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# *A Year In Guitar*



Every year brings some anniversary or other to celebrate, but 2024 saw both Gibson and Fender – the most influential makers in electric guitar history – commemorate some pretty special milestones. Most notably, the Fender Stratocaster – arguably the most iconic guitar design of all time – reached 70 years of age. The fact it still seems so relevant and endlessly adaptable today is the ultimate testament to the design flair of the mid-50s team at Fender. To celebrate the occasion, we were able to assemble some of the world's top Strat exponents to share their perspectives on this modern masterpiece, including the Godfather of British guitar, Hank Marvin and many, many more. Tuck into that feast of Fender on page 80.

Not to be outdone, Gibson had a lot of rich heritage to share on the occasion of the company's 130th anniversary, particularly the pivotal role played by the archtop in the company's burgeoning fortunes in the mid-20th century. Although a lot of Gibson's history has been extensively documented, we were able to uncover some fresh pearls of info about some of the most famous guitars of all time and on some of the personalities and key decisions that guided the company's path as it grew from artisanal acoustic guitar maker to titan of electric tone in the space of a few decades – you'll find the full story on page 122.

Of course, guitars would be nothing without inspiring musicians to play them – and we got into a fascinating extended debate about what skills count for the most in guitar with 57 of the world's top players, from Nita Strauss to Eric Johnson over on page 106 as we asked them for their advice on practising, performing, learning and sounding better on guitar. Their answers were always illuminating, sometimes surprising and – very often – affirmed that basic fundamental skills can get you an awful long way in guitar. There's yet more in this Annual besides these gems, of course, so I hope you enjoy every page.



Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

# Guitarist
## ANNUAL

**Future PLC** Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA

**Editorial**
Editor-in-Chief **Jamie Dickson**
Art Editor **Darren Phillips**
Managing Editor **Lucy Rice**
Editorial Director **Jon White**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**

**Cover image**
Phil Barker

**Photography**
Phil Barker, Joseph Branston, Olly Curtis, Adam Gasson, Neil Godwin
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**Advertising**
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com

**International**
licensing@futurenet.com

**Circulation**
Head of Future International & Bookazines **Tim Mathers**

**Production**
Group Head of Production **Mark Constance**
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Content Director, Music **Scott Rowley**
Head of Art & Design, Knowledge & Bookazines **Greg Whitaker**

**Printed by** William Gibbons, 26 Planetary Road, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 3XT

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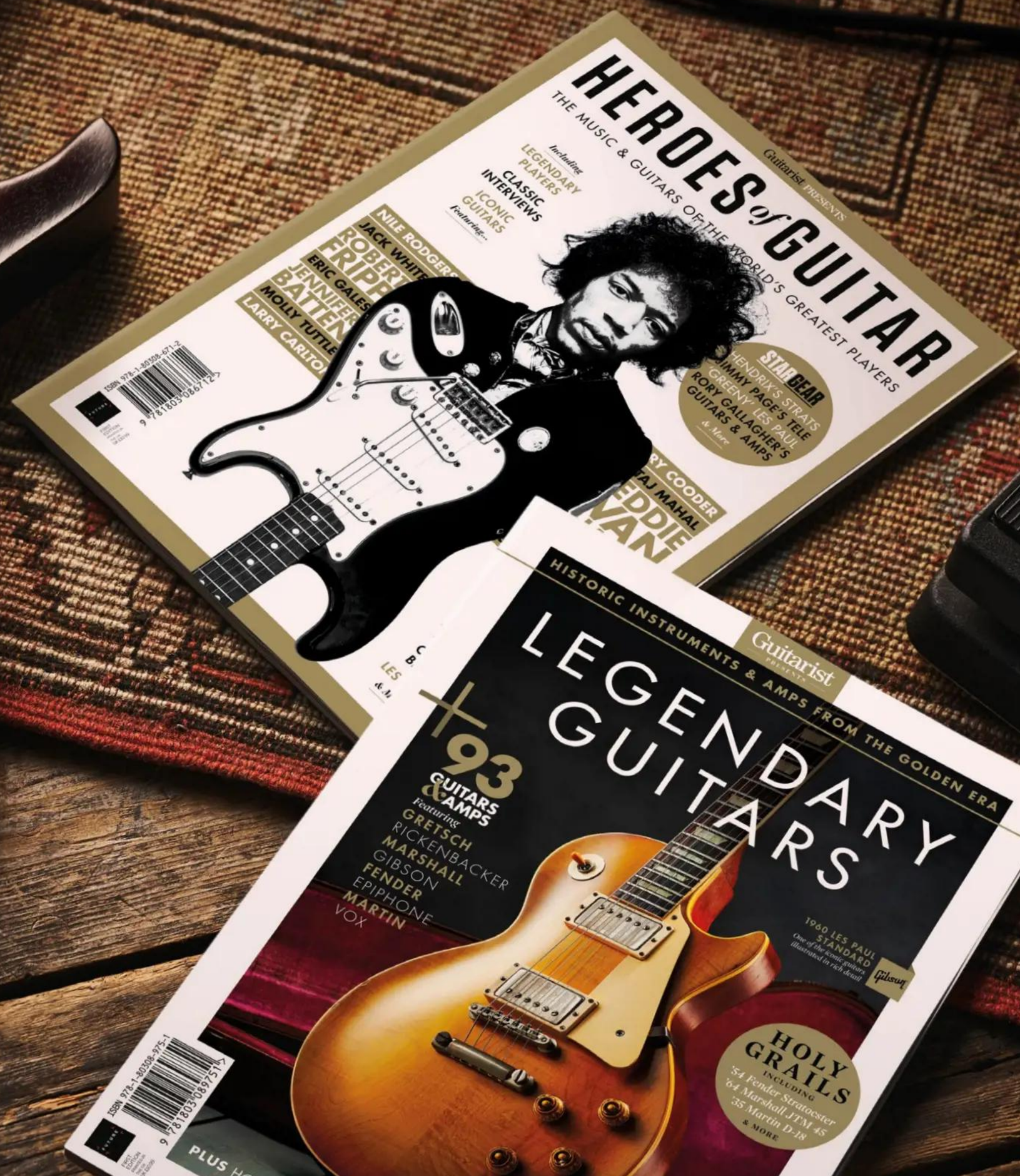
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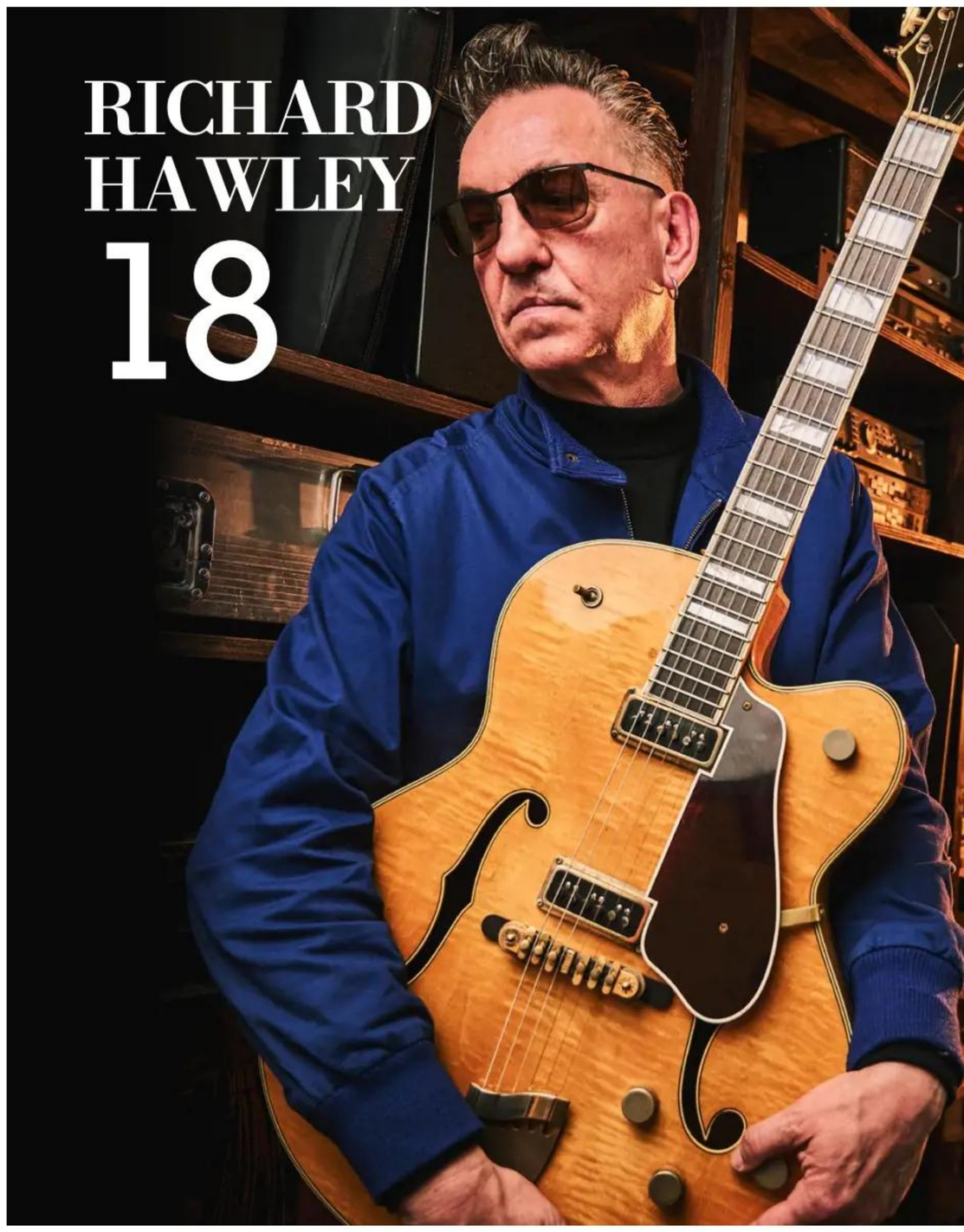


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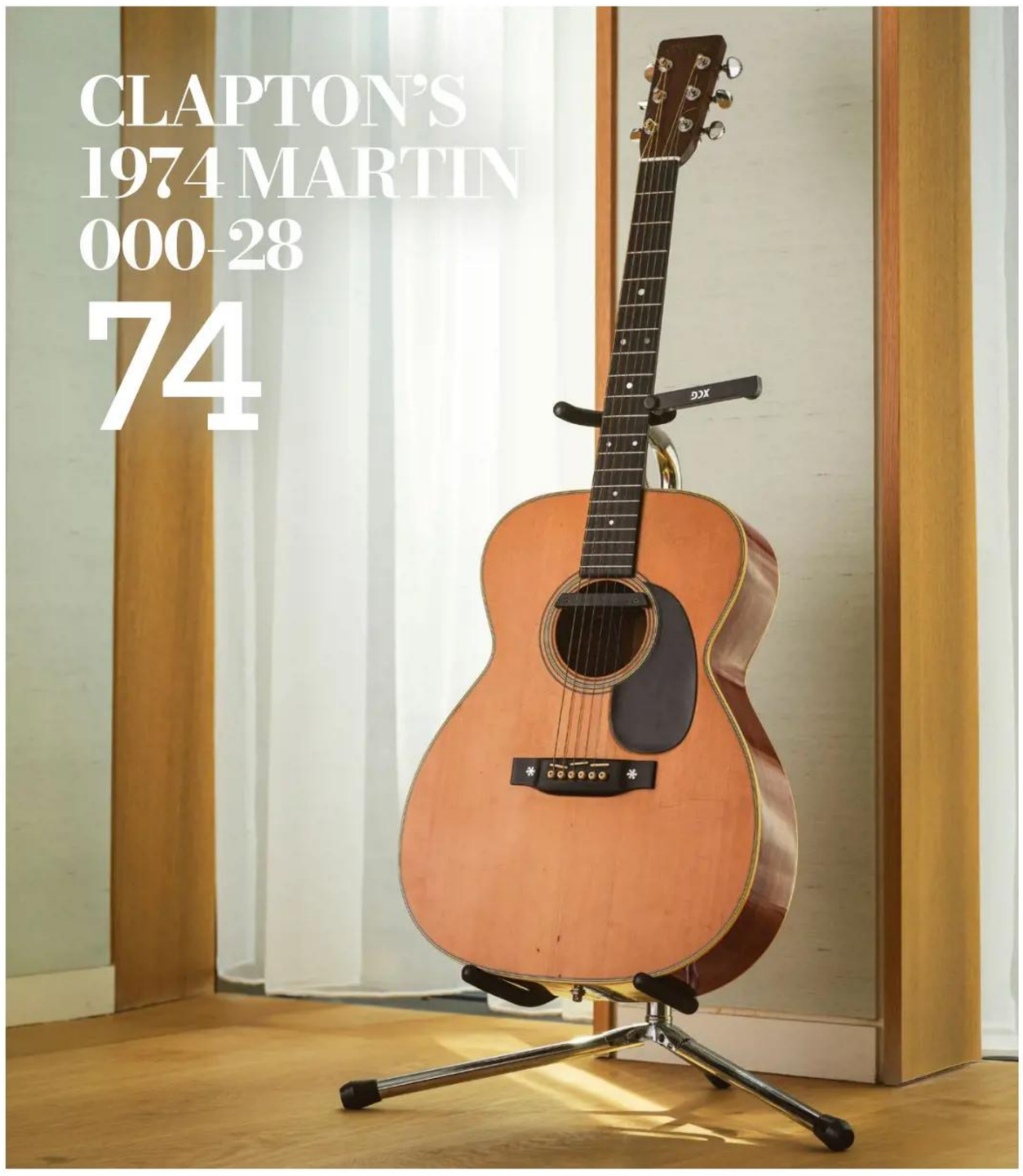


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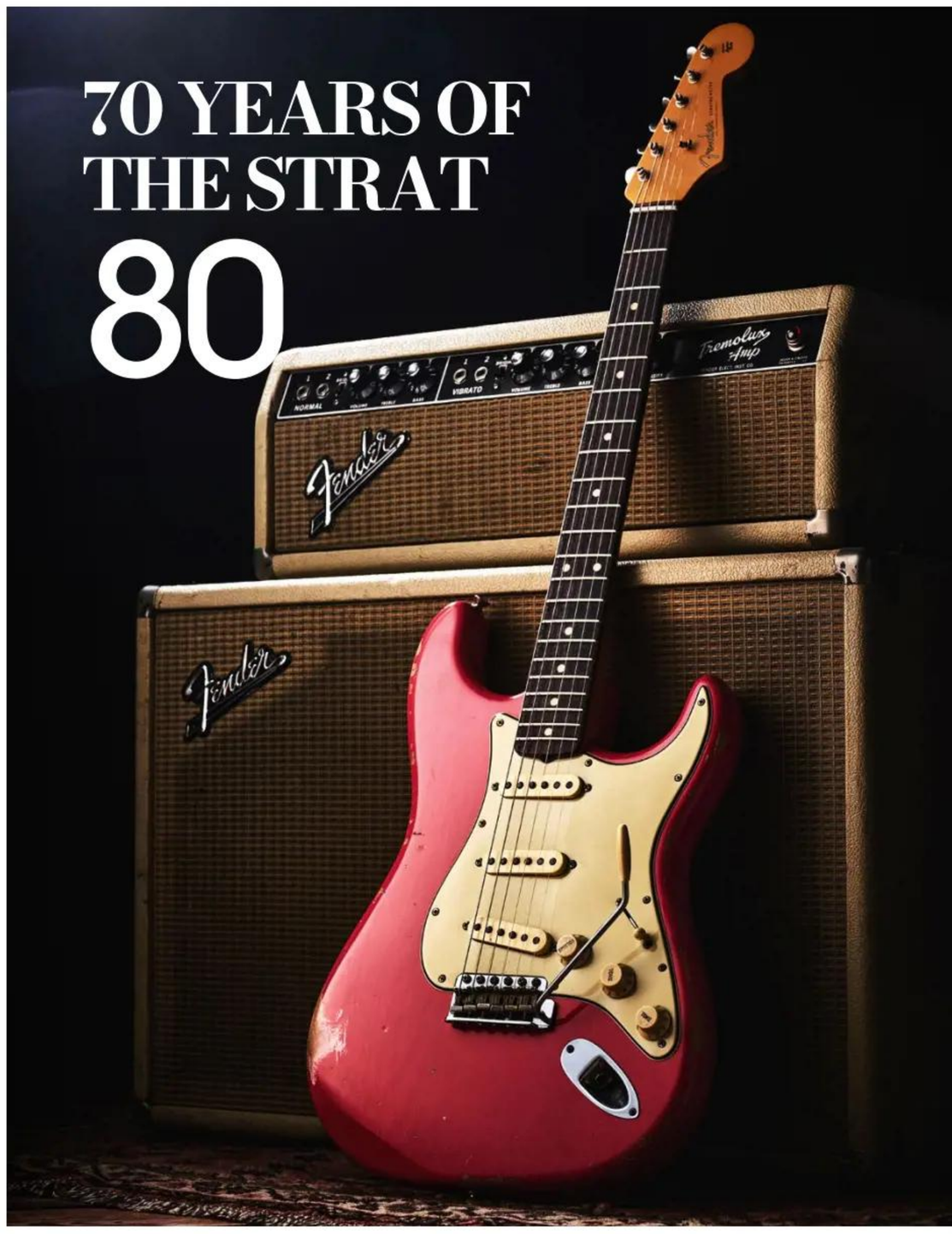


PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER




PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

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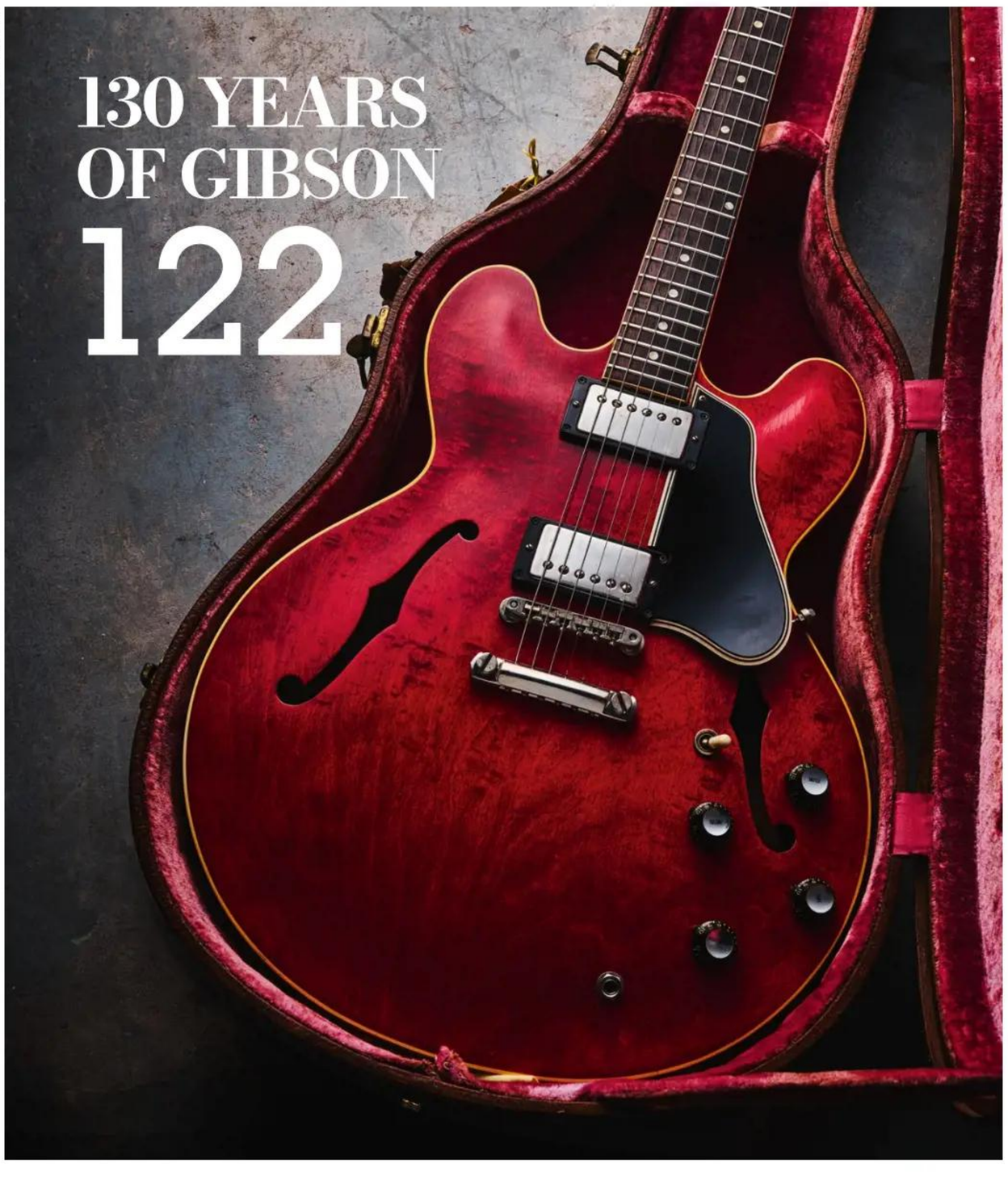



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THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

# CARLOS ALOMAR

Playing professionally since his teens, Carlos Alomar was part of the DAM Trio rhythm section that backed David Bowie from the mid-70s – and now, he says, it's time to commemorate that legendary collective





**Words** Andrew Daly

Growing up in the Bronx, the shadow of the church loomed large over a young Carlos Alomar. But larger still was the shadow of a Sears and Roebuck guitar/amp combo gifted to him by his father as a teen. Some years before when he was 10 years old and playing in his local church's band, Alomar couldn't have known that around a decade later, he'd be standing beside David Bowie as a member of the legendary DAM Trio – which featured Alomar on guitar, George Murray on bass and Dennis Davis on drums – and aiding in the creation of iconic records like *Station To Station* (1976), *Low* and *"Heroes"* (1977), and *Lodger* (1979).

Looking back on Bowie's decision to put together a proper rocking band out of New York City, Alomar tells us: "David left The Spiders From Mars and then he came to America. The fact is that he had this black rhythm section backing him all these years and nobody ever really said anything about it. As we get older, we have a legacy."

Before then, Alomar starred with everyone from Chuck Berry to James Brown to The Main Ingredient. And once with Bowie, he held his own on tour while perched beside the likes of Earl Slick and Adrian Belew en route to becoming Bowie's musical director and lifelong friend. Alomar stuck with Bowie – albeit in an on-and-off fashion – until the early 2000s. Along the way, he appeared on records by Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney and The Pretenders, and even lent his licks to Mark Ronson's 2014 mega-hit, *Uptown Funk*.

As for Bowie, the two kept in touch and Carlos took the iconic vocalist's 2016 death from liver cancer hard. When many of Bowie's past cohorts celebrated his career, Alomar, stricken with grief, chose to refrain ("Man, I would have started crying right in the middle of those songs," he says).

But now, Alomar is preparing to step out of the shadows. "I've got to be able to preserve that legacy. Brian Eno and David Bowie were very smart about taking that opportunity to introduce electronic music to the world via the [Berlin] Trilogy albums [*Low*, *"Heroes"* and *Lodger*]. But it came at the cost of diminishing the great works that the DAM Trio had done. All the experimental albums got a lot of acclaim because of the electronica, but that was when we were at our strongest."



PHOTO BY MIKE COPPOLA/WIREIMAGE FOR NARAS/GETTY IMAGES

Alomar is so passionate about the legacy of the DAM Trio that he's called George Murray out of retirement and plans to insert any number of superstar guitarists into the mix.

"I really want to do a tour to commemorate the life and times of David Bowie and Dennis Davis," Alomar says. "So I'm [doing] something that will honour the legacy of all those people I've admired and the music that has been my vehicle of expression," he says. "It's time for me to unleash that onto the world.

"It's not my final dance," he adds, "but it is a dance of purpose that I need to do, and as long as you're curious, you'll stay young. Right now is a wonderful time, like all times are. Everything's in its time, and in its time, everything."

**How did your foray into guitar begin?**

"It started after my father, a Pentecostal minister, gave me a guitar. The next thing I knew, that guitar came with obligations – not responsibilities, obligations. Suddenly, I found myself the only guitar player in church and I was about 10 or 11 years old. I knew three chords, man. But my father knew something that I didn't and one day he went into my room and saw that there was blood on the sheets, so he pulled them back a little and realised that my fingers were bleeding. I had this old Stella guitar and the action was high... I don't know what the hell I was thinking [laughs]. I think he knew I was dedicated to the instrument."

**Can you remember what it was about guitar that led you to persevere?**

"There's something mystical about an instrument to a small child. The metal key tuning pegs, the strings... It had wonder. And for a kid, man, that was everything. When I went to church and played, I played it like I meant it; I played it like I wrote the song.

"My father rewarded that dedication by taking me to the music store – and I was in awe. There was this Mel Bay chord book that said, 'Learn 1,200 chords'. Dude, I knew three chords, so I bought that book. And it had pictures of fingers on the fingerboard. I studied that book like it was the Bible.

"I learned how to play a diminished chord and I practised every chord in that book, and everything was fine until I got to the dominant 7th chord. For all of you who don't know what that means in the regular world, the dominant 7th chord is the rock 'n' roll chord. When you hit that 7th chord, boy, your butt starts shaking [laughs]. That's when I started getting into trouble. I was told, 'You're playing the Devil's music,' and I got put on discipline!

***"There's something mystical about an instrument to a small child. The metal key tuning pegs, the strings... It had wonder. For a kid, that was everything"***



PHOTO BY MIKE COPPOLA/WIREIMAGE FOR NARAS/GETTY IMAGES

1. As a Puerto Rican-born minister's son, Carlos grew up around the music of the church in New York City, before a book of guitar chords set him upon a rock 'n' roll trajectory

"By the time I was 14 I had formed a little band and we were rocking that church. Next thing I knew, I had the audacity to tell the minister, 'If it wasn't for my music, nobody would even come to this church.' I got put on discipline [laughs]. Anyway, my father says to me, 'Carlos, what's going on?' And I said, 'I'm playing God's chords.' My father died a little bit later, but he had bought me a Sears and Roebuck guitar amplifier, like a little grey amplifier with one speaker. That was it. That was my heaven."

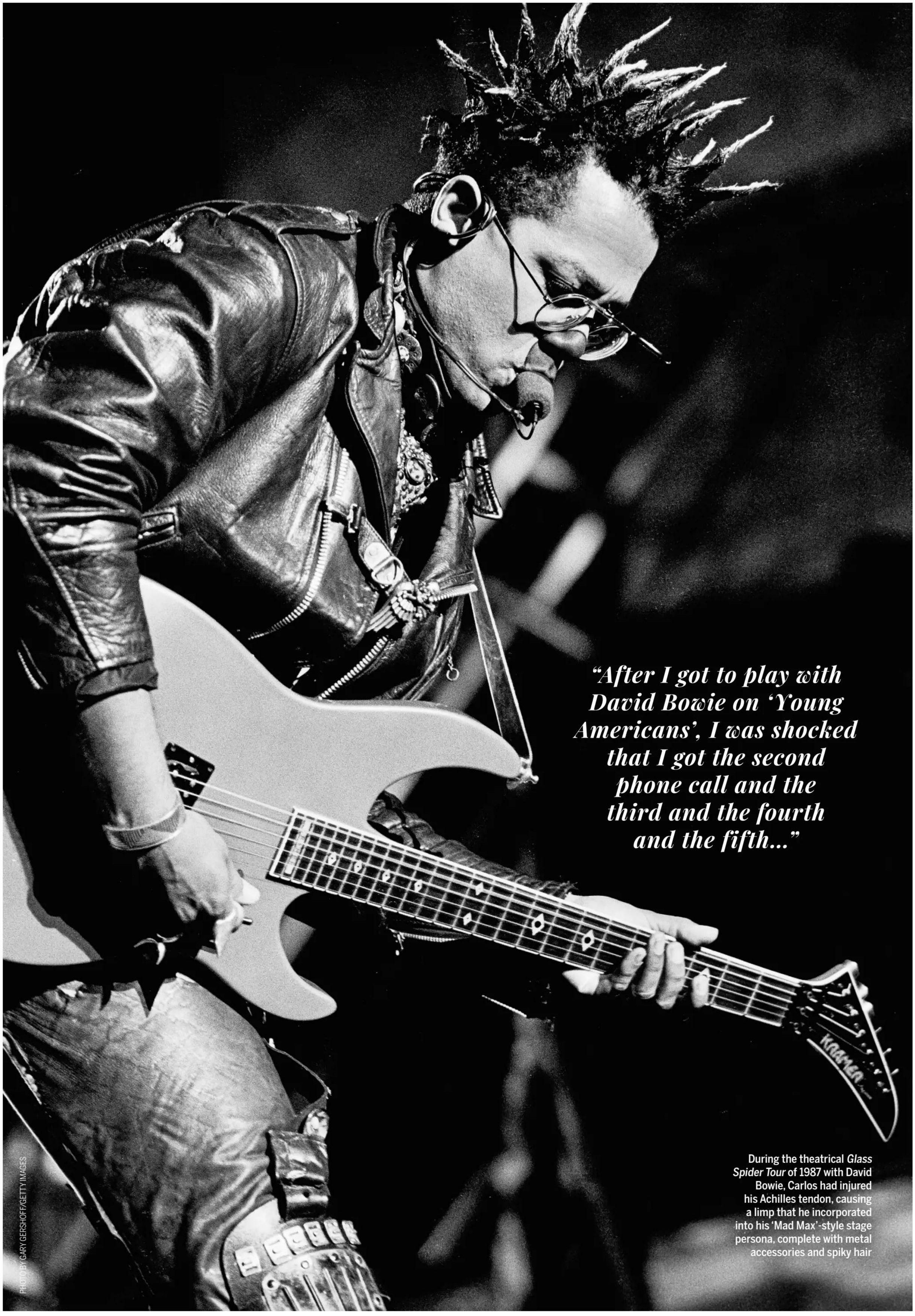
**And it was around this time that you met Luther Vandross, right?**

"After my father's passing, I got to go to Fordham University for a program for underprivileged kids. The best part was during the summer when they took us to see plays. That's when I met Luther, who became my best friend when I was 14 or 15.

"Luther had this opportunity to go to the Apollo Theater [in New York City] because there were auditions for this group. He said, 'Carlos, come with me; I need moral support.' So Luther sang and he got in that group, and the next week, he said, 'Carlos, come back. I'm in.' So I sat down and watched, and the director said, 'Boy, what do you do?' I said, 'I play guitar, sir.' He said, 'I don't want to see your face around here unless you bring your guitar and show me what you can do.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' But oh my God, I was from the Bronx, man. What the hell was a 15 or 16-year-old kid doing on the train with a Sears and Roebuck guitar, carrying my guitar and amplifier to the Apollo Theater?

"I could hear them chuckling and laughing at my Sears and Roebuck guitar. But I plugged it in, played a solo and they applauded. I got the gig and that was the beginning of my life.

"That group was the one that did the pilot for *Sesame Street* back in the day. People like Nancy Wilson, Cannonball Adderley and Flip Wilson would all come to see us. And not long after that, when I was 17, I started working around joints in Harlem."




*"After I got to play with David Bowie on 'Young Americans', I was shocked that I got the second phone call and the third and the fourth and the fifth..."*

During the theatrical *Glass Spider Tour* of 1987 with David Bowie, Carlos had injured his Achilles tendon, causing a limp that he incorporated into his 'Mad Max'-style stage persona, complete with metal accessories and spiky hair

PHOTO BY GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES

**While working at the Apollo, you played behind Chuck Berry. How did that go down?**
"He came in with this guitar, a beautiful ES-335, and he would lift the headstock up and down and that would tell you what to play. Depending on how he moved his headstock, you'd stop or start. That was it. And man, he walked in and said, 'Okay, let's go.' But I had the audacity to say, 'Are we gonna rehearse, Mr Berry?' He didn't turn around; he *whipped* around and yelled, 'We don't rehearse rock 'n' roll!' Let me tell you, I still give my musical cues to this day with the headstock, just like Chuck Berry."

**You toured with James Brown a bit, too.**
"With James Brown, I had an opportunity to do a small bit of roadwork with him on the East Coast. While I was playing with him, he kept saying, 'We're gonna take it to the bridge,' but I had to wait for the cue. Finally, he whipped around and said, 'Hit me,' and, unfortunately, I did not hit him at all [laughs]. I missed the cue. So when I went down on Friday to pick up my money – in the old days, they used to stuff all your money in a small yellow envelope – I looked at the guy and said, 'Hey, there's $20 missing.' He said, 'Yeah, Mr Brown said you didn't hit back.' I was intelligent. My father gave me a mantra: 'If you can't explain it, defend it.' So I learned to talk real fast and to explain exactly what I wanted... And I was fired.

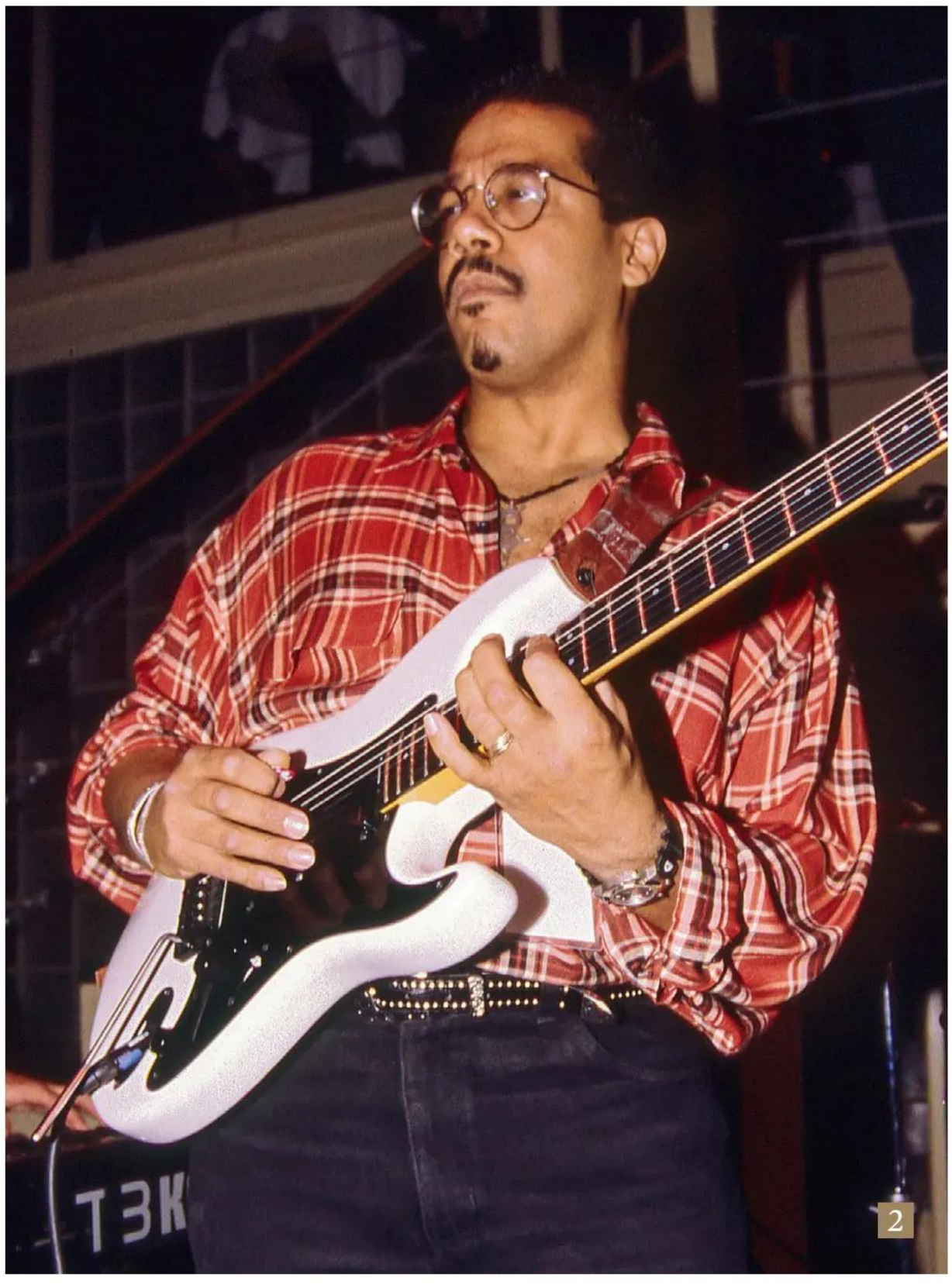


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2. Before, during and after his tenure with Bowie, Carlos remained a versatile, in-demand session musician, noting that both proficiency on his instrument and personality were essential in securing these jobs. He's pictured here at Le Bar Bat in NYC, 1993

"I was always taught patience and understanding, and I realised that I didn't need all these credits with James Brown, I just needed one. And so, yes, I worked with Chuck Berry; yes, I worked with James Brown. But the anxiety of a job being where I'm supposed to stay forever was never a part of my mentality. When you don't feel beholden to somebody else, it's great.

"From there, I kept playing and getting more and more gigs. I've always had the mentality of, 'You don't owe me anything.' Even with David Bowie, after I got to play with him on *Young Americans*, I was shocked that I got the second phone call and the third and the fourth and the fifth..."

**Afterwards, you began your session career and recorded *Everybody Plays The Fool* in 1972 with The Main Ingredient.**
"I got my first real job as the guitar player for The Main Ingredient. *Everybody Plays The Fool* became a hit and the next thing I knew, we're going on the road. By then, I started getting really good and became the house player at RCA Studios. I was working in Studio A and during that time Tony Sylvester [from The Main Ingredient] introduced me to David Bowie. I was really excited. That was the beginning of everything.

***"I want to honour the legacy of all those people I've admired and the music that has been my vehicle of expression. It's time for me to unleash it onto the world"***

"Bowie said, 'I'm working on an album. I'd like you to come down.' The Main Ingredient had a hit and we were touring the East Coast. I was making money, I was married, so it was steady. So I got myself a white manager and I told my manager to negotiate something. And I heard, 'Oh, maybe $200 and maybe we can get it up to $250.'

"I was making about $600 to $800 with The Main Ingredient and all the other jobs I was doing. So in the middle of that conversation, I said, 'Gentleman, I'm so sorry, but honestly, I'm already making $800 a week; if you can't match that, I ain't doing it.' I answered to a higher power – and that's my wife [laughs].

"We stayed in contact and next thing I know, he's recording again and he says, 'I'm getting ready to do something and I want you to come down and work with me.' He said he'd take care of the money. And he did. I was called up and told I'd be working on his new material, the *Young Americans* album. I showed up at the studio and that was it."

**What did your rig consist of at that point?**
"During those years, I was more of a rhythm guitarist. My usual equipment was a Fender Twin Reverb amplifier, my go-to, and I had a red Gibson ES-335, which was so clean. I showed up with that 335 for the sessions and it was just glorious."

**What was it like touring with David for the first time?**
"When I got the call to do the tour, they had this lead guitar player called Earl Slick and he rolled up with a Marshall stack with the volume turned to 11. It was



PHOTO BY LUCIANO VITI/GETTY IMAGES

3. On stage with Bowie in France, 1983: by this point Carlos had already contributed to the legendary Berlin Trilogy, and his working relationship with Bowie would last until the turn of the century

just like the movies. The easiest thing for me to do was turn my amplifier down, but the minute I did, David turned around and said, 'Earl, could you turn your amplifier down? I can't hear Carlos.'"

**Did your rig change much when you recorded *Station To Station*?**

"That was when I got introduced to some new equipment and understood the value that equipment could have. While we were doing *Station To Station*, I said to David, 'I can't play with a Twin Reverb amplifier any more. Would it be okay if I got another type of amplification?' He said, 'Yes, whatever you want.'

"I ended up getting a customised system done and, to my credit, it was one of the first ever rack systems used on stage. I had a three-tier system and it was the size of a refrigerator [laughs]. Not only that, but I also had them do a crossover network so that I could cross over the amount of power that went into each unit. Luckily, during those years, we had a budget for everything. There were ridiculous amounts of money they were throwing at this man. The main rig then was my Alembic 'Maverick' Guitar, my MXR rack with a crossover and equaliser, and Crown power amplifiers. The speaker cabinets had tweeters, twin 12-inch fibreglass encased mini-cabs, and a 15-inch Gauss speaker bass cab."

**Rolling into the 80s, you worked with Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, The Pretenders and more. What kept you in such demand?**

"It comes down to two aspects: a musician should know their place and their style. I was always taught to say yes to everything. Anytime I got a phone call, I'd say, 'Yes.' Sometimes it's like, 'Do you play mandolin?' I don't own a mandolin, but I'd buy one. Did I know how to play mandolin? No. But have I played mandolin on records? Yes.

"But it's not just the proficiency that you have on your instrument but the personality. Let's say you have three choices for who is going to do the job; only one of them is the right one. You can have the quiet guy, who is always out front. And then the other guy who may have personality, he's smart and plays really well – that's the guy you want to go on the road with for eight months, that's the guy that you can get along with. I was calm and played excellent guitar, a combination that helped me when trying to get a job."

**You're planning to celebrate David's music with other members of the DAM Trio. How do you think this will take shape?**

"This is news for everybody, but, yes, I am planning to do a tour. I want to pay tribute to David Bowie and the DAM Trio. I want to do a tribute to the trilogy of albums we made in the 70s: *Low*, *"Heroes"* and *Lodger*. Why? Because that's when the DAM Trio was at its height.

"I called George Murray, saying, 'Hey, man, let's put the band back together again.' He said, 'Okay.' I think I want to use Vernon Reid from Living Colour or maybe Steve Stevens. I really want to highlight all the powerful stuff that we created during those times. Quite honestly, a lot of those pieces have never been performed in their entirety because they're so damn difficult to play.

"I'm speaking to promoters now and getting the lay of the land. I'm really used to being a quiet sideman, man. I prefer to stay more hidden, but the time for staying hidden has to have a moment of clarity attached to it. And I think my vision is pretty clear about what I want to do right now."

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# Ani DiFranco

Percussive and heavily processed, the US troubadour's new album, *Unprecedented Sh!t*, burns the playbook of acoustic folk. *Guitarist* called her to hear about driving a song, working a crowd, and "living in the hairline between a whisper and a scream"

**Words** Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates **Portrait** Danny Clinch

By her own description, Ani DiFranco set out on her career in the early 80s as "this little chick in the corner with an acoustic guitar, trying to get the attention of people who were not naturally predisposed to pay attention to her little heartfelt numbers". Four decades later, in almost every respect, the 53-year-old New Yorker is unrecognisable. Since finding major-league success with mid-90s albums such as *Dilate*, DiFranco has commanded a global fanbase who hang on every socially charged lyric. And while the acoustic is still this alt-folkie's instrument of choice – and her rippling, percussive fingerstyle remains a potent weapon – latest album, *Unprecedented Sh!t*, finds those wood-and-wire tones cloaked in studio trickery by producer BJ Burton.

**Your partnership with BJ Burton seems to have led your music – and guitar sound – in a radically new direction.**

"For a long time, I've been wanting to harness the power of machines, in a way that I haven't been able to on record, because I'm always just recording and mixing and producing my own shit. So I asked my management, 'Who out there is young and knowledgeable about what the gear is and how to do something more than just set up microphones in front of my band and document what we do live?'

"My managers sorta sniffed around and made a list of 20 names, and BJ Burton – I guess because his name starts with 'B' – was top of the list. And I looked at his album credits, which include Bon Iver and Low, and these things that were exactly what I'm talking about when I put out into the ether that I wanted to employ the world of machines, not just musicians playing instruments. So I didn't even read any further, I just called BJ and he said, 'Yes, send me some shit.'

"So that's how we did it. We were barely in the same room together. We did it all at a distance. I would record the songs and send them to him and he'd mess with them. We were really in our own little worlds, just lobbing shit at each other."

**How did it feel to hand over an element of control after so many years as a self-reliant artist?**

"Creatively, it was awesome to have BJ, and his incredible mastery of the world of gizmos, come in and realise exactly what I had hoped for – y'know, soundscapes that are a little more vast and varied than conventional instruments. It was hard for me in terms of waiting on him. I could put the songs down myself as fast and furious as I wanted, but then I would send them to him and just be in limbo. The process did kind of drag on for a long time because he's busy and he would disappear for weeks and months at a time. So that took patience on my part to just say, 'This is what I signed up for, this is gonna be worth it, I have to have faith.' But yeah, it was frustrating to not be able to drive at whatever speed I was feeling."

**There's a real contrast between the intimacy, simplicity and expansiveness on this new album. Was that by design or something that emerged?**

"Well, I love contrast. From the beginning of making songs and playing them for people, it was all about that hairline between a whisper and a scream. I love to live right there. And BJ is just the same way. We really

relate to each other in that. At one point, he was teasing me about something I was doing in one of the songs, and he was like, 'What, are you trying to scare people?' I knew what that joke meant – it's because we both like scaring people. It was the pot calling the kettle black. We both like to be surprised and put out of the conventional or comfort zone with art."

**The rhythm of your right hand is so important for driving these songs. Where did that percussive style come from?**

"I developed my playing style from being in bars and public spaces from the time I was a teenager, playing solo. It was all about leaning into dynamics and turning the guitar into a band with those percussive elements that I work with. And I learned very early on, if you play really loud – then stop suddenly – everybody's words are hanging in the air. They're shouting over your music and that makes them notice themselves and then they notice you – and then you have an opportunity to actually get their attention. And those were all devices that I learnt from playing live."

1. Ani has favoured a "beefy" low-end sound for solo playing, but she also picks up four-string tenor guitars that occupy more of a midrange space, in order to change her perspective and direction on a track

**Silence can be a really powerful dynamic.**

"Yeah, totally, and that's why I am mostly a fingerpicker, not a strummer. Because strumming sort of erases all those silences, and fingerpicking is about making patterns out of silence. And I love it."

**What guitars do you find yourself gravitating towards today?**

"I've grown up to be a Gibson girl. I mean, for many of my early years I played Alvarez because they were good workhorses on the road, and they were very kind to me as a company and would give me guitars. I still have some Alvarez guitars I employ, but my fella at some point was like, 'You should play better instruments.' I should maybe not say that in public. Thank you, Alvarez. I love you, Alvarez. But he told me, 'You should explore the world of vintage instruments.' So I went to stores and played all the guitars from the 50s and 60s, and I found my ear favoured Gibson. So my workhorses now are, like, LG-1 type Gibsons. I also play four-string tenor guitars. Like, the song *Baby Roe* is a tenor guitar."

**"I developed my playing style from being in public spaces. It was all about leaning into dynamics and turning the guitar into a band"**




**What do you like about tenor guitars?**

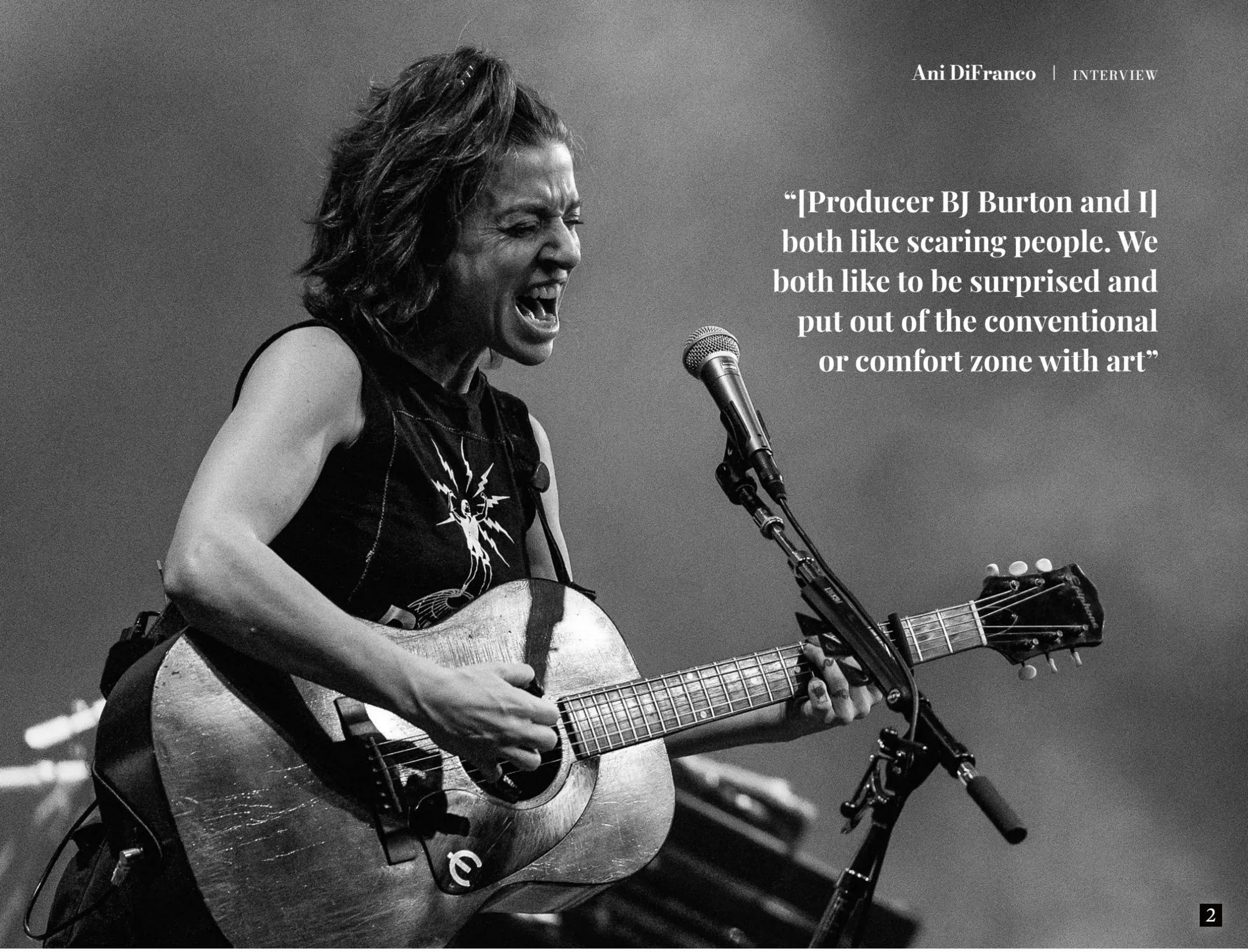
"My general game with an acoustic guitar is to crank the low-end. Especially when I'm playing solo. I have to move over and make room for a bass player and a drummer when I'm with the band, but generally I like a real beefy sound and I roll off the top of the acoustic kinda radically compared with how many people approach it and the place they put it in the mix. But with a tenor guitar, it's not really about that bottom. It sorta slots into the middle of the mix – it has this middy, midrange sorta sound. I don't know, I think it's cool how much room it leaves, for a change. And it makes me do different things, play differently. There's also a song on this record called *New Bible* that I play ukulele on. It's the only ukulele song I ever wrote."

**What you've done on this new record with Burton really goes against the grain. So many artists are so reverential about the sound of the acoustic guitar.**

"BJ was absolutely non-reverential. On a lot of songs that have more expansive production, he turned my guitar into so many different sounds, and he built that out of just my voice and guitar. I was talking to somebody recently and they were saying how the record opens with this very meditative, murky keyboard part on *Spinning Room*, and I was thinking, 'Yeah, that's my guitar.' BJ would just do whatever the hell to it."

**There's a song called *The Knowing* where the guitar sounds really pitched down.**

"*The Knowing* is a regular acoustic guitar and BJ just messed with it. That song is an interesting example because I released a version of it prior to this record coming out. I made a children's book called



**“[Producer BJ Burton and I] both like scaring people. We both like to be surprised and put out of the conventional or comfort zone with art”**

*The Knowing* – so a version of the song that I made and mixed already came out with the book. So for anyone curious to discern the BJ effect, probably somewhere on the internet is the version of *The Knowing* that entered the world before this record. And then BJ got his hands on it and it has that really soupy, pitched-down, almost dissonant sound now.”

**What are your intentions for performing *Unprecedented Sh!t* live?**

“I don’t know. I’ve been in New York for six months doing a Broadway show [*Hadestown*], so I’m going to go home in the fall and revisit my life. So I won’t go out touring behind this record until the New Year. And how are we going to do it? How are we going to bring these songs to life on stage? I don’t know. I’m gonna see how that unfolds. I think this will be a little bit different in that I haven’t played with my band in a long time. We’re going to get together and rehearse these new songs from an album that has certain vibes and sounds going on – and I guess just see what happens, how we want to incorporate all that into how we’re gonna present these songs live.”

**Before the internet, artists like Neil Young would put forward a viewpoint about the world and hoped it would change things. Now, we shout our opinions at each other on social media. Where do you feel that leaves the role of the songwriter?**

“I’m not really a critic or a social theorist. I see my role as a songwriter as a type of storytelling. Songs don’t need to be direct instructions or lessons to change people or awaken something inside them. I try not to be too calculating or strategic about what effect I’m trying to have on the listener because that seems one or two steps removed from what I think my purpose should be, which is to just free myself and heal myself by getting the thing out of me.

“And then, whatever somebody makes of it, or doesn’t, or if it helps them or bores them or whatever, that’s not my problem. And that shouldn’t be my focus, I think. So I think in that sense, the role of the songwriter is the same as it’s always been, which is to do something necessary for their own wellbeing and evolution and healing and liberation. And if people get off on that and they go with you, that’s awesome. And if not, keep doing it anyway.

