

Guitarist

Issue 479

DECEMBER 2021

THE NEW WAVE

FEATURING

30

MODERN ELECTRIC
GUITARS WITH
MIND-BLOWING
TONE & ULTIMATE
PLAYABILITY

EXCLUSIVE!
GENESIS

MIKE RUTHERFORD
ON WHY HE PLAYS A
£120 STRAT LIVE
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REVIEWED

PJE MACON JUNIOR DC
STRYMON ZELZAH PHASER
GORDON SMITH GATSBY



PLUS
JUDAS PRIEST LEGEND KK DOWNING
CARMEN VANDENBERG
OX4 PICKUPS

BORN PLAY^{TO}

Sheeran
BY Lowden



SheeranGuitars.com

Tone International



It was with some satisfaction that I read our veteran gear editor Dave Burrluck's review of the .strandberg Boden Original NX 6 (see review, page 90). Over the years, Dave's seen and played it all, pretty much, so rare is the occasion he writes that a piece of gear has shifted his perceptions of how to make a good guitar – and yet so it turned out to be with the .strandberg. That guitar is even more interesting as a symbol of where guitar making is at these days (see cover feature, page 62), as the brand has never built guitars in large numbers in its home country of Sweden. Instead, founder Ola Strandberg has sought out the best place to have his interesting designs made, trying US production for a while then moving on to high-quality makers in Japan, Korea and now Indonesia.

A lazy analysis of that last move might conclude that .strandberg was seeking to simply find the cheapest place to make its instruments. Ola Strandberg offers a surprising alternative reason: technically minded young Koreans now want to work in hi-tech, not industry, leading to a gradual drain in skills from the shop floors of large OEM guitar makers there, whereas Indonesia has been investing in making quality instruments for the past few years. Quite simply, as Ola Strandberg put it, Indonesia is “where the state-of-the-art exists now and they invest in doing high-capacity, high-quality production in a way that people don't really try to do any more elsewhere. The more traditional markets are probably more suited now for smaller-volume production.” While that's just his viewpoint on the matter, it's further evidence that if you have any dusty preconceptions about where and how quality gear is made in 2021, it may be time to rethink them. Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



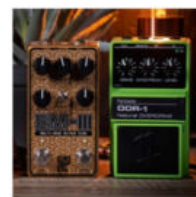
KK Downing

The Judas Priest legend doesn't mince words about his split from the band and the working class roots of British heavy metal on **p52**



Great Gatsby

A British-made offset that shines as an all-rounder and looks the business? Must be Gordon Smith's latest electric on **p10**



Order, Order!

Stefan Fast has some powerful creative ideas on pedal order for you to try out in his regular column on stompboxes on **p114**



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Neil Godwin

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FIRST PLAY



GORDON SMITH GATSBY
£1,299

WHAT IS IT? Downsized offset solidbody with twin GSG P-90 single coils on a poplar or ash body with very in-tune vibrato system and plenty of options

The Jazz Age

The latest design from long-running British guitar makers hops on the offset bandwagon. But is the Gatsby great? We find out...

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

As long-time fans of Gordon Smith guitars in both their original incarnation and their relatively new guise under new owners, the Auden Musical Instrument Company, it's been a little while since we've featured one in our pages. Why? Because, as MD Doug Sparkes is forever telling us, "They're all sold!" But earlier this year the company's latest design, the Gatsby, surfaced and finally we got one in its Launch Edition splendour.

The Gatsby was designed to "broaden the appeal of Gordon Smith, certainly for younger players," Doug tells us. "It isn't exactly fashion-led, but we feel it's a little more in the moment. It also provides us with the opportunity to get into a different part of the market. Gordon Smith has never made an offset before so we thought we'd put something out there and see what sort of response we got. And judging by the Launch Edition models – like the one you have – the response has been fantastic."

The general term for anything remotely inspired by the Fender Jazzmaster or Jaguar is, of course, 'offset', referring to the waist of the guitar that's higher on the bass side than it is on the treble. But, as we saw in our last issue with PJD's St John (another Brit-made offset), redesigning that classic outline is very much of the moment. As any Jazzmaster







1. A classy version of 'that' headstock uses Gotoh tuners, twin roller string trees and a nicely shaped brass nut. Truss rod adjustment is at the body end of the neck

2. The heel area is reduced in thickness, while the neckplate displays 'Launch Edition' reflecting the introductory 'standard' spec of our guitar. You can custom-order a Gatsby from the Gordon Smith website



3. Along with the shoulder-mounted pickup selector toggle, the controls are simple: master volume and tone. The output jack is side-mounted on a chromed metal 'football' plate

4. This neat Golden Age roller bridge is sourced from StewMac in the USA, and the HK41 vibrato is from Hosco. The locking function, which is very smooth in action, turns the vibrato into a hardtail

player knows, they are big guitars – the larger, longer body can add weight, too – so downsizing has its appeal, especially when it's done as elegantly as this.

"We're constantly being asked for lightweight guitars; it's a real thing at the moment," continues Doug. "The idea that your guitar had to break your shoulder after 45 minutes, well, people seem to have moved on from that," he laughs. "So we just put that into the design brief of the Gatsby. We have this incredible young designer, Elliot Heggie, who joined us probably 18 months ago, and has been working on a whole new range of guitars for us. This is the first product of his that he's designed from a blank sheet of paper."

The Launch Edition specification is for a poplar body (ash is used on the see-through Tobacco), with a bolt-on maple neck, a maple fingerboard and a range of seven colours. Beyond this standard specification you can custom-order a Gatsby from the drop-down menu on Gordon Smith's website. "We have a lead time of about 12 weeks," says Doug, though he warns that "like everyone, we are struggling to get materials and components".

Like that PJD St John, the Gatsby's 45mm thick body is downsized in comparison to its inspiration, with a mainly slab body that has a stylish forearm chamfer and light rib-cage cutaway. The heel area is relieved, too, and the design allows great access to the top of the fingerboard where you'll also see a handy wheel adjuster for the truss rod. The

It has an appealing and very Fender-y acoustic response, but plugged in things begin to change

headstock doesn't mess too much with the classic bolt-on style, either, and the finish is relieved on the treble side to provide a contrast with the natural wood and a place for the logo. There's something very familiar about the overall design, which is very easy on the eye. "We certainly didn't want it to be radical," says Doug. "We're not trying to reinvent the wheel. We just wanted to have our flavour in it, and I think Elliot achieved that really well."

The generic Jazzmaster/Jaguar vibrato here is very much a part of the offset style and it's married to a rather neat roller bridge that is firmly mounted and doesn't rock. Any movement of the strings over the saddles is friction-free thanks to those free-moving rollers. The 'dead' string length behind the bridge is considerable in this style, and the height of the bridge affects how much of that impacts what we hear: too low and you really hear some quite honky resonances; too high, well, you lose that dead string resonance. Here, with the bridge around 17mm (from the G string to the top of the body), we have more of the firmness of the latter setup, which is ideal for general

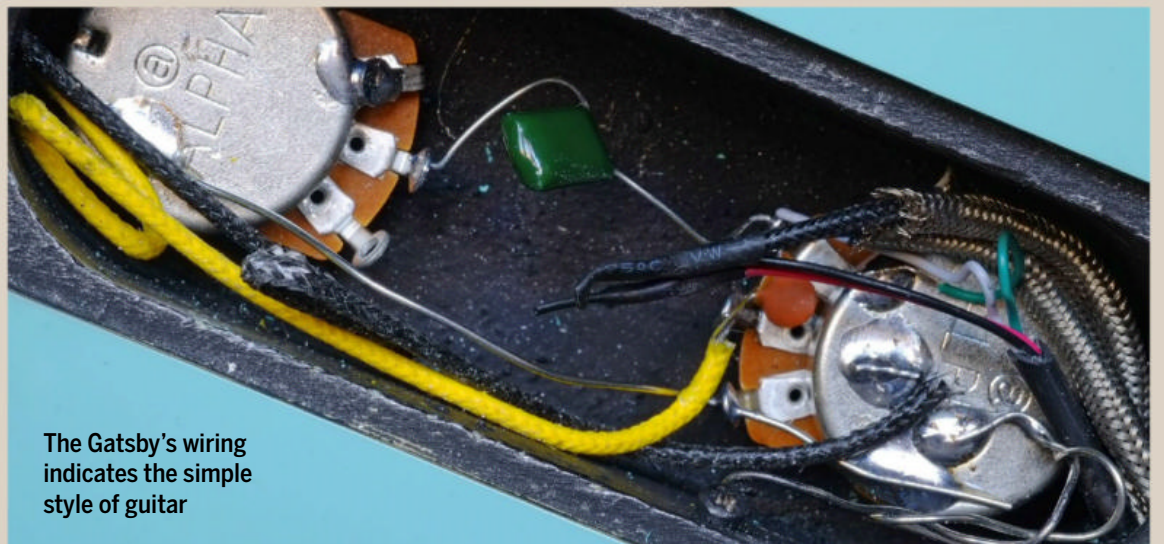


use but it's maybe slightly too high if you enjoy the funkier and more unpredictable response of a shallower string angle with a lower bridge. The Huber Piet prototype we evaluated last year, for example, had a lower bridge height (around 14mm) and noticeably more 'dead string' resonance.

Feel & Sounds

With a good light weight of 3.57kg (7.85lb), the Gatsby feels great when played seated or strapped on. The neck is a fairly conventional full 'C' that has a depth of 20.8mm at the 1st fret and 22.9mm by the 12th – slightly bigger in the upper reaches than those Fender Player Plus models we evaluated last issue. In fact, the fretwire is pretty similar in size, too (approximately 2.62mm wide by 1.14mm high), very slightly higher than those Fenders, and the frets are very nicely fettled. The setup is excellent, and although a brass nut is rare these days it's well shaped and polished and certainly doesn't impair the excellent tuning stability. Plus, with a satin back and fingerboard face, it's an easy player.

The Gatsby has an appealing and very Fender-y acoustic response, but plugged in things begin to change. For example, there's quite a duality here that moves from frankly a pretty full Strat-like voice at the neck to the more Gibson-esque character at the bridge. The neck has quite a smooth attack, less 'smash' than a good Strat but with a full and quite woody percussiveness. The mix retains a crispness and funk and on cleaner



The Gatsby's wiring indicates the simple style of guitar

UNDER THE HOOD

We investigate what's going on in that control cavity

Reflecting what is a very straightforward guitar, we have a simple circuit with no tricks. Both volume controls are 250k Alpha audio taper whereas many would use 500k pots with a P-90-style single coil. Along with the chromed brass covers of the pickups, this may account for the slightly rounded high-end we hear. There's a small ceramic 270 picofarads treble bleed cap on the volume and a green .022 microfarads polyester film tone cap – you see these in countless Asian builds. The cavity is shielded with conductive paint, and the backplate has a foil shield, too.

The ceramic-loaded pickups are made in-house and are designed as a matched

pair, although their DCR readings are quite different: 9.61kohms at the bridge and 5.46k at the neck. "Your bridge pickup sounds a little hotter than I would have expected," Doug tells us. "I thought you'd say about 8.5k, so maybe you have one that's at the higher end. The idea was that they are balanced and work as a set together."

"Like all GS guitars, we wanted to make sure that the tonal range of the guitar is as wide as it can possibly be so the guitar can do as much as possible for you," he adds. "I think it achieves that going from some gentle rounded blues tones to the more aggressive in-ya-face sort of punky rock tones – it's all there."



The soapbar single coils are wax potted and made in-house: "When you put them in a brass casing you're effectively making the whole casing magnetic and live," says Doug Sparkes. "You've got to wind them carefully so the whole thing doesn't become too microphonic. We've placed an additional piece between the cover and bobbin to slightly dampen the pickup's liveliness without killing it"

amp tones, too. These two selections cover a lot of ground. Switch to the bridge and that rowdy rocking cousin shows up: rougher and rawer with a good volume lift and quite a nasty – as in good! – snarl. Again, the high-end is slightly rounded.

As we up the volume it's a lively guitar and these pickups don't sound potted (even though they are) and really pick up any taps and thumps from the body. There's some ballsy grind that recalls a Gibson Junior here, and the vibrato takes us via Neil Young into some dirty grunge. And while a vibrato system like this is an awful lot cheaper than the highly regarded Mastery, its smooth, really quite Bigsby-like feel, in-tuneness and pitch stability are very good indeed.

The volume control is nicely graduated, but the tone does take a little while on its travel to pull the highs back. We can't help thinking this has 'pedalboard driver' written all over it.

The Gatsby has a good Fender/Gibson flavour, expanding the offset style

Complaints? Well, the vibrato arm has no tip and does feel a little rudimentary, and there's no hum-cancelling in that middle mixed pickup position. Those fingerboard edges, with the 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard radius, do feel a little sharp – not least following the necks we got to experience with Fender's new Player Plus models, which share the same radius.

Verdict

There's an awful lot to like here. The Gatsby is a stylish, slightly downsized offset at a great price for a UK-made guitar, and there are plenty of customer-order options, not to mention colours available. The vibrato and bridge setup is excellent and works effortlessly – something that not all Jazzmaster/Jaguar owners can say. Sounds-wise, it's no slouch and there's a good Fender/Gibson flavour here, too, between the neck and bridge pickups, again expanding the offset style and, as ever, there are plenty of aftermarket soapbars if you want to experiment post-purchase. After all, a bit of modding is very much a part of the offset genre. A very credible addition to Gordon Smith's ever-increasing catalogue. A great Gatsby? It's a yes from us. **G**



GORDON SMITH GATSBY

PRICE: £1,299 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Double-cutaway offset solidbody electric

BODY: Poplar

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Brass/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Golden Age tune-o-matic-style roller bridge, Hosco HK41vibrato, Gotoh SG381 enclosed tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: 2x GS 'Homewound' soapbar single coils in chromed brass covers, 3-way toggle switch pickup selector, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.57/7.85

OPTIONS: The base price is £1,299. For options see drop-down menu on website

RANGE OPTIONS: The classic GS starts at £799, the start-point to a now 14-strong range – all of which can be custom-ordered

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price

FINISHES: Cromer (as reviewed), Merlot, Vintage White, Real Ale, Rockingham, Tobacco, Jet Black

Gordon Smith Guitars

01933 391234

www.gordonsmithguitars.com



PROS Tidy build matched by a very attractive price; versatile duality from the pickups; an excellent in-tune vibrato system

CONS A little fingerboard edge rolling would help, not least with the 305mm fingerboard radius



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FIRST PLAY



LANEY LIONHEART LT20-112
£1,049

WHAT IS IT? Compact 1x12 combo from Laney's recently upgraded Lionheart range with a unique 20-watt parallel single-ended Class A output stage

Top Of The Class

Laney's unique Class A tribute to vintage British tone blends classic styling with a wide range of tones. You need to hear this!

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

One of the UK's longest-established amp builders, Laney has a history that goes all the way back to 1967, when founder Lyndon Laney needed an amp and decided to try his hand at building one. Lyndon played bass in a West Midlands group called Band Of Joy, which briefly included Robert Plant and John Bonham. Plant and Bonham went on to greater things, while Laney's amplification designs were winning fans of their own. Faced with a choice of going to university or carrying on with electronics, Laney decided to give amps a try for a few years – and over four decades later, he's still there.

Today, the Laney catalogue covers every angle, from hand-wired recreations of the classic 1960s heads and combos that powered the massively influential West Midlands music scene, to affordable practice amps that are perfect for home and studio. Sitting near the top of Laney's range, the Lionheart series blends vintage British styling with boutique-inspired electronics,

1

1. The Lionheart LT20-112 combo features high- and low-gain input jack sockets to handle a wide range of guitars and to extend the clean headroom when you're using pedals

2. This series features a handy built-in kickstand that angles the cabinet backwards for improved projection and spread. This simple idea works well in practice and is ideal for smaller stages

including a unique parallel single-ended output stage. The series has recently enjoyed a subtle makeover to further enhance its performance, and here we're looking at the new-improved L20T-112 1x12 combo.

The L20T-112 is built to a high standard and finished in a restrained royal blue vinyl with a tough beige and blue speaker grille. There's plenty of attention to detail, including a matching blue leather carry handle, white piping and brushed stainless steel vents to match the control panel, which is adorned with white chickenhead knobs that have blue marker lines.

Inside the ply cabinet there's a single Celestion G12H-30 12-inch loudspeaker and a robust steel open-ended tray chassis, supporting a doughnut-shaped toroidal mains transformer, a choke and a conventional horseshoe output unit. All three wound components are generously sized and together with the outsized magnet of the Celestion G12H this means the L20T-112 is a rather hefty box to lug around – this combo tips the scales at just under 25kg.

The rich, touch-sensitive voice of this combo makes for a rewarding playing experience



Inside the chassis, most of the electronics are contained on two high-quality PCBs, with one supporting the front-panel controls and a larger one for the main circuitry, including the valve sockets. The wiring is neat, with quality components and clean, bright soldering.

The L20T-112 is a single-channel design with a footswitchable drive section and a digital reverb. The controls are easy enough to navigate and include a clean volume level, gain and master for the Drive section and a regular three-band passive EQ. There's also a Bright switch and a reverb level, together with a master tone control.

Around the back you'll find fixed impedance speaker outlets and sockets for the L20T-112's two-button footswitch and series effects loop, which has switchable levels and a handy bypass option.

The amp's power stage is unique to Laney, using a quartet of EL84s wired in parallel single-ended Class A to produce around 20 watts. Most amps with two or four output valves run in push-pull Class AB; the signal is split into upper and lower halves using a circuit called a phase splitter then sent to separate power valves before being combined in the output transformer. In a single-ended design there's no phase splitter; the valve runs in pure Class A, amplifying the whole signal. We're used to seeing small single-ended practice and recording amps – the L20T-112 gets its extra power by running four single-ended amp stages in parallel. It's not as efficient as a Class A or AB push-pull design, hence the slightly lower power output, but it does retain the sonic purity of the single-ended configuration.



3

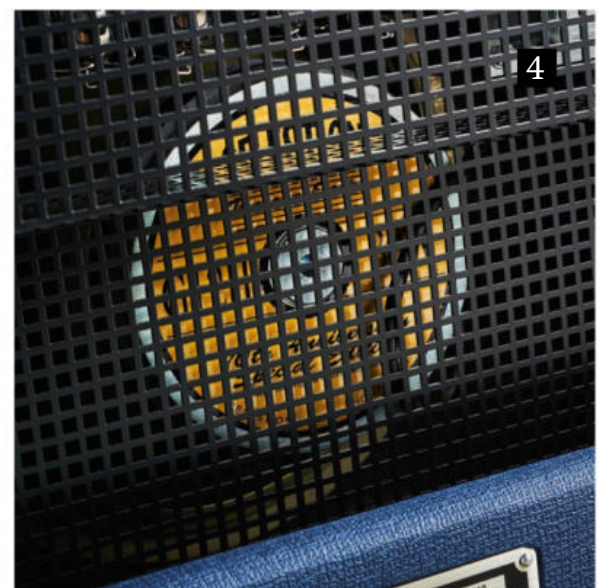
Overall, the Lionheart exudes a classy, capable vibe that looks the business under stage lights, while being built like the proverbial brick outhouse.

Feel & Sounds

The rich, touch-sensitive voice of this combo makes for a rewarding playing experience. The tone and gain controls are deceptively powerful. At lower levels the clean voice has plenty of headroom, making it ideal for jazz, country and pedals. Alternatively, you can turn up the clean volume for a great AC/DC-influenced pushed rhythm tone that becomes edgy when you dig in more. This is the sound of the output stage being driven hard, which is the key to authentic classic guitar tone, something that's still hard to convincingly replicate with digital technology.

As for the Drive channel, there's plenty of gain on tap here, making it ideal for blues and classic rock, as well as more modern genres. One really cool feature onboard is the master tone control, which sits at the very end of the preamp just before the output stage. You can use the regular EQ and Bright switch to balance the guitar and then set the master tone to vary the amp's overall character, from bright and spanky with plenty of treble snap, to warm and punchy, with a powerful midrange that steers clear of becoming nasal.

The buffered series effects loop is clean and quiet. There are two level options to suit stompboxes and rack gear as well as a bypass, which removes the loop circuitry to leave an all-valve signal path. The digital reverb is custom-made in-house and sounds great; its warm decay flatters any guitar.



4

3. The L20T has a trio of fixed impedance loudspeaker jacks, together with a quality series effects loop. The fully buffered loop features switchable levels and also has a handy bypass switch

4. You'll find Celestion's G12H-30 70th Anniversary loudspeaker here, a premium driver with powerful lows and midrange, coupled with a snappy high-end response. It's a great driver for classic rock, with the big ceramic magnet adding plenty of attitude

Laney was one of the first amp builders to incorporate a digital reverb in its heads and combos. The reverb is a custom Laney module that's also featured in its Black Country Custom pedals and sounds better than many studio plug-ins, as well as being quieter than the conventional spring tank



LANEY LIONHEART L20T-112

PRICE: £1,049

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Valve preamp, parallel single-ended valve power amp

OUTPUT: 20W

VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 4x EL84

DIMENSIONS: 465 (h) x 565 (w) x 255mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 24.5/54

CABINET: Birch ply

LOUDSPEAKERS: 1x Celestion G12H-30 12"

CHANNELS: 2

CONTROLS: Clean volume, drive gain, drive volume, bass, mid, treble, reverb level, master tone, Bright on/off, Drive on/off

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Built-in digital reverb, series effects loop with switchable levels and bypass

FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch (supplied) toggles drive and reverb

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: L20H head version sells for £799. There's also a L5T-112 combo (£849), L5 Studio head (£649) and L20T-212 combo (£1,299). A matching 1x12 extension cabinet costs £399; the 2x12 version costs £599

Laney Amplification

0121 508 6666

www.laney.co.uk



PROS Footswitchable drive and digital reverb expand this combo's versatility; series effects loop has a useful bypass; vintage styling; kick-back stand

CONS A heavy lump to carry on just one handle; if the blue colour isn't for you there's currently no alternative – what about some limited-edition alternatives?

The amp is remarkably free of hiss and hum, thanks in part to that toroidal mains transformer, which has a much tighter hum field compared with traditional horseshoe types, making it a great partner for home and studio use. Meanwhile, if you crank up the volume there's plenty of power to handle any gig.

The premium Celestion speaker and 20-watt output section easily cope with an averagely loud drum kit, aided by a

The tones lurking within the Lionheart's precision crafted heavy-duty cabinet are versatile and wide ranging

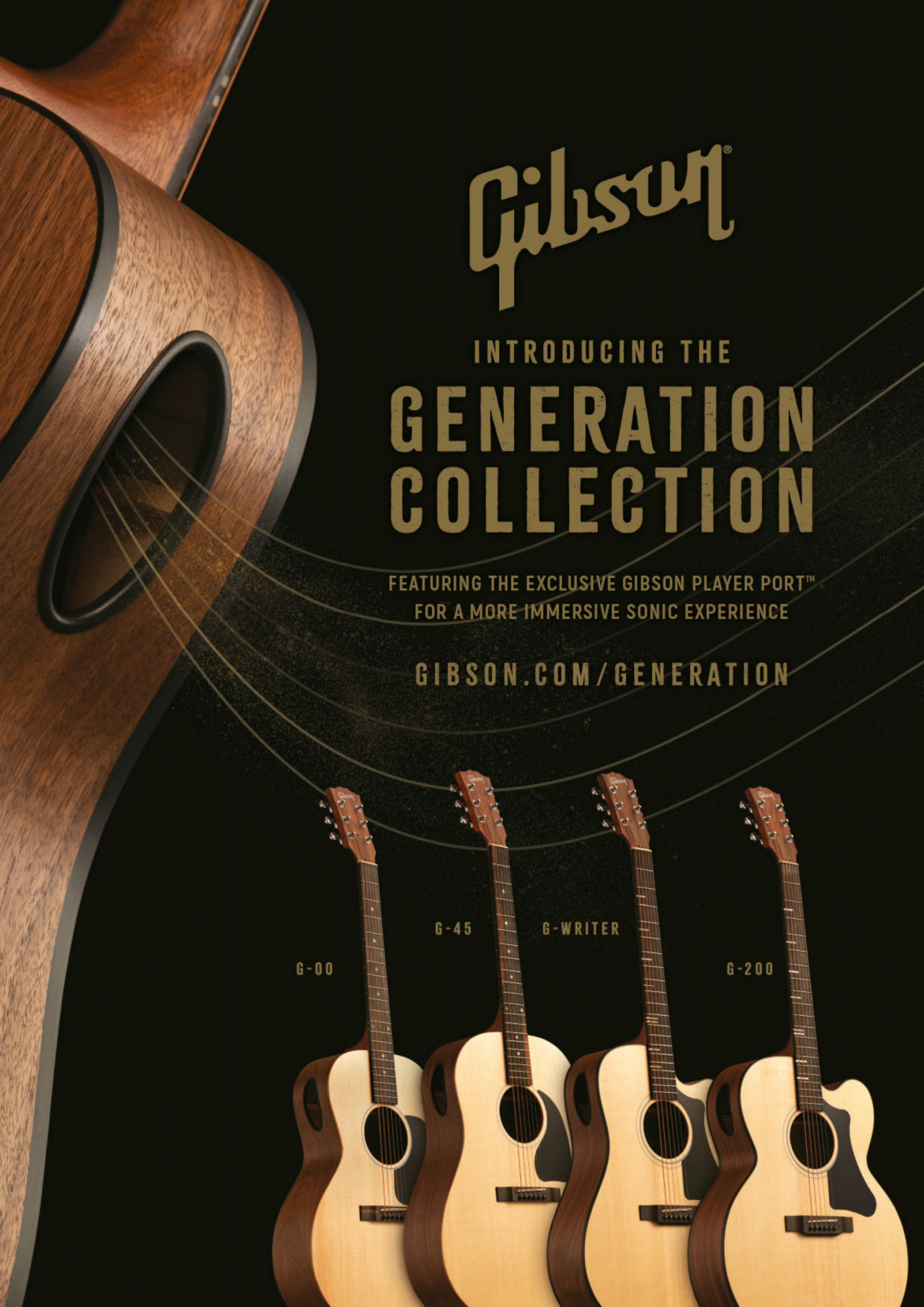
handy integral kickstand that angles the cabinet back to throw the sound upwards, away from your knees. Guitarists playing average pub gigs without the luxury of monitors often stand right in front of their amp, with their ears several feet above the loudspeaker, overcompensating with the treble control to correct what they perceive as a muddy tone. This addition helps avoid that, improving your tone and your audience's experience to boot.

Verdict

We've thoroughly enjoyed our time with Laney's L20T-112. For British blues invasion and classic rock tones it's a sonically rewarding performer with more than enough power for live gigs, delivering the elusive dynamics of a pushed single-ended valve power stage at sensible volumes.

The tones lurking within the Lionheart's precision crafted heavy-duty cabinet are versatile and wide ranging, sounding impressively authentic in a wide range of genres, from country and jazz to blues and hard rock. And yet thanks to impressively low noise levels, it's also just as capable in the studio or at home. While it's compact enough for a 1x12, prospective owners should take note that it's a hefty beast – definitely a case of never mind the quality, feel the weight. We feel it should really come with a pair of side grab handles, like the matching 2x12 extension cabinet, which weighs exactly the same.

The vintage Brit styling looks great, although blue vinyl may not be to everyone's taste; maybe Laney should test the water with a couple of limited-edition colour alternatives? Nevertheless, aimed at pro players and serious amateurs, the Lionheart will satisfy any vintage British tone cravings, and the build quality is first rate. It's genuinely excellent value for money, too. If you want to experience proper Class A tone, this is definitely worth a try. **G**



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FIRST PLAY



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE
MACON JUNIOR DC
£2,999

WHAT IS IT? Superlative Junior-style electric solidbody from Brit-making royalty. Does guitar craft get any better than this?

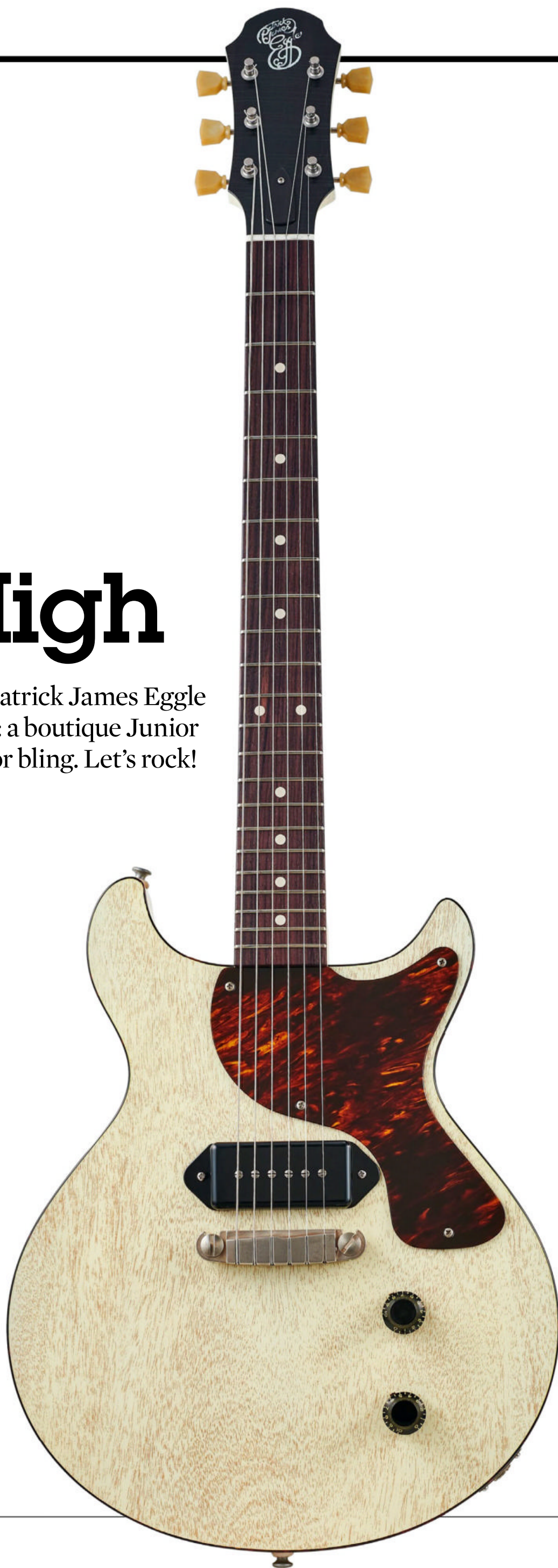
Junior High

Oh dear, cut up your credit cards. Patrick James Eggle has sent us his latest electric vision: a boutique Junior with not an ounce of flame maple or bling. Let's rock!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

Any reckoning of the UK's guitar making industry has to include Patrick James Eggle, a fixture on the scene since the early 90s and now the perfect illustration of the artisan or boutique small-output maker. Patrick, like many over these past months, has seen his orders rise, he's taken on more staff, which now total seven, and produces some 20 guitars a month.

You don't need us to tell you that this latest creation is inspired by Gibson's double-cut Les Paul Junior, a guitar designed at the end of the 50s and one that refuses to die. In fact, its influence on guitar makers, large and small, seems to increase year-on-year. PJE also offers a single-cut Macon Junior (albeit with dual pickups), and with an added maple top it becomes a Special. Our double-cut Junior, then, is the only 'correct' Junior in the Macon range with its single pickup referencing the basic student Gibson model from 1958. But there's nothing 'student' about this guitar. If there were such a thing as Michelin stars for guitar







1

1. The inlaid PJE logo is about as much bling as you'll get here set against the ebony headstock facing. Note the beautifully shaped ebony truss rod cover and perfectly fettled bone nut

makers, Pat would have a few. This is simply a superb version of a very classic recipe.

It doesn't deconstruct or mess with the classic ingredients, either. Here, we have a one-piece slab body (45mm thick) from genuine mahogany, likewise the neck, topped with a dot-inlaid and unbound dark Indian rosewood fingerboard. The light weight is perfect for the style and, unlike many of PJE's builds, it's unchambered like the carved-top Macon, for example, and there's no maple cap, either. Aside from the inlaid headstock logo, the only bling is the body's edge-binding from a rich and dark-coloured tortoiseshell celluloid nitrate plastic that mirrors the acrylic scratchplate. The light dirty cream colouration of the Grained Blonde finish might make you question what the actual materials are, however – until you see the worn-through neck back, which has the finish removed and shows you what's underneath. Look a little closer and you'll see numerous cracks in the heat-aged nitro finish that otherwise



2

2. It might have simple dot inlays but the dark Indian rosewood looks superb and is matched by the equally good fretwork. The frets here are Jescar 55090, best described as narrow/high

3. Patrick is a big fan of the German-made ABM hardware such as this wrapover bridge with its preset intonation ridge – a design pioneered by PRS in the early 90s. Although the last couple of PJE's we've reviewed have featured Cream T pickups, the dog-ear single coil here is from another great UK pickup maker, Mojo

has a healthy gloss sheen. It's not a relic, although all the hardware is aged in-house. Not for the first time, this Eggle comes across as a very well cared for vintage guitar, and one that's certainly been played in.

Remove that scratchplate and you'd expect to see the long tongue of the neck. Such is the quality of the craft you really have to look twice to see that the tongue is the full width of the neck and has a rounded end that extends some 80mm into the body – something you wouldn't get if there were a neck pickup.

Feel & Sounds

Let's be honest, as good as this build is it's not really bringing much to the table in terms of new sounds or features. But, for many of us, that's exactly the appeal. If you could find a real double-cutaway Junior that felt, played and sounded as good as this does, well, we'd doubt you'd snag it for this price. It's absolutely superb and, like any high-line guitar, its sound should be totally absorbing. It is.

But to backtrack, it's the worn-through neck, with its bare-wood feel, that feels stripped down and well used. The 'C' 60 profile might be a bit of a misnomer as, dimensionally, it's just a couple of passes

With the 'blower' switch engaged, this is one of the most visceral in-your-face Juniors we've played

UNDER THE HOOD

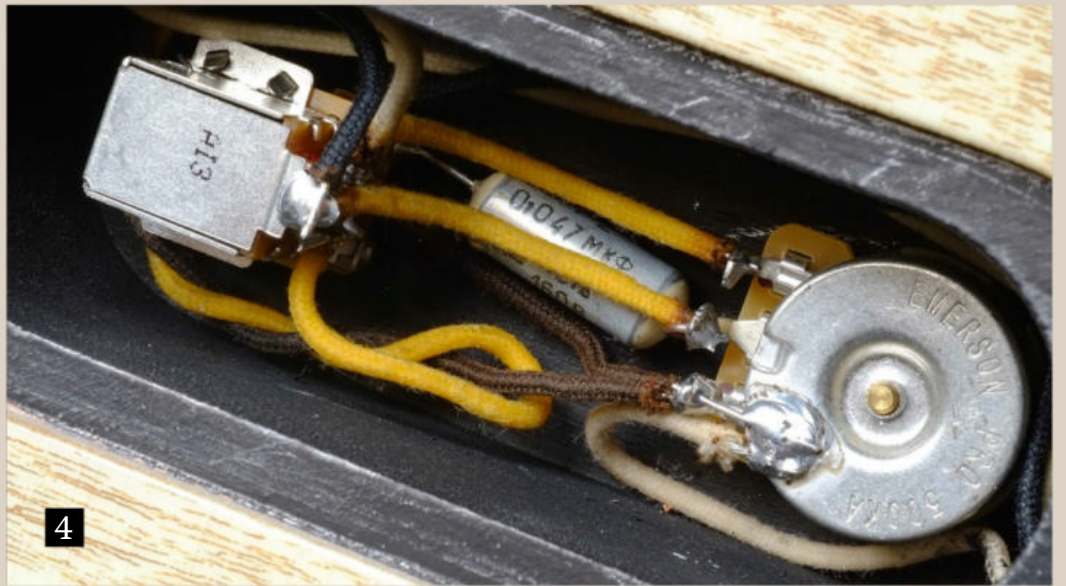
A boutique guitar deserves boutique wiring!

The perfectly fitting and recessed tortie backplate (with foil shield) sits over the small control cavity, which is also shielded with conductive black paint. Inside, the immaculate wiring looks like it was perfectly done back in the 50s: that cloth-covered wire and the old-style Russian BM-2 .047 microfarads paper-in-oil capacitor all add to the illusion. They're joined by a 500k audio Emerson Pro volume pot (which measures 508kohms) and a switched tone pot (measured at 535k), wired vintage-style. The 'blower' switch on the tone control takes the pickup directly to the output jack, bypassing the volume and tone controls, and, while it's not huge, you can easily hear the treble lift.

The Mojo P90 Dogear itself measures in at 8.35kohms (slightly overwound according to Mojo specs) at output and uses 42 AWG wire and Alnico V magnets. As ever, there's no height adjustment save for the screw polepieces. It's mounted without a shim and sits some 3mm from the low E and 2mm on the high E (measured from the underside of the string depressed at the 22nd fret to the top of the polepiece).

4. Perfectly wired in vintage style, reflecting the detailed build of the model

5. With the scratchplate removed, you can barely see the long tongue of the neck



with glass-paper thinner than the Macon's Fat 50 neck we reviewed last year: 22.5mm at the 1st fret and 24mm at the 12th, as opposed to 23.5mm/25.3mm of that earlier Macon. Maybe it's the relaxed shoulders, but the neck really does seem slimmer than the dimensions suggest. Then there are the well-rolled fingerboard edges and the highly polished frets (approximately 2.28mm wide and just under 1.4mm high) with perfectly domed ends. There's no compromise here, just great vintage-informed craft.

How does it fare against our original '57 single-cut Junior reference? Well, better than many. Single-cut Juniors might have the edge in terms of depth; the double-cuts typically sound a little leaner in the low-end, and that's certainly what we hear here. Yet that almost focuses the midrange-y, raw-edged P-90/mahogany 'grind', a sound you've heard countless times. It's not at the expense of high-end detail, which is crisp without being excessive.

The control circuit gets close to the original, and the vintage wiring gives a lot of subtlety for thinner and lighter voicings, although we might be tempted to use a lower-value cap as the roll-off here is a little excessive. But that's only a consideration if



Guitars such as this are a simple drive, but when you pull up the tone control's 'blower' switch the output bypasses the volume and tone for a slight treble lift. You can also use it as a preset lead sound keeping the volume pulled back – and the tone control switch pushed down – for your rhythm tones

This cover version turns the simple student model design into a thoroughly top-level tone machine

you actually use the tone control. Frankly, with the 'blower' switch engaged (the pickup goes directly to the output), this is one of the most visceral in-your-face Juniors we've played. Yes, it can do 'subtle', but when it's as raw and raunchy as this, embrace it: the essence of rock 'n' roll.

Verdict

To say Patrick and his small team have settled into their stride is an understatement. It's not just the hugely detailed build but also the vintage-like played-in feel of the guitars that continues to impress us and many others. And with such a quality build these guitars never sound less than spectacular. To some, of course, a guitar like this is simply a Gibson knock-off with the wrong name on the headstock, but it's one of the best cover versions of that classic design we've played, turning the simple student model design into a thoroughly top-level tone machine. Seriously, plug one in and see what the fuss is about. Don't blame us if you have to buy it, though.... **G**



6. The tuners, like the rest of the hardware, are aged in-house at PJE, while the worn-through finish of the neck is the only place you can see the real colour of the genuine mahogany



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE MACON JUNIOR DC

PRICE: £2,999 (inc case)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Double-cutaway, set-neck solidbody electric

BODY: 1-piece mahogany

NECK: 1-piece mahogany, C-60 profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625.5mm (24.625")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.15mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with 'clay' dot inlays; 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium/tall Jescar 55090

HARDWARE: Milled aluminium ABM 3025 intonated wrapover bridge/tailpiece, Gotoh SD90 vintage-style tuners with 'keystone' buttons – aged nickel

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Mojo P90 Dogear single coil, master volume and tone controls (with direct out 'blower' switch)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.26/7.17

OPTIONS: Base price is £2,900; our top binding adds £99. Options: 3A grade roasted maple figured neck (£80), master grade figured maple neck (£300), white pearloid pickguard (£50). Standard gloss nitro finish. Custom colours/metallics (add £140)

RANGE OPTIONS: Single-cut Macon Junior (from £3k), Macon Special (from £3,400 with 4A maple top, no binding); carved-top Macon from £4,400

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost

FINISHES: Grained Blonde (reviewed), Grained Black, Aged Mahogany, Cherry Red – heat-aged gloss nitro

Patrick James Eggle

01691 661777

www.eggle.co.uk



PROS A perfect version of a classic that feels, sounds and plays to the highest level; we'd rate it 11/10...

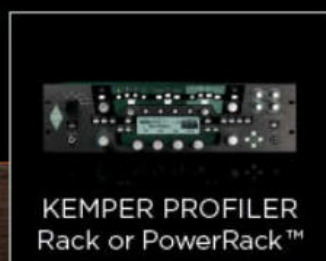
CONS But while you can't fault the craft, it is a pretty close cousin of the hallowed double-cut Gibson



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theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Manson DL-OR £9,999 & DL-OR Relic £12,999

CONTACT **Manson Guitar Works** PHONE **+44 (0)1364 653751** WEB **www.mansonguitarworks.com** Words **Jamie Dickson** Photography **Adam Gasson**

Matt Bellamy of post-rock superstars Muse has enjoyed a long partnership with Devon-based Manson Guitar Works, and has held the majority share in the company since 2019. Now the first Manson guitar that made history in Matt's hands has been reproduced with obsessive care in ultra-high-end replica form. Matt famously used a custom DL-1 single-cut, originally built by Hugh Manson, during launch gigs for Muse's *Origin Of Symmetry* album back in 2001. The original guitar took styling cues from a DeLorean sports car, as seen in the movie *Back To The Future*, (hence 'DL') and featured in-built Zvex Fuzz Factory and MXR Phase 90 effects, plus custom electronics by Ron Joyce.

The time-travelling reference is even more apt today, as Manson Guitar Works completes a painstaking three-year project to replicate the original 2001 guitar, which is still in its possession, with the launch of these strictly limited-production DL-OR and DL-OR Relic instruments – the 'OR' bit stands for Origin Reissue, by the way. The exactly built DL-OR Relic version features an onboard Fuzz Factory effect built from New Old Stock transistors that even Zvex didn't know they still had until Manson requested

them. These were hand-wired onto a period-correct 'breadboard' circuit by Shoua Thao, the original Zvex employee who built them at that time.

Likewise, the custom Ron Joyce preamp for the DL-OR's Graph Tech Ghost piezo pickup system was rebuilt from scratch using 20-year-old schematics. Some concessions to practicality have been made, however, as Manson CEO Adrian Ashton explains: "The phaser speed used to be adjusted from an internal trim pot – but Matt found the setting needed adjusting from song to song."

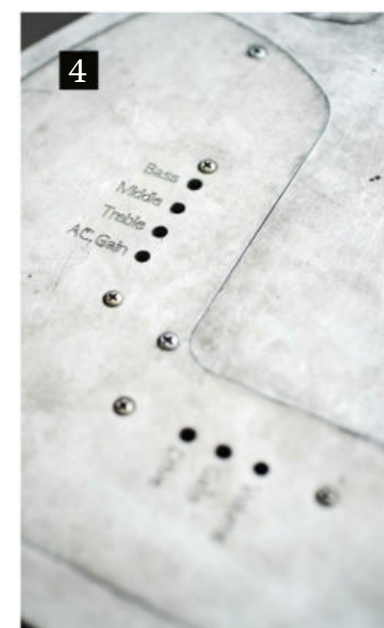
Sensibly, phaser speed is now governed by a control knob that formerly operated a GK synth pickup that Matt stopped using fairly quickly. The body shape of the DL-ORs has also been made a little less extreme than the original DL-1. As mentioned, the DL-OR has been built in two variants, the non-Relic version of which has been polished to such a high sheen it has to be handled with gloves prior to shipment to its eventual owner. Or perhaps we should say *current* owner: the exclusive DL-OR Relic, limited to just six pieces, sold out in "less than 30 seconds", despite its high price tag, while the non-Relic DL-ORs, limited to 24 guitars, sold out within half an hour. **G**

1. Micro switches engage the DL-OR's onboard Fuzz Factory and Phase 90 effects

2. The multi-rail Mother Superior bridge pickup is a Manson in-house build by Simon Thorn

3. The cylindrical tuners were inspired by a tutor at the Bass Institute of Technology (BIT) music college in LA, who fitted similar ones to his bass to stop it detuning in and out of gigbags

4. Access to trim pots controlling the piezo preamp and additional controls for the Fuzz Factory can be had via the backplate. Cleverly, Manson also fitted extra screws to this plate for techs to use as spares if any were lost on tour





5. The non-Relic version of the DL-OR is buffed to such a high sheen that it needs to be handled with gloves prior to delivery to its owner. The aluminium body is not a solid billet but is built on a wooden core

6. The lowest of the three smaller control knobs governs phaser speed. The larger knobs controlling effects level and master volume are the same knurled units used as tuners on the headstock

7. The maple neck is slim, fast and oh-so-smooth and comfortable to play. The Relic variant uses the same, slightly smaller 6230 fretwire as Matt's original, while the non-relic DL-OR has slightly chunkier wire

8. The neck pickup is a hot-output Deci-Bel 90, again wound in-house by Manson

9. The Relic version of the DL-OR has a fantastic aged patina – plus NOS Fuzz Factory parts not used in the non-relic version



Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

New Pedal Releases £Various

Flashy new guitars and trouser-flapping amps are great, but there's something about new pedals – the affordability and instant gratification of adding new sounds and possibilities to our rigs – that is unmatched by the other parts of our setups. It's been a busy month

in the world of stompboxes, with everything from cheap pedals to speaker-emulated 'pedalboard amp' solutions, through to one of the most sophisticated loopers we've seen to date. Let's take a look at some of the hottest releases for the end of the year. [SW]



BLACKSTAR
DEPT.10 DUAL £249
Blackstar's new Dept. 10 Series Dual Drive and Dual Distortion pedals pack an ECC83 valve each, and have been designed to run at amp-level internal voltages to really get those lightbulbs cooking. But there's a digital twist in the form of Blackstar's new Cab Rig emulation, which – combined with the new Architect software – gives you deep, flexible editing of a virtual cab, including speaker and mic choice, placement and EQ for a portable, valve-powered direct solution for live and recording applications. Both pedals feature regular and dedicated emulated outputs, three-band EQ, Blackstar's ISF control, an effects loop and USB for use as an audio interface.
www.blackstaramps.com



BLACKSTAR
DEPT.10 BOOST £159
Also included in Blackstar's new series is the Dept. 10 Boost. This sets itself apart from the Dual pedals by being aimed at a more traditional pedalboard setup – you won't find any digital wizardry here. Instead, this single-ECC83-equipped pedal aims to give your 'board a bump that Blackstar says is akin to adding two hot gain stages to your chain. Thanks to the James-Baxandall-style EQ circuit – known for its smooth, wide-sweeping tonality – it promises rich second-order harmonics and natural compression.
www.blackstaramps.com



HARLEY BENTON
MINISTOMP SERIES
£16 to £30
Why launch one new pedal when you can launch, say, 27? That's clearly the thinking over at HB HQ, as the Thomann-owned brand has dropped a boatload of its MiniStomp pedals encompassing flavours from across the palette of effects including overdrives/distortions/fuzz, amp modelling, EQ/filtering, looping, plus modulation and time-based effects. As the name suggests, these fairly utilitarian-looking pedals are also designed to take up minimal pedalboard space, but, best of all, prices start at around £16, capping off at around £30! To browse the full range, check out Harley Benton's website.
www.harleybenton.com



ELECTRO-HARMONIX
NANO DELUXE
MEMORY MAN \$203
There's been a number of Memory Men over the years, from the miniaturised Memory Boy/Toy iteration classics, to the full-sized Deluxe Memory Man. Now, fresh out of the Electro-Harmonix lab comes the new Nano Deluxe Memory Man. Not only does it feature the same analogue delay circuit and control set as the pedalboard classic, but EHX has gone two better and thrown in Rate/Depth controls for more detailed tweaking of modulation in place of the original's Chorus/Vibrato knob. Plus the delay time has been extended from 300ms to 500ms for extra-long tails, all in a Nano-sized stomper. It'll be available by the time you read this.
www.ehx.com

JARGON CRUNCHING

Amps On 'Board

Pedalboard-based 'amps' are becoming more popular, but what's the story? Well, these front-ends are essentially preamps that behave like the input stage of your amp. They're usually equipped with decent switchable speaker emulation, too, meaning you can go direct to a FRFR (Full Range, Flat Response) powered cab, or even straight into a PA system. These types of pedals also lend themselves to direct recording, and we think we'll be seeing a lot more of them over the year ahead!



