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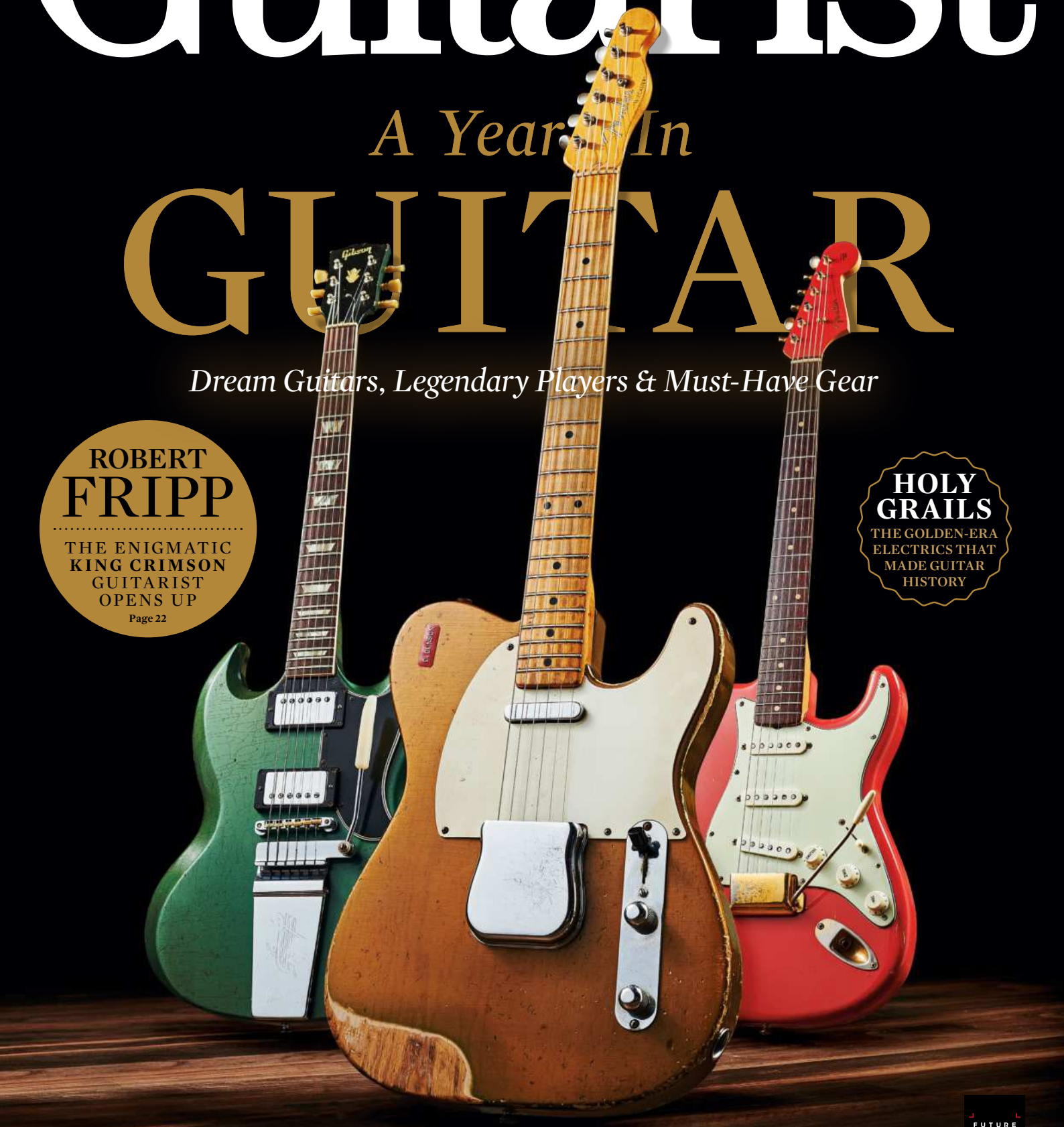

ROBERT FRIPP

THE ENIGMATIC **KING CRIMSON** GUITARIST OPENS UP

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HOLY GRAILS

THE GOLDEN-ERA ELECTRICS THAT MADE GUITAR HISTORY

FUTURE

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A Year In Guitar

Welcome to the all-new *Guitarist Annual*, containing the cream of a year's playing, reviewing, interviewing and writing about the very best happenings in guitar, from around the world. One major highlight of the past 12 months for us was journeying to Long Island to view the astonishing vintage instruments on display at Well Strung Guitars, which go beyond being merely nice stock in a very good vintage guitar store. In fact, many of the guitars there tell us important things about how historic guitars brands, such as Fender, designed and evolved the instruments we know and love today – from the earliest Custom Colors to one-off instruments made for important figures such as Bill Carson and Jimi Hendrix.

We were also honoured to welcome some incredible players in the pages of *Guitarist* over the past 12 months, such as Eric Gales – a man on career-apex form who released the album of his life with *Crown*. We joined him to talk about the hard road through life that yielded a diamond of a recording, plus all the techniques and gear that helped him express himself so powerfully. We were also privileged to be granted a rare interview on guitars with Robert Fripp, whose seminal work with King Crimson, David Bowie, Brian Eno and other luminaries redefined what was possible on the instrument. He invited us into his home to talk about the rigorous creative approaches that led him to new realms of music, plus the guitars that have accompanied him on that thrilling journey over the decades.

Elsewhere in this packed edition, we join over 40 top guitarists to learn what their favourite effects pedals of all time are and how they use them, and we celebrate some milestone anniversaries with Marshall and Squier and reveal the extraordinary histories of two companies that have done so much to popularise guitar. Enjoy the annual and see you again next time...

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

COVER IMAGE: OLLY CURTIS

Guitarist ANNUAL

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Guitarist Annual Vol 6

Part of the Guitarist bookazine series

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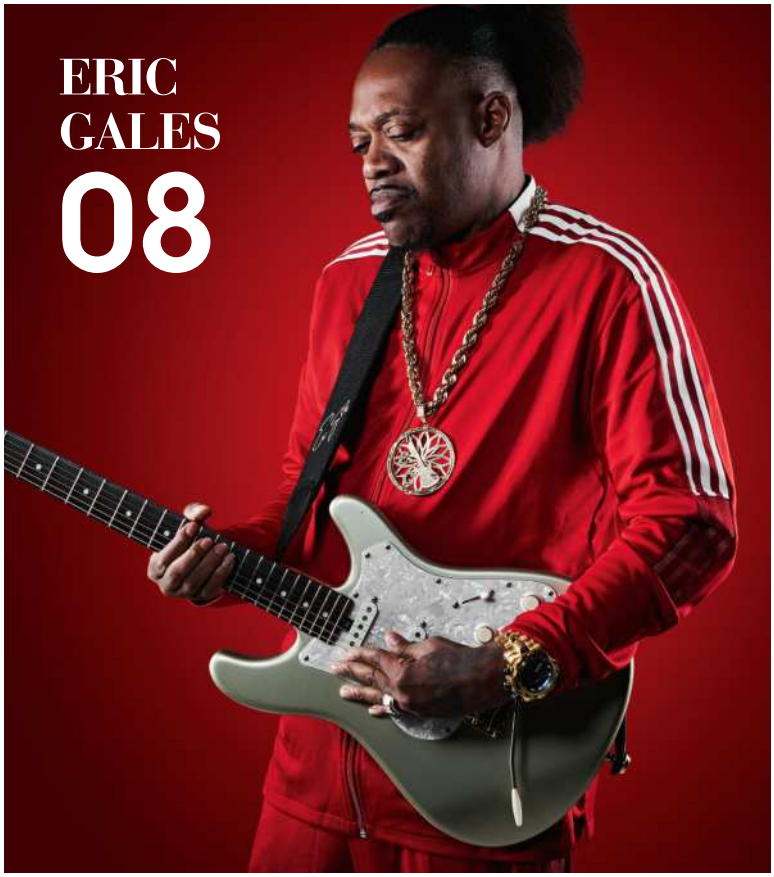

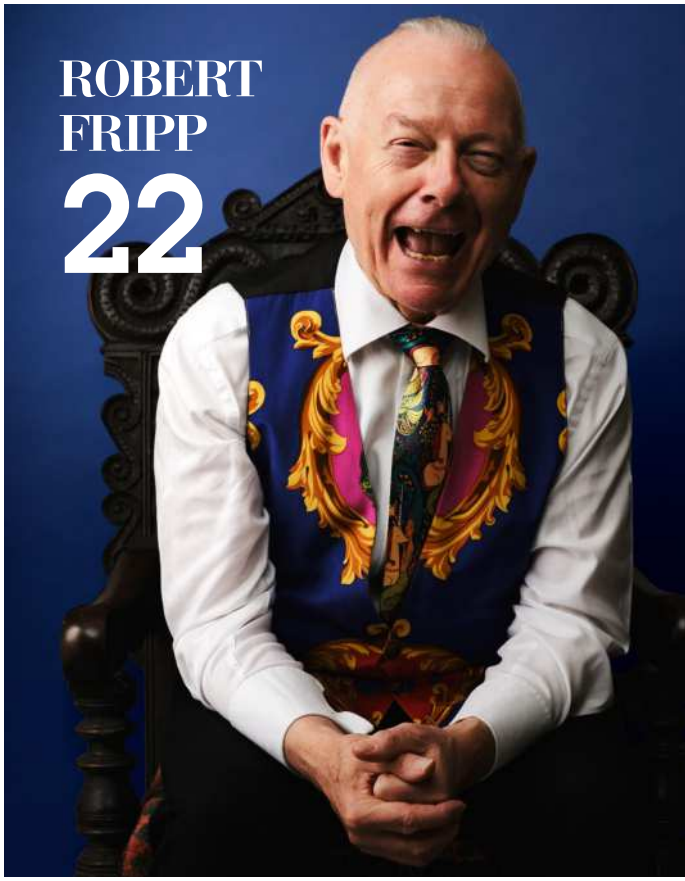

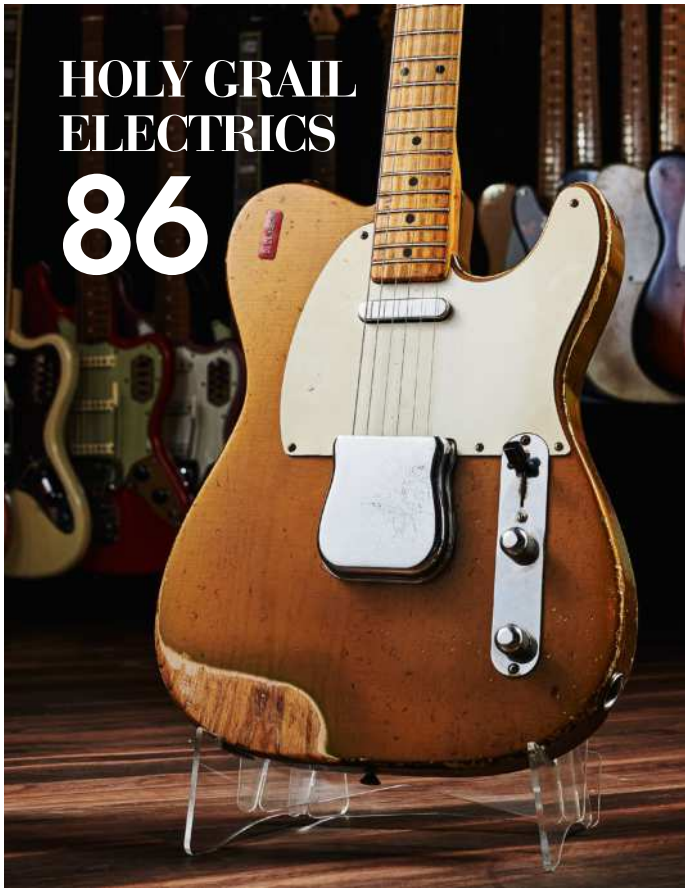

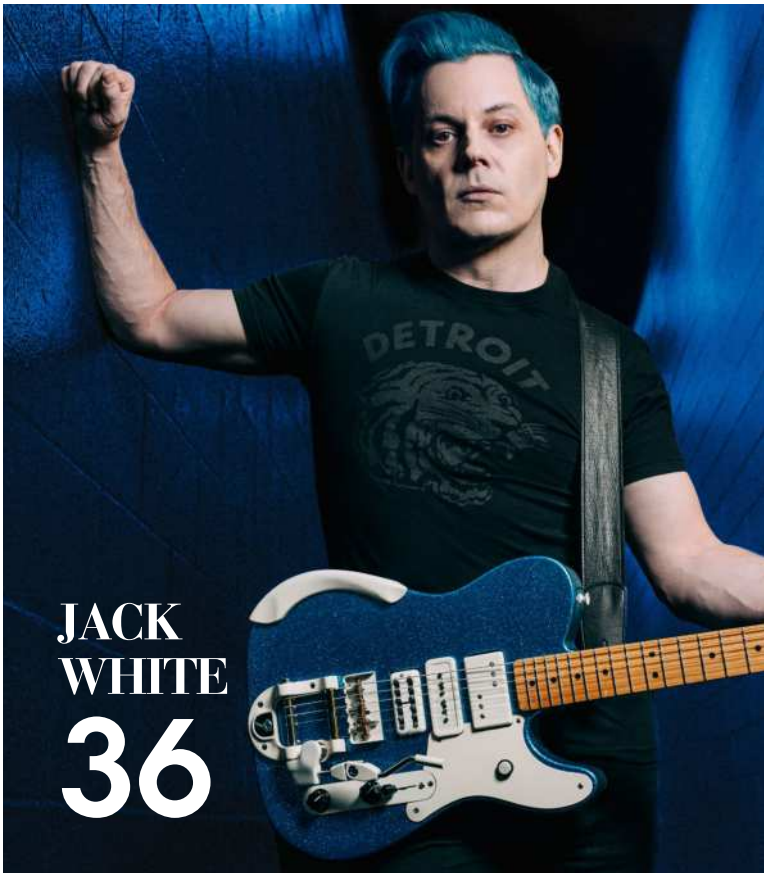

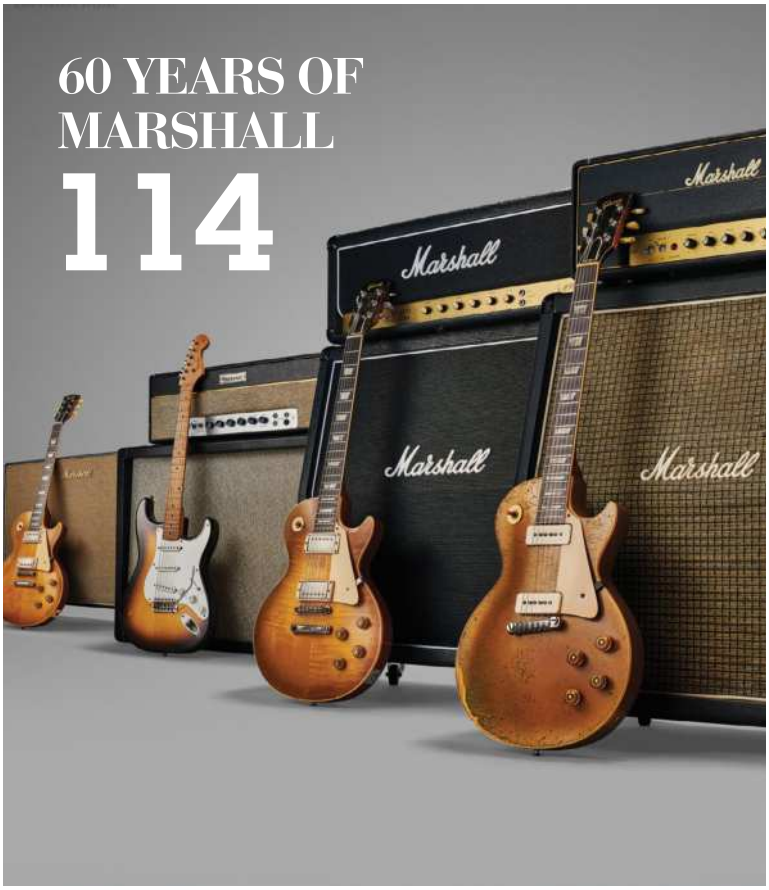

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GALES FORCE

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis

ERIC GALES' NEW ALBUM 'CROWN' IS THE WORK OF AN ARTIST AT HIS APEX. THE CHOPS ARE STAGGERING, BUT IT'S THE SONGWRITING – WHICH DELVES DEEP INTO HIS PAINFUL EXPERIENCES OF PREJUDICE, DEMONS OF SELF-DOUBT AND ADDICTION – THAT HITS YOU IN THE GUT. IS THERE ANYONE TO BETTER HIM RIGHT NOW? WE JOINED HIM TO FIND OUT...

Anyone who has witnessed Eric Gales live will agree that he fully deserves his newfound status as blues-rock royalty. But his guitar vocabulary extends way beyond just those domains as it incorporates elements of jazz, funk, soul and gospel within its compass, all channelled into what he describes as his "upside-down and backwards" playing style. Touring to promote his new album, *Crown*, he recently wowed audiences across the UK with the unstoppable force of his live performance, a canny blend of showmanship and unbelievable chops. "Everybody is actually blown away, man," he tells us as we settle down for a cuppa in the *Guitarist* studio. "And the response and the emotion that has been displayed by the audience receiving the material live has been awesome. Everybody's been really enjoying it."

Lyrically, the album explores areas that are at once both old and familiar and shockingly contemporary. "It's inspirational to watch actually, to see the tears come in people's eyes when I'm playing and singing these lyrics," he continues. "Predominantly, a lot of people come to the shows to see the guitar playing, but at the end of it they are moved by the things that I have to say. It's a one-two punch, doing everything that I can to try to help change the world."

To say that *Crown*'s release was eagerly awaited would be an understatement. As with many recent projects it was stalled by the onset of the pandemic. "We made wise use of our time and we even delayed the record coming out for a year because I didn't want it to be released and not being able to fully promote it and tour and everything," Eric remembers. "So we held off until this year. It's been anticipated for quite some time and I hope it was worth the wait."

Unleashed to the world at the beginning of the year, the album has proven to be not only worth the wait but something of a game-changer for Gales with the prize finally in sight and a coronation imminent...

PHOTO BY CATHERINE MCGANN/GETTY IMAGES

1. The guitarist grew up surrounded by music, playing guitar as a child in church alongside his family and older brothers. By the age of 14 (as pictured above in New York City), he'd formed his first group, The Eric Gales Band

"Cousins, aunts, uncles and everybody was playing – my mom and dad, all of them. It was everywhere, it was all over me"

Would you say that *Crown* is very autobiographical in a lot of ways?
"It's very autobiographical. The writing was taken from the state the world is in and it's been in for quite some time as it relates to race and equality and things like that. We felt like it was important to get that message across on this record."

What is the central message of the new album?
"That we're all here for a purpose. No-one is less than nobody – we're all equal, we've all got parts to contribute. When the whole world can view it like that, then you can begin to be a better place."

What got you into playing guitar in the first place?
"Man, music was inevitable. My brothers were already playing and I got to be turned on to Albert King and Muddy Waters and Hendrix and Stevie Ray and just a whole cast of different players. I was going to church every week because my mum and dad were heavily religious, and so I was in the church and I began to play in the church. I was listening to blues and rock and everything. So that was basically what my household was like coming up: traditional gospel, blues, rock, funk... everything."

Are you actually left-handed?
"I play left-handed, but I write right-handed. I just picked [the guitar] up and that was what was comfortable. I picked the guitar up when I was about four years old, so [I wasn't even thinking] which way to play it. That's what felt comfortable to me and, ironically, my brothers play the same way."

Did you inherit a guitar from your brothers?
"Yeah, it was passed down. I'm the youngest of five brothers and it was passed down from my uncles to them. Cousins and aunts and uncles and everybody was playing, you know, my mom and dad and all of them. They had a gospel group, so it was like everywhere, it was all over me. That's why I say music was inevitable, seeping into all of us in some kind of way. First thing I learnt to play was some Albert King stuff, you know, topped with gospel music, just basic church, praise and worship type of music and things like that. That was where the egg was hatched."

SOUND ADVICE

Stuck in the woodshed and in need of a little encouragement? Heed the wise words of a master guitarist…

"Don't stop what you're doing. No matter the amount of frustration that comes to you, no matter how many days you end up frustrated, the days that you aren't frustrated are gonna outweigh them. Keep yourself surrounded by the right people, don't let the woes of this world suck you in, and try to stay inspired. With those things, I think you've got a winning chance. Keep doing what you're doing and, if all else fails, listen to *Crown*!"

Watch Eric demonstrate his signature gear and pedalboard and talk about his playing style in our exclusive videos at *https://bit.ly/GuitaristAnnual2023*

"Blues is the world man's [music] and gospel is a religious person's blues… But musically, the effect emotionally, it's exactly the same"

When was the first Eric Gales Band formed?
"Oh my, the first Eric Gales Band happened when I was 14 years old. But I did a battle of the bands around the town when I was like 11 in my brother's band. So it started there. And then, when I was 14, my brother said, 'Let's turn this into The Eric Gales Band… and you're going to be the frontman.'"

What sort of material were you playing back then?
"It was all original. The first two Eric Gales Band CDs were all originals, except we did a rendition of *I Want You (She's So Heavy)* on the *Picture Of A Thousand Faces* record in '93."

When did you first come across Hendrix?
"Day one. I mean, my brother was hugely influenced by Hendrix, so he was definitely one of the ones I was introduced to. But I began to be more influenced by people that were influenced by Hendrix more than him. You know, you can't get around him being the top of the tree, but there's people ahead of him, such as Buddy Guy, Curtis Mayfield, Albert King, Lightnin' Hopkins and Robert Johnson. It's who you are influenced by that automatically makes you acquire who *they* were influenced by. It's just evolution. So, Hendrix, you know, there'll never be another him. I just do my best not to be the next him, and I just do my best to be the first me. And that is honouring him, by showing how his legacy made me be who I am.

"Hendrix is a huge part of everybody's style and they're lying if they say that he ain't, but the object is – how does it help mould you into being the best in you? Because, at the end of the day, what's going to stay and stick is your DNA. No-one has a DNA like yours. So what type of imprint are you leaving? Is it an imitation of an imprint of somebody you like, or is it your own? And that's what matters."

3

PHOTO BY ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

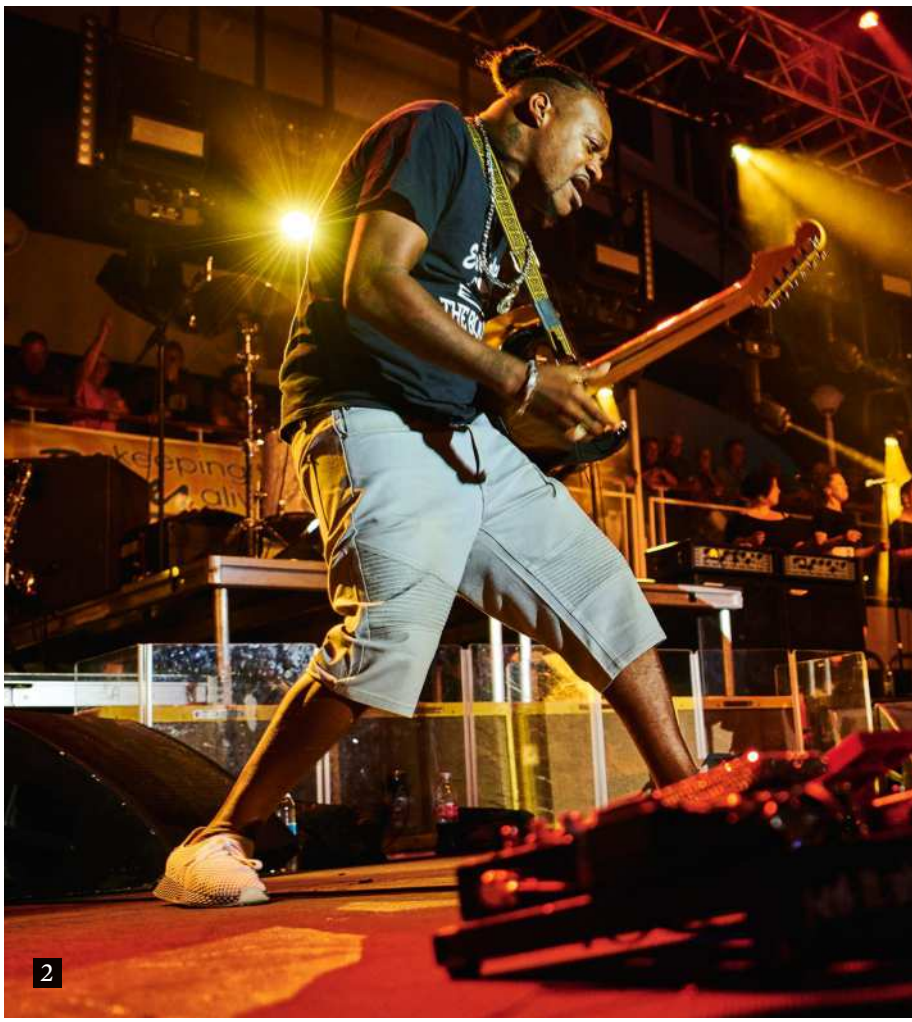

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PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

2. Eric faces off with Joe Bonamassa, performing together for the first time on the Keeping The Blues Alive Mediterranean Cruise in 2019. Bonamassa went on to co-produce *Crown*, alongside Josh Smith

3. Pictured here in 2008 at the Experience Hendrix Tour in Las Vegas, Eric Johnson has been one of Gales' biggest influences since his formative days: "I got turned on to him at six or seven years old, and it completely changed my life"

As you progressed, these other influences started to come through. There's a lot of jazz in your playing, particularly in your chord voicings. Who were you listening to at the time?
"Wes Montgomery, George Benson, Herb Ellis, Kenny Burrell, Grant Green, Jonathan Butler… All of those guys, man, were people that my brother was hipping me on to. And I just took it in, it was amazing. There are plenty that I'm probably leaving out that contributed as well. But there are a lot of known and unknown musicians out there who contributed to the whole pot of inspiration. I was basically just at home and listening to their records. YouTube wasn't even around back then, so it was just dropping the needle on the record and trying to pick it out."

So all of these different guitar styles poured into your guitar playing, but blues was basically the core?
"Yeah, it's the main ingredient that is common in all of it. Everything else is just spices that's thrown in sporadically with no rhyme or reason, no motive, no process. That's totally a feeling thing. It's very hard to dictate that."

You once said that there are a lot of similarities between gospel and the blues.
"Absolutely, yeah. Music-wise, it's the same sensation, the same emotion that you get. Just two different types

"I just do my best not to be the next [Hendrix], and be the first me. And that is honouring him, by showing how his legacy made me be who I am"

4

PHOTO BY JIM ARBOGAST

of words, you know, blues and gospel, but musically, the effect emotionally, it's exactly the same. Gospel is the religious man's blues. That's what it is. I've never thought about that before, but that's exactly what it is. Gospel is a religious person's blues because it's pain, it's suffering, it's all kinds of things they spoke about in gospel, but it's the same. Because pain, suffering and all kinds of things are talked about in blues. So blues is the world man's [music] and gospel is a religious person's blues."

What gear did you use when you were recording *Crown*?
"In the studio I used my signature DV Mark Raw Dawg [amp] blended with a little bit of Dumble that was provided by Joe Bonamassa. I used the RawDawg Magneto [guitar] predominantly for the record and I used my pedalboard that has a Cry Baby wah , a DigiTech Whammy pedal, a Colossus fuzz made by Mojo Hand, a [EWS] Brute Drive made by Xotic Pedals, a Tech 21 [Boost] DLA, the Raw Dawg Boost Drive made by MXR and an Octavio MXR fuzz."

When did you first discover Magneto guitars?
"I would say it was about 13 or 14 years ago, and I've been liking them ever since. They kind of discovered me, man. I had a conversation with Chris [Hatstatt], president of Magneto Guitars, and he said, 'Man, I got something I think you'll like,' and I tried it out. At that time, I was going through some things and other companies really didn't want to deal with me – but he did and I never forgot that. We just continued to build our relationship, and I never will forget the fact that he was always in my corner."

4. Trimming the tone during the recording sessions for *Crown*. To get a close-up look at what's on Eric's pedalboard, check out our exclusive video at https://bit.ly/GuitaristAnnual2023

5. Eric has been working with Magneto Guitars for over a decade. The RawDawg II shown here is based on the company's Sonnet model, loaded with three custom single coils and featuring an alder body, maple neck and Indian rosewood 'board. The RawDawg III joined the Gales signature family at late last year, with a basswood body three-piece maple neck, rosewood 'board, and Gotoh vibrato and tuners

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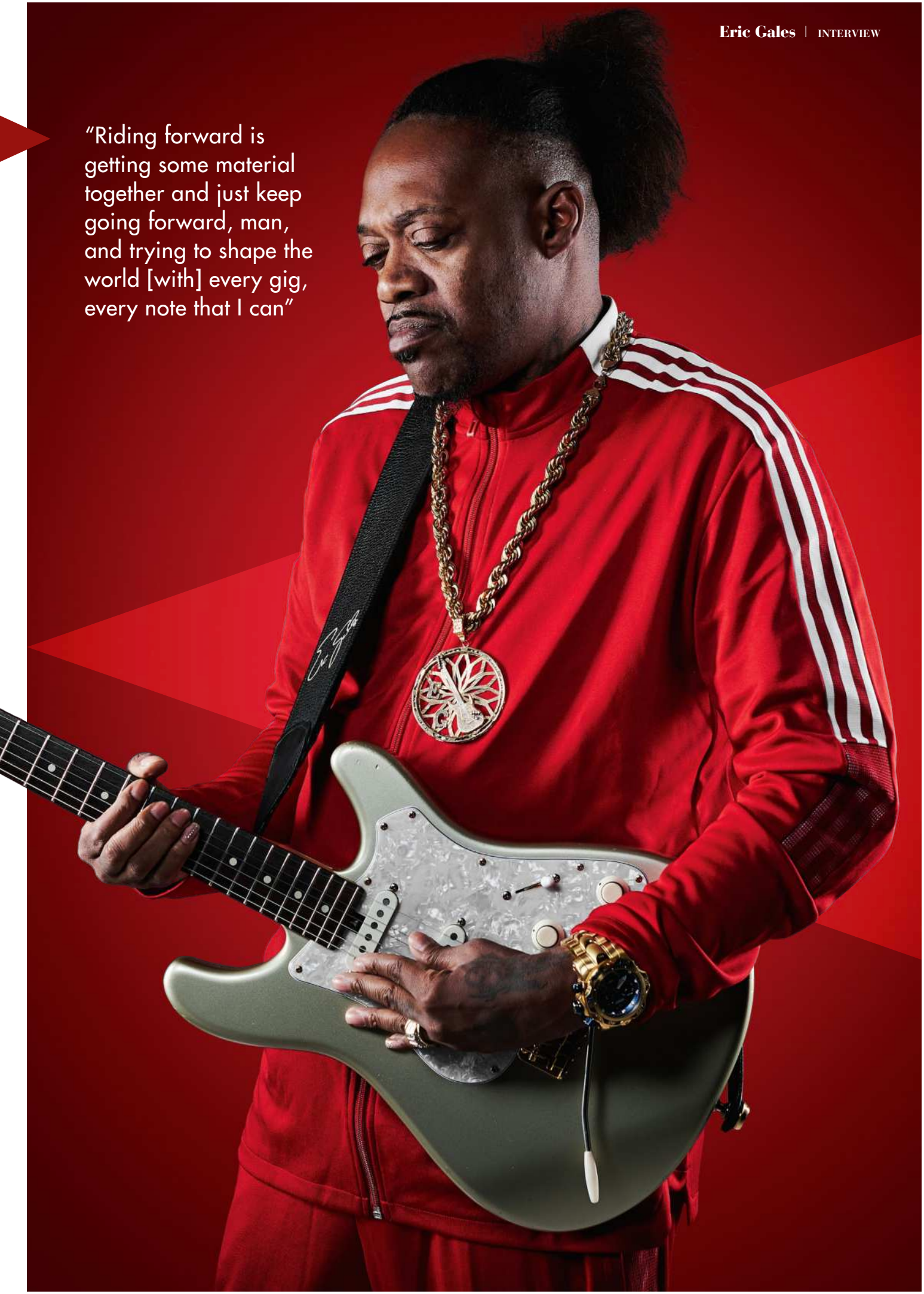
"Riding forward is getting some material together and just keep going forward, man, and trying to shape the world [with] every gig, every note that I can"



What sort of features were you looking for on your signature model?
"Oh, there's the bells and whistles, being draped in gold and all this, but nothing different to the original one that I was playing: 'Give me that, but let's engrave my name in the neck...' and stuff like that and putting my nickname, Raw Dawg, on the back of it. But I like the tone of the Jason Lollar pickups that were in them, they sounded great and we just dressed it up a little bit more to look flashy, like I like to be. I would have played it like it was, but he was like, 'Let's do a signature. What would you want to see?' I told him and boom, boom, boom. Basically, we doctored up the Eric Gales model."

Just two controls – master volume and tone?
"Yeah, a master tone with one tone knob that works on all three pickups in all positions. It's just a little more convenient, to be honest with you. I mean, one tone knob working all three pickups is a little more convenient than mixing and blending two tone knobs on the traditional Strat. I'm not unaccustomed to working with that, it's what I worked with for years."

Were you playing Strat-style guitars from the outset?
"Oh yeah, I've always been more connected to a Strat style. I mean, I've had Les Pauls and I even have a Flying V and SGs, Paul Reed Smiths. But my particular preference is more of a Strat style."

The S-type has always been part of Gales' sound. "I've had Les Pauls and I even have a Flying V and SGs, Paul Reed Smiths", he says, but he's always come back to the Strat style

PHOTO BY WILL CARTER

How did you go about developing your signature DV Mark Raw Dawg amp?
"Just basically had a conversation with Marco [De Virgiliis, DV Mark owner and amp designer] and told him I wanted something crystal clean and loud. I wanted it to be not too heavy and he made it all happen with the signature model. Treble, bass, midrange, volume and reverb, which I rarely use, but it's there. As to the cabinet, I chose a cabinet with two neo [neodymium] 12-inch speakers in, I think they're 60 watts. I used two generally, but I often like to run four cabinets as well. It's not about the volume, it's just about the dirt that it gives, you know? That's a pretty well oiled machine for me with that combination of the pedalboard and the guitar, and I can take that anywhere and take care of business."

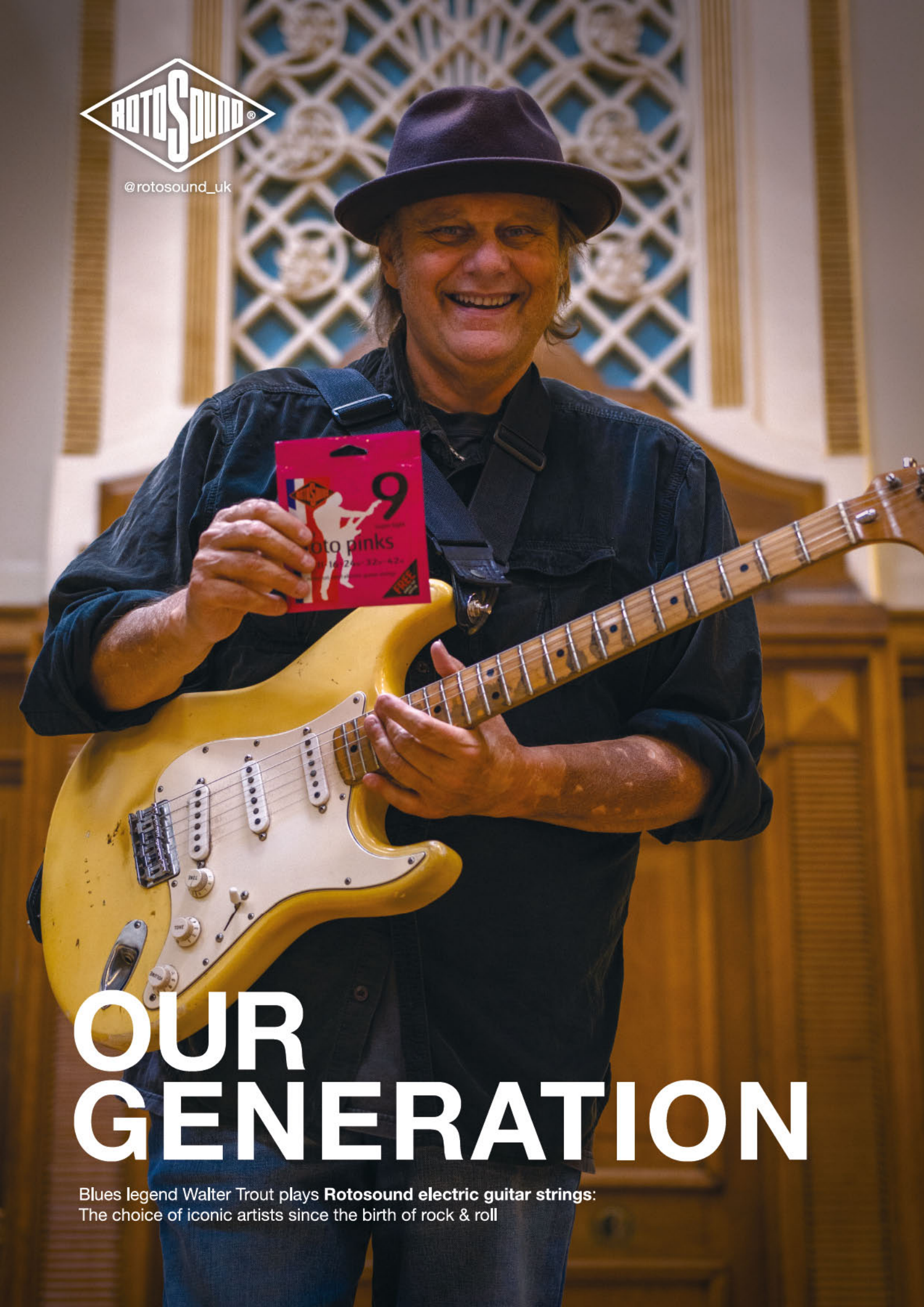
What does the immediate future hold for you?
"A whole lot more touring, supporting this record, getting this message of *I Want My Crown* out to everybody. Meanwhile, riding forward is getting some material together and just keep going forward, man, and trying to shape the world [with] every gig, every note that I can."

HEAR IT HERE

ERIC GALES
CROWN

Eric manages to coax so many shades of tone from his guitar on tracks such as *The Storm, Stand Up* and *Rattlin' Change*, with particularly fine soloing throughout. Solo highlights include *The Storm, Survivor* (which channels both Eric Johnson and SRV), plus *Too Close To The Fire* and *My Own Best Friend*, with their *Little Wing/Lenny* influenced chordwork. Special mention should go to Eric's wife and collaborator, LaDonna, for her outstanding vocals on *Take Me Just As I Am.*

Eric Gales' new album, *Crown*, is out now via Provogue and a UK tour begins on 2 June
www.ericgales.com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CROWNING GLORY

RICHARD BARRETT ZEROS IN ON **ERIC GALES**' CAPTIVATING AND GENRE-MASHING GUITAR STYLE TO BRING YOU A SPECIAL TECHNIQUE LESSON THAT WILL CHALLENGE YOUR CHOPS – WITHOUT HAVING TO FLIP YOUR GUITAR!

The objective of this article is to give you an insight into the style, sound and techniques of the great Eric Gales. To do this we'll be looking at extended chords, flowing pentatonic lines and some very specific picking techniques. But before we get into those details, perhaps we should deal with what many would agree separates Eric from the vast majority of his contemporaries.

Eric plays a right-handed guitar flipped over, but, as he explains in the preceding interview, he is actually right-handed, learning 'upside down and backwards' like this because it felt comfortable. Having the strings reversed like this gives a different perspective on chords and lead lines. We'll be paying particular attention to how it can also give an unusual twist to his fast and fluid economy picked lines – and have a shot at emulating this without having to buy a left-handed guitar and flip it over!

Eric builds his tone on the foundation of a clean amp with a selection of carefully chosen drive and fuzz pedals, enabling him to cover the wide-ranging tonal bases he relies on for chords, crunchy rhythm parts and solos. Of course, it's not possible to cover every single aspect of a style as wide ranging as Eric's in this space; his chordal approach could likely take up a whole article, then there is his use of Phrygian mode for unexpected exotic melodic lines... Hopefully, these examples will give you a good overview of the way Eric approaches many key areas, which can be expanded upon at leisure. There is also a 16-bar solo, in which I aim to put some of these into a more 'real world' context.

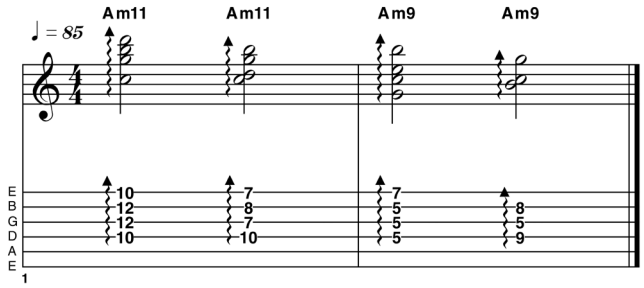
Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from **www.richardbarrettguitar.com**

In the style of: Eric Gales

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Stratocaster, STL AmpHub & Logic Pro X
Difficulty ★★★★☆ | 20 mins per example

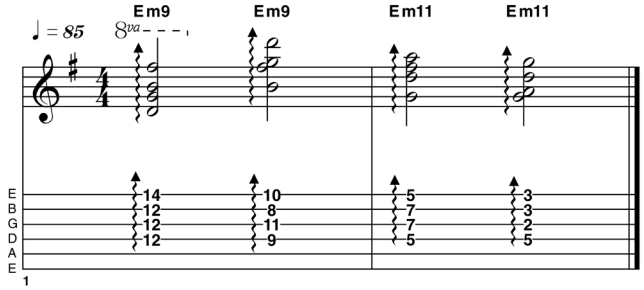
EXAMPLE 1

TAKING THE FIRST OF THE TWO CHORDS IN OUR EXAMPLE TRACK, A minor, we have both the minor 11th (a particular favourite of Eric's) and the minor 9th, which is similar but less 'open'-sounding. These are arranged so that the top notes give a variety of melodic options, if you fancy some Wes Montgomery or Eric Johnson-style chord melodies – both of whom have been a big influence on Mr Gales.



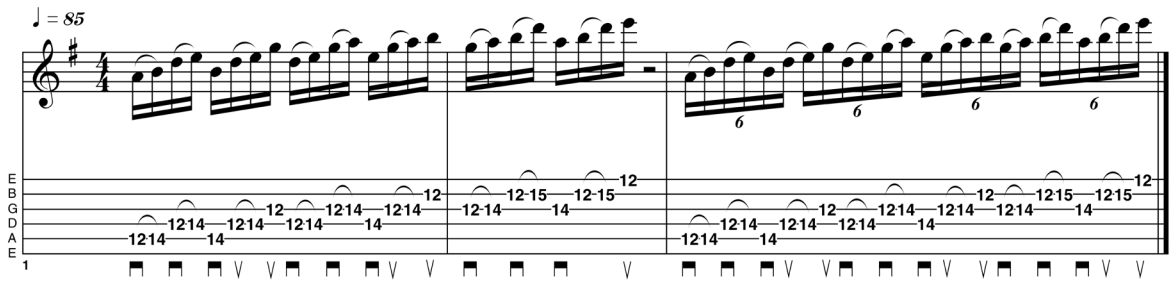
EXAMPLE 2

THE OTHER CHORD IN THE DEMO TRACK IS E MINOR. I have given this the same treatment as the Am9/11 chords in Example 1. Though these are played in a sequence, it doesn't have to be that way. A well-chosen extended chord goes a long way, especially mixed into a melodic line or two. This goes some way to explaining how Eric manages to fill so much musical space with one guitar!



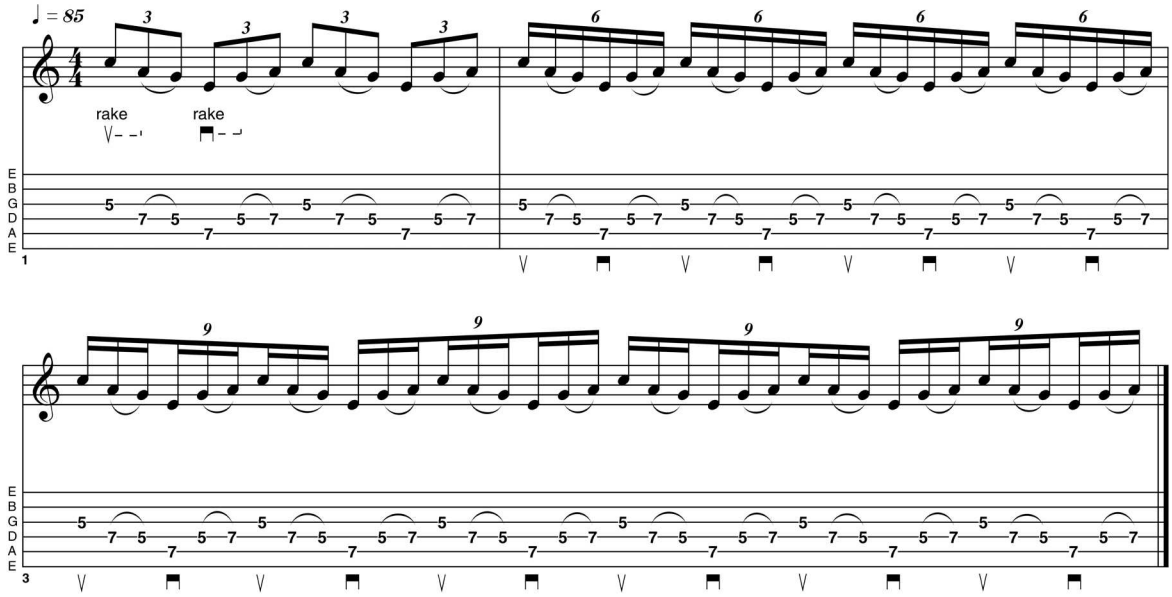
EXAMPLE 3

THIS ASCENDING PENTATONIC LINE IS BROKEN UP INTO TWO HALVES to walk you through what happens with Eric's picking hand as he crosses the strings. Though alternate picking certainly plays a part in his style, many of Eric's distinctive pentatonic lines are generated by raking across two strings with a single up- or downstroke. In this example, notice how this forms a pattern of three downstrokes followed by a single upstroke.



