

KISS LEGEND ACE FREHLEY (1951-2025)

GUITAR WORLD

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TRANSCRIPTIONS

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BUDDY HOLLY

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Contents

VOL. 47 | NO. 1 | JANUARY 2026



Ace Frehley backstage
in Boston, May 11, 1975

TRANSCRIBED

Three Six Five

SHINEDOWN

PAGE
90

Blue Days, Black Nights

BUDDY HOLLY

PAGE
95

Young Man Blues

THE WHO

PAGE
98

DEPARTMENTS



74 Soundcheck

- 74 Ibanez Q54W
- 77 Boss Plugout FX PX-1
- 78 Sterling by Music Man Kaizen 7
- 80 Fender American Professional
Classic Stratocaster
- 82 Warm Audio Throne of Tone
- 83 JHS Pedals 424 Gain Stage

84 Columns

- 84 Follow the Groove
by Cory Wong
- 85 Tales from Nerdville
by Joe Bonamassa
- 86 Workin' Man
by Charlie Starr
- 87 Hardwired
by Jared James Nichols

89 Performance Notes

114 Power Tools

Compared to the "holy triumvirate" of the Gibson Les Paul Standard, the Fender Stratocaster and the Fender Telecaster, the Gibson SG Standard is the solidbody-electric equivalent of Rodney Dangerfield; it just doesn't get anywhere near the respect it deserves.

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VOL. 47 | NO. 1 | JANUARY 2026

Savor *Guitar World's* final interview with Ace Frehley

AS I WROTE in this space exactly one year ago, we like to get an early start on our annual end-of-year issue. Therefore – out of necessity – a lot of these stories were put together in late September and throughout October, including our annual “the biggest guitar news of the year” feature (page 28). But, to prove how alive, dynamic and inherently interesting “guitar land” is, I’ve had to update our news feature – literally on the page – almost every day as our printer deadline approaches. Whether it’s the sale of Eddie Van Halen’s “Kramer Ad” guitar, the Stray Cats’ tour cancellation, Gibson/Epiphone’s new *Back to the Future* ES-345s, Nigel Tufnel’s new Marshall amp or who knows what else, it seems there’s always something going on. Of course, the biggest – and saddest – piece of “late news” was the death of Kiss co-founder Ace Frehley, a down-to-earth and charismatic guy (not to mention a local boy) who has graced our cover several times. We happened to have an unpublished 2025 Ace Frehley interview in the can (the one where he talks about 1987’s *Frehley’s Comet*), so it made sense to include that as part of this issue’s 11-page Ace tribute. The interview conveys everything that made Ace fun to talk to and know – his honesty, his sense of humor and his wealth of detailed memories about the good-ish ol’ days. Our condolences go out to his family and friends.

SOME OTHER STUFF:

+ Your eyes do not deceive you; there is no Tune-Ups section in this issue, but it’ll be back – and screaming for vengeance! – in the February 2026 issue.
+ There’s *Guitar World* the magazine and *Guitar World* the website (also known as guitarworld.com), but there’s also *Guitar World* the YouTube channel – and it actually bares very little resemblance to what you see here. If you head there now, you can watch longtime *GW* Tech Editor Paul Riario interview Steve Stevens, Tesla’s Frank Hannon, Chris Buck and the gang from Halestorm. Enjoy!

DAMIAN FANELLI



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READER ART OF THE MONTH

If you've created a drawing, painting or sketch of your favorite guitarist and would like to see it in an upcoming issue of *Guitar World*, email GWSoundingBoard@futurenet.com with a .jpg or screenshot of the image. And (obviously) please remember to include your name!



JEFF BECK

BY DAVE WEIL



TOM PETTY

BY NOAH GOLTZ

DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH



Billy Gwalthney

AGE: 60

HOMETOWN: Philadelphia, PA

GUITARS: 2020 Gibson Les Paul Classic, '88 Charvel 3DR, '65 Gibson ES120T, Kramer Assault LP

SONGS I'VE BEEN PLAYING: Van Halen

"Everybody Wants Some," Led Zeppelin
"Tangerine," Dream Theater "A Change of Seasons"

GEAR I WANT MOST: Ernie Ball Music Man
John Petrucci Majesty, Neural DSP
Quad Cortex



Roger Rhodes

AGE: 62

HOMETOWN: Madison, WV

GUITARS: Fender Player Stratocaster, 2013 Gibson Les Paul Traditional, Martin GPCPA5K, Squier Classic Vibe Telecaster, Epiphone Greeny Les Paul, Epiphone Joe Pass

SONGS I'VE BEEN PLAYING: Peter Green "The Stumble," Gary Moore "Don't Believe a Word," Fleetwood Mac "Merry Go Round," AC/DC "Shot Down in Flames"

GEAR I WANT MOST: Dr. Z MAZ 18



Mason Vincent

AGE: 81

HOMETOWN: Southbridge, MA

GUITARS: Gibson Les Pauls, Custom and Classics; Strat custom builds; Fender (and other) Telecasters; Jackson Soloist

SONGS I'VE BEEN PLAYING: Albert King "Oh, Pretty Woman," Gary Moore "Still Got the Blues," John Coltrane "My Favorite Things" and my own compositions

GEAR I WANT MOST: Fender Tone Master Pro Multi Effects Guitar Workstation

ARE YOU A DEFENDER OF THE FAITH?

Send a photo, along with your answers to the questions above, to GWSoundingBoard@futurenet.com. And pray!

— ACE FREHLEY (1951-2025) —

A KISS GOODBYE

An era of extravagant rock music comes to a close with the death of Kiss co-founder Ace Frehley. We salute the otherworldly life of the Spaceman

BY ANDREW DALY

NEWS OF ACE Frehley's passing on October 16 wasn't just a shock to the Kiss Army, but to the rock and guitar communities. After all, this was a man who had survived car crashes, police chases, addiction, relapse and two tumultuous stints in the Hottest Band in the World, Kiss.

The general thought was that the guitarist, affectionately known as "Space Ace," would live forever... or at least longer than a mere 74 years. What's more, if he were going to be taken out, surely it wouldn't come at the hands of not one but two seemingly innocuous falls in his home studio, right? Wrong. As Frehley told *Guitar World* in 2024, he had experienced balance issues throughout his entire guitar-playing life.

"I'm mostly a guitar-into-an-amp type of player," he said. "I can't have pedals on the floor; I'd trip over them. You'd be hard-pressed to find a photo of me playing with pedals; I'd be shocked if you could find one. It's rock 'n' roll, so I don't need 'em much anyway."

It was apparent from a young age that Ace – born Paul Daniel Frehley on April 27,



1951, in the Bronx, New York – was born to rock. Like many players of his era, he was influenced by the guitar gods of the British Invasion, especially blues-based players like Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Keith Richards.

As a teen, Frehley, who had experienced a rough home life that led him to join a gang, acquired the nickname "Ace," reportedly

because he had a knack for picking up the ladies. Something else he was also pretty good at by the time he reached his teens was playing guitar. He ditched his studies for it, then dropped out of school and made it his life's work.

Soon, Frehley found that a life playing music is kinda hard to come by. As a 22-year-old would-be guitar-slinger, Frehley spent his days driving a cab around New York City. It was around this time that he came upon an ad in *The Village Voice* that read: "LEAD GUITARIST WANTED with Flash and Ability. No time-wasters please. Paul 268-3145."

The Paul in question was Paul Stanley. The band? Soon to be named Kiss. Legend has it that Frehley showed up at the fledgling act's New York City rehearsal space on East 23rd Street with a guitar and two different-colored tennis shoes on his feet, one red and one orange. Frehley has often said that the chemistry between him and the other members of Kiss – Gene Simmons, Peter Criss and Paul Stanley – was immediate. But it was Stanley, the other guitarist in the band, that he initially connected with on a musical level. ▶



**"I was always old-school,
with a Marshall turned up
to 10, playing a Les Paul.
That's my sound"**



Ace Frehley in 1976 with his 1973 Tobacco Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe

"I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if I didn't get sober 17 years ago"

"More than anything, it was chemistry," Frehley told *Guitar World* last year. "But it's hard to say; it's always that way with those things. I do know that the little things about my style fit well alongside Paul's."

After joining the group in 1972, Frehley was up and running: he designed the band's lightning-bolt logo and came up with his Spaceman makeup design, lending a hand to Stanley's Starchild image, too. But his most significant contribution was an unschooled, frenetic guitar style that took songs like "Deuce," "Strutter" and "Black Diamond" to the next level. According to Frehley, he didn't put much thought into it, telling *GW*, "I was always old-school, with a Marshall turned up to 10, playing a Les Paul. That's my sound."

By 1973, Kiss had hooked up with manager Bill Aucoin, and within a year, Casablanca Records label head Neil Bogart had agreed to take a chance on the band, inking them to a contract. Kiss fired off three albums in short order – *Kiss* and *Hotter than Hell* (both 1974) and *Dressed to Kill* (1975) – none of which sold well. Sure, the albums featured Frehley's fiery playing and a few monster cuts like "Cold Gin," "Parasite" and "Strange Ways," which he had penned – although he was afraid to sing – and the anthemic "Rock and Roll All Night," but people just weren't into Kiss as a studio band.

With Casablanca on the verge of bankruptcy and the members of Kiss facing the prospect of getting day jobs and seeing their

dreams die, a last-ditch effort came in the form of 1975's *Alive!*, a double album that showcased what Kiss did best: play live.

"It broke incredible ground for us," Stanley told *Guitar World* earlier this year. "We were building this rabid following, yet we weren't selling albums that reflected that. *Alive!* was a sonic souvenir where people could go home and say, 'That's what I saw, and that's what I heard!'"

Speaking to *GW* in his last-ever interview in 2025, Frehley echoed Stanley's sentiments. "We felt that our studio albums were good, but they didn't capture the essence of our concerts. I think *Alive!* did. A lot of people jumped on the bandwagon."

Alive! was a multi-platinum smash hit, catapulting Kiss to the top of rock's ranks. As for Frehley, it turned him into a Les Paul-wielding guitar hero overnight. You'd think this would have been good news for him, but looking back, it was the beginning of the end. By 1976, he had developed a drinking habit. Maybe it was his free-wheeling personality, maybe it was the stress of being in the spotlight, maybe the guy just liked to party. Whatever the reason, Frehley's boozing led to him being late to studio sessions for 1976's *Destroyer*. The album's producer, Bob Ezrin, wasn't having it.

"Sometimes I showed up late because I had a hangover from the night before," Frehley told *GW*. "Everybody knows I was an alcoholic. Bob was a guy who liked to get things done quickly, probably because he had a mountain of cocaine and a bottle of Rémy Martin on the mixing desk with him. But, of course, Paul and Gene never mention that."

Destroyer would ride the wave of success created by *Alive!*, though Ezrin did sub in session player Dick Wagner on "Sweet Pain" and the ballad "Beth." This upset Frehley, not only because it happened, but because he didn't know about it.

"I was told Bob did that because he felt my solos weren't as great as they should have been, so he had Dick play them," Frehley said. "But it was more about punishing me for not being on time. I see it as partially my fault but also partly Bob's fault. The thing that bothered me most was that I wasn't told he had replaced my solos; I had to find out after I listened to the record at home on my turntable. That bothered me for a long time."

That wasn't all that was bothering Frehley, as he was electrocuted during a show in Lakeland, Florida, in 1976; the experience inspired his signature track, "Shock Me," which appeared on Kiss's 1977 album, *Love Gun*. The song, noted for its slick guitar solo, also became Frehley's first-ever lead vocal.

Love Gun's producer was Eddie Kramer, who had captured the likes of Jimmy Page

and Jimi Hendrix on tape, so he knew a good guitarist when he heard one.

"Right from the beginning, I knew Ace would be a star – that's for sure," Kramer told *GW* in 2023. "Ace had intuitive talents; he could play blues and rock, and I loved that he could play all these cool blues licks but make them his own. He wasn't scared of anything."

As talented as Frehley was, Kramer had a hell of a time capturing his vocals for "Shock Me." "I'd have him on the floor with a bottle of whatever to calm him," the producer said. "And the more takes we did, the more confident he got. By the second or third take, he was up on his feet, and I said, 'Alright, Ace, keep going. It's cool.'"

Love Gun was another big hit for Kiss, but all was not well. Frehley's drinking and drug use were escalating. Making matters worse – at least for Frehley's bandmates – was that "Shock Me" had lit a fire under the guitarist, leading him to consider quitting the band even though Kiss was on top of the world in 1978. This led to the group's decision to record four individual solo records and release them on September 18 of that year. As fate would have it, on the strength of songs like "Rip It Out," "Snowblind" and the smash hit cover of Hello's "New York Groove," Frehley's self-titled solo record was the best – and most popular – of the bunch.

None of this made Frehley want to – or think he needed to – stay in Kiss. He often said he was "more creative out of Kiss" and that he was "held back" by Stanley and Simmons. There's merit to this, as Kiss's next three albums, 1979's *Dynasty*, 1980's *Unmasked* and 1981's *Music from "The Elder,"* featured more and more Frehley cuts. What's more, those songs, including "2000 Man," "Save Your Love," "Talk to Me" and "Dark Light," were often the best tracks on the album.

Frehley's new confidence collided with his off-the-rails addictions, and in 1982, before the sessions for *Creatures of the Night* began, he told his bandmates he was quitting Kiss. According to Frehley, Stanley and Simmons begged him to stay. Once again, there's merit to that claim: as Simmons told *GW* in 2022, "We had to find a workaround for the Ace [problem] – and that wasn't easy because, for all his issues, Ace was a unique player."

Given the strength of his writing and playing toward the end of his days in Kiss, you'd think Frehley's solo career would have taken off like a rocket, but it didn't. What followed was a whole lot of drinking, several near-death car crashes, failed rehab attempts and a separation from his wife, Jeanette. Through the chaos came very little music, but that changed when Frehley met veteran bassist John Regan in 1984, although he was out of sorts, let's say, at the time.



"As I walked in, Ace was lying on the floor," Regan says. "He looked up at me and said, 'Oh, hey, how's it going?' He was so unassuming, and didn't seem to think it was weird the way we were meeting [Laughs]. We hit it off straight away and got to talking. It didn't take long for us to start chatting about getting together and playing some music."

Regan recalls his chemistry with Frehley as immediate. The good news for Frehley was that his new partner had his shit together, meaning that when Megaforce Records label head Jon Zazula, after some prodding from Vice President Eddie Trunk, threw up a Hail Mary and signed Frehley to a contract a few years later, there would be someone around to keep him on the straight and narrow.

For a time, Frehley kept it together, leading to the successful solo album, 1987's *Frehley's Comet*. The record almost went gold on the strength of "Rock Soldiers," making it his most successful non-Kiss album. However, the wheels soon came off, leading to more drinking, though Frehley did manage two more solo albums – 1988's *Second Sighting* and the mighty 1989 effort, *Trouble Walkin'*.

By the Nineties, Frehley was in his 40s and drinking heavily; he'd fallen entirely off the

musical map thanks to the then-new grunge movement. Interestingly, minus the drinking, Frehley's predicament, albeit on a slightly grander scale, had also befallen his old pals in Kiss, inspiring a reunion in 1995 for an episode of MTV's *Unplugged*. Frehley, along with original drummer Peter Criss, joined the then-current Kiss lineup of Stanley, Simmons, Eric Singer and Bruce Kulick for a surprise run-through of classic songs, including "2000 Man," "Beth," "Hard Luck Woman" and "Rock and Roll All Night."

This led to Stanley and Simmons secretly shacking back up with Criss and Frehley, despite the fact that behind the scenes, the latter was still drinking heavily and using drugs. As for Kulick, he knew there was trouble in paradise.

"I knew something was up," Kulick told *GW* last year. "A reunion was always in the back of my mind. I hoped it would never happen; I always knew it would – especially after *Unplugged*."

Kiss's Reunion Tour saw Frehley gallivanting around the world once again to great success. His future should have been great, but within a few years, and after 1999's *Psycho Circus*, a reunion album gone wrong, the

Frehley plays one of many "New York Groove" Les Pauls in 1996

[above] Three of Frehley's *GW* cover appearances – [from left] September 1996, August 1993 and June 2016





Frehley in action in Las Vegas, March 6, 2016, with his signature Les Paul (inspired by his iconic Kiss-era "Budokan" guitar)

wheels came off once again. His drinking and drug use escalated once more, making the supposed Farewell Tour in 2000 and 2001 inevitable – even though the tour wasn't so much a farewell for Kiss but a farewell to Frehley and Criss as members of Kiss.

When Frehley quit Kiss for the second time in 2002, he claimed once again that his bandmates had begged him to stay. It wasn't to be. He assumed that he'd pick up his solo career where it left off, but that wasn't to be, either – at least, not at first.

Frehley didn't sober up until 2006, but once he did, starting with 2009's *Anomaly*, he rattled off a series of triumphant solo records that matched the best of what he'd done in and out of Kiss in the Seventies and Eighties. His most recent record was 2024's *10,000 Volts*, crafted with the help of his co-producer, Trixter guitarist Steve Brown, and one which he felt was his best yet.

Be that as it may, while speaking with *Guitarist* in 2024, Frehley revealed that he was simply happy he'd survived.

"I got rid of my demons," Frehley said. "I used to be a bad drunk and did a lot of drugs. I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if I didn't get sober 17 years ago. When I talk to young musicians, I always tell them, 'Don't fall into the pits that I did.'"

This, along with the fact that Frehley was said to be working on a new album in 2025, makes the news of his death all the more heartbreaking. In the years since quitting Kiss, he'd fallen out with his ex-bandmates, Stanley and Simmons. In particular, Stanley was in his crosshairs.

"A few months before the [final Kiss] concert," Frehley told *Guitarist*, "Paul goes on

Howard Stern's show and says if me and Peter got up on stage, you might as well call the band Piss. I don't know why he said it. Paul's a good guy; he's a very talented songwriter, singer and frontman. But he's hot and cold. Sometimes he'll say nice things, and sometimes he'll say things that aren't nice."

These comments, along with Kiss's refusal to meet his monetary demands, were probably why Frehley chose to forgo appearing as a guest during Kiss's End of the Road Tour, which concluded at New York's Madison Square Garden in December 2023. Note, however, that Frehley oscillated between saying

"I'm probably gonna go until the wheels come off!"

that Stanley and Simmons wouldn't pay him enough, and that they never asked him at all.

We'll never know the truth. What we do know is that by the time *GW* spoke with Frehley for the last time this past August, he was open to reconciliation.

"I'm the kind of guy that never says 'never,'" Frehley said. "I don't hate Paul or Gene. We're rock 'n' roll brothers. Peter, too. So anything can happen, just not at this point. I'm having too much fun doing my own thing. Maybe I'll get inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a solo artist!"

Maybe the latter will happen, but the former won't. Frehley's tragic passing saw to that. Still, after his death, Simmons and Stanley sent love to their fallen brother. The former said via X, "Our hearts are broken. Ace has passed on. No one can touch Ace's legacy."

I know he loved the fans. He told me many times. Sadder still, Ace didn't live long enough to be honored at the Kennedy Center Honors event in December. Ace was the eternal rock soldier. Long may his legacy live on!"

Given the state of their relationship, unsurprisingly, Stanley was a bit less touchy-feely, posting under a picture in which he and Frehley were laughing: "I remember in 1974 being in my room at the Hyatt on Sunset in L.A., and I heard someone playing deep and fiery guitar in the room next door. I thought, 'Boy, I wish *that* guy was in the band!' I looked over the balcony... [There] he was. It was Ace. This is my favorite photo of us..."

Then there was the man who stabilized Kiss's lead guitarist spot after Frehley's departure, Bruce Kulick, who tells *GW* exclusively, "I knew Ace's passing would rock the music world. I remember thinking, 'This is like Eddie Van Halen's death. He influenced so many, and he was one of a kind.' What I'm seeing online proves me right. His legacy is monumental."

And, of course, there's Tommy Thayer, Kiss's modern-day Spaceman – who, despite being Kiss's longest-tenured lead guitarist, took a hell of a lot of flak for wearing Frehley's iconic makeup. Frehley himself often jabbed at Thayer, but that didn't stop the latter from taking the high road.

"A legend who will never be forgotten," Thayer said of Frehley via social media. "He inspired generations of guitarists, myself included, to chase greatness. It's been an honor to walk in his footsteps. His legacy will live forever. Rest in peace, Ace."

With all this said, if Frehley's death feels sudden and unfair, that's because it was. If it feels like he had more to do, more shows to play, more music to make, that's because he did. It's tough to fathom a world without him. As the meme says, "You can be a doctor, a lawyer, a pilot, but you can never be Ace Frehley." What did the meme mean? That Frehley – while not the most technical player – had a vibe. He influenced a vast number of guitarists, and he knew it, jokingly telling *Guitar World* in 2024, "If I'd known I was gonna influence thousands of players, I'd have practiced harder." Maybe he should have. But then again, what would the point be? He had the thing that many players who are "better," worked harder and were "respected" wished they had: the "it" factor. As Kulick puts it, "He defined what it means to be a rock star."

Heartbreaking as Frehley's death is, we must remember that he told *GW* in his final interview: "I'm probably gonna go until the wheels come off!" And while we didn't expect it to be so soon, we can take solace in the fact that the guitar-playing Spaceman from Planet Jendell lived as he wanted, with no regrets – until the goddamned wheels came off.

CLASSIC ACE

Longtime *GW* contributor Nick Bowcott remembers the man that launched a thousand licks – and laughs

BY NICK BOWCOTT

ACOMMONLY UTTERED warning is "Never meet your heroes," but Ace Frehley is a hero I met on many occasions – and I'm thankful I did. Even though he met countless people, he always greeted me with a big smile and a loud, "Hey, I know this guy! How's it going, Nick?" He also made me laugh – a lot. He was a truly funny guy, not to mention a master storyteller.

The first few times I met Ace, I was either wearing my "Guitar World journalist" or "Marshall Amplification Artist Relations" hat. Then we became friends – a priceless gift that still blows me away. The fact that I was also fortunate enough to play rhythm guitar on "Parasite" and "Cold Gir" on stage alongside Ace at a couple of Dimebash charity concerts will always seem surreal too. Can you say, "huge bucket list item"?

In the early 2000s, I performed a Marshall demo at a big public guitar show in New York City. Ace was there doing a signing, so I opened by playing a segment from his "She" solo spot from *Alive!* I apologized to him afterwards, saying, "I hope you didn't mind me doing that, my friend. I love that part and couldn't resist playing it." He replied, "I didn't mind at all, Nick. You played it pretty well." Then, after a perfectly timed pause, he added, "But not as well as I do, kid!" before breaking into one of his instantly recognizable, trademark laughs. Classic Ace.

Another unforgettable Ace moment was his touching tribute speech to the much-missed Abbott brothers (of Pantera fame) at Vinnie Paul's funeral service. I had the honor of being the emcee at the ceremony, which was a celebration of an amazing life, and the speech Ace gave that day was unforgettable – thoughtful, emotional and funny.

Aside from a few texts, the last time our paths crossed was after he performed at the Eagles Theater in Wabash, Indiana, in 2022. His band played a proverbial blinder, and so did he. Ace was 71 at the time, but he performed with the energy and passion of

Nick Bowcott [left]
and Ace Frehley,
November 3, 2022



[inset, from left] Sirius XM's Jose Mangin, Rita Haney, Frehley and Bowcott at Vinnie Paul's memorial service in 2018

someone less than half his age. After he'd signed a pile of stuff backstage, he told me an amazing story about how he'd managed to buy the white-gold watch he had on his wrist for next to nothing because, "the pawn-shop dealer was a total moron who had no freakin' clue what he had or how valuable it was!" Once again, it was classic Ace, and my sides were aching from laughing; boy, could he spin a captivating yarn. I left the venue that night

with a spring in my step and a big-assed grin as I'd just been entertained and inspired by a living legend – on and off the stage!

My thoughts are with Ace's loved ones, family, friends and band mates. He was one of a kind, and there'll never be another quite like him. Ace, thank you for the incredible inspiration your playing has blessed me with, and thanks for all the belly laughs! Your music, memory, influence and legend will live on.

NEW YORK GROOVES

Ace Frehley's six greatest Kiss-era guitar moments

BY ANDREW DALY

ONE OF OUR favorite Ace Frehley quotes is something he told us last year: "If I'd known I was going to influence thousands of guitar players, I woulda practiced more!" He was joking, of course, but there's an element of truth to the Spaceman's words. No one ever could've accused Ace, a free-spirited (and, in his youth), hard-partying type, of being meticulous when it came to his playing. The Spaceman was more of a grip-it-and-rip-it guy.

"I'm always flattered when people tell me I influenced them," Frehley told *GW* in September 2024. "I've had so many players come up to me and say, 'You are the reason I play guitar,' and I'm always like, 'Wow...'"

To Frehley's point, everyone from John 5 to Marty Friedman to Richie Kotzen to Tom Morello to Nuno Bettencourt (should we keep going?) was encouraged to pick up the guitar because of Frehley's electrified antics.

No, the man from Planet Jendell didn't possess the skill of Eddie Van Halen, the work ethic of John 5 or the business acumen of Paul Stanley, but it didn't matter. Frehley had a vibe, look, style and tone that transcended all that other stuff. He also had a knack for writing catchy riffs, solos and songs that many kids-turned-rock stars learned in their bedrooms and still play professionally today. Here are six of our favorites.



Cold Gin Kiss (1974)

It's no secret that Frehley liked to drink in his younger (and yes, some of his older) days. Alas, one of his earliest contributions to Kiss's catalog was "Cold Gin," a hard-riffing drinking song tailor-made for biker-bar singalongs. There have been rumors that Frehley used an Ovation Breadwinner on 1974's *Kiss*, but he ended those rumors last year, when he told *Guitar World* that – that for most of the album – he used a red double-cut Epiphone Coronet like the one the Small Faces' Steve Marriott played. As for the "Cold Gin" riff, Frehley reportedly came up with it in his head on the subway on the way to a Kiss rehearsal. The rest, as they say, is Kisstory.



Strange Ways Hotter Than Hell (1974)

"Strange Ways" is generally considered one of Frehley's nastiest solos. There's a good reason: it's heavy, cutting, kinda psychedelic and very off the cuff. It's got the vibe of a madman – with a Gibson Les Paul slung over one shoulder – standing in front of a mighty Marshall and letting it feed back as he attacks the strings uninhibited – and that's precisely what happened. By this point, Frehley had his trusty '73 Tobacco Burst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe equipped with DiMarzio Super Distortion/Dual Sound pickups. With those in hand, he let rip and produced what Gene Simmons has often referred to as Frehley's "dinosaur bends," followed by a hard-charging, frenetic guitar solo.



Parasite Hotter Than Hell

From the album of the same name – and recorded with the aforementioned hot-rodded Les Paul Deluxe – comes this majestic track. It was penned by Frehley, though at the time he wasn't comfortable singing, so he let his guitar do the talking. "Parasite" was a Kiss-concert staple through 1976 and returned to the setlist in the Nineties and early 2000s when Frehley returned to the fold. After leaving Kiss again in 2002, "Parasite" became a Frehley solo staple, with Ace having the courage to sing this time. Guitar-wise, "Parasite" is one of Kiss's heaviest songs, with a curb-stomping proto-metal riff and an off-the-rails solo that finds Frehley demonstrating his version of shredding, which is basically him grinding across all six strings and flying along the neck as quickly as his fingers would allow.



Deuce Alive! (1975)

If there's one solo that epitomizes early Kiss – and what Ace was about as a player – it's the outro solo from "Deuce." The song appeared on Kiss's 1974 debut, but that version has this searing solo faded out. The one we're blabbing about here is the live version from *Alive!*, which finds Frehley rattling the walls of a forlorn Rust Belt arena with his '73 Les Paul Deluxe. If you've seen Frehley live with or without Kiss, you've seen him perform this solo. There was simply nothing like watching him slip into another world while he sloppily (a style choice!) lacerated your eardrums with a 100-watt driven Les Paul dustup.



Shock Me Love Gun (1977)

No one could have accused Frehley of being hyper-focused on technique, but that didn't stop him from writing solos that subscribed to the "song within a song" theory. Aside from being Frehley's first-ever lead vocal, "Shock Me" features a typically repetitive yet catchy riff, leading into a solo that sounds as if it crawled out of the Spaceman's amp and hit you upside the head. As usual, the solo is relatively straightforward and, as he told *Guitar World* in 2024, resulted from Frehley "emptying his head." The word on the street is that Frehley handled the rhythm parts with a Fender Strat but grabbed his Les Paul for the solo, all while plugged into a 100-watt dimed Marshall.



Rocket Ride Alive II (1977)

Remember how we said Frehley wasn't so technical? For this one, we can throw that out. "Rocket Ride," which comes off a random suite of studio cuts on Side Four (an old term from the age of vinyl) of *Alive II*. The riff is notable as it features a flange effect, something Frehley wasn't known for. And then there's the mid-song solo, which isn't anything special technique-wise, but is interesting as Frehley deployed a wah, creating a sound and vibe that was unique to him. Lastly, there's the end solo, which finds an unaccompanied Frehley dialing into his blues roots and delivering an unusually hyper-focused, yet clearly off-the-cuff guitar solo with a tone that's rich and enticing.

ACE'S ROCK SOLDIERS

The late Ace Frehley's five most iconic Kiss-era guitars

BY ANDREW DALY

1973 Tobacco Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe

It's long been rumored that Frehley auditioned for Kiss with a late-Sixties Gibson Firebird in nasty condition. And once he'd entered the fold, he reportedly recorded the band's debut record with an Ovation Breadwinner. Whatever. By February 1974, the Spaceman had found a gorgeous Tobacco Sunburst '73 Les Paul Deluxe (pictured on page 18) at Manny's Music in NYC. Frehley's first single-cut had mini humbuckers when he bought it, but Frehley quickly swapped them for a combination of full-sized DiMarzio Super Distortion/Dual Sound pickups. The '73 LP had Kluson double-bar tuners, a pancake body composed of four-ply maple and mahogany and a three-piece maple neck with a rosewood fingerboard. At some point, Frehley contoured the heel with a screwdriver, making it extra comfy until he all but retired the guitar in 1976.

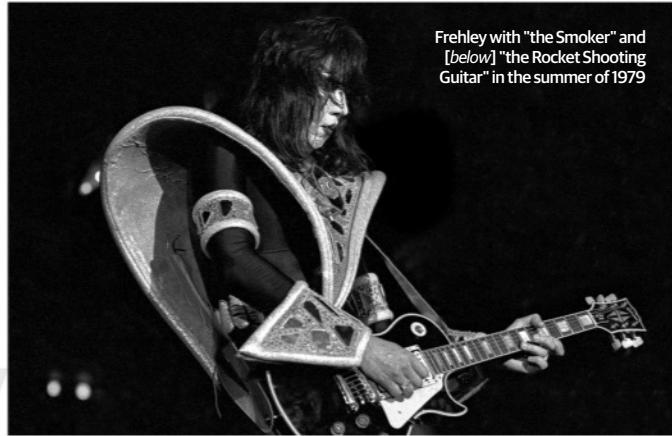
1976 Cherry Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Custom, AKA "The Budokan Guitar"

While it's been rumored that Frehley's '73 Deluxe had been stolen, the truth is he painted it black, didn't like it and then turned it into a double-cut. The result? It was time for a new guitar. Ace went back to Manny's and nabbed a '76 Les Paul Custom with a distinctive two-pickup look; Frehley added a "dead" middle pickup because he "liked the look of it." Again, the stock humbuckers were discarded, with Frehley opting for DiMarzio Super Distortions as he felt they gave him a "hotter sound." Now brandishing the guitar that'd become synonymous with the Kiss sound/aesthetic, Frehley hit the road for some of the largest shows of the band's career, sporting it in Japan (where it was dubbed his "Budokan Guitar"), Europe and the U.S. Frehley would use guitars modeled after his '76 Les Paul well into Kiss's Reunion era and beyond.

1977 Black Les Paul Custom, AKA "The Smoker"

Frehley first developed the idea for what became known as "The Smoker" in 1976 and reportedly used a Black '76 Les Paul Custom. Ever the mad scientist, Frehley is said to have modified the guitar himself. While the guitar initially acted as intended, the homemade electronics eventually proved faulty. The Spaceman gave it a second go in '77 using another Black Les Paul Custom. This time, the guitar and its hot-wired innards held up, seeing that the '77 version stuck around through the Seventies and into the early Eighties.

So yeah, it held up, but that didn't mean "The Smoker" was safe. To keep himself from being burned by the gobs of smoke spewing from the guitar's middle dummy pickup during the "Shock Me" solo, Frehley installed a cardboard shield. It's worth noting that his smoking guitar returned during the Reunion era, along with another insane guitar — a '57 Gibson Black Beauty that shot rockets, which we'll get to later.



Frehley with "the Smoker" and [below] "the Rocket Shooting Guitar" in the summer of 1979

Late-Fifties Les Paul Special (TV Yellow), AKA "The New York Groove Guitar"

As far as we can tell, the exact year of Ace Frehley's infamous "New York Groove" light-up guitar is unknown. But we know Frehley took what would now be considered a sacred guitar — a late-Fifties TV Yellow Les Paul Special — and had the face routed to hold upwards of 1,000 incandescent lights. This was before the advent of LEDs, so Frehley went with bulbs powered by a Ni-Clad battery pack, leading to a mostly reliable unit. To be sure, the guitar was the brainchild of Frehley, but instead of doing it himself, this time he solicited the services of Milton Bradley toy designer John Elder Robinson. The guitar first surfaced in 1979 while on the *Dynasty* tour and was exclusively used by Frehley when playing "New York Groove" from his '78 solo record. While generally reliable and certainly cool looking, the guitar wasn't always user-friendly, and the old-school lights often became red hot, leading to burns. In recent years, Frehley played an updated version of the guitar; it was decked out with battery-powered LEDs.