BOSS RC-600 LOOP STATION £527

The RC-600 floor-based Loop Station boasts six stereo tracks, 49 input FX/53 track FX (including a guitar-to-bass simulator, a host of vocal manipulation tools) and 200 rhythm patterns – complete with intelligent transitions, and the ability to import your own beats via the RC Rhythm Converter software – covering everything from jazz to EDM. The audio conversion works at 32-bit, and the RC-600 is equipped with a pair of phantom power-enabled XLR mic preamps as well as two stereo line inputs, plus three pairs of assignable line outs for routing options. There are also nine assignable footswitches, to make controlling your loops flexible in a live environment.

www.boss.info



IK MULTIMEDIA AMPLITUBE X-GEAR SERIES £299

Fans of AmpliTube, rejoice! In fact, fans of feature-packed pedals should do a little dance, too, for IK Multimedia has made what could be its best move into guitar hardware yet with the new X-Gear pedals. Porting the brand's algorithms into sturdy multi-mode pedals, the X-Gear series comprises Drive (distortion), Vibe (modulation), Time (delay) and Space (reverb), with each offering 16 selectable algorithms of respective classics, 50 factory presets (with 300 user memories, too), seven pedal-mounted controls and a built-in large display. The pedal can communicate with the also-new X-Gear plug-in counterpart for seamless hardware/software hopping and integration.

www.ikmultimedia.com

ALSO OUT NOW...

GUILD BOB MARLEY £359



Guild has unveiled a tribute model for none other than reggae legend Bob Marley. The A-20 Marley is based on the Guild Madeira A-20 acoustic, which Bob used to write many of his hits. It's a dreadnought-style body, fitted with a solid spruce top and mahogany back and sides. The neck is also mahogany, fitted with a pau ferro fingerboard with a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length and, in keeping with Bob's 70s Guilds, features a flat, round-cornered headstock and period-correct Guild logo. There's a Marley script inlay at the 12th fret, plus Bob's signature on the scratchplate. Meanwhile, inside the included deluxe gigbag there's a booklet containing the history of Bob's guitar, three custom picks and an exclusive poster of Bob with his Guild.

www.guildguitars.com

RAPIER 33 £429

John Hornby Skewes and guitar designer Alan Entwistle have teamed up to revive the Watkins Rapier (albeit without the Watkins brand name). The Rapier 33 resembles the same double-cut outline as the Brit classic, but this time it comes loaded with Entwistle EWR64 foil-style mini-humbuckers. These are controlled by a three-way switch giving you bridge/neck combinations, with a slider switch to engage the middle pickups – that's seven tonal options from the pickup switching alone. There's new hardware, too, with a modernised Original Rapier Hi Lo bridge/vibrato, Wilkinson E-Z-Lok tuners, a Graph Tech bone nut. It's available in 3 Tone Sunburst, Artic White, Daphne Blue and Fiesta Red. Full review next issue.

www.jhs.co.uk





The Players

The latest news, views and happenings from the world of your favourite guitarists

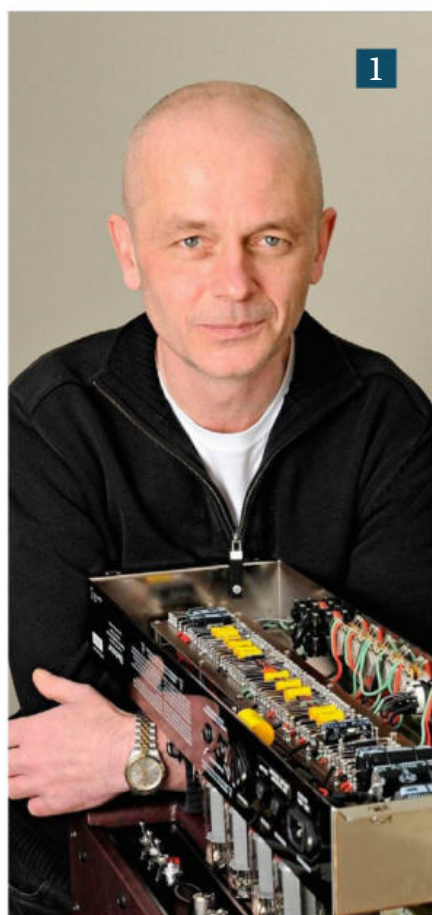


PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACKSTAR AMPLIFICATION

1. Bruce Keir 1961-2021 Blackstar Amplification co-founder dies, age 60

Blackstar co-founder and technical director Bruce Keir passed away on 14 September, after battling early-onset Alzheimer's disease for a number of years. Bruce was one of four Marshall alumni, along Ian Robinson, Paul Hayhoe and Richard Frost, who started Blackstar Amplification in 2007. His engineering knowledge and forward-thinking mind was the technical driving force behind Blackstar designs that have become cornerstones for the company, including the acclaimed Artisan and Series One amp range, plus the HT series overdrive and distortion pedals. He also designed the original digital algorithms that became Blackstar's ID:Series.

"Under Bruce's guidance Blackstar has established a world leading guitar technology



PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

R&D facility which invests constantly in researching guitar technology and driving forward innovation," said the Blackstar team in tribute. "Over the years, Bruce has been an inspiration to many, many people. Those who met him will remember the warmth, humour and gravitas of a truly unique individual. Blackstar will make sure his legacy is remembered, protected and strengthened."

2. Go West How Tom Morello simplified his recording process

After a dry creative period in his home studio, Tom Morello was inspired by Kanye West to record guitar parts for his new solo album, *The Atlas Underground Fire* on an iPhone. "I read a quote by Kanye West where he said he had recorded the vocals for a couple of his hit records on the Voice Memos [app] on his iPhone,"



PHOTO BY SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/HEARST NEWSPAPERS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Morello explained to *Rolling Stone*. "I was like, 'You can do that?' And I started just playing guitar straight into my iPhone. I'd send the guitar riffs off to various producers, engineers, and artists around the world. That re-lit the pilot light."

3. Ask Me Why McCartney reveals who decided to split The Beatles

In a recent interview with Radio 4's *This Cultural Life*, Paul McCartney refuted claims that The Beatles' dissolution was down to him: "I am not the person who instigated the split," he told interviewer John Wilson. "Oh no, no, no. John walked into a room one day and said, 'I am leaving The Beatles.' Is that instigating the split, or not?" McCartney described it as "the most difficult period of my life... This was my band, this was my job, this was my life, so I wanted it to continue." But he



PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON

is diplomatic about Lennon's motives: "The point of it really was that John was making a new life with Yoko," reasoned McCartney. "John had always wanted to sort of break loose from society because, you know, he was brought up by his Aunt Mimi, who was quite repressive, so he was always looking to break loose."

4. Wizards With Ozz All-star guitar cast assembles for Osbourne's album

Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Tony Iommi and Zakk Wylde are all playing on the new Ozzy Osbourne album, according to the Prince Of Darkness himself. There was just one little hiccup: "Eric Clapton, on this new record, one of the lyrics was about Jesus, and he wasn't sure about that," Ozzy told Billy Morrison on SiriusXM radio. "But it was all right in the end... [His solo] is very good." **[RL]**

A man with voluminous curly hair and a beard is looking down. He is wearing a black t-shirt with the Marshall logo. His arms are covered in tattoos. The background consists of horizontal metal slats.

Marshall

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Albums

The month's best guitar music - a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax



PHOTO BY DAILY MIRROR/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Beatles Let It Be

UMG

7/10



The Fab's most contentious album receives its puff of fairy dust

For many people, *Let It Be* is the runt of The Beatles' otherwise brilliant litter. Little more than a failed experiment to write and record a new studio album in a month –

January 1969, to be precise – under the unforgiving eye of a camera crew. The resulting film, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, made matters considerably worse by documenting a band on the verge of breaking up with John, Paul, George and Ringo filmed arguing in the studio and an air of general dissent prevailing throughout.

Meanwhile, the finished recording was handed to Phil Spector who somewhat controversially added orchestration to tracks such as *The Long And Winding Road*, amid what have been generally accepted as other production faux pas. Despite the somewhat luxurious packaging on its original release in March 1970, the album was met with a lukewarm response from fans and critics alike. Furthermore, following in the wake of the totally brilliant *Abbey Road*, *Let It Be* seemed like a disastrously unfitting epitaph for a truly phenomenal band.

Now, on the eve of *Lord Of The Rings* director Peter Jackson's new six-hour version of the film, Giles Martin has remixed the album, resulting in pristine vocals and a new crispness to the instrumentation. Spector's not-so-special sauce is still present but seems to have been pushed to the back of the mix. The Super Deluxe version includes rehearsals, outtakes and so on, but it seems that we have to wait for that glorious moment from the original sessions, the rooftop concert, which showed without doubt what an amazing band The Beatles really were. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Across The Universe*

For fans of: John, Paul, George and Ringo

Dream Theater

A View From The Top Of The World

Inside Out Music

9/10



The prog metallers unleash 15th studio album

With seven tracks and a one-hour-11-minute running time, Dream Theater's latest album is everything we'd expect from the band: great interplay, angular rhythms, fantastical lyrics and blazing solo passages. There's a fine art to guitar and keyboard arranging, which John Petrucci and Jordan Rudess have crafted via unison lines, swapping lead/comp roles and timbre-balancing from soft to aggressive. Opener *Alien* has a frenetic, all-blazing intro with melodic shred solos featuring Petrucci's Music Man and Mesa/Boogie gear before Rudess goes 'Jan Hammer on steroids'. *Answering The Call* starts with low B moshing and precise 16th lines before James LaBrie's vocals enter. There's a great wah solo later, too. The 10-minute *Sleeping Giant* is quite a sonic journey and talk of an eight-string Music Man Majesty guitar this year suggests that *Awaken The Master* is where you'll find it here – the riffing is spectacularly low! **[JS]**

Standout track: *Awaken The Master*

For fans of: Liquid Tension Experiment, Queensrÿche

Davy Knowles

What Happens Next

Provogue Records

8/10



Renowned Americana guitarist finds stylistic crossroads

While Davy Knowles is known for blues/Americana stylings, *What Happens Next* sees him lean towards R&B and soul, ranging from Small Faces through to The Black Keys via Otis Redding and The White Stripes. It's a rich brew of influences that has produced songs that are very much vocal-led as opposed to busting with guitar solos. That said, Knowles' breadth of guitar tones is quite something here: from gnarly Fuzz Face distortion right through to classic clean amp shimmers. Opening stomper *Light Of The Moon* – 60s psychedelic ambience meets Queens Of The Stone Age riffing – is a great earworm. *Roll Me* has a tasty 60s-meets-Mark-Ronson blend of soul stylings with great vocals and a reverb-rich guitar performance. *Get Lucky* (no, not that song) weaves elements of The Zombies with a Bruno Mars groove. All in all, this is a refreshing embrace of old and new genres, and definitely worth checking out. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Light Of The Moon*

For fans of: John Mellencamp, David Grissom



JoBo's back and this time it's in the studio with the typically bluesy *Time Clocks*

Joe Bonamassa

Time Clocks

Provogue

8/10



JoBo rocks around the clocks

Literally weeks seem to have passed since we last saw an album release from Joe Bonamassa, but you have to admit the guy is nothing less than a hard-working and prolific artist. Arguably, too, you could say that JoBo's forte is in the form of a truly formidable live act, the studio albums somehow falling slightly short of the high-tide mark he's established in the concert arena. But this latest release might be the album that changes all that for good. *Time Clocks* kicks off with what sounds like a short-and-sweet homage to Jeff Beck, before erupting into the first full track, *Notches*, a powerful, riff-laden outing with Joe's signature guitar singing over the top. While the title track is destined to become an anthemic live staple, the rest of the album treads the course of ballads and blues in the JoBo fashion. The man himself begins a European tour next April, kicking off in Glasgow, and you can be sure that many of the songs featured here will find their way onto the setlist. Prepare to be enthralled. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Notches*

For fans of: Clapton, Gary Moore

Nicolas Meier World Group

Magnificent

MGP Records

8/10



World guitarist releases triple-CD package

In view of the fact that Nicolas Meier was once a part of Jeff Beck's touring ensemble, he has a remarkably low profile on the world stage. His solo releases thus far have featured a fascinating fusion between jazz and Eastern music – often veering more towards the former end of that spectrum. He has a proven track record on the gigging circuit, too, but releasing a triple-CD package into the current market might seem like a bold move. It was lockdown that inspired this amalgamation of live and studio work – with all the unexpected time on his hands, Nicolas focused on putting together a series of live streaming events, even managing to organise a virtual guitar festival in the process. Spurred on by the inertia of those projects, a writing-and-producing marathon ensued, which brings us to where we are now. This set is a perfect introduction to his music, and if you like jazz with a twist, this set should be on your radar. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Stories From The Garden*

For fans of: Antonio Forcione, Chick Corea Akoustic Band

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Top Pick

Adam Goldsmith quizzes some of the industry's most active session musicians on what makes a great pro guitarist – spoiler: it's rhythm

The question that most budding professional musicians tend to ask essentially boils down to 'how can I get more gigs?', whether it's an enquiry from a purely musical perspective or with a mind to growing their business. My current regular gig, at the Garrick Theatre in London's West End, is *The Drifters Girl* starring Beverley Knight. The band for the show includes some of the UK's busiest musicians, so I thought I would get their thoughts on what would make them recommend a guitarist for a gig, as well as

“Each individual has to be a team player with everyone coming to an agreement on where the time and feel of the music fits”

what qualities they value in guitar players. (Spoiler alert: no-one mentioned Instagram followers or playing really fast through true bypass pedals.)

Our panel for these purposes comprises drummer Neal Wilkinson (whose credits include work with James Morrison, Van Morrison, Annie Lennox, plus thousands of sessions), bass player Phil Mulford (who has years of sessions with the *The X Factor* under his belt, plus work with Paul Jackson Jr, Steve Hackett, and many films and shows), and percussionist Karl Vanden Bossche (who's played with Sade, Steve Winwood and for Damon Albarn's Gorillaz).

Without exception, all three immediately mentioned rhythm and groove playing. Neal cited as important the ability to very quickly find a natural rhythm part

that complements the drum pattern and “takes the weight of responsibility” away from the drums in places. He also quoted the legendary drummer Steve Gadd, who, when asked what ‘groove’ meant, replied, “It's an agreement,” which I thought was a fantastic sentiment.

It alludes to the social aspect of music, whereby each individual has to be a team player with everyone coming to a musical agreement on where the time and feel of the music fits. Another of Neal's tips was to check out the Montreux Jazz Festival concert featuring the band Stuff (view it on YouTube), which includes guitar players Eric Gale and Cornell Dupree who are great examples of the art of this subject.

The Time Team

Bass player Phil Mulford was up next, and he mentioned the three Ts of time, tone and taste. (Note, once more, no mention of playing fast fusion licks on the internet.) He also talked in some depth about choice of chord voicings, the essential drift being the ability to choose chord voicings that don't conflict with either the bass or keys player, and that don't muddy the mix in any way.

The theme of being musically sensitive to your surroundings was continued by Karl: “Be a team player with great time and don't get in the way of the artist's vocals,” he said. He used the example of guitar players in reggae bands, who don't usually have hugely technical parts, yet are totally essential to the groove and the music as a whole. British guitar players such as Robbie McIntosh and Rob Harris came up frequently in our conversation as examples of people who are great to work with. And not only on a personal level (it's important to remember that 70 per cent of any tour, for instance, is hanging with your fellow musicians, both before and after the gig) but also to provide all the musical things we have talked about here.

Obviously, the specific requirements for guitarists for hire depend on which area of the music industry you want to go into. But it's certainly interesting to note that the thing we all seemingly need to concentrate on is the very thing that many guitar players neglect: the importance of rhythm playing.

Personally, I've always noticed that a lot of big names in rock-guitar playing, where the attention is usually given to solos, have also been fantastic rhythm players as well. Just look to Eddie Van Halen, Nuno Bettencourt and Steve Vai, for instance. And, in turn, the ability to play in time and sit on the beat well in your rhythm playing is invariably going to reflect well in your time and phrasing when you're soloing. This means when it comes to your moment to shine in any solo, whether it's on a live gig or in a studio situation, you still retain that fundamental sense of groove, even in your lead lines. 

Left to right: percussionist Karl Vanden Bossche, drummer Neal Wilkinson and bassist Phil Mulford impart their many years of wisdom and expertise





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Across The 'Board

With his Helix seemingly throwing a wobbler, **Neville Marten** visited *That Pedal Show* to suss out a new 'board for theatre shows and beyond

My Line 6 Helix seemed to have gone a bit nuts lately, with 80 per cent of the sound suddenly dropping out mid-gig. It's incredibly panic-inducing, especially as I've had it for four years and it's done literally hundreds of fuss-free shows. Mind you, one can never rule out pilot error on these occasions!

I'd already been looking at back-up solutions, based around the plethora of pedalboard amps that's recently arisen. I wanted something that I could use in theatres with in-ear monitors, but also in front of my Matchless Lightning for pub gigs. On a recent social visit to Mick and Dan at *That Pedal Show*, Dan kindly offered to build me a new 'board for exactly such occasions. So last week I took my higgledy-piggledy bunch of boxes over and Mick and I spent an afternoon auditioning 'board amps, distortions and delays, as I wanted to upgrade my pub gig pedalboard, too. As you do.

We narrowed it down to a Strymon Iridium, which boasts three amp types and a number of speaker

emulations, and the DSM & Humboldt Simplifier. The Iridium is digital, whereas the Simplifier is analogue, but with similar amp types and speaker emulations. I'd whittled the choice of delays down to Strymon's El Capistan or the equally fabulous Volante, and was open to suggestions from Mick regarding drives.

On my 'board at present sit a TC Electronic PolyTune 2, a Dunlop Cry Baby Junior, Fulltone OCD, Analog Man King Of Tone, Providence Anadime Chorus, Voodoo Labs Tremolo, and Keeley-modded Boss DD-3 Delay. The King Of Tone has never really done it for me, despite what everyone says about it, and while I love the Keeley-modded DD-3, I really require something more versatile.

Armed with my red Strat we set about our business. Mick rigged an Electro-Voice full-range speaker cabinet and we went through the amps first, using my current pedals to add colour. While the Strymon was fantastic, there was something about how the Simplifier 'felt' that tipped the balance its way. Both the El Capistan and Volante delays were awesome – open, transparent and authentic tape delay sounds. But the Volante won the day as I do need to instantly access two distinctly different delay types. Its reverb was incredible, too.

We then looked at a bunch of overdrives, and wound up choosing one I hadn't even considered – the Hudson Electronics Broadcast. On its own (and we now had the Volante and Simplifier in line) it gave a genuinely real-sounding amp crunch, but mated to the OCD the results were spectacular. The guitar's tone was never subsumed by gain; instead, the Strat retained its own voice across all pickup selections. What's more, the Broadcast's germanium transistor preamp can deliver huge and stable fuzz tones should that be required.

Hopefully Dan can put the whole thing together with one of his neat switching systems. We opted for a beautiful Schmidt Array 450 pedalboard and I'll have two outputs, one from the Simplifier amp and one bypassing it for when running the 'board into my Matchless. We left the wah-wah off, as I so rarely use it, and while I was going to include my Line 6 Relay G70 wireless receiver/switcher at the front, we decided this would also be better used separately.

And thereby hangs a tale. When using a temporary 'board that Mick wired up for me, at exactly the same point in the show the sound dropped out again. Surely not? A closer inspection revealed the fault to be with a worn transmitter cable, and not the guiltless Helix at all.

Many thanks to Mick for his time and knowledge, and to Dr Dan for building me a beautiful pro 'board. A big nod, too, to Andertons for supplying the pedals, and to Schmidt Array for the stunning pedalboard. I may well get back to using the Helix for my theatre shows because it's so simple and so rugged, but now I have a brilliant backup, too. A 'board for all seasons! **G**

"I wanted something that I could use in theatres with in-ear monitors but also in front of my Matchless Lightning for pub gigs"



GAS OF THE MONTH

Send Her Victorious

What? Victory V4 'The Duchess' **Where seen?** Andertons, Guildford **Price?** £699

A close contender for my new 'board, the pedal version of the superb V40 head boasts an all-valve preamp into a 180-watt solid-state power amp, so you can use a backline speaker cab instead of a hefty combo/stack. There's onboard reverb and tremolo, plus the facility to run it directly to your PA or recording console. Featuring three-band EQ, tremolo depth and speed plus reverb control, there's also an effects loop and footswitch jack for the tremolo. A super option if you fancy reducing your backline, require a simple recording solution, or need to placate volume-averse sound engineers.

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Fret Started

This month **Alex Bishop** dons his perfectionist cap and contends with the tricky process of expertly fretting a hand-built guitar

When it comes to trying to impress fellow guitar makers, it is often the little details that count most. I always tell my lutherie students just before installing the decorative purflings and bindings around the edge of the instrument that this the moment when any flaws in their craftsmanship will be exposed – and that no matter how great the sound of that guitar, they will be somewhat pained forever by that missed opportunity to have made the ‘perfect’ instrument.

Fretwork is no exception when it comes to sweating the small stuff and lately I’ve been faced with fretting a pair of 000-size guitars I’ve spent most of the year building. Those simple strips of nickel adorning the

TIP OF THE MONTH

Essential Tool Checklist

FRET BENDERS

A high-end fret job requires many tools, including a good hammer, fret saw and top-quality nippers. A fret bender – consisting of a trio of bearings between which fretwire is fed – will allow you to apply a radius to your lengths of fretwire, ensuring fret ends are perfectly seated every time.

“If one fret is a fraction too low or high it will influence the clarity of tone of the notes around it and limit the playability of the guitar”

fingerboard are the very point of contact between instrument and fingers, and as I see it they must do their job perfectly. If one fret is a fraction too low or high it will influence the clarity of tone of the notes around it and limit the playability of the guitar. Rough or unpolished fret ends will wreck the feel of a good neck, and badly installed frets can unseat over time, giving rise to problems later on. There’s a lot at stake, but on the other hand a perfect fret job makes for a guitar that feels delightfully comfortable and much easier to play.

My own fretting process has responded to problems I’ve encountered over time, and one of the biggest issues I used to contend with was the problem of ‘fret poke’. This phenomenon occurs when wood, such as the

fingerboard, shrinks. I have found common fingerboard hardwoods like ebony and rosewood are particularly inclined to do this, resulting in the metal frets protruding slightly from the edges. After an otherwise perfect fret job, this contraction – which may not occur until months afterwards, often in timing with the change of the seasons – need only be minuscule to become a great irritation.

In order to fix this, I decided to start by binding the edges of all of my fingerboards. This essentially means that fret slots do not extend right to the edges of the neck. Fretting a bound fingerboard requires the extra work of adding a small undercut on the ends of every fret, but it also means that the fret does not necessarily have to come right to the edges of the ‘board. This small discrepancy gives space for the fingerboard to shrink in future, without the risk of overhanging frets. I also take the opportunity to carefully shape the fret ends before I install them, opting for ‘semi-hemispherical’, or ball-ended shaping for ultimate comfort. I think the difference compared with a conventional fret job makes for an instant improvement.

Once the agony of repeatedly filing and turning the frets is over, I have a tidy regiment of precision-cut nickel frets arranged to be hammered into the neck. A fret is simply held into place by tiny barbs on the side of a tang, which pushes into a slot on the fingerboard. Mostly, it’s the compatibility between the size of the tang and the slot that determines how easy or difficult this next stage is. Given that frets come in a multitude of sizes, results can vary – but too tight and the frets won’t go into the fingerboard properly, too loose and they won’t stay put. It takes practice and experience to master, but a combination of good hammering technique, slot filing, fret prep and sheer persistence is the recipe for a smooth afternoon of fretting.

The result should be a fret job that seasoned repairers and luthiers will be impressed by and, most importantly, a guitar that people won’t want to stop playing – and they won’t even know why it feels so good. 

Each fret is painstakingly filed to size and checked before being hammered into the guitar’s neck

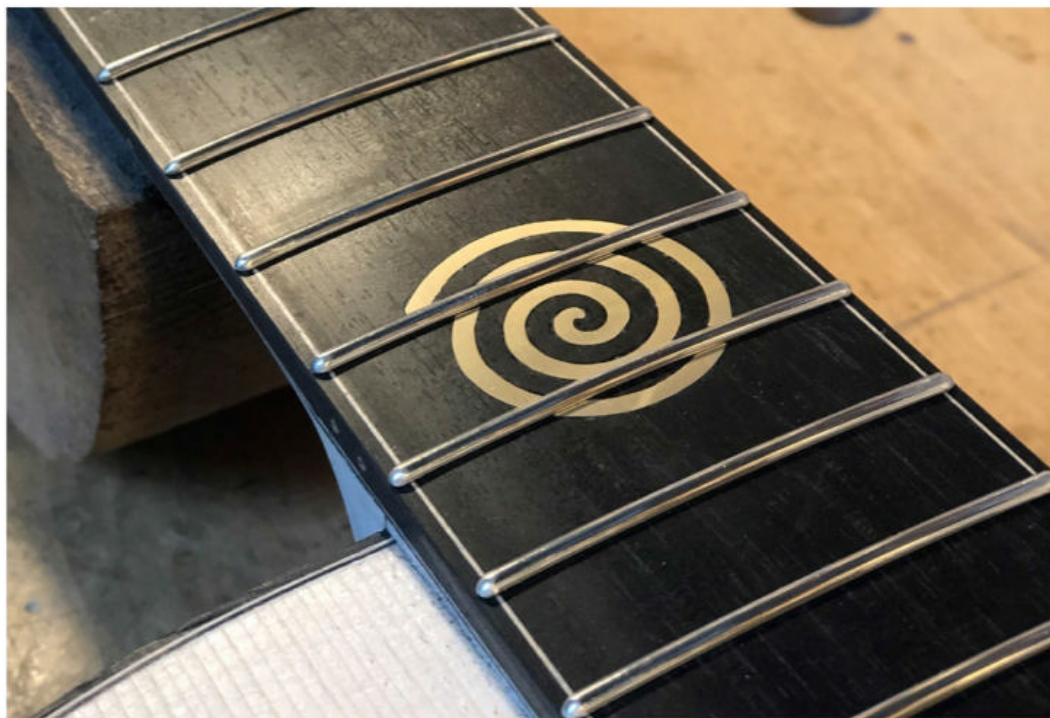


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Amplifier Essentials

Simon Fraser-Clark of Laney tells **Jamie Dickson** everything you always wanted to know about amps (but were afraid to ask)

During *Guitarist's* recent trip to the home of legendary Birmingham amp company Laney, I got chatting with Simon Fraser-Clark – its resident expert on valve amp tone – about the things that people often wonder about amps but may feel too embarrassed to ask, in case they appear ignorant. Amps are, on the whole, less talked about than classic guitars, and the electronics jargon behind how they produce amplified sound can seem a bit impenetrable. The result

“When a preamp tube starts to fail, you will play a note and, as the note dies away, it sounds like there’s a pan of frying bacon sizzling nearby...”

Dialling in an amp for great tone tends to be about balance rather than extremes. Simon favours starting with the EQ at 12 o'clock

is that some very basic questions can be left unanswered in players’ minds for years without being properly answered – so Simon helpfully agreed to participate in a quick FAQ on amp tone while we were chatting. First up, I ask him how players can decide whether a combo or head and cab would be best suited to their needs?

“I think as with all things tone-related, the golden rule is there is no golden rule,” says Simon. “Really, you pick

the one that works for you. But from a flexibility point of view, heads and cabs are really *de rigueur* at the moment. You’re finding more and more people using them. From a home-recording point of view, they’ll mic up a single cab really well and then they’ll just interchange heads to get different sounds. So heads give you more flexibility – but combos are a great solution to not having to lug a head and a cab around.”

With that simple but useful advice imparted, I ask him about a feature of many amps that seems to defy easy categorisation for many players: the Presence control. What, in practical terms, is it useful for? Isn’t it just a glorified treble control?

“Think about presence as an overall tone control – but at the back end of the signal path,” Simon explains. “Basically, it’s an easy way to tune the overall character of your EQ to a particular environment. So if you have a nice balance of bass, middle and treble dialled in on your amp, but one night you’re playing in a lounge club and the next you’re playing in a swimming pool, then some people use Presence – which sits in the output section – as an extra, overall EQ control to dial the sound of your amp in to suit the room. Rather than being specific to bass, middle and treble, it just allows you to take a little bit of top-end off.

“In reality, what everyone should do every single time they play a gig is zero their EQ, you know? You should flatten the EQ every time, but no-one does that. So presence works as a way to fine-tune the character of your overall EQ blend to suit different venue characteristics. But EQ is a strange thing; people don’t appreciate the power of it. And, you know, the number of times I hear people say, ‘I played a gig last night and my amp sounded brilliant, but when I played tonight it didn’t sound as good.’ ‘Well, how did you EQ it?’ ‘Oh, exactly the same as I normally do.’ So then you go, ‘Okay, that may be the problem.’ You know, you’re not taking into consideration the environment that you’re in, and the idea of EQ is to give you the perfect sound irrespective of the environment you’re in. Some environments are more bassy than others. Therefore, you need to adjust the EQ accordingly on the amp to give you the sound that you’re looking for,” Simon concludes.

Dialling in an amp for great tone is a bit of an art in itself, but Simon says there is no magic path to success – though a good tonal balance is usually the goal.

“Again, the golden rule is there are no golden rules. I think in reality, you want to avoid extremes. So if you have an amp where you’re kind of dialling everything all the way up from a volume point of view and from a tone point of view then you might actually need something that’s a little bit bigger, from a wattage point of view. The way I dial an amp, if it’s an amp I’m not familiar with and I’m coming to it cold, I’ll make sure all the EQ starts at 12 o’clock, and I’ll make sure that the gain control is set just at the point where the amp starts to break up, with a little ‘hair’ on it, so





to speak. I do that because I think people don't understand the kind of impact a guitar's controls have on how they set up the amp. So I will set an amp up until it's just on the edge of a nice kind of break-up. And then I'll vary the guitar's controls in order to clean the amp up or drive the amp a little harder."

Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

Finally, we turn to a familiar but important question that bears repeating here: how do you know if the valves in your amp need replacing?

"The two basic types of tubes are preamp tubes and power amp tubes," Simon explains. "When a preamp tube starts to fail, you will play a note and, as the note dies away, it will sound like there's a pan of frying bacon sizzling nearby... That's a pretty good indicator that one of your preamp tubes is on the way out. The way to determine *which* of your preamp tubes is on the way out is to turn the amp on and turn the volume up to a relatively decent level then carefully flick each preamp tube in turn with the back of your fingernail. You'll soon find the one that is on its way out and has become microphonic. When you flick it the tube will ring, you'll hear it.

"With power amp tubes it's a little more difficult to tell," Simon continues. "If you've had an amp for a while and you're familiar with the way it sounds then you'll tend to find that, as a power amp tube drifts out of spec, you have to dial more and more bottom-end in. Another thing to be aware of is the visual look of your tubes. Tubes tend to glow a uniform colour. If one is glowing brighter than any of the others, there could be a problem. But the bright one isn't necessarily the one that's failing. In fact, that's usually a tube taking up the work of another tube that's failing – so you can see you have a tube in your output section that's on its way out." **G**

"As with all things tone-related, the golden rule is there is no golden rule," says Simon Fraser-Clark of Laney Amps

THREE TO GET READY

A trio of lovely Laney heads



Laney L5-Studio head £519

Designed with home recording in mind, the tone-rich little L5 head has a raft of features to make getting tone down on tape easy – from a single-ended Class A power stage for easy access to responsive, blooming tone to Laney's T-USB output allowing direct recording to a DAW. Boutique-grade tone in a flexible, studio-ready package that doesn't cost a bomb.



Laney Cub-Supertop head £329

Laney's entry-level valve head doesn't skimp on features or tone – as demonstrated by Brazilian phenom Lari Basilio who uses these live. The cool but minimal enclosure houses a 15-watt EL84-based amp with a footswitchable boost function plus digital reverb and can be stepped down to one-watt output for bedroom use.



Laney Black Country Customs LA30BL head £779

Harking back to the muscular, mighty Laney amps of the 70s, the LA30BL is a study in potent simplicity. Deriving 30 watts of output from a pair of EL34s, the LA30BL has four inputs, three-band EQ, presence and a gain control... and not much more, except some of the most evocative tones the company can offer. You just have to crank it right up to get 'em.



Neither Major Nor Minor

Richard Barrett explores chords that break the major/minor mould and how distortion can be a worthy companion

It's fair to say that one of the most important distinctions we can make when classifying a chord is to note whether it is major or minor – because each has its own feeling or mood. However, rock and blues frequently sidestep such classification by either avoiding the notes that would qualify a chord as major or minor – or by containing a contradictory selection of notes that make it impossible to say!

The 7#9 'Hendrix' chord is a perfect example of this: it contains both the major and minor 3rd. As well as creating an alternative feel to 'straight' major or minor, these chords can have practical uses on a distorted guitar. One reason powerchords often avoid major or minor 3rds is the dissonance that can occur due to these intervals being incompatible with the harmonics the distortion introduces. With these, not so much! You might not want the gain at maximum, but it's surprising how far you can go to add interest to chord progressions that otherwise might seem to dictate powerchords.

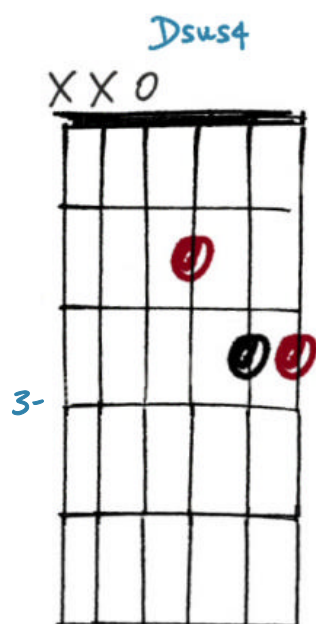
Right: Andy Summers was a master of subtly extended chords in a pop/rock context



PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

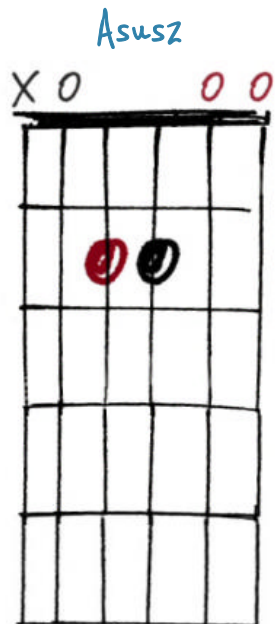
Example 1

This Dsus4 contains no 3rd, so can be heard as major or minor, depending on the context. Not only does this make it easier for it to sound in tune (major 3rds are notoriously tricky!) but it adds a certain complexity without messing with the harmonics of any distortion you may be using.



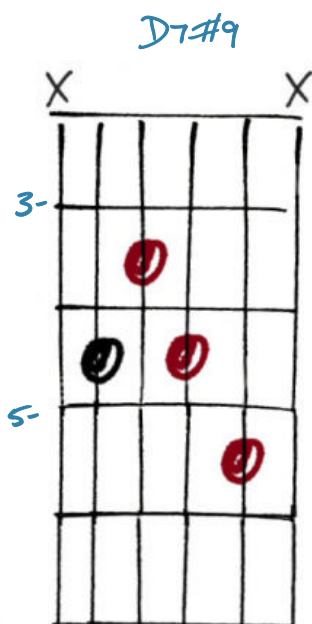
Example 2

This Asus2, like Example 1, has no 3rd, meaning it can stand in for any major or minor chords you may want to 'toughen up' by adding a little gain. It also makes for a more enigmatic feel because the guitar fills out the sound without adding any particular harmonic colouration or mood.



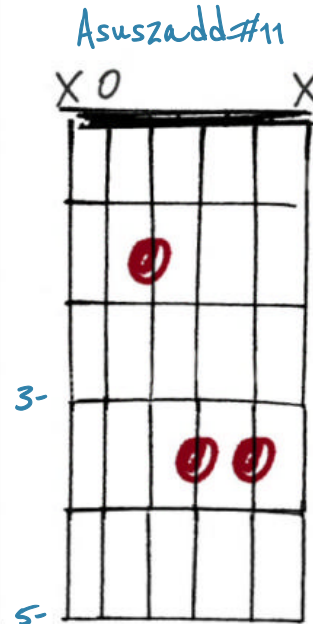
Example 3

Rather than avoiding 3rds, this D7#9 chord contains two: both the major (F#) and minor (F natural) 3rds are here, albeit an octave apart. Like a blues piano player trilling between major and minor (as they do), this chord forces both elements together. Slightly chaotic under distortion, but it works.



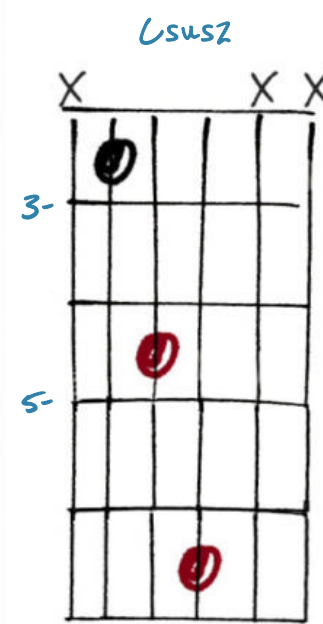
Example 4

I've called this Asus2 (add#11), though I should point out it could be named in several ways – so if an alternative makes more sense to you, feel free to look at it that way. Essentially, the Asus2 from Example 2 has been expanded with a D#, adding a suspended kind of feel at the high-end. Resolve this to a straight A major and you'll see what I mean.



Example 5

Harmonically, we've been here before with a sus2 chord, but this voicing highlights how it could be viewed as an extended powerchord, like Andy Summers' playing on *Message In A Bottle*, for instance. Just three notes, none of which are the 3rd, make this a great candidate for use with distortion.





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STAR LETTER

TONE CONNECTION

In your Bought & Sold articles, I've been struck by the answers to the question: 'Would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a really top-notch amp?' I used to think the answer was fairly obvious: given a finite budget, you would get the best return on investment (sonically speaking) if you put your money towards an amp. A cheaper but well-set-up Squier Strat, paired with a decent valve amp would sound better than a high-end equivalent going into a soulless solid-state amps that many of us had to make do with.

Leaving aside golden-era US guitars, where a 'student' instrument was often a stripped-down version of the 'pro' model, the quality of mass-produced budget guitars and amps has increased dramatically. Advances in solid-state design and digital modelling have meant cheaper amps can sound closer to the rigs of our heroes – and at more practical volumes.

If you're a home player looking at modelling amps, devices or software, then perhaps it makes sense to spend money on the guitar. If you're gigging with a drummer then a decent amp (and maybe pedals) become more important. But then this has changed, too. Quiet stages, noise restrictions or just wanting an easier life mean that digital amps or floor units are popular choices for many gigging guitarists and the financial focus can again shift towards the guitar. I think what lies at the heart of the question, though, is that sense of connection where guitar, amp and speakers combine and react together.

Jonathan Waller, via email

Thanks, Jonathan – the tone equation is becoming more complex to solve... or should we really say 'easier to solve'? It's tempting to feel like we need to belong to a particular 'camp', but there's no need to be dogmatic. Modelling is a great solution for certain situations, valve amps are a great solution for other scenarios. In general, we'd recommend avoiding the very cheapest of products, but there are (rare) exceptions even to that. After all, Mike Rutherford uses a £120 Squier Bullet Strat on Genesis world tours (see page 82). So go figure. Mike does make an interesting point, however, about modelling amps sometimes struggling to cut through the mix in a way that valve amps don't. Anyone else experienced this? Modelling fans, if you have a great solution to this perceived weakness of modelling amps – or think it's a non-problem – write in and let us know, we'll share the best viewpoints here.



KORG

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RENEWED PRIDE

Back in 1987 after a final gig supporting Sigue Sigue Sputnik in Coventry, Sheer Pride, the band I was in (a sort of 'heavier' Duran Duran, and I was Andy Taylor) split up and we all went our separate ways to make our way in the world... Fast-forward to 2019.

When the pandemic hit and it was impossible to socialise, my rehearsal-room jamming band had to be put on hold and I had to find another avenue for my guitar playing. It was time to delve into the box of ancient Sheer Pride Portastudio tapes gathering dust in my loft to see what treasures I could unearth. Many, many hours later I had painstakingly transferred all the best tracks into my computer DAW.

Over the subsequent months, I set about rebuilding, re-recording, arranging, quantising and editing them, while trying to keep as much of the original recordings as possible. It was interesting to listen to my guitar playing back then and hear how much it has changed.

Eventually, with my mission complete, my son Sam helped me upload our album to Spotify etc, and it is now available to buy or stream on all platforms and download sites. Music helped get me through the worst parts of this pandemic when I was feeling very low – it gave me a focus, a purpose. Music has always been a place I return to when I need to feed my soul.

Now, 35 years later, still great friends, we five guys in Sheer Pride meet once a year at our 'AGM' to share



Sheer Pride get together to reminisce: with their album now on Spotify, could they enjoy success once more?



Great re-cover: Anthony turned his Ibanez MiMx 65 orange to complement his blue Sky Indie 10 and white Mooer Hornet

a beer, stories and now, hopefully, some royalties... maybe a slap-up meal at Greggs next time!

Chris Beach (aka 'Eddie Van Rental'), via email

Chris, thank you for bringing a smile to our faces with your tale of old New Romance rediscovered, if you catch our drift. It's brilliant that digitisation allows old recordings to be editable, tweakable and enjoyable all over again – bringing back vivid and happy memories. The editor of this tome sometimes listens back to his music college recordings and wishes he still had chops like that! If only we all had endless hours free just to practise our chops as in formative years...

We're delighted to learn that your walk down a musical memory lane gave you a lift during lockdown and that you've been able to 'reunite' with your band. We'll definitely be checking out some vintage Sheer Pride online now.

COVER UP

With most guitar amps – new or secondhand – covered in black Tolex, I thought you might be interested in a re-cover of my Ibanez MiMx 65 amp. The original black covering was in poor condition when I bought it, so I thought I would re-cover it in something more colourful. It's a faux-leather, heavy-duty, fire-resistant material in orange. I also put casters on the bottom to make it more manoeuvrable. I thought it would go with my other colourful amps: a Sky Indie 10 in blue and my Mooer Hornet in white (those two are original).

Anthony Lloyd, via email

Tidy work, Anthony! It's funny how so many of us lavish plenty of attention on modding our guitars when amps are also ripe for cosmetic and sonic mods, too. Changing a covering on a standard-issue amp certainly gives it the personal touch, while speaker upgrades are in many ways simpler to do yourself than a pickup swap on a guitar. Granted, any work on the circuitry of the amp is in a different realm and requires specialist training to do safely (even amps disconnected from the mains can kill thanks to residual charge in capacitors), but savvy home electronics fans can get themselves clued in and undertake the work if they are committed enough.

There are whole modding communities built up around worthy but workaday amps such as Fender's Blues Junior that can benefit from a tweak or two, so if you are technically minded there's plenty of scope to get trained and start modding your amp – while the rest of us can always have a go a facelift, as you have. Great stuff.



BOXING CLEVER

I guess this will have been done before, but I thought that my gear-storage idea for taking cables, pedals and other kit to gigs might bring a smile. This is a plastic fishing box that comes with a padded outer 'rucksack' (for the want of a better word). It has a carry handle and it also comes with arm straps and can be carried just like a rucksack. It has two sets of compartments on the top. If you had nothing else, it is also strong enough to sit on – otherwise it is too low. The one I have is made by a company called Roddarch.

On the subject of making life easier, could we have an article sometime on playing with arthritis? I have a bit creeping in and have been swapping around guitars in order to find one that is easiest to play.

Richard Patrick, via email

Bravo, Richard – a great repurposing of a tackle box. We read somewhere that Django Reinhardt was a keen fisherman. Not entirely sure if that's true, but if so, the great Gypsy jazz master might have divided such a box into guitar gear on one level and floats, weights and other tackle! Ideal for performing tracks such as Steve Hillage's *Fish Rising*, we'd venture to suggest... Bad puns aside, it's a great idea and looks like it holds all you could need on your gigs. Any other readers got any good storage ideas? Send them in and we'll print the best here.



Richard Patrick found this ingenious solution that 'tackles' (ahem...) the issue of neatly transporting cables, pedals and kit to gigs

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

BRITAIN'S BEST AMATEUR GUITAR BUILDER 2021

It's time to unveil the guitars – and their talented makers – that won our inaugural home-built guitar competition...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Neil Godwin



Earlier this year, *Guitarist* launched its first-ever competition to find Britain's Best Amateur Guitar Builder. To keep the brief simple, the competition was open to electric guitar builds only and, as the name suggests, professional luthiers were not eligible to enter – just talented enthusiasts making guitars for the love of it.

Backing us in this worthy quest were the good folk at StewMac, global suppliers of specialist tools and materials for guitar makers. The American-based company kindly put up the top prize of \$500 worth of equipment from their extensive catalogue, plus a runner-up prize of \$250 of lutherie kit. With that incentive to whet entrants' appetites, plus the glory of winning the competition, we received a full mailbag

A home-build should possess great craft, purposeful design, aesthetic flair and technical ingenuity

of incredible entries to the competition – ranging from sleek-looking headless electrics to opulently appointed exotic-wood creations.

Whittling this rich haul down to a shortlist of six instruments was no easy job, but *Guitarist*'s regular review team took on the task and selected the strongest entries that we felt represented many or all of the qualities an excellent home-built guitar should possess: great craft, a design that dovetails with the intended purpose of the guitar, aesthetic flair and technical ingenuity. We'd have happily given prizes to all our shortlisted entrants (see page 51), but in the end there could be only two medallists in this race: an overall winner and a worthy runner-up. StewMac had the unenviable task of picking the final winners and here they are...



