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POWER PLAYER

Fender's next-gen acoustic Telecaster gets affordable

Guitarist

Issue 482

MARCH 2022

V.A.I.

**THE
GODFATHER
OF SHRED
OPENS UP
HIS GUITAR
VAULT FOR
NEW ALBUM**



INTERVIEWS

**ERIC GALES
JOEY SANTIAGO
DANNY BRYANT
EL AMIR
& MORE!**

NEW GEAR

GRETSCH

**RICHARD FORTUS
SIGNATURE FALCON
WITH BIGSBY**

PAGE 22



PLUS
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GIBSON JIM JAMES 335
SCHMIDT ARRAY**



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For The Love Of Guitar



The most important thing about playing the guitar is that you are enjoying what you're playing and that it's something meaningful to you. You'd be surprised at how many people do not allow themselves to do this because of conditioned thoughts they were taught by the world, believing they should be doing something different.

My advice is to abandon all dreams of the future.

Forget about it completely. Forget about the fantasies of wild success – because they might happen and they might not. I can tell you if they don't happen, you'll blame yourself, or somebody else, or the world in general, or the music business, or your parents. I can also tell you that if you do get there and you do have that success, it's not going to be enough for you, because if what you're doing right now is not enough for you to feel fulfilled, it's not going to be enough later. No matter how successful you become. Now, I know this is an easy thing for Steve Vai to say. And I wish everybody could experience the kind of success that they dream of, so they can discover it's not it.

The universe that created you, that you came from, has endowed you with certain skills so that you can bring your inspirations into this world in a co-creative way with everybody else. That's of the greatest value because when you receive a unique inspiration that's tailor-built for you, throw yourself into it unconditionally with no excuses, NOW. Because when you're enjoying the creative process NOW, you're living life. You say, 'What about my future?' Well, guess what happens when you live a happy life now? The future takes care of itself.

Exercise your creative ideas with no excuses. That means using obstacles to your advantage. That's a mindset: to see challenges as opportunities. Can you see your own worthiness and embrace it? If you can, you will enjoy being yourself. When you enjoy being yourself, you really enjoy all the creative things that you do.

Steve Vai **Honorary Editor**

Guitarist

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A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark grey long-sleeved shirt, is seated and playing a white PRS Fiore electric guitar. He is looking down at the guitar with a focused expression. The background is dark and moody, with some light reflecting off the guitar's body and the man's shirt. The guitar has a white finish, two humbucker pickups, and a maple neck with a dark fretboard. The PRS logo is visible on the headstock.

Fiore



PLAY IN FULL BLOOM

MARK LETTIERI SIGNATURE MODEL

"All guitarists have a sound in their head – a sound that evolves and grows as they progress, discovering all of the beautiful idiosyncrasies that define their individual voice. To facilitate this process, players need a vibrant, dynamic guitar that becomes a free space in which their personality can unfold. PRS and I designed Fiore to be this guitar."

- Mark Lettieri

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Leland Hayward

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<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>

FIRST PLAY



FENDER ACOUSTASONIC PLAYER TELECASTER

£1,049

WHAT IS IT? The Mexican-made version of the USA Acoustasonic Tele, with some emphasis on its electric side

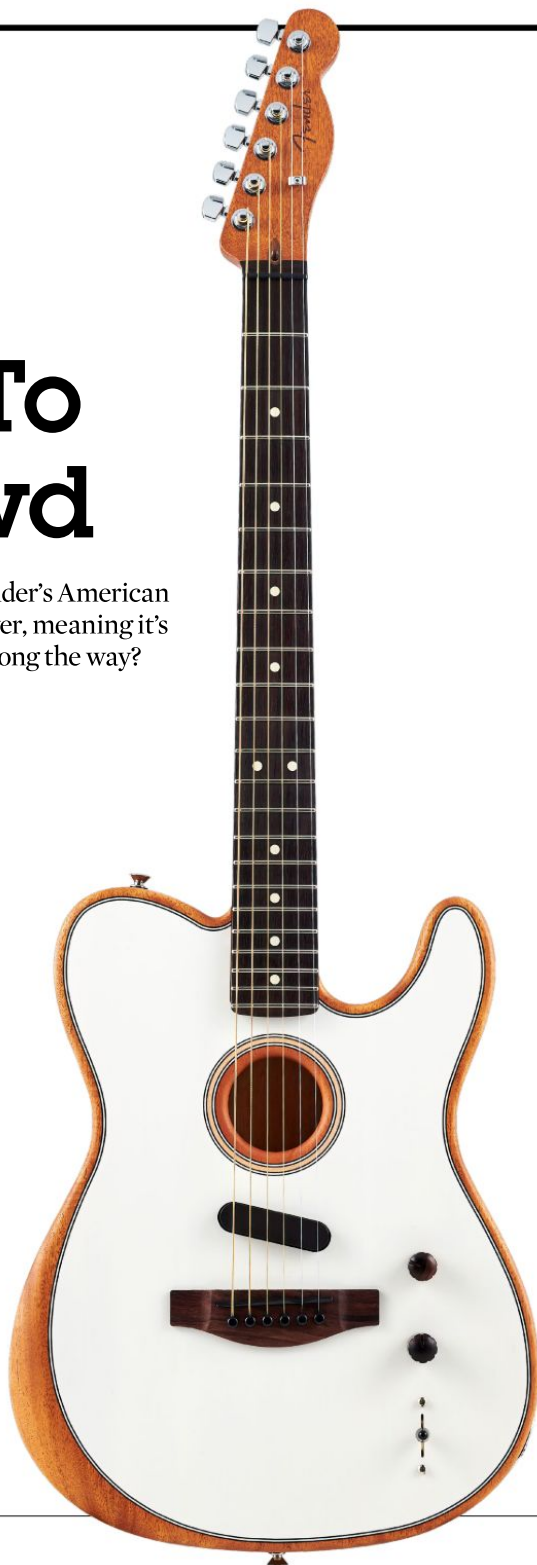
Playing To The Crowd

There'll be rejoicing in the shires. Fender's American Acoustasonic gets a Mexican makeover, meaning it's much cheaper. But what do we lose along the way?

Words Dave Burruck **Photography** Olly Curtis

Cost, for most of us, is central to any instrument. Yet we have a strange take on that sometimes, not least when innovation is involved. People happily pay upwards of £3k for a replica of a solidbody plank unchanged from the 50s, but when Fender put out its first American Acoustasonic Telecaster, the design of which involved a huge amount of costly R&D, many dismissed it – before even playing one – as too expensive. “If they did a Mexican version, we might be interested.” At the tail end of last year, Fender did exactly that.

Fender's factory in Ensenada – where its ‘affordable’ guitars such as the big-selling Player and Vintera series are made – is a few hours' drive south from its US manufacturing base in Corona, California. The launch PR is revealing: this new Acoustasonic Player Telecaster required “building an entire new factory from the ground up... adjacent to Fender's long-standing Mexico factory, which has been building Fender guitars for 35 years”. We're also told that bringing this guitar to market has been a “26-month long journey” and that the new factory “will bolster the Ensenada community by adding over 100 jobs with room to grow in the future”. If you think the Acoustasonic is just a flash in the pan, you might need to reconsider.





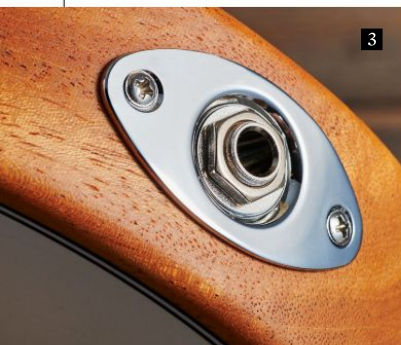


1. The standard Telecaster headstock with its staggered height tuners, string tree and 'branded' Fender logo is identical to the USA Acoustasonic Tele's

2. The Player platform uses two pickups instead of the three pickup systems present on the USA model. The visible magnetic pickup is Fender's Noiseless N4



3. Another casualty of the Player version is that it uses a standard nine-volt block battery to power the electronics; the USA version uses a smart USB rechargeable battery accessed from the output jack. The output socket and mounting plate here are very standard



The new Acoustasonic Player Telecaster is more affordable and currently lists at £1,049 compared with the USA version, which costs £1,749: a reduction of pretty much bang on 40 per cent. Coincidentally or not, that figure exactly correlates to the reduction in sounds. The USA version has 10 (of which the five sound-pairs can be blended or gain added to the magnetic pickup voicings). The Player version drops down to six sounds from its three-way (as opposed to five-way) Voice Selector switch. Elsewhere, we go from three onboard pickups – under-saddle, body sensor and magnetic – to just two, the casualty being that body sensor.

Yet pulling the new Mexican-made Acoustasonic from its classy gigbag (the same that's supplied with the USA model, as far as we can see), you'd be hard-pressed to see any difference in the construction. The hollowed mahogany body with an inset Sitka spruce top and the bolt-on mahogany neck appear identical, although the mahogany of the Mexican model is considerably lighter in colour than the deeper red of the USA guitar. The light satin finish allows you to clearly see that the USA guitar has a two-piece centre joined body; the Mexican guitar is four-piece.

As we investigate further there are more subtle differences. The fingerboard and bridge here are rosewood, not the striped ebony of our well-used USA Jazzmaster.

We'd wager the printed colour of the top is thicker, too. On the USA model you can easily see the spruce's striped grain through the finish and even the position of the two longitudinal braces that sit either side of the 'doughnut' soundhole, while the white top of our Mexican model appears not only more matt but more opaque, too.

Conversely, plenty of the USA model is retained here: that rounded nose heel, for example, with the Micro-Tilt neck pitch adjustment, the same staggered height enclosed tuners and string tree, not to mention the Graph Tech Black Tusq top nut and compensated bridge saddle.

But it's the electronics that have taken the biggest hit. As we said, we have one less pickup and fewer sounds, but we also lose the classy USB powering of the USA model with its USB input and colour-changing power status LED on the Electrosocket-style output jack plate. They're replaced here with a nine-volt block battery – accessible in a clip-top compartment on the central rear cavity cover – and a standard metal output jack plate. Those rear backplates are black plastic, not the brushed aluminium of the USA models, too.

Feel & Sounds

It's important to remember that the Acoustasonic is an acoustic guitar. It's hollow with a lightly braced spruce top, and the size of the guitar's cavity directly

PLAYER TIME

We catch up with one of the Fender Acoustasonic Player's key designers, **Tim Shaw**



Great job with this Player Telecaster, we're really enjoying the guitar. We're told work started on the project over two years ago. Was the plan always to offer

a streamlined version of the USA platform?

"We're glad you like this version! While we started work on the Acoustasonic Series here in Nashville in 2016, the work on the Acoustasonic Players did begin about 26 months ago, and it involved a huge team across many locations in the US and in Mexico. We'd always planned multiple models, and always knew there'd be a variation like this one. We also knew we'd need a new factory to do it in Ensenada. That took a bit!"

The reduction in price (40 per cent) equates to the fewer sounds we have. Are the acoustic sounds (3A and 3B) basically the same as those on the USA guitars?

"The construction of the USA Acoustasonic Telecaster and the Acoustasonic Player are

Are different 'tone stacks' used for the Lo-Fi and Fat Noiseless Tele crunch sounds? And what about the amps they're based on?

"They do share the same basic analogue tone stack, which is a Fender Deluxe with a single 12-inch speaker. Just as you'd use different pedals to dial in your tones, we adjusted the drive and compression parts of the signal chain to suit the pickup you're playing at the time."

This Player version comes across as more like a true electric/acoustic hybrid, as opposed to the USA models, which feel more acoustic. Would you agree? And was that a part of the original design concept?

"I do agree. On the Acoustasonic Tele, eight of the 10 main switch positions have at least one acoustic voice available. We've curated just two specific acoustic voices – and their blends – for the Player. So two of the six main voices are acoustic, two are electric, and then we have the Lo-Fi piezo with its own unique sounds. We'd always known this version would be simpler and have a more focused set of controls.

"The original intent for the Acoustasonic Player was to have Position 3 as an acoustic pair – a dreadnought and a smaller guitar. Position 1 is essentially the same mag voices as on the US model: clean Tele and fat Tele, again, through an analogue stack. We'd initially thought that Position 2 would work much as it does on the US Acoustasonic Tele model, panning from an acoustic voice to a fairly clean electric voice. But then we heard the Lo-Fi voices in the studio on the way to do something else, and they stopped us cold for a minute. They weren't part of the original plan for Position 2, but once we heard them, we had to include them!"

Clearly from the investment that's been made in Ensenada, this is just the start of the Player Acoustasonic programme. Any idea what's coming next?

"Well, we have a beautiful state-of-the-art, climate-controlled factory and one of the best workforces in the music industry... it'll probably involve guitars that aren't solid and are very interesting musical tools!" **[DB]**

"Just as you'd use pedals, we adjusted the drive and compression parts of the signal chain to suit the pickups"

substantially the same; we do use a rosewood fingerboard and bridge on the Ensenada model. As on all Acoustasonics, the body is still contributing at least 50 per cent to the overall tonality.

"On this model, 3A is a small-body, short-scale mahogany guitar; this wasn't on the original Acoustasonic Tele. 3B is a rosewood dreadnought, which was on the original Tele. It isn't an exact match, though, and it wasn't intended to be one. We very much like the idea of giving each guitar a unique character, and our ears led us to these particular choices."

Are the Lo-Fi sounds essentially just the under-saddle with minimal or no processing?

"Yes. The Lo-Fi sound pair starts with the under-saddle Sonicore pickup, run through a buffer but nothing else. You're hearing a piezo pickup and an acoustic guitar. That sound's been around for decades now – it's been in countless clubs and thousands of records, and we liked the idea of letting it out to play on this model."



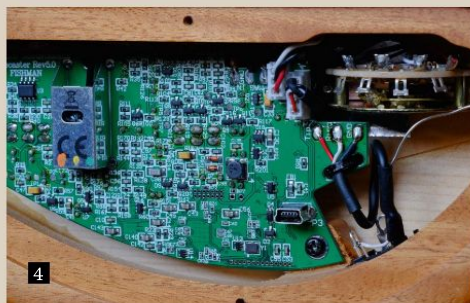
The Player Tele joins the Acoustasonic family with a voice all its own

UNDER THE HOOD

Take a look inside this Acoustasonic Player Telecaster and you might well see the future!

Just as you'll find with the existing USA Acoustasonic Telecaster, when you remove the rear control cover plate you see an expanse of circuit board with zero reference to the 1950s. This is positively space age. "The acoustic voices are based on actual guitars and different mics," explains Tim Shaw, "but their processing is digital and uses the same Fishman technology that we've used on the entire Acoustasonic platform. On the Acoustasonic Player model, the Lo-Fi piezo and Noiseless Tele voices started with that 'blackface' Deluxe and a pedalboard, and we basically worked with those the same way you would."

"Our 'under the hood' tech works the same across all Acoustasonic models," Tim continues, "but we made many deliberate decisions this time around to give the Acoustasonic Player Telecaster its own voice and vibe. The Acoustasonic Player doesn't have a body sensor and its under-saddle pickup is a Fishman Sonicore instead of the Fishman Matrix of the other models. The Sonicore has different sonic properties, so all the voicing for this model took that into account."



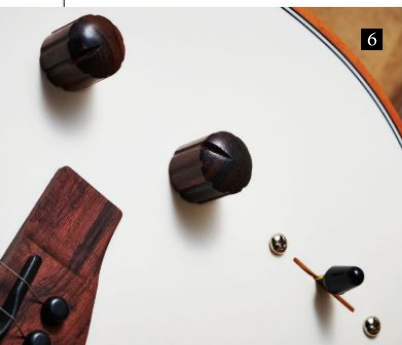
4. Inside the Acoustasonic Player. A vintage Tele this is not!

5. With the central rear cover removed, you can see the Noiseless Telecaster pickup, but there's no body sensor, as with the USA models



This Player distills the versatility of the USA version into a more direct instrument

6. The Player model swaps to a three-way lever Voice Selector switch, although the USA version's volume and blend controls are retained, offering a total of six voices



impacts what you hear, not least unplugged. The Strat, then, has the smallest voice, the Jazzmaster the largest, and the Tele sits in between. So whereas the bigger USA Jazzmaster has considerably more depth, the unplugged sound here, while initially seeming a little brash and dare we say cheaper, really grows on you. Our perception is that the all-solid guitar does mature as it gets used to being a guitar – why wouldn't it?

The neck dimensions are pretty close to the USA model, very electric in feel (aside from the acoustic strings and that wound third string, of course), and although the frets are described as narrow/tall, they're pretty standard medium, again more electric-like, nicely installed and buffed on the 305mm radius fingerboard with lightly rolled edges. There is a little more flex to the neck compared with the USA guitar, but really they feel very similar.

The biggest change, then, is the number of acoustic sounds. In the 'neck' position on the three-way lever Voice Selector switch, the mahogany small body 3A (anticlockwise) sounds very present, very nicely detailed in the upper frequencies with tight but not thin basses. This is a sound that'll cut through a band mix with just big chord strums. It's also a lovely fingerstyle solo sound – really intimate –

and quite the mean acoustic blues voice, too. As you turn the control up (clockwise) things get a little fuller and warmer until you reach the rosewood dreadnought, again a lovely voice that softens the attack, replacing it with a rich sweetness. It's a very good start.

Moving to the middle position on our three-way switch, there's not a huge difference between 2A (Lo-Fi Clean) and 3A, but this Lo-Fi sound, while less acoustically accurate, is hugely recognisable – that under-saddle piezo sound we've all heard at countless concerts and on some pretty landmark recordings. It has that fast attack and is definitely acoustic-'like' more than acoustic-'accurate' with a slightly strident character. As you wind in the light crunch you lose some of that stridency and there's an impression of softness in comparison – it's the truest 'hybrid' sound on the guitar in that it really does sound like an electro-acoustic layered on top of a cleaner-to-lightly-crunchy amp'd electric.

Select 'bridge' position on the Voice Selector and we're now all electric and, taking up 33 per cent of this guitar's sonic choice, there's much more of a feeling that this is a truer magnetic electric/acoustic hybrid than the USA models, which are weighted more heavily in favour of the acoustic sounds – with the magnetic electric sound almost seeming like an afterthought.

7. In addition to Fender's Noiseless N4, there is a Fishman transducer under the compensated saddle on the acoustic-style pin bridge, which is rosewood here, not the striped ebony of the USA Jazzmaster

8. Yes, we've seemingly lost 40 per cent of the sounds here, but just like the USA model, the heel is rounded and we also get Fender's Micro-Tilt adjustment through the neckplate, which makes setup very easy



FENDER ACOUSTASONIC PLAYER TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,049 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody-sized electro-acoustic

BODY: Mahogany (hollow) with inset Sitka spruce top

NECK: Mahogany, modern 'deep C' profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

TUNERS: Fender standard cast/sealed staggered tuners

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Black Tusq/41.9mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white dot markers, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, narrow/tall

BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood w/ compensated Black Tusq saddle/53.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fishman under-saddle transducer, Fender Noiseless N4 magnetic, master volume, Blend knob, 3-way Voice Selector lever switch, Single mono output.

9V block battery

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.33/5.13

OPTIONS: Colour only

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Artic White (as reviewed), Brushed Black, Butterscotch Blonde, Shadow Burst – colours over inset spruce top only. Polyester satin matt to body; satin urethane to neck and headstock

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA

01342 331700

www.fender.com



PROS Clean build, excellent weight and playability; fewer sounds but considerable contrast from acoustic to crunchy electric

CONS Not everyone will get the concept, but it's hard to fault; very valid version of the platform

The trouble is, listening through our AER Compact 60, it really doesn't sound like a Telecaster, evidenced when we plug our '69 Tele into the same amp. Even through the 'wrong' amp, the '69 has that snap at the bridge that shouts Telecaster. The Acoustasonic in comparison sounds a little generic 'narrow aperture' sound. It's a marked difference to the USA Acoustasonic Jazzmaster's big bridge humbucker, which certainly doesn't try to emulate the real thing. But the bridge pickup on our Player Tele does provide quite a contrast, particularly to that sweet rosewood acoustic. Wind in the crunch from the blend control – which is just such a cool feature of all the Acoustasonic models – and we've never heard sounds like this coming out of our AER. Plug into a standard electric guitar amp and, again, it ain't a Tele, but it's definitely a Fender voice and yet the mainly hollow construction of the guitar does affect what we hear. Played cleaner or with light crunch you definitely hear a less solid response; with more gain and processing, that impression is lessened.

Despite the fewer sounds here there's still a lot to play with and it remains a proper acoustic guitar despite its solidbody size. Where it scores for us, like the USA Acoustasonics before it, is as a recording tool: a very fast sketch pad to capture some

credible acoustic sounds with the minimum of fuss. The Lo-Fi crunch and the magnetic Telecaster sounds take us in new directions, and tracking parts on a recording, not least in a rootsy style, works really well. These aren't replications of classic sounds; they're the true sound and potential of the Acoustasonic platform. Where you take them is really up to you.

Verdict

This Player Acoustasonic initially comes across as a 'lite' version of the USA platform – Fender refers to it as "streamlined" – rather than just a less-costly version of the full package. That's not a criticism; it distills the flexibility and versatility of the USA version into a more direct instrument that pushes the electric side to the fore. The graduation from acoustic through electro-acoustic to electric is vividly presented, more so than the USA models. You almost feel that the USA model was the catwalk concept; this is the high-street version. As you'd expect, there is slightly less refinement here but little to alter the experience. But just like the USA version, we're presented with an instrument that can go in numerous directions: from a compact and lightweight electro-acoustic to a very rootsy electric, and a guitar that can be used in any signal chain you fancy. **G**





FIRST PLAY



**CORT TUBE CRAFT CMV15
1X12 COMBO**
\$649

WHAT IS IT? The first all-valve amp to feature the Cort brand name, designed in collaboration with the Korean effects supremo Moollon

True Tube

Cort is becoming well known for its own-brand guitars, as well as those it makes for other brands, such as PRS's SE line. But a valve amp? Let's take a look...

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

Pioneered by the late Jack Westheimer back in the heady days of the early 1960s, the Cort brand is familiar to many guitar players around the world. However, the scale of this Korean company's operation may be less well understood. From its factories in Indonesia and China, Cort annually ships around a million guitars worldwide and almost a third of a million guitar amplifiers. Many of these are OEM products built for other well-known brands, although, for some time, Cort has produced instruments under its own name as well. There's now a Cort all-valve amplifier to add to this manufacturing giant's catalogue: the new Tube Craft CMV15, designed in collaboration with Korean boutique effects master Moollon.

The Tube Craft CMV15 is a handsome-looking compact 1x12 combo, echoing the 'less is more' ethos of many high-end boutique builders. The birch-ply cabinet is neatly covered in heavy-duty black vinyl with black metal corners and a matching grille cloth with gold piping. A smart gold Cort badge sits over the cloth and you'll



1

spot a discreet Moollon logo in the bottom-right corner. The none-more-black colour scheme is broken up by a trio of ivory vinyl 'go faster' stripes on the top panel inlaid with black piping, adding a touch of boutique class, although the equally black control-panel is a bit difficult to read and we'd have preferred a contrasting colour or graphics to make the controls stand out a little more.

The CMV15's electronics live inside a compact aluminium chassis, which is a great choice for valve guitar amps; it's much lighter than steel, non-ferrous so it doesn't interfere with transformer magnetic fields, and a very good conductor of heat. The internal layout is an interesting mix, with one main PCB in the centre of the chassis for

the preamp and power-supply components, and smaller PCB strips for the front-panel controls and rear-panel sockets. On the main board, the components are all arranged parallel to each other as they would be on an old-school turret-wired assembly – like that found in vintage Vox AC15s, for example. Meanwhile, the valve bases are mounted directly on the chassis and hand-wired into the rest of the circuit. This approach completely isolates the circuit boards from thermal and physical stress, using the aluminium chassis as a heatsink to help keep things cool, which greatly improves the amp's long-term reliability prospects.

The control panel won't demand a long time with the manual. It has a pair of high- and low-gain input jacks feeding black chickenhead knobs for Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble and a master volume. On the rear panel, there's a selection of fixed impedance output jacks and a pair of send/return jacks for the CMV15's series effects loop.

1. The CMV15's controls follow a standard format that's easy and straightforward to use. The three-band passive EQ controls are smooth and interact nicely with each other

The simple circuit has a clarity and transparency that lets the guitar breathe... ideal for many genres



Overall, the Cort CMV15 is a good-looking, straightforward combo that's compact and not too heavy to cart around. It also has robust build quality and hand-wired valve sockets, making it a great longterm bet.

Feel & Sounds

We checked out Cort's Tube Craft CMV15 with our regular PAF-equipped Les Paul and an old Strat loaded with Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro II single coils. The sounds we hear are more Brit influenced than American, with a prominent midrange, tight bass and highs that can be pushed into an aggressive bite when needed. On our sample there's a slight background hum, which would need a little attention from a noise gate for recording. However, this isn't uncommon with cathode-biased output stages and is usually cured by swapping to a different pair of output valves. For live use, however, the background noise is unnoticeable.

There's plenty of volume available from the custom Moollon G12-30M loudspeaker, which stays crisp and responsive as the master volume is turned up, providing a wide range of different overdrive tones depending how you balance the gain and master volume. The traditional passive EQ tone controls interact in a nice predictable fashion, making it easy to dial in the amp.

Some amplifiers sound equally great with single coils and humbuckers, others tend to favour one or the other pickup types. Our impression is that the CMV15 definitely favours the thicker midrange of a decent 'bucker. Our Strat (which doesn't have high-output pickups) certainly sounded okay, but it worked much better with a little help from an overdrive pedal. When we were using our Les Paul, we found some great tones with the gain and master volume both around halfway up, where the preamp overdrive and output stage clip began to work together nicely for dynamic,

2. Ivory 'go faster' stripes on the top of the cabinet add to the Cort's visual appeal. Look closer and you'll see there's real attention to detail here as each panel is trimmed with black piping

3. A pair of high- and low-gain input jacks handle most active and passive guitar pickups. Pedalboard users should consider using the low-gain jack for improved headroom and clarity



4. The G12-30M loudspeaker is a special design from effects giant Moolton, who also collaborated on the amp design. It's a great-sounding driver that has plenty of headroom

5. The CMV15 has a pair of send and return sockets for its simple series effects loop. Located between preamp and power amp, this is the best place for modulation and delay effects



touch-sensitive leads that clean up well as you pick with a lighter touch or back off the guitar's volume control.

In common with many boutique designs, the CMV15's simple circuit has a clarity and transparency that lets the guitar breathe, making it ideal for many different genres, although it really excels at late-60s and early 70s blues and classic rock, with plenty of volume and headroom for live gigs and a great loudspeaker that seems to enjoy being driven hard. With the gain set low and the master volume high, the CMV15's clarity makes it an excellent pedalboard amp as well, whether or not you choose to use the series effects loop.

Verdict

Hand-wired amps are increasingly expensive things to buy these days, and while the Tube Craft CMV15 uses a few PCBs, the valve sockets are neatly hand-wired into an aluminium chassis here, and

The CMV15 favours the thicker midrange of a decent humbucker

the component layout is based on turret board designs, giving this amp the kind of sonic integrity, build quality and reliability more often seen on products costing up to twice the price. We also really like its British classic rock vibe, not to mention the cool racing stripes on the neatly covered cabinet.

The key thing here, though, is the asking price, and Cort is putting the CMV15 up against opposition from several established brands with pretty strong performers in the £600 bracket, so it will be interesting to see how well the Korean industry giant fares.

The CMV15 is a great little combo that's aimed at valve enthusiasts of all levels – and for a very tempting price to boot. Definitely one worth checking out. **A**



CORT TUBE CRAFT CMV15 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £649

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: All valve

OUTPUT: 15W RMS

VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 2x EL84

DIMENSIONS: 470 (h) x 500 (w) x 230mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 17/37

CABINET: Birch ply

LOUDSPEAKERS: 1x Moolton G12-30M 12"

CHANNELS: 2

CONTROLS: Gain, bass, middle, treble, master volume

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop

FOOTSWITCH: None

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: CMV15H head is £529; CV112 extension cab is £220

440 Distribution

0113 284 2342

www.cortguitars.com

8/10

PROS A stylish combo that's built to last; excellent value for money; great-sounding speaker

CONS The background noise on this sample is slightly too high for home practice and serious recording; the front-panel control markings are a little difficult to read

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FIRST PLAY



GIBSON JIM JAMES ES-335
\$3,099

WHAT IS IT? Lightly pimped, owl-themed thinline in deliciously 70s-era walnut-only finish and powered by T-Type 'buckers



Good Morning

The new signature model ES-335 from My Morning Jacket's Jim James presents a working-player spec and 70s vibe

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker

1. It might have a 70s-era walnut nitro finish, but the bound dot-inlaid fingerboard and short pickguard are more classic appointments, giving this an almost refinished vibe

2. Like the majority of standard-wired current Gibsons, under the hood you'll find CTS 500k pots and Orange Drop caps. The 'witch hat' knobs are another 70s favourite

3. These are Kluson's top-of-the-line die-cast tuners – they're known as the Super, Waffleback or Radiator Back and were used on early Gibson Les Paul Customs in the 50s. Note the owl emblem on the back of the headstock: the guitar also comes with a custom Jim James owl emblem hardshell case

4. While the late-60s T-Tops invariably had a DCR of around 7.5kohms, the calibrated set of T-Types here measure 747k (bridge) and 7.17k (neck) at output

Gibson's Artist Collection currently holds some big-name thinlines such as the Chuck Berry ES-355, Trini Lopez and Slim Harpo ES-330. But this release from a more contemporary artist – My Morning Jacket's Jim James – outwardly nods back to Gibson's Norlin-era models with its all over walnut finish, a common colour during the 70s, although it first appeared in the latter half of the 60s. Now, the once-reviled 70s are cool again and this comes across as a workingman's thinline, not forgetting the owl motifs on the headstock back and case – a cracking example powered by the new Gibson T-Type humbuckers, used across the current ES range.

"As the name implies, the T-Types are a tribute to the 'T-Tops' from the late 60s to the late 70s/early 80s," says Jim De Cola, Gibson Brands' R&D manager and master luthier. "We call them T-Types as we are using the same bobbins as our other historic pickups, which don't have the 'T' embossed in the top, hence the term 'T-Top'. They use 42-gauge poly wire and the same blueprint spec number of turns, as well as Alnico V magnets as the originals had. Both rhythm and lead pickups would share the same specs in regards to wire, turns and magnets, just as the originals had. The only difference would be cable lengths for rhythm and lead positions. The ES Models use a calibrated set of T-Types. The neck pickup is very slightly underwound and the bridge pickup is very slightly overwound – from the nominal T-Type spec – to provide a calibrated output. Otherwise, all the specs are the same."

Unlike recent and heavier thinlines we've had on review, this sub-8lb ES-335 is perfectly weighted and it makes such a difference to the feel – and quite probably the sound, too. Jim has also spec'd the guitar with Gibson's Slim Taper neck profile akin to the Les Paul '60s Standard and Classic that (back to front) measures 20.5mm at the 1st fret and 23.7mm at the 12th, with quite full shoulders as opposed to 'rounded C' neck profile used on most other current ES models.

Comparing our reference Les Paul Classic with its retrofitted Burstbucker 1 and 2 humbuckers and, of course, its different construction, there's a lot to like with these: slightly less hot and a more open midrange providing clarity at the neck, while the bright edge at the bridge is easily tamed with the tone control as you add in some gain. One of the best new ES-335s we've played in a while. **G**



GIBSON JIM JAMES ES-335

PRICE: £3,099 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway, semi-solid thinline electric

BODY: Laminated maple/poplar/maple with f-holes and solid maple centre block

NECK: Mahogany, slim taper profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.57")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound Indian rosewood, acrylic dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium/jumbo

HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece, Kluson Waffleback tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: Gibson T-Type calibrated covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, individual volume and tone controls for each pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.55/7.81

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: The Modern ES-335 Satin (£2,499) kicks off the current range; the Original ES-335 is £2,899. Other artist models include the Chuck Berry 1970s ES-355 (£6,099) and the Slim Harpo 'Lovell' ES-330 (£2,599)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Walnut (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose

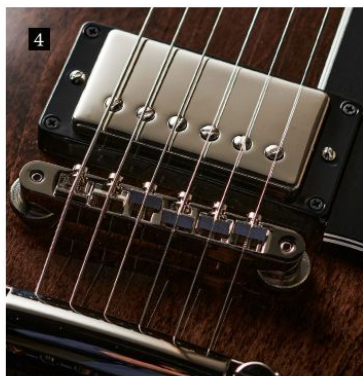
Gibson

www.gibson.com



PROS A lightweight thinline that might have an artist association but has also a real working-player's vibe; huge versatility from the T-Type 'buckers

CONS Only one finish and owls might not be your thing; the Original series ES-335 is cheaper at £2,899





theWishlist

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

Gretsch G6636T-RF Richard Fortus Signature Falcon Centre Block with String-Thru Bigsby £3,199

CONTACT Fender Musical Instruments EMEA PHONE +44 (0)113 284 2342 WEB www.gretschguitars.com WORDS Dave Burrluck PHOTOGRAPHY Oilly Curtis

Plenty of big names have Gretsch signature guitars, but Guns N' Roses' longest-serving guitar player, Richard Fortus, is greedy: he gets two, both based on the double-cut 17-inch wide Falcon. Our pictured G6636T-RF Vintage White Bigsby model is joined by the G6636-RF Black V-Stoptail version, slightly cheaper at £3,049. It's not just those features that differentiate the guitars; by design the Bigsby model uses a longer scale length.

Differences aside, this pair of Falcons is designed to be used loud on stage – and they're big models, at that. The maple laminated bodies have a chambered spruce centre block so feedback or high-volume playing isn't an issue. Necks are maple with a standard 'U' profile, 'boards are ebony with Gretsch's Pearlloid Neo-Classical Thumbnail inlays and medium jumbo frets (around 2.39mm wide by 1.16mm high) that are well installed on the 305mm (12-inch) radius'd face. The guitars are bound throughout with tasteful tortoiseshell plastic with inner black/white/black purfling.

