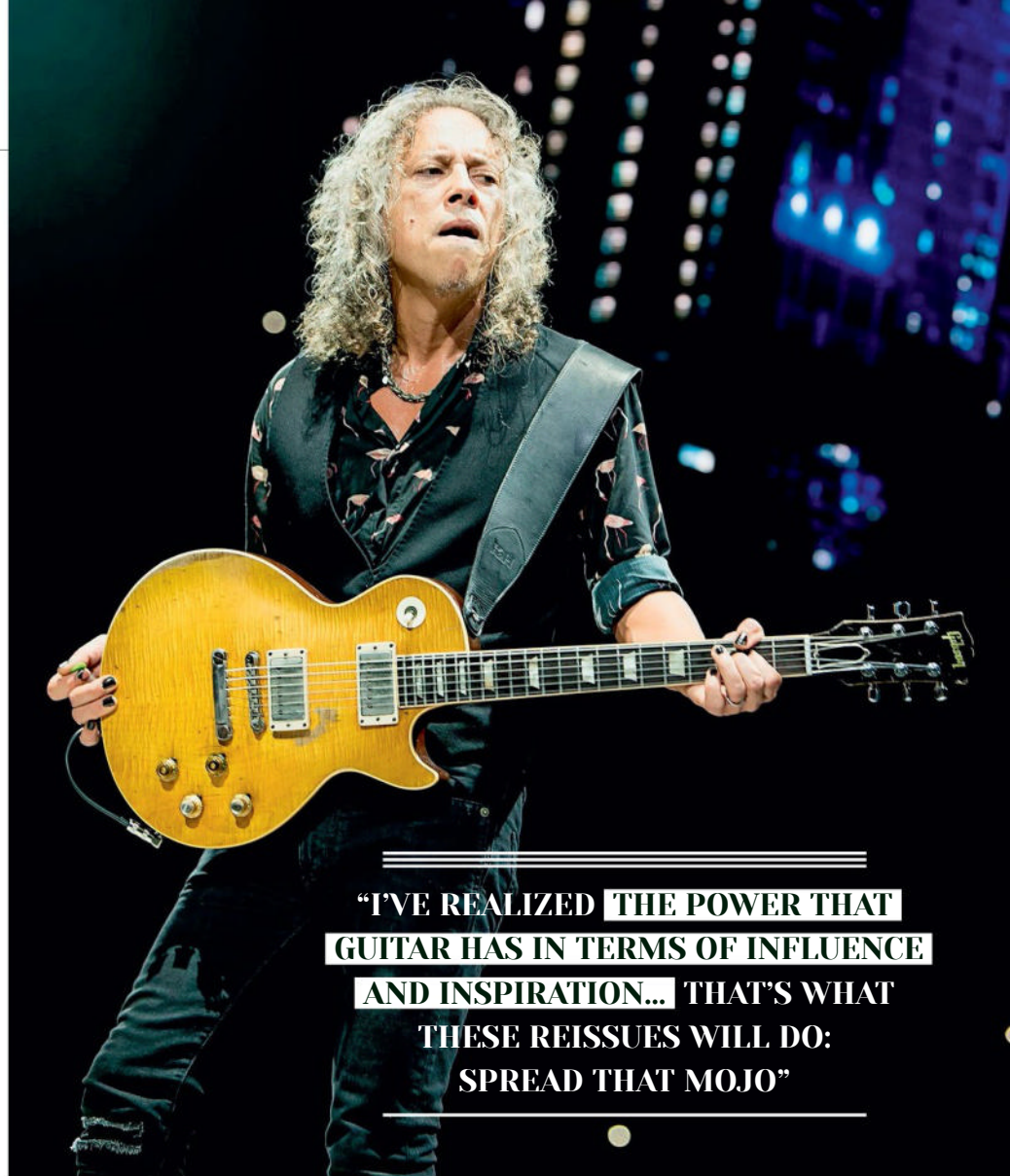
Nutube-based combos in front of his computer], and a new Carr amp. I'm basically plugging Greeny into anything that's around me because Greeny likes amps, and amps like Greeny. Greeny will make a shitty-sounding amp decent. It's just one of those guitars. There are amps out there that like guitars. I have an amp where you plug in just about any guitar and it sounds wonderful. Just like certain mics love voices — have you heard that phrase? Greeny is the guitar that loves amps, and amps love Greeny.

No matter what the combination, Greeny always sounds interesting. Because it's in the wood; it's in the pickups. It's a complete package. All you need to do is a little tweak here and there on the amp and then

you're good to go. Like I said, it's an amazing piece of wood and it's been played to hell. I mean, Peter Green played it a lot, Gary Moore really fucking played it to hell, and I play it to hell. And other people played it, too: Jimi Hendrix has played it, Rory Gallagher's played it, Jeff Beck, George Harrison. I mean, the list goes on and on and on.

How does the feeling of playing the real Greeny translate to the various Custom Shop and now Gibson USA replicas of the guitar?

I've realized the power that guitar has in terms of influence and inspiration. I am not elitist with that guitar and I'm not as protective as I should be, because I think it really is the people's instrument. And so I'll



"I'VE REALIZED THE POWER THAT GUITAR HAS IN TERMS OF INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION... THAT'S WHAT THESE REISSUES WILL DO: SPREAD THAT MOJO"

let anyone play that guitar. And when they play it, oh my god, their hands are shaking, or they're just playing differently. So I thought, How can I share this with more people, outside of what I'm already doing?"

That's what these Gibson reissues are doing now. It's to try to spread that inspiration, spread that influence, spread that mojo. I mean, you'll never have an exact Greeny copy, because guitars are like human beings — so individualistic — but you can make a Greeny copy that looks like Greeny, feels like Greeny and 80 percent sounds like Greeny. And when I say "80 percent," the bridge pickup has to have that bark, that neck pickup has to have that beautiful tone that just draws you in. And then it has to have that out-of-phase sound in the center, which I call the Dragon Tone. To me, it sounds like a Strat through a 100-watt Marshall — and Les Pauls are not supposed to sound like that! But Greeny has that, and I just love it.

The first thing I check when I get these prototypes is the middle position to make sure it has that out-of-phase sound. I have to tell you, man, I've tried the Gibson Custom Shops. Those Greenys are great. Tom Murphy Greenys are really great. The Gibson USAs are great, but my favorite version of Greeny is probably the Epiphone. The Epiphone Greenys, just by themselves, sound great and play great, and I was amazed at how I was playing an Epiphone and I didn't want to put it down, and it was delivering for me. *[At the time of this writing, no Epiphone Greeny has yet been announced officially, but Gibson's president, Cesar Gueikian, teased such a release, so time will tell].* It's just on all levels. This was two or three weeks ago. That Epiphone

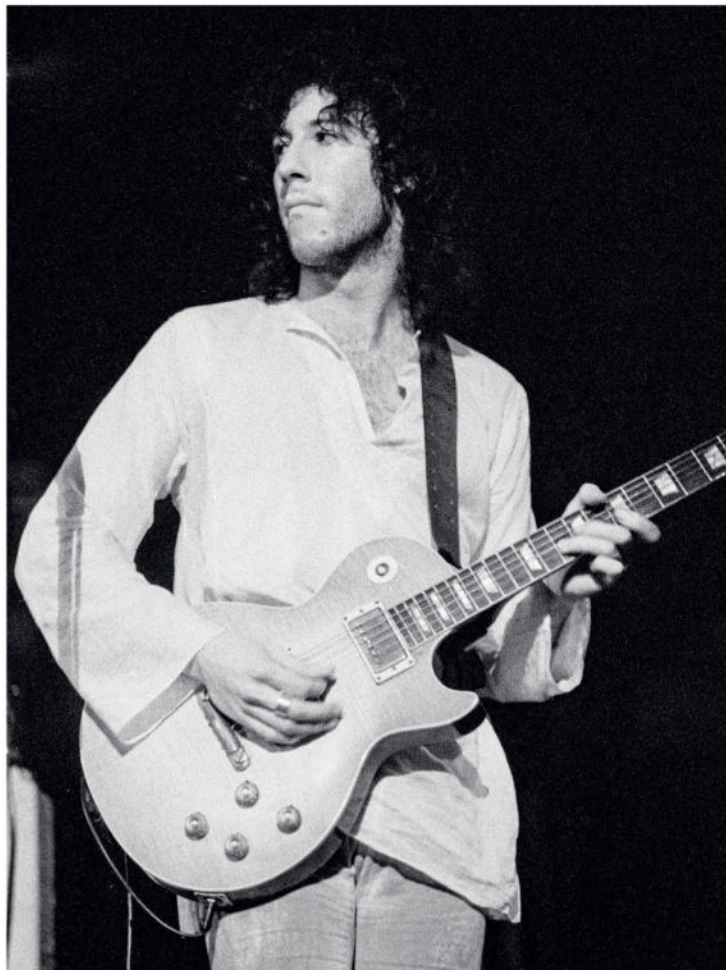
Greeny is now my couch guitar, and I reach for it when I'm watching TV, like most guitar players are apt to do.

I guess I'm most excited about that Epiphone because it makes the Greeny mythology, the Greeny influence, the Greeny inspiration available to everyone around the world who was motivated to get it. For me, it's a super-powerful thing, because I might be helping some young musician get a Greeny in their hands to play heavy blues like Peter Green or Gary Moore, or to come up with a song like "Oh Well" or "Albatross" or something. Or maybe they're just a Metallica fan, but then they come up with some weird,

crazy, heavy metal/blues hybrid that no one else has ever heard before. Maybe it's because of Greeny. I don't know.

The main thing is the power of influence and power of inspiration. To me, it leads to the music of 20 years from now. So maybe it's just an investment in the hope that someone will take *[a Greeny replica]* and make great music that we can all enjoy in the end. Those are my intentions. It's not fucking status. It's not finances. It's not to see my name out there. My motivation is mainly musical and to go out there and put guitars in the hands of musicians who will make music that, hopefully, I will like in 10 or 15 years' time. ■

Peter Green may have given Greeny its name, but the guitar has seen many stages over the years in the hands of Gary Moore and, now, Hammett.







MATTEO MANCUSO



IS LIGHT YEARS AHEAD OF US ALL

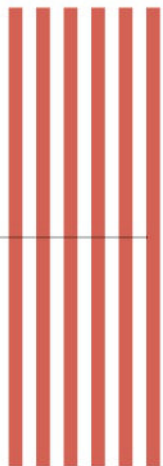
When it comes to improvisation, Italy's fingerstyle fusion maestro leaves the best players in the dust.

Says Al Di Meola, "It would take two, three lifetimes to catch up with him."

BY BILL MILKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAOLO TERLIZZI





It was just before the pandemic hit in 2020 that I happened upon a YouTube video by an Italian funk-fusion trio named the Snips.

The initial hook for me was the fact that they were playing “The Chicken,” the funky Pee Wee Ellis tune that Jaco Pastorius had adopted as a set opener for his Word of Mouth big band in the early ’80s. As Jaco’s biographer, I was naturally curious about their version. These were three young guys, just 19 or 20 years old at the time they first posted this audacious video in 2017. Jacked on adrenaline and youthful enthusiasm, they burned through the funk vehicle at an absolutely blistering pace (that video to date has garnered an awesome 2.4 million views on YouTube). The rhythm tandem of bassist Riccardo Olivia and drummer Salvatore Lima was impeccably tight, but what really stood out for me was the guitarist, Matteo Mancuso, who executed the incendiary lines and mind-boggling solo that followed, sans pick, with a kind of nonchalance that was totally disarming. And while his fingerstyle approach immediately recalled such other players who eschewed the pick — Mick Goodrick, John Abercrombie, Lenny Breau, Phil deGruy, and of course the whole lineage of classical and flamenco players who historically have navigated imposing lines with a strictly fingerstyle approach — this was something else entirely.

Other YouTube videos followed by this precocious trio, including uncannily exacting renditions of chops-busting vehicles like Allan Holdsworth’s

“Fred” (which has gotten 370,000 views to date), Chick Corea’s “Spain” (915,000 views), Tribal Tech’s “Face First” (113,000) and UZEB’s “Penny Arcade” (365,000), as well as Matteo’s at-home practice videos of him blazing through John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” (255,000), Charlie Parker’s “Donna Lee” (648,000) and the age-old jazz jamming vehicle “Cherokee” (272,000), each one containing more jaw-dropping feats of fretboard fantasia by the young prodigio.

The comments sections for those same YouTube videos were soon flooded with superlatives about this amazing new guitar discovery. And it wasn’t long before the pros began weighing in on Matteo’s abundant talent, with no less than Al Di Meola, Steve Vai and Joe Bonamassa welcoming Mancuso into that rich lineage of great Italian guitarists, from Eddie Lang (Salvatore Massaro), Joe Pass (Anthony Jacobi

Passalacqua), Pat Martino (Pat Azzara) and Joe Diorio to Frank Zappa, Bucky and John Pizzarelli, Di Meola, Vai, Frank Gambale, Joe Satriani, John Frusciante, John Petrucci and Chris Impellitteri.

“What the hell? I wrote to him and said, ‘Matteo, what are you doing? You’re killing us!’” says Di Meola, who invited the young Palermo-born guitarist to sit in with him on “Spain” and “Mediterranean Sundance” at the 2022 Eddie Lang Jazz Festival in Monteroduni, Italy. “I mean, his improvisational ability is light years ahead. Like, it would take two, three lifetimes to catch up with him. It was almost like when Jaco came on the scene: How the hell did he get so good so fast?”

Adds Steve Vai, “I was pretty stunned when I heard Matteo. The evolution of the guitar is firmly secure in the hands of people like him... It’s just a new level: the tone, the touch, the notes... Incredible!”

And Joe Bonamassa was over the moon for Mancuso. “There’s a kid from Italy that plays the guitar... I’ve never seen anything like it,” he raved. “It’s the most incredible thing I’ve seen since I first saw Stanley Jordan. He’s completely reinvented the instrument. He rips like Eric Johnson, then he’ll play over changes, then he’ll play Iron Maiden. It’s the most versatile thing I’ve ever seen.”

Finally, after six years of blowing minds on YouTube, Mancuso has released his first album, *The Journey*, on the Players Club/Mascot Label Group. And rather than just showcasing his prodigious and unprecedented chops on yet another string of well-chosen covers from the jazz and fusion canons, the 26-year-old has written all original material for this eagerly awaited debut, each already garnering hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube. Playing a Yamaha Revstar Custom with a Line 6 Helix pedalboard for all his solos while overdubbing rhythm guitar parts on another Yamaha guitar, as well as a Bacci baritone guitar, Matteo rips on rockers like “Silkroad” and “Drop D,” swings confidently on the jazzy 3/4 number “Polifemo,” conjures up a bit of Holdsworth and Eric Johnson on “Falcon Flight” and “Samba Party,” and a touch of Pat Metheny on the bright, uplifting melody of “Open Fields.” He then showcases his beautiful nylon-string acoustic playing on “Time to Leave” and the poignant title track, which closes *The Journey* on a hymn-like note of reflection.


