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Guitarist

Issue 523

MAY 2025

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ANDY SUMMERS

ON HIS 80s AVANT GARDE ALBUMS WITH FRIPP

THE PRETENDERS

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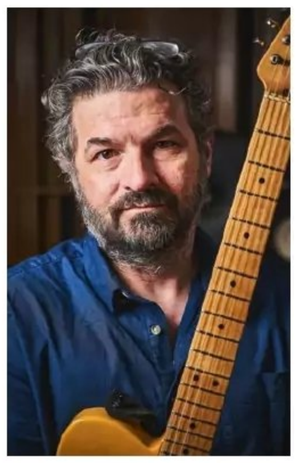
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Keeping It Real



While we were chatting with this month's cover stars, Chrissie Hynde and James Walbourne, the subject of phones at gigs came up –The Pretenders have a strict no-phones policy, which has caused some fans to grumble. Why shouldn't people capture a little memento of a great gig, you might ask? The answer lies, I feel, in the fact that we've become so used to being passive consumers of entertainment via electronic media (me included) that we've forgotten that the audience is an essential part of the show, too. If you doubt that, think back to any times you may have played a gig when hardly anyone was in the audience – and compare that to nights when the place was packed.

Performers aren't robots, and the chemistry of a great gig relies on a crucial connection between the energy of the music and the crowd's reaction – and, somehow, the forest of phones that sprouts in upheld hands when a famous song comes on kills it instead. "It's hard to explain what it is," Chrissie Hynde reflected when we joined her at Dawsons' well-appointed store on Denmark Street for our interview. "It's something about some invisible, indefinable thing that's in the room. I don't want to use the word energy because it's overused, but something breaks the vibe."

Perhaps, like George Martin and The Beatles, the audience is, if you will, an undeclared member of the band. And if that member is taking pictures rather than joining in the flow of the music, we all feel their absence. That being said, it's not the only off-piste behaviour at gigs that we've heard of. The tech of one very famous guitarist who's no longer with us (and who was celebrated for his sustain) told me that some obsessive, serial-attending fans took along stopwatches to time how long he held the climactic note of a famous solo at different gigs! Perhaps they recorded his progress on a wallchart? It takes all sorts... Enjoy the issue and see you next time.



Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Andy Summers

It's hard to imagine a more cerebral art-rock guitar duo than Andy Summers and Robert Fripp – Andy takes us inside their 80s albums **p32**



A Matchless Master

We were deeply saddened by the recent death of Matchless co-founder Mark Sampson. Read our final interview with him on **p106**



Unplugged Perfection?

Feedback-free, thinline stage acoustics have come and gone, but has LR Baggs finally cracked it with the new AEG-1? We test it on **p8**

COVER IMAGE BY JOBY SESSIONS; ABOVE: ANDY SUMMERS & ROBERT FRIPP IMAGE: DGM ARCHIVE; MARK SAMPSON IMAGE COURTESY OF BAD CAT AMPS; LR BAGGS IMAGE BY PHIL BARKER

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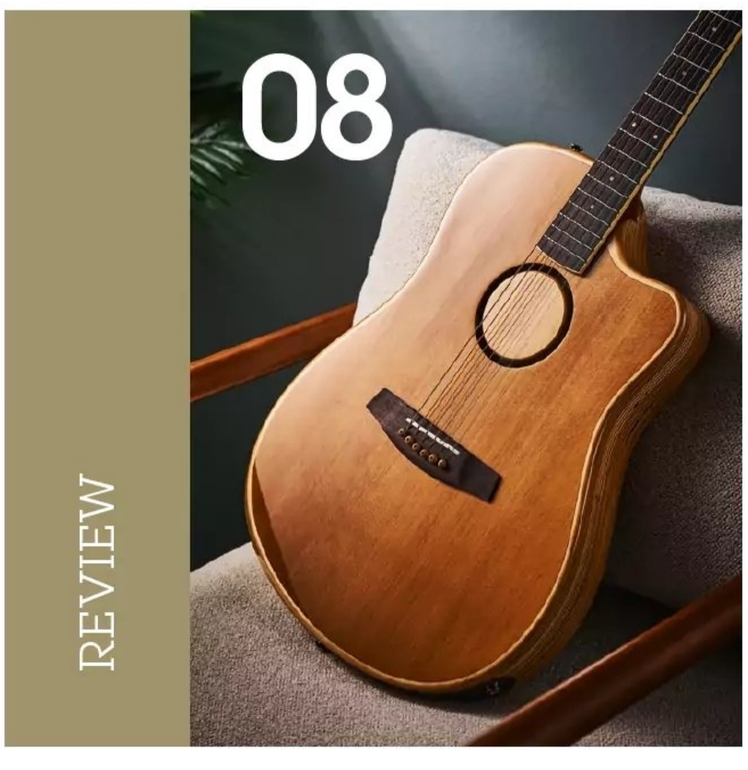


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LR BAGGS AEG-1
£2,015

WHAT IS IT? Fresh take on the thinline acoustic from master luthier turned acoustic-pickup guru

It's A Frame-Up

This cutting-edge electro from LR Baggs has a plywood body frame, torrefied spruce top, rosewood back and studio-quality electrics – and we can't wait to plug it in!

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

Lloyd Baggs is best known for designing industry standard acoustic pickups such as the Anthem, Session VTC, HiFi and HiFi Duet. But, in fact, Baggs comes from the world of high-end lutherie, creating instruments for Ry Cooder, Jackson Browne, Janis Ian, Graham Nash and other great artists. And it was watching Cooder struggling to amplify his Martin that set Lloyd on his new career path. "I saw Ry's pain in trying to amplify his acoustic," Baggs reveals. "It was pretty brutal, so it has become our quest to make amplifying an acoustic as easy, pleasurable and simple as it is with an electric guitar."

Thinline electro-acoustics have been around for years, notables being Gibson's Chet Atkins SST, the Godin Multiac (which Baggs had a hand in creating), Fender with its Highway and Acoustasonic series, and many others. But after years of creating some of the world's favourite acoustic pickups, Lloyd has returned to guitar building, combining his luthier's knowledge with innovations in acoustic amplification that have since occurred, many of them his own. The result is the new AEG-1. There are three







1. See how the neck is bolted to only the AEG-1's plywood frame, so there's no stress on either the guitar's separate top or back. The circular wooden backplate can be removed for access to the HiFi Duet pickup system

different top options available: Natural Engelmann Spruce, Torrefied Sitka Spruce (as here) and Sunburst Sitka Spruce.

After much experimenting, Baggs devised a solid plywood frame into which the guitar's top and back are inset, with the neck separately bolted into place. "On a regular acoustic guitar the neck is actually held in place by the top and back," explains Lloyd. "Take the back off and it'll collapse. Since the AEG-1's neck is only attached to the frame, it allows us to tune the top and back independently. Tuning the back allows us to really enhance the lower frequencies."



The instrument's multi-laminated poplar ply is made in the USA. "We started out using Baltic birch, but that stuff's really heavy," Lloyd continues, "whereas the American-made poplar ply is light, strong and stable."

The AEG's evolution reminds us of Les Paul's experimentations with his 'Log', chopping up guitars to make prototypes until something works. "Every couple of years I would take a few days out and try to figure out how to get rid of the 'banjo' sound that you can get with an electro-acoustic," Baggs states. "When Covid hit, the guys in the shop said, 'Why don't you build a guitar?' So I hollowed out a solidbody, put a really good top on it and a really good pickup in it, and it was good but not exactly thrilling. So I cut down a cheap 000-size Chinese guitar to the thickness of an acoustic-electric, then put wood around the inside lining to simulate what a hollowed-out guitar's sides would be, and stuck the back on. That sounded really good, so I did some tuning and when I got the frequency of the back below that of the top, it started to get a really nice bass. I then laminated a bunch of plywood, and on our CNC we cut out the first bodies and it was, 'Oh, this works!'"

The ply frame is machined so that its laminated lines are exposed around the guitar's edges. There's also an attractive

2. The rosewood bridge features a compensated composite saddle and dotted pins. Behind it, on the bridge plate, sit the HiFi Duet's sensors and Silo microphone
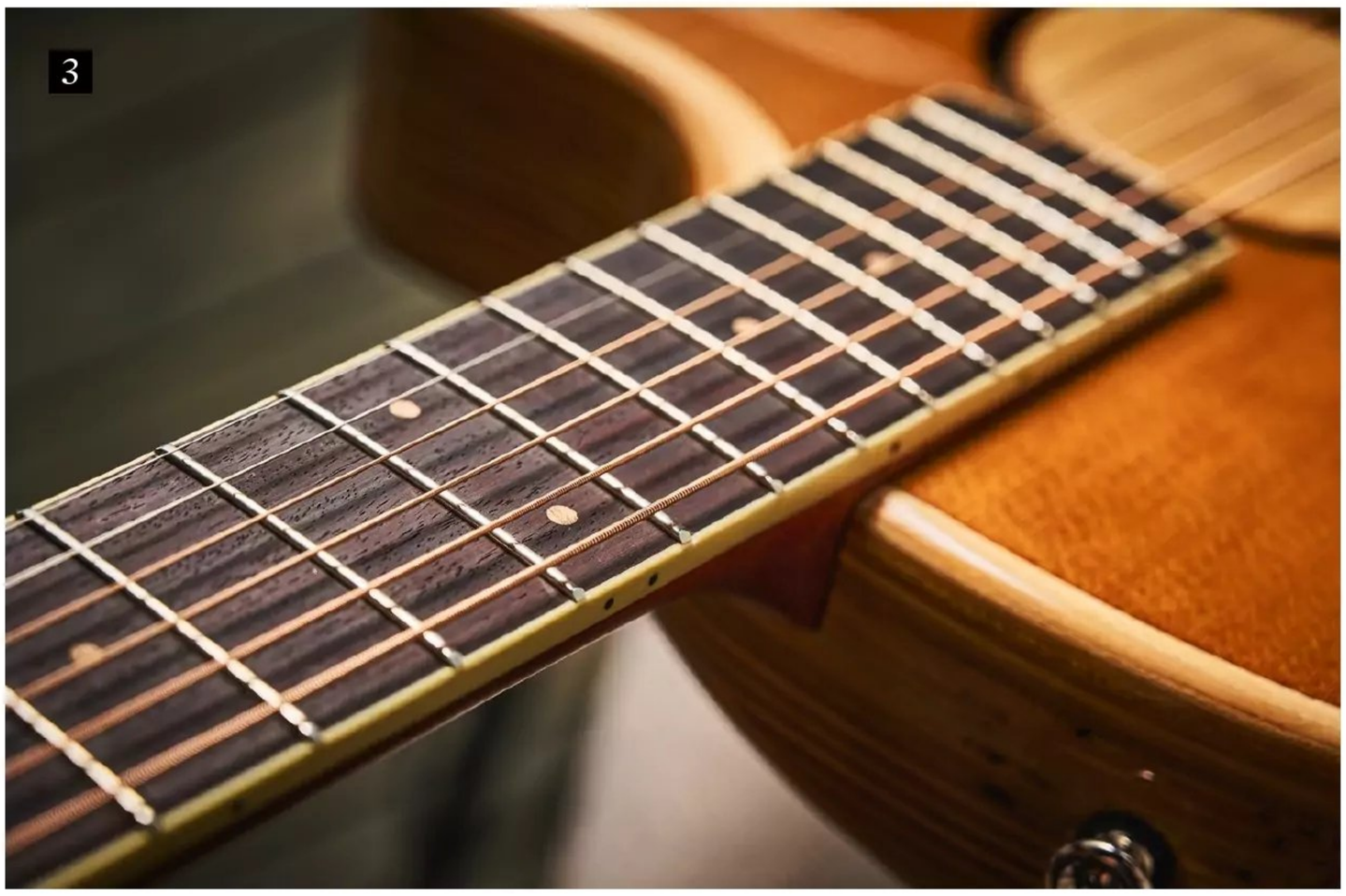
3. A 406mm (16-inch) radius Indian rosewood fingerboard carries small wooden dot fret markers and 20 medium frets

4. The AEG-1's headstock is modern and attractive, with its matching cream plastic truss rod adjustment coverplate, edge binding, and buttons for the closed-back tuners

5. This side-mounted control panel features volume, tone, mic/pickup balance, phase invert button and low-battery warning light, all powered by a single nine-volt battery

forearm chamfer, like you'll find on certain high-end acoustics. The faux soundhole is a circular slice of the poplar ply, with the 'rosette' a sunken recess between this and the top itself. Our example features a back of handsome Indian rosewood, and it all makes for a good-looking, if futuristic, take on the electro-acoustic theme. Four hefty bolts hold the medium-C-profile African mahogany neck in place; atop this sits a bound Indian rosewood fingerboard with 20 medium-fine frets, and the headstock holds six fully enclosed, cream-buttoned tuners.

Internally, the AEG-1 is braced in a regular scalloped 'X' pattern, with a bridge plate that carries the pickup sensors and microphone. Baggs has chosen to fit his ready-made HiFi Duet, with its twin sensors and Silo mic all attached to the plate (a removable circular wooden disc on the rear allows access if required).


3



4



5

> An AEG-1 would give even the most complex of live acoustic guitar rigs a run for its money

"Since our iBeam, we've been trying to make a bridge plate pickup that works," reveals Lloyd. "There's a bunch of them out there, but they're not very dynamic and they feed back early. The HiFi has all the advantages of an undersaddle pickup, such as feedback resistance, stability, dynamics and presence, but it's non-invasive: you just stick it on and drive it away." To control all this, the system's discrete studio-quality preamp is mated to a side-mounted panel housing volume, tone, pickup/mic balance, phase inverter and battery life indicator.

The AEG-1's overall level of construction is exactly what you'd expect from a Korean-made instrument, with a flat, high-gloss poly finish and everything confidently put together.

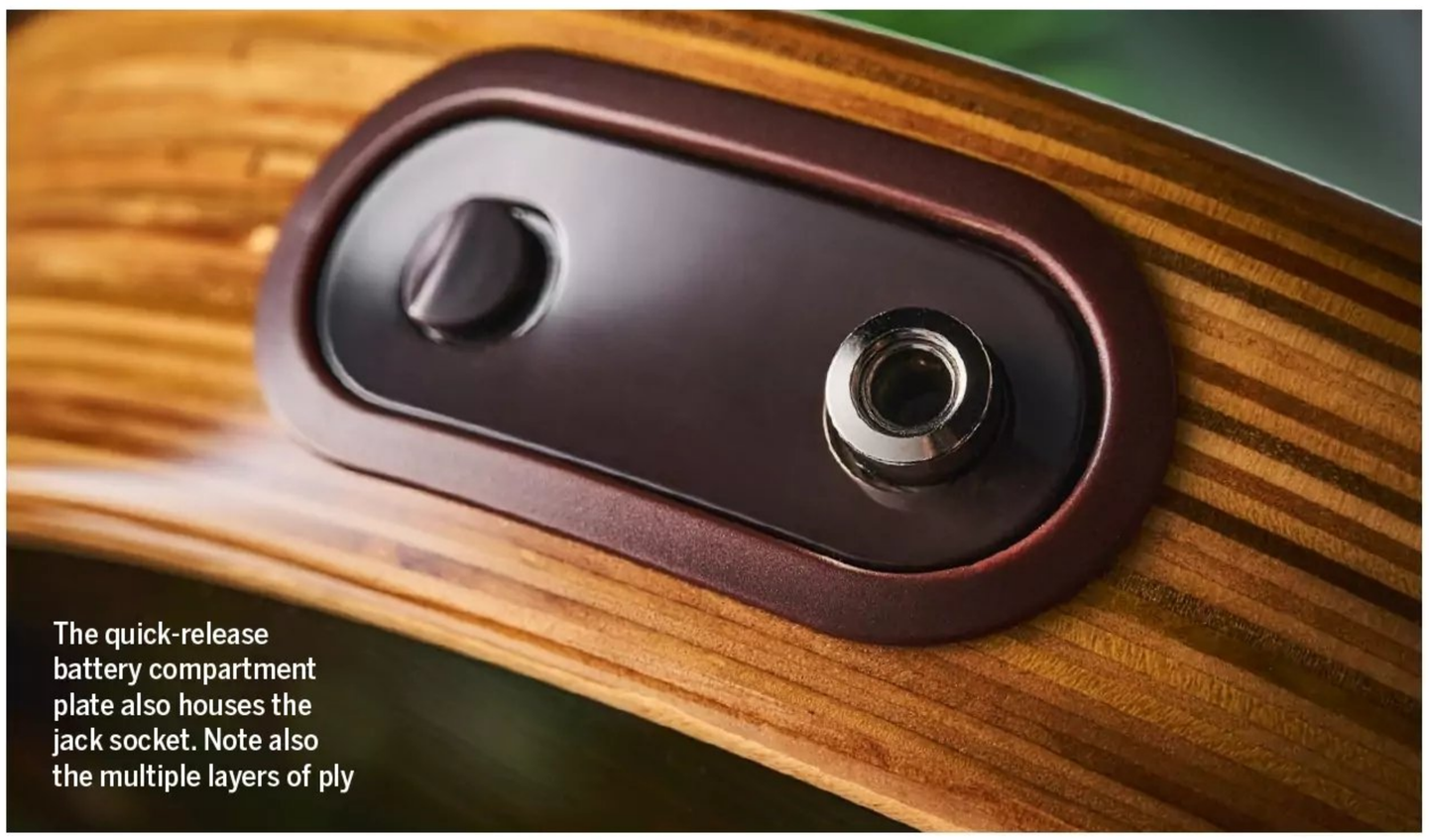
Feel & Sounds

Due to the way the heel attaches to the poplar body frame, it's a chunky affair, but you can get pretty high up on the neck if need be. With its satin finish, the neck feels reassuringly meaty in the hand, and the action is low and comfortable straight out of the quality padded gigbag.

Unplugged, the sound from the AEG-1 is surprisingly fulsome and acoustic-like, with plenty of volume and no hint of boxiness. Plugging into an AER Compact 60 set flat, the response is pure and



Four sturdy metal screws connect the AEG-1's chunky neck heel to the plywood frame, into which are inset the rosewood back and spruce top



The quick-release battery compartment plate also houses the jack socket. Note also the multiple layers of ply

natural. Setting the guitar's volume and tone to taste and experimenting with the microphone blend control reveals a set of acoustic tones that are warm and clear, but even at its extremes there's nothing unpleasant. We settled on the pot set at around two-thirds of its sweep, which added a lively breathiness to an already convincing acoustic tone. We encountered no feedback issues, and are confident that an AEG-1 would give even the most complex of live acoustic guitar rigs a run for its money.

Unplugged, the sound is surprisingly fulsome and acoustic-like, with plenty of volume

Verdict

"We've always had a sneaky jealousy for electric guitar companies," confesses Lloyd Baggs. "Any 12-year-old kid can go into a guitar store, plug in an electric guitar and have a big grin on his face. But amplifying an acoustic is more like going to the dentist for a root canal. So we wanted to build a guitar that, when you closed your eyes, you were hearing a *real* acoustic."

And we can only conclude that LR Baggs has done just that! At a smidgen over £2k, it's several hundred more than even a US-made Fender Acoustasonic, but while there's no magnetic pickup for those electric tones, we really like the simpler, uncompromising proposition the AEG-1 offers. It's hard to successfully describe 'tone', but if you're a gigging acoustic guitarist you need to get down to your nearest dealer to try an AEG-1 soon. We think you'll be bowled over. We were. G



LR BAGGS AEG-1

PRICE: £2,015 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Korea (by Crafter)
TYPE: Thin-bodied, cutaway electro-acoustic
BODY: High-quality plywood poplar frame (made in USA), w/ solid Sitka spruce top w/ scalloped bracing, Indian rosewood back
MAX RIM DEPTH: 60mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 394mm
NECK: African mahogany w/ medium 'C' profile
SCALE LENGTH: 651mm (25.63")
TUNERS: Closed-back
NUT/WIDTH: Composite/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, wooden dot fret markers 406mm (16") radius
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian rosewood bridge w/ composite saddle/55.1mm
ELECTRICS: Custom LR Baggs HiFi Duet w/ HiFi bridge plate pickup and Silo microphone, side-mounted control panel w/ volume, tone, mic/pickup balance, phase invert button, and low-battery warning light, powered by single 9V battery
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.721/6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: As above but w/ torrefied Sitka spruce or natural Engelmann spruce top (all £2,015)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Natural Engelmann Spruce (as reviewed), Torrefied Sitka Spruce, Sunburst Sitka Spruce

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Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Probably the most convincing acoustic tone from an electro that we've yet heard; attractive and futuristic, it plays well and is totally fuss-free in use

CONS Is it a tad pricey? To the acoustic purist, it's likely to be what a Tesla is to the petrolhead community – otherwise it's a cracker!

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MARSHALL STUDIO 900
£1,199

WHAT IS IT? A 'shrunken' 20-watt Marshall JCM900 with two channels, spring reverb and switchable output power

Slight Return

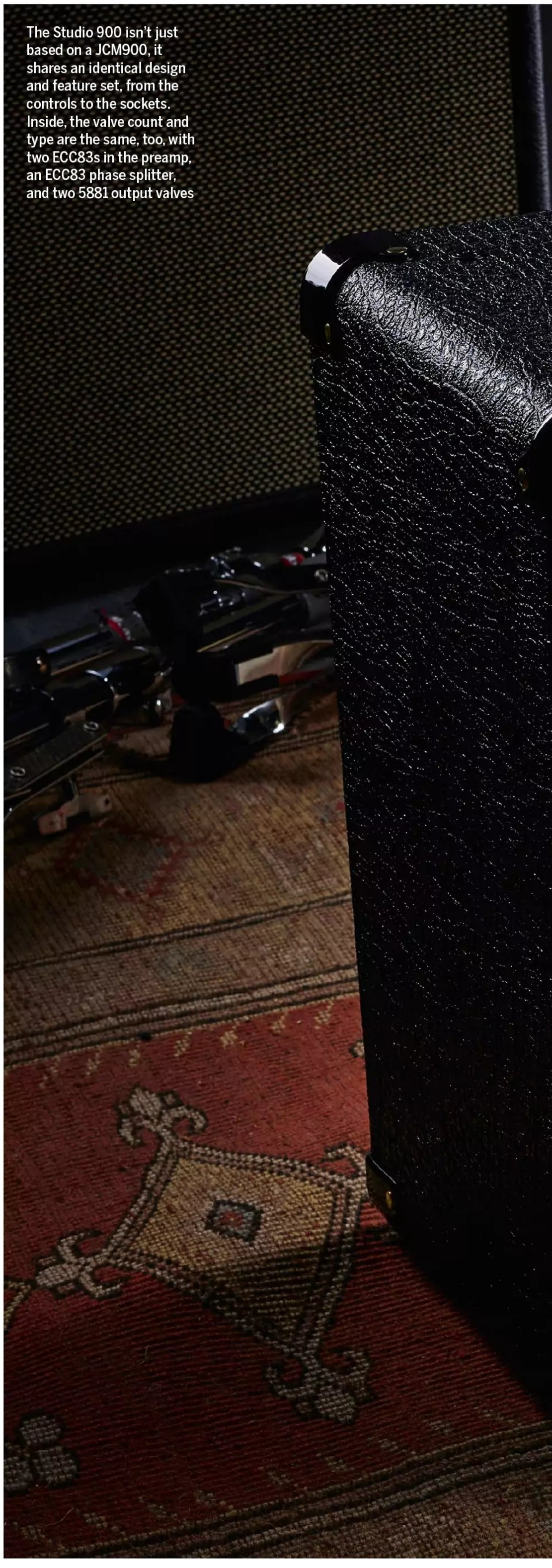
Marshall's cult classic from the 90s makes a comeback, joining the brand's Studio range as a low-watt combo

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Olly Curtis

After the rip-roaring success of the JCM800 in the 80s, Marshall ushered in the 90s with the JCM900 – its then-modern evolution of the JCM series, which sought to bring more gain to the table in response to the trends of rock, metal and a burgeoning grunge scene.

To some, it hit the spot. To others, it never faced a fair trial, its main 'crime' seemingly being the fact that it wasn't the JCM800. Despite this, the JCM900 – particularly the 100-watt 4100 and 50-watt 4500 models – became the 'Marshall of the 90s', offering hot-rodded Marshall tone in combination with dual-channel, dual-master volume convenience and a spring reverb assignable in different amounts to each channel. This saw the 900 find favour, particularly in the live environment, with everyone from Dave Grohl in his early Foo Fighters rigs, Green Day's Billy Joe Armstrong, Weezer's Rivers Cuomo and, the man who shifted more guitar gear than anyone in the mid-90s, Noel Gallagher.

Somewhat unbelievably, the JCM900 turns 35 this year, and to mark the occasion



The Studio 900 isn't just based on a JCM900, it shares an identical design and feature set, from the controls to the sockets. Inside, the valve count and type are the same, too, with two ECC83s in the preamp, an ECC83 phase splitter, and two 5881 output valves


INPUT
GAIN
LEAD GAIN
TREBLE
MIDDLE
BASS
PRESENCE
REVERB
VOLUME
REVERB
VOLUME
PUSH ON (CH. B)
PREAMP (CH. A)
PREAMP (CH. B)
MASTER (CH. A)
MASTER (CH. B)
STANDBY
POWER
JCM 900
20W Hi Gain Dual Reverb
STUDIO
Marshall



1

1. While there were a number of versions of the JCM900, Marshall has zeroed in on the dual-channel, dual-reverb 4100 model as its basis for the Studio 900. The EQ is shared, but we get independent gain, volume and reverb selection for both channels. "When the 900 was first released, the dual reverb was the more popular model due to the feature set," says Marshall's Steve Smith. "It's the same Accutronics reverb tank that the originals had in the 90s"

2. Bumping an amp's front-end with diode-driven gain pedals might be commonplace, but the JCM900 has often come under fire for its use of clipping diodes in the valve preamp. The same hybrid design is implemented here, and we're not really sure what all the fuss is about!

Marshall has selected the 900 as the latest in its legacy products to receive the Studio treatment, scaling it down to a smaller-format amp with a maximum output of 20 watts offered in both head and combo versions, the latter of which is the subject of this review.

While this sort of exercise can often result in a redesigning of at least the power section of the amp to accommodate the reduced power, Marshall has opted to keep the design of the Studio 900 faithful to the original. "The schematic and values are the same as the full-size JCM900," says Marshall's product expert, Steve Smith. "We felt it was important to keep the headroom feel of the original tubes, while dropping volume by adjusting the plate voltages and using custom transformers, therefore keeping the character of the original."

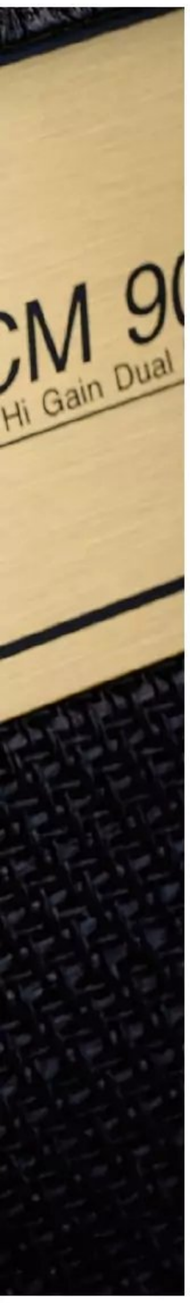
Those design points include a pair of ECC83 valves in the preamp, a third for the phase splitter, and a pair of 5881s (essentially military-grade 6L6s) in the output section. However, that brings us to one of the other main reasons that the 900 is sometimes viewed less favourably than its older sibling: the presence of a hybrid valve/diode preamp stage. This observation by many a valve purist is used as a reason to diminish the 900's tonal qualities, while overlooking the fact that boosting the input of a JCM800 with an analogue overdrive is common practice, so we're not going to dwell on it here.



2

Elsewhere, the Studio 900 continues to follow an almost identical design to the 4100/4500 models. On the front panel, we get gain controls for each channel, a shared EQ, reverb controls and a pair of volume knobs to balance the output of each channel. To the back, there are five speaker outputs, a pair of line outputs (one direct, one Recording Compensated), an effects loop (with the original's trim pot replaced by a full-size control knob), and the Studio's power-reducing toggle switch. This drops the output from the full 20 watts down to five watts in the middle position and less than one watt at the minimum setting, and the whole lot is pumped through a Celestion G12T-75 speaker.

In use, the Studio 900's Channel A (the clean channel) brings us our first surprise. Far from the heated-up bluesy clean tone we were expecting, it's quite the opposite, yielding a sharp, spiky, jabbing clean sound. It works brilliantly paired with single coils for funk playing, or really any style where you want your clean sound to be just that. With Presence and Treble controls to hand, there's comprehensive control in the top-end frequencies, which is just as well because





If you thought that a small JCM900 would equate to a cheap design, think again. The Studio 900 is built in Bletchley, and our amps arrived with stickers giving nods to the people who complete the covering and finishing on each amp



MARSHALL STUDIO 900

PRICE: £1,199
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Valve combo
VALVES: 2x ECC83 preamp valves, 1x ECC83 phase-splitter, 2x 5881 output valves
OUTPUT: 20W (16 ohms), switchable to 5W/>1W
DIMENSIONS: 240(w) x 510 (d) x 460mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 17.9kg/39.4lbs
CABINET: 1x12
LOUDSPEAKER: Celestion G12T-75
CHANNELS: 2
CONTROLS: Gain, Lead Gain, Treble, middle, Bass, Presence, Reverb/Volume per-channel, FX loop level, output power toggle switch
FOOTSWITCH: 2-button, included
OPTIONS: Studio 900 Head (£1,099),
RANGE OPTIONS: Studio JTM Combo (£949), Studio Classic Combo (£949), Studio Vintage Combo (£949) (Studio Classic 1x12 cabinet (£449), Studio Classic 2x12 cabinet (£499)

Marshall Amplification
01908 375411
www.marshall.com

we found ourselves needing to round off some of the sharp edges at times.

With the output power set to 20 watts and the channel volume at 'band levels', there's a lot of headroom in Channel A's gain control. This drops a bit in the different power modes, and by balancing the preamp gain and output volume, it's possible to move into slight overdrive at the upper end of the gain scale. Together with some of the true spring reverb courtesy of the Accutronics tank, it's a versatile channel that adds an extra dimension.

Channel B is where we find the rockier side of the Studio 900. There's plenty of gain, but it's still very much centred in the indie/alternative/classic zone, with the potential for the more vintage end of metal achievable once the dial is maxed out and the output volume cranked. All the while, the Studio 900 keeps an amount of abrasive edge to the sound, and it's clear to see why it has been (and continues to be) a favourite of punkier players.

It's worth noting that we tried the combo (which has an identical feature set to the head version) into Marshall's Celestion V-Type-loaded Studio Classic 1x12 cab, as well as in parallel with the internal G75T. Obviously, the extension cab doesn't have an amplifier or spring reverb tank housed inside of it, but when going into the Studio Classic cab the sound became altogether beefier on both channels, with more weight and low-end in the room.

With some of the true spring reverb courtesy of the Accutronics tank, the versatile clean channel adds an extra dimension

The only slight oversight we can point out is that for an amp that's designed with the purpose of taming volume levels, we'd love to see the Recording Compensated output mute the speaker for direct, mic-free, quiet recording.

Verdict

If you find yourself swearing at manuals as you try to memorise menu and button sequences with your gear, then you'll love the simplicity of the Studio 900. It's a good old-fashioned valve amp that does what you expect. The controls are laid out in a very easy-to-understand, linear arrangement with no dual functionality or hidden features.

While some will gripe at the Studio's close proximity to the JCM900 Vintage Reissue's price, we applaud Marshall's convictions for keeping the build of its heritage-derived products in the UK. The only thing we'd like to see is some more '2025' features when it comes to connectivity in an age of home recording and near-silent stages. G

8/10

PROS Excellent lower-powered JCM900 tones; spring reverb; easy to use

CONS It's the same price as a full-size JCM900 head; no speaker-less operation



BEETRONICS LARVA MORPHING PHASER
£239

WHAT IS IT? Six-stage analogue phaser with digital control from LA's Beetronics

Mighty Morpher

Beetronics' latest offers a pair of different phaser/vibrato settings with footswitchable morphing between the two

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Adam Gasson

1. These LEDs are basically a 'ramp indicator' that light up in sequence to show the progression of the ramp between the two phasers. The leftmost LED flashes blue at the rate set for Phaser 1; the far-right one flashes pink at the rate set for Phaser 2

2. This is the Tap/Ramp footswitch (on the left of the pedal), which can set the phaser rate by normal tap tempo methods and also initiates the ramping action when pressed

3. The bypass footswitch (on the right) can be double-tapped to flip between Phaser 1 and Phaser 2, inverting the ramp direction. It can also be held down to access two secondary parameters – setting tap tempo subdivisions for perfectly sync'd changes between different speeds, and setting the LFO centre point

4. The Bypass LED in the centre of the pedal doubles as a distortion meter for the preamp, moving through traffic-light colours

Beetronics has been on a run of releasing dirt pedals recently, but its latest offers modulation (plus a modicum of dirt). The Larva Morphing Phaser is a six-stage analogue phaser with an element of digital control, which has morphing capabilities between two adjustable presets, and also sports a preamp – inspired by Moog's Moogerfooger pedals – that adds practical tonal variations.

There are three toggle-switched options for the sound the Larva delivers: you can have phaser, vibrato (wet signal only) or just the sound of the preamp with no modulation effect. The Preamp has a natural warmth and is controlled by gain and master volume knobs that can be turned up to build in valve-like overdrive. The basic effect architecture of the pedal offers Phaser 1 and Phaser 2, which can be toggled with the left-hand footswitch, the transition between the two being determined by a choice of three ramp shapes and a knob that sets the ramp speed. Each phaser has its own Rate and Depth knobs, but there's also a knob, common to both, that adjusts the resonance for greater intensity and a flanger-like metallic ring at its extreme. The core sound is that of nice, thick classic 1970s phasing or vintage vibrato. That Resonance knob, plenty of depth adjustment and a very wide range of speeds offers plenty of variation, but there's even more from a secondary parameter that allows an offset shift in the LFO's centre point.

There's lots of scope available via the ramping options for onstage performance. The first ramp shape switches from one phaser to the other and stays there. While using this and setting the ramp speed at minimum gives you instant switching back and forth between the two, you can also set the ramp speed for evolving transitions – perhaps emulating a rotary speaker if you set up slow and fast rates for the two effects. The second ramp shape lets you move from one phaser to the other while the footswitch is held down, and it will ramp back when you release it. And the third ramp shape does the same but delivers an immediate switch back, making it great for momentary blasts of a more intense effect.

Verdict

Two instantly accessible sound variations combined with the preamp's drive options make this a flexible vintage-flavoured asset for your signal chain. G



BEETRONICS LARVA MORPHING PHASER

PRICE: £239
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Phaser pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Rate 1 & 2, Depth 1 & 2, Ramp Speed, Resonance, Preamp Gain, Preamp Master Volume, Ramp Shape switch, Effect toggle switch (Preamp/Phaser/Vibe), Tap/Ramp footswitch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 100 mA
DIMENSIONS: 90 (w) x 140 (d) x 68mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.beetronicsfx.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Classic phasing sound; two different sounds available at all times; adjustable switchable transitions; tap tempo; preamp can add dirt

CONS Preamp adjustment can be a little fiddly if you're trying to dial in cleaner sounds; side-mounted jacks may be a no-no for some



THE RIVALS

The Larva has a unique feature set, so here are a few of our favourite phasers that do their own thing. Behringer's Dual Phase (£95) is the company's version of the Mutron Bi-Phase, putting two independent six-stage phasers in one box. Elsewhere, there are no knobs to adjust on Heptode's three-footswitch Virtuoso (£175, right), which channels the classic 70s Maestro PS-1A phaser. Also check out the ThorpyFX Pulse Doppler (£265), a versatile four-stage analogue phaser that is footswitchable between Phase and Vibrato modes, and Strymon's Zelzah (£299), a digital pedal that offers independent four- and six-stage phasers.





J ROCKETT BLUE NOTE SELECT
£239

WHAT IS IT? A new version of J Rockett's low-gain drive pedal

Electric Blue

The latest pedal in J Rockett's Blue Note Series brings together features from previous versions for versatile low-gain drive

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker



1. The Blue Note Select has two gain structures: Standard and Hot. Flip the switch to the Hot position for more gain
2. These classy metal knobs have been custom made purely for this pedal
3. The Tone knob will brighten or darken your top-end to match your rig, and the Fat knob adds girth while staying tight

It's probably fair to say that J Rockett's Blue Note pedals haven't had as high a profile as other drives, but maybe that will change with this third incarnation: the Blue Note Select. Prior to this, there was the larger but similarly equipped Blue Note Pro, and then a smaller Tour Series version without the Hot switch. Now, that Hot switch has been reinstated in another nicely compact offering that's had a complete makeover, not just in looks with its electric blue colour scheme and silver knobs, but with the circuitry, now in V2 with "an enhanced low-end response", in the company's words. What you're getting here is a low-to-medium gain drive pedal with toggle-switched Standard and Fat modes, the obligatory volume and gain knobs, plus tonal adjustment via Tone and Fat knobs.

Starting off in Standard mode, the pedal's remit is boost and low-gain drive. With the gain knob down, there's a little bit of clean boost available beyond unity on the volume knob, but it's using those two together that dials in just a little 'hair' or a touch of crunch to a clean sound. Sonically, it's pretty transparent so won't radically alter your core tone, but there is enhancement to be had with the Tone knob tweaking the crucial top-end frequencies, while that Fat knob pushes your lower midrange and can add a lot of body to thicken your sound.

J Rockett's recommendation is to set your amp just past the minimum edge of break-up and let the pedal take it further – and, doing this, it gives a very natural extra push to our black-panel Fender and vintage Marshall JMP50. As such, it's a great 'more' pedal that feels very much like a natural extension of the amp. Hot mode doubles your options with a touch of extra gain and a perceived slight increase in presence, taking things a stage further into more medium-gain, raunchy territory.

Verdict

The name holds a clue: this is a pedal that may be ideal for blues players, but in more general terms it's an excellent overdrive that may find its best use as the sole dirt pedal in front of an amp that's starting to cook, or as a vital component in multiple-pedal gain staging. G

J ROCKETT BLUE NOTE SELECT

PRICE: £239
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Overdrive pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Gain, Tone, Fat, Hot switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 8mA
DIMENSIONS: 58 (w) x 103 (d) x 50mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
https://rockettpedals.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Solid build quality; compact size; two gain modes; practical EQ

CONS We'd like it even more if it cost less...



3

THE RIVALS

There are plenty of drives out there that can do the low-gain enhancement thing – check out any of the 'klones' for a start – but let's mention a few that might fit the role. Nashville favourite the Nobels ODR-1 has a few variants (ODR-1X is £129), or how about the Keeley Noble Screamer, which puts Nobels and Tube Screamer-style sounds in one chassis (£199)? The Greer Lightspeed Organic Overdrive (£229) has Loudness, Drive and Frequency knobs, while the MXR Timmy (£139, right) is a mini-sized pedal with Volume, Gain, Treble and Bass knobs and a Clip switch that provides three different clipping styles.



MXR's space-saving mini pedal offers a breadth of drive tones

FIRST PLAY



VOX VRM-1 REAL MCCOY & V846 VINTAGE
From £259

WHAT IS IT? Recreations of the first Vox wah pedals from the 1960s

1

2

Vintage Voxes

With a legacy of distinction, Vox revisits its past with modern recreations of its first two wah pedals

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker



1. Apart from the large Vox logo on the front of the V846 and writing on both baseplates, the pedals look identical

2. As is traditional with wah pedals, the bypass footswitch is operated with a press at the treadle's toe position

3. The pedals are battery-powered only. Access is by unscrewing the rubber feet to remove the baseplate. There's no screwdriver required, just grab the rubber and turn

The wah pedal was introduced to the market in 1967 as a Vox product. Without getting into the convoluted story of its genesis and later production, we can say that the first incarnation was called the Clyde McCoy pedal (named after a trumpet player) and the second was the V846 model. These pioneering pedals are regarded as classics and Vox has now brought out new versions: the VRM-1 Real McCoy and the V846 Vintage.

While there are other Clyde McCoys and V846 versions on the market, the Vox plan this time was to meticulously replicate the exact tonal characteristics of the pedals. The company boffins got busily into reverse engineering, looking into the factors that made a mint-condition 1960s original just right, including the casing and all the electronics, especially the all-important inductor. That inductor design has been replicated in two versions so that the VRM-1 and the V846 Vintage each have a distinct tonal characteristic.

In keeping with that vintage aesthetic, the pedals run from battery only, giving approximately 100 hours of use from a zinc-carbon type. Construction is solid and weighty with just the right amount of resistance on treadle travel. This means it feels comfortable in use but will also remain in position if you require a cocked wah sound.

Both pedals exhibit a consistently steady transition of tone from heel to toe, but the character of that transition is different in each. To our ears, the VRM-1 is the more mellow of the two, moving smoothly through the midrange and not exhibiting as much top-end at the toe position as the V846, which is a little more strident in that position. The V846's transition could be described as peakier, exhibiting more bark or quack in its travel.

Verdict

Two holy-grail wah pedals back in a close-to-original form has to be a good thing. In an ideal world there'd be a way we could have both versions in one chassis, but that's not a possible so you have to choose.

We liked the VRM-1 for its expressive vocal quality, but we were also enamoured with the V846's more aggressive nature and how it handled 'wacka-wacka' *Theme From Shaft*-style rhythms. Let's not forget, though, that both are designed to do the same job and they do that job extremely well. Try them side by side and see which voicing works best underfoot for you. G

VOX VRM-1 REAL MCCOY & V846 VINTAGE

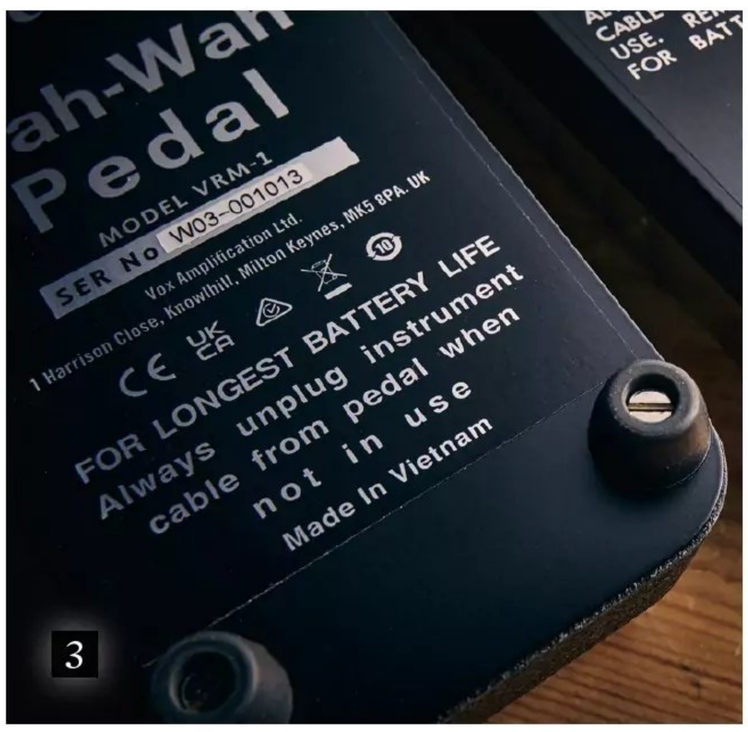
PRICE: £259 each (chrome version of VRM-1: £299)
ORIGIN: Vietnam
TYPE: Wah pedals
FEATURES: Standard bypass
CONTROLS: Treadle with bypass switch under the toe
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery
DIMENSIONS: 103 (w) x 254 (d) x 75mm (h)

Korg UK
01908 304664
www.voxamps.co.uk

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Accurate reissues; quality distinct vintage sounds; good treadle action

CONS Battery power only; slight treble loss when bypassed



THE RIVALS

Jim Dunlop has a wide range of wah pedals under the Cry Baby banner, including several signature models such as Slash and Joe Bonamassa, but the one that most resembles an original 60s model is the CM95 Clyde McCoy (£199), which can run from battery or a nine-volt power supply. Jam Pedals' Wahcko (£289) is a favoured choice of many pro players; it features a six-position rotary switch for different frequency sweep ranges. The Xotic Effects XW-1 (£279) has a slightly smaller footprint and features four external controls that alter Bias, Wah Q, Treble and Bass to really dial in your sound.



The expressive and versatile Jam Pedals Wahcko wah pedal

PHOTO: WWW.JAMPEDALS.COM



the Wishlist

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

Stromberg Master 400 £7,999

CONTACT **Stromberg Guitars** WEB **www.stromberg-guitars.com** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

For a guitar brand that stopped making instruments 70 years ago, Stromberg is enjoying quite a revival. There have been a few attempts to resurrect the brand in those decades, but this new wave of Czech-built beauties are in a different league. Along with our pictured Master 400 – Stromberg's flagship acoustic archtop – there is also the Master 300 (£6,999), and both are very limited. As this year progresses we'll also see the unlimited Hanover Series models (from £2k), which should broaden the appeal.