“What I’m so over is people doing things for an effect. I’m so over people performing something for the world. On the internet, everybody is just creating these elaborate identities and performing them all day long. The focus is so much on, ‘How am I seen? I want you to see me in a certain way.’ I want to escape from that as much as I can. I don’t care how you see me. That’s not what it’s about.” G

**2.** For Ani, songwriting isn’t about provoking a reaction or creating a persona. Instead, a songwriter’s aim is to “do something necessary for their own wellbeing and evolution and healing and liberation. And if people get off on that and they go with you, that’s awesome. And if not, keep doing it anyway”

PHOTO BY ANTHONY MULCAHY



Ani DiFranco’s new album, *Unprecedented Sh!t*, is available now on Righteous Babe Records

***https://anidifranco.com***




# RICHARD HAWLEY

The Sheffield songsmith's new album, *In This City They Call You Love*, is undoubtedly one of his finest yet – and its sounds were carved out with some of the most characterful guitars, amps and effects you'll find anywhere, including Scott Walker's Tele. We join Richard in the heart of the city that inspired the record to find out more

**Words** Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Reverent references to Duane Eddy, Pops Staples, Scott Walker and other giants of the vinyl era are never far from Richard Hawley's lips. But with his new album, *In This City They Call You Love*, Hawley has produced a work that deserves to stand alongside that of the legends he has always admired.

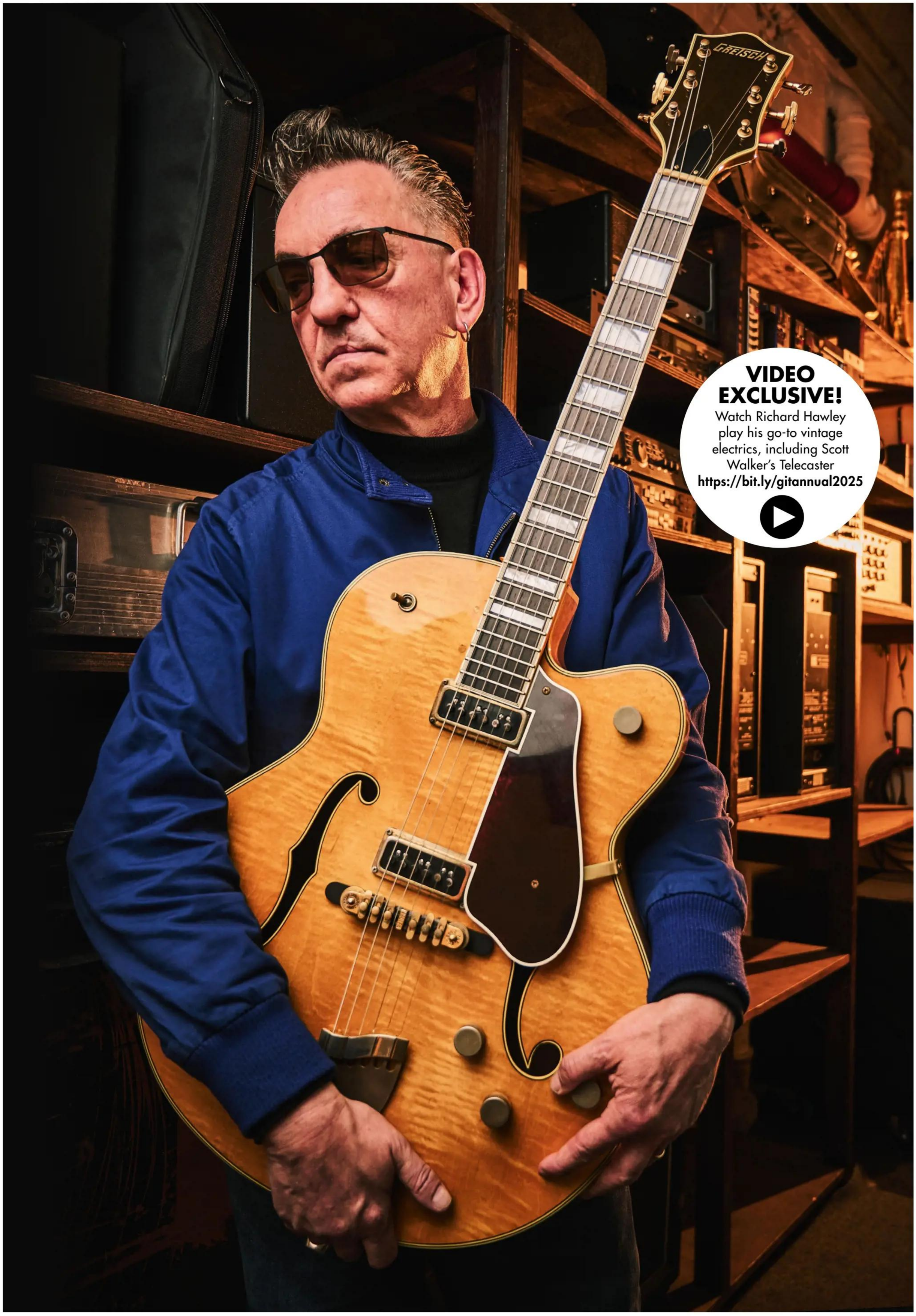
You'd never hear him say that himself, of course, as there's a genuine and abiding humility in his approach to music. But the tender, yearning ballad *I'll Never Get Over You* is a song that Roy Orbison might easily have penned, while *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow* sounds like a lost, lovelorn Eddie Cochrane ballad. Yet Hawley somehow manages to wear his influences lightly, like a well-fitting jacket that suits him and that he makes his own. And if the past looms large in his work, its main purpose is to highlight the unbroken threads of memory, pride and love that stretch from childhood to the present day and imbue it with meaning.

A particularly enduring theme in Hawley's music is his home city of Sheffield – he's named several of his albums after its landmarks, and the place and its people are a continuing wellspring of inspiration. Ironically, however, it was a chance encounter with visitors from out of town that gave his latest album its name.

"It was something I overheard some people saying," Hawley recalls. "They weren't from Sheffield and one of them said, 'Oh, in this city everybody calls you love,' and it went in like a missile. I just heard that, literally walking past a cafe and I went, 'Whoa, I'm having that.' You know?"

Hawley acknowledges that songwriters have to have something of the magpie about them, always ready to snatch up a golden phrase and wing home with it, to be tucked away for later use. He adds that the best songs come from that part of our mind that isn't caught up in mundane, day-to-day decision-making. Words and phrases overheard by chance can open the taps to a sudden, instinctive flow of inspiration that yields better songs than conscious effort, he argues.

"You can hit the bullseye without aiming for it. But if you aim for the bullseye, you're probably not going to hit it. Technically, music is numbers and letters, mathematics and literacy. But actually it's something that you cannot define. You can't bottle it. You know what I mean? I write all the songs walking the dogs now because there's something about putting one foot in front of the other, where something flips in your mind... with rational, normal thought, that you need to survive on Earth, your yes/no synapses


GRETSCH
VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!
Watch Richard Hawley play his go-to vintage electrics, including Scott Walker's Telecaster
https://bit.ly/gitannual2025

are flipping all the time in your mind. But there's something that happens when you're doing something rudimentary, like walking the dogs, washing the pots or whatever... you hit the bullseye without aiming for it. And that's the best advice I can give anybody who's going to write a song. If you try to write a song, it'll probably be shit."

We can only conclude that Richard's dogs must have had plenty of exercise recently because every song on the album hits home emotionally. The production is simple yet beautiful, a touch less orchestral than some of his previous records perhaps but all the more direct and powerful for it. A key theme is memory and how we live with it – of loves and loyalties that fade all too quickly into the past, yet from which we can never wholly free ourselves.

"I think music gives you the ability to accept the fact that maybe we are mortal, but also to hover like a kestrel in time," Richard reflects. "You've got more time than you realise, to think about things."

The songs on the album are often deceptive in their simplicity. *Deep Water*, for example, is a kind of secular gospel song – a prayer for acceptance of the kind that people tend to write as life experience accrues and an awareness of mortality colours one's thoughts.

"The thing about records, I realise as I've got older, is that I listened to stuff when I was younger and I just thought, 'That's rubbish,' and then later in life, I got it," Richard reflects. "And it's because you're not ready for it, as a person. Events and time and ageing and stuff like that... you're not swimming in the fucking shallow end any more. You haven't got a choice. So music is an accompaniment to the passage of your life, and some songs you'll hear when you're 16 you're not ready for, but you might hear them when you're 40 or 60, or whatever, and you get it.

"A lot of folks, you know, when they hit 30, they think it's over, you know? But when you approach 60 and you see a picture of yourself at 30, you just go, 'Didn't I look young?' [laughs] Do you know what I mean? Nick Banks, actually, one of my dearest friends, the drummer out of Pulp, he sent a picture of me and him backstage at Finsbury Park in '98, and we were in our 30s then, and I look back and I just go, 'Whoa, man, we look like little kids.' And we were off our heads as well. I just thought, 'Stupid, stupid boy.' [laughs]"



1. Hawley's 1950 J-200 has a warm, expansive sound. He was inspired to buy it by childhood memories of his father's J-200

## GUITAR MAN

Fittingly, Hawley's guitars are as steeped in time and memory as his songs, especially his gorgeous 1950 Gibson J-200 bought from Tony Werneke at Replay Guitars, which has a sweet yet expansive voice that is what that guitar is all about, at its best.

"Martin Simpson found this for me," Hawley explains, referring to the celebrated fingerstyle folk guitarist who is a good friend of Richard's. "Because my dad had a J-200. And it was a 60s one – I think it was a '62, or something like that. And during the steel strikes he had to sell it, to feed us, you know? There was always this thing in my mind [ever afterwards] that it was an injustice. And so I looked around for one for years and years and years. It's funny – because

*"I think music gives you the ability to accept the fact that maybe we are mortal, but also to hover like a kestrel in time"*

it's part of mine and Martin's story – he just says 'Oh, you don't want one of those, you want one of these' – a PRS or a Fylde or one of these really mental high-end guitars. But I couldn't get on with them at all... maybe it's an ergonomic thing, but they just didn't feel right. I think it's down to sonic memory. Because when you play something when you're young there's a part of your brain that works in a certain way..."

Richard strums the first few bars of *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow* to demonstrate, then grins at the wonderfully evocative sound coming out of the J-200.

"And that's it," he smiles. "It's a great guitar to play and the neck's not as slim as a lot of the modern ones. But it's to do with ergonomics, isn't it? It's bit like if you go into a shop and you want to buy a new shirt or a jacket or something like that, don't look in the mirror – put it on and see how it feels first, you know? And it's

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*"Bo Diddley used a Country Club, and Eddie Cochrane – it's got this liquid sound to it, like moving water. It's amazing"*

Hawley's Gretsch Country Club has a stunningly figured top – and he first used it in anger playing a 50s-style version of Zepp's *Rock And Roll* with Robert Plant




Hawley loves his 1954 J-160E acoustic, long associated with The Beatles. Despite having a pickup built in, he values it for its intimate acoustic sound

the same with any musical instrument. Close your eyes and just listen – you were given these [points to ears] by nature for a reason and you can read all the reviews you want, you can you can be fooled into buying something because you think it's going to be this, that and the other. But you've got to use these, your ears – they're the greatest asset you've got."

Does Richard use the J-200 a lot when he's recording, we enquire?

"I use it when I'm frying eggs," he laughs. "Or whatever... It's on the wall [ready to hand at all times]. It's just such a great guitar to play."

No Richard Hawley record would be complete, of course, without the lonesome shimmer of a Gretsch electric. Accordingly, Richard shows us a beautifully figured natural finish 1954 Gretsch Country Club that is a go-to for studio work.

"I love that – it sounds like Pop Staples to me," he says, strumming the big archtop through the beautiful tremolo circuit of his 1958 Watkins Scout combo.

"That's one of the problems with the Gretsches, but I've always found it an asset," he observes as the guitar teeters on the edge of incipient feedback. Like some other vintage guitars among Hawley's collection, the Gretsch was bought locally. "I got this from a local store in Sheffield called Rich Tone Music and it's run

*"There's something that happens when you're doing something rudimentary... you hit the bullseye without aiming for it"*

by people who subsequently became friends of mine – James and Dylan Ferguson – and they've always got amazing stuff. Again, actually I owe Martin Simpson again for this because he's in and out of there all the time and I'm always on tour or travelling and stuff, and he'll just [tell me] they've got this such and such guitar... He called me up and said, 'They've got this Country Club and it's insane – it's a 1954, you're going to love it.' I went down with him and I literally just played a couple of chords on it and I'm done. In my mind I was sold.

"I ended up using it on the *Jools Holland* show [only days later] and I got asked to play with Robert Plant and Imelda May. It was the last song of the show at the Hammersmith Apollo, when they did it there, and it's quite fun because it wasn't anything that we'd rehearsed. I was playing with Jools doing Fats Domino stuff and we'd had this idea to play an A- and B-side from the same single, back to back, so we did those two tunes and Robert heard me play. I've known Robert on and off for many years, he's a lovely fella, and so afterwards he just called me over to the piano and said, 'Do you want to do a song with us?' It was nothing to do with management and completely unscripted.

"So I said, 'Yeah, what is it?' and Robert said, 'We're going to do rock 'n' roll.' I said, 'Yeah, what song?' And he said, 'Rock 'n' roll...' and I go, 'Yeah, yeah, I can play rock 'n' roll, but which *song*? And he says, 'No, you silly fuckwit [laughs], *Rock And Roll* by Led Zeppelin.' I said, 'No, I'm not doing it because I don't want to be in Jimmy Page's graveyard,' you know – nobody can play

Richard Hawley with an icon of Gretsch design: his 1957 (or possibly 1956) 'G-Brand' 6120 model hollowbody

*"[Feedback is] one of the problems with the Gretsches, but I've always found it an asset"*

like Jimmy, he's the don of that [style of guitar]. And he said, 'No, we're going to do it like Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'N' Roll Trio. So I said, 'Okay,' and we did it like that – and that was the first time I ever used the Country Club. I'd only bought it a week or so before and I had it plugged into an old 50s Magnetone amp, which has got this really... it's not a tremolo, it's a vibrato, which is actually different and it sounds like liquid. Bo Diddley used one, and Eddie Cochrane – it's got this liquid sound to it, like moving water. It's amazing."

## GREAT SCOTT

One testament to the bond music can create is the fact that many of Hawley's heroes later became personal friends – notably the late, great Duane Eddy, with whom Hawley recorded the beautiful album *Road Trip* in 2011. Hawley also became friends with one of the most interesting figures in 20th century pop, Scott Walker, who after huge initial success as a mainstream 60s orchestral pop star developed into one of the most nuanced, innovative and experimental artists working in contemporary music.

Walker and Hawley met while working on Pulp's 2001 album, *We Love Life*, which Walker produced, and their friendship blossomed after a rocky start when Hawley turned up late to a session with the fastidiously punctual Walker. Hawley's reason for being late – rescuing a stack of rare records from a closing-down sale – earned Walker's forgiveness, however, and their friendship grew from that moment forward. Though Walker passed away in 2019, his white circa mid-70s Telecaster features prominently on Richard's latest album, as Hawley explains.

"Three days into recording the new record, I got a phone call from my old friend Cathy [Negus-Fancey], who was Scott Walker's manager," Richard explains. "Scott and I were friends, we used to play

*"Close your eyes and just listen... You can read all the reviews you want. But your ears – they're the greatest asset you've got"*

darts and sup Guinness together and there was no discussion of music – it was just darts and Guinness and occasionally a game of pool, but he was shite at pool so I'd always hammer him. So he preferred darts because I was crap at darts – I still am [laughs]. Anyway, Lee, his daughter, said one of last requests was to [feigns a parody of Scott Walker's drawl] 'Give that tosser Hawley one of my guitars...' and this is it.

"It arrived three days into recording the new record and I must say it was in quite a parlous state. It had been unplayed and my long-suffering guitar tech, Gordon White, who is a genius, [took on the job of fixing it up] and the hardest decision was to actually do anything with it at all. Because basically, [traces of] Scott blood's was on there – his physical remnants were on the guitar. But Gordon said, 'Fuck it, it's got to be playable,' and he fixed it all and made a beautiful thing and it was very, very close to me recording the new record; I recorded all the mad shit on it."

Hawley says Walker's impeccable musicality and rigorous high standards made him such a formidable artist and producer.

"We did this track on *We Love Life* called *Bob Lind (The Only Way Is Down)* where I had to play acoustic 12-string guitar. Jesus, he [Scott] whipped me like a racehorse, I'm telling you. He made me do it again and again. He was saying, 'Bite in, bite in – play deeper, like *really* dig in...' And my fingers at the end of that session literally bled. But the end results were great. I learned a lot from Scott, especially about microphones. His ears were immense: he could hear subtle inflections in the sonic quality of microphones or guitars or whatever it was, and his sonic palette was so expansive... I mean, I'm not really a musician. I just collect sound, you know, that's what I do. And I think Scott got that... but he was still shit at pool [laughs]." G







**2.** Hawley's late-50s Watkins Scout combo may be relatively low output, but it has a room-filling, evocative tone that suits his work perfectly

**3.** "It's scruffy, it's beat-up... but I just love the sound of it. It's beautiful," he says



Richard Hawley's new album, *In This City They Call You Love*, is out now on BMG

**www.richardhawley.co.uk**




4. This mid-70s Tele belonged to pop icon Scott Walker and was bestowed on Richard following Scott's death in 2019

5. Hawley's wild-sounding wah-fuzz pedal has a nameplate from the Monofinn company from the city of Lahti, Finland – and a curious reference to leather uppers that suggests shoes more than fuzz! Cyrillic text on the bottom of the pedal may indicate Soviet manufacture in the Cold War era

6. Hawley's circa 1954 to '57 Epiphone Emperor Regent (pickup was added later) is a real looker and was formerly owned by Mike Collins of synth-funk pioneers SunPalace











# PABLO VAN DE POEL

When a band from The Netherlands describes themselves as ‘raw, psychedelic Southern rock’, it may take a little cognitive processing to work out what that might mean. One listen to DeWolff, however, and you will be duly transported to the 60s for some fuzzed-out rock ’n’ roll



**Words** David Mead
**Photography** Adam Gasson

DeWolff are a three-piece band comprising brothers Pablo (guitar and vocals) and Luka van de Poel (drums) with keyboard player Robin Piso. The band takes its inspiration from the tie-dye days of the late 60s, and they pull it off, too. The sheer enthusiasm for music that was made before any of them were born exudes from the stage, providing audiences with a mix of nostalgia and up-to-the-moment frenzied rock.

We caught up with Pablo as the dust was settling at the end of end of DeWolff’s recent UK tour, a few days after playing at the Omeara in London. “I did have voice problems right around that time, but after all these years, I’ve kind of learned to just not worry about it,” he tells us. “Every time, the last show of the tour is always the best one...”

Not only were the 60s a driving force in DeWolff’s music, but the era influenced Pablo’s taste in guitars, too. A long-time Gibson Firebird fan, he turned up at *Guitarist*’s studios clutching not one but two examples of Ray Dietrich’s famous creation, as well as a pedalboard festooned with fuzz pedals...

**Where did your journey with the guitar begin?**
“I first started when I was eight years old. I was a massive Metallica fan; how that came to be I’m not entirely sure, but they were very popular at that time. Every hour or so there would be a Metallica video on the music channels on TV and, for some reason, I was attracted to the sound and the look and the guitars.

“My dad was singing in a covers band and so every chance I had, when I had school vacations and stuff, I would come along with him to rehearsals and I was always mesmerised by the sound and the look of the guitar. Their guitar player had a Gibson Les Paul, so that must have imprinted something in my psyche. I was determined I wanted to play guitar. I had to save up for one myself, so for a full year I saved all my money and I bought a Squier Telecaster.”

**Did you take lessons?**
“Yes, I had to promise my parents that I was going to take lessons. So I took guitar ones and I was this Metallica kid, but my guitar teacher wanted me to read music, like *Old MacDonald Had A Farm*, stuff like that.




PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIEN DUPEYRON

I was not interested at all, but I was also a very polite kid so I just kind of played along. This teacher, I don't want to discredit him, but he kind of turned me off guitar playing. For some reason he thought it was a good idea to teach a nine-year-old metal kid *Old MacDonald*...!

"So, for a while, I took a lot more interest in skateboarding than guitar playing... until I discovered Nirvana when I was 11. [With] Metallica it was kind of like, 'I can't really play this stuff, it's pretty technically advanced,' but Nirvana was something that I could grasp. I figured out how to play *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and, of course, as a kid it gives you so much satisfaction to be able to play a song that you love. I think that's when I regained my passion for guitar playing, thanks to Nirvana."

**When did your love of 60s music begin?**

"When I was 13 my dad bought me a Jimi Hendrix compilation CD. He grew up in the 80s so he never experienced the music that came from the 60s [first hand]. He didn't know who Jimi Hendrix was, he just knew that people called him the best guitar player of all time, so he figured maybe I'd like it. At first I was like, 'Whoa, this is weird music...' But I played the CD over and over and over, until all of a sudden, it clicked. I heard *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)* and I was like, 'Wow, this is awesome.' That was basically my gateway to 'old music'. From there on, I discovered Cream and The Doors and Pink Floyd and The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. This all happened when I was 13 or 14 years old, and that was basically the start of everything for me."

**"I figured out how to play *Smells Like Teen Spirit* – as a kid it gives you so much satisfaction to be able to play a song you love"**

**Did you start playing in bands soon afterwards?**

"I formed my first band when I was 12, right after I learned to play a couple of Nirvana songs. We played a Smashing Pumpkins song and also something that I think was the first song I ever wrote. We started out as a grunge thing, but when I discovered Hendrix we started shifting more toward rock 'n' roll. AC/DC was a big influence, too. By the time I was 14 or 15 we were playing some pretty big festivals here in the Netherlands, and when I was 16 I started my second band – and that was DeWolff."

**You've gone from that first Squier Telecaster to Gibson Firebirds. What came in between?**

"My second guitar was an Epiphone Les Paul Custom. That was because of Jimmy Page. Then I was really influenced by Rory Gallagher and so I needed a Strat. I saved up for a Mexican Strat that I still have somewhere. Then, because of Eric Clapton on the Cream farewell show at the Royal Albert Hall, I saw an ES-335 and I was mesmerised by the beauty of that guitar, but I could never afford a Gibson. So I bought a Samick 335 and that's what I used on the first DeWolff EP. Then I got an endorsement with Danelectro and so I played them for a good while. They sounded really good, but they weren't very comfortable guitars. So that's when I bought the Firebird reissue."

**1.** Pablo's early adventures with guitars included Squier, Fender, Samick and Danelectro, but then he discovered Firebirds and hasn't looked back!

**2.** This Les Paul was originally loaned to Pablo by Gibson, but was eventually gifted to him by CEO Cesar Gueikian

**“The guitar player in my dad’s band had a Gibson Les Paul, so that must have imprinted something in my psyche. ”**

Battleworn and bruised, Pablo's Firebird III reissue has been his faithful onstage companion for hundreds of gigs

**LES PAUL VS FIREBIRD!**

Watch Pablo demonstrate his guitars and pedalboard in our exclusive videos

**https://bit.ly/gitannual2025**

Evidence of his love of 60s music, Pablo's pedalboard creates a maelstrom of fuzzed-out bliss for DeWolff's live set

**And since then you've added a vintage Firebird to your live setup. Tell us about it.**
"Yeah, I bought the reissue secondhand and I played it on every show and almost every recording for years and years and years, so it looks very beat-up, like an old one. The Firebird is like an extension of my body and so I figured I'm a Firebird guy. It's also kind of a unique guitar. The Firebird [reissue] I had played for so many years is a good guitar, but it's not a great guitar because it has almost no sustain. And, I don't know, there's just some things about it that make it a little hard to play. So then I figured if I want to be the Firebird guy, I gotta go for a vintage one, but they're always super expensive.

"I met up with a friend who's a vintage guitar dealer and he had this '65 Firebird III hanging on the wall. I played it and, even acoustically, it was one of the best guitars I'd ever played. The bottom half had broken off at some point and the headstock had broken off at some point, so it wasn't a valuable guitar. But he didn't want to sell it because it was his favourite guitar.

"Some weeks later, I dreamed about it and after that experience I was like, 'Oh my God, that's the Holy Grail!' After that my friend got a Firebird VII in the shop and he said to me, 'Hey, isn't this something for you?' I was like, 'No, man. What if you keep the Firebird VII and sell me the III?' A couple of days later, he was like, 'Pablo, I'll think about it...' Fast forward a couple of days later: 'All right, let's do it!' I had to promise that if I ever sell it I'll give him the first option. But yeah, I finally have my dream guitar."




**There's a bit of a mystery with the non-reverse headstock, isn't there?**
"Yeah, there are two scenarios. The first would be that Gibson was already well into transitioning to the non-reverse Firebirds and they put a non-reverse headstock on it. The other scenario is that the headstock broke on the way to the first dealer and they sent it back and, for some reason, they put on a left-handed headstock. There's a photo from the 70s of a guy in quite a famous Dutch band playing this guitar and it already had this headstock on it. Why I think it happened on the way to the dealer is because if I was a customer in the early 70s and my headstock broke, I would take it to a luthier and I wouldn't be okay with that luthier putting a left-handed headstock on my right-handed guitar. I would be like, 'No, you gotta fix it properly.' Whereas if they sent it back to Gibson, and Gibson does it, maybe it's like, 'Well, I guess it's okay then.'"

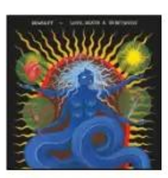
3. After years of playing his Firebird reissue, Pablo was lucky enough to stumble into a great deal on this vintage model dating from 1965

**"The Firebird is like an extension of my body and so I figured I'm a Firebird guy. It's also kind of a unique guitar"**

**You have three separate fuzz pedals on your 'board – the Jen Tone Bender and Isle Of Tone's Haze 65 and Luxe 64. How did you become such a fan of fuzz?**
"It started a long time ago, actually. When I got into Hendrix I was too young to understand how he got his sound. I just saw the guitar and amps and I thought that was it. So that intrigued me, but then I discovered The Black Keys. I loved Dan Auerbach's guitar tones on their early records and I discovered that he used fuzz to get his sound. So I looked on guitar forums to see what kind of fuzzes they were and I somehow got hold of an Analog Man Sun Face. Then, all of a sudden, I realised that you could clean it up and that's what all the old guys were doing, which I had never really understood before. I just started experimenting with that.

"Then, coincidentally, a guy from Spain – [César de Vicente of] LofiMind Effects – sent me a message. He was like, 'I'm making this fuzz and I want you to try it,' and he sent it to me. I had an instant connection and was like, 'Oh, this is great. I can dial in these sweet clean sounds but also just over the top, gritty distortion.' Then that broke down and I borrowed an Isle Of Tone fuzz from someone and the Isle Of Tone guy saw a video of me and he sent me a couple of fuzzes. I've become good friends with Joe [Huber] from Isle Of Tone and that really got me into the fuzz game."

**What's next for DeWolff?**
"We're gonna record a new album in May at Fame Studios in Alabama – the original studio where Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin recorded, and where the first Allman Brothers rehearsal ever took place. And then we're going to spend a week at the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, where *Brown Sugar* and *Wild Horses* were recorded and some Willie Nelson records, too. So that's gonna be really exciting!" G



DeWolff's latest album, *Love, Death & In Between*, is out now via the Mascot label

***www.dewolff.nu***

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

# RIVER DEEP

**Mark Knopfler** is at an interesting crossroads in his life and music. He's just sold most of his **guitar collection** and he's got a **new album** out that's as deep in emotion and storycraft as its title suggests. As you'd expect, it's also got some sublime guitar on it, though Knopfler himself believes his playing became "rusty" during the pandemic and is still in recovery. On the eve of the release of his new long-player, ***One Deep River***, we join him to hear his perspectives on songcraft, gangland Britain in the 1960s, his enduring relationship with the **Stratocaster**, and the guitars that he couldn't let go...

**Words** Jamie Dickson **Photography** Joby Sessions

This April will see the release of Mark Knopfler's 10th solo album since he struck out on his own with *Golden Heart* in 1996. Dire Straits had disbanded the year before and you'd have been forgiven for thinking, at that moment in time, that his best years were perhaps behind him. But it says much of Knopfler's musical integrity that both the depth and quality of his work have only improved in the 30 years that have passed since then.

In fact, listening to his latest album, *One Deep River*, you get a sense of an artist who – strange as it might seem to say – has quietly revealed the real mettle of his songcraft in his post-Straits solo work. *Money For Nothing* may have made him a household name, but ballads such as *Matchstick Man* from his 2018 album, *Down The Road Wherever*, or *Basil* from 2015's *Tracker* are masterpieces of powerful, mature ballad writing. There's humility, grace and nuance in their unhurried stories and poignantly phrased guitar lines that hold the listener's attention like a fireside story or a personal confession.

So it was all the more intriguing to learn that, just after selling the majority of his guitar collection at Christie's in London for a record total (25 per cent of which went to charity) in January, he announced a new album, *One Deep River*, to be released on 12 April. Would this be a swan song, then? A final statement on his life in music? Happily the answer seems to be 'no' – but it's fair to say that the album's songs cast longer shadows than those of his previous two records.

Thematically, the album is full of departures – from relationships, from towns, from life itself – and its 12 tracks are haunted by the uneasy presence of mobsters, scam artists and stick-up men. Yet the songs are as unhurried and beautifully performed as ever, while the addition of slide maestro Greg Leisz lends it some of the melancholic grandeur of a movie soundtrack set somewhere in the American West. And, of course, it has those unmistakable moments of guitar that only Knopfler seems to be able to deliver, saying much with just a few notes that always make the listener *feel* something, rather than just another ego-buffing solo.

And yet joining Mark to talk about the album we find him – perhaps surprisingly for a man who's a hero to so many players – musing on what he calls his "rusty" technique and ongoing struggles to stay engaged with playing the guitar while he works on the deep craft of lyric writing. Introspective yet frank, his thoughts on where he's at with guitar and music are as absorbing as the new album, so join us as we wade a little deeper into Knopfler's views on music, guitars and recording.

*"Some guitars are just that little bit special... You wouldn't want to sell them because they'd be too hard to say goodbye to"*

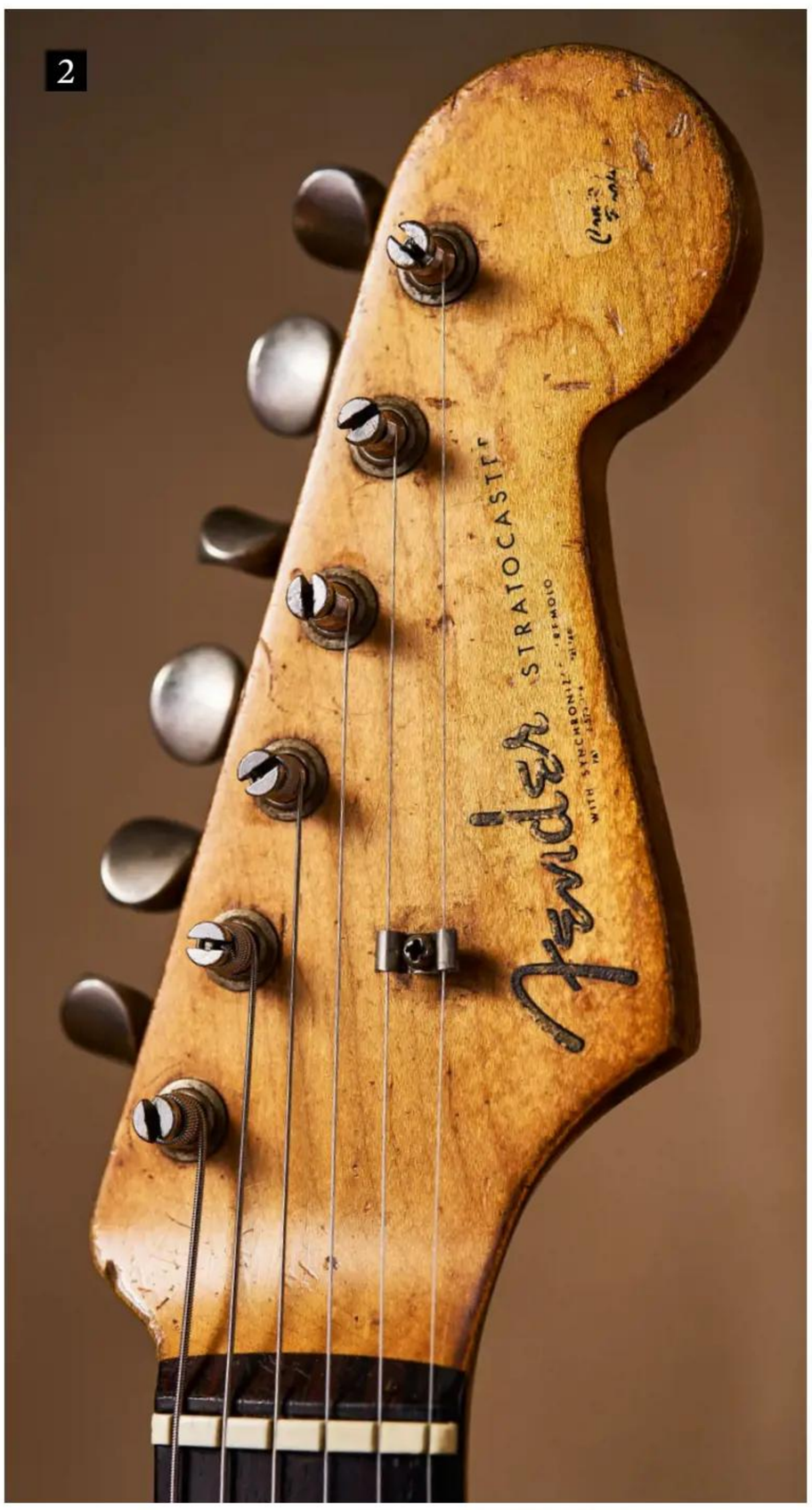
Mark's original 1961 Fender Stratocaster with rosewood 'board, famously used to record *Sultans Of Swing*. Its voice, for many, remains the definitive Knopfler sound and it was acquired by Mark in 1977. It is perhaps no surprise that it was not among the guitars put up for sale at Christie's in January

*"The musician part [of me] is much reduced, I think, but the writer part is as strong as ever. It's not that I've forgotten how to play, I'm just rusty"*




**1.** The '61 Strat is beautifully and naturally aged and is an icon of his early Dire Straits work. In 1995 Mark told *Guitarist*, however, that *Sultans* was written on a National resonator and the arrangement was originally quite different to the version on the Strat, which became so celebrated

**2.** With a slab 'board and spaghetti logo, not only is this 1961 guitar famous for the music recorded with it, it's also many people's idea of the definitive 60s Stratocaster spec




**Congratulations on the album. It feels like you're playing more Strat on it, such as on the single *Ahead Of The Game*, than we've heard from you for a while.**
"Yeah, I think that was the old '54. Oh, I'm sure it's a pretty backward kind of an approach. But, you know, I've always been a soft touch for something like that – a little figure [simple melodic pattern] like that."

**Does a Strat still feel like 'home' to you after all these years, given that there's another big strand of your work that's played with Gibson electrics and the like?**
"I think I'm equally at home with either. I mean, not that I'm at home with [any] guitar now. I've looked at so many words over the past few years, through the pandemic and beyond, that I'm hardly playing. My guitar playing has become a real passenger. So when I sit down to look at songs, I'm always just looking at lyrics, that's where I am, really. I tend to be more interested in the song that I'm just writing, a song that I've just finished writing, or the song that I'm just in the middle of writing. So that's where I'll be and it won't be practising [guitar]. So I'm afraid that's the truth of it."

**Do you find that as time goes by there's more you want to write about – in terms of subject matter – or, in fact, less?**
"Well, I've certainly been writing more songs and I don't know whether that was [specifically] to do with the pandemic or not, or because I just had more time. But it certainly hasn't helped my playing any. The musician part [of me] is much reduced, I think, but the writer part is as strong as ever. If a song wants to be born, then I try to let it happen, but I think the playing has deteriorated a little bit... I'd [find I'd] be ready to sit down and look at a song on the computer, but I wouldn't be playing enough. But that's just something that seems to have happened recently, and I should really take steps to spend more time behind the instrument, to just get playing. It's not that I've forgotten how to play it – I'm just rusty."

**Guitar is funny – it kind of waxes and wanes a bit in every player's life. It's a real lifelong relationship, with ups and downs.**
"It is, and it's often how you just start off. So the first good move for me is to get the damn thing out of the case. Certainly, for me, if it's in the case I'll often just start looking at the song, rather than looking at the guitar. So I'll try to keep an acoustic

and an electric on stands so that I can just reach for them and play and I don't have to start picking up the case, hitting somebody's chair with it, getting the guitar out, knocking something off another stand as you're sitting down again... The whole thing is just kind of cumbersome. So I like to have a couple of guitars out of their cases and on stands, and that way they've got a fighting chance of getting played."

**Your 2015 album, *Tracker*, was full of songs about people who could be described as unsung heroes, such as the Irish labourer in *Mighty Man* or the poet Basil Bunting. By contrast, the new album has a lot of villains in it, such as the murderous train robbers on the track *Tunnel 13*. Why?**
"I don't know... I suppose it may be just getting older and looking at the world. And I suppose, even in terms of social history, I've been looking at a certain period, which was a kind of a pivotal time in Britain. I wrote a song once called *5:15am*. It was about a miner coming onto his shift and he came across this car, a big Jag Mark X, and inside it was a man whose body was full of bullet holes.


4

**4.** The Gibson Custom Shop's ageing work includes numerous fine details aiming to reproduce Mark's original 1958 Lester

**3.** British social history inspired a lot of the album's themes, especially the emergence of gangland crime in the Northeast of England in the 1960s


3

This was the introduction to the Northeast of that kind of gangland killing, which was really about the fruit-machine [racket] that had come up from London. And so in a roundabout way, I suppose I've been reading about that period.

"There was a revolution in Cuba and the Mob had to do a quick reverse out of there and start up again, and London was the kicking-off point. So then the nightclub scene changed and the Gambling Act was brought into place so that those guys could start operating.... I'd started to read about that stuff way back a couple albums ago, and it's still an interesting period to me. A lot of people lost their innocence during that time. Sometimes they lost their bank accounts, too [laughs].

***"'One Deep River' could be a description of a person or the river itself. I like the idea of [a range of possible meanings]"***

"Actually, there were some extra tunes from this album and I suddenly realised that I could take four of

*"I like the idea of writing a good song: the challenge being to do that and the other challenge being to make a good record of it"*

This is the first prototype of Mark's 2016 Gibson Custom Shop Mark Knopfler '58 Les Paul Standard based on his original 1958 'Burst, which remains in his keeping. It was used to record *Janine* on Mark's new album and was also used to perform *Money For Nothing* and *Going Home* live on tour in 2019

*"The [forthcoming] EP features songs that combine thematically, about fairgrounds and showgrounds and vanishing boxing booths"*

The 2004 Fender Stratocaster is a 1954-spec model made to commemorate the Strat's (then) 50th anniversary. It has toured with Knopfler's and Neil Diamond's sideman Richard Bennett, who played it from 2005 to 2019. Knopfler used this on the tracks *Tunnel 13* and *Before My Train Comes* on the new album, while Richard Bennett played it on the track *This One's Not Going To End Well*

those songs and make them into an EP [*The Boy*, out 20 April], which is yet to come out. It's just songs that combine thematically, about the fairgrounds and showgrounds and the vanishing boxing booths [boxing booths pitted veteran fighters who journeyed from town to town against onlookers brave enough to challenge them in the ring – Ed]. There were once many, many hundreds of them, but they were trying to introduce the British Boxing Board Of Control to control it more – and also the showground culture.

*"Greg Leisz is a phenomenal player and straight away it felt as though he'd been with us for a long, long time – it was an instantaneous thing"*

"I was always fascinated by the fairground that came to Newcastle once a year when I was a boy and, of course, it had its boxing booth, too – so that time was quite interesting. There's a song on the EP called *Mr Solomons Said* and a song about a bad day for a knife thrower and [narratives about] people who were attracted to the bright lights of London, maybe like the boy who'd cycled in from the countryside. So it's just where I'm at now."

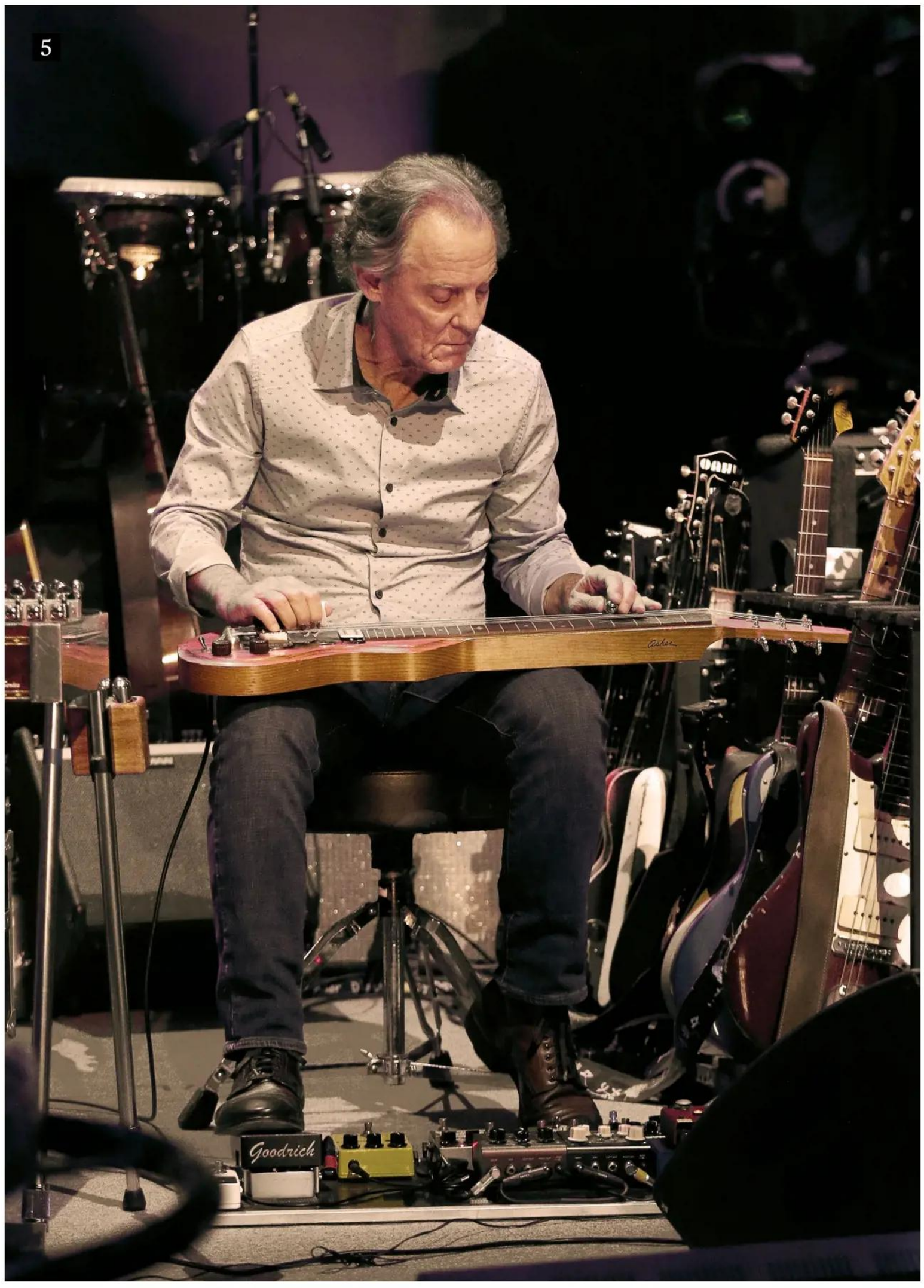
**You called the album *One Deep River*. What does it mean to you?**
"Well, what does it mean to you? It could be a description of a person, or it could be a description of the river itself. So, you know, I like the idea of it being available across the range [of possible meanings]."

**With lyrics, you have to leave a certain amount open to interpretation by the listener. Otherwise, it becomes a bit trite.**
"Yeah, that's right. And very often, you know, if you try to explain the song to somebody I've found that just gets you in deeper."

**The album also sounds like the most Americana-influenced record you've done in a while, on tracks like *Janine* and *Before My Train Comes*. The superb lap steel playing from Greg Leisz certainly evokes that melancholy Western feeling. Would it be fair to say that's a theme?**
"Yeah, well, it's never very far away. Greg is a phenomenal player and straight away it felt as though he'd been with us for a long, long time so he didn't need to become assimilated – it was an instantaneous thing. With this band, it's the high point of a year when they get together and, with Greg, it was just *more* of that. I don't give directions [to musicians such as Greg Leisz]...

"If you're directing Colin Farrell or someone you don't say, 'I'd like you to walk over to the window, lean out and then I'd like you to scratch your head and look as though you don't know what you're doing...' That's the last thing you would tell a good actor to do. Because what he would be doing would be thinking about a possible approach, thinking about things that might or might not work, and possibly discussing it with you at some point but not needing to have a set of directions put in his lap. And it's the same thing with these guys. I just sing them the song and leave them to it, really, and then just keep an eye on what's unfolding and maybe nudge things in certain directions, possibly.

"But that's part of the joy of it – welcoming people into your song and them finding their place in it themselves, rather than being told where to go and sit."




5. Veteran slide master Greg Leisz added his trademark graceful playing to the album, lending it a feeling of the American West in many places

PHOTO BY GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

**When working with really great musicians, it can be a pleasure to surrender control and just enjoy letting them react to the song instinctively.**

"You're so right – that's part of it, part of the joy of it. I think these guys, they just take it for granted now that they'll be skating on their own for a bit, you know, and they'll just be finding out that they'll be listening to each other as well, as much as anything else. You have to be able to seamlessly fit in with all the existing textures and that takes a certain amount of time and experience and confidence in what it is that you're doing. If I change my part, you can be sure that the band will hear it and will mark that change and play according to it. But you probably won't even have a discussion about it with anybody.

"That's what musicians love more than anything else – when you're playing with someone who has heard what you've done, what you've changed, and has changed their path without mentioning it, just adapted to your change with no words, no words necessary. It's a wonderful gang to be part of and it makes all the other times worth it – because a lot of times you're just struggling. But when it comes clear like that, it's tremendous."

**There's some beautiful acoustic parts on the album – and we couldn't help noticing that your lovely pre-war Martin D-18, which featured on the last album, *Down The Road Wherever*, wasn't up for sale at the recent Christie's auction of your guitars.**

"Well noticed. That's a '35 D-18 that was given to me by a good friend. That guitar, the D-18, will have got on a lot of songs up to this point. But I found another little guitar that seems to have gotten onto a few songs on this album, taking that role, and it's a little mahogany parlour guitar made by Arthur Boswell. It just seems to have answered for some songs on this record and I don't know how many tracks it's actually on, but it's four or five. That's become the guitar of this album.

"The song *Tunnel 13* mentions redwood, but it's not actually a redwood-top guitar [being played], although Boswell makes beautiful redwood guitars – and, in fact, I've got one and they're lovely. But this one's a mahogany guitar and it seems to have spoken on a few songs quite nicely. Quite why that should be I've no idea. I'm looking forward to working with the redwood [guitars by Boswell] and seeing where that goes to – but until I sort of test them in the songs, I won't really know."

*"I like to have a couple of guitars out of their cases and on stands, and that way they've got a fighting chance of getting played"*




6. This detail of Mark's Duesenberg Gran Royale shows off its unusual retro-styled pickups – deceptively, one is a P-90 and the other a humbucker beneath the foil-like covers, selectable with a vintage-style four-way rotary switch

*"The Duesenbergs are great guitars – I found they went straight on to records and I didn't expect them to sound as good as they did"*

Mark's Duesenberg Gran Royale was delivered to him at a 2019 concert in Berlin at the Mercedes-Benz Arena. It was used on the new album

*"That's part of the joy of it, welcoming people into your song and them finding their place in it"*

This 2008 Mark Knopfler signature Stratocaster has been refitted with Callahan pickups and it features on the new album

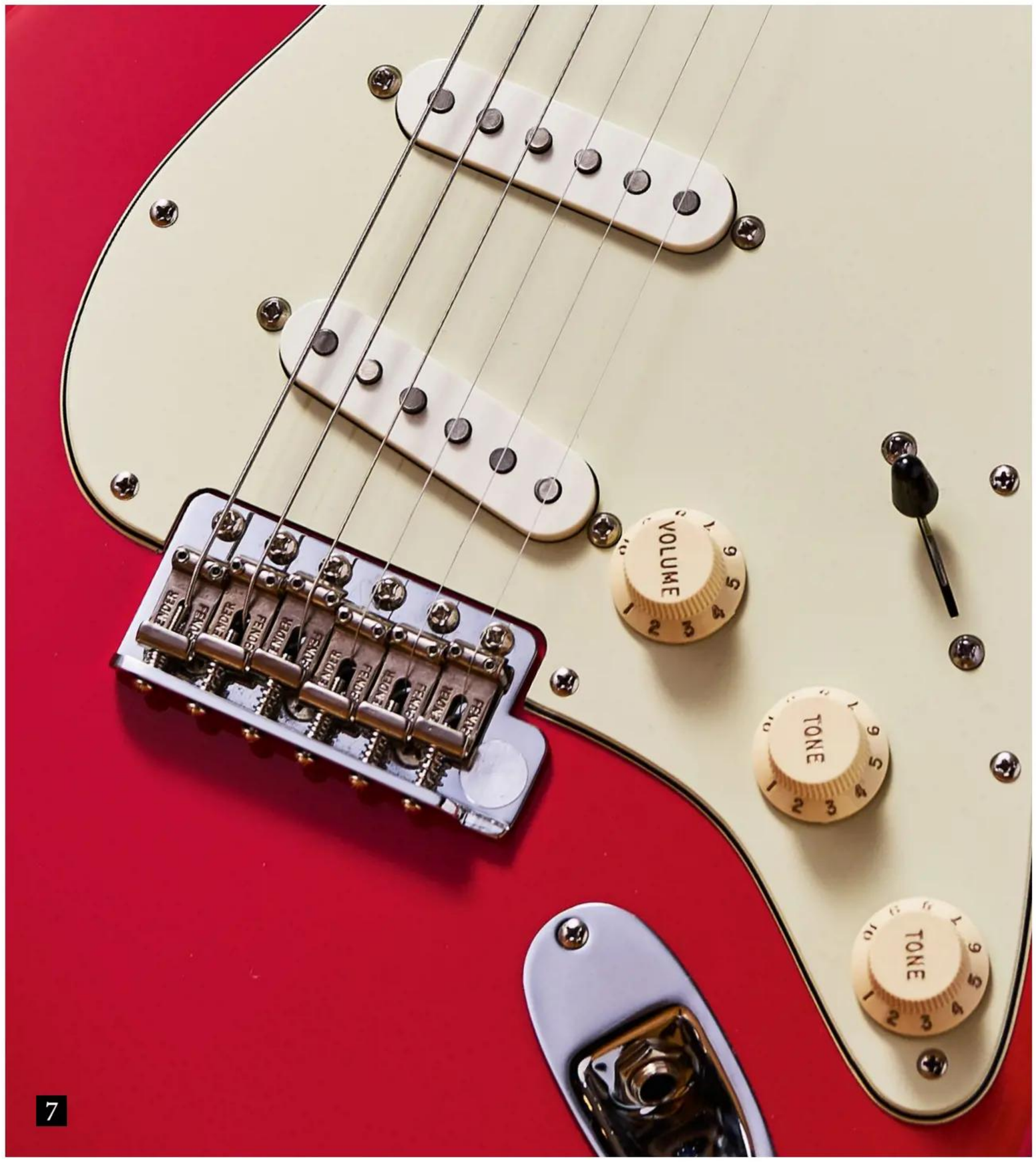
**When it comes to recording an album in the studio, the guitars that actually make it onto a record aren't always the ones you go into the studio meaning to use. Have you experienced that before – been surprised by how central an unexpected guitar became to the sound of an album?**

"I certainly have – I remember the Grosh Electrojet doing that. With this album, it was the Duesenbergs. Because I bought two, I have a Caribou and a Gran Royale. They're great guitars, I've found that they just went straight onto records and I didn't expect them to sound as good as they did. But they're great instruments and I haven't even scratched the surface yet with those guitars."

**You've spoken a fair bit about your motivation for auctioning much of your guitar collection at Christie's earlier this year. But what about the guitars you decided to keep? Why did you decide to hang on to some guitars in particular?**

"Partly it's sentimental, but also I wanted to have enough left to record with, you know? Enough that I'd be happy to be recording with in years to come. So I need to have a few of those. Also, I've got a son who plays guitar – actually, both boys play guitar – and a daughter who plays guitar. So I wanted some stuff left for the kids to enjoy playing as well. Plus, you want to hang on to things that are family heirlooms, really. Like the National that Steve Phillips played – that was Steve's National and I treasure it and that was the *Romeo And Juliet* National... but it's the same thing for Strat Number One from *Sultans*, so I am careful about that.

"There's things that you get really closely attached to. For example, I got to be good pals with Tony Joe White and ... he gave me his ES-330 that he used for *Rainy Night In Georgia* and *Groupie Girl* and all of those things. I said, 'You can't give me this thing...' but it was under his bed and covered in dust and the fingerboard was pitted so deeply from his sweaty gigs that it needed a new fingerboard anyway. So I got a new fingerboard for it and I use that 330 on every record that I make now; it's just become part of the scenery. So, again, some guitars are just that little bit special that they work their way in, you know? Or like the Martin D-18 I mentioned before, there will be guitars like that. You couldn't sell them and you wouldn't want to sell them because they'd be just too hard to say goodbye to."




7

***"[Not auctioning guitars is] partly sentimental, but also I wanted to have enough left that I'd be happy to be recording with in years to come"***

7. Note the black pickup selector switch tip on Mark's signature model Strat

**You recently made a special recording of the theme to the *Local Hero* movie, *Going Home*, which ended up featuring the better part of the world's top guitarists on it (see box over the page). It's such a memorable and timeless melody. Where do those powerfully emotive, Celtic-sounding lead lines come from, with you? They feel like a really important part of your musical DNA.**

"A melody like that just resonates with childhood for me because of listening to Jimmy Shand and Scottish country dance music when I was small. I think that was among the earliest music I would have heard in Scotland. I'm more or less half-Scottish so it's in the genes already on my mother's side, who are just a family essentially of Scottish Geordies. There's a lot of links between the Geordies and the Scots; a lot of Scots moved down to Newcastle to work in the shipyards and in heavy industry. So when I'm writing in that vein, it doesn't seem like it's a foreign language to me at all. Sometimes [Scottish] musicians will say, 'Oh, that's very 'West Highlands', Mark,' or 'That's Strathspey that you're playing there, Mark...' And I'll say, 'That *what* that I'm playing?' So you live and learn. But anyway, I'm reasonably at home with [those musical traditions] and they don't seem like a foreign country to me."

