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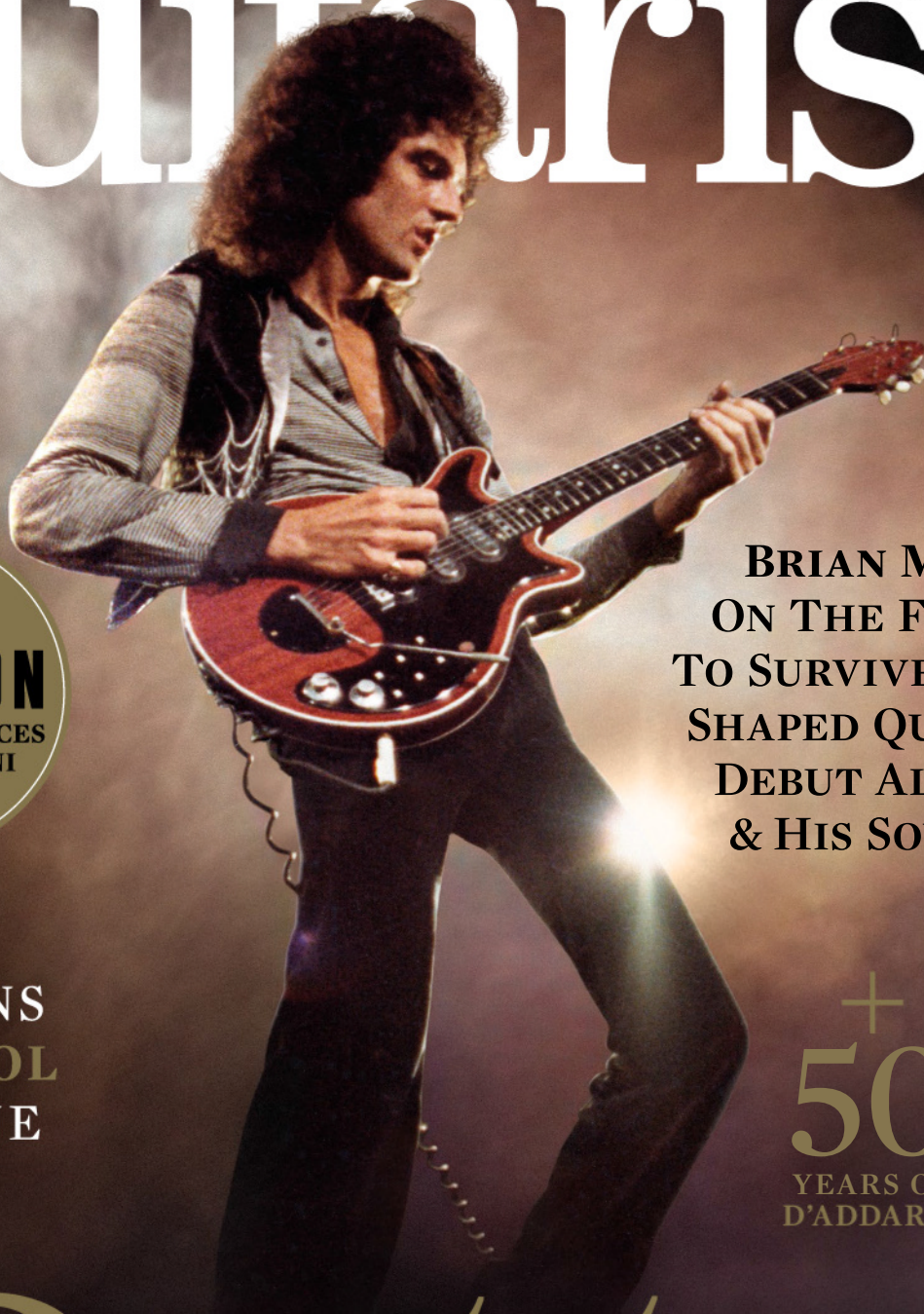
A BETTER BASSMAN?
FENDER '59 TONE MASTER COMBO REVIEWED



Guitarist

Issue 521

MARCH 2025



PLUS!
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ON JOINING FORCES
WITH SATRIANI
& STEVE VAI
& MORE

BRIAN MAY
ON THE FIGHT
TO SURVIVE THAT
SHAPED QUEEN'S
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Perspiration, Inspiration



The revered American choreographer and dancer Martha Graham once said, “No artist is ahead of his time. He is his time; it is just that others are behind the times.” I was reminded of the quote reading this month’s cover story with Brian May – the polymath guitarist who built his own instrument and then persevered, along with the rest of Queen, as early sceptics dismissed the band’s chances of breaking through to mainstream success with their unique, flamboyant and brilliant sound.

Unlike most other guitar bands of the era, there was very little blues in Queen’s brand of rock, outside of May’s repertoire of expressive bends. Instead, there was an operatic grandeur that seemed to belong both to the aristocratic past and the realms of futuristic fantasy. Yet despite resembling nothing else in the charts, Queen became so successful that it’s hard to think of a band that delivered more spectacularly on their promise to be different and to be completely themselves.

In a way, it can be easy to look at Queen and simply shake your head and say, “Well, they’re incredible, but they’re such a one-off, I don’t know if I can learn anything from their example.” I think that’s probably a mistake, however. To quote another famous cultural figure, Picasso: “Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.” Watching videos of Queen’s live performances today, I’m struck by the incredible work-rate of the band and what team players they were. Think of Freddie singing the lyric ‘Playful as a pussycat...’ from the song *Killer Queen* and it’s impossible not to hear Brian May’s miaow-like lick on guitar that immediately follows. Queen’s lesson, for me, is that if you want to lift your music to the highest level, leave no detail, no opportunity to elevate the song, unexploited. Of course, not all guitar music is as intricate as Queen’s, but making your band into a formidably cohesive unit where each member musically supports the others will never let you down. Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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Songcraft, new Gibson signature acoustics, and the personal and musical legacy of her father, The Man In Black. We meet her on **p62**



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D’Addario Turns 50
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Guitarist

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REVIEW



PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

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FIRST PLAY



LOWDEN GL-J
From £3,950

WHAT IS IT? Superbly crafted semi-solid electric pairing high-grade woods and unique construction with Lollar's Imperial humbuckers

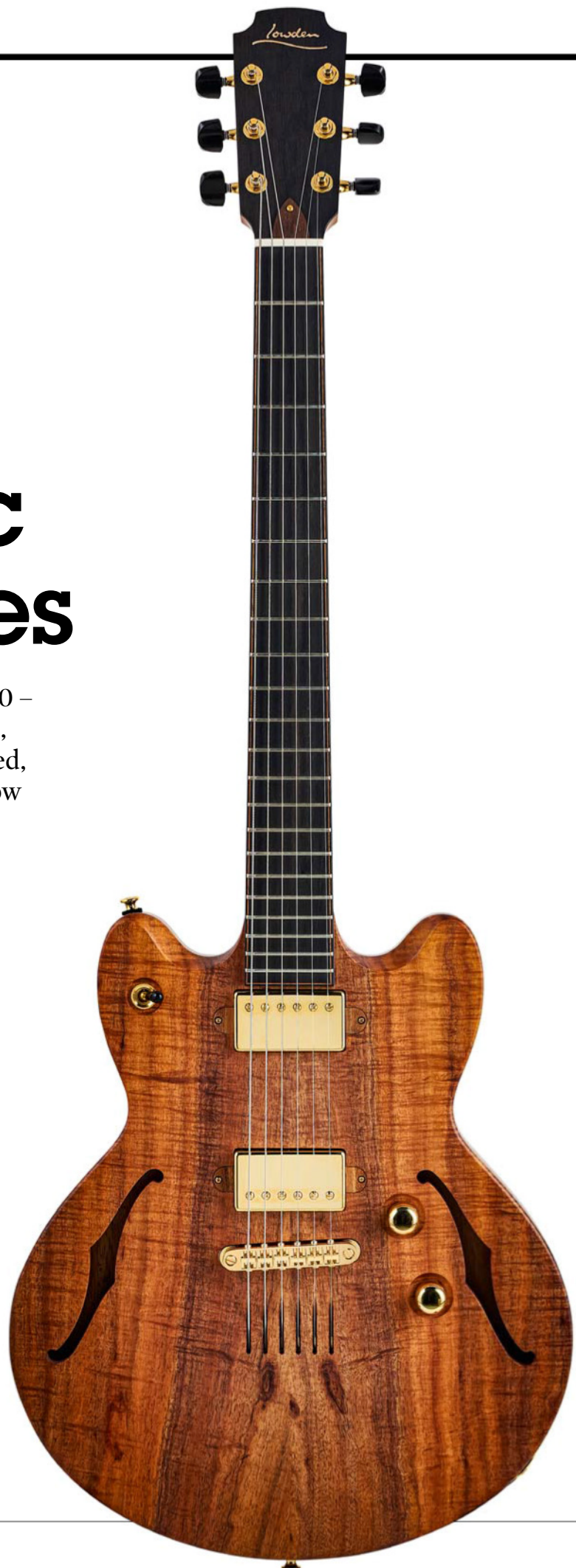
Electric Avenues

A Lowden electric? The GL-10 – originally introduced in 2018, and recreated for a red-headed, mop-topped troubadour – now gets a semi-solid sibling

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis

Under the considerable shadow of the finely crafted acoustics that have been Lowden's calling card for the past 50 years, a lone electric model – the single-cutaway GL-10, which launched some six years ago – could well have been a minor footnote. Instead, there was a variant, the GL-10c, which added chambering and, with it, weight reduction. And here we have the third Lowden electric, the double-cut GL-J.

Lifting the GL-J from its classy GWW case, we can't help but smile. The new design adheres to the timeless, individual craft style that we're more than familiar with from Lowden, the natural colours and textures of the woods given centre stage; there's no glitzy, gaudy colour stains or opulent inlays here. But this is far from rustic craft. Fine detailing abounds, while the finish (originally oil) is now the hand-burnished super-smooth satin that's used on the acoustic instruments.







1. The headstock and neck construction are virtually identical to Lowden's acoustic guitars. Here, the back-angled head is faced with ebony, back and front, the finely cut nut is bone, and even the truss rod cover is precisely shaped ebony

The symmetrical double-cut outline, with its pair of f-holes, obviously nods to the style of the ES-335 by design, but it's considerably downsized here. It measures 356mm (14 inches) across the lower bouts, slightly wider than the 348mm (13.7-inch) single-cut GL-10 we previously evaluated. Construction is pretty similar with a one-piece mahogany back, approximately 22mm thick, topped with a AAAA-grade

2. This recessed Gotoh bridge and unique through-body string anchoring are retained from the GL-10, as are the Lollar Imperial pickups. The unit at the bridge has a measured DCR of 7.99kohms and uses a degaussed Alnico V magnet

Tasmanian blackwood, centre-joined top (walnut, koa and ebony are also offered); a decorative veneer is sandwiched in between that's spec'd as pau ferro but looks more like maple. It seems the central section is solid, but the 'wings' are hollowed and the top is relieved in depth, or "scalloped" as Lowden calls it. Overall depth is pretty much 42mm. There's a light doming from the bass to treble side, and the top slopes down more noticeably past the bridge, reducing the rim depth at the base of the guitar to approximately 32mm.

The three-way toggle pickup selector still sits on the bass-side upper bout and yet the individual pickup volumes and master tone of the GL-10 are slimmed to just an overall master volume with the same master tone. Typical of the super-detailed build, the three controls all sit in perfectly machined recesses in the top, while the 4mm-thick walnut rear covers are perfectly inlaid into the back wood like pieces of elegant marquetry.

The GL series instruments all feature the same neck that's based on Lowden's 630mm (24.8-inch) scale length. Three pieces of finely grained mahogany form the bulk, with a pair of rosewood stringers, and the headstock is capped front and back with ebony, also used for the fingerboard,



SHAPING SOUND

George Lowden built his first guitar professionally in 1974. Half a century on, he's as busy as ever – his company now a byword for supreme craft

After dialling into George's workshop, a quick 'How are you?' evokes: "I'm extremely busy! We've got about seven different projects going on at the minute. That's kind of okay, but I'm 73 now," he says with a laugh. Once again, we're thinking, 'Where have those years gone?', but it's that distant past that informs the design of this latest Lowden electric, the GL-J.

"In terms of playing, both the original GL-10 and this new GL-J are just as accessible up in the higher positions, so it wasn't to do with the accessibility," George explains. "It was really the fact that when I was a teenager I was very much a fan of Cream and Peter Green and plenty of other players, but my dream guitar, which I couldn't afford, was a [Gibson] ES-335. But for my 70th birthday I was bought a 1974 ES-335 – 1974 was the date I started building guitars professionally – so I now have one."

But having finally achieved that dream of his younger self, George did make some observations. "Although it's relatively light in weight, it's actually very big! So that's really where the GL-J comes from: it's a double-cutaway version of the GL-10. It's about the same size, but it's hollowed

out inside, which means that the weight is considerably less [compared with the GL-10].

"The 'J' in the name stands for 'Jazz', not that it necessarily has to be played in jazz; it's just as good for blues and rock styles. The frets, for example, are slightly heavier than they were before. That was one of the comments people made about the original GL models – that a bigger fretwire might be a good thing, so we've added that."

Also unlike an ES-335, the GL-J features solid wood, not laminate, and it's chambered. "Yes, we've thinned the top, especially in the area where the f-holes are," says George, "but we wanted to leave it thick enough so it was structurally stable. As always, it's a balance between structural stability and weight. So the middle part of the guitar remains solid, but, either side of that, the back is also hollowed out quite a bit as well."

The heel area of the guitar is very different from an ES-335. "It wasn't really a question of the access – I didn't want there to be any problem when players wanted to play high

up – but the challenge was to make the whole neck joint assembly as strong and stable as possible," he tells us. "The dimensions of the [neck] tongue, or what you might call the tenon, in relation to the wood around is very important. If the tongue is too big and the wood around it is too small, that would make it vulnerable if, let's say, somebody let it slip off a stand.

"I'm happy with the way it's turned out," he continues, "but I'm always doing minor tweaks here and there – like that fretwire. I'm always trying to do things to make the guitars better, but I think what we've got here works quite well. For example, I did already change the internal curve of the cutaways, so there's just a little more room for the hand when playing up high."

So while the GL-J's construction is different from the GL-10, Lowden still favours Lollar's Imperial dual humbucker setup.

"We love them because they're a relatively low-output pickup, very vintage-y sounding. We do like that sound; it's a very sweet

"The 'J' in GL-J stands for 'Jazz', not that it necessarily has to be played in jazz; it's just as good for blues and rock"



The new GL-J evolved from George's original GL-10 electric model (pictured here) and offers a double-cutaway format and chambering to the body

kinda sound, but you can overdrive it, too, of course. We have another model coming out [in 2025] that will have a different pickup in it that can be coil-tapped – the guitar is designed specifically for that coil-tap. Initially, that'll be on the GL-10 platform, but then the GL-J too."

Again, it'll be a Lollar pickup, says George: "I'm very happy working with them, but one thing about this new pickup we're working with them on is that when you switch from humbucker to single coil, you don't get a significant drop in volume. Of course, we also offer Lollar P-90s on the GL-10, too, though not on the GL-J at the moment.

"I do think the design of these guitars and the workmanship involved, in combination with these Lollar pickups, is important," George concludes. "We spent a huge amount of attention trying to get the workmanship and the design balanced, and we've worked very hard on that, and I think the combination of that and the Lollar pickups just seems to work so well." And we're certainly not disagreeing. [DB]



which is ebony-bound with a thin, lighter wood coach line. It's seamlessly glued into a long sloping and square-sided body extension, and at around the 16th fret the neck itself has a small heel; we presume this gives the neck a similar stiffness to the single-cut GL-10, despite the double cutaway. Of course, a natural finish such as this leaves nowhere to hide – and the joinery is exceptionally crisp.

As with the GL-10, the Gotoh tune-o-matic bridge is recessed into the top, while the strings pass through finely machined slots and then small brass tubes before anchoring at the back into an inset brass sustain plate. You'll notice two small 'ears' either side of the humbuckers. These are not for height adjustment; they simply cover the tips of the pickup legs, which screw directly to the body with what feels like hard foam to allow height adjustment.

Feel & Sounds

We could sum this up with two words: 'exceptional' and 'extraordinary'. Firstly, the weight is excellent at 3.45kg (7.59lb), and it's way more compact than a big ol' ES-335 – it feels it, too, seated or on a strap. That heel platform is relatively bulky, less so than a Les Paul, of course. It takes a little adjustment, but when your thumb snuggles into the small heel, access to

3. The Lollar Imperial in the neck position uses a degaussed Alnico II magnet with a measured DCR of 7.44k

the top frets feels perfectly good – great for slide players, too. Although there's so much to suggest this guitar isn't about high-position pyrotechnics.

With a nut width of 43.5mm (and string spread of 36mm), it feels far from cramped. Thanks to a slope-shouldered C profile, the beautifully smooth-backed neck doesn't feel anywhere as big as its depth dimensions (22.3mm at the 1st fret,

4. The GL-J has simple master volume and tone controls that use CTS 500k pots and a .022µF capacitor, wired modern style. Lowden is working with Lollar on a new coil-splittable humbucker to be released this year





Aside from the chambered body, the main difference here from the GL-10 is the double-cutaway outline. However, the small heel adjacent to the 16th fret is the same as the GL-10. Unlike on some double-cuts, the top strap button is on the bass-side horn, not at the heel



LOWDEN GL-J

PRICE: From £3,950 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Northern Ireland

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: 1-piece mahogany with scalloped AAAA

Tasmanian blackwood centre-joined top

NECK: 5-piece mahogany w/ rosewood splices, 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 630mm (24.8")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.2mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Gotoh GE103B-T bridge w/ through body stringing, Gotoh 510 tuners w/ ebony buttons – gold-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Lollar Imperial humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone control

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.59

OPTIONS: With walnut top (£3,950), Tasmanian blackwood (as reviewed, £4,200), koa (£4,450) and ebony (£5,035). Figured maple neck adds £300. Mother-of-pearl fretboard dot markers, shallow neck carve, medium or modern jumbo frets, hardware plating (chrome, cosmo black) and Lollar P-90s (all n/c)

RANGE OPTIONS: The GL-10 (from £3,650) is the original Lowden electric, also available as the GL-10c with internal micro-chambers to reduce weight

LEFT-HANDERS: No extra, to order

FINISHES: Natural – hand-finished acrylic satin lacquer

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9/10

23.7mm by the 12th) might suggest. The larger fret gauge suits the style: it's 2.6mm wide with a good but not excessive height of approximately 1.2mm. Oh, and if you can't get on without face position markers, you can order any GL electric with mother-of-pearl dots.

The GL-J is far from the construction of an acoustic guitar, but it rings like a bell and you really notice – and certainly feel – a vibrant sustain, almost like you have an acoustic compressor in there. Plugged in, the word 'regal' springs to mind when describing what we hear. There's an almost chocolatey darkness to the voicing with the neck pickup selected; it's smooth but not unclear. There's obviously more bite at the bridge, with a 'lower-wound late-50s Gibson pickup style' of sound, making the both-on position nicely textured, classically bouncy and percussive. Three quite distinct voices, then, as it should be. There's nothing hot or overwound about what we hear, but likewise no thinness or sharpness – it's a balanced, mature voice with surprising depth.

Verdict

The GL-J may be loosely inspired by the ES-335, but that's where any similarity ends. It's all-solid wood for starters, and while it retains a solid centre section, the

The craft level is supremely high, and this is an almost timeless design from one of the greats

internal chambering – top and back – not only keeps the weight in check but no doubt adds to what we hear. Which is exceptional. There's a wonderful depth and inherent sustain that's perfectly captured by the detailed Lollar Imperials, just like great microphones picking up a beautiful, rich and musical voice. From defined jazz cleans on the neck pickup to a classic Patent Applied For-like clarity and bite at the bridge, it's a superb journeyman guitar that almost plays itself, not least with the slightly bigger frets used here.

Of course, the craft level is supremely high, and this is an almost timeless design from the hands and ears of one of the greats. Lowden may first and foremost be an acoustic guitar company, but these are special guitars that celebrate their ingredients and yet not at the expense of sound or playability. **G**

PROS High-level detailed craft; superb neck shape and feel; new larger frets; super-smooth hand-rubbed satin finish; beautiful voicing from the Lollar Imperial 'buckers

CONS Its woody appeal might not be for everyone, nor the price when AAAA-grade timbers are involved

FIRST PLAY



FENDER TONE MASTER '59 BASSMAN

£1,429

WHAT IS IT? Fender's classic 4x10 Bassman combo reimagined in digital form into the now considerable Tone Master range

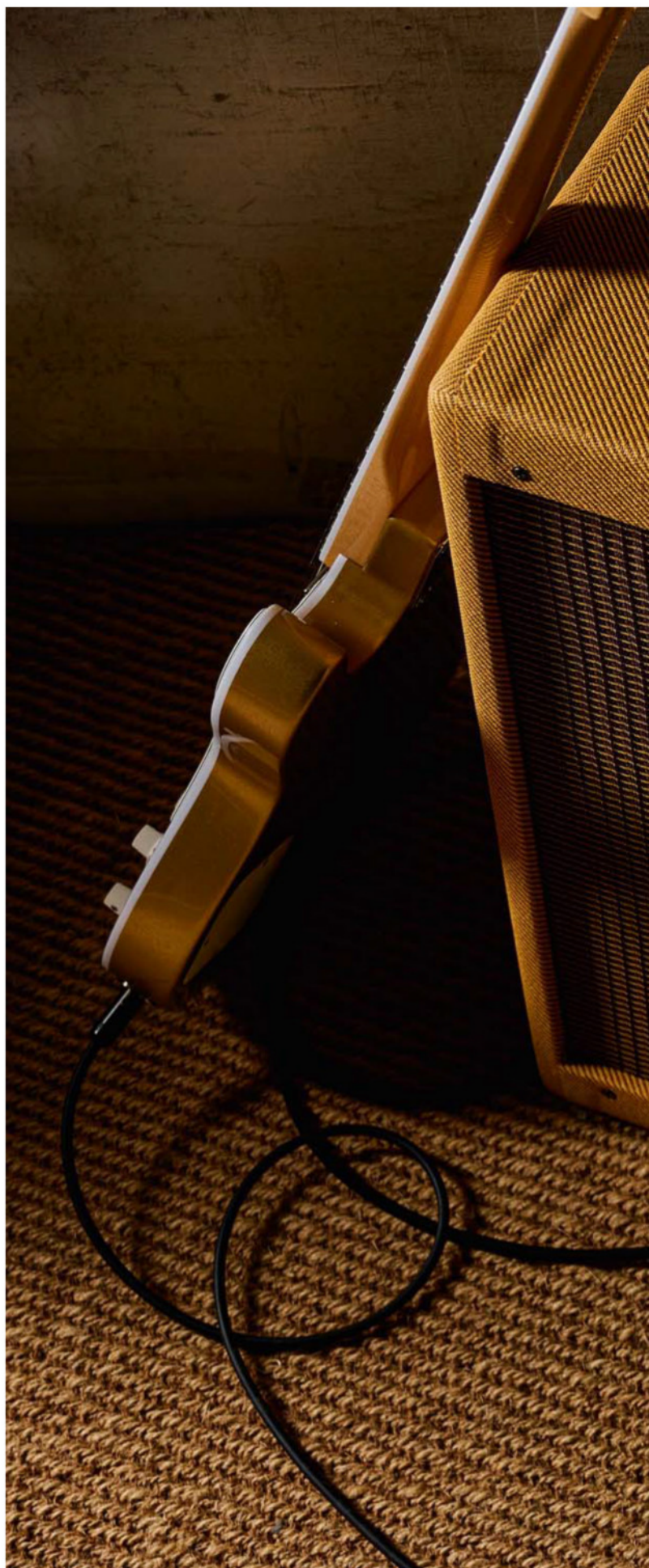
Vintage Modern

Fender attempts the incredible feat of replicating the historic Bassman with a silicon heart in its latest addition to the Tone Master series

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Neil Godwin

The Fender Bassman is one of only a handful of historic amplifiers that have shaped the sound of the electric guitar as we know and love it. Since its release in 1952, the unmistakable throaty authority of the tweed 4x10 combo has had top players including such luminaries as Michael Bloomfield, Buddy Guy, Paul McCartney, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Eric Clapton enthralled.

The amp was so ubiquitous that Marshall used its two-channel, four-input design as a jumping off point for other classic amps in our hypothetical historic handful, starting with the JTM45. Ken Bran leaned heavily into the Bassman's circuit, albeit with UK valves and a UK-voiced tone stack, achieving a more aggressive midrange than Leo Fender would have ever allowed to leave the Fullerton factory. However, there are other things in heaven and on earth that Leo Fender may never have dreamed of, and perhaps the technological possibility of a fully digital Bassman may be one of them.







1



2

Fender has set a high bar here to produce a perfect replication of the original Bassman with modern enhancements. To that end, behold a beautifully lacquered tweed cabinet made of lightweight solid pine, loaded with a handsome set of grey-blue enamelled Alnico Jensen speakers, all topped off with a familiar chrome faceplate.

Visually, this amp is every bit as believable and authentic looking as its valve counterpart, save for the digital goodies on the back panel. Pick it up, however, and it's a very different story: it's so light you'd think they forgot the speakers. Lightweight is a very nice by-product of a valve-less, D2- design, not least for the ageing rockers among us. But that's all well and good only if it sings!

In Use

Firing up in standby mode, the corresponding jewel light changes colour from amber to green to indicate the amp is 'warmed up' (read: booted up) and we begin plugged into the Normal channel's low-gain input with all the tone controls in the mid position. This neutral start point helps us establish what the cab and speakers are delivering. Sat beside this new model here in our testing room we have a genuine vintage tweed Bassman as reference. We're immediately impressed by the Tone Masters valve-like top-end shimmer with a Strat. The ability to dial in a dose of spring reverb is a welcome feature never before afforded to this amp model. It's a great-sounding emulation of a spring, though we noted that it didn't perhaps

1. The beautifully enamelled Jensen P-100R 10-inch speakers use the same Alnico magnets as the classic Tweed-era amplifiers. Alnico is known for a slightly softer, less harsh tone when compared with ceramic magnets used by Celestion

2. The lightweight pine cabinet is cleanly finished with classic lacquered tweed as originally featured on the 1950s Fender amps. The chrome faceplate sports an additional control for the convolution reverb alongside an otherwise traditional set of controls

extend to the fully wet drip some valve-driven reverbs exhibit.

Overall, tonally, the Tone Master has more brightness available than the original, which sounds darker and woolier with matched settings. That said, we actually enjoyed the slightly more articulate top-end available from the Tone Master. While the vintage Bassman power stage starts to sag and saturate subtly at volumes over 3, the Tone Master still pumps out bold power, albeit with a valve-like compression that begs for a few heavy-duty Stevie Ray Vaughan riffs.

A big advantage of the digital version is the ability to juggle the output power against the gain control to achieve your desired blend of saturation at any volume level. Further tailoring of the output by

3. It's possible to jumper the Bright and Normal channels together, just like on the original Bassman and other four-input amps, by using a patch cable to diagonally connect the opposite top to bottom inputs of either channel

4. The power output is selectable from 45, 22, 12, three and 0.5 watts, while the Vintage-Tight switch enables a more vintage-voiced, less deep sound. The IR output has three selectable profiles: a Shure SM57, a Royer R-121 ribbon mic and a blend of both



3



4

way of the back-panel mounted Vintage-Tight switch brings a touch of focus and definition, more useful at higher volumes.

The original Bassman is known for getting along with all types of guitars and pedals, and this modern counterpart is a chip off the old block. It's gratifying to learn that the ability to jumper the two channels together via a patch cable has been replicated here, allowing for all the tone-blending capability that brings. The smooth character of the overdrive available belies its digital architecture and would surely outwit many valve purists in a blind test. The integration of an effects loop is a great addition to this amp, allowing for a connection to your time-based effects.

The Bright channel's normal gain input reveals the extra potential of the Bassman to saturate in all kinds of pleasing ways, and this new model does exactly that. It's a kind of classic overdrive mostly heard on the 60s and 70s recordings of the American blues greats, a softer midrange roar without the more pointed mids of the UK amps.

We had a chance to use this amp on stage for a theatre gig and it was immediately loved by the sound technician who got a great front-of-house sound by simply plugging his XLR lead into the cab IR output, sparing time for mic'ing up and the sound-spill that inevitably brings. A difference in response between the Class D power and a valve power section could be marginally felt, though not particularly heard. The spread of the four speakers provided a gratifying dispersal of sound that filled just the right amount of stage.

The ability to dial in a dose of spring reverb is a welcome feature never before afforded to this amp model

Verdict

In many ways, this amp is far more versatile than its valve counterpart and we found it had much wider tonal versatility, too, especially thanks to the reverb that surely every original Bassman owner would put on their wishlist. Digital power has come a long way, and certainly at lower volumes this amp can behave just as you might expect a valve amp to. It may be argued that it doesn't collapse under sound pressure exactly like valves, but this isn't perhaps an amp that will be run on 11 in any case. The authentic pine and tweed cabinet, meanwhile, is certainly everything it should be, with its broad sound dispersal.

It's worth noting that for an extra £640 (and an extra 9.54kg!) Fender's all-valve version is available, but you won't have access to the cab IRs, reverb or power scaling we find on the Tone Master.

So, here, Fender has produced a fantastic-sounding, lightweight amp for stage, studio and home that brings the Bassman tone into the digital age. What's more, the package is largely indiscernible from its mid-century forebear: this amp combines vintage sound and looks with digital features and convenience. **G**



FENDER TONE MASTER '59 BASSMAN

PRICE: £1,429 (inc cover)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Digital combo amplifier

VALVES: None

OUTPUT: 45W (Class D) with power-scaling down to 0.5W

DIMENSIONS: 235 (w) x 269 (d) x 569mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 14.5/32

CABINET: Lightweight solid pine w/ lacquered tweed covering

LOUDSPEAKER: 4x 10" Jensen P-10R Alnico speakers

CHANNELS: Normal and Bright channels, each with dual inputs

CONTROLS: Normal Volume, Bright Volume, Treble, Bass, Middle, Presence, Reverb

FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch included

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, Vintage/Tight switch, line output w/ level control, 3-way IR cabinet simulation, 6-way power attenuation switch, USB port for firmware updates

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The Tone Master range includes: Princeton Reverb (£829), Deluxe Reverb (£999), Deluxe Reverb Blonde (£1,059), Twin Reverb (£1,129), Twin Reverb Blonde (£1,309) and Super Reverb (£1,459)

Fender Musical Instruments

EMEA

01342 331700

www.fender.com



PROS Great tone, just like the original but with useful power scaling and IR outputs; the onboard convolution reverb is a welcome addition

CONS Higher price than many digital amps; reverb could have more depth; some experienced valve users may notice a lack of power-amp sag at high volumes

FIRST PLAY



**SHERGOLD
MASQUERADER
STANDARD SM11**
£409

WHAT IS IT? More affordable version of the Eggle-designed update of the most famous model in the original SherGold range

Unmasked

An original British guitar model – beloved of leftfielders like Bernard Sumner and Julian Cope – updated, modernised and punching well above its new lowly price point

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Adam Gasson

Shergold's history is complex and chequered, but knowing the gist of it will help contextualise the brand. Ex-Burns employees Jack Golder and Norman Holder started out building necks and bodies for the likes of Hayman, Burns London, Ned Callan and Rosetti before striking out with their own range. Initially, they used up leftover Hayman parts; if you remember Hayman, you'll recognise the similarities. The company's fortunes waxed and waned with the prevailing music trends, leading to closure in 1992 after Golder died.

Keen to revive this interesting British marque, UK distributor Barnes & Mullins bought the name in 2015 and conscripted Patrick James Eggle to breathe new life into the brand, which was relaunched in 2017 with the new-design, Indonesian-made and now-called Classic models, the Masquerader and Provocateur.

For 2024, however, SherGold added a new design, the Telstar Standard (reviewed in issue 505), which moved manufacturing to China and hit a lower price point. A Standard version of the Provocateur quickly followed, and now the Masquerader Standard joins the line-up. While the original Masquerader looked like a strange melding of a Strat and a Music Man Stingray bass but with the slab sides







1



2

1. The Masquerader's Chinese P-90 neck pickup kicks out that beloved mix of clarity, power and punch, and the frets are perfectly laid and crowned

2. Like the originals, there's no pitch, or back angle, to the headstock, but it's been treated to a modern look with tasty locking machineheads

3. A nicely grained Indian laurel fingerboard features cool stripe position markers that echo the elegant Art Deco headstock logo

of a Tele, it nevertheless hit its mark with a certain type of player. Its oddly long but non-pitched headstock, huge humbucking pickups, thick control plate and pickguard (with make and model name in gothic script) have given way to something rather more conventional.

Style-wise, this new Masquerader follows the design of the 2017 reboot and we see a broadly similar body built from poplar, with roasted Canadian maple neck, plus an Indian laurel fingerboard whose neat 'stripe' position markers look arty and modern; they echo the elegant Art Deco-ish headstock inlay, too.

The new Standard comes in two metallic finishes, Quartz White and the attractive Solid Astral Blue seen here. Although the headstock still remains pitch-free, it's smaller and much more streamlined and carries a set of staggered-height locking tuners. Pickups are an Alnico V P-90 style at the neck and an Alnico V humbucker in the bridge position. The hardtail bridge is chunky chrome with six fully adjustable saddles and sits aft of a snazzy black/white/black pickguard.

Given the guitar's insanely reasonable price tag, it's superbly put together and finished. If you'd told us it was two or even three times this price we'd have believed you.



3

THE EGGLE CONNECTION

Patrick talks about the rebirth of Shergold, and the reasoning behind some of his design choices

Aside from creating some of the world's finest electrics under his own name, Patrick James Eggle has also been responsible for the designs of the Faith acoustic range along with the rebirth of the Shergold electric models – originally made in Indonesia – while the new Standards, including the Telstar and Provocateur, are Chinese-made and hit a lower price point.

Tell us about the pickups in the Masquerader Standard – they're not Seymour Duncans as on other models.

"The Masquerader Standard models – the Chinese made ones that we have just released – are all fitted with a P-90 in the neck and a humbucker at the bridge. We chose these Alnico variants as they most closely echoed the sounds we had previously heard with the Classic (Indonesian-made) models that were fitted with the USA Seymour Duncans. We're really pleased with the pickups in the Standard models as, although clearly intended to ensure the guitar remains affordable, they're plenty powerful, and the P-90 still oozes that warmth that we all love."

Is Shergold a good fit for the Barnes & Mullins range?

"Yes. In fact, B&M were the original distributors of Shergold back in the day. Brian Cleary, the owner [and MD] of Barnes & Mullins, had a Shergold Masquerader as his very first 'proper' guitar. So I think it was understandable that he felt a passion to bring the brand back to life, and I was delighted to be given the opportunity to reimagine Shergold in 2016/'17."

It seems you've slightly modernised the design.

"Although the Masquerader body shape isn't a million miles away from the original, as many historic Shergold aficionados will tell you it's definitely not the same. When Brian and I discussed the project for the first time nearly eight years ago, we agreed that these new Shergold Masqueraders should echo the past but stop well short of being simply copies or reissues. Having the chance to allow the past to inspire yet not dictate seemed like a fun challenge."



Patrick James Eggle is rightly proud of his close affiliation with Faith and Shergold

How come the Standard is made in China while other models are built in Indonesia?

"The first relaunched Masquerader models in 2017 were made in Indonesia and were of a really incredible specification, with solid rosewood necks and equipped with top-end hardware and USA pickups. These 'Classic' models are still available in small numbers now and carved out their own niche among early adopters. But we always knew that when the time was right, we needed to make these instruments available to a wider audience. So the Standard models have been made in China and use a number of more standard parts, rather than the somewhat boutique approach of the Classics. Barnes & Mullins have built up a huge network of manufacturers over the years, so we have great partners for these Standard instruments, and by carefully choosing our materials and parts we can be confident of quality while remaining affordable."

The Shergold models are set up in the UK before being shipped to dealers, correct?

"Yes, all the Shergold guitars and basses go through the tech workshops here before being shipped to stores in the UK and Ireland. To be fair, that is the case with all instruments under the Barnes & Mullins

umbrella, such as Faith acoustic guitars, too, another brand that I've been delighted to work closely on."

Do you think people welcome the return of an old British brand?