The guitars are dotted with specific features that suit Richard's style: the upper strap button (a Grover

locking style), for example, sits on the bass-side horn, not on the heel, so the strap doesn't get in the way for high-position playing. The pickup toggle selector switch is way down on the treble side lower bout by the No-Load tone control, not on the upper shoulder, again so it doesn't get in the way. And there's just a single master volume (with treble bleed) on the treble side horn; there are no individual pickup volume controls.

The Falcon is a big guitar, but the weight here is quite solidbody-like at 3.85kg (8.47lb), and as ever the 'U' shape neck feels more C-like than its name implies, measuring 21.5mm deep at the 1st fret and 24.5mm by the 12th, with a nut width of 43mm. But it's the voicing of these custom wound pickups that really is the icing on the cake. With the master volume pulled back – and with a few Bigsby shimmers – you can head off to your rockabilly gig. Wind up the wick and the sound becomes thicker but still very Gretsch, producing an almost three-dimensional textured voice that's pretty definitive modern rock 'n' roll. It's a very considered signature guitar with a simply superb voice. Or should that be voices? **B**

1. This Bigsby B6-equipped model uses a TonePros tune-o-matic-style bridge with roller saddles on a wooden foot base that's pinned in place

2. The only visible signature element is Richard's logo on the truss rod cover. Despite its Bigsby vibrato, we get non-locking Grover Rotomatic tuners, again preferred by Richard over the locking style. The well-cut nut is Graph Tech's slippery Tusq XL

3. The jewelled G-Arrow knobs certainly add some Gretsch style, and the master volume here is the key to the way Richard drives his signature guitars, effectively giving two distinct flavours



4. Key to this guitar are the new-design pickups, custom-wound by John Gaudesi, which aim to marry a classic Filter Tron with a PAF-style humbucker, enabling classic Gretsch cleans with the master volume reduced and more kick and midrange with the volume turned up. Simple. The pickups still sit in the low-output category with measured DCRs of 6.96kohms (bridge) and 7.17k (neck)

5. It's rare that an artist guitar comes with two different scale lengths. Richard prefers the longer scale here (648mm/25.5 inches) with the Bigsby setup, while a shorter scale (627.3mm/24.6 inches) is used on the hardtail model, not least for easier string bending

6. The string-through B6 Bigsby here doesn't use a retainer bar, again to Richard's preference. The neck angle, however, is increased on this vibrato model, which also has the longer scale length





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

Ibanez AS Series 2022 additions from £289

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JARGON CRUNCHING

Worth a Tri

Ibanez's Tri-Sound toggle is connected to the neck pickup of a set of Super 58 humbuckers and gives you three voicing options. Position 1 is the regular full humbucker sound. The middle position offers a coil-split, and the final position gives you parallel-coil wiring.

Ibanez? The only sweeping I do is with a broom...

It's time to put the shred preconception down. While Ibanez has had a huge hand in creating modern instruments for technical players, there's a long history in the brand outside of divebombs and down-tuning. Its hollow and semi-hollow bodies have been revered for decades. In fact, long before Shrapnel, Korn and djent, one of the first artist models Ibanez produced was for none other than jazz great George Benson.

What do we have here, then?

New for 2022 are a number of additions to Ibanez's AS series, spanning a range of budgets. We'll start with the AS113-BS, which, with a price of £829, takes its cues from the much more expensive, Japanese-made AS2000.

It looks almost the same...

Indeed. The AS113 apes its high-end sibling in a number of ways, but with some obvious differences that keep the price down. First, production is moved to Indonesia. Next, there are some wood changes – nyatoh/maple for the neck rather than African mahogany/roasted maple. The body is laminate and made of a spruce top/flamed maple back and sides combo (which we'd struggle to see as a compromise).

What else should I know about?

Ibanez has gone with a Gibraltar (known for making sturdy drum hardware) Artist bridge and its own tried-and-tested Quik Change III tailpiece. The fretboard is ebony, but it's Macassar ebony, which has the potential to appear more striped. It's sort of a moot point in this

AS113-BS

The AS113-BS is a more affordable version of Ibanez's flagship AS2000. It features the same brown Sunburst finish, with a few material differences

PICKUPS

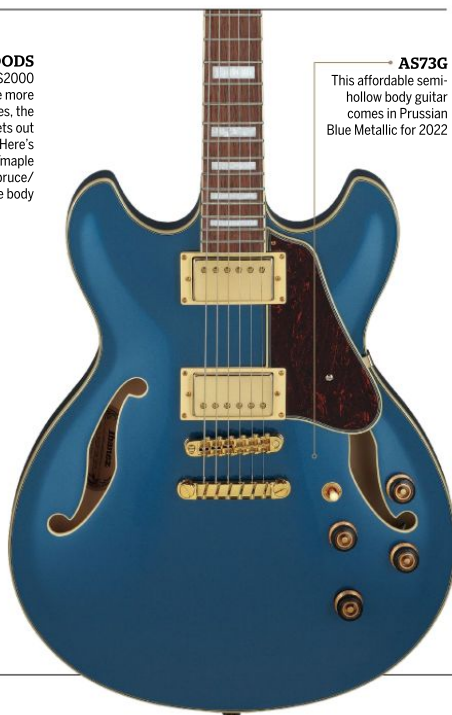
Ibanez has fitted the same Super 58 pickups – as found in the AS2000 – and has also included its Tri-Sound mini-toggle

WOODS

Where the AS2000 features some more exotic examples, the AS113 still sets out a fine stall. Here's the nyatoh/maple neck and a spruce/flamed maple body

AS73G

This affordable semi-hollow body guitar comes in Prussian Blue Metallic for 2022





You may not be fully aware of Ibanez's most affordable AS53 model, but this guitar will currently set you back £289. This Sunburst Red Flat finish is new for 2022

case, though, as Ibanez has furnished the 113 with the same decorative acrylic and abalone block inlays as the 2000, which gives the 113 a highly decorated look.

Ibanez has probably scrimped on the electronics, though, right?

On the contrary! At the heart of the AS113 are Ibanez's iconic Super 58 jazz magnets – the same humbuckers found on its high-end counterparts and loved by many a player. These are wired to dual tone and volume controls, and controlled by a three-position switch as you'd expect. There's a mini-toggle for Ibanez's Tri-Sound circuit, too (see Jargon Crunching, left), and our first glimpse suggests this is going to be a fine jazz/blues guitar for not too much money.

Sounds good so far! But what about the other models?

While Ibanez has expanded colour options, it's a good time to discover some of the AS line-up that might have passed you by, such as the AS73G pictured left. With a price tag of £449, this model boasts a nyatoh set neck, linden body and a bound walnut fretboard. The bridge (the G in the model designation stands for gold) is from Gibraltar, in this case a Performer model, and once again we have the Quik Change III tailpiece. The pickups, meanwhile, are Ibanez Classic Elite ceramic models. For 2022, Ibanez has added the fetching Prussian Blue Metallic finish alongside the existing Flat Black and Rose Gold Metallic options.

Now we're talking...

And it gets even better. The AS53 is the introductory model to the AS line-up, starting at £289 and following a similar base construction to the 73 with a nyatoh set neck/linden body. But the whole thing is stripped back a bit to make this guitar even more affordable – and we think it's got 'mods' written all over it. Sunburst Red Flat joins this year's colour palette next to Tobacco Flat and Transparent Black Flat.

When can I get my hands on these, then?

These models were freshly announced at the start of 2022, so we'd expect to see them hitting shelves in the coming months. Retailers are already taking pre-orders, so get in touch with your preferred Ibanez dealer for further information. [SW]

ALSO OUT NOW...



MAESTRO ORIGINAL COLLECTION £149

Gibson has revived its Maestro brand of pedals, best known for the FZ-1 that Keef used to imitate a saxophone on *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*. With a first run of five different pedals, which Gibson is calling the Maestro Original Collection, we get the Fuzz-Tone FZ-M, Invader Distortion, Ranger Overdrive, Comet Chorus and Discoverer Delay.

Coming from a brand steeped in vintage tradition, these pedals are, of course, all analogue in their design. They include a simple three-knob control layout and Gibson has included two modes on each pedal in order to give a nod to the brand's history, as well as offering updated features such as Modern/Classic (Fuzz Tone FZ-M), Hi/Low Gain ranges (Ranger Overdrive), gating (Invader Distortion), amplitude modulation (Comet Chorus) and modulation (Discoverer Delay). Gibson says these five are just the start; keep your eyes peeled for more information next issue.

www.maestroelectronics.com



RELISH TRINITY £699

Fans of Relish's hot swappable-pickup concept, rejoice! The brand has unveiled the Trinity, a sub-£700 electric that makes use of the same no-solder, no-fuss, no-time-at-all pickup replacement system as its high-end guitars. This basswood-bodied beaut has a C-shaped maple neck with a 24-fret laurel fingerboard, master volume and tone controls, and a three-way switch. It comes loaded with Relish Bucker XX pickups as standard, but thanks to that patented pickup system, you can change them in a matter of seconds. Relish currently supplies swappable P-90 and humbucker options from its own line, as well as Bare Knuckle and Seymour Duncan. But you can also buy its pickup-swapping mounts and fit your brand of choice.

www.relishguitars.ch



Alexander Dumble

c.1945-2022

On 17 January 2022, the legendary amp designer Alexander Dumble died, leaving behind him a legacy of near-mythical classic amps revered by musicians worldwide

Intensely private by nature, little is known about Dumble himself, which is at odds with how recognised his designs have become. He grew up in Bakersfield, California, as Howard Alexander Dumble (he later asked to be known as Alexander) into a musical family. His interest in instruments and electronic equipment started young – and it was these twin passions that served as foundation for his extraordinary career. He started producing amplifiers in the early to mid-1960s, and by the end of the 70s had built amps for highly acclaimed musicians including David Lindley, Jackson Browne, Lowell George of Little Feat and Bonnie Raitt. He would also go on to build amps for Larry Carlton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Johnson and his good friend Robben Ford.

His spark didn't stop at designing hardware – because when it came to playing guitar itself he also excelled, with many reporting that Dumble was an incredibly accomplished player, even opening for Jimi Hendrix with the band Captain Speed.

However, Dumble's focus was always to make the finest and most responsive guitar amplifiers he could. He never craved success as a businessman or household name and, in fact, Dumble only ever produced around 300 amplifiers, thus strengthening the legendary and coveted nature of his designs.

Throughout the latter part of the 60s he was known to modify Fender amps in addition to designing his own, eventually establishing his first dedicated amp shop in Santa Cruz, California, in 1968. By the following year, the Explosion model appeared, which later evolved into the highly prized Overdrive Special.

Dumble produced a range of amplifiers that included the Steel String Singer – used by artists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Kirk Hammett and Eric Johnson – plus the Dumbleland, Manzamp (a favourite of Bonnie Raitt), the Winterland and his tube-buffered effects loop, the Dumbleator. But it's the Overdrive Special that many guitarists revere as the Holy Grail of guitar amplification. Robben Ford, Larry Carlton, Joe Bonamassa and Eric Johnson – artists who are renowned for their guitar tone – are just a few who sing its praises and who have used one on countless recordings and live shows.

The Overdrive Special is available in a few different guises. A twin-channel amp, individual versions can be found powered either by Fender-ish 6L6 or Marshall-esque EL34 output valves. This was due in part to Alexander Dumble's keenness to continually evolve his creation and equally his mission to tune each amp to its player's own gear. "The amplifier responds so differently to each guitar that to get some effects I need to use the

player's guitars, instead of my own," he told *Guitar Player* in a rare 1985 interview. "That's one of the great things about the amplifier; it doesn't modify any guitar into any one sound or homogenise it. It expands whatever you start with."

Many tributes to Dumble have been shared over social media, including from US guitarist Kenny Wayne Shepherd, who posted: "[Alexander] had an especially kind heart and was a man of strong convictions and faith. He inspired me both as a person and a player and he elevated my music with the amps he created for me. I will forever cherish our friendship and never forget his example."

However, we'll leave the last word to Alexander Dumble's great friend, Robben Ford, who recounted in a 2016 *Guitarist* interview how he first met Dumble in a club in Palo Alto, California: "We chatted for a while and he told me he'd got the idea to build the Overdrive Special from listening to me play through a 60s piggyback Fender Bassman and cabinet – I've always been very proud of that. I think it might have something to do with the really warm relationship we both have. I consider him a really close friend; I mean, like family." 📺

Back in 2017, *That Pedal Show*'s Mick Taylor had the chance to play through a Dumble Overdrive Special. Watch the YouTube video here: https://bit.ly/dumble_demo



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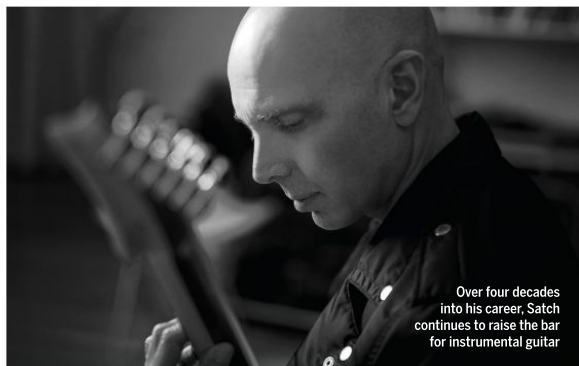


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Over four decades into his career, Satch continues to raise the bar for instrumental guitar

Joe Satriani The Elephants Of Mars

Ear Music

9/10



Once again, Satch blows the lid off instrumental guitar

Back in the early to mid-80s a new breed of instrumental rock-guitar albums emerged with Joe Satriani and Steve Vai as the undisputed leaders. Now, nearly 40 years later, both Satch and Vai are still producing fresh and exciting music, expanding the boundaries they created all those years ago. There have been many other pretenders to the throne of fretboard righteousness in this area, but none have come close to being able to conjure up cinematic soundscapes in quite the same way – and so convincingly, too.

With his new album, *The Elephants Of Mars*, Satch set the bar for himself a few notches higher than before: "I do want to show people that the instrumental guitar album can contain far more complexity of creative elements than I think people are using right now," he tells us. There's evidence of this on tracks such as *Faceless*, which is rich with orchestration – heartfelt ballads were always a strong point in Satch's work – whereas the album's opener, *Sahara*, could literally be the soundtrack to an epic movie of *Dune* proportions. Joe gets his funk on for the verse to the track *Blue Foot Groove*, before a majestic chorus section that you'll be humming for the rest of the day leaps from the speakers. *Sailing The Seas Of Ganymede* finds Satch on his home ground – it's sci-fi guitar with heroic overtones and a suitably frenzied solo section.

A multi-layered delight from start to finish, Satch proves once again that he is an absolute master in the field of instrumental rock guitar. Still surfin'? Absolutely. **[DM]**

Standout track: 104th St NYC

For fans of: Steve Vai, Guthrie Govan

Various Artists

Legacy: A Tribute To Leslie West
Provogue

9/10



Star-studded salute to guitar hero

Leslie West was a hugely influential rock guitarist who passed away in December 2020. Just over a year later, this tribute demonstrates how many musicians revered him. Ranging from Slash and Zakk Wylde to George Lynch and Steve Morse, the guitar line-up is really something – as is the music. The 12 songs featured mostly involve Leslie's long-serving rhythm section (Rev Jones and Bobby Rondinelli) with the guests paying homage to Leslie and his band, Mountain. *Nantucket Sleighride* has strong vocals from Joe Lynn Turner and searing chops from Marty Friedman, *For Yasgur's Farm* has Joe again on vocals with Martin Barre on guitar (delivering a great solo), and *Why Dontcha* has Ronnie Romero on vocals and Steve Morse's guitar for riffs and singing lead lines. *Never In My Life* pairs Dee Snider and George Lynch – a great combination – while *Long Red* features blazing major key phrasing from Yngwie Malmsteen. The album's closer is fan-fave *Mississippi Queen* with Marc Labelle on vocals and Slash on guitar. Great stuff. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Mississippi Queen*

For fans of: Mountain, West, Bruce & Laing

The Georgia Thunderbolts

Can We Get A Witness

Mascot

9/10



Southern rock is alive and well

The debut of The Georgia Thunderbolts is perfect for those who like Southern rock-infused Gibson humbucker guitar action. The band's influences are from Lynyrd Skynyrd and Little Feat through to Audioslave and Black Stone Cherry, and guitarists Riley Couzzourt and Logan Tolbert play up a storm. *Lend A Hand* demonstrates strong riffing, exclamatory vocals and a rousing solo with doublestop bends and burning blues licks. *So You Wanna Change The World* features great country rock licks, crunchy chord picking and a searing solo. *Spirit Of A Workin' Man* has a Led Zep meets JoBo swagger to it – with a great slurred guitar riff in the verses, too. It's all superb stuff. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Looking For An Old Friend*

For fans of: Blackberry Smoke, Lynyrd Skynyrd



Marillion's 20th album combines rich anthems with big themes

Marillion

An Hour Before It's Dark
Ear Music

8/10



Prog rockers deliver 20th album

It's been six years since Marillion's celebrated album *F.E.A.R.* was released. The album proved to be something of a game-changer for the veteran

progrgers, garnering them a new shift of fans, and the subsequent tour finding them selling out the Royal Albert Hall within the wink of an eye when the date was announced. The mood of that album was suitably dystopian – "There are only so many songs you can write about unrequited love..." singer Steve Hogarth noted at the time – and that theme is pretty much continued here. *An Hour Before It's Dark* reflects the fight against climate change, among other things, but despite the somewhat gloomy overtones present here, the album is relatively upbeat and, in places, quite beautiful. *The Crow And The Nightingale* is a case in point: majestic and richly anthemic with a climactic solo from Steve Rothery. It's another winner from prog-rock's champions. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Sierra Leone*
For fans of: Yes, Floyd, Genesis

Dan Patlansky

Shelter Of Bones
Virgin

9/10



Riff-laden Strat tones from South Africa's finest

The opening track here, *Soul Parasite*, lays bare Dan Patlansky's manifesto for his new album, with a thundering riff and some acrobatic licks that set us on course for an absolute maelstrom of great guitar playing. Three years in the making, *Shelter Of Bones* is yet another product of the unscheduled hibernation that lockdown cast upon the music world: "The pandemic allowed me to take my time and really think about how I want the songs to come across," he says, and it shows – there's great hooky songwriting with Dan's signature Strat tones powering through on every track laid down here. Rockers such as the pneumatic *Selfish Lover* and *Bad Soul* sit alongside ballads like the soul-baring *I'll Keep Trying* and show a performer who is happy and comfortable with the direction he's taking. If riffy, rocky, blues-shaded guitar is your thing, you won't go wrong here. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Bad Soul*
For fans of: SRV, Joe Bonamassa



Dan Patlansky's latest album powers up from the start



Pick up a penguin: The Brackish stop for sustenance and grab an honorary band member on the way...

START ME UP

The Brackish Atlas Day
Halfmeltedbrain Records

9/10



A musical hall of mirrors built with warped genius

Bristol-based four-piece The Brackish has become one of the must-see live acts of the area's rich music scene. And much of the delirious grandeur of their performances comes across on *Atlas Day*, their fourth long-player. Guitarist Luke Cawthra, formerly of Phantom Limb, manages to bring a disquieting yet serene touch to his playing on tracks such as *Leftbank*, which sways between Chet Atkins-style melodicism and a kind of musical delirium. Rhythms and melodies morph and melt away, only to arise again in a new form. This kind of esoteric instrumental material could end up a pretentious mess in less skillful hands but the band is superb, their grip on the slippery dynamics is sure throughout and always musically aware. Together they have a unique style: wilfully enigmatic, with flashes of dark humour throughout. If prog had an older, weirder brother he would be called The Brackish. Recommended. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Leftbank*
For fans of: Frank Zappa, The Aristocrats



Tones Behind The Tracks

Eric Gales is reigning supreme with his powerful and timely new album, *Crown*, featuring the cream of Nashville's session scene

Artist: Eric Gales

Album: *Crown* (Provogue/Mascot)



Eric Gales' *Crown* was recorded in Nashville in 2020, with co-producers Josh Smith and Joe Bonamassa helping out on rhythm guitar

There's no denying that Eric Gales is a man in motion. His 2019 album, *The Bookends*, heralded a new energy and sophistication to his music. For many years, by his own admission, he struggled with addiction; now clean for some time, he's on the form of his life. His new album, *Crown*, stakes Eric's claim to the place among guitar's royalty that his playing deserves. But, much more than that, it is also a powerful platform for an anti-racism message, which Eric says is the culmination of years of lived experience as a black American – and, now, on his new album, he is inviting his audience to have “a conversation” with him about it.

Stinging, stylish, powerful, soulful – *Crown* is all these things and more. We joined Eric to hear how he made the album of his life.

“It is one of the most iconic records I have done in my life, and it was done by friends getting together and saying, ‘Let’s help you get your crown’”

***Crown* leaves an indelible impression on the listener. What was your mindset when you set out to make it?**

“The day before we started, the George Floyd murder happened, so there were a lot of [emotions] going on, you know? And [it was then a case of] how can we put this into a record where it can be shown that I have some things I want to say? We recorded it in Nashville at The Sound Emporium and at Ocean Way, with Michael Rhodes on bass, Greg Morrow, Lamar Carter on drums, Reese Wynans was on keys... Josh Smith and Joe Bonamassa were on rhythm guitars and JD Simo was on some rhythm, too.

“Joe and Josh also produced the record and they made a really good team. They did everything they could to help me make the best record I could possibly make – not a ‘Joe Bonamassa’ record, not a ‘Josh Smith’ record, but to help Eric Gales make the best record he could. And that was with all hands on deck and everybody fully engaged in making this record happen.

“We cried every day, it was very emotional. The lyrics were so deep and they cut to the bone... I feel like it is one of the most iconic records I have done

in my life. And, you know, it was done by two friends getting together and putting their minds together and coming together and saying, ‘Hey man, let’s help you get your crown’. And that was the goal.

“At the end of the last note that was played and sang on the record we feel that we gave it everything that we had. So far it is wonderful to hear that the world is receiving it as such.”

What does it mean to you to hear praise for *Crown*?

“It’s a very gratifying feeling to have all those things come to a guy that spent almost 30 years of his life committed to doing drugs and committed to dying [while] as high as I possibly could [be]. I feel like I’ve risen like a phoenix from those ashes – but my gift never left me. It stayed with me and was there the whole time. It was just waiting, waiting on my physical body and my mental and emotional self to catch back up with who I was – and I did. And I think I came back even stronger than before because I now have all these emotions and encounters and situations that have happened in my life [to incorporate into my music] with a very clear mind. So *Crown* is one of the most in-depth pieces of work I feel I have done thus far. And I believe it is just the beginning... it’s one of the most exhilarating feelings that anyone could have in the world.”

What did working with a band and production team like that draw out of you, musically, on *Crown*?

“We put our heads together to do a record that was very fitting for the time and what was happening in the world, and the issues that needed to be addressed. And there were things that were involved with myself being a black man in this world, which are a part of [wider] things that are happening. You know, don’t give me a pass because I play guitar and you like what it is that I do... On any given day, a police officer don’t give a damn about what I do or what I am. All they see is what colour that I am. I’m not trying to push or preach that to anybody, but I just wanted to have a conversation with the listener on this record.

“A lot of the mindset right now [on these issues], is not [people’s] fault because they don’t know how



The Lineup

Eric Gales started working on the album the day after the murder of George Floyd. "The lyrics cut to the bone," he says

"I feel like I've risen like
a phoenix from the
ashes - but my gift
never left me"





"I am playing, I believe,
from a space of the most
powerful energy
and emotion"



it feels to be in the skin of someone who [faces] those problems. So if they don't know, they don't know. If you don't know you have privilege, you wouldn't know because... these are things that never happened to you. So I tried to get this point across in the way of songs and expressing stuff that had happened to me.

"I am playing, I believe, from a space of the most powerful energy and emotion that I have ever done in my life – and everything I'm telling you got put into this record. And now we're doing everything we can to ensure the world hears this record. Not just to let people know that Eric Gales is back and better and stronger and sober and living his best life, but also to let them know there are things on the record that could potentially change the mindset of people that didn't know these things are happening.

"[There are] people who may think, 'Why are black people so angry?' It's like, 'No, we're not mad just for nothing.' It's been happening for some time, and I speak on that platform because, man, if you take everything away that the world knows me for [in music making] that puts me in the same position of being, potentially, who George Floyd was."

Your chordwork on the album is lovely and some of the changes have a jazz-like feel. Are you headed in that direction as a player?

"Well it's also a heavy, heavy dose of gospel that comes from my background. It's a heavy dose that is poured into everything I do: regardless of what it is, I find a way to keep it in there. And, you know, I don't apologise for it. I can be your traditional I-IV-V guy, but there's too many other influences and styles that I am fond of and they just come out at random times. And I'm happy that they do because it changes the road, it changes the route. The destination is the same, but the travel to get there is all one's own adventure. At the end of the day, my style, if I had to give a description, is deeply rooted in gospel and blues. But it just has other different things tossed in there.

"When someone listens to *Crown*, it's not the regular beaten path... it's not the average predictable record. Even in the tracks that are [based on tradition] it's done the way that Eric Gales envisions it. And that's what's supposed to happen: people that inspired me, inspired me – but not as a clone. Because why would a person go buy a clone of someone when they can go a few rows down in the record store and buy the real thing?"

One cool feature of the album is the short grooves or vamps between longer tracks that faded up for a few seconds before fading away again. Where did the idea come from?

"Yeah, we decided to do the vignettes because me and Joe were talking. We remembered listening to old BB and Albert Records and Little Milton records where you would hear just maybe 30 to 40 seconds of a serious groove that went by and it made you want more. So we decided to incorporate things that inspired us coming up as youngsters – and which still do. So I was very happy to incorporate those into the record."



"When someone listens to *Crown*, it's not the regular beaten path... it's not the average predictable record"

PHOTO BY KATRENA WIZE

One of the standout aspects of your style is you transition so easily from slippery legato playing to tight, rhythmic alternate picking – and back again. How did you develop that?

"Honestly, man, I don't even know how to answer that question! I just knew what I wanted to accomplish and I kept going till it worked for me. There was no preference [in picking style or approach] for me as a left-handed upside-down player... I didn't pay attention to it. That's the best answer I can give to you. There was no meticulous practising on a particular sweep or legato or staccato. Whatever fit where it was supposed to is exactly what I tried to make happen and it just sort of formulated into a whole world of its own."

"I can be your traditional I-IV-V guy, but there's too many other influences and styles that I am fond of and they just come out at random times"

Gear-wise, you've long used Strat-style electrics built by Japanese maker Magneto. Were those still your go-to for *Crown*?

"Yeah, I used those and my DV Mark amps. I used those with some Dumble – Joe inserted that just to give it a little bit more. But every day was predominantly with the DV Marks and the Magneto guitar."

The vibe of the playing is very much a tight-but-live feel. Did you track the album as a band rather than layering individual parts?

"It was tracked as a live band. And 90 per cent of the solos that were on this record were all done live, too."

You also sound great with a plush horn section behind you – that feels like a new thing for you yet fits so well.

"It was great. It was an idea that was brought up and, you know, just doing something different: 'Eric, let's just do something different from what you've done and the normal beaten path. Let's go to the next level, man.'" [JD]



Eric Gales' new album, *Crown*, by is available now on Provogue/Mascot

www.ericgales.com

PHOTO BY JEFF FASANO



Starting Line

How do you *really* get onto the rungs of the session-pro ladder? **Adam Goldsmith** shares tips from his past 20 years in the biz

One of the questions I get asked most from students and people looking to break into freelance guitar playing is 'How do I get started working as a session guitarist?' I've always found this difficult to answer – mainly because there is no real definitive answer and everyone's experience is different. However, I'll give it a go and hopefully it will be of use.

The only caveat is, when I was starting out in my 20s (I'm 44 now), the internet was in its infancy and social media didn't exist. There was more emphasis on whether you could cut it in a studio or on a gig, and not so much on your video-editing skills... Nevertheless, if you want to be a studio musician, a good start would be

Many of the studio players from a couple of generations before me also went down this path of music college/ National Youth Jazz Orchestra, and the last couple of guitar players to come out of it are now depping for me on various projects.

It's important to use this time in your life to get your basics together – fundamental harmony, awareness of styles, a bit of reading, and your rhythm playing – as much as possible. I've possibly said this before, but I think it bears repeating: at least 90 per cent of your time as a working musician is spent playing rhythm, so using all your time to play fast solos on Instagram may gain you followers, but it certainly won't gain you studio or live work in any meaningful sense.

"I said yes to every gig that came my way, including playing banjo at Bernard 'Turkey' Matthews' house in front of Ronnie Corbett at 1am"

to live in an area where there is a healthy music scene. In the UK this means somewhere such as Greater London. You then need to meet people. University or college courses are good for this. We've all got YouTube and Spotify, so we know what to practise, but you need to make friends – and these friends could well be the producers and composers of tomorrow.

Personally, I learned more in my five years with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra in my early 20s than I did doing a classical music degree, which I mostly spent in my room trying to cop non-syllabus-based Pat Metheny licks, or attending the odd jam night.

Lots of hard work and humility helped Adam – pictured below at Mark Knopfler's British Grove Studios in London – get to where he is today

Humble Pie

I also said yes to pretty much every gig that came my way, from playing banjo at Bernard 'Turkey' Matthews' house in front of Ronnie Corbett at 1am, to teaching at primary schools (never again, please) and getting asked to do my first TV gigs (playing jingles for telephone numbers on a kids TV show). And these all led, directly or indirectly, to proper film and TV sessions, which have been the backbone of my career for the past 20 years or so.

Much experience, both musical and social, was also gained in playing in a function band in my early 20s. They're essentially low-pressure sessions – many styles, playing songs all the way through, music you potentially don't like, and variable levels of enthusiasm and appreciation from your clients. At this stage in my life, an average week would have been: Monday to Friday, music college, possibly a jam night; Saturday morning, NYJO rehearsal followed by a dodgy function gig in the evening. In hindsight, it was all very useful.

Finally, if you're going to contact older players for advice out of the blue, try to avoid the 'Can I have your gigs, please? I'm brilliant. Look at my Instagram' approach. This will invariably result in an internal 'No, never contact me again.' It helps to be down-to-earth and vaguely humble and you'll hopefully get a pleasant response and some useful advice. I remember emailing Steve Lukather around 15 years ago when I was on tour in America and asking for a lesson. I was super polite, tried not to bang on about how brilliant I was or sell myself, and he sent me a lovely and considered reply. He declined giving the lesson as he was in Europe at the time, but the point is he *did* reply, which I really wasn't expecting, so you never know your luck.

It helps to remember from the start that being a session musician means keeping your ego out of any situation and that you're being hired to make other people's music better, not for them to sit in awe of your dazzling tapping chops and personality. **■**



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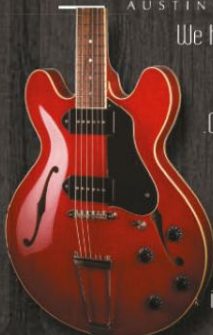
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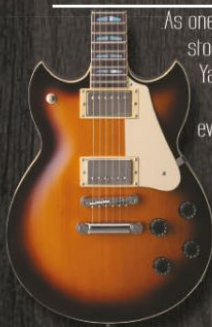
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Road To Damascus

After more decades' playing than he'd like to remember, **Neville Marten** experienced a turning point with a hitherto 'Kryptonite' gear combo

As I get older and (as it so often seems these days) not wiser, nothing fails to amaze me. Do you have certain preconceptions about the gear you like and don't like? I certainly do. And two of these were blown right out of the window for me recently.

I've always said that I've never really got on with classic Fender amps. I love Blues Juniors and adored an old red-knob Twin I had yonks ago, but the joys of the Bassman, Deluxe, Twin and Super Reverb have always eluded me. There's something about the middle frequencies that I don't warm to. Ibanez Tube Screammers, too, have never seemed to do for me what they so clearly did for many people whose tone and playing I admire.

"The joys of the Bassman, Deluxe, Twin and Super Reverb have always eluded me. There's something about the middle frequencies that I don't warm to"

Cut to 2021 and my great friend Robbie Gladwell invited me to join his band for the annual charity event he puts on in Sudbury, Suffolk. We were to do a couple of acoustic numbers together then I'd be part of an amazing backing group with keys, horns and everything. Some monster players in the line-up, too.

"Don't bother bringing an amp," Robbie said. "I have loads." Dutifully I turned up with my Gibson Hummingbird, the red Strat and my 'pre-Mick and Dan' pedalboard. "Your amp's over there." He pointed to a little black Fender Deluxe Reverb. Gulp! Well, at least I had my OCD and King Of Tone to help me out.

The gig went brilliantly and my tone was, frankly, incredible. I rattled off some acceptable solos, too, even if I say so myself. At the end I told Robbie I loved the

amp. "It's got a Celestion Neodymium Creamback in it," he explained. Ah, now it's starting to make sense. I'd always wondered if it was the Jensen speakers I didn't particularly bond with.

A few months later Robbie decided – owing to 2020's charity bash being cancelled due to you know what – to stage another in early December. He said I could use the same amp this time and, although I had my 'interim' board in the car, I asked if he had a drive pedal I could borrow, too (I was his second guitarist and didn't require a host of sounds, plus I was worried about looking 'big-time'). You already know what pedal he brought out, don't you? A bright green one with a silver footswitch in the middle. Yes, my two bête noires were ganging up to get me. You know the next bit, too... I got the most fantastic sound: pliable, nice and gnarly but also smooth and articulate, too. *Drat!* And double *drat!*

At the end of the night I asked Robbie if he'd sell me the amp and pedal. We agreed on a (very nice!) price on the Deluxe, but Robbie said he'd had the TS for 20 years and would rather keep it. And why not?

Mr Gladwell has been part of Steve Harley's band for over 20 years, and at the end of last year he rang to say they were playing right next door to our offices at the Forum in Bath. Would I like to come up and see them? Of course I said I'd love to. He then piped up with, "Oh, and I thought about it and I'm bringing that Tube Screamer as your Christmas present!" How lovely is that?

I told Mick Taylor the whole story and he howled about 'old dogs and new tricks'. So I'm taking the pedal over soon and he and Dan will build it into my new 'board – they're going to film me trying out the whole shebang, too, so keep an eye out for that.