**There are often distinct chapters in every person's life that can be quite different from each other. Musically speaking, do you feel that way about your own work over the years?**
"No, I think the ditties are pretty much nursery rhymes and they haven't really changed musically. I haven't been too interested in improving that side of it. There was a spell a few years back when I was in New York a lot of the time and I was kind of interested in learning how to play a little better, just to learn a bit more about the music game. But generally speaking, it's the same old nursery rhyme and so, no,

***"The 'Going Home' melody resonates for me because of listening to Jimmy Shand and Scottish country dance music when I was small"***

I don't think so. But, lyrically, I'm still interested in trying to improve as a writer – I like the idea of writing a good song: the challenge being to do that and the other challenge being to make a good record of it. Gillian Welch once said to me that, 'All I'm trying to do is write a good song and make a good record of it,' and I thought to myself, 'Well, I've never heard a better explanation of the process,' and it's all that matters." G



*One Deep River* is set for release on 12 April on British Grove Records/EMI
***www.markknopfler.com***



PHOTO BY BEN STANSALL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

8. The new charity single version of *Going Home (Theme From Local Hero)* features a who's who of great guitarists, with cover art by Sir Peter Blake

9. Mark's iconic 1988 Pensa-Suhr MK1 went under the hammer at Christie's in late January where it fetched a remarkable sum of £504,000, with 25 per cent of the auction proceeds going to charity. Mark's remaining guitars will be used on future recordings or kept for posterity




8

# CALLING ALL THE HEROES

*Mark Knopfler on recording a charity single that ended up with the bulk of the world's greatest players on it*

While Mark Knopfler was busy making *One Deep River*, he also found time – along with partner in crime Guy Fletcher – to produce a remarkable recording in aid of the Teenage Cancer Trust charity. Taking his well-known theme music from the 1983 film *Local Hero* as its basis, over 60 of the world's greatest guitar players contributed parts to the single, including Eric Clapton, David Gilmour, Pete Townshend and Slash. Poignantly, it also features the last known studio guitar session by Jeff Beck. The project, which was released under the name Mark Knopfler's Guitar Heroes, made plenty of headlines when it finally came out in March, so we asked Mark for his behind-the-scenes account of how it all came together.

"I mean, the organisers knew more people than I do," Mark says with a smile. "I couldn't believe it. And yet it seemed that the more people the organisers suggested to me and Guy, the more people were getting on it. Poor Guy did great – I mean, he worked a lot harder than I did on this thing. We did have time to discuss the way something felt occasionally and where it might go, but a lot of the hands-on work had to go to Guy because he's got all the recording and engineering skills at his disposal. Thank goodness he does. Guy did a great job, really. Because [the list of contributing players] could have gone from here to Leeds," Mark chuckles, adding that the number of players who got involved meant that two separate edits had to be made for release.

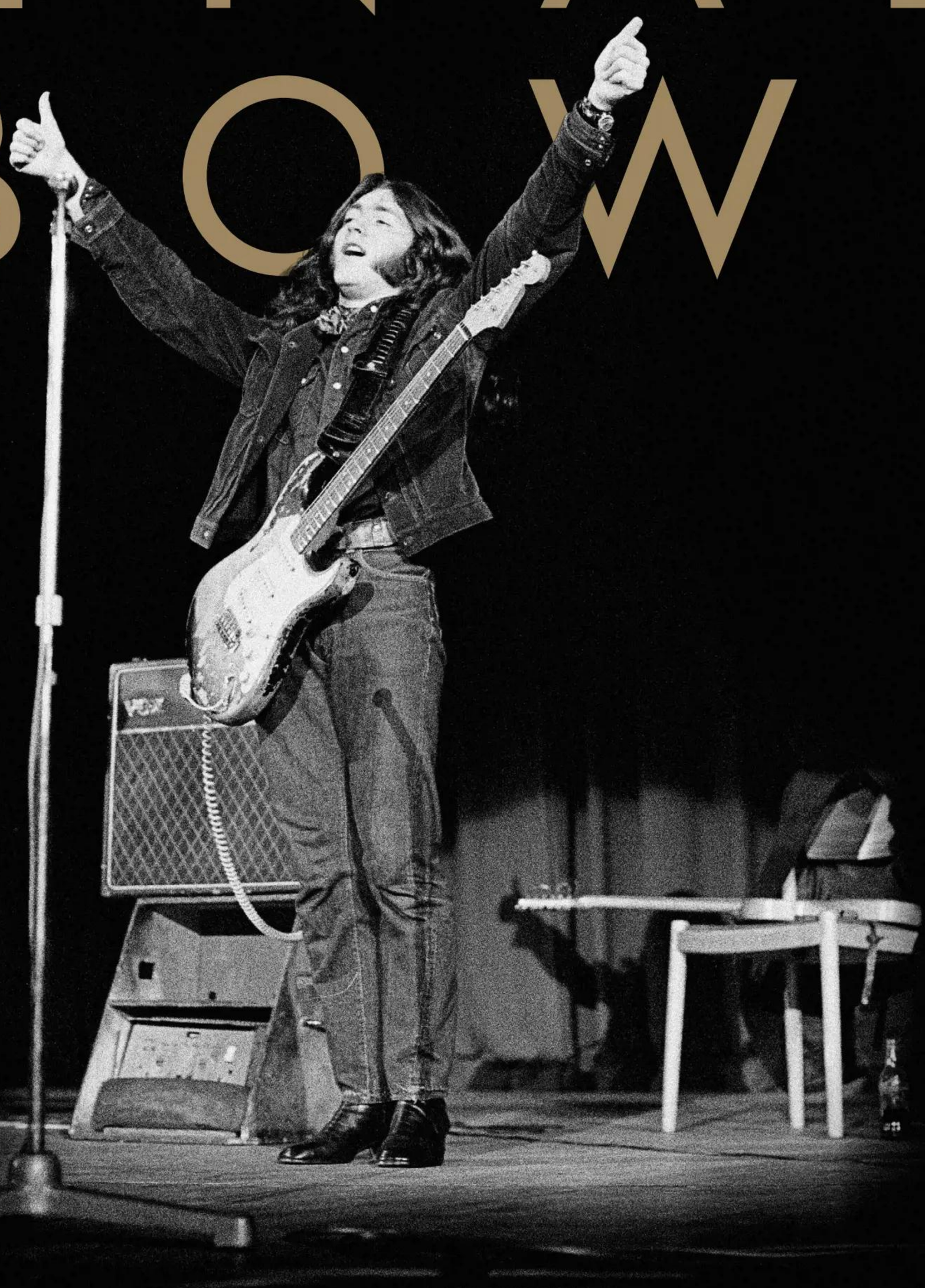
"Cutting it down to two [versions] was the solution, really," Mark explains. "Just one for the radio – which would be desperately savage cutting – and the other one that lets the track stretch out a bit... I think it's about eight or nine minutes. But we used to make records that long anyway, in the old days [laughs], so it's fine. But I just really want to thank everybody for such fabulous input and such great session playing from beginning to end. Pete Townshend came in first and did what only Pete Townshend can do with a chord – or two or three. And then Eric Clapton came and played some lovely guitar and different licks. After that, it was David Gilmour... and people like Joe Bonamassa would just send stuff in from their studios. But it was all fantastic."

Of the process of making such disparate contributions hang together in something like a coherent, musical fashion, he says: "All you have to do is just try to treat it the way you would treat your own playing. And, I mean, it's your baby, you just want the best thing you can for it. Obviously, it's a little crowded down there in the vegetable market, but I think Guy did a sterling job, considering, and I'm really pleased with the way it came out."

*"You want to hang on to things that are family heirlooms. Like Steve Phillips' National. I treasure it – that was the 'Romeo And Juliet' National"*

Mark with the 1937 National Style O resonator that is one of the guitars he'll never part with, as well as being a key part of his live and recording setup on an ongoing basis

# FINAL BOW



*Rory Gallagher's 1961 Stratocaster is one of the most recognisable guitars in the world. So closely bound with his own family history and that of Irish music itself, it seemed unlikely the guitar would ever be sold. Now, nearly 30 years after Rory's death, we join Rory's brother Donal to find out why it's time to let go*

**Words** Jamie Dickson

Rory Gallagher's '61 Stratocaster is one of the most iconic guitars of all time. Fender's Custom Shop replica of it is a good guitar, make no doubt, but no craftsperson could truly recreate what that guitar has been through, where it's travelled and what it represents.

Bought in Crowley's music store in Cork when Rory was just 15, the guitar was purchased when his mother took a leap of faith to underwrite the hire-purchase agreement for an instrument that was, at the time, beyond the means of most pro musicians. And yet how he repaid her trust – the 14 solo albums that Rory recorded before his untimely death in 1995 remain a benchmark for all guitar players. Not only for the headlong, ecstatic energy of tracks such as *Big Guns* and *Walk On Hot Coals* but also the tender poignancy of songs such as *I'll Admit You're Gone* and *I Fall Apart*.

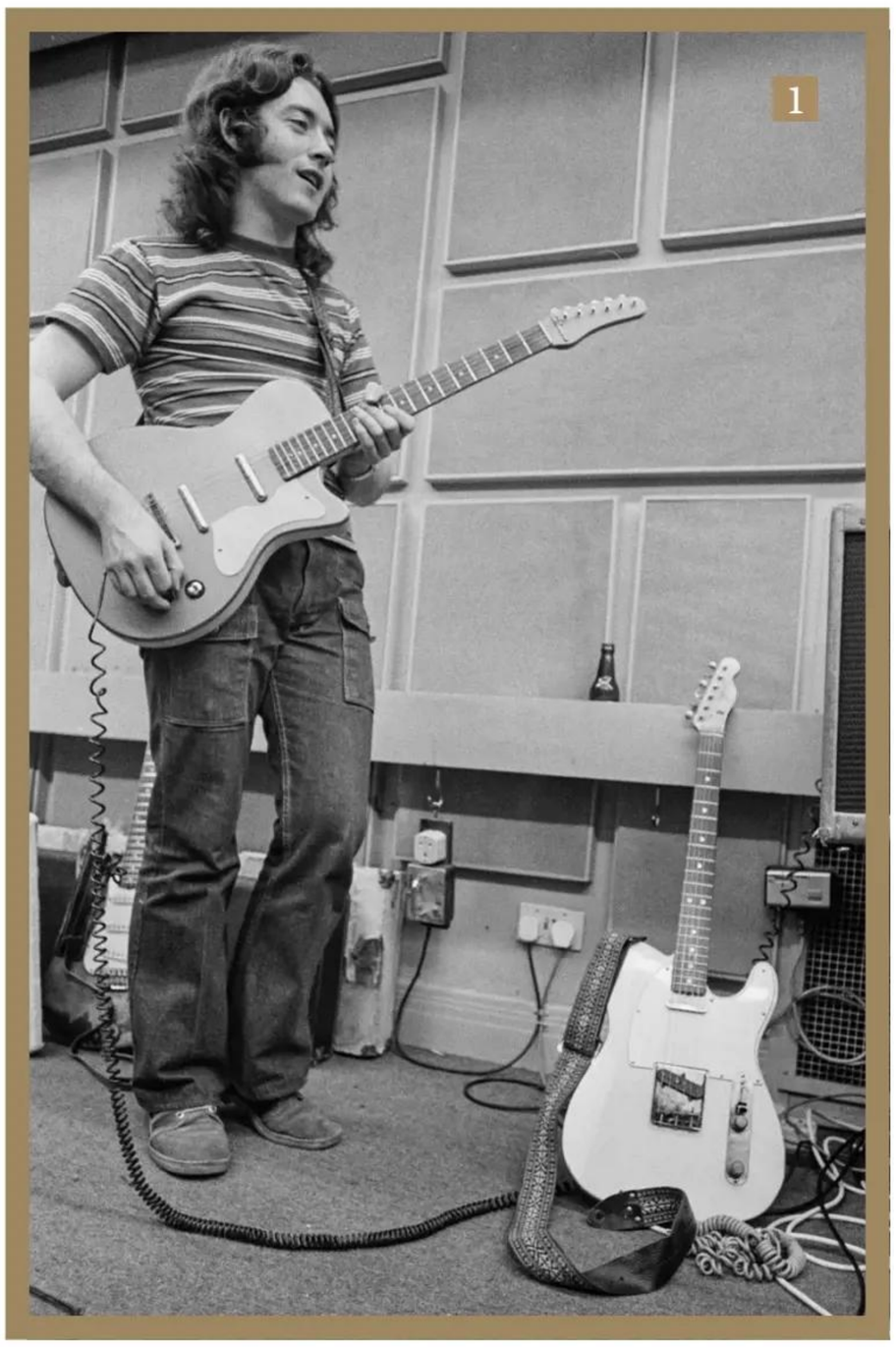
Not all of his songs were recorded with the Strat, of course – Rory was a collector of all kinds of guitars, most of which he put to use in the studio or on stage – yet the '61 Strat somehow contains them all, embodies all he was as a musician. In the dark years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the sound of Rory playing this guitar in Belfast's Ulster Hall, brought people together, dispelling the shadow of gunman and car-bomb for a few fleeting hours. Its voice rang out from the Isle of Wight festival in 1970 and inspired a young Brian May with a lifelong love of how single-coil pickups could sound when they howled at full tilt through a Vox AC30.

Today, the exposed grain of its alder body has become as grey as sun-bleached driftwood with use, the little that remains of its original sunburst finish mere flakes of lacquer and colour, scattered like islands in a jagged archipelago – a map, somehow, of all the places the Strat has been. A document of genius, written in battered wood and faded paint.

It means a lot, to a lot of people, that guitar. It was, therefore, all the more surprising when the news went out that the Strat (and the rest of Rory's collection of guitars) was being put up for auction at Bonhams in London this October. Some found it hard to accept – especially in Ireland, where Rory Gallagher is rightly venerated as a pioneer of Irish rock and blues, a hero for the ages.

The possibility that the Strat, in particular, might end up in the hands of a private owner overseas led to calls for the Irish government to intercede, and fans have even begun crowd-funding appeals to buy the guitar for posterity. It's understandable that the guitar is so well loved – less palatable are cynical accusations that the sale was motivated by greed, taunts that must surely hurt the guitar's custodians, Rory's family, especially as no-one knows what that guitar means, in emotional terms, better than they.

"I'm putting blinkers on, to be honest," Rory's brother Donal Gallagher reflects. "I mean, it was the main evening news last night on television in Ireland and the radio news as well. And then the Mayor of Cork, who is a Rory fan, has come out and demanded the government makes sure it stays in Ireland, so it's going to go into that political sphere, as well as everything else."




1. Despite being best known for his 1961 Strat, Rory was never a one-guitar man – much of his collection was American in origin such as his white '66 Tele, above, and what appears to be a twin-pickup Silvertone

PHOTO BY JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

## LETTING GO

In the 30 years since Rory's death, Donal has become a full-time steward of Rory's guitar collection as well as an ambassador for his musical legacy. However, in recent weeks, he's been besieged by calls about the sale – calls from journalists and fans, government bodies and even Vatican officials. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion on the 100-plus-item sale, which includes nearly all of Rory's guitars, amps and effects.

As custodian of all this gear, it was ultimately Donal's decision – in close consultation with the rest of the family – to sell Rory's instruments. So why do so? And why now?

"Well, several factors," Donal says. "One, I suppose, is the conveyor belt of life and you have to look at your own situation. Next year it'll be the 30th anniversary [of Rory's death], and obviously that puts a lot of things into focus – especially as we've been completing a new documentary on Rory ahead of the anniversary. When I looked at the instruments [while making the documentary] I couldn't help thinking, 'What happens after *my* demise?' for instance. And I suppose being hospitalised myself [Donal underwent successful treatment for cancer not long ago] brought that into sharper focus. I knew all the difficulties I faced,

***"Next year it'll be the 30th anniversary [of Rory's death], and that puts a lot of things into focus"*** **DONAL GALLAGHER**

holding the collection, which I never get to see anyway. Because you can't just hang the Strat up over your fireplace, so it's not an object for the family to enjoy."

Donal adds that, over the past three decades, the idea was to tour the guitars through high-profile museums, guitar shows and national institutions. But, especially post-Brexit, staging such international events has become prohibitively difficult on a number of levels.

"It was great to do the *Guitarist* exhibition at Olympia [in 2018], where you could show the guitars

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

off and people could enjoy them," Donal recalls. "But opportunities to do that kind of thing have become limited. To have a touring exhibition, visiting different countries... nowadays it's just so difficult. For instance, we sent the Strat out to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame for their 'Play It Loud' exhibition and it required all sorts of special licences.

"But when it went out to the States, Covid hit and so we didn't see the guitar for nearly three years because of the closure of the museum at that time... So then you have sleepless nights any time the guitar travels because when are you likely to see it again? It's great that other people are seeing it and visiting it, but you start thinking, 'What if something happens? If there's a fire or whatever.' Obviously it's insured for its value, but that doesn't begin to compensate..."

It's completely understandable that Rory's fans should want the best for the guitars and for them to remain accessible and in responsible hands. But beneath all the strong, sincere feelings people have about these iconic instruments, lie practical realities that cannot be ignored – including the high cost of keeping them secure. While Donal doesn't name any exact figures, it's clear the annual cost of insuring and storing the guitars safely could buy a respectable vintage guitar collection in itself. And Donal's under no illusion that when his own time comes, that cost would be transferred to his surviving family.

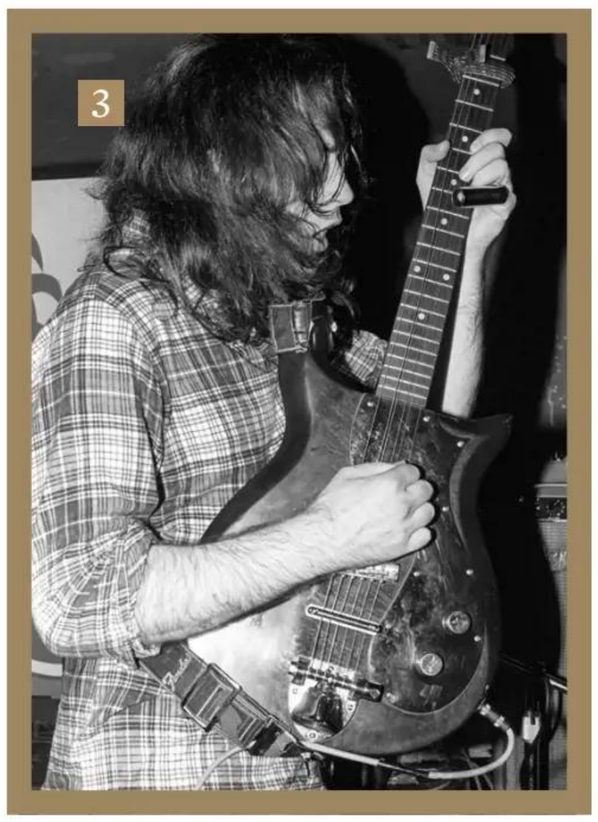


PHOTO BY PETER NOBLE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

All this has led some to suggest that the guitars should simply be donated to a museum for posterity. It's an attractive thought – and Donal says he has looked into the possibility many times over the years. But, he argues, simply giving the guitars to a public institution isn't as straightforward as one might think.

"There are institutions, particularly in Ireland [that could potentially host the guitars]. For example, I've had lots of contact with Cork City Hall, and the Music Library in Cork is named after Rory, so initially that's where the guitar collection was going to go. They were building a brand-new library that was going to be five storeys, with two basement levels, and the whole library was going to be themed around Rory, and either part or all of the collection was [proposed] to be housed there. Now, that was first discussed back in 1998 – but the building is still on the drawing board. In the meantime, you're holding this collection, waiting for government bodies to build these buildings, you know?"

*"You have sleepless nights any time the guitar travels because when are you likely to see it again?"* ***DONAL GALLAGHER***

Likewise, prior attempts to lodge the guitars with private museums have met their own set of problems, Donal says. "There was a museum out in Germany where we were going to put an exhibition on, and that was government-funded in Germany, [it was] their main music one. But by the time we got around to the exhibition, they'd closed it down as they'd run out of funding.

"Another place was the Fender Visitor Center in California. I got invited out to the opening of that, and, you know, it was a wonderful place near the factory, and I thought, 'Oh, well this would be a great location,' but sadly that closed down just a couple of years after it had opened.

"And then there was The Beatles Museum in Hamburg, which was amazing, but that's also closed down. So you have no certainties with giving the guitars to an institution, as to what happens to the guitars [in the years that follow donation]."

While one imagines it might be possible to draw up some kind of agreement to return the instruments to the family in the event that a host museum closes down, that would, of course, take things back to square one – with fresh arrangements having to be made for their secure storage by the family. That open-ended, long-term responsibility became all the more daunting, Donal says, after the lockup where some of the guitars are currently housed was broken into recently.

"Actually, the people who broke into the unit were targeting other units next to us," Donal explains. "[There were] six guys dressed as emergency gas men with bolt-cutters and angle grinders. It was horrifying just how quickly they got into our unit – obviously [what was in there] wasn't what they were after, but it had the same effect [as if they had deliberately targeted it] and you kind of go, 'Wow, that's scary.'"

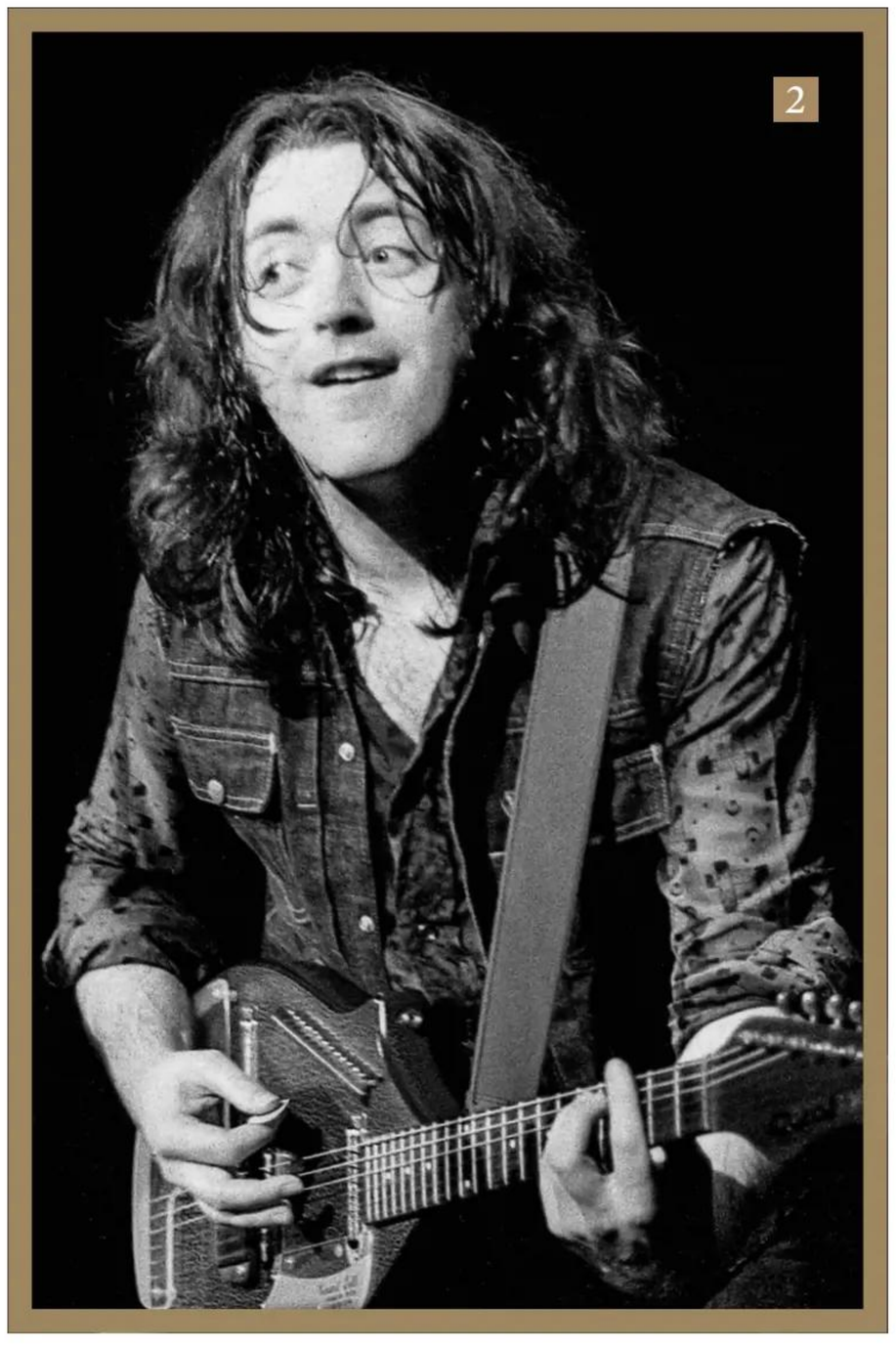


PHOTO BY DAVID CORIO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

**2.** Rory was a musician first and foremost and so he typically acquired guitars for their musical utility or to spark inspiration, such as his 1968 Coral electric sitar

**3.** Some of Rory's guitars – often hotter output, single pickup, single-cut solidbodies – were primarily used for slide, as with his modded 1963 Gretsch Corvette

*"It was great to do the Guitarist exhibition at Olympia [in 2018], where you could show the guitars off and people could enjoy them"*

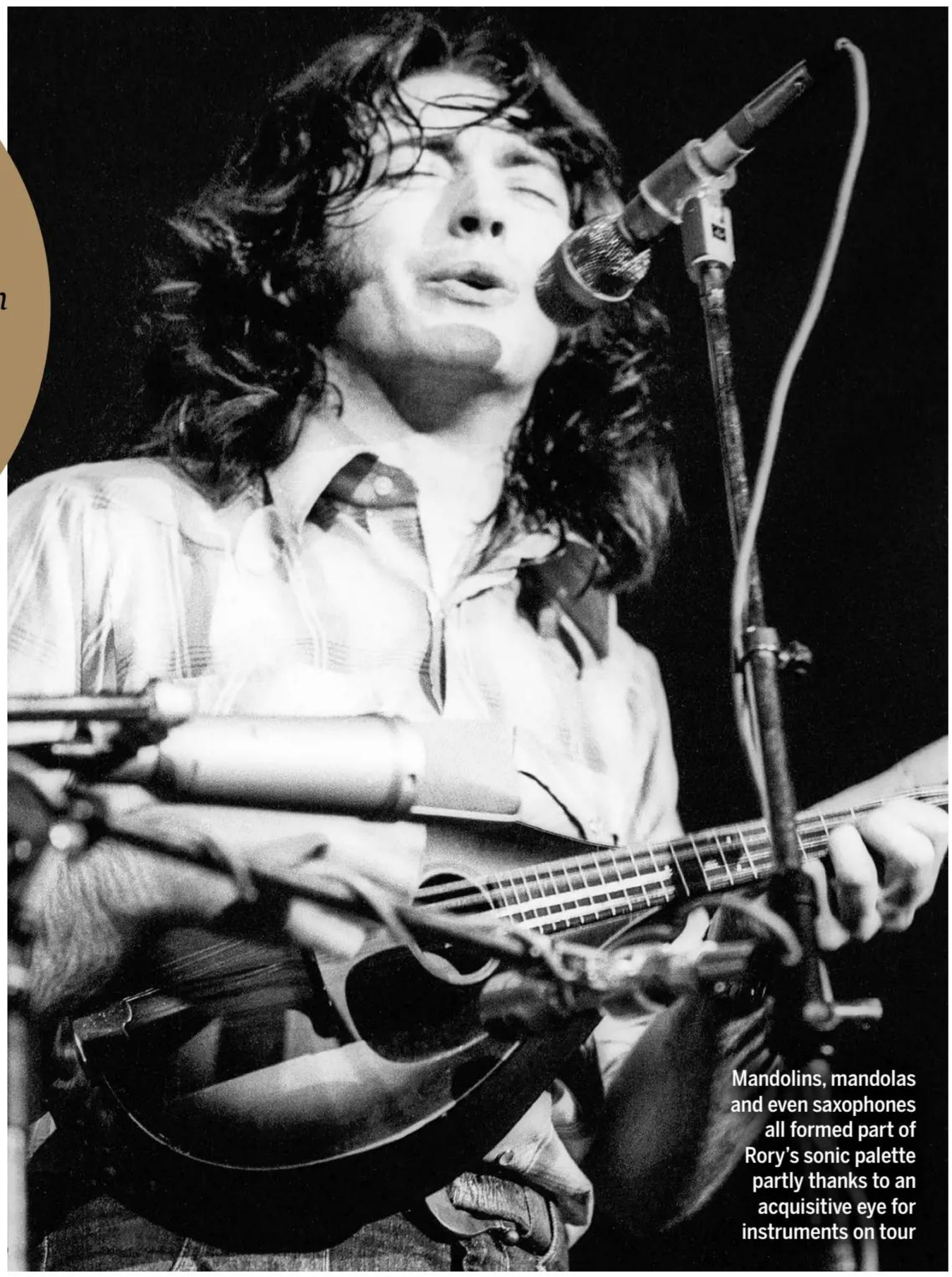
**DONAL GALLAGHER**

PHOTO BY GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES

**A lot of Rory's guitar collection was bought in emulation of his blues heroes, such as this angular Airline 'JB Hutto' electric**

# ECLECTIC COLLECTOR

*Rory's taste in guitars, amps and effects was wide ranging and often driven by the demands of stage performance – but more than a little hero worship, too, as Donal Gallagher explains*



Mandolins, mandolas and even saxophones all formed part of Rory's sonic palette partly thanks to an acquisitive eye for instruments on tour

PHOTO BY IAN DICKSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

During the years when Rory's Strat saw use in hundreds of gigs, Donal was Rory's *de facto* manager – travelling the world with him and handling everything from air freight to negotiating record deals. He was the only person Rory trusted to handle business while he rocked the world's great stages. He also helped Rory track down an eclectic but hard-working collection of mostly classic American guitars but with a fair smattering of vintage Japanese oddities and rarities, folk instruments and, of course, amps and effects. The motivating force behind Rory's collection was typically either pragmatic need – say, for a workhorse stage or studio instrument – or the desire to emulate his own heroes, who were drawn from the golden age of pre-war blues and jazz.

> *"Buying the baritone was inspired by Rory's admiration for Glen Campbell. So, the next thing, this guitar was coming into his life"*
>
> DONAL GALLAGHER

"Primarily, he was buying a blues guitar collection," Donal reflects. "If he'd read an article that said Alexis Korner used Japanese guitars, Rory would investigate the thread of that – maybe to try and get the sound that Alexis Korner got from that particular instrument... it would take him down that avenue.

"But I also remember one of the later purchases he made was a baritone guitar, which he used nicely on *Fresh Evidence*. It wasn't something I was familiar with, but I think [Rory was inspired to get one by] Jet Harris hits like *Diamonds*, which had that big, deep guitar sound. We always thought that was Jet Harris playing the bass but actually there were specific baritone guitars [involved]. I think buying the baritone was also inspired by Rory's admiration for Glen Campbell and his solo on *Wichita Lineman*. So the next thing, this baritone guitar was coming into his life. You know?"

Despite being relentless in pursuit of certain instruments, Rory was very particular about what he wanted – and sometimes passed up even highly collectible guitars if they didn't feel like a good fit for him, including a guitar that was almost a twin to Rory's '61 Strat.

"Another time, somewhere in Texas, this guy turned up at this venue and he had a sunburst Stratocaster to show Rory. He came backstage and I met him, and he said, 'I wonder if your brother would be interested in this? It would be the same age as his.' And then we compared serial numbers and found it was only one digit off Rory's Strat and I'm going, 'Oh my God.' Rory was always saying, 'What if anything ever happened to the Strat?' so I thought it was a certainty he'd want to buy this guitar. I asked the guy to wait while Rory finished his soundcheck, but, to me, it wasn't even a question of how much. But, actually, it was quite peculiar – when Rory saw the guitar, I remember just feeling in myself, 'He's not even going to entertain this.' And, in fact, he didn't buy it. Although, for the life of me, I couldn't understand why he wouldn't."

## NEXT LIFE

Clearly, the decision to sell the collection was not taken lightly – and that both personal factors and long-term practical obligations weighed in the balance. When the decision was made, Donal did so in close consultation with his wider family. One concern raised by fans is that Rory's Strat could end up in some collector's bank vault. But Donal says the irony is that the Strat, due to its high value and historic status, already *is* kept in a bank vault, out of view most of the time.

> ***"The guitar has got to move on. The life it's got at present isn't necessarily the kindest one it could have"*** **DONAL GALLAGHER**

"Put it this way, if I was a man who could play guitar and enjoyed playing it, that'd be one thing," he reflects. "If the family had wanted to keep it, that would be another thing. If I didn't have to worry about the safety aspect of it and that all goes with insuring an instrument like that and it was in my house all day... it still wouldn't get any use. I always saw it as having a life of its own. I mean, you can still watch the footage of the guy who originally had the guitar [before Rory] on YouTube – he was called Jim Conlon and he was in a band called the Royal Showband.

"It's so difficult. The guitar has got a life of its own and it's got to move on. And put it this way: I think that the life it's got at present isn't necessarily the kindest one it could have. To be sitting in a bank vault is not the way. And whatever few years I might have left... I mean, it's about trying to pass it on before the inevitable happens, you know? You hope that if somebody wants to bid on it and buy it, that they'll cherish it, and they're doing it for all the right reasons. But either way, hopefully the instrument gets played and used or featured somewhere."

While it's unlikely that everyone will be reconciled to the idea of the guitars being sold, it's certainly a lot more comprehensible in the light of what Donal has to say on the matter. It would be nice to think that another leading guitarist will buy the Strat – but there are no guarantees. And in the instrument's life to date there have been few of those anyway. If Rory's Strat hadn't been returned after being stolen early on in his career, none of this would be taking place. If Rory hadn't died, all too soon, perhaps he'd be playing it yet. Perhaps, maybe, what if? It's only human to ask those questions. But in reality, to paraphrase George Harrison, all things must pass.

In the meantime, while the guitars are still in the family's possession a little longer, we decided to document them on camera one last time at the scene of some of Rory's most memorable moments on stage – including the breakthrough moment when Taste supported Cream for the latter's farewell show – the Royal Albert Hall in London.

With Donal as our guide, in the following pages we share his personal favourite stories about seven guitars from Rory's collection that will be under the hammer in October... G

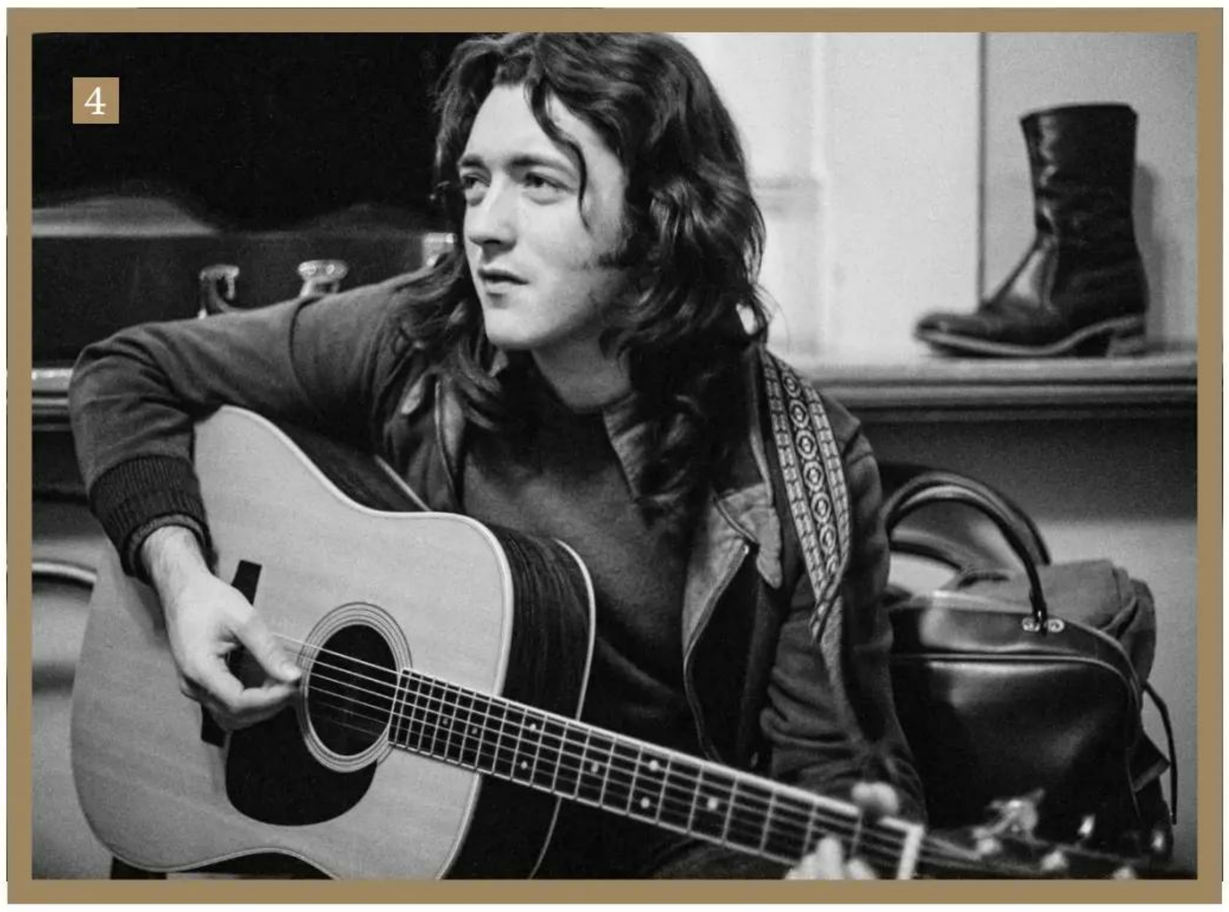


PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

**4.** Rory's Martin D-35 gave him the classic Dreadnought voice that every working guitarist's collection needs. It was bought in London in 1969

**5.** Rory with the 1932 National Triolian that became, in resonator terms, what the '61 Strat was to his electric playing – a pillar of his live performances

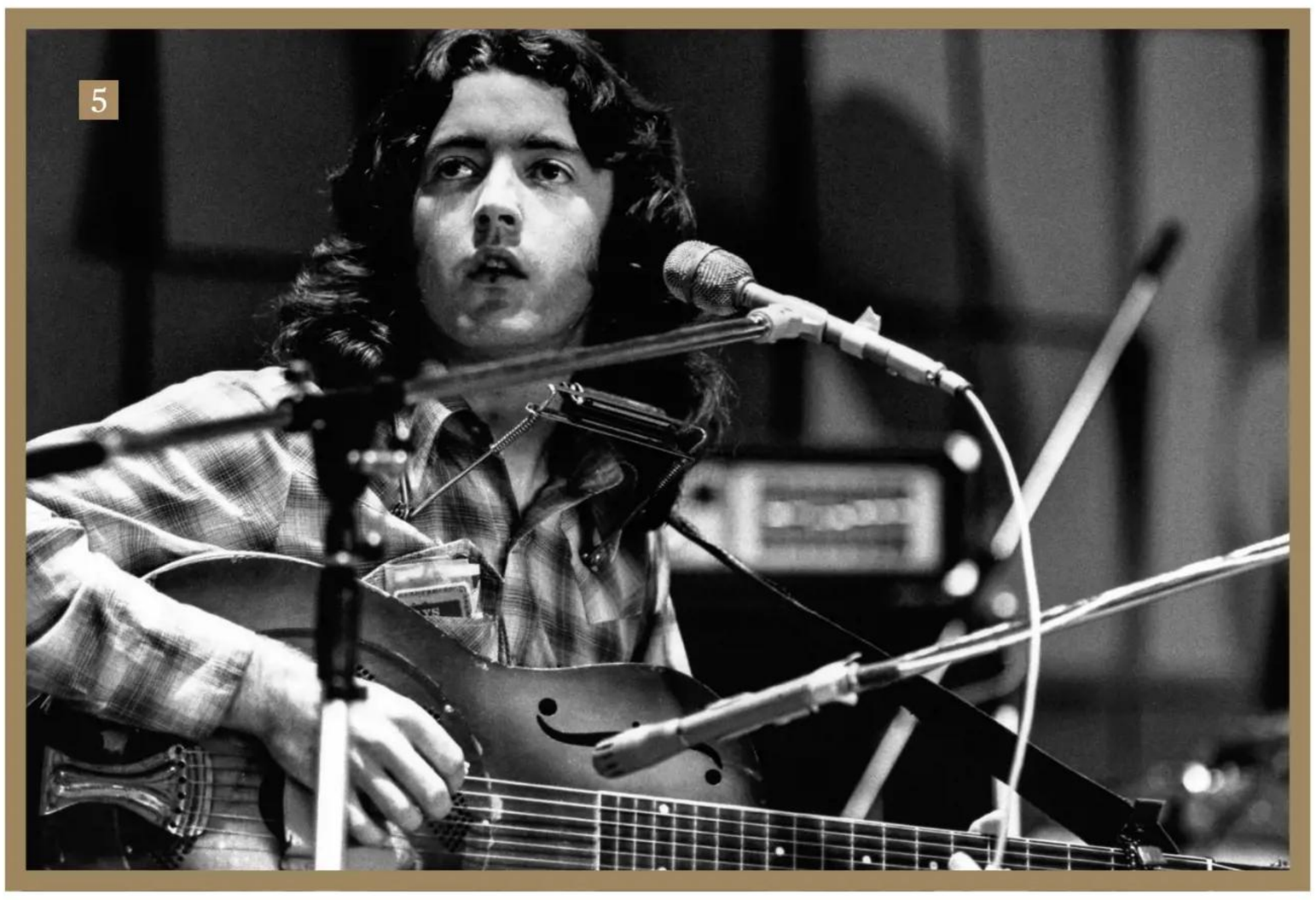


PHOTO BY ANDREW PUTLER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The Rory Gallagher Collection will be auctioned at Bonhams in New Bond Street, London, on 17 October 2024
**www.bonhams.com**

# 1961 FENDER STRATOCASTER

*Rory's iconic Strat is one of the most storied guitars in the world. But the day Rory, with untold thousands of gigs under his belt, became stage struck in the presence of his hero is one of Donal Gallagher's favourite tales*

For this issue we photographed Rory's guitars, for perhaps the final time, in the Royal Albert Hall – the scene of some of Rory's most glorious moments. So perhaps it's only fitting we share a story about the one occasion where Rory, the consummate live performer, was lost for words and paralysed by stage fright at the Royal Albert Hall in the presence of his childhood musical.

"To Rory, Lonnie Donegan was the first guy [to inspire him to play roots American music] – even though he wasn't an electric guitarist," explains Donal Gallagher, "But it was that introduction to blues music and Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly, you know – Lonnie really was bringing it through... he was the guy who was passing the torch down the line.

"In December '75, we'd been on tour as usual with Rory non-stop and I hadn't managed to find him a present for Christmas. And this was the first concert at the Royal Albert Hall since The Nice set fire to the American flag on stage in July 1968 – which curtailed all rock at the Albert Hall. So it was a very important concert, not just for Rory but for rock, generally. Everyone behaved. Prior to that, Rory had played there with Taste for the Cream farewell gig and a few other shows.

"So we had set up in the afternoon and Rod de'Ath, the drummer, had got himself a new drum kit made by an offshoot of Arbiter who dealt with Fender here in the UK. The guy who brought the kit was a drummer himself and I got chatting with him. I said, 'Who do you play with?' And he said, 'Oh, Lonnie Donegan, when he's in town,' and I went, 'Oh my God, where is Lonnie now?' Because he'd kind of gone off the radar quite a bit.

"And he said, 'Well, he's in town as it happens.' So I said, 'Would you ask him along tonight?' And so he took me down to a pay phone at the back and he dialled the number, put the sixpence or shilling in, and just literally handed me the phone. So it was a cold call to Lonnie Donegan.

"Lonnie came on the line and I explained how much Rory and I admired him and told him that Rory was playing the Albert Hall that evening and, despite the short notice, would he consider coming to the gig. And he kind of went, 'Oh, well...' and hemmed and hawed. Then he said, 'Well, look, if you meet me at the stage door I'll come – but I don't want any messing around getting in and all that,' and I said, 'I'll be there.'

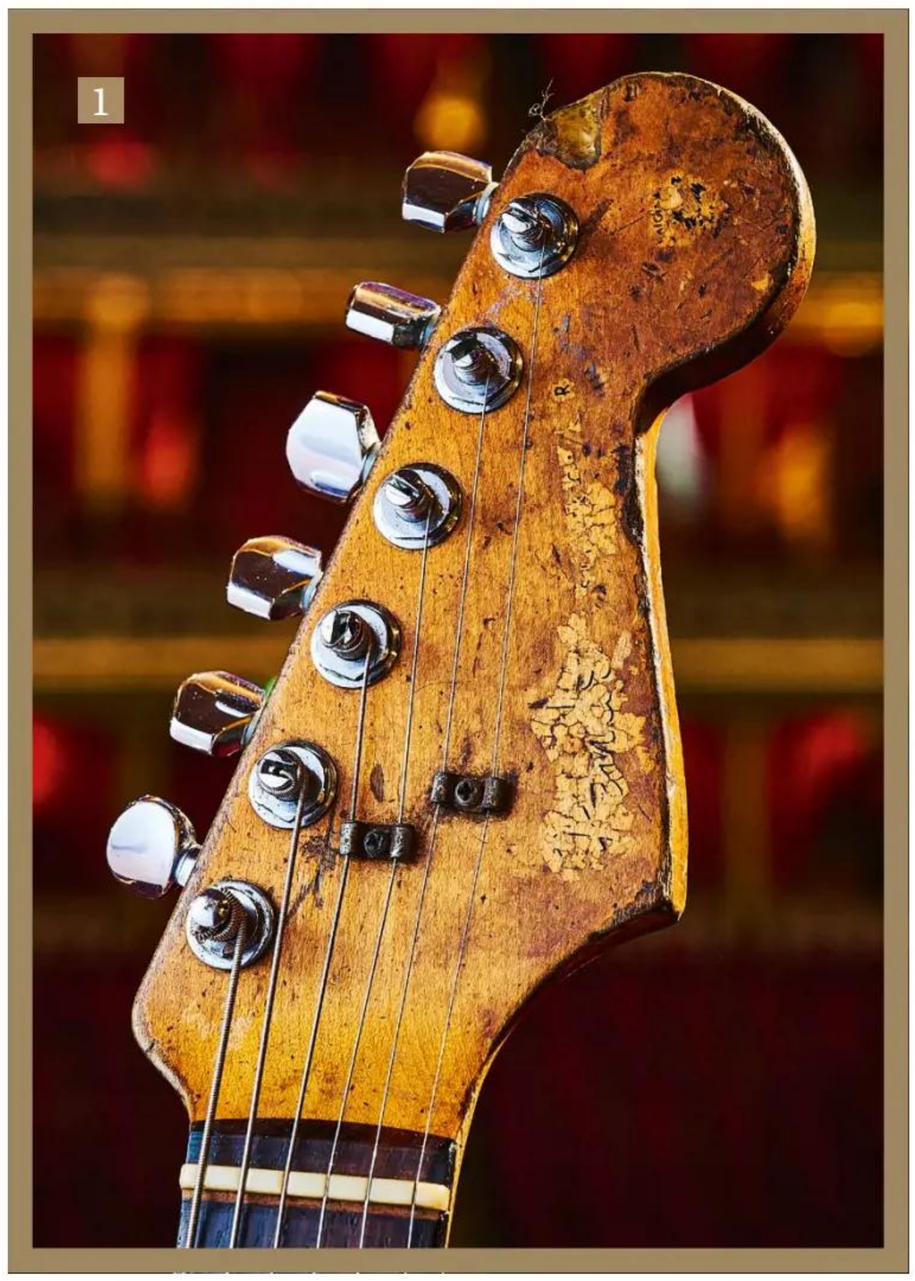
"So I was waiting there when he arrived and he came in a dress suit and we were all in our casual Western shirts and jeans and what have you. And he was flabbergasted because in his day playing the Royal Albert Hall was like going on the BBC to read the news – you had to wear a dress suit. It was quite formal. So I engaged with him anyway and just said, 'Look, I didn't want to disappoint Rory by telling him, but then you weren't able to make it or something like that.' And I said, 'But would you do us the honour of announcing Rory on stage?'

"He said he would, provided I announced *him* on stage because he didn't want to go on cold – he said, 'No-one in this audience will know me.' But I said, 'Don't worry, they will,' you know? And I said that this was to be a surprise for Rory, his Christmas present. Anyway, I went on and introduced Lonnie Donegan and explained how Rory was one of his biggest fans and he was such an inspiration to Rory and the crowd took to their feet and gave him a very warm reception, and Lonnie came on and said a couple of words and introduced Rory.

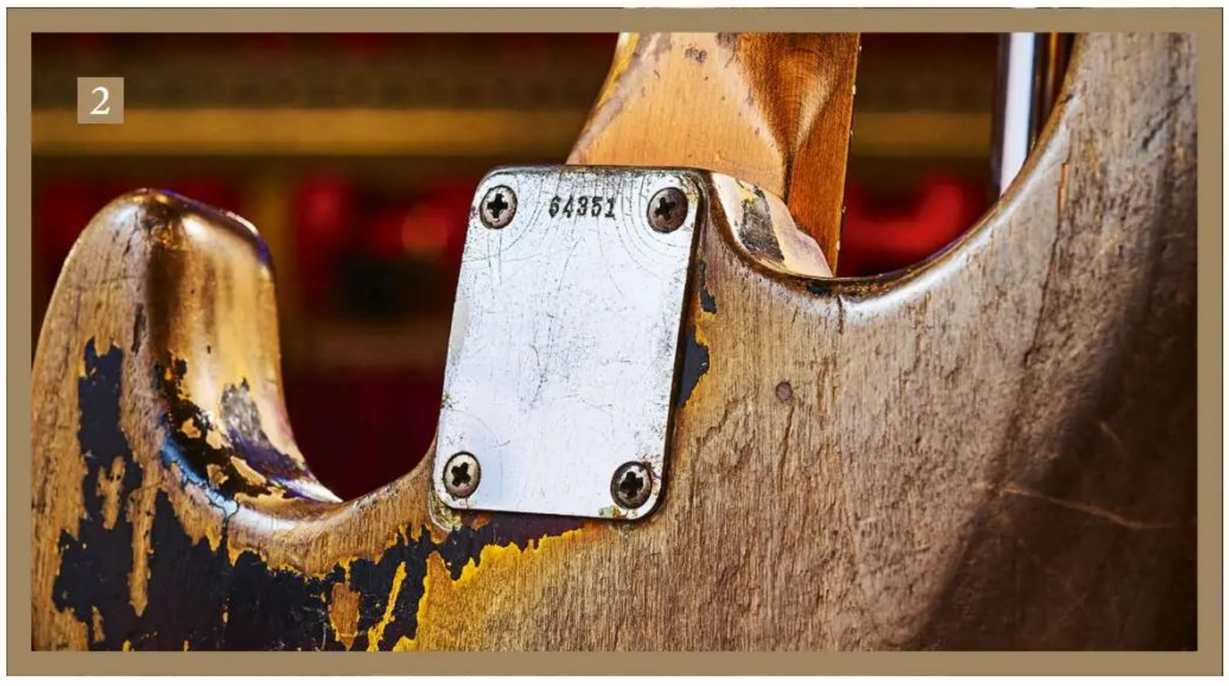
"I was looking around to see where Rory was but there was no Rory. Normally, he came on like a bullet, straight across the stage, in his usual form. The band had come on, but no Rory: most unusual. But, in fact, Rory was in a state of shock and couldn't bring himself to step on stage!

Afterwards he said, 'It was lovely, but *never* do this to me again.' He'd actually got stage fright because he was performing in front of one of his heroes." G

***"The band had come on, but no Rory: most unusual. He was in a state of shock and couldn't bring himself to step on stage!"***




**1.** The Fender decal is all but obliterated on the headstock – testament to the thousands of gigs performed with this iconic guitar over Rory's career. At one stage it was set aside so it could dry out from all the perspiration it had absorbed during tours




**2.** Donal Gallagher says a visitor to a show in Texas brought along another Strat with a serial number only one digit away from Rory's '61 sunburst – although the guitar was for sale, Rory chose not to buy it

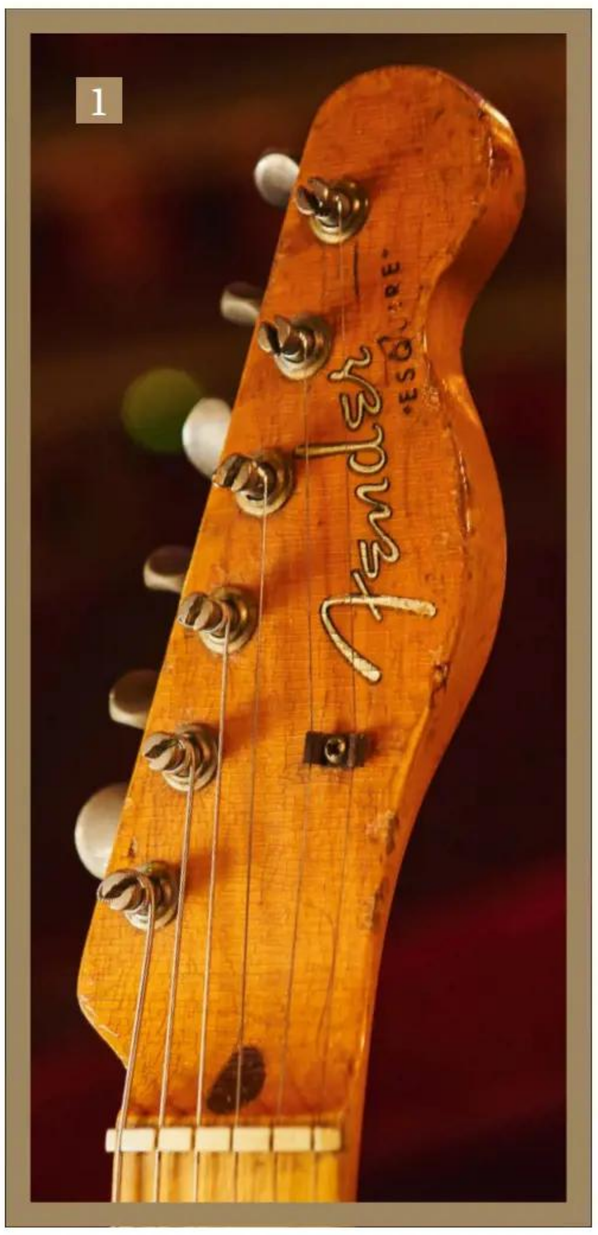
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLLY CURTIS

# 1959 FENDER ESQUIRE

*Heavily modded over the years, this hot-sounding Esquire was, outside of the Strat, Rory's go-to Fender for slide work – but it nearly came to an untimely demise on an airport runway...*

**VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!**

Watch Joe Bonamassa play through Rory's '59 Esquire
**https://bit.ly/gitannual2025**







Rory's 1959 Fender Esquire, the earliest photos of which date from live gigs in Milwaukee, 1971, saw many changes over the years. A crude engraving on the guitar's neckplate, still visible today, gives a clue to the guitar's origins, reading: "Property Of Buzz Harding, Greensburg Kansas". But once in Rory's possession it would never leave his side. In fact, the only time its place in his collection was in serious jeopardy was when it was crushed on a runway and then inadvertently refinished in a colour Rory hated. Donal Gallagher takes up the story.