"I think it's just as you'd expect. Some people are pleased to see a British brand reborn and some see it less favourably. I can understand both aspects of this as I, too, have many fond memories of particular old brands and guitars from my own youth and would be sceptical if they reappeared. But we were deliberate in our attempt to reimagine the brand, rather than just plunder what had already been created in the 70s, and I think you can see that from the other models in the range such as the single-cut Provocateur or offset Telstar."

"We have always been conscious that these new instruments shouldn't be simply copies of well-known shapes with the Shergold brand on top. I have always embraced the opportunity to create something more interesting: not so radical as to leave people confused and running for the hills but instead reflections of what guitarists love and understand with some unique twists and character. And I think that's what we've achieved so far." [NM]



4

4. It's great to see an original style of bridge on an inexpensive guitar, rather than the off-the-shelf generic ones commonly used. The humbucker is a poky beast, too

5. Switching and controls are simple, rather like a Telecaster, with master volume and tone, and three-way pickup selector switch

6. The neck joint is stepped for slightly better top-fret access, and the neck is held on by four chunky recessed screws

Feel & Sounds

All SherGold guitars are set up at Barnes & Mullins' headquarters at Oswestry in Shropshire, under the guidance of the Eggle team. And boy does it show. The dark-toned roasted maple neck is a well-proportioned medium C profile and its satin sheen feels frictionless and expensive. With the fingerboard a thick slab of 304.8mm (12-inch) radius laurel and 22 medium jumbo frets, it feels slick and bendy, too. While the action is low and comfortable, there's not a buzz or rattle to be heard. The heel area has been sculpted to be around a centimetre thinner than the rest of the body, so ultra high-end access is good, although not quite as slick as on a Strat. Overall, though, this is a charming and thoroughly enjoyable guitar to spend time with.

Our test amp here is this reviewer's own Mark I Reissue Boogie combo, which suits the Masquerader's P-90/humbucker pairing well. This particular setup is a favourite on Pat Eggle's own instruments since in the neck position a P-90 is like an ultra-fat Strat or Tele, while the bridge humbucker provides darker and more raunchy tones.



5



SHERGOLD MASQUERADER SM11 STANDARD

PRICE: £409

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Solid poplar

NECK: Canadian roasted maple with dual-action truss rod

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Indian laurel, with 305mm (12") radius and stripe inlays

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo, hard nickel

HARDWARE: SherGold fixed bridge with individual saddles, staggered height locking tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Alnico P90 (neck) and Alnico humbucker (bridge), 3-way pickup selector, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The current Masquerader range includes: Classic SM01-SD (£765) with solid rosewood neck, Seymour Duncan P90 and humbucker; Classic SM04-SD (£799) with 2x Seymour Duncan humbuckers; Classic SM03-SD (£809) with 3x Seymour Duncan single coils; and Classic SM02-SD (£835) with Seymour Duncan HSS pickups

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Solid Astral Blue (as reviewed), Solid Quartz White – high-gloss body with satin neck

Barnes & Mullins

01691 652449

www.shergoldguitars.com



9/10

PROS Punches way above its weight; fantastic build quality, great materials, perfect setup and great-sounding pickups; it's an original design

CONS Being extremely picky (and possibly even mean), some might crave easier top-end access

And so it is with the this new SherGold. The P-90 is rich and round, but dead clean; with some nice reverb the edges remain clear and sharp. Add some gentle drive and we enter light blues or heavy jazz territory, and that's an expressive, warm and musical place to be. Flip to the bridge and it's a harder, more muscular sound that greets us. Not hard in a nasty way but more strident and in-yer-face, so arpeggios or crunchy open chords really poke through. Using the Boogie's own gain things get hotter, but even with quite heavy drive the humbucker remains articulate and non-mushy.

You never know what to expect with the switch in the middle position, especially with two different types of pickup. Here, it thins out and gets way funkier. But clean country picking sounds great, too, as does piling on the gain where we find ourselves

"Allowing the past to inspire yet not dictate seemed like a fun challenge"

Patrick James Eggle

on the edge of Brian May or heavy Knopfler territory with some lovely honky tones. These Chinese-made Alnico V pickups are extremely good indeed, as is the guitar.

Verdict

It's becoming harder and harder to see why one guitar made of two lumps of wood bolted together with some basic electrics and hardware can cost £4,000, while one like this is a 10th of that price. Of course, custom shop woods are specially selected, necks and bodies are often sonically matched, pickups are specifically voiced – plus, of course, labour costs in the USA/UK are vastly greater than those of Indonesia or China.

And yet this bottom-of-the-range Masquerader Standard has put a smile on this reviewer's face that many far more exalted models have failed to do. It's beautifully crafted, plays like something several times the price, and kicks out tones that are pleasing and satisfying. It just goes to show that with the eye of a Pat Eggle overseeing an operation, it's more than possible for a cheapie instrument to cut some serious mustard. Hail SherGold! What a great little guitar this is. **G**

FIRST PLAY



J ROCKETT PXO £359

WHAT IS IT? Signature boost and drive for Bon Jovi's Phil X



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2

X Factor

J Rockett provides Bon Jovi guitar-slinger Phil X with a signature boost and overdrive pedal

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The Pre/Post switch selects whether the drive section comes before or after the boost for different sonic outcomes
2. The Boost and Drive footswitches are independent of each other and so you can use boost and drive individually or stacked together
3. Turning the Tilt EQ knob anti-clockwise will introduce more bottom and less top; turning it clockwise brings in more top and reduces bottom-end

When it comes to choosing a drive pedal, there are many, many choices available out there and it's often a case of trial and error with a bunch of stompboxes until you settle on the one (or several) that will really work for you and become a long-term fixture in your rig. Some high-profile professional players who know exactly what they want, however, are lucky enough to get to work with a pedal manufacturer and get their ideal pedal made for them.

And that's the case with Phil X, the Canadian guitarist who officially replaced Richie Sambora in Bon Jovi back in 2016, and who has worked with J Rockett to arrive at the PXO. The idea here was to create something that would be of use in the studio and help Phil achieve his sound with any backline – and the result is a pedal with independently footswitched Boost and Drive sections that can be stacked in any order.

The Drive section has gain and volume controls working together with a two-band EQ. The range runs from low-level raunch through to a full-on cranked-stack rock sound with plenty of compression, all with functional volume-knob clean-up. There's full low-end and a solid midrange, plus a top-end that can be dialled in to be smooth or cutting courtesy of the Treble knob, which – working in conjunction with its Bass companion – offers a practical range of tones to match pickups and amps.

The Boost section's Level knob starts at unity gain and goes on to provide high levels of boost, while its Tilt EQ offers an easy way to set your treble and bass balance, delivering an increase in treble and decrease in bass as you turn it to the right of its central position, with the opposite effect to the left. Used by itself, this section can be really effective as an always-on tonal enhancement. In terms of footswitchable boost, though, to give you that extra when needed on stage, there's plenty of scope. The Pre/Post switch determines whether the boost pushes the Drive section that little bit further into distortion with tonal shaping as desired, or comes after it to give you a lift in volume with or without a twist in the EQ.

Verdict

A twin-footswitch boost and drive is one of the most practical pedals you can add to your 'board, and the PXO is a very flexible example of the genre. **G**



J ROCKETT PXO

PRICE: £359

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Signature boost and overdrive pedal

FEATURES: True bypass

CONTROLS: Volume, Treble, Bass, Gain, Tilt EQ, Level, Pre/Post switch, Boost footswitch, Drive footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 28mA

DIMENSIONS: 106 (w) x 101 (d) x 50mm (h)

FACE bvba

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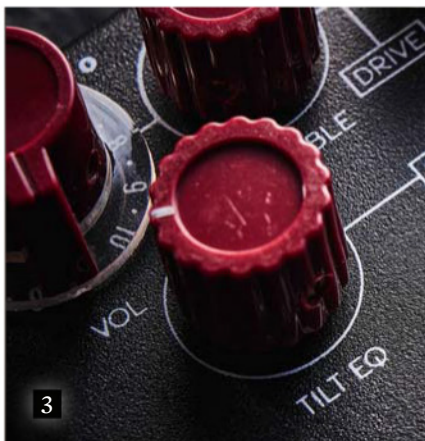
<https://rockettpedals.com>



9/10

PROS Solid build quality; nicely compact for a twin-footswitch pedal; independently switched boost and drive; flexible effects order; tilt EQ

CONS It's a tad expensive.



THE RIVALS

Twin-footswitch boost and drive pedals that are associated with a named guitarist? Perhaps most closely resembling the PXO is the Revv Shawn Tubbs Tilt OD (£239) as it has a boost section with a tilt EQ; however, it doesn't have a switch to change the effect order. A winner in 2024's Gear Of The Year was ThorpyFX's Electric Lightning (£419), the Chris Buck signature pedal that features valve-based overdrive preceded by a boost section with low-end EQ. Thorpy also has Peter 'Danish Pete' Honore's The Dane MKII (£265), and let's not forget the Keeley D&M Drive (£249), made for *That Pedal Show's* Daniel Steinhardt and Mick Taylor.



ThorpyFX's Electric Lightning also offers both overdrive and boost

FIRST PLAY



**MXR ROCKMAN
X100 ANALOG TONE
PROCESSOR**
£249

WHAT IS IT? 1980's 'hi-tech' headphone amp recreated in pedal form. What year is it?



Rocking On

MXR revives Tom Scholz's fabled 80s guitar headphone-amp tone in its latest pedal

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. Labelled Mode, this is a non-latching switch and presses on it scroll through the four modes, indicated by blue, yellow, amber and red LEDs

2. Set the input gain slider to best suit how your incoming guitar signal interacts with the four modes, and match the output volume to what's next in the signal chain. Note that there are no detente positions on the sliders

3. The output jack can be set to mono or stereo operation by an internal DIP switch. For stereo you'd need a Y cable with a TRS jack running to two mono jacks

4. The CTRL socket allows you to plug in a footswitch for control of the Mode switch (MXR recommends its TRS Split + Tap compact footswitch)

Long before the current plethora of 'rig-in-a-box' pedals there was the Rockman. Anyone who played guitar in the 1980s will be aware of it, and anyone who's listened to Def Leppard's *Hysteria* album will have heard it in action. In 1982, Tom Scholz of US rock band Boston designed and released the Rockman X100 headphone amp via his electronics company Scholz Research & Development, putting amp sound and effects for silent guitar practice into a portable unit that could also be connected to a recording console. The distinctive compressed sound, with its integral analogue chorus, soon found its way onto various recordings in the 1980s.

Now, over 40 years on, the range of Rockman units is apparently in demand, so MXR is catering to that with a new addition designed to revive the sonic character of the original headphone amp.

The new pedal features four different presets (CLN2, CLN1, Edge, Dist) as found on the original, and has switchable rich, shimmering chorus courtesy of a MN3007 bucket brigade chip. There's no sign of the original's switchable 'Echo', which was basically reverb, but that's not a problem as there are better options these days to partner the X100. The output (mono as shipped) can be switched internally to stereo, which gives you really spacious chorus.

An A/B test with our original unit proves that the new pedal has the vintage sounds down accurately. Overall sonics are very compressed with a bright top-end and some bottom-end roll-off. The two cleans each have a different EQ contour and offer sparkly clarity. The Edge sound offers crunchy raunch all day long and is sensitive to input gain settings for variation, while the Distortion is full on with loads of sustain – just right for those wailing leads. We liked the X100 best for DI recording, offering up flavours and textures that are entirely its own, but it could work plugged into an amp for radical tonal shifts.

Verdict

We welcome the fact that the X100 revives gear with a distinctive sound that has been out of circulation for some time, giving players another tool for the sonic shed. While it remains a rather niche option, it may be perfect for anyone seeking that specific 80s arena-rock vibe, and it's now available for all to discover. Maybe the time is right for the Rockman revival! **G**



MXR ROCKMAN X100 ANALOG TONE PROCESSOR

PRICE: £249

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Analogue tone processor pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass

CONTROLS: Volume, Input Gain, Mode switch, Chorus switch, internal mono/stereo switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, CTRL input

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 62 (w) x 110 (d) x 47mm (h)

Westside Distribution

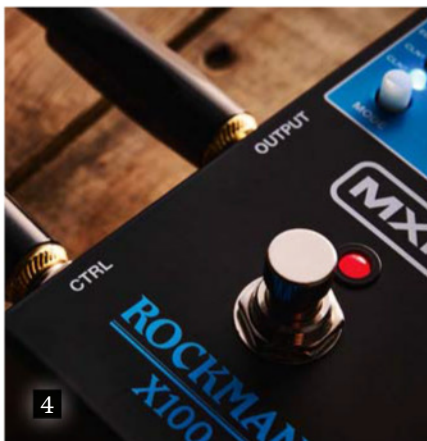
0141 248 4812

www.jimdunlop.com

8/10

PROS Welcome revival of a 'lost' sound; compact size; four distinct modes; stereo chorus

CONS We would have liked a dedicated headphone socket



THE RIVALS

This is a tricky one because there are no obvious current equivalents. We dare say you'd get close to the sound by combining compressor, EQ, chorus and distortion pedals, and, software-wise, there's a Rockman in Joe Satriani's gear collection for IK Multimedia's AmpliTube. Elsewhere in the Jim Dunlop roster you'll find the Rockman Guitar Ace (£118), a headphone amp in the spirit of the original that has three sounds (Clean, Semi Distortion and Heavy Distortion) but no chorus. Common on eBay and the like is the GOAT Analog Distortion Generator, a Japanese stompbox revival of the Rockman Distortion Generator half-rack unit.

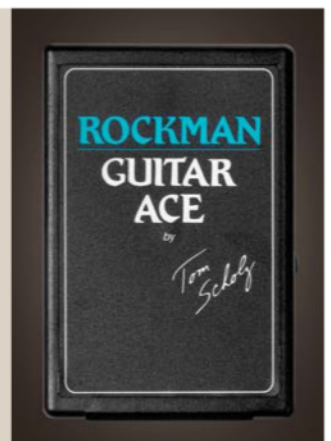


PHOTO WWW.JIMDUNLOP.COM



Gas Supply

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

PRS Standard 24 Satin & Swamp Ash Special £3,449 & £3,160

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

JARGON CRUNCHING 'Sinky' Finish

A what finish? This is PRS speak for an open-grain paint job that 'sinks' into the wood. This type of unfilled finish reduces labour time (and therefore costs), requiring fewer processes such as sanding, filling and curing to create the guitar's finish while still offering good protection.

What's this, an affordable PRS Custom?

No. As you might already know, 2025 marks 40 years in the business for the company that bears Paul Reed Smith's name. To mark the occasion, PRS is celebrating with a host of new models, starting with the Standard 24 Satin (£3,449, pictured below left).

Okay, you're going to have to elaborate...

Back when PRS was still based out of a small workshop, Paul Reed Smith took to the road visiting potential dealers. He took two guitars with him: the Custom 24

and a guitar known simply as 'the PRS'. That model went on to become the Standard, and now it's been introduced to the company's Core line-up for the first time ever.

How is it different?

For a start, it's an all-mahogany guitar. That means there's no maple top, and rather than a mirror-like gloss, the mahogany body is finished in an open-grain satin finish. Of course, it's a PRS, so we still get the violin carve to the top of the body.

STANDARD

Before PRS became one of the biggest guitar brands in the world, Paul Reed Smith designed the Custom and PRS model. The Standard is the evolution of the latter.

DMO PICKUPS

Last year, PRS introduced its Dynamic, Musical, Open pickups to a great reception. Here, they're back again for the Core Standard.

SWAMP ASH SPECIAL

Making its return to the catalogue, the model comes in two versions: Swamp Ash Special (right) and Swamp Ash Special Maple. Both are fitted with 51/8 LT and Narrowfield humbuckers.

HARDWARE

The Standard and Swamp Ash Special are both fitted with PRS's Gen III Patented Vibrato.





Both of the new models feature PRS's lightweight Phase III locking tuners

Is the neck mahogany, too?

Yes, and it's a one-piece design glued into the body. The fingerboard is rosewood with a 254mm (10-inch) radius and, of course, it has bird inlays. But PRS has also served up the full range of hardware and electronics we'd hope for, with unplated Phase III tuners, plus a Gen III Patented Tremolo taking care of vibrato duties.

What are the pickups?

These are PRS's latest DMO humbuckers. If you're not familiar, that stands for Dynamic, Musical, Open. PRS claims they're "wide open with a vocal character" across the frequency bands, which hopefully puts paid to any worries about the lack of a maple top making this guitar too dark tonally. They're wired to a five-way switch that gives us the usual three positions on a dual-humbucker guitar in positions 1, 3 and 5. As well as this, there's an H/S combination in position 2 (with the neck pickup split) and a mix of both humbuckers acting as single coils in position 4. These are controlled by a master volume and tone control. It comes in four "sinky" finishes: Frost Blue Metallic, Pearl Black, Pearl White and Red Apple Metallic.

2025 marks 40 years in the business for the company that bears Paul Reed Smith's name

What's that other guitar?

That's the Swamp Ash Special (£3,160), which you might remember from its various incarnations beginning in 1996. We last saw a US-made Swamp Ash Special in 2012, appearing with a trio of Narrowfield humbuckers. But you don't have to think back too far to the stellar SE Swamp Ash Special, released around this time last year. Clearly, it was a success as the model is once more a part of the Core cast.

What's this one packing?

Well, the swamp ash body is met by a bolt-on Pattern Regular maple neck. It comes in two versions: Swamp Ash Special and Swamp Ash Special Maple (the former with a rosewood 'board, the latter with maple). Both feature 58/15 LT humbuckers in the neck and bridge positions, with a Narrowfield humbucker in the middle. Thanks to the five-way switch and mini-toggles, there's a whopping 12 voicings to hand. Both guitar are shipping now. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

ELECTRO-HARMONIX PICO 360+ LOOPER £140

Small pedals are big business and EHX has grabbed the miniature bull by the horns with its ever-expanding Pico line. The latest to go under the shrink ray is the 360+ Looper, which was previously only available in the brand's Nano Series. It gives you 360 seconds (that's six minutes) of looping time along with 11 selectable loop memories (via the stepped Loop knob), and level



controls for Dry, Loop and Overdub layers. The loops can fade out, too, controllable from one to 10 seconds, and if you're anything like us you'll be glad to hear it comes with an undo/re-do function in case you make a mistake. Being a Pico-sized pedal, it measures just 92mm by 50mm by 50mm, and it's shipping now.

www.ehx.com

ORANGE BABY SERIES £459

No, Orange isn't launching a range of accessories aimed at new parents. The incoming Baby range is a trio of all-analogue 100-watt amp heads designed to take the backache out of using a traditional amp. The line-up comes in three flavours: Dual Baby, Tour Baby and Gain Baby, each weighing in at just 3kg (6.6lb). All three feature two channels, with the Dual Baby's first channel derived from the Rockerverb's dirty channel, while the Tour Baby and Gain Baby both include a VCA compressor for punchy clean tones. Each of the amps comes equipped with a Class A/B power stage, plus a buffered effects loop and multiple speaker output options.

www.orangeamps.com



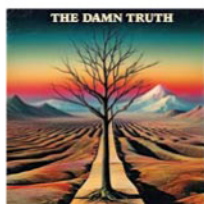


Fretbuzz

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: The Damn Truth

Album: The Damn Truth (Spectra Musique)



The self-titled *The Damn Truth* is the band's fourth studio album, out 28 March www.thedamntruth.com

The Damn Truth bring a ton of fun to rock. Rising from the lively music scene in Montreal, their songs are full of hooky riffs courtesy of lead guitarist Tom Shemer and impassioned vocals delivered by singer and rhythm guitarist Lee-la Baum. But beyond the rock lurks a wealth of other genres too, most noticeably the blues, which uplifts the melodies to create the blend of the band's sound. "I think the blues is the birthplace of rock 'n' roll," Tom says. "I'm a big blues fan and Lee-la is, too, in her vocal style. We definitely come from a blues-rock place; that's the starting point."

Melting Pot

Blues-rock might be at the centre of it all, but the band's other members also bring a range of influences into the mix. "We [each] come from a different place," says Tom. "Lee-la has a more folkie background, with people like Joni Mitchell, whereas I'm more from the classic rock school. Dave [Traina, drums] is a metal guy, and then PY [Letellier, bass] comes from a remote community in north Quebec – out there it's mostly country music. So I think that's the sound of the band and we couldn't do it by ourselves."

Tom Shemer (below) plays a 1971 Les Paul Custom and Lee-la Baum's guitar is a Bunting Alice model from boutique builder Yaniv Loria



Naked Ambition

Lee-la and Tom first met while they were both embracing their "rock 'n' roll hippy" spirit – naked at a festival in Israel – and their heavy rock sound evolved from there. "None of it was decision making, really," Lee-la tells us. "We didn't set out to do a genre; it started when Tom and I were playing our favourite music around a campfire and getting to know each other. When I was four, my dad gave me his Beatles collection, so between four and six I learned every song. Then by 10 or 11 I was listening to Woodstock and loving Jimi Hendrix and rock 'n' roll. And then discovering Janis Joplin, this powerful woman who didn't give a fuck, was really inspiring. I think I approach music from a 'heart on my sleeve' way. I can't say there was a moment where we said, 'Let's go heavy' – it's how the songs came out."

Nothing But The Truth

The band's next release is a Bob Rock-produced self-titled LP. "There's a lot of power to our band name," Lee-la says. "It had to do with a time in music [in Montreal] when we weren't part of any scene, so it was like, 'Who are we? We are The Damn Truth and fuck everybody else – we're doing music that's true to us.' And I find that people are really drawn to us; they think it's a bold statement. I've always thought that the self-titled album was missed [by us], and with this album it fitted most. It's our best yet and I'm very excited about it."

Live & Kicking

When it comes to live performance, the band see it as their time to get real. "We play a lot of big festivals, where you get to see all the big pop acts," Tom tells us. "A lot of the time people aren't really performing their music – they're there to look cool or advance their Instagram. It's not something we're interested in. When I watch a performance, I want to be surprised, to see the imperfections and see a moment that's true to this artist, at this time. And it may never happen again. That feeling of danger and living on the edge as musicians is very exciting."

"If there's an improvised moment," Lee-la adds, "we're not going to think about it too much. In a way, those are the moments an audience connects to the most and we want to keep it going." **[GK]**

Standout track: *The Willow*

For fans of: Brave Rival, Aerosmith, The Black Keys

IT TAKES TWO

Tom and Lee-la riff on their relationship

As a couple playing guitar in the same band, we couldn't resist asking... who's the better player? "Are you kidding?" Lee-la laughs. "I'm a rhythm guitarist and I've never attempted to go into solos, I do that with my voice – I've always just accompanied my voice. He's the guitarist."

"Yeah, but I love how Lee-la plays," says Tom. "I could never sound as grungy as her. Sometimes we go for that early 90s sound and I overthink it. When she does it, it sounds just right. It's cool. It's rock 'n' roll."

**"There's a lot of power
to our band name...
And people are really
drawn to us; they think
it's a bold statement"**



Albums

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

Suited and booted into overdrive: The Darkness

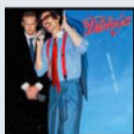


PHOTO BY SIMON EMMETT

The Darkness

Dreams On Toast

Cooking Vinyl (available 28 March)



Big laughs, serious riffs – and weaponised ennui

Full disclosure, this writer bought his first electric guitar off Dan Hawkins as a teenager – but, my, how the brothers Hawkins have grown since those formative Lowestoft years. And yet *Dreams On Toast*, the band's eighth album, still

contains the oddly elusive mix of taut, exciting rock guitar and exquisite satire that has characterised their work since the beginning. However, this new outing also delves into 70s country rock, grandiose Supertramp-style AOR and laugh-out-loud send-ups of 90s hard-rock clichés.

Let's start with the latter, since the album opens with *Rock And Roll Party Cowboy*, which mercilessly nails the blowhard bores of the rock scene with their uniform of "leather jacket, no sleeves / Harley Davidson... yes please". As always, while the lyrics go for laughs, the guitar work is played straight as a steel rule, and just as hard edged. This is the mystery inside an enigma inside a gag that is the Darkness – a hugely talented rock band that takes not taking things too seriously very seriously indeed. Justin really hits his stride in terms of droll wordplay on the second track, *I Hate Myself*, about a self-acknowledged dumpster fire of a boyfriend who wants his ex-girlfriend back but knows the break-up is his own fault and declares that he will now "hate myself for two / I hate myself, so you don't have to..." In among all this tomfoolery is some of the best lead work we've ever heard Justin pull out of the bag on tracks such as the Queen-like *The Longest Kiss*, where he dances through tricky changes like the jester-prince of guitar he is. Fine stuff. **[JD]**

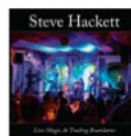
Standout track: *I Hate Myself*

For fans of: Aerosmith, Thin Lizzy, Supertramp, Spinal Tap

Steve Hackett

Live Magic At Trading Boundaries

InsideOut (available now)



Intimate acoustic performance from the Genesis legend

Steve Hackett's acoustic performances at Trading Boundaries in Sussex have become something of an annual event in recent years, giving fans a chance to witness a stripped-back live set in more intimate surroundings. "It's always a joy for me to play at Trading Boundaries," Steve tells us. "A magical, intimate place full of beautiful lights and exotic imagery... it's the perfect location for my acoustic set." Supported by a band comprising regulars from his Genesis Revisited touring ensemble, the album presents a mix of Steve's Genesis, solo and classical material including extracts from *Supper's Ready*, *Blood On The Rooftops*, *Hands Of The Priestess* and *Ace Of Wands*. As you'd suspect, the playing throughout is wonderful and represents a rare chance to hear Steve focus on the nylon- and steel-string acoustic side of his repertoire. Fans of his electric side should watch out for Steve's 2025 tour dates celebrating the 50th anniversary of Genesis's classic *Lamb Lies Down* album. **[DM]**

Standout track: *After The Ordeal*

For fans of: Genesis, Camel

Jethro Tull

Curious Ruminant

InsideOut (available 7 March)



Times change, but the prog remains...

The names of the band members might be a tad unfamiliar to Tull fans of yesteryear, but there's no mistaking the songwriting style, voice and flute of Ian Anderson. Of course, the revived version of the band is still a controversial topic among the fanbase as gone is the superb grind of Martin Barre's riffmongery, along with his bandmates that made classic albums such as *Aqualung* and *Thick As A Brick* in the 1970s. Much of the original band's flavour remains, however; songs like the title track have that trademarked medieval/baroque styling that was such an original stamp of the band way back when. Lead guitarist Jack Clark makes his recording debut here, despite having played live with the band since 2022. He leaves a mark, too, with some burning solos throughout this joyful prog-rock romp. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Stygian Hand*

For fans of: Original Tull, Gentle Giant, Yes



County Donegal's Muireann Bradley has a talent beyond her 18 years

Muireann Bradley

I Kept These Old Blues

Decca (available 21 February)



Stunning debut from rising acoustic blues star

Originally a sought after independent release, 18-year-old blues fingerpicker Muireann Bradley's first album is now available in remixed and remastered form via a major label. After a meteoric rise to notability that began with videos of her playing country blues acoustic on YouTube, she was invited to appear on the BBC's *Jools Holland's Hootenanny* in 2024, which was, unbelievably, only her third gig! Since then Muireann has wowed audiences with her virtuosic guitar style, and the album itself stands as a testament to her maturity as a performer. The album's track listing is a mix of classic country blues songs such as Blind Blake's *Police Dog Blues*, the Reverend Gary Davis' *Candyman*, and instrumentals like Sam McGee's *Buck Dancer's Choice*. Throughout, her fingerpicking is squeaky clean with an enchanting vocal delivery. Watch this space for an exclusive interview and video in *Guitarist* soon. [DM]

Standout track: *Frankie*

For fans of: John Fahey, Rev Gary Davis, Woody Mann

My Morning Jacket

is

ATO Records (available 21 March)



Stylish, sunny psyche-pop for 2025

There's always been something affable yet hard to characterise about My Morning Jacket, who started out in Louisville, Kentucky, 27 years ago, a surprisingly long track-record given how fresh their latest sounds. If The Doors had their soul replaced with that of The Beach Boys, you'd arrive at something like their sound – dark and warm in timbre yet sunny in spirit, as on standout track *Everyday Magic*, which weaves through its easygoing changes like a longboard surfer on an afternoon wave. There's a lightness of touch that not all alt-rock and post-rock bands manage – the charm of *I Can Hear Your Love* has an almost Everly Brothers'-like innocence. Guitarist and frontman Jim James plays unselfishly, setting his painless hooks with ease and economy, always playing to the song's needs. Relaxing, meditative, charming, *is* warms you to the marrow. [JD]

Standout track: *Everyday Magic*

For fans of: Blitzen Trapper, Jonathan Wilson



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Tones Behind The Tracks

Baring her soul and showcasing her fingerstyle, British singer-songwriter **Mary Spender**'s pain is our gain on this exquisite break-up album

Artist: Mary Spender

Album: *Super.Sexy.Heartbreak* (Self-Released)



Super.Sexy.Heartbreak is Mary Spender's debut studio album, following 2021's Patreon-fan funded collection, *Songbook Volumes 1 & 2*

Mary has been creating online content on guitar culture for a decade, and now has over 750k YouTube subscribers

You wouldn't wish the inspiration behind Mary Spender's *Super.Sexy.Heartbreak* on anyone. The acclaimed British singer-songwriter and content creator has undoubtedly suffered for her art (these 11 tracks chronicle the status of her smashed heart across a lifetime of failed relationships). But having caught the spark at producer Pau Romero's BeatGarden studio in Barcelona, the result is one of the great modern break-up albums: a minutely observed journey of hurt and healing, with faint shades of Joni Mitchell, Mark Knopfler and Fleetwood Mac in its shimmering sounds and twisty fingerstyle.

Tell us a little more about the concept behind *Super.Sexy.Heartbreak*.

"I guess the title makes it clear that I've experienced some heartache in my time. Some of these songs I wrote when I was, like, 20 years old, so there's a mixture of muses. It starts with *You Can Have Chicago*, which is that idea of someone ruining a city for you because their shadow or ghost is around every corner, in every pub, every bar, every restaurant, every park. Then it's like an arc, venturing into self-hatred, then back to self-love, and by the end you've both moved on – as you should."

The very first line on the album is, 'You broke my heart'...

"Yeah [smiles]. I can't say that my lyrics are all that secretive or misleading – they're pretty clear on this album. It does exactly what it says on the tin."

How hard was it to lay yourself so bare on this record, lyrically?

"I don't know how people sing songs that aren't authentic to them. I think, for me, I'm just a massive oversharer. I want to hear about everyone's deep, dark secrets within five minutes of knowing them, and I'm willing to do the same. To me, writing songs was my hobby as a kid, then it was my therapy. It's cathartic. But there's still a barrier. There's still artistic expression, drama is heightened. I always joke that my love life is not as interesting as I make it sound... but then, it probably is because it's all autobiographical."

How does your writing process work?

"I don't write when I'm really happy, and I don't write when I'm really sad, either. I sort of write in that middle ground of uncertainty and insecurity. Because I start with the music, I start with my guitar in hand – mostly an acoustic. And if what I'm feeling matches what I'm playing, then it becomes a song."

"There's such a range of emotions in the album. It gets quite heavy and then ends on a lighter mood. I wouldn't say I'm a folkie; people might see you with an acoustic guitar and just jump to that genre. But fingerstyle, for me, is such a range of things – you can still be quite aggressive – and I think this album is showcasing what it can deliver."

What sort of influences have gone into your songwriting and playing?

"John Mayer's *Battle Studies* was one album that definitely hit me in my early 20s. I don't know whether it's a full-on break-up album, but it definitely sounds like it. With something like *You Can Have Chicago*, the reference there is just Mark Knopfler, especially the solos. I'm just sort of harking back to the people who are much better than me at fingerstyle guitar."

Are there any particular guitar parts that stand out for you on this record?

"I guess my favourite guitar moment is not me! Ariel Posen's slide playing on *Drop, Drop, Slow Tears* – I listen



to that and I go, 'My God, how amazing to have such a skilled player on my album.' You know, talking of unique style and recognisable playing techniques, he is a thousand levels above me. Some of the most famous players in the world, he's their favourite guitarist."

What guitars did you take into the studio with you?

"I mostly used my Vigier GV Rock Hollow. Then I had this red S-type built by Marceau Guitars. I had the idea of doing *Sultans Of Swing* with a guy called Josh Turner, and I wanted to play a maple-neck red Strat based on Mark Knopfler's, but couldn't afford the real thing. So I was like, 'Okay, well, let's make a new version but relic'd.' And that guitar, although it had been built-for-purpose for that one thing, it just kept coming out, especially for the Knopfler-esque solos in *You Can Have Chicago*.

"I used my Rory Gallagher Fender Custom Strat as well. Then I've got an Epiphone archtop from 1937 – I think it's an Olympic – that's on the intro to *Getaway Sun*. It's not a very heavily acoustic album, but there was also my Martin OM-28. And sometimes we'd double the acoustics using Pau's Martin, which is an Eric Clapton signature."

What did you choose when it came to amps and pedals?

"I used the Victory Duchess with the OX Box – I've gigged with that amp a lot and I still love it. There were two main pedals. The Chase Bliss Generation Loss is quite obvious at the end of *Drop, Drop, Slow Tears*. Then the Hologram Electronics Microcosm was used on the electric guitars and grand piano on *I Blame Myself*. Otherwise, most of my guitars are quite clean, or overdriven using the amp. Then Pau's 'washy' guitars were him just messing around for hours with a pedalboard."

You've already taken this material out on the road – how did it go?

"I love playing every night, and that being my job. And it was great to see faces, rather than just uploading a video and seeing numbers online. I mean, I never expected to be a studio-based musician making videos. Gigging was all I did for a really long time, but I knew I had to find the audience to be able to gig in the way that I wanted.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WWW.MARYSPENDER.COM

Mary's album was recorded with producer Pau Romero in Barcelona and features mainly electric guitars, including a Marceau S-style, Vigier GV Rock Hollow, Rory Gallagher Fender Custom Strat and 1930s Epiphone archtop model

"But touring is a whole other beast. I learnt a lot of lessons along the way, and I've been quite honest on YouTube about how much it cost and how much I actually made. I have so much admiration for touring musicians. It's so hard. People are like, 'Well, you're getting to do the thing you love.' But it's real work. Even just getting my stage chops back. It had been five years since I'd toured, although I'd played one-off shows here and there just to get back on the scene."

"Fingerstyle, for me, is such a range of things – you can still be quite aggressive – and I think this album is showcasing what it can deliver"

You're well known for the YouTube videos that you create on guitar culture – but is it important to you that people see you first and foremost as a songwriter?

"Well, at this point, I don't think I really mind. In fact, I feel like I actually have an advantage. The people who care about me being a singer-songwriter see me in that way. And then, in the other lane, if they don't like my songs, then they might still like my YouTube videos. So I just feel fortunate that I'm running two careers in parallel, but there's significant crossover between them. So at this point, I'm like, 'You'll see whatever you want to see.' If you just want to see a YouTuber, then fine. But the people who know me, and have watched me for years, know I'm a little bit more than that." [HY]



Mary Spender's *Super.Sexy.Heartbreak* album is out now on independent release

www.maryspender.com



Same Same But Different

Neville Marten meets up with an old colleague and gets to discussing how supposedly identical guitars can feel and play so differently

I recently got together with an old workmate from Gibson/Norlin in Rotterdam. Dick Noordijk joined us when he was not yet 20 but already a fine guitarist, and keen to learn he fitted in immediately. He spoke superb English and his sense of humour was identical to ours. Dick is still a successful luthier in the Netherlands, building and repairing guitars for top players including Focus's excellent Menno Gootjes (he's fixed the headstock of Menno's black LP Custom three times now, it having snapped in three different places!).

"We might check 100 Gibsons a day, and while most would be good, a few needed work, and a couple or three were totally outstanding"

During our reminiscences Dick recalled how we might check 100 Gibsons in a day, sometimes all the same model, and while most would be good, several would be a bit 'meh', a few needed work, and a couple or three were totally outstanding. We'd all have a play and invariably agree that this or that one was something special. And while even back in the late 70s things were becoming more automated, there was still plenty of room for the stars to align on a particular instrument.

Sometimes one would simply play so much better. But we'd measure the action, check neck widths and

depths, and there would be nothing in it. And yet one stood head and shoulders above. Of course, guitars are made of wood and no two pieces are ever the same, so differences in weight and sound are hardly surprising. But we never got to the bottom of why one just seemed 'better'. It was palpable – but seemingly not measurable with any tools that we had.