My obvious question to you now is, have you had any Damascene gear epiphanies? If so, we'd love to hear them. See you next month. **G**

GAS OF THE MONTH

Bebop Deluxe

What? Fender Tone Master Deluxe Reverb, Blonde

Where seen? www.dv247.com **Price?** £839

My old mate Robbie sold me his all-valve Deluxe Reverb as he's replaced it with one of these. It looks so cool in this Blonde finish, and sonically it's as close as is possible to get using digital modelling to the tones and dynamic response of the original. With the same Celestion Neo Creamback speaker as in mine but with no valves and large transformers to weigh it down, you can lift the thing with a finger. It has that proper pine cabinet, lush reverb and 'tremolo', and also features a balanced line out using speaker Impulse Response technology for accurate sound reproduction. Look at the price, too; it streets over £500 less than the '65 Deluxe Reverb valve version.



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Quirk Of Art

This issue, **Alex Bishop** dismantles a piece of 1960s American guitar history hoping to bring it back to its former glory

As a repairer of guitars both old and new, I cover everything from minor setups to time-consuming restoration projects. It might be valuable, worthless, historical or absurd; I feel like I've seen it all (seemingly, that is, until the next customer walks through the door). But what also fascinates me is the motivation that gets musicians to restore and repair instruments in the first place.

My favourite reason to fix a guitar is because the owner simply loves the sound of it. This makes for an interesting repair challenge when the very reason why the guitar sounds so good can have a lot to do with why it is broken in the first place. So it was that I found myself casting an eye over a very fine 1960s Harmony Sovereign acoustic guitar during the interval at a jazz gig towards the end of last year. The primary complaint was that the guitar was not only difficult to play, but it was desperately out of tune further up the neck.

"One way to fix its playability would have been to add braces to the top, but that would have fundamentally changed its character"

However, it had a tone unlike any other guitar that my client had in his collection, and it was a valuable tool in his recording studio, despite its shortcomings.

When faced with any potential repair job I scan over the whole guitar to spot anything that looks out of place. For starters, there was very little saddle left poking out of the bridge of this guitar. Assuming it was built correctly in the first instance, this should have meant the strings were low to the fretboard, not high, so something really wasn't right. The neck looked in reasonably good shape, although a professional refret would have definitely improved the feel of the fingerboard. It was only when I ran my hands over the soundboard that I could feel the obvious problem: it had dishd the wrong way quite dramatically, even to the

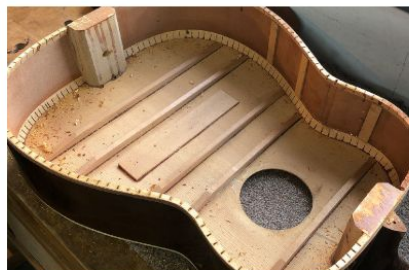
extent that the soundhole was quite severely distorted into a squashed oval shape.

Once I had the guitar back at my workshop I inspected inside with my fibre optic camera, and the bracing on the underside of the soundboard revealed all. Most steel-string acoustic guitars use Martin-style 'X-bracing' to stiffen the top of the guitar. Primarily, two overlapping softwood struts reinforce the thin spruce top allowing it to withstand the pull of the strings, with a further seven (or more) additional struts and patches for extra strength. However, this guitar was 'ladder braced' with only four modest struts running across the grain and nothing else to support the areas of the soundboard around the underside of the bridge.

The bracing arrangement of an acoustic guitar has a direct effect on the sound, and in this instance I was confident that the secret of the sound of this guitar – and the reason my customer was so enamoured by the tone of it – was a direct result of the way the top was braced. The obvious way to fix its playability would have been to add braces to the top and put it back into the correct shape, but that would have fundamentally changed the character of its sound.

After a bit of chin stroking and procrastination I opted instead to change the angle of the neck, not by removing it but by taking off the back. This suddenly makes the guitar very flexible, so with a little pressure on the headstock the neck can be gently tilted back to pitch at the correct angle (slightly warping the sides of the guitar) and then the back is glued back to stabilise the whole arrangement. This realignment means the strings are now much closer to the fingerboard, and with a new saddle at the proper height the guitar has plenty of projection with all of its original tone intact.

It might still have a top that has more in common with a cereal bowl than a 'flat-top' guitar, but there is deep satisfaction that comes from fixing up a special-sounding guitar for a discerning client. It might not be perfect, but as a fellow guitar maker once told me, "Strive for perfection, and settle for excellence." **G**



The modest ladder bracing here had inadvertently given this guitar a unique character – but how can you fix the tuning issues without interfering with its distinctive sound?



PJD

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Lacquer Laws

Did you know your acoustic top's lacquer can weigh more than the soundboard itself? **Jamie Dickson** explores finish and unplugged tone

Last issue we looked at how the finish of an electric guitar influences its tone. Luthier Patrick James Eggle concluded that the key quality a finish – be it nitrocellulose or poly – should have is to be as thin as possible while still protecting the guitar.

This principle is even more important when it comes to the world of the acoustic guitar. Achieving a thin finish that doesn't affect the resonance of the guitar's soundboard – which is effectively the 'speaker cone' of the guitar – is clearly desirable. But surely a spray-on finish couldn't make that much of a difference, could it? Think again, says Patrick James Eggle. Did you know, for example, that a heavily applied finish can weigh as much as the soundboard itself?

Patrick James Eggle believes "the best thing is for the lacquer on the guitar to be as thin as you can get it", in order for the soundboard to react quickly to the energy and vibration of the strings

"On an acoustic guitar, especially on the soundboard, you want the actual soundboard to react fast to the energy from the string," Patrick explains. "So you're relying on the energy of the string getting the soundboard moving. You want it to have a fast reaction, and if you have a thick layer of heavy lacquer on the guitar – which may easily be heavier than the actual spruce itself – then there's going to be all this [extra] weight to overcome. The [vibration coming from the] strings has to move the soundboard and it's obviously going to react far slower if it has a heavy finish."

As Patrick explains, efficient energy transfer from string to soundboard is all-important. For the guitar designer, that means preventing energy from being robbed by badly designed parts of the guitar before it can be turned into vibration by the soundboard. Patrick no longer builds acoustics these days, focusing entirely on high-end electrics, but he built very fine acoustic guitars for many years, so he knows whereof he speaks.

"My approach was always to keep the neck as stiff and inert as you can," he explains, "so when the string starts to move, the energy is not dissipating through the neck. Most of it is going through the bridge – and that's what has to get the soundboard moving. So you want the soundboard to be responsive and to be able to react easily to the energy from the string."

"We basically put lacquer on the guitar to protect it from all the things that happen in daily life: humidity and spills and plectrum marks and everything else," he adds. "And I think everybody basically agrees that the best thing is to have lacquer on a guitar but for it to be as thin as you can get it. So if it's covered in a millimetre of really rock-hard polyester lacquer that weighs as much – or more – than the actual soundboard then it's going to make a huge difference to its reactivity and to its tone."

So why don't we simply apply as little finish as humanly possible to the top? Well, as with all things, it's a question of balance. Some dampening effect from a judiciously applied finish can actually help the guitar sound composed and poised, Patrick explains.

"If you have a single coat of satin lacquer on a soundboard, it's faster-reacting and it sounds a lot more 'fizzy'," he says. "This is really a subjective thing: whether you like the sound of a guitar with lots of lacquer on it or whether you like the sound of a guitar with hardly any lacquer on it."

"Everybody has their own views on how they like the instrument to actually sound," he continues. "With acoustic guitars, I actually prefer the sound of an acoustic guitar that has a thin lacquer finish, rather than a guitar with just a single sealer coat or something like that. I think they sound a bit too lively and fizzy – I prefer that slightly more rounded-off tone. Also with the lacquer finish it ages more nicely."





Another highly skilled acoustic luthier who believes finish has a huge impact on tone is Northern Irish guitar maker Ciaran McNally, a former craftsman at both George Lowden and Atkin Guitars, who now runs his own high-end, hand-built acoustic guitar company in Armagh. Ciaran argues that the influence of finish on an acoustic guitar's sound can even extend to whether it is a hard gloss or a satin finish – in part due to the volume of finish used in each case.

"With a handmade American guitar, such as a Collings, I do believe that the very crystal-clear tone you get a lot of the time is created by that ultra-flat finish and how the finish has been treated and how hard the finish is, too. I do a satin finish and a gloss finish on my guitars, and I find there is a difference in tone between those two things. There is certainly a difference in the amount of lacquer used, which is definitely contributing," Ciaran adds.

So what sort of subtle differences might we hear between hard gloss and satin?

"The gloss will be more of a consonant and a satin will be more vowel-like and open. If there is less lacquer, it's allowing that vibration more"

"The gloss is going to be brighter," Ciaran says. "It's going to have a clearer kind of sound. And I always try to describe these things in terms of consonants and vowels. So the gloss will be more of a consonant and a satin will be more vowel-like and more vocal and open. If there is less lacquer and it's thinner, it's allowing that vibration to take place more. Whereas with a heavier, harder gloss finish that's been polished to a flatter surface as well, I think is restraining the tone a little. And it's sort of helping with the higher frequencies and the lower frequencies," he concludes.

The answer is good acoustic tone is promoted by a thin finish – but the fine-tuning of how thin and how hard it is offers the luthier a way to dial in the voice of the guitar to suit its intended character still further, in yet another of the magical nuances of guitar design that make lutherie such an endlessly fascinating art. **G**

The ultra-thin high-gloss nitrocellulose finish on this Collings D2H T allows its tone to ring through very clearly

THREE TO GET READY

Three acoustics with beautiful finishes



Lowden S-23 12-Fret £3,475

A deserved Gear Of The Year winner, Lowden's S-23 offers a lithe playing experience in this smaller-bodied 12-fret configuration, which features a gloss polyurethane finish (that's sanded back to look like a satin finish) on its walnut body with a red cedar top. Reviewed back in issue 471, we said "the S-23 sings with a beautifully bright, airy voice. Sustain is practically infinite, too."



Epiphone FT-110 Frontier £3,619

Reborn in the USA, so to speak, Epiphone's reissued FT-110 Frontier is a thing of beauty tonally and in terms of styling. Built in Bozeman, Montana, the Frontier is a 14-fret dreadnought with Sitka spruce top and flamed maple back and sides, and its beautiful vintage sunburst is clad in a vintage nitrocellulose finish that does nothing to cloak its clear, articulate voice.



Taylor Builder's Edition 816ce £4,859

As part of the progressive 'Builder's Edition' range, the 816ce is just a little different from the norm, not least because of the soundport in the elegantly scooped cutaway. Like many contemporary Taylors its finish is a thin but flawless satin – and in some areas, such as around the soundport, the finish feels little more than a fine sealer coat, making its voice breathy and expansive yet composed.



Extended Chords Explained

Adding notes to a chord to enrich harmony can be a confusing topic – and gymnastic for the fingers! **Richard Barrett** is here to help

On paper, the idea of extended chords is reasonably simple to grasp: adding extra notes to a chord beyond the root, 3rd and 5th from its 'parent' scale. However, once we add in the conventions that govern add, sus and 7th chords, plus concepts such as leaving the 3rd out of a dominant 11th chord to avoid dissonance, and the lack of strings/fingers to hold all these notes down on a guitar, dark clouds within the mind can start to gather...

This issue's article is an attempt to demystify at least some of this and put you back in charge of your harmonic destiny, as it were! The examples start with an E7 (aka E dominant 7, if you want to use 'theory' jargon). From there, we extend to the 9th, 11th and 13th, dealing with the issues stated above. Bear in mind that the extended notes are not always added to the top of the chord in ascending scale order. The guitar isn't really arranged that way – and humans don't have enough fingers! **■**

Right: Jazz guitarist George Van Eps delivered something extra with his 'pianistic' approach to guitar playing

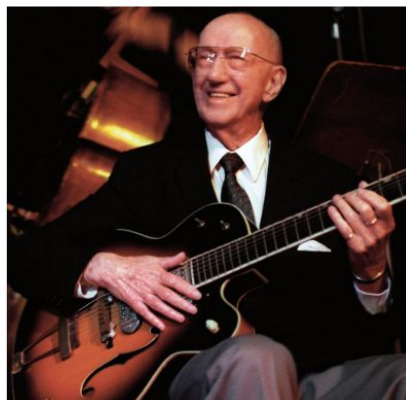
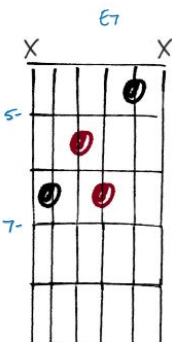


PHOTO BY RICHARD HARTOG/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

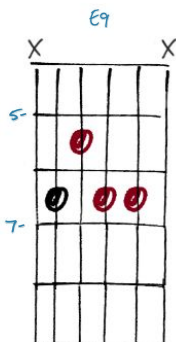
Example 1

For this E7, I've used a 'C7' type shape and moved it up to the 7th fret. Technically, I didn't need to include the extra root note on the second string, but the extra fullness this gives makes it 'sit' better alongside the other chords. Notice that the 5th (B) is omitted: this is often the case with extended chords to retain clarity and save available fingers.



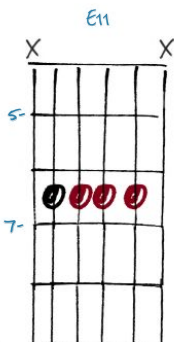
Example 2

Keeping the basic shape intact and adding an F# on the B string gives us an E9 chord, which replaces the extra root from Example 1. Again, the 5th (B) is absent, but this could be added in on the high E string if you wish. This would make it the top note of the chord but would not change the name.



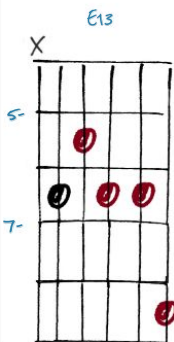
Example 3

This E11 chord retains the root, 7th and 9th, but also features the A (11th) on the fourth string – replacing the 3rd, which would clash a bit with all the extensions. Though the 11th is not the top note of the chord, its relationship to the 7th and 9th here marks it as a further extension of the chord, if not 'higher'.



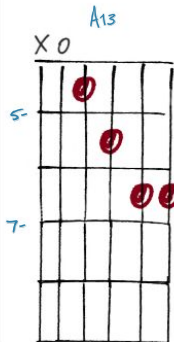
Example 4

Unlike Example 3, this E13 chord does feature all the extensions in ascending scale order. Reaching that 13th (C#) on the high E is not the most comfortable experience, but it hopefully introduces the concept in a way that continues to make sense if we juggle things around a bit for a movable version, which is coming up next...



Example 5

For this A13, I've used the open A string to give this some context on its own. However, this can work in any position in a band context or with a bass player. Note that the 13th and 9th have swapped places. As stated earlier, this doesn't change the name of the chord.



GOOD TO GO

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Feedback

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

STAR LETTER

UNDER THE INFLUENCE



Coco Montoya had a 10-year tenure with John Mayall

PHOTO BY PAUL NANTIN / JEFFREY MAGE

Having reached the age of 72 I have recently stopped gigging due to failing health after playing in local covers bands for over 50 years. I have been reflecting on my many influences over the years. One band that I have followed since the very early days is John Mayall and his Bluesbreakers, and it is great to see that he is still performing. My first repertoires consisted mainly of songs from his early albums with Eric Clapton and Peter Green. I have seen the Bluesbreakers live many times over the years and have loved the solo work of people like Walter Trout and Buddy Whittington.

I have recently been revisiting my favourite of [Mayall's] guitarists, Coco Montoya. He is probably not as well known as some of the other names and I don't recall many references to him in *Guitarist*. I was fortunate enough to catch one of his gigs with his band while on a trip to New York about 20 years ago at the Bottom Line Club. Before the gig I had been browsing in a nearby record shop and was approached by his keyboard player who had spotted me buying one of their CDs. After the gig he introduced me to Coco and we had a very pleasant half hour discussing guitars and amps and his time with John Mayall alongside Walter Trout.

I have recently been revisiting Coco's several solo albums on Spotify and am still bowled over by his soulful playing as well as his great singing voice. He is now back on top of my playlists along with Joe Bonamassa and Matt Schofield. Well worth a listen for anyone not familiar with his work.

Tom Woods, via email

Thanks for writing in, Tom – and the praise of Coco Montoya is certainly deserved. He's sometimes overlooked as a powerful but poised player with a great voice, too. It's always a pleasure when you can enjoy a conversation with players of that calibre, not as a selfie-seeking fan but a fellow guitarist. Your letter is also a nice reminder of how some musicians, such as John Mayall, are like great trees in the landscape of music, whose long-lived branches support all kinds of careers; witness the number of great players Mayall has had in his band. Honestly, has anyone ever had more or better guitarists in his line-up than Mayall? At any rate, you've earned this month's Star Letter prize.



KORG

Each issue's Star Letter wins a Korg Pitchblack Custom – a smart pedal tuner with ultra-high +/-0.1 precision for sharp visibility and pinpoint accuracy right at your feet.
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LIGHT MY FIRE

Your photo of Jimi at the Hollywood Bowl in August of '67 [in issue 478] brought back memories for me as I was at that concert. It was the first of five Hendrix concerts I attended. Though my seat was far from the stage, the image of him setting his guitar on fire still burns (sorry) in my memory, as well as fans splashing in the pool in front of the stage. I don't recall if he threw the guitar into the pool or not. Jimi inspired many people to take up the guitar, but as a left-hander he was especially inspiring to me. I'm still trying.

Bob Gervais, via email

How we envy you that memory, Bob, thanks so much for writing in to share it with us. The reflecting pool in front of the stage at the Hollywood Bowl was doubtless installed for its scenic qualities, but it must have come in handy when Jimi was torching Strats! Others can copy Jimi's pyrotechnic acts of stage theatre, but they'll never be the first to make that kind of powerful statement – sacrificing the guitar to the flames at the climax of the gig, as if sending it off to Strat Valhalla.

We've had two great letters sharing personal memories of Jimi gigs now. Did anyone else see the master in action during his too-short career and have some great recollections to share with other readers?

OLD FAITHFUL

I've owned a Fender Strat Plus Deluxe from new, bought in 1998 from the USA, and it's still my favourite guitar today. It's been refretted twice, but everything else onboard is original. It has the Mini Floyd Rose II bridge, which is probably reaching its end of life now. The saddles are struggling and over years I've swapped them around to maintain playability. It has the LSR roller nut and locking tuners, pop-in chrome whammy bar and Fender Lace Sensors: Red (bridge), Gold or Silver (hard to tell and I just can't remember – middle), Blue (Neck).

This guitar has travelled everywhere with me, from South Africa to the UAE to the isolated islands in the South Atlantic Ocean, Ascension and St Helena, and back here in the UK. Even though I don't dive on the whammy, but do use it frequently, it just stays in tune. It's as faithful as can be and so adaptable to a wide range of music genres. I hope the supplied picture [above right] is interesting enough to be given the absolute honour of being printed in your magazine. It's my way of giving back to this beauty, a small piece of the years of pleasure and love it has given me.

David Peters, via email



Hi David, thanks for sharing your love for what has obviously been such a reliable friend over the years. The 1989 launch of the Strat Plus was quite a bold step in the direction of innovation from Fender, who had only just salvaged its reputation for building quality instruments again after management bought out the company from CBS in 1985.

The Strat Plus was built around its Lace Sensor pickups, which were designed by Don Lace to have a very different internal construction to conventional magnetic pickups, with the aim of reducing magnetic pull on the strings to increase sustain and reduce hum and other interference from nearby electrical devices. The Deluxe Plus Strat had even more tricks up its sleeve including the Hipshot Tremsetter device that ensured the vibrato returned exactly to a desired preset position every time, a Fender/Wilkinson roller nut for smooth vibrato operation and many more tweaks.

We can certainly see the American Ultra Strats of today as the descendants of this feature-loaded double-cut. The editor of this mag remembers feeling awestruck seeing them on the wall at his local guitar shop, Morlings, in Lowestoft – and wondering what the difference between the different colours of Lace Sensor was. Gold, it later transpired, was voiced like a 50s Strat pickup, while Blue was meant to be somewhat like a PAF, and Silver was intended to be voiced like 70s Strat pickups, an interesting choice given that Fender had only just shucked off the reputational woes of that era! Anyway, so glad to hear you're still enjoying those progressive features 30 years on. Why, it's almost vintage now – there's a scary thought!

NICELY FOCUSED

I thought your readers may be interested in my creation. The body has had its cutaway horns curved completely round with extra contours added. It has a Seymour Duncan Lil '59 for the neck and two Tri-Sonics, one of which has been modified and wired in series at the bridge. I then made my own nut from steel. It has vintage Kluson tuners and I finished it in Ford Focus RS Electric Orange.

Paul Cooper, via email



Love that colour, Paul, and we applaud the way your design really hangs together as a coherent whole. It's got just a touch of Ibanez Joe Satriani model about it, but it's very much its own thing. We'd love to hear how it sounds with that distinctive combination of Tri-Sonics and the Lil '59 for a bit of clout at the neck. We always enjoy seeing readers' custom creations so send 'em in and we'll print the best.

SUPER 'SONIC

Re-reading Dave Burrluck's Longtermers review of the Fender Acoustasonic Jazzmaster in issue 478, I spotted that he had not yet gigged the guitar. Well, I have, twice, now that we have been let out of Lockdown Limbo, so here's a view that might interest.

Like many others, I have struggled when playing occasional acoustic numbers within a live electric band situation. Sufficient volume to hear myself among other loud instruments, let alone cut across for a solo, can lead to a huge howl-around and much moving around to find a spot that blocks the acoustic feedback path. I have a beautiful Taylor 424 in full koa that sounds wonderful, and a Taylor T5 that I thought might help the issue, but neither really works without so much EQ fiddling on the mixer that they no longer sound properly acoustic.

Now we have added a second guitarist to the band, I took the Acoustasonic plunge. Some great acoustic tones, easily varied to taste, as loud as you like and not affected by pickup from the bass amp or kick drum. Is it as tasty as the Taylors? No. But the sounds played through an LR Baggs Venue straight into the PA are truly convincing as an acoustic guitar within an electric band. And we have found that extra elements to some songs can be added by a quick flick to the humbucker at the bridge, for a crunchy electric solo, or similar rhythm backing to the other guitar. A stomp on my Line 6 G70 footswitch can also direct the Jazzmaster straight into the electric amp instead of, or even as well as, through the Venue into the PA. Also, in the event of a broken string or other failure of the electric

Above left: David Peters' Fender Strat Plus Deluxe has been a faithful companion since purchased new in 1998 – and it's even travelled the world with him

Above right: Finished in an eye-catching Electric Orange, Paul Cooper's custom double-cut features two Tri-Sonic pickups and a Seymour Duncan Lil '59

Below: Reader David Wheeler has found Fender's Acoustasonic Jazzmaster to be the ideal fit for his live acoustic numbers in an electric band



guitar, this could save the day. Above all, this is an enjoyable and inspiring instrument to play.

David Wheeler, via email

Great to hear the Acoustasonic hit the spot in what feels like its natural home: the live stage. In the studio, you have the luxury of being able to carefully select the guitar that suits the track the best, record a part and then browse for other sounds with other instruments if the recording seems to call for it. But gigging a mixed set calls for a supremely pragmatic, adaptable instrument – and the Acoustasonic instruments are just that. We have a feeling they'd be a superb match with looper pedals in live performance as you could use the wide variety of contrasting tones to really build up a sonically rich, multi-layered loop. Probably be a good busking tool, too. Tell us if you'd like to see us have a go at that and we can always ask Mr Burrluck...

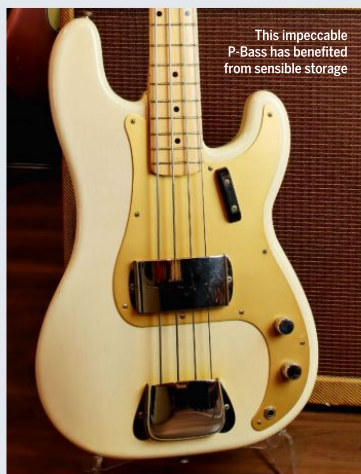
READER'S RIGS

I'm sending in my pictures and text for inclusion for the Reader's Rigs feature. At last, the sound in my head is achieved through: Fender Japan HSS Stratocaster (1993) fitted with extra 22nd fret, Bulldog pickups and Pure Tone multi-contact jack socket; Chord Company Cream instrument cable; Wienbrock 112 Gaucho amp combo with Tayden Great Brit speaker and Turbo>Tone (WE) speaker cable upgrade; and sound improvement stand.

Tony Bilny, via email

Thanks for sharing your rig with us, Tony. It's an unmatched feeling when the sound in your head translates to real life! Want to share your own rig? Drop us a line...

Below: Tony Bilny's rig comprises a modded '93 Fender Japan Strat, Wienbrock combo and high-end cables



This impeccable P-Bass has benefited from sensible storage

REQUESTS...

Want to see something in the mag? Tell us at guitarist@futurenet.com

Back To Bass-ics: Although nowadays I play six-string guitar, too, I was originally a bass player and as such am always interested when a bass sneaks into the pages of *Guitarist*, such as David Davidson's interesting Vintage Icons article in issue 480 featuring a 1958 Fender Precision Bass. Mention was made of storing the guitar properly, thereby avoiding the headstock leaning forward because of tension over the years.

My question is, what is the correct way to store a guitar? And also, does it depend on how long it goes without being played? I have a Fender Precision, a Rickenbacker 4003, an Ibanez semi-acoustic bass and a 1980 American-made BC Rich Mockingbird bass. Limited space sees them in their cases when not being played and standing virtually upright, just leaning back against a wall. Is that ideal? I leave the strings at normal playing tension. Would an article on 'back to basics' instrument care be an idea? (Ideally including basses, too, please.)

Dee Evans, via email

Hi Dee, great suggestion – we've forwarded your question on to our gear editor, Dave Burrluck, for a full explanation on the best way to store guitars in a future Mod Squad column. The Back To Basics regular feature sounds good as well. We'll see what we can arrange...

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

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IN MY LIFE | *Joey Santiago*



JOEY SANTIAGO

He's the square-peg radical of alt-rock, whose angle-grinder guitar parts made the Pixies the biggest cult band of the late 80s. As the Boston band releases a deluxe boxset of its fabled 2004 reunion shows at Brixton Academy, Joey Santiago tells us about military coups, celebrity fans and refusing to turn down

Words Henry Yates

Coming To America

"I was born in the Philippines, and if I'd stayed there, I probably would have joined the fucking guerillas, raised a coup, overthrown the government. We already had The Beatles, but if my family hadn't emigrated to the US in 1972, maybe my musical choices wouldn't have been so rock 'n' roll. I remember taping radio shows, especially the comedy hour. But I get bored easily and after a while, I started thinking, 'There's gotta be more than this.' And there was. There was tons of music out there."

Snake Bite

"My first guitar was an Ovation Viper that my mother bought for me. It was a good guitar and I wish I still had it. But I remember, I broke up with someone just a little too early before getting my guitar out of there. I was influenced by players like Jimi Hendrix and George Harrison, Even Chet Atkins and Wes Montgomery. Maybe a little of their spirit is in my playing here and there. I don't know how, but it'll find its way in there. Les Paul, I like, too. He's crazy. Like, the song *The World Is Waiting For The Sunrise*. I love it. It's so good."

College Rock

"I have great memories of going to college and meeting Charles [Thompson, aka Pixies frontman Black Francis]. I was just relieved I wasn't among jocks. I was afraid of that when I went to college. I just didn't want it to be, like, 'bro', 'bro', 'bro'. There were eight of us and we were all eclectic, geeky nerds. That's what I wanted. And I wanted to be the coolest one. I could tell immediately that Charles had something."

Choose Your Weapon

"Charles gave me the choice of playing lead guitar or bass. But I wasn't gonna play bass. When Kim Deal [bass] joined the Pixies, she was definitely the coolest one among us. She's just got this other thing going on. And a great bass player, always locked in with David [Lovering, drums]. She played like a bass player. You know when a guitarist is playing bass? You can tell. It's not good. But she just locked into it."

Tools Of The Trade

"Charles is a really good rhythm player. Really exceptionally fucking good. My role is that I'm trying to refuse to play

chords with him. Sometimes I have to, which is fine – you gotta start the song off – but I like it best when I veer off, like, ‘Where the hell did he go?’ And then I come back in. It’s just one of those things that works. I’m not the most proficient guitar player out there, but I’ve got a hammer, I’ve got a screwdriver and some duct tape. I think you can build almost anything from there. You can fix anything with those three tools. You just have to use them differently every time.”

Circuit Breakers

“I remember, the Pixies played a few songs in the college common room. I think we already had *The Holiday Song*, and I already had the mandolin-trilling and the string-bending stuff going on. When we started playing around Boston, people seemed to get it, right away. Our first gig ever was nerve-racking. We played to not many people – I think it was a Tuesday night – but the crowd really liked it. I thought maybe they were just saying that. Y’know, they were my brothers and my friends, so what the hell else were they going to say? But they kept coming back!”

Dynamic Duo

“A lot of other bands did the quiet/loud dynamic, too, so giving us all the credit is kinda silly. But we really exploited it. Also, we were heavily influenced by The Cars, and they chug a lot. When we discovered that chugging thing, it was like, ‘Holy

fuck, this is really good.’ So you could really just chug it down then be quiet – and then just power in with another chord. Volume-wise, we were really, really loud. Even in those club days, Charles and I were those guitar players where the promoter was like, ‘You gotta turn down.’ And it was like, ‘No, don’t be silly.’ We’d turn down for the soundcheck, but then we’d start turning it back up. Then we figured out you could face the amps towards David, not towards the audience.”

Yin & Yang

“Frank uses Vox amps and I use the Marshall JCM800. He plays a Telecaster and I mostly play a ’57 Custom Reissue Les Paul. So it’s single-coil pickups and then humbuckers – the perfect combination. If I would have got a Tele, too, aesthetically, we would have looked like a country band. It just wouldn’t have been right.”

Less Is More

“The only scales I really know are the blues, major and minor. But that’s all you really need to know, right? I arpeggiate a lot and I have my favourite stuff I like to do. But scale-wise... it’s important to know, but I don’t do it. I’ll go with my favourite four or five notes and that’s all I use. And sometimes, you only need one. I describe my guitar style as ‘angular and bent’. That’s the kind of shape I’m looking for on a guitar. Because I know what a blues scale looks like: it’s boxy and square, and you’re gonna sound like that. Y’know,

•

“I describe my guitar style as ‘angular and bent’. That’s the kind of shape I’m looking for on a guitar”

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you’re gonna sound boxed-in. I’m looking for things that have that chord in there. Y’know, the Jimi Hendrix chord. I don’t even know what you call that!”

Surf’s Up

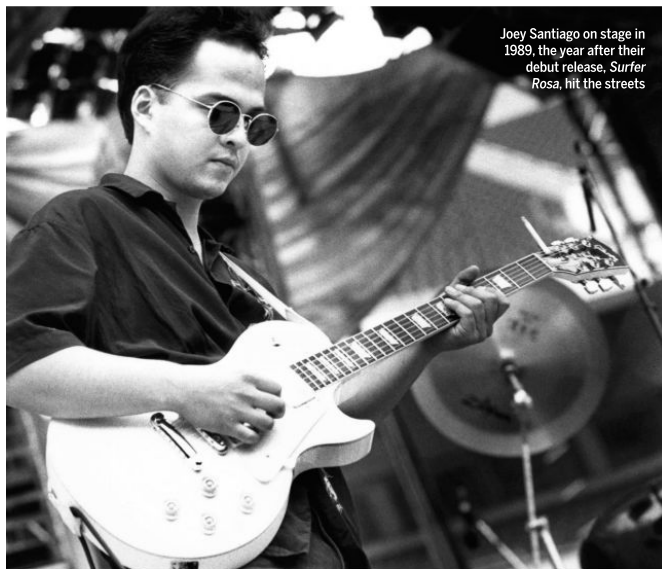
“I get why people like the *Surfer Rosa* [1988] and *Doolittle* [1989] records so much. Maybe it’s because we were performing those songs for so long before we recorded them. *Here Comes Your Man* was Charles’ old riff that he had down on his piano a long time ago. That surfy sound we got was overdubbed with a lot of guitars. There was a Jazzmaster, a Tele, anything with single-coil pickups; I don’t think my Les Paul made it on there. I don’t know how the *Debaser* riff came about, but I forgot how to play it at one show in Japan. I had such a massive jetlag. Charles thought I was kidding around. But it was like, ‘I just can’t do it, I totally forgot!’ My own favourite guitar moments? I like the riff on the second chorus of *U-Mass*. And I like *Is She Weird*. It’s just so weird and clean-sounding, which I hardly ever get to do.”

More Taste, Less Speed

“I think a good guitar lick is something that you can hum, just something catchy and original. I’ll leave the Van Halen school of guitar playing to them. Technicians make me feel like shit. Like, ‘Why are you doing this to me?’ But not any more because I know where I am and I know what I have to do. But yeah, they’re impressive. Kudos to the technicians. You gotta respect them. But you gotta give them space, leave them alone. The job of any musician or artist is to be different, to offer something new.”

Outer Limits

“I have a DOD FX-17 wah that’s very modern-sounding, and I get a crazy sound from my Moogerfooger pedal, too. But I think the non-traditional sounds I get are maybe just the way I attack the guitar. When we play *Vamos* live, I’ll hit my amps, bite my strings, I just go bananas. On the other songs, it’s almost like the real me, very reserved. I’m a different person on *Vamos*. I remember,



Joey Santiago on stage in 1989, the year after their debut release, *Surfer Rosa*, hit the streets

Pixies: Joey Santiago,
Paz Lenchantin, David
Lovering and Black Francis

"Our first Pixies gig ever was nerve-racking – but the crowd really liked it. I thought maybe they were just saying that. But they kept coming back!"



Recording plans for a brand-new Pixies album are already underway

PHOTO BY SIMON FOSTER / ALL CREATIVE ENTERPRISES LTD

my Les Paul broke at the Zenith in Paris. It slammed down and it kept feeding back. So I put it on the stand and had a literal interpretation of a guitar solo, where the guitar is really by itself..."

High Praise

"It felt good to be endorsed by Kurt Cobain, but I could live forever knowing that David Bowie loved us – everything else is really just gravy. We did have bad reviews, too, though. *Indie Cindy* [2014] got really slammed. On the reviews for *Bossanova* [1990], I remember someone saying my playing was really elementary. And it was like, 'Yeah, you caught me.' It was, on some songs. So with *Trompe Le Monde* [1991], I came back and started doing hammer-ons, just because I was really sensitive and didn't want that reviewer saying anything else about me."

