



GOLDEN ERA STRATS

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Guitarist

Issue 525

JULY 2025

THIN

THE INSIDE STORY, BY THE GUITARISTS

LIZZY

PLUS

LA LOM

VINTAGE SURF-FOLK
SOUNDS FROM LA'S
HOTTEST BAND

Featuring

ERIC BELL

JOHN SYKES

GARY MOORE

SCOTT GORHAM

BRIAN ROBERTSON

& More

1957 GOLDTOP LP

EPIPHONE'S VINTAGE REISSUE HAS THE MOJO

FUTURE

LARRY DIMARZIO

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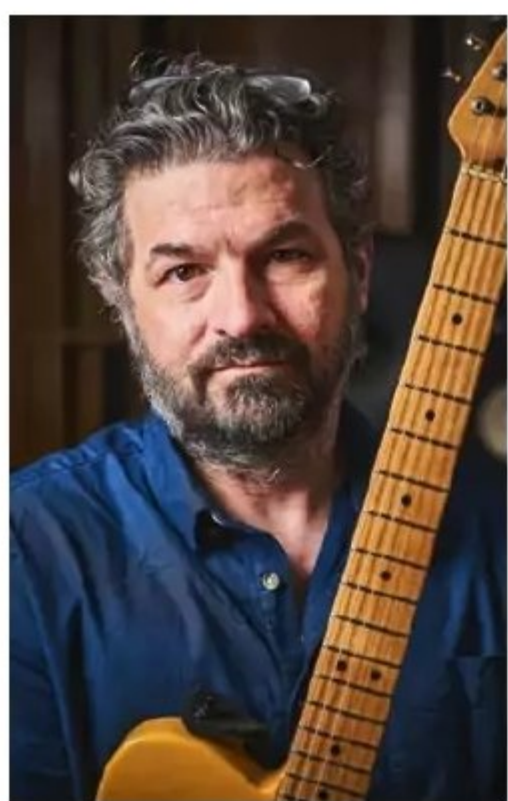
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Common Purpose



This month's cover feature on Thin Lizzy, as well as being a highly welcome reminder of the dazzling array of guitar talent the band has boasted over the years, begs some interesting questions about the nature of a band – and the role guitarists play in its musical identity. Thin Lizzy aren't the only band that have had a revolving door policy regarding guitarists: the first that comes to mind is John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, which played host to some of the greatest British blues guitarists in history, notably Eric Clapton and Peter Green. But the line-up continued to feature stellar players such as Buddy Whittington long after those two greats had departed. We could also, in a looser sense, include bands such as Steely Dan in that reckoning. Although they brought most of their guitarists in on a track-by-track basis as session players, it's hard to imagine their sound without the long-term contributions of guitarists such as Jeff 'Skunk' Baxter, Larry Carlton or Elliott Randall.

Yet every coin has its reverse. Why, given the revolving-door policy those bands had with guitarists, do we hear more continuity than change when we listen across their back catalogue? Partly, it's the influence of charismatic vocalists such as The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde who have provided a dazzling focal point for our attention over the years. But even famous singers leave the stage eventually, and their bands may, in fact, carry on successfully without them, as with Genesis after Peter Gabriel's departure. Indeed, Lizzy resumed a few years after Lynott's tragic death, first with John Sykes on vocals and guitar in '96, then later in 2010 with The Almighty vocalist Ricky Warwick on the mic.

So perhaps it is really a sense of common musical purpose and identity, passed down from line-up to line-up, that defines a band's musical soul. While we may have favourite eras and guitarists, we still feel we're listening to the same band that we've always loved – a thing greater, in the end, than the sum of its parts.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



LA LOM

This melodically rich guitar band have diverse musical roots yet also recall the shimmering sounds of 60s instrumental rock **p44**



Solid Gold?

It's a well-spec'd Goldtop with the 'right' headstock and authentic looks – but is this Epi a better bet than a low-tier Gibson LP? **p8**



Photo Fenech

Here's something a little different in the acoustic world: Aussie-made guitars with non-mainstream woods and a keen ear for tone **p84**



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FEATURE



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REVIEW

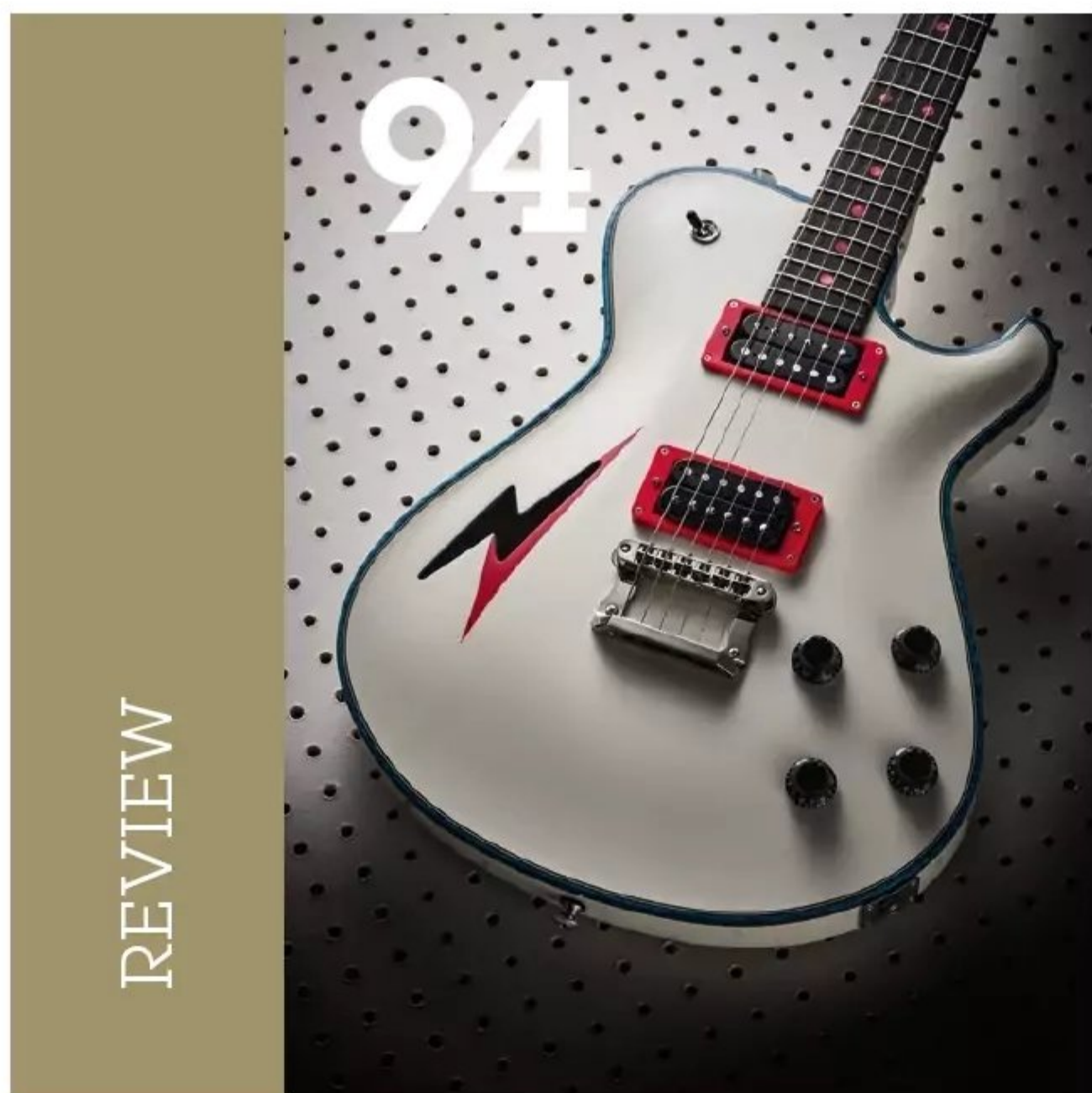


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FIRST PLAY



**EPIPHONE 1957 LES PAUL
GOLDTOP REISSUE**
£1,199

WHAT IS IT? What it says on the tin: a Chinese-made repro of a 68-year-old Gibson on the cusp of becoming a 'Burst

The Weight

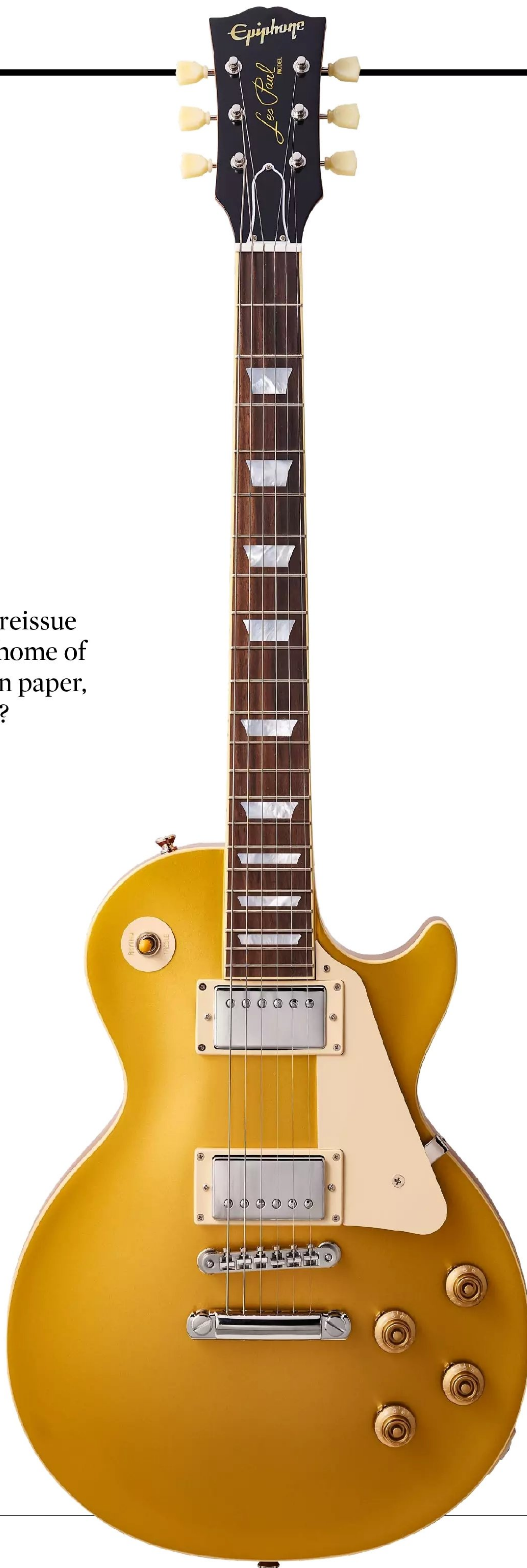
With a raft of recent high-spec reissue launches, is Epiphone now the home of affordable 'vintage' Gibsons? On paper, yes. But what about in the flesh?

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis

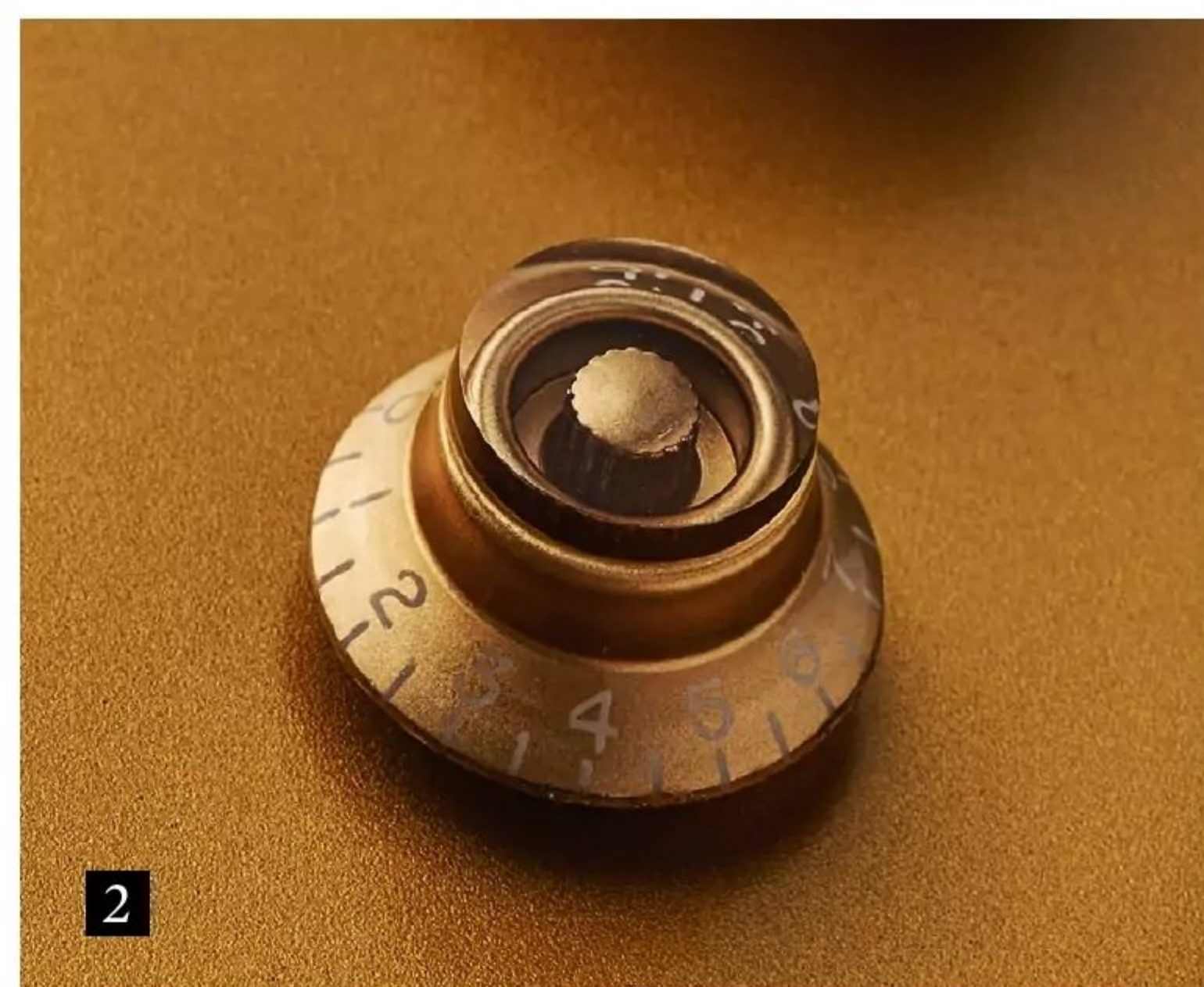
Whatever the evolution of the Les Paul design over the years, plenty of us still want it just how it was – at least in appearance. Few can afford prime examples of the real thing, and Gibson Custom's vintage-aimed models are slipping into the ether, too, in terms of price. Even a rather good Gibson USA 50s or 60s Les Paul Standard will cost you £2.7k. And while these are available in a host of colours, they're very shiny, new and far from vintage in the looks department.