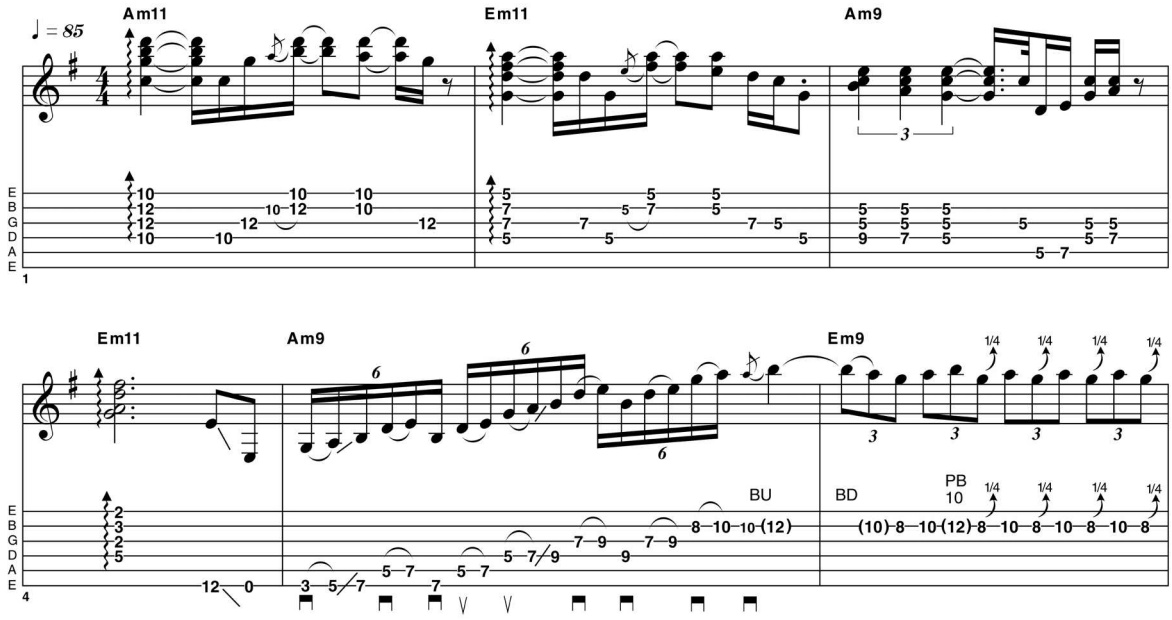
EXAMPLE 4

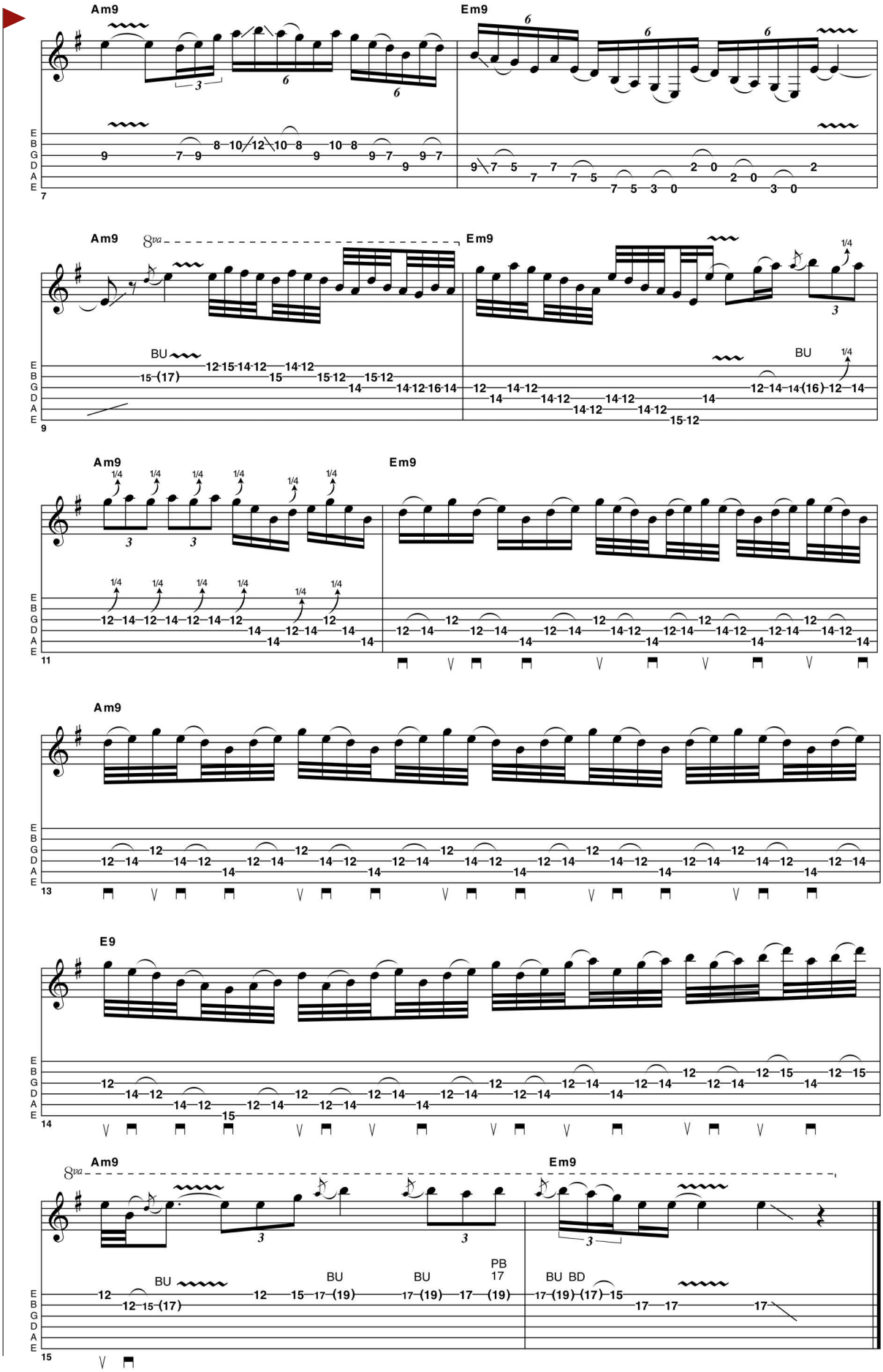
TAKING THINGS UP A GEAR, THIS EXAMPLE USES A SIMILAR PICKING APPROACH, raking across the strings rather than adopting a strict alternate approach. This allows you to cross the strings far more quickly, though it can feel counterintuitive at first – a bit like sweep picking. We move through various triplet based groupings, finishing up with nine on each crotchet beat! This is advanced stuff, so don't feel that you should be able to master it quickly.



EXAMPLE 5

THIS SOLO TAKES A FEW OF ERIC'S FAVOURITE IDEAS and combines them with the hope of emulating his style. Some clean extended chords are followed by a switch to a fuzz-type tone, mixing pentatonics with bluesy melodic lines and some fast runs using both alternate and economy picking. I've included detailed instructions of where to use up- and downstrokes, but it's an interesting exercise to try reversing these sometimes. Remember, Eric sees the strings – and his picking patterns – the other way up!

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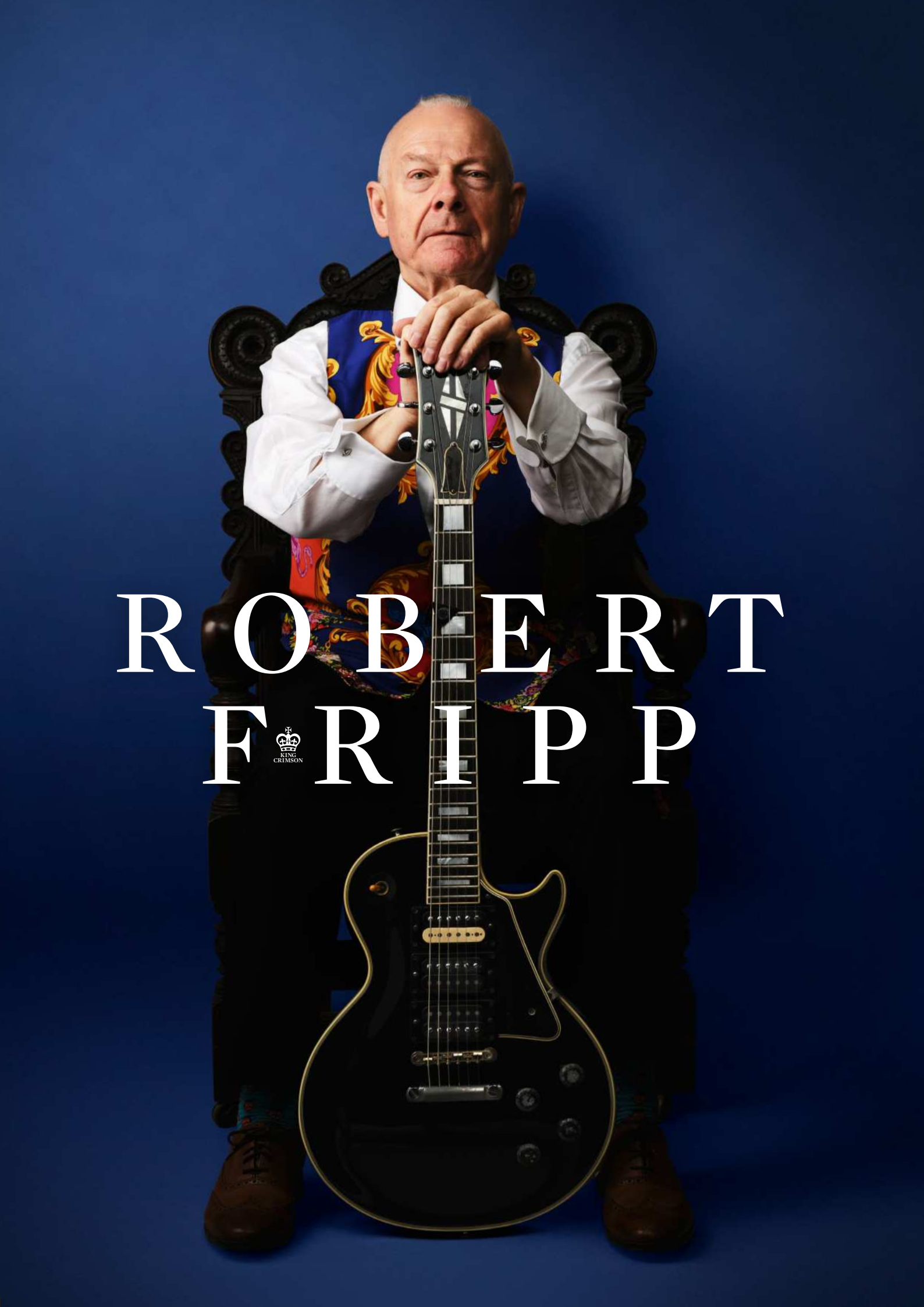
ROBERT
FRIPP
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KING CRIMSON

WITH A **32-DISC BOXSET** OF HIS SOLO WORK DURING THE LATE 1970s ALREADY RELEASED INTO THE WILD AND A **GUITAR BOOK** COMING OUT IN EARLY AUTUMN, ROBERT SITS DOWN WITH US AT **FRIPP HQ** IN THE MIDDLE ENGLAND COUNTRYSIDE TO TALK ALL THINGS **KING CRIMSON**, AS WE TAKE AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT THE **INSTRUMENTS** THAT HAVE GIVEN VOICE TO SOME OF **PROG-ROCK'S FINEST MOMENTS**

Words David Mead **Photography** Adam Gasson

Interviews with 'That Awful Man', as Robert Fripp refers to himself these days, are rare, and until now he hasn't allowed his collection of guitars to be photographed, including the one pictured opposite that was used on so many classic Crimson albums. "I don't collect guitars," he tells us as we settle down to talk, "they are merely tools that I use in my work." However, we note that the famous '59 Les Paul Custom appears to be in almost pristine condition – in fact, it's still shiny even after years on the road. "One careful owner," he quips with a wry grin.

Anyone who wants to assess Fripp's skills as a guitarist need only check out *Fracture* from the King Crimson album *Starless And Bible Black*. The *Moto Perpetuo* from that piece is a legendary example of his crosspicking finesse. His guitar journey began with lessons that found him playing some challenging classical pieces with a plectrum, instead of the more conventional fingerstyle. This influence reached into the Crimson repertoire and is apparent in 1970's *Peace – A Theme* from *In The Wake Of Poseidon*. "Yes, Carcassi *Etude No 7*, the middle section," he tells us. "You probably wouldn't be able to see the connection, but *Peace – A Theme* wouldn't have quite ended up that way unless I practised the Carcassi *Etudes* for fingerstyle, but with a pick because crosspicking was my speciality."

Now that Crimson has entered another hiatus, the rendition of *Starless* in Japan last December being regarded by all as the last we'll hear from the band, it's time to catch up with Crimson's only permanent member. And we start our conversation at the very beginning...

How did you become interested in music – and specifically the guitar – in the first place?

"My trajectory was at age 11 my sister and I bought two records, *Rock With The Caveman* by Tommy Steele and *Don't Be Cruel* by Elvis Presley. The guitarist on Tommy Steele I learnt later was Bert Weedon, on Elvis, Scotty Moore. There weren't any English rock musicians, they were all jazzers. Old men, basically. Old men who would come in and do the young character sessions. Mel Collins' [Crimson sax player] father would be doing the ripping tenor solos on [BBC music programme] *Six-Five Special* with Tubby Hayes and Ronnie Scott sitting next to him. They would be making derogatory comments on these young rock artists who really weren't in the same musical ballpark as they were. In America it was entirely different. There was nothing demeaning about playing rock music and moving out of blues. Scotty Moore, Chuck Berry, the sheer power of Jerry Lee Lewis... That was me around 11 to 12.

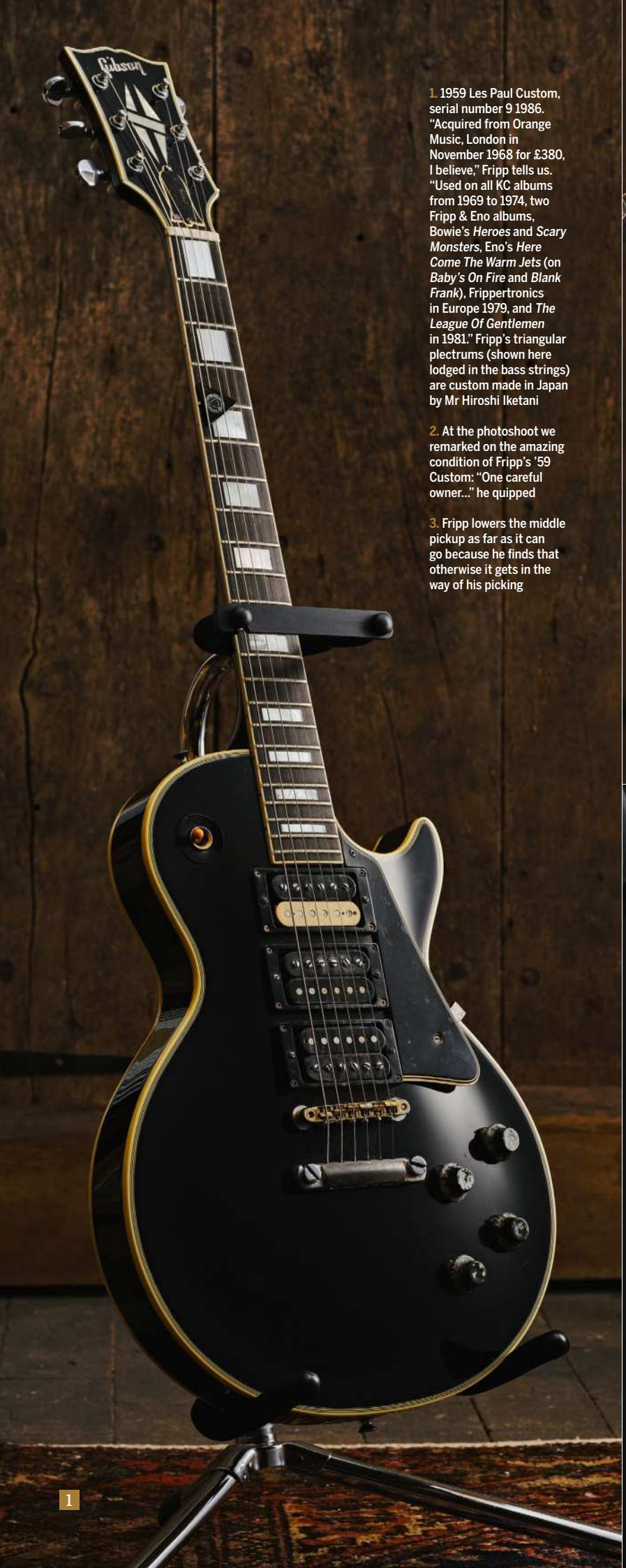
"At 13 trad jazz came along. I would go down to the Winter Gardens in Bournemouth and see all the characters: Chris Barber, Acker Bilk, Monty Sunshine and just about everyone else that was working at the time. Memphis Slim I saw there, too – I think he was supporting Chris Barber. Wow, wow. At 15, hearing Mingus, *Extrapolation*. Max Roach, *Town Hall New York City*. Then, at 17, the more challenging aspects of what we call classic music. It segued into The Beatles and 1960s English rock instrumentals. I saw The Outlaws at a show in Poole when I was 17 with Ritchie Blackmore, he was then 18. He was phenomenal. He had all the moves. He had the music, he had the playing, it was astonishing.

"The Bournemouth scene was very hot. Working in the first League Of Gentlemen we would do lots of specialty vocals: Four Seasons, Beatles. We would also do the instrumental specialities, *Entry Of*

1. 1959 Les Paul Custom, serial number 9 1986. "Acquired from Orange Music, London in November 1968 for £380, I believe," Fripp tells us. "Used on all KC albums from 1969 to 1974, two Fripp & Eno albums, Bowie's *Heroes* and *Scary Monsters*, Eno's *Here Come The Warm Jets* (on *Baby's On Fire* and *Blank Frank*), Frippertronics in Europe 1979, and *The League Of Gentlemen* in 1981." Fripp's triangular plectrums (shown here lodged in the bass strings) are custom made in Japan by Mr Hiroshi Iketani

2. At the photoshoot we remarked on the amazing condition of Fripp's '59 Custom: "One careful owner..." he quipped

3. Fripp lowers the middle pickup as far as it can go because he finds that otherwise it gets in the way of his picking



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The Gladiators, which I didn't realise until I met him years later was Mick Jones of Foreigner. Then I went off to college to take A-levels to go onto university and take a degree in estate management.

"My musical interest went slightly to the side, and I went to the Majestic Dance Orchestra to pay my way through college. When that came to an end, there was Hendrix, *Sgt Pepper* and things shot off in a different direction, to the extent I could no longer continue. Going on to London where I'd been accepted for a place for three years to take a degree in estate management at the College of Estate Management in South Kensington, I had my digs booked in Acton; how awful that was. I said to my father, 'I can't continue,' and I turned professional on my 21st birthday."

What was the first guitar you had when you began playing?

"It was an Egmond Freres, an appalling instrument. The action at the 7th fret, you needed pliers to depress it. It was appalling. It required me to develop such strong muscles that I remember in 1971 practising to put less pressure into my left hand. I moved onto a cheap Rosetti guitar, which was not good. Then a Höfner; I believe it was a President, it was the cutaway version. It wasn't great, but at least it was an instrument.

"My first good guitar was my Gibson ES-345 Stereo, which I bought from Eddie Moors music shop in Boscombe where on a Saturday afternoon I would give guitar lessons. Young characters would come in and say, 'I'm interested in buying a guitar.' They'd say, 'We have an in-store guitar teacher who can give you lessons on Saturday afternoon.' I'd go around the corner to something like a village hall in Boscombe and give guitar lessons. Then in the evening I'd go on to Chewton Glen Hotel, this was when I was 17, and play in the Douglas Ward Trio. This was my first good guitar, and it was expensive, something like £350. That was the guitar with The League Of Gentlemen. That took me to London with Giles, Giles And Fripp, that guitar, which I used until 1968 when I got my first Les Paul. I only used the 345 again with Crimson on *In The Wake Of Poseidon* on *Cat Food*, and *Bolero* [from *Lizard*]."

Was there an influence on you musically from listening to classical music?

"I began listening to the Bartók String Quartet and Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring*. The turning point in my musical, and I suppose personal, life was something like 'music is one'. I didn't hear separate categories, I heard music but as if it was one musician speaking in a variety of dialects. The crashing chords of *Rite Of Spring* or Bartók, where is that coming from? The opening bars of *Purple Haze* or *Day In The Life*, *I Am The Walrus*, it all had this incredible power as it reached over and pulled me towards it."

You're well known for your crosspicking ability on pieces such as *Fracture*. How did this skill begin to develop?

"It's what in Guitar Craft is called 'a point of seeing'. It's not the process of rational deduction of working out; you simply *see* something. I remember specifically the moment. I was at home in the first floor rear room where my sister and myself would do homework. I was practising *Study In 3/4* by Dick Sadleir. My guitar teacher, Don Strike, gave me a very good technical foundation. In terms of current music, it was a little old-fashioned. It was kind of corny for a young character who enjoyed Scotty Moore. Instead of doing *bom-bish-bish bom-bish-bish*, I began crosspicking. The same shapes, the same notes but crosspicking it. Seeing that that was so obviously the way to go I continued to develop that as a speciality, including [Francisco] Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, which was a very challenging piece for the pick."

"The question eventually became formulated for me as, 'What would Hendrix sound like playing the Bartók String Quartets?'"

There's not a great deal of blues influence in your playing...

"Why didn't I become a blues guitarist? Probably because I wasn't a very good blues guitarist. The thing

4. The 1970s incarnation of King Crimson (left to right): Fripp, Bill Bruford, David Cross and the late John Wetton

"When Giles and McDonald left it was heartbreaking for me. Giles' contributions to the arrangements and direction were stunning"

5. At The Hit Factory NYC in 1978 during the early Frippertronics era, using his other 1959 Custom Les Paul: serial number 9 0993. "Bought privately in NYC around March 1978," he says. "This became my US guitar and was used on *Exposure*"

PHOTO BY LISA TANNER

is, a lot of young players and some established players have said to me, 'I only wanted to be like Clapton.' They didn't say it, but you knew it. That wasn't my aim. Stunning player, but... The question eventually became formulated for me as, 'What would Hendrix sound like playing the Bartók *String Quartets*?'

"In 1969 the major musical influences in Crimson were Ian McDonald and Michael Giles. I recognised they had a connection with music, which at the time I didn't have, but I could recognise in others. I'd known this probably since I was 17 or 18 working alongside and going to see the other young players in Bournemouth, stunning young players."

How did McDonald's and Giles' influence connect with you in Crimson's early days?

"In the studio recording *In The Court Of The Crimson King* they would make a comment, [and] I would adjust my response to sit in accord with theirs. Then when they left it was heartbreaking for me, because although Giles wasn't a writer his contributions to the arrangements and direction were stunning.

"My primary role for *In the Court*... in Crimson in 1969, as I saw it, was to come up with guitar parts that supported the writing. Although you could say that McDonald and [Peter] Sinfield were the main writers, you can't exclude Giles from that. You can't really exclude anyone from that, it was five people. *Moonchild* on that album, the music was 99 per cent Robert [Fripp, himself] with one suggestion from Ian McDonald to move a G to a G#, which we incorporated. This was Ian, he had a gift for the simple melodic phrase.

"That's what we went with. For the writing credit, which properly should have been Fripp/Sinfield, I decided to have all the names of the members because I felt that actually everyone was involved equally. How can you exclude anyone at that point? For me, Crimson has always been a co-operative, which it certainly was in 1969."

This led to some turbulence within the band, didn't it?

"My personal difficulties with any Crimson musician since have been if they favour themselves or see themselves as somehow coming ahead of the other players or the music. To put that positively within Crimson, the music comes first: principle one. Principle two: the band comes first. The interests of the band come ahead of the interests of the other players. Three: we share the money. Why do there seem to be personal difficulties? Look at those three principles and really that's the clue to anything that follows.

"If the music does come first, then all the names are there at the top. We shared the record royalties; we shared the publishing royalties. There is a legitimate concern that if you have one person who writes

6. Suited and booted, the 2018 Crimson line-up (left to right): the late Bill Rieflin, Jakko Jakszyk, Pat Mastelotto, Fripp, Gavin Harrison, Tony Levin, Mel Collins and Jeremy Stacey


"How I experience and engage with music and other musicians is subtle. If I'm explaining it in bold terms, it falls under the heading of cosmic horse shit"

7. Gibson ES-345, serial number 100510. "Acquired 1963, and so probably 1962 manufacture. Used in the original League Of Gentlemen (1964/'65) at The Majestic Hotel, [and with] Giles, Giles & Fripp. Not used much in KC other than on *Cat Food* and *Prince Rupert's Lament* (1970)"

8. It's unclear as to whether Fripp used Gibson's infamous Varitone switch much, and that extra piece of wire looks like it was employed to cure an earthing problem on the Bigsby

9. Fripp tells us that he receives a lot of communications from guitarists telling him that his string ends look untidy, but he insists that his method of restringing is both functional and thoroughly effective

"With Crimson it was an open form of engagement, which has always been complex, always problematic and always very demanding"

all the music, shouldn't they get a disproportionate part of the publishing? The answer is yes, they should. This was a legitimate concern for Adrian Belew.

"From 1994 onwards, we would look at essentially who had made the greatest contribution to writing this piece. Between 1970 and 1974 when Robert was the primary writer, even if Bill Bruford didn't play a note he would receive an equal share of the publishing income. Why? Firstly, because it exemplified the view that where there is an equal commitment there is an equitable distribution. Secondly, if Robert made a value judgement or recommendation that we go this way, there was never any question that my recommendation for either a musical or business direction favoured me. There was never a conflict of interests with Robert. If I said, 'Look, lads. I think we should do this.' It was because I thought we should do this. Why? Primarily for the music, then primarily the interest of the band and so on."

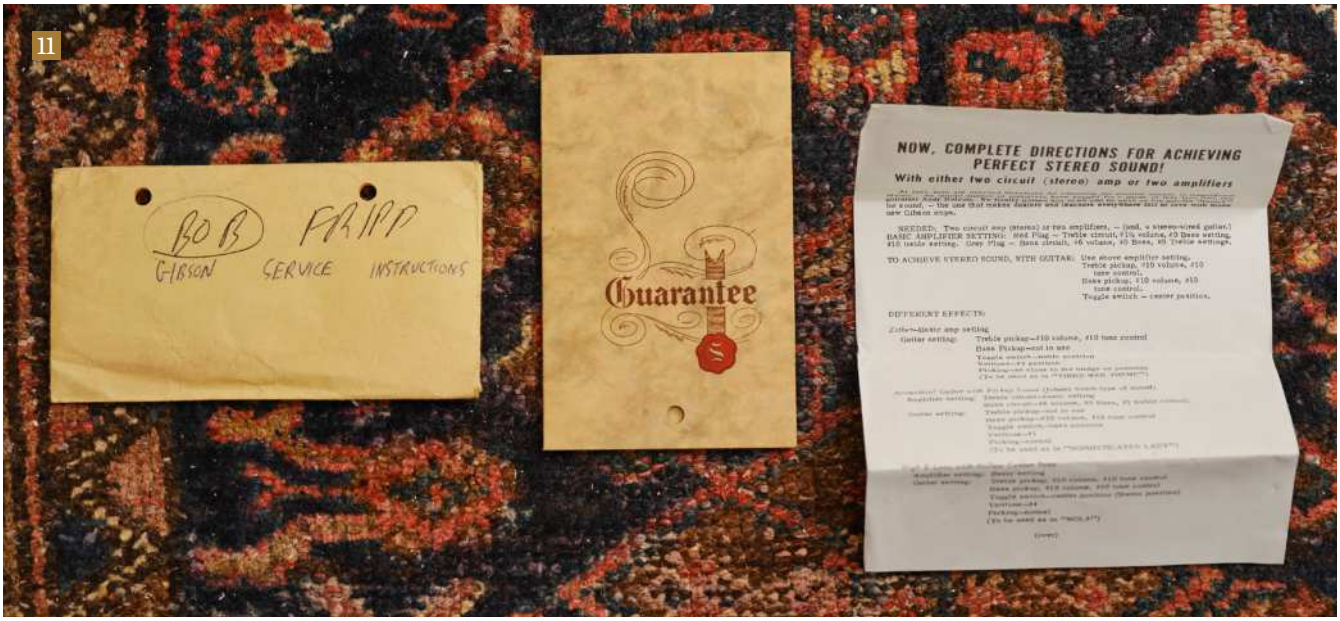
The recent release of the *Exposures* boxset features Steven Wilson remixes of your solo material. As with the Crimson remixes Steven has done, they're remarkably faithful to the originals.

10. Crimson in 1984 (left to right): Adrian Belew, Bill Bruford, Fripp and Tony Levin

"When I go in to mix something, I don't go in with a historic overview to mind. Steven's aim was very faithfully to reproduce the original but with modern technology. There had been the odd discussions. For example, with *Lizard* there were one or two things we didn't quite put in and so on. My view on occasion has been we actually didn't get it right the first time, so now is an opportunity. Then you say, 'What's right and what's wrong?' If it has been adopted and accepted by decades of listeners, then maybe that's what it is. Steven aims to get it exactly as. Me, I'd be very happy to go a different way.

"In terms of *Exposure* I went down and worked with Steven, I was very up for complete reimagining. Steven: 'No, this is a classic.' His brief, this is Steven, is to present this as the original. How can I put it? That desk [pointing to an antique writing desk in the room in which we are sitting] is an 1830s desk. It's a classic of its kind. If I were designing a desk for today to use with modern things, such as having computers on the side, it wouldn't be designed like that. However, for me that is the classic and I'm not going to redesign it. That's Steven's point of view: this is the classic. The only innovation we had on *Exposure* was with [Dolby] Atmos mixing, which isn't, I suppose, entirely legitimate."

Revisiting *Exposure*, it is possible to see a stylistic link between the albums *Red* from the mid-70s and *Discipline* from the early 80s, with the two guitars playing offset then synchronous parts. Was this an idea forming in your mind during Crimson's hiatus in the late 70s?



11. The original paperwork that came with the ES-345 opposite, including the instructions for using the guitar in stereo

"Was it Steve Reich? Was it Philip Glass? Was it Robert Fripp? Was it in the air? Was it world music? Anyway, all of this, my thinking, my academic interests and approach to music were in place in 1980, 1981, with the coming together of that form of King Crimson. I met Adrian [Belew] personally at The Bottom Line in New York when I went down to see Steve Reich. Bowie was there with Adrian. We went over and said hello and Adrian said, 'Let's get together for tea tomorrow,' so we did. That's how our personal connection began."

People might not be aware that you actually write these pieces out on manuscript paper.

"Yes, I do. I don't give the other players charts. I don't like the word 'bandleader' because I've never viewed myself as a bandleader. That's another endless wittering on. You have [Charles] Mingus. I understand that Mingus didn't give the other characters in the band charts. Why? Because it goes in through your eyes. You present the music you have and you say, 'If I'm playing this, what are you playing?' One of Bill's good quotes from the time was, 'It was as if Robert expected us to know what to play.' Of course. If I have to tell you what to play, why are we working together?

"What I would aim to do is construct situations or conditions within which the talent of each of these players is given an opportunity to develop. To the extent that when Robert composed for Crimson it was writing specifically for these people in this band to play. Not a generic piece that anyone could play, it was specifically for these people.

"I don't give the other players charts because it goes in through your eyes… If I have to tell you what to play, why are we working together?"

"There were two occasions when I presented *Larks' [Tongues in Aspic, Part] Two* to that formation of Crimson. We had short rehearsals in Covent Garden and then we went to Richmond Athletic Club. I presented the defining *Larks'* rhythm and chords at Covent Garden and it wasn't heard, it went nowhere. Then I played it at Richmond Athletic Club and Bill and John [Wetton] leapt straight in. They had it; clicked, it worked. Most really good rock drummers in London at the time wouldn't have heard it because it wasn't written for them.

"With Crimson it was an open form of engagement, which has always been complex, always problematic and always very demanding. If you would like a band to break up, have writing rehearsals. What you do when you hit that problem is you get on the road. Then you introduce an audience into the situation, music comes to life and you'll keep going. Not that Robert is a bandleader, but in terms of practical strategies for keeping the band together and working, you move from writing rehearsals as quickly as possible into live performance."

12. Gibson J-45, serial number 122301. "Acquired around 1972 from Denmark Street. May have been used on *Larks' Tongues In Aspic* in 1973 but not otherwise on records"

Can we talk a little about gear?

"You know I have no interest in that. I have no interest in gear at all. For example, whatever fuzzbox, whatever guitar, whatever amp I'm using I'll get my sound. Here's an example of this. I went to see Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea at Carnegie Hall: wow, breathtaking. Chick Corea is stage right, Herbie Hancock on the left. They changed places and played and their sounds went with them. I still don't understand that. How can that be? It cannot be that the sound of a piano changes. The sound of a piano is the sound of a piano, surely?

"With Crimson I use Axe-Fx, which is very good. For basic work that I can carry myself without a team of engineers I use a Helix. Why? Because Jakko [Jakszyk] uses

13. Tokai LP-type, serial number 8 0001. "Given to me around 1984 by the UK importer of Tokai. Modified for me by Ted Lee and used on David Sylvian's *Gone To Earth* in 1986, Sylvian-Fripp from 1991 to '93, and in The Robert Fripp String Quartet, 1993"

14. A Roland hexaphonic guitar synthesiser pickup is nestled between the bridge humbucker and Kahler vibrato system, and the guitar is also fitted with a Fernandes Sustainer unit, which Fripp describes as a life-saver in that it saved him having to rely solely on fuzz for his distinctive solo sound

15. The guitar's electrics were heavily modified to Fripp's requirements: "Lots of switches that I probably never used..."

16. Fripp's current KC guitar is a Fernandes Gold Custom that has been equipped with a Seymour Duncan pickup and a Roland synth pickup in the bridge position, and a Fernandes Sustainer at the neck

17. Kahler vibrato systems are a staple on Fripp's current touring and studio guitars

18. A comprehensive switching system ensures that everything in Fripp's sonic arsenal falls directly under his control

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"If you would like a band to break up, have writing rehearsals. What you do when you hit that problem is you get on the road"

a Helix and if you're working in a band with another character you aim for compatibility. The other thing is, he can tell me how to work it."

The rig you use for soundscaping hasn't changed too dramatically over the years, has it?

"It changed. I'm trying to think when it changed from the 'Solar Voyager' to the 'Sirius Probe'. It changed when I stopped using the [TC Electronic] TC2290, which I used to use for sampling. It developed high-level digital frizz. I started using the Eventide 8000s, which are astonishing things. You have 90-second samples that will repeat. You can leave them 24 hours, come back, no decay, no degeneration whatsoever. For sampling, that's astonishing. There is something irreplaceable in those early versions of the Eventides. I've no idea what the algorithms are, but wow. They shape the sound.

"In terms of the 8000s where I have bona fide quadraphonic sound, what I do is I work to ratios in delay. If you have four outputs, if a short loop is needed, one stereo pair will have 12 seconds on one side and 18 seconds on the other. You have a 3:2 ratio. On the next one I tend to have an offset of maybe 20.5 to 21 seconds.

PHOTO BY ALAN TANNENBAUM

19. The Kitchen, NYC, 1979: Fripp was using two ReVox A77 tape recorders to create intricate tape loops for a Frippertronics event, using his Stateside '59 Les Paul Custom

It's just essentially the same delay, which over a period of maybe half an hour will change. If I'm going for longform soundscapes it might be something like 42:49 or 42:63. On the other stereo pair to complete the quadraphonic might be 21:35 or 63:72. In other words, there are ratios within the time delays generally in terms of six or seven seconds, which lots of experience – including being booed constantly – has suggested to me this has resonance.

"I'll then go in and I have my defining programmes within the Eventide 3000s, which sends it shooting off in different directions. In terms of soundscape performances, I bypass all of that and through an Eventide Eclipse I have a solo sound. It gives me my solo voice. In the quiet moments the solo voice will come up with all of this, all in real-time. I have had various suggestions, 'Bob, why don't you use Ableton Live?' The answer is, when I'm doing a live performance soundscape with the rig I have, the Sirius Probe, all of the parameters I can change in real-time by hand as I am playing. I don't have to go to a computer and fiddle about. I don't have to look up here and see what's going on, I can do it all with one hand."

Are you still using the Roland GR-1?

"It's set up in my full Crimson rig. I haven't been using it recently, but I have used it certainly in 2015, probably using it for the first half of seven-, eight-piece Crimson. Why? Because it does two or three things that nothing else does. The same as the 3000s. The GR-1 has a fretless bass sound, that is breathtaking, which I would use to have fun with

20. King Crimson's latest thunderous line-up had three drummers up front

Tony Levin. Tony would be doing some upright slides, I might slip in some fretless. Tony would look up wondering where the bass sound was coming from.

"It's also stunning in terms of low-end for soundscapes. It also has bell sounds, which in combination with an Eventide 3000 programme called 'In Six' makes astonishing sounds. It also has a piano sound, which I haven't really used since 2003, but which was astonishing. I used it a lot in all the ProjeKcts."

Technology has come a long way since your early Frippertronics work.
"Yes, that's right. I've had these posts, 'Bring back the ReVox. Where is Frippertronics?' It's just not feasible. Why not? If you go back to when I used that technology you'd have to fly it. What would happen if there was a bounce? Here's another one: you have it set up on the table, what would happen if someone walked by and bumped the table? The answer is, there would be a fluttering on the tape. You'd then have to shape the entire Frippertronics piece around the flutter. If, as in Madrid in May 1979, what happens if the ReVox the record company has brought in begins to catch fire? What do you do? These are practical examples. It's not feasible."

Would it be true to say that *The Guitar Circle* book you have coming out in September isn't what you might call a conventional guitar tutor?
"Correct. It's the attitude. It's less what you do, it's more how you do and why you do. We've now had guitar courses since March 1985 and the book is essentially a report on the history of Guitar Craft and the Guitar Circle to date. If you're looking for a book of guitar exercises, this is not the way to go.

"People who have a background in martial arts feel an immediate affinity with Guitar Craft – it's developing a personal discipline"

"People who have a background in martial arts feel an immediate affinity with Guitar Craft in the Guitar Circle. One character said to a pal of mine it's like martial arts with a guitar. I've a little tai chi, some muay Thai. Here, your response is governed by the intentionality of the person with whom you're sparring. If you wait for them to make a move you're on the floor. What you respond to is their intention. How we respond to someone's intention before there's any movement at all is a subtle thing. How to explain that? That falls under the heading of 'cosmic horse shit'. The point is, it can very easily be experienced.

"Guitar Craft was basically developing a personal discipline with a guitar. The Guitar Circle is developing a personal discipline within others. We're learning to work with others and with ourself. In a sense it's a maturing and a development within a social context.

"One of the difficulties I've had doing interviews over a period of 53 years with guitar magazines is that just about everything that is real with me in terms of how I experience and engage with music and other musicians is subtle. If I'm explaining it in bold terms, it falls under the heading of cosmic horse shit. One of the important principles in this is 'accept nothing that someone is telling you, presenting you, judge by your own experience'. When someone comes into a Guitar Circle, don't take Robert's view of what might be happening for yourself, what is *your* experience?" G

21. "I have no interest in gear at all..." Fripp sits in front of his latest King Crimson rig

Robert Fripp's 32-disc boxset, *Exposures*, is out now, via DGM/Panegyric. *The Guitar Circle* book will be released on 1 September via Panegyric Publishing in association with Discipline Global Mobile
www.dgmlive.com


"My personal difficulties with any Crimson musician have been if they see themselves as somehow coming ahead of the other players or the music"


DETROIT

DAWN STAR

Jack White is one of guitar's most mercurial figures, whose core influences span decades and embrace both Son House and Van Halen without apparent contradiction. With a new album, *Fear Of The Dawn*, out, we join him to explore his equally eclectic guitars

Words James Volpe Rotondi & Jamie Dickson*
Photography Eleanor Jane

It says something about the way we unconsciously pigeonhole artists that it was a little shocking to see Jack White use a customised EVH Wolfgang guitar to perform the track *Lazaretto* on the US TV show *Saturday Night Live* in October 2020. Just like the movies, the world of guitar has its tropes and clichés, and one of these is that alt-rock guitarists should play painfully hip pawn-shop relics and turn their nose up at anything with the mark of shred upon it. White played the EVH partly as a gesture of tribute to the late master. "I won't even insult the man's talent by trying to play one of his songs tonight," he said prior to the show. "[But] Eddie was very kind to me and saw to it that this guitar was made for me to my specs..."

And while some might be surprised to learn that indie-rock's champion of primal blues lines and the late, lamented heavy rock virtuoso were so sympatico, it makes terrific sense on many levels. In addition to decades of knocking out album after album of wicked riffs and potent solos, both players have displayed an almost obsessive pursuit of individualism and specialised design in the instruments they've played throughout their careers – never content with stock features and aesthetics, always pushing the envelope to make their own guitars more idiosyncratic, versatile and allied with their own approaches to both technique and tone.

As White and his band prepare for his first full tour in more than two years, James Rotondi of our sister magazine *Guitar Player* sat down with Jack to discuss the methods to the madness behind his creative and fluid approach to recording, writing and modifying both guitars and pedals – including his own Third Man line of effects, which includes the cool Bumble Buzz, Triplegraph and Mantic Flex – and how his tone has evolved from his early days with The White Stripes through his Raconteurs years (with co-frontman Brendan Benson), The Dead Weather, and his own unique and often-challenging solo albums.

**This feature has been adapted from the July 2022 edition of Guitar Player*

1. Jack was an early adopter of Fender's innovative Acoustasonic series of instruments but asked for his to have a deliberately restricted range of tones to include his favourite acoustic sound, an electric tone and finally a blend of both

2. As well as an Acoustasonic Jazzmaster, Jack has a Telecaster from the hybrid acoustic-electric range. Its striking, high-contrast blue sunburst finish was inspired by Fender's love-or-hate-them Antigua finishes of the 1970s

3. A delectable Fender Jazz bass in full chromed-up trim is also found among Jack's collection

Let's start with the very unique blue-and-white Telecaster you're holding in the opening shot for this feature. It resembles the more copper/orange sparkle Tele you played with The Raconteurs, right?

"This is sort of the next step on from that guitar, which Chip Ellis and I had started working on around The Raconteurs' last album, before the pandemic. We called it the Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster. We started with a B-Bender-equipped Telecaster that I received as a Christmas present a few years back, and we just started adding cool elements and features that I've been wanting to add based on my experience playing live over the past couple of solo tours I've been doing.

"The B-Bender Tele was a great present to get. I'd always wanted one, and we changed the colour of it to something more suitable for the colour scheme of The Raconteurs, with that orange sparkle finish. Then the thought was, 'Okay, as long as we're repainting it, let's put some new pickups in it.' At that moment in time, I was really into the Fender Lace Sensors for the bridge and then a P-90 in the middle position. And then we added a neck pickup that was on my brother's 1972 Fender Telecaster Thinline when I was a kid. I always thought that the bassy-sounding neck pickup on that was really creamy, so I wanted to have that in there.

"I got to road-test the Acoustasonic heavily. And the first thing I asked was, 'Is there any way we can have fewer choices for sounds?'"

And then eventually the bridge pickup changed from the Lace Sensor, as well.

"My wife, [Third Man singer/songwriter/guitarist and session player] Olivia Jean, had gotten a custom guitar from Fender and [pickup guru] Tim Shaw had made these outstanding Filter'Tron-style pickups for that. I love Filter'Trons and I've played Gretsch guitars quite a bit, so I really wanted those same types of pickups in my Telecaster. Sure, if you A/B most Filter'Trons against a lot of the higher-output pickups out there, they don't compete for gain, but whatever Tim did to make these balance with the output of my other pickups, they're just really furious Filter'Trons. Tons of bite. And we're even considering adding a coil-tap to it next. We did that with the humbucking

4

4. Jack White's 1964 'JB Hutto' Res-O-Glass Airline electric is the guitar most people think of when his name is mentioned, to this day. Its Valco pickups are humbucker-sized but are in fact single coil units, while the body is made of hollow fibreglass

5. An apparent variation on the Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster shown on page 42, this metallic blue Custom Shop creation features a "furious" take on Gretsch's Filter'Tron humbucker at the bridge, which was designed by Tim Shaw

6. Custom hardware abounds on Jack's heavily customised Telecaster and includes a highly adjustable trem arm

7. The guitar features a Mexican-built, pale-hued maple neck, an aesthetic touch Jack says he prefers over darker, aged-looking lacquer on maple

Lace Sensors I used on the last tour, and that was really interesting at times for adding a bit of extra treble when you need it."