1957 Les Paul Black Beauty, AKA "The Rocket-Shooting Guitar"

It's a bit unsettling to think that a 1957 Black Beauty was used in this way, but, hey, it's legendary all the same. In Ace Frehley's early rocket-shooting days, he'd shoot bottle rockets from his headstock while tufts of smoke spewed from "The Smoker." Eventually, that wasn't enough, leading him to push the proverbial envelope. The most famous of his rocket-shooting Gibson Les Pauls would be the '57 Black Beauty, which can be seen in Reunion-era videos on YouTube; examples include Tiger Stadium in 1996 and Madison Square Garden in 1997.

"The Rocket-Shooting Guitar" featured classic Grover kidney-bean tuners and Ace's typical dummy middle pickup surrounded by DiMarzio Super Distortions. But this time, Frehley had Steve Carr



LOST CLASSICS

FREHLEY'S COMET

In his final interview for *Guitar World* magazine (conducted in early 2025 and not published until now), Ace Frehley looked back on the 1987 album that brought him back into the limelight

BY ANDREW DALY



Frehley in New York City with a Washburn Wonderbar-equipped Gibson Les Paul, January 16, 1987

▶ **AFTER QUITTING KISS** in 1982 due to his heavy drinking, drug use and stifled creativity, Ace Frehley was seen as a liability in the music industry. He thought leaving Kiss would be fruitful, but things hadn't gone to plan. Despite his influential guitar style, swagger, showmanship and songwriting ability, no record company would touch him.

By 1984, Frehley had begun to sober up. He connected with bassist John Regan, guitarist Richie Scarlet and drummer Anton Fig (who had played drums on Frehley's '78 solo record and Kiss's *Dynasty* and *Unmasked*) and formed what would become Frehley's Comet.

Frehley also had tunes. Regan and Scarlet helped him refine songs like "Breakout," which dated back to Frehley's Kiss days and had been co-written by Kiss drummer Eric Carr. But that wasn't all, as Frehley was also working with songwriter Chip Taylor on another soon-to-be classic, "Rock Soldiers," based on Frehley's newly adopted "say no to drugs and alcohol" lifestyle – and a certain car chase through Connecticut involving a DeLorean. But Frehley needed a record deal, and no one came calling – except Johnny Zazula's Megaforce Records. Even so, Megaforce only wanted Ace because a young Eddie Trunk, who was Megaforce's vice president at the time, vouched for him, resulting in a six-album deal and the initial sessions for 1987's *Frehley's Comet*.

With Eddie Kramer in the control room and a reshuffled band consisting of Regan (bass), Fig (drums) and Tod Howarth (guitars), who replaced Scarlet after his drug-related firing, Ace hit Right Track Recording Studios in New York City and reeled off one of the finest studio albums of his career.

On the strength of songs like "Rock Soldiers," "Breakout" and "Calling to You," *Frehley's Comet* proved that Ace was a viable commercial entity amid the Eighties hard rock and glam-metal scene. Now his influence wasn't only in the past but on full display across stages and on MTV, the latter of which was new to Ace, too.

Frehley's Comet nearly went gold upon its release – and many, including Trunk, have called for a re-evaluation, meaning it's widely believed that if it didn't go gold in the Eighties, it sure as hell has gone gold by now. But no matter, as "Rock Soldiers" echoed, Ace was back –

and just in time, as his album was in direct competition with Kiss's 1987 album, *Crazy Nights*.

Frehley's record didn't outperform Kiss's, but it did leave Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley wanting what they once had while knowing full well they wouldn't get it... yet. As for Frehley, he was just happy to be back in action.

"That album was the first after I left Kiss," he said. "It took me a while to get my act together, because I was getting off drugs. But in the end, it was a good record. It might have taken me several years after I left Kiss to put that record together, but I was — and I am — happy with the way it turned out."

Why did you choose John Regan and Richie Scarlet for the initial version of Frehley's Comet, and why did you replace Richie with Tod Howarth when it came time to record?

I met John at Northwick Studios. I was impressed with his bass playing, and I asked him to be in the band, which really worked out. And with Richie Scarlet being in the band, I was in the process of getting sober, and Richie wasn't sober. I talked to John about it, and he said, "Let's get somebody that doesn't get loaded." So I fired Richie and hired Tod. Richie was a showman and a little wilder than Tod, who was a little more reserved. But Tod is a talented guy.

Eddie Trunk has a big hand in Frehley's Comet being signed to Megaforce Records. Did you have trouble getting a deal before them?

Not really. Once Johnny Zazula, who passed away a few years ago, heard the demos of our stuff, and Eddie said he knew me well, I got signed. Eddie was vice president of Megaforce, so they gave me a shot, and the record was a success.

You co-wrote "Breakout" with Eric Carr while Kiss was recording *Music from "The Elder,"* but you recorded it for Frehley's Comet. What's the story there?

I actually went to Eric's apartment, and he was fooling around with that riff, and I just took it to the next level. I kind of rewrote the song and added some guitar parts. I think I wrote most of the lyrics, though Eric might have written half of them. I don't remember the exact breakdown with the lyrics, but I know Eric came up with the riff, and I worked on it from there, and we finally recorded it for *Frehley's Comet*.

How about "Rock Soldiers," which has become a signature song for you?

[Singer/songwriter] Chip Taylor came to my house, and we wrote that together. "Rock Soldiers" was originally called "Just Say No." I was going to AA, and I wanted to do a song about sobriety, and Chip said, "Why don't we do a song called 'Just Say No?'" I think that was a slogan people used at the time to say no to drugs. So we started the song with that, and then, when we were recording it, Chip walked into the room and goes, "I've got a brainstorm. Let's try singing 'Rock soldiers come, rock soldiers go.'" So we switched it from "Just Say No" to "Rock Soldiers Go," and that's how that song was born. Chip was an interesting guy. When I first started work-



"I didn't really think about it. I did my best guitar work there without thinking. I just emptied my head!"

ing with him, I had no idea he also wrote "Wild Thing," which was recorded by the Troggs.

Eddie Kramer, who produced your 1978 solo record, produced Frehley's Comet. What was it like working with him again?

I hadn't changed my guitar sound. It was always the same. Eddie helped tweak my guitar tone. He showed me a lot of micing techniques I wasn't familiar with, like blending two different mics together. Eddie liked to use a Shure SM57 and a ribbon mic and blend the two together. Those mics have different qualities; every microphone has its own sound. But the SM57 is universally used on guitar amps, and they're inexpensive too. By the same token, every speaker sounds different. Depending on the angle at which you place the mic, that can be very important. People don't realize that. People just think, "If the mic is in front of the speaker, it always sounds the same." But depending upon the angle of the mic, you get a little bit of a different tone. So if you experiment with that stuff, which Eddie did, you get different tones. He taught me how to put a mic far away and blend it with a mic that's close to the speaker so that you get ambiance. I did that a lot.

One of the most singular solos on Frehley's Comet is on Tod's song, "Calling to You." Do you remember how you approached that?

I didn't really think about it. I did my best guitar work there without thinking. I just emptied my head! As long

Frehley's Comet in San Francisco, April 23, 1987; [from left] Frehley, Tod Howarth, John Regan and Billy Ward



Remembering



as I knew what key I was playing in, I'd do three or four takes, sometimes even half a dozen, and we just picked the best one. A lot of times, we even used Fender guitars. I'd blend the Fender and Les Paul on a rhythm, and then I'd double the solo with a Tele or Strat, so I probably did that for a thicker sound.

The promotional pictures of you from that era show you endorsing Laney amps. Do you use Laney's in the studio, or did you stick with Marshalls?

I may have used a Laney, but I know I also recorded with

Frehley's Comet in action at the Chance in Poughkeepsie, New York, June 21, 1987; note the Laney cabinets in the background

Marshalls at that time. I also recorded with a Fender tweed. Sometimes I'd do a track with the Marshall, and then I'd do a track with a smaller amp. But there was a Laney around, and I know I tried the Laney, but Marshalls are just more consistent with their sound.

You were also pictured holding a Les Paul with what looked like a Floyd Rose on it. Did you use that on Frehley's Comet?

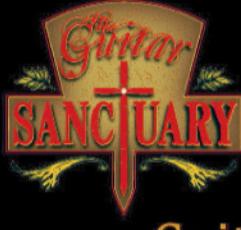
It actually wasn't a Floyd Rose; it was a torsion whammy bar, and it was a big hunk of metal. [Laughs] I remember using it when I did "Rock Soldiers." But when I used the whammy bar, it became too easy to depend on it to get tremolo. With the bar, you do it with your right hand, and my tremolo with my left hand suffered. So I just ripped that thing off the guitar. I focused on developing many different styles of tremolo with my left hand. I could do fast, slow, up and down. I could even tremolo with my pinky! [Laughs] I didn't even realize I was doing it at first, but I started barring with my pinky, since I have a long pinky.

Frehley's Comet was your first album after quitting Kiss and, at the time, your first solo album in almost 10 years. What did its success mean to you?

I always enjoyed working with Eddie, so that was great. He always thought outside the box. He was willing to try different techniques, amps and configurations of mics and amps. I found a different harmonic range and blended some things together – and that was great. 

EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES




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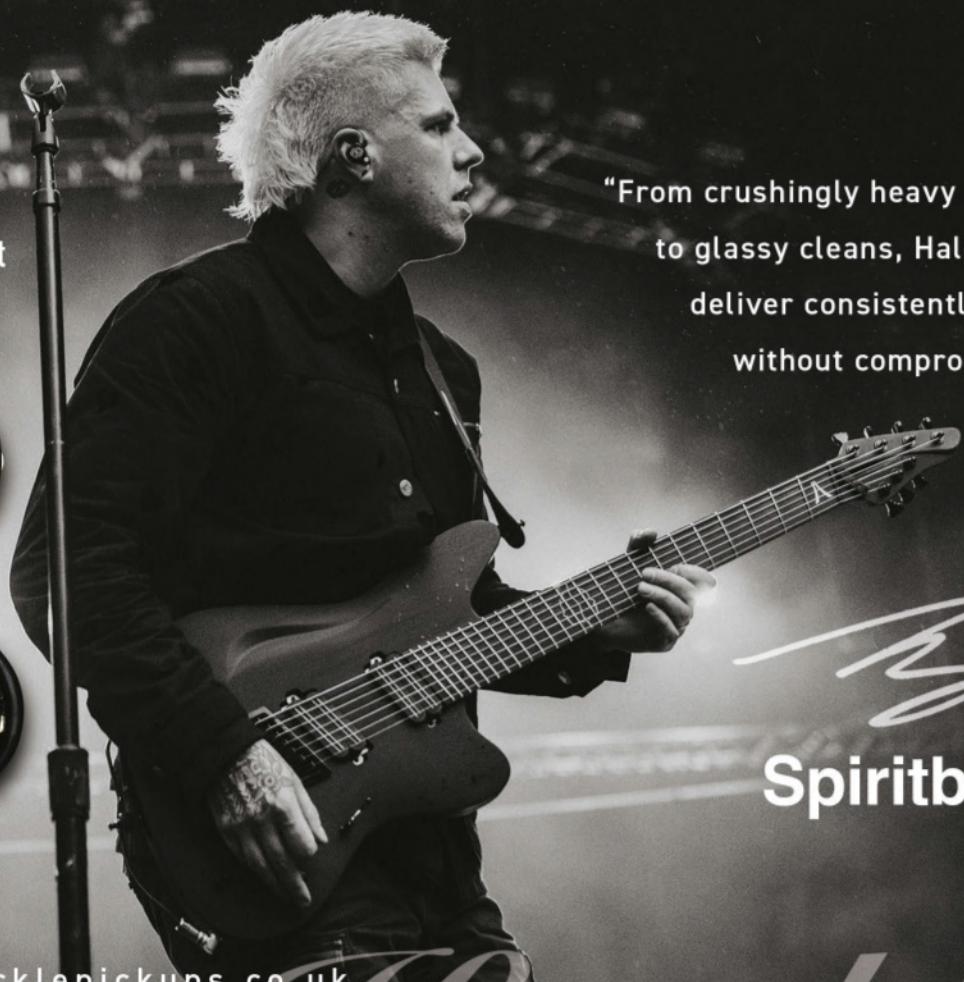
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NEWS OF THE (GUITAR) WORLD

Lean back and get ready to relive the biggest, baddest and downright craziest guitar-centric headlines of 2025

BY AMIT SHARMA

WELL, THAT WAS an interesting 365 days, wasn't it?

Crazy ol' 2025 packed its fair share of ups, downs, shocks and surprises. Some bands seemed to reappear out of nowhere, such as U.K. rock 'n' roll originals Spinal Tap, who themed their new rockumentary around their final gig. We all knew Oasis was returning, of course, and the general feedback from those lucky enough to have attended any of the reunion shows has been overwhelmingly positive, with fans noting how well the Gallagher boys looked and sounded on stage together for the first time in 16 years.

Meanwhile, thrash heroes Megadeth announced that their next album (and impending world tour) would be their swansong. If they're true to their word, that means guitarist Teemu Mäntysaari will be simultaneously recording his first and last album alongside Dave Mustaine & Co.

And speaking of farewells, we still mourn the loss of guitar giants like Brent Hinds, John Sykes, Mick Ralphs and more (and let's not forget non-guitarist Ozzy Osbourne) – all of whom left an enduring mark on our universe, for which we'll be eternally grateful. One of the saddest goodbyes came in mid-October when it was announced that original Kiss guitarist Ace Frehley – also known to millions of fans as the Spaceman or Space Ace – had left us at age 74, way too early as is often the case.

Without further ado, here's a look at the biggest guitar-centric headlines of 2025.

Black Sabbath's Final Farewell

► **MANY MIGHT LOOK** back on Back to the Beginning's stacked bill as the greatest heavy metal concert of all time – and with good reason, given how industry heavyweights as revered as Metallica, Guns N' Roses and Tool were happy to sign up as support acts in a show that was jam-packed with once-in-a-lifetime thrills, all in honor of Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne. Tom Morello served as musical director for the July 5 concert at Villa Park in Birmingham, England, roping in bands like Slayer, Alice In Chains and Halestorm while also teaming up musicians into various supergroups, with members of the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, the Smashing Pumpkins and Ghost appearing on stage together for the first and quite possibly last time. As well as performing originals, every band was tasked with performing a cover from Ozzy's illustrious career – with some of the standouts being Tool's hair-raising version of Sabbath's "Hand of Doom," Alice In Chains tackling "Fairies



Metallica's James Hetfield [left] and Robert Trujillo in action at Back to the Moon. Beginning on July 5

Wear Boots," Metallica's take on "Hole in the Sky" and Halestorm's bold interpretation of "Perry Mason."

Jake E. Lee, who appeared on 1983's *Bark at the Moon* and 1986's *The Ultimate Sin*, made his live return after a random shooting in October 2024. But the axman who stole the majority of the headlines was Extreme man Nuno Bettencourt, who ended up performing more tracks than any other musician that day, bringing his inimitable sense of finesse and six-string sparkle to classic songs like "Believer," "Bark at the Moon" and "Whole Lotta Love." For more about all this rampant Nuno-ism, head immediately to page 66.

Zakk Wylde was also in fine form, performing four songs with Pantera – including covers of "Planet Caravan" and "Electric Funeral" – before joining Ozzy for his solo set ahead of Sabbath closing the night, keeping a close eye on the man who gave him his big break. It was an emotional sendoff for those in attendance and the millions watching the live stream.

A mere 17 days later, the event would take on an even greater meaning to Sabbath fans

around the world when Ozzy – in one of the true shockers of the year – left us.

RIP Ozzy

THE DOUBLE-O WAS a lot more than just a frontman. In Black Sabbath, he was responsible for pioneering a sound that'd go on to change the world and remain relevant to the present day, close to six decades later. And then there was how he reinvented himself as a solo artist, moving with the times in search of harder-hitting sounds that were also somehow able to cross over into the mainstream. But to most of you reading this, the Prince of Darkness was a talent scout of the highest order – plucking names like Randy Rhoads, Jake E. Lee, Zakk Wylde and Gus G out of the underground and putting them where they belonged, stage left at the world's biggest arenas and stadiums. As a collaborator, he was equally astute, having teamed up with an all-star cast that included Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Josh Homme and Mike McCready on 2022's final solo effort, *Patient Number 9*, while other collaborations over the

years saw him working with everyone from Slash to Joe Satriani and Steve Vai.

"I want someone that's hungry," the singer told *GW* in a June 1990 cover story alongside Wylde. "I want someone who wants to go out and kick Eddie Van Halen's ass. I look for that hunger; that ability to succeed."

RIP Brent Hinds

IN A SURPRISE announcement on March 7, Mastodon revealed they were amicably parting with founding lead guitarist/singer Brent Hinds. In an interview with *Guitar World*, the band's remaining guitarist Bill Kelliher revealed how "like a marriage, sometimes people grow apart, and they get interested in other things," while also expressing his wish for "nothing but the best for Brent in chasing his dreams." In the months that followed, however, Hinds took to social media to vent his frustrations with how his tenure came to an end, saying, "they kicked me out of the band" and how he wouldn't "miss being in a shit band with horrible humans." The group called on



Brent Hinds performs with Mastodon last year in Chicago; [below] Noel Gallagher on stage in Wales in July

respected YouTube Ben Eller for their live performance at Tool's Live in the Sand festival in the Dominican Republic before revealing that Canadian virtuoso Nick Johnston would be joining as lead guitarist for all the dates to follow, including Back to the Beginning. The band started working on their followup to 2021's *Hushed and Grim* over the summer, with Kelliher confirming that Johnston had been involved in the writing process.

On August 20, Hinds was killed in a traffic collision after being hit by another vehicle while riding his motorcycle in Atlanta. "We are heartbroken, shocked and still trying to process the loss of this creative force with whom we've shared so many triumphs, milestones and the creation of music that has touched the hearts of so many," the band said. At the end of their first show following his former colleague's death, Mastodon drummer Brann Dailor addressed the audience to pay tribute, admitting, "We had the ups and downs of a 25-year relationship" that was "not always perfect" and "not always amazing," but they were still "brothers to the end."

No One Is Looking Back in Anger

HISTORY WAS MADE in July in Cardiff, Wales, when Oasis made their long-awaited return to the stage, with battling brothers Liam and Noel Gallagher having finally managed to put their differences aside. What they gave the audience that night was worth the wait; its hit-laden setlist included



mega-singles "Supersonic," "Don't Look Back in Anger" and "Champagne Supernova" as well as the cult classics "Whatever," "Acquiesce" and "The Masterplan." The reviews that flooded people's timelines the following morning were unanimous – this was one of the biggest events in the history of guitar music, right up there with the one-off return of Led Zeppelin in 2007 and Guns N' Roses kick-starting their ongoing reunion in 2016. And while the Britrock legends had always been a twin-guitar band in the past, this year saw Noel joined by original axeman Paul "Bonehead" Arthurs and his replacement, Gem Archer, who took over when Arthurs left in 1999. However, in early October, Arthurs announced he was pulling out of a portion of the tour after being diagnosed with prostate cancer.

The new Les Paul seen in Gallagher's hands for the first two tracks on the setlist – "Hello" and "Acquiesce" – also got some attention from the keen-eyed guitarists at Cardiff's Principality Stadium, thanks to its Murphy Labaged body and P90s, complete with

Custom-style binding but a non-bound headstock. Gibson announced the Custom Shop Noel Gallagher Les Paul Standard the following month, with just 25 models made and hand-signed by the Oasis hero that sold out instantly. "Gibson is honored to support Noel Gallagher in what has become one of the biggest music reunion tours in recent history," said Lee Bartram, head of commercial and

marketing EMEA at Gibson. In late October, Gibson announced its new, limited-edition Noel Gallagher Les Paul Standard. "This guitar is simply too iconic and cool not to be released more widely," Bartram said in a statement.

'Deth, Where Is Thy Sting?

IN AUGUST, JUST days after sharing a teaser post that read "the end is near," thrash metal pioneers Megadeth announced their retirement – with their upcoming 17th full-length set to be the final chapter in a genre-defining career and their next world tour expected to be their final farewell. The album will also be notable for being the first and last Megadeth disc to feature Finnish guitarist Teemu Mäntysaari, who replaced Kiko Loureiro in 2023. "There are so many musicians that have come to the end of their career, whether accidental or intentional," said founding frontman Dave Mustaine in the band's official statement. "Most of them don't get to go out on their own terms on top, and that's where I'm at in my life right now." While thanking fans for their support over the years, he rightly noted how his band had "started a musical style; we started a revolution, we changed the guitar world and how it's played, and we changed the world."

Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop

CHRISTIE'S OF LONDON oversaw a Jeff Beck mega auction in January, with all pieces sold for \$10.7 million, more than eight times the pre-sale estimates. The sale included his prized "Oxblood" 1954 Gibson Les Paul, immortalized on the cover of *Blow by Blow*, which went for double the amount expected at just over \$1.3 million. It broke the world auction record for the most expensive Gibson Les Paul ever sold – a title previously



BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY IMAGES, SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE

Jeff Beck's "Oxblood" Gibson Les Paul, photographed at Christie's before it hit the auction block in January



held by Duane Allman's 1957 Standard goldtop, which sold for \$1.25 million in 2019. Also up for grabs was Beck's 1959 "Yardburst" Les Paul Standard, which sold for just under half a million dollars, the pink 1983 Jackson Soloist Beck used on Tina Turner's *Private Dancer* album, the pedalboard used on his final tour in 2022, the Tele-Gib hybrid from his early solo years and the guitarist's early-Nineties "Anoushka" Custom Shop Strat.

RIP Ace Frehley

ON OCTOBER 16, it was announced that original Kiss guitarist Paul Daniel "Ace" Frehley had passed away due to complications following a serious fall at his home studio. In a joint statement, Kiss legends Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons paid tribute to "an essential and irreplaceable rock soldier during some of the most formative foundational chapters of the band and its history." Other testimonials for the man's brilliance came through thick and fast, with Mike McCready admitting how he "studied Ace's solos endlessly over the years," using them as a template for his own, while also

citing Frehley's 2008 guest appearance with Pearl Jam for a performance of "Black Diamond" at Madison Square Garden as "a dream come true." Tom Morello penned some words singling out Frehley for "his timeless riffs and solos, the billowing smoke coming from his Les Paul, the rockets shooting from his headstock, his cool spacey onstage wobble and his unforgettable crazy laugh." But some might say Steve Vai said it best when he hailed Frehley as "the embodiment of rock 'n' roll attitude – unapologetic, loud and irresistibly catchy," highlighting how "his riffs had swagger, his tone had bite and his presence lit up stages like a supernova" and poignantly ending his mark of respect with, "The Spaceman has left the stage, but his orbit will shine forever."

Nigel Makes Plans

WHO COULD FORGET exactly where they were the moment they heard Spinal Tap was returning? Most of us, probably. But return they did – and in grand style – starring in *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues*. The film – which came out more



than 40 years after 1984's *This Is Spinal Tap*, the staggering work of heartbreakingly genius that introduced us to Nigel Tufnel, David St. Hubbins, Derek Smalls, a casually forgotten keyboard player and an endless stream of usually dead drummers – featured cameos by Paul McCartney, Lars Ulrich and Garth Brooks. Hey, there was even a new Tap album. "In the old days, we had what you would call a lawsuit against one of our labels," Tufnel told *GW*. "They said at the time – this is 30 years ago – they said, 'We will pay you not to record.' But now, you see, we've made a new record. We're in a different place." And then there's this: Near press time, we learned Marshall was ready to announce its new Spinal Tap JVM410H Limited Edition head, aka "the loudest amp ever made." How loud is this sucker? Every knob goes to 11, except the master volume, which goes to infinity.

The Strife of Brian

IN FEBRUARY, STRAY

Cats legend Brian Setzer announced he was suffering from an autoimmune disease that was affecting his hands. "I cannot play guitar," he revealed via Instagram. "It feels like I am wearing a pair of gloves when I try to play. I have seen some progress in that I can hold a pen and tie my shoes. I know this sounds ridiculous, but I was at a point where I couldn't even do that... I will beat this, it will just take some time." A month later, he revealed he was getting better – which meant he was able to get back on stage. But in late October, the band was forced to cancel their entire U.S. fall tour "due to serious illness." "I'm gutted," added Setzer, understandably.

The Strange Tale of the Keithburst

IN JULY, IT was announced that New York City's amazing Metropolitan Museum of Art had received around 500 guitars from the golden age of American guitar-making — a "landmark gift" to be displayed in 2027. One of its more notable inclusions was the 1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard played by Keith Richards during a Rolling Stones appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964 and used by fellow Stone Mick Taylor during their performance at the Altamont Free Concert in 1969. Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton had also borrowed and used the guitar at various points. Since the announcement from the Met, Taylor has claimed the guitar had been sold to him by Richards in 1967 and was then stolen while the group were recording 1972's *Exile on Main St.* on the French Riviera. *The New York Times* revealed it had received a message from Taylor's business manager, Marlies Damming, requesting for "the Metropolitan Museum to make the guitar available so that we can inspect it and confirm its provenance one way or the other." The Met responded by sharing a copy of the guitar's recorded provenance

with *Guitar World*. "This guitar has a long and well-documented history of ownership," we were told.

A Mirador Opens

GIVEN THAT GRETA Van Fleet and Ida Mae are two of the most important names in today's vintage-inspired rock 'n' roll scene, it came as no surprise that the first album from Mirador — the new project from Greta's Jake Kiszka and Ida's Chris Turpin — was an absolute masterclass in retro musicality, nodding to some of the sounds for which the pair are famous while also covering new creative ground. The musicians met while touring together in 2018, and their backstage jams ended up paving the way to an official partnership, leading to Mirador opening for GVF in 2024 with Kiszka on double duty. After giving us a first taste with mid-summer single "Feels Like Gold" (and a visit to GW HQ in May), their self-titled debut arrived in September, living up to the sum of its parts and then some. "I was very attracted to how they had this blues element that they mixed with worldly music and this sort of ancient folk approach," Kiszka said in our July 2025 cover story.

Mirador's Chris Turpin [left] and Jake Kiszka



Norman's Rare Netflix Spotlight

TOPPING THE LIST of shops where you're most likely to find tonehounds like Joe Bonamassa and Slash picking up ultra-high-end vintage instruments, Tarzana, California's Norman's Rare Guitars is more than just a store — it's an institution. And even those of us who aren't particularly enamored by old instruments will have been pleased to

FUTURE

see a household name like Netflix streaming a dandy little film called *Norman's Rare Guitars Documentary*, thus championing the story of a man who decided to start dealing guitars in the Seventies, back when they weren't particularly sought after or collectible. "People think I just made up the prices," Norman Harris told *GW* in April. "But it was always based on my knowledge and what I and other stores had to pay for guitars. Each one sounds different, plays differently and feels different."

Pedals (and Amps) to the Metal

WHILE MANY OF us would agree that the big news from Marshall this year was the arrival of the long-awaited modified series, with the company releasing their own official mods of the 1959 plexi and JCM800, 2025 was also notable for the U.K. amp giants putting out pedal versions of their most famous amps. As well as the two aforementioned cult classics, they also included models like the JVM, DSL and JCM900 in their new amp-in-a-box designs, sitting together as a "greatest hits" of their storied history. "These pedals bring the sounds of some of the great Marshall amps of history onto the pedalboard," said the brand's director of amplifier R&D, Jon Magill.

A New Standard

OVER THE LAST decade, it seems more and more of the best guitars under \$1,000 have had "Made in Indonesia" written on the back of their headstocks, so the news of Fender launching a new Indonesian-manufactured Standard Series shouldn't be a surprise, with models starting at \$599. Sitting in between the ultra-affordable Squier range and the Fender Player II line, the new series now stands as the most affordable electrics to bear the Fender logo. "We didn't want to take a Squier and put 'Fender' on it," Fender EVP of Product Justin Norvell told us in February. "So we spent considerable time in the factories and in design, figuring out what that would be – and what the specs would end up shaking out as – to make it make sense and have a reason to exist but still be compelling."

We'll Take the Kramer!

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER big-ticket guitar auction. On October 24, Eddie Van Halen's famed "Kramer Ad" electric guitar became one of the most expensive



six-strings to be sold at auction. Owing to its significance, the guitar was given a fairly sizable estimate window, but it eventually exceeded expectations and went for \$2,734,000. This makes it the sixth most expensive guitar ever sold publicly. Back in August, Sotheby's announced it would be selling one of the highest-profile Van Halen guitars to ever hit the auction circuit. The guitar, which was built in the early Eighties, was one of the very first Kramer guitars that Van Halen built and used, and was famously featured in Eddie's "It's very simply the best guitar you can buy today" full-page Kramer ad that you might've spotted in your favorite guitar magazine many decades ago. As *Guitar World* Associate Editor Chris Gill puts it, "It's an iconic instrument as a symbol of Ed's blossoming endorsement with Kramer, which propelled the company to incredible success, enabling them to briefly become the best-selling electric guitar manufacturer during the mid-Eighties with sales exceeding even those of Fender."

Country Fried Lamb

LAMB OF GOD guitarist Mark Morton released his first solo album back in 2019, a project that saw him recruiting the likes of Mark Lanegan, Chuck Billy and Alissa White-Gluz to sing on ideas that lived more in the hard rock realm than the groove metal he and his main band are known for. This year saw the release of Morton's second solo album, *Without the Pain*, notable as more of a country-fueled affair, roping in guests Grace Bowers, Jared James Nichols, Jason Isbell, Travis Denning and Cody Jinks. In 2024 Morton shared a photo of what looked like a new quilt-top signature model through Gibson and though he didn't quite confirm any firm release date, he did tease that such an idea would be a "cool" thing for the world to see.

On Dreams We Will Depend

BACK IN APRIL, former Van Halen singer Sammy Hagar released a song – "Encore, Thank You, Goodnight" – that he says he wrote with the late Eddie Van Halen in a dream. "This was 100 percent a communication from the beyond," Hagar told *Rolling Stone*. "There is no question about it." He spoke of how the much-missed guitar hero showed him various harmonics, licks and ideas in the dream – parts that ended up being performed by Joe Satriani in the final recording. "I thought, 'I'll never write a song with Eddie again. This is the closest I can come to it,'" Hagar said.

Learning to McFly

THE MOMENT WHERE Marty McFly, portrayed by Michael J. Fox, picks up a Cherry Red Gibson ES-345 to perform "Johnny B. Goode" in 1985's *Back to the Future* is a definitive guitar moment in movie history. The instrument was rented out by vintage-guitar dealer Norman Harris, but it ended up disappearing into obscurity. With the film having celebrated its 40th anniversary this year, Gibson launched an international hunt in the hope of finding what they called "cinema's most influential guitar." An update on the search came in September, when Gibson Director of Brand Experience Mark Agnesi revealed the company had found the instrument used in 1989's *Back to the Future Part II*, though the iconic guitar from the original film still remained at large. A major plot twist arrived in late October, when Gibson unveiled its new Gibson Custom (not to mention Murphy Lab-aged) and Epiphone versions of the Cherry Red ES-345 in question. Whoa, this is heavy!

Fetch That Gretsch

ON THE SUBJECT of missing guitars coming home, Neil Young revealed he'd been finally reunited with the Gretsch 6120 he played in the Squires after some six decades apart. During a show at the Blossom Music Center in Ohio, he explained how the orange-finished hollowbody had found its way back into his hands. "Randy Bachman called me up and said, 'I found my guitar. I can tell you how I did it. I got a picture of it taken back in the day and I put it on the Internet and looked and looked,'" Young said. "Finally, someone has taken my guitar from the Squires and put it online. You could see the grain – it was the same. So here it is."

Reholster Them Pistols!

PUNK ROCK LEGENDS the Sex Pistols made their comeback with ex-Gallows singer Frank Carter in August 2024 with three shows in London. This year they continued to perform across Europe, Australia and Japan and were booked to continue the 50th anniversary tour across North America in September. Sadly, it was not to be; just a few weeks before the first show at the Longhorn Ballroom in Dallas, guitarist Steve Jones announced that he'd broken his wrist and the group had no choice but to cancel their first tour on U.S. soil in more than 20 years. "The good news is the surgeon said I will be back playing guitar in the not-too-distant future," Jones said, while jokingly signing off his update with "God bless – and God save the wrist." Check out our interview with Jones in the October 2025 issue.

Khruangbin's Double Whammy

FOR THE FIRST time in the company's near-80-year history, Fender launched



Khruangbin's Mark Speer [left] and Laura Lee Ochoa with their new signature Fenders

a signature guitar and bass for two members of the same band – Mark Speer and Laura Lee Ochoa from Texas trio Khruangbin. For Ochoa, who admitted she played a Jazz Bass copy for many years due to budget constraints, the idea of her own signature model is especially mind-blowing. "Mark helped me get my first bass, which was a knockoff Fender, which is what I've been playing for the history of Khruangbin," she said. "What's so wild is that now I have a signature model, essentially based off of that knockoff."

