



## CLASSIC GUITARS

Producer John Shanks shows us inside his epic guitar collection



## SUZANNE VEGA

On the art of acoustic songcraft and her hits



## SPIRIT OF 1962

We test the new Epiphone Joe Bonamassa '62 ES-335

# Guitarist

Issue 491

NOVEMBER 2022

Fender®

## VINTAGE REBORN

★ **JIMI** ★  
**HENDRIX**

HAS PRS CAPTURED  
HIS TONE IN A  
£799 AMP?

PAGE 8

AMERICAN VINTAGE IS BACK  
AND BETTER THAN EVER

*Reviewed*

'51 BUTTERSCOTCH BLONDE TELECASTER  
& '61 OLYMPIC WHITE STRATOCASTER

*Plus: Other key models*



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## What Is Vintage?



These days, the term vintage has seemingly come to mean anything more than a decade old, but its original meaning came from the world of winemaking, where it simply referred to the year when the grapes used to make a wine – that's the 'vin' part of vintage – were picked. Over time, the word vintage became shorthand for 'a classic year', probably because people just left out a couple of words when they really meant 'a good vintage'

– and it's this secondary meaning that we seem to have imported into the world of guitar.

When I first got into guitar, in the 90s, vintage largely meant 1950s and 60s Gibsons (or earlier) and pre-CBS Fenders. These days, sellers of secondhand guitars are quietly trying to expand the term to mean 80s and even early 90s guitars. That's because 'vintage' has become a kind of mystical property that makes everything it touches more desirable, at least for some. The more complex truth is that many guitars that are a few decades old have issues that need to be looked at, design or construction flaws that have been engineered out of more modern guitars and, of course, you may well pay a premium to inherit all these niggles to boot.

That's why really good reissues are such a tempting proposition these days, as our cover guitars from Fender's new American Vintage II range demonstrate so well. With such guitars you get, say, 80 per cent of the vibe of a real one but none of the problems – and at a fraction of the price. With that said, I've recently bought a couple of guitars from the early 70s and there's just something really cool about an instrument that's got genuine miles on the clock, especially with acoustics where time really can be heard in the tone. It seems the past is something we all find hard to leave behind, sometimes. Enjoy the issue.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

## Editor's Highlights



### String 'Em Up

The story of the unique 'Stringer' Tele, told by David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars, was new to us – as was its radical styling **p132**



### Voodoo's Child

The relatively affordable new PRS HDRX 20 amp is a little firecracker, with Jimi-inspired features and stonking tone on **p8**



### Plenty To Gain

Huw Price delves into the world of preamp valves, the gain-forming bottles behind classic amp tone, clueing you into their mysteries on **p124**



# Guitarist

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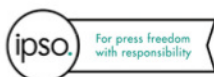
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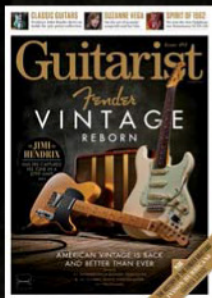
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*Neil Godwin*

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<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



**TAP TO GET  
OUR WEEKLY  
NEWSLETTER**



## FIRST PLAY



**PRS HDRX 20 HEAD**  
£799

**WHAT IS IT?** An Indonesian-made 20-watt addition to PRS's HDRX amp range

# Hendrix Approved

This affordable compact head joins PRS's HDRX range, which aims to reproduce Holy Grail late-60s tones with modern design and components for improved tone and reliability

**Words** Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

**F**ollowing the so-called 'British Invasion' that swept the USA in the mid-60s, many British bands and guitarists who followed the first wave were powered to stardom by the electric blues genre, including Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, The Faces, Humble Pie and Fleetwood Mac – to name just a few from this remarkable epoch of creative change. Ironically, one of the UK's most influential exports was an American guitar slinger brought to England in 1966 by Animals bassist Chas Chandler, who rapidly soared to stratospheric fame after teaming up with Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding. Jimi Hendrix's guitars – and those of many other players – were powered by the Marshall 1959 100-watt Super Lead head, which was everywhere back then.

Ever since, many amp builders have used it as an inspiration for their own designs, including Paul Reed Smith, who's had significant success in recent years, from the 25th Anniversary head to the HXDA

models and more recently the HDRX 100 and HDRX 50 heads. These latest designs have the approval of the Hendrix estate and are based on Paul Reed Smith's and amp guru Doug Sewell's detailed examination of a vintage Super Lead kept at the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, which was purportedly used by Hendrix at Woodstock. While those HDRX models are hand-wired and made in the USA, there's now a new head called the HDRX 20, which is produced in PRS's new factory in Indonesia, offering a more affordable and portable option.

The new HDRX 20 is a compact, all-valve head, broadly following the same layout of the larger models but with a few interesting changes. The case is a symphony in black, with neatly applied vinyl, perforated metal vents on the front and rear, black piping and a large PRS logo. Heavily radiused corners subtly evoke the original Marshall Super Lead's styling.

Internally, the steel chassis supports a pair of decently large transformers,











1

together with a choke – a transformer-like component used to filter AC mains ripple. Inside the chassis, most of the components live on a large high-quality printed circuit board, which is double-sided and through plated, including the front-panel controls and three JJ ECC803S preamp valves. There's a separate PCB strip for the rear-panel speaker jacks and the HDRX 20's bias

circuit, with test points and an adjustment preset pot accessible on the rear panel. While the preamp valve bases are board-mounted, the power valves are bolted directly to the chassis and hand-wired. This keeps the main source of heat away from the circuit board and should improve the amp's longterm reliability.

Unlike the larger HDRX 50 and 100 heads, which use EL34s, the HDRX 20's power comes from a pair of Russian-made Tung-Sol 5881s. The Tung-Sol name is one of several old valve brands presently owned by New Sensor Corporation. However, the original 5881 was made by the famous Tung-Sol Lamp Works of Newark, New Jersey. Tung-Sol valves were regarded as the best of the best, and the 5881 pentode was announced in 1950 as an improved alternative to the contemporary 6L6GA/B, with a ruggedised construction inside a shortened glass bottle, higher plate voltage rating and increased power. It was used by Fender on its 5F6-A Bassman 4x10, which was the inspiration for Marshall's original JTM45 amplifier.

The HDRX 20's control panel is a clever twist on that design, with two parallel preamp channels called Treble and

1. The HDRX 20 has two parallel preamp channels with separate volume controls fed from a single input jack, replacing the patch lead often used on four-input Super Leads and JTM45s. The amp also benefits from a master volume, allowing the preamp gains to be pushed harder when needed

2. This small toggle switch adds a useful lift to lower-output single-coil pickups, adding a little extra punch and clarity to help zero in on Hendrix/SRV-type clean sounds. It's a subtle difference, but it's worthwhile for some guitars



2





**3. What's in a name?**  
The PRS logo stands for quality and a commitment to great tone; quite rightly it's become one of the most coveted brands in guitarism. Perforated vents to the front and rear look cool as well as being practical

Bass, using internal jumpering instead of the patch lead frequently used on old Marshalls, to allow both Normal and Bright channels to be heard simultaneously. There are separate volume controls for the two preamp channels, feeding treble, middle, bass and presence tone knobs. There's also a master volume, which the two larger HDRX amps don't have, with two small toggle switches operating a bright function on the Treble channel and a High-Mid Gain boost, which apparently copies a cathode-follower component change on the Hendrix 'Plexi'.

The simple rear-panel features include five speaker jacks, for connection to four-, eight- and 16-ohm cabinets, together with bias test points and a recessed adjustment pot. A screen-printed Hendrix signature and the Authentic Hendrix logo indicate the HDRX 20's heritage. Overall, the HDRX 20 is a solid, no-frills head that's built to last, with typical PRS good looks and styling.

The HDRX amps are ideal as the core of a rig that can be as simple or complex as you need



## Feel & Sounds

We tried out PRS's HDRX 20 with our usual test guitars, including a Strat fitted with low-medium output Duncan Alnico Pro single coils, and a Les Paul loaded with a pair of old PAFs, with cabinets powered by Celestion's Vintage 30 and the G12H-75 Creamback – the same speaker PRS use for its HDRX enclosures. Once the amp has warmed up and the voltages stabilised, it's impressively free of hiss and hum, thanks partly to a DC supply for the preamp valve heater filaments.

The two parallel preamp volume controls are best treated as the HDRX 20's primary tone controls, with the other EQ knobs and switches serving to fine-tune the sound once you're getting close. The Bright switch is useful for adding extra zing to midrange-heavy high-output pickups, while the High-Mid Gain switch adds a subtle lift to single coils, which helped our Strat get into the Hendrix tone ballpark. The master volume adds another refinement, allowing you to turn the preamps up high and get a moderate crunch at polite volume levels, although the master needs to be at least halfway before it sounds properly good, with the same bright but not harsh treble

**4.** The HDRX 20 uses a pair of Russian-made Tung-Sol 5881s, the same valve type fitted to Fender's vintage tweed Bassman 4x10 combo – the inspiration for Marshall's original JTM45 head





Five speaker jacks provide comprehensive hook-up options for four-, eight- and 16-ohm cabinets, while the external bias test and adjustment feature helps keep the output valves running at peak performance, without needing to remove the chassis

and smooth mids you'd expect to hear from a good tweed Bassman or 'Plexi'-inspired design. It's perhaps more like a sweetened JTM45 than 'Plexi' to our ears but impressively vintage nonetheless, with a great dynamic response that lets you clean up just by backing off the pick or guitar volume control.

With its medium-low gain channels, the HDRX 20 is a great platform for pedals of all types, but there's no effects loop, so pedal users will need to place them between the guitar and the input jack, or use a loadbox with a loop or line out, between amplifier and speaker. PRS recommends the Koch LB120 II for the larger non-master volume HDRX 50 and HDRX 100 heads, although there are other suitable products available with varying features.

### Verdict

Paul Reed Smith's amp manufacturing fortunes continue apace, with impressive signature products for David Grissom and Mark Tremonti alongside the dual-channel Archon range, which easily covers practically any genre from country to metal. The HDRX amplifiers, with their 'Authentic Hendrix Touring Circuit' design, accurately evoke vintage Super Lead tones and punch in a modern package that benefits

## The High-Mid Gain switch adds a subtle lift to single coils, helping our Strat get in the Hendrix ballpark

from improved design and components – although in other ways the HDRX is just as uncompromising as its ancestors, with no effects loops, footswitchable functions or speaker emulated outputs.

Thankfully, technology has moved on since the late 1960s and today there are many outboard effects and loadboxes to take care of that, making the HDRX amps ideal as the core of a rig that can be as simple or complex as you need it to be. Set alongside the larger EL34-powered heads of the range, the new HDRX 20 is still plenty loud enough for live gigs, with the advantage of easier portability and significantly improved affordability, thanks to offshore manufacturing.

Aimed at serious amateurs and pros looking for authentic JTM45 or 'Plexi'-inspired tone in a modern, reliable and affordable package, this new HDRX 20 could turn out to be another winner for Paul Reed Smith. **G**



### PRS HDRX 20 HEAD

**PRICE:** £799

**ORIGIN:** Indonesia

**TYPE:** Valve preamp, valve power amp

**OUTPUT:** 20W RMS

**VALVES:** 3x JJ ECC803S, 2x Russian Tung-Sol 5881

**DIMENSIONS:** 440 (w) x 230 (d) x 235mm (h)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 9/20

**CABINET:** Plywood

**CHANNELS:** 2, parallel, permanently on

**CONTROLS:** Bass volume, treble volume, master volume, treble, mid, bass, presence, high mid gain switch, bright switch

**FOOTSWITCH:** None

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** External bias adjust points on rear panel

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The USA-manufactured HDRX 100 head costs £2,999; the HDRX 50 head is £2,799. The matching closed-back Celestion Creamback-loaded cabinets sell at £849 for the 2x12 and £1,249 for the 4x12

**PRS Guitars Europe**

**01223 874301**

**[www.prsguitars.com](http://www.prsguitars.com)**

8/10

**PROS** Looks, style and sonic integrity; very affordable compared with the bigger hand-wired HDRX amps; external bias helps keep the 5881 output valves performing at their best

**CONS** No standby switch; no footswitches or effects loops (but these aren't part of the HDRX's vintage ethos)





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## FIRST PLAY



EPIPHONE  
JOE BONAMASSA  
1962 ES-335  
£1,149

.....  
**WHAT IS IT?** A tribute to JB's  
lost-but-found vibrato-equipped  
Gibson '62 ES-335

# Homeward Bound

The latest Epiphone release from the collection of Joe Bonamassa is based on the ES-335 he used on his first album. But what happened next?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Olly Curtis

According to Epiphone, the story goes that in 1996 Joe Bonamassa bought a '62 Gibson ES-335 that he used on his debut album, *A New Day Yesterday*. In 2001, he sold the guitar to help finance his move from New York to Los Angeles, and then, nearly 20 years after that first record, an unexpected phone call led to a reunion with his ol' thinline.

This new 2022 Epiphone limited tribute shows no signs of 60 years of use; its vibrant red finish is brand-new shiny just like the hardware, not least the long Maestro Vibrola and the pickup covers. You can clearly see the plain maple facings of the back, front and sides through the finish, while the neck is spec'd as one-piece mahogany (which appears quarter-sawn) and the 'board swaps from classic Indian rosewood to Indian laurel (which is increasingly used by similar offshore brands, including Gretsch).

The cream edge-binding around the body is cleanly scraped, as is the fingerboard binding, and fretting is good – the fret ends sit over the binding, subtly increasing the playable width. Other visible details, such as the f-holes, are nicely done with a clean black painted edge. It's a tidy piece.











Part of the cost is the Gibson USA Burstbuckers, pots by CTS, tone caps by Mallory and a Switchcraft pickup selector

Yet this ES-335 is considerably more expensive than the standard non-vibrato model, which lists at £549. So what extras are we getting? Part of the cost is the Gibson USA Burstbuckers, with a 3 at the bridge and a 2 at the neck. Pots are by CTS and the tone caps by Mallory (.022 microfarads), and you can see through the f-hole that the toggle-switch pickup-selector is Switchcraft (and you'll spy neatly kerfed linings too). The hardware might be a touch generic in comparison, but neither the wired tune-o-matic with its easy-to-adjust slot-head posts nor the Kluson-style tuners caused us any problems. Another upgrade, of course, is that Vibrola, and while the 'Custom Made' plaque (originally used to cover the holes for the stud tailpiece, though there are none of those here) might not fool a vintage expert, it's cut in a similar style.

We then get a sturdy 'Bonamassa Nerdville, CA' logo'd case and case candy

1. Gibson USA Burstbuckers are a big upgrade. At the neck is a Burstbucker 2 with a measured DCR of 8kohms. The Burstbucker 3 at the bridge is slightly hotter at around 8.43k. Both use Alnico II magnets and are unpotted

2. This very Gibson-style headstock outline is a new-ish addition to Epiphone. Tuners follow vintage Kluson style, with double ring buttons





that includes the story of the guitar and a photo of Joe in a small booklet. Here ends the defence.

### Feel & Sounds

At 3.96kg (8.71lb), this guitar is no featherweight – heavier than the 3.55kg Gibson Jim James ES-335 and only slightly lighter than the 4kg Gibson Custom Shop Lucille Legacy we've most recently evaluated. The chunky feel continues with the neck profile, classed as a 'rounded C' with quite full shoulders. At 21.3mm at the 1st fret and 24.6mm at the 12th it's a little deeper than that Jim James and virtually identical to the Custom Shop Lucille.

It's not quite as full as Gibson's slightly bigger 50s profile, but certainly feels fuller in the hand than the thinner 60s Slim Taper. The Vibrola, of course, is only designed for a light waggle and the arm does sit quite high from the body, but with zero TLC the overall tuning stability is really good and there's minimal neck flex.

It's nicely set up, too. To be honest, we're looking for faults and struggling to find any. There's a vibrant and engaging acoustic response, too. There's gotta be a catch? Well, if there is, it's not in the sound department.

3. Using CTS pots, Mallory tone caps and a Switchcraft toggle switch, the electrics spec is pretty high. The controls are wired modern style from what we can see, hear and feel

4. This plaque was originally used to cover the holes for a stud tailpiece on electrics custom-ordered with a vibrato such as this or a Bigsby. The plaque here is cosmetic – there are no holes for a stud tailpiece underneath





Epiphone's Maestro Vibrola: Gibson referred to it as the 'Deluxe Vibrola' to differentiate it from the short 'Gibson Vibrola'. It's also known as the 'Lyre' vibrato because of the engraving

As one reference we plugged in our Gibson Les Paul Classic with its retrofitted Burstbuckers 1 at the neck and 2 at the bridge, and the Epi holds its own. The bridge pickup here is slightly less thin and the neck nicely balanced; both really nail classic blues-rock for which, frankly, this guitar seems tailor-made. But it's certainly not all about bluster.

A few years ago many would turn their noses up at Epiphone – but now things have changed

Both pickups clean up well, or suit a cleaner amp where, as ever, a good ES-335 seems to cover most bases. We A/B'd it against some other instruments that cost twice and three times as much, and we still couldn't find the catch.

### Verdict

A few years ago many would turn their noses up at Epiphone: the poor man's Gibson. But as many of our recent reviews have illustrated, things have now changed. While £1k is hardly pocket change, this new release is a very nicely detailed piece, but it's the sound, playability and tuning stability – the things that really matter – that make it very credible. We'd rock this one any day of the week. **G**



### EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA 1962 ES-335

**PRICE:** £1,149 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, semi-solid electric

**BODY:** 5-ply layered maple;

solid maple centre block

**NECK:** 1-piece mahogany, 'rounded C' profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 628mm (24.75")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech

NuBone/43.3mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Bound Indian laurel, pearloid small block markers, 305mm (12") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge, Maestro Vibrola, Epiphone Deluxe tuners w/ double ring buttons nickel-plated

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:**

51.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** Gibson Burstbucker 3 (bridge) and Burstbucker 2 (neck) humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, 2x volumes, 2x tones (CTS pots/Mallory capacitors)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.96/8.71

**OPTIONS:** No

**RANGE OPTIONS:** Epiphone BB King Lucille (£799), Epiphone Noel Gallagher Riviera (£799)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISH:** Sixties Cherry – all gloss

Epiphone

[www.epiphone.com](http://www.epiphone.com)



**PROS** Very good build matched with versatile sounds from the Gibson Burstbuckers

**CONS** Fret tops could do with a little more smoothing, and it's no lightweight





TAKAMINE LTD2022

# THE DIAMOND IN YOUR COLLECTION



## Introducing our LTD2022 model

In the early days of Takamine's 60 year history, a model made of Hawaiian koa adapted the classical body shape to an x-braced concert steel string with a cutaway.

Our LTD2022 takes inspiration from this historic model, featuring back and sides crafted from the finest Hawaiian koa, complimented by a solid Sitka spruce top.

The new CTF-2N preamplifier revives the legendary sound of our early FET preamp, adapted with modern features including a chromatic tuner and notch filter.

The twelfth fret is crowned with a diamond-shaped inlay, with vibrant abalone purfling and matching rosette completing this distinctive anniversary guitar.

*Takamine*



Takamine Guitars are distributed by Korg UK & Ireland Limited



## FIRST PLAY



**BREEDLOVE ECO  
PURSUIT EX S CONCERT  
SWEETGRASS  
£869**

**WHAT IS IT?** Electro-acoustic cutaway featuring a figured myrtlewood top and a supporting cast of other very ecologically sound timbers

# Green Machine

An acoustic guitar where sustainability and ecological common sense are first and foremost in its design and construction. But do all these good intentions add up to a great-sounding instrument?

**Words** David Mead **Photography** Neil Godwin

**I**n recent years we've witnessed guitar builders, both large and small, begin to seek out more sustainable and less controversial materials for use in their products. Alternatives to the more established timbers such as rosewood, spruce and certain strains of mahogany are being actively sought in the quest to find new champions with which to fuel our acoustic meanderings. As such, we have come across woods with strange-sounding names that put our traditionalist tendencies to the test. But a healthy dose of open-mindedness is essential on everyone's part if we're really serious about putting the planet's interests first. We've certainly found some really first-class acoustics recently where the woods initially seemed seriously off the beaten path, but the tones we heard from them confirmed their place in the pantheon of tonewoods.

As far as Breedlove is concerned, owner Tom Bedell has travelled far and wide to seek out timber that has been properly managed, taking the time to assess how its harvesting has affected local wildlife and the surrounding environment's general health. No clear-cut trees – that is, trees











1. Notice how Breedlove's distinctive headstock shape sits nicely with the guitar's overall design aesthetic

2. Like the fretboard, the bridge is made from ovankol that has been stained black to resemble ebony

that have been harvested and replaced with man-made, non-environmentally sound plantations – are used. Salvaged wood or individually harvested trees from reputable suppliers is the name of the game hereabouts.

As the name suggests, Breedlove's ECO Pursuit range epitomises the company's green credentials and the guitar before us here is no exception. Designed in Bend,

Oregon, and built in China, the Concert Sweetgrass is a handsome fellow and a large part of this is down to the timber used in its top. Breedlove has been a pioneering force with myrtlewood, the timber used for this acoustic's top, having used it for more than 25 years. Myrtlewood is also present in the guitar's back and sides, but here it is a laminate on top of mahogany. As a tonewood, it combines the attributes of rosewood, mahogany and maple with rich basses, mellow mids and sparkling trebles. But before we commit to a single strum, let's look at the other constituent parts of the Concert Sweetgrass.

The neck is African mahogany with a fingerboard of ovankol that has been stained black, presumably to mimic the accustomed look of ebony. We're going to assume that this must have been an aesthetic choice on Breedlove's behalf in order that the colour sits well with the myrtlewood as ovankol's natural colour resembles rosewood. Maybe it wouldn't have looked out of place in its natural state? Who knows. In any case, it's the same with the pin-free bridge, which is the same timber stained black. It's easy to see Breedlove's attention to aesthetic detailing here. The copper-coloured tuners,







3

position markers and fretboard side dots sit very easily with the paleness of the myrtlewood and darkness of the ovankol. Both the body and neck are trimmed with plastic tortoiseshell, too, which adds to the instrument's overall visual appeal.

Flip the body over to take a closer look at the neck and we can see it's a three-piece affair with a separate heel and a scarf joint to the base of the headstock. It's a satin finish, too, in contrast to the body's high-gloss lacquer.

Quality of workmanship is well up to the standard we have seen coming from Chinese workshops these days, and coupled with the top notch design, this is a very well thought out and good-looking acoustic.

For amplified use, the ECO Pursuit comes with a Fishman Presys under-saddle pickup and preamp, the latter boasting a simplified set of controls and an onboard

There's bags of bass but not of the boomy variety, with rich mids and sweet trebles

tuner. Just volume, contour and phase is all we have to play with. The output jack socket is mounted on the guitar's lower bout, with a built-in battery compartment for easy access. If you've ever had to do an emergency battery swap at a gig when the battery terminals are hidden away inside your instrument, you'll probably want to stand and applaud this idea...

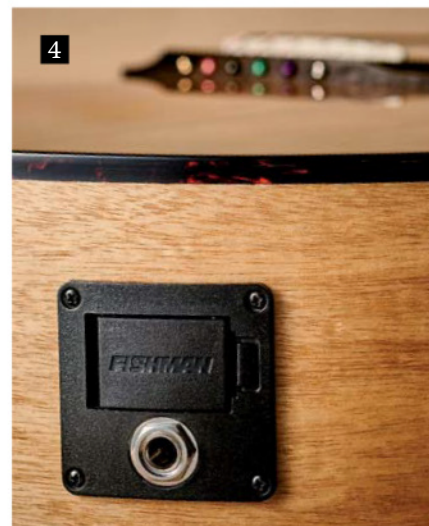
### Feel & Sounds

Picking up the Breedlove we find that it's a well-balanced affair that sits well in the hands. The feel of the satin finish neck is really quite appealing, too. It's a nice C-shape profile: not too chunky, neither is it too thin. We found that one or two of the tuners were a little stiff at first – this could merely be because it's a brand-new instrument – but once we got the guitar in tune we didn't have to touch them again and so they did the job faultlessly.

The guitar's action might be a fraction higher than we'd like, but probably only to the tune of 1mm or so. Easily remedied, of course, and it could also have been due to atmospheric conditions. The guitar arrived with us in a cardboard box with no case or gigbag and so it has possibly been effectively open to the elements while in transit.

3. The fretboard position markers – found both here and on the edge of the neck – sit in harmony with the copper-colored tuners

4. The jack socket is side-mounted with a built-in battery compartment – no more fishing around in the soundhole for emergency power-ups!





Myrtlewood has a very attractive grain pattern and has been used here for the Breedlove's top, back and sides



5

Sound-wise, we were in for a pleasant surprise as the ECO Pursuit really does have a very nice singing voice. There's bags of bass but not of the boomy variety, with rich mids and sweet trebles – everything that was promised to us with the presence of myrtlewood, in fact. Chords shine and shimmer with good sustain, and individual notes demonstrate a very capable dynamic

range. Anything from moody and mellow ballad style to snappy and bright blues was accommodated with ease.

Testing the pickup through our AER Compact 60, we were happy with the sound we heard pretty much from the start. As we've mentioned, there are no treble and bass controls, just a contour push-button. What happens here is effectively a mid-scoop and, once engaged, it has the effect of making the basses richer and the mids more transparent, while leaving the sparkle of the trebles in place. Despite the fact that there is no direct control over treble and bass as you may expect, the contour control was very effective and we didn't really yearn for anything more.

### Verdict

This guitar ticks very many boxes for us. It's a very good-looking instrument, the myrtlewood is a very attractive timber and will, of course, vary greatly from one guitar to the next, but Breedlove certainly deserves full marks on the design front. Build quality is, as we've said, very good with very obvious attention to detail on behalf of the Chinese builder. There is the very slight niggles about the action height and the lack of a gigbag, and these are really the only points that keep the Breedlove from getting a higher score. Apart from that, this is a real winner from both sound and ecological points of view. **G**



The guitar's copper-coloured tuners blend in well with the headstock's African mahogany

6



### BREEDLOVE ECO PURSUIT EX S CONCERT SWEETGRASS

**PRICE:** £869  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Concert cutaway  
**TOP:** Myrtlewood  
**BACK/SIDES:** Mahogany/myrtlewood laminate  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 106mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 390mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 642.6mm (25.3")  
**TUNERS:** Breedlove copper w/ copper buttons  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic/43mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ovangkol  
**FRETS:** 20  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ovangkol/55mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Fishman Presys I  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.9/4.2  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** There are 12 models available in the Breedlove Pursuit Exotic range with various tonewood combinations and body sizes on offer. Concert-size models include the Concert Companion Tiger's Eye (£869), the Concert Edgeburst (£1,599) and the Concert Amber (£869)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISH:** Sweetgrass gloss

**Rosetti**  
**01376 550033**  
<https://breedlovemusic.com>

# 8/10

**PROS** A seriously well designed, good-sounding electro-acoustic at a very attractive price point

**CONS** A gigbag would have been nice and not pushed the price too far north



A man with short dark hair, wearing a dark green long-sleeved shirt, is seated and playing a white PRS Fiore electric guitar. He is looking down at the guitar with a focused expression. The guitar has a white body, a maple neck, and a rosewood fretboard. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Fiore



## PLAY IN FULL BLOOM

MARK LETTIERI SIGNATURE MODEL

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

**- Mark Lettieri**



## FIRST PLAY



**BEETRONICS ZZOMBEE  
FILTREMULATOR**  
£399

**WHAT IS IT?** A stompbox featuring a bunch of interacting analogue effects for some sonic mayhem





# Dead Stinger

Take a flight of fancy into filtering, fuzz and frequency shifts with the latest from the bee-fixated boutique builders

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. On the surface the Presets switch calls up two presets or the Live mode, which reflects the current position of the knobs. Hold down the Bypass footswitch to access another three presets

2. It may be difficult to read because of the intricate graphics, but the knobs are multi-function with the alternate functions accessed by holding down the Bypass footswitch

3. The Filter switch assigns the filter to either the Parasite or Bee signal. When set to Off, the pedal enters its amplitude modes (Parasite, X or Bee) selected by the Mode switch

The latest from Beetrnix, the Zzombie, is described as a 'Filtremulator'. This is a one-of-a-kind analogue multi-effect pedal featuring Filter, Wah, LFO, Randomized Filter, Tremolo, Swells, Overdrive, Fuzz and Low-Octave, plus a unique effect called Cross Tremolo where the tremolo pulse alternates between root note and low octave.

The pedal has a set of controls that combines the effects for some very unusual sounds, but it may take some time to get your head around the four three-way toggle switches, three knobs and two multi-function footswitches. They offer a range of options so wide that you get a 29-page user manual to navigate your way through them! Fortunately, five onboard presets let you store favourite sounds, so once you've found something special you can always go back to it.

The sonic starting point is the two parallel signal paths that can be used independently or combined: Bee is your instrument signal in clean, driven or fuzz versions; and Parasite is a monophonic low octave. Various processing options can be applied to these – there are three modes of modulated filter and three modes of modulated amplitude. While there's provision for plugging in an expression pedal, a momentary footswitch offers real-time performance control in triggering, ramping the filter up or down, or starting/stopping modulation, depending on the mode you have set. It can also be used for tap tempo – invaluable for its tremolo and sequencer-style sounds.

So, what of those sounds? Well, you can just turn up the Bee side and get plenty happening – straight drive and fuzz, tremolo and auto-wah effects are all there – but you can also apply the filter to create some analogue synth-style sequencer action. LFO mode with an LFO controlling the filter keeps the sequencing pretty straightforward, but the aptly named Mad mode offers some 65536 random filter patterns: hit a chord and it gets all Kraftwerk. Bring the Parasite knob's low octave into proceedings and things become nicely complex and synth-like, but you'll need to be careful with your picking to stay glitch-free.

## Verdict

This is one very busy bee. It's capable of a range of powerful conventional tones, but its main function could be as your pedalboard's wildcard with its staggering array of off-the-wall effects, perhaps making an instant impact using the Momentary switch to bring things in and out. We might need a sit-down. **G**



## BEETRONICS ZZOMBEE FILTREMULATOR

**PRICE:** £399

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Filtremulator pedal

**FEATURES:** True Bypass

**CONTROLS:** Parasite, Depth,

Bee, Mode switch, Buzz Level

switch, Filter Router switch,

Presets switch, Ramp/Rate

footswitch, Bypass footswitch

**CONNECTIONS:** Standard input, standard output

**POWER:** 9V DC adaptor

(not supplied) 100mA

**DIMENSIONS:** 58 (w) x 102 (d) x 46mm (h)

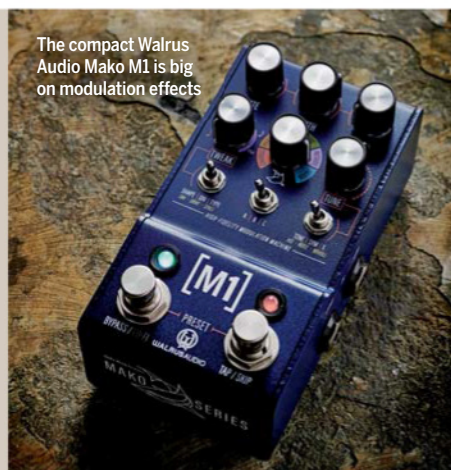
**FACE** bvba

+32 3 844 67 97

[www.beetronicsfx.com](http://www.beetronicsfx.com)

## THE RIVALS

Described as a "psycho multimode filter", the Death By Audio Evil Filter (£369) features a filter with high-pass, band-pass and low-pass modes, as well as two types of screaming resonance. And it also adds two types of fuzz via a separate footswitch. In many ways a much more conventional pedal, the Walrus Audio Mako M1 (£319) has a compact footprint but offers a range of modulation effects that would be an asset to your 'board, including both tremolo and filter. The Spaceman Effects Artemis (£279) is a modulated filter pedal featuring seven modulation modes, which are said to provide unprecedented capabilities for sonic exploration.



The compact Walrus Audio Mako M1 is big on modulation effects

8/10

**PROS** Solid build quality; a wide and quirky range of sounds; onboard presets

**CONS** Steep learning curve; low octave can get unwieldy



## FIRST PLAY



### ELECTRO-HARMONIX STRING9 STRING ENSEMBLE £199

**WHAT IS IT?** A string synth  
for your guitar from the  
New York City effects boffins





# String Along

Electro-Harmonix adds another string to its bow with this versatile emulation pedal for lush synth and orchestral tones

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Olly Curtis

1. The Ctrl knobs adjust specific parameters for the programs – choose tone, sustain time or something else entirely
2. Select the nine programs from the rotary switch – 7, 8 and 9 all feature a freeze effect
3. For a manual freeze effect, start from Bypass, hit the footswitch and play a chord or note, which will then sustain until you hit the switch to enter bypass

**W**ith its '9 Series' Electro-Harmonix has created a minor genre in pedals that recreate the sounds of other (mainly keyboard) instruments from any electric guitar – no additional synth pickups required. The latest, String9, has been designed to emulate orchestral and synthesiser string sounds and, to that end, offers the well-established array of nine different sounds selected by a rotary knob. There are volume knobs for your guitar and the emulated string sound to mix at the Effects output. There's also a Dry output, which delivers the input signal at unity gain, leaving plenty of options for your signal chain.

As with the other '9 Series' pedals in the range, there are no problems with tracking here – there's no need to have to have dry guitar sound mixed in to disguise any shortcomings, so you can have pure string sounds if you want. However, blending strings with guitar offers a lovely range of textures combining a sharp attack with lingering sustained body. Each of the patches has its own distinctive character, though all are in the same ballpark of sustained string sounds, and each has two specific adjustable parameters enabling quite a range of variation from the basic sound.

The first program, Symphonic, offers a rich orchestral sound and can have a long fade-out time via Ctrl 2. Elsewhere in the program list you get polyphonic analogue synth and PCM digital synth strings, plus an emulation of 60s and 70s mechanical string machines, such as the Orchestron. AARP offers the familiar 70s sound of an ARP Solina string synth with optional phaser, and Crewman emulates a Crumar Performer string and brass synth with adjustable filter sweep. The last three programs – with orchestral, string synth and a Mellotron choir and strings – provide the freeze effect to sample and hold notes and chords with infinite sustain. This offers two modes, with Auto being the most natural and creative, sustaining each note or chord until you hit another one; the footswitch-operated Manual mode is useful for a sustained string pad to play over with the dry sound.