You've been exploiting interrupter or kill switches for a while now, and most of your guitars have them. What inspired that?
"My interrupters do a complete cut of the signal, but, I mean, Tom Morello was doing a similar thing back in the 90s by just turning on and off between two pickups. And, of course, people would do similar things with Les Pauls back in the day, where they'd have one of the pickup's volumes down, so the pickup selector would act as a kind of kill switch. So it's nothing new. All my White Stripes guitars had those sorts of on/off switches on them back in the day, and I enjoyed playing with them, but eventually I thought it would be much easier if we installed them as buttons. The inspiration for that way of doing it probably comes from when I was using the Fender EVH Wolfgang USA Eddie Van Halen Signature guitars, which have these momentary push-button switches. I'm tempted to put them on all my guitars now. And it's not an issue for me with blending two pickups because I've never blended pickups on any guitar I've used, not ever. Even my Tele is just three positions, not five.

"The Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster started [out as] a B-Bender-equipped Tele and we added cool elements"

"I've also got a V-neck on this Tele, made from the whitest maple we could find because I don't like that sort of yellowy maple; I like it to be really white. I like the V-neck a lot. All the old Gibson acoustics I play, like my 1915 Gibson L-1 [aka the Robert Johnson model], are V-necks. I understand why people wouldn't like it; it's hard to play. But I think I like making things a little bit harder on myself, too. So there's that..."

Tell us about these customised Fender Tele- and Jazzmaster-style Acoustasonics you're playing. They look rad with those cool blue finishes. But there's more to your specs on these than just the finish, right?
"Yeah, I made some recommendations regarding the range of sounds in them as well. Y'know, I first started

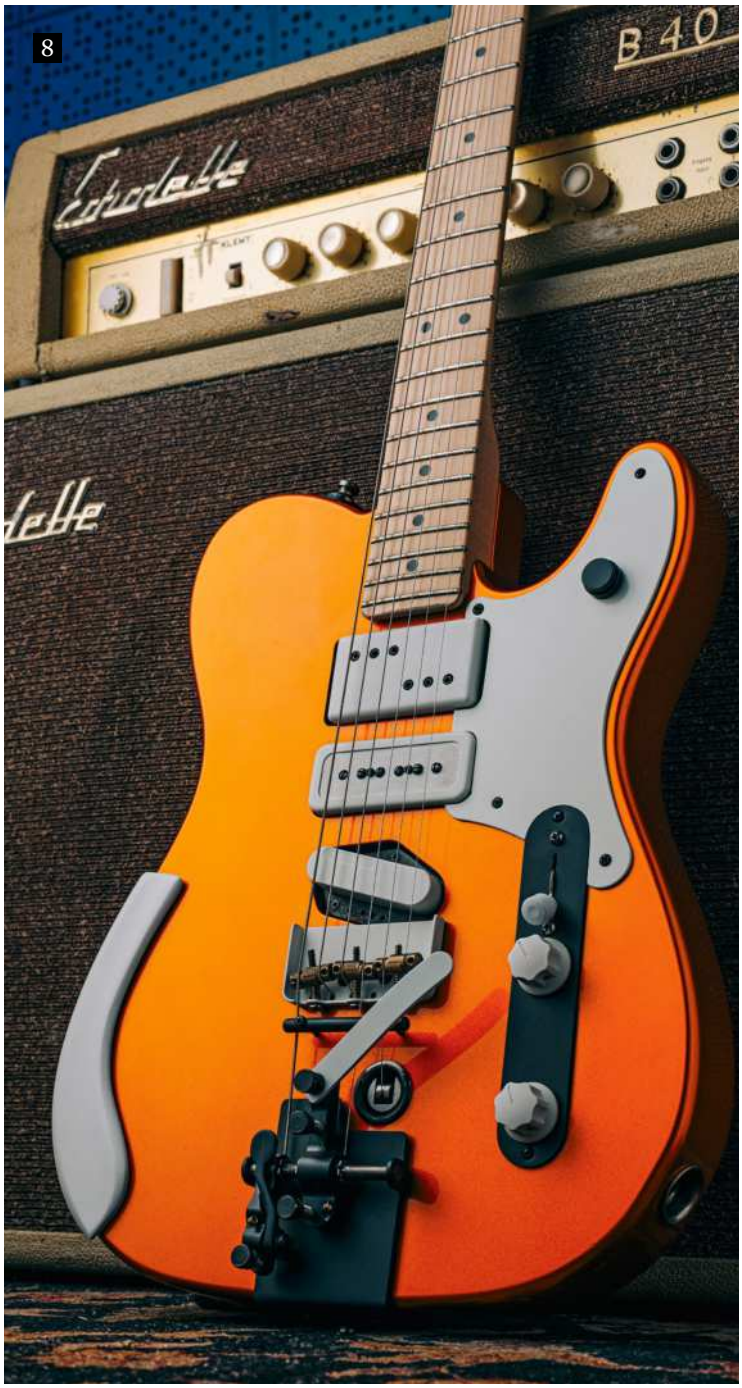
"I understand why people wouldn't like the V-neck; it's hard to play. But I like making things a little bit harder on myself…"

using an Acoustasonic for the last Raconteurs tour. Since we were going with an orange colour scheme for that tour, we borrowed the design idea from one of my Gretsch Rancher Falcon acoustics, the one I named after the actress Claudette Colbert, which has her face engraved on the back by a great tattoo artist in Cincinnati named Kore Flatmo. Along with the tribute to Claudette, my thought was to try to mix some of the design vibe from those interesting old Fender Antigua finishes from the 1970s but with the modern Acoustasonic guitars.

"As for the sounds, I was lucky enough to be one of the first people to get an Acoustasonic when they first came out, and I brought it straight out on tour with The Raconteurs, so I got to road-test it pretty heavily. And the first thing I asked them was, 'Is there any way we can have fewer choices for sounds?' I felt I only needed three sounds – one great electric, one great acoustic and then a sound with both together – because that solved a basic issue with how to play songs of mine that had acoustics and electrics, either in different sections of the same track or sometimes doubling the same parts. That came in real handy with The Raconteurs. Before that, I'd have to write acoustic sections with a long enough space at the end so I could switch back to electric."

This custom Jazzmaster electric you've got in process here looks cool. Any interesting mods on that one?

"Oh, yeah. So, Dan Mancini, my brilliant guitar tech and mission man, has been working a lot on this one. A while back, I showed Dan a clip of a guy who had incorporated some sort of synth device into his guitar, and I thought, 'That's what I've been trying to do for years that I wish we could figure out!' I remember speaking to Matt Bellamy of Muse about how he incorporated a Korg Kaoss Pad into his [custom Manson] guitar, and I always thought that was a great idea. So Dan and I began talking, and right now he's in the process of installing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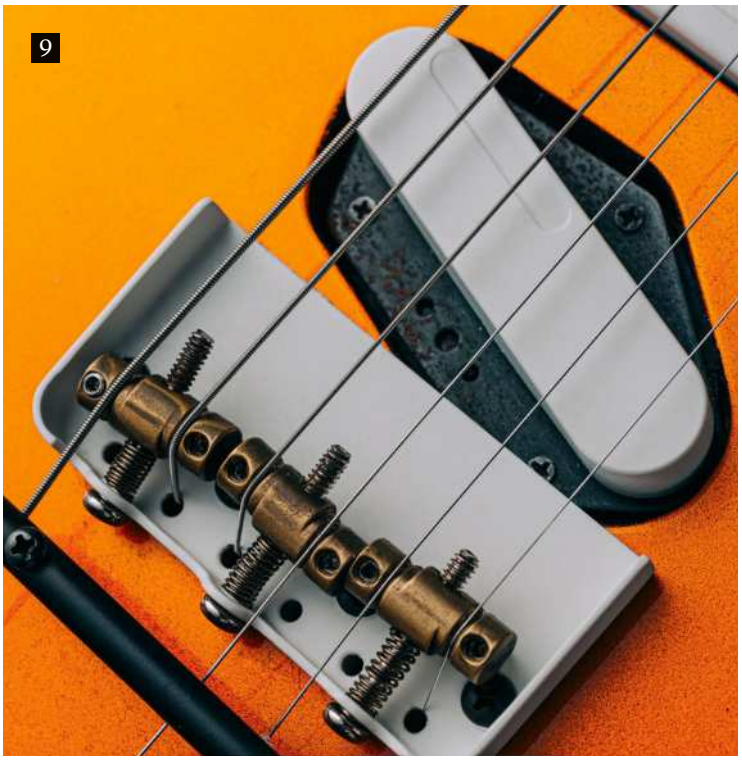
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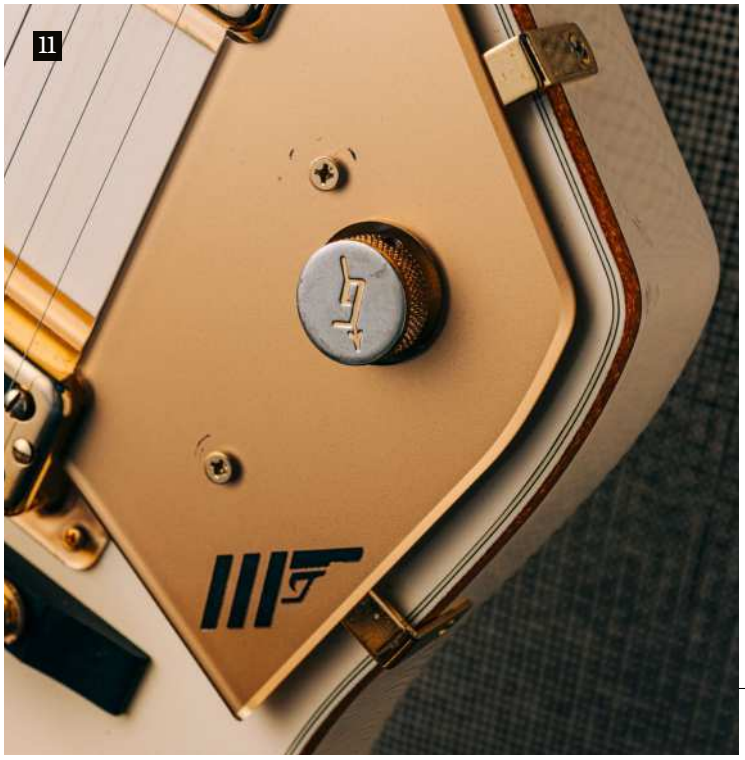
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the guts of an Electro-Harmonix Pitchfork pedal into the back of this Jazzmaster. The intermittent switch can turn on the harmonies, but I can also use one of the pots to bend the pitch as well, just like with a Whammy Pedal. I think Tom Morello may end up getting jealous of this and have to put it on his guitar, too... I'll have to send him a clip of it and see what he thinks."

Will that have a similar mix of Filter'Trons and P-90s like the Telecaster?

"It will have some of the same features as the Tele, but the pickups will be different. I own this incredible Gibson Fort Knox 'Skunk Baxter' Firebird that I played with The Raconteurs, and the mini-humbucker pickups on that, which Jim DeCola designed, are just so impressive. Honestly, it's almost a shock every time I play it. So Tim Shaw at Fender is working on his own version of that type of mini-humbucker to put into this Jazzmaster."

From your well-documented 1964 JB Hutto Montgomery Ward Airline to your gorgeous Gretsch 'Triple Green Machine' to your 1950s Kay Hollowbody to your EVH Wolfgang guitars, you constantly seem to be exploring unusual choices in pursuit of both new sounds and new/old aesthetics. What do you think drives that for you?

"I just think it's cool that there are these moments in your life where you might play through a certain pickup or type of guitar, but maybe it's at the wrong moment in your life, and somehow you decide, 'Nah, that's not for me.' And then you revisit it 10 years later, and you're like, 'Oh my God, actually this is great. It just has its own kind of appeal.' Now, obviously this kind of experience only happens when you're really deep into the tone thing. Plenty of people wouldn't know the difference if you played them five different pickups in a row. They'd probably sound exactly the same to them. But when you're a guitar player, you can really hear how the differences matter and how they influence your playing and tone." G

"When you're a guitar player, you can really hear how pickup differences matter and how they influence your playing and tone"

Fear Of The Dawn by Jack White is out now on Third Man Records. For more information on tours and releases, visit Jack's website ***https://jackwhiteiii.com***

8. Jack's Fender Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster is a creation of the Custom Shop and is converted from a Nashville Tele fitted with a B-Bender. Its trio of pickups includes a Lace Sensor single coil in the bridge position, a P-90 in the middle and, at the neck, a Wide Range humbucker

9. A close-up detail of the Low Rider Tele's bridge reveals compensated brass saddles

10. Given its rarity, you might assume this was a Gretsch Custom Shop creation, but it's an original 1957 G6199 Jupiter Thunderbird

11. Decades of play-wear is evident on the Thunderbird's controls

12. Jack's eclectic effects include the Coppersound Triplegraph octaver built with his design input

BILL FRISELL

Guitarist, composer and all-round esotericist, Bill Frisell is difficult to pin down to any one musical style. A brand-new biography, *Beautiful Dreamer: The Guitarist Who Changed The Sound Of American Music*, is a treatise on his life and career that endeavours to set the record straight

Words Jamie Dickson & David Mead **Portraits** Monica Frisell

"There were things in there I didn't even know about, myself," Frisell jokes when we say how much we enjoyed reading our advance copy of *Beautiful Dreamer*. Despite his work with artists as diverse as Ginger Baker, Suzanne Vega, Brian Eno and Loudon Wainwright III, many would describe Bill as a jazz guitarist. But, as the new book reveals, this would be a mere thumbnail sketch of a man whose work as a composer and performer spans a far wider musical terrain. In fact, he has been described in some quarters as 'the Clark Kent of the guitar'. We decided it was time to talk to the man himself and our conversation began with the recent tome...

How much of a peculiar experience was it to have your life and career examined in such detail?
"I spent a lot of time with Philip [Watson, the biography's author], but I had no idea, until I finally saw it, what he was actually doing or how it would come out. He was very careful about making sure everything was accurate. I had to read the whole thing from beginning to end to make sure there were no obvious mistakes, so it was wild. It's hard to describe what it felt like, going through my whole life like that, just emotional and strange. Also, I'm not that fast a reader, so, oh my God, 700 pages..."

Going back to the beginning, which childhood musical experiences left the deepest impressions on you?
"I can't remember exactly how old I was when I got a little transistor radio. I think that's where I remember hearing music and being so enthralled. This is before I played an instrument or anything. It was just this sound that was calling out to me. I would be listening to it all the time, and have it under my pillow when I was sleeping at night and all that.

"When I was in the fourth grade, when they started the music programme in the public schools, that's when I actually picked up an instrument and started trying to mess around with trying to make some sound myself. I was taking music lessons playing the clarinet. Then electric guitars were coming out, like Fender guitars in all these crazy colours. I remember looking at album covers of all these surf bands and thinking, 'Wow, look at those guitars. They look so cool.' That's when I started wanting to get a guitar."

Did the early grounding in the clarinet give you a perspective on music that you carried forward to playing guitar or was it just a stepping stone?
"I had this very strict teacher. You had to tap your foot this way and follow all these rules – almost military training. I played in marching bands and band orchestras, but just playing with other people, you're hearing this whole sound happening around you. You're trying to blend in with it and play at the right volume, and play in tune, and put things in the right place – all these basic things are huge.

"Later on, as I got better, I would play in smaller chamber groups, like a woodwind quintet or something. There, you're super-sensitive about the intonation, and how loud you're playing, and just being in harmony with the other instruments and making a blend all together. That kind of stuff has really stuck with me to this day. I can remember it, and also playing a wind instrument, where you're breathing into it, you play a phrase and it lasts as long as you can breathe. There's a whole element of how the breath is related to the musical statement that you're making, so I can feel that when I'm playing guitar now, even though I'm not, technically, blowing air into the thing, I am still breathing with what I'm playing."

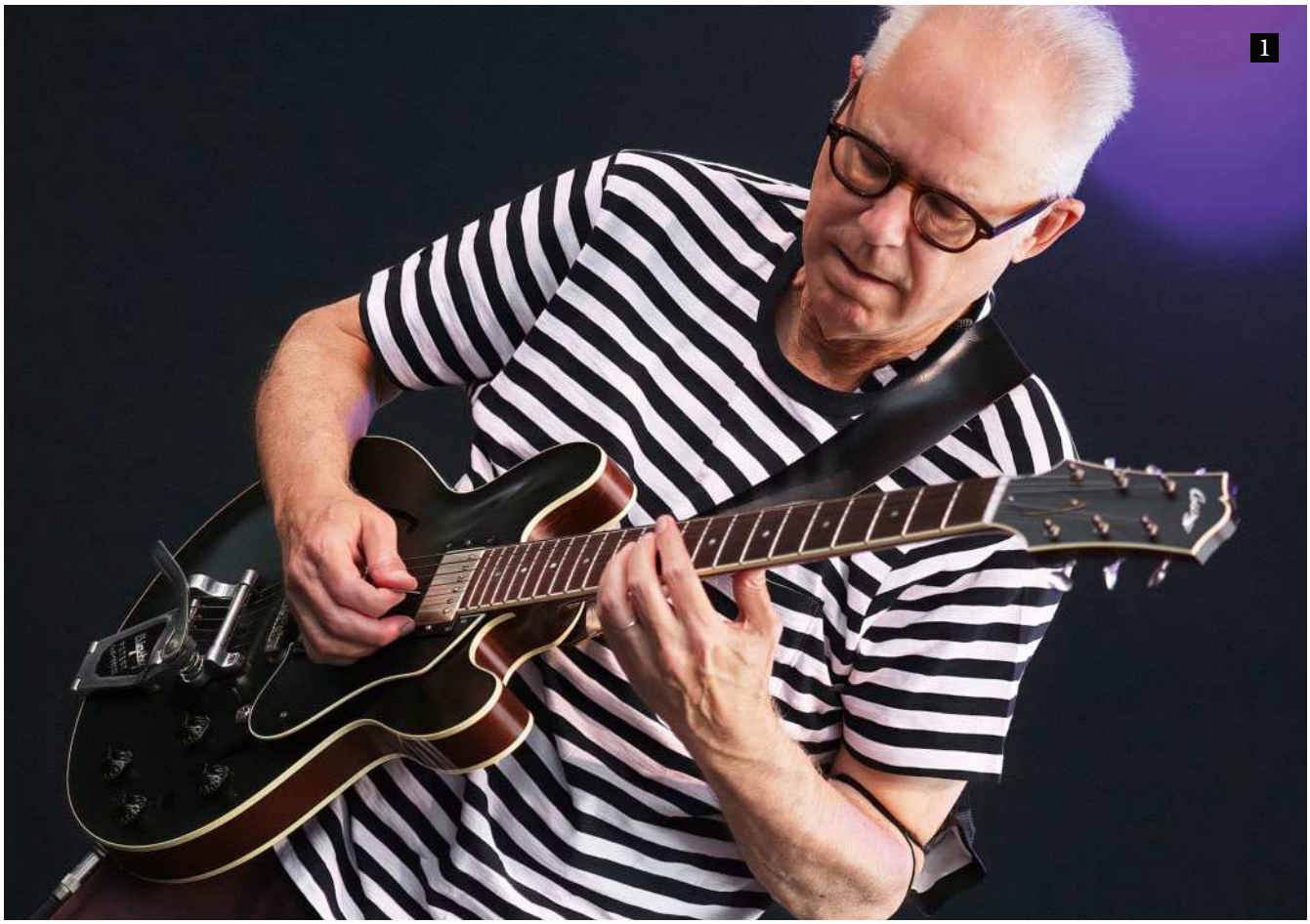


PHOTO BY LUCIANO VITI/GETTY IMAGES

1. Bill's formative training on clarinet – and his subsequent stints in marching bands and orchestras and more intimate settings such as chamber groups – equipped him with a sensitivity to intonation, harmony and the importance of letting the instrument breathe, which he's carried with him throughout his career on guitar

2. The guitar is a tool with "an extreme range of expression", says Bill. And he's eschewing boundaries as he sets about his own explorations of the instrument

What kind of things did you learn from Jim Hall and the other jazz guitarists of the 60s?
"With Jim, it was the timing, the space, the rhythm and the way he was interacting with the groups that he played in. He was really coming from the inside of the music out. It wasn't about him trying to show you something, show off about something that he knew or playing something fancy. Everything he played was in service to the whole musical situation. I think that's what inspired me the most. The groups, like him playing with Sonny Rollins or him playing with Art Farmer, or those duets with Ron Carter or with Bill Evans, or any situation he was in, he lifted the whole thing up but from the inside out.

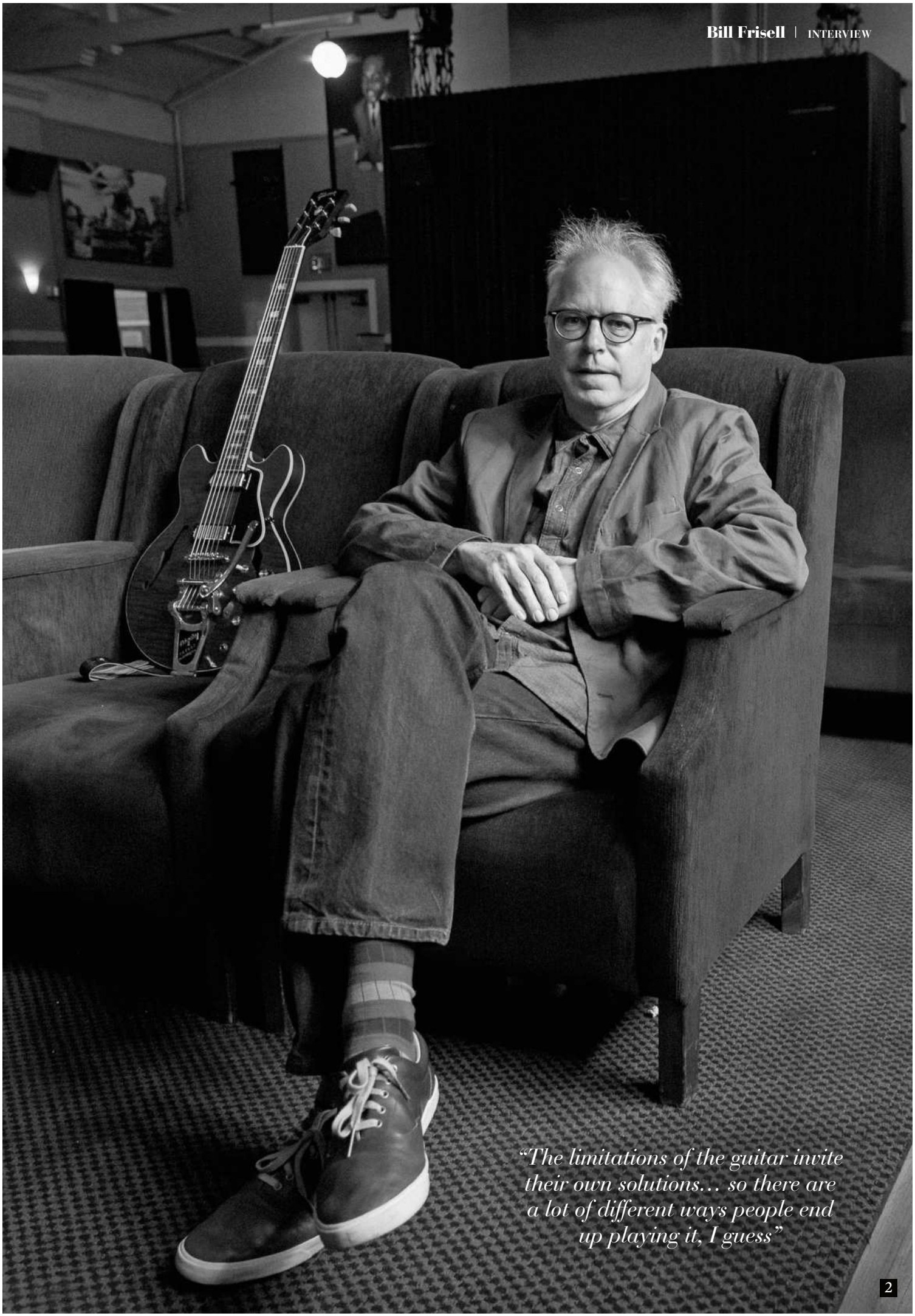
"Before Jim Hall, I heard Wes Montgomery for the first time, and that was the big 'Eureka!' moment for me. Prior to Wes Montgomery, I hadn't really heard much."

Both Hendrix and SRV stated they were fans of Wes – he seemed to reach across musical boundaries...
"Wes Montgomery was playing music that was popular at that moment. It was like he was the Pied Piper or something. He was like, 'Listen to this, but look where it's possible to take it...' Also his connection with blues. Right at the heart of all this music, blues was in there. It'd be so down-to-earth, but then he would show you this way up into outer space. He'd take you from down here on the ground and go as far as your imagination could go.

"Also my age when I heard him – I guess I was 16 years old – it was just the right time in my life and where I was at with my understanding of music and what I was trying to do. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. It led me to wanting to find a guitar teacher. I'd been trying to figure it out on my own, mostly. I had a couple of teachers, or I would learn from my friends or whatever, but that was the moment when I thought, 'I've got to get a serious teacher and try to figure out what's going on with this music.' This is in Denver, Colorado, which is not exactly the jazz capital of the world, but I was lucky to find my teacher there, Dale Bruning. He was the guy who introduced me to Jim's music and introduced me to Jim in person, too."

"Jim Hall was coming from the inside of the music out. Everything he played was in service to the whole musical situation"

On to a broader question – what do you take to be the purpose of what people think of as jazz guitar, certainly in its classical period of the 50s, 60s and 70s?
"Oh, man. It is broad, because when you say 'jazz,' it means so many things to so many people. Some of the greatest jazz musicians reject the word itself, like Duke Ellington. For me, when I think of jazz, it's like, 'This is a place where anything is possible.' For me, it's music you can't pin down. Okay, you could say there's Howard Roberts, or Jim Hall, or Wes Montgomery, or Kenny Burrell, or Joe Pass, or John McLaughlin, or Derek Bailey, Jimmy Raney and Grant Green... it goes



"The limitations of the guitar invite their own solutions… so there are a lot of different ways people end up playing it, I guess"

3. With jazz guitar, says Bill, "anything is possible" – a sentiment that he found to be true in the music of influences such as Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery

on, and on, and on. To me, when I hear all those names, it's like I hear a sound in my head. It's not just one thing. Each one of them is a complete, unique world unto themselves. I can't think of any other instrument that has such an extreme range of expression. It's pretty wild, right?"

The guitar is an idiosyncratic instrument. What do you regard as its best qualities and its worst?
"There are limitations. On a piano, everything is laid out in front of you. Visually, you see the whole thing. On the guitar, there's a lot of deciphering that you have to go through. You have to figure out where things are, and you can play the same note in different places. When I played the clarinet, basically you push this button down and it makes that note. That's where you play that note. On the guitar, it's a bit more mysterious. You can play an A – an open A – or you can play an A on the E string, or you can play it on a different string. It's scattered around. Just the way it's organised is quite a bit different than some other instruments, so you have to sort all that out.

"I think, whatever the limitations are, they push you into finding ways around them. So there's a lot of opportunity for different people to find their own way. I never really thought about it quite like this, but maybe

"I love music and I don't want to be hemmed in, in any way. I'm just following what I love and it's never-ending"

the limitations of the guitar invite their own solutions. There are a lot of different ways to get to those solutions, so there are a lot of different ways people end up playing it, I guess."

In your career, you've played many makes and styles of guitar. What do you look for in a guitar these days?
"Oh, boy, that's just never-ending. I have a lot of guitars and if I get another guitar, there'll be something – it could be a subtle thing, like the way the overtones ring – that leads your fingers into some other place, or leads your ear, pulls you in a certain way. It's like each guitar will tell you something, it's like a teacher. Then when you go back to another guitar that you were playing before, you'll realise there was something in there that you didn't know was there before. If I play an acoustic guitar for a long time and then go to my electric guitar, it'll show me things on the electric guitar I hadn't thought of before."

PHOTO CAROLE D'INVERNO

You've made this wonderful virtue of eclecticism in your music. What are the challenges of being broad-ranging in one's playing, as opposed to purist?
"To me, that shows I love music and I don't want to be hemmed in, in any way. I'm just following what I love and it's never-ending. It's like, 'Wow, how am I going to do this?' That's the challenge all the time. You go chasing after it and try to understand it. It's not consciously trying to be eclectic or anything. It's just that I like music and I'm trying to figure it out."

We guess sometimes it can be easy to forget you're there just to create, really...
"When I was first in a band, we were in one of these 'Battle of the Band' contests. People were saying, 'You have to move around more. You need to dance around.' I was just standing there playing. In my mind, the music was dancing around, but they wanted me to move my body. I never felt comfortable with all that stuff."

The biography is the reason we are speaking, but what, more broadly, are you up to musically at the moment?
"There's a lot of going on right now. I just finished recording a new album a couple of weeks ago. I'll be mixing that in a couple of days, and then I'm travelling to San Francisco to play with Ambrose Akinmusire. Then I go to England for the release of the book. I'm going to play one solo concert there [in London's Jazz Cafe in November]. It's just one thing after another. It's crazy. Then I go to Germany to play with John Zorn, and then come back to the States. I'm travelling pretty much non-stop these days." G

Bill Frisell: Beautiful Dreamer – The Guitarist Who Changed The Sound Of American Music by Philip Watson is out now via Faber & Faber

www.billfrisell.com

Guitarist

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MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder recently reunited, after nearly 60 years, to record a sublime tribute to Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. Entitled *Get On Board*, it's among the best records either man has made. We joined Taj and Ry to find out why they decided to catch the late train...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Abby Ross

Talk to any dyed-in-the-wool fan of blues music and it won't be long before they mention Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. Hailing from Tennessee, guitarist Brownie McGhee learned his craft from Blind Boy Fuller. But it was when he paired up with blues-harp wizard Sonny Terry that he found his perfect foil – and the duo were lionised by the folk scene of 60s America.

Around that time, a young Santa Monica guitarist, Ry Cooder, stumbled across their records in a secondhand record store. After that, he sought out live performances by Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, learning licks directly from McGhee after the shows. Meanwhile, another aspiring blues-folk artist, Taj Mahal, was piecing together where he might witness

1. Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder (pictured below, far right) played together during the mid-1960s with Rising Sons, alongside (L-R) Gary Marker, Kevin Kelley and Jesse Lee Kincaid

2. Taj Mahal was on the cusp of his 20s when a Robert Johnson album opened his ears to a sound that was surprisingly little-known

the music of a duo he had heard fragments of over the late-night airwaves. Like Ry, he couldn't believe Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry weren't major stars. And, like Ry, he found that their live performances were a wellspring of pure musical joy. Weaving together strands of blues and folk, their music defied easy categorisation – which is, in itself, reflective of the underlying reality of the music of America's South. Eclectic, entertaining and wide-ranging, it was a huge influence on Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal.

The latter moved to Santa Monica in the 1960s and met Ry – and Ry played on Taj Mahal's eponymous debut album in 1968. Now, nearly six decades later, they have reunited to record *Get On Board*, a captivating tribute to the music of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. We joined these two past-masters of American music to discover why returning to their roots yielded one of the best recordings of their career, and we learn why a guitar so large that Ry could barely get his arm around it was the star of the show...

When did you first encounter the music of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee?

Taj Mahal: "Well, I started hearing them probably when I was 15 or 16 years old. You'd hear little bits and snatches of them on the radio and whatnot. Not on regular radio – but some late-night blues programme would be on and you'd hear it and be struck by how good it was and how come you didn't hear it all the time? And then I just wondered where these people were. But later I came to university, during the 60s, when the whole folk-craze came through. And many of these musicians, people like Brownie and Sonny and Bukka White, Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes and others, were being brought around to coffeehouses and played at folk festivals. So I began to realise that there was a place you could go and see them play, you know?

"I got to see them and I thought they were just incredible. And I hoped that I would be able to be that good someday. I mean, I could play a little bit and I could sing quite well, but I was just learning to get my guitar chops together. But Brownie was really good and Sonny was just a wizard on the harmonica. Those guys, they'd play with Lead Belly, they'd play with Pete Seeger, they'd play with Blind Boy Fuller or the Reverend Gary Davis... they had some versatility, to be honest. They were involved in different plays on Broadway like *Finian's Rainbow* and came up with some great stuff. I mean, that whole *Fox Chase* blues stuff that Sonny Terry came up with – that's a Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina style. Goes over to Arkansas, too – but it was always a great show. I never saw them put on a bad show. Ever."

Why do you think history has remembered Robert Johnson and BB King, for example, but only hardcore blues fans tend to know about Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry?

Taj: "Well, I don't even think that everybody knows the aforementioned people you're talking about. In fact, I'd never heard *Dust My Broom* [by Elmore James], none of that, until I came to the university and I was about 19 years old and they put out that record *Robert Johnson King Of The Delta Blues Singers*. I was like, 'Who *is* this guy I've never heard of before?' Why, all of a sudden, was this whole group of folkies going, 'Wow, wow, wow – listen to this guy *play*...'? I had absolutely no idea! So I put the record on and at first it sounded [quick]. And the reason was they had printed the record at too fast an rpm. But when they finally got it at the right speed, it really made more sense.

"But still, never heard of Robert Johnson before that. Now, John Lee Hooker I'd heard of. BB King I'd heard about. And maybe now and then I would hear that sound when I'd be at a neighbour's house... their moms and pops were in the kitchen and maybe BB King would be on in the background. But I'd never heard Elmore James or even understood the sound of slide guitar, except that it was on a couple of Jimmy Reed records I knew. But a lot of that comes from the record-selling industry – they were always trying to put music in boxes. You know, like, 'This is *this* kind of blues, *this* kind of country & western, *this* kind of pop,' separating things like that. Oftentimes, the listener didn't get a chance to realise that [music] was just one big river full of lots of different fish."

How did the idea of working together again start?

Taj: "Well, we literally hadn't played together for over 50 years and I was getting a lifetime achievement award in Nashville at the Ryman Auditorium, which is the Mother Church of Country Music. Ry and his son were involved in the band, as well as Buddy Miller and Don Was, and so Ry reached out to me and


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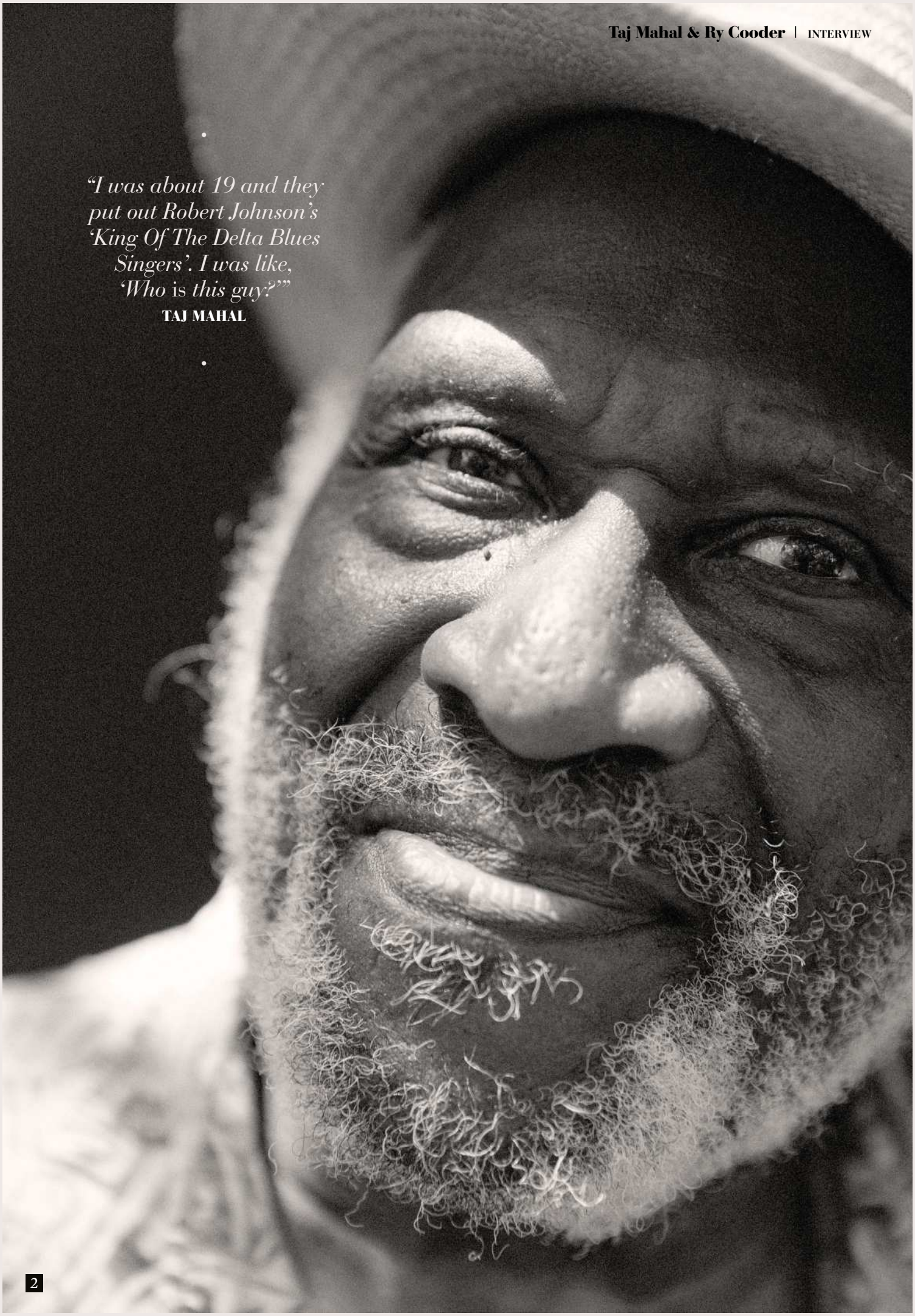
PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



"I was about 19 and they put out Robert Johnson's 'King Of The Delta Blues Singers'. I was like, 'Who is this guy?'"

TAJ MAHAL

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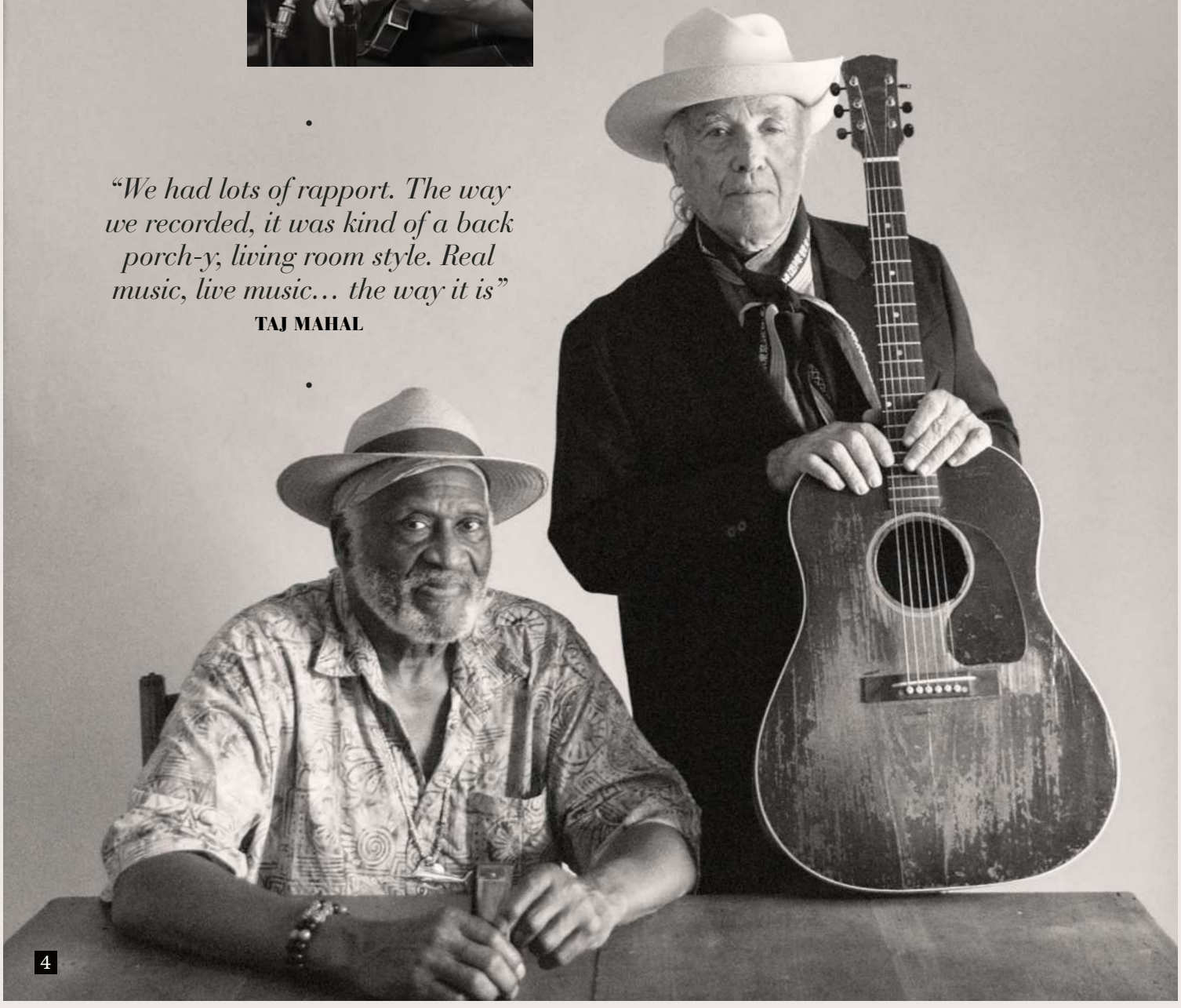
"We had lots of rapport. The way we recorded, it was kind of a back porch-y, living room style. Real music, live music… the way it is"

TAJ MAHAL



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> *"If you like the sound, you can record anything. If you don't like it, you might as well go home"*
> **RY COOODER**

said, 'What material do you think you'd like to do?' I suggested maybe something that was a little more country. He said, 'Oh, well, I mean, that's all right, but I think we should pump it.' And I was like, 'Okay, I do, too – but I was trying to be a little diplomatic.' So I said, 'Well, that only means only one thing, Ry – *Statesboro Blues*.' He says, 'You're on,' and so we did a version, which is now on YouTube.

"Little by little, we started communicating with one another again and his birthday came and I called him up. Then we started sending music back and forth and, at one point, he came and he said, 'Well, what do you think about this? I've got an idea. Why don't we do a tribute to Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry?' Well, I was ready right there [laughs]. So I came down to Los Angeles and we played together again and it was just great. We had lots of rapport, lots of communication and it took off from there. The way we recorded, it was kind of a back porch-y, living room style, you know? Real music, live music... the way it is. Ry set the music up and then we got to playing and we're talking to one another. That's what you really want to happen is that, ultimately, you're speaking to one another through the instruments."

How did the sessions for *Get On Board* go down?

Ry Cooder: "Well, [my son] Joachim's got this nice old Spanish-style California house down the street from us here. We're in an old neighbourhood – we're not in LA any more. We're all out in this other area. But I mean, it's an older neighbourhood, it's an older area. His living room is about the shape of what you might expect in an early recording studio with a very high ceiling, wood floor and some plaster as well. The architect that designed the house was a very good architect. I happen to know who it was – and at the time, in 1927, he came upon this shape of this room somehow, and he thought it would be pleasing. But maybe he didn't know that it's also acoustically perfect, as long as you don't play too loud. You can't hit a loud snare drum in there and you can't play electric bass in there. But you can do all kinds of things acoustically.

"Then [there was] our engineer friend Martin Pradler – to say he's a genius is like saying Beethoven was a pretty good orchestrator. I mean, he's a tremendous interpreter of how the music should be recorded and we've worked with him for a lot of years now. So I said to him, 'Martin, I'm going to play acoustic guitar, which I hardly ever do in recording, and Taj is going to play harmonica. We're going to sing. It's all live and Joachim bangs on these strange oddball drums. And we're going to sort of be in a triangle. The drums a little further away from the vocal mic, but it's a good-sized room and we want to mic the room... don't mic us too close. We want it so it sounds like you walked into a place like a little juke joint or a little bar or somewhere where you hear the thing [as a whole], not as isolated individuals...'

"So he set the mics up. Tube mics, naturally. We've got all this old equipment – me and Martin between the two of us – that's really good. But, the point is, it's period equipment. It's vintage but good. We record through an old AM radio tube-powered board [desk] and he moves mics around until you hear in the earphones, 'Ah, that's the spot for that mic.' You know, that's capturing something that's well defined, but it's ambient – like being in the room. That's what I want. When I hear it, I'll like it. And when we like what we hear through the earphones, then we can go ahead and play and we don't have to work too hard and it's very natural. If you like the sound, you can record anything, you can play anything. If you don't like the sound, you might as well go home.

"I overdubbed stuff here and there, but the basic tracks with the live singing is what you're hearing. Yes, I added bottleneck here and there and whatnot, and maybe another harmony sometimes because it's nice to hear three voices just for fun. Nothing fancy but just to get the feel. Get the groove going right. If the groove is right, you're in business with that music. That's really what it is. Who cares what the lyrics say so much? They're fun lyrics, but the point is the groove, you know?"