Charles A Stromberg, a Swedish immigrant, started his business in Boston in 1906 offering a range of instruments, including banjos and drums, although little is known about the size of his company. His oldest son, Harry, worked with him until 1927; his younger son, Elmer, started in 1910. Stromberg built a reputation for finely crafted banjos and he began making carved-top guitars, possibly as early as 1927.

The instruments were based on a 16-inch body (406.4mm in today's money) called the G series, reflecting the move from banjo to guitar by the leading players of the day. Evidence based on surviving Stromberg models suggests that, although the serial numbers started at 300, some 636 guitars were made before both Charles and Elmer passed away in 1955 and the original Stromberg company ended.

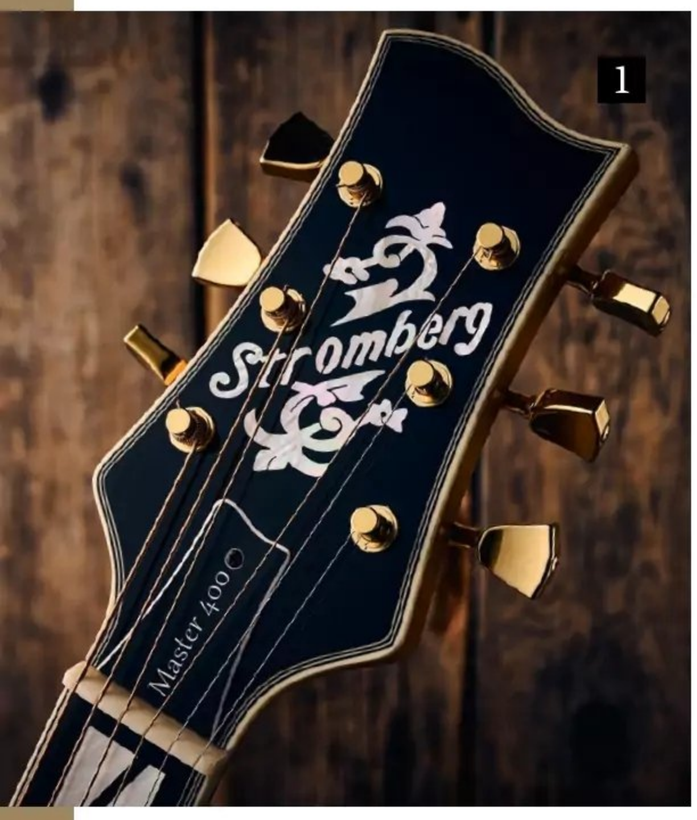
The later-period guitars were highly revered, as are surviving examples. Freddie Green, who joined Count Basie's band in 1937, became known as 'Mr Rhythm' or "the most famous big-band guitarist of them all", and by late 1940 he's pictured with a blonde Stromberg Master 400 (which he only stopped using in the late 50s after the death of Charles and Elmer resulted in a rise in value of the brand).

"These guitars are among the most sought-after of all rhythm guitars," says George Gruhn, guitar historian. "[They] possess a sound of their own, epitomised by a power and projection unsurpassed by any other archtop acoustic."

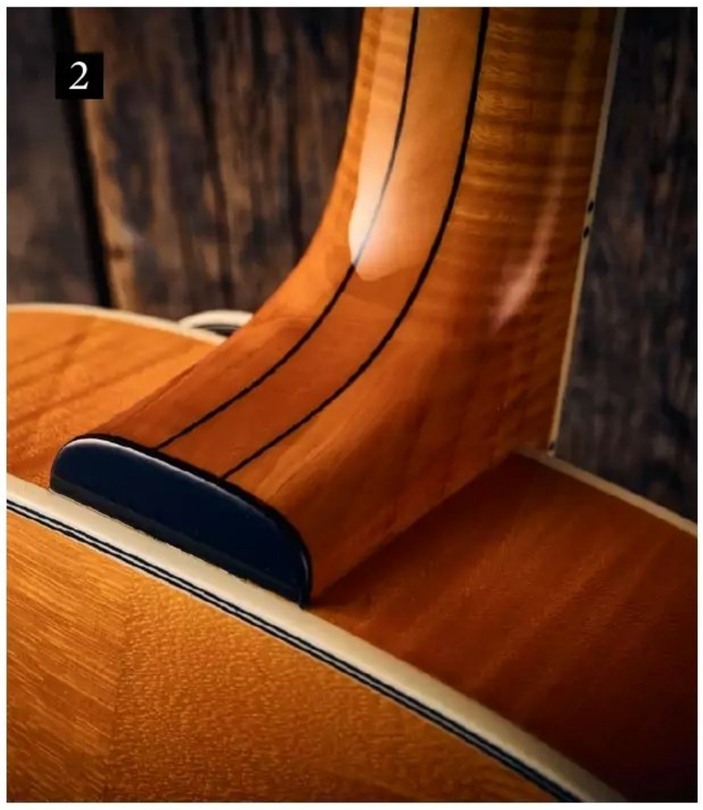
Guitarist's Neville Marten says of the pictured Stromberg: "It's a big bold blonde with tons of power in the bass but plenty of typical archtop treble to cut through the band. You'll not be playing second fiddle to anyone with this fabulous beast in your hands. Sit with it for five minutes, look at the clock and an hour's gone before you know it." G

1. The ornate headstock of today's Master 400 features an ebony facing both front and back, while the crisp inlay is mother-of-pearl. The tuners for this repro are Kluson Wafflebacks – gold plated, of course!

2. The Trans Honey finish here (Vintage Sunburst is also offered) shows off the workmanship and quality of the woods. The back and sides are finely figured maple (solid, not laminated), and the top is finely grained spruce. The neck is a five-piece laminate; the outer sections are heavily flamed and rather beautiful maple



1


2


3

3. With its 14-frets-to-the-body neck join and the non-cutaway style, Stromberg's Master 400 isn't designed for high-position noodling. But the dark ebony fingerboard with split-block m-o-p inlays feels good, as does the neck shaping

4. At 482.6mm (19 inches) wide, this might well be the largest acoustic guitar we've handled (even though the scale length is PRS-like at 635mm/25 inches). It's also one of the loudest we've played, reflecting its original role as a rhythm guitar in the swing bands of the day

5. A unique feature of later-period Stromberg archtops is a single diagonal top brace. This seems to have been used from 1940 to 1955, known as Stromberg's 'golden era', though it's estimated only 150 guitars were built during that time



THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

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

PRS 40th Anniversary Limited Edition models From £6,999

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

JARGON CRUNCHING

TCI Pickups

TCI stands for Tuned Capacitance and Induction, referring to two electronic influences on the tone. PRS's theory is that these two combine to create a resonant peak in the pickup's response, and PRS seeks to harness this by tuning it for a consistent response. Coupled with the high-pass 'EQ' filter switching, the TCI models allow for some forensic tone-sculpting.

I recognise these as PRS guitars, but they look special. What's the deal?

As you're no doubt aware, PRS is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, and if there's one thing we know about PRS – both the brand and the man himself – it's that they know how to mark an occasion in style. Continuing the 40th celebrations are the PRS Charcoal Phoenix Limited Edition (£7,999) and the 40th Anniversary Custom 24-08 Semi-Hollow Limited Edition (£6,999) models, both of which are available in limited numbers worldwide.

Charcoal Phoenix, eh?

Yes, despite the analogy of conquering adversity, the guitar actually takes its name from the finish on the top and back of the guitar: the deep crimson back of the guitar represents the fire, and the charcoal "microburst" finish of the top serves as the ash.

In fact, for this guitar PRS has pulled out all the stops to create what Paul Reed Smith wants to see and play personally in an electric guitar. It draws inspiration from the design of the Private Stock John McLaughlin Limited Edition model from 2023. "I was inspired by its exceptional sound and playability," says Paul. "For the Charcoal Phoenix, I wanted to create something equally remarkable but with a stoptail bridge." Remarkable, it is, featuring a chaltecoco neck, ziricote fingerboard (22 frets, 635mm/25-inch scale) and a 'Fat Back' mahogany body that's topped with Private Stock-grade figured maple.



ANNIVERSARY MODELS

Continuing its 40th birthday celebrations, PRS has announced two Limited Edition guitars. The Charcoal Phoenix (far left) is based on Paul Reed Smith's own guitar preferences, while the Custom 24-08 Semi-Hollow expands the Custom blueprint

CHARCOAL PHOENIX

Paul enjoyed working on the Limited Edition Private Stock John McLaughlin so much, he decided to pursue the concept further, opting for a fixed bridge design, rather than a vibrato, while maintaining the TCI pickups and EQ switching

PRE-FACTORY INLAY

Both guitars feature the 'pre-factory' Eagle inlay on the headstock (with both models veneered with a ziricote faceplate), nodding back to the brand's early days. As well as this, there are 'Old School' birds in the fingerboard

FINISHES

The Charcoal Phoenix takes its name from the deep crimson 'fatback' slice of mahogany and the Charcoal "microburst" of its figured maple Private Stock-grade top, and comes in Charcoal Phoenix finish only. The Custom 24-08 Semi-Hollow, however, is available in four finishes



Custom 24-08 Semi-Hollow (l-r): Charcoal Cherry Burst, Charcoal Tri-Color Burst and Faded Whale Blue Smokeburst

Chaltecoco? That sounds like something I'd drink before bed!

We wouldn't advise it. Instead, this dense hardwood – which is native to central America – lends itself well to instrument manufacture and has a natural orange hue to it. It's made an appearance in the PRS catalogue before, most notably on previous 'Paul's Guitar' models.

What about the pickups?

Again, the Charcoal Phoenix has been put together with Paul's current preferred spec. With that in mind, his current favourite pickup in the PRS line-up appears to be the TCI Treble and Bass humbuckers. These are wired to a three-position switch, but there are also two 'EQ' mini-toggles that engage a high-pass filter per pickup, plus a master tone and volume.

PRS has pulled out all the stops to create what Paul Reed Smith wants personally in an electric guitar

What about the Custom 24-08 Semi?

The Custom 24 gave PRS its start, and here we get that same model's hallmarks – a mahogany neck, mahogany body and carved 10-Top figured maple top wood – but it's delivered in PRS's popular semi-hollow design. It's got the same John McLaughlin-derived tonal expansion with the electronics, too, featuring the TCI pickups and mini-toggle EQs as found in the Charcoal Phoenix. This gives us eight 'voices' through a combination of pickup selection and the two filters. Unlike the Phoenix, though, it includes a vibrato instead of a hardtail, courtesy of the PRS Gen III Patented Tremolo. This Custom 24-08 Semi Hollow comes in four finishes: Faded Whale Blue (pictured left with natural back), Charcoal Cherry Burst, Charcoal Tri-Color Burst and Faded Whale Blue Smokeburst (shown above).

You said they're limited – how many and how much?

Yes, these are both Limited Edition models, with 300 Custom 24-08 Semi Hollow and 150 Charcoal Phoenix guitars being produced worldwide. The Custom 24-08 Semi Hollow costs £6,999, while the Charcoal Phoenix is priced at £7,999. To get hold of one, visit the PRS website to locate your nearest retailer. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

BLACKSTAR AIR WIRE i58 £149

Wireless systems have come a long way since the days of knowing when a nearby taxi was approaching. The latest to join the no-cable party is Blackstar, with its Air Wire i58 system. Operating at 5.8GHz, it offers nine hours of playing time from one 2.5-hour charge, and includes an auto-shutoff circuit to save battery if there's no signal after 10 minutes. Blackstar has built in a Cable Tone switch if you prefer the 'warmer' sound from your lead, and it promises low-latency, dropout-free performance. In fact, if the Air Wire detects interference, it'll automatically switch to the next frequency to avoid any disruption. Up to four systems can be used in the same setup, and each transmitter/receiver pairing will work over a distance of 35 metres.

www.blackstaramps.com



VINTAGE PACIFIC COAST FROM £199

Another brand celebrating an anniversary this year is Vintage, the John Hornby Skewes-owned affordable guitar manufacturer, which was launched 30 years ago. In keeping with its tradition for making quality guitars that don't break the bank, Vintage has launched the Pacific Coast line of acoustics. Based around the V300 folk body and its "soft cutaway", we get mahogany back and sides accompanied by a solid spruce top and nato neck and techwood (a poplar/obeche composite) 'board. The Pacific Coast series features six finishes, with each one available as an acoustic (£199) or electro-acoustic equipped with a Vintage T6 preamp (£249).

www.vintageguitarsrus.com



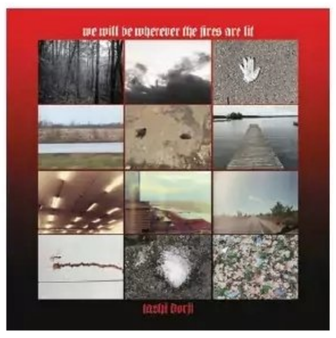
THE LINEUP

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: Tashi Dorji

Album: We Will Be Wherever The Fires Are Lit (Drag City)



We Will Be Wherever The Fires Are Lit is a 10-track collection of improvised guitar from Tashi Dorji **https://tashidorji.bandcamp.com**

Bhutan-born experimental guitarist Tashi Dorji resides near Asheville, North Carolina. While he began his musical journey through punk-rock, he now plays spiky, improvised guitar music that can be as beautiful as it is challenging, as his newest album, *We Will Be Wherever The Fires Are Lit*, attests. A singular player, Tashi doesn't seem to worry too much about audience reaction: "You can make music for the purpose of soothing people's ears and to give them comfort, but I make it as a practice that is part of what I do," he explains. "It's not that I'm intentionally trying not to please people, it's just a pretty raw form of art that I record and release. I know that some people like it and some don't, and that's okay."

Undefined & Unpredictable

It's difficult to categorise Tashi's solo sound, such is its mercurial, unpredictable nature, a fact that he seems well aware of. "I really don't know how to describe it," he smiles, after a pause. "A lot of it feels impermanent... The stuff I'm trying to play doesn't seem to have any lasting [effect], you know? I think that's why I'm attracted to improvised music – there's this interesting idea of it not enduring. It just [snaps his fingers] disappears, although it's also constantly alive. I've been playing this style for so long now that, not to sound pretentious, it feels part of [me]. At this point I'm not interested in formalism or knowing anything, actually. It feels like this music has become part of my day-to-day physical movement."

Beyond Choice

When Tashi is discussing his output, it's from an artist's perspective, which begs the question: why was music the chosen medium? "It was never I chose or didn't choose," he answers. "When I got to the US I was mostly into underground punk-rock from around the area, which was heavy in that anarchist tradition. It was really inspiring and it kind of led me into the music I now play. But, to me, music is also political, especially improvised music; it is radical in its practice and the way it approaches structures. For me, it's the closest thing to anti-statist, in that it defies hierarchy and power structures."

Mindblowing Mentors

As we talk about artistic influences, we ask if a certain Derek Bailey often gets mentioned to Tashi. "All the time, man!" he laughs. "It was he who opened my eyes, and this wasn't too long ago. I was hearing a bit of people like John Zorn, Albert Ayler or Sun Ra, but not much beyond that. I found the Derek Bailey CD *Standards* and it just blew my mind – it was so singular and so beautiful. But it was accessible, too, at least to my ear. It was just tremendous. I'd heard improvised horn and larger band music, and I'd wondered if there was the equivalent of free-jazz on guitar. That was when I found Derek Bailey and it was a profound and beautiful experience."

If It's Broke...

Once we get to talking about instruments, it quickly becomes clear that Tashi is not a gearhead in the traditional sense, and that his relationship with guitars is more modest. "It's really about affordability," he says. "I've been to guitar shops and played fancy guitars and cheaper ones. I just don't understand why people pay so much money. Look at Terrie Ex from The Ex [Netherlands band]; his guitar is so old and broken and he's amazing. I saw them live and I don't think I could have played it, it was so broken. He's been using it for so long that he has this way with it... There's something special about that." **[GK]**



PHOTO BY YANN DUPUIS

Tashi's improvised music has its own agenda: "There's this interesting idea of it not enduring," he says. "It just disappears, although it's also constantly alive..."

Standout track: *Meet Me Under The Ruins*
For fans of: Derek Bailey, Bill Orcutt, Sun Ra, Sarah Louise



"Improvised music is radical in its practice and the way it approaches structures. For me, it's the closest thing to anti-statist – it defies hierarchy and power structures"

PHOTO BY DAVID A. SMITH/GETTY IMAGES

THE BUZZ

How Tashi uses instruments' quirks to his advantage

Although Tashi often uses a Jay Turser semi-hollow electric and an Ibanez 2839 classical guitar, for this album and 2020's *Stateless* his only tool was a steel-string acoustic. "I really love steel-string guitars, they sound great. I have this old guitar, erm, what's the brand?" We suggest it's a Hohner HW605. "Yeah, that's it [laughs]. Somebody gave me that and it's incredible. I bought a Guild for on tour and it just can't make those percussive sounds; the Hohner is smaller-bodied and buzzes everywhere. So when I did *Stateless* I just had so many ideas and I wanted to continue that. I think the next one will be completely different."

THE LINEUP

Albums

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



Chris Robinson and Jimmy Page on stage together in 2000 following their collab at The Greek

PHOTO BY KMAZUR/WIREIMAGE

Jimmy Page & The Black Crowes

Live At The Greek

Guitarist CHOICE

The Orchard (available now)



Supergroup romp through Zep and Crowes classics

Cast your mind back 26 years to 1999 – The Black Crowes were a force to be reckoned with in rock music but had failed to enlarge upon the success of their first two albums, 1990's *Shake Your Money Maker* and *The Southern Harmony And Musical Companion* from '92. Likewise, Jimmy Page was, it seems, at somewhat of a loose end, following the release of *Walking Into Clarksdale*, the only studio album to come out of his Page and Plant collab in '98. Perhaps Jimmy's reunion with Plant gave him the urge to return to Zep's catalogue in earnest on the live stage.

Whatever the case may be, the decision to join forces with the Crowes for a run of gigs the following year proved a solid match-up as this 25th anniversary re-release of the resulting shows at LA's Greek Theatre in October of 1999 entertainingly demonstrates. The setlist is a mixture of well-chosen Zep cuts, such as *Celebration Day* and *Custard Pie*, plus Crowes hits such as *Hard To Handle*. The result is intriguing. Page is on decent form, especially with the riffs, playing them as only he can and delivering that strangely scribbly but wonderful improvisational style of his on the solos, though perhaps a shade more scrappily than in his 70s prime. Chris Robinson on vocals, however, invests Zep with less coquetry and more Southern 'tude to deliver a rollicking reboot of many classics here. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Custard Pie*
For fans of: Led Zeppelin, The Black Crowes, Greta Van Fleet

Taj Mahal & Keb' Mo'

Room On The Porch

Concord Records (available 23 May)



Cross-generation duo delivers sublime collaboration

It's been eight years since Taj Mahal and Keb' Mo' released *TajMo*, the album that went on to Grammy success, winning Best Contemporary Blues Album. Now, the pair reunite for this long-awaited 10-track sequel: "That first album turned out so great that part of me wondered if maybe we just got lucky," Keb' tells us. "But when we got back into the studio together, I felt that same magic again, and I realised it wasn't luck at all." The album comprises more co-written compositions than *TajMo*, but includes covers including Jimmie Cox's *Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out*. However, it's the originals that shine here. It's a wholly uplifting, positive album with tracks such as *Thicker Than Mud* and the album's title track living inside your head long after the fadeout. Excellent! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Junkyard Dog*
For fans of: Eric Bibb, Ry Cooder

Status Quo

Status Quo – Live!

Edsel Records (available 16 May)



Seminal Quo taking flight in Glasgow

"Is there anybody out there that wants to rock?" This is the question, delivered to the crowd at the Glasgow Apollo Theatre in 1976, that opens this hefty collection of Quo live tracks. If your answer is 'yes', you've come to the right place as this eight-disc set leaves almost nothing to the imagination regarding Quo's three-night, mid-70s stint in Scotland, which is remembered by fans as a high point among their live shows across the decades. It also provides an expansive window on the band before they became synonymous with cheery chart-toppers such as *Rockin' All Over The World*, revealing a more urgent and gutsy band than we know today on tracks such as *Backwater/Just Take Me* and *In My Chair* – with the overall effect sounding somewhat like early Hawkwind without the psychedelia, though The Doors' *Roadhouse Blues* does make the setlist. The playing is endearingly scrappy at times, but the energy of a young Quo and the crowd's love for the band is captured perfectly here on this immersive treat for Quo completists. **[JD]**

Standout track: *In My Chair*
For fans of: Thin Lizzy, The Move, The Hamsters

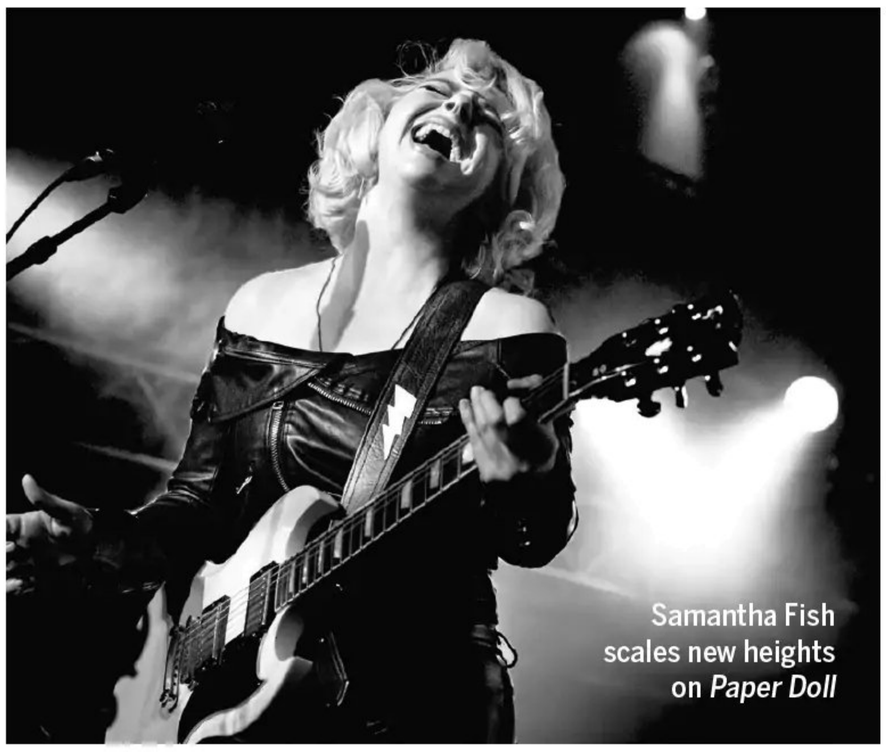


PHOTO BY DOUG HARDESTY

Samantha Fish scales new heights on *Paper Doll*

Samantha Fish
Paper Doll

Rounder Records (available 25 April)



Renowned blues-rocker turns it up to 11

Last year, Samantha Fish was invited to support The Rolling Stones at Thunder Ridge Nature Arena in Ridgedale, Missouri, where the audience was treated to her fire-raising take on 21st century blues-rock. And now, following 2023's Billboard No 1 album, *Death Wish Blues*, where Samantha teamed up with blues maverick Jesse Dayton, comes the powerful and intensely soulful *Paper Doll*. The album's nine tracks not only highlight her skills as a guitarist and slide player but she seems to have reached new heights as a vocalist, too. "It's taken me years to finally find my voice in a studio setting," she confirms. "But with this record, I took everything I had and slammed it right on the table." It's a passionate and expressive ride, with tracks including *Off In The Blue* and the riff-laden *Fortune Teller* guaranteed to feed your blues-rock soul. Look out for live UK dates this May. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Off In The Blue*
For fans of: Joanne Shaw Taylor, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram, Erja Lyytinen

Robin Nolan
For The Love Of George

Dark Horse Records (available now)



Top Gypsy jazzer pays touching tribute to fallen fabster

Robin Nolan has been part of the Harrison inner circle for years, having been encouraged by George in his early playing career. This recording – made at George's studios at Friar Park using some of the ex-Beatle's own instruments – came about when Robin was playing at a birthday party for Harrison's wife, Olivia. One of George's guitars appeared and Robin played a version of *And I Love Her* for the guests. The idea of the album was born in that moment. Subsequently, Olivia sent Robin an envelope on which George had scribbled some chords and these appear here, formed into a new composition entitled *For The Love Of George*. And so it is that tracks as diverse as *Wah-Wah* and *My Sweet Lord* are all given the Gypsy jazz treatment, resulting in a beautiful and carefully crafted tribute that succeeds on all levels. **[DM]**

Standout track: *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*
For fans of: Django Reinhardt, George Harrison



THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

As **Andy Summers**' and **Robert Fripp**'s avant-garde albums of the 80s are reissued, we hear all about how the side-project came to be

Artist: Andy Summers & Robert Fripp

Album: The Complete Recordings (Panegyric)



The Complete Recordings: 1981-1984 features three albums: 1982's *I Advance Masked*, *Bewitched* from 1984, and *Mother Hold The Candle Steady*, a compilation of previously unreleased material

Four decades later, it's a pairing so strange you're tempted to write it off as a fever dream. Yet the release of a new boxset comprising 1982's *I Advance Masked* and 1984's *Bewitched* albums – plus 11 unheard tracks from the vaults – confirms that Andy Summers and Robert Fripp really did join forces. As star names from the disparate worlds of stadium rock and prog respectively, The Police and King Crimson guitarists also seemed poles apart as players. But as Summers tells us, their fleeting, never-to-be-revisited collaboration pushed the envelope with its collision of jazz, ambient and world flavours.

What made you want to collaborate with Robert Fripp in the early 80s?

"Well, I wasn't into King Crimson at all. Definitely not my kind of music. But Robert and I come from the same area of England. I was part of the Bournemouth music scene and you heard about this 'weird kid' out in Wimborne – and it was Robert Fripp because he has a certain style. At 16, I got a job as a guitarist in a hotel band with some very stellar jazz musicians. I eventually left and went to London with Zoot Money – actually, I got fired for trying to pick up hotel girls – and Robert took over the 'guitar seat', let's call it. So there's a sort of cosmic connection there, I suppose.

"So years pass. I went to university in America, studied music, came back, was down and out, as it were, and had to get reconnected. And the person who reconnected me, strangely, was Robert. He gave me the number of a drummer, Mike Giles, who was just about to tour with Neil Sedaka, so I had a gig with him.

"I subsequently became the world's most famous guitarist with The Police. And being the kind of searching musician I am, I started looking around. I was starting to feel somewhat musically hemmed in by being in that band. I wanted to stretch my legs and play with somebody else, just to see how I'd do, almost like an experiment on myself. At that time, Robert was living in New York and I was there all the time. So he popped into my mind: 'Oh yeah, Robert Fripp, he's a good guitarist. Maybe we could do something together.' It started with a fairly casual hook-up, when we went to practise in a photographer's flat in Soho."

What were your impressions of Robert as a guitar player?

"You know, he plays the way he plays. It's that multimeter, single-string style that he plays very well. You couldn't say, 'Oh man, let's do a blues' or 'This thing is in 3/4' or 'Let's make it more country.' His thing is the polyrhythmic guitar lines. That's what he does. He doesn't really do anything else. He doesn't play the blues. He's never played the blues in his life. That's not who he is.

"I'm a much broader guitarist. I saw that his style was going to be the anchor for whatever we did, and my job was going to be to somehow put the flesh on the bones, and see if we could make up an album's worth of material. We sort of messed around for a couple of hours and said, 'Yeah, it'll be okay'. We got on very well. We were the usual ironic Englishmen, living in New York and laughing at it all."

Where were the album sessions held?

"Well, another common link was an engineer back in Bournemouth, a guy called Tony Arnold. We were all in awe of him as kids because he had these incredible American guitars that nobody else had. So he was this giant figure that loomed over us. At this point, he'd started a recording studio in Bournemouth called Arny's Shack. It was a little two-room joint, but Tony was absolutely immaculate in his setups, everything technical was top of the line. So we thought, 'We'll go and record there.'



The somewhat unlikely pairing of Andy Summers and Robert Fripp, which resulted in a Billboard Top 50 album in the States

PHOTO: DGM ARCHIVE



PHOTO: DGM ARCHIVE

"And we actually had a lot of fun doing it. We had to work it out, how to come up with this stuff. It wasn't a question of guitar chops – we had that in abundance – but [the challenge] was to make some sort of imaginative album between the two of us that didn't really sound like jazz or pop music, necessarily, but was reflective of the two characters doing the guitar playing."

I Advance Masked is arguably the more avant-garde of the two albums. Why do you think you were so experimental outside of The Police?

"Well, I think my ears just always went there. As you go on and you mature and you're interested in 'real' music, why are you going to stick with I-VI-IV-V?"

Fripp said _Bewitched_ was "a lot more Andrew than it is me". Is that your memory?

"Yeah, it's true, to a point. You know, he is on every track. But he had to go on tour, so I finished the album and mixed it on my own. There was less of a full engagement, let's say, between the two of us on *Bewitched*. The first album, it felt like we had something to prove: 'Can we pull it off?' And the second one, we went, 'Well, we've got our style now.' But it's true: he couldn't make all the sessions, so it was more or less left to me."

What setup were you using in the studio?

"I think I had my JC-120 and Telecaster from The Police. Probably also a Stratocaster, a Les Paul and an acoustic of some sort. You know, a small battery. And my Pete Cornish pedalboard, which I obviously was very used to working with in The Police. There's some chorus on those albums – and the most fancy thing that was available in that period was the new Roland guitar synthesiser, which is in there somewhere. We also had this Yamaha drum machine – and neither Robert nor I could get it to work."

Summers and Fripp came together for the first of their collaborations, *I Advance Masked*, after the release of King Crimson's 1981 album *Discipline*, while The Police were recording *Ghost In The Machine*

"It wasn't a question of guitar chops – we had that in abundance. [The challenge] was to make an imaginative album that was reflective of [us both]"

What was the reaction to the two albums?

"The first one was a real success. It got into the Billboard Top 50, which, for the kind of music it was, was astonishing. I guess Robert was popular, and I was, like, mega. So a lot of notice was taken of it. I thought it was weird that it got that high in the American chart. Shocking, actually. But very encouraging. We never went on the road or anything. We never became a band. There never seemed to be time. You can imagine what it was like for me. Robert didn't like screaming girls, either, so..."



Looking back on the experience, do you think you and Robert left a mark on each other's guitar playing?

"I doubt that Robert would be interested in playing anything like me at all. Because I really came from jazz and blues, and then eventually rock. I was a very different player. And I got his thing, but I wasn't interested in it, particularly. Of course I could play the lines – I had the technical facility to play anything. And that's what, really, he would bring to every song. I couldn't say, 'Robert, why don't you play some altered chords'; that wasn't his thing. He would play the way he would play and we would fit around it. But it was all fairly congenial. We weren't, like, fighting or arguing over it. It was such an odd setup, with two rather disparate guitarists, but it worked. Out of that difficulty, it made something very good."

The two original albums are being reissued along with a disc of bonus material. How did that come to light?

"I got this call about three years ago. I had all the two-inch tapes in a storehouse in Los Angeles. Who knew what was on them? No-one. But all these other tracks turned up, which were surprisingly good. So I'm pleased to see this come out because there's some material that we didn't even know about, and it all seems to have held up quite well. They're a really weird couple of records. Not necessarily by today's standards; things have moved on. Maybe we were ahead of our time."

More than four decades have now passed since the avant-garde recordings were intially released

"It was such an odd setup, with two rather disparate guitarists, but it worked. Out of that difficulty, it made something very good"

Would you consider reconnecting with Robert to make more of this music?

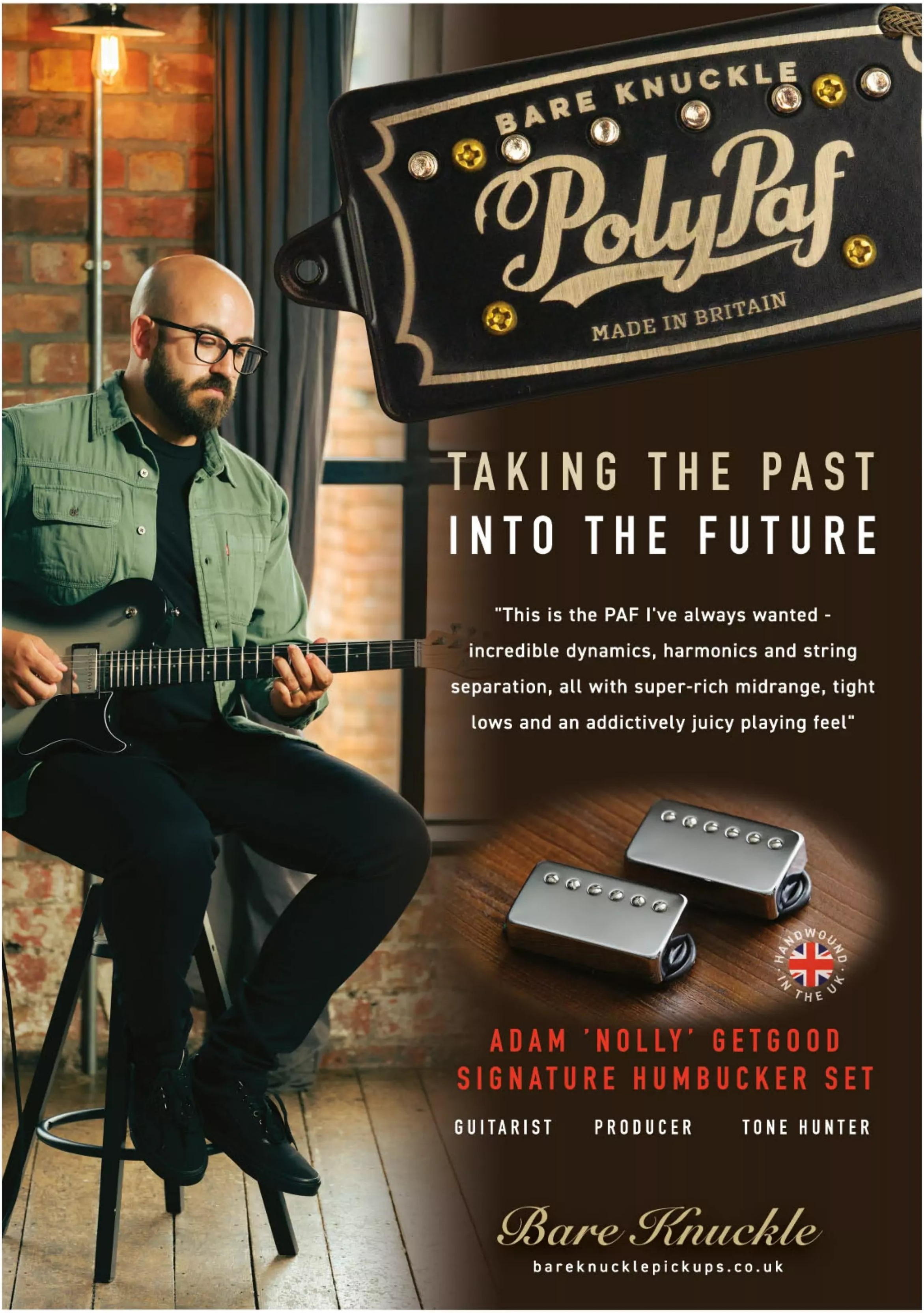
"It felt like it was enough. I would not be against it. Robert would have to approach me. Let's see if [this reissue] stirs anything up. I mean, Robert's out there doing his… I don't know how you describe that stuff he does with his wife. He's become like a one-man cover band. So I don't know, knowing him, if he'd be up for anything like that. It'd have to be very good. But I wouldn't necessarily categorically say no." **[HY]**



The Complete Recordings is set for release on 11 April on Panegyric Recordings

https://andysummers.com

PHOTO: DGM ARCHIVE


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NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE



This Old Thing?

Neville Marten ponders whether relicing, the phenomenon he loved in its early days, has gone too far

I've told you before about my first Fender Relic, a '51 Fender Nocaster that I bought off the Fender stand at the London Music Show. It was the first year Relics surfaced, so I suppose that makes me an 'early adopter'. Years ago I let go of the few vintage guitars that I owned, and today have two Custom Shop Strats, a Tom Murphy aged Les Paul and a Hummingbird acoustic. All of these feature ultra-light to medium distressing. To my eyes, it enhances them as it provides the look of decades-old guitars that have been played but loved, the way most vintage instruments have been.

"I've been involved with guitars for decades, and I can probably count on two hands those I've seen with half the finish gone from the front"

My issue with the ageing business now is that it's become extreme and unrealistic. By unrealistic, I mean the number of vintage guitars that lost that much lacquer is tiny compared with those that didn't. Obviously, Rory's and SRV's are cases that test my point, but those Strats were toured constantly for decades, played excessively hard in sweaty clubs and theatres, often doing 300-plus shows per year.

However, most old Fenders, Gibsons, Gretsches, Rickenbackers and the like were cherished and nurtured by their proud owners. They were significant investments that warranted care and attention. Hence most of them have survived with only light to moderate wear.

I've been involved with guitars for decades, and in all that time I can probably count on two hands the vintage instruments I've seen with half the finish gone from the front, and a circle of it gouged out of the back. But this is now so prevalent in the world of relicing. It's not for me to say what's wrong or right – and drastic ageing is certainly not wrong if people like it, and many seem to. It's just that I don't particularly, even though I've seen a couple of spectacular examples. I must stress that both Fender Custom Shop and Gibson Murphy Lab do very light ageing, too, and it's usually excellent.

I also don't like guitars with the finish removed from the neck because, although this was common on Strats and Teles that were played for years, I've yet to see one that looks convincing. In fact, I've declined two otherwise beautiful Teles recently for this very reason. My old Lake Placid Blue Strat's neck finish had completely gone, but it didn't look like bare wood; it was buffed to a glossy sheen, and the transition into the headstock and heel's lacquer was smooth and elegant.

Dry Run

On a completely different note, during the coldest months of the year, acoustic guitars in centrally heated houses can struggle. If the timbers dry out it can be catastrophic for a lightly built, finely crafted instrument. Obvious signs are a high action, the belly dipping in, the fret ends feeling sharp as the fingerboard shrinks, or all of these. Luckily, we can rehydrate our acoustics and there are many great options from D'Addario (left), Martin, MusicNomad, Boveda and others.

As my own Taylor was showing the signs, to nip it in the bud and not having a proprietary humidifier to hand, I improvised. With the guitar on its stand, I inserted a Sharpie pen between the middle two strings, its pocket clip hooked over one and the pen's other end resting on the back's central cross brace. Then I wet and completely rinsed out a face flannel so no water was dripping out (most important), and carefully draped it over the pen. It was fiddly, but I made sure it touched neither the guitar's back nor the soundhole-mounted preamp controls. As the flannel dried out over a couple of days I repeated the procedure and, believe it or not, my contraption did the trick. I've ordered a 'proper' one now, though.

Even as we move further into spring, if you've kept a nice acoustic out for noodling over winter, check for the signs and purchase a humidifier post haste! G

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

The Humble Humidifier

What? D'Addario GHP Humidifier Pro **Where seen?** www.gear4music.com **Price?** £11.80

You'd have to agree that 12 quid is nothing compared with allowing central heating to destroy your acoustic guitar. Here's how D'Addario says to use the GHP Pro: "Remove cap and moisten sponge. Squeeze to remove excess water, then insert into holder and re-engage stopper. Place in soundhole so that the humidifier is suspended by the two middle strings." D'Addario also does a humidifier for your guitar case. The Humidipak comprises a 'saddlebag' system that drapes over the middle strings into the soundhole, with another for under the headstock. Other companies make great humidifiers, too, (and dehumidifiers if damp is the problem), so check 'em out!



D'Addario's GHP Humidifier Pro protects your guitar from dry conditions

PHOTO: D'ADDARIO



For Old Times' Sake

This month **Alex Bishop** gives a much-loved guitar a well-earned makeover to mark its 100th birthday

The world of guitar repair is a realm where one can particularly appreciate the erosive power of time. Sure, my eyesight is getting worse and I've started making noises when I get up from my workbench, but restoration work has also shown me that guitars are not just static pieces of woodwork but delicate, interactive sculptures that suffer the swells and contractions of seasonal change and the bruises of life on the road.

Recently, Villagers' Conor O'Brien stopped by during his Bristol tour date to have some emergency maintenance work carried out on his stunning Emmanuel Stone acoustic guitar. As Conor's main guitar, the instrument has travelled extensively round the world, mainlining artistic expression and entertaining fans (myself included) for years. But even modern Titebond glue can only take so much musical potency without intervention, so we stepped in to help.

Parlour Games

The bread and butter work of the repair department at Alex Bishop Guitars keeps musicians' road-worn instruments in fine fettle show after show. But occasionally repairs involve a deeper level of restoration that requires more than just fretwork and a twist of the truss rod. Towards the end of last year I received an email from a regular customer of mine asking if I'd take a look at his 'Lyra' guitar. Steve had owned it as a child growing up, and it was purchased by his grandmother at a penny auction between the wars. The original owner, an American army veteran, had emblazoned his name across the back of the guitar in navy blue paint. These cheap catalogue instruments were put out in the 1920s as knockabout parlour guitars but have become desirable today as punchy blues machines with a ladder-braced tone that set them a world apart from their X-braced counterparts.

The work required was extensive, but Steve had felt that as the custodian of this family heirloom the time had come to bring it back into playable condition. There were minor issues common to many old guitars – worn frets, flaking lacquer, a missing bridge – but the main problem was the way the top had distorted around the soundhole. Viewed from the side, the misshapen soundhole had the appearance of a pringle; a century of constant string tension had pulled the soundboard in on itself. At the waist the top was heavily distorted and the action was unplayably high.

Distortion around the soundhole is often attributed to a failure of the upper transverse brace. This thick, sturdy brace (positioned directly beneath the fingerboard) is responsible for taking the pressure from the end of the fingerboard to keep the top from buckling under. A cursory inspection inside the guitar revealed that the thinner-than-usual support had almost completely separated and hadn't been doing its job for decades. Some keyhole (soundhole?) surgery would be required.

I was keen to avoid taking off the back, so removing the brace would have to be accomplished with my hand through the soundhole clutching a palette knife to separate what was left of the glue-join. With the spindly bit of softwood removed, I rummaged through my wood store to find an appropriate spruce block and set to work making a new 16mm wide replacement. Soundboard braces are very slightly arched to help provide a bit of stiffness to the top (I went with a 25ft radius), and after some careful shaping I managed to fit the brace perfectly in between the linings, spanning the full width of the top. This had to be done with some additional clamping pressure on the neck to pull the top back into its original shape.

"The misshapen soundhole had the appearance of a Pringle; a century of constant string tension had pulled the soundboard in on itself"

Occasionally, a little artistic license is necessary, so I added some additional vertical braces either side of the soundhole for long-term stability; after all, who wouldn't want a little bit of extra help when they'd reached a century? With the structural work complete, the guitar was ready to be strung up and sing once more. I'm just left hoping someone will look after me in the same way after 100 years. G

Alex runs guitar making and repair courses at Bristol Guitar Making School www.guitarmakingschool.co.uk



A ton of attitude: this 100-year-old parlour guitar featured a misshapen soundhole and distorted top

PHOTOS BY ALEX BISHOP

RAISING THE TONE



Dishing The Dirt

Metal guitarist, producer and tone expert Adam 'Nolly' Getgood joins **Jamie Dickson** to bust some myths about getting great high-gain tone

Adam 'Nolly' Getgood explains how a number of variables affect high-gain tone, from pick and string gauge, to pedal and amp choice – and, of course, your own playing technique

PHOTO BY JOSEFA TORRES

Adam 'Nolly' Getgood is the guitar world's man for all seasons. He's been a member of influential contemporary metal outfit Periphery, an in-demand producer of hard-rock and metal records, and an expert adviser and product developer for Bare Knuckle Pickups. He has several highly regarded signature humbucker sets to his name – including the recent the PolyPaf set that delivers vintage humbucker tones with a subtle, contemporary twist. But he is perhaps best known for his ability to craft incredibly chunky, detailed high-gain guitar tones that lack for nothing in definition and edge – yet still have a harmonically rich and full sound.

While it's tempting to think high gain is all about amps and distortion choices, Adam says the process of getting searing-hot tone that sounds chunky and well defined begins with the player's fingers.



"For high-gain tones, I'd say that the player and how they're playing is absolutely critical, even though the amp is distorting the signal so much," he tells us. "And it's not about there being a single solution. It's about matching the player's technique and intensity with an appropriate gauge of pick and string to generate a signal that doesn't have too much low-end – and which is generating pleasant overtones for the intensity they're playing at.