In Memoriam

IN JANUARY, IT was announced that John Sykes, admired for his work in Whitesnake and Thin Lizzy, had died. Badfinger's Joey Molland left us in March, followed by Rick Derringer in May and Mick Ralphs in June. In August, we lost Bobby Whitlock of Derek & the Dominos. We also lost Buddy Holly collaborator Sonny Curtis, Parker Fly mastermind Ken Parker, musician/collector Jim Irsay, Yardbirds guitarist/bassist Chris Dreja, blues singer/guitarist Cool John Ferguson, jazzier George Freeman, Brian James of the Damned and Moody Blues bassist John Lodge. We also bade farewell to Beach Boys mastermind Brian Wilson, plus Sly Stone, Terry Reid, Iron Maiden original Paul Di'Anno, Tomas Lindberg of At The Gates, jazz bassist Anthony Jackson, Limp Bizkit bassist Sam Rivers, David Ball of Soft Cell and Edweena Banger of Slaughter & the Dogs. Not long before press time, we learned that noted rock photographer Glen La Ferman had died. La Ferman's photos graced several classic several *GW* covers from the Eighties right on up to our May 2024 issue. Our condolences go out to his – and everyone's! – family and friends. **GW**

ALYSSA GAFJEN/FENDER

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OUR FAVORITE GEAR OF THE YEAR

There was an onslaught of new guitar products released over the past 12 months. Here are the ones that had us talking

BY AMIT SHARMA

Marshall

Modified Amplifiers

\$3,449-\$3,849, marshall.com

1

WE ALL KNOW Marshall amps have played a huge part in some of the greatest guitar albums ever made, but it's worth noting that a small portion of these genre-defining tones were produced by circuits that had been modded in some way or another, and therefore could no longer be considered "stock." Slash, for example, used a JMP 1959 Super Lead modded by Frank Levi on Guns N' Roses' *Appetite for Destruction*. Another big name in the Marshall mod universe was José Arredondo, the now-deceased tech who customized heads for Eddie Van Halen, Mick Mars and James Hetfield. Until this point, however, the U.K. amp company had largely stuck to their guns and chosen not to acknowledge that certain players were enjoying tones that had been tweaked and enhanced. Which is why the release of the JCM800 Modified – boasting switches for gain boost, mid-boost and extra tightness – and the slightly more expensive 1959 Modified – with a new master volume control and two overdrive modes – dominated headlines in January. As a famous guitarist once noted, more is more.

Boss

RT-2 Rotary Ensemble

\$239, boss.info

2

LAUNCHED IN 2005 as part of the Twin Pedal series and discontinued in 2019, the Boss RT-20 quickly became one of the world's most beloved rotary simulators, giving guitarists the chance to dial in realistic Leslie tones without the hassle of having to carry around an extra speaker. In recent years, however, the Japanese pedal giants have been innovating new levels of functionality into their single unit designs – and the new RT-2 is a perfect example. It comes with three modes: a classic vintage rotary and two modified circuits with exaggerated results to make even more use of the emulated Doppler effect. There are doubled-up controls for Level and Drive and the speed of the Fast and Slow modes, which can be selected by holding down the footswitch. And then there's the mini switches to control the Rise/Fall time and Drive/Balance, plus stereo ins and outs, as well as the option for an external footswitch or expression pedal. That's a whole load of tones packed inside a single stompbox.

EVH

SA-126 Standard

\$949-\$1,159, evhgear.com

3

RETAILING AT AROUND half the price of the Mexican-made SA-126



1



2



3



4

Special, this year's Standard line of Wolfgang Van Halen signature semi-hollows still manages to keep a lot of the original mojo. You get the same Tim Shaw-designed pickups – which have more bark than your average ES-335-style guitar but without getting into the extremes – as well as the same oversized strap buttons and keystone tuning pegs. Of course, there are some trades being made to keep the price down; the fingerboard is derived from rosewood instead of ebony, there's a baked maple neck replacing the two-piece mahogany one found on the flagship and, perhaps most importantly, you will find no basswood center block. There are some new color options, though, from the slightly higher-end Wine Red and

the mid-priced Piano Black and Pelham Green finishes to the most affordable model in Satin Vintage White.

PRS

SE Custom 24 Semi-Hollow Piezo
\$1,279, prsguitars.com

4 IT SAYS A LOT about the PRS SE line that every year we find ourselves looking at their latest releases and wondering if these are the greatest guitars the company has ever produced outside of Maryland. The SE Custom 24 Semi-Hollow Piezo is undoubtedly one of the most feature-rich designs you'll find coming out of their Indonesian factory, and it's worth noting you'd be looking to pay

about four times as much for an American-made equivalent from the Core line. Available in deluxe finishes like Orange Tiger Smokeburst, Lake Blue, Charcoal and Vintage Sunburst, it comes with a pair of 85/15 "S" pickups which can be tapped via the push/pull tone control. And then, of course, there's the LR Baggs/PRS piezo system, which has its own output jack and volume control, giving users the flexibility of using independent or integrated rigs for acoustic and electric sounds, as well as options to blend both together. From the patented PRS tremolo and lampshade knobs to the shallow violin carve and matching headstock veneer and binding, it's every bit as versatile as it is alluring.

Taylor**Gold Label Acoustics****\$2,599-\$4,999, taylorguitars.com**

5 **WHEN IT COMES** to acoustics, Taylor is best-known as the go-to for modern players; they're the company who meticulously design perfect instruments for anyone looking for contemporary high-fidelity sounds, increased performance, playability and access. The Gold Label series, launched at this year's NAMM, is what happens when modern masters look back to yesteryear, and find that sweet compromise between vintage soul and present-day innovation, with models like the 814e and its variants taking particular inspiration from classic 1930s and 1940s flat top acoustics. There's also a new Super Auditorium body with fanned V-Class bracing and a long-tenon neck joint – a combination of specs to produce a richer and more resonant tone. "When I think about the kinds of music that people are making now, there's a bigger variety than ever," noted Master Guitar Designer and CEO Andy Powers in the promo video. "I want to be building a bigger variety of sounds to meet them where they are at and let them take our guitars into different places."

**5**

recreate your favorite pedals, preamps and cabs, which is something you rarely find at this price point. Beyond that, you get a 480-second looper with infinite overdubs, a drum machine with 54 kits, more than 350 original factory models, a five-inch hi-res touchscreen and all the usual effects you'd expect, plus Bluetooth, MIDI and USB connectivity. That's a lot of boxes ticked for very little money considering how much these kinds of devices can go for.

Mooer**GS1000 Multi-FX Amp Profiler****\$449, mooeraudio.com**

6 **COULD THE AI-EQUIPPED** Mooer GS1000 be the world's most advanced multi-effects unit under \$500? A quick glance at the spec sheet seems to indicate as much. Perhaps the main headline with this four-button pedal is the amp-capturing technology, which can analyze and then emulate any rig you plug it into "with immense precision." And it's also worth noting that this sampling tech can profile a lot more than just amps – you can use it to

**6****Blackstar****Polar Go Interface****\$129, blackstaramps.com**

7 **WHEN IT COMES** to miniature recording studios, the Blackstar Polar Go could just about be the most pocket-sized tech we've ever seen. It's a super compact audio interface that can fit in the palm of your

hand, with built-in stereo mics and up to four audio inputs to let you play, sing, and record whenever and wherever inspiration strikes. The built-in rechargeable battery offers up to four hours of continuous use, and there's everything from phantom power to a 3.5mm headphone output that can provide accurate, real-time monitoring. The dual USB-C ports make for seamless connecting and charging, and then there's the free Polar Go app to really fine-tune your results, including the "Audio Magic Wand" tool to automatically enhance your recordings using smart presets tailored for vocals, instruments, podcasts, and streaming. And to top it all off, you get DSP effects like reverb, compression, EQ and noise control for studio-quality audio even in non-ideal environments. Some might go as far as saying recording has never felt so portable and straightforward.

7

TAYLOR, MOOER, FUTURE



DigiTech

HammerOn Pitch-Shifter

\$279, digitech.com

8 WHEN DIGITECH LAUNCHED their latest pitch-shifter at the beginning of the year, they described it as seven pedals in one "to create never-before-heard licks and riffs," and boldly declared "the only limit is your imagination." Well, it turns out they

weren't lying. The newest product from the pitch-shifting specialists sees them merging elements of their Drop, Ricochet and Whammy pedals while also innovating in new directions. The two footswitches can be assigned an interval to which the pedal transposes whenever the respective footswitch is held, with 27 pitches to choose from in total, ranging all the way from two

octaves down to two octaves up. There are also options to Trill, with multiple rapid-fire pitch shifts at customizable speeds, and Harmonize, where users can blend their dry signal with a selected interval to create more depth. And beyond that, you can also make use of their Drop/Capo Sequence function or use several modes at the same time to create what DigiTech has called an "automatic techno guitar sequencer."

Jackson

Misha Mansoor Pro Plus Series Juggernaut

\$1,159-\$1,259, jacksonguitars.com

9 IN ONE OF the more memorable promotional campaigns of 2025, Periphery guitarist Misha Mansoor's "sold" the key features of his latest Jackson signatures – three new seven-string models – in the style of a television-shopping network. But it wasn't just the marketing behind the poplar-body instruments that sealed their place in the standout extended-range models of the year. The 26.5" scale guitars come with a pair of MM1 high-output passive humbuckers designed in collaboration with the man himself and also feature bolt-on caramelized maple necks with graphite reinforcement, string-through-body hardtail bridges and a push/pull activation for the tone control to take it out of the equation. There's also the choice to upgrade in terms of finish – the standard Juggernaut HT7s coming in Signal Yellow and Silverburst Sparkle, and the slightly more expensive HT7P arriving in Chlorine Burst.



**MXR****Rockman X100 Preamp Pedal**\$239, jimdunlop.com

10 **AS WELL AS** penning AOR anthems like Boston's "More Than a Feeling," "Don't Look Back" and "Amanda," Tom Scholz is also notable for launching Scholz Research & Development Inc. – the company that manufactured the Rockman headphone guitar amplifier from 1982 onwards. Said device wound up in the hands of bands like Def Leppard, Judas Priest and Megadeth and went on to become a defining product of its era, thanks to its mid-focused distortion, crystal cleans and stereo chorusing. All these years later, MXR chose to reimagine the unit as an all-analogue pedal, bringing those legendary Eighties tones into the modern age via our feet – partly thanks to the inclusion of the same MN3007 bucket brigade chip found in the original headphone amp. Granted, it might not be for everyone, but the long-overdue return of the Rockman has certainly made a lot of Eighties-loving rock guitarists happy.

TC Electronic**Plethora X1**\$159, tcelectronic.com

11 **LAUNCHED IN 2020**, the Plethora X5 struck a chord with guitarists, thanks to its tone-beaming multi-effects ingenuity, giving us the option to run five TC Electronic

pedals of our choosing in whatever order we liked. Two years later, they released the slightly downsized Plethora X1, which led to growing calls for a single version that didn't exist until now. The X1 comes with seven ready-to-play TonePrint effects: the Hall of Fame II, Flashback II, Sub n Up, Corona Chorus, Viscous Vibe, Quintessence and Pipeline – though it actually has space to hold up to 14 effects across its seven dual-slot boards. The single footswitch can be used in a number of ways, from the simple on/off "latching mode" and hold-for-effect "momentary" mode to the dual function "A/B," tap tempo and MASH modes. Could this be the ultimate Swiss Army Knife single pedal? When it comes to sonic versatility in a small package, we'd like to think so.

Charvel**Super-Stock So-Cal Style 1HH FR RW**\$1,679, charvel.com

12 **PARTLY INSPIRED BY** the 2022 signature model for Evergrey guitarist Henrik Danhage, this Superstrat is undoubtedly one of the most awe-inspiring Charvels we've seen in recent years. Firstly, the distressed nitrocellulose lacquer on an Aged Arctic finish means you are guaranteed to have jaws drop whenever you take it out of

**12**



13

the included multi-fit gig bag, and that's before people even notice the tortoiseshell pickguard. Then there's the trio of DiMarzio pickups – you get the PAF Pro humbucker in the neck, the Dark Matter 2 single-coil in the middle and finally the Def Leppard-approved Super Distortion humbucker in the bridge – three classics perfectly curated to cover a whole range of sounds. And the icing on the cake is the Floyd Rose 1000 Series double-locking tremolo system, which will keep you in tune no matter how much abuse you throw in its direction. What you're looking at here, essentially, is a shredder's dream.

ESP LTD RZK-III Phoenix \$1,999, espguitars.com

13 LET'S NOT BEAT around the bush here; Rammstein guitarist Richard Z. Kruspe isn't particularly known for playing offsets. His previous signatures have lived more in the SG and Les Paul world, which is precisely why his third model, the RZK-III Phoenix, ended up becoming one of the most talked-about artist models of 2025. As well as carrying his signature Fishman humbuckers, the new LTD models were notable for coming

equipped with a killswitch he described to be wired "the German way." Naturally, we had to find out more. "The American way is with the sound on and the killswitch kills the sound," he told me in May. "The German way is the opposite. You have no sound at all; the guitar has been silenced by a toggle, and when you push the button you hear the sound. It brings a different rhythm, which is good because I can choose to sustain the sound on the one rather than the in-between. I guess my one shouldn't be called a killswitch because it doesn't kill anything – it does the opposite and switches you on!"

Ernie Ball Music Man

Cory Wong
StingRay II
\$2,999-\$3,299,
music-man.com

**14 IN ALL
FAIRNESS,** nobody was expecting to see a Cory Wong signature

made outside of the Fender wheelhouse in 2025, but that's precisely what we got at this year's NAMM. Technically speaking, we actually got two – given the inclusion of a Deluxe model upgraded with a roasted maple fretboard, parchment binding and a matching headstock. What made it all even stranger was that it took direct inspiration from the iconic StingRay bass instead of any typical six-string electric, as detailed by its distinctive round scratchplate. But rest assured, the StingRay II is very much a guitarist's guitar – with a Cory Wong neck plate and a pair of his ultra-clean HT humbuckers. "Huge shout out to Fender for being open to me exploring a second guitar in my rotation," the modern funk hero said. "When Ernie Ball Music Man released Joe Dart Jr. StingRay bass, I asked what I thought was a simple question, 'Can you put six strings and humbucker on it?' I guess it wasn't quite that easy, but they were up for the challenge."

14



15



Fender

Acoustasonic Standard Jazzmaster/Telecaster

\$629, fender.com

15 IS IT MORE of an electric or an acoustic? The jury is still out, but in any case, the Fender Acoustasonic series, launched in 2019, remains one of the biggest and boldest innovations the guitar industry has seen in recent years. The guitars have ended up in the hands of artists as varied as Sting, Nile Rodgers, Molly Tuttle and Kirk Hammett, though until now have usually lived around the \$2,000 price bracket for a U.S.-made model, or just north of \$1,000 for a Mexican-manufactured instrument. This year, they launched the most affordable version to date, moving production to Indonesia for the all-new Standard series, starting with these Jazzmaster and Telecaster shapes. Of course, some corners have been cut; you get a nyatoh body instead of mahogany and simplified electronics, but all in all, it's an Acoustasonic nonetheless.

Third Man Hardware /Eventide

Knife Drop

\$299, eventideaudio.com

16 A FUZZ PEDAL that claims it's come from the twisted depths of Jack White's imagination

is convincing enough for the large majority of us, but saying it can "conjure walls of fuzz that sound like they're crawling out from the depths of a cursed VHS tape" is the kind of thing that'll have just about any guitarist reaching deep inside their pockets. This collaboration between White's Third Man Hardware and audio maestros Eventide is far from your typical Big Muff clone – it comes with a synth mix, switchable octaves, filter shaping and routing, a cutoff frequency and

more – making it one of the most feature-rich fuzz pedals we've seen. There are five presets crafted by White, but users are encouraged to create their own wild cards and unleash their own sonic disturbances via the Eventide H90 Control software interface.

Martin

Chris Martin IV 70th Birthday 000-18 and D-18

\$4,699, martinguitar.com

17 LIMITED TO JUST 70 of each worldwide, it's easy to see why these models made in celebration of Chris Martin IV's 70th birthday dominated headlines for being the most collectable acoustics of 2025. Perhaps the most striking feature here is the usage of reclaimed spruce tops – a first for Martin. To be more specific, the wood has been sourced from around Prince of Wales Island in Alaska from wind-felled trees and dismantled log bridges to the massive logs once used in historic barge ramps and floating logging platforms. Which makes them as historic as they are sustainably sourced. Furthermore, each model is based on an original 1955 Martin acquired at auction – the 000-18 taking inspiration from serial number 145102 and the D-18 harking back to serial number



144636. They also look the part, too, with spruce top printing to replicate the look of Martin's 1955 originals, adding even more authenticity to the vintage appointments.

Epiphone

Jeff Beck Oxblood 1954 Les Paul

\$1,299, gibson.com

18 AS WELL AS the gear auction by Christie's, which totaled almost \$12 million, this year's other Jeff Beck news was the release of an Epiphone copy of his storied and heavily customized 1954 Les Paul goldtop, refinished in oxblood. The original sold went under the hammer for just over \$1.3 million in January, and the last replicas had been made by the Gibson Custom Shop in 2009 as part of a limited edition of 150. So you could say this Epiphone version of his most famous singlecut – seen on the cover of *Blow by Blow* – was certainly well timed. The guitars come with a mahogany body and maple cap, a one-piece mahogany neck with a long neck tenon and Jeff Beck Custom Large C Neck profile, as well as an "open book" Gibson-style headstock, a low-friction Graph Tech nut and Schaller M6 90 tuning machines. As for electronics, the guitars boast USA-made Gibson Custombuckers connected to CTS potentiometers and Mallory capacitors using Fifties-style wiring.

17



17





19 Crazy Tube Circuits Heatseeker

\$279, crazytubecircuits.com

19 GREEK PEDAL SPECIALISTS Crazy Tube Circuits might very well be one of the more underground and boutique names on this list, but that hasn't stopped their products from ending up in the hands of Billy Gibbons, Doug Aldrich, Alex Skolnick, Dweezil Zappa and Peter Frampton. This year they unveiled their Heatseeker, an amp-in-a-box circuit many felt was best described as "Angus in a box." Not only does it recreate three of the AC/DC guitarist's favorite amps – the JTM45, 1959 Super Lead and late-Seventies JMP 2203 Master Volume with controls for Volume, Master, Bass, Middle, Treble and Presence – it also carries a footswitchable boost with the same kind of tonal enhancement and dynamic expansion that came from the axman's fabled wireless, the Schaffer-Vega Diversity System. For those about to rock, you might want to pick up one of these.

PRS

SE NF 53

\$979, prsguitars.com

20 LAUNCHED IN 2018, the PRS Silver Sky might have courted some controversy to begin with – mainly due to its obvious spiritual origins – though it didn't take long to prove itself as a modern classic. Similar things could be said of the 2023 Myles Kennedy signature that kick-started the T-type NF 53 series, which finally got reborn sub-\$1,000 as part of the SE line earlier this year. Available in Black Doghair, Pearl White and White Doghair, the guitars come with a swamp ash body, a bolt-on maple neck and fretboard, a steel plate-style bridge with brass barrel saddles and PRS Narrowfield DD "S" pickups that live up to their promise of bringing power and musicality without the hum. And though it's easy to see what kind of vintage guitars influenced the aesthetics, the SE NF 53 – and NF 53 series – exists sonically very much in the present, designed to produce the kind of tones and playing experience today's players are looking for. **CW**

20



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THE YEAR'S BEST NEW STUFF

Pro players weigh in on 2025's best songs, solos, riffs, guitar moments, guitarists of the year, gear and more

COMPILED BY ANDREW DALY

Tommy Emmanuel

SONG: "My Babe" by Robben Ford & Jimmy Witherspoon

ALBUM: *Live at the Legion* by Billy Strings & Bryan Sutton

RIFF/SOLO: Everything Molly Tuttle plays on *So Long Little Miss Sunshine*

GUITAR MOMENT: Listen to *Live at the Legion* by Billy Strings & Bryan Sutton. That whole record is brilliant, and they are two of the best players on the planet.

NEW GUITARIST/ARTIST: Frano

NEW GEAR: Udo Roesner Amp

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: *Me & Jerry* by Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Trey Hensley. I'm glad to see the IBMA Bluegrass Music Awards thought so, too. I also think Robben Ford has killed it in 2025. He's kept writing, recording, shooting videos, touring with multiple lineups and shown us all what an artist can do. His sound is revolutionary; his enthusiasm is infectious. More power to you, Lord Mr. Ford! Billy Strings, Molly Tuttle and Sierra Hull have come on like a tsunami in Americana/bluegrass. They've raised the bar, stretched the boundaries and won the ears and hearts of the young generation. More power to those young guns who come into our world to shake us out of our comfort zones.

Don Felder

SONG: "Some Kind of Feeling" by Orianthi

ALBUM: Bernie Leadon's new album, *Too Late to Be Cool*

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Renee Rapp. She's not necessarily a guitar player, but she's a triple threat.

Brad Gillis

NEW GEAR: The RJM Mastermind GT-16 MIDI controller. That model is on the floor, and my guitar tech, Darren Hurst, keeps the GT-22 model back at my amp. We've configured my favorite effects that best suit the Night Ranger song list. I'm able to

run all over the stage, and Darren does most of my switching. These units have been flawless to MIDI-up any combination of effects. They're built solid and are very roadworthy.

Ally Venable

SONG: "Daisies" by Justin Bieber produced and co-written by Mk.gee

ALBUM: *Never Enough*, Turnstile

RIFF: My song "Money & Power" has a rockin' riff!

SOLO: "Honky Tonk Hell," Marcus King

GUITAR MOMENT: Ozzy Osbourne's final performance at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Turnstile

NEW GUITARIST: Mk.gee

NEW GEAR: Big Joe Power Box ISO8

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: *Back to Black*, Amy Winehouse

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nuno Bettencourt

Mick Thomson (Slipknot)

SONG: "Sunshine Felt the Darkness Smile," Dax Riggs

ALBUM: *An Insatiable Violence*, Cryptopsy

RIFF: *Into the Cesspool* by Dying Fetus. Which riff? There are no wrong answers!

SOLO: "Rampage" by Vader

GUITAR MOMENT: Acid Bath playing European festivals

NEW GEAR: Knaggs Chesapeake Potomac and Patuxent acoustic guitars

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: *Good Company* by the Dead South and *S/T* by Asteroid

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: John Gallagher from Dying Fetus. For releasing just one song? Okay, so I've spiritually added the recent *Make Them Beg for Death*, which deserves massive recognition for its crushing brilliance.

Kiki Wong (Smashing Pumpkins)

SONG: "For I Am Death," the Pretty Reckless

ALBUM: *Songs of the Last Resort*, the Haunted



[from left] Yungblud, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry connect at the 2025 MTV Video Music Awards on September 7

RIFF: Deftones, "My Own Summer (Shove It)"

GUITAR MOMENT: Nuno Bettencourt at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Not new, but growing – the Linda Lindas

NEW GUITARIST: Maya Neelakantan from *America's Got Talent*

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nuno Bettencourt

Steve Lukather

NEW GEAR: The [Keeley] Halo delay and the [Keeley] Mk3 Driver overdrive pedals. Both were gifted to me by my dear pal and master player, Andy Timmons.

Trev Lukather

SONG: Barbarians of California, "Modern Fashion." A face-melting band with filthy riffs,

aggressive vocals and great chord choices.

ALBUM: *The Strike, A Dream Through Open Eyes*. Incredible songs with amazing production. The guys are beyond talented. A few melodic, tasty guitar solos that bring those Neal Schon vibes.

RIFF: "Devil I Know" by Dorothy. Sick riffs by Scott Stevens with a powerhouse performance by Dorothy, who I believe is one of the best singers out there.

SOLO: "Off the Deep End" by What Matters Most? The solo is by Pierce Akers, a young ripper who's not in the band but brought it in the studio – an all-around player.

GUITAR MOMENT: Everyone will mention this, but Back to the Beginning was full of incredible guitar moments. Legends being legends on all levels. Inspiring. RIP, Ozzy.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Return to Dust

NEW GUITARIST: Zach Irons. He's in Barbarians of California,

AWOLnation and his own band, IronTom. He's a very unique player with incredible timing. He has his own thing, but he can adapt to so many different styles.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Army of Anyone*. The DeLeo brothers (Stone Temple Pilots), Richard Patrick (Filter) and Ray Luzier (Korn) formed a supergroup that never got the love it deserved.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Sam Koltun. I wasn't really hip to Sam's playing before filling in for Eliot Lorango, playing bass on Dorothy's U.S. tour. He absolutely blew my mind every night. He's a rockstar. He's got the Godsmack gig now, and he's just one of those true-blue players who can adapt to his surroundings and bring consistent licks with great feel/tone. I'm rooting for him to win in the guitar world.

Jimmie Vaughan

NEW GEAR: I like my Fender Strats from the Custom Shop.

And I like my flatwound strings. If I have those, I'm happy! And I'm using the Strymon Flint now for reverb and tremolo.

Tom Morello

SONG: "We Mean It, Man!" by Gogol Bordello

ALBUM: *Inertia* by Grandson

RIFF: Grandson, "God Is an Animal"

SOLO: Roman Morello (with Jack Black), "Mr. Crowley"

GUITAR MOMENT:

Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

The Neighborhood Kids

NEW GUITARIST:

Roman Morello

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Kneecap, Fine Art*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

Charlie Starr (Blackberry Smoke)

SONG: "Before I'm in the Grave," Bones Owens

ALBUM: Mark Morton, *Without the Pain*
RIFF: "Honky Tonk Hell," Marcus King
SOLO: "Falling Up," Tyler Bryant
GUITAR MOMENT: A two-way tie between Back to the Beginning and the triumphant return of Oasis
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Zach Top
NEW GUITARIST: Zach Person
NEW GEAR: 1957 Fender Esquire
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: The newly mixed and remastered live EP from the forthcoming anniversary release of Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Same as every year – Billy F. Gibbons!

Sierra Levesque

SONG: "Some Kind of Feeling," Orianthi
ALBUM: Bumblefoot ... Returns!
RIFF: "Lachryma," Ghost
SOLO: "Excelsis," Ghost
GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning! Hail Ozzy!
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Francesca Tarantino
NEW GUITARIST: Cross Tinoco
NEW GEAR: Epiphone Flying V Prophecy
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Ozzmosis* by Ozzy Osbourne
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Kiki Wong

Max Cavalera

SONG: "Storm the Gates," Soufly
ALBUM: Soulfly, *Chama*
RIFF: "Execution Wheel" by Hedonist
SOLO: Incite, "Dolores"
GUITAR MOMENT: Pat McCrory's solo on Turnstile's "Never Enough" at Glastonbury. It had an old-school Bad Brains vibe. Amazing!
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Goetia – D.C. death metal!
NEW GUITARIST: Demir Soyer of Goetia
NEW GEAR: Peavey Vypyr X2
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Turnstile, *Never Enough*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Igor Amadeus Cavalera

Joe Perry

NEW GEAR: We did a photo-shoot with Yungblud, and our old friends at Chrome Hearts brought some clothes, belts, etc. I asked if they had any guitar straps, and they had one, but it wasn't for sale, though I used it for the VMAs performance. Next thing I know, it's my birthday, and my wife Billie handed me a small package. I opened it, and it was the guitar strap! But with Chrome Hearts, we go way back with [co-founders] Richard and Laurie Lynn Stark from when they first got rolling.



Insider tip: You might wanna keep an ear out for Lambrini Girls in 2026

Al Pitrelli

SONG: Disturbed's "I Will Not Break." I love that band.
ALBUM: Ghost's *Skeletá*
GUITAR MOMENT: Hellfest, Clisson, France. All the Long Island Italian guitar players were there. Me, Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, John Petrucci and honorary Long Islander Joe Bonamassa. He said backstage was "like being at the feast of San Gennaro."
NEW GEAR: I got a new Martin Inception and Grace Moxi acoustic pre-amp – also, Mojotone Iso Cabs.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Street Survivors*. It's timeless and still amazing. Steve Gaines is still an inspiration.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nuno Bettencourt

Joe Satriani

NEW GEAR: My red-on-red Ibanez JS, which I used for the "Thank You, Encore, Goodnight" video (with Sammy Hagar). It plays like a dream.

Grace Bowers

SONG: "Nothing Tastes as Good as It Feels," Lambrini Girls
ALBUM: *10* by Sault
RIFF: "Patrouille de France (live at L'Olympia)" – Cory Wong

GUITAR MOMENT: Nancy Wilson sitting in with Chappell Roan for "Barracuda"

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Snacktime

NEW GEAR: Jam Pedals RetroVibe

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: A Tribe Called Quest, *The Low End Theory*. It fits every vibe you could ever need!

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Ella Feingold

Chris Caffery

SONG: Dream Theater "Midnight Messiah." The video was 2025! Honorable mention for Judas Priest's cover of Sabbath's "War Pigs."

ALBUM: *Black Light/White Noise* by Smith/Kotzen

RIFF: Dark Chapel, "Hollow Smile"

SOLO: "Midnight Messiah"

GUITAR MOMENT: Satriani and Vai at Hellfest

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Dark Chapel

NEW GUITARIST: Aanika Pai

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Popular Monster* by Falling In Reverse

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

The late Criss Oliva. The return of Savatage showed me that he is more popular than ever; his fans arrived from all over the world to celebrate his legacy, and his legacy is growing.

Myles Kennedy

SONG: "People Watching," Sam Fender

ALBUM: *Private Music*, Deftones

RIFF: "Death and Glitz," Avatar

SOLO: "Believer," Ian Thornley and Big Wreck

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

MJT the band

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Moisturizer* by Wet Leg

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Wolfgang Van Halen

Mike Dawes

SONG: "The End," Mammoth

ALBUM: *Never Enough*, Turnstile

RIFF: The breakdown riff in "Birds" by Turnstile

SOLO: "Hedwig's Theme," Jason Richardson

GUITAR MOMENT: Nuno Bettencourt at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Ando San

NEW GEAR: ToneWoodAmp2

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Oasis' *(What's the Story) Morning Glory*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Wolfgang Van Halen

Vernon Reid

SONG: "Bad Like Me" by Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. I love the groove and feel. It's a perfect post-Sinners taste of what it's like to hear an old tradition living inside of a young man. John Lee Hooker's "I'm Bad Like Jesse James" provides a little DNA with nurturing from the Dirty South. Kingfish emerges whole and triumphant.

ALBUM: Eric Gales, *A Tribute to LJK*. It's a smoking, warm, loving, hot and ice-cold tribute to his brother, Little Jimmy King (Manuel Gales), who passed away too young at 37 in 2002 from cardiac arrest. A thoroughly joyful celebration of his beloved brother's life.

RIFF: "Tiles Whispers Dreams," Car Bomb. They're a maelstrom, a rising tide of shards. The sound of a tank groaning just before it burst. They are implacable. Impossible. Unflinching.

SOLO: The solo played by the remarkable Julian Lage on "The Law Years" [from Ornette Coleman's *Science Fiction*] at the Village Vanguard, in jazz saxophone maestro Joe Lovano's quartet – which included Santi Debriano on upright and my Living Colour cohort, Will Calhoun, on drums. Julian played in a way that fully embraced Ornette's harmolodic free jazz approach, yet it incorporated elements of gypsy, folk and Latin classical in ways that were remarkably fresh without it being "I'm a remarkable guitarist!" – even though that was the end result. Jaws were on the table for the entire club.

GUITAR MOMENT: Seeing Tony Iommi play the truly final Black Sabbath show for Back to the Beginning. Hearing "War Pigs" with Birmingham, England, singing every word was the definition of epic.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Jesse Welles

NEW GUITARIST: Austin's Jackie Venson. Her *The Love Anthology* is a future-forward record of personal songs about love's challenges, featuring guitar that bites and sings along with her in ways that perfectly reflect her anguish and faith.

NEW GEAR: Polyend Mess, an incredible four-track glitch multi-FX pedal that's integrated with a sequencer with access to 120 different effects. Its closest rival is the Chroma Console, but that is only a rough approximation. Polyend Mess opens pathways to very different sonic countries than Chroma, despite some very surface similarities.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Sly and the Family Stone, *Live at the Fillmore East: October 4th & 5th, 1968*

Grayson Stewart (Norma Jean)

SONG: "Infinite Source," Deftones

ALBUM: *Lonely People with Power*, Deafheaven

RIFF: "Dying Sun," Bleed from Within

SOLO: "God Complex," Bleed from Within

GUITAR MOMENT: Mastodon's cover of "Supernaut" at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Don't Try

NEW GUITARIST: Nick Adams of Justice for the Damned

NEW GEAR: ESP LTD Mick Thomson MT-1

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Charley Crockett, *Live from the Ryman*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Bleed from Within's Craig Gowans and Steven Jones

Will Swan (Dance Gavin Dance)

SONG: The Voidz, "Unholy Lover"

ALBUM: *Club Night*, Joy Coming Down

RIFF: Deftones, "Infinite Source"

SOLO: The Voidz, "Russian Cone Island"

GUITAR MOMENT: Spinal Tap returning is a huge deal for lead bassists everywhere.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Nuvolascura

NEW GUITARIST: Ian Tatum

NEW GEAR: STL Tonehub. I use it on Logic, and I love the Kris Crummert tones. I'm basically using my own album tones for my demos, and they sound so good.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Deftones' Stephen Carpenter. It can't be easy to be the guitarist of such a powerhouse of a band and have to keep coming up with new directions and territory for the band to cover. I've been listening to him since junior high and am a lifelong fan. My first real guitar was his signature green ESP.

Marty Friedman

SONG: Wakazaemon, "Lung"

ALBUM: Mrs. Green Apple, *10*

RIFF: Official Hige Dandism's "Rashisa" and Naoki Morioka's "Absolutes"

SOLO: Aikawa Nanase's "Eiyutan" and HAYASII's "Hunting Soul"

GUITAR MOMENT: A brand-new video and song featuring a suspiciously unique pairing of guitarists from Neural DSP that should be out by the time you read this...

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Yee Loi

NEW GUITARIST: You!

NEW GEAR: Tech

21 Marty Friedman Signature Sans Amp

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Ichika Nito or Marcin

Jake E. Lee

NEW GEAR: My old Jordan

Bosstone, Nashville-built. My favorite fuzz. And the Dunlop John Petrucci Cry Baby. I don't know John personally, but his wah

has huge balls. I went through almost a dozen from Dunlop, and that's the one I brought to Back to the Beginning.

Richie Kotzen

NEW GEAR: My Marshall

1959HW head with two matching cabinets, finished in blue. Check it out on my Instagram where I posted a photo [@richie_kotzen].