Gibson's in-house answer, then, is Epiphone and the premise of a number of recently launched 'reissues' in its top-tier 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' strand, including a 1960 Les Paul Standard in Washed Cherry Sunburst and Iced Tea Burst, and the 1957 Goldtop we have here. The term reissue is used on these new models "to differentiate them from the ones that came before", Gibson tells us, and to highlight numerous changes to last year's 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' models: for example, the fingerboard wood, finish and vintage-style capacitors.

But navigating your way through Epiphone's Les Paul line-up isn't







1. While plenty of Epiphones use the very good LockTone hardware, here we revert to a more generic 'vintage' style with an ABR-1-type tune-o-matic and lightweight stopbar tailpiece

immediately straightforward. Topping the 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' collection is the Kirk Hammett Greeny that made many, including ourselves, sit up and take notice. At a premium price for an Epiphone (£1,499), it not only restored the Gibson 'open-book' headstock but also included a pair of Gibson USA Greenybuckers. With no artist attachment, our 1957 Goldtop is more keenly priced but still comes in

The case looks the part, but lifting the guitar out, we're wondering if we've got the year right. Is this a 1975 boat anchor?

a vintage-y hard case, uses the Gibson Custom staple Custombucker humbuckers and restores the correct fingerboard wood, rosewood, instead of the laurel that Greeny and many others have used.

The typically high-gloss polyester finishes of plenty of Epiphones don't fit a repro of an old guitar that would have used

a thin nitrocellulose finish. The Greeny's Greeny Burst went for a satin front with lightly burnished back, sides and neck – not identical to the real thing, of course, but a credible nod in the right direction. Our 1957 GT takes a similar path and is finished in a "new Vintage Gloss version of the classic Gold colour that gives it a vintage appearance without looking overly aged", says Gibson.

But is this all style over substance, you might well ask? After all, Gibson's creatives expound that "the 1957 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue isn't just a guitar; it's a bridge to a symphony of possibilities..."

The hard case looks the part, as does the guitar nestled inside, but lifting it out, we're wondering if we've got the year right. Is this a 1975 boat anchor? Having played some great-weight Epiphone LPs over the past months – that Greeny was 3.91kg (8.6lb) and the lowly Joe Bonamassa 1955 Copper Iridescent was very close at 3.96kg (8.71lb) – this new '57 is a whopper at 4.56kg (10lb) and we can't help thinking that the aforementioned "symphony of

2. In keeping with the reissue theme, the wiring here (which uses proper CTS pots and Luxe 'bumblebee' capacitors) is vintage- or 50s-style. It's the key to unlocking a broad range of sounds

3. These tuners are unlogo'd but very smooth in use, and thanks to a well-cut nut, tuning stability is very good. We can't imagine that 'Hand-Crafted in China' sticker will stay in place very long, though

4. One of the changes with these latest reissue models is a return to rosewood (rather than laurel) for the bound fingerboard. Frets are as they would have been in 1957: quite small



4

possibilities” might well include a future visit to the chiropractor.

Weight aside, the craft on show is rather good. Through the low-gloss sheen of the back, sides and neck back the centre-joined two-piece back is classic mahogany in hue with a pretty tight grain. The neck – save for the headstock widening wings – is one piece, while smaller details such as the binding in the cutaway don’t cover the full depth of the maple top. It’s the only bit of maple you can see, of course, and that top colour is a silky satin sheen, while the clearly scraped binding is very well done.

No complaints with the hardware, either. The Kluson-style tuners look the part and, more importantly, have a smooth action, while the bridge and tailpiece seem pretty generic – there’s a small ‘G’ on the underside of the lightweight stud tailpiece and a raised ‘B-2’ visible on the underside of the ABR-1-style tune-o-matic. These are more ‘historic’-style parts, and that stopbar will slip off its posts when you’re restringing (unlike Epiphone’s LockTone bridge and tailpiece), although the tune-

UNDER THE HOOD

What do we find inside the ‘57?

While it’s not quite like taking the back cover off a real 1957 Les Paul, it’s not a million miles away. There’s no screening paint or foil and the 500kohm CTS pots have short (not long) shafts. The vividly coloured ‘bumblebee’ PIO capacitors, rated at .022μF, dominate the cavity (these are apparently made by Luxe Radio, who specialises in vintage-style capacitors). As we’re seeing on an increasing number of Epiphone Les Pauls, the wiring is vintage style, which has quite a specific effect on how you ‘drive’ the guitar. As ever, changing the wiring to ‘modern style’ if you prefer is dead simple.

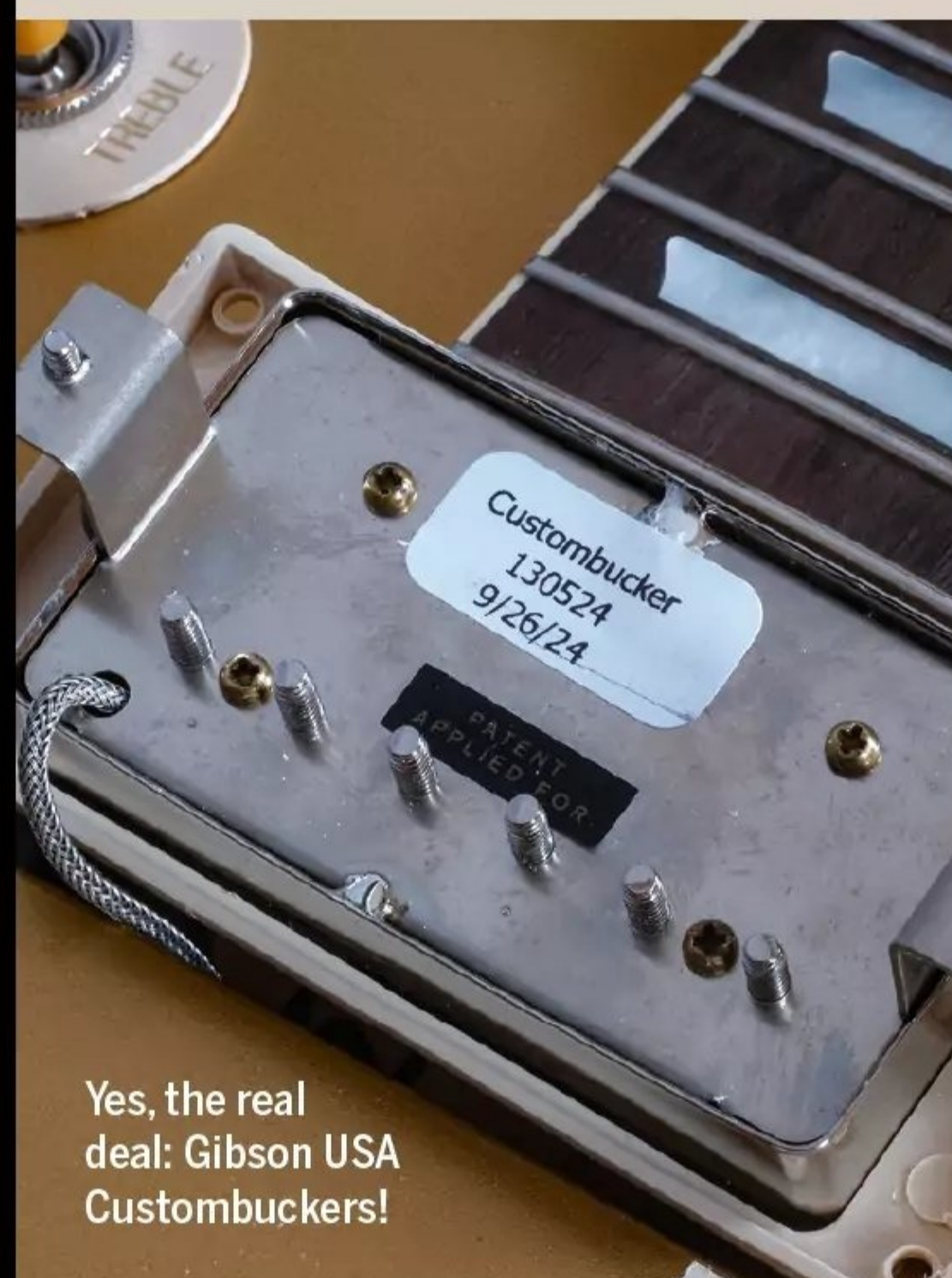
There’s no doubting the pedigree of the pickups here – both are clearly marked – and when we caught up with

the Gibson Pickup Shop a while back, the Custombuckers (although first introduced in 2013) had never been previously offered aftermarket and quickly became Gibson’s No 2 behind the perennial ‘57 Classics. Very much Gibson Custom pickups, these are quite a coup here. “Each Custombucker uses Alnico III magnets for a warm, sweet tone that accurately delivers the sonic characteristics of those highly cherished early humbuckers,” says Gibson. “Like the original Patent Applied For humbuckers, the Custombucker uses 42 AWG wire and unbalanced coils that are left unpotted for a historically accurate pickup that will please even the most discriminating player.”

The DCRs of our pair measured 7.97k (bridge) and 7.75k (neck).



There are some quality parts here, not least the Luxe PIO capacitors and vintage-style wiring



Yes, the real deal: Gibson USA Custombuckers!



A real ‘57 might well have been a little tidier, but the long neck tenon here is very similar to those old ones

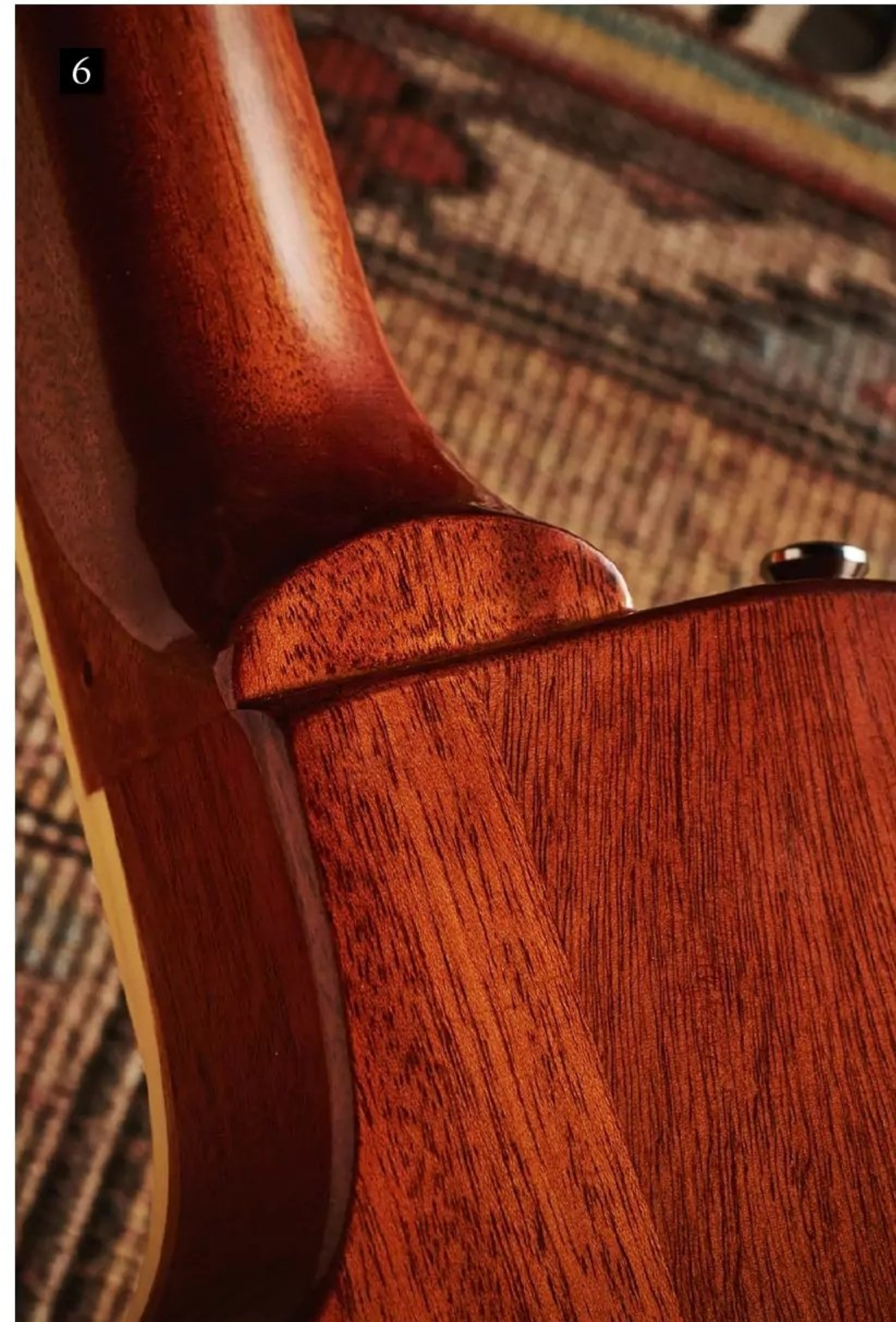
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5. This reissue might have the 'wrong' name up there and that three-screw truss rod cover isn't true to the period, but the latest Epiphone headstock is oh so Gibson

6. There's some crisp woodworking on show through the transparent finish and very little finish build-up around the probably more '59-style smaller neck heel here

6



VINTAGE 101: KNOW YOUR 'PAULS

What makes our 1957 Goldtop a thing? Well, there were five iterations of the Les Paul over seven years. As we all know, the Les Paul arrived in 1952 and featured that 'long and wrong' tailpiece and dual P-90s. No surprise, then, that by 1954 (actually, it was mid-1953) that tailpiece had gone, leaving the classic wrapover bridge/tailpiece. The next significant change was the tune-o-matic bridge and separate lightweight stopbar tailpiece, introduced in '55 but settled by 1956. Finally, we get to 1957 and the classic Patent Applied For humbuckers are installed, thereby replacing the P-90 single coils. For 1958, of course, the original Goldtop finish was stripped off and the top changed to two-piece centre-joined (figured and/or plain) maple, then a sunburst finish was applied. The 'Burst was born!

o-matic here is quite firmly mounted on its two posts and it's a good height, too.