Winner of Britain's Best Amateur Guitar Builder 2021, Nigel Greening (right) with runner-up Richard Fletcher at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath

Meet The Makers

Everyone at *Guitarist* was in full agreement with StewMac's thoughts on the winners, but we thought it'd be nice to hear a bit more about how these two beautiful (yet contrasting) guitars were built. Winners Nigel Greening and Richard Fletcher duly obliged by popping down for an enjoyable visit to the mag, where they saw their creations shot in loving detail by *Guitarist*'s expert photographers. While they were here, we quizzed them on the methods and materials they used.

Overall winner Nigel said: "It started with the wood. Actually, I think that piece of wood came from StewMac, and when it arrived, it was such a beautiful piece of 'cushioned' maple – but it was a lot bigger than you need for a conventional solidbody. I just wasn't prepared to throw away the rest, but it wasn't big enough to make a 335, or something like that.

"So I kept it for about 18 months, just looking at it and thinking about it, but I hadn't got any body material that worked for it. And then one day, I heard about a board of recycled Brazilian mahogany that was for sale, and I thought, 'Ooh, that'd be nice.' It wasn't quite as thick as I would've liked, but it was big enough. I couldn't get a 335-type of width, but I could get a Collings I-35 size guitar from it and I own an I-35, which is a really nice-size guitar. So it was born of the wood, really. That gave me a back and a top," he explains.



OVERALL WINNER

Nigel Greening

“At first glance this guitar is visually striking,” StewMac said of Nigel’s stunning carved-top semi build. “It is a sophisticated interpretation of a familiar design that we found very pleasing. The heavily figured carved top, bold finish, clean lines and simple appointments make this guitar a visual stunner. But the more you look at this guitar, the more it reveals some surprises – the level of detail and design to hide the controls and electronics, the neck joint, and small design details. Our team was universally impressed with Nigel’s guitar.”

KEY DETAILS

The top of Nigel Greening’s winning set-neck archtop is hand-carved from ‘cushioned’ maple, inside and out and left unbound. The back is fully hollow and made from reclaimed Brazilian mahogany, with the centre section retained to form the centre block, and is 50mm deep overall. The neck is carved from flamed sugar maple, with a scarf joint and a 10-degree headstock and a 635mm scale.

The neck has carbon reinforcement and the truss rod is fitted but effectively is redundant other than for ‘fine-tuning’. The headstock plate and fingerboard are Macassar ebony, with a salmon inlay in paua and m-o-p. The f-holes are a nod to the Monteleone Radio Flyer. Weight is comfortable at 2.8kg (6lb).



Though the winning build began with a beautiful piece of wood, it was also a source of concern that even ended up delaying the project, as Nigel explains.

“I was very nervous about carving the ‘cushioned’ maple; it’s really difficult because it breaks out on you all the time. Regular flame maple’s a lot easier to manage. And so I’d always been a bit scared of it. In fact, it was nearly two years after buying the wood that I finally picked up the gouges and thought, ‘Well, it’s now or never.’ But it worked out pretty well. I’d done the design before I started: I nicked the idea for the f-hole shape from John Monteleone’s Radio Flyer. I’ve owned a couple of John’s guitars in the past and so I thought, ‘Yes, that’s quite a statement, it brings out the width of the thing.’”

Nigel adds that not all processes common on production guitars can be replicated by the home builder, meaning that the high-spec carved top was actually the most practical option.

“The carve-top route to doing a semi-acoustic really suits home manufacture because laminating at home doesn’t work. You’ve got to carve because laminating’s just bonkers. But you can drill out a body and then rout it and clean the whole thing out – so having a solid, fully routed body attached to a carved top is actually the easiest process you can do at home. So it went from there. And then I got the

Not all processes common on production guitars can be replicated by the home builder

Seymour Duncan on it, which happened because I had one, which worked fine.”

Even though Nigel’s made quite a few guitars in the past, like all good luthiers, he’s always learning. Some decisions, like the guitar’s finish, are just things you have to take the plunge with, he says.

“The smart thing would’ve been to have put the electronics in before I glued the top on – because retrofitting the electronics through the soundholes is a bit frustrating, but it was okay. And then at the end of it, I agonised for a long time about staining it because you can’t undo stain. But all my life, going back 50-odd years, I’d wanted a green guitar. Nobody seems to make green guitars. And back in the late 60s when I was trying to earn a living – and failing miserably – playing guitar, I used to have a dark-green leather jacket, and I always wanted a dark-green guitar to go with the

jacket, but nobody ever made one. And so in the end, I thought, ‘Okay, I’ll see if I can do a green guitar.’”

With the guitar finally made (and winning a competition) we had to ask: have you still got the jacket?

“No, the jacket went years ago,” he laughs.

Nigel recently wrote to tell us the win has prompted him to take the plunge and go professional with his guitar making. We wish him the very best of starts in his new career – and on the fine evidence of this guitar, it’s likely to be a success.

Light My Fire

Runner-up Richard also had some valuable insights to offer home builders on the process behind his stunning modern single-cut, which was in fact made from mahogany reclaimed from an old fire surround. Incredibly, the guitar is his first build – though a background in design and engineering guided him.

“The inspiration for the guitar? Well, I wanted to make use of the wood. I didn’t think I could sneak another bought guitar into the house,” Richard jokes. “So, I thought, ‘Well, if I’m going to make one, I’ll make the very best specified guitar I possibly can.’

“I’d already decided on what kind of tuners I wanted, as I’ve always been impressed with Gotoh tuners. But as far as whether I should use P-90s or humbuckers or single coils or a combination – and which maker I should go with – I had to do a lot of research. So the first decision was to go with humbuckers and then to use British-made ones.

“I’ve always been impressed with the possibilities of a piezo bridge. I started a dialogue with Dr Lars Bünning at Schaller and I learned that they don’t make piezo saddles any more. But he said, ‘I think I’ve got a few left in my drawer.’ So he sent me what he’d got and I got seven saddles, plus the piezo bridge and so on. Once I’d got that far, it started to move me towards certain directions I could go in, such as using a five-way Megaswitch and so on. I’d not done electronics before – I had no electronic training – but, again, I embarked on an awful lot of research to find out how to do it. I quickly made the decision that I didn’t want to solder everything – I’ve seen some horrific photographs of soldering attempts! So the idea of the Seymour Duncan Liberator [solderless pot system] seemed to be the answer.”

The painstaking attention to detail that went into the guitar is incredible and helped clinch Richard’s place on the podium in this year’s competition. Of his prize, Richard says simply: “It’s good, after all that work, to have some recognition.” **G**



RUNNER-UP

Richard Fletcher

“Wow... what a fun ride,” StewMac’s judges said of Richard’s streamlined but feature-packed contemporary single-cut. “From a quick glance, this guitar looks ‘simple’, but in this case looks are definitely deceiving. It is evident to us that a *lot* of thought went into both the aesthetics and technical aspects of this guitar – even the strings are gold! The removable back is a fantastic way to hide the electronics and keep a clean aesthetic. The variety of possible sounds with the pickups, piezo and wiring configuration make this a really fun – and versatile – guitar to play.” To this fulsome and well-deserved praise, StewMac added, “the overall workmanship on both guitars is top notch”.

KEY DETAILS

Richard’s modern single-cut is fitted with Gotoh 510 locking tuners and boasts tons of tonal clout thanks to matched neck and bridge Bare Knuckle Black Hawk humbuckers with coil-splitting, Schaller Hannes Piezo bridge (and Flagship preamp and piezo volume/blender), five-way Schaller Megaswitch and stereo jack, three-way pickup selector switch governed by one 500k push-push tone pot, and a Seymour Duncan Liberator 500k volume pot.

Richard wanted every internal electronic component to be removable and, as far as possible, solderless. The guitar body has been constructed as a sandwich. Front and back panels clip together with poppers. This avoids having to provide any access-panels or screws showing on the back. The pickups and strings are internally mounted so no screws, plastic panels or pickup rings are visible externally.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
stewmac

The Shortlist

Guitarist would like to commend and thank the following makers who all made our shortlist for the final and whose guitars were all a credit to their talented creators. Well done, guys.



PETER CROUT
WENGE WONDER



MICHAEL SLSSINGAR
MAPLE ROCKER



MASA TOMITA
TULIPWOOD BEAUTY



NICK SEDGWICK
ASH SENSATION



DOWNING

The former Judas Priest man is back from the wilderness with an album that flies the metal flag high. He told us about broken necks, Frankenstrats, the trouble with modelling gear, and the acrimonious split from his old band

Words Henry Yates Photography Adam Gasson

For a moment back there, it felt like we had lost KK Downing. As a founder member of Black Country metal gods Judas Priest, the guitarist had presided over four decades of leather-studded Sturm und Drang. But after Downing's unhappy exit from the line-up in 2011, the silence was eerie. Sure, as the now 70-year-old reminds us, there's been the odd writing credit and guest spot, some production work, an autobiography, a golf resort. But without a band to call home, it rankled fans to see his world-class talents merely ticking over.

As such, it's a pleasure to report that Downing is not only back but nudging the top of his game, leading out new band KK's Priest, jousting fellow guitarist AJ Mills and going toe-to-toe with the cauterising shriek of sometime Priest vocalist Tim 'Ripper' Owens. With a debut album to promote and a photoshoot awaiting him, for the first time in a long time, the clock is ticking. Downing settles down with a vindicated grin: "It's good to be busy."

It's a decade since your split from Priest. What happened to your guitar skills during that time away?

"Well, the other guys from Judas Priest told the world that I had retired – that's absolutely misinformation, it's not true at all. I kept myself pretty busy. I can't say I played an immense amount of guitar. But I can just pick the guitar up, and it's a bit like playing golf – sometimes you can not play for six months then go out and play better than you did before."

How did your debut album, *Sermons Of The Sinner*, come about?

"Christmas bores me, so in December 2019 I shut myself away to see if I could write an album. Within five days, I had the backbone of all the songs. It was important for me to get all these emotions out, you know, and to make that connection with the fans again. I didn't even question it. It was just something that needed to be done."

How did you approach the guitar work?

"I think I did feel a bit restricted in Judas Priest in the latter years. Because Glenn [Tipton], he was a bit more pushy and I was always more flexible and laid-back, and I sometimes felt, like, 'Hang on, I think I should be playing more.' So I didn't find this album difficult. I've found this new freedom. I'm fairly well musically schooled. And when you've got all of those thousands of modes you can mix and match, you're a lot better off than people that just pick the guitar up and go straight into a pentatonic. I've got so many styles – I love Hendrix-style out-of-control feedback solos and I like to put really fast stuff together. I like to mix scales up and I like to alternate-pick fast. I like to do odd stuff, you know?"

What other techniques did you find yourself pulling out?

"I was playing a lot of three-note arpeggios but with all the notes picked as opposed to sweeping. And then creating harmonies with the other guitar player, AJ. Even tapping harmonies and stuff like that. That's a lot of fun for me, all those embellishments."

I went a bit wild on *Hail For The Priest*, in the part with the Hendrix-style vibe. There's some mad panning. We used to pan our guitar solos back in the early 70s, too, so it was fun to revisit that. I love to improvise. Like, that solo on *Raise Your Fists*, I just picked up the guitar and played it. Creating all those guitar parts was total freedom. I think the album could have gone on almost forever, really."

How does your guitar partnership with AJ work?

"AJ is a really good guitar player, but obviously he's younger and he looks up to me, and he enjoys stepping up to the mark. And that's good and it's healthy, really. But I was adamant that I wanted to split everything with AJ. Because I want this to be a band, not just all about me. That's why it's a two-guitar band. And that's what Judas Priest was supposed to be – which it was, until latter years when Glenn had more of a monopoly on the solos. I tried to go 50/50 right the way down the line because I wasn't happy in Judas Priest when it wasn't 50/50, so I don't want to inflict that pain on somebody else."

You've always loved the twin-guitar format, haven't you?

"Yeah. I love the trade-off solo thing. From the fan's perspective, I think it's a better deal. To start with, in Judas Priest, I was reluctant because I was happy being the only guitar player in the band. It was the record company that wanted a different line-up because Zeppelin, Sabbath and



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“[In Judas Priest] I sometimes felt like I should be playing more. So I’ve found this new freedom [with this album]”

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Free had just been. So they said, ‘There’s lot of bands with that line-up. Can you add a keyboard or sax player?’ Fucking hell, no way. But I thought, ‘Well, maybe another guitar player, that could work.’ I’m very proud and respectful of everything myself and Glenn did. He was a very hard worker. We ambled along, like any relationship. We made it work. But I did more on this album than we did in Priest, in the respect of harmonies and stuff.”

What guitars did you use on *Sermons Of The Sinner*?

“Well, I’ve brought all of them along to the shoot today. I like to play the KxK guitars because they were made for me. They look great, they’ve got scalloped frets, Floyd Rose SpeedLoaders – they’re just live animals, really. They’re a touring-quality guitar. So I play them a lot. I’ve got a classic Gibson Flying V, which was a gift from Zakk Wylde. I’ve got an ESP that was built for me, again, with a SpeedLoader and scalloped frets.”

That reverse-neck Strat is pretty eye-catching, too...

“It’s a replica of the one I used to play back in the late 70s and early 80s on the British Steel tour. That was the first time I ever saw anybody play a right-handed body with a left-hand neck. I’d smashed my Strat’s original neck at a gig – Sheffield City Hall, I think – so I quickly twisted my mate’s arm to let me take a neck off one of his guitars, so I could finish the tour. That original Strat eventually went to a Hard Rock Cafe

because it had started to fail on me – the neck was starting to split. This new one is going to be exactly the same, but it’s going to be a ‘SuperStrat’. I’m still working on it, actually. I’ve got about another £1,000 to spend. It looks great. And I played that one on the album for some nice, clean sounds.”

How about your taste in amps?

“For preamps, I tend to either use the Marshall JMP-1 or sometimes I go back to my old POD XT Pro, along with Marshall 9100 power amps, going to vintage Marshall 75-watt cabinets. When you get on that stage, it’s got to be clean, natural distortion. Even with Marshall power amps, they’re all valves, so you want to be able to drive that amp and get those valves to glow red-hot.”

Do you spend time sculpting your sound?

“Obviously, you’ve got the guitars, the preamps, the speakers – all those combinations. It’s a bit of a minefield. You’ve got to use your ears to know what you want to dial in. Because the pre-programmed sounds on modelling gear – whether it’s in the Axe-FX or the POD – they’re terrible, just a waste of time. You should scrap them all, really, and start again. Strip it all back. Some of the programmed sounds might sound okay in your bedroom, but when you go to play a gig, the sound will just stay in the speaker cabinet and won’t come out. The POD XT Pro is a very good piece of kit, to be fair. But you’ve got to put it through something vintage like the

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“I could hear heavy metal in Hendrix. I didn’t know it was heavy metal, but I could identify this ingredient I wanted”
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Marshall head. With the POD, I’ll just go into their version of the Marshall JCM800, and just put a bit of compression on there, and it will come through like a son of a bitch on stage. Without any stompboxes. For pedals, I just use a Cry Baby wah.”

How does that rig compare with Priest’s approach back in the day?

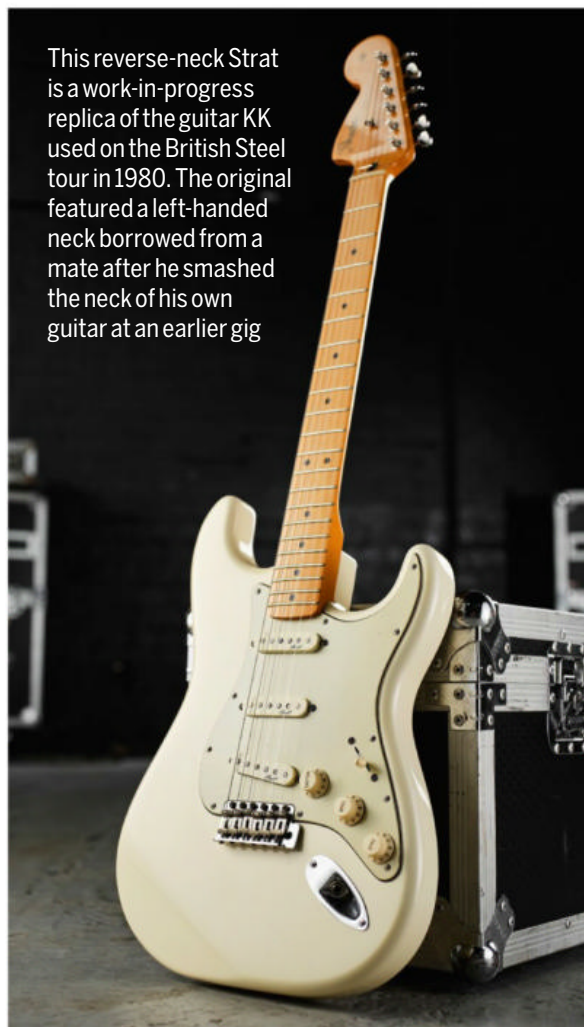
“Back in the 70s and early 80s, all we ever used were 50-watt heads. But on the front-end, very importantly, we used Rangemaster Treble Boosters. You can’t get them now, but you can get them remade and I’ve still got some. That’s still the best sound – the only thing you haven’t got is the ability to switch between sounds. When you’ve got a programmable front-end like the POD or JMP-1, it’s totally switchable, so you can just programme in the sounds for your whole set, and they’re right there at the tip of your foot, aren’t they? Otherwise, I’d go back to my old sound, with my Rangemaster, all day long.”

Speaking of old times, do you remember your first electric guitar?

“Well, it was a handmade thing, kind of reminiscent of that thing Eddie Van Halen had. It had some kind of generic Strat body. It looked very cool, but it was terrible. The first real guitar I had was an SG Junior with one pickup.”

Do you remember how you became a heavy metal guitar player?

“I was so lucky to be born in 1951. Because even though I hate being almost 70, I’ve not only witnessed this wonderful evolution, I’ve actually been a part of it. When I was just a youngster, there wasn’t a music for us. My sisters had pop, and there was jazz and classical. You had the blues – but everybody latched onto that. Every great player you could think of – Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Peter Green – they took the blues standards and did their own interpretation, like Cream with a big improvised solo in the middle of *Crossroads*. I loved all those bands. But it wasn’t what I was looking for. When Hendrix came along, I could hear heavy metal in how he played. I didn’t know



This reverse-neck Strat is a work-in-progress replica of the guitar KK used on the British Steel tour in 1980. The original featured a left-handed neck borrowed from a mate after he smashed the neck of his own guitar at an earlier gig



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1. KK was gifted this Gibson Flying V by Zakk Wylde, who signed the guitar fondly as "your little brother"

2. Downing has his own line of USA-made models, KxK Guitars, including this custom V with EMG pickups, Floyd Rose SpeedLoader vibrato and scalloped frets

3. KK's ESP V was custom made to his specification with his favoured EMG pickups, Floyd Rose SpeedLoader and scalloped frets again

4. Another spiky V from the guitarist's KxK selection: note the distinctive inlay designs on both the fretboard and body

2



3



4



it was heavy metal, but in some songs I could identify this ingredient that I wanted more of. When I became a player myself, I was writing riffs like *Whiskey Woman*, right from the get-go. It was riff-oriented, not 12-bar, you know?”

In Priest, you doubled down on that sound?

“Yeah. You see, the bands I’ve been in, we played music that nobody could describe. There wasn’t a name for it. At points, I’ve been called ‘progressive’, ‘heavy rock’, ‘hard rock’, ‘heavy metal’. We couldn’t get a record deal. But we were trying to create this sort of white man’s blues, if you know what I mean? That’s the way I see heavy metal and hard rock. I understand that blues music used to help people get through the day, in another world, in another country. And I think that’s what heavy metal is for the working classes. If you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth in the mid-60s, you became a pop fan. Because life was good. You wanted to hear songs about love and how wonderful the world is. But if you’ve had it rough and tough then you were more a fan of this style of music.”

When it comes to Priest’s catalogue, which of your parts are you the most proud of?

“I like everything I did, really. But I suppose the live stuff, when I would play *Sinner*, *Victim Of Changes*, *The Rage* – I just used to get into my own world of improvisation. It’s a dangerous world because some nights would be great, other nights not so great – a lot of it would depend on the whole sound, the reverb, the mix, the monitors. But when it’s good, it’s such a high.”

Priest exploded with 1980’s *British Steel* album. What are your memories?

“Everything came to fruition. We had a great album, with a great cover. Everybody was in leather and studs, and now it’s the archetypal heavy metal look. We would play anywhere. We would support anybody. KISS. Alice Cooper. We didn’t give a shit because we had something unique. We had heavy metal. We *were* heavy metal. So we could go out and not be afraid of anybody. You know, nobody could ever blow AC/DC offstage, but because we were different, we could always stand our ground. There was a sense of pride and

a sense of power, I think, when you were standing behind the curtain with your bandmates, ready to go on, all clad in leather and studs. It was great to be uniformed up – and having such an incredible vocalist, it gave you a lot of confidence as well.”

Priest singer Rob Halford’s voice was a major ingredient, wasn’t it?

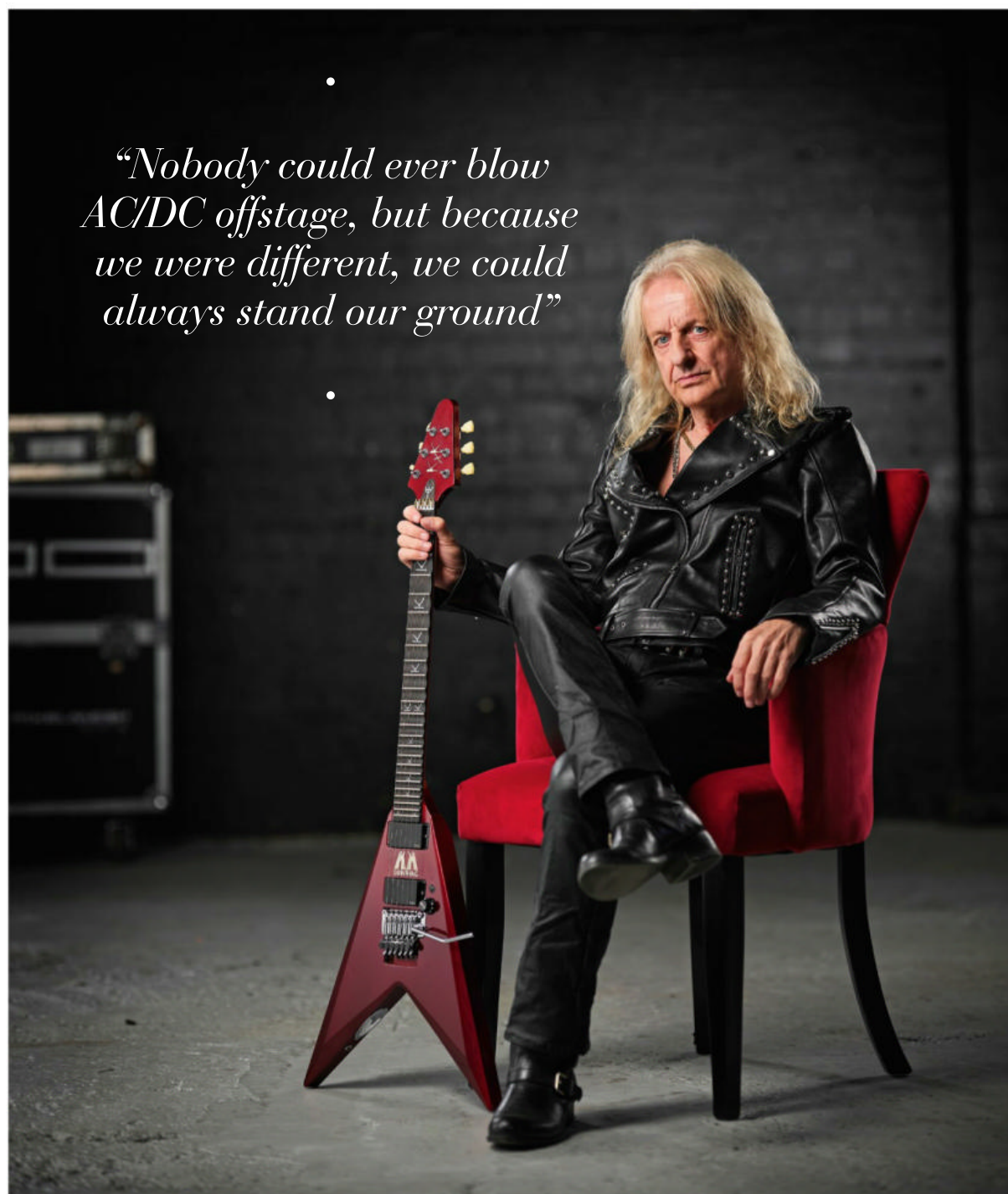
“I used to listen to Ian Gillan in Deep Purple, thinking, ‘My God, this guy’s got the best voice ever.’ And then, when I was able to get Rob for the band, I was like, ‘I’ve gone one better here.’ You’d get in a room with him and it was just incredible. And, of course, now Ripper can still do all of that. So I’m very lucky. Because I can go back and draw on that stuff. I can play *Run Of The Mill* if I want to. With singers like Ripper, you don’t have to write for their voice: they can sing in any key. Rob was the same. They never even question the key. It was extraordinary. They never said, ‘Can we drop the key down?’ or ‘Can we take it up?’ They just get out there and do it.”

What’s your take on how Priest ended for you?

“In 2010, we were all going to finish the band and retire. That’s what the deal was. I just exited from that last tour. The reason I didn’t do it was because I didn’t think I was going to enjoy it, because the band wasn’t what I wanted it to be. And I wasn’t going to end my career doing a tour where I was loathing every gig. I thought they’d just find somebody else to come in for me, do the tour and that would be it. That was what we agreed. That’s what all the press statements said, which I’ve still got on my computer. I threw my toys out of the pram, but by March, I was coming around to changing my mind. And I spoke to Ian [Hill, bassist] about it, and I even had him send over the setlist and I was going to do the tour. But they’d obviously found somebody new, they’d had a lot of backslapping and a few pints down the pub, and they decided they were going to go that way. Do I wish it had ended differently? Oh, absolutely. It was stupid. It was ridiculous, really.”

Still, it must feel amazing to be back in the game?

“Yeah. It’s all a bit strange at my age. But it’s like riding a bike. I’m so happy with this band. I think this band is very, very good. I wouldn’t do it otherwise. We’re just raring to go now, and to get on that stage – and let the games begin.” 



KK’s Priest’s debut album, *Sermons Of The Sinner*, is out now on EX1 Records
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CARMEN VANDENBERG

Retrofitting the blues, tearing up tradition, trading licks with Jeff Beck... Carmen Vandenberg is a musician in constant motion. We caught up with her in Los Angeles to hear about collaborating with the player's player, kissing her guitars goodnight and beating the lockdown blues

Words Henry Yates Photography Tyler Lee Aubrey

Carmen Vandenberg makes everything appear effortless, drawling through interviews with the assurance of an old hand. But dig a little deeper and the picture emerges of a blues fanatic and sonic pioneer, who has walked a fascinating road from the ACM music college, via session work for Kate Nash, to her alt-rock outfit Bones UK. "I want to experience the world," she tells us. "And I want to jump off stages."

A leap of a different kind came back in 2016 when Jeff Beck asked Carmen and Bones UK singer Rosie Bones to co-write an album with him. Beck had publicly stated he didn't want to make another "guitar nerd album", and while this briefly seemed like a betrayal by a talisman of the scene, his manifesto made more sense once you heard the album, *Loud Hailer*. Politically charged and powered by leftfield tones, it turned out Beck hadn't ditched the guitar at all, just his old bag of tricks – while gaining a revolutionary new foil in the 20-something Londoner Carmen. We caught up with Carmen to find out how it all began...

What first attracted you to guitar?

"To be honest, I started playing the violin when I was five. But my parents loved rock 'n' roll, the house was always full of

records and my dad was a big Hendrix fan. He showed me a VHS of Woodstock – and I knew I wanted to do that. Then I had the luck that my best friend at school, his dad is Dave Stewart from the Eurythmics. So I went over to their house and it was full of guitars, and I was like, 'Okay, I *really* want to do this.' The starting point for me was getting a three-quarter-size classical guitar. I'd just play by ear or play the violin songs I could read the music to. Or just pretend to be a rock star."

Blues wasn't mainstream when you were growing up. Why did it call to you?

"I have no idea. To this day, it just has this effect on me. Even when I was a kid, my parents were very confused as to why I would sit for hours in front of a record player, playing Albert Collins, Albert King, Freddie King, BB King, Buddy Guy. I would just have this little grin on my face, and I wouldn't budge. I can't quite explain it to you. I was just attracted to it. It just makes me feel – a lot."

What do you consider good – and bad – guitar playing?

"I've never been a big shredder. I like guitar playing that is heartfelt, melodic. It mainly needs to have passion. You can hear when

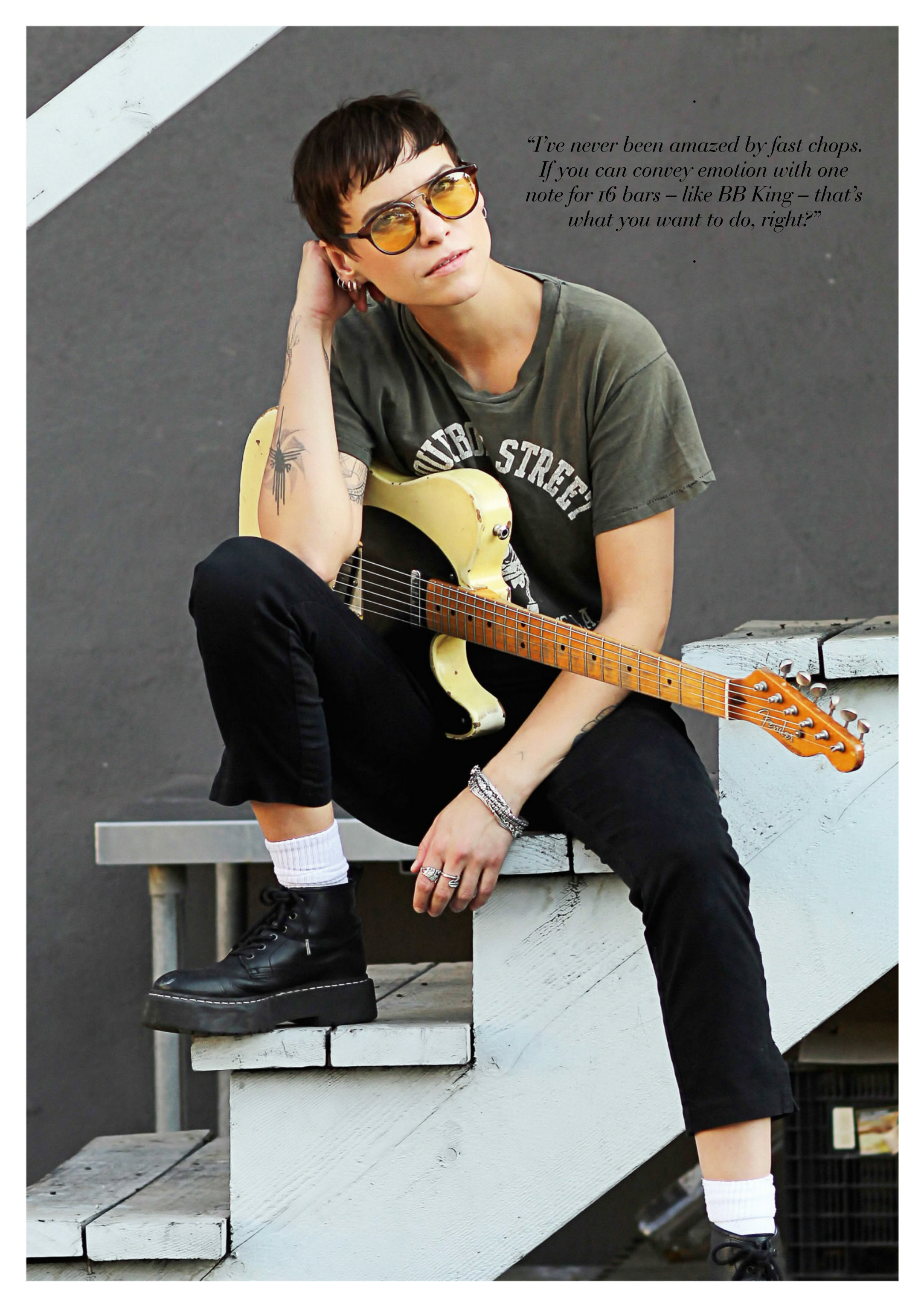
a guitarist can make the guitar sing, like Jeff does so beautifully. I've never been someone that gets amazed by fast chops, or wants to do that, either. I feel like if you can convey emotion with one note for 16 bars – like BB King can – that's what you want to be able to do, right?"

You seem torn between the Strat and Tele...

"They're two different beasts. It depends on your mood. Sometimes you want to talk to a Strat, sometimes a Tele. The Tele is my main guitar when it comes to Bones because of the way we've built our sound, with Filippo Cimatti producing. Y'know, a Tele is an aggressive axe – it cuts through. But then, when I do my own solo music, or work in the studio doing sessioning or writing, I like the versatility of a Strat. There are so many characteristics that only a Strat can have. Fender really helped me out. They built me a custom Strat for my tiny hands during the Jeff tour. And they sent me a beautiful little Mustang bass, which I'm using for this next Bones record as well. We're just into pre-production..."

Bones isn't exactly a conventional rock band, is it?

"We call it 'future rock'. It's trying to not replicate what's already out there but create



*“I’ve never been amazed by fast chops.
If you can convey emotion with one
note for 16 bars – like BB King – that’s
what you want to do, right?”*

•
*“I worship my guitars...
 I treat them pretty rough,
 but as soon as the show is
 finished, I clean them and
 give them a goodnight kiss”*
 •



something new – instead of us being cover bands of our heroes. If *Guitarist* readers want to check out our stuff? Well, definitely learn the riff from *Pretty Waste*, which Filippo actually wrote. *Beautiful Is Boring* is a fun track to play, too, especially if you want to experiment with pedals and sounds.”

What else have you got going on?

“I’ve just finished a solo record, which is very different from *Bones*, with more mellow guitar. I started it before lockdown and I’ve just been cleaning up the edges. But I struggled a bit during lockdown as far as playing because it just felt like there were bigger issues in the world. The lack of shows didn’t really make me feel like I wanted to pick up the guitar in the morning. Performing for people gives me my nutrition, my energy. The smiles are what fuels me. Not having that... I did burn myself a little low. A skateboarding injury was the cherry on the cake for 2020. I still get some wrist pains, but it’s recovered. I was very silly.”

Based on your beat-to-hell *Tele*, it doesn’t seem like you worship your guitars.

“No, no, no – I worship them a lot. That *Tele* was beat-up already when I got it because most of the parts are ’63 original, but it got fixed in the 80s. So it arrived to me beaten up, but it is my baby. They’re like my soulmates, so although I do treat them pretty rough – I won’t stop myself from jumping off a stage – believe me, as soon as the show is finished, I make sure they’re in their cases, and I clean them and give them a goodnight kiss.”

Tell us about your signature Blackstar CV30.

“What I wanted was a combo amp that did everything. Y’know, an amp that a younger version of me would have just picked up, grabbed a guitar and played a show with it. It was really important that the CV30 was a valve amp, with ECC83 and 6L6s. That’s the sound. There’s just something different about the tone. It’s a pain in the ass when valves break, but the warmth is worth it.”

Do you remember your first conversation with Jeff Beck?

“We were at a birthday party for [Queen drummer] Roger Taylor. Roger came up and said, ‘I want you to meet somebody.’ It was Jeff, and Roger said something like, ‘This is the guitarist I was telling you about.’ I was 20 and I think the first thing I ever said to him was, ‘Oh fuck, you’re Jeff Beck.’ Maybe it wasn’t quite that, but that’s definitely how I felt. We actually started off by talking about blues, bonding over Albert Collins. Then he came to a *Bones* show and started working with me and Rosie.”

Jeff didn't want *Loud Hailer* to have a traditional guitar vibe? What was the writing process like?

"No. He had a concept in mind and there was a conversation between him and Rosie about how to get that through in the lyrics. Then, literally, we all just sat around a fireplace, drank Prosecco and wrote the album together. I think he just wanted to do something different. He's always done that in his career. He's never done the same thing twice. So I think he just wanted to do something that people wouldn't expect from him. He saw that in us."

How do you go about fitting into Jeff Beck's universe as a guitarist?

"You have to drop all ego and just become the guitarist that can support the magnitude of somebody like Jeff. So you're not sitting in a corner sulking because you don't have a solo. You're just like, 'How can I support such a genius?' It was probably the moment in my life when I learnt the most, because just being in his presence definitely enlarged my vocabulary. And that's a beautiful trait of Jeff's – the opportunities he's given young musicians."

What's it really like watching him play guitar close up?

"It's beyond inspiring. It was a ridiculous experience. The only problem is that sometimes I was so overwhelmed by what he was doing that I forgot to play!"

Jeff's quite a character, too, isn't he? What was it like working together?

"That's for sure. One of my fondest memories is helping him work on his hot-rods while we were doing the album, and learning how to TIG weld. And he stole my wah! MXR gave me a new wah pedal and it looked really cool. So I let Jeff try it – and he took it. But he gifted me the little [J Rockett] Archer overdrive pedal, which I still use every day. He's got the silver one and I've got the gold one."

What are the three pedals that you couldn't live without?

"I just got gifted some pedals by EarthQuaker Devices, the Data Corrupter and the Organizer. I'm using them on this next record and they're amazing beasts that I need to learn how to tame. But I would say the [J Rockett] Archer, for sure. The [Electro-Harmonix] Micro POG. And I love [an MXR] Carbon Copy delay. Those would be the three."

What are the pleasures and challenges of the session world?

"I love sessions. I haven't done it as much recently because I'm trying to find my



own sound, but the brilliant thing about sessioning is that challenge of having to be versatile, listening to the artist to understand what they're hearing in their head. But it's like a muscle: if you don't keep practising it, you might lose it.

"When I was doing sessions all the time, I was much more versatile as a player. Now, I'm more the kind of person that if you want me to be on your record, you're asking me to come as Carmen, as opposed to someone that can just play anything. I think there are far better players out there than me, for that."

You've said guitarists shouldn't be selfish, we should all share our licks...

"I absolutely believe in that. If there's a new lick I've learned, I can't wait to show my other guitarist friends, like, 'Here, have this.' And then someone will give you another lick. I think the beauty about being a musician is just taking, sharing and helping each other out. And it's not just the guitar. I see that as a way of life as well." 

"I'm now more the kind of person that if you want me to be on your record, you're asking me to come as Carmen, as opposed to someone that can just play anything"



Keep up to date with Bones UK tour dates and releases at

<https://lnk.bio/bonesuk>



THE NEW WAVE

Sometimes guitar design seems to evolve as slowly as a maple tree grows, little by little, with deep roots in tradition. But every now and then a storm comes along that uproots settled ways, and we are in the midst of such a time now. The good news is that players are getting better and more highly developed guitars than they've ever had before – regardless of genre. In the following feature, we examine why guitar design is undergoing a renaissance in the wake of the pandemic, rounding up the best of 21st century lutherie and talking to some of the prime movers in guitar innovation about the new wave of guitar and what it means for players everywhere

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Neil Godwin



It's become a cliché that guitarists don't 'do' progress. Certainly, there's no denying that battered Tweed amps and old Les Pauls are magical things – and there's a reason they're still benchmarks for a certain kind of tone and a certain kind of player. But, as we emerge slowly from the pandemic, there are signs that a genuine renaissance in guitar design is happening – and that it's being driven by player demand.

The pandemic has played a role in that. Prior to the world locking down for a year, webcasting and using social media as the main outlet for your music was just a rising trend. Now it feels central. Other norms are crumbling, too. It used to be that only flawlessly black ebony passed muster on a fingerboard, but now players are hip to

figured ebony. That's partly because it's a less wasteful choice in a world that's running out of natural resources – non-black ebony used to be left to rot in forests if a tree was felled and found to contain 'inferior' figured wood inside – but it also looks great. Mexican-built Fenders now come shipped with pau ferro fingerboards, not rosewood – and to be fair not everyone likes the look of *that* – but the sky hasn't fallen in yet and it does the job well. Taylor is making guitars out of trees harvested from city streets that would otherwise have been made into garden mulch. The times they are a-changing, to be sure.

Some of the changes in how guitars are being made are due to long-term issues, including depletion of natural resources. Others, such as supply chain logjams, are

short-term consequences of the pandemic. But, as terrible as it has been in most respects, the pandemic also persuaded large numbers of people to take up the guitar for the first time. Andy Powers, master luthier at Taylor Guitars, says this sudden influx of new players is a huge deal and will have lasting consequences for the guitar industry.

"It would be impossible for us to ever go back to what we once thought of as normal now," Andy reflects. "Within the music world, changes are always driven by players – or maybe I should say that the *acceptance* of changes is driven by players. And so when you look at the guitar world, you now have a larger set of potential players active at any one time: you have people that you would call baby boomers,

you have people you'd call millennials. You have the kids of millennials... you have a big swathe of the population who are now all interested in playing guitar and all active at the same time. And while that's going on, you have a wider range of styles, genres, repertoire, technique and ways to use a guitar than you ever have at any one time.

"There used to be a fairly small, very narrow way to use a guitar and it would get shifted from season to season," Andy continues. "Let's say if you were making music, it was a fairly predictable avenue: maybe your success was defined as 'playing guitar in a band on a record that was receiving radio airplay'. Well, that's not the case now. You might find you have an audience for your music via YouTube, via a social media channel or some outlet that way. It might be in traditional records. It might be in a live-only, small-community setting where you have a regular following and people want to go to a coffee shop to hear this one musician every week do



1

1. Andy Powers says that a broadening player demographic means people are using the guitar in new ways, which in turn influences design



PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

2. Taylor's 324ce Builder's Edition uses what Taylor calls Urban Ash as its main tonewood. Novel woods offer new sounds as well as sustainability

3. A post-modern relic? Manson Guitar Works' new Relic DL-OR is an updated (yet hand-aged) replica of Matt Bellamy's original DL-1 custom

their residency. There is a nearly infinite number of avenues for somebody to be making music."

Growing numbers of people taking up guitar plus a huge expansion in guitarists using social media to reach their audience is already changing the landscape of guitar design, Andy argues.

"There's such a fragmentation going on. There is no clear, single path for a guitar player to be using their guitar any more. And I think that's wonderful because it's a far more inclusive musical environment than it ever has been. So, at the same time, you have a larger swathe of the population interested and active in playing guitar. You have a wider number of outlets for people to share and participate or interact with their music. And you have an appetite for more unique, different kinds of sounds to fit in these different environments. So, to me, it feels like this perfect storm that's a new lift-off era for the guitar itself."

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

That lift-off effect is not limited to American makers, either. For example, Britain has always produced great custom-built electrics. Now the UK seems to have two makers, in Gordon Smith and PJD Guitars (see interview, page 76), that are building high-quality electric guitars in significant numbers and for a price that makes them a mass-market proposition. These guitars are not ungainly oddities, either – they look and sound as good as anything built across the pond. With post-pandemic shipping prices from China and Indonesia rising ever-higher, suddenly building guitars closer to home is looking more attractive. Guitar makers have found themselves in an economic hall of mirrors where guitars that were once far cheaper to produce overseas are now, in some cases, viable to build at home – with no international shipping delays to contend with, either. Amp maker Laney,

for example, recently brought production of its Lionheart amps back to the UK. Auden, a high-quality acoustic brand that is stablemate to Gordon Smith Guitars, has up to now done initial construction of its acoustics in China with neck-set and final finish being completed in Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire. They're now going to be built 100 per cent in the UK.

"We have started the process of moving the full production of Auden into the UK from the Far East," says Auden and Gordon Smith owner, Doug Sparkes. "Currently, the wooden shell [unfinished body] is made in a small workshop in China. But with the world's current global supply chain difficulties, it actually now makes economical sense to move into the UK. But at the same time, it's also something I've always wanted to do so it's sort of the last part of the jigsaw in terms of supporting British manufacturing, which, as you know, is something I'm

really passionate about. So I'm really excited and pleased by it."

The general situation is still volatile, however, and makers who have spread their bets between overseas and domestic production are best placed to cope, argues Adrian Ashton, CEO of Manson Guitar Works, the Devon-based brand that crafts Matt Bellamy of Muse's futuristic stage instruments (see page 28) but also affordable modern electrics made in partnership with giant overseas guitar maker Cort.

"What we've seen in the last couple of years, I don't think anyone could have dreamed up," Adrian says. "And you've got to be ready to change and adapt to those conditions. Fortunately, we have such a mixed portfolio. We do have a guitar that is just over £500 retail, which is manufactured overseas. We also have a full-custom guitar that is manufactured totally in-house in the UK, and we have what I call our 'production custom', which

"There used to be a fairly small, very narrow way to use a guitar... There is now a nearly infinite number of avenues for making music"

ANDY POWERS, TAYLOR GUITARS

is a mix of both of those elements. So when the market changes, if you have a flexible portfolio, you can adapt to those changes. If you're stuck in one direction, you have to continue in that direction just to generate the funds to keep the company going."

Adrian also echoes Andy Powers' words about an explosion in the number of musicians who are using guitars in non-conventional ways.

"The guitar world has changed drastically in tune with the world," he reflects. "It's just fantastic that we're seeing many, many more singer-songwriters with all sorts of backgrounds and diversity so it's not just a trio or a quartet pounding out rock: it can be all these different styles and things merging together. Even if you just look at something like the hip-hop world, well, how do you make a guitar that's relevant to that style of music? But with our MIDI screen, we actually do have an instrument that's very relevant to that work. So diversity in design is important. Perhaps we're not celebrated for it as much as for the crazier stuff we make, but we do make an MA guitar with just a bridge and a neck pickup and nothing else wild on it. But we also make the same guitar with a MIDI controller on it or a Fuzz Factory installed."

INTERESTING TIMES

So, what does this all mean for the evolution of guitar? Taking the above factors into consideration, it's clear that there are some real themes developing in guitar design. Some small-volume makers are taking the best of the past and refining it, raising the craft to a new level of attention to detail and hand-built quality. Good examples of that include makers such as Patrick James Eggle in the UK and Nik Huber in Germany or Suhr in the US. These brands aren't about utility mass-production but handcrafting superlative instruments with classic roots in sufficient numbers to make the exercise much more than just a cottage industry. PRS has taken that concept and gone even further, becoming arguably the first 'boutique' mega-brand.

In fact, many major guitar brands are now looking to build guitars that meet the needs of players who want highly evolved features and performance in a classic-

looking package. Ibanez's AZ range (see interview on page 80) is a great example of that, as is Fender's new Mexican-built Player Plus line. Interestingly, demand for such instruments at an affordable price point has been driven by players such as Guthrie Govan popularising guitars from the previous category – boutique high-performance instruments based on classic platforms. So AZ and Player Plus can be seen as mainstream outgrowths from the YouTube success of technically outstanding players who were no longer satisfied with 'pointy headstock' guitars to play their music, which has proven to be more soulful and eclectic than shred ever was. These guitars are being made to a very high standard in serial production everywhere from the US to Mexico, Japan and Indonesia, meaning mainstream, premium-quality guitar making is now truly international.