**“I WROTE
 TO HIM AND
 SAID, ‘MATTEO,
 WHAT ARE YOU
 DOING? YOU’RE
 KILLING US!’”**
 — Al Di Meola



Guitar Player caught up with Matteo in a Zoom chat from his home in Palermo.

It's great to meet you, Matteo. I've been following you on YouTube since "The Chicken."

Yes. That was the first viral video, from 2017. That was my first trio, Snips. I was maybe 19 when it was starting. The bass player was Riccardo Olivia, who is also from Sicily, but now he lives in Milan. The drummer, Salvatore Lima, is also from here. We were playing a lot of very traditional fusion stuff back then, like Chick Corea's "Spain" and Allan Holdsworth's "Fred," which I still play live. It's one of my favorite tunes to play live. And then, in 2020, during the pandemic, I founded the Matteo Mancuso Trio, and it was a different trio from Snips. And that's when

I started composing original material and working on this album, *The Journey*. So there are nine pieces in total, all original compositions.

The new core trio is Stefano India on bass and Giuseppe Bruno on drums. It's a very flexible trio.

They are very versatile musicians, able to play rock very aggressively and also swing, and sometimes within the same song. My goal was to have an album that wasn't associated with only one style, and these guys really help me achieve that.

Let's talk about your beginnings on the instrument. I read that your father, Vincenzo, was a guitarist and that you and he played Django Reinhardt together early on.

My father is an electric/classical guitar player. He played everything from classical music to funk, so he's a very versatile player. He was in an Italian rock band called Camaleonti in the mid 1960s, and he worked as a touring pop guitar player for other people here in Italy. Now he is more like a producer than a pure guitar player, so he's worked with a lot of popular Italian musicians. He helped a lot with my album. He was like a listening guide for me, more than a teacher. I started playing guitar when I was around 10 years old, and I always saw my father playing guitar around the house. When I first started, I played with fingers because I thought that the instrument was meant to be played like that, because I always saw my father playing with fingers.

Your father never used a pick?

Sometimes, but he mainly uses fingers. I started playing in a duo with him when I was around 17, though I had already played live at age 12 at the 2009 Castelbuono Jazz Festival in Sicily. I later studied jazz guitar at the conservatory here in Palermo, and because I wanted to study that repertoire, a guitar duo was perfect for me. That's why I started playing live with my father. We mostly played standards and Joe Pass stuff.

And it was very natural for you to play with fingers from the beginning?

Yeah, it felt really natural from the start. I didn't even know that you should use a pick for electric guitar. Basically, you have four picks when you play fingerstyle, so it allows you to have more possibilities for extended arpeggios. So I started off playing with bass technique, using two fingers. Later on, when I was around 14, I started studying to learn classical guitar, and that helped me a lot to develop my right- and left-hand technique. But I wasn't really a good student of classical guitar. I consider myself an electric



guitar player rather than a classical one, but I borrowed a lot of things from the classical world.

What about the flamenco world?

Flamenco is slightly different. They use different guitars than the pure classical models, and the technique is different, of course. I have some similarities with the flamenco technique, speaking of the right hand. But I think my technique is closer to the bass rather than the pure flamenco technique.

You mentioned bass technique. I'm sure you're familiar with Mick Goodrick. He played with two fingers on his beautiful single-note lines.

Yeah, yeah. I know him.

And then we have someone like Lenny Breau, who played fingerstyle on a seven-string guitar with a high A. Were you hip to him at all?

Yeah, I discovered him a few years ago, and I was shocked because of all the harmonics he was playing. I borrowed some stuff from him, speaking of chord melody. Yeah, he's a phenomenal player.

I'd like to talk about your instrument of choice. Like in those early videos, "The Chicken" and "Fred," was that a different guitar than you're playing now?

No, it's actually always been the Yamaha Revstar. It was a different model then, of course. Right now I mostly use my Custom model, which I've played since 2019. I use slightly different models for rhythm parts on the new record, but the main one is the Revstar Custom. I really like that the Revstar has a dark sound. It's close to a Gibson SG, and I was chasing that for a while; that fat, humbucker sound is something that I really like. The Revstar is a little bit more versatile than the SG, so I can play jazz, funk and metal with it. And I have a five-way switch on my Custom, so I can also split the humbuckers to get a single-coil sound. Of course, I prefer a slightly wider string spacing, just because you have more room for your fingers. But once I got used to it, it wasn't really a problem for me.

You mentioned the SG. I understand that one of your early rock influences was AC/DC. Angus Young plays a Gibson SG, and Holdsworth also played one in his earlier days.

Yeah, Angus Young was the reason I bought an SG [depicted on 2017 YouTube videos of him shredding on Guthrie Govan's "Fives," Eric Johnson's "Cliffs of Dover"



and UZEB's "Penny Arcade"]. I was and still am a big AC/DC fan. That was the first band that I was listening to. So the SG was because of Angus Young. Later on I discovered Fender Stratocasters through Jimi Hendrix, who was another big influence on me.

Some of the first tunes that I learned of his were "Hey Joe," "Purple Haze" and "All Along the Watchtower." But AC/DC was always a big influence.

Holdsworth and all the fusion guys came later for me, when I was around 17. Allan is for sure one of my biggest influences, especially when it came down to phrasing and vocabulary. He was such a big influence, in fact, that I stopped listening to him for a while, because I started sounding too much like him.

So I started listening to other players, like Scott Henderson, Frank Gambale, Robben Ford...

All the jazz-rock guys. And I basically built my vocabulary through these players. So yeah, Allan is such a big influence that I had to stop listening to him too much. He changed the guitar forever, I think.

"I really like that the Revstar has a dark sound," says Mancuso, who plays a Custom version of the Yamaha model. "It's close to a Gibson SG... and a little bit more versatile."


**"FINGERSTYLE
FELT NATURAL
FROM THE
START. I DIDN'T
EVEN KNOW
YOU SHOULD
USE A PICK FOR
ELECTRIC GUITAR"**

Comparing your early YouTube videos to your more recent stuff from *The Journey*, it seems that you've developed some incredible whammy-bar articulation, shaping the notes in that liquid fashion that reminds me of Holdsworth. When did that become part of your vocabulary?

It started when I first got the new Yamaha Pacifica, which is basically their Stratocaster. I started playing that when I was listening to Scott Henderson, who is a master of the whammy bar. So I started playing like that because of him. And actually, the first tune on the album, "Silkroad," is dedicated to Scott, because the first theme was inspired by that diminished aspect of his playing. And then, of course, there is the Holdsworth influence on all the legato stuff. But that is also because Scott himself said that Holdsworth

was a big influence for him. So I guess it's also a tribute to Allan, you know?

The second tune, "Polifemo," opens like a swinging jazz tune in 6/8 that you play with a warm, clean tone. But you also inject some kind of crunch sound on your solo. You're very adept at mixing influences, not strictly separating the tunes stylistically into rock and jazz camps. It's all integrated very organically. Can you break that tune down?

"Polifemo" is a perfect mix of my jazz influence in a rock song, if you want. Because I feel that if it is hard to categorize, that means that you are on the way to making something new. So that was the goal with "Polifemo." I wanted to do a jazz song, and I wanted to promote distortion but without sounding too much out of place. The first solo is with the piano, played by Giuseppe Vasapolli, and I came to the second solo with a distorted tone, but it's not too aggressive. It's more like a tone that Eric Johnson uses, for instance. More like an overdrive, rather than a pure distortion pedal.

And what device or pedal are you dialing for that?

I mainly used a digital amp modeler for the entire album. So all the sounds you hear on the album are digital, basically. And I mainly used the Line 6 Helix for modeling. The simulation of the amp was a Matchless DC-30, which is called the Matchstick Channel 2 on the Helix. And the Helix distortion I used for "Polifemo" is called a Tube Driver. It's really close to the Klon Centaur distortion. The distortion sound on "Silkroad" was the same sound, but with a different guitar.

"Falcon Flight" is an intense tune with a lot of harmonic movement and some open-string arpeggiating underneath. And you have a fairly clean sustain tone on the melody and your solo. Tell me about that one.

First of all, I wrote that tune, like, two years ago. I wanted to write a bass drum 'n' bass song because I was listening to a lot of Mark Lettieri back then. He's a really funky guitar player with Snarky Puppy. I love Mark. So I was trying to write something similar, but I ended up doing something completely different. That's how I write most of these songs: I get inspired by one player or one particular song and I try to do something similar, but I end up doing something completely different.

On "Falcon Flight," the rhythm section is slightly different. Gianluca Pellerito plays drums on that track. He's a pretty popular player in Italy. He is more like a chops kind of player, very American-sounding. There was a drum section that was really busy in that





**“I GET INSPIRED
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way, and I think Gianluca was the perfect choice for that piece.

“Open Fields” feels a little more relaxed. It opens with solo guitar that develops this kind of warm, inviting, almost Pat Metheny—esque kind of a melody. Very engaging and uplifting, like Metheny’s “Phase Dance.” To go from the burning intensity of “Falcon Flight” into the more intimate “Open Fields” is a nice contrast.

I actually wrote the song with classical guitar, but I wanted to do a trio version for the album, so it changed a little bit during the recording. It is dedicated to Sicily: The Italian name for “Open Fields” is “Campagna Siciliana,” which means ‘Sicilian countryside’. So it’s dedicated to the landscape we see every time we go to my home in Sicily. It’s really similar to what you see on the album cover of *The Journey*. And yes, it has a lot of Metheny vibes, because I was listening a lot to Pat when I wrote it.

Pat Martino told me that his people were from Palermo. Was he of interest to you when you were at the conservatory there studying jazz?

Yeah, Martino was the starting point for my bebop vocabulary. I began working on it back when I was at the Conservatory of Palermo. Of course, I started with Charlie Parker and then I studied all the bebop guys,

like Pat Martino and Joe Pass, of course. I learned a lot from them, especially Joe Pass, who was my starting point for my chord melody stuff, even though I don’t consider myself that kind of player. Joe also played with a pick a lot, but later on he played with just fingers.

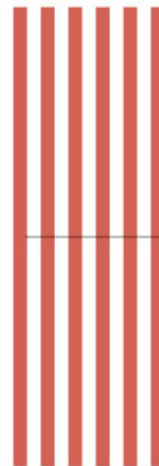
There’s no mistaking the rock influence on “Drop D,” your first single. There’s some heavy power chording, and you’re just wailing on it. It sounds like a big production number with a lot of guitar overdubs. And you are just shredding on it with a ton of tapping on your solo.

“Drop D” is my kind of tribute to my first rock influences — AC/DC, Led Zeppelin. It’s also a tribute to all my rock-blues influences. This is the tune where I recorded lots of layers, guitars on guitars — backing guitars, even with the Bacci baritone guitar. I think it’s the most produced song on the album, because it’s more like traditional song sections rather than jazz elements.

“Blues for John” is a swinging tune with Giuseppe Vasapolli on organ. And I think I heard some Wes Montgomery kind of chord melody and octave playing in there. He must have been an influence on you at some point.

Yeah, sure. Wes is one of my favorite jazz players.

“When I first started, I played with fingers,” Mancuso says, “because I thought the instrument was meant to be played like that.”



And “Blues for John” is one of my favorite tunes on the album, because on the solo section it tells through guitar my story to the blues, starting from the bebop clean stuff of Pat Martino, Wes Montgomery and George Benson, then moving into the more blues-rock players like Joe Bonamassa and Eric Johnson, with distortion tone. And this tune is actually dedicated to John McLaughlin, who is one of my favorite composers as well being a legendary guitar player. John McLaughlin is a perfect example of mixing technique with beautiful compositions. So it’s a blues dedicated to him, basically.

“Time to Leave” sounds like you’re playing a nylon-string acoustic guitar.

It’s a classical guitar, though my kind of touch is not really like a classical player’s. I play in a more aggressive way than a classical player. “Time to Leave” started as a solo guitar piece, but then I changed my mind and started to work on an arrangement for the trio. That was actually one of the first things I composed for this album. I wrote it during the pandemic.

“Samba Party” features some incredible arpeggiating. And your fingerstyle technique allows you to very easily integrate tapping into your absolutely hellacious solo on this tune. Most players with a pick have to make a big overture to start tapping, but you do it so naturally.

I worked a lot on it, of course. I try to mix the tapping in a natural way. I don’t want it to be like a switch turning on: like, “Now I’m doing tapping, now I’m doing alternate picking, and now I’m doing legato.” So if I have to do a tapping section, it needs to be integrated into the solo really well.

One of the guys that does this consistently is Greg Howe. He’s a really big influence, especially when it comes to the tapping sections, so he is one of my inspirations for “Samba Party.” I think it is maybe my favorite song from the album, because, personally speaking, I can’t categorize “Samba Party.” I don’t know if it’s fusion, jazz or rock. It’s a perfect mix of all of those influences.

So yeah, my goal, as I said, is to find something that wasn’t associated with only one style, so “Samba Party” is a perfect example of that.

I’ll tell you what it isn’t. It’s not a samba.

Yeah, that’s for sure.

You’re such a scholar and you have such a developed ear. You have obviously assimilated the music of Allan Holdsworth, Scott Henderson, Eric Johnson — and not just skimming off the top. It seems like you’ve very deeply absorbed these guys. You have a great ear and you integrated it all very organically into your own vocabulary.

Thank you. Yeah, I’ve transcribed a lot of their solos and worked on the phrasing, so that’s why you hear those guys in my playing.

I imagine that “The Journey,” the very poignant melody played on acoustic guitar, expresses your own journey that you’ve been on.

Yeah. That was the last tune I wrote for the album. Initially there were only eight songs but I wanted to write a pure ballad. “Open Fields” was the closest to a ballad, but there is also the distortion ending. So I wanted a pure ballad, like a Pat Metheny kind of vibe. I started working on the melody with my father, and he ended up playing second guitar on that tune. My father was on the acoustic guitar and myself on the classical guitar. So it is a father-and-son duo.

That’s a beautiful way of coming full circle for you.