3. The Spanish-style Californian home of Ry Cooder's son Joachim played host to the recording sessions, with its "acoustically perfect" shape and high ceilngs

4. When Taj was awarded a Lifetime Achievement award from the Americana Music Association a few years back, Ry Cooder was part of the band at the Ryman. And so the seed was sown for their latest collaboration...

5. Taj has released numerous solo and collaborative records since his debut album landed in the late 60s


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PHOTO BY MARKA/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

6. Pictured here in the 70s, Ry Cooder says his proficiency on guitar has improved as time has passed: "I'm a slow learner. So now I'm playing the way I wanted to play when I was young... I can say to myself, 'This is exactly what I aspired to do all those years ago'"

The acoustic sounds on *Pawn Shop Blues* are incredible. What guitar did you use for that?

Ry: "Oh yeah, that's a nice guitar. That one there is one of these Banner [logo] Gibsons J-45s. I think it's from 1943. But I like to vary things. The real oddball guitar, the crazy guitar, was on the track *[What A] Beautiful City*. It's the most goddamnedest thing you've ever seen. It's an Adams Brothers guitar that's so big. It's as big as a guitarrón, and I can barely hold it and wrap my arm around it. It's enormous and it has a short neck, so it can only be played in one key, E. But it has this incredible sound, it's a big goddamn guitar, real thin. 1905 it was made, and how it survived all these years, who the hell knows. That's a wonderful guitar.

"But that J-45 on *Pawn Shop* is nice, yeah. It's not as resonant as the D-18. I used the D-18 for most of the tunes because that's what Brownie played and it's a good one, 1946. Very, very good guitar. For that music it's perfect: very big, twangy sound. But for *Pawn Shop* I needed something a little quieter and played a little softer, so that Banner J-45 is nice – it was in a fire, I think, so it's real damaged [laughs]. It looks like somebody in Pompeii had it when the volcano erupted, but it's good."

Taj: "Ry also had a cello banjo. The [pre-war] instrument makers made violins, viola, cello. And they made banjos like that, too – bass banjos, mandolas, mandocellos or banjolins. That was the imprint from the European instruments when they came over here and started to make them. Ry had some extraordinary ones... I had a steel guitar and a wooden guitar and a plethora of harmonicas."

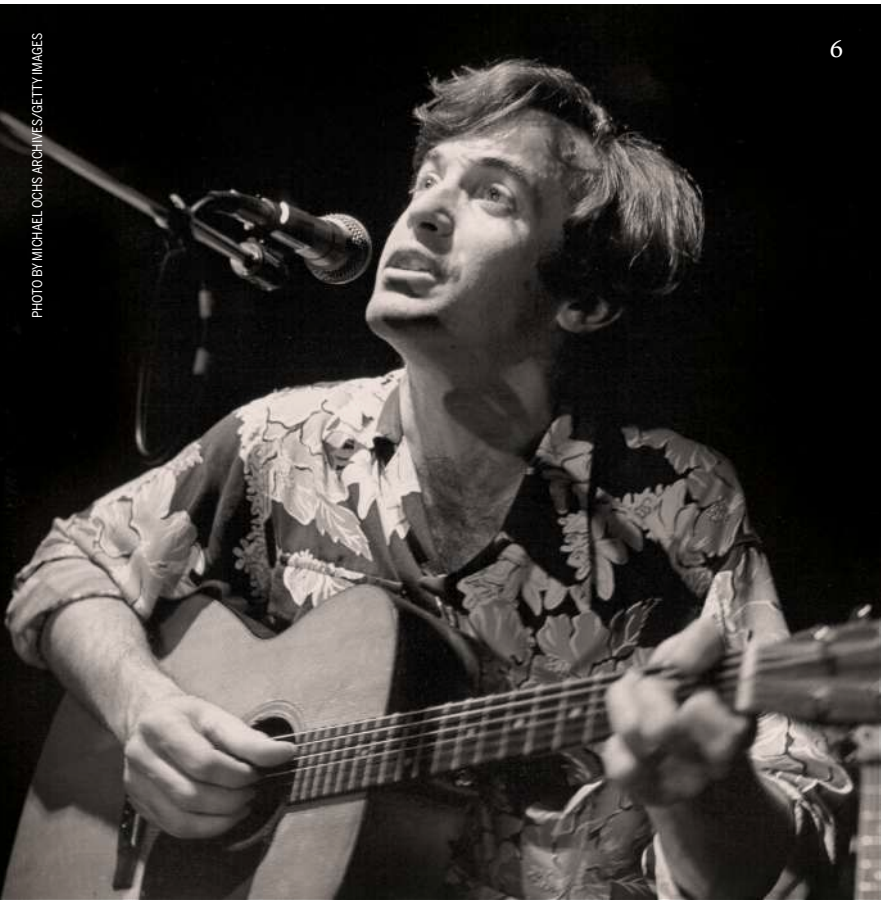

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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> *"[The Adams Brothers] guitar is the most goddamnedest thing you've ever seen. It's so big"*
>
> **RY COODER**

***Pawn Shop Blues* has a really slow, meditative tempo that gives it huge emotional weight. You don't hear that so much any more in blues. Why?**

Ry: "First of all, everybody's moving too fast. If you don't think so, just go on to LA freeway sometime. People move too fast or they're in a hurry all the time, like, 'I get my brown shoes – no socks – I get my tattoos, I get my beard and my hat and my little box-back coat. And then I'll get my guitar and then I'll make my record and then I'll be famous.' [Laughs] And that's the order of battle, that's how it's going to play out. Well, that's ridiculous. There's no way that can work. I mean, we older people know that – but it's basic. So it does take some time.

"The other thing is, if you're going to play real slow, then you have to go into that song as a meditation. I mean, shall I use that word? You have to immerse yourself in it. You have to have the ability... the desire is very important, but stop thinking about 'brown shoes, no socks, beards and tattoos' and think about nothing and just play the goddamn song. Can you evoke something? Can you make it felt? If you feel it, your audience will feel it. And yet at the same time, you have to have enough ability.

"By the way, it's taken me a lifetime since I started guitar when I was four or so. It's not something you learn overnight, and I certainly didn't learn it overnight. I'm well aware records exist that show us there were people who were very young, such as Louis Armstrong, who had an epiphany and they became who they became suddenly. So that can happen – but not me. I'm a slow learner. So now I'm playing the way I wanted to play when I was young. I actually can hear that I'm doing it, and I can say to myself, 'This is exactly what I aspired to do all those years ago.'

"I remember one time, Terry Melcher, the record producer, said to me – and I was in my 20s at the time or even younger – he said, 'The rate you're going, it's going to take you 20 years to get anywhere.' And I thought, 'Jeez, that's harsh.' But it wasn't. He was actually way off the mark: 20, hell! 40, 50 years maybe. You have to realise I'm not from some little podunk town in the South with uncles to teach me. I didn't have uncles to teach me. In Santa Monica, there's no uncles! You're just on your own. I mean, if you can get anywhere and not have to become an insurance underwriter or an auto mechanic... I mean, they should have taught me auto mechanics when I was in high school, but they didn't. So I went on and learned guitar [laughs]." G

Get On Board by Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder is out now on Warner Music Group
www.tajblues.com
https://rycooder.com

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Compiled by Jason Sidwell, David Mead & Jamie Dickson
Photography Neil Godwin

Guitarist would like to thank Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars for the kind loan of the incredible sparkle finish 60s Stratocaser that appears here
www.vintageandrareguitars.com

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ALLEN HINDS
IBANEZ TS9 TUBE SCREAMER

"I've used one since the early 80s. Even the pedals I use now are a version of that pedal, such as the Xotic AC Comp. The Tube Screamer just works at all levels, in any position. It helped mellow out all the varieties of pickups and amps back in the 80s. In front of a Marshall it's magic.

"My second choice if I could have one would be an old Buddha wah from the 90s, purple colour. It's also magic."

ANDY TIMMONS
KEELEY HALO ANDY TIMMONS DUAL ECHO

"I have to answer this one generally first, then specifically! Echo devices have been a big part of my tone since the early 80s: I've used everything from the Maestro EP-3, Roland Space Echo, Deluxe Memory Man, Strymon TimeLine and endless stompboxes and rack units looking for the ultimate echo sound. But now (shameless but very proud plug alert!) I now have my ultimate dual echo signature pedal, the Keeley Halo.

"The Halo combines all the things I love about vintage echo devices into my ultimate vision of great echo tone" **ANDY TIMMONS**

"The Halo isn't specifically replicating any of these vintage units but rather combining all the things I love about them individually into what my ultimate vision of what great echo tone can be. I rely heavily upon on this 'Halo' effect – a very tape-like modulated dual echo that diffuses into a reverb-like aura around the note – and I leave it on all the time. It allows me to have a singing, vocal-like quality to my melodies and also acts as kind of a sustain pedal on a piano for my chord solos."

ANDY WOOD
SUHR WOODSHED COMP

"It really depends on the amp I'm using and the style I'm playing. If it's country Tele chicken pickin' stuff into an old Deluxe then it has to be a compressor. Lately, I worked with Kevin Suhr to design a custom compressor called the Woodshed Comp; it's my favourite.

1. The TS9 Tube Screamer works for LA tutor and session ace Allen Hinds to mellow pickups and amps with its smooth top end and compression

2. Robert Keeley has proven to be one of the sharpest pedal-makers in the world, with an impressive roster of artists using his gear. This includes Andy Timmons who put his name to the Halo Dual Echo, which offers five delay rhythms and 1500ms of delay

3. Technically dazzling guitarist Andy Wood isn't the first country-influenced player to turn to compression to even out the peaks of his chicken-picking – but says that a digital delay, even a standard model, is another staple of his board

"If I was needing blues up to hard-rock gain levels into a clean amp then it has to be the Wampler Gearbox. That pedal is a two-in-one overdrive with a Klon-style circuit on one side and a 'Marshall in a box' on the other. There is an internal noise gate to get rid of the idle hum, so it's incredibly versatile.

"If I'm using a big half-stack where the amplifier provides all of the gain, then a killer delay pedal like the UA and Strymon pedals are my favourite delay. However, I can get the job done with a little Boss DD if need be."

BILL NELSON
LINE 6 POD 2.0

"I haven't used an analogue pedal or an amplifier for many years, being an early adopter of digital modelling technology. I have digital processors from Zoom, Line 6, DigiTech and Fractal, all of which I use. But despite it being 'old tech' now, my favourite is a very early Line 6 Pod 2.0, which I've used since the early 90s. I've programmed it with my own sounds and it gets used every day in my studio, and also in live shows coupled with a floorboard controller. Though the Fractal has some great sounds, there's just something that I really

ANDY TIMMONS PHOTO BY TERESA JOLIE BILL NELSON PHOTO BY MARTIN BOSTOCK ANDY WOOD PHOTO BY CHELSEA LAUREN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

like about the old Pod, particularly for clean and slightly overdriven sounds, and it's become an essential part of my tonal palette. I'm often asked about what pedals and amp I'm using on different recordings, but when I tell them it's just an early model Pod, they don't believe me!"

BRETT GARSED

DIGITECH IPS 33B

"I know it's a rackmount unit and not a pedal... [but] I found I could link an expression pedal to the ambient delay input level, which is a key part of my sound to this day. The DigiTech led me to the Yamaha UD Stomp – which IS a pedal. The UD Stomp made me realise I could do the same effect within the Axe-Fx III, which is the main source of my sound."

CHRIS BUCK

SNOUSE BLACKBOX 2

"The pedal I find myself leaning on increasingly heavily is a Snouse BlackBox 2. It's a one-to-one clone of the old Marshall Bluesbreaker pedal from the 90s, which, although I own an original – I was lucky to get in before their value sky-rocketed! – can be a temperamental beast, to say the least, so it's much less worrisome to use a modern equivalent.

"When it comes to overdrive pedals, I set them all fairly subtly so I can stack them to achieve different levels of gain – no one overdrive pedal on my 'board has a particularly marked effect in isolation – but there's something incredibly natural, musical and dynamic about the BlackBox that I always find myself gravitating towards. After the fuzz, it's first in the chain so is invariably used to hit the pedals that come after it that little harder, and I think it's testament to its quality that I've yet to find a pedal whose inherent tone the BlackBox doesn't improve or add something special to."

4. Chris Buck's rig is built around smoothly sustaining drive that suits his fluid legato style well – he says the Snouse BlackBox 2 is a pillar of that setup

5. David Grissom is universally praised for his expressive sound – which is given richness by the Xotic EP Booster, based on an Echoplex preamp

CORRADO RUSTICI

DV MARK SIGNATURE SOPHIA

"For the past three years my absolute favourite, and that I couldn't do without, is my soon-to-be-released DV Mark signature Sophia expression pedal. It might seem like a plug, but it's not. For the very first time, I can control and give expression to my guitar playing/phrasing, like I never could before. I'm really enjoying exploring the beauty of vocal/sax/violin-like expression on a 'mainly' percussive instrument, without killing its dynamics with extreme distortion and/or compression."

DAN PATLANSKY

HONEY BEE CLEAN DRIVE

"I love the Clean Drive because it's by far the most natural-sounding pedal I've ever played. In fact, since I started using it I've never turned it off; it's part of my clean sound now. It adds a very subtle break-up and beauty to even the cleanest and most sterile-sounding amps."

DAVE KILMINSTER

BOSS CHROMATIC TUNER

"My favourites are the MXR Micro Amp, Electro-Harmonix Small Stone Phase Shifter, Fulltone Deja'Vibe and Hermida Zendrive. The one pedal that I always use is a Boss Chromatic Tuner. I don't like to hear bands tune up on stage; it always sounds like amateur night. Also I'm a little obsessive about tuning. During a show I'll constantly check my guitar – sometimes between every song – and even though it's usually fine, I check it anyway. When touring with Roger Waters there can be up to four guys all playing guitars at once so if something sounds a little off then I can stand there with a grin of confidence thinking it's not me!"

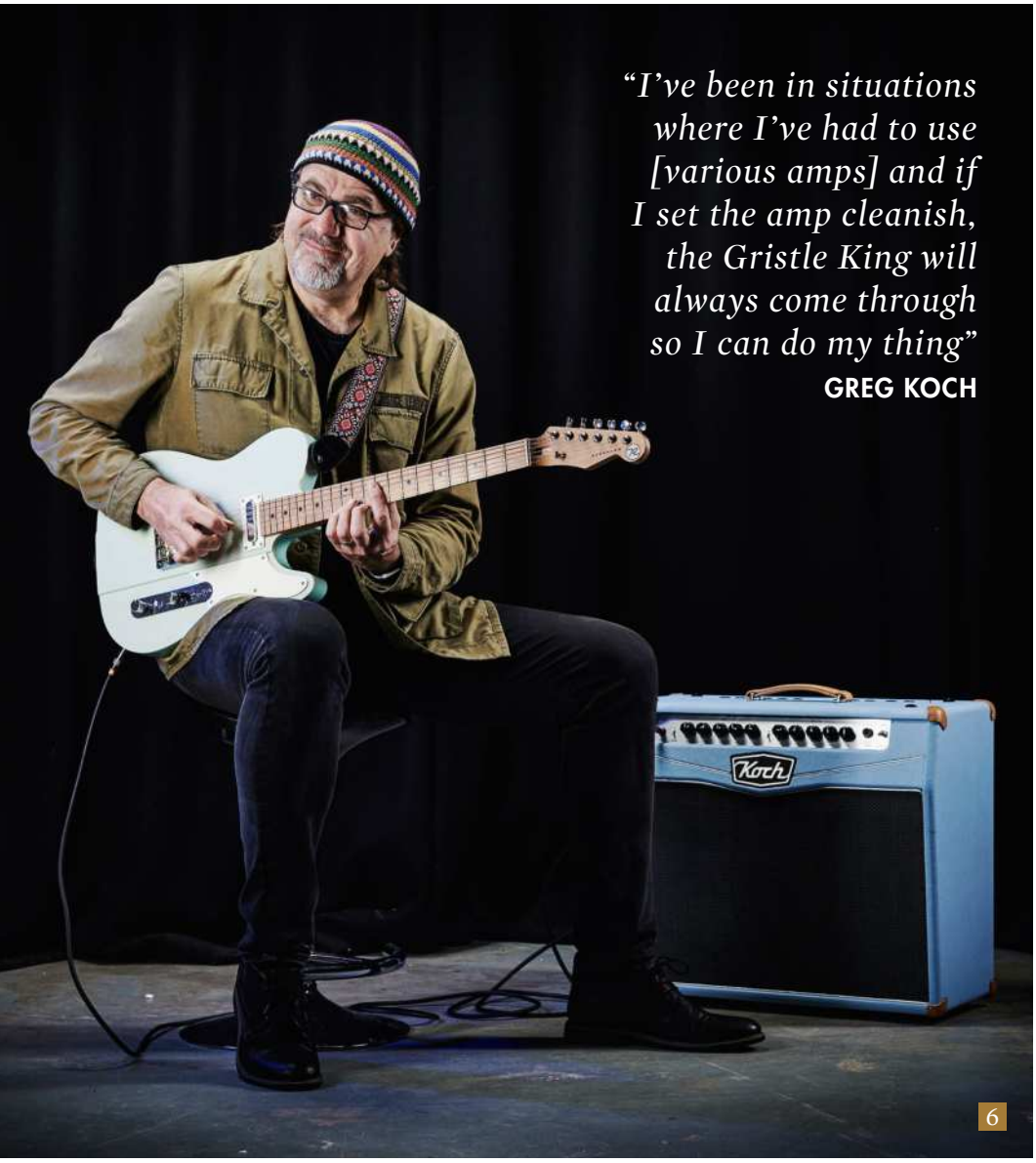
DAVID GRISSOM

XOTIC EP BOOSTER & **LINE 6** M9

"I use the EP Booster with the internal dip switches in vintage mode. Unlike other boost pedals I've tried that usually sound transparent and sometimes add top-end, the Xotic adds warmth, volume and fattens my tone just enough as long as it's in vintage mode.

"I've used a Line 6 M9 since they came out many years ago. Yes, you eventually have to replace the footswitches, but the variety and quality of delays, accuracy of the tap tempo, the best pitch vibrato I've found, great tremolos, and a bunch of other stuff, like the phase shifter I need once a year, make it a musical Swiss Army knife. A very organic-sounding multi-effects box."

BRETT GARSED PHOTO BY TIBBY FLORA CORRADO RUSTICI PHOTO BY ALESSANDRO PEPE DAVID GRISSOM PHOTO BY GREG VOROBIOV



DENNIS COFFEY
DUNLOP CRY BABY

"My favourite/most used pedal of all time was the Cry Baby wah-wah pedal. I first used it on *Cloud Nine* for The Temptations at Motown in Studio A in Detroit. It was the first time a wah-wah pedal was used on an R&B record. I was the only musician to play at Motown in Detroit and Mowest in LA. The guitar player for The Jackson 5 in LA left the band during a rehearsal so I was called in to play the entire show without a rehearsal. The Jackson 5 then included both Michael and Janet. I donated one of my guitars and wah-wah pedals to the Motown Museum in Detroit. I set them up next to the chair I used to sit in as a Funk Brother."

ERJA LYYTINEN
TC ELECTRONIC FLASHBACK DELAY

"I started using the TC Electronic Flashback Delay pedal years ago and the pedal's strength is the natural sound that it maintains while using it. The different delay effects work beautifully, and my favourite positions are Mod and Tape. You can vary the speed of delay, and the amount of feedback and level, and there are some fun delays, like ping pong and reverse but also a looper. This pedal also has a useful stereo output. I often add delay when playing slide guitar solos to achieve a big and airy sound and prolong the notes. Can't play a gig without a delay!"

6. Eclectic virtuoso Greg Koch likes to live in the crisply expressive zone between clean boost and overdrive

7. TC's widely adopted Flashback delay offers the flexibility Erja Lyytinen needs live

7

FRANK GAMBALE
ROLAND FV-500H VOLUME PEDAL

"I rarely use pedals, but I always use a volume pedal. It allows me to have real control over my volume when my hands are occupied, and [is] great for swells with delay and chorus. Also, by having the volume pedal in my effects loop I can have full overdrive volume from my guitar and control the overall output from the volume pedal, so I can have full distortion from a whisper to a roar!"

GREG KOCH
GRISTLE KING PEDAL

"The pedal I've used the most over the years is my Gristle King pedal designed for me by my old college buddy Tim Jauernig – I've probably used it for about 20 years. But the pedal I've had the longest is my trusty Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, which I first procured in 1986. If I bring one pedal it's the Gristle King because it's a clean boost and overdrive, and it sounds sublime. I set it so that I first hit the clean boost and then hit the overdrive on top of that. I've been in situations where I've had to use anything from a Roland JC-120 to an Orange half-stack and if I set the amp cleanish, the Gristle King will always come through so I can do my thing."

GUTHRIE GOVAN
FRACTAL EV-1

"This might not be the most exciting answer, but for me it's definitely the humble volume pedal. I'm currently using the Fractal EV-1... Being able to conceal the attack of a note really opens up a lot of expressive possibilities on guitar, especially for slide playing. In more general terms, I just enjoy having real-time control over the level of gain hitting the front-end of the amp at any given moment, without ever needing to move my picking hand away from the strings. Also, my volume pedal generally goes immediately before the amp's input so it can double up as a kind of manual noise gate when I'm using more overdriven tones."

DENNIS COFFEY PHOTO BY MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES FOR LES PAUL FOUNDATION ERJA LYYTINEN PHOTO BY ANTTI KARPPINEN FRANK GAMBALE PHOTO BY MICHAEL HILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

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8. Analog Man's King of Tone is hugely well regarded and evolved from a highly modded Marshall Bluesbreaker pedal. Expect natural, amp-like overdrive

9. The original Roland Space Echo was a delay classic – now Boss have bottled its tape-driven essence in the deftly voiced RE-2

10. Free The Tone's Red Jasper Low-Gain Overdrive is perfect to add a little tasteful bite and compression

11. Boss's TB-2W is its update on the classic Sola Sound MK II Tone-Bender fuzz, adding true or buffered bypass and a three-way voltage selector

"I was the first studio guitarist to build a pedalboard and was always the first cat to buy pedals as soon as they came out" **JAY GRAYDON**

JAY GRAYDON
MAESTRO PS-1A

"I was the first studio guitarist to build a pedalboard and was always the first cat to buy pedals as soon as they came out, so I need to mention a total of three. I always use a compressor first that routes to an Ernie Ball volume pedal, with a NOS pot that is very important. Then there's the [Tom] Oberheim [Maestro] Phase Shifter, which was groundbreaking. These days, there are so many pedals and I have not kept up with current stuff since nothing seems to be groundbreaking.

"Another option is the best pedalboard, which is the [Line 6] Helix. One reason is over 100 effects and many are good, but the big reason is that many of the new pedals use A-to-D and D-to-A converters, so with more than one, the delay time adds up causing too much delay. Also, no wires to go bad or have bad connections. The last reason is if the Helix was stolen, with your patches saved, you simply buy a new Helix and can get back to work! When I was doing sessions, my gigbag was stolen and it took a few days to replace all pedals, cables, tools, and so on – and some didn't sound as good. In the Helix, all effects were electronically rebuilt to original spec and sound great. One more thing about the Helix is the volume pedal has a totally 'even' throw. A lot of the pots used in volume pedals are terrible as the level curve is not even and typically starts abruptly with areas of no level changes and then a big uneven jump."

"No matter what overdrives, fuzzes or tremolo pedals/units I use, the one thing that I really hate to be without is my delay" **JOEY LANDRETH**

JEFF KOLLMAN
XOTIC RC BOOSTER

"My go-to pedal most of all, besides always wanting the obvious reverb and delay, is the Xotic RC Booster. I actually have mine modded so it's always on and then I boost solos from there. I find that it thickens the tone on my Marshalls and gets a more creamy boosted lead tone overall. I can take a bit of treble out for the solos and crank the gain a bit for sustain."

12. While many effects aim to produce naturalistic, analogue tones, Jennifer Batten values the freedom of expression offered by the DigiTech Whammy pedal, which is almost an instrument in itself. Other top players who make full use of its unique capabilities include David Gilmour

13. The warmth and musicality of analogue chorus pedals sometimes gets overshadowed by the pristine shimmer of digital stereo chorus. But blues guitarist Joanna Connor favours the classic CE-2, first launched in 1979

JENNIFER BATTEN
DIGITECH WHAMMY

"I discovered the DigiTech Whammy pedal not long after they released it in 1989. I used it all over my debut record *Above, Below And Beyond*. I mostly used the whole step down mode for slide effects. I loved it so much it inspired several tunes including *Cat Fight* (octave up mode); I discovered you can make it sound like an angry cat. I also dedicated a tune to it called *Whammy Damage*. I had a Whammy pedal under each foot so I had to sit down to play it. I had my left foot set to an octave down and the right set to an octave up. I played three octave riffs and arpeggios in the same spot."

JOANNA CONNOR
BOSS CE-2 CHORUS

"I know many guitar players will choose some kind of overdrive/distortion, because we as guitar players love to solo, and I do also. There's nothing like just letting it all go on six strings. But I will tell you, I started as a singer and rhythm guitarist. I still

JAY GRAYDON PHOTO BY TASJA WELLS/GETTY IMAGES JEFF KOLLMAN PHOTO BY REBECCA SAPP/GETTY IMAGES FOR CARUSO JOANNA CONNOR PHOTO BY MARYAM WILCHER

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love to play rhythm guitar, driving the groove, composing on the stage and in the studio. I love a pretty thick and clean guitar tone for chords/comping, so my go-to pedal for all of this is a Boss CE-2 Chorus, and now I use a Boss CH-1 Super Chorus. I like to flavour that up with some type of analogue delay. I can get dirty with an overdrive. However, having a clean amp with a chorus is also mandatory for me in my guitar palette."

JOE BONAMASSA

IBANEZ TS9 & TS808 TUBE SCREAMER

"My most-used pedal over the years has been the Ibanez Tube Screamer in both the TS9 and TS808 configurations. The reason this has been my most-used pedal is, historically, I have been in very different musical situations requiring different amounts of gain structure. A 'green box' is usable in almost any situation with almost any amp. It gives you a nice step up in the midrange frequencies (around 800Hz) that is useful for not only soloing but for powerchords and big rhythms. There have been many versions of the Tube Screamer and many boutique copies have been made over the years, but for my $80 you can't beat a reissue Ibanez TS808 to create a great sound with both Fender and Gibson electric guitars."

14. Despite owning unobtainium such as Dumbles, Joe Bonamassa says that the $80 TS808 is one of the soundest and most versatile ways to boost your tone

15. US maker Chase Bliss are known for their intricate yet tone-packed pedals that often combine digital controllability with analogue tone circuitry. Its Thermae pedal is a core part of Joey Landreth's tone

16. Joe Satriani relies on his signature Vox Big Bad Wah more than any other pedal in his collection

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JOE SATRIANI

VOX BIG BAD WAH

"Without a doubt, my original Vox Big Bad Wah pedal is not only my favourite wah pedal but also the one pedal I couldn't do without. It's got an unbeatable sound, two different sweep settings, a variable gain boost, and a choice of two potentiometer profiles. I've used it in front of all kinds of amps, plug-ins and modelling suites and it always 'speaks' with clarity and authority. And it has my picture on the backplate!"

JOEL HOEKSTRA

FULLTONE FULL-DRIVE 2

"I love having the two different stages of gain boost, and the first stage can be either more of a clean boost or just adding a bit of distortion. I've used it countless times over the years on fly dates to push the front-end of Marshall amps. I use the channel switch of the Marshall for a lead boost, so Channel 1 is high-gain rhythm with the Full-Drive 2 engaged, or a clean when not engaged and the guitar rolled off a bit."

JOEY LANDRETH

CHASE BLISS AUDIO THERMAE

"No matter what overdrives, fuzzes or tremolo pedals/units I use, the one thing I really hate to be without is my delay. I don't just depend on it for a tasteful solo sound or to take advantage of its pitch-shifting fun stuff, but I most often use it set really short to add a thickening effect to my sound. I also love to blend in a tiny amount of around 80ms to 90ms to make it kind of sound like you're in a room that's giving you a little reflection off the walls. Of course, long modulated delays for more ambient textures are a must for me as well. Then, of course, you get into the pitch-shifting wildness that is a rabbit hole so worth falling down. I'm always trying different drive circuits, different fuzzes and I love analogue modulation of just about any kind, but I'm hard pressed to leave the house without my Thermae."

JOE BONAMASSA PHOTO BY ELEANOR JANE JOE SATRIANI PHOTO BY EDUARDO PEÑA DOLHUN

KIRK FLETCHER
CATALINBREAD TOPANGA REVERB

"I feel like I can express myself the best with a little reverb. 'No reverb' can be the difference between getting lost in the music and making it through a set. I don't use a lot of gain or anything to get the guitar to sing, so the reverb adds this beautiful note pillow to my playing. Other notable mentions are a Fender Reverb Tank and the 'Blackface' Fender amp circuit reverb."

MARK TREMONTI
MORLEY POWER WAH

"It's because I've used it the most over the years. It's also the pedal that I can't live without on stage. I'm not just saying this because it's my signature pedal...!"

MARTY FRIEDMAN
MAXON AF-9 AUTO FILTER

"It's the only pedal I use. Here are my settings: all switches down, and both faders completely down to zero. If I am feeling saucy, I will raise the left fader the slightest bit. I don't like anything interfering between what I'm playing and what you are hearing. You barely know the effect is there, but occasionally it gives a subtle and wonderful human element to melodies."

MATTIAS IA EKLUNDH
LINE 6 HELIX

"This is a tough nut for me as I have never really used any pedals. I use the Helix nowadays but it's a thousand pedals in one! For all these years I have just plugged into my Laney and faked my way through it!"

MIKE KENEALLY
T-REX DR SWAMP

"My brain responds well to simplicity in a guitar pedal and I like what this pedal offers – two distortion channels with variable gain, and that's it. I love the Tim Beal quality and sensitivity of both channels. The early version of the pedal, which I have, has only one tone and one level knob controlling both channels. Subsequently, they've added separate tone and volume controls for each channel, and I need to get my hands on one of those!"

MITCH DALTON
MESA/BOOGIE V-TWIN

"Ever longed to warm up that light, portable but ultimately soulless transistor amplifier? Ever driven to the studio with amp anxiety, concerned lest your all-valve monster blows a tube? This over-engineered metal box is home to two AX7, sporting two channels yet three modes – Clean, Blues and Solo – all with appropriate colour coded lights, Green, Blue and Red. It was manufactured between 1993 and 2005, and you can pick one up today online for around £250. Pop one into its padded bag, stash it in the glove box and you're ready for whatever that rock gig may throw at you. Apart from real rocks, obvs..."

17. Spring reverb is one of those effects that has to be somewhere in your tonal palette – either on the amp or replicated in a pedal such as the Catalinbread Topanga, as favoured by Kirk Fletcher

18. Megadeth and fusion shredder Marty Friedman uses what could be an extreme effect, the Maxon AF-9 Auto Filter, on its most subtle settings

19. Okay it's not a pedal but more than one of the top guitarists we consulted pointed to the Line 6 Helix as the only effects solution they need

NICK JOHNSTON
MXR M300

"My favourite pedal of all time is the reverb pedal from MXR, the M300. As soon as I saw it hit the market, I was all over it. I couldn't wait to get it for travel and touring. When I was really getting into live performance and using tube amps, I found that certain amplifiers did not have an onboard reverb unit. For a stretch of time, I was doing a ton of guitar clinics and some of the rooms I was in were very antiseptic, you could say. Without a reverb pedal, it felt like I was playing through the stiffest, most stubborn amp. It added a certain sweetness that nothing else could."

"I feel like I can express myself the best with a little reverb. The reverb adds this beautiful note pillow to my playing" **KIRK FLETCHER**

MARK TREMONTI PHOTO BY ROB MONK MARTY FRIEDMAN PHOTO BY SUSUMU MIYAWAK MATTIAS IA EKLUNDH PHOTO BY PETTER BOSTROM MIKE KENEALLY PHOTO BY DANIEL KNIGHTON/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES MITCH DALTON PHOTO BY IAN BOICHAT AT ORIGIN PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIOS

VINTAGE LEGENDS

THREE SEMINAL STOMPBOXES TO TRY BEFORE THE BATTERIES DIE

20. The Foxx company, founded in 1970, was short-lived but influential. The Tone Machine Fuzz with octave effect has inspired numerous pedals, most recently the Danelectro 3699

21. The original Electro-Harmonix Big Muff Pi was made from 1970 to 1984 and generated its smooth, distortion-like fuzz from four transistors

22. The Phase 90 four-stage phaser is in its classic, early Script Logo form here – though the lack of an LED can be inconvenient for modern users

"When I want the phase shifter sound of the first Van Halen album or of Rush's '2112', the MXR Script Phase 90 does it best" **PAUL GILBERT**

OZ NOY

IBANEZ TS808 TUBE SCREAMER

"If I have to put one pedal in my guitar bag and go play a gig it's always a TS808 Tube Screamer. It can make pretty much any amp sound good – or at least decent. It's got a wide dynamic range so I can go from clean boost to overdrive or heavy overdrive, and makes anything you plug into feel good. By playing with the volume knob on your guitar you can get different levels of gain."

PAUL GILBERT

MXR SCRIPT PHASE 90 WITH LED

"I love a lot of different overdrive pedals, flangers, delays... But when I want the phase shifter sound of the first Van Halen album (knob at 8 o'clock), or the sound of Rush's *2112* (knob at 12 o'clock), this is the pedal that does it best. And I want those sounds!"

PHIL MANZANERA

DUNLOP FUZZ FACE

"Of course, it's never about just one pedal. Right from the beginning of me using guitar pedals I would combine with echo. That said, the 1969 Dunlop Fuzz Face is the one because Hendrix used it. I was just blown away by everything about his playing and look!"

23. Sonic explorer Phil Manzanera of Roxy Music has tried everything over the years but keeps coming back to the Fuzz Face

ROBBEN FORD

STRYMON TIMELINE

"The Strymon Timeline delay is the most essential pedal on my 'board. It's incredibly versatile: basically, I like some reverb and a couple of delays, long and short – the Strymon timeline has those things, and it just reacts the best. It just has just the best clean, studio quality down. I'd also have to mention the Hermida Audio Zen Drive, because that's been my overdrive pedal of choice for as long as I can remember. Nothing has matched it – it's just the right amount of clean, the right amount of distortion, the most direct, uncompressed overdrive sound."

"It's never about just one pedal. Right from the beginning of me using guitar pedals I would combine with echo" **PHIL MANZANERA**

24. Jazz-blues master Robben Ford values the Strymon Timeline for its pristine, studio-grade reverbs and delays, though he doesn't use the full breadth of its features

ROCCO ZIFARELLI

BOSS CS-2 COMPRESSION SUSTAINER

"I love the compressor pedal, in particular the old Boss CS-2. It's part of my regular guitar effects path for the 80 per cent of my playing, from rhythms, large chord swell sounds and arpeggios to lead sounds. For solos, I add another one as a boost. A lot of famous great solos were recorded just with a compressor and a tube amp, such as David Gilmour's and Phil Palmer's to name a few.

"This pedal is a must for rhythm guitar stuff, but many years ago, before amp simulators, I needed to practise during the night with headphones and the compressor let me play with sustained sounds to simulate a saturated long tone. I then realised I could also harmonise melodies with chords keeping everything clean and clear, not muddy as with overdriven pedals. My preference for compressors are CS-2, then MXR Dyna Comp and then Marshall ED-1."

OZ NOY PHOTO BY YOSSI ZWECKER ROBBEN FORD PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND ROCCO ZIFARELLI PHOTO BY DARIO NARDACCI RONNIE TEKRD PHOTO BY PER OLE HAGEN/GETTY IMAGES RUSTY COOLEY PHOTO BY MARK DEL CASTILLO

"The Maxon OD808 can give my tone a little more cut and clarity, and notes on the high-end a little more legato fluidity" **RUSTY COOLEY**

25. Along with the Ibanez Tube Screamer, the Boss OD-1 Over Drive helped late-70s guitarists get jucier tone from unyielding high-headroom amps

26. Probably the most influential tape delay in the world, the Echoplex (and its variants) was liked by artists not only for its warm delay sound, but for the flattering drive and tonal colouration offered by its preamp, which has been replicated in many standalone pedals

RONNI LE TEKRØ
BOSS OD-1

"The Boss OD-1 overdrive as heard in all my music since '82, including my new album, *Bigfoot TV*. No tone control is an advantage regarding pedals."

RUSTY COOLEY
MAXON OD808

"I have been using the Maxon OD808 pedal since the 90s. It's not an effect pedal like a delay or a flanger so it can go unnoticed if you don't know what you're listening for. I don't use it for more overdrive or gain; I set the overdrive usually to nine o'clock and the balance to three o'clock and tone around 11 o'clock. This combination gives my tone a little more cut and clarity, especially on the low-end, and the notes on the high-end a little more legato fluidity, and pick harmonics jump right out."

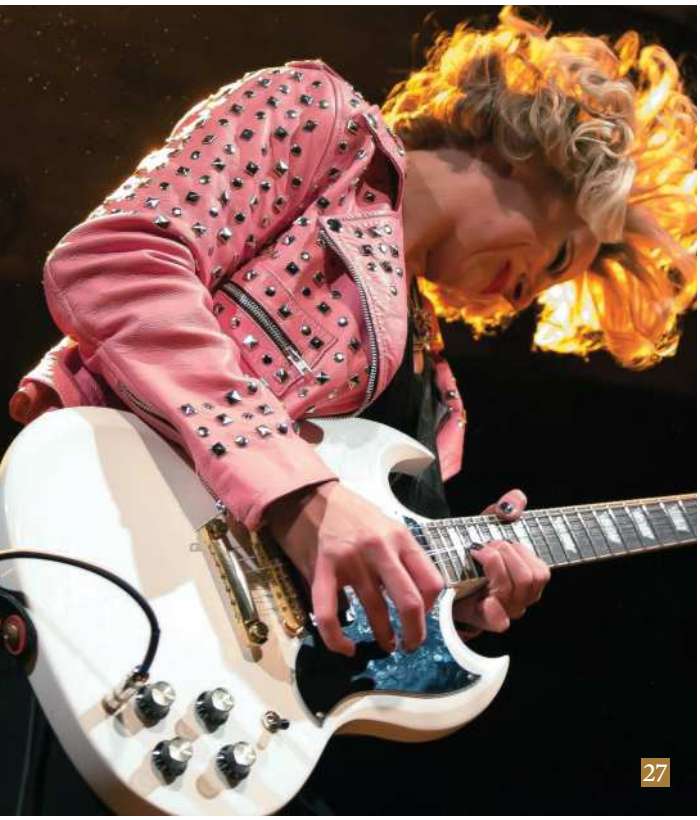
SAMANTHA FISH
ANALOG MAN KING OF TONE

"That's probably my most used pedal. I like it because I can use it subtly. When I'm on an unfamiliar rig at a fly date festival, I can count on that pedal to help me find my tone. It's like a tube amp that's super hot. Not too compressed or distorted, just a nice gain boost. At least that's what I use it for. It's a staple on my pedalboard."

STEVE LUKATHER
ECHOPLEX

"It's a hard question to answer, but probably a delay like an old Echoplex as my first choice and a distortion or solo boost as my second choice. I have been using these since I was 14 as my heroes like David Gilmour and Joe Walsh usually used a little delay. I loved the depth it gives when used tastefully as they did and do.

SAMANTHA FISH PHOTO BY KEVIN BURNSTEIN & DIANA KING/KEVIN & KING



27

28

SAMANTHA FISH PHOTO BY BACKSTAGE FLASH JOE BONAMASSA PHOTO BY ELEANOR JANE JOE SATRIANI PHOTO BY EDUARDO PEÑA DOLHUN

I used to dime the amp and lower the volume on the guitar and then just crank the volume knob for a solo. Then I started messing with pedals. Mike Landau – brothers since we were 12 years old – always had a Fuzz Face or a Maestro phase shifter when they came out. I used to borrow them from him for gigs. I was into whatever the new gadget was. Problem was, I could not afford it. We all used to borrow each other's stuff, and even tech for each other on gigs if we were not in the same band at the time."

STEVE MORSE

TC ELECTRONIC FLASHBACK DELAY

"The delay – whether it was my tape echo back in the day, or my Lexicon Prime Time, or my present Flashback delay pedal (with my custom TonePrint parameters) – adds space, air, modulation (on my TonePrint, anyway) and sustain. I originally found that setting the Echoplex tape delay, or any other delay, to output ONLY delay, then putting that through a separate amp gave me undisturbed dry sound and would open up the sound by adding an additional source. I've always used my Ernie Ball volume pedal to bring in that delay smoothly, as you would with a mixing console fader... and, just as importantly, to reduce the delay smoothly, when a fast passage is being played. I also use a second Flashback delay with the same parameters but set at the smallest possible delay, which gives a very nice stereo chorus as well. But if I forgot my tuning pedal or my channel switcher, I'd drive back home and get them, too!"

"When I'm on an unfamiliar rig at a festival, I can count on the Analog Man King Of Tone to help me find my tone" **SAMANTHA FISH**

27. Samantha Fish doesn't use a whole lot of effects but when she does, as the saying goes, she chooses an Analog Man King Of Tone, which is sought-after for its organic, amp-like drive tones

28. A quintessential boutique gain pedal, the Ethos Overdrive aims to provide a comprehensive Dumble-like drive

29. Despite being better known for its octave-altering functions, the POG can be a great note-envelope shaper

TIM LERCH

ETHOS OVERDRIVE

"I don't use pedals much these days, but of all the pedals that I have used I'd say that the Ethos Overdrive is my all-time fave. It's a really great-sounding, feature-filled and versatile piece of gear. I was honoured to give Robbie Hall a fair amount of feedback when he was developing the original and the subsequent versions. It's just really great sounding and capable of getting a great variety of really musically pleasing sounds."

TIM MILLER

ELECTRO-HARMONIX POG2

"The EHX POG2 is a unique pedal that allows for subtle changes in the guitar's attack. When combined with a distorted tone I can slightly alter the initial attack, giving the guitar more of a violin-like sound. The pedal has many different features that I do not use; I only adjust the Attack slider."

29

40 YEARS OF SQUIER

Four decades on, the budget brand Fender created to beat Japanese copyists at their own game has acquired its own identity and cachet, even making the cut for Genesis world tours. As Fender releases a swathe of Anniversary electrics to mark the occasion, we look back at the birth of Squier and Fender JV, and why Fender decided to go big in Japan…

Words Tony Bacon & Jamie Dickson

In the early 1950s, Fender was in the vanguard of innovation, revolutionising the guitar world with a new wave of solidbody electric instruments that stood, as usurpers, on turf that Gibson and Gretsch thought belonged forever to the hollowbody archtop. In fact, Leo succeeded so well in popularising the solidbody guitar, that only 30 years later his designs were being copied extensively by guitar manufacturers in Japan – who built their clones so diligently they began to seriously threaten Fender's share in the market they had created.

The prognosis didn't look great. At the start of the 1980s, during the final years of CBS ownership, quality control was faltering in Fender's US factories, and Fender had a hill to climb in convincing guitar buyers that its flagship American instruments were still worth buying. And while Fender made effective moves to fix those problems with the help of a trouble-shooting team drafted in from Yamaha, notably including Dan Smith, the Californian company was still left with the problem of what to do about the rising threat from Japanese brands such as Tokai and Greco.

Fender's answer was very much from the 'if you can't beat them, join them' school of thought. In March 1982, Fender inked a business agreement with Japanese distributor Yamano Gakki and wholesaler Kanda Shokai, establishing a joint venture to manufacture and sell Japanese-built Fender guitars. Since Kanda Shokai owned the Greco brand, the deal neatly halted the threat posed by Greco-badged Fender copies from that moment on.

What followed was a minor renaissance in Fender guitar making, and it was soon realised that Japanese-built Fenders had a character and clean-lined beauty of their own – while the cost-saving, at that time possible by building guitars in Japan, gave Fender a competitively priced offering that was a bona fide official Fender product but which could go toe to toe on price with the remaining 'clone' competition. With Fender Japan guitars being sold to the domestic market in Japan, Fender created a sub-brand to sell what were effectively the same guitars in Europe. The brand was called Squier and its first products became known as Japanese Vintage or 'JV' models.

In the following pages, we take a look at two new JV electrics from Fender, stunning anniversary models from Squier itself, and explore some of the incredible Japanese-market Fenders that have been created since 1982. But first, it's time for a little bit of Squier history...

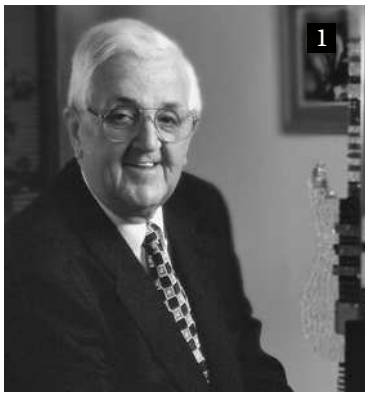

Squier
TELECASTER

As the 1970s came to a close, Fender was in trouble. It was suffering from increased costs, especially in manufacturing, and a sagging reputation for quality control. Alongside that, Japanese makers were offering ever more serious competition. Simply and starkly put, Fender was in a mess and needed to find a way out.