"And even then, you're probably still going to be reducing low-end by using something like an overdrive pedal, classically a Tube Screamer/Super Overdrive kind of thing – not really for distortion but because they have this naturally very filtered frequency response, eliminating huge amounts of the low-end. That's really critical for palm muting and chugging, which really is the big challenge with high-gain guitar tones: anyone can dial in a really fat, thick, saturated guitar tone for single notes, but what happens when the player palm-mutes? Does it just fall apart? A lot of the time it does."

As Adam highlights, while fat low-end may feel empowering, it's often an enemy to punchy high-gain tone, muddying your sound and slowing down the crisp response to pick attack that fast, articulate playing demands. Accordingly, Adam adds that the heavily 'scooped' sound that people often associate with metal – with treble and bass set high and mids set low – may have arisen from a misconception.

"If you go back to Metallica using those [Mesa/Boogie] Mark IIC+ amps back in the beginning – the tone stack on that amp is before the distortion... [With that amp,] you have to cut the midrange with those V-shaped graphic EQ [settings on the front panel of the amp] for it not to sound really boxy and mid-forwards. But I think, just from the visual of that, people started thinking that metal guitar tones needed to have very little midrange to them. Actually, that's not necessarily the case. Especially since the 90s, it's pretty rare for high-gain guitar tones to have very little in the way of midrange frequencies. All of that distortion flattening out the frequency response requires some mid coverage to sound great."

Likewise, the days when a ceramic 'bucker with an output like a power station was *de rigueur* for metal are probably over, he says.

"I think the high-output pickup thing was relevant in a time when people were trying to squeeze more gain out of amps that naturally have a huge amount of low-frequency cut in the bottom gain, like Marshalls," Nolly explains. "So you could chuck a very high-output pickup, which naturally is going to have a lot more low frequencies, into that and it doesn't get out of control."

Today's amps, he argues, have abundant bottom-end on tap so the game is more about controlling low-end and adding in some useful midrange heft.



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

"You still want to have a pickup that's got a decent midrange. Some really vintage pickups can be quite hollowed out in that region, so typically you want a pickup that's in the medium-output range, or a pickup that's lower output but voiced with a nice prominent midrange, so when you distort it, it doesn't sound hollow and harsh. I think where we're at now is that high-gain players are mostly using a medium-output pickup or high-gain pickups that have been voiced to have less low-end, or even lower-gain pickups that are voiced to have more midrange and softer treble.

Adam's Bare Knuckle PolyPaf pickups, pictured here in his 2008 PRS Modern Eagle II, are an evolution of traditional humbucker design – and the bridge unit especially can hold its own in a gain-heavy environment "with rich midrange and firm low-end", says Bare Knuckle

"For high-gain tones, the player and how they're playing is critical, even though the amp is distorting the signal so much"

"Then you've got something like active pickups, which were obviously a huge thing when they came out, and are still used by lots of metal artists who are playing EMGs and Fishmans. Those typically have a huge amount of built-in low-cut on them, actually, so they're very hot, but the low frequency has been filtered out, which immediately makes them sound very tight. But you actually almost can't use those with players that are too aggressive because they're already so kind of toppy and they exaggerate that pick attack."

So far from being a monolithic genre, with a maximal approach to gain, EQ and pickup strength, metal is as nuanced in its way as any bluesman's tonal palette that's powered by Patent Applied For pickups and Tweed amps – and understanding this is definitely to your gain. G

THREE TO GET READY

Electrics With High-Gain Mojo



Manson ORYX VI £2,899

Designed in collaboration with Adam 'Nolly' Getgood, the ORYX comes in both six- and seven-string versions. It's a thing of stark beauty – and impeccable build quality. Designed from the ground up as a modern high-gain machine, it has a pair of Bare Knuckle's Polymath humbuckers at its heart, made all the more adaptable with a series/parallel Free-Way switch.



Epiphone Jerry Cantrell 'Wino' Les Paul Custom £879

Jerry Cantrell's chunky distortion sounds have inspired many a high-gain player, and this is an affordable replica of Cantrell's 90s LP Custom, which has been a bedrock of his gain-rich sound over the years. With an Alnico Classic Pro humbucker at the neck and an uncovered and edgily hot 98T PRO humbucker at the bridge, it straddles classic and modern Gibson gain tones with ease.



PRS SE Mark Tremonti £1,039

Alter Bridge and Creed guitarist Mark Tremonti's long-time weapon of choice has been his PRS signature model. There's a US-built version, of course, but this SE sibling, which retails at just over a grand, is beautifully turned out. And it packs in all the features you need to summon up Tremonti's blistering sound with his 'S' pickup set fitted and a Wide Thin neck profile for buttery playability.

SUBSTITUTE

AUDIO ▶ http://bit.ly/guitaristextra



Lo-fi Jazz Chords

This month **Richard Barrett** gets experimental with chord progressions to loop over modern beats

Lo-fi is to audio what black-and-white or sepia-tinted film is to visual. Often lo-fi tracks will loop a sample from an old vinyl record, complete with scratches and crackles, then drop it over a modern beat. In this case, the idea is to be able to create your own loops or chord progressions, although this knowledge is useful beyond this genre, too, of course.

Apologies in advance for Example 1, which is a bit of a stretch, but sometimes we have to make these sacrifices if we're going to find voicings you don't hear every day! All of these chords have their highest note (B) in common, with most of them also featuring F# as the second highest. As we play through these, it's interesting to hear the shifting intervals and changing relationships. It's yet another angle at which we can look at harmony and chord construction, which benefits every single area of our playing – with the possible exception of an aching fretting hand... G

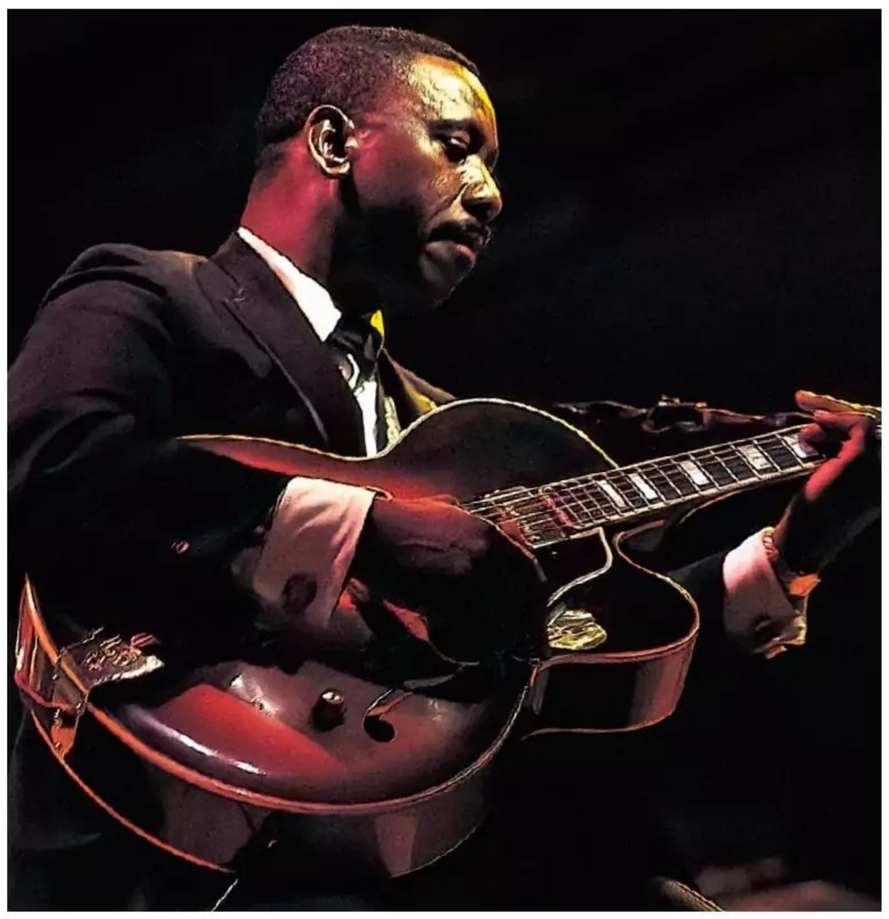
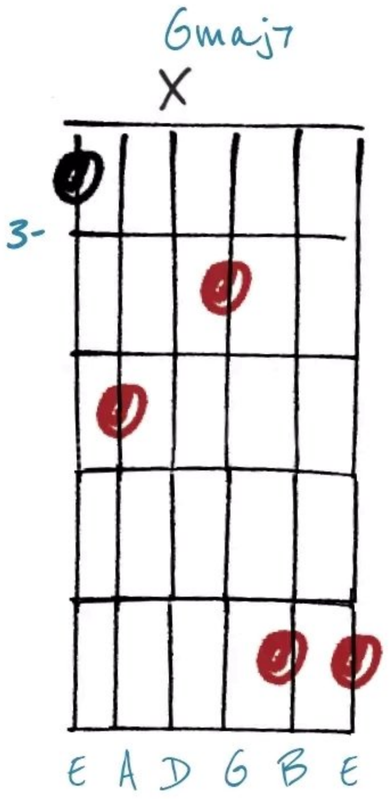


PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Wes Montgomery is exactly the kind of guitarist that gets sampled for lo-fi tracks

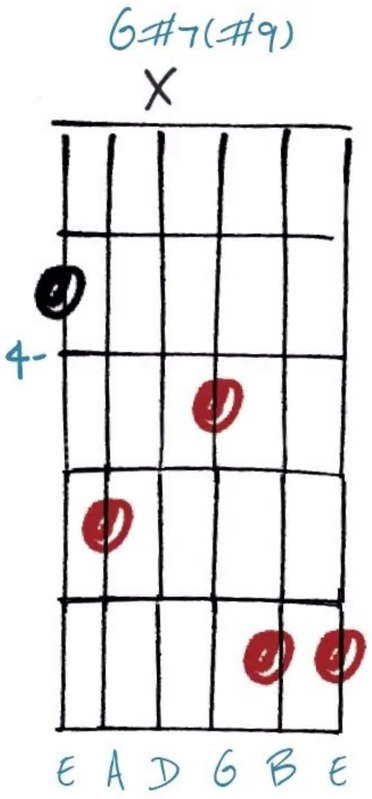
Example 1

This is a Gmaj7 but with an unusual stacking of notes and a wide skip between the 5th (D) on the fifth string and the 3rd (B) on the third string. On the top two strings we have the maj7th (F#) and another 3rd (B) in ascending order. The fourth string is muted.



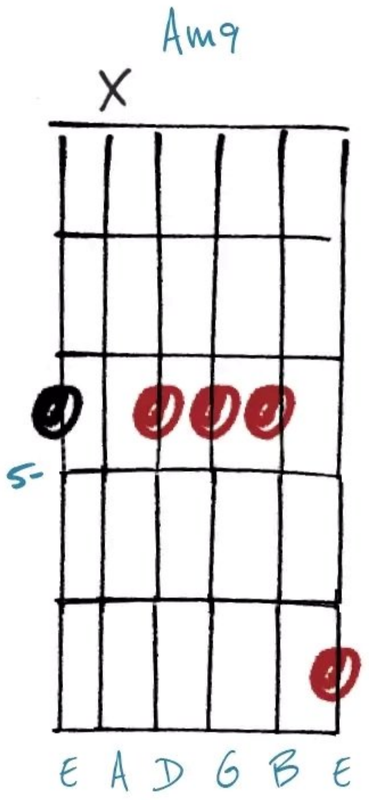
Example 2

This is a very similar shape, but it keeps the top two notes (F# and B) while we shift everything else up one semitone or fret. The result is a G#7(#9). If you moved your fourth finger up to the 8th fret, you'd be back to the maj7th voicing but in G#.



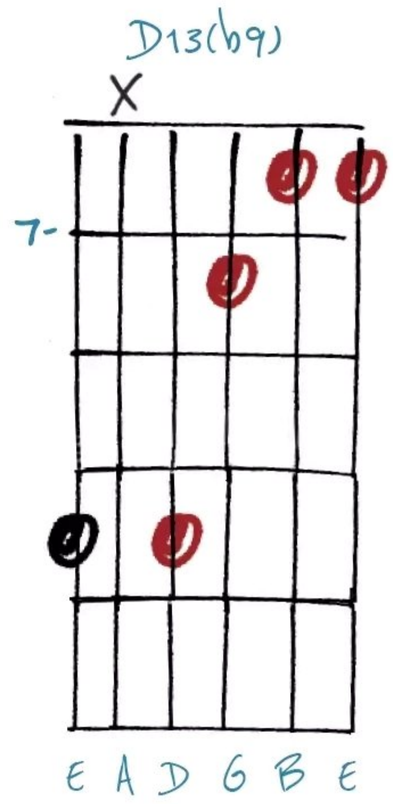
Example 3

This Am9 keeps the B on the top, but we lose the F# for now. In this position we could use the open fifth string as our root, but we'd lose some consistency in the tone and the chord wouldn't be movable, so that's the reason for this seeming harder than it needs to be!



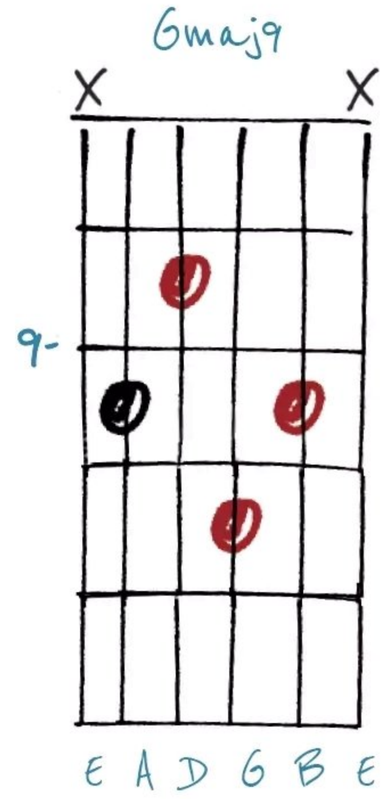
Example 4

Like a few of the other examples, this D13(♭9) doesn't use the fifth string. This means we have a wide interval of a dominant 7 (aka ♭7) between the root and the next note in the chord as you brush across the strings. The top three notes give us the ♭9th (E♭), the 3rd (F#) and the 13th (B).



Example 5

This Gmaj9 gives a nice finishing chord, meaning Examples 3, 4 and 5 in sequence give us the II-V-I progression, a classic chord move in this style. Perhaps it would be nice to cycle Examples 1 to 4 a few times, then finish with this? From bottom to top, we have: Root (G), 3rd (B), maj7th (F#) and 9th (A).



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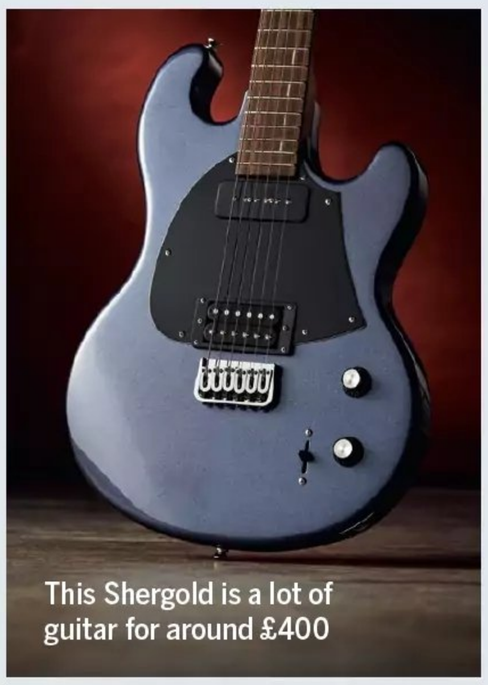
FEEDBACK

Feedback

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

STAR LETTER

GOLD STANDARDS


This Shergold is a lot of guitar for around £400

As guitarists, musicians and music lovers, we often hark back to the 'golden age' of whatever genre we're particularly interested in, imagining how wonderful it would have been to have been there to witness a certain band in its heyday, find vintage Fenders in pawn shops or pick up a late-50s Les Paul for a song when they were out of favour during a certain part of the 60s. But it occurred to me recently that we are actually living in the golden age of guitar ownership, and we ought to take a moment to appreciate it.

In a time when everything else seems so expensive due to the cost of living crisis, we have access to guitars starting at such low price points that it's possible to buy a guitar of much higher quality than the entry-level guitars of my youth for the cost of a weekly shop. The vast array of makes, models and specs available to us is mindboggling, and the quality coming out of the more cost-effective manufacturing locations is often superb.

At the other end of the scale we have more superlative boutique makers than ever before, and we're spoilt for choice at every price point between the two. If all this wasn't enough, the miscellany of effects, amplifiers and recording equipment starting at pocket-money prices that fill today's marketplace make virtually any sound accessible regardless of budget. So, park the nostalgia and enjoy living in the golden age of guitar ownership!
David Elliott

Hi David, thanks for your thoughts on the embarrassment of choice we have as guitarists these days. We heartily agree, especially at the entry-level end of the market. Guitars such as Yamaha's Storia II acoustic or the Shergold Masquerader Standard SM11 we reviewed in issue 521, to name but two, mean that it really is (in the words of reviewer Dave Burrluck) "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 [Masquerader] is a 10th of that price". We confess, we think about that a lot these days! As always, play whatever you intend to buy before laying down any cash – and only buy a guitar that really connects with you and stays in tune! Surprising how often the latter isn't the case, at all price ranges...



KORG

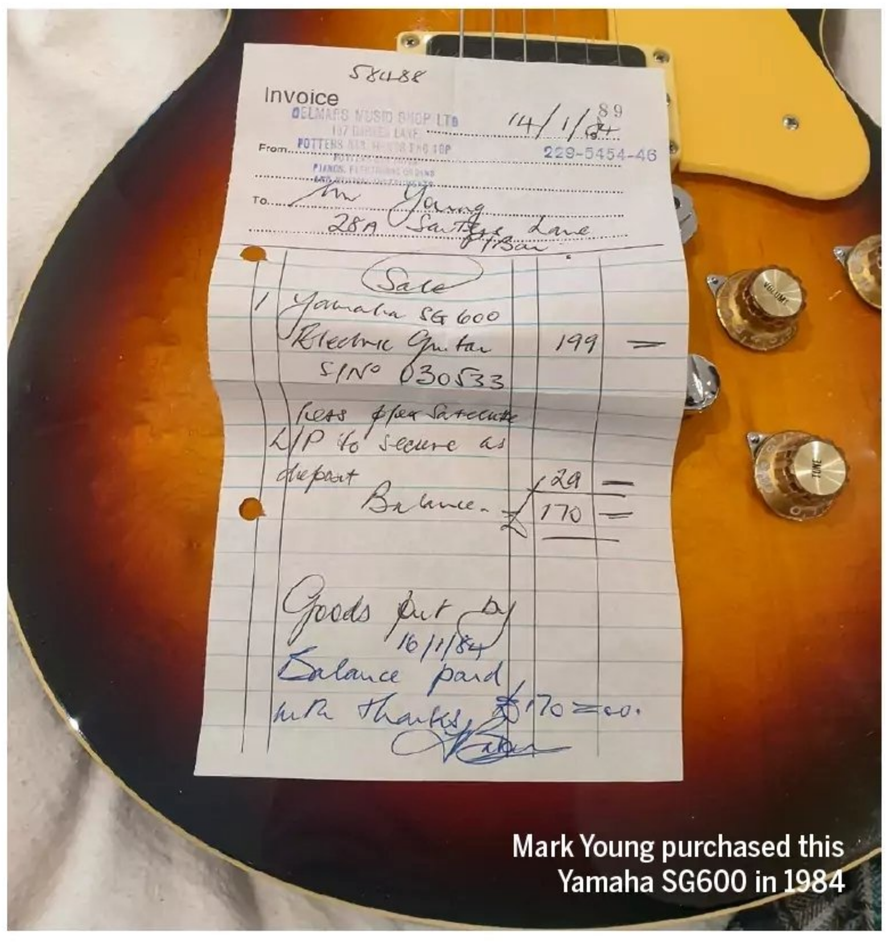
Each issue, the Star Letter will win a Korg SH-PRO Sledgehammer Pro clip-on tuner!
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KEEPING RECEIPTS

It was really interesting to read the letter about keeping receipts for guitars [from John Holmes, issue 521]. In 1983, I used to regularly walk by our local music store, Delmar's in Potters Bar, which has now sadly gone. One day when I walked in they were displaying three Yamaha SGs: a 600, 1000 and a 2000. I used to look at these beauties in reverence wondering if I should ever dare consider a purchase. Potters Bar wasn't exactly the hub of musical enterprise and so these remained in the window for some time while I drooled on.

Eventually, I could stand it no longer, so I decided to raid my post office savings account and, together with trading in my Tiesco Les Paul copy, I had enough money to take the plunge. The truth is I could have afforded the SG2000 but was too tight to go for it. The SG600 has become an old friend, but the older self says I should have gone for the better model. I remember this story when making other purchases and tell myself, 'If you can afford the little extra, don't hold back because you will regret it later.'
Mark Young

Far be it from us to encourage overstretching oneself financially, but we're inclined to agree that, provided you can afford it, buying the exact thing you want rather than a compromise can often be the right course. Provided we don't go without essentials or get into unsustainable debt, the initial pain of forking out is surprisingly quickly forgotten and you then have exactly what you want, to enjoy for as long as you like. With that said, the SG600 is a fine beast in its own right, so maybe not too much to regret there!



Mark Young purchased this Yamaha SG600 in 1984





Tom Simmons' Aria Pro II single-cut came home with him in 1980 and has been a firm (and heavy!) friend ever since

SPEAKERS CORNER

Browsing through your NAMM report in the April edition I saw the Celestion Peacekeeper and immediately thought, 'A deliberately inefficient speaker? This must be a very well-written April Fool item.' Well, more fool me because I checked the Celestion website and there it is! So either you're all in on the joke together or this is a serious piece of kit that seeks to solve a very real problem. Bands the world over won't need to tell guitarists to turn down their amps any more, and we will allegedly still have our sweet-spot tone. Result!

Kenn Palmer

Yes, it's a real thing and we have to say it sounded pretty good – from what we could hear amid the din of NAMM. There are a lot of ways to approach attenuation, from reducing the number of power valves an amp has in use at a given time, to sophisticated reactive loadboxes such as Boss's Waza Tube Expander or the Universal Audio Ox. But the important thing to remember is that the best attenuation methods all try to keep intact, or closely emulate, the dynamic relationship with a real speaker. Why? Because it provides so much of the nuance and feel behind great guitar tone. So, given that's the case, why not attenuate... with an actual speaker? We look forward to giving one a try in more depth soon.

TAKE THE TUBE?

I read your review of the Fender Tone Master '59 Bassman in issue 521. The retail price point of Tone Masters is a marketing tool in itself. They cost more than most solid-state amps because they are of better quality, but it's a way of not totally wrecking their tube amp market. They still want you to consider buying a Fender valve amp. They are saying you can have the digital version at roughly two thirds the cost of the real thing. Some are prepared to pay that extra – older players and tube snobs, people who think valve amps sound and feel better. The question is for how much longer? In the case of the Bassman, the non-valve version has a lot going for it, as you've shown.

Vince Leonard

Thanks for your thoughts, Vince. As modelling and other methods of emulating valve amp tone get ever closer to the real thing, the question of what to buy gets harder to decide. Sometimes the choice can just be based on pure subjectivity – and at the end of the day we're in the business of music-making, which is all about emotion and connection. So, for many players, just knowing there are good old analogue bottles glowing away in the back of an amp gives them a warm, contented feeling. And there are many players and producers who will insist valve tone still has the edge in nuance, authenticity and complexity. But there are many more doing great work with modelling gear, and most listeners would never be able to tell the difference between it and music recorded with valve gear. So we'd recommend listening to both valve and modelling amps without prejudice and be unafraid to just choose what connects best with you.

ARIA'S NO BARRIER

Thanks very much for the fine articles on Japanese guitars in issue 522. Really interesting stuff, and it reinforced my own experiences. I still have my 70s Aria Pro II 'Les Paul' that I bought secondhand in Liverpool in 1980 for £220 (I think!). As I was trying it, a mate, Ali Crook – a superb guitarist and wonderful bloke – walked into the shop. He tried it, too, and confirmed my thoughts when he handed it back, simply saying, 'Yes, buy it!' I did and have cherished it ever since.

I had a nice Gibson Les Paul Standard a few years back, which I really liked, but I sold it because it simply wasn't as good, in my opinion, as my old Aria. I have had the pickups replaced a few years ago to a set of Bare Knuckle Crawlers, which are brilliant, and, being splittable, open up more tones.

> "It occurred to me that we are living in the golden age of guitar ownership, and we ought to take a moment to appreciate it" DAVID ELLIOTT

The guitar itself never ceases to delight me; it plays better than any LP style I've tried and is rock solid in every respect. It's bloody heavy, but when it plays and sounds so good, I don't mind. I know it's not 100 per cent original, and my daft application of an Aria sticker on the headstock hasn't helped, but I'd never sell it.

Tom Simmons

Thanks for the kind words, Tom. There's something really special about guitars that connect and stay with us over the years, defeating all comers. It can happen with amps and effects, too – the editor of this mag has had the J Rockett 45 Calibre overdrive on his 'board for years and every time he takes it off to give something else a try, it's swiftly put back on again. Some gear, like good friends, just clicks and feels comfortable to be around whatever the season. We wish you many more happy years of motoring with your Aria.

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

Toby Lee

At only 20 years of age, Toby Lee has a CV that would make any player twice his age proud. He's shared the stage with a host of top names, including Buddy Guy, Billy Gibbons and Joe Bonamassa, and is tipped to become the UK's next blues-rock superstar

Words David Mead **Photography** Adam Gasson

Back in 2015, on hearing that blues legend BB King was unwell, a 10-year-old Toby Lee recorded a video called *Get Well Soon Mr King*, playing a wailing blues solo on his Les Paul. The video went viral, attracting millions of views in only a short time. After BB's death, his daughters were so touched by Toby's tribute that they flew him to Memphis where he played in BB King's club on the city's famous Beale Street. A prodigious talent, he's since appeared on UK TV many times, won an Olivier Award as part of the cast of the West End production of *School Of Rock*, and appeared on US TV's *Ellen DeGeneres Show*. This January he won the Bob Harris Emerging Artist gong at the 2025 UK Americana Awards in London.

We caught up with Toby at the end of last year when he was on the road with Jools Holland, promoting his latest album, *House On Fire*.

Despite having only recently turned 20, you've been playing a long time, haven't you?

"Well, it's kind of been a long old journey. I grew up in a household full of instruments and I could have gone down any rabbit hole, let's say. Because we had pianos, my mum had violins, dad had a full drum kit set up, we had guitars, we had basses. I started on the drums. That was my first thing and with drums you can tap anywhere, you know, like with my pencils at school, just drumming on the desk and annoying everyone. But the neighbours weren't so keen on that. So there needed to be a shift change.

"There was a ukulele that my grandma had bought me, I think, for my birthday. I must have been four or five years old. It was a little green thing with palm trees all over it and that was my first go at a stringed instrument. I got so obsessed with it that I felt sick if I didn't have it. So every car journey, it would be in the footwell, like I couldn't let it leave my side. And I just got more fascinated by the whole process of a stringed instrument."

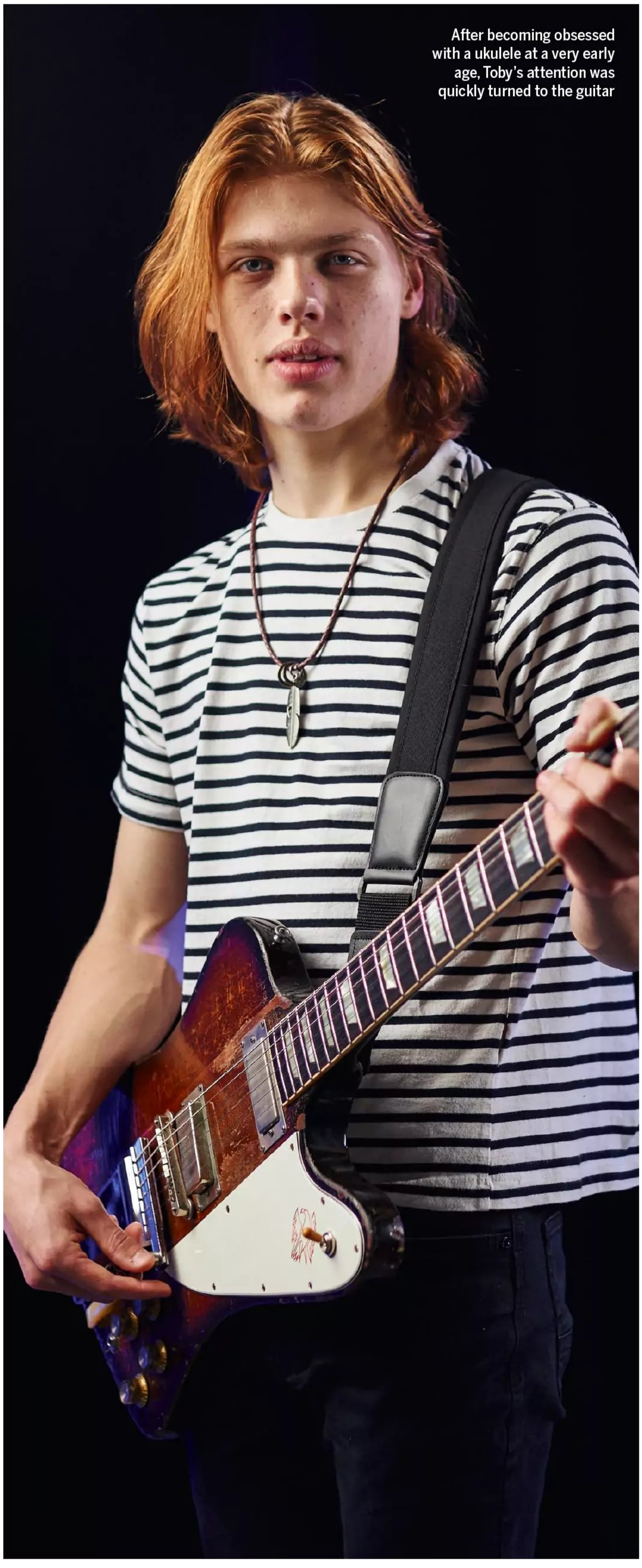
When did the six-string guitar make its first appearance in your life?

"I got my first six-string when I was about six years old and, again, I was completely obsessed with it. I'd seen all these videos of guitarists pop up on the emerging YouTube of the time and seeing Slash with his big hair and this big Les Paul. And I thought it was the coolest thing in the world! I remember there was a video of Gary Moore and he played *Red House* on this Fiesta Red Strat, and I thought it was just the most incredible thing, to the point where I've watched it more times than I care to admit, just because it blew me away. And so then came the want of guitars and guitars and guitars. By the time I was 10, I decided it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life because I didn't really know life without it. Since then, I haven't put my guitar down."



VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!

Watch Toby talk about his gear and demonstrate his guitars in our exclusive video!
http://bit.ly/guitaristextra



After becoming obsessed with a ukulele at a very early age, Toby's attention was quickly turned to the guitar

Apart from Gary Moore, who else numbered among your early influences?

"I think a lot of people assumed that I went into blues through the Robert Johnson and early Delta blues stuff, whereas I came in from a completely different angle. I loved early rock 'n' roll: I loved Buddy Holly, I loved Elvis and Eddie Cochran, and my dad would always have it playing around the house and so I was always surrounded by every form of music. I think the bit that was very apparent to me was that whether it was a solo in a Deep Purple song, or a Guns N' Roses song, or even some early rock 'n' roll or whatever, I could hear that there was a similarity between all of them and that it stemmed from the blues. So I went through just listening to everything. And when I say everything, it wasn't just blues, it was literally everything.

"I was never that kid that played video games on computers. My whole computer life would be looking on YouTube. So I guess my start into bands was seeing music videos. You know, you've got your live stuff and then you've got your more storyboarded stuff, but I was

"By age 10, I decided [playing guitar] was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life because I didn't really know life without it"

fascinated by everything in terms of the music side of things because it was putting a story to the music. It made me feel like I wanted to be part of that energy and part of that vibe. And obviously the only way to do that is to play the music and be part of a band. And that was kind of where the obsession began.

"I would spend my whole day at school sat in an English lesson or a maths lesson, waiting to get home to get on the laptop to listen to these bands. But the only sad reality of it was I was the only one at school that really enjoyed music for what it was. A lot of people saw music in a different light. I saw it as something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I had a little iPod and my dad pre-set it with a load of songs that went from everything from Sum 41 to Ronny & The Daytonas and all these crazy, crazy things. But I think that really opened my mind to all types of music because the genre base in my family was just so large."

Skipping to the present, tell us about your love for Gibson Firebirds.

"It wasn't particularly any guitar player that made me want a Firebird, it was just the guitar itself. I loved everything about it, and at that point I hadn't really played one that much – I just loved the shape. And so I had a couple of newer Firebirds before I could get my hands on the one I have now. The story behind this particular guitar is a very long-winded one, so I'll try to keep it as concise as possible...

"I had a '61 SG Special and a '59 ES-125, and so I played the SG for a bit and I loved the ES. Both of them sounded incredible, but it felt like you really had to work to get the tone out of them. So I started trailing on eBay to see what I could find and I found a '76 Gibson Explorer with a set of P-90s in it. I had a look and saw [the seller's] other items and he had a Firebird – a '76 Bicentennial

Toby's '64 Gibson Firebird V, for which he sold a treasured vintage car, is a firm live-stage favourite



Whereas many people assume that Toby's journey to the blues was via the conventional route, it was recognising that the idiom was a musical common denominator in different genres that helped form his own signature playing style

Firebird, but it had been refinished in Wine Red and it had had every tailpiece fitted to it known to man, but at this point it had a stock tail on it. It had three humbuckers and all gold hardware. I just thought, 'A hot-rodded Firebird? This is great!' We came to a deal and I ended up with this Firebird. It had green frets, it hadn't been restrung in about 20 years, and everything was disgusting on it. I cleaned up the Firebird, put a new set of strings on it and recorded a whole album on it because it was just amazing. And so the love of Firebirds, especially vintage Firebirds, went from there.

"When we were at [the seller's] place, he told me that he'd sold vintage Firebirds and stuff in the past, and he bought out this new Custom Shop case. I'm thinking, 'Okay, he's got a Custom Shop Firebird or something in it.' And he said, 'It's a '64 [Firebird] V. I've had it for a while now. I've had loads of people ask me to sell it, but I've never been ready. And I want it to go to a home where it's not going to sit in a collection and it's going to be used...' So [long story short] I sold [my old Volkswagen Beetle] and I went back to Mick, the guy that had the Firebird, and said, 'Can I buy it?' And I made him the promise that I would always, always use it. And I've used it at every gig ever since. It's flown to every country I've been to and I'll never, ever get rid of it. I never thought I'd have a favourite guitar, but I would be wrong if I said that this wasn't it because every time I pick it up, it just fits."

"My dad pre-set an iPod with everything from Sum 41 to Ronny & The Daytonas and all these crazy, crazy things"

What's your amp of choice on stage?

"It's a Blackstar St James and it's bright red, so it's definitely the striking-looking amp on stage. But I've been working with Blackstar for about four or five years now; they've been incredible to work with. They came to me a couple of years ago and said, 'Look, would you be interested in working together on a collaboration and doing a signature amplifier?' I was initially using an HT-20, which I absolutely loved, but I'd had it re-covered in red and white, just because I thought it would be really cool to have a red and white amp. So [Blackstar] said, 'We're bringing out the St James range. It's going to be the lightest valve amp we could possibly create.' And so they were telling me about how they changed the transformer out for a switch mode power supply and [invited me to] try the weight between my HT-20 and [the St James]. And it's like my HT-20 head weighed about as much as the whole stack, including the cab. And what I couldn't believe is how they managed to get 50 watts out of this thing that kind of just weighed nothing. It's a fairly compact little thing, too, but it absolutely screamed. I'm a bit of a sucker for reverb and it's got a good reverb channel, which is always fun. It's been an incredible workhorse." G



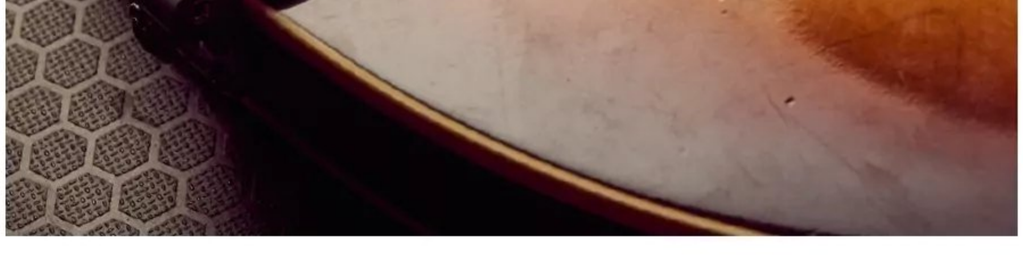
Toby Lee's latest album, *House On Fire*, is available now via 100% Records

www.toby-lee.com

When Toby attended an early '20s NAMM Show, Gibson asked him to spec out his dream guitar. He did so and when he visited Gibson's Nashville HQ months later this Custom Shop ES-335 was waiting for him on a stand. Hear the full story in our accompanying video!







SMASHING PUMPKINS

The band's latest album, *Aghori Mhori Mei*, sees Billy Corgan and co finding a fresh perspective in revisiting gear and writing approaches from the past, and – "for a change!" says Corgan – fans and media alike are loving it

Words Andrew Daly **Portrait** Jason Renaud

Dating back to the late 80s and led by Billy Corgan, Smashing Pumpkins have polarised and galvanized with records such as *Gish* (1991), *Siamese Dream* (1993), *Melon Collie And The Infinite Sadness* (1995) and *Adore* (1998) through an outright refusal to adhere to genre confines, regardless of the success those confines afforded them. Because of this, and Corgan's tendency to speak his mind, critics and fans alike have had a field day. But that hasn't stopped those same pundits from filling seats in arenas, such is life for the Pumpkins – light and shade, as it were.

But things change, as do attitudes, especially when it comes to rock music – and even more so when you're a Pumpkin. This is never truer than in the case of *Aghori Mhori Mei*, the Pumpkin's 13th studio record, which, upon its sudden dropping in August of 2024, has been universally praised by critics and fans alike.

Corgan admits that the process and sound of this new record harkens back to the band's early days. But don't mistake this for a nostalgia trip. "It's something we argue about behind the scenes," says Corgan of the band's approach. "I think if I was being overly simple, or if something feels like, 'I've been there, done that,' I'd be less interested, even if I like the riff."

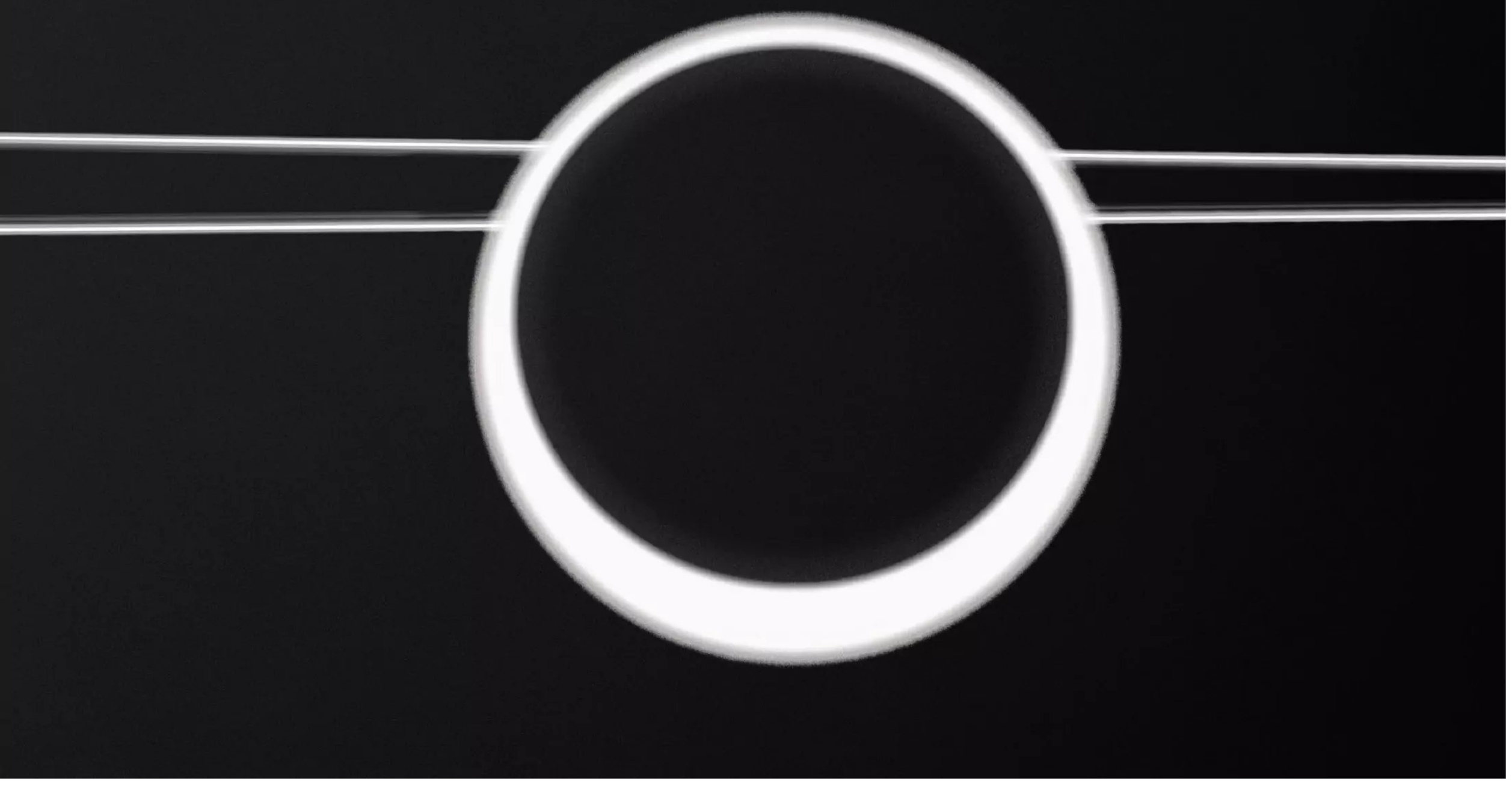
From a guitar perspective, Corgan doesn't feel he's returning to the well as much as he's left his old approach behind long enough that it feels fresh again. "Our way of making music seems to be very different from other groups," he says. "There's a long map there. If you want to bother charting the wins and losses, overall it's been a singular path, which is something I'm really proud of."

Monstrous new tracks like *Edin*, *Pentagrams* and *Sighommi* feature mega riffs, distorted sounds and some typically searing Corgan solos. Fans should be – and are – happy, yet Corgan sees a trend. "People get weirdly bent out of shape when I talk about my guitar playing," he says. "It's a strange thing that I find really curious. I don't know what to think about it. The guitar in the last 20 years, in many ways, was highly marginalised in independent music as people went toward electronics and beats and production values. When you get to the issue of me as a player, I'm happy to point out that I'm not a particularly skilled player because I never took lessons.

"It's interesting to note the number of people who were influenced by how I played and went on to do amazing things," he adds. "It gets into this weird conversation, where the public has one perception, but that doesn't always translate in alternative music – especially in a guitar magazine – like metal or even country. I think it's really more a contrivance of the genre."

> "YOU LEARN ALONG THE WAY THAT YOUR VERSION OF YOUR BAND IS NOT THE VERSION THAT THE PUBLIC HAS OF YOUR BAND"

Come what may, Corgan isn't bothered by any of it. "You kind of stand up for yourself and say, 'Hey, how is it that this band is still here, kicking ass so many years later?' If the way the intelligentsia rates us... does it really sort of hold up against, let's call it, empirical data? So, by and large, I'm totally fine with whatever people perceive. The fact that young people seem very interested in what we're doing currently, not just in the past, is really important to us."



What was your intent as far as guitar sounds going into *Aghori Mhori Mei*?
"I've always tried to find something new every album. I think I wanted something that was a bit clearer and more old-school. That's somewhat contradictory because our old-school sound wasn't necessarily clear... but I think I kind of found it in what we did do."

You've never been one to cater to fans in terms of harkening back to old sounds, so why do it now?
"It just seemed to go with the songwriting. It was exciting to play with. I guess in the late 80s and early 90s, we played with Marshall JCM800s, and there was a certain midrange clarity there that I liked. But at some point I went off of it, so it was cool to go back there. To hear the way we used to voice guitars – it wasn't sentimental as much as it was just trying to find something that felt fresh."