## Verdict

This pedal is designed for a specialised job, and it does that job perfectly. While it's handy if you need a substitute for a keyboard player, there are plenty of new textures on offer when you mix the strings proportionately with guitar. **G**



## ELECTRO-HARMONIX STRING9 STRING ENSEMBLE

**PRICE:** £199

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Strings emulation pedal

**FEATURES:** Buffered Bypass, 9x patches (Symphonic, June-O, PCM, Floppy, AARP, Crewman, Orch Freeze, Synth Freeze, Vox Freeze)

**CONTROLS:** Dry volume, Effect volume, Ctrl 1, Ctrl 2, Patch selector knob, internal bypass mute dipswitch (for the Effect jack), Bypass footswitch

**CONNECTIONS:** Standard input, standard Dry output, standard Effect output

**POWER:** Included 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw

**DIMENSIONS:** 97 (w) x 119 (d) x 52mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix  
www.ehx.com

8/10

**PROS** Instant string sounds; flexible output options; ability to set guitar/string blends

**CONS** Manual freeze mode can take a bit of getting used to



## THE RIVALS

The main rivals here have to be the rest of the EHX '9 Series'. If you're looking to get sustained keyboard sounds out of your guitar, the following have you covered with different flavours: the B9 and C9 reproduce organ sounds, Mel9 gives you Mellotron sounds, and the Synth9 offers vintage synth sounds.

If you want a bit more versatility in your range of sounds, how about a full-on synth pedal? The Boss SY series is a good starting point, either the full-on SY-200 (£299) with its 128 memories or the SY-1 (£179) in the Boss compact series.



The compact Boss SY-1 is a neat way to get some synth into your sound



# WHAT IS AVAXHOME?



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# the Wishlist

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

## Ivison Guitars Hurricane £3,995

CONTACT **ATB Guitars** WEB [www.atbguitars.com](http://www.atbguitars.com) WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

**I**n a previous life Neil Ivison was a guitarist and guitar tech for more than 20 years – the last band he'd worked with was The 1975 – but with a young family he came off the road in 2018. “After wondering what I was going to do,” he tells us today, “I set up in the garage and started doing a few guitar repairs. Then I thought I'd have a go at making a guitar. Word spread and it snowballed from there: 18 months later I realised I had a business.”

Neil is now based just outside of Worcester, and his designs are both single-cuts: the Hurricane (here in Junior Burst), sort of rolling up a 50s Les Paul Special with some 'Burst style; and the Dakota, introduced at the start of 2021, ploughing a more Firebird-like style.

If you like your vintage pieces, not least Gibsons, you'll certainly be at home here. From the moment you pull this one out of its Hiscox case you're transported back to a different time. Yet while this build might sweat the details, it's no copy – that lowered and softened treble horn changes the aesthetic, and the headstock is functional, not fancy. The body is solid one-piece African mahogany, while the top is lightly figured Eastern maple that's lightly carved. The neck

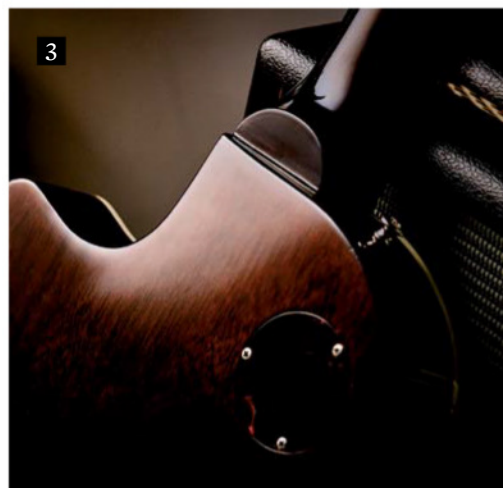
is 'old growth' mahogany, the rosewood fingerboard is uncannily close to our 1957 Les Paul Junior reference, and the back carve slightly fuller in the hand. One nod to modernism is a light chamfering on the body by the neck heel, just slightly reducing the bulk.

The finishing is superb. Neil uses a “100 per cent nitrocellulose that's lightly aged, vintage formulated and non-plasticised”. The back, sides and edges of the sunburst are a really accurate-looking, dark but lightly translucent brown with a beautiful light-amber centre to the front.

Using Sunbear pickups, the Hurricane doesn't disappoint – from the smooth but defined voice of the neck soapbar to the subtle grunt of the bridge 'bucker, and, as set, the mix is deliciously full and harmonically rich. But use the volume and tone and you'll uncover one reason why 50s Gibsons are so revered: the controls really clean up and are subtly interactive, ideal for older-style blues at the bridge, while the neck P-90 seems equally at home with jazzier voicings, vocal and smooth in equal measure. It's great craft and really feels and sounds like a well-cared for piece that's a lot older than it actually is. **G**

**1.** A beautifully simple design, the back-angled headstock looks quite 'Junior' in style with its black face and simple script logo. The truss-rod cover, like all the plastic parts, is an old-looking dark tortoiseshell. The superbly cut nut is polished buffalo bone, while the single ring tuners are by Faber

**2.** At the bridge is a Sunbear 59 SB-PAF humbucker that's classed as “low-mid” in output (ours measured 8.27kohms) and uses a rough-cast Alnico IV magnet. The neck pickup is the 56 SB90 Soapbar wound with 42-gauge plain enamel wire with two rough-cast Alnico IV magnets and a measured DCR of 7.05k





3. Unlike the vintage Gibsons that so inform the build, the heel area is lightly chamfered to reduce bulk in higher positions. The finish overall is lightly aged, though not relic'd, just like the Faber hardware. It all adds to the illusion that this is an 'old' guitar

4. There's virtually no modernism in this build. There's the slightly shorter 'correct' Gibson scale-length of 24.625 inches (625.5mm), a single-action truss rod, and Neil's '59 neck profile, which measures a whisker over 43mm at the nut with a depth of 22.4mm at the 1st fret and 25.4mm by the 12th

5. "I met Stuart Robson of Sunbear, who's based down in Knebworth, at a guitar show," says Neil. "Stuart's very much into the vintage PAF world. He said, 'I'll make you a set of pickups and if you don't like them I won't bother you again.' I loved them!"

6. The master volume and tone are wired 50s-style using Six String Suppliers premium taper CTS 500k pots and a .022 microfarads PIO tone cap, while the three-way toggle and output jack (mounted on a chromed metal plate) are by Switchcraft

4

5

6





# Gas Supply

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

## Gibson Standard Faded series **FROM £1,899**

CONTACT: **Gibson** WEB: [www.gibson.com](http://www.gibson.com)

### IN THE PIPELINE

#### Fade To J

It's not just electrics that are getting the Faded treatment. Gibson has also confirmed the release of three Faded acoustics: the flat-top J-35 30s model (£1,899), a J-45 (£2,169) and a Hummingbird (£3,039), all equipped with LR Baggs electronics

### Even more expensive American guitars?

Not exactly! In these times nothing gets our GAS-detectors chiming more than classic designs made more affordable. Yes, these are American-made, but they're not the wallet-emptying variety you might expect – they come in at around 10 per cent cheaper than the Standard models. What we have here are two Les Pauls (50s and 60s, both £2,169) and an SG (£1,899) with vintage-style faded finishes, marking a return to the catalogue after the last Faded series guitars appeared in 2018.

### Ah, so they've reissued those ones?

Not really. The 2022 Faded series shares the same name as its predecessors, but there's a lot more to it than that. First up, these are all Standard models that

are based around similar specs to the regular gloss Standards. In the case of the Les Pauls, that means we get a mahogany body, capped with a AA maple top, and if what we've seen so far is anything to go by, the tops are already a big improvement. With that comes proper binding, and the fretboards are inlaid with trapezoids rather than simple dots.

### Why are there two Les Pauls?

This is a simple one to answer: one is a 50s model and the other is 60s, with the main difference lying in their neck profiles. The Vintage 50s neck profile is chunkier, while the 60s is a SlimTaper. The 50s Les Paul comes in a Honey Burst finish, and the 60s model is a more exaggerated Vintage Cherry Burst.

### NECK PROFILE

The Les Paul comes with a chunkier 50s neck profile (here) – or, if you prefer less heft, there's the SlimTaper of the 60s model (right)

### PICKUPS

Gibson's Burstbuckers are fitted in the regular Standard models, and here Gibson has used uncovered versions of the same models for each guitar

### FADED FINISHES

The Faded series guitars each come in a single finish option – that's Honey Burst for the 50s Les Paul (far left), Vintage Cherry Burst for the 60s Les Paul (middle), and Vintage Cherry Satin for the SG (here)





Excepting a few small changes to the pots and scratchplates, these guitars are essentially Standard spec but with the faded finishes

### What's the story with the SG?

While you might have expected the same stoptail as the Les Pauls, Gibson has taken a further turn towards vintage by including its Maestro Vibrola, making it more *Light My Fire* than *Thunderstruck*. Being a '61-inspired model, it shares the same SlimTaper neck profile as the 60s Les Paul. The body is, of course, a carved slab of mahogany, so in this case the binding is only applied to the fingerboard. It comes in a timeless, extremely SG-appropriate Vintage Cherry Satin.

### Obviously they're faded, but is this a different type of finish?

No, these are nitrocellulose. The faded aesthetic is simply Gibson's way of keeping the price down, while also adding a vintage vibe to the guitars. But this is more akin to a satin finish than some of the more roughly applied worn-type finishes we've seen before.

### Are the electrics the same as a Standard?

In essence, yes. All three guitars come fitted with open-coil Burstbuckers – Burstbucker 1 and 2 in the 50s Les Paul, 60s Burstbuckers for the 60s Les Paul, and the SG has Burstbucker 61R/T in the neck and bridge positions respectively. Control-wise, it's business as usual with a pair of volumes and a pair of tones (featuring Orange Drop capacitors) plus a three-way switch.

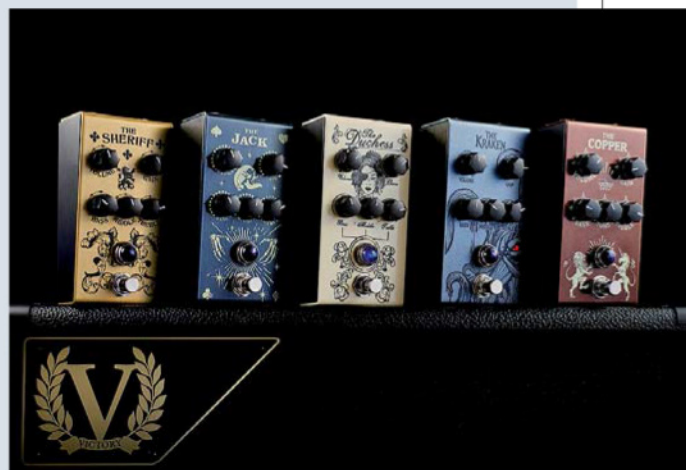
### So what's the catch? Are there weird tuners or something?

No! As you might have heard, Gibson underwent a management change a few years ago and these guitars are continuing the new direction of the brand. And, talking of tuners, these guitars feature either chromed Grover Rotomatic 'kidney beans' (60s Les Paul), or keystone button-equipped Vintage Deluxe models.

### It sounds like these are pretty close to Standards, then!

Yes, the specs are very close, with the most obvious differences coming in the finish styles (and singular options). Outside of this, these guitars have the same key appointments as their glossy siblings, from the electronics to the machineheads. Okay, the Les Pauls don't come with pickguards, but let's be honest, they do have a bit more attitude without. The prices start at £1,899, and all three guitars ship in a hard case. [SW]

## ALSO OUT NOW...



### VICTORY V1 SERIES £199

Victory has had an incredible rise since it began in 2013. And now the British amp brand has teamed up with another well-loved UK brand, ThorpyFX, to bring us its V1 line of pedals. Victory says the brief was to create a single-button pedal that encapsulated each of its amp families. We get a choice of five: The Sheriff, The Jack, The Duchess, The Kraken and The Copper, all of which put the tonal flavour of their namesakes into a pedal-based amp-in-a-box. Each pedal is designed and handmade in the UK, and features a three-band EQ plus volume and gain controls.

[www.victoryamps.com](http://www.victoryamps.com)

### MXR DUKE OF TONE £189



MXR's Custom Shop has announced its Duke Of Tone, which is a partnership with the originator of the King Of Tone drive (and its offshoots), Analog Man. As a single-channel pedal, it's based more on the Prince Of Tone than the two-channel King Of Tone, but the Duke's three-mode (Overdrive, Boost and Distortion) circuit offers the King's voicings in isolation. There are also Volume/Drive/Tone controls, and it can be run in 18-volt mode for greater boost headroom. At £189, this pedal is accessible, plus there's no waiting list. [www.jimdunlop.com](http://www.jimdunlop.com)





# Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

## Artist: Brad Barr

Album: *The Winter Mission* (Secret City Records)



*The Winter Mission* is Brad Barr's second solo instrumental album. Discover more at [www.missingpiecegroup.com/brad-barr](http://www.missingpiecegroup.com/brad-barr)

As a solo musician and singer-songwriter, the work of Brad Barr differs significantly to his work with his sibling Andrew in The Barr Brothers, which specialises in folk and blues-rock. Brad's second album, *The Winter Mission*, displays diverse tunes for solo guitar, all recorded live with no overdubs – surprisingly so when you hear the complex music. “My solo style is rooted in improvisation,” Brad tells us, “but I’m also always looking for a physical feeling from the guitar. The way that the hammer-ons and pull-offs line up has to be visceral. It’s not enough for it to sound nice, it also has to *feel* nice.”

### Rocky Beginnings

Originally from Rhode Island, Brad's musical journey began around the time he traded his drum kit for Andrew's guitar, but it wasn't plain sailing. “The guitar was this mysterious thing I couldn't quite make work,” he says. “When I can't do something, I really want to learn how to do it, so the challenge of that kept me going. That and MTV...”

“Angus Young was my first guitar hero. He looked like he was having a really good time and I wanted to know how to get the guitar to do what he was doing [with it]. He carried me through a lot of my teenage years, as did Slash. I listen to his tone and how he plays and it's really impressive.”

Brad Barr: “I realised that music holds far more than what's on the surface”

### Musical Discoveries

As his own musical ability developed, Brad's influences shifted and he moved towards more complex music. “I started listening to jam bands like The Grateful Dead and The Allman Brothers,” he says. “But when I hit about 18 it was guys like John McLaughlin, Wes Montgomery and Bill Frisell, so all the jazzers. I got heavily into those guitar players. I had figured out all of Angus Young's licks by then, and what I liked about the jam bands was they were taking rock 'n' roll and blues and stretching it out and bringing different harmonies and melodic scales to the music. It was just a natural progression for me. I mean, these guys were drawing from John Coltrane.”

### Sibling Strength

Brad is a fascinating guitarist whose music, both with The Barr Brothers and solo, feels like an expansion of all of the styles that have influenced him throughout the years. “For me, it's more of a continuum,” he says. “I'm sure from the outside it looks like a drastic change, but, like lots of teenagers, I grew up playing rock 'n' roll. I eventually realised that music holds far more than what's on the surface and it's a lifetime's pursuit I decided I was going to take.”

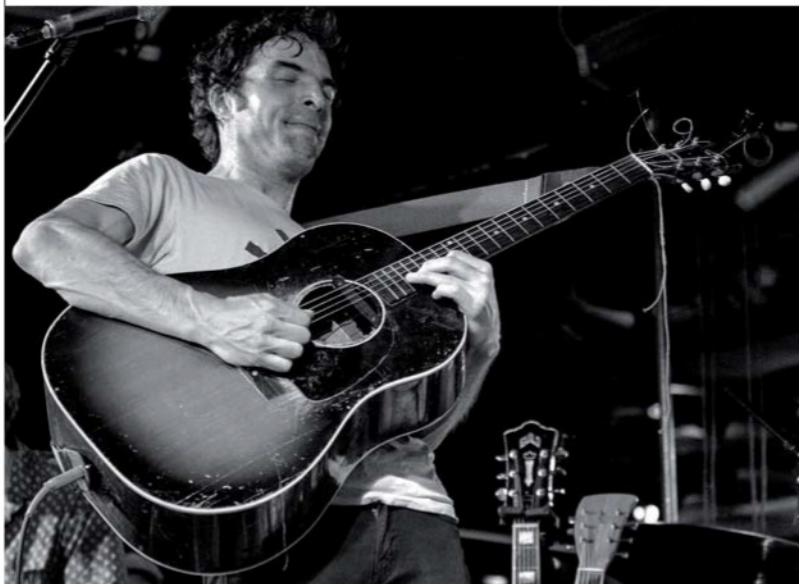
“Having my brother helped, too. He is one of the biggest influences in my life because I have a partner to go through it all with and we hedge our bets together. If I was doing it alone, it would have been much more daunting.”

### Gear & More Gear

Brad's guitars of past and present make an extensive list, including one long-overdue six-string. “After 35 years of listening to Angus Young, I finally got an SG,” he says. “It's now my go-to guitar – it's a Special, so it's got two P-90s you can switch between. But the first really cool guitar I got was an Ibanez early 70s Studio thing that was shaped like a Les Paul. Then I got a 1954 Gibson ES-175 hollowbody and I played that for a good 14 years. I had a mid-60s Guild Starfire V, then a 1951 Gibson J-35, but all the while I was picking up Danelectros and Silvertones – I love cardboard guitars, man, and plastic instruments have a whole unique sound to them.” [GK]

**Standout track:** *Two Hundred And Sixteen*

**For fans of:** Bill Frisell, Pink Floyd, John Fahey, The Grateful Dead







### SOUND OF MEXICO

Brad gives us a tour of his handmade nylon-string

"Here's one I want to show you," Brad says, picking up a four-string Mexican *requinto*, a small nylon-string instrument. "I used this on *Magic Square* [from *The Winter Mission*]. The maker, Alfonso Paxtian, carves the whole thing from one block of wood and then lays the soundboard and fretboard on top. It's been my favourite instrument for the last couple of years. I love it because I can find a way of playing just about everything I want on it. Right now it's [tuned] in FCFA. I've got another one in transit, too, but with five strings."

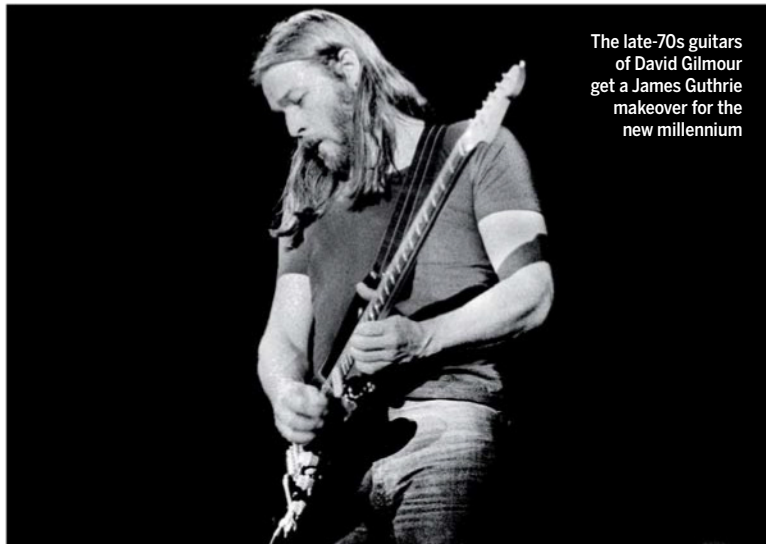




# Albums

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

PHOTO BY GUSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



The late-70s guitars of David Gilmour get a James Guthrie makeover for the new millennium

## Pink Floyd Animals (2018 Remix)

Parlophone (available now)

10/10



### A welcome reimagining of a classic album

To say that this album has been long-awaited by Floyd fans worldwide would be an understatement. Producer James Guthrie – longtime Floyd auxiliary – undertook the remix of the band's 1977 album *Animals* almost five years ago, but

the ongoing hostility between Gilmour and Waters has delayed the release until now as they couldn't agree on the liner notes. But, infighting aside, it was definitely worth the wait.

As a little bit of historical context, *Animals* was released at a time when punk-rock was enjoying its 15 minutes of furious fame and the original mix back then was, shall we say, suitably angry and, well, punkish. Lyrically based loosely on the concepts explored in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the music was in direct contrast to the album's more reflective predecessor, *Wish You Were Here*. For the remix, Guthrie has employed modern-day studio magic to produce a more mature and dynamically enhanced reading and definitely not just a quick wash and brush-up. Nick Mason's drums possess added power and Gilmour's guitar snarls and spits out of the speakers like a clowder of angry cats. Rick Wright's keyboards enjoy more prominence and, on occasion, a subterranean, foundation-shaking bass.

As a whole, the album feels like it has been reborn into the 21st century with more of a contemporary feel to it throughout. James Guthrie is to be congratulated for his work on reimagining an album that is often regarded merely as an overture to its sumptuous follow-up, *The Wall*, and repositioning it as the masterpiece it truly was. **[DM]**

**Standout track:** *Dogs*

**For fans of:** Genesis, Yes, Crimson

## Troy Redfern

The Wings Of Salvation

RED7 Records (available now)

8/10



### UK slide maestro rocks like thunder

UK slide guitarist Troy Redfern sure knows how to rock. Performed in a trio format, Troy's 10-track album is full of powerful riffs, pounding drums and soulful rock vocals that are augmented by his slide chops. Opener, *Gasoline*, has a 7/8 time signature with that Zeppelin-esque swagger as Troy screams and wails over it – a strong intro indeed. *Sweet Carolina* is a hard-hitting, pounding stomper that will work great at gigs and festivals, while *Come On* features some of the most arresting slide playing on the album. The measured swagger of *Mercy* is appealing with a great bluesy solo that borders on shred, and the solo on *Can't Let Go* shows that Troy can comfortably achieve vocal-like phrasing with a slide. The punk rockabilly of *Profane* – think Stray Cats meets The Damned – has a lot of punch and drive, and finally the closing track, *Heart & Soul*, evokes old-school blues with just guitar, voice and kick drum. Impressive. **[JS]**

**Standout track:** *Heart & Soul*

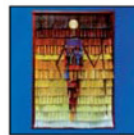
**For fans of:** Zeppelin, Wile And The Bandits

## Vieux Farka Touré & Khruangbin

Ali

Dead Oceans (available now)

9/10



### Transcontinental meeting of minds yields album of hypnotic beauty

For those who haven't been following Khruangbin, the Texas trio have garnered a huge following for their unique style of sultry funk infused with global influences, thanks to the intricate guitar lines of Mark Speer. A collaboration with Vieux Farka Touré, son of the late Malian guitar legend Ali Farka Touré, was an inspired match-up and this is the result – an album at once looser and more open-ended than Khruangbin's tautly arranged solo material but also more expansive, mature and soul-satisfying. The upbeat call-and-response groove of *Tongo Barra* reveals how the trio's impeccably solid grooves blossom into a larger, more profound music when lifted by Vieux's charismatic vocal presence. Elsewhere on *Ali Hala Abada*, a deep well of spirituality is drawn from to hypnotic effect. An album to savour at length. **[JD]**

**Standout track:** *Tongo Barra*

**For fans of:** Ali Farka Touré, Bombino, Kel Assouf





Joanne Shaw Taylor gives it her all on new JoBo/Josh Smith-produced album

## Joanne Shaw Taylor

Nobody's Fool

KTBA (release date: 28 October)

8/10



### Landmark album from blues-rock dynamo

Released on Joe Bonamassa's Keeping The Blues Alive label, Joanne Shaw Taylor's new album is already being regarded as her best to date. Produced by Bonamassa and Josh Smith, the album features 11 tracks and includes cameos by The Eurythmics' Dave Stewart (on a fiery rendition of *Missionary Man*), Carmen Vandenberg, cellist Tina Guo (Hans Zimmer) and JoBo himself. The title track opens the album and sets the mood with JST's signature husky, soulful vocals embellished with some powerful guitar lines. *Bad Blood* is catchy and pop-driven, whereas tracks such as *Just No Getting Over You* are all about downhome blues-rock, with a stellar solo here from Joanne. A UK tour kicks off on the 22 November in Cardiff and we're quite sure that material from this album will ignite on the live stage. **[DM]**

**Standout track:** *Fade Away*

**For fans of:** Bonamassa, Bonnie Raitt

## The Cult

Under The Midnight Sun

Black Hill Records (available now)

8/10



### Gretsch-fuelled 80s rockers pound it out

For those of a certain age, the combination of vocalist Ian Astbury and Billy Duffy's Gretsch White Falcon guitar is one of pure magic – *She Sells Sanctuary* or *Rain* spring to mind. So it's good to see it's still going strong on the band's new eight-track album, *Under The Midnight Sun*. The album's opening track, *Mirror*, has a yearning quality, enhanced by Billy's string-bending motif, tasty chord changes into new sections and a euphoric chorus, and *A Cut Inside* follows with an old-school drum beat with lashings of layered guitars arched by Ian's sizable vocals. You'll find a fresh sound on *Knife Through Butterfly Heart* – starting with nylon-string guitar picking, percussion and piano before an orchestra and jangly guitars expand the production. The album's closer is the string-rich arrangement of the title track, mildly evocative of recent Bond movie songs and – like the whole album – it's a moreish listen. **[JS]**

**Standout track:** *A Cut Inside*

**For fans of:** Billy Idol, The Mission



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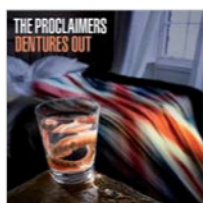


# Tones Behind The Tracks

**The Proclaimers** are back with their own signature brand of ear-worm choruses tempered with that familiar Scottish lilt

## Artist: The Proclaimers

Album: *Dentures Out* (Cooking Vinyl)



Some 35 years since the release of their debut album and now aged 60, the brothers Reid are back with another long player

**T**he new Proclaimers album, *Dentures Out*, features 13 songs in only 34 minutes with not a single word or guitar chord wasted. It also has a surprise guest in the shape of Manic Street Preachers' James Dean Bradfield. It's very cathartic to hear really good songwriting addressing the maladies that post-Brexit Britain suffers from at the moment, so we begin our conversation by asking Charlie Reid if it was cathartic for them to write, too?

"The writing of the songs started before lockdown and then was affected, as everybody was, by the fact that it's the longest period probably that Craig and I couldn't actually stand with everyone and sing

first time there's been one – it's been about looking back and nostalgia. How people look back, whether they do so accurately, whether they do so through rose-coloured glasses, and how people examine the past and how that affects their view of the future. I think that's what the record's theme is."

### It's a really super band that you got together to record this album.

"I think it's probably the fifth time we've recorded down at [Rockfield Studios] in Monmouth and certainly the third time with Dave Eringa, who was the producer of the record. We had Zac Ware on guitar and Stevie Christie on keyboards, Clive Jenner on the drums and Gary John Kane on the bass. We brought other people in, including James Dean Bradfield, and it was just a lot of fun to do it. Unfortunately, I contracted Covid the week before so I was two or three days late getting to Wales. So the guys laid down about four or five basic tracks before I got there. I just came in with a slightly blocked ear and a bit of a sore throat, just got on with it and we were done within a couple of weeks."

### Would you say that you're pretty prolific writers or do you like to work on a song for a long time?

"We have become more prolific in the last 15 years, I think. At the start of our career it was very stop and start. Everybody's got their first record ready to go by the time they sign the deal and we made [*This Is The Story*, 1987] and then we made another record 18 months later, the *Sunshine On Leith* one, which had the hit [*I'm Gonna Be*] (500 Miles) on it. Then we didn't make another record until '94, I think [*Hit The Highway*]. And then not until 2001 [*Persevere*] and some of that was because we were having families, wives, kids being born – you know, a lot of stuff going on. But since 2001 pretty much every three years we've put a record out."

### Was it Zac playing pedal steel on *Play The Man* or did you get someone else in to play on that track?

"That was Zac. By the time Zac came into the band, he'd already started playing the pedal steel and he rapidly improved. He's all over that song and it really

"If there's ever been a theme on a Proclaimers record – and I think this is the first time there's been one – it's about looking back and nostalgia"

together, and that did slow things down a bit. It was a bit frustrating, but we didn't get hit as badly as some people did. It was certainly cathartic, but I think it was very important for us to do it when we did. The songs are not directly about lockdown, obviously, although a couple of them have that feel. If there's ever been a theme on a Proclaimers record – and I think this is the

Craig and Charlie (right) were joined by The Manics' James Dean Bradfield during the recording of *Dentures Out*







PHOTO BY MARK HOLLOWAY/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

makes it. It's not an easy instrument to play; I mean, it's not just the pedals and the slide bit, it's the knees as well. I don't know how the hell he does it."

### How much of an influence is country music on you?

"It's always influenced us – along with R&B and Black music, which was the bedrock of what most British musicians were doing in the early 60s. Along with that we began with The Beatles and even The Stones to some degree, but certainly The Beatles were always an influence. But George Jones was a big influence, and Merle Haggard, certainly as a songwriter. And, you know, some of the great guitar players, too – Jerry Reed, obviously, and Chet Atkins. People don't talk about them any more, how influential those guys were – [and] Glen Campbell, who actually started off as country. So, yeah, the playing and the songwriting style, the directness of contribution and the fact that we occasionally use waltz rhythms as well, which is always a giveaway that a band has been influenced by country music."

### Do you have a particular method between the two of you for bringing a song to fruition?

"Any and all to some degree. Craig does a lot more than I do. We come in and start rehearsing in a little flat that we use just for rehearsals and we just sort of muck about with the songs until they get the right feel. We normally start with a melody and then put something around it and try to write it in a different way to something we've done before. You're approaching similar themes, but you try to write them from a slightly different point of view.

So that's something I think is a craft and hopefully you get somewhat better as you get older. You don't want to complicate it, don't [want to] put too many chords in unless you need to, and make it fairly straightforward. And that's certainly from all the things we liked – The Beatles' songwriting, country music, old R&B records that just made the point. Try to make the point in two or three minutes."

### What guitars did you take into the studio for the album?

"I always take in Taylor acoustics. We've built them up over the years, I think we have six now. Interestingly, the guitar tech was looking for replacements – not that they're terribly damaged but just for the future. Zac's got a couple of acoustics including a very good Martin and there's his Les Paul and that pedal steel."

### Tell us about James Dean Bradfield's contribution to this record.

"Absolutely fantastic. I knew from the many great records over the years what a great songwriter he was and what a fantastic player. James sort of came in, settled down and said, 'Are you sure this is what you want?' I don't know if there was a touch of uncertainty. And yet he was playing fantastic and he just got better and better, better and better with almost every take. Total mastery. And he plays with passion and that was really important for us." [DM/JD]

Live at the Isle Of Wight Festival earlier this year. The band are now in the midst of their UK and Ireland tour – if you're quick you might just catch the last few tickets...



The Proclaimers' new album, *Dentures Out*, is available now on Cooking Vinyl

<https://the.proclaimers.co.uk>





# Strings & Things

**Neville Marten** puts a new set of pickups in his Les Paul due to noise issues, but a recent article makes him think, "Is this just nonsense?"

"Now here's a thing," is how Mitch Dalton, columnist for our sister mag *Guitar Techniques*, might begin his monthly article. Mitch has been one of the country's top studio and live session guitarists for decades, and is called to back artists such as Lionel Richie and Glen Campbell, does the *Strictly Come Dancing* live shows, *The Proms* and so on. But if you want to hear a particular ditty that bears his touch, then check out the fast acoustic flurries at the beginning of Monty Python's *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life*. That's your man!

"There is something scary about the reliance on one type of esoteric pick. Suppose it gets lost? So now I'm happy with everyday plectra..."

Mitch's latest article for *Guitar Techniques* is all about picks, strings and so on. As a *Guitarist* reader I suspect that you, like me, have pondered plectrum materials and thicknesses, and lost sleep over string makes and gauges. Well, here are some edited highlights of what one of the country's most sought-after guitarists has to say on the subject: "When my teacher placed a black plastic pick bearing the moniker 'Ike Isaacs' betwixt my thumb and first finger, my 10-year-old self knew not of product endorsement in general, or of Mr Isaacs and his stellar curriculum vitae. All I remember is that I had no

difficulty in adapting my technique to this accessory. It was the equivalent in shape and size to the ubiquitous Fender 351 that I still employ to this day. Heavy gauge, to be specific.

"Yer average pick is available in a bewildering range of sizes and materials: nylon, metal, wood, felt, glass, plastics and polyoxymethylene. Or an old-fashioned sixpenny piece if your name happens to be Brian May. As someone who's had the good fortune to settle on a pleasingly practical plectrum from day one, I've never felt the need to mess with other pick possibilities. But there's no harm in knocking yourself out in exploring the myriad varieties, if you must. However, I do feel the need to offer a word of caution: you won't become a better player by driving yourself nuts in the relentless pursuit of the perfect plectrum. You ain't gonna play like Mr Bo Rap himself merely by employing an old coin. And if you persist in thinking that way, dissatisfaction and frustration are guaranteed. The same goes for infinite string-gauge experimentation, or messing with custom pickups and esoteric effects pedals."

And there you have it. Having just put noiseless Lindy Fralin P90s in my Les Paul, strung it with NYXL 10-gauge strings and wondered if I should have used 10.5s or upgraded to a 'better' bridge and tailpiece, I stand guilty as charged. I've not tried the Fralins in anger yet, but they sound pretty good through my home setup. These were a genuine requirement, though, since the hum and buzz were impacting on the rest of the band as we all use in-ear monitors.

## GAS OF THE MONTH

Sleigh Ride!

**What?** Bare Knuckle Nantucket HSP90 **Where seen?** [www.pmtonline.co.uk](http://www.pmtonline.co.uk)  
**Price?** From £290.40 (set)

Mentioning P-90s – and noticing something of a resurgence in taste for Gibson's first electric guitar pickup – got me thinking. Most guitarists own at least one humbucking guitar, but P-90-equipped models are much rarer. So, Tim Mills down at Bare Knuckle devised a genuine P-90 that fits in a humbucking cover. Brilliant! £300 for a mod, and not a couple of grand for an SG Special, should you decide the P-90 tone is not for you. Bare Knuckle says: "Scatter-wound by hand with 42AWG plain enamel wire and using

sand-cast, vintage-cut Alnico V magnets, the tone of the Nantucket humbucker-sized P90 is raw and in your face. The wide, squat coil creates a fatter tone compared with a Strat or Tele coil, while the twin magnet design gives all the power of a humbucker." Need I say more?



## Does It Even Matter?

But is Mitch right? He's certainly had plenty of work done on his own guitars, and may just have been lucky with that old Ike Isaacs plectrum. But there is certainly something scary about the reliance on one type of esoteric pick. Suppose it gets lost? I've had it myself when I used a homemade tortoiseshell one. It's panic inducing. So now I'm happy with everyday plectra, like the one Mitch uses or similar.

But then... I've got some Lollar Imperials to put in my ES-335, and a TonePros bridge and tailpiece. But will a single person in the audience know the difference? (Partly Mitch's point, I believe.) My 335 sounds great, so perhaps it's just an itch we need to scratch, and less about what actually matters musically.

And there's another point: Mitch absolutely has to get it right first time, every time. In that game, time is money, consistency is key, and musos who keep screwing up are out the door quicker than a losing Premier League manager.

Anyway, I'd love to hear your plectrum, string or pickup stories, and whether your personal quest for perfection has ever been attained. See you next time. **G**



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# Under Wraps

This month **Alex Bishop** analyses the internal structure of an acoustic guitar soundboard, brace by brace

**I**n my workshop I have a wooden rail screwed just behind where I stand at my workbench. Upon this rail I hang fronts and backs of unfinished guitars. Given that I teach guitar-making on top of my own commissions, it's helpful to have multiple guitar parts at various stages of completion to help inspire (or confound) my students. Indeed, the daily collisions between my forehead and the plethora of delicate soundboards (normally every time the doorbell rings) proves that it's been a busy month for soundboard bracing and carving spruce.