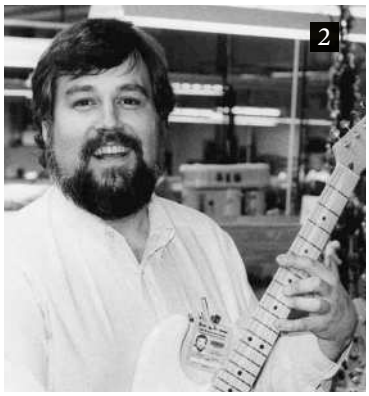
In 1981, Fender's owner, CBS, took a first step, bringing in new management from the American musical-instruments division of Yamaha. John McLaren became the new overall head of CBS Musical Instruments; Bill Schultz was the new president of CBS's Fender/Rogers/Rhodes division; Dan Smith became director of marketing electric guitars; and Roger Balmer came in from Music Man, though he, too, was ex-Yamaha, and he became head of marketing and sales. From within, CBS's chief financial officer of the instruments division, Bill Mendello, relocated to California and based himself at Fender. These key managers would guide the troubled firm through the tricky years ahead.

Roger Balmer recalled an early presentation he made to CBS bosses: "I told them that Fender had about 15 per cent of the worldwide Fender-type market, and that this was declining. The other 85 per cent was a variety of Fender copies and Fender-like products. Before we came along, Fender's strategy to deal with this was legal, run by their lawyers. But it just wasn't getting the job done. The results were not coming – we were losing. I said that no sports team or company can hope to succeed playing only defence in its home market, and that we had to go on to the offence at home and internationally."

1. As president of CBS's Fender division, Bill Schultz saw the company through some of its most difficult, but finally transformative, days



2. Dan Smith was a leading figure in the renaissance of Fender guitar making in the 1980s and admired the quality of the Japanese guitars



> "Everybody came up to inspect them, and the guys almost cried because the Japanese product was so good" **Dan Smith**

3. The original focus of Japanese-built Fenders was heritage-oriented, hence the term 'Japanese Vintage'. That element of Squier continued into a new century, as evidenced by these Classic Vibe models from 2008

It was clear that Japanese firms made their biggest profits at home in Japan. Balmer's suggested offensive had Fender looking to sell Japanese-manufactured Fender-brand products in the Japanese market at prices below copyists such as Tokai and the rest. The idea was to diminish their business in Japan, which would force them to raise prices abroad after they had to lower prices at home to be competitive. "Our ultimate goal," Dan Smith said, "was to force them to stop copying us and to develop their own unique products."

Fender decided to make reissues of the original guitars that the Japanese copyists had targeted, in order to recreate the guitars and basses from the firm's golden years in the 1950s and 60s.

Fender planned to make its new Vintage series not only in the USA but also in Japan, exclusively for sale there. A new joint venture was set up – Fender Japan – and Fender chose the Fujigen factory in Matsumoto as its Japanese manufacturer. Fujigen was well placed for the task, having made the well-rated Greco copies alongside other quality instruments for brands such as Ibanez.

US-made Vintage models did not appear until 1983 thanks to problems at Fender's Fullerton plant. But the first Fujigen-made Fender Vintage models were in Japanese shops around May 1982. Dan Smith and his colleagues at Fullerton saw samples well before American production started. "Everybody came up to inspect them," Smith said, "and the guys almost cried because the Japanese product was so good. It was what we were having a hell of a time trying to do."

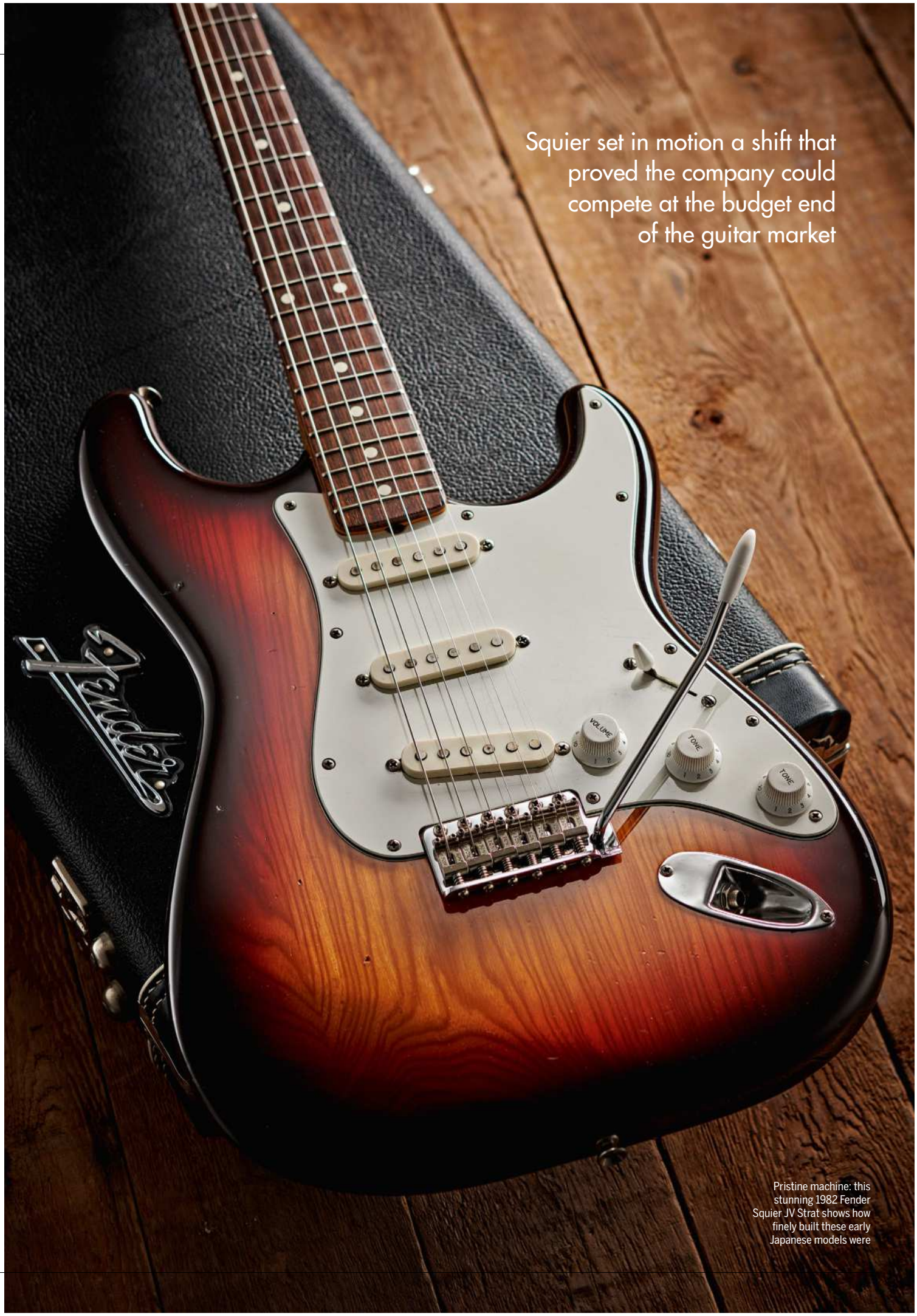
JAPAN & BEYOND

Following Fender's announcement of its new Vintage series in 1982, Martin Fredman, the sales and marketing director at CBS/Fender, wanted something more accessible in the same vein. Ivor Arbiter had started CBS/Fender in England in 1973, and by the early 80s it was wholesaling Fender products to dealers in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

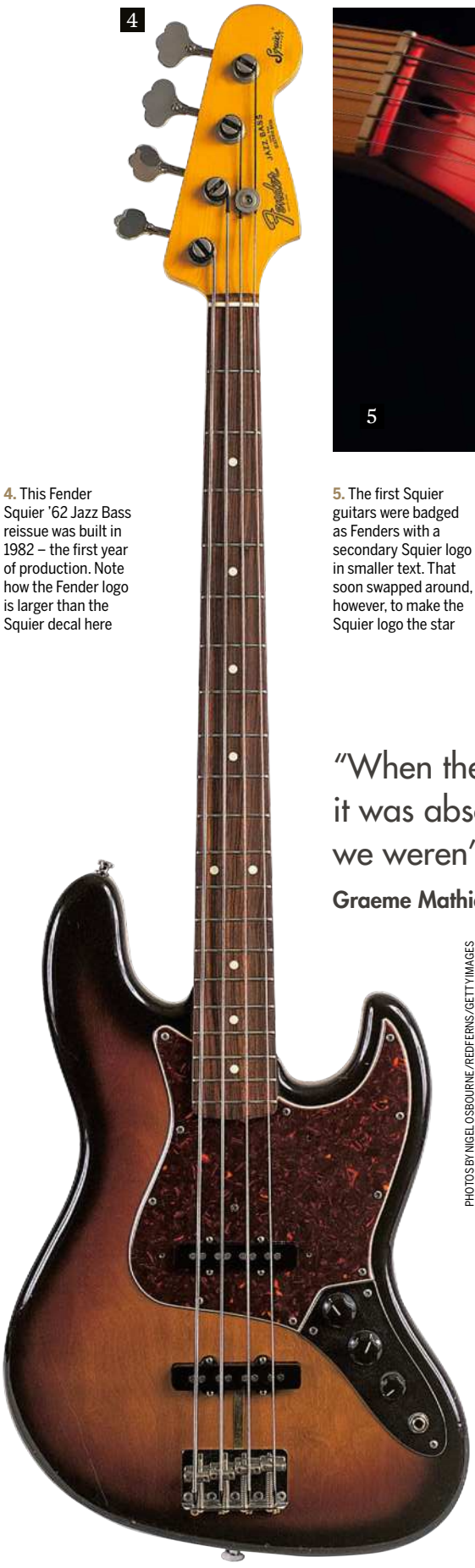
Martin Fredman figured that Fender ought to be making a similar but cheaper line because there were so many others out there making budget-price copies. "Tokai were the main instigators," he remembered. "They were copying the Fender range as a whole and selling it cheaper." He told Fender's boss that Fender itself should be doing this, that it should, in effect, be copying itself.

A solution was right in front of Fender's eyes. The firm's long-standing Fullerton factory in California had its problems and, among other things, seemed incapable of producing a cheap, decent guitar. But here was this new Japanese-made Vintage line.

Squier set in motion a shift that proved the company could compete at the budget end of the guitar market



Pristine machine: this stunning 1982 Fender Squier JV Strat shows how finely built these early Japanese models were



4. This Fender Squier '62 Jazz Bass reissue was built in 1982 – the first year of production. Note how the Fender logo is larger than the Squier decal here

5. The first Squier guitars were badged as Fenders with a secondary Squier logo in smaller text. That soon swapped around, however, to make the Squier logo the star

PHOTOS BY NIGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS/GETTYIMAGES

The deal with Fender Japan was that its guitars would be sold only in Japan. But could they be sold elsewhere? The idea that developed was to produce some less expensive models in the Fender Japan line, that had an identifying logo, and to promote these as a separate line – at first only in Europe, to meet the demand there.

> "When they came into the stores, it was absolutely unbelievable… we weren't selling anything else"
>
> **Graeme Mathieson**

The addition to the headstock typography would be a simple 'Squier Series' logo on the tip. The other wording would remain as on the other Fender Japan models. The Squier name itself was conveniently to hand as one that Fender already owned – since CBS acquired the VC Squier string-making firm back in 1965 when it bought Fender and its associated companies.

A STAR IS BORN

At the Fujigen factory in Japan, the first run of the new Fender Squier Series vintage reissues went into production toward the end of April 1982, set for export from Japan to Europe and produced by the new Fender Japan alliance. There were six models: two Stratocasters (maple-neck '57-style; rosewood-'board '62); a '52 Telecaster; two Precision Basses (maple-neck '57; rosewood-board '62); and a '62 Jazz Bass.

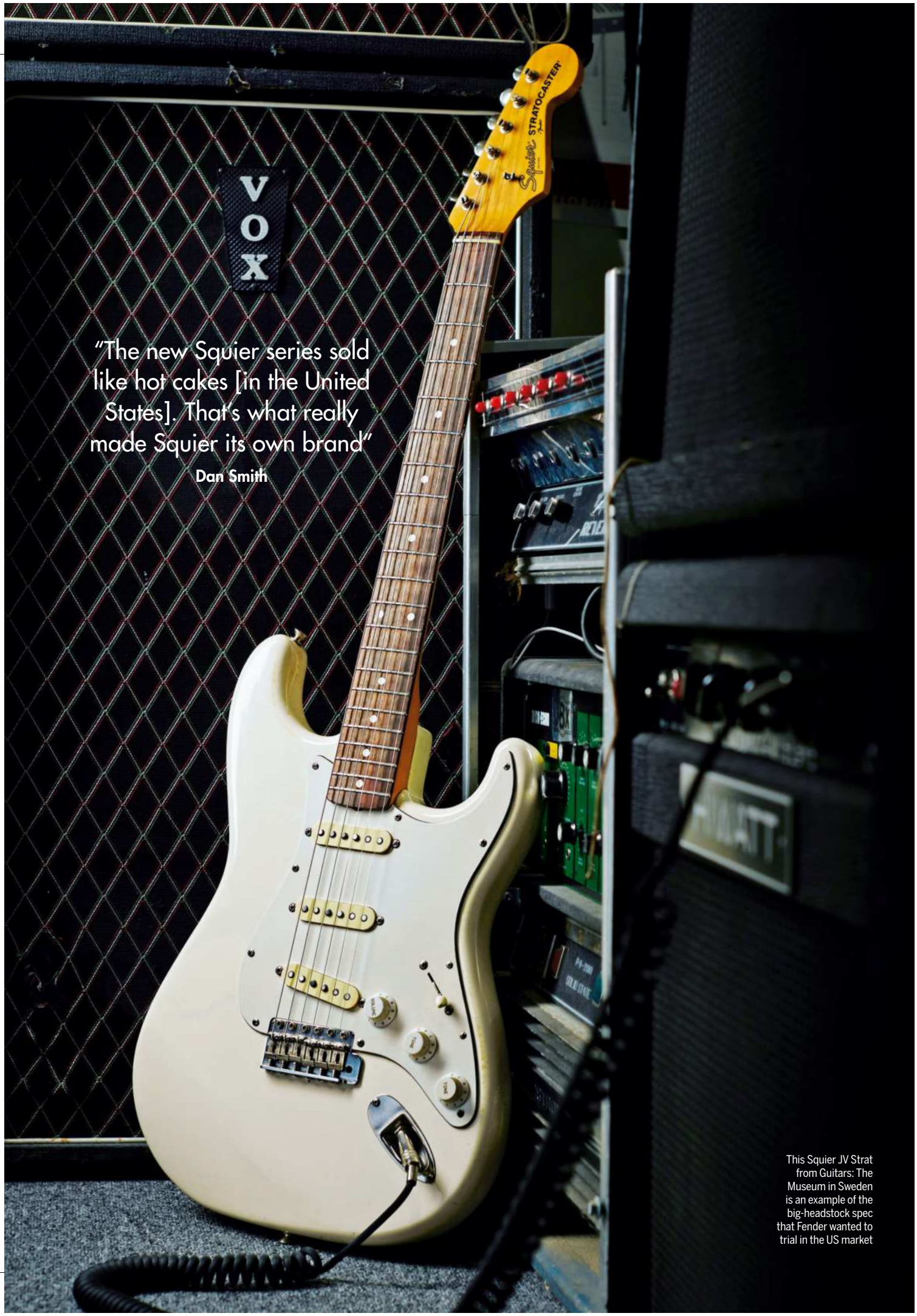
A couple of months later, the first Fender Squier Series instruments reached European outlets. CBS/Fender in the UK pitched the Fender Squier Series '57 Stratocaster at £223, the '62 Strat at £230, '52 Tele at £198, '57 P-Bass at £213, '62 P-Bass at £221, and the '62 Jazz Bass at £223.

Not coincidentally, these prices were almost exactly the same as the cheapest Tokai copies. The cheapest US-made Fender Stratocaster listed at £436, making the Squiers about half the price. And, not least, the Squiers offered the only way for a European guitarist to buy a new vintage-look Strat, Tele, P-Bass or Jazz.

Graeme Mathieson, a district sales manager at CBS/Fender, recalled: "When they came into the stores, it was absolutely unbelievable. Everybody was prepared to slag them to bits because it's a Japanese Fender – and what's that all about? But when they played them, everybody just said, 'These are better than the American guitars.' It got to the point where we were told as salesmen not to take any more orders because we had so many on back order – and we weren't selling anything else."

SQUIER BY FENDER

A small change since afforded importance by collectors came when Fender altered the logos on the early Squier headstocks. The Japanese wanted to keep the big Fender logo and lose the Squier, to match its existing Vintage models. The Americans wanted a big Squier logo and a small Fender, presumably to minimise the effect they figured



"The new Squier series sold like hot cakes [in the United States]. That's what really made Squier its own brand"

Dan Smith

This Squier JV Strat from Guitars: The Museum in Sweden is an example of the big-headstock spec that Fender wanted to trial in the US market

a Japan-made guitar might have on the main brand's reputation. The Americans won.

"There had to be some differential to make people realise these weren't the authentic American product," Martin Fredman at CBS/Fender said, "but that they were getting something made under the auspices of Fender. They just wouldn't pay so much money for it."

The revised Squier Vintage models rolled off the Fujigen line around July 1982 and soon reached Europe. They were the same guitars with this simple change. Now, there was a large 'Squier' logo in a vintage spaghetti-like font where 'Fender' had been. Underneath, a small line added 'Made In Japan'. Under the model name, to the right, was a 'by Fender' logo. And with this, the Squier By Fender brand was properly under way.

MADE IN JAPAN, SOLD IN THE USA

The next move at Fender in California was to try selling a made-in-Japan guitar in the United States. Times were still hard: Fender had yet to turn around the factory at Fullerton, and it was not showing the profits CBS wanted.

"We were running out of time," Dan Smith said. He sold his immediate boss, Bill Schultz, on the idea of using the features from what he called "the most disliked Fender guitar" for a Japanese-made Squier that Fender could sell in America.

That "disliked" guitar was the three-bolt big-headstock Strat, a modified model originally introduced by CBS back in 1971. Fujigen proved its reputation for quality by producing a good new version, modifying the criticised three-bolt joint so that it now provided a sturdy fit.

When Smith visited American dealers to introduce this new made-in-Japan Squier, the reaction was that it seemed okay, but that it wouldn't have much impact on Fender USA products. "Boy, were they wrong," he recalled with a smile. "Me, too. The new Squier series sold like hot cakes. That's what really made Squier its own brand, and that's what really told us it could be its own brand – when we started to market it in the United States."

CBS SELLS FENDER

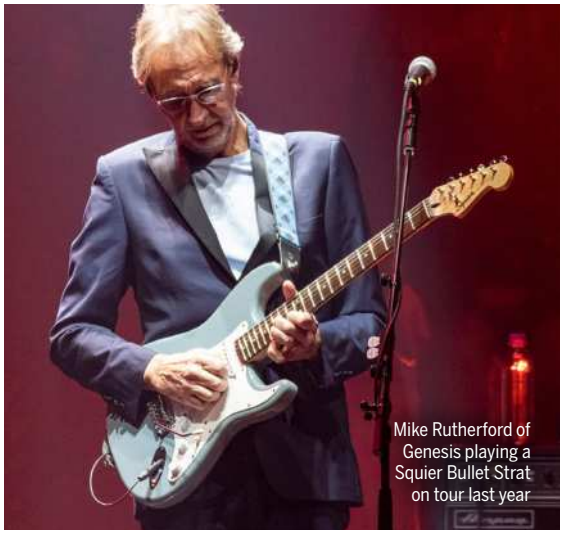
The success of the new Squier guitars was undermined by CBS's continuing disappointment with Fender's general performance. And in 1984, CBS decided to sell Fender.

One trade estimate put sales of Fender's guitars down by 50 per cent during the early 80s. "CBS does not report financial statistics for its division separately," the *San Francisco Chronicle* explained, "but attributed an $8.3 million [CBS] Group operating loss for the third quarter of 1984 in part to 'continued losses in the musical instruments business'."

Eventually, early in 1985, CBS confirmed it would sell Fender to "an investor group led by William Schultz, president of Fender Musical Instruments". The contract was formalised in February and the sale to the existing management was completed in March, for $12.5 million.

Despite this upheaval, it's impossible to ignore the significance of Fender's creation of Squier. It offered Fender a true parallel brand, which set in motion a shift that proved the company could compete at the budget end of the guitar market. Perhaps most significantly in business terms, it would lead beyond the gradual recovery following the CBS sale to Fender becoming the international manufacturer it is today.

"Most people look at Squier as a low-end Fender," Bill Mendello said. "It is, but to us it was a way to compete in the world. It's not only a low-price brand, it's a value brand. We felt competitiveness was critical to our success. For a long time we tracked it, and we were selling more Squier units than any electric guitar brand in the world. It's probably still true today." G



Mike Rutherford of Genesis playing a Squier Bullet Strat on tour last year

PHOTO BY SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES

> "It's not only a low-price brand, it's a value brand. We felt competitiveness was critical to our success" **Bill Mendello**

6. Squier has its share of signature models and the J Mascis Jazzmaster, pictured, has a cult following

7. This 2013 Vintage Modified Cabronita Tele with Bigsby, centre, was inspired by the Custom Shop designs flanking it

SELECTED HITS

Fender produced a number of significant Squier models in the brand's first 15 years, following its launch in 1982

The glowing reputation of the very first set of Fender Squier Series Strats, Teles, P-Basses, and Jazz Basses – with the big Fender/little Squier logos – has only increased over time. The big-Squier-logo versions that followed immediately are more or less the same instruments, and they, too, continue to enjoy top-notch status for build and playability.

The big-head Strat that changed the US market for Fender (in the UK it was known as the Popular Stratocaster and in Japan the Current Stratocaster) is another model from the first years of Squier that qualifies today as a prime collectable, alongside accompanying Telecasters and basses.

Collectors today often refer to these early and highly praised Fender Japan guitars and basses – with the Fender or Squier brand, and wherever they may have been sold – as JV models. This relates to their serial numbers, which from 1982 to '84 have a JV prefix (Japan Vintage). Also significant are SQ-prefix serials, which applied from 1983 to '84.

Fender shifted general production of Squiers away from Japan, at first to Korea in the late 80s. While Fender Japan continued to produce and sell models at home in Japan (and these are still highly rated today), in 1992 there was a brief return to export Japanese production with the notable Silver Series guitars and basses, sold in the UK as well as Japan.

Squier's Pro Tone series, introduced in 1996, marked a step up in quality for the brand's Korean production, mixing premium visuals and finishes with assured playability. Fender dropped the Pro Tones two years later, concerned about the effect their relatively affordable quality had on sales of Fender-brand guitars and basses.

In 1997, Squier's 15th year, the shortlived Japan-made Vista series appeared, with Fender comfortable to experiment away from the main brand with new and revised shapes and styles. The Venus, as a six- or 12-string, was based on a Mercury guitar used by Courtney Love, the Super-Sonic was inspired by a photo of Hendrix with an upside-down Jaguar, and the Jagmaster was based on a humbucker'd Jazzmaster played by Gavin Rossdale.

PHOTOS BY NIGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

SQUIER DESIRE...

Neville Marten recalls seeing the very first Fender Squiers to arrive in the UK in the early 1980s...

"Back in 1982, Martyn Booth and I worked together in what had been Gibson's UK repair department. The company had moved its European operation to Rotterdam so we set up on our own, and negotiated with both Yamaha and CBS Fender to do their work, as well as private repairs.

"One day, our Fender contact arrived with four cardboard boxes. On opening them our jaws dropped. These were the first JV Squiers, with a large 'Fender' and a small 'Squier' on the headstock. They were closer to the originals than anything we had seen before, including the revered Tokais.

"We were told Fender Japan had received the original blueprints; it certainly looked that way, though this was never confirmed. The Strat was a rosewood neck, three-tone sunburst '62 style, and we wanted one – badly! I've had several Strats and Teles over the years, and still own a sunburst '62 Precision. Fabulous!"

ORIGINAL EARLY 1980s JV STRAT

HEADSTOCK
With the headstock shape from the 50s and early 60s, the first Squiers had a large Fender logo with a smaller 'Squier Series' decal on the tip

NECK
The Squier's vintage appointments continue with a rosewood fretboard with a 184mm (7.25-inch) radius atop a classic 60s profile maple neck with 43.5mm nut width and 21 2.01mm wide frets

PICKUPS
The DC resistance for the pickups is as follows: bridge – 7.2kohms; middle – 7.27kohms; neck – 7.01kohms

PLUGGED IN...
When we put both JVs through an amp, the original delivered all the rich tones you'd expect from a top-notch Strat. Its more recent companion had slightly less output but sounded excellent, the switching to include neck and bridge pickups, an asset

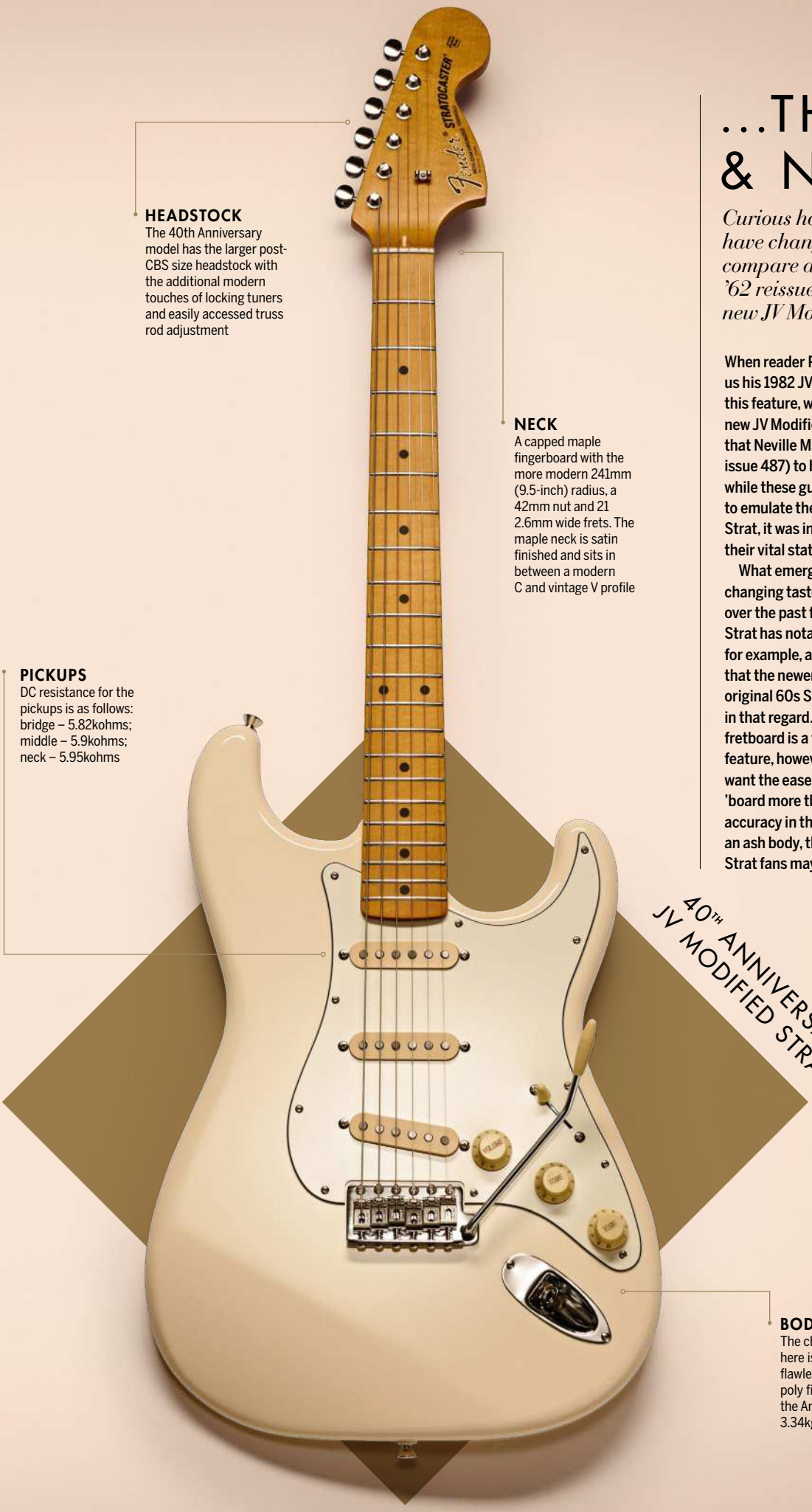
BODY
It looks like the wood here is Japanese Sen Ash, its grain pattern set off by the expertly applied sunburst finish. The guitar weighs in at a perfectly reasonable 3.6kg (7.9lb)

...THEN & NOW

Curious how things have changed? Here, we compare a 1982 Fender JV '62 reissue Strat with the new JV Modified '60s Strat

When reader Paul Baker kindly sent us his 1982 JV Strat to be included in this feature, we happened to have the new JV Modified '60s Stratocaster that Neville Marten reviewed (in issue 487) to hand as well. And while these guitars aren't aiming to emulate the same year-class of Strat, it was interesting to compare their vital statistics side by side.

What emerges is a picture of changing tastes in the guitar market over the past four decades. The 1982 Strat has notably hotter pickups, for example, and we'd venture to say that the newer JV is more faithful to original 60s Strat pickup outputs in that regard. The new JV's flatter fretboard is a typically modern feature, however, as most players want the ease and utility of a flatter 'board more than absolute historical accuracy in this area. The oldie has an ash body, though, which some Strat fans may prefer to basswood.



40TH ANNIVERSARY JV MODIFIED STRAT

HEADSTOCK
The 40th Anniversary model has the larger post-CBS size headstock with the additional modern touches of locking tuners and easily accessed truss rod adjustment

NECK
A capped maple fingerboard with the more modern 241mm (9.5-inch) radius, a 42mm nut and 21 2.6mm wide frets. The maple neck is satin finished and sits in between a modern C and vintage V profile

PICKUPS
DC resistance for the pickups is as follows: bridge – 5.82kohms; middle – 5.9kohms; neck – 5.95kohms

BODY
The choice of body timber here is basswood with a flawless Olympic White poly finish. We measured the Anniversary model at 3.34kg (7.35lb)

EAST MEETS WEST

Keith Anderson makes his livelihood bringing rare Fender Japan electrics into the UK and he's seen thousands over the years. So what does he think the magic of MIJ is all about?

Words Jamie Dickson

1. "This is an (E Serial) stars and stripes Telecaster from the early 80s," says Keith. "It was order-built for Fender at FujiGen. It's the only one I have ever seen"

2. "A 2012 order-made Mustang with a factory Bigsby. The only one we've seen. A real oddity!"

3. "One of my favourites: mid-80s FujiGen-built Telecaster in Vintage White/Gold finish, a custom order. We have only ever had and seen two of these"

When we think of Japanese Fender and Squier electrics from the 80s onwards, we often imagine pristine-looking reissues available from the official Fender Japan ranges of a given time period. But Fenders made for the domestic Japanese market are a riot of custom finishes and features not seen in Europe and the US, while their build quality is typically exceptional. To get a sense of what's on offer for the guitarist willing to hunt down rarities from the past 40 years of Japanese production, we caught up with Keith Anderson of Gas Station Guitars in Taunton, who turned a casual hobby of bringing Japanese-market Fenders over here into a flourishing business a few years ago. Here, he explains what to look out for and expect when buying Japanese Fender and Squier instruments. Be warned, though – he says it can get addictive...

What are the key terms we should be aware of with Japanese Fenders?
"Well, you've got MIJ/CIJ thing, when the guitars were made in FujiGen, which was the first factory that had the contract for Fender in Japan. Before the serial number, it would have the words Made in Japan, abbreviated to MIJ. And then when FujiGen moved on to other things and the contract went between a factory called Dyna and Tokai, they rebranded the prefix of the serial number to CIJ [Crafted in Japan]. So you do have a bit of a MIJ versus CIJ debate going on now about which were the better Fender Japan guitars. And the truth is they're all good.

"When Fender moved from FujiGen to building guitars in the other factories, there was really no drop in quality. You do get people trying to instigate a debate... In my experience – and I've had thousands through my hands – FujiGen are probably a little bit more sought-after now because that factory has almost mythical status with the early Fenders and the fact that they built some really nice old Grecos and stuff prior to building guitars for Fender."

Japanese-built Gretsches and ESPs are seen as absolute top-quality marques. Does Fender Japan still suffer from being perceived as a rung down from USA-made equivalents?
"I think it's a perception that comes from when Fender originally moved over there in the early 80s and it was seen [partly] as a cost-cutting exercise. The factory Fender originally got to build their guitars was FujiGen. FujiGen had started in 1960 and had made a kind of niche for themselves in copying other guitars like Gibsons and Fenders through brands like Greco. Fender had been in the doldrums in the 70s and I think they now realised that, actually, the guitars being built in FujiGen were fantastic. I think Tokai almost got the original contract with them in 1980, but that fell through, so Fender went to FujiGen. And so the original idea of a cost-cutting range of guitars is perhaps what's persisted in people's minds when they think of Japanese Fenders. But nowadays if any boutique guitar company was to move production to Japan it wouldn't be seen as a step down, just a step across.

"I guess the one weakness, or what some people see as a weakness of Fender Japan, is that their Achilles heel is their electronics. You'll get a lot of people saying the pickups and the wiring are a bit shitty... And, to be honest, it can be on a lot of the guitars. So what people normally do is buy the guitar because it's just a fantastically well-made instrument, then put their own boutique pickups in there, their own wiring – and you've got the best version of that guitar you could probably ever have. A lot of people do that with their Fender Japan guitars. And, you know, most

"People make the mistake of thinking the Fender Japan catalogues are the be all and end all – when that's just the tip of the iceberg"

of the Fender Japan guitars were poly finished, which some people don't like as much as nitro lacquer. But it's not something that's ever really bothered me."

How has the output of Fender Japan changed over the years?

"They're doing very, very small production runs now. Alongside that small production run, they'll do an even smaller production run. For example, they recently did a kind of Jazzmaster reissue with a basswood body and that was a limited FSR run. Then, almost to launch it, they made a really, really limited Jazzmaster run based on the same build, but it was an alder body with a walnut stain...

"They're still kind of trying to price their guitars right, but I think they've cottoned onto the fact that people are starting to see Fender Japan as quite an exclusive brand in its own right. It's not the cheap alternative any more."

What have been the standout best Fender Japan guitars that you've seen over the years?

"They made a rough approximation of an Albert Collins Telecaster, around the mid-2000s, and it was an absolutely fantastic guitar. I don't think they were allowed to call it the Albert Collins Telecaster... That was a superb guitar. They also made a guitar based quite loosely on Keith Richards' Micawber with the humbucker at the neck. It was like a boat anchor and FujiGen only used really heavy ash for it. But again, an absolutely fantastic guitar. I have one of each in my own collection and I would never part with them. I'm quite partial to the J Mascis purple sparkle Jazzmaster, too. That's a great guitar, even though they made it from basswood. A lot of people look down on basswood, but I've got no problem with it, personally. Those stand out as some of my favourites."

You must have seen some real oddities and one-offs over the years...

"Recently I had – which I never knew existed – a hollowbody Mustang in. Like a thinline Mustang... In all other ways it was just a standard Mustang, but it just had the f-hole in it. It was something you would never expect: why would you make a hollow Mustang like that? But it actually worked, it was quite a nice guitar – that one shocked me. I've also had a Mustang that was made just in Japan, for a particular guitar store, which had a factory-fitted Bigsby on it as well. That one stands out: again, why would you put a Bigsby on a Mustang? But they did and it worked and there are a few like that."

Do you come across much interesting Squier and early Fender JV stuff?

"The way I run my business, I'm lucky in that I get to select what I have – and I am a bit more skewed towards the FujiGen era. So all the way from '92 to about the mid-90s... But I don't get a huge amount of JV stuff in purely because, at the time, a lot of it was exported over here anyway. So because I buy directly from Japan I don't get a huge amount of the JV or the Squier stuff in. It's effectively more obscure [over there] than the Fender Japan stuff I normally go for, you know, of which there's absolutely thousands and thousands of models.

"I think people make the mistake of downloading the Fender Japan catalogues and thinking that's the be all and end all of Fender Japan – when actually it's just the tip of the iceberg. There's so much out there that was made in very, very limited numbers, like special orders for Japanese guitar stores. That's what I love about it: you can never actually get to the bottom of it, you know? It just goes on and on the further you get down the rabbit hole." G

www.gasstationguitars.com

4. "A 2007 Aerodyne Jazz Bass, Dolphin Grey – a wonderful series only available from Fender Japan. It has a carved top and slimline bound body, order-made with block inlays on the neck"

5. "Thinline Mustang from 2012: another real rarity. Fender Japan also made a thinline Jaguar, but the Mustang is much rarer"

6. "1999 HH Jaguar Special Vintage Gold: Fender Japan's original HH series Jaguars had lovely finishes, including Gunmetal Red and Blue, plus this scarce Vintage Gold version"

GOLD STANDARD

The sharply styled Squier Tele that graces this month's cover belongs to a two-pronged 40th Anniversary range specially designed to commemorate four decades of affordable tone. Its official moniker is the Gold Edition 40th Anniversary Telecaster and its deft styling includes a few features not commonly found on workaday Teles, including a bound fingerboard with block inlays, gold anodised aluminium pickguard and an engraved anniversary neckplate.

Its amplified tone comes courtesy of Fender-designed Alnico V pickups, while the 21-fret maple neck is topped with an Indian laurel fingerboard, a tonewood that's now widely used by Fender as a substitute for rosewood. The latter features a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius that offers an ideal middle ground between vintage and modern, flatter-radius fingerboards.

The Gold Edition 40th Anniversary Tele comes in high-gloss Black as pictured here or an equally arresting Sherwood Green with the same gold hardware and appointments. The Gold Edition range also includes similarly styled Stratocaster, Jazzmaster, Precision Bass and Jazz Bass siblings, so check them all out if you like the vibe of this Tele.

If you find the Gold range not quite classic enough, however, Fender is also releasing a 40th Anniversary Vintage Edition range featuring heritage-inspired electrics with a twist, including Satin Sonic Blue, Satin Sea Foam Green and Satin Wide 2-Color Sunburst Stratocasters, plus Telecasters clad in Satin Vintage Blonde, Satin Mocha and Satin Dakota Red finishes, among other commemorative six-string and bass models.

GOLD EDITION 40TH ANNIVERSARY TELECASTER

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HOLY GRAILS

In a low-key store on a quiet city street in Long Island, you will find some of the rarest custom-colour and prototype guitars from Fender and Gibson's storied past. And each one has a fascinating tale to tell about guitar history. We ventured inside Well Strung Guitars, in company with owners David and Paige Davidson, to take a forensic look at the golden-era instruments that gave birth to legends. Here's what we discovered there...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Call me last. Those three words have become David Davidson's calling card in the vintage guitar world and they catch you off guard, as perhaps they are supposed to. But what do they mean?

We're sitting in his office at Well Strung Guitars, the Long Island-based store that he co-owns with his daughter, Paige. It contains some of the most jaw-dropping instruments you'll ever see. A dozen 'Bursts hang on one wall. Across the room are more than 20 Blackguard Teles, Broadcasters and Esquires. In the middle are two 50s Flying Vs facing a wall of custom-colour Firebirds. All original, no refins, no reissues. If even a drop of guitar-loving blood flows in your veins, this place is a dreamland – an Area 51 of tone, where things you didn't even think existed hang right there on the wall, waiting to be played.

"'Call me last' has been my tagline since I started this thing," David says, leaning his elbows on his desk. "Go find out everything you want – talk to anyone you want to. But before you sell your guitar, call me last – don't make a mistake and sell it too cheap... that was always my thing."

David fell in love with vintage guitars at a young age and started trading them when he was barely into his teens. Over the years, he's been able to track down some of the rarest instruments in the world and has been known to pay a premium to acquire them. But he's also a committed steward of historic guitars and wants to raise awareness of America's guitar-making heritage. In 2017, he helped establish what was arguably the greatest exhibition of vintage guitars there's ever been – the Songbirds Museum in Chattanooga – donating scores of instruments from his own collection and involving A-list musicians from his contact book with the museum's work. To David's astonishment, a film about Songbirds even won an Emmy this year.

The pandemic, however, brought changes to the museum's plans and Songbirds has since shifted its focus towards general pop-music history, with fewer guitars on show. Recently, David and Paige undertook the laborious task of returning a truckful of the rarest Songbirds instruments to Well Strung Guitars. Today, if you happen to be passing the store, you can walk in off the street and play a piece of history. In fact, the business has more custom and prototype electrics from the 50s and 60s than we've ever seen. Such instruments, by their very nature, were made in far fewer numbers than standard production guitars. But they also tended to be at the cutting edge of their era's lutherie. And that's why we're here: to learn what the rarest instruments from Fender and Gibson's golden age can teach us about guitar history.

1966 Inverness Green

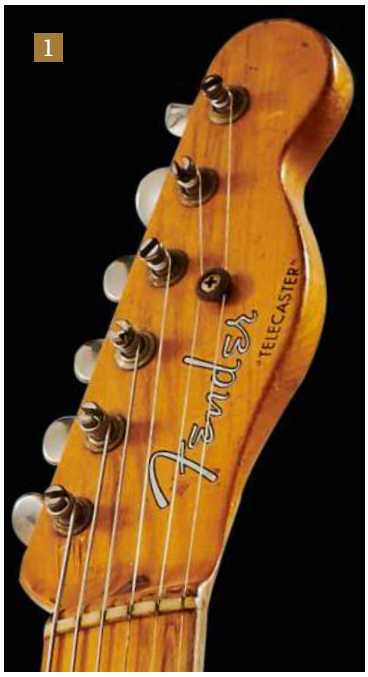
GIBSON SG

"I originally thought this guitar was just a faded Pelham Blue until I found out all Inverness Green guitars were first painted Pelham Blue, after which Gibson applied a pre-tinted yellow coat on top [in order to produce the desired green in the factory]," David Davidson says. "Sometimes you will look at an Inverness guitar and you'll see hints of blue. I have an Inverness Green Firebird V that is true Inverness Green under the guard, in the control cavity and everywhere else. But at the top of the headstock, along the edge, it's more blue because they didn't spray a whole lot of tint there. So, all Inverness Green really started as Pelham Blue, and the tint-coat was added on top. Though Gibson will dispute this, I've seen so many... you're always going to look for the original colour where there was no chance for oxidation, like under a pickguard or inside the control cavity and that's where you'll see the true colour. So that's why we know on this particular guitar is Inverness not just a faded Pelham."

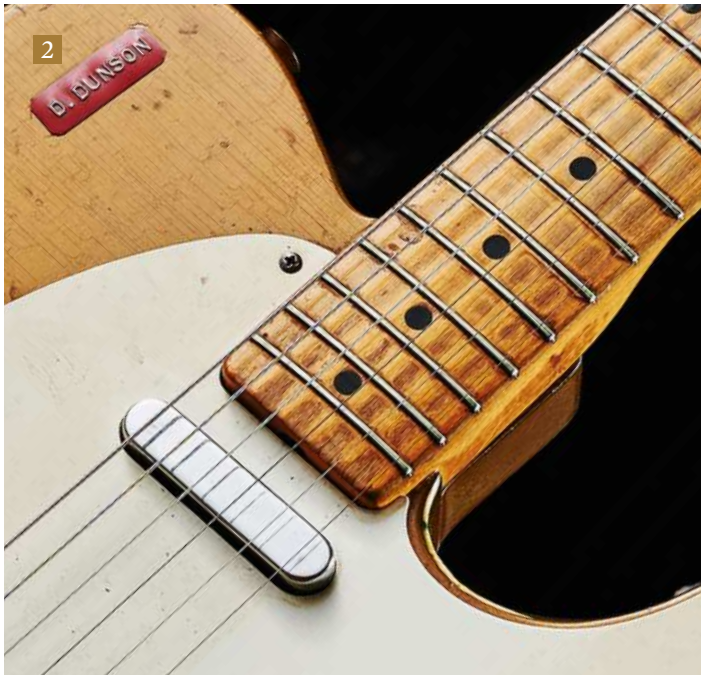
PAINTING LESSONS

One of the earliest ways electric guitar makers customised instruments was with paint. And paint can tell you a surprising amount about how things were done back in the day. The first guitar we examine at Well Strung Guitars is a case in point: a 1953 Fender Telecaster in Aztec Gold (see page opposite), which predates by three years a small batch of Aztec Gold Strats made by Fender.

"That guitar went around for a little while before I saw it," David recalls. "And it's a great example of the fear of the unknown: I know three or four dealers that have come to me since I bought that guitar and said, 'Man, when I first saw that guitar, I just couldn't believe it was real. I couldn't buy it...' I mean, I've got six Aztec Gold Stratocasters – they only made eight and I've got six of them," David observes. "And that's the only Telecaster I've seen in that same paint and it's made three years before the run of Strats, which were all made in '56 – except for one guitar, [guitarist and arranger] Eldon Shamblin's '54 Stratocaster, which is also Aztec Gold. It has the same green verdigris in the wear of the paint as this guitar does."



1. A very early example of a custom colour Tele, this 1953 instrument has a round string-tree and a nicely yellowed tint to the maple neck



2. A small, embossed plastic nametag on the Tele's body was put there by a former owner, Dewey Dunson

3. Equal partners in the incredible enterprise that is Well Strung Guitars: Paige and David Davidson

David says that with very early custom colours there was no codified system of paint mixes, as there was later in the 60s. In this case, while you might class both the '56 Strats and this earlier Tele as Aztec Gold, subtle differences can be seen, due to the haphazard way paints were bought and used by Fender then.