From a gear perspective, what was the key to finding that voicing?
"I always start by trying to use new equipment in a novel way so that what I'm hearing myself play seems unfamiliar to me. I sort of have to adjust my playing, and then there becomes this relationship between the sound and the way I play."

What song kicked that process off for you?
"I don't remember... We went to Nashville somewhere along the way and did about 60 instrumental demos. So it was just a lot of riffs; it was what people would call a 'riff tape', I guess. That would have been the start of it, but it also evolved out of the types of riffs that I was writing. Sorry, I'm trying not to be too nerdy because once I go in there, it just goes on forever!"

Be as nerdy as you like! How do you decide what riffs are not only worth pulling out but Smashing Pumpkins-appropriate?
"Well, there really isn't any 'Smashing Pumpkins appropriate'. That's always been part of the public part of the argument because we were able to establish such an identifiable approach. It became this hate that we were always supposed to wear. I do feel good now that, over time, people have recognised that there are other kinds of languages that we've developed under the umbrella of the Smashing Pumpkins, you know?"

On a deeper level, it seems that no matter what you do, the expectations placed on you and your band are sort of unfair. It's damned if you do, damned if you don't.
"First of all, I don't mind being held to a high standard, you know? If that standard is somebody's perception of a standard that we created, that's even better. Certainly, we notice at times where it doesn't seem that people are held to the same aesthetic and musical standards that we are, but that's okay. I was – and am – a Rush fan. I held them to a very high standard, so maybe there's a sort of backward compliment in it. But as far as the rest of it goes, I don't have a really clear answer."

"WE WANTED TO BE A BAND THAT COULD PLAY ANY STYLE WE CHOSE. BUT IN THE POST-SOCIAL MEDIA AGE, THAT WORKS AGAINST YOU"

It doesn't hold you back or cloud your vision as a guitarist, then.
"It gets into... this is more of a science dissertation... but I really think it gets a lot into the transition era between pre-social media and post-social media branding of artists. There have been artists that have been very successful coming out of the 90s – and I don't need to say who they are – and they're more successful than we are by and large, almost without exception, but they're known for doing one or two things really well. We, of course, moulded ourselves more like Zeppelin or The Beatles, where we wanted to be a band that could play any style we chose. But in the post-social media age, that works against you."

How so?
"Because, on some level, you're always pitting people against each other. It was sort of novel in the 90s because, again, very few people were doing it. But now there are more independent artists who do that, and they're more celebrated as auteurs in a non-commercial sense. It's the schism between a band that refuses to have one personality and a commercial band that sells a lot of tickets. It creates constant tension."

Having said that, *Aghori Mhori Mei* seems to have satisfied a lot of fans.
"For a change! [laughs]"

The opening three tracks, *Edin*, *Pentagrams* and *Sighommi*, feature killer riffs and great songwriting. Can you give insight into how you put that trio together?
"Thank you for saying that, really. My approach was to do it the way we used to do it. It's a very effective way of arranging the guitars. Simply put, you try to arrange the guitar parts into a musical composition before the vocals are even involved. So if you just listen to the track, the track itself is very exciting from a guitar, rhythm and riff perspective. Then you write the

1. Billy Corgan, guitarist James Iha (centre) and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin (left) were all part of Smashing Pumpkins' initial line-up in 1988, with D'arcy Wretzky completing the band as bassist



PHOTO BY JASON RENAUD

“THERE’S A POINT WHERE INNOVATION JUST WINS. IT’S NOT SENTIMENTAL; IT’S STRICTLY PROGRESS”

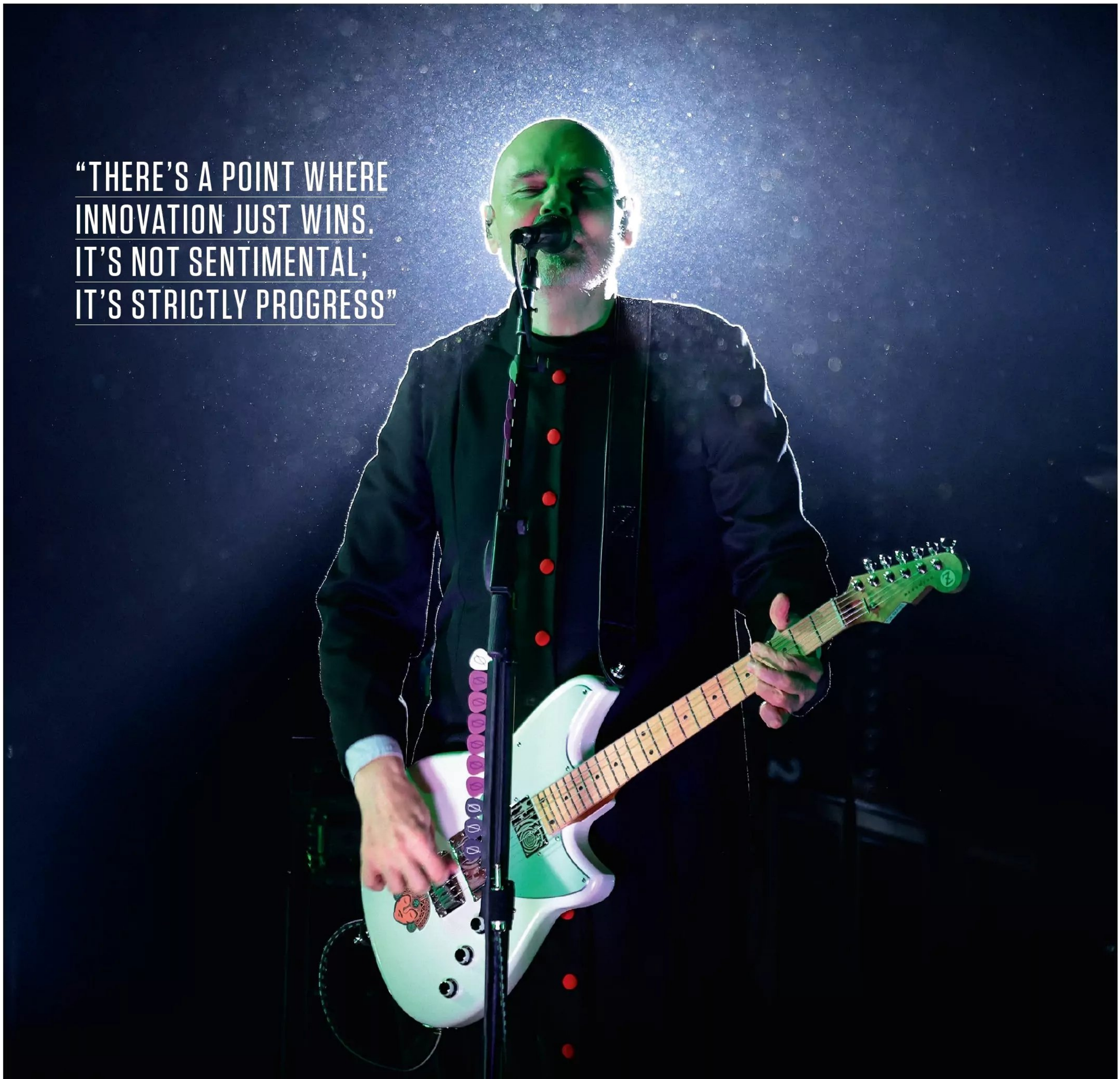


PHOTO BY FRANKLIN JACOME/AGENCIA PRESS SOUTH/GETTY IMAGES

vocals and put all the overdubs on top of that. It’s very much the way we did the first three albums [*Gish*, *Siamese Dream* and *Melon Collie And The Infinite Sadness*].”

Do you still use the vintage valve amps you recorded those albums with?
“I do have some vintage stuff, but lately I’ve been using these custom amps that Brian Carstens out of Chicago makes [Carstens Amplification]. There’s an amp called Grace that he and I did together, and he’s got a new amp called Empire, which is more of a metal amp; I use that one a lot. It’s like a mixture of a Laney and maybe a Hiwatt or something. Then he’s got another amp called Cathedral, which is like a Hiwatt/Fender blend and is highly tweakable.”

Are there specific amp characteristics that you know are right for you?
“These days, my sound is more midrange than

The Reverend signature guitars that Billy Corgan plays on stage and the latest album are the same as the production models in-store. “It means a lot to me that a young musician can go into a music store and take a guitar that they can probably afford, and if they work hard like we did, they can have that same sound and have that same opportunity with that great instrument,” he tells us

I would personally go after if I didn’t care about good mixes and stuff like that. So there’s a lot of presence – and I’m trying to get as forward as I can without gimmickry. Meaning raw power, guitar into amp into cabinet, mic’ing, and trying to get that signal as far forward as I can get it.”

Interesting. A lot of people assume your sound is just a Big Muff paired with a Fender Strat.
“That hasn’t been my setup since ’92! [laughs]”

It’s only been 33 years!
“Yeah, I get it, though. It’s such a cool sound. I loved that sound, and I still do. I still use that sound here and there for overdubs because I love the zing of it. But when I sat and watched Eddie Van Halen play 3ft in front of me in the studio, I learned that it’s about the hands. Great guitar players can get the same sound out of any amp; it’s something about the way they play. That’s the beautiful thing, right? And I do play a certain way that’s very strange.”

What's strange about it?
"I hear it when outside guitar players come into the band, whether it was Jeff Schroeder and now Kiki Wong, you know, they're kind of like, 'Oh, there's this other thing you have to learn how to do...' It's not just the sound, like, they'll say, 'I always thought it was the sound, but it's actually the way you *play* that sound that makes the sound that I'm hearing.' It's hard to explain... I have a very busy left hand, which is something I learned from my father."

You've been using Reverend lately, but have you ever broken out your old Strats from the 90s while recording?
"I'll bring out old gear. I still like using old gear to write. I certainly have gone into some albums where I'm like, 'Okay, I'm going to use this stuff because I just want to. I don't care what anybody thinks.' And then, halfway through the process, it just falls to modernity. Like, Joe Naylor with Reverend, his pickups, and these designs that he's done for me, they've just brought the guitar forward. I don't know how else to say it."

Where would your modern sound be without that?
"It's just what's required today. You know... everybody loves a good soapbar pickup, and I love those old guitars, like Billie Joe [Armstrong] with Green Day plays and old Les Paul Specials. But if you try to use those old pickups, everybody's cell phone is coming through them [laughs]. There's a point where innovation just wins. It's not sentimental; it's strictly progress. I had to get out of the way and say, 'What's more important? Supreme sound or my personal taste?' And at the end of the day, sound always wins because it needs to."

2. Over the past 30 years, Corgan has cultivated what he refers to as a "very strange" way of playing. "When I sat and watched Eddie Van Halen play 3ft in front of me in the studio," he says, "I learned that it's about the hands"

Is it true that your Reverend guitars are off-the-wall, stock guitars?
"This is the greatest endorsement that I can give: I don't know what the list price of a Reverend guitar is, but let's say it's about $1,000 or whatever. That's the same guitar that I'm playing on *Aghori Mhori Mei*, and that's the same guitar that I'm playing on stage with the band and on tour with Green Day in front of 50,000 people. It's the same guitar."

A lot of artists would spring for a custom guitar. Why don't you?
"It means a lot to me that a young musician can go into a music store and take a guitar that they can probably afford, and if they work hard like we did, they can have that same sound and have that same opportunity with that great instrument. That's really important to me as an independent musician, you know? I've certainly played super-expensive guitars – but it's pretty cool playing a guitar that doesn't need to be souped up."

Why do you think Smashing Pumpkins still matter as a guitar band in 2025?
"I don't know why we matter any more than why we don't matter, if that makes any sense. When you're in a band, you have your theories about why people like what you do, but you learn along the way that your version of your band is not the version that the public has of your band or how the public arrives at somewhat of a collective decision about who you are. It's a very curious thing to me."

"I ALWAYS TRY TO USE NEW EQUIPMENT IN A NOVEL WAY SO THAT WHAT I'M HEARING MYSELF PLAY SEEMS UNFAMILIAR TO ME"

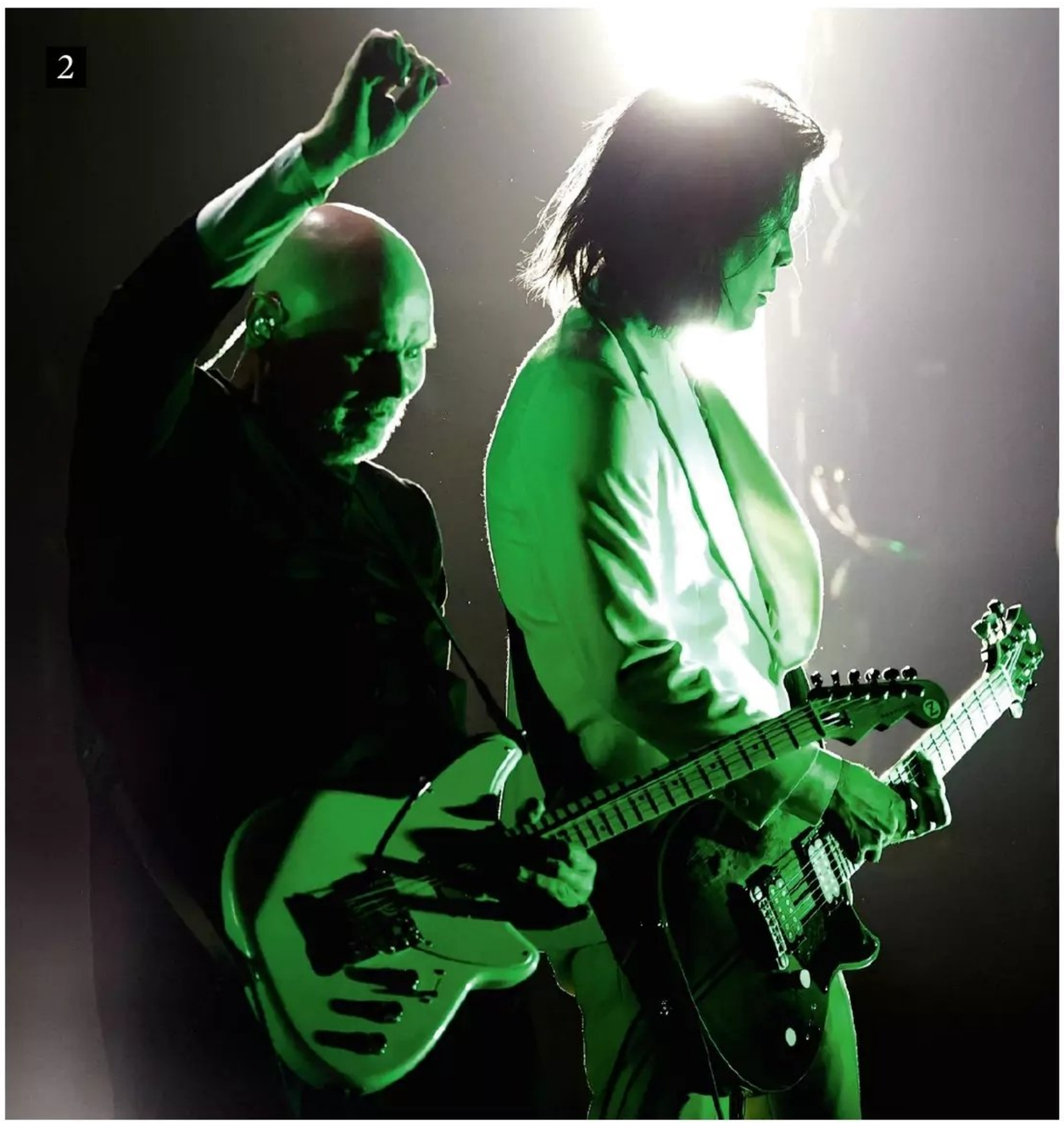


PHOTO BY KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES FOR AUDACY

Come what may, does that perception, and the expectations that come along with it, impact you at this stage?
"The simple way I would explain it is, by and large, most people perceive the Pumpkins as a loud alternative rock band, even though that's not the way we perceive ourselves. That alone is kind of strange to me, right? Like, how is it that you're in a band that you think is different from the band that the public thinks you're in? That perception, at that level, is an interesting cloud that follows you around.

"It doesn't mean it's always raining all the time, but it follows you around whether you want it to or not. So when it gets to issues of relevance and influence, I'm not saying I'm of the mind to let other people make judgments on that; I'm just of the mind that I can accept that other people's perceptions aren't mine – and I don't feel the need to fight for mine, maybe, like I used to." G



Smashing Pumpkins' latest album, *Aghori Mhori Mei*, is available now on Martha's Music/Thirty Tigers
www.smashingpumpkins.com

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THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

LAST OF THE INDEPENDENTS

Fierce, tender and defiantly independent, ***The Pretenders*** *are rock's rebels without a clause in the contract. Four decades and dozens of huge hits into their career, they still do exactly – and only – what they want.* ***Chrissie Hynde****'s high-wattage charisma and breathtaking voice are part of the equation. But so are a fistful of effortless, irresistible guitar hooks that make you reach for rewind every time a Pretenders track plays to the fade. With a stripped-down, rock 'n' roll live album,* ***Kick 'Em Where It Hurts****, set for release in the coming weeks, we join Chrissie and guitarist* ***James Walbourne*** *to find out why 'holding the fort for bands' remains their mission*

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Joby Sessions

Guitarist would like to thank Dawsons of Denmark Street, London, for the kind use of its premises for our interview and photoshoot
www.dawsons.co.uk

The Pretenders are the black cat of rock music. They go where they want, without seeking approval, yet are more enduringly loved than many trend-chasing acts that have come and gone during the four decades that they've been in business. Bad luck has crossed their path once or twice over the years, too, notably with the tragically early death of guitarist James Honeyman-Scott, whose influence is still felt in the band's music today, many incarnations on from the original 1978 line-up to which he belonged.

To this day, the band's musical DNA is pure mercury – you could read their music as punk for romantics or pop for rebels, or simply tough yet tender-hearted rock 'n' roll that speaks with the force that honesty always commands. And did we say that you can find some of the best guitar playing you'll hear anywhere in their recent recordings, thanks to guitarist James Walbourne? We did now. We join Chrissie and James, who today form the songwriting nucleus of the group – a musical partnership that has thrived for many years now – to find out what the gang, unchained, is up to next...

1. Chrissie Hynde and James Walbourne performing with The Pretenders in Spain in 2024 – they are careful to preserve the spontaneity, interaction and energy of a club-rock band, even when playing larger venues

What's your working relationship like recently?

Chrissie Hynde: "It has changed a lot. I can knock out lyrics when I wake up – but I started only with the guitar and coming up with a riff – some basic bullshit that would inform what the song was going to be about, just from what it sounded like. But James has a great melodic sense. So I can send him a lyric and he can send something back that I hadn't thought of at all that's very melodic. So that has made me even more lazy on the guitar than I was anyway [laughs].

"[Playing the club circuit post-lockdown] made us feel like a band again and informed the way we were writing" CHRISSIE HYNDE

"The thing is, I resisted trying to write anything with James, for the first I don't know how many years we've been working together, because I knew he was great on stage and I knew he was a real hotshot guitar hero, so that's mission accomplished already. I thought, 'What if we do try to write together and it just doesn't work?' I thought it could kind of fuck things up a little bit. It really scared me for years."

James Walbourne: "I had no confidence, back then, to write, either – especially collaboration. I very rarely do that. So when we first ventured to collaborate, I was just sitting at home one day and I think Chrissie maybe sent me a lyric or something. It was that song, *You Can't Hurt A Fool*. I just did a little recording on my phone [of a possible chord sequence on guitar] and I thought, 'Oh, fuck it,' and sent it to Chrissie. That was the first one we started. It just blossomed from there really quickly, but it's that thing of not being scared to send it and relinquish all hold over the song."

Chrissie: "I think 99 per cent of anything I've sent him, he has sent back [with a suggested



PHOTO BY ALDARA ZARRAOA/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"I see it very much as my position in a band is to shine a light on the guitar player. To me, a band is about the electric guitars"

CHRISSIE HYNDE

Chrissie Hynde says the electric guitar is still the keystone of a great band – and gives guitarists who work with her an admirably free hand to express themselves and The Pretenders' songs



PHOTO BY GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

melody] and I'm like, 'Amazing.' There have been a couple weird moments, but..."

James: "Chrissie's lyrics are fantastic. If something speaks to me straightaway, then the melody will come out straight – it's almost pretty instant with some of them, which is kind of amazing to me. It would just stem from that, really. Then I just go through them and send them to Chrissie."

Chrissie, what do you like – and what don't you like – in a guitarist that you're working with?

Chrissie: "Well, first of all they have to be much, much better than me. I just get the job done, so I see it very much as my position in a band is to shine a light on the guitar player because, to me, a band is about the guitar player, primarily. That's what I loved right from the beginning. It's the unit of it, but it still is about electric guitars.

"So it has to be someone that can carry the whole thing, that has a kind of unique sound because The Pretenders' sound started with James Honeyman-Scott. The guitar players I've had subsequently have all been big Jimmy Scott fans, so they have really taken a lot from his sound. That has given it a continuity, which I haven't gone for on purpose, but anyone who's going to entertain the idea of playing with me is going to be a James Honeyman-Scott fan, so they already like that kind of sound."

The Pretenders, from album to album, always sound completely distinctive – regardless of who's on guitar. Why is that?

Chrissie: "It's all because of Jimmy Scott."

Do you feel he set the tone for the whole of The Pretenders' career that followed, guitar wise?

Chrissie: "Yeah. Also, you know... I'm not going to be self-effacing, but I'm not a great musician, I know that. But what I *am* good at..."

James: "Yeah, but hold on a minute. See, I hear this and I can't actually... because that's quite a load of bollocks because you are a great musician and you say that too often. You do yourself down – because Chrissie's guitar playing holds the band together and it's fantastic. It's the rhythm playing, it's unique in a great way."

Chrissie: "Well, because when I first started playing, I was too shy to go with the guys in the art room and play so I just had this foresight, like most people who end up writing songs, just to be on my own and write something I could sing to because I wasn't good enough to play along with the radio. So I could only really sing if I was playing. For years, I needed that."

James: "Chrissie's playing really shapes the sounds of a record, especially the early ones. It was Chrissie and James Honeyman-Scott, that was the sound. It wasn't just one, it was two. It was definitely a shared thing.."

Chrissie: "Well, there was one

2. Chrissie Hynde on stage with the first line-up of The Pretenders, with James Honeyman-Scott (right) on guitar. His on-point playing influenced all who followed him in later incarnations of the band, including James

"It was Chrissie and James Honeyman-Scott, that was the sound. It wasn't just one [person], it was two" ***JAMES WALBOURNE***



James Walbourne has an incredible feel for rock 'n' roll guitar with his playing running the gamut of country, rockabilly, R&B and blues – and his '63 SG Junior sounds killer

"I've played in lots of bands in the past, but Chrissie was the first person, really, that never told me what to play at all"

JAMES WALBOURNE

time with Jimmy Scott where we did a show somewhere, I don't know where it was and, for some reason, I kind of stopped playing and got more handheld [with the vocal mic]. I had never done that before. I really enjoyed that show and I thought, 'This is fucking great.' I remember really being pleased and I never felt like that after shows. I always felt that I wasn't really very good.

"I'm not going to put myself down – but maybe most people feel like that, so it's not unique to me. Anyway, I did this handheld stuff and I came off and I thought, 'That was amazing.' I just felt more in the pocket and everything. So when we came off, I thought Jimmy was going to go, 'Nice one,' and he looks at me and he goes, 'Don't you ever fucking do that again.' I don't think I'd ever seen him really angry at me before. It was the only time I remember him really pissed off at me"

James: "Well, that goes to show how important your parts are."

Chrissie: "Yeah. I didn't get it at all."

James: "As a guitar player, if you're in a four-piece band and the other guitar goes out, it's horrible – it's not fun. You play off each other."

James, do you have any personal rules regarding what kind of guitar playing works in the context of The Pretenders?

James: "No."

Do you do what just feels natural over the music?

James: "Yeah."

Chrissie, do you ever veto any guitar parts that James comes up with?

Chrissie: "No, not the top parts. I think one thing that probably is my strong point is orchestrating [the whole song]. So I can kind

of sit back and listen and get a feel for what works and what doesn't. Also, I'm good at breakdowns and laying out certain things, or if we need to extend a part because I hear it differently. I don't count; I'll hear it more in terms of when I feel it's right... so, you know, I'm just good at putting it [all] together."

James: "Absolutely. Also, I've played in lots of bands in the past, but Chrissie was the first person, really, that never told me what to play at all. Because I've been in bands where people tell you what to play – and it's like, 'Just do it your fucking self, then! What am I doing here?' [laughs] Really, it was the first time ever."

Chrissie: "Wow."

James: "It was a breath of fresh air and, in that way, it was very unique. Chrissie was like, 'Just go and do your thing.'"

Chrissie: "Yeah. I mean, I don't know that much about football. James is really the football fan, but even in the early days, when I was a Joe Jordan fan, watching Manchester United, I got it. The job when you're on that pitch is to set the other guy up to get the ball in the net. That's my mentality on stage: 'Don't look at me.' Okay, I know I'm singing and I'm like the main attraction for some of you, but what it really is about is for me to make him look good. That's how I feel a band works. When you're watching a band, you don't want to just focus on one person.

3. Robbie McIntosh had an important role in coining some of The Pretenders' most famous riffs during his tenure as guitarist

"Chrissie's lyrics are fantastic. If something speaks to me, then the melody will come out pretty instantly" *JAMES WALBOURNE*

"That's why it doesn't work in stadiums on big screens because you've got a camera looking right up your snout and you're only seeing one person who's, like, 50 yards away from the other person. You might as well stay at home and watch it on TV. So we always made sure that we're the same distance apart on stage [as we would be] if we were playing in a club. It doesn't matter how big the stage is."

Chrissie, you're best known for playing that Ice Blue Telecaster – how did you come by it?

Chrissie: "I got it in the early days, somewhere in New York City, Manny's or one of those places – I can't even remember who I was with, maybe Jimmy, I don't know. The guy had two Teles and I wanted to get one. One was a blue one and one had the original finish. Because I come from a punk mentality – and I really do have it – I don't like collectors' items and all that. So the guy in the shop said, 'Well, this one has the original finish, the white one, so it's going to be worth more.' I said, 'Give me the blue one.' So that's where I first got my blue one.

"Over the years, in the early days, a guitar company would come and I'd go into a soundcheck and there'd be all these cases open with different guitars, a whole line of them, and they'd say, 'Choose one. We'll give you a guitar.' I'd be like, 'No, thanks. I have a guitar.' 'But you can have any of these,' they'd tell me – but I'd always say, 'No, I'm okay with my guitar.' It was always like that.



PHOTO BY PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Chrissie's Ice Blue Tele has become something of an unintentional part of her stage presence: here, she holds Fender's recent replica of her original refinished guitar bought in New York – and she uses the replicas on tour

> *"When I listen to other bands, I think, 'You aren't a fucking guitar hero, [James Walbourne is] a guitar hero!'"*
>
> *CHRISSIE HYNDE*

"Later, when people said, 'You can get a signature guitar,' I did all these sketches and I'd be thinking, 'I wonder if I want a black one, I wonder if I want this. Maybe I can have that.' But in the end, I thought, 'I don't even fucking want a guitar. I like my guitar.' So I said, 'If you want to make me a signature guitar, just copy the one I've got. There you go. That's it.' So they pretty much copied it exactly, except I sort of defied the experts and let them put on some modern machineheads because any real guitar nerd would say, 'No, you've got to have vintage machineheads,' and I said, 'Yeah, but if I'm in a hotel...' I can't even string the guitar any more, to be honest. I have to get someone else to do it, I can't remember how it's done. In the early days, I changed the machineheads on my SG, but now I can't even change a string. But that's the only difference.

"Actually, my initials are on the back, that's one difference. Then, on the strap, there's a deputy sheriff's badge, which Viggo Mortensen gave me because I was such a fan of *Appaloosa*, the film. I met him and I went on about it so much, probably. I've seen the film so many times. Then I went on tour and my friend took me to see Viggo reciting *The Waste Land* by TS Eliot. Afterward, I collared him and said, 'Can we talk about *Appaloosa*?' Anyway, after that my friend said, 'Oh, Viggo Mortensen wanted your address,' and I said, 'Amazing,' and she goes, 'Can I give it to him?' I said, 'Yeah, but I'm on tour,' and she goes, 'Well, I'll have him send whatever it is to me.' I said, 'Yeah, fine.' So I thought, 'Wow, how cool.'

"Anyway, I finally see her after the tour and she goes, 'Oh, this is from Viggo and it's the sheriff's badge from *Appaloosa* that he wore in the film.' That went right on my



PHOTO BY KI PRICE/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

guitar strap! So when they did the signature guitar, I said, 'And you have to put a sheriff's badge on there...' I wanted to say thank you very much, Fender, for making that guitar because it is fantastic. Now, I take that one on the road, the signature model – you played one, didn't you?"

James: "Yeah, it's brilliant. The neck's great."

Chrissie: "I took about three different guitars that I liked, made sure the neck was right and then just had them do it like the blue one, the original one. Actually, I have one more story about my signature guitar that I'd like to tell...

"I was in Paris and I walked by a guitar shop. I was staying in Paris at the time. I didn't have a guitar because I won't carry anything. Anyway, I walked by this shop and at the back of the shop, I saw the Chrissie Hynde signature guitar. I thought, 'Fucking hell, there's my guitar. Great.' So I walked in and I said, 'Can I get that guitar, the one at the end there?' The guy said, 'Yeah,' put it in the case and gave it to me. I went to pay for it and I gave my credit card. He looked at the name on the credit card and then he looked up at me [laughs]. He said, 'Oh, can I have a selfie with you?' and I said, 'Yeah, if you carry the guitar across the street' [laughs] and he did."

James, what Pretenders songs do you enjoy playing the most, as a guitarist?

James: "That's interesting. Well... oh, God."

Chrissie: "Our new ones, probably, that you wrote."

James: "The new ones that I wrote [laughs]. Thank you for that! Yeah, I enjoy playing those, but there's also the old ones. Because when I first joined the band, Chrissie said to me, 'I don't want you to play what's on the record,' which was music to my ears because, quite honestly, I find it difficult to be constrained by those sort of things, but, obviously, with those older songs, there are parts you have to play. You can't play *Back On The Chain Gang* without playing the riff..."

Chrissie: "Which was Billy Bremner's riff..."

4. James Walbourne in action alongside Chrissie in Liverpool in 2023. James has also played with The Pogues, but his first gig with The Pretenders, in Palm Springs, was a trial by fire: with no time for rehearsal and all the band's gear lost by an airline, he passed the test with flying colours

James: "Things like that, and a lot of the famous parts of the song, you have to keep, but I certainly didn't learn them verbatim. All the major hooks and everything, of course. But something like *Mystery Achievement* is a great one from the older songs because they're just great parts and you can really get into them. Oh, what's the other one? I've been playing it for about two years... *Time The Avenger*, that's great.

"When you're watching a band, you don't want to just focus on one person – that's my mentality on stage" ***CHRISSIE HYNDE***

Chrissie: "Oh, that's Jimmy Scott."

James: "It's great because they're almost like Northern soul riffs on them, really, you know? Then a bit of punk guitar and very melodic."

The little staccato riff that trips along on *Don't Get Me Wrong* is perfect like that.

Chrissie: "That was Robbie McIntosh. I would like to say, a



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"The guy said, 'This one has the original white finish, so it's going to be worth more.' I said, 'Give me the blue one'"

CHRISSIE HYNDE

5. Chrissie's current Fender signature model features her initials on the neckplate and also a badge on the strap that takes its inspiration from the film *Appaloosa*

lot of these songs, I now feel it is wrong for me to claim credit because I would write a song on the guitar, take it to the band, and then they would [add their own contributions] – that's how it always worked. They would embellish it with their own sounds. That's why it wasn't called the Chrissie Hynde group, it was called The Pretenders. But then, over the years as it evolved, I realised that the guitar riff is... it's a tricky thing with songwriting because if someone comes up with just a title and that triggers off a song, they have a credit, but if you've already written the song and you take it to them and they embellish it, it's like you took the finished song and they [simply added further details].

"Chrissie's guitar playing holds the band together and it's fantastic. It's the rhythm playing, it's unique" ***JAMES WALBOURNE***

"So, now, if I were to go back on it, I would think, well, Billy Bremner had such a significant part on *Back On The Chain Gang* and Robbie McIntosh... I mean, he played on *Middle Of The Road* and *2000 Miles* and stuff. Adam Seymour had significant parts on anything he played on. I'm sorry, guys, you know?"

James: "But that's guitar players, you know – that's just how it works. We know that."

Chrissie: "The germ of the thing belongs to the [original writer], but then the way people embellish it and produce it and put it together – that's the difference between a band and a solo artist, probably, if I had to define it."

Tell us about the new live album.

Chrisse: "After lockdown, I insisted on playing clubs because I felt like I was at club level [as a performer] after not doing anything for so long. It was against the advice of the powers that be, true, but I knew that – just psychologically, for whatever reason – I had to do that. And I said, 'Look, if you can't find us any gigs, we'll just do some pre-shows.' And miraculously, some gigs appeared. I said to my manager, 'You know, Ian, I don't really care if I break even.' He goes, 'Yeah, but if you don't break even, I can't pay my staff.' So I said, 'Oh, of course.' I don't think in business terms.

"So we did a whole tour of clubs, and then when we played The Social here in London, our agent came down and my manager – they stood back and they went, 'Okay, we get it now. We get it now.' Because what you get in the club with the band, you don't get it anywhere else. And if a band is playing only stadiums and arenas, if they want to do a club, it becomes a special show. But I thought, 'No, we're not doing that. This is us.'"

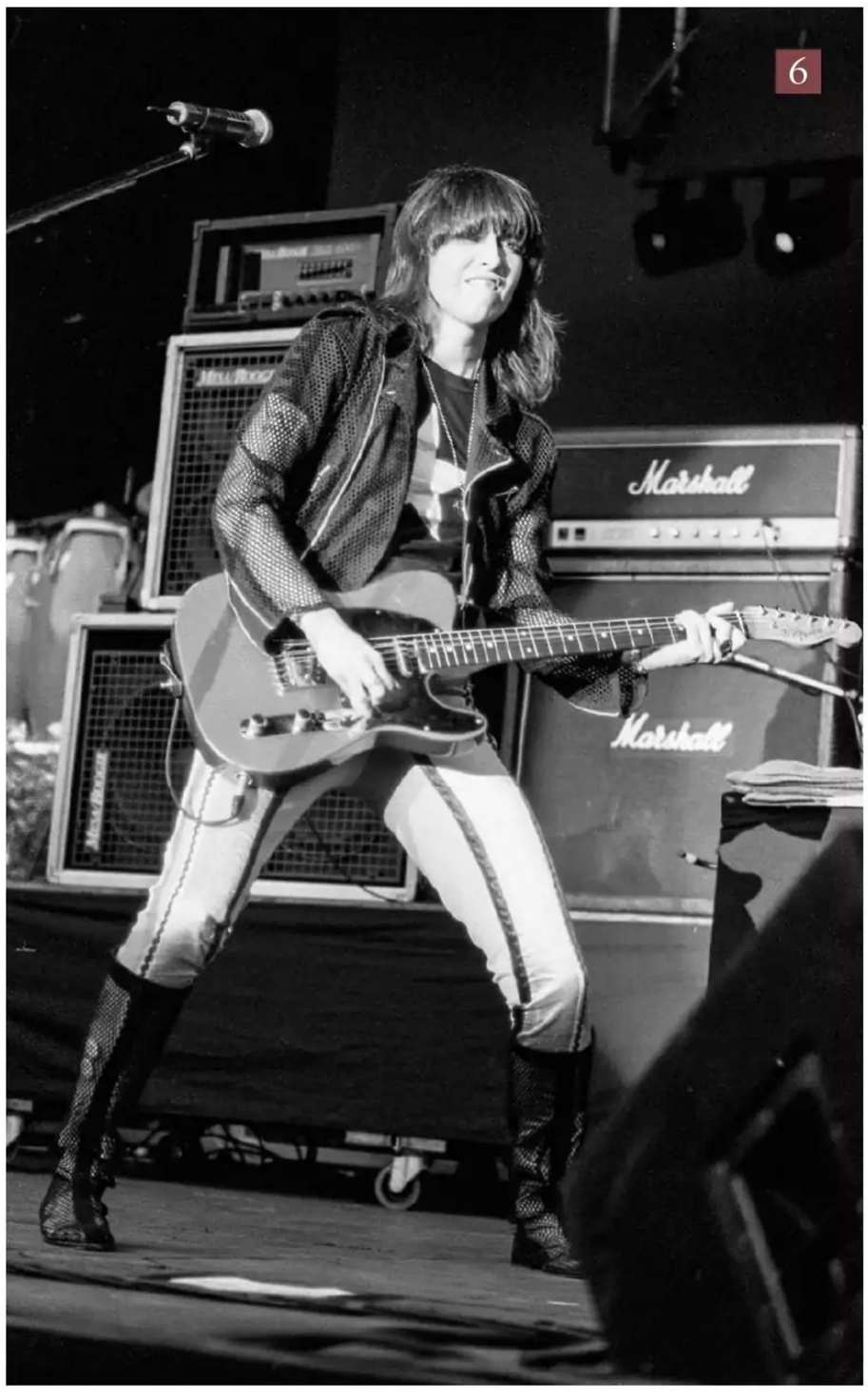
James: "One night we played this mega-dome somewhere. And the next night would be the 7th St Entry in Minneapolis, which holds about 200 people at a push. And so it was a very strange tour."

Chrissie: "But what it did for us is it made us feel like a band again, so we kind of knew what we were doing. And it informed the way we were writing..."

James: "And we hated each other

6. Chrissie on stage with her original Tele in 1994 in Dublin. Despite pop hooks, the band is emphatically a rock 'n' roll guitar outfit

7. James uses a '66 Tele, refinished in Candy Apple Red, for many of his Pretenders gigs, but he's not afraid to mix it up with many other guitars when gigging



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PHOTO BY INDEPENDENT NEWS AND MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

"My strong point is orchestrating [the whole song]. So I can listen and get a feel for what works and what doesn't"

CHRISSIE HYNDE



8. James's 1963 SG Junior is a huge-sounding guitar and, despite his high-energy playing style, he says it stays in tune remarkably well!

at the end of it [laughs]. So we really did a good job."

Chrissie: "A theatre is a great size. In the early days, I didn't like them because people were sitting and I thought you had to stand up. And now I don't give a shit – sit down, just watch the show, whatever. It gives the band the possibility to have a lot of light and shade or nuance within the set, which I think is really important, so we can do some sort of ballads."

James: "But the main reason we did the clubs was because, leading up to Covid, we played a lot of gigs where we had to do the hits – we played with Fleetwood Mac, we did a lot of stuff. So by the time that Covid happened and the lockdown happened, it needed to change and that was the catalyst."

Chrissie: "We talked about it a lot – of course, everyone wants to hear the songs. You know, if I went to see David Bowie, I'd have wanted him to do *Changes*. If he doesn't, I'll go home and, you know, cry. But then, on the other hand, I never wanted to play *Brass In Pocket* for the rest of my life – and I'm not going to. You have to split the difference and give the audience what they want, but also you have to do what you want: that's why they liked you in the first place because you did what you want. So you have to bring it back.

"That brings me up to why we did the live album. Because the live album is just what our monitor [mix] recorded. In our live show, there's what you might call deep cuts, songs that we've done for the last two years – but the main audience won't know it because they were never hits. It was never on the radio. If we put it out in some way, if we do go out again, we can do these songs and they're more familiar because people want what they're familiar with. A case in point is that song *The Losing* [from the 2002 album, *Loose Screw*]."

> ***"Everyone wants to hear the [hits]... but I never want to play 'Brass In Pocket' for the rest of my life"*** ***CHRISSIE HYNDE***

James: "Some of those songs like *The Losing* might have – with the greatest of respect – suffered from some of the production at the time..."

Chrissie: "Oh, big-time."

James: "So we stripped it back to how a four-piece rock 'n' roll band would do it. The song really came out to where you think, 'Fuck me, that's a great song.' Which might have got lost in translation, before."

Chrissie: "I mean, James's playing on *Thumbelina* – which is an older Pretenders song – [is incredible]. The live album is called *Kick 'Em Where It Hurts*, and the reason for that is because I'm so fierce about my guitar hero [James] that when I listen to other bands, I'm thinking, 'You aren't a fucking guitar hero, *that's* a guitar hero!' And so when I listen to some of the other guitar players out there, that's what I thought: 'You call yourself a band? *This* is a band.'" G

The new live album from The Pretenders, *Kick 'Em Where It Hurts*, is set for independent release on 13 June
https://thepretenders.tmstor.es



EXCLUSIVE! FREE TRACK DOWNLOAD

After sitting for this interview, Chrissie kindly offered to make a track from the stunning new live album, *Kick 'Em Where It Hurts*, available exclusively to *Guitarist* readers. To add it to your music collection today, enter the following link into your preferred browser or scan the QR code to download the zip file, then open the zip and save the mp3:
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STEVEN WILSON

One thing you can be sure of, when Steven Wilson releases a new album, it will be different from anything he's done before. His latest, *The Overview*, is a very proggy space odyssey that takes the listener on a journey to the outer reaches of the universe...

Words David Mead **Portrait** Kevin Westenberg



"It's a big chunk of conceptual rock music about the cosmos, and why not?" Steven Wilson says as we settle in on our Zoom call. His past couple of albums, *The Future Bites* (2021) and *The Harmony Codex* (2023), veered instrumentally more towards electronica with the guitar taking a back seat. But *The Overview* sees the instrument return to central focus and even includes a four-minute long epic guitar solo from Wilson's Porcupine Tree touring companion Randy McStine. The central concept on which the album is based concerns the effect that viewing our planet from space has on both astronauts and space tourists alike. It's a mammoth work, with just two tracks spanning its 43-minute duration.

"The guitar belongs to the 20th century in many ways. So [how] can you reinvent that vocabulary to make it seem relevant?" STEVEN WILSON

What was it that brought you back to progressive-rock concept albums?

"Well, to be honest, I've always had a concept around every record. That was true of the last record, the one before that, too. I think the difference here is that it's structured into a single flow of music. So if the question is, 'What drew me back to that?' I think the answer is, the concept itself kind of suggested it. I think when you're dealing with a subject like this, it didn't make sense to me to write 10 separate songs. It made sense to create a feature film for the ears; something in the long-form that would really allow me to take the listener on a musical journey, conceptually, from Earth onto the other side of the universe."

What was your starting point for the album, from a writing point of view?

"The starting point is always the same for me. Whatever I do, it's 'What can I do that's different? What can I do that is not going to be simply more of the same? What can I do that is a reaction against what I've done before? What can I do that will confront and surprise the expectations of the audience?' And I think one of the things I'd not done for a while was something more in the long-form.

"The second part of that answer would be the actual starting point for the concept was deciding that I wanted to do something, perhaps as a collaborative work, where I could maybe create music for a video or an installation or a film of some kind. I set up meetings with a few people and one of the people I met with was Alex Milas from Space Rocks, which is an organisation dedicated to bringing together the worlds of astronomy and science and music. During those conversations, Alex said to me, 'Have you heard of this thing called the Overview Effect?' And he went on to explain that it's a recognised phenomenon: the first time that astronauts go into space and they look back at the Earth, they have this very profound moment of understanding and perspective. For some people it's very negative, and for some people it's very positive.

"I was immediately fascinated with that idea and straight away it was kind of a light bulb moment. 'You know what? I've got the title, I've got the concept, and this is a situation where I've got both of these things in place before I've written a single lyric and a single note of music.' So the music flowed fairly swiftly and over about a six-week period I mapped out the basic shape of these two long pieces."

The album sounds like it was always going to be best appreciated in spatial audio. Did you have a Dolby Atmos version in mind when you were putting the album together?

"Yes and no. I'm always aware that I'm going to be doing an Atmos mix, and I'm trying to raise the bar in terms of what's possible with spatial audio. But at the same time I'm always having to acknowledge to myself that 99 per cent of people will only ever get to hear this in stereo, and so I'm primarily focused on making an audiophile stereo experience. I do believe there's an audience out there that still cares about dynamics. They care about the quality of sound, they care about the texture of music, and they're prepared to immerse themselves in listening to an album from beginning to end and really engage with it. So I'm very committed to this idea of making records that sound beautiful.

"And I think it would be naïve to concentrate too much on the spatial audio aspect of that at the expense of creating something that sounds beautiful in stereo, which is what most people ultimately are going to hear. But I've always got this thought, 'Oh, you're going to be doing an Atmos mix,' and does that influence some of the production decisions I make? You know what? Probably, subconsciously, I'm making decisions, knowing that these things will sound great when I get to that stage of the process."