This phenomenon showed up keenly on two topline archtop Kalamazoo Award models. Both hand-built and signed by Gibson legend Wilbur Fuller, they were very different instruments: the natural one in quilted maple with short L-5-style headstock was great, but the sunburst one in flamed maple with the longer Super 400 headstock was utterly spectacular.

On both, the maple pickguard with onboard volume and tone controls had been pushed in so the top had a slight split between there and the f-hole. It was tragic, but it did mean we had these gorgeous instruments as our playthings.

The sunburst guitar was more resonant and sonorous, too, and we wondered if this was due to the longer headstock adding mass and sustain. We did countless blindfold tests, but could always tell we were playing 'that' one. I asked to buy it and was given a price of £700. I hummed and hawed but finally declined. I've just looked online and there's one going for \$20,000!

Tension & Release

This difference in how two ostensibly similar guitars feel is particularly noticeable in Strats. I daren't say 'string tension', but guitarists use that term (however scientifically inaccurate) to describe how stiff or loose a guitar feels. Some, like my sunburst maple-neck Strat, feel slack and forgiving, while my Fiesta Red one demands a bit of a fight. The strings 'feel' tighter. In fact, 11s on my sunburst one feel like 10s on my red one. It's a conundrum I've debated with several guitar bods and, apart from saddle height and string break angle, I've yet to truly get to the bottom of it.

It's rather like 'top wrapping' Gibson-style guitars. Players say it makes the strings feel slacker; the other guitarist in our band does it on his Les Paul and now uses 11s instead of his usual 10s. This is most likely due to the lighter break angle over the bridge that it produces, the greater length of string it creates between ball-end and nut, or both. On a Strat it could be that one's neck is slightly more pitched, so the string angle over the saddles is tighter.

But that Kalamazoo Award. What a guitar. Of course, it would have been wasted on me and I'd have sold it years ago anyway. But it's a lovely memory to cherish. As it was having lunch with my old mate who I'd not seen in 40 years! **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

All That Jazz

What? Epiphone Broadway, Vintage Sunburst
Where seen? www.thomann.co.uk **Price?** £799

An archtop is something most guitarists would love to own but perhaps feel somewhat unworthy. And yet look what you can get for well under a grand. Epiphones are fantastic, and this Chinese remake of one of the brand's most famous jazz boxes has a laminated maple body and neck, a laurel fingerboard with mother-of-pearl blocks inset with abalone triangles, a headstock with pearl leaf-and-branch motif, twin Classic Pro humbuckers, Frequensator tailpiece and pau ferro bridge, plus Wilkinson tuners and tortoiseshell-style pickguard. Basically, it's got the lot – and for way less than 20,000 bucks!





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Up To Speed

Alex Bishop is busy in the workshop crafting acoustic guitar necks – but can he keep up with his students?

As guitarists, nothing can be better for our musical development than being forced to play in a way that takes us outside of our comfort zone. It's so easy as we get older to strum along with the same old tunes and find ourselves stuck in a rut. When I was younger I remember trying to learn a Wes Montgomery solo after years of hacking away at Jonny Greenwood-style riffs on my Telecaster, and later bringing home a cheap five-string banjo upon which to learn bluegrass. I recall my dad muttering, "Jack of all trades, master of none..." as he passed my bedroom. But I'm pretty sure he just didn't like the banjo very much.

"Blending the main portion of the neck into the heel and headstock is woodwork in its purest form: shaping with just knives and chisels"

In spite of my dad's protestations, I think there is something to be said for broadening one's horizons, even if you ultimately end up back where you started. When it comes to the world of lutherie, it's my guitar-making students that are so often the reason for me trying new things. This month I completed one of my one-week guitar building courses and, coincidentally, both of my students had opted to use exclusively UK-grown timbers; yew, laburnum, London plane and walnut all featured heavily in place of the usual exotic hardwoods. We were focusing on neck construction, having completed the soundboxes back in September.

So first up: cutting the scarf joint. This is a diagonal cut running 12.5 degrees across the grain, but the angle is really up to the maker. In any case, it forces the strings to apply pressure at the nut – imperative for powerful-sounding open strings. The offcut is flipped over and glued to the underside of the main section to form the headstock, but the small piece needs to be thickened before glueing. This is one of many 'points-of-no-return' where my students have to make a critical design decision: whether they wish to proceed with a sleek (16mm-thick) solid headstock, or go traditional with a fatter (19mm-thick) slotted headstock.

I decided to join in on a spare workbench by making a slotted-headstock neck from the stash of London plane I chopped up almost a year ago (see *Guitarist* 508). I was surprised by its workability, expecting it to be hard and dense like a tough maple, but it smoothed easily with a plane and carved painlessly, similar to cherry or poplar. It wasn't all easy, though, as the migraine-inducing grain patterns made it difficult to mark out the critical dimensions.

I've learned that setting up these measurements is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the key when it comes to neck carving. Rather than offering an aggressive rasp to my students and suggesting they simply "go for it", I get my students to 'box in' the neck by shaping it into a tapered oblong before anything gets rounded over. It depends on the guitar, but, for me, a 45mm nut and 56mm body join – for an acoustic guitar – wins every time. A neck thickness of 21mm at the 1st fret and 24mm just in front of the heel ensures that everything comes out just right every time, regardless of profile. C-shape or V-neck, with these measurements it's a winner every time.

Slow & Steady

The technical work done, by Thursday my students and I moved onto blending the main portion of the neck into the heel and headstock. These transitions are woodwork in its purest form: shaping with just knives and chisels, and some very sparing use of sandpaper only at the very end. With knitted brows we each set to work, and over a period of time the three of us dissolved into our flow states. A blanket of concentration had enveloped the workshop; I came to lutherie for my love of guitars, but I stayed for these gratifying moments of unexpected communion.

Looking up from my woodworking-induced reverie, I realised that my students were pulling ahead of me, having already marked out their dovetails and moving onto their fingerboards. I've noticed lately that I'm actually getting slower in my work, but it's not for want of efficiency. Lutherie is a field where the more you learn, the more you see, and my relentless desire for perfection remains – as yet – unfulfilled. **G**



When students come into Alex's workshop, they not only bring their own goals but also motivate their teacher to try new things

Lowden

GUITARS





Salves For Valves

Jamie Dickson checks in with tone-meister Dan Coggins who shares his tips on getting the best from your valve amp

As regular readers of this column will know, sometimes we focus on very specific topics and sometimes we meander a bit more freely across the topic of guitar tone. Recently, I picked up the phone to one of the most knowledgeable tone-smiths on the British scene, Dan Coggins. Dan was the designer behind the highly influential Lovetone effects pedals from the 1990s, and today he's a frequent collaborator with ThorpyFX and designer of the Gear Of The Year-winning Dinosaural Cogmeister overdrive. What fewer people may know, however, is that he's also a valve-amp maven with years of meticulous repair and restoration experience under his belt. So while we were chatting, I took the opportunity to draw on his know-how regarding the myths and realities of how to get the most from your valve amp.

We typically see power valves sold in matched pairs - is that crucially important?

"Yes and no. I mean, it's not as crucial as you think. It's only important if failing to do so results in background noise coming up because if [the two power valves] are not equal and opposite in a push-pull arrangement, then they won't reject the power-supply noise or hum. But most amps were designed to – or *should* be designed to – tolerate a bit of mismatch. I mean, years ago, I bet you Hendrix's output valves weren't all matched in his

amps. He probably just replaced them every five minutes because he was caning them so much. But I heard or read somewhere that his favorite Marshall – that he used in many of the studio recordings – was one that still had the original factory KT66s in it, so it was one from, like, early '67 and he used it on a lot of gigs as well. So they obviously weren't changing stuff *that* often."

Are there any aspects of valve amp tone that are under-appreciated, do you think?

"Well, I'll tell you something about valves generally. I don't know if you've noticed this – I've spoken to quite a few people who picked up on it – but when you switch something on that's made with valves, it sounds fine to start with, but after about 20 or 25 minutes you suddenly notice it sounding better. What's happening is called equilibration, where all the disparate [electrical/electronic] forces within the amp reach a point of being settled and so the whole thing settles down and reaches its own level, if you like. I've noticed this a lot of times on all manner of valve gear. And I don't know if it's auto-suggestion or just me fooling myself, but I think it generally does apply. If you want your amp to warm up to settle like that before you use it, switch it full on – not just on standby. Just turn the volume down and run it without the signal, so it's fully operational."

Electronics expert Dan Coggins imparts useful tips that are accessible to any valve amp players



Different techs we've spoken to recommend different methods for powering up amps and powering them down to best preserve the amp's serviceability - what do you do?

"What I always used to do with my amps, my old amps, was to turn the mains off but leave the standby switch on because I knew then that all the capacitors would be draining through the circuitry. And then I'd turn the standby off as well, so that when it's time to turn the amp on again, it goes mains, then standby. But that's a habit I've got into."

As a pedal designer, what are your favourite tips for using overdrive or boost pedals to bring out the best in a valve amp's own inherent sound?

"When you turn the pedal on, you want to be able to at least double the signal level available in bypass, so that it can push the first gain stage of the amp towards clipping – but not so it's not clipping completely, just to prime it up so when you turn the volume up after, it will symmetrically clip into the next stage. And, in fact, this was something I used to do for many years with my Vox AC30 – my favourite thing was to use just the guitar, a distortion pedal of some kind, but more importantly a Watkins MK IV Copicat, a solid-state mid-70s one."



"I bet Hendrix's output valves weren't all matched. He probably replaced them every five minutes because he was caning them so much"

"I'd just use that [Copicat] to drive the Normal channel of the AC30 and up the level into the first valve of the AC30, not so it was distorting but just so it was starting to blow a bit audibly. I rarely used the Top Boost channel – although sometimes I'd switch between Normal and Top Boost to get a rhythm sound and a lead sound. The Copicat seemed to do something because it'd chop off a bit of the bottom-end, it would round off the treble, but also give a bit of an upper midrange boost into that Normal channel. It was just a magical sound. And I know I'm not the only person who's used them for that. People use the Echoplex similarly.

"I used to make a version of the Copicat [preamp circuitry] to use as a booster; the [effect of the circuit was to add a] bit of gain and buffering and a bit of messing with the bandwidth, and then provide enough level to push the amp a bit. The Colorsound Power Boost used to be good for that years ago as well, of course. David Gilmour used the Power Boost primarily to overcome all the [signal] losses. I know this because I had a conversation with [Gilmour's tech] Phil Taylor recently. He said Gilmour used it to compensate for the losses [to capacitance effects] in the curly cable and then drive the Binson Ecorec with a bit more top-end, so that its repeats would be a bit more distinct. So using it was really just to compensate for cable loss." 

<https://cogginsaudio.co.uk>

A Vox AC30 proved to be the beating heart of many classic players' tone, including Rory Gallagher, whose rig is shown above, and this month's cover star, Brian May

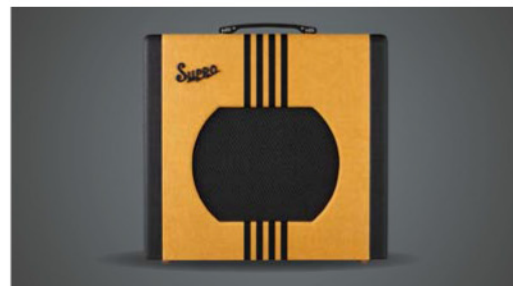
THREE TO GET READY

Neat little valve amps



PRS HDRX 20 head £799

Based, PRS says, on a scaled-down version of the 'Plexi' Hendrix used on tour, this neatly styled little lunchbox head is a pleasure to play. It sounds chewy and characterful in the warm useful zone between clean and light overdrive but also grants you those classic dimed 'Plexi' tones at manageable volumes without the need for a jumper cable between inputs (as that bit is done internally). It's priced way lower on the street, too, right now.



Supro Delta King 12 combo £645

If you don't have a small, juicy-sounding valve combo, you should definitely get one as they're perfect for jamming at home and for smaller gigs, unlocking more of the chunky sound of power valves working hard at realistic volumes. This retro-looking 15-watter is a vibey alternative to Fender's ubiquitous Blues Junior and, despite a rather short and splashy spring reverb, it delivers the sonic goods with aplomb in a compact, sensibly priced package.



Harley Benton Mighty-15TH head £219

Retailing from Thomann for the price of an overdrive pedal, this 15-watt, Class A, EL84-based amp sounded really quite decent when we reviewed it a couple of years back. It even boasts a boost switch and switchable power reduction for seven watts if the full 15 isn't required. Better than it deserves to be, with a warm, vintage-inspired tone, this could make a great backup or perfectly good basis for a pub-rock rig.



Embellished Chords

Richard Barrett helps you explore more chordal opportunities in standard tuning

The term 'embellished' isn't really a theoretical one, but it seems an appropriate way to describe these examples. Sometimes an idea for a chord progression can come to us virtually complete; at other times, we have to work a bit harder to refine an idea. In a recording session, it's not unusual to be asked if you can add something to a 'standard' set of chords and bring something else to the harmony – all within reason, of course.

The theme linking these examples is that (with experimentation) they could all make nice alternative voicings or 'overlays' to more conventional chords. Some of them have a complexity you can normally only achieve in alternative tunings, which is also a wonderful world to explore, but it makes sense to get the most out of regular tuning, too. There's also the convenience of not having to retune. All of the examples can be strummed (with some judicious muting of unwanted strings) or fingerpicked. Don't let the complex-sounding names spoil your enjoyment!

Eric Johnson is great at coming up with complex-sounding voicings in standard tuning

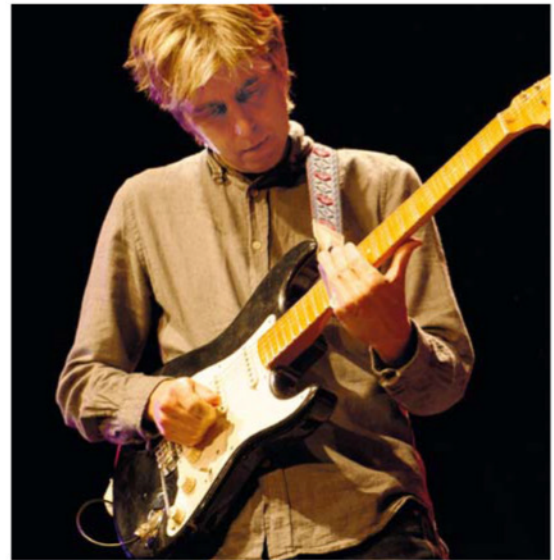
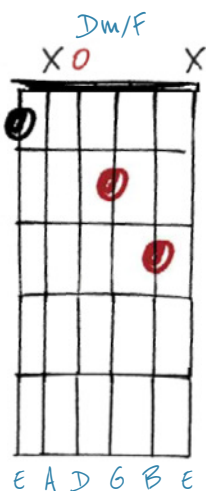


PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

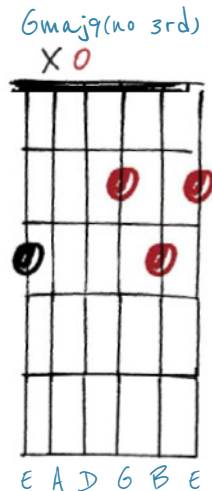
Example 1

This chord could correctly be called F6 or Dm/F as both share the same notes (F D A D). The naming is a matter of preference and/or context. For example, this may follow a D/F# chord, in which case it could make sense to call this Dm/F. Even then, you wouldn't be wrong to say F6 if you preferred.



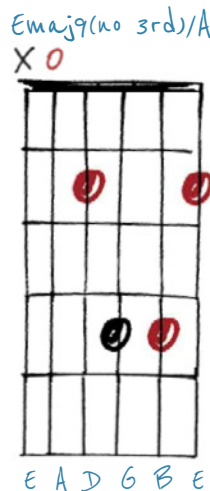
Example 2

From a player's perspective, this chord is easy to recognise as D with a G in the bass (D/G), but in practice it sounds more like a Gmaj9 chord with no 3rd (B). With G as our root, we pass the muted fifth string, then the open fourth gives us the 5th of a G chord (D). The third string A gives us a 9th, then another 5th (D) on the second string, and major 7th (F#) on top!



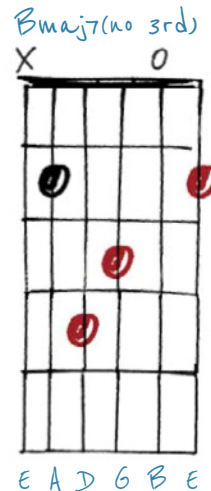
Example 3

There are several ways you can view this chord. Looking closely, there is a B major triad on the top three strings, with an A5 chord in the bass. After some head-scratching, we felt this is most clearly described as an Emaj9(no 3rd)/A, though you might want to try this with, or instead of, an A major chord – it won't work all the time, but when it does it will be lovely.



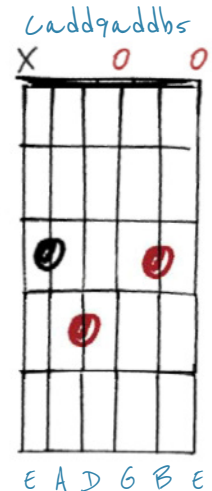
Example 4

Another chord with the 3rd omitted. This isn't for any fancy theoretical reason; it's more about running out of strings/fingers! Many will recognise this as a Bmaj7 but replacing the 3rd (D#) with the open second string (B). This gives a bit of dissonance – just the thing sometimes. Try adding in the open sixth string for a twist on E major.



Example 5

This is definitely based around C major: you can clearly see the triad (C E G) on the fifth, first and third strings respectively. We have the 9th (D) on the second string, so that would mean Cadd9, but then we find a ♭5 (Gb) on the fourth string. As we already have a 5th on the open third string, we'll call this an 'add ♭5': Cadd9add♭5.



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STAR LETTER

TILL DEATH DO US PART



As I read through the guitar reviews in *Guitarist* this month, I, as usual, bemoaned the fact that virtually none are available left-handed. But it did set me thinking about my 50-year-plus guitar journey and the fact that I have kept many of the purchase receipts.

August 1971: less than a month after starting my first job I purchased my first quality guitar, a right-handed sunburst 1964 Gibson ES330 that I restrung left-handed. The salesman was Ian Bishop (author of many guitar books), and the shop, I think, was Guitar Village in Shaftesbury Avenue. The price? £125.

Fast forward one year and the 330 was replaced by a new SG Special (right-handed). This time it was definitely Guitar Village, and the salesman was another well-known guitar aficionado Ken Achard. The price: £190 – those were the days!

July 1973: a second guitar was added to my collection of one. This time a lefty sunburst 335 from Top Gear in Denmark Street, sold to me at the bargain price of £214.50.

Barely three months after buying the 335 I traded both axes for the first lefty Les Paul I had seen for sale at £290 brand-new. Having said that, I only got £235 for both the SG and 335 as trade-ins. This time the shop was Rhodes Music, also in Denmark Street, and the salesperson was the manager Veronica 'Ronnie' Waters.

I wonder how many other readers still have their old receipts and can recall the stories behind them?

John Holmes

Thanks John, as journalists who often have to puzzle over the back-history of guitars, we're absolutely delighted when people keep the receipts – there's nothing like provenance dated and printed in black and white!

More seriously, it's funny how receipts acquire meaning through time. When they're handed to us at the till, they're no more than a document of a transaction. Decades later? They help us remember the story of our life and our progress in guitar, and their dry factual quality becomes revelatory if – looking at them again for the first time in years – we recall what we were doing, where we were in life, and what we could then afford. So we'd love to hear more stories from readers who kept the receipts and have stories to go with them. Send them in and we'll print the best.

PICK & CHOOSE?

I almost choked on my cornflakes when I read Neville Martin's piece 'Plectrum Spectrum' about a humble plectrum costing £30. My first thought was that I must be reading the April 1st edition. I for one will happily continue using the gadget one of my sons bought me several years ago, which punches out plectrums from old credit cards!

David Hughes

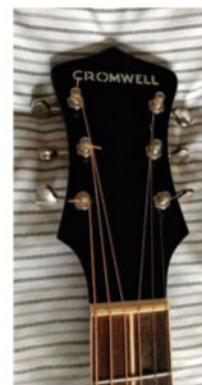
I think the key phrase here is 'whatever works for you', David! If you get results your way, you've got what you need for next to nothing and we doff our hats to you. But perhaps we shouldn't dismiss the £30 pick so lightly, especially if you tend to plug straight into the amp with no effects. It's your picking hand's point of contact with the strings – would we dismiss a record stylus out of hand for being pricey? Okay, we get it, it's an (almost) silly amount of money for a pick, but sound is a subtle thing, and if it gives you the 'Goldilocks' feel and tone then we can think of worse things to spend £30 on. As you say, no-one absolutely *needs* to spend that much to get a good sound going, but it's nice to have options.

DUST STORM

I enjoyed the most recent edition (issue 519) and particularly David Mead's article on the Atkin Dust Bowl acoustics. The reason it caught my eye was that he said that the inspiration for them was the 'Depression-era' acoustics that came out of the USA in the 1930s. This got me wondering if you have ever featured the original Depression-era guitars in previous issues as I own a 1937 Cromwell [see pics below], produced by Gibson, Kalamazoo, in that era that sounds amazing. I understand that they were named depending on what store they were being sold in, but details are quite hard to come by, even from



Jeremy Lee's
late-1930s
Gibson-made
Cromwell



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

Feedback

Gibson. It would be very interesting to know more about them and how many guitar companies made instruments during this time.

Jeremy Lee

Great idea, Jeremy. We did a Historic Hardware piece a few years ago about Martin's Depression-era all-mahogany acoustics, but there's a lot more to be said on the wider topic, and it's interesting to see that even top-end makers including Collings have dabbled in this area with guitars such as its Waterloo series of instruments, complete with deliberate, visible glue dobs inside to mimic the cheap-and-cheerful design and build of some of the guitars of that era. In the meantime, if the subject interests you, we recommend checking out Stay Gold Guitars of Santa Fe, New Mexico, somewhat of a specialist in such instruments and who holds a fascinating stock of guitars from the period in question.

JEFF'S BOOGIE

What a breath of fresh air to read about and see the great Jeff Beck's working guitars (issue 520). Covered in sweat and gunge, heavily modded and played within an inch of their lives, these are the 'players' grade' instruments, as some guitar snobs might say, with which some of the greatest jazz/rock ever was made. This will always be far more exciting to me than period-correct originals (or replicas, relined or not) whose every scratch, screw and scuff is pored over and imbued with a level of importance and value that confounds me. Given the chance (and money), I'd take an Oxblood over a Murphy Lab '59 replica any day of the week because an Oxblood is what real guitar playing is all about.

As a lefty who has necessarily spent much of his playing career modding guitars to his own requirements, I identify strongly with Jeff's approach. It may be a statement of the obvious, but guitars are, above all, made to be played!

Steve Painter

Amen to that, Steve. While we confess we also love a pristine guitar that seems to have stepped right out of the past, as much for its historical insights as anything else, they do say the ones that are the most beaten up are likely the ones that sound best – because they actually got played! And Jeff Beck was an absolutely tireless guitar-mechanic when in quest of the perfect sound and feel.

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INTERPOL

As the New Yorkers set out on the anniversary tour for 2004's classic second album, *Antics*, *Guitarist* met Daniel Kessler to hear about early rejection, the magic of hollowbodies, and why you won't catch him playing major chords

Words Henry Yates Photography Adam Gasson

At the turn of the millennium – and not for the first time in rock history – there was nowhere cooler than New York City. For the hipsters rifling vinyl crates in the East Village thrift stores, the essential soundtrack was *Is This It* by The Strokes, all trash-can guitars and curled-lip anthems howled through a glitchy microphone. But in the wee small hours, when the city fell to ink and neon, Interpol came out to play.

Debuting in 2002 with *Turn On The Bright Lights*, these four sharp-suited shadowmen made music that sounded like rain on a coffin lid, with frontman Paul Banks' sombre proclamations met by the desolate, delay-clad riffing of Daniel Kessler. But it was 2004's follow-up, *Antics*, that stands as arguably Interpol's greatest work to date, its stately melancholia and sudden explosions of violence casting an enduring spell in the age of throwaway landfill indie.

As such, two decades and seven albums later, the still-questioning band wound back the clock with the *Antics* anniversary tour. And when we visited the Bristol Beacon to meet Kessler – now an impeccably tailored 50 year old – we found him on the tightrope between past and present, debating how to balance his youthful gear choices and musicianship with the artist he has become.

What do you remember about the road to the *Antics* album?

"We'd been a band for five years. Nobody was really rushing to sign us. Plenty of record labels had rejected our demos, including the label we eventually signed to, Matador, who had rejected our first three demos. *Antics* really came on the heels of 2002's *Turn On The Bright Lights*: we never stopped between the two records. We were touring *Bright Lights*, then we got back to New York and went into a little rehearsal space in Brooklyn and we started writing *Antics*. A week or two later, the new songs were moving

forward. The idea was to write the next chapter without overthinking it. We were putting our heads in the sand, just trying to stay focused on the music and not how it resonated. I think *Antics* solidified that we weren't a one-hit – or one-album – band."

Antics sounded so different to the prevailing music scene of 2004. What did you want Interpol to be?

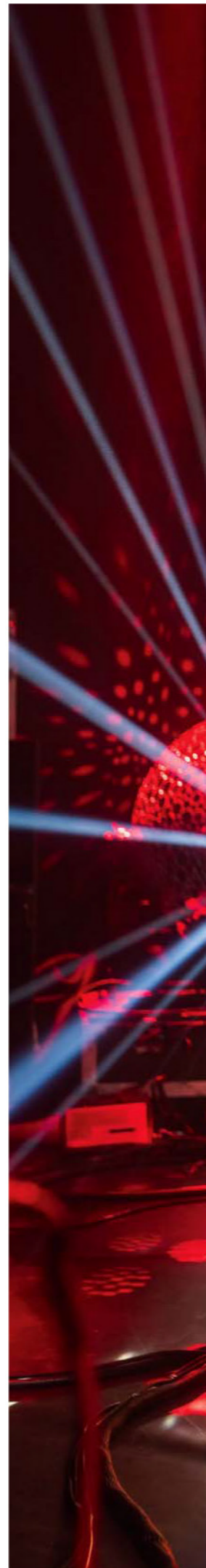
"With the first record, we'd maybe been lumped into certain musical categories. And it wasn't exactly a motivating factor – we're gonna write what we're gonna write, no matter what – but I think we wanted to show other sides of the band. Y'know, even starting off *Antics* with a song like *Next Exit* – I mean, you can't call that a 'post-punk' song. It's just not. It felt more like something from the 50s and 60s, or a song by Roy Orbison, who we were all gigantic fans of. I think these things had always been in the band, but *Antics* gave us the opportunity to dive deeper. For me, a song like *Take You On A Cruise* or *Not Even Jail* is a good illustration of that."

You once said that you're not "a big major chord person". Could Interpol ever write a genuinely happy song?

"I mean, *Slow Hands* is probably the closest thing that we have to a major-chord moment. I guess the short answer to that is – no. But I have no aversion to major chords, if they really attract you."

What was the atmosphere like in the studio when you were recording *Antics*?

"There was intensity, passion, decisions to be made. I think when you're making a record, it can go terribly right or terribly wrong. Sometimes there'll be a song you think is pretty straightforward and you'll be like, 'Why is this song having such a hard time expressing itself or being what it wants to be?' In the rehearsal space, all the parts were mapped out, but right here in the studio it's just not doing its thing."





“Then there are the songs you feel are going to be really difficult because they’re complex or have tempo changes – and it’s one take, there it is. And I think that’s a beautiful thing about music. You think something is going to happen according to the blueprint and it doesn’t. But beyond that, there’s always been a lot of laughter, easy banter, inside jokes. It’s important to have that. We’ve never been in a situation where we’ve made a record that’s been painful or had no chemistry.”

“You can make an impact with very little. I always felt like a songwriter on the guitar, rather than a guitarist per se” DANIEL KESSLER

You’ve always said you want your guitar parts to be supportive, rather than flashy. Where did that ego-free philosophy come from?

“Music has been a constant in my life. I shared a room with two older brothers who were really serious and passionate about it – certain bands were almost more like a religion. Through them, I got to hear really underground music when I was in single digits. But I think the biggest factor was living in Washington DC and being super into the underground music scene. A band like Fugazi changed my perspective. That band is easily the biggest influence on me. Listening to how

those two guitarists [Ian MacKaye and Guy Picciotto] worked together – it fascinated me that one of them could just hit the same note throughout the song, while the other guitar has a lot of movement, but that one note added so much dimension and depth and texture.

“I’m a minimalist. You can make an impact with very little. I always felt like a songwriter on the guitar, rather than a guitarist per se. Paul is a really good guitarist and he’s also constantly evolving as a player. I think he’s way more exploratory and expansive than I am. Paul played a lot of the lead on *Antics*. A lot of the solo guitar stuff would be him, and I’m more like the rhythmic stuff.”

Two of the best-loved songs from *Antics* are *Next Exit* and *Slow Hands*. What can you tell us about writing those?

“*Next Exit* is one of the songs we came up with together in our rehearsal space, years before *Antics*. We’d just got a new keyboard, so Carlos [Dengler, bass] was playing those chords. We originally wrote it to be an introduction when we went on stage, before we were even signed and still playing bills with five other bands; same thing with *Untitled* from the first album. They were these introductory pieces, like a palate cleanser to announce ourselves, then later we fleshed them out and made them into songs.

“I remember coming up with the riff for *Slow Hands* sitting on my couch with a classical guitar. I write most

1. Daniel Kessler was always drawn to semi- and hollowbody guitars: “It’s a timeless sound that you’ve heard since the 50s and 60s,” he says





2. Paul Banks' 1968 Gibson Les Paul Custom has been with him since high school, and he has no qualms about taking it out on the road with him

3. As the pedal connoisseur of the two guitarists, Paul experiments with various effects, his current favourite the EHX Canyon delay



"I'M FROM THE KURT COBAIN SCHOOL OF SOLOING!"

Interpol frontman, Paul Banks, on guitar interplay, goofing off in the studio and why he's no fan of the Fender Twin

What might we have seen if we'd visited the studio when you were making *Antics*?

"What you might expect. People that are serious about their craft but also kinda goofing around. And then, a lot of peering over [producer] Peter Katis's shoulder and wondering what the fuck he's doing – but also liking how it sounds."

Daniel told us you played most of the leads on *Antics*?

"I suppose that came from him being a songwriter on *Antics* and thereafter. He'd always bring in the chordal structure, so that's sort of like him being the rhythm player, and that meant, by default, I was the second contributor. But I think I've always been somewhere between a rhythm and lead player. I'm pretty minimalist with the leads; it's more about the interplay between us. There's a kindred spirit in our guitar parts. Y'know, I speak that language. Like in *Narc*, there's a great push-and-pull happening, a lot of interesting ways of filling in the gaps."

What makes a good solo for you?

"I don't think I have the agility on the neck to do a traditional guitar solo. I'm more from the Kurt Cobain school. But I think a lead has to contribute to and enhance the emotions of the moment. It has to do the job of the vocal. A great example of both of those things

happening is my favourite John Frusciante solo, *I Could Have Lied*, where he takes a solo, then the vocal comes back in and the solo continues – and it's even more powerful with the vocal on top."

Would you play your *Antics* guitar parts differently if you tracked them now?

"Not so much. I think it's hard to really look at things through a revisionist lens like that because I wouldn't change anybody else's parts, and I feel like my parts fit in very nicely with theirs. I could always do things that are busier or harder to play – but they wouldn't be necessary. There's nothing that's too overwrought there."

What was your setup for *Antics* in 2004, and how faithful is your rig for this tour?

"It's very similar. I've always had this '86 Les Paul Custom, the same one I bought in high school. If it's Interpol, that's what I'm playing. I don't mind bringing it on the road. At some point, the headstock broke and somebody fixed it. Now, it feels very sturdy. It's like they say: sometimes a fixed guitar can end up stronger than an unbroken guitar because of the way the glue works on the wood fibres."

"In the studio, I was mostly using a Deluxe Reverb. In the early days, I had a Pro Reverb and I just went through different Reverb amps – all except the Twin, which I hate.

But the Deluxe Reverb was the one I was using a lot on the early records, and on this tour I have a handwired reissue – and it's fucking dope."

How about your pedalboard, then and now?

"Back then, I had an amazing pedal called the Tube Works Real Tube, which had an actual tube in it. They're hard to find, but it was a very cool, authentic, warm, fuzzy, woolly distortion pedal, with great EQ so you could make it cutting or whumpy. I have one somewhere in my apartment, but it's like an artefact, so I don't use it now."

"I had digital delays like the Boss DD-5 – which is the same as today – but now I like using a tape replay emulating pedal [the Electro-Harmonix Mel9]. My best tone right now is an Electro-Harmonix Canyon delay, such a cool-sounding pedal. I have various distortions, like the MXR Classic Overdrive and the Greer Amps Gorilla Warfare. There's an MXR delay I like [Carbon Copy] and that's always on, almost like a reverb. I also have an Electro-Harmonix Pitch Fork. I used to use a Micro POG, but I like this more. So I use that for low-octave add-on in *Public Pervert*.

"I don't know if this sounds douche, but we have such a great guitar tech that I just kind of walk out, grab my guitar and it sounds great – and exactly like I expect it to sound!"



things on that guitar – I’ve been doing it since I was a teenager. I’ll watch films and just let my mind wander without thinking about what my hands are doing. My mother bought that classical at a local guitar shop and it’s crap, it’s terrible. But there’s something about it. It’s a little bit smaller around the body. It’s very comfortable. But it doesn’t sound good, so, to me, if an idea comes from that guitar, it really has to jump out at me. It has to demand my attention for me to want to build something around it. Sometimes, I feel like when you plug into a great setup with effects and reverb – it’s almost too comfortable.”

What was your amp setup for *Antics* back in 2004, and how faithful is your rig for the anniversary tour?

“It’s actually very faithful. For the first two records, we were recording with Peter Katis [producer] and he had an old Fender Princeton. I’d blend that with some other crazy amps, maybe a Gibson, maybe a [Carr] Skylark – and some other things that I haven’t seen before or since. I think that’s where I really developed a love for Princetons and, consequently, why I bought an old Princeton, a ’68, which I still have. When we were touring *Antics*, I was using Twins live, but for that record I really leaned on a Princeton. And now, I’m playing Princetons live, since Fender reissued them. So, if anything, my setup is more faithful to *Antics* now.”

What was your choice of guitar then, and what are you playing now?

“I used an Epiphone Casino for both *Turn On The Bright Lights* and *Antics*. For this tour, it’s not the exact same guitar – because I don’t have that any more. It was a terrible tour lesson. It was stolen out of a dressing room, because of bad security, in Vancouver. I was really heartbroken. But I’m a creature of habit and for the *Antics* shows I’m using a Casino from around the same time period, a ’67. So I have my Casino from ’67, my Gibson 330 from maybe ’68 – and I also have a 1960 Gretsch Anniversary. The output on that guitar is so low, you have to really dress it up with the right support in terms of pedals. When I plug it in, it doesn’t shine on its own. But the pedals really bring it out and I do think there’s something about that guitar and its age – it just has so much character.”

“What [continues] to motivate me is [that] there’s no greater feeling than when you come up with something new” DANIEL KESSLER

That hollow and semi-hollow body format seems to be a constant across your career. Why does it work so well for you?

“I think the reason I fell for Casinos – much like the Gretsch – is that it’s a timeless sound that you’ve heard since the 50s and 60s. There’s just something very sincere, genuine, emotional and vulnerable about that sound. And, for me, I think that sound has always been my calling. Even with Ennio Morricone’s Spaghetti Westerns – hearing those guitar sounds in films as a kid, I just wanted that. I can’t say for sure, but, to me, that sound sounded like a single-coil pickup. I’m not a humbucker person, I’m a single-coil guy. It’s like picking out a shirt and saying, ‘That’s my style.’”



4. For the band’s anniversary tour, this 1967 Epiphone Casino replaces the model Daniel used for the original *Antics* shows, which was stolen

5. A late-60s Gibson ES-330 joins the Casino, in addition to a 60s Gretsch Anniversary that comes to life with some select pedals

6. Daniel has stuck with the Boss DD-5 since recording *Antics* as it is integral to the album’s sound

7. Working together since the late 90s, Daniel and Paul continue to create an idiosyncratic “push-and-pull” between their guitar parts

Your sound is so atmospheric – how many pedals does it take to get you there?