1. The headstock says 'Esquire' but the pickup configuration is that of a Telecaster – a mod that had already been made when the guitar came to Rory

2. The neckplate still bears the name and home city of a former owner, Buzz Harding, though the inscription has been partly scored out, possibly by Rory

***"The guy did a full circle to go back – and drove straight over the guitar! And I thought, 'That's it – dead...'"***

"Back in the early 70s, we were touring America. We had arrived at some airport on a regional flight – it was a small jet, maybe a DC-9 – and we'd got off the plane. It was in the Midwest, I think it was the afternoon flight to Columbus, Ohio, or some town like that. Through the [arrival hall] window, you could see there was a conveyor belt with the instruments coming down in their cases out of the plane's hold. They weren't even flightcases, when I think about it. Crazy, it was. We always managed to get the Strat on board the plane with us though.

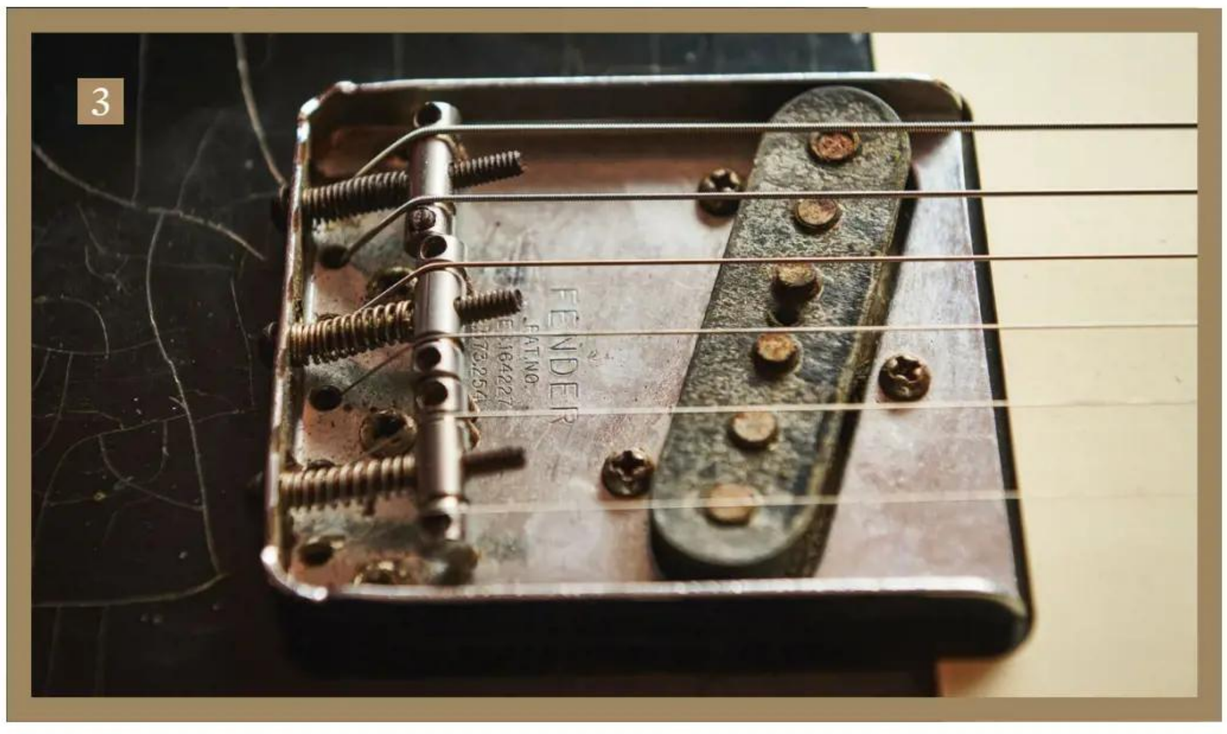
"So we were watching the Esquire and the bass being unloaded from the plane [from inside the arrivals terminal] and put on a luggage trailer, when I saw the Esquire case fall to the ground, and the guitar just fell out of it, and I thought, 'Oh Jesus.' We were looking through the plate-glass window, and kind of shouting and banging. As we were waving at the guy driving the tractor, he did a full circle, to go back – and drove straight over the guitar! And I thought, 'That's it – dead.'

"The gig that night was important for Rory and so I remember getting to the venue and thinking, 'Oh Jesus,' and plugging the Esquire in. They're as tough as nails, Esquires, but the body was completely scraped and scored and it was actually outshining the Strat as being the most worn guitar on stage that night!"

The Esquire needed extensive repairs to the body and crushed bridge hardware when it returned to London, which were completed by Chris Eccleshall. During the repair, Chris fitted 60s-style threaded steel saddles to the bridge and a new scratchplate, swapping out the seven-screw single-ply scratchplate present on the guitar at time of repair for a white five-screw single-ply one.

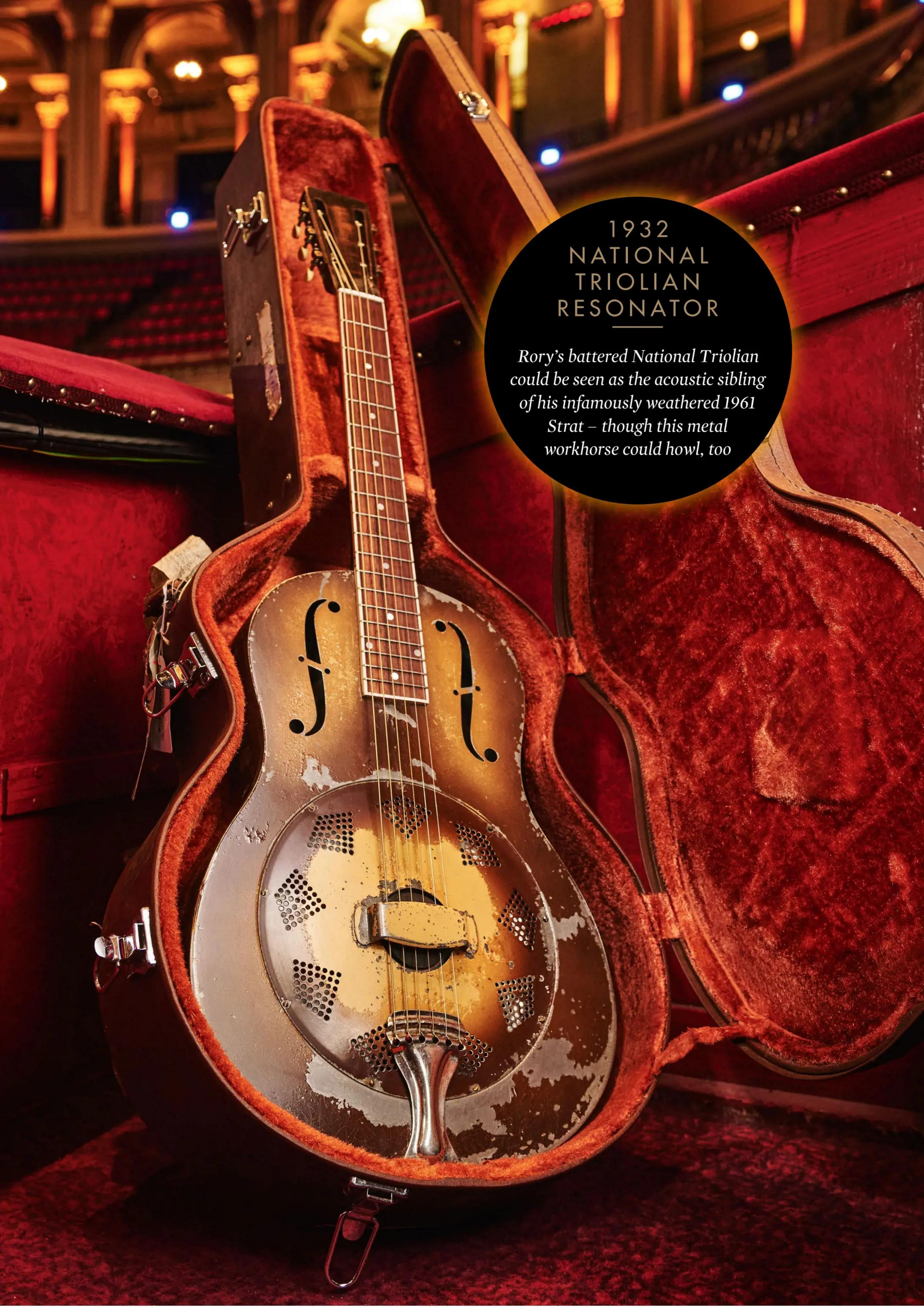
"As Rory was due to go out on tour again, Chris decided the original nitro finish couldn't be replicated in time and used a faster-drying poly finish during the repairs, which left the guitar with an unfortunate greenish hue in certain lights. Donal says Chris Eccleshall joked that this was perhaps appropriate for an Irish artist when he presented the guitar to Rory. Rory was, however, unamused.

"It just was the most awkward moment. You know? Rory was a peaceful man, but I thought he'd thump poor Chris on the spot," Donal jokes, adding that the guitar was soon refinished by Chris a second time and today sports a solid black paint finish. G




3. The Esquire's original bridge and saddles had to be replaced after its calamitous accident at the airport. The extensive repairs were made by the luthier Chris Eccleshall, who died in 2020

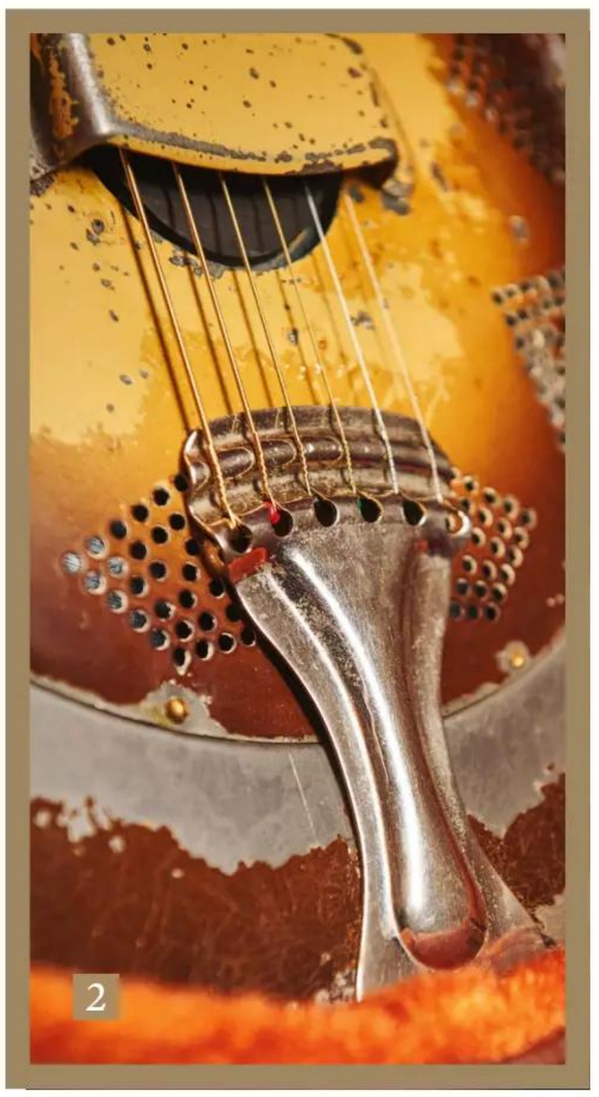
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON



## 1932 NATIONAL TRIOLIAN RESONATOR

*Rory's battered National Triolian could be seen as the acoustic sibling of his infamously weathered 1961 Strat – though this metal workhorse could howl, too*





Fans of Rory's famous *Irish Tour '74* album – one of the great live rock and blues recordings of our time – will know the National as the guitar used on the track *As The Crow Flies*, with its metallic yet soulful voice evoking so many of the old blues and roots recordings that inspired Rory growing up.

"I remember Rory picked it up in Denver, and he was particularly after a resonator like the one Scrapper Blackwell played," Donal Gallagher recalls.

1. Rory's Triolian was normally set up for slide, though he did use it for fretted playing as needed

2. The earliest National Triolians featured wooden bodies, but this was soon changed to metal, as on Rory's guitar, finished in a 'walnut' sunburst

to pick it up and play it, it almost plays you. I can tell you, it brings power to your hands, you move from that neck to the Strat and it's like running your hand across a jelly."

Despite its powerfully projecting sound, the guitar – serial number 513W – often struggled to be heard above the cheering of Rory's fans on tour. Donal says this ongoing issue led to the guitar being superseded by a newer National late in Rory's career.

"Rory didn't have a pickup on the guitar, he just played it into the mic and let it carry," Donal says. "I think we attempted various bugs and things, but also the paint was inclined to flake, so putting anything like glue or epoxy on it never ever worked. In fact, at the end of a tour Rory did in 1991, he discovered that National had brought out a solid version [of the resonator concept], called the Resolectric, which had built-in pickups [see page 78]. And Rory managed to get one of those, even though there was something like a year's waiting list. In other words, they let Rory jump the queue and get his hands on one.

"I remember we were on our way from San Francisco back down to LA and an arrangement was made with National, who were based in San Luis Obispo, where they agreed to drive out to the highway with the guitar. We were on the highway and we had to time it so we could pick the guitar up at a roadside truck stop.

"The thing we had to deal with was that when Rory was playing live, his audience loved the acoustic songs, so they'd really start cheering and clapping along. So you were forever trying to get the volume on that guitar up above the audience as much as you possibly could; it would then start to squeak and squeal quite a bit. That Resolectric guitar eventually solved the problem of feedback." G

***Despite its powerfully projecting sound, the guitar often struggled to be heard above the cheering of Rory's fans on tour***

Rory himself added more detail about the purchase in a 1977 interview with *International Musician*, stating that:"I got it from a guy in the States. You get these travelling guitar salesmen going round. I got it for a very reasonable price – about £100.

"I feel it sounds better than the steel-fronted model... It's got more of a banjo sound and it's got the old classical machineheads... The resonator caved in, believe it or not, so I had that beaten out again... The National is really good, though, even for a beginner



3. Rory's Triolian shows evidence of the heavy use it got on tour – the flaking paint proved an impediment to fixing contact mics to it over the years. Rory's example is a 12-frets-to-the-body design though later Triolians changed to a 14-fret neck instead

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

# 1963 GRETSCH CORVETTE

*A search for empty guitar cases ironically turned up this punchy single-pickup Gretsch – a potent electric that, hot-rodded with a P-90, became a mainstay*

Rory had a lifelong affection for single-pickup student guitars that he often modded with more powerful pickups then played on the major stages of the world. Arguably, this guitar – serial number 60937 – is the most famous guitar of that style in Rory's collection. Ironically, however, it was found by chance by Donal Gallagher while Rory browsed a nearby guitar store.

"This guitar was found on one of the many trips to LA we made over the years. We were there for just a few hours in the afternoon, and Rory said he wanted to visit a guitar store, I think it was called Valley Sound, and he knew the guy there. So I said, 'Okay, Rory, let's go down. But it's a nightmare parking because there's only a couple of meters.' So I dropped him at the place, and he said, 'Oh, I think they have something I might want, I won't be very long,' and, of course, he walks in the door and I said, 'Okay, I'll stay with the car.'

"Going into guitar stores in places like LA, where they knew who Rory was, was always funny because you'd get other guys trying a guitar out and, of course, they'd see him and immediately start a Rory guitar riff at full volume, to show that they knew who he was. A lot of the time, my head wouldn't be in the right space for that, but Rory took it gallantly. Anyway, he was in there and I was outside with the car. You're not supposed to do it, but I kept feeding quarters into the parking meter, hoping the attendant wouldn't spot me doing it, but I was getting so bored.

"But then I realised we were parked outside a pawn shop, and I kind of looked and I thought, 'Oh, I wonder if they have any spare guitar cases.' We had this ongoing thing where Rory was picking up loads of guitars, but none of them had decent cases – or sometimes the original cases had been lost or they weren't up to touring. And I thought, 'Well, I'll kill five minutes.' So I went into the store and I said, 'Would you have any guitar cases?' and the guy said, 'Oh, do you not want to buy a guitar?' and I said, 'No, no, I haven't got the money for that.' I was like, you know, pleading poverty.

"I'd seen one case that looked good, but he said, 'Oh, well, you'd have to buy this guitar to get the case.' So I looked at it and it was a Gretsch Corvette. So I said, 'How much do you want for that, then?' and he said, 'Oh, it's $500.' But I was seriously focusing on the very good case that it had. So in the end, I got him down to $150.

"I took it out and put it in the boot of the car, fed the meter some more and waited for Rory. Rory eventually came over, all disappointed that he hadn't found anything, and I said, 'Well, Rory, look, you'll probably kill me for this, but I spotted they had a guitar... Actually, the case is probably much better than the guitar is.'

"So he said, 'What is it?' and I said, 'It's a Gretsch,' and he said, 'A *Gretsch*?' and I opened the trunk of the car, he looked at it and he just closed it down again and said, 'Let's get out of here before they realise what they've sold you [laughs].'" G

*"Going into guitar stores was always funny because you'd get guys immediately start a Rory guitar riff at full volume..."*

1. Gretsch's answer to the Les Paul Junior was introduced in 1961 and was available in a mahogany finish (as in this case) or Platinum Grey though the latter proved a short-lived option, discontinued in 1963

2. Rory's Gretsch Corvette, which his brother Donal found by chance in Los Angeles, features a single P-90 pickup at the bridge but this variant of the Corvette would have originally had a single Hi-Lo 'Tron pickup when new from the factory. The option to have a flat-arm vibrato on single-pickup Corvette models was offered from 1963, which chimes with the appointments of this '63 example







PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

## 1968 CORAL 3S19 ELECTRIC SITAR

*The sound of the electric sitar is synonymous with Rory tracks such as 'Philby' – but despite its niche utility as an instrument, it ended up being one of the most costly guitars he ever used*

It's well known that Rory used an electric Coral Sitar for tracks such as *Philby*, but less well known is how much his devotion to its atmospheric sound ended up costing. The 19-string instrument, made by the Danelectro sub-brand Coral in collaboration with session guitarist Vinnie Bell, was surprisingly rare and reputedly only around 50 were ever made, many of which were already owned by well-known players such as Pete Townshend. So Rory simply hired one for touring. But, being a scarce item, doing so cost him an arm and a leg.

"I'd got to the point of frustration with touring costs and budgets," Donal Gallagher recalls, adding that he tried to find Rory a Coral Sitar he could buy and so do away with hire costs. To Donal's further chagrin, a seemingly perfect example that he found for sale on tour in Australia was rejected by Rory, leaving him back at square one, paying the sitar bills. However, Donal eventually spotted another one for sale for $1,500 in New York.

Taking matters into his own hands, he decided to buy it on a business trip and bring it back for Rory. Little did he know that the Coral Sitar would once again end up costing dear. Donal takes up the story: "I had to make a short trip out to the States as we were negotiating a new record deal with Mercury Records at the time," he says. "I had an accountant and a lawyer with me so that the deal could be done within a week – it was quite a pressure. But I took the time then to look up one of the guitar traders out in New Jersey who had a Coral Sitar listed on its sales pamphlet, and picked it up.

"On the last night before we were flying back, the accountant and the lawyer said, 'Oh, as it happens, Cliff Richard's in town tonight doing a gig. Would you like to go along with us?'" And I said, 'Oh, that's great.' I hadn't seen Cliff, and it was unusual to see him in New York, because he wasn't so big in America.

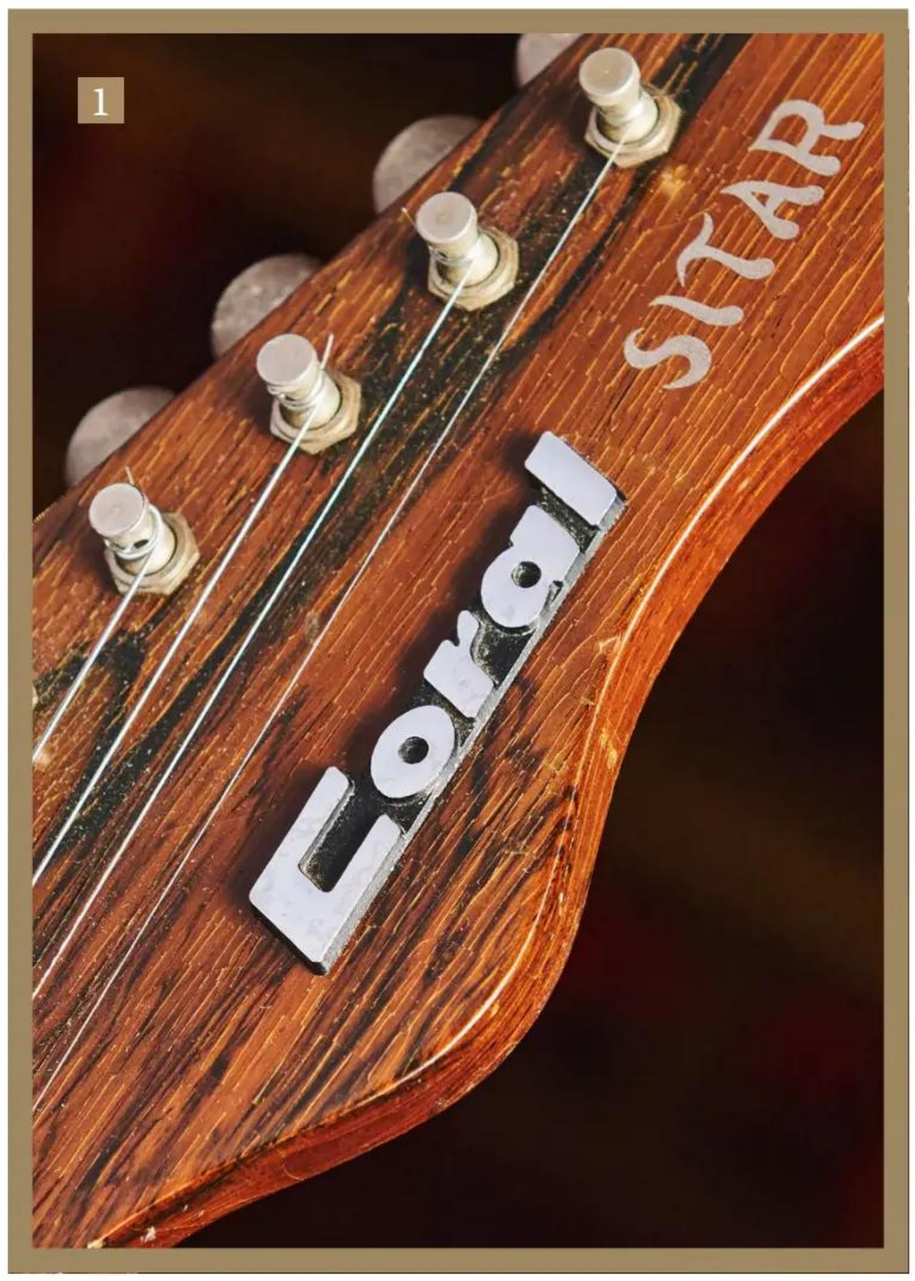
"So it was a lovely theatre and a great gig and I had a quick chat with Cliff after the show. He told me he was going back to London the next day and asked me when I was heading back, so I said, 'Well, we're booked to fly back in the morning at 10 o'clock.' And he said, 'Oh, I'm on the 10 o'clock as well. See you on board.'

"Well, it turned out he was on the 10 o'clock Concorde. However, we had been given seats in first class by the record company. So I got to the airport and said to the guy at check-in, 'The 10 o'clock is Concorde, isn't it?' 'No, no, no,' he replied. 'It's a different flight – but they go out at the same time.' And I said, 'Well, what's the cost to change and go on Concorde?' Because it was due to be taken out of service, even then, and I wanted to fly on it at least once. So he said, 'Would that be cash or charge?' and I said, 'Cash, if it's the right price' [laughs]. So in a New York fashion, I gave the guy cash and so the next thing we're on.

"So the sitar came back on Concorde, and then everyone sort of got their baggage at Heathrow. Cliff had an impressive entourage with him and the two guys I was with both had a suit and tie on. So I decided that I'd walk through the 'Nothing To Declare' lane with them, though the sitar was in an embarrassment of a guitar case at that point.

"Anyway, I got the nod and was pulled over by the customs inspector. I said something like, 'Well, I'm just bringing it back from my brother. I'm not a player. It's something that was picked up in New York for him as a gift.' And the guy says, 'Oh, well these things can be worth a lot.' So I was going, 'Are you serious?' And he said, 'Well, you have to pay something for it [in import tax]. Hang on there a minute.' And he went off and came back with a manual. Not only that, within the manual, he had the pamphlet from the guitar trader that I bought the Coral Sitar from in America with the price on!

"So it became an even more expensive guitar – but worth every penny and I paid the charge to Customs." G




1. The Coral brand was a subsidiary of Danelectro. While not many electric sitars were made back in the late 60s, they've been on their fair share of hits such as Denny Dias' solo on Steely Dan's *Do It Again*

***"I walked through the 'Nothing To Declare' lane, though the sitar was in an embarrassment of a guitar case at that point..."***




2. Sympathetic 'drone' strings, 13 in number, provide some of the shimmer of a real sitar. They are tuneable and have their own dedicated pickup

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

# 1960 GIBSON MELODY MAKER

*Gibson's under-appreciated student electric proved potent enough for Slash, especially after Rory had modded it with a poky humbucker*

This 1960 Melody Maker was nudged in a more Les Paul-like direction, with the addition of a humbucker at the bridge, when Rory acquired it in 1985 originally for slide work. However, when a certain member of Guns N' Roses turned up at a Los Angeles gig to pay homage to Rory, it came in handy for another purpose, as Donal Gallagher explains.

"In March of 1991, we'd arrived back in LA after a long flight from Sydney. Oddly enough, we'd left Australia on 2 March, which was Rory's birthday. I'd kind of planned the flights so that Rory would get two birthdays [after crossing the International Date Line]. The first gig in LA was at the Roxy down on the Strip. Anyway, thanks to this sort of *Lost In Translation* flight experience, everyone was not in the best of humour. So I was just trying to get everyone's spirits up for the show and kick off the whole tour at the Roxy.

"And somebody said that Slash from Guns N' Roses was there and the bass player, Duff McKagan, and that they'd come to see Rory. So I went backstage and said to Rory, 'There's a guy out there called Slash, who's come to see you.' I didn't personally know too much about him. I kind of knew of the band but not much about him as an individual – but Rory's eyes lit up and he went, 'Oh my God.' I said that they were asking if Slash could come up and have a jam. And Rory said, 'All right.'

"Rory gave me chapter and verse about how Slash was great and a brilliant player and then he said, 'Oh, go and find the Gibson Melody Maker' for him. A lot of the gear still hadn't arrived by airfreight from Australia at that point, but luckily the Melody Maker had and it was just out in the truck, so I brought it in.

"Rory said, 'Oh, he'll like playing that.' If Rory ever invited another guitarist up for a jam session, he'd make sure that they got a guitar that Rory considered they'd be very comfortable with. So, anyway, at the end of the show we signalled that it was time for the jam session and Slash comes up and I said, 'Oh, Rory wants you to have this guitar for the jam.' He strapped it on [with approval] and went, 'Oh my God, a Melody Maker, how did he figure that out?' But that was Rory. And it was an excellent jam." G

***"I went backstage and said to Rory, 'There's a guy called Slash, who's come to see you.' I didn't know too much about him..."***

1. Presumably as a cost and labour-saving measure, the 1960 Melody Maker had a straight-sided headstock without the 'wings' of the classic Gibson 'open book' headstock design

2. Launched in 1959, the Melody Maker had a slab body 1 3/8-inch deep, sporting a single cutaway. The model then switched to a twin-cutaway design in 1961

3. Rory beefed up his '60 Melody Maker with a humbucker, but it would have originally had a covered single-coil pickup without visible poles 5/8" wide, plus a simple wrapover bridge without the intonation adjustment of the non-original bridge on Rory's Melody Maker







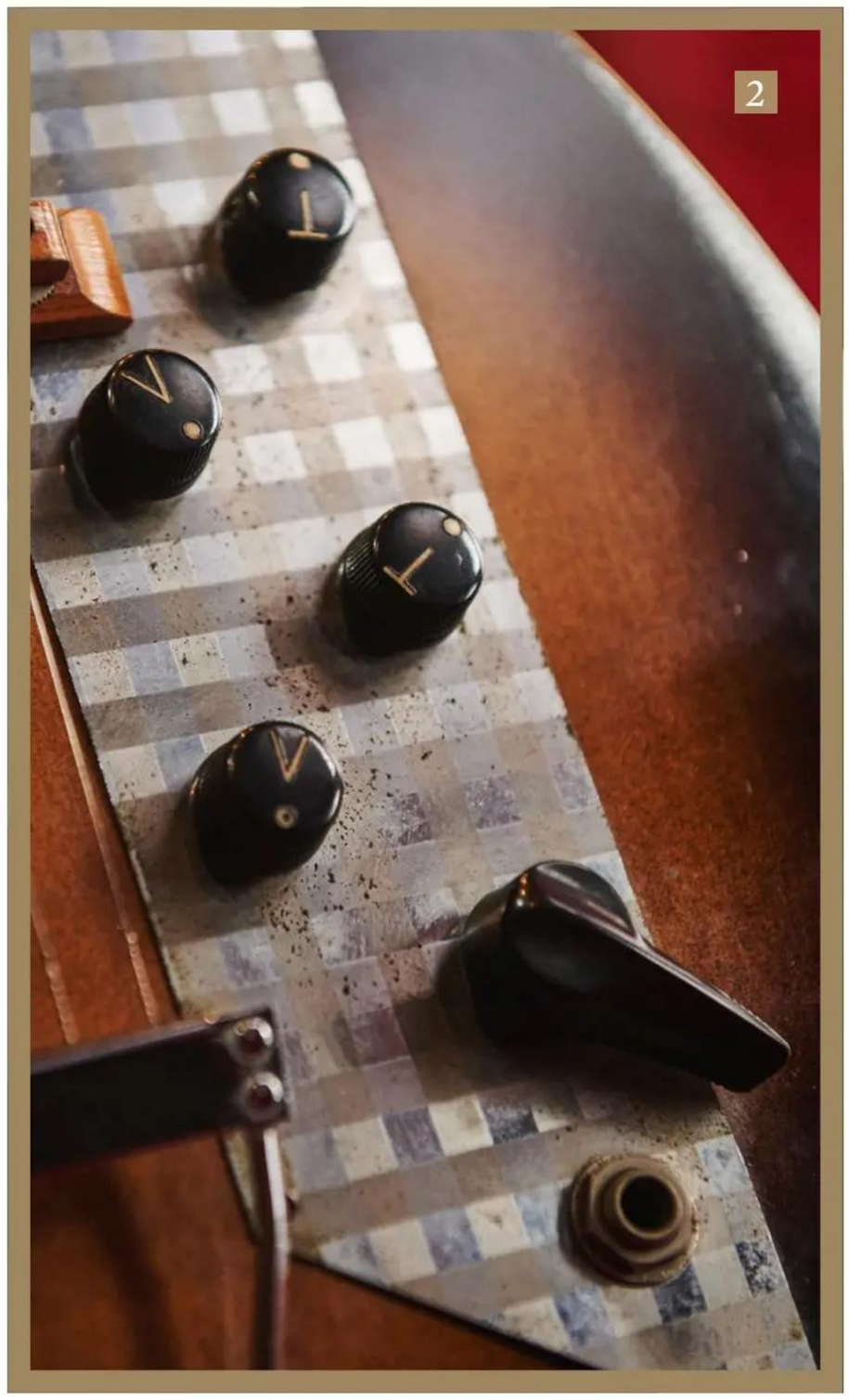



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

# 1961 KAY K1962 VALUE LEADER

*This vibey early 60s electric looked too pricey to buy, even with the help of blues musician John Hammond Jr – but Rory's charm secured it in a New York minute, as Donal explains*




"John Hammond Jr is the son of John Hammond, the great A&R man at CBS who signed Bob Dylan. Oddly enough, he never signed his son, but Rory loved John Hammond Jr's albums and his playing, and one of his ambitions, once he got out to the States, was to meet up with him. This was on the '69 tour, and Rory was trying to track him down in New York.

"In the end I think Eric Clapton provided a number for John, but Rory didn't connect with him on that tour – it was when we went back in '71. Rory called him up and had a chat and obviously, like all good guitar players, he knew where the best guitars were, and Rory was particularly after something to play blues on. So John took him down to 11th Street down in Bleecker Street [near] the Bowery, which was not a fashionable area back then, but there was a store there that John knew about, a kind of pawn shop, and on the second floor Rory found exactly what he was looking for.

"Rory brought it down and [as one familiar with New York haggling] John took control of the situation to get Rory a good deal. But the lady wanted $500 for the guitar and wasn't budging. But then Rory interjected himself and spoke to her, chatted to her, and as John later said, that beautiful thick Irish accent that could melt anyone's heart. And the lady ended up selling the guitar to Rory for $50!" G

***"[Rory's] beautiful thick Irish accent could melt anyone's heart. And the lady ended up selling the guitar to him for $50"***

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

**1.** This particular Kay was kept at home a lot by Rory. His nephew Daniel Gallagher remembers it from childhood visits to his uncle – possibly giving it the status of Rory's 'sofa guitar'

**2.** Volume and tone controls are handily marked with large 'V' and 'T' characters for ease of use

**3.** Kay's Value Leader model was made in single-, double- and triple-pickup variants, and despite its solid looks it's a lightweight semi-hollow design with a very simple wooden bridge



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# GIBSON ES-330T

This single-P-90 variant walked in the shadows of the humbucker-toting 335 and its late-50s ES siblings, and yet its straightforward charm continues to endure some 65 years on

**Words** Bob Wootton **Photography** Phil Barker

Gibson had used the 'Electric Spanish' or 'ES' designation since the launch of its first electric guitar, the ES-150, in 1936, but it would later become synonymous with the thinline double-cutaway 'semi-acoustic' ES-335T, which first appeared on the back cover of Gibson's spring catalogue in 1958 (along with the initially short-lived Flying V).

A quick word on ES nomenclature before we continue: T stands for thinline, so applies to all models; D is for double-pickup, redundant for all but the 330; N is for Natural, C for Cherry and W for Walnut); S for stereo; and V for Vari-tone. Some now call the later, longer variant a 330L, but that was never official.

Back to the ES-335, then, and this model had a pair of Gibson's new and improved noise-cancelling 'humbucking' pickups, four controls and a switch, dot fretboard markers and a stop tailpiece, while also launching with new, bigger frets, which would soon feature across all models. Sunburst was the standard finish at $267.50, with Natural blonde an optional $15 upcharge. A radical design, it proved successful and has been in production ever since, almost matching Gibson's long-running ES-175 jazzbox, which was produced for 70 years, from 1949 to 2019.

Like the early Les Pauls from 1952, the neck angle of the first 335 models was too shallow. This required the bridge and stoptail to be ground thinner and thereby made more fragile to get a good playing action. This issue was fixed by 1959 when neck binding was also added. That same year, Gibson jumped to extend the range with the fancier ES-345, featuring stereo output (sending each pickup to a separate amp) and Vari-tone circuitry, and the even posher ES-355 (introduced in a very small number in 1958 before its official introduction in '59) added multi-ply binding, gold hardware and Les Paul Custom neck appointments.

## Single Minded

The runt of the litter was the ES-330T – the single-pickup sibling to the 330TD and the main focus of this feature – which joined the ranks in 1959, replacing the ES-225, along with its fellow new double-cutaway thinlines, the 335, 345 and 355. Not much cheaper at $230 (in Sunburst), it was a more showy proposition than entry-level 'student' models such as the Les Paul Junior. The 330's construction was surprisingly different. The neck joined the body three frets earlier (at the 16th fret, rather than the 19th of the 335), reducing higher register access. And whereas the rest have a solid maple block under the top to anchor the pickups, bridge and tailpiece, the 330 is fully hollow. It therefore has a trapeze tailpiece to anchor the strings, which wasn't fitted to other ES models until several years later – and in turn was removed by many players.

330s are a great transition guitar for acoustic players who often play cleaner and are used to dealing with feedback, while the hollow construction confers a certain familiar snap to the action. Unlike their fancier siblings, 330s had Gibson's earlier single-coil P-90 pickups under dog-ear covers – black plastic until '62, then nickel-plated until turning to chrome in '65. Bigsby and Gibson vibratos were offered across the ES range and all models' features evolved along the typical Gibson path over time.

Knobs started as 'bonnets' and became metal cap 'reflectors' in 1960, before changing again to 'witch hats' by '67. Switch tips lightened over the years as plastics improved, but they often darken to a nice amber with age.

The 330 necks had a chunky C profile in '58, flattening slightly to a D in '59, and got much skinnier in 1960, fattening again by '63. Many feel the fatter necks have a bigger tone – just witness Clapton's famous '64 Cherry ES-335. By '65, however, necks were narrower at the nut, compromising playability and desirability. Meanwhile, rectangular pearl blocks replaced the original dot fret markers in '62.

As ever, there are transitional examples, such as the mid-'62 330s with plastic pickup covers and block fret markers (*Guitarist* contributor Huw Price has a great example). To many, the plastic covers sound better and their combination with the great-playing dot necks explains why these earlier examples are the most sought after. Another quirk is that some 330s seem to have left the factory with two knurled thumb wheels on each

*330s are a great transition guitar for acoustic players who often play cleaner*

Natural ‘blonde’, as seen on this 1960 ES-330TN, was an upgrade option from launch in ’59. During 1960, the Cherry red of this 1961 ES-330TC took its place

bridge post. One adjusts bridge height and action, while the other rests on the body, arguably helping tone transfer and certainly stabilising the posts, which can lean and skew intonation.

## Taking Shape

Body shapes also evolved, the earliest having very rounded corners and nicknamed 'Mickey Mouse ears'; these became more pointed by '63. Body thickness was quite variable, too, and the earliest ES models had thinner tops (4.4mm versus the later 5.6mm), making them even more responsive – and indeed desirable. This writer discovered this via a fellow UK collector who sourced many of his beautiful ES guitars from world-leading expert Charlie Gelber of OK Guitars in Kent, Connecticut. Charlie has handled hundreds of golden-age ESes, including unique custom orders. Most of his personal favourites have these thin tops and come from a specific serial number and date range in 1959.

The finish colours of 330 models followed that of the 335: three-tone Sunburst was standard, with Natural blonde an option in '59 and '60, succeeded by Cherry in '60 (though Gelber has so far unearthed 19 Cherry-finished 335es from '59). A two-tone yellow to sepia sunburst, Argentine Gray, also surfaces occasionally.

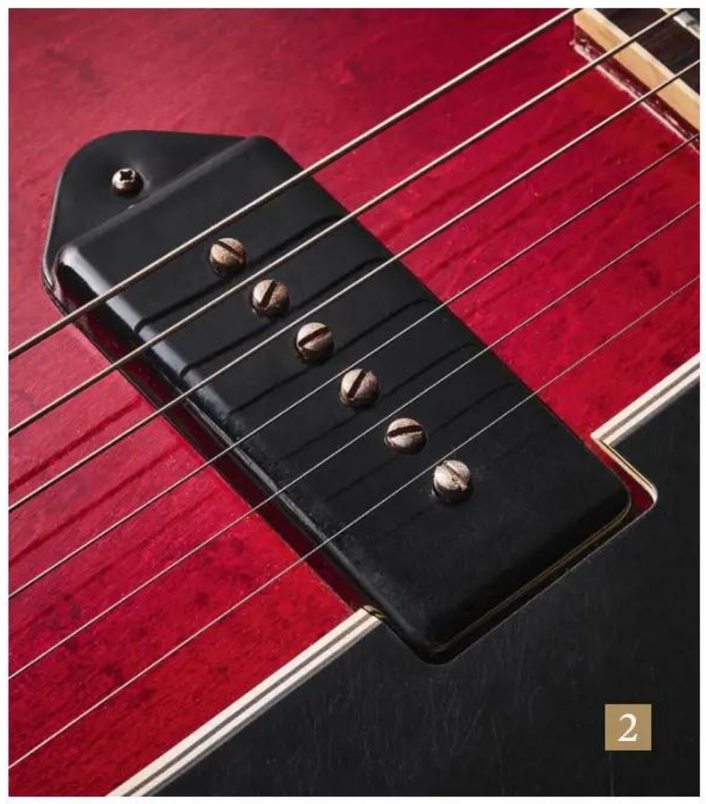
The first Sunburst Les Pauls show Gibson's red pigment was famously unstable until early to mid-1960. The earliest Cherry ESes also fade to a much sought-after 'watermelon' shade, and a Sunburst that often ages to an attractive 'teaburst' was offered by '65. This writer had one with chrome pickup covers – a very pretty but uninspiring player.

By '68, the 330's neck length was brought into line with the 335s and Walnut and Sparkling Burgundy finishes had appeared. A very few Gibsons of the time were custom-ordered in black. Super rare and highly desired by collectors, solid black is easier to fake than transparent finish, so buyers need rock-solid provenance – and/or a steady nerve!

Next mention must go to Epiphone, which Gibson acquired for $20k in 1957 and had integrated into production ready to be shipped from the Kalamazoo factory in 1959. Made alongside Gibsons, models share craftsmanship but retain distinctive features: New York and then mini-humbucking pickups, headstocks, tailpieces, pickguards and fret markers. The ES-330-equivalent E230 Casino debuted in 1961, in both double and rarer single-pickup variants; standard finish was Royal Tan, a paler orangey sunburst.



1. Colour differences belie the mahogany neck and maple body, while the flat D shape of the heel indicates the typical flat '61 neck profile



2. Vintage P-90 pickups were underrated for years. On these single-pickup variants they're located in the 'Goldilocks' spot

By 1962, Casinos had acquired a mother-of-pearl headstock legend, but a few earlier examples (see image 6, above) exist with Epiphone's previous enamelled metal plate 'bikini' logo and dot fret markers.

## Unsung Hero

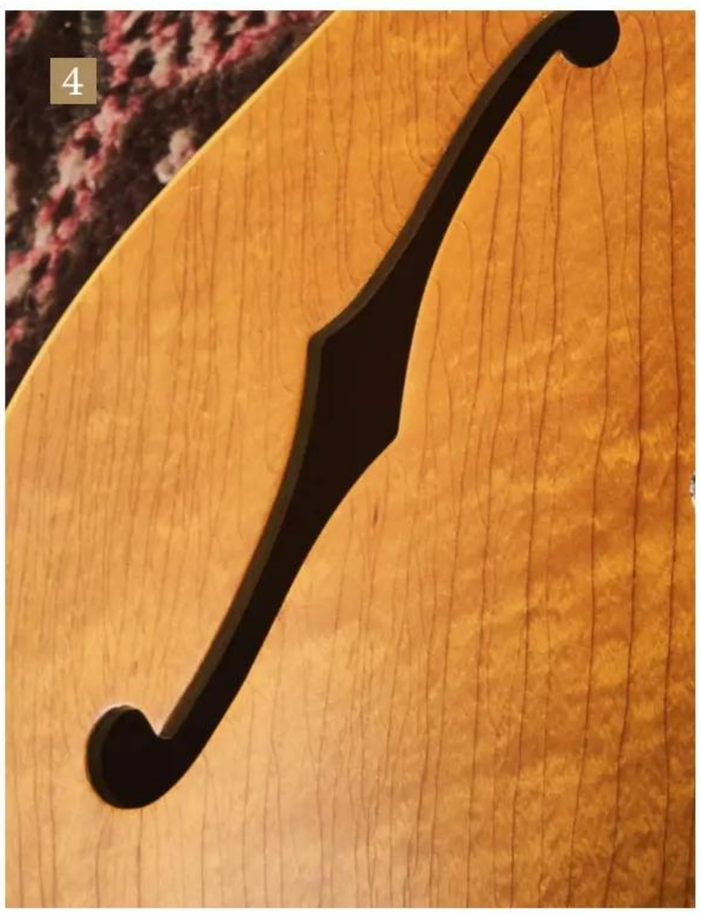
Surprisingly few big-name players are associated with 330s. The great jazzer Grant Green and bluesman Slim Harpo are the most notable, and it was Emily Remler's main squeeze, too. BB King and Chuck Berry played them in the early days, JJ Cale and Terry Smith (60s award-winning British jazz player who later founded early fusion band If) also picked up the model, and – perhaps unlikeliest of all – wall-of-fuzzers The Jesus And Mary Chain used them, too. Likely because of affordability and suitability for rhythm, the ES-330 is quite common in pictures from the early 60s British scene; influential Animals' guitarist Hilton Valentine sported one, as did The Stones' Brian Jones. Latterly, John Mayer has used one to great effect.

The sibling Epiphone Casino had better fortunes as it was taken up by The Beatles, an association that ensured its success and a unique position among Epiphones as the only model that consistently commands higher vintage prices than its Gibson equivalent. Paul Weller, Noel Gallagher and Gary Clark Jr keep the flame alive.

Even at today's soaring prices, then, 330s are relatively affordable because their fully hollow body means they're prone to feedback, so they don't suit higher gain styles. This writer was in Dallas in September 2019, teching for the late Alan Darby when he rejoined Eric Clapton's band for the Crossroads



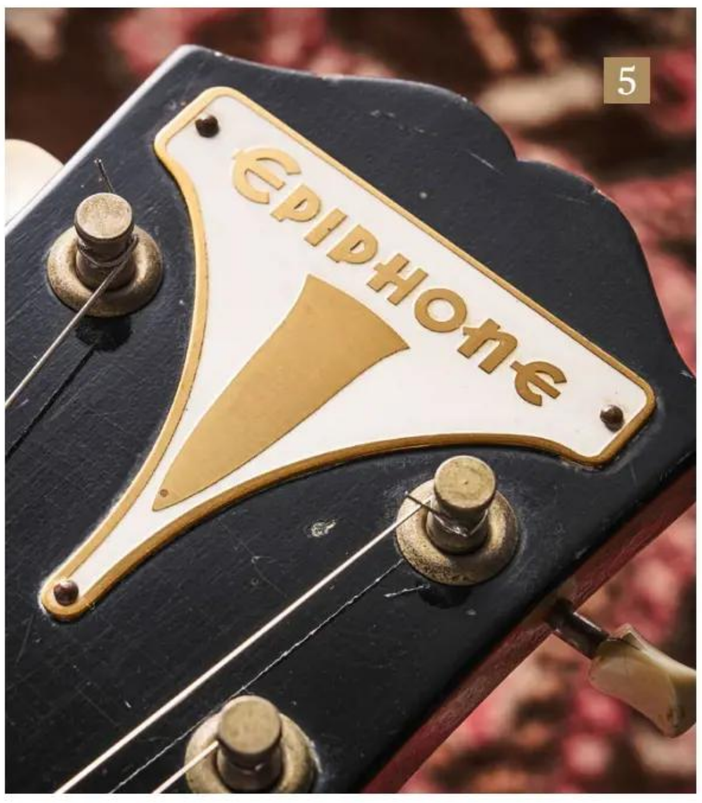
3. Almost a player's eye view, you can clearly see the model's layout in this shot, along with a hint at the very playable wide/flat-feeling neck



4. This close-up of the Natural finish shows some longitudinal finish checking in the clear coat that has yellowed uniformly with age

**5.** The enamelled metal 'bikini' logo plate on this 1961 E230T was phased out before the ES230T Casino's official launch in spring 1962

**6.** This '61 E230T features a regular vintage sunburst with a cheeky bit of flame. Note the 'reflector' knobs (introduced mid-1960)




Festival fundraiser's finale. Gary Clark Jr was playing the show and he shared a little of how he managed his signature Casinos at volume. He'd started with the old bluesmen's' trick of stuffing socks/rags/t-shirts into the f-holes but had recently found a clever new way: inserting the long thin balloons that kids' party entertainers twist into animal shapes and, once inside, inflating them to break up body resonances.

Pictured in this feature are this writer's 1960 Gibson ES-330TN, 1961 Gibson ES-330TC and 1961 Epiphone E230T. All three are in excellent condition, though there is some checking on the blonde model, and a previous owner was careless with a tuning peg winder on the sides of the Cherry model's headstock. The Epi is very clean and has never had a neck-heel strap button, so it's a sitting-down guitar – not a problem, though, as these are the ultimate couch guitars.

But why are the single-pickup models of particular interest? Well, they really can sound better. Consider how Les Paul Juniors tend to fetch more than Specials, despite being less fancy, for example. Some say the second pickup's magnetic pull and 'phantom' circuit loading both influence tone; the neck pickups on many 330TDs can be quite boomy, while the bridge unit can be contrastingly thin. But the ES-330T's single pickup is mounted in the middle – the 'Goldilocks' spot – meaning the early dot-neck 330T is definitely up there as a must-have guitar. G

***Guitarist* would like to thank Bob Wootton for allowing us to photograph his collection of single-pickup thinlines**



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# IAN BAIRNSON'S 1974 LES PAUL CUSTOM

When Pilot's Ian Bairnson used this guitar to play the solo on Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights* in 1978, he was nursing a broken wrist... We catch up with fellow Pilot David Paton and producer Alan Parsons to find out more

**Words** David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

Ian Bairnson was already a successful session musician before he joined the band Pilot back in the early 1970s. The band's single *Magic* was an instant hit on its release in 1974 and served to introduce Ian to Alan Parsons, who produced the early Pilot albums. This led to Ian becoming a member of The Alan Parsons Project, playing on all the band's album releases. Sadly, Ian was diagnosed with a progressive neurological condition in 2018 and passed away in 2023 after a long battle with dementia. His family then took the tough decision to put his instruments up for auction in June at Gardiner Houlgate in Wiltshire. Among them was this 1974 Les Paul Custom, which has the added distinction of being featured on Ian's solo at the end of Kate Bush's debut single, *Wuthering Heights*.

The guitar was bought brand-new from Take Five in London's Shaftesbury Avenue in 1974 and quickly became Ian's number-one instrument. As you can see, it has had several modifications, including a change of pickups and the addition of two mini-switches, which act as coil-taps for the humbuckers. We asked Gardiner Houlgate's head of guitar, Luke Hobbs, for the lowdown on the modifications to the guitar in its present form.

"Basically, they are Tom Holmes pickups that are currently installed; they're supposed to be PAF replicas," he tells us. "But the guitar was sold with the original pickups alongside the guitar. The tuners have been replaced with Schallers – they were just deemed to be more stable. The control knobs were replaced; it would have had the black 'witch's hat' kind of knobs and essentially it would have had all black hardware in terms of the plastics. The two pickup surrounds were replaced – they would have originally been black, as would the poker chip. The original black pickguard was included in the case... And I think that pretty much covers it."

Looking back to the early 1970s, David Paton – the bass player in Pilot and who also went on to play with Alan Parsons (and, in the mid-1980s, Elton John) – shares his memories with us here.

**How did you first meet Ian?**

"We met in Edinburgh. Ian played in a club called Tiffany's – you may be familiar with the name as there was one in London, too – and I was asked to join the band with Ian on guitar. That would be about 1972. He then decided to move to London, so he left the gig at Tiffany's in Edinburgh and moved to London and took up the gig at Tiffany's there."

**When did you invite Ian to join Pilot?**

"We were recording in Abbey Road, the first album, just as a three-piece. The album was finished, including *Magic*, which I had played guitar on, but we didn't have a strong enough intro. So we decided to re-record the intro to *Magic* and Ian was there at the time, so he agreed to play on the intro. Then he came along to the studio one time while I was auditioning guitar players. I went up to the control room and he said, 'What are you



Pilot in 1975 (clockwise from left): Ian Bairnson, Stuart Tosh, David Paton and Billy Lyall

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Ian's 1974 Les Paul Custom underwent a good deal of modding over the years, including the coil-tap mini-toggles in between the volume and tone controls








1. Ian bought his Les Paul Custom in 1974 for £315 and, over the years, changed a few things "to make it look more like a Standard", including the tuners here, by Schaller

2. The Custom was a 20th Anniversary model that Ian teamed up with a 50-watt Marshall amp in the studio with no pedals between the guitar and amp – any effects were added at the mixing desk

3. A slight case of buckle rash to the rear shows that this guitar was a thoroughbred road warrior and was used by Ian on recordings by Pilot, Kate Bush and The Alan Parsons Project

doing?' I said, 'Auditioning guitar players...' and he said, 'Why didn't you ask me?' So that was it: he was in the band."