"When Fender needed to buy colours at that time, they would literally run down to the automotive supplier and say, 'Go get me a can of metallic gold'"

"It's a different paint formula than the Aztec Gold they went on to use in '56," David says. "So the only reason I said, 'I'm going to take a chance on this guitar' is because maybe three or four weeks before, I had held the Eldon Shamblin guitar and I'd studied the paint. When I saw this guitar, I said: 'That's from the same can.' You have to realise that when Fender needed to buy colours at that time, they would literally run down to the automotive supplier and say, 'Go get me a can of metallic gold.' They'd buy a quart of paint,

1953 Aztec Gold

FENDER TELECASTER

As a very early custom colour Fender (see page opposite), this Tele is already incredibly special – but a small stuck-on name tag, which read: 'D Dunson' provided a further layer to its story. The initial 'D' stood for Alfred 'Dewey' Dunson, a former owner of the instrument. "The guy's just played the death out of it," David Davidson comments. "I mean, it's refretted and he wore it down to the wood! Usually when you strip a body with a chemical, the chemical is going to take the grain filler out of the wood too, So you don't often get to see something worn naturally [down to the grain filler] over all these years. So now I'm looking at the pore-filler in the wood and I'm taking macro pictures of this thing, because I need to have this on record. This is the only guitar I've ever seen that's worn to a point where I can see how they applied it."

"The guitar went around for a while before I saw it. Dealers have come to me since and said, 'Man, when I first saw that guitar, I just couldn't believe it was real'"

"When you have experience in 50s custom colours, you realise that everything was done differently than it was in the 60s"

say, then reduce it to usually a 50/50 mix with a lacquer thinner, which is the drying agent. So back in '53, they would buy a can of paint and get whatever they could out of it: they painted that Telecaster and they had enough paint left over to paint Eldon Shamblin's Stratocaster."

The hue, oxidation and thickness of these small batches of thinned-down paints are almost like a fingerprint that helps vintage guitar traders such as David and Paige identify guitars as early, factory original customs. In this case, the close similarity to the paint used on the Tele to that of Eldon Shamblin's Aztec Gold '54 Strat provided one clue. A second clue was more interesting still, providing evidence that Fender was very much feeling its way in the brave new world of custom colours back in 1953.

"Fender was used to spraying super-thin paint in 1953," David explains. "But they had a rude awakening when they started dealing with custom colours because the [gold metallic] paint shoots out of a spray-gun a lot thicker. If you take the neck off of this particular Telecaster, the neck pocket is not painted, it's scraped right down to raw wood, which is going to make anybody say, 'Well, somebody messed with it, it's not original.' Except, when you have experience in 50s custom colours, you start to realise that absolutely *everything* was done differently than it was in the 60s – every production procedure. So that's how I approach guitars – I want to be in their heads. What made them do this? Why are certain things so different to what you might expect?

4. Light playwear in the lower frets shows this guitar has performed its share of songs over the years

5. The single-ply scratchplate and plastics have a clean, white glow that screams '50s Strat'

6. Quite a view: a wide shot of Well Strung's Long Island showroom shows the breadth of history hanging on the wall. Two Flying Vs are hiding up front

"So, I was thinking 'You know what's crazy? If this guitar had originally been blonde I would have seen some traces of it – especially in the scraped neck pocket – but there's none'. So I measured the thickness of the paint with a light-refraction tool used by car collectors, then I measured the width of the neck pocket, and I found that if Fender had left that gold paint in the paint pocket they wouldn't have been able to put the neck on the guitar. The paint was too thick and so the neck wouldn't fit – they could have pounded it with a rubber hammer and they still wouldn't have gotten it in there without the paint coming off and making a mess. So they scraped it instead, to make it fit."

TAKEN AS RED

Early custom colours, such as Aztec Gold, pose one set of challenges to the vintage guitar expert, but even familiar finishes such as Fiesta Red have a rich story and their own twists. Reds in particular have a fascinating history at Fender and many early red finishes are often mislabelled 'Fiesta Red'. By way of example, David points to a Fullerton Red '57 Strat on the showroom wall that has a somewhat similar hue to Fiesta but actually predates it (see page opposite).

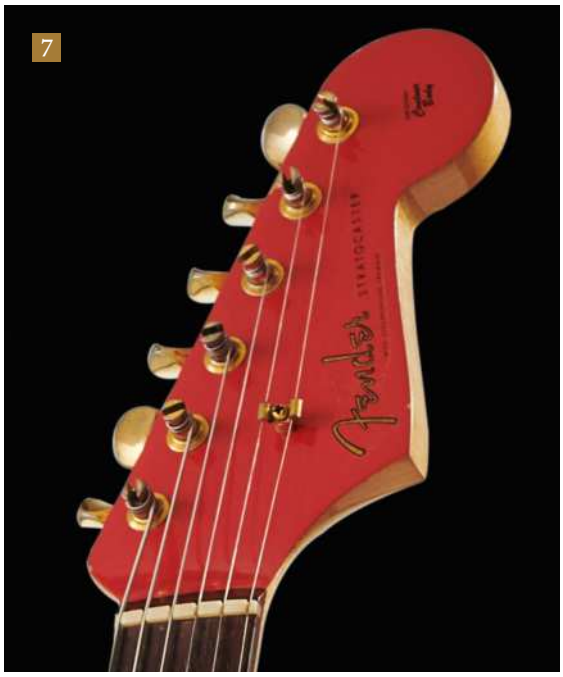
"Fiesta starts in '59, right?" David says. "So any guitar made before the 1959 'Bill Carson' Strat that we have is not Fiesta Red, it's really just another red."

1957 Fullerton Red

FENDER STRATOCASTER

"The first red that Fender painted was Dakota. By 1958, there were at least four different reds in use at the company, including the colour of this guitar, which was called Fullerton Red, and there was also Roman Red and Mandan Red. And then it all culminates in them dumping most of those reds and going with Fiesta and Dakota, but not at the same time – Dakota goes away for years and doesn't resurface again until the Custom Colour chart of '61. However, Roman Red, which is a 1958 Corvette colour, hangs around for a couple of years [unofficially]. I have a Roman Red Bass VI made in '62 and was probably finished with leftover paint. So they were screwing around all the time, but Fiesta became their staple red colour," David Davidson says.

"Many early red finishes are often mislabelled 'Fiesta Red'. The Fullerton Red '57 Strat on the showroom wall has a similar hue to Fiesta but actually predates it"



The 1959 Strat David refers to also tells a broader story about Fender history, because it was built for one of the architects of Fender's success, Bill Carson. David says: "Bill was a country music star and Fender's first signed [endorsee], but he would also work to build and engineer Fender Stratocasters with George Fullerton, Don Randall and Leo Fender. Many of the earlier prototypes, such as Strats with a narrow trem cavity and three springs, or leather pickguards and all kinds of other crazy things we've seen – those were all guitars that were given to people like Bill to go out and play and give feedback on, so Fender could make improvements. We've discovered fairly recently that the first bodies for Fender Stratocasters were made in May of 1953, so that's a full year before regular production launches. Most of the early guitars were made as salesman samples and later came back to Fender to be reworked, right? Bill Carson had a lot to do with that reengineering. He was the person that went and said, 'Hey, these guitars aren't comfortable, if we put this big tummy cut in here, it's going to be more comfortable – and you should put an arm-cut in, too.'

"Just half a dropper of white could change the shade of Fiesta Red. That's why you'll see it looking anything from orange to salmon pink"

"The 1959 Fiesta Red Strat we have [see page opposite] was made specially for Bill ," David continues, "And it was part of a push towards standardised custom colours. Fiesta Red was a logical choice, because it was an extension of a colour that was called Fullerton Red that was produced in-house by Fender. That's why if you look at Fiesta Red and even Fullerton Red, the colour shading difference is so great. Because they started with a can of red paint and added a small amount of white to it. But just one extra dropper-full or even half of white could change the shade of the finished Fiesta Red batch dramatically. So that's why you'll see Fiesta Red guitars looking anything from orange to salmon pink."

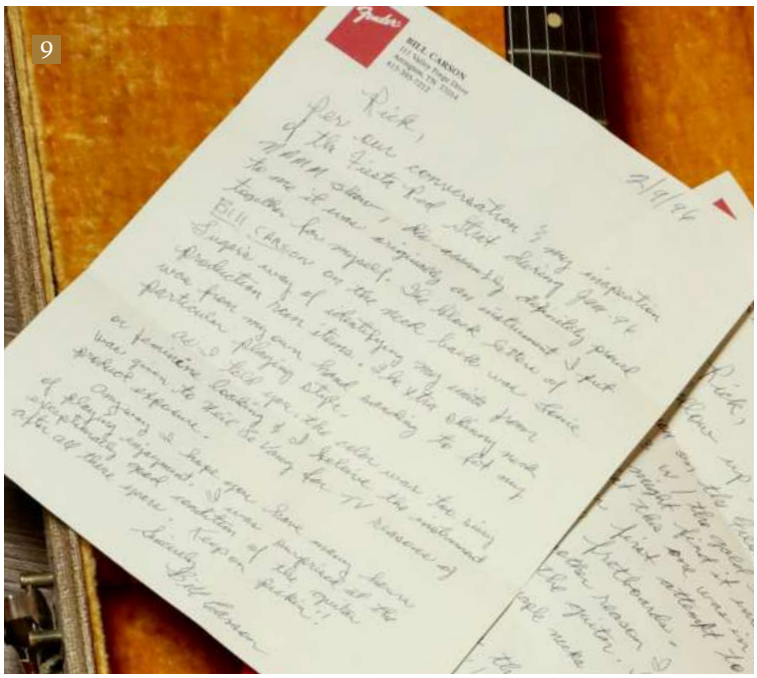


PHOTO BY PAIGE DAVIDSON

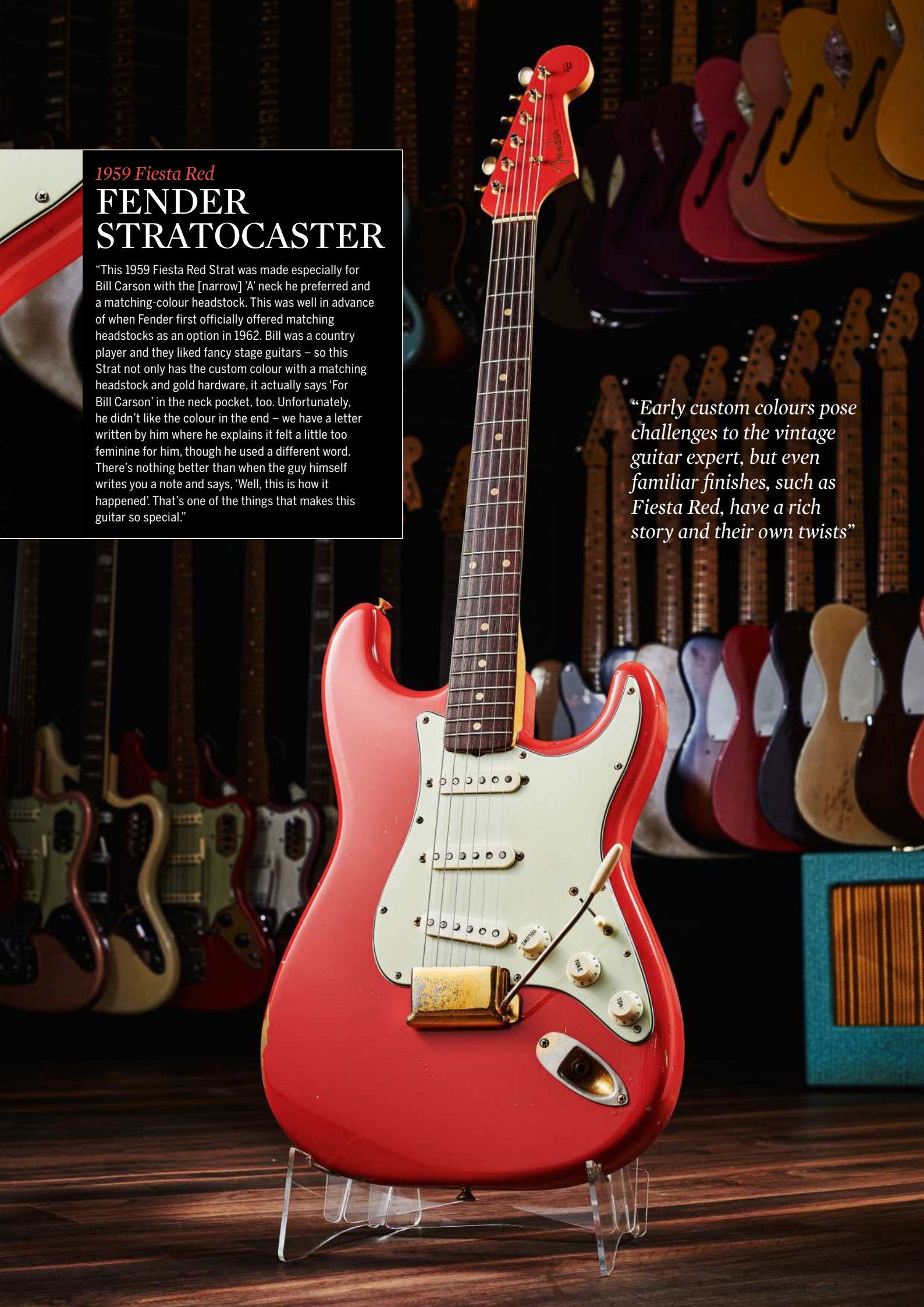
7. Matching-colour headstock and gold hardware mark Bill Carson's Strat out as fancy indeed in 1959

8. The Fiesta Red finish indicates the start of a new era in Fender Custom colours, while the three-ply scratchplate shows the Strat evolving into its 60s form already

9. A letter from Bill Carson discusses the background to the guitar and why he parted company with it

BIRDS OF PARADISE

With Fender enjoying a huge growth in popularity throughout the 50s, Gibson was forced to try and beat Leo's company at its own game. In the early 60s, the Stratocaster hit what was arguably its peak as a design, with the classic



1959 Fiesta Red

FENDER STRATOCASTER

"This 1959 Fiesta Red Strat was made especially for Bill Carson with the [narrow] 'A' neck he preferred and a matching-colour headstock. This was well in advance of when Fender first officially offered matching headstocks as an option in 1962. Bill was a country player and they liked fancy stage guitars – so this Strat not only has the custom colour with a matching headstock and gold hardware, it actually says 'For Bill Carson' in the neck pocket, too. Unfortunately, he didn't like the colour in the end – we have a letter written by him where he explains it felt a little too feminine for him, though he used a different word. There's nothing better than when the guy himself writes you a note and says, 'Well, this is how it happened'. That's one of the things that makes this guitar so special."

"Early custom colours pose challenges to the vintage guitar expert, but even familiar finishes, such as Fiesta Red, have a rich story and their own twists"

1960 Prototype

GIBSON SG SPECIAL

This SG Special prototype is notable for having a slab body without the SG's familiar edge bevel. "When I first took it out of the case it was like when you haven't seen a friend in a while and there's something different about them, like maybe they shaved their beard," David Davidson says. "It's a '60 serial number, inked on. I always look at that guitar as kind of like the slab-body Fender Mustangs you saw early on. It was as if the people making the prototype were thinking 'Well, if we can make it cheaper, let's try', before the styling department said, 'No, you can't cut that corner'." David adds that he's never seen any SG Standard prototypes without bevelled edges so, possibly, a simpler un-bevelled version was only considered for the cheaper SG Special in much the same way as the Les Paul Special did without the carved top of the LP Standard.

"When I first took it out of the case it was like when you haven't seen a friend in a while and there's something different about them..."

rosewood-board spec and a raft of custom colours available to order. Keen to come up with a product that echoed the Strat's sleek modern lines and versatile range of tones, Gibson hired car designer Ray Dietrich to design the reverse-shape Firebird – a difficult-to-construct guitar that didn't last long before being altered to a simpler, non-reverse design – making early Firebirds in Custom Colours some of the rarest electrics in existence.

10. Without its familiar edge-bevels this prototype SG Special has a more blocky look that was rejected in favour of continuity with the rest of the Gibson SG range – though the classic P-90 pickup configuration stayed

"Car designer Ray Dietrich created the reverse-shape Firebird – in custom colours [these are] some of the rarest electrics in existence"

"First of all, they didn't make Firebirds in big numbers to start with," David says. "Reverse Firebirds were a failed experiment that lost Gibson money on every guitar. The coloured ones were basically made to hide shoddy workmanship, at first, until they decided to compete with Fender and put out an official Custom Colour chart. I would say that their rarity, as opposed to that of a custom colour Fender, is dramatic. Especially pastel-colour Firebirds – because most custom-colour Firebirds are red, white or blue. Pastels were far less common, probably because young guys in the 60s were thinking: 'Do I really want

CONNECTING WITH HISTORY

Preserving the past requires an eye to the future, says Paige Davidson

As co-owner of Well Strung Guitars, Paige Davidson not only undertakes the detailed forensic work of authenticating guitars, she also helps guide customers to the instruments that will suit them perfectly. It's a hard task to stay objective as, like any player, she has personal favourites among the extraordinary vintage guitars that pass through her hands at Well Strung Guitars.

"Currently, my favourite guitar is a 1957 Stratocaster," she says. "It's in an unbelievable [custom] blue metallic finish and there's also an Esquire in the same matching colour. When I look at that Strat, I feel like I can almost close my eyes and be there the day it was made."

It's clear that these instruments have lost none of their power to beguile and yet, just as players of the past left their mark on these guitars in forearm wear and buckle-rash, Paige shares how the guitars themselves left indelible impressions on the lives of the people who owned them. And this endures down the decades too. She says, "We have a 1954 Stratocaster here – it's the one that your eye gets drawn to in the line [of sunburst 50s Strats]. It's very smoky and you can tell it's seen the inside of many bars. That piece has photographs of the original owner with it, from the time she played with an old-time, bandstand type of show, and we also have documents, such as her business card as a travelling musician.

"Her son reached out to us and we're connected to that family forever, no matter what happens with that guitar. We've had that guitar [at Well Strung Guitars] more than once in our time as a business, and her grandchildren are aware of us and aware that we have it – they are just so happy that we're keeping all of the records in one place. I really do believe that that's a big part of our duty here."

But if this heritage is to be carried forward, it's essential for new generations to experience it, which as time goes by is going to be one of her key goals as proprietor.

"I want more young people to be involved. In an ideal world, I'd love to see more women in this industry – as of now, there are not many. I just want to see the legacy that's been created here move forward. And what that looks like is yet to be determined."

1964 Kerry Green

GIBSON FIREBIRD V

"Since Firebird production was low in the first place, when you're talking about a Kerry Green Firebird of any type: ones, threes, fives or sevens, you're talking about handfuls of a particular colour," David Davidson says. "I had virtually every model and every colour at Songbirds. The museum did not have a Kerry Green VII, though – and I don't know of a Kerry Green VII in existence, in fact. I have been right through the logs at Gibson and sometimes there's a [serial or order] number but no description next to it. So there *could* be a Kerry Green Firebird VII, but I've never seen a promotional picture that showed one and I've never seen one in the flesh."

11. The Kerry Green finish is rather minty, almost heading towards a Sonic Blue hue. The classic Firebird pickups remain a unique voice in electric guitars

to own a guitar that looks like my kid sister's bedroom?' They didn't really want those baby-green, baby-pink colours. So only a handful of guitars in colours like Kerry Green were made."

So were these scarce custom-colour guitars individually made to order? Or did Gibson ship a few out to selected dealers to see if they would prove popular? The answer was a bit of both, David says. "I think really what it was, is that a dealer was sent

"Gibson rep would insist you stock some guitars in those colours, because they wanted to promote this idea and get it out there"

the Custom Colour chart and a bulletin. Gibson was always putting out these typed bulletins. I've had many different ones and these bulletins might say: 'In response to customer demand, Gibson has decided to offer these 10 exciting new colours for our instruments.' And they would send an envelope with this little chart and a tri-fold and it would show a colour wheel of finishes. And sometimes a dealer would request these colours – other times the Gibson rep would insist that you would stock some guitars in those colours, because they wanted to promote this idea and get it out there."

12. As the 60s wore on and tastes became less conservative, more striking finishes, such as this California Coral hue, were trialled – but remained a niche in the guitar market of the day

1965 California Coral

EPIPHONE WILSHIRE

"This is the only Epiphone I've ever seen in this colour, although it was advertised – it was actually in their flyer with another called 'Pacific Yellow', and I've only seen one of those," David Davidson says. "So for whatever strange reason, they didn't seem to make many of these. And I don't really know why. This particular one that I got from a gentleman in Vermont, along with a couple of other Epiphones – I guess he was sort of a collector. And he had sourced it through his years of collecting, and I was lucky to get it when I did. I got it somewhere around 2007 or 2008, sold it, got it back. You know, we're big recyclers. We're very green!"


13


14

FLOWER POWER

As the 60s became ever-more wild and psychedelic, Fender decided to see if prototype instruments in special finishes could help them tap into a market that had gone from all-American surf groups who thought custom colours were pretty far-out to LSD-taking hippies exploring the outer limits of the human psyche. Fender tried to rise to this almost metaphysical challenge by creating so-called 'Ghost Finish' guitars with psychedelic designs that showed up only under UV light. Vanishingly rare, David is only aware of the existence of two prototype Teles, one of which is at Well Strung Guitars (see page opposite) though photos exist of a 'Ghost Finish' bass, too.

An easier way to tap into pop-culture movements was to make guitars for famous artists, of course – and, as the 1970s approached, none were more famous than George Harrison of The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. Most people know that Fender made a rosewood Telecaster for Harrison, but fewer people know that two rosewood Strats were also made, one of which was intended for Jimi Hendrix. Well Strung Guitars has one of those Strats to show us and it's likely the one made for Hendrix – though the story has some nuances, David explains.

"That guitar has a very long history and to get it all down might be difficult, but I'll tell you what I know," he says. "When I was new to the guitar business, I was very fortunate to meet a guy – Philip Kubicki – who had a company that was making really expensive boutique basses. And Phil had formerly worked with Roger Rossmeisl over at Fender in their Special Projects workshop. Philip was charged with making a rosewood Telecaster to be presented to George Harrison, and he was also tasked with the job of making a rosewood Stratocaster for Jimi Hendrix.

"In fact, Philip was charged with making two Rosewood Stratocasters," David continues. "One is going to be just a prototype for Fender to keep [as a proof of concept] same as with Harrison's Telecaster, and the other one is going to be gifted to Jimi who's going to come out to Fender and pick it up the next time he swings to the West coast – except he passes away before it's made."

"We know they made two rosewood Strats – and we know the other one is in the wind: no one's seen it, no one knows anything about it..."

One of the reasons Hendrix never got his hands on it, David adds, was that the rosewood used in its construction was unusually difficult to work with.

"The interesting thing is that both Harrison's guitar and Hendrix's guitar were 1968 production, but they had problems with the Stratocaster because the rosewood they used emitted a tremendous amount of oil. Philip told me that they had to wipe it with alcohol and steam it and get the oil to flow and then wipe it again, and this procedure took months to complete on the Strat. So even though it started its production in '68, it really wasn't ready until 1970. By that point, in September of 1970, Hendrix had already passed and he never got the guitar," David says.

"So here comes the controversial part," he adds. "We know they made two rosewood Strats – and we know that the other one is in the wind: no one's seen it, no one knows anything about it, Philip had no idea [what happened to it] and now he's passed on, too. But while he was alive, Philip wrote more than one explanation of the guitar that survives, which we have here. This guitar had to have a special clearcoat formula – no other clear was bonding, it was just falling off the guitar – and that formula is written in the neck pocket. So there's one magazine article where Philip claims the Hendrix guitar had nothing written in the neck pocket, but he contradicts himself [in a different article] where he says that the Hendrix guitar had the clearcoat formula written in the neck pocket."

David shrugs and leans back in his chair. Supporting evidence, including documents from Fender

13. Under normal lights, the 'Ghost Finish' Telecaster appears to be an unremarkable, late-60s blonde colour

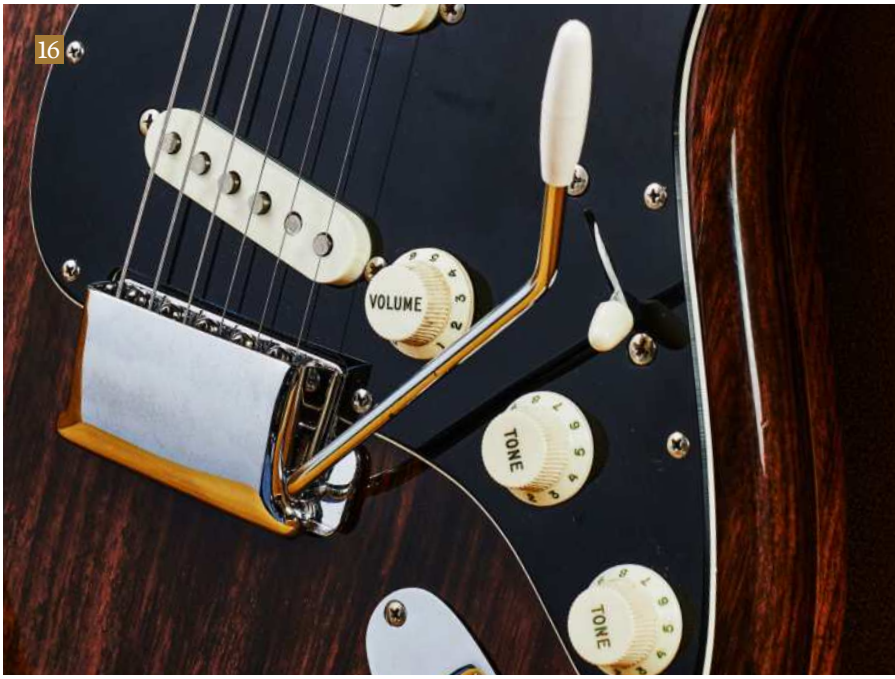
14. Switching on UV lights reveals a different story: the trippy floral patterns of the body are continued, in the form of day-glo stripes, up the fretboard to the headstock

1968 'Ghost Finish'

FENDER TELECASTER

"Right after the '67 Summer of Love Fender decided they were going to go and buy into this hippie dream," David says. "So they come up with a few different designs for these 'ghost' or day-glo finishes that only show up under UV light. I know of only two different patterns [for six-string guitar] and there was only one of each one made. This is the 'Floral' pattern and there was another one called a 'Swirl'. The Swirl is like a bunch of horseshoes that go around the bridge cover in different colours, and when you blacklight it, it comes to life. That was also applied to a Telecaster that exists, but has non-original tuners and no day-glo patterns on the fretboard or headstock as this one does. The other 'Ghost Finish' guitar is a bass that has what looks like firework pinwheels painted on it, but I've only seen pictures of that one – I've never known it to actually be out there."

"The market had gone from all-American surf groups who thought custom colours were far-out to LSD-taking hippies exploring the outer limits of the human psyche"



and a car museum that formerly exhibited the Strat (see page opposite), suggest it is probably the one intended for Hendrix. But long experience has taught David that, with vintage guitars, some questions can never be completely resolved unless further evidence comes to light. But that's part of what makes vintage guitars so fascinating – like people, they all have secrets they may never give up. Some of these lost details don't matter, while others remain among the big unanswered questions of guitar history.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

In fact, history is impossible to avoid at Well Strung Guitars. Pick a Strat off the wall and you might just be holding something that belonged to one of the founding fathers of Fender. Yet, when all's said and done, it's a store and you can buy their guitars if you are fortunate enough to have the funds to do so. It's unusual for a retailer to have to consider the same questions of access and inclusivity as a museum might but, when you have guitars as exceptional as these on display, it happens.

15. The wide-flared headstock of the Rosewood Strat looks stunning up close

16. The instrument follows much the same styling scheme as George Harrison's famous Rosewood Tele

17. Paige and David encourage visitors in the store to play the historic guitars on show there. Paige says the guitars need to be experienced for their heritage to live on

"Putting these guitars in people's hands, letting them hear how it sounds with a vintage amp, it sets us apart"

"I think that it has to be made accessible," Paige Davidson says. "To me, this stuff will have no future if people my age, 30 and younger, don't care. And they can't care unless they see what makes it different. Putting these guitars in people's hands, and letting them hear how it sounds through a vintage amp as well, gives them that full experience... I think it sets us apart."

She's serious about that last point – if you visit, she'll hand you a 'Burst or a Broadcaster to try, if you take an interest in such things. For some visitors, though, the experience of playing a chunk of history can be daunting, she admits.

"I've had people where I'll go to hand them a guitar, and they'll put their hands up and take a step back and say 'I could never...' And I'll say 'Why not? They want to be played. It's what they're here for. You might as well enjoy it'. This won't be anything if nobody else cares 20, 30 years down the road from now. I think that's the biggest thing for me: prolonging the stories, because each of these guitars has a life. They each have a story to tell."

www.wellstrungguitars.com

1971 Rosewood 'Hendrix'

FENDER STRATOCASTER

The complex story of this 1-of-2 prototype, designed for Jimi Hendrix, is told in full on page 72, but the instrument had history well before coming to Well Strung Guitars. David says, "The guitar has travelled through several hands – it was in Fender's own museum where it was advertised as the guitar that was never presented to Hendrix – it was supposed to be, but he died before that could happen. We also have a letter from Fender, dating from the 1980s, stating that this was an experimental Fender guitar, plus a piece of published literature showing that the guitar was on display at the Petersen Automobile Museum for a 'cars and guitars' exhibit, where it was displayed as a guitar made by Philip Kubicki for Jimi Hendrix."

"In Fender's own museum, it was advertised as the guitar that was never presented to Hendrix – it was supposed to be, but he died before it could happen"

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GIBSON ES-225

The ES-225 can be viewed as a short-lived transitional model or a significant yet overlooked milestone in the evolution of Gibson guitars. Either way, it is one of the few non-student model Gibsons from the 1950s that is still just about affordable

Words Huw Price **Photography** Neil Godwin

We recently observed that the ES-225 is to a pre-1956 Les Paul Goldtop what a ES-335 is to a 'Burst. If you compare an ES-225 from 1956 with any pre-1956 Goldtop, you'll notice identical pickups, potentiometers, tone capacitors, control knobs and switches. Assuming the guitar in question is original, even the truss rod cover and nylon nut are the same.

ES-225 neck profiles and frets evolved throughout the 1950s, and they tracked the Les Paul models very closely. Besides the buttons, the Kluson tuners are identical, too, so that leaves the thinline body as the only significant point of difference. Even the trapeze bridge is a throwback to the earliest Les Pauls and it actually enhances the ES-225 – but more on that later.

The Skinny

During the 50s, players were beginning to appreciate smaller and more comfortable guitars with extra feedback resistance, and Gibson was facing stiff competition. In those days, Gibson was a fairly traditional guitar manufacturer, and it hit on an idea that maintained the company aesthetic while catering to the latest trends: it introduced new models with thinner bodies.

In essence, the ES-225 is a thinner version of the ES-295, which is just an ES-175 with a fancy tailpiece and glitzy lacquer. All three models share an identical Florentine cutaway outline and laminated body construction, but where the ES-295 and ES-175 measure 3 5/16 inches (84mm) deep at the rims, the ES-225s clock in at just 1 11/16 inches (43mm).

The ES-225 was Gibson's first thinline electric and, as such, the forerunner of the ES-330 and ES-335 and many others. The ES-225 was soon joined by the ES-350T and carved top Byrdland, but it was the only one with Gibson's full 24 ¾ -inch scale length. The other two had a 23 ½-inch scale length and were actually a half-inch thicker. But the ES-225 has a hidden feature that sets it apart from all the others and can be seen as a significant first step towards the radical centre-block design of the ES-335.

Gibson glued a maple block measuring about half an inch thick between the top braces. It extends from the bridge area towards the lower bout and it must be assumed that Gibson did so to solidify the top and dampen resonance.

•

The ES-225 has a hidden feature that can be seen as a first step towards the radical centre-block design of the ES-335

•

One Or Two

The ES-225T was introduced in 1955 as a single-pickup guitar. This wasn't uncommon for archtop guitars, but rather than situate the pickup in the usual neck position, Gibson elected to place it dead centre instead. Being charitable, it could be argued that single-pickup ES-225s offer a distinct and engaging tone.

Conversely, you may find the middle pickup simply gets in the way of your picking hand and the tonal limitations make the ES-225T models precisely one third as good as the dual-pickup ES-225TD models that followed in 1956.

That Bridge

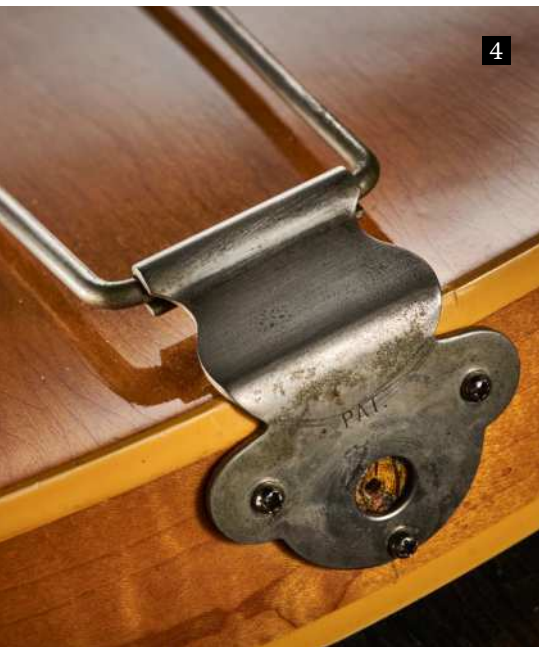
The ES-225's trapeze tailpiece/bridge unit is an elongated version of the bridge that was fitted to Les Paul Goldtops in 1952 and early 1953. As such, their reputation is tainted by association, but there is absolutely nothing wrong with the bridge itself when it's used as intended by its designer, Lester William Polsfuss.

The shallow neck angle on the earliest Goldtops meant that the strings had to be wrapped under the bridge, and this renders them uncomfortable to play and tricky to palm-mute. But on an ES-225 the bridge is top-wrapped, so it produces great tone and there's sufficient downwards pressure to prevent the bridge from sliding about.

The trapeze bridge lasted until the ES-225's final year of production in 1959,

Our ES-225 collection includes a tobacco sunburst 1956 at the front, a natural finish 1957 and a 3-tone sunburst from 1958

1. Used as intended with the strings top-wrapped, Les Paul's bridge design is stable, it feels comfortable to play and it sounds superb
2. Like 1950s Les Pauls, ES-225s have small wooden strips bridging the gap between the sides and the binding. But in this case, it's top and bottom
3. Single line Klusons with plastic buttons were the standard tuners and, if necessary, modern replicas can be fitted without any need for modifications
4. The white plastic strap button is missing and the hole has been plugged and drilled for a metal strap button



when Gibson changed to an ES-330-style trapeze with a ABR-1 Tune-O-Matic bridge mounted on a floating rosewood base. Having tried both bridges on the same ES-225, we can report that the original bridge sounds louder and fuller, and has greater sustain.

Les Paul registered his 'Combined Bridge And Tail Piece For Stringed Instruments' in 1952 and was awarded the patent number 2737842 in 1956. Gibson had water slide patent number decals made up and attached them to the underside of the trapeze hinge plate, right next to the ground wire solder joint. They must have over-ordered because these decals were later used to replace the 'patent applied for' decals on early 1960s humbuckers.

In Use

We must confess to always blithely assuming that ES-225s must be a more archaic version of the ES-330. After eventually trying one – a 1958 ES-225 TDN – it turned out to be nothing of the sort. Having owned and endured a mixed relationship with three ES-330s, we were surprised to find that ES-225s display a more even response all along the fretboard, noticeably longer sustain and a good balance between the pickups.

Hardcore ES-330 fans may miss the livelier acoustic response, but the ES-225 is somewhat more predictable and easier to handle at higher volume levels. While

Hardcore ES-330 fans may miss the livelier acoustic response, but the ES-225 is easier to handle at higher volume levels

not entirely like an ES-335 in the semi-solid stakes, the evidence suggests that the maple block under the bridge does exert an influence. As a result, we believe that the ES-225 is, in fact, more versatile than an ES-330. In clean mode it's more than capable of producing mellow and woody jazz sounds on the neck pickup, and then you can flick to the middle setting to indulge in some Chet Atkins-style picking. Add some slapback echo to that factory shimmed bridge pickup, and you'll be able to enjoy a range of classic rock 'n' roll and rockabilly tones.

Dial in some dirt and ES-225s ease effortlessly into blues and rock territory. Powerchords sound immense and lead lines have the fluid and vocal quality that exemplifies 1950s Gibsons. Granted, they're not really built for shredders, but there's enough sustain and solidity to veer towards classic rock and fusion. Fans of George Thorogood's ES-125 slide tones

In clean mode the ES-225 is more than capable of producing mellow and woody jazz sounds on the neck pickup

The natural finish ES-225TDN is the rarest and most collectable version, and the 'Cali Girl' Lifton case is a bonus

The guitar on the left has the 3-tone dark sunburst introduced in 1957, while the tobacco sunburst, on the right, only featured in 1955 and 1956

may be interested to hear that ES-225s can sound much the same.

It should be noted, however, that ES-225s do vary to some extent. First and foremost, P-90s underwent changes through the 1950s, and there was some variation in the magnets Gibson used. Earlier examples will probably have Alnico III magnets, which have a softer and woodier character than the Alnico II, IV and V magnets in later 1950s P-90s.

In addition to the sublime late-50s neck profile, you can also expect later ES-225s to have P-90s with slightly more treble and higher output. The frets changed, too, and although the effect on tone is minimal, many players will find the fatter frets, which Gibson installed from 1958 onwards, more comfortable than the skinny frets on 1955 to 1957 examples.

Mods & Buying Tips

If you have a 1959 ES-225 with an ABR-1 and the later tailpiece, you should probably keep the guitar original – or maybe replace that trapeze with a Bigsby. On the other hand, an earlier model with a replaced bridge would certainly benefit from having an original trapeze reinstalled. They do come up for sale fairly regularly and any money you spend will increase your guitar's value accordingly. If you're fussy about intonation, investigate the compensated bridges that MojoAxe and Glaser offer for early Goldtops.

ES-225s are not really built for shredders, but there's enough sustain and solidity to veer towards classic rock and fusion

Gibson didn't fit metal strap buttons, and if a strap button is installed it will most likely be a white plastic one wedged into the tail block. This can be replaced with a modern button, but the original hole will have to be plugged with a tapered dowel, and then drilled for a new button screw. If you want to play standing up and would prefer to add a strap button rather than tie the strap to the headstock, it's better to position it on the rear of the body – as seen on ES-330s and ES-335s. Placing it on the heel itself means your hand will hit it whenever you play up the neck, and upper-fret access will be restricted.

Compared with early Les Pauls, ES-225 pickups are set further away from the strings. However, P-90 shims are easy to buy and install, so you could try raising the pickups if you need more power, sensitivity and cut. Shims are a reversible mod, so you can always backtrack if you change your mind. Also try raising the pole screws above the covers. Elsewhere, frets on early examples are very skinny and low, which can compromise playability. If you find yourself loving the tone but struggling to play, a refret shouldn't necessarily be considered off limits.

Since most ES-225s were bought by jazz players rather than rockers, they generally show up in excellent condition today. The vast majority will also have survived without pickup swaps, refinishes and ill-advised hardware 'upgrades'. However, the knobs, switch tips, truss rod covers and ABR-1 bridges fitted to ES-225s are identical to 'Holy Grail' models such as 'Bursts, Flying Vs and so forth. Parts pilfering has been rife for decades, so take care to ensure that all the bits onboard are original. If they're not, that should be reflected in the price you pay.

Not so long ago, vintage ES-225s cost less than many of Gibson's Custom Shop models. Gibson even made an ES-225 reissue, but the originals weren't that much more expensive. Things have changed and ES-225 prices have been climbing steadily over the past few years, especially for a natural-finish example with a 'Cali Girl' case. Try one if you get the opportunity, and if you like it, you'd better move fast... G

Guitarist would like to thank Mike Phillips for the loan of the 1957 natural-finish ES-225 and Dave Williams for the 1958 sunburst ES-225

The majority of ES-225s have survived without pickup swaps, refinishes and ill-advised hardware 'upgrades'

ES-225s never had serial numbers, so you have to locate the FON stamp under the treble side to determine the year of manufacture

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FENDER SPARKLE FINISHES

Few people in the world know more about Fender sparkle finishes than our resident vintage guitar veteran David Davidson. Here, he takes us through the oft-misunderstood history of Fullerton's most lustrous axes

Words Rod Brakes **Photography** Phil Barker, Joby Sessions, Olly Curtis

Sparkle finish guitars are among the rarest and most enigmatic of Fender instruments. Decked out in metallic paint and embellished with metal flake, these dazzling beauties, though striking in appearance, often carry a mysterious past. While they are considered a true Fender finish, for a long time these special paint jobs were tasked to third parties. As custom finishes in the realist sense they extended not only outside the boundaries of Fender's automotive-inspired custom colour chart but beyond the limits of the factory itself. Perfectly encapsulating the golden era of American guitars, cars and movies, these glittering vintage rarities are a jewel in California's cultural crown.

"It was mostly about the hot-rod culture in California," begins guitar guru David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars. "People associate sparkle finishes with surf, but it really wasn't the surf thing so much as it was about the car culture in Southern California. That really was a big deal at the time, and Fender was right there in the middle of hot-rod country.

"They were in Fullerton, California, and all that stuff was happening around them. So, naturally, the idea of painting your guitar to look like a hot-rod was a cool thing. There were a lot of bands with hot-rod names, and groups were writing songs about cars. There was Ronny & The Daytonas, for example, and The Rip Chords who wrote *Hey Little Cobra* about the Shelby Cobra. Dick Dale wrote about cars. As did The Beach Boys. So having guitars that kind of resembled cars was a really big deal."

Fuelling the obsession were the movies of the time, which often featured cars decked out in colourful, glittering finishes. Before long, sparkle finish guitars were also appearing on the silver screen.

"There were a lot of car movies and beach movies made back in the late 50s and early 60s," explains David. "Typically, there's a scene where a guy pulls up in something blue sparkle or red metal flake, or green metal flake like the '62 Jaguar [pictured here on page 111]. So, as you can imagine, people started saying, 'Hey, I want my guitar painted like that!'

These glittering vintage rarities are a jewel in California's cultural crown

"It starts to hit a fever with Ann-Margret in [the 1963 feature film] *Bye Bye Birdie*. That movie features a highly customised Fender Jaguar. It's unbelievable. It's black with a gold pickguard and controls, and it has this big gold sparkle ribbon painted on that says 'Conrad Birdie'. They made several different guitars for the producers to look at and decide which guitar [protagonist] Conrad Birdie was going to play. One of them is a gold Jaguar with a black to gold sparkle sunburst pickguard and a matching headstock. I have that guitar here."

David's collection of Fender sparkle finish instruments is enviable. Having hunted down these rarities for many years he has built up a ton of knowledge on their unique idiosyncrasies. But how does he manage to navigate the minefield of the vintage market? After all, genuine sparkle finishes are notoriously difficult to authenticate.

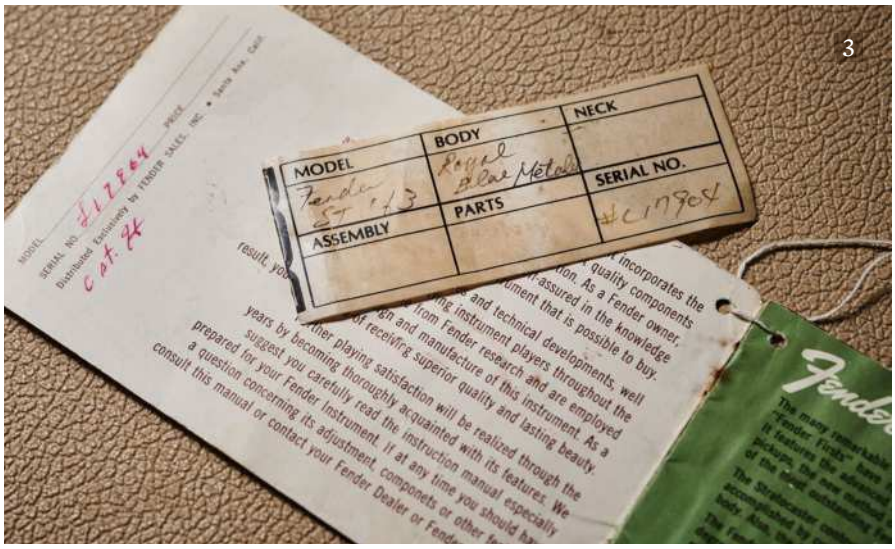
"When I started to do the deep dive into sparkle guitars years ago, I got offered a lot of them," says David. "People knew I was buying them and I saw many. But I've got to tell you: more than 80 per cent of them were fake! Authenticating them is about using all your senses – sight, sound, touch, texture and even smell. It's based on experience.

"Car culture was a big deal, and Fender was right there in the middle of hot-rod country"

DAVID DAVIDSON

This 1963 Fender Stratocaster in Royal Blue sparkle finish is featured in Norman Harris's book *Norman's Rare Guitars*

1. This uber-rare sparkle finish Strat is currently being offered for sale by Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath
2. A veneer rosewood 'board with clay dots and mint green 'guard are the typical hallmarks of a Strat from this era
3. Tags displaying the instrument's serial number and specific automotive paint type – in this case, Royal Blue



"There were different shops, each with their own painting techniques. Firstly, there is the blue-grey primer era. Then there is the rough era, followed by the smooth era. Also, when I look at a chip in the paint, I can see the stages of how the paint was applied. Knowing paint and being a guy who really loves automotive things and paint finishes, I've gotten a really good feel as to what it's supposed to look like. Over time, you start to notice consistencies and inconsistencies that make you think, 'Okay, this is the way that every one of these looks for that period.' It took me going through about 80 sparkle finish Fenders to figure it out."