“It’s actually pretty stripped. I probably could use a little more courage, to go to a guitar store and set up in a little room for a while and just go through 20 pedals and find new discoveries. I really like the Vox Valvetone, which is on *Antics*, and I still play that quite a bit. I’m still using a Boss DD-5 on this tour. As much as there’s amazing analogue stuff now – it’s definitely come a long way since we were starting out – there’s something about the DD-5 that’s very singular to that *Antics* sound. I don’t switch out pedals too often. There’s usually only one or two things that are different every few years. Whereas Paul is always discovering new pedals that I’ve never seen anywhere else. He’s not beholden to the past.”

You’ve said in the past that you have no interest in becoming a technically dazzling guitar player. So how would you like your playing to evolve from here?

“For me, it’s really about songwriting. And I’m not tired of that at all. If the well felt a little dry as far as finding new things, then I wouldn’t force it, I’d take a big break, I wouldn’t push things. But it doesn’t feel that way to me. The plan is to write and record the next Interpol album in 2025. So it’ll be a fun next few months of touring and finishing these *Antics* dates – but then I’m really looking forward to switching mindframes and really getting into the next chapter. I think what motivates me now is the same thing that motivated me as a teenager: there’s no greater feeling than when you come up with something new. Artistically, that’s the best thing, when you go, ‘This is the best thing we’ve ever done.’ And I feel like as artists – whether people agree or not – you should be the most excited about the last thing you did.” 



Antics (The Twentieth Anniversary Edition) is out now in digital and vinyl boxset formats via Matador Records

www.interpolnyc.com



BATTLE ROYAL

For 51 years, Queen's self-titled debut album was the cult curio of their fabled catalogue. Now, as the new *Queen I* boxset drags these lost songs into the daylight, Brian May tells us about poverty, parental disapproval, the Red Special's first run-out – and the perils of playing through Jimi's stack

Words Henry Yates Photo David Tan/Shinko Music/Getty Images

Half a century later, when discussing the road to Queen's self-titled 1973 debut album with Brian May, it's necessary to suspend your disbelief. Imagine, if you can, a time when the classic line-up of May, Freddie Mercury, John Deacon and Roger Taylor were not multi-platinum national treasures. A time, in fact, when they were penniless nobodies, typically found bottom of the bill at a sweatbox club, being ushered from record label offices or facing tough questions from parents convinced these four bright boys were burning their futures for an impossible dream.

Appearing on our Zoom call in a halo of grey curls, May can smile about it now, knowing what lay ahead. In spring '72, the

band cut their first chink in the industry's formerly impenetrable armour as they were granted nocturnal recording sessions at the famed Trident Studios. And with precisely nothing to lose, the music flooded out, with the visceral gallop of *Keep Yourself Alive* leading them across the gamut of soul-metal (*Doing Alright*), proto-prog (*My Fairy King*), acoustic percussive tapping (*The Night Comes Down*), even flashes of flamenco (*Great King Rat*).

The first Queen record is a head-scratcher, though. Selling modestly on release, for 51 years, it has been the closest thing this all-conquering band had to a curio, its tracklisting unfamiliar to fans who know every note of, say, *A Night At The Opera* or *The Works*. In that same period, the band, too, had an uneasy

relationship with their opening gambit, frustrated by the album's dry, distant sound. It's a thorn plucked in style, however, by the new *Queen I* boxset: a paving slab-sized vinyl/CD package whose remastered and expanded treatment finally reveals these songs as sunken treasures to rank among the band's very best.

If there is one final, jarring aspect of discussing May's distant youth, it is the 77-year-old's recent brush with mortality. In late August of 2024, the guitarist was set to conduct this interview when he suffered a minor stroke that left him temporarily unable to use his left arm. With customary kindness, May rescheduled when his health mercifully returned, and our first question had to be how this great friend of the magazine is bearing up.



Your stroke must have been frightening. Did you wonder whether you'd play guitar again – or was that the least of your worries at the time?

"It went through my mind. When I suddenly couldn't control this left arm, it was quite scary. I had no idea what was going on. I phoned my doctor and she said, 'Okay, I think you're having a minor stroke. Dial 999, get in the ambulance and I'll see you there.' But even at the worst time, although I couldn't control where the arm was, I could control my fingers. So I thought, 'I'm probably not really in danger.' I'm all right now. I'm just taking it slow."

The first Queen album is largely a story of struggle, isn't it?

"It was very tough. And I sometimes wonder if that helped to shape us because everything was a fight. It was a fight to get into a studio. It was a fight to get our own way – and we didn't, entirely, because we were just boys and everyone else was more powerful. It was a fight to get it released – and then it got completely slaughtered by the music press. But later I learned we weren't the only people being hit by those destructive arrows. In fact, that's one thing that

cheered me up. I remember they gave Led Zeppelin a bad review, and I just thought, 'Well, Jesus Christ, if they don't understand that [throws up his hands]...'"

Likewise, every label rejected your demo recorded at De Lane Lea Studios?

"Nobody bit. Not one record company wanted it. Some of them said, 'Come back in a few years, we'll talk to you then.' Again, it strengthens your resolve. You look inside yourself and you think, 'No, actually, I do believe in this.' Very early on, as soon as we had John, we really felt we had the power."

Perhaps it's no surprise your father didn't approve of your musical career. But could he really complain, given that he helped you build the Red Special?

"Well, you wouldn't think he could complain – but he did! He liked helping me with my hobby, but when the hobby became my career, he was very unhappy. I think he also felt he'd sacrificed a lot of his own life to enable me to take my education so far. Me giving that up was the worst thing he could imagine. So it was hard for him. It took a long time to sort that out. It only got sorted when

1. Pictured here performing in November of 1973, Brian and the band had to hold their nerve to get as far as the debut album in the face of sceptics of their unique sound

I flew him to Madison Square Garden on Concorde, sat him down and said, 'Okay dad, what do you think?' A great moment. I think we all need that approval from our parents, don't we?"

The early 70s was the golden era of blues-rock. And Queen were definitely not that.

"There were a lot of people staring at their feet on stage. I don't know if that made it easier or harder to break through. We just knew what we wanted to be. It was very arrogant of us, but we had big dreams. We wanted to give people the experience we'd felt watching The Who at Regent Street

"I learned [guitar] quickly, and maybe you do when you've got that amount of passion and hunger in your body" **BRIAN MAY**

Polytechnic. They were an hour late, and when they finally got on stage, it was like an earthquake. We wanted to give people that same intake of breath. The sound, the lights, the performance, the clothing, the drama – give them everything we had. And, yes, it was very different from the mood of the day. It also wasn't glam-rock. That was going on at the same time and it's very much about the glitter or whatever. Which we weren't."

As a live band, could you have competed with Black Sabbath or Led Zeppelin?

"Well, we had to. There's videos from the early days and I think we were pretty good. Very early on, we arrived at this view that being a live act was not the same as the studio. Actually, it was simpler because there's only four of us on stage and no overdubs. It took me a long time to feel confident about being the only guitar on stage. I always felt like I needed a rhythm guitar. But, gradually, I got into this habit of playing lead and rhythm at the same time – and I realised that nobody noticed the lack of it. So we had enough. You could fashion that live performance to make people feel they'd heard an orchestra."



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



2

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

It was while recording Queen's demo that you first tracked a three-part solo. How did that feel?

"Amazing. That was in my head long before I could actually make it happen. It goes right back to hearing Jeff Beck on *Hi Ho Silver Lining*, where he double-tracks his lead. I never asked him about it, but he goes into a two-part harmony – probably accidentally – halfway through. And I realised it would be possible to build up whole panoramas of orchestral sounds but with guitars. So I had this vision that the solo for *Keep Yourself Alive* could be this three-part sequence. But to actually make it happen was a great moment.

"Okay, there was one predecessor, when I did a two-part harmony on *Earth*, a single we did as *Smile*. But the three-part harmony is the big deal. Because things suddenly get colourful if you use three parts in creative ways.

"[Making the first album] was tough. I wonder if that helped shape us because everything was a fight" BRIAN MAY

2. Queen, pictured here in 1973, were flamboyant harlequins in a rock scene dominated by blues rockers in jeans and tees. They never lost their ability to use theatrical flair to expand their musical presence, and it soon became an integral part of their success

Not just parallel 3rds and 5ths, which is an easy trap to fall into; I never wanted to do that. I always wanted the tensions and colours of dissonance and counterpoint. Everything that an orchestral arranger needs to know, you have to get in your head if you're going to do something that endures."

Eventually, the sessions proper began at Trident. How was the atmosphere?

"We were pretty jolly. This was an amazing opportunity, and we were all leaving our supposed careers behind. In a sense, we were aware we were leaving our families and friends behind as well. Because once you put

a foot on that road, it takes you a long way from everything you know. But we had each other and our belief that we were doing something special that nobody else could do. We had that insane optimism.

"Through the years, there's been times when there was tension from trying to paint on the same canvas. You're feeling sidelined, your baby is being neglected or whatever. But in the case of the first album, that hasn't happened yet. We're just thrilled to be there. So on the 'Sessions' CD in this boxset, you hear snatches of us baiting each other, having a laugh. But you can also tell we're serious about what we're doing. We get frustrated when it's not right, when we can't get the blend or things aren't in time. Making that album was an amazing exploratory process. It's like giving a sculptor his first bit of clay and saying, 'Here you go.'"

“The Red Special has a very wide sound. But hearing it back through the speakers was thrilling... We wanted it to sing”

BRIAN MAY

The unique guitar that helped Brian May forge an inimitable sound: his homemade Red Special. Though unconventional, its distinctive sound became his sonic calling card



Could you immediately relax as a studio player or did that take time?

“There’s a definite learning process. I remember finding that with the backing tracks you could immerse yourself and let go fairly quickly. Overdubbing is actually harder to keep the spontaneity. Because you’re standing there

“Making that album was an amazing exploratory process. It’s like giving a sculptor his first bit of clay” BRIAN MAY

with your headphones on. Your guitar is revved up. And you’re waiting for your moment. It feels unnatural. But I got into this little trick where I fooled myself into thinking I was playing live, and when the moment hit, I was on stage and there were people out there watching.”

How would you describe yourself as a guitarist back then?

“I’m surprised, looking back, how complete I was. I don’t think I can play that much better now than I could then. It had all happened in the teenage years. It’s quite a hothouse, where I came from. Richmond and Twickenham is where The Yardbirds and Rolling Stones came from. I had lots of mates to play with and there was fierce competition. You know, ‘Have you heard this latest solo? How did Hank Marvin do that? Can you do that?’ So I learned quickly, and maybe you do when you’ve got that amount of passion and hunger in your body.”

Would you play anything differently if you were tracking that debut album now?

“Actually, no. We’re rebuilding the sound on the boxset. But we didn’t feel the urge to change any of the performances. It would be different, but it wouldn’t necessarily be better. I honestly wouldn’t change a note – and we didn’t.”

That was the first run-out for your homemade Red Special. Wasn’t there pressure to use a standard production model?
“Not at the time. I remember,

much later, when we did *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, I said, ‘I want a James Burton atmosphere on the solo, so I’m going to make my guitar sound like a Telecaster.’ And the producer, Reinhold Mack, who’s a dour old sod, said, ‘Well, why don’t you just play one?’ But that’s probably the only time in my whole career when I’ve given way.

“The Red Special held up surprisingly well. I did have doubts in the early days because I knew it sounded different from what everybody else was using. It was different from a Strat:

it’s warmer. It’s different from a Gibson: it’s got more top-end. It’s got a very wide sound. But hearing it back through the speakers was thrilling. Everyone had told us, ‘Nah, it’s never going to work.’ But hearing that stuff coming back, we thought, ‘We can conquer the world.’ We weren’t a modest lot [laughs]. But that self-belief has to be there. It has to be the source of your power.

“You know, the Red Special was designed to make that kind of noise. We wanted it to sing. We wanted it to feed back. That’s why it’s got the acoustic pockets in the



Remastered to reveal the full glory of the original – the expansive new boxset edition of *Queen I*



BOXING CLEVER

Brian May on the newly remastered and expanded *Queen I* boxset

“Most of all, with the new *Queen I* boxset, I get a feeling of completeness. You know, the idea that you’ve done everything you could possibly do and now you can leave it to posterity. There’s no stone that’s been left unturned in making it the best that it can possibly be, the very best version of itself. I am a perfectionist. I kind of fight it some of the time because it can sometimes get in the way. But I love to do things to the max, the best they can possibly be done.

“I think in all of our minds – and that includes Freddie – we always felt this first album was... Yes, we were proud of it, but we didn’t like the way it actually sounded, particularly the drums. We liked the performances, we liked the songs, but as far as the actual sounds, it didn’t feel like we were in the room with you, and that’s what we always

wanted, for it to sound like the live situation. So now we were able to achieve that, by various dodgy means! Again, we’ve altered the guitar sound on the *Queen I* boxset and made it more like how I would record it these days.

“My favourite element of all, I suppose, is the vinyl. Because it’s a complete revisit. And to open the box and see that beautiful, pristine vinyl and know that, through the digital medium, we’ve been able to restore it to what we wanted it to be originally – that’s a great feeling. I’m talking sound-wise but also the cover itself – I was the original culprit and I made that with my scalpel and glue and a piece of board. It’s all been updated to the point where we’re completely proud of it.”

The *Queen I: Super Deluxe Edition* Boxset is available now on EMI. For details, see <https://queenonlinestore.com>



PHOTO BY GUISBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

body. I still don't know if it was all thanks to our design or luck, but it just made that sound. Still does."

Were the other elements of your classic rig – the AC30 and Dallas Rangemaster treble booster – already in place?

"Yes. That was there from the moment I saw Rory Gallagher and managed to stay behind at The Marquee when everyone had gone home. I asked him, 'Rory, how do you get that sound?' And he said, 'Well, it's easy, I have the AC30 and this little box, and I turn it up and it sings for me.' The next day, I went to a guitar shop and found two secondhand AC30s for £30 each. I found a treble booster. And that did it. I plugged in with my guitar, turned all the way up and it just melted my stomach. That's my sound. And it's different from Rory's. His is much more bright."

You came up in the era of the Marshall stack. Did that never call to you?

"It did – but it was a false call! I remember, we played one show at Olympia. Top of the bill was Jimi Hendrix and everybody

***"I plugged in with my guitar, turned all the way up and it just melted my stomach. That's my sound"* BRIAN MAY**

essentially played through the same gear. So I plugged into a Marshall stack with my guitar and treble booster. Turned it all the way up – and it sounded so awful. I could hardly play. I didn't know what to do. It sounded like an angry wasp. It didn't have any depth or articulation, I couldn't play chords. It was a really hard experience for me.

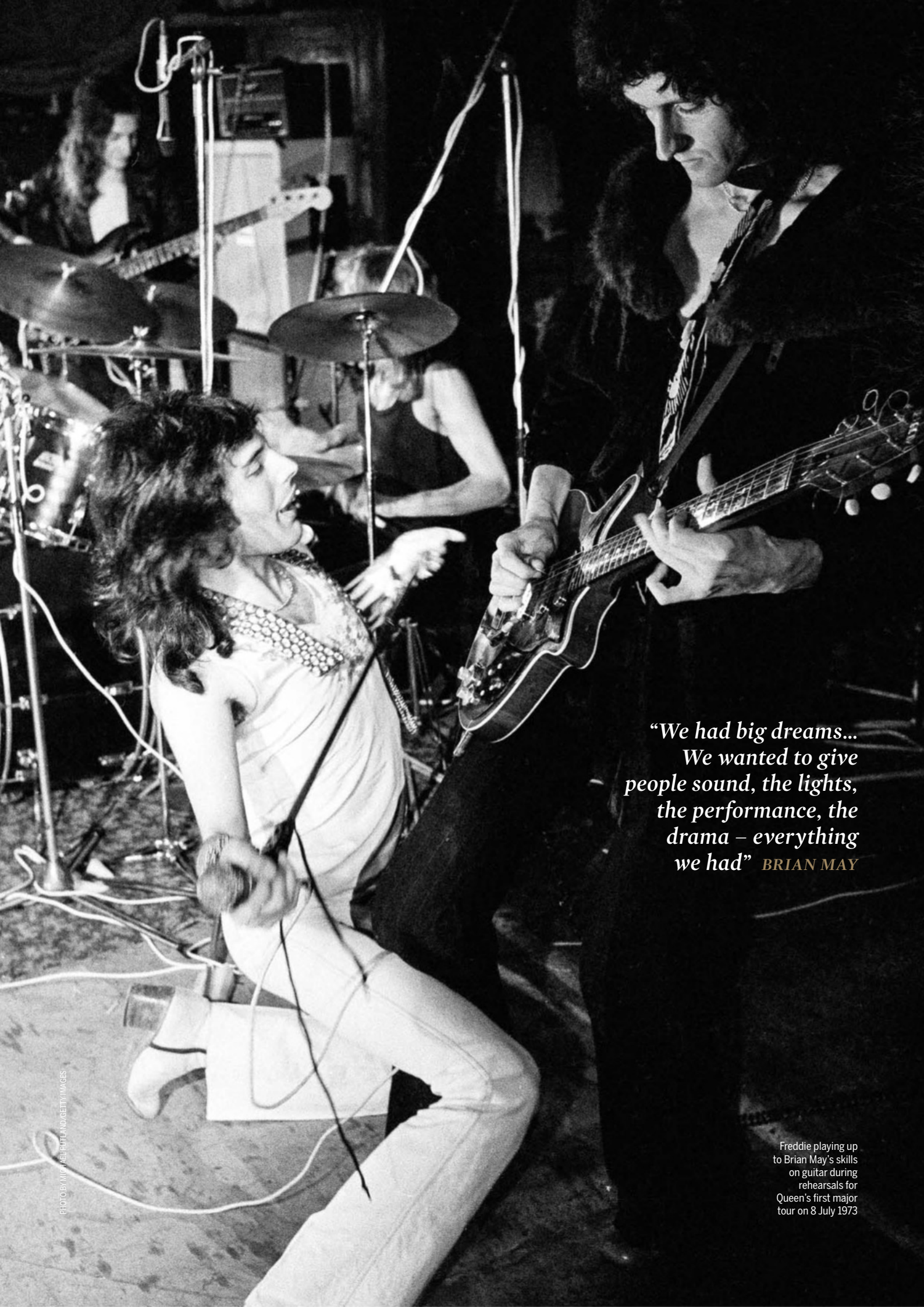
"After we'd played, I stayed behind backstage and I looked through between the amps as Jimi came on stage, plugged into that same amp – and it sounded like cataclysm. I think he had some kind of voodoo magic, but he made that amp sound like an orchestra. And for me, it just didn't work. So I never got on with Marshalls. I knew Jim Marshall and got on with him very well, but I could never quite tell him, 'Sorry, I can't quite get to grips with your amps...'"

3. A rare shot of Brian May posing with a Fender Stratocaster for a TV show in the Netherlands in November 1974. He soon found that staples of 70s rock tone such as Marshall amps didn't suit his harmonically rich, articulate sound, while on the guitar side the Red Special was, besides an occasional expedient switch to an alternative, completely central to his sound

How did Roy Thomas Baker record your guitars?

"Roy was a brilliant technician, but his head was in a completely different place from us. He'd been recording things like *Get It On*, when he'd plugged Marc Bolan's guitar directly into the desk. So it had no ambience whatsoever. You have no natural amp sound, no compression or smooth distortion. All you have is the direct sound of the guitar, and if you turn it up a lot, it distorts the electronics in the desk – which is a nasty sound, I would say.

"So this was the complete opposite of the way I wanted my guitar to be recorded. I wanted it to have the sound of the amp and the room. So we had a bit of a fight. To be fair, Roy and I had a long relationship where we evolved really good ways of recording guitars. But in those days, it was such a rush. And Roy was under pressure to get that 'Trident sound', which was very clean, guitars all tight – and it wasn't what we wanted, but that's what we got because of pressure from above. The Sheffield brothers [Norman and Barry]



*“We had big dreams...
We wanted to give
people sound, the lights,
the performance, the
drama – everything
we had”* **BRIAN MAY**

Freddie playing up
to Brian May's skills
on guitar during
rehearsals for
Queen's first major
tour on 8 July 1973



PHOTO BY BOJAN HOHNJEK © MIRACLE PRODUCTIONS LLP

wanted it to sound like an album that had the signature sound of Trident Studios. And we wanted to sound like Queen.”

What are your own favourite guitar moments?

“I love *My Fairy King*. We were experimenting with backwards stuff and I used to get the guys to turn the tape over and give me a cassette I could take home, so I was ready when we came into the studio. *Keep Yourself Alive* was supposed to be ironic, a reaction to the idea that life was just about keeping yourself alive. But I discovered it’s hard to be ironic in a rock song. It came out sounding jolly. And in the end I didn’t fight it because people got a lift from it, so why not?”

“That riff goes all the way back. I remember playing it on acoustic at parties, late at night, when people are sitting around. And I remember being surprised that people were impressed because I was a loner and didn’t very often play to people. I remember everyone surrounding me going, ‘Wow, we’ve never seen that before.’”

“You could fashion that [rhythm and lead guitar] performance to make people feel they’d heard an orchestra” **BRIAN MAY**

What’s happening at the start of *The Night Comes Down*?

“That was played on a very unorthodox guitar. It’s a little acoustic that had belonged to my best friend at school, Dave Dilloway, who drilled holes all over it to put pickups on. So it looked a mess. I put my own bridge on and made it lower and lower until eventually the strings were buzzing on the frets. But I thought, ‘Well, I actually like this, it sounds like a sitar.’ So I designed the bridge with all sorts of junk, like needles and pins, to make each string buzz. It’s a guitar that no-one else would take seriously, but it made that particular noise on *The Night Comes Down*. I’m tapping it and making it buzz, and John is playing in unison with me. When it comes to the chorus, that’s me doing Mantovani’s strings with guitars.”

4. Brian’s use of acoustic guitars has been a little more diverse than his electric guitars over the years – here, he is pictured with a custom Gibson J-200 12-string while performing with Queen + Adam Lambert in Baltimore in October of 2023. On *Queen I*, the most distinctive acoustic sound was a guitar that belonged to one of May’s school friends

Big rockstars always say the most exciting moment is that first breakthrough. Is that how *Queen I* felt?

“Yes. And thanks for calling me a big rockstar. I’m still a kid! I haven’t changed since those days. But it’s a good question. And the moment we felt it was that first Imperial College gig after the album was released. I’d been on the entertainments committee at Imperial College. We booked Hendrix to play in that big Union Hall, and I remember thinking, if we ever did anything like that, it would be incredible.”

“Three years later, we’d booked it out, and from being a band that everybody walked past, suddenly we had an audience who actually wanted to hear what we did. Instead of people who grudgingly listened but really they’d rather hear us play covers – they were shouting out for our songs. That was an extraordinary moment. I remember that thought in my head: ‘There is a boulder rolling here...’” 

For the latest news from Brian May, see his website at <https://brianmay.com>

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PHOTO: GIBSON



W O M A N — I N — B L A C K

Her surname precedes her (whether she likes it or not). But as Gibson releases a limited-edition recreation of her fabled father's SJ-200 – alongside her new J-185 – Rosanne Cash tells us she's comfortable in her skin and proud of her own legacy

Words Henry Yates

Glance at them under the lights and there's no mistaking the rock 'n' roll dynasty behind Gibson's latest signature models. Even if you never saw Johnny Cash driving his beloved brimstone SJ-200 back in the 1950s, it's hard to miss the Man In Black's moniker snaking up the neck of this recreation in inch-high mother-of-pearl letters. Meanwhile, for the avoidance of doubt, the J-185 released in tandem also salutes country's first family with a stern upper-case 'CASH' punched into the pickguard.

Decades back, when she was starting out as a young songwriter, and ambivalent about her father's long shadow, you sense Rosanne Cash might not have signed off on such a family affair. Now, as a formidable artist in her own right, and with four Grammy awards and a fistful of chart-topping singles, the 69-year-old tells us she was glad to partner with Gibson's master craftspeople and join the dots between her past, present and future.

How did it feel to recreate your dad's famous Gibson SJ-200 model?

"Well, in the beginning, I thought, 'Do I really want to do that?' You know, did it seem like encroachment on something that was iconic? And then my husband John [Leventhal] and I talked about it, and I said, 'In this point in my life, it's not like I'm a kid and just starting out and trying to co-opt something.' It just made sense. My dad and I are the only father and daughter in the Nashville Songwriters Hall Of Fame. And I thought, 'Well, this is something like that.' The generations go on, and we have a family business."

Was the original SJ-200 a familiar sight around the house as a kid?

"Oh yeah. It was like, 'Oh, that's my dad.' That guitar is inseparable from my idea of who my father is. I think the original is in the Country Music Hall Of Fame And Museum now."

Would Johnny typically play acoustic more than electric at home?

“Oh my God, yeah. My dad never played electric. And he had no sense of being territorial about his guitars when we were kids. You were always welcome to play his guitars. In fact, there’s a tradition in country music where an older musician – in order to give respect to a younger musician – would give them his guitar. So I remember my dad gave Bob Dylan one of his guitars.”

Back in the day, Johnny came up with that SJ-200 pickguard himself. Was he more of a designer than most people realise?

“That’s interesting. He did have an eye for design. He loved to take photographs and do crazy little drawings. His visual sense was well developed and it really matched him, with the long jacket he wore. He was very conscious of that.”

Are you pleased with your new signature J-185?

“Really pleased. John and I, we went back and forth. Even with the pickguard. That was really important to me. The pickguard on my dad’s Gibson has sharper edges, it’s a little angular – and I really didn’t want that. I wanted this to be more like waves. I thought having curves for the pickguard would be more feminine. That’s obviously just the most cosmetic thing. The J-185, it was a really good size and shape for me. It’s not as big as my dad’s guitar, and it’s not as visually assertive, you know? My dad’s guitar, it’s dramatic and it comes towards you. I just wanted something more subtle all around.”

It’s a jumbo shape, but has a shallower body depth. Why did that appeal?

“Because I’m only 5ft4in [laughs].”

Were you closely involved in choosing the SlimTaper neck profile?

“Yes, but John had a lot of suggestions. He’s a great musician and knows the provenance of guitars, and the

1. Gibson’s Johnny Cash SJ-200 (left) honours two models made for Cash in the late 50s, while the J-185 was built to Rosanne Cash’s specifications. Both models are limited to 100 pieces

“My dad’s guitar, it’s dramatic and it comes towards you. I just wanted something more subtle all around”

Are you the kind of musician who doesn’t worry so much about nuts and bolts but knows a good guitar when you hear and feel it?

“Yeah, I’m definitely more intuitive. I don’t have the technical knowledge that John has – or Peter and Robi – but I have my Martin signature model, so I knew the size that suited me, and the feel of it.

“When you talk about all of this, you go back and forth, and then the guitar is actually made and it comes and you open the case – and it’s so beautiful. Then you’re so worried about how it’s going to sound because you never know if the sound and appearance are going to match. But then it sounded so great. I was so happy to hear it.”

Have you played your J-185 on stage yet?

“Oh yeah, and it was fantastic. My sound man loves how it sounds out front. The musicians I play with – particularly Kevin Barry, the other guitar player in my band, he’s just obsessed with it. It just fits, you know? It’s just that feeling of it fitting me exactly. It’s a really well-balanced sound. It can cut through and yet it’s really warm, and that’s a hard trick to pull off.”

2. Rosanne’s design choices were made to fit her style and comfort, with a SlimTaper neck profile and “more feminine” aesthetics such as the rounded-edged pickguard

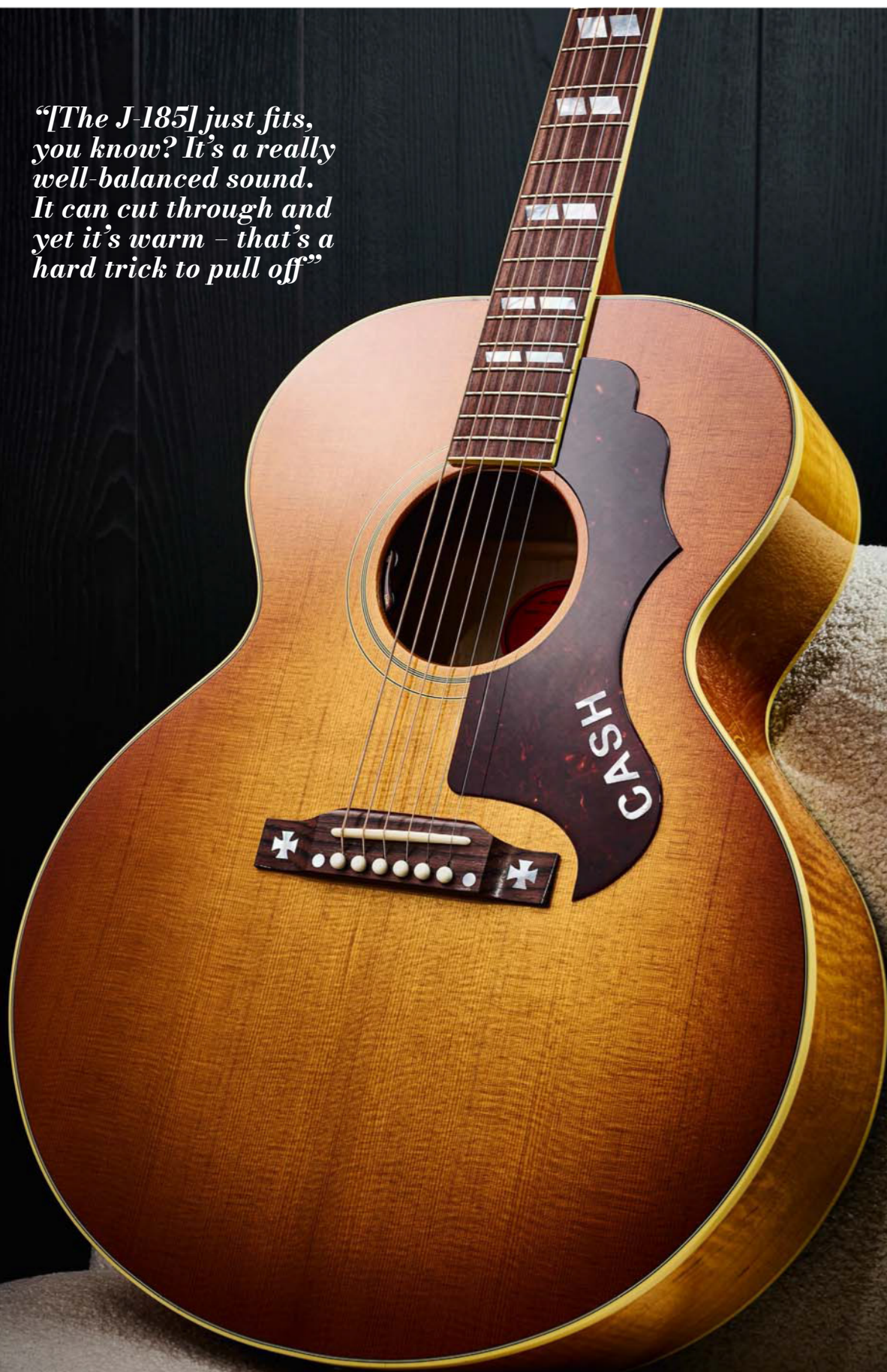
PHOTO: GIBSON

**The pickguard is based on the name tag on your father’s military uniform, isn’t it?**

“I’ll tell you that story. When my dad died, I inherited his little antique desk that was in his office. I went through the drawers and there was this white patch, a little bigger than a credit card, and sewn into it was the name ‘CASH’. It had been on his Air Force uniform and he’d saved it for all these decades, which was so touching. So I took the patch to a tailor, who sewed it on my strap and I used that for years.

“But one night, I had a dream that I showed up at the gig and somebody had taken the strap. I woke up shaking, I was so alarmed. I went to soundcheck that day and told my soundman, ‘I have to take this strap off the road.’ And he said, ‘Oh thank God, I worry about it all the time.’ So then, when we were designing the new guitar, Robi and Peter wanted to put ‘Cash’ on there somewhere. Not nearly as big as on my dad’s fretboard – I didn’t want it like that. But they wanted to subtly put my name in. We were talking about fonts, and I said, ‘Well, the one that makes the most sense to me is the one on the strap.’ So I took a lot of pictures and they copied the font as close as they could – and that’s what they put on the pickguard.”

*"[The J-185] just fits,
you know? It's a really
well-balanced sound.
It can cut through and
yet it's warm – that's a
hard trick to pull off"*



Do you believe that guitars have songs in them?

“Well, this J-185 is new – so it’s gonna have my songs in it. I do think that sometimes when you get an older guitar, whoever played it before, there’s something of that person in there and the songs they wrote on it. There’s something very mystical about that.”

What was it about the acoustic guitar that called to you as a teenager? What could it do that the electric guitar couldn’t?

“I think I just liked the organic feel and warmth of it. And the gentleness, depending on how you play. I’m a huge rock ‘n’ roll fan, too, so Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing electric guitar was one of the greatest things ever for me. I even tried it when I was young and starting out. But I was never an electric guitar player.”

But the acoustic could be dangerous in the right hands, too, couldn’t it?

“Oh yeah – ‘this machine kills fascists’, you know?”

Were the songs from your classic 1993 album, *The Wheel*, written on acoustic?

“Oh yeah, all on acoustic, maybe a couple on piano. There’s no rhyme or reason to when my songs come. And I think if there was, then it wouldn’t be songwriting, it wouldn’t be a creative act; it would be something else that had a formula. I mean, there are ways to get yourself in the space of writing and thinking out structures of songs. Like with *The Killing Fields*, I knew what I wanted to write about, I knew I wanted it to be in the structure of an Appalachian narrative ballad, with no choruses. And I knew what the first verse was. Then it was a matter of months of turning it over in my head, sitting down with it, or getting an idea while I’m taking a walk.”

Is it too early to ask about your solo album due later in 2025 – and if your J-185 will be part of those sessions?

“It will be involved. And it’s not too early, although we’re not done yet. But I do find the songs that John and I are writing together – and the songs that I’m writing on my own – have a more acoustic feel to them. They’re kind of grounded in a dark folk sensibility and swampy, too.”

How different were you and your father as players?

“I can play barre chords and my dad couldn’t. And you know what’s interesting is that my dad had a strum that was identifiably his, and in the early days he would put a matchbook cover under the strings to get that kind of deadened strum. But when I learned to play, I learned from the Carter women. So my strum style is more of a Carter scratch than a straight strum like my dad had.”

Was there a moment you realised he was more than just your dad?

“No, I always knew he was famous. Because he was famous by the time I was conscious of that kind of thing. One of my earliest memories is of a television show coming to our house. It was called *Here’s Hollywood*. They came to our house to film, and me and my sisters had to sit carefully on the sofa in our dresses, and I thought, ‘This is awful, I hate this. I don’t want

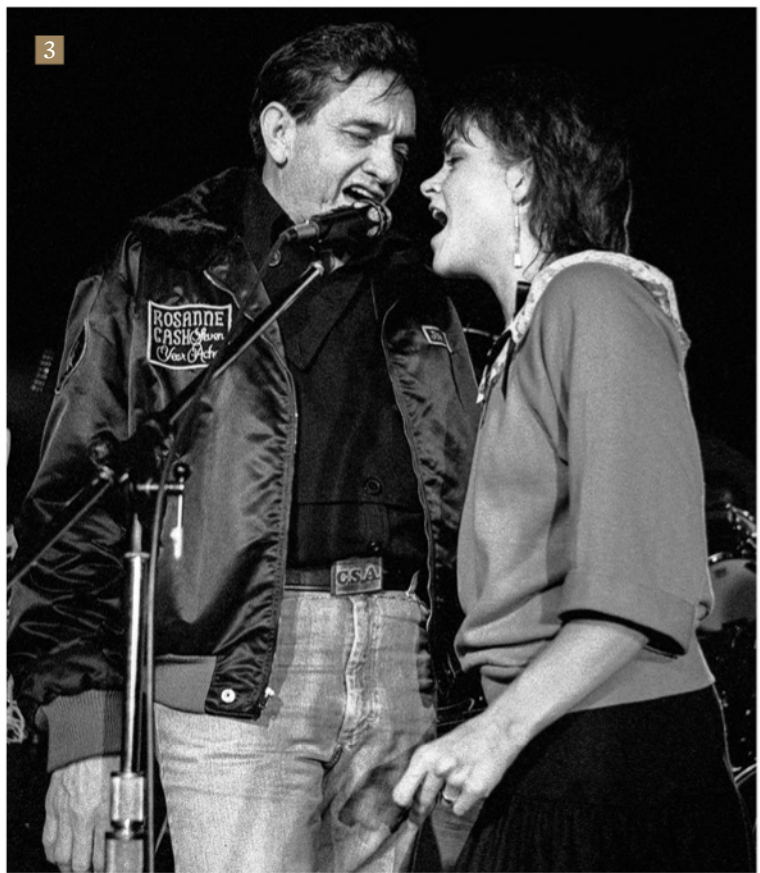


PHOTO BY RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES

anything to do with this.’ So I was always conscious that he was part of the world, that people knew who he was. And I resented that at the beginning – I think like any child would.”

