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FEBRUARY 2025

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Inventing The Future



Reading this month's feature on the sale of the guitar collection of the late, legendary Jeff Beck (see page 58), I'm struck by how often players who do something truly unique have to adapt guitars or even build them to suit their needs. From the mongrel 'Yardburst' to the continually shifting spec of his late-era white Strats, Beck was always swapping out parts, hunting for an advantage like a race-car driver. This tells us that players who operate on the edge know every way in which their guitar is delivering – or not delivering – what they need out there at the perimeter, to paraphrase The Doors.

Eddie Van Halen was the same, with his Frankenstein electric, yet so was Danny Gatton who endlessly modified his Telecasters, from neck to pickups, to deliver his incredible talent on stage perfectly. And perhaps it was no coincidence that, like Beck, Gatton was another avid mechanic. But they are not alone. Les Paul was perhaps the archetype for this kind of player-engineer who designed and built the future from scratch when no existing guitars cut the mustard – and as a result we have Gibson Les Pauls to rock on, rather than the voluminous archtops that were the only game in town when Les entered the electric arena.

So one of the signs that someone is really taking guitar music somewhere interesting and new is that they have to build a new type of guitar to get there. Of course, they don't have to do it themselves: Steve Vai and the development of the JEM with Ibanez is a great example of that. But even if we, as players, don't need to demand quite so much from our instruments, the example set by Jeff Beck and other trailblazers at least tells us to value and cultivate what is distinctive in our own playing, rather than hide among our influences so deeply that our own musical personality cannot be heard.

Enjoy the issue, and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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Don Musser acoustics

They are undeniably obscure, but if you ever have a chance to play one, you should take it. Are these the 'Dumbles' of the unplugged world? **p78**



Non Plus Ultra

Fender has revamped its top-flight contemporary electric line – we find out if the new American Ultra II guitars are worth it on **p84**



Building Jimi's dream

A new docu-flick on Electric Lady Studios tells the story of how Jimi's dream recording environment came to fruition over on **p108**

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FIRST PLAY



**GRETSCH PROFESSIONAL
SERIES HOLLOW BODY
TENNESSEAN**
£2,399

WHAT IS IT? Professional Collection model with Pro-FT Filter'Tron pickups, String-Thru Bigsby vibrato and Gotoh locking tuners

Tennessee Honey

The working musician's hollowbody designed to handle most popular styles but retaining that unmistakably cool Gretsch vibe

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Olly Curtis

Debuting in 1958, the 6119 Tennesseean was the least fancy of the four Chet Atkins models available from Gretsch. Eschewing the Western bling of the other instruments – including the 6120 beloved of Eddie Cochran, the 6122 Country Gentleman favoured by Atkins himself, and the Les Paul-sized 6121 chambered ‘solidbody’ Round-Up – it featured just one Filter'Tron humbucker at the bridge and was played most notably by The Beatles' George Harrison, albeit in later form.

Although nominally a 406mm (16-inch) wide single-cutaway hollowbody, the Tennesseean's depth wavered during its first few years until settling on the 64mm (2.5-inch) we see today. However, the most notable change came when Gretsch added a neck pickup, significantly enhancing the guitar's versatility. The Tennesseean's colour choice of Deep Cherry Stain or Walnut further separated it from the other Chet Atkins models, which usually came in the more familiar Gretsch orange. Harrison's was a 1963 model in red with dual Filter'Tron pickups.







1. Not only does the Gretsch logo'd Bigsby tailpiece impart that classic shimmering vibrato, it's so much a part of the look. Here, stringing is made easier by the String-Thru roller bar

2. Although Gretsch has plenty of original bridge designs in its history, this Adjusto-Matic isn't one of them. It sits on the wooden 'foot' that's pinned in place to stop it moving

3. These Pro-FT Filter'Trons employ an Alnico II magnet at the neck and Alnico V for the bridge pickup. Typically, the control circuit uses a master volume (pictured) with individual pickup volume controls and a master tone

Shift forward six decades and the Tennessean is back. Looking much like its Brooklyn-built forbear – with arched laminated maple body, bound all-round in white, a two-piece maple neck with dark centre stripe and white heel cap, a bound rosewood fingerboard, bound f-holes and twin Filter'Tron pickups – the Japanese-made model, however, aims to bring a more modern edge to this journeyman guitar. Hence on the B6CP Bigsby vibrato the strings feed through a hole in the rocker bar, rather than having to awkwardly locate the ball-end onto a steel peg. The top's 'trestle' bracing has been updated to Gretsch's new Arc-Tone system that company literature describes as "torrefied maple tone bars with arc-shaped spruce support braces located underneath the bridge area". Said to promise "enhanced sustain, crisp note attack and excellent feedback control", it should allow the Tennessean to handle powerful overdrive without the inherent issues associated with all-hollow instruments.

Other nods to the modern age include Gotoh locking tuners to aid tuning stability, Grover straplocks, and an Adjusto-Matic bridge that's perched atop a pinned rosewood foot.

The Tennessean's U-shaped neck carries a 305mm (12-inch) radius bound rosewood fingerboard with 22 medium jumbo frets. The 'board's edges have been rolled for playing comfort, while the beautifully profiled frets invite eager hands to play. Nickel hardware with grey pickguard and pickup rings work well against the flawless Deep Cherry gloss, the whole thing looks crisp and smart and, as we'd expect from Japan, expertly put together.

4. Reflecting its workingman style, there's no model name or decoration on this austere headstock face, unlike the horseshoe inlay on the Nashville and the more flamboyant design of the Falcon



Feel & Sounds

Although Gretsch describes the Tennessean's neck as Standard U shape, it feels like a regular C profile with a depth of 20mm at the 1st fret and 23mm by the 10th before it fattens into the heel. It's very comfy and not tiring to play over long stints. Indeed, so well are the fingerboard edges rolled and the frets so expertly finished that it's a pleasure to simply sit and noodle. And with its classic radius, slightly shorter-than-usual 625mm (24.6-inch) scale length and medium jumbo frets, it welcomes all manner of fretboard antics, with bends and vibrato beautifully served on the 11-gauge strings. Like Gibson's ES-330 (reviewed in issue 519), ultra high-end forays are off the agenda, but blues-rock soloing at the 12th position is perfectly doable. And although said Gibbo is lighter than our Gretsch due to the latter's deeper body and significant metalware, it's still an easy instrument to wield on a strap.

The Japanese-made model aims to bring a more modern edge to this journeyman guitar

Electrics-wise, today's Tennessean is a simpler beast than the model of times past, with a master volume mounted on the cutaway's horn, individual pickup volumes, master tone, and three-way pickup selector. It's quite intuitive, and through our test rig of a Mark I Reissue Boogie combo, plus Hudson Broadcast, Lovepedal Hermida Zendrive, Providence chorus and Echoplex delay pedals, it delivers a wonderful array of tones. With the bridge pickup set clean and a dash of almost slap-back echo, we're treated to a glistening, musical tone. Bright and chiming, it's perfect for rock 'n' roll lead, fingerpicked chords and clean riffs.

Similarly, the neck Filter'Tron – both on its own and in tandem with the bridge – oozes warmth, clarity and class. You can see why the rockabilly players loved it. But in the hands of a total musician like Chet Atkins, the sonic landscape is all but boundless.

Players such as Neil Young, Stephen Stills and, of course, the great Malcolm Young have made wonderful distorted noises on Gretsch guitars. And stepping on the Zendrive and off the Echoplex, leaving only a dribble of Boogie reverb, we're treated to the kind of tones a





Along with that String-Thru Bigsby, the rear-lock Gotoh tuners make restringing very easy and help keep tuning stable. Other modern details include the glow-in-the-dark Luminlay side dots and Graph Tech Tusq XL nut



GRETSCH PROFESSIONAL SERIES HOLLOW BODY TENNESSEAN

PRICE: £2,399 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Japan

TYPE: Single-cutaway hollow body electric

BODY: 'Tennessee Rose' shape, laminated maple with Arc-Tone bracing and bound f-holes

NECK: Maple with standard U-shape profile

SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq XL/42.86 mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white bound, with neo-classical thumbnail markers

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Gretsch-branded B6CP String-Thru Bigsby, Gotoh locking tuners, G arrow knobs, Grover strap locks, all nickel plated; grey plexi pickguard, grey pickup rings

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Gretsch Pro-FT Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, 3-way pickup selector, master volume control, volumes for each pickup, master tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.175/7

RANGE OPTIONS: Hollow Body Falcon (£3,549) with larger body, in White and Cerulean Smoke with gold sparkle binding, or Black with silver sparkle binding; and the Hollow Body Nashville (£2,799), with finishes including Orange Stain, Cadillac Green and Midnight Sapphire, each featuring a gold plexi pickguard and gold hardware

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Deep Cherry Stain (as reviewed), Havana Burst, Walnut Stain

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9/10

PROS Beautifully built, with sensible modern twists, a great-feeling neck and an inspiring range of wonderful tones

CONS Some players might rue the lack of upper-fret access here

Gibson doesn't quite do. On the bridge, it's strident, articulate and almost sweet, while flipping to the neck things become warm and, yes, the old clichés 'woody and flutey', somewhere between Les Paul light and Strat heavy. With both pickups on things become thinner, a tad more vowelly and definitely funkier.

Ray Butts' Filter'Tron is a markedly different animal from Seth Love's humbucker. Is it clearer? More focused? Sharper? Possibly all three, but we'd hesitate to say better.

Verdict

It's great to see the return of guitars like the Gibson ES-330 and this delightful Gretsch Tennesseean. A simpler offering than many guitars in the stable on its release, the model found favour with players who loved 'that great Gretsch tone' but were less enamoured by cowboys, cacti and steer horns, simply wanting a purposeful guitar that looked fabulous, played well and sounded right.

The Tennesseean of 2024 is an altogether less idiosyncratic, more intuitive but

It welcomes all manner of fretboard antics, with bends and vibrato beautifully served

still distinctly handsome machine. That it's beautifully built, plays and feels like a much more modern proposition, and supplies all manner of brilliant sounds from shimmering cleans to snarling driven tones is testament to the work that Gretsch has put in. But let's also doff our caps to the old guard: designer Jimmie Webster, pickup guru Ray Butts and, of course, inspirational genius Chet Atkins.

If Gretsch guitars have passed you by, nip down to your local guitar store and audition a Tennesseean through a good amp with a decent pedal or two. You may just be converted. And since it's likely to street for not much over the two grand mark, you'll be getting some serious bang for your buck, too. **G**

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FIRST PLAY



JET GUITARS JS-45 ELITE
£919

WHAT IS IT? Posh super-S
with impressive specification
but trim price

Reach For The Sky

Based in Slovenia and made in China, Jet Guitars' impressively wide range of mainly lookalikes is now heading upmarket. The seat belt sign is on...

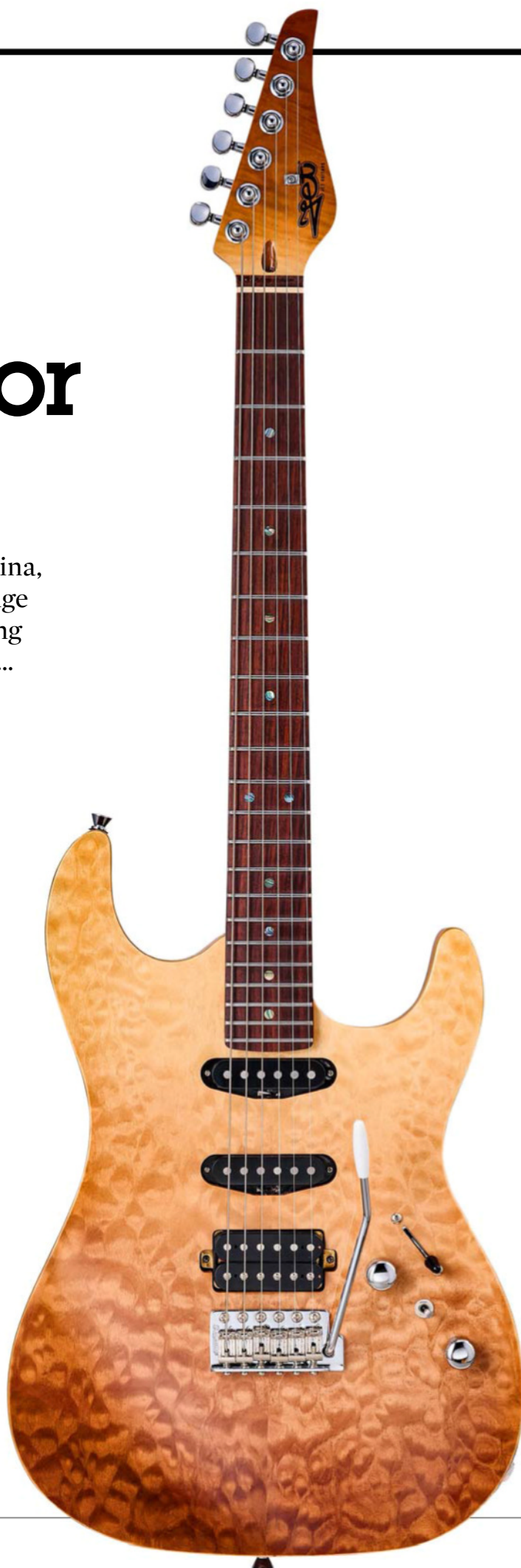
Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

While the rarefied high-end electric guitar world seems to be escalating in price at an alarming rate, there's no shortage of lookalike styles. So if you can't afford (or justify) that posh-looking Tom Anderson or Suhr, increasingly there are options such as this new Jet JS-45 Elite that aims to capture some of that posh vibe with a far more attainable price tag.

Designed by Primož Virant in Slovenia and made in China, Jet guitars burst onto the scene about five years back focusing on well-made yet highly affordable lookalike designs. Its models quickly became a modding favourite, too, with perfectly good chassis that can be easily upgraded.

While the current Jet range kicks off with direct copies such as the JS-300 (from £189), our review sample comes from the top-tier Elite models. These aren't limited editions; instead of building down to a price point, the Jet team looked to create instruments that compete with boutique styles, all without an eye on the end cost.

Our JS-45 is a standard Fender-scale super-S with an impressive on-paper specification: quarter-sawn, light roasted maple neck bolted to a two-piece mahogany body with a "solid" quilted maple top. In the flesh, however, that roasted maple, while clearly quarter-sawn, has an unusual grain





The JS-45 Elite features a standard control setup with simple master volume and tone, while that mini-switch activates the coil-split. If it ain't broke...

1. The tuners are quite generic in style but do offer staggered-height string posts and the rear lock feels positive. Aside from being fast to restring, the overall tuning stability of the guitar is very good

2. The rather generic 'hot' bridge humbucker certainly suits the style, but the coil-split is very usable, too. Likewise, the vintage-style Wilkinson vibrato does a great job and also has a push-fit, tension-adjustable arm



figure in the lower portion that plenty of upper-market makers might reject. The 'solid' quilted maple top is – like PRS's SEs, for example – a thin 5mm solid maple cap with a quilted maple veneer that you can clearly see through a loupe on the natural body edge. Typically, the graduated 'burst is just applied to the top, the natural mahogany back looks lightly tinted, and overall the body is gloss-finished with the usual contours and quite a heavy rear-edge radius. Also typical for the style is a rounded heel – the screws sit in recessed cupped washers – with a rear scoop behind the treble cutaway. Nothing remotely original but good craft.

Obviously, its HSS pickup array (all direct-mounted to the body) is pretty standard, too, likewise the rear-mounted control layout comprising a standard

five-way lever pickup selector (the web spec erroneously says it's a three-way), master volume and tone and a small mini-switch that splits the humbucker, voicing the slug single coil. The chromed metal 'football' jack plate is side mounted, as you'd expect.

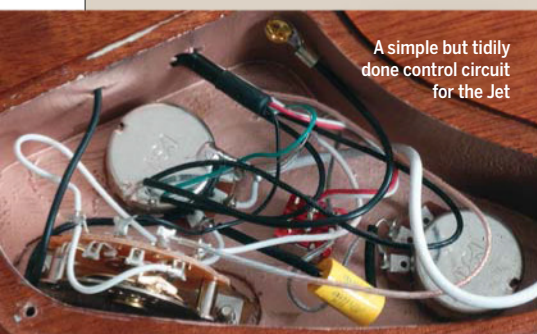
Perhaps a little surprising is the vintage-style vibrato, albeit with a push-in, tension-adjustable arm and offset string holes that pass through the die-cast black-painted block. The standard saddles and top plate are chromed steel, and to be picky it would be nice to add a thicker neck shim so those protruding saddle height-adjustment screws could be buried into the saddles. There's a little more modernism with the Jet logo'd tuners, which are rear locking with staggered height posts. No complaints there.

Feel & Sounds

While we're seeing more and more lighter weight chambered or semi-solid designs, the all-solid JS-45 tips the scales at a manageable 3.67kg (8.1lb). Seated or strapped on, its form is comfortable and, importantly, the neck shaping is rather good, not least its satin feel.

The shallow-shouldered C comes in at just under 21mm at the 1st fret and fills out nicely to 22.8mm by the 12th. And while many guitars in this style promote a compound fingerboard radius, here the 305mm (12-inch) 'Gibson' radius avoids an overly flat feel in higher positions. Those face markers do vary in colour and lack a little contrast against the deep brown of the rosewood fingerboard, though; thankfully, the simple white side dots are much clearer in playing position.

UNDER THE HOOD Is the inside as smart as the outside?



Yes! There are decent-looking full-size pots for starters, with nominal 500kohms values, and the selector switch is a proper lever type and looks robust, too. The wiring is modern and uses a 223k code .022µF tone cap. There's no treble bleed on the volume control or any extra resistors on the single coils, which could subtly pull down the high-end, like a 250k pot. However, the soldering looks clean and bright, and the cavity and cover plate are shielded.

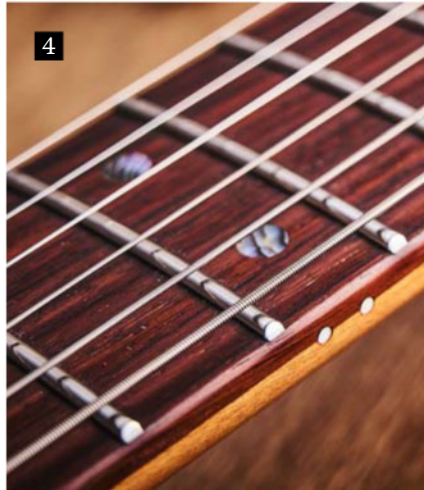
Apparently, the pickups are hand-wound in Korea, although there's no ID on the very clean-looking single coils. These pickups have a curved magnet stagger that pretty much matches the fingerboard radius, and although the single coils are direct-mounted they both have proper hard foam supports and springs to allow easy height adjustment. The bridge has a handwritten '650' sticker on the brass baseplate, but that's the only clue we get (the web spec simply states: "HSS Alnico Custom Set"). The DCRs reflect pretty much what we hear: the humbucker measures 13.16k (6.69k when split), the middle single coil is 6k and the neck is 5.95k.



3

3. The single coils appear to be cleanly made but have no maker ID. Although direct-mounted, they are height adjustable to fine-tune what you hear, while the magnet stagger pretty much follows the fingerboard radius

4. These look like abalone (probably laminated) position dots and they do lack contrast against the rosewood fingerboard. But fretwork is good and we get a classic 305mm fingerboard radius



4

Plenty of care has been taken with the fretting. The wire isn't over-big and has a good height, the ends are well rounded, plus there's a little fingerboard edge-rounding, too. The tops do feel a bit scratchy in places – a little more care would elevate the craft and the feel, though it's far from a dealbreaker. Overall, our sample came nicely set up and, once the strings were stretched and settled, it plays very nicely in tune. Aside from those

This Jet really excels at those classic 80s breaking-glass-like funk and dance rhythm voices

slightly protruding screws on the outer E saddles, the vibrato is well set up, too, with a little up-bend and enough down-bend for smooth shimmers, rather than any divebombing intention. It all holds its tuning well, too.

There's no tricky switching here and the voicing is obviously 'Stratocaster' with an added kick at the bridge. The single-coil sounds are pretty good overall, a little lighter and subtly brighter than our PRS SE Silver Sky reference, not to mention our Bare Knuckle Triptych-equipped Fender Road Worn. But this Jet really excels at those classic 80s breaking-glass-like funk and dance rhythm voices before you slam in with your solo on the thick and pretty

hot bridge humbucker. That's not the only way to drive it, of course – the single coils, and certainly the neck/middle mix, sound pretty soulful with all the bounce and percussion you'd expect.

A coil-split is hardly revolutionary, but when split here the bridge isn't over-spiky. It gives a great hot blues, classic rock or Americana voice that not only suited the guitar rather well, but we preferred it over the more clichéd and subtly compressed full coil. Either way, while there are no surprises, there's plenty of stylistic reach here in what is a smartly turned out spin on a modern classic.

Verdict

We've had plenty of super-Ses on our review pages in the past couple of years, so much so that we could suggest there's a bit of a renaissance of the style. The super-S was always about adding modern elements and features to the Stratocaster: bigger frets, fancy wood tops, improved vibrato and locking tuners and, of course, that HSS (or HSH) pickup array.

This JS-45 Elite certainly aims in that direction, but it's actually a little more classic than some with its vintage-style vibrato and sensible frets (nickel silver, not stainless steel), plus a pretty standard control layout and pickups. That works in its favour; combined with some competent craft, there's little to criticise. With a good weight, versatile sounds and a far from 'shredder' neck, it might not be the cheapest in the Jet Guitars line-up, but it's a very credible, classy instrument.



JET GUITARS JS-45 ELITE

PRICE: £919 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Double-cut solidbody electric

BODY: 2-piece mahogany with solid quilted maple top

NECK: Quarter-sawn 'light roast' maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, white shell dot markers, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Wilkinson WV6S vintage-style vibrato, Jet logo'd rear-locking tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING/BRIDGE: 53.5mm

ELECTRICS: Double-black open-coiled Alnico humbucker (bridge), black covered Alnico single coils (middle and neck), 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone, mini-switch (to split humbucker and voice slug single coil)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.67/8.1

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Other Elite series models include the JS-50 Art (£919) with dual humbuckers and custom painted top, the T-style JT-30 Gold (£709) with metallic gold finish and fibreglass pickguard, and the HSS JS-40 Metallic Burst (£765)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Fireburst (as reviewed), Indigo Grey – gloss body and headstock face; satin neck back

Hal Leonard Europe Ltd

+44 1284 702600

www.jetguitars.com

8/10

PROS Modern looks with classic style, like the vintage-style vibrato; competent build; good neck feel, setup and tuning stability; no surprises with the sounds – perfectly good and nicely versatile

CONS Let's sort those protruding saddle screws; a bit more elbow grease is needed for the fret tops

FIRST PLAY



GIBSON FALCON 20 1X12 COMBO

£1,999

WHAT IS IT? All-valve, vintage-voiced 12-watt, 1x12 combo with scalable power, reverb and tremolo

And Your Bird Can Sing...

We travel back to the future to bask in the glory of Gibson's reincarnated 1960s rare classic, the Falcon combo

Words Martin Smith Photography Phil Barker

From its sonic heritage to its sumptuous styling, the new Gibson Falcon promises a journey back to the 1960s. Not so much a direct replica of the original 1961 GA-19RVT Falcon, this amp is more of an 'influenced by', re-engineered update with a contemporary twist in the form of Multi-Watt power scaling. Technologically groundbreaking, the original Falcon was one of the first combo amps to feature both reverb and tremolo. Although comparable in size and wattage to the Fender Deluxe amp, it was produced in much smaller numbers so it is quite rare to find a surviving example in the wild today. Let's find out if this rare bird can indeed sing!

It's certainly a beautifully finished amplifier from its cream Tolex covering to that vintage-style oxblood speaker grille, while its polished chrome vented fascia sits alongside a dazzling Lucite handle, emblazoned with the Gibson logo. An elegant jewel lamp illuminates a row of silver capped, vintage-styled speed knobs, and the large Gibson badge on the front grille is reminiscent of the headstock badge found on the original 1958 Gibson Flying V.





Born from the ashes of the 1961 Gibson GA-19RVT Falcon and redesigned by the team behind Mesa/Boogie, today's Falcon sports a Baltic birch cabinet that's wrapped in cream bronco Tolex and crowned by a beautifully fabricated Lucite and chrome handle sporting the Gibson logo

We can't detect any shortcomings in Gibson's efforts to perfect its dazzling looks.

Under the hood we see the construction hallmarks of the Mesa/Boogie amp company, which was purchased by Gibson in 2021. The team has designed and constructed this amp around a densely populated PCB, to which the preamp valves are mounted. The power amp valves hang outside the chassis, protected by a sturdy cage and cooled by a quiet but undefeatable cooling fan. As a cathode-biased amp, it's reassuring to know these valves can be replaced without need for rebiasing. The patented Multi-Watt Power circuit provides 12 watts in push-pull pentode Class A at full power from the pair of 6V6s, five watts of the same in triode mode for half power, and one watt of single 6V6 output in low-power mode.

The back panel features the words "hand-wired in Petaluma, CA, USA", which was clarified for us by long-time Boogie employee Tommy Waugh, now product manager for Gibson Amps, who outlined how the fabrication process consists of a hybrid approach of utilising machine-made PCBs alongside hand-wiring of components and hand-assembly.

There's a supplied two-button footswitch for the reverb and tremolo that's sturdy and comes with a cable, and it was fun to find a Gibson cloth patch also included along with the product manual and matching logo-emblazoned slipcover.

Sounds

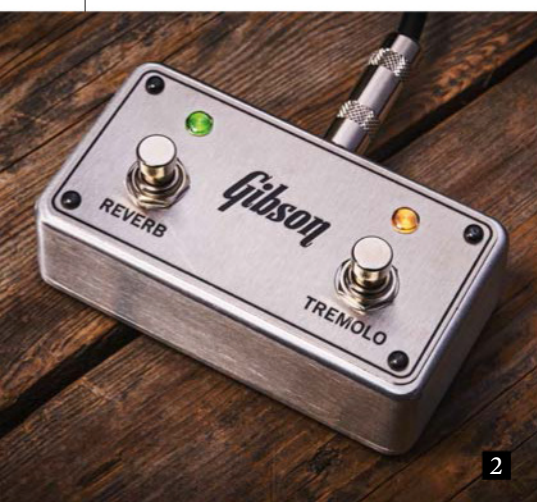
Armed with high hopes for vintage tones, our retro appetites are satiated with an abundance of lo-fi lushness. You can access a wider range of gain levels than expected by balancing the normal and low inputs, the single volume control and the patented Multi-Watt Power switch. In full 12-watt power mode you can access



the amp's highest headroom and greatest potential for clean tone. Indeed, plugging into the lower-gain Input 2 we're served up oodles of sonic sauce. This amp is clearly built to deliver character in abundance. The bottom- and top-end one might hear in a modern amp have been somewhat engineered out in favour of a highly touch-sensitive, darker midrange character, which should please the growing number of fans of vintage classics such as Valco, Magnatone and, of course, Gibson.

Pushing out its vintage vibes, the specially designed 12-inch Alnico Jensen Jet speaker, partnered with the well-constructed Baltic birch cabinet, has a muscular midrange with bags of punch. The limited range

of tone-shaping options available is not only true to the vintage aesthetic, it also prevents the tone-sapping effects of unnecessary circuitry. To this end, a single tone knob directs the tone stack to shift the general frequency orientation. Being a passive design, the control's limited range makes it more of a broad brush with which to colour the sound, ranging from Wes Montgomery/Grant Green-style smoothness when turned bass-wards, through to sinewy treble when turned clockwise, making our Teles twang and Les Pauls snarl. This is all presented with a slight power sag on strong note transients that one might expect and desire from a low-power vintage-style valve amp.



1. Jensen has created a special edition of its 40-watt Jet Alnico speaker in vintage blue enamel to pack midrange punch with a vintage-inspired frequency range
2. The footswitchable reverb and tremolo are enabled with the supplied vintage-style two-button unit
3. The two-input design offers a normal input gain for Input 1 and low-input gain on Input 2. A single volume is further governed by the Multi-Watt power-scaling options





Multi-Watt Power was devised by Mesa/Boogie in 2010 to tame the output of its Dual and Triple Rectifier amps to manageable levels. In the Falcon it can be used to reduce the wattage from 12 to five or one watt



GIBSON FALCON 20 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £1,999
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: All-valve combo amplifier
VALVES: 2x 6V6 power valve (optional 2x 6L6); 4x 12AX7 preamp valves
OUTPUT: Patented Multi-Watt power (1W, 5W, 12W)
DIMENSIONS: 508 (w) 225 (d) 445mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 14.06/31
CABINET: Marine-grade Baltic birch
LOUDSPEAKER: Single 8ohm Jensen Blackbird Alnico 40
CHANNELS: Single Channel, double input
CONTROLS: Volume, Tone, Reverb, Tremolo Depth and Frequency
FOOTSWITCH: 2-button vintage-style (reverb on/off, tremolo on/off; supplied)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Slipcover
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The new range includes the bigger Dual Falcon 20 2x10 combo (£2,449) and the start-up Falcon 5 1x10 combo (£1,659)

Gibson
00800 4442 7661
www.gibson.com



9/10

PROS Authentic vintage tone with luscious reverb and tremolo; beautiful styling details; Multi-Watt power scaling; that 'implosion' fuzz tone

CONS Faster tremolo speeds would be welcome and there isn't a huge amount of clean headroom due to the 6V6 valves; we'd be interested to hear it with 6L6s

Engaging the spring reverb and tremolo creates a warm and evocative backdrop, as if we're transported back into an early *Bond* soundtrack. Both the reverb and tremolo have a hot, valve-y tone at higher depth settings, too. The valve-powered tremolo in particular has a beguiling shape to its swells, although the tempo doesn't extend beyond a mid-tempo throb.

Pumping the volume to halfway brings on a garage-rock bark with bags of period-correct authenticity. *Whole Lotta Love*, for instance, sounds closer through this amp than any other in our collection. Once the volume control is pushed beyond halfway, the tone begins to incrementally compress and soften the attack. As we get to three quarters round the volume, notes begin to glue together with a vocal-like fluidity.

Plugging a humbucker-equipped guitar into the higher-gained Input 1 carries that compression into more saturated realms, nailing that late 60s/early 70s grainy distortion character that was so prevalent at the time. In the final quarter of the level control's travel we don't find any extra volume. Instead, we're rewarded with the amp's party piece: an imploding fuzz tone unlike any pedal we've heard, where notes are saturated to the point of disintegration.

Verdict

The Gibson Falcon occupies a unique place in the world of guitar amps, speaking with an authentic vintage tone all its own. It partners wonderfully with characterful

In the final quarter of the level control's travel you'll find an imploding fuzz tone unlike any pedal we've heard

low-to-mid output guitars, such as hollowbodies or offset cutaways, which perfectly complement its low-fi aesthetic. It would have been nice to have faster tremolo speeds available, but it's still a gorgeous throb of a sound.

The power-scaling features worked flawlessly in bringing this (albeit not particularly loud) amp down to domestic, even night-time levels. The Falcon would make an excellent studio-based recording amp or even a wonderfully decadent amp at home, and if more volume is needed for stage use, its monitor output jack can be used to feed the Falcon's full output to an additional clean amp.

The vanishingly small chance of finding an original Falcon in perfect condition at anywhere near an affordable price makes the case for this amp's re-release. Indeed, all that's missing here from the authentic vintage experience is the crackling knobs and intermittent reverb, the lack of which will be mourned by no-one at all! With this stylish Falcon, Gibson has engineered a superb-sounding time machine, ready for your trip back into sonic history. **G**

FIRST PLAY



LAVA ME AIR £499

WHAT IS IT? Effects-equipped 'smart' carbon fibre electro-acoustic guitar complete with app integration

Smart Cookie

Lava is hellbent on revolutionising the acoustic guitar. Forget what you know about spruce and cedar – this one's boasting about carbon fibre and onboard effects

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Phil Barker

As we reach the second quarter of this century, it seems that nothing is safe from the 'smart' revolution. What started with our phones and TVs has made its way through our rigs and, now, the movement that we're calling 'The Internet of Strings' has reached our acoustic guitars. "About bloomin' time!" we hear you cry. Because it's true, no good music has been made on an unplugged steel-string. Ever. You can't even hear it over a drummer and, frankly, we don't know how the dreadnought ever made it this far...

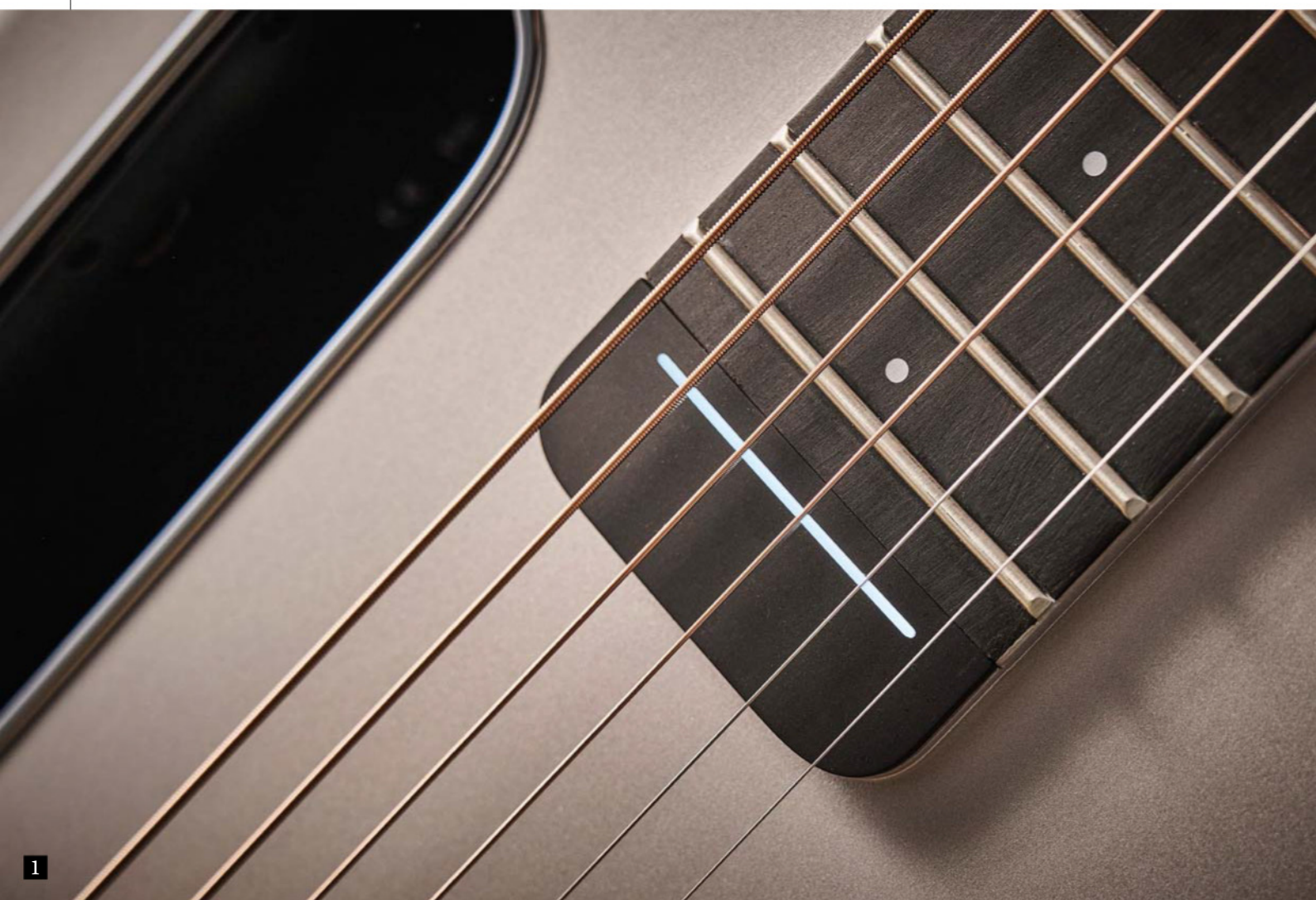
In case AI and interconnectivity have stifled your perception, we are, of course, being sarcastic. Plus, the 'smartification' of our strummers isn't exactly new, either. Lava Music has been around since 2013, and the Lava ME Air we're looking at here is the latest in its now fairly substantial line-up of acoustic guitars. Unfamiliar? Here's the nutshell.

It's a carbon-fibre bodied acoustic, with a 'honeycomb bionic' structure. This combo serves up a few benefits. It's lightweight and it increases strength and rigidity for durability and near impervious defence against the traditional acoustic guitar's biggest enemies: temperature and





You get five customisable effects presets featuring delay, reverb, chorus, wah and pitch. These are routed through the output, but the headline is that they also emanate from the guitar itself when engaged, adding a real extra dimension for 'round-the-house' playing



1

1. The Lava ME Air is equipped with a magnetic pickup, but inside the soundhole there's a roller control for blending between this and an 'acoustic simulation'. We found our favourite settings somewhere around the mid-point, but both sound great through an amp

humidity fluctuations. Finally, carbon fibre is also pretty good at resonating and projecting sound.