According to David, Fender outsourced all sparkle finishes up to 1966, the reason being they were unequipped to complete such specialist work in-house. As ad hoc custom orders, one might reason it was uneconomical to invest in the necessary equipment and expertise to meet such relatively infrequent requests. After all, Leo Fender was all about streamlining manufacturing processes.

"This is the bottom line: before 1966, the Fender manufacturing facility never painted a guitar in a sparkle finish," underscores David. "All sparkle finishes were subbed out to be done at local shops. Fender used a very common spray gun in that period called a Binks Model 7. If you look at any old pictures where they're spraying guitars, they'll be using one of those. It's a suction-style paint gun, meaning you fill a cup with paint, it gets sucked up a tube, mixed with air and then comes out of the main nozzle. On the other hand, area hot-rod shops used a downdraft paint gun where you put the material into a cup that is attached to the top. It's gravitational, meaning the paint falls into the paint gun instead of getting sucked up.

"When Fender used a suction-style Binks Model 7, the suction was not strong enough to pull up that heavy metal flake. The downdraft paint guns were what was needed and that's why they went to hot-rod shops to be begin with. However, by 1966 Fender had their own paint guns that were able to do this process."

So, when did Fender start sending them out? The company didn't publish its custom colour chart until the early 60s, so any custom colour from the 50s is especially rare. But a 50s sparkle finish?

"First of all, they never used a regular custom colour for sparkle finishes," highlights David. "It was a completely different colour – normally a hot-rod colour of some kind. Think about what people were driving and what colours they were painting the cars: it was gold, silver, red, white, blue and green. That was about it. Those are the Fender sparkle colours.

"The earliest true sparkle Fender guitar that I know of is actually a red '55 Stratocaster," David tells us. "It was made for Jimmy Bryant. But he did not originally get the guitar in sparkle; he gave it back to Fender who then had it repainted for him. I don't know exactly when the finish was applied, but it has the typical blueish-grey undercoat of the first era of sparkle finishes from the 50s.

> *"Before 1966, all sparkle finishes were subbed out to be done at local shops"*
> **DAVID DAVIDSON**

4

"Authenticating [uses] all your senses – sight, sound, touch, texture, even smell"

DAVID DAVIDSON

5

6

4. This iconic-looking 1966 Fender Jazzmaster is the epitome of surf-rock. It features a bound rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays (block inlays appeared later in 1966)

5. Like some regular custom colour models of the early 60s, sparkle finish Fenders often feature matching headstocks (as per the three offset guitars pictured here)

6. This 1962 slab-'board Fender Jaguar is one the earliest of its type and was the star of the Songbirds Guitar Museum's surf guitar exhibition curated by David Davidson

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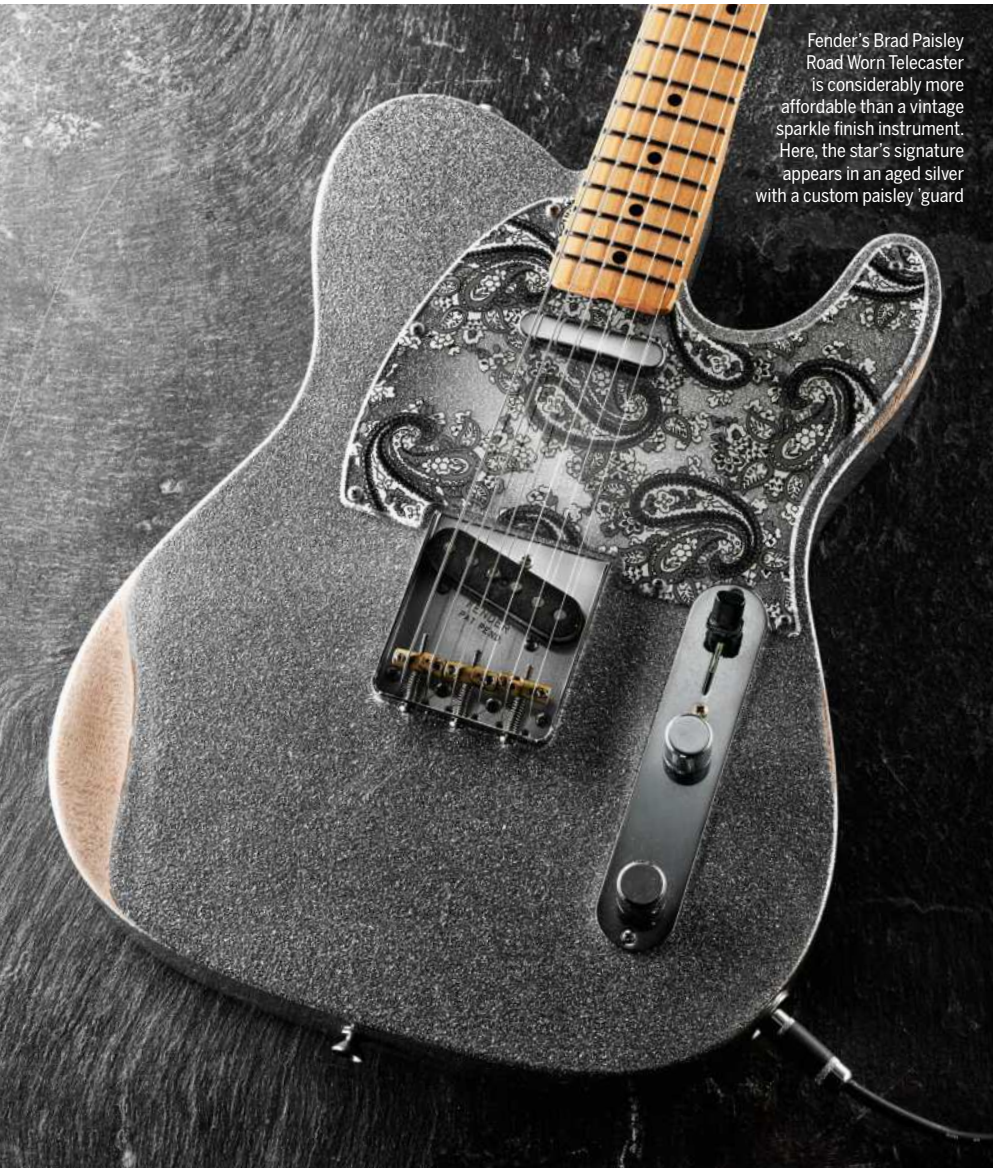


Fender's Brad Paisley Road Worn Telecaster is considerably more affordable than a vintage sparkle finish instrument. Here, the star's signature appears in an aged silver with a custom paisley 'guard

"The earliest instruments I've seen that were sold as new in a sparkle finish were made in 1957 as presentation pieces. And I have a 1957 blue sparkle Precision Bass that was owned by Lloyd Trotman who was the bass player for Ray Charles; it was also owned by Shifty Henry who played with Elvis. I also have a '57 Stratocaster here with a blueish-grey undercoat that appears on early sparkle finishes. We surmise that they were all done by one person."

According to David, other sparkle finishes from the late 50s he's examined look very similar. However, by '59, the undercoats and finish textures appear different.

"I have a '59 that doesn't actually have an undercoat," he points out. "I think by that time they were using someone else to do them. Not all the names and places are on record, but we know a guy named Dennis Swiden did a lot of the beach guitars, including Dick Dale's.

"The famous silver sparkle Buck Owens and Don Rich guitars [from the early 60s] were made from crushed glass, so the finish on them is very rough. It feels like rubbing your hand over pebbles. There were three of those guitars made: one was made for Buck, one was made for Don, and [Fender employee] George Fullerton kept one for

"Crushed glass [finishes] feel like rubbing your hand over pebbles"

DAVID DAVIDSON

Some of Scott Cameron's artful ageing processes have been tastefully applied to this silver sparkle finish

If you look closely, you can see some horizontal lacquer checking typical of vintage Fenders

7. A 1963 Fender VI in 'Pink Champagne' sparkle finish: "When I was first contacted about this guitar, I thought, 'It's not going to be real,'" recalls David

8. Introduced in 1961, the VI (often referred to as the 'Bass VI') featured three single-coil pickups with metal surrounds. In '63 the model adopted these Jaguar-style notched metal pickups

9. When David examined this guitar it was deemed to be original. It also happened to come with authentic publicity photos!

himself. I have that guitar here. They're all Custom Telecasters with rope binding on the front and the back. Interestingly, they were also the first maple cap [fretboard] guitars ever made. And they have matching headstocks too, so they're really, really cool.

"I also have guitars from the early 60s that are not quite crushed glass like the Buck Owens and Don Rich guitars, but they do have very, very heavy metal flake finishes. What's interesting is that their texture changes depending on who painted them. But by 1966, when Fender start doing sparkle finishes in-house, the texture becomes very smooth. I think they were just sprayed with a very thick clearcoat, which they were then able to polish to a smoother finish. It was a refinement." G

Guitarist would like to thank Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York, and Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath

BRIGHT SPARK

Scott Cameron of Golden Era Aged Guitars is keeping the art of the sparkle finish alive in 2022

With a new product dropping on its website at 7pm every Friday night, you never quite know what might be coming out of Scott Cameron's workshop at Golden Era Aged Guitars (previously SC Relics). Ranging from classic custom colours to metal flake finishes, Scott's skilfully aged Fender-style bodies and necks are works of art in themselves. We asked him about some of the ins and outs when it comes to the tricky business of sparkle finishes.

Many people have found refinishing their own guitars to be a satisfying experience. Would you recommend DIY-ing a sparkle finish?
"Sparkle finishes are pretty niche and I wouldn't recommend doing them in your garden shed. This isn't a case of buying an aerosol from Manchester Guitar Tech or Halfords for a weekend project."

Run us through your process.
"When I get the bare body, I put a sealer on it, which is clear, so that there is a flat surface and something for the metallic basecoat to adhere to. I'll spray that on thinly, let it dry very quickly, then it's ready to be hit with flake. I usually pour the dry flake into the clear lacquer and add a touch of thinner, which helps it all go through the gun a bit easier. But you've got to be careful it doesn't run. It takes a lot of twisting and turning to avoid any sagging or runs. After that, I'll hang it up overnight.

"The next day, I'll load up the clearcoat gun somewhere in the range of 80:20 lacquer to thinner. With a sparkle finish, you have to put on an excessive amount of clear. It's very laborious. It takes far more coats and sanding than a regular flat colour. You could probably do three or four flat finishes in the time it takes to do one sparkle finish.

Sparkle finishes have a bumpy texture early on in the process because of the flake. But if you start to sand it too early, you'll scuff the colour off the flakes – your nice gold flakes might end up with weird silver sanding marks. That's why you need to put more clearcoats on. You could probably get away with three or four clearcoats over Sonic Blue, Fiesta Red, Olympic White et cetera. But with sparkle finishes you're looking at 15 to 20 coats of clear lacquer over the top.

"Sparkle finishes are niche, they take a lot of work and they're hard to do. But they're totally worth it."

What's the demand for sparkle finishes like at the moment?
"The people who go for sparkle finishes tend to really love them. I find the Champagne, silver and gold sparkle finishes sell really well. Personally, I like the stronger colours like purple and teal. I love them; I just like to see some colour in life. When you're surrounded by a batch of sparkle finishes it's awesome. There's an amazing amount of colour and mess all over the place – my workshop looks like a unicorn has thrown up Skittles everywhere! – but when you look at a rack of sparkle finishes it just looks totally bitchin'."

60TH Marshall ANNIVERSARY EDITION

BLACK GOLD

Big, brutally loud and British, Marshall amps' impact on the mid-60s music scene was as forceful as Pete Townshend swinging a Rickenbacker into a Plexi. Six decades on, we examine Jim's legacy...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

The year is 1962. *Return To Sender* by Elvis Presley is at the top of the charts, the astronaut John Glenn orbits the Earth and the first ever Bond film is set to hit cinemas. Tucked away in a quiet suburb of West London, Jim Marshall's unassuming music shop must have seemed an unlikely venue for history being made. And yet the sounds that were born in his workshop have, arguably, shaped our world as much as Glenn's orbit or 007 ever did. Perhaps more so. The dark, lava-thick scream of Hendrix's cranked Marshalls on a Woodstock stage just seven years later heralded a new era in music – one where power, adrenaline and art all combined in one glorious purple haze of sound. Six decades on, we're still feeling the tremors of this musical earthquake and we still have much to be grateful to Marshall for.

With that in mind, we chose to mark the diamond anniversary with a look back at the technical – and human – history of how those unforgettable sounds were created. We hope, too, to show there's surprising breadth in Marshall's heritage as an amp maker. We all love the cliché of Marshall stacks kicking out lethal decibel levels – the 'going to 11' that Nigel Tufnel of Spinal Tap famously boasted of. But many of Marshall's most inspiring tones are surprisingly clean, and that warm but electrifyingly jagged tone you hear on AC/DC records isn't a sound you can make without having a really great clean tone inside your amp before you crank it past the point of break-up.

Marshall has also been at the forefront of tech-rich amps, too, from the then-pioneering triple-channel heads of the 90s to the modelling amps of the past 10 years. Just as a good whisky brand can be identified from the first sip, somehow they all 'taste' like Marshalls to the ear, though. So join us as we examine the sonic heritage of Marshall – a history lit by the glow of EL34 valves being pushed beyond reasonable limits by artists who knew none at all.

Guitarist would like to give a big thank you to the good people at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, a premier retailer of historic instruments, for supplying the stunning vintage Strats and Les Pauls that grace the pages of this feature (**www.vintageandrareguitars.com**). If you want to hear them in all their glory, head to the accompanying video with none other than spellbinding Welsh guitarist Chris Buck, who plays these landmark amps and guitars at full tilt and shares his thoughts on Jim Marshall's musical legacy in an exclusive video interview that you can access here:

https://bit.ly/GuitaristAnnual2023

1968 **MARSHALL** JMP50 & 1954 **GIBSON** LES PAUL GOLDTOP

AMP NUMBER ONE

From wartime crooner and big band drummer to legendary shop owner, Jim Marshall led a life that was shaped by music. And in 1962, alongside a crack team in their garden sheds, Jim would bring the first Marshall JTM45 to life – a Holy Grail of rock guitar

Words Nick Guppy

As time draws on, the story of the creation of 'Amp Number One', the very first Marshall JTM45, is turning into legend, with truth and myth sometimes interwoven depending on which version you read. When this writer was privileged to meet and spend a day with Jim Marshall back in early 2001, he was still working 12-hour days at the Bletchley factory – usually the first to arrive and often the last to leave. Jim's own version of events, which at that time had taken place four decades earlier, was well rehearsed as he'd obviously recited it countless times to journalists from all over the world.

Jim Marshall suffered from ill health as a child and he was exempted from military service in World War II because of it. He became a popular singer on the London club circuit and doubled up on drums to earn extra money, as civilian musicians were in short supply during the war. With petrol rationed, he rode a bicycle to gigs, carrying a homemade PA system in a cart so he could make himself heard. Despite his success as a vocalist, drumming became Jim's main focus and, like many other young drummers of that era, his idol was the American Gene Krupa, whose electrifying performances and good looks earned him frequent cameo appearances in Hollywood musical films, making him an international star.

After the war, Jim took lessons from Max Abrams, who was the top teacher in the UK at that time. Jim practised hard and swiftly became good enough to teach drums to others. By the 1950s he was working as a full-time professional musician and teacher, earning enough money to open his own music shop in Uxbridge Road, Hanwell, in 1960. The local music scene was buzzing and it was a time of tumultuous change as rock 'n' roll replaced the pop crooners. Established stars such as Jim Reeves, Perry Como and Frank Sinatra were being ousted from the charts by brash young artists including Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley – who all played guitar. Jim Marshall's drum shop quickly adapted to the changing trend and branched out into guitars; the drummers Jim taught would often bring in their guitarists and the shop quickly became a focal point and melting pot for local musicians.

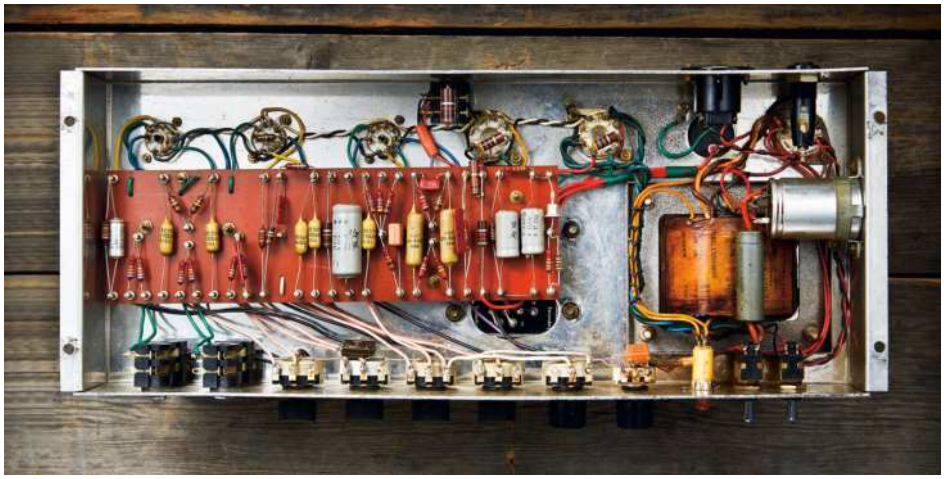
RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

The West London location of the shop was a classic example of being in the right place at the right time. Jim's customers in the early years included Pete Townshend, Ritchie Blackmore, Big Jim Sullivan and later on a young Eric Clapton, while among his drum students were Keith Moon and Mitch Mitchell, who would go on to play with Jimi Hendrix. The shop was also less than two miles from the legendary Ealing Blues Club, which was opened in March 1962 by Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies and instantly became the epicentre of the British electric rhythm and blues scene, hosting Pete Townshend's High Numbers (which became The Who), The Rolling Stones (who met each other at the club), Cream, Manfred Mann, The Yardbirds, John Mayall and Fleetwood Mac, to name just a few.

Jim's shop was less than two miles from the legendary Ealing Blues Club, the epicentre of the electric R&B scene

A 1965 'Block Logo' JTM45 MKII, still close to its Fender roots but forging a new tone

Back then it wasn't easy to import the American guitars and amps that Jim's customers craved. Clearly, there was room for a homegrown competitor, and repair tech Ken Bran suggested they try building their own, following numerous requests from local musicians. Jim was always careful to listen to what his



1964 **MARSHALL** JTM45 ANATOMY

A look under the hood at valves and circuitry used in the JTM45's early history

The JTM45 shares much of its DNA with Fender's Bassman 4x10 combo, in particular the 5F6-A circuit. This was the last 'tweed' update, introduced around 1958 and phased out in 1960. The Bassman was originally intended to complement Fender's new Precision bass guitar, although as it evolved from a 1x15 TV-fronted combo to the more recognisable narrow-panel 4x10 open-backed design, many guitarists discovered it was also a formidable partner for the six-string instrument. It was this amp that Ken Bran and Dudley Craven used as the basis for the JTM45, and the Marshall's circuitry is more or less identical, with the same 'long-tailed pair' phase inverter.

However, there were a few important differences. The first valve in the JTM45 preamp was changed from a 12AY7 to a 12AX7, which has around double the gain. Fender used the 12AY7 to maximise clean headroom, while Marshall was chasing a hotter sound so the 12AX7 was a logical substitution. Negative feedback was increased to tighten up the speaker response and add extra highs. There were many other small changes as Marshall would tweak the circuit for individual clients, or vary it depending on component availability – some amps had a second 'bright' capacitor on the high treble channel, others didn't. It's quite possible that no two heads were identical in those early days.

Possibly the most famous custom order was the Gold Lion KT66-powered open-back 2x12 combo version built for Eric Clapton, who requested a Vox-sized combo that would fit into the boot of his car. This was the amp that became the Model 1962, which Clapton turned up to 11 to record the famous 1966 'Beano' album with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, bringing the Ealing Marshall sound to an international audience and profoundly changing the electric guitar's place in popular music.

Other significant changes were mostly down to geography and economics as Marshall used British suppliers for parts, while Fender's components were sourced in the USA. The Bassman's 5881 valves were made by Tung-Sol Lamp Works of Newark, New Jersey, who also invented the 6550. The 5881 was a high-spec military version of the 6L6GB, with a maximum plate dissipation of 23 watts compared with the 30 watts of the later 6L6GC, and a lower maximum plate voltage. They were neither easy nor cheap to import back in the early 1960s and after trying 6L6s on some amps, Marshall replaced the 5881 with the KT66, a high-quality British version of the 6L6 designed and made by Marconi-Osram Valve (M-OV).

The KT66 valves sounded superb but were expensive, prompting a change to the cheaper, more plentiful EL34 around 1966. This altered the amp's sonic character as it became more powerful, with uprated transformers and silicon diodes later replacing the GZ34. This led to the rare 'Black Flag' JTM50 'transition' model.

Loudspeakers and cabinets were another significant difference. The Bassman used four 10-inch Jensen speakers in an open-backed combo cabinet, while Marshall chose to make a separate head for the amplifier and combine it with a closed-back cabinet loaded with four Celestion G12s – the first step on the way to the universally recognised Marshall stack.

customers wanted and, having already built several PA and bass guitar cabinets, agreed to the project.

One of the most coveted American amplifiers in the UK at the time was Fender's tweed 4x10 Bassman combo, and according to some stories an example was acquired and reverse-engineered to understand how it was put together. Bran co-opted two other electronics wizards into the project: a brilliant teenager called Dudley Craven and Ken Underwood, who were both apprentices at EMI, while Ken Bran had worked on radio equipment for Pan Am at Heathrow. All three were amateur radio enthusiasts and knew each other through the local ham radio network, meeting weekly at Greenford Radio Club and often going on to a local Wimpy bar in Ealing afterwards.

Number One – the JTM45 prototype still in Marshall's keeping

PHOTO BY MATT YORK / MARSHALL

RADIO GAGA

Amateur radio and audio are closely linked, and for us there's no doubt that all three had the necessary technical chops and inventiveness to create something that went beyond the Bassman circuit. They shared out the work between them, with Jim fabricating the chassis and cabinet, Ken Bran producing the tag boards, Dudley Craven doing the wiring and Ken Underwood joining later on final assembly. Because of a lack of space at Jim's music shop, most of the fabrication was carried out in their garden sheds. Dudley is thought to have experimented with 6V6s at first, before discounting them and returning to the 5881 used in the 5F6-A Bassman circuit. In total, six prototypes were made and it was number six, with a separate closed-back cabinet loaded with four 12-inch Celestion speakers, that made Jim Marshall exclaim, "That's it! That's the sound."

According to legend, on a Sunday in September 1962, a band was assembled at the Ealing Club to try out the new 'loud sound' that Pete Townshend and others had been asking Marshall to build, featuring Mitch Mitchell on drums, who was by now working for Jim, and Jim's son Terry on saxophone. Christened the JTM45, for James and Terry Marshall, combined with the amplifier's nominal output power of 45 watts, the new amp immediately appeared in Jim's shop and pulled in nearly 30 orders after its first day on display. Almost overnight, the JTM45 became the amp of choice for the Ealing-based rhythm and blues movement and Jim rode on the wave of its success, opening a second shop in March 1963 at number 93 Uxbridge Road.

However, the manufacturing operation quickly outgrew the new premises, leading Marshall to open the first dedicated factory in Silverdale Road, Hayes, in June 1964. Even after Jim's departure from retail into full-time manufacturing, the JTM influence that made Hanwell and Ealing such an important focal point for British musicians continued for decades, with three other famous shops opening in the area: Tempo Music, which later became Flying Pig Music, was a next-door neighbour at 72-74 Uxbridge Road, while Peter Cook's Guitar World, owned by the famous luthier and managed by Trevor Newman, was a short walk away at 69 Station Road.

Six prototypes were made and it was number six that made Jim exclaim, "That's it! That's the sound"

Jim Marshall in later years with two descendents of that original Number One JTM45

Visitors to the area today can find two blue plaques, one commemorating the sale of the very first Marshall amp in 1962 at 76 Uxbridge Road, and another a short walk down the road at 42A The Broadway, marking the place where the Ealing Club was founded. While there's nothing on the plaques to link them, there's no doubt both events contributed to each other's success, changing the world in the process. Meanwhile, Amp Number One – one of the Holy Grails of rock guitar – was reacquired by Marshall several years ago and now occupies pride of place in the Marshall museum at the company's Bletchley factory.

LIVING LARGE

Hooked from the moment he heard one, Marshall devotee **Joe Satriani** tells us why only giants could take on this mighty amplifier and how his signature amp finally "understood" him

Interview Henry Yates

"The first time I ever heard a Marshall amp, I was a teenager and a friend brought me over to watch this older guitar player in Queens. So we're in this guy's basement, and he's got a Les Paul and Marshall stack. He turns it all the way up and I'm like, 'Oh my God.' I just remember that sound.

"Later, I remember going to see Chicago at a small theatre, playing in the round, with Terry Kath on guitar. They were squished on this little circular stage and Terry was standing right up against his Marshall stack. It sounded so good. I started to go to concerts more and more, and I'd see all these players go through Marshall stacks. Steve Miller, Zeppelin at Madison Square Garden – that was just insane. Those amps just never gave up.

"When I think of what my heroes sounded like when they plugged into those things and turned them up, I'm just so impressed. Jimi and Jimmy, right? Hendrix and Page. They sound so totally different, it's unbelievable. That amp is receiving these two geniuses and getting their personalities to come out.

"When I started playing Marshall myself, those amps just seemed to pick up everything. There is no hiding when you plug straight into a Marshall and turn it up. If there was ever an amp that makes you feel self-conscious – and at the same time emboldens you to play like a giant – it's a Marshall. So it's not for the faint of heart. At least, not until

"If there was ever an amp that makes you feel self-conscious – yet emboldens you to play like a giant – it's a Marshall"

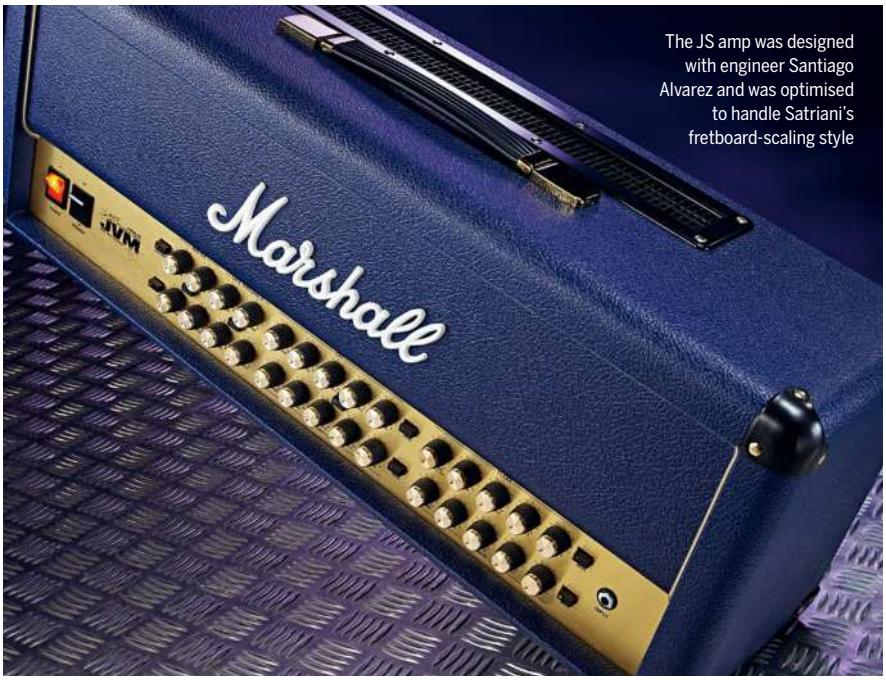
the 800 came out, or any of the master volume ones. Then mere mortals could start to relate to the amp. Up until then, only giants could somehow make it work.

"It was a real moment when I got my own Marshall JS signature amp. I was in Chickenfoot and also had my own band, so I had to come up with an amp that made sense for the gigs I had. That meant an amp with lots of gain for melodies and solos. But it had to be super fat so my high notes wouldn't screech. That's cool if you're a lead player who just takes 16 bars and shaves everybody's head off for a few moments – but that's a whole different gig! Me, I walk out on stage and, for two hours, I have to play beautiful melodies all the way up the neck, so I can't have the amp be that nasty up there.

"Santiago Alvarez – the Marshall engineer who designed the JS amp with me – understood what I was trying to do. So we created this beast. We removed a lot of compression, took down the gain a little and made everything super fat so it held together from the lowest to highest notes. And, boy, it really freed me up when I started to tour with those amps. I just found I could play so much more because the amp was helping me achieve all these different things, especially switching from legato to picking. It was like the amp understood me, y'know?" G

Messrs Hendrix and Page, plus Terry Kath and Steve Miller, drew Joe towards the Marshall sound

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES



The JS amp was designed with engineer Santiago Alvarez and was optimised to handle Satriani's fretboard-scaling style

MARSHALL BY NUMBERS

Here we explore milestone moments in Marshall's 60-year quest for bigger, badder tone through 20 significant numbers

[1] A DO-IT-ALL VALVE PREAMP FOR THE 90S

The JMP-1 valve preamp, launched in 1992, was a child of the rackmount era. It featured four channels, two clean and two dirty, and was (natch) MIDI programmable. A pair of 12AX7 valves provided the tonal authority, but the JMP-1 also featured OD1 and OD2 modes – which offered vintage and tight, modern drive voices respectively – plus a stereo effects loop, speaker emulation and a Bass Shift function that altered the low-end voicing. It was a bestseller, and stadium giants Def Leppard and Billy Gibbons, who routed one or more JMP-1s into a Marshall 120/120 Valvestate power amp, were among the well-known players who racked up hits with the JMP-1, which could be combined with Marshall's EL84-based 20/20 single-rack unit power amp (which provided 20+20 watts of stereo output) for an ultra-compact, all-valve rack rig.

[3] THE NUMBER OF MARSHALL STACKS HENDRIX FIRST BOUGHT

Jimi Hendrix was only just finding his feet as the rising star of the London scene in 1966. Author Rich Maloof notes in his excellent reference book *Jim Marshall: The Father Of Loud* that Hendrix was chagrined to discover he couldn't bring the Fender amp he ordinarily used because the space was already taken up by multiple Marshall head-and-cab rigs used by other guitarists on the bill. So Mitch Mitchell duly brought Jimi down to Jim Marshall's shop where he bought "three stacks", according to Jim's recollections, which were intended to be shipped to different continents so Jimi had one on hand at all times when touring. Jim added that one of Jimi's roadies was subsequently trained by Ken Bran and Dudley Craven to be able to repair Hendrix's hard-pushed amps on tour – launching Hendrix's long and iconic relationship with the brand.

[4] MARSHALL'S 350-WATT HYBRID

Marshall's Mode Four amp, which was launched in 2003, was designed to meet the needs of contemporary metal players. A two-amps-in-one design, it utilised a 350-watt solid-state power stage to deliver tightly defined high-gain tone, though its two independent preamp channels featured an ECC83 triode valve. The Mode Four's party trick was that the power amp could run in two modes – named Amp 1 (Plexi style) or Amp 2 (optimised for down-tuned guitars). Both Amps could be operated in two further sub-modes called Clean and Crunch on Amp 1 and two overdrive types on Amp 2, hence the Mode 4 name – as four distinct voices resulted. While Marshall's Mode Four hybrid wasn't embraced by the purists, it was adopted by respectable numbers of pro players, such as Dave Navarro of Jane's Addiction.

PHOTO BY BOB BAKER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Marshall amps became a mainstay of Jimi's rig after his arrival in London

[8] THE NUMBER OF SPEAKERS PETE TOWNSHEND WANTED

As a customer since Marshall's earliest days, The Who guitarist's needs shaped mid-60s prototype amp designs. By 1966, Townshend had already taken delivery of a more powerful 50-watt version of the JTM45 head (realistically producing nearer 30 watts) called the Model 1987. However, a request for a 100-watt head was not long in coming. Marshall duly made three prototypes, after which Townshend requested a behemoth 8x12 cab. Jim Marshall warned him it would be punishingly heavy for The Who's roadies to lift, to which Townshend allegedly replied, "Sod 'em, they get paid!" However, since a 1960A 4x12 cab weighs around 38kg (84lb), the massive 8x12 probably weighed over 70kg (154lb), so Marshall designed the now-iconic two-piece stack with a straight-fronted 4x12 cab on the bottom and an angled 4x12 on top. The latter was designed to slope back towards the head to make the overall look less blocky – though Jim claimed it also projected sound towards the back of auditoriums better.

MARSHALL JCM800 & 1960 **GIBSON** LES PAUL STANDARD
This reissue head is paired here with the famous 'Grainger 'Burst' and a Model 1960A cabinet

PHOTO BY JIM STEINFELDT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

None more Marshall: Nigel Tufnel of Spinal Tap goes all the way to '11' on stage

Ultimate overdrive: an 'infinite volume' dial on a custom-built head made for the Spinal Tap guitarist

[11] NIGEL TUFNEL'S MAXIMUM VOLUME SETTING

The infamous 'one louder' that the volume controls of Nigel Tufnel of Spinal Tap's Marshall head could be set to, as compared with the maximum of 10 that ordinary Marshalls of the era went up to. Spoof documentary maker Marty DiBergi's bafflement at this ("Why don't you just make 10 be the top number and make that a little louder?") is now legendary and, to their credit, Marshall soon made the joke official. When the JCM900 was launched in 1990, six years after *This Is Spinal Tap*, it featured a Sensitivity or Lead Gain dial (depending on variant) that went up to 20 or "nine louder" as Tufnel helpfully pointed out in promotional ads of the time. When *Guitarist* visited the Marshall studio to photograph rare amps for this issue, we were shown the last word on this loudness arms race – a custom head built for Tufnel on which a channel volume dial went up to... infinity (see pic, right).

[18] THE WATTAGE OF MARSHALL'S SMALL-BUT-JUICY 60s COMBOS

While towering stacks are the iconic image of Marshall amplification, some of their most toneful amps of the 60s were much smaller. It's easy to forget that Marshall was in pretty heated competition with Vox in the mid-60s with Jim Marshall declaring he was "going into battle" with Vox's Tom Jennings after the latter made ill-tempered phone calls to Jim warning him to stay off Vox's commercial turf.

Vox's star products were its AC15 and AC30 combos, so in 1965 Marshall duly launched three 18-watt combos: the Model 1974 (1x12), the Model 1973 (2x12) and the Model 1958 (2x10). Powered by EL84 output valves operated at a low plate voltage and featuring three ECC83 (12AX7) preamp valves, it was easy to unlock the full rich, compressed voice of these amps at studio volume levels – which made them highly sought after in subsequent years, with Gary Moore featuring one of the cover of his *Still Got The Blues* album in 1990. An optional reverb also, incidentally, made them the first Marshalls to feature the effect.

Small but potent: a vintage Model 1974 18-watt combo

PHOTO BY MATT YORK/MARSHALL

[30] THE ANNIVERSARY THAT LAUNCHED TRIPLE-CHANNEL AMPS

By 1992 Marshall amps had been in business for three decades and the company decided to mark the occasion by introducing a feature-laden series of 30th Anniversary amps that promised to deliver a motherlode of historic Marshall tones from past and present. The result was a highly configurable triple-channel amp with seven preamp valves that was a tone-tweaker's delight. For example, Channel 2 had a Mode A/B/C selector that allowed the player to switch between the voices of Super Lead Plexis, 70s Master Volume heads and high-gain JCM900 amps – or as near to each as a single amp could get, at least. Other progressive features included a damping switch that tuned the amp to deliver crisp, detailed cleans or loose but aggressive midrange.

The amps that were made in the first year of production were clad in commemorative blue Tolex, while a further 1,300 limited-edition 'LE' models featured brass plating on their metal chassis components plus a solid brass Marshall logo.

[76] THE STREET NUMBER OF JIM'S FIRST SHOP

Jim Marshall & Son opened up for business in 1960 at 76 Uxbridge Road in Hanwell, and though it was primarily a drum shop at first, its early customers included Ritchie Blackmore and Pete Townshend. By 1961, the guitar side of the business was growing – American guitars including Fender and

1963 **MARSHALL** JTM45 & 1956 **FENDER** STRATOCASTER

This 'coffin logo' JTM45 is one of the earliest heads in Marshall's keeping and shows how different pre-Plexi styling was

Rickenbacker were stocked – and Jim noticed Fender's Bassman amp was admired by young British guitarists, inspiring the creation of Number One (see page 116 for more) in 1962.

When the new JTM45 amps proved a hit, Marshall expanded into a larger shop down the road at 93 Uxbridge Road in March 1963. However, even this site wasn't big enough to house both an amp-making workshop and a music retail store. So in June 1964, Marshall amp production moved into its first dedicated factory in Hayes, Middlesex, where 15 people were employed to make around 20 amps per week.

[175] THE NUMBER OF CABS ON STAGE FOR MARSHALL'S 35TH

The phrase 'a wall of Marshalls' has entered into rock 'n' roll cliché, but the term was probably aptly used, for once, to describe the 175-strong line of cabinets assembled for Marshall's 35th Anniversary event at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1997. As author Rich Maloof notes in *Jim Marshall: The Father Of Loud*, a few artists came fairly close to this achievement on stage at the height of their pomp, with KISS using up to 44 Marshall cabs in their stage rig and Slayer touring with a mere 24. Van Halen also gets an honourable mention for posing for a photoshoot in front of 80 Marshall cabs.

[200] THE WATTAGE OF THE LOUDEST PLEXIS OF ALL

In the late 60s, before PA systems were widespread, volume was king. Top guitarists wanted frightening amounts of output from their amps and even a 100-watt Super Lead was felt to be insufficiently loud by some – leading to the development of the 200-watt Marshall 200, which was launched in 1967, powered by potent KT88 output valves. In late 1968 the model's tone controls were revised and the head was renamed the Marshall Major. Fans of these 200-watt Marshalls included Deep Purple guitarist Ritchie Blackmore, who had been a customer at Marshall's shop since 1961. In 1970, the year *Deep Purple In Rock* was released, Blackmore made the switch from using Vox AC30s to Marshall 200-watt heads that he claimed were boosted, following modifications by his techs, to 300-400 watts.

[900] A FACTORY-MODDED MARSHALL FOR THE 90s

The JCM900 series of amps, which launched in 1990, aimed to beat Marshall modders at their own game by offering amps that came fitted with hot-rod performance straight off the production line. The JCM900 models were fitted with three ECC83 (12AX7) preamp valves for extra gain, though later SL-X (Super Lead eXtended) variants had a fourth ECC83, yielding yet more dirt. JCM900 amps were all made in one of two types: single-channel Master Volume MK III, tracing its ancestry to the 2203 and 2204 models of 1975, or the twin-channel Hi Gain Dual Reverb type. All models, however, featured a series effects loop, two line outputs and a High/Low switch that halved the amp's output for bedroom use.

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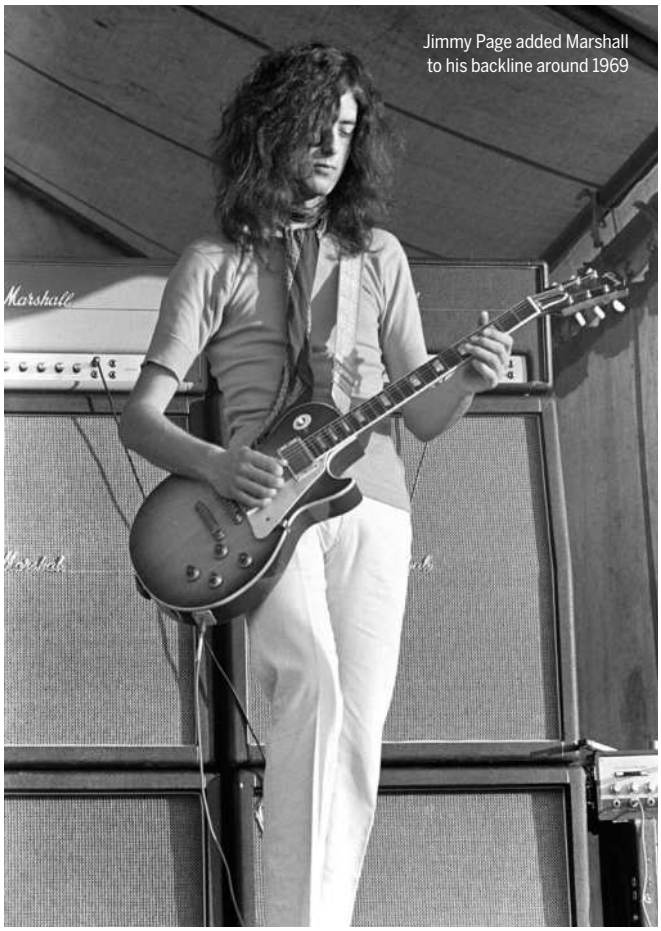
[1965] THE YEAR PARK AMPS SPUN OFF FROM MARSHALL

In 1965, Jim Marshall signed a 15-year contract with the Rose Morris Agency, an international instrument distributor. Although it opened up new markets, the contract meant Rose Morris got 55 per cent of the proceeds of Marshall amps sold in the US, as well as a healthy slice of the profits of amps sold in the UK. In order to keep Marshall amps competitively priced in stores, Jim was forced to reduce the margin Marshall itself received and later said that signing the Rose Morris deal was one of his few regrets. Keen to claw back this loss of profit elsewhere, Jim started a wholesale business called Cleartone Musical Instruments (CMI). The Rose Morris deal prevented Marshall amps being sold via distributors Jim had previously worked with, including John Jones. However, Jim decided he could continue selling amps to Jones via CMI, provided he didn't badge them as Marshalls. Thus the 'Park' line of amplifiers was born, the moniker deriving from John Jones's wife's maiden name.

[1966] THE YEAR THE PLEXI WAS BORN

Few terms in the world of amplifiers are as evocative as 'Plexi'. But the moniker is simply short for Plexiglas, which was a trade name for what is widely known today as Perspex. This material, with screen-printed characters on the front and gold backing, was used to make control plates for Marshall amps from 1966 to 1969, though surplus stocks of Plexiglas plates continued to be used up to 1973. After that point, control plates were fabricated from aluminium instead, being easier to produce. Classic Plexi

Park life: two vintage Park heads form the foundation of this tower of tone in the studio of Guns N' Roses guitarist Richard Fortus



Jimmy Page added Marshall to his backline around 1969

(PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

1964 **MARSHALL** MODEL 1962 COMBO & 1959 **GIBSON** LES PAUL STANDARD

Pictured above is a quintessential pairing of a 'Bluesbreaker' combo and the 1959 'Preacher' 'Burst from a private collection

Marshalls include the Model 1987 head, which was essentially a JTM45 that had the GZ34 valve rectifier swapped out for a solid-state equivalent, and this used EL34s as standard in the power stage plus a new mains transformer, upping the power to 50 watts. The most famous Plexi of all is, of course, the 100-watt Model 1959 Super Lead, but the toneful little Model 1974 18-watt Plexi combo, introduced in 1966, is also highly sought after.

[1969] THE YEAR JIMMY PAGE STARTED USING MARSHALL

To be fair, Page was quoted in Marshall promotional brochures in 1992 as saying 1970 was the year he began using Marshall amps on stage, but it's known that he used Marshalls at the Festival Of The Blues at Bath Recreation Ground in June 1969 and on *Led Zeppelin II* (released in October '69). Page typically used 100-watt Plexi heads on stage but boosted their power further through the use of KT88 power valves instead of EL34s, and Page claimed he succeeded in getting closer to 200 watts of output through modification. Like Blackmore, Page had considered, at the start of Led Zep, using multiple AC30s but ended up with 100-watt Marshalls (interestingly set with the volume "at about three" as Page told *Guitar Player* magazine in 1978) to compete with the deafening live sound of John Bonham's kit.

EL34s are a cornerstone of the Marshall sound but became scarce in the 90s

[1981] THE YEAR MARSHALL'S JCM800 BROKE FREE

In 1981 Marshall's ill-fated contract with distributor Rose Morris came to an end. This enabled Jim Marshall to slash export prices of Marshall amps by 25 per cent, opening up the American market – a liberating moment that inspired Marshall to launch the classic JCM800. The JCM800 had its roots in Marshall's first Master Volume amps, the model 2203 (100-watt) and 2204 (50-watt) designed by Steve Grindrod in 1975. These were based on earlier Plexis but featured cascading gain stages and a preamp gain control that enabled players to get overdriven tones at a lower overall volume. The JCM800 was essentially a 2203 with cosmetic updates including a much-enlarged Marshall logo and white piping around the baffle, which was covered with cabinet grille cloth, not vinyl. JCM stood for James Charles Marshall.

Marshall's Silver Jubilee amps have unique and versatile gain controls

[1991] THE YEAR VALVESTATE MADE HYBRID AMPS A HIT

Considering that glowing valves are such an important part of Marshall DNA, the success of the affordable Valvestate line, which featured but a single ECC83 (12AX7) in the preamp, might have come as a surprise. But the blend of decent tone, affordability and gig-ability made these mainly solid-state amps a big-seller. Marshall designed a special "bipolar, high-impedance" circuit to emulate the sound and feel of an all-valve amp and it worked well enough to garner the Valvestates a big following. They hit the market during a shortage of EL34 valves when the Czech Tesla factory that supplied Marshall folded, after which the company's all-valve heads had to switch to Sovtek 5881s for a time. Marshall's tube-frugal Valvestate series was not vulnerable to such problems and was expanded into a sprawling range that included everything from stereo-chorus combos to a 10-watt micro stack.