Joining the big names in this enterprise are rising British makers such as Gordon



PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

Smith and PJD, who again aim to offer high-performance modern guitars that have classic roots. What sets the latter two brands apart is their proud determination to make as much as possible of their instruments in the UK – a move that is, for the moment, in step with the economic realities of our time. Right now, shipping parts in from overseas can be costly and unpredictable, especially for growing brands that don't have the financial might to simply wait out economic storms and have to be nimble and adaptable to survive. So those factors are driving a small renaissance in guitar making in this country, creating another trend.

Lastly, we have paradigm-shifting innovators, such as .strandberg (see review and interview, page 90) and, in respect to at least some of their output, Manson Guitar Works. These brands cater to artists who want to use the guitar in entirely new ways. In the case of Manson Guitar Works, this might mean empowering the guitarist to control digital devices via the use of onboard MIDI controllers. In

the case of Taylor, on the acoustic side, it means making compelling guitars from unorthodox, sustainable tonewoods such as Urban Ash. Other makers still are looking closely at the rise of young, technically minded players who want to distance themselves entirely from the rock 'n' roll roots of guitar.

"You've now got this new breed of player who really has a disdain for anything pre-1998," comments Lee Wrathe (see interview, page 80), a stellar guitarist who's well known for his official demos of Ibanez instruments. "You've got characters like Tim Henson, from the band Polyphia, referring to standard blues licks and bends as 'Boomer Bends'. It really winds me up, to be honest with you! So you've got that and then you've got people who are creating music in a different way. There's Ichika Nito, who is the Japanese signature-model artist for the new Ibanez Quest [headless guitars]. Ibanez, just like they did with the JEM and the RGs back in the 80s, have gone, 'Okay, who is the next person we should be going to? It's a new venture,

exciting. Let's go and find those players... We want to be capturing the hearts and minds of the followers of these new guitar heroes,' if you like. So they've asked them the question: 'What do you need?'

"The kind of music they play almost sounds like a music box. The way they tap on the guitar is almost piano-like. It's a little like what Jennifer Batten would have done back in the day. The way they typically sit to perform also creates an angle on the guitar that means that their fretting hand is having to do different things, so Ibanez has gone, 'Well, we'll just angle the frets, then.' They haven't gone, 'Right, okay, we'll just take a standard fanned-fret guitar and do that,' because that would then change the scale length and all of that. They've kept it the same, but they've just angled the frets and worked out that an eight-degree slant is the one for them."

Whether you like the almost avante-garde music being made by younger players who reject the blues lineage of rock 'n' roll, there's no doubt that

"The guitar world has changed drastically in tune with the world... You've got to be ready to change and adapt"

ADRIAN ASHTON, MANSONS

it's popular. Ichika Nito has 1.7 million subscribers on his YouTube channel and Polyphia's geometrically intricate track *G.O.A.T.* has been viewed on YouTube 23 million times. But look beneath the surface and there's a further twist to the tale, as Lee Wrathe explains.

"When you look at the pickups of the Quest guitars, here's the very interesting thing. One of the things that might factor into how new guitars are designed these days, in the current climate, is that the lack of supply of certain parts has a knock-on effect in terms of what the design of the next guitar is going to be. So with the Quest guitars, we don't see DiMarzio pickups in there. We don't see Seymour Duncan. We don't see any third party pickups. We see Ibanez pickups in there, partly because they're easier to get hold of. But they've done a wonderful job on them for their intended purpose."

So here, at the bleeding edge of design, we find a world in which almost all the norms of guitar making in the 20th century have been turned on their head by logistics, economics and, most importantly, player demand. Interesting times, indeed. **G**

The Ibanez Q52 LBM forms part of its Quest line of headless guitars, some of which also offer slanted frets to suit the style of players such as Ichika Nito



PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON



MACMULL STINGER

One evocative trend in guitar design is taking elements of classic designs and combining them in new guitars that look retro but play modern. This MacMull Stinger, kindly loaned by high-end retailer Renegade Guitar Co., is a great example: extremely light at 6lb 12oz, it's built of black limba wood. With a 25.5-inch scale, it's a shotgun marriage of Les Paul Special and Telecaster

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

FORWARD THINKERS

From avant-garde to ergonomic, these rule-breakers dare to be different

Words Nick Guppy



VOX BOBCAT S66 £1,279

Vox's Bobcat S66 has all the glamour of the Italian-designed 60s original with upgraded hardware and electronics to meet modern demands. Vox has reproduced the knurled aluminium knobs, the vertical headstock logo and matched the original plastic hue, adding tons of retro cool. Meanwhile, the revoiced pickups add tonal depth and complexity.

www.voxamps.com



.STRANDBERG BODEN STANDARD 7 £1,599

The .strandberg's striking looks are certainly an attention-grabber, but there's serious design at work here and the legendary playability has won .strandberg many dedicated fans all over the world. The fan-fret multi-scale headless neck, custom bridge and pickups combine with the ergonomically balanced body for a unique playing experience.

www.strandbergguitars.com



TRINITY BY RELISH £1,599

The guitar equivalent of a Swiss Army knife, the Relish is a high-quality instrument featuring a fast 24-fret neck joined to a basswood body that's home to a magnetic interchangeable pickup system. As well as Relish original pickups, there are adapted designs by Bare Knuckle and Seymour Duncan, making for a choice of 11 different humbuckers and P-90s.

www.relish.swiss



EASTMAN ROMEO £1,949

Top-quality timbers and superlative hardware – including custom-wound Lollar Imperial 'buckers – make the Eastman a very covetable take on the versatile thinline semi-acoustic format. The spruce-topped mahogany body is joined to a maple neck with an ebony 'board for a woody warmth and effortless sustain that straddles many genres with ease.

www.eastmanguitars.com



MUSIC MAN ST VINCENT \$2,799

The signature guitar for Annie Clark, aka St Vincent, blends visual impact and exceptional playability. Music Man is revered for its fabulous necks and the St Vincent has one of the best, with figured roasted maple finished with hand-rubbed wax and gunstock oil. Featuring three humbuckers and a vibrato bridge, the St Vincent is more than just an eyecatcher.

www.music-man.com



MANSON MA EVO SUSTINIAC/FUZZ FACTORY £2,219

Manson's MA EVO builds on the MA-2's success, featuring the best hardware and electronic wizardry, including a Sustiniac sustainer system and a built-in Zvex Fuzz Factory, opening the door to an extraordinary vista of tone. More conventional features include a Manson PF-1 PsychoPAF bridge pickup and a killswitch.

www.mansons.co.uk

SOPHISTICATED SWITCHING

Precise control and a wealth of tone at your fingertips

Words Nick Guppy



IBANEZ AZS2200F PRESTIGE FROM £1,999

Ibanez's Tele-inspired AZS2200F features a Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro bridge pickup and a Magic Touch-mini humbucker, hooked up to the Dyna-MIX5 switching system. As well as a regular three-way selector switch, a separate toggle switch gives two different altered modes, together with a bypass, for a range of series and parallel options.

www.ibanez.com



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA TELECASTER £2,099

Fender's American Ultra Tele brings the revered 50s plank right up to date. Ultra Noiseless Vintage pickups provide all the classic tones with no hum and are linked to an S-1 volume pot switch offering a choice of parallel or series wiring. Meanwhile, a treble-bleed circuit progressively maintains the highs as the volume is rolled down.

www.fender.com



GIBSON KIRK DOUGLAS SIGNATURE SG £2,199

'Captain' Kirk Douglas's signature SG makes full use of its triple humbuckers, with three separate volume controls, each with a coil-tap and a master tone control, plus a master volume control mounted on the scratchplate. The middle pickup is independent from the selector switch and can be blended in with either neck and bridge humbucker, or both.

www.gibson.com



GIBSON LES PAUL CLASSIC £2,299

The Modern version of Gibson's Les Paul Classic brings an expanded tonal range with push-pull pots under all four control knobs. It offers a phase switch, independent coil-tapping and a 'bypass' switch on the bridge tone control that connects the bridge pickup directly to the output socket, cutting out everything else for unadulterated Les Paul tone.

www.gibson.com



MUSIC MAN VALENTINE TREM £2,749

The James Valentine signature features a unique single-coil bridge pickup and a neck humbucker, linked to an active preamp with push-push volume and tone pots for gain boost and various pickup-splitting options. There's a kaleidoscope of tone behind that deceptively simple-looking control layout – in a guitar built to Music Man's typically high standards.

www.music-man.com



PRS MODERN EAGLE V £5,350

Produced in limited numbers for the cancelled PRS Experience 2020 show, the Modern Eagle V's HSH configuration unleashes a vast array of tone from a five-way blade selector combined with mini coil-tap toggles, a push-pull tone control that activates both humbuckers, and a third toggle that changes the volume pot's value from 500k to 250k.

www.prsguitars.com

DOING THE MATHS

Tim Mills of Bare Knuckle Pickups used all of his ingenuity to marry the nuance of a vintage PAF with high-gain drive and clarity. The result is a next-gen humbucker called the Polymath

Words Jamie Dickson

When we started working on this issue's theme of progressive gear design it so happened that Tim Mills, founder of Bare Knuckle Pickups, released one of the most interesting humbuckers we've seen in a while. Designed as the signature pickup set of renowned producer and guitarist Adam 'Nolly' Getgood, both the concept and execution of the resulting Polymath humbucker set goes deeper than is first apparent.

Ordinarily, Tim likes to listen to what an artist wants and then lets them pick their favourite of several prototypes in a blind listening session, conducted face to face. But thanks to lockdown, the Polymath set couldn't be done that way. Instead, Tim relied on his experience and Adam 'Nolly' Getgood's exacting feedback via email to get the job done. Trouble was, Adam wanted two things: a humbucker that performed as subtly and dynamically as a good PAF – but also one that could drive high-gain riffage with definition and articulation. It was the tallest of orders, but Tim thinks they “hit a home run” with the Polymath humbucker set, while the story of its creation sheds fascinating light on how pickups are designed and refined in the 21st century.

Why did you decide to make a signature set for Adam 'Nolly' Getgood?

“Adam and I have got a history that goes back over 12 years now. I've worked with Adam a lot over the years. We did the original sound clips for the Bare Knuckle website together, which was quite a journey. It took about three weeks. People think knocking out sound clips for a website is easy, but when you look at how many pickups we make and then all the different permutations you have to do of those, it took weeks and weeks locked in my studio with Adam bashing out these sound clips and me literally making pickups and gutting guitars and swapping them all. We tried to use the same host guitar as much as we could. We got to know each other very well as part of that process, and became extremely good friends.

“There are tricks under the hood for a PAF-like touch-sensitive feel... But you also get the definition required for modern metal”

TIM MILLS, BARE KNUCKLE PICKUPS

“Obviously Adam's career has blossomed since then, namely with his work with Periphery but more so these days as a producer. I was going to say a sound engineer, but he's not really a sound engineer in that respect; he's more the mix and production side but also this person with this obsessive ear for tone. Some of the things that Adam does, his pursuit of tone is kind of legendary, really. Subsequently, he has mixed and produced albums for some of the biggest rock and metal artists in the world.

“It got to the point where we decided that, between the two of us, it would be a no-brainer to do a signature set. We started work about a year ago and had to do it all remotely this time, which was a little bit unusual. The end result was the Polymath.”

Where does the Polymath set sit on the spectrum of vintage versus modern tone?

“The Polymath kind of encompasses things that are tweaks on traditional designs through to things that are quite innovative. We're talking about humbuckers, so in some respect there's nothing innovative there. The actual way a humbucker works has been largely unchanged, in terms of a passive pickup, for years. What we have done instead is look at the application of



As its name suggests, the Polymath – the signature set for Adam 'Nolly' Getgood – has a breadth of expertise to suit any style or tuning

“A lot of Adam’s work is on the mix and production side, but he also has an obsessive ear for tone. Adam’s pursuit of tone is kind of legendary”

TIM MILLS, BARE KNUCKLE PICKUPS



1. Adam 'Nolly' Getgood, a pro player, has mixed and produced albums for some of the biggest names in rock and metal

the humbucker, particularly in relation to the types of music that Adam produces – like I said, predominantly rock and metal. It was very much about drilling down into the right output ballpark, if you like, that Adam wanted. Then looking at the applications of these pickups and how I could translate that through to the actual design of them.

“There are some unique things that go on under the hood with these pickups in terms of how I created them to reproduce the sounds that Adam uses. We use some quite unusual combinations of magnets, wire and production techniques right the way down through to the amount of potting, wire gauges, the types of material that were used in the pole screws, so on and so forth. So there were a lot of variables that were used to create this set.”

When you design a new set of pickups for an artist, do you have their preferred guitar model or tonewood combination squarely in mind?

“When we do these sorts of things, not just with Adam but with any artist, we look at the guitars they use first and foremost. We tend to sort of go, ‘Right, you’re most known for playing this sort of instrument. We’ll work on that one primarily.’ Once we’ve dialled it in there, we then start beta testing it across other guitars. I think it’s very important to do that.

“A lot of people have messaged me over the past week and said, ‘So were these designed primarily as a six-string pickup, is that the true voice of them? And if I were to get a seven- or eight-string that wouldn’t be the true voice of the Polymath?’ Well, that’s not the case. Once we’ve worked on a six in the type of guitar construction that Adam mostly is thinking he’s going to use them in, we then move it out into sevens and eights and different timbers and constructions, different bridges, neck joints... We’ll be looking to see if there is any huge variation at any one point where we go, ‘Whoa, hang on a minute, that doesn’t sound anything like it any more when we put it into that guitar.’

“So we’re looking for some consistency rather than jumping around on too many different instruments to start with. Otherwise, you just can’t develop any focus, particularly in this instance where you’re having to not work in the same

“I came up with using an unoriented form of Alnico in the medium-output pickup [to capture] the touch-sensitivity of the vintage-hot prototype” **TIM MILLS, BARE KNUCKLE PICKUPS**

2. Bare Knuckle's Tim Mills stretched his skillset during the Polymath's development, working remotely with Adam to bring it to fruition

room, so there was a lot of messaging and sending of clips backwards and forwards and me having to send pickups to Adam for him to install himself. I couldn't see what he was doing, he couldn't see what I was doing, so we were both working blind in that respect.”

How did you find your way to the right solution with these particular pickups?

“At the outset Adam was a little bit split between whether it was going to be a vintage-hot output, which he does enjoy – he loves that extra headroom you get with hotter vintage pickups – or if it was going to be based around a medium-output pickup. I had to get over that hurdle first. We worked hard on producing some prototypes of both and he liked both of them, which wasn't a huge help at that point. You know, it's like, ‘Oh, I can see lots of applications for this that I'd use, the vintage-hot one.’ Equally, I could see more people identifying with the medium-output one. What I did was I actually came up with using an unoriented form of Alnico in the medium-output one because I thought, ‘If I can get some of that feel that he's enjoying, the touch sensitivity and extra headroom, from the vintage-hot into this medium-output one, I think we're going to get a lot of both of what he wants in one model.’ That was the straw that broke the camel's back. All of a sudden, once we made that change to that magnet, it was like, ‘Wow, now we're running all of a sudden.’ There were a few little tweaks to winds that we made and it was a homerun at that point.”

Was the unaligned Alnico prototype a hit with Adam straight away?

“Oh, it was. It was like night and day; you could hear it in his playing. The sound clips that were coming back, you could almost pick up on this energy and excitement that was coming through those sound clips. It was staggering, really. The unoriented magnets, just to dig into that a little bit, they're essentially slightly lower-output or less pull, if you like, than oriented Alnico V. What that's actually doing is giving us a little bit more headroom, but it's not driving the bass so hard. With a medium-output pickup he's getting that real lovely squishy chug that he wants for



high-gain metal, but when he's going up on the higher registers, solo tones, those notes are staying really fat and musical.

“There's an output range there that most people will feel comfortable with. It keeps the mids nice and present in the mix. That was ticking all of those boxes. You roll off the volume a little bit and you can get some absolutely awesome classic rock tones out of these. We ran through some sound clips of quite a few different styles of rock and metal just to see how they sat in the mix with different types of tracks. We really knew we were onto something at that point.”

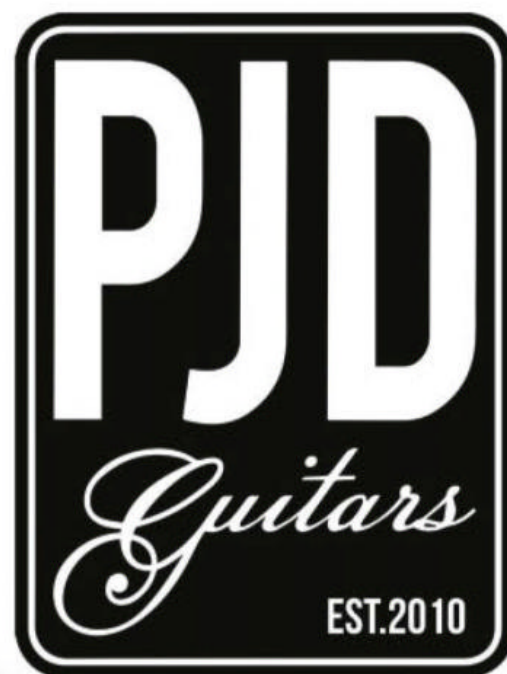
Is the neck Polymath the same design as the bridge?

“No, the neck pickup is something that I'm really proud of, actually. There are a lot of quite different things going on in there compared with the bridge. I'm using two different wire types, for starters. There's a little trick that I've done with the inductance to make sure it's very articulate. It's got this lovely tubular neck tone, but it's very articulate. It's not super-bloomy, if that makes any sense, like you would get with a traditional PAF-type neck.

“On paper, you look at the DC resistance and you think, ‘That's quite hot.’ It's going to really drive super hard, but it'll soak up a lot of gain and still sound really, really clear. Using these twin wire types also means that the split and series/parallel tones are really quite special. This is something that Adam drilled down into a lot. He really got into using not just a series tone and not just a single-coil tone but looking at how the pickups worked in parallel as well so that we could really capitalise on all of that. So you can get a complete range of tones just off the guitar itself without having to do any post-production.

“The neck pickup also uses unoriented Alnico, but, as I said, there are quite a few little tricks going on under the hood right down to the length of potting times to make sure that you still get this very much touch-sensitive feel out of the pickups that you would expect – like when you play a PAF – with the notes blooming under your fingers. But you also get the definition that is required to play modern metal styles.” **G**

The Polymath humbucker set is available now from Bare Knuckle. For more info see www.bareknucklepickups.co.uk



**CAREY
STANDARD**



WWW.PJDGUITARS.COM



EVOLVED CLASSICS

Upgraded, enhanced and out of this world

Words Nick Guppy



GORDON SMITH GATSBY FROM £1,299

Taking things in a different direction, the Gatsby is Gordon Smith's first offset guitar. The relatively small body is chamfered front and rear, while the neck fits like a glove, with butter-like playability. A long list of options means you can have your Gatsby the way you like it, too, creating a unique tool to enhance your music. Read the full review on page 10. www.gordonsmithguitars.com



IBANEZ AZ2402 PRESTIGE FROM £1,989

The Japanese-crafted AZ2402 packs a full two-octave maple and wenge Super Wizard neck with stainless-steel jumbo frets on the roasted maple fretboard. Titanium bridge saddles and Seymour Duncan Hyperion humbuckers connected to a Dyna-MIX10 switching system ensure this guitar sounds absolutely stellar in the right hands. www.ibanez.com



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA STRATOCASTER £2,049

Fender's upgrade of the 2016 Elite series adds a new neck profile with a slightly flatter compound radius rolled-edge fretboard for a slick, modern playing experience, enhanced by a curved and scalloped heel. A trio of Ultra Noiseless pickups drives a modified control layout adding extra versatility for a contemporary vibe. A great pro choice. www.fender.com



PRS MCCARTY 594 £3,999

The PRS 594 first appeared as a Private Stock model but was such a hit that it was quickly adopted as a Core model. An evolution from the original 1994 McCarty model, the 594's controls and hardware should leave you in no doubt about its inspiration. The moniker comes from this guitar's scale length of 24.594 inches, mirroring that of classic vintage Les Pauls. www.prsguitars.com



KNAGGS ERIC STECKEL KENAI £5,399

The Kenai is Joe Knaggs' take on the popular single-cut format, built to exceptionally high standards (as you'd expect from the former PRS Private Stock master builder). This version is tweaked for blues-metal phenom Eric Steckel and features Seymour Duncan 'Candy' Custom Shop humbuckers driving a vintage control layout that nails the late-50s magic. www.knaggsguitars.com



COLLINGS 470 JL £6,150

The 470 JL is Collings' second signature model for jazz virtuoso Julian Lage, and this time it's electric. While there are no f-holes, the body is hollow, imparting a unique feedback-resisting resonance captured by the special Ron Ellis pickups and Bigsby vibrato tailpiece. A truly inspiring instrument for a remarkable instrumentalist. www.collingsguitars.com

RETRO-MODERN MASH-UPS

Revisiting the old-school for a contemporary take on classic tone

Words Nick Guppy



GRETSCH G2655T-P90 STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK JR £479

To give it its full title, the G2655T-P90 Streamliner Center Block Jr Double-Cut P90 With Bigsby is part of Gretsch's entry-level Streamliner range, with vintage mojo emphasised by FidelitySonic 90 pickups, a staple-styled P-90. These are wound on the hot side and it's fair to say the Streamliner loves gain – it's a bold and brawny with a tone to match. www.gretschguitars.com



STERLING BY MUSIC MAN MARIPOSA £649

The Indonesian-made version of Ernie Ball's Mariposa offers the same clean lines, which look to have evolved from the Albert Lee model. A 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length ensures plenty of snap from the custom-made humbuckers. The four-plus-two machinehead design leaves no doubt as to this guitar's heritage, and, at the price, it's excellent value, too. www.sterlingbymusicman.com



PJD CAREY STANDARD FROM £1,799

PJD's UK-made Carey Standard is a single-cut with a chambered ash body joined to a bolt-on quarter-sawn roasted maple neck, with power provided by a Bare Knuckle Boot Camp Old Guard bridge humbucker and a P-90 in the neck position. You can also spec the guitar with an f-hole top, while a choice of unusual finishes adds to the boutique appeal. www.pjdguitars.com



YAMAHA REVSTAR RS502T £619

The Revstar range was the result of a collaboration between Yamaha and a London-based design agency, drawing inspiration from the 60s and 70s café racer motorcycle trend. The exquisite lines, custom hardware, cool colours and specially designed pickups have proven to be a winning combination for many players looking for something different. www.uk.yamaha.com



FIDELITY STELLAROSA FROM £1,665

Taking inspiration from the rare Japanese-made Stella Japonica from the 60s, the Stellarosa maintains the retro looks and features re-engineered hardware and electronics. It's available in premium Deluxe and Standard models, plus Lite I (single pickup) and II (two pickups) versions from the budget range, each with Mojo Pickups' Charlie Christian P90s. www.fidelity-guitars.co.uk



MACMULL STINGER FROM £2,175

Alongside highly desirable Strat and Tele recreations, Macmull's original-design Stinger incorporates all of the brand's RVT (Real Vintage Tone) ethos to produce a good-looking almost-offset instrument powered by a pair of Macmull's own P-90s for a dynamic punchy tone. The Stinger comes in a range of finishes and options to suit every taste. www.macmull-guitars.com

MAKING WAVES

PJD Guitars has become one of the largest guitar makers in the UK, as founder Leigh Dovey blends Leo Fender's 'production-line' ethos with the quality of bespoke builds

Words Dave Burluck

There's no shortage of guitars out there and yet, in a relatively short amount of time, Leigh Dovey's PJD Guitars has crafted out its own niche in the industry, bringing high-quality electrics with a classic feel into the mass-market arena at an affordable price. The instruments are all made in the UK at the company's workshop base in York, employing the latest technology alongside the skilled hands of the team to bring the guitars to life – and our gigbags.

"The way I see it," Lee tell us, "is that the electric guitar was always intended to be a factory-made instrument. When I think of how Leo Fender designed the Tele and Stratocaster, they were production-line instruments: if the neck broke, you unscrewed it and put a new one on. I just thought that, although it's built on a production line, the quality doesn't have to be any less than that of a bespoke builder. So I wanted to blend the two: to offer a high-end guitar at a price people could afford because of the methods used to produce it. That's what we're doing here."

You're pretty state of the art using CNC routing, lasers... It's not a bunch of people with hammers and chisels.

"Absolutely not, no. Who knows what would come out if it was [laughs]."

Your production is around 40 guitars per month. Do you plan to increase that?

"As you know we were approached to build Cream T guitars for Tim Lobley [see Blueprint, issue 477]. We're now onto the second model for them, but that's all hush-hush at the moment. In fact, although I can't tell you the details as yet, we are also working with a top UK luthier at the moment to produce a more affordable instrument. I can't say more, but we're well into the prototype stage and there is more to come on that front. We kind of fell into it if I'm honest. It was never a plan to do this; people approached us.

"The point is that there is a limit to the number of PJD guitars we can sell into the market. So by making for other people we don't have to sell a thousand PJD guitars over a couple of years because we wouldn't be able to sell them. It's something we need to ramp up slowly as we build our brand."

You say your guitars are "proudly crafted in the UK", but presumably you import most of the woods you use?

"Yes, we do. We've certainly experienced some shipping issues [because of the pandemic], but we've adapted very well. Swamp ash was difficult and rosewood, too, as we deal with a company in Europe. As soon as Brexit hit, an order that would

previously have taken two weeks to get to us was taking two months because of documentation and things like export and import licences. But now we know the process it's really not an issue."

Do you see a time when you could use indigenous woods in your builds – or is that totally infeasible?

"I don't think it's infeasible. It's more about the willingness of the customer to try – and accept – new stuff. I'd be more than happy to try English sycamore for necks, for example. But I also think having the facilities to mill the wood and potentially roast it and store it to the moisture levels we require, certainly for neck wood, is about the infrastructure to actually achieve that. That would be the most important consideration because we're not really set up to do that in this country, certainly for guitar wood. But I'm open to

"I wanted to offer a high-end guitar at a price people could afford because of the methods used to produce it"

LEIGH DOVEY, PJD GUITARS

experimenting, and within the next few years it's something I'd like to bring into our production."

What about UK-made hardware?

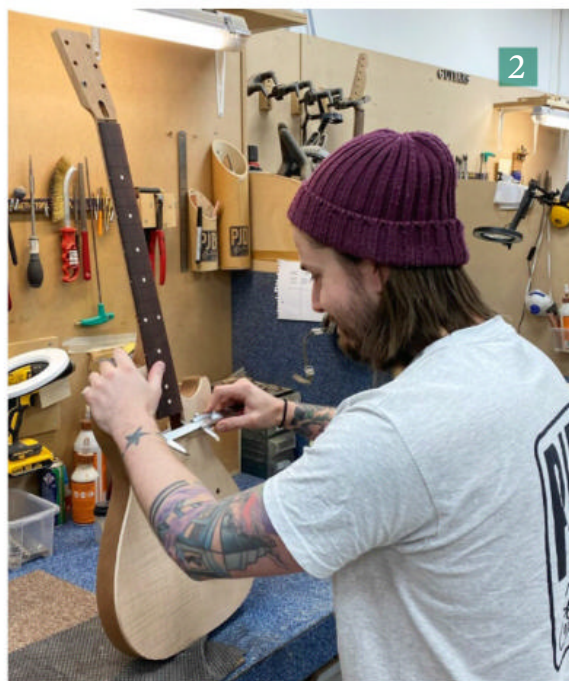
"That's very definitely a 'watch this space'. It makes so much sense to be able to offer hardware made in the UK, but not if it's going to break the bank for people. Offering a bridge that costs £275 or whatever is totally ridiculous, whereas if you could offer a nice hardtail bridge that looks good and is functionally as good as the Gotoh bridges we use, and in a similar price area, I think we could be on to a winner. Classy, simplistic but high quality – you'll be the first to know!"

How are you finding the finishing process now that you're doing it in-house?

"Oh, it's night and day. We now have full control over what we do. I think it's important not to be constrained by 'this



1. The PJD Woodford (left) and St John designs offer classic lines and quality materials with a price point of under £2k



2. Leigh Dovey in his York-based workshop. The company was founded in 2010 and has gone from strength to strength

“We’re not just building guitars for the studio or playing out live – you also have a resonant electric guitar you can play unplugged”

LEIGH DOVEY, PJD GUITARS



3. PJD's St John Elite models (front and back, with and without f-holes) alongside the Carey Standard

is the only way to do it' mindset. There are better ways, quicker ways, and we're finding that what we're doing now, well, we're getting the best finishes that we've ever done. Our guy is absolutely first class. It's about process and working out the best way, even if that means doing things slightly differently, so be it. It used to scare me if I'm honest – finishing seemed like a dark art. But I don't feel like that any more. When you break it down and look at it, it's actually fairly simple in terms of process.”

Another theme we've seen, certainly during the pandemic, is a longer lead time for orders. Is that your experience?

“I think the thing we're struggling with is actually getting hold of the parts that are out of our control, be that our cases, or hardware and pickups. We're not struggling to make the guitars by any stretch, but it's a constant juggling act to get hold of the right parts. But, generally, no. We're getting stuff out and that's important to our retailers. They know they can order six guitars and they'll get them in, for example, six weeks' time as opposed to us saying you might get them next year... if you're lucky.”

Do you think the sort of guitars people are buying is actually changing? Your guitars are light in weight with an almost acoustic-like resonance to them. They're very vibrant instruments.

“I actually do think times and tastes are changing. We know more people are working from home, and obviously that's a result of the pandemic, but having an electric guitar that you can sit and play acoustically is very appealing. I feel like we're not just building guitars for the studio or playing out live – a lot of musicians want something that they can play at home on the sofa, so having an electric guitar that you can play unplugged that's resonant... I mean, it's much more comfortable to play a guitar like that rather than an acoustic dreadnought, isn't it? You then, obviously, can easily plug it into your computer. and with all the technology there it's easy to get some great sounds.” **G**

For more information on PJD Guitars, visit <https://pjdguitars.com>

PROGRESSIVE ACOUSTICS

Unplugged or amplified, these superlative six truly deliver

Words Nick Guppy



GIBSON GENERATION G-45 £1,099

Taking its cue from Gibson's famous 'workhorse' J-45, the G-45 has a regular soundhole plus a second 'player port' on the top shoulder of the bass bout to let the player hear their guitar closer to the way an audience would, with unmasked treble and increased volume. Together with the Advanced Response neck profile, the G-45 is a real player's instrument. www.gibson.com



TAYLOR GT URBAN ASH £1,299

Taylor's GT stands for 'Grand Theater', a new mid-size scale length that's about halfway between a full-size acoustic and a travel guitar. With reclaimed-ash back and sides sourced from felled urban trees, it's a positive environmental move from Taylor, plus there's all the build quality and fretting at which the company excels. Ideal for fingerpickers in all styles. www.taylorguitars.com



MARTIN SC-13E £1,599

Martin's SC-13E is aimed more at the electric player, with an S-shape asymmetric cutaway body plus a clever chamfered heel design that allows unlimited access right to the top of the fretboard. Thanks to innovative (and very un-Martin-like) design and Fishman's MX-T pickup, the SC-13E sounds just as good amplified as it does when used as a pure acoustic. www.martinguitar.com



EMERALD VIRTUO FROM £2,150

Emerald's VirtuO is a guitar for the player who needs to handle everything from one instrument. It's an acoustic that can turn into a twin-humbucker electric at the flick of a switch and also packs a MIDI pickup with the standard 13-pin connector. Fishman Fluence pickups and a Graph Tech Ghost Piezo take care of the electric and acoustic signals. www.emeraldguitars.com



IBANEZ JGM10 £3,049

Acoustic virtuoso Jon Gomm gets a signature model that's truly worthy: the JGM10 marries pau ferro back and sides to a premium Sitka spruce top for a powerful and highly responsive tone. Amplification is taken care of by two Fishman pickups and an internal microphone, a unique triple-source system that can run in mono, stereo or with all three signals split. www.ibanez.com



LOWDEN BARITONE FAN FRET FROM £5,199

Lowden's Baritone model teams superb tonewoods with peerless craftsmanship to create one of the ultimate modern acoustic guitars, at any price. The fan frets make the guitar easier to play, with more definition and power in the low-end, while staying perfectly balanced. George Lowden likens it to the difference between a baby grand and concert grand piano. www.lowdenguitars.com

CIRRUS

SPATIAL-TEMPORAL MODIFIER



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Just close your eyes and let the KMA Machines' Cirrus Delay and Reverb carry you across the open sky, onto its sonic cloudscape.



www.kma-machines.com

POINT TAKEN

Lee Wrathe explains how Ibanez restored its mojo with a new kind of high-performance solidbody electric designed to entice YouTube-savvy virtuosos. The result was the AZ family of guitars: less ‘pointy’ but just as powerful

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Joseph Branton

Ibanez made its name in the shred era with what were then cutting-edge guitars such as the JEM and RG Series. In recent times, the Japanese company realised that the tastes of YouTube-celebrity guitarists such as Mateus Asato were driving a new trend in guitar design – a fusion of vintage looks with next-generation playability and tonal versatility. Concerned that RG-style guitars were being left out in the cold by this new generation of eclectic but virtuosic players, Ibanez asked some of the world’s best guitarists playing across multiple genres what they wanted from a guitar, including superb British guitarist and online star Lee Wrathe.

Apart from his formidable and eclectic solo work, Lee is also a long-standing demonstrator of Ibanez instruments online, making him a natural choice to help Ibanez develop its new range. Here, Lee joins us to explain how Ibanez got its mojo back with the AZ Series of electrics, which excite and surprise with their versatile, slick blend of classic and progressive features.

How did the AZ Series first take shape?

“By hook or by crook, I was one of the people that they wanted to talk to, as a longterm Ibanez player, about what I found difficult about the RG Series – your typical pointy guitars – when playing my YouTube versions of jazz, fusion, country and all of that sort of stuff. So off the back of Guthrie Govan playing all these different styles of music and popularising that, there were characters like myself who were just doing that anyway – just like Guthrie does but obviously to a hugely different degree.

“That’s where the AZ guitars sprung from: a movement of ‘player’s players’ [who found an audience online], if you like. Not that I’d put myself in that bracket, but you’ve got people like Tom Quayle and Martin Miller, and these characters who are famous within that niche world of YouTube and famous among guitar players. So why aren’t they using a high-end, Japanese-made RG to play those styles of music?

“To try to find out, [Ibanez] asked a variety of relevant players and we gave them our thoughts on the matter, about

why we wouldn’t use a Floyd Rose, for example, in those musical situations. The look and vibe of the guitar would also need to change so you don’t feel the mojo has gone; when you have a pointy guitar and play some country, it just doesn’t seem to work. The output of the pickups also needs to be different, lower powered than your standard DiMarzio, so something a little bit more traditional. And then they came up with this switching system to allow you to get everything from traditional Strat and Tele tones through to your heavy rock kind of tones. They listened to us and then they also looked to the market as well and went, ‘Okay, so what do Suhr do? Suhr has found these people. Everybody seems to want

“Ibanez asked a variety of players about the difficulty of the RG Series then made the guitar that everybody told them to make”

LEE WRATHE



1. A longtime Ibanez demonstrator and YouTuber, Lee Wrathe helped the brand develop its innovative new lines



2. The AZS2200 is a slinky, evocative T-style, with a maple roasted 'board and Seymour Duncan Magic Touch-mini neck 'bucker

“[With the AZN variant], Ibanez has created a blueprint for a really great workhorse guitar, a little bit like the RG in the 80s” LEE WRATHE



3. The AZ2204N takes things in a more traditional direction with its Seymour Duncan Fortuna single-coil pickups and double-cut alder body. For all the classic looks, it's packed with modern refinements, from a compound-radius neck to Luminlay side dots, plus tone-expanding circuitry offering 10 different pickup combinations

to play Suhr. Why is that?’ So they took all of the elements of those and, in their ultimate humility, just made the guitar that everybody told them to make, so you have these lovely appointments to them – and that became the standard AZ.

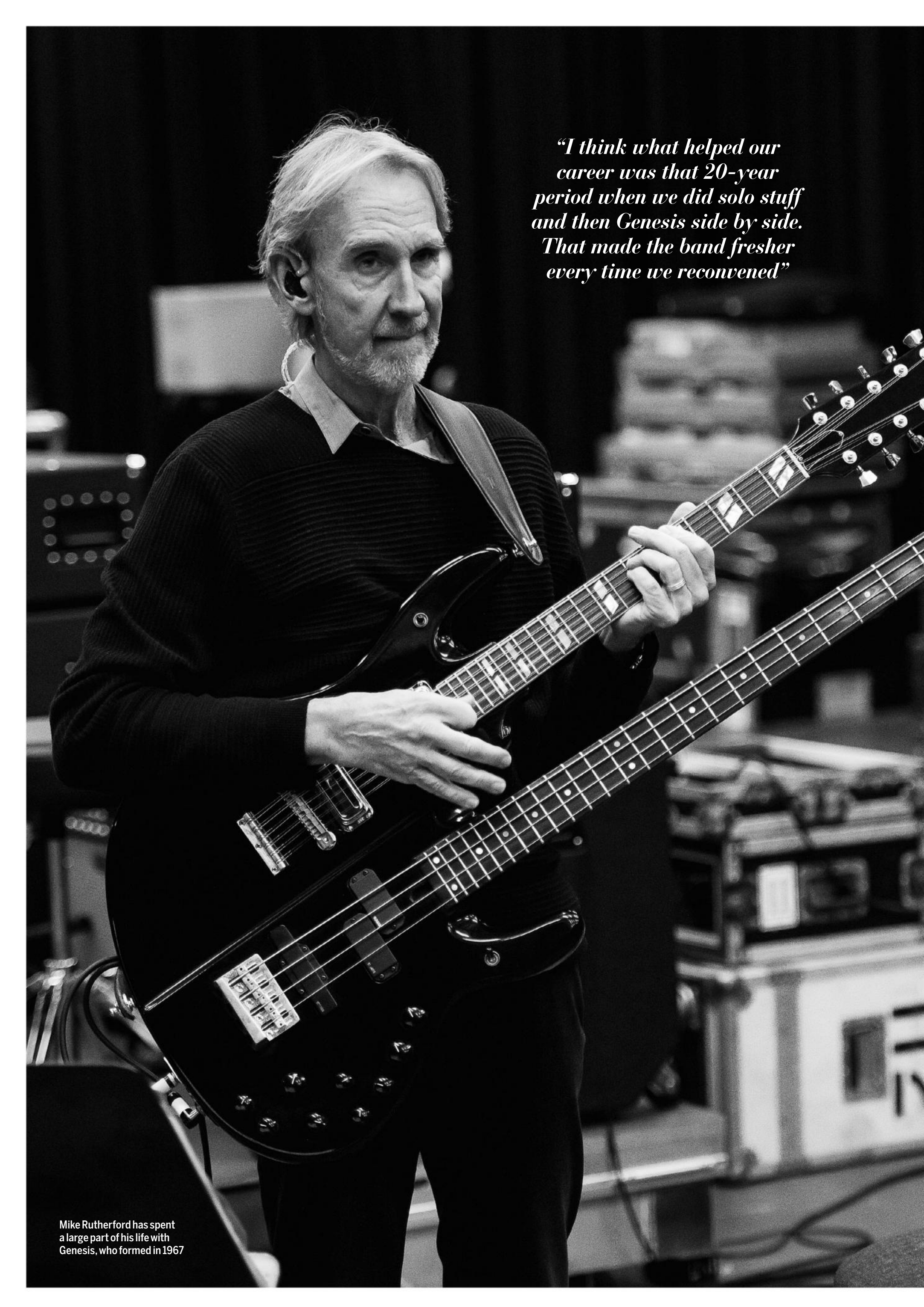
“And at that moment as well, you’ve also got characters like Mateus Asato on Instagram, basically playing beaten-up old Telecasters, or his versions of that style of guitar, and recording these beautiful little renditions – perfect renditions – of things. They’re études more than anything else. It’s very traditional music, it wasn’t avant-garde, wasn’t breaking new boundaries, but it was that kind of neo-soul movement, which really carried players to dizzying heights on Instagram. It made them household names – within our world, anyway. So off the back of that, you’ve got Ibanez going, ‘Okay, well, we’ll make a single-cut version of the AZ because it was so successful.’ So then they made the AZS [T-style single-cut]. There are two different versions of that, plus you’ve got the Signature, which is a different spin-off from it, but they’re almost the same guitars.”

How about the AZN? That seems more traditional still than the twin-humbucker AZ variants.

“They realised that people will still want the traditional – really traditional – elements of a Strat, so they made the AZN, which uses a different set of pickups, [Seymour Duncan] Fortuna pickups, and a different neck profile, compound radius neck, all that kind of stuff. What they’ve done is they’ve created a blueprint for a really great workhorse guitar, a little bit like the RG in the 80s. In very, very recent times, they’ve gone, ‘Okay, how do we make our ‘Squier’ version of that, the super-affordable one that helps people into the market but has those appointments and those kinds of vibes?’ And there you have AZES, which is Essentials.

“They’re masters of thinking and talking to people properly. They’re creating a great design, but they’re running with that design and branching off when it’s popular, like the RGs and now with the AZs. They’re going to be around for a long time.” 

Find more on Ibanez’s latest innovations at www.ibanez.com/eu

A black and white photograph of Mike Rutherford, an older man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a dark ribbed sweater over a collared shirt. He is holding a black electric guitar and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred studio setting with various pieces of equipment.

“I think what helped our career was that 20-year period when we did solo stuff and then Genesis side by side. That made the band fresher every time we reconvened”

Mike Rutherford has spent a large part of his life with Genesis, who formed in 1967

DOMINO EFFECT

As guitarist and bassist with Genesis, Mike Rutherford has a unique perspective on what makes the band tick. Here, he talks about the gear that has powered the band's sound over the years – including a lowly £120 Strat – and reflects on touring for what may be the final time

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Will Ireland

Genesis have had an extraordinary career, even by stadium-rock standards. They've been making music for more than half a century, sold 150 million albums, recorded 15 albums – and even the band members' solo careers, from Peter Gabriel and Phil Collins to Rutherford's own Mike And The Mechanics, have ranked among rock's great chart successes. When we caught up with founding member Mike Rutherford, Genesis was about to embark on 'The Last Domino?' tour – the band's first in 14 years – with Phil Collins fronting, despite well-documented health problems – and Rutherford sharing guitar and bass duties interchangeably with Daryl Stuermer, who has been part of the band's live line-up for more than 40 years.

Since recording this interview, the band sadly had to halt the tour – which was just getting off the ground – due to a band member (undisclosed) testing positive for Covid-19. This spanner in the works, while carefully guarded against, is all the more galling for band and fans alike, as the initial shows had garnered impressive reviews. Happily, the shows that were postponed have since been rescheduled for 2022 along with some additional dates in Europe, and so it seems that the band is looking forward to putting this setback behind them.

When we spoke to Mike, however, this was all yet to befall the band so our conversation ranged from first-night nerves to Strats, formative influences and Mike's unique perspective on the skillset you have to acquire to shine on both bass and guitar. His 54-year journey with Genesis has clearly been nothing if not eventful – but he remains refreshingly pragmatic about gear and music-making, even to the point of using a £120 guitar on a huge tour if it suits his needs, as we found out...

As we speak, you're just about to embark on 'The Last Domino?' tour – what's the feeling like in the band?

"Yeah, it's good. I mean, we did the main production rehearsals last November, December in lockdown. So we were sort of prepared then, which was a

strange choice actually at the time, considering it was a tour that may never have happened. And then we reconvened about two weeks ago. We've just had a little break as Phil's daughter Lily got married in America [in September]. So we had a week off there and then we start again tomorrow. So we're ready to go – we're in good shape."

Genesis first formed when you were at school – did you have any inkling that you'd still be doing this so much later in your life?

"None of us did! [Laughs] What was that lovely line Ringo said? He wanted to make enough money to buy his own hairdressing salon in Liverpool and that was his goal. No, I mean, Christ, it's been 54 years now. I mean, not at all. But in a sense I think we managed quite well by never really looking too far ahead. And I also do think that what helped our career – and our pleasure in doing it – was that 20-year period when we did solo stuff and then Genesis side by side. That, I think, made the band fresher every time we reconvened."

A lot of late-60s British bands looked to the blues for their main inspiration. What musical traditions was early Genesis fuelled by?

"I would say a mixture of bands. It was a very exciting time in the UK – The Beatles, The Stones, The Kinks were just ahead of us by five or six years, although that seemed a big gap when you were 12 years old rather than 18... And also folk music, Joni Mitchell, that sort of stuff. But then again, Peter was more R&B so it was a complete cross-section of stuff, really."

When you played the spit-and-sawdust British gig venues in the early part of the 70s, did you encounter any hostility to the theatrical look you adopted?

"I think there was more surprise in the audience – it was a bit different. But here's the weird thing: I think the music carried Peter's onstage look. Sometimes, you know, we'd start soft and acoustic with 12-string guitar

1. Mike Rutherford, Tony Banks and Phil Collins pictured during production rehearsals ahead of 'The Last Domino?' tour

2. While Mike used a guitar/bass doubleneck comprising a Gibson 12-string neck and Yamaha TRB 4P bass for the live shows, for rehearsals this model combines the Gibson neck with a CCGX (Charlie Chandler's Guitar Experience) four-string bass

3. The latest tour sees Genesis embark on an acoustic section for the first time, for which Mike uses a Fender Acoustasonic Stratocaster, a new addition for him

4. Precious cargo behind the scenes at 'The Last Domino?' tour rehearsals

5. Co-guitarist/bassist Daryl Stuermer's Godin Signature DS-1

6. Mike favours the T-Rex Dr Swamp dual-distortion on stage, and has recently turned to Strymon's Riverside and Sunset for more onstage drive sounds

and the audience would all be at the bar, but then the drums came in and they left the bar [to come forward to the stage]. I think new fans were bemused more than anything, really. But the set got quite strong and powerful at the end, with songs like *The Knife*, and I think it surprised them."

You supported Rory Gallagher around that time – quite a contrast musically, though both incredible bands. Do you happen to remember how that gig went down?

"Yeah, I mean, we supported everybody. Any band who was around then of any size, we supported them. I just remember he had a little amp backstage, actually, which he was blues-ing on. It was so fucking loud! It sounded fantastic."

The band has covered so much musical terrain over the years. Do you feel like Genesis is really several separate bands that have simply worked under a common flag?

"Yeah, I mean, if you're in it, it's always the same band to you, if you know what I mean. I think the perception [of what Genesis was about musically] was quite bizarre in the 80s and 90s because of MTV. The singles got such a high profile that they overshadowed the long tracks that we did – every album we made always had a long 12-, 15- or 30-minute track on it. But obviously on the radio no-one heard those because they were only played live, so I think people sort of forgot that we still did that. I feel it was more perception [that there had been a shift in the band's core focus] because, you know, MTV did change the way people perceived our songs."

What does Daryl Stuermer bring to the table, on both guitar and bass, on tour with Genesis?