Was there ever a thought of doing something else with your life, or was the call of music just too strong?

“Oh no, I thought of doing many other things. I wanted to be an archaeologist, a librarian, a nurse. I wanted to write novels. I avoided music for a long time. But then I started writing poetry when I was in my early teens, and then I wanted to put the poems to music, so I was a songwriter first.”

“When I learned to play, I learned from the Carter women. So my strum style is more of a Carter scratch...”

Has that famous surname opened doors, or have you worked twice as hard for the success you’ve achieved?

“Well, in some ways, yes. It was a big shadow to crawl out of. I felt in the beginning like, ‘Don’t ask me about my dad. I’m me. I’m *sui generis*’ – which, of course, nobody is. And then it took me a while to grow into an acceptance of my own legacy and what my dad has given me. I wouldn’t say ‘curse’. But it’s a blessing and an obstacle at the same time.” **G**

3. Rosanne with her father, Johnny Cash, at The Moon Shadow Saloon in Atlanta, Georgia, 1982



Rosanne Cash: *The Essential Collection* is available now on Rumblestrip Records. For more on the new Gibson SJ-200 and J-185, visit www.gibson.com www.rosannecash.com



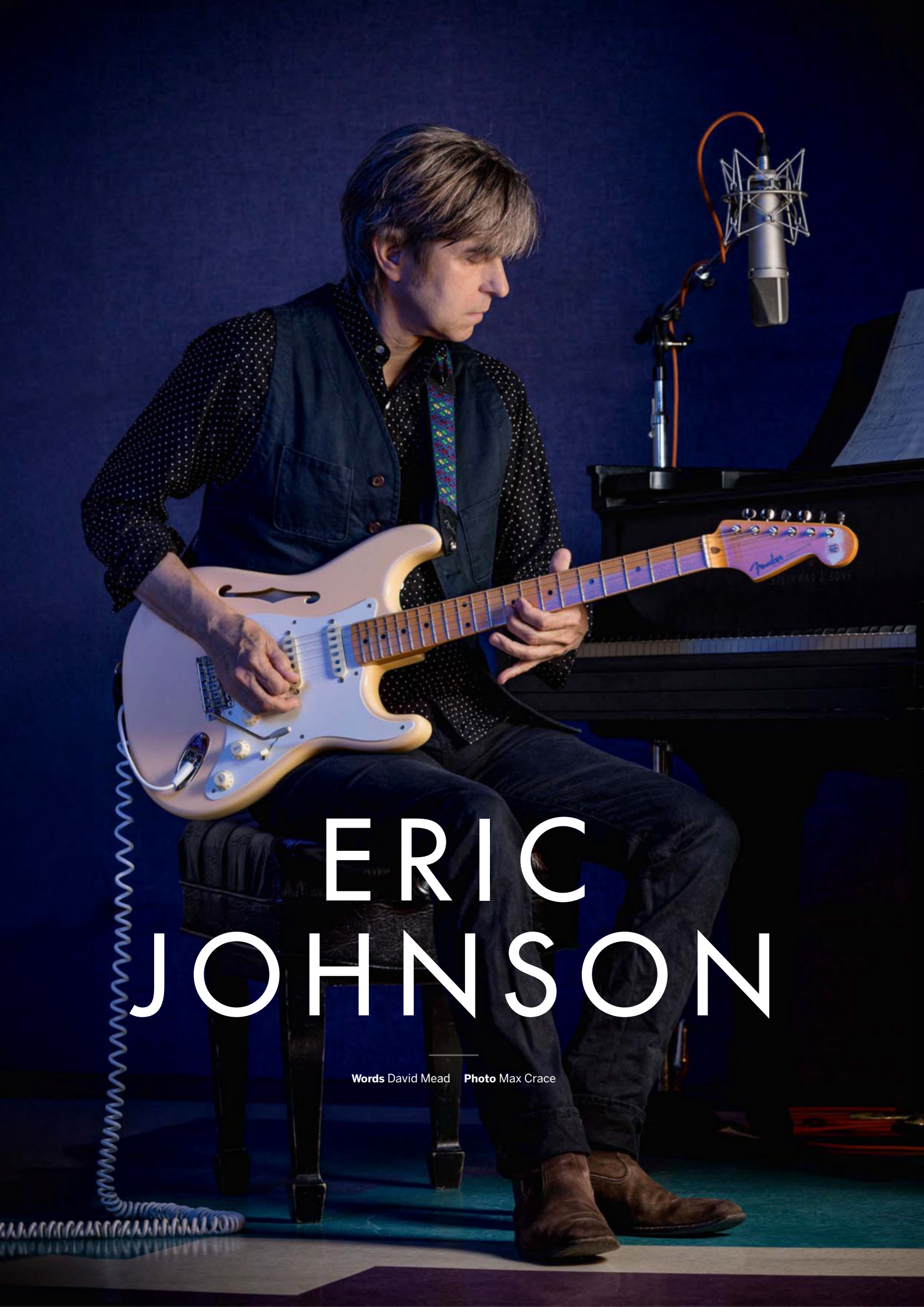
4. The mother-of-pearl fretboard inlay and angular pickguard (shown above) of the SJ-200 are both features from the two models that inspired this new tribute

5. The 'CASH' patch sewn into the J-185's strap is a homage to Johnny's Air Force uniform name tag, which Rosanne discovered after his death. It's also recreated on the pickguard (shown above)

4

5



A full-page photograph of Eric Johnson sitting on a stool, playing a white Fender Telecaster guitar. He is wearing a dark vest over a patterned shirt and dark jeans. A vintage-style microphone is positioned to his right, and a Steinway & Sons piano is partially visible in the background. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue and purple hue. The guitar's headstock features the Fender logo and 'STEINWAY & SONS' text.

ERIC JOHNSON

Words David Mead Photo Max Crace



PHOTO BY JEN ROSENSTEIN

A NEW LIVE ALBUM FEATURING **STEVE VAI, ERIC JOHNSON** AND **JOE SATRIANI** DOCUMENTS A REUNION FOR THE MEMBERS OF **THE ORIGINAL G3 TOUR** THAT THUNDERED INTO THE WORLD BACK IN 1996. WE CHECK IN WITH ONE THIRD OF THE TRIUMVIRATE TO FIND OUT MORE

In the past, G3 tours have found many esteemed masters of shred take to the stage to thrill audiences worldwide. Players such as Steve Morse, Paul Gilbert, Yngwie Malmsteen, Uli Jon Roth and many more have sent flurries of 32nd notes out into the ether in the name of fretboard finesse. But way back in the mid-90s it was Joe Satriani, Steve Vai and Eric Johnson who started the G3 ball rolling. Last year, the three reassembled for a sell-out tour that has resulted in the album *G3 Reunion Live*, restating their preeminent position in guitar's hall of fame.

You could say that if members of this particular G3 incarnation were The Beatles, then Eric Johnson would almost certainly go down in history as being The Quiet One. Never one to entertain unnecessary flamboyance in his performance, the way Eric channels his virtuosity is positively laid-back and deeply melodic. When we settled down for our Zoom interview and asked what it was like to return to the G3 format, Eric was – like his playing – concise and to the point: “Oh, it was pretty amazing. A nice experience, kind of like picking up where we left off, I guess...”

"There's something really wonderful about the blues guitar idiom... It gives a little bit of soulfulness, no matter what kind of music you end up playing"

The new live album features a complete set from each of the three G3 guitarists, topped off with an all-aboard frenzied jam session at its conclusion

The success of the recent G3 tour would indicate that there is still an audience for what is, to a large extent, instrumental guitar music.

“I think that there are people that always want to learn more about the instrument, or learn how to push the envelope, whether that’s going to be their complete cup of tea or if that’s just going to be a piece of the ingredients of what they do. I think there’s a faction of people that just want to pursue what they can get out of the instrument, and there’s all different styles of music where they can find that.”

Did you, Joe and Steve put the set together so that you complemented each other stylistically?

“Well, we kind of just put our own sets together and then we collaborated to decide what jam pieces we would do, and we arrived at those three or four songs that are on the record [as Encore Jam]. *Born To Be Wild* was kind of out there, but that was fun because I used to do that song when I was 13 years old. It’s one of the first songs I played in a band. So it was kind of like full circle.”

So you were playing in bands when you were just 13?

“Yeah, I joined a band and we played fraternity parties and clubs and stuff. I had to try to stay up late and my parents would have to come fetch me and take me home. But it wasn’t too out there, actually, what we did because we were all pretty young.”

■ “[Playing] ‘Born To Be Wild’ was kind of out there, but that was fun because I used to do that song when I was 13 years old”

What sort of music were you listening to back then?

“When I first started, I was listening to Nokie Edwards of The Ventures. That was a big influence, and then I found out about The Yardbirds and so I really started studying Jeff Beck, and then I found out about the *John Mayall And The Blues Breakers* [With Eric Clapton] record. About the same time, when I was about 14, a very close friend of mine turned me on to Wes Montgomery and I’ve been listening to him ever since. Another friend named Jim Mings, a really fine guitarist from Texas who taught me a lot about guitar, turned me on to Freddie King and BB King and Albert King about the time I was discovering The Blues Breakers record. So I started listening to those guys and kind of trying to learn that alphabet, that kind of blues inflection.”

Wes Montgomery had a wonderfully melodic style, and if you add that as an ingredient into blues playing you end up with a style that is incredibly melodic – but also it’s got that bluesy pentatonic base to it.

“Yeah, and there’s something really wonderful about the blues guitar idiom. I think it’s a wonderful style for guitar, no matter what kind of music you end up playing. That’s my feeling. So even if I’m going to make a pop record, I like having that little bit of intention or style of approach: your sound, or the way you stretch the strings, or vibrato or intonation. That kind of blues intention mixed in gives it a little bit of soulfulness, I guess.”

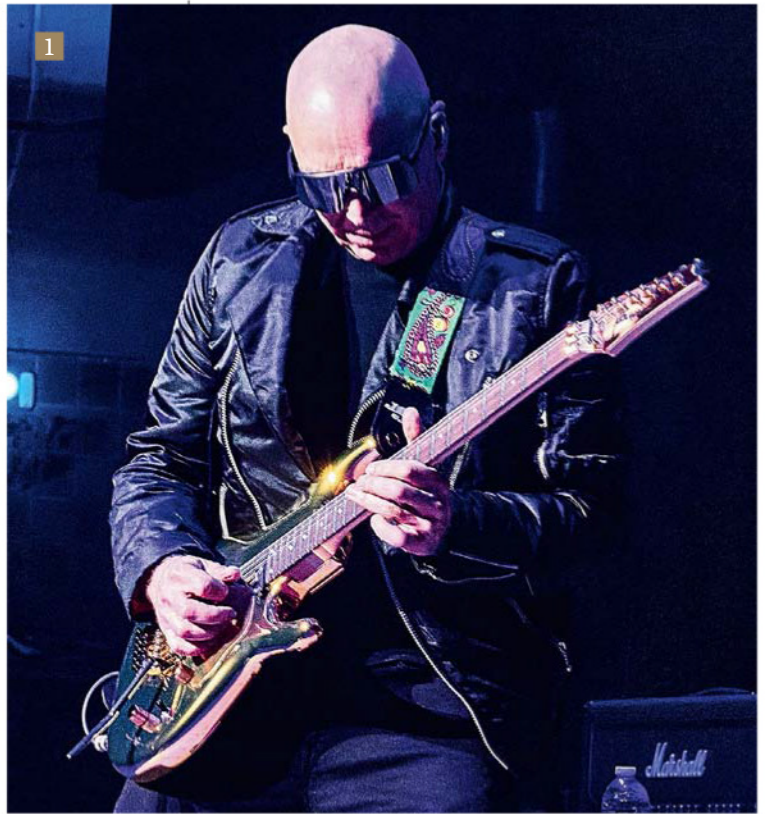


PHOTO BY JEN ROSENSTEIN

1. Joe Satriani kicks up the dust during his G3 Reunion set, which features classics and fan favourites from his four-decade career

When you were learning from those players, what was the most difficult thing to get right?

“I’m still learning from Wes – he was so deep, harmonically. So that’s always hanging above my head, trying to pull down more knowledge of that all the time. And Hendrix, where he would just go out on a limb and it would just be like these happy accidents that would happen that are really extremely hard to learn and recreate – that was a big influence on me. I think with Clapton, it was trying to get down that vibrato and also get down the tone because that would really interest me. So all of it can be a bit of a challenge, really.”

Did you transcribe solos?

“I did pick them off of records at the time. Just learning solos from Wes Montgomery and Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, learning note-for-note what they did, so I could study it and assimilate it. Then, at some point, it becomes a launching [place from which] to do your own thing. But, as a means to an end, I think that copying some of the people you really admire is a very healthy thing to do because it teaches you to get inside what they do and digest it, and then you can take it from there, change it to where it’s you.”

You soon moved on from playing fraternity gigs and joined your first pro band, didn’t you?

“Well, I joined a group called Mariani. Vince Mariani, the drummer, was the leader of the band, and that was the first time I got to start working on original music. We played concerts around when I was 15 to 16, and then I just kind of played in various bands that would hire me. When I was 19, I joined up with this group called The Electromagnets, which was Steve Barber [keyboards], Kyle Brock [bass] and Bill Maddox

[drums]. They had been going to music school at the University of Texas and studying music. So I kind of jumped in, learning from them and playing in that band for three years. After that, I just started playing in clubs and playing around in my own group, and trying to learn how to sing and write. I did that for many years and finally got a chance through Christopher Cross. He introduced me to Warner Brothers Records and they signed me to do the *Tones* [1986] record.”

We've heard that the Austin area was densely populated with great guitar players back in those days.

“That’s probably true, yeah. It was kind of like Nashville in that way. And it was all different styles, very eclectic, but yeah, a lot of really good guitar players and I feel fortunate that I got to grow up around all those people. I just thought that was normal. When I look back now, I realise, well, there’s certain little artistic pockets that are known for certain things, you know, like new art. Austin had its own thing and its own artistic pocket. A lot of the players there had that blues influence, no matter what kind of music they do; whether it’s country or country rock or blues or jazz, there’s an element of blues in what they do.”

And Stevie Ray Vaughan was another great player from the area.

“Stevie was fantastic. He was great. I got to do some touring with him and hang with him a little bit. He was a wonderful guy and obviously a tremendous talent. Just the way he could give it up and go out there and get out of the way of himself and channel this great, beautiful force and be a really, really fine singer in front of all the powerful music that he did. I really admire that, probably just as much as his guitar playing. I think he was a great singer and he wrote really good songs; he had the whole package. I think I learned a lot from that – trying to put emotion into what you do. He certainly was a master at that.”

“Copying people you really admire is a very healthy thing to do – it teaches you to get inside what they do and digest it”

Coming back up to date, could you outline some of the gear you were using on the G3 tour?

“Well, I always use a couple of Fender [amps] for my clean rhythm tone, because I run through a TC Electronic Stereo Chorus. That particular tour, I was using two Bandmaster Reverbs that ran through a stereo Marshall cabinet. Then, if I wasn’t using that sound, I’d switch over to another Bandmaster Reverb into a Marshall cabinet for a dirty rhythm. And then, if I didn’t use that sound, the third selection would be a 50-watt Marshall through a Marshall cabinet. I had a couple of new Strats and one older Strat out with me, too.”

What sort of thing did you ask Fender to include on your signature Strat?

“I wanted a certain kind of neck profile and I wanted a tone control on the bridge pickup so that I could even it out with the neck pickup. I wanted the fingerboard kind of flat with big frets, and I wanted a quarter-sawn maple neck for stability. I just wanted it to sound

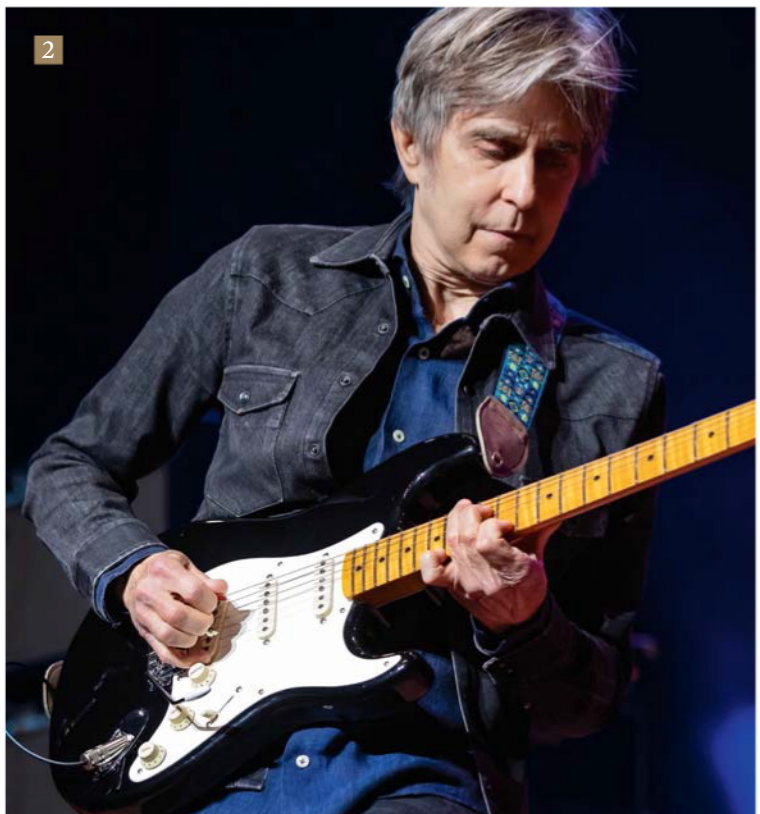


PHOTO BY MAX GRACE

2. Eric had some very specific requirements from Fender when he was working with the brand on designing his signature Strat

good, you know? On the early models that I’ve done – there are two models that I do with Fender – one has a copy of an old Strat pickup but a little bit more powerful. And then the other specialty Strat I have out, the [Stories Collection 1954] Virginia model, has a DiMarzio HS-2 in the bridge, but I don’t hook up the bottom coil. I just use the top single coil only and it is significantly hotter than a regular vintage Strat pickup, and that’s why I like it.”

One of your signature Strats had an f-hole. What was the thinking behind that?

“I didn’t do a ton of exploration on the f-hole Strat idea. We came up with one concept and it worked pretty well, but it would be interesting to try a bunch of different construction techniques because I think there’s a lot of room in there to explore that more. But there are so many different ways you can achieve a hollowbody guitar. We did it where we took a solidbody guitar, sawed the top off, hollowed it out and put the top back on. If I had to do it again, I might do it completely differently – maybe do it more like a 335 or something.”

What are the plans for the immediate future? Are you going back into the studio?

“Yeah, I cut about 12 new tunes before I went on tour, so I need to revisit those and see where I am with that. We kind of cut them real quick and then I left town. So I don’t know what the state of that is, but I want to continue working on that for a new record.” 



G3 Reunion Live, featuring Joe Satriani, Eric Johnson and Steve Vai, is released on CD, deluxe vinyl and digital by earMUSIC and is available from www.g3tour.com www.ericjohnson.com

"I think that there are people that always want to learn more about the instrument, or learn how to push the envelope"

Learning solos by Wes Montgomery and Eric Clapton introduced a wealth of diversity into Eric's style





1928 MARTIN 0-42

Martin has become synonymous with dreadnoughts and OM models, and there were rich pickings in the small-bodied pre-war era, too

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

With Martin model designations, the digit before the hyphen corresponds to body size and the bigger the number the smaller the body. So, when the 0 (usually pronounced 'oh' despite it being an 'ought') was first introduced in 1898, it would have been considered a sizeable guitar. It was second only to Martin's 00 model, which was introduced the same year and remained Martin's biggest model until the arrival of the 000 in 1902.

Officially, the 0 models measure 13 1/2 inches across the lower bout, but they sometimes came out a tad wider. The tail depth is 4 1/4 inches and the scale length is 24 3/4 inches. As is typical with Martin's V-profile necks of the pre-war era, the fretboard is fairly wide and measures 1 7/8 inches across the nut.

Style 42

As a rule of thumb with Martins, the higher the number after the hyphen, the fancier the guitar. For Martin guitars at the turn of the last century, 'fancy' meant more expensive timbers and a higher level of ornamentation. It has been suggested that the model designation also corresponded with price, so a 42 model would have set you back \$42 in the mid-1800s. Clearly, this would never have been

*As a rule of thumb
with Martins, the
higher the number
after the hyphen, the
fancier the guitar*

sustainable in the long term, and prices increased in line with body sizes while the numbering system was retained.

Style 42 represented a step up from the similarly appointed Style 40. The zipper pattern back strip, abalone soundhole ring and abalone inlay around the soundboard edges were retained, but Martin added an abalone border around the fretboard extension and markers were inlaid into the fretboard. The number varied depending on the body size and the production year, but this is where Martin's 'snowflake' inlays first started to be seen.

Between the 0-42's introduction in 1898 and discontinuation in 1942, Martin company records show that a mere 389 of these guitars were made. Each one would have had Brazilian rosewood back and sides and an Adirondack spruce top, but changes did occur during the production run.

Post-1918

Until 1918, an 0-42 would have been fitted with an ivory bridge, with ivory also used for the body and fretboard binding. Subsequently, ebony 'pyramid' bridges became standard and synthetic 'ivoroid' binding was used instead. Ivoroid is still produced from celluloid today and features an ivory-like ripple effect.

Also in 1918, Martin changed to mahogany necks. Earlier necks were carved from Spanish cedar (*Cedrela odorata*), which resembles mahogany in colour and grain pattern. It's still used in Spanish-guitar making and is popular with some luthiers as a lightweight mahogany alternative for solidbody guitars. Martin persisted with traditional French polish finishes until 1926, when it switched to spraying nitrocellulose lacquer.

The 0-42 may look more like a traditional classical guitar than a quintessential American steel-string flat-top, but the resemblance is purely cosmetic, rather than structural. Most, though not all, 0-42s have slotted headstocks that are strung up much like classical guitars. Those that don't have the solid headstock, which is more closely associated with post-war Martins, are likely to have friction peg tuners.

The body shape clearly derives from traditional European guitar building, too.

*The 0-42 might look more like
a traditional classical guitar
than a quintessential American
steel-string flat-top, but the
resemblance is purely cosmetic*



Considering it's almost a century old, this Martin 0-42 has survived in remarkable condition, both cosmetically and structurally

All 0-42s and 00-42s had 12th-fret body joins, which results in a longer body and a bridge placed more centrally on the lower bout. Martin favoured an X-brace pattern, rather than fan or ladder bracing, despite the fact that its guitars were designed for gut strings.

Steel strings rapidly gained popularity during the early 20th century as guitarists strove to be heard over the banjos and mandolins that were arguably more popular than guitars at that time. Compared with other manufacturers, such as the Larson brothers, Martin was pretty slow on the uptake and didn't beef up the bracing to make provision for steel strings until the 1940s.

The recent hammer price of £12,000 places this 0-42 into the realm of fantasy guitar for most of us

However, some Style 42 and 45 guitars were being built a little more robustly by the end of the 1920s. They can be used with steel strings, but it's always advisable to stick to lighter gauges, low-tension sets or silk and steel strings. The 1928 Martin 0-42 pictured on these pages came courtesy of Gardiner Houlgate, so we asked auctioneer Luke Hobbs to give us the lowdown.

Model Specifics

"It came from a private collector of vintage Martin instruments who is actually a left-handed player," Luke explains. "Like a lot of his guitars, this 0-42 had a left-handed conversion, which basically entailed a new nut and swapping the strings around. As it's symmetrical, it worked out perfectly for him and the intonation didn't suffer because there's no slant on the bridge saddle. Although he had it for a very long time, he doesn't gig or tour, and that partly explains why he has been able to keep it in such unbelievably stunning condition.

"It's a particularly good and solid example with no faults that we could detect. It's a nice player and sounds really big, which is almost unexpected with a smaller guitar, and it's a joy to play. Despite looking so fresh, it definitely has that vintage feel and, with such old wood, it really projects.

"It had been converted back for right-handed playing before coming into auction and we think the nut may



be a replacement, but other than that everything appears completely original and there are no signs of crack repairs or cleats. It's especially amazing with Brazilian rosewood, which can go dry and brittle. With guitars of this age, we would always expect there to be issues, and it almost doesn't feel right when there aren't any. It must have always been kept in near-perfect conditions.

"There is barely any wear on the back of the neck, so it has had relatively little use and was never played in anger. The new owner is someone I know well and he's also a collector of this type of instrument. He came for a private viewing and he had made his mind up to buy it within 30 seconds of playing it. He said it felt extremely comfortable for him because the action is so good and no major work would be needed to improve it."

Pearl's A Stringer

In the days before CNC routing, inlaying pearl and abalone was an extremely time-consuming process that commanded higher prices. Martin's fancier guitars divide opinions, with some preferring the austere Shaker-like aesthetic of 'lesser' models such as the 18, 21 and 28. It's suggested that pearl edging enhances tone by more effectively decoupling the front and back from the sides, but the theoretical basis is more anecdotal than empirical.

This 0-42 would have cost more than \$42 dollars in 1928 and the recent hammer price of £12,000 places it into the realm of fantasy guitar for most of us. But if you're curious about how it plays and sounds, check out Chris Buck's demo on Gardiner Houlgate's YouTube channel and read his thoughts in the accompanying box. www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk



1. Abalone inlay around the fingerboard extension was introduced for Martin's '42' models and carried over to the '45's

2. Ebony 'pyramid' bridges replaced ivory in 1918, but Martin retained the straight saddle slot for a while longer

3. The Brazilian rosewood back and sides pre-date the ban, but CITES certification would still be needed to travel abroad with this instrument

4. Slotted headstocks can be fiddly to string up, but many find the button orientation more ergonomic



Bling For Buck

Chris Buck (tentatively) picks up the 0-42

"I rarely feel scared of playing a guitar, but there's something about handling a Martin that's about to celebrate its 100th birthday that is absolutely terrifying. Even in the controlled conditions of a video shoot. There was never any danger of going 'full Kurt Russell' with it, but accidents happen... especially around me!

"Consequently, it's hard to judge it purely as an instrument without becoming swept up in the romance of playing a guitar that quite literally resonates with history. Pretentious nonsense aside, it was truly a superb guitar that, after taking a few minutes to acclimatise to its new surroundings, rung like a bell and – much like every great acoustic or electric guitar I've ever played – appeared to come with its own compression and reverb.

"Notes virtually leapt off the fingerboard and seemed to fill the room in a manner at odds with its diminutive size. Its condition and elaborate inlays – I hesitate to use the word 'bling', but... – all felt undeniably modern with the only obvious nod to its vintage being the width of the neck.

"While this meant that more intricate lead playing was a bit of a challenge, the increased string spacing made fingerpicking that much easier and more defined. This no doubt gives some indication as to the type of music it would have made in the first part of its life.

"As someone who doesn't particularly play a lot of acoustic guitar, I'm ashamed to say most of the subtleties and nuances of such an historically significant instrument are most likely lost on me. So the fact it left such an impression, especially on a day spent playing innumerable old, valuable instruments, is testament to there being some magic in them there strings."



'Pauls Apart

Two recent Les Paul launches from Gibson and Epiphone take a nod back to the 50s in style. But not only are they made on different continents, they're very different in price. Which is best? Let's find out

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin





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What You Need To Know

1 Unusual colours for Les Pauls.
The new Epiphone replicates a very rare Gibson colour that collector Joe Bonamassa spotted and confirmed was the real deal. And a TV Yellow all-mahogany Les Paul Standard? So wrong, it might just be right.

2 You can't seriously compare guitars at such different price points?
Normally, we wouldn't – but JoBo is quoted as saying this Epiphone repro sounds better than one of his real Copper Iridescent-coloured '55 LPs (while admitting it has old flat-wound strings on it!). We wondered, just how good is a new Epiphone compared to the real non-vintage Gibson?

3 If the Standard is all-mahogany, shouldn't it be a Custom?
The original Les Paul Custom was launched in 1954 and used an all-mahogany body with block inlays on an ebony (not rosewood) fingerboard. Our review model therefore is a cross between a Custom and a Standard and, not least in its TV Yellow finish, could be called a Les Paul Custard! Oh dear...

Choices, choices, choices: you want to buy a new Les Paul but which one? At the time of writing, and excluding Juniors and Specials, Gibson USA has quite a few and Epiphone has quite a few more, priced collectively from the low hundreds up to £4k. We'll leave the Custom Shop out of this discussion.

Our two new additions pretty much sit in the mid-point of their respective Gibson and Epiphone ranges. Yes, they are priced quite differently, and this reflects their

respective countries of origin and the overall, more cost-effective parts and pickups of the 'offshore' model. They share plenty, however. Both employ unusual colours (see the 'Colourways' box, page 84) and both have a 50s aim. But, for the money, which is best?

While both follow the Les Paul recipe, as their titles suggest there's outwardly none of the modernism we've seen in both brands' more progressive designs. There's no weight relief or chambering, although



It's all about the name. The Gibson's headstock has a steeper back angle with sharper pointed edges, but can you live with the Epiphone headstock? We can!

The tune-o-matic here is a little high, which means the bridge P-90 sits quite high from the body. Unlike the 50s originals, the pickups don't follow the string angle. Meanwhile, the knobs might be a little sharp-edged, but they're painted underneath in the unique colour like the originals found by JoBo



the Epiphone is the lighter of the two at 3.96kg (8.71lb) and the Gibson chunkier at 4.22kg (9.28lb).

Both use mahogany backs. You can clearly see the grain and centre joint of the Epiphone through its rich brown transparent finish, and while you can't see that detail on the Gibson, we suspect it is standard two-piece as the overall TV Yellow finish is semi-opaque. While the Gibson uses a mahogany (not maple) top – the point of the model – the Epiphone's is

P-90s come in plenty of flavours, and from the off the Epiphone certainly doesn't lack power or kick

spec'd as being maple, although you can't see that under this rather fabulous Copper Iridescent top colour. Both top carves are very similar and, if we're honest, they lack that lovely re-curve as the dishing meets the outer edges. Obviously, the Gibson uses binding around the top body edge and fingerboard, though, unusually, it's black, while the Epiphone's is traditional cream. The Gibson, of course, is finished in a gloss nitrocellulose, and the Epiphone

is presumably polyester and similarly glossed, unlike that slinky burnished satin of models such as the more expensive Epiphone 'Greeny'. Both guitars are full-depth: the Gibson maxes out at approximately 61mm by the bridge and is 51mm at the rim; the Epiphone is just under a millimetre thinner.

With both guitars laying on their backs you can see the neck angle is slightly flatter on the Epiphone, but the tune-o-matic actually sits slightly higher. The Gibson's bridge is as close to the top as you'd want it to allow for different string height tastes, certainly on the treble side. It means that the Epiphone's bridge soapbar sits quite high, too, and unlike the guitars from the 50s, the pickup rout doesn't follow the string angle; the cavity base is parallel to the flat back.

The Gibson's headstock has a steeper back angle and appears thicker, but they're both pretty similar, just a fraction over 15mm at the tip. And side by side you can see the difference in the headstock shapes, not least the up-turned tips of the Gibson head with its overall sharper edges.

The differences continue with the fingerboards. The Gibson's is a good-looking, lightly striped dark and rich coloured rosewood, and the Epiphone's is laurel with a more consistent dark brown colouration – it doesn't look 'wrong' in

THE RIVALS

The combined ranges of Epiphone and Gibson offer considerable and ever-expanding choice. Perhaps oddly, however, Epiphone only has one carved-top Les Paul with P-90s – our reviewed model. Gibson USA has just the one model, too: the Les Paul Standard 50s P-90 Gold Top (£2,649), also available in Tobacco Burst (£2,799).

Unlike during the 1950s, today the Gibson Les Paul Standard is available in a host of snazzy colours beyond the classics. The Les Paul Standard 50s Custom Color (£2,599), albeit with a plain maple top, comes in six opaque top colours. There are also a number of online exclusives that come in different hues such as the Les Paul Standard 50s Figured Top in Dark Purple Burst (£2,899). And, of course, there's the start-up carved top, all-mahogany (but thinner in depth) Les Paul Modern Lite (£1,499) in five standard satin colours.

Over at Epiphone are models including the Les Paul Modern Figured (£799) in Mojave Burst and Purple Burst, a trio of fade colours and plenty more, too.



The Epiphone's fretwork on the laurel fingerboard is good, and the fret ends sit over the binding. This is currently the only P-90-equipped carved top Epiphone Les Paul – these P-90 Pros are worth a listen

any way. The Gibson trapezoid inlays have sharp swirly detail to the acrylic; the Epiphone's are slightly softer and more mottled. While the medium-gauge fretwire wire is pretty similar on both (neither is particularly high), the fret ends sit over the thinner binding on the Epiphone, while the thicker black binding of the Gibson forms the end of the fret ends, aka the 'nibs'.

Although the nut width on the Gibson is slightly wider at 43.95mm as opposed to 43.1mm of the Epiphone (the string spacing on the Epi is 35mm, the Gibson is 36mm), the neck widths at the 12th and top 22nd frets are very similar – pretty much 53.5mm and 57.6mm – while the string spacing at the bridge is the same

With its vintage-correct wiring, the Epiphone has a quality of sound that shouts, 'Beat that!'

on both at 51mm. This does mean that you have less metal fret width on the Gibson: 49mm compared with 52mm of the Epiphone, for example, when measured at the 12th fret. Both traditional neck heels are similarly dome-nosed – the Epiphone's is slightly longer.

Hardware

Both tuner sets are based on the original Klusons, and the Epiphone's look a little more vintage with push-in bushings on the headstock face. The more modern-style Gibson tuners have a squarer-edged body and use the also more modern screw-on nut mounting on the headstock face.

The nut material on both is quoted only as Graph Tech, presumably Tusq, but the Epiphone's is larger with a heavily curved back edge; the Gibson's is a smaller, squarer section. Neither is shaped to boutique standard, but both are tidy enough.

Like the tuners, the hardware might look the same, but the Gibson model uses the standard ABR-1 tune-o-matic with a lightweight aluminium stopbar. The

Epiphone's actually stays in place when you take off the strings, and we have no idea of the material used. We also get the always handy (but not vintage-correct) slot-head post adjustment for the bridge.

Colour aside, the Gibson's pickguard has nicely finished smoothly chamfered edges and perfectly lines up and fits around the humbuckers' mounting rings. The Epiphone's has sharp, unfinished and square edges, and the fit around the soapbar single coils is, at best, approximate. The plastic output jack plates follow the binding colour, likewise the 'poker chip' toggle switch surrounds. And while the Gibson uses black bonnet knobs, the Epiphone's speed knobs – which have rather sharp edges – look to have been painted underneath to match the top colour. Another nice detail.

Feel & Sounds

While the overall weight might well be your first impression, it'll be quickly followed by the neck profile. With pretty similar widths, the necks both have that big feel, but the Gibson feels

UNDER THE HOOD Let's compare the circuits...

The Gibson's circuit all looks crisp and clean with the pots mounted on a metal screening plate. The Gibson logo'd CTS pots have a nominal value of 500kohms and the Orange Drop tone caps are both rated at .022 μ F. Despite its 50s aim, the circuit here is wired modern style, although if you can use a soldering iron it's a simple job to change it to vintage or 50s style.