Live & Dangerous

"Whenever the Pixies record a song in the studio, we're very concerned about: 'Can we actually play this live?' I don't change how I play my riffs and solos live because I'm a music fan and when I go see bands, I want to hear it just like the album. For me, I don't want any bullshit going around. I want it no-nonsense, just like the way it was. But the way we attack the songs is always different. Every show you do live, none of them are the same. Otherwise, it'd be too robotic. I'll hit a note a little softer here and there, and I'll hear Charles phrasing a little different. Just different enough to be cool, y'know?"

"If my family hadn't emigrated to the US in 1972, maybe my musical choices wouldn't have been so rock 'n' roll"

The Price Of Fame

"The Pixies was great at the beginning, with *Surfer Rosa* and *Doolittle*. And then, *Bossanova* was all right. But it came to a time when people in the band, for some reason, weren't happy. I don't think it was about the success so much as it was about people being tense, not having a good time. There was stuff we should have said. We just kept dusting it under the carpet until the carpet got turned into a mountain."

New Start

"The period after the Pixies split in 1993 was hard. I had to find something else to do. Charles had me play on a few of his records. Then I started composing for films. It's a very different discipline. It's scary, like, 'What am I going to put on top of this?' What happens is, you meet the producer and director, and they already have a sound they want. It's like, 'Do it like this [film], very close to being sued.' Then I sit there watching the footage

with a guitar in my hands, basically. Then I'll cry or take a nap from the stress. I prefer making tense film music. But I did a comedy with Judd Apatow, too, called *Undeclared*. That was fun, like these little mini rock songs."

The Bright Side

"I have to look at the silver lining of lockdown, right? I'm in L.A. The traffic was great. I have a cat. I just played a lot of acoustic, mostly just strumming, which I love. I was sat on the couch at Norman's Rare Guitars, with a bunch of acoustics all around me, ready to drop, like, \$18,000 or something. I was gonna get a Martin D-28 or a D-14. But in the end, I got another Martin, this little guy, a 50s 0-18. I fell in love with this guitar. It was like, 'Man, this is the one – and it's somehow less than I wanted to spend.' It's all mahogany, sounds great, should record well. A lot of Pixies songs start off on acoustic and I want to do that more. It makes it easier for me, first of all. I don't have to compete with another distorted guitar."

Next Chapter

"We're going to Vermont to record a new Pixies album in January. I know I'm excited because I get very nervous. But this time around, I'm trying to have a different mindset. It's just like, relax and don't be too hard on yourself. It doesn't have to be that painful. I'm just gonna wing it!"

www.pixiesmusic.com



"I HAVEN'T HEARD IT YET... BUT I WAS DEFINITELY THERE!"

Joey Santiago on the Pixies' new *Live In Brixton* boxset

What are your memories of playing the Brixton Academy in 2004?

"The excitement. The crowd. The anticipation. Brixton is one of those magical places for us. From the moment we got back together, we were definitely going to play that room. That was a no-brainer. Like, 'You guys are getting back together.' 'Okay, when do we hit Brixton?' You know what I mean? We just love it. We love the town. It's a magical venue. It's one of those few in the world that gets us that excited."

What do you remember as the standout tracks at those shows?

"Let's see. For those kinds of shows, it seems like the slower-paced ones are the ones that catch on. Like *Caribou* because it has a good arc. And then, just the songs that everyone wants to hear. *Monkey Gone To Heaven*. Stuff like that. The Jesus And Mary Chain cover of *Head On* always goes well."

Why do the slower-burning numbers go down best?

"I think because it's just better for a bigger room like that, y'know? The harder, trashier songs are really for clubs and things. We've found this out. It's more spacious and you kind of play the space."

The crowd goes crazy when you kick into *Debaser*...

"It's just amazing. The opening bass notes: it's just so recognisable. And a great guitar riff. Those first two notes, it just sounds like [sings Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*] 'mamma-mia'. It's very cool and people go nuts when we play it. The balcony was bouncing up and down in Brixton. And I thought, 'Himm, that's pretty fucking dangerous!' But it's built for that. It's endured a lot of gigs."

What gear did you use?

"It's always the same. I have the '57 Custom Reissue Les Paul. I put

a Bigsby on it, like it wasn't heavy enough already. And then I have the trusty 1965 ES-345, the red one. Those are the main ones I used that night. I've also got a Goldtop that gets handed to me for *Vamos* because I might wreck it. And I usually do whack it out of tune. I've had my Marshalls since the beginning of time, the JCM800. It's got the Sharpies on there. It's been on the same settings since 1989 – it's never changed!"

How pleased are you with the *Live In Brixton* boxset?

"I haven't actually heard it yet... but I was definitely there!"

Live In Brixton is released on 25 February as a vinyl or CD boxset, with 24-page booklet featuring photographs and new artwork

"I don't change how I play my riffs and solos live because I'm a music fan – I want to hear it just like the album"



PHOTO BY VENUS/SHUTTERSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Following the sold-out reunion shows in 2004, Pixies would later return to Brixton Academy with Paz Lenchantin on bass

GOLD FINGERS

How do you get the enviable job of playing guitar on the Hans Zimmer score for the latest James Bond movie, *No Time To Die*? We went undercover to talk to flamenco guitarist El Amir, who did just that, to find out

Words David Mead

Also known as Amir John Haddad, El Amir is something of a double agent. Known internationally as one of the top flamenco stylists of his generation, he can also occasionally be found toting a Kramer guitar and rocking out on his own brand of “heavy rock funk metal”. It’s a curious mix of styles, but El Amir himself insists that there is a connection between these two seemingly disparate musical entities and that is the dynamo of pure emotion that drives him.

Having played with artists including Stanley Clarke and Marcus Miller, El Amir also tours with film composer Hans Zimmer, playing film scores to stadiums and arenas worldwide in a live show. It was only a matter of time before his latest mission unfolded...

How did you come to play on the Bond soundtrack?

“In 2018, I was approached by the artistic direction team for Hans Zimmer through my management. They were looking for musicians to perform in *The World Of Hans Zimmer*, which is Hans’ latest show, and since then I’ve been touring through arenas in Europe with him. Then he started to send me cues for some films and one day he said, ‘I have this beautiful project. You have to come to London, I want you to record for the Bond movie.’ And I was like, ‘Wow.’ When I got to London, I arrived just in time to be at a meeting that Hans was having with Cary Fukunaga, the director, and the whole team.

“After that, Hans had a little meeting with me about what he was looking for. Then I went to Stephen

Lipson’s studio – he is a phenomenal producer – and I spent maybe three hours there and recorded a bunch of tracks and a bunch of guitar lines here and there. And that’s what they used. I think I’m on four songs of the soundtrack.”

Were you playing flamenco guitar?

“Yes. In this case I played a Spanish nylon-string. I recorded very delicate stuff: arpeggios, nice melodies, some chords that fitted the emotion on screen. Hans is a genius, anyway, so he really uses an instrument for the sake of transmitting an emotion that is going on within his composition and within a scene.

“What I want people, or other musicians, to know is that when you record something for a movie it’s never about your skills or your ability to play your instrument. Everybody



assumes that you need to be at a good level but everything else is just to focus on music, emotion, expression and dynamics. Sometimes even a very simple chord progression has to be played in a way that sounds very deep. It's a beautiful concept because, as soloists, we're used to performing on stage and showing what we have – the full programme of our technical range and everything. But for film music, it's a little bit different."

How did you first form an interest in flamenco guitar?

"I was born into a family with three cultures. My grandfather is from Hamburg and so he was German, but he eventually went to South America. So my mum comes from Colombia, she's from Bogota, and my father is from the Middle East – he was born in Nazareth within a Palestinian family. Then, at a very early age, he came to Germany and studied physics. So I was surrounded by these three cultures. And, of course, with that, I was surrounded by the music. I would listen to German radio: classical, pop, rock, funk, whatever it was. And then the whole oriental and Arabic classical music from my father

– he plays the Arabic oud – and he was such a lover of flamenco music because I think that was the music style that was the closest to his own culture, somehow. The singing, the tonalities and things like that.

"So even though I wasn't born in Andalusia, I would listen to the old-style flamenco maestros such as Ramón Montoya, Sabicas, Paco de Lucía and all the generations that came after that. I was lucky enough to listen to the basics of flamenco from a very early age and I started imitating my dad. He would leave the instruments on the sofa. I would grab the oud or grab the guitar and fool around. One day my dad saw me grab the guitar and he said, 'Do you want to learn more seriously?' And I said, 'Yes.' So he took me to his teacher while he taught me the first steps at home."

And when did your interest in rock guitar start to develop?

"The elder brother of one of my friends – he was 16, we were 12 – handed us a cassette and on one side was *Ride The Lightning* and on the other *Kill 'Em All* by Metallica. That was probably the first conscious

"When you record something for a movie it's never about your ability to play... the focus is on emotion, expression and dynamics"

1. A booking on the renowned *World Of Hans Zimmer* concert tour led to El Amir contributing to the soundtrack of the latest James Bond film, *No Time To Die*

2. With a South American mother, Palestinian father and German upbringing, El Amir's diverse cultural influences impact his own music

moment of listening to heavy metal or rock. For me, that was a new sound. The funny thing is, I didn't know what an electric guitar was; I only knew my flamenco guitar and nylon strings. One day, shortly after that, I saw my first heavy metal magazine and I saw guys with long hair and those crazy looking guitars and I said, 'I need to have one of those.' So I would go downtown to some guitar stores, grab a guitar, plug in and try to play what I heard on those cassettes. And they would throw me out: 'Okay, you've been playing for four hours, go home!' Finally, my dad bought me an amp and an electric guitar, and that's how it all started."

Flamenco and rock styles demand different playing disciplines – how does one style feed into the other for you?

"At first you might think that they are separate, but since I was able to learn the oud, which is played with a pick, and the guitar, which is fingerpicking, I learned both techniques without even realising it. As a little kid you just do it. So by the time I picked up the electric guitar, I felt very comfortable. I just had to adjust things a little with the pick to make it work.

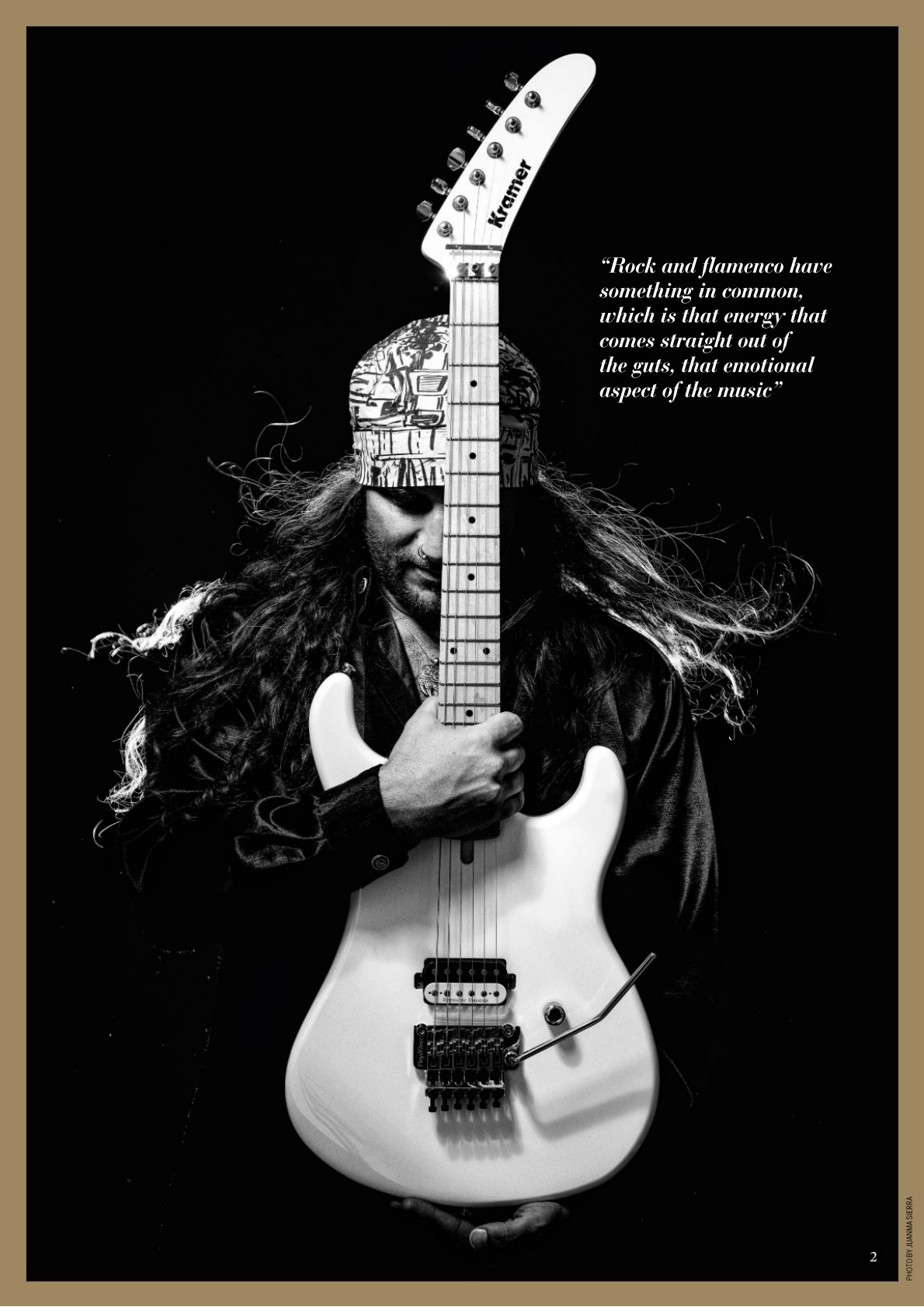
"I think rock and flamenco have something in common, which is that energy that comes straight out of the guts, that emotional aspect of the music. I could kind of rely on that emotion and energy, and everything else was then just learning and refining technique, trying to learn repertoire. My way of learning was just play, stop, reverse on a cassette recorder. And I had to slow down vinyl – and then there were VHS cassettes that I recorded from TV shows. I would just try to pick up everything I could."

Where is home musically for you?

"Since I've been exposed to so many languages, different emotional ways of feeling things, each culture gave me a different way of absorbing and understanding things. The same thing happens to me with music styles. I've opened up myself to so



PHOTO BY PENNY SERRA



"Rock and flamenco have something in common, which is that energy that comes straight out of the guts, that emotional aspect of the music"

many music genres, and I've bought so many stringed instruments in order to be able to play those styles.

"I like to play the saz when working on Turkish music, or Greek music with the bouzouki. I've really learned to appreciate them all. When I pick up one of my electric guitars, I just like to go and find really nice heavy, juicy-sounding riffs and then come up with nice motifs to solo on. When I play flamenco guitar, I try to connect with a more meditative emotion. When I play oriental music, I try to evoke those feelings. And each culture has a different way of feeling the same... You're exposed to the same thing, but each culture will feel it differently. So I have the ability, maybe, to engage with that kind of emotional expression."

You've recorded your own rock album. How did that happen?

"The rock thing was always a little bit of an aside because somehow my career evolved around the flamenco guitar and being a flamenco soloist. The rock thing was something that I always kept more private. Here or there I would play with bands, but my aim had to be on that other road because that was what was happening. Flamenco guitar is very exotic and it kind of gave me a place. And then one day I just said, 'I have all those rock songs in my head, I need to lay them down.'"

"So I went to a studio of a friend of mine in Madrid and laid down many songs, which I call 'heavy funk rock

"I was born into a family with three cultures... each gave me a way of absorbing, understanding things. It's the same with music styles"

metal' because it's the mix of all those four genres, basically. I played almost everything. On some songs I also played the bass. I didn't play drums, though, because my level is not good enough, but I did all the vocals, all the overdubbing and they're just out there. I never released the album – it's on ReverbNation.com so you can easily access and listen to it. Eventually, I want to do something live because I think forming a power trio and being able to perform certain songs in a very raw kind of a band configuration is something I still need to explore."



3. Pictured here with his single-humbucker Baretta Special, El Amir bestows Kramer with the title of "most emotional guitar brand"

Let's talk about gear. First of all, your flamenco guitar...

"When I was a little boy my father bought a guitar from Granada by a builder called José López Bellido, and I played that instrument for many years. Three years or four years ago I came up with an idea together with a friend of mine who builds guitars: 'Why not do a signature flamenco guitar?' It's the Modelo 'El Amir', built by Jose Salinas.

"We ended up doing a year of research and finally we came up with a structure that I like and these are the guitars I've been using with Hans Zimmer. These are the ones that are on *SpongeBob 3* [*The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge On The Run*] and *The Boss Baby 2* and *James Bond* and so on. So it has been a beautiful journey for that instrument because it got to see the world a little bit. And, for me, it's just an amazing feeling to have an instrument built by a friend – that connection is so rewarding."

What's your principal rock guitar rig?

"In 2019, I went to NAMM for the first time and I got this message on my WhatsApp from a Spanish friend who was working as a technician in London. He said, 'If you're at NAMM, talk to Danny Gomez from Orange. He's a friend of mine.' And so I thought, 'Why not? Just go and say hi.' So I went there and we had such

a good connection from the very first moment. He said, 'We're looking for a nylon-string player because we're launching some acoustic amps and pedals – do you want to try them out?' That's how my relationship with Orange started.

"After a year working on the acoustic side of things, they said, 'Okay, let's go and do the electric side,' because they saw me performing with Hans Zimmer. So that's now my electric gear – Orange amps, specifically a Pedal Baby 100 power amp, a Dual Terror head and a 4x12 cab.

"With guitars, I thought, 'If I'm working with somebody at an endorsement level, it has to be about a relationship and it has to be something emotional. What is the most emotional guitar brand?' Of course, Kramer. The sound I grew up to. I asked Danny Gomez and he said, 'Talk to the artist relation manager at Gibson, Madrid.' So I ended up getting two guitars from them – The 84 from the Kramer Icon Collection and a Baretta Special – and that's how it all started. Sometimes it's really not about how you plan things, it's about things you really are longing for emotionally. It's a whole different energy because I could have planned everything, and it wouldn't have worked, right?" ■ <https://amirjohnhaddad.com/en/>

Cream

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What Billy says about his new pickups. 100% electronic reproductions of the pickups found in his famous '59 burst known as "Pearly Gates"

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STEVE



With his new album, *Inviolata*, in the can, we entered the inner sanctum of Steve Vai's studio to explore the guitars that define not only his new record but the whole span of his dazzling career

Words Robin Davey Photography Leland Hayward

“Wanna see something cool?” Steve Vai offers shortly after we arrive in his aptly named Harmony Hut studio space in Encino, California. Guitars adorn almost all available wall space, including various incarnations of his iconic JEM signature model. There are PIA models, too, the newest in his signature line, a little more sophisticated and a little more dressed up than its predecessor. However, it is toward the centre of the live room that we are being ushered, where a very out-of-place, drab-looking grey towel is covering something obviously different, something ominous, and by the playful glint in Vai's eye, it's something he is excited to reveal.

Vai exudes a calming confidence and awareness – instantly talkative and eager to share, yet measured and articulate whenever he jumps into a subject. He also has tremendous awareness of his craft, not just from a guitar player's perspective but also an understanding that he is an entertainer, too. A prominent part of the Vai brand is not just the creativity in his guitar playing but the glitter and showbiz he brings to the genre. “I’m a ham,” he openly admits. “I’m a performer, and I like stuff like that.”

As he carefully pulls back the towel, like a magician unveiling his latest trick (or more so, Dr Frankenstein revealing his monster), Vai's latest creation does not

disappoint. It's a multi-necked, part-fretted, part-fretless part-guitar, part-bass, part-harp, part-creature. It's like if *Game Of Thrones* were an instrument, not just the throne itself but the whole damn series. There are simply too many strings to count. It's awesome, in the proper sense of the word. No sooner than it's revealed, Vai is behind it, playing a series of riffs encompassing each part of the beast, a beast we can't imagine anyone else attempting to tame.

Vai admits it was a little daunting when Ibanez finally delivered the finished piece after three years of back and forth. “When I first saw it I was stunned. It was beautiful and engaging, but it was also terrifying because I knew I had to compose this piece of music, so I put it on the stand and left it in the studio for about a year.”

“It feels like it would growl at you as you passed,” we offer by way of consolation. “Yes,” Vai replies. “And it'd stick out its big eye and go, ‘You know you're going to have to play me?’”

We get the impression that if Vai wants to do something, he does it, so of course he tamed the beast, in the studio at least, though live could be a challenge for even Vai himself. He gave it a name, too: Hydra. And the opening song *Teeth Of The Hydra* from his brand-new studio album, *Inviolata*, also bears its name. While it may be the centrepiece, the album has plenty more to offer than mere spectacle.



"I'VE LEARNED TO
ABANDON THE
FUTURE. IF YOU'RE
HAVING A GOOD
TIME RIGHT NOW, IT
TICKS ALL THE BOXES"



1. Steve on stage with Frank Zappa in 1981, serving his apprenticeship as an avant-garde rock virtuoso in Zappa's infamously demanding live band

Did the idea of the new album spark into being or was it more of a drawn out process?

"Well, it was a process that changed continually because we all were confronted with challenges over these last two years and we adjusted. I think musicians are a very resilient group and we figure it out. And I was part of that.

"I had a project in mind to record three records, trio-based, very stripped down, guitar right in your face, with loops and all sorts of things. The first record was going to be very clean tones, the second one was more kind of distorted, my normal tone, and the third was going to be an extraordinarily heavy record. But I also started fooling around with another idea that I always wanted to do, a solo acoustic guitar vocal record. I thought, 'Well, I'm in lockdown. Maybe this is a good time.' So I recorded all the guitars. I got a couple of the vocals done. And then right when I was working up the last song, I had to go get shoulder surgery. When I got out of the surgery I was in this sling and the doctor that did the surgery, Dr [Thomas] Knapp, designed this sling specifically for this kind of surgery. He called it 'the Knappsack'. So I was stuck with this Knappsack on my arm, and when I came into the studio I picked up my new black Onyx PIA."

"THE PIA RAISED MY EYEBROWS AND MY HEART. I PUSHED MYSELF TO MAKE THAT MY GO-TO GUITAR"

At that point did you have a certain idea that you thought might work one-handed or did you just go, 'I have one hand, let's see what happens'?

"The moment I put my hands on the guitar I instinctively knew, 'You're going to record a song with one hand, you can do it.' I said, 'First and foremost, it's got to have a good melody.' That's what I say all the time in my head. Because for me, melody is always the thing. It's king and it has lasting power. We don't necessarily go back and listen to music to hear how intellectually stimulating it could be. We're looking for emotional stimulation, and melodies do that. The other demand that I gave myself was it had to be relentless. It had to seem like, 'What is going on here? How could that be?' because I love that."

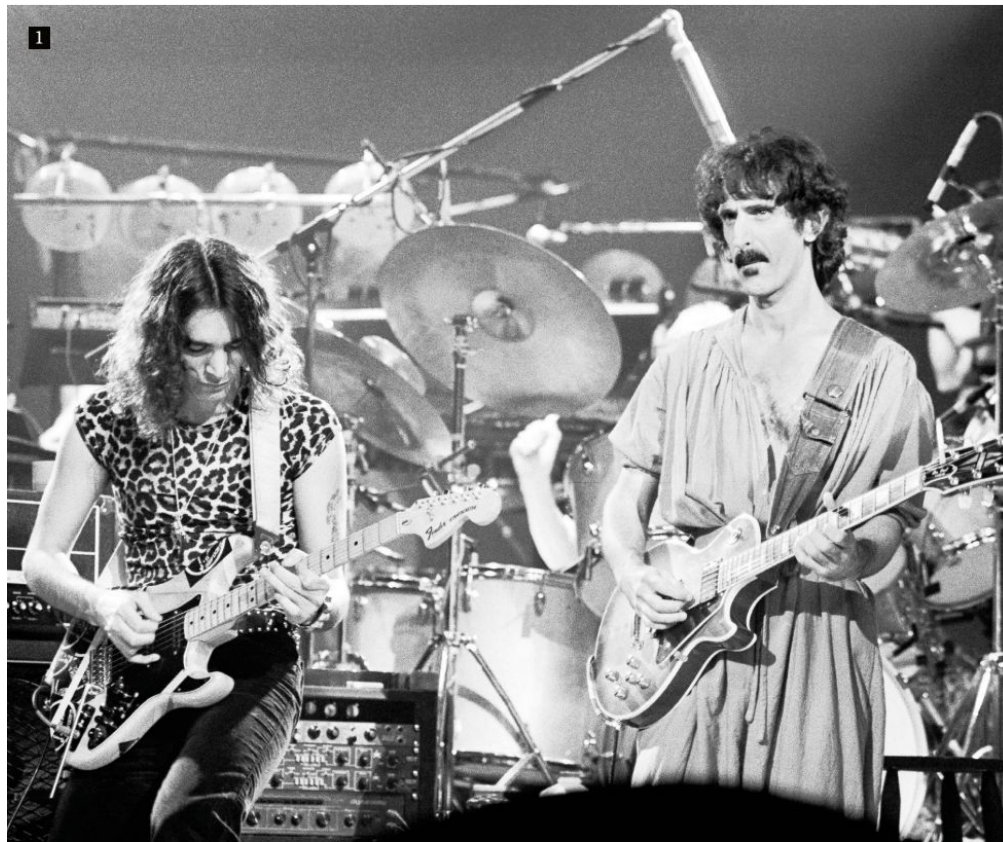
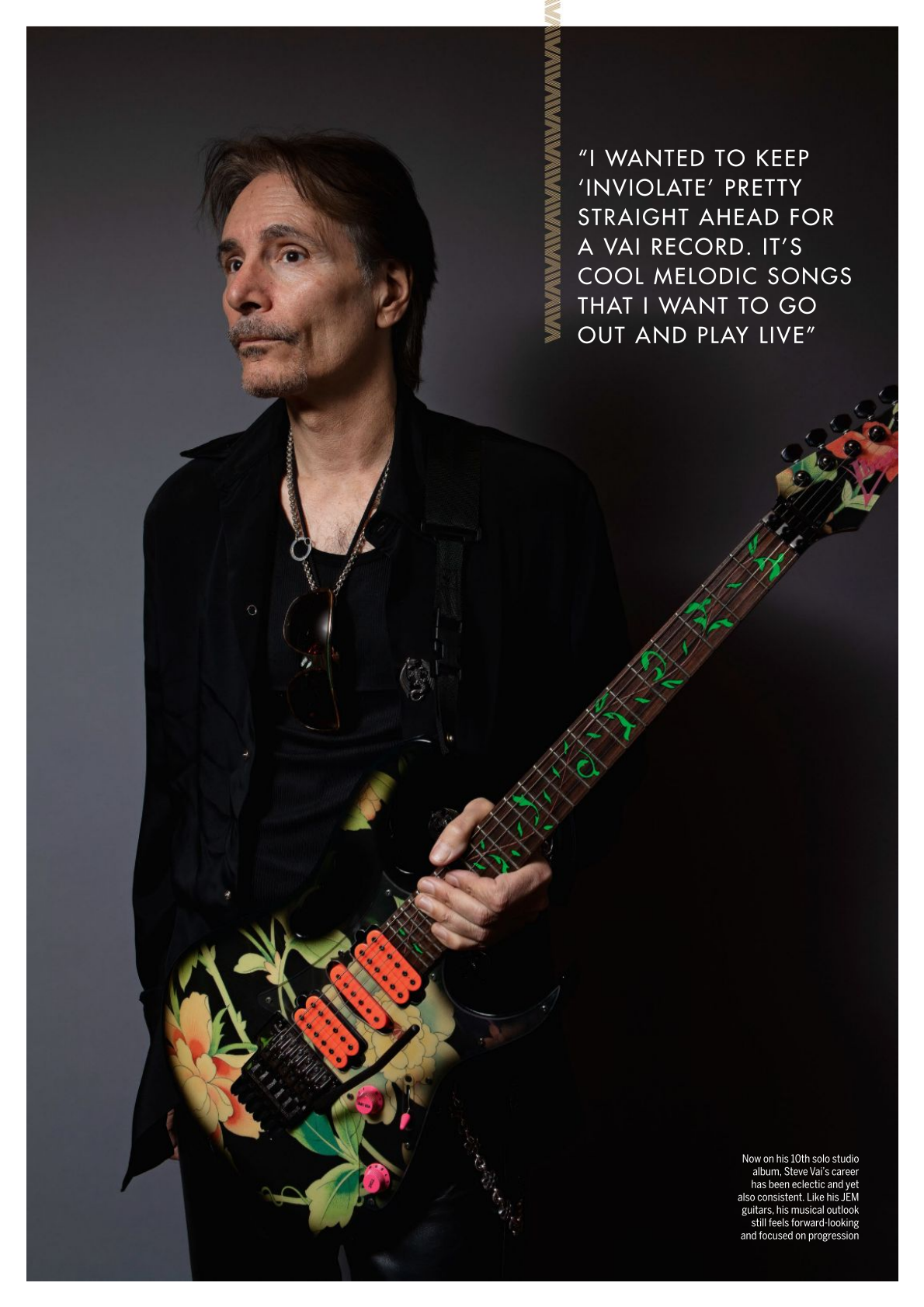


PHOTO BY JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES

A portrait of Steve Vai, a man with long dark hair and a goatee, looking off to the side. He is wearing a black jacket over a black shirt and a necklace with a large ring. He is holding a JEM electric guitar with a vibrant floral and leaf pattern in yellow, orange, and green. The guitar has orange pickups and a black bridge. The background is dark and moody.

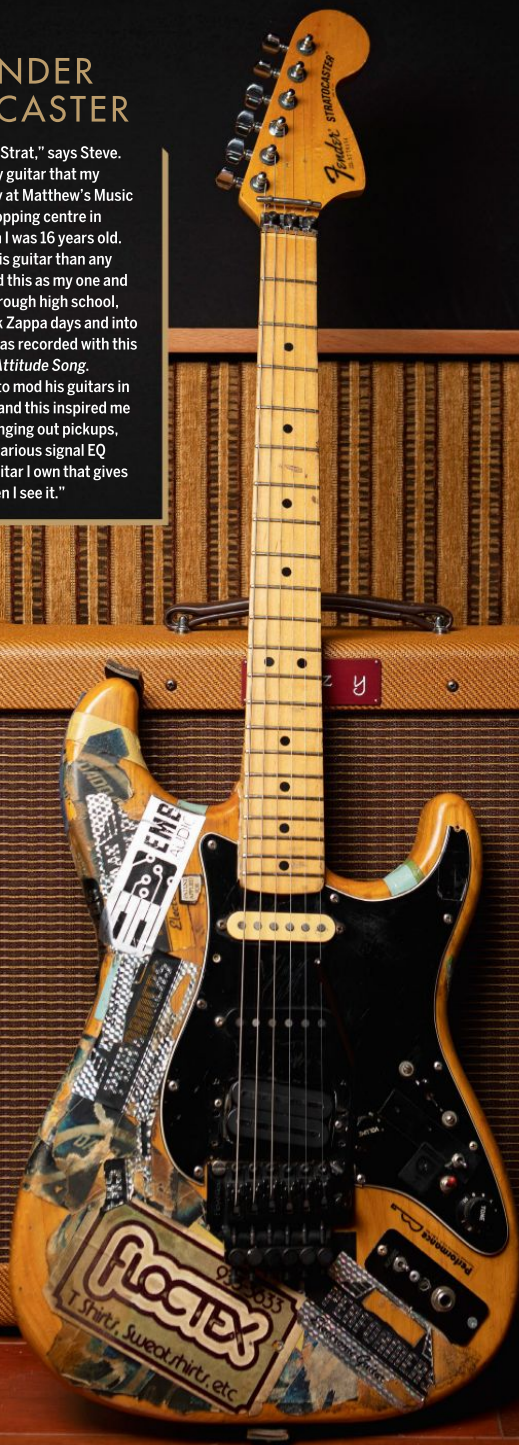
"I WANTED TO KEEP
'INVIOULATE' PRETTY
STRAIGHT AHEAD FOR
A VAI RECORD. IT'S
COOL MELODIC SONGS
THAT I WANT TO GO
OUT AND PLAY LIVE"

Now on his 10th solo studio album, Steve Vai's career has been eclectic and yet also consistent. Like his JEM guitars, his musical outlook still feels forward-looking and focused on progression

1977 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"This is a 1977 Fender Strat," says Steve. "It was my first quality guitar that my mother helped me buy at Matthew's Music in Roosevelt Field [shopping centre in Long Island, NY] when I was 16 years old. I put more notes on this guitar than any other that I own. I used this as my one and only main guitar all through high school, Berklee College, Frank Zappa days and into Alcatraz. *Flex-Able* was recorded with this guitar, including *The Attitude Song*."

"Frank Zappa used to mod his guitars in unconventional ways and this inspired me to do the same by changing out pickups, adding preamps and various signal EQ boosts. It's the one guitar I own that gives me the most juice when I see it."



There must be something really satisfying, though, about the simplicity of going, 'I only have one hand, I'm just going to make something,' then seeing the video of that attach itself to millions of people.

"It is. I mean, I'm tickled. I feel honoured. I've done things where I thought people would just say, 'Okay, here it is. It's done.' And it's just flown way under the radar. And then I've done things that seem so simple and natural to me just blow up and it's like, 'Whoa, you see what he's doing?' So when it comes time to do something, I've learned to abandon the future. Just abandon because you don't know. What you do know is if you're having a good time right now, and that I did know because I was excited, and it ticked all the boxes."

Both Knapsack and Candle Power were first heard when you posted them online. Was transitioning into streaming and reaching people in new ways something that was an easy step forward, or something you had to push yourself into?

"Well, it was very easy for me because I understood the potential and then I just hired the right people to do it for me because I am not going to try to keep up on the evolution of social media. That's like a full-time job. And there's also a lot of booby traps in all of this. So for things that I don't want to start discovering, I have no real

"I WAS FORTUNATE WORKING FOR FRANK ZAPPA BECAUSE I LEARNED THAT IF YOU WANT SOMETHING, JUST DO IT"

interest in, and this is good advice, work with people that do. Work with people that have an interest in those things that you don't have an interest in."