Thank you. I wanted to do something with my father as the last tune, because he was my listening guide for a lot of years. 🎸





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ABANDON TO THE SPIRIT

“All of a sudden, you’re on a tightrope!” As he reunites his Indo-jazz supergroup Shakti for a new album and tour, **John McLaughlin** expounds on harmony, rhythm and the power of improvisation.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

JOHN McLAUGHLIN’S steel-string work in Shakti is some of the all-time most astonishing acoustic virtuosity, right alongside his hugely influential nylon-string playing with Paco de Lucía and Al Di Meola in the Guitar Trio. McLaughlin and tabla master Zakir Hussain are celebrating a half century since joining worlds as Shakti by releasing *This Moment* (Abstract Logix), the group’s first new studio album in 46 years, and going on tour. To that end, on September 9 at Davies Symphony Hall, *Guitar Player Presents* helped SFJAZZ welcome McLaughlin back to San Francisco, where he has a storied history.

The City by the Bay was the site of McLaughlin’s latest live album, 2018’s *Live in San Francisco* as well as the Guitar Trio’s celebrated *Friday Night in San Francisco* album, recorded in late 1980 and released in 1981. In 2022, *Saturday Night in San Francisco* finally saw the light of day after spending more than four decades gathering dust in Di Meola’s basement. It was recorded the night after the legendary Friday show, and Di Meola produced the project during pandemic lockdown. McLaughlin says, “Al called me up and told me about finding the tape of the second show, and it was exciting that the program on Saturday

night was different enough to make another album.” Via a Zoom connection from GP’s origin in the Bay Area to McLaughlin’s longtime home in Monaco, the virtuoso goes on to connect the dots of how Shakti and the Guitar Trio have shaped his acoustic career through the lens of the various instruments he’s

played, right up to the new, long-awaited Shakti album.

McLaughlin’s playing in Shakti is remarkable on a number of levels. His highly evolved technique pervades impossibly complex compositions that mostly follow unpredictable Indian raga forms full of next-level improvisations.



The newly revived Shakti. (From left) Selvaganesh, Vinayakram, Shankar Mahadevan, John McLaughlin, Ganesh Rajagopalan and Zakir Hussain.

Perhaps most incredible is how the twisting, turning melody lines are so intricately linked with the rapid-fire percussion rhythms. As impressive as the *GP* Hall of Famer's playing remains, Shakti serves a higher purpose. The stratospheric level of collective expertise creates a mystical musical vessel designed to take the listener on a transcendental celebration of life. The current lineup includes violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan, percussionist Selvaganesh Vinayakram and vocalist Shankar Mahadevan.

To have a fully functional Shakti at this time is miraculous. Mandolin guru U. Shrinivas passed away in 2014. McLaughlin's arthritis became so severe that he announced his retirement from touring in 2017. Then the pandemic hit. But rather than let his world stop spinning, McLaughlin took it all as inspiration to keep his wheels turning. Using deep meditation techniques described in his 2021 *GP* interview, he healed himself. He recorded the solo effort *Liberation Time* during lockdown and challenged Shakti bandmembers, who live on different continents, to learn digital recording and video conferencing

technology so they could finally collaborate remotely on a new one as well. The result is pure sonic joy, full of fresh tones.

This Moment presents a contemporary take on the classic Shakti sound, and was — ironically, given its title — carefully crafted rather than recorded live in the moment. It sounds refined, with 21st century elements layered into Shakti's signature Indian/jazz fusion. Shakti means "power" and McLaughlin re-energizes the timeless ensemble in a modern way, playing electric guitar and guitar synth in the otherwise acoustic affair. He makes pristine tones from his new signature PRS guitar sound at home in the worldly mix, and he uses a Fishman MIDI guitar controller and software system to conjure an array of sounds, from bamboo flute to synth bass to strings.

How did you come to play electric guitar and guitar synth in Shakti?

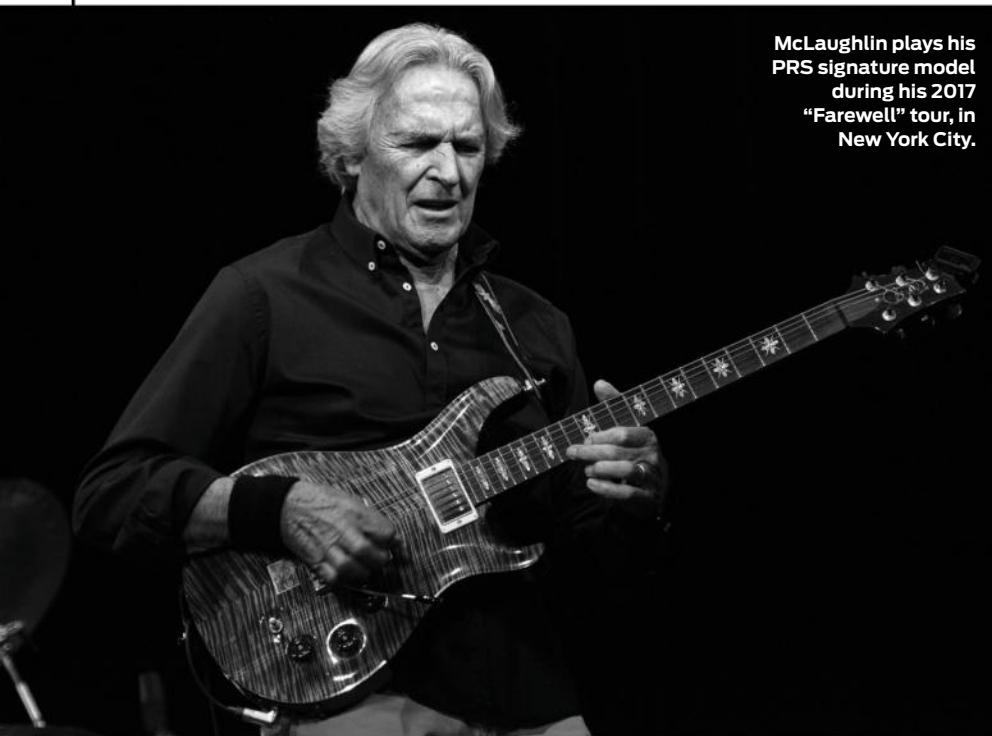
There are a couple of reasons. Of course, Shakti was originally acoustic, and I played a very special guitar with 13 strings and a scalloped fingerboard. [The original Shakti guitar, built by Abraham

Wechter during his tenure at Gibson, was based on McLaughlin's favorite model, the J-200, with the addition of seven tunable sympathetic strings running underneath the main six at a 45-degree angle.] Then there was a period that started in 1978 when Shakti percussion player Vikku Vinayakram had to go back to India to run the school his father founded, after his father passed. It just so happened that I ran into Paco de Lucia when I was in Europe that year. We started to hang out, and that was the beginning of the Guitar Trio. I went from playing the steel-string Shakti guitar to a nylon-string guitar for a classical tone, because Paco was playing a beautiful flamenco guitar. I must have spent 10 years playing the nylon-string.

I loaned out my Shakti guitar, because I believe instruments must be played, otherwise they get sick, just like humans. When the Shakti guitar was brought back to me, it was broken. That was a big tragedy. I kept in touch with Zakir, and all the while I was playing a very fine Wechter nylon-string acoustic. When Shakti got an invitation to tour, I started playing a big-bodied Gibson Johnny Smith [archtop]. At the end of the tour, I was sitting with Zakir and I said, "Shakti is such a beautiful form. We have to find a way to keep going." We ended up inviting Shrinivas to join us, and he played an electric mandolin with a solid body. He was a genius. I was playing the Johnny Smith Gibson, which has a very sweet, clean sound that went very well with the electric mandolin. We continued like that until we lost Shrinivas in 2014.

That was a bad year. We also lost Paco, and I got zapped with arthritis in the right wrist. It took me until 2019 to cure myself. At my tender age, when I try to play the big Wechter nylon-string, I feel a stress because of the right-hand position. I have to sacrifice playing the acoustic, because I don't have any problems playing the electric guitar, and musically I've never felt better. The other good thing about playing the new PRS is that, through MIDI, I'm able to bring more orchestral sounds from my Western world into the Shakti group.

McLaughlin plays his PRS signature model during his 2017 "Farewell" tour, in New York City.





**“PAUL REED SMITH CHOOSES
WOOD LIKE STRADIVARI, WHO
USED TO WALK AROUND THE
DOLOMITES TAPPING ON TREES,
SAYING, ‘I’LL TAKE THAT ONE,
NOT THAT ONE’”**

It makes me happy, and it makes them happy too, because they love Western music as much as they love Eastern music. That’s why we’re here today.

There is so much rapid-fire energy in the music of Shakti, and it’s nice to hear that the PRS is helping facilitate that. This is, technically speaking, your first signature PRS, correct?

Yes, although I first met Paul over 20 years ago at the Frankfurt Musikmesse.

Finally, last year, he called up saying that he wanted to make me a signature model. Oh, the tone! He chooses wood like Stradivari, who used to walk around the Dolomites in Italy tapping on trees, saying, “I’ll take that one, not that one.” Paul has got the most astonishingly beautiful wood. The neck of my guitar is made out of hormingo, which is a wood used in marimbas for its sound-producing tines. As a guitar neck, it’s extraordinary. I’ve got three other PRS

guitars, but there’s something magical about this one. Paul is a maniac. He’s as crazy about what he’s doing as I am about what I’m doing.

Do you ever miss having a scalloped fretboard, like on the Shakti guitar that allowed you to do bigger bends?

That came about in around 1971 or ’72, when I started studying the South Indian veena, which has got a huge neck with big frets embedded in beeswax. When you bend a string, you don’t push — you pull it, like sitar. But the veena is not curved like that. It’s flat. I spent two years with my guru, Dr. Ramanathan, at Wesleyan University, before I realized my guitar playing was suffering. That way of bending the string, which they call a *gamaka*, you can do all the way up the fingerboard, but you’ve got to have the space under the strings, and that was the whole point of the scalloped fingerboard on the Shakti guitar. But

then I ran into Paco in 1978 when we formed the Guitar Trio, and after 10 years of playing the nylon-string classical guitar, I kind of lost that bending technique.

Can you substitute glissando?

No. That's a Shrinivas technique. It's more like a vocal approach. [*Imitates a quivering vocal*] That's what I loved about the veena, too. And one of my first adventures coming out of Shakti was I had a luthier make the scalloped fretboard on my 1968 Gibson 345, which is big, but it's thin.

I'm going to try when I get some time... Well, I don't have time at the moment, because we started touring India in January, and in rehearsal we started changing and re-arranging the tunes from the new album. We're crazy. So now I'm busy learning the new arrangements.

They're so worked out, especially the lengthy melodic runs that you play in unison with the vocal and the violin. Are they written down?

No. Everything is oral. That's the Indian way. Crazy, huh?

It's seems truly impossible.

Everything is sung in India. When you learn, even the percussion players sing the rhythm. In South India it's called *konokol*. I started studying it with Ravi Shankar in the mid '70s. Every time he came to New York, I'd go to his hotel. He taught me the rhythmic theory, and it's all vocal. Once you get a handle on the *konokol* system of rhythm, you understand exactly what a drummer from anywhere in the world is doing, because, in a way, it's all mathematics. It's mathematics with soul, you know?

And the biggest musical difference is the Western sense of harmony, correct?

They are as developed in rhythm as we are in harmony. That's how crazy they are. You can hear it on the album in some of the compositions that Zakir and Selva [*percussionist Selvaganesh Vinayakram*] do in unison. It's phenomenal.



“THAT WAS A BAD YEAR. WE ALSO LOST PACO DE LUCIA, AND I GOT ZAPPED WITH ARTHRITIS IN THE RIGHT WRIST”

And it's apparent when your compositions come from a different place. “Las Palmas” sounds a bit flamenco in a Paco de Lucia kind of way, and then there's a bluesy turnaround.

Las palmas is Spanish for clapping. That's what they call it in flamenco, which is a direct influence, because it was just late last year when they finally did the memorial concert for Paco de Lucia in Madrid. All the greatest guitar players, dancers and singers were there. Oh, it was fantastic. Al [*Di Meola*] was there too, and we played with Paco's nephew, Antonio Sanchez. What a monster

player! At some point maybe he'll take the crown. “Las Palmas” is kind of an homage to that world I love and experienced with Paco.

And what a world of difference it must be playing ragas with Shakti.

Right, there are no chord changes in Indian music. I'm the only Western musician in Shakti, so triggering sounds with the Fishman MIDI pickup and substituting another harmonic structure that gives them a completely different view of the raga are ways that I can bend the rules.

Mahadevan and
McLaughlin perform
with Shakti.



Those guitar synth elements are clear to hear on the introduction to the appropriately titled “Bending the Rules.”

Do you ever break from standard tuning?

I can only play in standard tuning. Don’t ask me to de-tune a string; I will be in deep trouble.

Can you speak about how the improvisational cycles flow in Shakti?

Improvisation is the heart and soul of a band. And it’s one of the great connections Indian music has with jazz, because they’re masters of improvisation. An improvisation is like a moment of truth. You stand up to do a solo, and your trousers are down by your ankles. You cannot hide, so you have to go with it and let it all hang out. You have a structure. You take risks. And it’s exactly the same for the Indians. They have the raga, but if I slightly modify some harmony underneath, they’ll hear it and go with it.

Another aspect that’s so close to jazz is the rhythm. God bless Ravi Shankar for all the lessons he gave me in konokol, because as soon as we start to play the drummers are on my case, “kicking my butt” as they say. But that’s exactly what I want in music. I want somebody to stimulate me — knock me out of my little niche. All of a sudden, you’re on a tightrope. What are you going to do? You abandon yourself to the spirit, and you go with it. That’s the point where things start to happen.

How did improvisation factor into a remote recording process?

That’s one of the reasons it took two years to make the album. We’d put down some basic files and send them around. Then I’d get files back, and holy smoke, I’d have to redo my part, and the improvisational section too. That would happen with everybody, reacting by abandoning their parts and redoing them

three or four times. There was a lot of excitement going on. It didn’t feel at all like I was alone. I’d put on the headphones, close my eyes, push “play,” and they were with me in the room. We basically went until we couldn’t work anymore. It’s wonderful. We wanted to do a studio album because we hadn’t done one since 1977, but we’ve made some live albums because in a way we’re a live band.

In the Equipment section of your website, there’s a re-creation of your Shakti acoustic from the ’70s credited to master luthier Mirko Borghino. Does it sound like the original Wechter, and have you considered sampling it?

It was about three years ago when the Italian luthier came to see me. He built a Shakti guitar based on photos, and it’s so well made that it does sound like the original. It’s unbelievable. I have thought of sampling its sound. I’m fascinated by

that aspect of it, but I'd need some technical training. I do miss the acoustic guitar. I miss the Shakti guitar. My problem is what I mentioned before. That's what happens when you get old. The attack is wrong on the acoustic guitar samples that I've heard. It sounds artificial, and it bothers me. But I enjoy using the guitar synth to get anything orchestral, or perhaps a flute or something to accompany the voice or the violin. I use the Fishman Triple Play Connect system in conjunction with my laptop, and it works like a dream.