**Do you remember Ian's '74 Custom?**
"Oh, I do, yes. Such a gorgeous guitar. I think he bought that after he joined Pilot, and that was 1974, so it must have been new, right?"

**By the time it came up for auction there had been a few modifications made to it. Was Ian a modder in that respect?**
"You know, Ian could be quite boring when you asked him about a guitar [laughs]. Because his knowledge was so comprehensive that he would tell you how many [wire turns] there were on his pickups and what-not. He was really, really into it. So he certainly had a lot of knowledge and whoever the technician he worked with was, I'm sure Ian's input was quite substantial."

**And you both went on to work with Kate Bush.**
"We did. We did a lot of things like that together. The Kate Bush session was perfect for us. We didn't want to continue with Pilot any more and session work was the ideal thing. I think that was about '76 or '77 and there seemed to be plenty of it for us. It was Andrew Powell, who did a couple of string arrangements for the Pilot singles, he produced the first two albums for Kate Bush, and Andrew wanted Ian and I to participate in that particular session. I played 12-string guitar on *Wuthering Heights*."

**Is it true that Ian played the solo with his arm in a cast?**
"Yes. Ian and I shared lots of mutual interests and one of these was trail bike racing. We had a couple of bikes in Edinburgh and we used to go into the hills to the firing ranges and do our tricks up there. And Ian just happened to do something that was a bit beyond him and came off the bike badly and broke his wrist. When we got back to the house, I said, 'Tomorrow, you'll be fine. You've just sprained it,' without realising that he'd actually broken it. It began to swell up quite a bit, so we took him to the hospital and he got a cast put on. And we knew that the session was coming up..."

**Which arm was it?**
"I think it was his right. I've got a picture of him on a bike with this cast on somewhere." G

***Guitarist* would like to thank Luke Hobbs at Gardiner Houlgate for giving us access to Ian's Les Paul Custom**



## Height Of Success

The Les Paul Custom continued its journey with Ian Bairnson into The Alan Parsons Project. We talk to Alan about the re-release of the album *Pyramid*, which features Ian on guitar

**You met Ian when you were producing Pilot...**
"Yes, the original Pilot was a three-piece: David Paton, Stuart Tosh and Billy Lyall. Ian came onboard and made a huge difference to what the band was capable of. He came up with that opening solo for *Magic*. We got to know each other pretty well and Pilot essentially became the rhythm section of The Alan Parsons Project."

**When did you think of inviting the guys from Pilot to join the Project?**
"It was really just when we had the songs ready to record. It seemed so easy with a single phone call to Pilot's management to have them come in and just learn songs. And it turned out that they would remain with us. David, Ian and Stuart were there for the first two albums, and Stuart Tosh was then replaced by Stuart Elliott for *Pyramid*, but I don't know what we would have done without Ian. He was definitely a part of the Project's sound. I think *What Goes Up* has my favourite guitar solo of anything he ever did. And we're actually going to be promoting the album because of the new boxset. I'm having the guitar player learn that solo note for note for this because it's magical."

**Ian had a very melodic style, avoiding the blues guitar clichés of the time.**
"Yes, but that isn't to say that he wasn't capable of doing an incredible blues performance as well. He could play the blues like no-one else. He did have an incredibly clean technique, which was very, very rare. I've never found it in any other guitar player. No fretbuzz, no little glitches – it was always a clean, clean sound for every note he played."

**What was he like to work within the studio?**
"Oh, very amenable. He would sometimes take a somewhat serious look at the job in hand, but other times he'd be really humorous, really funny, you know? He was just the most amazing player and I miss him."



The special edition *Pyramid* album will be available from 23 August via Cooking Vinyl
**www.the-alan-parsons-project.com**

*"Ian had an incredibly clean technique. I've never found it in any other guitar player"*
ALAN PARSONS

*This guitar is emblematic of more than just a hugely important song. It became a constant companion in the early phase of Clapton's solo career*

**VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!**

Watch our video tour of the unique features of this historic guitar at Bonham's auction house

**https://bit.ly/gitannual2025**

# AFTER TONIGHT

Eric Clapton's *Wonderful Tonight* is one of the great love songs of our time. So when the guitar he wrote it on, a 1974 Martin 000-28, came up for auction in London, we didn't need a second invitation to go and take a closer look

**Words** Jamie Dickson **Photography** Adam Gasson



Steve Clarke, the vintage and collectible guitar expert who prepares guitars for sale for Bonham's, joined us to discuss the guitar prior to its auction

Behind many platinum-selling songs lies a simple acoustic guitar, one that is always close to the artist, at home or on the tour bus. One such guitar is Eric Clapton's 1974 000-28, the instrument upon which he wrote *Wonderful Tonight* – a love song inspired by his then-girlfriend Pattie Boyd that would become his best-selling single.

The guitar has been largely out of the public eye since it was sold at auction to a private collector in 1999 for $173,000, with the proceeds going to Clapton's Crossroads Centre for rehabilitation from drug and alcohol addiction. That all changed earlier this year, however, when Bonham's auction house of Knightsbridge, London, announced that it would be presenting the guitar for sale on behalf of its current owner. Would we like to come down and take a look before it went under the hammer? Yes, we would, came the swift reply.

For this guitar is emblematic of more than just a hugely important song. Built in 1974, it became a constant



1. The guitar's bridge features snowflake inlays, non-standard on Style 28 guitars, as well as three staggered saddles, which may have been a later non-factory mod

The guitar currently has a Fishman Rare Earth soundhole pickup installed. Inside, there is evidence of some kind of contact mic that may have been fitted for Clapton's use

*"The scratchplate has shrunk near the soundhole, so you can see the glue line that's been left behind; the same thing happens on 60s Strat 'plates"*

STEVE CLARKE

companion of Clapton in the early phase of his solo career after Derek And The Dominos disbanded. It also established a long-running connection between Clapton and Martin's 000-size acoustic, the shorter-scaled sibling to the OM-size guitars built by the company but sharing the OM's hourglass shape. This association reached its peak in January 1992 with the recording of Eric Clapton's *MTV Unplugged* performance, during which he used a vintage 1939 000-42 – the '42' part denoting the 'style' or level of ornamentation of the guitar. Clapton's longtime sideman Andy Fairweather Low, who accompanied him on the recording, which became the best-selling *Unplugged* album, played a 000-28 that had been upgraded to Style 45 appointments (see box, page 84).

The success of the *Unplugged* concert not only boosted the profile of Martin's '000' series of guitars but reinvigorated the fortunes of the whole company, making this one of the most significant artist/instrument associations in Martin's long history. But it was the humbler 000-28 that first fired up Clapton's love of Martin guitars, says Martin historian Dick Boak, adding that Clapton went on record to say that a film clip of Big Bill Broonzy playing *Hey Hey* on one such Martin inspired him to use the model – which leads us back to the *Wonderful Tonight* guitar.

*"It's not been messed around with different machineheads or any kind of serious modifications in that way, or even refretted"* **STEVE CLARKE**

In 1974, the year that particular guitar was made, the 000-28 model was being produced a little differently to the pre-war examples that first made it a classic, says Dick Boak: "To my knowledge, a mid-70s 000-28 would not have had scalloped braces," Dick says of the production techniques used to make Clapton's 1974 000-28. "The bindings would be Boltaron instead of ivoroid. The fingerboard inlays would probably be mother-of-pearl dots instead of the vintage diamond-and-square abalone position markers. And, of course, the back and sides would be East Indian rosewood instead of the Brazilian rosewood found on pre-1964 models."

All of these features are very typical of in-period Martin acoustics – so for a closer look at the specifics of Clapton's 000-28, we turned to Steve Clarke, the vintage and collectible guitar expert who prepares guitars for sale for Bonham's. Here, he shares with us what he found.

**What unique features did your inspection of Clapton's '74 000-28 turn up?**

"One of the first things I could see was what they did with this bridge. I'm not sure if you spotted it, but that bridge has the two little snowflake inlays on either end – you'll see those on a Martin D-42 as well. But what was interesting was those three little offset saddles that are on the bridge: you can see evidence underneath that it had an original [single, horizontal saddle] slot cut out and you can just see where it's been filled in. It's been done very well, but under strong light you can actually see the channel that they then filled in and put these pieces on. It's quite a nice job – I don't know who did it. Maybe Martin did it, who knows. But it was a nice touch."

**How about inside the guitar?**

"I did have a root around inside the guitar. And another interesting point was there was a wire hanging down from underneath the bridge area near the bridge pins. I took an endoscope with me – always carry one of those! – and I saw that it was abruptly cut off, you know, this black wire. Now, to me, that was evidence of something like, say, a [contact mic] or bug-type pickup that will have had double-sided tape, or some kind of a glue or putty fastening it in place. And I've seen this before with guitar techs... it's the only way you can do it, really – there's no need for you to try and struggle to pull it out.

"But what I think might have happened is that someone, it might have been Clapton, decided to change pickups and they just cut the wire off [of the redundant contact mic] because once those things have stuck fast, after a period of time they become so difficult to shift. So I think they just left it there because it's awkward to get out – so you can just cut the wire off. It's not doing anybody any harm. I don't think it was [connected to] an under-saddle piezo-type pickup, you know? This was more like a bug-type pickup. So that's been left there.

"Previous to that there's a curious-looking picture from [Clapton's appearance on] the *Old Grey Whistle Test* where he's got this elongated kind of cream-coloured




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**2.** The Grover tuners are factory original, as are the frets, the first two of which are worn slightly flat from Clapton's regular playing in this area of the fingerboard




REPRISE RECORDS/DUCK RECORDS

## UNPLUGGED, UNPRECEDENTED



**Clapton may have written some of his greatest 70s songs on his '74 000-28, but it was a rather grander 1939 000-42 that inspired a series of Martin signature models when Clapton recorded his *MTV Unplugged* session. Martin historian Dick Boak tells us the story.**

**How did Martin come to be involved in making a signature 000-42 guitar for Eric Clapton?**

"On January 16, 1992, *MTV Unplugged* taped a special acoustic performance with Eric Clapton at Bray Film Studios in Windsor, England. For most of the songs, Eric played his 1939 000-42 Martin guitar. According to a 1976 interview with Stephen Stills, Stills indicates that he gifted the 000-42 Martin to Clapton. Eric's backup guitarist, Andy Fairweather Low, also played a 000-28 that had been modified by Mike Longworth with Style 45 abalone trim. The show brought Eric Clapton back into the popular spotlight, but, in the process, it also revitalised the mass appreciation for acoustic music, repopularised the smaller 000 body size, and gave a major boost to Martin and the entire acoustic guitar marketplace.

"It wasn't long before my phone started to ring off the hook. Everyone wanted to know exactly what model Eric was playing and whether the guitar was available. It seemed too obvious that a Clapton Signature Edition would be extremely well received. With Chris Martin's blessing, I prepared a brief but sensitive fax to Roger Forrester, Eric's manager, in his London office. A heartfelt and favourable response came back the next day."

**Did Eric ever explain his preference for the 000-size guitars? What do you ascribe it to?**

"Eric wasn't really a Dreadnought player. He much preferred the smaller body 000 size. I had always assumed that he preferred the 000 (24.9-inch short scale) over the OM (25.4-inch long scale) because the shorter scale length has less tension on the strings making the notes more bendable and perhaps more expressive. It is more likely that Eric simply loved the 000-42 because it was a great-sounding vintage Martin! Though it's interesting that Eric did warm up to Dreadnoughts several years later when giving them a second chance. He was surprised by their power."

PHOTO OF DICK BOAK BY JOHNSTERLINGRUTH.COM

pickup with a wire trailing from it going across the guitar. Having looked into this, there's no evidence anywhere that this [pickup] ever went into production, whatever that thing is. I've seen some rumours that it might have been a Barcus-Berry prototype. Nothing confirmed, though – it was definitely some kind of a one-off early experiment that didn't last very long.

"Again, whatever was sticking that down, I don't think it stayed on the guitar long because, on the surface of the guitar, there's no damage or marking to the lacquer, which you probably would get after a period of time. If you leave something like that with any sticky stuff underneath, that finish is gonna have an impression of some kind around it. So I don't think Clapton had that on too long. To be honest, I'd be surprised if it had been on as long as a year. The pickup that's on it now [visible in the soundhole] is a Fishman Rare Earth that was on the guitar when it was sold to the current owner."

**Playwear on the guitar seems fairly light. What hints that Clapton used this guitar as a go-to songwriting tool did your inspection reveal?**

"Well, it's got the divots on the first couple of frets that are quite deep because of the 'cowboys chords', so it's a little worn in that area. I took a fretwire measurement and the 1st and 2nd frets were a little bit flat on the top, again because he's playing a lot in those areas and not doing a lot of barre chords. So as you go further up to around the 4th or 5th fret you're getting the crown back. But that lower area is well played. Original frets, though, which is cool."

**And you can also see the trademark cigarette burns on the headstock!**

"Isn't that amazing? It was the first thing I spotted when I opened the case – it was facing my way and I thought, 'Oh yeah, must be his then! [laughs]"

**The guitar's now some 50 years old. What sort of typical marks of natural ageing can be seen on it today?**

"The scratchplate's shrunk on it – that happens with those old 'plates. So just near the soundhole, particularly in that area, it's shrunken back so you can see the glue line that's been left behind; the same thing happens on 60s Strat 'plates. That's why that first screw by the neck pickup has more often than not got a crack in it. It's always that screw because there's a lot of tension there and the shrinking of the celluloid just pulls it apart."

**It's obviously a very special guitar, due to its association with Clapton and with the song *Wonderful Tonight*, but it also seems a very honest, workmanlike instrument. What did you like about it, in that regard?**

"To me, it was the fact that it's still got the original Grover machineheads on it since Clapton had it. I mean, there's another nice thing – the fact it's not been messed around with different machineheads or any kind of serious modifications in that way, or even refretted... All those things. You think, 'Oh, that's cool.' I like to see that. But it was his go-to guitar, apparently. It's the one he took around with him – the one he went back to the hotel with, after gigs." G

**Clapton's 1974 000-28 went on sale at Bonham's, Knightsbridge in its Rock, Pop & Film sale on 12 June. For more info, see www.bonhams.com**




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**3.** Burn marks on the top edge of the headstock are reminiscent of those seen on Clapton's 'Blackie' Strat

**4.** The huge sticker bearing the slogan 'She's In Love With A Rodeo Man' is a homage to Clapton's love of American songwriter Don Williams

**5.** Clapton is said to have called this guitar his "best friend" as it went everywhere with him. Note the stencilled 'Eric Clapton Group' on the case




5

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# The Strat

# At Seventy

AS LEO FENDER'S GREATEST CREATION CELEBRATES ITS SEVENTH DECADE, WE GATHER A REMARKABLE GROUP OF ARTISTS AND EXPERTS TO ASSESS ITS 70-YEAR IMPACT ON THE LANDSCAPE OF GUITAR MUSIC – KICKING OFF WITH SHADOWS PIONEER HANK MARVIN. WE ALSO ASK FENDER'S MASTER BUILDERS WHAT SEPARATES A GOOD STRAT FROM A GREAT ONE AND REVIEW THE NEW ANNIVERSARY MODEL FENDER HAS BUILT TO MARK THE BIG OCCASION...

**Words** Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Imagine you are musician walking past a shop window in 1954. You stroll past, take a glance... and then stop dead in your tracks. Behind the glass is what seems to be a rocket ship, its sunburst finish glowing like polished amber. The guitars around it seem bulky and cumbersome by comparison – even that upstart solidbody, the Telecaster, you first clapped eyes on a few years before, now seems like a tractor parked beside a Cadillac...

In 1954 there was no guitar like the Strat. More remarkable still, in the seven decades since, no other new guitar has had such a transformative effect on the guitar scene. Today, a Strat looks as familiar as a tree or a drinking glass. But 70 years ago, it had no real precedent. The shock of that arrival must have been all the greater in post-war Britain. Rationing was still in effect the year the Strat launched and a ban on imported goods from America, which included electric guitars, would remain in place until June 1959. Little wonder, then, that guest editor Hank Marvin describes his first experience of a real Strat as being akin to an encounter with "a guitar from Mars". To read the full account head to page 64.

In many ways, the Strat retained its power to astonish, to revolutionise. Just six years after Hank got his first Strat and made sweet, melodious musical history with it, Bob Dylan outraged a traditionalist crowd at the Newport Folk Festival by 'going electric' armed with a Strat, revolutionising popular music in America, at a stroke. Then, only 10 years after Hank's first encounter with Fender's most famous creation, Hendrix used a Strat to stir a magma-hot cauldron of sound into life when he played his epochal version of *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the muddy finale of the Woodstock Festival. Here, he delivered that historic event's most powerful moment as its unprecedented crowds ebbed away in the grey morning light.

At all times, the Strat has seemed to have the capacity to astonish built into it. In the following pages we pay tribute to its enduring power, in company with dozens of influential artists who have made music history of their own with a Strat. We also receive insights from luthiers who know the instrument inside out – Fender Master Builders Paul Waller and Austin MacNutt – and review the latest Anniversary Strat to join the fold. So join us as we wish happy birthday to an electric icon...

Thanks to Fender, Chris Turpin, and Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath

This 1960-spec Custom Shop Stratocaster – belonging to former *Guitarist* Editor Neville Marten – captures the essence of what must have seemed viscerally astonishing at the close of the 1950s. Bold colour, electrifyingly exciting sounds and a shape straight from dreamland



PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI (FMIC)

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# The Soul Of A Strat

WHAT MAKES ONE STRAT ORDINARY AND ANOTHER OUT OF THIS WORLD? IT'S A QUESTION PLAYERS HAVE PONDERED FOR THE LAST SEVEN DECADES – AND WHO BETTER TO EXPLAIN THAN MASTER BUILDERS PAUL WALLER AND AUSTIN MACNUTT OF FENDER'S CUSTOM SHOP. WE JOIN THEM TO TALK VINTAGE TONE, MIRACLE MODS AND SANDING – LOTS OF SANDING...

**Words** Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

**Which is the greatest era of Strat in your personal opinion?**

**Paul Waller:** "For me, it's early 60s. I think that's when the Strat really started to come into its own. Putting the rosewood on there, slimming out the neck, and the pickups started getting dialled in to really make what pure Strat sounds are for me."

**Austin MacNutt:** "I like the late-50s Strats – just the classic look. They all look great, but I feel like they really got it right, right out of the gate."

**What do you regard as an ideal weight for a Strat?**

**Paul:** "I personally like just under 8lbs – maybe 7¾lbs."

**Austin:** "Yeah, that's a good range. I'm not terribly picky about it, honestly. I've got Strats all over the weight spectrum [in my personal collection] and I don't tend to go for one more than the other because of the weight – it doesn't affect my choice as much as [it might for] some people."

**What's your favourite body wood for a Strat?**

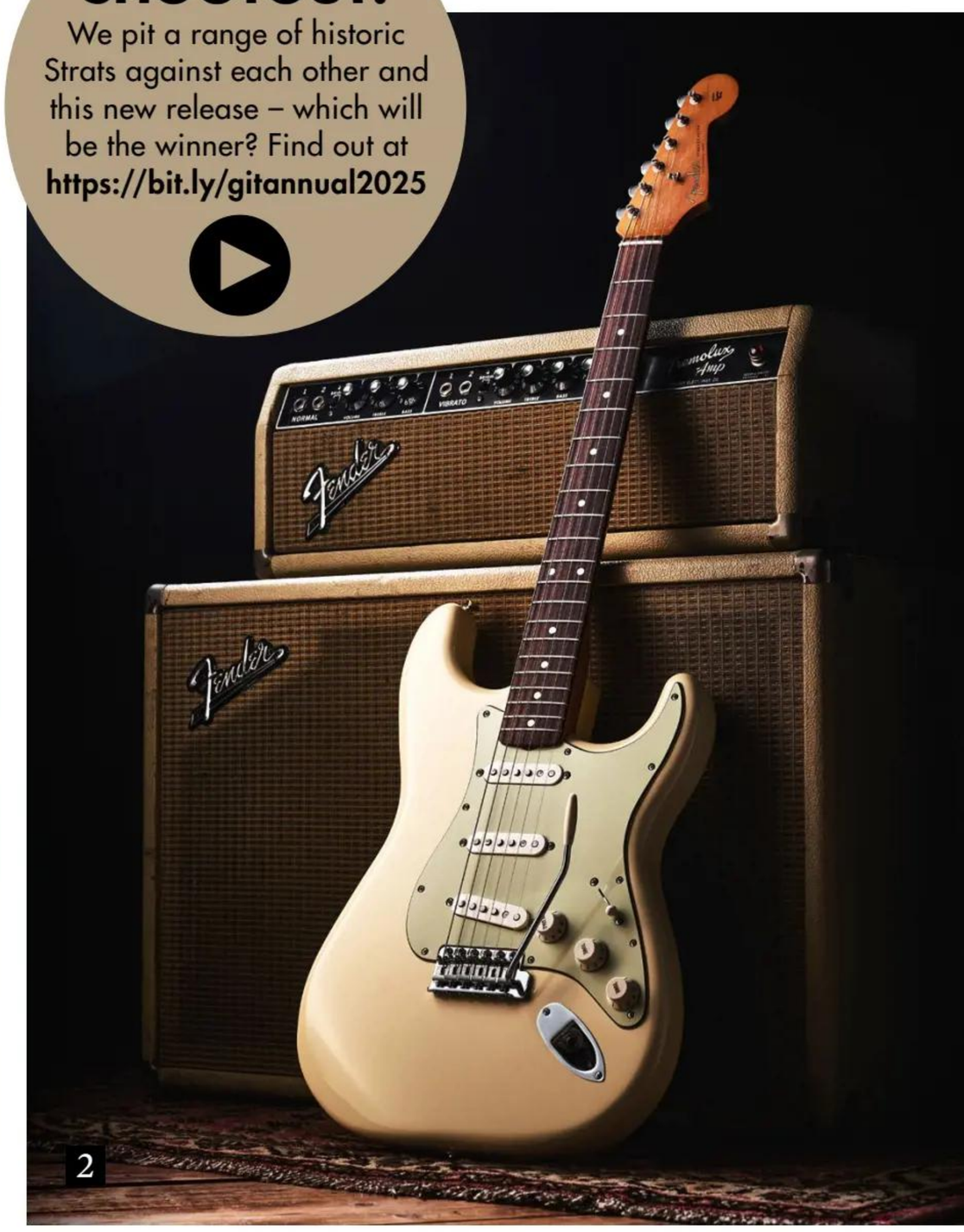
**Austin:** "I have go to with ash. I love the look of it, especially if you can get a nice, lightweight piece. And they're out there. I like seeing the grain – it's a little more interesting than an alder body, speaking personally."

**Paul:** "Yeah, I really like ash-body Strats and it's a dirty little secret that, because I like the 60s neck, when I get a customer that orders an ash-body 60s, I'm like, 'My dude!' [laughs]"

This original 1956 Strat is an early alder-bodied example from around the time Fender transitioned away from ash – but Master Builders Paul Waller and Austin MacNutt personally prefer the more striking looks of ash

This refinished (but otherwise original) 1961 Strat embodies what Paul Waller calls the period when "the Strat started to come into its own... and the pickups started getting dialled in"






**What are your favourite pickups for Strats?**
**Paul:** "It's tough."
**Austin:** "That is tough."
**Paul:** "Do you want to go first?"
**Austin:** "I feel like it's a revolving door... I mean, I just finished one that had Ancho Poblanos in it and I was just playing it and I was like, 'Wow, this sounds really good.'
**Paul:** "I almost feel like certain pickups might sound better in certain combinations, but, yeah, it definitely moves around for me. I've designed sets of pickups that we have here and I've put a lot of those sets in guitars, and they tend to be on the lower-output side, more like a vintage [set]. But, then, I also really like '69s, anything with enamel [wire]. The set I designed actually has one enamel in it, in the neck, so you can get that really fat 'Jimi' stuff with it, but then I also like the '62s as well. So that was my way of getting the best of both worlds: having a '62 set in the bridge and middle, and an enamel '69 in the neck. That was a fun set to do. I get a lot of orders for those.

"But it's so hard to say what's best because they're all so good. Especially when you have access to the winders that are making the premium stuff. Pickups are also easily altered by adding copper or taking copper away, mixing magnets... It's quite a soup recipe with a lot of ingredients that can be changed very easily."

**1.** This Fender Custom Shop Heavy Relic 1962 Stratocaster was made by Master Builder Dale Wilson and shows how adept the Custom Shop is at relicing guitars

> **"Pickups are easily altered by adding copper or taking copper away, mixing magnets... It's quite a soup recipe"** PAUL WALLER

**A lot of players want Strats with quarter-sawn maple necks. What benefits does a quarter-sawn neck bring, in lutherie terms?**
**Paul:** "One of the guys here took a piece of maple and cut it into a 1x1-inch cube and we made sure it was dimensionally the same in both grain directions with a calliper. Then we put it in a press and measured the deflection from point A to point B – you know, the deflection in the middle [when both ends were subjected to a high-pressure load] – and it was the same in both flat-sawn and quarter-sawn. So that really spoke to how maple is one of those materials where it's already really strong, even without the grain orientation. So I would say 'stability' is a word that people should be using, not 'strength' when it comes to grain orientation. A [quarter-sawn maple neck] is going to be a more stable neck, probably, but not necessarily any stronger."

**2.** On the mass-production side, Fender's Vintera II 60s Strat offers suprisingly authentic vintage tones, as a recent shootout video confirmed (see above). Pickups remain a key area where makers can dial in sonic character to suit a particular era

**What are your thoughts on using roasted or torrified maple in Strat necks?**
**Austin:** "I like it. It has a nice look. It oils up well if you're going down that route of an oiled neck; it feels great."
**Paul:** "I like it, too – I would say the light-roasted version, though. Anything beyond that starts to get too brittle for me and you can get other issues with cracking, and I would be concerned about the longevity of the instrument. I mean, Fenders are designed and built to last forever, so material is an important aspect of that. Anything beyond a light roast I'm not going to be interested in. That has to do with experience of having issues with the darker roasted pieces."

**Tell us a really cool setup tip or maintenance tip for Strats.**
**Paul:** "Just leave the bridge alone. The traditional Fender [Strat bridge

This 1966 Strat, refinished by renowned British specialist Clive Brown in Firemist Silver, is set up with the bridge flat against the body. According to Paul Waller, this is the most practical arrangement for most players



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PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

setup] is the floating bridge. And that's fine if you're using the bar all the time. But, after speaking with a lot of guys, they're not really hammering on the bar. Maybe it's for a specific song or something... but not too many live in that world all the time. And so now I set up Strats where the bridge is actually sitting on the face of the guitar. That way, it'll always come back to pitch and you don't have to worry about putting your thumb on it and changing its pitch. Then, if you decide you want to use the bar, you can put the bar in and dive it, which would satisfy most people.

"For the few that want the floating bridge, you can float your bridge, but you're just asking for trouble at that point. That's why things like Floyd Rose exist, because of floating bridges, and the type of music that came out of that era. That was a problem that needed to be solved and so [the Floyd Rose] came about. But, now, with today's music, that's not really necessary so much. Running with the trends of how guitar players are playing today, that's how I set mine up and I would suggest anybody do it that way."

**Some players believe that hardtail Strats have something extra-special about them. What are your thoughts on that?**

**Austin:** "They have a different feel to it, for sure. Yeah, I like them."

**Paul:** "I do, too. I've always liked them because I've always been into Teles, so it was an easy segue for me to do a hardtail Strat. But I would say that they're a bit more hit and miss than a standard Strat. Hardtails are more like Teles, where there tends to be a bit more variance and good ones and bad ones. But when you get a good one it's like, 'Oh boy, what have I been missing?' They can be special, for sure."

**3.** This Custom Shop Strat belongs to Chris Turpin of roots-rock band Ida Mae. It features a control plate patterned after one fitted to a 1954 prototype presented to George Fullerton, then Vice President of Production at Fender

> **"For the few that want the floating bridge, you can float your bridge, but you're just asking for trouble"** PAUL WALLER

**What are your personal favourite electronics mods for Strats?**

**Austin:** "I like having the 'blender' in it, so you have [three knobs that control] volume, tone and the blender [allowing bridge-and-neck and all three pickups to be engaged at once]. I think that's incredibly useful."

**Paul:** "I've been doing that a lot lately, too, especially with a humbucker [in HSS builds], because now you can get the humbucker and the neck [using] the blender. I would say in the last 20 years, that's been one of the greater upgrades for the Strat. Because you really can't fix much on the Strat, but that helped bring in some stuff and now somebody that's maybe playing country can kind of get a Tele thing out of it with the blender."

**4.** Nile Rodgers with the 1960 Strat that became known as the 'Hitmaker'. He used it to create songs that led to some 500 million record sales – Paul Waller says it's one of the best-sounding Strats he's ever played, too

**What's the best Strat you've ever played?**

**Austin:** "I did a refret on a '58 years ago that someone brought me, that one just sounded amazing. Maybe it was just one of the first vintage ones I worked on, but I played that one for a while before I called the owner and had him come pick it up!"

**Paul:** "That's a tough question. A couple that stick out – Ronnie Wood has a hardtail Strat and that one was incredible, I think it was a '55. And then Nile Rodgers' Hitmaker Strat, that one's incredible." G

***www.fendercustomshop.com***

# 70 Strat's Life

## MORE THAN 30 OF THE WORLD'S TOP STRATOCASTER PLAYERS JOIN US TO SHARE THEIR LOVE OF LEO'S DOUBLE-CUT MASTERPIECE

**Words** Andrew Daly, Jamie Dickson & Jason Sidwell

### Hank Marvin

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"Going back to my school years, hearing the intro and solo of The Crickets' *That'll Be The Day* on a jukebox was a revelation, and motivated me to try to copy this 'new to us' American style of rock 'n' roll guitar. As regards my own playing, I thought *The Theme From The Deer Hunter (Cavatina)* was special as it's a beautiful composition written by Stanley Myers, and also my performance was recorded in one take, except for one note where there was an odd distortion. I dropped in and replaced the note.

"A couple of other recordings that I like for different reasons are *Hot Rox*, which I wrote with my son Ben; it was fun for me to go nuts and play an extended blues-rock solo. And also *Ain't No Sunshine* arranged for me by Mark Griffiths, which gave me an opportunity to play a jazzy, blues-influenced solo. Very satisfying."

**What's your best tip for getting great tones out of a Strat?**

"Because I use the vibrato bar and most of the time have it held in my right hand, I was forced to pick nearer the fingerboard, rather than the bridge. This produces a slightly sweeter tone. I would also not have too much top on the amp. In fact, the early AC30s – it's their 65th anniversary this year! – did not have a top boost function and then, when they added it, I discovered that if not used with restraint it would cause Bruce [Welch] to howl in pain – or perhaps he was just singing?"

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**

"From late 1958 to early '59 I was playing an Antoria, which had a neck designed and constructed by Fred Flintstone, who thought he was making a club. To put me out of my misery Cliff [Richard] bought me my first Strat in spring 1959. It was red with a bird's eye maple neck and fingerboard, and gold-plated hardware. It looked out of this world. A guitar from Mars. It unfortunately had very heavy strings, something like 13 or 14 to 56, impossible to bend a string, other than the second string up a half-step, but I was saved by the vibrato bar, which enabled me to pull the second string up a whole tone. But it had to be set up to enable that. At that time, the only finger vibrato I was aware of was the classical one, which doesn't work too well on heavy steel strings. Wanting to make the guitar 'sing' more, I found using the vibrato bar achieved that. I also used it to dip the pitch and sometimes to give the strings a wild shake as on the intro to The Shadows' hit *Man Of Mystery*. I certainly would not have been able to develop that on any other guitar available in those days."

**Rosewood or maple?**

"I prefer a bird's eye maple fingerboard. I always thought it looked better. How shallow is that? But importantly I like the feel under my fingers."

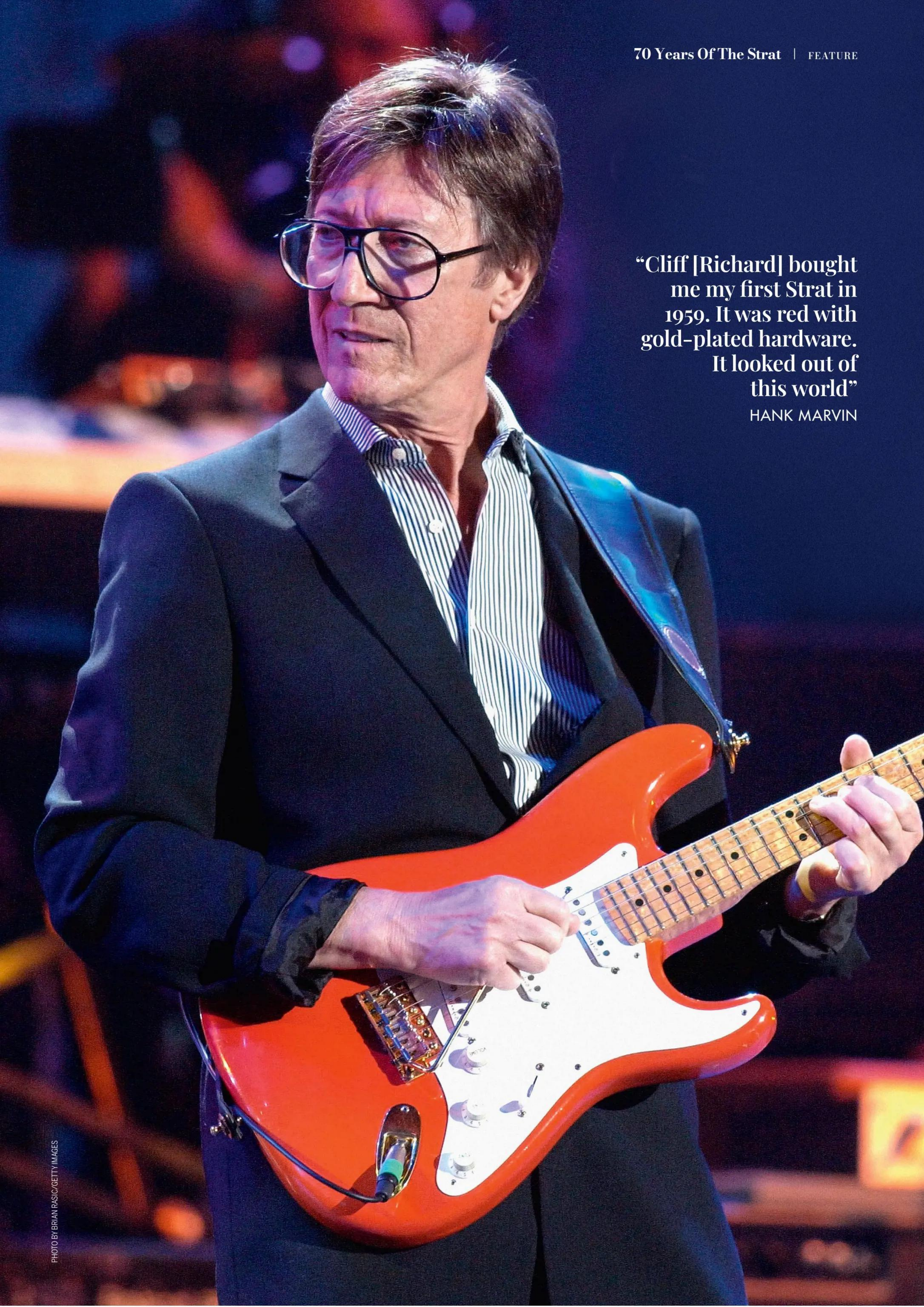
**Strats look coolest in what finish?**

"A red Strat is historically associated with me, although I have had and performed with both white and black Strats."

**You've never been a stickler for playing vintage Strats, but do you own any?**

"The Strats I've used since 1989 have been my Custom Shop Signature models, which are based on a 1958 red one that I used through the 80s. That '58 is the only vintage Strat I own."

PHOTO BY MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



> “Cliff [Richard] bought me my first Strat in 1959. It was red with gold-plated hardware. It looked out of this world”
>
> HANK MARVIN

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

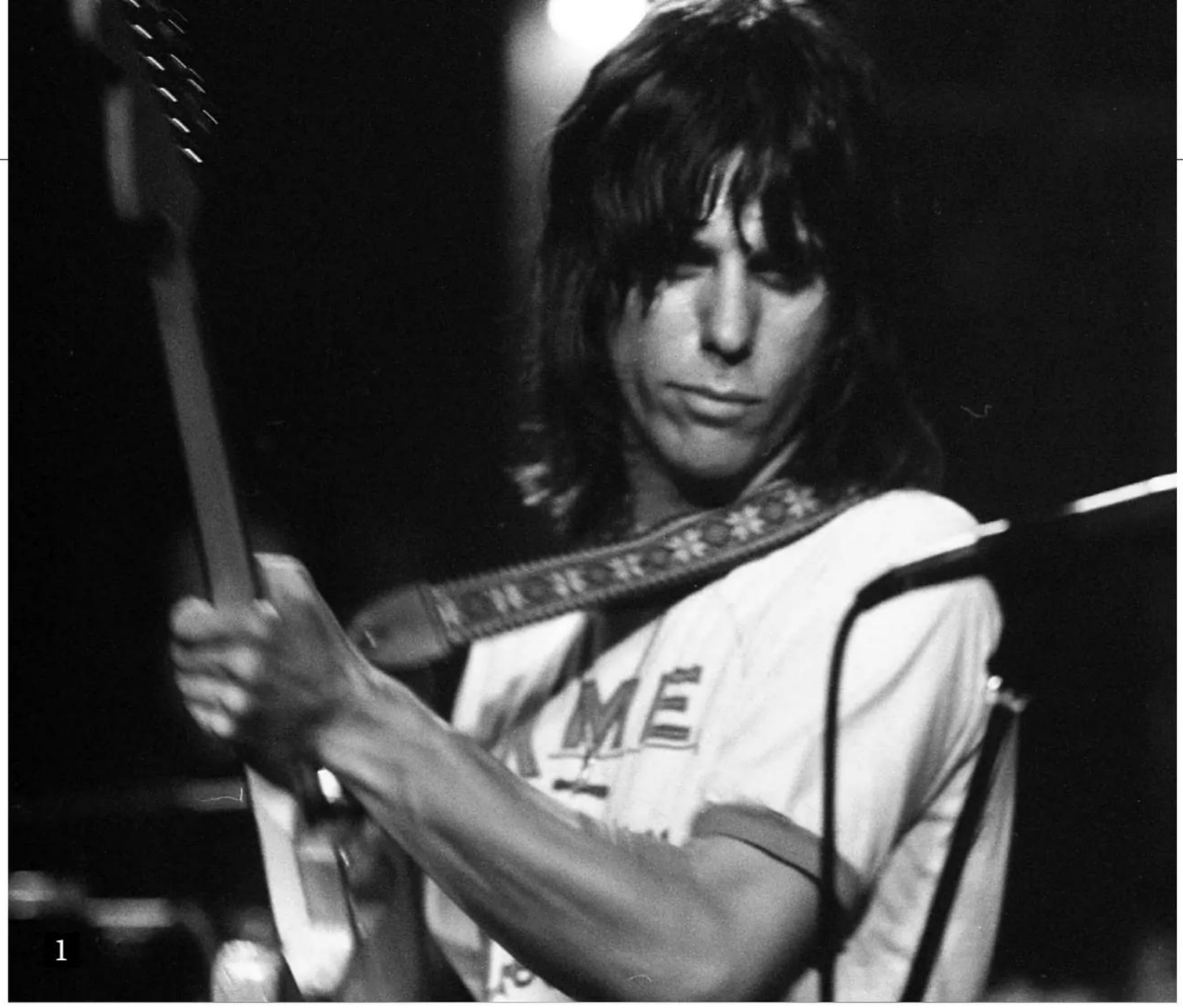


PHOTO BY WATAL ASANUMA/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

1. Jeff Beck's playing on his 1976 album *Wired* is cited by many as the pinnacle of what can be expressed on the Strat. Beck is pictured here at the Roundhouse in London in '76

## Jennifer Batten

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"Jeff Beck's *Wired* album. The tones that he got out of the guitar were, and continued to be throughout his life, absolutely magnificent."

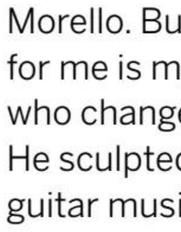
**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**

"I'd have to go with my years of playing with Jeff Beck: he was using a Marshall DSL, one of three prototypes before production began. He used a [Pro Co] Rat [2 Distortion] pedal and later a [J Rockett] Archer. His pedal use was always minimal. He got reverb and delay dialled in by the monitor/front-of-house engineers as part of rehearsal so nothing else was clogging his tone. Other pedals would sneak in from time to time, like a Snarling Dogs Wah, flanger for the intro of *Blue Wind*, which was immediately out of the chain after, and a ring modulator on the *You Had It Coming* tour."

> **"The Strat feels organic, it moves up and down and back and forth in sync with you. It can twang and it can sizzle"** MARK BOWEN

## Mark Bowen, Idles

**Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?**



"It is the quintessential electric guitar. If you ask someone to draw an electric guitar, they will invariably draw a Strat. It feels organic, there are no edges or corners, it moves up and down and back and forth in sync with the expression of your movement. It can twang and it can sizzle. It can cope with big ol' strings. The necks – especially the big thick 70s ones – just feel right to me. You wield a Strat, not just play on it."

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**

"There's too many, that's the whole point. Hendrix, SRV, Knopfler, Morello. But the most important for me is my guitar hero, Dick Dale, who changed music with a Strat. He sculpted and carved what guitar music was."

## Tyler Bryant

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**



"I grew up idolising Jeff Beck... He was and will always be the freakiest guitarist to me. If I can figure out how to pull a fraction of the sounds out of my Strat that he pulled out of his, I'll feel like a winner. With a good Strat, the sonic possibilities are endless."

## Mitch Dalton

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"I vividly remember the 'light bulb' moment regarding the Strat. It occurred at a holiday camp in Devon and I must have been eight or nine years old. The jukebox there continuously belted out 60s hits of the day. As I walked past on the first day, the menacing sound of low quaver tom-toms filled the air for four bars, to segue into – BLAMMO! – the guitar intro to *Apache*. The cutting tone, the tremolo arm, the reverb and echo, the minor key... That was that. There was no going back."

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**

"I'd been working in studios for about five minutes when it became deafeningly obvious that I needed a versatile instrument capable of responding to the musical and stylistic demands of any job that might be thrown my way. It had to be a Strat. I trawled through the pages of *Exchange & Mart* and there it was: 1962 pre-CBS item, £150 or nearest offer. I'm told it's worth a shed load of money [today]. All I know for certain is that it sounds great, especially when you do The Shadows walk at the same time."

MITCH DALTON PHOTO BY IAN BOICHAT/ORIGIN STUDIOS

TYLER BRYANT PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

## Kirk Fletcher

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**



"I love making a Strat fatter. I shy away from the [Ibanez] Tube Screamer thing; the pedals I like with the Strat have always been Lovepedal's Tchula [Boost] or the [Vemuram] Jan Ray [Overdrive]. It could also be a clean boost pedal with some really cooking non-master volume Fender amp, like a Super Reverb or Tweed 4x10 Bassman. Or a whole other approach from my gospel days – a loud, clean amp like a [Fender] Twin, Jazz Chorus, or even a Peavey Renown, believe it or not."

**What is the greatest tone made with a Strat on a record?**

"Firstly, Jimi Hendrix's *Machine Gun*. Secondly, Doyle Bramhall II on his first solo album, self-titled. With the tone on *Stay A While*, he really turned my head around on getting the fattest tone from a Strat. I saw him live in the mid-90s and he had the sparsest gear you could imagine: a reissue [Fender] Bassman, a couple of Strats and a couple of pedals. It sounded incredible! I realised how much tone is in the mind and the hands; the heart and soul, too. Finally, Michael Landau: literally any recording, but how about *Born In The Rain* off *The Star-Spangled Banner* record?"

PHOTO BY TIBBY FLORA

## Brett Garsed

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**



"I really like using fuzz tones with mine as it'll fatten up the back pickup. If you can get that kind of sound with pedals it allows a Strat to do what it does naturally, so you can have the best of all worlds tonally."

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**

"This is an impossible question to answer, but the first person that came to mind for me was Rory Gallagher."

> "I really connect the imagery and essence of Stratocasters to Jimi Hendrix and the 60s era of art and music" GIRL IN RED

## Girl In Red

**Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?**



"The Strat was my first ever electric guitar, so for me it's the epitome of what the electric guitar is. And now I use it because it's iconic and I love the sound."

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**

"The most iconic Strat player will always be Jimi Hendrix. Not only was he a really cool guitarist, but I really connect the imagery and essence of Stratocasters to Jimi Hendrix and the 60s era of art and music."

PHOTO BY NINA WESTERVELT/WWD VIA GETTY IMAGES

## Allen Hinds

**What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?**



"How many times have I gone into a store, seen a beautiful Strat and when I pick it up, it immediately turns me off due to an improper setup? And by a 'setup' I mean several things: neck pitch, truss rod, fret continuity, each individual saddle's height, pickup height, bridge screw adjustment, intonation. When all this is right, your hands have a much better chance of ultimate expression, feel and tone."

**2.** Stevie Ray Vaughan was a force of nature when he played live on the Strat. Pictured here in New York, 1981, his gig at the El Mocambo club in Toronto, two years later, is deemed by many to be his greatest to make it onto a recording

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND

**3.** Allen Hinds says that, even more so than for other electrics, a really thorough setup is essential if you want to get the best from a Fender Stratocaster

**What is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?**

"There are a couple for me. One of the best years was '56: the soft V-shaped neck, super comfy, and that old two-tone lovely nitrocellulose look. A friend has one and it has to be one of the most resonant Strats ever – last of the ash bodies, so the weight is perfect. My next favourite might be a '60 slab-'board for the aesthetic of the finish. The dark, dark oxblood red is different from the later fire-engine reds... and the slab 'board is great. But I think the '64s were the best neck shape: girth without being overly fat."

## Eric Johnson

**What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?**



"One of the things I like to do is to put the tone control on the bridge pickup and roll it off a bit. Also, I put the bridge pickup quite close to the strings to make it a little stronger."

## Richie Kotzen

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"Ritchie Blackmore's intro to the song *Woman From Tokyo* is one of the greatest-sounding rock 'n' roll guitar intros played on a Strat. It is relatively clean with just enough gain to give it power and attitude [and] he sits in time with the drums. This is something a lot of fans take for granted, but it is a very important component in how and why performances 'sound' as they do."




3



2

PHOTO BY REBECCA LOVELL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

## Rebecca Lovell, Larkin Poe

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"[Stevie Ray Vaughan's] *Live At The El Mocambo* is probably one of the most inspirational exhibitions of a Stratocaster from where I sit. Also, we played Doheny Blues Festival in California five or six years ago and watching Jimmie Vaughan play his Strat on stage was like raising hair on the back of the neck. When you see somebody playing with that authority, that is a connective moment where you understand the instrument's power."

**What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?**

"It's all in the right hand – and that's coming from someone who started out as an acoustic player. It's taken me a long time to understand the appropriate amount of force to use on a Strat. Because watching a player like Stevie play, you begin to understand how much violence the guitar can actually take [laughs]. You can draw a lot of dynamics out of your instrument if you're willing to muscle in but also lighten up. I've broken thousands of strings on my blessed guitar... poor thing [laughs]."

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**

"On a track called *Bad Spell* I used a Fender Deluxe with a Royal Jelly by Beetronics. It's like a really overblown fuzz pedal that gives a kiss of an octave sound to it. It's got a little bit of a slap on it and sounds really sick."

## Steve Lukather

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you the most?**



"This is tough to answer. I suppose Jimi was my first 'Wow, I love that sound!' moment. Doesn't hurt if you *are* Jimi... Jeff Beck's *Where Were You*, all of SRV's stuff, David Gilmour... Mike Landau knows how to make a Strat sing. Eric Johnson. Man, it's hard to answer completely."

**What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?**

"Be a great player [laughs]. A great amp... Marshall and Fender amps come to mind. I suppose a Dumble, but I had a very early 1980 Dumble Overdrive Special I bought for 1,000 bucks. But for *me*, it was hardly a magic amp. Only thing magic was the 2,000 per cent I made when I sold it! It really is the players that use them."

## Yngwie Malmsteen

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"When I was seven or eight years old, I bought a 'Strat', but it wasn't a Fender; it was a bogus copy. But it was exact, you know? And the first thing I noticed was that I hated the pickups. So I went to the music store and they sold me something called a Fat Strat pickup, which was still a single coil, and it sounded way better.

"That was the one and only thing I found with Strats that I don't like: the pickups. I think they're awful. But that's just me. Because you'll hear Hendrix and you hear all these other guys, and they sound great with them. I mean, my playing style is... different because it's not only the blues, it's more linear and I just play a very different style than most guitar players do. Other than that, man, fuck, the Strat is amazing."

**Which is the coolest Strat headstock?**

"I like them all. But I always kind of gravitated to a big headstock because it just looks really cool. And secondly, if you don't know this, now you shall: on a solidbody electric guitar, like Telecaster or Stratocaster, the sound resonates not really from the body but from the headstock. If you take the body of the guitar and hold it against the wall, you get nothing. But if you put the headstock against the wall, the whole wall vibrates the sound from the Stratocaster, like from the volume of the guitar. Basically, the resonance is from the headstock. So the bigger headstock would have more volume."

**Strats look coolest in what finish?**

"I have a hilarious story for you. When I was a kid, I used to do a lot of gigging, and it was not like in America, where you could play in Top 40 bands, you know? I had a band with a real guitar player, believe it or not, and his father was a well-off guy who had his own company. So his father was like, 'You kids can play here every weekend, as long as you play one ABBA song and one Beatles song.' I was 12 or 13 years old and we got paid. One day, somebody filmed the show on one of these [Kodak] Super 8 cameras. I was wearing black and I was playing a black Strat. And what I saw in the picture in the film was... it looked like I was just playing a fucking pickguard. All I saw was the pickguard. I said, 'Fuck it.' I went home, took the guitar apart and painted the guitar white. From then on, I said, 'I need the lighter-coloured guitars.'"

> **"I'd [never] write music in the way I do without the Strat. It's so dynamic, it makes you play in a different way"** SIMON NEIL

## DeWayne 'Blackbyrd' McKnight, P-Funk

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"While I was in one of my favourite music stores in midtown LA called Grants School Of Music, I looked behind the counter and saw a guitar that looked exactly like a sunburst Strat with a maple neck but no Fender logo on it. I asked Mrs Grant if it was for sale. She said yes; it was $68. I begged my parents to buy it for me to no avail. As my 18th birthday was coming up, my brother offered to buy the guitar for me. I thought it was a copy, but at one point I took the neck off the guitar to find a date: it was 9-58. I showed the guitar to an expert and he confirmed it was a 1958 sunburst Fender Stratocaster. I still have the body of the guitar – and the rest is a horror story, which I won't go into."

**What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?**

"I've been told that I am a heavy-handed player, so I need the action at a level to compensate for that. I first set my strings to 5/64th-inch off the frets across all the strings, measuring from the bottom of the strings. My favourite tech told me that this is the lowest measurement to get a good tone for the way I play. If my hands and my guitar have a great relationship, gear and anything else is a plus."

## Tom Morello

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**



"Jimi Hendrix, David Gilmour, Jeff Beck, Ritchie Blackmore, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Andy Gill of Gang Of Four and Brother Wayne Kramer of the mighty MC5 have all wielded the Strat in inspirational ways – and my 'Soul Power' Strat allowed me to unlock a new era of sound and fury in Audioslave."

## Simon Neil

**Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?**



"I don't think I'd have ever come to write music in the way that I do without the Stratocaster. It's so percussive, so dynamic, it makes you play in a different way. My very first one was gifted to me by my bandmate's dad, and I recorded our first three records on that Stratocaster. It's the most expressive guitar I've ever played – there's a reason I'm still playing it now!"

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

**4.** DeWayne's first experience with buying a Strat resulted in him bagging a bargain: $68 for a '58!



DEWAYNE 'BLACKBYRD' MCKNIGHT PHOTOS BY PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY JMENTERNATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES

## Oz Noy

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**



"Jimi Hendrix: he started it all and opened the doors for everybody. Jeff Beck took the instrument to the next level, pushing the envelope further than anyone so far. Stevie Ray Vaughan took Hendrix, Clapton, Albert King & BB King and made it into his own personal style with the most glorious tone ever imagined. Eric Johnson, the most original rock player since Hendrix and Beck, invented his new vocabulary of blues-rock and beyond."

## Carlos O'Connell, Fontaines DC

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**



"Best drive would be anything that chokes, anything with good sag in it. Fender Blender is a classic effect that takes the dynamic in a Strat so well. Right now, I'm using a 636P by Soundgas based on the preamp from the old Grampian spring tanks. The choke on it makes the Strat top-end sound so fuzzy and really brings out the low-end that's so perfectly balanced on the Strat, making it feel like the cones in the amp are about to blow up."

> **"There's an undeniable power to the Strat; when I play, there is no fear and I'm transported to a different state of being"** ARI O'NEAL

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**

"The obvious answer is Hendrix. But Frusciante has to be the most exciting and sensitive Strat player in modern music."

## Ari O'Neal

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"I got my first Strat when I was in college from a pawn shop. I wanted something that sounded more diverse and versatile, and the Strat does that for me. I have been playing it ever since! There's an undeniable power to it; when I play, there is no fear and I'm transported to a different state of being."

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN



PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE

**5.** Though Joe Perry is often associated with the Gibson Les Paul, the Strat has been central to his sound since the early 70s

## Joe Perry

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"Anything Jeff Beck did in the last 30 years since he put down his Les Paul and was exclusively a Strat guy. I saw him play at the Boston Tea Party touring behind the first album, and they did a song from their new upcoming album [*Beck-Ola*], and he switched to a Strat for that; it was *Jailhouse Rock*. He used the Strat and the vibrato as part of his vocabulary. He used that [vibrato] in a musical way – way more than anybody else that I've ever heard. Jeff was heads, hands and feet above everybody else when it came to using everything a Strat had to offer."