Niggles? Aside from the weight of our sample, there's a very slight indented line in the top finish (perhaps a glue-line that hasn't been properly joined and/or filled); the fit of the USA pickups in their rather flexible Asian-made pickup rings is a little off; while the unbevelled edge of the pickguard is unnecessarily sharp, as are the tops of the control knobs.

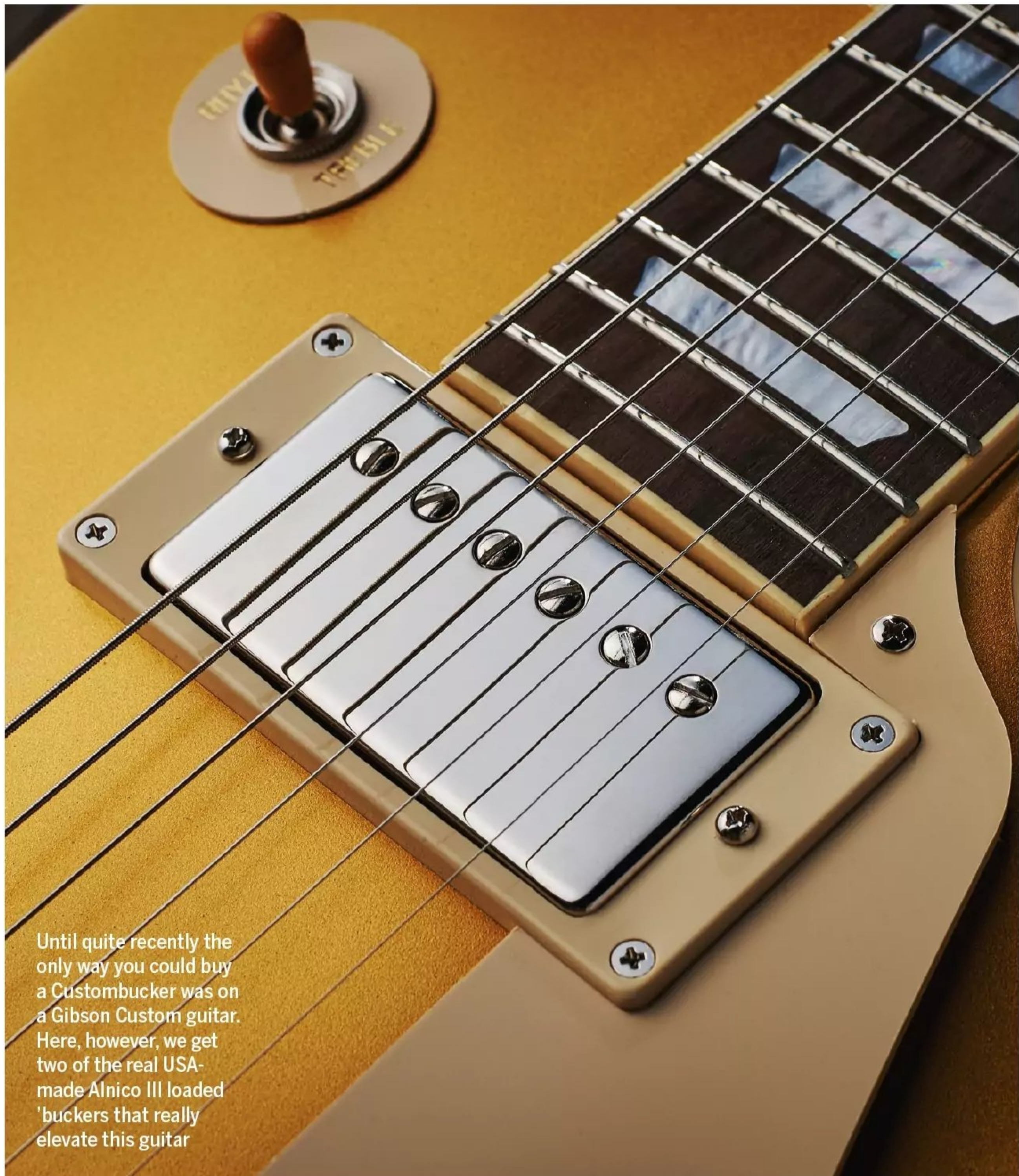
Feel & Sounds

The finish not only looks classy, it feels it, too. And credit where it's due: the neck shape and feel, not to mention the binding and fretwork, is really good. Yes, as befits its 50s reissue status, the fretwire is small (about 2mm wide by 1mm high), which isn't a deal breaker, but, practically speaking, a slightly bigger wire, as used by Gibson USA, might give a slinkier feel and little more life before levelling and/or a refret becomes necessary.

Dimensionally, things are pretty standard with the neck. There's a 43mm

With the controls full up, you find a beautiful creamy, not overthick Les Paul voice

nut width and a depth of 22.9mm at the 1st fret and 25.5mm by the 12th, which is very similar to Gibson's current 50s profile and really not too far from our real 1957 Les Paul Junior, although that has a subtle hint of a V in lower positions that we don't have here. The supplied setup was okay, but the neck needed a little straightening, then the bridge needed raising, while a final polish on some upper position frets would alleviate the slightly gritty feel when you bend a string. The nut work is really good – although the Graph Tech nut doesn't look remotely vintage – and once everything had settled down the tuning stability was spot on, not least on those sometimes tricky G and D strings.



EPIPHONE 1957 LES PAUL GOLDTOP REISSUE

PRICE: £1,199 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany w/ bound carved plain maple top
NECK: Mahogany, '50s Rounded Medium C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Cream bound rosewood, mother-of-pearl trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge and historical aluminium tailpiece, Epiphone Deluxe vintage-style tuners w/ single ring keystone buttons – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: Gibson USA Custombuckers (neck and bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.56/10

RANGE OPTIONS: 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' LPs include: 1959 Les Paul Standard in Factory Burst; Les Paul Custom in Ebony; web-exclusive Tak Matsumoto 1955 Les Paul Standard in Antique Gold; 1960 Les Paul Standard Reissue in Washed Cherry Sunburst and Iced Tea Burst (all £1,199)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Double Gold (as reviewed) – vintage gloss

Epiphone
www.epiphone.com



9/10

PROS Pared-back 'old' finish; construction; rosewood 'board; Gibson USA Custombucker and vintage-style wiring produce really classic voices – this is a Les Paul with expansive sounds

CONS Too heavy to most of us; vintage small frets won't suit everyone; plus a few minor cosmetic details

This was quite possibly helped by the headstock's back angle, which is slightly less steep than current Gibson USA models like our Classic.

While it's (very) hard to ignore the weight here, we have few issues with the actual sounds we're hearing. In the company of that Les Paul Classic with its retrofitted Burstbucker 1 and 2 (and lighter in weight at 4.1kg/9lb), well, it might be half the price, but it certainly isn't half the sound in terms of quality. There's marginally less high-end detail with the controls full up, slightly less clarity to the neck humbucker, but it's a beautiful creamy, not overthick Les Paul voice that this writer would use at the drop of a hat. Find the sweet spot for the tone controls – wound back but not fully – and pull back the volumes and the sound cleans up producing a timeless, rounded 'single voice' rhythm sound, then you can pull either volume back up for your solos. It's a classic way to drive any four-control Gibson with vintage-style wiring and really expands the design way beyond classic rock.

Verdict

The price-point appeal here is obvious, and the thought of a vintage-aimed Les Paul at this price – aside from the logo on the headstock, of course – is hugely tempting, isn't it? Weight selection clearly isn't part of Epiphone's QC process, and a little more care to the fret finishing and final setup would also be appreciated. But there's no denying the voice here, enhanced by those Custombuckers and vintage-style circuit, which reminds us of just why we're still writing about these ancient designs.

However, as we've said before, the choice of proper Les Paul models is now considerable, and with the low end of Gibson USA kicking off with the Studio at £1,499 you might simply be tempted to go with the *right* name on the headstock. But there is subtly more vintage flavour here, from the playing feel through to the sounds we hear. If these 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' Epiphones aren't on your radar yet, they should be. Just check the weight and you might find a really vintage-flavoured friend.



FIRST PLAY



**MARSHALL
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WHAT IS IT? Hand-wired reissue of the classic Marshall 'Plexi', factory-modified for increased gain and tone



**MARSHALL
JCM800 MODIFIED
100-WATT HEAD**
£2,699

.....
WHAT IS IT? Factory-modified edition of the definitive 80s master-volume rock amp

Boys Are Back In Town

The gatekeepers at Marshall have finally unlocked beast mode, releasing two brand-new Modified high-gain amps. Time to plug in!

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

Marshall Amplification, originally under the careful stewardship of Jim Marshall (aka the Father of Loud), has arguably done more to define the sound of rock guitar than any other amp brand. We have all surely fallen at some point for the majestic tones coaxed from these amps by guitar legends since the early 60s, with each generation's guitar hero finding new and innovative ways to expand the Marshall sound while the designs themselves remained largely unchanged since their inception.

Towards the late 70s a hotter, more fluid guitar sound began to emerge from the US. Tinkering technicians such as Jose Arredondo and Lee Jackson had begun developing hot-rodding techniques to achieve a variety of goals – increased gain

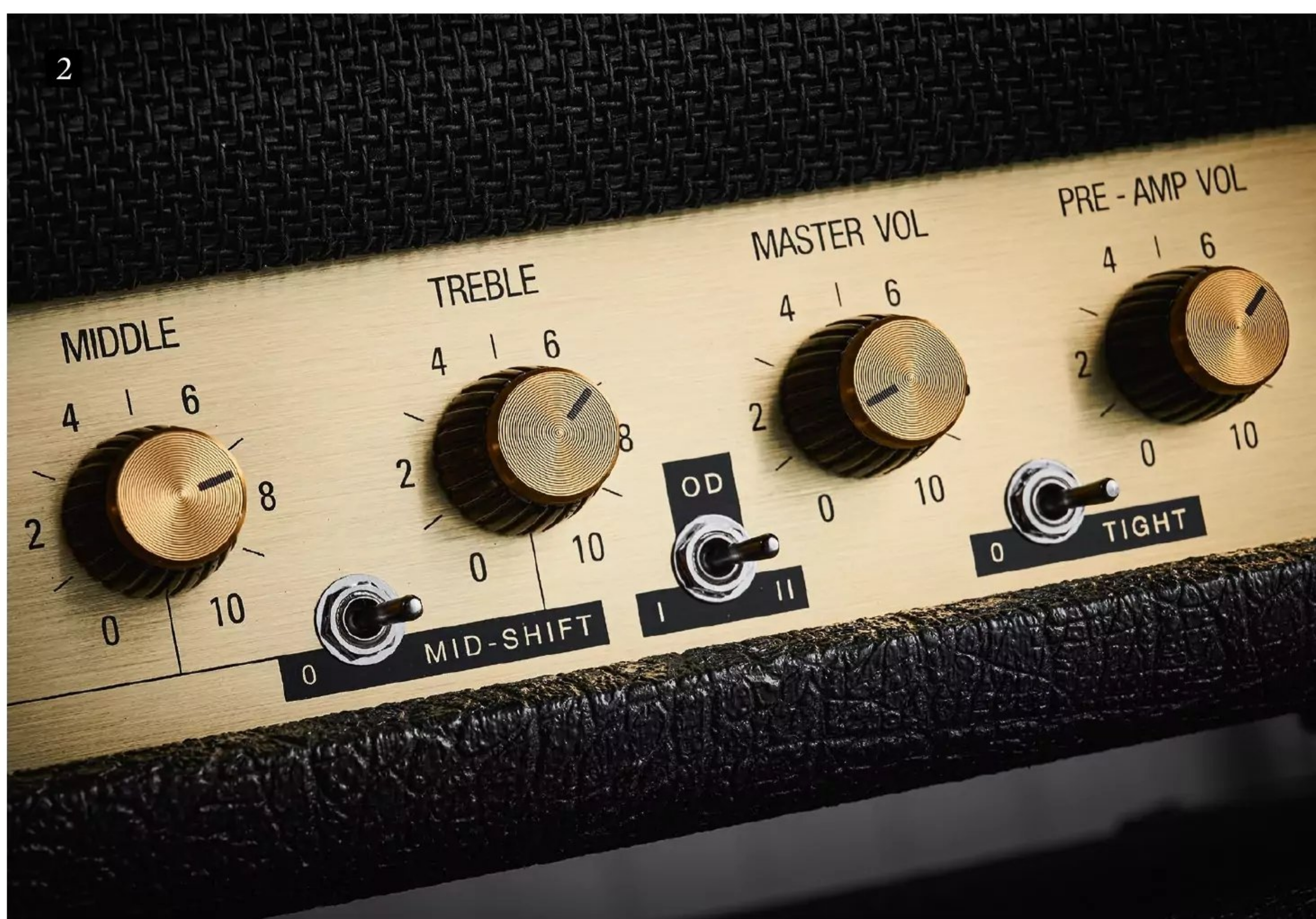
being chief among them. These jacked-up tones would dominate the airwaves for a good decade until the buzz and fuzz of grunge brought slacker aesthetics to the fore. However, the modded-Marshall sound never went away and still represents a hot slice of the amplifier market.

Meanwhile, Marshall imperiously ignored such fads, happier to conserve and reproduce its heritage offerings. That is, until now. With a fresh energy and player-focused attitude at Marshall HQ, our stalwart monolith heads have finally been tricked out with tried-and-tested mods appropriate to the model. Let's find out if these brand-new Marshalls sound like the records.