What's the main signal chain for the PRS?

I'm still in learning mode with the new PRS, because it's got two toggle switches that engage high-pass filters, one for each pickup. So there are a lot of configurations. I like to use different tones for, say, playing arpeggios or strumming chords, but the music happens so fast in Shakti. I have to plan when to switch pickups and when to switch the EQ into the position that I want. I use a [Hermida Audio] Zendrive 2 pedal, and I'm currently experimenting with a [DSM Humboldt Electronics]

Simplifier amplifier simulation pedal. You can control the amount of preamp or power amp drive and the sound of the speakers. The fact that it's all analog is very nice, because I really like the tone. It's different, very pure. I'm going to try it out for sure. After the Shakti tour when I'm at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival in Los Angeles [September 24 and 25] I'll be playing with an amp, of course.

What's the plan?

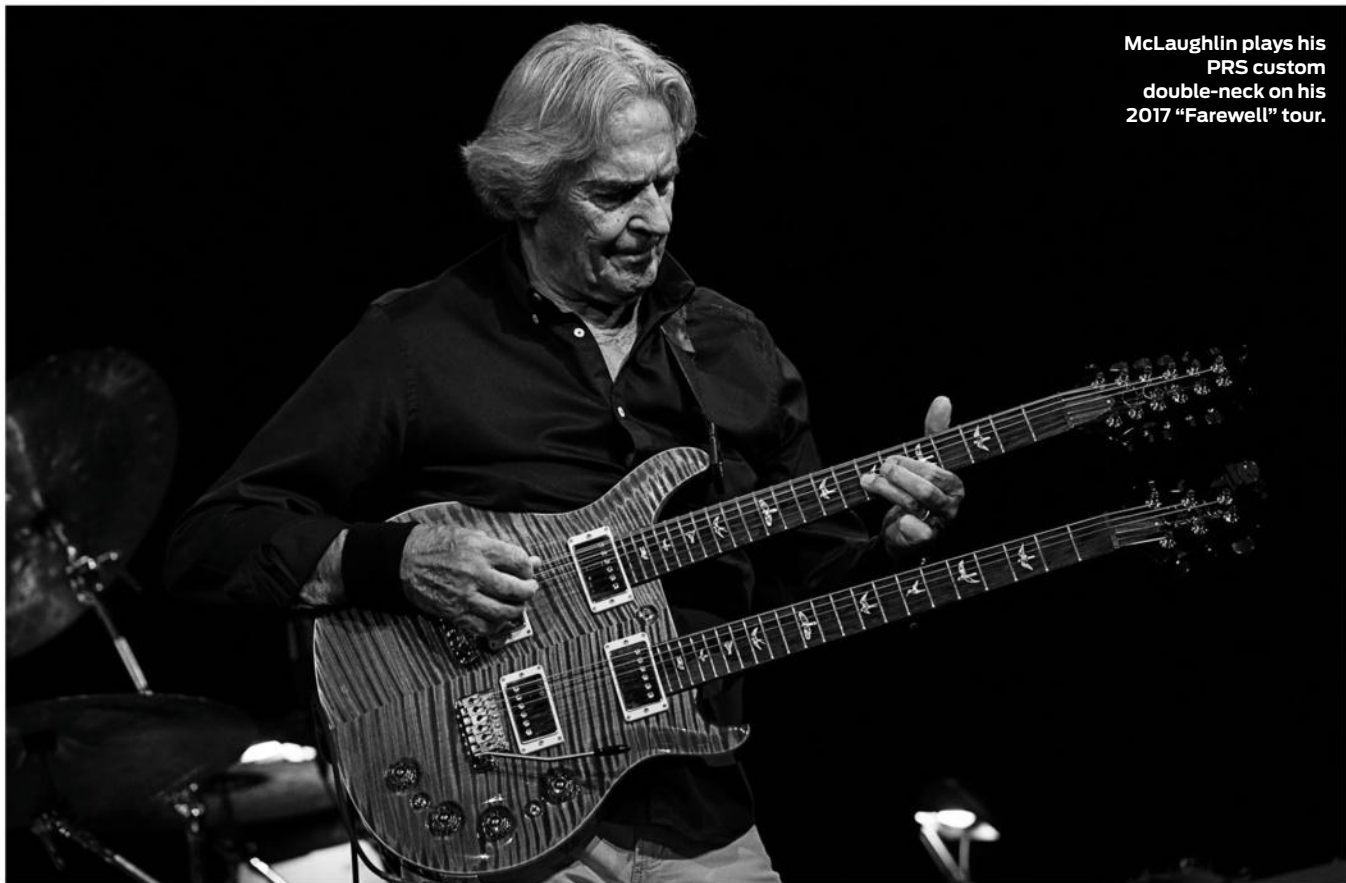
I spoke with Carlos Santana, and we're planning to play together on Sunday night. Maybe we'll do a couple of golden oldies from *Love Devotion Surrender*, or from *Welcome*. Joe Bonamassa invited me to play a tune. I like Joe, and he can sing too, so I'll probably do a number with Joe on Saturday night and just, you know, jam.

Shakti is very different, eh?

Shakti is a totally different trip. ■

**“AN IMPROVISATION IS LIKE A
MOMENT OF TRUTH. YOU STAND
UP TO DO A SOLO, AND YOUR
TROUSERS ARE DOWN BY YOUR
ANKLES. YOU CANNOT HIDE”**

McLaughlin plays his
PRS custom
double-neck on his
2017 “Farewell” tour.



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JUMP, JIVE AN' WAIL

A tribute to Brian Setzer's guitar mastery and unique blend of nearly forgotten musical styles and classic, time-honored playing techniques.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

IN THE 1980S, the Stray Cats, led by Long Island, New York-native Brian Setzer, were something of a time machine, transporting audiences to the bygone era of the 1950s, with its heyday of Sun Records legends like Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. On their 1982 album *Built for Speed*, the band fused early rock and roll and rockabilly with more modern elements of punk music, quickly finding a place in a pop landscape that from the outside might have seemed a tad unwelcoming. After all, that year saw the release of seminal albums like Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, Prince's *1999* and Roxy Music's *Avalon*. But with songs like "Rock This Town" and "Stray Cat Strut," and their complementary videos in constant rotation on the burgeoning cable channel MTV, the Stray Cats vaulted their retro sound into the mainstream.

There's more to the story, however. The 1980s were dominated by the rise of shred guitar, which would largely fall out of favor with the release of Nirvana's 1991 grunge classic, *Nevermind*. But Setzer's playing, while as brash and adventurous as that of the shredders',

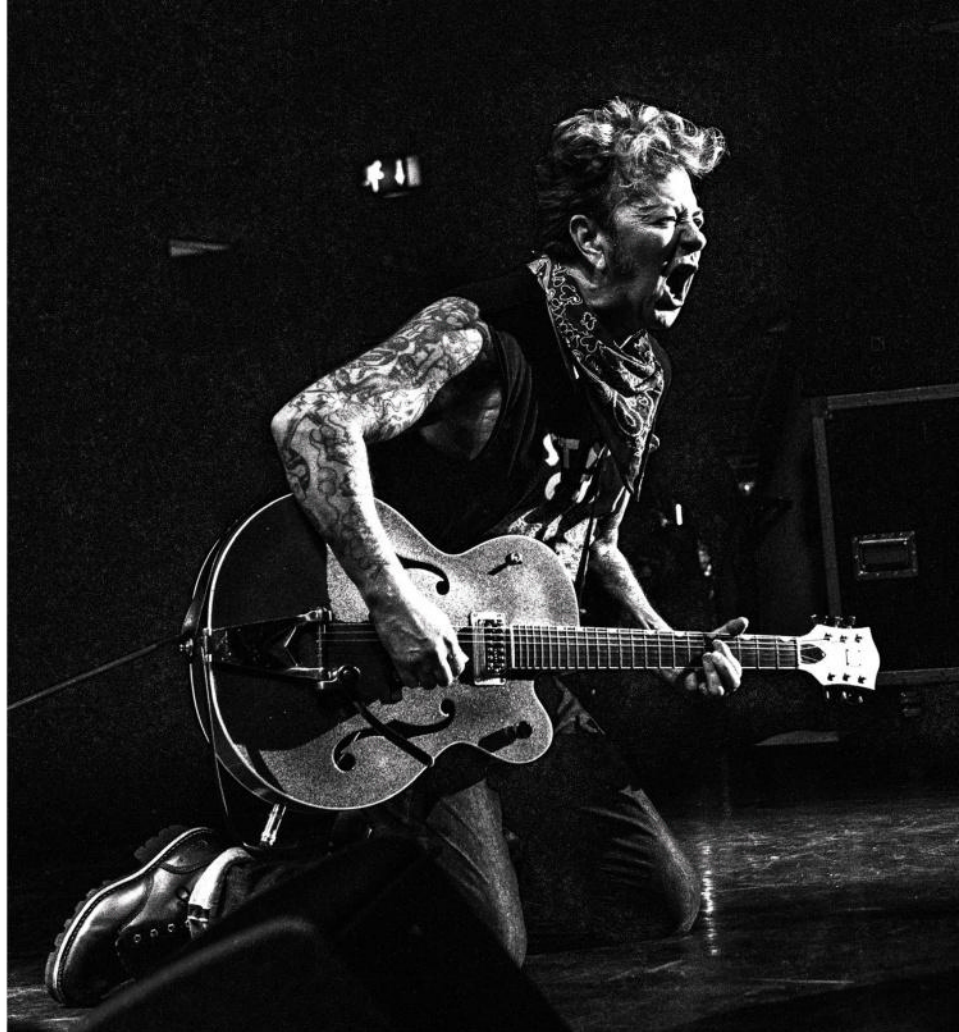
was something entirely different. At the age of 16, Setzer's muse was sparked when he heard the rock and roll gem "Be-Bop-A-Lula" by Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, after which he developed a deep reverence for the early rock era's largely forgotten musical forms. He would go on to electrify audiences by playing his big, orange Gretsch 6120 hollowbody electric guitar through a pair of vintage Fender Bassman amps as he plied his unique blend of rockabilly, swing and jump blues.

With the recent release of Setzer's 25th solo album, *The Devil Always Collects*, it seems like a mighty fine time to peel back the multiple layers of his simultaneously irreverent and thoughtful guitar style. Some might simply call it rockabilly, but it's so much more.

Let's start with a look at the foundation of Setzer's style, a house built on an intimate knowledge of chords. **Ex. 1** is based on the bridge to "Stray Cat Strut" (from *Built for Speed*). The strumming style is reminiscent of the big-band swing-jazz era, an approach to playing rhythm guitar popularized by the iconic Charlie Christian, who first

brought the electric guitar into jazz, most famously with the Benny Goodman Orchestra in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In this style, the guitar generally contributes large chord forms, played as *staccato* (short) quarter-note stabs on each downbeat. In our example, the chords are often played short, but muted strums inhabit many of the eighth-note upbeats, enabling us to establish our swing feel. Simply relax your fret hand's grip on the strings, just enough so that the notes stop ringing, allowing the fingers to lightly rest on the strings as you strum, producing a pitchless, percussive effect. Also, here the rhythm is more *syncopated* (stressing the off-beats).

The progression is dominated by 7th chords, adding to the jazz flavor, but it's Setzer's punk-inspired attitude that makes it sound just a tad menacing. In the penultimate chord, we've got a nifty take on a standard G7 chord (G, B, D, F), which functions as the V ("five") chord here in the key of C minor (C natural minor scale: C, D, E $\flat$, F, G, A $\flat$, B $\flat$). Notice the 3rd of the chord is raised to B, which is borrowed from the C



harmonic minor scale (C, D, E $\flat$, F, G, A $\flat$, B), a spicy move common to the style. Even spicier, Setzer knows that also raising the 5th, creating a dominant 7 $\sharp$ 5 chord, or 7 $\flat$ 13, will fit right in. While finger vibrato is employed for the final bar, Setzer would almost certainly grab his Bigsby bridge's vibrato arm for a classic '50s-era warble. This wealth of chordal knowledge is the foundation of rockabilly guitar and is on display quite often in Setzer's approach to his rhythm playing. But he also wields it powerfully in his solos. Let's see how.

Ex. 2 is inspired by Brian's playing in his "Stray Cat Strut" outro solo, and the devil is in the details. This time, let's notice the use of *smaller* chord shapes incorporated into the lead playing, demonstrated by the pickup notes in bar 2. Furthermore, note how these chord shapes are sounded by sliding into them from a half step (one fret) below. In rock guitar, whole-step bends and finger slides predominate. But, in what would

SETZER'S PLAYING, WHILE AS BRASH AND ADVENTUROUS AS THE SHREDDERS', WAS SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT

seem like a minor alteration, the half-step slide is a powerful move in jazz playing, as it lends an air of anticipation.

Another nifty way to incorporate smaller chord shapes is seen in beat 1 of bar 2. Played over an A $\flat$ chord (A $\flat$, C, E $\flat$), a simple raked A $\flat$ triad adds personality and a nice percussive attack. The use of a lithe jazz-inflected line (note the recommended fingering) echos one of Setzer's most-cited influences, the legendary Scotty Moore, who famously played with Elvis Presley in the '50s and '60's. In the final bar, we're thinking of the G7 chord as G7 $\flat$ 9 (G, B, D, F, A $\flat$), targeting the $\flat$ 9 (A $\flat$) by working off of a Bdim7 arpeggio (B, D, F, A $\flat$), which is essentially a G7 $\flat$ 9 arpeggio minus the G root note. This is a common melodic

Ex. 1

* (♩ = ♩³)

Fm7 Cm7

(Elec. Gtr. w/clean tone)

*All examples, unless indicated otherwise.

2.

D7 G7 $\sharp$ 5

**Th-----↓

**Fret 6th string w/thumb.

Ex. 2

(Cm) (B $\flat$ 7) (A $\flat$ 7) (G7)

(Elec. Gtr. w/light dist.)

2 3 1 2 3

approach in jazz improvisation and a useful device for any guitarist to have in their bag of musical tricks.

Whew! That's a lot of musical knowledge delivered in just one song. But such is the depth of Setzer's playing. Still, with this talk of jazz sophistication, let's not forget that the guitarist's style is also heavily rooted in good ol' rock and roll. **Ex. 3** is informed by the gnarly intro to "Girl on the Billboard," from the *The Devil Always Collects*, for which Setzer relies on simple and nasty-sounding double-stops delivered with his 1957 Gretsch Duo Jet 6131 Firebird. For the first two bars, pick close to your guitar's bridge to summon an even more strident tone, one sure to upset your neighbors.