The album feels very eclectic in its influences – Candle Power has a very country feel and then there are other songs that have blues and funk elements. Were there any kind of influences that you were delving into that inspired those?

"I avoid thinking genre-specifically because I'm not good at it. *Candle Power* was a track that was trio-based and had that clean sound. I did not set out to write anything that would remotely resemble a country song, it just happened to turn out that way. The song gave me

2. After seeing Ritchie Blackmore play one, Steve fell hard for the natural wood Strat – and this one became his own for around \$175 in the mid-70s

3. Steve followed Frank Zappa's lead and modded this guitar (nicknamed 'The Sticker Strat' for obvious reasons) with an Alembic preamp and new pickups, with the help of Arthur 'Midget' Sloatman at Zappa's Utility Muffin Research Kitchen home studio in Los Angeles



4. Steve Vai relaxes at the console of his studio, which he has dubbed The Harmony Hut and supersedes his earlier, playfully named studios such as La-La Land, The Mothership and Stucco Blue Studios

an opportunity to fool around with this technique that I had in the back of my head, which involved bending multiple strings in different directions while using pull-offs and playing other notes and sometimes two to three strings. I discovered that in order to get notes to bend with one finger and not have the rest of your finger damp the strings, you got to come straight down on the string and just shift the joint in the tip of your finger. So I just coined it 'joint shifting' and I knew it was going to sound over-obtuse. And I was right. And I love that.

"One of the things I'm hoping to achieve with that video of *Candle Power* is for some young people with younger fingers and more time on their hands to come along and see the potential. Because in my mind's eye I can see an entire piece of music written like this with constant joint shifting all over it."

Was there a common thread to your tone on the record or was each track a different approach to get to what you wanted to achieve?

"The common thread that probably runs through this record on a gear level is my signature Synergy [amp] module. Once the Fractal is set up in the chain, that's like a space station – it's got everything. Certain effects, I'm not a fan of the digitalness of them, so I'll use some pedals. And what I also do is I always record a DI signal,

"THE COMMON THREAD THAT RUNS THROUGH THIS RECORD ON A GEAR LEVEL IS MY SIGNATURE SYNERGY MODULE"

and then I have this really outstanding reamp box, it was one of the first ones ever made – Joe Satch gave it to me – and I reamp the DI and blend it with other amps. It's an art, though, because you have to be really careful with phasing, but I get very forensic and make sure that everything is lined up. Fucking space docked, you know what I mean? The frequencies are space docked."

This is your first record using the PIA. When do you reach for the JEM and when do you reach for the PIA at this point?

"It was a transition period because usually there are two JEMs that I reach for. One is the one I call Flo III: it has a sustainer and it's the one I've used the most in the last



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c.1993 IBANEZ JEM SV #148

"This is SV #148 serial number 253318 from my collection," says Steve. "It's a Floral JEM that we believe was built around 1993. I received it from Ibanez in or around the early 2000s as a replacement for my original floral pattern JEM that was stolen."



10 years. The other would be Evo, which doesn't have a sustainer and has a pretty different sound. But they're both the same guitar, basically. I'm not a big fan of new guitars, I like to break them in. So it was hard to depart. I knew I was going to, but I was just looking for the right PIA that said, 'I'm the one. I'm all yours.' When I got that black PIA that I did *Knappsack* on, that one started to raise my eyebrows and my heart. At this point, I would push myself to make that my go-to guitar."

How different are your JEMs from an off-the-shelf Japanese model?

"When I got them, they weren't any different, but I have certain peculiarities, certain things that I like, like a sustainer. I like a tiny little bit of scalloping on some guitars, just a little bit. So, through the years, I would put little touches on my personal guitars, but they're the same. Many times, I've been travelling around the world and I don't want to bring my guitar, and I just grab a JEM from a music store and it's just great."

Let's talk Hydra. It is an utterly unique guitar that spawned a piece of music that is equally unique.

How did both of those come into being?

"The universe will inspire in you those unique ideas that are suited for you and you'll know them because

"I'M HOPING 'CANDLE POWER' [WILL INSPIRE] YOUNG PEOPLE TO SEE THE POTENTIAL OF THE 'JOINT SHIFTING' TECHNIQUE I USED"

they come as complete downloads and also with the feeling of enthusiasm. So I remember I was watching a *Mad Max* movie and there was this one scene where there's this guy strapped to the front of the truck and he's playing this wild guitar [the Doof Warrior, played by Australian guitarist iOTA, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*]. And I saw that and I thought that was really cool. But it was fake, it was a movie [editor's note: the guitar built for the movie did actually work!], and I thought I'm going to make it real but much cooler.

"Instantly, a visual came and the visual was a guitar with seven strings, a bass neck and these harp strings, and also that I was going to create a piece of music on this instrument that was a much evolved version of

5. The headstock of the Floral JEM marks it out as one of the most beautiful guitars Ibanez has yet made and as iconic, in a quiet way, as Vai's Loch Ness Green early-model JEMs

6. The complex switching options on the HSH pickup configuration of the JEM made it deceptively versatile, and many players picking one up for the first time are surprised by how generally usable its tones are beyond the hard-rock role its looks seem to betoken



7. The extraordinary, multi-necked beast that Vai has dubbed the Hydra earned its own eponymous track on Steve's new album, entitled *Teeth Of The Hydra*

things that I've done with other triple-neck guitars. I was really going to integrate into the piece of music all the necks, and I haven't done that. I also knew that this piece of music had to stand alone as a piece of music and it can't sound gimmicky, and I knew that the melody had to be uninterrupted, it had to sound like a melody while I was juggling all these other things."

It sounds like *Inviolata* was a fun record to make...

"It really was because I knew that I wanted to keep it pretty straight ahead for a Vai record and I wanted to make it relatively simple. There's no in-between bits. It doesn't have a lot of the quirkiness that I usually have. There's not a lot of giant pieces that have concepts, and the record is not part of a concept or anything like that. So it was cool melodic songs that resonated with me that I wanted to record and go out and play live."

The record does seem like it's built for a live experience.

"Yes, yes. A lot of my records have songs that don't really translate live because they're too dense and just too produced. With this record I want to play every song on the record. I'm tired of the old setlist, do you know what I mean? Not tired, I mean, I'm just ready for a change. So I wanted to create songs that I think the fans will enjoy hearing live and also mix that with some of

"[INSPIRED BY A 'MAD MAX' MOVIE], I GOT THIS VISUAL OF A GUITAR WITH SEVEN STRINGS, A BASS NECK AND HARP STRINGS"

the ones that they might be expecting, and also some tracks from the catalogue that I never played live, and some surprises. And I've been really chomping at the bit to get on tour."

You performed *Knapsack* one-handed, is that how you will approach it live?

"Sure, don't you want to see me play it that way?"

Well, of course. But then we need to discuss the elephant in the room, or the Hydra in the room, we should say: how are you going to play *Teeth Of The Hydra* live?

"I'm going to slay that fucking beast!" 🐉





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Gordon Smith

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2016 IBANEZ JS2450-MCB

"Serial number F1609180, this guitar is a Joe Satriani prototype of the JS2450-MCB (Muscle Car Black)," says Steve. "which was only available in 2017. This guitar was built in 2016. My dear friend Joe Satriani used this guitar on one of his tours, brought it home, beat it up and made a lovely custom painting on the back and sent it to me for my birthday in 2020. It's a prized possession as it came from my musical life mentor who started teaching me how to play the guitar when I was 12 years old and has continued to inspire me through my whole life."

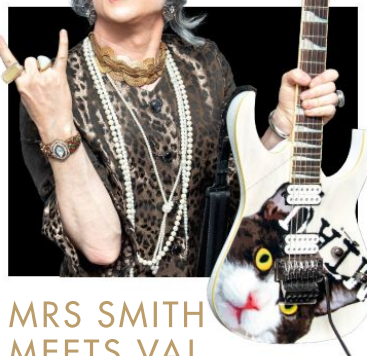


PHOTO BY ROY ROCHLING/GETTY IMAGES

MRS SMITH MEETS VAI

The beehived guitar-wielding personality grills Vai on invoking stage demons and presents a very challenging 'would you rather'...



With her towering silver locks, strings of pearls and her love of cats, the Upper East Side socialite cuts an unlikely figure in the shred-guitar world, but Mrs Smith – the alter ego of comedian, musician and actor David Hanbury – has the chops to stand her ground, whether busking on the streets of NYC or making an appearance on *America's Got Talent*. And after famously challenging Kirk Hammett to a wah-off, and winning, who better to ask Steve Vai the questions no-one else will dare to? Mrs Smith, over to you.

Mrs Smith: "On stage, you infuse your guitar playing with serpentine sexual energy and aggression. Yet off stage, you are known as one of the most approachable guitar legends. Describe your pre-show rituals, wherein you invoke these demons and – even more important – how do you shed them afterward to walk once again among mere mortals?"

Steve Vai: "They're always there and there's no need to shed because they're my friends. There's certain idiosyncrasies that just come out while you're playing that you don't have much control over or you don't want to have control over. I'll even watch my performance sometimes and see some slink in there. You know what I mean? It's like, 'What are you? What are you doing?'"

Mrs Smith: "I'm known as the reigning Queen Of War and I'm shocked you haven't come for my title. Are you afraid? Don't answer that... You are set to perform at an inter-dimensional concert and in the audience will be all your musical and artistic heroes and friends, but you must perform at this most high-pressure event without your whammy bar or your wah-wah pedal. You must choose, Mr Vai. Which is it? Why and how will you compensate for the missing component?"

Steve Vai: "I would not show up. Where my whammy bar goes, I go."

1998 IBANEZ CUSTOM JEM

"I enjoy Strats, but they are missing a few elements that I'm accustomed to in my JEMs," Steve explains, "so Ibanez made me this custom JEM/Strat[-style] in September 1998. I've used it on various recordings and specifically in the *Candle Power* video. We had the bridge locked, so it's more like a hardtail guitar."



PARADISE IN ART

Since developing the Ibanez JEM in 1987, Steve Vai's ability to guide his artistic vision to fruition has always been strong. Here, he reminds us of the strides he took to bring the initial JEM guitar to life, and why – after three decades with this original signature – he decided it was “time for a little change” with the Japanese-made PIA

Words Robin Davey Photography Leland Hayward

The JEM has been around for 35 years. At the beginning, why did you feel the need to develop that guitar?

“I was fortunate working for Frank Zappa because one of the things I learned from him is if you want something, just do it. So Frank was molesting his guitars with electronics and putting things in them, like frequency modulators and parametric EQs, and I'm changing the necks, changing the pickups. I thought, ‘Well, that's what you do. You find what you want.’ I loved Strats because they had a whammy bar, but I didn't like the way they sounded. They weren't rock 'n' roll enough to me. I loved Les Pauls because Jimmy Page played a Les Paul and they had a better sound for me, but they weren't sexy to me. They felt awkward and none of them you could really comfortably play in the high register. I don't know why they give you the frets when they don't give you the access to them.

“I knew that I wanted to have something that was not necessarily one of those. Edward [Van Halen] came out with a humbucker on a Strat-style guitar, that was perhaps the first SuperStrat. That was fantastic because now we can get a really good, big fat sound with a whammy bar. But there were things about that guitar that were very limiting to me. So very innocently I decided, ‘What do I want? I could have anything made.’”

Were you thinking about this potential guitar purely on a personal level at that stage?

“I didn't think, ‘I'm going to design something here that everybody's going to love, and it's going to make me a lot of money.’ None of that. It was just, what do you want?

I went down to Charvel, met Grover Jackson. He gave me a guitar that turned into the Green Meanie. It still was missing a lot of the things I was looking for, but it had humbuckers.

“I knew that I wanted 24 frets, which was very rare at the time. I didn't know any guitars that had 24 frets – and I think maybe the Jackson was one of the first. I knew I wanted my hand to be able to comfortably fit without any obstructions. I knew I wanted it to look sexier than a Strat or a Les Paul in my mind. And I knew I wanted a pull up on the bar, and no guitars did that. So I actually took a hammer and screwdriver and I chiselled out all this shit. Next thing you know, I had a floating tremolo and you could pull up on it and break the string if you wanted and, to me, that's a good time.”

What about the pickup configuration?

“I really liked that ‘tubey’ Strat sound with the two single coils. I had to make the five-position switch so when it's in the neck position, you get the full-on neck humbucker. When you click it to the next position, it splits the coil on the humbucker and you get two single coils, so you get that Strat-y sound. Then the single coil in the middle, if you ever wanted it, I never use it. Then the next position splits the coil on the treble position; that's the Strat sound I always liked. And then you've got your full-on humbucker in the treble position. So they tell me that was unique at the time. Also, I can never understand why the input jack in a Strat or a Les Paul is built so that if you step on the cable, the thing pulls out. It's like, duh, put it on an angle.”

1992 IBANEZ JEM EVO

"This was one of the first white JEMs that appeared in 1992 and was a prototype and I first started using it on *Sex & Religion*," Steve tells us. "I named it EVO after the Harley Davidson Evolution engine. It was basically stock. Through the years I changed out the neck and pickups several times, and also the electronics and the bridge.

"At that time this guitar had a magnetic-like pull to me. The first time I played it, it felt like home. This was the main guitar I used from 1992 to present day. I used this guitar at more concerts and recordings than any other guitar. It always felt like my safe place."



2021 IBANEZ ONYX PIA

"This is the second prototype of the ONYX PIA from 2021," says Steve. "It's stock with a Sustaniac pickup added, a slight scalloping of the neck and a trem-stopper. I've been working this guitar into the setlist and it looks as though I will be making it one of two of my main guitars for the 2022 to 2023 touring season."



"I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING ARTISTIC WITH THE GRIP. ALL OF THE DESIGNS HERE ARE BASED ON THE RATIO OF THESE PETALS"

So, how did the handle come about?

"Joe Despagni was a kid that was my best friend since before kindergarten. All through the rock 'n' roll high school years, Joe and I were inseparable. And he was one of these MacGyver tinkers and he was starting to build guitars, too. He was the first one to put a handle in the guitar when we were kids. I didn't assume to put it in the JEM until a little later. There were four that I made, prototype JEMs. I took them on tour with Dave Roth. And once I joined Dave's band, all the guitar companies wanted me to endorse them, but I just felt like, 'Thank you. But I have my guitar.' They were like, 'We'll make that guitar for you.'

"I sent the schematics to a whole handful of the big companies that were interested [in making the guitar] and they all fucking flopped. They sent me their guitar with my name on it and some little tiny adjustments and I'm scratching my head going, 'Why are you sending me this?' Except for Ibanez. In three weeks, man, they made a JEM and they made it exactly the way I wanted. And that was it. I said yes.

"They said, 'Well, we want to make these for other people, too.' And I'm thinking, 'Who's going to want this? It's so weird, weirdly idiosyncratic to me.' And they said, 'Well, Mr Steve, we think a lot of people.' So I thought, 'There are some interesting aspects of this guitar that will probably be borrowed and that's fine. That's how it works. So I have to do something that nobody's going to have the balls to steal.' That's when the Monkey Grip came in. At first, I put it in because we were shooting a video with Dave Roth and I wanted to have something where I could take the guitar and spin it around. But then there was something quirky and very Vai about it. Poor Ibanez, I said, 'This is the guitar, but I want a Monkey Grip in it. And also dayglow colours.'"

What was the reception when the production model was released?

"Part of my agreement with them was that they could release a lower-end model because the JEM was very expensive, and that turned into the Ibanez RG. Lighting struck because it hit a nerve with all the players. It became the No 1 metal rock guitar for many years. And the RG was, I think, either the second or the third biggest-selling guitar in a given year. It's usually a Strat, Les Paul and an RG of sorts, and the JEM has just had incredible staying power."

And now you have introduced the PIA. How did that come about?

"After 30 years of me playing the guitar that is completely comfortable for me, it was time for a little change. So the first thing I knew I wanted to mess



around with was the grip. Do something a little more artistic. That took a while, a year and a half of coming up with the teardrop cutaway. The yin and yang and positioning. Just the positioning alone took a long time because then we decided to take these dimensions – and even their relationship with one another – and incorporated them into the rest of the body. All of these designs here, they're based on the ratio of these petals."

And the back cover snaps on with magnets instead of screws?

"Yes. I'm not a fan of guitars that require tools to do anything. For decades, I've been trying to find somebody who can create a nut that eliminates the need of a tool, especially changing strings and stuff like that, but I just haven't met anybody smart enough to figure it out."

It's like if the JEM is a teenager, this is like the grown-up version, right?

"That's the young adult. The PIA is a very pleasing to the eye guitar." 

8. Baroque-looking motifs on the bridge pickup of the PIA Onyx take its aesthetic in a yet more ornate direction than the JEM series. But a strong family lineage can nonetheless be traced between the two ranges

NEW GROUND

Vai picks his Top 5 players to watch who are taking six-string exploration to the next level

Words Robin Davey

TIM HENSON



"Tim Henson [of Polyphia] is exploring new grounds. I'm seeing an evolution in a direction that I didn't... that I couldn't even see coming. And it's magnificent. I just love hearing those ideas and watching the execution of them. He thinks totally outside the box. And if you listen to early stuff, you can hear when he was thinking conventionally, but something happened and he just surrendered to some kind of creative vision. And that's what their music is. It's fantastic."

CORY WONG



"I love watching him play. It's rare for a guitarist to truly understand what it means to lock and what it means to groove. Of course, everybody has a level of understanding of groove. You may have a shredder that just has this powerful ability to play wildly fast. Or a jazz guy who can play chord changes at the speed of light. There's few cream of the crop guitar players who play rhythm that own the groove. They own it – meaning they can play ahead of the groove, behind the groove. They can divide the groove in a relatively unconventional kind of a groove, and own it, and make you feel it while they're doing it. And I love that about Corey. He owns it."

"He's also doing really interesting things with arrangements, reaching outside of the box of conventionality and [the style is] a little more homeschooled. He's using horns and these kinds of things, as opposed to technology, as being in the forefront. It's really about groove and I love that."

MATTEO MANCUSO



"He's one of these players that has really evolved the fusion-style guitar playing. He has incredible ears, but his technique is pretty remarkable. You know, he can play with a pick, but he plays with his fingers. The variations of tone that he gets and the smoothness, and things like his intonation, his ability to play melodically over pretty fierce changes and stuff like that. I think he's more of an evolution in the fusion department. I'm really looking forward to seeing some of the things that he eventually comes out with."

YVETTE YOUNG



"Yvette [of Comet] is just a wildly artistic person from head to toe. Her guitar playing and the things she comes up with is one aspect. It's a particular colour in her palette. She has this creative perspective that I just find so refreshing. She's an artist, she paints, and I just really love the energy and the atmosphere that she manifests."

DANIELE GOTTARDO



"Daniele is one of the few, for me, that is doing remarkable things with technique. I see phenomenal players all the time. People send me clips and it's stunning what younger people are doing, how they're evolving technique on the guitar. But it's very rare that I ever hear any real harmonic evolutions. Daniele sends me stuff sometimes. I listen and I go, 'Okay, this guy's thinking and feeling outside of the box.'"

PHOTO BY MARCO FRANCESCHETTI

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RICKENBACKER CAPRI SERIES

Martin Kelly – author of *Rickenbacker Guitars: Out Of The Frying Pan Into The Fire* – recounts the fascinating story of how luthier Roger Rossmeisl defined the look of Rickenbacker's classic electrics. His crowning achievement was the Capri series

Words Rod Brakes Photography Olly Curtis & Phil Barker

Rickenbacker holds a unique seat in the pantheon of great American guitar builders. It was the first to introduce the electric guitar concept by taking it to market in 1932 following the development of the horseshoe pickup the previous year. By the late 1950s Rickenbacker's new owner FC Hall was keen to break into the thinline semi-acoustic market and would launch a series of guitars that have endured for more than six decades. Known as the Capri, this iconic design was a marvel of guitar craftsmanship when it arrived in January 1958. Furthermore, by a bizarre twist of fate, the very first Capri ever made – serial number V81 – ended up in the hands of John Lennon in 1960, directly changing the course of popular culture as a consequence.

It's a strange tale that bounces back and forth across the pond. Boiled down, it simply goes like this: a German-born luthier by the name of Roger Rossmeisl (1927-1979) emigrates to America, teams up with Rickenbacker in California then designs a new style of electric guitar. The very first one he makes ends up being shipped back to his homeland where a young John Lennon finds it for sale in a Hamburg music store. Lennon buys this now historic Capri – a 325

model – and within a few years the world is gripped by Beatlemania. Subsequently, demand for Rickenbackers explodes.

Augmented by a plethora of British invasion bands toting Rose Morris-imported Capris, Rickenbacker's place in history is well and truly cemented. But who was Roger Rossmeisl and how did this all begin?

“Roger Rossmeisl was born in Germany where his father, Wenzel, a jazz musician, was making guitars throughout the 1930s,” begins Martin Kelly, whose new Rickenbacker book – crammed with incredible photography courtesy of his brother, Paul Kelly – has recently set the guitar world alight with its definitive account of the company's colourful history.

“During the war, Roger was sent to safety in Schönbach, Austria, where, between the age of 12 and 18, he learned the art of

guitar making under the tutelage of a guy called Franz Hirsch. He returned, fully trained, to Berlin after the war and set up shop working alongside his father making jazz guitars under the Roger brand. They were producing beautifully made guitars, but in post-war Germany materials were in desperately short supply and it wasn't long before Wenzel was caught smuggling materials in from the communist-controlled East. He was sentenced to four years in prison and Roger was left holding the baby.

“After a couple of years running the company alone, Roger hit money problems and wrote to Gibson in Kalamazoo, where [company president] Ted McCarty offered him a job, so [in 1953] he packed up shop and emigrated to the US. Unfortunately, things didn't work out at Gibson. Ted was less than impressed with an acoustic guitar Roger built, which had a thick carved top, and there was still a lot of anti-German feeling among some of the staff during the post-war years. So Roger split for sunnier climes and a stint playing Hawaiian guitar on a cruise ship on the West Coast, eventually ending up in Los Angeles where he landed a job at Rickenbacker [in early '54]. I don't doubt he'd knocked on Leo Fender's door as well, but it was Rickenbacker who gave him his first real break.”

*“By a bizarre twist of fate,
the very first Capri ever
made ended up in the
hands of John Lennon”*

1964 Rose Morris model
1996 (left) and 1964 Rose
Morris model 1993, both
from the Capri series



This 1960 Deluxe model 360F is one of the lesser-seen Full Body variants



F-BODY GUITARS

A Rickenbacker for the jazz guitarist

"These rare variants of the Capri range were aimed at the jazz market. The F-body (Full Body) guitars share the same outline as late-40s Roger guitars. I'm sure Roger was fond of that design and thought, 'Why not recycle it?' Roger guitars were all hand-carved and therefore time-consuming to build, whereas the F-body Rickenbackers have flat tops and flat backs.

"In '59, Rickenbacker stopped hollowing these ones out and they switched to gluing pre-cut sides. If you think of the size of that body, hollowing it out would have taken a long time – significantly more time than it

would take to hollow out a regular-sized Capri. When they moved to glued sides, the pitch of the neck became a lot flatter and more in line with body.

"In 1966, Dick Burke reshaped the body to make it fatter – the waist looks like it's 'put on weight' – and the pickguard changed from a teardrop to a kidney-bean shape. To my mind, it's a much less attractive guitar by the late 60s. I think the earlier ones are a lot more stylish.

"Paul Weller played an F-body in The Style Council quite a bit, and Jimmy Bryant used one to amazing effect. You can hear it on his early 60s records."

Indeed, Rossmeisl eventually joined Fender in 1962 where he would go on to develop several new guitar designs, beginning with its first foray into acoustics ("Very underrated guitars!" Martin tells us). However, his most enduring contribution to the Fullerton firm's catalogue is the Thinline Telecaster released in '68 – a design that evolved directly from his earlier efforts at Rickenbacker.

"The Capri design is essentially a solidbody hollowed out from the rear with the back glued on, very much like the Telecaster Thinline," Martin says. "In fact, the Telecaster Thinline is very much a Rickenbacker made by Fender – because that's what Roger went over there and did! The Thinline and Fender Coronado – also designed by Rossmeisl – even sport the same stylised f-holes seen on Roger guitars from the 40s right through to Rose Morris Rickenbackers. It's Roger Rossmeisl all the way. Roger has given so much to the guitar world that people take for granted. And there's probably more we don't know about."

"Rossmeisl has given so much to the guitar world that people take for granted"

At this point in the story, it must be pointed out that the Fender-Rickenbacker connection extends further back than Roger Rossmeisl's appearance. After Rickenbacker's co-founder Adolph Rickenbacker made it known to Fender partner FC Hall that he was preparing to retire, the astute businessman bought the firm in December 1953, much to the chagrin of his Fender colleagues. Having been involved with Fender since the mid-1940s, Hall was ultimately frozen out of the company in 1955.

"FC's role in Fender had been seriously diluted by 1953 and he clearly wanted something he could call his own," says Martin. "He definitely had his eyes on the prize. The electric-guitar market was beginning to explode and FC wanted his own piece of the action."

Having acquired Rickenbacker, FC Hall approached an industrial designer named Hunt Lewis in order to produce a brand-new Spanish-style electric guitar. The instrument's blueprint is dated April 1954 and depicts a solid construction hollowed out from the front with a glued-on

1964 Rose Morris model
1993, a guitar that Pete
Townshend often played
during the 60s



The eye-catching 1971 model 331 put on quite a show as its bulbs flashed in time with your playing



LIGHT SHOW GUITARS

This psychedelic Rickenbacker was blowing minds (and bulbs)

"Based on the 330, the 331 Light Show Guitar is part of the Capri series," Martin tells us.

"Rickenbacker also made a 4005LS bass and the 331-12 [12-string]; Roger McGuinn had one of only two 331-12s that were made. The idea was taken to FC Hall in 1969 by a couple of guys called Stephen Woodman and Marshall Arm. FC Hall was always keen on bringing in new ideas and the pair suggested, 'What about making these speaker cabinets with lights inside them? They flash in time with what you're playing.' You know, 'Wow! Psychedelic, man!' FC then suggested, 'Yeah, that's cool, but

what if you put the bulbs inside the guitar?' And that's how the Light Show Guitar was born.

"Depending on what you're playing, certain light bulbs will flash, which is quite a laugh if you're running up a scale or something. They do work, but they're incredibly temperamental and, unfortunately, the bulbs don't tend to last. As you can imagine, they're fraught with peril. Light Show guitars were only built for a year to 18 months, but they stayed on price sheets a fair bit longer. They had limited appeal at the time and sold in relatively low numbers, and as a result fetch over £12k these days."

top. This design effectively laid the groundwork for Rossmesl's refinements once he came onboard two months later.

"The genesis of the Capri range stems from the early Combo 600 and 800 models designed by Hunt Lewis," says Martin. "Lewis wasn't a guitarist and looked at the guitar in the way an industrial designer might. He came up with the idea of making the body from a hollowed-out solid block of wood, something Roger hadn't previously done. Hunt's original design shows the body being hollowed out from the front with a top being glued on. But when Roger arrives a few weeks later he makes changes. For example, he hollows from the reverse side, putting a German carve into the top. Roger finesses the design somewhat, he changes the cutaway and the headstock shape, but the principle of taking a solid block and hollowing it out

"Impressed by what he saw, FC Hall urged Rossmesl to come forward with new designs"

remains. No-one else was making guitars that way. Although you get chambered out bits on a Gretsch or Les Paul, it's not the same as being completely hollowed out."

During his first few years at Rickenbacker, Rossmesl was mostly working to a brief while introducing his own embellishments. Impressed by what he saw, by 1957 FC Hall was urging him to come forward with new designs.

"The Capri series evolved from the Combo series," says Martin. "The Capris were the first truly semi-acoustic guitars that Roger made with soundholes. He advanced the process to make the guitars super lightweight by taking a lot more wood out. The top and sides are one piece, and he'd hollow right through for the slash/soundhole. Then he'd glue a piece of wood on the back.

"By 1957, FC was letting Roger off the leash a little and that's when you really begin to see the flair and flamboyance of his designs. It's when the company's brand identity really takes shape. You see several ideas creeping in that Roger had developed in Germany – triangular markers, slash (cat's eye) soundholes, deluxe binding – all these sorts of things that he'd been using before suddenly start coming into the picture.

1966 model 365 OS (left)
and 1967 model 365,
later models from the
expansive Capri series



1. John Lennon with his model 325, serial number V81 – the first Capri ever made

2. Martin Kelly: "I wouldn't dare count how many guitars Weller has sold for Rickenbacker!"

3. Later stripped of its black refinish John Lennon's 1958 model 325 Capri was the first in the initial batch made with solid tops. F-holes were added thereafter

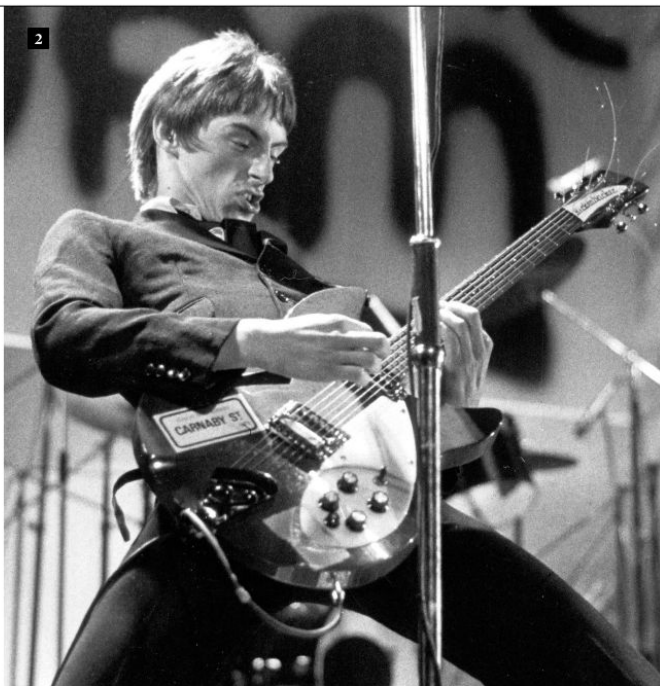
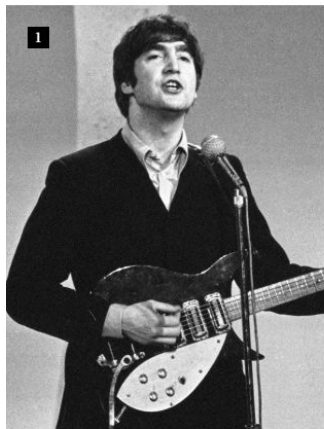


PHOTO BY PAUL POPPER/POPPER/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY ANDY DICKSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY ANGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS

"If you look at late-40s Roger guitars, you'll see numerous connections with his Rickenbacker designs. Take the laminated necks, for example – that's something Roger was doing earlier, which he carried over to Rickenbacker. Strips of contrasting wood not only made the necks stronger but gave them an upmarket appeal. There are lots of other details that are similar to Roger guitars, like the fingerboard bindings, 'R'-tailpieces, headstock shapes... but he refined it all at Rickenbacker."

Though Roger employed a high level of craftsmanship, the carving of tops was a relatively time-consuming process.

Naturally, FC Hall required more turnover.

"It was in this moment that things start coming together," Martin says. "That's when the Capri range was really born. One of the things Roger had brought over from Germany was carved tops. Most early Combo models featured the German carve; it was not only time-consuming but kept prices higher than the competition. FC was clearly requesting to 'speed production up' and that's when you start seeing the flat-top Ricks. The first prototype for the Capri range, known as the Polynesian, did indeed have a carved top, but by the time production commenced and Roger built Lennon's V81, the carved-top idea had been abandoned and all Rickenbackers from that point, bar a few specials, featured flat tops.

"FC immediately saw the potential of the new range and named it 'Capri' in honour of the family cat. There were just six 325s

"FC immediately saw the potential of the new range and named it 'Capri' in honour of the family cat"

made with solid tops like Lennon's, but after those first six, Rossmeisl started cutting f-holes into the short-scale Capris."

Having created the short-scale 325 in January '58, Rossmeisl continued to evolve the Capri body shape. Via three 'long body' prototypes he arrived at the full-scale 300-series Capri dimensions.

"Roger kind of stretched the dimensions of the 325 body design lengthways then sideways," says Martin. "That's how he arrived at the classic late-50s style Capri. In '61, he redesigned the Capri again, dropping the waist and filling out the body horns. It's a subtle but very dramatic change. There were hints of it coming, but the Capri range with its extreme cutaway really defined the iconic Rickenbacker look – and the company's image for decades to come." 



Rickenbacker Guitars: Out Of The Frying Pan Into The Fire by Martin Kelly and Paul Kelly is available now via Phantom Books www.phantombooks.com



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High Flyer

After plenty of speculation, PRS and John Mayer finally unleash the affordable SE version of the Silver Sky. Another cheapo Fender copy or one of the best signature guitars we've ever played? Let's find out...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin



PRS SE SILVER SKY £895

CONTACT PRS Europe PHONE 01223 874301 WEB www.prsguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1

This has been on the cards for ages, right?

Yes. In fact, an SE version of what was to become the Silver Sky was discussed right at the start of conversations between PRS and John Mayer. Anticipation was increased when a picture of the SE guitar was leaked at the start of 2021.

2

Why so much interest is what is obviously just a Stratocaster copy?

Call it the Mayer effect! The Silver Sky is the guitar John wanted PRS to build him and it's the guitar he plays. Since PRS launched the Silver Sky at the start of 2018, it's struggled to keep up with demand. The guitar is now in the top three best-selling PRS models alongside the classic 37-year-old Custom 24 and the more contemporary 594.

3

But is this just a low-quality version of the USA model?

Low quality and PRS aren't synonymous. The inspiration is obvious and PRS certainly isn't the only brand 'doing a Fender', but the quality here is exceptional, especially bearing in mind the SE version is a third of the price of the USA model.