Using a shorter 597mm (23.5-inch) scale length, the fingerboard is made of HPL (High-Pressure Laminate), just as we've seen on plenty of Martin guitars before, and – while not everyone's cup of tea – it does have the bonus of removing inconsistencies while also putting up a fight against humidity changes.

What ran the risk of being a toy-like guitar actually proved to be some serious fun

As well as the non-traditional looks and materials, the Lava ME is packing electronics that aim to bring the acoustic guitar into the 2020s. A magnetic pickup is nestled at the body end of the 'board; just as we've seen with Yamaha's TransAcoustic range, it's also home to

digital effects. You don't even have to plug in to hear them! Add Bluetooth connection to the Lava+ app and an internal rechargeable battery (via a USB-C), and the Lava is looking rather smart indeed.

Feel & Sounds

Getting started with the manual, website and Lava+ app, you'll find it's all very Apple-inspired. Words such as 'unibody', overzealous inter-capped naming, and even the finish names (our review model is Silver, but it also comes in the oh-so-Cupertino Space Black). But get past that and keep your mind open.

Strumming our first chords, the tension from the strings at a shorter scale took a bit of adjusting to – barre chords felt slightly fatiguing and our hands got a bit cramped. Once you're over that, the next thing you'll notice is just how smooth the tuners are, followed by the sound. Unplugged, it's not an unpleasant response, but it's also not particularly characterful, either. This isn't a bad thing, but don't expect us to reach for

2. It looks like it came from anywhere but a guitar-maker's workshop, and we applaud it. As with other Lava instruments, the ME Air is looking beyond tradition. It has an intentionally sterile appearance, although the ME 4 Spruce is available with a spruce top if you'd rather something a bit more familiar

3. Its shorter scale length and thin design just about put the Lava ME Air in the 'travel guitar' category. However, our review guitar's string tension combined with the shorter scale made it a slightly unforgiving player to begin with



the usual lexicon: it's an even, balanced, almost lab-grown flat response. Not too bright, not too bassy.

The fun really begins when you engage the effects, which include chorus, delay, reverb, auto-wah and pitch-shift. These are controlled by three knobs on the guitar's shoulder. The control on the far right switches through presets with a press (and serves as the volume control when plugged in), while the other two controls are assignable. Each of the presets blends two effects, and out of the box the controls are already assigned to common parameters such as delay rate or reverb mix. Start playing unplugged and you'll probably grin the first time you hear your sound swirling and repeating its way out of the soundhole. It's addictive – and they sound good, too. We did experience some digital noise when switching between presets, mostly due to killing reverb and delay tails abruptly.

Plugged in, we can blend between the blade-style magnetic pickup and a rather

vaguely described 'acoustic simulation' via a soundhole-mounted volume wheel. There's no latency with the latter, and to our ears it certainly doesn't sound synthetic. The magnetic sound is decent, too, with a bit more brightness and the midrange brittle sound that we'd expect. Of course, the effects are also routed through the output, so you can make use of them in a live setting or, ironically, enjoy your acoustic guitar through your headphones.

Verdict

Overall, the Lava ME Air surprised us. What ran the risk of being a toy-like guitar actually proved to be some serious fun, and the fact that we found ourselves immersed in the sonic side of it long enough to make us late for our deadline is probably the biggest benchmark. Is it perfect? No, but it kept us playing. And in a world where 'smart' things turn our attention away from instruments, we can't say fairer than that. **G**



LAVA ME AIR

PRICE: £499

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Electro-acoustic 'smart' guitar

TOP: AirSonic carbon fibre composite w/ honeycomb bionic pattern

BACK/SIDES: AirSonic 2 carbon fibre composite

MAX RIM DEPTH: 65mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 325mm

NECK: Airsonic 2 carbon fibre composite

SCALE LENGTH: 597mm (23.5")

TUNERS: Lava zinc 20:1, 3-a-side

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic (PPS)/43mm

FINGERBOARD: HPL composite, 400mm (15.75") radius

FRETS: 17

BRIDGE/SPACING: HPL w/ synthetic (PPS) saddle/55mm

ELECTRICS: Magnetic pickup, on-board effects, 3x controls, USB charging, output jack

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.1/4.62

OPTIONS: N/A

RANGE OPTIONS: Lava ME 4 Carbon (£1,249), Lava ME 4 Spruce (£617), Lava ME Play (£489)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Silver, Space Black

John Hornby Skewes & Co Ltd

0113 286 5381

www.lavamusic.com

8/10

PROS Slick design; great-sounding amplified effects; addictive playing experience married with good standard acoustic sounds

CONS Slightly uncomfortable playability; lots of fluffy information/instructions; it's a big departure for traditionalists

FIRST PLAY



ELECTRO-HARMONIX POG3 \$599

WHAT IS IT? A polyphonic octave generator for a variety of pitch-shifted effects



Pitch Perfect

Updated and enhanced, this latest version of the POG expands its pitch-shifting and tone-shaping possibilities

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. Each red LED glows brighter as its slider is pushed up. The light will blink if a slider is moved after a preset has been loaded, to indicate the value no longer matches that of the preset
2. Use the footswitches to scroll through and load presets. Press and hold for a faster scroll or press the first two together to deactivate the current preset and go back to Live mode (physical knob positions)
3. The Focus button toggles between the original POG algorithm and a Pitch Fork-style algorithm for the +1 and +2 octave voices. This allows Whammy-style pitch bends and freeze effects via an expression pedal
4. The Navcoder knob is situated at the top-right corner of the unit and navigates menus, parameters and presets, and adjusts settings. It has three actions: rotation, centre-press and four-way directional pad

Electro-Harmonix seemed to hit the ground running in 2005 when it released the first version of its Polyphonic Octave Generator, which offered several octave voices with solid tracking. Since then, there have been plenty of different POG versions and several related spin-offs including two HOG pedals and the '9' series that emulate the sounds of various keyboard instruments. And now we have the ultimate expression (to date) of it in the POG3.

The new pedal has a much more upmarket feel than its predecessor, sporting three footswitches and red LEDs on each slider. But it offers more than just a facelift as there's an extra slider to add in a +5th voice, 100 onboard presets, and an enhanced effects section with individual dry effect routing and expression control over almost every parameter. The POG3 generates extra voices one and two octaves up, and one and two voices down (plus that new 5th voice). Each has its own dedicated slider so they can be blended with or without the dry sound, which also has its own (Dry) slider.

A variety of treatments can be applied to the generated voices – and optionally to the dry sound – via three more sliders and three knobs. The treatments are to set the Attack time for a fade-in, to adjust a Filter for tonal options or synth flavours, and to apply Detune for a spacious chorus/doubling effect. You also get individual pan knobs for each voice slider if you use the stereo outputs.

There's great tracking here and instant access to the practical use of straight octaves, such as getting bass sounds from a standard guitar and faux 12-string (or even 18-string!) sounds. Beyond those are realistic organ sounds and plenty more that's traditionally the province of a keyboard player.

10 factory presets will get you started, but operation is straightforward, making it easy to conjure up ethereal and otherworldly sounds that are crying out to be fed into ambient reverb/delay. For real-time performance options, you can add an expression pedal for Whammy-style pitch bends, and control of the filter for wah, synth sweeps and more.

Verdict

If you like what a POG does, you'll love this! Taking things to a new level, this is sonic wizardry at its finest for those looking to get creative with sound. **G**



ELECTRO-HARMONIX POG3 POLYPHONIC OCTAVE GENERATOR

PRICE: £599

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Polyphonic Octave Generator pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 100 presets, mono or stereo output, 6 separate voices, 6 expression modes, direct output for input signal, comprehensive MIDI capability

CONTROLS: Navcoder, Master Volume, Input Gain, 6x Pan knobs, Dry, -2, -1, +5th, +1, +2, Attack, Filter, Detune, Q, Env, Spread, 3x Dry buttons, Left button, Right button, Direct button, Exp button, Focus button, Preset down footswitch, Preset up footswitch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard outputs (L & R), standard Direct Out, EXP/CV In, MIDI In, MIDI Out, USB

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied) 300mA

DIMENSIONS: 180 (w) x 148 (d) x 67mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com



THE RIVALS

If you like the idea of the POG but can't stretch to a POG3, EHX has some less expensive options: the POG2 (£319) is still available; check out the small-format Micro POG (£189), Nano POG (£179) and Pico POG (£197); and the Soul POG (£315) combines the effect with overdrive. EHX also has various other pedals that do pitch shifting, including the Pitch Fork+ (£177). If the idea of dropping more than £500 on a pedal doesn't phase you, there's always Eventide's H9 Max (£529) with 45 different algorithms providing a host of classy effects, including plenty of pitch shifting.



PROS A comprehensive reimaging of the POG; solid tracking; easy hands-on operation; presets; red LEDs; added 5th voice; external control options; direct output

CONS EHX pedals are generally quite affordable, but you'll need deep pockets for this one

FIRST PLAY



**WALRUS AUDIO
VOYAGER PREAMP/
OVERDRIVE MKII**
£245

.....
WHAT IS IT? A greatly updated
version of the brand's original
Klon-style pedal



Outer Limits

Walrus Audio revitalises its very first pedal, the Klon-emulating Voyager, with some tasty additions

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The Mode knob offers five variations of overdrive texture via different diode clipping options
2. Midrange EQ is brought in with a footswitch. Meanwhile, the Freq knob sets the centre frequency in a range from 250Hz to 2kHz, and this can be cut or boosted by the centre-detented Mid knob
3. Our review pedal is finished in 'seafoam' style green with black ink and the Voyager satellite graphic, but it's also available in matt black with cream ink and a space helmet graphic

Walrus Audio started up back in 2011 with its first pedal, the Voyager Overdrive, a three-knob Klon-style stompbox that found favour with the likes of Joe Bonamassa, Ed O'Brien and Nels Cline. Now, for 2025, the company has brought out an updated version that greatly expands on the original.

The Voyager MKII sports the obligatory Volume, Tone and Gain knobs, but it supplements those with a rotary switch that offers a choice of five variations of the diode clipping circuitry, plus a footswitchable parametric mid-frequency EQ. While the Tone knob operates a low-pass filter to place the top-end where you need it, the midrange EQ section targets frequencies at the heart of electric guitar sound – the centre frequency can be set between 250Hz and 2kHz, and cut or boosted by 12dB.

The pedal is excellent in use as a clean or low-gain boost, offering a natural clarity that can be further enhanced with any tonal shifts you care to dial in and some grit from the Gain knob's lower reaches. Once you start turning that Gain up, the various clipping modes come into play for player-exploitable variations in both feel and sound.

The sound of the original Voyager pedal – and perhaps the most accurately Klon-like as it utilises 1N34A germanium diodes – is found at position 1 on the rotary switch. This is the most compressed of the five options, and there's an alternate variation of this with a little bass boost at position 2. Position 3 switches to the sound of symmetric silicon diodes, which opens up the sound somewhat and has more of a response to dynamics. The least amount of compression is found at positions 4 and 5 where asymmetric silicon diodes deliver the most driven sounds, with position 5 adding bass boost. Whether it's just-breaking-up tones or full-on drive, the five modes offer plenty of variations on the theme, while the Mid EQ can not only sculpt that further but can also be used as a switchable variation on it, maybe a presence boost for solos, that will give you two sounds underfoot.

Verdict

Any number of Klon-style pedals go beyond the original three-knob paradigm for extra flexibility, but these alternatives often offer no more than really subtle changes in tone and response. Walrus has gone well beyond that proposition here with the inclusion of its switchable midrange, which makes the Voyager MKII a very flexible drive/boost pedal. **G**



WALRUS AUDIO VOYAGER PREAMP/OVERDRIVE MKII

PRICE: £245

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Drive pedal

FEATURES: True bypass, choice of 5 clipping modes, footswitchable mid EQ

CONTROLS: Volume, Tone, Gain, Mid, Freq, Mode, Mid footswitch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 100mA

DIMENSIONS: 67 (w) x 125 (d) x 57mm (h)

FACE bvba

+32 3 844 67 97

www.walrusaudio.com



PROS Compact size; diode clipping options; footswitchable midrange; top-mounted jacks

CONS The price will put it out of reach of some players



THE RIVALS

The obvious rival here would be J Rockett's Archer Select (£299) with its seven selectable diode options; a Clipping footswitch engages your selected clipping diode but defaults to the stock diode when off. Officially the nearest thing to a vintage Klon would be the Klon KTR (£399), Bill Finnegan's very own reworking of his original pedal, handmade in the USA. For something that looks like an original Klon, albeit much smaller and eminently more affordable, check out the new Behringer Centaur (£69). In a similar price bracket is Electro-Harmonix's Soul Food (£79), which has plenty of Klon flavour.





the Wishlist

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

PRS Private Stock 40th Anniversary McCarty Dragon £18,995

CONTACT PRS Guitars WEB www.prsguitars.com WORDS Dave Burrluck PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Barker

Back in 1992, PRS Guitars was just seven years old and plenty of people thought the first Dragon guitar was the beginning of the end. For a brand in its infancy known for high-end opulent guitars, that Dragon was a 'love it or hate it' run of just 50 pieces aimed not for the stage but for very well-heeled collectors. In reality, that particular guitar was more the starting point: a redesign of the recipe.

Up until that stage, PRS's set-neck guitars were only available with 24 frets. The Dragon introduced a shorter (and stiffer) 22-fret Wide Fat profile neck with a longer heel and a slightly steeper headstock back-angle in an attempt to improve the sound. "Ralph Perucci and I designed it on my kitchen table at Christmas," Paul Reed Smith told this writer back in the day. "We talked about the changes, and I knew we had to change the neck. Any time I'd found an old guitar with a short, fat neck it sounded better."

That first '92 Dragon also introduced the PRS Stoptail one-piece wrapover bridge and another first was the set of covered humbuckers (Dragons, naturally). This design led directly to

the standard production Custom 22 in 1993, followed by the McCarty Model in 1994.

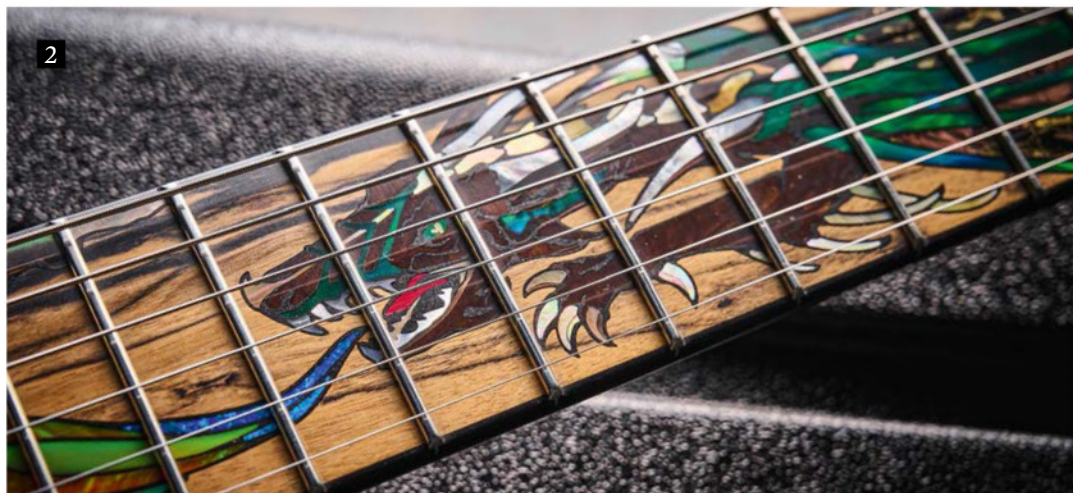
Just shy of £20k, today's 40th Anniversary Dragon is the 10th Dragon we've seen since 1992 and it's certainly a sizeable investment (although the 2005 20th Anniversary Dragon Double Neck cost an eye-watering £32k on its launch). This latest model is limited to 165 pieces, with 40 heading to the UK and Europe.

The new Dragon is based on the PRS McCarty platform and has a mahogany back and Private Stock-grade figured maple top – "the kinda flame maple people dream of," says Paul. "This is the rare stuff!" The neck is ziricote and the fingerboard is Gaboon ebony with a pale moon ebony insert. It's all finished in a gloss nitro Burnt Chestnut.

"I don't want to just make some piece of art," says Paul Reed Smith today. "I want it to be an extraordinary instrument. It should be able to be used at a recording session, a gig. It should be a helluva guitar. That's important to me and that's what I really like about this 40th Anniversary Dragon." **G**

1. The intricate 207-piece fingerboard inlay extends to the truss rod cover, and the headstock features the Private Stock-only eagle inlay. The back of the headstock is hand-signed by Paul Reed Smith and head of Private Stock, Paul Miles

2. The inlay design was drawn by Jeff Easley of *Dungeons & Dragons* fame – a relationship that goes back to the '94 Dragon III. The inlay comprises more than 200 pieces including blue Pacific opal, brown scale Juma, and gold, black, white and brown mother-of-pearl. It was realised by Aulson Inlay who continues the work of the late Larry Sifel and Pearl Works, which made the original Dragon inlay possible



3. The production version of that first Dragon (without the inlay) was the 1993 Custom 22, which used the changes in the design and was the first non-limited guitar to feature the Stoptail bridge and (uncovered) Dragon Treble and Bass pickups. The ceramic-powered Treble aimed for a big 'fat' voicing "with zero loss of clarity", said PRS, while the Bass pickup was lower output and more PAF-like with an "angelic" high-end. Those original first-version Dragon pickups are now highly desirable among PRS aficionados. "We always used Dragons to release new pickups," says Paul today. "While those Dragon Is were about us dipping into more turns to give it a throatier sound, the new McCarty IIIs [see caption 5] are throaty but in a very clear way"

4. Paul Reed Smith says: "When I was a teenager, I had a dream about a guitar with a dragon inlaid down the neck. That dream has since become an important part of our history." It's actually the 10th PRS Dragon Guitar – the first one, back in 1992, had a US list price of \$8,000 and was used personally by Paul Reed Smith for his gigs and clinics. But from that first Dragon, the opulent inlay was almost a smokescreen for the changes and innovation the new design brought to the PRS guitar

5. These new McCarty III pickups are "vintage-inspired pickups that bring a vocal clarity to their full, warm tone" – and this is all PRS is saying. *Guitarist* contributor Neville Marten recently had a chance to play this 40th Dragon and commented: "I was reminded just how good a PRS guitar can sound – that rich, dark flavour that cleans up really well and sounds very sweet. It's a proper grown-up sounding guitar"

6. As with the first Dragon, the machined aluminium PRS Stoptail bridge is used, but here it employs the small brass inserts under the string break points, another small tonal tweak that's favoured by Paul Reed Smith, and the same bridge that's used on his Paul's Guitar





Gas Supply

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

Gibson Mary Ford Les Paul Standard £2,599

CONTACT **Gibson** PHONE 00800 44427661 WEB www.gibson.com

JARGON CRUNCHING

Golden Wonder

Before the 'Burst stole its thunder, the Goldtop was the king of Les Paul finishes. However, unlike the exposed, bookmatched two-piece tops found on Les Pauls since they went 'flame', the top beneath the gold paint job wasn't always uniform, ranging from plain single-piece to figured multi-piece tops. The way to find out? You'll need to take the finish off, unfortunately!

That's a Les Paul...

Correct – but not just any Les Paul. As the saying goes, behind every great man, there stands a great woman. What we're looking at here is the latest Les Paul: a signature model for Iris Colleen Summers, who you might know better as Mary Ford.

Mary Ford? I thought she was the voice while Les played the guitar?

There's no doubt that Mary's voice was the focal point, and while Les was no stranger to the charts prior to the pair's musical and romantic partnerships, Mary's voice doubtless contributed to the success of their hugely popular *How High The Moon*, which spent nine weeks at the top of the Billboard chart. But Mary was no slouch on the guitar, either.

Okay, so why release this model now?

Well, Mary – whose life was cut short in 1977 after battling alcohol addiction – was born 100 years ago in 1924. While she never received a 'signature' model during her life, the Gibson Mary Ford Les Paul Standard is here to pay tribute to the woman herself.

Tell us more...

This model is based on a Les Paul that Gibson believes was built to order for Mary back in 1958, and it's an old-school Les Paul in nearly every way. As you will be able to see from the pictures, it comes in the quintessential finish of the 1950s: Goldtop. And, as you'd probably expect, it's made from the classic Les Paul recipe of a mahogany body, capped with carved maple, and a mahogany neck.

You said "old-school in nearly every way". Are you talking about that plastic thing?

That 'thing' is actually an armrest. Mary was a fan of the ES-295, which featured a floral design on the scratchplate. For her Les Paul, it's believed that Mary specified the same design alongside a matching one for the armrest on the body.

So what makes it less original? Weight relief?

Nope, this is a full-fat, non-weight-relieved Les Paul Standard, just like the current Standard. The main difference is that, rather than having a chunky 50s neck, the Mary Ford model features a SlimTaper profile.

STANDARD

Mary and Les were married by the time the Les Paul was first issued. Here, we have a full-weight, 50s-style replica with a red finish on the back

ARM REST

As well as the decorative floral scratchplate, it's believed that Mary Ford spec'd a matching arm rest to ease the fatigue of the Les Paul's tight edges

BURSTBUCKERS

Mary's original was ordered in 1957, placing it in the 'Goldilocks zone' for LPs. For the 2024 replica, Gibson has gone with Burstbucker 2 and 3 humbuckers





While the headstock still bears Les Paul's name, this golden-era signature marks the importance of Mary Ford's contribution to their partnership

Elsewhere, this LP has a Cherry back finish, which is rarely seen on a Goldtop. The 50s nostalgia continues with Deluxe Kluson-style tuners (Keystone buttons) and gold 'top-hat' control knobs.

Shouldn't it have P-90s?

Nope! Since this is based on a '58 model, it's emulating a guitar that would have been fitted with PAF humbuckers. Here, Gibson has opted for Burstbucker 2 and 3 models,

Based on a Les Paul that Gibson believes was built for Mary in 1958, it's old-school in nearly every way

which, as we've witnessed plenty of times before (most recently, in Dave Grohl's signature Epiphone) have more than enough beef for modern palates.

What's the damage, then?

It'll cost you £2,599, which is £200 less than the price of a regular Les Paul Standard 50s Goldtop. It comes with a hard-shell case and is available now. [SW]

NECK

Fans of big, chunky 50s-style necks look away. The Mary Ford model is a 50s throwback, apart from its SlimTaper neck profile



ALSO OUT NOW...

BOSS KATANA-MINI X £149

In the past 12 months, we've seen no fewer than eight Katana releases from Boss (including the short-lived Katana Go). Now, it's going for number nine with the all-new Katana-Mini X. This overhauled version sits outside of the core Katana line-up and features a number of new features. The cabinet has been redesigned, this time in wood instead of plastic, and the previous Mini's reliance on AA batteries is gone, in favour of an internal rechargeable battery. There's also Bluetooth built in – with no need for an adaptor, which even the bigger Katanas can't say! Finally, there are three amp models onboard, each with three variations and 10 effects (including staple reverb/mod/delay along with synth, auto-wah and defretter).

www.boss.info



HEADRUSH FRFR-GO £134

With more modellers and preamp pedals aimed at taking us direct than we can count, HeadRush has spotted a gap in the market for anyone who wants to play at home. The FRFR-Go is a full-range, flat-response speaker cab that sits on your desktop and plays nicely with your modelling/emulation pedals. It's 30 watts, with a line-level input designed to connect directly to your modeller. Control-wise, you'll find a master volume and three-band EQ section, plus you can stream music wirelessly (and simultaneously) via Bluetooth. Inside, there's a pair of three-inch speakers and a rechargeable battery offering 13 hours of playing time, plus it'll also run off mains power.

www.headrushfx.com





Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Steve Logan

Album: *Psych Ward* (Flip Flop Records)



Steve Logan's sixth album, *Psych Ward*, is out now www.stevelogan.co.uk

Cardiff-based singer, songwriter and guitarist Steve Logan makes intricate music that blends folk, Americana, blues and rock, sometimes with an acoustic edge and sometimes in an all-out rock style. *Psych Ward* leans on a more energetic sound, particularly on songs like the terrific *Jesus Is My Vaccine*, inviting comparisons to bands such as the Manic Street Preachers. "I wanted to blend everything I had done before," Steve explains. "So British blues-rock, West Coast Americana and this Welsh post-punk, indie pop-rock. I wanted to try to put all of that stuff together."

Writing Politics

The album's multiple styles come together with an emphasis on strong writing, often with a political bent, much like the Manics. "People tend to realise my favourite band is the Manic Street Preachers," Steve says. "I've followed them for a long time and I grew up near them. Lots of the songs are about political things. *Jesus Is My Vaccine* came out of reading an article about a Trump rally and the banners people were putting up at the time.

"On this album there is certainly a strong focus on the lyrical content. I wanted the lyrics to be important. But you have to be careful, otherwise people can say that it's just setting poetry to music, which it isn't."

Freed from the constraints of playing in covers and tribute bands, Steve's own songs offer a political bent

Louder Than Words

"For a long time I was in a touring tribute band to Free and Bad Company," Steve says. "I founded and fronted that band, and what I learned from singing Free songs was that the words were often quite simple but they released a passion and energy in the singer. And that's what the audience keys into because they often can't hear the words. I think of lyrics and music as being aspects of each other and they make one thing."

Beyond Compare

As a discerning musician, it's no revelation that Steve is as thoughtful with his guitar sound as he is his lyrics. "The acoustic was the focus of my attention for a long time," he tells us. "When I started playing electric I went through the usual difficult transition people have when they do it that way round. I remember realising that you didn't have to play full chords or stay at one end of the neck. Eventually, I started to develop a more blues-based, pentatonic style of playing, which you can hear on this album."

But Steve states that he is still primarily about passion: "Because I've studied Neil Young, I'm aware that there are loads of guitarists that could knock spots off of him, but I'm also aware that he's often referred to – by very technically adroit players – as a benchmark of a particular style because he's aware of his limitations and hasn't spent his energy trying to perfect his technique. I think I've carried that forward."

Walking The Tightrope

When it comes to playing live, Steve likes to alternate between acoustic and electric, giving his sound more diversity. "I was once listening to a bootleg of Neil Young playing at The Bitter End [in New York]," he says. "It was a solo acoustic album and I was listening to it in the dark and being completely absorbed. I feel that when you do the acoustic stuff, you're drawing listeners into a sort of communion with yourself that is ideally profound.

"With the electric sets, the dynamic range is wider. The opportunity to focus on lyrics is restricted, but the opportunity to focus on guitars is increased. In the electric sets, there'll be long solos and band interactions. I know audiences enjoy that kind of tightrope walking." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Jesus Is My Vaccine*

For fans of: Manic Street Preachers, Neil Young, Free



PHOTO BY PAUL SHEARMAN



“In the electric sets, there’ll be long solos and band interactions. I know audiences enjoy that kind of tightrope walking”

DYNAMIC DUO

Discover the guitars that capture Steve’s sound

We asked Steve what one guitar he would grab from his house in an emergency. “Can I have two?” he asks. “My favourites are a Martin HD-35 and an Olympic White 1989 Mexican Strat. The Martin sounds fantastic and sound engineers love it; it’s so responsive. And I’ve just bonded with the Strat. I know my way around it, I’ve had it a long time, and I’ve worn out the selector switch. I just feel very comfortable with it.”



Albums

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

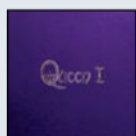


Queen's historic 1973 debut gets the remix and remastering treatment

Queen

Queen I

Virgin (available now)



Deluxe boxset and remix of Queen's first album

For many, the first introduction to Queen's music was on BBC's *Old Grey Whistle Test* in 1973 when the track *Keep Yourself Alive* was aired with a promotional film and the assurance from presenter 'Whispering' Bob Harris

that no synthesisers had been deployed during the recording. So what was that wash of knee-trembling harmony that we heard around two-and-a-half minutes into the song? Ladies an' gentlemen... Brian May and the Red Special!

It was a heck of a debut that those of us of a certain age remember to this day – and we were still a couple of years away from being similarly jolted by *Bohemian Rhapsody* at this stage. And so it was that Queen's first album blasted its way into the world and fixed itself in the consciousness of an entire generation, from the opening phased guitar of the aforementioned *Keep Yourself Alive* to the tease of *Seven Seas Of Rhye* at its close.

Five decades on and *Queen I* becomes the band's first album to receive a full remix and suitably regal boxset accompaniment, which includes a 108-page book detailing the band's history. As for the remix itself, it includes the track *Mad The Swine*, which was missing from the original 70s vinyl release. The set's six discs includes demo versions of the album tracks, BBC sessions from the period, backing tracks and much more. Overall, it is a sublime retelling of a momentous first outing that details the power and majesty of a band destined to become a legend. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Liar*

For fans of: Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, The Who

Manic Street Preachers

Critical Thinking

Sony Music (available 31 January)



Sweeping, intelligent alt-rock

The Manics have always occupied a unique niche in alternative rock: cerebral, bleak at times, yet anthemic and strangely uplifting. Their 15th studio album since their 1992 debut, *Critical Thinking* sees the band extend their sonic signature of expansive choruses and soul-scrutinising verse into more maximalist territory. As always, the band finds the universal in the particular, from the wide-open chords and simmering angst of *Brush Strokes Of Reunion* to the poignant song-portraiture of *Dear Stephen*. James Dean Bradfield's deft guitar parts are by turns lithe and full of momentum. He's a far more adept player than some might credit him as being, but he plays so instinctively in service of the song that we hear that skill more as part of the vital fabric of the composition, rather than showboating. The work of a band in full maturity, *Critical Thinking* explores the fault lines of modern life with verve and honesty. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Being Baptised*

For fans of: New Order, Johnny Marr, Simple Minds

Genesis

The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway 50th Anniversary

Rhino (available 28 March)

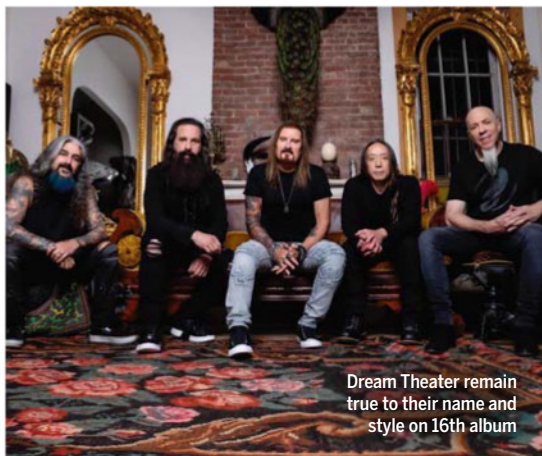


Prog masterpiece receives timely remaster

It's actually 51 years since Genesis released the album that was to be their last with Peter Gabriel, despite this being touted as a 50th Anniversary reissue. It was 1974 and prog still reigned supreme among the flared jeans and trenchcoated youth, and *The Lamb...* was the answer to that generation's prayer: a double concept album from one of rock's more eccentric and eclectic bands. Riding on the success of 1973's *Selling England By The Pound* and its hit single *I Know What I Like (In Your Wardrobe)*, *The Lamb...* was a complex piece of storytelling and an even more complicated live show. Here, its hero Rael lives again in this crisp remaster, and fans will be thrilled with the addition of a full live performance from The Shrine in LA from 1975, a Dolby Atmos mix, a 60-page book and sundry memorabilia galore. Progtaastic! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Back In NYC*

For fans of: Yes, Floyd, Crimson



Dream Theater remain true to their name and style on 16th album

Dream Theater

Parasomnia

Out Music/Sony Music (available 7 February)



Album 16 from prog metal's finest

There's plenty to be joyous about in the Dream Theater camp. To begin with, the band has just celebrated its 40th anniversary in the business with a tour that hit London last October, and then there's the return of prodigal son Mike Portnoy to the fold. As a result, this is the first album that has seen this line-up since the release of *Black Clouds & Silver Linings* in 2009. For the uninitiated, the album's title, *Parasomnia*, relates to a raft of sleep disorders, a subject that dominates the album's lyrical content. From the album's opener, Dream Theater is on familiar territory, entering with a crash on *In The Arms Of Morpheus* and moving on to tracks like *A Broken Man*, which is an angry Metallica-influenced outing with 16th-note flurries and ominous riffing from fretmaster Petrucci. An album full of dark delights that will enrapture the band's dedicated fanbase. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Dead Asleep*

For fans of: Metallica, Queensrÿche

Smith/Kotzen

Black Light/White Noise

BMG (available 7 March)



Muscular, virtuosic solo-fest

The latest tag-team outing from Iron Maiden's Adrian Smith and Tele-shredder Richie Kotzen is like a neon time capsule from Los Angeles, circa 1988. The guitars are fast and hot, the lyrics grizzled but full of yearning – and the freeway beckons ahead. The track *White Noise* sets the tone with its grinding rhythm track, which takes a swing at social media flooding the collective imagination with insecurity while 'killing joy'. Social commentary aside, there's shred-hot, virtuosic lead playing in plenty here – the album is a real solo-fest – while the songwriting is purposeful and hard-edged. The duo are at their best on *Heavy Weather*, whose sinuous, bluesy riff evolves into a loping chorus with characterful vocal performances from messers Smith and Kotzen, who buddy up in hard-rock duet mode here very effectively. It may not break unique ground, but there's much to enjoy in this midnight ride in the shotgun seat of Smith/Kotzen's musical imagination. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Heavy Weather*

For fans of: Queensrÿche, Whitesnake, Guns N' Roses



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Tones Behind The Tracks

Gillian Welch and **David Rawlings** tell the story of the return to their beloved Nashville studio and a remarkable record that bears its name

Artist: Gillian Welch & David Rawlings

Album: Woodland (Acony Records)



Named after Woodland Sound Studios, the new album from Gillian Welch and David Rawlings celebrates the comeback of this Nashville landmark

Welch and Rawlings are continuing the legacy of the recording artists who graced the studio before them, from Willie Nelson and Emmylou Harris, to Johnny Cash

The long-awaited new album of original material from Gillian Welch and David Rawlings comes 13 years after they worked together in a co-writing capacity on *The Harrow & the Harvest* and four years since cover album *All The Good Times (Are Past & Gone)* was released in July 2020. Just a few months before that, in March 2020, the pair's historic Nashville studio was torn apart by the devastating tornado that hit the city – and now this 10-track album, produced by Rawlings, is something of a celebration of the return to their beloved space. “That whole experience and the aftermath definitely changed things,” begins David.

How does it feel to be back in the studio?

Gillian Welch: “I’m just so grateful to still *have* a studio, after the tornado. Everyone who worked on this record felt the same way. Between takes, I would see the other musicians just looking around the big A room smiling. Woodland Studios has been a Nashville fixture for 60 years. I can’t imagine the town without it.”

David Rawlings: “We were able to get back in there and work with a drummer and bass player. I was also able to arrange strings and horns for a few of the tracks. To be able to use Woodland for everything it’s good for and to use that building, with all of the work that had gone into it, to try to make it all bear fruit, was a very empowering feeling.”

What happened in the weeks and months after the devastation of the tornado?

David: “We stopped being on the road and we had a lot of reconstruction to do; I had to spend most of my waking hours in the studio, other than when Gillian and I would play and work on songs [at the couple’s house]. Something happened to our playing then because we had a routine and we had just a couple of instruments there. I ended up playing this old D-28 that I kept at the house and one of my old Epiphones that was there.

“Playing different instruments does change things. I use my main [1935 Epiphone] Olympic a lot for arranging, and we often use a lot of capos for varying the tonal palette of the guitar. When I was playing that D-28 I hardly used the capo at all. Even if I was in something like C#, I would play it naturally and I enjoyed what that did; it brought something different to the arrangements. I used that D-28 on the *All The Good Times* record.”

What did you want to achieve with this new album?

Gillian: “Pretty much what I’m always trying to do: not suck, continue on the artistic path that David and I started upon 30 years ago, and write songs that only we would write. I never ever could have foreseen the trials presented by the last few years, and yet here we all are. I wanted to capture some of that destruction and endurance on the album if we could.”

And how did you decide upon the sound of the record?

Gillian: “We knew it was not going to be minimalistic, at least by our standards! Even the duet tracks are more intricate than parsed. We wanted to play and fill the room with music, and expand the songs a bit, so we invited in other musicians on bass and drums and pedal steel and strings. But our two acoustic guitars are still at the core of all of it.”

David: “When we went back to the studio, I returned to the Epiphone but with a bit of a different toolbag. I don’t think that would have happened without that prolonged period at home where I was doing some experimentation. If that disaster hadn’t happened, I might have spent more time with guitar books and playing around, and things might have developed in a different way. You can find bad in everything that happens, but you can find good in it, too.



PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFK JEN 2024

"I never could have foreseen the trials presented by the last few years... I wanted to capture some of that destruction and endurance on the album" Gillian Welch





David's 1935 Epiphone Olympic archtop featured heavily in the recording of the album



PHOTO BY ALYSGEAKJEN 2024

"Some of the tracks we recorded in Studio B, capturing things similarly to on *The Harrow & The Harvest*. *Here Stands A Woman* is closest to that, but something like *The Bells And The Birds* was recorded in the B room but with more of a stereo mic'd sound to capture the instruments in the air – a bit like *All The Good Times*. *Howdy Howdy* was done on the banjo in a way similar to something like *Hard Times*. And some of the band stuff is reminiscent of [Gillian's 2003 album] *Soul Journey*. It was a case of throwing the kitchen sink at it!"

"To be able to use Woodland for everything it's good for... to try to make it all bear fruit, was a very empowering feeling" **David Rawlings**

***All The Good Times* was recorded at home whereas *Woodland* was back in the studio. How did that affect your approach to recording this time around?**

David: "The studio's just a bigger space. But the living room isn't a very neutral acoustic environment; you hear the reverb in the room and down the hall. The space is more present on that [previous] record and there's nothing you can do about it. In the studio you can tailor it a little bit. The microphone on *All The Good Times* was a single [Neumann] SM 2 that was capturing both of us at the same time. But when we got into Woodland, we used a lot of the techniques I've worked on over the years. We were able to do things that were very intimate. I set it up so I ran the tape machine from the live room, so Gillian and I were able to record certain tracks like *Hashtag* or *Lawman* just by ourselves, with no engineer. And that was inspired partly by the stuff we did by ourselves with *All The Good Times*."

Tell us about the acoustic feel you've created on the record.

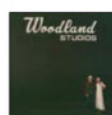
David: "It was interesting to me that I think the track *Lawman* captures our acoustic guitars in a different

way than before; it has a different side to it. I was playing a different guitar, an old Epiphone Emperor Concert, which they only made three of. They did one for Johnny Smith, who helped with the design, and two others that they took to a trade show in 1949, but nobody ordered any so they didn't go into production. It's a very innovative design: Johnny Smith wanted this kind of chamber jazz instrument with a very smooth, even sound. I play that on *What We Had* and *Lawman*, and it has a very different tonal palette."

Was there a particularly special instrument that you were drawn to on the album?

Gillian: "While we were finishing writing the record, David found me an extraordinary Gibson J-35 with a white pickguard that was Ed Bruce's, the cowboy singer-songwriter who wrote *Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*. It is beautiful and lonesome sounding, especially the low string, which is like a church bell. I wrote some of the record on it, and I'm playing it on *What We Had*, *Empty Trainload Of Sky* and *Lawman*."

David: "I played my main [1935 Epiphone Olympic] on quite a number of the tracks. I played that Emperor on two songs, and I played a different Epiphone for *Bells And The Birds* because it's a little livelier and the harmonics sounded a bit better, which was good for that track. Gill played her [Gibson] J-50 quite a bit, but she also played that J-35, a slightly earlier version of that guitar. It's a very rare and interesting version because it has that custom pickguard that Gibson put on in around 1940 and it's unlike any other pickguard that was on these things. I think she used her Martin 2-17 on *Here Stands A Woman* and her rosewood [Gibson] Nick Lucas on the *Turf [The Gambler]* track." **[GK]**



Gillian Welch & David Rawlings' new album, *Woodland*, is available now on Acony Records

www.gillianwelch-davidrawlings.com

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Plectrum Spectrum

Neville Marten recalls a plectrum incident with the great Alan Murphy, and ponders whether spending £30 on a pick might actually be worth it

Back in the 70s my brother found an Edwardian tortoiseshell pendant in the shape of a spade you'd find on a playing card. The hole where the chain went had broken away and it was all but useless for its original purpose, so I whittled it into the shape of a Jim Dunlop 'Stubby' pick... For ethical reasons, real tortoiseshell wouldn't be allowed today, but being a natural material, it had a slight 'rasp' when you stroked it against the string. Needless to say, the plectrum soon became my inseparable friend.

I worked at CBS Fender in Enfield at the time, and various luminaries would come down to check out instruments. Fender's John Hill would invite artists down and I'd tweak the guitars if they needed it. We sorted out David Gilmour with the metallic red and white Strats he used for years, I helped Freddie Mercury's assistant find the white Tele that the singer played on stage with Queen, and I assisted Hank Marvin with a Fiesta Red Strat or two.

Alan gave me a wry smile when I told him. Sadly, he was already unwell and it wasn't long before we lost one of the guitar world's best-kept secrets.

Despite my appalling picking technique, I've always had a thing for plectrums. I love finding new ones, trying different materials and assessing whether they really make a difference. They do. A good old standby is the Dunlop Jazz III, the larger red one, which to my ears sounds better than the black version. Another great pick is by Wegen (in The Netherlands). They're supposed to be for bluegrass pickers, but they sound excellent and feel good. I like the white one with the grippy holes in it. They're £17.50 for a pack of four.

Really Picky

There are several manufacturers that fall into the 'boutique' category, some of which cost upwards of £30. One such brand is Red Bear. Guthrie Govan has a signature model at \$35. I've always smarted a little at paying that much. But when you think about it, you can spend plenty on your guitar, another lump on an amp and pedals, and even a cable can cost £100. But we resent shelling out for the very interface that connects us to all this money's worth of gear. I've discovered the 'wrong' pick can make you sound average, but the 'right' one will put all that tone back.

I recently found a plectrum at home. It felt great and gave a thick, warm tone. It became my go-to. The writing had partly worn off, but looking closely it was a Red Bear and I had no idea how I came to have it...

So maybe it is worth forking out a little more? Looking around, the nearest thing to my old tortoiseshell plectrum might be the D'Addario 2mm Casein pick for £33.99 (see below). The Dunlop Primetone is great, too, at just £11 or so for three.

I reckon this topic would make a great round-table podcast, with different picks, players and sound bites. Perhaps I'll chat to the powers that be... Let us know your thoughts and see you next time. 

"In cartoon-style slow-mo, the pick danced like a ballerina in the air before plunging down a drain hole in the road. Gone! I was mortified"

Another regular visitor was the lovely Alan Murphy. What a player he was! One day Alan said, "Nev, I've forgotten my pick, can I borrow one?" I handed him my torty and he, too, fell in love with it instantly. "Can I buy it off you?" he asked. "It's my favourite pick and I made it," I whimpered. He never did prise it out of my possession.

That weekend I had parked my car outside my girlfriend's house and was fishing for my keys to unlock the door. As I retrieved the clump of keys from my pocket, up came the tortoiseshell pick, too. In cartoon-style slow-mo it danced like a ballerina in the air before plunging down a drain hole in the road. Gone! I was absolutely mortified.



NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH PICK OF THE CROP

What? D'Addario Casein Plectrum **Where seen?** www.stringsdirect.co.uk **Price?** £33.99

Here's what D'Addario says about this rather special plectrum: "For years, the tortoise or turtleshell pick has been heralded as the ultimate material for guitar tone. Our Casein picks are made from a dairy protein, which is the closest in tone and feel to natural tortoiseshell that we have found." D'Addario reckons the tone is loud, warm, and with plenty of definition. "The edge is bevelled for smooth transitioning between strings, but the tip remains pointed for precise playing." Would you shell out (sorry!) over £30 for a pick? I think I just might!



On The Clock

This month **Alex Bishop** considers time management and the formidable task of preparing for an acoustic guitar build

When I tell my lutherie students that building an acoustic guitar from start to finish can take around 200 hours, I'm never quite sure whether they will perceive if that's a long time or not. Given that the raw state of my materials resembles a tree more than it does a musical instrument, and that I work almost exclusively with hand tools, perhaps you could be forgiven for thinking it is a Herculean task beyond the scope of any straight-thinking enthusiast.

What I propose, however, is that one should consider the acoustic guitar to be an assemblage of many components: the neck, sides, back, top, fingerboard and hardware. Breaking down the project into smaller chunks is an obvious way to make it more digestible and organised. However, it helps to have some idea of where the major challenges are likely to lie.

For a first guitar, acquiring the necessary jigs and fixtures is not to be underestimated. But there are some useful suppliers out there who will happily furnish aspiring builders with external moulds, templates and plans if they're willing to pay for it. The 'can-do' attitude of a lot of guitar makers, however, makes it perfectly realistic to make all of these fixtures in-house – which is essential for those luthiers who want to design their own instruments, rather than follow the herd.

Time Flies

A straightforward design free of elaborate inlay and intricate purfling will cut down the project time; once construction begins I recommend factoring in around 80 to 100 hours for a first instrument, depending on previous woodworking experience and confidence.

I prefer to start with the rim assembly (10 hours), which includes bending the sides and trimming them to fit in the mould. The numerous glueing operations that go into the soundbox means that you'll always be able to work on something else while the glue dries.

Making the back (six hours) is the perfect warm-up exercise before tackling the more complicated soundboard. Thicknessing, jointing, outline cutting and brace shaping are repeated on both sides of the guitar, so it makes sense to work on these while the bent sides are settling down in the mould. The soundhole and extra bracing on the soundboard all adds time, but by keeping the rosette inlay to simple concentric rings stops the schedule from spinning out of control (13 hours).

In between glue runs on the front and back bracing, I normally begin construction of the neck. This part of the guitar – with its profiled surface and carved transitions – appears to be one of the most complicated components. And yet even with a hand-tool led approach, a well-thought-out method should see that plank of timber turn into a fully shaped guitar neck in a relatively swift 14 hours.

By this point we're approaching the crest of the hill; all the work 'under the bonnet' has been completed and the general assembly is to follow. Bringing together the front, back and sides – 'closing the box' – is satisfyingly quick, but the main time-drain is the (very rewarding) job of installing binding, as well as other finishing details: adding the end graft inlay and bevelling the soundhole edge. With the body construction (10 hours) complete, this woodworking project may even be starting to look like a thing of beauty...

"Breaking down the project into chunks makes it more organised. However, it helps to have an idea of where the challenges are likely to lie"

The most critical step in the build comes next – and that's the union of the neck and body. Getting the angle exactly right is difficult, but it's time well spent to ensure perfect playability and favourable tone. The fingerboard and its attachment to the neck wraps up the final assembly (10 hours) and the finishing process awaits: 20 hours or more of French polishing, significantly less if one is opting for wipe-on oil finish.

Final setup can be a short-lived process if lucky, but occasionally guitars take a little while to bed in, requiring truss rod adjustments and nut filing until everything sits just right (10 hours). It's all been worth the effort, though; that first chord is the start of a whole lifetime of music making. **G**

Building an acoustic guitar by hand is a time-intensive endeavour – and so it's important that Alex schools his students on realistic timescales



PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON



Boutique Acoustique

Neville Marten asks, what exactly makes for a great acoustic guitar tone – materials, construction techniques or simply the luthier's art?

When guitarists discuss 'tone', it usually involves which electric guitars, amps, pedals and speakers might provide the ultimate sonic bang for buck. It's also unquestionably true that the law of diminishing returns mostly applies, where you spend 100 per cent more for 10 per cent of perceptible improvement. When it comes to acoustics, the situation seems even more nuanced, although unsurprisingly the diminishing returns scenario remains.

Traditionally speaking, steel-string acoustics or 'flat-tops' are built using a restricted palette of timbers. So we're talking rosewood, mahogany or maple back and sides, usually some variant of spruce, or sometimes cedar and occasionally mahogany or koa for the top. Necks are invariably mahogany or something either related, species-wise, or similar in nature, sometimes maple, and fingerboards are commonly rosewood or ebony.

However, in recent times, partially due to the disappearance and therefore legal protection of many of these so-called 'tonewoods', that narrow selection has been broadening. Companies such as Lowden in Northern Ireland, Taylor in California, bespoke builders including Rosie Heydenrych of Turnstone Guitar Company, and many others, have been employing koa, redwood, African blackwood, walnut, ovangkol, sapele, bog oak, reclaimed urban timbers, and all types of exotic or esoteric alternatives.

Like many, I have preconceptions about mahogany versus rosewood bodies, spruce versus cedar tops, what jumbos do best and where smaller bodies excel. George Lowden is founder of a brand that makes some of the finest, most innovative and desirable acoustic guitars

that money can buy. During his busy schedule he was kind enough to answer a few questions on the subject of acoustic guitar construction and tone.

So George, how do types of timbers affect a flat-top's tone?

"Personally, I believe the overall design and the way of making each guitar affects the final sound more than the wood choice. Once the design and methods of assembly are optimised, it's then that the tonal differences – provided by wood texture, density and grain fibre configuration – all begin to affect things. From one extreme, say, African blackwood, to another, say, mahogany, there will be a significant tonal difference. Same thing goes for soundboard woods; Alpine spruce is very different from sinker redwood and so on."

What about the effects of bracing, which seems like something of a dark art?

"After 50 years of making guitars I'm still learning and listening and trying new things. The big picture and challenge is to brace a guitar in such a way that it's structurally very stable, giving it longevity but at the same time encouraging it to breathe and be sensitive. So achieving the strength and stiffness needed but keeping the weight of the bracing as light as possible will help to make the guitar respond easily. This is especially important for fingerpicking. However, for heavier flatpicking a slightly stiffer bracing works best – as it does for guitars that are going to be plugged in."

How do you manage to build the definite 'family voice' into Lowden instruments (it goes for other brands, too)?

"It's mostly about design differences. The assembly methods have a large effect; for instance, how much stress is introduced during the glueing processes. The sound of my guitars came about because, from the very first instruments back in the 70s, I didn't get an American guitar and copy it. In my naivety, I just used a basic X-brace design, but I had no idea whether it was similar to a Martin or whatever. Therefore, the sound was always different and I experimented with bracing and construction ideas to try to make it better and better over the years. I listened to feedback from players and just tweaked things with the aim of increasing sustain and balance."

Unusually, your guitar necks feature multi-timber, laminated construction.

"Well, I knew that a laminated neck construction (three or five-piece) was stronger and less likely to warp than a one-piece neck. Then I discovered by accident how nice the five-piece looked down the heel when using a rosewood laminate in between the mahogany pieces. We also cut



Lowden Guitars recently celebrated its 50th anniversary; its founder, George, built the first guitar to bear his name back in 1974



the two outside mahogany pieces from one larger piece of wood, reverse the grain direction and glue up, making it even less likely to warp afterwards"

Can a guitar builder deliberately 'tune' an instrument to sound a certain way?

"Of course, but it's not painting by numbers. I can have a certain sound I'm trying to get for a certain player and I will build in certain voicing characteristics. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

Are you constantly on the lookout for the next rosewood or mahogany substitute?

"Yes, I am. But I find that all the exotics, like cocobolo, Tasmanian blackwood, African blackwood, Claro walnut, Koa, Madagascar rosewood and Central American rosewood varieties, all have great tonal characteristics and I'm happy to use them all. Trying new woods is always an adventure. I count it as a great privilege to be able to work with these species."

The bracing of an acoustic guitar top is a critical stage in its build, as George explains: "The challenge is to brace a guitar in such a way that it's structurally very stable, giving it longevity but at the same time encouraging it to breathe and be sensitive"

"The lengths we go to, in terms of wood choices and how we process it, all combine to give our guitars their sound and balance and feel"

Which are your favourites among the more-esoteric timbers?

"My favourites are Madagascar rosewood, which is very very like Brazilian rosewood in tone, namely very subtle and fine, and African Blackwood, which is ultra fine and clear and loud!"

What makes Lowden different from other high-end acoustic guitars in construction, tone, or whatever?

"The design is different inside and out. The lengths we go to in terms of wood choices and how we process it (even the strut materials we split first, rather than just sawing) – the smooth finish inside, the very stable neck, the hand carving of the bracing and so on – all combine to give our guitars their sound and balance and feel. It's a never-ending journey of discovery and I feel very privileged to be on it, designing and making guitars in the hope that they will inspire musicians to write new music to give joy to the listeners."

In conclusion, and as any good chef will tell you, the finest ingredients poorly seasoned, overcooked and unappealingly presented are unlikely to produce a great meal. It seems the same is true with acoustic guitars. It's a balance of all the above, with each builder proud of his or her own particular recipe in bringing us instruments that brim with aesthetic beauty and sonic flavour. 

<https://lowdenguitars.com>

THREE TO GET READY

Supremely toneful options



Martin D-28 Authentic 1937 Aged £9,750

With its classic dreadnought design, the D-28 is perhaps the archetypal acoustic guitar. The Authentic 1937 Aged is the ultimate, but many cheaper versions are available. Built using the classic combo of rosewood body (beautifully grained Guatemalan), Adirondack spruce top (torrefied to mimic ageing) with herringbone inlay, mahogany neck, abalone-inlaid ebony fingerboard with 44.5mm bone nut, it's a thing of simplistic beauty. Add a cannon-like voice with huge projection and the D-28 is the flat-top that does everything well.



Gibson SJ-200 Original £5,499

Another acoustic that can trace its heritage back almost 100 years, the 'Super Jumbo' is a handsome beast. Its flamed maple build, hand-painted flower motif pickguard, four-bar 'moustache' bridge and cloud inlays make it one of the most ornate, too. A legendary strummer, stick a good microphone in front of it and let the guitar do the rest. And if you play live, the onboard LR Baggs VTC pickup won't let you down.



Lowden S-50 Honduras Rosewood/Adirondack £9,785

This elegant instrument is constructed from the finest figured Honduras rosewood, with Adirondack spruce top, and features an ebony fingerboard with stunning leaf inlays and a pearl-edged soundhole rosette. The five-piece neck looks fabulous and ensures stability and strength. All in all, it's as good looking an instrument as you'll find, and with Lowden's legendary tone and butter-like playability, it could be that 'forever' acoustic you've been searching for.



More Altered Chords

Richard Barrett builds on last issue's column to explore more about the practical uses of altered chords on the fretboard

In the previous Substitute, we looked at the difference between extended and altered chords, and I wanted to give some further examples and explanations of how altered chords work in practical terms. After all, the guitar can be a tricky instrument on which to conceptualise music theory! All but one of the examples here have been altered – namely, at least one note has been raised or lowered from where you would normally expect to find it in the 'parent' scale. We'll talk about which one is the odd one out (and why) later.

We can get some pretty dissonant 'murder mystery' type chords without having to get our fingers in a twist. However, most chords don't present themselves to us neatly on the fretboard in linear scale order in the way in which they do on the piano keyboard. This can be off putting until you realise that virtually all altered chords are based around a small selection of more familiar shapes. Have a look for yourself. **G**

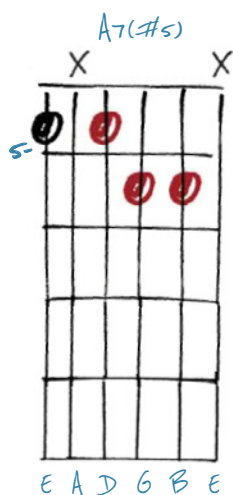
Robben Ford likes to use altered chords and frequently references them in his solos



PHOTO BY ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

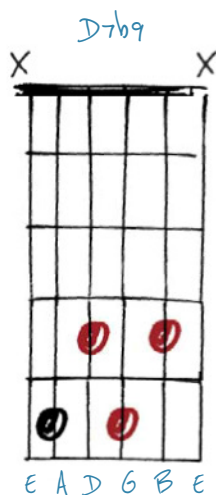
Example 1

Based on the regular A7, this version omits the 5th (E) you might normally expect to find on the fifth string, but if we look at the second string there is a #5 (F) at the top. A #5th is often referred to as augmented, so if you see A7(aug 5) on a chord chart, this is it!



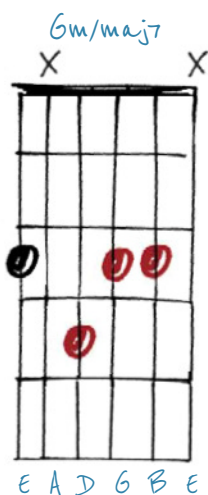
Example 2

This would be a D9 chord, but if we look at it from low to high, we have: root (D) - major 3rd (F#) - dominant 7th (C) - ♭9 (E♭). The E♭/♭9 is the note that makes this an altered chord. Play this after a D7(#9) and end with E minor and you'll recognise a fragment of Pink Floyd's *Breath*.



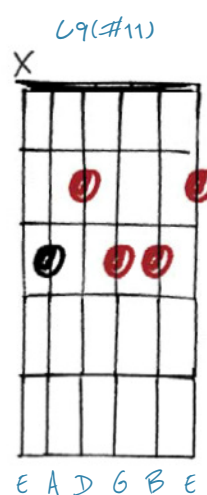
Example 3

This is based on a Gm7 chord, but instead of the dominant 7th (F), this features a major 7th (F#). We've just found the odd one out! A ♭3rd does not count as 'altered' in the theoretical sense, neither does a dominant/♭7 or major 7th. Still a great chord, though.



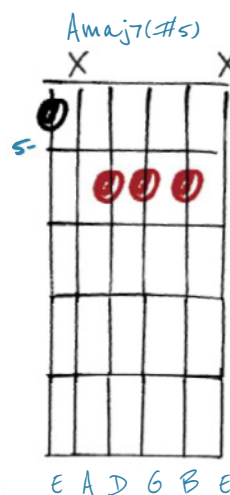
Example 4

If you rake down across the strings slowly, this sounds like a regular C9 chord. However, once you get to the first string, that F# is raised, as opposed to the F you usually find in the C major scale. That's why this is an altered chord. It's much nicer than adding a regular 11th (F) on top.



Example 5

This very dramatic chord is an Amaj7(#5). Shifting (altering) the 5th up a semitone from E to F on the second string takes us from pretty love songs to 'murder mystery' territory. It's worth noting that using a dominant 7th in this chord (G) would bring us back to the A7(#5) of Example 1.



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STAR LETTER



NECK & NECK

In response to your request for further ideas on the back of Richard Patrick's feedback in issue 518 for household items to use on guitars, I thought I'd share a nifty idea of my own. Whenever I do any work on my guitars and require the neck supported, I use an old yoga foam block that I've cut to accommodate the neck. I've been using this for years and it works perfectly.

The foam block provides a wide surface area for support, the block material is never going to cause any scratches to necks, and it doesn't slide around. It was also dead cheap. You can pick them up in TK Maxx or Home Bargains for £5. Even better, shaping the curves on the different sides means that it works great for electrics in the lower position, but flip it over and it provides a higher neck support for acoustics and semi-hollow guitars.

Here are some pictures of it in use doing a restring, fret polish and fretboard conditioning. You may recognise my Chris George Custom from the cover of issue 458, which was the trigger for me purchasing it!

Neil Pragnell



A yoga block is transformed into a neat neck support

Brilliant! Thanks Neil, that's a great life hack for anyone who's maintaining guitars. While some lutherie tools are best bought from a specialist retailer, this is a perfect example of where you really don't have to spend much to get a practical, safe and supportive accessory for setups and the like. Nice one – we're awarding you this month's Star Letter prize, too. Have any readers got any money-saving suggestions that can match Neil's? Send them in and we'll print the best.

OFFSET UPSET?

I was fascinated by Dave Burrluck's article in your Mod Squad column in issue 518, particularly by his comment, "Does the world really need another S-style, T-type or even offset?" It struck a chord as I was in a similar mind when I set to building my recent lefty guitar for myself and striving to come up with an original design.

The 'Blue Leopard' finish was inspired by the blue leopard/Jaguar on the rear of Free's *Tons Of Sobs*, one of my fave albums. The shape, while undeniably "another offset", is surely original in that it is kind of an extreme offset – so extreme that it falls off a normal stand and has to go on one of those stage stands where it hangs, rather than sits.

I took it to a jam to show off my original design and a mate said, "It looks like an Aria Diamond AD SG-12T." Rats! Maybe there is truly nothing new under the sun. I'm still proud of it, though – especially as I made it for about £70 with a piece of free worktop, plus a used neck and other bits off eBay.

Rod French



Rod's lefty offset is a real head-turner with a finish inspired by Free's *Tons Of Sobs* album artwork



Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!
www.voxamps.com

Thanks for sending in pics of your fabulous feline, Rod. In truth, there are very few completely original outlines in guitar body design, so don't feel too bad! Perhaps we may say, with Sir Isaac Newton, that 'if I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants'. Most guitar designers use something from the past as a precedent. Leo Fender may have made the Strat headstock immortal, but we can trace its origins back – via Paul Bigsby and CF Martin – to Johann Stauffer and his 19th century acoustic guitar designs. Though, as you've discovered, going towards the extremes of geometry can have minor drawbacks – like the guitar not wanting to lean against an amp. Well worth it for such a stunning result, though.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

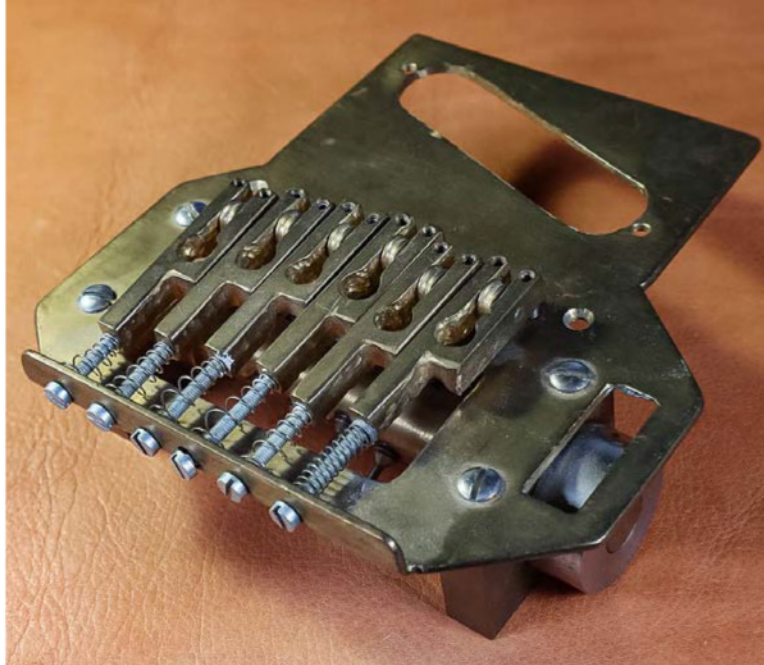
Neville Martin's 'Hit List' article about studio musicians brought back some fond memories. After college I needed to move back home to LA and get a job in 1974/'75. I wound up finding one as a delivery person for a liquor store on Sunset Blvd. Doesn't sound so great, but the job held some great surprises. We delivered only to accounts so there was no money involved. Our accounts involved many of the music sources around Hollywood. These included Studio Instrument Rentals (rehearsal spaces), the Hollywood Bowl, A&M Studios and many others. This dumb starter job at minimum wage plus tips allowed me to deliver to Harry Nilsson, Roger McGuinn, Joni Mitchell, Barry White, Bonnie Rait, The Moody Blues, and even watch Donovan do a soundcheck at the Hollywood Bowl. Yep, lousy job, no benefits, worked till 2am but...

Bob Gervais

That's brilliant, Bob – what a roll call of musicians we'd love to meet. I guess they need refreshment as much as anyone else. Possibly more! That is the saving grace of some jobs that would otherwise be humdrum; they can have cool perks. Have any other readers had a brush with guitar stardom while doing otherwise unconnected jobs? Send in your stories and we'll print the best.

TUNED TO PERFECTION

It was interesting to read about the Powers Electric [A-Type] and the Bigsby-style vibrato that stays in tune when playing chords in issue 518. The idea isn't new, however. About 30 years ago I designed a vibrato system based on a similar principle – and surely someone back in the 50s must have done more or less the same.



The idea came to me when I changed the setup on my pedal steel guitar and realised that a thin string needed far more travel to reach a certain pitch compared with a thicker one. So I created a prototype with individually adjustable leverage for each string. This crude contraption – only built to prove the concept – also included roller saddles, needle bearings and Strat-style springs. It was installed in a modified Telecaster (long since scrapped) and it worked beautifully. Six-string chords stayed perfectly in tune during vigorous bending up and down, and returned to zero without hesitation. Since the fully floating mechanism was hidden under the bridge plate, resting my hand on the bridge saddles didn't affect the tuning at all.

With a bit of development work it could have been a lot more compact, but back then I had too many other projects to attend to. Then about six years ago, when I bought a Gretsch guitar with a Bigsby, I immediately saw how that design could be adapted – but Powers obviously beat me to it, in a very elegant way, and I wish them great success!

Per Berner

Thanks for sending in details of your unique and ingenious vibrato system. They say that when faced with a particular problem, we'll often see examples of convergent design by engineers who have no knowledge that others are working on similar solutions – your vibrato and that of Andy Powers a case in point here. Andy's one of today's most thoughtful, original luthiers working at the top of the industry and it's typical of his design work that he doesn't just shrug and call it good but instead goes the extra mile to develop a solution that knocks the problem on the head and offers a smoother, more sonorous (and tuneful) playing experience.

Following our review of the new Powers Electric A-Type with its proprietary Camtail vibrato, reader Per felt compelled to share his own problem-solving design with us, too

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

VIC FLICK

1937–2024

The veteran gun-for-hire played on sessions for The Beatles, Tom Jones and Dusty Springfield – but his chief legacy is the tough, wiry riff from the *James Bond Theme*

Words Henry Yates

Vic Flick – who died on 14 November, aged 87 – was not a widely known name. Yet as one of the UK's most prolific session men of the 60s, and beyond, every single one of us will have heard his work. From Dusty Springfield's *I Only Want To Be With You* to Tom Jones's *It's Not Unusual*, via The Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* film, Flick had a hand in many of the era's stone-cold classics. And while he was reportedly only paid a £6 fee for his credit on Monty Norman's *James Bond Theme*, he would dine out reputationally for the rest of his life on that suave guitar riff.

One of the golden generation of Surrey guitarists (albeit a few years senior than Clapton, Beck et al), Victor Harold Flick was born in May 1937. Always dedicated to his guitar playing, in one interview he



PHOTO BY NEL BOUZAD/GETTY IMAGES

“I leaned into those thick low strings, played it slightly ahead of the beat, and it came out exciting, which fit the James Bond image” VIC FLICK

recalled practising until the tips of his fingers bled on the Gibson Kalamazoo he bought at the age of 14.

He joined the John Barry Seven in the late 50s, which ensured he was well placed when Barry was hired to rearrange Norman's theme for 1962's *Dr No*. Flick suggested that the instrumental should be dropped an octave, so creating the low-slung sound that Norman said captured “Bond's sexiness, his mystery, his ruthlessness”. Playing a '39 Clifford Essex Paragon Deluxe archtop – and raising the guitar's DeArmond pickup closer to the strings by means of a “crushed cigarette packet” – the rest came down to the attack of Flick's right hand.

“It had an edge to it, sort of a dynamic sound,” Flick told Jon Burlingame for *The Music Of James Bond* book. “I overplayed it – leaned into those thick low strings with the very hard plectrum, played it slightly ahead of the beat, and it came out exciting, almost ‘attacking’, which fit the James Bond image.”

With *Dr No* grossing \$6 million at the box office – and Flick's barbed-wire jangle indelibly tied to Sean Connery's secret agent – the session man found himself in high demand. A run of Bond soundtracks logically followed, including *Goldfinger* and *From Russia With Love*, and while he once reflected that George Martin could be an impatient taskmaster (“He had a bit of an attitude, a bit of, ‘I say, old chap, come on!’”), the Beatles producer turned to Flick for the Fabs' debut feature film of 1964.

“Mostly, The Beatles kept apart, sitting at the table in the corner, unlike the session guys who would come in and spread themselves all over the place,” recalled Flick. “I did some special pieces, like the *This Boy* theme in *A Hard Day's Night*, where I play my Fender Strat when Ringo is walking along the river.”

Drawing on his seemingly endless versatility, from the mid-70s Flick went on to work on several movie soundtracks for Merchant Ivory, and also reconnected with Paul McCartney for the bassist's 1977

Thrillington album. A decade later, while working with Eric Clapton on another (ultimately halted) Bond soundtrack, he watched his own shot at stardom evaporate. “After we finished the *Licence To Kill* soundtrack [1989],” said Flick in a 2001 interview with *Guitar Player*, “one of the suits said, ‘We'd like to sign you up to be a featured soloist.’ Off they went back to America with their briefcases. I waited and waited. I eventually phoned: ‘What's happening about my being a star?’ ‘Sorry, Vic. That's all off...’”

Yet 007 continued to cast a long (and welcome) shadow. In 1999, the guitarist was backed by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra for the tribute album *Bond Back In Action*, and he moved with the times to work on the music for Electronic Arts' 2005 video game, *From Russia With Love*.

However, it wasn't until 2013 that Flick received perhaps his defining career accolade, when he was presented with the National Guitar Museum's Lifetime Achievement Award.

In recent years, Flick had been living with Alzheimer's disease, which claimed him at an LA care facility last month. But, as one of our last great sessioneers, Flick's musical immortality has been secured by that enduring Bond riff, its enigmatic bite still carrying an evocative shiver of glamour and danger. **G**

BILL PUPLETT

1946-2024

The esteemed luthier and guitar expert cast his repairing magic over decades of dedicated practice

Words Mitch Dalton

On the first occasion that Bill Puplett returned an instrument to me (a Guild F-50 jumbo acoustic), my reaction was one of astonishment. There seemed to be only two possible explanations: either he'd purloined the unplayable, pudding-sounding original and substituted this sublime replica for it, or I was losing what passed for my mind. There was simply no resemblance other than physical to the disappointing box I'd handed in. We sat in his workshop, the tiny converted dining room of his bijou cottage in semi-rural Harrow Weald. He then proceeded to itemise the painstaking adjustments and improvements he'd performed. I resolved immediately to bring him my entire collection of instruments for evaluation, setup and modification as necessary.



Bill Puplett pictured in his meticulously organised workshop

PHOTO BY ADRIAN LEGG

In tandem with his skill as a luthier and repairer, an interview with Bill gave access to a compendium of guitar-based facts

And so began a relationship and then a friendship that was to last for 30 years. The dining room days ended eventually when Bill was able to construct a purpose-built workshop, cleverly disguised as a double garage adjacent to the cottage. A visit to his premises was to enter a world of tranquillity combined with meticulous organisation. You felt as if you might be in the presence of a Zen master. An atmosphere of unhurried calm pervaded the room while Radio 3 wafted gently in the background. Workbenches, clients' instruments and every conceivable spare part known to man (and some hitherto unknown) were arranged in humidity controlled, immaculate order. Of course, the epicentre of this private world was Bill himself, going about his business quietly and at his own unflustered pace.

In tandem with his skill as a luthier and repairer (the term 'artisan' scarcely did him justice), an interview with him gave access to a compendium of guitar-based facts that would have embarrassed

The British Library. One extraordinary example will suffice as proof of this remarkable repository of knowledge.

At some point during our guitar odyssey, we arrived at my Gibson L-4 reissue. Bill examined the instrument in trademark forensic fashion before declaring himself satisfied that he could improve it: "I don't want to involve you in unnecessary expense, but I strongly recommend that you replace all of the Kluson machineheads on this guitar."

I adopted my best poker face and asked for further enlightenment. "Because for a few years Gibson fitted a modified design, which, while looking identical to the traditional items, have been known to fail. Whereupon the four small screws that hold the cover in place are unable to withstand the internal force of the gear failure and the entire machinehead will explode. The string can then fly across the guitar with the potential to cause a facial injury. The maker reverted to the original design subsequently, but this particular

example was built before they did so." Remarkably – and unknown to him – this had already happened to my guitar a few years earlier.

Born in September 1946, Bill was considerably more than the sum of his spare parts. As an intensely private individual, few of his clients would have learned of his love of sailing, his talent as a painter and his enthusiasm for snooker. To say nothing of his ability as a guitarist. (This writer must move on swiftly from his support for West Ham United.) He also possessed a wicked sense of humour. On one occasion, having been taken to hear an underwhelming concert by a jazz guitarist and asked for an opinion, he replied, "I'm sure he's better than he sounds..."

It is a special person that draws the guitar Great and Reasonably Good to a funeral. Players as diverse as Johnny Marr, Adrian Legg, John Parricelli and John Etheridge were to be seen in attendance inside the packed chapel.

Bill died on 9 November 2024, aged 78. He will be deeply missed by his partner, Linda, his children, his extended family, his many friends and his hundreds of grateful clients. It's entirely possible that you may encounter one of the latter along the way – they will be shuffling along in a disorientated state, intoning the words: "What am I supposed to do now?" **G**

Larkin Poe



Seventh studio album, *Bloom*, sees Rebecca and Megan Lovell embrace family dynamics, take the spark from stage to studio, and serve up the guitars “neat”

Words Andrew Daly Photography Robby Klein

There are few bands that combine roots rock, classic rock, Americana and bluegrass with the blissful ease of Larkin Poe. As far as the guitars go, sisters Rebecca and Megan Lovell were born to do it. They're dyed-in-the-wool lovers of all things timeless, which shows in their music – especially their latest record, *Bloom*.