"I'm a fan of asymmetrical bracing as irregular shapes discourage the reinforcement of specific frequencies, resulting in a more favourable tone"

Earlier in the year, in issue 487, I wrote about the effect that acoustic guitar bracing has in shaping the tone of a guitar, so perhaps it's time to delve a little deeper and assess the role of the individual braces.

It's well acknowledged that the 'X-brace' guitar tops brought to the market at the start of the 20th century revolutionised the acoustic guitar. Most notably they did this by allowing the instrument to accommodate steel strings, enhancing the guitar's sonic potential in the process. And it is this design that persists today.

At the centre of the soundboard, a pair of braces are notched out and cross over one another to form a 'lap' join. This creates the structural backbone of the top, with the intersection of the two braces sitting just in front of the bridge to provide stiffness just where it's needed. Without this key component, guitar tops tend to buckle catastrophically over time, resulting in a concave top and unplayably high strings.

## Less Is More

Secondary to the primary X-brace are what I call the 'tone bars', the most important of which occupy the space between the bridge and the end-pin. This area covers some valuable tone-producing real estate, and these braces can be viewed as a sort of EQ: structurally less important than the 'X' but essential nonetheless in sculpting the harmonic profile of your guitar.

Removing material (less stiffness) tends to bring the bass frequencies to the fore, while adding wood (more stiffness) helps the higher-frequency overtones shine through. Some makers get the best of both worlds with a second X-brace, with the intersection adding another area of high stiffness without bulking things out.

Another way to achieve this is by adding an asymmetrical slant to a pair of struts. I'm a fan of asymmetrical bracing as irregular shapes often lend a more favourable tone, discouraging the reinforcement of specific frequencies, resulting in a more balanced sound. The way a piano is set up is an example of this: when you strike a single key you might be hitting up to three strings at once, but they will not be tuned in perfect unison – to do so produces a harsh, bright sound. Whereas a carefully calibrated trio of strings, which are 'imperfectly' tuned, result in a smooth tone.

The small 'finger' braces that radiate from the X-braces are more inconsequential. However, I discovered by keeping them fairly small (about 6mm in height) I was more pleased with the sound. Sometimes you just stumble upon something that works and stick with it! It emphasises the notion that many acoustic guitars are overbuilt – from this starting point any opportunity to remove wood tends to improve the sound, provided it is stable and won't collapse. With this in mind, the ends of each brace are scalloped according to each maker's style, releasing the soundboard at the stiffest areas where the soundboard is fixed to the sides, allowing it to vibrate more effortlessly.

It's been enjoyable to discuss bracing with my students this month, as next week will see several rims receiving their tops, effectively entombing the bracing within the soundbox. After all, it's the unseen influence of these humble strips of wood that truly defines how the guitar will be judged when the maker is stringing it up for the first time. **G**



Alex creates his X-braces with smaller 'fingers' to help deliver a more pleasing tone



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# Telecaster Transformation

Before you buy a reissue, it's worth considering a 'player's grade' vintage guitar. **Jamie Dickson** explains why in part one of his Tele story...

**M**ost readers will be familiar with the term 'player's grade vintage', but for those who aren't, it describes vintage guitars that have been modded or messed about with over the years, losing some of their originality in the process and usually commanding lower price tags as a result. Vintage collectors generally don't want such 'corrupted' instruments, but for everyday guitarists who appreciate the vibe of a nice old electric and don't mind the odd non-original part, they can prove a bargain.

A guitar I bought a few years ago was a pretty typical example of a 'player's grade' vintage guitar. During a visit to World Guitars in Stonehouse, Gloucestershire, I noticed a natural-finish early 70s Tele Custom that

imbued with a vintage aura that really felt good – from the honey-toned lacquer on the headstock to the subtle figure in the maple of the neck. Julian said Jeff hadn't left much in the way of info about his project behind, but he thought the original parts of the guitar dated to the early 70s. He named a fair price that took into account the non-original condition of the Tele and, very pleased with my find, I walked out of the shop with it half an hour later.

## Natural Progression

I played the guitar a lot over the following months and it gave me no reason to regret my decision. However, one thing did niggle at me. The Warmoth body was light – probably much lighter than the original – and nicely crafted. But its squeaky clean, high-gloss, natural poly finish seemed out of whack with the gently aged vintage hardware and neck. It was just too glossy and fresh, like a new pair of trainers; I could easily imagine how much better it could look with a well-chosen, subtly aged refinish.

The idea took root in my brain and grew over time until eventually I mentioned it to Scott Cameron of Golden Era Aged Guitars. He used to do refinishes, but now devotes his time to making some of the most exacting aged guitar bodies you'll find anywhere. To my surprise, he offered to do a one-off refin on my Tele, provided we could do something interesting with it – and with his eye for vintage detail I didn't doubt the result would be something special. I duly sent off the Tele, with a promise from Scott that although the refinish might take him a little while to get round to (the aged bodies he sells are much in demand), he'd make it worth the effort.

While all that was being set into motion, I sat down with *Guitarist* contributor and vintage restoration expert Huw Price to talk over some common quandaries that

"Should you try to keep as much as possible original on these vintage guitars – or grant yourself a free hand to make further mods?"

1. The early 70s Tele Custom Jamie picked up for a song from World Guitars had one glaring non-original part: the body

2. The high-gloss natural finish the guitar came with was nice enough – but there was room for major improvement, once in the Golden Era's workshop

stuck out among the gleaming new PRS, Tom Anderson and Nik Huber guitars on sale. The neck and hardware looked original; the body seemed a bit newer. The ever-helpful Julian explained that this guitar had been a bit of a personal project of the store's late, much-missed owner Jeff Pumfrett. He'd built it from original Tele Custom parts, including the sought-after original Wide Range humbucker, but the body was a later Warmoth replacement. 'Bitsa' guitars of this type aren't normally within the store's remit, but it seemed too nice a guitar just to gather dust, Julian said, so he put it up for sale.

Intrigued, I gave it a try through a Matchless head in the shop's demo room and found it to be a really enjoyable guitar – toothy in tone, very playable and







can come up with player's grade vintage guitars. Given that these guitars are usually non-original to some degree, should you try to keep as much as possible original – or grant yourself a free hand to make further mods? In the case of my Tele, the fact the body was completely non-original meant I wouldn't be committing sacrilege if I wanted to refinish it. But even so, would it be most fitting to refinish it in original 70s Fender livery? Or should I treat it like a Custom Shop order, choosing whatever finish took my fancy?

Thrashing out the pros and cons of the above, Huw and I talked about some of the mods that can be made to vintage guitars without raising eyebrows or slashing the guitar's value. In recent years, Huw said, the vintage guitar market seemed to be becoming more sensible and pragmatic about small repairs that a guitar might naturally go through in its lifetime or which made it functionally playable as an instrument again.

He highlighted the example of refretting an old guitar: "I think frets are really important to look at [as an example of this kind of issue] because if they're worn out, they can hurt playability, and I think there's a widespread acceptance now that if a guitar can be improved and enjoyed more as a player's instrument by changing the frets, then it's acceptable. Having said that, ever since Stevie Ray Vaughan became known for using massive jumbo frets, a lot of Strat players of that ilk have tended to follow his example. But as a Strat enthusiast, when I see jumbo frets on a vintage Strat, it just sets my teeth on edge [laughs]. To me, it just feels all wrong. But I get what I get why people want to do it and, ultimately, it's absolutely fine."

It's arguably trickier to decide when to upgrade and when to leave well alone when it comes to electronics. Just like frets, electronics can become worn out. But they can also be seen as part of the sonic 'soul' of an old guitar and thus careful consideration is prudent before making changes, Huw said, citing the example of potentiometers such as volume and tone controls.

"I think pots are an interesting one because they do wear out and you can have all kinds of problems with them. And sometimes a squirt of DeoxIT is not going to

be enough of a solution," Huw observed. "In which case, if you want to use the instrument, you've got to change the pots. But that has a knock-on effect: one of the things that people look for in vintage guitars is original solder joints – particularly with Fenders – to establish that the guitar has never been taken apart [to be resprayed]. So as soon as you break those solder joints, it can cast doubt over the originality of the finish. That's something you need to consider quite carefully. Another thing is that the pots are a way of corroborating the date of the guitar because of the stamped codes on the casing of the pot. Another reason why people want to keep them."

### It's Only Natural

My Tele has a non-original body, which actually made some decisions easy. If the body had been completely original, finish and all, I probably wouldn't be thinking of a refin. But since the body is a respectable but otherwise unremarkable Warmoth replacement, it's fair game for a new paint job. But which colour? Part of me wanted to play it straight and ask Scott for one of his beautiful three-tone sunburst finishes to match the early 70s neck and hardware. But how far up the road of period-correctness did I really want to go? After all, I'm not going to have him finish it in thick 70s poly just to be accurate.

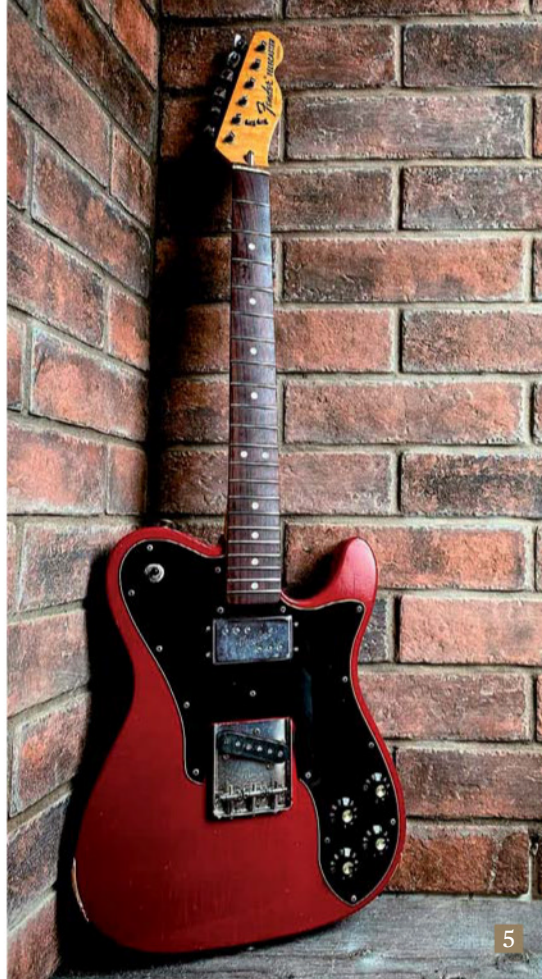
As a complete contrast, I could go all-out and request one of Scott's dazzling sparkle finishes, which, with an aged nitro topcoat, would look really vibey and vintage. As a stage guitar, that would be great – but would the eye tire of all that bling after playing the guitar day in, day out at home? So how about a solid colour instead? It might be quite cool to try a Fender finish that was never offered in the Tele Custom range back in the 70s, such as Ocean Turquoise or Dakota Red. Coming to no firm conclusions, I decided to sleep on it for a few days.

One day, after cruising the internet for ideas, I hit upon what I thought might be the ideal solution: a heavily aged natural nitro finish, complete with play-wear and honeyed, aged tints. Yes, the guitar already had a natural finish, but it was so squeaky clean, glass-clear and ageless that I worried it might never acquire an interesting character of its own. Having Scott apply a

3. Beneath the tough-as-nails natural finish was a decent Warmoth body in lightweight ash

4. A refinished Tele Custom spotted on the internet gave Scott Cameron the inspiration to paint the Tele in one of Fender's less-known 50s finishes, a rich Mandan Red

5. Not yet fully assembled but roughly fitted together, the Tele already looks great. In this later pic you can see some ageing effects Scott applied - more of which next month



more attractive, natural nitro finish might complete the guitar's journey towards vibey 70s styling, even if it lacked the wow factor of something brighter and bolder.

Mustering my resolve I tell Scott this is what I want. He reports that he'll soon be ready to begin spraying, adding that he had a devil of a job removing the thick high-gloss finish that was on the Warmoth body, which stubbornly resisted to the bitter end. But as the day approached when Scott indicated he would lay new lacquer on the body, I suddenly got cold feet. Wasn't it a bit boring to take a natural finish guitar and just have a better-looking natural finish put on it? So I came up with a more unusual solution instead: I decided I'd ask Scott to surprise me. He'd already heard plenty about what I like and don't like, and he has great taste in finishes so it was less of a gamble than it might first seem. Initially cautious, Scott quickly warmed to the idea. "Okay, you're on," he said.

The days ticked by and I grew curiouser and curiouser about the fate of my Tele. Would it simply arrive at my door one day, unannounced? The answer was not long in coming – Scott fired over a DM on Facebook one morning. Would I like to see what colour he chose? After a bit of deliberation, I write back, "Yeah, go on then." Moments later an image appears of the Tele clad in a lustrous, vibrant red – it looks absolutely stunning and Scott reveals it to be Mandan Red, one of the various reds Fender trialled in the 50s before standardising on Fiesta and Dakota. I'm thrilled – it's one of the loveliest hues Fender ever painted a guitar in, a touch deeper and richer than Dakota. Scott says he got the idea from a refin'd 70s Tele Custom he found online, painted in just such a colour and looking stunning.

For the moment, my guitar is still freshly sprayed, but Scott promises he has more surprises in store when he comes to the ageing process, as part of which he promises to bring a fictional 'backstory' for the guitar to life using all the nuance and craft of his trade. Tune in next month to find out how it all turned out... **G**

## THREE TO GET READY

Modded Tele Custom and Deluxes to try



### Squier Classic Vibe '70s Telecaster Custom £409

Inexpensive and classic, the Squier '70s Tele Custom subtly updates the original, adding an "easy-playing [241mm] 9.5-inch radius fingerboard and narrow-tall frets" to the equation to suit post-Millennial playing styles, plus Fender-designed Alnico pickups, though you won't get the really authentic CuNiFe magnet Wide Ranges found on the new American Vintage II guitars. No matter, at this price it's a steal.



### Fender Kingfish Telecaster Deluxe £2,249

Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram is one of the most powerfully expressive blues guitarists out there and his new signature model Telecaster really spices up the twin-humbucker Tele Deluxe concept with a V-profile neck, a brace of custom humbuckers voiced for hot blues, and a stunning 'Mississippi Night' metallic finish. Could this be the 'Fender for Gibson lovers' you've been looking for?



### Fender American Original '70s Telecaster Custom £1,999

It may be drawn from the outgoing American Original range that American Vintage II has come to replace, but there's a really decent Tele Custom in this now-superseded line that you should check out. It features a authentic CuNiFe-magnet Wide Range humbucker at the neck, just like the new AV II models as well as a nitro finish and vintage hardware – an easy playing, subtly tweaked take on the original.



# REAL PLUGIN



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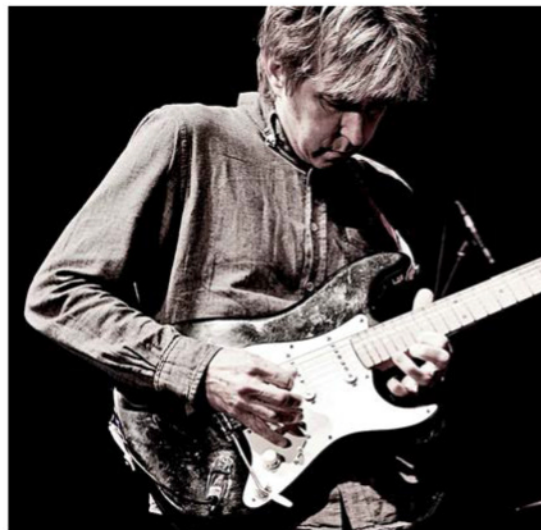
# Ambient Chords

This issue **Richard Barrett** looks to Eric Johnson's ambient clean tones and discusses his use of 'shell' voicing

**E**ric Johnson is renowned for his immaculate tones and phrasing, ranging between roaring Marshall/Fuzzface lead sounds and super-clean ambient chords. The latter is what we'll be looking at here. Before we get into the voicings themselves, it's worth pointing out that, like Eric, I've used an (approx. 400ms) echo with a touch of modulation – it's an integral part of the sound, rather than just an enhancement. You can also get a bit of movement in the echo with some subtle whammy bar, for a light chorusing and a bigger sense of space.

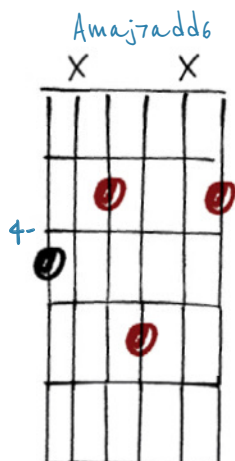
Some of these chords are what might be described as a 'shell' voicing, meaning that the chord is stripped to the bare minimum amount of notes to get the harmony across. Counterintuitively, this can make for a bigger, more open sound compared with big block chords – especially when adding the echo we've already talked about. These are all played fingerstyle, though a hybrid of pick and fingers is also possible. **G**

Eric Johnson manages to achieve expansive sounds from bare-bones chords



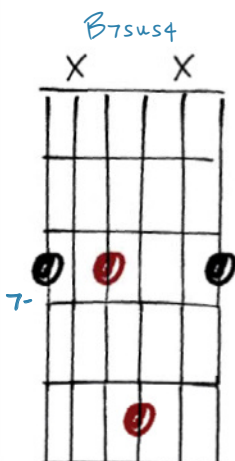
## Example 1

Perhaps the most concise way to name this chord is Amaj7add6. Both E strings are used, with the root on the bottom and the maj7th (G#) on top. The second and fifth strings are carefully muted, leaving the 6th and major 3rd on the D and G strings respectively.



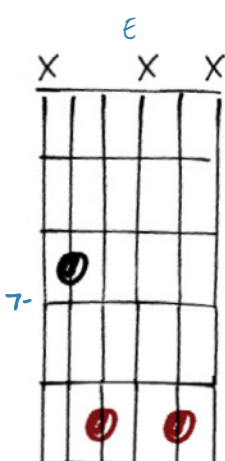
## Example 2

Using exactly the same string grouping as Example 1 for the picking hand, this B7sus4 omits the 5th (F#). Adding this back in really highlights the difference the 'shell' approach can make, giving more ambiguity and interest. As with Example 1, the fifth and second strings are muted/not played. This takes a while to master but is easier than it first seems.



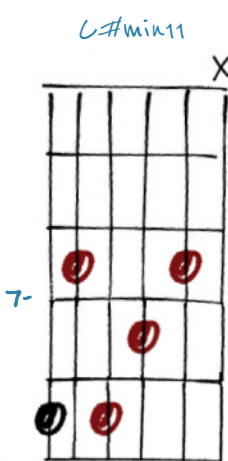
## Example 3

In context with the other chords, this can sound similarly exotic, but is in fact a plain old E major using the minimalist shell approach described above. Both E strings are carefully muted and the G string avoided at all costs! For a minor version, simply play a G natural on the B string instead of the G#.



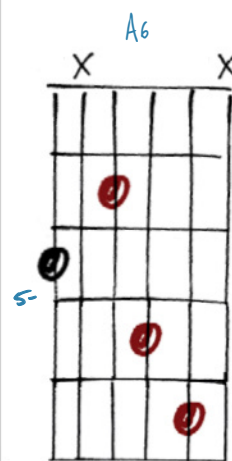
## Example 4

This C#min11 could be played using all six strings, but we don't really need the extra root note and it sounds nice with the F# on top. Having no muted or skipped strings makes it easier to glide across with a pick or thumb stroke, depending on the tone you want to achieve.

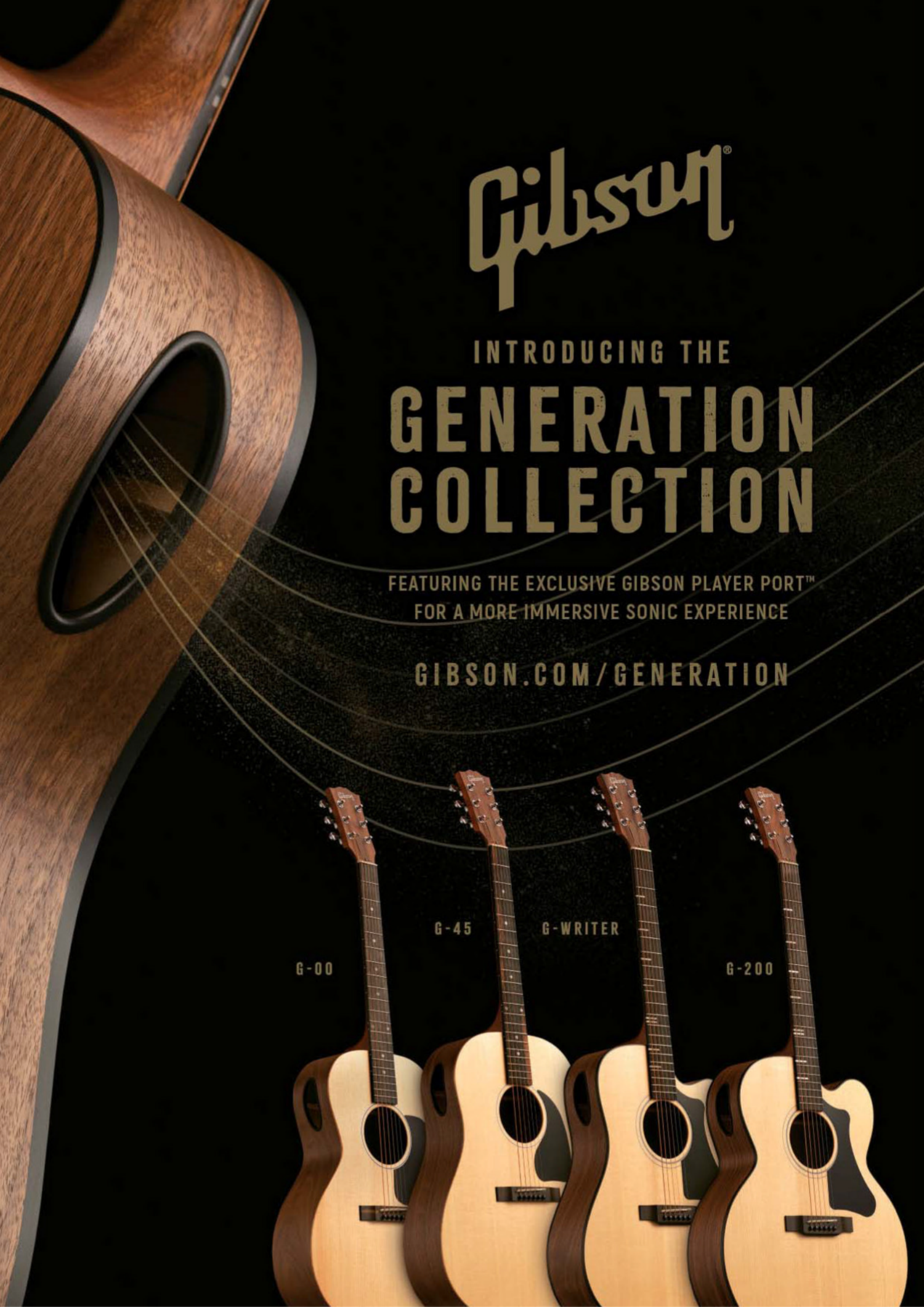


## Example 5

Theoretically speaking, this is a simple A6 chord, though the missing 5th (E) and the doubled 6th (F#) plus the echo give this a much more spacious feel. We're avoiding the fifth and first strings, so like all these examples it can be played in any position of the fretboard.







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# Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.  
Drop us a line at [guitarist@futurenet.com](mailto:guitarist@futurenet.com)



## STAR LETTER

### RHYME & REASON

As I work towards my Grade 7 guitar exams, I started thinking about all of the difficulties to overcome in order to truly master this magnificent instrument. So I decided to write this silly poem about some of the questions I've asked myself as I progress. I thought I'd share it with other readers to see if they can relate to any of it.

#### Perhaps I'll Be A Star

One of these days, I'm gonna learn to play this guitar  
One day in the future, hopefully not too far.

Should I play an arpeggio, or strum it real sweet  
I hesitate, lose my cool, and now I've missed the beat  
Is it Bm, or is that a C?  
I just can't play a riff of this complexity.

Should I play it staccato, or let the notes ring?  
Turn down the volume, to stop it distorting  
Harmonic minors, a myriad of modes  
I can't take any more of this before my head explodes.

Should I use pedals, or just a natural sound  
Play sweet and softly, or chords I can pound?  
Alternate picking, or chicken style  
To master this will surely take a while.

Should I use reverb, or try some tremolo?  
It's all so confusing, how will I ever know?  
Major, minor or flat 5, 7?  
If I ever master this I'll be in heaven.

Should I play pop, rock? It's all hard for me  
Written on staves of increasing difficulty  
I could try blues, or give jazz a try  
I'll be struggling with this, until the day I die.

Maybe I should play the drums instead  
Smack out rhythms, running through my head  
Or maybe I give in and learn the tambourine  
But playing *Kumbaya*, just isn't quite my scene.

One of these days, I'm gonna learn to play this guitar  
If I practice enough, perhaps I'll be a star.

I may have a go at turning this into a song in the future – or if any of our other readers fancied giving it a try, I'd love to hear what they come up with.

**David Hammerton, via email**

Bravo, David – you're already a bard so mastering your lute (sic) shouldn't be too much trouble! In recognition of your eloquence, we award you this month's Star Letter prize of a superb set of Vox headphones. Anyone else got any self-penned poetry (or doggerel) about playing guitar that might raise a smile? Send 'em in and we'll print the best.

### SIXTH GEAR?

Here is a poser for you. In March 2019, I went into Fair Deal Music in Birmingham and saw a Brad Paisley signature Tele on the wall and asked to have a closer look and a try-out. I have always loved his playing and liked the guitar, except for the 'over the top' relicing, especially where the forearm goes. However, as you can see from my photo [above], there is no relicing here; there is some minor cracking on the neck and some relicing of hardware. So I bought it, and asked the shop assistant how come it had no bare wood on the body and was told that was how it came into the shop from Fender. I subsequently emailed Fender Customer Relations and they were stumped and had never known anything like this. If you catch it in a certain light, you can see where the paint was sanded back then the finish was reapplied. Whether the relicing wasn't up to standard and went back to the paintshop to be re-reliced, nobody seems to know. All I know is I have a unique Tele and I love it. I certainly wouldn't have bought a 'proper' one as the relicing is over the top for my taste. Thanks for looking, now if only I can find the same thing with his new black version!

**Kevin Palmer, via email**

Thanks for sharing your one-off Fender, Kevin. What could be cooler than a factory anomaly like that? Especially when it's more in line with your personal tastes than the original. Back in the 50s, there were plenty of one-offs and puzzling, unique guitars coming out of the Fender factory before production processes settled into a well-established groove. But, in a way, it's much rarer to see a guitar like this slip the net in the era of carefully controlled factory production, CNC machines and so on. We hope you enjoy playing it for many years to come. Who knows, maybe Brad will put in a good word if he hears about this and have Fender send you a black one!

### TRAVELLING LIGHT

Dear *Guitarist*, you're absolutely right about lightweight gear (see *Raising The Tone*, issue 489)! We are sick of lugging massively heavy amps and cabs around. My Mesa days are over and the 4x12 Marshall



Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!  
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Mike Chandler no longer has to shoulder the weight of a hefty amp, thanks to Victory's V4 The Jack

went years ago. Consequently, I bought a [Victory] V4 The Jack Amp recently with a lovely camera-type case. I also bought a Barefaced cabinet, with a 12-inch Celestion Creamback in it, last year and I use it with the lightweight V4. People actually think you're playing through the PA with these cabs, they certainly have an omnidirectional delivery. Game-changers.

**Mike Chandler, via email**

Thanks for sending in your powerful but highly portable rig, Mike. We bet it sounds great and that walk out to the car after the gig must seem a whole lot shorter now!

### NOT FAST - AND FURIOUS

Okay, I'm just going to come out and say it. I can't shred. Just can't do it. I am going to meetings of NSA (Non-Shredders Anonymous) where I can expose my shame in group therapy.

**Alan Roughley (age 75), via email**

Well, Alan, as we've said many times in the *Guitarist* office, if you want your playing to be loved by millions... play slower. David Gilmour, Eric Clapton and Mark Knopfler didn't notably do a whole lot of shredding, but people remember their solo note for note. Don't get us wrong, we love a bit of dazzling virtuosity, too, but you haven't 'failed' at guitar if you never manage to alternate-pick with crisp articulation at 140bpm. For those who do want to progress further towards shredding, however, it's possible that quite basic elements of your technique – right down to how you grasp the pick – are holding you back from unlocking more speed and fluency. If that interests you, check out German shredder Bernth on his YouTube channel, who has plenty of friendly and really detailed advice on how to unlock your inner Paul Gilbert ([www.youtube.com/user/Bernthguitar](http://www.youtube.com/user/Bernthguitar)).

### TREASURE TROVE

I've just been enjoying the Feedback section of issue 489, which arrived recently, and although Tony Lloyd's Korean Squier Strat was most certainly an enviable bargain, I think I can beat it... I suffer from severe GAS, which leads me to constantly check various online sales sites. One Friday afternoon a few years ago I checked one such site on my return home from work and was excited to see an advert that had only been live for around 15 minutes offering two guitars for £150. There was only one low-quality photo of a Strat and an acoustic, but I could just make out 'Fender' on the headstock of the Strat. So I contacted the seller immediately and was soon on my way to them.

On arrival I discovered that it was indeed a Fender Strat, made in Japan, accompanied by a lovely



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Kudos to David Elliott who got his late-80s made-in-Japan Strat (top) for a song, along with some other bargain gear that he sold to pay for this brand-new Les Paul Future Tribute Goldtop. Skills!

Takamine electro-acoustic. I was told there was also a pedal included in the price, which turned out to be a TC Electronic Flashback X4. I was then offered a fairly worn Marshall AS50D amp for a further £30. Needless to say, I soon parted with £180 and left with the two guitars, pedal and amp.

Further investigation of the Strat when I got it home (accompanied by some ferocious Googling) yielded the discovery that I had acquired a late-80s E-Series Japanese Fender Strat. It needed sorting out as someone had attempted to rectify a neck relief issue by shimming the neck instead of adjusting the truss rod, but once that was dealt with it was in fine working order.

As if this wasn't enough, two days later I happened to be browsing the GAK website and discovered they had a few bargains courtesy of a Gibson warehouse clearance. I couldn't miss this opportunity so I decided to sell some of the newly acquired gear to help fund a brand-new Gibson Les Paul Future Tribute Goldtop for the giveaway price of £449! I sold the Takamine and amp to a friend for £250, and the Flashback for £80 online, which by my reckoning left me with a semi-collectible Strat and a brand-new Les Paul for a net £300. Further research showed my E-Series had the inferior Japanese electronics, as opposed to those built with US pickups sent to Japan when the US Fender plants closed, so that is now sporting a set of Bare Knuckle Old Guard pickups, which sound great.

**David Elliott, via email**

Blimey, David. That really takes the cake. Reminds us of those guys who start out selling a paperclip on eBay and end up with a house 25 transactions later! Anyone think they can beat our new king of thrift, David, with a story of an even better bargain? Send them in and we'll print the best.

## WHAT'S NEW?

Having bought issue 489, I looked at the new offerings by PRS, including the very costly Joe Walsh model, one Les Paul/Tele cross from PJD, which didn't quite hit the mark for me, another look at the Holy Grails feature. Aside from a few tweaks, guitars and guitarists are pretty conservative, there is little to be truly excited about. Take the front cover – a 50s Tele! Seen it. Does anyone else feel this way? They should do, especially manufacturers. It's not good enough. However good the PRS Silver Sky may sound, it's still a Strat copy. Where are the new designs and alternative materials?

**Victor Lewis, via email**

## REQUESTS...

**Want to see something in the mag?  
Tell us at [guitarist@futurenet.com](mailto:guitarist@futurenet.com)**

**Amping Up:** I started playing during the pandemic and have been an eager learner and reader of the magazine since. I am trying to save up some money for a 'proper' amp. I really would appreciate – and I am sure other readers would, too – a buyer's guide for amps like the supplement for guitars in issue 490. Or an extended feature on the best tube and modelling amps.

**Stephan Weber, via email**

**Thanks Stephan, great idea – sounds like something we'll have to add to our Buyer's Guide in future.**

**While we're on the subject, what did the rest of you readers think of the recent Buyer's Guide? Is there anything you want to see more or less of next time we do it? And is there anything extra you'd like to see in it next time around that didn't feature in it recently? Let us know and we'll build it into future endeavours...**

Hi Victor, thanks for your thought-provoking perspective. Certainly, if we never moved on from the 50s, then we'd deserve the stagnation that would inevitably result. But we're a little more upbeat about innovation in guitar design than that. You mention the PJDs being not to your taste, but Leigh Dovey and co also make the pickup-swapping Cream T instruments that offer a genuinely useful way to circumvent the soldering iron when swapping pickups – a mechanism devised by Swiss firm Relish, whose guitars are even more forward-looking, with very few visual references to the past. Both companies' instruments have been reviewed and featured many times in these pages. Likewise, the Manson Oryx VI, which was reviewed in issue 488, owes very little to designs from the past being created from the ground up as a pure performance machine for the contemporary guitarist, much like the .strandberg\* headless, fan-fret design we reviewed a few issues back.

So the good news, then, is that innovation is very much a part of the current guitar-making scene and we do feature it in *Guitarist* – long may that continue. How about the rest of you readers? Do you want to see more progressive and radical guitar designs in the mag? Drop us a line on the address below to let us know and we'll take it from there...

**Your letters** to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at [guitarist@futurenet.com](mailto:guitarist@futurenet.com)



# GOOD TO GO

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# GREG LEISZ

The mournful sound of pedal steel is among the most evocative in the guitar world – but notoriously hard to master. Fresh from album sessions with Mark Knopfler, steel guitar master Greg Leisz tells us what it takes...

Words Chris Eaton

Off to one side of the star, somewhat anonymous to the fans – such is the role of a sideman. Some so-called sidemen are impossible to ignore, however, as their touch and style on the guitar shines out of every recording they play on. Greg Leisz is such a one: rightly regarded as one of the world's finest pedal steel players, he's just as at home tearing it up on lap steel, Dobro, Weissenborn, mandolin and regular guitar. When we caught up with him via Zoom at his Californian home he had recently returned from London after recording with Mark Knopfler for the latter's next album, which has yet to be announced but which may see the light of day next year.

#### How did the sessions with Mark Knopfler go?

"I was honoured that Mark reached out to have me join in with his long-time band. Some of them have been playing together for nearly 30 years. They have a great chemistry, which can only come from being together that long. Those guys hadn't seen each other for over two years because of the pandemic, so it was like a reunion for them; they were very happy and Mark's studio is fantastic. It was a really good experience.