Looking every inch the definition of rock legends, both amps are made as solidly as

1. Marshall styling and construction is on point as ever, now with a military-styled front plate to the top left, detailing the modified version as M01

2. Switching and labelling stay true to the modified aesthetic, rather than factory-incorporated options. In both amps, the modifications enhance the natural character



we've come to expect with each featuring period-correct birch ply cabinets and appropriate vinyl patterns. Both amps, in fact, begin life as stock hand-wired 1959 and JCM800 models respectively, before receiving their individual modifications. This also makes for ease of serviceability, something of a high priority for a brand who supplies the backline for a large proportion of the touring music industry.

In the case of the hand-wired 1959 'Plexi' amplifier, the modifications allow for a two-way clipping circuit, Bright

Marshall has delivered steroidal boosts that magnify the individual amps' characters

cap and a master volume – eminently sensible additions considered *de rigueur* for any Marshall on steroids. The amp relies on power section saturation for a large part of its signature sound and is therefore not an ideal candidate for an effects loop, hence its omission. For the JCM800 we now have two clipping options (OD I and II), a midrange boost and a Tight switch. We also have an effects loop on the rear alongside level and bypass switches.

Oh, and if you wish to personalise these amps further aesthetically, the design team at Marshall will happily produce

an amp for you with your personal selection from a vast library of finishes and materials, all the way through to reproducing your own artwork on the cabinets and grills.

Sounds

The JCM lives up to its reputation as the defining rock amp of the 80s. Its muscular and present character is given all-new gain and tone-shaping options here via the midrange boost switch. Moving through the range of the preamp level control, it's great to be reminded just how versatile this circuit can be. A semi-acoustic brings out a rounded jazz tone from the low input that is both present and warm. However, with all the restraint of a child ripping open their Christmas presents, a super-S has to be plunged into the high input – and the glory shines out.

The already transcendent saturation we're greeted with by 7 on the preamp level is enough for fluid modern soloing and metal rhythms. Flicking the overdrive circuit into action with OD 1, we bring up the sustain up by an appreciable amount. OD 2 continues on with a further boost of the same type. Quite transparent in effect – more like an extension to the preamp gain level, rather than the sound of extra circuitry – the gain mods in this amp do, in fact, utilise its own inherent topology, instead of extra diodes or transistors.

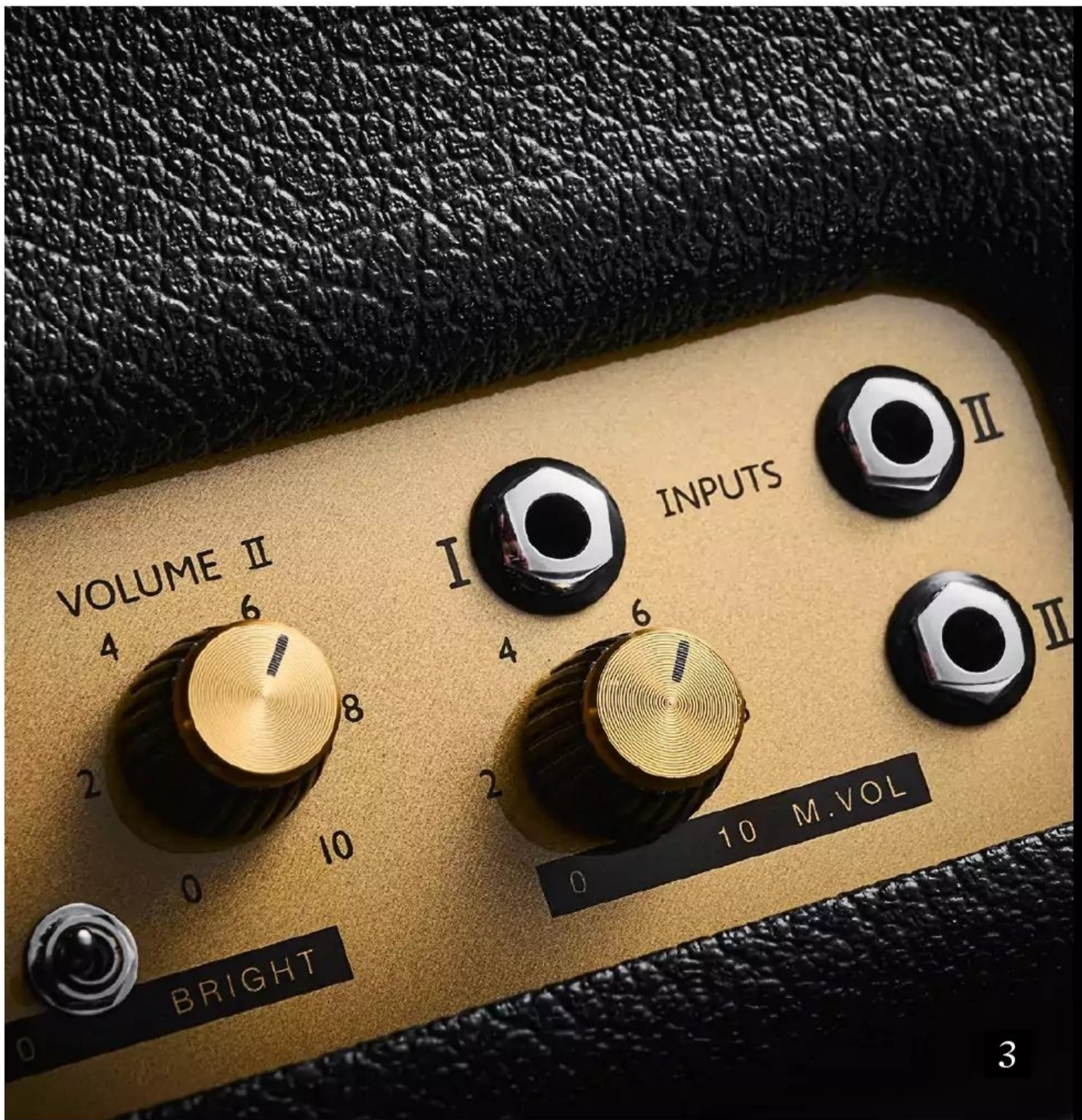
Should you wish to goose up the mid frequencies a notch, the midrange boost offers a well-judged push that's not a million miles from a Tube Screamer's

frequency range: Strats rejoice! If things get muddy using seven-string guitars and drop tunings, the bottom-end can be defined by employing that Tight switch: a high-pass filter that relieves the valves of their heavier chores, allowing them to produce faster transients and harmonics.

Now, for the hand-wired 1959 – confusingly released in 1964 – the kerrang and crunch of the 80s is still a thing of the future. Instead, the more open and less maximised sound here with plenty of vibrant top-end invites more of a classic approach. The 'Plexi' has always had the power to roar when the volume is raised, but now we have a choice of two spicy gain-boosting options to get us into that zone at lower master levels.

In clip position 1, the diode-based circuitry provides crunch with a recognisable sharp edge, while position 2's transistor-based clipping smooths out the midrange, which not only sounds incredible but also feels effortless to play. It's a great place to start for early Van Halen tones, for instance. The pre tone-stack master volume appears to give a little extra range to the EQ controls, too, allowing for extra tonal tweakability.

In both cases, once the traditional master and gain levels start to reach full peak, the effect of the mod-switching becomes less apparent due to power section distortion. But by that point the party is likely in full swing. Using a correctly rated power attenuator can be yet another way to access the final dizzying echelons of gain from these amps.



Verdict

With these modifications Marshall brings the sound of the gods down to the volume-restricted reality of us mere mortals. Between the instant gratification of the JCM800 and gain-injected classicisms of the 1959, Marshall has delivered steroidal boosts that manage to magnify the individual characters of the amps without losing any of their sonic signature. With each amp costing around £500 more than its unmodified counterpart, their prices put them in line with boutique amps such as the Friedman Plex. However, their unmistakable midrange crunch has Marshall written through it like a stick of, well, rock! Sometimes, only the real thing will do, and for players with the budget and occasion to use these amps in the way they're intended, they will definitely roar like only a Marshall can. **G**

3. The 1959 loses its Channel 1 low input in favour of a pre tone-stack master volume, impeding traditional high- to low-channel jumping. Channel 2 low input can be jumpered into Channel 1 high input in order to blend both channels together

4. The JCM800 has a two-level effects loop with bypass facility for the integration of modulation and delay-based effects



MARSHALL 1959 MODIFIED

PRICE: £2,999
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: 100W valve head with modifications
VALVES: 2x ECC83, 1x ECC83 (Phase Splitter) and 4x EL34
OUTPUT: 100W
SPEAKER OUTPUTS: 2x standard jack w/ selectable 16/8/4 ohms load
DIMENSIONS: 741 (w) x 294 (d) x 210mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 21/46.3
CABINET: Baltic birch ply
CHANNELS: 2 with shared EQ controls
CONTROLS: Presence, Bass, Middle, Treble, Volume 1, Volume 2, Master Volume, Clip Level, Clip Toggle and Bright switches
OPTIONS: Custom finishes available

Marshall Amplification
www.marshall.com



MARSHALL JCM800 MODIFIED

PRICE: £2,699
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: 100W valve head with modifications
VALVES: 2x ECC83, 1x ECC83 (Phase Splitter) and 4x EL34
OUTPUT: 100W
SPEAKER OUTPUTS: 2x standard jack w/ selectable 16/8/4 ohms load
DIMENSIONS: 741 (w) x 294 (d) x 210mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 21/46.3
CABINET: Baltic birch ply
CHANNELS: Single with dual inputs
CONTROLS: Presence, Bass, Middle, Treble, Master Volume, Pre-Amp Vol. Mid-Shift, OD and Tight switches
OPTIONS: Custom finishes available



9/10

PROS Diode or transistor-boost option for two classic mod styles; pre tone-stack master volume gives more power to tone stack
CONS A power-scaling option would keep power-stage saturation for which the amp is famed



10/10

PROS Same great JCM800 but mods offer up natural-sounding gain and tonal options; British-built and traditionally serviceable construction
CONS The Mid-Shift mod switch is quite subtle

FIRST PLAY



ACLAM GO ROCKY GO
£319

.....
WHAT IS IT? Pedal recreation
of a Vox Conqueror's preamp



Flying Colours

Aclam releases its third pedal inspired by vintage Vox amps and the Fab Four’s guitar sound

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The pedal’s artwork is inspired by George Harrison’s ‘Rocky’ Stratocaster, which was originally finished in Sonic Blue but was hand-painted by George in 1967 using day-glo paint
2. The primary functions of the two footswitches are as a standard bypass and to turn the distortion on and off. A push on both together brings in the MRB, while holding the Bypass switch for 1.5 seconds brings in Crunch mode (the LED turns blue instead of white)
3. The MRB switch selects the midrange boost: position 1 boosts at approximately 500Hz; position 2 boosts at approximately 700Hz; and position 3 boosts at approximately 1kHz
4. The Attack–Sustain knob and the small Dist Vol knob below it are the gain and volume controls for the distortion circuit, which is engaged by pressing the left-hand footswitch. The Dist Vol control also lights up orange when distortion is engaged

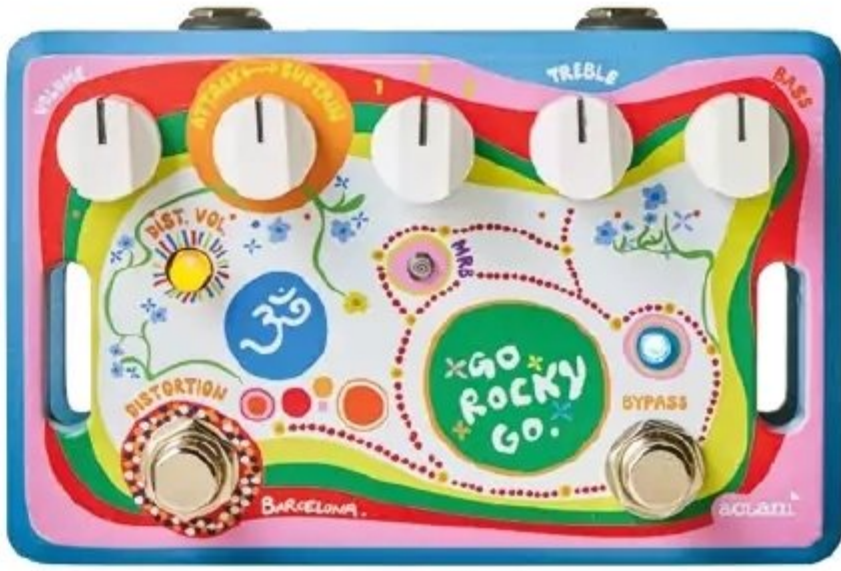
Aclam has released a third in its series of pedals aimed at recreating The Beatles’ sounds. While guitar sonics on the *Revolver* and *Sgt Pepper’s* albums were the aim with its Dr Robert and Mocker pedals, the company has now moved further on in the discography to the tones of *Magical Mystery Tour* and ‘The White Album’ with Go Rocky Go, a pedal replica of the Vox Conqueror amp’s preamp.

The Vox Conqueror, one of a solid-state range of amps that also included the Supreme and Defiant, was used by The Beatles for recording around 1967 and ’68, and can be seen in the *Hello, Goodbye* video. Aclam had an original amp and measured all its components and recreated it in the pedal, albeit with a couple of additional features/modifications that expand its versatility.

Based on a Vox Conqueror’s Brilliant channel, the pedal gives you several building blocks for sound creation, accessing mid-to-late 60s Beatles tones and more. The core sound is controlled by the volume, treble and bass knobs and has two modes, Normal and Crunch, which are activated by holding the Bypass footswitch down for 1.5 seconds: Normal is the spanky clean tone, while Crunch offers a degree of extra grit that can add an aggressive edge to rhythm work. There’s also an internal Crunch Gain control for fine-tuning.

Further sonic tweaking comes courtesy of the MRB (Mid-Range Boost) switch that’s engaged by pressing the two footswitches simultaneously. This was a feature of the original amp and was closely related to the development of the Vox wah pedal, so it’s no surprise here that the three different frequency boosts are reminiscent of the vocal resonant sound of a cocked wah. Things can get real dirty when the fuzz-like distortion mode is footswitched in, controlled by an Attack–Sustain knob that ramps up the gain, and a dedicated volume knob to add a boost if needed. Combine the distortion with the MRB and you’ll get raucous tones that really cut through.