Herman Li

SONG/SOLO: Dream Theater, "The Shadow Man Incident"

ALBUM: Lari Basilio, *Redemption*

GUITAR MOMENT:

Back to the Beginning

NEW GUITARIST:

Matteo Mancuso

NEW GEAR: PRS 40th

Anniversary Custom 24

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: Andy Timmons, *Recovery*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

about guitars because of all the styles I play. There's no "one size fits all," but Kiesel makes something for everything. I don't feel like I'm making sacrifices in tone or playability.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED

TO MOST: Chet Baker Sings, of course.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Dan Jacobs of Atreyu

Ira Black

SONG: Machine Head, "Outsider"

ALBUM: Destruction, *Birth of Malice*

RIFF: Warbringer's "Strike from the Sky"

SOLO: Testament's "Infanticide A.I."

GUITAR MOMENT: Watching George Lynch sit in with Dokken and shred the "Tooth and Nail" solo for probably one of the last times. George is so incredible and perfectly seasoned to the ultimate balance of taste and shred. Also seeing Jake E. Lee reconnect with the Ozzy camp, reconcile their friendship and play "Shot in the Dark" — after he got shot! It's a mind-boggling, ironic redemption story out of the pages of the encyclopedia of rock 'n' roll!

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

The Warning

NEW GUITARIST: Luke Man of Warbringer

NEW GEAR: Neural DSP Quad Cortex. I love it!

ALBUM YOU LISTENED

TO MOST: Vio-Lence's *Eternal Nightmare*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Miles Dimitri Baker from Ice Nine Kills

Duane Betts

SONG: Charley Crockett, "Crucified Son"

ALBUM: Marcus King Band, *Darling Blue*

RIFF: Neil Young and the Chrome Hearts, "Big Change"

SOLO: Marcus King, "Honky Tonk Hell"

GUITAR MOMENT: "In Memory of Dickey Betts" — Macon, Georgia, February 28

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Dean Johnson



Atreyu's Dan Jacobs
got at least one vote
for 2025's guitarist
of the year

there. I'm not kidding; I avoided it at all costs. I guess sometimes being delusional pays off.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Half Me. You guys deserve the world.

NEW GUITARIST: Mike Monto of Hawk

NEW GEAR: My new Kiesel guitars. I'm extremely particular

NEW GUITARIST: Johan Borgh
NEW GEAR: Secret Engine Fuzz
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: The Smile, *Wall of Eyes*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Marcus King

Joe Bonamassa

SONG: Larry McCray, "Heartbreak City"
ALBUM: Robert Randolph, *Preacher Kids*
RIFF: Walter Trout, "Sign of the Times"
SOLO: Eric Gales, "Grand Closing" from *Sinners*
GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Eddie 9V
NEW GUITAR-IST: Matteo Mancuso
NEW GEAR: Fender Tone Master '59 Bassman
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: B.B. King, *Live at the Regal*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Marcus King



Eric Gales' guitar work received praise from Joe Bonamassa, Vernon Reid and Kiko Loureiro

Eric Gales

NEW GEAR: A Gibson Explorer remake from an independent builder named Daniel Killa. It's awesome.

Josh Bradford (Silverstein)

SONG: "Cruising to Self Soothe," Ecca Vandal
ALBUM: *Lonely People with Power*, Deafheaven
RIFF: Silverstein, "Drain the Blood" – shhhh, I'm not biased...
SOLO: Abigail Williams, "Life, Disconnected"
GUITAR MOMENT: The return of Minus the Bear
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Bloom
NEW GUITARIST: Tim Henson
NEW GEAR: DigiTech FreqOut Natural Feedback Creator pedal
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Bahamas, *Barchords*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nick Johnston

Rob Fetters (The Bears/The Raisins)

SONG: "Fuck This Shit" by There I Ruined It (on YouTube)
GUITAR MOMENT: Warren Zevon's posthumous Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction
NEW GEAR: Wavelength Audio's Octane Tube Clean Boost
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO THE MOST: The Rolling Stones, *Beggars Banquet*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Adrian Belew

Sadie Dupuis (Speedy Ortiz)

SONG: "Peacocking" by Baths
ALBUM: *Danger in Fives* by Wombo
RIFF: Maneka, "Yung Yeller"
SOLO: Forty Winks, "Noise"
GUITAR MOMENT: Guerilla Toss getting both Stephen Malkmus and Trey Anastasio to guest on a track

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Forty Winks
NEW GUITARIST: Asher White
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Wendy Eisenberg and Ted Leo

Yngwie Malmsteen

NEW GEAR: My signature MXR Yngwie Malmsteen Overdrive

Keith Urban

SONG: "Pink Pony Club," Chappell Roan
ALBUM: *This Wasn't Meant for You Anyway*, Lola Young
SOLO: "Pink Pony Club." It's pure Eighties!
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Lola Young
NEW GUITARIST: Mk.gee
NEW GEAR: My PRS with a wooden truss rod... I love it!
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Maybe You've Been Brainwashed Too* by New Radicals
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Billy Strings

Serena Cherry (Svalbard)

SONG: "Night Terror" by Dream Theater. *Parasomnia* is the best album Dream Theater has released in years, and "Night Terror" is the standout. Moody, proggy and packed full of epic solos, it's a song that screams out loud that Dream Theater has very much still got it.

ALBUM: The Halo Effect, *March of the Unheard*. Pure melodic death metal goodness! I love that it sounds like my favorite era of In Flames. This album has so many riffs that will get you headbanging.
RIFF: The verse riff in Employed To Serve's "Treachery"
SOLO: The final solo on "Night Terror" by Dream Theater
GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Split Chain has that gorgeous, washy, reverb-drenched guitar tone, which I'm a sucker for.
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Donny Burbage, Cradle of Filth

Josh Hager (Devo)

SONG/SOLO: Moist Towelette, "M.A.F.A. (Make America Funky American)"
RIFF: "Unravelling" by Muse
NEW GEAR: Ron Thorn J2V2
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: *Trojan Records: 40 Years, 40 Tracks*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Matt Henderson

Sammy Boller

ALBUM: *Return to Dust, Speak Like the Dead*
RIFF: *Return to Dust, "Bored"*
SOLO: Wolfgang Van Halen on Mammoth's "The End"
GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning
NEW GUITARIST/ARTIST: Mei Semones
NEW GEAR: H2 Audio Helios Channel Strip
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Ruston Kelly, *Shape & Destroy*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Marcus King

James Black (Finger Eleven)

SONG: AFI, "Behind the Clock"
ALBUM: King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard, *Phantom Island*
SOLO: "Lonely Cosmos" by King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard
GUITAR MOMENT: *Alien: Earth*, Episode 3 – the guitar solo as they approach the island, which was inspired by/borrowed from Funkadelic's "Maggot Brain"
NEW BAND/ARTIST: Hollow Ship

Gary Hoey

SONG: "Hello Heaven, Hello" by Yungblud
ALBUM: Billy Idol, *Dream into It*
RIFF: Dream Theater, "Midnight Messiah"
SOLO: Bumblefoot featuring Steve Vai, "Monstruoso"
GUITAR MOMENT: Nuno Bettencourt and Jake E. Lee at Back to the Beginning
NEW BAND/ARTIST: The Warning
NEW GUITARIST: Marcus King
NEW GEAR: Fender Tone Master
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: The Warning, *Keep Me Fed*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nuno Bettencourt

Danko Jones

SONG: "Fed to the Dogs," John Reis
ALBUM: *Volume Six* by Sacrifice
RIFF: "The Grand Slam" by Spidergawd
SOLO: Marty Friedman on "Diamond in the Rough" by Danko Jones. He slayed on our new album, *Leo Rising*.
GUITAR MOMENT: Jake E. Lee performing "The Ultimate Sin" at Back to the Beginning with Lzzy Hale, Nuno Bettencourt and Vernon Reid.
NEW BAND: Lüt, from Norway
NEW GUITARIST: Aubrey Ghent Jr.
NEW GEAR: My Hagstrom Ultra Max guitar
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Blood Incantation, *Absolute Elsewhere*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Marty Friedman

Roger McGuinn

NEW GEAR: A Bluetooth transmitter for listening to the radio – purchased from Amazon.

**Colin Clive
(Mustard Plug)**

SONG: "Catch These Fists"

by Wet Leg

ALBUM: Dead Pioneers, Po\$t American

RIFF: Propagandhi, "At Peace"

SOLO: Superchunk, *Songs in the Key of Yikes* – the whole album. So many killer leads!

GUITAR MOMENT: Oasis at Soldier Field in Chicago. Amazing!

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Lambrini Girls and Die Spitz

NEW GUITARIST: Jojo Orme [AKA Heartworms]; Ellie Livingston and Ava Schrobilgen of Die Spitz

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Sulynn Hago from Propagandhi, who's releasing an amazing solo album soon.

John 5

NEW GEAR: My signature Fender Phantom Telecaster. It could be my favorite Tele. It's coming out very soon.

**Randy Resnick
(Pure Food and Drug Act)**

SONG: "I'll Drive" by the Bros. Landreth

ALBUM: 25 Years Ago by Joey Stebanuk

SOLO: "Revival" by Aleksey Lopez

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Quarters of Change New guitarist: Matteo Mancuso

**Kiko Loureiro
(ex-Megadeth/Angra)**

SONG: "Break Through" by Steve Morse Band

ALBUM: Yamandu Costa, SAGA

RIFF: "Unbound," Machine Head

SOLO: "Don't Wanna Go Home," Eric Gales

GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning and Steve Vai doing King Crimson. Also, jamming with Satch/Vai on stage in July

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Igorrr

NEW GUITARIST: Grace Bowers

NEW GEAR: JHS PackRat

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Steve Morse. I'm happy to see him back.

**Doug Aldrich
(The Dead Daisies)**

SONG: The Dead Daisies' cover of Don Nix's "Going Down"

ALBUM: Breakthrough by Joe Bonamassa

RIFF: "Icarus" by the Band Feel

SOLO: "The End" by Wolfgang Van Halen/Mammoth

GUITAR MOMENT:

Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Steve Vai and Joe Satriani's band

NEW GUITARIST: Tyler

Armstrong from the Band Feel

NEW GEAR: Blackstar

Beam Solo

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

**Blackbyrd McKnight
(Parliament-Funkadelic)**

SOLO: Vernon Reid at the 60th Birthday Extravaganza for Norwood Fisher in September

GUITAR MOMENT:

Mike Stern at the Baked Potato, Studio City, L.A.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Isaiah Sharkey, Mohini Dey, Grace Bowers and Jack Gardiner

NEW GUITARIST: Grace Bowers, Derek Day and Spanky Alford

NEW GEAR: Line 6 HX

Stomp XL, Line 6 HX Native, Morningstar Engineering

MC8, Line 6 Helix Stadium XL, Reunion Blues Gig Bags and RB Expedition Electric Guitar Case

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

George Benson. Are you kidding me?

**Phil X
(Bon Jovi)**

SONG: "Fake the Day Away" by Phil X & the Drills featuring Tommy Lee

ALBUM: Pow!

Right in the Kisser by Phil X & the Drills

RIFF: "Find a Way,"

Phil X & the Drills

SOLO: "Way Gone (Beam Me Up, Scotty)," Phil X & the Drills

GUITAR MOMENT: Ozzy

Osbourne and Sabbath at Back to the Beginning. So many moments for so many reasons, and too many to mention, but Nuno Bettencourt was outstanding every time he took to the stage.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Yungblud

NEW

GUITARIST:

Taj Farrant

NEW GEAR:

J. Rockett PXO Overdrive/Boost

ALBUM YOU

LISTENED TO MOST:

Van Halen, *Fair Warning*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Derek Trucks



Ian Thornley's playing on Big Wreck's "Believer" will, you guessed it, make a believer outta you

Gus G

SONG: "A Little Is a Little Too Much," Helloween

ALBUM: Arch Enemy, *Blood Dynasty*

RIFF: "Emergence," Sleep Token

SOLO: I thought the solo from my track "My Premonition" was pretty sweet!

GUITAR MOMENT:

Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Jelusick

NEW GUITARIST: Spiro Dussias

NEW GEAR: IK Multimedia ToneX One

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: The Beatles, *Abbey Road*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Joe Satriani and Steve Vai

**Jackie Parry
(Dianthus)**

SONG: "Peacefield" by Ghost

ALBUM: *Wrath and Ruin*, Warbringer

RIFF: Intro to "The Sword and the Cross" by Warbringer

SOLO: "Through a Glass, Darkly," Warbringer

GUITAR MOMENT: I was shopping at Ulta recently and saw a photo of St. Vincent modeling a beauty product. She was holding a guitar in the photo as well. I thought it was so cool because I've never seen that type of ad in a store like that.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Seven Hours After Violet

NEW GUITARIST: Helena Nagagata of Crypta

NEW GEAR: The Noise pedal by Tallon Electric

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Luke Man

**Billy Morrison**

SONG: "Hello, Heaven, Hello" by Yungblud

ALBUM: *The Satanic Rites of the Wildhearts* by the Wildhearts

SOLO: Ian Thornley (Big Wreck), "Holy Roller"

Nili Brosh

SONG: Gojira's official release of "Mea Culpa (Ah! Ça ira!)" at the 2024 Olympics

ALBUM: Dream Theater's *Parasomnia*

SOLO: John Petrucci's solo on "Bend the Clock"

GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning is the one that'll go down in history. If we had to lose Ozzy this year, I feel so utterly fortunate to have gotten such a rare goodbye as that one!

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Tears for Fears' *Songs from the Big Chair*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt. Whether it's Back to the Beginning, the VMAs or the new Extreme stuff, Nuno is always the fixture carrying the torch.

Blues Saraceno**SONG:** "Don't Run" by Free Milk**ALBUM:** *Believer* by Free Milk**RIFF:** "Take Up the Fight"

by Family Money

SOLO: Anythingfrom *Believer*

by Free Milk

GUITAR**MOMENT:**

Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Free Milk

NEW GUITARIST:

Barrie Cadogan of Little Barrie

NEW GEAR: Fairfield Guitar Co. guitar straps**ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO****MOST:** *Take Up the Fight* by Family Money**GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:**

Dweezil Zappa



The great Guthrie Trapp also got at least one vote for 2025's guitarist of the year

Frank Hannon
(**Tesla**)**SONG:** Marcus King,

"Honky Tonk Hell"

ALBUM: *The Blues Summit* byDevon Allman and *American Romance* by Lukas Nelson**RIFF:** "Good Times and

Tan Lines," Zach Top

SOLO: "Country Boy Blues,"

Zach Top

GUITAR MOMENT: Nuno at Back to the Beginning**NEW BAND/ARTIST:**

Hermanos Gutierrez

NEW GUITARIST: Grace Bowers and Saxon Weiss**NEW GEAR:** Fender Tone Master Pro**GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:**

Duane Betts

Adrian Belew**NEW GEAR:** The Electro-

Harmonix Pog III, which is a remarkably versatile effects box, and a new Monos suitcase, an essential for a touring musician.

Joseph Pepper
(**Cartel**)**SONG:** "Never Enough"

by Turnstile

ALBUM: Viagra Boys' self-titled**RIFF:** Frankie and the Witch

Fingers, "Dead Silence"

SOLO: Cartel, "Settle Down"**GUITAR MOMENT:** Adam Jones playing Penta's WWE entrance song, "Zero Miedo"**NEW BAND/ARTIST:** Pool Kids**NEW GEAR:** Fairfield Circuitry

20% More Slew Limit Distortion

Elwood Francis**(ZZ Top)****SONG:** 9 O'Clock Nasty,

"People Pleaser"

ALBUM: *Bootsy Collins, Album***of the Year #1 Funketeer****RIFF:** The Wildhearts,

"Maintain Radio Silence"

SOLO: Nashville Pussy,

"Tired of Pretending

I Give a Shit"

GUITAR**MOMENT:** Back to the Beginning**NEW GUITARIST:**

Yoyoyoshie of Otoboke

Beaver

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Guthrie Trapp

Scott Holiday
(**Rival Sons**)**SONG:** Spoon, "Guess I'm

Fallin' in Love"

ALBUM: Unknown MortalOrchestra's *Curse* EP**RIFF:** Mirador, "Feels Like Gold"**GUITAR MOMENT:**

Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: The Smile**NEW GUITARIST:** Ruban

Nielson of Unknown Mortal Orchestra

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Julian Lage

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt!

Angel Vivaldi**SONG:** "Triangulation" from the

Steve Morse album that features

John Petrucci. Prog heaven!

ALBUM: Anika Nilles, *False**Truth*. Great modern fusion with a touch of gospel and chock full of incredible performances.**SOLO:** Dream Theater, "In the Arms of Morpheus"**GUITAR MOMENT:** Nuno at either the VMAs or at Back to the Beginning. The guy is the definition of a rock star.**Alastair Greene****SONG:** Warren Haynes, "Life As

We Know It." Warren has written so many great songs, and he continues to do so!

ALBUM: Jimmy Page and the Black Crowes, *Live at the Greek* (new reissue with bonus tracks). This is an insanely good record, and now we can hear the complete show.**RIFF:** Walter Trout, "Sign of the Times." Walter is an underrated riffsman. Every record he makes, there are so many good riffs. Simple and effective. It works!**SOLO:** Joe Bonamassa, "Breakthrough." Joe gets a bad rap for shredding through everything. This is a great example of his sense of taste and wah skills.**GUITAR MOMENT:** Jake E. Lee's appearance at Back to the Beginning. I would have liked it if Jake had gotten to play with

Ozzy, but given the time constraints, politics and Ozzy's health, I understand why things were organized the way they were. I'm just happy Jake was involved, as

he really was such an important part of Ozzy's solo career.

NEW GEAR: Epiphone's Inspired by Gibson line has got some really cool guitars at affordable prices.**ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO**

Fans of Julian Lage's 2025 playing include Vernon Reid and Rival Sons guitarist Scott Holiday

MOST: Black Sabbath, *Vol. 4*. After Ozzy's passing, I went back down the rabbit hole where I lived when I first started listening to music after I began playing guitar. I listened to so much Sabbath and Ozzy's solo records. I kept coming back to *Vol. 4*; it's so heavy and melodic. It's the crown jewel of the Sabbath catalog.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Eric Johnson. I just listened to the *G3: 25th Anniversary Tour* live record, and it's ridiculous. Satriani and Vai are killer as always, but there's always been something about EJ that just takes me to another place when I'm in the "listening to an absolute virtuoso" realm. Tone, touch and technique. Incredible.

Ben Eller

SONG: "Blindsides," Car Bomb
ALBUM: *The Spin*, Messa
RIFF: "Void Meridian," Messa
SOLO: "Immolation," Messa

GUITARMOMENT: I'm gonna sound really biased here, but getting to step in for Brent Hinds and play with Mastodon at the Tool in the Sand festival was my personal highlight.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Field Trip. Check out "A Floor for Falling Into"

NEW GUITARIST: Alberto Piccolo, Messa
NEW GEAR: My Synergy SYN 50 head and the amazing modules they've released for it.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Alberto Piccolo of Messa

Reggie Wu (Heavens Edge)

SONG: "Silent Divide" by Alter Bridge. Myles Kennedy and Mark Tremonti are so prolific, and they've never written a bad song!

ALBUM: *Superheaven* by Superheaven. Love the energy!

RIFF: It's an old riff (1998), but it's finally making its mark in 2025. Check out the monster riff in "Stoned Groove" by legendary

Philly guitarist Mark Hafer. Killer!

SOLO: Yiannis Papadopoulos' solo on Scott Stapp's "What I Deserve" is spectacular.

GUITARMOMENT: Jake E. Lee at Back to the Beginning. He was a massive influence on me, so it was great to see him on stage again, especially after the shooting. So glad he is okay!

NEW GUITARIST: Joshua Jones. He's a phenomenal player with incredible chops, but what sets him apart from other shredders is his unreal vibrato and attack. He reminds me of Dimebag and Zakk – so much fire and energy in both his lead and rhythm playing. He's from Tulsa. Check him out on Instagram and YouTube!

NEW GEAR: TC Electronic Spark. What a great boost pedal!

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: Shinedown's *Sound of Madness* is a fantastic listen.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Yiannis Papadopoulos's work with Scott Stapp is futuristic

and incredible.

Alex Grossi (Quiet Riot)

SONG AND SOLO: Joe Satriani and Sammy Hagar, "Encore, Thank You, Goodnight."

ALBUM: Dizzy Reed, *Rock 'N' Roll Chose Me*

RIFF: Spinal Tap featuring Elton John, "Stonehenge"

GUITARMOMENT: David Lee Roth (with guitarist Al Estrada) live at the 2025 M3 Festival

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Marbin

NEW GUITARIST: Al Estrada from the David Lee Roth Band

NEW GEAR: SoloDallas Orbiter

Fuzz Pedal

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: Ozzy Osbourne,

The Ozzman Cometh

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

Terry Corso (Alien Ant Farm)

SONG: Fit for an Autopsy, □



K KEELEY

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"It Comes for You"
ALBUM: Vildhjarta, *Där skogen sjunger under evighetens granar*

RIFF: The outro riff in Spoon's "Guess I'm Fallin' in Love"

SOLO: Anything Paul Gilbert does on his Instagram

GUITAR MOMENT: Brandon Ellis quits the Black Dahlia Murder and Wes Hauch takes his place.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Ladrones
NEW GUITARIST: Jose Macario from Ladrones

NEW GEAR:

Danelectro Baritone/six-String doubleneck

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST:

...Like Clockwork, Queens of the Stone Age

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Billy Strings



"Listen to Live at the Legion by Billy Strings [above] and Tommy Sutton," says Tommy Emmanuel

Rocky Athas

SONG/RIFF: "Trigger Finger," Joe Bonamassa

ALBUM: *Saving Grace* by Robert Plant

SOLO: "So Hollow" by Let Babylon Burn

GUITAR MOMENT: A Levi Clay video called "Albert Lee Making Clapton Look Like He Should Have Kept The Day Job!" But I don't agree with that title; I love everything Eric Clapton ever touched.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

The Zac Schulze Gang

NEW GUITARIST: Zac Schulze

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Zac Schulze

Jimi Bell (ex-Autograph)

SONG: "When I'm Gone" by Dirty Honey

ALBUM: Joe Bonamassa, *Breakthrough*

GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Dirty Honey

NEW GUITARIST: Matteo Mancuso

NEW GEAR:

Boss IR-2 Amp & Cabinet pedal

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: AC/DC, *Back in Black*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

Jenna Fournier (Niights/Kid Tigrrr/ Billy Corgan's Machines of God)

SONG: Niights, "Statelines" – I'm biased, of course.

ALBUM: *Coma Cinema*,

Grand Delusion

SOLO: Personal shoutout to Frank Maraldo on Niights' "Statelines."

GUITAR MOMENT:

Having Billy Corgan rip

"Porcelina of the Vast Oceans" two feet from my face every night.

NEW GEAR: I integrated the Line 6 HX Stomp, and it has been a game-changer.

Sam Koltun (Dorothy/Godsmack)

SONG: "Believer" by Big Wreck. Ian Thornley's guitar work on this track is incredible.

ALBUM: *I Beat Loneliness* by Bush and *Alienation* by Three Days Grace

RIFF: "Never Gonna Get Me" by Ashes of Billy

SOLO: The solo on "The Deadfall" by Joe Holmes (the former Ozzy guitarist) is absolutely rippin'.

GUITAR MOMENT: Nuno at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

The Lonely Ones

NEW GUITARIST:

Sebastian Silva from Unto Others

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Nuno Bettencourt

Steve Brown (Trixter)

SONG: "Run with the Pack," Blackberry Smoke

ALBUM: Bumblefoot ...Returns

RIFF: "Living Like There's No Tomorrow," Femme Fatale and Lorraine Lewis

SOLO: "Bad Love" by Femme

Fatale with Bumblefoot

GUITAR MOMENT: Jake E. Lee with Nuno Bettencourt at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Hippies and Cowboys

NEW GUITARIST: Dallas Russo from the Kobi Reese Band

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST: Bon Jovi, *New Jersey*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Steve Lukather

Richard Fortus (Guns N' Roses)

ALBUM: *Viagra Boys* by Viagra Boys

RIFF: "Hooray Hooray Hooray" by the Hives

SOLO: Anything Matteo Mancuso plays on

GUITAR MOMENT: Back to the Beginning. Seeing Tony Iommi and Black Sabbath, as well as all of the outstanding performances by so many legendary guitarists – Vernon Reid, Nuno, Slash, Zakk Wylde, Kirk Hammett, Jerry Cantrell – was just incredible, and the vibe was amazing. It's an event I'll never forget and feel so fortunate to have witnessed and participated in.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Horsegirl

NEW GUITARIST: Filipe Rosset

NEW GEAR: I've been obsessed with my Gypsy-Vibe by Argenziano Effetti. It's

the best Univibe I've ever heard (and I've heard a lot). Also,

the Chroma Console by Hologram

Electronics.

ALBUM YOU

LISTENED TO

MOST: *Happiness*

Bastards by the

Black Crowes

GUITARIST OF THE

YEAR: Adrian Belew

and Steve Vai for Beat. Those three King Crimson records were so important to me; it was incredible to see them be performed again.

Leilani Kilgore

SONG: Anything off of Larkin Poe's *Bloom* or the new Hives record, *The Hives Forever*

the Hives

ALBUM: Turnstile's *Never Enough* and Wunderhorse's *Midas*

RIFF: "Lachryma" by Ghost. I know Ghost gets a lot of hate, but the riff on this is sick and got stuck in my head immediately.

SOLO: Eric Gales and Joe Bonamassa on "Don't Wanna Go Home"

GUITAR MOMENT: The return of Oasis. Either that or Spinal Tap. I could see both inspiring a whole new generation to pick up the guitar, hopefully.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Mirador

NEW GUITARIST: Fellow Nashvillian McKinley James

NEW GEAR: The Gretsch Electromatic Jet Gold Sparkle that was released this year.

It's slick, affordable and looks seriously good onstage.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: Yungblud's *Idols*. I'm fascinated with the way rock is coming back into trend, and I think Yungblud can be given a lot of credit.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

I saw Jack White perform at the Pinnacle, Nashville, and he's still one of the most exciting players in my book. Honorable mention to Rebecca and Megan Lovell of Larkin Poe.

Melanie Faye

SONG: "Doe" by Blazn

ALBUM: *Swag* by Justin Bieber

RIFF: "Slidcancel" by Carlos Jr.

SOLO: "Algo

Temporal (pero en Math Pop)" by Anibal, Jack Bones & Ruben Wan.

GUITAR MOMENT:

@penny.plays going viral on TikTok for performing "Evil Jordan" by Playboi Carti on electric guitar at his school talent show.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Rome Wilson

NEW GUITARIST:

Zack Auslander

NEW GEAR: Seymour Duncan's

Hot Rail for Strat bridge pickup installed into my rose gold colored Fender Mustang American Performer

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:
Eric Gales

Mike Vennart (Biffy Clyro, ex-Oceansize)

SONG: Wet Leg, "Davina McCall"
ALBUM: Pulp, *More*. It's been a pretty indie year for me!
RIFF: Water from Your Eyes, "Life Signs"
SOLO: "Irukandji Syndrome" by Tropical Fuck Storm. Gaz Liddiard is an anti-guitar hero superhero.
GUITARMOMENT: Witnessing the end – in very real terms – of Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne. If that band were magically wiped from history, I'd simply turn to vapor. My love for them knows no bounds.

NEW GUITARIST: I'm guessing most of your readers don't know Kavus Torabi, but he's a hero 'round these parts.

NEW GEAR: The Boss DM-101 Delay Machine is absolutely dreamy. Just when I thought I had all the delay I'd ever need... My god, this thing is wondrous.

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO
TO MOST: Nick Drake, *The Making of Five Leaves Left*
GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:
Tony Iommi

Parris Mayhew (ex-Cro-Mags)

NEW GEAR: DigiTech Drop
ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO
MOST: Polyphia, *New Levels* *New Devils*. The band really came into their songwriting on the previous EP, *The Most Hated*, but *New Levels* was a major step forward. I never thought Seventies instrumental jazz a la Dixie Dregs-style music would ever come back in any shape or form, let alone be hip too, but it really is the only way to describe Polyphia in a known context.

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:
Scott LePage and Tim Henson of Polyphia. I can't really tell who is doing what, but it doesn't matter because every note on *New Levels*

New Devils is inspired, so my vote goes to the pair.

Angela Petrilli

SONG: "Everybody Knows" (live) by Bywater Call
ALBUM: *Need to Know*, Yates McKendree
RIFF: "Sittin' Pretty," Robert Jon & the Wreck
SOLO: "Keep On Running," Chris Buck (Cardinal Black)
GUITARMOMENT:

Paul Simon at Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. during the A Quiet Celebration tour. He played "The Sound of Silence" solo acoustic to end the show. You could hear a pin drop. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen or heard.

NEW BAND/ARTIST:
Robert Jon & the Wreck
NEW GUITARIST: Zach Person

NEW GEAR: Universal Audio UAFX Enigmatic

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO
MOST: *So Beautiful or So What* by Paul Simon

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:

Jimmy Page! It was so awesome watching *Becoming Led Zeppelin* in an IMAX theater. I'm in awe of his contributions to music, production and guitar.

Elliot Easton

ALBUM: *Horizons* by Daniel Donato

SOLO: J.D. Simo and Luther Dickinson, "Do the Rump!"

NEW GUITARIST:

Matteo Mancuso

NEW GEAR: Supro Black Magick and Fender Blues Junior IV 30th Anniversary

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO
MOST: King Curtis, *Everybody's Talkin'*, with Cornell Dupree on guitar

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:
Duke Levine, Joe Bonamassa and Derek Trucks

Steve Stevens

SONG: "Catch These Fists" by Wet Leg

ALBUM: Billy Idol, *Dream into It*

RIFF: Mammoth, "The End"

SOLO: Ian Thornley on Big Wreck's "Believer"

GUITARMOMENT: Back to the

Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

High Fade

NEW GUITARIST:

Andrew Synowiec
NEW GEAR: Universal Audio Apollo 16 ver. 2

ALBUM YOU

LISTENED TO

MOST: Wet Leg, *Moisturizer*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Nuno Bettencourt



Herman Li and Steve Plunkett's album of the year? *Redemption* by Lari Basilio

Steve Plunkett (ex-Autograph)

SONG: "Redemption," Lari Basilio

ALBUM: *Redemption*, Lari Basilio

RIFF: Joe Bonamassa, "Trigger Finger"

SOLO: Tim Pierce on my song, "Turn Up the Radio 2025"

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

The Southern River Band

NEW GUITARIST: Callum

Kramer and Jason Caniglia of the Southern River Band

NEW GEAR: Fender Tone Master Pro

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

MOST: Def Leppard, *Hysteria*

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Lari Basilio

Nick Rossi (Born of Osiris)

SONG: Thrice, "The Dark Glow"

RIFF: Bleed from Within, "God Complex"

SOLO: Travis Montgomery's solo in "Follow the Signs" by Born of Osiris

GUITARMOMENT: Watching Black Sabbath play for the last time at Back to the Beginning

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Lost in Separation

NEW GUITARIST: Marc Okubo, Veil of Maya

GUITARIST OF THE YEAR: Spiro Dussias

Travis Stever (Coheed and Cambria)

SONG: "Yvonne," Foxwarren

ALBUM: Arcadea's *The Exodus of Gravity* and Deftones' *Private Music*

RIFF: Deftones, "My Mind Is a Mountain"

GUITARMOMENT: Watching Nick Johnston step on the stage with Mastodon every night and not only fill the void of Brent Hinds but also bring a whole new vibe and life to the music. It was inspiring and fun to watch every night. And I also got to hear some new stuff they are working on, and let's just say some of the best is yet to come.

NEW BAND/ARTIST: Foxwarren

NEW GUITARIST: Rob Hammeren of High Vis

NEW GEAR: I love my Gibson Victory!

ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO

Damon Johnson (Brother Cane/Lynyrd Skynyrd)

SONG: "If This Means War," Brother Cane

ALBUM: Jason Isbell, *Foxes in the Snow*

RIFF: Deftones, "My Mind Is a Mountain"

SOLO: Jason Isbell, "Ride to Robert's"

GUITARMOMENT: Oasis' reunion

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Amyl and the Sniffers

NEW GUITARIST: Emily Roberts, the Last Dinner Party**NEW GEAR:** Fractal AX8 Amp Modeler/Multi-FX Processor**ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST:** Brother Cane, *Magnolia Medicine***GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:** Brent Hinds**Des Rocs
(Danny Rocco)****SONG:** Geese, "Taxes"**ALBUM:** *Fake Moon* by Cleopatrick**RIFF:** Badflower, "Swinging Hammer"**SOLO:** Zayn, "Break Free"**GUITAR MOMENT:** The Struts collaborating with Brian May**NEW BAND/ARTIST:**

Jigsaw Youth

NEW GUITARIST:

Jess Allanic of Calva Louise

NEW GEAR: Custom Des Rocs guitar made in collaboration with Aviator Guitars**ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST:** Cactus, *Restrictions***GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:**

Nicole Cerminara

**Jim Ward
(ex-At the Drive-In)****SONG:** Horsegirl, "Switch Over"**ALBUM:** Deftones, *Private Music***RIFF:** L.S. Dunes, "Violet"**GUITAR****MOMENT:**

Oasis' reunion

NEW BAND/**ARTIST:**

Gus Baldwin and the Sketch

NEW GUITARIST:

MJ Lenderman

NEW GEAR: Fender Tone Master Pro**ALBUM YOU LISTENED TO MOST:** U2, *Achtung Baby***GUITARIST OF THE YEAR:**

Jesse Welles



Jesse Welles performs at Farm Aid 50 in Minneapolis on September 20

**Cesar Soto
(Ministry)****SONG:** "Slowdive" or "Birds" by Turnstile. The vibe hits hard for me.**ALBUM:** *Never Enough* by Turnstile**RIFF:** The breakdown riff on "Birds" by Turnstile is pretty damn great.**SOLO:** "Seein'

Stars" by Turnstile is like a beautiful vocal line. If you can hum it and it creates an earworm, it's a beautiful memory capturing a beautiful moment.

GUITAR MOMENT:

The passing of Brent Hinds. He was in his own league when it came to his approach. Developing your own style isn't easy. For some, it just comes naturally.