"Well, it's been 40-years-plus now [that we've worked together] and on stage he's a big part of Genesis, really. There's a lovely email that came a couple of years ago and he said, 'I heard you guys might be possibly thinking about doing something with Genesis... Please consider me.' And I went back saying, 'Well, the thought of doing without you is out of the question. You know, you are the holder of knowledge of the chords, how all the songs go and where the changes are.' So I couldn't

"I think the perception [of what Genesis was about musically] was quite bizarre in the 80s and 90s because of MTV"

imagine doing it *without* Daryl, actually. He's fantastic. He came from the jazz-rock world: he was playing guitar with Jean-Luc Ponty but then became a bass player with Genesis. But for five years or so you don't [fully] become a bass player, first of all. First tour, you play the right bass notes – but it takes a while to really understand it, and it's great now."

How do you divvy up guitar parts?

"Genesis songs like *Firth Of Fifth* with these huge guitar solos that Steve Hackett used to play... It's not my forte that sort of thing – fast, fluid solos – so obviously Daryl took that one, plus other stuff that Steve did like that. Then on some of the more recent songs I feel closer to the guitar – but it's not set in stone. This time around we've been rehearsing *Jesus He Knows Me* and last tour I played guitar [on that song], but this time I'm playing bass because I just felt like it."

A lot of guitarists assume that six-string fretboard skills are directly transferable to bass – only to discover when they pick one up that it's a very different mindset...

"So much is a feel thing. You sort of learn to understand what bass needs to do to give a song a lift. For example, I don't play bass apart [from the pragmatic necessities of] recording and live work, but in the last 10 years of doing Mike And The Mechanics, I've realised that when I get on the bass to put an album down, you can change the song hugely and give it a real lift. It's so important what it can do. Bass and drums kind of get forgotten now: they're mainly in the box, you know, on the computer. But they can give a track a real lift if you play it manually."

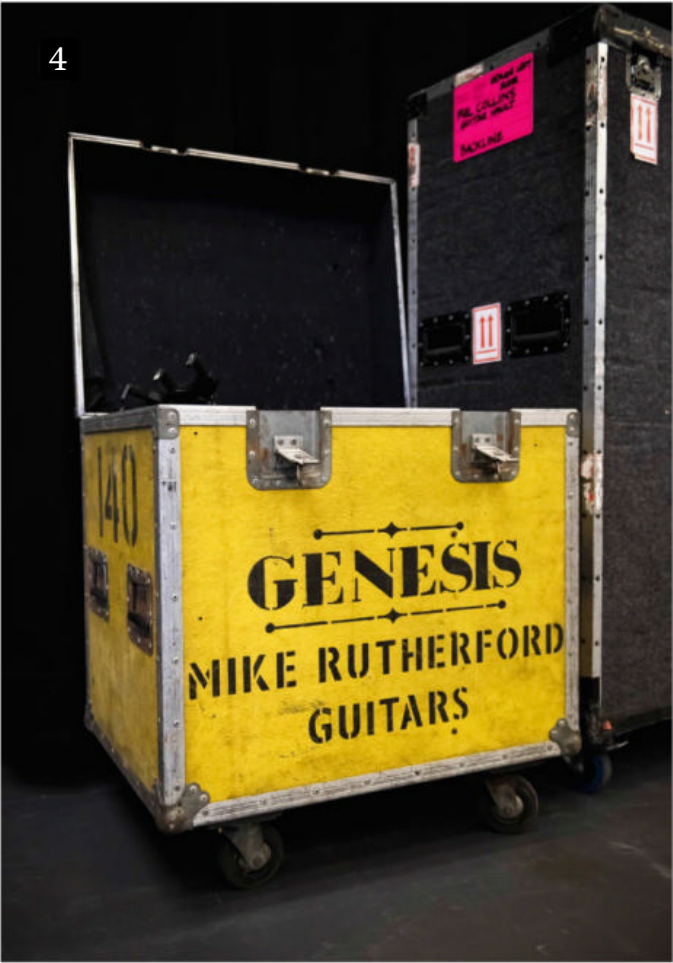
Back to guitars, you seem to gravitate towards Strats. How did you settle on them for your Genesis sound?

"I didn't really get excited about Strats until I bought the EC model – Eric's one – with that boost thing, which really made a difference to me, actually. And I tend to use the Lace Sensor Gold pickups, which really do help. But the thing is, the Strat can be anybody, they can cover all kinds of moods. Whereas other guitars like Gibsons have a sort of one-sound thing, I think."

What Strats are you taking along for 'The Last Domino?' tour?

"I have my main Strat, but here's a funny thing. Last year, I went to Cape Town for two weeks and got stuck there in lockdown for two months because there were no flights. And just prior to lockdown, I thought, 'Christ, I haven't got an electric guitar...' So I went to a music shop there and I bought two Squier Bullet Strats. You know, Indonesian-made, standard spec... and one of them I just love. It cost £200 at the most. And I play it on stage on *Mama* and *No Son Of Mine*. I just love it. It's got







BITING THE BULLET

Guitar tech Steve Prior reveals why Mike Rutherford can't get enough of Fender's entry-level Squier Bullet Stratocaster

Mike Rutherford is usually to be found playing a Lace Sensor-equipped Strat like the one pictured above. But recently the prog legend has taken to playing guitars from the other end of Fender's price range – the humble Squier Bullet Strat – and he does so in front of thousands of Genesis fans. So, how has this entry-level Strat managed to convert a seasoned pro such as Rutherford? After all, he could play virtually any Stratocaster he wanted. We spoke to his guitar tech, Steve Prior (who is currently out on the road with Queen's Roger Taylor following the postponement of 'The Last Domino?' tour dates) to find out.

"The Squier Bullet Stratocaster is his favourite at the moment, it really is," says Steve, "and I've just bought him a couple of others that I've found rather cheaply in the clearance section at Guitar Guitar in Newcastle.

They were only about 100 quid each! I mean, they're unbelievably good guitars for the money.

"His favourite one is an unusual colour: it's a limited-edition finish called Sonic Grey," he continues. "Squier Bullet Strats in this finish were imported into South Africa from Indonesia. Mike bought the guitar in a shop in Cape Town because he forgot to take his black Clapton Strat with him on a visit. He actually bought two – the other Bullet Strat is Arctic White.

"Sitting at home in Cape Town plugged into his Blackstar three-watt amp, Mike just fell in love with it playing along to his laptop and relearning all the Genesis songs. That was him for almost all of the first lockdown because he wasn't allowed out of Cape Town. He was stuck there. But he came back saying how much he loved this guitar."

The Sonic Grey Squier Bullet Stratocaster features a polyurethane-finished poplar body and 648mm (25.5-inch) scale 'C'-profile maple neck with a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius, 21-fret laurel fingerboard. Three Standard Single-Coil Strat pickups along with a six-saddle Vintage-Style Synchronized Tremolo means the guitar stays close to Fender's original 1954 design.

"It's super lightweight; it feels like balsa wood," says Steve. "But I have changed the bridge/saddles and put Gotoh tuners on just to make it more reliable for the tour. Mike loves the sound of the pickups, although on a couple of these guitars I have put Fender Noiseless bridge pickups in, just in case we get any interaction with the stage's enormous 70ft LCD screen."

While Fender's Squier Bullet Stratocasters are cheerfully

functional instruments, pro players may want to upgrade and mod the guitars to bring them up to spec. Indeed, they serve as ideal testbeds for tinkering.

"If you want to put Gotoh tuners on you've got to enlarge the peghead holes," advises Steve. "I also recut the nut and dressed the frets. I would maybe recommend upgrading the electronics to Switchcraft and CTS, too. It's about fine-tuning the guitar, really.

"Mike has got so many other wonderful Strats, but he also loves using these Indonesian-made Squier Bullet Stratocasters. He can't put the Sonic Grey one down. It's the first guitar he wants to play every day.

"I asked him if he'd like me to take the Squier decal off the headstock, but he said he wanted it stay. I'd bet Fender are probably over the moon about that!" [RB]

a life to it. It's a little bit lighter than some and it's got a slightly smaller neck, which helps my ageing fingers."

Pretty impressive that it made the cut for a Genesis world tour. The standard Squier Bullet Strat is around £120...

"Yes, well, my guitar tech Steve Prior, who's the best guitar tech in the world, did change the machineheads. But it's about what works for you, really."

You played a Steinberger in the MTV video for *Anything She Does* from *Invisible Touch*. Was that just for the camera or did you genuinely favour them at that point?

"Oh no – the whole of the *Invisible Touch* album is all Steinberger. I loved them, I really did. It was such a crude thing, you know, just a bit of graphite, six strings, like an old sort of blues guitar – you know what I mean? It was really crude. I loved it. And then I played it on stage and people said to me, 'Well, can't you get a bigger-size guitar? Why have you got a small one? Because you're a tall bloke, you know?' And so I went to Steinberger and said, 'Can you make me a bigger one?' But they said no. So I built one with Roger Giffin, with a proper body shape. And then they copied it – but the sound wasn't quite the same, it wasn't quite as good as the original one... After that I went to the Strats."

Are you taking anything new out on tour this time, guitar-wise?

"On this tour we're doing a short acoustic bit, which is the first for us, in the middle of the stage. And I've got one of those Fender Acoustasonic Strats, the little ones, which is really nice. I mean, it's not as good as a real acoustic guitar to be honest, but for stage it's very easy and friendly."

You're also well known for using doubleneck guitars, combining bass and 12-string...

"Yes, my favourite was the very first one. I've a funny feeling it might be in a Hall Of Fame exhibit now. I had a lovely Rickenbacker 12-string, black one, and I had this Micro-Frets bass, which had a weird sound. So I went to a guy who cut them up and joined them together. And

that's my favourite. But at the moment I have a 12-string and a bass doubleneck... it's got a Gibson 12-string neck combined with a Yamaha TRB 4P active bass below, which is really nice."

In terms of backline, do you stick with classic valve amps or have you gone down the whole modelling route as so many pro users of Fractal, Kemper and so on have on tour?

"Well, basically the last tour Genesis did was in 2007. We rehearsed in New York and I had one of those Line 6 amps, which I'd rehearsed with at home, and I'd created all the echoes and the EQ and stuff on it in advance. Went into New York and I couldn't hear it above the band! So then I went back to the old Fender 410 DeVille. And that's still what I use. It's got a sort of frequency, you can hear it anywhere. It's got its own sound really."

What's on your pedalboard for the tour?

"It's quite simple really. There's a new one, a Strymon, that I like, which Daryl turned me on to, the Riverside Overdrive – and the Strymon Sunset dual distortion is also great. But the main one I use is still my T-Rex Dr Swamp. Another thing I've got is the [Boss] DD-2 Digital Delay and I just stick it in the amp's Send and Return. There's something about those old ones: I hear them better. With the modern ones I just don't like the sound of the delay, really. But in general, I'm very comfortable with the sounds that I've got. It's nice having chorus pedals that don't go wrong, too... I've got about seven pairs of the old Moog pedals and they're just not reliable."

How about on the bass side of the backline?

"Since the last tour with the Mechanics I went onto Ampeg SVT bass amps with two 410s because, once again, you can hear them. I used to use Trace Elliott, which was very nice, but the Ampeg, when you fiddle with the EQ on the bass, it's still the same sound – you can't change it much, which I like. It's got its quality of sound and you can add stuff but you can't go off the radar."

How do you see the future panning out for Genesis as a touring band from here?

"Well, I would imagine we'll do the leg in America and then just take stock and see how we're doing, see if we're having a good time – that's the way to do it. I'm sure our manager's got dates held for next year, which you have to do, but I think we should just get going. People say to me at the moment, 'Are you excited about it?' And I'm just like, 'That's the wrong word – I just want to get it going.' It's been a long time coming, you know? I just want to get a couple of shows under my belt and make a start... I mean, it's a bit weird – there's a 'Covid officer' and we carry a doctor, you know? All the procedures. It's probably one of the first big arena shows since lockdown, I think. So let's just hope it all goes okay." 

Keep on smiling: the final UK tour dates have been rescheduled to March 2022



A new collection of Genesis's best-loved songs, including their biggest hits and legendary album cuts, entitled *The Last Domino?*, is out now, available as a double-CD and a four-LP set www.genesis-music.com



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Brave New World

With a decade of guitar making behind it, .strandberg's new NX level Boden is both modernistic and superbly detailed. Oh, and it's headless, too

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis



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What You Need To Know

- 1 C'mon, it's not the April issue...**
Haha... Headless guitars aren't new (even Les Paul had one, we believe), but they are associated with their heyday in the 80s thanks to Ned Steinberger. And for many of us classicists, they just look wrong.
- 2 So, why the review?**
To let you know that – divisive looks aside – this is one of the most inspiring electric guitars we've ever played. As you'll read, it has a very unusual neck shape with a very flat fingerboard radius, but ergonomically it's superb with a super-light weight.
- 3 Fanned frets, though. Why?**
Again, this is far from new, even old-school luthiers such as George Lowden are a fan (pardon the pun). Compared to some seven- or eight-string guitars, the multi-scale difference is slight here: 635mm (25 inches) on the top E moving to 648mm (25.5 inches) on the low E. In theory, the basses are slightly more 'piano-like', the trebles slightly softer. Our advice is don't knock it till you've tried it – a bit like the overall guitar.

1. The hardware on the Boden is superb. This string lock at the tip of the neck is very easy to use when restringing. Note the string guide and larger-gauge zero fret

While the mainstream guitar industry seems more than content to continue recreating the past, the majority of forward-thinking and genuinely new designs come from what we used to call the underground. Except, of course, thanks to social media, the underground is worldwide and very visible. Radical, niche guitar designs are just a tap or mouse-click away. Ola Strandberg's designs might certainly appear out-there, but the new NX level guitars are made in Indonesia by Cor-Tek (one of the largest guitar factories in the world), a reflection of their increasing popularity.

Our first impression of the Boden NX 6 Original is just how well the package is put together. The combination of the headless design and foreshortened body creates

what many of us might consider a 'travel' guitar – it's 800mm (31.5 inches) in length from tip to tip, a good 180mm (seven inches) shorter than a Stratocaster. It's feather light, too, at just 2.07kg (4.56lb) – but grabbing the neck with your left hand moves it further away from any electric guitar you might ever have played. But we'll get to that in a short while...

Still, you'll find some classic references in the materials used. The diminutive body is – on this first production run – made from sassafras, which is actually chambered, presumably not for weight consideration, and topped with a flame maple veneer over a solid maple cap, similar to what PRS uses on its SE guitars, for example, and this shares a similar-style natural edge 'binding'. There's also a forearm curve over





2. Your eyes aren't playing tricks: like all .strandberg guitars, the Boden is multi-scale (635mm to 648mm) and as a result the frets are fanned

3. These new Rev7 bridge pieces are machined from aircraft-grade aluminium. This is one of the most stable guitars we've ever experienced

THE RIVALS

Steinberger, now owned by Gibson, offers wooden versions of Ned's original headless/body-less design such as the Spirit by Steinberger GT-Pro Deluxe (street price of around £350). But it's the influence of Ola Strandberg's designs, not Ned Steinberger's, that clearly inform the new headless Ibanez Q (from £849), which comes with standard or fanned frets and in various pickup/wood combinations. As Ibanez admits, due to "the prominence of more technical playing styles, and players' desire for lighter, more portable instruments, today's headless guitars are pushing far beyond designs of the past".

Classy copyist Harley Benton is on the headless bandwagon with its Dullahan series that features a more regular Strat-type body. The FT 24 has a standard Fender scale, stainless-steel frets, roasted maple neck and Roswell pickups for a lowly £338.

that lower bass-side bout next to the bridge and a ribcage cutaway on the back. The finish is a smooth satin to the top, while the sassafras has a very light finish that feels rather textured over the quite ash-like grain (apparently the next production run will actually use swamp ash).

The neck is laminated from three pieces of quarter-sawn maple with two very thin graphite stripes, and is topped with a lightly bird's eyed maple fingerboard. As you can see, it's a multi-scale guitar: the scale length of the low E string is Fender-like at 648mm (25.5 inches), the top E is 635mm (25 inches), like a PRS, which accounts for the angled or 'fanned' Jescar stainless-steel frets. Both side and face dots are the same-size, black-outlined, glow-in-the-dark Luminlay dots by the look of them.

Obviously, a headless design needs its tuners on the body and the design here is very elegant with a precise-feeling tuner

Everything is telling you this is progressive, different, but it begins to feel incredibly natural very quickly

knob at the end of each individual-string aircraft-grade aluminium tube. The actual saddle is a threaded hex nut with a V'd saddle slot that can be screwed up or down to set precise string height, while the whole tube moves and can be locked in place to set accurate intonation. At the nut, well, we have a zero fret that sits in front of a black string guide then a simple thread-through-and-lock assembly. Oh, and in case you don't have the correct Allen keys or spanners, .strandberg supplies a very neat NX adjustment tool.

Feel & Sounds

In the many years this writer has commented on electric guitars, it's fair to say we've never encountered a neck quite like this patented EndurNeck. In terms of width – 41.7mm at the nut, a shade under 52mm at the 12th fret – it's pretty normal. The depth, however, doesn't taper, measuring pretty much the same 22.6mm at both the 1st and 12th frets. But it's the shaping, the profile, that is totally unique in our experience. Imagine a heavily V'd neck whose point is shaved off at the back to create a flat area around 15mm in width. To make it more complex, that central flat back area moves from being slightly to the treble side under the low frets to the bass side by

UNDER THE HOOD Modern in style, but what's inside?

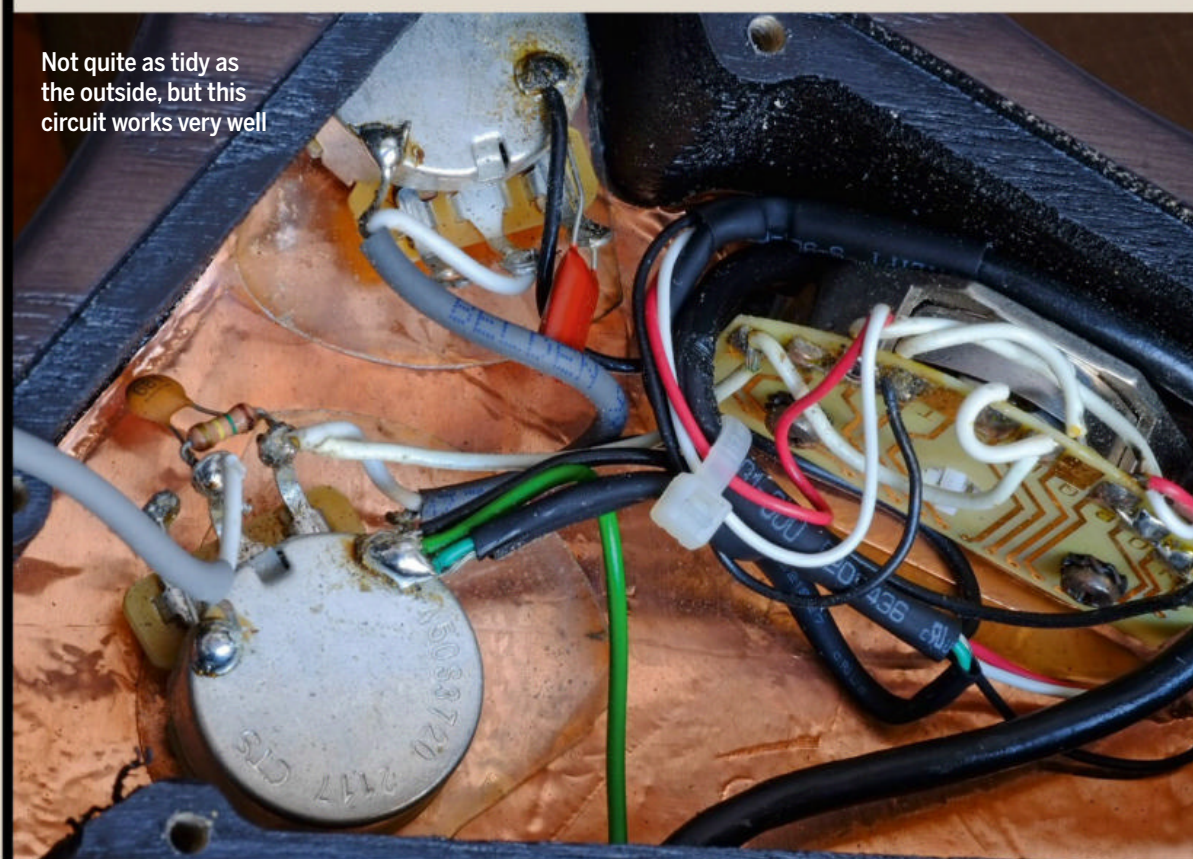
Removing the 3mm thick aluminium backplate, which also holds the output jack, you might expect to see a modernist circuit board. But no, things here are pretty conventional. The cavity itself has copper foil lining and we basically have two 500k CTS pots and a Schaller Megaswitch

(M) five-way lever pickup selector. The tone capacitor is a standard Mylar .022 microfarads (2A223), while the treble bleed circuit uses a 680 picofarads (681) capacitor in parallel with a 150kohms resistor.

Suhr's pickups are well renowned and both here – Suhr SSH+ at the bridge and SSV in the

neck position – are SS (as in 'single screw') open-coiled humbuckers. The SSH+ has a measured DCR of 16kohms and is described by Suhr as "a true high-output humbucker. The pickup exhibits excellent harmonic content, lots of midrange and a focused low-end. Well suited for classic rock or metal."

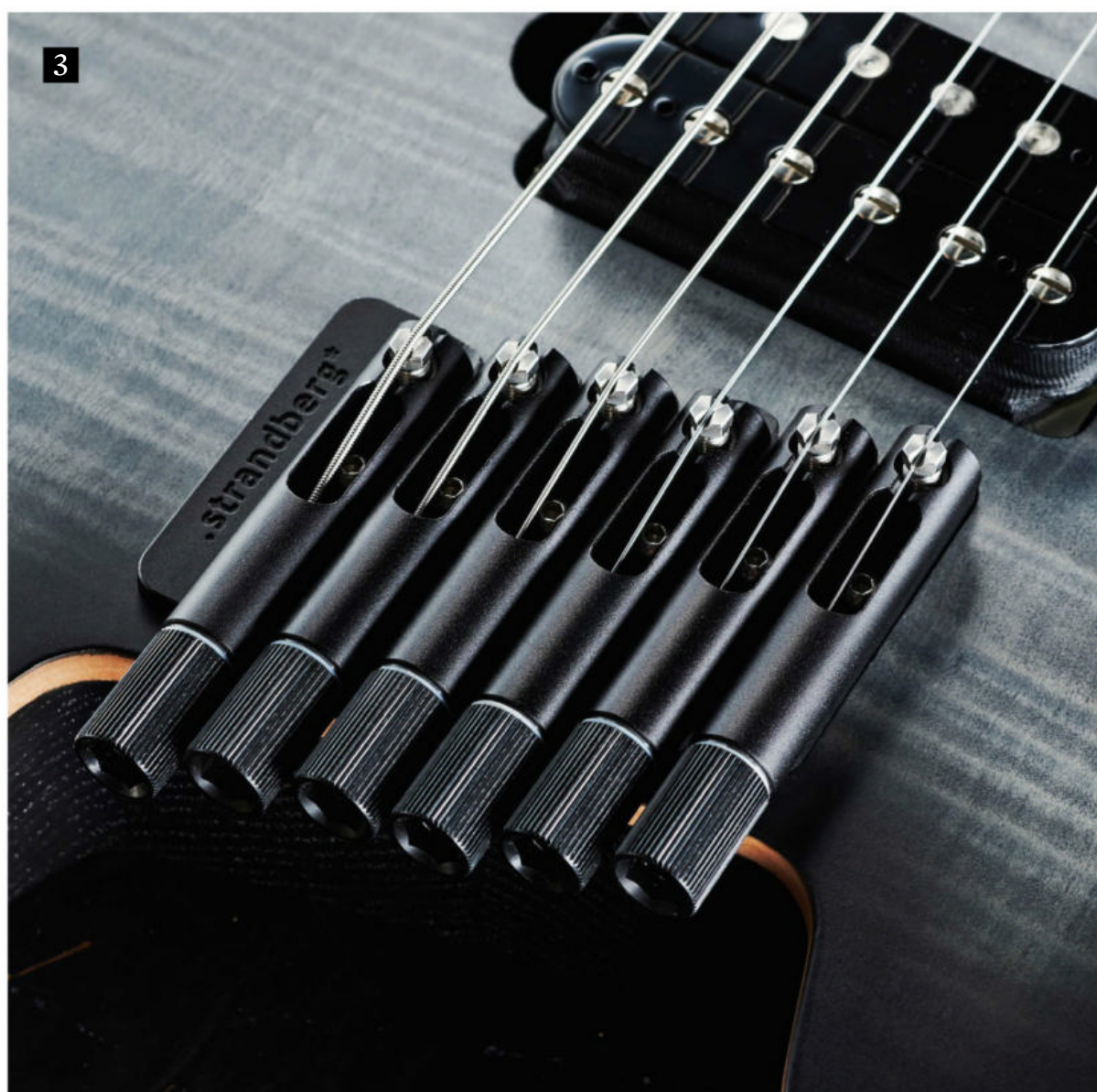
Not quite as tidy as the outside, but this circuit works very well



The bridge pickup is girthsome and powerful, while the neck unit is a little more rootsy sounding

The SSV neck pickup has a measured DCR of 7.33k, offering "a broad sonic aperture with very little compression", says Suhr, "making for a dynamic, vintage output humbucker, a versatile pickup that combines the warmth of a vintage humbucker with increased clarity and definition". Although it's direct-mounted, there is some height-adjustment capability.

Position 2 on the five-way selector links the inside slug coils of each humbucker in parallel. Position 3 voices the outside screw coils in parallel, while position 4 voices just the screw coil of the neck humbucker.



the 12th fret. This offset, if you like, means the bass side of the V increases in area as you move up the neck and it's the area (with the guitar strapped on quite high) where your left-hand thumb sits. As we say, the back and sides are flat planes and only lightly curved where they meet. If you play with your thumb around the neck – as many of us do – this will feel very strange indeed. But with a more studied left-hand position it begins to make sense.

Indeed, strap it high and that strange feel becomes less odd the more you play. Your left hand certainly doesn't feel strained; you don't have to pull up the neck because of any imbalance as with an SG, for example. Its light weight means it just hangs in a perfect playing position.

The setup is low (pretty much 1mm on the treble side, 1.2mm on the bass) with barely a fraction of relief, while the fret height, which measures 1.3mm, ensures that bends, hammer-ons and pull-offs are stupidly easy. That said, if you've ever played a headless guitar, you'll know it does take a little adjustment – you can easily fret higher, for example, as your eye just isn't used to the 1st fret being so close to the tip of the guitar, which is usually the headstock. The fretwork is superb, the frets feel super smooth, and whatever

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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4

4. It might be a feature-packed design but the controls are simple: a very smooth-tapered master volume, with treble-bleed circuit, and tone. The Schaller five-way Megaswitch selects either humbucker or a selection of single-coil voices
5. Best described as having a trapezoid profile, the patented EndurNeck is designed by Ola Strandberg. He says: "It results in less stress on muscles, joints and tendons, which lets you play more relaxed, with less fatigue, which results in less risk of injury and better playing"
6. Although the seven- and eight-string versions of this guitar feature Fishman's active Fluence pickups, our six-string here uses passive Suhr humbuckers: the pokey SSH+ at the bridge and the more vintage-voiced SSV at the neck

subtleties the fan fretting brings to the table, after just a little playing you forget they're even there. Everything is telling you this is modern, progressive and different, but it actually begins to feel incredibly natural very quickly.

But what does it sound like? Well, it's quite vibrant and lively but with less acoustic volume compared with our PJD Carey Standard – not dissimilar in construction with a lightweight chambered ash body and bolt-on roasted maple neck – which now actually feels quite huge in comparison to the Boden. There's less apparent low-end but quite a similar crisp treble response.

Plugged in, these differences continue. The Boden is very well voiced. The bridge pickup is girthsome and powerful and quite JB-like, while the neck unit is a little more rootsy sounding, or 'vintage' if you like, lower in output with a good clarity. In between those selections are the single-coil sounds, which provide considerable contrast: a rather good neck tone that really cleans up the full humbucker, and two parallel mixes that don't disappoint, sitting more in the Strat-like position 2 (bridge and neck), the outside screw coils a tad crisper than the inside slug coils.



5



The neck shape takes adjustment, but we were so absorbed by what we heard we almost forgot about it

So, while it could be argued that the sounds are the most conventional part of the guitar, they're well done. The control knobs are very neat and the controls are very smooth in taper. The volume has one of the best treble bleeds we've come across. It really gives a very similar sound as you roll it down and there's just the right amount of tone roll-off to pull back the highs, particularly on those single-coil positions. While you can heap on the gain and live on the bridge pickup, play the single coils clean with some old- or new-style reverbs and they sound new-age, ethereal. With drier cleans we move from Hendrix-y rhythm texture to super-tight funk. The sound seems almost post-EQ'd with the low-end cleaned up and a touch of compression.

Finally, we head off to band rehearsal and prepare ourselves for some jovial comments

from our band members. Swapping from Les Paul to Boden is quite a leap – *everything* feels different – but it's the sound we hear that speaks for itself. It's a fantastic voice that's slightly cleaner in the low-end but not thin, there's bags of power on tap and a beautiful juicy resonance that edges into musical feedback when we lean into our cranked amp. We weren't expecting that. Everyone in the room is seriously impressed.

Verdict

The style and neck shape here will polarise opinion, to put it mildly. But as a musical instrument, this Boden is absolutely superb. It is one of the most stable guitars we've ever encountered – we barely touched the tuners during our three-day test window. It has a vibrant resonant voice that sounds huge if you want it to. There's also a real acoustic-like resonance here that creates a lively, responsive playing platform and suits a huge range of styles. While the neck shape will take adjustment, we were so absorbed by what we heard that we almost forgot about it. Playability is superb and the balance and weight soon have us wondering why we still lug our big ol' heavy solidbodies about. The revolution is here. **G**



.STRANDBERG BODEN ORIGINAL NX 6

PRICE: £1,664 (inc Venture gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Double-cutaway chambered-body headless electric

BODY: 2-piece, centre-joined chambered sassafras with flame (or quilted) maple veneered maple top

NECK: Maple with 5-ply carbon fibre reinforcement, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 635-648mm (25-25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: EGS Rev7 string lock/41.7mm

FINGERBOARD: Bird's eye maple, Luminlay face and side dot markers, 508mm (20") radius

FRETS: 24, medium jumbo stainless steel (Jescar)

HARDWARE: EGS Rev7 fixed bridge/tuning system

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Suhr SSH+ (bridge) and SSV (neck) direct-mount open-coiled humbuckers, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.07/4.56

OPTIONS: Available in 7- and 8-string versions, with Fishman Fluence Modern pickups, at £1,728 and £1,800

RANGE OPTIONS: The Boden NX is also available in Fusion, Prog, Metal and Classic families – see website for details

LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently

FINISHES: Charcoal black (as reviewed), Autumn Red – satin body colours with natural satin neck finish



9/10

PROS Beautifully detailed ergonomic design and crisp build; light weight; balance; superb fretwork and setup; immensely versatile yet simple drive

CONS Obviously, not everyone will enjoy the headless style or the unusual neck shape

Headless Norseman

The guitars built by .strandberg may look unconventional but they are designed to be more ergonomic and playable than guitars of the past, says founder Ola Strandberg

Words Jamie Dickson

For many people, Sweden is the home of thoughtful, elegant design. From vintage Saab cars to furniture from flatpack-icon IKEA, the signature style of Swedish manufacturing is a purposeful minimalism where sleek looks combine with high-level functionality. And so it proves with .strandberg guitars, too. Based in the city of Uppsala, near Stockholm, the company is the brainchild of Ola Strandberg, who was kind enough to join us for a chat about the guitars he's been building and refining since the early 80s.

Why did you adopt a non-traditional, headless design for .strandberg guitars?

"It started as a hobby. I built guitars in my teens and had not looked at a guitar for almost 15 years. I was kind of shocked after those 15 years when I decided to make myself another guitar, and went to my favourite music store and, looking around, nothing had happened. That was kind of a shock... the Tube Screamer was still the favourite overdrive pedal, which I had used years before.

"It seems weird for a few minutes but then quickly becomes second nature..."

"So I guess that was like the first seed of, 'let's make something different', but then I kind of slipped into it because I was attracted to the headless concept. I had owned a Hohner Steinberger copy back in the day, which I had butchered. I built a new body and neck for it, but I reused the original hardware. I was attracted to that concept, so when I started planning my own guitar I wanted to make it headless and I just realised that there was no headless hardware to buy anywhere.

"Then I stumbled on this community called Building the Ergonomic Guitar, which was an online community of a few guitar builders. They were trying to do something different and solve a problem, not just build a guitar. I was attracted to



The new NX Concept series is made up of a number of models, including this Boden Metal NX 6, designed to "deliver an organic and woody yet pulverizing high-gain tone for today's most demanding metal genres", says .strandberg

that as well, so that kind of became the project: not just build a guitar for myself but to solve this problem of guitar ergonomics and in such a way that I would want to be a customer [for what I was building].

"I also had a long background in the software industry and product development and management overall. So that made me think up this product concept, which I named the Ergonomic Guitar System, which featured [tiered] levels of ergonomics. First, I would make hardware that would allow you to convert your existing hardware to make it lighter and more ergonomic. The second level of the Ergonomic Guitar System was a replacement neck that you could fit to replace the neck of your existing guitar. Then level three of the Ergonomic Guitar System was the entire guitar – the guitar body shape that I had come up with.

"I don't think the decision was necessarily to make something untraditional. The decision was more one of 'approach this as an industrial design project and

come up with a compelling offering for ergonomics'. It started there."

Tell us about the neck profile. It's a really remarkable shape...

"Yes, the original idea was inspired by a bass builder called Jerome Little, who designed what he called the Torzal Twist neck, where the neck is actually twisted, so as you extend your arm you can straighten your wrist. That seemed to make a lot of sense, but at the same time it's a very complicated construction – it's very hard to manufacture. Lace Music Products, who make the Lace Sensor Pickups, actually had a commercially available guitar with this twisted neck. I had the opportunity to visit them in California and talk to them. They showed me this neck and it was obvious it worked in terms of ergonomics. At the same time, you'd have to adapt your playing technique because you can't bend upwards. If you bend upwards you'll choke the strings, so you can only bend downwards. That would be a huge limitation. The other limitation is if you need

The Boden Fusion NX 6, here in Amber Yellow, has a chambered alder body, solid maple top and maple neck, with a trio of Suhr pickups. A versatile and genre-straddling instrument



Ola Strandberg first devised his Ergonomic Guitar System back in 2007, having worked on his lutherie skills since the early 80s

of it as, ‘What a chunky neck.’ It kind of tricks your brain into experiencing it as a thin neck. That contributes a better tone because there’s more mass in the neck, but it also has these ergonomic benefits. I think generally, if people want a comfortable neck on a fast-playing guitar, they think of a super-thin Ibanez Wizard-type neck. So a lot of people who are looking for good ergonomics will contact us and say, ‘How thick is the neck? I like thin necks.’ We then say we prefer not to talk about dimensions because that dimension won’t mean anything to you – we say instead, ‘Just try it and see if you like it.’ Generally, people find that it works really well. That’s regardless of playing style – even people who wrap their thumb around the top of the neck, they still find that it works really well.”

How do you feel when you see professional musicians making the switch to your guitars?

“That is the ultimate reward, I think. To see the instruments in use, hear music that’s created by them, hear the stories of people who become more inspired by a .strandberg guitar and they look at it and want to pick it up and they start playing more, whether they had ergonomic problems or not.

“Right now we know that most .strandberg customers didn’t buy a .strandberg guitar because of ergonomics. They got it because they felt it was a better-performing instrument. I also think we’re going to more of a digital environment [as guitarists] and being like a desktop musician using a lot of headphones and near-field monitors. In that environment, you hear the difference in a .strandberg guitar much more than you would have a bunch of years ago when you went to some rehearsal space and you had a stack of amplifiers behind you. So I think the environment where you create music has gone hand in hand with this. I mean, now, just the resolution of the audio chain highlights the defects of 1950s technology. So I think it raises the bar of what an instrument needs to do, and we’ve been able to meet that better than a traditional design.” 

<https://strandbergguitars.com>

to service your guitar and bring it to a guitar tech, I’m pretty sure 100 per cent of guitar techs would just say, ‘No, I’m not going to touch that...’

“So I wanted to accomplish the same function but with more standard production techniques, something that would be more user-friendly and wouldn’t require you to change your playing style. That was the first objective. The second was very early on I did some collaborative work with Rick Toone, who is an American guitar builder. He had come up with this trapezoidal neck shape, with three flat surfaces on the rear. I noticed that kind of neck shape was just more comfortable to play; there was less fatigue in the hand when playing.

“Later, I combined those two concepts with the angular surfaces – but I would just twist the surfaces, so I twisted the rear of the neck but not the front of the neck. I discovered that worked just as well as the original Torzal Twist innovation because the angles in both surfaces would encourage you to play with a straighter wrist angle.

Combining that with the three distinct surfaces [on the rear of the neck], rather than the semicircle, gave those benefits as well, so it both relaxes muscles and tendons in your fretting hand and forearm but also encourages this straighter wrist angle.”

How do players take to it, in your experience? It’s quite different from a traditional neck shape.

“In general, what I find from people who try our neck design is that it seems weird for a few minutes but then quickly becomes second nature and doesn’t feel strange any more. I guess there’s also a third aspect of it, which is the cross section of the neck, so what you would refer to as thickness, is actually thicker than a lot of necks. That also comes from ergonomics: if you want to grip a very thin object you have to press hard and it creates fatigue in the hand. If you grip something that’s thicker, it’s easier to grip.

“With the way the three surfaces interact and the angles, you don’t necessarily think

Acoustic Renaissance

For years AER's Compact 60 amp has ruled as the acoustic player's indispensable live companion. But now there is a challenger to the throne, and a very worthy one at that...

Words David Mead Photography Olly Curtis



UDO ROESNER AMPS

DA CAPO 75 ACOUSTIC AMP £949

CONTACT **Barnes & Mullins** PHONE **01691 652449** WEB **www.bandm.co.uk**

1 **Hmm, this looks rather familiar...**

Funny you should mention it. Udo Roesner, the designer of the Da Capo, also designed the AER Compact 60, and he's taken his former brainchild as pretty much the aesthetic starting point for his latest creation.

2 **What has been upgraded, exactly?**

As far as we can see, Udo has gone back to the drawing board and rethought the whole thing from the ground up. So everything you liked about the Compact 60 is here but in a souped-up or enhanced form.

3 **What about new features?**

What immediately stands out to us is the new dual-cone speaker and the rejigged built-in effects section. Everything seems warmer and more hi-fi to our ears, and the high-pass filter on Channel 2 offers a lot of extra control over either big-bodied acoustics or mics.

1. Channel 2 features a high-pass filter (hpf) to offer extra control over bass frequencies

2. A push-button selector on both channels toggles between line and microphone level inputs

When a player of Tommy Emmanuel's calibre champions a brand-new amplifier stating it's the best amp he's ever played through – despite having his own signature model with a different manufacturer – there's an understandable tremor of curiosity among acoustic performers everywhere. Tommy forsaking AER? That's big news in some quarters. But let's dip below the surface for a moment and examine the evidence. Both the Compact 60 and this new Da Capo amplifier were designed by Udo Roesner who has now stepped away from AER and started his own company called Udo Roesner Amps. As you will see in our interview with him that follows this review, Udo has gone back to the drawing board and pretty much re-examined everything that made the Compact 60 such a stalwart in the first place.

In musical terms, Da Capo means "repeat from the beginning" and so now perhaps we can get a clearer idea of the initiative behind the new amp. Yes, cosmetically at least it owes a lot to AER's flagship, but just about everything else has been reviewed, revised and revitalised. So is it, as the handbook describes, a "giant in a shoebox, powerful, crisp, clear, assertive and yet so warm, mellow and beautifully balanced"? Let's fire it up, take it out for a spin and find out.

The Da Capo features an analogue preamp and A/B Class analogue power amplifier, delivering 75 watts into a specially designed eight-inch dual-cone speaker. Udo tells us that it has a larger transformer in order to deliver more power and enhance the unit's low-end response. Everything is tucked away inside a remarkably small plywood box with a large, workmanlike handle on top and a gigbag that makes portability a breeze. It's a tad heavier than a Compact 60, Udo informing us that this is down to

Virtually everything a gigging acoustic player needs in one compact unit

the transformer size, but a side-by-side comparison reveals there actually isn't much in it at all. You could easily set off to a gig with a guitar case in one hand and the Da Capo over your shoulder and not worry too much about straining anything, put it that way.

The amp's two channels both feature jack and XLR mic inputs with mic/line push buttons to select between either. It also has 48-volt phantom power for both XLR inputs, meaning you can use a mic for either





3

3. The amp's output section features a separate XLR for each channel plus line outputs to connect to a mixer or a soundcard

4. A tough metal grille protects the amp's custom eight-inch dual-cone speaker

vocals or sound reinforcement for your guitar, and choose which channel's preamp controls suit your setup the best.

Channel 1 features controls for Gain, Tone – essentially a treble boost – push-button, Bass, Middle and Treble. On Channel 2 the controls are the same, except that now you have a high-pass filter replacing the treble boost option. This control has the effect of letting higher frequencies through into the sound picture while rolling off the bass. It's a useful control if you happen to have a large-bodied acoustic that's prone to low-end feedback or if you have a microphone and want to subdue unwanted bass resonance.

There are six built-in digital effects on a rotary control in the 'efx' section, along with Pan and Level rotaries. The effects give you: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay – all being controlled by a TRS footswitch, which isn't provided, but we're

A larger transformer delivers more power and enhances the low-end response



4



5

assured that any standard double unit will do the job of both switching effects on and off and tapping in the delay rate. The Pan control delivers the chosen effect across the amp's two channels: if you only require reverb, say, on Channel 1 then leave the control panned to the left; if you want it on Channel 2, pan to the right; and any position in between offers incremental dispersion between the two. Finishing off the preamp control array at the far end, you'll find the Master Volume.

Udo highlights that the preamp controls are interactive: "The Da Capo is not simply a box with a speaker, it is a pretty complex arrangement of signal processing stages that all interact and need to be at peace with each other for best performance..." It's also important to note that some of the factory-set parameters can be reset via jumpers on the main circuit board inside the amp. You can, for instance, change the footswitch so that it acts as an on/off for the effects loop, but all jumpers – and there are 11 – should only be adjusted by someone who knows what they're doing. In other words, there are no user-serviceable parts inside.

Meanwhile, on the back of the amp we find outputs for headphones, footswitch,

send and return for the parallel effects loop, two line outs (1 for home recording via a soundcard, and 2 for connection to a mixing desk). There are also XLR balanced outputs for each channel independently and a mini-jack aux-in for inputting backing tracks.

It sounds to us like Udo's 30-year experience with amp design has culminated in a very well-thought-out package that incorporates virtually everything a gigging acoustic player needs in one compact unit. But what's it like in practice? It's time to hook it up to a guitar and find out.

Feel & Sounds

Our test guitar is a Fylde Goodfellow, fitted with a Headway FEQ under-saddle pickup, which has seen action in various live acoustic settings, inputted electronically either via PA or through our Compact 60. One thing that is immediately apparent is the warmth the Da Capo brings to the sound. Just a few moments fiddling with the preamp controls on Channel 1 and setting the reverb to Long Reverb, and the sound literally takes us aback with its musicality. It's a sound that makes you want to stay and play for longer, and that's never a bad thing.

5. Designer Udo Roesner points out that all the preamp controls on the Da Capo are interactive and will need to be "at peace with each other for best performance"

THE RIVALS

Obviously the AER Compact 60 is the main contender if you're looking for a versatile, trustworthy and robust acoustic amp. Expect to pay around £849 for the Mk IV and £899 for Tommy Emmanuel's signature model, which includes some features tuned to TE's specification, including the reverb settings.

Other makes would include Fender's Acoustic 100 at £359, Marshall's AS50D for £269, and Fishman's Loudbox range, including the Loudbox Mini at £289 and the Loudbox Artist Bluetooth for £521.

If you need something you can carry to a gig on the bus or tube, we're hearing very good things about Schertler's range of acoustic amps. Check out the Schertler David at £1,044, for instance.



The six built-in digital effects in the 'efx' section include: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay

We found that what Udo told us about the controls being more interactive is absolutely spot on, too. When compared with the Compact 60, it takes longer to set a sound up, but the time spent is worth it. We don't usually have to turn the bass down for the Goodfellow, but here we dropped it a fair bit, as well as reducing the mids a little, too. There's a very rich bass to be had here, probably thanks to the custom-built speaker and ported cab. Engaging the Tone button brings sparkle to the top-end, which is handy for chordal accompaniment when you want some shimmer to find its way through a mix.

Swapping to Channel 2, we play with the high-pass filter, which offers more control over reducing the bass. Getting the balance right between the HPF, Bass and Mid controls takes a little bit of concentrated effort, but, once again, the results are worthwhile. The main thing we felt here was that we were more in control of the

When compared with the Compact 60, it takes longer to set a sound up, but the time spent is worth it

Goodfellow's sound and found ourselves making plans to try using the amp on the next available gig. After all, with this amount of control it's logical to assume that all one has to do is offer the soundman an XLR output or two and the job's all done.

There is so much here that we've already decided the Da Capo is headed for our Longtermers section. And we can't wait to start experimenting with other guitars and maybe even a mic added to the guitar for an extra level of control.

Verdict

If you found yourself playing a game of 'fantasy acoustic gig gear' and decided to use an amp rather than DI, you'd probably opt for one that was not only portable but comes with a great sound and mixing-desk levels of EQ quality, too. Throw in an effects loop – switchable if you get an electronics boffin to flip the jumper inside – and mic or line level inputs, phantom power to allow the use of studio-quality condenser mics, and XLR outputs on both channels to make the sound guy's job an easier one. Add to this a very usable onboard digital reverb and you're practically all set for an evening of acoustic bliss; do a thorough soundcheck then sit back and have some fun. The Da Capo covers all these factors – and more. We think we've found a new best friend. **G**



UDO ROESNER AMPS DA CAPO 75 ACOUSTIC AMP

PRICE: £949 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Analogue preamp and A/B Class analogue power amplifier

OUTPUT: 75W

DIMENSIONS: 265 (h) x 325 (w) x 245mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7.5/16.5

CABINET: Plywood

LOUDSPEAKER: Custom 8" twin cone, full range

CHANNELS: 2 mic/line on each

CONTROLS: Channel 1: mic/line switch, gain, tone switch (treble boost), bass, middle, treble. Channel 2: mic/line switch, gain, high pass filter, bass, middle, treble. Both channels: effects pan, FX level, master volume

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

Built-in effects: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay. Headphone output, 2x line out (1: lower level for soundcards, etc; 2: mixing consoles), 2x DI out (balanced XLR for both channels), footswitch (not provided), aux in

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: None as yet



10/10

PROS A familiar face with a totally new personality – everything you need in one compact unit

CONS Preamp controls may be fiddly for some, but the results are worth the effort

Thorpy^{FX}

Phaser
Trem
Vibrato



www.thorpyfx.com

Design For Life

We talk to the Da Capo's creator, Udo Roesner, about the thinking behind his new amplifier and how some of its upgraded features came about

Words David Mead

It's always interesting to talk to the designer of a piece of new gear. Often, their perspective is very different to the musician in whose hands the gear will end up. As a general rule, guitarists have little or no idea about what goes on under the hood of an effects pedal or amplifier. Their assessment is merely based upon whether it sounds good or not. As you can tell from the review on the preceding pages, we were really quite enamoured with the Da Capo 75 and were eager to hear about its origins. After all, this was the man who brought us the Compact 60, an amp that has become pretty much standard issue among acoustic players. So we were very curious about what Udo found on his journey back to the drawing board.