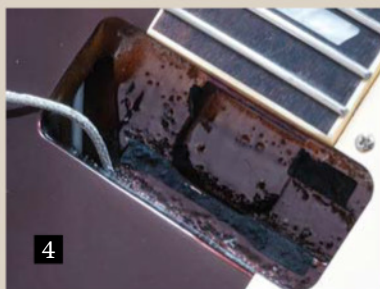
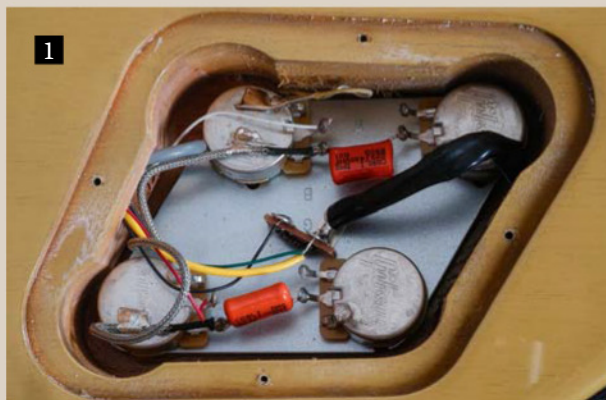
You don't need to do that on the Epiphone because it's wired vintage style already and the pots are clearly labelled CTS 500k. The Mallory tone caps have the same .022 μ F rating, and while it all looks less smart than the Gibson (plus there are push-fit connectors to no doubt aid production, and no screening), it's perfectly functional.

Whether you prefer modern to vintage wiring is obviously personal and really

depends if you use the volumes and tones to shape your sound. With both full up, there's no difference, but as you pull back the volume on the vintage circuit, then reduce the tone, your sound is thinned and becomes almost acoustic-like – which is great when you're going straight into your amp. In modern style, as you pull back the volume the high-end drops off a little, as well as the volume obviously, and the tone functions normally.

Pulling out the neck pickups on both you can see a very clean cavity on the Gibson and the neck stops at the top edge, whereas in the cruder-looking neck pickup cavity of the Epiphone you see the neck's tenon protruding into the cavity by about halfway, hence the vintage-style 'long tenon' reference. Can you hear the difference between the two methods? Good luck.

Gibson's Burstbucker 2 at the bridge has a measured DCR of 8.1kohms and the 'underwound' Burstbucker 1 at the neck measures 7.6k. They use Alnico II magnets with a slight coil offset and are wax potted. The Epiphone's bridge pickup measures 7.82k, while the neck is close at 7.72k. Both have spring and foam cushions under the pickups. Removing the plastic covers, they look absolutely classic P-90 in terms of construction and Epiphone says, "[They are] manufactured to historic dimensions [using] Elektrisola magnet wire, sand-cast Alnico V magnets and pole shoes manufactured using correct alloys and to Gibson's original dimensions. And for you sticklers to detail, the pickups also have tin-plated brass baseplates as used on 50s and 60s-era Gibson P-90 pickups."



1. Typical Gibson USA components here, and you can clearly see the modern-wired capacitors

4. Compare the Epiphone's neck pickup cavity with the Gibson's and you can see the 'long' tenon

2. There's no shielding plate inside the Epiphone, but it's wired vintage style

5. The Burstbucker 1 in the neck position of the Gibson

3. Removing the neck pickup reveals the Gibson's clean cavity

6. The Epiphone's neck P-90 Pro is very tidy looking with its tin-plated brass baseplate





7. The neck on the Gibson uses quite a thick black plastic binding and, in classic style, forms the ends of the frets. Of course, the fingerboard is an attractive-coloured rosewood

8. While the Epiphone uses period-correct vintage-style wiring, the current '50s Gibsons are (perhaps oddly) wired modern style

9. Compared with the Epiphone, the Gibson's ABR-1 tune-o-matic sits slightly lower. The Burstbucker 2 really suits the guitar, with plenty of late-50s humbucker style

fuller, with a rather appealing and quite full-shouldered C, which has a depth of 22.7mm at the 1st fret and 25.5mm by the 12th. While the Epiphone is only fractionally slimmer in depth (22.1mm at the 1st fret, 24.9mm by the 12th), it has slightly less full shoulders, which help to create an overall less bulky feel.

Setups are really very similar, too. The Epiphone needed a slight tweak of the truss rod to reduce the curve and give it some very light relief, like the Gibson, and match the 12th-fret string heights of just over 1.5mm on the treble and a little under 1.8mm on the bass side. Both are supplied with 0.010 to 0.046 gauge strings and, bearing in mind the vastly different price, they actually have very similar playing feels. The Epiphone's fret tops could do with a little more smoothing, likewise the ends, but we're splitting hairs somewhat... and the nut grooves on both are left slightly high.

Playing unplugged, they might feel pretty similar, but the Gibson has noticeably more acoustic volume. It feels more alive, too, although the Epiphone feels far from an

COLOURWAYS

Unusual colour choices – so where did they come from?

Don't worry if you've never heard of a Copper Iridescent Les Paul. Neither had we. In fact, checking through our Gibson library, there's no mention in any of the key history books, either. Until 2016, which was 61 years after the paint was applied, even die-hard collectors like Joe Bonamassa hadn't heard of it.

However, after Bonamassa had uncovered the first 'brown' one from a Gruhn Guitars listing that he believes is very much the real thing, Gibson discovered mention of five unusual colours in its 1955 ledger, among them Copper Iridescent. The 'brown' Les Paul had a name. Subsequently, Mat Kohler, Gibson's VP of Product, is quoted as believing that the copper colour may have been part of a special run of Les Pauls headed for the 1955 NAMM Show. All good, except you might have thought some mention of these custom finishes would have made a small footnote in those history books.

Looking outside of the guitar industry, car manufacturers set numerous style trends back in the mid-50s. General Motors, whose Michigan HQ was only a couple of hours' drive from Gibson's factory in Kalamazoo, annually produced concept cars within the various brands it owned, and copper metallics weren't uncommon. That being said, many of these appear brighter, more 'new penny' copper than our Epiphone's hue, of which Joe says "from a distance it looks brown, but in direct light it has gold metal flake in the finish" – it almost flip-flops from deep brown to that lighter copper. Whatever, Joe now owns two Copper Iridescent '55 Les Pauls and a Deluxe from 1972 (with 'Custom' on its truss rod cover), the 20th anniversary of the Les Paul.

But right from the birth of the Les Paul, stories and specs got mixed up. Les Paul might have asked Gibson to spray a

Gibson discovered five unusual colours in its 1955 ledger... Copper Iridescent may have been a special run for the NAMM Show

guitar all gold for a friend of his in hospital, but later said he intended the gold colour to be used on the upmarket Custom (released in 1954) and black on the standard Les Paul model, rather than the other way around. Likewise, apparently the Custom should have had the maple top and the standard model should have been all-mahogany.

Then there's the 'TV Yellow' finish that first appeared on the Les Paul TV (a Les Paul Junior with the different finish) late in 1954, which was intended to show up better on monochrome television sets. But why would you finish your cheapest solidbody, aimed at students and amateurs, with a finish like that? There was certainly plenty of variation in the colour (some TV models even used maple bodies), not to mention the name: limed mahogany, or limed oak and natural (Gibson 1957 catalogue and price list). And back to the present, we can't help thinking that our TV Yellow Les Paul has a slightly greeny hue? It's a mad world. What's next?



9

inert, dead plank. In terms of neck shape alone, there will be plenty of players who are going to prefer the Epiphone.

Now, obviously, in terms of plugged-in sound, we have two very different sets of pickups, and it's less about the quality of sound but more about the preference of the player. P-90s come in plenty of flavours, and from the off the Epiphone certainly doesn't lack power or kick. At the bridge, it's like a slightly rawer late-50s humbucker style, less smooth with plenty of midrange colour. The neck pickup is quite a contrast – big and vocal with good depth and clarity, and it doesn't sound over-smooth. Then there's that middle position, which, with some volume reduction on both pickups, nods to a more Fender-y, Gretsch-like character with jangle and soulful funk. Impressive.

Now, we couldn't compare the Epiphone to a real '55 Les Paul, but another reference, a '57 Les Paul Junior, is rather illuminating in that the lowly Epiphone doesn't disgrace itself. The Junior has a bit more depth and sizzle, and arguably a classier neck profile (big but lightly V'd in lower positions), but

The Burstbuckers' creamy grind is the absolutely classic sonic feature of the Gibson solidbody

we're talking sound here and, really, it's far from lacking. It also has that neck pickup and plenty more sounds.

At full chat, the Gibson sounds glorious! The Burstbuckers here aren't over-egged and comparing it to our reference Les Paul Classic (retrofitted with the same pickups) it is slightly less bright, but it has a little more creamy grind, the absolutely classic sonic feature of the Gibson solidbody that this 'Paul really focuses on. This really is blues-rock heaven. Pulling the volumes back does pull that clarity back, though – and again, depending on the player, that can be good or bad.

One thing is that the Epiphone is wired vintage style. The Gibson modern style (see Under the Hood, page 83) has quite

an impact if – and only if – you use your volume and tone controls to vary your sounds and levels. So the edge and “sparkle”, as JoBo puts it, of the Epiphone's single coils are pretty much retained as you pull back the volumes, cleaning up but not rounding what you hear. As you pull back the tones, they thin the sound before the roll-off is applied at the end of the travel. It's a very different drive.

So while it's little surprise that these are different-sounding Les Pauls, we're not hearing £1.6k difference in the sonic quality, feel or playability. Far from it.

Verdict

We're a funny old bunch, aren't we? Plenty of players aspire to owning the real thing and plenty frankly don't care. As the models are considerably different in price, however, we have to ask: is the Gibson really that much 'better' than the Epiphone? There isn't very much difference in the primary construction details, and some would argue the lighter weight and more refined neck profile of the Epiphone are preferable. Yes, scrappy



10

The 50s style and all-mahogany build of the Gibson paired with those Burstbuckers is quite inspired and sounds superb

10. The lowest output in the Burstbucker range, the 1 used here in the neck position has good clarity – a great choice for the all-mahogany construction

details such as that rough-cut pickguard and the sharp-edged control knobs of the Epiphone let the side down, but its more regular fretting might be preferred over the rather archaic binding ‘nibs’ of the Gibson’s frets.

Sound-wise, we’re not comparing like with like, but with its vintage-correct wiring, the Epiphone is very viable with a quality of sound that sort of shouts, ‘Beat that!’ Okay, for that classic, full-fat creamy humbucker Les Paul voice, we’d choose the Gibson, but the slightly rawer, punkier voicing of the Epiphone is hugely valid, plus, with volume reduction, it has more rather good single-coil voicings that the Gibson can’t match.

Which is best? Well, the Gibson continues the purposeful craft that we’ve seen consistently over the past four years, and the 50s style and all-mahogany build paired with those Burstbuckers is quite inspired and sounds superb. But, while not perfect, the more vintage-aimed Epiphone is simply a steal: tidy build, great colour and backstory, with wide-ranging, quality sounds to match. **G**



EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA 1955 LES PAUL STANDARD

PRICE: £799 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with bound carved maple top

NECK: Mahogany, ‘Custom ’59 Rounded C’ profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.1mm

FINGERBOARD: Cream bound laurel, pearloid trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stopbar tailpiece, Epiphone Deluxe vintage-style tuners w/ keystone buttons – chrome/nickel plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm

ELECTRICS: Epiphone P-90 Pro soapbar single coils (neck and bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.96/8.71

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: See The Rivals (page 81)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model

FINISHES: Copper Iridescent metallic (as reviewed) – all gloss



PROS Very good weight and neck profile; pretty tidy build overall; great voicing, with its vintage-style circuit; quite the looker!

CONS A few minor details that could be sorted easily



GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD 50S MAHOGANY TOP

PRICE: £2,399 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with carved top

NECK: Mahogany, ‘50s Vintage’ profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.95mm

FINGERBOARD: Black bound rosewood, acrylic trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge and aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Vintage Deluxe vintage-style tuners w/ keystone buttons – chrome/nickel plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm

ELECTRICS: Gibson Burstbucker 2 (bridge) and Burstbucker 1 (neck) covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.22/9.28

OPTIONS: The Les Paul Standard ‘60s Mahogany Top has the same price and colour but has 60s Burstbucker humbuckers and SlimTaper neck profile

RANGE OPTIONS: See The Rivals (page 81)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model

FINISHES: TV Yellow (as reviewed), Vintage Cherry (online exclusive) – all gloss nitrocellulose



PROS Very good example of Gibson USA’s current 50s-style build; the all-mahogany construction and Burstbuckers are a great match; blues-rock heaven!

CONS Not everyone will enjoy the weight or the ‘wrong’ colour – can we have black or white, please?



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Chef's Kiss

This acoustic trio hails from Shropshire-based J.W.J.'s Select Series, essentially guitars made to a spec that luthier Rich Jones would choose himself. Let's see how they measure up

Words David Mead Photography Neil Godwin



JWJ PARLOUR SELECT, ORCHESTRA SELECT & SLOPE SHOULDER SELECT £2,445, £2,145 & £2,445

CONTACT **JWJ Guitars** PHONE **07968 590718** WEB <https://jwjguitars.co.uk>

We've sung the praises of Rich Jones's JWJ acoustics in the past, particularly for the very high-quality build at supremely affordable prices. So we were interested when we heard about his latest range he has on offer – the Select Series. The reasoning behind the new additions is straightforward. “The idea with a Select Series was to do one guitar of each shape,” Rich tells us. “A slope shoulder, an orchestra and a parlour – essentially what I would choose myself.”

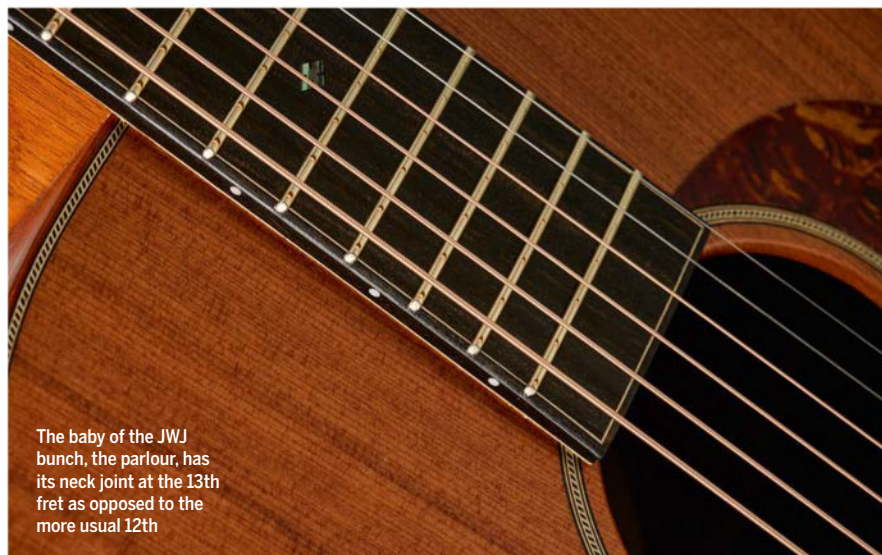
These three shapes chase some of the most familiar acoustic body sizes and, as Rich has said, we have a parlour, moving up to an OM and then on to a dreadnought. Each has a particular set of body woods, but it's worth knowing that JWJ has a custom side to the business and if any of these wood combos don't fit your ideal acoustic guitar mindset, then Rich will be happy to adapt with other timbers of your choosing.

For those unfamiliar with JWJ, Rich departed from his original career as a chef

after his hobby of building guitars began to grow more towards a full-time enterprise. A one-man band, he builds in a smallish workshop in Shrewsbury, but, as he reveals in our interview on page 96, he will shortly be moving to larger premises as his order book has increased significantly in recent years and he simply needs more space to satisfy customer orders.

For now, it makes sense to look at each of these three acoustics in order of size, beginning with the baby of the bunch, the Parlour. There are plenty of differing images that are brought up when considering the parlour body size. Many will imagine that diminutive and slightly emaciated-looking figure-of-eight shape, but that is far from what we find here. JWJ's Parlour looks more like a slightly shrunk-in-the-wash OM – or an 00 body size – and has a passing resemblance to what some manufacturers might tag as ‘folk size’, too.

The other departure from what many regard as the norm is that there is a 13th-fret body joint, something we're seeing more and more frequently. You'd think this might trip you up somewhat when navigating the upper reaches of the fretboard, but we can assure you it doesn't. In fact, we acclimatised very quickly indeed. But more of what the Parlour is like in action a little later on.



The baby of the JWJ bunch, the parlour, has its neck joint at the 13th fret as opposed to the more usual 12th



The combination of a redwood top and koa back and sides is one of luthier Rich Jones's favourites

First, let's consider which ingredients Rich Jones has used in its construction. The top is redwood, with koa for the back and sides: "I wanted to do redwood and koa because that's my favourite combination on a small body," Rich says. "I like the warmth of the redwood, the koa works really well with it, and they look fantastic together."

Both timbers are at the more expensive end of the tonewood spectrum and so a decision about cost had to be considered.

"I was sort of dancing around with other ideas," Rich continues, "and in the end I decided, 'Well, you know what? I'm just going to put the price up on that one a little bit so it is a little bit more expensive,' but I think it's worth it to get those woods. And I also really wanted to see a slot head because everybody wants that on the Parlours. It looks great."

We'd second that because the honeyed high figuring of the koa really does match the dark-reddish hue of

the herringbone bound redwood top. Elsewhere, the Parlour has a Honduran mahogany neck with an African ebony fingerboard that's festooned with abalone inlays. Tuners are Kluson, both nut and bridge saddle are bone, and the guitar is finished in satin nitrocellulose.

Moving on to the Orchestra, Rich has selected torried Adirondack spruce for the guitar's top wood – and for a reason: "With the Orchestra I really wanted to do an Adirondack top," he says. "There was a



The Parlour's finely crafted slotted headstock features Kluson open-back tuners

"The koa works really well with the warmth of the redwood, and they look fantastic together" **Rich Jones**

guitar I built a few years ago and I only had it for less than a week before somebody bought it. It was the first time I'd done a mahogany orchestra with an Adirondack top and I always remember that guitar just sounded incredible. At the time I thought, 'This is the best thing I've done.' That's always been on my mind and I'm trying to chase that sound. I love that combination."

Adirondack spruce is known for having a 'this one goes to 11' type of



1. JWJ's Orchestra features a torrified Adirondack top with ivoroid binding and a herringbone trim. "I love herringbone!" Rich Jones tells us

2. An attractive set of Honduran mahogany – one of the royal family of acoustic tonewoods – is used for the OM's back and sides

dynamic range, and will take anything from sensitive fingerstyle to abandoned strumming in its stride. Pairing it with Honduran mahogany is an inspired decision, too, as its rich midrange and tight bass response should act as a perfect foil for the Addie.

The rest of the Orchestra's architecture is similar to the Parlour, save that it has ivoroid binding to the fingerboard and front and back of the body, along with the herringbone trim to the latter. But

the neck, fingerboard and other body furniture are just about the same spec.

The Orchestra's mahogany back is very neatly bookmatched – in fact, we had to look very closely to see if there was a centre seam at all. We also reflected that a Honduran mahogany back and sides and Adirondack top at this price point is quite rare, and so JWJ's bang-for-buck quotient is still very much to the fore. If this guitar sounds as good as we think it will, then the cost of just over £2k is an absolute steal.

The slope-shouldered dreadnought is last to take the stand, and the departure from the decorative finish when compared with the other two is obvious. The dark Gibson J-45 type sunburst has been expertly applied and gives the impression that this dread means business. It's also been fitted with an LR Baggs HiFi pickup, which is both comparatively new to the market and also new to us as we haven't previously seen it on any acoustic we've reviewed for these pages.

This time the 'Select' side of the model name is a little more personal to Rich. "That's the guitar I generally play," he says. "I'm a singer, really, a rhythm guitarist, so I generally play a slope shoulder. It's mahogany and a sunburst Sitka spruce top – that's kind of it for me. Then the inlays, I just really like those





diamond inlays and they go well with the herringbone trim. I love herringbone!”

Once again, the recipe here is a familiar one, with a torrified Sitka spruce top and Honduran mahogany back and sides, which is, again, seamlessly bookmatched. As before, much of the dread’s remaining spec is shared with its siblings. So much for this trio’s ingredients, it’s time for the taste test...

Feel & Sounds

Reversing the order and beginning with the dreadnought, we were reminded how comfortable and fretting-hand friendly JWW’s neck profiles are. Slightly asymmetrical in build, they fit your hand very well along the length of the neck.

Then we come to the dread’s sound: second only to the mighty jumbo in terms of popular body sizes, the dread is known for its toneful bark, and on the JWW it really does have all this and more. The basses rumble, but there’s plenty of attack and snap to the upper frequencies, too. Campfire chords ring out boldly and fingerstyle can be anything you choose, from gently ambient to a blues-laced holler.

When we hook it up to our test AER Compact 60, none of this boisterous largesse is lost, and all the pleasing acoustic virtues mentioned above are faithfully reproduced.

The dread is known for its toneful bark, and on the JWW it really does have all this and more

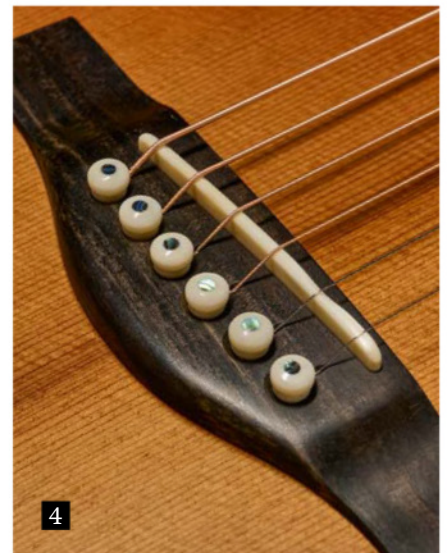
As for the LR Baggs HiFi, we’d say it more than lives up to its name. With volume and centre-indented tone controls inside the guitar’s soundhole, we found we had a more than adequate command over our sound. And the fact that we couldn’t find a bad tone during our endeavours speaks volumes in itself.

The Orchestra raised a few eyebrows in the general vicinity, too. Expecting it to be ‘dreadnought lite’, we were surprised to find all the grunt and volume of the dread was still in place but with perhaps the slightly more polite bass response you’d expect from a smaller body size.

The Adirondack/mahogany combo here is certainly earning its crust as both the dynamic range and the tonal spectrum were at a premium. Once again, chords and fingerstyle were ably dealt with and the sheer musicality of the tone was a real joy. We spent far longer playing the guitar than is strictly necessary for this review, and that in itself tells a story.

3. It’s Honduran mahogany for the Orchestra’s neck, too, with JWW’s characterful volute and a set of Kluson 18:1 tuners

4. The Slope Shoulder dread’s top features torrified Sitka spruce with an African ebony bridge and bone saddle





The controls for the dreadnought's LR Baggs HiFi pickup system sit just inside the soundhole

Lastly, the smallest of the threesome on review tells pretty much the same story as its two bigger siblings. Naturally, we can't expect the colossal bass response from a small body, but there's still plenty there in proportion to the mids and trebles.

Playability is premium and that super-comfortable neck makes the Parlour an admirable choice for a living room companion, and if you were to install a pickup, you may well end up with a fully portable little powerhouse for gigging, too.

Verdict

What can we say? JWJ has done it again with another batch of expertly built, tone-rich acoustics that employ premium tonewoods and top-class workmanship at an almost unbelievable price. And all three tick the accustomed boxes for us in terms of good looks, an easy drive and wonderful sound quality.

Of the three we were particularly drawn to the Orchestra for its all-rounder ability to deliver on many counts, and the dread proved to be everything you would expect from this body size and more, with the LR Baggs pickup being the cherry on top.

However, individually, all three stand up for themselves remarkably well and ex-chef Rich Jones is to be congratulated. If only we could hand out Michelin Stars for guitar-building! **G**



JWJ PARLOUR SELECT

PRICE: £2,445 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Slotted headstock 00-sized acoustic
TOP: Redwood
BACK/SIDES: Koa
MAX RIM DEPTH: 105mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 365mm
NECK: Honduran mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")
TUNERS: Kluson open back 18:1
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.5mm
FINGERBOARD: African ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: African ebony with compensated bone saddle/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.78/3.92
OPTIONS: LR Baggs HiFi Pickup £300, wide or slim neck profiles available on request
RANGE OPTIONS: The Select Series comprises the 3 models on review here. However, we're sure that Rich Jones would be open to discussing custom options on request
LEFT HANDERS: Yes, at no extra cost
FINISH: Natural satin nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS Great build quality, premium tonewoods and a wonderful sound – what's not to like?

CONS Doesn't quite fit the all-round idea of a parlour body shape, but we really are splitting hairs here



JWJ ORCHESTRA SELECT

PRICE: £2,145 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: OM/000-sized acoustic
TOP: Torrefied Adirondack spruce
BACK/SIDES: Honduran mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 110mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 386mm
NECK: Honduran mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")
TUNERS: Kluson open back 18:1
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.5mm
FINGERBOARD: African ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: African ebony with compensated bone saddle/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.86/4.1
OPTIONS: LR Baggs HiFi Pickup £300, wide or slim neck profiles available on request
RANGE OPTIONS: See Parlour
LEFT HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost
FINISH: Natural satin nitrocellulose



10/10

PROS As with the Parlour as far as tone and build quality are concerned, but this guitar had a little bit extra in the tank that made it an addictive player

CONS We really couldn't find anything we didn't like



JWJ SLOPE SHOULDER SELECT

PRICE: £2,445 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Slope shoulder dreadnought-sized acoustic
TOP: Torrefied Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Honduran mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 119mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 402mm
NECK: Honduran mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")
TUNERS: Kluson open back 18:1
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.5mm
FINGERBOARD: African ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: African ebony with compensated bone saddle/57mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs HiFi pickup
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.98/4.37
OPTIONS: Base price is £2,145; the price here includes the LR Baggs HiFi Pickup at £300 extra. Wide or slim neck profiles available on request
RANGE OPTIONS: See Parlour
LEFT HANDERS: Yes, at no extra cost
FINISH: Sunburst satin nitrocellulose



10/10

PROS As before but add an expertly applied sunburst finish and very giggable electric sound

CONS As with the Orchestra, we're niggles-free hereabouts!

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Best Recipes

Switching from chef to luthier might seem an almost unfathomable career changeover, but JWJ's Rich Jones insists that one work ethic really does flow into the other

Words David Mead



After just five years as a lone builder, chef-turned-luthier Rich Jones has been making instruments that have created quite a buzz among the customarily reserved acoustic guitar fraternity. Certainly, the few we have had pass through our hands have been full of surprises with top-class workmanship and amazing, musical tone very much to the fore. And when you consider that those instruments were built in a premises little bigger than the average garden shed, eyebrows are raised and the plot thickens even more.

When we encountered the Select Series reviewed in this issue, we took the opportunity to talk to Rich about his transition from one profession to the other. "The best chefs aren't necessarily the most creative," he tells us. "They're the ones who are organised and can manage their time. Those who can't end up rushing and making mistakes, and I think the same applies to what I do now. I have to be organised to give myself time to do each job properly."

This year, things at JWJ are pushing forward with a move into larger premises already on the cards...

"The best chefs aren't necessarily the most creative. They're organised and can manage their time"

What do you consider will be the main benefits from expanding the business and moving into a larger workshop?

"It means I can get a better workflow. For example, when I'm building bodies I've got jigs out for bending the sides, I've got jigs out for clamping the braces, and then I've got to bring other tools out to make the braces... And this week I'll just be constantly moving things from one place to another, so that I can bring this or that tool out, and it slows me down – it's kind of frustrating. So it would just be nice to have everything in its own space.

When our 10/10 review of JWJ's all-mahogany dreadnought, The Hog, hit the shelves, Rich Jones's waiting list doubled!

“(A bigger workshop) means I can get a better workflow... be more efficient and build more guitars”

“The workshop I’m moving into is probably six times the size of what I’ve got now. And it’ll also mean that I can bring a few things in, like a drum sander, which will mean that I can use more figured woods. Because at the moment I’ve got to use a plane, which would chip highly figured woods. So it’s a case of either I do it very laboriously by hand, or I don’t do it. A drum sander will help me get some more consistency across what I do. So, really, it’s about trying to become more efficient, build more guitars, and get more guitars to people, you know?”

Your build time is very quick – often a matter of weeks, rather than months, which is a lot speedier than many lone-builder operations.

“Yeah, it’s just as I was saying earlier; I think it comes from being a chef, really, where you look for anything, literally anything you can do, to save a few seconds in service. Because those few seconds add up over the course of the evening. And your expectation, when you’re in hospitality, is there will be probably an hour a day where you’re in trouble; you’ve got too much work on, you know? So you’re constantly looking to get ahead. And I’ve just brought that mentality to whatever I do, really. I’m always looking at, ‘What will make this quicker?’ ‘What will make this more efficient?’ And I work at that kind of pace all the time. There’s not a lot of standing around and admiring my work. It’s, ‘Right, this needs to get done.’

“I’m also conscious that it’s fine to make a living out of your hobby, but you have to actually make a living, otherwise you’re just doing your hobby while other people pay your way and that’s not fair. So it’s not just about me having fun – the end users



Rich Jones's skills from the hospitality industry have helped him run a tight 'shop with the focus on serving the customer

aren't paying me to have fun, are they? It's great that I do something that I love, but people are paying for an instrument that they want to be good. They're not paying me just to have a great day. They want something good at the end of it, don't they? So, yeah, that's kind of my work ethic, really. I'm efficient and I just try to work hard and get the orders to people as soon as I can."

What's your waiting list like at present?

"We were at a steady six-month waiting list for a couple of years, but then [Guitarist's] Hog review went out and it jumped up to a year. So I'm probably back down to about nine months now. It's definitely taken off better and quicker than I thought it would when I started this five years ago. But we had that first year of the pandemic where nothing happened. I mean, that was a write-off. So, really, it's been four years since I've been able to get

the guitars out to people. And I'm quite surprised as to how quickly I've managed to make a living. I had a part-time job to start with, and that didn't last very long once the orders started coming in. I set myself minimum targets for sales and I said, 'Well, if I can't sell that much, then I need to rethink this and go back and find a job.' And I doubled all of those."

Apart from moving to the new workshop, are there any more changes planned, like new instrument designs, for instance?

"The other thing is I'm working on another series, a sort of in-between one called the Special Series. I've done a few; it's kind of in between The Hog and The Standard. Obviously, The Hog's been really popular, so I've tried a few prototypes. I'm not quite set on exactly what the final specs of it will be, but maybe sometime later this year I'll have that ready to go." 📧

<https://jwjguitars.co.uk>

Magic Touch

Boss takes the sound engine and touchscreen from its larger GX-100 and puts it in a compact, more affordable format

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Olly Curtis





BOSS GX-10 £349

CONTACT **Roland UK** WEB www.boss.info

What You Need To Know

- 1 This looks smaller than Boss's usual multi-effects offerings.**
We haven't seen a compact format such as this since the GT-1000Core arrived in 2020. This time around it's a more affordable cut-down version of the GX-100.
- 2 Does it have the GX-100 sounds?**
Its more compact format means it has a smaller number of footswitches and loses some of the socketry, but it has the same sound engine and touchscreen as the bigger unit.
- 3 Does having the touchscreen make much of a difference?**
Yes, it's a worthwhile asset that streamlines the editing process and also features a bunch of easily recalled display screens for different functions.

Following a long line of GT processors, Boss moved to another prefix to release the GX-100 in 2022, the defining difference between that and its predecessors being the use of a touch display. Now we have a new model in that series, the GX-10, a more compact affair that cuts down on the number of footswitches but retains that touch display and has the same GX-100 sound engine at its heart.

Like its larger sibling, the GX-10 has been designed to undertake a multitude of tasks: it will function like a standard pedalboard in front of your amp to provide a massive range of effects, or can be connected direct to a PA or FRFR if you wish to make full use of the onboard amp and cab sims. That whole fully processed effects/amp/cab sound can also be used for silent practice through the headphone socket, or for recording sessions using the unit's capability as a 2-in/2-out USB audio interface. Its USB socket also opens up other possibilities, notably connection to the Boss Tone Studio software (on a

Mac or Windows computer) that offers quick and easy editing and organisation of presets, as well as allowing you to load your own speaker cab IRs. With an internet connection, it also offers direct access to Boss Tone Exchange, an online platform for downloading and sharing sounds and more with other GX users.

If wireless editing from a mobile version of the app appeals to you, the GX-10 has a rear-panel socket to house the optional Bluetooth Audio MIDI Dual Adaptor. Other connections include send/return jacks to integrate favourite pedals into the signal chain (or initiate the four-cable method), plus a socket for expression pedal or up to two footswitches.

It's the effects where the GX-10 really shines – it's worth the price of admission for these alone

In Use

The GX-10 has 99 preset memories onboard that can't be overwritten, plus 198 user memories for storing your own sets of sounds. Memories are stored in banks of three and each memory has a chain of effects with up to 15 blocks that can include two amps. The chain can feature series and parallel routings, and you add effects to it simply by dragging blocks with a finger on the screen from an 'effects palette.'

The pedal provides 23 guitar amps and nine bass amps, many of them Boss originals sitting alongside a handful of well-known classics. The range is designed to cover just about all tonal needs with plenty of cabinet options available between those onboard and your own IRs. As for



The send/return loop lets you hook up your own pedals, and there's also the option to connect an expression pedal or external footswitches



1. The touchscreen display enables you to use your fingers here to set up effects chains and adjust parameters. The Page buttons scroll through different views

2. Assigned to functions and values in the screen above, these soft knobs have both push and turn actions

effects, there are 170 to choose from in all genres, many of them modelled recreations of Boss pedals. You also get a stereo looper with 19 seconds of looping time (38 seconds in mono).

Once you've got all your memories sorted, you have options on how to use the GX-10 in a live situation – all of which are pretty straightforward. There are three basic modes of operation that determine the functions of the three footswitches. The basic default is Up/Down Mode where the first two footswitches scroll up or down, loading the memories in sequential order. In this mode, the third



footswitches – which can be individually set for toggle or momentary action – operate functions that you can assign to them in the selected memory. You'll most likely be switching individual effects in that memory in and out like standard pedalboard methodology, although there is the capability for changing up to 20 assignable parameters with just one press.

A third option is Bank Mode where you have a loaded bank of three memories and can select each memory in the bank with the footswitches (presses on two footswitches simultaneously will change banks). In this mode, you can also access

3. An optional Bluetooth Audio MIDI Dual Adaptor lets you edit sounds and stream audio from an iOS or Android mobile device

4. The GX-10's chassis has a very rugged metal construction, while the treadle is plastic. By default, the treadle is a volume or a wah pedal (if you engage the toe switch), but it can be assigned as an expression pedal to adjust other parameters, and offers a tuner at its heel-down position

Whether you want to create a complex chain for a composite sound or simply construct 'pedalboards', you're well sorted

footswitch (C1) operates an assigned function of the loaded memory like turning an effect on and off, initiating a parameter change or tap tempo.

If you press the second and third footswitches simultaneously, you enter Manual Mode. Here, the three

THE RIVALS

If Boss floats your boat but you want a bit more flexibility in switching and have the space for a bigger unit, the GX-100 (£449) may be the unit for you. Elsewhere, with a similar form factor to the GX-10 and also sporting a touch display, there's the recently released HeadRush Flex Prime (£459) that features 14 DSP blocks per preset and has onboard 109 effects, 97 amplifier models, 315 IRs, plus 82 speaker cabinet and microphone captures. Other compact units with treadles include the Line 6 Pod Go (£349), and the less expensive Valeton GP-200JR (£229) and Hotone Ampero (£238).



parameter change by pressing the switch for the currently loaded memory.

The factory memories in the unit give you plenty to play with. There's some practical bread-and-butter effects chains with logical switching options for immediate use or to give you ideas when setting up your own memories.

If it's purely amp sounds you're looking for, then there are many great-sounding alternative options to consider these days with the rise of amp capture and dedicated single-amp pedals. But the modelled amps here are built with AIRD technology and are all playable, they respond well to dynamics and volume changes, and they should adequately cover the broad musical needs of most players with extra sonic flexibility available by stacking two amps together in parallel.

It's the effects, though, where the GX-10 really shines and it's worth the price of admission for these alone, all of which have plenty of editable parameters to tailor the sound to your exact taste. There's all the modulation effects, delays and reverbs that you are likely to need, including some specific Roland/Boss types such as the Space Echo, based on an RE-201, which offers six different

playback head options, and the Tera Echo with its unique ambiances.

There's also plenty of variation in the range of overdrive, distortion and fuzz on offer, which includes classic Boss compact types like the SD-1, DS-1, BD-2 and Metal Zone, as well as the usual suspects from other brands. Quality pitch-shifting options abound, too, and there are loads of one-offs getting more into the realm of the esoteric – Feedbacker, Sitar Simulator, Ring Mod, Slicer and an emulation of the rare Slow Gear pedal. Whether you want to create a complex chain for a composite sound or simply construct 'pedalboards' with three switchable effects, you're well sorted here.