Verdict
There’s no denying The Beatles’ ongoing influence on music and Aclam’s Go Rocky Go can definitely zero in on some of their retro tones. But there’s more to it than that. In a world where valve amps generally rule the roost, an amp-in-a-box pedal based on a solid-state amp is a rare thing and offers the opportunity to embrace a less-travelled path of tonal colours. **G**



ACLAM GO ROCKY GO

PRICE: £319
ORIGIN: Spain
TYPE: Preamp/distortion pedal
FEATURES: True bypass, silent switching, Smart Track fastening system-ready
CONTROLS: Volume, Attack–Sustain, MRB selector, Treble, Bass, Distortion Volume, internal Crunch Gain, Distortion footswitch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor (not supplied) 25mA
DIMENSIONS: 136 (w) x 87 (d) x 55mm (h)

Aclam
www.aclamguitars.com



PROS Resurrects the tones of vintage equipment; practical switchable options; flexible EQ options; cute paint job!

CONS Not everyone will appreciate the holes for the Aclam Smart Track pedalboard mounting system



THE RIVALS

First off, check out Aclam’s other Beatles pedals: the Dr Robert (£297) recreation of Vox UL730 amp sound, and The Mocker (£255), an expanded rendition of the UL730 series fuzz circuit. The Castledine Magical Mystery Box (from £298) is also based on the Brilliant channel of a Vox Conqueror and the other amps (Supreme, Defiant) of that solid-state series – with footswitchable MRB and Distortion effects. Bispell Audio’s Proxy (£189) has been designed as an authentic rendition of the Vox UL730 amp (like the Dr Robert) but is equipped with a Vox Conqueror Mid Boost switch, offering boosts at 830Hz and 590Hz.



Aclam’s The Mocker is based on the Vox UL730’s fuzz circuit

FIRST PLAY



**CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS
VENUS**
£235

.....
WHAT IS IT? A modern take on
the classic BK Butler Tube Driver



Greek Goddess

Crazy Tube Circuits takes on a classic valve overdrive pedal and makes it accessible and relevant for the modern 'board

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The Bias knob controls the current passing through the valve and can be used to set the texture of the overdrive. Turn it to find your favoured sweet spot
2. This Tight switch selects the amount of low and low-to-mid frequencies that hit the valve gain stages. You can have the full fat sound or push it in for a leaner bottom-end
3. The Line Driver switch works on the output, selecting between unbuffered instrument level of the original pedal version or buffered line out level, like the rackmount version
4. Being a valve-based pedal, the heat has to escape somewhere – and these ventilation holes on the side of the pedal also let you see the valve glowing for reassurance that all is well

The BK Butler/Chandler Tube Driver seems to have been around forever and has been a staple in the rigs of several luminaries: David Gilmour, Eric Johnson, Billy Gibbons and the two Joes – Satriani and Bonamassa – have been seen to use it. That large mains-powered valve-based overdrive is now the inspiration for the Venus, which takes the idea and enhances it with some real pedalboard-friendly practicality, notably a relatively compact-sized enclosure and standard nine-volt operation.

When you take into account both the pedal and rackmount versions, there have been lots of Tube Driver variations, but Crazy Tube Circuits tells us that it has concentrated all of the different voicings and features into one pedal. Original Tube Drivers featured an ECC83 valve that users sometimes changed for an ECC82, but this pedal opts for the best of both worlds with an ECC832, which is half ECC82/half ECC83, although you can easily put in a valve of your own choice.

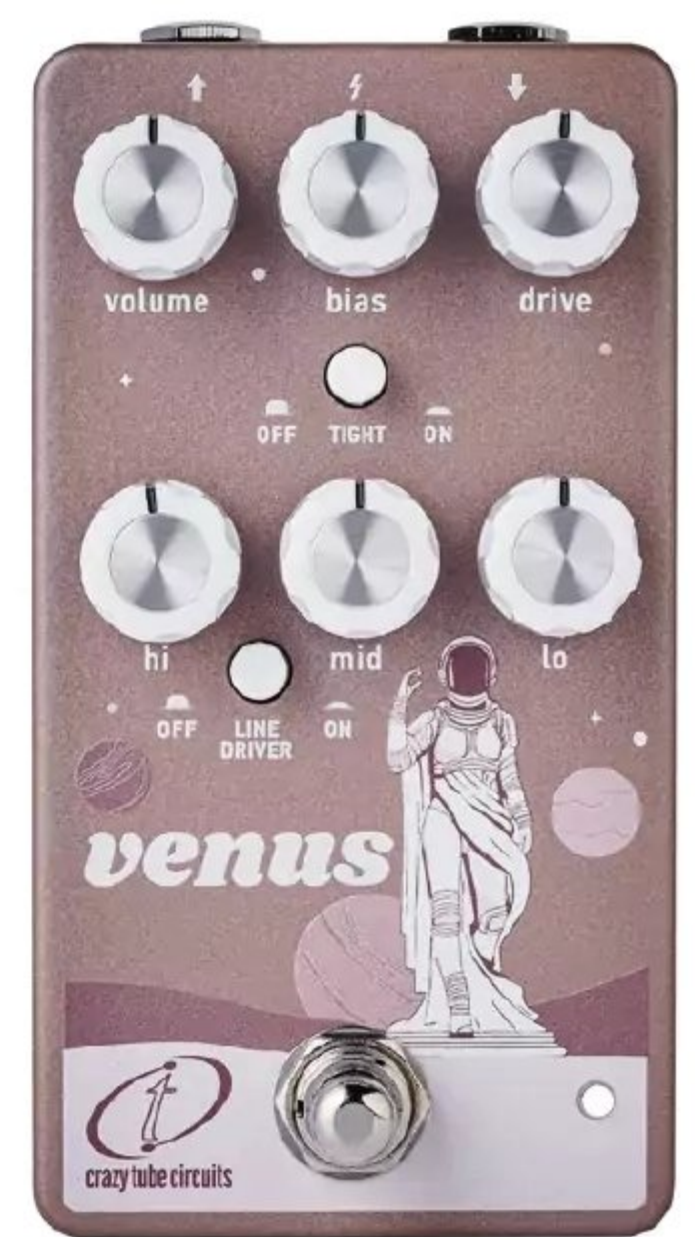
The Bias control sets the sweet spot for different valve types, but you can also use it for a wide range of variations in the drive sound: for example, turning it anti-clockwise from its end stop will take you from the smoothest overdrive through gnarlier drive/distortion to gated fuzz sounds.

We also get plenty of output volume available for boosts, with even more provided by selecting Line Driver output mode, while the Drive knob itself dials in the dirt from just beyond clean to really creamy and full-on drive, dripping with sustain and cleaning up nicely with guitar volume.

A trio of extremely effective Hi, Lo and Mid EQ controls are well capable of matching the sound to your amp (particularly the Mid knob) and/or tweaking it to exactly fit your sonic needs, while the Tight switch is great for taking out any unwanted flub and keeping that low-end in check. Overall, you're getting huge flexibility in natural drive tones that will sit just right with your amp.

Verdict

We didn't have an original Tube Driver for direct comparison, but the Venus does the exact same job in a smaller footprint with an extended feature set and none of the drawbacks, such as mains-transformer hum. While Gilmour admirers will like its smooth, sustained lead sound, there's actually something here for all drive lovers. Bit of a game-changer, this one! **G**



CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS VENUS

PRICE: £235

ORIGIN: Greece

TYPE: Valve-based drive pedal

FEATURES: True bypass, power-up choice of bypass or active, 2 output level options, easy 4-screw valve access for changes

CONTROLS: Volume, Bias, Drive, Hi, Mid, Lo, Tight switch, Line Driver switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 500mA

DIMENSIONS: 66 (w) x 126 (d) x 57mm (h)

FACE bvba

+32 3 844 67 97

www.crazytubecircuits.com



PROS A Tube Driver emulation with extra practicality; compact; nine-volt power; interchangeable valves; powerful EQ

CONS Nothing



THE RIVALS

BK Butler is still hand-building Tube Drivers and you can order one for \$299 (plus, of course, the shipping and taxes). Modded versions with variable bias are available for extra. Australia-based PastFx makes the TD-Y (\$239 AUD), a "faithful reproduction of the now-discontinued Buffalo FX TD-X Equaliser and Gain Booster pedal", which was inspired by the Tube Driver. Lovepedal's Tube Driver-inspired Hermida Audio Dover Drive (£227) nods to Eric Johnson in its name, while a valve-powered option on a budget is the TC Electronic Tube Pilot (right, £69) with just Tube Drive and Output Level knobs.



TC Electronic's Tube Pilot is a 12AX7 valve-powered overdrive



the Wishlist

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

Fender Custom Shop Limited Edition '59 Journeyman Stratocaster £4,400

Fender PHONE 01342 331700 WEB www.fender.com WORDS David Mead PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Barker

We don't often feature the fruits of Fender's renowned Custom Shop in these pages for the simple reason that nearly all the guitars it produces go straight to dealers. But we managed to snag this rather beautiful '59 limited-edition Strat by chance and decided to display its dashing good looks.

What we have here is a Journeyman Strat in faded Sonic Blue, with many characteristics that are shared by Stratocasters of the period. Journeyman guitars have the lightest amount of relicing available, and here it's limited to slight crazing in the nitrocellulose finish, as if the guitar has been used but certainly not abused during its fictitious lifetime. On some of these instruments Fender has aged the hardware and removed some of the playing area finish from the back of the neck. Not here; this one definitely leans more towards the company's 'new, old stock' designation.

Another thing we see here represents that snapshot in time when Fender was transitioning from maple 'boards to the 60s rosewood staple and had started to experiment with tri-laminate pickguards as opposed to the single-ply white that had been standard

beforehand. We say 'experiment' because you'll notice that this '59 Journeyman still has eight screws in its 'guard as opposed to the 11 that were to become the norm a few months later on. Apparently, you'll find an assortment of variations in this regard from Strats of the period. You'll also note that the pickguard is a darker, more greyish green to emulate the colour of the celluloid (or nitrate) 'guards of the time.

Spec-wise, the body is two-piece alder with an outrageously flamed maple neck, the profile of which is at a point between a chunky 50s V and a 60s C. The spec sheet says that it is a "60s style oval C", and there's certainly plenty of heft to it compared with a regular C-profiled '61 Strat we have handy. A handful, for sure, but not uncomfortably so. One concession to the 21st century is that the fingerboard radius is the modern 241mm (9.5 inches) variety as opposed to the 184mm (7.25 inches) of yesteryear.

Other highlights include a trio of hand-wound '60/'63' pickups (which sound delightful, by the way) and a specially chosen dark rosewood 'board with the famous clay dot position markers. **G**

1. This is not only a Fender Custom Shop Strat but also a member of the slightly more elite 'Limited Edition' club, meaning that only a handful of instruments with this specific set of features will be available on the market worldwide

2. The flamed maple used for the neck of the '59 is absolutely stunning and we think it was a good move on Fender's part to leave the finish on the back of the neck pristine and not remove it to emulate wear as on some 'aged' models

3. The only relicing to the body here is limited to crazing in the thin nitro finish with the occasional light ding

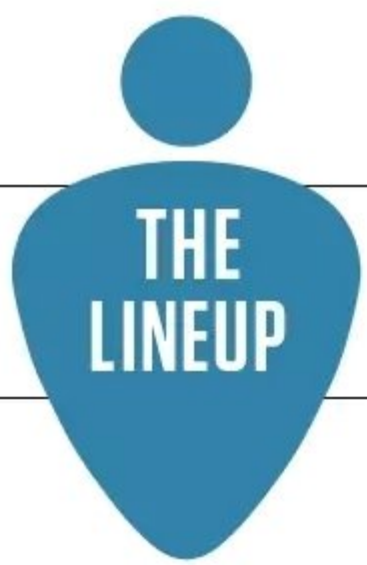


4. During the transition between single-ply and tri-lam pickguards, Fender experimented with the number of screws used before settling on the standard 11 we know today

5. According to the 'Floor Traveler' spec sheet that accompanies the guitar as it works its way through the Custom Shop, the pickups are hand-wound '60/63' models

6. The timber for the fingerboard is specially chosen dark rosewood to emulate the Brazilian rosewood that would have been in use at the time. Check out those clay dots, too!





Gas Supply

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

Epiphone Inspired By Gibson Custom Collection From £999

CONTACT **Epiphone** PHONE **00800 44427661** WEB www.epiphone.com

JARGON CRUNCHING

Custombuckers

Epiphone's humbucker models in the Inspired By Gibson Custom range use the Custombucker. This is arguably Gibson's closest approximation of its Patent Applied For humbuckers: Alnico III magnets, 42 AWG, dual-conductor wiring and 'True Nickel' covers, all of which add up to replicating that elusive vintage tone.

Are these based on Epiphone models?

No, what you're looking at are the latest additions to Epiphone's Inspired By Gibson Custom line-up. If you've been reading these pages over the past few years, you'll know this range has gone from strength to strength in terms of spec, build quality and features. They're designed in collaboration with Gibson's luthiers from the Nashville Custom Shop, and Gibson/Epiphone has opted to call them reissues. Aljon Go, Epiphone product manager, Nashville, says of the range: "These guitars are part of our ongoing mission to make the exceptional craftsmanship and elevated appointments of the Custom Shop more accessible to players and fans everywhere."

What's in the series?

There are eight reissue models in total, spanning the most popular delicacies on the Gibson platter from specific years: 1962 ES-335, 1960 Les Paul Special Doublecut, 1964 SG Standard with Maestro Vibrola, 1963 Firebird V With Maestro Vibrola and Firebird I, and a trio of Les Paul Standards – 1957 Goldtop, 1959 and 1960.

Wow, that's a lot. What makes them special?

With eight guitars in the range, we can't detail all of them here (though you can read a full review of the 1957 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue on page 8). However, there are common features and upgrades across the board.