"It has the ability to reproduce fine timbres, but it's not analytical or cold"



Udo Roesner co-founded his former company AER in the 1990s and subsequently designed the Compact 60, an industry stalwart for acoustic players

The Da Capo sounds more 'hi-fi' with a lot of added warmth to the sound – would that be an accurate appraisal?

"I know what you're trying to say, but I never would use the term 'hi-fi'. To me, 'hi-fi' is something that reaches the ear more than it reaches the body, and I would say the Da Capo has quite a potential to hit the body, so I would rather call it 'pro audio' than 'hi-fi' in this respect. But you are absolutely right; the Da Capo has a certain amount of delicacy and softness and warmth in contrast to the Compact 60. Believe me, I've dealt with the Compact 60 for so many years that I know it inside out, and I know there's a couple of things that can be annoying, especially if you consider medium-class guitars or limited skills or whatever. It can turn into something harsh pretty quickly, and one of the key goals for me was to try to find a way to get this solved."

The high-pass filter is one of the key new features on Channel 2 of the amp.

"It's always a question of how complex you want to design something to be because,

at the end of the day, features are very important in the sense of being able to combine things to make them flexible. I decided to implement a high-pass filter, as well as the three-way equalisation, because there are so many different guitars and some, let's say a bigger-bodied one, may take advantage of having the extra control with the high-pass filter – bringing the low-end grumble under control. It's pretty flexible even though the two channels are not identical; they sound different."

So you could use a microphone in front of the guitar in Channel 2 and tame it with the high-pass filter while blending it in with the under-saddle pickup in Channel 1?

"Yes. If you think about the fact that there are some jazz players who use a microphone [on the guitar] as well in order to capture a little bit of the acoustic sound, it has a lot of flexibility. You can really bring the microphone to the point of best performance without losing volume or a round, full sound."

Another part of the upgraded design is the dual-cone speaker.

"Well, it's modified for sure, but I'm not a speaker maker. As you may understand, the speaker is one of the most crucial elements in the whole setup. It has a bigger tolerance than other elements in the electronics. To get a speaker to do what it's supposed to do there's always a bit of nagging the speaker maker to have another attempt, send another sample. Then you're back into measurement, comparison and evaluation with playing and listening.

"Another part is gain structure and how we set up the EQs, they are modified as well, and the cabinet has been modified quite significantly. The cabinet is a pretty familiar shape, but the speaker inside has quite a lot more volume to work in.

"Most people don't understand in this preset world that we're living in, the audio range is actually very, very small and the tools that we have are pretty raw and our hearing is extremely sensitive. So sometimes things that are not audible, not visual and definitely not measurable



"It's always been my wish to move forward with a sound that gives you the opportunity to get lost in it"

Udo Roesner

Acoustic master Tommy Emmanuel has said the Da Capo is the best amp he's ever played through – that's some recommendation!

make quite a big difference. You get a result, but what the result actually means is still very doubtful and you're always back to listening again, trying to figure out what is potentially a point you can grab and modify to get to a slightly different state. If it's too much – if you overdo it – you'll easily end up with a catastrophe. It's a walk on the edge, pretty much."

How many of the modifications were based on customer feedback and how many on things you have wanted to do for a while?

"That's a good question – and it's a fair mix, I have to say. I mean, I have been following my own product for decades now. The AER was my baby and so I'm pretty familiar with everything in there, and I've done lots of customer relations things and I've worked with distributors, stores and a lot of musicians. But it can also be quite difficult and I find that the quality of the instrument over the decades has changed. It has acquired more cosmetic things and features rather than tone. I find

many instruments where I'm actually quite disappointed in the way they sound. A lot of players use effects to make their sound more spectacular, but if you go back to just the guitar, the pickup and the amp then the quality of the guitar is extremely important.

"In the earlier days instruments were less bright, they were more mid-y, more round, and that frequency range is more difficult to project. So being more present and supporting more frequency ranges that really drive the signal path, that was the objective at that time. The Da Capo has the ability to reproduce all the fine timbres that you put into it, but it's not analytical or cold. It has always been my wish to move forward with a sound that is lively and direct and instantly gives you the opportunity to get lost in it – be washed away on the wave of sound that you're generating."

You also seem to have focused on enhanced connectivity, with two separate balanced XLR outputs.

"I think it's a wonderful feature because you really have clear channel separation.

You can do whatever you want with the channels, there are no rules. But the man at the mixing desk knows his job; he wants the purest signal that he can get and if this is so then he's happy and everyone is happy. If you want combined signals with the effects and everything, you have the line outs because we're not talking sensitive microphones signals. We don't need balanced signal processing for that kind of signal transport. If you want a signal combined with the effects then use the line out. We've kept the DIs as pure as possible and also, as there are two, not only is the separation important, they are not connected in such a way that an unused channel adds noise to the DI out."

You sound very happy with the Da Capo.

"Oh yeah. I'm used to people saying, 'It could have had this or that...' There's always somebody who needs a different setup. But we're working on something interesting that we will be showing people at the [2022] NAMM Show." 

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STRYMON

Zelzah

Purple phase, all around: Strymon puts two vintage phasers in one pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

Looking at Strymon's previous output, there must have been plenty of guitar players wondering when the company would produce a dedicated phaser pedal. And here it is in the very purple form of the Zelzah Multidimensional Phaser. Not just a single phaser pedal, the Zelzah offers two separately footswitchable true stereo phasers in one chassis: one a four-stage phaser, the other six-stage. These can be run individually or simultaneously with various stereo and mono output options. As with previous Strymon pedals, there is full MIDI implementation with access to 300 preset locations and the ability to add an expression pedal or footswitches.

SOUNDS

The left-hand side of the pedal is home to the four-stage phaser with three toggle-

switched options, the first of which is Classic Sweep. Here, you can dial in various aspects of phasing with careful placement of the three knobs. The Mix knob gradually mixes out the dry element of the signal, starting from a very mild phased sound and running through to the point where you get 100 per cent wet signal for vibrato sounds. Familiar 1970s phase pedal sounds are found at a 12 o'clock setting and you can adjust the Speed and Depth knobs to your taste.

Speed is wide ranging, going from 0.1Hz to 10Hz, which effectively means that at minimum the phase sweep will take 10 seconds to complete, while you'll get a warble at the other extreme, which is like a rotary speaker on fast. Meanwhile, if you're looking to emulate some particular classic pedals then the Depth knob can set the character. We found a setting that matched

our script logo MXR Phase 90 at about 10 o'clock and our Electro-Harmonix Small Stone at around one o'clock.

The second mode on the toggle switch is Barber Sweep, which has its own distinctive sonic signature where, instead of the traditional rising and falling, you can set a sweep that's either continually rising or continually falling, "similar to the visual effect of a barber pole", says Strymon. The third of the three modes is an Envelope Phaser setting that's available for a touch-sensitive envelope phasing effect. Here, you can control the effect with your playing dynamics to conjure up quacky autowah-like stylings.

The six-stage phaser also has Speed and Depth knobs on the right-hand side of the pedal, but its toggle switch brings in different degrees of resonance where signal is fed back to the input for

01. SWEEP SWITCH

When set to Env, you can control the phasing with playing dynamics: the Depth knob controls the sensitivity, while Speed sets the range

02. RESONANCE SWITCH

This offers three settings (Off, Mild or Strong) of regeneration that add colour and intensity to the sound

03. VOICE KNOB

This will take you beyond basic phasing (on the left) by bringing in a time element for flanging past 12 o'clock and chorus sounds further along

04. EXP/MIDI SOCKET

A multi-function communication jack. Add an expression pedal here or a footswitch for preset recall or tap tempo. It also takes a quarter-inch MIDI connection

05. USB SOCKET

This computer connection can be used for MIDI control or for performing firmware updates



Tech Spec

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Phaser pedal

FEATURES: 4- and 6-stage phasing, selectable true or buffered bypass, Class A JFET input circuit, 300 presets, MIDI control, support for instrument and line level signals, expression pedal input

CONTROLS: 2x Speed, 2x Depth, Mix, Voice, Sweep selector switch (Classic, Barber, Env), Resonance selector switch (Off, Mild, Strong), Input selector switch (Mono/Stereo), 4-Stage footswitch, 6-Stage footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input (TRS stereo), standard outputs (L & R), EXP/MIDI, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor, 300mA

DIMENSIONS: 102 (w) x 114 (d) x 44mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

increased sonic intensity, offering a more pronounced vowel-like 'wow' to the sweep – like engaging the Color switch on a Small Stone. In place of the Mix knob in this section you'll find a Voice knob that introduces and gradually increases a time element into the mix, letting you get beyond phasing into flanging and then chorus territory. The added resonance comes in really useful here, delivering a very prominent flange sweep.

Things get really interesting when you use both sides of the pedal together and the various sonic options combine for some complex modulation, be that two phasers, phaser and flanger, or phaser and chorus. By default, the effects are in series with the six-stage phaser feeding into the four-stage with your output in stereo or mono, but there are two other modes available for combinations. One is a split mode,

which sees the two sides as separate mono entities – the four-stage phaser going to the left output, the six-stage to the right. The other is a parallel mode with both phasers running side by side. This offers up a different vibe to series mode if you're running a mono signal chain, but it can really become animated and dimensional in stereo because each phaser has its own independent stereo spread. This means that you can pan one effect narrowly in the centre and have a wide spread for the other, for example.

With all the options available from the pedal's inherent flexibility, those 300 preset slots will definitely come in handy. But, really, you'll need to embrace the MIDI functionality to have full access, or use Strymon's single MiniSwitch for one favourite preset or the MultiSwitch Plus for access to three presets.

VERDICT

Not all players will want a dedicated phaser pedal, many relying on the sort of multi-effects pedal that will 'do' phasing alongside other modulation effects. However, as phaser pedals go, you won't go far wrong with the versatility that the Zelzah provides: two distinct phaser flavours and many ways to use them, as well as the flanging and chorus that you might have got in a multi-effects unit. This is one powerful modulation pedal that can both conjure up vintage sounds and provide a way to create new ones. **G**

PROS Two great-sounding phasers in one box; Voice knob goes beyond pure phasing; flexible output options; preset storage

CONS It would've been good to have access to at least one preset without having to plug in external equipment



ROUND-UP

Pigtronix pedals

A space-saving trio of cosmic tone-tweakers

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

New York-based Pigtronix has been around since 2004, but was acquired in 2020 by Bond Audio, giving access to design resources as well as international distribution. This seems to have resulted in an uptick in pedal releases, including this trio of space-themed offerings announced back in January.

Whether you call these pedals micro or mini, the space-saving format offers offset input and output jacks, and power from a

standard nine-volt DC supply rather than a battery. Substantially built, each pedal packs in plenty of control action (four knobs and up to three buttons/switches) into a small footprint without it feeling cluttered or fiddly. The Moon Pool tremolo/phaser and Constellator analogue delay are capable of the esoteric but can also deliver more conventional sounds, while the Space Rip synth pedal is most definitely ‘out-there’.



Moon Pool Tremelo Phaser £165

Marking back to the first Pigtronix pedal, the Envelope Phaser, the Moon Pool is an analogue phase shifter and tremolo that can manipulate the effect via your playing dynamics. A three-way toggle switch allows you to use the two effects individually or combined. Each effect has a Speed control, but Depth is set globally via a single knob, and each also has its own three-way switch to set how it responds to dynamics – either no response or an increase or decrease of speed with harder playing, another knob setting the overall sensitivity.

We preferred the bias tremolo’s rounded throbby pulse to the phaser’s more workmanlike nature, but their combined texture yields a range of ethereal modulations, some with rhythms that play off each other. Plus, the envelope action will give you an expressive layer to exploit for even more unusual effects. **G**

VERDICT A pedal that helps you explore the possibilities of mixing phasing and tremolo



Constellator Modulated Analog Delay £165

The Constellator is an analogue delay with two MN3005 BBD chips (modern versions of those found in some vintage pedals) allowing up to 600ms of delay time, and it has the standard triumvirate of Time, Mix and Repeats knobs but also a control for adding modulation. Two modulation choices are toggled by the Feel button, which adjusts parameters simultaneously for a different flavour – basically chorus or vibrato. Between the two, there’s plenty to explore whether it’s subliminal shading, tape echo-style wobble on the repeats or full-on rich modulated delay. Those repeats are everything you’d expect of an analogue delay, melting off and degrading into the distance and going into self-oscillation if desired. From metallic ambience through vintage slapback to Edge-style rhythmic repeats and longer spacey echoes, there’s plenty here. **G**

VERDICT An excellent way to easily add real analogue delay to your ‘board



Space Rip PWM Guitar Synth £165

Described as “an analog synth buzzsaw that sounds like tearing the fabric of spacetime in half”, the Space Rip creates its sounds by pulse wave modulation (PWM). A choice of sawtooth and square wave voices are continuously modulated at a speed set by the Rate knob, which alters the degree of a tremolo-like aspect of the sound. Fine-tune the synth voices to get them in tune with your guitar or dial in some discordancy. What you get is an edgy monophonic synth voice that tracks well but can be glitchy if you’re not careful with your playing technique. Blend it with your dry sound to bolster it with a bit of weirdness, dial in equal parts for some unison guitar and synth noodling, or just turn the Mix knob up for 100 per cent synth. If you want to get really rumbly, an Octave button transposes everything but the dry sound down an octave. **G**

VERDICT If synth sounds are your thing, this gives you some in a smaller footprint

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Analogue phaser and tremolo pedal

FEATURES: True Bypass

CONTROLS: Phase Speed, Trem Speed, Depth, Sensitivity, Dynamics switch (Phase), Dynamics switch (Trem), Trem/Phase switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 43 (w) x 93 (d) x 45mm (h)

8/10

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Analogue delay pedal

FEATURES: Buffered Bypass

CONTROLS: Time, Mix, Mod, Repeats, Feel, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 43 (w) x 93 (d) x 45mm (h)



9/10

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Analogue synth pedal

FEATURES: True Bypass

CONTROLS: Rate, Tune, Mix, Sub, Shape, Octave, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 43 (w) x 93 (d) x 45mm (h)

7/10



MASSIVE UNITY

TAE 10th Anniversary

Vintage Brit tone from a signature Spanish stompbox

Words

Trevor Curwen

Photography

Phil Barker

Pedals from Spanish companies tend to go under the radar in the UK for some reason, although we do get to see them occasionally – the Aclam Dr Robert (reviewed back in issue 453) being one such example. This issue, we have the Massive Unity 10th Anniversary Danny Gomez signature TAE pedal on review, designed by its namesake, a highly experienced session musician and designer, as well as a massive Brian May aficionado. As for the rest of the name – TAE stands for Tube Amp Emulator and the pedal commemorates 10 years of the original Danny Gomez design, as seen in a pedal made by another Spanish company, Thunder Tomato.

The TAE is basically a preamp pedal that takes its inspiration from Vox amp tone, but it has a range of applications via its two outputs. One output delivers the straight preamp sound so you can plug it into a power amp or the effects return of your amp, thus using the

TAE rather than your amp’s preamp section. Alternatively, you can use it like a straight drive pedal going directly into your amp. The second output has speaker emulation based on the sound of an open-backed cabinet with two 12-inch Alnico Blue speakers like an AC30, so you can use it direct into a PA or for recording.

Three knobs control the action: Volume for output, Gain to dial in the amount of dirt in the sound, and a Tone knob for the top-end. Nicely touch-sensitive and functioning as a standard drive pedal or preamp, it will endow your amp with a very practical range of Vox-flavoured drive. Using the speaker-emulated output, direct into an audio interface, we were able to record realistic mic’d AC30 tones without the high volume and hassle. What’s more, it takes other pedals well: a Rangemaster-style treble booster in front of it will definitely put you in the ballpark for some driven Brian May tones.



VERDICT

If you like that particular Brit tone, this pedal is a very flexible purveyor of it. It can be a practical drive and boost working with your amp, but that speaker-emulated output will give you great sounds for recording and get you out of trouble if your amp goes down at a gig. **G**

- PROS

Authentically Vox-like tone; practical size and layout for pedalboards; speaker-emulated output
- CONS

Nothing to speak of

ALSO TRY...



Valvenergy Mystic Edge £159

Vox’s AC30-in-a-box pedal features an all-analogue signal path based around a Nutube miniature vacuum tube. Use it in front of your amp, as a line-level preamp, or direct into an audio interface or PA.



Iridium £379

Three amp choices combined with three IR speaker choices make this a really versatile pedal for creating driven valve amp tones. Choose the Chime setting for AC30 sounds.



AC-Tone £129

Looking for a pedalboard-friendly drive pedal with Vox tone? This is based on the larger twin-channel Pro Series AC-Tone with a simpler single-channel setup and slightly beefed-up gain section.

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: Spain

TYPE: Preamp/drive pedal

FEATURES: True Bypass

CONTROLS: Gain, Tone, Volume, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard preamp output, standard speaker simulated output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 120 (w) x 97 (d) x 50mm (h)

**Guitarist
CHOICE**

9/10





Pedal Dis-order

The rules are there to be broken, says Stefan Fast of YouTube channel ThePedalZone, as he experiments with alternative signal flow methods



Running your distortion into the wah turns the legendary tone on its head for a super-sharp, aggressive filter tone

When we first get into pedals, most of us quickly learn the standard approach to pedal order, which goes a bit like: tuner – wah – compressor – drive/distortion – modulation – delay – reverb. We're told, plus it is how it's sold, that this is a tried and true method and one that will keep our tone clear and defined. There's truth to this; the classic signal flow will work every single time and it will deliver great sounds. But the most fun part about learning 'the rules' is so you can find ways to break them. So, let's break them together!

COMPRESSOR AFTER DRIVE

A lot of players tend to place compressors at the start of their rigs, in order to smooth out volume peaks and send a consistent output to the rest of the chain. But this method does not always play well with dirt pedals. Compression is an amplitude effect and therefore will affect the gain stage of your drive pedals when

“Wah into distortion is the tone of legends. But maybe you want to find your own way with the wah? If so, flip the order”

placed before them. Distortion pedals also compress your signal by design, so if you send an already loud and compressed signal into them then it can result in very squashed and undynamic tones. If you flip things around and send the distortion into the compressor, you get a much subtler studio-style effect, where the compressor simply lifts your core drive sound without affecting the gain, all while adding some natural amp-like valve sag to your tone. This trick works really well for rhythm playing, whereas having compression before drive is great for soaring leads with otherworldly sustain.

WAH AFTER DISTORTION

Wah into distortion is the tone of legends. It's Hendrix, it's Stevie Ray and it just sounds warm, vocal and smooth. But maybe you want to find your own way with the wah? If so, flip the order. This allows the wah's bandpass filter to excite the distortion's frequencies post-gain, which results in a really sharp and aggressive filter tone. It works best for super-slow filter sweeps as this will deliver a very resonant and synthetic sound.

WAH AFTER DELAY

Placing a wah after delay is a fun way to tweak the tone of the repeats in real-time. This works well on really long delays with a lot of feedback to create slow, atmospheric pad-like filter sweeps. Alternatively, a self-oscillating delay frenzy sent into a wah lets you unleash filtered walls of sound with a bold synthetic quality. This is a weird one – it's probably more for the sound-designers out there – but sometimes you just have to let your freak flag fly!

1. Avoid squashed tones by placing any compression after the dirt pedals in your signal chain. This will give you a much subtler, studio-style effect – which works really well for rhythm playing

2. Break from the norm and send the reverb into your delay for more clarity in your repeats. While you're forgo those more atmospheric results, this order can create some unique sounds

3. Not a modulation fan? Experiment with some mod pedals before drive for subtle, organic effects – you'll experience a melding of modulation and distortion

4. On the other hand, if modulation is your best friend then place it after your reverbs and delays for delicious swirls and sustain. Give it a go with tremolo and phasers – you won't be disappointed!



REVERB & DELAY BEFORE DRIVE

If you're into shoegaze then this is probably how you've always set up your pedals. It's the ticket to those iconic walls of sound as the fuzz really helps to dirty up and compress the reverb and delay, resulting in a dense and intense sound, giving the trails a gritty granular character. A reverse reverb or big hall reverb into a Big Muff-style fuzz will give you My Bloody Valentine vibes, whereas a digital delay into a raspy rat-like distortion equals instant Slowdive tones. This trick also works well for more rattly, percussive lo-fi tones, à la Phil Spector, if you send a spring reverb into a lower-gain overdrive.

DELAY AFTER REVERB

Sending delay into reverb is probably how 90 per cent of us roll. It delivers a dreamy and atmospheric result that's a joy to get lost in. However, it will also cloud the presence of your delay repeats as they are sent into the oceanic ambient well. So, if you're looking

for more clarity in your echoes, try placing your delay after your reverb. It's especially fun with really long echoes as they will sample a part of the reverb going into them, all resulting in some highly unique and splashy delay repeats.

MODULATION BEFORE DRIVE

This tip is great for people who generally find most modulation effects to be overbearing. The 'problem' with running modulation after drive is that the effect is being pummelled with all of the extra harmonic content that a drive/distortion introduces, which sends modulation pedals into effect ecstasy. What sounded lush, wide and dreamy on your clean tone, all of a sudden sounds like a swirling sci-fi circus when driven. By placing your modulation before drives, you take the harmonic edge off of things because all of the extra harmonics are introduced after the modulation stage, which creates a much more subtle and organic effect, where the modulation melds

together with the distortion. Think the classic phaser before drive trick here, à la Eddie Van Halen.

MODULATION AFTER REVERB/DELAY

This trick is for ambient explorers who can't get enough of modulation and just want all the mod magic possible. By placing modulation after reverb and delay, you can get the mod effects to sustain and swirl almost endlessly. Just bump up the decay and feedback on your reverb and delay... and float away. This works really well with tremolo and phasers, for instance, as it will create a rhythmic sequencer-esque effect. You can also just put a chorus at the end for lush extended tails and constantly modulating delay repeats. Divine dreamscapes await!

All right, my rocking rule-breakers. That was a little something to get you started. Now go out there and further explore the infinite pedal order possibilities. The only real rule here is to always have fun! **G**

Longtermers

A few months' gigging, recording and everything that goes with it – welcome to *Guitarist's* longterm test report

What's The Best Way To
Record Great Tone?

with Jamie Dickson



Writer

JAMIE DICKSON
Guitarist, Editor-in-chief



This month, Jamie embarks on an epic multi-report comparison of three contrasting ways to get great guitar tone down on a recording: mic, modelling and reactive load boxes. May the best tone-machines win...

The pandemic focused everyone's attention on playing and recording at home – and while it's very good news that gigging is starting to happen again, many guitarists found a real passion for their home studios. And there's one big question for any player who wants to get good electric sounds down at home: which method do I use?

For the past few years modelling devices such as Line 6's Helix, Fractal's Axe-FX and Kemper's profiling amps have held out the promise of getting authentic, gutsy, hassle-free guitar tone in a home studio. Dial up the sounds you want from a selection of digitally modelled amps and effects, plug into your DAW or recording workstation and off you go. No loud amps for your housemates or family to put up with, no cumbersome, finicky mics to adjust. The arrival of Neural DSP's excellent profiling amp, the Quad Cortex, raised the bar even higher, so it should be a no-brainer to just go the digital route, shouldn't it?

Well, despite how good digital devices are getting, there are still plenty of players and studio engineers who just aren't convinced. I've spoken to more than one top engineer who won't use them and, having spent the past year switching between a really nice valve amp and pedalboard rig and modelling devices of various kinds, it's hard not to conclude that there's still something special about the real thing. Maybe it's just getting air moving, maybe it's the black magic that happens in valves... As accurate as modelling and profiling amps are getting, I can still perceive a difference. It's testimony to the power of digital tech, however, that it's getting harder and harder to decide if the difference is all just in the mind.

Mic, Model Or... Box?

There you have the basic dilemma of the home studio guitarist: go with modelling and accept it will get you 95 per cent of the way there but *may* miss that last elusive degree of tonal authenticity, or make your excuses to your loved ones and turn your old valve amp up loud with SM57s in front of it and hope they don't get driven insane by the same phrase played over and over while you try to nail a take.

There is, however, a third method that a lot of guitarists are now turning to as a 'best of both worlds' solution. Reactive load boxes and

impulse responses (IRs) have been around for a long time, but – since the advent of Universal Audio's popular Ox – reactive load boxes seem to have really taken root in guitar culture recently. For the uninitiated, a reactive load box is a sophisticated attenuator that accurately mimics the dynamic interaction between a real speaker and your amp. You're connected to the load box, not real speakers, so you can turn your amp all the way up until it's running hot and send the resulting signal straight out of the load box to your DAW, complete with all the rich harmonics and dynamics of a dimed analogue valve amp, but only you – via your headphones – will hear it.

In that raw state, the resulting signal isn't quite ready to be used, however. To transform it into a living, breathing amp tone you'd swear was the real thing, you need to combine the

“Many are turning to reactive load boxes and IRs as a ‘best of both worlds’ solution”

signal from your reactive load box with an IR. IRs are digitally mapped recreations of how a real physical speaker cabinet responds to sound and shapes tone. You can also get IRs of rooms, mics and anything whose dynamic response to a brief test signal can be digitally captured. Once mapped out in this way, the sonic characteristics of that cab, mic or room become an IR that can be used to process the raw signal from a reactive load box and make the resulting recorded tone sound just like a real amp working flat out with a classic cab, speakers and mic in the signal path.

So, which of the above methods gives the best results? Well, that's what I'm going to try to find out in a special run of Longtermers test reports. I'm going to use all three methods to record guitar parts for tracks I'm currently

working on – and then I'll tell you the pros and cons of each approach, as I see them.

The recordings I make will be presented in three versions – one using each method – so you can compare and contrast the sonic results. I'll also evaluate the three methods from a workflow perspective, assessing which method yields solid results quickly and intuitively. Too often, people concentrate on fine shades of tonal authenticity that might not even be audible in a finished mix, overlooking the creative importance of using a method that is intuitive and easy to use. In the end, it might prove best to use a method that sounds five per cent less good but is 100 per cent less hassle to make progress with... We shall see.

To make it a fair challenge I've picked market-leading devices in each instance. On the digital side, I'll be using the Neural DSP Quad Cortex, which many think is at the leading edge of profiling/modelling tech currently. I'll compare it to other high-quality modellers and profilers such as the Kemper Stage and Boss GT-1000 Core as I go along, but the Neural will be my main digital contender for the test. For the reactive load/IR testing I'll be using the excellent Two Notes Torpedo Captor X, which combines the functions of a reactive load box and virtual cabinet/IR loader in one device – though I will also be trying Laney's Ironheart IRT-Studio desktop valve amp plus software-based IRs. Good old classic mic-and-amp recording will be done with Shure SM57s (because most people have tried them and know the sound) and a Dr Z Jaz 20/40 40-watt valve combo. Handily, I can also profile the Dr Z with the Neural DSP (and the Kemper Stage) for a really fair comparison of resulting tones.

All that remains is to roll my sleeves up, warm the amp up, set the mics up, switch the devices on... and may the best method win. See you next time for my first report covering mic'ing the amp up the traditional way... **G**



Neural DSP's Quad Cortex and Two Notes' Torpedo Captor X represent the next-gen side of Jamie's home recording test setup

Prices: £1,599 (Neural DSP Quad Cortex), £429 (Two Notes Torpedo Captor X), £84 (Shure SM57) **Studio Sessions** Not yet **Gigged:** N/A



SAMANTHA FISH

The fiery blues-rocker muses on cigar box guitars and mourns the loss of a treasured Fender amp



What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"The first one I bought myself was a custom-made guitar from this guy in Kansas City called Larry James. He was a luthier and was building stuff out of his house. He used to come out and see me play when I had a Monday night jam, and he told me he wanted to build a guitar for me. I said I wanted a Thinline Telecaster with humbucker pickups and an f-hole to open it up. Telecasters with a solid body have got a real twang to them, but I wanted something that could get super-aggressive and a little deeper sounding. That's what I threw my cheque book down for and I gigged with that for years. I still have it, too."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last one I bought was a white Classic Fender Jaguar. I guess I wanted a challenge and it's proven to be incredibly challenging [laughs]. To me, the pickup system sounds great for R&B, but Fender put out the Vintera series a couple of years later and I got one of those

"I never regret buying a guitar, even if I don't play it – I always feel, at some point, the right opportunity is going to come through"

Seafoam Green [sic] Vinteras – and that thing wails. The Classic has a lighter touch to it, it feels slinky, the way I have it set up. But I like it. The challenging part is when you're getting into it and then you accidentally hit the kill switch and you can't figure out which one it was. That definitely is deflating, but it keeps you humble."

What's been the most incredible find or bargain you've had when buying gear?

"My [Stogie Box Blues] cigar box [guitar]. I've got so many miles out of that thing. I bought it on a whim and I never thought I would be performing so much with it. For what I paid for it, which wasn't much, it's become such a staple in my arsenal. When I purchased it, I never could have anticipated it being such a big part of my character as a musician."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've experienced?

"Well, it's not because of the guitar, it's because of me. But I wanted to be good at lap steel and pedal steel. As it turns out, it's a difficult thing to learn. The pedal steel for me especially, just because it's a whole other beast. So I'm not going to blame that on the guitar, it's more user error. I never regret buying a guitar, even if I don't play

PHOTO BY ZORAN VESELINOVIC/XLA

SAMANTHA'S GO-TO RIG

"My primary guitar is an Arctic White Gibson SG from 2016. Then I have a Stogie Box Blues cigar box guitar, which is one of my most popular. I play a deep Cherry Red Gibson Firebird on the road and a Seafoam Green [sic] Vintera series Fender Jaguar. I have a Taylor acoustic and a Delaney 512 – it's sort of patterned off a [Gibson] 339, but I use that one for a lot of open tunings and slide work. "For amps, I'm rocking a Category 5 setup right now. I switch out my heads between a 50-watt and 90-watt, but I've been rolling with this 4x12 cabinet lately. For smaller gigs, I have a combo, which has a 10- and a 12-inch speaker in it and it's called the [Category 5] Andrew. "On my pedalboard there are various tuners and a volume pedal, an Analog Man King Of Tone, a JHS Mini Foot Fuzz, a JHS Superbolt [drive pedal], an EHX Micro POG Octave pedal, an MXR Carbon Copy, and a Boss Super Shifter for divebombs and octave up. I also have a Boss synth pedal I've been experimenting with and trying to work into the show."

with it. I'm like a hoarder in that sense, like I never get rid of anything. I always feel that at some point I'm going to use it or the right opportunity is going to come through."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"Again, I don't think I've ever sold anything. I will say that I lent out a Fender Super Reverb to somebody, but I can't remember who it was and I don't know where it is. I've called around, but it's just gone. And I do regret that because I loved that amp. It was the first amp I bought for myself – so as far as having remorse is concerned, I definitely regret that."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"If you have a collection, get something that's unique and isn't like everything else that you have. I think sometimes people get into that pattern of purchasing things that are really similar. If you know you like a certain size of neck, find something that feels similar to that so you're not trying to fight the guitar when you get it. It's going to be a fight anyway, you're going to be experiencing a new instrument, so make sure the size of the neck fits in your hand."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar-shop window and what were you looking at?

"I'm always looking at stuff. I went to the Gibson Garage, the new one they built in Nashville – it's not a shop, it's a showroom – and they have all these incredibly unique, beautiful Gibsons. I just did a music video and they lent me this prototype Silver Sparkle Les Paul. I'm telling you, I'm obsessed with it. I'm in love! The guitar doesn't exist on the marketplace, but when it does, that's the one I'm going for."

Would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"Well, I wouldn't say any of my guitars are over-the-top expensive, but my amps are pretty pricey. So I guess I would go for the cheaper guitar, set it up nicely and get a really nice amp. It's tough, though, because it depends on the guitar. You can get a cheap guitar and make it sound great, y'know? My cigar box wasn't expensive and I play that through Category 5 amps and that seems to work out okay. So that's what I'm going with."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would you choose and why?

"Humbuckers, for sure. I don't know, just because they rip. They sound incredible, they're versatile and something that I've got a good handle on. I think you can make them sound really cutting like a single coil and you get that beefy side to it, too."

Do you have a favourite guitar shop?

"Lately, I guess it's been Reverb and Sweetwater [laughs]. I do like the Chicago Music Exchange just because it's kinda like candyland right when you walk in, y'know? It's cool and they have unique stuff. I like the Nashville shops because they have a cool selection of old acoustic guitars. But I do like coming to the UK and Denmark Street with all the guitar shops. I like any place that carries vintage because every guitar has got a really cool story, and the older they are the more character they have." **[DM]**

Samantha's Arctic White Gibson SG (far left) is a mainstay of her rig, while she bought her diminutive Stogie Box Blues cigar box guitar (above) for a song and it has contributed a surprising new character to her music



Samantha Fish's new album, *Faster*, is out now via www.samanthafish.com. Her UK tour starts on 30 January 2022. For tickets, see www.alltickets.com

ORANGE AMPS

This British brand has spawned many a classic design since arriving on the scene in the late 60s

The roots of British amp giant Orange can be traced back to the West End of London where, in 1968, company founder Cliff Cooper opened up a small secondhand instrument store called the Orange Shop. Having painted the shopfront a dazzling psychedelic orange colour, Cliff's new enterprise certainly caught the eye of passing guitar shoppers as they perused the wares of Soho and Tin Pan Alley.

"Guys like Marc Bolan, Gary Moore and Paul Kossoff would sit in the shop chatting and jamming all day long," Cliff told us. "It was part of the whole thing that was happening. They'd come in, take a guitar off the wall and plug in."

One such patron of the Orange Shop was a young Peter Green whose stellar guitar playing in his band Fleetwood Mac had set the London blues scene alight – and Cliff went to see them play at every opportunity. With the band on the verge of international success, Cliff offered to supply them with a full backline of Orange amps for their upcoming American tour.

"Fleetwood Mac were really the first band to use Orange equipment," said Cliff. "We were lucky. When they took our gear to America, it launched us in the States, and not too long after that, Stevie Wonder also used the equipment to record *Superstition*. That launched us all over the world." **[RB]**

1 LATE 60S

By the time Cliff had decided he wanted to build his own guitar amplifiers, he had already studied electronics at college. Working in collaboration with Mat Mathias of Radio Craft – a radio repair shop in West Yorkshire – the first Orange amps were assembled in Mat's native Huddersfield and were also branded Matamp. Meanwhile, the first Orange speaker cabinets were constructed in the basement of Cliff's shop (where, in the early days, he would often sleep!).

From November 1968, fewer than 50 100-watt OR100 Orange Matamp units were completed, making them highly sought-after collector's items. The very first amps were supplied to Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac for their US tour. The 200-watt OR200 appeared later in March 1969 and was powered by four 6550/KT88 valves (double the number onboard the original OR100). That spring, the second version of the OR100 appeared and it came fitted with four EL34s, while the new 50-watt OR50 was driven by two EL34s.

2 PICS ONLY

Demand for Orange amps ramped up quickly and, in early 1970, production shifted to a larger facility in the Huddersfield area with subcontractors HH Electronics and Howells Radio helping with the workload. Within a year, however, manufacturing had relocated home to the West End. And there it stayed until 1973 when Orange escalated to assembly-line production at its new factory in Bexleyheath, Kent.

Designed in 1971, the EL34-powered 'Pics Only' GRO100 and GRO50 amps were launched in 1972. Boasting crunchy overdriven tones, they were the genesis of the 'Orange sound', becoming the benchmark for all future Orange amp designs. They had a different circuit than previously and they introduced Orange's unique six-position FAC midrange tone switch. Later named the OR100, OR80 and OR120, these 'Pics Only' amps were rejigged in 1973 to include text on the control panel. The later 'Pics & Text' amps launched in 1974, comprising the classic OR120 and OR80 models.

3 AD SERIES

Manufacturing of the amplifiers at the Bexleyheath factory ended in 1979, though Cliff hung on throughout the next decade building and selling Orange amps – albeit in limited numbers. In 1993, the Orange brand was licensed to Gibson who opted for the new amps to be made in England by Matamp. However, these 70s reissues were not a great success (though Noel Gallagher used an Overdrive 120 model for a time), and in 1997 Cliff regained control of the brand he started back in the late 60s. It was the dawn of a new era for Orange.

Beginning with the launch of the AD30 in 1998 (an amplifier that was famously played by Jimmy Page, Adrian Utleigh and PJ Harvey, to name just three), Orange went from strength to strength as the AD15 picked up the Editor's Pick Award in *Guitar Player*, when it was released the following year. This new phase for the company also saw Orange reconnecting with its Fleetwood Mac heritage when the AD15 combo became guitarist Jeremy Spencer's amp of choice.

4 ROCKERVERB

Launched in 2003, the original Rockerverb was Orange's first high-gain amp design, making it a firm favourite in the metal world. Its versatile design also proved a winning formula for guitarists who desired an ultimately flexible amp to cover all bases. Indeed, Orange Rockerverbs are popular among sessions players for use on stage and in the studio.

After Orange began receiving requests to build an effects loop into the AD30, the company instead decided to design a new amp from the bottom up. Featuring a valve-driven effects loop (the first amp of its kind, no less), the Rockerverb 50 and 100 amps were revamped in 2010 with the launch of the MKII versions, though their much-loved Pics Only-style crunch character was retained.

The current incarnations of the Rockerverb – the MKIII amps – are available in orange and black livery and feature selectable output power options. As per the 'MKI' and MKII Rockerverbs, a combo version of the MKIII is available.



1



2



3



4

RESPECT WHERE IT'S DUE

Dave Burrluck uncovers a guitar from the 90s with quite the backstory and the need for some restoration



It's just over 20 years ago that the British guitar industry lost one of its most talented craftsmen – Sid Poole. In not much more than a decade, Sid turned from hopeful into high-level, with his instruments crafted at his small garage in Kent, his wardrobe-sized spray booth in the well-tended back garden. By the end of his cut-short career his clients included Pete Townshend, Andy Fairweather Low, Bernie Marsden, Micky Moody, Geoff Whitehorn and Phil Hilborne, not to mention Barry Martin of the hard-gigging Hamsters. His work stretched well beyond these shores with plaudits from the likes of Paul Reed Smith and tech-guru Dan Erlewine, plus customers in Europe and Asia.

Getting to know Sid back in the early 90s was both a personal pleasure and an education. While he'd honed his woodworking skills as a high-level joiner, his early guitars were always superbly built. But with local guitar greats such as Geoff on hand to show him old Les Pauls, PRSes and the like, Sid's guitars just got better and better. Of course, he also carried out repairs for anyone who asked and was just as happy to construct a partscaster for you as he was your custom dream guitar.

"What might've been a piece of history is not in particularly original condition"

What on earth does this have to do with The Mod Squad, you might ask? Well, I have a bit of a repair/restoration job to consider that not only reminds me of me ol' mucker Sid but also of another friend and local guitar player – Jim Matthews, who we also lost too early in life. The guitar in question isn't a Poole but a Westone Prestige, designed by Sid in the late 90s and made by Status Graphite in Colchester. Jim gigged the guitar for many years as a 'Fender' to his Gibson Les Paul. Those Brit-made Westone guitars were really rather good, but never took off for a variety of reasons. And, as far as I'm aware, only 162 of the four offered models were made: something that's hard to confirm as the company that commissioned them, Fletcher, Copdock and Newman Ltd (FCN), ceased trading some years ago.

After 20 years, it's probably time I fessed up to being the third member of that Westone Prestige design team. Back in 1996

I was approached by Andi Brooke Mellor on behalf of FCN when they had the idea of relaunching Westone. To cut a lengthy story short, Sid and myself set about designing something suitable and, after a failed attempt to get a Korean factory to make the guitars (Sid's damning appraisal of its 'prototypes' put an end to that), I suggested Rob Green at Status Graphite who was interested in making conventional guitars to augment his established bass business at that time. Rob, by the way, is in good health and continues to make his famed graphite basses and guitars today.

What's The Plan?

As you can see in the image opposite, the Westone in question – a Corsair Custom – isn't quite all there. I selected the body and neck (unfinished) from Rob on one of my many visits to his factory. Sid slightly reshaped the neck and I swapped out both the bridge humbucker and the vibrato; on the original guitars, the pickups and hardware were all by Gotoh. So what might possibly have been quite a collectible (if minor) piece of guitar history is not in particularly original condition, and the dirt and wear on the guitar was all down to Jim.



This UK-made Westone Prestige guitar is missing a few parts!

If I'm restoring the guitar to playing condition, then, what do I do? Find the missing bits and clean it all up? Or do I keep the condition the same and just find some new parts? To me, its history is about a couple of good friends, not its original condition, and I wouldn't mind hearing what this near 24-year-old guitar performs like today.

Parts, Parts, Parts

As you can see, I'm a bridge humbucker and bridge away from a full picnic, and although the guitar would originally have come with a two-post but otherwise vintage-style Gotoh vibrato, those post-holes have been neatly filled and it's been redrilled for a PRS vibrato. Clearly, my modding adventures were well in place back then – no doubt with Sid's help.

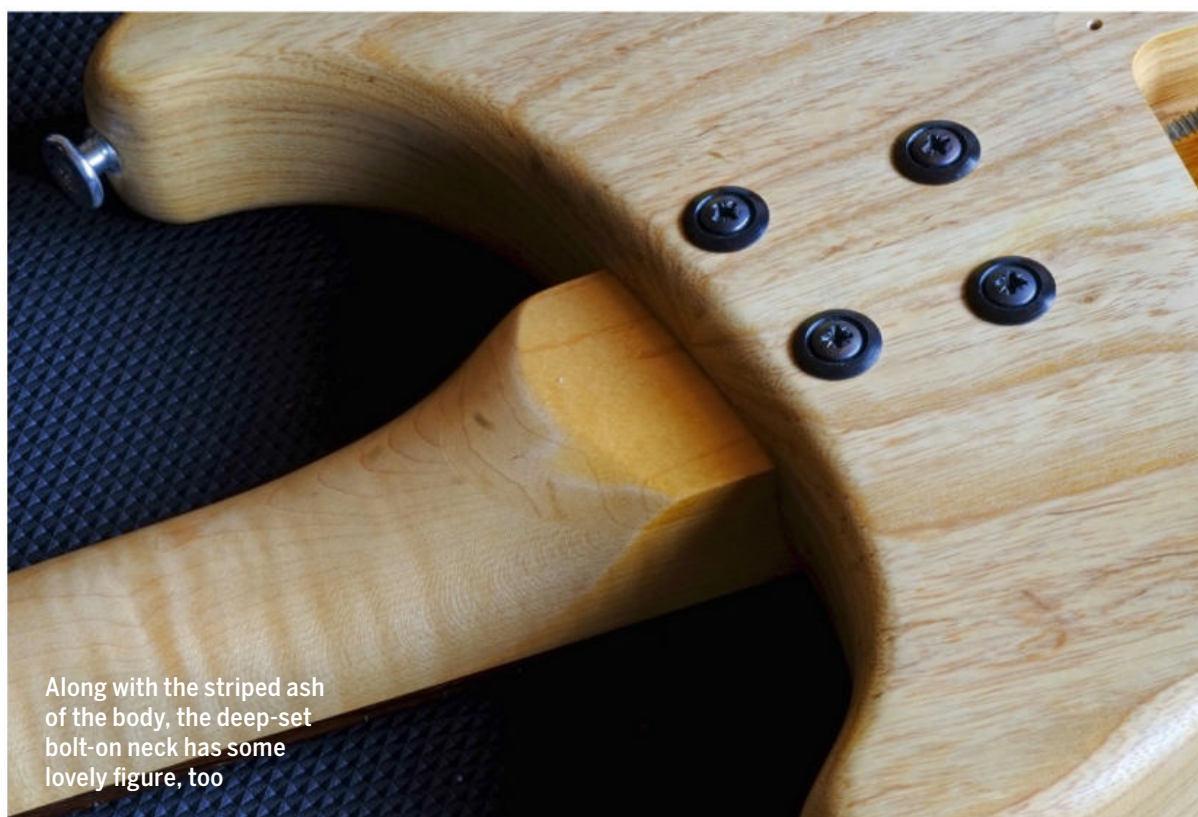
Then there's the wiring to consider. It's a pretty standard HSS setup here, but for some reason I suggested to Jim we could split the bridge humbucker on the tone control, something I tried and wasn't too impressed with. Jim, however, loved it. Less so the Westone script logo, which he covered with a piece of gaffer tape: "Burley, I can't play a guitar with Westone on the headstock!" But should I leave the residue around the logo?

I'm reminded of the very clean work Rob put into this design. The bodies should have been finished, but this one never was. At best, it had a wipe or two with oil and Briwax back in the day. There are better things to use today, but I decide to reapply. The neck was oiled and waxed and feels great: chunky but rather nicely lightly V'd (I'm pretty sure PRS's Wide Fat profile was our guide and I do remember Sid working his magic post-production).

Watching Sid at work was an education. He would be telling some humorous story while I tried to concentrate and ask questions. He'd reel off exactly his fret levelling and polishing process; I'd be furiously writing notes. Even simply sanding a shaped neck, Sid's eyes would drift off somewhere as his experienced fingers and thumb felt the neck and any invisible humps that needed more sanding. He worked fast, too, but never hurried.

Back to today and, with the guitar's parts removed, I clean off some of the dirt by the bridge and that gaffer tape residue around the headstock logo using a little white spirit rubbed on with a piece of kitchen towel. I don't want to clean it up 'as new', though, and a couple of rubs with Briwax, left to dry and then polished, has the body looking nicely antique complete with a few dings and scratches from real use.

Time to reassemble and work out that wiring... See you next issue. **G**



Along with the striped ash of the body, the deep-set bolt-on neck has some lovely figure, too



The headstock proudly displays 'Made in England' – a first for Westone



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SINGLE MINDED

Why do we still put up with single-coil hum, asks one reader.
Dave Burruck can't help but wonder...

Q Dear Mod Squad, I have a question about hum. I've used my Strat for years with no problem. The single coils can pick up hum as we all know, but I did a gig in a local sports hall and I couldn't get rid of it whatever I did. The only pickup selections I could use were the in-between sounds – the solo pickups all hummed excessively. What do you suggest and why on earth in this day and age do we still have this potential problem?

Brian, via email

A Hi Brian, I had exactly the same experience and, in that case, it was down to those bloomin' LED lights flashing on and off around the 'stage'. For us weekend warriors, we're not all playing proper venues, are we? I'd stupidly only taken a three-single-coil guitar and, like you, thanks to the RWRP (reverse wound, reverse polarity) middle pickup, those in-between sounds were the only ones I could use. Meanwhile, my fellow guitarist just looked at me smugly and said, "That's why I fitted EMGs," and carried on as normal.