When reflecting on their approach to the guitars on *Bloom*, Rebecca keeps it short, telling *Guitarist*: “It’s just guitar served up neat.” But, of course, there’s more beneath the surface, Megan adds: “When flowers bloom, they don’t stay around forever; they die, wilt, fall off the vine and then another one grows. That’s how we view our process.

“We’re always looking toward the next mountain we’re going to climb,” she adds, “and we find a lot of joy in that. We do that instead of being like, ‘Oh, well, look, I have to climb up this hill.’ Instead, it’s, ‘I get to climb this hill and see what’s around the bend.’”

Fierce guitars and an array of vintage amps aside, *Bloom* is about growth, empowerment and knowing oneself after a long, arduous journey – which isn’t remotely over. In other words, art is never easy. But Rebecca wouldn’t have it any other way: “It’s the artist’s responsibility to dig deep and find what’s meaningful to them,” she says. “But you’ve got to do it without the fear of judgment that we’ll inevitably receive. So it’s the artist’s responsibility to put that out into the world and find resonance with other people who feel similarly...”

What inspired your latest record, *Bloom*?

Rebecca Lovell: “*Bloom* represents a cool moment for Larkin Poe. It’s the culmination of the efforts we’ve had underway for years. The preeminent focus is the songwriting process, and this album is one of the first projects that Megan and I have truly collaborated on from the ground up. As a result, you can hear a new moment of evolution in time for us as songwriters and players. We’re super proud of this newest chapter. It’s great to get into your 30s and let it all hang out.”

Megan Lovell: “We had a lot of success with *Blood Harmony* [2022], learned a lot from that process, and made a lot of strides. We came into *Bloom* with a good idea of what we wanted to create. We were writing for the live stage and thinking about touring while writing, and what might feel good to sing with people on the road. We’re a touring band, that’s our big focus, and we bring that spark to the studio with us.”

What gear did you bring to the table while searching for tones? Do you intentionally choose things that will contrast one another, rather than mirror?

Megan: “We’re classic-rock lovers; that’s the focus in tones. We like warm vintage-sounding tones, [and there’s] a lot of classic tones going into the process. For this record, I was listening to a lot of records, trying to find inspiration for new tones for myself. I was listening to David Lindley. I play lap steel and he’s one of the preeminent lap steel players

The latest album from Rebecca (left) and Megan Lovell marks “a new chapter” for the band and their songwriting process

of all time. Specifically, I listened to his tone on Jackson Browne's *Running On Empty*.

"And Tyler Bryant co-produced this record with us and was instrumental in helping us find tones as we were recording. We'd be talking about tone, and he was like, 'Well, let's just look up David Lindley's rig and try to put you through something similar.' We had a Dumble clone with such a cool tone – it was something I'd been searching for. We plugged straight into that and were like, 'This is it.' With every song, we tried to beat that tone with something different and we never could."

Rebecca: "For our recording process, since there are two of us as guitarists, we're not interested in having a whole tonne of overdubs. Not once on the record did we double the guitar or try to fatten up the choruses. It's a pretty rock 'n' roll outfit, so for my guitar sounds I'm typically plugging into – somewhat unexpectedly, to get a bigger tone – some really small amps to be a bit of a foil to Megan's big, fat, sort of wide lap-steel tone."

"She always comes straight down the middle, and I was playing through a [Fender] Champ and a Princeton. There's a cool manufacturer called Square Amps, who retrofits old radios and puts tube circuitry into the cool little vintage housings. I played a lot of guitar through that, but we didn't use a lot of effects. Maybe some here and there, like a Space Echo or a rack-mounted stereo, to create some cool, slappy tones."

Being siblings in a creative space must create a dynamic atmosphere. What's that like?

Megan: "We've known each other since the womb, so we've always been a package deal. Even as toddlers; we've always had projects together all through childhood. It's very natural that we ended up running alongside each other in life. There have been some tense moments throughout our relationship, but we have a really good working relationship."

"We put a lot of time, effort and communication into our relationship because that's what it takes. Anyone with siblings can appreciate that. It can be a fraught relationship if you don't treat it with kid gloves. But we also have Tyler Bryant, Rebecca's husband, so it's just the three of us, and that's an interesting addition to the relationship, too – but in a wonderful way."

"This album is the culmination of the efforts we've had underway for years as songwriters and players" Rebecca Lovell

"It makes for a safe, cosy recording process. We really know each other and love each other. We also have similar views on music and what we want our music to do. We are very much on the same page musically, which helps the process a lot. It's really quite special."

Rebecca: "Clearly, Megan and I, having grown up in the same household, have memory recall to the same classic records that shaped our lives from being toddlers strapped in car seats in the family minivan, listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, to our parents spinning The Carpenters, The Beatles, Elvis Costello, Fleetwood Mac and Black Sabbath, and then edging into classic rock and bluegrass."



PHOTO BY KRISTEN BOURDEAU

1. When it came to recording this album, Megan looked to lap steel luminary David Lindley for inspiration on tones and backline choices

"We grew up in a household that celebrated all genres. Sharing that experience with one another in terms of the genres that inform how we write and arrange our songs and riffs, and having Tyler Bryant co-produce, feels so special. [With Tyler] it feels like we have found such a kindred spirit in terms of musical interest. That really was one of the big reasons that he and I fell in love."

"We became buddies after realising that we loved the same kind of music. Our relationship with art, music, live shows, songwriting and guitar and gear acquisition syndrome is like walking on parallel paths. Leaning into that synergy as a family and digging deep to try to create the best songs and recordings is just second nature."

One of Bloom's standout tracks is *If God Is A Woman*, which feels more poignant than ever, given the current state of the world.

Rebecca: "Having grown up in the guitar music space, we remember a time when it was very rare to be on the festival circuit and see other women booked. We definitely have been the recipients of the experience of women with guitars being treated as a novelty. You can't help but respond to that experience – but not with a bad attitude but an attitude of empowerment to be the change we wish to see in the industry."

"When your run-of-the-mill, random guitar dude tries to instruct you on how to tune your guitar, you kindly let them know that you're aware of how a guitar should be tuned. You do your best to just rip on a solo and let them know that women are also here to play, that women can also do rock 'n' roll, and that we need a little bit of space with which to do it."

"It's cool to feel like a droplet in a wave crashing down on rock 'n' roll music. So many of my favourite bands are female-fronted. To be able to celebrate that journey and be a part of the change and to be able to say, 'Hey, girls can do anything that guys can do,' is amazing."

"By that token, perhaps the white male Jesus is actually a black woman. Perhaps that is the kind of future we need to envision for ourselves and to allow space for women to continue to expand and bring and share their creativity at the table."

"We've always been a package deal. It's very natural that we ended up running alongside each other in life"

Megan Lovell



Rebecca remarks that while they've been subject to "being treated as a novelty" as women playing guitars, she also feels empowered to be a part of a positive change within the guitar industry, especially on the festival circuit

Given the climate we find ourselves in today, are those issues getting better, stagnating or something else?

Megan: “We have to give some credit. Around five to 10 years ago, there was an outcry to festival promoters, complaining that the percentages of women on the bills were so small. There was a big response from a lot of promoters trying to rectify that, and we’ve seen a resurgence of women on festival bills. That’s really important because festivals are where a lot of bands find a foothold and are where people discover music. We are now travelling a lot and seeing a lot of women on bills along with us. Whereas before, there might have been only one or two female-fronted acts. Now, I think we’re creeping up there... I think women are finding a lot more support in music.”

Rebecca: “I also would speak to the idea that it takes two to tango. Actually, it takes *everyone* to tango. That’s not being sexist in either direction; we’ve had incredible male mentorship. Some of our biggest heroes who have put their faith in our abilities and go on tour with them are men like Bob Seger. To be in your 20s and have an artist say, ‘You know what? I want you to come and expose your music to my fandom. Come on tour with me...’ To be on stage with Keith Urban, Elvis Costello and all these guys who are really pulling their weight in the belief of equal representation for women in the music space is cool to see. It’s cool to see the temperature shifting in the music industry.”

“There’s a lot more space and a lot less judging books by covers. We’re allowing artists to speak and write songs the way they want to write. Having a space of acceptance feels really fabulous. We’re continuing to climb the mountain together, and it feels great.”

“Art isn’t something you can quantify, but we can look at Spotify plays and map it out for ourselves” *Megan Lovell*

Themes of growth, finding yourself and knowing yourself are prevalent throughout *Bloom*. How have those themes extended to your guitar playing and what conclusions can you draw about yourselves as artists?

Megan: “There were lots of conversations between Rebecca and I because it can be tense to be an artist – especially with these platforms where you can very easily compare yourself to other artists in a way that maybe we shouldn’t. Art isn’t something you can quantify with numbers, but here we are. We can look at someone else’s Spotify plays and map it out for ourselves.”

“That can be hard because you can get in your own head pretty easily and tear yourself down block by block until there isn’t anything left. We’ve been aware of this and speaking to each other about it, trying to work our way through that tangled mess. There’s strength in self-acceptance, knowing what you bring to the table, and finding your power within that. It’s an ever-evolving process.”

Has that process freed you from any expectations thrust upon you? And to that end, what are your expectations as you move forward?

Rebecca: “It’s very tempting to believe there is a right and wrong way to do things. Realistically, it’s all on a



2. Rebecca sees *Bloom* as a vehicle for “finding power and letting it hang out”

spectrum. It boils down to the individual expression. With *Bloom*, just as Megan said, it’s about finding power and letting it hang out. This record feels like we’re not trying to be anything other than what we are.

“For me, especially as a guitarist, it’s taken me many years to embrace my identity. I grew up playing a lot of bluegrass guitar; that was my introduction. That’s hard to shake, and whenever I’m playing electric, you know, it’s taken me years to lighten up my right hand to where I’m not breaking strings every 30 seconds.”

“At times, I’ve felt the temptation to be judgmental of how I play and describe myself as ‘not a true electric guitarist’ because I came from a unique perspective. But in reality, that’s the bag I carry. That’s the hand I was dealt. If I accept those angles of myself, I can share that unique, quirky, left-of-centre side of guitarmanhood with the world. That’s what I’m able to give people.”

At the top of the conversation, Megan mentioned that Larkin Poe is a live band at its core. How does playing live add to your growth as guitarists?

Megan: “We’ll be doing a lot of touring in ’25. I’m very much looking forward to it, especially considering we have a couple of months to go into rehearsals and work these songs up. I think anybody who tours a lot and consistently, and rarely takes long breaks from touring, can attest to finding yourself in ruts, where you’re like, ‘Whoa, it’s another show...’

“It can feel like *déjà vu*. It’s your responsibility as an artist to break yourself down and get yourself out of that rut. I’m looking forward to spending a lot of time over the next few months working on not thinking too much while on stage. I do find myself not enjoying when I’m playing; I have to get into this meditative space where I’m not in my own way, which is easy to do if you get stuck. I’m looking forward to getting into that space next year.” **G**



The new album by Larkin Poe, *Bloom*, is set for release on 24 January via Tricky-Woo Records

www.larkinpoe.com

PHOTO BY KRISTEN BOURDEAU



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DIAMOND DUST

Jeff Beck had no equal for the joyous, headstrong energy and beguiling subtlety he brought to his playing. When he died suddenly in January of 2023, he left behind the lightning rods through which his electrifying talent passed – an eclectic collection of guitars, many of which are as heavily customised as the hot-rod cars that were Beck’s other ruling passion. Almost exactly two years after his passing, these legendary instruments are now set to go under the hammer in London. We join the experts from Christie’s auction house on the eve of the sale to take a closer look at ‘Oxblood’ and other historic instruments from Jeff’s career – and discuss the portrait they paint of a pragmatic, restless yet peerlessly gifted talent and his musical legacy

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Ben Bentley

It can’t have been an easy decision. In a brief statement about the forthcoming auction of Jeff Beck’s guitars in London, his widow, Sandra Beck, wrote movingly that: “These guitars were his great love and after almost two years of his passing it’s time to part with them as Jeff wished. After some hard thinking I decided they need to be shared, played and loved again. It is a massive wrench to part with them, but I know Jeff wanted for me to share this love. He was a maestro of his trade. He never lusted after commercial success. For him, it was just about the music.”

Encapsulated here, in these words of devotion, is perhaps

all you need to know about Jeff Beck. Gold discs might have been welcome enough – but, for Jeff, the real riches were in the music. And what music it was. When it comes to electric guitar, there will perhaps never be such eloquent expressions of yearning as *Cause We’ve Ended As Lovers* or *Where Were You*. A matchless maverick; a magician who conjured with six strings and a row of glowing EL34s; a cheerful heretic in the faithless church of chart success. Beck was all these things and more.

But his musical character can also be understood through the guitars he played, which is why we joined a trio of experts

from prestigious auction house Christie’s – all of whom worked on the sale for Mark Knopfler’s guitars – to take a tour through Beck’s collection. We sat down with Amelia Walker, specialist head of Private & Iconic Collections, Christie’s London; Kerry Keane, international consultant and specialist for musical instruments (who was also closely involved in preparing the Eric Clapton and David Gilmour collections for sale); and Caitlin Graham, consultant, Rock & Pop Culture (who also worked on the Gilmour sale), to lift the bonnet of Beck’s most iconic music machines and see where he found all that tonal horsepower...

First up, how much of Jeff Beck's musical life – as expressed through his guitars – does the sale cover? It seems to form a picture of his whole career, almost.

Amelia Walker: “It really does; it covers his entire career. So, with the exception of some instruments that you know very well are no longer in his collection, like, for example, the Yardbirds Esquire that he famously swapped with Seymour [Duncan] in 1973, there are all the greats that you can imagine from across his career. From The Yardbirds, there's the first Les Paul he bought in 1966, all the way through to guitars that he only acquired for his last tour and that he played on the last tour. So it's really his entire, almost 60-year-long career. It's guitars, a couple of other instruments, a ukulele, a violin – that sort of thing – that he had at home, a few basses that he had purely at home. Then amps, pedals, various travelling cases, but all to do with instruments.”

Let's start at an obvious place with what is arguably the most iconic of all his guitars, Jeff's 'Oxblood' Les Paul.

Amelia: “Well, I'm going to caveat the conversation with the fact that research is still live right now [at time of interview in late November of last year – Ed], so we are still formulating our full

picture of these guitars. But we can say he was on tour with BBA [Beck, Bogert & Appice] in late 1972. And I think his search for a new Les Paul coincided with the 'Yardburst' getting damaged again – because it has had a few fair breaks, that poor guitar. So he was really looking for a guitar that could replicate that fat Les Paul sound. BBA was a loud band and that was their signature [style] – a power trio with a lot of volume.

“So he was passing through Memphis and went into this shop called Strings & Things, where he tried a few things and apparently even signed the door of the back office, according to some accounts, but he didn't actually find anything that he wanted in the store. Then he contacted a friend of his who he'd met – a young fan, in fact – called Buddy Davis, whom he'd met a few years before and who had taken other guitars to show him. The way Buddy has told the story is that Buddy drove Jeff around various hot-rod shops in Memphis, where he bought things for cars, but in his car he also had his guitar, the 'Oxblood', which Buddy had acquired from Strings & Things – the same shop in Memphis that Jeff had visited – where it was on sale because it'd been unwanted by its previous owner. Buddy hadn't yet paid for it, however. The guitar itself had been owned by another guitarist.



PHOTO BY KOJI HASEBE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

1. Jeff Beck wields 'Oxblood' on stage at the Korakuen Baseball Stadium in Tokyo, 1975

2. The well-weathered headstock of 'Oxblood': it originally would have topped a Goldtop Les Paul Model, which is how the guitar began life before its hallmark mods

“This guy had taken it into Strings & Things six months previously and said, 'It's a Goldtop. I want you to respray the guitar to match my shoes [laughs]. I don't want these P-90s, either, I want humbucking pickups and I want a slimmer neck profile. Here you go.' So they [Strings & Things] did all the modifications that we see now. Then, when he went back to pick it up, he decided he didn't like it

“[The auction] covers his entire, almost 60-year-long career... there are all the greats that you can imagine” AMELIA WALKER



PHOTO BY BEN BENTLEY

any more, and then Buddy Davis walks in, says, 'I love it.' I think he was meant to pay \$300 for it, or something, but he took it away on credit and actually hadn't yet paid for it by the time Jeff called him. So then Jeff buys it directly from Buddy, before Buddy had even paid for it from the shop, and so I think he made a little profit. That's the legend – and it's a legend that has changed over the years...”

Caitlin Graham: “A couple of those stories are mixed up, if you read them from both parties, but we confirmed it with the guitar technicians [who were there] at the time.”

Kerry Keane: “As you know, there's probably not a rock god guitar out there that isn't wrapped in mythology at some level.”



Heavily played and modded, 'Oxblood' still bears one or two traces of its mid-50s Goldtop DNA, including the straight-sided gold 'speed' knobs



PHOTO BY BEN BENTLEY

4

3. The retrofitted humbucker was sited so close to the wrap-around bridge that there almost isn't enough clearance to install the high E string

4. As this photo shows, 'Oxblood' is still very much in the "ridden hard and put away wet" condition that Jeff left it in

When did Jeff begin using 'Oxblood' in anger?

Amelia: "By all accounts, I think he put it to use almost instantly..."

Caitlin: "It's famously on the cover of *Blow By Blow*, but it wasn't actually used as much as the Strat and, I think, the 'Tele-Gib' for the actual recording sessions..."

Amelia: "Yeah, it was used for one or two songs on *Blow By Blow*."

Caitlin: "But it was definitely more like his primary performance guitar from that period onwards. There are obviously so many amazing photos of him playing it."

What's the general condition of 'Oxblood' today?

Caitlin: "It's still in the condition that he left it. We haven't cleaned it, which is lovely. It has definitely got an aura to it."

Amelia: "I think we've put one string on because it only had five strings for about 30 years."

With perishables such as strings, it must be tough to decide what must be untouched for originality's sake and what absolutely must be replaced for the guitar to be able to be presented for sale.

Kerry: "Correct. It's a narrow needle to thread. You want to honour the instrument, you want

"You pick up 'Oxblood' and you realise that it has been rode hard and put away wet. It's a well-used instrument" *KERRY KEANE*

to honour the history, and at the same time it's merely a static object if it's not playable."

Is there anything that leapt out about 'Oxblood' as you were preparing it for sale, Kerry?

Kerry: "Without a doubt, you pick this guitar up and you realise that it has been rode hard and put away wet. It's a well-used instrument.

As a guitarist and as a guitar maker, I immediately looked at those first alterations that were made from a Goldtop, fitting it with humbuckers, and how that bridge humbucking pickup is sort of jammed right up next to the wraparound bridge. There's not even room there for the [pickup] surround; even the surround is bent so it can fit there.

"It was late '53 when you first started to see these wraparound bridges. When you look inside this guitar, I don't fully embrace the potentiometers as original, yet the 'speed' knobs appear from the period. The capacitors have certainly been changed. I would expect those waxy looking 'grays',

PHOTO BY CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2024





Though purists may shudder, the stripped-finish look was what Jeff wanted – further evidence of his pragmatic approach to guitars



and there has been quite a bit of rewiring, which is to be expected with all the alterations. Though the neck on the guitar is not as thick and as chunky as you would expect from the '54, and for the simple reason that that neck has been replaced at some point. It's certainly cobbled together. But at the end of the day, it's a great-playing axe, no doubt about it."

Were you able to determine what the pickups were? Are they PAFs or something other?

Kerry: "Both the pickup chassis are patent numbered. We didn't fully pull them apart, but they're exposed all-blacks and I'd say original 'T-Top' bobbins – one with worn-plated adjustment poles and the other chrome-plated poles. With that being said, they are certainly a married pair of humbuckers."

Let's move on to the other big Les Paul in the collection – the 'Yardburst'.

Amelia: "Yeah. The great thing about the 'Yardburst' is you can kind of see him making decisions of what he wanted to change, step by step through his very early career. So he takes the pickguard off. Then takes the switch surround off. Then he takes the pickup covers off. Then he takes

"Les Pauls are very much tied to his earlier career. When he started switching to Strats, it was true love" CAITLIN GRAHAM

the finish off [laughs]. All these things happen, but it was clearly used to record various tracks on *Beck-Ola*, I think. It was used to record *Beck's Bolero*. That's probably the most significant thing to note. The 'Led Zeppelin that never was' band, which I think is very cool.

"Then I think it was still very much a main guitar for him through both Jeff Beck groups. Only when it got damaged and the neck got completely repaired, with the inlay and the new headstock... Even after the pickups were stolen out of it, or removed from it, by an earlier restorer in the late 60s, he was still using it. It was a very, very loved guitar."

Your thoughts, Kerry? What's your perspective on this one, as opposed to 'Oxblood'?

Kerry: "Again, both double blacks in there..."

Amelia: "I think they're patent-granted ones."

Kerry: "Yeah, they had patent numbers... and late-60s



5. Sadly, the original PAFs that were fitted in the 'Yardburst' went walkabout back in the day – prompting Seymour Duncan to make Jeff the 'Tele-Gib' opposite

6. A replacement neck was among the many heavy mods made to the 1959 'Yardburst' Les Paul Standard. The headstock bears a flowerpot/torch inlay and 'The Gibson' logo above it, which was phased out in favour of a straight logo with no 'The' by the mid-30s

PHOTO BY BEN BENTLEY

PHOTO BY CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2024



7. Created for Jeff Beck by Seymour Duncan, the 'Tele-Gib' was famously used to record *Cause We've Ended As Lovers*

8. The double-white PAFs that Seymour Duncan fitted to the 'Tele-Gib' came out of a Lonnie Mack Flying V and they inspired the hugely popular JB and JM model pickups by Seymour Duncan

9. Detail of the neckplate of the 'Tele-Gib': assuming a Fender origin, as it has no letter prefix, this would appear to have come from a guitar made around 1956

PHOTOS BY CHRISTIE S IMAGES LTD. 2024



“[With the ‘Tele-Gib’] Seymour Duncan genuinely wanted to create something that Jeff would like to play” AMELIA WALKER

style chassis screws. The potentiometers and ‘Bumblebee’ capacitors all look original to ‘59.”
Amelia: “The PAFs were taken out in 1968, I think. Actually, that was Seymour Duncan’s reason for wanting to make Jeff the ‘Tele-Gib’ because he felt so sad for Jeff that he didn’t have PAFs any more in a guitar that he owned, that he wanted to create something for him. Which I imagine is your next question...”

Well, yes, that’s a good moment to segue to the ‘Tele-Gib’.

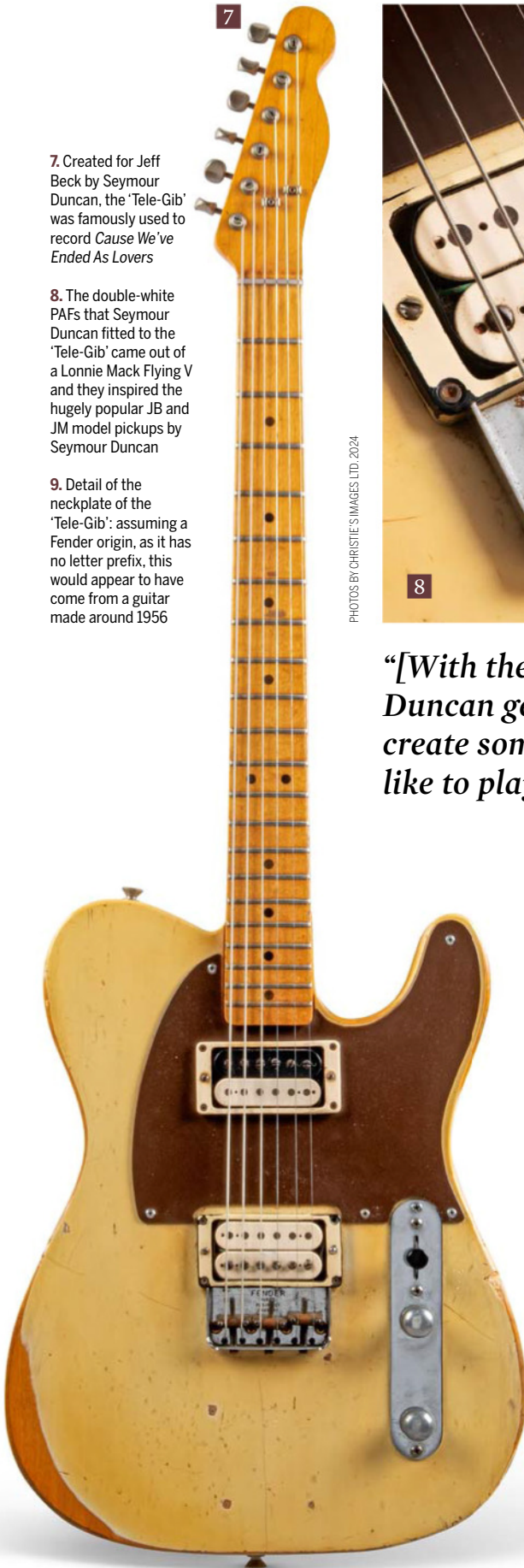
Amelia: “I think from when we spoke to Seymour – who’s a lovely man – he really, genuinely wanted to create something for Jeff that Jeff would like to play. He knew that Jeff loved the lightness of the Tele body but wanted the fat sound of the Gibson and the fat frets. I think he put Gibson jumbo frets in the fingerboard; the body and the neck are effectively one date, the same guitar, but he just redid the fingerboard and put new, big frets in.

“Jeff loved the guitar, I think. By all accounts, he thought it was a great-sounding guitar. He used it straightaway on *Blow By Blow*, in *Cause We’ve Ended As Lovers*. So, yeah, it’s a unique ‘Frankenstein’ from that point of view. And the pickups that [Seymour] made for him also had their own story in that they’d come out of a Flying V that used to belong to Lonnie Mack, who Jeff also loved. Seymour said he rewound them, but they were effectively those pickups, so they are PAFs. Then they, themselves, formed the basis of what Seymour then developed as his own JB and JM model pickups.”

There’s an interesting split personality thing with Jeff Beck, between his love of Fenders – especially his finely expressive playing on the Strat – and the more muscular playing he did with Les Pauls. Do you feel that that’s reflected in the collection, those contrasting facets of his musical personality?

Amelia: “There’s a variety. There are definitely a lot of Strats because the Strat was his tool, particularly in the last 25, 30 years, but he’d definitely got the range [of sonic tools available to him], I’d say.”

Kerry: “When you look at his collection as a whole, you can



see here's a virtuosic player who played his instruments to destruction. Really, he played them hard, and when they were played out, he moved on to another. There are these epochs of performance periods where he has dialled into one instrument specifically, and when that instrument literally gets played out, he's moving on to something else...

"I thought about this. He's a lot like Les Paul and so it's no great surprise to me that Les Paul was one of his heroes. Jeff Beck is always looking to change [and enhance] tonal quality, constantly. He's always searching for a new sound, and being inventive in the way he produces that sound, either physically with the guitar or by incorporating different circuitry and electronics. It's never-ending."

Caitlin: "I don't think he played anything that was standard [laughs]. I think he loved hot-rodding cars and he loved hot-rodding guitars. But I think the Les Pauls are very much tied to his earlier career. Then, when he started switching to Strats, that was it; it was true love with the Strats. That was his primary tool after that, partly inspired by Jimi Hendrix. And I think he's quoted

as saying that the Les Pauls made him sound like somebody else. It was a great sound, but he didn't 100 per cent feel himself with the Les Pauls. With the Strats, it was his true voice."

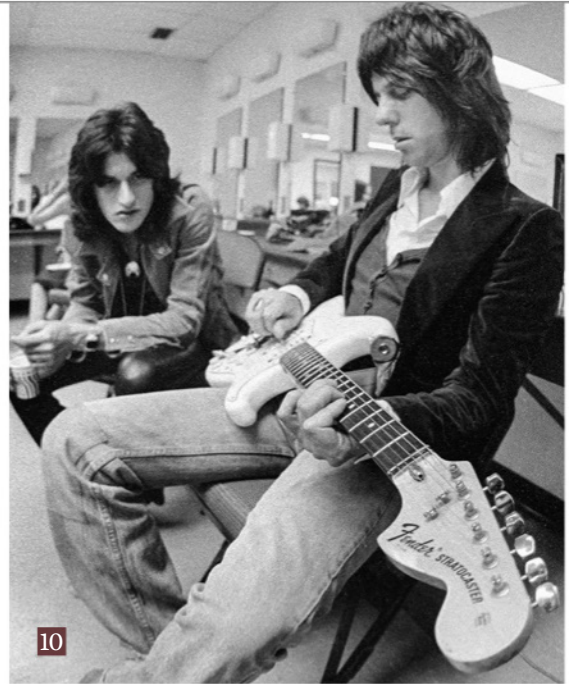
Amelia: "I'd say that the one instance where he comes back to Les Pauls is when he's paying tribute to Les Paul."

Caitlin: "Yes – although he definitely never gives up the Les Pauls completely, or the Gibsons as a whole."

This might be a good point to discuss the '54 Strat that's in the sale. In our experience, original first-year-of-issue Strats – which were almost working prototypes early on – can sound more bright, edgy and hot than the classic Strat sound we know and love today. What's this one like?

Kerry: "From my [examination], I think it's from later in '54 and so we've got a guitar, I think, where those contours are really coming into play. Though you're

"There were always guitars on the couch or leaning against the wall; I don't think I ever saw a guitar in a stand" **JOE PERRY**



10. Joe Perry hangs out with Jeff Beck in the dressing room prior to Beck taking the stage at The Providence Civic Center at Rhode Island in 1976

right: the tonal quality of the early Strats sounds tonally parallel to what you'd hear from a Telecaster. That's the type of sound that Leo's customers wanted – it was that twang, without a doubt, and with a very hard bite. So that's not surprising at all to me."

How did this particular guitar come into Jeff's ownership?

Amelia: "The date is slightly opaque at the moment, but he got it after a particularly hard session with Stevie Marriott,



JOE PERRY ON JEFF BECK

From fan to friend, the Aerosmith guitarist remembers Jeff's pragmatic approach to his instruments

"I saw Jeff on every tour. The only one I missed was the Stevie Ray Vaughan tour. Before Aerosmith, I'll never forget him walking down the stairs after a show, and I was the only one at the backstage thing. I didn't ask for an autograph or anything; I just had to shake his hand and tell him I thought he was the best.

"Once I started to get a little Aerosmith notoriety, I'd get to meet him backstage and I'd always try to get my hands on his guitar, just to see what the magic was all about. I was always struck by the fact that they were usually new guitars, like a top-of-the-line Fender, except for a couple of those Les Pauls that [he was] famous for. But I never saw him with anything on the road other than a new Strat.

"Another thing that I was surprised about was how heavy the strings he was using were

– and that the action was kind of high on the guitar. I was a little surprised – but again, it was just a regular white Strat. There was nothing special about it; it was very minimal.

"And then, after he passed away, his wife gave his number three Strat to us on the [Hollywood] Vampires tour to play. I got to play Beck's *Bolero* on his number three Strat for that whole tour. It was just a regular Strat with a small headstock and Noiseless pickups – a straight-up Custom Shop Strat, it wasn't fussy.

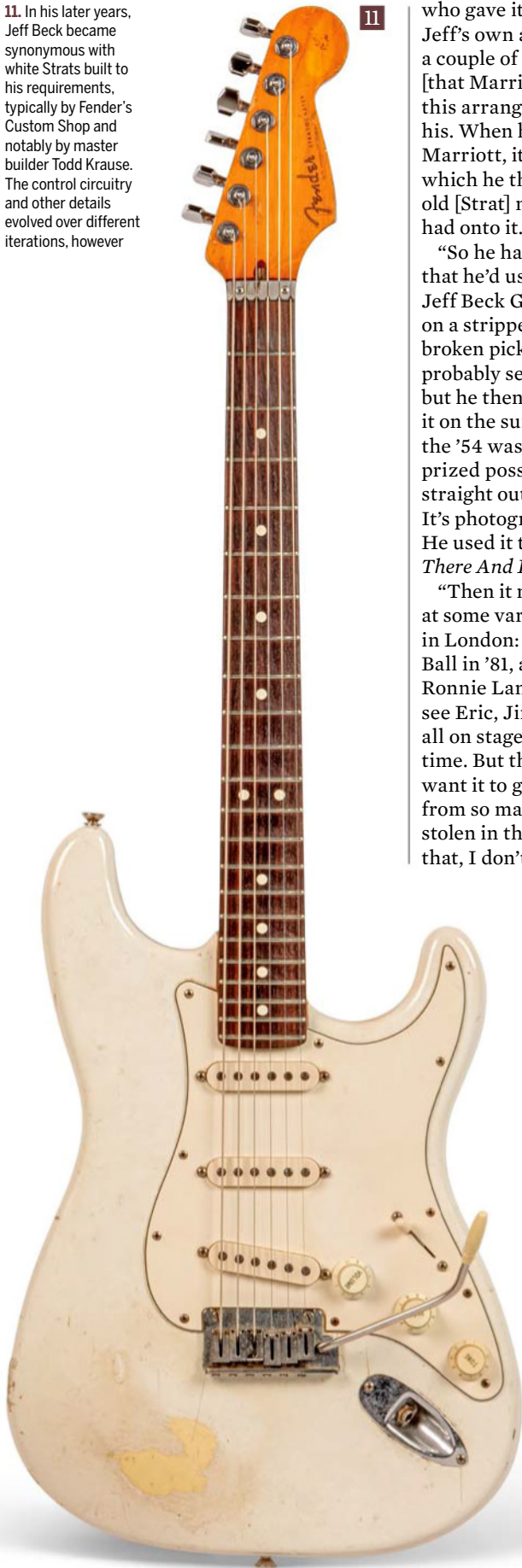
"But when I was down at his house and he was showing me around, there were always guitars waiting on the couch or leaning against the wall; I don't think I ever saw a guitar in a stand. I think he had the old Tele in one room and an old Strat in another. But I really think he found his voice when he just stuck to the

Strat. With the variety of tones, there's just something about the Strat where that guitar was almost designed for him.

"With his guitars, though, I don't think he was as attached to them. He looked at them as tools; it didn't matter much to him, at least from what I can tell. You would think he'd have been more particular about that stuff, but, to him, an off-the-rack guitar was fine.

"But I guess [the auction] is what happens, you know? There'll probably be a couple of guitars that are going in museums, but other than that, all I can say is I have a huge collection of guitars and I'll probably sell a few off before I go. But once I do, I expect my kids to take a few and sell the rest off. I don't know... It's a cool thing to have a guitar that Jeff Beck owned and probably played."

11. In his later years, Jeff Beck became synonymous with white Strats built to his requirements, typically by Fender's Custom Shop and notably by master builder Todd Krause. The control circuitry and other details evolved over different iterations, however



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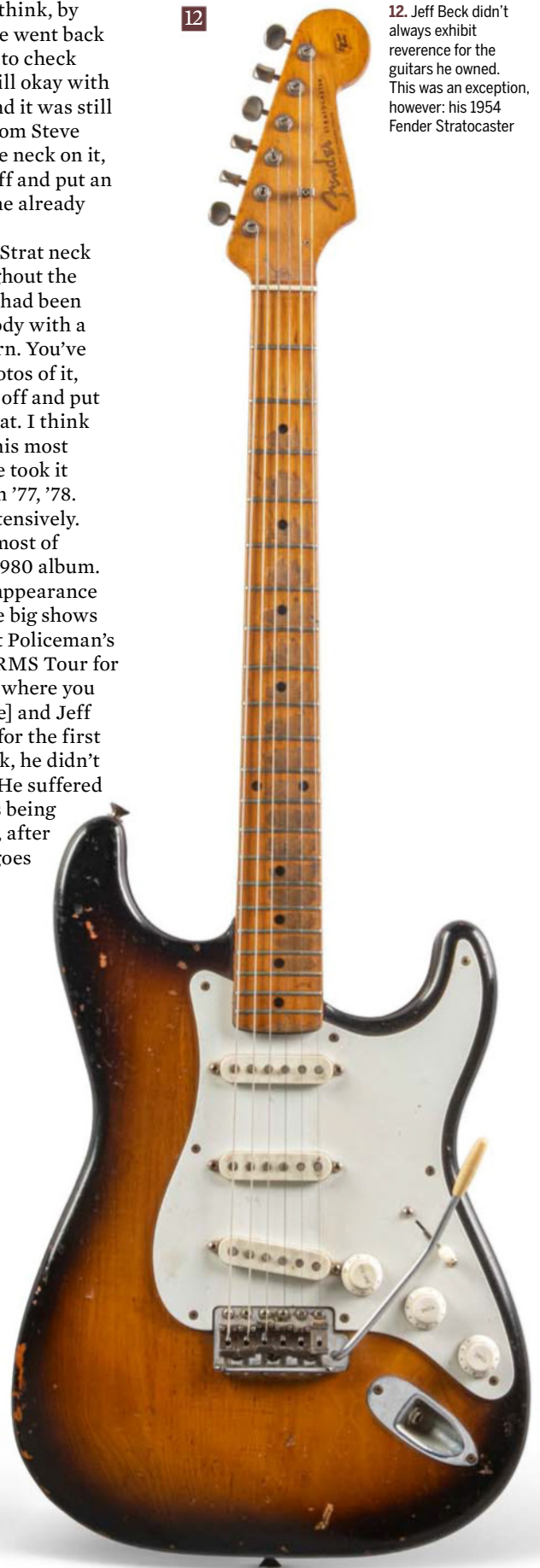
who gave it to him. I think, by Jeff's own account, he went back a couple of days later to check [that Marriott was still okay with this arrangement], and it was still his. When he got it from Steve Marriott, it had a Tele neck on it, which he then took off and put an old [Strat] neck that he already had onto it.