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**

"To start with, I would take an old Klon pedal and put it into a small Fender. Then I would probably put a compressor on it somewhere; I have a Carl Martin [Compressor Limiter], and Universal Audio has a really good one called the 1176 [Studio Compressor]. I would go for that before I go for more overdrive."

**In your opinion, which is the coolest Strat headstock?**

"I think the bigger one [from the 70s] looks cool. There's no denying that the guitar is a phallic-looking musical instrument. And, you know, to dot the i's and cross the t's, the bigger headstock does it..."

## Ana Popović

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"I'd have to go with Riviera Paradise *by* Stevie Ray Vaughan from the album *Live from Austin, Texas*."

**What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?**

"Put the toggle switch in the second or fourth position. Combining the Alnico V pickups with a Fender clean-toned amp, such as Super Reverb or Deluxe Reverb, is as close to the heart and soul of a Fender Strat as you can get, especially if played on a maple-neck Strat."

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**

"It was in '96, I believe at a shop in my hometown of Belgrade, Serbia. I bought a secondhand CBS Strat from 1975 with a natural finish. That got me through the first shows with my first band."

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**

"In my opinion, a Mesa/Boogie Mark IV with an original Ibanez Tube Screamer [TS808]. You can even use two for an extra boost! Then add an original Boss Chorus."

**Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?**

"Jimi was revolutionary; he changed the accustomed way of playing guitars in the 60s and 70s, and the Strat and Fender were never the same

PHOTO BY LELAND HAYWARD

after that. Stevie Ray Vaughan added sweetness to the Strat tone, and that hasn't been heard before or after; Stevie's fluency was astonishing and new to the game. And then Jeff Beck went even further to broaden the musical spectrum; Jeff widened the sound options and modernised the approach on a Strat in the 90s."

**Strats look coolest in what finish?**
"My favourite is my signature 'Foggy' finish, which is called Foggy Mirror Chrome. When paired with a mirror pickguard, it's a showstopper!"

## REI

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"My first memory of playing a Stratocaster was in kindergarten in NYC. It was a Made-In-Japan '62 Stratocaster from 1986 with the iconic three-tone sunburst. The Strat screams 'main character vibes' and also has a wide range of tones to offer, which is great for an artist like me who has all types of genres on one setlist/album."

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

## Nile Rodgers

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"I got my Stratocaster in 1973 when I realised that it was what my sound was missing, and once I did... it changed my life 1,000 per cent. I have been able to write the jazz-influenced, dance-disco funk pop songs that people have loved for decades as well as rock, country, folk and EDM collaborations thanks to my Strat."

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

## Philip Sayce

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"When I was in high school I worked after school and weekends in the plumbing department at Canadian Tire, making minimum wage with a goal of saving up for a 90s inexpensive black Strat with a maple neck, something that looked just like Clapton's. Oh, how I cherished that guitar; I spent thousands of hours playing it until it was sadly stolen, just days before the high school Battle Of The Bands. That guitar definitely set me on the course to acquire my first vintage pre-CBS Strat, 'Mother'."

**What is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?**
"To me it's the rosewood veneer-'board 1963 Strat. Stevie Ray Vaughan is the ultimate 'Strat Boss', and my understanding is that he very often played veneer-'board guitars from 1962 or '63. Pre-CBS Strats can be great for various reasons... and '63 seems like a sweet spot. Both of my Strats, 'Mother' and 'Big Daddy', are from 1963 and I consider these 60-year-plus single-coil guitars as transcending any brand name as they are covered in my blood, sweat and tears, and millions of miles, over the last 20 years. I cherish them and feel grateful to have them in my family."

## Josh Smith

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"It was 1994 and I saved up my gig money every week to buy my Stevie Ray Vaughan Signature Strat. I felt like I finally had a real guitar when I got it. I was 14 and I played the guitar almost exclusively for the next 10 years. I still have it, of course. I was playing that guitar when I opened for and met BB King; he signed the back of the headstock for me. I was playing that guitar when I met my wife. There is a sticker that says 'I love Niki' right next to BB's signature. That guitar will be with me always."

**In your opinion, what is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?**
"First, the '57 Strat, my personal dream guitar: the 'V' neck shape, the two-tone burst, the maple neck with the first-year alder body. It's the most versatile Strat ever made. Perfect. Then the '63 Strat: the perfect rosewood-'board Strat. Sounds like Jimi, SRV and all the prototype Strat sounds I hear in my head. Those two years and you are covered with Strats forever!"



**6.** Philip Sayce with the 1963 Strat that he calls 'Mother' – the guitar was made in the year he judges to be the pinnacle of Fender's Strat output



**7.** An original 1957 Strat from the Seven Decades Collection in London. Josh Smith reckons that year's distinctive 'V' neck profile makes it one of the true classics from the model's history

## Tash Sultana

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"I was always begging my dad to get a guitar, and on my eighth birthday I was playing in my room and dad came in and said, 'Get to the lounge!' I thought I'd broken something, but waiting for me was a Black Squier Stratocaster."

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

**Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?**
"I prefer the cutaway on the body so I can get right down and dirty on the neck. Other guitars obviously also provide that, but I've just landed on Strats in this era of my life. I've always been a big fan of Stratocaster players and their guitars. For me, the Strat is easy, it's lighter, and I can literally beat the shit out of it on stage and it handles it well."

**"I have [written] jazz-influenced, dance-disco funk pop songs, and rock, country, folk and EDM, thanks to my Strat"** NILE RODGERS

**What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?**
"What I'm trying to approach in my drive tone is matching my gain and sustain, as well as presence. I like that 'metal' squeak in the bends and for the guitar to ring out as much as possible – almost like an electrical current is crawling through the guitar."

## Shane Theriot

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**



"You can't mention a Stratocaster without mentioning Jeff Beck. His performance on *Live At Ronnie Scott's* shows what is possible with the instrument when combined with his highly skilled hands and ears. During that show he makes use of everything on the instrument – tone knobs, whammy bar and volume knobs – in a highly musical way that I don't think other players have ever done. The song *Where Were You* off *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop* is such a beautiful piece of music that always inspires me."

PHOTO BY BRIAN KILLIAN/GETTY IMAGES

## Andy Timmons

**When did you get your first Strat and what was it?**



"I was in a Top 40 band in Miami, summer of 1984, and I only owned a Les Paul at the time, but all of pop radio was about the Nile Rogers' clean Strat rhythm tone, so I bought a 1983 Squier Strat – it was all I could afford. I immediately put EMGs in it because that's what Steve Lukather had in his guitars at that time. I still have that guitar and it's truly one of my best Strats!"

PHOTO BY TERESA JOLIE



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**8.** Jimi Hendrix at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970. By any measure Hendrix was the major disruptor and innovator in late-60s guitar and his astonishing flair on the Strat turned the model's fortunes around for Fender. He remains, for many, the greatest Strat player of all time

PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES

**What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?**
"Eric Johnson's entire Austin City Limits performance from 1991. That, paired with Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Live At The El Mocambo*, are the two ultimate documents of what the Stratocaster is capable of – along with Jeff Beck's *Emotion And Commotion* record and the *Band Of Gypsys* record... This is impossible [laughs]!"

## Chris Turpin

**What Strat moment on a recording (including live recordings) inspires you most to this day and why?**



"For me it's the intro to *The Calvary Cross* by Richard and Linda Thompson. Thompson is a spellcaster. His playing style is frenetic, wild and entirely his own. The intro captures the essence of 1950s 'Strat tone' but somehow is oddly British. On a model of guitar that is so commonplace, probably more than any other guitar on the planet earth... you instantly know it's him. To have such a distinctive voice and unique touch on the instrument is something I've always strived for."

## Jimmie Vaughan

**Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?**



"I used to ride the bus downtown and look in the music store window at the Strat for months before I had one. For me, it's a rocket to outer space; it's my favourite guitar!"

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

**"I looked in the music store window at the Strat for months before I had one. It's a rocket to outer space"** JIMMIE VAUGHAN

**What is the greatest tone made with a Strat on a record?**
"*Nowhere Man* by The Beatles, which I believe is John and George playing their matching Sonic Blue Strats, plugged into the same AC30 with massive compression and treble added at the board. I tried this for myself: two old Strats into an old AC30 – nailed the tone! Honourable mentions also go to *Texas Flood* by SRV and *Peggy Sue* by Buddy Holly."

## Carl Verheyen

**What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?**



"I believe string gauge has very little to do with tone, and action height has everything to do with it. I can get SRV's tone using a 0.009 to 0.046 set because my action is not down on the deck. Pickup height matters as well. If the pickups are too high, you lose clarity."

PHOTO BY PETER FIGEN PHOTOGRAPHY

**In your opinion, what is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?**
"They really got it right by the time the 60s rolled around. Once on tour in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I ran into Seymour Duncan when we were both doing masterclasses at the university. He said, 'Verheyen, you're a Strat guy. The best-sounding three pickups in a row that I've heard in years is on a '58 Strat at Voltage Guitars on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. You should own it!' I picked it up a few days later and he was right! The neck pickup is fat and woodsy. The middle pickup is glassy with a sparkling high-end. And the bridge pickup is bright but not like an icepick in the ears. Exactly what a Strat should be!"

**Rosewood or maple?**
"I've come to believe I get more definition playing with higher gain on my maple-neck guitars. Especially below C# on the 4th fret of the A string. I try to avoid a mushy low-end, so I can use the guitar's entire range."

# BRITISH BLUES BOOM

With the death of John Mayall in July, we lost one of the architects of the 60s blues boom that not only transformed Britain's music scene but restored America's blues guitar pioneers to their rightful place on the world's great stages. Here we trace the story of the grass-roots movement that gave birth to rock itself

**Words** Denny Ilett



The recent passing of the 'godfather of British blues', John Mayall, marks the closing of an extraordinary chapter in British music history. His 1966 album, *Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton*, was a pivotal moment between the initial blues scene that produced The Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann and The Yardbirds and the post blues-boom era of Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and Fleetwood Mac.

But how did the blues arrive in the UK in the first place and what made so many young musicians fall under its spell to the point that it changed the make-up and sound of music throughout the world?

To answer these questions we need to travel back to the late 1930s where, in the United States, an interest in early jazz and blues pioneers began to gather momentum. Both genres, still intrinsically linked at that point, had evolved at a startling rate since the birth of the recording industry. Pop music of the day was ruled by a combination of swing-era big bands and balladeers, or 'crooners' such as Bing Crosby. Blues had somewhat fallen behind and continued to be sold almost exclusively to black record buyers. However, a young generation of white fans were discovering the music through the work of white musicians that had absorbed the style of those early black innovators.

This so-called 'revivalist' movement was primarily led by father-and-son ethnomusicologists John and Alan Lomax who travelled throughout the US (and many other countries) gathering 'field recordings' and interviews with as many folk and blues musicians as they could find. Their work, heroic as it turned out, was an attempt to create a timeline linking music harking back to slavery with the pop music of the day.

Of particular interest to this story is that they attempted to track down Robert Johnson in 1941, only to discover that Johnson had already passed away. Locals recommended Muddy Waters as someone they might like to meet. At the time Waters was working on a farm, but realising that there was fresh interest in his music decided – for the second time – to pursue music full-time. For Muddy Waters, the rest is history!

Later into the 1940s a revival also started for traditional jazz forms. By that time, jazz had experienced the bebop revolution, which led many to look back at the early New Orleans artists that had started the jazz ball rolling around the turn of the century. The music of those old-timers still had its roots firmly in the blues leading the two genres to effectively have the same set of new fans.

Many of these jazz and blues innovators had given up music as a profession by this time. They were left behind stylistically as developments in the music rendered them old-fashioned and passé. Suddenly, with this renewed interest in their music, they were back on the road and in the recording studios.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

1. Muddy Waters circa 1950 in Chicago, a city that became the epicentre of a hard-hitting blues style that was well suited to the post-war, electric era

PHOTO BY TONY GALE / PICTORIAL PRESS LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO FLAG ILLUSTRATION BY CHEKAT / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES

## THE BRITISH SCENE

In Britain, from the late 40s until the arrival of The Beatles, there occurred the first British musical 'boom'. Existing side by side with the burgeoning rock 'n' roll scene, the 'trad boom' was huge with bands led by Ken Colyer, Humphrey Lyttelton and Chris Barber, among others, filling concert halls and clubs with eager teens finally having a music to call their own. As youngsters themselves, they had also fallen under the spell of the Lomax recordings and featured folk, blues and spirituals arm in arm with their trad jazz tunes at gigs and concerts.

Jazz trombonist (and bassist) Chris Barber led a band with



PHOTO BY © CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

2. Along with his father John, musician Alan Lomax (pictured) became an important archivist of – and advocate for – America's blues and folk music traditions

***Pop music was ruled by swing-era big bands, balladeers or 'crooners' such as Bing Crosby. Blues had fallen behind...***



PHOTO BY MIRRORPIX/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY IMAGES

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trumpeter Ken Colyer at the end of the 40s, and hearing of a young guitarist called Anthony Donegan, invited him to audition. Still a teenager, Donegan joined the band and brought with him his folk and blues influences, which began to be featured as part of the band's set. Anthony soon changed his name to Lonnie Donegan and quickly became a hugely popular and influential part of the revival scene in Britain. The name change was inspired after Donegan heard 1920s blues maestro Lonnie Johnson in concert in the early 50s. These interval sets performed by Donegan became known as the 'skiffle break' and introduced British audiences to the music of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie among others.

Such was Lonnie's popularity that by 1954 he'd made several recordings. In that year he recorded one of the most important records in British music history with his cover of Leadbelly's *Rock Island Line*.

Originally part of a Chris Barber 10-inch LP, *Rock Island Line* was eventually released as a single at the end of 1955. The B-side was *John Henry*, which Donegan had heard from Woody Guthrie's recording. By early 1956 it had reached the Top 10 in the UK, but perhaps more significant is the fact it also made the Top 10 in the USA. The seeds for the subsequent British Invasion had been sown!

It was the record that made an entire generation of fledgling musicians believe they could do the same. These youngsters realised they could make music with little or no training and with cheap, often homemade equipment. It was a seismic shift in musical tastes that foreshadowed the punk explosion of the 1970s.

## HOOKED ON SKIFFLE

This was post-war Britain, still on its knees economically. Coincidentally, wartime rationing finally ended in 1954, the year that Donegan recorded *Rock Island Line*. Musical instruments were expensive and few could afford the luxury of owning one. Britain went skiffle crazy with bands and clubs forming everywhere up and down the country, but most famously in Liverpool where a skiffle group called The Quarrymen had *Rock Island Line* as a focal point of their shows. Those youngsters were later to change their name to The Beatles, but that's a whole other story...

Realising the commercial potential and cultural significance of this wave of interest in folk and blues, Chris Barber set about inviting some of the originators of the music to the UK to take part in his touring schedule. The first artist to appear in the UK courtesy of Barber was a true icon: William 'Big Bill' Broonzy. Broonzy was a virtuoso guitarist and vocalist who released a string of popular and influential records in the 1930s.

As part of the initial revivalist movement in the US, in 1938 and 1939 producer John Hammond (who brought the likes of Billie Holiday and Bob Dylan into the public eye) staged a pair of concerts at New York's Carnegie Hall entitled *From Spirituals To Swing*. Hammond's success in educating the so-called sophisticated New York audience to what they had previously considered 'primitive' music was a big achievement for its time and paved the way for African American artists to be seen for the exceptional artists that they were.

The shows featured, in chronological order, gospel groups, blues, traditional New Orleans jazz and the top swing musicians of the day such as pianist and bandleader William 'Count' Basie. To fulfil the folk-blues element of the show,

3. Lonnie Donegan, who was known as the 'King Of Skiffle', provided an early link between American tradition and British audiences

4. The Beatles, seen here in a very early incarnation of the band, initially took inspiration from skiffle groups

***Britain went skiffle crazy with bands forming everywhere up and down the country, but most famously in Liverpool...***



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES

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Hammond had wanted Robert Johnson to perform, only to discover – as the Lomaxes did – that Johnson had passed away. Broonzy was drafted in to take his place.

As for Robert Johnson, despite his unimpeachable status today, he was a relatively obscure artist during his lifetime in comparison to Broonzy. Jumping on the revivalist bandwagon, the record label Columbia rediscovered Johnson's recordings, which had been languishing in their vaults for more than two decades. Re-released on 12-inch LP under the title *King Of The Delta Blues Singers* in 1961, at the height of the first wave of the blues boom, Johnson's place as a genius was finally realised. The album's influence over a generation of young blues fans cannot be overestimated.

Broonzy's tour of the UK was the first opportunity for British audiences to see and hear the 'real deal', although it wasn't without some controversy. It's worth noting that blues musicians were, at that time, defined by their recorded output. Labels were not interested in anything but blues from artists such as Broonzy, despite the fact that his shows also featured Tin Pan Alley 'standards' alongside folk and even pop songs.

When Broonzy presented his regular show in Britain, he was dressed in a sharp suit and went through his entire repertoire. Audiences were shocked with some even accusing Big Bill as inauthentic. Quickly realising what was going on, Broonzy changed his set to purely folk-blues and spirituals and, incredibly, now dressed in dungarees and wearing a straw hat, ticket-buyers were 'satisfied'...

Despite this initial setback, the tour was a huge success and paved the way for many other artists, by now neglected in the

*Big Bill Broonzy's tour of the UK was the first opportunity for British audiences to see and hear the 'real deal', although it wasn't without some controversy*

PHOTO BY GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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**5.** On his first tour to the UK, Big Bill Broonzy, elegant and sharply dressed, didn't fit the stereotypical preconceptions British audiences had about black blues musicians

*Muddy's music had evolved from the Delta and was now raw, gritty and loud. Audiences had never heard anything like it*



**6.** In 1964, Muddy Waters arrived at Wilbraham Road Station, Manchester, to film the legendary ITV *Blues & Gospel Train* special, along with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee

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US, to embark on European tours. Barber set up many other tours including the incredible duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, but the most explosive and revolutionary visit was the 1958 tour featuring none other than Muddy Waters.

## UNCHARTED TERRITORY

History hasn't recorded whether Barber knew what he was letting himself in for when Muddy Waters arrived in the UK armed with a Fender Telecaster. Perhaps he was expecting Muddy to perform his Delta-style country blues on the tour? This tour truly represents a pivotal moment in music history. It could even be argued that rock itself would have taken a different path if Muddy hadn't got on stage and plugged in for his 1958 tour.

Fans in the UK still saw blues as an ingredient of jazz in 1958. They saw it as a primitive folk form and hadn't yet heard the urban version of blues that was emanating from Chicago in the late 1940s. Muddy's music had evolved from the Delta and was now raw, gritty and loud. Audiences had simply never heard anything like it before but, importantly, neither had a group of young pretenders namely Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton, among scores of others. The early influence of skiffle seemed old-hat overnight, with Waters' tour spawning hundreds of new, dedicated blues clubs across the country.

However, Muddy's 1958 tour wasn't the first time UK audiences had heard electric blues guitar. That honour goes to



**7.** Blues legend T-Bone Walker tearing it up at the American Folk Blues Festival at the Hammersmith Odeon, 1967. The flamboyance of rock music owed much to the showmanship of T-Bone and other blues guitar pioneers

PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



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PHOTO BY TV TIMES/TV TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY CHRIS WARE/KEYSTONE FEATURES/GETTY IMAGES

**8.** Sister Rosetta Tharpe performing on stage with Chris Barber and his band in the late 50s. Tharpe was the first American artist to play hard-driving electric gospel and blues in Britain – but more followed...

**9.** Delta blues singer and guitarist Big Joe Williams performing at the very influential American Folk Blues Festival, London, 1963

Sister Rosetta Tharpe who toured with Chris Barber a year earlier in 1957, armed with a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop. Despite her overdriven guitar sound, Tharpe's music was heavily focused on gospel and spiritual songs. What made Waters' tour arguably more influential was the fact he played the type of heavy blues that continues to form the DNA of rock music to this day.

## BLUES BONANZA

As the blues boom gathered pace, promoters rushed to sign up as many African American blues artists as they could find. Visits across the Atlantic quickly evolved into package tours,

***By the early 1960s the American Folk Blues Festival was in full swing, bringing an incredible line-up of artists to Europe***

effectively a travelling festival. By the early 1960s an organisation called the American Folk Blues Festival was in full swing, bringing an incredible line-up of artists on tour to Europe.

Along with Waters and Tharpe, the likes of John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Otis Rush, Big Mama Thornton (who performed the original version of *Hound Dog*), Lightnin' Hopkins, Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor, Willie Dixon (his song *You Need Love* morphed into Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*) and Sugar Pie DeSanto, and a wide host of others, regularly toured on this side of the Atlantic through the 1960s and beyond.

In 1957, harmonica player Cyril Davies and multi-instrumentalist Alexis Korner formed the London Blues and Barrelhouse Club. Initially a skiffle venue, it also hosted many of the visiting American blues artists that Barber was promoting. The next year, in response to hosting the Tele-wielding Muddy Waters and growing tired of the skiffle craze, the pair formed the now infamous group Blues Incorporated. Both Korner and Davies recognised that the future was electric, but found their new, loud and raucous music was too much for the club's clientele. By 1961 they had relocated their club to Ealing in West London and the umbilical cord between traditional jazz, skiffle and blues was finally cut as the Ealing Blues Club was the first establishment dedicated to electric blues. Things would never be the same again.

## A NEW GENERATION

Korner and Davies had first worked with Chris Barber back in 1949 and recorded with him in the mid 1950s, so they were already a feature on the trad jazz, skiffle and blues scenes. Each of those three strands of African American music had existed side by side throughout the 50s in the UK as though waiting for one of them to break away. The introduction of the amplified guitar served as the fuse that caused the explosion.

The Ealing Blues Club had initially opened as a jazz venue in 1959. Arthur Wood, Blues Incorporated's vocalist and, incidentally, the brother of Ronnie Wood, suggested the venue to Korner and Davies and it soon became the go-to place for the increasing number of young blues musicians and enthusiasts in London.

Among those in regular attendance were Jack Bruce, Ginger Baker and Eric Clapton who were later to become Cream. Graham Bond, Rod Stewart, Paul Jones, Manfred Mann and Eric Burdon were among many others

PHOTO BY TONY EVANS/TIMELAPSE LIBRARY LTD/GETTY IMAGES





**10.** Ealing Jazz Club London, 1962. Alexis Korner, a prime mover of British blues, plays guitar while a young Charlie Watts (soon to find fame in the Rolling Stones) backs him up on drums



PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

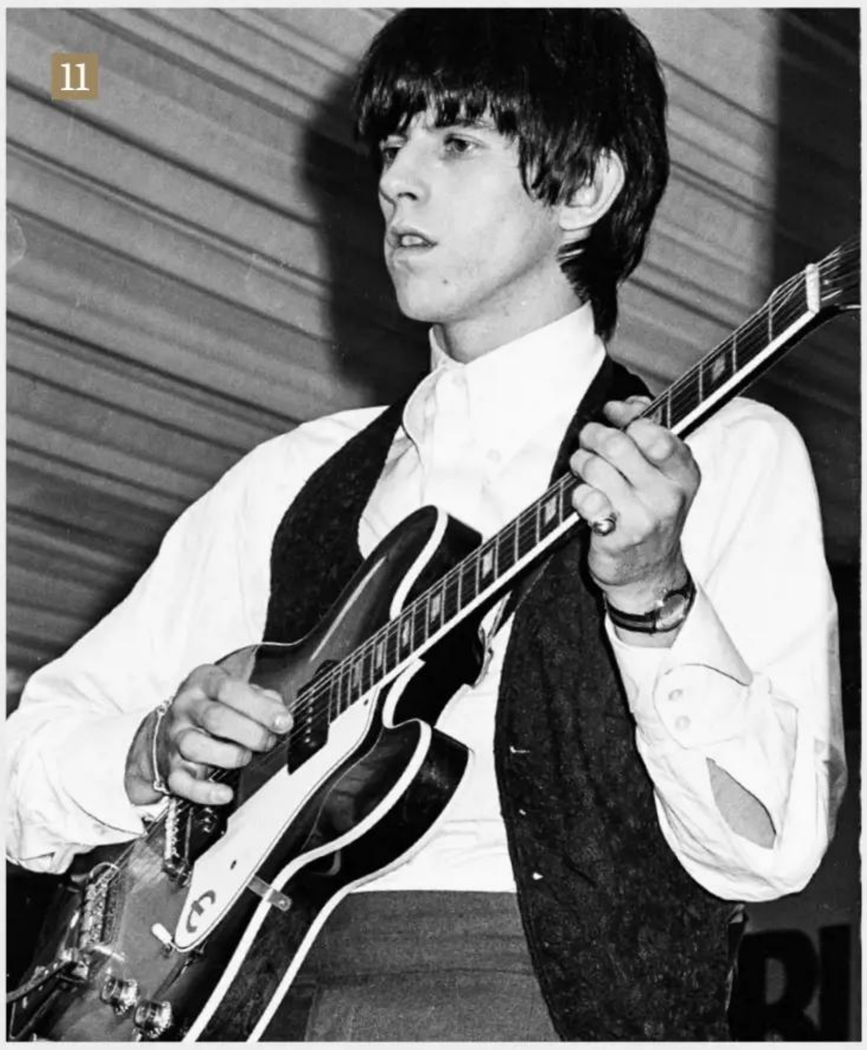


PHOTO BY STANLEY BIELECKI/ASP/GETTY IMAGES

**11.** Inspired by the American blues artists he had seen on tour, Keith Richards plays an Epiphone Casino at the National Richmond Jazz And Blues Festival, 1964

**12.** John Mayall at the Royal Albert Hall, London, 1967. Though a very handy guitarist himself, his greatest contribution to blues guitar, arguably, was as a bandleader

frequenting the club. Perhaps most famously, the Ealing Blues Club is the venue where in 1962 Charlie Watts, Brian Jones, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger first met. In July of that year, this line-up played their first gig at London's Marquee Club, with the Ealing Blues Club's stage a key part in their early performances.

On Alexis Korner's advice, John Mayall moved to London from Manchester in 1963, formed his band The Bluesbreakers and started playing at the Marquee. Their original guitarist Bernie Watson, a sadly now-forgotten cog in the wheel, came over from Cyril Davies' group, the R&B All-Stars, which Davies formed shortly after his departure from Blues Incorporated. The Bluesbreakers' next guitarist Roger Dean was present when the band supported John Lee Hooker on his 1964 UK tour.

1964 was also the year that both The Rolling Stones and The Beatles first toured America. These early tours set off the 'British Invasion' that saw these young, white British kids effectively 'selling coal to Newcastle'. Both groups were staggered to discover their heroes were neglected, and sometimes forgotten, in their own countries. Both groups were a culmination of a decade's worth of musical development in the UK with The Beatles growing directly from skiffle and The Stones from blues. Both owe a lot to the foresight of people such as Chris Barber and Alexis Korner.

Around the same time bands including The Who, The Animals, The Kinks and The Yardbirds

***Bands took traditional blues and rock 'n' roll elements and cranked them through Vox or Marshall amplifiers***

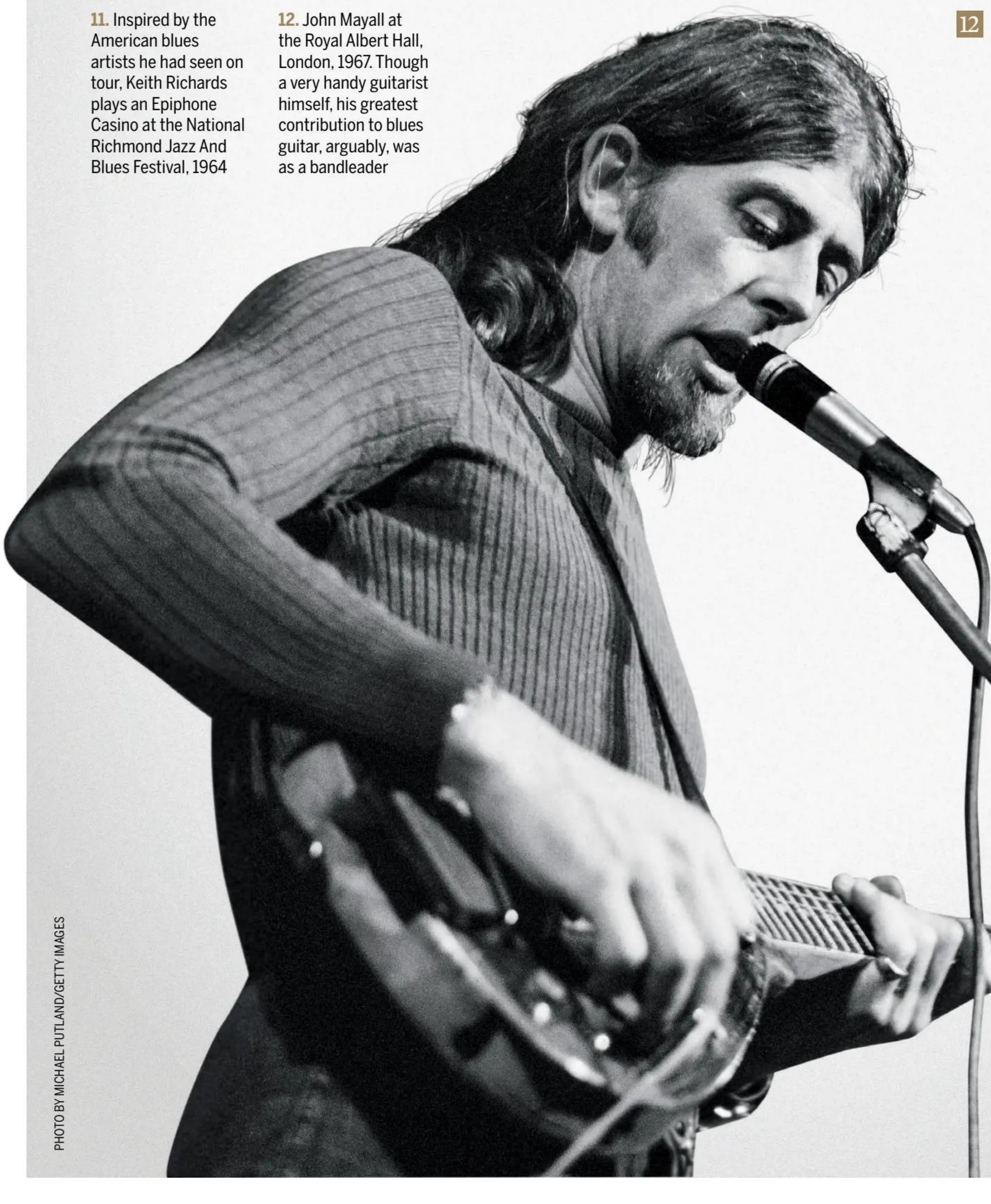


PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

**13.** Young Yardbirds: an almost unrecognisably fresh-faced Eric Clapton (far left) with Paul Samwell-Smith, Keith Relf, Jim McCarty, and Chris Dreja

**14.** The classic line-up: the Bluesbreakers, 1966, London. From left to right: John Mayall, Hughie Flint, Eric Clapton and bassist John McVie



were taking the UK, and then the US, by storm. All were under the spell of those mid-50s blues masters who had travelled to Britain, and each had their own ideas on where to take the music. They took traditional blues and rock 'n' roll elements and cranked them through Vox or Marshall amplifiers. Then, by the mid-60s, another split to the musical atom started to take place.

## CASHING IN

The point of division was between those that saw dollar signs and those that felt the music was losing its blues roots. Eric Clapton had joined The Yardbirds in 1963 when the group were almost exclusively disciples of the type of Chicago blues they'd heard Muddy Waters perform in 1958. By 1965, and with inevitable record company pressure, they'd recorded and released the hit single *For Your Love*. Clapton was unhappy with the commercial path the band was taking and left shortly after the song's release. Feeling the need to stay true to his love of blues, Eric joined John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and recorded one of the most staggering albums in guitar history. As for The Yardbirds, they had no need to worry about Clapton's departure – they had Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page onboard in no time!

And so it was with a lot of bands that had emerged from the initial

# CLAPTON'S HIDEAWAY

## The tone EC achieved on the 'Beano' album has become a benchmark for how a 'Burst and a Marshall should sound together. But it's a little more complex than that...

**Words** Jamie Dickson

**Few guitarists will forget the first time they heard Clapton's ecstatic playing on the track *Hideaway* from the Bluesbreakers' 'Beano' album. The tone EC achieved on that record has become one of the classic archetypes for how an electric guitar should sound. His Les Paul is pushed hard, its voice a full-throated yet expressive song – with the dynamics to reveal the nuance of every phrase – but enough sustaining compression to really take flight when Eric lets rip.**

**The basics of how he got that sound, in terms of gear, are known. The guitar used was, of course, the 'Beano 'Burst' whose current whereabouts are unknown (though widely speculated upon). Stuart Robson of Sunbear Pickups, a tone archivist by trade, fills in some of the other details of the guitar, both documented and conjectured: "When it comes to Clapton's long lost 'Beano 'Burst', speaking in absolutes is rarely, if ever, possible. After all, this 'Burst, which helped inspire so many to pick up the guitar themselves hasn't been seen in 57 years. With that said, it's broadly agreed that this Les Paul, with its double black [bridge] and double white [neck] PAF pickup set was a 1960. This helps us a little when it comes to its pickups but not quite as much as it might first appear.**

**"Some key changes occurred at Gibson through 1960, so the elusive detail of precisely when the guitar was built leaves us relying just as much on the recordings themselves as anything else, and what recordings they are! To my ear, this Les Paul has the certain strident 'shouty' edge common to later PAF specs and this leads me to feel the coils were probably quite even, Leesona-wound spec, likely Alnico V magnets and a moderate-to-high wind in the PAF range of the time.**

**"The guitar howls and responds in Clapton's hands as few things can more than a classic, unpotted PAF and regardless of the specifics, they were clearly a pair that exhibited much of what made these sometimes inconsistent pickups so legendary."**

**The amp used was, famously a Model 1962 Marshall combo with two 12-inch speakers that was effectively a JTM45 in combo format. But Adrian Emsley of Orange Amps cautions that, when trying to achieve Clapton's sound on the album, you have to factor in the compressors and mic preamps used for the session – things that aren't usually on guitar players' radars but which were just as present and influential in the signal chain as any other element.**

**"People will go, 'Oh, I have a JTM45, I have a Les Paul, but it doesn't sound like Bluesbreakers,' and that's because you haven't got a mic-preamp with 48-volt rails going into a [Teletronix] LA-2A Leveling Amplifier [compressor] going into a tape machine. That is a massive part of it," Adrian explains, with a wry smile. "In the 1970s, that became an [Universal Audio] 1176. But it's still the same. Back then it was literally: microphone, mic pre, line level, compressor, tape machine."**



PHOTO BY DAILY EXPRESS/STRINGER/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES




PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

blues scene. Most followed a path that strayed from the blues with The Rolling Stones arguably managing to maintain their own blues roots more than the others.

New influences were making their way over from the States at the same time. Soul and Motown sounds were becoming popular but kept only tentative links to blues. Artists such as James Brown were taking soul in another direction and inventing funk in the process. All made a big impact on British music and threatened to kill off the hardcore blues scene were it not for the likes of Alexis Korner and John Mayall who remained steadfastly loyal to the blues.

Had they decided to 'sell out', the British Blues Boom might have ended there. But with the release of the iconic 'Beano' album, a new strand of blues was created that paved the way for groups such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Fleetwood Mac and Black Sabbath to conquer the 1970s. Each of these put their blues roots before commercial pressures and managed to find huge audiences as a result.

## OUT OF OBSCURITY

The story of the British Blues Boom isn't without its ironies. Artists such as Buddy Guy, BB King and others enjoyed a whole new career path as a result of it. Many great and important American blues musicians struggled with the advent of rock 'n' roll, a genre that stemmed directly from blues. Many had to give up music as a full-time job and many were 'rescued' from obscurity after a bunch of British

*New influences were making their way from the US, taking soul in another direction and inventing funk in the process*

**15.** The blues was a keystone of Jimi Hendrix's playing, but he took it to new realms entirely, revolutionising guitar

**16.** The Yardbirds were a proving ground for many of the great guitarists of 60s Britain. Pictured after a show in LA, 1966, are Chris Dreja, Keith Relf, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page and Jim McCarty with a smile for the cameras



15

PHOTO BY SVENSKA DAGBLADET/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



16

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

lads took American music back to where it had originated and reminded Americans that many of those originators were still alive and kicking.

But perhaps the most poignant part of the story is that of Jimi Hendrix. An obvious supreme talent who, had he never been 'discovered' playing a small club in New York in 1966, would still have been able to boast an impressive CV. He'd already played and toured with a veritable who's-who of American soul and rock 'n' roll stars such as Little Richard, The Isley Brothers, Ike and Tina Turner, Wilson Pickett, Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson, but he was yet still unnoticed for his genius and was always constantly broke financially.

When Chas Chandler, bassist from The Animals, saw him for the first time he couldn't believe that Hendrix hadn't been signed up for stardom. Recognising that the music scene in Britain that had been kickstarted by Jimi's predecessors might be the answer, he soon had him on a plane to London to find out.

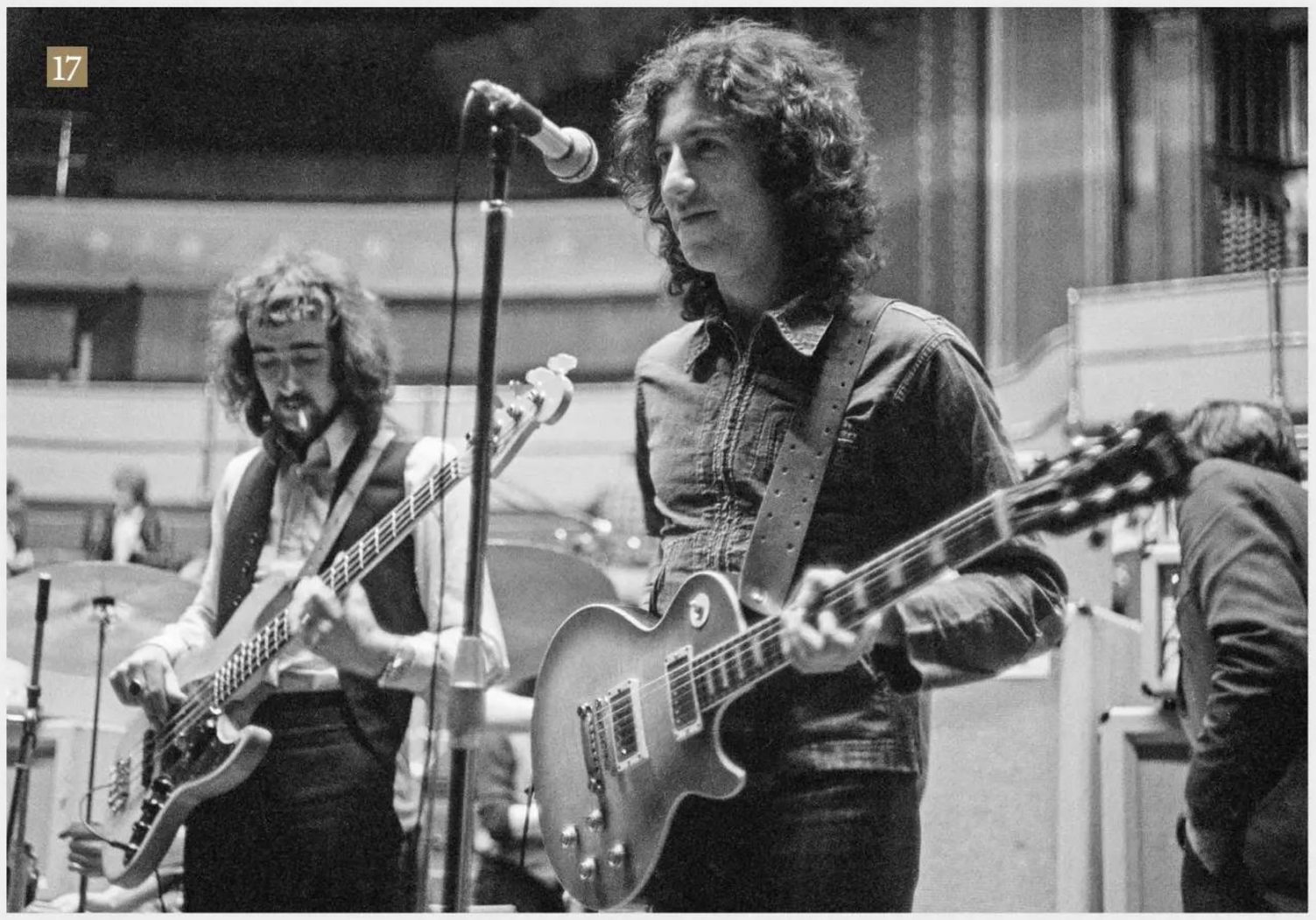


PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

***Jimi was hailed as a messiah by every blues and rock star. Here was a genuine, authentic blues musician of their generation!***

Within days Jimi was being hailed as a messiah by every blues and rock star that saw him play. Here, suddenly, was a genuine, authentic blues musician of their generation! The British Blues Boom had unwittingly created a space for this unknown American to find his voice. Jimi's arrival gave British music a shot of adrenaline that it wasn't primed for.

It would likely never have happened for Jimi Hendrix in his native country, yet within nine months he was back in the States as a superstar, leaving Americans wondering how they could have missed out on him before he'd left. It definitely wouldn't have happened for Jimi in the UK had the interlinking strands of traditional jazz, blues, skiffle and rock 'n' roll not created the perfect platform for him to ride in on. It was a scene that originated from an interest in folk blues and early jazz going back to the 1930s before crossing the Atlantic – constantly being fuelled by small groups of enthusiasts huddled around a 78rpm record player listening to whatever discs they could lay their hands upon.

As it gathered pace in pubs, clubs and dance halls, it was inevitable that the surviving pioneers would be sucked in eventually, where, from there, it took on a life of its own in the ensuing decade. A generation of young musicians were transfixed, and, without realising it at the time, forged a new music for the world – a music that was revolutionary and pioneering in its own right yet never lost its respect in those who had created it. G

**17.** Ex-Bluesbreakers Peter Green and bassist John McVie rehearsing with Fleetwood Mac at the Royal Albert Hall, 1969

**18.** Passing the torch: BB King jams with Eric Clapton and US blues musician Elvin Bishop in New York, 1967

**19.** Chas Chandler of the Animals saw the huge potential of Jimi Hendrix and invited him to London



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY JAN OLOFSSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Somewhere in life, you may have experienced something like the following: you struggle to get your head around something for years – say, a particular skill that eludes you – until one day an expert in that subject explains things in a new way that suddenly makes perfect sense. That person's unique take on a problem, combined with their experience, helps you leap forward several steps. And all you had to do was listen. At other times we gain strength from consulting a trusted mentor for exactly the opposite reason – they can tell us we are already on the right track and simply need to place more faith in our own instincts and abilities.

# MASTER

All of the above applies to the art of playing guitar and that's why we've brought together 57 top players, from Eric Johnson to Steve Cropper, to ask them what really makes a great guitarist? From the core skills every player should cultivate to the emotional and even spiritual connection we must each develop with the instrument, the pro players we consulted gave, without exception, thoughtful, useful and sometimes surprising answers to the question of how to become a better guitarist. We hope the lessons they have to impart over the following 14 pages help you grow as a musician and feel even closer to the core of what makes guitar such a special instrument.

JOE BONAMASS

JENNIFER BATT

STEVE LUKATHE

ANDY TIMMONS

NITA STRAUSS

DAMON JOHNSO

VINNIE MOORE

SERENA CHERR

ROCKY ATHAS

JAY JAY FRENCH

SA ERIC JOHNSON PHILIP SAYCE

EN KIRK FLETCHER STEVE SE

R MARTY FRIEDMAN BILL N SON

S STEVE HACKETT DUANE TTS

SAMANTHA FISH STEVE CR PER

# CLASS

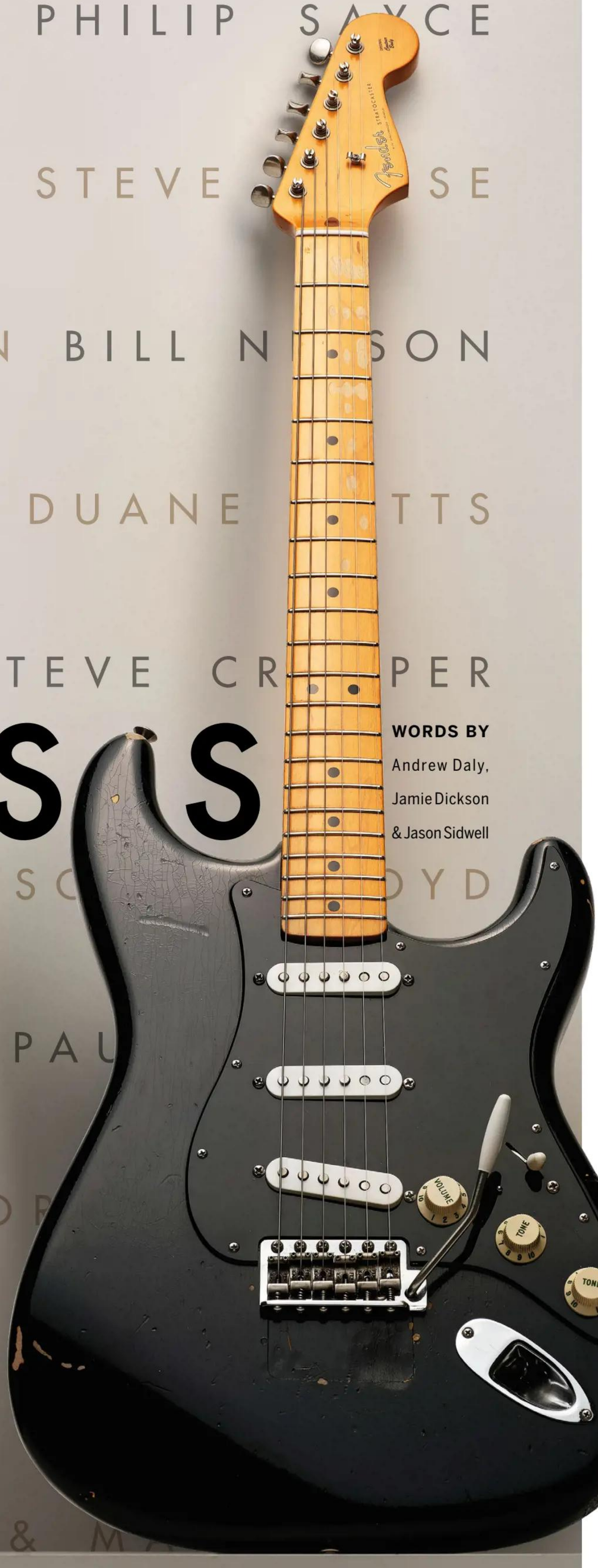
ON JESSE DAYTON SC DYD

YVETTE YOUNG PAU

Y ZAKK WYLDE OR

DEVON ALLMAN

H DAVID GILMOUR & M



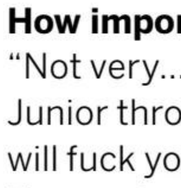

**WORDS BY**

Andrew Daly,
Jamie Dickson
& Jason Sidwell

*Guitarist* would like to thank Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath for the loan of this exceptional 2012 Fender Custom Shop David Gilmour Relic Stratocaster, which is for sale. For more information: www.vintageandrareguitars.com

## JOHN 5

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



"The positive experiences have taught me the joy and love that the instrument can bring to a person. When you're down or when you're sad or even when you're happy – just any kind of experience that you're going through, no matter what, for me, my guitar will always bring me love and excitement."

## DEVON ALLMAN

**What's your best tone tip?**



"Turn down. The volume and tone pots probably have 50 different flavours of tone within their spins."

**How important is gear?**

"Not very... However my '57 Les Paul Junior through my '66 Super Reverb will fuck you up! But I can also sound like me through cheap shit, too."

**What's your best advice for playing well with other musicians?**

"Listen and play within the cut, not on top."

## MICHAEL ASTLEY-BROWN

*(MAEBE)*

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"Confidence in their unique voice on the instrument. Play with conviction and you will sound 100 times better than someone who isn't sure of themselves, or playing a style they don't believe in."

**What negative experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"Battling long bouts of depression taught me how the guitar can be a way to process my darkest emotions and turn them into something positive. And if you're dealing with those thoughts while you're recording, channelling that into pure feeling – no matter how messy – can be more evocative than hitting the right notes."

## ROCKY ATHAS

**What's your best tip for banishing stage fright?**



"Two things. First, nothing replaces being prepared. Nothing. After that, the only way to rid yourself of stage fright is to perform in front of others every chance you get, so that it all becomes second nature. Perform in the living room in front of the family. I did that plenty at my parent's urging during every family holiday gathering. Perform at school, perform anywhere and everywhere you can.

"The experience helps you work out your fears and helps you learn how to handle little problems like broken strings, being out of tune because of the weather, etc. Because all those things *will* happen at the worst possible moment on stage. You need to experience the good, the bad and the ugly to prepare for professional life. Really, all of that just boils down to being prepared. So, I guess there is just one thing. Be prepared."



2



1

**1.** Getting top-flight gigs with artists such as Michael Jackson and Jeff Beck were validating moments for Jennifer Batten

**2.** Just a single pickup plus a volume and tone control can yield a world of tone – if you are prepared to invest the time to really use these under-utilised controls to the full

## JENNIFER BATTEN

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



"Being chosen by Michael Jackson and Jeff Beck was extremely validating. It's easy to get really frustrated with your progress because you always want to be at a certain level, and when you get to that level, you're always looking further up the road at the next level. It's endless. The realisation that you never really arrive anywhere and that music is an ongoing learning and expressive experience is powerful. Getting those gigs let me know I was doing something right.

"All you can really do is spend time with the instrument and never stop working on it. I think the dedication magnetises new experiences in ways you can never anticipate."

**How important is gear?**

"Gear is important to the point where you shouldn't really have to struggle. If you have a guitar with extremely high action and heavy strings, that's going to be a struggle. There's no need for that and decent gear isn't that expensive. I buy quite a bit of used gear, too, so it's even cheaper. David Sanborn once had a TV show in the late 80s. The band received a letter from somebody saying they only sounded good

DEVON ALLMAN PHOTO BY REINER HERBOLD COURTESY OF DEVON ALLMAN / MICHAEL ASTLEY-BROWN PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS / ROCKY ATHAS PHOTO BY DAVID WOLFF–PATRICK/REDFERNS / JENNIFER BATTEN PHOTO BY PHIL DENT/REDFERNS/GETTY

because they were rich and had the best gear. So the next week they all showed up with the worst gear you could possibly have including a plastic saxophone and toy piano, etc – search 'Night Music Playing Toy Electronic Instruments' on YouTube. They sounded as good as ever, which proved the ultimate point: it's the player, not the gear."

## MICHAEL ANGELO BATIO

**How important is theory to your playing – and what is its main value, in your view?**



"I have a degree in Music Theory and Composition from Northeastern University. The university degree doesn't make me a better musician or smarter than anyone else; it says that I finish things. The main objective was to learn as much as I can and to *finish* school. Music theory is second nature to me. However, I don't think you need music theory to be a great musician or composer, but I feel the strength of knowing about music gives you the opportunity to analyse a piece of music and understand it immediately. My saying regarding knowing theory is that if a person is truly musical and has something to say, they will find a way to say it: 'Musical people find a way to make music.'"

**What's your best tone tip?**

"Tone is very much in your fingers and what your mind tells them to play, but modern equipment can give an average player a very good sound. The thing it can't give you is uniqueness and your own style."

## SHAUN BAXTER

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



"I remember getting asked to go 'head-to-head' with a world-renowned and very technically advanced player. Instead of getting into an arms race in front of a live audience, I simply focused on playing with beauty. This took all the pressure off me and forced me to focus on what was musically relevant. I still ended up playing lots of notes – because that's often what I hear in my head – but it was an approach that guaranteed that there was a reason behind every one of them."

**"Play with conviction and you will sound 100 times better than someone who isn't sure of themselves"**

MICHAEL ASTLEY-BROWN

SHAUN BAXTER PHOTO PRESS IMAGE / JIMI HENDRIX PHOTO BY HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

**Hendrix always managed to surrender himself completely to the act of making music – but simply playing with commitment will help you sound great**

## DUANE BETTS

**What's your practice routine?**



"I love to play acoustic guitar in the morning after coffee. It's great not only for practising, but it centres me and doesn't let my mind drift into unnecessary thoughts and worry."

**Have you ever encountered a barrier in your playing you wanted to overcome but couldn't – and what did you do about it?**

"I've done acoustic jams with bluegrass musicians and I have always loved those players, but trying to keep up with them is another issue. Sometimes it's just best to admire what other players do. We all have our strengths."

## JOE BONAMASSA

**What's your best tip for learning new material quickly and effectively?**



"I like to write it down first. Play and sing it while reading it then take the paper away. Step and repeat until you know it."

**What negative experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"You learn the most when the gig goes to shit. You learn how to be a showman, an entertainer and to play, sing and smile your way out of trouble. There is always tomorrow."

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

"I realised very quickly that no matter what you do, it probably has been done before. So smile and enjoy the music. Your style will develop in time."