Verdict

This easily transportable do-it-all unit offers a way to get access to a load of Boss sounds for a reasonably affordable outlay. Whether used on its own or as a component on a standard pedalboard complemented by a few choice pedals, it can deliver an extensive range of sounds with solid and practical performance options provided by the inclusion of a treadle, and the flexibility of assigning functions to the footswitches. **A**



BOSS GX-10

PRICE: £349

ORIGIN: Malaysia

TYPE: Multi-effects floorboard processor

FEATURES: Touchscreen, 300 memories (200 user, 100 preset), 32 amp types, 170 effects, monophonic/polyphonic tuner, optional Bluetooth, audio interface capability, software editor, adjustable input sensitivity, global EQ, controls lock

CONTROLS: Touchscreen, 4x soft knobs, Select, Output Level, 6x buttons, 3x footswitches, treadle

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard outputs (L/Mono, R), standard stereo phones output, standard send, standard return, CTL/Exp pedal input, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V PSB-1U adapter (unit current draw: 600mA)

DIMENSIONS: 300 (w) x 183 (d) x 74mm (h)



PROS Solid build quality; touchscreen; treadle; flexible signal chain; huge range of effects; tuner; audio interface capability

CONS When using the C1 footswitch, you have to be careful not to hit the treadle and accidentally cut the volume

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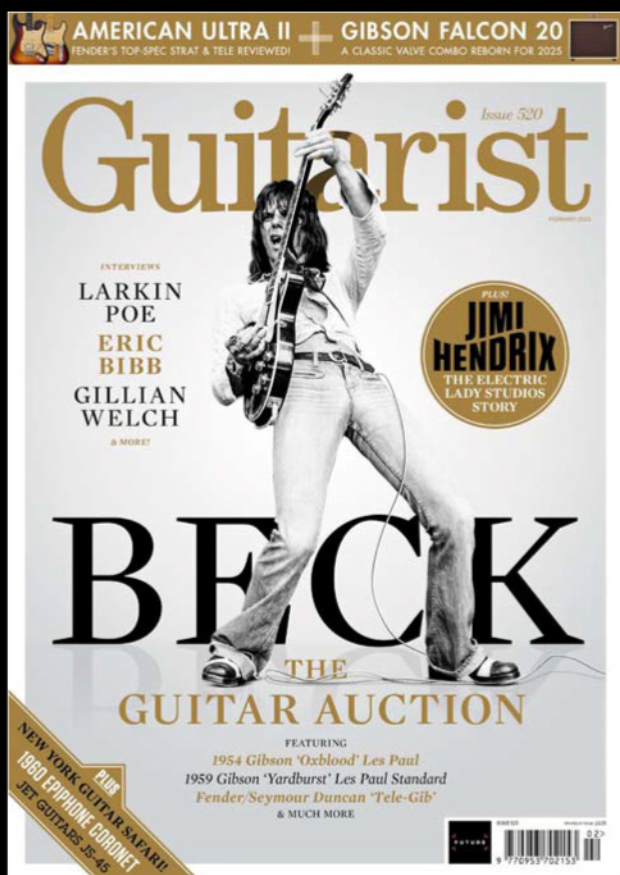
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Introducing

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West Valley Guitars Custom £2,450 (inc case)

EMAIL info@westvalleyguitars.co.uk WEB www.westvalleyguitars.co.uk WORDS Dave Burrluck PHOTOGRAPHY Olly Curtis

If there were a perfect path for the modern guitar-maker, it might well include touring Europe and the UK with a band, learning to become a furniture maker, then realising making guitars sort of combines both worlds! Such was the journey of West Valley Guitars' Josh Stopford. Along with running a busy repair shop and guitar setup courses, he's evolved the design we see here through several prototype models to form the basis of his stock and to-order builds.

"I wanted the design to feel familiar, especially to Fender players," Josh tells us, "so there are definite references: for example, the position of the leg cutaway to the nut. But I always loved offset guitars, too, so I wanted some of that. Stylistic inspiration I guess came from 1950s car manufacturers, rockabilly music, and surf rock from the 50s and 60s. I also wanted to make a guitar that felt a little more feminine than a lot of guitars do. Practically speaking, I'm quite a short guy, and being a bass player I always felt a little dwarfed by my own instrument, so I wanted to make something that was a little more delicate feeling."

With a weight of 3.19kg (7lb), it's certainly that and it's no surprise to find that the Fijian mahogany body is also chambered – and slightly thinner than

Fender standard at 40mm – with some nicely done tortoiseshell binding and inner purfling around the top edge. The Tahitian Coral top colour is a thin matt nitrocellulose, while the bolt-on sapele neck, body, sides and back retain a woody vibe with a super-smooth oil and wax finish. The neck work is really good, too; from the sharply crafted binding of the ebony fingerboard to the crisp and mirror-polished fretwork, it's a joy to play.

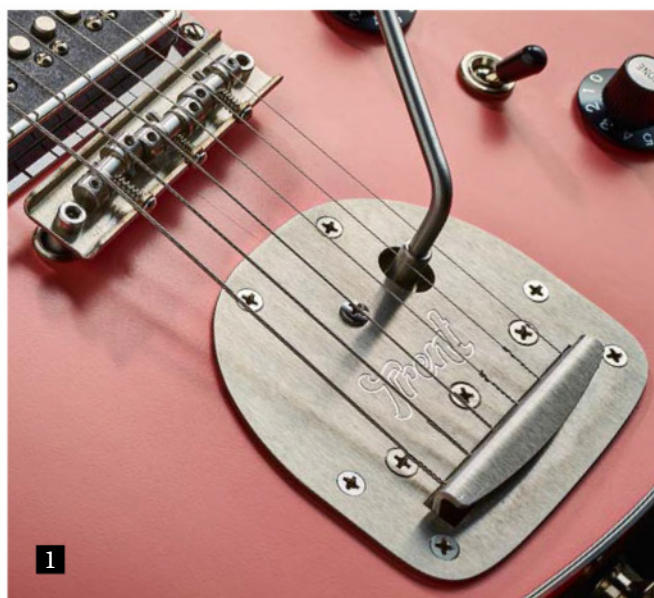
Although our pictured sample features Mojo pickups, Josh is winding his own, too. "On a practical level, you're bringing everything in-house, which is just a financial necessity when profit margins have become so low for custom building. But creatively it feels so much like *your* guitar when you've wound the pickups as well. It can also give the client more say on what they want and it just becomes a part of the collaborative design process. But we have some master pickup makers here in the UK and I do use them – Mojo, House Of Tone, Bare Knuckle – so I'm not exclusively using my own winds and I absolutely love trying out other people's pickups."

These guitars are beautifully made with evocative sounds to match, and we can't wait to spend a little more time with a West Valley Custom later this year. **G**



BUILDER PROFILE

NAME: West Valley Guitars
FOUNDER: Josh Stopford
LOCATION: Frome, Somerset
STATUS: Founded 2018 (first build), now fully professional
EMPLOYEES: 1
FIRST GUITAR SHIPPED: 2019
CURRENT OUTPUT: 5-6 instruments per year
STYLE: Currently just 1 outline as featured (bass version in development)
CAD/CNC: No, all old-school handcraft
PICKUPS/HARDWARE: In-house wound going forward/Gotoh upwards
FINISHING: In-house, nitrocellulose top, oil/wax neck and back
REPAIRS: Lots!
CUSTOM ORDERS: Yes, based on the pictured model/outline
DEPOSIT/BUILD TIME: Once spec determined, 30% deposit, balance on completion/7 weeks depending on finish
WAITING LIST: Not at present
DEALERS: No, but stock builds often head to GuitarBitz.com in Bath
PRICE RANGE: Junior model starts at £1,950; Slim with f-holes from £2,250; full custom (as featured) £2,450



1. There's more UK craft on show with the Trent offset vibrato and bridge. "I'm grateful to be a part of the current British guitar-making scene," says Josh, "not least [being able to work with] Elliot at Trent Guitars." Before setting up his current workshop, Josh also worked as a guitar-making instructor for Crimson Guitars

2. The headstock face is colour-matched to the body, and Josh cites Frank Brothers of Toronto as inspiration. "I loved the way their Arcade model often had a coloured top then all the feature of the timber is on the back, so there's this kinda wood-craft finishing to the back-end, but the front was rock 'n' roll!"

3. Although Josh is also winding his own pickups, custom-order commissions can feature any brand you like. Here, on this Custom model, we have Mojo's P90 Soapbar Dyna single coils with their adjustable rod magnets. They're wound with 44 AWG wire and have a quoted DCR of 7.5kohms (neck) and 11k (bridge)





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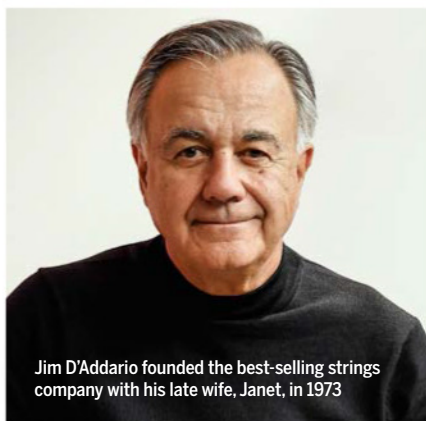
WINDING ROAD

As the world's biggest string manufacturer, it's fitting that the half-century history of D'Addario has plenty of twists. We speak to current chairman, Jim D'Addario, about the company's roots, breakthroughs and next moves

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates

The D'Addario story begins in the Abruzzo mountains of Southern Italy, crosses the ocean to America at the dawn of the 20th century, and writes a new chapter with every pack pulled from the peg of a neighbourhood guitar store. But alongside the geographical mileage, what resonates with this family firm's current custodians – chairman of the board and chief innovation officer Jim D'Addario and CEO John D'Addario III – is the relentless march of its product.

From the hard-won intuition of its first string-makers to the forensic accuracy of its cutting-edge wire mill in Farmingdale, New York, D'Addario has remained the market leader since '74 through its credo that even the most advanced guitar string is a work in progress. Better materials, tighter tolerances, greater uniformity: all are moving targets that have seen the firm deliver breakthrough products spanning from the XS coated series to the uncanny pitch-holding abilities of the NYXL line – not to mention luring star turns including Nile Rodgers, Mark Knopfler and Guthrie Govan. We asked Jim D'Addario to reflect.



Jim D'Addario founded the best-selling strings company with his late wife, Janet, in 1973

Congratulations on last year's milestone anniversary, Jim. But the D'Addario story actually goes back even further, doesn't it?

"Yes. My grandfather [Carmine/Charles D'Addario] came to America in 1905 – at about 14 years old – after there was an earthquake in the family's hometown of Sala, Italy. He wasn't really a trained string-maker yet, but there was a shortage of quality strings in America at the time because the recording business was just getting off the ground and there was more need for musical instruments and strings. My grandfather started importing strings, but then, during World War I, there were

embargoes on importing. So he partnered up with an uncle that knew the trade and he trained him to make strings.

"They were partners for several years, and later on he just branched off by himself as C D'Addario. Then my dad joined him in the 1930s when he was in his late teens, and then it was C D'Addario & Son, all the way through to 1959 when my grandfather retired.

"My dad formed Darco Music Strings, which was a partnership between John III's dad – my brother, John Jr – and two other gentlemen from the same area in Italy. They were in business for about 10 years, then merged their business with Martin Guitars in '69, at a time when Martin had made various acquisitions like Levin Guitars and Vega Banjos.

"My brother, John Jr, and my dad both had contracts to work for Martin and had to stay for five years. But I wasn't under contract, so I left in the fourth year and started this company with my wife [Janet], as a printing and marketing company at first. Then, in August of 1974, when my dad and brother were able to join us, we began making strings again. We also decided in '74 that we would use the family name on the strings directly, thus, the 50th anniversary of the brand name

PHOTO COURTESY OF D'ADDARIO



From the groundbreaking Phosphor Bronze and coated XS acoustic strings, to the super-durable NYXL electric strings, D'Addario's innovative product line keeps the company in its market-leading position

D'Addario in 2024. But we've subsequently traced our family history all the way back to 1680. The father always had to put his occupation down on the church records, and it's 'string maker', all the way back to the 1600s. So we've been making strings for hundreds of years."

Looking at the timeline from '74 onward, was there a particular product or string that represents a breakthrough moment for the company?

"There were several, actually, because we were testing new materials all the time and I was very inquisitive about how they affect the string. Of course, it was all trial and error. At the time, we didn't have a lab like we have now. We couldn't measure things the way we can today, scientifically, but we did some really innovative things.

"I would say the biggest breakthrough for our company in the 1970s was the Phosphor Bronze acoustic string. Prior to that, various materials were used. The Black

"We've traced our family history, and it's 'string maker', all the way back to the 1600s"

Diamond string was the biggest-selling guitar string with a steel core. They started in the 1890s and dominated the market all through the 1920s to 1950s. Then Gibson, Fender and other brands of guitars started to have private-label strings made, or had their own string companies.

"The Black Diamond string was a silver-plated copper-wire string that tarnished early and wasn't really the best-sounding string on a steel core, but they had a dominant share of the market. Then Gibson put out Mona-Steel, and my dad started developing 80/20 strings – they called it 'bronze', but it was really brass – for D'Angelico, Martin, Guild and multiple other companies.

"The 80/20 was really the benchmark string that my dad developed with John D'Angelico in, like, 1938. Those specifications are very close to what we use today in terms of core-to-wrap ratios and the alloys, but no-one experimented with a lot of different bronzes. They were using what they called 'bell bronze'. Black Diamond had a bell-bronze string, and I believe that was, like, a 90/10. It was 90 per cent copper, a very red-looking alloy, and it didn't really sound great. A lot of that had to do with the fact they didn't really have sophisticated machinery...



So, even though it looked like a string, it didn't have the performance that we expect today from strings. The whole state of the art of making strings has improved so dramatically.

"So I would have to say the Phosphor Bronze was the big one. The second biggest was our Half Round bass strings in 1975. The whole world was migrating more towards a round-wound, brighter sound, even on the bass, when people like John Entwistle were making it more of a solo instrument. When we introduced those, they were a big success."

Is it harder to make a good electric string than a good acoustic string?

"They're pretty much the same in terms of the process, winding techniques and so on. What is different is specifying the material, and the temper it needs to be annealed or softened to after drawing it. We did a lot of trial-and-error testing.

"We weren't as sophisticated as we are today, but when I purchased our first Instron tensile-testing machine in the early 80s, we realised, 'Oh my God, these people are just making the wire any which way they wanted.' It was like they didn't ask you whether you wanted your steak rare – you just got steak!

"We started doing blind acoustic testing of the various alloys in the 80s. We spent a lot of time A/B testing, without telling people what they were playing. We varied the tempers and discovered that having that wire tempered to the ideal temper for the particular type of string – whether it's an acoustic or an electric string, whether it's a Phosphor Bronze instead of an 80/20 Bronze – they are all slightly different. Those slight variations in the way you temper it make a pretty big difference with the performance.

"Having the good fortune to afford a machine to do that testing, we honed in on where we wanted to be with those wrap wires. Now, we have a wire mill here in Farmingdale, where we make almost all our wire, both high-carbon steel for the core and plain strings, and wrap wires. We make nickel-plated steel for electric, Phosphor Bronze and 80/20 for acoustic.

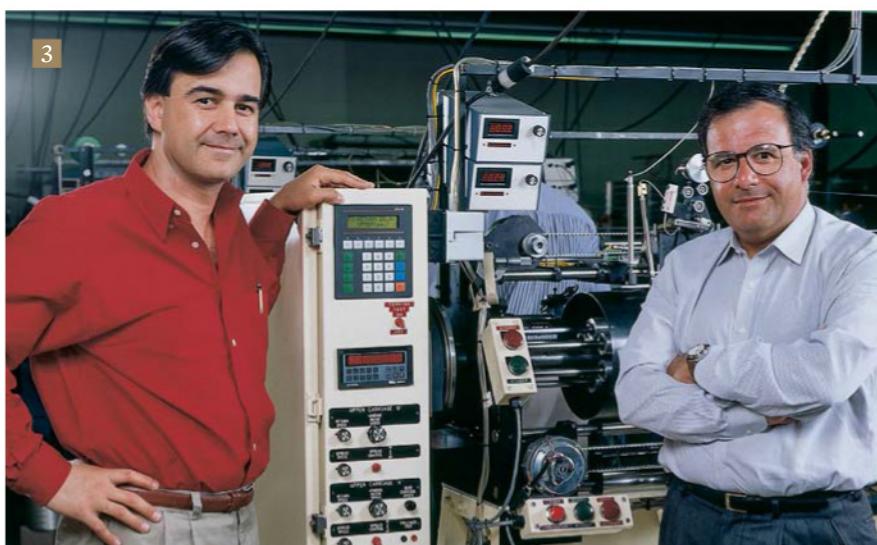
"We're able to zone in with the equipment we have today. It's all digital. In a lot of cases, we're not even using traditional ovens to temper the wire. We're using plasma on one line and induction on another. You can control the temper so precisely, you don't have to be concerned that it's varying and that you might be getting different strings from



1. Taken during World War I, this photograph from 1917 shows the string workshop in Jackson Heights, New York, where Charles initially began making strings at home

2. The D'Addario family pictured in the late 60s (left to right): John Jr, Charles, John Sr and Jim

3. Brothers Jim (left) and John Jr in 1980 with the company's state-of-the-art string winding machine



the output of your factory. It's one of the reasons why we decided to invest in a wire mill and grow that, and it's a pretty nice operation that we have there. If you can believe it or not, we sell quite a bit of wire to our competitors."

Can you tell us a more about your wire mill operation – and how it has improved the quality of the D'Addario product?

"About 10 years ago, we moved the wire mill we had in Massachusetts down to here. But we essentially discarded all the equipment and bought all-new, super high-tech German wire-drawing machines, four of them to start with. We now have six of those for high-carbon steel and three more for wrap wires, so we have nine lines running [and a 10th to come]. We immediately started experimenting with the high-carbon steel back then to see if we could just tweak that tensile up a little bit. We were fortunate enough to make it about 10 per cent stronger, so it stays in tune better.

"We also developed the Fusion Twist, where the twisted area of the ball-end is fused so it doesn't slip. The NYXL was the first set we introduced with this new wire, and the tuning stability was really noticed by the consumers. Pat Metheny said, 'It

does away with the need for my roadie to tune my guitar after I play a wild song' – and it's true.

"We wouldn't have had that opportunity if we didn't make our own wire mill because none of the vendors were capable, or interested, in doing anything like that. [This was] because the quantities of wire the music industry uses is pretty small compared with electronics, automotive and that kind of thing. High-carbon steel is used in steel-belted radial tyres – imagine how much more high-carbon steel is produced for the tyre industry than the string industry, right?"

You mentioned Pat Metheny. What role have artists played in making significant advances in D'Addario's product line and its quality?

"They're a very important factor. We do a great deal of testing with our artists – and I'm not going to say that some are 'better' at it, but they're more valuable testers because they actually take a more objective and scientific approach to evaluating what you're asking them to test. Other people are sometimes not as discriminating – or sometimes overly discriminating. They're great players, but they're not great testers, right?"

"Then there are people you know you're getting a reliable answer from. Pat is one of them. He's one of those guys that, when he tests something of yours, it usually correlates with the scientific knowledge we already had about the product we asked him to test."

What trends have you seen over the years, in terms of string gauges and their suitability for various acoustic body types?

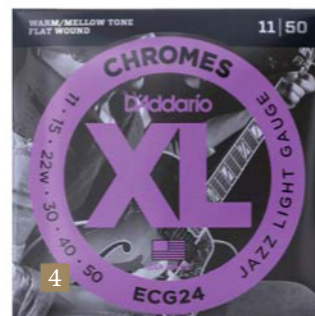
"Well, when I first started playing acoustic guitar in the 1960s, they were just starting to monkey around with piezo pickups – Ovation really being the first electrified acoustic guitar you could take on stage and have a semi-decent tone through the pickup system they developed. Prior to that, everyone was standing in front of a microphone. So if you watch Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger, they're standing there in front of a microphone and trying to maintain the right distance.

"Very tricky to get really great tone out of the guitar, so everyone was always gravitating towards large dreadnought Martins, right? Because they were louder. But you see a lot of people now playing 00s and parlour-size guitars because the pickups and strings are much better.



4. Pat Metheny collaborated on Chromes strings in the late 70s

5. Classical guitar strings are among D'Addario's top-sellers today; the Pro-Arté strings were first introduced in 1978



The fact is that some of those guitars speak better in the midrange, particularly if you're a soloist or your particular type of songwriting uses those middle strings. We don't even sell heavy gauge much any more. Doc Watson used to get our heavy-gauge 80/20 strings. It's like playing ropes! It's a lot of work, but they drove those guitars and made it possible for you to hear them.

"We've explored almost all the materials, turned over almost every rock. So now our opportunities are about process"

"Now, that has changed dramatically because there are so many other tools. You have different sound effects, pedals and amplifiers to tweak the tone, and these smaller guitars sound wonderful on stage. You don't really need a thicker string. Our biggest-selling set is our 012 Light Gauge. But I always made, for myself, a set which is like our EJ26 set, which has an 11 and 15 on the top. Then

the rest is almost the same as the EJ16 Light Gauge set. I always liked that better because the top string spoke better for me, and I could bend them a little bit. Of course, all the ageing baby boomers like me, we've got arthritis in our fingers now, so we're not going to play medium-gauge strings any more anyway because they hurt to play!"

Right now, it feels as though acoustic singer-songwriters are the most prominent guitar practitioners. Is that reflected in relative sales of electric and acoustic strings?

"We were always known for the acoustic strings first. But now, recently, with our NYXLs and our XS coated electric strings, we have a first position in almost every category of string. In all honesty, the sales of acoustic guitars right now are sluggish. Factories are not running at capacity, but that doesn't mean people aren't playing the same amount of acoustic guitar. I think the problem we have now is you compete with used instruments, as a manufacturer, particularly acoustic instruments, in that they actually sound better when they're older, right? So people don't put the guitar in the basement, next to the boiler, and watch it crack or put it in the attic. They put it on eBay or on Reverb – and get their money back!"

Finally, what do you think are the most promising areas for the further evolution of guitar strings, whether for acoustic or electric?

"I would even spread it out a little further because one of the things we're working on is a way to come up with a covered classical guitar string. That's a real challenge because the core melts in the process of fusing the coating, so we have to come up with a different coating that would actually function at a lower temperature. We're working hard on that because we think the coated wound strings on a classical guitar string would be a big seller for us. We have a lion's share of the classical guitar-string market worldwide. In fact, two out of 10 of our top-selling sets of strings are classical guitar sets, believe it or not.

"I think we're at a point where we've explored almost all the materials that are viable. Those 'aha' moments are few and far between now because we've all turned over almost every rock in the garden, looking for worms. So now our opportunities are about process. What we've done on our machinery and everything else is to incorporate sophisticated digital controls and measuring sensors and devices everywhere so that every string comes out the same. It's almost impossible for our machinery to make a bad string." 

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ANDY TIMMONS

The genre-traversing virtuoso talks Les Pauls stolen from the backseat of cars, his most incredible bargains, and a burgeoning love for vintage axes

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

"God, it was a long chain of guitars. I had my first job when I was 13, and every couple of weeks or months my pay would be used to try to trade up to the next level. The first guitar I had that was really good was an Elektra Les Paul copy. It would have been about 1976, and I bought it from ABC Music on Main Street in Evansville, Indiana, where I grew up. It was a bolt-on maple neck, cream-coloured Les Paul – unusual but really cool-looking. It was my main guitar until 1981 when it got stolen from my car. Can you imagine the heartbreak of that? I loved it so much. I left it in my car for 30 minutes, went to check on it, and it was already gone. Man, I must have cried for a week."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"It was a black '63 Fender Strat. I was in Bozeman, Montana, and went down to a guitar store. I walked in and tried this one, and it's just magic. It's been refinished and the neck is a bit fatter and rounder, but it just has a vibe to it. And the fact that it was refinished makes it a bit more 'affordable' [laughs].

"I think the refin was done in the factory in the early 70s. It's nitro and it's got a really nice patina and wear to it. I was born in '63 and this guitar was built a week after I was born in August; I was born July 26, so that's kind of cool. It's my birth-week guitar, and it's pretty rare. It felt like it was meant to be."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"I got a '65 Strat on eBay that had been really poorly refinished and had some issues with the neck, and pieces and chunks of wood missing. Somebody hadn't treated this guitar very well – but that made it kind of affordable. The pickups were original and I thought, 'I can take a gamble on it.'"

"I had my luthier strip it down past the red refinish down to the original 'burst, but he couldn't save the original finish. So I had him refinish it to look like the white Strat that Hendrix would play or like the one on Jeff Beck's *Wired* album cover. And you know what? It may be the best-sounding Strat I've got. It's just got this thing to it. It turned out to be a good investment because it's a working guitar that I've used on a lot of records and one that I still use quite a bit."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"Good question. I'm looking around my very crowded studio and I've been lucky because most of what I've

"If I spend money on gear, I want it to be a tool I use and not just something that looks cool in the studio"

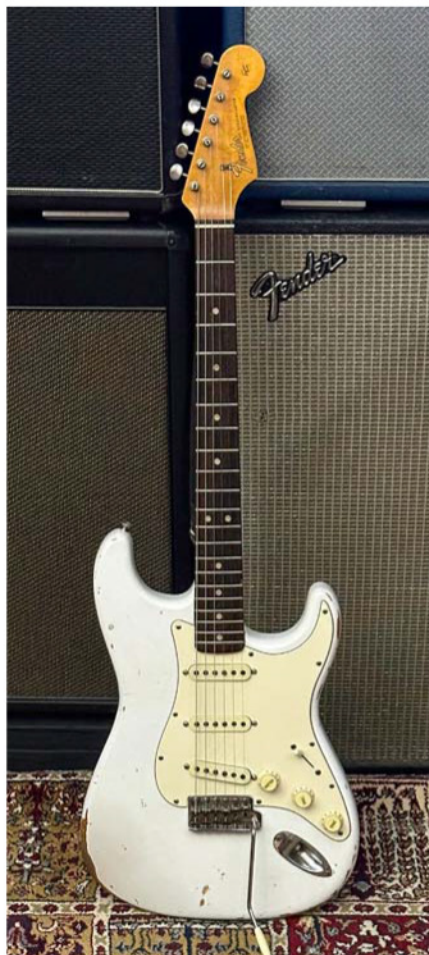
acquired works pretty well for me. But I got a Marshall JTM45 Plexi head and cab that somebody famous had owned, and it looks amazing, but I haven't used it. Maybe if I get into a Bluesbreakers phase, or I get the feeling, I will – but I tend to be a 100-watt guy, so I should really let it go to another player or collector. If I spend the money, I want it to be a tool I use and not just something that looks cool in the studio."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"After my Elektra Les Paul was stolen, I replaced it with a brand-new Gibson Tobacco Sunburst Standard. I wanted it because it looked like Ace Frehley's [laughs]. It looked like the one Ace played in KISS's early years, but I lost that one at a pawn shop in Denton, Texas. It was lean times back

These two 60s Strats are both refin. The black '63 is a recent edition to Andy's collection that was 'born' in the same week as him, while he had the '65 model refinished to resemble Hendrix's and Jeff Beck's white Strats

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDY TIMMONS



ANDY'S GO-TO RIG

"I've got my signature Ibanez ATZ10P-STM, which has the single-coil-tap now. I've also worked with JHS [Pedals] on the AT overdrive, which is awesome, and Keeley on the Mk3 Driver. The Keeley is a custom boost/gain pedal that we collaborated on, and this is the third iteration, which is like a modded [Boss] Blues Driver. So that's always on my 'board. As for amps, I've used the Mesa/Boogie Lone Star for many years; they've been long discontinued, though it's a great circuit. I've recently been drawn back to my '68 Marshall Plexi, and Suhr makes an awesome version of that called the SL68. I'm using those heads as a clean platform for stereo, and those feed two Mesa/Boogie 2x12 Rectifier cabs. That's my main tone for gigs lately."

in the 80s, probably a year or two before I joined Danger Danger, so money was tight. I hear stories that someone in Dallas, Texas, still owns it. I think that at some point, I'd like to try to track that down for sentimental reasons."

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"You've got to play it. You've got to have it in your hands. Man, you've just got to find one that feels good in your hands and that encourages you to play. There's got to be something that draws you to it. It can be cosmetic or physical, too. Guitars can be such attractive things, and you want something that's going to draw you to it by the vibe and the sound of it. When you have it in your hands, it has to be something that really fits you."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"It was Dave Davies' '58 Gibson Flying V. I stared at that guitar on The Kinks' *Greatest Hits* album cover when I was kid, and it was just the coolest vibe. That guitar was just acquired by a guitar shop in Seattle called Emerald City Guitars, and I don't know if it's for sale yet, but I was looking at photos of it. Then I was also looking at a cream-colored Elektra Les Paul from '76, like the one I had, so we'll see how that goes!"

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?

"Ah, the age-old question. It's got to start with the guitar because if the guitar isn't happening, no great amp is going to improve that. Well... it can improve it – but it's not going to save it. We all know that tone comes from how we attack the strings, and the fingers on our fretting hand, so if those things aren't resonating before you plug it in, you're at a deficit."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"I've got to go with single coils because I've got a single-coil-tap on the humbucker in the bridge of my main guitar, and the neck pickup sounds like a single coil. There's something so dynamic and immediate – but also delicate and revealing about single coils. That's where I want to spend the rest of my years. That's why I'm working on a custom single coil with DiMarzio. I'm trying to come up with my ultimate iteration of the classic single-coil pickup." **[AD]**



Andy's latest album, *Electric Truth*, is available now on Timstone Music

<https://andytimmons.com>

Andy has been an Ibanez artist for over two decades now, and his signature guitars offer a versatile platform, with DiMarzio pickups, Wilkinson vibrato and Gotoh locking tuners

PHOTO BY LARRY DIMARZIO

MORE FINE TUNING

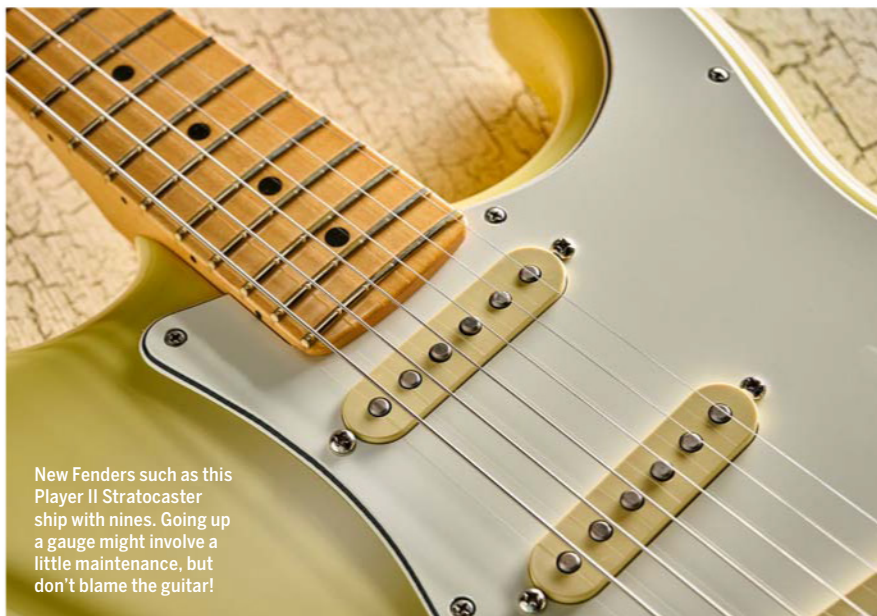
After Dave Burrluck's 'rant' about the varying quality of review instruments' setups in his 'Fine Tuning' piece issue 519, he's taken to task by a reader or two

In the wide world of modding, there are plenty of topics and techniques to cover – yet once again I find myself discussing setups. It seems this most basic of DIY skills is uppermost in plenty of players' minds.

Nick Gassman dropped The Mod Squad an email illustrating some very valid concerns. "I thought the points in Dave's article were well made. I recently bought a PRS SE partly because they have a reputation for being consistent and playable out of the box. I'm not an expert on guitar setup and so I rely on magazines like yours and the guys in my local shop to help me with such things.

"While I can understand you have a relationship to maintain with the guitar companies, I would really like to have known which was the guitar that Dave said was unplayable and he had to spend so much effort on to get it right. I and many others look to the reviews in your magazine to guide us on purchases and we need clear information. If I buy a guitar from company 'x', will I need to put in extra effort to get it set up right (I might not even know that it's sub-optimal, I don't have the experience), and might I even need to pay extra for a tech to do it?

"In short, I encourage you to be completely open and honest about lazy brands as much as the good ones. If all reviewers called them out, they may be forced to change their ways."

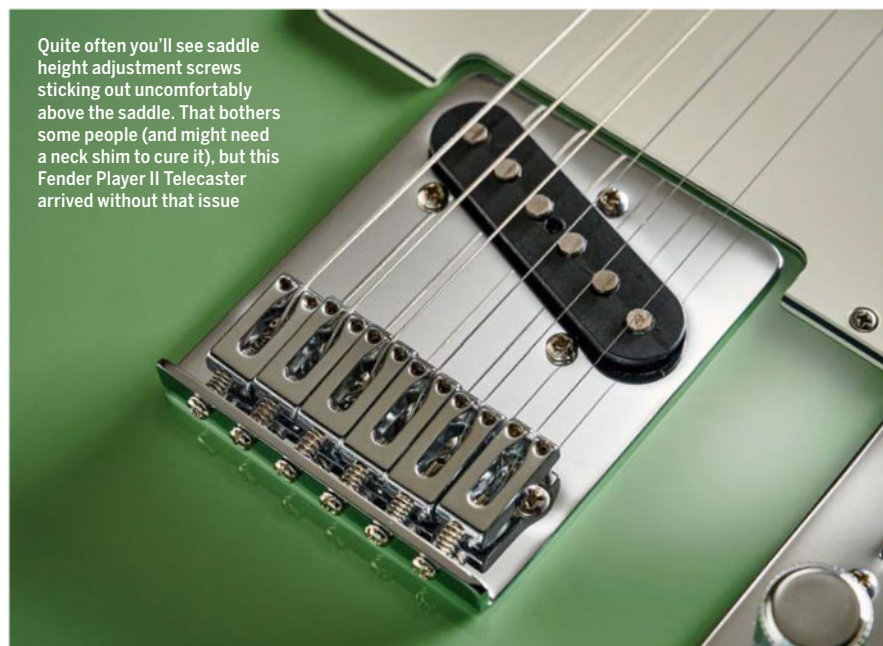


New Fenders such as this Player II Stratocaster ship with nines. Going up a gauge might involve a little maintenance, but don't blame the guitar!

I'd like to think we are completely open and honest when it comes to our reviews, and we often call out instruments that are a bit lacking in the setup department. We could go over the top and exclaim, "OMG, the string height was 0.05mm higher than I like it. Unbelievable rubbish." Or we could follow some pretty basic rules, adjust it to our taste and carry on. As I said in that previous 'Fine Tuning' piece, while we did seem to have a run of review

submissions that needed a little TLC, it's rare we get something that has a more serious problem – and if we do, we simply ask for another sample.

How you like a guitar to be set up can be quite personal – string gauge, string height, relief and so on – and you can't expect a mass manufacturer to cater to *your* specific technique. So company 'x' might set up its 648mm scale guitars with nines and a pretty low 'fast' action;



Quite often you'll see saddle height adjustment screws sticking out uncomfortably above the saddle. That bothers some people (and might need a neck shim to cure it), but this Fender Player II Telecaster arrived without that issue

"It's rare that we get something that needs more than a little TLC – and if we do, we simply ask for another sample"

you might prefer 10s and a little more string height. Now, a simple string change from nines to 10s can involve adjustment – a slight tightening of the truss rod to compensate for the additional string tension, for example, and nut grooves might need to be opened out to stop the wider-diameter strings from sticking. Obviously, if you have a Strat-style vibrato, you'll probably need to tighten the spring claw to compensate for that added tension. Then if you want a higher action, you'll



We certainly shout out when production guitars such as this PRS SE NF3 (reviewed in issue 513) arrive for review in perfect order: "After some basic new-string stretching, the SE NF3, which ships with 10s, is perfectly in tune, and even with some pretty vigorous vibrato wrangling it stays that way," we said



An example of the classic Fender Jazzmaster vibrato with its original-style rocking bridge. Set up well, they work perfectly

need to raise the bridge saddles or the bridge and dial in the intonation. Another common bit of adjustment is pickup height. Again, how you set this can be personal, and in other cases it simply might have been overlooked.