That brashness fueled Setzer's playing from the start, as evidenced by the flashy outbursts in his solo from *Built for Speed's* "Rumble in Brighton," which inspired **Ex. 4**. Here, half-step finger slides (or hammer-ons, if you prefer) mix with open strings and set the stage for a ferocious series of pull-offs that produce quite a musical rumble. These machine-gun barrages of notes were made famous by another of Setzer's guitar idols, rockabilly icon Cliff Gallup, a great example of which occurs in Gallup's solo in the aforementioned Gene Vincent's 1956 song "Race With the Devil."

Following the Stray Cats' 1984 breakup, Setzer spent the remainder of the decade releasing solo records, including 1986's *The Knife Feels Like Justice*, which had more of a heartland rock sound. But much as he brought rockabilly back to prominence in the '80s, Setzer would soon do the same for jump blues and swing in the '90s with the formation of his big band, the Brian Setzer Orchestra. The Orchestra's third release, 1998's double-platinum *The Dirty Boogie*, features the 1956 Louis Prima song "Jump Jive an' Wail," for which the guitarist won the 1999 Grammy Award for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal.

Big bands commonly feature extensive horn sections, and Setzer's ensemble was no different, with the minor exception that the towering

Ex. 3

(♩ = ♩) N.C. E

(Elec. Gtr. w/dist. tone)

pick w/all downstrokes

slight P.M. -----

Ex. 4

(Em)

(Elec. Gtr. w/dist. tone)

(Am)

Ex. 5

Bb7 Db7#9 C7#9 B7#9 Bb9

(Elec. Gtr. w/dist. tone)

Th

presence would be his singular guitar style. **Ex. 5** is informed by his dynamic chordal *turnaround* (section ending) in “Jump Jive an’ Wail” (1:00) which precedes the song’s second chorus. Here, Setzer’s guitar acts as its own horn section, replacing the Orchestra’s — and just to make it a tad more rebellious, he dials in a bit more overdrive than we might expect. Ex. 5 features a series of descending dominant 7#9 chords, and it’s noteworthy that Setzer omits the roots — another common jazz approach. Setzer came to idolize jazz guitar legends, especially the dynamic Django Reinhardt.

In a separate live version of “Jump Jive an’ Wail” performed by the Orchestra at the 2010 Montreal Jazz Festival, Setzer substituted some hip 6/9 chords, as demonstrated fittingly in **Ex. 6**. The 6/9 chord is unique in

MUCH AS HE BROUGHT ROCKABILLY BACK TO PROMINENCE IN THE '80S, SETZER WOULD DO THE SAME FOR JUMP BLUES AND SWING IN THE '90S WITH THE FORMATION OF HIS BIG BAND

that it offers some harmonic color to a run-of-the-mill major chord, yet it’s nondescript enough to avoid sounding overly jazzy. How does it accomplish this? The 6/9 chord is formed by stacking a series of perfect 4th intervals (two and one-half steps), known for their “hollow,” unassuming quality. In Ex. 6, the chords are made up of three of these intervals: the *dyads* (two-note chords) formed by the top, middle and bottom sets of strings. Notice that the chords in our example do not even possess a 3rd, major or minor, making them even more anonymous. Fourths are, of course, featured prominently in rock guitar playing — as in Ritchie

Ex. 6

(Elec. Gtr. w/dist. tone)

Bb7 Db9 C9 B9 Bb9

Th

Ex. 7

(Elec. Gtr. w/light dist.)

G7 G/B C7 C#o7 G13

Th -----| Th -----| Th

Bb13 A13 C/D G13

Th ----|

Blackmore’s classic “Smoke on the Water” riff. Not surprisingly, these 6/9 chords sound great with a dirty tone. So, by all means, crank up the overdrive, as these “jazz” chords won’t flinch.

Another great example of Setzer’s chordal wizardry can be found in “Lady Luck,” from the Orchestra’s self-titled 1994 debut. Here the guitarist can at times be found nimbly doubling the Orchestra’s chordal escapades. **Ex. 7** is inspired by this rollicking Setzer composition, and it just might be one of the most fun things you’ll play all day. There’s a whole host of chord colors and *inversions* (chord voicings for which the lowest note is not its root). The

downright nifty descending dominant 13 chords are especially horn-like, and this voicing, with its 2nd-string root, sounds very comfortable in a variety of settings. Try substituting them when you get tired of playing 7th or 9th chords in any given blues situation. But to bring the Setzer magic, you’ve got to play with reckless abandon, nailing the accented chords and swingin’ like you’re channeling the legendary orchestras of Duke Ellington or Count Basie.

Let’s close up shop with a few barnburner lead licks inspired by Setzer’s solo on his big-band version of the Stray Cat’s classic “Rock This Town,” from *The Dirty Boogie*. In **Ex. 8**,

country-style oblique double-stop bends segue into a slow-burning, palm-muted early rock and roll-tinged finger slide, ending with some punk-inspired reckless detuning of our 6th string one whole step to D.

To fully explore the many musical facets of Brian Setzer's inimitable guitar style would require more than a single lesson. His unique mix of rockabilly aggression and jazz sophistication is as deeply musical as it is fun to play. Today, 50 years into his still-thriving career, Setzer continues to exude that very same fire that he did as a young, rebellious guitarist when he burst onto the music scene with his blond mane of rockabilly hair and his orange guitar. ■

Jeff Jacobson is a guitarist, songwriter and veteran guitar transcriber, with hundreds of published credits. For information on virtual guitar lessons or custom transcriptions, feel free to reach out to Jeff on Instagram @jjmusicmentor or visit jeffjacobson.net.

Ex. 8

(Elec. Gtr. w/dist.) (D7)

The notation for Example 8 is divided into two systems. The first system, labeled '1', shows a guitar solo in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the fretboard is shown below. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with some notes being double-stops. The fretboard shows fingerings: 13, 13, 13, 10, 13, (13), 8, 8, 8. There are two 'hold bend' markings over the 13th fret notes. The second system, labeled '3', shows a palm-muted (P.M.) section in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the fretboard is shown below. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with some notes being double-stops. The fretboard shows fingerings: 12, 0, (0), (0), 3, 0. There is a 'w/tuning peg' marking over the 12th fret note, and a '1/4' marking over the 3rd fret note.

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THE BENDS

Outside the box ideas for making string bending easier on an acoustic guitar.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

ONE OF THE biggest differences between playing acoustic and electric guitar is the force required to bend the strings. A typical medium steel-string set starts at gauge .013, compared to .010 for an electric set. The most crucial difference is the acoustic's wound third, which makes even your typical "Johnny B. Goode"-style licks a hell of a lot harder. Here are a few suggestions for how to make it easier.

LIGHTEN UP A LITTLE

Lighter strings can obviously help. Nylon strings are altogether easier to bend than steel strings, but they also stretch more easily, so make sure to break them in or you'll risk falling out of tune. As for steel, the tradeoff is tone: lighter strings equal lighter tone. If you do a lot of bending, consider using a hybrid set with lighter strings on the top three, where the lion's share of string bending happens. Or try just a slightly lighter second and/or third string. But if you want to keep a full tone and bend the low notes, there are other tricks to facilitate bending licks.

TRY A SHORTER SCALE LENGTH

Shorter scale equals looser string feel, which makes bending easier. The most obvious comparison is a triple-0 body style compared to an OM, which share the same body but have different scale lengths. The OM has a full 25.4 inches,



The shorter scale length on Eric Clapton's signature Martin 000-28EC is one reason his string bending sounds so effortless.

while the triple-0 is a half inch shorter, at 24.9 inches. That seemingly small specification makes a big difference to your fingers on the fretboard. It's one of the main reasons Eric Clapton sounds so effortless playing the blues on his signature Martin 000-28EC (also because he's Clapton). But check out some of the OG blues gurus from whom he copped his moves, and you'll notice smaller guitars with even shorter scale lengths, such as the Gibson L-1 flat top Robert Johnson is holding in the famous photograph of him.

FEWER FRETs CAN BE MORE FUN

Lots of old acoustic guitars had only 12 or 13 frets to the body, and there has been a resurgence of interest in them as of late. Those guitars have a throaty tone all their own, and bending strings on them can be way easier. Catfish Keith, who was the Frets feature in the August issue, is a manic string bender, and he uses all the tricks. His signature Santa Cruz Catfish Special is a small guitar with 13 frets to the body and a short scale length. He also uses Santa Cruz Low Tension Parabolic Strings tuned below standard pitch. Says Catfish, "When I'm handed a guitar tuned to standard pitch, the strings feel tight, and I have trouble bending them."

DE-TUNING IS EASY

It follows that you can add string

bending as an often-overlooked benefit of playing in alternate tunings. Most common open tunings, like DADGAD, open Spanish G and Vestapol D, involve slackening, rather than tightening, the strings, thereby making them easier to bend. But what Catfish does most, and what most cats forget, is that simply slackening standard is a great way to make bending easier. Even a half step makes a whole lot of difference. Being one fret off can be slightly awkward in an ensemble, but going solo is no problem. Dropping every string down a whole step is particularly cool for delivering a deep tone while maintaining fretboard familiarity and maximizing bendability. I love to do that with heavier strings because everything balances back out in terms of playability, and the tone is even more robust. Working with an ensemble is still relatively straightforward because everything is one fretboard marker away, and you can place a capo at the second fret to get right back to standard.

Have fun investigating all the ways and means to add maximum bend mojo to your acoustic flow. Make up your own sets of strings, try different guitars and tweak the tuners. Everything is cool, as long as you bend it, but don't break it. ■

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player- and Frets-related videos on his YouTube channel, and learn about his acoustic/electric rock group at spirithustler.com.

PRS

Myles Kennedy Signature

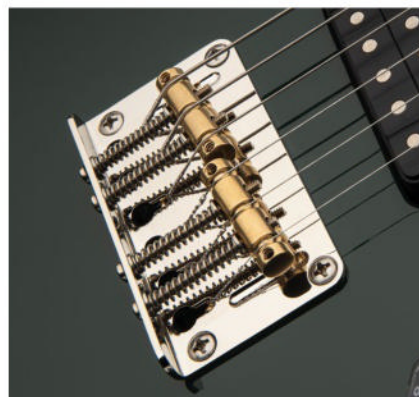
TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

PRS'S EXPANDING SERIES of artist guitars now includes an instrument created for Myles Kennedy, guitarist/vocalist/songwriter for Alter Bridge and Slash and the Conspirators. This signature model is a bit different for PRS, as it features a Tele-esque flattop body made of swamp ash, and a bolt-on, scarfed-construction maple neck that's carved to Kennedy's own custom shape. The 25 1/2 inch-scale maple fretboard has Birds inlays and carries 22 well-groomed medium frets. The strings run across a smooth bone nut on their way to a set of nickel-plated vintage-style tuners, and at the opposite end there's a top-loading PRS plate bridge with two large brass saddles that carry three strings apiece. Each round saddle is adjustable for height via a recessed set screw at each end, while intonation adjustments are made by two spring-loaded machine screws per saddle. It's a serious piece of hardware that looks proportionally correct on this guitar, which also has a black single-layer phenolic pickguard and a geometric owl on the truss-rod cover, as seen on Kennedy's solo release *The Ides of March*. Ergonomic touches include a comfy back bevel and a sculpted cutaway that provides easy access to the high frets.

Kennedy's choice of Narrowfield humbuckers brings an interesting twist to this artist model — as well as the standard-production NF 53 guitar which shares many, but not all, of the same components (more on this to come). Introduced in 2010, these pickups were designed to take a great-sounding single-coil and combine it with the "positive characteristics" of a humbucker — i.e. no hum and a full sound.

The idea for the narrow design is that it captures the vibrations of a smaller section of the strings, creating a more focused





single-coil sound. The top of the pickup is also stair-stepped so that the distance between the magnets and the strings remains consistent across the radius of the fretboard.

The Kennedy signature features all-new Narrowfield MK pickups, and the rear unit is angled toward the bridge on the treble side. The controls are volume and tone, and the latter has a push-pull function that activates a preset treble roll-off to slightly darken the sound in all positions except the neck setting. The five-way blade selector offers the following settings, from bridge to neck:

Position 1: Bridge humbucker

Position 2: Bridge humbucker and neck coil-split

Position 3: Bridge and neck humbuckers

Position 4: Bridge and neck, both coil-split

Position 5: Neck humbucker

It's noteworthy that the aforementioned NF 53 differs from the Kennedy in its use of Narrowfield DD (deep dish) pickups that carry more winds and deliver more output, and

they are mounted parallel to each other. The NF 53 also has a three-position blade switch and does not have a push-pull tone control.

My review guitar felt a little on the heavy side due to the thick body and somewhat beefy neck, but its acoustic sound is resonant and lively, and it has excellent sustain. As set up by the factory, the playability is great. The neck sits nicely in the hand, the action is low

and buzz free, and the tuneful intonation made it enjoyable to play before I even thought about amplifying it.

Tested on some gigs with the guitar plugged into either a Fender Deluxe Reverb or a Tonemaster Princeton Reverb, the Kennedy proved to be

a great-sounding and versatile guitar. It has a ballsy sound, with nice midrange presence on the back pickup. That position got plenty of use with the tone knob pulled up, creating a slightly browner tone (at least compared to the brighter knob-down sound) that was excellent when dirtied-up with a TWA SH9 pedal or run clean through the cranked-up Deluxe. And with its natural sustain and the

THE PICKUP'S NARROW DESIGN CAPTURES THE VIBRATIONS OF A SMALLER SECTION THE STRINGS, ALLOWING FOR A MORE FOCUSED SINGLE-COIL SOUND



way notes sing when pushing an overdriven amp, this guitar sounds killer for slide.

The pickups are dead quiet and sound great in the other positions too. The dip in output in positions two and four makes it easy to get a pristine clean tone — the bridge and neck pickups both coil-split, which is great for that— while the bridge humbucker with the neck pickup coil-split is cool when you want to channel Chic for a funky rhythm groove. And by notching the selector a click or two in either direction, the girth comes back for a meaty lead tone on the neck setting or a clear, stringy rhythm sound with both humbuckers on.

The more I played the Myles Kennedy signature and experienced what it can do, the more I liked it. This six-string lightning rod is a helluva guitar, and it gets an Editors' Pick Award. 