**"No matter what you do, it probably has been done before – so smile and enjoy the music"**

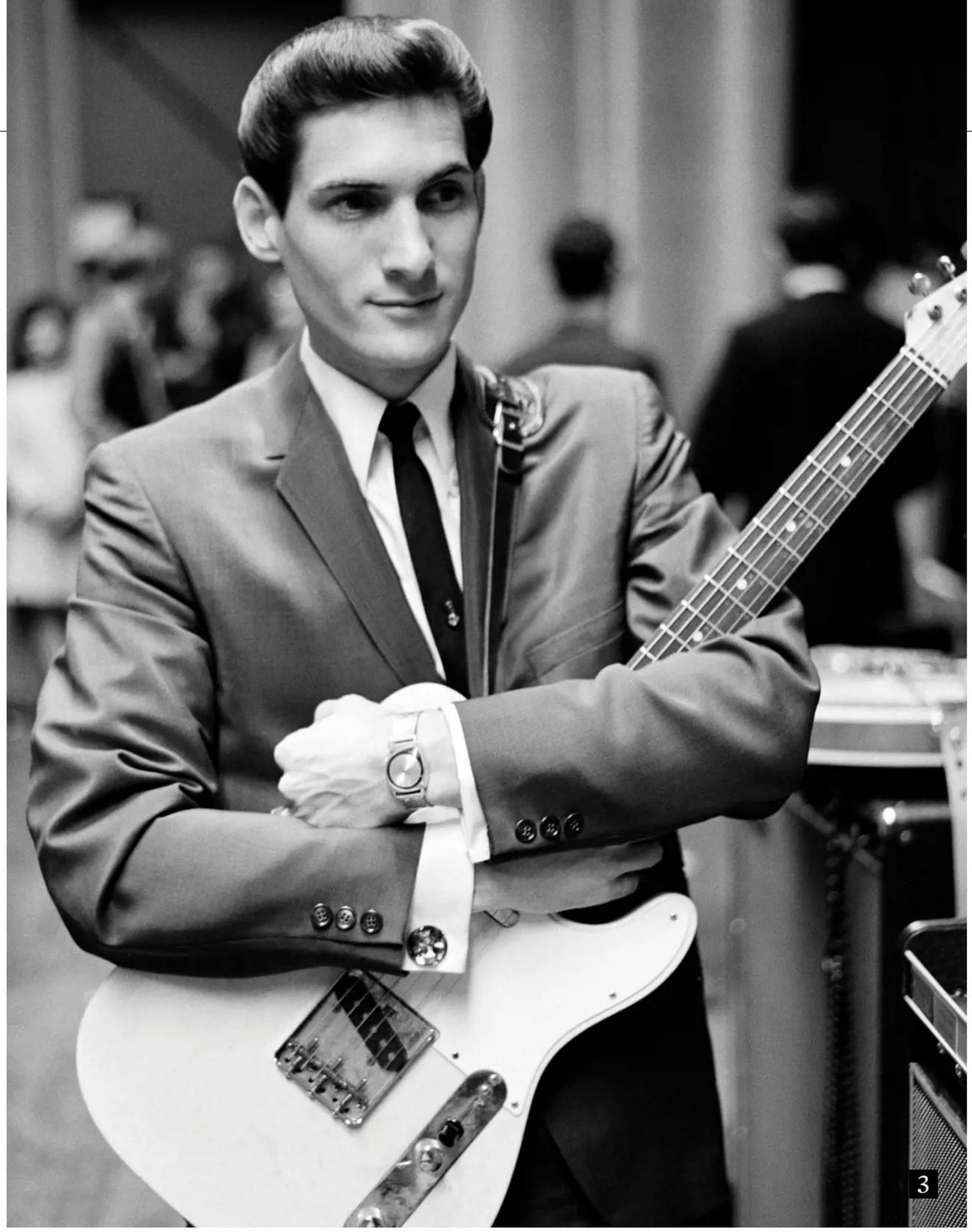
JOE BONAMASSA

## NILI BROSH

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"That it's all a lifelong journey, that it's a marathon and not a sprint. I've always been an impatient person, and when I was younger I thought I had to 'accept the limitations' of what I thought my weaknesses were. It didn't dawn on me that I have my whole life to continue learning and improving, and that music is so vast it becomes a lifelong journey for everyone."



**3.** Steve Cropper pictured in 1967 during his time with Booker T & The MG's. Steve says the small but toneful Fender Vibro Champ was his secret weapon in the recording studio

**If you could be more like any one guitarist, alive or dead, who would it be and why?**

"EVH! Speaking of confidence, never 'playing it safe', a plethora of spontaneity and improv moments out of nowhere, all while smiling and being effortlessly cool. Who wouldn't wanna be more like Ed?"

## SERENA CHERRY *(Svalbard)*

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"That playing music is not a competitive sport, you don't need to compare yourself to other guitarists – just create what feels right to you."

## STEVE CROPPER

**What's your best tone tip?**



"For the *Under A Bad Sign* session, I used my Fender Vibro Champ. I remember wanting to cry because I needed an amp that was warm but louder [laughs]. And to this day, I still have one of those 60s Vibro Champs in my garage. Everybody loves it. You just plug into it, and it's always ready to go until you turn it off."

## JESSE DAYTON

**What's your best advice for playing well with other musicians?**



"Not being married to small things. Don't die on that musical hill if it's just not working. Be able to bob and weave and change. It doesn't matter who comes up with the best idea, it matters that you're giving the song what it needs. Stay open to new ideas."

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"Probably the most positive

DON PAULSEN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES / JESSE DAYTON PHOTO BY DANIEL SANDA

DUANE BETTS PHOTO BY DAVE VANN / NILI BROSH PHOTO BY @VEHGUS / SERENA CHERRY PHOTO COURTESY OF SERENA CHERRY / STEVE CROPPER PHOTO BY DON PA

experience that guitar playing taught me was watching how music brings people together. Playing for a crowd that's all in for the band and the show feels like the most positive thing ever."

## SADIE DUPUIS *(SPEEDY ORTIZ)*

**What's your best tip for learning new material quickly and effectively?**



"Drill, drill, drill! Once I've got a general handle on the parts, I'll play them while I'm doing something else distracting – watching TV or a movie, for example, or even sitting outside unamplified if the weather calls for it. I find that practising through diversions helps the parts develop more innately than if I spent all my learning time solely fixating on guitar."

## TOMMY EMMANUEL

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"I had a lot of breakthroughs when I started to hear myself recorded. I heard that I needed to work on my time, my tone and not overplay all the time. Hearing my bad habits forced me to be a better listener and a better team player."

**What negative experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"I think that being embarrassed by my lack of knowledge and experience in the company of better players helped push me into humility and hard work. I opened my mind, my heart and my eyes and left my judgments behind. I haven't looked back since! A musician's first job is to listen!"

## SAMANTHA FISH

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"I remember being in the studio with Luther Dickinson when we were working on my *Wild Heart* record. I was recording a solo and didn't have much direction for it, so I was just swinging in the dark. He gave me this really simple piece of advice that has helped to shape my approach since. Start with a simple melody, something people can sing, and build from there. Random riffs and flashy shit don't really speak to the soul. The memorable moments are built off of strong melodies, and sometimes it's so easy that we miss it entirely. Reinforce the hook or create one when you have the opportunity."

**What negative experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"Gear failure is always a great teacher because the gear will fail from time to time. I've been on stage when the pedalboard dies, the amp dies, a pickup in the guitar fails – you don't have time to diagnose and fix it, but the show must go on. The power comes from your hands, and having confidence in your ability to carry the show without the comforts of your gear."

## JASON FALKNER *(BECK)*

**What's your best advice for playing well with other musicians?**

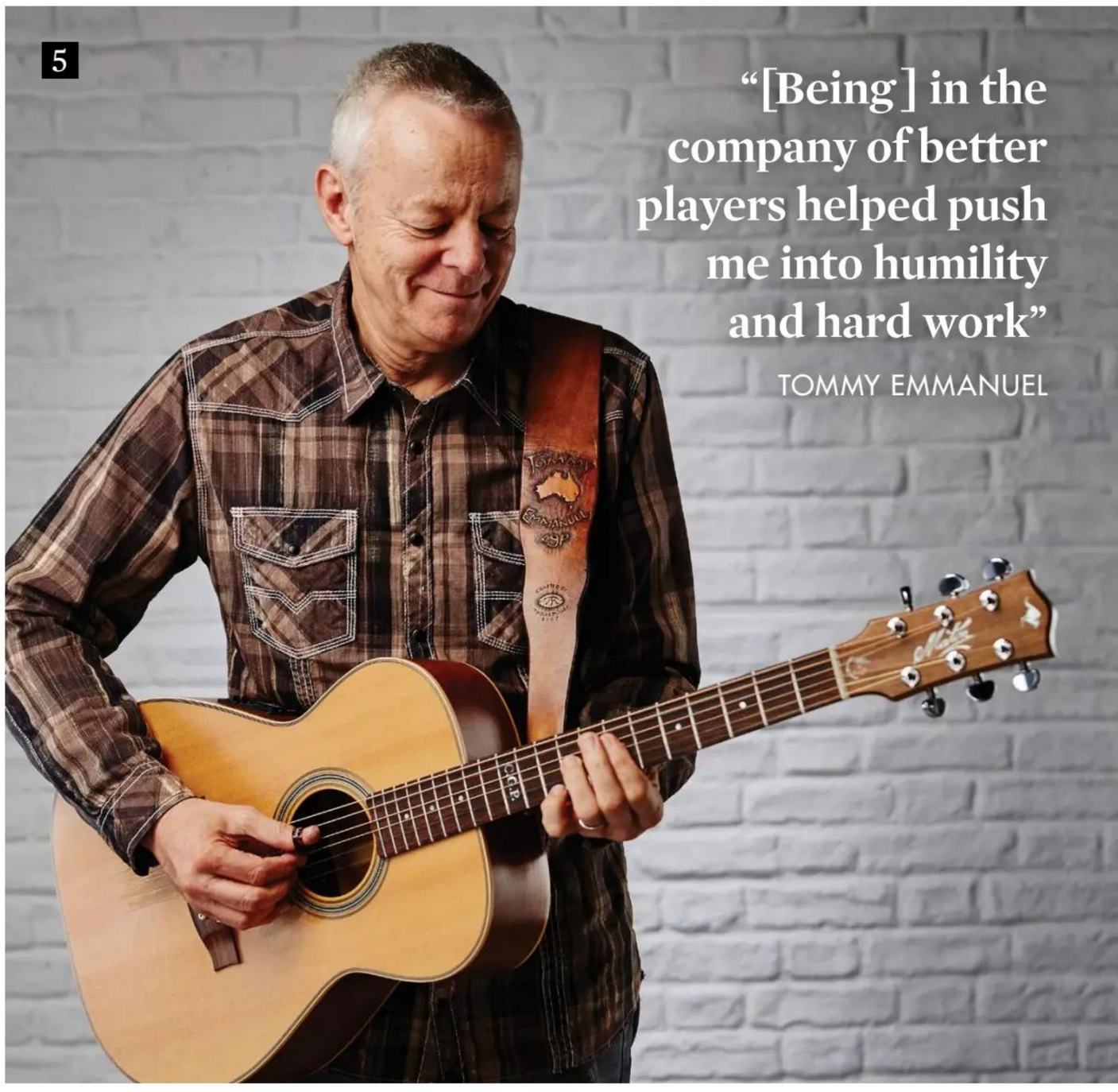


"Listening but also being confident enough in what you're doing that you're not waiting for musical instruction from what others are playing. It's like standing your ground but also being hyper-aware of what's going on around you."

**4.** Blues-rock maven Samantha Fish says that building licks around small chunks of memorable melody is the key to playing really effective solos

**5.** Tommy Emmanuel says that listening back to recordings of your own playing is a powerful way to develop technique






SADIE DUPUIS PHOTO BY ZACHARY DE GUZMAN / JASON FALKNER PHOTO BY RICK KERN/GETTY

**A great guitar player is ...**
"Someone who knows when to shine and when to serve the song and support."

## STEVE FARRIS *(MR MISTER)*

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"Not sure it helped me grow, but certainly survive... Trying to make it in a place like LA, once you accepted the idea that at least nine out of 10 great things that are 'supposed to happen' won't, you no longer give a shit about every disappointment, audition failed or that time you bombed when sitting in. But until you do all that, you don't get to cross the finish line, ie, make it! After that, you just take all setbacks as part of 'getting there'. I've told this to many people. Great survival tool."

## KIRK FLETCHER

**How important is gear?**



"I'm a guitar-first guy. I literally can't play a guitar that is set up weirdly, has little frets, or something. Heck, plug me into the PA; I'll make it work [laughs]!"

## BRIAN FORSYTHE *(KIX)*

**What's your best tone tip?**



"Guitar – straight into the amp. No pedals. Crank it."




**6.** Marty Friedman says there are 'no locks on the fretboard'. The best way to familiarise yourself? Play – a lot

**"Over time, the more you play to people and the larger the crowd, the more you get used to it"** JAY JAY FRENCH

## JAY JAY FRENCH

*(TWISTED SISTER)*

**What's your best tone tip?**



"This is so subjective. The guitar mags will try to convince you that a certain guitar, amp or pedal will get you where you wanna go. This is true to a degree, but understanding who you are and knowing that it's what is in your head and fingers – that's where the truth lies. Trust me. All the greats will sound like themselves regardless of what gear they play through."

**What's your best tip for banishing stage fright?**

"Over time, the more you play to people and the larger the crowd, the more you get used to it. By the end of our touring years – in 2016 – we played in front of an average of 40,000 people per show up to 110,000. By then it was just another gig. I could be sleeping 30 minutes prior, get up, go on stage and play for two hours then go to my hotel, check the baseball scores of my favourite teams and go to sleep."

## MARTY FRIEDMAN

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"Unless you are regularly playing classical music with orchestras, practice at home is the very least effective, lowest priority thing to do as a musician. One show – and its accompanying prep (rehearsals, soundchecks, song choosing, song arranging, promotion, staging and performance, etc) – will do more for you as a musician than hundreds of hours of practice at home. That will turbocharge your abilities. In other words, you get good at what you do. If you practise at home a lot you will get better at practising at home. If you play out a lot, you will get better at playing out."

**What's your best tip for understanding/unlocking the fretboard?**

"There are no locks on the fretboard. If you play long enough, you will know where everything is, I guarantee it. Stop looking for shortcuts. Just play. A lot. Learn from anybody and everybody."

**What's your best tip for banishing stage fright?**

"Remember the show is not about *you*; it is about the people who came

STEVE FARRIS PHOTO PRESS IMAGE / BRIAN FORSYTHE PHOTO BY JASON SQUIRES/GETTY




7. Paul Gilbert advises players to learn to play vocal melodies – the voice is unbound by scales or positional patterns so following what it does on guitar can be liberating

BRETT GARSED PHOTO BY TIBBY FLORA / PAUL GILBERT PHOTO BY SAM GEHRKE / TRACII GUNS PHOTO BY JOE SCHAEFFER PHOTOGRAPHY

DAVID GILMOUR PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

to see you. It’s their night. They are already in a forgiving mood. Unless you have a train wreck, no-one will notice your mistakes. And if you think you might make mistakes, it just means you aren’t even close to being prepared. Overprepare and stage fright goes away.”

**How important is gear?**
“Can’t play without it.”

## BRETT GARSED

**What’s your best tip for understanding/unlocking the fretboard?**



“I personally work on intervals, rather than shapes or patterns. This doesn’t mean I don’t use shapes or patterns, of course, but the shapes and patterns have a sound to them that I can hear as well as see. If I’m playing a note on the fifth string and the next note I want to hear is a minor 3rd, I know I can either go up three frets or over to the fourth string and down two frets. I navigate the fretboard by sound using this method, so I feel like it gives me a lot of freedom and I never get ‘stuck in a box’, so to speak.”

## PAUL GILBERT

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



“Being fluent enough with guitar so you have enough mental space left to listen to the drummer. Listening to the drummer solves nearly every problem.”

**What’s your best tip for understanding/unlocking the fretboard?**
“Learn vocal melodies. Practising scales up and down will sound like scales going up and down. Learn the vocal melody to *I Will* by The Beatles. With the exception of one note, the entire melody stays in the F major scale. It’s beautiful.”

## DAVID GILMOUR

**What’s your best tone tip?**



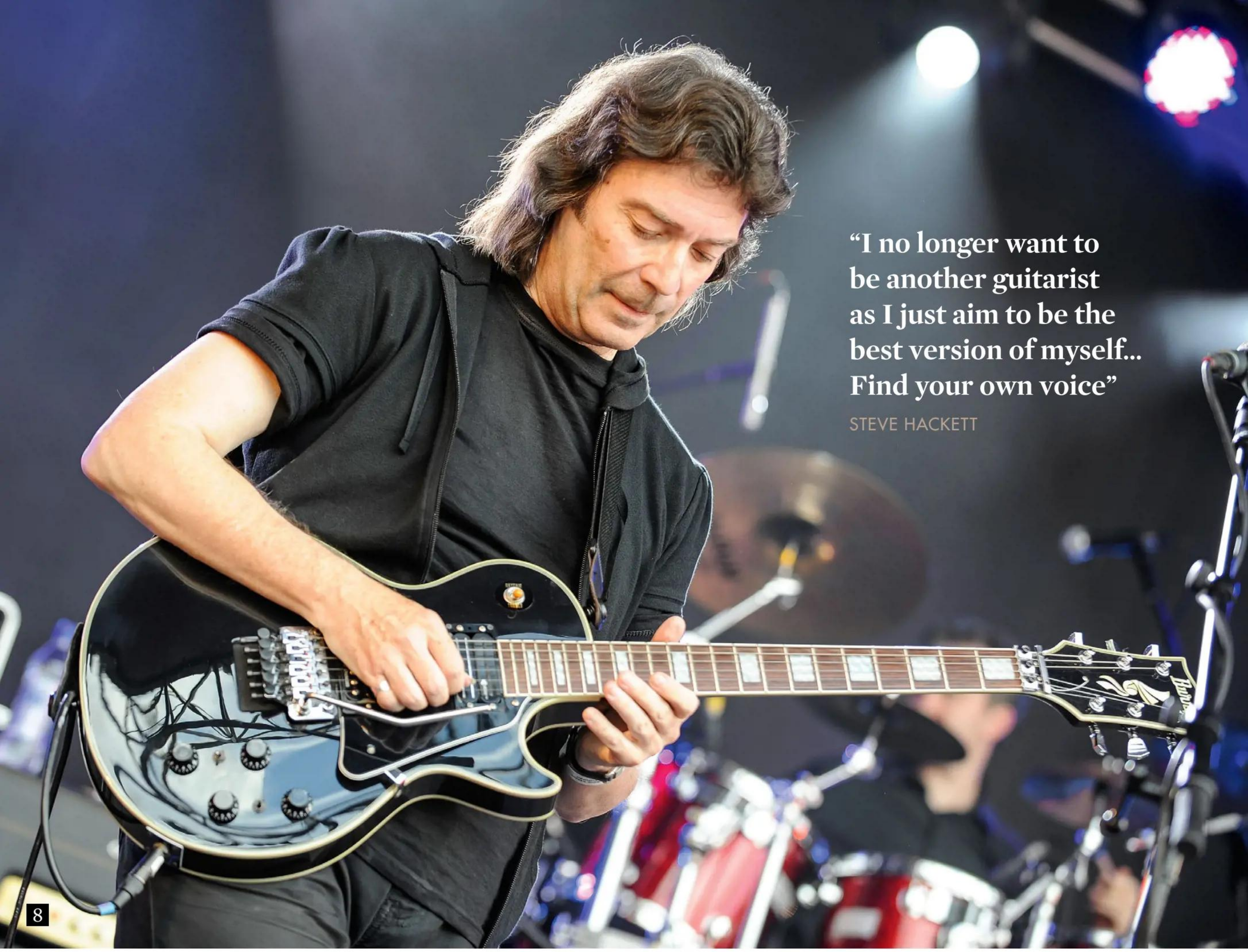
“I do unrepentantly like the old [guitars]. Older instruments have a tonality of their own that often takes years to develop. But these things go in waves... Luckily, I know the periods of guitar and the types of guitar that I like. You just need to look in the right places.”

## TRACII GUNS *(LA GUNS)*

**What’s your best tone tip?**



“Tone is what makes the player comfortable. You’re gonna play at your best when your sound is most comfortable to your hands, your body and your nervous system. For me, that’d be a Telecaster or Les Paul through a great-sounding Marshall – for example, a perfectly tuned 80s JMP Marshall has a way of reacting to a humbucker or single-coil pickups that’s very expressive and dynamic. And then




8

what adds that extra layer of comfort is the Boss SD-1 distortion pedal: it gives me that forgiving kind of sustain that makes me feel confident in my playing.”

## STEVE HACKETT

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



“Skills can be acquired. Every finger dance becomes a skill turned into muscle memory, but the thing that cannot be acquired is passion for the medium itself. Either you want it so bad or you don’t. Nureyev had to dance, even though his father tried to beat it out of him. A teacher hit Gary Moore on the head for even thinking about a big red guitar. But in both cases, passion met brilliance.”

**What’s your best tip for banishing stage fright?**

“Phil Collins once said that enjoying playing was more important than fearing it. Enjoyment is the most powerful weapon against fear.”

**If you could be more like any one guitarist, alive or dead, who would it be and why?**

“I no longer want to be another guitarist as I just aim to be the best version of myself. It is important to find your own voice.”

## PHIL HILBORNE

**What’s your best tip for learning new material quickly and effectively?**



“I know it might seem obvious, but one of the best ways of learning new material is simply to listen to it a lot before even attempting to play it. I think ingraining the structure and phrasing is a lot easier if you do it this way. Too many people just grab their guitars and dive in and try to play the material too soon.”

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

“The realisation that it’s all in the details – often the smallest of these make such a big difference. Particularly with regards to timing, feel, groove as well as the finer points of dynamic control, intonation and overall band interplay.”

**8.** Steve Hackett urges players to connect with the enjoyment of playing live, even if you feel butterflies before stepping on stage – or perhaps especially then

## CHRISTONE ‘KINGFISH’ INGRAM

**What negative experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



“Sometimes the road can be tough. Sometimes this whole industry can be tough. But when you get yourself up and out there it can be very beautiful.”

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**

“As simple as the scale is, pentatonic ideas are always the best way to reach an audience. Those tend to be the notes they feel even if they don’t even know why... The secret to pentatonic playing is finding as many licks as you can. You have to be inventive so it doesn’t sound like a scale.”

## DAMON JOHNSON

*(BROTHER CANE/LYNYRD SKYNYRD)*

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



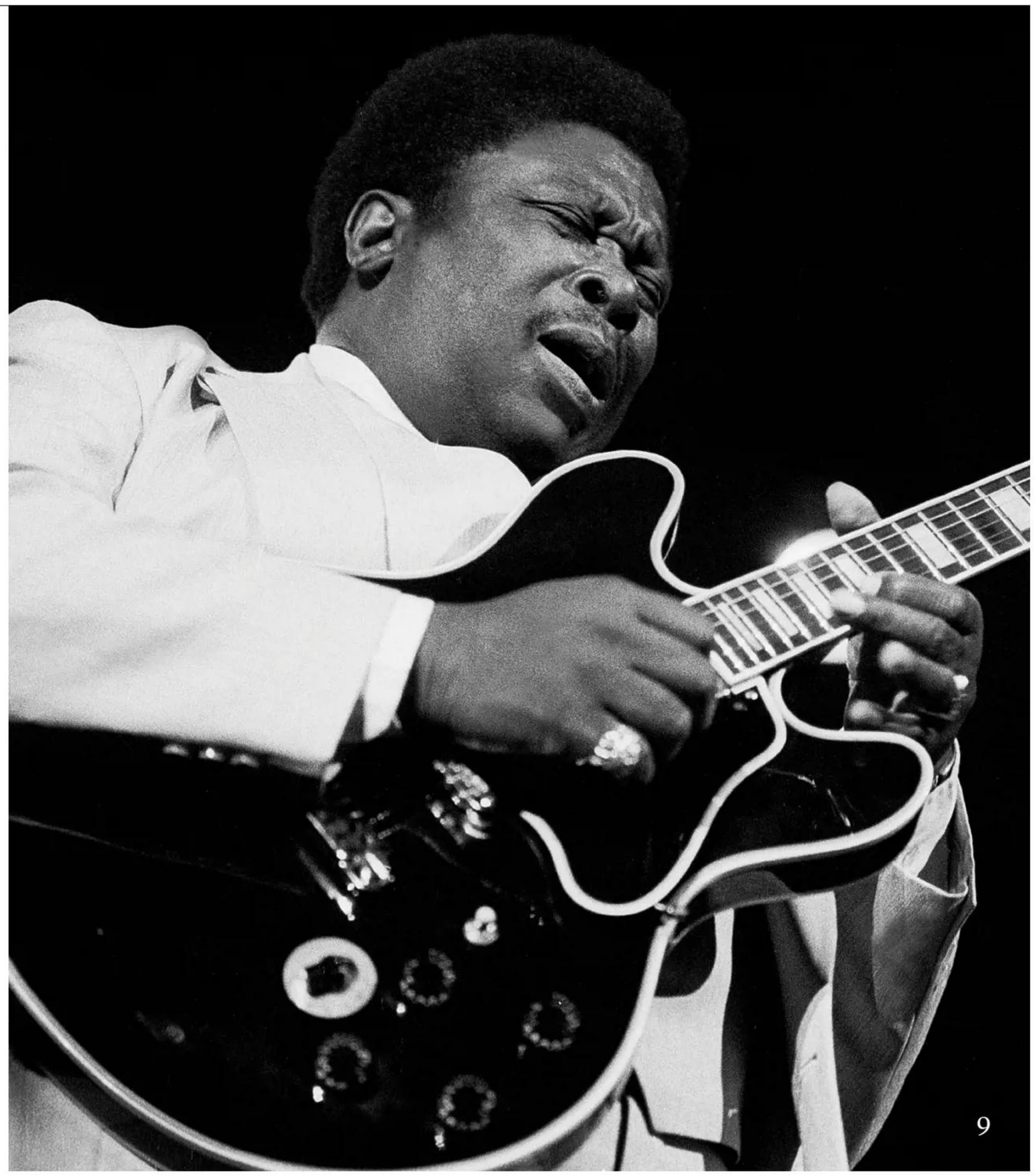
"For me, it comes back to that issue of tone. In 1990 a friend guided me to ordering a modified '72 100-watt Marshall Super Lead head that had been worked on by the late great Frank Levy. Spending $1,000 back then would be like spending $10,000 now, but it was worth every penny. That amp quite literally changed my life, as I had just put Brother Cane together and used that amp on stage and in the studio for our first album, and I still have it with me today. The compliments and encouragement I got from everyone around me about the sound of that amp was rocket fuel for my confidence."

## ERIC JOHNSON

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"One of the most important realisations I had as a player was to work on not living in my head too much when I play. Entertaining the potential of how you could sound in your head is sometimes romancing the reality. In other words, if you're honest about your playing and take a real look at it, you can take the responsibility to improve your playing. The more you manifest into reality the dream romance of how you want to sound in your head, the more you can let go of all of that and just play from your heart."



**9.** BB King, pictured here on stage in 1980, was the very epitome of 'taking your time' to express the music with full intensity and expressiveness

**"This whole industry can be tough. But when you get yourself up and out there it can be very beautiful"** CHRISTONE 'KINGFISH' INGRAM

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**

"A valuable skill for a guitarist is to be able to honestly review their playing and work on all the aspects of improving their technique, so that when it comes time for the music you can forget about technique and just play."

## ANDY LAROQUE

*(KING DIAMOND)*

**Have you ever encountered a barrier in your playing you wanted to overcome but couldn't – and what did you do about it?**



"Yes, but when you realise you can't play a certain part exactly as you want, that's when you create your own unique style. Although if I went back now to check some of my favourite players, I'd probably manage to play their stuff better than I did when I was 18!"

## BILL LAVERTY *(FIREHOUSE)*

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"Playing in time is more important than playing the 'right' notes. I'll always be a student working on my rhythm playing – and lead playing – to be more in the pocket. I want my playing to sound effortless without speeding up or slowing down."

## TIM LERCH

**What's your best tip for learning new material quickly and effectively?**



"'Quickly' is usually not effective. Take small bites, chew them well. Once you've learned a phrase very carefully without mistakes, do the repetitions necessary to make it yours. Don't try to do too much too soon!"

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

"Always remember why you wanted to play in the first place. Don't let egoic machinations steal your joy."

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"I was at a blues jam with some very seasoned older players in my early days. When I somewhat frantically launched into my big solo, a sax player leaned over and said, 'Take your time, son.' I'm still trying to follow that very helpful advice."

DAMON JOHNSON PHOTO BY STEPHEN JENSEN, F3 STUDIOS / ANDY LAROQUE PHOTO BY DANIEL BOCZARSKI/GETTY / BILL LAVERTY PHOTO BY RALPH ARVESEN COURTESY OF BILL LEVERTY / BB KING PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES / TIM LERCH PHOTO PRESS IMAGE

## SOPHIE LLOYD

**What's your best advice for playing well with other musicians?**



"Interact with everyone around you. So many people stand there in their own bubble not looking up from their instrument for a second. You want to be making eye contact with everyone around you, smiling and rocking out with them – look for cues from others and have fun."

## KIKO LOUREIRO

*(MEGADETH)*

**What do you know about guitar now that you wish you had known when you were starting out?**



"Being creative, writing songs and solos is for everyone. We all have that, we just need to access it. In the beginning, though, I needed to learn everything before trying to create my music."

**What's your best tip for learning new material quickly and effectively?**

"If it's a song, I prefer to listen to it a lot before even trying to play it. Then I learn the rhythm parts and structure, and move on to the solos, isolating the difficult licks and making exercises out of them."

## STEVE LUKATHER

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



"Well, competition was fierce growing up as there was nothing to do but play music or sports and I sucked at sports, so music became my best friend and I found other kids that could play good – it was the 60s and rock music was not that difficult then.

"I learned the solo for the song *Gloria* by Them as a small kid and people thought I was some child genius. Thank you, Jimmy Page. That was the first Page solo of many I learned and loved. We all hung out and played as kids in the local neighbourhoods, practised together and grew musically together and hung out and listened to the latest records... It's all I ever cared about as a kid. It's all I ever wanted to do and all I was any good at."

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

"Time and groove are everything. Vibrato, which is one's thumbprint, is also something to work on. It comes natural after a while – but be patient."

## STEVE LYNCH *(AUTOGRAPH)*

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"I believe the most important and useful skill is being yourself. By that, I mean create something that is *you*. Having good technique and knowing your theory is important, but what's key is to have an original sound. If you reflect on the most respected guitarists throughout history you'll find that, above all else, they have a specific sound and style that defines them."

**"Be yourself. The most respected guitarists throughout history have a specific sound and style that defines them"** STEVE LYNCH

## ALEX MASI

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"There were at least a couple – realising that in order for anything to sound musical it had to be played with a certain amount of authority. Even the simplest thing can turn into an important musical statement if played by projecting out each single note while still paying attention to dynamics."

## VINNIE MOORE

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"I think that developing your ear is at the top of the list for any musician. When I had been playing for about a year, my guitar teacher asked me to go home and figure out the chord changes to Van Halen's *Ice Cream Man*. I thought that I had nailed it, but when I played it for him I learned that a lot of it was wrong. At that point I hadn't developed my ear. So I began frequently listening to songs and trying to figure out the chord progressions. The more I tried, the better my ear got. Soon I was listening to and figuring out solos. Writing songs or improvising all starts with your ear. It is one of the most fundamental and essential things you need to be a good musician."



**10.** For many players we spoke to, Eddie Van Halen embodied all the important virtues a guitarist should have – superb groove yet also blistering licks and an irrepressible joy in playing

SOPHIE LLOYD PHOTO PRESS IMAGE / KIKO LOUREIRO PHOTO BY ISTVAN BRUGGEN PHOTOGRAPHY / STEVE LYNCH PHOTO BY SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY / ALEXI MASI PHOTO COURTESY OF ERNIE BALL / EDDIE VAN HALEN PHOTO BY ROSS MARINO/GETTY

## STEVE MORSE

**What's your best tone tip?**



"Muting the strings you're not playing. For instance, playing slide guitar becomes easy if you use all your right-hand fingers to block the strings you don't want to hear because the slide creates extraneous noise as you move it around. Or on high-gain distorted sounds, holding every other string still gives you the opportunity to play a clean, lyrical single voice part while using an awkwardly high-gain setting otherwise."

**How important is gear?**

"Gear is a tool. You go in a garage with master mechanics and they will have different tools and joke with each other about the ones that came from a lower-priced tool store. But they know what each one works best for, and they make miracles with them if they're really masters. Same with gear. It's a tool – and if you know what it will work for musically, and how to master the choices it gives you, well, you've got some great tools. Still, the art is picking the right tool for the job and having the feel in your hands along with the knowledge to not over- or under-torque a part."

## BILL NELSON

**What's your best tip for understanding/unlocking the fretboard?**



"Not sure I've ever unlocked it, though it's been fun trying to pick the lock! I never had guitar lessons, nor absorbed much music theory; I play entirely by ear and instinct. Don't be afraid to take risks, you learn by making mistakes. Eventually, you will get to the point where you and the instrument are one and the barriers will fall away to some degree."

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

"One realisation was when the input volume on my Watkins Copicat tape echo unit was accidentally turned up too high – this was back in the early 60s. The resulting feedback and sustain was like a light bulb being switched on. The sound

Bill Nelson's well-loved and much-played 1963 ES-345 – he says he's still unlocking the secrets of the fretboard every day, after years of playing

**"I play entirely by ear and by instinct. Don't be afraid to take risks – you learn by making mistakes"**

BILL NELSON




**11.** Malcolm Young of AC/DC was everything a great rhythm player should be – rock-solid in the groove, tireless and the engine behind AC/DC's biggest hits

became violin-like, rather than a percussive twang! The covers band I was playing in at the time threw me out for being a noisy hooligan!"

## ORIANTHI

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"Be inventive – learn from the greats then find your own fingerprint. And don't think too much! That gets in the way of not only having a good time but taking the audience on a journey with you. Go on a feeling, always."

## JACKIE PARRY *(DIANTHUS)*

**What's your best tone tip?**



"Balance with any frequency is key. No matter the genre, always aim for a tone that isn't too harsh or shrill. At the same time, though, you don't want a tone that is muddy or easily lost in a live setting. I remember back in the day when I was new at playing live, I would crank up the bass dial on my amp. I wanted to sound so heavy! This only dirtied up my tone and I couldn't cut through my sister [Jessica]'s drumming. After many years of playing live and watching footage back, I've learned it is so important to embrace the higher frequencies that a guitar should have in the mix. If you can understand this, your bass player will love you forever, too!"

## CHRIS POLAND *(MEGADETH)*

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"There are a few, but if we are talking about soloing I would say phrasing. I feel it is the thing that keeps the listener interested. Phrasing helps bring a theme to a solo. Jeff Beck had genius phrasing, and Eric Clapton's take on soloing has always stuck with me. Always try to have a beginning, a middle and an ending to a solo."

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**

"How beautiful music really is and how it has so much power. Music is soul food. Music is healing. I could go on, but I think everyone agrees music has gotten them through the best and worst times of their lives. It's spiritual. There – I said it!"

## ANA POPOVIC

**What's your best tone tip?**



"Fender Strat single-coil pickups – Alnico V – matched with Mesa/Boogie Mark IV medium distortion channel, used simultaneously with the Fender Super Reverb '65 [black-panel], via an A/B box."

**A great guitar player is ...**

"Humble. They have put in enough work and years in their craft to know that you shouldn't take pleasure in bashing other people's work."

## RYAN ROXIE

*(ALICE COOPER / SLASH'S SNAKEPIT)*

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"The skill to play solid rhythm guitar always takes the back seat to playing lead and I don't know why. Without Malcolm there wouldn't be Angus, or at least not the Angus we all know. Learning rhythm guitar will actually help you become a better lead player as it will lock you in more with the 'rhythm section' aka bass and drums. Wanna get popular on YouTube? Play mind-blowing solos and post 'em up. Wanna get employed with a touring band? Play mind-blowing rhythm parts as well as solos that ultimately lift the song that becomes popular on all musical platforms, including YouTube!"

**Which guitarist has most impressed you and why?**

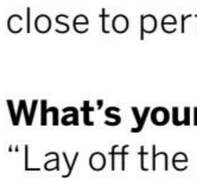
"Brian May pound for pound is one of the most important guitarists I know. Style, tone, image and, most importantly, songs. One only has to listen to Queens's 1977 *News Of The World* to hear just how many different styles of guitar you can record on one record. Classical, punk, blues, Spanish... it's got it all! Plus the guy *still* looks like a rockstar when he hits the stage. Absolutely love and respect that guy!"

**"Be inventive – learn from the greats then find your own fingerprint. And don't think too much! It gets in the way..."** ORIANTHI

ORIANTHI PHOTO BY KEVIN WINTER / JACKIE PARRY PHOTO BY JACK LUE / MALCOLM YOUNG PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

## BLUES SARACENO

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"To really try to achieve your absolute best you had to be willing to fail miserably. No half measures. The problem with swinging for the fences is that the numbers aren't in your favour – but when it does happen, it's totally worth it."

**What record by another artist taught you the most about what matters in music?**

"I would listen to early Bob Dylan records and would think about how imperfectly perfect they really were – also the real early blues albums by various artists. My favourite art has never been even remotely close to perfect."

**What's your best tone tip?**

"Lay off the preamp gain... You're welcome."

**"Music is soul food. It's healing. I think everyone agrees music has gotten them through the best and worst times"** CHRIS POLAND

## PHILIP SAYCE

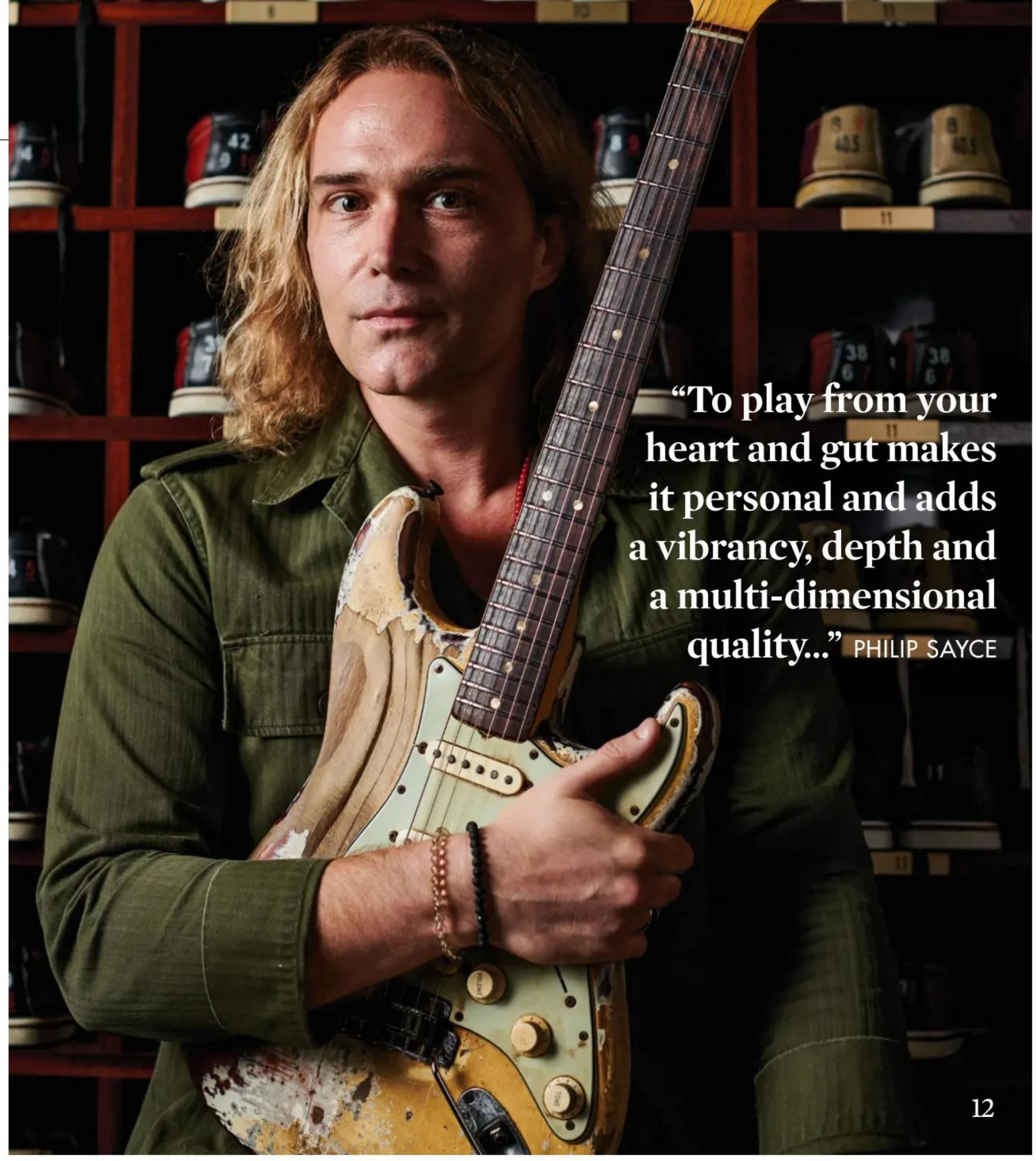
**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"Connection to emotions. To play from your heart and gut makes it personal and adds a vibrancy, depth and a multi-dimensional quality to one's music. Even just one note from deep within your soul can shake the world."

**What's your best tip for banishing stage fright?**

"To focus on gratitude. To understand that playing music is a privilege. To have the opportunity to connect with other people through the power and spirit of music is an incredible gift. To be grateful to all of the musicians that have come before me for their influence and their beautiful music, which has turned me on for my entire life. To be thankful to all the people in my life who support me as a musician during my lifetime, and to play my ass off for them in every moment at every opportunity. To understand that we are all equals and whatever each of us has to say musically is valid and important. To open my heart and mind to receive guidance and inspiration through the language of music from my higher power."




**12.** A sense of gratitude and connection to one's emotions is key to being an effective and authentic performer, says Philip Sayce

## JEFF SCHROEDER

*(SMASHING PUMPKINS)*

**What do you know about guitar now that you wished you'd known when you were starting out?**



"Clichés can be difficult because we have a tendency to gloss over them. That being said, the phrase 'tone starts in the hands' is something I wish I understood better when I was younger. In an era where we are continually inundated with what I would call a false need or desire for the latest gear, it is easy to slip into a mentality that getting a new guitar, pedal or amp is necessary to improve your playing and/or sound. It can help, especially if the gear you're using provides challenges. However, I've found over the years that it isn't as important as we often think it is."

## ALEX SKOLNICK

**How important is theory to your playing – and what is its main value, in your view?**



"Theory is very important as a tool of mental organisation. I'm also very respectful of players who just play by ear and don't have a use for it. I thought I was going to be that type of player, but when I got the bug for jazz guitar and high-level improv, I realised I needed to grasp theory. I remember seeing pages of scales and modes and just feeling baffled and having no intention to ever learn them, yet that completely turned around once I was able to make the connection between those concepts and sounds I was hearing that I liked."

**What things make you cringe/do you dislike when you hear other guitarists do them?**

"My biggest pet peeve with other guitarists is uncontrolled vibrato. I often compare vibrato on the guitar to vibrato on the voice. A note needs to be sustained for a moment before any vibrato is incorporated. This is how it is done with most singers, unless we're talking about Jello Biafra from the Dead Kennedys. On guitar it just sounds

BLUES SARACENO PHOTO BY MANISH GOSALIA COURTESY OF BLUES SARACENO / JEFF SCHROEDER PHOTO BY TRAVIS SHINN

ridiculous to vibrate instantly and uncontrollably. As I've told many students over the years: vibrato should not control you. You need to control it, not the other way around."

## NITA STRAUSS

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"The most important realisation I had was that I wanted what I do to be fun. I didn't want playing guitar to feel like a chore! I enjoy every moment of my playing, on stage and off. It's my hope that that joy and enthusiasm translate to the audience when they see me play."

**How important is theory to your playing – and what is its main value, in your view?**

"I think it's important to understand the basics of theory in anything that you do. Music, math, painting ... knowing the theory is helpful. Understanding how the notes fit together does help you create more sonically beautiful and cohesive pieces of music. However, I don't think that knowing theory is the end all be all of creating! Claude Debussy said, 'Works of art make rules; rules do not make works of art.'"



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**What things make you cringe/do you dislike when you hear other guitarists do them?**

"Honestly, nothing! I hear other guitar players do things that I wouldn't do, but they don't make me cringe. It's better that we don't all sound the same."

**14.** Andy Timmons hails the inventiveness of jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery, above, as one of the most inspiring sounds in all guitar music

**"Timing is the most important thing. You can play any notes with hip timing and it sounds good! You can't do the opposite"** CARL VERHEYEN

**Have you ever encountered a barrier in your playing you wanted to overcome but couldn't – and what did you do about it?**

"Marcus Aurelius, the stoic philosopher, says in his famous *Meditations*: 'The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way, becomes the way.' So to put this simply ... Just do it! Do the thing you can't do, slow before fast, until you can do it."

## SHANE THERIOT

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**



"The idea of hearing what you are going to play in your head before you play it. Take a second and 'hear' a melody or idea before you even start playing. Singing while playing solos to make your phrasing more 'you' and less about playing memorised licks. All the great improvisers do this to some degree. It's helpful for coming up with parts for a song."

## ANDY TIMMONS

**What one skill do you think is most useful for a guitarist to possess and why?**



"The ability to listen on a deep level. Listening is everything: being able to learn by ear, recognising what's happening around you musically and how to respond and blend in real-time. That idea spills over into just general awareness as a human being and how you interact in society. Is it 'all about you' or are you sensitive to the bigger picture? In other words: 'Everything I do affects everything around me'. It's the same with music."

**What's your best tip for understanding/unlocking the fretboard?**

"Learning scales on one string, opening up the horizontal fretboard in addition to the vertical/position-based fretboard knowledge that's more commonly applied. Knowing the names of every note on the fretboard is certainly helpful, too."

**If you could be more like any one guitarist, alive or dead, who would it be and why?**

"Wes Montgomery as he played with such melodic freshness and inventiveness. You can sense the incredible creativity happening in real-time. Django Reinhardt even

SHANE THERIOT PHOTO BY BRIAN KILLIAN/GETTY / ANDY TIMMONS PHOTO BY TERESA JOLIE / WES MONTGOMERY PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY

more so. It's not that I desire to play in their style but with their command and freedom."

## CARL VERHEYEN

**What positive experience taught you the most about playing guitar?**



"The great guitarist and mentor of mine Joe Diorio had a paralysing stroke. When I heard he was giving a masterclass locally and knew that he wouldn't be able to play a single note on the guitar, I was worried. But I attended what I still consider to be the heaviest masterclass I've ever seen because it was all about tapping into the creative pool at any level of technique you have... The ability to touch people is equal. It's not about chops."

**What was the most important realisation about playing that you had, coming up, and how did it help you grow?**

"I understood that time – or timing, if you prefer – was the most important thing. You can play any notes with hip timing and it sounds good! You can't do the opposite. If you talk about economical blues players like BB King and Muddy Waters, the time was everything – and, of course, taste. If you take extremely advanced players like Allan Holdsworth, it was his timing that was most important, how he ended the phrases and his pauses. He had a fantastic time-feel. Many players that copy him miss that fact."

## ZAKK WYLDE

**How important is theory to your playing – and what is its main value, in your view?**



"I enjoy theory, scales and the language of music, but if something doesn't serve you, why waste hours on that when you could invest your time on something you'll use?"

## YVETTE YOUNG

**Which guitarist has most impressed you and why?**



"I've been listening to a lot of stuff where guitar is not at the forefront and it's a tool. I had this really amazing guy Scarypoolparty [Alejandro Aranda] with me on tour. He's technically amazing and he writes really good songs." G

Nita Strauss showed her mettle in Alice Cooper's band and she says obstacles to advancement should be viewed as an essential part of becoming a great player – not something to be shied away from

**"Do the thing you can't do, slow before fast, until you can do it"**

NITA STRAUSS

CARL VERHEYEN PHOTO BY PETER FIGEN PHOTOGRAPHY

130TH Gibson ANNIVERSARY

# CURVED AIR

**Words** Jamie Dickson

This year Gibson celebrates its 130th anniversary – all the more remarkable because many of the core features that made the company's guitars popular a century ago can still be found on gleaming new Les Pauls, 335s and the like today. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Orville Gibson's chisel, patiently chipping curls of wood shavings from a slab of walnut, was shaping the future. And that shape was an elegant arch that itself drew upon violin-making traditions stretching back centuries.

So when we look at the cello-like curves of an ES-335 now, we see a modern guitar that is completely relevant and useful today as a musical tool. But its familiar shape also leads us on a duck-walk through the roaring stadiums of 60s rock 'n' roll, the smoky confines of 50s blues clubs and on back to the gramophone days of the 1920s when Gibson's hourglass-shaped L-5 gave jazz a vibrant new voice. All these things are connected by an arch – that distinctive curved top that Orville Gibson patiently summoned from blank wood – and its contours match those of 20th century music itself.

Join us, then, as we look back on the watershed moments in Gibson's history and celebrate the curious mixture of innovation and continuity that defines the company's iconic guitars to this day.

*Guitarist* would like to thank ATB Guitars in Cheltenham, Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, and Gardiner Houlgate auction house for the loan of the exceptional instruments photographed for this feature, many of which are for sale. For more information visit www.atbguitars.com, www.vintageandrareguitars.com and www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk

130TH Gibson ANNIVERSARY

# MAKING HISTORY

*From its mandolin-making origins to today's status as one of the most iconic guitar brands in the world, Gibson has seen its fair share of brave new shapes, sounds and technologies, alongside the rise and fall of its fortunes, over the past 130 years. Here, we highlight 20 of the company's most defining moments*

**Words** Tony Bacon

## 1902: Birth of the Gibson company

Around 1880, Orville Gibson moved from his native New York State to Kalamazoo, Michigan. He developed an unconventional mix of ideas and methods to make his mandolin-family instruments and guitars, starting in the mid-1890s – with the company today marking 1894 as the year of its inception. He did not use internal bracing. Instead, he would carve his tops and backs, and rather than the usual heated-and-bent sides he'd saw the sides from solid wood. In 1902, Orville sold out to a group of five businessmen who formed the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Manufacturing Company. Orville left soon afterwards, receiving a regular royalty for five years and then a monthly cheque for $41.66 until his death in 1918.



1. The company's namesake, Orville Gibson, set up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the late 1800s, manufacturing fretted stringed instruments, and sold on the company just a few years later in 1902



2. A Gibson-built mandolin from 1898 made using walnut, spruce and ebony. Notable is its arched top – something that was to become an enduring hallmark of Gibson instruments

PHOTO BY: SEPIA TIMES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

## 1922: L-5 archtop introduced

Gibson had shifted from Orville's idiosyncratic creations to produce reliable models such as the L-4 archtop (1912) and the Nick Lucas flat-top (1927), although at first the company's emphasis was on mandolins and then banjos, for a time the most popular stringed instruments. Lloyd Loar's Master Series L-5 guitar of 1922 defined the contemporary archtop, apparently more akin to violins than guitars. The L-5 had a carved arched top, two f-holes instead of a single round soundhole, a floating height-adjustable bridge with strings fastened to a separate metal tailpiece, and a neck-strengthening truss rod.

## 1934: Guitars take centre stage

The growing popularity of the guitar made it the focus of Gibson's efforts during the 30s, leading inevitably to bigger, louder, improved instruments. There were two key introductions in 1934: the Jumbo flat-top, which together with the Advanced Jumbo (1936) and the J-45 (1942) established Gibson's slope-shouldered style; and the Super 400, the brand's impressive top-of-the-line acoustic archtop that was the biggest and flashiest of its kind at launch. Meanwhile, the J-200 (1938) would become another long-lived Gibson flat-top, introducing the narrow-waist style often known by the 200's original name, Super Jumbo. By now, Gibson was the market leader among American guitar makers.

## 1935/'36: First electric models

At the end of '35 the Kalamazoo firm introduced the EH-150 steel and amp set, its first foray into electric instruments. The ES-150 followed late in '36, marking the start of Gibson's remarkable history of electric guitars. It was also the beginning of the company's long-running ES series, the letters standing for Electric Spanish – with 'Spanish' referring to a guitar played in what we now consider regular style, as opposed to the on-the-lap Hawaiian steel style. The budget ES-100 appeared in '38, fitted a couple of years later with a new pickup with adjustable polepieces, and in 1940 Gibson launched its most expensive pre-war electric model, the ES-300, with an angled pickup that accentuated bass and treble.

## 1944: CMI acquires Gibson

Maurice Berlin's Chicago Musical Instrument Company acquired a controlling interest in Gibson, with the manufacturing base staying at the original factory in Kalamazoo, roughly equidistant between




3. Gibson's ES-150 model, launched in 1936, represented a full step into the electric era, though it retained many of the design elements of Gibson's seminal L-5 model, which debuted a decade earlier

HISTORICAL IMAGES COURTESY OF GIBSON



This stunning pre-war Gibson SJ-200 represented the state of the art in flat-top acoustic design when it was built. Featuring rosewood (not maple) back and sides and an expansive body, it offered another way to be heard over the other stringed instruments of the era. Gibson's flat-top production (above) output expanded and diversified over time

Chicago and Detroit. Gibson's sales and admin departments were moved to CMI headquarters in Lincolnwood, a suburb of Chicago. As Gibson gradually increased instrument manufacturing after the deprivations of World War II, the electric guitar would become a vital part of its reactivated business. Musicians and other guitar makers took serious note of what the market leader was up to, and Gibson's firm commitment to the future of the electric instrument marked an important step in its wider acceptance and technical development.



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## 1952: Les Paul Model launched

Fender's activities over on the West Coast with a new-fangled solidbody electric were not lost on the bosses at Gibson HQ. Soon, company president, Ted McCarty, was negotiating with Les Paul, probably the most famous guitarist in America thanks to big hit records, and a plan emerged for Les to endorse Gibson's first solidbody Spanish. The Les Paul Model was introduced in 1952. With its carved top and fancy gold finish, it was designed to reflect Gibson's craft heritage, in contrast to Fender's straightforward, unpretentious approach. Three models would complete the Les Paul line – Custom, Junior (both 1954) and Special (1955) – and the Goldtop famously switched to a sunburst finish (1958 to '60).

**The Les Paul Model, with its carved top and fancy gold finish, was designed to reflect Gibson's craft heritage**

## 1953: Debut of the Tune-o-matic bridge

The Tune-o-matic was Gibson's first fully adjustable bridge, introduced in '53 on high-end electric archtops and the following year on the new Les Paul Custom. Fitted in conjunction with a bar-shaped tailpiece, the bridge had two adjustment wheels for overall height adjustment, and six brass saddles with screws that, for the first time on a Gibson, offered individual adjustment of string length, improving intonation.