"Mark wants everybody to come up with a part that they feel will suit the song. He's a very good leader and totally involved. I played whatever instrument was right for the song. I didn't really play any electric guitars, but I did use acoustic guitars, pedal steel, lap steel, Weissenborn, National resonator and also mandolin on a couple of songs. It's all about being creative in the studio.

"Mark's thing is having everybody playing at once. He doesn't tell people what to play, but as you're working on a song the direction of the track or what you play tends to change as you try to figure things out. Everybody's basically trying to solve the same problem: 'What's the right thing for the song?' Sometimes it's discussing what's happening before you even play it and then the

first time you run through the song it ends up being *the* take. Other times you work on a song for a long time and then decide it needs a different drum set or bass part or whatever. But the way Mark's studio is arranged makes it very convenient to start working on something immediately: everything is set up ready to go all the time, which is really conducive to creativity and spontaneity."

#### You've played for everyone from Jackson Browne to k.d. lang – how did you work your way up to those big gigs?

"Back in the day it was about developing relationships with other people based on musical compatibility. You might play a gig in a bar and meet somebody and write your number on a piece of paper. Some players went as far as making business cards, but I never did that. It took a long time, it didn't happen overnight, but it gradually built to a point where I was almost too busy and so there really wasn't much motivation for more self-promotion. But I do admire people who use social media because it's time-consuming and takes a lot of work and, of course, it's necessary nowadays."

#### Playing in Jackson Browne's band, you're walking in the footsteps of another iconic steel guitar player, David Lindley...

"Everybody thinks of David Lindley when they think about Jackson Browne and steel guitar. Those early records had 'that' sound, which was inexplicably connected to Jackson. During the 70s, David was a pretty constant member of his band from the very beginning, but it's been almost 40 years since Lindley toured with him in his full band and yet people still say, 'Hey where's David Lindley?'"

"For about 20 years Mark Goldenberg was Jackson's guitarist, he played all the Lindley stuff with bottleneck slide. The only song where I quote what Lindley played is the beginning of the solo on *Running On*







*"I learnt to improvise on pedal steel [by] playing in a live band situation with musicians who were better than me"*





*Empty* because it's so iconic. Lindley's solos were all improvised, they weren't composed solos. It's more about the way you play instead of the actual notes, that's what Jackson is looking for I think.

"I started playing with Jackson semi-regularly in 2014, but we've known each other for longer than that. I worked a lot on his album *Standing In The Breach* and the following tour."

**Being able to offer a selection of tones and textures from different instruments is very useful, but which guitar style has been most in demand?**

"That's a really hard question to answer. I think the [pedal] steel guitar tends to be a way in because not as many people play it. I get asked to record a lot with pedal steel and lap steel and acoustic slide. Then again, on Jackson Browne's newest record [*Downhill From Everywhere*] it's mostly regular guitar I played. With k.d. lang I ended up playing a lot of different instruments, but I don't think I would've started working with her if she hadn't been looking for pedal steel to add to her band. I did a tour with Eric Clapton and I played mandolin on some songs and everything else was pedal steel or Dobro or lap steel, playing the famous guitar melody from *Wonderful Tonight* on pedal steel, which was an unexpected thing that happened when Eric was trying to figure out what I should play in his songs. I really enjoyed that time with him.

*"The instrument draws you into music theory... The [original makers] were trailblazers and they understood chord theory"*

"I try to do some research before I start working with an artist, so I don't take too many instruments that won't be required. Sometimes I don't need to take a pedal steel, but most of the time I do take one. I spend half my life changing strings! So I take advantage of tours that have guitar techs. I'll get them to change all my strings at the end of a tour, so I don't have to for a while after that. However, my hands don't sweat at all when I play, so I'm pretty easy on strings. They don't need changing for every gig, unless the intonation is suffering because of the strings."

**The pedal steel is a complex instrument, with a tone bar, knee levers and foot pedals all altering pitch in different ways. How do you even find a way in, let alone master it?**

"The instrument draws you into music theory. As you're learning what the pedals do to your chord changes you start to understand why the guys who built the original instruments created them that way. These guys were trailblazers of the pedal steel and they understood chord theory. Open tunings, which were developed from Hawaiian music and the lap steel, influenced the design and led to the pedals being used to access different open tunings on one neck, without having to retune or pick up a different lap steel. The pedals weren't originally put there to bend strings and create an effect, which everybody recognises these days – that was just a happy coincidence.



PHOTO BY ERIKA GOLDING/GETTY IMAGES

"The early lap steel players would slant the bar to reach two- or three-note chord inversions that were not possible with a straight bar, so the original lap steel players were already thinking about chord construction before the pedals were invented. It's a fascinating thing.

"When I started learning pedal steel there was a very limited amount of instructional material around at that time. It really didn't speak to anything in particular, like how to sound like this player or that player. It was simply explaining how the instrument worked. So you had to find your own way and apply the instrument to the kind of music you wanted to play. But that has now changed. There's a huge online network of players you can ask for advice. A huge amount of resources, which provide shortcuts for learning.

"What helped me a lot was getting in situations where you could play with other people. Not sitting in your room playing to a track – that's no substitute for being in a band. You have to learn how to create your parts and improvise. Being able to improvise on pedal steel the way you can on any other instrument, not just doing a few tricks on it, and the way I learnt to do that was playing in a live band situation and playing with musicians who were better than me.

"Nowadays, I can't imagine there are a lot of people wanting to get a job in a country and western band. They're probably looking to use the pedal steel in a different framework. But you have to learn to play the instrument somehow and being able to overplay where it's okay to do that is important. And that's one of the advantages of country music – it allows you to play more than maybe it's appropriate to play and get all that out your system. The pedal steel doesn't do well if it's overplayed in the real world, people start to shut you down pretty quick because it tends to get in the way of a lot of other things." **G**

**1.** On stage here as part of Jackson Browne's band, Greg Leisz has performed with a huge list of artists, including Mark Knopfler, Eric Clapton, Joni Mitchell, k.d. lang, Bill Frisell, Bruce Springsteen, John Mayer, Daft Punk, Bon Iver and The Smashing Pumpkins

**2.** The pedal steel is a complex instrument to learn, and Greg suggests doing so in an environment where it's acceptable to "overplay", such as country music: "It allows you to play more than maybe it's appropriate to play and get all that out your system," he says









# JOHN SHANKS

Grammy Award-winning producer John Shanks has worked with the A-list of pop and rock, both in the studio and on the world's biggest stages. He joins us from Los Angeles to share the story of his guitar journey so far – plus part of his enviable gear collection

Words Robin Davey Photography Eleanor Jane

John Shanks is in his Los Angeles studio, and behind him the walls are adorned with rows of gold and platinum records that bear his name. As a producer he has consistently been making hit records for decades, emboldened by a finely developed curiosity for sound that started when he was a kid. He recalls listening to his parents' Beatles records: "I remember finding the Balance knob and realising, almost suddenly, the drums were on one side, or the harmonies were on the other side, listening to parts more individually that made up the whole."

Growing up in New York City it was hard to escape the barrage of influences that were all around. "There was always music playing out of cars, taxis, the park," he says. "Then there would be my parents' parties, these elaborate parties. You're hearing Cole Porter and Gershwin and classical music."

However, it was the guitar that really drew him into the world of music. "I was playing tennis rackets and anything when I was in first grade and saw the attention that I got pretending to be John Lennon or McCartney." This eventually led to Shanks picking up his sister's acoustic, which sat imposingly in a back room of the house.

**At what point did that acoustic guitar become an electric?**

"I had this acoustic probably from 10 to about 13 and then I wanted a Strat. My mom was great. She was like, 'Save up your money and then wherever you get to, I'll match you.' She was awesome. So I worked summer jobs. I did whatever – walking dogs, working at a pharmacy, delivering medicine to old ladies. I went to this camp and I worked in the kitchen, scrubbing pots and cleaning tables and mopping floors. But I had this guitar in my head, this shining light on the hill. I remember, I think it

1. Built in 1958, this Goldtop directly preceded the introduction of the 'Burst-finish Les Paul Standard later that year
2. Extensive playwear on the fretboard hints at the busy working life this superb Goldtop has had in Shanks' hands. He says it's the guitar he'd be most reluctant to part with
3. The beautiful engraving on the face of this Zemaitis guitar was done by Danny O'Brien who learned his trade with historic firearm maker James Purdey & Sons
4. The ornately engraved truss-rod cover proclaims who the guitar's original and well-known owner was
5. The 'diamond cluster' inlays at the 12th fret are characteristic of many Zemaitis electrics
6. Even the controls are embellished with fine engraving work

was eighth grade, seventh grade, somewhere in there. I got to about 150, 160 bucks, and a new Stratocaster in '75 was \$237 with the case, I still remember the price. We took a cab there. We made it right before closing and it was hanging on the wall. Then I proceeded to strip it. Four days later, I had sandpaper and I was taking all the goopy 70s lacquer off my Strat. I had that Strat until I was 26 and it got stolen. I eventually put the humbucker in it. I put a Floyd Rose on it at some point. But that guitar got me here talking to you."

#### Who were some of your early influences?

"I wanted to play guitar like Jimmy Page or Beck or Peter Frampton or Gilmour. It was that great time of guitar players and the English blues guys and giving back to us what we had forsaken. But also, we had a lot of blues records in our house, so I understood the three Kings. It was Albert first and then BB and then Freddie, and you start to see the connection. But I think, for me, AM radio really taught me about songwriting and songs back when I was a kid. It was Sly And The Family Stone to Elton John, or John Lennon to Stevie Wonder."

#### At what point did you start playing with other people?

"I think, initially, it was some friends from school. In New York, there are these rehearsal rooms and you would all chip in \$10 or \$15, anything you could get your hands on. Then we'd get a couple of hours in these

*"Growing up in New York there was always music playing out of cars, taxis, the park... my parents' elaborate parties"*

rooms and you started learning how to play, and not just [playing] to records. There's a difference between playing to a record and moving the needle and trying to learn the lick, and then playing with other musicians...

"But let me backtrack a moment. I got a four-track recorder, a Tascam 144 – and that changed my life in a sense because I learned how to layer parts. I could double this, I could pan it. I started to learn how to build a chorus. I started to learn counterpoint just on my own.

"Then somehow I started playing on really, really early hip-hop sessions in New York. A guy named D.S.T., we did *Rockit* with Herbie Hancock. I think I played on the Afrika Bambaataa record, maybe a couple of powerchords. You show up with your guitar and a Rockman and you were good to go. That was the start. I didn't really know what I was doing. Then when I was 16, my family moved to California and it was in my



### '58 GOLDTOP GIBSON LES PAUL

"That Goldtop, believe it or not, that might be the best guitar I own – in the sense that it's perfectly balanced, the weight and the neck, the neck is a perfect size. It's not super, super chunky like some '58s. You have to understand that halfway through '58 is when they went to the sunburst, so I'm sure if you pull the gold off that thing, there might be flame underneath, who knows. But there's something about that era. '57 and '58. When the gold fades it just has such a beautiful lustre and they're beautiful looking. It's perfectly balanced where the neck pickup is weaker than the bridge pickup. You go to the neck pickup and it's really bell-like and chime-y. It has that classic kind of Dickey Betts, Allman Brothers-y thing, which is a lot of tone, a lot of cut and character, not muddy. And when you roll down, it gets really clean.

"I would love to take that guitar on the road, but I won't do it. I've often thought about it because I play this game where I think, 'Oh I should sell some guitars. I've got to sell guitars. Which ones would go first?' And I'll tell you that Goldtop would be one of the last."





## ZEMAITIS CUSTOM

"That guitar is a Zemaitis, made in England by Tony Zemaitis. Guys like Ronnie Wood played one. I think Dave Edmunds played one, but then I saw that James Honeyman-Scott, who was the lead guitar player in The Pretenders, played one – and I'm a huge Pretenders fan. I love Chrissie Hynde and I love James Honeyman-Scott's guitar playing... huge fan. I was lucky enough to meet Peggy Sue Honeyman-Scott, who was married to James. At the time she was selling some of his guitars as she was putting a kid through college, so I was a caretaker for about four of his guitars for a couple years and had the privilege of bringing them back to life, cleaning them up, getting tech to properly work on them. They were pretty beat up. Then she sold some of them through an auction. This was the last one and I just couldn't let that one go."





7. Though the nitro clearcoat has yellowed over time, turning this guitar a greenish hue, Shanks says it was originally Firemist Silver back in 1963

8. Fender's transitional logo, with a gold outline round a blockier font, looks great on the headstock, which bears the same finish as the guitar's body

9. The Jaguar has a unique, wiry voice – due in part to its unique pickup design with its surrounding 'claw'

10. John's evocative and time-darkened Esquire is a composite of two guitars that were converted to Telecaster spec with the addition of a neck pickup

11. Few guitars acquire this much patina over time

12. Shanks says that Fenders originally built as Esquires had a punchier bridge pickup than those originally made as standard Telecasters

junior year of high school and that's when my whole life was just trying to get into a band.

"In high school I met this singer and she was like, 'Oh, you should play with my sister. She's an artist,' and turned out it was Teena Marie who was on Motown. I auditioned for her band and got the gig. We opened for Prince. It was crazy. It was like that period when *Controversy* first came out. Not that I'm a huge funk guitar player, but it really taught me how to play in a band and sit in a pocket and understand that aspect of playing. But I was still a kid. You think it's about the money and it wasn't. It was just really about the experience and getting to play with really great musicians. Each time I thought, 'This is it. This could be the break,' and they're not. It's just part of the journey. It's just part of your path."

**What was the path that took you from being a session guitarist around town to a Grammy Award-winning record producer?**

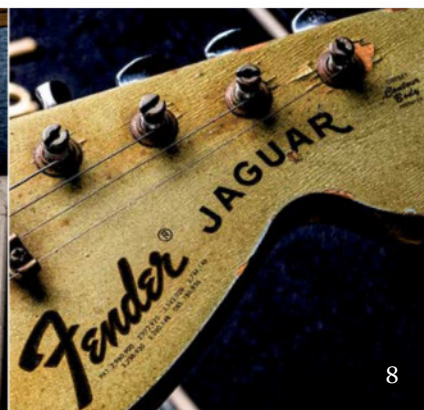
"I was playing in this band, it was called The Uninvited. We were playing clubs around town and this young gal kept coming to see us play and I heard she was putting together a band. She came up to me one night after we played a show and she's like, 'I'm playing The Roxy tomorrow night, I think you should come see me.' And I'm like, 'Oh yeah, okay.' It was Melissa Etheridge and this is her early, early days and she had just moved to

*"[My break producing for Melissa Etheridge] wasn't because I imposed my ego on her, it was a collaborative journey"*

LA, so I went to see her play. I was so blown away by her stage presence and her songwriting and her strength as a performer and as a writer. I was like, 'Well, so much for my dreams.' My dream in that moment was like, 'I want to stand next to her. I want to be in her band.' And that was probably a really smart thought because our lives have intertwined since the 80s and she's been a force for me forever.

"I started playing as just her guitar player for many years and I got the opportunity to tour the world with her – starting off with her in a van and then a shitty bus. Then we got a better bus, and then I left the band for a little bit and grew up a bit, came back to LA and got my shit together and started working again, and then started doing more sessions.

"Then I was playing somewhere and I bumped into Melissa and she asked me to come back and join the



## '63 FENDER JAGUAR

"That's a '63 Jaguar. I think it might have been Firemist Silver – it's a silver colour and it's faded into a green. I don't know if I'd use it on the road, but I certainly use it in the studio. It's a great guitar. They're very unique."

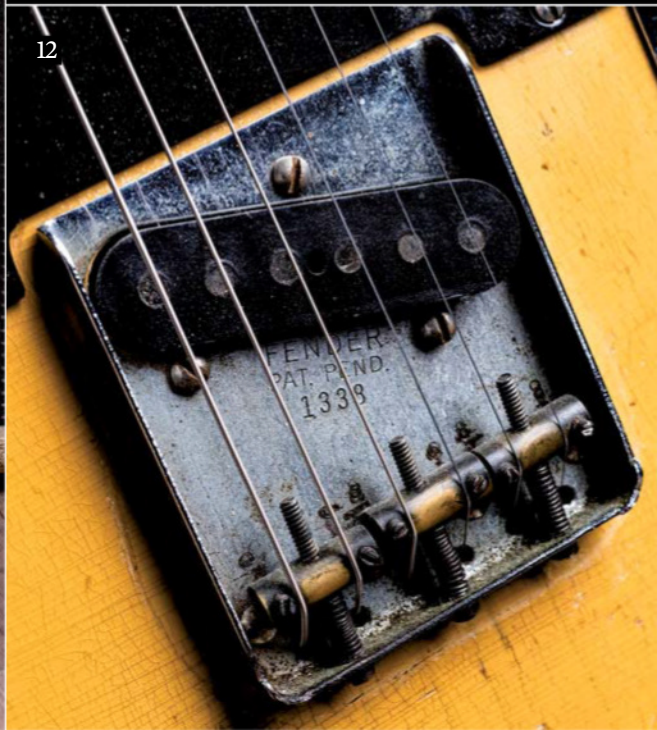






## '52 FENDER ESQUIRE

"I took the body for that neck and then had this other '52 and I just swapped it – and that's the one I play on the road. It's got the chunkier neck, but I made them both into Teles, even though they say Esquire. I was in New York and got the privilege of checking out Keith Richards' guitar one day, and a lot of his Teles are Esquires. They were always like, 'Man, you can't beat that pickup,' because it's a little tougher. It's a little hotter because it was the only pickup – they wound them a little tougher. I acquired those maybe in the early 2000s. Obviously, the prices of these things have gone through the roof, but at the time this guitar was so beat up, I don't think I paid that much for it. But in order to make the ultimate one, I just combined the body and the necks, and that's what I play live with Bon Jovi. It's very Stones-y. It kind of has that thing."







13

## '64 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"That's a '64 Shoreline Gold Stratocaster. I bought it for \$3,000 from Albert [Molinaro] from Guitars R Us, which used to be on Sunset Boulevard across from Guitar Center. He was very kind to me because at the time I couldn't just give him three grand. He literally let me pay him 200 bucks a week for months. I played that guitar at Woodstock '94. That's one of the guitars I won't sell; it means so much to me. Supposedly it belonged to Brian Setzer at one time, and then I think it went to one of the gals in The Go-Go's, and then it went to me. That's what I heard... you never know when you hear these stories."

## GIBSON ES-355

"This belonged to Johnny Marr from The Smiths, and there's pictures of him all over the internet playing it. What's interesting about the Johnny Marr one is he changed the pickups and put in Seymour Duncan pickups that he can split the coils, so he can get that real kind of jangly, single-coil Smith's thing, or you can make it a humbucker. So when you pull up on the volume knobs, they split the coils on the pickups. That was a guitar I said yes to without even playing it because I knew the guitar and what it was."

14





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*“Because of [Grammy-winning Breakdown] I got my credentials stamped. And since that day, I’ve never stopped working.”*

•

band again. She’s like, ‘I’ve been through all these guitar players... It’s time for you to come home.’ That was the beginning of her ascension.

“I was still just the guitar player, but it put me in a room with Pino Palladino and Hugh Pageant, who was the producer, and Kenny Aronoff. When I had the opportunity to be in a room with not just musician heroes or peers but producers that I respected, you start to see what qualities they have that I admire, and you go, ‘Well, this guy’s so good with singers, the way he treats them, the way he gets the best out of them, how he pushes them, how he really challenges the band as far as tempo, arrangement, getting the best version of the song down.’ That was massive for me because if you’re there and you’re just another schlub on the bus, so to speak, or a cog in the wheel, your job as a player is to make the song sound as great as it can be.

“I was very cognisant of never crossing that boundary with Melissa. I never went to her and said, ‘I write songs, too,’ or ‘You should hear my demos.’ So when we were working on a record and the person who was producing the record wasn’t going well, Pino Palladino came up to me and he goes, ‘Listen, man. By the end of this day you’re going to be producing this record, so get ready.’ And I was like, ‘There is no way I’m going to produce this record.’ He’s like, ‘She loves you, it’s your time. You’re ready. You guys work well together and I’ve been in this position. I’m just further down the road than you and I’ve seen this happen. And you would be the right guy.’ And that opportunity happened.

“It wasn’t because I imposed my ego on her; it was a collaborative journey we went on. And that record, I made sure I wasn’t the only guitar player. I brought in Greg Leisz to play what he does and he’s my friend. I brought in Jon Brion, a guitar player I really loved. And we had all these amazing drummers – from Abe [Laboriel Jr] to [Jim] Keltner to [Steve] Ferrone, to Matt Chamberlain, to Kenny Aronoff to Vinny [Colaiuta]. It was amazing. And that record, [Breakdown, 1999], got nominated for a number of Grammys. [Angels Would Fall] was a song that she and I had written together that was nominated for Best Rock Song.

“All of a sudden, because of this record, it was like I got my credentials stamped – to them, to the A&R community, to the managers, to the record companies.

13. John’s Shoreline Gold Strat has a storied past and may have belonged to Brian Setzer

14. Black 355s are rare birds to begin with, but this one’s association with Johnny Marr made it irresistible to Shanks

15. The gold hardware on this 355 makes it rarer still and its mono wiring caught the eye of Joe Bonamassa

16. As highlighted in last month’s Holy Grail issue, the difference of appearance between age-yellowed Pelham Blue and true Inverness Green is very slight



15

## ‘60 GIBSON ES-355

“These Gibsons are super rare. It’s an ES-355 from 1960. From what I’ve been told, it’s the only 355 from 1960. One of one. Really rare. This guitar is a ‘60 gold parts mono’, meaning it doesn’t have the tone switches. I’ve been told by Joe Bonamassa that if I sell it, I have to sell it to him.”

## 60s GIBSON SG

“There’s something about that colour green for me when it fades. I mean, it’s blue, but when it fades it gets greener. The slight amber of the lacquer gets yellower, which therefore makes the paint look green. It has a Vibrola, I think they are called. Everyone thinks Vibrolas don’t really stay in tune. But if you use them in a subtle way, they do.”



16





## VEMURAM SHANKS ODS-1

"This is my favourite effects pedal. It's an overdrive pedal by a Japanese company that makes boutique guitar effects. I designed a few pedals with them [a range of fuzz boxes], but the last one we did was this overdrive pedal. It took us two and a half years to develop. It's not a super gainy pedal; it has a lot of transparency and a lot of clarity. *That Pedal Show* reviewed it and they gave it the best review. It was like I wrote the review! So everyone go on YouTube and just watch their review of that pedal. I sat there with my mouth open. They were so kind – I'm a fan of that show. My other favourite guitar pedal is an [Electro-Harmonix] Deluxe Memory Man."

17. It's unusual enough to find one Trini Lopez in a vintage collection, but Shanks is a big fan and has a pair, both in rarer finishes than usual

I was the same guy, but to them I guess I was worthy enough. And literally since that day, I've never stopped working. That was in the 90s."

**You've worked with Van Halen, Sheryl Crow, The Doobie Brothers, Miley Cyrus, The Goo Goo Dolls... But it was Bon Jovi that saw you come full circle and get back on the road as a member of the touring band. How did this come about?**

"Well, I didn't tour from basically 2000 till 2016. I just didn't want to go on the road. I was grateful to be writing and producing records, and I thought that's my life. I have two boys and it was important for me to be at

home. But I was always producing and writing with Jon and Richie on these Bon Jovi records – we've done eight or nine together.

"Then when Richie left the band, I played more guitar on *This House Is Not For Sale*. At the end of doing that record Jon and I, we're really close, he said, 'Listen, do you want to do the promo tour with us? You played a lot of these guitars, it'd be really good for you and Phil to work together. Can you do that?' It was not, 'Can you physically literally do it?', but can you be Ronnie Wood? You're not Keith Richards, you're not Richie. Can you be the other guy? It's the joke in the band. It's like, 'Oh it's Phil X and the other guy. I'm the other guy. And I was like, 'Yeah, I can...' I probably wouldn't have been able to do it when I was 20 or 23. I was really cocky and my ego wouldn't have let me do it. But I think as one gets older, hopefully humility kicks in and you have more maturity, and I was very grateful.

"So we did the promo tour and at the end of it he said to me, 'It's basically yours if you want it.' I actually called a couple friends of mine, artists, and I said, 'Is this a bad thing to do for my career? Whatever Grammy-winning blah, blah, blah, is this dumb?' And it's funny, independently they both said to me, 'You've been staring at a computer screen for 20 years, and I think it's time.' I realise it's a privilege, that I'm ready to go back and I want to play with the band." **G**

<https://johnshanks.com>



## GIBSON TRINI LOPEZ

"Believe it or not, that [blue] Trini Lopez I found on eBay in the early days of eBay, I saved it as a search. It was a dream guitar – 'Pelham Blue, Trini Lopez' – way before Dave Grohl got into them. I thought the headstock was really unique because it's more of a Firebird headstock, and then you have this crazy colour, and the Patent Sticker pickups, which I'm a big fan of – they're super shiny and bell-like and cut through in a really musical way. So I saved it as a search and it turned out that the guy that sold it to me had had the guitar since he bought it.

"The black one's pretty rare, too. I know Gibson has just reissued a black Trini Lopez [Historic Reissue Standard in 2020] – and Phil X has one that he plays live. But this one's from the 60s."



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# SUZANNE VEGA

The New York singer-songwriter's albums have sold in their millions yet her music has always remained subtle, intelligent and unique. As Vega prepares to return to the UK with an album of songs from the Big Apple, we join her to talk guitars and songcraft

Words Jamie Dickson Portrait S. Holz

**B**ob Dylan and Joni Mitchell are rightly thought of as poet laureates of rock for the 60s and 70s. One could argue, with justice, that Suzanne Vega was cut from the same brilliant cloth when she emerged onto the 1980s folk scene. Her songs had a poise and honesty that cut through the day-glo bombast of the 80s charts and pierced people's hearts, most notably with her tragic ballad of child abuse, *Luka*, but also with introspective songs such as *Marlene On The Wall* and *Tom's Diner*. Though she found fame as a modern folk artist, becoming the first female headliner at Glastonbury Festival in 1989, she resisted typecasting, exploring electronica in songs such as 1992's *Blood Makes Noise* and carving her own unique path onwards. But she has always returned to what she calls "her only instrument", the guitar.

With a UK tour of her 2020 album, *An Evening Of New York Songs And Stories*, coming in spring next year, we join Suzanne to reflect on her early years with the Greenwich Village scene, the art of songwriting, and the hand-built Czech guitars that have become her standby for writing and performing.

**Your new album was recorded live in the heart of New York, in the same city where you first started performing as a teenager. What was the folk scene like then?**

•  
*"I just always felt compelled to go on the stage and sing the songs myself. And I always felt I had something to say"*  
•

"Well, they were very small audiences, let's put it that way. I mean, in the very beginning, in the coffee houses, it was great. The audiences *really* listened to the songs. And this was in the 70s – it was more difficult when I started to try to get gigs, at say, The Bitter End, which I was never successful at. I tried getting a show there for two years and never got one. Eventually, it occurred to me to try a different club, which is when I went over to Folk City and found a really great group of people that were very encouraging.

"The difficult part was actually getting on the stage and learning how to perform in front of a crowd without feeling shy or inhibited or angry. Sometimes I felt judged. And that would annoy me. So I had to really learn how to put all of that aside and learn how to really give a show."

**When did you realise you might actually have something, as a songwriter, that spoke to people?**

"Well, the second song I wrote was called *The Silver Lady*. And it's kind of a long narrative ballad. I had just turned 15 years old when I wrote that and I remember thinking, 'I think I've got something here.' I had been trying to write songs since I was 11 and I had written my first song when I was 14, which was okay, it was sort of a country western song. But with *The Silver Lady* I thought I really had something good. It took me a couple of years to work up my courage to go out and sing it, though. Moving from songwriting to performing was a big leap for me. I liked the privacy of my room and I liked the songwriting process, but learning how to be a performer was a whole other thing and that was more difficult. Not because of the audiences but because I felt that I was faking it, you know – I was suddenly trying to be pretty and nice instead of telling the truth in a song. So I had to work that out.

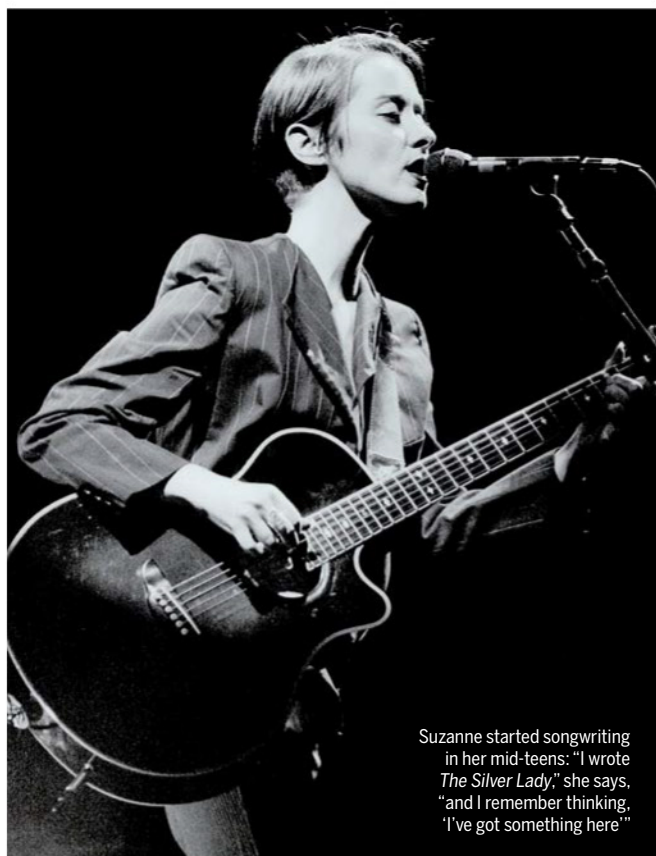
"I just always felt compelled to go on the stage and sing the songs myself. And I always felt I had something to say. And even in the auditions where I was rejected there would be one or two people who had been listening. Very often someone would come up and say, 'I really liked your lyrics, they really speak to me.' And that was enough to keep me going till the next audition."





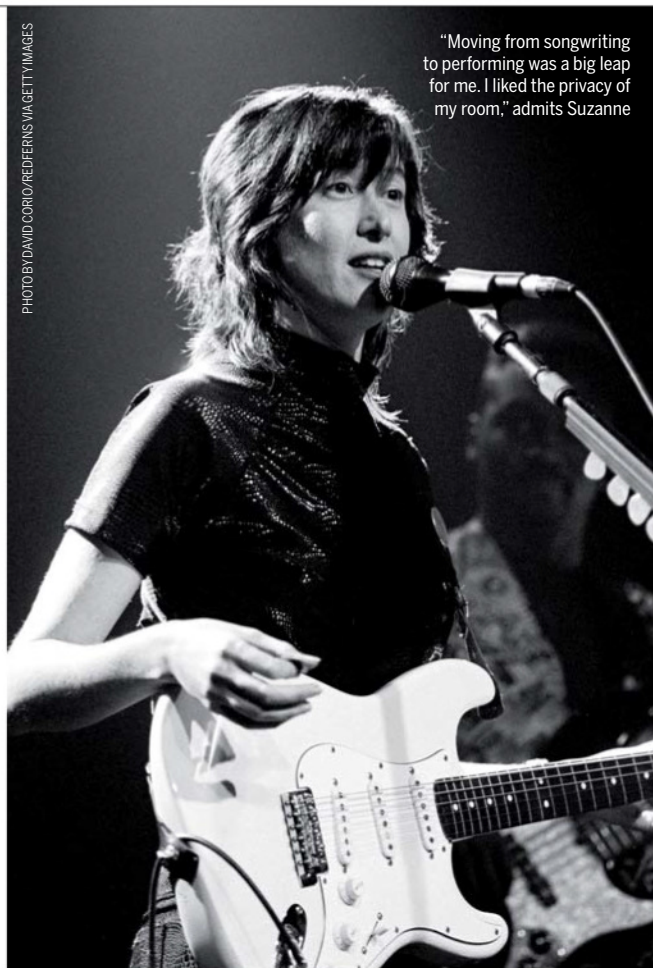


PHOTO BY FRANK GUNN/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES



Suzanne started songwriting in her mid-teens: "I wrote *The Silver Lady*," she says, "and I remember thinking, 'I've got something here'"

PHOTO BY DAVID CORO/REDFERNS VIA GETTY IMAGES



"Moving from songwriting to performing was a big leap for me. I liked the privacy of my room," admits Suzanne

**Your fingerpicking style is elegant and always serves the songs well – how did you develop it, early on?**

"I had taken one or two lessons. We had a boarder in our house because, from time to time, we would rent out a room if we were running short of cash. And this woman taught me a couple of lessons on the guitar, as I recall. It was some kind of picking thing that she taught me – and how to hammer on and how to pull off. But that seemed really obvious to me, so I'm not sure if I had already been doing that. And the rest of the time, I just made up things that made sense to me, you know, every other string down and then two strings up – that kind of thing.

"I would do whatever it took to get some kind of rhythm going. Sometimes picking three strings at once and filling them in. Now I do it pretty unconsciously, so I don't really know what I'm doing, but I just sort of do it. But, back then, I remember sitting patiently and working out for hours where to put my fingers and how to how to pluck the strings so they made a pattern and that there was a flow."

**What guitar did you use when you were starting out?**

"It was my father's guitar – he had a nylon-string classical guitar. He used to play blues songs, mostly by Lead Belly, and some folk songs, and he'd written a song or two himself. The guitar was just sort of propped

*"Things took off really quickly. I went from being a receptionist to selling a million albums in about two years"*

up in the kitchen in the corner. And it was nice, so I played that nylon-string way until my early 20s. Eventually, I got my own guitar, which was a steel-string Guild, an enormous, gigantic beast of a guitar, and I bought that from my boyfriend for \$200 back then. And so that was my first guitar."

**At what point did you start to believe you would have a career in playing guitar and writing songs?**

"I started writing songs when I was 14, but I worked a day job right up until I got my record deal 10 years later – and I was very loath to let it go. By that time, I had a manager, Ron Fierstein, and he told me, 'Look, you've got to quit your day job – you're getting a lot of gigs, you're getting good reviews, you're on the verge of getting a record deal. You've got to quit.' And I fought him. I said, 'This is a good job for

me.' I think I was making \$15,000 a year at that point, which was enough to live on. But I didn't want to let it go and so he lent me \$1,000, which during that time was more money than I'd ever seen in one place. I remember thinking, 'How will I ever pay him back? It's just such a huge amount of money.' But within three months, I had the record deal.

"I probably had some kind of advance and things went very quickly from there. I had that development deal and then I got a great review in *The New York Times* and then there was a bidding war. And the next thing I knew I had an actual [full, major-label] deal. Then the album came out and it sold a million copies. So I mean, things took off really quickly. I went from being a receptionist to selling a million albums in about two years. So that was the moment when Ron came to me and said, 'You've got to quit your day job.' And I reluctantly did so, because then I thought, 'Okay, I can make a living.'"