NEW GUITARIST:

Russell Watson. He's a Southern

California kid who has the passion everyone should have. People like that create infectious motivation.

NEW GEAR: Seymour Duncan JB Rail pickups have been a blessing and a perfect complement for my style and technique.

**Billy Martin
(Good Charlotte)****SONG:** Architects, "Whiplash"**ALBUM:** *Sleep Token, Even in Arcadia***RIFF:** Deftones, "Infinite Source"**SOLO:** Mike Stringer of Spiritbox on "Soft Spine"**GUITAR MOMENT:**

The return of My Chemical Romance

NEW BAND/ARTIST:

Thornhill

NEW GUITARIST:

Braden Groundwater of Diamond Construct

NEW GEAR: Neural DSP Quad Cortex. **GW**

GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

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GUITARISTS OF THE YEAR

Guitar World's editors and writers
select 2025's MVPs

BY JONATHAN HORSLEY

YOU WON'T ALWAYS know when the *Guitar World* editorial conclave is in session to determine the magazine's top 20 guitar players of any given year, but as the internet might put it, there will be signs.

The heavy traffic to and from the office, as Grubhub delivery drivers beat a path to the door. The lights, always on, reveal hunched, anxious figures — some staffers taken to chewing aspirin and sipping bourbon to cope with the anxiety at the prospect of leaving out Tony Iommi, who played his final show with Black Sabbath and reissued his signature humbuckers via Gibson, or Yvette Young, whose Ibanez Talman met Superman on a movie soundtrack, developed a signature pedal with Walrus Audio and is helping emo kids sleep with music.

We feel bad that honorable mention Nick Johnston, who stepped into Mastodon as the late Brent Hinds' permanent replacement, didn't make the top 20, but when the smoke emerged as the hallowed 6L6 blew during the "Eureka!" moment, this was the final list. In no particular order, here are our top 20 guitarists (and, in some cases, guitar duos) of 2025.

Jake Kiszka & Chris Turpin

► THE ONLY MISTAKE Jake Kiszka and Chris Turpin made when putting together their transatlantic Greta-Van-Fleet-meets-Ida-Mae rock alliance was by naming it Mirador — Kiszka had misspelled "Marauder" — but even that worked out okay and was conceptually relevant.

"A mirador is basically a vista or a viewpoint suspended on a high place, typically overlooking a body of water," Kiszka told *GW*. "That seemed to fit, and it felt symbolic being that Chris is British and he was always looking to the West for influences, whereas I looked East and got my influences from Europe. So that's how we became Mirador."

The forces of kismet are keeping the wind in their sails. Or perhaps it is a more ordinary magic, as practiced by the big beasts of rock in the late Sixties and throughout the Seventies as the sonic expansion redrew the boundaries of artistic possibility. Kiszka and Turpin can see such horizons clearly; the sepia vistas of roots and blues to the shimmering silver of psychedelia, riffs, tumult and everything in between. Turpin says it was "hugely freeing" to be playing in a two-guitar band for the first time; "There was just a natural symbiosis between us, like feathers folding around each other."

"Feels Like Gold" opens Mirador's self-titled debut album as though heaved from

the earth, the guitars scratching the soil off themselves as a Headley Grange groove leans forward (BTW, Dave Cobb's production is on point). A project such as this deserves special instrumentation. Martin came through with Pre-War style acoustics, one-of-one custom builds complete with the Mirador logo. You'll also hear Kiszka's '61 Les Paul/SG let rip – most notably on "Roving Blade," which, with a little help from a Sixties Vox wah and a Fender Princeton, dropped jaws in the control room.

While we're at it, Jake and his Greta Van Fleet (and literal) brother, Sam Kiszka, made an appearance in the 2025 Dave Cobb-produced Bruce Springsteen biopic, *Springsteen: Deliver Me from Nowhere*. They're part of a fictional band that jams with "Bruce" at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

Jake E. Lee

JAKE E. LEE is Ozzy Osbourne's true miracle man. In October 2024, Lee was shot multiple times while walking his beautiful dog, Coco. Recovering from that sort of thing takes time, and getting fit to play again was further complicated by arthritis, which involves "strengthening, stretching and steroid shots" to manage.

"The cartilage is basically gone," he told *Guitar World*. "I've had to adjust my playing style to where I'm using mostly the elbow on the right hand, trying to use as much elbow movement as I can, while keeping the wrist movement down to a minimum."

A lighter pick and a set of .07s helped him recover in time to give his former boss the sendoff he deserved at July 5's Back to the Beginning all-dayer in Birmingham, England. He tore through "The Ultimate Sin" and "Shot in the Dark." The latter is a little on-the-nose, but you need a sense of humor in his business. This is the man who was playing with the Double O when Ozzy forgot the words to "War Pigs" and sung "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" instead, and most importantly, he was the player who brought his A-game when Ozzy needed it most. Twice.

Spiro Dussias

A GUITARIST WHOSE economy picking has its own laws of physics, people simply can't compute Spiro Dussias. He's got people making reaction videos simply to admit a total defeat of comprehension before their heads ultimately explode a la David Cronenberg's *Scanners*.

STEM researchers could probably break his technique down better than we could, but luckily Dussias was good enough to explain. He calls it "muted sweep picking."

"It comes from experimenting with the mechanics of economy picking and what you



Mirador's Jake Kiszka [left] and Chris Turpin

can do with different angles and muting," he said. "There's this notion that economy picking gives you a more fluid or bubbly sound than alternate picking – but I've been proving the opposite."

We all have heard testimonials from Tim Henson and Tosin Abasi, but Dussias' entire social media presence is filled with bamboozled A-list players in a state

of total cranial eruption. Just listen to "Negative." It's unreal, neo-shred as sci-fi, an arpeggiated code for the mother ship with instructions to beam him back. "But can we please keep him a little longer? Henson has something planned for him, and it ain't a BMX ride around suburbia under the light of the moon."

Tom Morello in action in Pryor, Oklahoma, on August 30



Tom Morello

IT IS NOT for his adventures in hot-wiring the electric guitar with tools he bought in Home Depot, nor for animating a next-gen Tony Iommi riff with a hip-hop beat and then blazing some Whammy squawk over the top. This year, Tom Morello makes our MVP list because of his powers of convening, serving as musical director for the biggest gig of the year (that didn't have two Gallagher brothers onstage), and maybe even the biggest metal gig of all time.

Hired by Sharon Osbourne to be Ozzy and Black Sabbath's head of HR for Back to the Beginning, Morello assembled a bill of A-list hard rock and metal talent for "Metal's Live Aid," raising a heap of money for charity. He also played some guitar, performing "Snowblind" and "Breaking the Law" with K.K. Downing and jamming with Aerosmith. Well, it would've been rude not to.

Marcus King

WHEN MARCUS KING is at home, he doesn't touch the guitar all that much and will sooner pick up a ukulele or banjo – or sit behind a piano before picking up the guitar – and you can hear that in his songwriting and his playing. Ably backed up by six-string lieutenant Drew Smithers on the Marcus King Band's 2025 studio album, *Darling Blue*, King's playing is unimpeachable. It's never too needy, his feel and note choice immaculate. It's like the opposite of Larry David; King's guitar always says the right thing at the right time.

King has spent the year in good company, getting himself sober with the help of his

wife, getting Derek Trucks, Charlie Starr, Billy Strings and more to sit in on *Darling Blue*. He played Gregg Allman's actual Guild Starfire bass on the sessions. Since King emerged from South Carolina with his grandfather's ES-345, Big Red, there's been this promise that he'd follow in that tradition and become the next giant of Southern rock, pulling soul, R&B, blues and more into his orbit. He's making good on it and then some.

Kiki Wong

ONE MINUTE, KIKI Wong was one of among 10,000 guitarists applying for the vacant role in the Smashing Pumpkins, the next she is on the cover of *Guitar World* alongside Pumpkins king Billy Corgan, looking like she had been there since day one. Wong is many things. For one, she's the most metal player in the band. She has a different skill set from James Iha and Corgan. She looks totally different, too. But as Corgan explained, that's what makes the Pumpkins.

"If you're looking across the stage at the Pumpkins, James is wearing a suit. I'm wearing a priest's dress, Jack is wearing the Manchester outfit of a lumberjack shirt and jeans, and Kiki looks like Rob Halford's cousin," he said. "And I go, 'Yeah, this is the band...'"

What Wong is doing musically is extending the Pumpkins' range. For all the honeyed melodies, the high-concept musical progressivism, they have always embraced audio extremity. Wong's down picking has given Pumpkins a monster power-up. "We're heavier with Kiki, which is actually to the benefit of the band live," Corgan said. What

happens next when the Pumpkins assemble in the studio will be fascinating.

Noel Gallagher

WE WILL HAVE to wait for the full story on how Oasis' reunion went down, but we'd like to think that, after years of being called a "potato" by his kid brother, Noel Gallagher finally got hungry and popped over to Liam's for some lasagne. Pasta fixes everything. Or was it simply inevitable that the fraternal wound would heal and they'd put the band back together to pack out a bunch of stadiums and play for more than a million fans in the U.K. and Ireland alone? And then they hit the U.S....

Either way, Oasis' triumphant second act put the spotlight back on Noel, the guitar player, and the Chief did not disappoint, stepping out of the rhythm game to play lead once more, setting the guitar internet ablaze when he pulled out this mystery P90-equipped Les Paul Standard, and later releasing it as a signed Murphy Lab limited-edition model. The word around the campfire is that the world's second biggest rock reunion of 2025 will reconvene in the not-so-distant future. Clearly, there were no hard feelings that Spinal Tap stepped out of retirement to steal their thunder. More on that soon.

Pat McCrory

THERE'S ALWAYS ONE player on our year-end MVP list whom you'll be advised to wear a crash helmet and gumshield when watching them perform live. This year it's Pat McCrory, the guitarist for hardcore superstars Turnstile, who of late has swapped Les Pauls for a Jackson Soloist, a high-performance upgrade for a band whose live show is worth a bruise or six weeks in bandages. No barrier, just lots of people living in the moment, etc.

Hardcore can be a cloistered medium, attracting a demographic that Thurston Moore has called "cement heads," but Turnstile's multimedia full-court press for their audience's affections combines brains, brawn and soul, and if McCrory's electrified riffs send you off a wedge monitor in celebration, well, there will be an abundance of similar-minded maniacs to catch you.

Nigel Tufnel

WHEN THE NEWS broke like the wind that Spinal Tap was getting the band back together, we had to seek out the British rock institution's firebrand lead guitarist, Nigel Tufnel, to get the story behind the biggest reunion of the year. We hope you enjoyed it. It wasn't easy.

Secreted in the north of England, selling cheese and trading guitars, Tufnel was living the quiet life, keeping his chops up in the pub circuit, Brown Sound to go with the warm brown beer. But for Tufnel and Tap frontman/guitarist David St. Hubbins, *Spinal Tap II: The End of the Beginning* was a serious guitar event, with custom gear coming in from the likes of Ernie Ball Music Man, Collings and Marshall. Joe Satriani made headlines when they showed up with the Ibanez JS-3 signature models he gave them, but proving there is a fine line between stupid and clever, Tufnel's new Marshall stole the show.

"Marshall has made for me an amplifier, the head, and if you look at the dials, it now goes to infinity," he told *GW*. "Just think about that for a moment. Think about infinity – oh, my God, that's literally infinity."

Stephen Carpenter

DEFTONES HAVE FOREVER been about contrasts, light and shade, war and peace, Netflix and chill, and *Private Music* continues in the tradition, threatening mosh-pit dynamite before Chino Moreno's barbiturate vocals smooth out the edges, casting us into a fugue state. They've been doing this since the Nineties, but it's still fresher than just-laundered bedsheets. Carpenter is principally in charge of building

the wall of sound, and this time he has a guitar tone cleaved from analog tube fire as his digital detox finds him reengaging with old-school amplifier worship. My, does it give some of those low-end riffs some physical energy. Sometimes it does us all good to touch grass now and again.

Chris Buck

NOT EVERYONE HAD been paying attention to Chris Buck's Friday Fretworks on YouTube or the social media and streaming metrics underpinning Cardinal Black's irresistible rise. When Buck booked a small show in Nashville, the promoter was skeptical – then aghast that tickets sold out in two hours.

Thing is, Buck and Cardinal Black have been doing bigger venues, most notably playing the Royal Albert Hall in 2022, as special guests of Peter Frampton. Cardinal Black's *Midnight at the Valencia* is similarly opening doors for their aggressive expansion into larger-capacity venues.

Midnight is a record of smoking-hot tones, the sound of vintage Fender combos being dimed into submission. Buck's signature pedal from ThorpyFX, Electric Lightning, is a tube overdrive/boost with a 3-band EQ that tells you everything about his tonal proclivities. The Welsh guitarist is in his 30s, yet his heart belongs to the holy ritual of pushing air.



Deftones' Stephen Carpenter in action. The band's latest, *Private Music*, gets Myles Kennedy's vote for album of the year



Chris Buck with a Yamaha Revstar and Fender Super Reverb

Nuno Bettencourt

NUNO BETTENCOURT SHOULD have lifetime tenure in our end-of-year list. There is no greater box-office rock player alive. But lifetime tenure is officially not a thing. Bettencourt's on this list because his performance at Back to the Beginning damn near stole the show – also begging the question why he never joined Ozzy's band.

"For better or worse, I've always had my sights set on – and I'll never reach it, probably – becoming Randy or Edward or Brian May or Jimmy Page, and the list goes on," he said. "You have this mission to carve your own path, whatever that is."

Well, Bettencourt's path has been carved by string-skipping, percussive harmonics and all kinds of juicy overdriven magic from a rig that's basically a Marshall and a Rat distortion pedal that's not even really on. When Extreme returned with *Six* in 2023, he said he was "out for blood." At Back to the Beginning he was collecting heads, ripping through "Believer," "Sweet Leaf," "Changes..." Even his warm-up shred in the car ride to the show was essential viewing. And we're not even getting into his MTV VMA appearance in September.

Oh, and he formed his own guitar company, Nuno Guitars, launching with two very Bettencourt-esque S-styles, reverse headstocks, a promise to continue with the N4, and carrying a lot of the design DNA from his 35-year-long collab with Washburn.

Mk.gee

MICHAEL TODD GORDON is his name. Mk.gee is his superhero name. The manipulation of sound is his superpower. And the guitar never stood a chance. He was always going to pick it up and bend it, mold it, reshape it, keep it lo-fi and yet somehow at the center of our attention.

Talent can take you places. But musical curiosity is its own kind of talent; it can take you strange places. This year it notably took Mk.gee into the studio with Canadian pop-superstar Justin Bieber to co-write, produce and play on "Daisies," the lead single from the first of Bieber's two new albums, *Swag*.

First, Eric Clapton declared his love for Mk.gee's talents, now Bieber. If we catch Mk.gee live and he has a friendship bracelet on, it'll be an "oh-shit" moment, because we know what's coming next... Don't rule it out.

In other news, Mk.gee's gourmet retro-chic tone also inspired the JHS Pedals 424 Gain Stage (reviewed on page 87), as everybody and their TikToker sought out the analog fuzzy drive magic of the direct-to-Tascam sound. A heroic 2025, sir.

Arianna Powell & Olivia Rodrigo

IF THE JACKSON Soloist is an unorthodox choice for a hardcore player like the aforementioned Pat McCrory, then it is something way out of left field for pop. But when you think about Arianna Powell's playing style, and more to the point, her

mission (to inculcate a love of all things guitar in an explicitly pop audience and to encourage more young people – especially girls – to pick up the instrument), it makes perfect sense. It's a platform for next-level virtuosity, blockbuster shred and, with Olivia Rodrigo the brains of the operation, also a serious player in her own right, the mission is proceeding as planned.

"We all get DMs on Instagram from fans that are stoked and wanting to play," Powell said. "And I can only hope that inspires them, right? [Olivia] has so many fans who are young girls and young women. It's important to see that."

So, yeah, booksmart with a degree in jazz guitar from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and a flair for stunt guitar, Powell is Rodrigo's ace in the hole. She might be this generation's Jennifer Batten, which is to say an icon in the making.

Daniela "Dany" Villarreal Vélez

WHATEVER YOU DO, never let Dany Villarreal of the Warning tune your guitar for you. Lord only knows how it would wind up, but it sure wouldn't be EADGBE. Pitch-shifted drop tuning and weird AF alternate tunings are the not-so-secret sauce in the Warning's competition-grade riffs. She explained to *Guitar World* how she tuned her baritone Fender Strat, and it still didn't make sense.

"It is a baritone guitar, but I have it dropped as well," she said. "So the last string is not in



Arianna Powell [left] and Olivia Rodrigo perform in Chicago on August 1

B, it's all the way down to A. For some reason, I always looked at this guitar as a seven-string guitar without the first string."

This unorthodoxy is giving the Warning's riff-rock serious weight. Who could have guessed that a band that shot to fame as teenage sisters covering "Enter Sandman" would later orbit the almighty riff as adults? The Mexican rockers grew up in full view of the internet, TV and onstage supporting blue-chip acts such as Muse and Royal Blood. Only now does it feel like they're approaching critical mass, Villarreal Vélez's rhythm figures rivaling Jupiter for gravitational pull.

Maya Delilah

GIVEN HER BRAVURA take on "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room" (more than a million views on YouTube), there is a lot of scuttlebutt about Maya Delilah being the quote/unquote "next John Mayer," and we hope for her bank account that this comes true. But artistically, she's doing just fine as Maya Delilah, a twenty-something singer-songwriter from north London, signed to Blue Note, whose debut longplayer, *The Long Way Round*, bears all the hallmarks of natural, unworked talent (belying the fact that Delilah is a booksmart alumnus of BRIT School for Performing Arts and Technology).

Like Marcus King, she's another artist whose voice is just as strong as his or her guitar playing, but *GW* has a beat to cover, and on guitar – be it the Strats you'll have seen her with after her graduation from the Fender Next 2024 program or the bizarro

Mk.gee with a Fender Jaguar in New York City...





Maton electric she unearthed – she has this fingerstyle approach that's just... Well, it can be learned but it can't be taught. "I think the only thing it feels like it holds me back from is occasional speed," she said. "But at this time, I feel like I get a lot more feeling when I play with my fingers as well."

Buddy Guy

FOR A MAN who was supposed to be retiring from the road, Buddy Guy has clocked up an impressive amount of shows in 2025. But then the world's greatest living bluesman is a force of nature, his Damn Right Encore Tour! testament to his physical and artistic momentum.

It's only when speaking to him that you realize his age, his stories recounting the formative years of Chicago blues, and the before times, growing up in Louisiana, the son of sharecroppers, seeing a first-generation blues guitarist for the first time, and what that did to a young kid. Dress him in dungarees with a polka-dot shirt, hand him a Strat, he's eternal.

Guy bemoans the lack of airplay for the blues, but like today's blues artists, he is transcending the traditional routes of promo, taking matters into his own two hands by starring in Ryan Coogler's box-office hit *Sinners* alongside the likes of Christone "Kingfish" Ingram and Bobby Rush. He also put out a new studio album this year, fittingly titled *Ain't Done with the Blues*.

"Muddy Waters and B.B. King – I knew 'em before they passed away," he said, speaking to



Muireann Bradley on stage in Waterford, England. Be sure to check out her live performance of "When the Levee Breaks" on our YouTube channel

Variety, "and they told me, 'Man, if you outlive me, just try to keep the blues alive.'"

Muireann Bradley

THE INTERNET HAS made cynics of many and skeptics of us all, so when 13-year-old Irish country blues artist Muireann Bradley first put her Blind Blake cover on YouTube, some would've harbored the suspicion that this was just one of another online phenomenon, like a German Shepherd driving a speedboat. But they would be getting Bradley all wrong.

This is a player weaned on old-timey country blues. Taught by her father, her musical vocabulary and playing style is drawn from players such as Reverend Gary Davis and Memphis Minnie, and from music that's over a century old and has been passed from generation to generation like an heirloom. Like Buddy Guy, she's here to keep the blues alive.

Bradley shoulders that burden lightly, playing in open tunings. Her fingerstyle approach isn't a million miles away from folk – but as Keb' Mo' says, blues and folk are one and the same. Bradley performs on her father's Waterloo WL-S Deluxe and WL-14 X, modern-day boutique reproductions of the a 1920s Stella and 1930s-style Gibson L-00.

Decca just signed her, remixed and reissued an expanded edition of her debut LP, *I Kept These Old Blues*, and it features a stellar rendition of "When the Levee Breaks," which brings it on back to its pre-Led Zep form. "A lot of people out there don't seem to

be aware that the original was written by Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy," she said.

"I just love Memphis Minnie; she was an amazing guitarist and incredible songwriter. There's another amazing version of the track by Philadelphia musician Ari Eisinger, which influenced me heavily." Bradley turns 19(!) this December.

Tim Henson

POLYPHIA'S SOUND HAS always been so difficult and/or dense that it was hard to imagine just how it would play live in physical spaces, where the audience is fewer than for their online presentations and yet orders of magnitude more demanding. Tim Henson and Scott LePage make "high-information music," as one-time collaborator and instrumental guitar guru Steve Vai would describe it. And Henson admitted to *GW* that the awesome spectacle of playing stadium shows and Euro festival slots has made them reconsider how to shape their sound for such occasions.

"It was really like, 'Oh, we're playing 'Playing God' to 80,000 people. And I have no idea what this sounds like to the 55,000th person way in the back there!'" Henson said. "It made us realize, like, 'Hey, we should start composing for it to work in these situations of 80,000-plus people.' So we're trying to, obviously, bring more energy by making it heavier."

Henson's strategy involves eight-strings, baritones and rethinking the instrument

from the ground up. "We're just making new guitars that don't exist for the sole purpose of writing something really, really cool," he said.

How that turns out is TBC. Henson, in the meantime, has been in perpetual motion, guesting on the Babymetal record, collaborating with Hans Zimmer on the *FI* score (Johnny Marr, Guthrie Govan and now Henson? Zimmer can pick 'em), playing stadium shows with System of a Down, pulling together guests for his solo album and Polyphia's next LP, the latter to feature SOAD frontman Serj Tankian... And so on. Just how much RAM is left in Henson's giga-brain?

Hester Chambers & Rhian Teasdale

WATCHING WET LEG simply enjoy being in an indie-rock band – and embracing it as the unreal reality that they are living through – is a legal high with no comedown. They are like a 21st-century indie-pop Devo – utterly singular, lo-fi, meta, high-volume and playing altered-states oddball disco for oddball and mainstream audiences alike.

At the fulcrum is Hester Chambers, assuming the Malcolm Young position way

Wet Leg's Hester Chambers [*left*] and Rhian Teasdale do their thing at Glastonbury on June 27



in the back, working a Kramer Jersey Star as though it were some incognito choice. Fellow guitarist Rhian Teasdale goes over the top, 100 percent gung-ho in her role as frontwoman, heaving a fluoro-green, see-thru acrylic B.C. Rich Mockingbird.

Famously, Teasdale didn't play guitar until they formed the band – at the top of a Ferris wheel – and approached it with the musical purpose of a pianist and the

naïvety of the novitiate, and that's how you can make a sound that... Well, how you can make a record like Wet Leg's sophomore album, *Moisturizer*? "She's got a really beautiful way of playing and writing," Chambers said. "She's not restricted, not like, 'Oh, I need to learn these chords so I can make this song.' She just kind of plays around." **GW**

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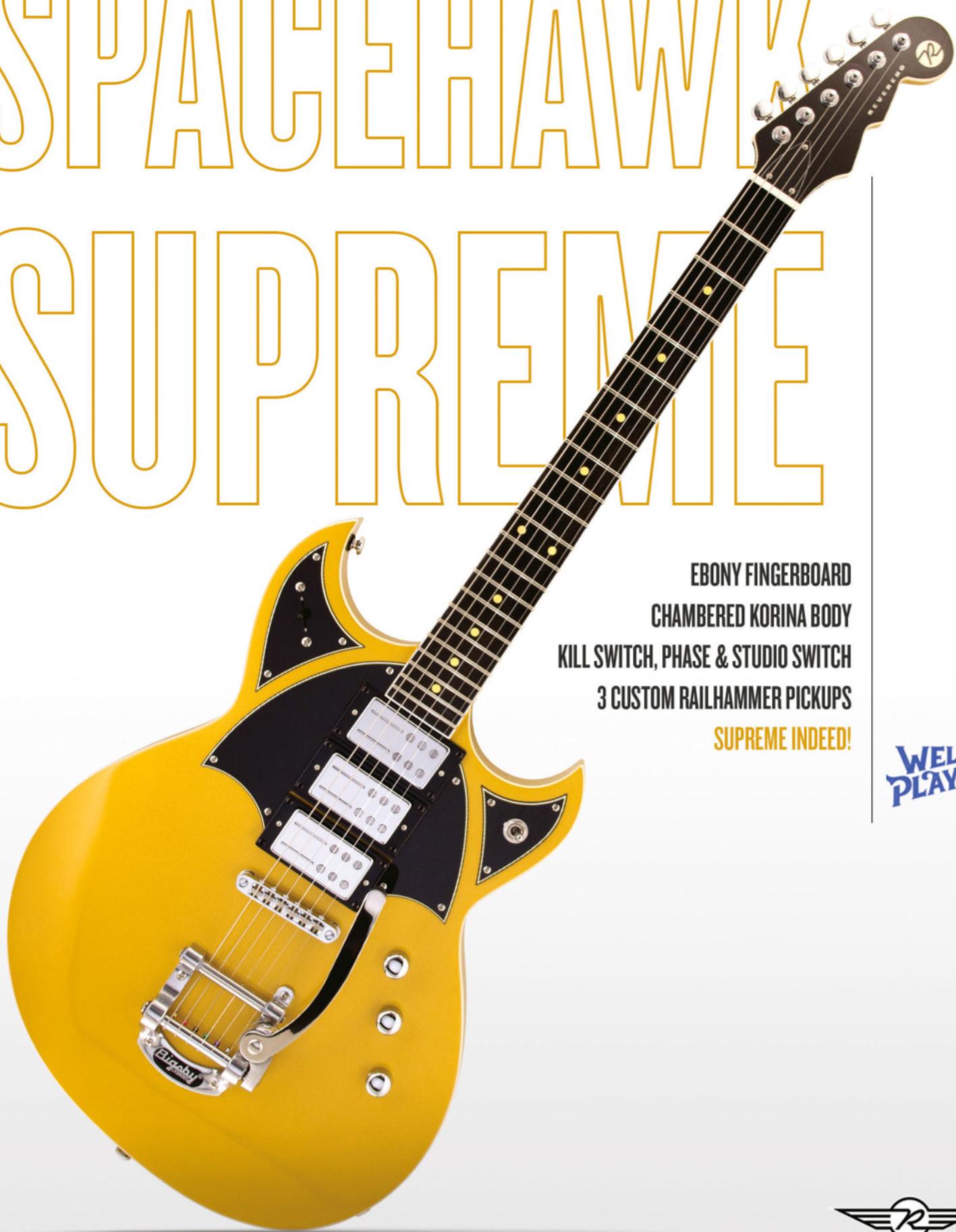
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Nuno Bettencourt

Which veteran ax horseman came galloping back into the guitar headlines in 2025? Say hi, Mr. B...

BY ANDREW DALY



IF YOU'VE BEEN following Nuno Bettencourt over the past couple of years, you'll be no stranger to his domination of all things electric guitar. For new fans, Nuno's theatrics feel fresh and new, but in reality, the guy is pushing 60 and has been rippling it up since the late Eighties.

But Nuno is doing nothing new; it just feels that way because it felt like he'd been, well, away for a while. That all changed when Nuno's longtime band, Extreme, dropped *Six* in 2023. It was their first album in 15 years, so it's not difficult to see why a very non-guitar-oriented scene had forgotten about him. But even with all that time passed, it seems ridiculous that people could just forget some-

ABOVE Nuno Bettencourt performs in Las Vegas during Extreme's *Thicker Than Blood* tour, February 29, 2024

one so evergreen. Yet it happened. Nuno's response? To kick us in the teeth six ways till Sunday — and then do it all over again on Monday. That's just how it is for a player who has been, is and always will be "out for blood."

And during Nuno's latest statement moment — namely his utter guitar-related ownership of this year's July 5 Back to the Beginning show in celebration of Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne — Jake E. Lee took notice.

"Jake said to me, 'You're one of the most well-rounded players — and what a player should be in a band,'" Bettencourt says.

"That was everything I wanted to be. I wasn't trying to chase anybody. I wanted to be in my own band. I wanted to be well-rounded. I was attracted to the guys who could rip but were in bands, could write songs, lyrics and melodies."

Dating back to his days as a young gun out of Boston, Bettencourt has done precisely that. With Extreme, a band that by his own admission was always a rock 'n' roll stepchild, he dropped songs like "Mutha (Don't Wanna Go to School Today)," "Get the Funk Out" and the polarizing yet popular "More Than Words." But, despite the chance to become the next solo guitar legend — and an infamous offer to join Ozzy's band after Zakk Wylde departed — Bettencourt never deviated from his plan to keep guitar music alive in a band setting.

"I'm really lucky," he says. "I don't take shit for granted. I keep it in my head, and I try to retain the feeling because that's something that no drug, no alcohol can give. Period."

When it comes to guitar, nothing but the sound of Bettencourt with a six-string in hand can give listeners that feeling either. The world's shutter-shocked reaction to *Six*, specifically the solo within "Rise," is proof of that admittedly hyperbolic statement. But is it really all that hyperbolic? There are plenty of great guitarists out there, but few dominate like Bettencourt. Few take over. And even fewer do so with humility, all while curb-stomping anyone who dares cross their path. It's that dichotomy that makes Nuno great, and dare we say, an outright legend.

"People are saying I was the MVP [of *Back to the Beginning*]," Nuno says. "But really, all I did was go up and be myself. All I did was learn and respect the songs. But I feel somewhat like after it happened, it kind of made me go full circle and realize who I am, what I did, why I showed up, why I was there... and maybe why they respected me enough to ask me. And it had nothing to do with guitar

ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

"I TEXTED JAKE AND TOLD HIM, 'YOU ARE JAKE E. LEE..."

players outdoing each other, or being in the same breath as Randy Rhoads, Jake E. Lee, or being in the company of Tony Iommi."

Nuno might not be the kind of guy who attempts to decide on his own legacy, but what he can – and has – decided on is where he takes his career revival next. To that end, he's working on "15 or 16 new songs" with Extreme and has launched a new range of instruments, Nuno Guitars. Two new models, the Dark Horse and the White Stallion, are set to be the brand's first guitars, and – as the marketing text puts it – the Nuno company will be "continuing the legacy of the N4," his longstanding signature Washburn instrument. Continuing the equine metaphor, the press release describes the new guitars as "true workhorses built with the same passion I've put into every note I've ever played. Let's ride!"

"This has been the culmination of everything I've ever learned, studied, done and respected," he says of the whirlwind of the last two years. "And with Back to the Beginning, I was there to represent that as a guitar player. But I'm more than a guitar player. I'm a songwriter, a musician, a vocalist and an arranger. It was the culmination of all of that."

You were one of the highlights of Back to the Beginning. Where was your head at after that experience?

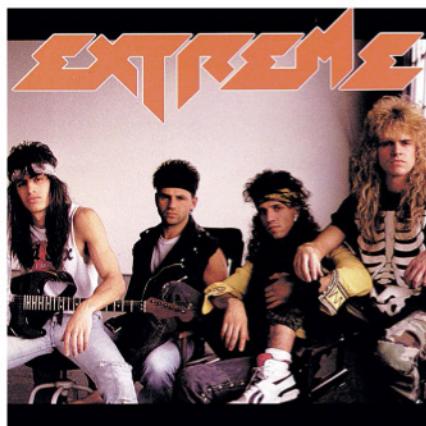
I mean, did it actually happen? [Laughs] It was one of those days where you just have to somehow believe the footage and photos and know you were actually there – and that you were invited. It was one of those milestone life and career moments. But I'll be completely honest. When I first saw the ad at the beginning of the year, and I saw that it was Black Sabbath, Ozzy's last show and all these amazing bands, I wasn't bitter – but I was surprised.

Why was that?

I saw the massive list of individual artists from different bands playing, who I imagine were there for a reason and had a connection, and I wasn't mentioned. I wasn't invited. I was like, "Okay..." Not that I felt like I should be, but it was like, "It would have been great to be a part of this."

Where did your mind go when you started to ruminate on that?

I was asked by Ozzy to join his band in 1995, and I was thinking, "Maybe it's because I turned it down." Nobody says no to Ozzy; it's the guitar gig of a lifetime. But then I was



HIS EXTREME DEBUT
EXTREME (1989)



HIS EXTREME LATEST
SIX (2023)

like, "Get over yourself! They just have a lot of people." But I started going to this place because Extreme has always been on the outside, like the bastard child of rock 'n' roll.

In the sense that no one knew what to do with you because of the genre-fluid nature of the band's music?

Nobody ever knew what to do with us. Between "More Than Words" and all the funk and horn stuff, they were like, "These guys aren't rock or metal..." But then I got a call to do the show.

Jake E. Lee has alluded to the fact that your role expanded massively along the way. What was that like?

It was exciting to be included. Tom Morello, who was putting these groups together, which was like wrangling cats, said, "Everybody is coming in, guesting and doing these supergroups. You'd be a part of one super-

group and do a couple of songs." Then, three days later, he was like, "Can you do another three songs?" [Laughs] He said, "So and so isn't coming." A couple of days later, he said, "Do you want to do another two or three? Wolfgang Van Halen is pulling out. He can't do it because of scheduling stuff. He has a gig the next day."

And of course, you were also on tour with Extreme at the time.

I said, "Tough shit. I have a gig the next day, too!" [Laughs] I had to fly from Birmingham and do that thing we're not allowed to do, which is fly the day of a show. If a flight goes wrong and you're playing a gig with Def Leppard in Canada on one of the biggest stages, what if you don't make it?