1. Like the USA Silver Sky, the SE version uses the same reverse PRS-style headstock. Only the 'SE' logo, truss rod cover and non-locking tuners give the game away

Whatever our (or your) feelings are about the validity of the Silver Sky – PRS's cover version of an absolute Fender classic in collaboration with John Mayer – it's very hard to argue with the instrument we have in front of us. While the USA Silver Sky sits more than comfortably alongside Fender's top-of-the-line production models, not to mention virtually every other high-end bolt-on, this new SE version is simply one of the finest examples of large-production guitar making we can recall. Aside from the 'SE' motif on the headstock face and the clear statement of manufacturing origin on its back, you'd be hard put to think this was anything else but an instrument that retails for at least twice as much money. And we've barely pulled it from its gigbag.

This is certainly a very close rendering of the USA model, but there are numerous differences necessary to bring the guitar in at its downsized price point. First off, its specification tells us the body here is poplar – not alder like the USA guitar – though you can't see that under the yellow-blond Moon White finish, one of four options. Aside from the extra dishing in the treble cutaway and rounded nose to the heel, there's little variation from the classic blueprint. Of course, if you draw around a Fender then do the same here you'll see some differences, notably the slightly deeper bass-side cutaway, a less protruding heel and, of course, the trademark scoop in the treble cutaway.

Four years on from its launch and we've certainly got used to the Silver Sky's reverse





2. The 635JM 'S' single coils are subtly different beasts from the pickups used on the USA guitar, the result of a lengthy design process by PRS

3. Unlike PRS's USA guitars, which never state a country of origin, the SE models always display exactly where the instruments are made



and back-angled PRS headstock. The vintage-style tuners, with their silver plastic buttons matching the truss rod cover, not only function perfectly but like any good guitar we rarely touch them. And not only is this a typically in-tune guitar, it stays that way. The nut looks oversized for the style, but this is PRS and there's a reason:

This new SE is simply one of the finest examples of large-production guitar making we can recall

it sounds better. No, it's not real bone like the USA models, it's a synthetic bone – the formulation of which was carefully chosen by PRS – and is cut superbly and certainly doesn't impair the vibrato. Rather than cloning the Silver Sky's six-post vibrato, here we have what is essentially the two-post vibrato we've already seen on PRS's Fiore. In fact, as PRS's Jack Higginbotham tells us elsewhere in this feature, this all-steel design came first. One of the updates on the USA Silver Sky is its rather beautiful moulded output jack dish and the exact same part is used here.

From here on in, though, there's little that PRS has brought, visually, to the table. We get proprietary control knobs very much in original Strat style with the exception of their missing function legends – PRS assumes you know your volume from your tones! The pickup selector switch cap is a redesign but barely affects anything. We still get the exact same pickup selections on the five-way pickup selector as the time-honoured Strat: the centre control (tone 1) works on both the neck and middle pickups; the lower control (tone 2) is solely for the bridge pickup. Nothing new there.

Feels & Sounds

The engagement with this guitar, and why it feels more expensive than it actually is, is simply down to its lightly golden tinted satin-finished neck. As we evaluate elsewhere in this feature, it's a close cousin (but not identical) to the USA Silver Sky. The headstock is scarf-jointed to the main shaft, just like PRS's USA bolt-on models, and here the two pieces are nicely matched. It manages quite a full rounded 'C' feel, which suggests it's bigger than it is. Depth-wise, it measures close to the USA Silver Sky models we've previously evaluated: 21.3mm at the 1st fret, 24.3mm by the 12th (fractionally slimmer than the USA models we've measured) and 41.8mm wide at the nut.

THE RIVALS

Coincidentally or not, the PRS SE Silver Sky has virtually the same full list price as Fender's Mexican-made Vintera '60s Stratocaster (£879 including gigbag). Specs include alder body, six-post vibrato, 'mid '60s C'-shaped maple neck, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius fingerboard and 21 vintage-style frets, available in three colours with pau ferro fingerboard only. Oh, and the right headstock!

Slightly more affordable is the Mexican-made Fender Player Stratocaster (£679 excluding gigbag), one of the world's best-selling electric guitars. Again, alder is used for the body with a two-post vibrato (with bent steel saddles), a 'modern C' neck profile, with 22 frets on a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fingerboard. It comes in a whopping seven colours with maple fingerboard options on some.

A more modern Mexican-made Fender is the recently released Player Plus Stratocaster (£939 including gigbag), which upgrades the Player with a flatter-radius 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard, Fender Noiseless pickups, locking tuners and some neat 'modded' wiring. It comes in five colours (three maple, two pau ferro).



4

4. Very similar in design to the USA Silver Sky's, this two-post vibrato is unique to the SE, although it formed the basis for the vibrato used on the PRS Fiore

5. Typically PRS in design, the classic neck heel has been rounded and, along with the different geometry around the horns, top-fret access is very comfortable

One difference here is the slightly flatter fingerboard radius of 216mm (8.5 inches), as opposed to the USA model's original Fender radius of 184mm (7.25 inches), plus frets that falls into the medium-size category (approximately 2.4mm wide by 1.1mm high) and are exceptionally fitted and mirror-polished. The fret slots are filled on the fingerboard edges and the 'board is actually a nice dark classic rosewood; we're fans of these smaller and more subtle bird inlays, too. The slight rounding of the neck heel and the PRS trademark scoop on the treble horn all just help to make high-fret access very comfortable.

Then there's the perfect-for-the-style weight. At 3.1kg (7.1lb) it just feels right – light in weight but not insubstantial, and the lightest of the Silver Sky/Fiore family we've tested. We haven't plugged in yet, but it's hard not to fall for this Sky's charms already.

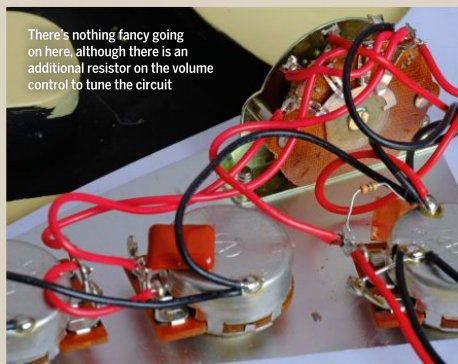
As we say, there are no new sounds here and if you want the 'seven sound' mod, or even a half- or full-blend circuit, you'll have to do it yourself. But it's a PRS guitar and anything that gets signed off by

What we get in every pickup position are very strong examples of the sounds we have grown up with

master guitar-maker Paul Reed Smith, not to mention master musician John Mayer, isn't going to sound rubbish, is it? There's a balanced fullness to the voice that you hear unplugged, which certainly suggests the guitar is working as one. Even the way that the vibrato is set up seems to enhance what we hear. The high-end especially isn't over-sharp or clanky. We'd call it sweet, a little softer than we hear from a heavier ash-bodied Strat reference (one of many we used on this test). There's obvious depth, too.

Plugged in, well, it sounds like a Strat and we all have our favourites. First off, there's a pretty good balance from neck to bridge, which isn't always the case. Obviously, you can tweak the pickup heights to suit your





There's nothing fancy going on here, although there is an additional resistor on the volume control to tune the circuit



Not quite a regular single coil as extra steel pins presumably provide a slight increase in inductance

UNDER THE HOOD

Tidy on the outside, but what's inside this Silver Sky?

You learn a lot about a bolt-on guitar when you unscrew it all. The neck screws here, for example, push through the body into the neck perfectly; there's no neck shim and the unfinished neck pocket is very smooth and obviously level. Although the entire body is finished (unlike the USA Silver Sky, which leaves the finish off the pickup routs), it's clearly thin. The pickup cavities are coated with a conductive paint, while the scratchplate has foil screening.

These are regular-sized single coils, too, each with the same polepiece spacing. The

rod magnets are very lightly staggered to achieve a light radius and each has a diameter of 5mm. The bridge and neck pickups have the same polarity, and the middle pickup is opposite and presumably reverse-wound to achieve the hum-cancelling in the in-between positions. PRS doesn't divulge specifics so, really, aside from the sounds we hear, the only thing we have to go on are the DCRs, which measure 7.32kohms (bridge), 7.18k (middle) and 7.21k (neck) at output. This is a little hotter than the last Silver Sky we had on test, which averaged pretty much 6k across its three pickups.

There are no surprises in the circuitry – it's perfectly tidy and uses Alpha 'Made in Korea' pots. For the record, tone 1 measures 215kohms; tone 2 is 253k. Like the Silver Sky, the volume pot is 300k (removed from the circuit, it actually measures 308k), but that's tuned via a 3meg-ohms resistor placed in parallel across the input and earth, which means the pickups 'see' a value of 279k. The polyester film tone cap has a 104 code, which means it's a 0.1 microfarads; it does produce quite a dark woofy voice fully rolled off, but it's period-correct to the early 60s inspiration.



Despite the proprietary knobs and switch cap, the three controls act as you'd expect on a modern S-type guitar. Unlike Fender's Player Plus guitar, there are no wiring mods or pull-push switches

idea of a great Strat sound, but like virtually every other facet of this guitar, we don't feel we want to touch a thing, even though the pickups (treble to bass) are tilted less than most of our references. What we get in every position are very strong examples of the sounds many of us have grown up with. The depth of the full-sounding neck pickup with its percussive smash to the start of the note, for example, gets a big tick. Both hum-cancelling in-between sounds bounce and cluck, while the bridge is obviously bright but on the right side of thin, and the middle pickup, which many of us forget, is a spot-on balance between the plummy neck and the thinner bridge. Exactly as it should be, although – not for the first time with a PRS guitar – what we hear almost sounds enhanced or expanded. Whatever, it's a great-tasting dish.

There are plenty of ways to set up a vibrato such as this. As supplied, the front sits approximately 1.6mm above the body, while the back is in contact with the face of the body so it slightly back-angles from front to back. You don't get any up-bend



Like the USA Silver Sky, the fingerboard is inlaid with smaller versions of PRS's classic bird inlays. The fingerboard changes in radius from 184mm to 216mm (7.25 to 8.5 inches)



PRS SE SILVER SKY

PRICE: £895 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Poplar

NECK: Maple, 635JM profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/41.8mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, small bird inlays, 216mm (8.5") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: PRS-designed 2-point steel vibrato, PRS-designed vintage-style tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm

ELECTRICS: Three PRS 635JM

'S' single-coils, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck & middle), tone 2 (bridge)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.21/7.1

Options: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The USA Silver Sky, with either rosewood or maple 'board, costs £2,620 (inc gigbag)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Moon White (as reviewed), Ever Green, Stone Blue, Dragon Fruit – polyurethane gloss body; polyurethane tinted satin neck

set like this, and things do feel a little stiff with four springs in place, but it does mean that when you hit a big G string bend the other strings don't go flat. In other words, it's set more like a blocked vibrato – all the sound, none of the tuning issues. Checking the string heights, it's slightly above PRS spec at 1.78mm on both high and low Es measured at the 12th fret with light relief, which overall makes for quite a tough feel, something to bend against and enough 'air' for slide, certainly from the middle of the 'board and upwards.

Okay, so we've played all the major SE models over the past two decades. It's not hard to see, feel and hear the progression, and whether it's the neck shape or the smooth satin neck-back finish, this SE is the best we've played.

Whether it's the neck shape or the smooth satin neck-back finish, this is the best SE model we've played

Verdict

Since 1985, PRS has probably done more than any maker to raise the level and art of guitar making. There are few makers – from one-man workshops to full-blown production manufacturers – that haven't paid attention. It was once believed within the company that the offshore SE line would somehow devalue that craft. Many of us would beg to differ, of course, but if proof were still needed, here it is. There is nothing cut-price here and the quality of build, feel and sound blurs – perhaps even erases – the whole country of origin consideration. It's not where but how that's important.

Yes, it's a Fender Stratocaster with the wrong shape and name to the headstock, which makes awarding a 10/10 *Guitarist* Gold award – which is what it undoubtedly deserves – difficult. It's frustrating, too, that there's not a maple fingerboard option available, and probably won't be for a considerable length of time, let alone an HSS variation. Clearly, PRS has concentrated on getting what you see bang on, and that's hard to argue with. A simply superb and hugely affordable rendering of the foundation of the electric guitar. **A**



9/10

PROS Price, build, playability, sound, all with PRS's 'nerdy' attention to detail; great neck shape – it really doesn't feel like a generic Fender copy

CONS With only four colours and no options, it's definitely 'what you see is what you get'

A man with a shaved head and a beard, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, is shown in profile playing a dark-colored electric guitar. The background is a dark blue with geometric patterns and a faint, complex geometric diagram in the upper right corner.

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Behind The Sky

This best-yet SE model was no overnight operation. PRS's Jack Higginbotham explains all as we discuss the SE Silver Sky's lengthy development

Words Dave Burrluck

The Silver Sky is a phenomenon. From its launch four years ago – the guitar that ‘broke’ the internet – John Mayer’s model has been in constant demand, something that surprised PRS’s chief operating officer, Jack Higginbotham.

“From my perspective, if you go back to the beginning of the concept and before we had prototypes and things, I was looking at what the pricing was going to be and the actual demand has been, like, 20-fold more than what I was originally thinking,” he tells us. “Even as the guitar started developing, and with John Mayer’s and Paul Reed Smith’s excitement, and then we showed it to some of our trusted partners, I’d say the interest in the guitar is still double what I thought it would be. It’s got legs I didn’t necessarily think it would have. It keeps on going and the orders still keep on coming.”

Has the Silver Sky eclipsed the classic Custom 24 in terms of demand and sales?

“No, I don’t think so. I would have to double-check the figures, but I believe the

594 is still outpacing the Silver Sky, and the Custom is outpacing the 594. But I think those are the three.”

When did you start planning the SE version of the Silver Sky?

“Quite literally the SE version was in the first conversation that I had with John Mayer – before there was a Silver Sky. There was talk back then of there being an SE version from that first conversation. I vividly remember that conversation with Paul and John, and John was asking about the SE series and how the proposed guitar could become a wide range of products.

“Logistically speaking, we started work in earnest on the SE version, rather than it just being a concept, about two years ago.”

The SE Silver Sky is being made by your partners in Indonesia, Cor-Tek, but we understand you’re moving into your own facility over there?

“Yes, we started out in a combination factory, called the Premium factory, which

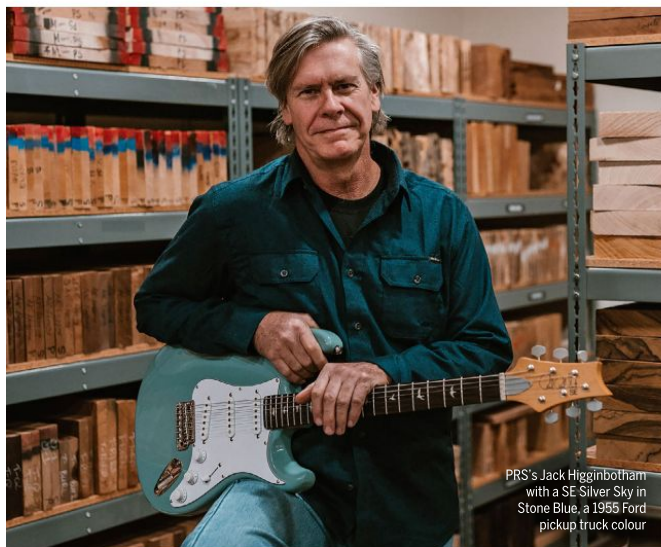
is where a bunch of brands including Cort’s own-brand instruments are made. We moved into our own facility probably two years ago – we did a factory tour that’s on our YouTube channel. But it became apparent even from then that it wasn’t going to be big enough in terms of output. We were looking at taking over more buildings, but Cor-Tek’s Jun Park said let’s not do that, let’s go ahead and build one building with the ability to get flow [of production] better and basically double the size at the same time. That building is now set to open: we’ll be moving the factory in January 2022 and firing up production in early February.

“As far as the future goes, unless the economy does something crazy, I see no reason why we can’t double what [output of instruments] we currently have – which is triple what we used to have. I believe that with the ideas we have going forward... I have a five-year plan that I think could possibly take us to a \$75 million SE business. I think that is real.”

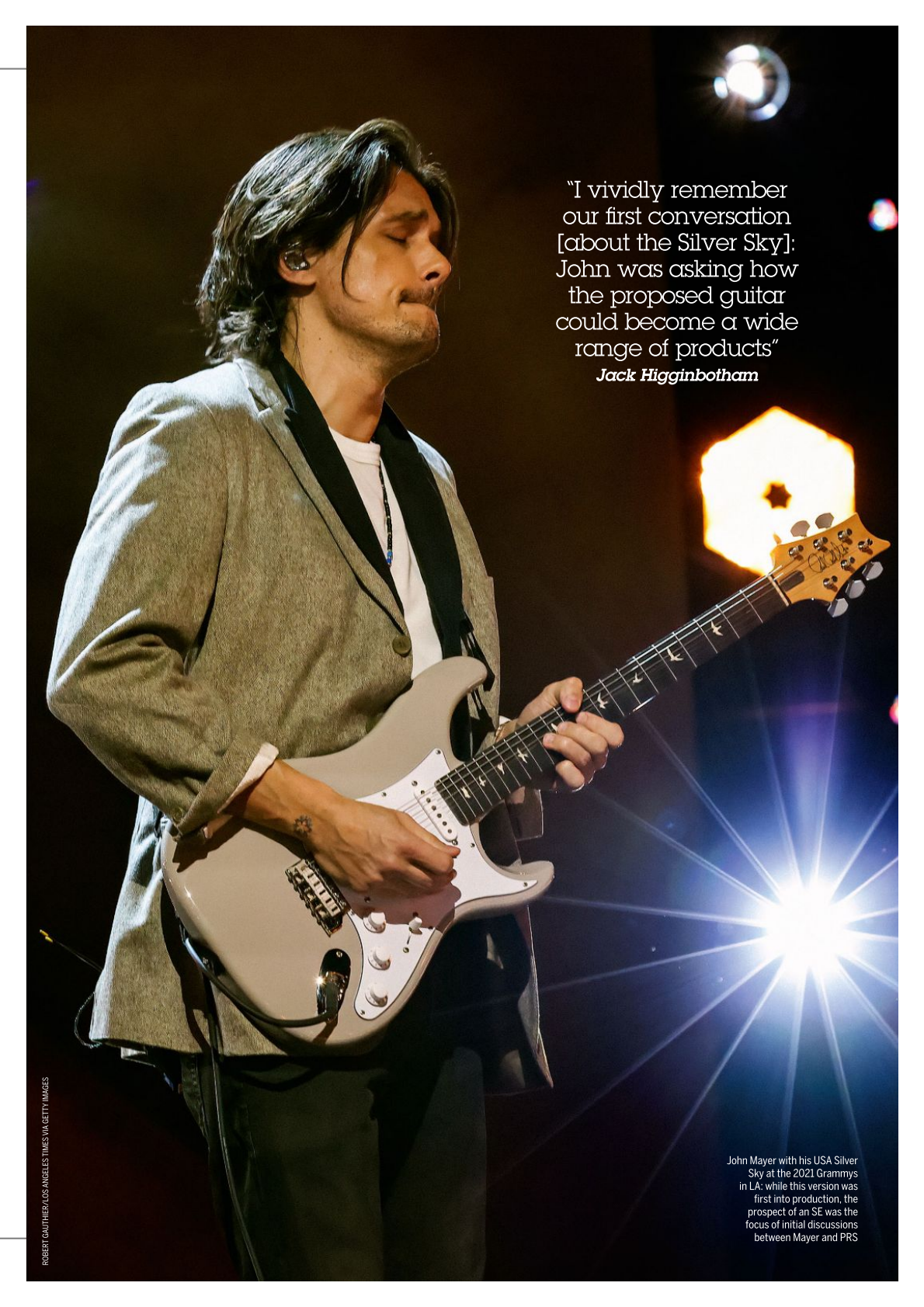
“We’re really pleased in the way the sum of all the parts are working together”

Now, you don’t need to be a market analyst to surmise that a more affordable version of a high-demand item is only going to increase demand, but we can’t side-step the elephant in the room: the Silver Sky is the closest PRS has ever got to making, well, a copy of another design. PRS’s defence is that the Silver Sky re-examines every facet of that design and improves the art and craft and the sound, adding subtle PRSisms such as those small bird inlays and the rather more pronounced reversed PRS three-a-side headstock.

Surely, then, we put to Jack, making an offshore version at a third of the price will mean that those subtleties are lost and the SE Silver Sky will just become another generic Fender copy?



PRS's Jack Higginbotham with a SE Silver Sky in Stone Blue, a 1955 Ford pickup truck colour

A full-page photograph of John Mayer performing on stage. He is shown from the waist up, in profile, facing right. He has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a light-colored, textured blazer over a white t-shirt. He is playing a white PRS USA Silver Sky electric guitar. His eyes are closed, and he has a focused expression. The background is dark with stage lights, including a bright blue starburst light in the lower right and a warm orange light source in the upper right.

"I vividly remember
our first conversation
[about the Silver Sky]:
John was asking how
the proposed guitar
could become a wide
range of products"

Jack Higginbotham

John Mayer with his USA Silver Sky at the 2021 Grammys in LA: while this version was first into production, the prospect of an SE was the focus of initial discussions between Mayer and PRS

1 & 2. The PRS SE guitars might be made in Indonesia but final QC for those heading for the USA is all done at

PRS HQ in Maryland. Meanwhile, the SEs travelling to the UK are QC'd in Cambridge at PRS Europe's HQ



"The poplar body was the first alternate choice by a long shot. It complements the pickups really well"

3 & 4. This Core McCarty 594 (pictured left) is one of the trio of big-hitters in terms of sales alongside the USA Silver Sky and, of course, the classic Custom 24 (pictured right in its USA S2 guise), which is available across all the PRS ranges

"That's a great question and a valid concern," he offers. "But I don't have that concern because, well, I have one here – we've both got one! – so I can go through it with you. Everything about this is *not* generic to me. The tuning pegs, they're a special-order item, made to our specs, just like the USA pegs. The design of these pegs has the same call-outs as the USA pegs: all the things that we think make a peg sound good, these have [them], too. The nut is a composite that we spec'd out, proprietary to this guitar. It has its own mould. It's moulded incredibly accurately as far as the string-break goes so that sound transfer and all the geeky stuff we've done in the US, we've really applied it to this SE probably more than any other SE because it was built from scratch – there's nothing carrying over [from a previous or existing SE model]. So the nut is its own thing.

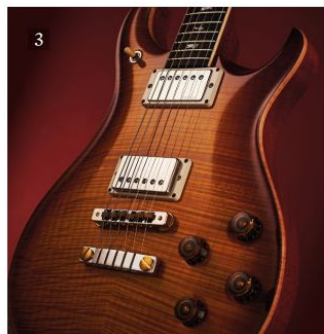
"The fretwire is a stock item, a company from Korea makes the fretwire, but it's really close to our US Silver Sky specs. The neck shape – obviously – is not a generic neck shape. The radius is different from the US model, it's 8.5 inches, it's not a standard radius for a fretboard, but it's one that we felt would accommodate both John Mayer's sensibilities and the broader public's sensibilities without compromising it.

"The body is probably the most generic – nothing crazy there. It's made from poplar instead of the alder we use in the US. The jack plate is literally our US jack plate.

"The bridge is obviously our own bridge, too; it's a two-post design and it's very similar to the Mark Lettieri Fiore guitar. The backstory is that this bridge was pretty deep in development when Mark's guitar came to be and we actually took this bridge design and modified it, and that's what Mark got on his guitar. So even though this one came out second, it was the impetus for the other one. It's not exactly the same; it's SE'd if you will. It's metric as opposed to SAE, some of the materials are slightly different, but it was the starting point for the Fiore's bridge."

Why switch the body wood to poplar from alder? It's perceived as a cheaper alternative, isn't it?

"Yes, I'd agree with that, but we did it because we expected very large numbers and high-demand for the guitar, and we didn't want to be limited by anything – we didn't want to have capacity issues. That was the first thing, so we started looking



for material that was more readily available but still of higher quality so we wouldn't be encumbered by it. Then we got in various different samples, alternatives, and Paul rarely agrees to doing a double blind test, but we did one with that and the poplar body was the first alternate choice by a long shot. It just sounded better: more consistent and with more tonal characteristics with these pickups – they complemented each other really well."

Speaking of which, the Silver Sky's 635JM pickups took quite a bit of work to get right. Where did you start with the 'S' versions for the SE?

"That's probably a story in itself! Basically, we said we know what we want it to sound like and we know what their limitations are on materials. As we've previously discussed, there is a company there [in Indonesia], PSE, that makes the pickups for Cor-Tek. Young Park is the older gentleman who owns Cor-Tek; Jun Park is his son and his brother, Peter, owns PSE [Pickups], which is basically the pickup company that's in the

"Everything about this guitar is not generic to me: the tuning pegs, the nut, the neck shape, the bridge..."

compound in Indonesia. It's massive and they make so many pickups, so fast.

"There's a guy there, Nemo. He's a really great guy and I think we capture his imagination a little bit. He looks at it as, 'Here's PRS – these guys really like what they're doing, it's a challenge and I'm going to enjoy working through this stuff with them.' So we asked him to send us a spool of wire that we thought was the closest he had to what we use to wind the Silver Sky pickups in the US. We started to mess around with the mass of the magnetic polepieces and just took things that he could get and started building pickups from scratch here in the US and seeing how close we could get [to the Silver Sky's pickups]. Once we got it to a place – and we have kinda a weird methodology of driving some extra metal through the fibre board – where we were happy with the sound, we sent it back to Nemo and he started reverse engineering the pickup. That took a while, about a year, and then once we got that really close we started messing around with resistors on the volume pot, really getting it down.

"When it's all said and done, it's different from the US Silver Sky's, but some people like it a little more because it's got a little

bite to it, whereas the US Silver Sky pickups are very round and very mellow. I think they're beautiful and they sound wonderful, but this guitar cuts a little more, like what you'd expect a single coil guitar to do. In certain people's heads they really like it.

"I just bought an old Ampeg VT-40 from Paul with 4x10s in it – it's a fantastic amplifier and I've got a US Silver Sky at my house and one of the SEs. They both sound wonderful, but this, the SE, is what I think more of as a single-coil sound that I want to get. We're really pleased in the way the sum of all the parts are working together: they're playing together nicely from the vibrato, the body material, the pickups, the way the nut works, the way the pegs work."

The SE Silver Sky has a slightly unusual setup in terms of that vibrato, right?

"I guess we're going slightly off reservation in the way we set these guitars up. We're going about 2/32-inch up on the front and then decking the back of the bridge. I've tried it all sorts of ways: fully decking it, coming up one 32nd, two 32nds and dropping the saddles down – this is what we think is the sweet spot to how to get the guitar sounding the best."



In a mirror of the USA PRS factory, there's plenty of hand-sanding to be done on the production line at Cor-Tek in Indonesia

Like the USA guitar, we have a choice of four colours. We'd guess John Mayer might have had a say in those...

"Oh yes, John was very involved in this process as you can imagine. He had Pantone colours in his head that didn't work that well with the [polyurethane] finish that we're using in Indonesia, so we did have to compromise there a little. The Stone Blue finish is one that he actually suggested early on and then he decided that he didn't like it. But we'd already shot some samples and it's the colour I really love, so I had to argue with John a little bit to keep that as he wanted to kill it. Now it's his favourite colour, so that's cool! It's actually a 1955 Ford pickup truck colour."

Dare we ask if you're going to offer the SE Silver Sky with a maple fingerboard?

"Here's what I think will happen. We're already swamped with demand that we can't fulfil. We're going to launch this thing and a whole other wave is going to hit us that we're going to struggle with for a year or two to fulfil. Then we've got some more ideas cooking that'll do it all over again. So, my best guess is that a maple version is at least three or four years away." ■



Kindred Spirits

It might use the name and overall design of the USA model, but the new SE Silver Sky has many more differences than it seems at first glance. We investigate

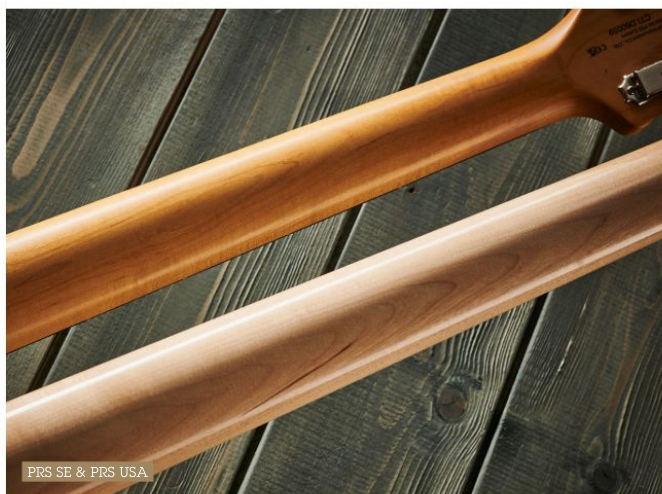
Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin



PRs SE & PRs USA



PRs SE & PRs USA



PRs SE & PRs USA



PRs SE



PRs USA

The majority of PRS's SE models are based on prior or existing USA models, as you'd expect. The SE Silver Sky is the first bolt-on in the range, and while it's not obvious from a few metres away – indeed, this version might look identical to the USA model – just about every part has been re-engineered and there are virtually zero 'off-the-shelf' parts or components.

Headstock Style

Probably the most polarising part of the original Silver Sky is the reverse PRS headstock. With its extended scoop from the nut to the top E tuner, it is back-angled so string trees aren't necessary. It's easy to identify the SE model thanks to that bold logo and the truss rod cover, which is smaller and recessed on the USA model, while the SE's is standard for the line but made from a silver-coloured plastic that matches the tuner buttons.

Another obvious difference is the locking tuners on the USA model; the SE's are non-locking. Both use Kluson-style backs and push-in grommets on the face, and the SE's tuners actually feel very similar in use. The USA model features a bone nut; the SE's is a synthetic and more like the relatively large size used on the majority of PRS guitars, rather than the thinner nut of the USA model that apes classic Fender style.

As with all PRS SE models from day one, this SE proudly states the factory and country of origin: "Built by Cor-Tek Musical Instruments Co., LTD Indonesia under licence for PRS Guitars." The USA guitar, as ever, has no such marking, just the handwritten serial number.

Neck & Fingerboard

While both necks are slab-sawn maple with a scarf-jointed headstock and 22-fret rosewood 'board, that's about as far as the

similarities go. The USA Silver Sky has a gloss nitro finish to its neck back, the maple appears untinted, and there is quite a visual contrast between the pieces used for the headstock and neck back. The SE goes for a satin polyurethane finish, lightly tinted, and the matching of headstock to neck is actually slightly better, certainly less obvious than the USA model. There's also a light but pleasantly noticeable flame on the SE.

Both Silver Skys use rosewood 'boards, the USA model with the smaller original Fender radius of 184mm (7.25 inches), the SE's radius slightly flatter at 216mm (8.5 inches). The edges of the US 'board are rolled slightly more than the SE, too. Both guitars use very similar smaller-sized bird inlays, and while the fret size is different it's not by much: we measured the USA model at approximately 2.28mm wide by 1.27mm high, while the SE's are slightly wider and lower at 2.4mm wide by 1.1mm high.



Body Features

As we cover in our preceding review and interview with Jack Higginbotham, the body wood of the SE changes from alder to poplar. This is one reason why, at 3.21kg (7.1lb), the guitar is the lightest of the Silver Sky family we've already tested, indeed lighter than the brand-new USA Silver Sky we're comparing it to, which weighs in at 3.44kg (7.58lb).

The shaping of both is very close: there's a very slight edge on the SE where the edge

The SE is a viable instrument in its own right, enough to be a different tool from the USA Silver Sky



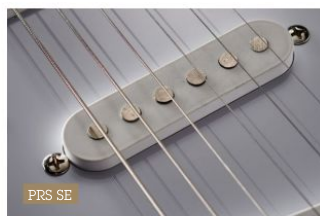
radius flows into the top, back and sides, and a slightly more pronounced hump from the neck into the treble cutaway scoop. Conversely, the edge radius around the domed front heel of the SE is slightly larger in diameter than the USA model. The neckplates appear very similar (aside from the large SE logo), though the USA model has a flatter texture than its greyer colour. Like the necks, the finish is different on the bodies, too. The SE uses polyurethane, the USA model uses nitro.

Elsewhere, the strap buttons are clearly different parts: the SE's have those little felt washers and slightly domed tops, but like so many of the differences between the two guitars, we can't help thinking we're splitting hairs. A more obvious contrast, however, is the lack of cover plate over the vibrato springs on the back of the USA body; the SE has a standard white plastic cover. Both vibratos use deep-drilled steel blocks, the SE's being very slightly wider and with a greyer finish. Both use four springs.



Vibrato Style

It might be a two-post vibrato on the SE (it pivots on two threaded bolts screwed into the body) as opposed to the USA's six-screw style, but the vibratos otherwise appear very similar, not least the pressed steel saddles. However, each of these on the USA model sits in tracks to stop any sideways movement under string tension; on the SE only the two outer saddles sit in tracks. Both arms appear to be stainless steel with a white plastic tip: the USA arm is 4.75mm in diameter and very slightly longer; the SE's is 4.48mm and also sits very slightly higher from the body face. Both vibratos are set the same with a rise of approximately 3.175mm (1/8 of an inch) at the front, while the back sits flush to the body.



Pickups & Plastic

As ever, PRS keeps quiet about what's under the hood as far as its pickups are concerned. The USA pickup covers have 'PRS 635JM' stamped below the top two polepieces and a small radius to the edges of the covers. The rod magnets on both have a light radius – slightly more on the USA Sky, which are a little narrower in diameter at 4.75mm. We discuss the DCRs of the SE pickups in our review: the USA DCRs, measured at output, read 5.54kohms (bridge), 5.55k (middle) and 5.54k (neck).

The plastic parts are very similar, from the three-ply white/black/white scratchplates, that 'paddle' switch cap and even the control knobs where the only difference we can see is slightly thicker and darker colour numbers around the skirt on the SE's knobs.

One thing the 'Skys share is that output jack dish – the exact same part is used on both.

Feel & Sounds

Obviously, the SE Silver Sky aims to be a cut-price replica of the USA model – which it is – but it's also a hugely viable instrument in its own right, enough in sound terms to be a different tool from the USA Silver Sky, and one you might prefer. The big cost difference affects our engagement with the guitars, too. The SE, well, it feels like a guitar you can sling in the boot of your car, or not worry about jean studs or belt buckles or if the rubber supports on your stand might react to the finish. On the other side, and not for the first time with a USA PRS guitar, you can't help treating it with more respect and care. It's a major reason, of course, why many of us gig our Mexican Fenders while, if we're lucky enough to own one, the Custom Shop guitar stays at home.