"So he had a maple Strat neck that he'd used throughout the Jeff Beck Group that had been on a stripped Strat body with a broken pickguard horn. You've probably seen the photos of it, but he then took that off and put it on the sunburst Strat. I think the '54 was actually his most prized possession. He took it straight out on tour in '77, '78. It's photographed extensively. He used it to record most of *There And Back*, the 1980 album.

"Then it makes an appearance at some various, quite big shows in London: the Secret Policeman's Ball in '81, and the ARMS Tour for Ronnie Lane in 1983, where you see Eric, Jimmy [Page] and Jeff all on stage together for the first time. But then, I think, he didn't want it to get stolen. He suffered from so many guitars being stolen in the 70s that, after that, I don't think it goes

12

12. Jeff Beck didn't always exhibit reverence for the guitars he owned. This was an exception, however: his 1954 Fender Stratocaster



out very much, if at all. I think it stays at home.”

Caitlin: “Yeah, he very much was not precious about his guitars, and definitely saw them as tools, but he seems to have been slightly more precious about this one, although perhaps not at the beginning because we have seen photographs of him using it as a pogo stick! But at some point he decides that it’s his pride and joy and doesn’t want to let it out of his sight and out on tour. He actually replaces it with a reissue that he starts using live.”

Kerry: “What’s interesting is that so many players work with three tremolo springs [in their Strats]. But Jeff Beck, who was a master of bending tone and sound with the tremolo, left all four springs in there. Which makes it, as you know, so much more of a physical endeavour. You listen to a recording and it’s all so wonderful, but then you start to watch videos and film clips of him playing, and how smooth and quick and tactile he was with his right hand, working controls and the tremolo. It’s like it happens in a flash and he has changed the timbre of the instrument.”

“The guitar was a means to an end. It was how he completed his musical journey – by getting the right tool” *KERRY KEANE*

13. Jeff in full flight at the Greek Theatre, Los Angeles, 1980, with what appears to be the 1954 Strat. This was soon to be retired from the road, however, over fears it might be stolen

14. When it came to Jeff from Steve Marriott, the ‘54 Strat had a Tele neck on it, which Jeff then swapped out for a vintage maple Strat neck more fitting for the guitar



PHOTO BY DAVID TAN/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

Many of the guitars have been modded in rather idiosyncratic ways to suit Jeff’s musical needs. Do you think the collection paints a portrait of a man who wasn’t a collector per se but who acquired guitars pragmatically?

Amelia: “Yeah, I think he got them when he needed them. It was very pragmatic.”

Kerry: “I think, of all the collections I’ve worked on, Jeff Beck more than anyone else viewed these instruments truly as just tools; they weren’t precious at all. With David Gilmour’s magnificent collection [which Kerry prepared for auction in

June 2019], he was very curatorial in how he approached it. The same with Mark Knopfler, the same with Eric Clapton. But with Jeff Beck, no. It [the guitar] was a tool; it was a means to an end. It was how he completed his musical journey – by getting the right tool and doing it.”

The pink Jackson – as incongruous as its pointy headstock may seem in this company – is probably another example of that.

Kerry: “Yes, a true Californian pointy guitar, as you say...”

Amelia: “He was given it by Grover Jackson at the ARMS concert in Madison Square Garden in 1983, when they took the tour over to America.”

Caitlin: “But he had actually said that he had that as the spare for the Steve Marriott vintage to use... He got the pink Jackson to Strat on the road because he didn’t want to get the Marriott Strat damaged.”

Amelia: “It got a lot of use in that period of ‘83 to ‘85 – it got a lot of use on sessions with other artists. It has a Kahler bridge that I think enabled him to do more [finely expressive] bends. I think I remember reading somewhere that he said that the Marriott Strat was like a beauty: it sings to you if you get it right, but it had a habit of going out of tune. Then, of course, Tina Turner signed it with a flick knife after he recorded for her in London. Then they all went out to dinner [laughs].”

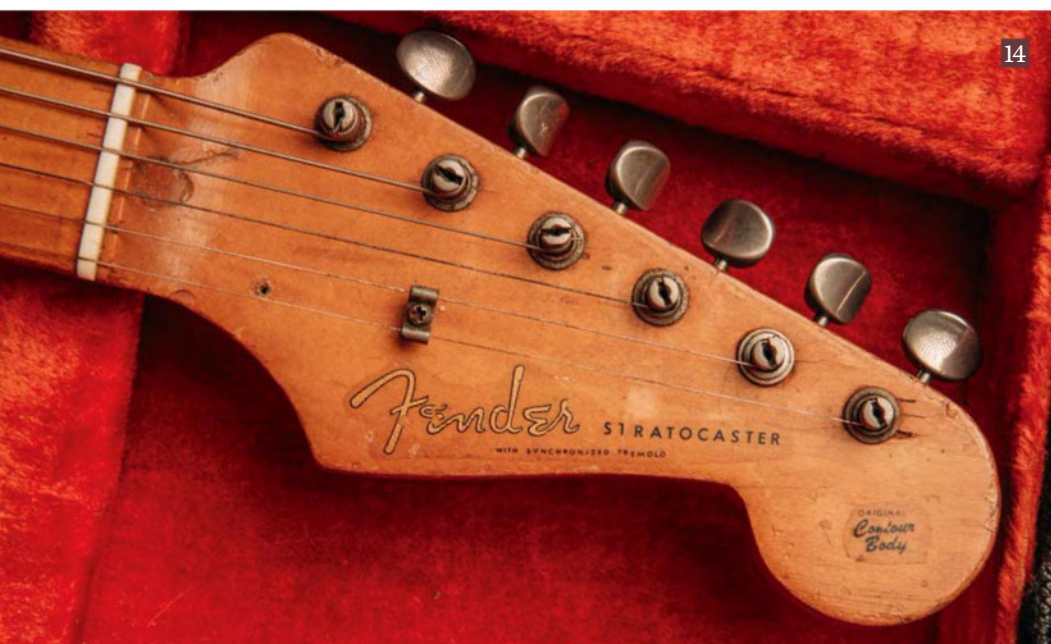


PHOTO BY BEN BENTLEY

Despite his reputation for finely nuanced work with the vibrato arm, Jeff favoured a beefy four-spring setup in the 1954 Strat, which he struggled to keep in tune at times





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PHOTOS BY CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2024

15. Jeff pictured in 1984 with the pink Jackson custom, built the year before – perhaps surprisingly, this superseded the more staid '54 Strat in his stage rig

16. Sometimes derided for alleged tone-sapping properties, this Kahler vibrato proved good enough for Jeff Beck

17. Signatures don't get more rock 'n' roll than Tina Turner scoring her name into your guitar with a knife! Naturally, the Jackson became known simply as 'Tina' thereafter

In more recent years, of course, Jeff settled into more of a regular pattern of using white Strats built to his preferred spec – and there are a number of those in the sale. Do these later Fenders settle on a particular spec or do they indicate his evolution of tone was ongoing at the time of his passing?

Caitlin: “Yes, he used different white Strats and different tunings for different songs. So there are actually a number of opportunities for bidders to acquire a Jeff Beck white Strat because there's more than one.”

Amelia: “They're very different from the signature series [production models], I would add, and they were all Custom Shop-built for him with a nut [design] that doesn't exist on the signature series, and often they are reverse headstock – or there's a marriage of an earlier style of neck that he'd had made in the 90s by JW Black with a Todd Krause body because he liked the pairing. So there are a lot of interesting combinations in those as well.”

Kerry: “And [non-standard] wiring harnesses. Again, the guitar techs were switching parts back and forth.”

Caitlin: “That's one thing that has been quite tricky for us in putting this together – he

“Jeff got the pink Jackson to use on the road because he didn't want to get the Marriott Strat damaged” CATLIN GRAHAM

definitely switched necks around a lot. And he had a number of guitar techs over the years, so the stories have [been verified with] various different guitar techs along with the various different modifications, and getting to the bottom of exactly the history of each guitar was quite a journey.”

Kerry: “What was brilliant of [Jeff's tech] Steve Prior was that he wrote on the back of the pickguards what was changed, when it was mounted and where. So there's this wonderful story to be told whenever you pull one of the pickguards off of the Strats [that Steve worked on].”

Amelia: “Sometimes Jeff did it himself [laughs].” 

Jeff Beck: The Guitar Collection will go under the hammer in a live auction on 22 January 2025 at Christie's in London. Spanning almost 60 years of his career, from joining The Yardbirds in 1965 to his last tour in 2022, the auction presents over 130 guitars, amps, pedals, cases and more used by Jeff. For more information, see www.christies.com/en/events/jeff-beck-the-guitar-collection/what-is-on



GOING, GOING... KLON

The Christie's Jeff Beck auction isn't just about guitars – amps old and new, plus rare effects, are all going under the hammer

As we've seen, Jeff's guitars are an eclectic mix – is that reflected in the amps and effects that are in the collection as well?

Amelia Walker: "There's a lot of Marshall, obviously. There are a small number of early little Fender Tweed [combos] that he probably picked up in pawnshops in the 70s – because you could at that time, for very little money. They were mainly kept at home, I believe, for studio use. I think he had one Marshall head that was his favourite of all time, a late-60s model JTM45. Then a few much later 1980s models, including a Fender Twin Reverb II and Princeton Reverb II, that had a lot of touring use, and then an interesting set of prototype Dual Super Leads that were, I think, sent to him and a few other

guitarists in the 90s. Steve Prior, his guitar tech, told me that everyone else's blew up, or failed, or didn't work, but Jeff's worked like a dream. For a lot of the live and recorded work from mid-90s through to the mid-Noughties, he just loved this, these two particular DSLs that just had a really unique quality to them." **Caitlin Graham:** "Just from my point of view, there are a couple of Marshalls that I particularly love and Jeff Beck fans will recognise because they changed around the lettering from 'Marshall' to 'Arsehole' [laughs]. So, yeah, we have those..."

"Also, from the more recent tours, he had the 'Becktones' by Magnatone [a Super Fifty-Nine M-80 Head used with Magnatone's Varsity 1x12 Cathedral cab – Ed]."

How about effects?

Amelia: "We do have a couple of Klons, and he was actually quite an early user of Klon Centaur pedals. So we have his main Klon and another one that was a kind of backup. We're selling one on its own because people might be interested to see if they can buy one of those as they're quite rare in their own right. There's also a fascinating early-to-mid 70s ring modulator – which is on the main pedalboard – that I think he was using on the Jan Hammer tour. So that's quite a cool thing to have, something that has survived from nearly 50 years of being used and abused on the road."



Eric Bibb

With more than 40 albums, three Grammy nominations and countless

Blues Foundation awards to his name, Eric Bibb releases his most autobiographical set of songs yet on his latest release, *In The Real World*

Words David Mead

As a young man, Eric Bibb found himself immersed in the burgeoning folk scene of New York. His father, Leon Bibb, a renowned activist in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, entertained house guests that included Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, and their influence doubtless went on to help crystallise Eric's own musical direction. Eric found a home in the blues genre and, with five decades of relentless touring behind him, his new album, *In The Real World*, presents itself as something intensely personal. "Maybe it's an age thing," he says, "but I think you get to a point where you realise, 'My goodness, I've actually traipsed over many a mile...' and you start reflecting on that journey because it's suddenly amazing that it's been that long.

"I realised that, in that reflective mode, I'm starting to touch base with a lot of my early influences and the things that have become an ingredient in my gumbo, you know? So I just feel like, both thematically and musically, this record is a kind of a self-portrait."

What exactly were the influences you drew upon?

"Well, let's start with the music. Everything from early African American songs like *John Henry* and *Midnight Special* and later work songs. Early soul music from the early 60s that grew out of the wonderful gift of Sam Cooke and the whole church secular get-together singers, and folk singers and songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Dylan and Odetta. Those people were influences, not to mention, musically speaking, that jazz was an influence, too. It was part of the soundscape. So everything from gospel sounds to impressionistic music, like the music of [Gabriel] Fauré or [Maurice] Ravel. All of those were ingredients that influenced me in terms of melodies and that kind of thing."

THE
Guitarist
INTERVIEW

PHOTO BY JAN MALMSTROM

Adrift in a sea of guitars...
This shot, which is used on
In The Real World's album
cover, shows the extent of
Eric Bibb's guitar collection



Was there anybody in particular who influenced you to pick up the guitar in the first place?

“Well, my dad had a guitar at home. He was an amateur player who realised early on that his beautiful voice needed a beautiful guitar player, and he was not going to be that guitar player in time for his career. So he started hiring wonderful guitars. So around my home, not only was there a wonderful little Italian-made guitar, there were also the instruments of my father’s accompanists around when they were rehearsing at home. I had access – and not only sound-wise, but actually physical access – to fine guitars from a pretty early age. I was fascinated, and by the age of seven I was starting to take lessons.”

“Not only is the blues in the mix, but it’s become the foundation of my music making, even my songwriting”

Out of all those influences, it’s the blues that has remained a constant factor in your own music.

“It has emerged to be so, but I don’t think it was a plan. I don’t think it was a given. The blues was always in the mix. What’s interesting is how, not only is it in the mix, but as you say, it’s become, unconsciously but then consciously, the foundation of my music making, even my songwriting. It’s taken a place that certainly feels good, but it’s become a dominant influence in what I’m doing in some way or another, subtle or not subtle.”

What was the thinking behind recording the album at Peter Gabriel’s Real World Studios?

“Well, we really wanted to make a statement. We really wanted to let people know that what we’re doing is work that we feel is important, and that it deserves the best circumstances for producing the music available, within some kind of reason. And we also realised that there is this whole competitive business of music making and selling your music – and getting promotion has everything to do with who notices you. You have to kind of wave all kinds of flags to get noticed. Your

music is not enough. You have to have all kinds of other activities going on around that lets people know that the music even exists.

“So being able to not only have the advantage of a wonderfully equipped and wonderfully run studio, we also wanted a studio that was going to suit us musically. Really, what you want is to create something beyond the music – a buzz, if you will – so that part of it was driven by our artistic needs and sharing artistic vision with a guy like Peter Gabriel, but also had to do with making a big noise about it.”

One of the things about the album that really shines out is the arrangements, and this was something you did with Glen Scott, your producer. Can you tell us how that collaboration works out in practical terms?

“Glen and I have been working together very closely on my albums for more than 20 years. And we are prolific, as they say, meaning that we produce quite a few records in a short time. We’ve become so familiar with the collaborative process that it’s beyond thought; it’s almost telepathic in some ways.

“Glen is an arranger who really understands what I want to say and what the song says. He really serves the song sonically and he’s so diverse and informed [with] so many genres at his command. His ability to accent one or another of the influences that you’ll hear in a particular song is just, for me, genius. He’s somebody who knows how to frame my work and create the kind of excitement in the arrangement that keeps listeners aware that there’s a story being told.”

Glen is also a multi-instrumentalist, isn’t he?

“You know, you have a person who not only has a command of different genres but also several instruments, and not only several instruments but several styles involved with all of these different instruments. It’s an amazing array of information that he has available. I mean, I could go on and on, but it starts to get nerdy. Glen’s skills together with what I write and sing and play is just a marriage made in heaven. It’s been wonderful and it just gets more and more enjoyable making music together.”

1. Fully focused in the studio, Eric records one of the album’s beautiful fingerstyle guitar parts

2. In *The Real World*’s producer, arranger and multi-instrumentalist Glen Scott lays down a keyboard part

3. Actor Lily James duets with Eric on the new album’s bonus track, *Victory Voices*, during the recording sessions at Peter Gabriel’s Real World Studios



PHOTOS BY MAYNARD WHEATON

Where does an arrangement begin?

"It'll start with Glen hearing the song and with him framing the groove that the song is in. First the percussion and the bass, you know, and Glen plays all of that himself. So it begins from there and then it just seems to flower. And, finally, we reach a point where that's it. We kind of both intuitively feel like it needs no more. Maybe it even needs less. Then comes a final mix – there you have something you hope you're going to be happy listening to 10 years down the road."

Robbie McIntosh plays lead guitar on many of the tracks on *In The Real World*.

"The combination of having Glen as a producer and a side-person like Robbie McIntosh is heaven. He is a heavenly guitar player and a great guy to be around – so humble for his amazing talent and sensitivity. I would play with Robbie any day, every day. We've done some gigs with him, and it's always wonderful to play with him. We'll definitely try to be together at some of the [forthcoming] UK gigs."

Which guitars did you bring into the studio with you?

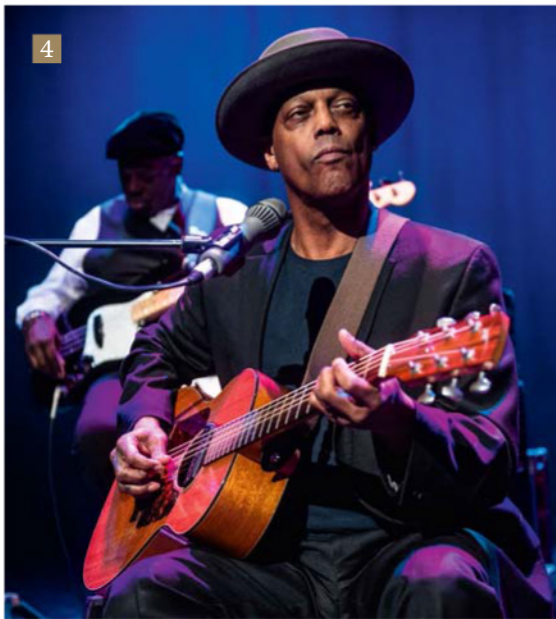
"One that you'll see often in the videos, a guitar I really leaned on was made by a luthier named Juha Lottonen. It's the guitar that has pickguards above and below the soundhole. It's wonderfully warm and funky, one of my go-to guitars."

"Another guitar was made by Larson Brothers, which is a brand once famous because of the two Swedish immigrants who went to New York and created great guitars, but their logo got sold to a company in Germany who uses that original Larson Brothers logo. The luthier who made this all-mahogany guitar is Maurice DuPont. He makes a lot of Maceferri-type Gypsy jazz guitars, but this is a flat-top, a great guitar."

"What else did I use? A Bulgarian guitar that's just amazing – it has a big, kind of oversized bout with a second soundhole. A great guitar that I don't tour with, but record with when I can."

"I had access to fine guitars from an early age. I was fascinated, and by the age of seven I was starting to take lessons"





4. Eric playing his Juha Lottonen guitar on stage during the Blues i Ritmes Festival at Teatre Principal in Badalona, Spain

5. A detail shot of Eric's well-travelled and much-loved Lottonen guitar that features on the new album: "It's wonderfully warm and funky, one of my go-to guitars," he says



How do you amplify your guitars when you play live?

"You know, ever since I started touring with these wonderful guitars, I've been using soundhole pickups made by Fishman called Blackstack pickups. They're passive, which is great. You don't have to fool around with batteries, which I've always found really annoying on tour to keep checking all of that. They're dependable and have a magnetic sound that I like.

"I run it through a Roland Jazz Chorus amplifier. I split the signal between a DI and then combine that with the microphoned amplifier. That's the kind of liquidy sound I like. When Roger Bucknall [of Fylde Guitars] first started making these wonderful guitars that I play, it seemed to really work well with them. A kind of amplified acoustic guitar sound that's as close to an acoustic guitar sound as possible."

"I've struggled, like everybody does, to try to get that balance between creative freedom and commercial accessibility"

Alternatively, in the studio it all comes down to sensitive mic'ing combined with good production.

"You're not wrong. It starts there, of course, and then it goes through the whole process. And Glen is a technician – an audio technician extraordinaire – as well, which means that he's with the process from beginning to end. And he's a stickler, you know? He's forensic. Many people comment on the sound quality of the album. I mean, it's multi-dimensional. And it doesn't come that way by coincidence or luck; it's really down to somebody who really has a lot of experience.

"I'm in a position as an artist that is so longed for in my circles, you know? And I'm there. I have a situation where I can make music with somebody without it being full of friction or complicated. I haven't always had it; I've struggled, like everybody does, to try to get that balance between creative freedom and commercial accessibility and all of that. So, yeah, you're looking at a happy camper."

Do you still enjoy touring?

"That's a great question. The emphatic answer is 'mostly, no'. Let's keep it real. I enjoy travelling sometimes and I enjoy playing almost always. It's a question of having done it intensely for decades. The older I get, [the more] I'm finding my comfort level is reduced as I haul guitars around the world. Where it didn't really bother me [before] to the extent that it would today, lugging three guitars around and changing hotels every night is no longer that attractive.

"It was necessary – and it was even enjoyable, to an extent – for a long time, when you're trying to get on the map and trying to let people know that you're out there. But having come past that point, I have to really start thinking about, 'Do I really want to do it like this for the next 10 years?' And I don't. So travelling to favourite venues, meeting bands, wherever I have them, on those kind of limited terms is what's attractive to me. I don't want to stop performing because I love it, and travelling can be wonderful. It's just a question of degrees."

Have you tried any of the new material out in front of a live audience yet?

"I have but not that much. It's been very limited because the album is really quite fresh. And usually, if I'm touring – and I was very busy last summer – I don't really have time to put new material into the book in the same way that I would if I had a long period of hiatus. But I'm looking forward to it because this album, more than others of recent issue, is really centred around my guitar, meaning it needs to be prominent in the mix. Meaning that the tune can be borne along with my guitar alone. And that's always been my goal. I'm that troubadour kind of guy, I want to be a self-accompanying singer." **G**



Eric Bibb's new album, *In The Real World*, is available now via Repute Records

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DON MUSSER ACOUSTICS

He's built guitars for some of the very biggest names in the business and yet Don Musser remains a known unknown. We track him down to fill in the blanks

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

Within guitar culture, some individuals achieve legendary status but somehow remain under the radar. Examples may include the elusive pickup maker and guitar builder 'Over The Pond Guy', renowned restorer Clive Brown, the late Les Paul replica builder known as Terry Morgan, and amplifier designer Howard Dumble. These aren't the type of people who engage with social media or even have websites, and a common phrase used in relation to them is 'if you know, you know'. Most don't – and a low profile combined with a high reputation and a shortage of solid information tends to foment fable and intrigue.

Over in the US, there's a renowned acoustic guitar maker who fits this profile and his name is Don Musser. He doesn't have a website and never advertises, but since the mid-1970s he has been quietly building guitars played by the likes of Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, Neil Young and even Eddie Van Halen. When the idea of a feature article was first mooted, we hadn't even anticipated being able to talk to Don in person.

More in hope than expectation, we contacted Dream Guitars in North Carolina to ask if they could put us in touch and shortly afterwards we received an email from Don himself including his phone number and an invitation to call any time. Needless to say, we took Don up on his offer and found him to be friendly, forthcoming and fascinating.

The Backstory

Naturally, we wanted to know Don's background as a luthier and guitarist. "My dad used to make replicas of early Colt firearms and he was a master machinist and a do-it-all wizard," Don recalls. "He had a workshop with an incredible amount of tools and he quickly noticed that he could set me a task and I had the ability and dexterity to execute it. That's where my interest in handwork and machine-level precision came from.

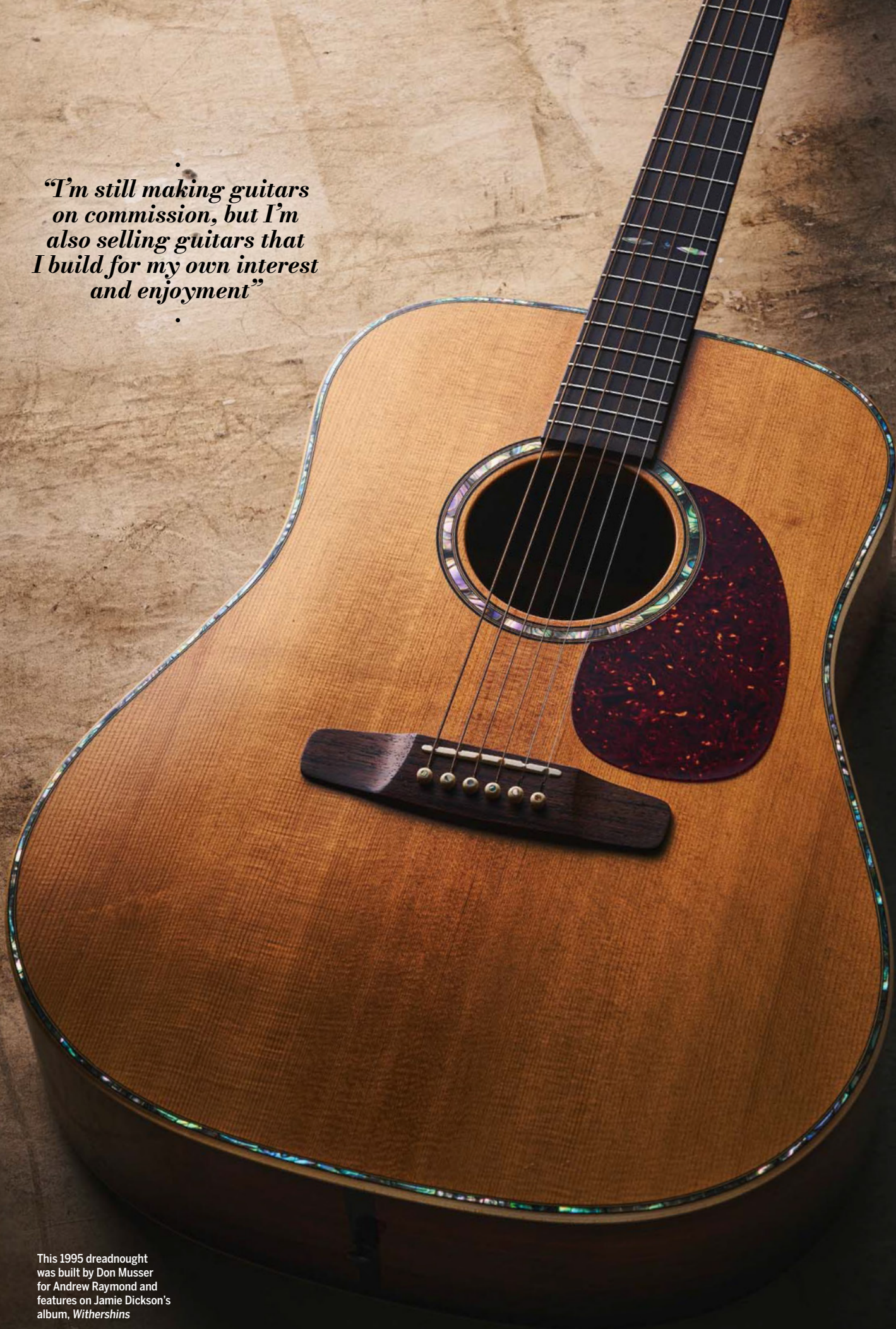
"I didn't get interested in guitars until I went into the army in the early 1970s," Don continues. "Fortunately, I wasn't sent to Vietnam and instead I was assigned to Germany, and in the last six months I was there I started to learn to play the guitar. When I got home to Reseda [Los Angeles] I wanted to buy a 12-string, so I went to a

store downtown that had a Martin. As I was trying the guitar, I flipped it over and sighted along the backstrip and the neck and I noticed it was a bit off centre.

"It was a fine guitar, but my machinist eyeball led me to wonder if there were any custom makers who could perform every aspect of the construction with more precision. I looked in the phonebook and found the name Mark Whitebook, so I visited his workshop and placed an order. I pestered him a bit too much with visits and questions, and eventually he told me he was refunding my deposit and it would be a good idea if I built my own guitar."

Without internet guides and books to help, we ask how Don set about the task. "To build a guitar all by yourself is a daunting task because there are so many stages and there's so much to learn about the woods" he points out. "I was really fortunate because Mark shared a workshop with another luthier called David Russell Young in a shop down in Topanga Canyon, and they were marketing their guitars through a shop called Westwood Music. They were getting a lot of success with very prominent musicians like James Taylor, Gram Parsons and The Stones.

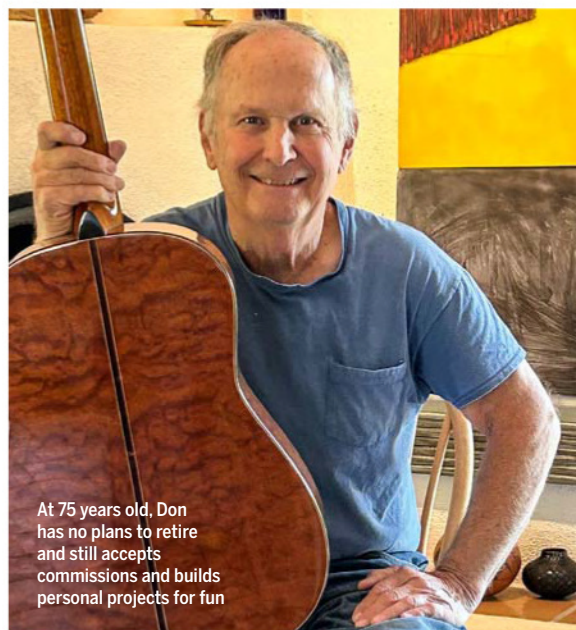
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*“I’m still making guitars
on commission, but I’m
also selling guitars that
I build for my own interest
and enjoyment”*
•



This 1995 dreadnought was built by Don Musser for Andrew Raymond and features on Jamie Dickson's album, *Withershins*



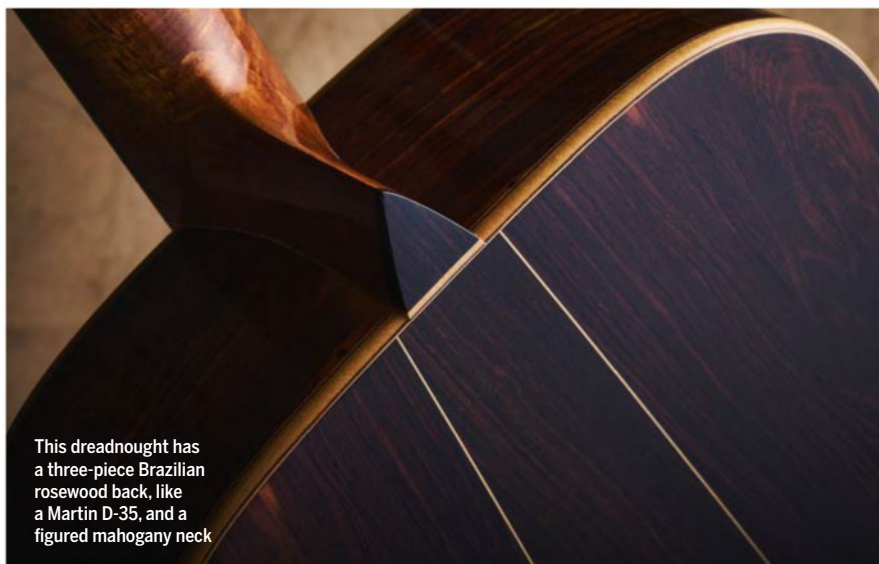
Don's fine craftsmanship is evident from his intricate inlay work and precisely sculpted nut scoops



At 75 years old, Don has no plans to retire and still accepts commissions and builds personal projects for fun

"David lived around the corner from me and he wrote a book on building custom acoustic guitars [*The Steel String Guitar: Construction And Repair*]. I learned a lot from him and another builder called Roy Noble, and they were really agreeable for someone who wanted to pick their brains. I got that first 12-string guitar together, but it was not a marketable instrument

"Anything you can do to make the neck less flexible produces more sound and enhances the sustain"



This dreadnought has a three-piece Brazilian rosewood back, like a Martin D-35, and a figured mahogany neck

PHOTOCOURTESY OF DONMUSSEY

and I knew I had a way to go. After another two or three guitars I felt I had got the finishing and playability down and I took a couple of guitars down to McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica.

"I looked at a Martin on the wall there that was retailing for \$1,000 and to make 100 per cent profit I offered them my guitars for \$500 each. They didn't even blink and they bought them and then sold both within a week. One went to Peter Fonda and the other to Tom Rush, who toured with that guitar for the next three decades."

Although Don was only a semester away from graduating in chemistry, he quit college to concentrate on guitar building. He's refined his methods over the years, but many of the things he still does came from his early mentors David Russell Young and Mark Whitebook.

Braces, Finishes & Glues

"On my guitars the top braces are radiused, rather than flat, so my tops end up domed. This withstands string tension better and it's a stronger construction method," Don insists. "Another critical thing is humidity control. If you glue braces to a top at 40 to 50 per cent and then let the humidity rise to 70 per cent before glueing the top to the sides, you'll have problems."

We wonder if Don has some special bracing method. "I'm still doing a basic X-brace," he assures us, "and having experimented with scalloped bracing early on, I realised I didn't care for that. I like the notion of the top as a diaphragm, so the flexibility needs to be a little bit greater. I taper my braces and I use another little brace behind the bridge plate because one of the problems with factory-made guitars is that they belly and

some of the string tension is dissipated into deforming the top.

"Supporting braces for the brace just above the soundhole are glued onto the sides. That was one of David Russell Young's innovations and I always liked it because of the leverage of the neck under tension around the 20th fret. Having a fairly substantial brace there that's linked into the sides of the guitar counteracts the leverage that can deform the top. I've found that anything you can do to make the neck less flexible produces more sound and enhances the sustain of an instrument."

Don has refreshingly straightforward preferences for adhesives, too. "I've always been real trusting of aliphatic resin glue, and for some things, such as inlay, I might use epoxy, but for wood on wood it's Titebond Original. I used to use epoxy to glue steel reinforcement rods into necks,

A Collector's Perspective

By Andrew Raymond



"I saw my first Musser guitar in a guitar shop in London in 1993 and I had never seen a 12-string quite like it. It sounded incredible and played like a dream, but it wasn't for sale. I asked the shop owner if I could have the first option if it became available. In the meantime, he put me in touch with Don and in 1995 he built me a dreadnought that is a joy to look at and play. Then a week later I was offered a small-bodied Musser and I bought it.

"Towards the end of the decade I attended an event at the shop and Eric Clapton was there, too. An assistant came upstairs and told me that Eric was playing the 12-string I liked. I collared the shop owner and he admitted the guitar was for sale, so I bought it on the spot. Then the assistant had to go back downstairs and break the bad news to Eric. I've still got all three and they're totally unique. I just love them."



Andrew's dreadnought and parlour both feature Don's distinctive bridge design

but I've been fitting adjustable truss rods since around 2000 when I started selling guitars in Japan. They have extremely dry winters and a very moist rainy season, and this causes neck fluctuations, and the top and back will shrink and swell."

As for finishes, Don prefers to keep things old-school. "I have always done nitrocellulose lacquer. A lot of people have gone to all kinds of exotic finishes, but they're hard to touch up and difficult to use for one reason or another. I've been very protective of my health and always used a respirator. I'm 75 now and I haven't suffered any consequences."

Timber Tales

Don has spent periods as a timber merchant to the guitar-making industry, and a couple of finds have been particularly significant. "Back in the 1980s I was living in Northern California and I was contacted by the partner of a woman who lived in Reno, Nevada. She had a stash of Brazilian rosewood imported in 1948 that was of incredible quality. The top dollar then was \$40 per board foot and people had been offering her \$10.

"When I walked in and saw the quality I said, '\$40, no problem.' I sawed it up and sold some of it, but I kept the best stuff. To this day I still have some of that wood and I'm looking forward to making more guitars from it. I was also able to purchase several quilted mahogany boards that were cut from a Honduras mahogany tree that has become so legendary it's known as 'The Tree'."

Moving Forward

We can't help wondering if retirement is on the horizon, but Don clearly still has the lutherie bug. "These days I'm still making guitars on commission, but I'm also selling guitars that I build for my own interest and enjoyment," he tells us. "I used to make eight to 12 per year, but these days it's more like five or six and I'm slower and more deliberate. If anything bothers me, I'll just redo it. I've always been perfectionistic and now that I don't have financial pressures, I'm even more so.