SPECIFICATIONS

PRS Myles Kennedy Signature

CONTACT prsguitars.com

PRICE \$2,899 street, soft case included

NUT Bone, 1.64" wide

NECK Maple, Myles Kennedy custom shape

FRETBOARD Maple with Birds inlays, 25.5" scale, 10" radius

FRETS 22 medium-jumbo

TUNERS Vintage style, non-locking

BODY Swamp ash

BRIDGE PRS plate with two brass adjustable saddles

PICKUPS Two PRS Narrowfield MK humbuckers

CONTROLS Volume, tone (with push-pull treble rolloff for the bridge pickup), five-way blade switch

EXTRAS Available in Antique White, Hunters Green, Black, Tri-Color Sunburst and Vintage Natural

FACTORY STRINGS PRS Classic .010–.046

WEIGHT 8.66 lbs (as tested)

BUILT USA

KUDOS A well-made guitar that plays great. The Narrowfield pickups deliver excellent humbucker and single-coil tones. Handy push-pull tone rolloff function for the rear pickup

CONCERNS None



NILE RODGERS AT THE FLICK OF A SWITCH

Myles Kennedy tells *Guitar Player* how PRS rose to his challenges with his signature model.

MYLES KENNEDY HAS been a PRS player for many years. His induction into the exclusive league of artists who have signature PRS models required him to do some deep thinking about the myriad elements involved in creating an instrument that would suit his tonal and playability needs, as well as incorporate some of the elusive mojo of his favorite vintage guitars. We spoke recently with Kennedy about the ingredients that went into his unique signature guitar.

What was the concept you had in mind for this guitar?

I used to play in cover bands in the '90s and I always thought it would be so great to have a guitar that was simple and easy to navigate in a live setting. It would have that nice throaty lead or rhythm sound, but if I wanted to play like Nile Rodgers, I could get there at the flick of a switch. I feel like that's what we've managed to do with this guitar. It's like this six-string Swiss Army knife in terms of what it can do tonally. For me, the most

important thing was for it to be vocal and have that midrange that would cut in a mix.

This marks the first time PRS has used the Narrowfield MK humbuckers in an artist instrument. How did they come into play with your guitar?

Bringing that pickup into the equation was PRS's idea. They said, "We have these pickups that can mimic single-coil sounds, but without the hum." I was like, "If you can pull it off, that would be fantastic." The first batch [of pickups] they sent sounded great, but they were a little darker than what we ended up with. Even so, I was really impressed with how quiet they were, and I remember reaching out to them after that first prototype guitar came along and asking if we can change this or that. So after a few weeks, Paul called and he was jumping through the phone, he was so excited, saying "Wait 'till you hear what we've done!" So when they sent the next round, I was doing cartwheels in the living room because, to me, it was like a great-sounding

vintage single-coil, but it also had elements of a P90, and this midrange and cut that I didn't expect them to achieve initially. They just hit it out of the park.

How are you using the pickup selections that are available on this guitar?

It depends on the song, but I would say 80 percent of the time with Alter Bridge I'm hanging on the bridge pickup, with the tone knob pulled up, because with that more high-gain environment you need to shave off a little bit of high end. It took a while for us to get there, because in the first setup it was basically taking the tone knob and rolling it off maybe 30 percent. And then we found it was not quite enough, so now it rolls off about 40 to 50 percent. But in my solo realm, I'm sure I'll be engaging that top end a little more, because I like that single-coil vibe. So when you plug it in, it's like a nice marriage of a number of things that makes it work really well, at least for me.

Since this guitar came into existence, it's really ignited my passion for playing again. I was in Germany a few weeks ago on tour with Alter Bridge, and Peter Dinklage stopped by one of our shows to check out the [Diezel] amps and make sure everything was working fine. He has some of the best ears I've ever encountered — he can hear these nuances like no other human I know! So I asked him to check out the guitar, and it was really great to see him in my dressing room playing it acoustically. He commented, like you did, about how resonant it is. So getting the thumbs-up from him was like the best compliment, because he's totally honest. There's something about that maple neck and the swamp-ash body, and it does resonate really nicely.

How did you come up with the neck shape?

I wanted something with a vintage vibe, and a lot of T-style guitars from the '50s have that certain profile. And maybe from years of being played they have a certain mojo and comfort level. So that was as paramount as what we were trying to achieve with the pickups.



"It's like this six-string Swiss Army knife in terms of what it can do tonally."

Because to me, if a guitar doesn't feel good in my left hand, then it won't inspire me. We talked a lot about that and how to achieve it, and a few people have mentioned that they like the profile. They feel like it's got enough girth to it but it doesn't feel like a baseball bat, which makes me happy, because I didn't want it to be something that would fatigue your hand. I just wanted it to feel right and ultimately inspire you.

Did you also need to think about the scale length or the fretboard radius?

I think one of the really difficult things for me, coming from my love of vintage instruments, was knowing that the radius would be seven-and-one-

quarter inches. So the whole thing for me throughout the process was whether to go for that or a 10-inch radius. I ultimately went for the 10-inch because my other PRS guitars were in that realm, and I thought it might be kind of strange to go from playing my McCarty to playing the signature guitar and have that extra-rounded fretboard. So I'm glad we settled with the 10-inch radius because it feels really good now.

Whose idea was it to use a top-loading, flat steel bridge with round brass saddles?

The prototype that we started with had a

version of that bridge, and it was top loaded, which I thought was interesting. I didn't know what to make of it at first, but as time went on I really grew to like it. One of the things we talked about as we continued to develop it was to give the bridge a little more mass and make it a little wider to have more steel touching the body, just to help it resonate more. It's aesthetically more pleasing too. What's interesting about the saddles is that there's just two of them, and so you'd think, How will it be to navigate when intonating it? But it works fine. It took me a while getting used to it, but now it's easy as pie.

How does your guitar stand up when mixing it onstage with other guitars?

Really well, with Alter Bridge in particular. For years I was using a PRS SC245 or McCarty, and I had different pickups in those guitars from what Mark Tremonti had. He had his signature pickups, but because my guitar was also a mahogany body with a maple top, there were similarities. Our front-of-house guy would say, "At times your frequencies run into each other a little bit." But since incorporating this guitar into the mix, the separation is there. He has no problem getting it to cut, and it has a certain midrange to it that really sits nicely in a mix.

So that's been really nice, because it's got a sweet spot that works well with a mahogany-body, maple-top guitar. So if somebody is playing that type of guitar with humbuckers, I feel like my guitar complements it really well. 🎸

"PAUL REED SMITH CALLED AND HE WAS JUMPING THROUGH THE PHONE: 'WAIT 'TILL YOU HEAR WHAT WE'VE DONE!'"

ACOUSTIC CONTROL

Gamma Effects Pedals

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

THE BUDGET EFFECTS lineup has been a popular go-to for many manufacturers over the past several years, but Acoustic Control Corporation — the parent company behind the new six-pedal Gamma lineup — arguably has a richer history in vaunted professional gear than most. This is the company behind the massively powerful Acoustic 361 bass amps that became a touring staple from the early '70s through much of the '80s, belting out the low-end of four-string stars like Jaco Pastorius, John Paul Jones, Larry Graham, John McVie and many others.

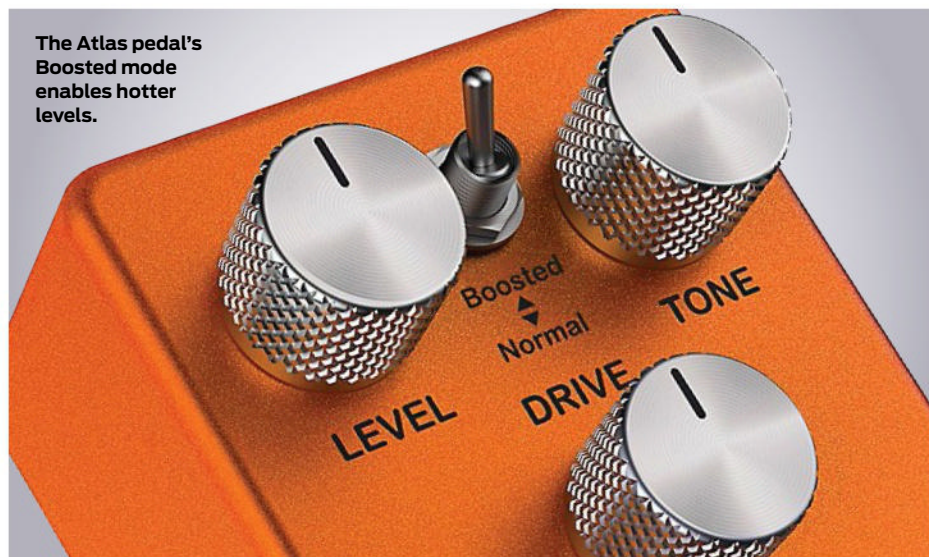
Following a pair of lower-priced solid-state guitar combos in the Gamma range, the company's new no-nonsense Gamma pedal lineup is designed in the USA and manufactured in China, and features six perennial standards, including three flavors of gain, chorus, reverb and delay. All but the latter two are a mere \$69, with those pricier offerings landing at \$89 each. They all fit into the same rugged 4.59 x 2.75 x 2.19-inch metal

box, each differentiated by its own color and model name — mostly based on the Greek god that best represents the pedal's capabilities — and all sport knurled silver knobs plus bonus features on a few, as detailed below. Each pedal also carries the same single input, output and electronic-

switching buffered bypass, and has an easy-access battery panel on the underside with a nine-volt DC center-negative adaptor input on the forward edge. All were tested using a Fender Jazzmaster and a Gibson Les Paul into a 65amps London head and 2x12 cabinet, and a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo.



The Atlas pedal's Boosted mode enables hotter levels.



ATLAS BOOSTED OVERDRIVE

The candy-orange Atlas Boosted Overdrive is a low-to-medium-gain drive pedal aimed at gain staging and overtone enhancement without masking the character and dynamics of your guitar and amp. It also enables hotter levels to push tube amps into heavier breakup with the Boosted toggle switch engaged. Control knobs include drive, level and tone.

While the characteristics of a low-gain boost or overdrive can sound quite subtle on paper, many guitarists find the resulting tone to be transformative, and I was impressed with how well the Atlas ticked that box for the price. This is a surprisingly balanced and

open-sounding overdrive pedal, with lots of shimmer and harmonic enhancement plus plenty of clarity throughout the gain range. And it all gets delightfully more so with the Boosted switch engaged, without going overly squishy or hairy. What's more, there's a sweetness and musicality to it that holds up quite well against many boutique overdrives costing two or three times this much. It doesn't quite perform Klon-level tonal magic tricks, but the Atlas delivers very appealing low-gain overdrive that should suit a boatload of applications.

SPECIFICATIONS

Atlas Boosted Overdrive

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$69

CONTROLS Level, drive, tone

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, Boosted/Normal gain mode switch

KUDOS Balanced and articulate, with a sweetly musical overdrive tone

CONCERNS None

BACCHUS DYNAMIC DRIVER



Colored a rich red in honor of the Greek god of wine-making and bacchanalia, the Bacchus is a broad-ranging gain pedal billed as taking you from "edge of breakup" to "epic metal tone." Controls include drive, level and tone,

and there's a Fat mode switch for a thicker, more full-bodied core tone that the makers say is great for fattening up single-coil pickups or adding more girth to humbuckers.

Despite the maker's description, the Bacchus doesn't provide notably more gain than the Atlas, perhaps until you wind the Drive up toward max. What it does present is a more midforward voicing that's a little closer to the classic hazy thickness of the Tube Screamer platform, which still appeals to so many players. It's a warmer, slightly chewier overdrive overall, with perhaps a little more compression at the front of the note. The Fat switch does as advertised for single-coils, although it's subtle at best and virtually negligible with the Les Paul. A good one when your clean amp needs an injection of thick and juicy.



The Bacchus delivers appealing compression and classic TS-style girth.

SPECIFICATIONS

Bacchus Dynamic Driver

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$69

CONTROLS Level, drive, tone

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, Fat/Normal voicing mode switch

KUDOS Warm, thick-mids overdrive with appealing compression and classic TS-style girth

CONCERNS Less clarity than the Atlas, and arguably less to distinguish it

HADES METAL DISTORTION



Of all the Greek god-themed pedals in the bunch, the metallic-black Hades is probably the most accurately self-descriptive. The maker promises aggressive high-gain distortion without sacrificing articulation and clarity... unless you want it that way. Full-size knobs offer drive and level, with the smaller black plastic knobs below them for setting bass, mid and treble levels.

The distortion pedal might be one of the simplest of gain-increasing devices to approximate, yet one of the trickier to do really well. The Hades gives it a good try at this price, delivering what players generally expect from the sector. It piles loads of saturation into a traditional metal-voiced driver that's an easy one-stop-shop for classic metal tones, with a fairly portly feel overall. That said, it benefits from respectable clarity for a high-gain pedal and a crispy high end that helps it cut through. Rolling the mid control down to zero for that archetypal

scooped EQ really just eviscerates the thing entirely, dropping the volume in the process. Its voicing is pretty darn scooped as is, although boosting bass and treble can further enhance that. Raising the mid, on the other hand, unveils a chunky, retro-metal sludge that I enjoyed even more.

SPECIFICATIONS

Hades Metal Distortion

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$69

CONTROLS Drive, level, bass, mid, treble

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS An easy route to heavy, crunching metal distortion tones

CONCERNS The mid control's range takes some getting used to

EROS CLEAN CHORUS



Was naming this metallic-pink chorus after the Greek god of love intended to evoke the potentially dizzying effect of both the emotion and the pedal? Either way, it's an easy pedal to like, if maybe not be obsessively enamored of.

Controls for level, depth and speed govern an analog circuit biased toward the crisp and shimmering.

Chorus pedals — even pricy ones — can range from the delectable to the distracting, which makes the Eros's achievements all the more impressive at this price point. This Gamma design does well, in my view, to avoid the extremes, restraining all parameters to the musical and usable. The result is an appealing chorus that's easy to dial in and a doddle to work into your setup. The "Clean"

in the name hints at the fact that this pedal doesn't give you the characterful analog textures of a CE-1 or a Small Clone, instead focusing on the effect itself, making it sweetly loveable and a real grower of an effect in the process.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eros Clean Chorus

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$69

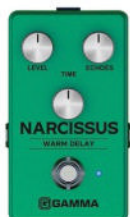
CONTROLS Level, depth, speed

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS A well-balanced and likeable chorus sound that's usable on a wide range of settings

CONCERNS Guitarists seeking the bonus of bucket-brigade signal massaging should look elsewhere

NARCISSUS WARM DELAY



Is delay the effect of the vain and self-obsessed? The metallic-green Narcissus seems to think so, although after just a short while I found it to be quite giving, selfless and eminently likeable.

Rather than employing the generic delay DSP found everywhere these days, the Narcissus is a nominally analog delay. It uses a Princeton PT2399 chip with some digital elements that has lately been found in a number of modern pedals that chase bucket-brigade-like echoes. Controls for time, echoes (repeats) and level are all you need to get the job done.