INSPIRED BY GIBSON CUSTOM

The eight new additions to the range have a host of features designed to bring these Epiphones closer to the feel and sound of guitars worth many times the price

ELECTRONICS

Every model comes with Gibson USA electronics: Custombuckers on the humbucker models, P-90 Soapbars on the DC Junior, and USA Firebirds on the, erm, Firebirds

HEADSTOCKS

The Les Paul, ES-335 and SG models all feature the iconic 'open book' headstock shape, as found on their Gibson counterparts – one less reminder that these are Epiphone guitars

VINTAGE GLOSS

It's not nitrocellulose, but instead Epiphone has finished these in what it's calling Vintage Gloss. There's less of the glassy 'new guitar' look, without it being beaten up, either





This 1957 Goldtop and 1959 Les Paul Standard are joined by one more new LP reissue in the range – the 1960 Les Paul Standard

USA electronics have been a fixture before and they remain here with Gibson USA pickups (Custombuckers or USA Firebird mini-humbuckers) installed in each guitar, along with CTS pots and premium capacitors. So you're getting the tonal engine room of a high-end guitar.

Yeah, but anyone can fit some new pickups...

We're not finished! Where applicable, Epiphone has adopted the correct 'open book' headstock shape for this series, making it a more faithful recreation. This is continued with one-piece necks, all of which are completed with rosewood fingerboards, rather than the laurel 'boards we're used to seeing on Epiphone guitars. But one of the biggest visual changes is the introduction of the new Vintage Gloss finishes.

They're using nitro?

No, it's a poly finish, but it's thinner in application and designed to look like a played-in lacquer finish. These aren't 'aged' in the beaten-up sense, nor are they matt or satin finishes. But there's less of a mirror-finish glaze and more of a sheen to the end result.

How much – and where are they made?

Prices start at £999 for the Les Paul Special Doublecut, £1,099 for the ES-335, £1,199 for the Les Paul Standards, SG and Firebird I, and £1,499 for the Firebird V. They're not part of the Epiphone USA collection, so these instruments are made in China.

Why would I buy one of these over a USA-made Gibson model?

You don't have to! But what we're seeing here are options. Epiphone's lower-priced ranges still exist, as do Gibson's USA production models. Clearly, though, the Inspired By Gibson Custom range is here to offer a faithful recreation of Gibson guitars, complete with Gibson Custom-designed appointments at a snip of the price of a Gibson USA or Custom guitar. It's a model that we're anticipating seeing more of across the industry. And choice is a good thing, no?

Okay, I'll read the review. When are these new reissues available?

They'll be landing in stores by the time you read this, complete with Gibson-style hard cases. Head to the Epiphone website for more info. [SW]

ALSO OUT NOW...

FENDER MIKE CAMPBELL RED DOG TELECASTER £2,749

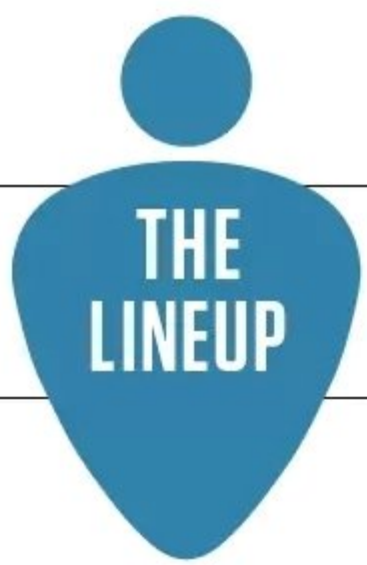
Fender's latest guitar to fall under the banner of its Stories Collection is a reproduction of Heartbreakers guitarist Mike Campbell's 'Red Dog' Telecaster. Best known for its performance on (and in the video for) Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers' *Refugee*, it's offered in two versions: the Custom Shop Masterbuild Red Dog, which will set you back £18,899, and the more realistic US production version, a comparative snip at £2,749. The US model is completed by Fender Mike Campbell signature pickups in an SHH configuration, a Bigsby vibrato, and his infamous 'Destruct boost' circuit, which provides an additional 35dB of gain straight from the guitar. It's available now. www.fender.com



DEAN GUITARS

You might have noticed an absence of the (at one time) seemingly omnipresent Dean guitars from these shores in the past few years. Now, if you're pining for the guitars made famous by ZZ Top, Michael Angelo Batio and, of course, the late, great Dimebag Darrell, then pine no more. Dean is making a return to the UK via Aurora Music Works. "This partnership is about more than distribution," says Aurora Music Works director, Tim Lobley. "It's about delivering that legacy, energy and freedom of expression to musicians across the UK." Stay tuned for an update on when the guitars will be available. www.auroramusicworks.com





Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Richard Dawson

Album: *End Of The Middle* (Domino Records)



End Of The Middle, Richard Dawson's eighth studio record, casts everyday life through an exploratory lens www.richarddawson.net

Newcastle-born Richard Dawson, who has been described as “Britain’s best, most humane songwriter” by *The Guardian*, released his eighth album, *End Of The Middle*, this year, and the storytelling here homes in on the family unit: “I wanted this record to be small-scale and very domestic,” he says of the concept.

Songwriting itself was something he worked on from a young age: “I wasn’t good at it, but it was a natural thing to want to do and I perhaps took the creative impulse for granted because I always had it. When I was 11, my sister had Iron Maiden’s first album and I fell in love with it. Then I got my first guitar and I never looked back, though it was just a [tool] to make songs at first. When I think back, it was terrible, terrible stuff.”

Sofa Sessions

Richard’s spiky guitar lines frame lyrics that can be simultaneously mundane and profound. “I just sit on the sofa over there,” he says of his process. “I write everything with the same guitar, which started life as a Baby Taylor but got stepped on and snapped, so not much is original now. For the last five or six albums I’ve gotten all of the music ready and I’ll sit and write the lyrics in one time period. It’s good because you can be more in control of the links between the songs. Sometimes it seems the words are quite jammed in, but it makes nice variations in the melody, which can get blasted out of shape but is still there.”

Richard’s Fidelity Signature JB facilitates his low C tuning preferences with the bridge being shifted back to accommodate heavy strings. The single pickup is custom-wound by Mojo

PHOTO BY KLARA WEISS



Walks Of Life

Richard’s music has explored various territories – take 2021’s metal-infused *Henki* with Finnish experimental rock band Circle, and his previous record, *The Ruby Cord*, which opens with 41-minute track *The Hermit*. This year’s *End Of The Middle* is rather more restrained in comparison: “The first thing I decided was that it should be starker,” he says. “I wanted to make the most ‘pop’ songs in a way – the most direct, melodic songs that live and die on their own strengths. The other thing is that in every song, the characters are experiencing some kind of rebirth, like hopefully we get in our own lives. I wanted a feeling of a newborn foal staggering around a barn – very naked and softly played. That softness was a challenge for Andrew Cheetham, who played drums, but it gave the music this nice unsteady feeling, like it was unsure on its legs.”

Singular Style

While Richard explained that his journey with the guitar began with it being a songwriting tool, over the years his playing and personal style has become more distinctive. “I have started to feel like I’m pretty good now and I can play like ‘me,’” he says. “I can’t play other people’s songs and I don’t think in terms of style; I’d find that a distraction. I don’t know the notes I’m playing, either, really, so it can be a struggle if I’m working with others. But if I have the time, I can figure things out quite quickly. So on one hand I’m quite a good guitar player and on the other I’m quite a bad one...” he laughs. “It’s the same, though; it doesn’t matter.”

Feel The Burns

Years back, Richard used to use his repaired Baby Taylor as both his live and songwriting guitar, but more recently he’s more often seen with a cool-looking Burns electric strapped to him. “I wasn’t looking for an electric, but this Burns Nu Sonic was in a shop in Newcastle and it became my main guitar,” he explains. “It’s a 1964 and it’s fantastic. It’s quite little and comfortable, with a microphonic pickup. I also have this Fidelity guitar that Matt [Oram] made for me [pictured left]. It’s really stable and sounds great – it’s my main guitar for when I play with Circle because it needs to be on point and in tune.” **[GK]**

Standout track: *Knot*

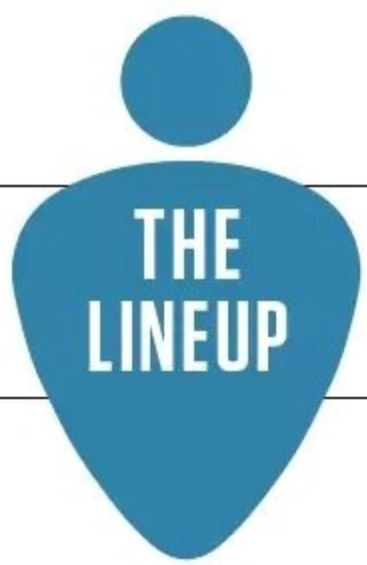
For fans of: Joanna Newsom, Captain Beefheart, Bill Ryder-Jones, Mike Waterson

MY BABY (TAYLOR)

Very far from factory fresh, this guitar tells its own story

Richard's hard-gigged Baby Taylor is dear to him in its underdog status and he appreciates its idiosyncrasies. "I squashed it a few times and was gigging with it when it wasn't projecting and the strings wouldn't ring at all," he smiles. "The audience got on my side when I came out with this broken guitar, and I just like the idea that there's not much of the original instrument left any more. It's like a broom, where you replace the handle and a year later you replace the bristles..."

"In every song on the album, the characters are experiencing some kind of rebirth... I wanted a feeling of a newborn foal staggering around a barn"



Albums

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

King of the sizeable blues-rock hill: Joe Bonamassa's new album is a career high



PHOTO BY MIKE SAVOIA

Joe Bonamassa Breakthrough

J&R Adventures (available 18 July)



A masterful romp of an album from blues-rock icon

When we bumped into Joe recently during his UK tour, we asked him how he managed to fit writing new material in between all the extensive roadwork he does. He responded: "I write when I have to, you know? I get six weeks out from a record and I just start..." Well, he is to be congratulated if he can come up with material of this kind of standard from a standing start – because *Breakthrough* is undoubtedly one of his finest studio albums to date.

Amazingly, the album was recorded over a two-year period, using studios across the globe to fit in with touring schedules. These included Egypt, Greece, Nashville and Los Angeles, and such venturing might have resulted in a lack of flow or continuity. But with producer Kevin Shirley's hand on the rudder and Joe's sublime level of craftsmanship at the helm of the various guitars in play, they've pulled it off.

The album starts with the anthemic title track and a riff as subtle as a wrecking ball through concrete, and the pace only lets up briefly for the album's beautiful acoustic ballad, *Shake This Ground*. Up until then, we have the funk of *Drive By The Exit Sign*, the slow blues mastery of *Broken Record* and the rollercoaster ride of *Life After Dark*, a brooding medium-tempo rocker with some killer lead breaks. Kevin Shirley sums it up: "This album is a round-the-world musical trip from Little Feat funkiness to Texas swing, from hard-rock power to acoustic singer/songwriter-style songs." We couldn't agree more! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Shake This Ground*

For fans of: Eric Clapton, John Mayer

Gentle Giant

Playing The Fool: The Complete Live Experience

Chrysalis/Alucard (available now)



Legendary live album receives remix wizardry

Gentle Giant remain one of the most overlooked and underrated prog bands of the 1970s and their legendary live album, *Playing The Fool*, originally released in 1977, came just three years before the band hung up its Mellotrons for good. Now, under supervision from the band and using the original multi-track masters, Swedish composer and producer Dan Bornemark has employed 21st century digital sorcery to fully restore and remix the album. And he's done a fantastic job. The band's full set has been remodelled to include tracks missing from the original release, tape hiss quietened and buzzes removed, and the album now sounds pristine and, it has to be said, magnificent. Complex tracks such as *On Reflection* and *Excerpts From Octopus* positively glimmer with new life and vitality. A repolished prog gem! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Free Hand*

For fans of: Yes, Genesis, King Crimson

Blank Spaces

Endless Echoes

AWAL (available now)



Deft, poised synth-guitar pop from NYC

Blank Spaces (led by Rory Gallagher's nephew Daniel) impressed with their sophomore long player, *A Home Away From Home* in 2020. *Endless Echoes* picks up where that record left off, its poised reflections on modern life in America's metropolis given an austere grandeur by expansive synth textures and deftly constructed guitar hooks. There's a finely balanced juxtaposition of emotional intensity and detachment in Gallagher's vocals – as in the electro-balladry of *Blood In The Water* or the ecstatic midnight flight through after-hours hedonism on the album's standout anthem *Turn It Up*. The writing is skilfully crafted, its New Wave influences discernible but never obtrusive. We also get welcome glimpses of Gallagher's skill on guitar with concise solos that fit the minimalist aesthetic but showcase his sharp melodic instincts and disciplined service to the songs. Taken as a whole, this is an album to immerse oneself in – nocturnal, cerebral, stylish. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Turn It Up*

For fans of: Fischerspooner, Ladytron, Jonathan Wilson

PHOTO BY STACIE HUCKEBA

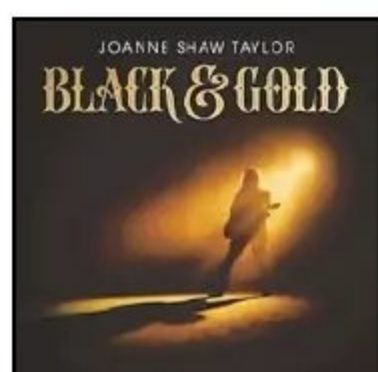


Joanne Shaw Taylor reaches a double-digit release with *Black & Gold*

Joanne Shaw Taylor

Black & Gold

Journeyman (available 6 June)



Blues, pop and Americana themes on 10th studio album

Joanne has been releasing singles from her forthcoming new album since early this year, a new strategy for delivering music to her waiting fanbase. "This approach allows me a bit more creative freedom compared with releasing a full album and then going quiet for months or even years," she tells us. "With music constantly coming out, I feel a bit less judged..." All that aside, having the full album available to us at last reveals 11 tracks that sweep through various styles all anchored by Joanne's soulful, husky vocal style. From the opening acoustic Americana of *Hold Of My Heart* to the stomping rock of *I Gotta Stop Letting You Let Me Down* (with some fine slide guitar throughout), to the breezy pop of *Summer Love*, *Black & Gold* reinforces Joanne's place in the firmament of today's brightest stars. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Grayer Shade Of Blue*

For fans of: Bonnie Raitt, Samantha Fish

LALOM

Los Angeles League Of Musicians

Verve (available now)