Last time we spoke you said you thought the guitar had very little relevance in modern music and yet you've made a return to it with *The Overview*. There's a lot of acoustic and electric guitar on there, and you have Randy McStine playing some epic guitar solos.

"Randy pretty much came in towards the end to basically be the solo voice of the record. Most of the other guitar parts I played myself, but in terms of the solo voice, my instruction to Randy was quite simple. For example, there's a very long guitar solo at the end of the first piece. I said to Randy, 'We're going to reinvent the notion of the extended classic rock guitar solo – we're going to do the 'not *Comfortably Numb*' solo.' Now, there's nothing wrong with *Comfortably Numb*; I think it's the greatest guitar solo of all time. But the point is, we need to reinvent this notion. We need to create something that has the same sense of drama, but we're going to do it in a way that sounds like it could only have been done in 2025. So the goal here was to try to bring back the guitar but in a more modern context."



PHOTO BY PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. Steven takes to the stage wielding his '63 Fender Custom Shop Telecaster at the Ziggo Dome, Amsterdam, in November 2022



"It's a gift for someone who thinks of himself primarily as a producer that there's never been more ways to process, twist and mutate sound"

STEVEN WILSON

It sounds like a great deal of digital processing has been used with the guitar sounds.

"It's a gift for someone like me, who thinks of himself primarily as a producer, that there's never been more ways to process, twist and mutate sound. It's just extraordinary, particularly when you bring together, as I have on this record, the two worlds of the vintage and the modern. I'm not a purist. I'm not interested in getting vintage tones for the sake of it. I like vintage tones, of course I do, and there are some on this record. But I'm a massive fan of what you can do in the digital realm, with processing and plug-ins, particularly with an old-fashioned – quote, unquote – instrument like guitar.

"I love the guitar, but essentially it's an instrument that belongs to the 20th century in many ways. So it's a question of, what can you do to try to reinvent that vocabulary to make it seem relevant? And Randy, being the young whippersnapper that he is, understands that. It was really fascinating to go down that road with him, where we tried to create something in the tradition of the epic guitar solo but in a way that perhaps was fresher to people who've heard that before."

So are you principally playing acoustic guitar on the album, or do you play electric as well?

"No, I play most of the electric parts, too, but the solos are Randy and he also contributes a few other parts. Because the album came together so quickly and I had such a strong idea about what I wanted, I pretty much ended up playing all the bass, most of the guitar parts and most of the keyboard parts myself. It was just easier to do that than try to explain to somebody else what I wanted. Adam Holzman, the keyboard player, came in at the end to provide those kind of solo voices. And obviously I'm not a drummer, so I needed the drums to be done as well. In a way, the collaborative side of things was pretty much the last part of the process."

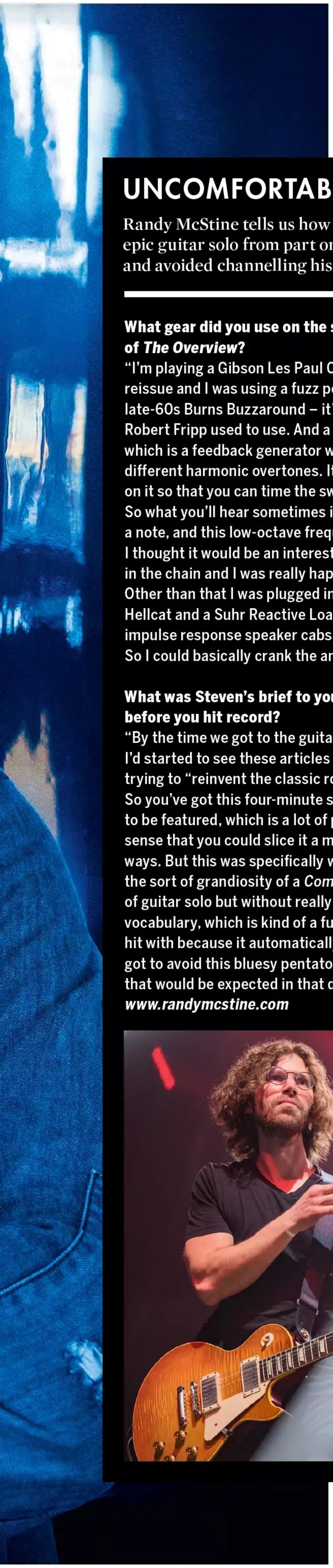
Which guitars did you use for the album?

"I used my Takamine, my regular acoustic, and I used an Ovation in Nashville tuning – and there's a lot of that on the record. I usually tend to combine the two, a regular acoustic and a Nashville-strung to create that really big sound. The electric was mostly all Tele. I fell in love with Telecasters about seven or eight

After playing only a supporting role on his recent albums, the guitar is back into central focus for *The Overview*

PHOTO BY KEVIN WESTENBERG


"The best of both worlds [is] using digital technology but then bringing in some of the characteristics of analogue that we love so much"
STEVEN WILSON
PHOTO BY KEVIN WESTENBERG

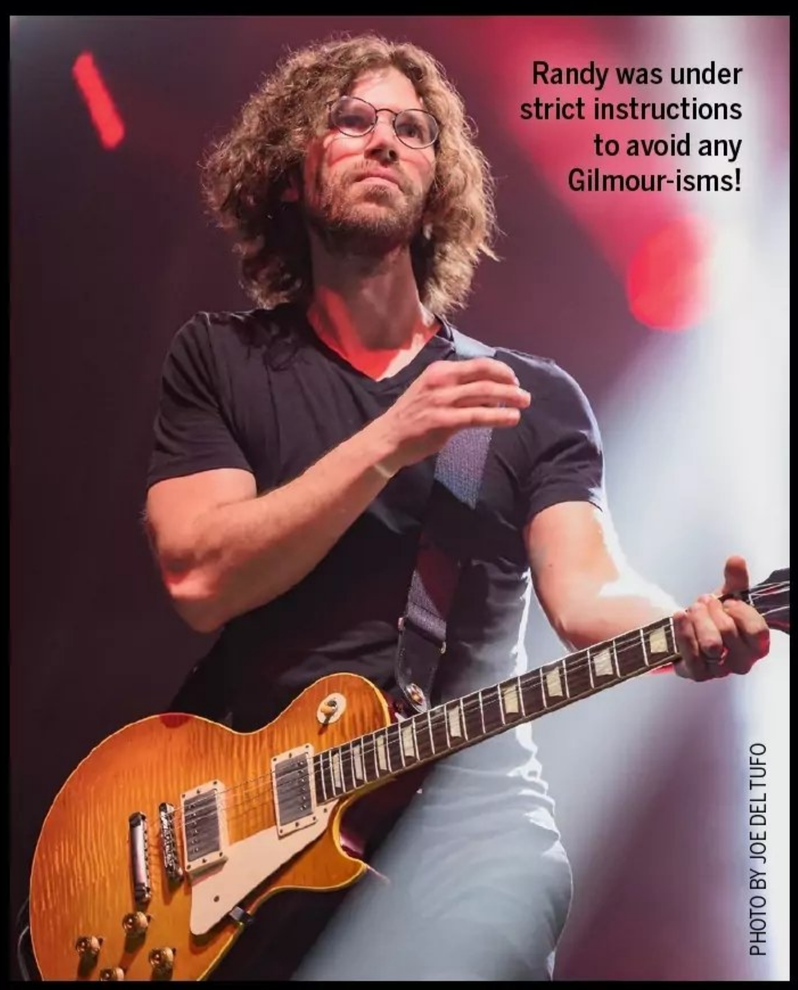


UNCOMFORTABLY NUMB?

Randy McStine tells us how he performed the epic guitar solo from part one of *The Overview* and avoided channelling his inner Gilmour

What gear did you use on the solo on part one of *The Overview*?
"I'm playing a Gibson Les Paul Custom Shop '59 reissue and I was using a fuzz pedal based on the late-60s Burns Buzzaround – it's based on whatever Robert Fripp used to use. And a DigiTech FreqOut, which is a feedback generator where you can dial in different harmonic overtones. It has a gate function on it so that you can time the swell of the feedback. So what you'll hear sometimes is I'll be sustaining a note, and this low-octave frequency will creep in. I thought it would be an interesting, chaotic element in the chain and I was really happy with the results. Other than that I was plugged into a Cornford Hellcat and a Suhr Reactive Load IR, which has impulse response speaker cabs loaded into it. So I could basically crank the amp silently."

What was Steven's brief to you for the solo before you hit record?
"By the time we got to the guitar solo in question, I'd started to see these articles pop up about trying to "reinvent the classic rock guitar solo". So you've got this four-minute space for the guitar to be featured, which is a lot of pressure in the sense that you could slice it a million different ways. But this was specifically wanting it to have the sort of grandiosity of a *Comfortably Numb* type of guitar solo but without really referencing that vocabulary, which is kind of a funny paradox to be hit with because it automatically tells you you've got to avoid this bluesy pentatonic minor thing that would be expected in that direction."
www.randymcstine.com



Randy was under strict instructions to avoid any Gilmour-isms!

PHOTO BY JOE DEL TUFO



PHOTO BY PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

2. Randy McStine (left) first worked with Steven in 2022 for the US/European Porcupine Tree tour

years ago, and I bought myself a beautiful Custom Shop 1963 Telecaster. I still use my PRS, too, but what I love about the Telecaster is that you don't have to drive it very hard for it to sound aggressive. It's just got that natural kind of bite. It's that Townshend/Syd Barrett/Joe Strummer type thing, where you don't have to drive it very hard for it to cut through. And so these days, I find myself putting less and less gain on the guitars when I'm tracking them, and I think a lot of that is down to the Tele just having a naturally aggressive, biting sound."

How did you process the acoustics and the electrics that you played?
"I love processing. My favourite plug-in these days, which I use on almost all the guitars and a lot of the keyboards, is one that makes things sound like they're coming off a cassette tape. It's a very lo-fi thing. It's a $20 plug-in made by Aberrant DSP called SketchCassette [SketchCassette II is currently $36]. You can choose the brand of tape, you can choose Ferric, Chrome or Metal, how much wow and flutter, how much saturation, how much hiss, how old the tape is...

"I love it because sometimes the problem with digital sounds is they just lack a little bit of character, and a little bit of what you would think of as an imperfection can make things have character. So very often, I just load up this cassette plug-in and add a little bit of flutter or warble or saturation, or just make it sound like it's coming off a tape that's been recorded over three or four times, and suddenly it gives the sound character. It gives the sound just a little bit more grain and that organic quality that you associate with analogue tape.

"This is what I mean when I'm talking about using the best of both worlds: using the best of digital technology, but then also bringing in some of the characteristics of analogue that we love so much. On a lot of the guitars I do, I used that plug-in just to give them a little bit more grain and character." G



The Overview is available now via Fiction Records. Steven Wilson's European tour begins on 1 May

www.stevenwilsonhq.com

EPIPHONE RIVIERA

From the New York jazz clubs of the 1920s, through the emergence of 50s electric blues in the late 50s, to today's vibrant, diverse scene, Epiphone has seen twists and turns but has been an enduring force – and the Riviera semi-acoustic is one of its greatest models

Words Bob Wootton **Photography** Phil Barker

Epaminondos 'Epi' Stathopoulos – a well-educated, worldly and dapper young man who went by the nickname of 'The Duke' – was 22 years old when his father, Anastasios, died in 1915 and he took charge of the family's musical instrument business, renaming it The House of Stathopoulo. Soon, the US's early 20th century craze for mandolins would morph into a new passion for jazz.

The business's early focus was banjos, where it quickly came to rival established makers such as Bacon & Day, Lange/Paramount and Vega-Fairbanks, becoming the Epiphone Banjo Company in 1928. However, by then Epi had already seen the future and that same year he launched his first range of acoustic guitars, as Jimmie Rodgers, The Carter Family and New York's Nick Lucas spearheaded a new age of music.

While these instruments were too small to compete with jazz-band horn sections, Epiphone persisted, surviving the stock market crash of October 1929 (Gibson resorted to making wooden children's toys to keep afloat) and establishing itself during the 1930s as the pre-eminent maker of professional-quality guitars. This was the era of big guitars: size was an important competitive feature as unamplified archtops had to pump out sound.

In 1936, Gibson introduced its first electrified instrument, the ES-150, and Epiphone followed quickly. Les Paul's original prototype solidbody, 'The Log' – rejected for years by Gibson – actually started life at the Epiphone factory back in 1939, being built from a 4x4 plank with its sides taken from an Epiphone body.

In the summer 1943, Epi died at the age of 49, and the inheritance of the company by his brothers Orphie and Frixo heralded change. A decade later, Epiphone had moved production to Philadelphia to avoid New York's powerful labour unions. Product quality remained, but tastes were a-changin' again – and Gibson and upstart Fender were there to clean up as the age of the electric guitar really took off.

Come 1957, Orphie was looking to sell and found a buyer in Gibson's owner, CMI, who paid $20,000, largely for its upright basses. By mid-'57, however, it became clear that Gibson would be acquiring more than just the basses – the deal was, in fact, for the whole company, including parts to manufacture Epiphone guitars.

By the July 1958 NAMM Show in Chicago, Gibson was ready to debut the revived Epiphone brand. These guitars were manufactured alongside its own in Kalamazoo, Michigan – fabricated in the same building but assembled a few blocks away. This was another peak period of innovation in guitar-making and, as vintage prices attest, signalled the height of Gibson's powers.

The story goes that Gibson president Ted McCarty assigned a crack team of staff under Ward Arbanas to ensure successful integration and output. It made good business sense; with another line to sell, Gibson could increase its coverage without upsetting exclusive territorial dealer arrangements. So the Epiphone range was made and numbered alongside Gibson's. Most Gibsons eventually gained a corresponding Epiphone model; they were similar but not identical, and were emphatically not cheaper alternatives. Several had higher specs and prices than their Gibson siblings. Take Epiphone's top-end Emperor, for example, which listed as $400 in Epiphone's 1936 catalogue – a translation to $9k today.

Welcoming The Riviera

Epiphone's Riviera model E360TD (pictured opposite) launched in 1962 as the counterpart to Gibson's ES-335T, which had debuted in 1958 and overcame early design flaws to find its stride by '59, becoming a classic and, of course, remaining in production today.

The 335 had Gibson's full-size humbuckers, which designer Seth Lover reportedly considered too large. In

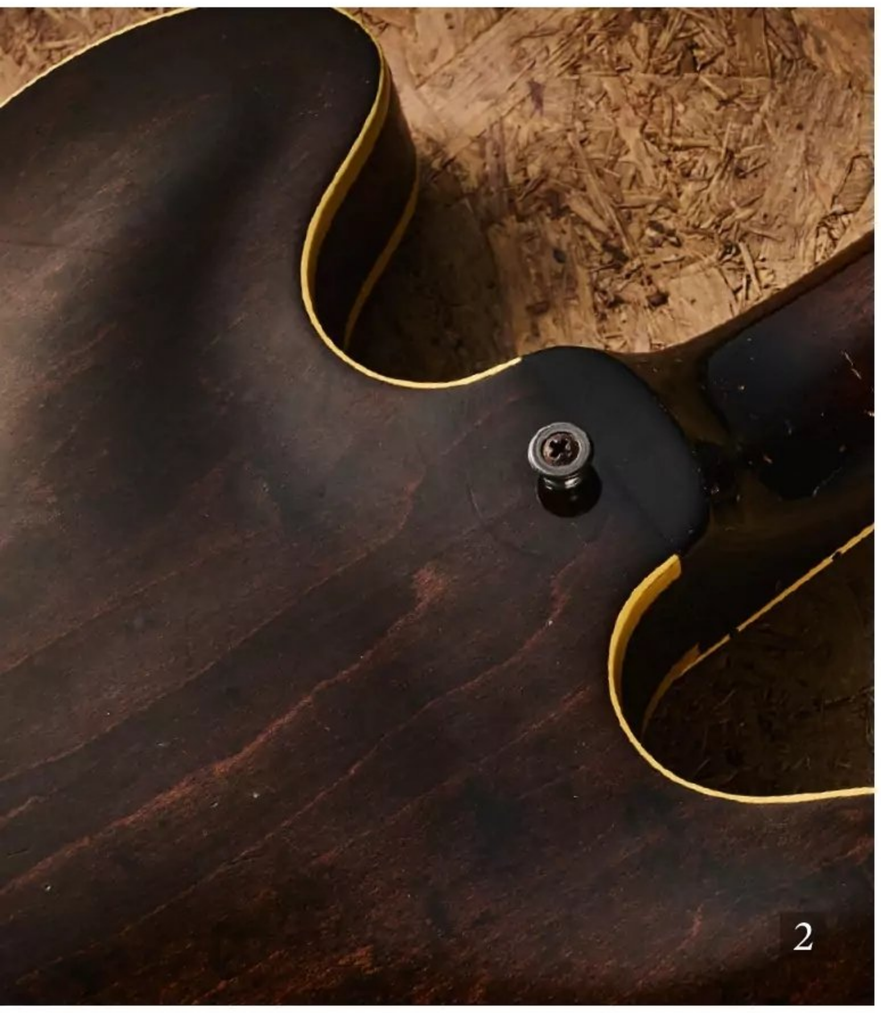
By 1964, the earlier ‘Mickey Mouse’ body ears of the Riviera had slimmed. The six-string is an unusual sunburst with narrower dark edges, while the 12-string E360TD-12 is the more common Royal Tan



1. Epiphone's distinctive slender headstock, which widened in '65, features Kluson tuners and a unique motif

2. Note the beautiful walnut brown stain on the nicely figured maple back, plus the Gibson-style strap button

3. This Riviera displays typical hallmarks of Epiphone guitars, including the split 'Frequensator' tailpiece and white laminated pickguard with silvered epsilon logo. The controls and jack are like those found on Gibson's equivalent models





contrast, the Riviera carries the mini-humbuckers that he had already designed to replace Epiphone's earlier 'New York' pickups. Their narrower magnetic field yielded a brighter tone that proved popular with Chicago's bluesmen (Fender's cutting single-coil pickup guitars were in vogue by then). Of Chicago's 'big three' at the time, two – Magic Sam and Otis Rush – played Rivieras. So, later, did Stevie Ray Vaughan, Robbie Robertson and Robben Ford.

Like Gibson's humbuckers, early minis have 'Patent Applied For' labels until 1963, then 'Patent Number' examples that are similarly sought after. (The design got another lease of life on the Les Paul Deluxe models introduced at the close of the 60s, which, too, remain popular today).

The Riviera also had a trapeze tailpiece years before Gibson adopted it on (and then dropped it from) the 335. But an Epiphone part, a 'Frequensator' with different length trapezes for top and bottom strings, purportedly enhanced the guitar's range by boosting lows and highs... a claim that many players would not substantiate!

Epiphone had never produced thin bodies, so all of its bodies are effectively Gibson. But its first thinline, 1958's Sheraton (an analogue to Gibson's ES-355), had leftover longer-scale Epi necks, influencing feel and tone. The Riviera models actually more closely resemble

Epiphone's Riviera model E360TD launched in 1962 as the counterpart to Gibson's ES-335T

the 335, both featuring a 24 ¾-inch scale, one-piece mahogany neck, with 22-fret rosewood fretboards. In addition, the Rivieras and 335s have a maple centre block that runs the length of the 16-inch-wide body, anchoring pickups and bridge and leaving resonant spaces either side.

But whether Epiphone leftovers or Gibson-made, Epis always had their own headstock shapes. And apart from rare early crossover dot-neck examples (mentioned in this author's piece on Gibson ES-330s in issue 515), they had their own neck inlays, too. Earlier Riviera models had rectangular ovals, which soon became the single parallelograms that were popularised on Epi's Casino model.

Many Epis and Gibsons share hardware – bridges, saddles (nylon or steel), tuners, control knobs and strap buttons – but pickguards and truss rod covers typically carried Epiphone's epsilon logo. The inherited metal-plate 'bikini' headstock logo was succeeded by a Gibson-style pearloid inlay by late '61.

Epi finishes were similar but not identical. The '64 Riviera pictured here is a rare three-colour sunburst (though with a narrower dark edge than Gibson's) and a dark-stained back. The standard finish was Royal Tan, a lighter yellow to brownish red, also called standard on Casinos with a paler tan back like this '66 E360TD-12. An optional Cherry finish was soon offered, too; it was often slightly deeper and matured to a beautiful dusky raspberry. Walnut came much later, and only one blonde example from '66 is known. Might other colours of the day such as Argentine Gray, Silver Fox or Pelham Blue also conceivably exist?

Sunburst models had gold Gibson reflector knobs, while Royal Tan examples sported black units. Epiphone cases mirror Gibson's, too, though they're grey with blue interiors and purple ribbon covering the hinges. As time passed, colours and specs (apart from pickups, pickguards and headstocks) converged with Gibson's. Through '65, necks were getting narrower in the misguided belief that it aided faster playing and easier chording.

By the mid-60s, most of the major manufacturers were acknowledging the trend towards a folkier influence that



4. The paler Royal Tan finish of this Riviera 12-string flatters the top's grain. Here, a regular trapeze tailpiece takes the strain of the strings, and the brighter mini-humbucker pickups capture the ringing overtones

5. Royal Tan was typically matched with a paler tan back, but few are as figured as this one

6. Both guitars have a clear, warm acoustic tone. The E360TD-12 was Carl Wilson of The Beach Boys' preferred live guitar



preceded the summer of love's psychedelic boom, and 12-string guitars were now everywhere, including electrics following The Byrds' success. Sadly, Gibsons with 41mm nut widths were almost unplayable unless you had fingers like chopsticks.

It's worth noting that while vintage ES-335s command strong prices (albeit diminishing across the 60s as features changed for the worse), the 12-string ES-335-12 was never popular. It's often found either in ES completists' collections or converted to six strings, which are at least somewhat playable. The craftspeople on the Epiphone benches seemed to resist this unfortunate trend, however, and mid-60s Riviera 12s with wider, more playable necks such as this Royal Tan example above can be found; its original case is extended to accommodate the longer headstock. The mini-humbuckers here also respond better to the complex overtones of the paired strings. Many 12s sound great with both pickups engaged, and Rivieras are no exception. Okay, tune-o-matic bridges weren't designed for 12-strings, but hardly any (except, characteristically, Fender's) had adjustable intonation per string.

By the late 60s, Epiphone sales had dwindled. Then-owners CMI discontinued production in 1969 and in 1970 put the name on imported Japanese Matsumoto-made budget acoustics and electrics. Many collectors and Epi enthusiasts were not impressed with instruments from this era, citing cheap woods and laminates as well as bolt-on necks as areas of concern. The 12-string dreadnought acoustic, however, was an exception – one of the most playable 12-strings ever until Taylor came along years later with acoustic guitars for electric players' hands.

Production moved to Korea and Taiwan in the early 80s, and in '86 Gibson's new owner – led by Henry Juszkiewicz et al – repositioned Epiphone as its affordable, mid-priced line. Still manufactured in Eastern Asia but to higher standards, the current crop is very good indeed as you'll have seen in recent reviews in these pages.

While some consider them less attractive, vintage Epiphones do hold their own against their Gibson equivalents. With the exception of the Casino model (counterpart to Gibson's fully hollow ES-330 thinline made famous by The Beatles), Epiphones trade for less than Gibsons. The rising tide has lifted all boats, but there are some good deals to be had. G



This writer would like to credit and pay tribute to Walter Carter of Carter Vintage Guitars, official historian and author of *Epiphone: The Complete History*

Back To The Start

It's not an official 40th Anniversary model, but the new Standard 24 Satin takes us right back to where this unique story started. It's also the most affordable Core model that PRS has released for nearly a decade

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker







PRS STANDARD 24 SATIN & S2 STANDARD 24 SATIN £3,449 & £1,999

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

What You Need To Know

1 Where's the figured maple top?
If you know your PRS guitars, you'll know that historically 'Standard' refers mainly to all-mahogany construction, while 'Custom' refers to an additional maple top, the opposite of Gibson's Les Paul. That said, there have been PRS Standards with maple tops.

2 You say affordable... really?
Okay, so £3.5k isn't chump change, but this new Standard is £950 less expensive than the current lowest-priced PRS Core model, the DGT (with moon inlays), and £1,140 less than the starting price for the Custom 24. In our book, that's more affordable!

3 What's new about the S2 Standard Satin model?
Last year PRS announced that its S2 line would come upgraded with USA-made pickups. 2025 sees the addition of wing-button locking tuners, plus a quartet of new colours. While we wait for that one to land, this 2024-spec model illustrates the difference between PRS's USA-made Core and S2 levels, not least with the lower price point in mind.

Think PRS and you probably see a curly maple-topped Custom: an absolute modern classic and the guitar that built the empire. But the Standard is also 40 years old, the original 'PRS guitar' as it was called until it became the Standard in 1987, with the only major difference being its all-mahogany body. Historically, the Standard has always been the less-expensive 'blue collar' option. But it's also been absent from PRS's Core range for over 15 years. It last appeared as the Standard 24 (or 22) Satin in the 2008 line-up and was gone the following year.
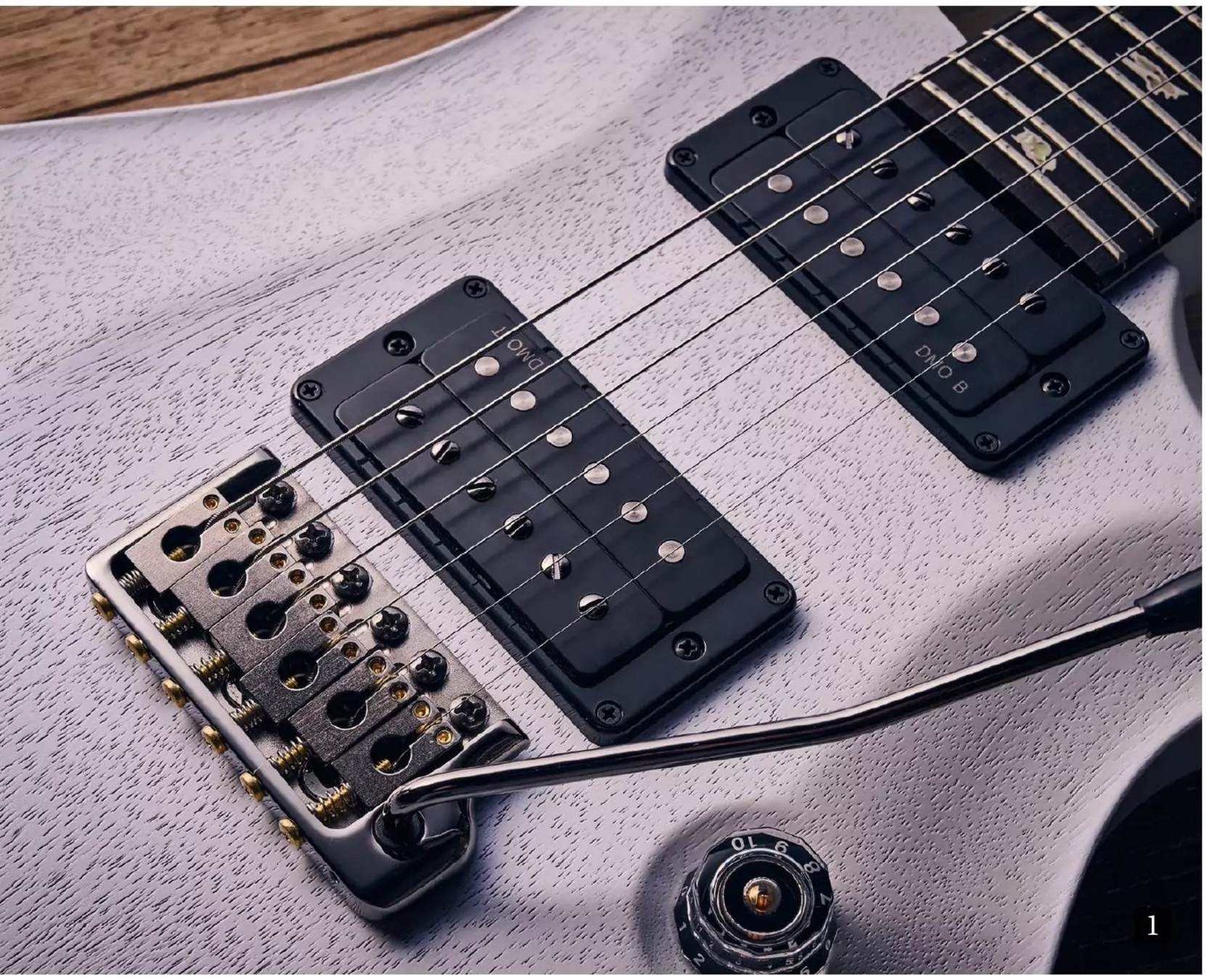
Take a quick glance at today's Standard 24 Satin and you might ask, 'What's changed over 40 years?' Pretty much everything. That now-classic outline can't be anything else but PRS, although the machinery used to make it today is a lot more sophisticated than the bandsaws, planers and Dupli Carver (which created the carved top back in the day) used in PRS's original Virginia Avenue factory. It also retains the original halfway-between-Fender-and-Gibson 635mm (25-inch) scale length and 254mm (10-inch) fingerboard radius.

Without the eye-catching maple fascia, a solid colour such as our Pearl White example – a proper pearl that subtly changes shade in different lights – lets you really appreciate the complexity of the top carve with its dished violin-like outer carve, the chamfering to the upper horn and the hallmark deep cut-out to the treble horn. The top edge has a very small, almost sharp rim. The back's edges are more rounded, and save for a subtle ribcage contour it's flat. Both controls sit in small carved dishes, and the overall craft is perfect, including the finishing with its open-pore – or 'sinky', in PRS speak – satin nitro. As ever, the mahogany body is one-piece stock.

While later guitars, from the early 90s McCarty Model, use a slightly thicker body, today's Custom 24 and this Standard

> The Core Standard's humbuckers are perfect for big stadiums, real or imagined

stick with the original 49mm depth, more feline Fender Stratocaster than ol' porky Les Paul. The full-width glued-in neck has an extended foot that sits under the neck pickup, and it's probably changed less than other details, not least the material quality and condition and the way it's made. Stability is everything; it's proper craft and always has been. Originally, as here, the Standard and Custom's fingerboards were unbound. The rosewood might no longer be Brazilian, but the East Indian variety here has a deep, dark almost black colour that shows off the bird inlays perfectly;



1. New year, new humbucker. Moving on from the date series pickups, the DMO Treble and Bass humbuckers also feature on the latest-spec Custom 24. Elsewhere, another difference between the Core and S2 models is the vibrato: this Core model has the brass Gen III version with numerous function and tone-improving tweaks

2. Proprietary parts such as these black lampshade knobs abound on the modern PRS guitar, but the Standard (like the Custom) offers distinct humbucking and single-coil voicings from the five-way lever switch

3. The Core Standard headstock features a rosewood facing with inlaid vintage ivory acrylic Paul Reed Smith logo





they look a lot crisper now and have green abalone centres – about the only bit of bling on the whole guitar.

A first glance, it's hard to see what's changed with the vibrato, too. Based on a Fender vibrato with its all-brass construction, walled top plate and block saddles, the overall style is similar to the original design (which was patented in 1984) and it has been constantly refined to this Gen III level with its larger brass pivot screws – to "maximise the transfer of the strings' vibration through the bridge and into the body of the guitar", states PRS – and grooves under the height-adjustment screws to provide better saddle-to-bridge contact. Subtle refinements to eke every drop of vibrational transfer. It pivots on those notched screws and sits parallel to the top using four springs.

At the other end we have the latest Phase III tuners – open backs, unplated brass posts, top locks – and they now feature these larger 'wing' buttons, which are a black synthetic to tie in with the smoked black plating. Even the nut material has evolved into the clearly brass-infused low-friction synthetic currently used.

THE RIVALS

All-mahogany, double-cut, twin-humbucking guitars? Well, Gibson obviously has its classic SG in plenty of styles and colours. The SG Standard, with a wide colour choice, starts at £1,699; the '61 with 60s Burstbuckers in Vintage Cherry is £1,899 (also available with Maestro Vibrola at £2,399). Another Gibson classic is the double-cut Les Paul Special, although these are rarer birds. There's the Rick Beato limited model at £1,999 or the Gibson Custom 1960 reissue at £3,999, though both use P-90 single coils, not humbuckers.

A recent addition from Gibson Custom is the Les Paul Special Double Cut Figured Top (£4,899). "We took a 1960 Les Paul Special Double Cut and added a figured maple top, body binding, Custombuckers, and an ABR-1 bridge and stop bar setup," says Gibson.

Aside from Fame, Harley Benton and Vintage, which typically ape a more Custom-like style, it's hard to find any serious competitors in all-mahogany construction outside of smaller 'boutique' makers. In reality, it's the secondhand market that provides the obvious competition and, without that maple top, used PRS Standards have always commanded lower prices than Customs.

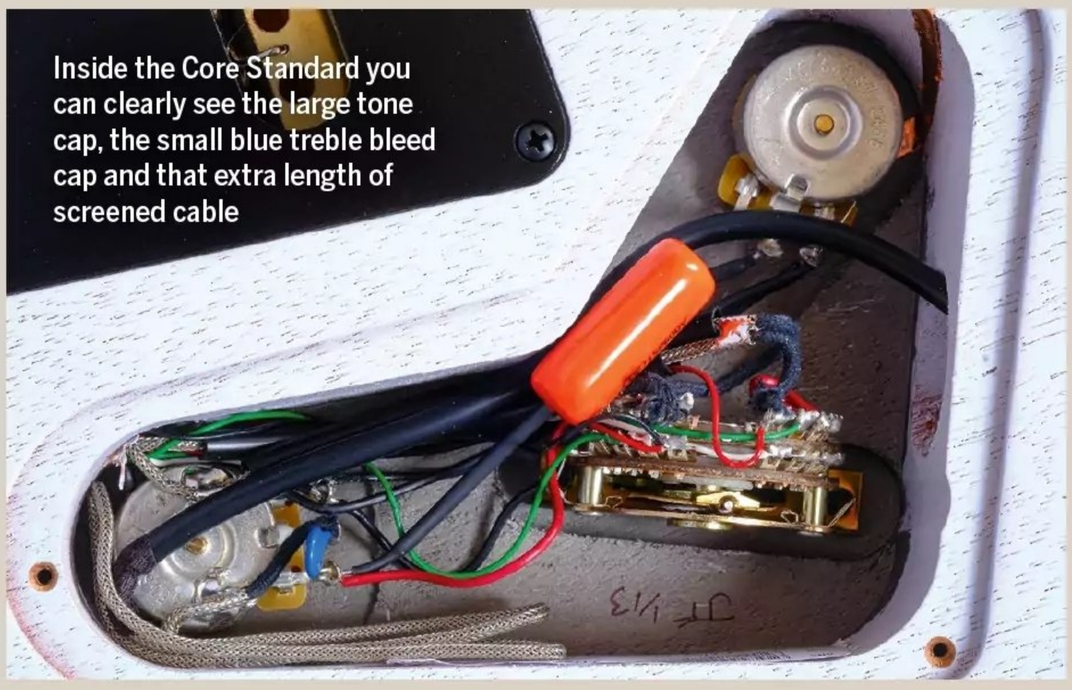
Along with the 2025 Custom 24 and Custom 24 Piezo, the Standard also introduces the latest PRS uncovered humbuckers, the DMO Treble and Bass (see Under The Hood, below). These adopt the proprietary square-bobbin style and mounting rings, and you realise that every visible part – the black lampshade knobs, the switch tip, the strap buttons, not to mention the tuners and bridge – are all proprietary to PRS.

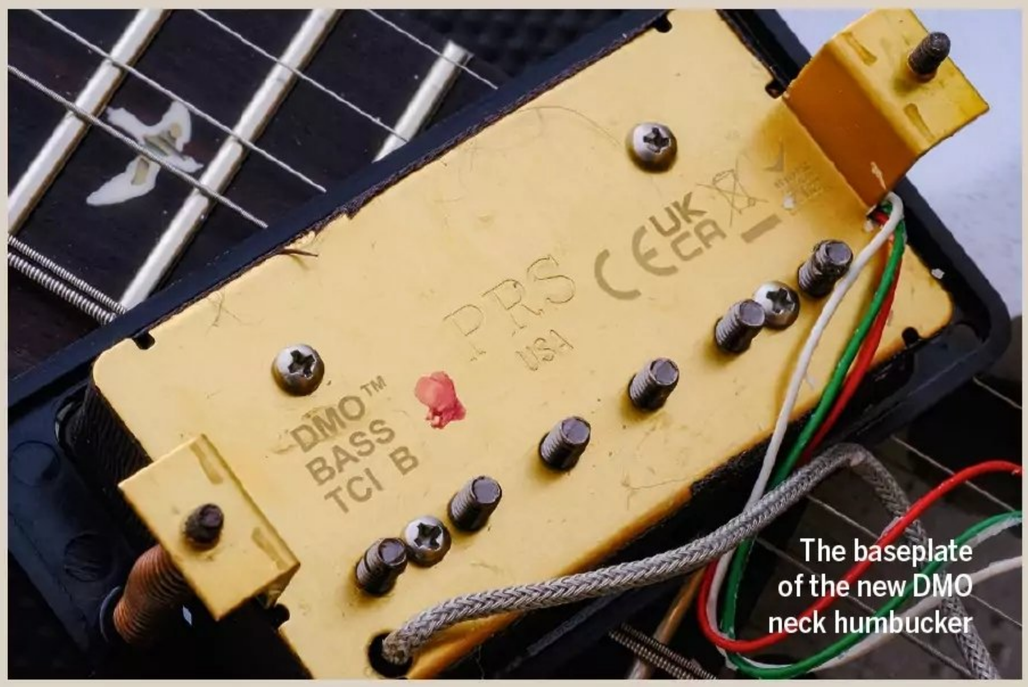
S2 Standard 24 Satin

Launched for 2014, the S2 line was designed to sit midway between the high-level USA Core guitars and the much more affordable offshore-made SE line. It's been the made-in-the-USA home for the Standard ever since it was released as a trio of S2 models for 2016: the S2 Standard 22 Satin, S2 Standard 24 Satin and the S2 Singlecut Satin, each offered in Charcoal, McCarty Tobacco, Vintage Cherry and Vintage Mahogany satin nitro finishes.



The highest level of tuners used by PRS is these open-back Phase III lockers; the wing buttons became standard during 2024. These same tuners will feature on the 2025-spec S2 Standard


Inside the Core Standard you can clearly see the large tone cap, the small blue treble bleed cap and that extra length of screened cable



The baseplate of the new DMO neck humbucker

UNDER THE HOOD Core versus S2: what's the difference with the circuits?

Along with the new McCarty III humbuckers, PRS also launched the DMO Treble and Bass humbuckers at the start of 2025, which feature on the new Standard, the Custom 24, Custom 24 Piezo and 40th Anniversary Custom. DMO stands for 'Dynamic, Musical, Open' and PRS states the "pickups were spec'd by Paul Reed Smith and the PRS New Products Engineering team. From our own hands-on research into coveted vintage pickup models to advancements in signal [analysis] and 'tuning' technology, these pickups incorporate every detail of pickup knowledge PRS has gained in recent years of R&D," adding that they have a "wide open sound with vocal character, meaning they deliver clear, pleasant-sounding tones across a wide range of frequencies (bass to treble) in each pickup". PRS tells us it uses American Alnico II magnets and quotes DCRs of 8.45kohms (Treble) and 7.57k (Bass).

The S2's 58/15 LT ('Low Turn') covered humbuckers, meanwhile, "are vintage-inspired pickups with exceptional clarity", says PRS. "Designed to capture the sweetness of vintage single coils and the warmth of late-1950s humbuckers, these pickups are lively and open with focused midrange and balanced treble and bass." PRS doesn't state magnet type here; our 2024 samples have a measured DCR of 7.33k (bridge) and 7.48k (neck).

Outwardly, as described, the switching in the five-way lever is the same on both, and taking a look inside they use the same components with volume and tone pots that read slightly above their nominal 500k values, with a small blue 180pF capacitor for the treble bleed. One difference is that the new core Standard uses a large Orange Drop tone capacitor with a 600-volt rating(!); the S2's cap is actually the unmarked but pretty-standard-for-PRS type. Both have the same value of 0.033µF.

The majority of Core models we've seen over the years have unscreened cavities, but here there's a grey conductive paint in the control and pickup cavities, plus the plastic rear cover is copper foiled and connects at the tone control via a small strip of the same copper foil. Another unusual feature (and no doubt part of the TCI 'tuning' process is the unnecessarily long screened cable (approx. 460mm), from the volume control to the output jack, when the actual distance is only 150mm. In theory, we believe this adds a small amount of capacitance that very subtly pulls down the resonant frequency. But can mere mortals like us hear that?

Although still made in the PRS factory, the S2 designs employ a simplified, faster production process with chamfered top bodies, three-piece necks and, originally, electronics and hardware from the SE line. As a result, the S2 was a far less expensive USA-made PRS. And that's still true today. The S2 Standard 24 Satin now costs £1,450 less than the new Core Standard, although it comes with a very good gigbag, rather than the new ATA hardshell moulded case of the Core model.

But while the basic style and construction hasn't changed, the S2 models were upgraded last year with USA-made pickups and electrics, and this year we get the new wing-button tuners and new open-pore colours – Mavis Mint Metallic, Metallic Midnight, Pearl White and Red Apple Metallic. As we said, our sample is from 2024, but PRS's engineering department has confirmed that, finish and tuners aside, there are no other changes for this year.

So we get the slightly thinner-depth body (45mm), which still appears to be one-piece with chamfered edges, what PRS calls an 'asymmetric bevel' top carve. Under these opaque finishes you can't see the headstock splice or the heel stack of the neck, but how the neck glues in is in a similar fashion to the Core model.



These USA 58/15 LT covered humbuckers are well loved in the PRS community, but despite the different pickups both our Standards use the same humbucker/single-coil switching

The S2 doesn't sound cheaper, but it is a little more vintage-flavoured, with more snap and high-end

Again, the dark rosewood fingerboard is unbound, the bird inlays are solid "vintage ivory acrylic", and by design there's a very Standard-like pared back aesthetic.

The major visual difference here is the scratchplate, which holds the brushed nickel-covered 58/15 LT pickups and the controls that function in the same way as the Core Standard, while the output jack is still metal mounted on the side of the body. The vibrato is the cast (or "molded", as PRS prefers) steel vibrato, used not only on the SE guitars but also USA bolt-ons such as the CE.

Feel & Sounds

Two Standard 24s, quite different in price. Which is best? If only it were that simple... Both guitars are very similar in weight, comfortably below the 3.6kg (8lb) threshold. And both use the Pattern Thin profile (aka the Wide Thin, in old money) with near identical dimensions and feel: a classic C that's not overwide or that thin, a very mainstream classic handful. The nut width measures a shade under 43mm (with 36mm string spacing at the nut, 52.5mm at the bridge) with a measured 1st fret depth of 21.1mm and pretty much bang on 22.9mm by the 12th on both models. As you'd expect, there's very little difference in the strapped-on or seated feel, aside from that slightly thicker and more domed top of the Core model, though it does have a thinner rim depth compared with the S2. Setups are identical, as are the PRS 'standard' frets, approximately 2.54mm wide with the same height of 1.14mm – the definition of medium-jumbo, we'd say.

Playing between the two unplugged, the S2 has a very slightly brighter response and is a little snappier; the Core Standard is very similar but slightly more rounded. The switching on both is the same, and while it doesn't give you the versatility of variants such as the Custom 24-08 or the more expansive HSH Modern Eagle V, the five distinct voices here cover immense ground. You can voice either humbucker individually, plus both together (in position 3), but the single-coil sounds are only voiced in combination: the inner single coils (position 4) and the inner single coil of the neck with the full bridge humbucker (position 2).

Now, along with different vibratos, the pickups are different, too, and provide sounds that have more variation to them than the feel. We are in a similar ballpark, but the Core's DMOs have a little more solidity, creating a subtly thicker voice that certainly sounds 'all mahogany' – without the addition of the maple top. Clean, the plummy jazz at the neck is contrasted by the subtle 'Patent Applied For' honk at bridge – and that impression of thickness is clear to hear.



4



5

4. It might have a scratchplate on the front, but the S2 models use the same glued-in neck-to-body join as the Core models; it's only the three-piece construction of the neck that differs

To our ears, this Core Standard's humbuckers sit most happily with some gain from amp and pedals. It instantly sounds huge: perfect for big stadiums, real or imagined. It's not that these pickups are actually high output – they're pretty regular, if we're honest, and don't sound overly compressed – but they certainly sound fuller in the midrange than a classic Patent Applied For style. The subtle high-end sizzle can be lost a little when you pull back the volume, and we barely touched the tone control as there are no spiky highs to tame; full up, it's dark enough as is. Well, unless you want to do a Santana that is – pulling back the tone a little gets you there in an instant. All in, along with its big fat rhythm chunk, this Standard is a soloist's dream.