I didn't expect a whole lot out of a delay pedal listed at \$89, which made the Narcissus all the more surprising. Without offering the bonus functions and added-parameter switching of more complex units, it sidesteps all the second guessing, simply delivering very usable and appealing echoes right out of the gate. I found the "Warm" in the name entirely justified, with the delectably thick impersonation of girthy analog-like repeats providing more character than might be expected from such a pedal. In addition, the long delay time allowed for major atmospheric and some wild self-oscillation when desired. Tasty stuff.



The Narcissus comes through on its promise of warm delays.

SPECIFICATIONS

Narcissus Warm Delay

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$89

CONTROLS Time, echoes, level

SWITCHES On/off foot switch

KUDOS A great sounding delay pedal for the price, with impressive delay time and a very usable range of settings

CONCERNS None

CUMULUS 3-WAY REVERB



The metallic-blue Cumulus strays from the Greek-god theme to dub a reverb pedal in the sky-themed manner that some other makers have used of late. This is the only properly digital pedal in the lineup, and the "3-Way" in the

name represents the impressive variation of type found on its mini-toggle selector for Studio, Spring and Plate. The decay, tone and mix knobs set the depth and timbre.

Reverb is tricky to do extremely well on a budget, and the Cumulus perhaps makes that case first and foremost, although it's also a usable and well-designed pedal at heart. Each of its three reflection varieties is usable, if not terrifically realistic, and the controls offer the range to do just about anything you'd want from a compact, workaday pedal. The overall quality, however, puts me in mind of the DSP loaded into more affordable "multi-featured" solid-state practice amps. It certainly does most of what it sets out to

do and should provide good value to many players, but arguably it isn't overly inspiring. It was also the noisiest of the six Gamma pedals upon switching on — perhaps not unusably so and perhaps noteworthy only because the others are so impressively quiet.

SPECIFICATIONS

Cumulus 3-Way Reverb

CONTACT acousticcontrolcorp.com

PRICE \$89

CONTROLS Decay, tone, mix

SWITCHES On/off foot switch, mini- toggle for reverb type: Studio, Spring and Plate

KUDOS Compact and affordable reverb pedal delivering three popular reflection types.

CONCERNS A little noisy, and arguably not overly inspiring

CONCLUSIONS

In all, I was impressed with the six-pedal Gamma series, and certainly more than I had expected to be, given the price range. They are well designed and ruggedly built, their buffered-bypass is refreshingly neutral, and all deliver sounds and functions commensurate with their promises and expectations. I found the Eros a chorus pedal that I could easily use in many situations. But I was even more smitten with the Atlas Boosted Overdrive for its balance, clarity and tasty overtone enhancement, and with the Narcissus Warm Delay for its girthy analog character and excellent range of parameters. All are worth checking out, but the latter two deserve Editors' Pick Awards. 🎸

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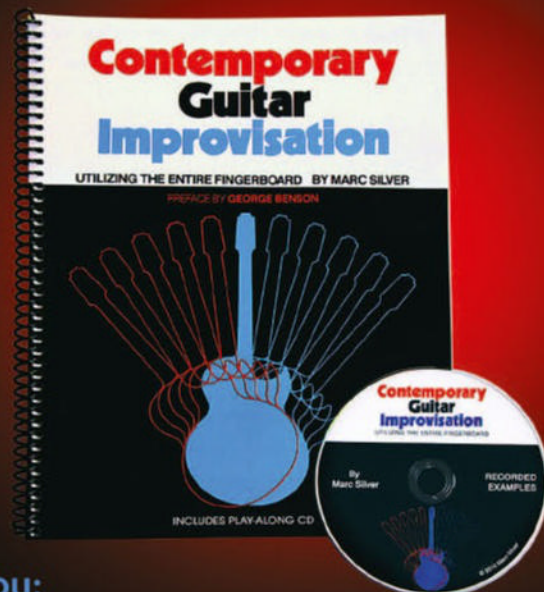
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L.R. BAGGS



HiFi High-Fidelity Acoustic Bridge Plate Pickup System

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

THE NEW HIFI active acoustic bridge-plate pickup system could represent a sea change, both at Baggs and throughout the industry. It's different from traditional systems, such as the venerable Baggs Element, which use an undersaddle piezo pickup. In the HiFi system, a pair of transducers adhere non-invasively under the bridge plate, while a high-fidelity preamp sculpts the output signal. The design delivers a balance of string and body energy for a holistic tone that fully represents the unique qualities of a particular acoustic. According to Baggs, the HiFi is the next-level version of the company's iBeam active bridge-plate pickup system, as well as a response to a challenge thrown down about a quarter century ago by Lloyd Baggs' friend Jackson Browne, a notorious tone chaser.

HiFi's installation is not particularly complicated and, significantly, requires no glue or epoxy. However, if those peel-and-stick transducers aren't affixed perfectly flush under the bridge plate, the sound will be shrill, so the job is best handled by a professional.

I had mine done by Phil "Philbillie" Milner, who is Bob Weir's former tech and all-around guitar and amp fixer of note in Northern California. He put HiFi in a stunning Martin CS-SC-2022

[see *New & Cool*, June

2023]. The straightforward system includes the endpin preamp, a nine-volt battery pack, and a pair of sound hole-mounted volume and tone flywheels. I recorded the guitar into a digital audio workstation for direct comparisons to the Martin's previous piezo-based system. I also ran it through

a variety of amps at home and used it on a couple of gigs.

Each situation yielded unique revelations, but one thing was consistently obvious: HiFi is indeed a high-fidelity acoustic experience. Recorded tones sounded clear and open, with HiFi delivering a full frequency range in

transparent, unfiltered fashion. It was easily more organic than the under-saddle piezo system it replaced. Through an amp? Well, such a high level of responsiveness to every touch and tap shouldn't be possible

without encountering feedback, especially at considerable volume. But feedback wasn't an ordeal, even on a loud solo gig in a rather large room. I also had a Baggs M1 passive sound-hole pickup running through gain pedals into a Gibson 2x12 tube amp, and a hot vocal running right alongside the HiFi's

signal into a Baggs Synapse Personal P.A. situated directly behind me. It fed a pair of main P.A. speakers, and the sound was bouncing all around the room. Using a wide variety of plucking approaches, from nuanced fingerpicking to aggressive percussive playing, I found the system kept feedback at bay and remained securely in place.

I did have to adjust my approach to accommodate such a vivacious sound. First, I rolled the tone down, then I grabbed some bass boost from a Baggs Align Series Equalizer pedal, because the SC is a rather thin-bodied performance acoustic. I wound up using more variety in the plucking approach, because HiFi is so sensitive and pristine that every subtlety — mistakes included — is audible. Since I wear fake nails, I had to become extra conscious of how much nail, versus flesh, hit the strings, and extra judicious in the overall approach, because the whole guitar became boisterous.

Slappers and tappers will be glad to hear that HiFi is a percussive player's dream! It



HIFI BOTTLES A GUITAR'S ACOUSTIC ESSENCE AND ELECTRIFIES IT IN UNIQUE FASHION

simply takes some getting used to, like going from standard video quality to HDTV. I wound up using the flesh of my thumb for an intimate sound on, say, a subdued verse part before wailing away with a full hand on a driving chorus. Whatever you put in is going to shine through, similar to how electric aficionados talk about playing through a Dumble amp — it's very revealing.

HiFi's performance is wide open and unbridled, and I had to learn how to harness that power in such a high-fidelity guitar. I loved complementing it with an M1 passive magnetic in the sound hole, which added a bit more string sound to the HiFi's bountiful body tones. The Martin SC has a glacial cutaway, so you can play up the neck. Higher notes on the first two strings lacked resonance and were somewhat plinky with the HiFi alone, but the M1 helped deliver those notes with plenty of pop.

I visited Baggs' headquarters to hear how HiFi sounded in several other guitars, and the main takeaway was that each sounded uniquely like itself. To take that endeavor as far as possible, the Baggs team also utilized its Voiceprint D.I. [see *Meet Your Maker from July 2021*] to create custom filters based on each instrument's particular body tone and pickup signal. The results sounded so realistic that one couldn't help but wonder who is



Hardware includes two transducers, endpin preamp, battery holder and soundhole controls.

going to prefer an under-saddle piezo, be it the Baggs Element or any other make and model.

Even piezo system tones near the \$200 price point have some plastic-sounding quack, a quality that's not present with the HiFi. That said, HiFi might sound a bit too present and dynamically responsive in some players' hands and instruments. Onboard control is limited, and while the tone control works wonders, I appreciated having some help from a tone-sculpting pedal. In addition,

I love the sound of HiFi in conjunction with the M1, which creates a very flexible dual system, as sound-hole pickups work well through all sorts of amplification.

Are we at the beginning of the end of the piezo age? I'd bet Baggs believes so. HiFi is a simple and affordable plug-and-play system that bottles a guitar's acoustic essence and electrifies it in unique fashion for a remarkably vivacious and organic tone. It's kind of like a cross between a mic and a hot, sensitive pickup, but without the insane feedback issues. For ushering in a new chapter at one of the most innovative companies in the acoustic-electric arena, HiFi earns an Editors' Pick Award. 



HiFi's transducers mount under the bridge plate without glue, but must be affixed flush.

SPECIFICATIONS

L.R. Baggs HiFi

CONTACT lrbaggs.com

PRICE \$199 street

CONTROLS Volume and tone

POWER 9-volt battery

BUILT USA (with some parts sourced overseas)

KUDOS Remarkably high-fidelity 3D tone is uber responsive. Simple, secure non-invasive installation. Strong value

CONCERNS Installation needs to be just right. Tone could be a bit too brilliantly responsive and revealing for some players and instruments



SOMA LABORATORY

Cosmos Drifting Memory Station

TESTED BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI



SOMA LABORATORY IS not well known to guitarists. Based in Russia and Poland, the company was founded in 2016 by radio engineer and musician Vlad Kreimer after the successful creation of his LYRA-8 synthesizer, a device that, in a unique move, generates tones from eight tunable touch-sensitive plates. Unlike most musical instrument makers, Soma's devices are designed to make musicians rethink how they approach the tools for creating music and, in doing so, break with the usual constructs of pitch and rhythm that define Western music, all while engaging more with themselves, their environments and each other.

Cosmos is a perfect example of that ethos. To quote the company's literature, it's "a drifting memory station designed to work with meditative states through music." To put it in terms more familiar to guitarists, Cosmos was inspired by Robert Fripp and Brian Eno's Frippertronics system to create ambient washes of sound through a combination of extremely long delay times and multiple delay lines. Suffice to say, Cosmos is not your traditional delay pedal but rather a generative musical device for mindful sonic exploration and performance. There's a lot to get into, so let's get started.

Cosmos' control panel includes an input and output level control at either end, between which are seven rotary controls. The

large central dial is where you choose which of the pedal's effects you'll be using. Cosmos has four types of algorithms — Two Delays, Four Delays, Giant Reverb and Granular Delay — each with three variations. Two Delays, which consists of two delay lines that constantly shift relative to one another, has delay times of about 2.5, 9.5 and 22 seconds. Similarly, Four Delays has four shifting delay lines with times of roughly 2.5, 8.5 and 11.5 seconds. Giant Reverb simulates echoes in an imaginary hall several kilometers in size, and is offered in huge, super-huge and insanely-super-huge varieties. Finally, Granular Delay chops the delay signal into small, medium or large grains, and the large setting includes an additional central granular delay.

The other controls are used to shape the chosen algorithm. From left, they include blur, drift, drive (a gentle overdrive), sup/com, FB (feedback) and mix (wet/dry balance). A few of these require some explanation.

Blur: In the Two and Four Delays algorithms, blur adds cross-feedback between the delay

lines, which causes the lines to become less separate and distinct. In the Granular Delay modes, it modulates the position of the grains. It does nothing in Giant Reverb.

Drift: With Two and Four Delays, drift randomly modulates the delay lines' positions to make them drift across the stereo field rather than remain in the left and right channels. Likewise, with Granular Delay, drift randomly modulates the positions of the grains within the panorama. It does nothing in Giant Reverb.

Sup/Com (Suppressor/Compressor): With this control in its middle position, no effects are applied. Turned counterclockwise, it applies a suppressor that replaces previously recorded sounds with new ones. The louder the incoming sound, the more suppression is applied. When turned fully clockwise, it engages a compressor that makes soft sounds louder and loud sounds softer.

Feedback: Similar to the feedback control on a delay, this affects how long you hear the effected signal. If it's set to less than 1.0, the delays will fade. At 1.0, the sounds stay at the same level, and at greater than 1.0, the volume of the effected signal will increase. The manual suggests, "In most cases, this knob should be at a position slightly less than 1.0," which was accurate to my experience.

In addition to all that, Cosmos has five function buttons along the bottom of the

Cosmos comes in a range of colors



pedal: (from left) HPF, LPF, erase, reverse/select, and record/erase all. HPF and LPF engage high-pass and low-pass filters, respectively, on the effected signal. Each button has two LEDs that indicate whether the filter is off (no LEDs lit) or on at various levels of intensity that can be set by pressing the button in conjunction with the reverse/select button. Erase can be used to erase signals from the delay line or to clear the memory buffer when pressed along with the record/erase all button. Reverse turns on reverse playback for each effect, and record has four modes indicated by two LEDs. When turned off (no LEDs lit), any recorded sounds are heard and any new signal is heard unaffected at the output. This is ideal for playing live over your recorded sounds. You can also choose to record to just the first group of delays (left LED lit), the second group of delays (right LED lit) or both (both LEDs lit). This last is the Cosmos' main mode.

Finally we have a five-LED sound level indicator with two green LEDs, two yellow LEDs and one red LED. Green indicates the

SPECIFICATIONS

Cosmos Drifting Memory Station

CONTACT somasynths.com/cosmos

PRICE \$699

CONTROLS Input and output volume, blur, drift, drive, algorithm select (Two Delay, Four Delay, Giant Reverb, Granular Delay), suppressor/compressor, feedback, mix.

FOOT SWITCHES High- and low-pass filters (each with two status LEDs), erase, reverse/select (with status LED), record/erase all (with two status LEDs)

I/O 1/4" TR/TRS left and right inputs, 1/4" TR/TRS left and right outputs, 1/4" stereo headphone

AUDIO 48 kHz sampling rate, with 24-bit resolution

POWER 12VDC (adapter included)

OTHER USB port for firmware updates via flash drive

DIMENSIONS 13.5" x 6" x 2.6" (LxHxD)

BUILT Europe

KUDOS Sonic bliss for mind and spirit

CONCERNS There's a minor learning curve, after which Cosmos becomes intuitive to use



Cosmos is solidly built and features a strong steel chassis.

volume is sufficient, yellow is for maximum volume without distortion, and red indicates that the built-in limiter has been triggered. Keep your signal in the green and yellow LEDs and you'll be fine.