**Getting a major deal like that must have felt like you'd really arrived – but did the stakes being raised make it harder to write?**

"Well, you hit the nail on the head – it also made me anxious. I remember being in the studio and coming in with a guitar and doing versions of the songs for the first album, feeling nervous. Because on the one hand, I was excited, I was happy that I had





the deal, but I also knew I was in it for the long run and I didn't want this to be a thing where I just burned out.

"I felt a lot of responsibility and I felt nervous doing *Solitude Standing*. There was a lot of pressure and I found the songwriting difficult for that second album. So it was both – I was both excited and nervous, but my manager Ron would be complaining. He complained to my boyfriend, 'Why isn't she happier? This is going so great.' But I felt the pressure of it and I felt the responsibility of it."

**The new live album kicks off with *Marlene On The Wall*, which remains one of your finest songs. What's the story behind it?**

"Well, I had a poster – it was a picture actually, a photograph of Marlene Dietrich on the wall of my tiny little room. And sometimes as a kid I used to pretend to see things from different perspectives and to pretend to be different people. I was thinking, 'If Marlene really had eyes that could see – if she was actually a sentient being, instead of just a picture on my wall – what advice would she give me and what was to be seen?' You know, I sort of had

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*"I felt a lot of  
responsibility and  
I felt nervous doing  
'Solitude Standing' – there  
was a lot of pressure"*

•

aimed to be like her, I liked her glamour and her toughness and her humour. So she was kind of an ideal, and I felt that I was very far from that ideal.

"Those were my thoughts at that moment in time, and in the beginning I thought, 'Oh, this song is too private, no-one will understand what I'm talking about here.' I tried to get rid of it, but my guitar player at the time, John Gordon, told me that we needed an upbeat, major-key song to start the setlist and so I was not going to throw it away. And in the long run, he was right – it's been a great show opener ever since."

**A lot of people know you best for *Luka*. It's a desperately sad song – were you surprised it became such an enduring hit for you?**

"Yes, it did surprise me. I mean, it took a while between the time that I wrote it and the time it was released – it was about two



or three years. But my manager saw the potential in it right away. It was really Ron Fierstein who said, 'I think that could be a hit.' I couldn't believe what he was saying, you know, because most people when they heard it in its acoustic version, they looked sad and they didn't seem to like it. Nobody really asked for it and it seemed to be a song that was slightly embarrassing to certain audiences. But once it was produced with its radio-friendly clothing *Luka* became an immediate hit the minute it went to radio, and it was a hit all over the world. I realised then how universal a situation it was. Whereas I did not realise that when I wrote it."

**Do you embrace writing about a difficult subject matter in your songs or do you hesitate before tackling it?**

"Both. I'm always nervous about it. But I sometimes feel compelled to do it. The people who have influenced me, like Lou Reed or Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen, never shied away from difficult subjects. They told the truth in their songs, and even Paul Simon... you know, there's a truthfulness about what they think and what they say. And that's what makes it powerful. So, yeah, I got a lot of letters

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*"I had a Fairlight  
[sampling synthesiser]  
and was hoping to be like  
Kate Bush. That didn't  
work out very well"*

•

at the time saying, 'Why did you write this? You wrote this all wrong...' or people complaining: 'We didn't want to hear about child abuse at the breakfast table,' because they would play it during the drive time. And so people would complain, but, you know, I stick by my guns – I felt I had a right to write it and people responded, millions of people."

**What's your method for deciding if a song you're writing is working out or not?**

"I guess my rule of thumb from myself is: 'Is the metre good and are the lines true? Does it say what I wanted to say?' And if all three of those things work, then I figure, okay, at least technically it's up on its feet. Then I play it for someone else, anybody else – it doesn't matter who, for a small audience or one other person – and I wait



The acoustic guitar embodies Suzanne's music: "I love the sound of it. I love playing it. I love the look of it. I love everything about it"

PHOTOS BY EHUD LAZIN

to see the response that I get. And even then, sometimes there have been songs I've written and put on albums, and then decided later they were no good and they were some kind of failed experiment. So then I don't go back and I don't play those again.

"But then there are the core songs that people do love and do know, or they come to know. And so that becomes the backbone of the body of work. But there's always your own internal things that say, 'Yeah, this is good, this really says what I wanted to say.' And then there were other songs where I wasn't sure, like with *Marlene*, for example – there were a lot of things I had stuck together. I wasn't sure if the premise of the song was sound. But nobody seemed to care about that [laughs]. You know, I thought there were too many metaphors, and nobody's gonna know what I'm talking about. But it didn't seem to matter at all. Whereas something like *The Queen And The Soldier* – I thought of it as a good solid narrative ballad. But a lot of other people were really knocked out by it."

**What guitars do you tend to pick up the most these days?**

"Well, [guitarist] Gerry Leonard had gotten in touch with the Furch company, they're a family-run company out of Prague, out of the Czech Republic, and they do beautiful work. And they make beautiful guitars with

beautiful inlay and gorgeous woods. And you can plug them in and they still have a lovely warm, full-bodied acoustic sound. So that's what I use all the time.

"I still have all my other ones – I still have a couple of Guilds, and at the very beginning I had a couple of Yamahas. The other really nice one I bought for myself was a Martin from the 1940s. And that's a very special one."

**What does the guitar mean to you, in terms of your life in music?**

"Starting out – and even now – the guitar is my only instrument. I've tried playing other instruments, I've tried to learn the piano. At one point, I had a Fairlight [sampling synthesiser] and was hoping to be more like Peter Gabriel or Kate Bush. And that didn't work out very well.

"But I love the acoustic guitar, I always have. I love the sound of it. I love playing it. I love the look of it. I love everything about it. And I taught myself how to fingerpick and I taught myself [theory] from books and from the random chords that I learned from my stepfather and from my uncle. So it's my main instrument, and it's what I really love." 



Vega's 2023 UK tour will feature songs from *An Evening Of New York Songs And Stories* (Amenuensis/Cooking Vinyl) [serious.org.uk/SuzanneVega](https://serious.org.uk/SuzanneVega)





# CAREY ELITE

Guitarist  
CHOICE

9/10

As reviewed in  
Guitarist Magazine  
October 2019!



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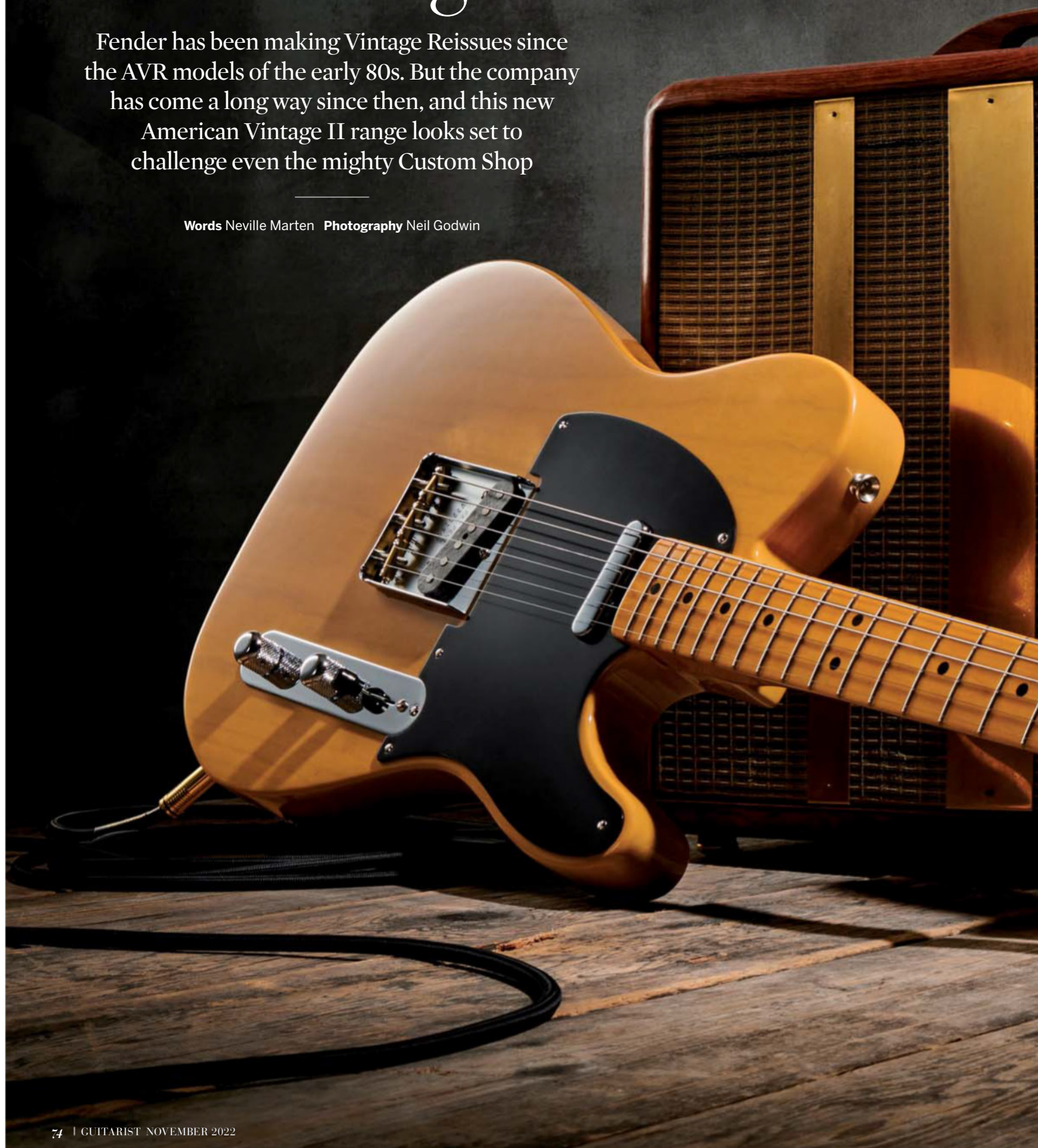


# The Second Coming

Fender has been making Vintage Reissues since the AVR models of the early 80s. But the company has come a long way since then, and this new American Vintage II range looks set to challenge even the mighty Custom Shop

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Words Neville Marten Photography Neil Godwin











## FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II '61 STRATOCASTER & '51 TELECASTER £2,049 & £2,099

CONTACT **Fender Musical Instruments EMEA** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB **www.fender.com**

### What You Need To Know

- 1 Another Strat, another Tele?**  
A question we've pondered many times. Fender, with great commercial wisdom, builds its models in different factories in the USA, Mexico and Asia to cater to all price points and tastes. These American Vintage Reissue II models are made in Corona, California, and they represent specific model years: the '51 Tele and '61 Strat we have on review are designed to look, feel and sound as close to the originals as possible.
- 2 Are there more models?**  
Yes (see our gallery on page 88 for a selection), including a fabulous-looking '66 Jazzmaster, a '73 Strat and three 70s Teles. Colours are limited to the classics – think two/three-tone sunburst, Daphne Blue, Olympic White, Fiesta Red, Lake Placid Blue and so on. Seriously cool!
- 3 No relics here?**  
No, for now at least, Fender is leaving that side of things in the hands of its Custom Shop: these are pristine. While plenty love the beaten-up look, many of us still prefer an instrument that's unsullied in any way.

**T**he vintage reissue side of Fender's product range has undergone all manner of changes since the first AVR models appeared back in the early 80s. Hence the bewildering name and line-up changes that have befallen this vital portion of Fender's income stream over the years. Its last iteration was the American Original series, which, rather than focus on specific years, amalgamated general aspects of a decade into each

model. There were some great instruments among the range, but Fender has recently been feeling it's time to go back to basics.

So 2022 sees the launch of some very interesting guitars that Fender has titled American Vintage II. It's a succinct but tastefully chosen range and includes most of the usual suspects, plus some that weren't even considered 'vintage' back in 1982, such as the 1975 and 1977 Telecaster Deluxe and Custom. Here, however,







1. The '61 American Vintage II Strat has a tone control on the bridge pickup, and sensibly comes with a five-way lever switch
2. You can see from where it ends behind the nut that this is a slab rosewood fingerboard. Classic tuners, a single string tree and spaghetti style Fender logo complete the picture
3. Build, fit and finish on both guitars is flawless, and you can see the beautifully finished narrow/tall fret ends on the 184mm (7.25-inch) radius fingerboard

we are looking at the true core of this new line-up, the '51 American Vintage II Telecaster and '61 Stratocaster.

If you recall that first Reissue range, you'll notice that what was the 1952 Tele is now the '51, and what was the 1962 Strat is now the '61. We asked Fender what changes between those years were noticeable enough to warrant the difference...

"Well, 1951 was the first time a Telecaster decal was applied to a Fender electric guitar, so what better year to kick off our new American Vintage II line?" we're told. "Also, in 1951 the Telecaster used slotted screws, which started changing in 1952 to Phillips head screws, eventually becoming all Phillips in '53. Also, the Fender headstock logo was less angled in '51; it was more angled in '50 and then again in '52. Also, the truss rod adjustment screw changed from slotted to Phillips in '51, which is what you see on our AV II '51."

And the Strat? "1961 was the year the Stratocaster sunburst finish changed to a more robust red and a blacker black. In 1961 the headstock decal showed two patent numbers, which changed to three

Each one is flawlessly put together, from the gloss finishing to the woodworking, neck-to-body fit and fretwork

## THE RIVALS

Squier has been knocking it out of the park recently, and the 40th Anniversary 'Vintage Edition' Strat and Tele (both £499) are cracking guitars at a fantastic price. A good place to start. Higher up the ladder are the Mexican-made Vintera. The '60s Strat has all the right vintage-like credentials, likewise the '50s Telecaster (both £919).

At the top of the pile is the Fender Custom Shop. The NOS Vintage 57 Strat (£3,859) features a two-piece, two-tone sunburst ash body, one-piece quarter-sawn maple neck with 21 Dunlop 6105 frets on a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fingerboard. Pickups are Custom Shop 57 Vintage with a tone control for the bridge unit, making this guitar the perfect modernised version of a classic. If you fancy a Tele with a tad more vibe, then the Custom Shop '52 Nocaster in Butterscotch with a black 'guard is it. In light relic form it looks used but cared for, has a two-piece ash body, maple neck with 241mm (9.5-inch) radius 'board, Custom Shop Blackguard Relic pickups and an 'ashtray' bridge with three compensated brass saddles. The absolute business!







4



6



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4. You can see from this detail shot how well everything is put together. And don't you just love that creamy nitrocellulose Olympic White finish?

5. The Strat's plastic parts, like pickup covers, knobs and switch tip, are all nicely aged. Note the vintage-style bridge with bent steel saddles and cold rolled steel block

6. Although the angle of this shot makes the frets look quite chunky, they are in fact classic-style tall and narrow. You can clearly see the slab rosewood 'board here

in '62. In 1961 it was also a slab rosewood 'board, which changed to a round lam in mid-'62. We like to think these and all changes are noteworthy and significant. We play a guitar or bass from a particular vintage year, get excited and celebrate it. We may switch it up in a year or two – there's something to honour in each year of every Fender model."

It seems, too, that Fender has sourced original guitars from each particular reissue year, and spec'd and voiced them accordingly. Fender again: "As you might imagine, we have a number of vintage Telecasters and Stratocasters at our disposal, some owned by Fender folks, some owned by friends and some in vintage shops we frequent around town. We always like to get our hands on as many samples of specified years as we can during development, so as to get a feel for how our prototypes compare."

From this you can guess that the two guitars' construction is as close to the

originals as modern production techniques, health and safety laws, availability of materials and so on, allows. And looking them over in fine detail reveals build quality that's as good, and probably better than ever. Each one is flawlessly put together, from the gloss finishing to the woodwork, neck-to-body fit, fretwork, setup and more.

Timber-wise, of course, it's ash for the Tele's body and alder for the Strat – with no obvious body join on either, although they are likely to be two-piece spreads – and while the Tele's neck is a hefty hunk of solid maple with a skunk stripe at the back, the Strat features a slab rosewood 'board on a slimmer neck, with no walnut fillet. Fender tells us that the necks and bodies of the 50s and 60s models are finished in nitrocellulose; the Tele's delightfully amber-toned Butterscotch Blonde and the Strat's pristine Olympic White bodies both look splendid, too.

For hardware it's classic stuff all the way: an 'ashtray'-style Tele bridge with three

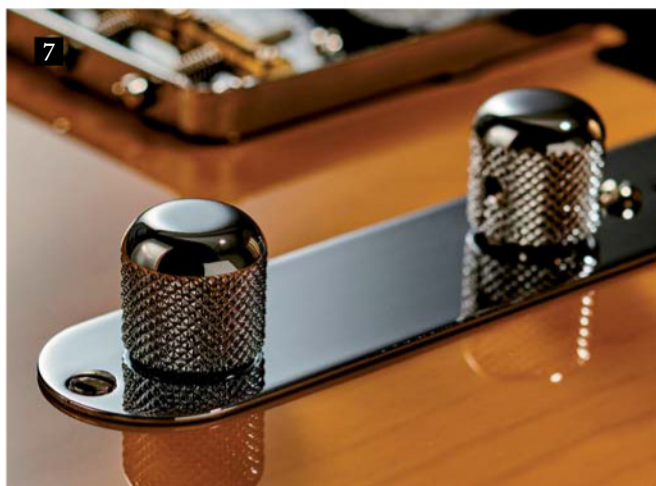
The sound you have in your head of every position on the Strat's five-way switch is exactly what you get



Although both guitars come with their respective bridge covers, they are almost never used. But here's the Strat's so you can see what Leo intended. Note the gorgeous Olympic White finish and mint pickguard, too







7. Everything about these guitars is shiny and new, including the posh chrome control plate housing the three-way switch and knurled volume and tone knobs

8. You can clearly see the greater camber of the Tele's 184mm (7.25-inch) radius neck here, and the 'black' guard from where it gains its nickname

9. Relic disapprovers will enjoy seeing the Tele's perfectly finished, tinted nitro lacquer on its headstock rear, and the lack of any dings, dents and checking. Shiny chrome tuners, too!

uncompensated brass saddles and serial number-stamped chrome base, while the Strat sports a vintage vibrato bridge with cold rolled steel block and Fender-stamped bent steel saddles. Tuners on both guitars are, of course, Kluson-style six-in-a-line, while a single 'butterfly' string tree holds down the top two strings on each.

As with the previous American Originals, we get Pure Vintage pickups and it seems they have been voiced somewhere between how they would have been on plugging in back in '51 or '61, and how magnet degaussing and general degradation would have made them sound after decades of general use and abuse.

### Feel & Sounds

With their narrow/tall frets and vintage-style 184mm (7.25-inch) radius fingerboards you might expect these guitars to feel anachronistic in these days of flatter 'boards and bigger frets. Not a bit of it! Try doing a three-hour set playing barre

chords and you'll thank Leo for his heavily cambered maple or rosewood chunks. And bending 'uphill' on smaller frets makes good sense, too, as there's more purchase for your finger to get behind the string. The larger U-shaped Tele neck and more slender C-shaped one on the Strat simply represent the right shape and size for each guitar: we certainly didn't feel weird swapping between them. In fact, one adapts without a second thought.

We had the luxury of trying out both guitars through a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Custom Shop hand-wired Blues Junior 'Woodie', so classic clean and also with a good degree of grunt from the BJ. As luck would have it, there was also a Custom Shop 1960 Relic Strat and 1952 Tele on hand for the 'almost' perfect comparison (no originals around that day).

Plugging first into the Deluxe with some dreamy Fender spring reverb, you get the real essence of what these guitars are about. Remember, Leo will have designed

Plugging in with some dreamy spring reverb, you get the essence of what these guitars are about



Even though it's a relatively simple design, there's real beauty in a Butterscotch Blonde Tele with tinted maple neck, black pickguard and shiny chrome parts (note the 'ashtray' in position, too)







10

them to sound as crystal clear as possible, since distortion was an unwanted intruder back then, plus amps were not as topky as they are today. The sound you have in your head of every position on the Strat's five-way switch (which back in 1961 would have been three-way, of course) is exactly what you get. Every guitar journo's tone cliché is here – pristine, chiming, bell-like, warm, woody – from the clear but mellow neck setting, to the almost vocal in-between positions, and the bright and articulate bridge pickup. Don't dismiss

Fender has nailed these two. Even the tiny concessions to modernity are what every player would do anyway

that middle pickup, either: it's one of the most musical sounds on the guitar. And if it's good enough for Clapton... Of course, the '61 Strat here has another weapon up its sleeve, which also wasn't available back then: a tone control for the bridge pickup, which adds a sweeter colour (or darker if you're driving it hard) overall.

Likewise the Tele. Clarity abounds, but there's real musicality from each setting of its three-way switch. True, there's bags of top-end from the bridge single coil, but it's never harsh, merely authoritative. And that beautifully flute-y neck pickup sounds pure and sweet. Again, don't ignore the switch's middle position, as 'both pickups on' is a fabulous tone that suits country, pop and even rock (Jimmy's *Stairway* solo, anyone?).

Through the Blues Junior with the master volume low and the gain at around 10, everything just fattens up. It's not distorted as such, but driving in a most musical way. Actually, it's here that both

guitars' bridge pickups love to be tamed with their respective tone controls. We've said it before, but add enough gain and knock the tones down to about 5, and you could almost be hearing a Gibson SG.

There's no space here to go into detail about how each guitar compared to its Custom Shop sibling, but generally the CS models had a tad more gain (they were designed as such) and surprisingly were a little brighter, too. To check them out, head over to the link above where you'll find our video demo, to see and hear all four guitars in action.

### Verdict

The success of these instruments is vital for Fender, since they are the essence of what each of its two most famous models represents. If you go back to the 50s and most of the 60s, a Strat was a Strat and a Tele a Tele. There weren't the dozens of alternatives we see today: a different colour was virtually all the choice you got.





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So what you see here really is 'The Strat' and 'The Tele'; all the others are variations on this theme.

You won't be surprised to learn, then, that we think Fender has absolutely nailed these two. Even the tiny concessions to modernity, such as the Strat's bridge tone control and five-way switch, are what every player would do anyway (so perhaps compensated saddles on the Tele might have been nice?). The guitars are built to supreme levels of craftsmanship; they play beautifully and sound amazing, just what a great Strat and Tele should be. What's more, their single-coil clarity will transcend to blues and rock guitar bliss through a decent pedalboard into a cleanish amp.

And, finally, if you're someone who has struggled with the whole 'bash 'em up a bit' relic thing, then these guitars are most definitely for you. They're pristine and gorgeous – and we'd challenge even the fabled Custom Shop to do it better. So top marks (literally!), Fender! **G**

**10.** The True Vintage Tele bridge pickup is rich and grunty, but brass saddles always add another degree of warmth to the guitar's tone

**11.** Finish on both neck and body almost glow beneath our photography lights, their respective ash and maple tints matching perfectly



## FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II '61 STRATOCASTER

**PRICE:** £2,049 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Double-cutaway electric

**BODY:** 2-piece alder

**NECK:** Maple, medium C profile, bolt-on

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/42mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood (slab-style), clay dots, 184mm (7.25") radius

**FRETS:** 21, 'vintage tall'

**HARDWARE:** Fender Pure Vintage vibrato with cold rolled steel block and 6x bent steel saddles; Fender Deluxe vintage-style tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 56mm

**ELECTRICS:** 3x Fender Pure Vintage 61 single coils; 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck and middle), tone 2 (bridge)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.65/8.04

**OPTIONS:** N/A

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The American Vintage II '57 Stratocaster (£2,099) comes with either ash or alder body, V-shaped maple neck and a trio of Pure Vintage 57 single coils. The AV II '73 Stratocaster (£2,149) has a large headstock, 'Bullet' truss rod adjuster, 3-bolt neck join, maple or 'round lam' rosewood 'board, and Pure Vintage 73 single coils

**LEFT-HANDERS:** AV II '57 Stratocaster LH (£2,049)

**FINISH:** Olympic White (as reviewed), Fiesta Red, 3-Color Sunburst – all gloss nitrocellulose

Guitarist  
GOLD

10/10

**PROS** The best vintage remodelling by Fender to date; period-correct features really do evoke those original groundbreaking designs; flawless construction, great sounds, good price and classic Strat playability

**CONS** There's really nothing we can fault here



## FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II '51 TELECASTER

**PRICE:** £2,099 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Single-cutaway electric

**BODY:** 2-piece ash

**NECK:** Maple, U-shaped profile, bolt-on

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/42mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, integral to neck, black dot inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius

**FRETS:** 21, 'vintage tall'

**HARDWARE:** Fender Pure Vintage 3-Saddle Tele bridge with brass barrel saddles; Fender Deluxe vintage-style tuners; chrome-plated control plate with knurled metal knobs

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 56mm

**ELECTRICS:** 2x Fender Pure Vintage 51 single coils; 3-way lever pickup selector, master volume and tone

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.35/7.365

**OPTIONS:** N/A

**RANGE OPTIONS:** AV II '63 Telecaster (£2,049) with alder body, C-shaped neck, 'round lam' rosewood 'board and Pure Vintage 63 Tele pickups. (See gallery on page 88)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** AV II '51 Telecaster LH (£2,099)

**FINISH:** Butterscotch Blonde (as reviewed) – all gloss nitrocellulose

Guitarist  
GOLD

10/10

**PROS** Authentic remake of the guitar's first year as 'Telecaster'; super-feeling chunky neck; great-sounding pickups; fair price; faultless build

**CONS** It'll be hard to resist, so prepare to be £2k poorer (plus another £40 or so for compensated saddles if that really bothers you!)



# Golden Years

As Fender returns to year-specific reissues once again, we ask Justin Norvell what's new when it comes to recreating the past

Words Jamie Dickson

**F**ender's American Vintage reissues (often abbreviated to AVR) have long enjoyed a great reputation as high-quality instruments that are as near as you can get to genuine vintage Fenders south of the Custom Shop. And with Custom Fenders now routinely costing over three grand, the idea of a really accurate reissue costing a fair chunk less is very tempting. Over the past few years, fans of vintage Fenders have had to content themselves with the American Original range, which aimed to provide a general flavour of 60s Strats and 50s Teles, for example, while offering flatter fingerboards and other modern conveniences. While those were very decent guitars, the launch of the American Vintage II range marks a return to stringent period-correct details and guitars based on those made in specific milestone years. This time around, however, Fender has brought some of its deeper cuts into the range – including 70s electrics and more, as executive vice president of products, Justin Norvell, explains.

## Why have you chosen to go back to year-specific reissues after the more generic American Original series?

"The American Vintage series had been around for so long [prior to American Original] and some of those models were so entrenched in the public consciousness – they'd been done for many, many years. But when we would talk about what years to do in the American Vintage range, we'd find we liked *this* spec from *this* year, but other details from another year. And it kind of led us down the path of what American Original became, which was kind of a 'greatest hits' package of each decade, which is cool. And I think a section of people really liked that and responded to it.

"But when someone is into vintage, one of the things they like is a guitar being a reissue of something [specific, not an amalgam of features] and there were definitely a lot of people asking for a return to year-specific models. Plus with that [American Original] as like a palate cleanser, it got really exciting to ask ourselves: 'If we started doing year models again, what would that be like?' Because we didn't want to just return to

just doing the '52 Teles and the '62 Strats – although the '57 Strat stays in there. It was more a case of, 'Well, what would be a different approach?' But we knew that 'different approach' couldn't just be picking arbitrary years that weren't the years we'd done before.

"So the R&D team and the Product Team, we just got talking about what we really liked. To me, the '62 Jazzmaster has been around forever, but the '66 model with the blocks and the painted headstock – that's also kind of a quintessential guitar that we hadn't done before in the series. If you look across the new models, there's round-lam fingerboards, there's slab fingerboards, there's the different dot-spacings, V-necks, C-necks...

"There's so much that's different throughout eras, so it's really fun to just pick [models] from some of those time periods. Because when you're talking about the Strat from '54 to '57, the amount of changes that went down... there's just so much movement in the line. And it's interesting

"Being able to now make those [historical models] where you're not rolling dice – that's really powerful"

because people will look at an old Tele or an old Strat and think that so little has changed, but underneath everything was *always* changing. So this is kind of our homage to these different periods of time and [it's about] making a really unique line-up of instruments and returning to that year-specific concept where every screw hole is located [precisely where it should be]. We're really excited to be bringing it back."

## What particular features inspired you to recreate the '51 Telecaster?

"The '52 Tele became kind of iconic, probably because that was the original one that we redid [when Fender first started making year-specific reissues], but actually '51 was the year that the 'Nocaster' became



Justin Norvell, Fender's executive vice president of products





1. The American Vintage II '73 Stratocaster features staggered polepieces and a Mocha finish option, both features indicative of its 'birth' year

2. 1951 marks the year that the model famously went from 'Nocaster' to Telecaster – giving players today a chance to own a real milestone in the shape's history

the Telecaster – so '51 is the original year and we just wanted to pay homage to that. There are tiny things – the dot spacing is a little bit different to the '52, for example – but it was really just kind of planting the flag at the beginning of the origin story of the model, not somewhere in the middle where things are humming.”

**You've also introduced some emphatically 70s models. It feels like post-CBS Fenders are getting a bit more love than they used to.**

“Yeah, so I would say it's probably been over a decade that they've gradually been reappraised in people's minds. There was a time where CBS-era instruments were just Kryptonite, all of them, but it turns out there are some good ones and there are some that are not so good and there was inconsistency, et cetera... we all know the story. But Fender brought Roger Rossmeisl in during the 70s and there was some really innovative stuff happening through the decade.

“We didn't include a Starcaster here or anything, but the CuNiFe [Wide Range] pickups were Seth Lover-designed and we have been able to have CuNiFe, which

was unavailable for quite a while, made again. So these are not what people used to call 'CuNi-fakes'; prior to now, everybody made something that approximated that sound. But we've actually re-sourced the correct magnet material and we're remaking those pickups and that's a great voice and a piece of our canonical history

of tone. I mean, a Tele Custom, whether it's in the hands of Keith Richards or whoever, is a hallmark instrument.

“When it comes to the '73 Strat, we picked that because Mocha was a colour that year and also '73 was the last year of staggered polepieces before they all got flat. Also, it's interesting because you get to do the 'suntan' on the '73 Strat, where the fretboard is lighter than the headstock because the headstock was still lacquered by that stage, but the neck itself was poly.

“I think that people have re-approached that era's guitars with a little bit more adoration and affection. And I think that, historically, maybe the execution of some of those designs was not perfect back then, but the conceptual design itself was great. Being able to now make those at a very high level of quality, where you're not rolling dice – you can get what they were shooting for. That's really powerful.”

**Were the pickups in the AV II range developed specially for the new guitars?**

“When it comes to the CuNiFe pickups, I think the neck had already come out on an Original extension [of the model range]. That said, the CuNiFe pickups are still new to us and we're still just getting into building those and having full sets of those. Elsewhere, pickup design was always kind of a continuous improvement and a work







3. There are three 70s Teles in the range: '72 Thinline, '75 Deluxe and this '77 Custom – here, with a rich Wine finish covering the alder body

4. Fender has brought back CuNiFe-magnet humbuckers, meaning you're that bit closer to nailing the iconic Keef sound...

in process. So we weren't starting from zero, but we did dial in the pickups for each model separately. You don't just take the pickups out of a mid-60s guitar and put them in an early 60s guitar – we actually went back and we did it all [right for the year and model in question], especially with the Teles. With the Teles, you've got brass saddles on one and steel saddles on another and a rosewood 'board et cetera, so that all those factors play into pickup voicing [and] what you're looking to get out of that.

"We're also always thinking about the music of the day, the records that use those

instruments on them and we also need to consider the difference between what those guitars would have sounded like new versus what an old one sounds like today, because they've mellowed and degaussed and all of that stuff. So it's about deciding, 'Where do we want that pickup to fall on the brightness scale?' and so on."

**When you last overhauled the American Vintage reissue line back in 2012, some of the hardware that was developed went on to be used on Custom Shop guitars, didn't it?**

"I mean, in all honesty, a lot of times the vintage correctness flows downhill from the Custom Shop to the production line. But that said, a lot of times the Custom Shop is making Custom guitars and not saying, 'Let's go through every [historic model of] guitar and redo all the tooling and stuff as a project.' So in 2012, particularly, we kind of let the Custom Shop know what we were doing in advance and we kept them in the loop. And we kept telling them about things as they were happening and then we would bring [the guitars] to the master builders and get their viewpoint on those



"We're also thinking about the music of the day and what those guitars would have sounded like new"

components and those things, and that continues to this day. The CuNiFe pickups are a great example of that.

"But it's also useful for us to ask, 'What do you, as a master builder, personally like about a '63 Tele? If you were going to build one, what would be the key hallmarks?' Because things varied more than you might think. For example, Vince Gill [celebrated country guitarist] finds and buys early Blackguard Telecasters with tiny necks. That's not the spec that people usually think of – it's typically a chunkier U shape – but he manages to find them. Obviously, there was someone at Fender at the time who was making necks a little differently.

"It's about knowing that there's no cemented rule to say that, 'This was the way they were in that year.' There's always a little bit of play. It's partly about asking, 'What have you seen or experienced?' to this hive mind of people in the Custom Shop and the guitar knowledge they collectively have. If that resource is there, then you've got to use it." **G**





# MAKING HISTORY SINCE 1958



Jimi Hendrix & Noel Redding  
talk strings with Rotosound's  
Alan Marcuson. March 1st, 1967.  
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machinery that wound Jimi's strings in 1967.