5. Aside from a different tone capacitor, the wiring and control circuit on both our Standard levels are the same. It's not the most expansive setup offered by PRS, but it's very fast in use

6. There's no headstock facing here and the 'decal' signature logo is black on this Antique White 2024 model. It's the same for 2025, though the colour switches to Pearl White with the new wing-button tuners



6

The S2 doesn't sound cheaper in the least, but it does sound different and a little more vintage-flavoured, with a touch more snap and high-end. The bridge captures a more Patent Applied For character with a little more honk and brightness, and a little more clarity; it's less 'big'-sounding at the neck. Pulling back the volume reduces the high-end, but it sounds more usable, especially with cleaner, lighter crunch tones.

The two single-coil mixes provide some welcome Fender-like brightness to counter the pretty thick-sounding 'buckers of the Core Standard. They're a great contrast to the DMOs in humbucking mode. They're a little thinner and brighter on the S2 and lean more towards that Fender-y snap and brightness. The sounds we used less on both are the twin humbuckers combined – they lack some bounce and sparkle when compared with our reference Burstbucker-equipped Les Paul Classic.

As players, there is very little difference between the two. Both are simply very finely tuned instruments with effortless playability, they're superbly stable and in tune, and have quite simply one of the best vibratos there is.



Verdict

It's a bit of a surprise that PRS hasn't given this new Core Standard a 40th Anniversary shout out – it really is the guitar (along with the Custom, of course) that started the party all those years ago. It's grown up a bit and has a big, muscular voice but just enough contrast to pull back the bluster for some of the best single-coil sounds we've heard on this classic platform.

The S2 Standard Satin certainly doesn't play or sound like half the guitar, and there will be plenty of players that will be drawn to its more classic voicing and even aesthetic, courtesy of its scratchplate – especially if you use lower gains. They're marketed as different levels, which is reflected in the price, but in reality they're different tools for different jobs. You could have a career with the S2, no question: it's a thoroughly professional-grade piece.

There's a lot more to a PRS guitar than its curly maple top and bird inlays. The fact that the brand is still tweaking and improving even the smallest details after all these years reflects its ethos: very good can always be better. G

> Subtle refinements to the Core model's Gen III vibrato eke every drop of vibrational transfer



PRS STANDARD 24 SATIN

PRICE: £3,449 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric
BODY: 1-piece mahogany with violin top carve
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, Pattern Thin profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: PRS Synthetic/42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, acrylic/green abalone bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 24, medium
HARDWARE: PRS Gen III vibrato, PRS Phase III locking tuners (w/brass posts and plastic 'wing' buttons) – smoked black plating
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS DMO Treble and Bass open coil humbuckers, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.36/7.39
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Other new satin finish models include NF53 Satin (£2,999) and Fiore Satin (£2,779) along with JM Silver Sky Satin (£3,300)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Pearl White (as reviewed), Frost Blue Metallic, Pearl Black, Red Apple Metallic – 'sinky' satin nitrocellulose

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Typically perfect build; great weight feel and playability; big-sounding but not over-hot DMO humbuckers with excellent single-coil options; with no maple top or gloss finish, it's a great price, too

CONS Perhaps not the guitar for the vintage stylist



PRS S2 STANDARD 24 SATIN

PRICE: £1,999 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with 'asymmetric bevel' top carve
NECK: Mahogany, Pattern Thin profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/43.2mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, 'old school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 24, medium
HARDWARE: PRS vibrato (cast), PRS Phase III locking tuners (w/brass posts and plastic 'wing' buttons) – nickel plating
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS 58/15 LT Treble and Bass humbuckers, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.41/7.5
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The 22-fret Standard Satin (same price) plus 22- and 24-fret S2 Standards are available with gloss finishes at £2,135
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Antique White (as reviewed). New 2025 colours are Red Apple Metallic, Mavis Mint Metallic, Metallic Midnight, Pearl White – 'sinky' satin nitrocellulose

Guitarist GOLD **10/10**

PROS It might be a lower-level PRS, but the build is equally detailed with the same great weight, neck shape and playability; its more vintage-flavoured, brighter voicing has plenty of appeal

CONS At the price, with the recent USA pickup upgrades, new-for-2025 wing-button tuners and metallic satin finishes, it's hard to fault

Never Standing Still

We take Paul Reed Smith back to the start of his 40-year-old company to discuss the new Standard 24 and quite a bit more

Words Dave Burrluck



Paul Reed Smith performing earlier this year at PRS's 40th Anniversary concert where he played a final prototype of the new Charcoal Phoenix. It's all on YouTube!

PHOTO BY PRS GUITARS

This year's 40th anniversary marks the year, 1985, that the Paul Reed Smith company moved into its first factory in Virginia Avenue, Annapolis. Paul had, in fact, made his first 'real' guitar in 1975, and as the decade progressed he went from repairman to a custom builder of some note, creating instruments for the likes of Ted Nugent and Peter Frampton (both in 1976 and the latter was the first with bird inlays), Al Di Meola, Roy Buchanan, Howard Leese (the first curly-maple-topped PRS in 1980) and culminating in Carlos Santana, which involved the beginnings of the PRS vibrato system, also in 1980.

It's already the stuff of legend, although Paul had not yet created the now-classic outline shape that was fully formed by 1984. Later that year, he set off on a tour of East Coast USA retailers armed with a pair of his guitars – a maple-topped Custom and a Pearl White all-mahogany guitar,

> "I always liked the sound of really early 70s Les Paul Custom [pickups] without the covers" ***Paul Reed Smith***

which was originally just called the 'PRS guitar' and would become the Standard in 1987. The aim was to generate orders that would go part of the way to raising the necessary capital to start the production company in 1985.

So while that all-mahogany PRS wasn't yet a Standard, it was there right at the very beginning. Why, then, isn't the new Standard 24 a part of the 40th Anniversary celebrations? "Well, we wanted to bring the Standard back as a *permanent* model, not just a limited 40th Anniversary run," explains Judy Schaefer, PRS's director of marketing.

Back in the day, the soon-to-be-Standard "was just a simple guitar: I didn't think people wanted complex guitars", said Paul in an enlightening PRS Archives video, remembering the early instrument you



The two guitars that got the party started back in late 1984: the bird-inlaid Custom (left) and the Pearl White 'PRS' with moon inlays

PHOTO BY PRS GUITARS

see pictured here. And today, Paul says that was basically true: "We had the PRS and the Custom. What blew me away was that everyone wanted the curly [maple] top and everybody wanted the bird inlays. I thought the birds were like a one-in-eight option that would be taken up. But people were calling, saying, 'I've got to have the birds.' I was like, what?

"But the Jimmy Wallace [guitar dealer and founder of the Dallas International Guitar Festival] phone call was the one," laughs Paul. "He said, 'Now Paul, you go in the back there and pick me a real nice curly maple top.' I said, 'You want me to cherry-pick you a top?' He said yes, but I said, 'Well, I'm charging you.' That was the day the '10 Top' thing started. I wasn't going to go back and pick a special top out of a pile of wood for somebody without charging them extra. Initially, I'd wanted it to be 'you got what you got', like in the old Les Paul days."

Looking Forward

Today's returning Standard 24 mirrors the current spec Custom 24 in all but that maple top and its gloss nitro finish, and both guitars introduce the new DMO humbuckers, the latest in a long line of pickups offered by PRS over these past 40 years. What's the deal here? "You're not going to like my answer," offers Paul enigmatically. "The first time I heard the DMO humbucker I went, 'John Sykes!' It had that wide open, beautiful John Sykes tone. Except we've made the DMOs a little more wide open. To me, I always really liked the sound of really early 70s Les Paul Customs without the covers because they were aggressive, wide-open sounding, they sounded musical, good for rhythm guitar, good for lead guitar, good for a lot of things. Now that's from a rock point of view."

We mention that the DMOs sound to us like a hotter pickup than they actually are. "Look, pickup power is magnet power and turns mixed," Paul says. "Then the cover is a filter that was designed to get rid of buzz and hum. It was a mu-metal can around the humbucking coil, which is what they put in audio consoles. But if you're getting rid of buzz and hum you're also getting rid of volume, so it was a balance between having it sweeter sounding but also a little bit quieter. So a McCarty III [which is covered and another new pickup for 2025] and a DMO are basically the same pickup, but one has a cover and the other one doesn't. [The cover] makes a huge difference in the tone. If there are wing magnets in the pickups, that makes them even louder – which would make them very similar to our TCI pickups. So the reason it sounds 'hot' is because there's no filter on it, no cover.

"Power comes from magnetic strength and turns, but there's one other place the power comes from," Paul explains. "If the pickup has more higher midrange, then it sounds louder." And part of the DMO's and McCarty III's new blend comes from a slightly different magnet material: "The new stuff we have [American Alnico 2] has more higher midrange and less treble and about the same amount of bass. So it's got more musical high midrange. DMO and the TCI pickups are very close to each other [in terms of sound]. We're also using wing magnets in the DMO Treble pickup only, which makes them louder so the DMO Treble is going to be way louder than the Bass pickup. It's like two P-90s stacked side by side."



The DMO is the latest PRS pickup, effectively an uncovered version of the new McCarty III humbucker

Fine Details

As we noticed checking over the new Standard, things are a little different in the control cavity, too, not least that there's a very large tone capacitor. Paul explains: "In an old Fender Esquire with the switch positioned fully to the right, the tone control is disconnected; it's significantly brighter than the middle-switch position where the tone control is wired in. Then,



Ready for a stage near you: the new Standard 24 Satin also comes in Pearl Black, Frost Blue Metallic and Red Apple Metallic – not a curly maple top in sight!

PHOTO BY PRS GUITARS

fully to the left, that tone control is turned all the way off. So that switch on the Esquire is three ways of doing the tone control: no tone control, the tone control is hooked up, and then the tone control is in circuit but fully rolled off. If you put an Esquire into that right position, the high-end will take your head off, so that tone control – even if it's turned all the way up – is a filter.

"The reason that 600-volt cap is in there is not because of its rating," Paul adds. "It's because of its sound. It's a 600-volt polypropylene capacitor." Does this mean we'll see these capacitors in the other Core guitars? "We're switching over as fast as we can on everything."

PRS guitars have rarely been fully screened. "But we're doing it now," confirms Paul, "because we found a way to get rid of almost all the noise. It's not just the shielding. We're also doing something special inside the pickup – there's a grounding scheme inside the pickup that really helps the noise to drop by another 6dB. What had originally happened was that we had started making the TCI pickups with fibreboard bases, and because there was no ground plane between the pickup and the stuff coming in the back of the guitar, we wanted to put a ground plane in the [pickup and control] cavity. When we started doing that we were listening to the noise levels and it was significantly better. The number one reason we did it, though, was that we found a way that, if you do it right, if you touch the guitar then don't touch the guitar, it didn't go buzz – no buzz. We know when you touch the guitar in the studio the buzz goes away. That guitar doesn't do that. The guitar you have should have been very quiet.

> "I finally learned how to get rid of the noise when you touch, or don't touch, the guitar" ***Paul Reed Smith***

"See, we didn't understand how to do it. Ground planes are very tricky. The people that make audio consoles understand ground planes incredibly well; the guitar industry hadn't taught me enough about how to do it well. But I've finally learned how to do it well – to get rid of the noise when you touch, or don't touch, the guitar. So we decided to do it. We don't use a carbon-based [shielding] paint, we use a nickel-based paint – the same thing a pickup cover is made of."

Still learning, still tweaking and still improving. Proving that PRS guitars, despite the name of these latest models, are far from standard. G

www.prsguitars.com

VINTAGE FUZZ REBORN

In response to an ever-growing demand from players, **Rotosound** has sourced a limited number of N.O.S. germanium transistors and is hand-building pedals from its factory in Kent. Once again, players can lose themselves in the **RFB1 Fuzz**'s chewy fuzz tones that was first heard in 1967 at Rotosound's Denmark Street showroom.

Find out more at rotosound.com

Budget Beauties

USA-made Gibson acoustics for under two grand, with solid timbers, nitro finish and an LR Baggs pickup. Too good to be true? Read on to find out

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker









GIBSON J-45 SPECIAL & HUMMINGBIRD SPECIAL £1,699 & £1,899

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

What You Need To Know

1 Utile – that's a new wood on me.
Utile is a member of the wider mahogany family. Indeed, it's sometimes called sipo or sipo mahogany. It works similarly to regular mahogany, is not CITES regulated (yet) and looks not dissimilar to true mahogany so is a good substitute as timbers become scarcer.

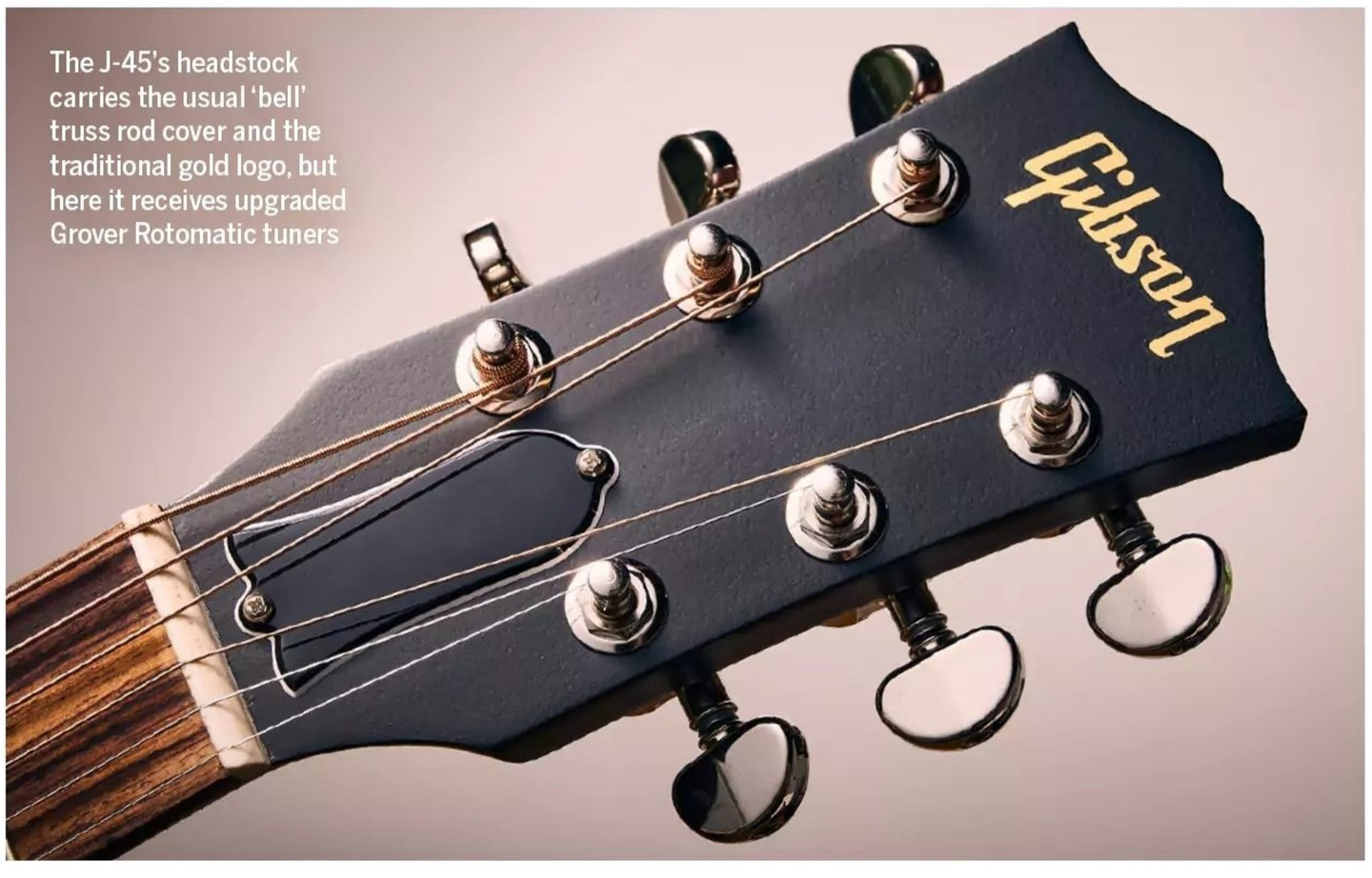
2 Why does Gibson make cheaper versions of some models?
It's something the company has a long and illustrious tradition for doing. Some of its most beloved instruments began as 'student' models. Think of the brilliant Les Paul Junior and even the recent Studio models that have gained a strong following.

3 Why are these guitars shallower than usual?
Gibson says it's to do with giving them a slightly different voice from mainline models, which it certainly seems to do. But it could be they have a stash of mahogany side blanks that are not quite deep enough for regular models. If this is the case, it's a very sensible approach.

It's nothing new for Gibson to release budget-friendly versions of its mainline models. Just look at the J-100 – a leaner, meaner take on the original Gibson super-jumbo that reveals the concept in action as far back as 1939. Perhaps we're more familiar with those 50s and 60s stalwarts the Les Paul and SG Junior, each one a perfect example of how to execute the strategy brilliantly. But let's also not forget the less than stellar ES-325, The Paul and SG-100 from the inauspicious 70s, or the now-collectible Depression-era Recording King and Kalamazoo brands that the company produced. We could go on, but you get the picture.

To this celebrated and not-so-celebrated roster we can now add the J-45 and Hummingbird Specials, pocket-conscious versions of two of Gibson's most lauded acoustic instruments. The range also includes the parlour sized L-00, but it's the former pair we're looking at today.

Following Gibson's tried-and-trusted formula, while the timbers used may not be the absolute pick of the crop such as you'd find on Custom Shop models, they

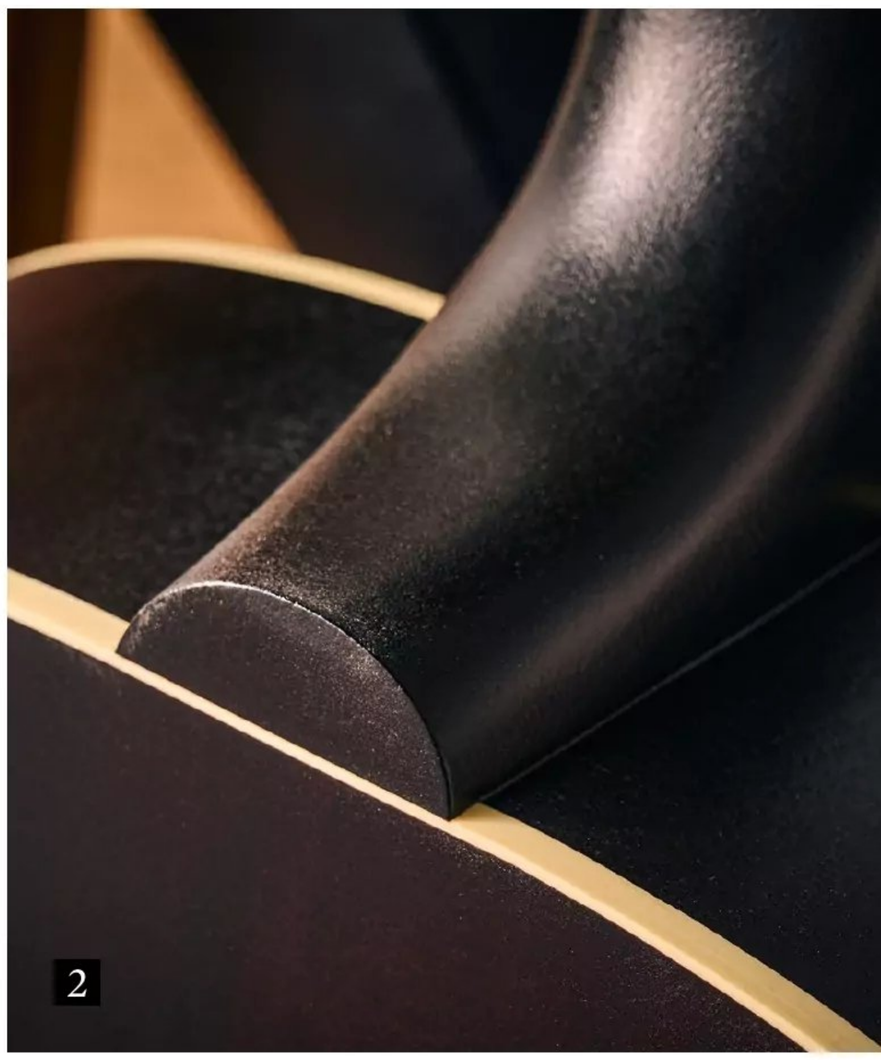


The J-45's headstock carries the usual 'bell' truss rod cover and the traditional gold logo, but here it receives upgraded Grover Rotomatic tuners



1. The thin satin lacquer works really well on the J-45's traditional tobacco sunburst finish, adding an even more workaday look to this classic workhorse

2. On both instruments the neck joint is a compound dovetail set deep into the block. Hide glue is used so that necks can be reset as and when needed



are all solid with both instruments' backs and sides hewn from genuine mahogany, and with tops of Sitka spruce with scalloped spruce X-bracing.

A new wood to us, though, is utile, also known as sipo, which is used for the necks of both Hummingbird and J-45 Special. The Wood Database informs us utile is a West African timber that sits in the broader mahogany family and shares similar working characteristics. Coming from the Latin word *utilis*, meaning useful, perhaps we'll be seeing more of it on guitars as genuine mahogany becomes scarcer.

Fretboards remain 304.8mm (12-inch) radius Indian rosewood, not laurel or pau ferro as we've often seen elsewhere, and both bear 20 standard frets. The Hummingbird's fingerboard, although usually bound in white plastic, is left bereft here, which is normal on the J-45, of course. But while this guitar can boast real pearl dots, the Hummingbird is given celluloid parallelograms (they're proper shell on mainline and Custom Shop instruments). This is a bit of a shame, since mother-of-pearl is a charming feature on full-fat Hummingbirds and other great Gibbos. But it would up the price considerably, so we appreciate Gibson's motives here.

One thing of note is that both of these acoustics sport slightly shallower depth bodies than their regular counterparts. Gibson calls this 'concert depth'. It's not much, only 19mm give or take, down from 125mm (4.92 inches) to 106mm (4.2 inches), but sound-wise the company says it tightens up the bottom-end, making it leaner but without turning the sound thin or shrill.

Naturally, our J-45 follows its 1942 forebear's round-shouldered look, while the Hummingbird has the model's usual squared-off top bout, the first Gibson acoustic to do so when released in 1960. Both guitars come with the traditional 'belly up' rosewood bridge and intonation

> There's no doubting that they have that signature Gibson tone [though] there's a tad more focus to these Specials



The J-45's round-shouldered design gives it one of the best acoustic shapes of all time, and the simple binding front and back adds the final touch



This rear view of the Hummingbord's peghead reveals the Grover tuners' butterbean knobs, plus the eight-digit serial number and 'Made In USA' stamps

THE RIVALS

While Epiphone also makes an 'Inspired by Gibson' J-45 (£746), we thought we'd home in on that model's original sister guitar, the Epiphone Texan (£799), from the Masterbilt series. This Chinese take on the original US model used by Paul McCartney to record *Yesterday* and other Beatles' classics, features the traditional mahogany/Sitka spruce J-45 combination and comes with a Fishman pickup and preamp system, Indian laurel fingerboard and reverse belly bridge, and ivory coloured tuner buttons.

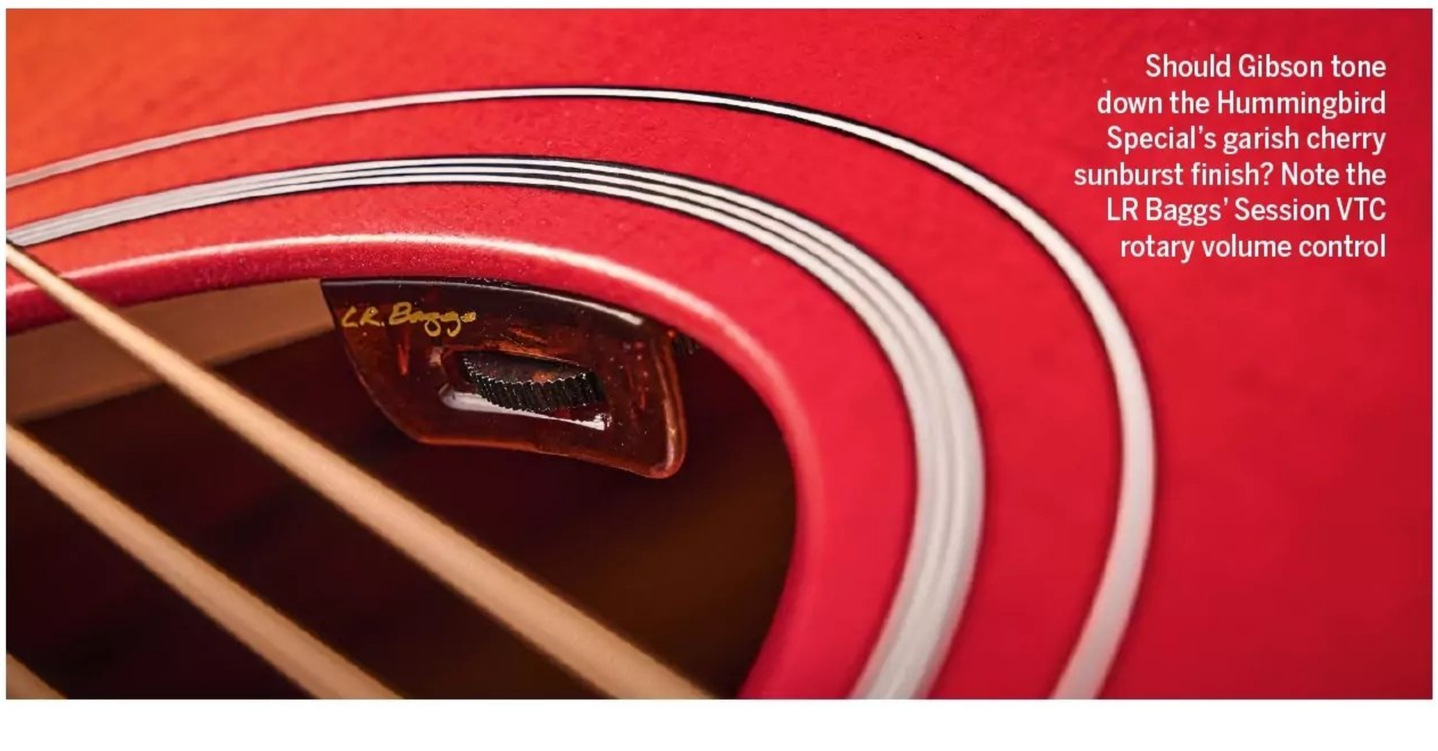
The Gibson Montana Hummingbird Original (£3,499) is the classic square-shouldered jumbo beloved of Jagger and Richards of the Stones. It features mahogany back, sides and neck, hand-painted hummingbird motif pickguard, and gold-plated green-button Kluson style tuners. It's also stage-ready with an LR Baggs VTC pickup.

And for something totally classy how about Gibson Custom Shop's J-45 Custom in Ebony (£4,799)? This tuxedo beauty features LP Custom-style appointments: ebony 'board with mother-of-pearl block inlays, LP-style headstock inlay, gorgeous jet black nitro finish, gold Grover tuners, and LR Baggs Session VTC pickup with soundhole volume and tone.

compensated Tusq saddles, nickel-plated Grover Rotomatic tuners, Tusq nut, plus the excellent LR Baggs Element Bronze undersaddle pickup with soundhole volume control.

Finish-wise, our Gibsons come in traditional nitrocellulose lacquer, albeit 'thin skin' satin. And while there's something very cool about this workaday approach on the J-45's classic 'tobacco sunburst', the Hummingbird Special's red-to-yellow shading really is rather garish. It's the only thing that looks a bit cheap here and is the very aspect that doesn't need to be, since it would be so simple for Gibson to tone it down a shade or two to create a far classier impression.

The two guitars' necks are attached to their bodies with a classic compound dovetail joint using hide glue. This means they can be easily removed should resetting or other work be required further down the line. All in all, they are built well and look tidy inside and out. The fact that they're cheaper by Gibson standards and come stage-ready means you needn't worry too much about the odd ding or dent while the guitars are out there earning their keep.



Should Gibson tone down the Hummingbird Special's garish cherry sunburst finish? Note the LR Baggs' Session VTC rotary volume control

Feel & Sounds

While this writer was talking to a legendary UK luthier at the recent Birmingham Guitar Show, he agreed that Gibson acoustics have always had a wonderfully earthy and organic sound, and continue to have their own voice despite alterations to bracing pattern, build changes and other factors. Today's bracing is tighter and less splayed than on vintage examples, providing a more focused midrange compared with older instruments, which usually sound bassier. So will our slightly more svelte duo display even more of this lightness and possibly project a bit more? Before we find out, let's see how they feel.

Other than the fact that they look totally different – one a dark sunburst acoustic with sloping shoulders and the other toting a square-topped body and blingier inlays – there's a whole lot in common here. The woods, hardware, electrics and so on are identical, but it's in the necks and therefore each model's playability where the differences lie. While the J-45 Special's



The Hummingbird's pickguard is a slightly simpler version of the model's usual design, and pearloid replaces real mother-of-pearl for the fingerboard inlays

neck is Gibson's much-loved SlimTaper profile, measuring around 22mm in depth at the 1st fret and 24mm at the 10th, the Hummingbird has a round profile with 23mm and 25mm measurements respectively. Nut widths are identical and at 43.82mm (1.725 inches) are wide enough for fingerstyle but not so stretchy as to put off the strummers, something at which both our guitars traditionally excel.

In the hand the J-45 feels the more modern of the two due to its gentle C-shaped carve, the Hummingbird's having a little more meat on the shoulders. It feels very close to this writer's own Custom Shop Hummingbird that's used regularly on theatre shows, is a breeze to play and never becomes tiring. The good news is that both instruments came out of their soft-shell cases perfectly set up and welcoming to play.

And there's no doubting that they have that signature Gibson tone. We'd actually been playing the guitars for a good 30 minutes before the penny dropped that they were a smidge shallower. It makes them a little more comfortable while seated and noticeably more so when playing standing up. We'd agree, too,

> If we needed a great strummer, we'd pick up the Hummingbird. For an all-rounder, it would be the J-45

that there's a tad more focus in the tones, especially that of the J-45, which perhaps provides the fingerpicking element that some say Gibson's don't have (tell James Taylor, John Renbourn, Jimmy Page and Bob Dylan that!).

They do sound a good deal different from each other, too. Who knows how much influence the square or round shoulders have on the tone? But the Hummingbird is definitely the fatter and warmer of the two, making it a brilliant strummer, while the J-45 is possibly the better all-rounder as it responds well to picking, too. As usual, these things are subjective so you'll have to try them for yourself.

LR Baggs' Element Bronze is a fine piece of kit: it's simple to use, has a beautiful flat tone that sound engineers love, and is unlikely to cause feedback issues.

Verdict

It can be tricky evaluating a brand's more cost-conscious guitars when you're used to playing the top-end stuff. For example, the Standard versions of our two models street at about a grand more; Custom Shop beauties come in at almost *three* times the price. So let's applaud Gibson for getting USA-made instruments down to this price point while making them fun to play and providing both with real musical personality. It's after sitting and playing them for a while when each guitar's character emerges and it all begins to make sense.

The Hummingbird's fatter neck is in no way a hindrance. In fact, a chunkier profile can often prove less tiring than a skinny stick of a thing. So we enjoyed its more old-school feel and even wondered if the bigger neck and that little bit more air in the body due to those broader shoulders might be providing the extra warmth it definitely exhibits. It's certainly the more mellifluous toned, which makes it seem the better of the two straight out of the box.

However, our J-45 Special, while initially having the less impressive voice,



3. You can clearly see the Hummingbird Special's pearloid markers here, and the fact that the lightish coloured rosewood fingerboard is unbound

comes into its own once you give it a chance to speak. You'll soon discover it enjoys fingerstyle and seems to project more like an OM or 000-size body. Its more slender neck profile, with a little less meat on the shoulders, also means capos are easy to fit and fingerstyle jaunts further up the frets feel unencumbered. We've said it before, but while all acoustic guitars will do all things, some will definitely do certain stuff that

Let's applaud Gibson for getting USA-made guitars down to this price point while providing both with real musical personality

little bit better. So were we needing a great strummer, we'd pick up the Hummingbird, and for a good all-rounder, it would be the J-45.

In the final analysis, though, while the odd corner has clearly been cut, remember these are true Gibsons with all the individuality that this brand exhibits, arguably over all others. They've definitely fulfilled their 'good guitar on a budget' remit and, although we weren't so sure at first, it looks like we might just have made a couple of new best friends. G



GIBSON J-45 SPECIAL

PRICE: £1,699 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Round-shouldered steel-string flat-top acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 106mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Utile, SlimTaper profile
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Grover Rotomatic – nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/ 43.82mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood with pearl dot inlays
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood 'belly-up' style with compensated Tusq saddle/54mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element Bronze with soundhole volume control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.077/4.58
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The mahogany/ spruce L-00 Special (£1,699) is the smaller-bodied parlour style model which also comes with the LR Baggs Element Bronze pickup
LEFT-HANDERS: N/A
FINISHES: Satin Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Satin Wine Red – 'thin skin' nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Well set up straight out of the box; versatile all-rounder with strong tonal projection; remarkable value for money; perfect gigging guitar

CONS For the price, there's very little to complain about, although J-45 aficionados may miss the fuller tone that the deeper-bodied model provides



GIBSON HUMMINGBIRD SPECIAL

PRICE: £1,899 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Square-shouldered steel-string flat-top acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 106mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Utile, SlimTaper profile
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Grover Rotomatic – nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/ 43.82mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood with pearloid split parallelogram inlays
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood 'belly-up' style with compensated Tusq saddle/54mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element Bronze with soundhole volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.22/4.89
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See J-45 Special
LEFT-HANDERS: N/A
FINISHES: Satin Vintage Cherry Sunburst (as reviewed), Satin Wine Red – 'thin skin' nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Well set up straight out of the box; great to play with a warm but powerful tone; excellent value for money; great stage guitar

CONS Shame about the plastic fingerboard inlays but understandable given the cost considerations; sunburst colours could be less garish



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Taking Flight

A collaboration with *That Pedal Show*, Hamstead's Redwing is an all-analogue modulation monster

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker



HAMSTEAD X THAT PEDAL SHOW REDWING ANALOGUE STEREO MODULATOR £429

CONTACT **Hamstead Soundworks** WEB **www.hamsteadsoundworks.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Oh, haven't I seen the Redwing on *That Pedal Show*?
Quite possibly. This is a collaboration between Hamstead Soundworks and *TPS*, following a similar venture with Keeley, which produced the D&M Drive, and Jam Pedals for the Harmonious Monk.

2 What's this pedal's speciality?
The Redwing is an all-analogue stereo modulation pedal. Dan Steinhardt from *TPS* was looking to Hamstead to design the perfect flanger, but this goes beyond that.

3 It's got a lot of knobs and switches!
That's true, but they each make a definite contribution to the sound. Between them, the controls can dial up flanging, chorus and vibrato, plus ring modulation and rotary speaker-style sounds.

There are myriad modulation pedals available these days. However, when it comes to chorus and flanging, there are still plenty of players that regard the first run of bucket brigade analogue pedals as the benchmark-setters for sonic quality. Daniel Steinhardt from *That Pedal Show* is one such player, holding the Boss CE-1 Chorus Ensemble pedal and the Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress flanger in particularly high regard. Daniel says: "Over the years, I've always searched for devices that not only match the magic of those originals tonally but also surpass them in terms of sound and functionality within a modern rig."

That search has now culminated in the Redwing, designed by Peter Hamstead of the British boutique amp and pedal company that bears his name, with plenty of informed input from *TPS*. The Redwing creates its sounds by using two independent BBD delay lines that are modulated by Hamstead's analogue 'signature' waveform generation as found in the brand's tremolo pedal. Connectivity is very flexible – it can work as a mono pedal in a standard signal chain, but it has stereo outputs and a stereo input (via a TRS jack), so you can have other stereo pedals in the chain before it. The stereo output can be configured as true stereo or as Wet/Dry with dry-through to the right and both modulation lines summed to the left output.

> "I've searched for devices that match the magic of the originals but also surpass the sound"
> ***Daniel Steinhardt***

In Use

Flanging, chorus and vibrato are closely related, so it's quite possible to provide all three in an analogue pedal if you have the correct set of parameters to adjust. The first key to this is the pedal's Manual knob, which adjusts the delay time – generally speaking, that means shorter delay times for flanging and longer ones for chorus. A Blend control is also needed to set the ratio of dry to wet signal; vibrato is created with wet signal only. Also crucial is the Regen knob, which controls the amount of effected signal fed back into the modulation circuit and is essential for the metallic whoosh of a flanger, for example.

Besides these there are Width and Speed controls for the modulation, and a choice of three modulation waveforms (Asymmetric, Sine and Triangle) that can be tweaked with a Shape knob to tilt the waveform lopsidedly left or right. Bass and treble knobs with up to 15dB cut or boost shape the wet signal only, while a



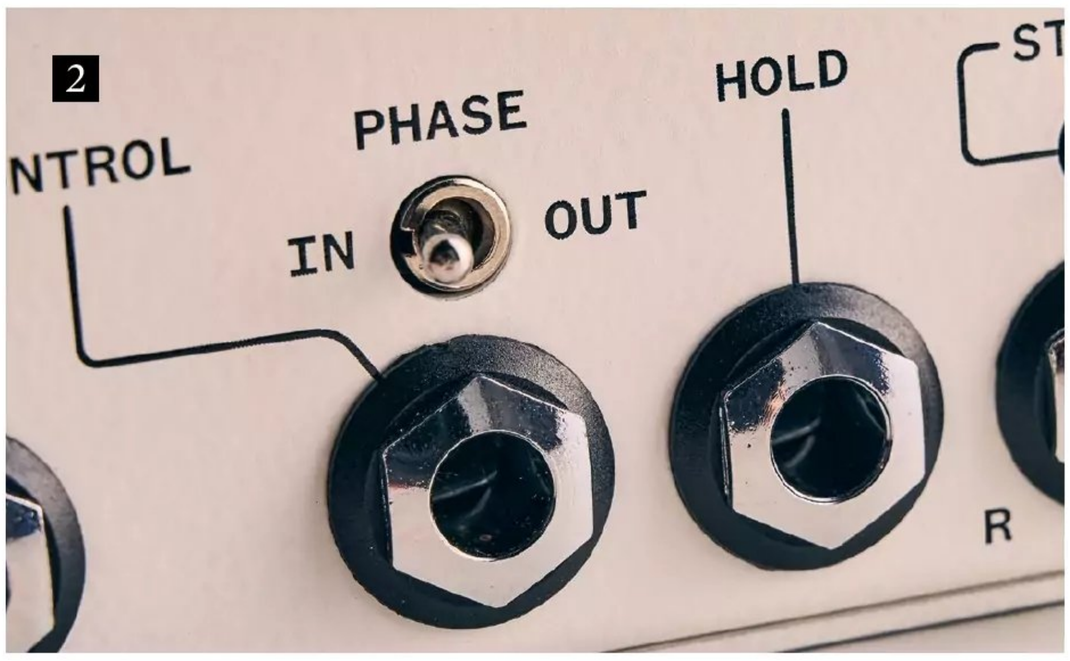
For more nuanced control of the Speed knob (which has a range from six seconds per cycle to 75Hz), it's split into two ranges – Hi and Lo





THE RIVALS

Another analogue BBD pedal with plenty of capability is the Flancher ($580) by French company Glou Glou – the FL7 and the FL9 models are designed for modulation. If you want to go the digital route to modulation with presets, there are plenty of options such as the Strymon Mobius (£369), Eventide's H9 (£529) and H90 (£845), and the Boss MD-500 (£379) or MD-200 (£239). And how about pairing up separate chorus and flanger pedals? Check out the ThorpyFX Deep Oggin (£265) and Camoflange MKII (£265) or the Boss CE-1w Chorus (£219) coupled with the Electro-Harmonix Walking On The Moon Analog Flanger (£109).



1. Switch in this Offset section and you can use the knob to offset the Manual setting of the R line, either side of what's dialled in with the Manual knob. Meanwhile, in the waveform section there are three choices that you can then tweak with the Shape knob: tilt the waveform to the left or right from the detent 12 o'clock setting

2. You can connect a momentary footswitch at the Hold socket for temporary feedback oscillation, while the Control input takes an expression pedal for direct control over modulation speed

3. The Stereo switch configures how the two output sockets work: choose between a true stereo output or Wet/Dry with dry sound to the right and modulation lines summed to the left

gain knob, starting at unity, sets the output of the pedal for a slight boost or at least makes sure your modulation doesn't get lost in the mix when you kick the effect in.

There is a lot to explore in this pedal with the many juxtapositions of knobs and switches offering nuanced sound choices. But our first task was to see how its sounds matched up to our own array of vintage 1970s pedals: EHX's Electric Mistress flanger and its mains-powered Deluxe sibling, plus the Boss CE-1 chorus/vibrato and CE-2 chorus. And with judicious tweaking, we found that it could be a viable substitute.

Now, while those old pedals with their minimal knob arrays may be easy to dial in, they can have certain drawbacks such as bulky form factors, reliability of old components, non-standard power needs, no gain make-up to remedy volume drop when kicked in, and a fixed EQ. The Redwing has none of those problems and has parameters with larger ranges, so it can go much further creating more extreme sounds if you want them or, perhaps more importantly, can dial in the sounds that 'fall between the cracks' of other units.

So you can get plenty of variations of flanging (including really good static flanging with no obvious sweep), chorus, vibrato, ring modulation and also some decent rotary speaker simulation. One important parameter that helps with that rotary sound is the one we've not yet mentioned – the Offset. This brings in a knob to offset one delay from the other by your chosen amount either side of the main Manual setting, opening up a whole

4. The EQ functionality of the pedal is taken care of by bass and treble knobs that work on wet signal only. Both can boost and cut by 15dB from their flat 12 o'clock positions







HAMSTEAD X THAT PEDAL SHOW REDWING ANALOGUE STEREO MODULATOR

PRICE: £429
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Modulation pedal
FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, selectable power up mode, GigRig Optokick footswitch
CONTROLS: Gain, Blend, Bass, Treble, Manual, Width, Regen, Speed, Hi/Lo Speed switch, Offset switch and knob, Shape switch and knob, Phase switch, Stereo switch, internal switches for power up mode, input mode and bypass mode, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output (L & R), Control, Hold
POWER: 9V-24V DC adaptor (not supplied) 365mA
DIMENSIONS: 115 (w) x 130 (d) x 65mm (h)

other layer of sounds. If you're using the pedal in mono, this offset can give you a bi-chorus or bi-flange effect with an added sense of dimension. It also means you can dial in through-zero flanging where the two flanging filters cross through one another. This is a distinctive sound that's great with fuzz or distortion in front of it if you want to get close to Jimi's *House Burning Down* tone.

Performance options include a Control input for an expression pedal with direct control over modulation speed – a practical addition if you wish to do the slow and fast rotary speaker speed switching. There's also temporary feedback oscillation available via a Hold socket for a momentary footswitch, which you might use to tap out a rhythmic pattern or to simply throw a curveball at your audience.

Verdict

This is a very well-thought-out pedal that is sonically excellent. Not only is it capable of BBD-created effects, it also provides hands-on control of all the parameters you need to tailor these effects to your exact needs – whether you're trying to emulate a vintage effect or are looking to create something bespoke – all in mono or full stereo.

Of course, because the nuanced control can create so much variation, it would be a fine thing to be able to store your newly minted sounds for future recall. However, this is a purely analogue pedal and it'll be down to the age-old method of recording all of your favourite settings on paper. That lack of presets could mean you might need to execute a few knob and switch position changes on stage, unless you're using just the one sound. But it would never be a problem in a recording situation.

> [Use] temporary feedback oscillation to tap out a rhythmic pattern or throw a curveball at your audience

The other side of that WYSIWYG coin is there's always the opportunity for happy accidents during tweaking, with new sounds waiting to be discovered. Embrace the analogue: this is your hands-on modulation toolkit! G

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Full stereo I/O operation; massive range of sound variation; expression pedal/footswitched performance options

CONS Footswitching lag; you'll need to go elsewhere if you want the modern accoutrements of presets and MIDI

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In Memoriam
Mark Sampson

With great sadness, we acknowledge the passing of Mark Sampson on 27 February 2025. A true pioneer in the world of guitar amplification, Mark was a co-founder of Matchless Amplifiers and a driving force behind Bad Cat and Star Amplifiers. His vision and craftsmanship helped shape the sound of countless musicians, leaving an indelible mark on the industry.