[2000] THE NUMBER OF THE BEASTLY DUAL SUPER LEAD

Despite its seemingly millennial title, the JCM2000 was in fact launched three years earlier, in 1997. As the Dual Super Lead moniker suggests, its design brief was to bring the chunkiness and warmth of the old Plexi Super Lead's power stage together with the high-gain performance of the JCM900. The first model to launch was the DSL100 head, which featured two channels – Classic Gain and Ultra Gain. These each had two

The father of loud: Jim Marshall, who refused sizeable offers to sell the company over the years

selectable sub-modes: Clean and Crunch for the Classic Gain channel, while the Ultra Gain channel offered Lead 1 and 2 modes, offering hot and hotter degrees of modded-Marshall scream. There was also a useful Deep button that boosted bottom-end but kept it tightly defined. One of Marshall's better-regarded post-90s lines, the JCM2000 series evolved into a Triple Super Lead variant the year after launch, boasting three channels like the 35th Anniversary amps before it, plus some sophisticated effects loop options, XLR emulated outputs, a Virtual Power Reduction attenuator and more.

[2016] THE YEAR MARSHALL WENT BIG WITH MODELLING AMPS

Marshall's Code Series saw the company come full circle, launching an amp that featured digital emulations of its most famous valve amps from six decades of the company's history, including the JTM45 2245, 1962 Bluesbreaker, 1959SLP Plexi, JCM800 2203, JCM2555 Silver Jubilee, JCM2000 DSL100 and JVM410H. The Code Series was the fruit of a partnership with Swedish digital modelling specialists Softube. The two companies had first worked together a few years previously on Marshall's JDM amps, which married a modelling-based preamp with a valve-powered power stage. The Code Series took things a step further with an all-digital series of amps, initially three combos and one 100-watt head, featuring 14 different preamps, four power amps and eight speaker cabinet combinations that could be controlled from a Gateway app on mobile devices.

[2555] THE MONIKER OF MARSHALL'S 100-WATT SILVER JUBILEE

Clad in now-iconic grey livery, the Model 2550 (50-watt) and Model 2555 (100-watt) Silver Jubilee amps, launched in 1987, were created to mark two important anniversaries: Jim Marshall's 50th year in the music business and 25 years of Marshall amps. Like so many of Marshall's post-60s designs, the Silver Jubilees were evolutions of the 2203 and 2204 Master Volume heads of the mid-70s. But they had some interesting quirks that make them sonically distinctive and sought-after even today. A novel and mildly confusing preamp channel featured three gain modes: Clean, Rhythm Clip (a boost activated by a pull-switch on the Input Gain Control) and hotter-gained Lead Channel (activated by footswitch or a pull-switch on the on the Output Master Control knob). Both the 50-watter and the 100-watt variants could be run at full or half power, too, using a Pentode/Triode switch, which governed the performance of the power valves – with Triode being the half-power setting – altering the feel and tone as well as output.

[£100m] THE AMOUNT JIM WAS ONCE OFFERED TO SELL THE BUSINESS

Author Rich Maloof recounts in his definitive reference *Jim Marshall: The Father Of Loud* that Jim Marshall had an enormous carrot dangled in front of him in 1989 to try to persuade him to sell the business. It was woodwind and brass instrument maker Harmon, improbably enough, that made the approach, offering Jim a reported £100 million for the iconic company plus £1 million a year for 15 years to stay on at the company as an adviser. Jim's refusal of the offer was characteristic: "It's *my* name," Marshall told them. "And I wouldn't want to be told what to do by somebody else." G

PERFECT PAIRING

Our Talking Loud columnist, Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough, explains how Celestion's speakers helped elevate the Marshall sound to its legendary status

With Celestion approaching its 100th birthday, it's clear that it didn't start as a company focused on guitar products – but the brand's ability to innovate and the experience it gained up until the early 60s helped it develop a range of drivers (speakers) designed for the guitarist, and one in particular that would allow Marshall amplification to become 'the sound of rock'.

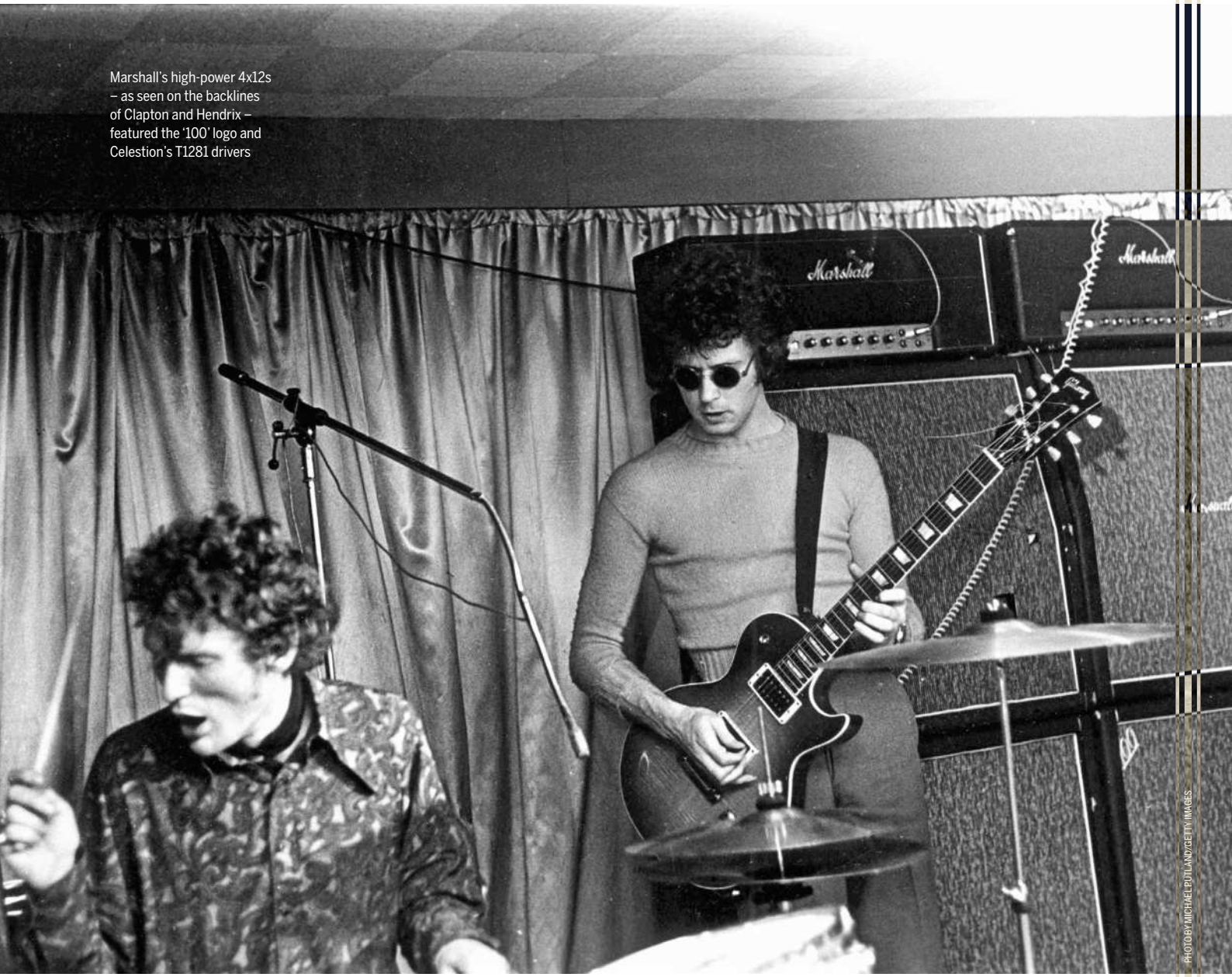
As with most companies, when Jim Marshall and Ken Bran started making guitar amplifiers in 1962 they found restrictions in the materials that were available to them, especially for speakers. Importing relatively large, heavy items such as 12-inch speakers would have been difficult in post-war Britain, not to mention costly, so turning to a local brand such as Celestion is likely to have been an obvious choice. By 1962, Celestion had already been producing guitar speakers for several companies including Vox, designing the now legendary Alnico Blue specifically for the brand. The Blue would not have been available to Marshall, but Celestion's off-the-shelf equivalent, the T652 was. Now, being silver and having no magnet cover at the time, its appearance may have been quite plain, but it sounded great and would be heard – and seen (from the back of combos) – until at least 1965.

This G12M Blackback driver from the mid-70s would come alive in Marshall 4x12 formats

For several years before this point, speaker manufacturers were starting to develop ranges of ceramic-magnet speakers, partly in response to volatile magnet prices. Rather than the costly Alnico magnets (an alloy made of aluminium, nickel and cobalt), ceramic magnets (often called ferrite magnets) are made of the much more cost-efficient strontium carbonate and iron oxide. Luckily, ceramic magnet speakers tend to be slightly more aggressive sounding than their Alnico cousins, lending themselves to the more overdriven guitar tones of the 60s and allowing them to slide into common use around this time. Celestion released its first ceramic-magnet speaker, the T1134, in late 1964, though Marshall didn't adopt them until around late 1965 when the company started using the T1221, more commonly known as 'the Greenback' due to its green plastic magnet cover.

Ceramic-magnet Greenbacks offered a more aggressive-souding alternative to the costly Alnico versions

The 50s and 60s saw a drive for ever more powerful amps – and in turn this required more powerful speakers. After blowing multiple 2x12 cabs, Marshall partly addressed the issue with its 4x12, but with the first Greenbacks only being 20 watts, the result was an 80-watt cab. Luckily once more, however, larger magnets can absorb more heat meaning they can also take more power, and in late 1966 we saw the introduction of the G12H (12-inch Guitar speaker with a Heavy magnet). One version, the T1281,



Marshall's high-power 4x12s – as seen on the backlines of Clapton and Hendrix – featured the '100' logo and Celestion's T1281 drivers

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

found itself in Marshall's high-power 4x12s (the ones with the 100 logo in the top-left corner), which were often used for guitar and bass, partly down to the H's lower bass resonance and also, I imagine, because of its higher sensitivity rating making the H sound louder still. Although the 75Hz cone version (T1217) seems to have been used more regularly in the 70s, it is the T1281 that holds a place in many guitarists' hearts for its warm lower mids, as well as being the speaker Jimi Hendrix was often seen to be using.

In 1967, due to developments in voice coil design, the Greenback speakers all increased their power by five watts. This took the G12M (Medium magnet) from 20 watts to its now-familiar 25 watts, and the G12H from 25 to 30 watts, making the standard Marshall 4x12 100 watts and the high-power version 120 watts. It wouldn't be until the introduction of the G12-65 in 1979 that a 2x12 would surpass the 100-watt mark.

"The 50s and 60s saw a drive for ever more powerful amps – and in turn this required more powerful speakers"

The 70s saw several colour changes of the Greenback's plastic magnet cover, but they were just that, a change in colour – unlike the modern Creambacks, which are high-powered versions of the Greenback models. Up until the introduction of the G12-65 and its leap in power rating, the main change in this period would have been the switch from Pulsonic cones in around '74 to '75, following a fire at the Pulsonic factory in 1973. Legend has it the secret sauce went up with that fire and some say cones would never be as soft and fluid-sounding again. Once these Pulsonic cones were depleted, we started to see slightly more aggressive-sounding Kurt Mueller cones appearing on a lot of speakers to feature in Marshall cabs, including the 'Blackback' speakers of the late 70s through to the G12-80.

The 1980s saw many changes, but the most significant of all would be the introduction of two of the biggest-selling speakers of all time: Celestion's Vintage 30 and G12T-75. Although speakers have changed through the years, whether due to technical advances or the availability of parts, the story of guitar speakers and their development certainly plays a major part in the musical icon that is the Marshall cab. G

MODIFIED MARSHALLS

They say necessity is the mother of invention and so it was that during the late 60s and beyond repair shop engineers began to modify amps to improve reliability and tone. Industry legend Paul Rivera Sr provides an insight into the pioneering years of the hot-rodder's art

Words Nick Guppy

The appeal of early Marshall amps was their sonic transparency and response, not to mention the prodigious power of a 100-watt EL34 head plugged into a 4x12 Celestion-powered cabinet. It was – and still is for many players – the archetypal rock guitar tone, a collision of components and voltages that created a unique voodoo. However, as guitarists grew into the new era of progressive rock powered by the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Cream-era Eric Clapton, the early Marshalls' simplicity – and the unreliability of circuits pushed to the max – became more of a hindrance for some players, meaning there was a growing demand for modifications as well as repairs.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, the amp-modding industry hadn't properly started, but amplifiers often needed repairing and it was repair shops that pioneered ideas in response to artist demands. Early Marshalls such as the 1959 head were utilitarian clean powerhouses that only began to distort when turned up loud, at which point overworked power valves began arcing, so unsurprisingly many modifications were about improving reliability, besides adding more gain or controlling output power. Later, as features such as preamp gain controls and master volumes became more common, they eventually filtered back into new factory designs, including the Mk2 and JCM800.

Meanwhile, amp repairers were upping their games, especially in the USA. One of the original tone gurus and a founder member of an elite club of engineers responsible for kickstarting the amp modification and boutique amp industry is Paul Rivera. Paul is well known for his association with Fender in the early 80s, but during his 70s tenure at the legendary Hollywood shop Valley Arts Guitars, and in the years prior, he worked on many Marshall amps. Paul Sr takes up the story...

Paul Rivera founded his own highly respected amp brand – but cut his teeth modding Marshalls for rock players

In the late 1960s and early 70s, it was repair shops that pioneered ideas in response to artist demands

MODS & ROCKERS

"I cut my teeth on early Marshall amps at my first shop in NYC in the late 60s," he tells us, "mostly warranty repair work, which gave me an opportunity to learn from the resident eastern European engineer who worked at their NYC distributor. Those early amps were temperamental due to excessively high anode and screen-grid voltages. Also, the output transformers were terribly stressed on peak-to-peak AC voltages due to the impedance swings of their speaker loads. Lots of blown output transformers and arced octal sockets!

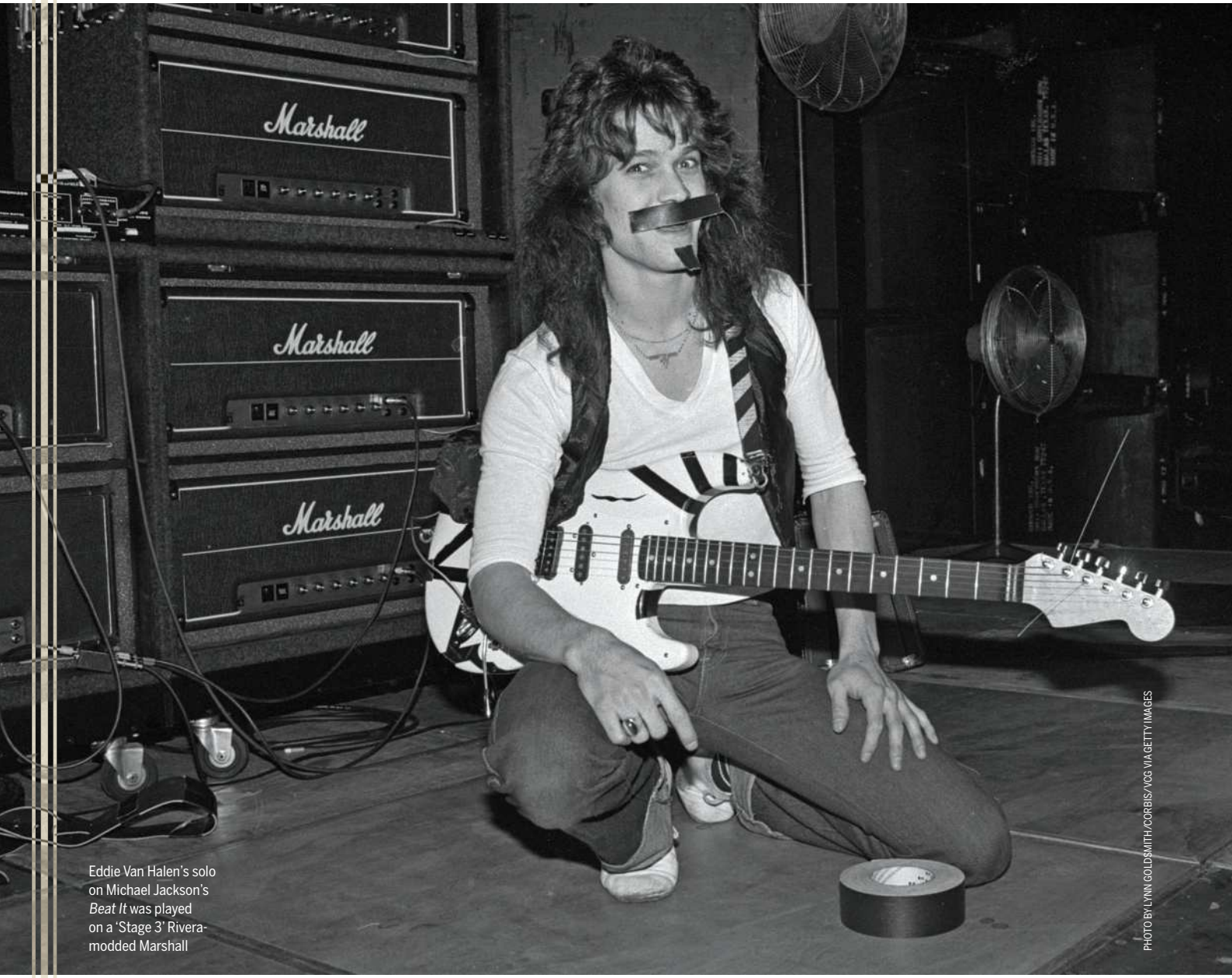
Friedman's BE Mini offers cranked Plexi tone in a tiny box

"A conversation in 1968 with a transformer engineer at Dynaco gave me hope that we'd found a superior output transformer and I started installing Dynaco's A-431 in 50-watt models and the A-451 in 100-watt models. I soon realised that using the ultra-linear screen-grid taps would require a large filter choke to lower the ripple, so I kept the DC stock wiring. In hindsight, if Marshall's Ken Bran had made a split DC supply with the screen grids kept at 50 per cent of the anode DCV, he could have had 600 volts on the anode and greatly increased reliability – based on using contemporary Mullard or Philips EL34s, of course. Those Dynaco transformers were far more reliable and sounded just magical.

"In 1972 I moved to Southern California, building my contacts in the music scene there. I continued developing Marshall modifications in stages to suit different budgets, helped by input and feedback from the studio engineers, producers and players that I worked with. This was about the same time that Marshall's Mk2 amps arrived on the market, with substantially reduced DC voltages and greatly improved stability. As 6KV+ diodes became available in the 1970s, we were able to use them as 'flyback' diodes on the anodes, which effectively controlled the arcing and blown transformer issues.

"Most Marshall players loved the cranked tone but needed master volumes to make their amps useful in smaller

Paul Rivera is a founder member of an elite club of engineers responsible for kickstarting the boutique amp industry



Eddie Van Halen's solo on Michael Jackson's *Beat It* was played on a 'Stage 3' Rivera-modded Marshall

PHOTO BY LYNN GOLDSMITH/CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Features such as built-in attenuators and automatic biasing started out on an independent amp designer's desk

venues. With a master volume, you could add extra gain without fear of deafening the first row of your audience – so that was Stage 1. Playing with the mids and bass frequencies, and creating a rotary switch to do all this, was part and parcel of the first Stage 2 mods. Master volume, switchable gain boost, a fat switch, an output stage rewire with flyback diodes (replacing the octal sockets if needed), and beefing up filter caps to reduce ripple and hum, all became Stage 2. Stage 3 added an additional preamp tube and associated circuitry along with all of the Stage 2 mods. An active effects loop was another option as time progressed. Stage 4 was full channel switching with two completely independent channels on a Marshall 1959 model, requiring dual-concentric potentiometers and stacked knobs to retain the stock appearance, additional preamp tubes, a bespoke motherboard PCB with Vactec (silent optical) switching, and a multi-function footswitch to control the effects loop bypass and channel switching.

"If you listen to Eddie Van Halen on Michael Jackson's *Beat It*, that was a Stage 3 I did for a journalist who lent it to Eddie for the session. Most of Steve Lukather' s tracks on the first four Toto albums were done using my modified Marshalls. Many other tracks by various musicians, including Eric Johnson, add to the legacy of those modified Marshalls I developed. So that was really the zenith. Post-Fender, by the time I started production of my own amps in late 1985, I had less time and desire to continue modifying other amp brands."

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

Nearly five decades later, Paul Rivera is still as active as ever, recently completing a restoration on a flood-damaged Marshall Super Bass 100 now touring with Tool. Other well-known Marshall hot-rodders who followed Rivera's lead include Reinhold Bogner, who arrived in LA from Germany in 1989 and worked on amps for Steve Stevens and Jerry Cantrell before introducing his own designs. Lee Jackson of Metaltronix assisted the tones of Paul Gilbert and Steve Vai, and the late Jose Arredondo and César Díaz were both noted for their work with Stevie Ray Vaughan and Eric Clapton. These highly talented designers helped move the Marshall sound forward and shape the tones used by the next generation of players. Bogner's three-channel Ecstasy made multi-channel heads the norm, while features such as built-in attenuators, automatic biasing and various other refinements all started out on an independent amp designer's desk somewhere.

Modern features we now take for granted are often thanks to the past pioneering work of an army of hot-rodders

The USA amp hot-rodding scene in the early to mid-70s provided Rivera, Soldano, THD, Kendrick, Mesa/Boogie's Randall Smith and many others with a platform to eventually manufacture and sell their own designs. Somehow, it never quite arrived in the UK. While there's no shortage of talent, most UK engineers tended to restrict themselves to servicing and repairs, with some ending up working for top brands including Marshall, while others such as Victory's Martin Kidd and 633 Engineering's Cliff Brown made the leap into manufacturing their own designs.

It's an occupation that's challenging for large and small manufacturers alike; sourcing components and subcontractors has become particularly difficult, with normally plentiful products such as diodes and capacitors now stretching out to 60-week-plus lead times. Nevertheless, Marshall continues to evolve, with the current JVM flagships incorporating many features we now take for granted, often thanks to the past pioneering work of an army of hot-rodders. G

Many of Reinhold Bogner's amps are highly evolved offshoots from the modded Marshall concept

« BLUEPRINT »

SAINTS ALIVE

Valve amps are old hat, right? If so, Blackstar didn't get the memo – the new St James range boasts its lightest amps yet and transforms 50 watts of classic valve tone into a tech-enabled tour de force

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Over the past few years, you'd be forgiven for thinking that using a valve amp was a bit like owning a classic car. Yes, you get all the charm and charisma of the 'real thing' but also some less desirable old-fashioned attributes, including heavy weight, limited compatibility with digital recording setups and a fraction of the variety of tones achievable with digital modelling devices.

Ever the innovator, Blackstar has taken a fresh look at some of those basic assumptions and tried to make an amp that looks and sounds completely classic and yet, under the bonnet, is both significantly lighter, more tonally flexible and tech-compatible than any the company has made to date. For example, if you're into recording nuanced valve amp tones, you won't need to mic these up – they come with a reactive load box and cab sim built in, obviating the need to drop another few hundred quid on standalone devices from another maker.

Intrigued, we joined Blackstar senior product developer Alex Gee to find out how the saints came marching in...

You're stressing light weight as one of the biggest selling points of the new amps. Why is that such an important part of the St James design?

"Well, that's been the number one asked-for thing from our distributors, from the artists that we work with and from end-customers.

Blackstar's senior product developer Alex Gee talks us through the design process behind the St James amps

The traditional complaint [about a quality valve amp] is, 'Yeah, it sounds great, bloody heavy, though... so can you take some of the weight out in any way?'

"Up until now, it's been an accepted thing that valve amps are heavy, so if you want something light, get something else. But with the advances in technology we have now, such as switch-mode power supplies, the new woods that we're using and also the speaker that we've been working on with Celestion, we can actually make the amp very lightweight and we can do it without making compromises on tone."

So can we assume the speakers are lightweight neodymium-magnet designs?

"No, the speakers are actually not neos. And that was one of the things we've been working on for a long time with Celestion. We're very close to Celestion, so it's always nice to work with them on new speakers. We had this idea: can we design a ceramic-magnet speaker with the sound we know and love but with a weight that's closer to a neo? Neos are great and some people really love them. But some people don't really like them because they've got a unique sound. They tend to have a faster attack than ceramic-magnet speakers and can be very clean-sounding, which is great for some kinds of playing. But for traditional players who love Vintage 30 speakers, for example, they are a bit too different.

"One thing we really wanted was to keep that ceramic magnet sound but reduce the weight. So we worked with Celestion to see what materials we could take away from the magnet and from the speaker without impacting the tone at all."

Cabs themselves, even with speakers removed, contribute a fair bit of weight to an amp. Did you manage to shave off any pounds there? And what were the trade-offs, if any?

"The cabs on the St James amps are actually plywood, though it's what's called 'candlenut' plywood. So it's real wood from real trees that's been made into ply. It's

ALEX GEE PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACKSTAR AMPLIFICATION

"With advances in technology,
we can make the amp
very lightweight without
compromising on tone"

18+

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1. The new amps come in both combo and head formats. The latter, pictured here, is compact and subtly retro in style

2. Lightweight ceramic speakers were specially designed by Celestion for the new amps

3. The rear panel shows off the advanced connectivity of the amp

really hard-wearing and strong and it's very similar to a normal plywood cab. We're not using MDF, which is very heavy, and we're not using really expensive birch ply and stuff like that, either. What we're using is a nice lightweight alternative to both that doesn't have very many drawbacks, apart from the fact that it's a new-ish thing in the market. When we got the first samples of these, we were really happy with the way that they sounded when comparing it to a standard birch-ply cabinet construction. So that was the main thing.

"Obviously, throughout all of the development of the St James amps, tone was always the most important thing. There's no point making the lightest-weight valve amp in the world if it doesn't sound good. That was the main thing when we were testing these new lightweight cabs."

Often, the higher quality the amp is the heavier the transformers. How did you get round that problem?

"That was one of the main R&D and development challenges through this process. A traditional valve amp has two transformers. There's the output transformer that works with the output valves and speaker to create the sound and the power that you need. Then there's the power transformer, and really its only job is to deliver high voltage to the amp, with high current. We knew that there had been huge advances in switch-mode power supplies; they save weight and they're really stable. They're also universal voltage, so you don't have to make a US spec and a UK spec, for example... or something different again in Europe and Australia. So those just completely seemed to make sense as a next step, once we'd worked out that you could use them in a guitar amp.

> "The switch mode is so solid all the time, delivering all of the current at the voltage you need"

"Using switch-mode power supplies in the St James amps means, among other things, that you can fly around the world with these [and just plug them straight into the local mains power supply without additional step-down transformers and so on]. You don't even need to change the rating on the back."

Tell us more – what are switch-mode transformers exactly?

"You can almost think of a switch-mode power supply as a ginormous version of your laptop power supply, although obviously it's not just a 16-volt thing. We've made sure that the voltage it gives is exactly what a traditional valve amp will give. The main difference is instead of a big chunk of iron changing your voltage from a main input to the voltages the amp actually needs, there's a much smaller, much lighter switch-mode power supply doing it."

The way a power transformer operates can change the whole character of an amp, so were you worried that switch-mode

transformers wouldn't be able to deliver the feel of a really nice old valve amp?
"Well, there were two steps to that. When we first tried the switch-mode power supplies we needed to do a lot of testing and development to see if the power-amp section sounded the same as it would on a traditional valve amp. We had to decide do we like them? Or do we need to emulate something that a conventional power transformer does in traditional amps that we just haven't got with the switch-mode power supply?

"So we did a lot of A/B testing between standard output transformers and this new switch-mode power supply and, in the end, we were able to achieve results we were really happy with."

"These are almost the 'vintage amps' we never had – if we'd started making amps in the 60s"

How about how the amp responds to pick dynamics? Some people like fast, instantly responsive amps and others like amps with lots of bluesy 'bloom' and sag. Where do these new amps sit on that spectrum, and how does the switch-mode power supply factor into that?
"In a traditional valve amp, such as our Series One 200, there's a massive power transformer. They're really overrated [in terms of power handling] so it can deal with anything; you're never going to sag that power transformer. But in a lot of smaller valve amps and a lot of vintage amps, the power transformer is much lower rated. When you're going for it, when you're diming out the master volume, you'll find that the power to the valves sags a little bit.

"So one thing that was different between the switch-mode power supply and a standard transformer is that the switch mode is just *so* solid all the time, delivering all of the current at the voltage you need. We intentionally added a sag switch to the St James design that can emulate that 'bounce' of a lower-spec'd power transformer if you want it.

"Actually, I think that's the beauty of the switch-mode power supply in the St James amps – you can have super-high headroom if you want, where you're getting all of those 50 watts all of the time. But if you switch on that sag control you get 50 watts for the instant peak of that note, but after that you get all the lovely compression and harmonics and sag that a lower-powered power transformer gives you... On the

4. Minimalist yet purposeful controls govern the tone-sculpting and gain-tweaking functions of the amp

5. The EL34 version of the St James amps features a boost to kick drive tones up a gear

6. The combo versions of the St James amps look perfectly built for walk-in club gigs

clean side, how compressed and how warm do you want that to feel? And also on the higher-distortion stuff, do you want it to be a bit 'gooey' when you play the notes or do you want it to be ultra tight? For example, if you were using the 6L6 St James on Channel 2 you might choose not to have the sag switch engaged, so that you get a really percussive attack on the note."

The St James amps also have a reactive load box built in. These have become quite trendy in recent years as they're meant to mimic the interaction between a real speaker and the amp more faithfully than basic attenuators. But they're usually sold as quite expensive standalone devices...
"There are a lot more people playing on silent stages and doing silent recording at home yet they still want to use a proper valve amp. But unless you have a separate reactive load box like a Two Notes or a [Universal Audio] Ox, that costs a big chunk of money after you've made your amp purchase – that's going to be difficult. But, in fact, halfway through the development process we realised that we can actually integrate this technology into our amps.

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"Blackstar amps already have DSP modules that we design in-house with our DSP engineers – they typically handle reverb and cab sims and stuff like that. Because of DSP developments we made with the Cab Rig that we put in our Dept 10 pedals, we found out that we could integrate a small reactive load [device] inside the St James amps that uses the two-watt setting. All of the sound is coming through your preamp valves and your power amp valves and the output transformer at all times – but when you're in the Standby mode, that power is being redirected into the reactive load.

"We found that by integrating Cab Rig technology we could have an affordable reactive load solution inside this amp, which will give you all the flexibility of having something like an Ox box and a great valve amp in one."

Talk us through the St James range.

"We've got two core models in the range, an EL34 version and a 6L6 version, produced in various different formats. The EL34 variant is your lower-gain pedal-platform amp. When I say lower gain, I mean that on Channel 2 you get a classic vintage lower-gain sound that you can push into quite a nice crunchy distortion. And then we've got a 10dB boost on that channel, too, so you can get quite a bit of gain on there. We're talking lower-gain AC/DC stuff. And then the Channel 1 on the EL34 is just a really high headroom, super-clean American-style channel.

"The 6L6 version has the same first channel as the EL34, a very high-headroom American-style channel, and the second channel is more of a higher-gain thing – more of a Traditional Blackstar/Modded Marshall sound. The voice on that channel has a much tighter low-end and a much brighter top-end.

"We spent a lot of time going through vintage reference [amps] and also our own reference amps from our Artisan range when we were designing the St James amps. We got the absolute best versions of those sounds that we could find and used those as references for voicing St James."

> "The whole concept of this was to make a really simple amp that's going to make every artist happy"

The tech inside the St James amps is innovative – but the outward styling is quite retro and looks a bit different to the norm for Blackstar.

"It was interesting developing the styling and look of these. When we were first looking at the lightweight amp concept, we had all kinds of designs from traditional Blackstar-looking amps to 'lunchbox'-style things. And the St James heads ended up coming in between that lunchbox format and the traditional Blackstar style.

"These new St James amps are almost the 'vintage amps' that we never had – if we had started making amps back in the 60s then they probably would look something like this. The whole concept of this [new range] was to make a really simple amp that's going to make every artist around the world really happy when they play it – and look absolutely killer on stage."

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« BLUEPRINT »

LIVE FOREVER

The project to replicate Noel Gallagher's iconic 1960 ES-355 resulted in Gibson's 'best ever' new electric, according to those who worked on it – at least, definitely maybe the best…

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Adam Gasson

Noel Gallagher has played many iconic Gibson and Epiphone semis over the years, both with Oasis and in his solo work. But few are as significant as his beautiful Cherry Red ES-355, which, until now, had never been replicated by Gibson. But with the company's Murphy Lab currently producing more accurately aged guitars than ever, the time seemed ripe to capture the detail of Noel's original – a stunning 1960 model with an unusually slim neck – in a highly accurate limited-run replica of that celebrated 355, plus a more affordable Epiphone Riviera model based on another of his Oasis instruments. Lee Bartram, Gibson's head of marketing operations EU and lifelong Oasis fan, tells us the story.

How did the Noel Gallagher ES-355 project get started?

"The long version would be that I met Noel in a guitar store. It was after Oasis had split and he was preparing to record his first solo album. So I'm talking 2010, maybe late 2009. We got chatting briefly about guitars and I said, 'It would be great if we did your J-150,' because of the whole Adidas thing. I just thought that was an amazing story to tell. And obviously I said we could get Adidas involved because he was really well known for playing that guitar. He said, 'Well, what about the 355 as well? Of course, that's the one...' In fact, we were looking at it at the time, but we were running into a couple of issues replicating the 355's neck profile, so it was kind of stalled. And at that point, I wasn't really in a position to do too much about it.

> "Noel knows exactly what he's looking for – and the only real thing was, we've just got to get it *right*"

"Fast forward to three years ago, and I was now in a position to return to it. We made connections and, actually, I wasn't initially looking at the 355, I wanted to do the acoustic. So we got that rolling first and I think we formed a pretty good working relationship. He knows exactly what he's looking for – and the only real thing was, we've just got to get it *right*.

"Once we got the acoustic right, just kind of in passing, we said, 'Hey, should we take a crack at the 355?' And one big change that had happened [since we first talked about making the 355] with regards to how we put our Historic models together was the addition of the Murphy Lab. We were now able to get around the issue of such a ridiculously thin neck profile on his original. We were able to use the Murphy Lab and Tom Murphy's skills in getting the neck profile as thin as the original, but with the addition of the neck-roll and the binding-roll, which gives it a really nice, slim feel that was super close to the original.

"Long story short, we bumped into each other, we talked and nerded-out about guitars... then we did the acoustic, which I think was successful, although I'll let the fans and the collectors and the buyers decide on that one. Then we moved on to the 355, which is the one I think everybody is clamouring to get hold of."

How did Noel come by his original ES-355 in the first place?

"He bought it in 1997 in London. Originally, it was never intended to see the light of day; it was – in his words – 'Too nice a guitar to take out.' So it was in his collection. I think there was a little bit of studio use, but definitely no live use when he bought it in '97. The early 2000s was when we started to see it out in the wild. He started to use

"Noel bought the original in 1997 in London – it was never intended to see the light of day"

A painstaking manual survey of Noel's 1960 ES-355 meant every detail was captured

1. The pickups have all the throaty mids you'd expect and the guitar's sound was among the best we've heard from Gibson Custom

2. The Varitone circuit is present, as you'd expect – but, like the original, the guitar has been converted from stereo to mono

3. Tarnishing on the gold-finish Bigsby looks compellingly authentic

4. Getting the neck feel and its thin profile correct was one of the trickiest parts of the project

it live then, but he has used this guitar in the studio ever since he got it – from late '97-ish to early '98. Every album from then on, it has appeared on those recordings in some way, shape or form. But I think mostly it will be known as his number-one live guitar since the early 2000s. For me, it's *the* Noel guitar."

How does the process of mapping out the exact features of a historically significant guitar like this take place?

"There are a few different ways of doing it. We can go to the extent of ultrasound [imaging], and the high-tech machinery that they use a lot in the US. But when it came to this one, the first thing we did was spend maybe the greatest day of my life in his studio, with pretty much his entire Gibson Epiphone collection, and we documented the whole thing. We took hundreds of photos, we took hundreds of measurements, we had the pickups out, we measured the outputs. We really went into an old-school, manual way of documenting the guitar. We took every single neck measurement at each of the frets to make sure we could get that as close as we could. We took all the photos of the ageing, the specific marks, the specific neck-wear, which you'll be able to see is quite heavily worn. We took it apart, documented everything and put it back together again in the most respectful way we could. And I think we got super, super close on this.

> "When Noel A/B'd the original guitar against the new one, the sound was ridiculously close"

"The colour was a factor, trying to make sure we could match that really deep early 60s Cherry. It hadn't lost any of its colour, it hadn't washed out and it wasn't going down the 'watermelon' route – it was still very much a deep red. We took hundreds of photos of the guitar from different angles and with different lighting that we could send over to the Custom Shop.

"The big difference between doing something for a UK or European artist is that we're not in Nashville, so we can't just go knock on Tom Murphy's door or Matt Taylor's door and say, 'Hey, what do you think about this?' We have to get all the information to them up front because you only get one pass at it – I can't keep going back and saying 'Can I just check the 13th fret again?' We had to get it all right. This manual process made a huge difference with this guitar. Because when questions were asked like, 'How yellow was the binding?' we *knew*. Talking to Noel gave us a lot of insight as well because he was able to give us a lot of information with regards to how he plays, and that tied in with what we found on the guitar, especially with the neck work.

"When Noel A/B'd the original guitar against the new one, the sound was ridiculously close. Clearly, we'd managed to get the pickups really well matched as well. When it comes to the other features, his started off stereo and was later converted to mono, which I think most of those guitars were, so that's

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consistent. Obviously, the Varitone is consistent and working. Even the switch tip... it doesn't sound like a big thing, but it was very important to make sure we got that right. What point in 1960 [a 355] was built would determine which colour of switch-tip you would get. This guitar comes with both [amber and cream] in the case, but Noel's always has the amber when he's using those guitars.

"I think the aesthetics of this guitar are probably the most interesting thing because his guitar is super, super clean. On the front it has the checking and signs of ageing, but it doesn't have huge chunks missing out of it. It doesn't have huge gouges. It's 62 years old, so you would say it's relatively clean – until you get to the back. And that's really where we spent a lot of attention to get the look and the feel and the back's wear-marks right."

What was Noel's reaction when he received the first prototype?

"It's always nerve-racking when you turn up to an artist with the first prototype. Because, while I have full faith and trust in the craftspeople of Nashville, you never really know what the reaction of the artist is going to be. Now, when I got these guitars here in the showroom and I opened them up, I was blown away. I was a little biased because I wanted it to be so good and so successful. But I sent a message to Cesar [Gueikian, Gibson brand president] and to Mat Koehler [senior director of product development] when I opened them and said in the 13 years I'd been with Gibson, this was the best new guitar we'd ever made. It was certainly the best new guitar that I'd played personally. So I had high hopes.

"We spent a lot of attention to get the look and the feel and the back's wear-marks right"

"We had a little chat to catch up, then I put the case on Noel's desk. I always let people open the case themselves and so he opened it up and he was blown away – to the point where he instantly grabbed the original, which we were lucky enough to have in the studio at that time, and he was like, 'I can't tell the difference.' That was one tick.

"Next thing, obviously, was how does it sound? He plugged it in; it sounded amazing. Again, he always compares to originals – whether that's the acoustic or the Riviera or the 355 – and his expectation is [measured] against the original, not whether it's just a great guitar. He said it sounded on par with his original guitar. So, the second thing, the sound, we got right.

"Then it was on to the neck... that's always the big one: making sure we get that neck right. We were in a rare position where the first prototype that came through was approved without any changes. He was so impressed. I mean, he used the prototype in the studio because he was doing some recording, and it stayed in the studio, as he always likes to try things out for a few weeks to put it to a real-life test. Every text I got from him after that point was, 'This guitar is the best guitar we've ever had.'"

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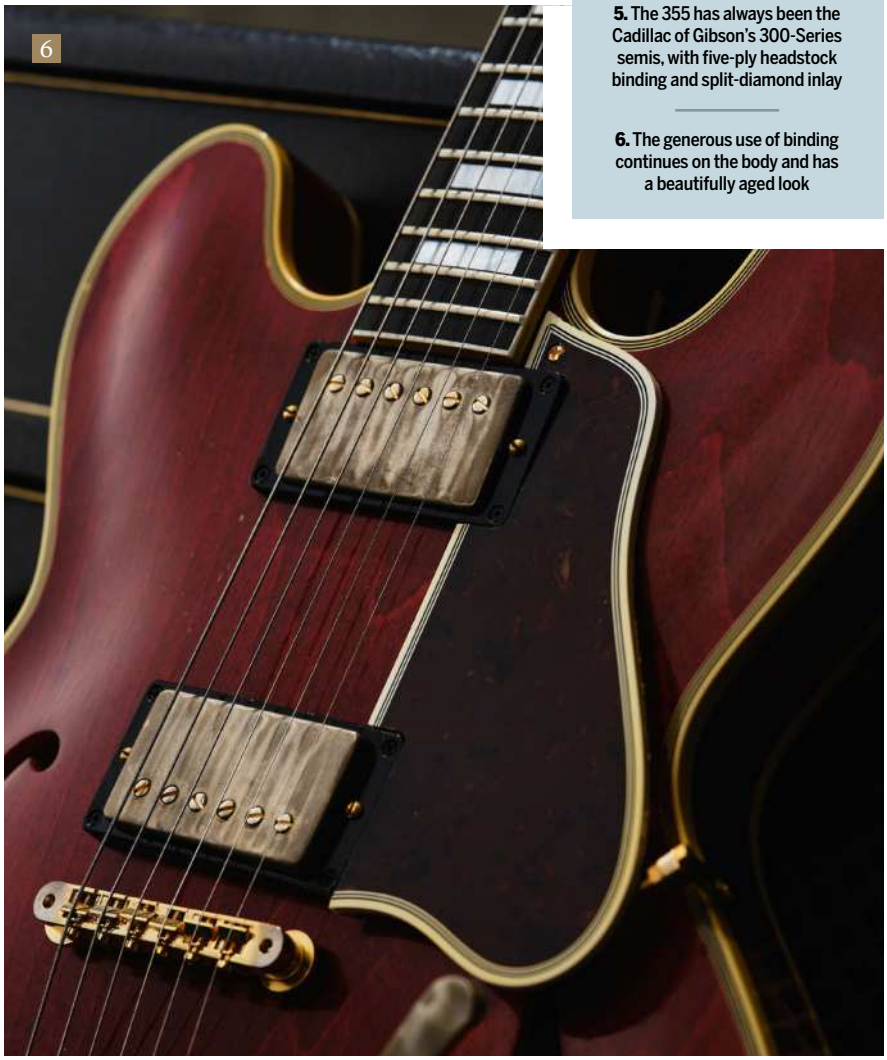

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5. The 355 has always been the Cadillac of Gibson's 300-Series semis, with five-ply headstock binding and split-diamond inlay

6. The generous use of binding continues on the body and has a beautifully aged look

This guitar is clearly a labour of love – how many will you produce?
"We're making 200 available worldwide and each one comes with the signed certificate from Noel. Each comes with a Bear strap, which is Noel's strap of choice and has been for many years. Each comes with the reproduced lyrics of *AKA...What A Life!* from his [High Flying Birds] solo work. We wanted to keep that relatively consistent with the J-150 [signature acoustic]. So, if you are lucky enough to get both of those guitars, then they [would form a complementary pair]."

Where would you say the 355 sits within the Gibson universe?
"It's *the* Gibson for me. It still has a huge following. It is in our Murphy Lab line-up; we do Custom Historic versions of it as well. So, for me, it's the most prestigious Gibson out there. I know that Les Pauls of an age command higher prices, but I really think it's down to your inspirations. So I think if you're into an artist that used to play a 355, or still does, then I think you're always gonna have a soft spot for this guitar."

"The [Oasis] story kind of starts with the Riviera, and continues through to the ES-355"

You're also releasing a much more affordable Noel Gallagher Epiphone Riviera at the same time. Tell us about that.
"What I was trying to do with the Riviera was to give the fans the opportunity to own a bit of that guitar history with the artist. So I said to Epiphone, 'Let's do a Riviera, and let's just make it accurate to Noel's original' and [product manager] Aljon Go and [director of R&D] Richard Akers over at Epiphone said, 'Yeah, but let's make it *dead* accurate. We'll do the label, like an early 80s Japanese Riviera. We'll go back and we'll try and get the foil correct on the scratchplate and on the truss-rod cover, we'll make sure it's got the volute.... all as per an original '83 Riviera like Noel's.' And that's what we did. What we've created is the Noel Gallagher Riviera, as seen on the *Don't Look Back In Anger* video, as used in recording *(What's The Story) Morning Glory* and most of that tour... But we've also recreated a really cool, historically accurate – to some extent – 80s Japanese Riviera. The intention was to make this guitar as accessible and as available as possible for as many people that wanted it.

"When I sent the Riviera through to Noel I didn't actually hear anything back for a couple of days. And then I get the phone call, just saying, 'This thing sounds awesome. It sounds just like my original did.' Which was great to hear. He hadn't played his original for many, many years, and it did inspire him to get his back out again and try it

"Ultimately, it was about making sure that we had something available for everybody. We've got the high-end, collectible Murphy Lab aged 355 and then we've got the Epiphone Riviera. The [Oasis] story kind of starts here, with the Riviera, and continues through to here with the ES-355. We're releasing both at the same time, so now everybody's got the option to own a part of that history." G

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Just 200 of these models are available, complete with a signed certificate from Noel Gallagher himself among other case candy

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