    
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# Reeling In The Years

What other beauties are there in Fender's new American Vintage II range? We take a look at a selection from the 12-strong series



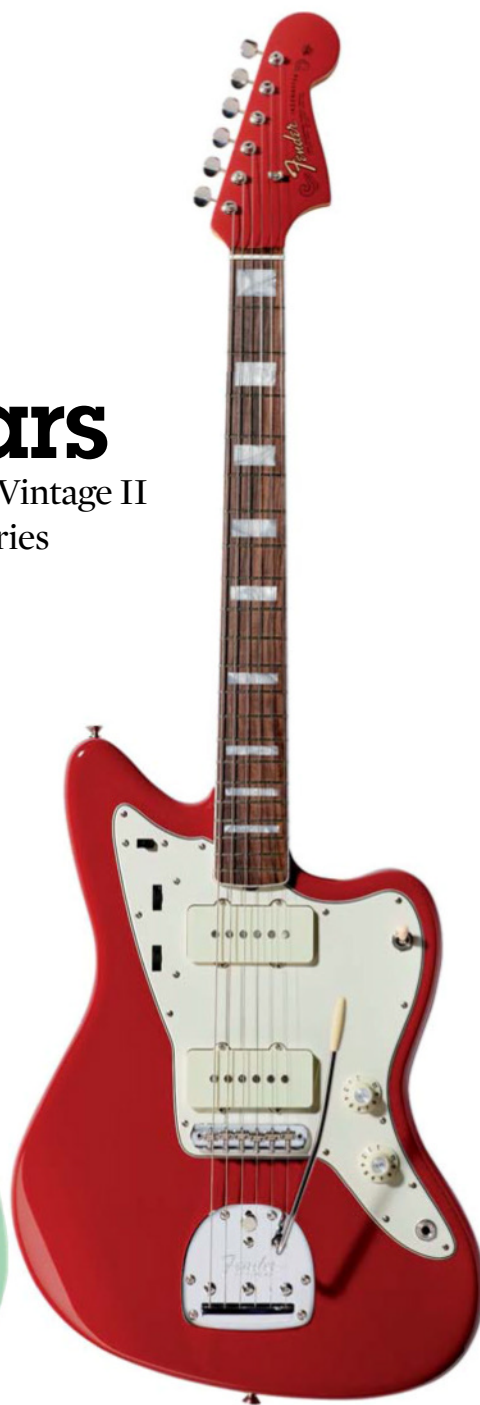
**AMERICAN VINTAGE II**  
**'57 STRATOCASTER £1,999**

Reflecting the original pre-rosewood fingerboard Stratocaster style, this is the earliest-spec Strat in the new range. That said, both alder and ash bodies are listed and we're presuming the 2-Color Sunburst will be ash, and the Seafoam Green and Vintage Blonde will be alder. All the new guitars use the original 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius with 21 vintage tall frets, while this specific Strat comes with Pure Vintage '57 Strat single coils on a single-ply pickguard and has a vibrato with cold-rolled steel block and bent steel saddles.



**AMERICAN VINTAGE II**  
**'63 TELECASTER £2,049**

Over a decade after the basis for our reviewed '51 Telecaster, things had changed on Fender's original solidbody with a new 'round-lam' rosewood fingerboard with 'clay' dots, alder body and threaded steel saddles replacing the earlier brass types. While the 3-Color Sunburst and Surf Green colours are over an alder body, the Crimson Red Transparent finish is, unusually, over a mahogany body. Pickups follow the model year: Pure Vintage '63 single coils. Sadly, there's no edge-bound Telecaster Custom in the new range.



**AMERICAN VINTAGE II**  
**'66 JAZZMASTER £2,249**

The lone offset guitar in the new range (there is also a '66 Jazz Bass), with no sign of the Jaguar, we get three colour options – 3-Color Sunburst, Lake Placid Blue and Dakota Red, all with colour-matched headstocks – over an alder-only body. The round-lam rosewood fingerboard comes with the post-'65 additions of binding and block inlays. Of course, it retains the dual rhythm and lead circuits, not to mention that classic two-piece vibrato that continues to enthuse and infuriate us players in equal measure.





**AMERICAN VINTAGE II '72  
TELECASTER THINLINE £2,249**

A 'Gibson in Fender clothing' was pretty much the thinking with this Thinline, originally introduced in late 1971, with its dual Seth Lover-designed humbuckers, replicated here as CuNiFe Wide-Range pickups. All three colours – Aged Natural, 3-Color Sunburst and Lake Placid Blue – are over a semi-hollow ash body (there's also the solidbody '75 Telecaster Deluxe at £2,149, with dual CuNiFe humbuckers) with a one-piece gloss polyurethane-finished maple neck with 'Bullet' truss rod adjuster, Micro-Tilt and F-logo tuners.



**AMERICAN VINTAGE II  
'73 STRATOCASTER £2,149**

The Stratocaster also went through some significant changes during the 70s that are evidenced here on this '73 model. So we get the polarising three-bolt neck join, with Micro-Tilt adjustment, a larger headstock with 'Bullet' truss rod adjuster and those F-logo tuners, plus the maple neck and fingerboard are glossed polyurethane. Hopefully, the ash body here won't be as heavy as many of the original examples, and the trio of colours available are Mocha, Lake Placid Blue and Aged Natural.



**AMERICAN VINTAGE II '77  
TELECASTER CUSTOM £2,049**

The third humbucker-loaded AV II Tele first appeared in 1972 and cleverly retained the Tele's single coil at the bridge with its new Wide-Range humbucker at the neck. The other masterstroke is the Gibson-style dual volume and tone controls, which allow you to balance the different pickup styles. The original is a long-time favourite of Keith Richards, and this new Custom comes in Black, Wine and Olympic White over an alder body, with a six-saddle bridge and both maple and rosewood 'boards, presumably colour-dependent.









# Two For The Road

Can't afford custom shop or boutique? Fret-King steps up with a pair of new designs that focus on serious sound-mangling, high-build quality but pretty affordable prices. Are they as good as they look?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Olly Curtis





## FRET-KING COUNTRY SQUIRE MUSIC ROW & ELISE CUSTOM £749 & £979

CONTACT **JHS** PHONE **01132 865381** WEB **www.fret-king.com**

### What You Need To Know

#### 1 These are designed by Trev Wilkinson, aren't they?

Yes and no. Fret-King guitars were designed exclusively by Trev until 2018 when his relationship with long-time distributor John Hornby Skewes (who acquired Fret-King in 2008) "changed to one of greater independence," we're told, "with the JHS Fret-King team taking on the design mantle and continuing to work with Trev on specific projects and co-operating in the incorporation of Wilkinson-designed pickups and hardware for Fret-King."

#### 2 I recognise these designs...

The Elise started out in the Vintage Advance range of the mid-Noughties as the AV3. It then resurfaced a couple of years later in the Fret-King Black Label range as a Gordon Giltrap signature, with the six-in-line headstock you see here.

#### 3 Still Wilkinson hardware?

Yes! The pickups (rebranded Fret-King here) are Wilkinson designs, except the Country Squire's dual series-linked single coils. You'll see 'Wilkinson' stamped into the baseplates of the Elise 'buckers.

**B**ack in 1994 when Fret-King originally raised its flag above the parapet at the Winter NAMM show, variations and mash-ups of classic guitars weren't as commonplace as they are today. The brainchild of Trev Wilkinson, then based in the USA, Fret-King has since had its ups and downs, but nearly 30 years on – and judging by these two new models – little has changed: these are guitars that draw on the classics, usually mixed up a bit, with tricky wiring and a whole lot of bang for your buck.

### Country Squire Music Row

If this style of guitar was made in a small boutique workshop, you'd probably be looking at a £3k price tag. For some years now Fret-King's guitars have been made in India, and this new model, based on the long-running Country Squire, might be loosely based on a T-style but just about everything is different. Except, as we've come to expect, it's anything but boutique in price, listed at £749 and including a pretty rugged gigbag.



Here, we have two T-style neck pickups joined in series. It might be inspired by the Cream T Banger & Mash pickup that Thomas Nilsen designed for Keef, although that uses a standard humbucker base





Typically neat Wilkinson design, this T-style bridge allows both through-body and top-loading for the strings, plus each of the three brass saddles is pre-intonated

Underneath the nicely glossed Laguna Blue finish (one of three offered) is a standard three-piece alder body. Yes, it apes its inspiration, but it's slightly offset, the treble horn thinned and the heel rounded for much more comfortable high-fret playing. It uses a standard Fender scale length, though the four neck screws sit in recessed ferrules and there's a lovely sloping line from the rounded upper shoulder into that cutaway. The neck differs, too, in that rather like PRS's bolt-on CE it continues past the end of the fingerboard and sits under the neck pickup. Weight-wise, it feels purposeful, a medium weight for the style.

The hardware comes from the Wilkinson stable. The T-style bridge, which can be top-loaded as well as through-strung, features compensated brass saddles, while the control plate alters the classic shape so the five-way lever pickup selector sits at a 45-degree angle. The pickup choice starts pretty Tele-like with a Tapped-Fifty single coil at the bridge, a Strat-like Dallas Special single coil in the middle position and a Country Road humbucker (two T-style single coils mounted side-by-side and wired in series) at the neck. The lever switch gives us Strat-like selections, while the Varicoil – the upper portion of the dual-concentric tone control – works on both the neck humbucker, pulling down the bridge-facing single coil until it's removed from circuit, while the bridge moves from the full coil (9.57kohms) down to the tapped coil (6.66k).

This new model, based on the long-running Country Squire, might be loosely based on a T-style but just about everything is different

### Elise Custom

Like the Country Squire, the Elise has been a cornerstone of the Fret-King range for some years and is the basis for signature models for both Gordon Giltrap and John Etheridge. In the new line-up it's simply the Elise Custom, available with a Maestro-style vibrato or, as here, with a standard tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece. Outwardly, it comes across as a downsized 368mm (14.5-inch) wide thinline with distinctly offset horns and a back-angled six-in-a-line headstock that adds a sort-of Gibson Trini Lopez vibe.

The major difference is that instead of a thinline's usual laminate construction, the Elise is constructed from solid wood. The two-piece centre joined back is heavily routed out, leaving a centre block that stops just after the stud tailpiece. Meanwhile the top, solid maple with a flame maple veneer, has quite a pronounced violin-like carve – inside and out – and a pair of f-holes. Thanks to the construction it's nearly a pound lighter than the solidbody Country Squire.

The dual Fifty-Five humbuckers look pretty classic in their brushed nickel-plated covers, and – just like on the Country Squire – we also get that Varicoil, the lowest control, while the middle master tone

### WHAT'S IN THE RANGE?

Along with our Music Row on review, there are five other Country Squire models to choose from. The Classic features a Staggettwin neck humbucker and Tapped-Fifty single coil at the bridge, again with the Varicoil control. The Modern Classic uses just the Tapped-Fifty at the bridge but with some tricky wiring, likewise including the Varicoil. The Stealth features an 'applique' f-hole but is still a solidbody, and it also includes a hum-cancelling circuit for its lone Country Road single-coil neck pickup and Tapped-Fifty at the bridge. All three cost £699 and come with a gigbag.

The Semitone Deluxe (£729) is a semi-solid design with an open f-hole, a trio of pickups – a Focusfield mini-humbucker at the neck, a Dallas Special in the middle and a Powertwin at the bridge – plus the Varicoil and a vibrato. Topping the range is the Tone Meister (£779), another sealed semi-solid design with Tone Meister Sixty (bridge) and A2C (neck) single coils plus some tricky five-way switching.



## UNDER THE HOOD

What's going on with all this switching? We take a look...

**W**ith sealed semi designs such as the Elise, the only way to investigate the electrics is to pull the controls out via the f-hole or bridge pickup cavity – something we might do in The Mod Squad but not with a brand-new instrument on review. However, the Country Square is a lot easier to investigate and, although we effectively have four pickups, the dual-control circuit is economical with an Alpha 'Made

in Korea' 500kohms master volume and a stacked 500k pot that combines a master tone control (the tone capacitor has no markings) on the outer portion of the control knob and the Varicoil feature on the taller inner portion. So, the five-way lever gives us the usual, neck (pair of single coils), neck and middle, middle, middle and bridge, and bridge.

As we mention, the Varicoil works on both the bridge and neck pickups simultaneously,

reducing the output of the tapped bridge single coil from 9.57kohms down to 6.66k and removing the bridge-facing coil of the 13.08k neck pickup, lowering its DCR to 6.63k. In theory, you should hear a graduation from humbucker to single coil, or the bridge pickup's full to its tapped coil, and although testing it with a multimeter shows the lowering resistance, what you hear is pretty subtle aside from the two extremes.



Our Country Squire packs plenty into its control cavity



The Country Road humbucker is actually two neck single coils wired in series and direct mounted to the body

1. It might be based on a T-style, but among the refinements is this well-shaped heel, while the neck screws sit in recessed washers, all making for very comfortable high-fret playing

If the Country Squire looks a little like an experiment in progress, it actually ends up sounding like one, too

also has a push-push switch that puts the pickups out of phase when both are voiced. Also like the Country Squire, the output jack is side-mounted within a circular Electrosocket-style jack mount.

### Feel & Sounds

Despite the different styles, both guitars use the same medium jumbo fretwire (approximately 2.43mm wide by 1.2mm high), nicely fettled on a 254mm (10-inch) radius fingerboard. The Country Squire's neck is lightly oil finished, with the exception of the glossed headstock face, and feels a little narrower and deeper: 42.6mm wide at the nut, 22.3mm deep at the 1st fret and 24mm deep by the 12th. The Elise is slightly wider at the nut and a little thinner in depth with a more shallow C profile. It feels a little slinkier, too, probably due in part to its shorter 628mm (24.75-inch) scale length.

If the Country Squire looks a little like an experiment in progress, it actually ends up sounding like one, too. With the Varicoil wound fully clockwise we get the full coil of the bridge, which certainly does the hotter Tele-style rather well. Switching to the neck position where we have both of those covered single coils in action, it has quite a contrasting, slightly round-nosed but classic humbucker voice. Winding the Varicoil back there's not much, if any, graduation, rather an audible drop in



1





2

volume and sound as the bridge-facing coil of the neck pair is removed, and the lower output tapped coil of the bridge pickup is voiced – now we have more of a classic T-style in sound. Mixing these with the middle pickup gets us into those Strat-ier mixed pickup voices; again the Varicoil moves them from thicker to thinner. The middle pickup on its own sounds a little out of place. It's brighter than you might expect, although it's a pretty strident rhythm voice, not least with a dollop of crunchy gain. In short, it's all about options and although we have plenty, the dealbreaker for some is that you can't produce the classic T-style neck and bridge together.

Sonically, the Elise Custom comes across as a less contrasting instrument in terms of its sounds, although the combination of the Varicoil and the phase switch means we're certainly not short on textures. If you like your classic PAF-style neck pickups for jazz and blues, this one is very slightly rounded in the highs but very evocative. We spent too long here when we should have been testing what else is on offer.

The bridge humbucker is a bit of a surprise and maybe should be called the Seventy-Five, not the Fifty-Five. It's a high-output 14k 'bucker with an Alnico (not ceramic) magnet that sounds thick and pretty juicy: an old-school rock humbucker. With the 'buckers fully split by that Varicoil switch (voicing the screw coils) there's a

useful contrast, and just balancing between this split and full humbucker – like a partial split – adds a little fullness. It illustrates the potential of the Varicoil, but the 'action' still happens in a very small part of the pot's travel. The out-of-phase voice is a bit too thin and nasal as we have only one volume control, but it certainly gives you another flavour that works for nastier fuzztones or takes us back to the 70s with a phase pedal.

2. While the neck pickup is a pretty classic PAF-style, the bridge pickup ups the windings for a very beefy voice. One advantage, though, is that the coil-split (achieved with the Varicoil) is rather good

3. This is a back-angled six-in-a-line headstock design that adds a touch of class and is very functional (with no string splay) over a more standard three-a-side headstock



3





4

While some players might prefer a more classic-voiced version, there's little doubt that the Elise model moves effortlessly from jazz, blues and fusion to classic rock and pretty much whatever you want to throw at it. It's still one of this writer's favourite Fret-King designs.

If you like your classic PAF-style neck pickups for jazz and blues, Elise's is very slightly rounded in the highs but very evocative

### Verdict

It's good to welcome back these designs, but Fret-King almost seems to be trying too hard and to cover too much ground, not least in the sounds and switching departments. The lack of that classic bridge/neck mix on the Country Squire is a major omission – and we can't help thinking that a more classic bridge humbucker with simple dual volumes and a master tone (with coil-splits) would suit the Elise. That said, the tone-tinkerers among you with a soldering iron will find plenty of potential here, especially since the actual guitars really punch above their prices and are both, for the most part, good-sounding and competently made. **G**

4. With master volume, master tone and the Varicoil control, we don't get dual-pickup volumes, which would help the out-of-phase pull-switch on the tone control to sound less thin when engaged



### FRET-KING COUNTRY SQUIRE MUSIC ROW

**PRICE:** £749 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** India

**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

**BODY:** 3-piece American alder

**NECK:** Maple, 'soft C' profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech Tusq/42.6mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, black dot inlays, 254mm (10") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium

**HARDWARE:** Wilkinson WTB bridge w/intonated brass saddles, Wilkinson WJ05 enclosed tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 55mm

**ELECTRICS:** Fret-King Country Road humbucker (neck), Dallas Special single coil (middle), Tapped-Fifty single coil (bridge), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone, Varicoil control

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.89/8.56

**OPTIONS:** No

**RANGE OPTIONS:** See 'What's In The Range?' box

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Laguna Blue (as reviewed), Gloss Black, Butterscotch – gloss body and headstock face, oiled neck back



### FRET-KING ELISE CUSTOM

**PRICE:** £979 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** India

**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, chambered thinline electric

**BODY:** 2-piece centre jointed, chambered mahogany with flame maple faced carved maple cap

**NECK:** Mahogany, 'soft C' profile glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 628mm (24.75")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech Tusq/44.2mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Bound rosewood, abalone dot inlays, 254mm (10") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Wilkinson GBR bridge and stud tailpiece Wilkinson WJ04 enclosed tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 51.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** Fret-King (by Wilkinson) Fifty-Five covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, master volume, master tone control (with latching push-push out of phase switch), Varicoil control

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.51/7.72

**OPTIONS:** No

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Elise Custom is also available with Fret-King vintage-style vibrato (£1,099) in Cherry Red or Gloss Black

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Walnut (as reviewed) and Tobacco Sunburst – all gloss

8/10



9/10

**PROS** Original and classy take on a classic; excellent neck feel and shaping; plenty of sound options to play with

**CONS** You can't combine neck and bridge pickups, and the Varicoil is a little on/off in use, rather than being more graduated

**PROS** Excellent design; use of solid woods (not laminate construction); a great player with serious versatility in the sound department

**CONS** Again, that Varicoil, plus the out-of-phase sound is a little too thin and some might prefer a less 'rock' bridge pickup





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# Cutting Edge

New designs aren't the exclusive property of high-end makers. While copycat designs aren't going away, there are plenty of inspired-by or frankly out-there designs that don't cost a fortune. Here's a snapshot selection...

**Words** Dave Burrluck



## TRINITY BY RELISH £599

Easily one of the most radical and innovative guitar makers out there, Switzerland-based Relish Guitars took a very different path with its Jane and Mary designs. Among the company's innovations is its instant pickup-swapping system, which is retained on this very affordable 24-fret bolt-on Indonesian-made version, whose outline shape is based on that of the original models. With Cream T taking up the pickup-swapping concept here in the UK, there are plenty of pickups now available to swap. Get onboard!

[www.relishguitars.ch](http://www.relishguitars.ch)



## YAMAHA REVSTAR RSS02T £649

The second wave of Revstars was launched earlier this year, with both Indonesian-made models and the Japanese-made RSP02T. Instead of copying ideas from other makers, Yamaha delved into its own history and Revstar definitely draws on the original SG2000 style mixed up with Japanese craft and 'Café Racer' motorcycle influences. The new versions all have a slightly enlarged chambered body, and the mid-price Standard RSS02T and RSS20 feature a unique passive boost, not to mention stainless-steel frets. Very classy.

<http://uk.yamaha.com>



## PRS SE ZACH MYERS £895

Like Fret-King's Elise, the SE Zach Myers is a thin-depth semi-solid instrument that uses solid-wood (not laminate) construction, albeit with a smaller block under the bridge. It's an affordable version of the high-end core PRS McCarty Hollowbody that inspired both designs. Very much in PRS style with its bird inlays and flame-maple-veneered maple top, this long-running signature was introduced in 2011. It's currently offered in Myers Blue, featuring PRS's 245 'S' humbuckers with coil-splits and the high-end adjustable Stoptail wrapover bridge.

[www.prsguitars.com](http://www.prsguitars.com)





**FENDER PLAYER PLUS  
METEORA HH £999**

Fender might be the epitome of the heritage company, but despite continually reproducing its past, it also continues to look forward with innovative designs such as the Acoustasonic. The Meteora started life in the 'out-there' Parallel Universe range from 2018, and for this year the radically shaped model reappeared with dual Fender Fireball covered (rather good low-output) humbuckers and two-post vibrato in the Player Plus series. It's a Fender, but not as we know it!

[www.fender.com](http://www.fender.com)



**GORDON SMITH GRIFFIN  
FROM £1,299**

Having already introduced its excellent take on the bolt-on offset with the Gatsby, earlier this year Gordon Smith took the wraps off the Griffin. Clearly inspired by the Firebird, and available in both Standard (reverse) and Flip (non-reverse) versions, it downsizes the original design for a much more usable platform. As ever, you can design your own model from a drop-down list of options that includes GSG humbuckers or P-90s, and there's a big choice of colours, too. Inspired UK craft.

[www.gordonsmithguitars.com](http://www.gordonsmithguitars.com)



**EASTMAN JULIET PB £1,499**

Despite making a name for itself with Chinese-crafted Gibson-style solidbodies, Eastman changed tack a couple of years ago with the very original Romeo and Romeo LA semi-hollow designs, and this year added the solidbody Juliet (shown here in Pomona Blonde). There are some classic references, such as the raised Firebird-style centre section and a nod to the current offset trend, while the new models come with dual Bare Knuckle humbuckers (as here) or P-90 soapbars. We can only wonder what's next on the drawing board.

[www.eastmanguitars.com](http://www.eastmanguitars.com)



# Blast From The Past

After putting out a successful call for examples of rare 1970s originals, Orange has reissued its Distortion, Sustain and Phaser units for the modern market – with heaps of retro cool

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Olly Curtis







## ORANGE DISTORTION, SUSTAIN & PHASER £199 EACH

CONTACT **Orange** PHONE +44 208 905 2828 WEB [www.orangeamps.com](http://www.orangeamps.com)

### What You Need To Know

- 1 Blimey! These look a bit different...**  
You're right if you mean the enclosures look rather chunky. Orange wanted to revive a range of pedals that it produced back in the 1970s (and are now extremely rare) and decided to keep the large aluminium chassis associated with the now-vintage pedals.
- 2 Have any concessions to modernity been made here?**  
Yes, these pedals have been rebuilt from the ground up with new circuitry, they can get their power from a standard nine-volt supply rather than solely from a battery, and they feature modern status LEDs.
- 3 They could have thought up some cooler names, though...**  
Why? That's what the pedals were called in the 70s (with the exception of the 70s phaser being named Phazer), and each one does exactly what it says on the tin.

1. Both Sustain and Distortion pedals have similarly named knobs, but Depth on the Sustain increases compression, while the same control on the Distortion turns up the, er, distortion

One of the great British amplification brands, Orange has a practical modern range of pedals including the Fur Coat, Two Stroke and others. But what is perhaps less well known is the fact that the company had a series of pedals way back in the 1970s – the Phazer, Sustain and Distortion. These units weren't produced in large quantities and are now very rare. Roll on to a couple of years ago and some photos of these turned up in online message boards, prompting something of a clamour on Orange's Facebook pages for them to be reissued. Orange responded by digging out some original schematics – complete with 40-odd-year-old tea stains – but didn't have any actual pedals. Consequently, the company put out a request via its social media channels to chase down examples

of the pedals and find out directly from owners what the playing experience and sound were like. The upshot here is that all of this information was passed on to Orange designer Ade Emsley who came up with this set of three same-size recreations that sport the vintage orange colour scheme and Art Nouveau typography.

While being based on their vintage counterparts, these UK-made pedals aren't exact clones; they are essentially upgrades that fulfil the same functions with improved performance and modern features, such as LEDs and nine-volt input sockets, with the socketry on the front, allowing close side-by-side placement. All three can run from battery power if desired, but considering that most users these days use nine-volt adaptors, Orange didn't want battery clips







2. Input, Output and the nine-volt power socket follow modern convention and are in the best possible place for pedalboard use

3. Orange has kept the look of the pedals as close as possible to the originals, with the same bright orange chassis and script labelling

4. One knob to phase them all – this governs the modulation speed and covers a wide range. The bright blue LED is a new addition



If you're looking for some authentic 70s phaser sounds, you'll find them in this gorgeous-sounding Phaser pedal

## THE RIVALS

There's one obvious rival to a single-knob phaser with an orange paint job and that has to be another single-knob phaser with an orange paint job: the MXR Phase 90! It's available in various versions, but for a vintage vibe we would plump for the Custom Shop CSP026 '74 Vintage 'Script Logo' model (£129) over the M101 standard model (£99).

For a smooth optical compressor with a simple two-knob interface, check out the Foxgear Squeeze (£79). For a British amp-style drive/distortion, there are loads on the market, many with more features than the Orange Distortion – the MXR FOD (£139) is certainly worth a look.

flapping about so have made a battery clip an after-market addition that can be easily soldered into place. The pedals' height offers just the right amount of space for a PP3 to naturally be held firmly in place once the four-screw baseplate has been reattached.

The construction of the pedals appears extremely solid with hard-wired footswitches directly fixed to the chassis rather than attached to a PCB, so switch replacement at some point in the future would be a simple task.

## Distortion

The original Orange Distortion pedal featured a back-to-back diode design, but not so for this one. The circuitry here has been built from the ground up and is an amp circuit that includes a tone stack with preset bass and midrange but with treble that can be adjusted via a trimmer inside the casing. Kick in the pedal and there's a slight bass roll-off and (with the default factory-set position for the trimmer) a top-end that's slightly brighter than your regular tone. The treble trimmer will allow more brightness or a more subdued top-end if you want to set the sound to whatever best suits your amp.

You can use the pedal as a clean boost if you keep the Depth (basically gain) knob at zero and dial in your desired volume jump with the Level knob above its unity gain position around two o'clock. But increasing the Depth brings in increasing levels of Brit-style amp drive, which runs from a mild crunch through to screaming stack with loads of sustain. Speaking of which...

## Sustain

Back in the 1970s, pedals offering compression were often marketed as 'sustainers'. Electro-Harmonix had the Black Finger, Colorsound had the Sustain Module, and Orange simply plumped for Sustain as its catchy name. Today's Sustain is an optical compressor with just two control knobs. The attack and release times are preset so you have a pedal that's very easy to dial in: the Depth knob sets the gain reduction and hence the amount of sustain, while the Level knob, with a detente position at 12 o'clock, sets the overall output volume. With the Depth at minimum, that detente position is at unity gain so there's scope beyond that to use the pedal as a booster with minimal compression.

As you ease in the compression, it's smooth and transparent with no extreme alteration of the note attack; it's more about consistency and eking out the length of the note. With higher settings of the Depth knob you'll be wanting to turn down the Level knob to keep things clean, but bring up the Level with compression applied and this will do the job of a low-level overdrive as a great amp driver.

## Phaser

There's a neat simplicity to the idea of a single-knob phaser – if the sound is there, all you need is a Speed knob. Indeed, MXR's classic Phase 90 is exactly that, and there are similarities between that unit and this new Orange pedal, which is likewise a four-stage phaser.





Orange seems to have dialled this one in just right. The sound is exactly what you'd expect from a vintage 1970s phaser and compared very favourably in an A/B setting with our vintage Phase 90 and EHX Small Stone. There's quiet operation and a great range, from a languid slow shift through to the warble of a Leslie cabinet at full pelt. If you're looking for some authentic 70s phaser sounds, you'll find them in this gorgeous-sounding pedal.

### Verdict

Orange has done a great job of delivering a set of pedals that have the look of the originals while bringing them right up to date with features that current pedal users would expect as standard. While that retro look and bulk will appeal to a certain set of users, others may consider the size a little too clunky in these days of taking advantage of every inch of pedalboard real estate – but that's a personal choice.

Sticking rigidly to that original vintage aesthetic has also precluded the company from making some practical control changes. While we wouldn't want anything different in the easy operation of the Phaser and Sustain pedals, we feel that the Distortion would have increased flexibility via an easily-grabbed Tone knob (or more), rather than an internal trimmer. That said, there will be players who prefer to set the ideal tone for their setup and not have to think about it again. Overall, it's a welcome return for three largely forgotten pedals. **G**



### ORANGE DISTORTION

**PRICE:** £199  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** Distortion pedal  
**FEATURES:** Buffered bypass, LED indication of gain reduction  
**CONTROLS:** Level, Depth, internal Treble trimmer, Bypass footswitch  
**CONNECTIONS:** Standard input, standard output  
**POWER:** 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 3mA  
**DIMENSIONS:** 93 (w) x 120 (d) x 75mm (h)

8/10

**PROS** Welcome revival of some forgotten pedals; ease of use, modern features and design paired with excellent voicing

**CONS** Size still could be an issue for some with less 'board space; minimalist controls mean this pedal is a bit limited for on-the-fly adjustment



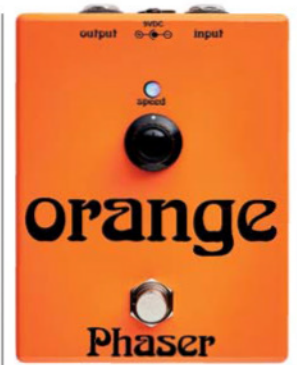
### ORANGE SUSTAIN

**PRICE:** £199  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** Sustain pedal (compressor)  
**FEATURES:** Buffered bypass, LED indication of gain reduction  
**CONTROLS:** Level, Depth, Bypass footswitch  
**CONNECTIONS:** Standard input, standard output  
**POWER:** 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 7mA  
**DIMENSIONS:** 93 (w) x 120 (d) x 75mm (h)

8/10

**PROS** As Distortion; preset attack and release times make it easy to dial in

**CONS** Size still could be an issue for some with less pedalboard space



### ORANGE PHASER

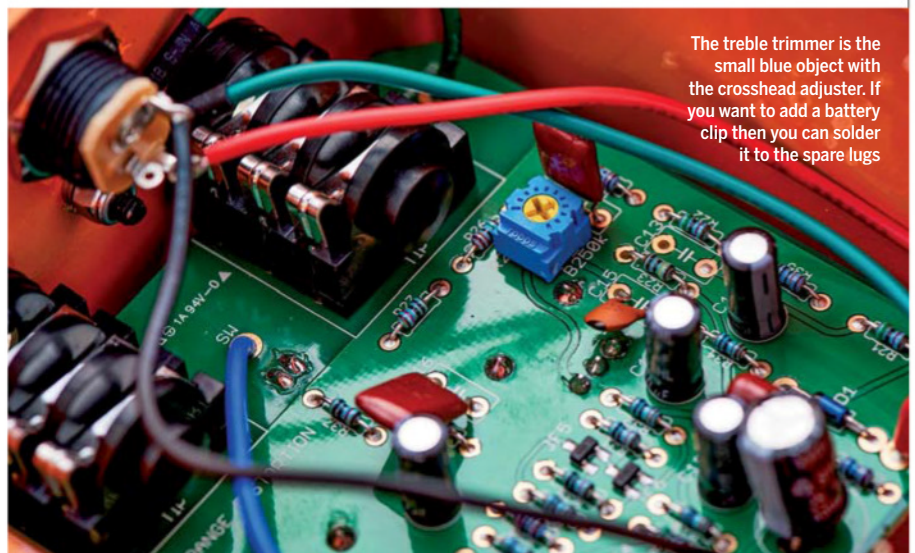
**PRICE:** £199  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** Phaser pedal  
**FEATURES:** True bypass, LED indication of gain reduction  
**CONTROLS:** Speed, Bypass footswitch  
**CONNECTIONS:** Standard input, standard output  
**POWER:** 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 17mA  
**DIMENSIONS:** 93 (w) x 120 (d) x 75mm (h)



9/10

**PROS** As Distortion; simple single-knob operation; great 70s phaser sounds

**CONS** Size still could be an issue for some with less pedalboard space



The treble trimmer is the small blue object with the crosshead adjuster. If you want to add a battery clip then you can solder it to the spare lugs



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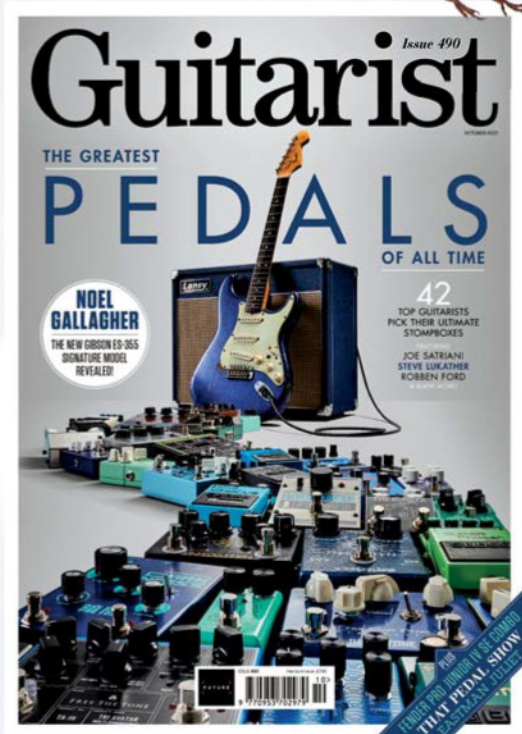
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# SEA CHANGE

The latest electric from Seth Baccus is a tautly designed yet unorthodox offset that is something of a shapeshifter, too. We join him to find out what lies beneath the Argonaut's curvaceous shell

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Words Jamie Dickson

**T**here's quite a resurgence in British electric guitar design at the moment, with companies ranging from Gordon Smith to PJD to Patrick James Eggle all producing top-notch instruments with a flair and character all their own. Many of the hand-crafted, high-end guitars being produced in Britain today owe little to the past but boast elegant, original lines. Seth Baccus is one of the best in the business in that regard and his Cornish workshop is home to some of the most svelte, distinctive and yet timeless new electrics you'll find.

Recently, he unveiled an all-new offset, the Argonaut, and like his other designs it's a mark of their quality that they can be styled and spec'd in radically different ways yet still retain a classic essence. We join Seth to talk about the development of a contemporary offset that was built to rock but will also do retro if you want it to. Heck, he'll even build it out of solid rosewood if you've got the brawn for it...

## How did the Argonaut design get started?

"I'd been working on an offset design in sort of scribble format for a few years – back of the beer-mat type stuff. I guess that probably started around 2016 to 2017, and the reason I'd been thinking about that was twofold: I'd been thinking about making a double-cutaway guitar, and lots of people had been asking me to make one. I was really conscious of not wanting to just make



Linesman: for Seth Baccus, it's all about the 'flow' of the design

"I wanted to come up with something that can either be a modern rock machine or a classic-vibed instrument"

another Strat or another PRS-inspired carvetop, double-cut type thing. I obviously wasn't averse to the idea of double-cutaway guitars, but it had to be something different, something a bit original.

"It went on the backburner when I was moving back to England [after plying his trade in Spain] and setting up a new workshop. Then I developed the Shoreline JM, which was my tip of the hat to the alt-rock scene, like grunge guitars, a nod towards Jags, Jazzmasters and that kind of thing, but still within my regular single-cutaway body shape. That took off and went really well. Then I had a customer in 2020 who had a Shoreline JM – and he's a tall guy, he's about 6ft 5in. He was like, 'I love the Shoreline. Everything about it – the sound, the feel – but I miss having that bigger body shape.' He was used to playing Jazzmasters and the sort of Jag/Tele hybrid guitars that Fender have been doing recently. So I said, 'Oh, it's funny you should say that because I'm about 75 per cent of the way through designing an offset guitar!' It prompted me to pick up the pencil again and get started on nailing down the design and trying to start turning it into a reality.