So, quite often, not least if I'm able to take the guitar to a band rehearsal or on a gig, I'm going to need it to feel and sound right to *me*. Don't forget, the guitar hasn't changed – it's just the setup. And to be honest, if part of the review process involves a string change and a bit of maintenance, well, it means that I get to know the instrument a little better and perhaps remind people that restringing a guitar equipped with a good ol' Bigsby can be, erm, fun!

Learning how to be a 'tech' isn't for everyone, so getting a store, repair person or competent friend to restring and set up your guitar to your taste is far from daft, and when purchasing a new guitar, it's worth bearing the additional cost in mind. Hopefully, it'll be then play optimally – and it should stay that way.

That's The Way I Do It!

Another reader Dave Poustie enjoyed that Fine Tuning piece, “but I have one caveat that is worth noting,” he said. “On the brilliantly designed Jazzmaster vibrato and those inspired by this design, the strings should remain in contact with the bridge saddles without slipping. The bridge is designed to rock forward and back with use of the arm, and return in tune. So never lubricate the string/saddle contact as this will cause, not cure tuning issues!”

Now, I didn't specifically mention the Jazzmaster-style vibrato setup in that Fine Tuning piece, but I did discuss ‘offset’

“If part of the review process involves a string change and a bit of maintenance, I get to know the guitar a little better”

bridges in the following issue, 520, which illustrated the rocking back-and-forth versus solid mounting. The Mastery bridge, and other modern designs, seems to exclusively go the solid-mounting route, making the saddles as friction-free as possible. Andy Powers' A-Type – though not specifically an offset – not only uses an improved Bigsby-style vibrato but also a separate solid-mount bridge and, as I reported last year, it's one of the most in-tune and stable guitars I've ever had the pleasure of playing. So which method is ‘best’ is hard to call: both methods have their fans and doubters.

What's Your Style?

Finally, Mike Reeves wrote in asking about setup string heights and “whether there's a one-size-fits-all standard or should each guitar be tweaked specifically?” Bearing in mind what I said earlier about the setup being quite personal to the player, there's actually nothing wrong with the one-size-fits-all concept, certainly as a starting point that

While a proper string-action gauge is handy to check and set string heights (or you can use a clear steel ruler), you can easily make a gauge to dial in pickup heights with two different notches for setting the treble and bass side of your pickups



“There’s actually nothing wrong with the one-size-fits-all setup concept as a starting point – it can be fine-tuned”

can then be fine-tuned. With pretty much every guitar I get to write about, I document the main dimensions: scale length, nut and neck widths and depths, string and nut spacing, weight, fret size, fingerboard radius and action height, as supplied. Initially, I documented the neck relief, too, but really that’s something that most obviously might need adjustment and could easily have moved in transit.

So the first thing to check is that neck and dial in the curve (relief) of the neck. Capo at the 1st fret, hold down the G string, typically at the end of the neck (then again at the fret that coincides with the neck-to-body join), and you’re looking for a slight gap around the 7th or 8th fret – no more than the diameter of your top E string. If the gap is more than that, then you’ll need to slightly tighten the truss rod. If there’s no gap, or indeed you can see a hump, then you’ll need to do the opposite.

Once adjusted, you can check your string height from the top of the 12th fret to the underside of the outer E strings



Paired with a separate, improved-Bigsby-style vibrato, the bridge on this Powers Electric A-Type has a solid mounting, and the one-piece saddle is made from Delrin

initially. I use my trusty StewMac string action gauge, which most easily displays hundredths of an inch, so as a rule of thumb I go for 0.06-inches (1.5mm) on the high E, and between that and 0.07-inches (1.8mm) on the low E. Not only is that what I prefer, it’s pretty much the average standard. With individual saddles you can check each string, setting them between those heights – or use a radius gauge, which is what I prefer. Now you can check the string height at the 1st fret: simply fret at the 3rd or 4th, then look back to the height of the string over the 1st fret and there should be a *slight* gap.

Dialling in pickup heights is easily done. Again, I go for a rule of thumb: $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch (1.59mm) on the treble side top of the pickup or polepiece to the underside of the string fretted at the highest fret. On the bass side, I go for $\frac{3}{32}$ -inch (2.38mm) – a little more on a Strat’s single coils.

All this will give you a ‘fit for purpose’ setup from where you can further dial in tuning aspects, obviously intonation at the saddles, and maybe a little nut tweakery if there are any obvious tuning problems. It’ll also make it easier to chase down any buzzes or rattles that may be caused by a high or low fret. **🔧**

CLEANING UP

No, it's not a device that instantly removes gunk from your guitar, but the Mars-Tronic Perfecto Clean Switch could prove handy once Dave Burrluck can work out exactly what it does...

Mars-Tronic is the brainchild of Ben Marshall, a young gent I first encountered when I was writing about his nifty Treblemaker variable treble bleed circuit on PJD Guitars' first run of Apprentice models. Working with PJD on a custom build last year, I'd specified an active level boost and the team commissioned Ben to sort that out, too. Called the Deci-Boost, that add-on should be a part of the Mars-Tronic line-up later on this year.

In the meantime, Ben's latest lil' circuit is this Perfecto Clean Switch. "Developed in partnership with legendary guitarist Perfecto de Castro," says the website, "this circuit ensures a seamless transition to a cleaner sound without sacrificing clarity or dynamics." Basically, it allows you to dial in a reduced volume setting, and switch between that and your full output. You might be thinking, "Why on earth do you need a switch to turn your guitar down – and with it perhaps clean up your amp sound – when we already have that

"It provides that switchable 'clean' tone instantly, instead of rolling back your volume to find the sweet spot"

good old volume control?" Well, Perfecto's idea is pretty valid: finding that perfect rolled-back volume level isn't always easy, so why not have a switch as well?

And that's only one part of the Clean Switch's capabilities. It also includes that variable Treblemaker circuit, so you can subtly tailor the notched-back sound. The standard Clean Switch, with mini-switch, has a pre-wired 1nF capacitor, and both series and parallel placed variable resistors. The Pro version has six capacitors to experiment with, but you'll need to wire it to a switch or a pull/push switched pot; the Standard version's switch is going to need a hole.

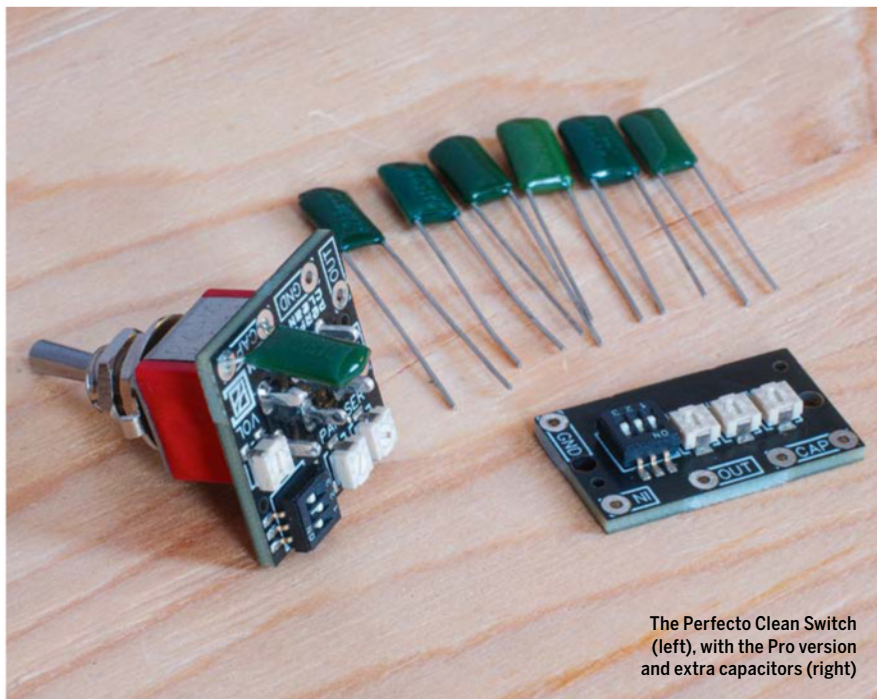
To listen to the circuit, I pulled out an old Dean Leslie West Signature that we last used to discuss the DiMarzio Super

Distortion/Dual Sound, which seems like a good pickup to clean up. Placing the new circuit in the larger tone control hole (you'll need a couple of larger washers, but it's doable) and just a volume with the DiMarzio wired as a series humbucker, we're good to go.

As I said, the circuit board is small, and the volume, series and parallel resistor trim pots and the three micro-switches (to select parallel, series or both placement of the resistors in the circuit) are very small, although the kit does come with a micro-sized screwdriver. So bear in mind that you might need some reading glasses, too, although it's not the sort of thing you'd want to constantly fiddle with. Once set, you'd leave it alone.

But it certainly works, providing that switchable 'clean' tone instantly, instead of rolling back your volume control in search of the sweet spot. Of course, you can set up your amp so the 'clean' tone is a little crunchy, then when you flick the switch the full output sounds like a level boost.

So if you like tinkering with your tone, then these considered and flexible little circuits might well help your endeavours. Keep an eye on Mars-Tronic! 



The Perfecto Clean Switch (left), with the Pro version and extra capacitors (right)

PHOTO BY DAVE BURRLUCK

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: Mars-Tronic Perfecto Clean Switch
COST: £25

ORIGIN: Designed in UK; made in China
TYPE: Pre-set volume reduction with variable treble bleed circuit. Includes board-mounted mini-switch, pre-wired 1nF capacitor, variable volume, series and parallel resistor value (10k to 500k)

OPTIONS: Perfecto Clean Switch Pro (also £25) includes 6 capacitors (470pF to 1.5nF) for the treble bleed circuit but no switching

SKILL LEVEL: Only requires basic soldering and somewhere to mount on your guitar
<https://mars-tronic.com>

PROS & CONS

PROS Simple way to pre-set reduced volume 'sweet spot'; extra control via adjustable treble bleed circuit

CONS It's small and a little fiddly to set up

8/10

*That should give you something to think about till our next issue.
In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.*

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age 11

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Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

Refretting and body buffing finally get the 1957 Strat back up and running

1957 Stratocaster Restoration (Part 5)



Refretted and freshly polished, Huw's Strat is now ready for the reliving to begin

You may remember that in an earlier instalment I mentioned that the neck depth felt somewhat different from Andrew Raymond's late-1956 Stratocaster that I've been using as a reference for this restoration. The soft V profiles are remarkably similar, but my neck has less heft. I actually prefer the neck on Andrew's guitar, but I like mine, too, and it has always been my assumption that the difference in depth can be attributed to overzealous sanding when the neck had previously been refretted and the fretboard was refinished. The guitar has clearly been played a lot and it's likely that an earlier owner wanted all the finger marks eliminated.

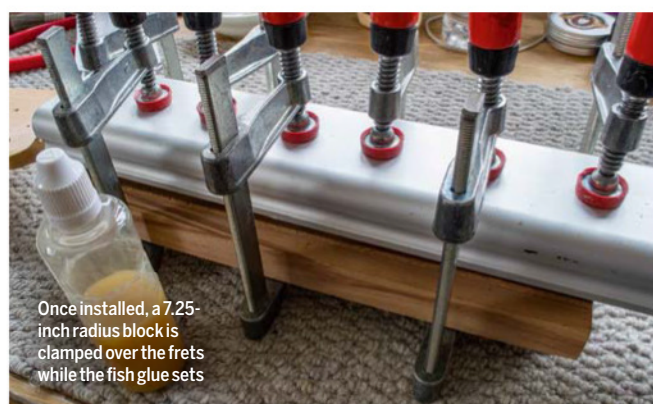
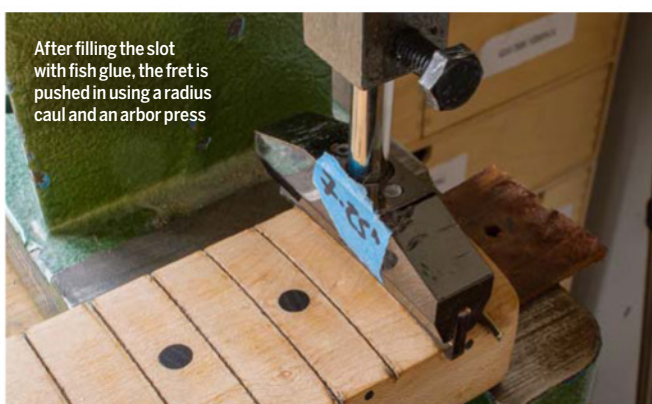
Given the choice of fretwire and the way the body was refinished, I think it was most likely done during the 1980s. This was an era when playwear and patina on vintage guitars wasn't universally appreciated and many owners opted to

"The main dilemma has been whether to enjoy the neck as is or to glue on a 'veneer' fretboard"

have their vintage guitars restored to 'as new' condition. On balance, this was preferable to having them retrofitted with locking vibratos and EMGs – as one name player of my acquaintance did to his 1954 Strat...

The main dilemma with this project has been whether to enjoy the neck for what it is or to take the more interventionist approach of glueing on a 'veneer' fretboard in order to make up for the difference in depth. So what sort of a difference was I looking at exactly?

Using digital callipers, Andrew's neck measured 0.88 inches at the 1st fret, 0.98 inches at the 12th and one inch at the end of the heel. At the same locations mine measured 0.81 inches, 0.91 inches and 0.947 inches, which averages out to around 0.065 inches/1.6mm difference. But that doesn't necessarily mean that 1.6mm was sanded off the top – because the neck could have been slimmer from the start.



Another way to gauge it is to measure the gaps between the tops of the side dots and the surface of the fretboard. On my neck, there's less of a gap at the nut end than at the heel, which suggests the 'cowboy end' had more fingerboard wear and was therefore more heavily sanded. At the 3rd, 12th and final frets, the gap measured 0.025, 0.038 and 0.04 inches respectively, while the measurements from Andrew's guitar were 0.06 inches all the way along.

Assuming the side-dot placement was more consistent than the depth of Fender's hand-carved necks, it indicates that my neck was around 0.035 inches and 0.019 inches deeper at the 1st and final frets when new – or 0.889mm and 0.48mm. Having sanded more than a few fretboards myself, I feel it's more likely that just under 1mm was sanded off at the most. Removing 1.6mm would have required a lot of effort.

Gluing on a new fretboard using a vacuum press would be the only viable method of increasing neck depth. Doing so would also mean sawing new fret slots that perfectly align with the underlying slots and installing new marker dots, while destroying the originals in the process. The rolled fingerboard edges that are so typical of mid-1950s Fender necks would make it difficult to true up the edges and conceal the joint line.

I eventually decided against a new fretboard because it didn't seem worth it simply to increase the neck depth by less than 1mm when the modification would have been clear and obvious. Besides which, this guitar has always played very nicely and I didn't want to risk altering the special resonance of the body and neck.

Wire Works

Installing taller frets is another way of increasing the apparent depth of a neck. Taller frets can also facilitate string bending and they can be levelled more aggressively towards the body end to create a compound radius. This facilitates choke-free string bending with lower action. The factory frets would have been skinny and low, but in my experience original frets tend to compromise the playability of all pre-CBS Stratocasters, and 1950s ones in particular.

That said, jumbo frets on pre-CBS Strats are not something I like to see. While I'll concede that they can enhance playability, they look wrong to me. Tang depth is another consideration when selecting fretwire. Vintage Fender guitars had quite shallow fret slots, and if the wire tang is too deep, the frets won't rest flush on the fretboard unless you saw the slots deeper prior to installing the frets. This isn't too

much of an issue with one-piece maple necks and slab rosewood 'boards, but it's the reason that so many refretted veneer-board necks have oversawn slots that encroach into the maple.

One wire I like to use for vintage Fender refrets is Jescar 50085. With a crown height of 0.05 inches and a width of 0.085 inches, it's fairly tall and just a tad wider than vintage wire, which tends to measure closer to 0.078 inches. The tang depth of only 0.05 inches is ideal for shallow slots, and the crown dimensions provide a more modern playing feel without departing too much from a vintage look.

There are numerous ways to install frets and, depending on the guitar, I'll hammer them in, tap them sideways through the slots or press them down using a clamp or an arbor press. For this project I used my arbor press fitted with a 7.25-inch caul.

After wiping the fretwire down with acetone to remove all traces of oil and dirt, it was passed through my fret-bending tool. I prefer to slightly overbend the wire because I find it helps to make the fretwire sit flush with the top of the fretboard at the ends without having to resort to superglue to hold them down.

Before pressing the frets home, I filled the slots with fish glue. Once they were installed, I clamped a full-length 7.25-inch



The radius block is removed to reveal 21 perfectly seated frets, and the next stage is to snip the ends flush

radius block over the frets and left the glue to set overnight. The fret ends were then snipped off and bevelled before I protected the bare fretboard with masking tape for levelling, crowning and buffing.

Shine On

The sunburst lacquer had been curing for several weeks and it was ready for polishing. Having been treated to flash coats after sanding with 320-grit paper, the surface was already very flat and fairly shiny. With barely any 'orange peel' to sand out, I was able to start with 1,200-grit wet and dry paper, which I soaked in water with a dash of washing up liquid to prevent it from getting gummed up.

When polishing guitar finishes, care must be taken around screw holes and areas of end grain that don't get much lacquer coverage. The danger is that water from the wet and dry paper can wick in and cause the wood to swell, which can then crack the finish. This looks more like damage than natural lacquer checking, and steps should be taken to prevent it.

I always apply wax using a cotton bud to coat the end grain and pack the screw holes because it forms an effective barrier against the water. I also try to keep any water on the surface of the body to a minimum. So long as the wet and dry paper is able to move freely and it isn't clogging up with lumps of lacquer, then

it's all good. Water doesn't need to be pooling up on the surface.

When spraying guitars with aerosols, Preval units and airbrushes, the finish invariably ends up being thinner than it would be from a factory spray gun. That's certainly what I was aiming for because the lacquer on 1950s Fenders always appears vanishingly thin and it shrinks into the wood grain.

After the 1,200-grit paper had levelled off the surface, I proceeded to 1,500-, 2,000- and 2,500-grit paper and then moved onto 3,500- and 4,000-grit micromesh. For most finishes I'll use Farécla G3 polishing compound followed by Meguiar's Scratch X after the 1,200-

"When polishing finishes, take care around areas that don't get much lacquer coverage"

grit. With this guitar I went straight to Scratch X after the 4,000-grit micromesh and I chose to polish it out by hand, rather than use a foam mop on my orbital sander.

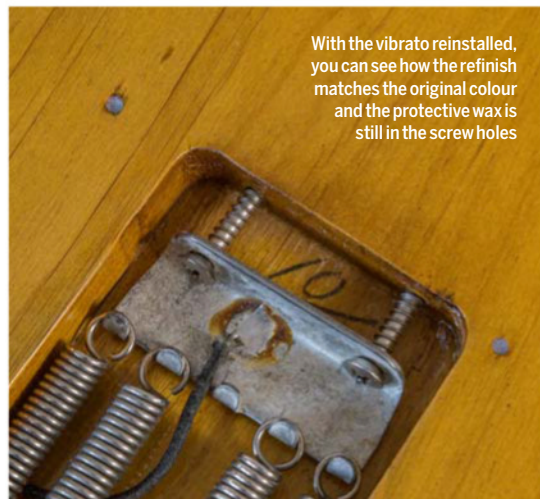
I did approach the cutting and polishing stages with caution to avoid rubbing through the finish, but since this finish was always going to be a relic job I knew that any rub-throughs could be worked into the ageing. And, sure enough, I ended



Masking tape is used to protect the bare fretboard while the frets are being levelled and crowned



Polishing begins with 1,200-grit wet and dry paper soaked in water with a dash of washing up liquid



With the vibrato reinstalled, you can see how the refinish matches the original colour and the protective wax is still in the screw holes

up with a couple of areas on the rear edge of the lower horn where the mid-brown was exposed. Since that's a natural area for the tobacco brown to wear away, I didn't lose any sleep over it.

Testing Time

With the frets done, I wanted to assess the nut that came with the guitar because it had always worked well with the old jumbo frets and looked old. It may even be original because a previous luthier had taken the trouble to shim it up using some maple veneer.

Since the neck had to be refinished, I needed the old nut (or a replacement) to be fitted prior to spraying so it would look

as though it was factory fitted. To do this, I had to put the tuners back on, along with the bridge and vibrato assembly. Of course, at this point I couldn't resist mounting the pickguard and jack plate, too, and wiring everything back up.

The nut functioned perfectly so I quickly decided to keep it, and after a few setup tweaks the guitar was playing better than ever. I certainly preferred the new frets and it felt even slinkier than before. If you're imagining that removing the non-nitro finish and applying a vanishingly thin cellulose finish must have freed up the body resonance, I'm afraid you're mistaken. Thinner frets with freshly filed crowns that are glued in tightly always

improve clarity and definition, but the fundamental tone, sustain characteristics and dynamics of this Stratocaster remained the same.

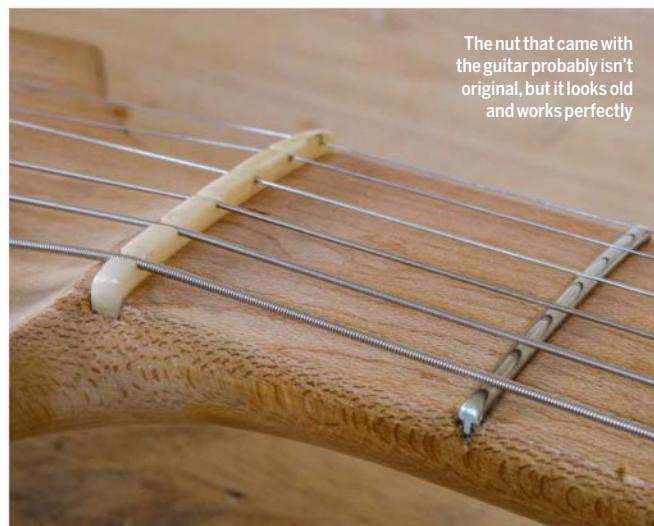
But after patting myself on the back for a couple of days, I remembered how much I dislike the look of pristine finishes on vintage guitars. I respect the views of those who feel otherwise, but if that does include you, consider this fair warning: in the final instalment I'll be reliving the body and neck. See you next time – or maybe not! 📧

www.huwpriceguitar.com

With thanks to Andrew Raymond and Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath



The lacquer is polished up to a fairly flawless gloss, but the body isn't going to look like this for long



The nut that came with the guitar probably isn't original, but it looks old and works perfectly



David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

The Bass VI may be the most widely heard but underappreciated of Fender's offsets

1960s Fender Bass VIs



This Shoreline Gold example is dated January 1962, and in addition to being one of the very first Fender VIs, the custom colour is extremely rare



Fender's sparkle finishes were at the height of their popularity in 1963 when this Champagne Sparkle VI was made

Introduced in 1961, the Fender VI is often referred to as the Bass VI. When I was growing up I wasn't a catalogue geek and I was unaware that this model even existed when I saw a listing in the classifieds of a local newspaper for a Fender VI. I just assumed it was a six-string guitar. It was a sunburst and the guy wanted \$200 so I bought it anyway.

"My friend recognised what it was and I soon discovered that the VI was used by Glen Campbell, The Hollies, Aerosmith, Jack Bruce, The Beatles and Brian Wilson. The VI also became a studio staple in Nashville. Although I wasn't even old enough to drive, I had discovered that you could open up Fender guitars and find dates on the neck and body. I had also learned how to read date codes on potentiometers, and very few people knew these things in the 1970s. The neck date

"The earlier pickups really do sound better and that's why they're the ones pros want"

was 11/60 and the potentiometer dates showed January 1961, so it was one of the very first VIs made.

"I just fell in love with these instruments, but for whatever reason I sold it and I later realised that the later ones had different pickups. Most people think they're Stratocaster pickups, but they're really not because the coil is wider. If you look at the bobbin material and how it's cut, they're basically Telecaster bridge pickups complete with inductance plates. They have the cool-looking metal surrounds, too. The earlier pickups really do sound

better and that's why they're the ones serious professionals want if they're using them to record. They sound richer and thicker than the later Jaguar pickup and they're just wonderful.

"I went on a quest looking for the earlier ones with the Telecaster pickups. I saw a few sunburst examples but never any custom colours. They're so rare to see on a VI and are actually far more common on Stratocasters and Jazzmasters. I eventually found a blonde one and I hung onto that for a while, then I found a Fiesta Red '63 with the later pickups, and eventually I came across the Shoreline Gold one that we can see here. It's a January '62 with the bridge cover, all the tags and a slab fretboard. The headstock is non-matching, but by late 1962 matching headstocks were on practically every one, despite it supposedly being an optional extra.



The earlier Shoreline Gold model has different pickups, simpler control switching and there's no press-up string mute

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

"The '63 Champagne Sparkle came from a guy in California who used to be a guitar finder for me. He thought it might have belonged to someone famous, but he wasn't sure who. Of course, that set me off on another quest. I discovered that Kathy Marshall, the 'Queen Of Surf Guitar', had a Champagne Sparkle Jaguar. Having mixed a quantity of paint, Fender would have sprayed more than one instrument in that colour, so I'm sure this VI was painted at the same time as hers. I tried to figure out who Kathy's bass player was, but it seems she mostly sat in with other bands, and I never did find out who the original owner was.

"It's a genuine Dennis Swiden sparkle finish of the period and there's only a little bit of wear and tear. I used to talk with Dennis on the phone and he shared lots of little tells to identify original examples.

"The VI can sound like so many different instruments; people are rediscovering them"

The period from 1961 to '64 was a crazy time and that's when almost all of the Fender sparkle finishes were done. Fender carried on spraying sparkle finishes in-house up to '68, but they look very different. The metal flake altered and a lot of them had urethane over the top, rather than nitrocellulose.

"The later VIs had Jaguar-style circuitry where you could turn each pickup on and off individually and also that phasey bass-cut setting. That fourth switch wasn't included on the earlier ones. It's interesting that you can still get strings for

them and my preference is for flat-wounds because they sound more authentic. But you can also fit round-wound strings and play with a dime to get that sharper Joe Perry sound.

"The mute is another great feature that players like Glen Campbell used, but the reissues don't have them. The VI can sound like so many different instruments; I think people are rediscovering them and creating sounds that have been missing from music for a long time. Of the two guitars, the Shoreline Gold is my favourite. Technically, it's for sale – I've priced it at a point where I hope nobody will ever buy it because I know I'll never see another." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Modern Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Les Paul Custom, Keeley Boss SD-1 & Marshall JTM45 MkII Reissue

Difficulty ★★★★★ | 20 mins per example

THE TERM 'MODERN BLUES' may seem a little ambiguous at first glance, so to be more specific, I'm referring to the inclusion of unusual and non-pentatonic phrases alongside more traditional ideas. But that wouldn't have made for a very good title! The example solo was played as a continuous live take, but we've broken it up into four sections to make it easier to digest. The more modern lines either take the shape of arpeggios (and fragments of these) or pentatonic ideas that are more influenced by players such as Joe Bonamassa and Eric Johnson, rather than the more 'classic' vocabulary of BB King or Eric Clapton.

In addition to this, there are some unusual picking patterns, or combinations thereof. Some of these may seem counterintuitive to start with, but they are worthwhile as they can enable the relaxed articulation of licks that would be far trickier otherwise. Despite this, it isn't always an exact science and there may be instances where you prefer to pick something differently from the suggestions on the transcription. You're the final judge in these situations, but do bear in mind that one of the hardest things about expanding our technique is going 'against the grain' of learned patterns – sometimes referred to as muscle memory. It might seem like a backward step at first,

but if you're prepared to deal with the initial discomfort, the rewards are well worth it.

The solo was recorded with a relatively high-gain tone, so you'll want to stay in control of any unused strings with the side/heel of your picking hand. There are also times when your fretting hand comes into play in this regard, only pressing down the strings as and when they're needed, and not allowing notes to ring together. Hope you enjoy the solo and see you next time. 



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Example 1

THIS FIRST PHRASE BEGINS WITH A MORE CLASSIC PENTATONIC FEEL but quickly switches to a more three-note-per-string approach using a combination of shapes 1 and 2 of the E minor pentatonic. Watch the picking hand closely here: there are quite a few consecutive downstrokes played as one movement when crossing adjacent strings. Start by following the directions exactly, but you'll find there are many ways this technique can be used, so be prepared to experiment.

The image displays a musical score for the song "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel. It includes a guitar part and a piano part, both with standard notation and guitar-specific tablature.

Guitar Part:

- Staff 1:** Treble clef, key of D major (F#), 4/4 time. Tempo is 95 BPM. The first measure is marked with a wavy line and "E5". The second measure has a wavy line and "BU". The third measure has a wavy line and "BU". The fourth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The fifth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The sixth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The seventh measure has a wavy line and "BU". The eighth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The ninth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The tenth measure has a wavy line and "BU".
- Staff 2:** Guitar tablature corresponding to the notes in Staff 1. It includes fret numbers (12, 15, 17, 14, 12, 15, 14, 12, 15, 14, 12, 16) and a 3-measure rest at the end.

Piano Part:

- Staff 3:** Treble clef, key of D major (F#), 4/4 time. The first measure has a wavy line and "BU". The second measure has a wavy line and "BU". The third measure has a wavy line and "BU". The fourth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The fifth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The sixth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The seventh measure has a wavy line and "BU". The eighth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The ninth measure has a wavy line and "BU". The tenth measure has a wavy line and "BU".
- Staff 4:** Piano tablature corresponding to the notes in Staff 3. It includes fret numbers (14, 12, 16, 14, 12, 14, 16, 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 14, 12, 14, 14) and a 3-measure rest at the end.

Example 2

THIS EXAMPLE SANDWICHES an alternate-picked descending pentatonic lick between some more traditional ideas. We're descending the shape 1 E minor pentatonic in groups of six, starting on the first string then coming back to start another group of six from the second string and so on. This finishes with an octave jump you'll often hear from Eric Johnson and Joe Bonamassa. All this strict picking is then balanced out with a more funky phrase using doublestops and bends.

Example 3

THIS IS THE MOST 'TECHNICAL' PART OF THE SOLO; the trickiest part to get your head around is probably the first two bars. We start with a G major arpeggio but quickly switch to a more pentatonic approach, using a similar picking style to Example 1. As a general rule, I'm using alternate picking when there is more than one note played on a string, but I'm using one single downstroke to change to the adjacent string. The C major arpeggio in bar 3 takes a one-note-per-string approach, played with a single downstroke and only pressing the strings down with the fretting hand when needed.

[illegible]

Example 4

THIS IS A MUCH MORE TRADITIONAL LICK to finish things up, though notice there are places where it's most practical to press notes at the same fret on adjacent strings by 'rocking' one finger between the two. There are a couple of instances where you'll notice this happening in the previous examples, but check out bars 2, 3 and 4 for some clear examples of this. It is possible to finger this more conventionally, but it might not sound as fluent.

Example 4 is a guitar solo in 4/4 time, featuring a melodic line with various bends (BU) and bends/dips (BD). The notation includes fret numbers (12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18) and chord symbols (C5, G5, A5, B5). The solo is divided into two systems. The first system (bars 1-4) features a melodic line with various bends (BU) and bends/dips (BD). The second system (bars 5-8) continues the melodic line with more bends and bends/dips.

Hear It Here

JOE BONAMASSA

LIVE FROM THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL



Joe Bonamassa is most definitely the touchstone for the example solo this month, and this album contains quite a few examples of the techniques we've been looking at but in a more 'real world' musical context. To start with, check out *So, It's Like That*, *Sloe Gin* and *So Many Roads*. It's worth bearing in mind that these techniques – though a lot of fun once you've got them under the fingers – form part of the whole, rather than becoming the basis of your vocabulary.

ERIC JOHNSON & ALIEN LOVE CHILD

LIVE AND BEYOND



Eric is very much an originator of this fluid but bluesy approach, combining non-traditional pentatonic lines with arpeggios and chord fragments. Have a listen to *Zenland*, *Last House On The Block* (which includes a great extended Cream-style jam) and *Once A Part Of Me*. In this live trio format, Eric does a great job of implying chords and keeping up harmonic interest by using these non-traditional approaches, to say nothing of the range of exemplary tones!

GARY MOORE

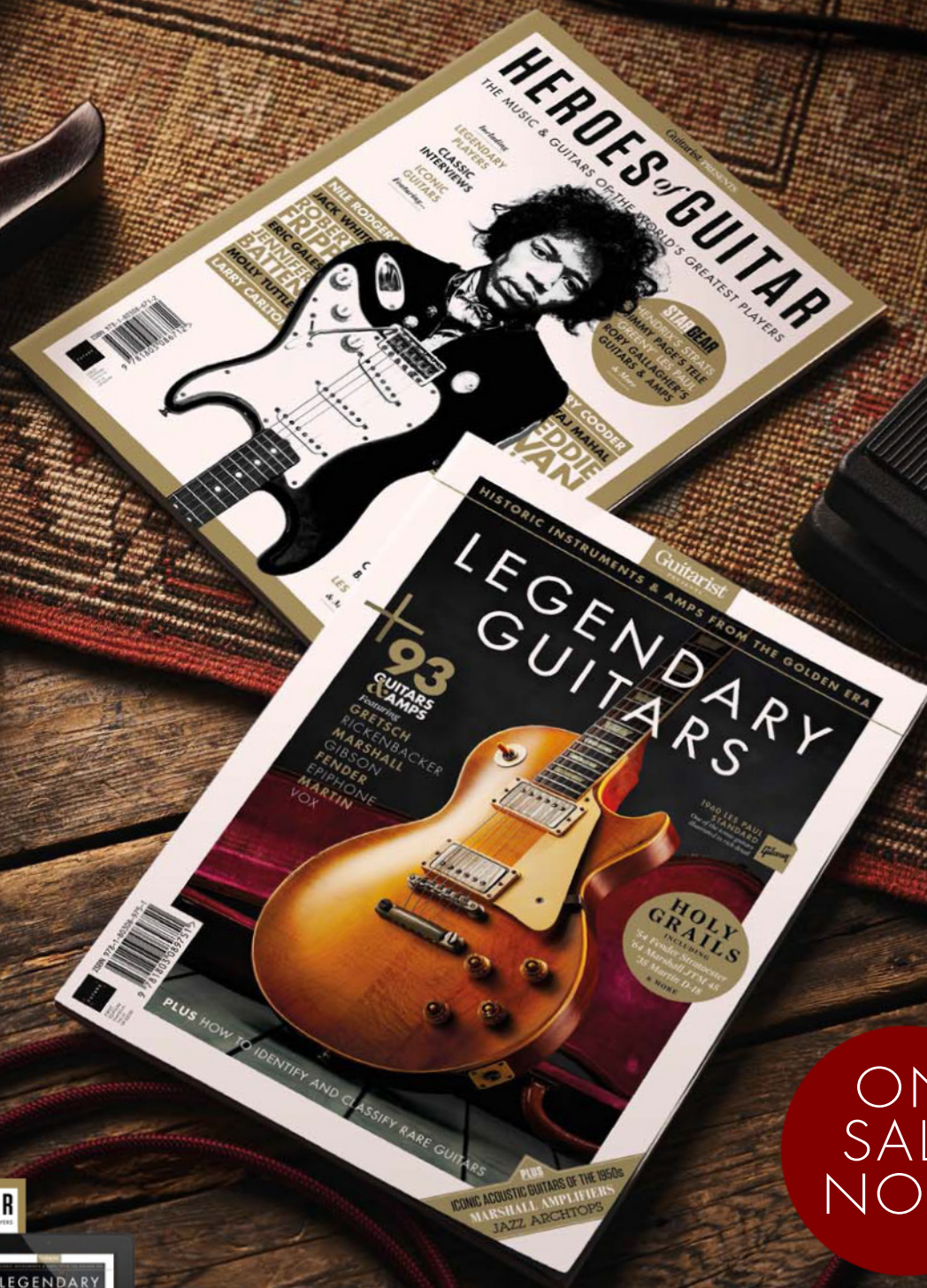
STILL GOT THE BLUES



Though Gary's playing leans more towards the more technical side of traditional pentatonic, his picking-hand technique falls firmly into the area suggested by the example solo. He frequently brushes across adjacent strings with a single movement to articulate phrases in a much more fluent way than alternate picking could produce. Check out the title track, plus *Oh Pretty Woman* and *Walking By Myself*, for some great examples that may have previously slipped under your radar.

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Next month



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

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