You ended up doing it anyway. How did you make that work?

My manager initially said, "You've got to choose one." I said, "Hell, no! I want to do the gig with Def Leppard, and I'm not not doing the Sabbath and Ozzy show. I'm doing both. Figure it out. Get backup flights. I'll take a rowboat across if I have to." I ended up doing 12 songs. [Laughs]

And you ended up being the proverbial "MVP" of the show!

I said, "Now I gotta get to work. Let me sit down and get this stuff right." I started playing it, and I was like, "Oh, this is why people pulled out." [Laughs] Not that it's technically impossible to play, but you gotta do your work because Randy's stuff was a little bit of a different language.

How so?

I hadn't played that stuff since I was a teenager. Back then, I believed I was playing it correctly, but I wasn't even close. It wasn't just the solos; it was the fingering. It's this classically driven, melodic, beautiful, just great – but fiery as hell – stuff. For some reason, I thought it was just melodic. But I was like, "No, there's some fire in here. There's some crazy shit going on here." And then after the solos, there's all these amazing licks in the rhythm playing. You can't improvise this stuff. You can't just almost do it, you know? It's Randy Rhoads – but it's also Jake E. Lee.

It sounds as if it was a transcendent experience on that stage.

You look over, and you've got all these iconic legends. It's like, "Where am I? What the fuck is happening here?" I definitely tried

THERE'S NO WAY IN HELL I'M TAKING THAT GUITAR SOLO!"



to not represent just me – I felt like I wasn't representing me at all – but representing history. I really wanted to do right by Randy, Jake and Tony Iommi. I felt like I had two versions of me there. One, especially during the photoshoot, where you're standing shoulder-to-shoulder, touching giants – was the version of me, going, "I belong here, right?" There's a part of me that's like, in a very dream sequence way, sees an Azorean Portuguese immigrant sitting in his bedroom in Hudson, Massachusetts. That version of me was standing there going, "You know what, somebody is about to walk in here from security, grab me and go, 'Hey, kid, get out of here. You don't belong here.'" I was like, "I'm gonna wake up and just be this 15-year-old kid, going, 'Fuck, I had this dream...' and everybody is going to go, 'Oh, that's impossible.'"

When Extreme released *Six*, you came out of nowhere to set the guitar world on fire again. In a lot of ways, what you're talking about now seems like the culmination of the trip you've been on since then, where you talked about a mission statement of helping guitar make a comeback.

I thought about that. It's like what sort of strange destiny was this for me in that sense? I was going for blood on that album, like I always do, but at a time when guitar-driven albums aren't around so much. When I was coming up, we were so spoiled because there were albums with great guitar players coming out every month. We were in the company of giants. From Edward Van Halen and Yngwie Malmsteen and all these great bands that

ABOVE Tom Morello [*left*] and Bettencourt rehearse for Back to the Beginning on July 4 at Villa Park in Birmingham, England

had great guitar players, we were so spoiled. They were everywhere. So I think you're right. When *Six* came out, I didn't realize – until I started reading the comments, and I was like, "Wait – what's happening?"

After being named guitar's MVP in 2023, and now being named Back to the Beginning's MVP, are you able to accept that level of praise?

After seeing the "Rise" solo being called the "solo of the century" in some magazine, I remember saying to Steve Lukather, "Come on, this is ridiculous." He said, "Look, we know you've always been able to do this stuff, so it wasn't like we were shocked. But people were starved for guitar playing within a band." It was just the band like it used to be, going for blood. There are still great artists out there, but I think it was the new-music thing. It was like, "Let's try and bury what we did. Let me up myself and what I did in the past." It was that feeling of like we were back in the day, where when you looked at Edward, or any guitar player you admired, you said, "What are they going to come up with next? What are they going to do to blow your mind?"

Returning to Back to the Beginning, it seems an interesting relationship was formed between you and Jake E. Lee. You didn't know each other before July 5, but it seemed like the vibe between you two was very natural.

I was talking to Jake constantly, having to

smack him in the head. Every once in a while, I'd go, "Stop walking around here so fucking damn humble." [Laughs] I told him, "You're fucking Jake E. Lee!" Not only did he replace Randy, but he took Ozzy to another place.

Is it true that you made sure that Jake had his moment onstage without another player, kind of like the old days?

At one point, Tom Morello said, "Jake said, 'I know Nuno has a lot on his plate, but could he maybe take the 'Ultimate Sin' solo?'" We all know that, as legendary as Jake is, he's struggling a little bit, as we all do as we get older and don't know what's going to happen to our hands and bodies. But I told Tom, "Give me his phone number right now." I texted Jake and told him, "You are fucking Jake E. Lee. There's no way in hell I'm taking that solo. You're going to play that solo. And not only that, I'll double it with you, and we'll do it together. Whatever happens, it's going to be fucking incredible," and that's what we did.

And I was supposed to play on "Shot in the Dark." I didn't tell anybody I was doing it – but I just walked off the stage. [Laughs] I wanted Jake to have his moment without another guitar player stealing his thunder. We all came from one-guitar bands. We didn't want rhythm guitarists. I wanted Jake to have his one moment up there by himself, so I just left. And Jake nailed it.

Is Extreme working on a follow-up to *Six*?

The fans made me realize, "Don't wait too long to do another album. You're lucky to have these fans. You're lucky to have this opportunity of being asked to do this stuff." And all of this stuff is happening to me at age 58. Nobody gets a second bite at the apple like that. Not with a new album, not with this kind of restart, right? And I'm thinking to myself, "Don't fuck this up, man. You're lucky. You're lucky at this age to be doing this." I turned 59 on September 20. I'm lucky to have this opportunity. I started saying to myself, "Fuck that album [*Six*]. I want to up that." That's what we used to do. That was the game.

The only difference is that Extreme was taken for granted back then, but now you're one of the hottest guitar tickets in the game.

The game was, "Don't sit there and let people say they love what you did and repeat it." It was, "You've gotta raise the bar for yourself every time." Whether you do it or not doesn't matter. But the excitement of raising the bar and being creative is what it was all about.

"IF BEING AMONG ALL THESE LEGENDS AND HEROES DOESN'T

What does being creative mean to you?

It's not only being creative with lead guitar, but with rhythm guitar, songwriting, melodies, harmonies, production – all of it. We have just about 15 or 16 songs already. If touring wasn't enough to kick you in the ass, and being among all these legends and heroes doesn't inspire you for your next album, I don't know what does.

Is there any gear you can't live without?

I'm going to say it's my hands. We know amps are important, and I've been playing this DSL live that I think I've finally locked into. But for anybody who's chasing gear to make themselves sound better, that's never going to happen. You need to find pieces of gear that allow your hand to allow you to express yourself in the best way. It's like finding a head that doesn't tamper too much with what your hands are saying and doing and – tonally – finding pedals that don't get in the way of that, like to where they process so much that it's not you anymore. The key is to find a pick that's the right gauge and the right strings.

I've been using GHS Boomers for, I can't remember, like my whole life. Every time another company comes to me and says, "Do you want to do an endorsement? We can send you a bunch of strings," I give it a shot, and I can't even bend them correctly. They bend too far or they sound too bright or just different. Find a string, a pedal, a pick, an amp and a speaker that best interprets you and doesn't get in the way of the power, expression and voice that your hands have. That's your secret weapon. The only true pedals, speakers and amps you need are your hands.

What's the key to making a rig that feels wrong or "off" work?

You should be able to plug into a small, shitty amp or anything somebody gives you. Your hands should, at the very least, be 70 to 80 percent of who you are. Even if the amp sucks, you should still make it talk. I've been there. Don't get it twisted; there are bands that know you're coming to their gig, and they have a "second rig" for that person.

A second rig? Is that pretty standard?

It's not the same rig as they're playing through. I'll tell you that right now. [Laughs] I've dubbed it the "punishment rig." The one where you're going to show up, and it's not going to have that much distortion or sustain; the guitar has action three miles off the neck and there are no special pedals, no special sauce. But you're gonna have to get up there



and battle it out with whatever it is. You're gonna have to show the fuck up, no excuses. That's when you separate the men between the boys – on the punishment rig. [Laughs]

Do you feel it took some years before people got hip to what Extreme was doing?

We had our fans, but in terms of the mainstream, we were the band that had "More Than Words." We were the band that had a guitar player, but there was always something that was a little disconnected. We never had proper respect. A lot of people are saying that it wasn't until *Six* that – as a band – we're finally being respected as a rock band with a guitar player who legitimately had a great album.

Do you agree with that?

I think they're correct because I don't think we were ever in the conversation until that album, which is really odd to say because we had three or four rock albums already. But our songwriting, melodies, harmonies and lyrics were a lot of beautiful stuff. We always had a Queen element; that's part of our DNA, and that almost got in the way sometimes of our rock 'n' roll.

None of that would have happened if you had chosen a different path with Ozzy.

I think you're right. Instinctively, inside, I knew I probably didn't belong in Ozzy's history. Those other guys had already carved

ABOVE Bettencourt [left] in action with Yungblud at the 2025 MTV Video Music Awards in New York City on September 7

it for themselves – and that's a big-ass responsibility. I didn't do it out of fear of stepping into someone else's shoes, like coming in after Zakk Wylde. I would have been honored to do that. I just felt like I was always supposed to carve my own path.

You seem like you have a handle on who you are as a player, which surely will help you as you move forward and continue to champion guitar-driven music.

Back to the Beginning was the culmination of all of this. All these people who were in bands, and hanging with them, that's where my place was. My place wasn't just to show up and shred and do whatever. My place was to go up and show respect. And if I got credit for people saying I was the MVP, I hope they believe it's because I wasn't trying to sit there, hang and be a better guitar player than any of these guys, stuff that I was playing.

I was just saying, "You know what? If I've got something to say here, it's that I can walk onto this fucking stage with all the work I've done for my whole life because I've respected every element of the band." To me, that's my only superpower. To be able to have the balls and the confidence to walk in – and it's not ego, or thinking I'm the shit – and just go, "You've been working your whole life, respecting the music so that I can be in the company of giants, and I can fucking hang with you guys for this day." **GW**

THE GEAR HUNTER

PRS Guitars

Where were you when Paul Reed Smith launched his company no fewer than four decades ago? We sit down with the maestro to discuss the first 40 years of his iconic brand

BY AMIT SHARMA



FORTY YEARS AGO, Maryland native Paul Reed Smith took a chance on starting his own guitar company with no idea how things would pan out. It's a good thing he chose to roll the dice. He's since become one of the world's most respected builders – someone whose creations encapsulate the very notion of a well-crafted and custom-made boutique instrument. Early on, he'd made guitars for Peter Frampton, Al Di Meola and Carlos Santana, and having witnessed firsthand how well his innovations had been working

"I did make a guitar for Eddie Van Halen, but that's a long story..."

out for them, he launched PRS Guitars at the 1985 NAMM Show, debuting the newly designed Custom 24.

It'd be fair to say a lot has happened over the four decades since then, with top-shelf musicians like John Mayer, Orianthi and John McLaughlin signing up to become signature artists, as well as the more metallic players from bands like Alter Bridge, Opeth and Periphery. While it'd be fair to say Smith's output has taken some degree of influence from the classic formulas pioneered in the Fifties, models like the Custom 24 are notable for having their own kind of identity – from the 25-inch scale length that sits right in between the original Gibson and Fender designs to the custom bird inlays, jaw-dropping flame finishes and highly dependable tremolo system.

With the U.S.-made Core line retailing for several thousands of dollars, there were many years where these guitars were generally regarded as instruments for doctors, dentists and lawyers. That all changed in 2001 with the launch of the overseas-produced SE Santana, which kick-started a whole line of models marrying quality with affordability. Since then, the line has expanded with various semi-hollow, extended range and piezo options – building up a fierce reputation as the best guitars you can find within their price range. It's been one hell of a journey, says Smith, whose company now stands as the world's third best-selling brand.

If you could go back in time and talk to the young man just starting out, what would you say?

"Don't stop – it's going to take you longer to mature than you think, but you'll survive, so don't worry about it too much!" I had a dream once, and I've never told anyone this, but I heard this loud voice and woke up in a cold sweat. The words I heard were, "It's 10 times more complicated than you ever imagined." And that's been true, from finally getting the pickups right for John Mayer, getting our necks to remain stable and our finishes to not injure the tone. I decided not to be a hermit – like "Nobody gets to talk to Paul!" – and instead, be the kind of person who talks to everybody.

What do you think has helped separate you from every other brand?

Guitars are tools for a job. I remember watching Carlos Santana playing the Oscars, and all I wanted was for the guitars to stay in tune and do what he needed. I just want my guitars to do their job. I don't sit there and feel this sense of pride, like, "I made that." I just hope the performance goes well. You only get one shot when

you're on the Oscars. You break a string? You're dead. That's it — sharp bridge saddle? Done. It only takes one thing to go wrong.

How'd you get into building?

There are two kinds of people. One will say, "I've got nothing to offer" and people will say, "No kid, you come with me." Then you've got the other kind who keep shouting about what they have, and everybody is like, "You've got nothing. Shut up and go home!" I was in group two. Some of the musicians I've worked with are in group one. They'd go to the studio and get told to sit in a chair and not move. Brent Mason is that way. He'd send in demos of himself singing, because he's a great singer, and they'd ask, "Who is on guitar?" When they found out it was him, the deal was done. I'd show people my guitars and everybody would say, "No, no, no!" But nice people like Carlos Santana would say, "What have you got?" He didn't care about what anyone else thought.

You had to make your own luck, to some degree.

Well, I didn't get invited to make Eric Clapton a guitar at 13. I started my journey because I wanted to play guitar, but like oil and water, it ran away from me. But if I opened a case on the counter of the biggest music shop in Washington, D.C., it would draw a crowd. The world was saying, "This is what you have to offer," but it still wasn't "Come with me." I was told my whole life that if you make something magical, the world will beat a path to your door. What a load of bullshit. If you make something magical, you might be able to get an appointment for 15 minutes. Guitar makers come around once every 30 years, and I've studied them all. I can't tell you how many times I've put guitars in cases and said, "Go do your job." I don't need to be there when the case is opened. I also realized you can be a nice guy and get no orders, or you could be a difficult human being and the world will give you tons. It's nothing to do with how



Paul Reed Smith in 2002
with a custom PRS
single-cut made for Creed

**"I just want
my guitars to
do their job"**

you are, it's to do with the caliber of the art you make. Guitars will sound good and play well regardless of how nice the builder is.

**You were a custom builder for high-profile artists
before launching your own company.**

I made a deal with all of them saying if they didn't



[from left] A PRS SE Standard 24, S2 Standard 24 and SE Standard Tremonti, photographed in 2015 next to a PRS 2 Channel combo

fall in love with the guitar, I'd give them their money back. Carlos would say, "You mean, if I don't love it, I don't have to buy it? Under that deal, I'll take it!" At that time, asking \$2,000 for a guitar was outrageous. I think \$900 was the ceiling. When we came out with a guitar at \$1,000, it was pretty out there. I remember having a meeting with our reps and all of them telling me we can't do this. It's not that I wanted to charge more; it cost more to make because it took more time and the parts cost more money. That's just the way it was – and is.

Ted McCarty was an early mentor. What do you remember about him?

He wasn't famous when I met him. He was a forgotten man, and I love that he got put back on the map. The last time I took him to NAMM, I rolled him around in a wheelchair and everybody came out to say goodbye to him, knowing it was the last time. He was cool, a real champion. He'd fall asleep and then I'd wake him up saying, "Ted, you've got an interview," so he'd do that and go back to sleep. He was kinda like the grandfather I never had. He trusted me. He handed us the baton, like in a relay race.

The SE line felt like a long time coming. It's incredible how close they can be to your Core models.

That was our goal. At one point, the SEs were going to go away; we were having trouble with sales. And all the guitar teachers in America made their students buy SEs



John Mayer with a PRS Silver Sky in 2019

"Ted McCarty was kinda like the grandfather I never had"

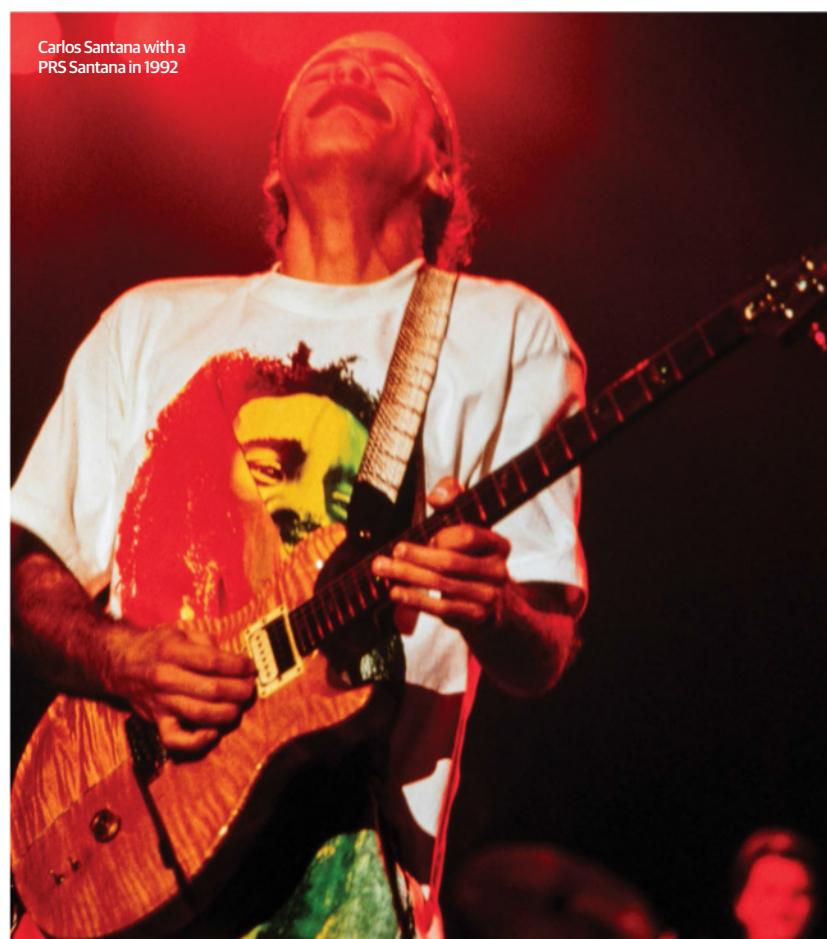
because they couldn't teach kids how to play guitars that wouldn't stay in tune. The teachers saved the line and we were back at the races. But it was almost done. That happens a lot in the guitar business.

Your guitars are no longer just for doctors, dentists and lawyers. Did that perception ever bother you?

No. The reason people would say those things is because doctors and dentists would have enough money to buy early Private Stocks and 10 Tops. When the S2 and SEs came out, that was over. Did it bother me? No. What bothered me was that one time I saw a catalog that said, "Best fit and finish in the entire industry" on our page, but on the Gibson page it said, "The sound of rock and roll." I thought to myself, "Wrong comment on the wrong page!" Frankly, there's a new sound we've come up with on our TCI guitars that doesn't sound like a Gibson, Fender, Les Paul, SG, Strat, Tele, Ibanez or anything. It's a humbucker that sounds like a single-coil, and I couldn't be happier.

There's a lot of speculation out there about where tone comes from. You've always seemed to be on "team wood."

According to the Internet, the only thing that's important when you play a Stradivari violin is the Neumann microphone hanging over the top of it. People say the same about guitars. I don't buy it. That means dead strings mean nothing. I mean, really? Put Vaseline all over your strings, pluck it and tell me your guitar sounds the same. I just don't buy it. What I do buy is that the pickup is half of it, but it ain't all of it, no way. For some people, if a guitar has no sustain, they buy a compressor. If it has no after-ring, they buy a reverb pedal. I understand that. I mean, Jimi Hendrix had a Uni-Vibe, a wah-wah, this and that, but I'm sorry, if you listen to the rhythms on "The Wind Cries Mary," that's just him playing a new guitar and amp and he sounds gorgeous. I don't buy the simplistic view. You can't take one of the only pieces I have away from me, saying it makes no difference. Alright then, make a guitar out of balsa wood and rubber, then add your pickup. I just don't buy it.



Carlos Santana with a PRS Santana in 1992

What's the greatest sound you've ever heard from a PRS on an album?

"Smooth" by Santana. I went to Japan when that song was a hit and it was the sound of Tokyo. You walked down the street and every store with speakers outside would be playing that song. I was in a grocery store yesterday and that song is still playing. Out of all the PRS guitars I've made, the one used for that song had the most impact. He got something like 10 Grammys for that song. He walked into my office after that, slammed the door and said, "I swear to God I haven't changed," basically telling me the fame hadn't gone to his head. And he said thank you to every single person in my factory. In the Jewish world, we call him a mensch, the very highest level of human being. He was spectacular that day and has always been.

Who would you love to work with that you haven't had the chance to yet?

Jimmy Page, except I did make a guitar for him. He used one of our guitars on the Outrider tour, and it was some of the best tremolo work I'd ever heard. I did make a guitar for Eddie Van Halen, but that's a long story and he's gone. People don't know this, but Jeff Beck had a PRS at home and he loved it. He told me I'd never see him with it but he used it to record. We've been trying to get it back; it wasn't part of the auction this year, but I know he loved that guitar. Of course, he's not with us anymore either – and the same goes for Stevie Ray Vaughan. I could say Eric Gales, but he's played our guitars plenty

of times. Joe Bonamassa told me that the first guitar he bought with his lawnmower money as a kid was a PRS McCarty. I like Joe, but I don't think we are in his destiny right now. There are an awful lot of people playing PRS guitars that you don't know about, but I do know they do. So I'd have to say David Gilmour. I've met him, he's a sweetheart and was really nice to me. The way he plays guitar is very written and intentional. American players are more like wild Mustangs – they just go for it. English players look for more beautifully written parts. Apparently, David spent two weeks on the "Comfortably Numb" solo. That's the story. I don't know if it's true, I don't even care if it's not true, it's just a good story.

What can we expect from PRS over the next couple of years?

I'd like to see the McCarty IIIs and TCIs accepted. It's staggering, the amount of artists playing the Silver Sky, which came out of us retooling an old 1963 pickup. I played a Charcoal Phoenix at our 40th-anniversary party. That went well. The new John McLaughlin went well. I'd like to see this stuff establish itself. You have to remember Les Pauls were out of business until Slash picked one up. Strats were out of business until Hendrix picked one up. Then people like Danny Gatton, Roy Buchanan and Bruce Springsteen brought Teles back. The guitar market is slow to move. I want some of our new products to get their feet more grounded in the long-term evaluation. I would like to see more acceptance across the board. **GW**

"Guitar makers come around once every 30 years, and I've studied them all"

**BORN
IN THE
USA**

KYSER.



Ibanez Q54W

The headless resurgence continues, this time from an iconic brand

BY JONATHAN HORSLEY

► A BIG PART of the appeal is obvious before even taking the Q54W out of its gig bag. It's so light, so compact. Where's the rest of it? We'd hesitate to call it travel-friendly because that can ghetto-ize an instrument – but it is exactly that, weighing just a couple of ounces over five pounds.

And it really does look like a guitar for 21st-century adventures in tone and technique, with its Copper Metallic Matte finish perhaps a sign that guitar makers are now looking away from Motor City automobiles and to iPhones for finish inspiration.

The Q54W presents us with a humbucker at the bridge and two R1 single-coil pickups at the middle and neck positions, plus knurled metal dials in Cosmo black to match the bridge. The HSS setup gives us even more core tones.

The five-way blade-style pickup selector switch works in concert with the Alter Switch for Ibanez's

Dyna-Mix 9 switching system, offering nine core tone variations.

It's seems slight, but the Q54W is a lot of guitar. The question is whether it was worth sacrificing one of the guitar world's most iconic headstocks in pursuit of a radical new high-performance platform.

Ibanez describes the neck as a Goldilocks profile – 21mm at the first fret, swelling very slightly to 22mm at the 12th. It is a Wizard C, but there is some shoulder to it that calls to mind the Modern D profile of Fender's American Ultra II range, even if it lacks the X factor of that high-end range. All things considered, with its Gibson-esque 12" fingerboard radius, the neck is the least radical proposition on the Q54W. And the feel is sumptuous; slinky, easy – and that's

with the factory 10s on it; sizing down would make it slinkier still.

Ibanez maintains that the Q58 humbucker was designed specifically for the headless guitar. Does the headstock's size, or even its very presence, make much of a difference to how it reacts with the pickup?

We can say it is a typical high-output ceramic humbucker; bright and bold, abundant clarity and top-end, punchy – and it feeds the drive channel to bursting, again, as you might expect. All that clarity you hear when played clean presents as pinch-harmonic readiness when the gain is cranked up. The tone control can roll off that top end, giving you a passable neck 'bucker tone. What's less impressive is how the humbucker sounds when you're rolling back the volume; it doesn't clean up all that sweetly.

The R1 single-coils similarly have a ceramic magnet and pair well with the humbucker, sounding a little

A guitar for 21st-century adventures in terms of tone and technique



MATT LINCOLN/FUTURE





overwound and hot when selected individually, with that gentle Fender-ish scoop giving it that percussive, precise attack for single notes, with chords sounding full.

With the Alter Switch in Position 1, the HSS configuration works as expected – neck single-coil, neck and middle single-coils together in parallel, middle single-coil, middle and humbucker's inner coil in parallel, humbucker alone. Versatile, but conventional.

In Position 2 the Alter Switch throws up some humbucking options

for the in-between positions, blending those pickups in series, and for those who have the needle in the red with regards to gain – or with complex signal chains with pedals such as phasers and flangers that accrue noise. This expanded switching system makes perfect sense.

It is a lot to get used to. You might wish that the Q54W had presets. But you'll get used to it. It's an intuitive way to get more out of the pickup configuration, with that Position 2 series combo of middle and neck pickups in unison almost enough

to compensate for not having a full-on proper neck humbucker. It'll give you that nasal high-gain tone that can be useful for cleaning up sweeps and arpeggios.

It'll also give you some rounded bass and midrange presence to give the fuzz pedal something to work with. The raw bloom of a Beetronics Tuna Fuzz seems like an inappropriately lo-fi choice to test this theory out, but it worked nicely for putting some wool on the power chords.

More woolly still is the third position with the Alter Switch in Position two, giving us two single-coils in series and the humbucker. It's a mighty meaty surprise from a bona fide featherweight guitar.

Looking for a more angular sound, more trebly plink for a hyper-compressed sound with slapback delay? Again, with the Alter Switch on Position 2, you can select the humbucker's inner coil, and my personal favorite – even if the symmetry suggests it – is the combination that pairs the bridge-side outer coil of the humbucker with the neck single-coil.

As Ernie Ball might describe it, this presents us with a "skinny top, heavy bottom" sound that works great with a clean, processed tone. **GW**



STREET PRICE: \$1,099

MANUFACTURE:

Ibanez, ibanez.com

PROS

- A lot of core tones
- Sensible neck profile
- Super lightweight and forgiving ergonomics
- The Mono-Tone bridge is tidy, low-profile and fully adjustable

CONS

- Limited color options
- Ibanez has one of the coolest headstocks ever... But not here
- Bridge humbucker doesn't clean up that nicely

VERDICT: The headless modernity of it all might make the Q54W a difficult guitar for every player to truly love, but it's an easy guitar to like, a very easy guitar to play and one that presents us with so many core tones.

Boss Plugout FX PX-1

Is this the "Best of Boss" pedal?

BY ROB LAING

► MORE THAN 50 years into a business that has become an icon in effect pedals, Boss is adding a new choice here – filling a gap for a multi-purpose compact pedal in its lineup. The PX-1 comes with eight effects preloaded (and another eight available once you register with the accompanying Effects Loader app), from the familiar (DS-1) to the discontinued and collectible/valuable (SG-1 Slow Gear).

Players will soon be given the option to buy additional effects models based on compact stompboxes from the Japanese company's past and present for \$9.99 each. Boss has described the PX-1 as "a living history of Boss pedals," but we're not museum curators; we just want to know if it can earn a coveted place on your pedalboard.

It's almost too easy to take for granted just what an industry standard the Boss compact chassis has become since the trio of OD-1 Overdrive, PH-1 Phaser and SP-1 Spectrum emerged in 1977. All three of those pedals are among the eight models represented here out of the box. The small 128 x 48 dot landscape monotone LCD screen is low-key enough for the pedal not to announce itself as a dramatic departure. It's comparable to recent multi-effect compact designs from Line 6 and TC Electronic in that regard – just enough screen to perform. Above the screen are three royal blue rotary

STREET PRICE: \$249.99

MANUFACTURER:
Boss, Boss.info

PROS

- The most compact way to combine multiple effects (from Boss's history) in a floor unit
- The modeling is consistently excellent
- Could be a good space-saver for modulation effects
- MIDI- and external-pedal compatible

CONS

- Limited to 16 effects onboard
- You'll have to factor in potentially paying for extra models
- Where to place in your signal chain could pose a quandary

VERDICT: It's not going to suit all Boss effects users – nor is it intended to – but approach the PX-1 with your specific needs in mind and you might discover a compact pedal that could be your tailor-made "Best of Boss."



push controls that will have a lot of pedal ground to cover.

While we don't think you should have to register for an app and update a product to access full functionality, once the 16 effect models are downloaded to the PX-1, we found it was a fairly quick learning curve to use and change between them. Though it's a shame Boss has seen fit to limit the pedal's capacity to 16 effects (and the initial eight can't be taken off to make space), so any more models you buy and want to add will mean replacing something each time.

When selecting specific models with the ominous-sounding "Execute" command, a brief monotone intro screen appears for the effect and then you're in; with three controls corresponding to a trio of rotary parameters on the screen (Tone, Level and Distortion for the DS-1, for example). Pressing the button for the additional page then accesses anything else that the pedal offers.

In the case of the DS-1 there's nothing, but for the DD-2 it's the delay length selection and Carry Over (trails) mode.

The addition of an external pedal input is welcome. One or two footswitches can access the Swap function to switch between two effects on the PX-1 (the models will remember the last settings you used with them), while most parameters can be assigned to an expression pedal. In this sense, the PX-1 can offer enhanced real-time control the original pedals don't – or couldn't because of when they were launched years ago.

The sounds stack up. We couldn't tell the difference when A/B'ing with a "real" DS-1. For modulation, we could imagine the PX-1 becoming useful for Boss fans who need an effect for only a song or two in a set but want to save space on their boards. But for other effect types, you might have a dilemma of where to place the PX-1 in your signal chain. **GW**



Sterling by Music Man Kaizen 7

Progressive guitar icon Tosin Abasi's dramatic Music Man custom seven-string, re-imagined for players with lighter wallets

BY CONNOR FLYS

IT'S SAFE TO say Tosin Abasi is already one of this century's key progressive players. This is someone who has made his name through pushing the boundaries of the electric guitar. Whether he's thumping, tapping, performing impossibly dexterous clean fingerstyle passages, shredding like a man possessed or churning out brain-breaking low-register metal riffs, Abasi has spent the past two decades rightly hailed as one of the geniuses of modern guitar.

Such a player requires a special instrument, and Abasi's latest weapon of choice is the Kaizen, which was developed with Music Man. It's a bold offset design, all angles and points, with fanned frets for balanced tension, proprietary pickups and custom shop build quality in a range of vivid colors. It's not a cheap electric guitar – but can those principles be adapted into an instrument that more of us can afford?

That's the question with the new Sterling by Music Man adaptation of the Kaizen. Music Man's sub-brand needs no introduction, having a lengthy track record of high-quality mid-range guitars and basses. This latest addition to the range will be welcomed by Abasi fans as well as anyone else exploring the forms that a modern electric guitar can take.

We got our hands on the seven-string variant, which is likely to be of particular interest to the target audience. Only two colors are offered; it's this Firemist Purple Satin or Stealth Black – or nothing; even the

purple is a subdued shade that rather downplays the Kaizen's dramatic shape. Some glossier, more unapologetic finishes might do wonders for the aesthetics, as it could be argued that this model looks a little undercooked as is. There were a couple of small finish flaws on our review example, too.

The build underneath is not to be sniffed at, though; it's a smooth, attractively grained roasted maple neck and well-fretted rosewood fingerboard mated to a lightweight nyatoh body (the guitar weighs 6 lbs. in total). The Sterling Kaizen ditches the fanned frets of the USA model, but it's a comfortable and ergonomic experience that should cater even to those unfamiliar with seven-string guitars. The USA-built Kaizen's Steinberger gearless tuners do make their way over here, and it's a plus from functional and aesthetic perspectives. It gives the headstock a streamlined, futuristic aesthetic with no buttons poking out from the sides, while the machines themselves are silky-smooth in action. At the other end sits Sterling's tried-and-tested two-point vibrato.

The body might look strange, but the shape sits comfortably and balances well, thanks to the long top horn. The neck is slim and subtly rounded, feeling hardly bigger than the average six-string neck despite

The playability and ergonomics leave many rivals in the dust



STREET PRICE: \$899

MANUFACTURER:
Sterling by Music Man,
sterlingbymusicman.com

PROS

- Fantastic neck and overall playability
- Lightweight, high-quality build
- Well priced for something with these ergonomics and features

CONS

- The color options are limited and don't really complement the bold shape
- The sounds are all perfectly competent, but none are exceptional

VERDICT: It might not have the full complement of features that define the USA Kaizen, but this Sterling model takes the basic design ethos and morphs it into a well-executed mid-range model.

actually having a slightly above-average seven-string nut width. The vibrato is smooth and expressive, holding tuning well. On a seven-string guitar, the standard 25.5" scale length can feel like a compromise, not allowing the low B string the tightness it truly needs, but engineering in fanned frets would add hundreds to this guitar's price tag.

Overall, the Kaizen plays superbly and encourages you to put your best foot forward technically; it's Tosin Abasi's guitar, after all.