"I've got some things in the back of my mind for next year. I have a couple of necks from 'The Tree' and I want to use those for some guitars with quilted mahogany tops from the same tree. I have never built one of those mahogany-topped guitars before. If somebody wants one of my guitars, Norm's Rare Guitars and Dream Guitars usually have some in stock, or they can contact me directly." 📧

To get in touch with Don, use the following details:
dmussergtrs@yahoo.com / 001575 388 4804



The guitar's original owner was Japanese and requested the dragon headstock motif

A Player's Perspective By Jamie Dickson



"I used Andrew Raymond's dreadnought on the last track of my album, *Withershins*, where it was put under the full glare of sonic scrutiny. For most people, a dreadnought is seen as a utility guitar that's more useful than exciting. As you get into acoustic guitars you perceive that not all dreadnoughts are created equal. You might conclude a nice old D-18 is a sweet, breathy and wonderful thing, and that's the point my appreciation of dreadnoughts had got to.

"Then I encountered a higher tier of dreadnoughts that take all the bassiness and expansiveness and orchestrate it into something very piano-like. None of it is flab and all that power is harnessed into beautiful notes, overtones and musicality. That's what I immediately noticed with the Musser.

"It marries power and detail, and the sustain is wonderful. That's where the piano-like element comes in because it's like having your foot on the sustain pedal all the time. Like a lot of fingerstyle players, I capo at the 2nd fret to enhance the sparkle. You trade off a little oomph by doing that, but the beauty of dreadnoughts in that role is that they backfill a lot of the lost bass.

"The Musser has enormous power and ability to project, and it's still able to produce a giant sound even with the capo. I wrote the track *Gone With The Dawn* on the Musser in one evening towards the end of the recording. That's a great example of a special instrument being so inspiring that you begin writing something that's suggested by the guitar itself."

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Top Tier

The upgraded American Ultra guitars get a subtle makeover, creating what Fender believes is its most advanced series of electric guitars. Vintage buffs, look away...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA II TELECASTER & STRATOCASTER HSS £2,259 & £2,299

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

What You Need To Know

1 These don't look very different from the current Ultra models...

This Ultra II series is more of a smart spring clean. The key elements are retained, but the neck-wood switches to quarter-sawn maple and we now have ebony 'boards. In addition to our Strat HSS and Tele here, there's a Stratocaster with three Noiseless pickups and a new Meteora.

2 What about pickups and circuits?

The Noiseless pickups are upgraded to 'Version 2' specs, and the previous Double Tap humbucker on the Strat HSS changes to the new Haymaker 'bucker, which has a coil-split activated by the S1 push-switch within the volume control knob. The Tele retains the series pickup link.

3 Don't upgraded Ultras already exist?

The Ultra Luxe series comprises four models with stainless-steel frets, compound radius 'boards and augmented D-profile neck shapes. An HSS Strat and dual-humbucking Tele feature alder bodies and Floyd Rose vibratos; the Strat and Tele use ash with the same bridge and vibrato as our review models.

For quite some time now, Fender has rejigged or refreshed its key series pretty much every four or five years. All good, although it doesn't seem that long since the American Ultra series replaced the previous American Elite series back in late 2019. So now we have the American Ultra II series, which is the company's "most advanced series of electric guitars that take the hyper-modern recipe and turn it up to 11", says Fender. "Built for modern musicians who demand both precision and performance, the Ultra II delivers

an unparalleled playing experience, showcasing cutting-edge technology and a refined design that sets a standard in the music world."

The spec of the Ultra II series, then, is all about progression and is in stark contrast to Fender's American Vintage II models, while the instruments in the more everyman American Professional II series sit with a foot in both camps. (Fender also owns the pretty modern Charvel and EVH brands, so the Ultras have plenty of competition in-house, too.)





The new Haymaker humbucker replaces the previous Fender Double Tap humbucker

Yet from a distance of a few feet, the same model from each Fender series looks like the classic it's based on, so, in reality, it's the finer – and in some cases, more subtle – details that shape the actual model differences. Not surprisingly, one obvious difference with these new Ultras is a price increase. When we looked at the first Ultras back in issue 453 they carried a full list of £1,859; the current list of those outgoing models is £2,159 for the Strat and £2,209 for the Tele. So, as you can see, these Ultra IIs cost a little more,

These new IIs have a raft of fairly small changes to what was already quite a well-tweaked platform

but what is effectively just a £200 rise is hardly salty, not least in the shadow of the tumultuous Covid years.

What we have with these new IIs is a raft of fairly small changes and tweaks to what was already quite a well-tweaked platform. In terms of the raw materials, bodies are alder only (no ash bodies), the rosewood fingerboard option of the prior series switches to ebony, while the usual slab- or rift-sawn maple necks are now

spec'd as being quarter-sawn, and the nut material changes from bone to Graph Tech Tusq. Both necks here are quite deeply amber-tinted, almost hinting at roasted maple; the neck backs are a super-smooth satin, like the headstocks, while the simple gold brand and model logos are subtle and very classy looking.

As before, the Strat has additional routing on the back, that modern-style scoop behind the treble cutaway, and a rounded heel that's lightly chamfered, too, to reduce thickness with a chromed four-screw asymmetrical neckplate. The Telecaster mirrors those features and adds Strat-like forearm and ribcage contours while still retaining its small-radius edges.

Aside from those changes, the neck specs are identical with a compound radius fingerboard, medium jumbo frets, rolled edges and slightly oversized (7mm diameter) face dots. New to the IIs (and Fender) are Luminlay glow-in-the-dark side dots in line with other modern-style makers.

Hardware on both models is identical to the previous Ultras, too. The Strat features the Fender '2-Point American Ultra Synchronized Tremolo' – to give it its full name – and features polished stainless-steel block saddles, cold-rolled steel block, and a push-fit tensional-adjustable arm. The material used for the Tele bridge's

thicker baseplate, without side walls, isn't specified (it's not steel), although the block saddles here are chromed brass, and those two additional screws at the tip of the plate will prevent any potential oscillation at high gains and volume levels. The tuners on both are the same rear-locking types with short string-posts and a single rigid chromed string-tree.

The Noiseless pickups are actually stacked humbuckers and they move to – you guessed it! – 'upgraded' II versions, but Fender doesn't provide any clues as to the actual changes. The Strat's neck and middle pickups have flush magnetic poles, while the Tele's bridge pickup uses slightly protruding but level poles, and the neck is covered and scratchplate-mounted so height adjustment is easy, unlike true vintage style.

Speaking of the scratchplates, these move to anodised aluminium in either black, gold or silver, depending on the body colour, which also affects the colour choice of the pickup covers and 'soft-touch' knobs on the Strat. While the Ultraburst of our pictured models – a three-colour 'burst with an opaque amber centre – is retained from the previous series, new Ultra II colours include Sinister Red, Avalanche (Tele and Strat only, not our Strat HSS) and Solar Flare on both, while the Strat and our Strat HSS add Noble Blue.



1

1. This modern Tele bridge is retained from the previous versions with its thicker baseplate and six block saddles. Note the extra screws at the tip of the baseplate

2. The Strat's soft-touch knobs are retained on the IIs, while the S1 switch in the volume knob activates a standard coil-split

Feel & Sounds

Plenty of players with their vintage blinkers on will be hugging their prized reissues (or, if they're lucky, their originals) and pooh-pooing all this modernism. Because right from the off, as you pull these guitars from their deluxe moulded cases, it's pretty clear these aren't 50s throwbacks. In fact, outline shapes aside, everything has been tweaked.

The necks fall into the modern camp, not excessively thin with depths of just under 21mm at the 1st fret and slightly over

22mm at the 12th. They're pretty similar to Fender's modern C, but the modern D profile here has slightly fuller shoulders, giving the impression that the neck is thinner than in reality. Fender quotes the nut widths at 42.8mm, but our callipers tell us they're slightly wider at 43.3mm with a hair's more breadth to the string spacing, which is 35.5mm here, not the 35mm of the previous Ultra Is we tested.

The 254mm to 356mm (10- to 14-inch) compound radius expands from the standard 241mm (9.5-inch) 'modern' Fender radius of the American Pro II, for example, and flattens out as you move up the neck. Hardly revolutionary but again a different feel; likewise, the very well-fettled frets measure approximately 2.6mm wide with a good height of 1.14mm. Can you feel the difference with the ebony 'board compared with a rosewood 'board? Barely, if at all, due to that fret height, though with lower and smaller 'vintage' frets you might.

In theory, the combination of the quarter-sawn neck and the ebony fingerboard should increase stiffness, and what is evident here is the snappy fast attack combined with a really dialled-in setup. There's no difference with the feel of our maple-'board Tele and, in all honesty, after playing these Ultra IIs for a few hours, our reference vintage-spec Strat and Tele now feel like museum pieces.



2

UNDER THE HOOD What's inside these perfect beasts?

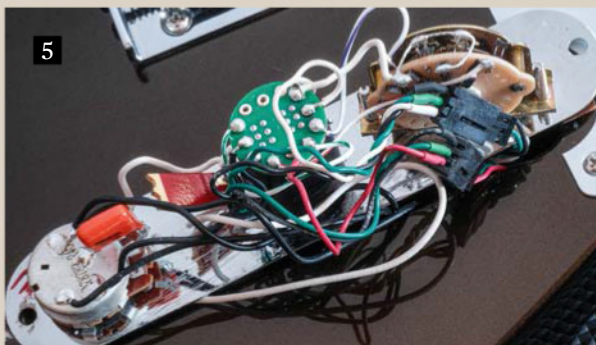
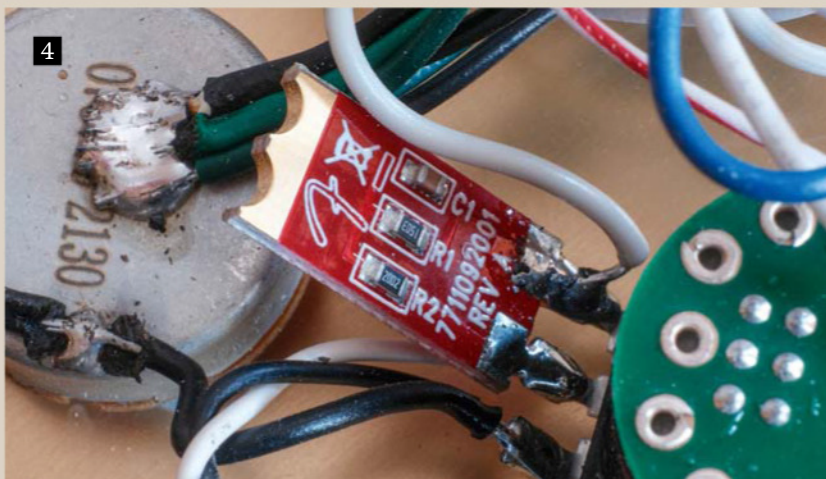
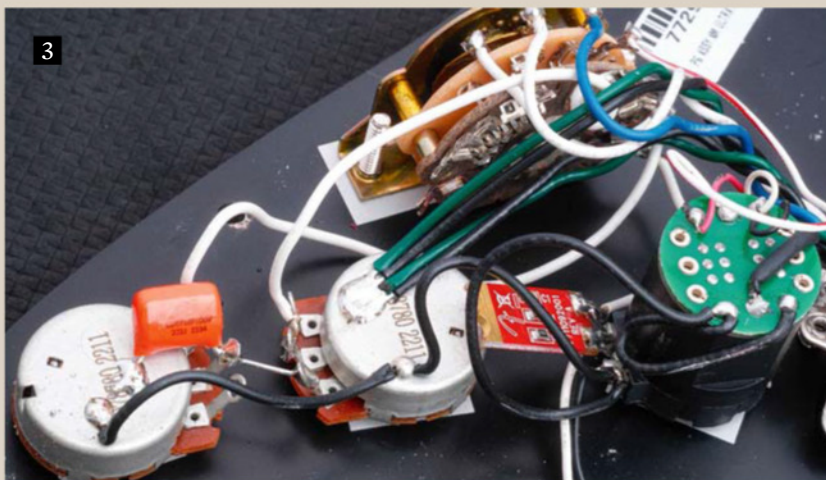
Fender hasn't mentioned any changes to the Ultra IIs' control circuits, which seem identical to the previous models. One anomaly is that – like the Ultra I models – we do have no-load tone pots via a notch at the top of the pot's travel, which you can feel on the Telecaster's master tone and on both tones of the Strat HSS. This effectively removes it from the circuit, adding a subtle treble lift. These aren't mentioned in the spec at all.

The Strat's circuit is mounted on the anodised scratchplate, providing shielding, and is very tidy and modern looking. With it removed, you can also see that the body is routed for HSH, and there's a pretty big 'U II' carved into the neck pickup cavity.

Although we have a four-pole 'Super' switch pickup selector and the four-pole S1 switch, they are overkill as the Strat's S1 switch simply splits the Haymaker 'bucker to single coil, voicing the slug coil. Its pots have no value markings, but presumably will have a nominal value of 250k. There's a single .022 μ F Orange Drop capacitor for the dual tones, while the treble bleed circuit is mounted on a PCB (that uses a pair of micro surface-mount resistors and a single capacitor) as with the previous Ultras and American Pro IIs. These all share the same '7711092001 Rev A' markings. Before Fender moved to these PCBs during the original life of the first-series American Professionals, the 250k/three-single-coil circuit used a 1,200pF cap in parallel with a 150k resistor and a 20k resistor in series.

The Tele's circuit uses the same S1 switch, but here the three-way pickup selector switch is a standard two-pole lever. The treble bleed is the same PCB type, likewise the tone capacitor. Push-fit connectors for the pickups join them into the circuit, although they're quite bulky, and along with that S1 switch it wasn't easy putting the control plate back in place.

As we mention, Fender also isn't telling us much about the pickups apart from that they use Alnico magnets (the first series Ultras used Alnico V) and have been "upgraded". The Strat HSS's neck and middle pickups have red backs with 'Ultra Strat Modern' logos (the standard Strat's pickups have blue backs with 'Ultra Strat Vintage' logos). With the exception of the HSS's regular bridge side-by-side humbucker, which has a DCR of 10.93k (6.73k when split), the Noiseless pickups are *stacked* humbuckers with the Strat HSS's neck measuring 13.68k and the middle 14.37k, while the Tele's bridge is 10.22k and the neck is 9.95k.



3. Using a black-scratchplate Strat HSS to shoot, you can see the two four-pole switches and the Orange Drop capacitor

4. The treble bleed circuit is on a PCB with a pair of micro resistors and a single capacitor

5. The Tele's circuit uses a standard pickup lever switch with the S1 switch operating the series/parallel option

6. The Ultra II's 'single coils' are stacked humbuckers with these red backs



7

7. The new Tele's knobs have very deep knurling, plus you'll notice that the three-way lever switch is slightly angled. It's all about the details!

If you're a gigging musician, you may well welcome the Noiseless pickups, particularly if you use a higher gained sound. Now, plenty of us gig our single coils without issue, but this added insurance typifies the Ultra premise. But how do they actually sound?

If you're after that classic Strat voicing, this HSS version might not be your cuppa. The Ultra Strat Modern pickups here, while virtually noiseless in operation, do sound more like conventional humbuckers than the cleaner, brighter voicing of the V2

Both become chameleon-like with even a basic pedalboard, not to mention our Helix LT's more complex voicings

Noiseless Vintage pickups on a standard Ultra II Strat we also had to hand during our sound test. These have a fuller voicing with less sparkle; the neck sounds very jazzy played clean; the middle has a bit more bite; and combined, we get that bounce – it's just a darker flavour. The Haymaker adds beef but not at the expense of clarity; it's actually a really well-voiced hot 'bucker, and if you live in a rockier, gainer world you need to hear this. It splits very well, the slug coil is voiced and is more Strat-y, not least combined with the middle pickup.

THE RIVALS

There's no shortage of brands offering 'improved' versions of the Fender classics, although the Ultra II recipe is actually a little shy of the modernism of other brands when it comes to the super-S. For example, Charvel's Japanese-made Guthrie Govan Signature MJ San Dimas SD24 CM 3 Tone Sunburst (approx. £2,199) combines a graphite-reinforced roasted maple 24-fret neck with a 305mm to 406mm (12- to 16-inch) compound radius fingerboard with stainless-steel frets, Charvel HSH pickups and a Floyd Rose-style vibrato with locking tuners.

Another Japanese-made signature, this time by Ibanez, is the ATZ100-SBT Andy Timmons (approx. £2,349) with 22 stainless-steel frets on a roasted maple neck with Wilkinson/Gotoh vibrato, and side-by-side single-coil-sized DiMarzio Cruiser humbuckers. Very classy indeed.

Yamaha's new Japanese-made Pacifica Professional PACP12 (approx. £2,166) is a fine modern-aimed super-S, but it's only available with HSS Yamaha Reflectone pickups, and has a compound radius 254mm to 356mm (10- to 14-inch) fingerboard with stainless-steel frets and Gotoh non-locking vibrato. The Indonesian version is nearly identical but with a lower price point around £1,259.

Modern T-styles are in the minority by comparison, and aside from Fender and the obvious brands it's worth checking some UK options, such as Cream T's classy new Astra 'Decades' (£2,499) with its dual control circuits and pickup-swapping system (neck pickup only), and Gordon Smith's Classic T, which can be custom-ordered to less modern tastes, while Chapman's now Indian-made Peter Honoré Signature DPT (approx. £999) combines modern style with a classic feel and Wilkinson R Series single coils.



8

Spending time with the Telecaster, initially on a recording project, is equally revealing. It's bright and twangy; the tone pot is a no-load type again and, just like the Strat, the treble bleed on the volume control keeps the clarity as you pull it back. That clarity extends to the neck pickup, though it actually sounds a little more humbucker-like, while the 'secret weapon' S1 switch – a simple push-switch on the volume knob – links both pickups in series, irrespective of where you place the three-way lever switch. It's the thickest and hottest sound, but pulling that volume down doesn't darken the voice, and with the volume pulled back it's a pretty cool jazz tone. But that series sound is also a great pedalboard driver, offering big cleans, and it loves gain and dirty drives – a 'single'-pickup sound that's extremely useful.

So while the voicing of these guitars suggests classic (Tele) and modern rocker (Strat HSS), both guitars seem to excel and become chameleon-like with even a pretty basic pedalboard, not to mention our Helix LT's more complex voicings. And don't pigeonhole the Strat HSS: especially with the well-tuned treble bleed, you can create some very usable big, clean voices with a little volume reduction, hinting at classic Gibson in the neck position, while even the full-coil bridge can be tamed by the volume without losing that balanced clarity. The Tele works so well with pretty

much anything: studio-style reverbs and multi-tap delays, light or heavy modulation, thickening crunch and drive.

The small details never get in the way of the playing – far from it. There's that excellent vibrato, for starters, and even the soft-touch control knobs of the Strat feel luxurious. Meanwhile, the heavily knurled knobs on the Telecaster come across as something from a jewellery shop, despite being slightly sharp to the touch. And even that slight angle to the lever switch adds another small per cent of comfort.

8. Again, these excellent 'F' logo'd rear-locking tuners, with their short string posts, are retained from the previous series

9. Unlike vintage style, the Tele's neck pickup is mounted on the anodised aluminium scratchplate so simple height adjustment is easy



9



10

10. As before, the Ultra II body has the same rear contouring and contoured heel with its round-nosed neckplate – only the logo changes

Verdict

When Fender says that everything has been tweaked on these new Ultras, that's pretty accurate. That was the premise of the original Ultra series, too. And while there's not a raft of differences between series I and II, the continuing refinement is very evident in what are superbly thought-through and executed designs.

Maybe it's time to move on from our much-loved dirty ol' relics and enjoy some rather fine player-led guitar making?

Initially, perhaps, they feel a little modern; the more we play, the more they come across as very well-sorted guitars that really do suit a wide range of pedal and amp settings. There's no struggle; nothing gets in the way. Maybe it's time to move on from our much-loved dirty ol' relics and enjoy some rather fine player-led guitar making? These are serious guitars for serious players. **G**



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA II TELECASTER

PRICE: £2,259 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cut solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Quarter-sawn maple, modern 'D', bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/43.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, black pearloid dot markers, Luminlay side dots, 254-356mm (10-14") compound radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender American Tele bridge with 6 chromed brass saddles, Fender Deluxe rear-locking tuners (with short posts), nickel/chromed-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fender Ultra II Noiseless Vintage Tele bridge and neck pickups, 3-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume (with S-1 switch & treble bleed) and master no-load tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.55/7.81

OPTIONS: Colour-dependent maple fingerboard

RANGE OPTIONS: Just one Tele but a newcomer is the dual-humbucking hardtail Ultra II Meteora (£2,399).

LEFT-HANDERS: No. See Stratocaster

FINISHES: Ultraburst (as reviewed), Sinister Red, Avalanche, (maple 'boards), Solar Flare and Texas Tea (ebony 'boards) – gloss polyurethane body with Ultra satin urethane neck and headstock face



PROS Crisp build; player-led upgrades; superb playability and setup; great weight; S-1 series/parallel switching

CONS Hardly a huge upgrade; no left-hand option



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA II STRATOCASTER HSS

PRICE: £2,299 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cut solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Quarter-sawn maple, modern 'D', bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/43.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, white pearloid dot markers, Luminlay side dots, 254-356mm (10-14") compound radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender 2-point Deluxe synchronized vibrato with pop-in arm, Fender Deluxe rear-locking tuners (with short posts)

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Fender Ultra II Noiseless Hot Vintage Strat (neck & middle), Haymaker humbucker (bridge), 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume (with S-1 switch & treble bleed), tone 1 (neck & middle), no-load tone 2 (bridge)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.79/8.3

OPTIONS: Colour-dependent maple fingerboard

RANGE OPTIONS: Also available in SSS pickup configuration (£2,259)

LEFT-HANDERS: Only Strat (£2,259)

FINISHES: Ultraburst (as reviewed), Noble Blue, Texas Tea (ebony 'boards); Solar Flare, Sinister Red (maple 'boards) – gloss polyurethane body with Ultra satin urethane neck and headstock face



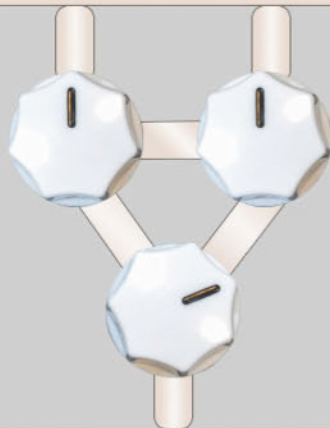
PROS Very well-turned-out guitar, centred on playability; good sonic (and hum-cancelling) performance; very usable treble bleed on the volume control; excellent vibrato

CONS Not a huge upgrade and, as ever, if you want a more classic Strat voicing, go for the standard SSS Ultra II model

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A Cut Above

Gibson refreshes one of its most iconic acoustic designs with three new cutaway models. Will these latest 'Birds fly or simply fail to take off? Let's take a look

Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker



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What You Need To Know

1

Gibson Hummingbirds are hardly new, are they?

Indeed. The model first appeared in Gibson's catalogue in 1960 and there have been plenty of variations over the past 65 years. This new series has been refreshed to include three contrasting cutaway models, with stage-readiness in the form of LR Baggs electronics.

2

Are they made in the USA?

Yes, the trio of new models are all made at Gibson's acoustic facility in Bozeman, Montana, with plenty of hands-on lutherie involved from the company's specialist team.

3

Why such a price difference between the two?

It's all down to fit and finish, basically. The Studio version is stripped back with a satin finish, utile neck (as opposed to mahogany) and other features that have been graded accordingly to meet the lower price point. Rest assured, it's still a helluva good guitar, though!

Making its debut at the dawn of the 1960s, the Gibson Hummingbird needs no introduction from us. Like its older brother, the J-45, it has established itself as a thoroughly reliable workhorse dreadnought and has seen generations of players succumb to its charms. It's famous, too, for its ornate livery, which includes the highly decorated pickguard that depicts a floral motif and, unsurprisingly, a hummingbird. After six decades of tweaks and spec changes, the old 'bird has received Gibson's latest dust-off in the form of three new cutaway variants aimed at providing accompaniment to another generation of songsters worldwide.

In short, the new range includes a baseline Studio model, the Standard EC and the Standard Rosewood EC. There's also a variation for the Standard EC in the form of an alternative Ebony finish, which is an exclusive online-only option. All models come equipped with LR Baggs pickups and so they are ready to rock 'n' roll straight out of the case.

Here, we're looking at the Studio and Rosewood Standard models that bookend the new range in terms of price point, with the Studio lifting off at around £2.5k and the Rosewood EC hitting the heights at just over £4k. To complete the picture, the Standard EC nests at £3.4k.





2

1. Gibson's Hummingbird acoustic has been in the company's catalogue since 1960. These refreshed versions come complete with a cutaway for upper-fret access

2. A Sitka spruce top, rosewood bridge and that characteristic Hummingbird pickguard are features shared by both of the models we have for review

3. The stripped-back Studio EC's headstock bears the silkscreen version of the Gibson logo and insignia

All the models are essentially hand-crafted at Gibson's dedicated acoustic facility in Bozeman, Montana, with a mission to provide "cutaway bodies for improved access to the upper frets and LR Baggs electronics for high-quality onstage sound you can rely on night after night..." So what exactly are the differences in spec between the two models we're looking at that can justify the £1.5k price differential?

Opening the cases, you'd be hard pressed to detect much in the way of a contrast because both look pretty identical, apart from the Tri-Burst finish on the Studio and the muted cherry of its sibling, the Rosewood Burst. It's only when you zoom in that these 'Birds begin to reveal their innermost secrets.

Considering the spec of the Studio model to begin with, the biggest difference here is the satin finish, as opposed to the high gloss that features on the Standard Rosewood. As you'd expect from Gibson, it's been nicely applied and doesn't detract from the Hummingbird's traditional good looks. In fact, you'd have to look twice to see much difference in finish with the guitars side by side. We certainly had to under those same circumstances.

Apart from that the Studio follows the expected flight plan with a Sitka spruce top and mahogany back and sides. Moving in for a close-up view of the former, the spruce here looks perfectly



3

4. The Studio may be less ornate than the Standard Rosewood, but we found it to be surprisingly loud and beautifully voiced – a real tone machine!

THE RIVALS

If the cutaway option isn't that important to you, then Epiphone's range of Hummingbirds is an excellent hunting ground for a more affordable version – the Inspired By Gibson Acoustic Aged Cherry Sonicore pickup lands at £839. There's a Studio model in Epiphone's catalogue, too, with a Faded Cherry finish and a Fishman Sonitone pickup costing around £439. Taking a look over Gibson's own fence will reveal more non-cutaway models, including the Faded Natural at £3,399 and the Hummingbird Original with a Heritage Cherry Sunburst finish at £3,799.

Cutaway dreads are rife in Martin's listings with the lower-end GPC-11E setting you back £1,129 or the higher price bracket GPCE Inception at £3,799. And Taylor, Furch and other top brands will satisfy your cutaway dread needs with a plentitude of models – as usual, a little time on the web will yield rich dividends.

serviceable and the Tri-Burst – fading from dark brown to red to mellow yellow – really does look the business. And that pickguard completes the picture nicely.

Turning the guitar over, the mahogany on the back and sides gives a good account of itself, too – nicely dark with attractive, if subtle, dark streaks running through the grain pattern. The body is set off with single-ply white binding front and back, and the furnishings here are complete with a rosewood bridge with a compensated Tusq saddle and an attractive multi-ring rosette.

Another major difference – although, again, you'd have to look hard to notice it – is the neck, which is made from utile, as opposed to mahogany. It has to be said that the grain pattern here is a dead ringer for mahogany, and a quick look at utile's fact sheet reveals it is indeed a very close relative of that more esteemed timber (and is sometimes referred to as 'sipo mahogany'). And, if you're curious, the name 'utile' comes straight from the Latin meaning 'useful'.

The Studio's fingerboard is rosewood and its pale appearance might indicate that it represents a more economical cut, but the fingerboard on the Rosewood Standard is practically identical and so we can assume this is merely what Gibson currently has available across the board, so to speak. On the Studio, the 'board is unbound, however.

With a powerful range of dynamics, we were knocked out by how strongly they performed

The headstock here has another tale to tell in that the Gibson logo and ornamentation is silkscreened and not the inlaid mother-of-pearl on the Standard. Both guitars benefit from Grover Rotomatic tuners, the Studio's being chrome, while the Standard's is finished in the more ornate gold.

As far as the electronics are concerned, we find an LR Baggs Element Bronze pre-installed, with a simple volume control located just inside the soundhole.

Switching over to the Rosewood Standard, and with that £1.5k price difference in mind, we find that the Sitka spruce here seems to be of a slightly higher grade, with plenty of cross patterning in the grain. As with its sibling, the sunburst finish has been applied nicely and this time the body has been multi-bound.

Another main difference between the two models on review is obviously the Standard's rosewood back and sides. Gibson tells us that the renowned tonewood's presence here will offer "a bit more bass and harmonic complexity



to the legendary Hummingbird tonal recipe". Gibson hasn't specified the exact nativity of the rosewood present here, but from the look of it, it has all the characteristics of timber hailing from India, with a sumptuous dark to milk chocolate stripy appearance.

As previously mentioned, the Standard has a bound 'board and upgraded tuners, but the mother-of-pearl parallelogram inlays are a feature shared by both. Lastly in our spec showdown, the LR Baggs pickup present on the Standard is the VTC, with both volume and tone controls hidden away in the soundhole.

Feel & Sounds

With two guitars that are the exact same build except for some peripheral refinements, it's no surprise that both models feel very similar in the hand. Necks share Gibson's Round SlimTaper and fingerboards, with a 406mm (16-inch) radius, and are very comfortable for both chords and single lines. The pair are quite light, too, and a comfortable fit either sitting or standing.

But the front-page news here has got to be how loud these guitars are. It's very rare to find an acoustic that actually sounds like it's already been put through some form of amplification, but these acoustics give you everything they've got from the start. And that's not to say it's all volume and nothing else because both

these 'Birds sing sweetly as well. With a powerful range of dynamics on hand, we were simply knocked out by how strongly they performed. It has to be said that the Studio might even have the edge in the volume stakes, perhaps due to the less dense satin finish. We'd agree that the Standard's rosewood brings something to the table in terms of complexity and tonal polish, but the Studio's mahogany is a perfectly worthy alternative.

Firing up the LR Baggs pickups in both gave pleasing results once more as all the tonal fullness and power transferred into the electronic realm with ease. Again,

5. The Standard Rosewood's upscaled livery includes multi-ply binding front and back, but the mother-of-pearl parallelogram fretboard inlays are a feature shared by both guitars

6. Both Hummingbirds are fitted with LR Baggs pickups: an Element Bronze for the Studio and a VTC for the Standard Rosewood with controls tucked away inside the soundhole





7. The origin of the rosewood on the Standard's back and sides is not specified in the spec, but we suspect it hails from East India

the Studio seemed to just perform a hair above the Standard, but that latter's extra tone control offered an additional level of flexibility to refine the tone just that little bit more.

Verdict

We've obviously had the opportunity to play a great number of acoustic guitars in the past, and very occasionally we've found one that stands apart in that its build and tonal characteristics come together to produce a really fine instrument. But here, we've found two, leading us to believe that the Hummingbird in its cutaway format is a

This cutaway format is a real winner. What's even more remarkable is that the Studio version is every bit a champ

real winner all around for Gibson. What's even more remarkable is that the lowlier Studio version is every bit a champ, tonally speaking, which means that if you can live with those slight reductions in bling levels and the rosewood back and sides, this is the one to go for. On the other hand, if you want all the whistles and bells and the extra 10 per cent that the rosewood's soundstage adds to the general picture, then that's the one for you. Hats off to Gibson! **G**



GIBSON ACOUSTIC HUMMINGBIRD STUDIO EC

PRICE: £2,599 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dreadnought cutaway
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 124mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Urtle
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Grover Rotomatic
NUT/WIDTH: Tusq/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/55mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element Bronze
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.08/4.6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: There's a trio of new Hummingbirds – the two you see here and the Hummingbird Standard EC, available in Heritage Cherry Sunburst or, as an online exclusive, in Ebony, both at £3,399
LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet
FINISH: Tri-Burst (as reviewed) – satin nitrocellulose



10/10

PROS Stripped back on everything except the tone – this is a real tuneful powerhouse

CONS There's really nothing to mention here



GIBSON ACOUSTIC HUMMINGBIRD STANDARD ROSEWOOD EC

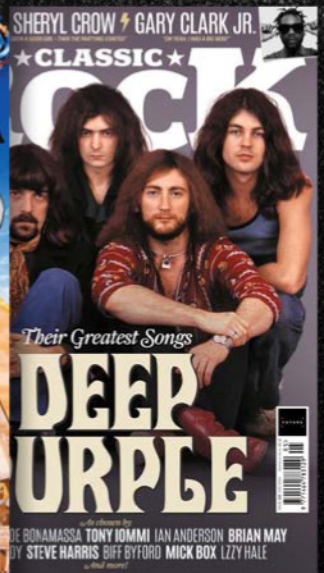
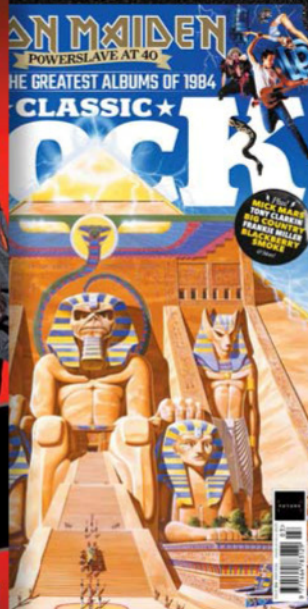
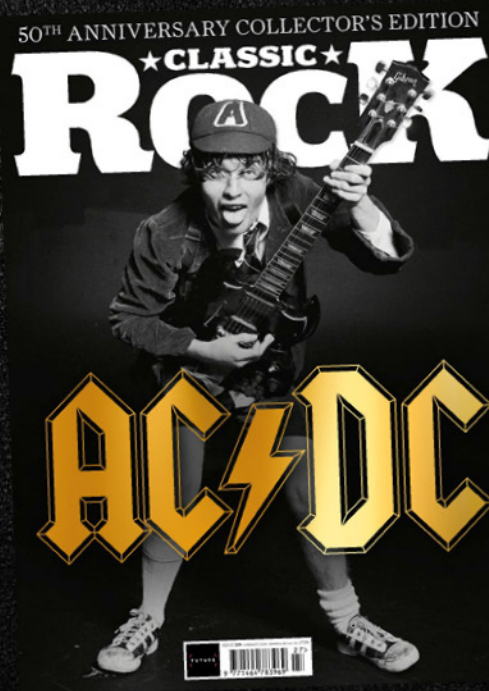
PRICE: £4,099 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dreadnought cutaway
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 124mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 407mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Grover Rotomatic
NUT/WIDTH: Tusq/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/55mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.11/4.66
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: As per the Gibson Acoustic Hummingbird Studio (see left)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet
FINISH: Rosewood Burst (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose



10/10

PROS A classic cutaway dread possessed of a sweet voice and amazing dynamics

CONS Like its sibling, there's really nothing to add here



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Virtual Pedalboard

Fractal Audio puts its Axe-Fx III effects in a conveniently sized stage-ready floor unit

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Olly Curtis





FRACTAL AUDIO VP4 £700

CONTACT **G66** PHONE **07392 395520** WEB www.fractalaudio.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 Fractal? Doesn't it specialise in amp emulations?**
 Well, yes, the Axe-Fx III is the company's flagship unit, but it also has loads of effects onboard – and the VP4 provides those effects for use with your own amp.
- 2 What's with the VP4 name?**
 The VP stands for 'virtual pedalboard' and it has four footswitches and four simultaneous effects. Logical, huh?
- 3 Does it go in front of my amp?**
 Yes, you can place it like a standard chain of pedals, but you can also connect it with the four-cable method so you can have some of its effects in front of your amp and some in its effect loop.

The US brand Fractal Audio is known for its high-end modelling products, notably the Axe-Fx III, packed full of amps, cabs and effects, and its FM9 and FM3 floor processor spin-offs. Besides those, the company has historically provided effects-only units as a solution for players who don't need the amp and cab modelling. Its FX8 eight-footswitch unit, which we took a look at back in 2015, was most recently available in the MKII guise but has since been discontinued. And now the effects-only tradition continues with the much more compact VP4.

This four-footswitch 'Virtual Pedalboard' offers four simultaneous effects chosen from 400 onboard effects derived from the Axe-Fx III. Fractal says the VP4 is designed to work seamlessly with a traditional amplifier but also excels at providing pre-and/or post-effects with any modeller, so it could easily slot into your rig whatever your working methods.