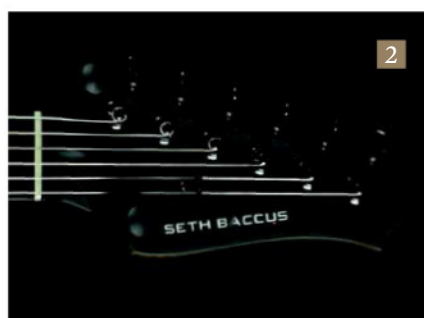
"I wanted to capture that offset style, but what I really like to do – what I've done with the Shorelines and the Nautilus – is to design a body shape that is visually so well balanced that it's not easy to stereotype. I wanted to come up with something that, depending on what aesthetics you throw at it, can either be a complete modern rock machine or a





Purple reign: the new Argonaut looks great in this finish but it can be styled in diverse ways





1. This Argonaut sports a very modern 'stealth' style finish, highlighting the design's adaptability

2. The six-a-side headstock has elements of both classic and modern influences

3. Form and function unite in the elegantly sculpted heel

total 60s classic-vibed instrument. That was the driving force behind designing the shape and putting my identity onto it – the way the curves flow, particularly in the bass-side horn and, round the bottom edge, the way the little scoop and the little flick kind of happens. Those lines and shapes you see throughout all my work and all my headstock designs.”

**Your guitars always look classic, even if they're decked out in contemporary hardware and finishes. What's the secret to a timeless body shape?**

“It's all about the flow. There are two ways of creating a guitar – I mean, really, there's a multitude of ways, but you can design a guitar around the tools, jigs and fixtures that you have, or you can design a guitar and you make the tools and the jigs and fixtures work for your design. It's fairly standard production-line procedure to cut corners to make a new design work with existing jigs, fixtures and fittings. Whereas I would always prefer to do things bespoke and let the design dictate how you build it.

“When I'm drawing my lines, for example, I'm absolutely looking for a flow – the elegance of the way a line flows and the way a curve resolves itself. Say, if you're talking about a lower bout coming into a waist, coming out again and up into an upper horn – that's three very distinct

curves that all need to be speaking the same language, as it were. That's definitely how I try to approach things.

“But there are various other things at play as well because you've got to combine the aesthetic with the function. That's why guitar design is so interesting – it's such a multi-disciplinary art. It's aesthetic, but it's also engineering because things have got to be in the right place and withstand certain stresses and tensions. You have form and function that both have to match up, ideally. You can draw an amazing, beautiful shape, and then you hang it on a strap and you're like, ‘Well that doesn't work...’”

**What kind of functional benefits do you try to design into the guitar beyond its basic playability?**

“As I mentioned, you have to consider standing up and sitting down. You want it so if you're sitting down with the guitar on your lap and you had a strap on it... then if you stood up, it wouldn't change position at

all. I'm pretty confident to say this about all my guitars: if you have it on a strap and you take your hands off the guitar and strap, the guitar won't move at all.”

**Do you tend to revise new designs much once you've built the prototypes?**

“I've got an old first-draft Argonaut template here that I use for marking out the shape on a blank before it starts getting machined down to size, and I've already tweaked the shape quite considerably since that first one. Not for any balance reasons, purely aesthetic. I just needed to tweak the curve coming out of the waist a little bit. But whether anyone else would notice the extra 0.5mm I put in that curve I don't know [laughs].”

**Like other offsets, the Argonaut is quite a large body shape as compared with a Tele, for example. Do you select lightweight woods to avoid adding too much mass?**

“Definitely by choice, that's what I would decide. The Argonauts I've built so far – I'm only up to about seven, I think, but I've got eight or nine in process at the moment – they've all been a mixture of either swamp ash or obeche, and obeche is naturally very light, generally. It's comparable to the really light swamp ash. But the ash situation is up and down and on and off, so if I have the opportunity to buy some

“You've got to combine aesthetic with function. That's why guitar design is so interesting”





The Argonaut was conceived as a contemporary rocker but it can do retro





4



5

4. This twin-humbucker variant with sparkle finish is very hard-rock focused. Note the wave-like notch in lower edge of body

5. Figured, roasted maple makes the neck stable and very easy on the eye to boot

that is an appropriate weight for making an Argonaut out of then I will. But if I can't, then I would recommend people take a look at the obeche.

"That said, I have actually been asked to build a solid rosewood Argonaut, which will be interesting. If we don't do any chambering – which is what the customer has asked me for – it's going to be probably a 12-pound guitar! So it wouldn't be my personal choice. But the customer has got a couple of my guitars already and we've been through all the implications of it together. He's a big guy and he's not that bothered..."

**How did you see the Argonaut being spec'd, originally, in terms of the overall playing experience?**

"Playability-wise, I suppose my instruments are a bit of a hybrid anyway. Even on the super-vintage-looking stuff, I do a 12-inch fingerboard radius and medium jumbo fretwire as standard and so it already feels more like a contemporary guitar. Playability-wise and setup-wise, you can set it up more like a contemporary guitar. In terms of the radius thing on the Argonauts, I think that shape really suits the bigger radius – the shape of the outline and how offset it is, is sort of designed with that radius in mind. Everything about it is

anchored to that in a way – not to say that I'd be averse to it if a customer required [a smaller radius].

"The Argonaut was a really interesting design process. Because it had been in my mind for a while, when it actually came to getting it down, it was a relatively easy birth – it sort of fell out of my brain in about three or four different iterations very quickly. There was the first for the customer who kind of prompted me to finish the design, which had a Telecaster bridge and a P-90 in the neck. But simultaneously, I designed a double-humbucking version, with a much more tune-o-matic-style bridge setup and a more contemporary scratchplate design. I also designed a completely classic version with double Jazzmaster-size pickups with a Mastery trem as well. There was also a double-P-90 version with either a cut-off Tele bridge or a Mastery trem as an option. So the outline and the radius stay the same,

"It's all about the flow. I always prefer to let the design dictate how you build it"

but then everything else can vary. But even the radius could be specified.

"[Customers can] get in touch with me and talk it through – I was just having a conversation with a guy this morning doing exactly that. He's just written to me saying, 'Can't get the Argonaut out of my head. I've seen the pictures you've been sharing. What's possible?' Basically, my reply was, 'Well, what do you want?' Usually, I start by finding out a bit about the player's preference, tonally, feel-wise, style of music, trem/not trem – all that kind of stuff. Then we can start narrowing down the options a little bit and closing in on what might fit them best.

"I'm trying to save up for getting someone to build a guitar configurator in my website, where you can mock up [different specs]. Especially with the new production runs, people will be able to really pick out whatever kind of cosmetics and visuals they want. For example, 'Can I put a tortoiseshell scratchplate on metallic green?' I think it would be really cool. I do it myself – if I'm building a few guitars for a show, or something that isn't commission-built, I'll quite often switch the scratchplate colour out about three or four times until it just clicks, like, 'Aha, that's it.'" 

<https://sethbaccus.com>





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# Longtermers

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



## StewMac Ghost Drive Pedal Kit

with Jamie Dickson



## Writer

JAMIE DICKSON  
Guitarist, Editor-in-chief



This month, Jamie gets the soldering iron out to make a kit overdrive, from US guitar tools and supplies company StewMac, based on a pedalboard legend

**M**any readers write in every year to share their pleasure in building kit guitars at home – which is a fine hobby to take up. But you really need a bit of space, ideally a well-equipped workbench in a garage, to do homebuild guitars. That's doable for many people, but as a dad with weekends filled with trips to shops and parks, sometimes the only chunks of downtime I get are in the evenings after the little 'un's gone to bed. Past about 10, however, and the clamour of routers and drills from the garage tends to be frowned upon by neighbours and it's much more satisfying to do woodwork in daylight, where you can see fine details of your handiwork more easily. So maybe there's something else I could build indoors, of a more desktop-friendly nature?

Gear editor Dave Burrluck comes to my rescue, suggesting a pedal kit from well-known lutherie parts supplier StewMac. If I'm

**"I have built a pedal before...it even worked, precisely once, before falling silent forever"**

perfectly honest, I hadn't realised the brand did them, but so it does – and the Ghost Drive, based on the Klon Centaur Professional Overdrive, looked ideal for an evenings-only project that posed an absorbing challenge but wasn't so tricky it never got finished. The name Ghost Drive raises a smile – is that where poltergeists park their cars? I can see why all reference to mythical horses was avoided, but the spooky stickers that declare the kit pedal's name may not make it onto my build!

As it happens, I haven't got any Klon-style pedals on my 'board at the moment, either, so there's the added incentive of putting a new sound at my disposal to recommend it, too.

### Ghost Town

A quick email to StewMac sends a kit winging my way and I was quite intrigued when it arrived. I have actually built a pedal before, a clone of a Echoplex preamp that I built from plans on the internet. It even worked when



The printed circuit board, onto which the components must be mounted, is high quality

I finished it – precisely once, when I plugged it in for the first time – before falling silent forever, victim to an undiagnosed fault. To be fair, I ordered all the parts for that myself online and so the experience of building it was pretty spartan with no hand-holding or tips beyond those I received from friends with an interest in pedal-making.

So it was a pleasant surprise to open the StewMac Ghost Drive kit and find a really comprehensive manual included that not only covers step-by-step construction but gives a useful overview of the functions of the various components, complete with a guide to deciphering the colour coding and spec information on electronic parts such as resistors. It was also gratifying to find advice on the order in which to complete tasks – for example, at the start of the manual there's advice on sanding, priming, spraying and sealing a custom finish on your completed pedal if you don't want to stick with the factory white finish the pedal is shipped with.

The reason for this is that it's more difficult to do the paintwork after you have wired the pots, jacks switches and circuit board together inside the enclosure. Indeed, doing the finish last involves partially disassembling what you've just lovingly soldered together, which is a pain. It's just those sort of procedural mis-steps that a well-designed kit can help you avoid, so it's great to see that StewMac really put some thought into the manual, rather than providing only the bare bones. Each step of the build is designed to make it easy to fit parts – so tall, obstructive capacitors, for example, only get fitted after the little resistors are all in place.

### Hot Metal

Speaking of soldering, it's actually been a while since I've got the 'iron out, so it was nice to see that the Ghost Drive manual includes a link to a four-part YouTube video series by StewMac on the basics of pedal-building ([StewMac.com/pedal-build](http://StewMac.com/pedal-build)) – do check it out, it's a useful watch even if you've not got a build on at the moment.

Like any homebuild project, the work of building a pedal is made much easier by having the right tools. Naturally, a soldering iron is essential, and while StewMac's manual states a simple 110-volt model from its own catalogue will get the job done, I'll be using an inexpensive 230-volt soldering station with adjustable temperature, integral reels for solder and a holder for the iron itself. Mine was bought from the middle aisle of a supermarket (thanks, Aldi), but any electronics store can sort you out.

From experience, you may also want to buy a de-soldering pump, which is useful for undoing solder joints done in error – not all builds run exactly to plan, even with a plan in front of you. StewMac also recommends a tool I don't currently have, a PC board holder, which is kind of a soft-jawed clamp that allows you to flip the circuit board over easily, so you can insert the legs of the components on one side then solder them in place on the other. The jury is out on whether I'll buy one of those as I have a similar clamp with an integral magnifying glass already; it just doesn't allow you to flip the workpiece so easily. In the meantime, I'll start sorting the electronic components into little trays for easy selection. Who says rock 'n' roll is dead? **G**



# Cream T Aurora Custom MP2PS

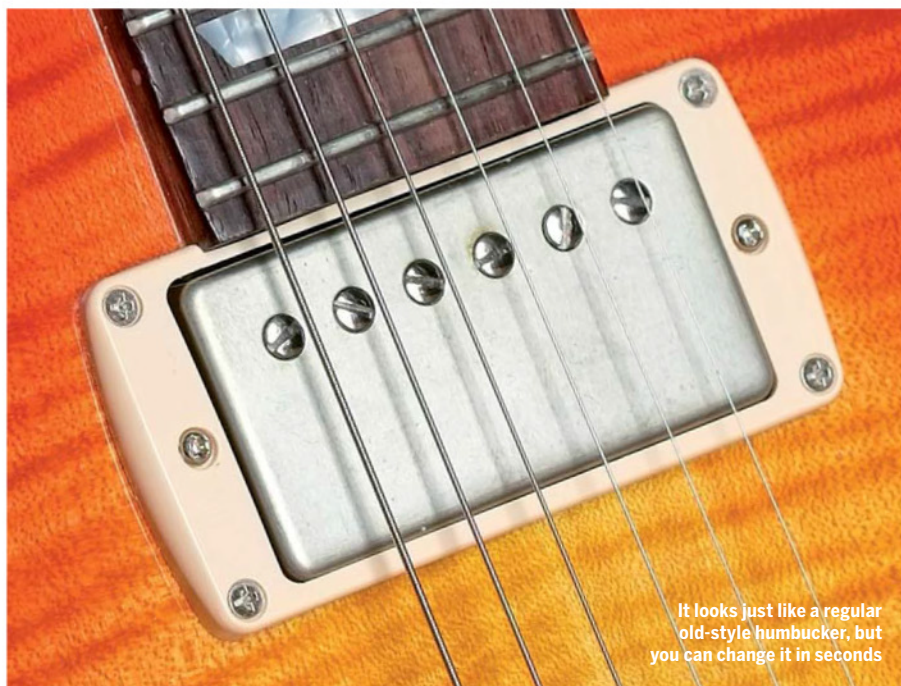
with Dave Burluck

## Writer

DAVE BURRLUCK  
Guitarist, Gear Reviews Editor



Our reviews editor calls time with a revolutionary guitar (and his soldering iron...) to see exactly what kind of versatility is at his fingertips



It looks just like a regular old-style humbucker, but you can change it in seconds

Reading through *Guitarist* issue 489 with its Holy Grails cover feature, I was reminded of how difficult it is to bring a new-design guitar to market. We devoted page after page to drop-dead gorgeous electrics... all designed before 1965. What hope does a new design really have?

At a recent live gig I strapped on this Cream T Aurora and kicked off our diverse set. But not one of my bandmates noticed there was anything 'different' about my guitar. I had a similar lack of reaction when I took out the second prototype last year. I wanted to shout, 'Hey! This guitar was co-designed by Billy Gibbons, you can swap pickups instantly, too!' But nobody noticed...

So maybe a new design can slip under the vintage radar and drop neatly into the 'new but classic-looking' category? I certainly think it's quite a classic-sounding

models? Or should the control closest to the bridge be the bridge pickup's volume, such as PRS's DGT, rather than the neck pickup volume, as here? Both volume controls have pull-switches that split the humbuckers voicing the inner coil, but they sound a little thin and bright. Hmm...

To cut a long story short, I downloaded the DGT wiring diagram from the PRS website and kept the Aurora controls as is. However, I added the PRS-style 180 picofarads treble-bleed capacitor to the volumes, and two resistors (1.1kohms on the neck and 2.2k on the bridge) to create 'partial' splits – something that David Grissom brought to the PRS canon and is now used on the majority of PRS humbucker/single-coil models. It's a mod that costs pence, much cheaper than the Dunlop Straploks I'd fitted for some onstage security.

Post-gig and resoldering, the Aurora is back in service to add parts to a demo recording. The Whiskerbuckers into a Helix Vox AC30-style amp simulation work perfectly for the lead parts, but for some rhythm parts I need something thinner sounding. Before I start fiddling with the amp, or thinking about a different guitar that might need restringing, I play the Aurora's trump card: its instant pickup-swapping. I pull out the Whiskerbuckers and replace 'em with an Original Banger at the bridge with a Duchess P-90 at the neck. Bingo! There's a little more cut and clarity, a different texture and character, but it doesn't sound like a completely different guitar.

It's still early days for this Cream T venture and the key to this pickup-swapping lark lies in being able to easily purchase different styles. Imagine a Filter'Tron, obviously true single coils, a vintage Ricky pickup, a Gold Foil, a high-output shredder, which you can instantly load in and out. If you're handy with a soldering iron, you can mount any humbucking-sized pickup to Relish's frame (or Cream T will do it for you). And don't forget, once Relish-mounted, your pickups will fit in Cream T's other current solidbody, the offset Crossfire, which costs £1,799 in its Skeleton form without pickups.

Two boutique-level guitars – a 'Gibson' and a 'Fender' – and a bunch of pickups that can be endlessly swapped in and out between the two isn't such a daft idea, is it? Of course, it's not cheap, but then neither the Aurora nor Crossfire feel nor sound anything but exceptional. It's a different way to look at your instrument. And, to be honest, I'm hooked. **G**

## "Imagine a Filter'Tron, a vintage Ricky pickup, a Gold Foil, a high-output shredder, which you can instantly load in and out"

guitar. When it's played live, with Cream T's Whiskerbuckers installed, it sounds like it might have been designed in the late 50s. I'll admit it's taken me a while to get used to its three controls – individual pickup volumes and a master tone – in terms of their placement and the way they work. Would a master volume/master tone control setup be better? Or maybe just have that tone on the bridge pickup – as Eastman has featured on its recent Romeo and Juliet

There's an improvement to those splits, which now sound subtly fuller and less thin, plus the slightly odd tapers of the originally wired pots seem improved by just changing a couple of wires around. 'You shouldn't need to be rewiring a guitar that costs £3k,' I hear you grumble. Well, I'm not so sure. One size doesn't fit all – not least on a guitar such as this where you can swap different pickups – and what suits Mr Cream T, or indeed BFG, might not quite suit you or me.

**Reviewed** 480 (as the Standard 2PS) **Price** £2,999 **On Test Since** May 2022 **Studio Sessions** Yes **Gigged** Yes **Mods** Yes **info@creamtguitars.com**



The Cream T Aurora with slightly modded wiring and Dunlop Straploks fitted. A classic in the making?







# ERJA LYYTINEN

The Finnish blues player reveals a new prototype guitar and a fondness for Eric Johnson Stratocasters...



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

"My father bought me my first guitar, actually. It was an Aria Pro II, you know, a kind of a Les Paul model. But the first guitar I bought myself was a red American Standard Stratocaster. So there was quite a difference between those two guitars, I think that changed my guitar playing back then. This was a really long time ago!

"I started to learn guitar with the Aria. It was quite a heavy guitar, but I liked it. It was beautiful and the tone was quite sweet and warm as those humbucker guitars usually are. I was around 14 or 15 years old and I had a background as a violin player, so I knew a lot of theory and all that. When I was around 15, my parents asked me to join their band, so I started at quite an early age. So, in a way, that was my first band."

## *What's the last guitar you bought?*

"My latest is from Ruokangas Guitars, a Finnish brand. We have been making this signature guitar for me and this is kind of a prototype, which I really like. I ended up playing almost all my guitar solos on my latest album [*Waiting For The Daylight*] with it. It has a smaller neck than on my Eric Johnson Stratocaster, which I use all the time when

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"When I was around 15, my parents asked me to join their band, so I started at quite an early age. That was my first band"

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I play around Europe and so on. It just instantly felt really good in my hands. I'm quite petite and I noticed I started to play differently. I started to play more challenging stuff with it as well. So after all the decades I've been playing electric guitar, I've discovered something new."

## *What is the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying gear?*

"I was teaching in a school for a little while and they had these instruments in storage. I saw this really beautiful yellow Tokai S-type that looked like it had been abandoned. At that time I was thinking it would be nice to get to know guitars better and maybe have a project guitar. So I said to the head teacher, 'There's this old electric guitar. Is it possible to maybe buy it from the school so I can fix it?' And she was like, 'It's old stuff, you can have it and just take it home.'"

"It's a Tokai from the 80s and it's really amazing. In fact, it's my favourite on shows nowadays. I simply love the tone of it, it has a lot of power and energy. So I was really lucky with that."

PHOTO BY HANNU JUUTILAINEN



**LIVE RIG**

"I have a Fender Super Reverb from 1968. It's a 4x10 and quite a loud one. I usually have it on 3, and I like to use a Plexiglas [screen] in front of it, so my sound technician is also very happy!"

"I have two small pedalboards that are combined, so it has a Fulltone wah, two distortion pedals [Xotic SL Drive distortion and the Mad Professor Little Green Wonder] and a DigiTech Whammy 5. I have a Wampler fuzz pedal and I've got a chorus pedal and delay from TC Electronics. Then I have a Suhr Jack Rabbit tremolo pedal and a Keeley Dyno My Roto, which I like to play when I do light chordal arpeggios.

There's an Electro-Harmonix Superego+ pedal, too.

"At the moment, my first choice of guitar is my Eric Johnson Stratocaster and I've been using this G&L Z-3 Semi-Hollow for my slide guitar."

***Have you ever bought a piece of gear that you've been particularly disappointed with?***

"I remember I bought this reverb module called an [Alesis] MidiVerb 4 back in the 90s. When I bought it I wanted to kind of expand my sound and so on. It had different presets for sounds and reverbs, but it wasn't as good as I would have wished."

***Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?***

"Sometimes I wonder about that first American Stratocaster I got myself. It would be interesting to still have it – it was a quality instrument. After that, I bought another American Stratocaster with Lace Sensor pickups on it. It was a bit smoother than a regular Stratocaster and that would have been interesting to have as well."

***What's your best guitar-buying tip?***

"I would say the feel and how the guitar inspires you. For me, that's really important. I do also love good-looking guitars, you know? I have a lot of sparkly guitars, but then I have a lot of road-worn guitars, which are brilliant, too. But the common thing is they inspire me to play differently. If it gives you something new, just go for it.

"When I was studying at the Los Angeles Musicians Institute I went to this guitar shop and they had this Mexican Stratocaster – it was \$250 back then – but it was so good. I mean, like, so good. And there was this guy in the shop who said to me, 'Oh, you sound like Muddy Waters!' And I said, 'Okay, I'm gonna get this...' It just felt really good. It was very cheap, but it was inspiring and I liked the tone."

***When was the last time you stopped to stare in a guitar shop window (or browsed online) and what were you looking at?***

"When I was recording my album I was thinking maybe I would get myself an acoustic 12-string guitar, so I was browsing through those. It would be great to have in the studio, it would add some nice textures to a song. That's on my 'gotta buy' list."

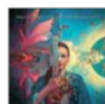
***Would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a really good amp?***

"Ouch, that is a tricky question! I would probably want to buy a more expensive guitar... but then again, I've just told you about buying a \$250 Stratocaster that works beautifully with all sorts of amps. So maybe a cheap guitar and a quality amp."

***If you could only use either humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be?***

"This is very easy for me. It's definitely single coils because when I play on stage I usually have two distortion pedals – I really love the Xotic SL Drive distortion and the Mad Professor Little Green Wonder – and I use those two together. So that's the way I get that fat distorted sound, like a humbucker kind of a sound." **[DM]**

Erja's penchant for sparkly guitars extends to this Blue Flake-finish G&L Z-3 Semi-Hollow, which is her go-to slide guitar



Erja Lyytinen's latest album, *Waiting For The Daylight*, is available now via Tuohi Records

[www.erjalyytinen.com](http://www.erjalyytinen.com)





# OFFSET DIY

Everyone's gone offset-mad. Dave Burrluck feels left out and decides to build his own... with a little help from StewMac

**E**xactly what has fuelled the offset trend I'm really not sure. What's for certain, though, is that seemingly every guitar maker is having a go at creating its own spin on the classic Jazzmaster/Jaguar-inspired style. But we're not talking copies here. No, the fun stuff invariably mixes up the references: an offset body but with a Telecaster bridge and pickups, or simply go the grunge route with dual humbuckers with or without a vibrato. There are loads of variations out there and some of my favourites come from the inspired imagination of Frank Deimel, a German maker who Nik Huber put me onto. Head over to his website (<https://deimelguitarworks.com>) and I guarantee he'll get your creative juices flowing. Fantastic stuff!

"The thing about a kit is you're not going to know what it will play and sound like until you've built it"

But with a quick bump back down to reality, us kitchen-table modders without fully-equipped workshops are a little more limited. The obvious choice is to find a used offset and get pimping, but that might mean we're stuck with a design, not to mention a finish, that's a considerable amount of work to restyle.

While Googling around I came across StewMac's offset guitar kits. One is hardtail with a shorter 624mm (24.56-inch) original Gibson-like scale length, the other – which caught my attention – features a Strat-style vibrato, a full Fender scale and a couple of P-90s. Okay, it's not the most original mash-up I've seen, but at around \$200, hey, I might be able to have some fun... not least of the experimental nature.

## What's In The Box?

Anyone who's looked at StewMac's website and indeed ordered all sorts of parts, will know that the company is extremely professional in everything it does. I've never bought anything from them that's been anything short of pro-level. Now, a relatively cheap kit like such as this [pic 1] isn't going to touch Nik Huber or Frank Deimel's build quality, but investigating the

well-packed box, there's everything you need plus a typically well-written 20-page Assembly Instructions pamphlet (which you can download from StewMac to take a look at what's involved in the build in advance of your purchase).

But the thing about a kit is that you're not going to know what it will play and sound like until you've built it. It's all too easy to devote time – and perhaps money if a third party is involved – to apply a body finish, only to find your kit-build looks great but really lacks in the sound and/or playability department. So while it might sound like the wrong way around to do it, I'm going to suggest you build the guitar *first* and if you get it playing well and sounding good, unbolt it all and *then* put a finish on.

You can get a feel of the outcome, however, by taking a closer look at the bits that we can't really change: the neck and body.

## Evaluation

This kit neck has a sort of 'half paddle' headstock; you could easily use it as is or cut it to your own design. Doing that by hand, as I've illustrated before, is perfectly possible, but it is pretty time-consuming. To be honest, the headstock here isn't too bad in its current form. Although not reversed, it recalls Kari Nieminen's Versoul headstock – and if that's good enough for Ronnie Wood, it's certainly okay by me.

So we have a plain maple slab-sawn neck with an Indian laurel fingerboard. The radius measures 305mm (12 inches) and the frets are on the smaller 'vintage' size, approximately 1.04mm high by 2.18mm wide. In terms of overall dimensions, the

neck measures 42.9mm wide at the nut, 52.33mm at the 12th fret and 56.05mm at the end. In depth it measures 21.5mm at the 1st fret, 24.3mm by the 12th. No surprises, then. Although, oddly, there are no side position dots, so these are something you may want to add.

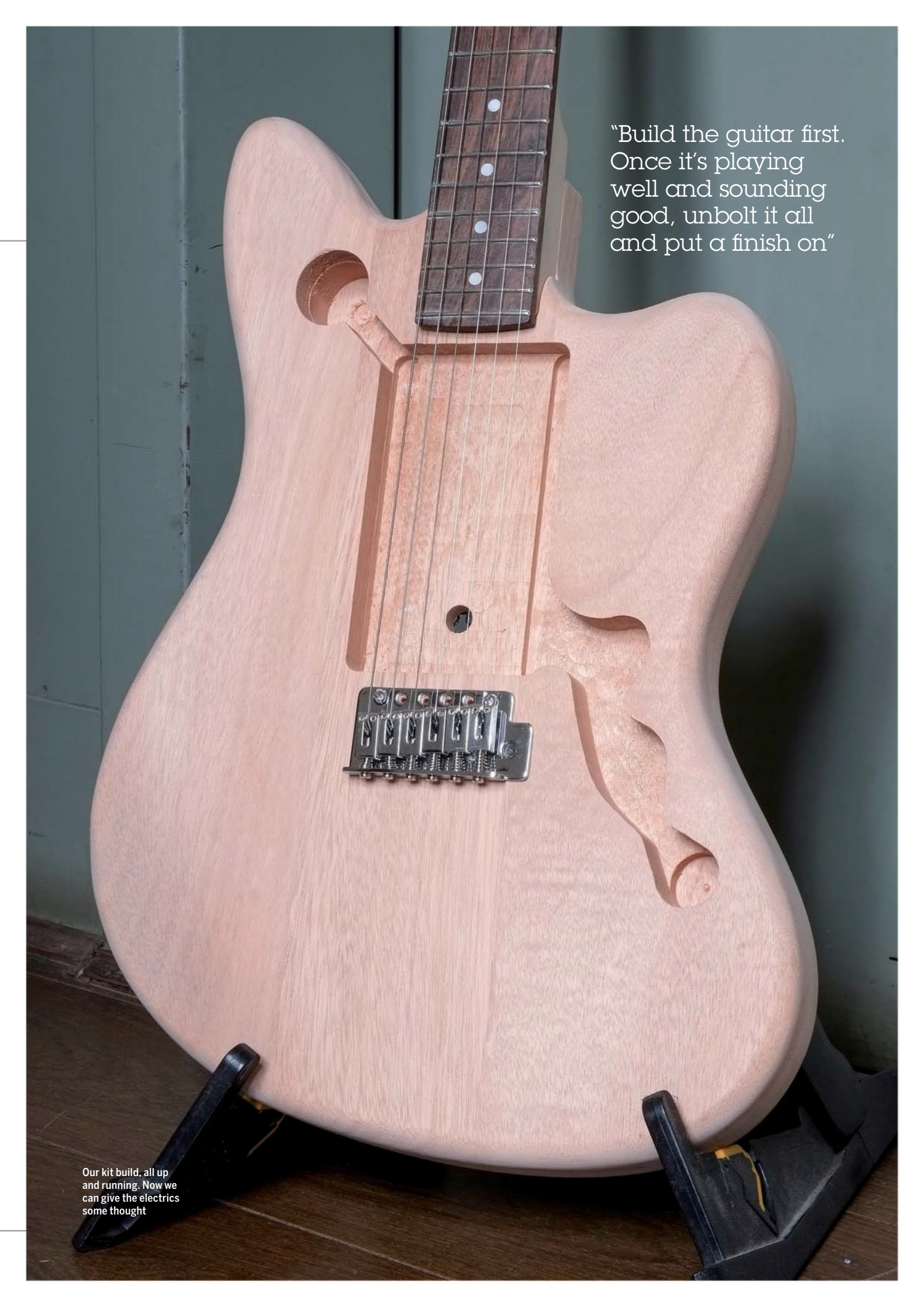
The mahogany body is pretty much a Jazzmaster clone – very slightly smaller compared with the real thing – and is cleanly machined; ours is a three-piece spread. It weighs 1.97kg (4.3lb), which suggests, from a 'formula' we knocked up back in issue 483, that the overall weight of the finished guitar will be around 3.65kg (8lb). Not too bad for the style.

Obviously, the hardware is basic: generic enclosed tuners and a vibrato with a steel top-plate and block saddles, and a thin cast alloy block. The string spacing is the modern standard of 52.5mm.

The pickup switch, master volume and tone controls, and output jack are pre-wired and attached to the white/black/white scratchplate, which has two open holes for the P-90 single coils that will screw directly to the body. As you can see, the body has a 'swimming pool' rout so you could certainly consider different pickups at a later stage, although that would involve getting a new scratchplate made. Anyway, that's something for the future. The two single coils look tidy enough with DCRs of 9.64kohms (bridge) and 8.54k (neck), while the volume measures 254k and the tone is 234k. The tone cap is very neatly soldered between the pot casing and its three lugs, but you can't see the value – we can worry about that at a later stage.



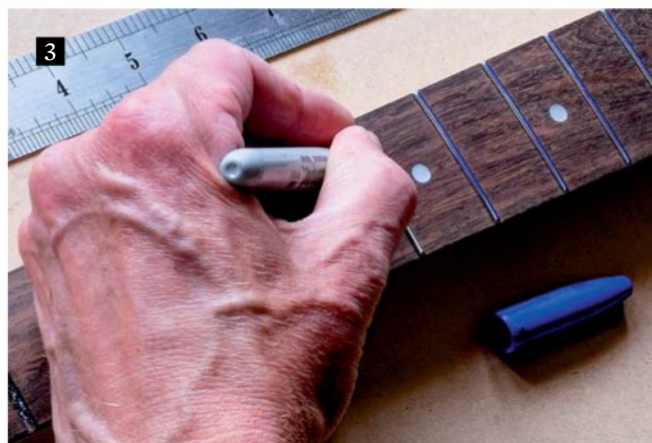




"Build the guitar first.  
Once it's playing  
well and sounding  
good, unbolt it all  
and put a finish on"

Our kit build, all up  
and running. Now we  
can give the electrics  
some thought





### Getting To Work

After getting the neck as straight as you can (in my case by tightening the dual-action truss rod and sighting with a 24-inch straight edge), you can check the frets are level with a Fret Rocker. StewMac suggests that if there's a high spot, try lightly tapping the guilty fret to make sure it's properly seated [pic 2]. We don't have a lot of fret height, so the less that has to be removed when we level, the better.

With things as level as I can get them, I need to lightly skim the tops and reprofile each fret. This is a process we've covered numerous times in The Mod Squad and it's really not as tricky as it sounds. You can level with a flat file or a straight beam with abrasive paper attached. Personally, I use a fine oilstone – typically used for sharpening planes and chisels, but this one is just used for fret levelling. Usually an oilstone has two grades, lighter and heavier, that are fused

2. Using a nylon-tipped fretting hammer by Thor to lightly seat any high frets
3. Before you level, mark each fret with a Sharpie
4. Lightly skimming the fret tops with the fine side of an oilstone



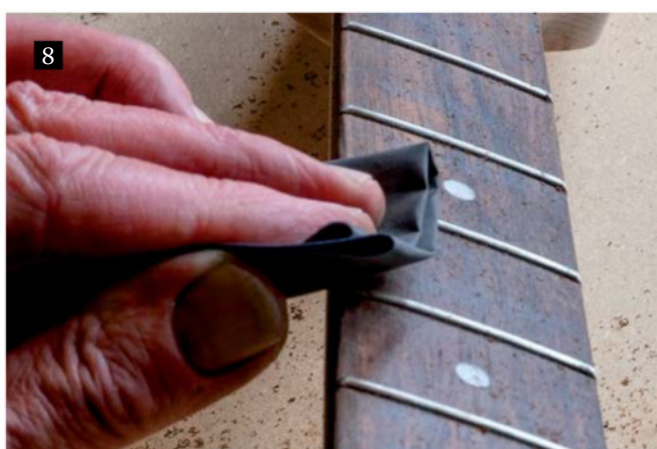
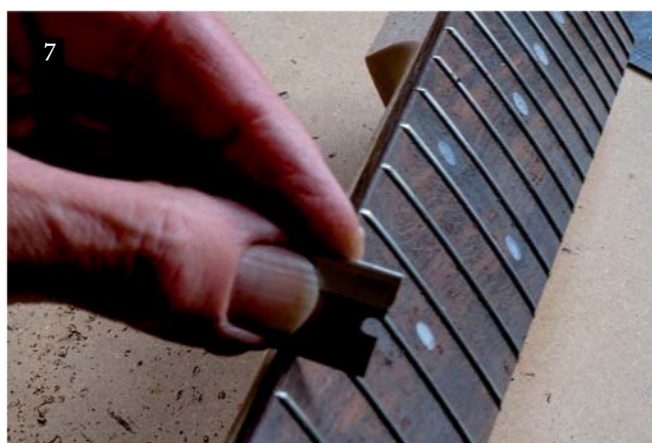
"Hats off to StewMac, the neck and body line up well; even the saddles have been adjusted to ensure pretty accurate intonation"

together; here, we're only after skimming the minimum so I only use the fine side. As ever, mark each fret with a blue or red Sharpie [pic 3] so you can see where you've levelled. Rub lightly up and down the frets a few times [pic 4] then across – you should see the oilstone has cut away those Sharpie marks. Double-check with that Fret Rocker again, and if you're good, you're ready to reprofile. I'm using a StewMac Z-File that we spotlighted back in issue 480 [pic 5].