"Having a spare hum-cancelling scratchplate is not as daft as it sounds"

I was recently discussing this age-old problem with Vox guitar designer Rich Lasner. He was showing me some new designs and I did offer the question, why are we still using single-coil guitars that can potentially hum? His reply was that he preferred the sound and that the vast majority of players did, too, and they just don't have a problem.

Of course, you can up the screening on the guitar, but it's difficult to completely screen everything, not least the pickups themselves. The best advice I can give, aside from always taking out a humbucking spare, is to go the hum-cancelling pickup route for your gigging guitar. And there's no shortage of those, passive or active. Kinman's pickups – which include the usual Strat and Tele plus P-90, Jazzmaster, Jaguar and even Gold Foil soapbar-style – will get you very close to true single-coil tone



Let hum-cancelling pickups, such as this EMG Retro Active set, cure your woes

without the hum. There are plenty more from the likes of DiMarzio and Seymour Duncan, Lace and Fender's Noiseless just for starters. Actually, having a spare hum-cancelling scratchplate is not as daft as it sounds, especially if you use one of those neat Radioshop Pickups volume controls with screw-in terminals (as discussed in Mod Squad issue 458), so you can swap pickguards without needing to heat up the soldering iron.

Active setups, such as Fishman's Fluence single-coil-sized pickups, have impressed us, too, and they include USB powering so you don't need to find the space for an onboard battery. EMG, of course, has long made its noiseless active single-coil-sized humbuckers; check out the relatively new Retro Active range that offers "all the benefits of active pickups with the dynamic response of vintage passives", according to the company itself.

But these hum-cancelling alternatives don't sound like single coils, the internet will tell you. Personally, I'd rather get through a gig with no problem than worry about that – and, anyway, you might be surprised. I've had a trio of DiMarzio Area

single-coil-sized stacked 'buckers on a bitser Strat (put together by Sid Poole, of course) for some years. It might sound a little more rounded in the high-end than the real thing, but it's a sound I find very useful, especially for gigs where the full-fat single-coil voice can be too much of a contrast, too bright and often unbalanced, especially when you're swapping from your Les Paul between numbers.

Don't forget that splitting a humbucker to single coil will potentially give you hum pick-up problems as well. So you might want to consider getting your single-coil fix from wiring that humbucker in parallel, like Mark Lettieri has on his signature PRS Fiore. Also, don't forget that P-90s are single coils, too, and can create louder hum, typically being higher in output than a Fender single coil.

As to why so many guitars being made today are still equipped with single coils and virtually no additional screening (perhaps, at best, a RWRP middle pickup), it's probably due to that original comment from Rich Lasner – most people don't care and many, many of those guitars will never be gigged. Thing is, once bitten... **G**

That should give you something to think about till our next issue.

In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.



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Benchmark Humbuckers

We catch up with Mark Stow at OX4 Pickups to talk quintessential PAF tone

Inspired by the tone he gleaned from a vintage Gibson PAF humbucker, Mark Stow began winding his own pickups under the name OX4. Since then, it seems the guitar world can't get enough of his hand-wound creations. And with some of the industry's leading names onboard – including Paul Stacey, Larry Carlton and Jason Isbell – OX4 pickups have become increasingly in demand.

"I'm just doing my own take on a good PAF," Mark tells us. "It was a 1957 PAF I owned and played – so possibly from a Goldtop or ES-175 – that sounded particularly nice. I reverse-engineered it by winding the bobbins to match the ohms/resistance and tonal characteristics. The magnets were measured using a gauss meter and my magnet supplier replicated that using Alnico IV. So it's essentially a low-wind Alnico IV magnet humbucker. It's a classic PAF tone – that's the pickup I started OX4 with."

While different magnet options are available, Mark feels Alnico IV provides a balanced sound: "Alnico IV has more top-end than Alnico II," he says. "Alnico III

is more midrange-y, and Alnico V can be very bright. So Alnico IV has a good balance, and when you dig in, it's got a nice quack. That's what I've got in my Les Paul right now – a '57 Terry Morgan replica – but I've also gigged with this pickup using a 1996 Epiphone Goldtop, using upgraded pots and caps, of course. You don't need a £10,000 custom shop guitar to get great tone!"

Due to manufacturing inconsistencies during the late 50s and early 60s, no two PAFs are the same. And yet while the sound of PAF humbuckers varies, many players agree that these types of pickup often share certain tonal characteristics.

"All the PAFs I've played sound very bright," says Mark. "In my opinion, it's all about the offset of the coils. It wasn't intentional; they were supposed to be 5,000 turns each, but that could vary by 20 per cent either way. I've seen bobbins with 4,000 and 6,000 turns. The right amount can give you a fantastic sound."

So, what is the quintessential PAF tone? "For me, Mike Bloomfield has the classic clear, honky PAF tone," Mark says. "It's interesting to put on a Mike Bloomfield

record and reference that. I think that's the quintessential sound. I have it on good authority that the pickups in his '59 Gibson Les Paul Standard were very low wind: both the bridge and neck are 7.1kohms each – and PAFs are normally in the range of 7k to 8k – so it's a very bright-sounding guitar. But the way he used the controls on the song *Mary Ann* from *The Live Adventures [Of Mike Bloomfield And Al Kooper]* album [1969] exemplifies virtually every PAF tone available.

"I absolutely love the middle position," Mark continues, "which is really quacky and spanky. And the more you dig in, the raspier it gets. In this song [*Mary Ann*], the amp is up very loud so he's really using the guitar controls to dial the sound in."

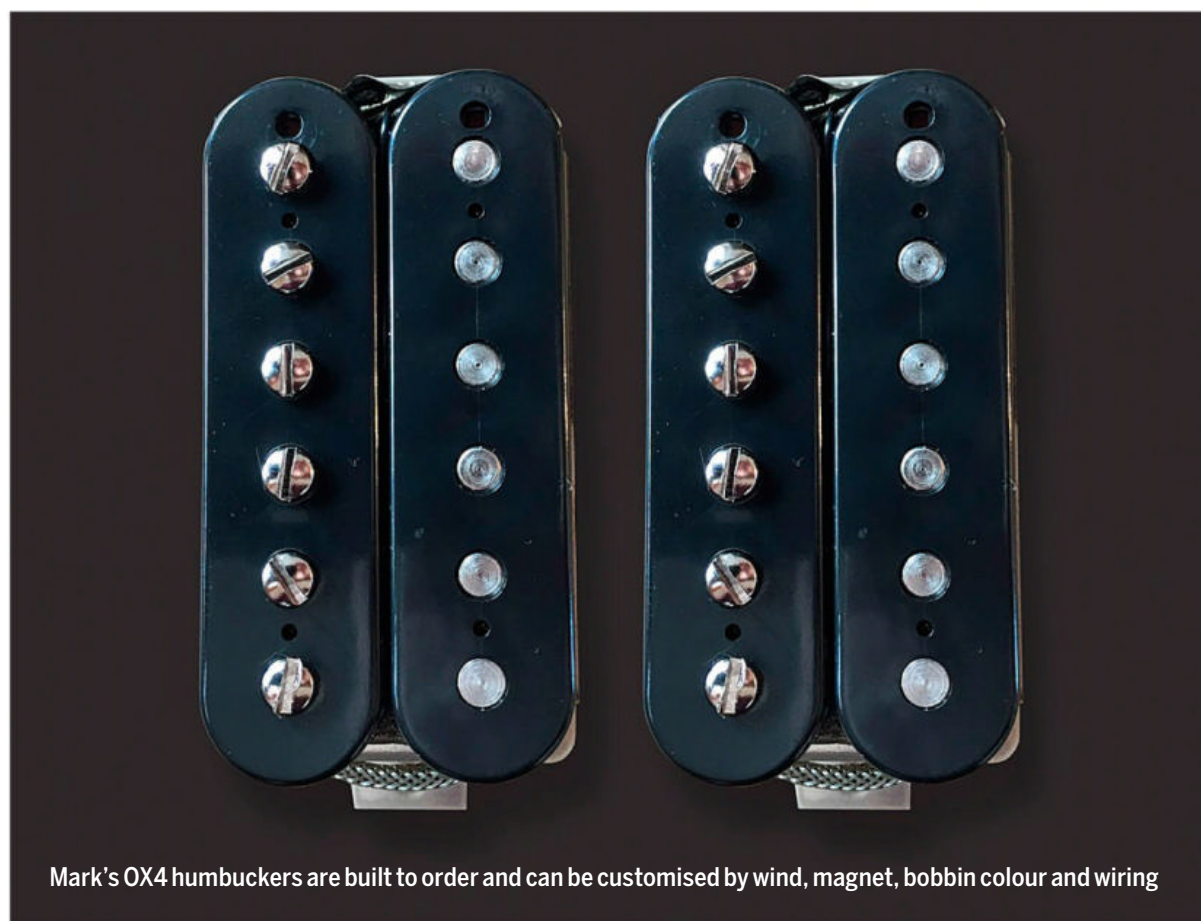
"For me, Mike Bloomfield has the classic clear, honky PAF tone. That's the quintessential sound"

Turning down the volume of the neck and bridge pickups balances the sound in the middle position nicely – it's clean and jazzy sounding. And for more of a biting classic rock tone, you can just roll the bridge volume up to 8 or 9. It's nice to experiment with the tone controls, too. PAF-style pickups respond very well."

Mark Knopfler is also an OX4 benchmark of classic PAF tone, says Mark: "I've seen him play *Brothers In Arms* live and he was in the middle position. If you have the neck volume on 10 and roll down the bridge volume to about 6 or 7 you can get a thick tone, but it still sounds bright. You don't need a loud amp to get that tone going, so it's nice to play at home like that."

"But it's great to have the amp set just on the edge so it breaks up when you turn up the guitar, or when you dig in a little harder," he admits. "It's those dynamics that make the sound interesting. That's when a good humbucker can really shine." **[RB]**

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Morphing from Tele- to Strat-style design, the P-Bass remains an industry standard

Fender Precision Bass

Looking back, it could be argued that no other Fender design has had as significant a cultural impact as the Precision Bass. Appearing in late 1951, it wasn't just a new model – as far as most people were concerned it was a new type of instrument altogether. This horizontal, fretted, solidbody electric bass guitar changed the course of music almost single-handedly. From the dancehall bands of the early 50s to contemporary electronic dance music, the P-Bass's legacy is evident.

Sure, there were other electric basses that came before it (produced by manufacturers such as Tutmarc and Rickenbacker), but none that were well designed enough to alter the way modern music was written and performed. Infinitely more convenient and easier to play than the ubiquitous double basses that came before it, and with the ability to be clearly heard at virtually any volume without feeding back, the Fender P-Bass punched its way to the top, leaving what little competition there was in the dust.

The Precision Bass was launched mere months after its six-string sibling, the Esquire – Fender's first Spanish-style electric solidbody – was released the previous year. This original incarnation of the P-Bass bears more than a passing resemblance to the Esquires and Broadcasters/Telecasters of the early 50s. In fact, Fender launched a 'reissue' called the Telecaster Bass in 1968, modelled

after its seminal design, although its white pickguard (not to mention the rare Paisley Red and Blue Flower finishes!) sets it apart.

As per the Blackguard Teles from 1954 and earlier, the P-Bass in its initial guise featured an ash slab body with a blonde finish and black pickguard. And while the headstock profile was instantly recognisable as being cut from the same Fender cloth, the Precision featured a new offset double-cutaway, enabling easier access to the upper frets, while helping to balance the instrument's weight. This unique shape influenced the blueprint of the Stratocaster. In return, the P-Bass took on more than a few of the Strat's design features when it was released later in '54.

From the dancehall bands of the early 50s to electronic dance music, the P-Bass's legacy is evident

That year, the Precision began morphing from a Tele- to a Strat-style design, a similarly contoured body complete with a two-tone sunburst finish and white pickguard establishing it as the bass partner to Fender's new flagship guitar. Further Stratocaster-derived alterations occurred in 1957 when the headstock profile was reworked. Additionally, the instrument's pickguard was reduced in length away from the bass horn and extended further into the lower treble bout area where both control knobs were now mounted – effectively replacing the Tele-style chrome control plate.

However, the most significant revision to the design of the Precision Bass that year (certainly in terms of sound) was the introduction of the humbucking split pickup, which replaced the original four-pole single-coil variety. From this point onwards, little changed with respect to the essential design of the Precision Bass. There were, of course, some (mainly cosmetic) changes – including the introduction of a rosewood fretboard in '59 – but the P-Basses Fender builds today are unmistakable. Much like the Tele and Strat, this winning design means it has never been discontinued. [RB]

The Evolution of the Fender Precision Bass

Late 1951

First shipped; ash body; fretted maple neck; blonde finish; black pickguard; single-coil pickup

Spring 1952

First advertised; 26-watt/1x15 Bassman (partner amp)

1954

Strat-style contoured body; 2-tone sunburst finish; white pickguard

1956

Alder body

1957

Strat-style headstock and gold pickguard; humbucking split pickup; 4-saddle bridge

1958

3-tone sunburst finish

1959

Tortoiseshell cellulose nitrate pickguard; 'slab' rosewood fretboard

1962

Veneer rosewood fretboard

1967

Offered with maple fretboard

1968

Early 50s-style Telecaster Bass (Blonde, Paisley Red & Blue Flower finishes)

1970

Offered with fretted maple neck



In 1957, the original P-Bass headstock was reworked to that of a Strat-style

1962 Fender Precision Bass

1. SERIAL NUMBER

Five digits stamped on neckplate (usually from 71000 to 93000)

2. HEADSTOCK

Stratocaster-style profile; pre-CBS Fender 'spaghetti' logo; decal reads 'Precision Bass'; nitrocellulose clearcoat

3. BODY

Alder; Stratocaster-style (offset double-cutaway, rounded edges, forearm and belly contours); 3-tone sunburst nitrocellulose finish

4. PICKUPS

Humbucking split pickup; master volume pot; master tone pot; one tone capacitor; front-loading jack socket

5. HARDWARE

Four nickel-plated tuners; round metal string tree; two metal strap buttons; chrome-plated: bridge plate with four fully adjustable saddles, two knurled control knobs (volume and tone), neckplate, pickup cover and bridge cover

6. PLASTICS

Four-layer (tortoiseshell/w/b/w) cellulose nitrate pickguard with 13 screw holes; two black pickup covers; black thumb rest; foam string mute strip (underside of bridge cover)

7. NECK

Single-piece maple; bolt-on (four screws); 34-inch scale length; Brazilian rosewood veneer fretboard; 20 frets; 'clay' dot markers; adjustable truss rod; bone nut; nitrocellulose clearcoat

Guitarist would like to thank Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath for showing us this gorgeous example



David Davidson's *Vintage* Icons

This late-60s sparkle finish was highly irregular for Gibson's successful electric hollowbody

1967 Gibson ES-175D



The Sparkling Burgundy finish was a regular option for some late-60s Gibson models, so it's surprising to see it on this more upscale 175 model

“When I was a teenager, it seemed as if people had forgotten about the earlier P-90 175s [Gibson moved to humbuckers in '57]. I had bought an ES-175D at a local garage sale that had changed pegs. It had two P-90s and it was really good. I used it mostly around the house, acoustically, to write and play songs. I always liked it because it had that archtop sound, and when I plugged it in, it didn't feed back – as long as I didn't turn it up really loud. It was a very warm-sounding instrument. A lot of people don't think about those P-90 guitars enough; they just tend to go for the humbucking guitars. But the dual ['D'] P-90 pickup models are really nice.

“When the ES-175 came out in 1949 it had a single [neck] P-90 and it was really a budget-conscious full-depth hollowbody, but it was the first Gibson to feature a sharp/Florentine single cutaway. This was the guitar that brought people in who couldn't afford to buy an L-5CES or Super 400CES [released in 1951]. So it became a great club date guitar. In the 60s, almost every lounge and wedding-band guitar player had a 175 in their arsenal. It's a great utility instrument. I look at 175s like I do Telecasters: they're great tools. There's a lot you can do with a 175, whether it be a P-90 or humbucker model. The sound changes dramatically if you roll back the tone on the neck pickup; you can really get a sweet sound that's very close to an L-5CES. You get this big jazzbox sound from a smaller, 16-inch guitar.

“It was a staple guitar for Gibson. Even today, if you go to a function and see a small orchestra playing, there's often a 175 on a stand. A lot of different guitar players used them. Steve Howe, of course, but a lot of

rockabilly guitarists like them, too. P-90 and humbucker 175s find their way into a lot of rockabilly bands. They're amazingly versatile. And it goes without saying loads of jazz players used them – Herb Ellis, Joe Pass and Howard Roberts being some of the best known.

“The 175 was based on the L-4 acoustic archtop – the dimensions are basically the same – and the L-4C [cutaway version, also released in 1949] is its solid-top acoustic archtop cousin. Gibson wanted to bring out an affordable electric for jazz players, and the laminated-body ES-175 really worked. It was a great idea. It was their best-selling jazz guitar for decades and it hasn't been

“There's a lot you can do with a 175, whether it be a P-90 or humbucker model”

discontinued since it was released. Gibson tried some variations of the 175, like the ES-175CC with the Charlie Christian pickup, and the ES-175T thinline, but the standard 175 had just enough of the bells and whistles to make it attractive. It was very utilitarian.

“The double-parallelogram inlays give it that ES-345 look. It's just a little upscale but nothing too fancy. Gibson needed to separate the 175 from the ['student' model] 125, so along with the cutaway they used fancier inlays and put binding on the neck, top and back. And they wound up with a winner. Personally, I've always really liked sharp cutaways. I recently sold a beautiful '62 Super 400 with a Florentine cut. I like

the look of the Florentine cutaways and a lot of players I know prefer that cut to the round/Venetian type.

“Vintage 175s are usually either Sunburst or Natural. I've only ever seen one Sparkling Burgundy ES-175D – this one! It's a super guitar. It's not as deep red as it once was; it's faded a little and you can see some of the Goldtop gold undercoat poking through. Sparkling Burgundy is an interesting colour that Gibson mixed in-house, a bit like how Fender did with Candy Apple Red. Both colours have gold undercoats – aside from the earliest Candy Apple Reds, which have silver – but Sparkling Burgundy has much more of a burgundy hue to it. Interestingly, I've had a couple of 175s in gold. That's the same finish as the ES-295, and virtually the same guitar.

“Sparkling Burgundy was a regular option for some Gibson guitars in the late 60s [including the ES-330TD, ES-335TD, ES-345TD, and ES-355TD] when it appeared as an option in the 1967 price list alongside Cherry. But the Sparkling Burgundy guitars are labelled 'TDC', just like the Cherry finish guitars were. Instruments that had defects in the wood were often painted in Sparkling Burgundy, but aside from some rare black models made in 1968, I've never seen a 175 in an opaque custom colour. When Sparkling Burgundy fades a lot it looks almost completely gold. Personally, I don't love that transitional colour. I like them either red or gold. But then everyone's different. There's an ass for every seat!” **[RB]**

David Davidson is the owner of Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York.

www.wellstrungguitars.com



Photos by Paige Davidson

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Ragtime Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Atkin J45T
Difficulty ★★☆☆☆ | 15 mins per example

Memphis Minnie, born Lizzie Douglas in 1897, became dubbed 'queen of the country blues' for her contribution to 20th century music



AS ENAMoured AS WE ARE with loud electric guitars, there is something incredibly satisfying about sitting down with an acoustic and creating a self-contained piece of music without needing to rely on backing tracks, or other potentially unrehearsed/late/loud/expensive musicians!

Though purists will (correctly) point out the differences between ragtime and Delta blues, others will (also correctly) point out that the labels we assign to genres often came along later. Those who created the styles were either unaware of, or unconcerned about, such labels. The traditional viewpoint is that ragtime was a forerunner of traditional jazz – and while I make no argument against that, I would like to point out it was blues players, such as Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Minnie who managed to transfer this piano-based music successfully onto the guitar. There are also parallels with country and folk guitar styles, too, but suffice to say this type of playing has a heritage that isn't worlds apart from the origins of blues.

On to more practical matters. It would be correct to describe the example piece as 'fingerstyle' in that there are simultaneous strings being played and it isn't a strummed chord accompaniment. However, there are a couple of ways this can be played that defy such a simple description. Many ragtime and country players use a thumbpick, giving the advantage of clear, strong bass notes to underpin the softer, more ringing highs. You can also rake across chords consistently the way you can with a pick. For the recording, I went with a hybrid approach; the pick takes the place of the thumb, with one or more of the remaining fingers handling the chord/melody notes. The advantage is that switching to alternate/flat/crosspicking or strumming is a breeze. See you next time!



Richard Barrett's new album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from www.richardbarrettguitar.com

Example 1

IN THIS FIRST SECTION, we establish the routine and rhythm of the 'alternating' bass notes, which happen predominantly on beats 1 and 3 – though frequently other supporting notes happen on beats 2 and 4. Note that all quavers are swung and that some of these are really grace notes, which help promote the overall swung feel between the solid bass notes. There is a first and second time bar at play here and you may notice some subtle differences in the repeat of the first couple of bars. This isn't intentional, but it isn't a mistake, either. Ideally, you'll become comfortable enough to allow tiny variations like this to creep in and add interest.

♩ = 143 approx

Let ring . . . Swung

C

1 G7

2 G7

C

Example 2

THE SECOND SECTION BEGINS with this F6 chord, keeping as strictly as possible to the rhythm/bass pattern we have already established. Like Example 1, there are some occasional legato notes in the top line. In this case, they are hammer-ons in bars 2 and 4. Note also that some of the quaver grace notes enable smoother changes to the next chord. The muted open G string in bar 2 is a good example of this.

F6

♩ = 143 approx

Let ring . . .

C

STAYING WITH THE F6 CHORD, this example then shifts the bass note up a semitone, giving us a D7 with an F# bass. At the end of this second bar, I had meant to use the open G as cover for the change into the next bar, but the open D string twice was fine! In the last two bars of this section I have deliberately slowed the tempo and played the quavers without a swing feel to highlight this further. I've been fairly subtle, so feel free to 'ham' this up as much as you like.

Example 4

AFTER A BRIEF RESTATEMENT of the main theme, this outro also goes with a 'straight' feel, rather than swung. I've cross-picked this for the tonal consistency this gives, but it is probably easier to play fingerstyle or with a thumbpick in the more classical 'pima' style. This is one of the trickier parts of the piece – you'll need to pay close attention to how the changes of chord shape are negotiated and camouflaged with ringing open strings.

♩ = 143 approx

F6 D7/F# C/G A7 D9 G7 C

Let ring . . . Not swung

E
B
G
D
A
E

1 2 1 0 1 2 0 0 3 0 0 3

1 2 3 0 2 0 4 2 3 0 0 3

Hear It Here

BIG BILL BROONZY SINGS FOLK SONGS



Here are some great examples of ragtime, country and blues all colliding, all played on a single guitar with no other backing of any kind. *This Train* and *Tell Me Who* demonstrate how the rhythm, bass and chord detail are covered in a single pass. The most obvious example here is the final track, *Glory Of Love*, the instrumental of which covers rhythm, bass, chords and melody. This takes plenty of co-ordination and practice!

Country Blues Guitar
New Book
Vintage Inspiration
and a Soundtrack of Country Blues
Book by David G. Brody



Stefan Grossman is an acknowledged authority on this style and, together with Rory Block, this whole album is a fantastic reference point. Start with *Devil Got My Woman* then perhaps lighten the tone a little with *Guitar Blues*. Also worth checking out is the intricate *Candyman*. You really get the feeling this is what it would have sounded like in the room when artists such as Son House and Robert Johnson were recording.

THE YES ALBUM



 This may seem a rather abrupt turn at first, but Steve Howe took a great deal of influence from jazz and ragtime; you only have to listen to his solo acoustic tune *Clap* to hear this. However, there are also plenty of other moments where you'll hear this style showing through. *Starship Trooper* is a great example, with the acoustic section being pure ragtime, plus some nimble and very inventive Chet Atkins-influenced fingerpicking throughout.



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Guitarist

Nextmonth



GEAR OF THE YEAR

< GEAR OF THE YEAR 2021

The very finest guitars, amps and pedals we reviewed in a year of exhaustive testing

JERRY CANTRELL

The Alice In Chains man on his 'Wino' Les Paul and the tones behind his new album

BLACKSTAR DEPT 10 PEDALS

The amp maker releases hot new valve-powered pedals with speaker simulation

*Next issue on sale
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Bare Knuckle

bareknucklepickups.co.uk

PHOTO: Courtesy of Guns N' Roses



GRETSCH **OUTLAW ORIGINAL**

GUNS N' ROSES
**RICHARD FORTUS
SIGNATURE FALCON™**



GRETSCHGUITARS.COM

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Guitarist
— PRESENTS —

GUITAR BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

• A HAND-PICKED SELECTION OF OVER 70 BEST-BUY ELECTRICS •





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A NEW KIND OF PLAYER

NOVA TWINS PLAYS THE STRATOCASTER® HSS
IN BELAIR BLUE

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GUITAR BUYER'S GUIDE 2021

• A HAND-PICKED SELECTION OF OVER 70 BEST-BUY ELECTRICS •



Welcome to *Guitarist's Guitar Buyer's Guide 2021* featuring our pick of the best-value and best-performing electric guitars currently on the market. Our selection has been drawn from winners of our coveted Gear Of The Year award over the past two years, product round-ups in *Guitarist*, and from guitars that scored highly in our regular reviews. You may spot a few notable absences, especially of guitars launched in the past few months – but fear not, we're saving some of this year's biggest guitars for a grand reckoning in next issue's 2021 Gear Of The Year edition.

In the meantime, if you're in the market for a great electric guitar, any one of the guitars featured in this 36-page guidebook is absolutely worth your time to check out the next time you're in the market to pick up a new electric. The selection is ordered by price, from low to high, meaning there should be something for everyone among the 70-plus guitars featured here; more affordable electrics are made to a very high standard these days and shouldn't be overlooked, even if you are lucky enough to have a generous budget. You'll also find seasoned advice on finding and buying your dream guitar inside this guide: as well as a multi-point checklist for evaluating a guitar's setup and build quality penned by gear editor Dave Burrluck, we've also got great tips and gear recommendations from three top British retailers who share the benefit of their long, combined experience with readers inside.

If you've enjoyed what you've read here, let us know as we may well extend the guide to include acoustics next time round if that's what readers would like to see. Until then, we wish you the best of fortune in finding the 'goldilocks' guitar that is just right for you – and many years of playing pleasure, whatever your next purchase may be.



Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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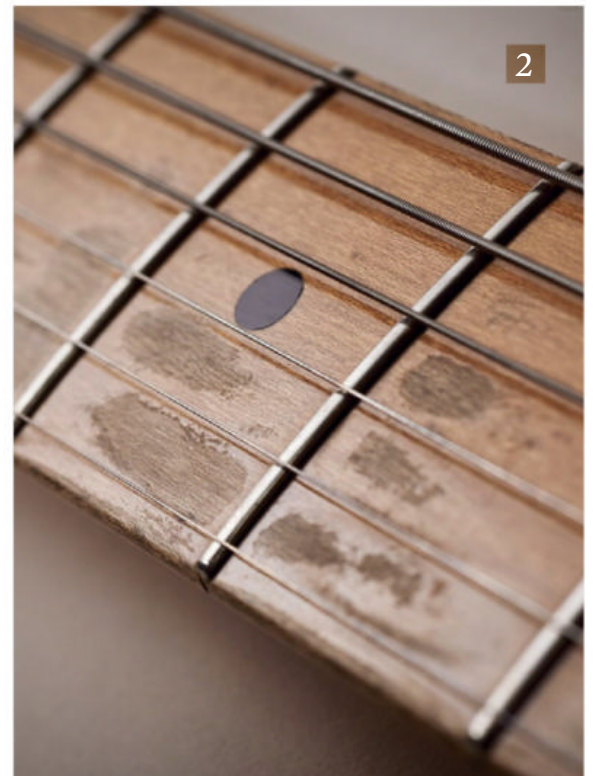


34 ELECTRICS OVER £3,000

Investment pieces from the pinnacle of electric lutherie

Buyer Checklist

Buying pre-loved, secondhand or merely used is the most cost-effective way, in theory, to grab your dream guitar. Or is it? Used guitars can have numerous 'issues' and repairs can be costly. Reviews editor, Dave Burrluck, shows you what to look for...



We're all obsessed by price, but sometimes the cheapest deal, especially on a used guitar, may end up costing you a lot more in the long run. Like cars, guitars need maintenance – the more they're played, the more likely things will wear out or stop functioning. Buying used from a good dealer should ensure that the guitar has been looked over, restrung and set up. Buying privately or online, however, you're on your own. Whichever route you choose, it's time for head over heart. And if you buy blind, you're open to all sorts of problems – we'd never recommend that, even though plenty of us do it! If you can, play the guitar and adopt a more thorough, cynical approach.

★ TUNE UP

First off, tune up with a tuner and stretch the strings. Double-check your tuning. Play, for example, a root E or A and then, using the low open strings as reference, play inversions up the fingerboard. If it sounds a little out of tune, re-check your tuner and repeat. Setting correct intonation is easily done, but double-check that there's enough adjustment at the saddle, for example, especially on a tune-o-matic bridge, to set your intonation and/or your string height

should you need to. Bear in mind, too, that if the strings are old you may get all sorts of stability and intonation problems that are simply cured with a new set. Run your finger under the high E. Does it feel rough? It shouldn't. Make a mental note of how the tuners themselves feel. Do you hear any little pings as you tune? That could mean the nut isn't cut properly. String buzz may mean you have a fret problem, the truss rod isn't set incorrectly or the string height is simply too low. If you ask nicely, some shops will restring the guitar for you and re-set action/intonation. We love these shops!

★ HARDWARE CHECK

Modern tuners rarely present problems, but always check. On a sealed unit, the feel of the tuner can be tightened up just by screwing in the flat- or cross-head screw that holds the button to the tuner housing. Bridges can be more problematic. Old-style wrapover bridges may be sonically efficient but are sometimes impossible to intonate accurately. Adjustment screws can get gunked up or ruined by someone over-tightening the screw and ripping its thread. Check carefully. Don't try to adjust a rusted screw, for example, on a vintage-style Strat saddle or steel-saddled Tele.

★ IS THE WHAMMY WORKING?

Vibratos [1] can be really troublesome, so a play-test is essential. Make sure it does what it should do – if the tuning is wildly out after a few waggles, you might have a problem that very much depends on the vibrato system. If all this is sounding out of your comfort zone, again, ask the dealer for advice. If it's a private seller, beware.

★ NUT

This little piece of plastic, metal or bone can be highly troublesome on some used guitars. Quite often, someone has done a little bit of, ahem, DIY and cut the grooves too low with the wrong tools. Replacing a nut isn't hugely expensive. Bend behind the nut: does the string come back in tune? Are there pings or creaks? Fret a string at the 3rd fret then ping it behind the fret – it should sound clearly and you should be able to see a slight clearance between the underside of the string and the 1st fret. Use that tuner again: does fretting at the 1st actually produce the correct note or is it sharp? If it is sharp, the nut grooves may be too high, or the nut might be in the wrong place. The nut is often the culprit on guitars that don't stay in tune; the string is catching in the incorrectly cut nut

grooves. You can certainly add lubrication (soft pencil lead still takes some beating), but a properly cut groove, which needs specialist files and some know-how, is the only proper cure.

★ FRETS

Take a close look at the frets themselves [2]. Fretwear is going to happen and a full refret, especially on a bound or maple fingerboard (which may require refinishing), can be expensive. That doesn't mean you should look elsewhere, you just need to budget for it. If there is visible wear, it's often possible with a larger gauge wire to lightly dress the fret tops and re-profile them – again, a job for someone who knows what they're doing. With 'vintage' small gauge wire, this might not be possible and a partial or full refret may be needed.

★ PICKUPS & ELECTRICS

It's rare that a pickup stops working [3], but far from unheard of. Plug in – check each pickup is working, all very obvious! Likewise, other idiot-checks are the controls and switches – check they work and do what they are supposed to do. Expect some crackles, especially if the guitar hasn't been used much recently. Rotate controls fast and move switches back and forth. Quite often, this will cure any issues. If not, you might have a problem that can't be fixed with a squirt of Servisol.

Check any pull-push switches that voice a coil-split, for example. Are the coil-splits actually working? Wiring repairs and mods are easy enough on Strats and Teles as well as the majority of solidbodies, for example, but semis such as an ES-335 are a lot more involved. That means more skill and time if you do it yourself or a bigger repair bill if you need to employ a tech.

★ SOUND ADJUSTMENT

How you set your pickup heights, such as your string gauge and string height [4], is a personal thing. Listen to the guitar plugged in: does the neck pickup seem a lot louder/quieter than the bridge? Simple height adjustment will alter things quite dramatically. Check you can get the approximate voicings you'd like, although you should bear in mind that some pickups aren't height adjustable and some require pickguards or scratchplates to



be removed. If the pickups remain vastly unbalanced then it's possible that some DIY modding has gone on – which is not always a problem, just another thing you may need to sort. Many a good guitar has been ruined, or at least impaired, by an enthusiastic amateur who thought they knew better than the original designer.

★ GENERAL CONDITION & PREVIOUS REPAIRS

Condition [5] will have an effect on the price you'll pay, which can work to your advantage if you're after a 'player'. However, things such as headstock breaks, even those that are well repaired, might mean you'll have difficulty selling on the guitar in the future. Check for finish cracks, too, especially on set-neck guitars where the neck joins the body and around the nut area. If there are any, it might be just a finish crack, but it could potentially be something more serious resulting from impact damage.

★ NECKS

Bolt-on necked guitars are wonderfully serviceable and, as per the original design, if you have a problem with such a neck, replacement is quite doable, although obviously adds cost. A set-neck

guitar presents more of a problem, and checking that all is okay isn't easy for the inexperienced. Sight down the neck from the nut end to the body using the low E string as a straight edge. Do the frets look parallel with each other? Does the neck have a slight concave curve (good), or does the surface look uneven, or even twisted (bad and worse still!)? In playing position, hold the low E at the 1st fret with your left hand and around the 16th fret with your right. Again, with the string as your straight edge you should see a slight gap above the 6th/7th fret and between the underside of the string – around 0.5mm or less. More than that and the guitar might need a slight truss rod (tightening) tweak.

Truss rods aren't rocket science – any tweaks will be covered by a store selling secondhand – but unless you know what you're doing, don't.

★ FORENSIC STYLE

Getting a 'picture' of the guitar you're thinking of buying is no bad thing. Think of the car analogy: one careful previous owner or a car used for business travel? We know which we'd go for! A guitar that has been looked after will invariably have less issues compared with one that's been heavily played and abused. **G**

5 Tips For Buyers

The high-street guitar shop is a theatre of dreams. Who hasn't gazed longingly into the window of a guitar store and wondered what bits of heaven and earth they could move to get the guitar that lies behind the glass? Here are five tips to help you find a keeper...

★ 1. BRING A MATE

"If you are spending a decent sum of money on a guitar, take a trusted friend with you," recommends *Guitarist* contributor and self-avowed gear addict Stuart Ryan. "At some point in proceedings, you may find yourself beginning to doubt your own ears, for better or worse, so it pays to have a second set of ears there to give you that uncut, personal opinion that a salesperson may not offer. Better still, if your friend is a decent player then you'll be able to hand them the guitar so you can stand back and hear what the instrument is capable of, up close, from a distance or even the other side of the room."

★ 2. FAIR TRADE

A trade-in is still a handy way of bringing a dream guitar within reach, provided you're realistic, says Mark Smith of the Renegade Guitar Co. in Dursley, Gloucestershire. "A trade-in is not usually going to bring in as much as selling your old guitar privately, but it is convenient, allowing you to get a sizeable discount on a new guitar with a minimum of hassle,"

he says. "The most sought-after guitars will obviously command a better trade-in price – but speculative pricing by private sellers on the internet sometimes gives people an inflated idea of what their own trade-ins are worth. As a general rule, you should expect the retailer to tell you not only what they're prepared to give you for your guitar, but what they will be selling it on for, so you can decide whether it's an acceptable trade." What is a fair trade? Well, the dealer is buying your guitar to sell on, so clearly they'll want to make some money on it. So, if they think your guitar is worth £1,000, that's what they'll need to sell it for. They need to make their margin – say 25 per cent – and then there's VAT to add at 20 per cent. Subtract those and you arrive at a typical trade-in price.

★ 3. PERKS YOU CAN PUSH FOR

What can you reasonably ask a retailer to 'throw in' by way of perks for sweetening a deal these days? Most dealers will offer to match a lower price you've found elsewhere or they may offer you accessories to the value of the price difference. With online selling paring down prices (and dealers' margins)

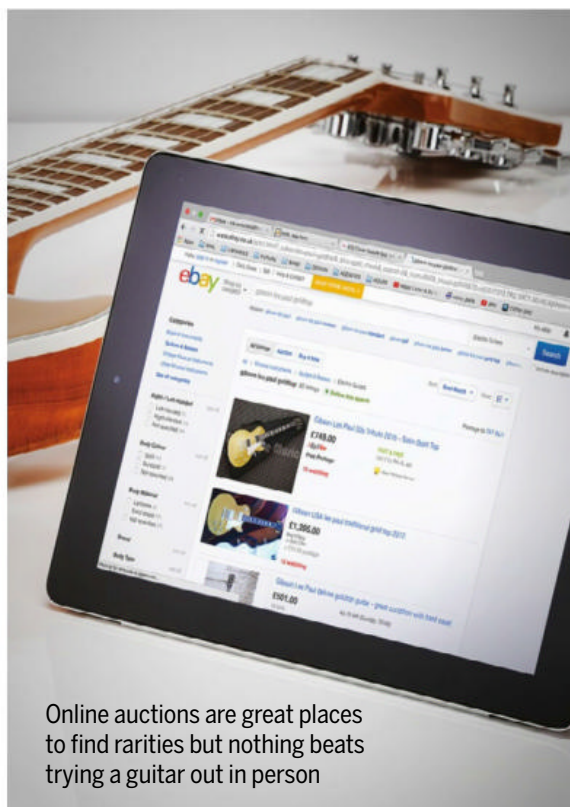
across the board, using a lower price found elsewhere – if a legitimate one can be found – may be your best leverage to obtain a few small perks.

★ 4. TRUST YOUR GUT

Trawling through noisy guitar shops is fatiguing. After a few hours of trying out guitars your ears will get tired and, as closing-time looms, you may feel the urge to buy something... anything... just to have something to show for your efforts. Do that and you'll likely make an over-thought or half-hearted decision that will haunt you later. Take regular breaks for coffee or a stroll to refresh your ears and restore your judgement. Trust your gut and if you don't come across a guitar that slaps an instant grin on your face when you play it, save your money for another day.

"A trade-in is convenient, allowing you a sizeable discount on a new guitar with a minimum of hassle"

MARK SMITH, RENEGADE GUITAR CO



Online auctions are great places to find rarities but nothing beats trying a guitar out in person

★ 5. BUY CHEAP, BUY TWICE?

Stuart Ryan argues that saving up for the guitar you really want can, in some ways, be more economical than accepting second-best. "Many years ago, I found myself in Ivor Mairants playing the most beautiful small-bodied Martin I'd ever come across," he says. "At the time I was young and broke, but needed a good acoustic. It was a toss-up between the Martin and a used Moridair [Morris] for £500. Of course, I did the safe thing and bought the Morris, with some slight regret. However, I only kept that guitar for about three years, sold it and then began a long hunt for a small-bodied guitar that would probably never have been necessary if I'd have bought the Martin. Sometimes, spending that bit more can actually save you a lot of time and effort in the long run!" **G**

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Under £1,000



EPIPHONE CORONET £349

A real contender for the 'coolest-looking guitar' award, Epiphone's reissued Coronet packs a single bridge P-90 Pro for brilliantly ballsy tones. It boasts a mahogany body and neck, and Indian Laurel fingerboard, with an intonation compensated 'Lightning Bar' bridge/tailpiece. An appealing symmetrical design that's fabulous value for money.

www.epiphone.com



VINTAGE V6 REISSUED £389

Whichever way you spin it, the V6 – part of the Vintage Reissued Series – performs well above its price with a very appealing modded vintage vibe that is good enough for the learning player or those of us who simply can't justify more cash. This one, with a tortie scratchplate, Wilkinson pickups and hardware, is especially a steal.

www.vintageguitarsrus.com



G&L TRIBUTE ASAT SPECIAL FROM £399

As per the Telecaster, the ASAT was originally branded the Broadcaster upon its release in '85. Available in a choice of three finishes including Gloss Black, Surf Green and Irish Ale, this under-the-radar Leo Fender-designed modern classic features a pair of wide/flat G&L MFD single coils similar in character to Jazzmaster and P-90 pickups.

www.glguitars.com



EPIPHONE SG STANDARD '61 MAESTRO VIBROLA £429

A gem from Epiphone's Inspired by Gibson Collection, this mahogany-bodied double-cut has a SlimTaper profile mahogany neck and a 304.8mm (12-inch) radius Indian laurel 'board with trapezoid inlays. Onboard are a Maestro Vibrola tailpiece with LockTone ABR tune-o-matic bridge, Epiphone Deluxe Vintage tuners, dual ProBucker pickups and CTS pots.

www.epiphone.com



RAPIER 33 £429

JHS and Alan Entwistle have revived the Watkins Rapiert model from the early 60s – and while there's pawn-shop charm in spades, its unusual pickup switching and dual-volume controls give considerable scope to this Chinese-made build. With hum-cancelling mini-humbuckers and a very in-tune vibrato, it's a refreshing addition to the entry-level market.

www.jhs.co.uk



GRETSCH G5222 ELECTROMATIC DOUBLE JET BT £449

Inspired by Gretsch's legendary Jet guitars that appeared in the 50s, this chambered mahogany body/maple top double-cutaway is kitted out with a V-Stoptail that is reminiscent of the Cadillac 'V' tailpiece styling of yore. From clean to gnarly overdrive, a pair of Black Top Broad'Tron humbuckers provides a pleasingly rich, full and focused sound.

www.gretschguitars.com



VINTAGE V100PBB £469

The Vintage V100PBB offers a taste of the real thing while holding its own in the affordable guitar market. The single-cutaway solidbody electric is put together in traditional fashion using a mahogany neck and mahogany body with a carved maple top. Dual Wilkinson W90 SK single-coil soapbars provide a broad range of tones here from mellow jazz to searing leads. www.vintageguitarsrus.com



Under £1,000



EPIPHONE UPTOWN KAT ES £479

With its 'bikini' logo headstock plate and dual mini-humbuckers, the Uptown Kat ES is all about that timeless vintage Kalamazoo style. An upmarket ebony fretboard with large pearloid block inlays, a mahogany neck and high-quality hardware including Grover Rotomatic tuners and a LockTone ABR adjustable bridge belie its modest price tag.

www.epiphone.com



GRETSCH G2655TG-P90 LTD ED STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK JR £479

Gretsch's Streamliner range has become a byword for value in electric guitars. This satin-finished Center Block Jr model downsizes the classic double-cutaway outline, adds a good-sounding P-90 soapbar at the bridge, and throws in a licensed Bigsby to boot. Somehow, it still sounds like a Gretsch but with a punkier garage vibe.

www.gretschguitars.com



PRS SE STARLA STOPTAIL £499

The SE Starla Stoptail features a classic tune-o-matic bridge/stud tailpiece combo. With a mahogany body, Wide Fat-profile mahogany neck with a 22-fret rosewood fretboard, and splittable PRS-designed DS-02 treble and bass humbucking pickups, this retro-inspired single-cutaway set-neck solidbody punches well above its weight in price.

www.prsguitars.com



EPIPHONE LES PAUL STANDARD '50S £549

Available in a choice of three finishes including Vintage Sunburst, Heritage Cherry Sunburst and Metallic Gold, this impressive recreation from the Inspired by Gibson Collection features a mahogany neck and a mahogany body with a maple cap (AAA grade veneer on figured tops). A pair of vintage-voiced Alnico II ProBucker humbuckers delivers PAF-like tones at a steal.

www.epiphone.com



DANELECTRO 59XT £569

A modern take on the Danelectro Shorthorns from '59, the 59XT couples a splittable Lipstick humbucker in the bridge position with a fat-sounding P-90-style single coil in the neck. Sporting a Wilkinson vibrato, this maple-necked semi-hollow double-cutaway electric is available in a range of finishes including Silver, Dark Burgundy, Dark Aqua and Black.

www.danelectro.com



GUILD STARFIRE I DC GVT £569

Appearing in Pelham Blue sporting an aluminium Guild vibrato tailpiece with a tune-o-matic bridge and 18:1 ratio Vintage 18 tuners, this maple-bodied double-cutaway features a mahogany centre block housing dual Guild HB-2 Alnico II humbuckers augmented by a three-way selector switch, separate volume and tone controls and a push-pull coil-split function.

www.guildguitars.com



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Under £1,000



GUILD STARFIRE I SC GVT £569

This single-cut with 'Guildsby' vibrato is modelled after the early 60s Starfire III and comes in around half the price of the Newark St repro. It employs the very good-sounding standard humbucking sized HB-IIIs with coil-splits from the tone control rotaries. "Retro style with more than competent sounds and little to dislike" was our verdict.

www.guildguitars.com



MANSON MBM-1 META SERIES MATTHEW BELLAMY £569

Produced under licence by Cort, Manson's Meta Series MBM-1 Matthew Bellamy signature model has been designed to reproduce the sounds and feel of those instruments played by the Muse guitarist himself. With a lightweight basswood body and compound radius 'V'-profile maple neck, this progressive design includes powerful dual humbuckers and locking tuners.

www.mansonguitarworks.com



FENDER PLAYER JAZZMASTER £579

This reimagined Fender classic offers a broader scope of tonal possibilities – from typically bright Fender-style single-coil cut to PAF-like growl – courtesy of two splittable Player Series Alnico II humbuckers. A 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fretboard and Fender 'modern-C' profile give this ever more popular old-school offset a comfortable contemporary feel.

www.fender.com



FRET-KING COUNTRY SQUIRE SEMITONE SPECIAL £599

Designed in collaboration with Trevor Wilkinson, this souped-up T-type semi-acoustic features a slightly offset two-piece American alder body and bolt-on Canadian rock maple neck with a dot-inlaid 22-fret ebony 'board. An extremely versatile instrument, the Country Squire Semitone Special's unique pickup configuration offers an expansive array of tonal options.

www.jhs.co.uk



JOE DOE BY VINTAGE PUNKASTER £599

Brighton-based custom builder Joe Doe Guitars is all about "where art meets guitar" – top-spec instruments with imaginative relic finishes inspired by rock 'n' roll lore. Vintage distributor JHS was so impressed with founder Ben Court's designs it decided to collaborate, and thus the eye-catching Joe Doe for Vintage limited-edition line was born.

www.vintageguitarsrus.com



YAMAHA REVSTAR RS502T £619

The stylish aluminium tailpiece with tune-o-matic bridge, the dual Alnico V P-90-style soapbar pickups, the 629mm (24.75-inch) scale length mahogany neck with rosewood fretboard – all combine to form a perfectly balanced retro-modern design. The RS502T boils the Revstar aesthetic down to its fundamental essence. A contemporary classic in our book.