Tonally, we've two unbranded ceramic humbuckers described as "focused, with an aggressive midrange bite." In theory then, ideal for modern metal guitar sounds – especially with extended range, where low frequencies must be tightly controlled. No doubt Sterling by Music Man suspects many buyers will swap straight over to their own choice of esoteric seven-string pickup, maybe even Abasi's own signature Fishman Fluence set – but let's give these stock units a fair shake.

The humbuckers immediately make good on their "focused" brief; there's decent attenuation of boomy lows and plenty of punchy midrange to cut through a mix. Some extreme tone-chasers might wish for a sharper, more cutting sound, but there's no lack of good qualities here. It also doesn't push a cleaner signal into undue breakup, important for those seeking to emulate the frequently clean-toned Abasi. It's not the most inspiring lower-gain voice, but it's perfectly usable. Tonally, it stands up to other comparable seven-strings, and the slinky playing experience only enhances the enjoyment.

Sterling's take on the Kaizen dispenses with fanned frets and custom pickups, but what's left is still distinctive and bears the hallmarks of a guitar that's been very well thought through. You might want new pickups, and the aesthetics aren't up there with the USA model, but the playability and ergonomics of this entry point to the Kaizen model leave many rivals in the dust. **GW**





Fender American Professional Classic Stratocaster

As the Performer series makes way for the American Pro Classic, is this Strat the perfect vintage/mod hybrid?

BY DAVE BURLUCK

HISTORICALLY, FENDER LIKES

to change or refresh its ranges every four or five years, and here, the new American Professional Classic range replaces the American Performer models we first saw in 2019. The new range covers a lot of ground. Along with our featured Strat there's an HSS version, a Tele, a "Hot Shot" variant that blends in some Strat, plus Jazzmaster and Jaguar offsets and a trio of bass models. Made in Corona, California, these new models, like the out-going Performers, are the start-up USA guitars.

While certain USA-made brands' start-up models can come across as not quite finished, that's not the impression here. In its opulent Faded Firemist Gold, the overall attention to detail of this new Stratocaster is – not least at this price point – very good.

All the new American Professional Classics use alder for the bodies, although the number of pieces is hidden by the opaque finish. The overall weight is a near-perfect 7.55 lbs. The classic body contours are well-shaped; the rib-cage cutaway is deeply cut in a very vintage style, but there are no modernisms like the sculptured heel we see on the American Professional II models.

Unlike the Performer Stratocaster, with its large Seventies-style headstock, the new Classic reverts to vintage-small, plus the maple has a golden vintage-y tint – all satin-

smooth except the gloss headstock face. The Modern C-neck profile is well proven, likewise the flatter-than-vintage 9.5" fingerboard radius with lightly rolled edges, and with some bigger medium jumbo frets it's certainly a familiar feel.

The hardware is pretty classy, too, with a modern-spaced Fender vibrato with its steel top-pate and bent saddles, plus a tapered and deep-drilled steel block. The ClassicGear tuners, which we first saw on the Performers, look like old-style Klusons but use a modern front nut mounting plus the gear ratio is higher at 18:1. New here, however, are the staggered height split-posts; the top four are lower than the bottom two, subtly increasing the back angle behind the nut. Just a single string-tree is used on the top two strings.

The supplied setup of this Stratocaster is pretty much good to go. The guitar ships with .009s, which produce a snappy response; the string heights pretty much Fender standard. If you hit hard you may want to go up a string gauge and/or slightly raise the string heights, but there's nothing to criticize, and once strings are stretched the slightly up-tilted vibrato, which provides a little

STREET PRICE: \$1,549.99

MANUFACTURER:
Fender, fender.com

PROS

- Faded finishes
- Modern C neck profile with big frets
- "Hot vintage" voicing from new Coastline '57 single-coils

CONS

- No case, just a gig-bag
- No extra sounds

VERDICT: A well-priced everyman Stratocaster that balances modern playability with some hot vintage sounds and a pared-back aesthetic from the faded classic Fender gloss finishes.

up-bend and certainly enough down-bend for classic use, this Strat held its tuning well.

The combination of the 'board radius and those bigger frets – which measure approximately 2.5mm wide and 1.0mm high – give the Classic a very "all-round" feel that's enhanced by the mainstream neck shape. Depth-wise it measures 21.2mm at the first fret and 22.3mm by the 12th, similar to the Ultra Lux Vintage's Modern D, but with more relaxed shoulders.

Typically, the new Classics introduce a new pickup line, although as Max Gutnik, chief product officer at FMIC, tells us, the new Coastline single-coils are "basically the Pure Vintage set – just like the American Vintage II guitars – but these are overwound a little to make them a little hotter. So you're getting a very authentic vintage tone but they take a little gain really well and they're really good for that on-the-edge-of-break-up tone."

It's a Strat with a little more beef, but not overdone, yet the added heat, especially at bridge, rounds that typically spiky attack and pulling back the tone you're almost hitting a Patent Applied For-like voice. The neck pickup is equally standout – a little fuller and less scooped than vintage voicing, and again, it works really well with a little gain, while the RWRP middle pickup means both mixes are hum-canceling.

Another more modern flavor comes with the tone controls: the upper tone 1 works on both neck and middle pickups; the lower tone 2 is just for the bridge. Both also use Fender's Greasebucket circuit that pulls back the highs, but doesn't have such a dramatic effect fully rolled off, and focuses on the midrange – again, quite noticeably with a little gain.

While this new American Professional Classic platform doesn't reinvent Fender's decades-old designs, this Strat is not only crisply made but really hard to put down. **CW**

It's a Strat with a little more beef, though not overdone – and it's hard to put down



Warm Audio Throne of Tone

Could this be the finest drive and boost pedal of the year?

BY PAUL RIARIO

THE MARSHALL

BLUESBREAKER has always had the benefit of being a heavily favored stompbox, not to mention John Mayer-approved, which explains its consistent popularity and evergreen status. But right now, the scarce King of Tone pedal (a heavily modified version of the Marshall Bluesbreaker) made by Analog Man's Mike Piera seems to be the most trending and coveted overdrive around, despite its years-long waiting list.

Warm Audio's Throne of Tone is a dual-sided overdrive pedal that takes visual cues from the former while combining two circuits inspired by both, which can be voiced independently of each other or duplicated on each side and cascaded together.

One of the best things about the ToT is that there aren't any inconvenient internal DIP switches to tweak; all your tone shaping is easily accessed and done on the face of the hefty pedal. Each side's layout is identical with controls for Volume, Gain, Tone and Presence, and mode switches for Voicing (King and Blues), Drive (Dist, Boost, and OD) and Gain Level (High and Low). The pedal offers two footswitches, allowing independent activation/deactivation of each side and the cascading of one side into the other.

The Tone knob functions after the input and gain stages, and works as expected in brightening the sound as it's turned clockwise. Meanwhile, when turned counter-clockwise, the Presence knob adjusts a variable corner frequency, which enhances top-end frequencies and seemingly eliminates muddiness. And if you

Two distinct and highly usable tones that'll invigorate any amplifier



STREET PRICE: \$229

MANUFACTURER:

Warm Audio,
warmaudio.com

PROS

- Authentic Bluesbreaker-inspired and King of Tone-style overdrive and boost
- Multiple tone-shaping options
- Built like a tank with a five-year warranty
- Internal Voltage Doubler switch offers increased headroom
- Send and Return jacks allow any effect to be inserted between the two overdrive sides

CONS

- For the flexibility and quality at this price? Nothing to mention!

VERDICT: You won't need to wait years or empty your wallet for what could easily be the finest drive and boost pedal of the year.

don't need it, you can shut it off when the knob is fully turned clockwise.

Incidentally, we found the Tone and Presence controls to be particularly effective when used together. By reducing the Tone and gradually increasing the Presence, we were able to achieve a warmer overall sound while bringing in clarity and definition.

The ToT also features an FX Order Swap switch, which allows you to change the order of the pedal sides in the signal path. Additionally, the Send and Return jacks enable unique interactions when you insert other pedals between the two sides of the ToT. For example, adding a delay can make one side of the pedal put the echoes in the background, while switching over to the other side will drive the echo in the same manner as putting it in front of a cranked amplifier.

Lastly, an On/Off voltage boost selector, located by the I/O jacks,

allows the pedal to run in two modes – 9V and the increased headroom of 18V. Right off the bat, the Throne of Tone truly shines with its touch-sensitivity and liveliness, delivering a rich, creamy overdrive and a polished, assertive boost that carves out its own unique space. The King side offers a distinctly warm, rounded, and sweetened drive, contrasting with the Blues voicing's sharper, more cutting tone and edgy warmth.

We found Boost mode by far the most lively and present of its three drive modes – boasting the highest headroom – but it's hard to commit to which voicing sounds better because both are remarkably complex and mid-focused.

With minimal tweaking, we were able to easily land on a tonal sweet spot for each side that perfectly complements our playing style. So, in essence, the ToT can provide two distinct and highly usable tones that'll invigorate any amplifier. **GW**

JHS Pedals 424 Gain Stage

Does this recreation of an iconic multi-track recorder's channel strip in a pedal capture the Mk.gee sound? It does that — and more

BY MATT OWEN

IF YOU'VE BEEN paying attention to the contemporary guitar scene over the past 24 months, chances are you've heard of Mk.gee, everyone's favorite fast-rising guitar hero who has ushered in a tonal revolution thanks to his mysteriously archaic setup. For a refresher, just work your way back to page 62.

He doesn't run through an amp — tube, solid state or otherwise — nor is he plugging into an amp modeler or pedal amp. In fact, he doesn't plug into any form of "amp" at all, and instead injects his modded Jaguar directly into a 424 MK1 multi-track recorder. Original examples of which are now on an upward trajectory in price on the vintage market.

The 424 Gain Stage is a recreation of a single 424 MK1 channel strip that delivers the exact same op-amps and controls for those looking for some easily accessible Mk.gee tones. Leaving no stone unturned, under the hood JHS has replicated the UPC4570 and NJM4565 op-amps found in the 424 MK1.

The 424 Gain Stage is a single-channel strip of the 424 MK1 in a pedal, with two Gain parameters, Treble and Bass knobs, and a Volume control. It's an effective way to streamline the 424 MK1 experience, because let's face it, not everyone would have the time or patience to plug into a desk and contend with the generous supply of controls. It can be quite intimidating, especially to those untrained in the way of multi-tracks.

JHS's pedal is an effective way to streamline the multi-track experience



STREET PRICE: \$249.99

MANUFACTURER:

JHS Pedals, jhspedals.info

PROS

- A faithful recreation of the vintage 424 MK1 multi-track recorder
- Mk.gee tones in a pedal — and then some
- Surprisingly broad array of sounds

CONS

- Better when used as a DI than straight into an amp
- Control layout is a bit crowded

VERDICT: Though many will simply see the 424 Gain Stage as "the Mk.gee pedal," it seems inaccurate to run with such a tag. Instead, it's more a platform to experiment with some wildly popular tones. You can truly make the 424 Gain Stage your own.

for an even more authentic experience.

As a cranked noise-rock fuzz pedal, the 424 felt quite at home on our 'board, and the squishy, saturated goodness that the controls can help dial in certainly gave us huge joy. It filled a sonic gap we didn't really know we had, occupying that weird grey area between analog fuzz and DI clipping, and proved to be quite inspiring indeed.

Having said all that, we had a much better time with the 424 Gain Stage when we went direct to some speakers with it as it's intended — no pesky preamp valves or amp speakers getting in the way. Here, the nuances of the 424 MK1 sound can really be appreciated, and though we wouldn't go as far as to base our entire rig around this in a live setting, we'd certainly incorporate it into my already-DI setup, as that's where we felt it could have the most impact. **CW**



FOLLOW THE GROOVE BY CORY WONG

Double Up

Using double-stops in a melody or solo

IN THIS LESSON, I'd like to talk about how to solo and create harmonized melody lines utilizing dyads, which many guitarists refer to as "double-stops." Although, technically, the term double-stop means two strings held down with a single finger, it is widely used to refer to any two notes sounded together. The most commonly used dyads/double-stops on the guitar are pairs of notes that are a 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th or octave apart.

A great example of how I use double-stops can be heard on the new Fearless Flyers song "Anaheim." If you're familiar with my music, you know that a big part of my sound is harmonizing pentatonic scales. For example, as demonstrated in **FIGURE 1**, I'm playing the D major pentatonic scale (D, E, F#, A, B) starting on the 6th, B, sounded at the 7th fret on my low E string.

The notes of this scale are harmonized by simultaneously sounding a 4th or a 3rd above each scale tone on the next higher string; these higher notes also follow the structure of D major pentatonic, meaning they stay within the confines of the scale.

A big part of how I attain the desired sound is to strum all of the two-note pairs with downstrokes and palm muting. **FIGURE 2** illustrates another riff performed this way. The downstrokes and palm muting give the riff a very specific sound and feel that's almost marimba-like, or like pizzicato strings.

When I play a lot of dyad-based melodies, I'll switch back and forth between muting and allowing the strings to ring freely. As shown in **FIGURE 3**, I begin by allowing the strings to ring then briefly switch to palm muting before releasing the palm mute to add finger vibrato to the held notes.

FIGURE 4 is also built from harmonized note pairs based primarily on D major

FIG. 1 (D)

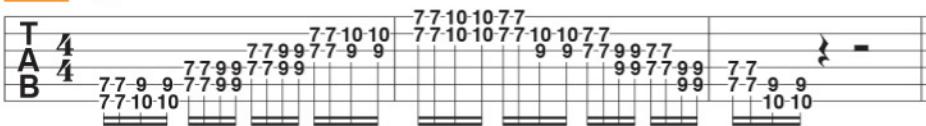


FIG. 2 (D)



FIG. 3 (D)

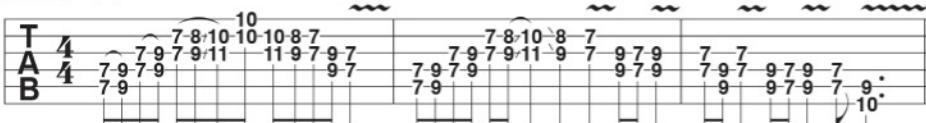


FIG. 4 (D)

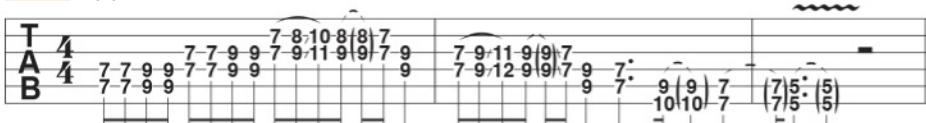


FIG. 5 (D)



FIG. 6 (D)

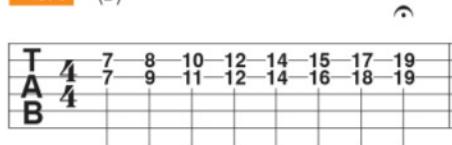
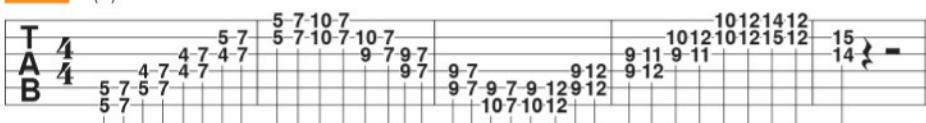


FIG. 7 (D)



pentatonic. Here, I begin with pizzicato palm-muted figures then switch to double-stops that I allow to ring.

You may ask, "How do I know what note pairs to play?" In these examples, at times I'm sticking with D major pentatonic, but I will also sometimes broaden the harmony to D major hexatonic (D, E, F#, G, D, B) or even the D major scale (D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#). Most often, I simply follow my ears in choosing what to play, so the end result isn't always formulaic.

A great way to practice this double-stop harmonizing technique is to move up and down the fretboard playing pairs of adjacent

string sets in harmonized 3rds. As demonstrated in **FIGURE 5**, I move up the top two strings playing 3rds, as they occur within the D major scale. Also practice doing this on all other pairs of adjacent strings, such as the G and B strings, as shown in **FIGURE 6**.

In **FIGURE 7**, I play D major pentatonic double-stops in different areas of the fretboard, moving freely between the different pairs of adjacent strings. Doing this is a great way to memorize these shapes, so that you'll be able to easily incorporate this approach and technique into your solo lines and harmonized melodic ideas. **GW**

For video of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/january2026

Funk, rock and jazz pro Cory Wong has made a massive dent in the guitar scene since emerging in 2010. Along the way, he's released a slew of high-quality albums, either solo or with the Fearless Flyers, the latest of which are 2025's *Wong Air (Live in America)* and *The Fearless Flyers V*.



TALES FROM NERDVILLE

BY JOE BONAMASSA

Weighty Work, Part 2

More on the art of writing a "heavy" riff

LAST MONTH, I spoke about writing heavy-sounding riffs, which is what I'm tasked with when working with Black Country Communion, featuring Glenn Hughes on bass and vocals, Jason Bonham on drums and Derek Sherinian on keyboards. The music of this band is very much inspired by the classic recordings of bands like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Free, Mountain and others.

When approaching writing a heavy riff, sometimes simplicity wins the day. Our namesake song, "Black Country," was written by accident. I was at Glenn's house – we've written all our songs in the same writing room so far, with me playing a guitar through an old Epiphone amp. We were just talking and wrapping up the day, and without any thought I began playing the riff in **FIGURE 1**, which is based on the E Phrygian mode (E, F, G, A, B, C, D). I play 16th-note triplets with repeating E notes followed by a slide up one fret to F, a slide back down to E and a pull-off to D. On beat 4, the riff ends with the notes A, B and D played in slower eighth-note triplets. Glenn heard it and said, "What's that?" I said, "I don't know!"

Next thing you know, he's doubling that riff on bass, and the pieces started to fall together into a song. **FIGURE 2** shows the big D5, E5 and A5 power chords we move into, after which the lick modulates up a 4th to A Phrygian (A, B, C, D, E, F, G), as shown in **FIGURE 3**, before reverting back to the riff in E. As a heavy song, it coalesces when the band plays it in a tight, precise way. This is where, for my guitar part, palm muting (P.M.) comes into play. Palm muting effectively reigns in the sound here; without it, the guitar riff would sound like a mess. It's all about chiseling out the riff: I will alter the amount of palm muting

FIG.1 N.C.(E5)

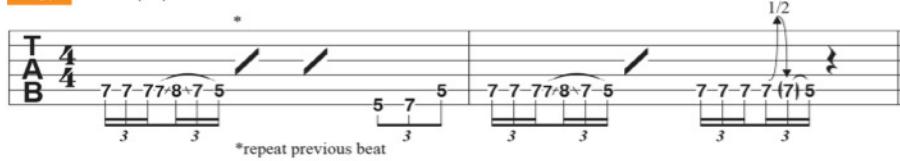


FIG.2 D5 E5 A5

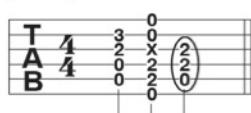


FIG.3 N.C.(A5)

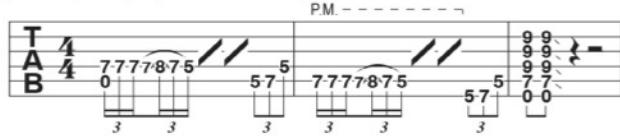


FIG.4 (E5)

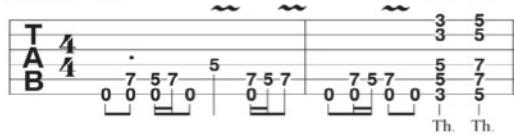


FIG.5 (E5)

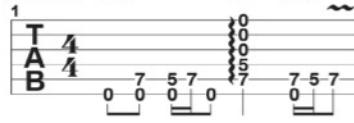
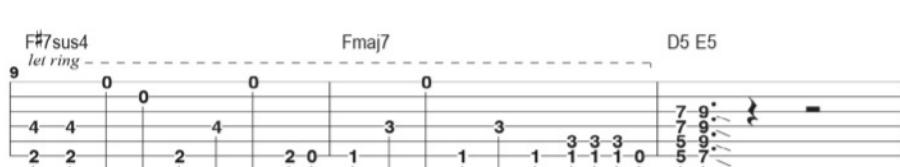
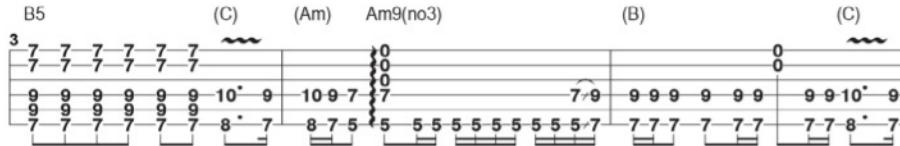
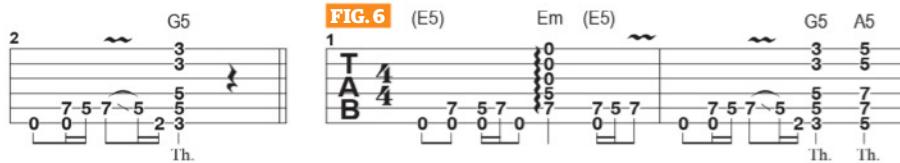


FIG.6 (E5)



F#7sus4 let ring –

as I play the riff, in order to change the feel and expressiveness of it, and I'll also rotate my pick to a different angle for a sharper sound.

I take a similar approach with my tune "The Ballad of John Henry," as illustrated in **FIGURE 4**. This riff is based on E minor pentatonic (E, G, A, B, D), and part of creating it was deciding where to play the open low E note in conjunction with the fretted E on the 5th string. For the G5 and A5 chords in bar 2, I thumb-fret the 6th-string notes and include all of the strings in the voicing except for the G string, which I mute with my fret-hand fingers.

When playing the song live, I add an Em

chord to the riff, as shown in **FIGURE 6**. In bars 1 and 3, on beat 3, I fret E and G notes on the A and D strings, respectively, and strum across all six strings to get the open top three strings into the voicing. Bars 3-8 illustrate the pre-chorus riff, which alternates between B5 power chords and sliding octaves that move between C, B and A, with an Am(add2) chord sounded in bars 4, 6 and 8.

And – are you ready for this? – most of my favorite heavy riffs are played in standard tuning, although Black Sabbath, Jimi Hendrix and others made things just a little heavier by sometimes tuning down. **CW**

For video of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/january2026

Joe Bonamassa is one of the world's most popular blues-rock guitarists – not to mention a top producer and *de facto* ambassador of the blues. His new album, *Breakthrough*, will be available July 18. For more information, head to jbonamassa.com.



WORKIN' MAN

BY CHARLIE STARR

G Whiz, Part 2

More on playing in open G tuning

IN LAST MONTH'S column, I talked about how using open G tuning (low to high: D, G, D, G, B, D) has inspired me to find my own musical and compositional voice as a guitarist and craft some cool and unique chord riffs and slide parts. To illustrate, I detailed how I play the intro and the main riff from the Blackberry Smoke song "Ain't Much Left of Me." This month, I'd like to provide some additional examples of the benefits of playing in open G tuning, by sharing how I play other sections of the tune, including the slide guitar solo.

The verse section is built from stop-time chord hits on G, followed by F/C to C and then G to F/G to C/E, accented by the band with big "crashes." This is played twice and then leads us into the chorus section.

FIGURE 1 illustrates the chorus. Starting in bar 1, on the V (five) chord, D, which I embellish "Keith Richards" style, with accents on G/D, bar 2 moves to Am7. In order to play this voicing in open G tuning, one must fret the 5th string at the 2nd fret, to sound the low A root note. Bars 3 and 4 move from G to D, respectively.

Bars 5-9 wrap up the chorus section, starting this time with held C and D chords, after which we return to the intro figure: Fsus2/G - C/G - G, shown in bar 9.

In devising a solo section, I thought it would be cool to get away from the "home" key of G for a minute and bring in a repeating chordal figure of F7 to G7 to solo over, as tabbed in **FIGURE 2**. Because of the open G tuning, the chord shapes are a little different than normal, but therein lies the beauty of an open tuning, as it avails you of all kinds of chord and riff choices that aren't possible in standard tuning. In other words, the tuning encourages creativity in devising rhythm parts to solo over.

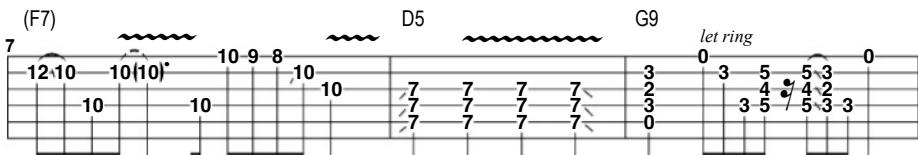
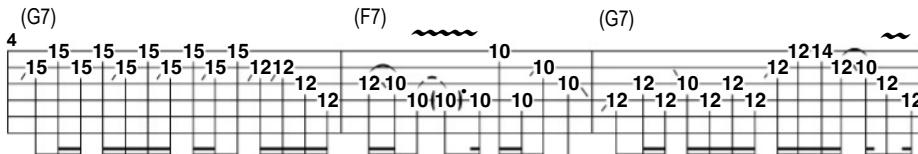
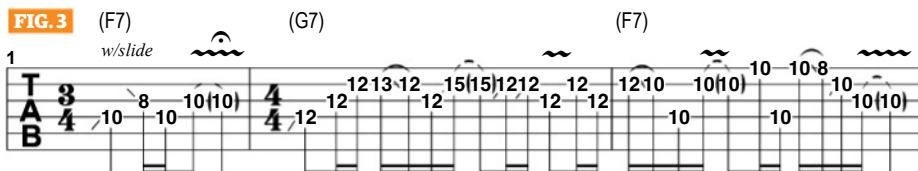
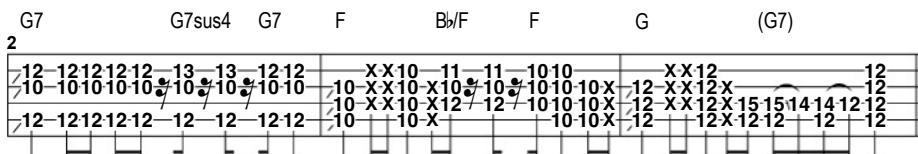
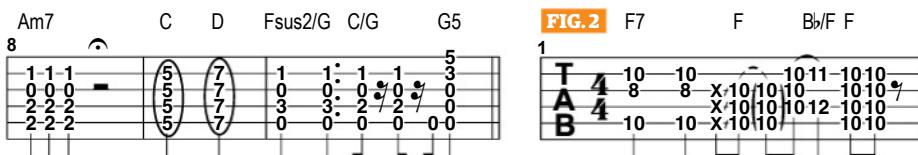
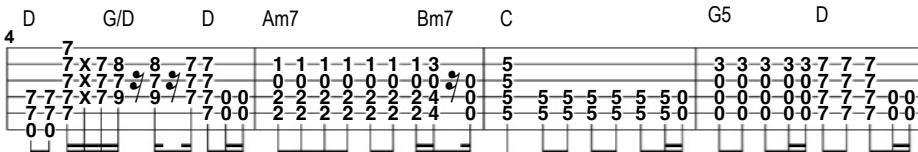
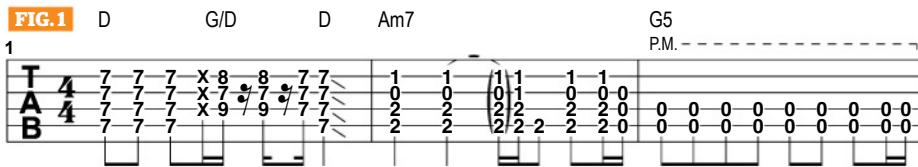


FIGURE 3 illustrates the slide solo: in bars 1-6, the chords alternate every bar from F7 to G7. After the F7 in bar 7, bar 8 moves to D.

The lines I play in the solo relate specifically to the alternating chords: over the initial F7, I slide into licks based around an F major triad (F, A, C), and over G7, the licks are based around a G major triad (G, B, D). This triad arpeggiation approach establishes a strong connection between the improvised solo

and the supporting chords underneath.

Bar 8 depicts the end of the solo, played over D, and bar 9 brings us back to the arpeggiated figures from the intro. And then we do it all again, moving back through the verse, chorus and outro sections.

I find this song to be a great workout in open G tuning, for both chordal work and soloing. As always, there are lots of new things to discover when using any open tuning! **GW**

For video of this lesson, go to guitarworld.com/january2026

Charlie Starr is the frontman and lead guitarist for Blackberry Smoke, a powerful Atlanta band that's been country-rocking its way around the universe since 2001. Their latest album is 2024's *Be Right Here*. For more info, head to blackberrysmoke.com.



HARDWIRED

BY JARED JAMES NICHOLS

The Power of Three

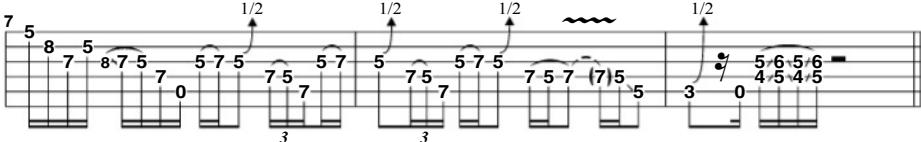
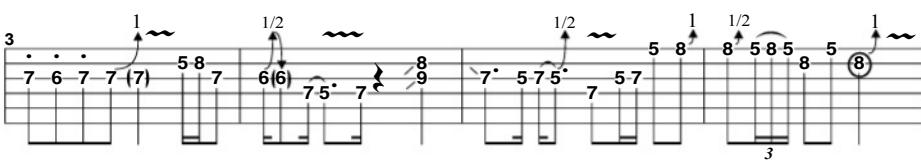
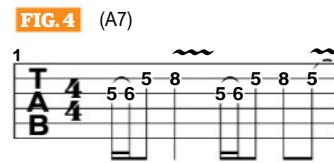
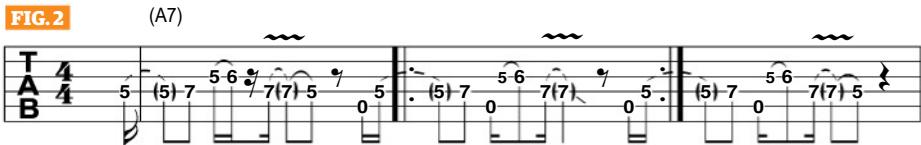
The joys of playing in a power trio

MY FAVORITE ENSEMBLE to play in is the power trio. With only three instruments – electric guitar, bass and drum kit – there's so much freedom to explore concepts like space, time and dynamic range. There is something really special that can happen when three musicians are playing off of each other and interacting in real time. Think of all the adventurous, exciting moments you've heard in the recordings of the great rock guitar/bass/drums lineups, such as the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream, Mountain, Rush, Led Zeppelin, the Who, Free and others.

One of the ways I like to take advantage of what the power trio lineup affords me as a guitar player is when we are in improvisation mode, expanding away from an established song structure in order to venture into uncharted musical territory.

A perfect example of this can be found in my song "Threw Me to the Wolves," which is built from a simple progression and arrangement that includes sections where we freely vamp over an A chord. During these sections, the bass player is pedaling on an A note; because there is no minor or major 3rd provided by another chord instrument, I'm free to move between major and minor phrases at my discretion. We like to make these sections as dynamic as possible by starting out quietly and reserved and then slowly build up the intensity as the improvisation develops.

Oftentimes, I'll start out with a motive that alludes to an A7 sound, as in **FIGURE 1**. The initial lick is based on the A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G), and in bar 2 I repeatedly slide into a two-note A7 voicing. Once that's established, I can develop the phrases a little



more, as in **FIGURE 2**, where I hammer-on from the minor 3rd, C, to the major 3rd, C#.

Laying this A dominant 7 groundwork allows me to move to ideas based on the A Mixolydian mode (A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G), like the phrase shown in **FIGURE 3**. I'll then elaborate a bit more in this direction with lines like those in **FIGURE 4**, taking advantage of the sweet sound of the major 3rd.

What's really cool is when you then bring in some different harmony, moving from A7 to Am7, as demonstrated in **FIGURE 5**. I might play four bars over A7 then change my whole mindset to focus back on the minor 3rd

and the sound of Am7.

FIGURE 6 begins with four bars that revolve around an A7 sound, with the major third, C#, accentuated in the phrases. I then switch at bar 5 to lines that target the minor 3rd, C, by moving into licks based on A minor pentatonic (A, C, D, E, G), played in a bluesy Eric Clapton/Leslie West/Mick Taylor style.

Harmonically, I have the complete freedom to explore wherever I'd like to go. As is standard practice in blues-influenced music, I like to move back and forth between parallel major and minor licks, as these two sounds compliment each other so well. **GW**



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HOW TO PLAY THIS MONTH'S SONGS

BY JIMMY BROWN

SHINEDOWN "Three Six Five"



RELEASED

AS A single, ahead of Shinedown's upcoming eighth studio album, this simple, well-crafted song, which

was no doubt at least partially inspired by Def Leppard's "Hysteria" and U2's "With or Without You," has guitarist Zach Myers flatpicking eighth notes with a clean bridge-pickup tone, laying down a repeating eight-bar pattern of ringing chordal arpeggios (see *Rhy. Fig. 1*, bar 1) that share three common tones, with only the bass note changing every two bars.

Notice Myers' use of his open G string throughout, which, paired with the F# note on the D string's 4th fret, lends the part a bright, twangy shimmer and also creates a beautifully dissonant minor-2nd (half-step) interval that's sandwiched between the highest and lowest notes of each chord.

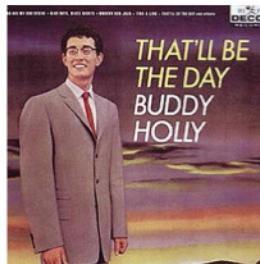
When forming each chord shape, make sure the finger that's fretting the F# note "stands tall," so that it doesn't inadvertently touch and mute the open G string (kind of like when playing the popular old electronic board game Operation).