In Use

The VP4 has a large coloured display with lettering that's easy to read from the floor while you're standing. There's plenty you can do with just the footswitches, so you might not even need to tweak any knobs once you've got it set up to your liking.

As with many other preset-based modelling units, getting it set up in advance is the key to using the VP4. This is reasonably simple to do via the hands-on user interface, or by connecting it to your computer and taking advantage of the excellent VP4-Edit software, which lets

There's no need to start from scratch – the banks are filled with usefully dialled-in factory presets

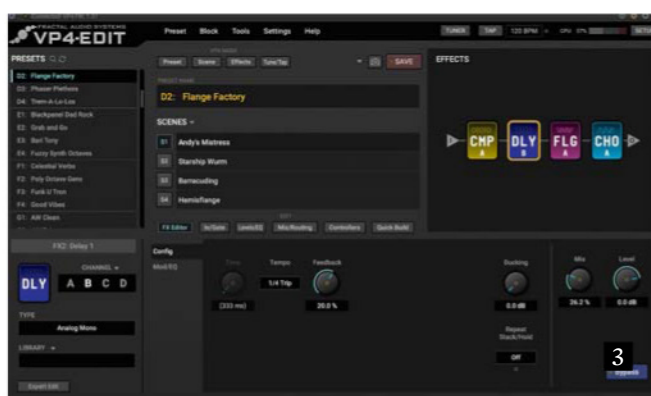


Turn the A, B, C and D soft knobs to adjust their associated onscreen settings. The Select knob highlights different areas of the current page for adjustment

you organise your presets and the effects in them. You can also take advantage of Fractal's official Axe Change site to get hold of other user's presets.

Connectivity is flexible. The pedal can be run in mono or stereo, and you can use the four-cable method to put effects in front of your amp and some in its effects loop. You can also use the VP4 as a 2×2 24-bit/48kHz audio interface, and there's robust MIDI capability and provision to connect up to two expression pedals or switches for real-time control of effect settings.

There are 104 presets onboard in 26 (A to Z) banks of four. Each preset can hold four effects, which you can choose from 24 different effects genres – 'blocks', in Fractal-speak.



Fractal's VP4 unit is full of classy effects. The Drive models are accurate, eminently playable and cover all dirt flavours

1. The four footswitches turn effects and Scenes on and off, and also change presets. The LEDs are blue in effect mode, red for Scenes and green for presets

2. These jacks are for connecting expression pedals. Alternatively, a single momentary or latching switch can be connected in place of an expression pedal

3. The VP4-Edit software is a great resource that lets you edit effects and organise presets with easy moves

Each block has a range of models (effects types). For example, the Drive block has 63 modelled pedals, while the Reverb block has 78 reverbs. There's no restriction on which blocks you can have in a preset, so you can have four different ones such as a classic Drive, Modulation, Delay and Reverb setup, or four of the same if you fancy stacking up four drives. The only thing to watch out for is not to eat up all the CPU available, but the VP4 will warn you if that's the case.

Each of the four effects actually has four channels (A, B, C and D) that, if you choose, you can either load with different models (for your drive effect, say, you could have a boost, overdrive, distortion and fuzz) or perhaps the same model with four different gain settings. With your chosen effects loaded in a preset, you have several ways to use them by selecting one of the VP4's Modes (Preset, Scene, Effects, Tuner). You can change modes by pressing footswitches 1 and 2 together and then making your selection via one of the other footswitches,

each corresponding to a different mode shown above in the display.

Preset mode lets you gaplessly select the four presets in a bank with the footswitches, with bank changes available by a press-and-hold of footswitches 1 (bank down) or 4 (bank up). Meanwhile, Effect mode is the method most akin to using a conventional set of pedals, whereby the footswitches facilitate standard bypass for each of the four effects. In this mode, you can also quickly change which channel of any effect you want to use by holding down that effect's footswitch and selecting your choice. If you don't want to switch between whole presets, but you need to turn on multiple pedals at once for specific combinations, then Scene mode is the place to be, offering

4. The high-contrast colour LCD lets you clearly see all relevant information: preset name, Scene name and your four effects

5. Connect to your computer to access the VP4-Edit software and you can use the VP4 as a 2x2 audio interface and get Fractal's regular firmware upgrades

THE RIVALS

Line 6's HX Effects (£449) multi-effects unit has eight footswitches and six simultaneous effects, while its HX Stomp (£519) has amp and cab sims onboard, but you can also use it just for effects. Also with amp and cab sims is the Boss GT-1000Core (£599) and the new Boss GX-10 (£349), both of which allow a large number of simultaneous effects – see our next issue for a full review. Eventide is known for really classy effects and the H-90 Harmonizer (£795) features 66 effects algorithms, though you can only use two at a time.



combinations of effects under control of a single footswitch. Each preset supports four different Scenes and you can store whether an effect is on or off and also its channel, so each Scene could have a different drive model or delay time, for example. Finally, the fourth mode, Tuner, calls up a really well-specified tuner, as expected, plus a tap tempo function.

There's no need to start from scratch with the VP4 because all the preset banks from A to T are filled with very usefully dialled-in factory presets. However, it's easy to build a preset and, needless to say, there are loads of parameters available for tweaking each effect to perfection should you wish to dive in.

The unit is full of classy-sounding effects. The Drive models are accurate, eminently playable and cover all dirt flavours. If you prefer to stick with your own favourite hardware dirt pedals then everything else is here as the unit excels at modulation, delay and reverb effects. There's also more esoteric stuff such as the pitch effects that include harmonies, atmospheric detuning and a virtual capo so you can play 1st position cowboy chords in other keys. Delay is well sorted with 128 delay types in four different blocks – one just for multi-taps – and there's lots of variation available in the Chorus, Flanger, Phaser, Rotary and Tremolo blocks.

Verdict

With its massive flexibility, the VP4 could be the sole pedalboard with your amp or amp modeller, or employed as a complement to your other pedals. Some players may embrace tap dancing between presets, Scenes, effects and channels, while others may simply use a single favoured preset for a gig and just switch the individual effects in and out.

The asking price represents a sizable outlay, but we think it's justified, considering the sheer range of quality effects on offer, along with the practical options in how you use them, all wrapped up in a bulletproof, sensibly sized unit. **G**



FRACTAL AUDIO VP4

PRICE: £700

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Multi-effects pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, tuner, 104 presets, 400+ effects, tap tempo, noise gate and EQ on each preset

CONTROLS: Soft knobs

(A, B, C, D), buttons x 6, Footswitches (1, 2, 3, 4)

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs L (mono) & R, standard outputs L (mono) & R, Pedal 1 & 2, SPDIF In & Out, MIDI In & Out, USB

POWER:

Supplied 9V DC adaptor 1300 mA

DIMENSIONS:

252 (w) x 162 (d) x 62mm (h)



PROS Solid build; sound quality; massive amount of effects types available; footswitching flexibility in how you use the effects; clear display; audio interface capability; software editor

CONS Nothing really, but with so many options it may take time choosing and editing your setup

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« BLUEPRINT »

POWER STATION

Founded by Jimi Hendrix mere months before his death, Electric Lady Studios was a mind-expanding creative mothership where his guitar playing reached new heights. As a new documentary explores this lost chapter, long-standing Hendrix engineer Eddie Kramer and filmmaker John McDermott tell us about Jimi's final brainwave

Words Henry Yates

Take a walk down New York's 8th Street in modern times and you'll find barely a sniff of the 60s counterculture that once pulsed in this neighbourhood. There is just one last holdout against the gentrification of Greenwich Village. Blink and you'll miss the mirrored gunmetal door. Yet beyond it lies the city's most fabled recording studio, conceived by Jimi Hendrix in the late 60s, operational by summer 1970, and the scene of the guitarist's final creative burst before his death that September.

By now, everybody knows about Hendrix's 1966 touchdown in London and the shifting of rock's tectonic plates, about this Seattle-born sonic terrorist's onstage humbling of Clapton, and the breakout Bag O' Nails show that forced Britain's guitar class to give up or get serious. By contrast, one chapter that has never been trawled to death is the birth of Electric Lady Studios. And that's a curious oversight because the story of this recording facility has everything, from quixotic ambition and ruinous debt, to last-gasp redemption and some of Jimi's most beautiful music.

Now, at last, the guitarist's spiritual home is getting its due with director John McDermott's fantastic new documentary, *Electric Lady Studios: A Jimi Hendrix Vision*. "It's the history of how we

put the damn place together, which was kind of a miracle when you think about it," says Hendrix's famed engineer Eddie Kramer, as he joins our Zoom call. "It was basically a bunch of hippies who thought they knew what they were doing. And I guess we did..."

The story goes that Electric Lady was originally going to be a nightclub?

Eddie Kramer: "Well, that was Jimi's thing. He loved to jam. He loved to go down to the Generation Club, as a place to hang – and he would always jump on the stage, no matter what was going on. So one day I get the call saying, 'We're gonna build a nightclub in the Village.' And I'm looking at the site, thinking, 'This is a great space. But what about what Jimi's been doing for the past year, spending money day after day at the Record Plant, The Hit Factory, wherever?' I mean, thank goodness he did that because it meant we had a huge body of material to work with. But, you know, he was spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on studio time. So I came up with a proposal: 'Let's make this the best studio in the world for Jimi. It's gonna be his home, he'll love it, it'll be a place he can relax and create.' And they went, 'Yeah, good idea. Okay, let's do that.'"

John McDermott: "I think it was an easy switch for Jimi. Once Eddie made the point

to him that this could be his creative home, I think that's when he really seized on that concept. As a commercial enterprise, the nightclub business was much more rough and tumble in those days. If you think about Cerebrum or the Generation Club or The Scene – none of which worked – I think building a studio was really the wisest move. The idea that somebody like Jimi could come in and successfully manage a club – it just wouldn't have lasted. Unlike the studio, which is still here today."

How much of a wreck was the original site?

John: "The Hendrix family was able to purchase the photography that documents the construction of the studio. And it truly was a mess. Y'know, they've got this problem, that problem, they hit water underneath the studio. It spiralled to the point where, as you'll see in the film, he had to go to Warner Brothers to get a \$300,000 loan to finish the studio. Which in itself was a ballsy move. That was an enormous amount of money back then. It came at a difficult time for Jimi. He was in litigation with Ed Chalpin over the old Curtis Knight recordings. He had [financial] obligations that seemed unrelenting. So it was difficult to be able to have the cash to simply move forward and get it done."



electric lady studios

A JIMI HENDRIX VISION

NT: <u>ALG VOL EX P1000</u>	REEL NO. <u> </u>	W. O. # <u> </u>	INVOICE # <u> </u>
ST: <u>Jimmi Hendrix</u>	TAPE NO. <u> </u>	MASTER: <u> </u>	30 I.P.S. <u> </u>
PRODUCER: <u>Hendrix Kramer</u>	STUDIO A ☒	REMIX A ☐	15 I.P.S. ☒
ENGINEER: <u>ED KRAMER</u>	STUDIO B ☐	REMIX B ☐	1/2 I.P.S. <u> </u>
DATE: <u>AUG 22-1-1970</u>			
16 TR ☐	12 TR ☐	8 TR ☐	4 TR ☐
2 TR ☒	MONO ☐		
TAKE <u> </u>	START <u> </u>	STOP <u> </u>	TITLE <u>6W-094-2</u>
COMMENTS <u> </u>			EDITOR <u> </u>



How did it feel to finally see that derelict shell become a psychedelic spaceship?

Eddie: “Well, I love your description of the spaceship. It looks like something out of *Star Wars*. Another cool thing was the colours. There were these bloody great big coloured spotlights, in various shapes and sizes. And then, in the control room, you had pro theatre lighting – none of that electronic digital shit, this was the real deal. I almost felt like you could play those lights like I could play the console. Jimi would say, ‘Hey man, I want green over here, purple over there,’ and we’d just dial in this beautiful vibe, which helped to create the atmosphere of the music. He’d be like, ‘Give me red, man.’ And that would mean distortion.”

John: “There was no studio construction industry back then. They were winging it. It wasn’t as if they were hiring a major company who had built 12 studios before. They were hiring technicians, craftsmen, who could bring [architect] John Storyk’s drawings to life. The round windows, the carpeting on the wall, the coloured lighting – Jimi was looking for a comfortable environment to be creative. And for someone like Hendrix – who had known poverty, right there in the rear-view mirror – it had to be exhilarating to think, ‘I’m on the cusp of

“There was no studio construction industry then. They were winging it”

John McDermott

having this unimaginable place and I can come down here any time I feel like it.’ At that point, you start to have all kinds of collaborative and creative opportunities. It’s like, ‘Hey, Steve Winwood’s in town, let’s ask him to come on over and do something.’ Because now they have the place to do it and no-one is gonna tell them to stop because there’s another group waiting out in the lobby.”

Do you remember Jimi’s reaction when he saw the finished studio?

Eddie: “Oh, he loved it. He came in early every bloody night. It was amazing to see him at the door. Like, ‘Jimi’s ready at seven o’clock, holy crap!’”

Hendrix recorded all over the map, but do you think there was a certain flavour that crept into his guitar playing once he got to Electric Lady?

Eddie: “I don’t know if I would use the

term ‘crept in’ – it manifested itself immediately. The energy level was so high. Man, he was on fire. The music took on this high-energy, high-voltage feel – and Jimi is ramping up those performances, and laughing and giggling. When you hear the outtakes, it’s wonderful, the rapport between him, myself, the band, even the roadies. It was a joy to be there. The three of them [Hendrix, drummer Mitch Mitchell and bassist Billy Cox] were just fantastic together. Their brains were on fire. You could tell. There was this fabulous energy, that sparkle in the studio.”

Why was Electric Lady such a good recording space for guitar?

Eddie: “Well, we lucked out. I mean, John Storyk had never designed a studio in his life before. But we had a very good acoustician who helped us. If you look at the shape of the room, the ceiling sloped up to the highest point, which

was right by the control room. The way the plaster was laid up into that ceiling, one half of the room sounded live and the other half sounded kind of dead and down. It just became this magic formula. Drums and bass sounded great. Guitar sounded amazing – because if Jimi was overdubbing a solo, we would just open up all the screens in the studio. I could stick a mic at the back end of the room, and you’d hear the guitar at the front, but then you’d also hear this beautiful decay. When that was mixed in, the guitar sounded frickin’ enormous.”

Another departure from the norm was that Electric Lady had a huge control room.

Eddie: “Yeah. Today, of course, everybody sits in the control room to overdub guitar, but nobody was doing that in those days. Jimi would say, ‘Hey man, can I play my guitar in the control room?’ He’d get this long cord, jack a few things, find





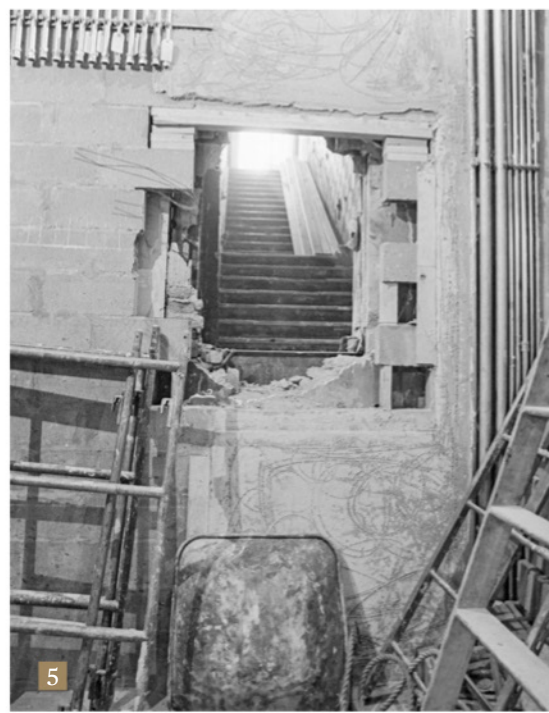
1. The studio's interior was a psychedelic experience

2. Shimon Ron, chief technical engineer at Electric Lady Studios

3. Eddie Kramer at the desk in the studio's early days

4. Jimi would experience the state-of-the-art space for just 10 weeks before his death in September '70

5. The site would hit many hurdles, including flooding, on its journey to becoming Jimi's 'home'



a place to plug it in. And then he's sitting there listening, like, 'Ah, so that's what it sounds like on the big speakers.' And we'd say, 'This is Jimi's jack, nobody messes with that.'

"We were one of the first studios to have 24-track, and I did the same thing with the console, making sure that we were able to cut 24 tracks. So we felt we needed a bigger control room with more depth than standard. When you were sat at the desk, you'd be looking at four huge monitors. There'd be two horizontal Altecs and two vertical ones, and the idea was to be able to have four-track monitoring. Plus, if you look at where the console ended, there was this drop-down and this beautiful bench below, all done in velvet for Jimi's guests. So they were out of sight, thank God. It was like, 'Shush down there!' You could have 10 people in there and it wouldn't bother you. But at Electric Lady, there were only ever a few hangers-on."

Where did Jimi keep his guitars and amps at Electric Lady?

Eddie: "The guitars were mostly kept at his apartment because he lived just around the corner on 12th Street. With recording, sometimes, he might use a Gibson – just for the tone difference – but 98 per cent of the time at Electric Lady it was the Strat. And Marshall was front and centre. Obviously, on the *Electric Ladyland* album, there were a couple of tracks where it was a huge Fender amp with, like, eight speakers, and that's what gave it that crazy bottom-end. But in that late period, Marshall was his go-to. That and the pedals. I think Roger Mayer had done some more tweaking. But there were so many other companies coming to him by then. Gibson gave him some crazy-ass pedals in those days."

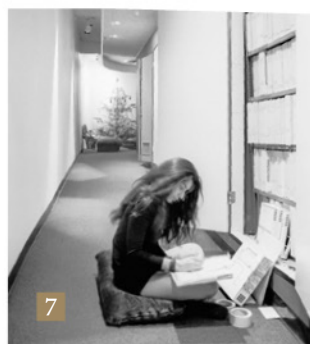
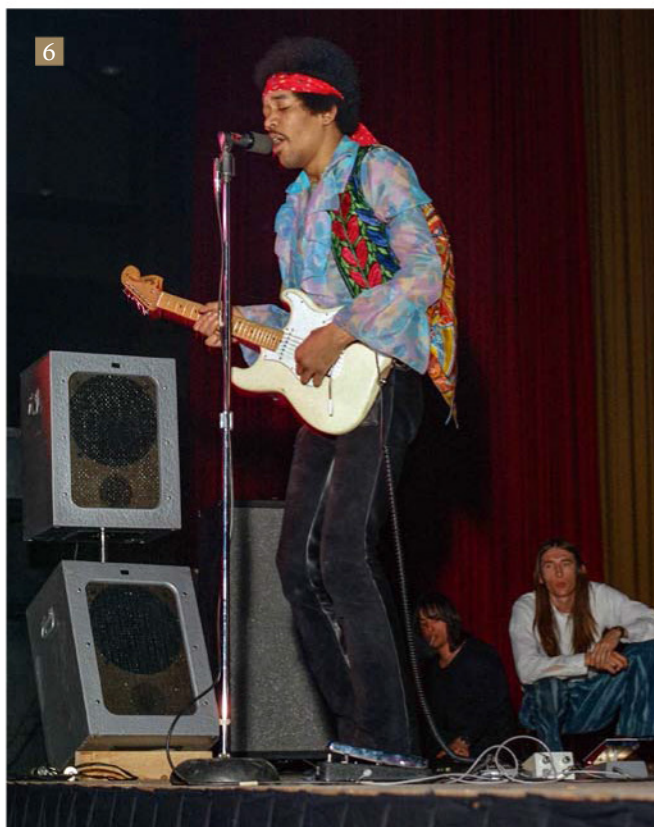
John: "You gotta think about this: when they started at Electric Lady, yes, it was operational, but the freight elevator didn't work yet. So they had to hump that stuff

by hand down those long stairs. So they had some stuff like amps in lockers, so Jimi didn't necessarily have to take his Marshalls out and bring them back in."

Jimi only got about 10 weeks at Electric Lady. But as the new boxset reminds us, he nailed some great tracks in that period.

Eddie: "Well, you look at the tape boxes and how far back a track like *Dolly Dagger* goes, how many overdubs were done – it was a work in progress and Jimi wasn't satisfied until it was the way he heard it in his head. It's a complex track, a lot going on. There were so many intense overdubs that we would have to punch in. I would even have to cut the tape to make sure we didn't get any overrun, then splice it back together. *Freedom* – same thing. Same intensity. Same attention to detail."

John: "The interesting thing about Electric Lady is that you were able to build the complex tracks there. For example,



6. Jimi playing live in May 1970, shortly before the studio was completed that summer

7. Cataloguing of Jimi's private tape closet in progress at the finished Electric Lady Studios

8. Lighting was a big part of the studio's magic. "We'd just dial in this beautiful vibe, which helped to create the atmosphere of the music," says Eddie Kramer



PHOTO BY STEVE BRAKER © AUTHENTIC HENDRIX, LLC

PHOTOS BY JOHN VELTRI © AUTHENTIC HENDRIX, LLC

Freedom, if you go and listen to the *West Coast Seattle Boy* boxset, there's a May '70 live take, just the three guys on the floor instrumentally doing *Freedom* because they're still developing it. But by the time you move the needle forward, timeline-wise, to June and July of 1970, they've built it up to this thing.

"You take a track like *Night Bird Flying*, let alone *Dolly Dagger*, and think about all the guitar overdubs interlaced through that piece. I mean, that comes with continuity. You can't get that from going to the Record Plant, coming back three weeks later, trying to restart it again. Jimi wasn't someone who would be able to present guys with charts and say, 'Okay, play this, do this, you'll come in here.' But so much time was jamming these songs in that room at Electric Lady that it became, like, 'Do you hear where I'm trying to go with this?' And as Eddie said, because they were so in tune, they were able to quickly get it. Like, 'Okay, yeah – here we go.'"

Eddie, you spoke to Jimi for the final time at Electric Lady, when he phoned to suggest you join him in London to record there instead?

Eddie: "Yeah, that phone call was very interesting. I reminded him, 'But Jimi, we've just spent all this money and it's a gorgeous studio.' And he was like, 'Yeah.' Almost like he was snapping back to reality. He told me, 'I'll see you in about

"[The studio energy] manifested itself immediately. Man, he was on fire"

Eddie Kramer

a week.' He knew he had to come back and finish the album. And he was looking forward to it."

John: "Had Billy never gotten ill and had to leave the tour, and Jimi had just finished the shows and come home, you never know what would have happened on September 18. He might have been somewhere else that day. You just never know. Life doesn't work that way."

Do you feel like Hendrix had more to give as a guitarist, had he lived?

John: "Oh God, yes. Listen to the Monterey performance of '67 – which is an all-time classic – and then go two years later to listen to *Machine Gun*. Again, you're talking about three pedals, a guitar and Marshall amps. So it isn't as if there's some kind of magic technology going on. It's still one guy, two hands, making sounds that nobody else had ever made before. So that's the great tragedy of this. I mean, as you listen to *Night Bird Flying*, you think, 'Wow, think of what the next record could have been, with him trying

horns and more keyboards.' Who knows?"

Eddie: "John's absolutely right. Jimi was on a rise, no question. I think the Band Of Gypsys was the key that opened the door because not only did it yield a fantastic album, but it also had that funk, blues, tough R&B vibe, which led to this beautiful open space for him to jam and really just stretch out for 15 minutes. That was the stepping stone. So his death was not only a shock to everybody, but it was premature in the sense of what he was thinking musically."

Finally, bands who record at Electric Lady Studios often say they can still sense Hendrix's presence. What do you think?

Eddie: "Oh, unquestionably. Y'know, you'll be mixing something, and it's like you get a little tap on your shoulder: 'You might not want to do that drum fill like that.' That studio has a mystique. I know musicians who are very empathetic and they walk in that room and they immediately feel something. And that's Jimi. They go, 'Okay, I can make some nice music in this place.' And they feel relaxed and the creative juices start to flow. It could be coincidental – but I like the other story." 



Electric Lady Studios: A Jimi Hendrix Vision is out now on Experience Hendrix, LLC and Legacy Recordings
<https://ajimihendrixvision.com>



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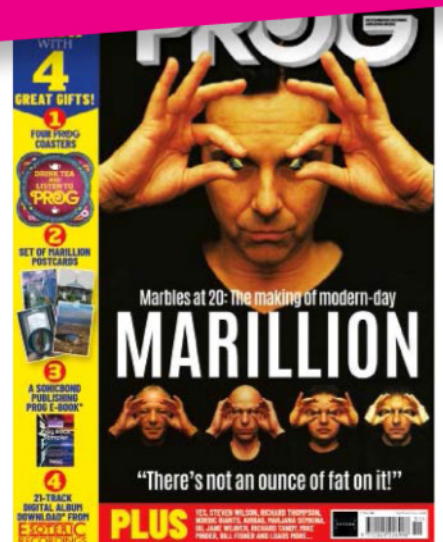
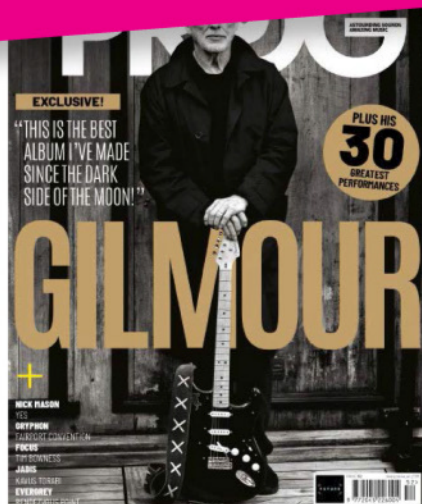
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VINNIE MOORE

Though he's most associated with all things 80s shred, some of Vinnie's gear choices might just surprise you

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

"I started out with a beginner guitar called a Teisco, and after about a year or so I got my first good guitar, which was an Ibanez PF300. I eventually traded that for a Fender Stratocaster, and soon after got a Gibson ES-335 made in 1965. My parents bought those guitars for me, though.

"The first guitar I actually bought myself was a Kramer Pacer. This was when Floyd Rose bridges first came out, and the stock Pacer came with one. A little before that, players were buying Floyds and having their guitars modified, which was not an easy thing to do. When the Pacer came out with a Floyd already installed, it was a no-brainer. Besides, it was a very good guitar that played well."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"I bought a Fender Jaguar and an Epiphone SG right around the same time. I got them because they are both completely different from what I usually play and I wanted to get some different sounds when recording. This can make you play a little differently, which can be a good thing. For one, they both have a smaller-scale neck, which changes the feel of your left hand. So, really, I just wanted a couple of guitars that were different for me to use in my studio. I'm always looking for things that might inspire me to play a certain way because of the feel and sound."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"When people give me free shit [laughs]! Someone once gave me an old Danelectro guitar that they had bought at a garage sale for \$10. I still have it and have used it on a bunch of my records. It's got a totally unique sound and comes in handy when I have a part that requires that sort of thing.

"I bought a 1965 Fender Super Reverb a few years back and got a good deal on it. It has been a great tool in the studio. But, to be honest, I don't buy a whole lot of gear any more unless it's something I really want or need. I used to be crazy about getting new things, but I've kind of gotten bored with it all, I guess. I am at the point where I already have too much stuff and prefer to get to playing and recording asap. I'm tired of wasting time tinkering endlessly with things. Sometimes, having too many options wastes a lot of time. So I really think things over before making impulse purchases. Where in the past, I would sometimes get new gear and then not end up using it. If it's something that I feel will inspire me – I'm in."

What would you consider to be the most inspirational piece of kit you've bought?

"Well, actually, there are many things that I've acquired that have been very useful and inspirational. One that comes to mind is my Marshall JMP head that I bought in the mid-80s. It has been my main head to record with for about eight years now. When I first got it, it wasn't working for me, so it laid around for years. For whatever reason, I decided to give it a try when recording a song one day and couldn't believe it sounded so good. It has become my number one in the studio.

"Other things that have been really great for me are software-related. For example, [Steinberg's] Cubase [digital audio workstation] has been invaluable."

"I'm tired of tinkering endlessly. Sometimes, having too many options wastes a lot of time"

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"The Gibson ES-335 I mentioned has always been something I wish I still had. However, it was a sacrifice made so that I would be able to buy a four-track recorder. That four-track was extremely important for me as far as developing my songwriting and learning about recording. So I'd have to say the sacrifice was well worth it because I got much more out of the recorder than I would have gotten out of the ES-335. I also sold an Ibanez TS10 Tube Screamer that I wish I had kept."

A garage-sale Danelectro has featured on a number of Vinnie's records, while his more newly acquired Epiphone SG and Fender Jaguar provide contrast when needed



VINNIE'S GO-TO RIG

"In the studio, I have been playing a prototype signature guitar that was made for me by Kramer. Most of the time, it's plugged into an Analog Man King Of Tone, and then the Marshall JMP 100-watt head into an Engl 4x12 cab with Celestion V30 speakers. I sometimes use different effects pedals in front of the amp, such as a TC Electronic Sub 'n' Up [Octaver], MXR Phase 90 or Boss PS-6 [Harmonist], to name a few. "I have tons of pedals and could name many more. As far as things like delay, I use plug-ins for that and monitor as I'm playing. Unless you're absolutely sure what delay settings you want to record with, it's best to wait until the mixing stage. There is no way to get rid of too much delay or change the delay time if you've recorded it that way. I mostly use the Echo Boy Jr made by Soundtoys."

"Buying a four-track recorder was extremely important for me in developing my songwriting"

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"First, get things that can inspire you to create; that's what's most important. As far as guitars, try different things out first if you can. It's always better to know how a type of guitar plays and sounds. Think things over to make sure that what you want will be useful to you, as opposed to impulse buying, which can sometimes lead to regret."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online and what were you looking at?

"I was checking out the [Neural DSP] Quad Cortex because I think that's something that could be very useful to me when writing and recording songs."

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

"Either scenario is not a good one to be faced with.

Is not playing at all and just smashing the guitar an option [laughs]? I'd rather have a good guitar – with that, at least you could play well. I have been stuck on stage with a bad guitar and you really can't do anything with strings that are a half-inch off the fretboard."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"Definitely humbuckers. I just couldn't handle the sound of a single coil in the bridge position – it was much too trebly for me. I would have to do some serious EQ'ing or whatever to make it fatter and less bright. It definitely has its use when you're going for a specific sound, but I prefer a warmer, fatter sound overall in the bridge. Also, the humming thing could be an issue at times." **[AD]**



Vinnie Moore's latest album, *Double Exposure*, is available now via Mind's Eye Music

www.vinniemoore.com

Kramer has been a name in Vinnie's arsenal since his early playing days, and today he has a prototype signature that's put to use when recording

BRIDGE OF SIGHS

While our mainly recycled build cracks on at a pedestrian pace, Dave Burrluck pauses to ponder that old chestnut: the offset bridge

Back in issue 518 I kicked off a collaborative domestic build with Jason Snelling at Maybury Guitars. To be fair, ‘collaboration’ is used in its loosest sense as Jason did the hard work, creating a cool body from recycled timbers, turning a paddle headstock kit neck into a ready-to-finish masterpiece, and laying out all the geometry. All I had to do was load in the offset bridge and thimbles, mount the Bigsby into pre-drilled holes then fit the Sunbear BearTrons and wire it up. Once everything is all working I can worry about a finish. Thanks to Jason, things were all looking good, and thanks to Stuart Robson at Sunbear Pickups, even though I was still a few sandwiches short in the setup hamper, it’s sounding a lot better than it actually plays.

Rather stupidly, however, I pinged a shot of the build thus far over to a modding mate to which he simply replied, “Oh, I’d have thought you would have put a Mastery bridge on that.” While I explained the point of the build was centred around *recycling*, he’d planted a seed that I couldn’t get out of my head. See, as wonderful as the original Fender offset design is/was, the bridge (and the way it’s set up) has always been a bit of a weak spot, not least that the whole bridge and vibrato system was conceived at a time of heavy gauge, flat-wound strings [pics 1 & 2].

As is, I don’t have quite enough height at the bridge, so a pretty simple neck shim is on the cards. While that’s no problem, I didn’t want to set up the guitar with a bridge that, well, has its issues. By design, it’s supposed to slightly rock back and forwards as you move the vibrato, and with relatively little behind the bridge string angle, the strings can easily slip



While modern designs have refined the standard Fender bridge, it’s still used on Fender offsets such as this first-series Vintera

across the saddles, which are threaded steel rods, with an outer diameter of 7mm without a central saddle groove.

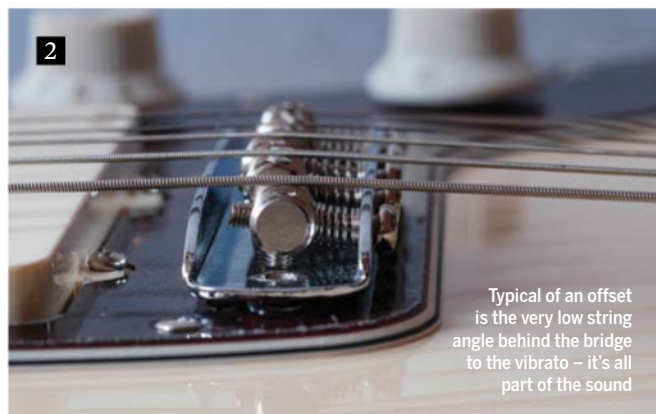
My dilemma wasn’t helped after spending time with a Powers Electric A-Type that uses an improved Bigsby-style vibrato and a solid-saddle bridge that’s firmly locked in place: one of the best and most in-tune ‘Bigsby’-equipped guitars I’ve ever had my hands on. There was also a ‘firmness’ to its sound that I wasn’t hearing on my in-progress build. Of course, an original offset like a Jazzmaster is a different beast, and it’s that low string angle, not to mention the extended string length from the bridge to the vibrato, that creates additional resonances you don’t hear on a Telecaster.

Chatting to Nik Huber after he’d built his first Piato on which he’d used a Mastery offset vibrato and bridge for the first time, he summed up the dilemma: “To be

honest, I was struggling with the Mastery vibrato because there was so much sound or noise coming from places I’ve never experienced before – there’s kind of a harp in the background, resonating.” Now, as much as I like the ‘harp’, it was dominating the acoustic unplugged sound.

Many Bridges To Cross

So, before I continued with the build, I began to consider some choices. Should I continue with the standard Fender vintage offset bridge, or look at some options? As the offset world has exploded over the past few years, there are quite a few. Fender, for example, has the American Professional Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge that uses solid brass Mustang saddles, with centre string grooves, their different diameters giving a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius and a string spacing of 52.4mm [pic 3]. Then there’s the well-regarded Descendent and even



Typical of an offset is the very low string angle behind the bridge to the vibrato – it’s all part of the sound



The Fender American Professional bridge with its Mustang saddles is a noticeable improvement over the standard offset bridge



The high-performance Sunbear pickups and Mastery bridge are offset by the deceptively figured ash top, which was a chopping board once upon a time!



the UK Staytrem bridge, and a raft of alternate new designs from the likes of Tuffset. Even Graph Tech offers some neat-looking Tusq Mustang-style saddles that can be used to upgrade the original bridge. And then there's that Mastery M1 offset bridge...

Cost is a big factor and I should be continuing with the recycled/reused theme, but with deadlines to meet I need to act sharpish. I order up one of those Fender bridges, which gets delayed somewhere in Scotland (really). Graph Tech is sending me some offset saddles to upgrade the standard offset bridge I already have, but they're coming direct from the US. A quick phone call later (after not wanting to risk an eBay purchase), Jeremy Tosh at Charles Guitars has given me his best price on a Mastery M1 bridge and with The Mod Squad's funds now firmly in the red, I finally have an alternative bridge to try.

"Compared with the standard offset bridge, the Mastery is rock solid and there's more depth to the voice"

Expensive it may be, but the Mastery bridge is as much a work of art as it is a highly functional bridge design [pics 4, 5, & 6]. I've tested these before – not least on that Huber Piet prototype – and it drops right into the Saguro's thimbles and setup is fast. I cut the nut grooves [pics 7 & 8] and having already given the frets the lightest of levelling, a good rub with 600-grit wet 'n' dry paper on a straight wood block, and lots of polishing with 0000 steel wool [pic 9], the build is now a properly playing guitar!

And what a difference a bridge makes. The superbly machined Mastery uses two one-piece saddles with height and intonation adjustment, and the string slots are deeply grooved so there's no chance the strings will pop out. "We use brass for our saddles," says Mastery, "a softer, warmer-sounding metal, but plate them with a unique hard chrome plating not found on any other guitar bridge. No other bridge manufacturer uses plating this durable. Our saddles will remain the hardest surface on your guitar."