More than just a brilliant amplifier designer, Mark was a passionate innovator who loved sharing his knowledge and pushing the boundaries of what a great amp could be. His legacy will live on in the warmth of every note played through his creations, inspiring generations to come.

This following interview with Mark and Bad Cat owner, John Thompson, took place in December 2024.

« BLUEPRINT »

LASTING LEGACY

As we were going to press with this issue, we learned the incredibly sad news of the passing of legendary amp designer Mark Sampson. Here, Mark spoke to us about returning to the Bad Cat fold to create the new hand-wired Era 30

Words Charlie Wilkins **Photography** Courtesy of Bad Cat

Mark Sampson is a legend in the world of amplifier design, known for his innovative work with Matchless and Bad Cat amplifiers. With a reputation for crafting some of the most dynamic, tone-rich amps ever made, he's earned a loyal following among musicians and engineers alike. Recently, Sampson reunited with John Thompson at Bad Cat Amps, bringing together decades of experience, passion and expertise for creating exceptional guitar tone. This collaboration has sparked excitement in the industry, as they combine their talents to push the boundaries of amplifier design once again with the Bad Cat Era 30.

You recently came together to create an exciting new Black Cat amplifier. How did this collaboration come about?

Mark Sampson: "We're calling it the Mark Sampson Era 30, which was John's idea. And I'll let John explain how we got together again."

John Thompson: "I walked in the door at Bad Cat in 2011 and bought the company from James Heidrich. Since the first time I heard the Matchless DC-30 back in '92 or '93, my dream was to work with Mark Sampson. He's not an easy guy to get a hold of. It's easier to get a hold of the President of the United States than it is to get Mark Sampson. I think he intentionally hides and probably gets bugged all the time by these amp nerds asking, 'Build me this or build me that.'"

Mark: "That's correct. I've had multiple offers just to license my name, but then that dilutes the reason why it's a good name. I want my name to stand for something that sounds good and is well built. I won't just put my name on anything."

John: "I think Mark is a private guy and also very humble, although he has no reason to be, honestly. I met him at NAMM around 10 years ago and told him, 'Hey, I'm taking care of your kids!' [referring to early Bad Cat amps designed by Mark]. There's no doubt in my mind that he was the father of the boutique amp revolution. You could argue a couple other guys and maybe Randall Smith at Boogie, but they were more corporate. Matchless spawned a whole bunch of guys buying amp kits and building stuff in their garages. I mean 40 companies were probably started because of Matchless, with Bad Cat being one of them.

"So about nine months ago [spring 2024], my good friend Joel Whitley [multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, producer] and I were hanging out and I mentioned that I would love to get a hold of Mark Sampson someday. To my surprise, he had Mark's cell phone number and said that he would ask Mark to call me. So about a week later Mark called and I told him that I wanted to collaborate on something. He wasn't into the idea initially, but we decided to meet for lunch, so I was real excited about that. Anyway, I guess something that I said along the way convinced him that I wasn't going to try to exploit him. I know he's turned down a lot of money over the years by people who just wanted to put his name on a product. I will fiercely protect his name and reputation as much as I protect the Bad Cat name.

"So we decided to work together and Mark asked me what I wanted to do. Well, you don't tell Picasso what to paint, but I did ask him, 'What if you didn't leave Matchless in 1999? What would the DC-30 look like today with all the 20-plus years of experience that you've accumulated?'"

PHOTO COURTESY OF BADCAT AMPS

"There's no doubt in my mind that mark Sampson was the father of the boutique amp revolution"

John Thompson

1. The new Bad Cat Era 30 is an evolution of the DC-30, Matchless Amplifiers' first design

2. Working with Mark Sampson had been a dream of Bad Cat's John Thompson (left) for years

3. Mark's reputation for innovation in amp technology made him a highly sought-after collaborator

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

Mark, what did John say to you that really sparked your interest in doing something with Bad Cat again?

Mark: "He said that Bad Cat's 25th anniversary was coming up and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, a quarter century has passed since I made the first Bad Cat amp for James Heidrich.' We kicked around a few ideas and ultimately decided to do something for the 25th anniversary but improve everything we could – building on the knowledge, techniques and strategies we've developed over the years. So that's exactly what we did."

What are some of the things that you wanted to improve?

Mark: "We cut the signal noise way back with near-noiseless filaments, so you don't get that 60-cycle hum when it's just sitting there. There's also an active effects loop that's hardwire bypassed when it's not being used. And separate masters for each channel with an overall global Master Volume, which allows you to set up separate clean and dirty sounds for each channel that can be switched either via footswitch or directly on the amp itself. You can also blend the channels if you want. These are things that I always felt needed improvement from the original Bad Cat design."

John: "The master volumes are pre phase-invertor and the global master is post phase-invertor. So you're able to get even more gain by cranking the channel masters and driving the phase invertor tube and then lowering the global master to control the overall volume. You have a lot of tonal options."

Mark: "You have a lot of versatility with this amp that none of our other designs have."



Mark, many of your designs are inspired by the Vox AC30. Would you say the Era 30 is similar?

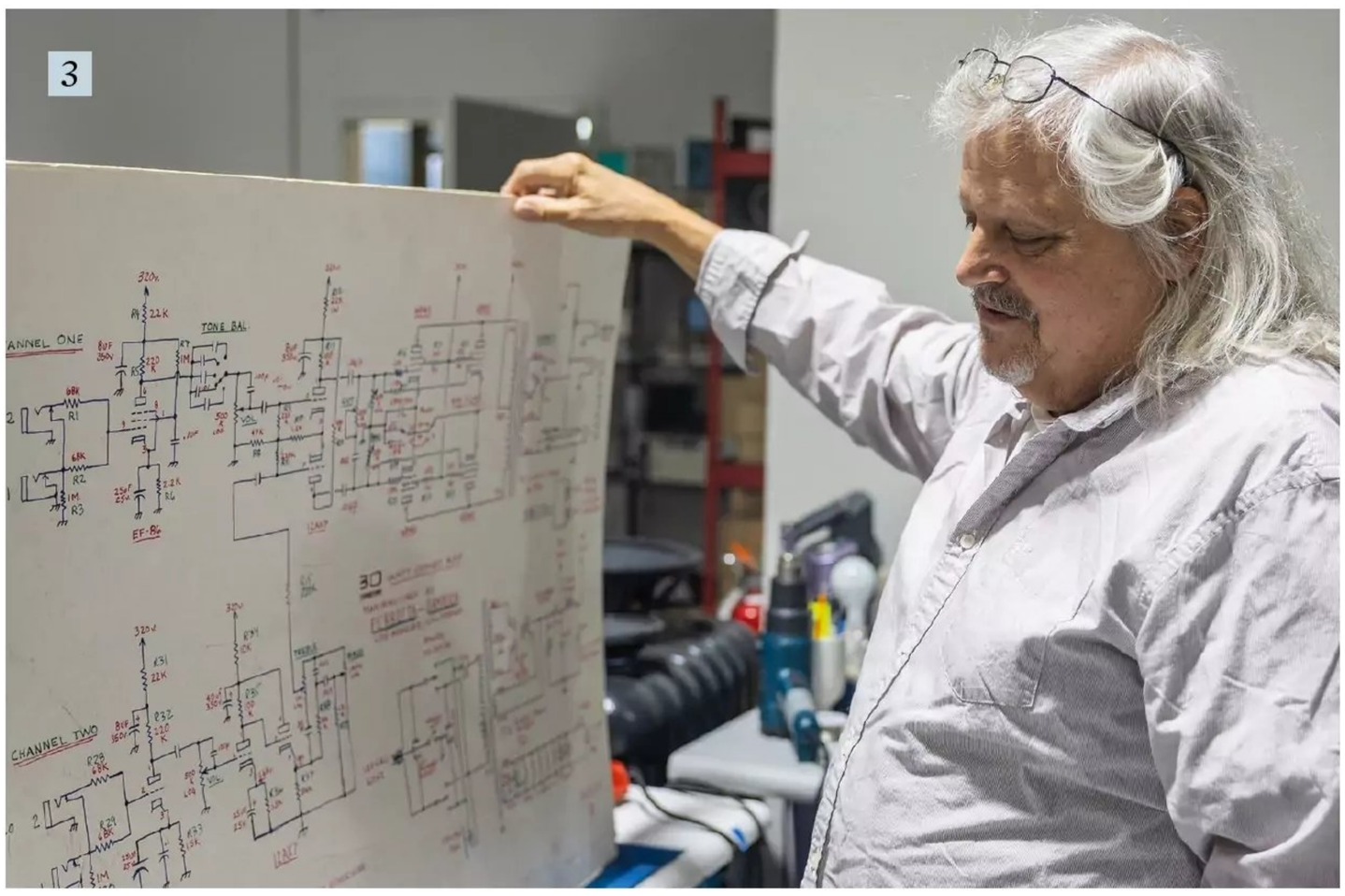
Mark: "Rick Perrotta [co-founder of Matchless] used to have a saying that 'thieves steal but artists borrow'. To expand on that, you take a concept, refine it and adapt it to suit your needs, instead of just stealing an idea. So, yes, the original Vox AC30s were my inspiration, and I worked on many of them over the years. I got started in this business by buying, selling and trading with a partner in England. I brought over about 1,000 AC30s over a three-year period and all of them needed work. Every single one had something that needed to be fixed. By the time I finished with that, I had a solid understanding of the problems that they had, what needed to be fixed and what could be improved in the design. All that knowledge went into the first Matchless and then later into the first Bad Cat amp designs."

What formats will the Era 30 be available in?

John: "Starting off, we're just offering a head – sort of simple with no reverb. Further down the road, we may offer a combo with reverb. Mark feels that if we add reverb, it may take a little while to work it out because it will alter the sound a bit. We don't want to do that because – trust me on this one – this thing sounds amazing. His reputation is well deserved."

How would you describe the sound of the amp?

John: "Mark told his story about repairing AC30s and his original idea was to make a more robust version, but the early Matchless and Bad Cat designs didn't sound anything like an AC30; they were definitely their own thing. They were walking on that side of the street in terms of how the high-end was clear and not harsh. I'll describe it to you like this: if you wanted to buy a guitar amp for the purpose of knocking a wall down, this would be a really good place to start [laughs].



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BADCAT AMPS



4. Mark favoured hand-wiring as it affords more flexibility when checking and adapting the circuit

5. The 'less is more' approach allowed for a modernised amp without a crowded control panel

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

"It has a punch that's almost difficult to describe. It has a softness to it, but you can feel it thump in your chest. One of our employees described it as, 'smooth but so clear and loud that it feels like I'm going deaf, but it doesn't hurt'. It definitely has the Bad Cat sound and feel, but... it's difficult to describe. After the initial orders are fulfilled and they're flowing out the door, the first moment there's one that's not spoken for, it's going home with me [laughs]."

Tell us about the tone stack and EQ.

Mark: "The pentode channel does not have a tone stack; it has a rotary switch that rolls down or rolls up the bass depending on which way you turn it. It also has a simple high-frequency cut like an old tweed Fender. The other channel has your standard bass and treble but no mids."

Why did you choose not to include a midrange control here?

Mark: "I've struggled with this thought for a long time. If you have a player that knows what they're doing with EQ and knows how to adjust it to fit the recording, the room or the playing environment, you're fine. But if you have someone that doesn't quite understand the ground rules for EQ'ing, you can actually get the amp sounding bad so that it doesn't fit the context of what you're trying to do. Most of the time I think it's better to just pre-set the mids. When you're dealing with mixing in a recording environment, mids are everything. Mids are where you want your signature sound or the essence of your tone to come through. If you let that get too far out of hand, you end up shooting yourself in the foot."

John: "The tone is very balanced. I don't find myself wanting to add or cut mids. I did notice that when you turn the treble up it does cut the mids a bit, and when you turn it down the midrange comes up a little bit. I can get any sound that I want with just those two controls. To me, the midrange is almost unnecessary."

Do you design your amps around particular speakers?

Mark: "When I'm designing, I try to use three or four different speakers and it has to work well with all of them."

John: "We had four different cabinets out here the other day and it sounded great with all of them, but my favourite so far has been the Celestion Alnico Cream. I love that speaker with this amp because it has a very detailed midrange. With the Era 30, I feel like you can reach out and grab the midrange in midair, and that speaker really helps it. It sounds great in 1x12 or 2x12 cabinets. It's a testament to Mark's ability to voice amplifiers, which I'm in awe of. I know how hard it is to voice an amp for different speakers. I have a lot of experience with this and there are designs that just don't work with certain speakers at all."

> "I want my name to stand for something that sounds good and is well built. I won't just put it on anything"
> ***Mark Samspson***

Did you face any challenges when you were designing this amp?

Mark: "Well, challenge is an interesting word. The hardest part of the thought process was, 'How am I going to improve this?' I started with making a list of things that I knew I could improve. When I started working with Bad Cat, it was sort of the second generation where I was improving things that I did with Matchless. Now I'm on sort of the third or fourth generation. I initially thought it would be difficult, but in the end I knew

PHOTO COURTESY OF BAD CAT AMPS



I could make improvements and I had all these ideas bubbling in my head. We were able to modernise it – but not to the point where it has a lot of knobs and switches."

John: "My experience is that every time you run through a pot, resistor or a capacitor, you're not amplifying the signal, you're actually degrading it. Then you have to find a way to amplify it and bring the signal back up. So the more things you run through, the less pure things are by the time it hits the output transformer."

Mark: "That's correct. Less is more."

What valves are you using?

John: "Four EL84s – 30 watts and hand-wired here in Costa Mesa, California."

What are your thoughts on hand-wired amps compared with PCBs?

Mark: "Initially, I liked to hand-wire because it gave me a little more freedom to alter the layout and design. Also, when I started using other people to wire for me, it made it much easier for me to check their work for mistakes. On a PCB, hopefully you don't have as many mistakes, but if you're going to build an expensive amp that sounds exactly the way you want, you would probably have to go through 10 to 15 or more board revisions to get it close, and you may not get what you want in the end anyway. With hand-wired, I can alter things inside simply by moving components around, even after they've been wired in."

John: "I remember when we started working on the Bad Cat Player Series amps, and we cut two or three different PCBs. The circuits and parts were exactly the same, but these two or three boards sounded vastly different. In Dave Hunter's guitar amp book [*The Guitar Amp Handbook*], he says that 'tube amps are not rocket science. They are much more complicated than that' [laughs]. Hand-wired amps are sort of an art form. They're like heirloom quality that you can pass down."

Why do you think people are still willing to pay the premium price tag for a hand-wired amp compared with PCB amps, which are much cheaper to make?

Mark: "Hand-wired amps typically have more harmonic content and pureness of sound. Overall, I believe they are sonically superior."

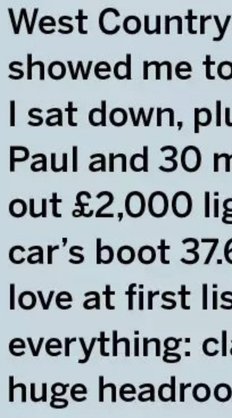
If you put PCB and hand-wired versions of the Era 30 side by side, would you be able to tell the difference?

Mark: "Definitely!" G

www.badcatamps.com

Matchless Memories

Neville Marten reflects on Mark's legacy



"I first heard of Matchless Amplifiers when I read the legendary *Guitar Player* amp shootout, where the DC-30 trounced the competition. They weren't available here then, but in the early 90s Manson's Guitar Shop in Exeter started importing them. I believe it was the store's Adrian Ashton (who had worked at the factory and built his own Matchless) that called me to let me know they had a green DC-30 combo that he couldn't sell as new since Hank Marvin had borrowed it for a TV show.

"I was on tour, so during our West Country leg I called in. Adrian showed me to a quiet room where I sat down, plugged in my Les Paul and 30 minutes later walked out £2,000 lighter but my poor car's boot 37.6kg heavier. It was love at first listen. This thing had everything: classic Class A shimmer, huge headroom, especially on the 12AX7 preamp side, and a mighty roar when plugged into the darker EF86 socket. It was epic!

"I bought it in 1994 and used it as my main amp for over 20 years. It stopped working twice, both times when the 5AR4 rectifier valve failed. I sold it when it became too heavy, then bought it back, sold it again and got a Lightning 15, my main squeeze until it, too, got the better of my complaining spine.

"I absolutely adore Matchless amplifiers. Rest in peace, Mark Sampson. You gave this old guitarist some of his finest tones ever."



Neville Marten's love for Matchless amps began back in the 90s and remains strong today

Longterm

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

Boss Katana-50 EX Gen 3 Combo

With David Mead



The Katana took everything David threw its way during the International Guitar Festival

Writer

DAVID MEAD
Guitarist Deputy Editor



After a successful round at 2024's International Guitar Festival at Bath University, David takes a deeper dive into the Katana's raft of onboard features.



Delving into the Katana's effects section opened up a whole new range of sonic possibilities

At the conclusion of the previous instalment of the Katana's Longterm Test in issue 518, I was headed off to teach at the IGF at Bath Uni for a week. Having sold my Peavey Delta Blues amp owing to it rarely getting used, I needed to borrow a combo for the duration and the Boss Katana-50 EX Gen 3 seemed like the perfect solution, being loaded with just about everything I needed, plus being diminutive in size and light in weight. Our friends at Boss were happy to lend me an EX for the duration and so I set off for Bath Uni, travelling light with just the amp and my faithful Mexican Road Worn Strat in hand.

Needless to say, the Katana was an able sidekick for the week, handling everything from Muddy Waters blues through to a few Led Zeppelin riffs with equal aplomb. I pretty much kept the amp on its Push setting – which emulates a valve amp just as it begins to get growly – and found that just a dash of reverb was mostly all I needed for the classroom. On occasion, especially for the aforementioned Zep riffs, I needed to up the ante and turn the Katana's Amp Type dial up a notch or two to Crunch or Lead, but apart from that I hardly needed to touch it all week. It really was a 'set it and forget it' situation, which was exactly what was needed.

> "One of the big plusses with the Katana is having practically everything you need effects-wise on tap, split into five sections"

As the dust from the guitar festival settled, it occurred to me that I hadn't really looked at the effects section of the Katana – mainly because I thought I didn't need to. I wasn't aiming to set up a full-on rock guitar sound because it just wasn't appropriate. After all, if you're trying to teach with a guitar sound lathered in delay, fuzz and heaven knows what else, it's difficult for students to work out exactly what's going on. The cleaner and clearer you can be, the better.

So I thought I'd take the plunge and give the effects section a bit of a whirl and see exactly what's on offer. I must admit that I stopped short of hooking my iPad up to the amp via its Bluetooth facility owing to the fact that I really wanted to see what was available to me without the aid of 21st century tech. And maybe here I should add a word or two about my relationship with effects, just to give a bit of a broader picture...

These days, I own barely any effects units or pedals, having spent a good while concentrating more on acoustic playing and performance. And for that I only really use a Yamaha preamp and a Boss octave pedal to add a little oomph to the acoustic's lower end. True to say that the Yamaha unit (an old AG Stomp I've owned for years) has built-in reverb and mic simulation to add warmth to the piezo pickup, but that's about it.

However, back in my pub-rock band days in the 1980s I fought in the pedal trenches, daisy-chaining various stompboxes and rack-mount units together and owning a whole assortment of celebrated dirt pedals like the Boss Turbo Overdrive and even the odd Boss Heavy Metal pedal. So I know my way around old-school effects and remember the faff of changing batteries and fixing patch cables, and experimenting with everything in a different order practically every gig!

But one of the big plusses with the Katana is having practically everything you need effects-wise on tap. The effects on the Katana are split into five sections: Booster, Modulation, FX, Delay and Reverb. The first four are available on two dual concentric knobs, the reverb is separate. All the effects are available in different flavours, a handy LED on each changing colour to let you know where you are all the time. Each is available to edit via the Boss Tone Studio app, but, as I said earlier, I wanted to see what was available to me 'in-house'. The Katana's manual is pretty easy to follow – even for a semi-technophobe like me – and so, after I had reacquainted my Strat with the amp, I was ready to go exploring.

As it turned out, I kinda wished I'd ventured into the effects section before last year's festival as one or two things here would have come in handy. Tremolo, for instance, would have been useful for a bit of Bo Diddly and, seeing as I was teaching both blues and rock as a foundation course, a little synchronised delay à la David Gilmour on Floyd's *Run Like Hell* would possibly have been enlightening, too. And although the amp has a very competent gain stage built in, I could have tried the Blues Driver-type overdrive, too.

In any case, the Katana proved to be a creditable companion for the week and I didn't feel there was anything lacking from a teaching point of view. I'm tutoring at the festival again this year and so I may very well call upon the Katana once again. It really is a great little amp. G

Reviewed *N/A* ***Price*** *£359* ***On Test Since*** *August 2024* ***Studio Session*** *No* ***Gigged*** *Sort of* ***Mods*** *No* ***www.boss.info***

BOUGHT & SOLD

DOUG ALDRICH

Be it with Lion, Dio, Whitesnake or The Dead Daisies, Doug Aldrich's love for Les Paul Goldtops has been a constant throughout his career

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"I had to borrow $150 from my mom and dad in the 70s, and I got a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop Deluxe. It was $300 total – I had saved around $150 and borrowed the other half. I sold a mini-bike to help pay my parents back and I earned back the rest by doing yard work. But the Goldtop was only a couple years old; it was from a friend of my sister. I wish I still had it."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last guitar I bought was a 1953 Les Paul Goldtop. It's player-grade from my buddies at Chicago Music Exchange. I wanted player-grade because I'm not a collector per se; I want to play it and the price is actually a lot more reasonable if there's been some modifications."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"There's one I got in 1988. I was teaching guitar at a music store and I had been interested in cream-coloured Les Pauls like Randy Rhoads had. The first time I'd seen that colour was when Randy played it, and in 1988 I walked in to teach during the summer and a used one was there. It was behind the counter and I didn't know if it was there for repair. It turns out they had just bought it from an individual named Will Jennings, who lived in the area and co-wrote a bunch of big hits for Steve Winwood and Eric Clapton. I don't know why he sold it, but I jumped right on it before it went up on the wall. I still have it.

"It's an amazing '78 cream-coloured Les Paul Custom. The neck pickup is still the same Gibson one, and it's killer – it's just so fat. I always used it with Whitesnake, which was perfect because it sounded like John Sykes' neck pickup. It's been on the road with me with The Dead Daisies, too. It's not every day you get to have some famous songwriter's guitar!"

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"I have multi-faceted remorse [laughs]. I found a 1970 Martin D-35. It was just beautiful, big and throaty. Right away, when I'd hit a chord, I was like, 'Whoa...



PHOTO BY HOLLY WEST COURTESY OF BLACKSTAR

After using the HT Stage 100H MK III since early 2023, Doug has recently developed his new DA100 Ruby signature amp with the Blackstar team

"I'm an emotional buyer and seller. I sell way too cheap and I buy way too high"

this thing is amazing.' I really wanted it; I'd always wanted a Martin, but I never had one. This was back in the early 2000s and I didn't have the money to get it, so I traded some stuff. One of the things I traded was a '68 Tele that I'd gotten from [producer] Andy Johns. God knows where he got it, but he traded me that Tele for a black Gibson Les Paul Custom that he wanted for his son. I traded that and a Fender P-Bass for the Martin, and I loved it.

"But every time I do a recording and need an acoustic, I always end up using a Gibson. The Martin is a great guitar, but I haven't figured out why no-one has been able to record it the way it sounds to my ears, so I definitely regret trading the Tele and the P-Bass. The Martin sounds great to play, but it's never been on a record."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you regret letting go of?

"It would have to be that '68 Tele. But another is my original '73 Goldtop. I don't remember who I sold it to, but I did. As a young musician, money is always tight and you're begging and borrowing stuff. I tweaked, refretted and made it a great player-grade guitar. I even put new humbuckers in it. I really shot myself in the foot selling that one, man."

DOUG'S GO-TO RIG

"I've got a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop that was gifted to me in 2006, and I've got a bunch of other Les Pauls, some of which we've talked about. They're all really good – I don't think a single one of them is bad. But this one in particular has a pretty hot humbucker in the neck and a bridge pickup that's not compressed. It's really open-sounding. It's got a natural relic from playing it; it's been everywhere with me.

"For pedals, I work closely with Dunlop Electronics – there's a lot of stuff I love from their company. I love Jimmy Dunlop, they've always been really good to me. There's a whole bunch of pedals that I love to experiment with. And for amps, I love Blackstar. I knew those guys back when they were with Marshall, and they broke off to form Blackstar. I love the HT Stage 100H MK III, their top-of-the-line three-channel amp. It's been my main amp."

Les Paul Goldtops have been a mainstay in Doug's rig since his late teens and remain his go-to guitars on stage

PHOTO BY FRANK HOENSCH/REDFERNS

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"I am probably the worst person to ask about this! Anybody who knows me will tell you that I'm an emotional buyer and seller. I sell way too cheap and I buy way too high. You could put two guitars that are the same on the wall, and one could be $1,000 while the other one could be $2,000, and I'll say, 'I gotta get the $2,000 one' [laughs].

"So my advice would be to take your time and take your emotions out of it. If you find a guitar that you like, really try to spend some time with it and make sure it's the one. Maybe put a deposit on it and keep it on hold for a minute. Go back to the store, play it a few times, and try to make a deal. If you don't like it, you can always get the deposit back."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"Last night [laughs]. I browse guitars at night when I'm in bed, it relaxes me. And it's constantly putting fear in my wife, like, 'What are you doing now? Why are you looking at that stuff?' But last night, I was looking at a bunch of different stores to see what they had to offer. I'm always looking at Les Pauls. I really am looking at Les Paul Juniors a lot right now. I just love the simplicity and the different tones you can get."

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?

"I'd rather have a really good guitar and a cheap amp. I spend a lot of time playing acoustically, and I really get off on the way the guitar feels and sounds acoustically. I think you can get a great sound out of any amp that works; you can get a sound that's going to be cool. And if you have a nice guitar, you're going to be passionate about what you play – and your fingers and your heart determine the sound anyway."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"It's a good question. Humbuckers and single coils are both awesome. I love guys that play Strats with single coils, but my favourite tones are probably from [guitars with] humbuckers. I love Les Pauls, so that's a pretty easy answer for me. But I would hate for a situation to come up where I always had to stay with the same pickup – they're all a little different and fun to play around with!" **[AD]**



Crossroads, the first single from The Dead Daisies' upcoming blues album, *Lookin' For Trouble* (Fame/Malaco Records), is available now
https://thedeaddaisies.com

The MOD SQUAD

CASINO GAMES

There's a whiff of spring cleaning in the air and The Mod Squad seems to have been tasked with a run of maintenance requests. Dave Burrluck is busy!

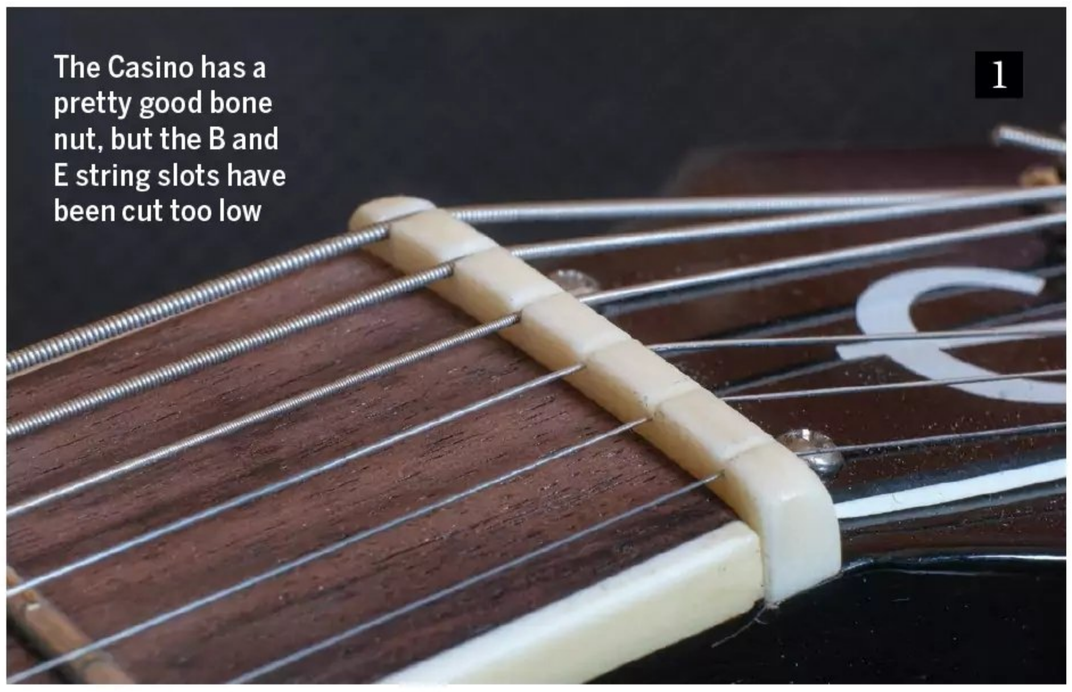
Writing this in early March, I'm beginning to wonder if guitarists everywhere are waking up from their winter slumber and getting back to guitar playing. "Could you check over my guitar? It's not quite playing/sounding right," seems an increasingly common request. To be honest, it's come from both pro and amateur players, and even my long-suffering partner has noticed the rather-more-than-usual comings and goings of guitar cases and gigbags: "Have you started a new business?"

A slightly pressured (if simple) job was to take a look and restring a pro's pair of ES-335s to make sure they're ship-shape for an imminent and important gig. These are guitars I've seen plenty of times over the years, both on stage and on my maintenance mat. Oddly, both tune-o-matics were fitted the wrong way around, and the thread on one of the older guitar's nylon saddles had stripped. Rather than muck about, I ordered a locking TonePros nylon-saddle bridge (great service from Northwest Guitars!) that dropped straight in place – and can be locked to the posts. After just cutting the saddles to space the strings correctly, we're good to go. A slight tweak of the string height was required, too, to give both guitars a bit more 'fight' (this is a serious bluesman asking). Despite a lot of wear and pretty low frets on both, which I wasn't going to touch, they sounded really good and apparently the gig went well. Job done.

The latest cry of help comes from another pro (albeit a guitar-playing keyboard player) who is busy recording, but his preferred guitar is causing problems: "It won't stay in tune and the bridge pickup has stopped working. Help!" Coincidentally, it's another thinline, this time a mid-90s Korean-made Epiphone Casino that's already been modded with some witch-hat knobs, a different pickguard that looks like it might have come off a Sheraton, some vintage-style Kluson tuners and a non-standard Schaller STM threaded-saddle bridge (pics 1, 2 & 3). It doesn't take very long to notice that those saddles have moved quite considerably on the bass side, narrowing the string spacing. And someone has slightly over-cut the nut, noticeably the plain strings. Speaking of strings, I don't think they've been changed for quite some time, either. But overall, the guitar is in good nick: the neck is pretty straight and the quite large frets (are they original, I wonder?) show barely any wear. It's an encouraging start.

Getting Started

As anyone who's had to repair or refit the electrics in a hollow or semi-hollow thinline knows, it's one of those jobs that's rarely straightforward. But before I begin worrying about that I plug in. It's all working fine with the exception of the bridge pickup, but momentarily it comes back to life as I rotate the volume control. I might be in luck. Removing the knob and securing nut, I can just pull the pot into the f-hole and squirt in some Servisol Super 10 switch cleaner (pic 4) then push the pot back into its mounting hole, vigorously



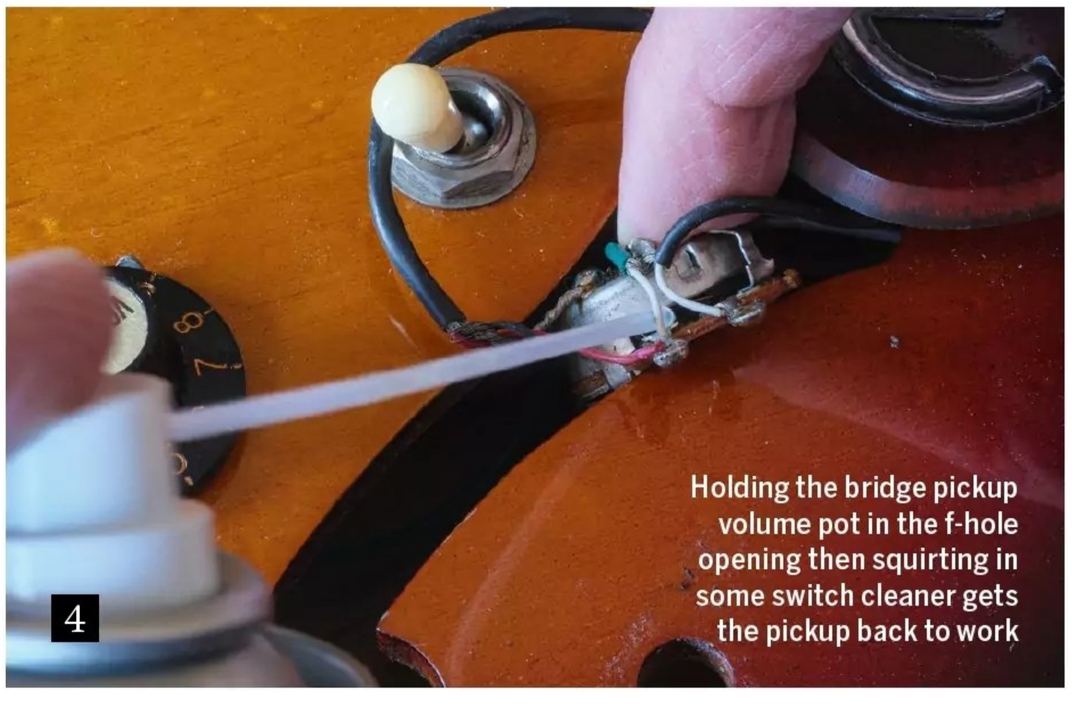
1 The Casino has a pretty good bone nut, but the B and E string slots have been cut too low



2 This Schaller STM bridge isn't original, either. It's a good bridge, but those saddles can move, reducing your string spacing

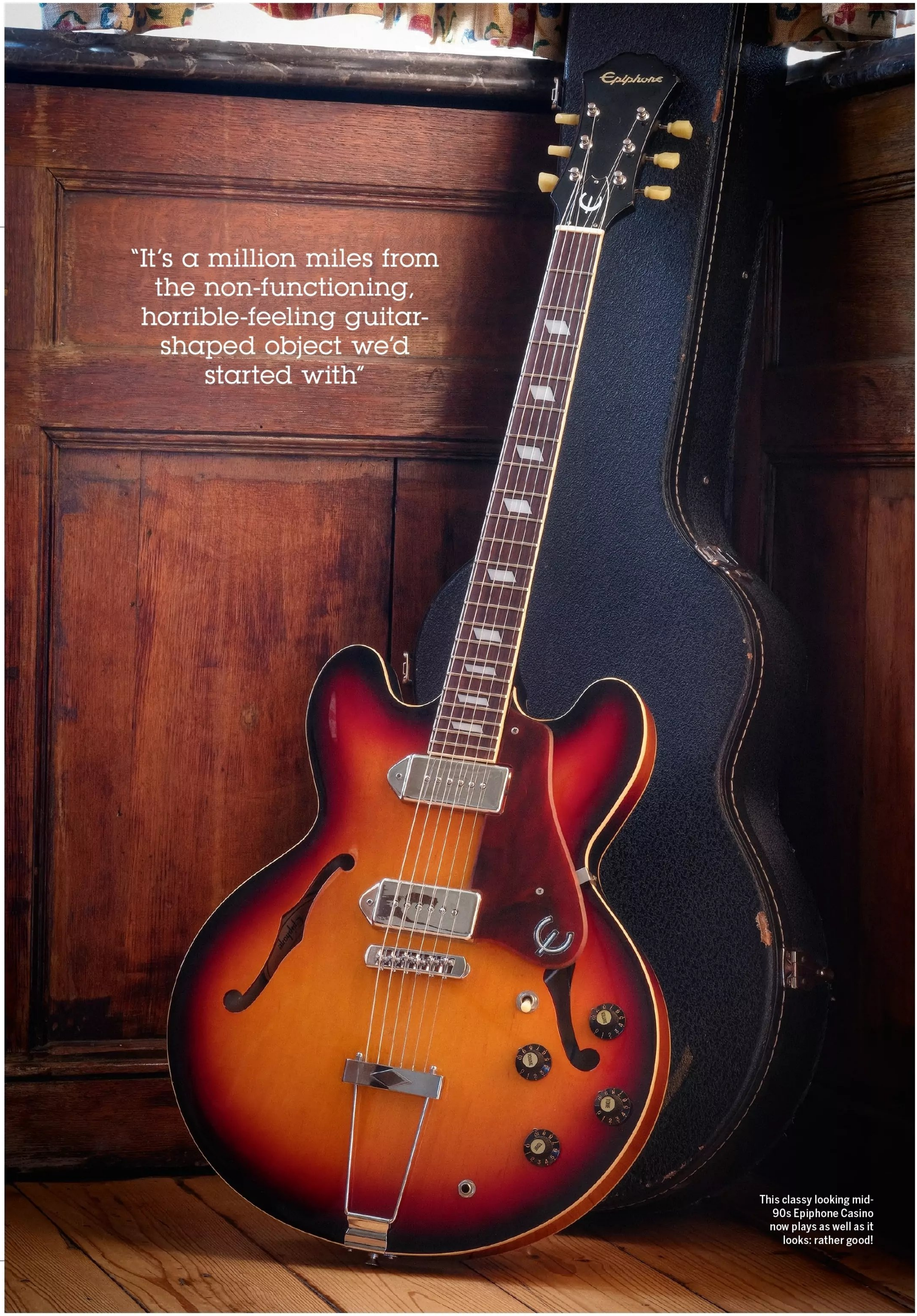


3 A set of decent Kluson vintage-style tunings are a nice upgrade, but they won't improve the tuning stability on their own



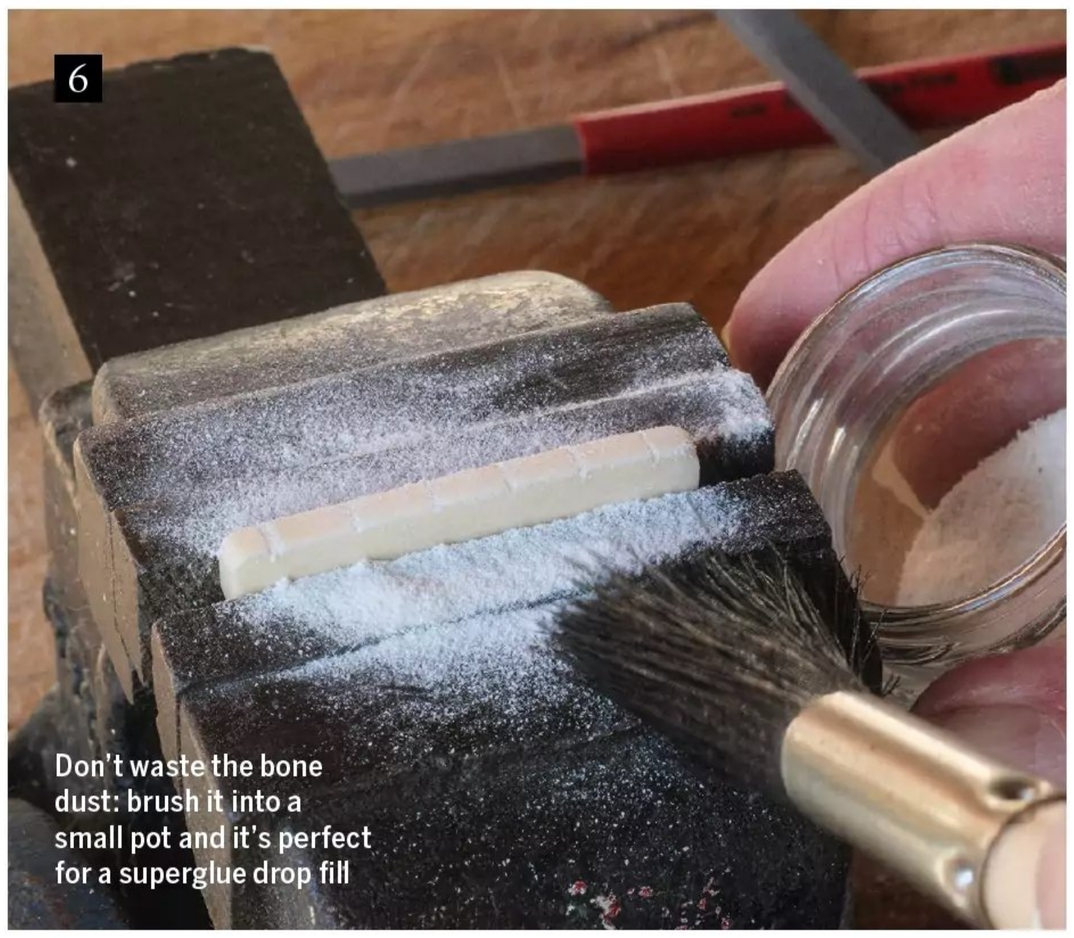
4 Holding the bridge pickup volume pot in the f-hole opening then squirting in some switch cleaner gets the pickup back to work

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK



This classy looking mid-90s Epiphone Casino now plays as well as it looks: rather good!









PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

"Repairing the electrics in a hollow or semi-hollow thinline is rarely straightforward"

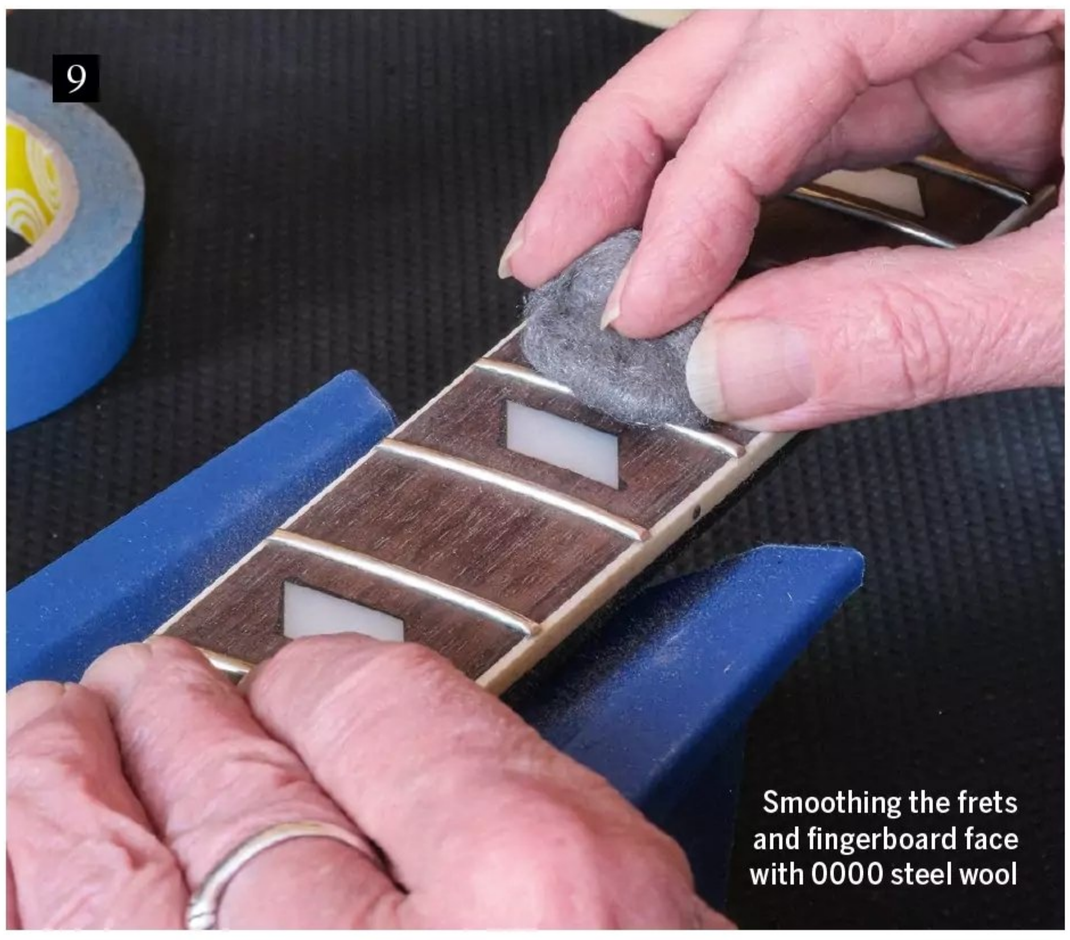
rotating the pot then screwing it back in place. Plugged in, I'm in luck. The bridge pickup and volume pot are now working fine. That serendipity has saved me some time and the owner some money. Coming back to the guitar a couple of days later, I just double-check that all is still good. It is. Time to get it playing better.