Languid Latin folk-melodies go electric

If Link Wray had ever travelled extensively in South America, one can imagine him returning with a record like this written in his mind – vibey and evocative instrumental guitar music infused with the spirit of Cuba, Colombia, Mexico and beyond. Raw as sliced sugar cane but impeccably performed by LA LOM's core trio of guitarist Zac Sokolow, percussionist Nick Baker and bassist Jake Faulkner, the group draws us into an intriguing world of shimmering melodies that sway like the motions of dancers in a sweltering equatorial ballroom on tracks such as the excellent '72 *Monte Carlo*. As well as gently propulsive Afro-Cuban dance grooves, the group is also capable of delicacy and haunting emotion on more reflective tracks such as *Ghosts Of Gardena* that has the romantic, faded appeal of a grand hotel gone to seed. LA LOM's music slowly draws you in, rather than grabbing the listener by the lapels, recalling a more elegant era when pure melody held sway over all guitar music, adding up to a bravura debut. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Ghosts Of Gardena*

For fans of: Ry Cooder, Richard Hawley, Duane Eddy



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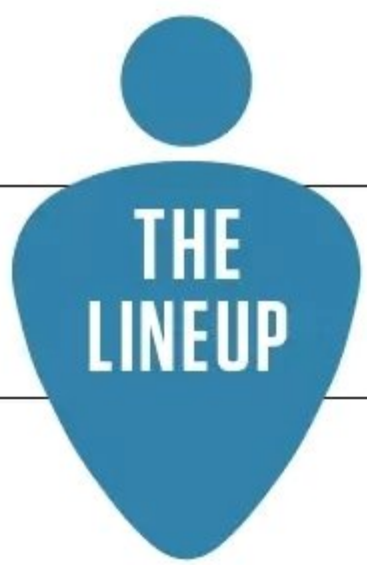
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Tones Behind The Tracks

As **Alex Lifeson**'s second album from latest prog project, Envy Of None, hits the stores, we delve deep into the mists of its sonic landscape

Artist: Envy Of None

Album: *Stygian Wavz* (Kscope)



Envy Of None's sophomore release, *Stygian Wavz*, sees Alex Lifeson pushing the boundaries of guitar sounds once more

Envy Of None (left to right): Alfio Annibalini, Maiah Wynne, Andy Curran and Alex Lifeson

For a band that has never done a gig together, Envy Of None has gained an increasingly high profile since the release of their eponymous debut album in 2022. After that record's success, the band were eager to keep the momentum up and so *Stygian Wavz* was released earlier this year. The tracks have gathered plenty of critical acclaim with their crafted blend of prog and pop and some superbly ethereal vocals from Maiah Wynne. Guitar duties fell once again to Alex Lifeson, but first of all we were intrigued to find out how the band was born.

How did Envy Of None first come about?

"After Rush finished our last tour in 2015 I kept playing and doing a bit of writing and [bassist] Andy Curran reached out and asked if I could put some guitars on some stuff that he was working on. One of those songs was a song called *Liar*, which is on the first record.

"So I did that. I didn't spend much time on it, just some rough guides. In the meantime, he was asked to be a judge in a talent contest, and [vocalist] Maiah was a contestant. He said to Maiah, 'The best thing for you is to go out, meet other musicians, work with other people and get a sense of what your skills are.' And she

said, 'Well, I Googled you and I know your background, so why don't we work on a song together?' And he sent that song *Liar* back to me after she did her vocals and he said, 'You gotta listen to this!' I was blown away by her voice, and I immediately said to Andy, 'Erase everything I did. I'm gonna redo all the guitars. We have to work with this girl, she's amazing.' And then it just kind of went from there.

"We added a couple more songs and then started talking about a record. So that was the first album, and we recorded it during the pandemic. We worked remotely and I think that's great because it's a very efficient way to work. We had so much fun making the record that we decided to start a second one almost immediately. We spent, I don't know, probably a little over a year putting *Stygian Wavz* together. And here it is, finally."

Your guitar work on the album is very textural and atmospheric and shuns the centre-stage spotlight.

"I think that's always been a part of me. I mean, I've always thought in those terms, you know? [In Rush] Geddy [Lee] and Neil [Peart] were really active as a rhythm section and it kind of forced me to pull back a bit. I thought, 'If these guys are going to play like this, I can't play like that anyway.' It would be crazy and it wouldn't service the song. So I really developed a style that's more chordal and broad.

"I use chorus a lot in my sound, just to get a more expansive kind of tonality and character to the guitar sound, and it was perfect for Maiah. She's a singer who has a beautiful, very nuanced voice that can sit on top of anything; the heaviest stuff, the darkest stuff, the bluesiest stuff... she's just fits on anything, so it frees all of us up.

"For me, I just love to approach guitar from a different angle. I love doing things that people don't expect me to do. I try not to be Alex Lifeson from Rush, you know? I try to create sounds on a guitar that are not guitar-like, which is kind of fun, camouflaging the instrument. On this record, I'm playing a lot more traditional stuff. I'm actually soloing more, provided that it's in service of the song. If the solo fits and does something to enhance, or plays a role in the arrangement of a song, then I'm all for it. But my days of shredding and playing like a crazy maniac are over. There are a million people on Instagram that do that now."



PHOTO BY RICHARD SIBBALD

“I love doing things that people don’t expect. I try to create sounds on a guitar that are not guitar-like, which is kind of fun, camouflaging the instrument”



PHOTO BY RICHARD SIBBALD

Which guitars did you use on the album?

"It was a mix. I have two 335s, so I used both of those. I used a Rickenbacker 12-string on *The Story* choruses. I used two Les Pauls, my good old reliable '57 Tele, and the Godin [Lerxst] Limelight – since I got that I've been using it quite a bit. For acoustics: Martins, Gibsons, Larrivées, and a PRS Angelus that they built for me, a beautiful, beautiful acoustic guitar. And a mandola and an oud [a Multi Oud Encore Nylon] that I got from Godin. It's a fascinating instrument. Really went down a rabbit hole with that one, but it's fun to explore an instrument that you don't really know how to play!"

You were saying that you enjoy camouflaging your guitar sound - which effects did you use in the process?

"I used my good old [Electro-Harmonix] Electric Mistress for a bunch of stuff and a lot of plug-in effects that are a little wilder and crazier. I think I used a Big Muff for something, and a [Boss OC-2] Octaver, which I came across in our storage that I used back in the 80s. Anything I can get my hands on, I try to incorporate it. But I would say mostly plug-ins, you know, because they tend to be the wilder kind of manipulators."

Which amps did you use for the album?

"I have two amps in my studio currently: a Bogner and a Mesa/Boogie Mark V. And then I have a single 12 Celestion cabinet that I can mic. Plug-ins are getting way better; I did a thing recently with the [IK Multimedia] Tonex people where they sampled all the amps I have [for the Alex Lifeson Legacy Signature Collection]. I was really impressed with how great they sound. I guess they're using AI to do the sampling, but

Despite just releasing their second album, the band have never played live together in person. But that may be about to change...

there's depth. They've really nailed the bottom-end of what a cabinet and a speaker does.

"I also got a bunch of [UAFX] amp pedals from Universal Audio: the Dream ['65 Reverb Amplifier], the Enigmatic ['82 Overdrive Special Amp] and there's another one called the Lion ['68 Super Lead Amp], which is sort of a Marshall thing. If I'm going to do a session somewhere, I just grab a few of these and toss them in a bag and go to the session or the gig, just like that."

"We can see what an amazing couple of hours it would be if we were to do those first two records in a live situation - a nice theatre with a nice PA..."

Are there plans for Envy Of None to tour the new album?

"We've been talking about it. You know, it's not easy to just go and do a gig. It's not like you grab your gear, jump in a van and go to a place and play. We have never played together, so we'd need to put together a set from the two albums. There's a lot of work involved to even consider doing some dates. But having said that, we would love to because, in our minds, we can see what an amazing couple of hours it would be if we were to do those first two records in a live situation. A nice theatre with a nice PA and a very subtle light show. I think that would be great." **[DM]**



Envy Of None's new album, *Stygian Wavz*, is available now via Kscope

www.envyofnone.com



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Stars In Your Eyes

Neville Marten recalls his first *Guitarist* interview over beans on toast with Hank Marvin, and bottling a not-quite Paul McCartney 'audition'...

The first person I interviewed for *Guitarist* was indeed The Shadows' legendary lead guitarist. It was before I joined the mag and was working for Fender in London. Hank had come down to try out some Strats, and the year was 1985.

The Shads were rehearsing at Nomis Studios, the brilliant but ultimately doomed brainchild of Simon Napier-Bell. It was a luxurious rehearsal complex around the corner from Olympia, and all the big bands rehearsed there. I recall interviewing John Page

"I would nab a guitar and amp from our room and, just as in a Hollywood movie, I would win miraculous acclaim and monumental success"

of Fender's Custom Shop there some years later, and we could hear Queen hits blasting out from an adjoining room. When the music stopped, bassist Pino Palladino emerged. Pino said he was standing in for John Deacon while the band rehearsed for the Freddie Mercury tribute concert on 20 April 1992. I never quite fathomed that one out, but I'm sure it's as I remember it (although I admit things become hazy over time).

Just after I joined *Guitarist*, Fender opened an Artist Centre in Nomis so visiting players could try out and even borrow gear for their rehearsals. John Hill from Fender asked if I'd come down to check over the guitars and tweak any that required a setup. He then invited me to attend its opening day (the time I told you about when Jeff Beck roared up in a 1930s hot-rod Ford in Sea Foam Green with a matching Strat on the back seat). That was also where Mitch Mitchell brought Jimi's white Woodstock Strat for me to set up, prior to him selling it, and where I got to meet María Elena Holly, wife and guardian of the estate of the legendary Buddy. María Elena was there to cut the imaginary ribbon, pronouncing the centre's opening.

One evening, John Hill was showing me around the operation's many facilities, and again music was leaking through the door of the largest rehearsal space. This time it was Beatles songs. "McCartney's rehearsing guitarists for his next tour," John told me. For a second I thought I might knock on the door and ask if I could have a go. I would nab a guitar and amp from our room and, just as in a Hollywood movie when the star falls ill and the understudy takes over, I would win miraculous acclaim and monumental success. Naturally, I abstained from causing myself almost certain humiliation.

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Oh Boy!

What? Fender Vintera II '50s Stratocaster, 2-Tone Sunburst

Where seen? www.andertons.co.uk **Price?** £929

Even now I refer to a two-tone sunburst Strat with maple neck as a 'Buddy Holly' one. The Vintera II is a great range to check out if you want to hit the affordable reaches of the Fender line-up. Representing a kind of average of a decade's features, this one has a gloss polyester finished alder body, gloss urethaned all-maple neck, vintage-style vibrato and tuners, three single-coil pickups with a handy tone control on the bridge unit, and single-ply parchment pickguard. It's a great guitar. If you haven't tried one, you don't know what you've been missing!

PHOTO: WWW.ANDERTONS.CO.UK



This Vintera model offers the best of 50s Strat features in an affordable package

Big Eyed Beans From Nomis

Anyway, back to Hank. I had no typewriter and would not have known one end of a word processor or computer from another. So, after conducting our interview over a lunch of beans on toast in Nomis's excellent canteen (where I'd queued behind Ade Edmondson, Nigel Planer and Rik Mayall of the spoof heavy metal band Bad News), I laboriously wrote out our chat in longhand. My girlfriend typed it up and I duly submitted it.

It was a real shame when Nomis closed as it represented a remarkable moment for music. Anyone who was anyone rehearsed there. But Napier-Bell says he had put himself in hock to the tune of £2 million just before Britain's economy tanked and interest rates rocketed. "At one time or other just about every top music artist in Britain was in that building," he recalled in 2018. "Songs were written, hits made, groups formed, managers fired, and bootlegs recorded. Drugs must have been ingested in ruinous quantities. And I should think a fair bit of sex went on, too. But mostly, bands just rehearsed."

That included me, as I was also hired to play alongside a raggle-taggle bunch (including Argent bassist Jim Rodford) for one of McCartney's celebratory Buddy Holly 'lunches'. So although I bottled crashing the Macca rehearsal, I did finally get to play for the man (well, kind of). Did you ever visit Nomis? If so, please send in your stories to the usual address!



Best In Show

Alex Bishop journeys up to Yorkshire for the inaugural String Break UK luthiers' summit

Back in March I invited myself along to the excellently named String Break guitar show – an exhibition showcasing 15 of the UK's top up-and-coming guitar builders. Focusing primarily on acoustic instruments (with a small corner showcasing a trio of electric guitars), String Break aimed to highlight the finest work found upon the top shelf of this country's handcrafted guitar offerings.

Hosted at Rooster's Brewery Taproom in Harrogate, Yorkshire, the exhibition was a stone's throw from the workshop of Tom Sands, known to acoustic guitar aficionados as a prolific YouTuber and ex-apprentice to Ervin Somogyi, the godfather of the golden age of modern American lutherie. Tom was the galvanising force bringing the exhibition together and exhibited his own work, which included a stunning Brazilian rosewood parlour guitar.

O'Gorman Guitars, however, bucked the trend for smaller-sized instruments with its Newlands and Moir guitars, both showing off – for my money – some of the most intimidating craftsmanship in the room. Brendan's propensity for neon purflings and hot pink headstock veneers also gives his guitars a very identifiable style.

In contrast to Brendan's modern-looking guitars, DG Lukes offered an OM adorned with nature themes: a mountain range rosette, English-grown hardwoods and his eye-catching signature fox heel. I found the oil-finished sides and neck beautifully tactile in the hand, and Daniel's ambitious (but always perfectly executed) scooped cutaway finished off a guitar that was – by a hair – easier to play than anything else in the room.

There was no shortage of innovation elsewhere, with a Ken Parker-inspired floating neck-join offering from Swannell Guitars (with adjustable access hidden

beneath a magnetic inlay). I've long been an admirer of Jamie's work, so it was a joy to finally get to play one of his guitars and find out for myself that they sounded just as good as they looked.

If only I had the budget this would have paired nicely with the Cranmer Guitars archtop that dominated the room; with its flowing curves, floating biscuit-thin pickguard and holes in all the 'wrong' places, it appeared to have been melted into being. Along with fellow exhibitors and Rory Dowling of Taran Guitars and Ian Dickinson, Isaac represented exciting new wave of Scottish luthiers coming through.

Artists In Action

I wasn't able to walk past the Marchwood Guitars stand without doing a double take, stopping to admire carving and engraving work. The founder Oliver Marchant is another youthful maker who appears to have short-circuited the decades of experience normally required to produce such high-level work. Even in the noisy environment of a guitar show I was impressed at how much his OM guitar was able to project.