Compared with the standard offset bridge, aside from the fact that the Mastery is rock solid and doesn't move, there's just more fundamental to the note response, more depth to the voice. After some basic oiling of the Bigsby (off the guitar), including the squeaky arm, that 'creaky ship' feel and – to a certain extent

– sound is replaced with not only excellent tuning stability but a very responsive feel for those all-important light shimmers. Raising the bridge, too (after adding a thin neck shim), pairs back some of the 'harp'. Obviously, there's less string length behind the bridge here compared with a classic offset, although there's still plenty of those lively resonances, particularly since I hadn't fitted a string tree. But when I was cutting the grooves for the top two strings I left the nut a little high so there's no chance of the strings popping out.

Another Bridge

When the Fender bridge finally turns up after its sojourn around the Highlands, that's another option. The difference here is simply that those threaded rod saddles of the original bridge (with height adjustment) are replaced with Mustang-style brass saddles with a single string groove per saddle. They're not height adjustable, but the different diameters create that approximate 241mm (9.5-inch) radius, and the saddles sit directly on the base; they certainly won't change in height over time. The bridge posts have a diameter of 6.33mm, very slightly thinner than the 6.55mm posts of the standard bridge. There's very little difference in weight: the standard bridge is 57g; the posher bridge is 64g. The Mastery bridge, meanwhile, weighs 61g and has post diameters of 7.8mm.



BASIC, BETTER, BEST!

Like any modding adventure, there are always choices, especially in the cost of the parts...

Fender doesn't list an official standard offset bridge, but there are plenty of choices from Hosco (£23.99, NorthwestGuitars.co.uk), while the same source also has a Mustang-style bridge at £19.99 and a Fender Mustang bridge with 184mm (7.25-inch) radius. Fender's official American Pro offset bridge, as tested here, costs £126.99, while a Fender Japan Mustang bridge lists at £59.99.

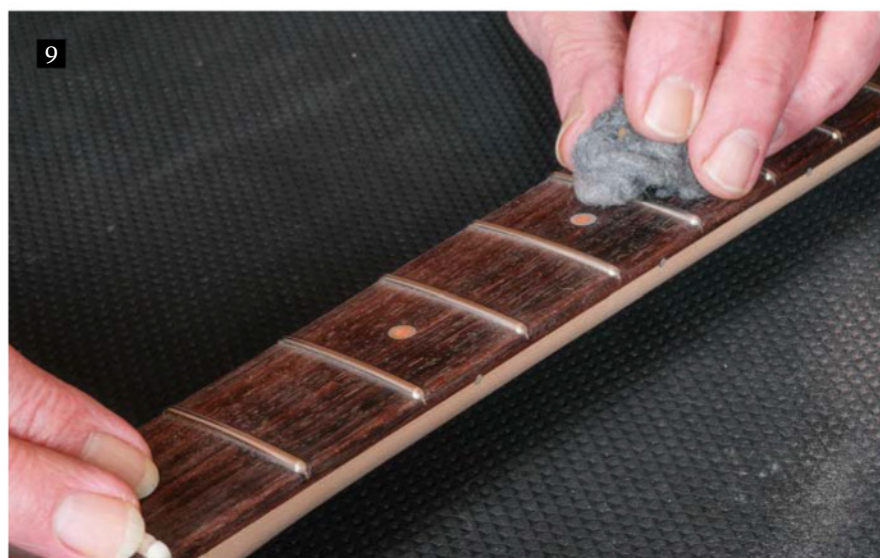
Via Charles Guitars (CharlesGuitars.co.uk) the Mastery M1 offset bridge costs £207, and the kit version (£237) includes a pair of stainless steel thimbles, plus there are other options to investigate, too. Other new-tech designs are available from Descendant who has the highly regarded Companion bridge (£214.99, HomeOfTone.co.uk). Graph Tech has a barrel saddle set (£71.99) made from Tusq, or its standard black String Saver material, with string grooves and height adjustment for Jazzmasters, Jaguars and Mustangs – a potentially good way of upgrading a standard offset bridge.

If our re-used, recycled theme appeals to you, there's no shortage of good deals on eBay and other auction sites, too. Good luck with your search!

To be honest, swapping between the three isn't as hard as you'd think: capo at 1st fret and put a small block of softwood under the string attachment bar of the Bigsby to stop the strings falling off, then slacken strings. It's hardly as fast as Guitar-X's pickup swapping, and while I wouldn't want to give a definitive sound test, the Fender Am Pro bridge and the Mastery sound very similar – even though the Am Pro bridge lightly rocks as you use the vibrato, as opposed to the solid mounting of the Mastery. Both bridges sound a little fuller than the original. As I said, the Mastery is the most adjustable, while the Am Pro has fixed height and string spread – overall height can be set, but you're stuck with that single radius. It's a basic/better/best scenario of escalating cost, too. But having paid for that Mastery, it goes back on.

Plugged in, the hint I'd had of the Sunbear BearTrons before I'd fitted the Mastery and properly set things up is enhanced. I'd not given the circuit any thought – it really is a volume and tone from a 1990s Les Paul. Any experiments such as a treble bleed and perhaps a no-load tone pot can wait. As is, I have a surprisingly bluesy fullness at the neck, a biting but not oversharper original rock 'n' roll bridge pickup, while 'both on' is rockabilly heaven. A finish can wait; I've got playing to do. **6**

4. With the Mastery bridge in place, you just need to tighten the posts with one of the three supplied Allen keys
5. The saddles needed a very small adjustment with the second Allen key here
6. To be fair, as supplied the intonation was pretty much spot on, with the exception of a small tweak to the low E
7. The final part of the setup is to get the nut slots cut with a razor saw for the top two grooves
8. The rest of the slots are cut to depth with my old set of StewMac fret files
9. Before I fitted the new bridge I removed the neck and gave it a light level and final polish with 0000 wire wool

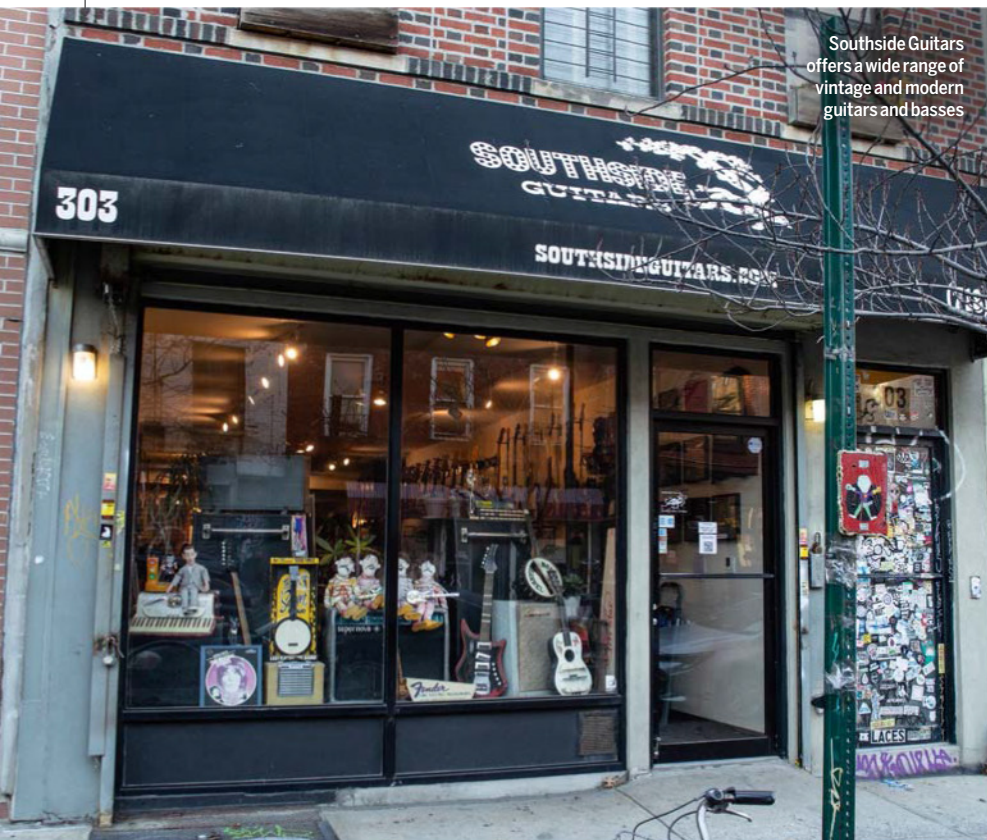




Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

Forget the tourist trail and follow our guide to NYC's must-visit stores

New York City Guitar Shops



Southside Guitars offers a wide range of vintage and modern guitars and basses



60s Epiphones hang above a '51 Kay Thin Twin and a '65 Martin F-65

For vintage guitar enthusiasts, a shopping trip to the US is surely a fixture on the bucket list. Nashville, LA and Chicago may seem like the obvious destinations, but don't discount New York – you'll be pleasantly surprised.

I recently travelled there to make a record with a Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter called Orly Bendavid and her band, The Mona Dahls. With the studio sessions complete, the remaining time was spent recording overdubs in Orly's home studio in the mornings and going guitar shopping during the afternoons. Orly, who also happens to be my niece, didn't need any persuading; she's an accomplished guitarist and the owner of a deep cutaway-bodied 1965 ES-125. She did all the phoning ahead to make appointments and took care of the travel arrangements.

Time was tight so, sadly, we were unable to travel out to Long Island to visit Well Strung Guitars this time. Even so, the sheer variety and quantity of guitars on offer was better than we had imagined.

Southside Guitars 303 Grand Street, Brooklyn NY 11211

We started closest to home on the Brooklyn side of the East River, not far from Williamsburg Bridge. To the left of the entrance, Southside's display wall of vintage guitars included a Gretsch Electromatic, Guild Starfire, Epiphone Coronet, Kay Thin Twin, Martin F-65 and a pre-CBS Candy Apple Red Strat.

Further along we saw a selection of Gibson ES-330s and ES-125s, a few Epiphone Casinos, a Magnatone, Danelectros, some Airlines and several quirky but fantastic-looking electrics that we couldn't even identify. Deeper inside we found a couple of 50s Goldtops, one of which had undergone a 'burst conversion, and a brace of gold non-reverse Firebirds. There were countless basses, too, and a fine selection of vintage amps.

The shop manager, Evelyn Benson, described a thriving local music scene with players who come in looking for

starter vintage guitars at the lower end and more established musicians looking for something more collectable for touring or just to use at home. Apparently, Danelectros, Silvertones and 1960s department store guitars remain really popular, along with Jazzmasters and ES-330s. She also suggested checking Southside's inventory online because a significant portion is not on display and is stored in cases.

Southside is a walk-in shop and you don't need to make an appointment, but if you call up in advance the shop will ensure any guitar you want to try is ready and waiting for you on your arrival.

To get there on public transport, go to Bedford Avenue or Metropolitan Avenue/Lorimer Street stations on the L and G Trains, or travel to Marcy Avenue station on the JMZ Line. Southside is a fairly short walk from each one.

+1 718-218-8201
<https://southsideguitars.com>

Rivington Guitars

73 East 4th St, New York NY 10003

Crossing the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan took us to Rivington Guitars on East 4th Street near Washington Square Park. Although much smaller than Southside, Rivington Guitars was packed with instruments and once again the sheer variety impressed. That said, Rivington is a regular guitar shop that sells strings, slides and capos, as well as vintage dreams.

Glass cabinets flank the central area of the shop and they're bursting at the seams with effects pedals. Behind them, guitars are distributed across three levels on floor stands and wall hangers. Vintage guitars are plentiful, but there are just as many secondhand and nearly new guitars to choose from.

"Nashville, LA and Chicago are obvious destinations, but don't discount NYC for guitar shopping"

On our visit, the acoustic area had several small-bodied Gibsons, plus a J-50, a Kalamazoo and a Gretsch Rancher. There was also a Guild dreadnought, an Aria copy of an Everly Brothers, two vintage Fender acoustics with six-in-a-line tuners and a 12-string with a hockey stick headstock.

The semi selection included a 1960s Gibson ES-125 cutaway, a brace of 1970s ES-335s, an ES-175, a Fender Coronado, a smattering of Epiphones and Guilds, plus a Cadillac Green Gretsch Country Club. For solidbodies, Rivington had a decent selection of 1970s and high-end modern Fenders and Gibsons, with a couple of vintage Juniors thrown in.

As well as an Olympic White pre-CBS Precision Bass, other seldom-seen highlights included an immaculate sunburst Mosrite and a Dan Armstrong Ampeg plexiglass model as used by Keith Richards. Overall, Rivington is more mainstream and mid-priced than Southside, and it didn't have many high-



Rivington is like a regular guitar shop that happens to stock vintage guitars



Semis abound, with Hagstroms, Guilds, Epiphones and Gibsons aplenty

dollar items or the more affordable range of garage band guitars.

Being fairly central, transport links are plentiful, and stations within walking distance of Rivington Guitars include the 6 Train at Bleecker Street, the F Train at 2nd Avenue, the B, D, F and M Trains at Broadway-Lafayette Street, or the 1st Avenue L Train in the East Village, which is a 10-minute walk from the store.

+1 212-505-5313

<http://rivingtonguitars.com>

Chelsea Guitars

224 West 23rd Street, New York NY 10011

Had I never been to Electric Ladyland in Bristol, I would probably say that Chelsea Guitars is the most peculiar music shop I've ever visited. It is actually in the same building as the infamous Chelsea Hotel, where countless actors, writers and musicians have lived and occasionally

died. Although the hotel has undergone an extensive refurbishment in recent years, the shop itself remains tiny and defiantly ungentrified.

It's basically a chaotic corridor that's packed to the rafters with guitar gear, but the first thing that may catch your eye is the large dinosaur, whose head is bursting out of the wall above the sales desk and, some might say, another one behind it. If you're in the mood for tall tales, rock 'n' roll anecdotes and old-school New York attitude, you will certainly be entertained.

You have to go digging to find the really good stuff. We discovered a lovely little Gibson amp hidden behind a silver-panel Fender Champ and a tweed-covered mandolin case. Other cool amps included an Ampeg Gemini II and a black-panel Princeton Reverb.

Some guitars – such as a vintage SG Junior, Pelham Blue SG Standard, Fender Coronado 12-string and various Vega, Eko and Höfner solidbodies – appeared to be in excellent condition. But Chelsea



Funky inside and out, Chelsea Guitars is basically a corridor stuffed with old guitars and amps



Given the cramped conditions, you have to root around to find the really good stuff

Guitars is also a great location if you're looking for a husk to restore.

We identified a few vintage Gibson flat-tops and an archtop that had tremendous potential as project guitars. But there was also a small but impressive selection of quality acoustics that included a Martin OM-45 and a vintage Gibson J-185.

Chelsea Guitars is just to the right of the main entrance of the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street. The closest station is 23rd Street, served by the A, C and E Trains, and the shop is located about half way between 7th Avenue and 8th Avenue. You can also take the 1 Train at 23rd Street and 7th Avenue, and the F Train at 23rd Street and 6th Avenue.

+1212-675-4993
www.chelseaguitars.com

Retrofret Vintage Guitars 87 Luquer St, Brooklyn NY 11231

Back into Brooklyn but just a little further out, we arrived at Retrofret Vintage Guitars. As impressed as we were by the range of guitars offered by all the other shops we visited, Retrofret's stock is so overwhelming we had to stop to take a breath as we walked through the door.

The instruments were mostly on floor stands and grouped by category. Out in front were the electric archtops, with various Gibsons, Gretsches and Epiphones, plus a Harmony and Silvertone that didn't look out of place in such illustrious company. Behind these, archtop and flat-top acoustics were arranged along the back wall. The range included just as many 12-fretters as 14-fretters, and there

were several all-mahogany Martins and even an all-koa slot-head. We found a selection of Gibsons and a few Washburns, but most exciting was the first vintage Larson Brothers I had ever seen in person. I even got to play it.

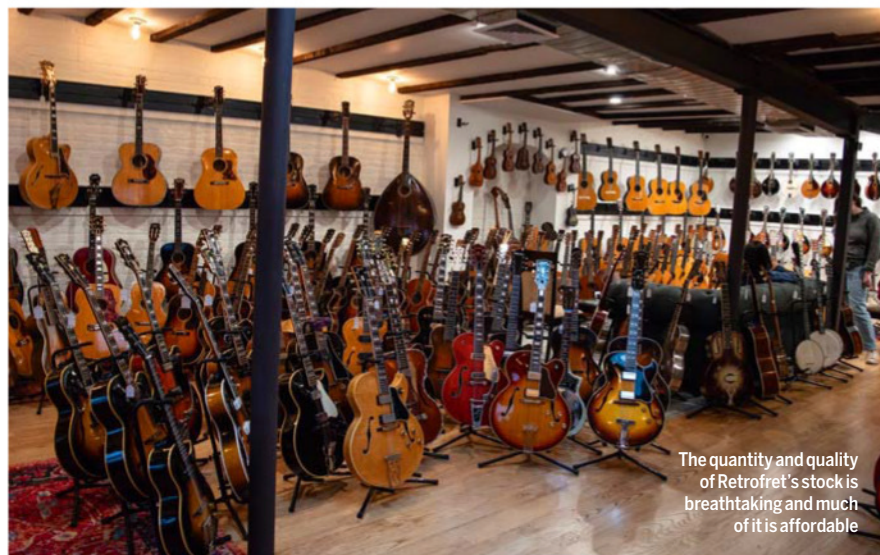
Turning the corner brought us to the vintage mandolin and banjo section, and across the aisle we found the solidbody and amplifier area, most of which was housed in a separate (presumably soundproofed) room. Outside it, we found several offset Fenders in sunburst and various custom colours, along with a handful of 50s and 60s Telecasters.

Inside, we discovered vintage Strats spanning the 50s, 60s and 70s, numerous Gibson semis and Firebirds, a selection of Rickenbackers, various vintage basses, Silvertones and Danelectros. Small and medium power amps were plentiful, too, with brown, blonde and black Tolex Fenders dominating the display.

Retrofret started out as a repair shop before developing into a vintage guitar dealership, and repairs and restoration remain key areas of the business. We were given a tour around a workshop that more closely resembled an operating theatre than a typical luthier's lair. No doubt many of the guitars offered by Retrofret benefit from this onsite expertise because they are all presented in stunning condition and every one we tried played superbly.

The closest stations are Smith-Ninth Street and Carroll Street, both of which are served by the F and G Trains and are a 10-minute walk away.

+1718-237-4040
<http://retrofret.com>



The quantity and quality of Retrofret's stock is breathtaking and much of it is affordable

TR Crandall Guitars

156 Ludlow St, 5th Floor New York NY 10002

Blink and you'd miss it because the entrance to TR Crandall's is nothing more than an unmarked door in a wall – though if you stop and look up you'll spot some signage in the space of a bricked-up window. Buzz to get in, step into the elevator and ascend to guitar heaven. The doors slid open to reveal a spacious and uncluttered shop with an impressive selection of vintage guitars and amps, as well as some newer stock.

"We played the Martin D-18 that Johnny Cash had bequeathed to his son-in-law"

Like Southside, TR Crandall's stock caters to all budgets. At the top end we saw a 50s Goldtop, dot-neck ES-335 and a near-immaculate sunburst pre-CBS Strat. There were also Musicmasters and Mustangs galore, funky garage band electrics, Harmonys, Silvertones and even a Wandre. Bassists are well served and the amp selection includes Fenders from every era, Supros, Ampegs and Gibsons. Acoustics abound, with plenty of pre-war Martins, vintage Gibsons and even oddities such as harp guitars and a Gibson Style O Artist.

We were about to leave when the manager told us that Tom Crandall wanted to say hello personally. We were expecting a New York version of George Gruhn or Norman Harris, but instead a genial gentleman shuffled out wearing a luthier's apron with traces of sawdust on his person.



Spacious and chilled, the TR Crandall store offers amps and guitars for every budget

When he learned I restore vintage guitars, he insisted we check out his workshop. A blissful hour followed as Tom handed us one vintage acoustic after another. He specialises in Roy Smeck conversions and we must have played at least three from the 1930s because Tom wanted us to hear how different they can sound.

Not wishing to outstay our welcome, we told Tom our parking meter was about to run out and he seemed genuinely disappointed. He insisted that we try one more guitar and pulled a shaded-top 1940s Martin D-18 off a shelf. It was hands down the nicest D-18 I've ever played, and that's when he told us it was the guitar Johnny Cash had bequeathed to his son-in-law. Needless to say, as a couple of hardcore Johnny Cash fans we felt a bit like mediaeval pilgrims who had been handed

fragments of the true cross. It's hard to imagine a more thrilling or memorable end to our mini guitar-safari in New York.

The closest stations are Delancey Street/Essex Street, which is served by the F, M, J and Z Trains, and 2nd Avenue, which is also served by the F Train.

+1 646-692-4235
<http://trcrandall.com>

Round-Up

In the UK, the vintage electric-guitar market is primarily based on the usual iconic models, and vintage acoustics are in relatively short supply. The sheer number and variety of guitars available in New York is something else entirely and there's something for every budget. Under-appreciated brands such as Epiphone and Guild are well represented, and acoustic players will not be disappointed. The budget-conscious can also experience the vintage charms of Washburn and Harmony, and there's no shortage of acoustic archtops.

But remember that if you're buying guitars abroad then you'll need a CITES certificate for any guitar with Brazilian rosewood. Without the proper paperwork, your guitar may be confiscated by Customs. When you factor in import duty and taxes, things may not end up being cheaper, but guitar shopping in the US is ultimately all about the choice, rather than the price. 

www.huwpriceguitar.com



This super-cool display of Supro amps and 'student' Fender electrics was a highlight



With thanks to
Orly Bendavid

<https://orlybendavid.com>



David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

This transitional model has a rare and possibly unique combination of features

1960 Epiphone Coronet



This near mint Epiphone Coronet was recently traded in by its original owner

Not long ago I was at the Philadelphia Guitar Show and a buddy of mine told me he had something I'd probably never seen before – and, sure enough, it turned out he did. I had only ever seen photos of this version of the Epiphone Coronet, but I'd never owned one or even seen one in person. My friend literally had it for a matter of hours because he acquired it from the original owner, who had brought it into his shop the day before the show. I wouldn't let him walk away until he'd sold it to me.

"The earliest Epiphone Coronets had New York pickups and a thick body, and I've seen them in cherry, white and black. By 1960, the Coronet's body had reduced in thickness from 1 3/4 inches to 1 3/8 inches, the square edges had been rounded over, a P-90 replaced the New Yorker pickup, and the headstock acquired a simpler script logo. But what we have here is a late-1960 that has a cherry-finished thick body with a cream-coloured covered P-90 pickup and a bikini headstock logo. These features, combined with a no-logo symmetrical pickguard, make this a very rare transitional model.

"It weighs a fairly typical 7.5lb and has a regular 8k-plus-change pickup reading that's a real screamer, but the really cool thing is that the neck profile is like a 1956 Stratocaster. It's a big and chunky hard 'V' that feels very substantial. It plays incredibly well and produces the greatest sound. I've had 1959 Coronets with New Yorker pickups before, but they've always had rounder necks that feel more like Les Pauls.

"I've had hundreds of pre-CBS Strats and more than 100 'Bursts pass through my hands over the years, but I've never had a thick-body Coronet with a P-90. The timeframe when they made Coronets with these transitional specs must have been so short. It has all the coolest things Epiphone ever did packed into one guitar, and the cream P-90 cover is the cat's meow.

"The condition is virtually brand-new, with no nicks, dings or scratches. I was the first person to pull the screws out when I was checking it over and I didn't even bother to drop the potentiometers because it was so obvious that nothing

"It has all the coolest things Epiphone ever did packed into one; the cream P-90 cover is the cat's meow"

had ever been touched. I did lift up the pickup to check the underside of it and it was perfect. The original chipboard case is in good condition, too, although the handle has fallen off as usual. We're in the process of sourcing an original handle to replace it.

"I played it dimed through a little five-watt DeArmond amplifier with an eight-inch speaker and it sounded like Leslie West-plus. I hate to use the expression because it's such a cliché, but it is one of those guitars that almost plays itself. It's so buttery with those large factory frets

and I actually felt excited about this guitar, which doesn't happen often any more.

"The thin-bodied Coronets feel more like SGs and the thick-bodied ones are more like Les Paul Juniors. It's a pretty significant difference that has an obvious effect on the weight. If this had been a single-P-90 thin-body Coronet, it would probably have come in at around 6lb or just above. You can hear the pound and a half of extra weight in the power of the bottom-end.

"These Epiphones do sell quite well and the thick-bodied New Yorker ones go for around three times the price of a thin-body P-90 version. There are quite a few serious Epiphone collectors here in the US and I could have taken the easy option and called any one of them, but I felt this guitar deserved a special player who understands these instruments well. So instead I called a friend of mine, who is a bit of a household name, to tell him I was shipping it over and that if he doesn't like it then he can just ship it back. But I know he won't be doing that.

"The body has a beautiful grain pattern and it's such a handsome guitar it was very hard for me not to take it home myself. I think that if I was younger and wasn't feeling the effects of arthritis, I would have added it to my personal collection. To find such a great guitar makes me feel rejuvenated and I'm very grateful to my friend for showing it to me first." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

"This guitar deserved
a special player who
understands these
instruments well"

The combination of
a thick body, white
pickguard, bikini logo
and cream covered P-90
makes this a very rare
transitional model

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Get Rhythm

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Lewis Pequeno Bastardo & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

MELODY AND RHYTHM are almost inextricably linked. I say 'almost' because you can have melody or harmony without a distinguishable rhythm, and rhythm itself can exist with no melodic content at all. The examples here contain elements of both, but I wanted to draw a clear distinction between the two before we start.

Many songs can be recognised by hearing the rhythm alone. Artists such as Bo Diddley can even make a rhythm their musical signature, while Steve Lukather has created memorable rhythmic parts that really push a song along using a single note!

I've leaned towards a funk style for these examples – this makes it easier to focus on

the rhythmic element – but the kind of funk I'm referencing is 'old-school' R&B/Motown. Think Earth, Wind & Fire, The Spinners or even Band of Gypsies-era Jimi Hendrix. Having made that point, let's get back to a more traditional blues standpoint and consider players such as BB King, Albert Collins or Eric Clapton. Would you agree that their choice of rhythm is as integral to their style as the notes?

Of course, it's one thing to acknowledge the importance of rhythm in guitar playing and another to set about methodically improving our practical skills in this area. And that's where the examples come in. If you divide each beat of each bar into

four, then play any note or chord using alternating downstrokes and upstrokes, you'll find yourself playing the classic funk '16 to the bar' rhythm – think Nile Rodgers. The skill is in choosing which notes to emphasise, or maybe skip entirely, while maintaining the alternate strokes (even if the pick doesn't contact the strings). There's no need to hit the strings hard unless you're going for a specific effect (see Example 2). See you next time! **G**



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Example 1

THERE ARE A FEW THINGS GOING ON HERE. First, this is mostly palm-muted. Second, in spite of this there are shorter and longer notes, hence the staccato markings. Third, though the underlying pattern is alternate-picked 16th notes, some are accented, some muted and some omitted completely, all while preserving the sequence of downstrokes and upstrokes. Last but not least, keep it relaxed: if anything, pull very slightly back, rather than pulling ahead of the beat. A funk song might just use two notes, but I've gone a bit more bluesy and pentatonic!

♩ = 80

Am7 Dm7

PM -----

E B G D A E

17 1

5 X 7 X 5 7 X 5 7 5 7 5 7 X 5 5 7 X 5 7

Em7 Am7

5 7 5 X 7 5 7 X 5 5 7 5 7 5 7/9 5/7 5 7 5

3

1/4 1/4

Example 2

I'M ATTACKING THE STRINGS MORE AGGRESSIVELY HERE, which gives a harder 'pingier' sound. I'm muting unwanted strings with my fretting hand, rather than the palm of my picking hand, which gives this example a different character from Example 1. I've taken a few more liberties rhythmically, culminating in a more 'lead guitar'-style doublestop phrase to finish. Hopefully, this starts to hint at how you might employ this approach in other scenarios, particularly a blues context.

Example 2 musical notation. The first system shows a progression from Am7 to Dm7. The second system shows a progression from Em7 to Am7. The notation includes fret numbers, accidentals, and a doublestop phrase at the end.

Example 3

MOVING FURTHER INTO BLUES SOLO TERRITORY, this example stays with the same A minor pentatonic position as Examples 1 and 2. There is less emphasis on keeping a constant rhythm with alternating down- and upstrokes, but you should be able to see how the rudiments laid out in the first two examples are being put to use. I rolled back the guitar's tone control a little to smooth the attack for this, though adding a touch of drive could also be nice.

Example 3 musical notation. The first system shows a progression from Am7 to Dm7. The second system shows a progression from Em7 to Am7. The notation includes fret numbers, accidentals, and a doublestop phrase at the end.

Example 4

THIS MOTOWN-STYLE RHYTHM PART is another way you might use the alternate '16s' rhythm discussed earlier. This is influenced very much by the kind of playing you'll hear on The Spinners' *It's A Shame*, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, and Earth, Wind & Fire's *That's The Way Of The World*. It's important to keep the strumming gentle and without too many grace notes. Don't let it get too 'choppy' or aggressive, either. That can have its place, but shouldn't be the default.

The musical notation for Example 4 is presented in two systems. The first system contains four measures of music. The first measure is marked with a tempo of 80 and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The chords for the first system are Am9, Am7, Dm11, and Dm7. The second system contains two measures with chords Em7 and Am7. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The guitar part is written in a style that combines standard notation with tablature, showing fret numbers and chord voicings.

Hear It Here

JAMES GANG RIDES AGAIN JAMES GANG



Joe Walsh is great at combining funky rhythms with blues-rock riffs and pentatonic lines. Check out *Funk #49*, *Asshtonpark* and *Thanks* (though, really, this is one of those albums you should play all the way through). Throughout, Joe manages to sound bluesy and rocky, with hardly a traditional powerchord to be heard. Note also how certain chord inversions are employed to allow a seamless transition into pentatonic lines – and back again!

FIRE AND WATER FREE



Free's music has always had a great rhythmic feel, with well-arranged complementary guitar bass and drum parts. Once you've played through the examples, take another listen to how these elements interact on the title track, *Oh I Wept* and *Mr Big*. Admittedly, the link between the examples and these isn't immediately obvious, but without doubt it is the awareness of rhythm and accents that sets this apart from 'regular' blues and rock.

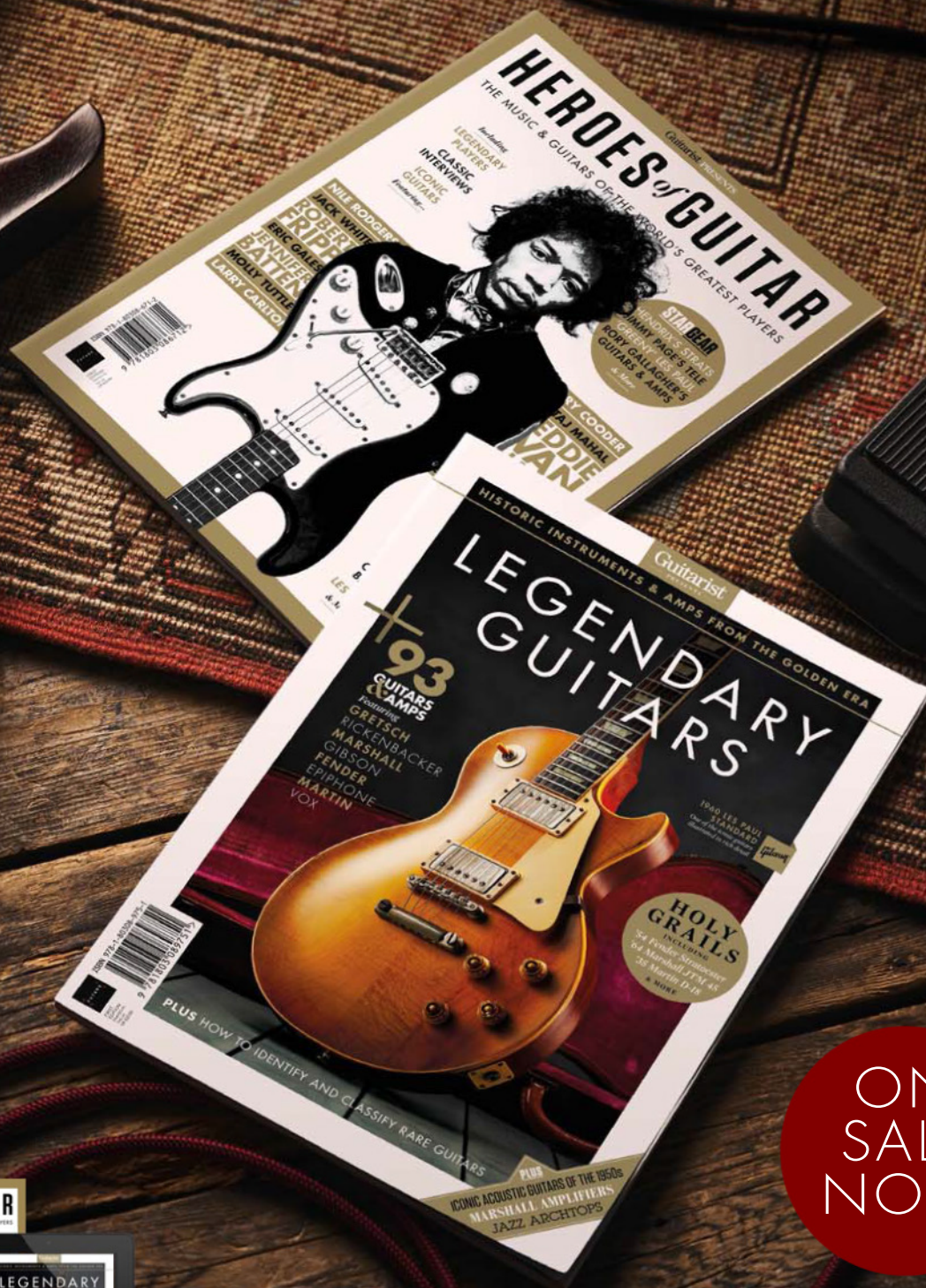
A NIGHT ON THE SUNSET STRIP (LIVE) ERIC GALES



Eric Gales is a great example of a modern blues player who has assimilated funk, jazz, blues and heavy rock. Have a listen to *Make It There*, *Sea Of Bad Blood* and *Swamp*, and you'll hear the techniques from the examples in action. As with any technique, you'll develop a feel for where and how much you use it. Borrowing from great players such as Eric is a great place to start your own rhythmic journey.

DEEPEN YOUR GUITAR KNOWLEDGE

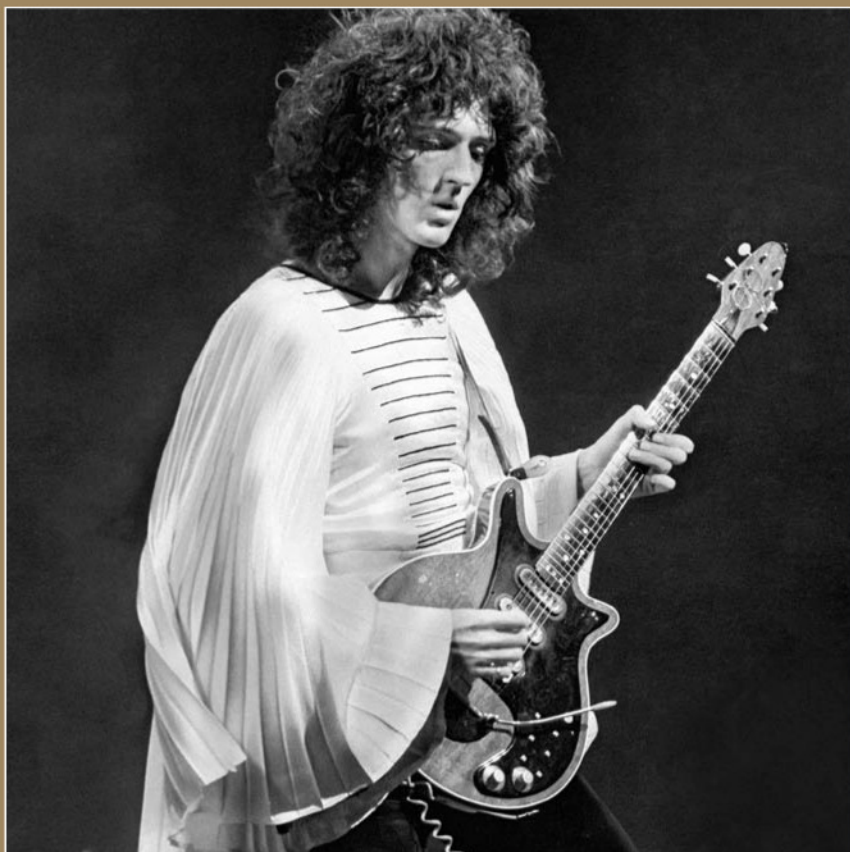
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DAUGHTERS
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