**4.** An original 1952 Les Paul Model – shot at the Gardiner Houlgate auction rooms in Corsham – bears evidence that Gibson's conversion to solidbody production was in its infancy. The wrap-under tailpiece would soon be gone and the neck geometry changed

Ted McCarty's name appeared on the patent, assigned to Gibson – though that doesn't necessarily mean he was the sole designer of the bridge, which more likely was devised by various members of the Gibson team.

## 1957: PAF humbucking pickup introduced

In Gibson's electronics department, run by Walt Fuller, Seth Lover came up with a new pickup model. For Gibson's take on the humbucking idea, Seth wired together two coils, with opposite magnetic polarity, connected in reverse so the current travelled clockwise around one coil and anti-clockwise around the other. The coils were out of phase, the magnets were out of phase, and the resulting pickup was in phase, but any 60-cycle hum was out of phase and cancelled. Starting in the early months of '57, Gibson began to put the new humbuckers in place of its P-90 single coils on many models, including the Les Paul Goldtop and the Custom, which was promoted from two P-90s to three humbuckers.

## 1957: Gibson acquires Epiphone

Epiphone had been Gibson's nearest rival in American guitars in the 30s and 40s, but by the late 50s Epi was in trouble. Gibson bought the brand in 1957, relocating the operation to its Kalamazoo base. By '59 Gibson was shipping its new Epiphones, made in the Kalamazoo factory to the same quality as Gibsons but as an independent brand with its own dealer network and a line that in part filled gaps in the Gibson range. The differences were mainly down to pickup types, tailpieces and vibratos, and decorative styles. By 1969, Epiphone production would be switched to Japan, and the brand's identity as Gibson's important second marque only grew in the following decades.

## 1958: Explorer & Flying V, ahead of their time

Until the Flying V and Explorer, electric guitars were supposed to look... like guitars. You know, a strongly curvaceous outline and a sense of historical heritage. Gibson turned conventional design upside



The ornate features of this 1962 Super 400 show that as the rock 'n' roll era bloomed, the company lost none of its traditional skills nor its connection to the still vitally important jazz market. Hollowbody guitars were labour- and skill-intensive to make (above) but Gibson persevered

down by using straight lines and angular body shapes, changing the way electrics could look and, in the process, creating a rare set of future collectibles. Famously, the new guitars were not a success – for now, at least. "Try one of these 'new look' instruments," the original publicity insisted. "Either is a sure-fire hit with guitarists of today!" That, however, was not the case. It would be the guitar players and guitar designers of tomorrow who would make them a hit.

### 1958: The fabulous hybrid 335

Gibson's most revolutionary guitar design, the ES-335 was a true first for the company: a double-cutaway thinline semi-solid electric guitar. Sales of its solidbody models had slipped a little, so the idea was that a guitar with the benefits of a solidbody in a hollowbody-like package might prove more appealing to wavering players. The secret was hidden inside the 335, namely a solid block of wood running through the inside of the otherwise hollow body. Guitarists have crowded around ever since to taste the 335's attractively different flavours. Gibson again developed a line from the core model with the addition of three more: the high-end ES-355, stereo ES-345 and fully hollow ES-330.

### 1960: New folkie flat-tops

Not only did these attractive new flat-tops sit well with the resounding folk boom of the era, but they lined up as the first Gibson acoustics to compare closely, shape-wise, to Martin's venerable dreadnoughts. That's why in later years these models would often be grouped together as "square shoulder" types, in contrast to Gibson's existing "slope shoulder" style, like the J-45. The Hummingbird appeared first (1960), with 24.75-inch scale and mahogany back and sides, followed by the Dove (1962), with 25.5-inch scale and maple body. They looked the part, too, especially those engraved pickguards with cute little birdies fluttering among the greenery. Songbirds, indeed.

### 1960: Move over Les Paul, here's the SG

The new SG solidbody design was a radical amalgam of bevels and points and angles, inviting players to reach the topmost frets with ease and speed. Gibson had decided the original single-cut Les Paul design was old hat and the SG would replace it. Luckily for us, both would survive longterm. The first two SGs – for now still named the Les Paul Standard and the Les Paul Custom – were announced in the early months of 1961, though production of the Standard started late in '60. In 1963, Gibson finally dropped the remaining Les Paul names, establishing the new line as the SG TV, SG Junior, SG Special, SG Standard and SG Custom.

**Gibson turned conventional design upside down by using straight lines and angular body shapes**

### 1963: Firebirds take off in reverse

Gibson called on a retired automobile designer, Ray Dietrich, to style the new Firebirds launched in '63. The I, III, V and VII each had different appointments but followed the same design and build. Rather than Gibson's customary glued-in set neck, they had a through-neck construction. Standard finish was sunburst, but Gibson went further than simply adopting Fender-like shapes for the new line and borrowed its rival's custom finishes idea, offering Cardinal Red, Frost Blue, Inverness Green metallic and more. Production hiccups would lead to a redesign in '65, with a noticeably different body shape (known as 'non-reverse', rather than the earlier 'reverse' style) and a regular set neck.

5. Ted McCarty led Gibson through its golden era – but nearly ended up in the confectionary trade

## FIGHTING SPIRIT

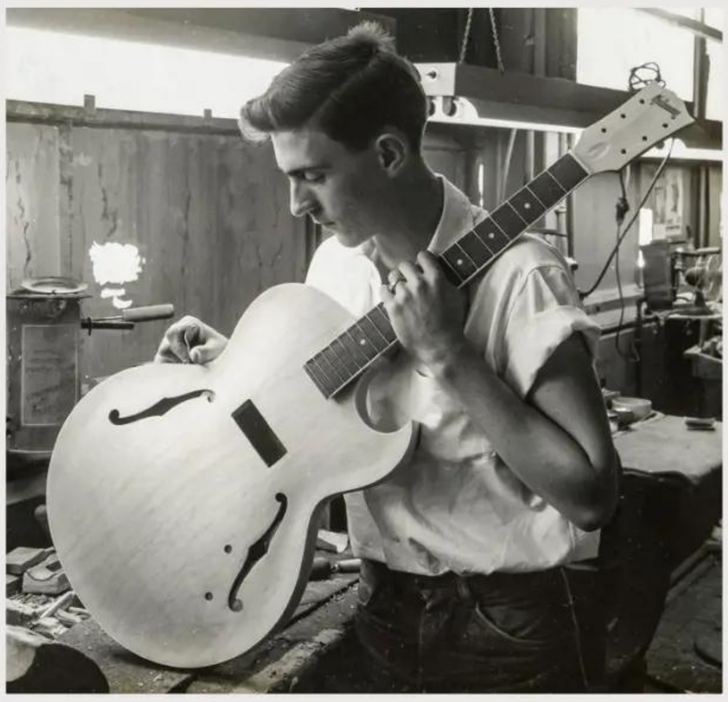
### VP of product, Mat Koehler, on the pugilist's tenacity that helped Ted McCarty make Gibson a success

**Ted McCarty was a massively important figure in Gibson's history. He spent the early part of his career at Wurlitzer before joining Gibson in 1948, becoming vice president of Gibson in 1949, then president in 1950. Under his leadership, the company introduced iconic guitar models including the Les Paul, ES-335, Firebird and SG and oversaw development of the Tune-o-matic bridge, the PAF and many more crucial innovations, all while increasing production from 5,000 guitars per year to over 100,000.**

**"Ted first had a job offer from Brach's, a maker of candy corn – a classic American candy popular around our Thanksgiving holiday time of year," explains Mat Koehler. "I think he was initially conflicted by whether to go to the candy company or to Gibson where he wasn't going to be leading right away because [the decision whether to give him a top managerial role] was to be based on his results, but the board had said, 'Hey, if you can turn this thing around, we'll give you the keys to the car.' Fortunately, he was able to do that.**

**"The other thing about Ted is that he was actually a boxer. A friend of mine sent me his college yearbook for the University of Cincinnati; there's a whole page with a painting of Ted as a boxer, which just speaks to his tenacious behaviour because I think that's what it is. It's like this laid-back thing, he's everybody's friend, but he's always thinking about growth and what's the next thing? Where else can we be? Where is our blind spot? He was always asking those questions." [JD]**





Thinline semis such as this beautiful 1961 ES-335, courtesy of Vintage ‘n’ Rare Guitars in Bath, gave Gibson a way to bridge the gap between its heritage and the high-volume demands of the rock ’n’ roll era. They still required many of the same complex manufacturing techniques as the older jazz boxes

## 1969: Gibson under Norlin management

Norlin Industries was formed in 1969 with the merger of Gibson's parent company, CMI, and an Ecuadorian brewery, ECL – 'Norlin' came from the combined names of Norton Stevens, ECL's chairman, and Maurice Berlin, CMI's founder. The takeover would be formalised in '74, and Berlin was shifted away from running the company. Norlin favoured cost-cutting and simplified production, and changes were made to some Gibsons built into the 70s. A new Gibson factory in Nashville opened in '74, and the original Kalamazoo plant was closed 10 years later. Some guitarists felt that these changes converged to create a dip in Gibson quality and innovation.

## 1980: Les Paul Heritage and Gibson history

The value of Gibson's past began to dawn on the company, and the idea took hold that recreating earlier features and models might appeal to guitarists who were now paying increasingly large sums for 'vintage' instruments. A hint came with the ES-335 Pro (1979), the first 335 with dot markers since the change to blocks in '62, the first with a stop tailpiece since the trapeze of '65. The Les Paul Heritage (1980) marked the first proper attempt to emulate more of that past glory, with revised humbuckers and corrected neck material, body shape and top-carve shape. It wasn't perfect yet, but it paved the way for the far-reaching reissue programmes Gibson would develop in the decades that followed.

## 1982: Chet Atkins CEC introduced

The CEC marks a rarity in the more recent history of Gibson because it was a brand-new style of guitar: a semi-solid electric classical. Despite his reputation as an electric player, Chet Atkins was by the 80s mostly playing nylon-string classical-style flat-tops, and he was on the hunt for a practical electric model. Amplifying acoustic classical guitars didn't work well for him, so he took his quest to Gibson. The result was the CEC, with a classical-like fingerboard width (there was a narrower version, the CE), a thin semi-solid body and a piezo bridge pickup, and it mostly looked and felt something like a classical guitar – only louder and without feedback tendencies.




**6.** The early 80s saw Gibson flex creative muscles that had lain somewhat dormant – creating an all-new type of electro-classical guitar for renowned player and producer Chet Atkins

## 1986: Norlin sells Gibson to new buyers

Norlin decided during the early 80s that it would sell Gibson. Sales had fallen by 30 per cent in 1982 to a total of $19.5 million, against a high in '79 of $35.5 million. The guitar market was in trouble, and most American makers were suffering in broadly similar ways – costs were high, economic circumstances and currency fluctuations were against them, and Japanese competitors had an edge. In 1985, Norlin found a buyer. Three businessmen who had met while classmates at Harvard business school, with Henry Juszkiewicz at the helm, completed their purchase of the Gibson operation in January '86 for $5 million. It would at times be a bouncy ride.

## 1989: Shifting production sites

Among the changes that Juszkiewicz and his team introduced – some welcome, some less well received – was the establishment of some new production facilities. Gibson acquired the Flatiron mandolin company of Bozeman, Montana, in 1987, and in '89 production of Gibson flat-tops moved to a new factory at the site. In 2000 Gibson opened another new factory, in Memphis. The Nashville factory was working at full capacity, so solidbody production stayed there, with the new building dedicated to ES models. However, the Memphis plant was closed in 2019 following Gibson's filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2018, and all electric guitar production was consolidated once again at Nashville.

## 2018: Another new owner for Gibson

Gibson emerged from its bankruptcy protection in November 2018, with KKR the new majority owner with controlling interest in the company. JC Curleigh was appointed president and CEO, joining Gibson from Levi Strauss & Co, with further appointments including Cesar Gueikian as CMO. Gueikian superseded Curleigh as president and CEO in 2023. The new owners seem today to be steering Gibson on a steady course after the choppy waters of earlier years. Successes include the creation of the Murphy Lab, a division of the Custom Shop headed by relic pioneer Tom Murphy to build historically accurate guitars, and a clarification of Gibson's lines into logical groupings, with electrics divided into Original and Modern, for example. Here's to another 130 years! G

The new owners seem today to be steering Gibson on a steady course after the choppy waters of earlier years

130TH Gibson ANNIVERSARY

# MANDOLIN WIND

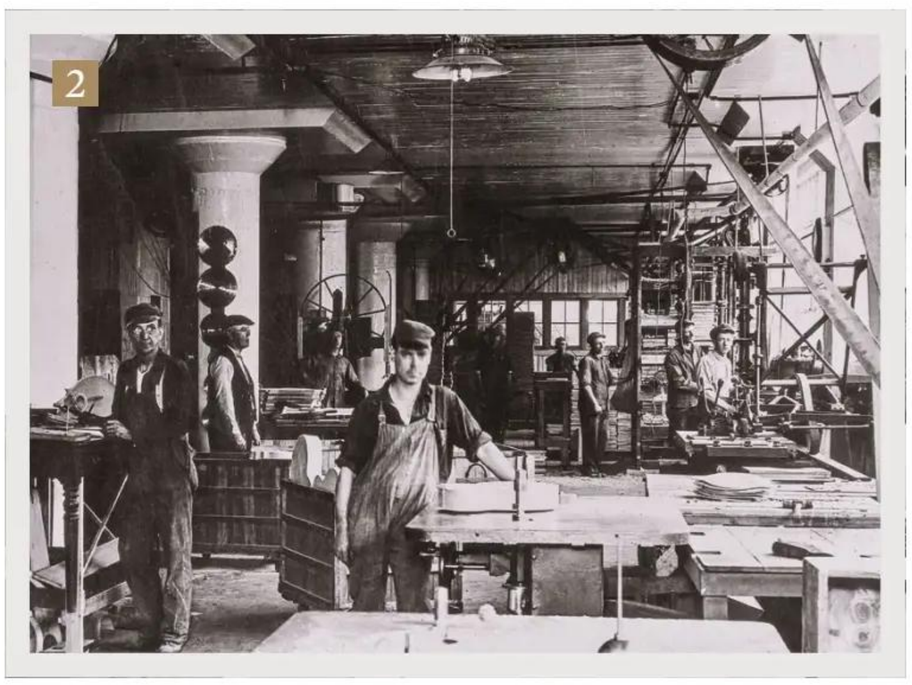
*Gibson, perhaps more than any other guitar maker, has a history full of interesting nooks and corners – and unanswered questions. We join two of Gibson's top experts on the company's history to try to shine a light on some of the more interesting 'what ifs?' and behind-the-scenes moves that gave us the Gibson we know today*

**Words** Jamie Dickson

There are guitar companies as old as Gibson but few who have made such a breadth of classic instruments – from mandolins and archtops to iconic solidbody electrics, debonair jazz guitars and sweet-strumming acoustics. So if you've ever struggled to get a handle on exactly how key events unfolded in over a century of guitar making by the company, you're not alone. Indeed, the guitar-playing public would never have been privy to many of the factors that shaped the company's evolution.

But decisions that got made in the boardrooms of the 50s and 60s and on the factory floor at Kalamazoo, and the personalities who shaped the company's fortunes, gave us the iconic guitars we know and love today just as much as famous musicians did. That's why we invited two of Gibson's most knowledgeable experts on its history – vice president of product, Mat Koehler, and director of product development and Gibson archives curator, Jason Davidson – to sit down with us so we could find out everything you wanted to know about Gibson but were afraid to ask...


1


2

## "Gibson was working with musicians in the hub [cities] of jazz, so it got them a broader reach" *MAT KOEHLER*

1. Jason Davidson of Gibson says that the company's origins in mandolin-making were simply reflective of what musicians most wanted at the time

2. The Gibson shop floor in 1917. The carved-top guitar became key to growth

3. A 1929 banjo advert reminds us that guitar often took second place to other stringed instruments back then

**Gibson began life as a mandolin company, essentially. In what ways did mandolin making influence how the company went on to make guitars in your view?**

**Mat Koehler:** "Orville Gibson came up in a time where mandolins were probably the most popular stringed instrument. So, for me, the mandolins are just fundamental to the history of Gibson of being there [to serve] every major genre that developed, especially in America. Orville Gibson was an actor, too, so this theme of adapting, improvising, was part of who he was and his identity."

**Jason Davidson:** "Yeah, and I think Orville was open not to just mandolins. I think Orville would have built any instrument that either came to his imagination or that was requested of him because, you know, there's mandolins and there's the lute that was famous on his early labels... there's the harp guitars, there's the traditional six-string guitars that he built – all using the same principles."

**Mat:** "Yeah, supposedly the lute was actually a mandolin, but it was just shaped like a lute."

**Gibson's trailblazing work with f-hole archtops in the 1920s was a hugely important step for the company. To what degree was Lloyd Loar responsible for that leap forward?**

**Mat:** "I think Loar gets a lot of credit for what, ultimately, was putting f-holes on the guitar. I mean, that's definitely his legacy; he's 'Mr F-Hole' [laughs]. Which is not something that sounds that glamorous, but that lineage continues to this day, obviously, especially on our ES models, the 335s, and so on. So it all kind of began with Lloyd Loar there and that fusion of violin-making mentality with what Orville created, which was this [concept of a] carved-top guitar, a lot of the time made from a single piece of wood.

"So, to me, that was Orville's greatest contribution: the carved approach to creating guitars. A lot of time he was using huge pieces of American walnut for that. He was all about trying to find the most resonant properties of a stringed instrument. Loar was definitely a scientist in his approach as well, and it just happened to be that the fusion of violin-making techniques and Orville's archtop design worked out beautifully."



3

**Fender relied on country artists to help develop its sound – would it be fair to say that jazz guitarists played an equivalent role in the evolution of Gibson as a guitar maker?**

**Mat:** "Yeah, broadly speaking, the most popular guitarists of the day were jazz guitarists, which is incredible to think about when we look at how small the audience size is for jazz music today. But, again, it goes along with innovation – these are hard bop, bebop guitarists like Tal Farlow or the Western Swing guitarists like Billy Byrd and Hank Garland – guitarists who really took the music to the next level with some virtuosity and new thinking.

HISTORICAL IMAGES COURTESY OF GIBSON

Whereas I think Leo was doing something a little bit more local to that area [Fullerton], while Gibson was working with musicians in New York and Chicago and New Orleans and other hubs of jazz, so it kind of got them a little bit broader reach."

**We've spoken about Fender having its roots in West Coast country music and Gibson in the jazz scene – do you think that, during the 1950s, the customers for Fender and Gibson were different people as well? Or were they both competing for the same market?**

**Mat:** "I think eventually they were [competing]. But, you know, with Gibson making guitars in Kalamazoo, [its development as a maker] was steeped in the techniques of immigrant furniture makers in the area. And it was a similar kind of thing with Gretsch in New York, where classic, old-school construction techniques met changes in popular music. And I think even Leo was emulating Paul Bigsby in a lot of what he did. So, again, he was just trying to take what was popular near him and make something of it – and not really knowing what would happen.

"But it just so happened that solidbody guitars became all the rage, firstly, because of the volume levels involved in the rock 'n' roll movement: early rock depended on that, and you can't really use a big old archtop with a monkey-on-a-stick pickup to blast some rock 'n' roll! So it had to evolve and, fortunately, I think Gibson was right there, and clearly the deal with Les Paul in 1951... I mean, there was no bigger guitarist at the time. They really keyed into what was popular."

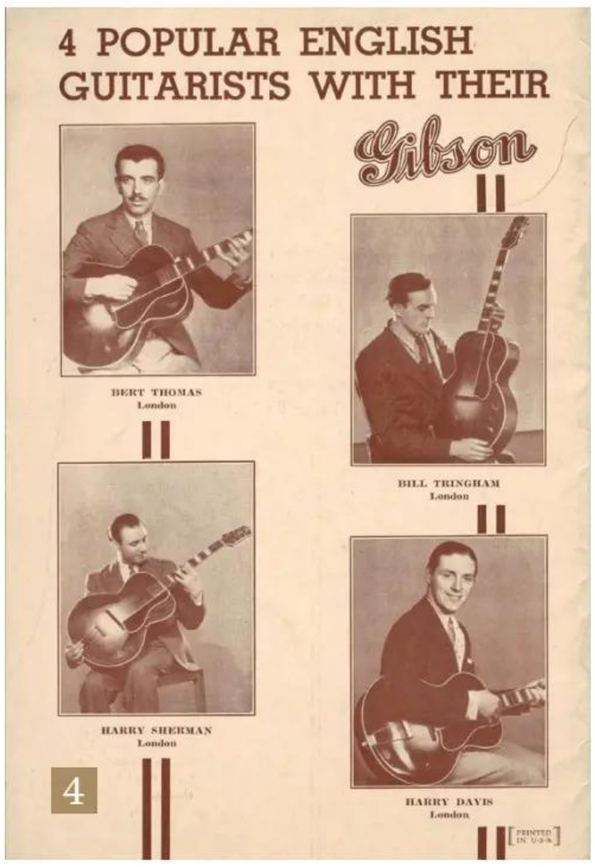
**When do you think Gibson reached full maturity as an electric guitar maker?**

**Jason:** "Maturity? I would think the late 50s – 1957 to '58 – with all the new solidbody designs and the release of the humbucking pickup. That, I think, is the full maturity. There was still more to go, with the Firebird several years later and other solidbodies down the line, but that is where we reached the top of the mountain."

"The fusion of [Lloyd Loar's] violin-making techniques and Orville Gibon's archtop design worked out beautifully"

***MAT KOEHLER***

Centuries-old violin-making skills inspired the design of this 1936 Gibson L-5, shot at ATB Guitars in Cheltenham. Yet the f-hole archtops of the 30s gave the company's 50s-era semis such as the 335 their sonic DNA and styling cues




4. Gibson's reputation as a go-to maker for jazz guitarists wasn't restricted to the USA, as this pre-war ad shows – the British players mentioned may have largely sunk into history, but the archtop guitars they hold (or their descendents) are still widely used today

**Mat:** "Yeah. We had more of a model-year mentality in those days because we were trying to find a good footing [in the solidbody market]. And at various stages of Gibson's more recent history, we've done the same. It's just, like, 'Let's try to develop more different styles and takes and variations, try to home in on what works and what's going to be the most relevant tool for artists.'"

**Plenty's been said elsewhere, including previous issues of this magazine, about the development of the original single-cut Les Paul model in 1952. Les Paul himself helped guide the design process for that guitar, but less has been written about the inception of the SG, which was much more of a purely in-house effort from Gibson. What drove Gibson to make such a bold departure from the single-cut Les Paul, do you think?**

**Mat:** "I was going to say it's part of that model-year mentality that I mentioned earlier where [it was seen as critically important to regularly] revise the portfolio. What else happened in 1960? All slim necks, so that was definitely sales feedback. That's the CMI team in Chicago and the sales network giving feedback of, 'We want faster-playing necks,' and so that clearly happened – and the SG style, I think, happened as a result of that.

"But it was also about showing off new capabilities – because, by that time, they had expanded the factory twice, there were three buildings now in 1960, and I know that there were new – what we would call CNC today – but just new carving capabilities that they wanted to show off with the SG. Also, if you think about it logically, it's definitely a departure in terms of looks, but also the body wasn't bound like a Les Paul, in that sharp cutaways are hard to bind, so maybe [binding] was presenting challenges in production [that Gibson wanted to dispense with].

> "Gibson reached maturity in '57/'58 with its solidbody designs and the humbucking pickup" ***JASON DAVIDSON***

5. It's not every day you see a line-up like this – three 1959 Les Paul Standards alongside a 1954 Goldtop. Yet despite the present-day supremacy of the 'Burst, it was Goldtops and Customs that Gibson brought back in 1968, possibly because of dealer requests for them

"So that's how I think about it today: what else was going on that maybe prompted this design? As we know, the best designs come about by necessity, and that's why the SG has had such a long run that continues today – they got it right the first time. Even the side-pull trem did a great job of balancing that body, and then later the Maestro tailpiece. I really think the in-house team spent some time on the SG; I don't think it was just a rough concept that made it into production. It was clearly a very, very refined concept, and we attribute a lot of that to Larry Allers, who was one of the woodworking engineers at Gibson."

**Do you think that the short production life of more radical designs such as 1958's Explorer and Flying V meant Gibson got cold feet about innovating at that time?**

**Jason:** "No, I don't think it was getting cold feet. I think [those guitars] were viewed as experimental at the time. They may have sold even more guitars than they thought they would have initially. So I think it was a success in their mind. I don't think it was viewed as a flop. I think it was just showing what we could do."

**By the middle of the 60s, you had Clapton and Bloomfield playing 'Bursts and literally kickstarting an interest in 'Bursts that continues to this day. So when Gibson relaunched production of single-cut Les Pauls in 1968, why did it go with black Les Paul Customs and Goldtops, rather than 'Burst reissues?**

**Mat:** "I think it's because they were working with Les Paul, and he was like, 'I've never played a sunburst one' [laughs]. I think



"The SG has had such a long run that continues today because they got it right the first time"

*MAT KOEHLER*

A 1965 SG Junior in Polaris White sits alongside an equally stunning 1962 SG-shape Les Paul Custom at ATB Guitars. The crisp, shapely lines of the design were intended to show off Gibson's advances in wood shaping capabilities


PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

6. The SG began life as a Les Paul signature model. According to his former tech Tom Doyle, Les accepted that the market wanted a lighter guitar and liked the SG shape's upper-fret access. He had doubts about its tuning stability, however

that's what it was. It was probably that simple. Jason, do you have any thoughts on that?"

**Jason:** "I don't really have a theory on it. I'd hope it wasn't because someone in R&D was tone-deaf to the music and the players at the time. It could simply have been that the dealers were asking for Les Paul Customs. Because I think that if dealers were asking for and ordering sunburst Les Paul Standards, Gibson probably would have responded, you know? Which they eventually did. But maybe they were scrambling at first and trying to get a sense of what they needed to build, and maybe the dealers that they initially talked to or the salespeople they were hearing back from were saying, 'Goldtops and Les Paul Customs'. So it could have been a result of that because it wasn't much longer after that that they started making sunburst models again. Albeit not to the specs of the 1959 Standards – but they were at least bringing something back."

**What were Gibson's best-selling guitars through the 50s and 60s? Do you have a sense of that?**

**Mat:** "By volume, it's going to be the more entry-level guitars. In the 50s, maybe the ES-125 – pretty humble guitars that are not the most identifiable today or the most famous today. Certainly, on the solidbody side, it'd be the Les Paul Junior. So if you're going to go by volume [number of units sold], the lower-priced models are often the ones that are the most popular – and that's true today, too.

"But I would say in terms of the most hallowed and revered models – in the 50s and 60s anyway – were definitely archtops, and by the time you get to the 70s, it's the Les Paul Custom that's the most revered, because of, again, where music was going in the late 50s versus where it was going into the 70s. Very different mindsets, and young guitarists practising at home wanted very different things."

> "By volume [sold], the lower-priced models were often the most popular – and that's true today, too" ***MAT KOEHLER***

**We've become used to Custom Colours on Gibsons, thanks to the present-day Custom Shop's work in popularising these originally rare instruments. How integral were custom finishes and other unique or limited-run orders to Gibson's guitar-making business back in the day?**

**Jason:** "Well, I think Gibson's history of custom guitars goes all the way back to the beginning – it was a special-order instrument maker. And we've seen examples of special-order instruments dating all through Gibson's history."

**Mat:** "Yeah, I think there's a misconception that the Custom Shop as we know it was something that began in the 90s... To an extent, it *was* definitely formalised in '93 and '94, and became its own business unit within the company. But, like Jason said, not only was customisation possible from the very beginning, there was a dedicated space in Kalamazoo – I think it was the third floor – put aside for the special-order department. There would be a written correspondence with Gibson and you could request anything you wanted. If you wanted a Les Paul Special with the tenor neck, or you wanted your Les Paul black like the Les Paul Custom – but you couldn't afford a Les Paul Custom – you'd just get a quote back saying, 'Oh, that'll be $5 more.'"

**What are the most unusual 50s and 60s factory-built customs you've encountered over the years?**

**Jason:** "I like... what was it, Mat? Torpedo Joe! That was an interesting one."

**Mat:** "Yeah, that was, what, '66?"

**Jason:** "Yeah, '66."

**Mat:** "This was a guitar in that dark period between when the [single-cut] Les Paul was discontinued and

7. While 'Bursts and the like may dominate the history books, it was the humbler, less expensive models that did the big numbers in terms of sales, such as the various versions of the Les Paul Junior



when we started making it again in ‘68. So there was this... somewhat Les Paul-shaped solidbody guitar that they made for this musician, Torpedo Joe [laughs]. And then there’s the guitar that Kent Westberry ordered. He was one of a few guys in ’58/’59 who ordered a J-200 with a Bigsby-style, six-in-line headstock. So they just received the order and used an Explorer-style headstock in that instance. There were actually a few of those that went out in 1958 and 1959, and we used a different headstock style on pretty much every one of them [laughs]. There was not a lot of consistency. It was just whoever received the order: ‘Okay, let’s go down to the floor and see what we can make happen.’ Those are obviously very unusual, but you’d see a lot of customer-name inlays in them.”

**We’ve spoken in the past how behind-the-scenes considerations shape the guitars that players eventually have in their hands – using up surplus stock of Epiphone mini-humbuckers in the Les Paul Deluxe of the early 70s is a good example. What other production-centric things have shaped iconic Gibson guitars over the years?**

**Mat:** “To me, the first thing that comes to mind is just the fact that at Gibson we believe in set-neck construction. A lot of guitarists will look at a bolt-on neck guitar, like a Fender, the same way as a Gibson in terms of their capacity to be used to create music. And absolutely they’re on par [in that respect]; it’s just that the set-neck construction is so much a part of our identity. But it takes so much longer to do and to set, and the neck-setting process is a whole stage of the build process within the factory environment. So, to me, that’s something that I think a lot of guitarists maybe take for granted – they forget all of the work that goes into making a set-neck guitar, especially in Gibsons. They’re definitely crafted longer than any other major brand that I can think of.”

**Jason:** “I would add the carved top on a Les Paul as well. A carved top is not necessary, but Gibson did it because Gibson was known for carved archtops and we could do it, and that was a differentiator back then.”

“Gibson’s history of custom guitars goes all the way back to the beginning – it was a special-order instrument maker”

***JASON DAVIDSON***

This elegant 1955 ES-350, shot at ATB Guitars, straddles the two epochs – the pre-war archtop days and the post-war rock ’n’ roll era that followed. The use of a set-neck design unites nearly all Gibson’s designs, however, to this day

**Name a major 'crossroads' moment in Gibson's history when the company could have taken a very different turn to what we know today.**

**Mat:** "I was going to say Slash..."

**Jason:** "That's a good one, yeah. If Slash had picked up a Strat or something, or stuck with his BC Rich..."

**Mat:** "Right, yeah. Him playing a Les Paul really changed the course of the company in the late 1980s."

**Jason:** "It did. I was going to say, even just a few years earlier than that, I've heard stories that if Gibson wasn't bought by the previous owners in the mid-80s, it could have just been broken apart and turned into an import brand. It looked pretty bad around '84/'85. Times were tough. I mean, even post-bankruptcy Gibson from 2018 – I've been here a long time and Mat has, too – I'm thankful that KKR and the group that did buy Gibson came in and did that because it brought in the right leadership and the right change of direction for the company, product wise, structure-wise. It could have went another way, for sure. There were a lot of other interested parties."



PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

8. Slash almost single-handedly repopularised the Les Paul in the 1990s, providing a huge boost for the company

> "We're making not only tools for artists – but the best tools that someone can possibly choose" ***MAT KOEHLER***

**Are there any unsung heroes in Gibson's history that you think should be better acknowledged?**

**Jason:** "Ward Arbanas. He was a great one. One of the things he did was he ran Epiphone when Gibson purchased it, but he was still with the company up through, roughly, 1990. He was with Gibson through the classic years, all the way up to the modern era pretty much, and was very active throughout – you see him throughout Gibson history in documentation, in photos. I think his last role was running the customer service department, which I ran at Gibson from the early 2000s through to just a few years ago. So I feel a connection with him."

**Mat:** "Ward's a great one. But I'm going to go with a modern-day hero. This individual started with the company in the Norlin days in the early 1980s. Her name is Lynn Matthews and she was the first female engineer at Gibson, probably the first female engineer in the industry, as far as she knows. That's an accomplishment on its own, but she still works for the company today. An incredible legacy and she was the right-hand person to Rick Gember at the Custom Shop.

"So, all of those engineering projects, all of the historic reissue projects and whatnot, all of that was Lynn. And she's still doing all the behind-the-scenes build and materials stuff for the Custom Shop today. She's also one of the two people responsible for saving a lot of the archival materials by recognising, 'This is important and we need to save this.' She and Keith Medley really did a good job of safeguarding all of our historic materials when no-one else did. So she's who I think of."

**Tell us something we probably don't know about Gibson...**

**Jason:** "I would say one misconception you may have heard, at least under the previous ownership, is about high turnover rates – that 'nobody lasts very long at Gibson'. Well, I've been with Gibson for 26 years. We have employees that have been here close to 50 years, since the Nashville plant opened. And it's not just one single person, either, but a number of people."

**Mat:** "I would also say that another misconception is that we're this [faceless] corporation. But I can tell you, on the inside, it does not feel that way. We are a family. We're a family of people who are extremely passionate about guitars and music and making instruments. We just want to be the preferred choice of artists, you know? And we recognise that we're making not only tools for artists – but the best tools that someone can possibly choose. So we feel a huge sense of responsibility to be providing that experience, and it's palpable throughout the organisation, wherever you go." G

***www.gibson.com***



130TH Gibson ANNIVERSARY

# SCOTT GORHAM

*Few bands harnessed the might of the Les Paul as powerfully as Thin Lizzy. Scott Gorham was the backbone of the band's sound, but, as he recently revealed, he secretly sketched artworks to stay sane on tour. From chaotic auditions to the Les Paul that landed him in court, this is the inside story of early Lizzy, as only Scott Gorham can tell it*

**Words** Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates

Scott Gorham is in his element. Holding court at London's Gibson Garage, surrounded by the tools of his half-century trade, with a wicked-uncle twinkle and an e-cigarette on the side that represents his last unkicked habit, the Thin Lizzy veteran remains the very best company in rock 'n' roll.

You sense it's a relief for Gorham to be back on home turf, having struggled in recent weeks with a nasty case of imposter syndrome. The official reason for our interview is the 73 year old's unveiling of his historic artwork (pictured on page 79): a series of wild, fantastical pencil sketches that he worked up while on tour with Lizzy, then hid under the bed for decades. But even after the successful launch of his collection at the Karma Sanctum Soho Hotel in April, the guitarist still flinches at the 'A' word.

"I can't call myself an 'artist'," squirms Gorham. "I figure there's all these brilliant men and women who were at art college for years – and here comes some slob like myself and I just step right into it. I feel really guilty with that."

Music, though, he can talk about all day. The band that made his name in the mid-70s now moves at a more leisurely pace, eschewing studio albums since the death of talismanic frontman Phil Lynott in 1986, while touring sporadically with a patchwork quilt of members. But all it takes is the click of a dictaphone to send the guitarist rifling through his memory banks for the best war stories in the business.

## "Robbo was just a great player, light years better than anybody I'd ever played with at the time"

**You joined Thin Lizzy alongside Brian Robertson in 1974, making it a twin-guitar band for the first time. Thinking back, what was the audition like?**

"I had no idea who Thin Lizzy was. I'd never seen a picture of these guys, never heard any of their music. But I was told they'd had a hit with *Whiskey In The Jar* [1972] and asked if I wanted to put my name forward. 'Hell, yeah. I got 30 more days left on my visa then I gotta go home.'

"The audition was at a dinner club. Phil stuck out that bear paw of his and shook my hand. We walk in and Phil says, 'Hey guys, this is Scott.' Robbo just looked up and went, 'Yeah, okay.' And I thought, 'Oh, let me warm my hands on that welcome.' But the reason they did that was because they'd already auditioned 25 guitar players. And here comes number 26, and guess what – he's a fucking Yank."

**How did that first meeting with Robbo progress?**

"Phil said, 'So, Robbo, teach Scott blah-blah-blah.' He'd flash these chords really quick, and I'd say, 'Could you slow it down a bit?' Then it was 1-2-3-4, and I'm looking at Robbo's hands and my changes were just a fraction later than his. Then he'd say, 'Now you take the lead.' It was chaos, really.

"But Robbo was just a great player, light years better than anybody I'd ever played with at the time. He just seemed to have his shit together. And, boy, he had the ego to go along with it: 'I always knew I was gonna be in Lizzy...'

"Phil took my number, on this tiny little piece of paper. And I thought, 'Great, he's not gonna lose that, is he?' I'm thinking, 'I probably did pretty shitty.' But that night, Phil gave me a call and said, 'We've all been sitting around listening to the tapes.' I went, 'Tapes? What tapes?' They'd been recording [my audition] the whole time. I had no idea. Probably pretty good that they didn't say anything.

"And Phil said, 'We all agree that you're the guy. What do you say?' I couldn't get the word 'yes' out quick enough. Hearing how talented all these guys were, you'd be crazy not to want to get in this thing called Thin Lizzy."

**How fast did you establish the guitar dynamic with Robbo?**

"I can't remember it taking a long time. There were certain songs where we'd be like, 'Well, maybe you take the second lead.' Or, if it was a song that Robbo didn't like, he'd say, 'Yeah, you take the lead on that one.' So it worked out like that until we started to feel each other out. We started to hang out, go out for drinks, make each other laugh, all that. We became a lot looser and closer at the same time.

"Still, to this day, I love the guy. I was devastated when he got kicked out. I kept trying to get him back in the band, and I finally did talk Phil into it, and I said, 'Brian, for fuck's sake, just keep your goddamn mouth shut. Every time you open it, man, you get yourself in trouble.' He'd say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' Then he'd do it again. But the great thing about Phil was that it was always my decision who was gonna be the next guy."

***Whiskey In The Jar* had been a hit, but success wasn't a done deal at that point, was it?**

"Yeah, we had nothing. Back then, you got your three-album deal, and if you hadn't made an impression by that time, they're warming up the car for you. We knew the pressure was really on. Phil brought in this song, which at that point was just called *The Boy Is Back* or something. And the lyrics were great, but it was kind of a bland song, just chord after chord.

"When we were making up the list for the *Jailbreak* album [1976], it was like, 'Okay, these are the nine songs, and those over there we're not gonna do.' But one of the managers came down to hear what we'd done. And he said, 'How about *The Boys Are Back*? Why have you discarded that one? I think you oughta include it.'

"So that's when Brian and I went to town on it. Phil was going, 'You know, there's a huge gap in between these lyrics. We gotta do something musical in there.





1. Now admitting to wielding a pencil as well as a Les Paul, Scott Gorham is an artist in more ways than one

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL BARKER




2

Something like doo-dah-doo-dah.' And I was like, 'Really? Doo-dah-doo-dah?' And I was like, 'Well, how about [sings classic guitar refrain].' And Robbo put the harmony on. And it was just like, 'Wow.' All of a sudden, that song exploded. I wouldn't say it was one of our favourite songs, but now we could see it was worth something. And we did the ascending line kind of deal at the end – that was the icing on the cake."

**Was it an easy decision to release *The Boys Are Back In Town* as the first single? Or were there other contenders in the running?**

"With *Nightlife* [1974] and *Fighting* [1975], we picked the singles and they did shit. So this time we're going, 'Well, obviously, we're crap at picking the singles out, so we're gonna let anybody else do it.'

"We were on tour in America, and in Louisville, Kentucky, there were two disc jockeys that fell in love with *The Boys Are Back In Town* and played it to death, at least twice an hour. That song just spread all through America."

**In the early years you played a Les Paul Deluxe with mini-humbuckers – something of a budget model.**

"Well, it was because I had to buy my own guitars. And when you're only earning £30 a week, it gets kind of expensive, right? And I liked that guitar. I knew it didn't have the sound Robbo had because he's got the big humbuckers, all that sweet sustain. That Deluxe had a thinner sound. And I loved the feel of that guitar. The way it looked, the way it felt, the way it played – I just wish it had some more guts, a little more bottom-end, some more sting. As soon as I was able to, I got my '57."

**How did that '57 Les Paul come into the frame?**

"Gary [Moore] was in the band, so it was probably '77 or '78. We were in Boston, and this vintage guitar dealer comes in and lays five cases down, flips all the lids. I went immediately to that one. It's the Holy Grail, right? He says, 'It's 2,300 bucks.' I'd never heard of a guitar being that expensive. So I play it, and it sounds great, feels great. I look at Phil and he's going, 'Yeah, man.' I got on the mic to our sound guy: 'Hey, Pete, what do you think?' And all he said was: 'Buy it.' So I had no negotiating room at all now. You wanted someone to go, 'Ah, I don't know.' But they were just saying, 'Buy it!' So I was kind of stuck on the $2,300."

**2.** There are worse places to chat about guitars than the artist lounge above the Gibson Garage. Scott originally wanted a 'Burst like the Murphy Lab reissues on display as we talk, but the Deluxe became a live-wire element of his early sound

Gorham on stage in October 1976 with his Les Paul Deluxe. While its lower cost was the driving factor behind its purchase, "I loved the feel of that guitar," Scott tells us. "The way it looked, the way it felt, the way it played"

"Robbo put the harmony on [the lead part of *The Boys Are Back In Town*]. And it was just like, 'Wow.' All of a sudden, that song exploded"

PHOTO BY ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

**How did it work out with that guitar, then?**
"I played that '57 for a month in the States. We get back to Heathrow and the customs guy has all our cases out, with the lids flipped up. And he went straight for that Les Paul. He says, 'What a beautiful guitar – how much did you pay for it?' I said, '$2,300.' He goes, 'Really? On the carnet here it says $600.' He closes the lid – whack! 'That's my guitar now.' So we had to go to court, right there at Heathrow. I didn't even know they had a court. A guy comes in, he's got the black robe on, and he goes, 'Well, Mr Gorham, we find you guilty – and the fine is the price of the guitar, plus £750 for breaking the law.'"

**You're reticent about showcasing your art. In the early years of Lizzy, did you feel the same way about music?**
"Oh no. I was all in. 'Let's make the album, do all the fucking interviews, get it out there.' If you're a wallflower, nothing's gonna happen. To be any kind of success, you have to be the guy that

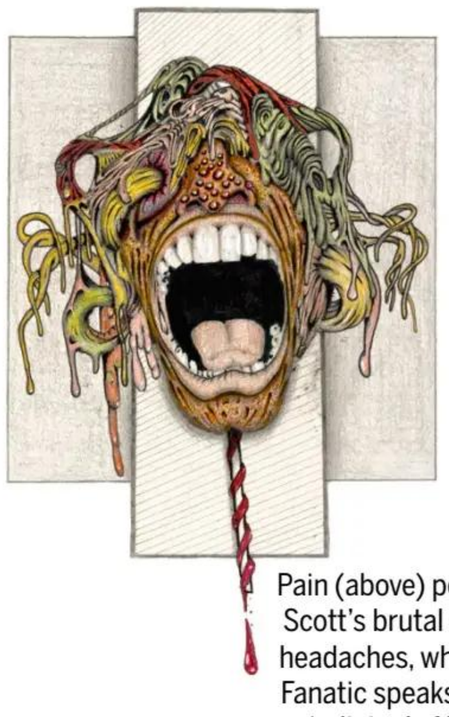
> "Nothing's gonna happen if you're a wallflower. You have to take three giant steps to the front of the stage"

takes three giant steps to the front of the stage. It sounds like an ego thing, but, to me, you have to think of yourself as an important cog in the machine, and that machine can't exist without you. Whether that's true or not is a whole other subject. But that's how you have to think."

**And with music, everyone out there has an opinion...**
"Right. And that's where you've gotta grow thick skin. That's why I stopped reading reviews decades ago. Because it'd be 'great, great, great, shit'. And it's the 'shit' you remember. And it destroys you. So I was like, 'I'm not even gonna read these. Just give me a quick overview...!'" G

## DIFFERENT STROKES

### Scott Gorham on the artistic talent he kept hidden for half a century







Pain (above) portrays Scott's brutal cluster headaches, while The Fanatic speaks to the 'religion' of being a true sports fan

**How did the launch of your artwork go back in April?**
"It went great. But man, I was scared to death sitting backstage. It's one thing to talk about guitars and your latest album when there's four other guys in the band you can shoulder the responsibility with. But with this thing, I'm the Lone Ranger, right? If everybody hates it, it's my fault. But as soon as I walked out there on stage and they handed me the mic, I was up and running. It seemed like the audience were really enjoying it. Hell, why not? All the booze was free."

**What was your background in art?**
"There was no background. I had one semester of art class in junior high when I was 14. The teacher, she was young, slim, long blonde hair and I think back now and wonder, 'Did I do it because I wanted to hang out with her?' I don't actually know if I remember anything I was taught in that classroom. But I'd taken typing before that and I thought to myself, 'Well, I'm not gonna be a fucking secretary.'"

**Fast-forward to Thin Lizzy. How did you end up expressing yourself that way?**
"You gotta remember, when you're out on tour, you're hanging round with the same bunch of guys and there's nights when you gotta break from the herd. Otherwise it's like, 'Oh my God, he's gonna tell that joke again.' I remember, we had a day off in Amsterdam. I just walked out of the hotel and went to look at the city. I walked by this art shop that just kinda drew me in. I had no intention of buying anything. But before I knew it, I had two wads of sketch paper and two tins of pencils."

**But you never showed your artwork to the other guys in Lizzy?**
"No. The most important thing was always the playing, the gigging, interviews, soundcheck, all of it. That was the absolute number one. But if someone knocked on my hotel room door, I would hide the drawings under my covers. I didn't really want to have to explain myself."

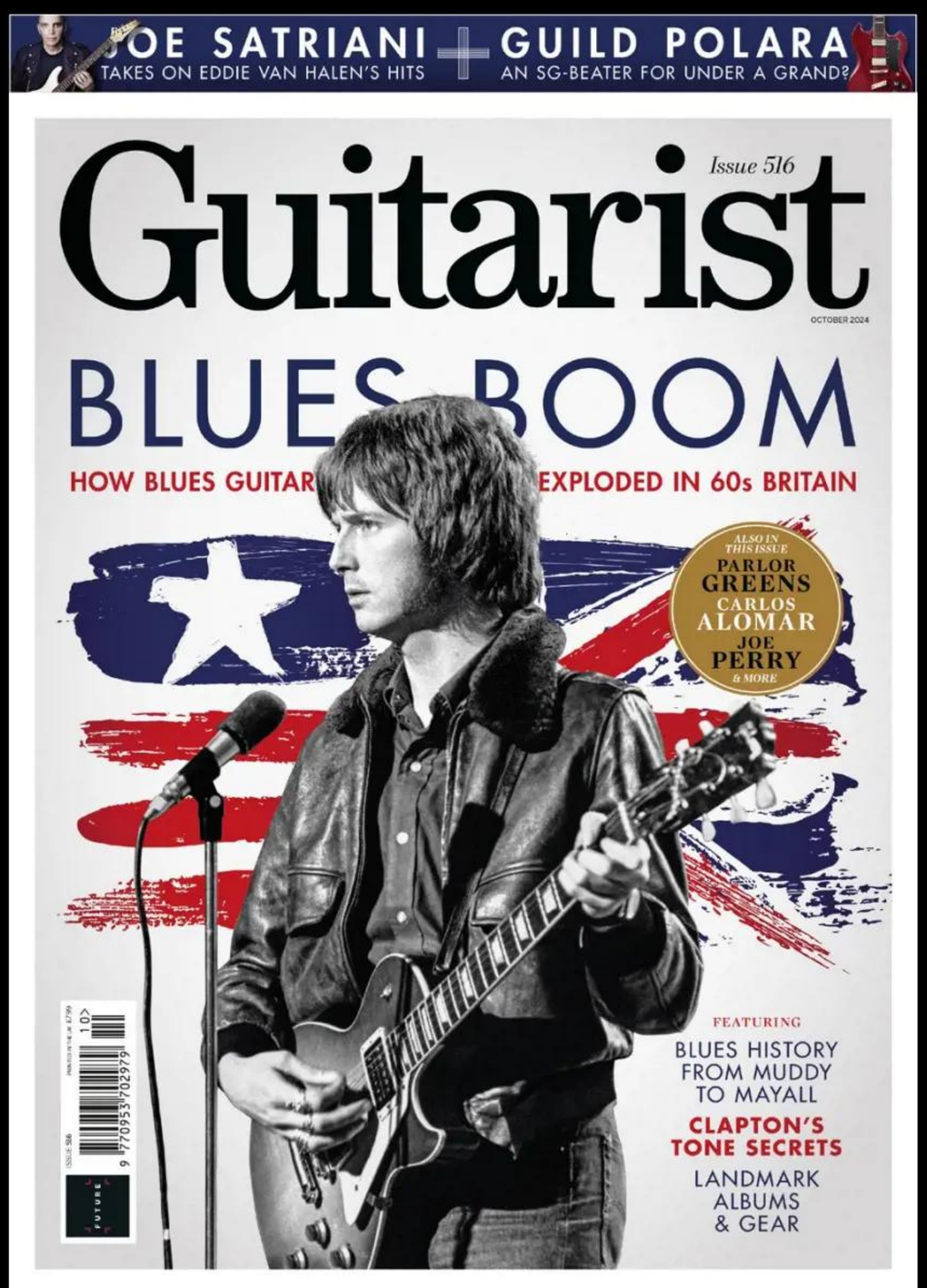
**How did your artwork come to light again?**
"My wife didn't even know I did it. We were watching a movie and it reminded me of one of the pictures I'd drawn. So I pulled it out from under the bed and said, 'What do you think of that?' She said, 'Hey, that's great, who did it?'

> "I would hide the drawings... I didn't really want to explain myself. My wife didn't even know I did it"

And I went, 'Well, I did.' She went, 'Fuck off!' So I showed her my whole portfolio – 40 pictures, something like that – and she was like, 'God, man, you gotta tell somebody about this.' I was like, 'Nah, this is just for me.' She kept banging on about it. It got to where whenever she would mention it, I would get up and walk out of the room. And it took her three and a half years of [nagging]. Finally, I went, 'Fuck, all right. What's your plan?'"

**For more of Scott Gorham's artwork, see scottgorhamworld.com**

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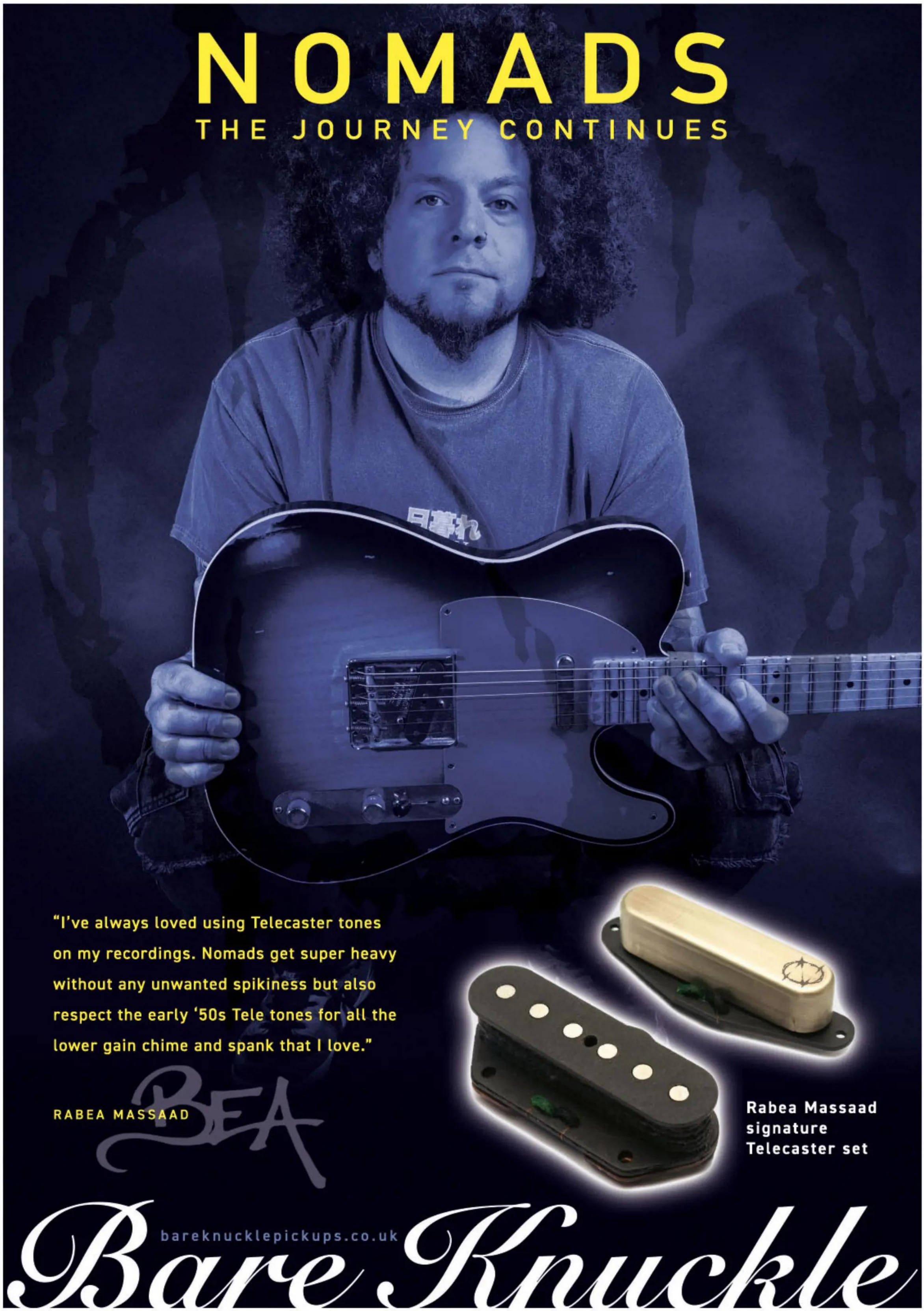
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