There is a difference in the size and feel of the two necks. The USA guitar feels

slightly bigger in the hand, although our measurement differences are barely half a millimetre apart. For example, the SE's nut width is 41.8mm; the USA model is 42.28mm with a fractionally wider string-spacing of 36mm as opposed to 35mm on the SE. But it is a fairly big-shouldered profile, not least by the 12th fret where the SE/USA depths are 24.3mm/24.9mm, while the 1st fret depths are more commonplace at 21.3mm/21.8mm. Frankly, the shaping on both is superb.

As we've reported before, the USA Silver Sky is no slouch in the sound department. It's not just *those* sounds we hear, but they're presented with a beautiful depth and sparkle that makes cleans a thing of beauty. That impression of enhancement is vivid here, too, and for anyone who lives in the lightly crunchy area it sounds both rootsy and 'produced'. The bridge pickup with a slight tone roll-off might well be the missing sound on so many S-type guitars: it's a fabulously steely Fender sound and one that we simply can't match with any of our references. To be fair, though, the SE's bridge pickup is just as impressive in terms of that depth, and it seems to subtly drive the amp a little harder.

As we continue to compare sound to sound from the USA model to the SE, you'll hear plenty of differences. For example, there's a little more clarity to the USA model – but the thing that's harder to quantify is that the SE's sounds are just as valid as its build. Having used the SE to build parts on a couple of recordings, we don't feel anything is lacking here. And while that additional sparkle of the USA model can certainly be helpful, the parts we sent off to our songwriting partner were primarily played on the SE. Definitely food for thought. **E**



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ROUND-UP

IK Multimedia X-Gear pedals

From plug-ins to pedals, here are AmpliTube sounds in physical form

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

The maker of the long-established AmpliTube guitar amp and effects emulation software has introduced a series of four X-Gear pedals. There's one each for modulation, reverb and delay, which we are looking at here, and another, the X-Drive, for drive, distortion, fuzz and so on.

Our three pedals have the same three-footswitch form factor with mono and stereo connectivity and full MIDI implementation. Each has 16 algorithms and up to 300 storable presets that can be managed with the included librarian app and used in AmpliTube 5.

In addition, the necessary USB computer connection lets the pedal function as an audio interface for recording, with or without cab sim. While basically preset-based, the pedals have physical knobs to quickly adjust the main parameters, while several more are accessed with a push-and-turn parameter knob. Presets and banks are easily recalled for live use and you get some useful performance features, such as being able to add an expression pedal, and the X-Mode facility, which momentarily alters a parameter by holding down a footswitch.



IK MULTIMEDIA

AmpliTube X-Vibe £299

The X-Vibe modulation pedal's three chorus algorithms offer pretty comprehensive cover, including good representations of the classic Boss chorus sound. For phasing and flanging, there is a range of very usable tones such as emulations of the Phase 90, Phase 100, Small Stone, Electric Mistress and MXR 117, plus a Uni-Vibe with both its Chorus and Vibrato modes available.

Speed change in the Rotary emulation is disappointingly limited to the X-mode ramping up to the maximum speed while the footswitch is held, although you could place slow and fast presets side by side on the pedal for an abrupt change between them. The Tremolo is generic but has all the necessary tools to shape a great sound, particularly in changing wave shape. Not as conventional as the rest, there's the Step Slicer, great for making use of the tap tempo and throwing in some rhythmic effects, while Step Filter is a little more quirky in its synth sequencer stylings. **[E]**

VERDICT All the modulation effects you'll need, if you only use them one at a time



IK MULTIMEDIA

AmpliTube X-Time £299

While a few delay styles can't be dialled in here, the algorithms have plenty of adjustability and use the X-Mode facility to ramp up feedback into self-oscillation, and vintage tape and BBD analogue sounds are well represented. The two Tape delays have slightly different control, the second with separate modulation rate and depth parameters allowing for some Deluxe Memory Man approximations. This is something the Analog algorithm doesn't do, though it does include degrees of saturation via the Mod knob. There's also a Dirty algorithm with distortion and phasing.

You'll also find ethereal ambiances, pristine digital delay, psychedelic reverse delay and dual delays related by music time. For pitched delays, the Pitch and Harm algorithms won't let you down. Turn the pitch to zero, though, and they'll do multi-tap; you can set delay times for three repeats, approximating the head spacings of a three-head tape echo. **[E]**

VERDICT Highly programmable delays with easy onstage access and tap tempo



IK MULTIMEDIA

AmpliTube X-Space £299

Among the usual straight reverb types, Hall, Room, Chamber and Church give you the sense of dimensional space you'd expect. The Plate and Spring emulations deliver the sonic flavour of the real physical thing and offer enough parameters to dial in the exact sound to sit well with your rig, the Plate having different damping parameters for the low, mid and high frequencies. You also get gated reverb, an 'early reflections' algorithm that's useful for building the sound of very small spaces, a reverb that swells in, and a cool reverse reverb.

The rest are altered and enhanced reverbs. There are two types of Shimmer: one where a single shimmer pitch can be set; the next with two pitches so you can set up harmonies or dissonances. Most of the others have various modulation options to create movement and floaty ambiances and, with no tap tempo, you get instant footswitch access to three presets, rather than the two of the other pedals. **[E]**

VERDICT The basics next to the esoteric – ready for recall at the drop of a foot

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: Italy

TYPE: Modulation pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, tap tempo, librarian software and AmpliTube 5 SE included. Safe mode (locks knobs), cab sim, audio interface capability
EFFECTS: 80 Chorus, Chorus 1, Chorus X, 60 Vibe, Phazer 9, Phazer 10, Phazer CL, Fox, Stone, Electric, Doubler, Metallic, Rotary, Tremolo, Step Slice, Step Filter

CONTROLS: Model/Back, Preset/Save, Parameter, Speed, Depth, Bass, Mid, Treble, footswitch A, footswitch B, Tap footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L/Mono, R), standard outputs (L/Mono, R), MIDI In, MIDI Out, Ext. Control, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 260mA

DIMENSIONS: 176 (w) x 144 (d) x 60mm (h)

8/10

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: Italy

TYPE: Delay pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, tap tempo, librarian software and AmpliTube 5 SE included. Safe mode (locks knobs), cab sim, audio interface capability
EFFECTS: Vtg Tape, Mod Tape, Analog, Digital, Ping Pong, Pattern, Dual, Reverse, Rev Pong, Swell, Duck, Pitch, Harm, Dirty, Slapback, Arctic

CONTROLS: Model/Back, Preset/Save, Parameter, Time, Feedback, Filter, Mod, Mix, footswitch A, footswitch B, Tap footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L/Mono, R), standard outputs (L/Mono, R), MIDI In, MIDI Out, Ext. Control, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 260 mA

DIMENSIONS: 176 (w) x 144 (d) x 60mm (h)

Guitarist
CHOICE

9/10

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: Italy

TYPE: Reverb pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, librarian software and AmpliTube 5 SE included. Safe mode (locks knobs), cab sim, audio interface capability
EFFECTS: Shimmer 1, Shimmer 2, Hall, Room, Chamber, Church, Plate, Spring, Swell, Gate, Reverse, Early Ref, Extreme, Ethereal, Bloom, Magnetic

CONTROLS: Model/Back, Preset/Save, Parameter, Time, Pre-Delay, Color, Mod, Mix, footswitch A, footswitch B, C footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L/Mono, R), standard outputs (L/Mono, R), MIDI In, MIDI Out, Ext. Control, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 260mA

DIMENSIONS: 176 (w) x 144 (d) x 60mm (h)

Guitarist
CHOICE

9/10



ROUND-UP

Electro-Harmonix pedals

Old-school sounds in modern pedal formats

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Olly Curtis

EHX's miniaturisation programme continues with a nano version of one of its most lauded pedals: the 44-year-old Deluxe Memory Man. Somehow the boffins have managed to squeeze a pedal that was originally large enough to eat your dinner off into something you could barely place a

KitKat on. A natural shoo-in for a compact pedalboard, it runs from a supplied nine-volt wall wart but needs 150mA if you want to run it from your own power distributor. Also on test here is the similarly sized Ripped Speaker, a fuzz pedal that celebrates lo-fi distortion and supplies it in varied shades.



ELECTRO-HARMONIX

Nano Deluxe Memory Man £179

What the Deluxe Memory Man has always delivered is bucket-brigade analogue delay with a side helping of modulation. And this diminutive version continues that tradition while actually offering more control in the form of separate Rate and Depth controls for the chorus/vibrato effect.

Elsewhere, it's business as usual with a Delay knob that covers a range from 30ms to 550ms, a Blend knob for the dry/wet mix, and a Feedback knob to add repeats that mesh organically with guitar tone and will take off into self-oscillation if you turn it far enough. The Level knob sets input gain and is at unity at about 11 o'clock, which gives you plenty of leeway for a kicked-in boost while adding in drive for an edgier sound.

As a straight delay, the pedal covers plenty of practicalities from reverb-like ambience through slapback to the longer echoes, but the modulation adds that extra dimension, giving the pedal its character. You can use it as little or as much as you like, from adding a frisson of interest with tape-like wobble, through chorus-led ethereal spaciness to rotary speaker sounds and wayward pitch vibrato. **G**

VERDICT Genius! This is a genuine Deluxe Memory Man that will fit any pedalboard



ELECTRO-HARMONIX

Ripped Speaker £79

The sound of *You Really Got Me* came about when The Kinks' Dave Davies took a razor blade to his speaker. Electro-Harmonix's pedal pays homage to that sort of damaged cone action, as well as the lo-fi distortion caused by faulty electronics.

At its heart, the Ripped Speaker is a fuzz pedal equipped with Fuzz and Volume knobs and an extremely effective transformative EQ – but it also sports a Rip knob that adjusts the bias, basically setting the amount of wave-form clipping. Around noon is optimum for a conventional fuzz sound, which is fat but rough-edged, straight out of the mid-60s and at its best in the upper reaches of the Fuzz knob. Turning the Rip knob to the right adjusts the bias for a hard gating effect – it's almost unplayable at its extreme, as if the battery is being given the last rites. Across the arc of the Rip knob you'll find there's plenty you can exploit with playing dynamics: tightly wound chords, spitty note clusters and sitar stylings. To the left, the gating is smoother and less hooligan, and while it can do extreme spluttery, there are subtle musical variations just left of centre. **G**

VERDICT Gnarly with knobs on. Edgy fuzz with all the fine adjustment you'll need

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Analogue delay pedal with modulation

FEATURES: Selectable true bypass

or buffered bypass with tails,
delay times from 30ms to 550ms

CONTROLS: Blend, Feedback, Delay,
Level, Rate, Depth, internal Tails switch,
Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input,
standard output

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 150mA

DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)



9/10

Tech Spec

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Fuzz pedal

FEATURES: True bypass

CONTROLS: Volume, Rip, Tone,
Fuzz, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input,
standard output

POWER: 9V battery (included) or 9V DC
adaptor (not supplied) 10mA

DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)



9/10





« BLUEPRINT »

THE SCHMIDT CROWD

Schmidt Array pedalboards are top-notch kit and the choice of stellar players such as Josh Smith – but the company's scientific-sounding German moniker hides a more intriguing tale. For example, doesn't its founder, Martyn Smith, have a somewhat British-sounding name? Time to give them a call...

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Olly Curtis

If you're into effects pedals, you might have noticed pedalboards made by Schmidt Array cropping up more and more on stages in recent years. Used by an eclectic range of pro players, from Tele-twanger extraordinaire Josh Smith to J Willgoose Esq of Public Service Broadcasting, their curving, retro-looking cases attract the eye and mark them out from the common run of cattle-grid-like pedalboards.

Intrigued, we decided to drop the company a line, knowing very little about it beyond the fact that it's based in Germany. So when we called, we were surprised to hear a British voice. The founder of Schmidt Array is Martyn Smith, who married a German woman and emigrated from Rushden, Northants to Halle in North Rhine-Westphalia many years ago. It doesn't take a linguist to realise 'Schmidt' is simply the German equivalent of 'Smith' – and the story gets more interesting from there.

A professional engineer, Martyn got into making pedalboards 10 years ago after buying a few pedals for use in his band and needing something to mount them on. Ever the tinkerer, he was baffled that most commercially available pedalboards mounted two rows of effects on a flat chassis, making it unergonomic to operate the back row of effects.

"I was convinced that the 'board had to be two levels and you had to be able to open one of them to put the power supply unit in," Martyn says. "It still amazes me that most of our competitors still do just a flat box where everything hangs out from underneath. But I thought, 'No, everything has to be stowed away safely. All the cables have got to disappear.'"

And so Martyn attempted to design and build the most functional pedalboard he could, for his own use. In a stroke of fate,

or *schicksal*, as they say in Germany, one of the first musicians he showed his prototype to – a stranger who just happened to be rehearsing in the room next to his workshop – turned out to be a writer for Germany's *Gitarre & Bass* magazine, and only weeks after making his first prototype the design received a write-up in that tome, sparking interest that led to the creation of a fledgling 'board-building company.

After making some inroads into the market, Martyn says, his business partner got cold feet about investing in new tooling to expand the company's output and they parted company. Undeterred, Martyn then sought out an old colleague and bandmate from the UK, Terry Woods, who had a background in Formula 1 engineering. Together, they spent a year finessing Martyn's core design and preparing it for serial production. And with that, the Schmidt Array pedalboard company was born, with the mission statement: 'British design hand-built in Germany.'

With that thought to guide us, Martyn lifts the lid on how he custom-makes pedalboards to meet the incredibly varied demands of players in today's market.



Founder Martyn Smith is an exacting engineer but also a lifelong guitar player

Schmidt Array 'boards are built to a very serious spec. Who are they aimed at?

"I'm always targeting pro customers who are touring, stuff's getting thrown around,

Schmidt Array's high-spec pedalboards are configured to each customer's needs



but every time they go on stage they want it to work, you know? Night after night, it's got to be foolproof. I love to meet up with pro players as much as possible and get their feedback and, of course, it's also a great excuse for getting into a gig for nothing [laughs].

"I recently drove to Cologne two nights in a row to catch up with J Willgoose Esq of Public Service Broadcasting, who has a really complex setup that requires two of our biggest 'boards. He was on the final night of their European Tour. The next night I went to see Dani Diodato of Arlo Parks' band who had just finished a US tour followed immediately by a UK tour and had then moved on to Europe. I was mainly there to check everything was fine with their 'boards after months of gigs, but the feedback that I got was invaluable. Dani told me, 'Look, I just want to say that we've just been all over America and every single night I've plugged the 'board in and everything works first time, over 60 gigs.' That was very satisfying to hear.

"With that said, when I first had the idea [for the Schmidt Array 'board design], the only thing that it had to do was meet my own personal specification. In a way,

"I love to meet up with pro players and get their feedback... night after night, it's got to be foolproof"

I design the 'boards for myself – because if it works for me then I'm pretty sure there are plenty of other people like myself out there who'll feel the same. At the end of the day, the pro customers are great and they give us a lot of publicity but most of our customers are ordinary musicians like myself who play the guitar just for fun. They may never even play on a stage, but they still want to play seriously at home with the same gear that professionals use."

Schmidt Array 'boards aren't like many off-the-peg pedalboards in that each one is configured for the individual customer rather than made to a strictly generic spec. And yet you do list different models on your website – so how does that all work?

"We have two core pedalboard systems and the model numbers [for example, the SA600] equate to the amount of space you have to fit pedals on the decks, from left to right. We started off life with our Standard 'boards, before switching systems [devices that control large groups



1. Even the carrying handle is of super-durable steel protected with a comfortable, plastic sheath

2. The spring-assisted steel catches that secure the lid are heavyweight items and do their job perfectly

3. Schmidt Array 'boards are finished in marine-grade, two-pack epoxy paint for high durability. This example is in standard black

of pedals from a compact central device, such as The GigRig G3] became popular. They were much less common 10 years ago, so the majority of our customers only needed a simple two-deck system. We used hinged decks, ergonomically positioned on two levels, to mount the pedals on. The idea was to make the 'boards as comfortable to use as possible and avoid forcing the player to do a tap dance routine to reach the second row of pedals. Then as switching systems became more popular we updated the Standard design to be able to accommodate those as well.

"However, with customers asking for increasingly large numbers of pedals, as well as switchers, to be fitted to their 'boards, I thought, 'Now's the time to design a three-row 'board,' so we then developed the XDM series. The name stands for Xtra Deep Man [laughs], which we came up with when working on the first 'monster' 'board for Rabea Massaad. This design was developed specifically for players who use switchers – because if you use a switcher you generally don't need to access

individual pedals with your foot. That meant we could design a deeper top deck and also create more space to fit pedals inside the 'board itself – and those are now our most popular format.

"And so those are the two different types of 'board we build, Standard and XDM. We have 11 different sizes to choose from now, in both Standard and XDM, which should cover the needs of most people."

You mentioned making illustrations of possible layouts that the customer can consult before deciding to go with a particular 'board and pedal configuration. Is that included with all orders or just complex custom stuff?

"We'll do a plan even for a standard 'board, if only for my own peace of mind, unless the customer says, 'This is the one, I'm quite happy that I've made the right decision...' I've built a library of thousands of pedals over the years, all imaged at 1:1 scale, which we use to draw up accurate plans for 'boards that customers want us to build. The library is continually growing, though,



as the amount of new pedals coming out every week is staggering. So I have all of these pedals on file and I use a combination of Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator and my engineering know-how to make a plan that guitarists can understand easily.”

Your ‘boards are very much at the high-end or professional end of the market. What aspects of the build quality justify the asking price?

“Well, firstly, we build our ‘boards from very good quality birch plywood from sustainable sources. But here’s the extra bit: we actually put a veneer on the pieces that will be fitted on the outside of the ‘board. Firstly, that gives you a higher-quality-than-normal finish – but more importantly it allows us to fractionally increase the thickness of the wood, so we can then machine it back very accurately to *exactly* the thickness we want. We’re talking about a level of precision that the wood supplier cannot deliver, which is why we do this process ourselves, and it basically guarantees uniformity of parts

and very consistent build dimensions. So if you then want to update your ‘board with replacement parts at a later stage, I can guarantee those new parts will fit exactly.

“Another example is, if a customer says ‘Look, I’m only using one expression pedal now, not the wah *and* expression pedal that the ‘board was originally designed for...’ then we’ll just send you a new deck that fits the new layout. They’re very, very easy to fit because everything is routed in. Most of the time when you see people using a hinge system similar to ours, they just surface-mount it. But we actually rout the wood out and the hinge drops into its own little alcove. It’s not just screwed straight on top because if you do that, hinges can move. The screws come loose and things aren’t lined up after a couple of months, you know? Ours are locked into place. That’s the sort of depth of detail that we go to.

“The bottom decks are also easily removable as they are mounted on ball locks, so they are not screwed down permanently – you just give the deck a little bit of upward force and it will pop out,

“Each ‘board can be modified whenever necessary to suit your changing pedal configuration”

though [when fastened] they’re locked into place very firmly. This means that if you need a different deck we can send you one that works for your new pedal layout and it will just click into place. So our pedalboards have a modular longevity, if you like – once you’ve paid the money for the original ‘board it can be modified whenever necessary to suit your changing pedal configuration, which makes it future-proof to a degree.”

One of the most eye-catching features of your ‘boards is the custom colours you can order them in. How does that work?

“We use a special epoxy, two-pack marine paint for durability. We buy huge amounts



4. One extra that many users find useful is the all-stereo, six-channel connector box for routing signal to and from amps' effects loops

5. An external socket and accompanying adaptor allow you to tidily bring power to your internally mounted power supply

6. A high-quality fitted gigbag is an optional extra to grant even more protection and hold accessories



of black, obviously, because black is still the most popular colour, and also because I've had instances of bands where the artist's spec for the stage setup demanded only black equipment. So a black finish comes at no extra charge. The finish is like a semi-matt, but it's very durable and it comes from a range of paints called RAL, which is pretty much the industry standard, heavy-duty paint for wood and there's a really wide range of colours in that.

"We have to charge extra for non-black paint colours, though, as we buy those in as required, one tin at a time. Due to its nature, the paint can't be stored for longer than a week once it's opened. But that does let you customise your 'board to the exact look you want. People will ask us if we can match the colour of the 'board to maybe a Sonic Blue or something like that, so we'll try to match colours to fit with guitars if you want. There are some other colour systems that we can use sometimes to try to get a bit closer. So you can have that, plus there are other more outrageous things like snakeskin finish options that we can do, too.

"We used to use just a standard high-quality, raw brushed aluminium for the lids,

"I want to get the pedalboard out of the 'accessory' category because it is so important..."

but this year we moved over to powder-coating the aluminium parts in various colours because it is a much more durable finish, much more scratch-resistant. So now, thanks to the colour options available with powder-coating, you can have the aluminium parts the same colour as the RAL system colour you chose for the 'board itself – or you can have a contrasting colour. People who own Marshalls often ask, 'Can I have gold aluminium parts but a black 'board?' and we can do that for them."

Not everyone would want to invest in a pro-grade 'board of the type Schmidt Array makes. What are the main benefits for musicians, as you see it?

"If you've got a 'board that you trust and rely on, and the pedals are firm under your

foot and they're always in the same place, not moving or anything, it gives you such a good feeling and just allows you to play the guitar better. I mean, obviously all the components of your setup are important. But the pedalboard is the nerve centre of everything.

"There is nothing worse than getting pumped up to play – whether it's for a gig or just a rehearsal – but then losing your creative flow because you have to bend down and waggle a cable to fix an intermittent signal. If that problem continues, then from my experience the good vibes just fly out the window and your brain focuses on the problem and not the reason you are there for – playing the guitar.

"My simple goal is for you to be able to forget about the 'board, safe in the knowledge that everything will work exactly as it should, time and time again. I want to get the pedalboard out of the 'accessory' category because it is such an important part of the configuration, it deserves a much higher status than being just an accessory." 

www.schmidtarray.com

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Longtermers

A few months' gigging, recording and everything that goes with it – welcome to *Guitarist's* longterm test report



Udo Roesner
Da Capo 75
with David Mead

The dual-channel Da Capo features a comprehensive range of output possibilities

Writer

DAVID MEAD
Guitarist, Deputy Editor



David delves deeper into the Da Capo 75 acoustic amplifier's EQ section in order to amalgamate it onto his rig for a forthcoming solo gig

During the previous Longtermers article (issue 480) I tried a number of my own guitars through the new Da Capo 75 amp. This was my way of getting to know it even better with my own gear, having already reviewed it for the magazine. If you missed it, here's a brief recap... The Da Capo is the brainchild of Udo Roesner, the designer of the AER Compact 60 amplifier that is beloved by the acoustic guitar world in general. With the Da Capo, as the name suggests, Roesner has literally redesigned it from the top down and, we were so delighted with the adjustments and new features that we awarded it a rare 10/10 *Guitarist* Gold back in issue 479. As I have previously mentioned, I am working towards a solo gig this March and want to use the Da Capo there, and so I'm making sure I'm familiar with the amplifier from tip to toe beforehand.

The guitar I'll be using is a Custom Fylde Falstaff, built by Roger Bucknall, which is fitted with a Headway FEQ under-saddle pickup, but I had the idea to combine this with a DPA 4099 condenser clip-on mic. The Da Capo has two channels that take either a standard instrument jack plug or balanced XLR inputs. This means you can send the signal from an under-saddle pickup to one channel, a mic to the other, mix the two using the Da Capo's comprehensive array of EQ possibilities, and send all to the front of house using the line out output on the back of the amp.

This all sounds very straightforward and also in line with my 'keep it simple, stupid' approach to playing live. I've never been one for football pitch-sized pedalboards or a spaghetti tangle of wires and footswitches at



my feet and so this sounded like a good idea. And indeed it was.

The DPA mic is studio quality and, on arrival of the borrowed unit, did an excellent job of adding a little 'air' to the piezo sound from my Falstaff. And the setup was quite easy and comparatively fuss-free. At a retail price of £425, the DPA is anything but cheap and so part of my mulling-over process was to have a conversation with a studio engineer about using a mic on the guitar live, when previously I've been used to an under-saddle pickup through a thoroughly trusted Yamaha AG-Stomp preamp. The engineer advised

"I've never been one for football pitch-sized pedalboards or footswitches at my feet"

– with a furrowed brow, I might add – that using a mic on stage was "a whole new ballgame" and might introduce an unwelcome random element into the evening's proceedings. After all, I'd be working with a sound engineer I don't know and, in that game of roulette we all play when doing gigs, it was something that could blow up in my face. I'm still mulling, to be honest, but meanwhile I need an alternative plan...

As I've said, my usual modus operandi is to use my Yamaha preamp, which has an array of features onboard – reverb, delay, chorus, EQ, limiter, notch filter and so on –

but the Da Capo covers much of this. I rarely use a limiter or notch filter anyway, so the amp's built-in reverb – which is excellent – and comprehensive EQ should substitute adequately. The only thing it doesn't have is the AG-Stomp's microphone modeller, which is something I've relied on previously to take some of the quack away from my guitar's piezo. I have to say at this point that the Headway FEQ is one of the more natural-sounding pickups I've come across and doesn't need too much of the mic modeller to tame it, and so maybe I could just spend a little more time with the EQ on the Da Capo instead? After all, units such as the TC Electronic BodyRez do pretty much the same thing and seem to be a combo of EQ and gentle compression to bring about the same tonal effect. Alternatively, I could use that one feature from the AG-Stomp in conjunction with the amp. Or cave in and buy the DPA mic after all. So many choices.

The answer, of course, is experimentation. I can't replicate all the conditions I'll meet on the stage from the confines of my flat, of course, but I can certainly do enough to give me a good idea. Further probing on this scale proves that the piezo by itself can be harnessed – but not tamed – by the Da Capo's EQ and so something has to give.

My other pedal, a Boss OC-3 Super Octave (the secret weapon of many solo acoustic players, in order to add virtual range to the instrument) sounded fabulous through the Da Capo. So, which way to go? Yamaha preamp or DPA with the Da Capo as the centrepiece? The clock is ticking and so I need to settle on a plan soon. Hmm...



The DPA 4099 condenser clip-on mic during its test run

Reviewed 479 Price £949 (inc gig bag) On Test Since October 2021 Studio Sessions No Giggled No Mods No www.bandm.co.uk



DANNY BRYANT

UK top blueser spins the tale of a bargain Gibson BB King guitar and a Custom Shop Strat that just didn't make the cut



What was the first serious guitar that you bought with your own money?

"An American Standard Strat when I was 15, so it would be a 1995. I've actually still got that guitar. I don't really use it very much, but it's one I've managed to hold on to."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"An Epiphone Riviera, 10 minutes ago! I've wanted one for a while, but they've all been out of stock. I don't know if it's because of Brexit or something. One came in so I thought, 'I'll buy it.' A lot of people think that Otis Rush and Magic Sam were Strat players, but both their big early albums like Magic Sam's *West Side Soul*, that's a Riviera – but because of the mini-humbuckers they do sound quite Strat-like."

What's the most incredible bargain you've had when buying gear?

"The most incredible bargain? Well, I got a BB King Lucille. And it was just before they changed the look of it; they changed the headstock, probably about 12 years ago. They changed it to 'BB King' in big letters instead of 'Gibson'."

"Buy with your ears and the feel rather than the look.

I'd rather have a guitar
I hated the colour of, but
it felt and sounded good"

I got that for £1,399, new, in Coda Music in Stevenage and I looked the other day and they're going secondhand on eBay – that particular year – for about £4,500/£5,000 now. So I'd say that's probably the best deal I've had. I tend to keep it at home. I mean, it's a great guitar and it's good in the studio; they just don't react that well to flying and things like that. It's a beautiful instrument. It's like a violin. It's sort of sensitive. I tend to fly with Strats."

What's the worst case of buyer's remorse you've experienced after buying gear?

"I bought a Custom Shop '69 Strat. It felt good in the shop and it just didn't feel right once I got it home. There wasn't anything wrong with it, there was no reason to take it back, and I even changed the gauge of strings that I would normally use. I tried everything and it was just a Friday afternoon type of guitar, you know? So I sold it. I didn't keep it very long. I mean, it might have been somebody else's number one, you know, but it just didn't speak to me."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"Well, I don't really live by this myself – I should take my own advice – but I would go and try something and maybe have a walk around [afterwards] and think about

DANNY'S GO-TO RIG

"I play a Custom Shop Strat. It's like a limited release: 1961, Fiesta Red. I've had it for almost 20 years. Then a couple of years ago, I found a late '59 reissue that felt exactly the same so I bought that as a backup – and I use a Firebird for slide. They tend to be the guitars I use the most. Then I take two Blackstar H-40s. I was approached by Blackstar for an endorsement and they sent me a [100-watt] amp, but then I had a fly-in [gig] and I asked them to provide an amp and they provided a 40-watt combo. I just found that the lower power was sort of sweeter in the midrange. So I use two of those – one's a backup, literally just behind the other one. That's pretty much what I take on the road."

it. Go somewhere where they have a few examples of the particular model you're after, so you can compare them because they are all slightly different. Try not to be too hasty. Buy with your ears and the feel rather than the look. I would rather have a guitar that I hated the colour of, but it felt and sounded good than the same model that was the perfect colour, but..."

When did you last stop and stare at a guitar shop window and what were you looking at?

"I haven't been in a guitar shop since Covid, so it would have been a while ago. I usually go to Coda; I'm not too far from Stevenage where they're based. I don't go too often because I normally go if I'm going to buy. If I go [otherwise] then I end up spending money that I haven't got. But I do enjoy looking around."

If you were forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"I would always go for a better guitar. I don't use any pedals. I always go directly into an amp and I like an amp to have reverb and I like it to have a gain stage, you know? I feel through the instrument more than I feel the amp."

I know you kind of do feel the amp when you play, but, for me, the long-winded answer to that would be the guitar."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would you choose and why?

"I'd have to say single coils because most of my life is touring. In the studio I do much prefer humbuckers, but I'll go with single coils."

What kind of strings do you like to use on your guitars?

"I use D'Addarios, 0.010 through 0.046. I used 11s for a long time, but then we got to the point where we were doing 25 days in a row and I started taking a guitar that was strung with 10s and I would use it for two songs a night to give my fingers a break – and I didn't notice a huge difference in the tone. So in the end I just transitioned and went to 10s." [DM]



Danny Bryant's latest release, *The Rage To Survive*, is available now via Jazzhaus Records. His UK tour begins in March www.dannybryant.com

While Danny is a faithful Strat-man on tour, he is partial to a humbucker-loaded guitar in the studio

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

Should you mod an existing guitar or start from scratch and build your own partscaster? Dave Burrluck weighs up the evidence



Our editor's vintage Tele needed some costly upgrades



Wilkinson's excellent kits include this early 60s Strat style model. Everything you need is included

This modding lark isn't cheap," observed our editor-in-chief, Jamie Dickson, whose Fender American Vintage Tele [pic 1] has now been pimped to perfection after a series of mods, from its pinstriping, replacement Lollar pickups and new control harness, to its new saddles and, finally, a stainless steel refret. As an exercise in gradual modding it's typical of what many of us undertake: a little at a time. But tot that lot up – not only the parts but labour, too, if you can't do the work yourself – and you'll have a pretty sum that could have been invested in a superior guitar in the first place. And there will be some wise ol' owls out there reminding Jamie, 'Good luck if you need to sell it!'

A couple of conversations recently with both readers and mates, however, reminded me that most of us really don't have a plan when it comes to our modding adventures, and if we do we rarely stick to it. A simple pickup swap turns into a major overhaul or rebuild with new pots, hardware upgrades and even a refinish on a new body (and/or neck). So, should you pump up whatever you've got knowing it'll always be exactly that? Or maybe you should start from scratch and give yourself the chance you choose what you want from the get-go?

As ever, there's no right way, but there are plenty of things to consider. And fundamental to any mod, or new build, is its basic parts: the body and neck, what we often refer to as the 'chassis'. If you opt for a used or new instrument as the basis for your mods, you'll already know if it's

something you can work with. I suspect, certainly from personal experience, that this is the route most of us take.

In contrast, buying a new-to-you neck and body, however carefully (or not) you choose, you're a little in the dark. Will you like the feel of that neck when the strings are on? How about the weight or condition of the woods? Will the truss rod work? Will the frets be level? And then there's the finish to consider. Of course, that can be all part of the fun – a journey into the unknown. Some of us like having our guitars with the same fretboard radius and fret size, the same neck profile and so on, while others prefer to mix things up, so you might have your 'vintage' bolt-on and your 'hot-rod' bolt-on. Different tools for different jobs. Again, personal choice. I still get excited (or slightly apprehensive, if I'm honest) when I string up a new guitar for the first time. It really can go either way with the result being an exceptional instrument that you may play for years to come or a costly mistake – a guitar-shaped-object that just doesn't engage you. More likely you'll end up with something between those two extremes, hopefully leaning towards the former. Hopefully.

Halfway House

Suppose you want the experience of putting together your own bolt-on but don't have the knowledge or time to pick out a neck and body, perhaps from different sources, and you're unsure whether the hardware will fit. Going the kit-build route is likely

GET SUPPLIED!

Here are some homegrown sources for your potential partscaster builds

Crimson Guitars offers a large range, including UK-made neck and body kits, and no-spray finishing materials and tools.

www.crimsonguitars.com

Guitarbuild holds a big range of UK-made bodies and necks as well as scratchplates; custom orders undertaken.

www.guitarbuild.co.uk

Northwest Guitars is a one-stop shop for all you'll need, from necks and bodies to nitro-finishing materials and tools.

www.northwestguitars.co.uk

SC Relics provides a superb service of nitro-finished bodies, necks and full builds, plus ultra-authentic Golden Era Ageing.

www.screlics.co.uk

WD Music UK and Allparts are one-stop suppliers for everything you'll need for your partscaster build. Fast and excellent service, too.

www.wdmusic.co.uk/www.allparts.uk.com

Wilkinson HMI Guitar Kits come in a range of styles and include everything you need to create a very credible build.