Not knowing the history of the guitar aside from what's in front of me, it seems that the new tuners and bridge are additions perhaps designed for 'better' tuning. On closer inspection, that nut doesn't look original, either. Checking the relief again, there's a little too much, so I just tighten the truss rod until there's barely any and recheck the action height at the 12th fret. But now the high E and B are pretty much touching the 1st fret. Slackening off the strings and pulling them to either side of the neck, the nut drops out. It's definitely bone and rather nicely done. If only those slots weren't too low...

I have a few options. First, cut a new nut; second, drop-fill those over-deep slots and re-cut them; or third, just add a thin veneer to raise the nut height fractionally. I decide to go the latter route by cutting a piece of black-stained wood veneer to the exact footprint of the nut. Testing the idea before glueing, it works perfectly. Now all I need to do is reduce the overall height of the nut (pics 5 & 6) as all the grooves were cut deep when they really only need to be no more than the diameter of the string, preferably less, not least with the back-angled three-a-side headstock (pic 7). It's looking good and I'll fine-tune the nut once the new strings are on.

Spit 'N' Polish

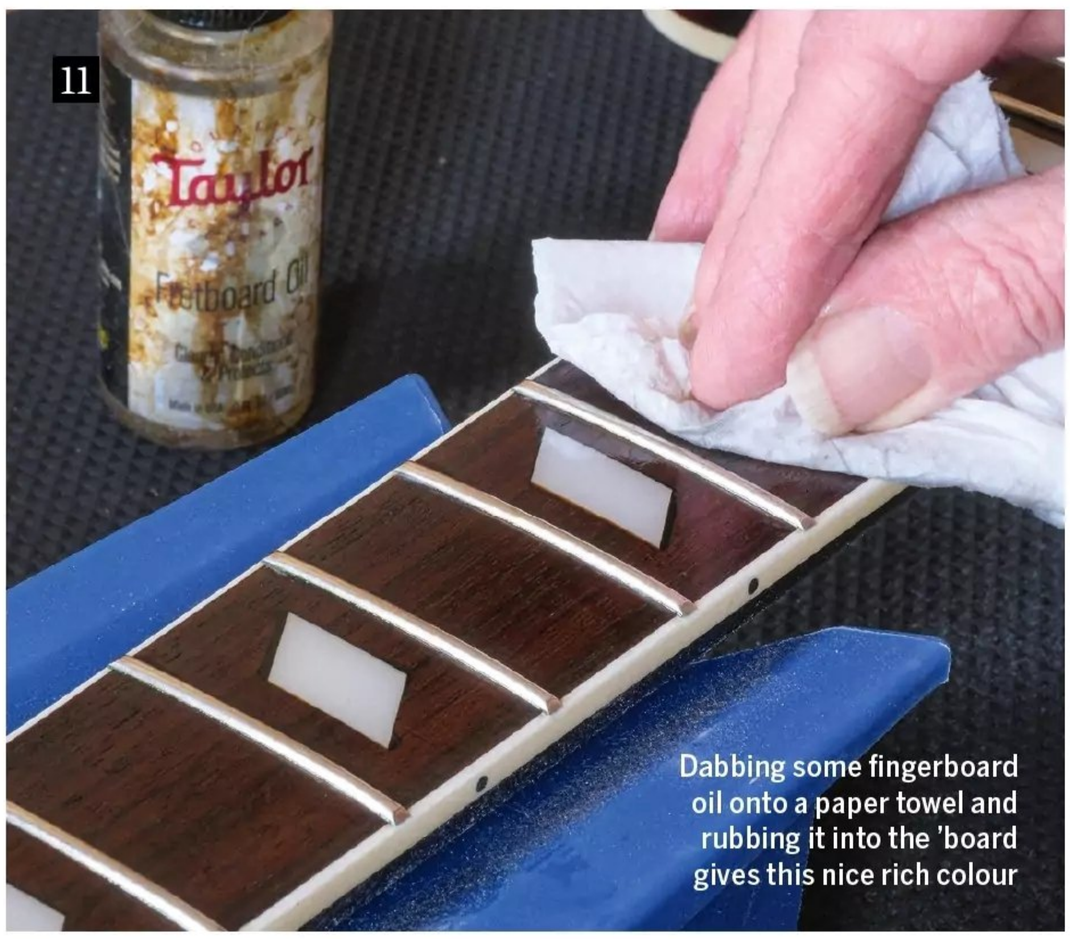
Now, new strings aren't cheap these days, so I want to make sure everything is ship-shape before they go on. A quick check of the frets with our good ol' Fret Rocker (pic 8) and they're very flat and, as I said,



Smoothing the frets and fingerboard face with 0000 steel wool



Polishing the frets using Music Nomad's Frine Fret Polishing Kit



Dabbing some fingerboard oil onto a paper towel and rubbing it into the 'board gives this nice rich colour



With the shimmed nut in place, double-check the neck relief and make any necessary adjustments

with very little visible wear. Taping over the pickup poles and covers, as well as the bridge and even the tailpiece, a vigorous rub with 0000 steel wool smooths the frets and cleans up the fingerboard face (pic 9). Using a large brush, I sweep off any steel wool bits and get the vacuum out to clean up my work space.

Next, I'm ready to polish with Music Nomad's Frine Fret Polishing Kit using a fretboard guard held over each fret and a dab of the polish (pic 10). Then I make sure there's no polish residue left on the fingerboard – I clean it with a paper towel and give it another good rub, particularly over the frets to remove any polish residue. Finally, a light drop of fingerboard oil and more rubbing gives a deep sheen to the fingerboard (pic 11).

With the new strings on and capo'd at the 1st fret, the bridge can be dialled in to height: typically 1.5mm (0.06 inches) on the treble side and 1.5mm to 1.8mm

"If you discover low nut slots, you can add a thin veneer to raise the nut height fractionally"

(0.06 to 0.07 inches) on the bass at the 13th fret. Now, the bridge has those threaded saddles so you can rotate those into place with an approximate spacing of 10.5mm between strings. There's plenty of width to the Casino's neck to accommodate the 52.5mm string spacing and, once happy, you can apply a small drop of superglue or nail varnish onto the thread within each saddle to stop them moving.

After double-checking the minimal relief hasn't changed (and making any adjustment if it has; pic 12), it's back to the nut, bringing down each string groove with the correct nut slot file so the string just clears the 1st fret. I always use a stack of feeler gauges in front of the nut: the height of the fret plus approximately 0.015 inches, which gives you a stop-point for your file, then the final height can be set by eye. As ever, fret the string at the 3rd or 4th fret and look back to the 1st fret where you want to see a very small gap between string and fret. Never rush this, otherwise you'll be back to where you started.

With everything pretty much done, a good play test should illustrate anything you've missed. The pickups are all working and, with fresh strings and a sensible setup, I'm pretty impressed with what I'm feeling and hearing. It really is a million miles from the non-functioning, horrible-feeling guitar-shaped object we'd started with.

So, whether it's performing an annual spring clean or you have a guitar that's just fallen out of use, get it sorted. These things are meant to be played! G



Huw Price's Nitty Gritty

The restoration concludes with refinishing, relicing and a special reunion

1957 Stratocaster Restoration (Part 6)



Huw's restored Strat (left) is reunited with its inspiration, Andrew Raymond's 1956 model

PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

After weeks of procrastination, during which I was mostly enjoying playing my Strat once again, I finally had to knuckle down and spray the neck. As with vintage Les Paul sunbursts and blonde Telecasters, there is no right or wrong when it comes to Fender neck shades. I've seen 50s Strats with ultra-pale necks that looked like they were sprayed a week earlier, and others with a deep orangey amber.

They all look different so anybody restoring a vintage Strat – or spraying a newer one to appear vintage – is at liberty to shoot for whatever tint they prefer. With Andrew Raymond's '56 on hand to use as a reference, I started tinting some lacquer thinner to achieve a close match.

Magic Formula

Using ColorTone stains from StewMac in the US, I mixed amber with a few drops of medium brown and a tiny dash of orange. On a scrap of maple veneer, I made colour swatches as I adjusted the tints until I felt the shade was close but a shade lighter to match the unstripped patina on the back of the neck.

The tinted thinner was then mixed with Nitorlack clear gloss and I applied it with an airbrush. This allowed me to build the intensity of the colour gradually, but I also wanted fine control of the lacquer to prevent it from getting onto the back of the neck where the original lacquer had all worn away.

Whoever sprayed the neck previously had clearly decided to leave this 'played-in' area original, and I wanted to do the same. The refinishing work was confined to the headstock, the fretboard and the heel. Once I was happy with the colour, I applied non-tinted clear coats to build up the depth.

Fender would have sprayed straight over the frets and then scraped the lacquer off. This is easy enough because nitrocellulose doesn't stick that well to metal, and I decided to follow suit. After it had cured for a couple of days, I sanded the sprayed sections level using 320-grit paper and applied flash coats comprising thinner with a dash of retarder and a small amount of lacquer to melt out the sanding scratches and level the surface.

1. ColorTone amber, medium brown and orange tints were mixed and applied to maple veneer to replicate the vintage look

2. The goal was to achieve a gradual transition between the refinished headstock and the play-worn back of the neck

3. The extra string-tree hole was left unplugged because it's part of the story, and a silk-screen decal completes the look







To finish up, I progressed from 1,200-grit wet-and-dry paper through to 6,000-grit micromesh. By then, the finish had a muted gloss look, and rather than use polishing compound, I buffed it out to a soft sheen using the palm of my hand like a French polisher.

Devil In The Decals

Tapping in tuner bushings with a hammer or mallet risks denting the headstock and you must be careful to ensure they go in straight. They can be squeezed in using a padded vice or a G-clamp, but if a hammer is your only option, place a wooden block over the bushing to keep the hammer away from the headstock.

With the tuners back on and the string tree reinstalled, the only thing missing was the decal. Most aftermarket decals are printed with modern metallic ink and as well as looking wrong, they feel wrong. Vintage Fender decals were silk-screened and as you run a finger over them you can feel that the 'Fender' section is raised. I'd had a silk-screened decal stashed away for a few years waiting for a project like this, but they can be found online if you search hard enough. Needless to say, you shouldn't put Fender decals on non-Fender guitars, but this Stratocaster surely qualifies.

Headstock decals are like the water slide decals that some of us applied to Airfix models when we were kids. Soak it in water until the decal moves easily on its backing, then slide it onto the headstock. Some careful positioning is always required, and slightly wetting the headstock in advance of the decal makes it easier to adjust.

Once I was happy with the position, I used a dry cotton bud to squeeze out any air bubbles then dabbed off the excess water using kitchen towel. After leaving it to dry for a few hours, I rubbed off any water marks surrounding the decal with a soft, dry cloth.

Dent In Time

I did warn you that this final instalment would include relicing, so if it offends your sensibilities, look away now because the time had come to make the body show its age. One obvious issue was the smoothness of the refinish. If you examine 1950s Fenders closely, the lacquer will invariably have shrunk down into the grain and it looks very thin.

You can achieve this effect by heating the finish with the type of hot air gun usually used for stripping paint. It's not without risks and the key is to keep the gun moving at all times, rather than lingering too long over any area. Too much heat will cause the lacquer to blister or even burn, and it will ruin the finish. I also use my spare hand to gauge the temperature in areas that I've just treated and always keep the gun about 20cm away from the body.

> "Vintage Strat necks all look different so you're at liberty to shoot for whatever tint you prefer"

Don't expect immediate results because the heated lacquer may require a few hours, or even days, before it begins to sink into the grain. But that doesn't mean you need to wait before preparing the body for lacquer checking.

For those who appreciate such things, part of the visual appeal of checking is the way that cracks in the lacquer form around dents and chips to form intriguing patterns. That's why all the 'damage' needs to be done before the lacquer is forced to crack.

I restore vintage Strats on a regular basis, so I keep a kit of parts for relicing that includes a pickguard, jack plate, bridge plate, neckplate and spring cover. They're all covered in masking tape and serve two purposes. When I'm applying tinted clear coats over custom colours, fixing the plates and cover onto the body enables me to get 'tan lines' in the areas that would normally be shielded from UV light. But in this instance, they prevent those areas from getting chipped and dented.



This relicing kit includes parts to protect the body, a handful of screws, some stones and a small hammer

Cracks will form around the tiniest dents, so there's no need to drop heavy bolts or bunches of keys onto the body. Instead, I take handfuls of small screws, nuts and bolts and allow them to fall onto the body from a height of about 15cm. You'll need to do the front and back, and don't neglect the sides.

Always consider how vintage guitars age naturally and the areas that tend to pick up more damage than others. With Stratocasters, you'll often see more chips around the edges of the lower bout and along the edges on the treble side. Small stones can be used to target wear marks by placing them against the lacquer and tapping them with a hammer. To randomise the marks, twist the stones around as you work. Other options might include a nail punch and the ball-end of a hammer.

The process is creative, rather than destructive, and this is where personal taste comes into play. Enjoy yourself, resist the temptation to overdo things and remember that you can always add more later or let things age naturally. Be warned that once you're done, the body will probably be looking worse rather than better, but that should change quickly once you get cracking.



Acetone on cotton buds followed by the vinegar and tea treatment simulates playwear on the fretboard lacquer

Cracking Up

Lacquer checking occurs due to thermal shock. It tends to happen when very cold guitars are taken into warm environments. The way to induce lacquer checking is to make it very cold very quickly. Two common ways of doing so are to place the body into a deep freeze or to spray it with an upside-down air duster. Both approaches have their pros and cons.

The freezer method doesn't cost anything, but it may take two or more freeze-and-thaw cycles before the checking gets going. The other issue is that checking lines tend to form sideways, rather than lengthways on the body. This is perfect for replicating vintage Les Paul sunbursts and Goldtops, and some metallic Gibson and Fender custom colours, but most vintage Fender body finishes tend to check lengthways.

You have a better chance of achieving this using an air duster, and that's what I chose to do here. You'll probably need two or more cans, so it can get expensive, and there is a technique to getting the best results. If you get too close, the checking can look more like a shattered glass than elegant lines. Work at a distance of about 40cm and give the body very short blasts while keeping the aerosol moving.

Checking lines may not appear immediately, but be patient and assess your progress after a few minutes have elapsed instead of trying to complete it all at once. If you get the lacquer checking



More ‘playwear’ is added at the top of the neck and you can see lacquer on the sides of the frets



You can induce sideways checking by putting the neck into a deep freeze



The headstock is aged by chipping lacquer away from the headstock edges and then oxidising the wood

right, the body will start to look like the real deal. I find this the most exciting part of relicing because there’s always a degree of unpredictability and the checking ties everything together.

The final step was to knock back the glossiness because Andrew’s ’56 is less shiny and has a slightly milky blush on the surface. Scuffing up the surface with Scotch pad or steel wool never produces results that I like. Instead, I misted neat acetone over the body using my airbrush. Don’t allow the body to become wet with acetone because it will dissolve the lacquer. Instead, go lightly and the acetone should flash off within seconds to leave the finish still looking glossy but with a duller sheen. It’s subtle but effective.

Neck & Neck

One advantage of reassembling the guitar prior to finishing the neck and playing it for an extended period is that the fretboard begins to show those dark finger marks that are so characteristic of 1950s maple necks. If I’d had a bit more time, I might have left it a few months longer before spraying.

Rather than attempt to freshen up the maple, I sprayed straight over the staining. Although I was pleased with the way the lacquer turned out, there was an abrupt change where the lacquered fretboard edge met the play-worn area on the back. On Andrew’s neck, the fretboard edges were worn down to bare wood, which had oxidised to a darker shade.

> “Part of the visual appeal of checking is the way that cracks in the lacquer form intriguing patterns”

The way I replicated this was to moisten cotton buds in acetone and gently wipe away the lacquer from those areas. The buds allow you to be accurate, but don’t get them too wet because you don’t want acetone running everywhere.

Bare wood that has been exposed to air over an extended period tends to oxidise, and on guitars it often turns a brownish grey. You can achieve this effect by using stains or oil paints, but my preferred method is an antique restorer’s trick. Soak some wire wool in white vinegar for a few hours and then apply it to the bare wood using a small paint brush. Allow it to soak in and dry before applying some strong black tea. This sets off a chemical reaction that produces very convincing results. You can finish up by sealing the area with wax.

Lastly, I chipped away at the headstock edges and again darkened the wood using vinegar and tea. The fretboard edges looked and felt a bit square from sanding prior to the refret, so I used a smooth screwdriver shaft to compress the wood fibres into a subtle roll over that enhanced the look and playing feel.

’57 Varieties

Guitar restorer Clive Brown once told me he thought professional-quality relicing is about kick starting the ageing process and allowing nature to continue the work. It’s a guiding principle that I always try to bear in mind when I’m relicing vintage guitars.

Although it’s fiendishly difficult to photograph, the body checking turned out exactly as I’d hoped. You can exaggerate cracks for photographic purposes by wicking dark stain into them, but I decided against that. Experience has taught me that the lines will become increasingly visible over the next few months and will look better if left to age naturally. Similarly, I decided against simulated fingerwear on the fretboard. The lacquer is vanishingly thin and I’m going to try to play my way through it. If that doesn’t work, or I lose patience, I’ll gently wipe the lacquer away using cotton buds and acetone, and oxidise the wood as described earlier.

There are still a few details to take care of. For instance, I’m disappointed with Retrovibe’s phone book capacitor and I’ll probably order a Luxe replica. My search continues for a 1950s volume knob that will be a better match for the tone knobs, but I’ll probably have to save up for that. So that’s it for now. I hope you enjoyed watching the restoration process of this 1957 Stratocaster as much as I’m planning to enjoy playing it. G

www.huwpriceguitar.com



David Davidson's Vintage Icons

All maple cap 'Hendrix'-spec '69 Strats are highly prized, but this is a unique showstopper

1969 Fender Stratocaster



Sparkle finish Stratocasters are extremely rare, and this one-off example has a matching headstock and pickguard

"This is a wonderful guitar that is very original and virtually unused. It has some great colouration and a really cool backstory because it was made in 1969 for the Musikmesse show in Frankfurt, Germany. This was during the Cold War era and the colours on the guitar were meant to represent different things about the United States. The gold is for the golden beaches, the blue is for the sky and the green is for the ocean. From what I was told, it was intended as a bit of a rub in the face for The Soviet Union. The simple message was, here in the US we have all these beautiful things and you don't.

"It has gold hardware with a medium-profile C-shaped maple cap neck, and the guitar is in exceptional condition with its original black case, tags, 'ashtray' bridge cover and everything else. It's a one-off trade show piece, and I don't know of anybody who has a Strat remotely like this one.

"By 1969, Fender was spraying sparkle finishes in-house and they got creative with the pickguard by also giving it the sparkle treatment. I've seen that on a couple of other examples, and the sparkle is in the plastic itself. It appears like there's a top layer of clear plastic over the sparkle, with a black and white layer under that.

"It's not as light as most mid-60s Strats, but it's certainly not heavy and it sounds like a Hendrix Strat on steroids. The guitar has definitely been played and it has a couple of scratches and nicks, but it's mostly through the top coat and nothing too bad.

"I bought the guitar about 16 years ago from a client in Europe who was supposedly the person who bought it at the Musikmesse show when it was new. Making special one-offs for trade shows was something Fender used to do. I've seen photos from the 1969 NAMM Show, and this guitar definitely wasn't there, so the Musikmesse story is more likely.

"They also made models especially for teen fairs, which were quite popular. Fender had a big trailer they pulled around with a truck. It had a side that would drop open for people to go in and play the instruments that were on display. They were very prevalent in the United States, and Fender went to all kinds of country fairs and the New York World's Fair. It enabled young musicians to be able to try an electric guitar, Rhodes piano or anything else Fender was offering at the time. This happened a lot during the CBS era, and post-1965 they even produced a separate teen fair catalogue. It was like a smaller booklet version of the official catalogue that was handed out in the tens of thousands to younger people who were interested in learning to play an instrument.

> "When you're dealing with a vintage guitar that's one of one, all regular pricing goes out the window"

"Whenever you're dealing with a vintage guitar that's one of one, all regular pricing goes out the window. For instance, you couldn't compare this one with a rosewood-'board sunburst, white or black Strat from 1969. First of all, you have to take into account the maple cap, which already makes it a more desirable guitar. Then you factor in the metal flake finish and the matching headstock, which makes it truly unique.

"A white one with average playwear might go for $25,000 to $27,000; then imagine it was a very-hard-to-find custom colour like Sonic Blue. Even then, it still wouldn't have the matching headstock, but it might still be worth double the value of a black or white one. With a matching headstock and metal flake finish, the value keeps multiplying, and that's what we have to consider when we're pricing a guitar like this.

"The type of person who would want to buy a one-off guitar is somebody who says two things: number one, I have everything else; and number two is that the guitar itself and the story behind it turn me on and I need to own it. So it will be expensive, but the eventual owner will be the only kid on the block who has one.

"Sometimes I'll offer a rare guitar like this and someone who has never bought a guitar from me before will buy it. Other times, I'll have several known collectors fighting over it. I used to believe I had a handle on this, but I no longer have such a clear picture of how these things work." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563



David acquired the guitar from its original owner, who bought it at the 1969 Musikmesse show in Frankfurt and clearly enjoyed playing it

"This guitar was made during the Cold War era and the colours represent different things about the United States"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

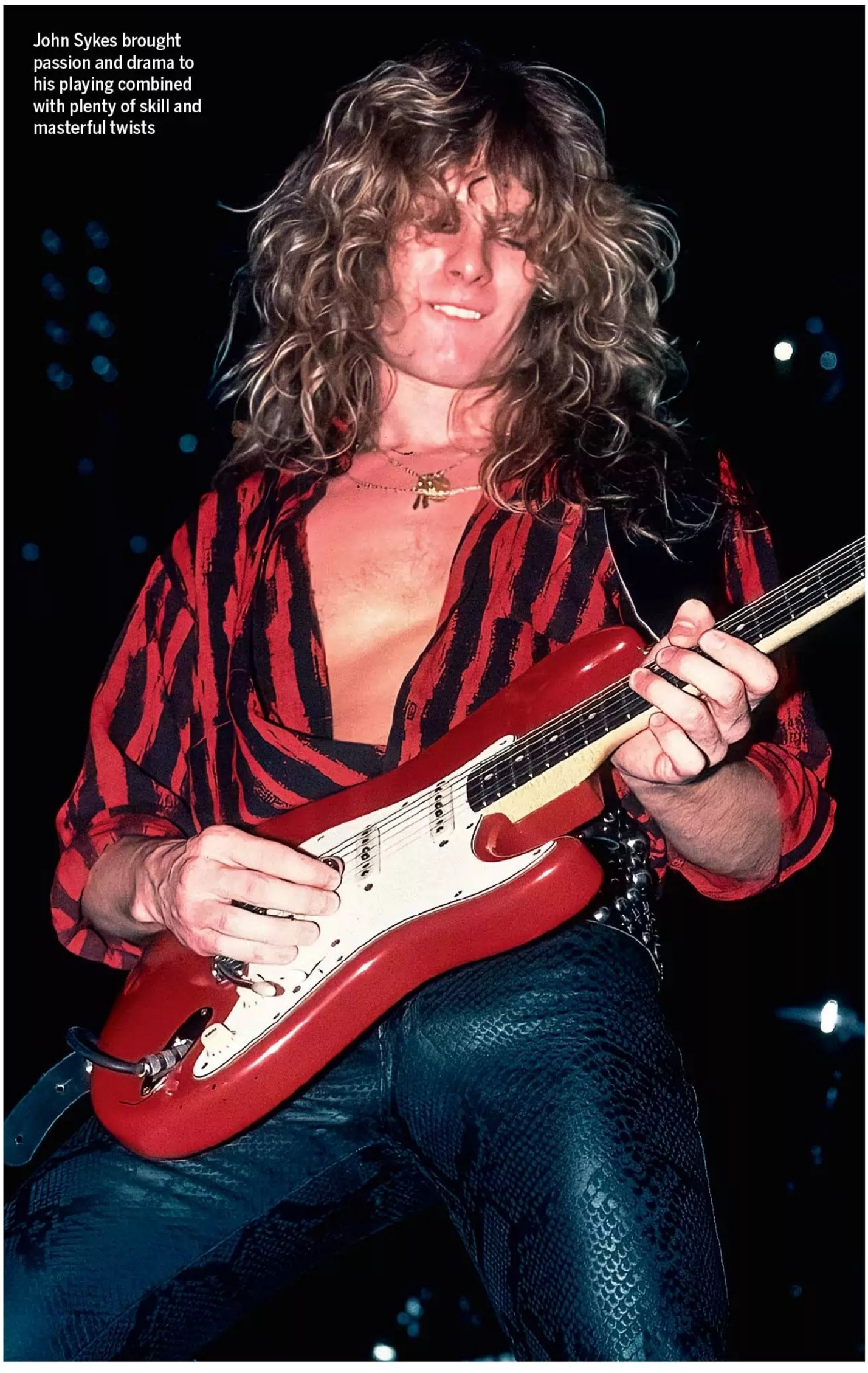
Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



John Sykes: A Tribute

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Gibson Les Paul Custom, Keeley Boss SD-1 & Marshall JTM45 MkII Reissue
Difficulty ★★★★★ | 20 mins per example



John Sykes brought passion and drama to his playing combined with plenty of skill and masterful twists

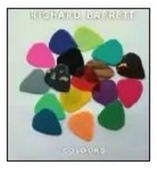
PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

AS WE REPORTED last issue, John Sykes passed away in December at the age of 65, to the shock and dismay of many. He first came to prominence in the early 80s with NWOBHM act Tygers Of Pan Tang, though within a few short years he had replaced Snowy White in Thin Lizzy, before moving on to Whitesnake, most notably co-writing the 1987 self-titled album at the peak of their US success. John's fluid, skilful playing combined the passion of Gary Moore with riffs inspired by Zeppelin and Deep Purple, plus unexpected melodic twists like Ritchie Blackmore and squealing pinched harmonics that pre-dated Zakk Wylde getting the Ozzy Osbourne gig.

John was also known for getting huge rhythm tones, some of which were created with the help of producer Bob Rock, who went on to produce Metallica's 'Black Album' a few years later. Though John settled in the US later in his career, he never lost the 'Britishness' in his playing – and while he was most certainly a rocker, he always retained a certain melodic blues feel, which set him apart from the shredders.

The guitar John is most associated with is his 1978 Les Paul Custom/Black Beauty with chrome hardware and a mirror pickguard, which he used throughout his career. He would generally plug straight into his amps, which at various times were Mesa/Boogie, Jose Arredondo-modified Marshalls and EVH 5150s. John liked his high-gain tones, and like Gary Moore he was adept at silencing the guitar/avoiding unwanted feedback by zeroing the volume knob between phrases.

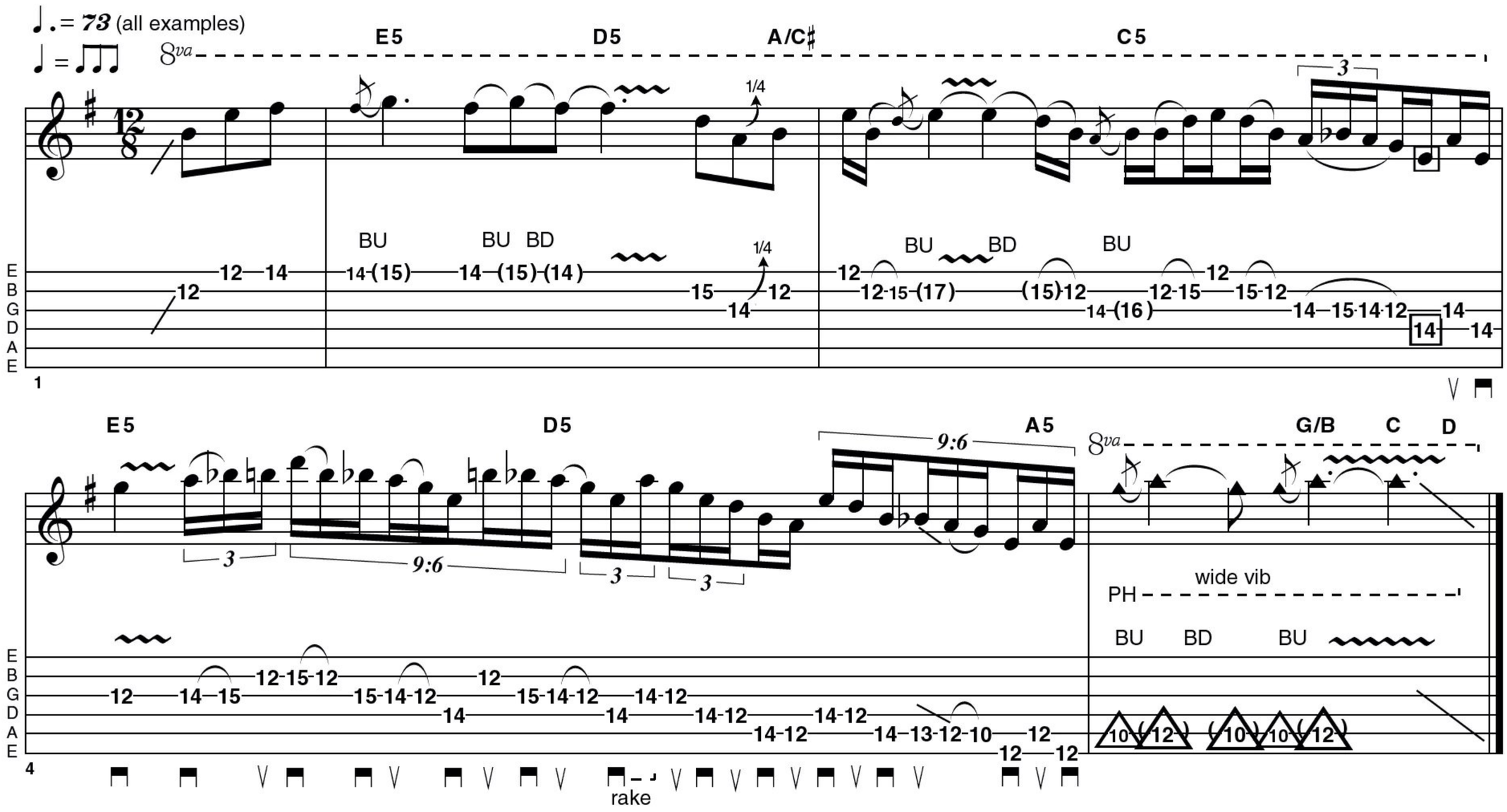
The example phrases are a challenge, so working through them methodically will definitely raise your game. They appear in sequence as if played in a single pass, but they were recorded separately, so don't feel you have to play the whole thing from beginning to end! G



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

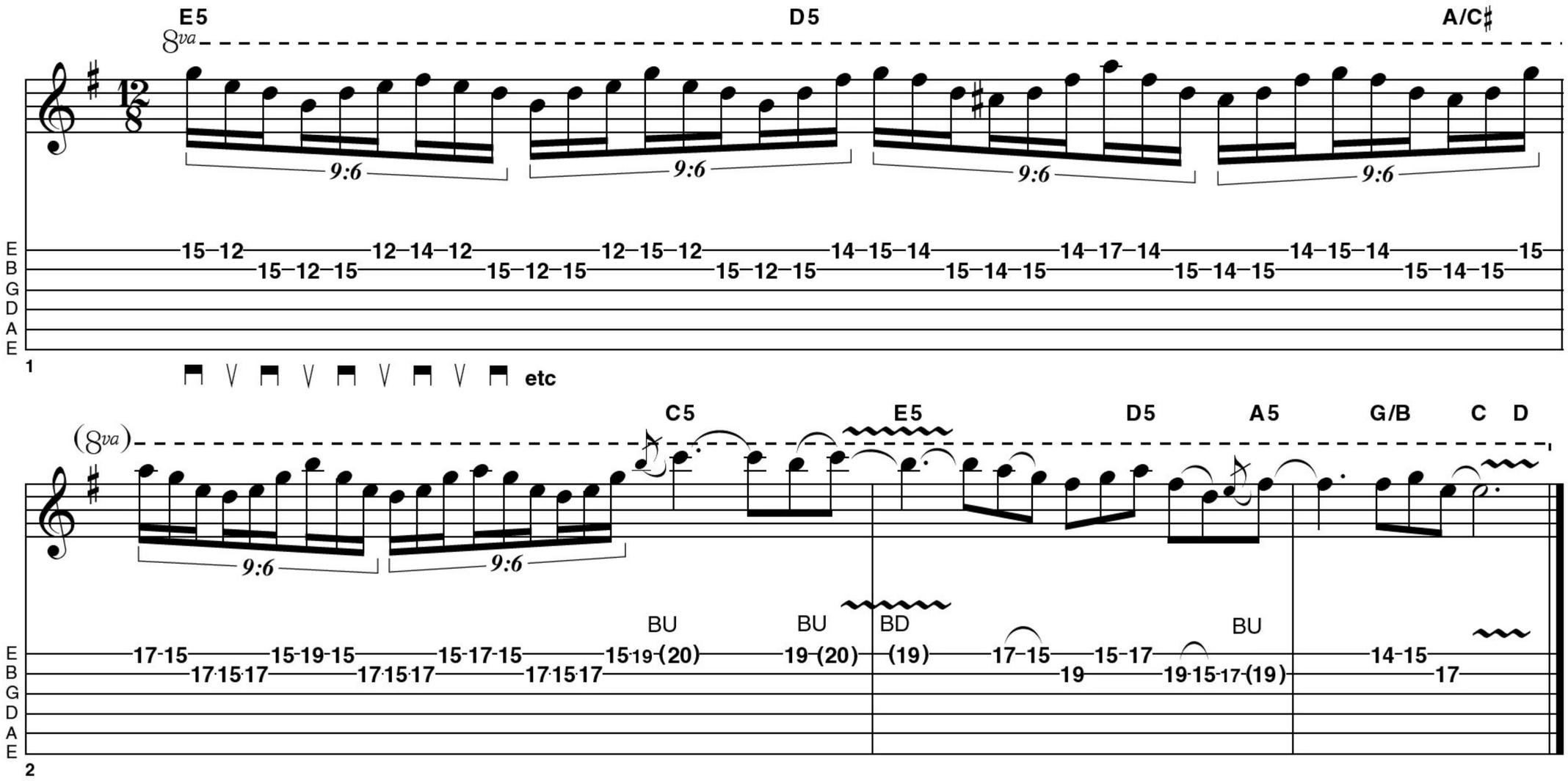
Example 1

STARTING WITH A MELODIC E NATURAL MINOR based lick, this example then shifts to a shape 1 E minor pentatonic/blues scale run that descends in an almost haphazard way to the final pinched harmonic on the fifth string. Though it is faithfully transcribed here, allow yourself a little leeway. The most important consideration is to come out on time for that final note. You can allow it to drift 'off time' if you want, which is also very effective.
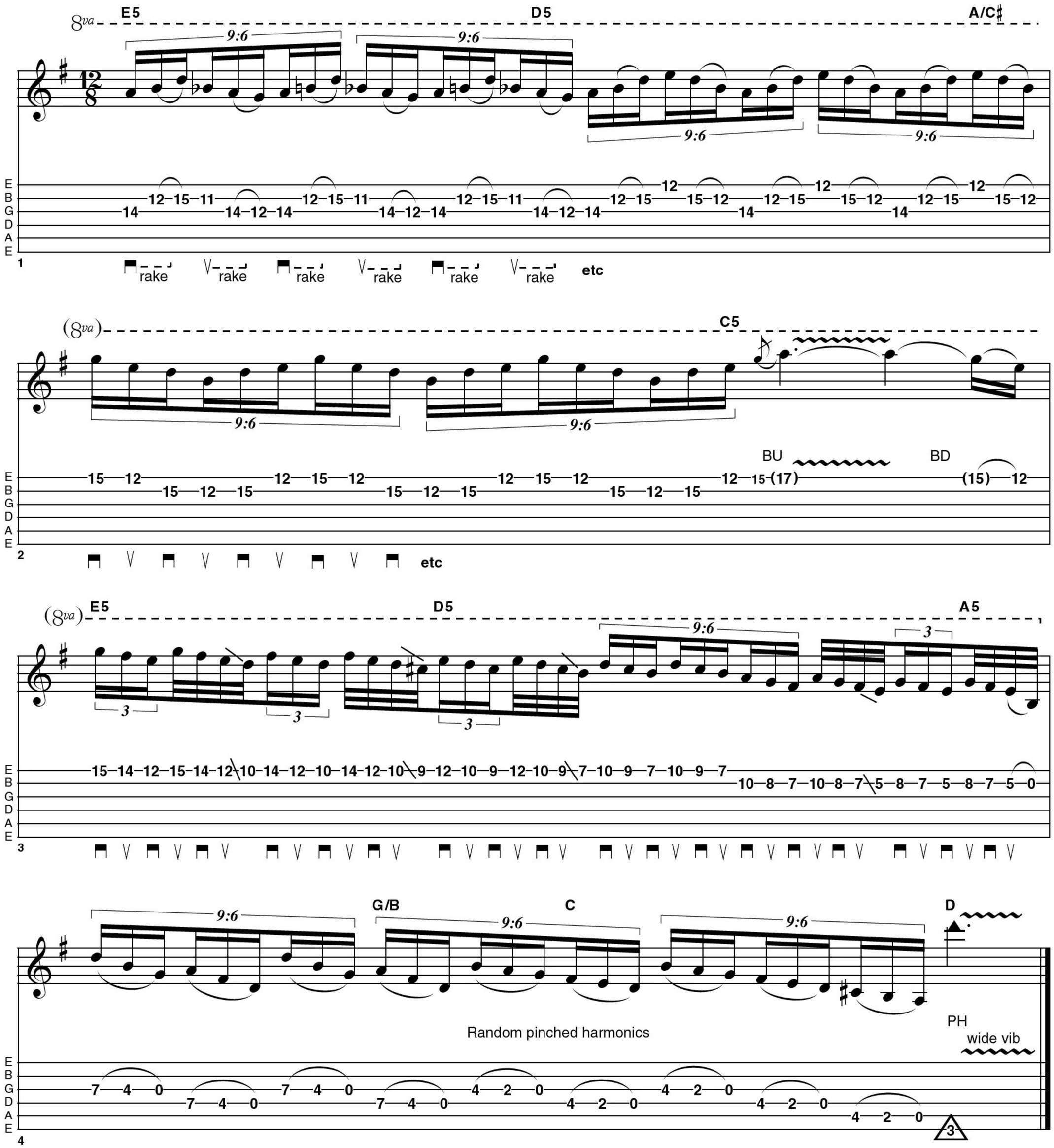


Example 2

SWITCHING TO THE NECK PICKUP (something John liked to do frequently), this example is the opposite of Example 1 in that it starts fast and furious with the Gary Moore-style alternate-picked lick, then slows down for some melodic held notes with a slowish vibrato. John liked to create drama with unusual note choices and this is one of the qualities that set him apart from other 'flash' soloists, especially in the early to mid-80s.



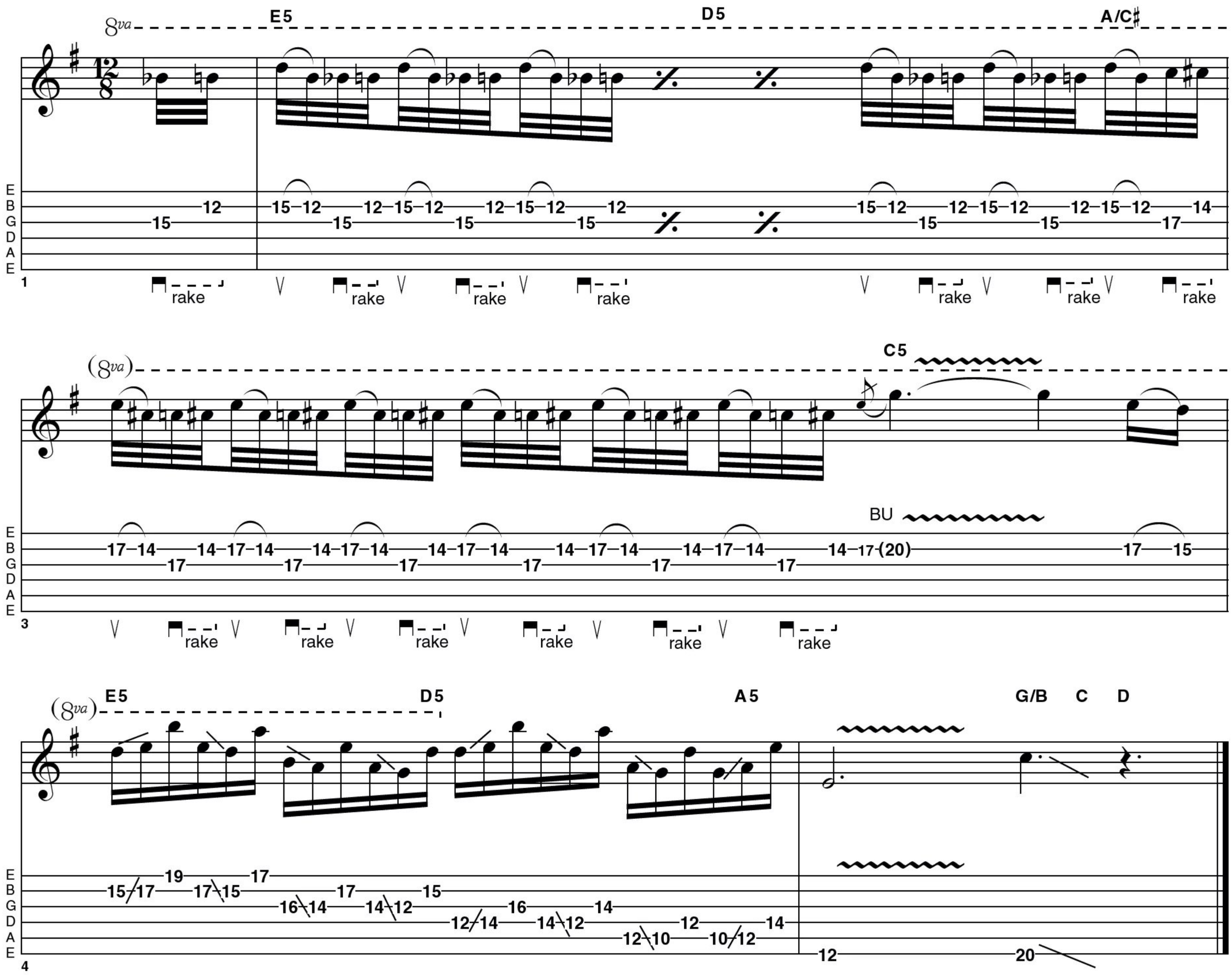
Example 3

THE PICKING PATTERN for bar 1 of this example is very specific. The first and second note of the first triplet pattern are picked with a single downstroke, with the third note hammered on. This is then reversed, using a single upstroke to play the first two notes followed by a pull-off. This is probably easier to do than to explain! The rest of the example is mostly conventional alternate picking, but keep an eye on the position changes as you descend.



Example 4

THIS RAPID-FIRE blues lick is generated with a similar technique to Example 3 but this time in groups of four. The first two notes are played with a single downstroke crossing from the third to second string. The third note is then played with an upstroke, with the fourth generated by a pull-off. It takes a while to get this under the fingers, but then it becomes surprisingly relaxed – as long as you don't overthink it! The final sliding intervals are similar to John's solo in the Blue Murder track *Riot*.



Hear It Here

THIN LIZZY
LIFE



Released in 1983 following their final album, *Thunder And Lightning*, from that same year, this live collection features a couple of rockers from that album alongside various Lizzy classics. Sykes' solos on *Cold Sweat* and *The Holy War* show that he was able to play all the supercharged blues licks and modern techniques but with a keen ear for melody and interesting note choice. His take on the Gary Moore/Brian Robertson solo on *Still In Love With You* is also well worth a listen.

WHITESNAKE
WHITESNAKE



This album, also known as *1987*, showed the band shifting to the heavier end of the blues-rock spectrum. MTV-friendly hits such as *Still Of The Night* and *Give Me All Your Love* featured videos with Adrian Vandenberg and Vivian Campbell playing guitar, but, in truth, Sykes had co-written and recorded the whole album. It's also nice to hear him add his powerful rhythm playing and electrifying solo to a re-recorded version of *Crying In The Rain*, which had first appeared in 1982.

BLUE MURDER
BLUE MURDER



After his exit from Whitesnake and before having the chance to tour the *Whitesnake* album, John was keen to show who had been largely responsible for its 'widescreen' sound – check out *Riot*, *Valley Of The Kings* and the title track, and the message is loud and clear. As well as an abundance of incendiary solos, John is in fine form on lead vocals here, too. However, sadly for the band, grunge was waiting just around the corner and was about to change the musical landscape...



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

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