I then use 600-grit wet and dry paper on a wooden or flat cork block across the

5. Once level, here we're using a StewMac Z-File to reprofile the fret tops
- 5a. Smoothing the reprofiled tops with abrasive paper on a cork block, moving across the neck from side to side





frets again, followed by 800-grit, which is usually fine enough at this stage [pic 5a].

Next, we need to take a look at the fret ends and the fingerboard edges. The former are a little proud – they feel sharp to the touch – so again I just use the oilstone, at an angle, up and down the edges. Then I can round the sharp ends with a small file – again, a StewMac Fret End File [pic 6]. I then turn my attention to the fingerboard edges, rounding them with a backed razor

blade [pic 7], then 600-grit paper, which will obviously smooth the fret ends, too [pic 8]. I like my wire wool and as we have no pickups nearby and it's easy to vacuum up any debris, 0000 wire wool will really smooth not only the frets but also the fingerboard face and those edges [pic 9]. You can certainly polish the frets at this stage, although I decide to do that when I get to the setup. I just give the fingerboard a quick rub with white spirit and leave it there for the moment [pic 10].

With the 'board looking and feeling pretty ship-shape, the headstock and neck stack need to be hand-sanded, going through the grades and paying attention to the relatively sharp edges of that headstock. As I'll invariably oil-finish the neck back, I go to a much finer grit paper than if I was going to apply a nitro (or other) finish. Even before oiling you need to be going for an ultra-smooth, almost burnished feel.

Unusually, perhaps, the holes for the neck screws are already drilled into the neck base. Normally, the holes in the body are drilled and then – with tuners and bridge in place – you clamp the neck to the body, get the spacing correct, then mark and drill those holes into the neck base. I'm hoping that the neck and body will line up, otherwise I'll need to fill the holes in the neck, line up and redrill.

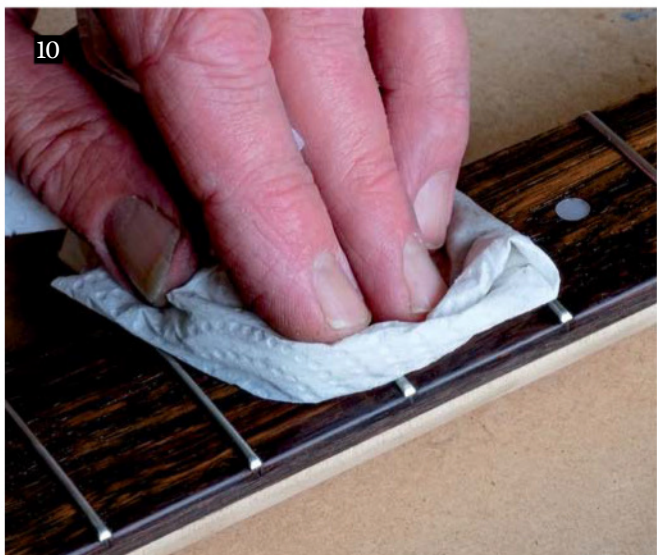
6. Each fret end needs to be smoothed and rounded before moving on

7. A backed razor makes rounding the fingerboard edges simple

8. After the razor blade, a vigorous rub with abrasive paper smooths the fingerboard edges and fret ends

9. A final rub with 0000 wire wool finishes the job for now. Don't forget to vacuum up the debris!

10. A quick dab of white spirit on a kitchen towel leaves the 'board looking good





## Body Works

If those holes in the neck base are a surprise, rather oddly the two holes needed to screw in the spring claw aren't drilled. StewMac suggests using a very long 'aircraft style' drill bit, which I don't have, but a simple hand drill with a 3mm bit does the job, obviously after I've marked the holes and centred them [pic 11].

Again, I sand the body, firstly making sure the curves and edge radius are really smooth – like you'd see on a Nik Huber

"Unplugged, the kit guitar has quite a lively, zingy response that's undamped by any finish"

or Seth Baccus bolt-on. I go through the grades and finally lightly wet the body then leave it to dry. This will have slightly raised the grain, so lightly resand again with the final sandpaper grade you've used. Things should feel pretty smooth.

Before you screw in the neck you need to mount the tuners and reinstall the vibrato. As I said, the tuners and the vibrato are quite generic in style and I decide to use my first modding card by installing a pukka set of Gotoh SD91s – which also require a set of six larger ferrules as the headstock holes have been drilled larger for the modern-diameter tuners, not the vintage style Gotohs [pic 12].

A pre-cut nut is supplied and, although that'll need final cutting and shaping, it's good enough to see if everything lines up.



Using a hand drill to make the holes for the spring-claw's mounting screws

I must say I was intrigued to see if the pre-drilled holes in the neck actually mean that when I've screwed it to the body things line up. The kit comes with a set of cheapo strings that are perfectly adequate for making sure everything aligns and to carry out a basic setup. Why waste a good set?

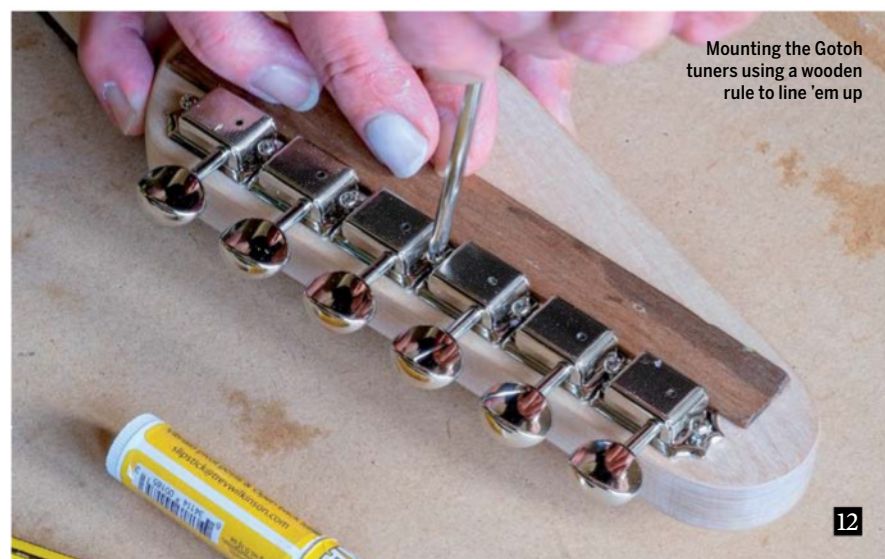
Hats off to StewMac, the neck and body line up really well; even the saddles have been adjusted to approximately the right height and position to ensure pretty accurate intonation. I decide to fine-tune things. After checking I have very slight relief in the neck, I lower the nut grooves and fine-tune the saddle height and radius until the guitar is playing pretty well.

Obviously, I can only listen to the unplugged sound, and what I hear is quite a lively, zingy response that's completely

undamped by any finish. Although we have a Strat-style vibrato at this stage I haven't added one or two string trees so I'm hearing a little of the Jazzmaster's funkiness.

There are some woodworking issues to consider: there's a slight edge where the shoulders of the neck meet the fingerboard, and the transition of the neck into the body heel could be improved, not to mention the body heel's rather sharp edges. If you'd rushed into putting a finish on you really couldn't alter any of these details. Building in the 'white' like this, there's nothing stopping you from reshaping any of these details.

And while I'm pretty eager to mount the electrics as soon as I can, I decide to leave the offset to get used to being a guitar for a time. I'm even quite liking the open body routs. Hmm, I wonder...



Mounting the Gotoh tuners using a wooden rule to line 'em up

## WHAT'S THE COST?

It's too early to conclude the overall quality of this kit, so we'll revisit that another time. But what have we spent on the build up to this point?

- StewMac Offset Trem Guitar Kit: £165 (at time of writing)  
Shipping (exc. import taxes etc): £86  
[www.stewmac.com](http://www.stewmac.com)

- Gotoh SD91 tuners: approx. £48  
[www.wdmusic.co.uk](http://www.wdmusic.co.uk)

Total spend (so far): £299

*That should give you something to think about till our next issue.  
In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.*





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**Guitarist**





# Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

Despite technological advances, we still can't get enough of the humble valve...

## Preamp Valves

**I**n previous decades, transistors offered guitarists cheaper and lighter amplifiers, and today digital amplifier modelling technology can achieve astonishing sound quality. But huge numbers of guitarists remain addicted to the bottle – or thermionic valve if you prefer.

Thermionic valves come in many forms and their names tell us how many working parts are contained within that glass or metal enclosure, not including the heater. The simplest form of valve is the diode, which only contains an anode and a cathode. A heated cathode releases negatively charged electrons into the vacuum, hence the terms 'thermionic emission' and 'thermionic valve'. With AC voltage from

the power transformer connected between the anode (aka plate) and cathode, current flows through the valve when the AC is in its positive phase at the anode because it attracts the electrons. When the AC is in its negative phase, no electrons are attracted to the anode and no current flows.

With current flowing in one direction but not the other, diodes can be compared to non-return valves used in plumbing applications – and that's how the name 'valve' came about. As a catch-all label, 'valve' has remained in use here in the UK long after the introduction of triodes, tetrodes and pentodes rendered it inaccurate and inappropriate. In the US, they prefer to say 'tube'.

Diode valves can be found in guitar amps and they're called rectifiers. They're used in the power supply as the first stage in converting AC to DC, but many later designs employ solid-state diodes rather than valve rectification. Diodes valves are not used in amplifier preamps, but the anode/cathode arrangement helps us understand how preamp valves work.

### Triodes

Triodes are the valves most often found in the preamp section of a guitar amp and, like diodes, a triode employs an anode and a cathode. The added element is a control grid, which can be considered the 'audio input'.

Amplifier power supply stages convert the AC (alternating current) coming out of a wall socket into DC (direct current). In simplified terms, the rectified HT supply is connected to the anode and the cathode connects to ground. Voltage is also applied to the heater, usually 6.3 volts AC but sometimes 12 volts DC to minimise noise.

Since the anode is always positively charged and the cathode is always negative, direct current flows through the valve. This is called the 'idle current', much like the idle revs on your car engine when you're waiting

Triodes are the valves most often found in the preamp section of amps and use an anode and a cathode

for the lights to go green. The interesting stuff starts happening when the alternating current generated by a guitar pickup is connected to the control grid.

An alternating current has positive and negative phases, which causes the grid to vary between positive and negative charge accordingly. When positively charged, the grid ensures a greater number of electrons reach the anode, so current flow through the valve increases. But when the control grid becomes negatively charged, this means that fewer electrons reach the anode and current flow drops. In short, direct current flowing through the valve becomes an alternating current when guitar signal appears on the control grid.



Rectifier valves such as the 5U4G (left) in this 1950 Fender Pro Amp are diodes



A Mullard ECC83 triode  
preamp valve of the  
kind made famous in  
Marshall Plexis



Huge numbers  
of guitarists  
remain addicted  
to the bottle – or  
thermionic valve  
if you prefer



1. This early Marshall JTM45 and others of its ilk ushered in a new era of hotter blues playing – and with it, the need for yet more gain
2. The interaction between the small, gain-forming preamp valves and the larger power valves is complex and helps define the amp's voice

Having said all that, the primary purpose of a triode valve – and indeed the amplifier itself – is to increase the amplitude of the input signal. In order to achieve that, two external components are required. A resistor is connected between the HT voltage supply and the plate, with a 'bias' resistor between the cathode and ground to control the current flowing through the valve.

We won't get into the complex subject of bias setting and gain manipulation here. For amplification purposes, the plate resistor will be larger than the bias resistor, with typical values being 100k/1.5k (Fender), 100k/820R (Marshall) and 220k/2.2k (Vox).

The guitar signal appearing at the control grid is measured in millivolts, but the voltage at the anode can exceed 200 volts. As the current flowing through the valve alternates, so does the voltage across the plate resistor. The wavelength and frequency of the alternating voltage at the anode will be identical to the guitar signal, but amplitude is far greater. In a nutshell, that's amplification.

## Pentodes

When gain is set beyond the capability of a triode, capacitance between the plate and the control grid can cause oscillation. This is known as the Miller Effect, and to overcome it valve designers introduced a screen grid between the anode and control grid. When positively charged at a voltage lower than the anode, the grid acts as an electrostatic shield.

But the resulting tetrode valve can have issues, too, because electrons hitting the anode at higher velocity may cause additional electrons to be emitted from the anode itself. This is called secondary emission and when these unwanted

Hi-fi enthusiasts appreciate the clarity of dual triode valves and they're suited to old-school jazz guitar

electrons are attracted to the screen grid, there's a loss of plate current and amplification is lower than it should be.

As a consequence, tetrode preamp tubes aren't used in guitar amps, but pentodes are. Pentodes have a third grid located between the screen grid and the anode. This is called a 'suppressor grid' and it is connected to the cathode – and because it's negatively charged it bounces secondary emissions back to the anode. With an anode, cathode, control grid, screen grid and a suppressor grid, a pentode has five component parts – hence the name. Pentodes are more efficient than triodes and are capable of far higher gain, but they can prove noisy and unreliable in guitar amps.

## Octal Triodes

Prior to the mid-50s, most guitar amps had octal preamp triodes. They can be easily mistaken for small power valves because they look much like 6V6s and plug into the same style eight-pin sockets – again, hence the name. The most common are the 6SC7, 6SN7 and the 6SL7 found in early Fender tweeds, various Gibson GA models and Ampegs. All are dual triode valves, housing electronically independent triodes with a shared heater.

These types of valves provide decent gain – especially the 6SC7 and 6SL7 types – and they combine full-bodied midrange tones with sweet treble. Hi-fi enthusiasts appreciate their clarity and they're ideally suited to old-school jazz guitar tones. But Fender's way of configuring them back in the early days of the V-Front Super and Dual Professional and TV Front Pro brought





out a smooth, fat and dirty grind that's perfect for raw blues and classic ZZ Top tones. When heavily overdriven, they're also pleasingly devoid of the edgy fizz of some later amp designs.

Most of the common variants remain in production and new-old-stock examples are widely available. Unfortunately, both are prone to microphonics and you're usually better off buying from a reputable valve supplier who can test the valves prior to dispatch and offer a warranty.

### Mini Triodes

These are the dual-triode preamp valves most of us will be familiar with. Requiring smaller nine-pin sockets, the most commonly used examples include the ECC83, 7025, 12AX7, ECC81, ECC82 and 12AY7. Although they all have different gain characteristics, most are interchangeable, but sonic performance may be compromised without tweaking the circuit for that specific valve. The ECC88 is an exception because its pin connections are arranged differently.

The 12AX7/ECC83 – and the 'low noise' equivalent, the 7025 – is by far the most common preamp valve for guitar amps, and with a gain factor around 100, it's

ideal for the job. When Fender tweed amps transitioned to mini triodes, the 12AY7/6072 was preferred for V1. With a gain factor around 44, the 12AY7 has a clear and open tone and the amp will run cleaner. Since most tweed fans are in it for the overdrive, replacing a 12AY7 with a 12AX7/ECC83/7025 will make an amp livelier and quicker to distort.

If a gain factor of 100 sounds too hot, a 5751 (aka 12AT7) can provide a nice halfway point with a gain factor of 70. The 5751 is a great-sounding plug-and-play replacement for a 12AX7. The ECC81/12AT7 has a gain factor of about 60, but it can sound a bit bland and more often shows up in phase inverter or reverb driver applications.

The ECC82/12AU7 has a gain factor of just 20, so it's unsuitable for guitar preamp duties. However, it works well in phase inverters where no gain is required and can be used for effects loop buffering.

### The Power Of Pentodes

In contrast to double triodes, pentode valves contain individual units and you can't replace a triode with a pentode because the pin connections differ. Although less common in guitar amps, the clarity and brightness of pentodes are desirable

characteristics for guitar amps. They also produce significantly higher levels of gain than any single triode.

Pentodes have a long history in guitar amps. Octal versions such as the 6J7 featured in the earliest tweed Fender Champs and Gibson's EH-185 and BR-6. Later nine-pin mini pentodes such as the EF86 can be found in early Vox AC30s, AC15s and AC10s, as well as Vox-inspired modern amps made by Matchless, TopHat, Dr Z and 65. Another mini pentode called the 5879 was used in 1950s Gibson amps, like the wonderful GA40.

There are also oddball valves such as the ECF82 found in original Vox AC10s, which combine a triode and a pentode in a single glass enclosure. But just like regular pentodes, the big issue is finding examples that are non-microphonic and will stay non-microphonic. The ringing and squealing can be especially problematic at high volume, and amp manufacturers try to alleviate the problem by mounting pentode sockets on rubber spacers and placing dampener rings around the glass.

Well, that's about it for preamp valves, but no doubt we'll be taking a close look at power valves very soon... 

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## Guest Speakers

Having dealt with a 1x12, Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough grabs a 4x12 to discuss the considerations – and tonal opportunities – when changing multiple speakers

**R**ecently in issue 489, we talked about how to change speakers in a 1x12 cab or combo. Now we're going to take a look at changing more than one speaker in a cab. The basics are the same, so this time we'll look at some of the finer details.

When we're getting set to change speakers in a cab or combo, it makes sense to start with a 1x12: the wiring is much simpler, there are fewer issues regarding impedance, and it's just less daunting for a first timer. With a bigger cab, even though there are still the same two main reasons for wanting to change a speaker – a fault or to add a different tonal characteristic to your amp/cab – multiple-speaker cabinets offer more situations in which either of these two reasons can arise, while at the same time greatly increasing the scope to achieve new and interesting sounds. It also gives us an opportunity to explore a few more important details that are relevant to single-speaker cabs, such as impedance, power rating and a speaker's sensitivity in a bit more detail.

In the past we have briefly touched on mixing speakers (mostly some of my personal favourites), and this is a topic we'll definitely pick up in the near future, but a broken speaker can often be the spark that initiates a new and different speaker's

introduction into a cab. Sometimes it might be because it's a spare that's lying around, and other times this scenario is just a good excuse to give a new speaker a go.

There are a few things to note here, though. It is always important to ensure the impedance (marked with the word 'ohms' or the Greek omega symbol:  $\Omega$ ) of the replacement speaker is the same as the speaker it is replacing. If not, the power distribution between the two speakers can result in a mismatch in volume and potentially damage your amp.

The sensitivity rating (often marked as a number near to 100 followed by dB) ideally wants to be the same as the speaker it's going to be replacing. This ensures the new speaker won't overpower the other speaker(s) in the cab. In my opinion, this isn't essential in most cases, but it is a good rule to stick to, at least for your first few times.

Now, power rating is the one everyone normally focuses on – and for good reason. It doesn't have to be the same as the replacement speaker, but it does need to be at least half that of the maximum output of your amp... So a 100-watt combo will need at least two 50-watt speakers. If the two original speakers were 60 watts, a replacement speaker will still need to be rated at 50 watts or ideally more.

With the next part, series and parallel wiring, you're going to realise why I started with a 1x12. Remember the science lesson where you had to connect light bulbs together in two different ways and you sat there thinking, 'What's the point in this?' Well, your physics teacher was preparing you for switching out guitar speakers in your kick-ass vintage combo. The brightness of the bulbs, when connecting in a string (of bulbs) in series or parallel is analogous to how the signal from the amp flows through the speakers in a cab, which can have tonal implications for various reasons. At this point, the main thing to note is that if the cab was wired in series before, then you need to do this when replacing the speaker as this can have a big implication on the overall impedance of the cab.

There are equations that can be used to work out the overall impedance of two or more speakers, but the quick explanation

**"Multiple-speaker cabinets greatly increase the scope of achieving new and interesting sounds"**

goes like this: two eight-ohm speakers wired in series give you a 16-ohm cab; two 16-ohm speakers wired in parallel give you an eight-ohm cab. So an eight-ohm 2x12 will nearly always have two 16-ohm speakers wired in parallel, and a 16-ohm 2x12 will nearly always have two eight-ohm speakers wired in series. A 4x12 will normally be the same impedance as the individual speakers in that cab. It can be confusing to explain in words, so if in doubt, seek out a wiring diagram online and it will all make sense.

Again, the physical act of changing a speaker is very similar no matter how many there are in the cab, though cabs with multiple speakers do introduce a few more elements to consider. This said, you can't go far wrong if you copy the original specs – assuming the original specs were correct! **G**







This 4x12 speaker cabinet belonged to Rory Gallagher and contains four different speakers. Due to the multiple changes that were made over the years, it's hard to determine what the original speakers were





# Rod Brakes' Classic Gear

The popular Mustang is a 'student' guitar enjoyed by masterful players

## Fender Mustang

**F**ender's practice of branding products in an effort to appeal to aspiring students goes back to the very early days of the 1940s with the Princeton lap steel and amp. And in the mid-50s, following the groundbreaking success of the pro-level Telecaster and Stratocaster models, the firm turned its attention towards producing solidbody electric guitars for students. Appearing in the 1956 catalogue alongside the Harvard amp, the single-pickup Musicmaster was partnered with the dual-pickup Duo-Sonic. Advertised "for adults and young musicians with small hands", both were touted as "¾ size" and featured a short 22.5-inch scale length (Strats, Teles and Jazzmasters have a full 25.5-inch scale).

By the mid-60s, Leo Fender's business partner, Don Randall, was pushing to extend their range of student solidbodies with a vibrato-equipped model. Thus, in 1964, the Mustang appeared sporting Fender's Dynamic Vibrato system. Though it retained the same 22.5-inch scale as its predecessors, the new dual-pickup guitar was also offered with a Jaguar-style 24-inch scale length, and this proved to be the most popular option by far. Featuring a solid maple neck with a rosewood fretboard and an offset poplar body, the Mustang came in a choice of three standard colours: Red, White and Blue (otherwise known as Dakota Red, Olympic White and Daphne Blue on Fender's custom colour chart).

Priced \$189.50, the Mustang sat between the \$159.50 Duo-Sonic and \$209.50 Tele on

the list. Much like its automobile namesake was for Ford in 1964, the Mustang was a massive success for Fender, the orders stacking up way beyond expectation. Its four-string equivalent, the 30-inch scale Mustang Bass, appeared a couple of years later and found favour with some seasoned musicians including The Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman. Other notable Mustang Bass players include Justin Meldal-Johnsen (Beck, St Vincent) who currently has his own signature model, and Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads.

Although the Mustang and Mustang Bass were discontinued in the early 80s, the 90s saw Fender offsets explode in popularity, thanks to guitarists such as John Frusciante, J Mascis and Thurston Moore. Similarly,

The Mustang was a massive success for Fender, the orders stacking up way beyond expectation

Kurt Cobain had great cultural impact in the earlier part of the decade and the Nirvana frontman did much to (re)acquaint guitarists with the humble Fender Mustang. Though it is often thought of as inferior to the iconic Strat or Tele (the 'student' tag doesn't help), the Mustang has served many a guitarist well over the years, including Adrian Belew, Todd Rundgren and Theresa Wayman of Warpaint.

In recent times, the sheer breadth of choice and relative affordability of Fender's classic electric guitars has rendered the concept of a bespoke 'student' design somewhat irrelevant. There's now a Strat, Tele, Jag and Jazzmaster for every budget from Squier to the Custom Shop. But it's not just the 'big four' that sail from the low hundreds and way past the thousand mark. Right now, the "100 per cent designed by Fender" Squier Bullet Mustang HH is a steal at £149.99, while the American Performer Mustang will set you back well over a grand. And with original examples now pushing a few thousand quid on the vintage market (sometimes more for a Competition Mustang), owning one of these classic guitars isn't just a cheap option any more. **G**

## The Evolution of the Fender Mustang

**1964**

Mustang released; Dynamic Vibrato; Red, White and Blue finishes

**1965 to 1966**

Some with slab rosewood fretboard

**1966**

Mustang Bass released

**1967**

No "offset contour body" headstock decal; vibrato patent number

**1969**

Body and forearm contours; Competition striped finishes (Red, Orange and Burgundy); matching headstocks

**1970**

Sunburst finish available

**1973**

Olympic White finish available; Competition finishes discontinued

**1974**

Black and Walnut finishes available

**Late 70s**

Fretted maple neck optional; Antigua, Wine, Blond and Natural finishes available

**1981**

Discontinued





PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD ECCLESTONE/REDERNS/GETTY IMAGES



## 1970 Fender Mustang

### 1. SERIAL NUMBER

Six-digit number stamped onto neckplate

### 2. HEADSTOCK

Gold/black 'Fender Mustang' decal; matching Competition Red finish; single string tree

### 3. PLASTICS

White tuner buttons; three-layer (w/b/w) pickguard (pearloid standard); two black pickup covers; two black sliding switches; two black control knobs; black vibrato arm tip (white standard)

### 4. HARDWARE

Chrome-plated: Dynamic Vibrato system, detachable bridge cover, control plate, 'F' logo tuners and 'F' logo neckplate; floating bridge with six adjustable saddles; two metal strap buttons

### 5. PICKUPS

Two Stratocaster-style single-coil pickups; independent pickup switches (on/off/phase); one master volume pot; one master tone pot; front-loading jack socket

### 6. BODY

Poplar; double cutaway; offset waist; forearm and belly contours; Competition Red poly finish

### 7. NECK

Maple; rosewood fretboard; 24-inch scale length; 22 frets; pearloid dot markers; adjustable truss rod

2. In 1976, the serial number moved from the neckplate to the headstock, while a second string tree and metal tuner buttons became standard

4. When set up properly, Fender's Dynamic Vibrato is stable and reliable with an action that sits somewhere between a Jaguar/Jazzmaster and Stratocaster vibrato







# David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

This one-off Tele features ornate body laminations and a fretted rosewood neck

## Fender 'Stringer' Telecaster



This experimental Tele gets its name from the veneer 'strings' that run through the body to separate the different woods

**T**his guitar probably left the factory around 1975, but it was put together earlier on by Philip Kubicki in Fender's R&D department. It was likely made around '75 as the original pots date to then. Philip Kubicki was an apprentice to renowned guitar-builder Roger Rossmeisl, and they both worked on the George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster [made in 1968] and the Hendrix Rosewood Stratocaster prototypes. Kubicki also worked on the Thinline Telecaster, LTD and Montego projects. He ended up becoming a production manager at Fender and was 'the guy' when Rossmeisl left [in the early 70s]. There are some very experimental guitars that Kubicki made, and this is one of them. When I met him in the 80s, he was already out of Fender and was busy building his [Factor] Bases. The store I was with was a dealer for them. He was a very smart guy and had a lot of interesting CBS-era Fender stories.

"This guitar features a solid rosewood neck with a maple skunk stripe and headstock plug, like a regular production Rosewood Tele – not a rosewood cap, like Harrison's prototype Rosewood Tele. It must have been a leftover Rosewood Telecaster neck that he used [Rosewood Telecasters were manufactured sporadically between 1968 and 1972]. There is no serial number on the neckplate, just the 'F' Fender logo, which makes sense as it's a prototype guitar. It sounds very much like a Rosewood Telecaster. We were trying to match the guitar's sound with other Teles we have here so that we could write a description for the website. But it didn't sound like an ash-body Tele. And it didn't

sound like an alder-body Tele. We just kept going through guitars and the closest thing we could find to it was a 1970 Rosewood Telecaster that we have here.

"The body is crazy. Evidently, a lot of work went into this electric guitar. I imagine every type of wood Kubicki had on his bench went into it. It's made from pieces of alder, ash, ebony, mahogany, padauk, purpleheart and spruce. And there are a couple of woods that I can't identify. There are about 35 different pieces of wood that make up the body. They call this guitar the Stringer because it looks like there are strings running through it – tiny little

"The body is  
made from alder, ash,  
ebony, mahogany,  
padauk, purpleheart  
and spruce"

veneers that just separate the different woods. It's got these black strings running through that are made of ebony to contrast with the light woods. And to contrast with the darker pieces, Kubicki used thin strips of white wood. It really is something else.

"It's got a black pickguard with pearloid on the back, just like a late-60s Rosewood Tele. And the bridge and knobs are late 60s, too. Because the original pots are dated to 1975, I think this guitar was finally assembled after lying around the workshop unfinished for a long time. It eventually went out the door with someone, somehow. When I first came across this guitar years ago, the person who had it showed it to

me said, 'I think this is a partscaster.' And I said, 'Yeah? I don't think so. I think you've got something really cool there. Would you mind if I open it up with you?' So we did, and we discovered Philip's signature inside. It's located in the bridge/pickup rout.

"So, despite the pots, I believe this guitar was made prior to 1975; it was just finished and left the factory then, or after. I showed it to someone who also worked at Fender and was familiar with it, and he said that they were trying to create an instrument that was a showpiece for all the different types of woods you could select. But it's all folklore. It's important to remember that a lot of old-timers left Fender in the late 60s and they also hired new staff, so stories often got mixed up. I think it was probably more of a pet project for Philip Kubicki – when he had time. But the level of detail that went into creating this guitar is a little extreme. Fender didn't make stuff like this in the 70s. Usually the quality is nowhere near as good. You can tell that a lot of special care went into it.

"It's in incredible condition. No work has ever been done to it and it's got no extra holes. All the wood looks beautiful and is blemish-free. It's not the lightest guitar; it's in the upper sevens [pounds]. For a Telecaster, that's maybe a little on the heavier side, but then there's a lot of glue holding it all together! But it's a really, really nice piece, and you don't get to see guitars like this very often. That's what we're all about at Well Strung Guitars – seeing stuff you can't see anywhere else!" **[RB]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York  
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A true one-off made by Phil Kubicki in Fender's R&D department

PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON



# Blues Headlines

*Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks*



## Open G Slide

**Tutor** Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Telecaster, Boss Keeley SD-1 & Vox AC15 C1

**Difficulty** ★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

Joe Walsh set his own benchmark for slide on *Rocky Mountain Way* in the early 70s



**OPEN TUNINGS ARE GREAT** for playing slide and hark back to the early days of the blues – as well as Hawaiian guitar, which originally popularised both slide and open tuning. In fact, Son House used to refer to slide playing as 'Hawaiian style'. The example licks here are played in open G (low to high: DGDGBD), with a more modern distorted tone that's inspired by Joe Walsh's approach on the classic tune *Rocky Mountain Way*. These ideas can be tackled separately or as a complete solo, you choose. They're designed to help expand the vocabulary of players who want to get into slide and/or open tunings but don't know where to start.

The most challenging aspect of playing slide is sorting out your intonation. To do this, you need to get used to positioning the slide directly over the fret, rather than just behind as with conventional fingering. Another valuable tip is to mute behind the slide (nut side) for a clearer note. This is especially important when playing on acoustic. The material and weight of the slide also makes a difference. Brass, steel and glass all have different tones and various degrees of handling noise, which (within reason) should be regarded as part and parcel of this style.

Another consideration is which finger you wish to wear the slide on. The best advice here is to go with what is most comfortable. I've opted for with the third finger of my fretting hand, but I know Joe Walsh uses his second/middle finger. You may find that a super-low action and very light strings feel a little flimsy, but if you have an average setup and string gauge, you can cultivate a light touch, which minimises the need for super-heavy strings or a light action – an approach that certainly seems to work for Derek Trucks. Hope you enjoy the licks and see you next time! 🎸



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



## Example 1

**THIS FIRST EXAMPLE** is played exclusively between the 10th and 12th frets. Though it's important to get the intonation as accurate as possible, sliding into notes and adding vibrato (all the things singers are warned against!) can give us a little wiggle room when settling into a note. However, we aren't necessarily looking for perfection – slightly sharp or flat can be very expressive in the right context, as long as it's on the right side of 'in-tune'.

Swung

All slides with bottleneck

Tuning: DGDGBD 1

## Example 2

**THIS EXAMPLE TRAVELS AROUND THE FRETBOARD** a little more, though you'll see I'm still using a similar approach to Example 1. Sliding up to the 5th fret gives us a C major chord to play with, where I'm adding a quick sus4 (F) in bar 1, then heading down to the 3rd fret to do some 'pull-offs', which are actually the result of lifting the slide off the still-ringing string. Finally, I take the risk of jumping up to the 12th fret, back to where we started.

Swung

All slides with bottleneck

Tuning: DGDGBD 1

\* Lift slide

## Example 3

**ADDING AN EXTRA LAYER OF COMPLEXITY HERE**, I'm going in on D (the IV) chord at the 10th fret, giving me A and C on the top two strings, implying a D7th before sliding down to the 5th fret for a D major. Moves like this can be transferred between keys and are useful in the way that discovering alternative pentatonic positions are useful in conventional playing. We end with a couple of ideas you'll recognise from earlier examples, heading back to D for the final turnaround.

Swung

All slides with bottleneck

Tuning: DGDGBD 1

\* Lift slide



## Example 4

**HERE'S AN ALTERNATE TAKE ON THE OPENING LICK** – or perhaps where the solo might go for the second time round? It's up to you. I've reused the idea from Example 3, playing up three frets from G to give a dominant 7th feel. In fact, I'm using a few notes from three frets above and two frets below the G major chord at the 12th fret in the way I might use a pentatonic shape as the template for regular playing.

Swung 8va

G Cadd9/G G Cadd9/G

All slides with bottleneck

Tuning: DGDGBD

1

G Cadd9/G G Cadd9/G

3

## Hear It Here

### JOE WALSH

THE SMOKER YOU DRINK,  
THE PLAYER YOU GET



Released in 1973, this album kicks off with what is perhaps Joe's best-known slide playing on *Rocky Mountain Way* (also featuring a talkbox solo that slightly predates Peter Frampton's *Do You Feel Like We Do*). Elsewhere, check out *Happy Ways* for more ideas. Joe's preferred tuning for slide is open E (low to high: E B E G# B E). To hear more of his slide playing, skip to *Help Me Through The Night* on his 1974 album, *So What*.

### JOHNNY WINTER

JOHNNY WINTER



Johnny was known both for his fiery slide and fleet-fingered regular playing, using a variety of open tunings as well as standard. On this 1969 release he tunes his resonator guitar to open G for *Dallas*, then open C (as open E but dropped down a 3rd) for *When You Got A Good Friend*. Finally, he straps on an electric tuned to open E for *Back Door Friend*. Rest assured, there's plenty of ideas and vocabulary to steal here if you need some extra inspiration!

### BONNIE RAITT

BONNIE RAITT



RELEASED in 1971, this debut album showcases (a young) Bonnie's skill with a bottleneck on both acoustic and electric guitar. Kicking off with *Bluebird* on acoustic in what sounds like open F (open G down a tone) she adds lots of interest between the vocal lines. *Walking Blues* demonstrates how slide can be incorporated into rhythm playing. And, finally, *Danger Heartbreak Ahead* sees her change to electric in open E, negotiating some tricky chord changes.





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# Guitarist

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