We've included pick strokes above bar 1, which establish a pattern of eighth-note alternate picking (down, up, down, up) that applies to the next seven bars. Note, however, that, due to the tied (held) open G note on the upbeat of beat 2 ("two and") in each bar, you'll end up picking two upstrokes in a row, separated by a "phantom" (silent) downstroke on beat 3.

If you're playing "Three Six Five" alone, without a bass player or second guitarist laying down steady "pumping eighths" root notes, a good performance option is to pick the bass note of each chord again on beat 3 of each bar, with a downstroke, as Myers himself will at times do when performing the song as an acoustic duo with singer Brent Smith. This effectively keeps the eighth-note rhythm flowing, without a pause on beat 3 of each bar.

When playing the strummed octaves at section C (bars 25-32), use your 1st and 4th fingers to fret the D and B strings and also to mute the adjacent A, G and high E strings, by lightly touching them. Doing so will prevent unwanted open notes from ringing.

BUDDY HOLLY "Blue Days, Black Nights"



of guitarist Sonny Curtis, who played Holly's Fender Stratocaster on the recording.

Named after country guitar legend Merle Travis, Travis picking is a technique and playing style whereby you hold down a chord shape with your fret hand and thumbpick alternating bass notes on the lower strings, which alternate with, or are sometimes played together with, notes fingerpicked on the top two or three strings with the 1st and 2nd fingers (the 3rd finger is rarely used, unless your name is Lindsey Buckingham).

The fret hand's available fingers sometimes add melodic "extensions" to the chord shape. In this song, the notes on the G string are mostly thumbpicked, the only exceptions being in bars 28, 29 and 32, where the thumb picks the D string and there's a melody note on the G string, which is picked with the 1st finger.

The glue that holds everything together with Travis picking is *palm muting* (P.M.) the bottom three strings. This effectively prevents the lower notes from ringing together, making them sound separate and more distinct while the higher notes ring out. It also gives you better overall control over your fingerpicking technique, as your thumb and fingers have a much closer tactile connection to the strings, as opposed to just having your forearm resting on the guitar body several inches away from the wrist. You'll additionally find it helpful to anchor your pinkie to the guitar's pickguard or body, like a kickstand, as this will further stabilize the hand position and help ensure fingerpicking accuracy.

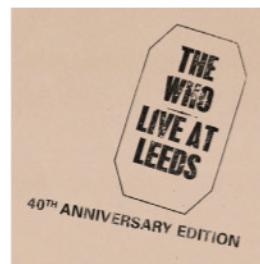
We've indicated specific pick-hand fingerings below the first eight bars, which serve as a model going forward. The abbreviations <p>, <i> and <m> signify the thumb, index finger and middle finger, respectively.

Note that the E chord pattern in bars 7, 9, 15, 17 and elsewhere includes the open B string, as well as the low E. When playing these bars, be sure to mute the unused G string with your fret-hand's 3rd finger as it frets the G# note on the D string's 6th fret.

WHILE NOT

A hit song for Buddy Holly, this early rockabilly-style gem from 1956 features some bouncy 'Travis picking', compliments

THE WHO "Young Man Blues"



in top form, as they turn in a spirited live performance of this adrenaline-fueled cover. The band's coordinated re-entrances after each of singer Roger Daltrey's a cappella vocal phrases during the verses were not exactly metronomic but were nevertheless tight enough and likely relied on visual cues among Townshend, drummer Keith Moon and bassist John Entwistle.

Townshend achieved an exceptionally sweet and harmonically pleasing overdriven guitar tone that night, with his P90-equipped Gibson SG Special plugged into a Univox Super Fuzz pedal and a pair of custom-modified Hiwatt CP103 100-watt tube heads and 4x12 speaker cabinets. A prime example of "letting the amp(s) do half the work for you."

Some of the chord grips that Townshend strums, or rather *swats*, during the song's intro and verses – namely, Esus4, E6sus4 and Em7add4 – are unusual. Notice that he chose *not* to include the B note on the 5th string's 2nd fret in these voicings. Instead, he mutes the string with the tip of his fret hand's 1st finger as he barres it across the higher strings at the 2nd fret. By doing this, he effectively prevents the 5th string from ringing as he whacks all six strings and does his signature "windmills."

Throughout the song, Townshend takes advantage of his instrument's E minor pentatonic "home key" and makes musically effective use of his open strings, in both his chord playing and soloing. Note the guitarist's slinky use of 1st-finger open-string pull-offs from the 5th fret in bars 78 and 82 and hammer-ons from open strings to high fretted notes in bars 90-95, which create cool and unusual wide intervals and a "yodeling" sound.

During the breakdown at section H, Townshend and Moon dial back the intensity of their jamming while Entwistle continues to cook along with his nimble walks up and down the E blues scale (E, G, A, B, B, D). Notice how Townshend mindfully rolls off some volume on his guitar here to do a bit of gentle triadic chord riffing over an open low E pedal tone. **GW**

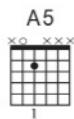
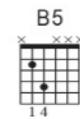
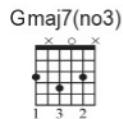
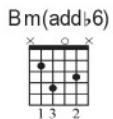
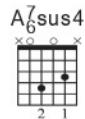
THIS CLASSIC BLUES-ROCK

tour-de-force from early 1970 features Who guitarist Pete Townshend and his bandmates

SHINEDOWN

"Three Six Five"

RELEASED AS A 2025 SINGLE
WORDS AND MUSIC BY ERIC BASS AND BRENTON SMITH
TRANSCRIBED BY JEFF PERRIN



A 1st Verse (0:00)

Moderately $\text{♩} = 107$

There's a hurricane and it's on the way
Been hangin' out and holding on

Been sittin' around this house for days
to every word in our favorite song

Dadd4

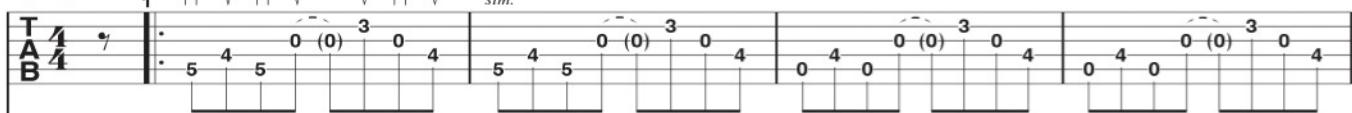
Gtr. 1 (clean elec.)

▀ = downstroke
▽ = upstroke

Rhy. Fig. 1
let ring throughout
sim.

A7sus4

GTR.1



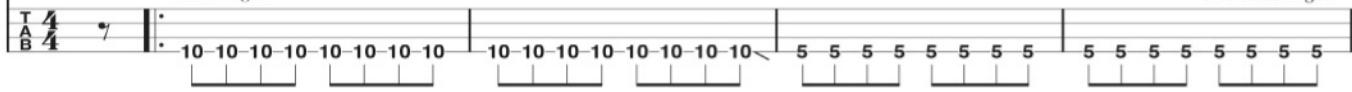
Gtr. 2 (clean elec.)
Rhy. Fig. 1a
P.M.

GTR.2



Bass
Bass Fig. 1

end Bass Fig. 1



I'm in here
These headphones

waitin' on the flood
are thicker than blood

If I could hitch

Bm(add9)6

Gmaj7(no3)

end Rhy. Fig. 1

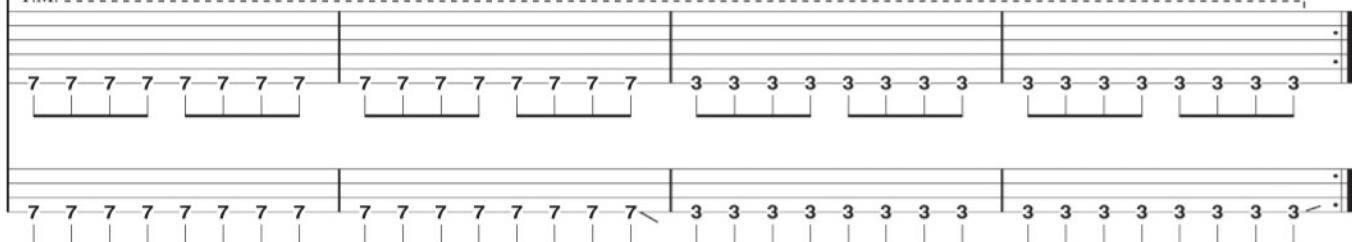
GTR.1



P.M.

end Rhy. Fig. 1a

GTR.2



TRANSCRIPTIONS

Bm(add9)

Gmaj7(no3)

29

GTR.3

D 2nd Verse (1:30)

Giving in not giving up

Dadd4

Gtr. 1 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 (see bar 1)

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1a (see bar 1)

Maybe I didn't care enough

A₆⁷sus4

33

GTR.3

Go back to **B** 2nd Chorus (bar 9)

I wish I could let you know somehow

Bm(add9)

Gmaj7(no3)

If I could hitch

37 Bass

E (2:19)

F Bridge (2:24)

A lot can happen in a year

A lot can happen in a year

(Year)

Gmaj7(no3)

Bm(add9)

41 Gtr. 1

Gtr. 3 plays Rhy. Fill 1 (see below bar 63)

GTR.1

Gtr. 2

P.M.-----

GTR.2

Bass

TRANSCRIPTIONS

you have to
close but I watch you disappear
I couldn't keep you here

Even though I said all

Bm(addb6)

59

GTR.3

Gmaj7(no3)

Even though I said all

Substitute Bass Fill 3 second time
(see below bar 63)

2.

I Outro (3:27)

A lot can happen in a year

Gmaj7(no3)

Dadd4

63 Gtr. 3

GTR.3

Gtr. 1

GTR.1

Gtr. 2

GTR.2

Bass

Rhy. Fill 1 (2:24)

B5

GTR.3 Gtr. 3 (piano and gtr. overdubs arr for gtr.)

A5

Bass Fill 3 (2:17, 3:20)

Bm(addb6)

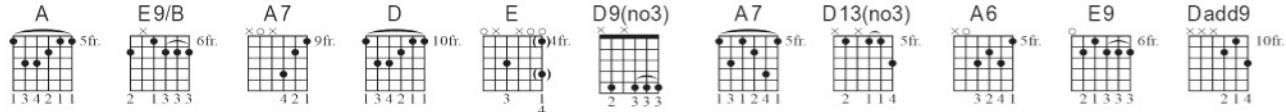
Bass Fill 4 (3:11)

Dadd4

BUDDY HOLLY

"Blue Days, Black Nights"

AS HEARD ON THAT'LL BE THE DAY
WORDS AND MUSIC BY BEN HALL
TRANSCRIBED BY JEFF PERRIN



A Intro (0:00)

Moderately $\text{♩} = 104$

A

E9/B

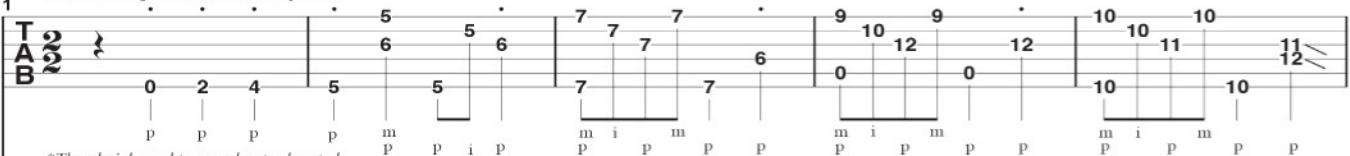
A7

D

Gtr. 1 (clean elec. w/slapp-back echo)
*w/thumbpick and first two fingers
P.M. thumbpicked notes throughout

let ring notes on top three strings ring throughout

GTR.1



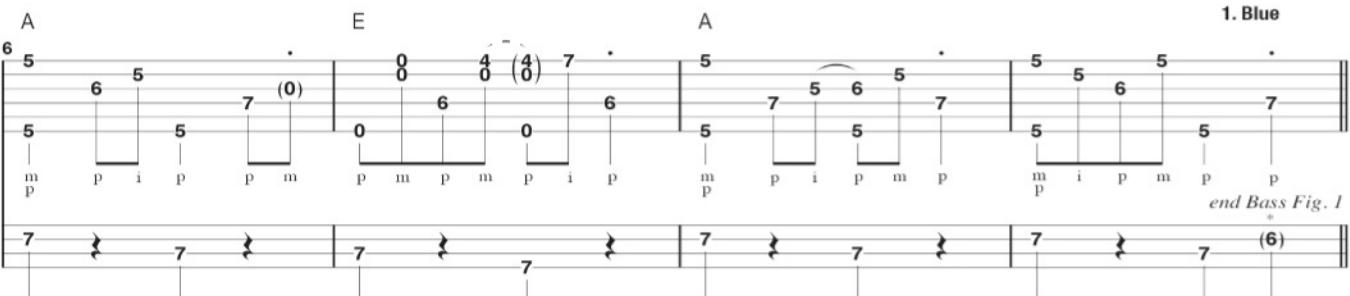
*Thumbpick used to sound notes located on bottom three strings throughout.

Upright bass arr.
for elec. bass

Bass Fig. I



GTR.1



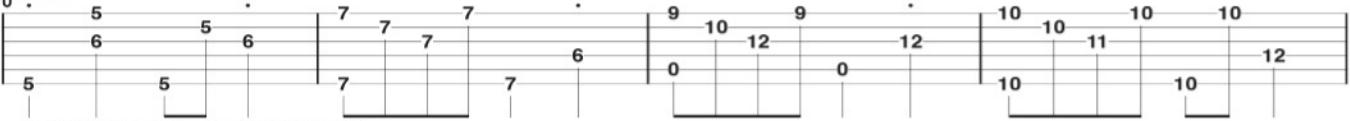
*Note in parentheses played on first Bass Fig. I recall.

B Verses (0:11, 1:25)

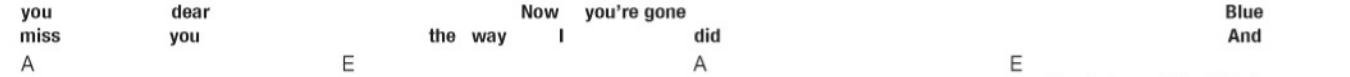
days black nights Blue tears keep on fallin' for
days black nights I didn't realize I would
A E9/B A7

Gtr. 1

GTR.1



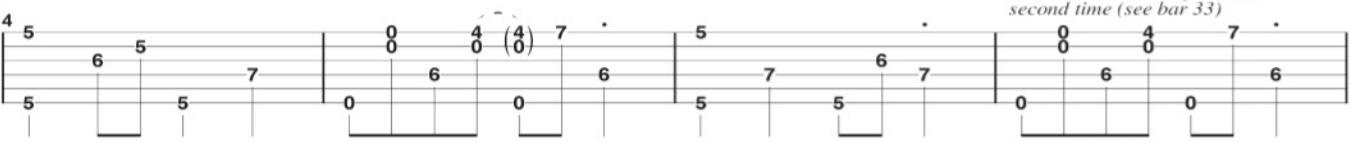
Bass plays Bass Fig. I twice (see bar 2)



Blue

And

GTR.1



E
Gtr. I substitutes Rhy. Fill. I
second time (see bar 33)

Bass substitutes Bass Fill 3
second time (see below bar 60)

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E Guitar Solo (0:48, 1:15)

Bass plays first four bars of Bass Fig. I (see bar 2)

**Note in parentheses
played 3rd ending only.*

Bass plays Bass Fig. 2 simile (see bar 26)

Go back to **E** Guitar Solo (bar 42)

F Outro (1:59)

you

The image shows a musical score for a 12-bar blues in A major. The top staff is for 'Gtr. 1' (Guitar 1) and the bottom staff is for 'Bass'. The score is divided into four 3-bar measures. The first measure starts with an 'A' chord (A, C#, E) on the first beat. The second measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The third measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The fourth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The fifth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The sixth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The seventh measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The eighth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The ninth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The tenth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The eleventh measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The twelfth measure starts with an 'A' chord on the first beat. The bass line follows a similar pattern, providing harmonic support. The guitar part includes various notes and chords, with some notes circled and some with dots above them, likely indicating specific performance techniques or notes to emphasize.

Bass Fill 1 (0:28)

Bass Fill 2 (0:43)

Bass Fill 3 (1:33)

A

T 4
A 4
B 4 7 6 4 6

TRANSCRIPTIONS

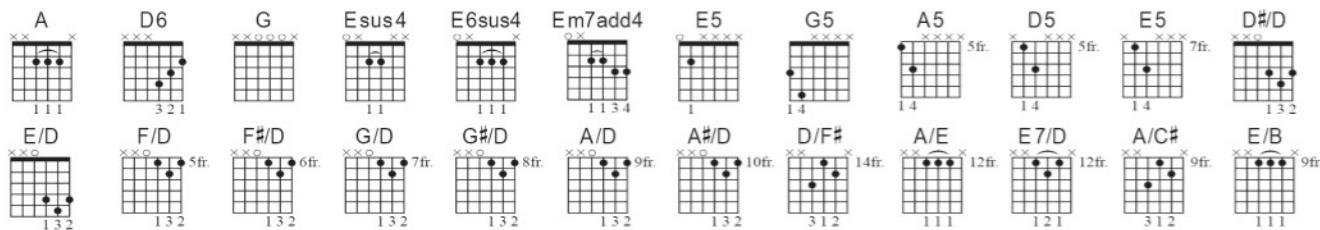
THE WHO

“Young Man Blues”

AS HEARD ON **LIVE AT LEEDS (40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION)**

WORDS AND MUSIC BY **MOSE ALLISON**

TRANSCRIBED BY **JEFF PERRIN**



A Intro (0:41)

Fast $\text{♩} = 150$

(Em7)

Gtr. 1 (elec. w/amp overdrive)

GTR. 1

B Verses (0:52)

Ah well a young man ain't got nothin' in the world these days

GTR. 1

GTR. 1

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said a young man ain't got nothin' in the world these days

(1:12)

(Em7)

17

Well you know in the old days when a young man was a strong man

All the

GTR 1

Em7add4

N.C.

(1:34)

people they stepped back when a young man walked by

32

16th-note patterns followed by 16th-note fills.

16th-note patterns followed by 16th-note fills.

16th-note patterns followed by 16th-note fills.

Em7add4

D

A

G (Em7)

GTR 1

TRANSCRIPTIONS

But you know nowadays

N.C.(G)

Em7add4

N.C.

GTR. 1

it's the old man who's got all the money

And a young man

ain't got nothin' in the world these days

Em7add4 N.C.

(2:02)

($\bullet = 163$)

say

Ain' got

nothin'

Ain't got

(Em7)

Em7add4

10

nothin'

D

GTR.1

TRANSCRIPTIONS

GTR.1 82

Em7add4 D A G Em7add4

GTR.1 86

Em7add4 D A

GTR.1 90

Em7add4 D A

GTR.1 94

Em7add4 D A

GTR.1 98

Esus4 Em7add4 D Esus4

"YOUNG MAN BLUES"

GTR.1 102 Em7add4 D A Em7add4 D A

GTR.1 106 P.M. - P.M. - P.M. - Em7add4 Esus4 let ring -

E (3:16) N.C. (E5)

GTR.1 110 Ooh yeah > >

GTR.1 114 E5 Ooh oh oh oh oh

yeah Get it

GTR.1 118 Em7add4 *w/fdbk. *pitch: A

TRANSCRIPTIONS

F (3:32)

N.C. (E5)

122

GTR.1

126

GTR.1

130 P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M. P.M.

1/4

P.M.

P.M.

P.M. P.M.

1/4

GTR.1

Em7add4

let ring

134 P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

G (3:53)

138

GTR.1

GTR.1 142

GTR.1 146

D#/D E/D F/D F#/D

GTR.1 150

G/D G#/D A/D A#/D

H Breakdown (4:14)

Everybody knows In the

N.C. (E5) Em7add4

GTR.1 154 P.M.

old days Everybody

D/F# A/E D/F# A/E E7/D D/F# A/E D/F# Em/G A/E D/F#

GTR.1 158

TRANSCRIPTIONS

stepped back when a young man walked walked by

A/E D/F# A/E G/D D/F# A/E D/F# G/D (E5)

162

GTR.1

They stepped

D/F# N.C. (E5) A/C# N.C. (E5)

166 P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M.

GTR.1

(roll gr. vol. forward
for overdrive tone)

back

E E/B A/C# E/B A/C# N.C. (E5)

They stepped

170 P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M.

GTR.1

back

Em7add4

G5

Em7add4

A

G

174 P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M.

GTR.1

back

They

Em7add4

178

GTR.1

I (4:51)

stepped

N.C. (E5)

182

P.M.

GTR.1

(4:59)

186

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

w/fuzz pedal

GTR.1

G

A

G

A

G

N.C. (E5)

(G)

(E5)

190

GTR.1

TRANSCRIPTIONS

Em7add4

N.C.(E5)

G Em7add4

194

GTR.1

Em7add4 N.C.(E5) G Em7add4

194

J Outro (5:12)

Freely

Nowadays if you're the young man...
You ain't got nothin' in the world these days I said

198

GTR.1

198

*flick pickup toggle switch.

(trem. pick)

(5:28)

They ain't got nothin'

Ain' got a sweet

206 (trem. strum)

206 (trem. strum)

fuck all

E6sus4

209

GTR.1

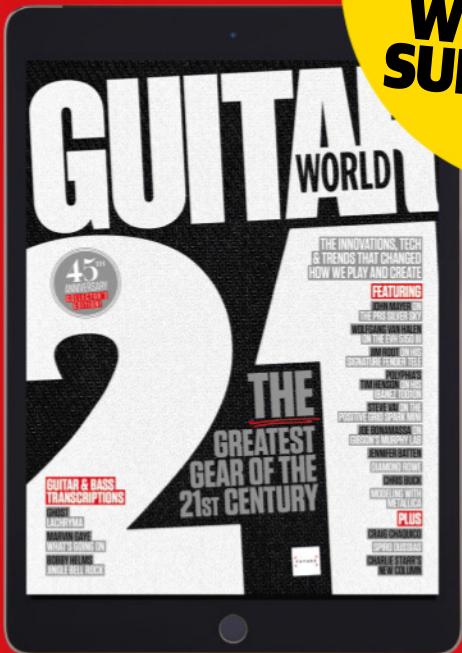
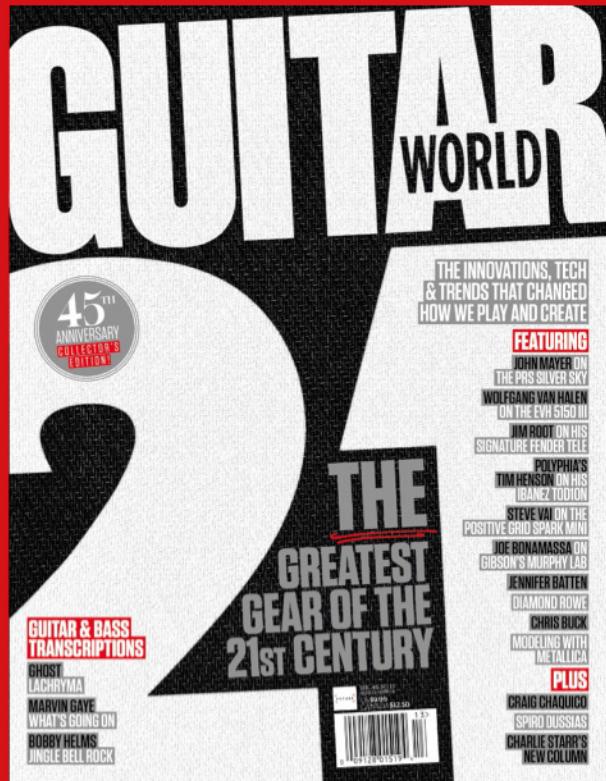
209

w/fdbk.

pitch: A

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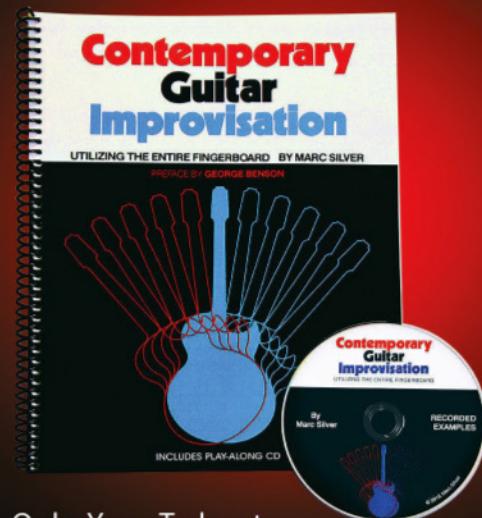
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BY CHRIS GILL

COMPARED TO THE "holy triumvirate" of the Gibson Les Paul Standard and Fender Stratocaster and Telecaster, the Gibson SG Standard is the solidbody guitar equivalent of Rodney Dangerfield – it doesn't get anywhere near the respect it deserves. Although the SG Standard is probably heard on a near-equal amount of classic recordings as the Les Paul, its status as a truly iconic guitar – particularly in the worlds of hard rock and metal where it has often played a dominant role – rarely gets mentioned. However, during the highly influential periods from the mid-Sixties through the entire Seventies and beyond, our unscientific estimate is that the SG was actually more prevalent and popular than most guitarists realize.

The Gibson SG model (with "SG" meaning "solid guitar") got off to a confusing start in 1959. Actually, Gibson's very first SG models (the SG Special and SG TV) were just their regular double-cutaway late-Fifties Les Paul Special and Les Paul TV with Les Paul's name removed. The SG body style that we all know and love came around in late 1960 when Gibson completely revamped the Les Paul Standard with the pointed "devil horn" double cutaway body that provided easy access to the entire neck and a mahogany slab body that did away with the maple top layer, featured beveled edges and measured a little less than half an inch slimmer than the single-cutaway Les Paul Standard. The electronics configuration of dual humbucking pickups, individual tone and volume controls, and three-way pickup toggle still remained from the Les Paul, but the output jack was moved from the side to the top. This iteration maintained the Les Paul Standard name until 1963, when it officially became the SG Standard.

During the Sixties, the SG/Les Paul and SG went through a variety of changes. Initially, all SG/Les Paul and SG Standards had a vibrato tailpiece, with the earliest versions available in three variants: the much-hated Sideways Vibrola, a short Bigsby and a short Maestro Vibrola with a decorative ebony block with pearl inlays. By 1963 only the long Maestro Vibrola with a plated tailpiece cover engraved with a lyre logo was offered as standard equipment. Starting in late 1965, the SG design transitioned to a larger "batwing" pickguard where the pickups are mounted directly to the pickguard instead of mounting rings.

Gibson temporarily discontinued the SG Standard for about a year between 1971 and 1972 with the introduction of the SG Deluxe, but the Standard quickly returned and has remained in production ever since. Incidentally, 1972 was also the first year that



A Gibson SG with a Maestro Vibrola – think George Harrison or Badfinger's Pete Ham – photographed in 2014

Like Rodney Dangerfield, the SG doesn't get anywhere near the respect it deserves



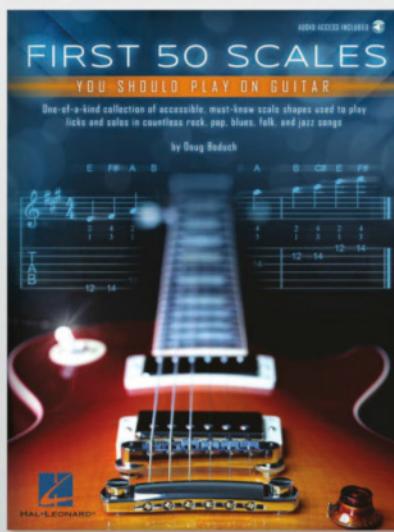
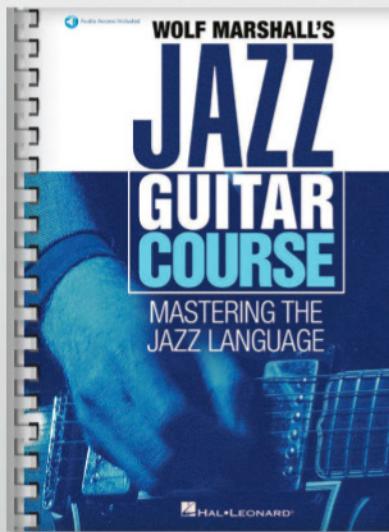
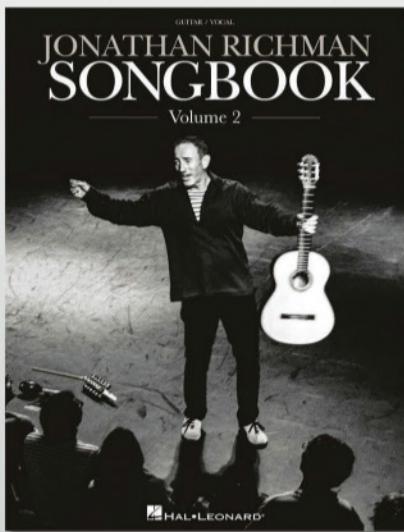
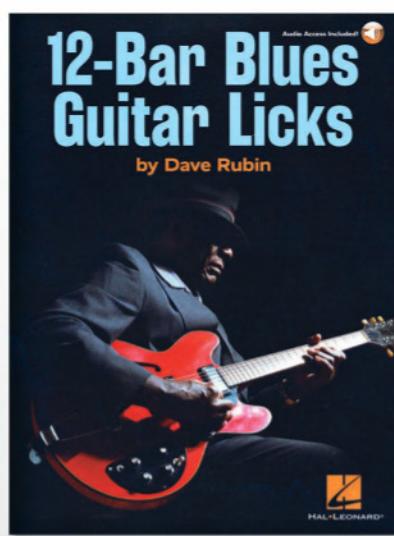
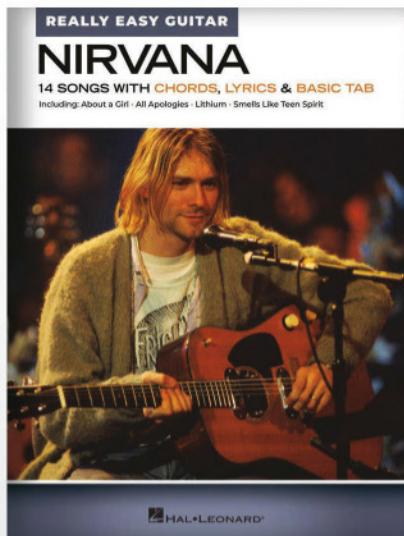
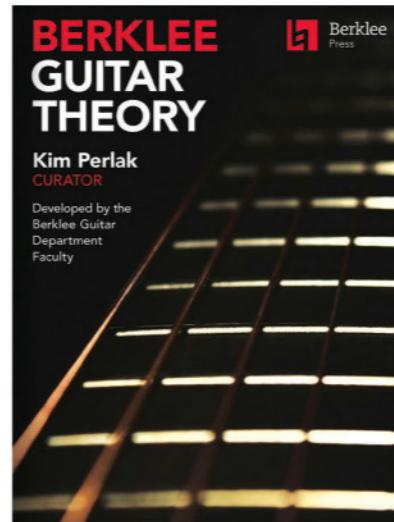
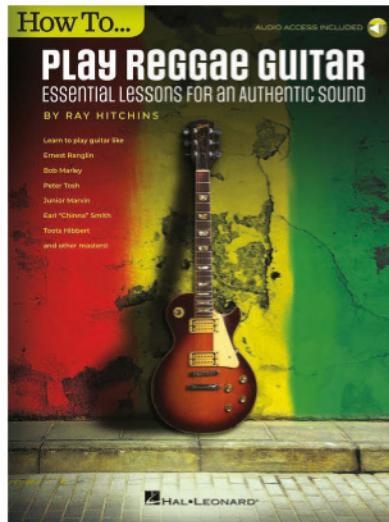
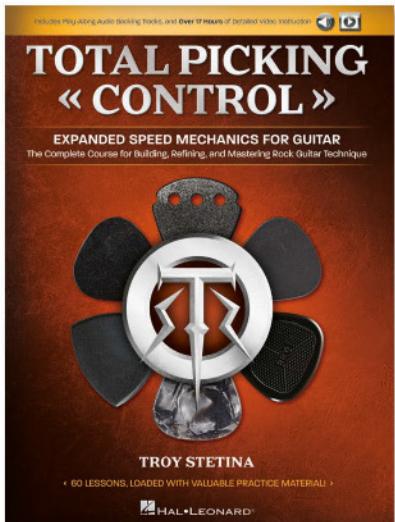
A CLAP-TONE TIP
Essential elements for duplicating Eric Clapton's lush, voice-like SG "woman tone" include a 500k tone pot, .022 ceramic disk capacitor and PAF-style vintage output humbuckers. Select the neck pickup and roll back its tone knob to 1 or 2 (not 0, which is too dark and muddy).

Gibson offered the SG Standard with a stop tailpiece instead of a vibrato. Exact details of the SG's specs varied considerably over the years, including neck and headstock angles, 500k vs. 300k pots, PAF/patent decal/T-top pickups, etc., so it's highly advisable to try before you buy if you're considering a vintage model.

As far as famous guitarists who played the SG Standard... how long have you got? George Harrison recorded numerous classic Beatles songs with his 1964 SG Standard starting in 1966. Eric Clapton also played a '64 featuring a psychedelic paint job by The Fool with Cream, which he used to summon his famous "woman tone." Robby Krieger tracked most of the classic Doors tunes with his SG as well.

Seventies players include Angus Young, Tony Iommi (in addition to his SG Specials and custom-made SG-style guitars), Buck Dharma, Frank Zappa, Jerry Garcia, Mick Taylor and Bob Marley. Even Barry Goudreau's bitchin' leads with Boston were played on an SG Standard. Slide players like Duane Allman and Derek Trucks have chosen the SG for its unrestricted fretboard access. Recent SG enthusiasts include Daron Malakian of System of a Down, Frank Iero of My Chemical Romance and Nameless Ghoul of Ghost. **GW**

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