Around the front are the on/off switch, the 1/4-inch left and right inputs and outputs, a 1/4-inch stereo headphone output, the 12-volt power input and a USB 2.0 port to which you can connect a flash drive when it's time to update the unit's firmware. (Note that Soma has different firmware versions available on its site, including a rhythmic version with a completely different set of algorithms.) The inputs can take TR and TRS cables, and the left and right inputs are sent to different delay groups. If you're sending just one signal, it will be replicated at the other input. You can also put Cosmos into a dual-mono mode, allowing it to act as a mixer for two mono sources.

While Cosmos' controls may seem arcane, the pedal is intuitive to use once you understand each control's application.

And even though it's designed to be used as a floor unit, the push buttons are easy enough to press with your fingers, making it useful as a desktop unit. Cosmos is beautifully designed and solidly built in a steel enclosure that's now available in orange, pink, blue, green, white and black. And, I'm happy to say, the sound is audiophile quality, thanks to a 48 kHz sampling rate with 24-bit resolution. In addition, Cosmos has a built-in noise gate that helps keep the loop sounding clean, and you can adjust its sensitivity as needed by following the manual's instructions.

I had a blast using Cosmos and really enjoyed the contemplative mood it put me in, regardless of the algorithm chosen. The delay times, even at their shortest, are long enough to discourage the sort of rhythmic playing I usually fall into when using a delay, and I found this was a natural inducement to sonic experimentation. The interplay between the original signal and the effect led me to be

alternately mindful of what I was playing and blissfully trancelike as I sunk into the groove of what was being generated.

I especially like the Granular Delay algorithms, with their pleasing rhythmic blip-like effect. The small Granular Delay setting, in particular, provides a nice entry point to the Cosmos. With feedback set low, suppression engaged and mix at the midpoint, the effect was manageable, never overwhelming, and allowed me to move slowly around the fretboard without creating too much harmonic chaos. From this starting point, I could gradually explore the pedal's more extreme modes and settings.

Given Cosmos' unique nature, I found a few basic ground rules helped me to get the most out of it. First, use the stereo output to receive full enjoyment from the unit. Second,

use the suppressor/compressor control on the fly to change how long sounds remain in the buffer. Third, keep feedback just under 1.0, as lower settings make the sounds fade away

too soon and don't play to Cosmos' strengths. Fourth, hit that reverse switch to smear the effect and add a psychedelic wash that blurs things even more. Fifth, use those filters! Engaging the high- and low-pass filters is a great way to add character to the effects and create a sense of depth between your original signal and the effected signals. Lastly, grab that central dial and switch up the modes as you play. Any signal that's in the buffer will be seamlessly transferred to the newly selected mode, allowing you to follow your sonic bliss without suffering any abrupt changes in mood.

It's not often that a pedal is both an effect and a generative musical device. Cosmos is that rare thing, as well as a mood-shifting gizmo that will expand your creative mindset while it soothes you, lowers your blood pressure and lets you drift off into heady sonic realms. For its uniqueness, gorgeous sound and healthful benefits to mind and spirit, it gets an Editors' Pick award. **E**

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT A PEDAL IS AN EFFECT AND A GENERATIVE MUSICAL DEVICE



of RCA inputs, an 1/8-inch aux in, a Bluetooth pairing button and a pair of LF/HF EQ buttons, each with an LED that indicates selections for -3dB, flat and +2db settings. There's also an AC power-in jack and a proprietary jack for connecting the right-hand speaker via the included eight-foot cable. Everything packs into a padded carry bag with shoulder strap, including the cables and adjustable tilt-back iso stands, which are secured to the speakers with machined-aluminum knobs. The front of the

left speaker has a volume

knob with a lighted push on/off switch and a 1/8-inch headphone jack. (The slightly larger and more powerful AuxGo 4" system costs only \$40 more and adds a balanced 1/4-inch TRS input, a USB audio input and Auto ARC automatic room correction.)

With a frequency range of 60Hz to 22kHz, the GoAux 3" speakers sound very clear and detailed and offer good bass response and a nice stereo presentation when placed the recommended three to five feet apart. Auditioned at various volume levels, they have a well-balanced soundstage and aren't fatiguing to the ears when listening at high levels. The included isolation stands have six

tilt-back adjustment stops to angle the speakers for optimal positioning, even on the floor. They also paired easily to Bluetooth with any device I used, and had

very low operational noise.

Overall, I'm impressed by the performance and value of the GoAux 3" speakers. They're certainly a great low-cost choice when you want quality sound in any environment where space is limited. **A**

SPECIFICATIONS

GoAux 3" Personal Monitors

CONTACT krkmusic.com

PRICE \$379 (pair)

CONTROLS Volume knob with push on/off function

CABINETS ABS, rear ported. 6.8" x 4.37" x 4.72" (HxWxD)

DRIVERS 3" woofer, woven glass aramid. 1" tweeter, soft textile dome

I/O (Inputs) Dual RCA stereo, 1/8" aux.

OUTPUTS 1 x 1/8" headphone

POWER AMP Bi-amped, 22 watts low frequency; 8 watts high frequency. Total power 60 watts per side

SPL 99dB maximum, peak

EXTRAS Bluetooth. Low- and high-frequency EQ (both with settings for -3dB, flat, +2db). Padded travel bag, isolation stands and cables

WEIGHT 8.04 lbs (as tested), including stands, carry bag and included accessories

BUILT China

KUDOS Excellent sound in a portable package

CONCERNS None

KRK

GoAux 3" Personal Monitors

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

TRAVEL CAN AFFORD one the opportunity to employ gear that might not be as useful at home. Such was the case this summer when I needed some compact monitors to carry along for listening to mixes and live recordings, and playing music on my phone.

Conveniently, I'd been sent the KRK GoAux 3" Personal Monitors for review, and they fit the bill perfectly. The system comprises a pair of small rear-ported speakers, each featuring a bi-amped power section that pumps 22 watts into a three-inch woofer and eight watts into a one-inch soft-dome tweeter. The back of the left-hand unit has a power switch, a pair

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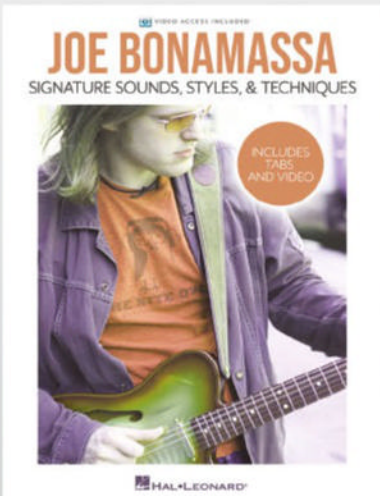
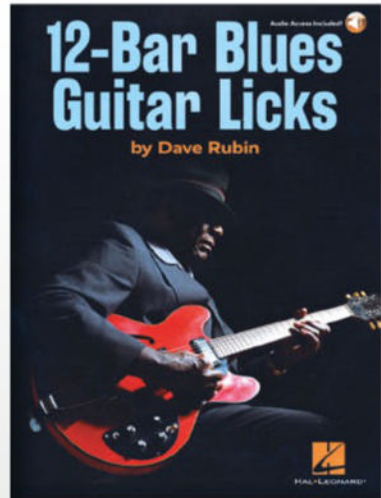
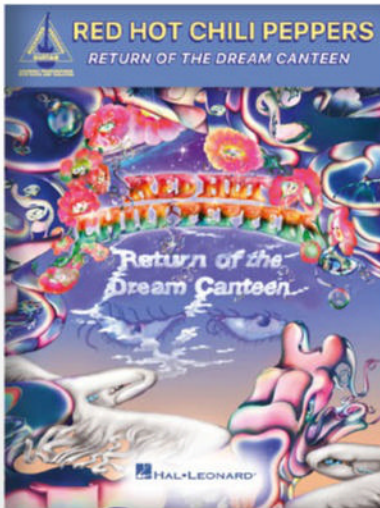
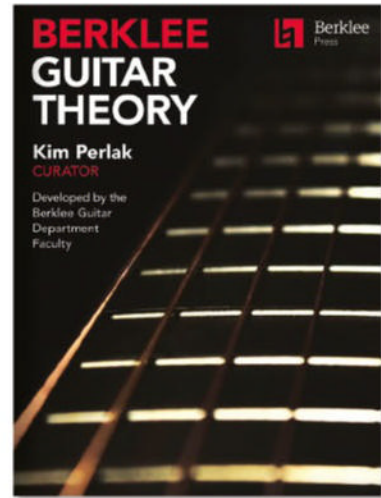
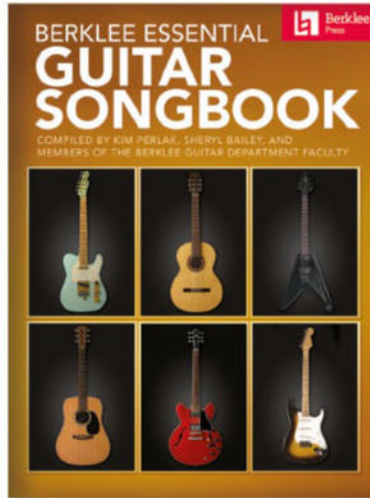
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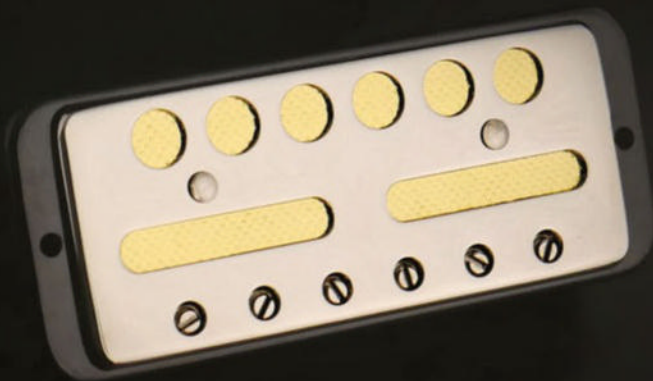
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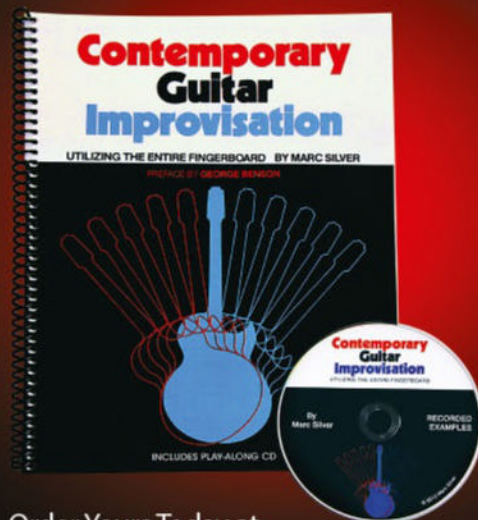
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How I Wrote...

“She’s So Young”

Moe Berg looks back to the birth of **The Pursuit of Happiness’s** 1988 international power-pop hit.

BY JOE BOSSO



IN MOST PLACES, Moe Berg isn’t a household name, but in his homeland of Canada he’s something of a national treasure. With his power-pop band the Pursuit of Happiness, the singer-songwriter and guitarist scored a number of ear-candy hits in the late ’80s, such as the snappy yet wistful gem “She’s So Young,” from the group’s Todd Rundgren–produced debut album, *Love Junk*.

“In some of my earliest songs, like ‘She’s So Young’ and ‘I’m an Adult Now,’ I was so preoccupied with age,” Berg says. “I hear them now and I’m like, Who was that guy? I was young when I wrote them, but I felt a sense of impending doom. ‘She’s So Young’ sounds very carefree, but it’s tinged with melancholy.”

“HEY MOE, IT’S TODD”

Berg hadn’t yet formed TPOH when the idea for “She’s So Young” hit him in 1985. “I saw these teenaged girls on the street, and they exuded this air of confidence,” he recalls. “I felt jealous of them because they seemed to have everything figured out. I ran home, picked up my guitar and wrote as fast as I could. I used these odd chords — major and minor 7ths with different bass notes. I borrowed that from listening to Todd Rundgren and Joni Mitchell. To my ears, that gave the song a poignant Beach Boys feel.”

For a while, the guitarist performed the song solo at open-mic nights. Once he put

the five-piece TPOH together, the band played some shows before issuing an indie single consisting of “I’m an Adult Now” with “She’s So Young” as its B-side.

Thanks to a super-cheap video that caught fire on Canada’s MuchMusic, the A-side became a fluke hit, winning the band a deal with Chrysalis Records. Todd Rundgren was Berg’s favorite producer, and the guitarist half-jokingly told label execs that he wanted his idol to helm the band’s debut. To his amazement, he soon received a phone call at a sound check: “Hey Moe, it’s Todd Rundgren. I want to produce your record.” “I couldn’t believe it,” Berg says. “I thought I was dreaming.”

“YOUR SOLOS ARE TERRIBLE”

In Berg’s view, Rundgren didn’t impose his own stamp on the band’s songs as much as point out where things needed work. “Todd’s basic approach during pre-production was,

‘This isn’t good. Make it good,’” he says. Berg had already made one change to “She’s So Young.” The original recording opened with the infectious chorus, but since then he’d decided to begin with the first verse instead.

Rundgren agreed. “Todd said, ‘The chorus at the front is way too much of a good thing.’”

However, there was one touchy point concerning Berg’s guitar skills. “Todd didn’t

pull any punches,” Berg recalls. “He said, ‘Your solos are terrible. You’ve really got to practice.’ I was crushed, but I worked at it in the time that I had. I wrote solos that more or less followed the chords.”

Recording at Rundgren’s Utopia Studios in Bearsville, New York, Berg used his 1981 Squier Telecaster and a Marshall combo for rhythm work, but he borrowed one of the producer’s Stratocasters for his solos. “Our other guitarist, Kris Abbot, played some solos, but I did the one on ‘She’s So Young,’” he says. “It only took one or two passes. Todd threw in all kinds of effects — distortion, chorus and harmonizers.”

NOT-SO-HAPPY FACES

Love Junk was completed in 10 days, and the re-recordings of “I’m an Adult Now” and “She’s So Young” scored high on Canadian, U.S. and U.K. alternative charts; in Canada, the album went both Gold and Platinum. Berg notes that “She’s So Young” would have fared even better in Britain had its video not run into censorship problems. “We had these happy faces superimposed in places,” he says. “Back then, happy faces were associated with the drug Ecstasy, so the U.K. wouldn’t play the clip. We were caught off guard by that.”

Although TPOH never technically broke up, they ceased full-time activity in 1996 and regroup only for occasional tours, where “She’s So Young” remains a staple in the band’s live set. “People connect with the song right away,” Berg says. “We start playing it and we see a change in the audience. I would never do a show without playing it.”

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