www.uk.yamaha.com



Giulietta



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Learn More at [VOXAMPS.CO.UK/GUITARS](https://www.voxamps.co.uk/guitars)

Under £1,000



GRETSCH G5655T ELECTROMATIC CENTER BLOCK JR £679

Small in size but mighty in tone, these giant-killing Jr models retain all the charm of Gretsch's unique heritage. Available in Casino Gold, Dark Cherry Metallic and Jade Grey Metallic, the Bigsby-equipped single cutaway G5655T has a laminated maple body and is constructed with a feedback-busting spruce centre block. It also features dual Black Top Broad'Tron humbuckers. www.gretschguitars.com



IBANEZ RG421HPAH £699

Featuring a nyatoh body, figured ash top, Wizard III roasted maple neck and jatoba fretboard with 24 jumbo frets, this exotic gold-hardware-endowed high-performance axe really does stand out from the crowd. Not only does it look great but its powerful DiMarzio Fusion Edge humbuckers help it cut through the mix with plenty of clarity and precision. www.ibanez.com



FENDER NOVENTA STRATOCASTER £729

The stripped-down format of these Mexican-made Noventa models oozes cool. You have a choice of three finishes on the dual-soapbar Strat, including this glossy Daphne Blue, and while that chunky neck P-90-style pickup might take some getting used to visually, the versatility it affords makes it more than worth it. Superb playability and an extremely keen price. www.fender.com



REVEREND DOUBLE AGENT OG £729

Marrying classic guitar design with the needs of the contemporary guitarist, Reverend guitars are renowned for their striking looks and breadth of tone. This korina solidbody is available in a choice of seven colours and comes equipped with custom Alnico V pickups – the HA5 bridge humbucker and 9A5 neck P-90 – for maximum openness, clarity and depth. www.reverendguitars.com



FENDER VINTERA '60S STRAT £749

The Three-Colour Sunburst over alder, three-ply mint green pickguard and narrow headstock with spaghetti Fender logo really give this Strat that classic pre-CBS look. Not only does it look 60s but a set of vintage-style '60s Strat pickups and a 184mm (7.25-inch) radius fretboard with 21 vintage-style frets make it sound and feel like the real thing. www.fender.com



STERLING BY MUSIC MAN VALENTINE JV60 £749

Also available with a vibrato in Toluca Lake Blue finish as the JV60T, the Valentine JV60 hardtail from Sterling by Music Man's Artist Series comes in two finishes – namely Trans Buttermilk and Vintage Sunburst – and features a unique front humbucker/slanted single-coil rear pickup combination augmented by a 12dB boost for expanded tonal range. www.sterlingbymusicman.com



GUILD S-100 POLARA £749

Harking back to Guild's second wave of SG-inspired 70s solidbodies, this classic-looking mahogany double-cut comes in three finishes. It features a pair of brightly voiced Alnico II HB-1 humbuckers (the originals of which are prized by Guild aficionados) and a Gibson-style control circuit with three-way toggle pickup selector and individual pickup volume and tone. www.guildguitars.com

Under £1,000



GUILD ARISTOCRAT P90 £799

A lightweight alternative to heavier solidbodies, this dual Guild Franz P-90 soapbar-loaded single-cutaway features a chambered mahogany body with a bound carved top. Oozing style, this model from Guild's incredible Newark St Collection boasts gold hardware throughout, including a harp tailpiece with a tune-o-matic bridge and vintage-style open-gear tuners. www.guildguitars.com



PRS SE CUSTOM 24 £799

Originally unveiled at NAMM back in 1985, the Custom 24 is the PRS model that started it all. Featuring a smart mahogany/bevelled maple body with a flame maple veneer and a 635mm (25-inch) scale length maple neck with a 24-fret rosewood 'board, this version from PRS's SE range offers players a more affordable alternative to its Core line counterpart. www.prsguitars.com



RIVOLTA MONDATA II HB £799

Designed by renowned luthier Dennis Fano, Rivolta guitars represent the more budget-friendly side of offset extraordinaire Novo. With a tune-o-matic bridge, stop tailpiece, trapezoid inlays and dual humbuckers, this mahogany solidbody has its heart in old-school Kalamazoo but leans heavily into classic Cali styling with an offset form and belly/forearm contours. www.rivoltaguitars.com



STERLING BY MUSIC MAN LUKE SIGNATURE £799

Also available in Blueberry Burst finish, the Luke signature in Hazel Burst is inspired by the masterful tones and deft technique of Toto guitarist Steve Lukather. Featuring locking tuners for added stability, its dual custom humbuckers are augmented by a 12dB boost as well as a five-way selector switch for extra versatility and dynamics. www.sterlingbymusicman.com



SHERGOLD PROVOCATEUR SP02SD £809

Designed by UK luthier extraordinaire Patrick James Eggle, the Provocateur SP02-SD boasts the classic dual-'bucker single-cut format, albeit with a sleek, understated modern aesthetic. Brandishing quality throughout, with a pair of Seymour Duncan '59 Model pickups and compensated brass saddles, this ebony-'boarded mahogany solidbody offers exceptional value. www.shergoldguitars.com



FENDER VINTERA '60S STRATOCASTER MODIFIED £825

The Vintera Modified models differ from the more vintage-accurate specification with tweaks. So here the pau ferro fingerboard's radius is slightly flattened from 7.25, but it retains a 'Modern C' neck profile and two-post vibrato with bent steel saddles. The 'seven sound' mod adds neck and bridge via S-1 switching for an even more versatile Strat. www.fender.com



FENDER VINTERA '70S TELECASTER DELUXE £849

The top of the Tele range in the 70s, the Deluxe is renowned for its Gibson Les Paul-style dual humbuckers and control configuration, providing rock-solid tones in a sleek, contoured Telecaster format. With Fender Wide Range pickups revoiced for improved clarity and a 'thin-C' profile maple neck, this leftfield Tele recreates that enduring sound and feel.

www.fender.com



Under £1,000



GIBSON LES PAUL SPECIAL TRIBUTE £849

US-made and available in a choice of four satin nitrocellulose lacquer finishes – including Vintage Cherry, Ebony, Worn White and Natural Walnut – this ageless single-cutaway design features the simple yet stylish Les Paul Special appointments of mahogany body and neck, rosewood fretboard with dot inlays, wraparound bridge and a pair of black soapbar P-90s.

www.gibson.com



CORT G290 LE £859

As the manufacturer for numerous brands we've featured such as PRS, Manson and Relish to name but three, Cort is becoming a major player in global guitar manufacturing. This limited-edition version of the G290 packs a great spec, with AAAA maple top, a compound radius ebony fingerboard, excellent vibrato, locking tuners and dual coil-splittable humbuckers.

www.cortguitars.com



EVH 5150 SERIES STANDARD £859

Proudly sporting a pair of hot direct-mount Alnico II EVH Wolfgang humbuckers, the 5150 Series Standard's EVH-branded Floyd Rose is built to withstand even the most devastating of divebombs and features fine-tuners along with the EVH D-Tuna mechanism to quickly and accurately switch between standard and drop D tuning.

www.evhgear.com



CHARVEL PRO-MOD DK22 SSS 2PT CM £899

This Mexican-made Dinky-body bolt-on has all the key points of the 'progressive' guitar, from its graphite-reinforced caramelised maple neck, Gotoh Custom 510 vibrato, Seymour Duncan pickups and Luminlay side dots. Its relatively flat compound radius fingerboard suggests it's just built for speed, but it's surprisingly good in a cleaner world, too.

www.charvel.com



PRS SE PAUL'S GUITAR £899

As one of the first SEs to be crafted in a new Indonesian factory, the price here is considerably lower than that of the USA Core model yet it still offers the same Private Stock bridge and concept TCI tuned pickups with true single-coil switching. The SE Paul's Guitar has a 635mm (25-inch) scale, 22-fret rosewood fretboard, mahogany neck and body, and figured maple top.

www.prsguitar.com



CHARVEL PRO-MOD DK24 HSH 2PT CM MAHOGANY £919

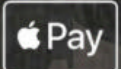
With a comfort-enhancing heel cut and classic body contours, this progressive but pared-back double-cut features a natural finished mahogany body, a super-stable graphite-reinforced caramelised maple neck, Seymour Duncan pickups and an all-steel Gotoh 510 vibrato. An effortless player – power on tap if you need it but with a vintage-y, rootsy heart.

www.charvel.com

12
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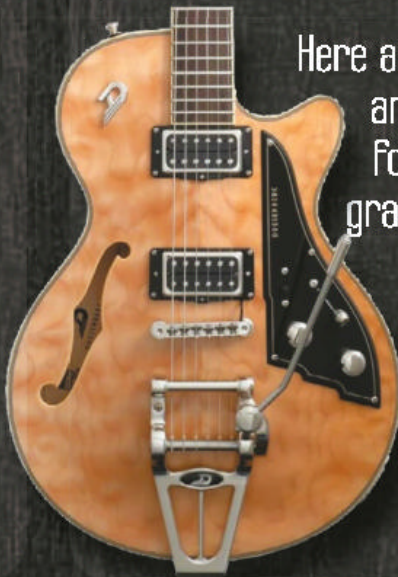
 **YAMAHA**



As one of the UK's major stockists of Japanese Yamaha instruments we keep nearly every model in stock or on order at all times, including SA, SG, Revstar and signature model electric & basses, plus their superb Acoustic guitars.



DUESENBERG



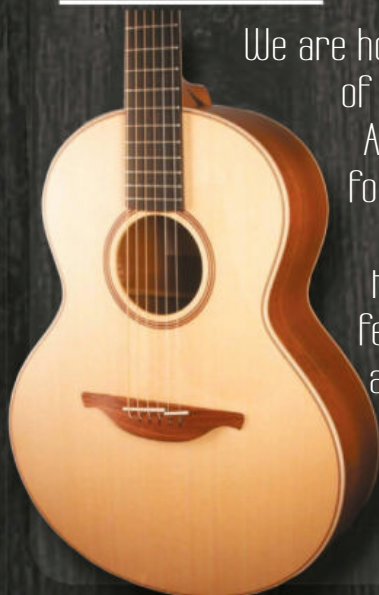
Here at Musicstreet we are the UK Flagship for these Premium grade stylish guitars from Germany. Joe Walsh, Elvis Costello, John Mayer all play Duesy's

H.S. Anderson



Every HS Anderson Madcat guitar is handbuilt in the original Moridaira factory by Japanese craftsmen. We are the UK's exclusive dealer for Madcat
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Lowden



We are honoured to be one of the handful of UK Authorised dealers for Lowden Guitars. Each collection in the Lowden Range features distinctive appointments with a selection of tone woods and custom options

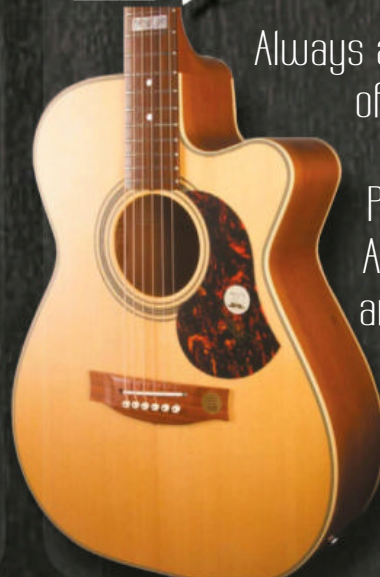
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Beautiful, Affordable Handcrafted Archtops, Thinline Semi's, and LP Style Guitars

Featured is the new uniquely designed Romeo LA

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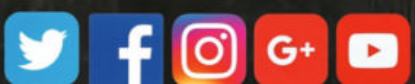
Always a great selection of Maton in store,

Plug one of these Aussie beauties in and find out what all the fuss is about

Featured
Tommy Emmanuel
EBG808CE-TE £2299

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WHAT'S IN
STORE?
...

Musicstreet

BY HENRY YATES

Since the fateful day in the mid-80s when he fought through the cigarette smoke of the local guitar shop to pick up his first Strat copy, MI retail has been in Tony Rawson's blood. From 1997, Rawson learned his trade at Machinehead Music under the much-missed Jeff Pumfrett, before establishing Musicstreet seven years ago in Huntingdon as a destination store for brands such as PRS and Duesenberg, and a beacon of friendly, knowledgeable service.

What's the focus of Musicstreet?

"We cover most bases, but I guess it's anything of quality. We do higher-end stuff and we're big on brands like PRS and Duesenberg. We've started doing a lot with Patrick Eggle, Victory Amps, that kind of thing. And then, on the effects side, it's Strymon and Origin. So they're tools that people can use professionally. At the entry level, we try not to go anything below a Yamaha Pacifica, which is around 200 quid. And then, at the top end, there's PRS Private Stock at about 10 grand, and there's some Duesenberg limited stuff at that kind of money, too. So I guess the sky's the limit."

It seems like Musicstreet has both classic and leftfield stuff?

"Yeah, I like that. If you come in the front door, we've got a wall of PRS, probably about 80 models, from SEs up to Private Stock and everything in between. To the left of that is Gretsch, Music Man and then a few esoteric brands like Patrick Eggle and Hahn, which we bring over from New York. The builder is called Chihoe: he's very well regarded in that circle, and has built guitars for Walter Becker and famous studio musicians. There is something about the Hahn guitars."

What's your best advice for anyone setting out to buy a guitar?

"The key thing is to try as many different guitars as possible. Find the one that sits nicely, feels nice to play and offers the sound you're after. Feel is a big deal – you know, if the neck's comfortable. Some players like a guitar you have to fight



a bit, but on the whole, it should be a pleasurable experience playing the guitar, not too much of a battle. If you're trying a guitar – with us or anyone – make sure the frets are in good shape and it's not rattling where it shouldn't be. A setup will generally sort that out, but make sure it's been fret-dressed properly and the frets are nice and not sharp or anything."

When should you walk away from a guitar?

"If it doesn't call to you. If it doesn't sound right, feel right, then look for something else. I mean, I've had a few nice Les Pauls over the years and I think they're a cool-looking guitar. But, for me, I just don't get on with them. I'm used to that Strat-style scale length. That works for me."

What are your bestsellers?

"PRS is a big focus, and we do sell a lot of them. We get people travelling from all over the country just because we've got

so many. If you're looking for a particular PRS model, it's likely we've got it. The same with Duesenberg: we've probably got more than any other store in the country."

What brands deserve more attention, in your view?

"If you look at some of the UK builders, Gordon Smith are building some great stuff now. Seth Baccus: he used to work for Mansons down in Exeter, and I think he still does stuff for Matt Bellamy. But he's been building guitars for years, set up on his own probably 15 years ago, and he's got a full order book. They're at the higher end but superb instruments, and I think if you're spending two or three grand on a guitar that's going to last you 15 years, it's not a lot in the grand scheme of things. I mean, guitars are still relatively cheap if you compare them with other instruments. You try and buy a decent violin, you're talking 10 grand."

1. Musicstreet aims to be a destination store and the breadth of its stock attracts visitors from far afield who are after scarce models

2. Tony Rawson, owner of Musicstreet, welcomes guitarists who just want to browse the wide selection of brands and models in store

3. Tony Rawson says the popularity of evergreen guitars such as the Strat and Tele has remained stable – but home recording gear has been a growth area



“The key thing is to try as many different guitars as possible. Find one that sits nicely... Feel is a big deal”

TONY RAWSON, FOUNDER

What should a good retailer be doing for their customers?

“Every guitar needs to be set up properly. You want to make sure it’s going to play as well as it can. Then you just want good, honest advice. We always try to advise our customers if they’re after a specific sound, and we’ll guide them based on our experience. Ultimately, they want to walk away happy with a guitar they’re in love with. You shouldn’t make them buy a guitar just because you’ve got it on the shelf. We’re not one of those pushy shops where it’s all about getting the sale. We’ll get guys coming in just for a chat about gigs and gear, which is cool.”

What changing trends in guitar buying are you seeing?

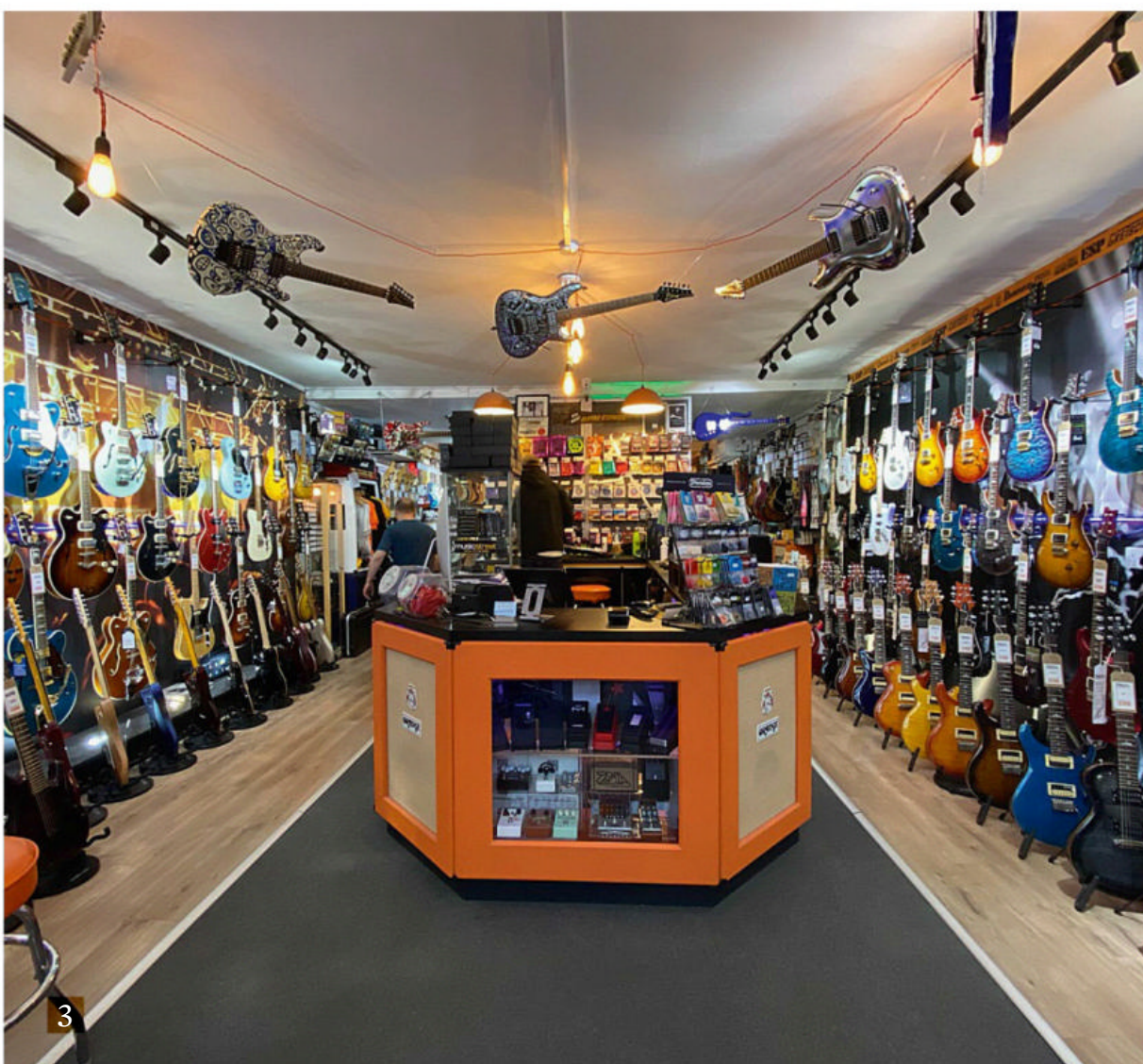
“The popularity of models like the Strat and Tele is fairly stable. But, certainly, during the pandemic, we’re finding more people are doing home recording and they’re after a guitar that’s going to give them a specific sound.”

What’s your favourite guitar in the store and why?

“That’s a difficult one. There’s one that I spec’d up a couple of years ago. It’s a Collings 360 and every time I pick it up I just think, ‘This is so amazing.’”

Do you remember your first trip to a guitar shop?

“I do, yeah. It would have been in the mid-80s, and I went along to a little local shop with my uncle. I won’t say where it was, but I remember going in and there was cigarette smoke everywhere because the guy behind the counter was smoking. He probably had a can of Red Stripe under the counter as well. But I couldn’t care less at the time. All I wanted was to



walk out of the shop with a guitar. What did I get that day? It was a Hohner Strat copy and it wasn’t fretted properly, so the action would have been really high. But it was my first electric guitar.”

Do you encourage people to test stuff out at Musicstreet?

“Yeah. I’d rather they came in, tried it and walked out happy. We do get a fair bit of online business, where repeat customers trust us that we’re going to set it up and send it out to them and it’ll play perfectly. But I’d still rather someone comes in the store and tries it out for themselves.”

Do you think it’s worth investing in a decent guitar, whatever your level?

“Yeah. If you buy some cheap rubbish, it’ll put you off playing forever. A lot of parents, especially, will ask, ‘What’s the cheapest guitar you’ve got?’ And they’ll tell me they’ve seen something online

for next to nothing. And I’ll say, ‘Well, you could buy that for little Johnny, but he probably won’t stick at it.’ Starting any instrument is hard, but if a guitar is painful, has sharp frets and you can’t get a good sound out, you’re not going to want to pick it up. So many people buy stuff online and they’ll bring it in and it’s just dreadful. You just think, ‘Well, you don’t really stand a chance.’”

Finally, have you ever had any celebrities coming into the shop?

“We get quite a few pro players in, guys from the West End and touring bands. We’re good friends with Rob Harris from Jamiroquai, too, and we’ve done stuff with Albert Lee. He’s lovely. I mean, he’s nearly 80 years old now and he’s still out there playing 300-odd gigs a year... when there’s no pandemic!”

For more information see
<https://musicstreet.co.uk>

From £1,000 to £2,000



FENDER AMERICAN PERFORMER TELECASTER HUM £1,049

This oddly named model takes the standard Performer Tele and replaces its neck single coil with a covered DoubleTap humbucker that offers a single-coil mode, widening the tonal scope significantly. Tradition and modernity are balanced elsewhere between the three-brass-saddle bridge design and Fender's ClassicGear tuners – that look and perform superbly. www.fender.com



FENDER ED O'BRIEN STRATOCASTER £1,099

Offering a Mexican build, a superb 10/56V neck profile and 21 'narrow tall' frets on a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius maple 'board, this model is powered by a Seymour Duncan JB Jr at the bridge, a slightly overwound Fender Texas Special in the middle slot, and the Fernandes Sustainer at the neck – illustrating just how adaptable the Strat can be. www.fender.com



EASTMAN SB55/V £1,239

Hugely vintage informed with a characterful Antique Varnish finish, this SB55/v is probably the closest you'll get to the real thing for a fraction of the price. The vibe is spot on and the weight from the okoume build is perfect. The boutique-style hardware from Faber and the Lollar dog-ear P-90 elevate it above the asking price. A well-informed tribute to a classic. www.eastmanguitars.com



PRS SE HOLLOWBODY II PIEZO £1,349

An impressively versatile electric-meets-acoustic for the price. Along with an almost timeless classic voice to the magnetic 58/15 'S' humbuckers, the new PRS/LR Baggs piezo system is extremely good. There's little doubt the Piezo model expands the sonic potential of the previous SE Hollowbodies, making a very good guitar quite exceptional. www.prsguitars.com



VOX BOBCAT S66 BIGSBY £1,399

Based on Vox's Italian-made thinline semis from the 60s, the Bobcat S66 – like all recent Vox guitars – was conceived by legendary guitar designer Rich Lasner and his team. And the expertise shows. The 2021 S66 features a trio of single coils along with a Bigsby B70 in the Sapphire Blue finish option, while the Jet Black model comes equipped with a Bigsby B700. www.voxamps.com



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER HSS £1,599

Seemingly small tweaks to the original Professional here, such as extra fingerboard edge rolling, a vintage-style neck tint and slight upgrades to the V-Mod pickups, all enhance the platform. But with the new DoubleTap humbucker replacing the previous ShawBucker, there's a slightly more contemporary edge. 'Small' upgrades that add up to a considerable difference. www.fender.com



GIBSON LES PAUL CLASSIC £1,649

It might be in the company's Modern category but it's identical to the '60s Standard save for Gibson's nine-hole weight relief and a plain maple top. The Classic retains the pull-switch PCB Quick Connect wiring, which means we have single-coil-like 'tap' voices, out-of-phase and direct-out options, and you can swap pickups without warming up your soldering iron.

www.gibson.com



From £1,000 to £2,000



GIBSON SG STANDARD '61 WITH MAESTRO VIBROLA £1,649

This model presents an attractive spin on the SG with the vibrola's smooth expression and retro aesthetic – it's also satisfyingly stable for general use. A sculpted mahogany body, slim taper mahogany neck, bound rosewood fingerboard with trapezoid inlays, and a pair of covered 61R and T Burstbucker humbuckers make for a versatile solidbody here.

www.gibson.com



PRS S2 MCCARTY 594 THINLINE £1,649

The 594 platform was introduced in 2016 and presents a classic Gibson-aimed recipe that differs with its two-piece bridge/tailpiece and four-control layout. While Core-level 594 models will cost you a pretty penny, the same two-piece bridge and tailpiece from it are employed here, while the 58/15 'S' humbuckers produce a pretty classic voice.

www.prguitars.com



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL '60S STRATOCASTER £1,699

Replacing the American Vintage, the Original series is the closest to vintage you'll get from Fender USA, with an alder body, 'round laminate' rosewood fretboard, a 'thick '60s C' maple neck profile and Pure Vintage '65 Gray-Bottom single coils. The playing experience recalls vintage, but it's all a bit easier and slinkier, with an appealing body.

www.fender.com



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL '70S TELECASTER CUSTOM £1,699

For many players, humbuckers on a Fender are just wrong, but with the reproduction of its Cunife magnets, the return of the real Wide Range humbucker might change your mind. It does a great Keef impersonation, but there's a lot more to the seemingly cleaner and brighter PAF-style voice of the Wide Range, which makes this feel very much a guitar for today.

www.fender.com



EASTMAN SB/56N-GD £1,769

This Lollar soapbar-loaded vintage-style single-cut features a vintage nitro finish and aged hardware. P-90s excel at spikier rock rhythm, but there's impressive ground to be explored with the tones, from surprisingly jazz-like thrum to some snappy funk, and sophisticated soul to nasally cocked-wah classic rock. Eastman delivers here for build quality, sound and price.

www.eastmanguitars.com



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA STRATOCASTER £1,799

The Ultra represents the most contemporary vision of the Strat, but this guitar is still unmistakably Fender. The compound radius fingerboard, sculpted neck heel, Noiseless pickups and S-1 switching to activate neck and bridge pickups are not features aimed at traditionalists, but for anyone else this is a superb showcase for Strat definition and versatility.

www.fender.com

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WWW.LANEY.CO.UK

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PJD CAREY STANDARD £1,799

UK builder Leigh Dovey delivers superb design, crisp quality build and vibe-y resonance from the chambered light ash body, and achingly beautiful sounds from the Bare Knuckle Boot Camp Old Guard P-90 and bridge humbucker. The neck work alone, from quarter-sawn dark roasted maple, is up there with the best boutique guitars. At this price, it's simply a steal.
www.pjdguitars.com



EASTMAN T64/V-GB £1,829

This Chinese-made ES-330-style hollowbody features top USA and Japanese-made parts and a unique Antique Varnish finish – which is less like a relic but rather evokes the general patina of age. It's lightweight, hollow construction reveals an engaging unplugged voice, while the Lollar P-90s conjure up all manner of wide-ranging tones. A versatile and great value guitar.
www.eastmanguitars.com



EASTMAN ROMEO £1,949

Designed by archtop maker Otto D'Ambrosio who heads up Eastman's USA design and custom shop, the Romeo is a thinline for modern times. Downsized and perfectly balanced, it features a carved spruce top, with a bridge block, paired with a lightly flamed maple neck and ebony fingerboard. Lollar Imperial pickups prove the perfect match.
www.eastmanguitars.com



IBANEZ AZ2402 PRESTIGE FROM £1,989

Design tweaks abound for the AZ series with heavily radius'd heels, torrefied maple necks, stainless steel frets, locking height-adjustable tuners, and an excellent vibrato based on Gotoh's 'modern classic' 510. Moreover, the Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion pickups and intelligent switching give this guitar incredible versatility.
www.ibanez.com



GRETSCH G6228FM PLAYERS EDITION JET BT £1,999

A Jet that plays and sounds as good as it looks, with a rock-aimed voice via its Broad'Tron BT65 pickups, which owe more sonically to an overwound PAF than something you'd expect from TV Jones. "You get the curb appeal of the vintage original," we said, "but the performance is as contemporary as it gets. This is the Jet you buy instead of a Les Paul."
www.gretchguitars.com



IBANEZ AZS2200 PRESTIGE FROM £1,999

This Japanese Prestige model includes a Seymour Duncan Magic Touch mini-humbucker at the neck, Alnico II Pro Custom single coil at the bridge, Gotoh T1802 vibrato bridge, along with typical AZ features such as a roasted maple neck with stainless-steel jumbo frets. The Alter Switch wiring provides enhanced pickup combinations for serious versatility.
www.ibanez.com



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WHAT'S IN
STORE?
...

Richards Guitars

BY JAMIE DICKSON

Richard Cholerton is the founder of Richards Guitars, a Stratford-upon-Avon based guitar store with a fiercely independent spirit. While the store stocks a range of familiar brands, the heart of the business lies in offering high-quality guitars sourced from Britain and Europe, including Gordon Smith electrics and Dowina acoustics – hand-built instruments that offer uncompromising quality without a baked-in premium on the price tag that major brands might command.

Unafraid to call it as he sees it, Richard encourages customers to keep an open mind and do plenty of research before committing to a guitar. He also dislikes heavy-handed marketing, feeling that the proof of a guitar is in the playing, rather than the hype or the name on the headstock. We caught up with Richard to hear his seasoned tips on how to buy a guitar you really click with.

What's your best advice for anyone setting out to buy a guitar?

“My best bit of advice for guitar players, without being contentious, would be to think outside the box – not to believe everything you see in the media. Question everything, including what I say. Anything that I tell someone, research it, question it, compare it to what other people are telling you. So flip it to me as if I’m the bad guy here. That’s how I would sell [a guitar] to any customer. I would say, ‘If I tell you that there’s this special brand with special people that do things in a completely unique way, research it elsewhere – see if I’m telling the truth, do your own research, don’t just believe everything I tell you.’”

“If you can buy something utterly brilliant and made in the UK or Europe, why the need for mass-produced American guitars?”

RICHARD CHOLERTON, FOUNDER



What are the common mistakes guitar buyers make – and how do you help avoid them?

“Let’s say a customer asks me for an acoustic guitar with a spruce top and rosewood back and sides. During the conversation, you ask them what they’re looking for [in terms of performance]. What’s it going to be used for, what kind of setting, what kind of musical style? Is it going to be plugged in or is it going to be acoustic? And during that conversation you hear the customer say they want something with a warm tone. So let’s just focus on that: they want something with a really warm, rounded tone. My first worry is that the guitar they are asking me about has got a spruce top, which will give you a brighter sound, and rosewood back and sides, which will give you more detailed and quite separated sounds. Let’s say, for example, they’ve asked for a [rosewood] OM. In that situation, I’d be thinking, ‘I’m

not sure this is going to give you that warm, rounded sound.’ So I would say, ‘Obviously we have the guitar you want – but I might have a few other recommendations, based on what you’ve said to me, and maybe we can chat a bit more about [what’s going to get you the sound you want].’ I’d try to guide someone to other genuine recommendations based on my knowledge of tone, if you like.”

In your opinion, which of the brands that you stock deserve wider exposure?

“Dowina, Furch, Gordon Smith... Basically, the products that I love and that I’m talking to people about are at the core of everything I do. European and UK guitar builders are producing just the most wonderful instruments.

“We live in a world where we buy mobile phones and don’t question the [human cost of the] technology, the chips that are going into them, the mines that



1. Richards Guitars champions brands that make and build their guitars in the UK and Europe, such as Gordon Smith in Higham Ferrers
2. Of course, the company doesn't forsake the expertise of makers from further afield; you'll find beauties like these D'Angelicos in-store, too

children are dying in to give us cheap technology. I'm proud of the fact that the main products I love are guitars with a much smaller [environmental] footprint because they are made in the UK and Europe. If you can buy something that is utterly brilliant and made in the UK or Europe, why the need for mass-produced guitars from America for example? To me, it doesn't make sense."

"So the brands that need more attention in the wider world are the brands I'm selling, because we live in that kind of world where marketing is so central to the popularity of a brand, even brands like Fender and Gibson. They have their history, but I feel all we ever get is the regurgitating of history, because it's the selling point and it's the marketing machine at work again. It's living off the history, living in the past... The guitars that need to be seen are the guitars that are true to the spirit of the industry, guitars that are made with love and skill, and can offer value for money without spin and marketing on top."

What should a guitar buyer expect from a good retailer?

"Honesty. It's going back a few years now, but you'd meet dealers who were caught in a trap. There are products that are sold because everybody wants them, so dealers feel they have to sell them. They're selling stuff because they're getting asked for it, not because they necessarily believe in it. To be honest takes energy, to be honest requires time and a longterm approach: 'I'm going to build this up, I'm going to tell people about this, I'm going to live by how I'd want to be done by, I'm going to treat people how I'd want to be treated.' It's expensive to do that, to look after people, to give people customer service and backup. It's also expensive to hand-finish guitars, to make sure every single guitar is set up to perfection in your workshop."

"Being honest about your business and what you are is an expensive process, but I am motivated by the responses I see in my reviews. If somebody values the experience I've offered them, and they



go out of their way to write a review, then that's positive. They make the effort to go into the details of why they're so pleased. That's what motivates me – that people just appreciate the effort I've put in."

What's your favourite guitar in the store and why?

"I'm going to give you one acoustic and one electric. On the acoustic side, I'm going to say the Dowina Pure [a stripped-down, handmade dreadnought with subtle, mindfulness-inspired styling]. It just did everything, it ticked every box in terms of the people involved with build, the care they put into making it, the message that it serves. It's like we've manifested something physical that connects with the emotional and the psychological. It just brings everything into this one little thing – and it's affordable. So the Dowina Pure is probably my number one."

"I'm also looking right now at the wondrous work of Gordon Smith. I asked Doug Sparkes [head of Gordon Smith] to make me a powder-pink classic 'S' with off-white parts. It has a chocolate-roasted maple neck and an ebony 'board, but the *pièce de résistance* is that it has a fairly wide 45mm fingerboard, which helps people with bigger, chunkier fingers. Even for standard playability, a wider fingerboard sometimes helps people get the chords down, and they like the separation between the strings."

"Again, it's about thinking outside of the box and giving people an alternative to what the traditional design would be. It epitomises Gordon Smith, being able to provide something truly bespoke, beautiful and gorgeous to look at, and that is unique in terms of the fretboard and how it feels."

For more information see
<https://rguitars.co.uk>

From £2,000 to £3,000



GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD '60S £2,199

Part of Gibson's Original Collection, the '60s LP features a mahogany body with AA carved maple top and a rosewood-board quarter-sawn mahogany neck. The Burstbucker 61R in the neck and 61T in the bridge allow for a slightly hotter voicing, while the slim taper neck offers wider potential appeal than the more vintage girth of its '50s sibling.

www.gibson.com



PJD CAREY ELITE £2,399

By his own description, UK luthier Leigh Dovey aims for "the feel of a Strat or Tele but the look of a Les Paul" here with a bolt-on neck and single-cut slab body. The result is a huge success: an addictive, lightweight electric from a talented builder with superbly balanced Bare Knuckle pickups in the form of Boot Camp Old Guard neck and bridge humbuckers.

www.pjdguitars.com



PRS SILVER SKY £2,399

PRS's take – and a very good one thanks to John Mayer – on a vintage-style Fender Stratocaster. In addition to that familiar outline, we have an alder body, 648mm (25.5-inch) scale maple neck, and three PRS 635JM single coils. One of the most hyped and discussed electrics in many a year, the Silver Sky is a highly tuned signature in pristine contemporary dress.

www.prsguitars.com



NIK HUBER PIET FROM £2,676

The Piet is based on the outline of Huber's long-running Dolphin model and named after his youngest son (pronounced 'Pete'), creating an 'offset' without the size or weight. It's also the perfect vehicle for the optional Mastery vibrato. Powered by Harry Häussel's single-coil pickups, the circuit is just volume and tone. A simple recipe that exudes quality and class.

www.nikhuber-guitars.com



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE OZ CREAM T FROM £2,800

It's hard to see how you could better this design with its roasted maple neck, contoured heel, superb 'worn-through' neck finish, and aged (not reliced) style. Added interest comes from the now UK-made Cream T Banger and Mash humbucker at the neck that, paired with the Cream T Tele-style bridge pickup, makes for a sound that easily matches the quality build.

www.eggle.co.uk



LOWDEN GL-10WA £2,995

Before making some of the most sought-after acoustics in the world, George Lowden loved his blues – his sonic reference here was recalling seeing Peter Green back in the day. He was given a 'nudge' by Ed Sheeran to make it, and the GL-10 is Lowden through and through: a hugely considered single-cut with a beautiful oil-finished, stealth-like feel.

www.lowdenguitars.com



GRETSCH BRIAN SETZER SIGNATURE NASHVILLE '59 'SMOKE' £2,999

It's impossible to separate Brian Setzer from his Gretsch guitars and this addition to his signature line is this painstaking replica of one of his most cherished possessions. While it's not reliced, that characteristic finish emulates the light fading and feel of the original, and the TV Jones Ray Butts Ful-Fidelity humbuckers complete this smokin' package.
www.gretschguitars.com

Guitarist
GOLD





Promenade Music

BY HENRY YATES

In the online age, Promenade Music in Morecambe is heartening evidence that the bricks-and-mortar guitar shop still plays a vital role. Founded in 1989 by the charismatic David Wood, you'll find everything here from flagship solidbody electrics to arguably the best selection of connoisseur acoustics in Europe. But, as Wood reminds us, his beloved shop is about more than stock levels and SKUs, with Promenade representing a pillar of the local community.

What's the focus of Promenade Music?

"The main focus is to represent each kind of guitar well. So in the solidbody electric stuff, we're very good at things like PRS, Guild and Fender. We have a big bass department, probably 100 basses



"Our main focus is to represent each kind of guitar well... We're a destination store"

DAVID WOOD, FOUNDER

in stock. We're the UK importer for GFI and Mullen, who are like the Fender and Gibson of pedal steel guitars. In our acoustic department, we obviously do all the standard acoustics and electros, but we've probably got about 25 resonators in stock and maybe 60 classicals, which not many shops have. Even in our left-handed acoustic range, we've probably got 16 models, including a Martin D-28."

Can you give us an idea of how diverse your acoustic range is?

"We're very strong with brands like Martin and Larrivée. We're the UK importer for RainSong, the carbon-graphite guitar maker, and sell Northwood, which is handmade in Canada by John McQuarrie. We're also about the only UK dealer for K Yairi – people like Paul McCartney have owned those guitars – and sell the actual Japanese Yairis from the original workshop.

We're also the UK people for another carbon-graphite guitar called KLOS. One of the bestsellers in the acoustic department is Maestro, by a guy from Singapore called Hozen. So we're a destination store because you can't always buy the stuff we offer. We have guys flying in from Berlin for brands like RainSong because we've got the biggest range in Europe."

What's your best advice for anyone setting out to buy a guitar?

"I think it's a bit like speed-dating. I've never done it myself, but I know there's certain people who you gel with immediately. Guitars are like that. If you pick up a guitar and don't really like it straightaway, chances are, you won't fall in love with that guitar. My advice is that when you're trying out different guitars, you should play the same thing on each one – whether that's a couple of solos or rhythm stuff – and also use the same amp and settings."

What sort of price range will we find at Promenade Music?

"We like to top out at about £3,500 in every area. Don't get me wrong: we just had a Martin D-45 in, which sold for £8,000 last week. We've also got a David

Pelter in stock, which is £6,500. So it's not just the token-gesture £99 classical guitar. Some buyers – especially mums and dads who are new to it – might go online and think, 'Well, I'll just buy a cheap guitar to get my kid going.' But those kids will never get going. When you're a beginner, that's when you need a really well set up guitar. That's what puts a lot of people off. It goes under the bed and then it's forgotten."

When should you walk away from a guitar?

"If it just doesn't feel right or doesn't suit you. Truthfully, I've got to tell you that I don't know many guitar shops that sell bad instruments. I do see a lot from online purchases, though. We get guitars brought into the shop that people have got from wherever; they might have a terrible bridge or sharp frets. Sometimes you have to be honest with the customer and say, 'Listen, there's no point paying us to put good-quality machineheads on a rubbish neck that already has frets sticking out.' But my experience is that none of the guitar shops are selling that kind of product."

What are your bestsellers?

"If we take out the brands that we are the UK distributor for, then we sell a lot of PRS, Fender and Squier. On acoustic,



1. You'll find all the classic models at Promenade but also everything from pedal steel guitars to resonators and high-end classical instruments
2. Founder David Wood says that although he loves people to try guitars at the store, live demos via WhatsApp have proven popular
3. Promenade also offers plenty of amps – with Marshall, Fender and Orange being top-sellers along with more recent digital offerings from pedal giant Boss
4. Fender and PRS are a focus at Promenade Music when it comes to big makes – but the store's stock is incredibly eclectic brand-wise



we do incredibly well with Martin and Tanglewood. Bass guitars, it's probably Fender and Cort. Classical guitars, we sell a lot of Ramirez. We're big into amplification, too. Marshall, Fender and Orange, I'd say, are the three biggest sellers, and Boss has to be in there as well. On the bass side, we do a lot more brands. So we do stuff like MarkBass, PJB, Eich, a lot of Aguilar, Gallien-Krueger. I think bass players are maybe more adventurous with trying out the smaller amp makers."

What should customers expect from a good retailer?

"I think the guys here are really good at honing in. It's about asking questions and listening. A customer could say, 'Oh, I love this track,' and you'll know it's a Guild semi-hollow. It's about not putting guitars that won't interest them in their hands. You want to be a bit like a dating app, matching people to guitars. Y'know, if they're into country and talking about Danny Gatton, you know they're probably going to be interested in a Telecaster."

What brands deserve more attention, in your view?

"Mine! We actually own the Mendieta and ResoVille brands, and what people don't realise is how much work it takes

us to make those guitars. We make the Mendieta in Valencia, and the work that goes into the design, bracings, different woods – it's months before that guitar ends up on a hook in the store. I think, generally, the art of guitar making needs to be championed more. I think every player should go to a factory to see one being made, or enrol on a guitar building course, just to see what actually goes into it."

What changing trends in guitar-buying habits are you seeing?

"I don't think it's what guitars are being sold; I think it's how the customers want their information. I mean, we've done amazingly well just by offering WhatsApp and FaceTime video demos. People aren't just happy with a generic video or pictures – they actually want to look at the guitar, get one of the team to show them the action or play a few bits on it. Lockdown has meant that some of our customer base, who maybe didn't do technology before, have had to learn. It's like the bulb has been lit: 'I can speak to my guitar shop online now!'"

What's your favourite guitar in the shop and why?

"In the acoustic department, there's a particular Northwood. It's called the M80 and it's an OM shape with a Venetian

cutaway. It doesn't particularly look that special, and it's £3,299, so it's not inexpensive. But my God, it is absolutely beautiful to play. When I got it, I actually phoned John and said, 'This is one of the best guitars we've ever had in the shop.'"

What defines great service for you?

"At Promenade, the customers end up being friends. We lost one of our members of staff last November, a guy called Keith Ashcroft. It was the height of Covid, and the hearse went past and stopped outside the shop for three minutes. And you won't believe this, but maybe 500 customers had heard about this through Facebook. And they stood outside, lined the road and clapped the hearse as it went past. That is what this shop is about. Of course, we need to sell a few guitars to keep going. But it's way beyond pounds, shillings and pence. We're at the heart of the local community."

Finally, what guitar riff gets played most often at Promenade?

"Among the fingerpickers, it's *Blackbird*. But I think because we're close to Manchester, there's a lot of *Wonderwall*. I don't think that'll ever change."

For more information see
www.promenademusic.co.uk

Over £3,000



VIGIER G.V. HOLLOW £3,459

Patrice Vigier and his team have been making exceptional guitars for a considerable number of years – and this G.V. Hollow might well be their finest to date. Despite its modernist features, it actually feels more like an old violin: perfectly shaped and weighted with nothing that gets in the way of its purpose. A guitar for the serious player with superb playability. www.vigierguitars.com



FENDER CUSTOM SHOP VINTAGE CUSTOM '58 JAZZMASTER £3,495

Aside from being a clever, fun concept, these Vintage Custom models with their new NOS finishes really do take us back to how a player might have felt picking up a Fender for the first time back in the day. If you've never 'got' Jazzmasters, this one might change your mind – if they all sounded this good then the model's history might well have been different! www.fendercustomshop.com



PRS MCCARTY £3,499

PRS's original 'vintage' vision is updated to offer a very grown-up appeal, with effortless playability. It also illustrates how far PRS has come over the past 26 years with a raft of seemingly small tweaks – unplated hardware, TCI tuned 58/15LT pickups and a new nitro-over-cellulose finish – that all add up to a superior and stellar guitar. www.prsguitars.com



ANDERSON GUITARWORKS GUARDIAN ANGEL £3,695

A superbly made 'SuperStrat' style guitar that takes Anderson's 22-fret Drop Top Classic but adds two more frets and a ground-up remodel. The range of instruments and options is tantalising – and no matter what your playing style or sensibilities, we'd defy anyone not to find a guitar for life here. Heaven-sent build, playability and tones. www.andersonguitarworks.com



PRS PAUL'S GUITAR £3,699

Constant improvements and new ideas mean that PRS's Core models continue to evolve, and Paul Reed Smith's signature guitar is no different. The 2019 model introduced the brand's TCI pickups – the humbucking sounds ooze character, but it's the single-coil voices that really seal the deal. This is the sort of instrument that makes you reevaluate your collection. www.prsguitars.com



SETH BACCUS NAUTILUS CLASSIC £4,299

Seth Baccus, the step-son of veteran UK maker Andy Manson, builds a small number of guitars per year in the UK, each one honed to perfection and beyond. This single-cut Nautilus Classic has a Spanish cedar back, figured maple top and glued-in flamed maple/rosewood neck. Exemplary craft and a unique style that presents the perfect blend of a Les Paul and a Telecaster. www.sethbaccus.com

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Promenade Music: One of the largest and best stocked music shops in the north of England. 404 Marine Rd E, Morecambe, LA4 5AR.

A full-page photograph of the rock musician Slash. He is wearing a black top hat with silver studs, dark sunglasses, and has long, curly dark hair. He is holding a red Epiphone Les Paul Standard electric guitar. The background is a stage with warm, orange and red lighting and out-of-focus stage lights.

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THE SLASH COLLECTION

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SLASH LES PAUL STANDARD

in November Burst, Appetite Burst, Vermillion Burst, Anaconda Burst & Slash "Victoria" Goldtop

SLASH J-45

in Vermillion Burst & November Burst