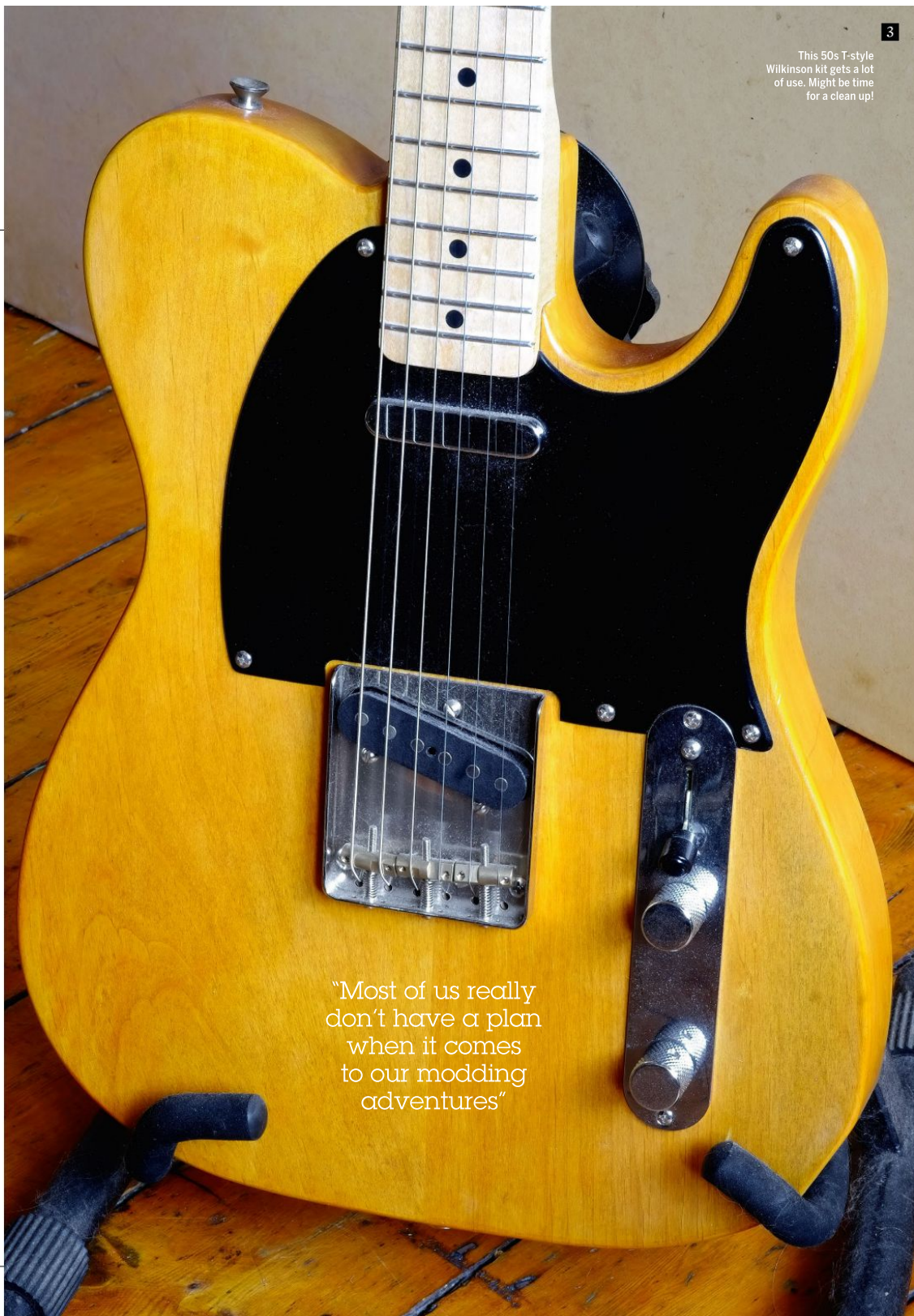
www.scan.co.uk

Wudtone Guitar Innovation specialises in proprietary designed hardware and offers some well-regarded finishing kits, too.

www.wudtone.com

This 50s T-style Wilkinson kit gets a lot of use. Might be time for a clean up!

"Most of us really don't have a plan when it comes to our modding adventures"



your best choice. Everything is supplied: you can bolt it together, screw on the hardware and solder up the pickups [pic 2]. All the experience without the hassle and, importantly, (aside from finishing) you'll know what your outlay is from the start.

This is exactly what we did with one of Trev Wilkinson's guitar kits, a T-style, back in issues 460 and 461 [pic 3]. Over time, I've upgraded it with Bare Knuckle pickups and a Broadcaster wiring loom – and that T-style probably gets more day-to-day play than any other guitar I own. It's always on its stand ready to be picked up for a quick noodle, a more serious practice session or a bit of recording. It's only a year or so old, but it's already looking well used and certainly feels and sounds a lot older than it is.

The downside of a kit such as this is that some of the parts weren't used or were at least replaced. Also, because it comes with a paddle headstock, you have to cut and finish your own outline, which is something not everyone is able – or even wants – to undertake. To be honest, there's not a huge choice of quality kits out there. The Wilkinson route costs under £400, and from personal experience if you have some skills and experience in this lark then you're going to get a pretty good result. There are a lot of cheap bolt-on kits out there in the £80

to £120 bracket (such as the Boston TE-10 guitar kit, which cost around £118 back in 2018 when we built it). And let's just say that they can be of varying quality. Yes, they can provide you with the experience of a self-build, but the quality of everything is obviously pretty low.

Buying a neck and body means you have more choice and control over your component parts – finished or unfinished. There's the choice of body wood type and weight [pic 4]. A three-piece alder body will typically be less costly than a one-piece lightweight body made from swamp ash. You might want a maple top or a more unusual or even exotic wood, and while the supplier will often list pictures of the actual body you're buying, that's no indication of sound, not least if you veer from the classic alder or light ash. Necks are typically maple with a choice of maple or rosewood (or similar) fingerboards [pic 5]. You'll need to check you can get the width and profile you prefer, the fingerboard radius and, of course, the fret size. Typically, the lower the cost the less choice you have.

Warmoth in the USA has long been the go-to for ultimate choice and quality, but it's no cheap option. There are plenty of homegrown options if you search around, and we've compiled a selection in 'Get Supplied!' on page 122. I'd recommend buying from the same source if you can to ensure the neck fits the body.

Finishing remains a major hurdle for many of us. Get a third party involved and costs can rise dramatically, especially if the old finish has to be stripped off. There are plenty of easier finishes, from old-school oil and wax, even basic French polishing can be done quickly, while outlets such as Crimson and Wudtone, to name but two, offer finishing kits that are ideal for DIY builds. Nitrocellulose in spray cans is pretty available, too; you'll need outside space and somewhere to hang the parts to dry.

How Good Are You?

Perhaps the most significant consideration is your own skill. If you're au fait with maintaining and modding a bolt-on and are happy to give DIY finishing a go, there's really nothing stopping you from starting a build with just that neck and body. If your skillset is less, it's probably best to start with one of those cheap kit builds: you're not going to create a custom shop quality bolt-on, but you'll learn a considerable amount in the process. Many guitar makers will be happy to assemble your partscaster for you, too, so that's another route to consider.

Over the next few issues we'll be putting together our own partscaster from as yet mostly undetermined parts. A fun project or a disaster waiting to happen? We'll see. **■**

FINDING YOUR FIT

There are plenty of sources of bodies and necks from all around the world, but we checked in with a UK supplier, Lincolnshire-based Guitarbuild

“I was very lucky to meet world-renowned luthier Bharat Khandekar, the most selfless person I have ever met,” recounts Phil Marshall, who founded Guitarbuild back in 1999. “We were able to see all his vintage original bodies and necks, and take measurements. His detailed knowledge and subsequent checking of the bodies and necks ensured they are perfect replicas and the best quality available on the market today.”

It's an attractive backstory that (some £110 and a few days later) is backed up by receiving a very nice and cleanly machined HSH alder body weighing 1.8kg (almost 4lb). Guitarbuild's bodies and necks are all machined here in the UK using woods sourced from the USA, India and Indonesia. “We buy all our wood kiln-dried,” Phil tells us, “and we check it in our factory. Further drying is done if required.”

What about buying trends? “Good-quality swamp ash is becoming harder and harder to buy, so that is a popular choice when we have stock.”

And does Phil have any advice for those setting out on their first partscaster builds? “A good place to start is the FAQ page on our website, and YouTube is a great source of information, too. If you're a first-time builder, check all your parts and hardware fit before applying your finish – nobody wants any surprises once the finish is on.” www.guitarbuild.co.uk



Three potential bodies for our partscaster build (4). The HSH Guitarbuild body is flanked by two Fender Roadworn bodies in various states of repair. Unless the supplier is licensed by Fender, you'll have to cut your own outline from the 'paddle' headstock (5)



All bodies from Guitarbuild.co.uk are clearly stamped as such in the neck cavity



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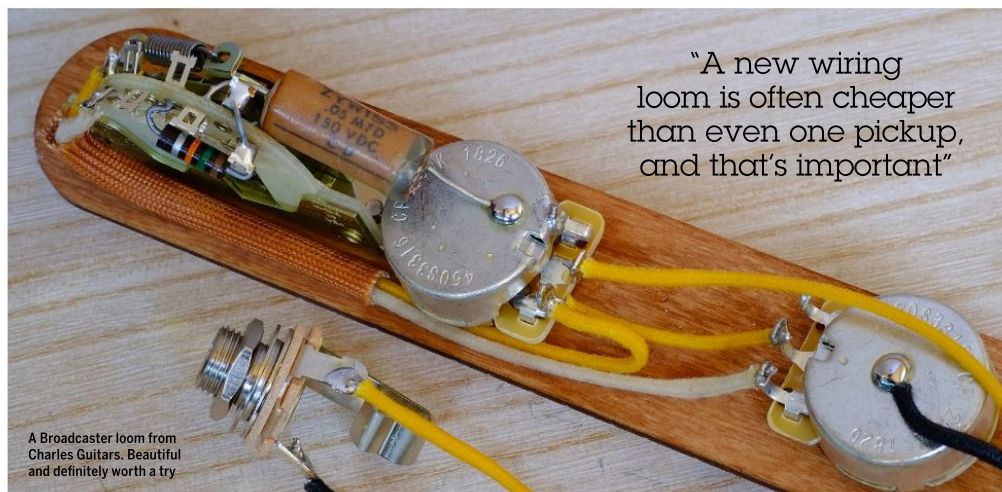
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TWISTED TELECASTER

A reader suggests a serious upgrade to his 50s-style Tele and is looking for an easy wiring mod. Dave Burrluck steps up



"A new wiring loom is often cheaper than even one pickup, and that's important"

Q I have a question and an observation about a relatively simple mod. I have an '85 Japanese 50s-style Telecaster for which several years ago I bought a pre-loaded replacement control plate (with the four-way lever switch wiring) using Oak Grigsby and Bourns parts plus a paper-in-oil capacitor. I can't remember how much it cost, but it was certainly far cheaper than a replacement pickup. I was staggered at the improvement in tone the upgraded electrics gave me, something your readers may wish to explore first before jumping in with pickup replacements.

As to my question: I've now decided to fit more authentic pickups on the 50s-style Tele and I'm left with a spare option on the four-way selector switch. I don't want to separate the earths on the neck pickup again, so do you have any suggestions for an easy wiring upgrade?

Nathan, via email

A Hi Nathan, we're totally with you in The Mod Squad when it comes to that wiring upgrade; it's something that really shouldn't be overlooked. We focused on that in our Gear Of The Year Mod Squad round-up back in

issue 480 and went a little deeper in last month's column (issue 481).

You could view anything between your pickups and your output jack as a lo-tech equivalent of a studio mic preamp in a recording chain. You can put the best studio microphone through a crusty preamp chain and it won't sound anywhere near to its full potential. Conversely, a lesser mic can be maximised by a quality preamp chain. So, if your pickups are the 'microphones', your pots and their value and taper, your tone caps and even treble bleed circuit, not to mention the way in which they're wired, become your own passive 'mic preamp' before your signal hits your pedalboard or amp. Unless you wire your pickups directly to the output jack, you never hear them without the effect of your simple volume and tone circuit (which can be good or bad). As you point out, a new wiring loom is often cheaper than even one pickup, and for us cash-strapped modders that's important.

Remember, your Telecaster effectively has a modular 'mic preamp' all mounted to that control plate. To swap over to a different one is dead simple – just unsolder the pickups and output jack, remove the plate and put in a new one.

Yes, the actual control plate will add to the expense, although it's easy enough to unscrew the two pots and the lever switch, but it means you can go from a standard Tele circuit to a Broadcaster setup, for example, in a matter of minutes.

As you've found for more adventurous wiring, such as the series link of the Tele's two pickups (or out of phase), you need to separate the joint ground wire from one output of the neck pickup and its metal cover. To be honest, I can't think of a useful mod to occupy that forth position on your switch *without* separating those ground wires. The simplest mod would be to swap the four-way switch for a standard three-way and enjoy the classic sounds and drive of your 50s-aimed Tele. From what we've discussed, I might be tempted to treat myself to a pre-wired Tele loom from the likes of Charles Guitars (pictured above) and keep the four-way loom intact for a rainy day.

As we explained in last issue's instalment of The Mod Squad, there's plenty to experiment with in terms of the pot's taper and value, and then there's your choice and value of tone cap, too, which can all help to 'tune' the circuit to the sounds you want to hear. Simple fixes that really won't cost very much at all. **✎**

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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Superior Sounds

What's so interesting about speakers? Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough takes a closer look at the 'bogeymen of the signal chain'

In the last article we briefly looked at mixing different speakers, what to look out for and a few of my favourite mixes. While I'm hoping to look at certain points more closely in future, it dawned on me that first I should probably answer the question I know a lot of you will be asking... What's so interesting about speakers anyway?

First off, I often lazily refer to guitar drivers as speakers. A driver is a transducer, which is an electrical device that converts one form of energy to another – in this case an electrical signal from your amp to a physical vibration or movement of the driver's cone. Put more simply, it's the thing that allows you to hear what your amp is doing. For guitar, drivers are mostly 12-inch sizes (around 310mm), but you will find 10- and 15-inch models as well as other sizes occasionally. The term 'speaker' tends to represent the cabinet and drivers as a whole, but, over the years, there has been a blending of the two words and their meanings. You will often hear 'speaker cab', but it is common to refer to drivers as

speakers. I have to admit, I do this myself and as most readers probably refer to drivers as speakers, too, I will talk about speaker cabinets and speakers.

Back in the 1950s and early 60s when solidbody electric guitars and amplification were a new thing, speakers were a limiting factor, but these constraints soon started to determine the direction of how the guitar would sound. As the power handling of most 12-inch speakers was still around the 15- to 20-watt mark, manufacturers started turning to head and cabinet design rather than the traditional open-back combo (we talked about the relationship between the power of your amp and maximum power handling of the speaker last issue).

You can see that if amps were to progress past 30 to 40 watts – a requirement because in-house PAs were not yet ready to tame ever-increasing stage volumes – the cabinet would need more speakers for a short while, eight in the case of Marshall's early 8x12 cabinets but settling down to four for practical reasons. Leo Fender started down

the head and cab route around 1959/60 when designing the Showman amps, partly to solve the problem of Dick Dale pushing his amps so hard they would catch fire. It is for this reason that Fender started using 15-inch speakers and some closed-back cabinets, resulting in a tighter, more focused sound.

And so to return to our original question: what's so interesting about speakers? Crudely put, they are the thing between the electrical signal and your ear. The speaker is the link in the chain that converts the signal created in your guitar's pickups – which travels through your leads, through the stompboxes, into the amp – and creates the changes in air pressure received by your ears.

As guitarists, we choose our guitar and amp carefully, but when it comes to the

"The limitations of speakers helped steer amp makers in the early days"

speaker cab, and therefore speaker(s), we often use the standard cab that comes with the amp, or the speaker cab we used with our previous amp, rather than choosing a speaker and cab to suit the new rig. Often the amp manufacturer will choose a speaker that represents how it wants the amp to sound. But as guitarists and individuals, we know what sounds good to us and what we're looking for – and the speaker can at least be the cherry on the cake, and often make for a better cake itself.

When the guitar and amp feel right but there is something missing, we often opt for a different pedal or maybe a pickup change, but I hope we can add speakers into the mix. They're the pieces of equipment that are often overlooked and, dare I say, 'the bogeymen of the signal chain'. We can forget how, due to their limitations, speakers helped steer amp makers in the early days, so why not use them to expand our tonal palettes today now that many of those limitations are a thing of the past? 

www.zillacabs.com



The Showman amps were some of Fender's first head-and-cab formats

"We know what sounds good to us – and the speaker can be the cherry on the cake"

Amp makers such as Marshall used 8x12 cabinets, pictured here behind Pete Townshend in 1966, in order to up the speaker count for increasing stage volumes



ClassicGear

Introduced during the war, these small flat-tops were a mix and match of greatness

Gibson LG Series

From the early 1940s, guitar-building materials were in increasingly short supply due to America's war effort. Furthermore, following President Roosevelt's formation of the War Production Board, Gibson was forced to turn its attention to the manufacture of military hardware. These monumental changes may have signalled the end of the Kalamazoo firm had it not been for the immense efforts of the female staff who, against the odds, not only helped keep guitar production going but also happened to create some of the finest flat-tops to ever leave the factory. Crafted between 1942 and 1946, these revered wartime instruments are often referred to as 'Banner' guitars on account of a headstock decal that reads 'Only a Gibson is good enough'.

Appearing in 1942, the 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide LG series fleshed out a limited range of wartime flat-tops, which also included the L-00, J-45 and Southerner Jumbo. Many will already be familiar with the LG series model names (LG-0, LG-1, LG-2, LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ and LG-3), although their appearances, disappearances, reappearances and redesignations has caused much confusion. Muddying the waters even further is the fact that specifications chopped and changed from one guitar to the next in the early days due to material shortages.

The sunburst LG-2 and its natural-finish equivalent, the LG-3, were both introduced in 1942. As was the sunburst J-45 along with its natural-finish counterpart, the

J-50. However, because of the difficulty in obtaining "good enough" quality tonewood for the plain tops, both the LG-3 and J-50 were temporarily discontinued until after the war (a total of 130 and 144 of each were shipped between '42 to '43 respectively). As the sunburst models were able to disguise imperfections in tonewood more easily, Gibson soon began using the finish exclusively.

The first LG-1 was shipped in 1943, as was the first Southerner Jumbo. The original incarnation of the LG-1 features X-bracing as per the LG-2 and LG-3. However, unlike its spruce-topped siblings, the Banner LG-1 features a mahogany soundboard; a stain finish further sets it apart. A mere 139 of these rare LG-1s left the factory – 138

The LG-0 was released for "students, strolling players, and anyone who wants to have fun with the guitar"

in '43 and the final one in '44. When the LG-1 reappeared after the war it did so with a sunburst spruce top. Thus it appears similar to the LG-2, although its budget-end lateral/ladder bracing provides a more midrange-focused sound.

In 1958, the LG-0 was released as a budget guitar for "students, teachers, strolling players, and anyone who wants to have fun with the guitar". Like the post-war LG-1, the LG-0 is ladder-braced. It featured an all-mahogany construction until '68 when a spruce top was fitted as standard (at the same time, the LG-1 was discontinued). While the LG-0 model was aimed at the lower end of the market, it is considered by many players to be a very respectable guitar indeed.

Similarly, the ladder-braced LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ appeared in 1949 marketed as "ideal for children or players with small hands". Regardless, this unique Gibson has found favour with many a pro player. Guitarist Martin Barre of Jethro Tull fame and singer-songwriter Arlo Guthrie – son of the great Woody Guthrie – both used LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ Gibsons, while Fender and Rickenbacker author Martin Kelly is never too far away from his favourite "kitchen guitar". [RB]

The Evolution of the Gibson LG Series

August 1942

First LG-2 shipped; first LG-3 shipped; mahogany backs/sides; spruce tops

April 1943

First LG-1 shipped; all-mahogany

1943

LG-3 and LG-1 production suspended; some LG-2s with maple backs/mahogany tops

1944

Switch from Adirondack to Sitka spruce tops

1946

Headstock banner discontinued; LG-1 and LG-3 production recommences

1949

LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ released

1958

LG-0 released; all-mahogany; discontinued 1973

1962

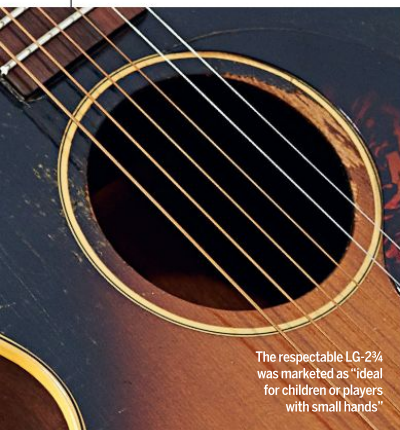
LG-2, LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ and LG-3 superseded by B-25, B-25 $\frac{3}{4}$ and B-25N respectively

1968

B-25 $\frac{3}{4}$ and LG-1 discontinued; LG-0 now with spruce top

1977

Last B-25 and B-25N models shipped



The respectable LG-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ was marketed as "ideal for children or players with small hands"



Martin Barre's 1950s Gibson LG-2 1/4

1. SERIAL NUMBER

Factory order number (FON) ink stamped inside; number prefixed by letter (denoting year)

2. HEADSTOCK

Gold silk-screened Gibson logo; black nitrocellulose face

3. HARDWARE

Kluson tuners with white keystone buttons (replacements); rectangular Brazilian rosewood bridge with fixed saddle

4. NECK

Glued-in; single-piece mahogany; shorter 22 3/4-inch scale length; unbound 19-fret Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with mother-of-pearl dot markers

5. BODY

12 11/16 inches wide; ladder-braced Sitka spruce top with sunburst finish and three-ply (w/b/w) binding; w/b/w soundhole rings; single-bound mahogany back; mahogany sides

6. PLASTICS

White bridge pins; tortoiseshell celluloid pickguard; black 'bell' truss-rod cover



David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

When is a Telecaster not a Telecaster? When it's a dual-pickup Esquire...

1952 Fender Dual Pickup Esquire



This pristine example of a two-pickup 1952 Fender Esquire is "pretty remarkable", says David Davidson

This is a 1952 Fender Esquire that is factory-fitted with two pickups. Interestingly enough, 'Esquire' is not indicated on the back of the neck heel or on the body; usually, it would say 'esq' in either of those places. I've seen eight or so double-pickup Esquires from this era and this is the only one I've ever seen that isn't marked as one. It doesn't say it on the neck or the body, so my feeling on this particular guitar is that there are two possibilities: one, somebody bought an Esquire and ordered the \$15 [neck] pickup option; or, two, the guitar went through [production] and was somehow decaled incorrectly.

"It could have gone either way, but I tend to believe that this guitar was decaled incorrectly. Only because I strongly feel it would have been marked as an Esquire on the body and on the neck heel – not where the date is written [on the end] but on the back part of the neck where it mates with the body in the pocket.

"This guitar is pristine. I mean, it's in the top two per cent of any I've ever seen. I think it was played a little bit but not that much. Otherwise, it was kept away in the case. The hardware is in great condition – it's so shiny, undisturbed, unpitted and unlined you would think they made it yesterday. There's a teeny bit of wear on the pickguard about the size of a half-dollar coin, and I think that's just from normal pick work. To me, it looks like a 'three-lesson guitar'.

"There's a little bit of a flame on the neck, and the back of the body is mint. It's really very beautiful, as is the original thermometer case. It's a fantastic instrument. It has a one-piece ash body,

which is pretty cool, and it plays very well, too. I mean the frets have zero wear on them. It is truly an under-the-bed kind of instrument. And it's an anomaly. You know, I like those types of guitars – I like guitars you can't see anywhere else.

"Most people would think this guitar looks strange, but we obviously black-lit the decal and did all of our normal in-depth analysis to verify its originality. And it's pristine. There's absolutely no reason to think anything's been changed whatsoever. Of course, we really went through the guitar very carefully, and I'm pleased to say that

"It's so shiny, unpitted and unlined you would think they made it yesterday"

what we have here is an amazing example of an original two-pickup Blackguard Esquire. It's pretty remarkable.

"Before the Broadcaster came out [in 1950] there was the Esquire [released earlier in 1950] and that could be ordered with either one or two pickups. The two-pickup model was referred to as a Dual Esquire. People continued to order an additional pickup for their Esquire guitars, even after the Broadcaster became available. I think the charge was \$15 including installation. The factory would basically convert the single-pickup Esquire into a Dual Esquire. But the work was done at Fender before the guitar was delivered new, so it's not like customers sent the guitars back afterwards to be changed. Once the Broadcaster came

along, that kind of goes away, except for some rare examples where people had already ordered a second pickup on their Esquire. Usually, people would place an order through their local music store.

"The solder is original to the guitar, no pickup was added and, again, it's not marked 'esq'. That's important to note because, to my mind, that's pretty much defining that this guitar should have been a Telecaster. Everything was factory-fitted at Fender, including the regular two-pickup 'guard; it hasn't been cut to fit a second pickup later on. You sometimes see that, but you can always tell when an Esquire pickguard has been cut into a Telecaster-style pickguard. This is just a standard black Tele 'guard, and the wiring is just the same as a Telecaster of the era where it's no longer a blend knob – it has a regular tone knob. Even when you work the controls it feels brand-new as they're not dirty or crusty. It was kept in perfect-climate conditions.

"It plays well, which is an interesting thing when guitars aren't used very much. I've seen plenty of clean guitars that don't play well, but a guitar that's very dirty almost always plays well. You have a 50:50 shot on a clean guitar – and this one also happens to play good! It's a pretty neat piece. It always amazes me when I see guitars like this. You don't see things like this every day. And that's exactly the sort of thing we love to do at Well Strung Guitars." **[RB]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563



PHOTOS BY PAGE DAVIDSON

Blues Headlines

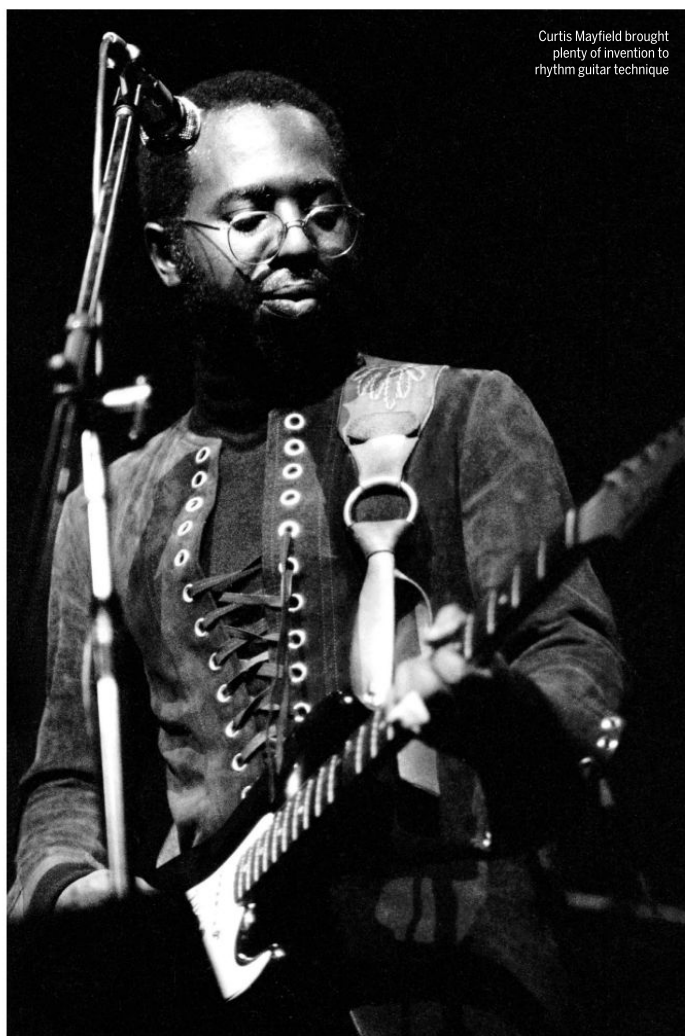
Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Got Rhythm?

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank, Vox AC15 C1

Difficulty ★★★ | 10 mins per example



Curtis Mayfield brought plenty of invention to rhythm guitar technique

BEFORE WE GO ANY FURTHER, I want to define what I am calling 'rhythm' guitar. Many of the great blues artists such as BB King, Albert Collins and Albert King were soloists who didn't really 'do' chords, but I wanted to have a play here with the guitar as a 'featured instrument' – not necessarily playing a solo or melody but not relegated to strumming inaudible block chords, either. That said, the bass and drum backing provides very little harmonic detail, so it is also necessary that the guitar steps in here, while providing a bit of rhythmic and melodic variety. This sounds like a very tall order indeed, but if we talk through our options, hopefully you will see it is completely possible to develop a flexible approach that also allows for some spontaneity.

Another bonus is that the skills we sharpen here can be applied to any style or genre with a bit of imagination and a change of tone or pickup setting. I've gone with a soul/R&B/Motown vibe and played five short alternative takes over the same backing track. These progress from almost entirely chords to quite a sparse single-note melody, with a mixture of approaches and chord voicings between those two extremes. I was imagining a producer asking me for different options (a fairly common scenario), including coming up with little 'hooks' in the form of embellishments or single-note lines. If you're playing on an existing song, the vocal melody (or even the lyrics) can be a great source of inspiration for parts like these.

As you place your fingers on some of these chord inversions, you may also recognise fragments of pentatonic scale. This is all to the good – try to 'file' those realisations for future use. Hope you enjoy these examples and see you next time! 



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from www.richardbarrettguitar.com

Example 1

THIS FIRST EXAMPLE sets up the rhythmic and harmonic patterns that the other examples follow – albeit taking a few more ‘liberties’ as we go. The rhythmic feel is based mostly around a mixture of staccato and looser downstrokes. However, you’ll see on the video that there are upstrokes in there, too, even if they don’t always connect with the strings. This helps keep any offset rhythms on track without feeling like you have to count each semiquaver to calculate whether an upstroke or downstroke would be best.

Example 1 musical notation, measures 1-3. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The first system shows measures 1 and 2, and the second system shows measure 3. The guitar part is written on a six-string staff with fret numbers indicated below the notes. Chord symbols Bb and C/Bb are shown above the staff. The bass part is written on a four-string staff with fret numbers indicated below the notes. Chord symbols Ebm6 and Bb are shown above the staff.

Example 2

EXPANDING ON WHAT I HINTED AT in the final bar of Example 1, this still outlines the harmony pretty clearly, but it allows a few doublestops to spice things up. Note the different inversions, which fall within the CAGED and pentatonic shapes. If you’re working with a vocalist or soloist, be sure to choose your moments for these, for two reasons: you don’t want to intrude on their territory, and you want your embellishments to be heard.

Example 2 musical notation, measures 1-3. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The first system shows measures 1 and 2, and the second system shows measure 3. The guitar part is written on a six-string staff with fret numbers indicated below the notes. Chord symbols Bb and C/Bb are shown above the staff. The bass part is written on a four-string staff with fret numbers indicated below the notes. Chord symbols Ebm and Bb are shown above the staff. A 'Let ring' instruction is present in measure 2.

Example 3

MOVING ON UP (pun intended) to a higher register, I've switched to three-note triads. This gives a little more focus to what would likely be quite a prominent part – and smaller chords are easier to move around! In this take, I've varied the rhythm a little, most noticeably in bar 2. Notice how I've gone with the *Little Wing* school of thought for the B_b/sus4 movement in the final bar. Not so many embellishments here, but the nature of this part is pretty upfront anyway.

[illegible]

Example 4

A CHANGE TO THE BRIDGE PICKUP here gives a different feel, which I thought suited this mixture of pentatonic melody and chord embellishment. After the initial melody, I've stayed within and arpeggiated some three-note versions of the chords. Bars 3 and 4 feature a little hammer-on as a nod to the way Jimi Hendrix or Curtis Mayfield would embellish their rhythm parts, before the final bar returns to the pentatonic approach we started out with, only now we're up around the 12th fret.

Musical score for guitar, showing two systems of music. The first system is in B major, 4/4 time, with a tempo of 100. It features a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The second system is in E minor, 4/4 time, with a tempo of 100. It also features a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings.

Example 5

MORE OF A MELODY than a solo or rhythm part, this example uses some 6ths (in the way that Steve Cropper might) to outline the harmony, while allowing the flexibility to switch to a single-note approach without feeling the chords have abruptly dropped out. A line such as this would benefit from a chord accompaniment from a 'production' point of view, but note that it does actually spell out the harmony far more than a 'standard' pentatonic solo might.

The musical notation for Example 5 consists of two systems. The first system is in Bb major, 4/4 time, and features a 'Let ring' instruction. The second system is in E minor, 6/8 time, and includes 'BU' and 'BD' instructions. Both systems show fret numbers and bends on the guitar strings.

Hear It Here

ROBERT WHITE

MOTOWN ANTHEMS



Robert was an integral part of the Funk Brothers, along with guitarists Eddie Willis and Joe Messina. Their 'one-for-all' teamwork resulted in interlocking, complementary parts on many classics, but I've singled out Robert for his pentatonic intro on The Temptations' *My Girl*, the Morse-code-style octaves on The Supremes' *You Keep Me Hangin' On*, and the strummed chords that deliver the foundation for Stevie Wonder's *My Cherie Amour*.

CURTIS MAYFIELD

ROOTS



You'll need to listen closely for Curtis's inventive rhythm guitar in the mix among the orchestrations, but this is well worth the effort. Check out the way he weaves in and out of the rhythm on the anthem *Get Down*. Other highlights include his embellished arpeggios on *Keep On Keeping On*, and *Now You're Gone* is a great example of Funk Brothers-style complementary parts with staccato chord chops, wah textures and bluesy fills.

TONY JOE WHITE

TONY JOE WHITE



Funk and blues collide here with a neat side order of tasteful wah and Motown-style arrangements. Check out *They Caught The Devil And Put Him In Jail In Eudora, Arkansas* (worth it for the title alone!). *My Kind Of Woman* brings some pentatonic riffs it would be easy to imagine Jimi Hendrix coming up with, and, finally, be sure to listen to *A Night In The Life Of A Swamp Fox*, with its mixture of chords, melodic figures and bluesy licks.

Guitarist

Nextmonth



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

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