“These makers' instruments are embodied with character and soul that weaves through every aspect, from the wood to the sound”

My overriding feeling was one of privilege at being in a room filled with makers who are, quite simply, obsessed with guitar making. For these makers it is not enough to be able to build a guitar; they are seeking an unattainable perfection in their work that is way beyond what one would expect from an off-the-peg guitar. Their instruments are embodied with character and soul that weaves through every aspect, from the wood to the sound. They are guitars that are as unique as the individuals who are lucky enough to get to play them.

For those considering a handmade guitar, I would urge you to take a look at what these young upstarts have to offer. While one might expect some eye-watering prices, many of the guitars on offer were actually in direct competition price-wise with high-end Taylors and Lowdens. Food for thought when thinking about upgrading your axe or expanding the arsenal.

What a time to be alive... 15 guitar makers, 16 craft beers, 30 guitars and a wagyu burger big enough to render me comatose for the rest of the evening. There was plenty to digest on the long drive back to Bristol. Upon reaching my workshop I couldn't resist pulling out a curly redwood top I had been saving for something special, and started jointing it. It appears I've accidentally started my guitar build for next year's show. String Break 2 anyone? **G**

Alex admires a DG Lukes creation with its maker, Daniel, at the first String Break show in Harrogate this spring





Holy Grail Or Hoax?

Charlie Wilkins digs into the mystique of NOS valves – can they really transform your guitar tone or is it all just a myth?

As a self-proclaimed tone chaser, I'll try almost anything in pursuit of better guitar tone. Years ago, intrigued by the hype around NOS valves and the promise that they could magically transform my amps into tonal bliss, I invested in a stash of pricey NOS 12AX7 preamp valves just to see what the fuss was about.

So, what are NOS valves anyway? 'New Old Stock' (NOS) refers to valves made decades ago and were never used. This was mostly during the golden era of tube manufacturing in the 1950s to early 1970s, as they were produced in massive quantities for military, broadcast and industrial applications. The saying, 'They don't make 'em like they used to,' might be true for these valves as they were built under strict quality control.

NOS valves have become somewhat legendary in the guitar world, prized for both tone and longevity. Brands such as Mullard, Siemens, Amperex, RCA, Telefunken and Brimar represent the pinnacle of tube craftsmanship. These were built to last and many still outperform modern equivalents. You'll find them tucked away in forgotten repair-shop drawers, hidden inside old radios and organs, hoarded by collectors, or offered for sale by reputable dealers.

Modern production valves are mostly made in just a handful of factories in Russia, China and Slovakia.

Are they terrible? No. There are some solid current-production options out there, but they aren't made to the same military-grade specs of the past.

When it comes to guitar amps, many players believe that NOS preamp and power tubes offer smoother tone, richer harmonics, lower noise and better reliability. Years ago, I started experimenting or 'tube rolling', as us tone junkies call it, by swapping tubes in the V1 preamp slot of my JTM45 clone. V1 is typically the first preamp tube in a valve amplifier, located closest to the input jack. It handles the amp's initial gain stage and has a major influence on overall tone. I tried out Mullard, RCA, Telefunken, Amperex and RFT valves. If you're wondering whether I heard a difference in tone, then absolutely – tone *and* feel!

Each valve has its own unique characteristics. Offerings from Mullard in the UK sound creamy and smooth with a rich, round low-end and round highs, while RCA valves from the USA have a thick feel with clear, balanced tone, round highs and excellent articulation. Germany's Telefunken valves are clear and punchy and with pristine clarity – very hi-fi sounding. Meanwhile, Amperex (from the Netherlands) produces valves with a rich, musical midrange that have enhanced harmonics, note separation and tight bottom. Finally, RFT (East Germany) valves are thick, dark and compressed with aggressive mids, tight punchy bottom and rolled-off highs.

Changemakers

John Thompson from Bad Cat Amps weighs in on NOS preamp tubes and feels that they can improve your tone, but the impact can vary depending on the circuit and design: "In Bad Cat amps, the difference in tone is subtle," he says, "but if you swap out V1 in an old Fender, you *will* notice a difference. The simpler the circuit, the more you'll hear the variations in NOS tubes. Not so much with amplifiers using multiple gain stages."

Carr Amplification's Steve Carr has similar views, stating that: "I've heard NOS 12 AX7s that absolutely transformed amps from being dull, flat and nothing special to something magical. I've also heard amps where there wasn't much of a difference. Vintage amps were designed around these valves, so if you stick a modern production valve in an old vintage amp, you may be a little disappointed with the tone. I really think it depends on the circuit."

I agree with the pros that it does depend on the circuit. Tube-rolling a high-gain amp with multiple gain stages, such as the Engl Powerball, only yielded subtle differences compared with the dramatic tonal shift experienced with the JTM45 clone and a Dr Z Remedy. Thompson also mentioned something else that I accidentally stumbled on while rolling tubes: "While many players focus on the V1 tube, swapping the Phase Inverter

Mullard valves, made in Blackburn in the UK, are prized among guitarists for their smooth sound



THREE TO GET READY

Got NOS? Then you might need these!



Orange Valve Tester MKII £850

This compact, user-friendly device takes the guesswork out of testing preamp and power valves. Whether you're sorting through a stash of NOS treasures or checking modern valves, it tests for gain, emissions, shorts and microphonics. If you're investing in NOS valves, owning a reliable tester such as this is essential for protecting your gear.



Blackstar Dept 10 Dual Drive £249

Blackstar's two-channel overdrive pedal features a real ECC83 (12AX7) preamp valve running at high voltage, delivering genuine amp-like tone in a stompbox. It includes Blackstar's ISF tone control, CabRig speaker simulation, USB recording output, XLR DI output and an effects loop, making it a versatile tool both live and in the studio.



AmpRX BrownBox 200 £449

The AmpRX BrownBox 200 allows players to safely dial down wall voltage to vintage-correct levels, ideal for preserving the tone and lifespan of NOS valves. By replicating period-correct voltage, the BrownBox helps NOS valves operate as intended, delivering sweeter tone, improved feel and longer-lasting performance in your vintage or boutique amp.

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN



– typically the closest preamp tube to the first power tube – also makes quite an impact on feel and timbre.”

Although there are many tonal variations from one NOS brand to another, the overall consensus is that a good NOS valve with the right circuit should yield smoother highs, enhanced depth, better feel under your fingers, more harmonic content and better note separation.

There are plenty of valves to choose from with some made in the same factories but just with different brand names. As you explore the world of NOS you'll see a huge selection of valves with different internal designs, gain ratings and other variants. The most sought-after valves can be identified by etched or printed factory codes, variations in construction, brand logos stamped on the

New valves don't necessarily fall short on performance, but NOS valves have a certain mojo that elevates them in the tone stakes

“A good NOS valve with the right circuit should yield smoother highs, enhanced depth, more harmonic content and better note separation”

valve glass and many other visual distinctions. You'll have to do your research to learn about the specifics.

One of the first things you'll notice when dipping into the world of NOS valves is the price tag. Compared with modern production valves, NOS can cost two to 10 times more. With a thriving NOS market and dwindling supplies, a single 12AX7 will now easily fetch £100 or higher. The coveted Blackburn Mullards (manufactured at the Blackburn factory in the UK), with their legendary status in the guitar world, can yield a price tag upwards of £250 for just a single valve. But buyers beware – the market is full of counterfeits and worn-out vintage valves where the magic has long since faded. Only buy from reputable dealers unless you know what you're doing or just willing to take a risk. I was not happy when my pricey black-plate RCA 12AX7 died just a few weeks after I bought it.

Of course, not all NOS valves are magical and not all modern tubes are bad, but in well-designed circuits, NOS tubes often have a noticeable tonal edge. Whether you're chasing vintage mojo, singing harmonics or just curious to hear what all the fuss is about, rolling in a well-chosen NOS valve is one of the more rewarding rabbit holes a guitarist can explore. **G**

PHOTO WWW.BROWNBBOX.ROCKS



Tension & Release (PART 1)

Richard Barrett experiments with suspended and altered chords to bring a sense of suspense to your compositions

One of the most powerful tools in a songwriter's box is the use of... suspense. Setting up tension with a dissonant or suspended chord – or perhaps a note over that chord – that then resolves to a more harmonious one has been popular for as long as people have been composing music. This can be approached in a variety of ways, so we'll work methodically and start with 'sus' chords.

Replacing the major or minor 3rd with the 2nd or 4th of the parent scale gives a suspension – sus2 or sus4, to be precise. These can resolve to a regular major or minor chord (think of Bach's compositions or *Pinball Wizard* by The Who), or they can be left hanging if you want to leave your audience wondering when to start clapping... Elsewhere, we could use altered chords resolving to a dominant 7th, or simply play the dominant 7th a semitone above then resolve to the home key. Check out the examples for some further explanation and ideas. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!

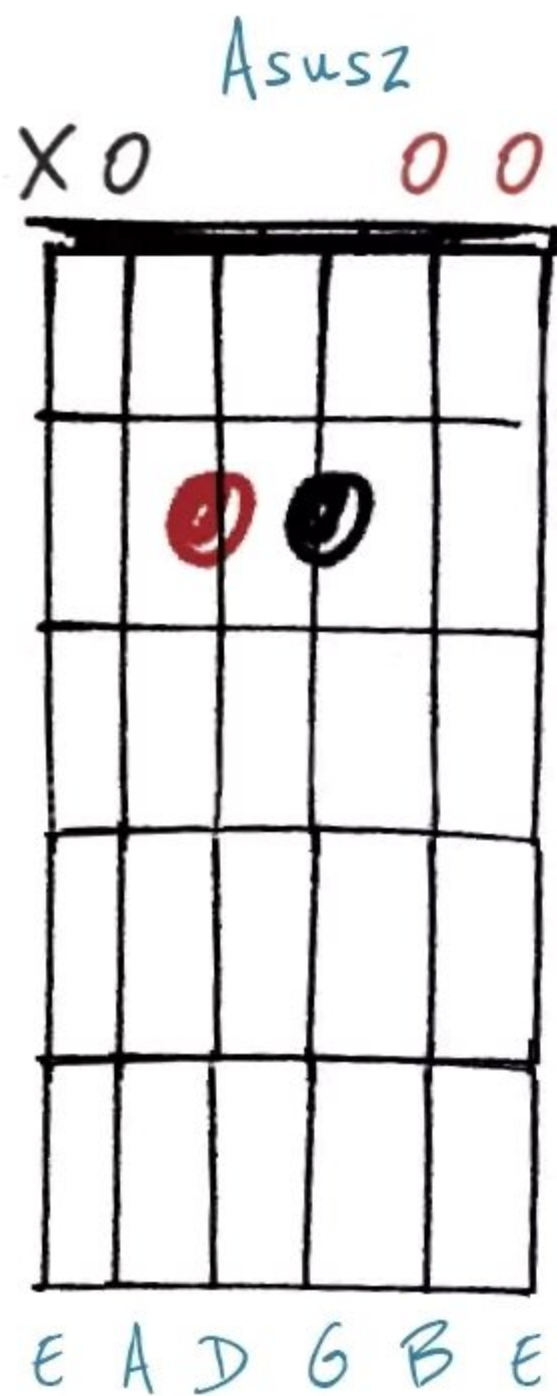
A great many Who songs contain sus chords – *Pinball Wizard* being a prime example



PHOTO BY MICKEY DAIR/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

This Asus2 is quite commonly used without resolving to A major or minor, but if you do so, you'll hear the sense of tension and release, or resolve. Sus chords aren't major or minor because the 3rd is replaced with the 2nd or 4th, but you can hear how where you resolve to affects how you perceive the preceding sus chord.



THREE DIMENSIONAL



SE NF3

The PRS SE NF3 is a new distinct guitar in the PRS lineup. The heart of this guitar is a trio of PRS Narrowfield pickups, a first for the SE Series. With the choice of either a rosewood or maple fretboard, the SE NF3 is a versatile workhorse guitar that is fun to play, hard to put down, and sounds highly musical. Go to prsguitars.com and learn more.

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STAR LETTER

BIG IN JAPAN



Tony Bagwell's
stunning FGN
Expert Iliad

Being retired, I've spent some of the last 10 years buying more than 200 old electric guitars locally on Facebook or Gumtree and bringing them back to life and getting them in as good a state as possible for others to use. I always assess their condition before considering the purchase to make sure that they're not beyond saving. But the Atkin JH3001 would sadly fall into my 'leave well alone' category were I to see anything like it offered locally. Surely at the price quoted in issue 524, someone's having a laugh?

A few weeks ago, I went to the Bristol Guitar Show with my daughter and her partner (neither of whom is a guitar enthusiast), but they enjoyed looking. At one of the first stands, we all independently homed in on a beautiful spalted maple-topped T-style guitar. While it was far more than I ever intended to spend that day, I couldn't resist and thus it ended up coming home with me. It was an FGN Expert Iliad (model EIL-EW1-HS-RM), probably one of the highest quality builds I'd seen in a long time, and two thirds the price of either of the two main guitars featured in your latest edition.

While Fujigen has, since 1960, been building top-of-the range guitars for many well-known brands worldwide, FGN is its own in-house brand and, from memory, I don't think your magazine has ever reviewed any. Perhaps now is the time to put that right?

Tony Bagwell

Hi Tony, thanks for the suggestion and the pic of your new guitar. We have indeed encountered FGN over the years and heard good things. When it comes to choosing review stock, in general we want to be sure that any brand we feature is freely available in the UK on a regular basis through an official distributor or some other reliable channel – otherwise the review might simply be stoking demand for something that you can't easily buy. However, we sent your request to reviews editor Dave Burrluck and he has pledged to look into the matter, as it seems FGN does indeed have a UK distributor. Watch this space!



KORG

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a Korg SH-PRO Sledgehammer Pro clip-on tuner!
www.korg.co.uk

BEAST FROM THE EAST

I read with great interest Jamie Dickson's welcome page relating to Japan. I have been reading *Guitarist* for about 40 years and although I am now 81 years young I still enjoy receiving and reading this wonderful magazine. Although I have owned and played many different guitars in the various bands I have played with – a 1969 red Strat, 1972 Gretsch Country Gentleman, 1980 Les Paul Standard, plus many more – I stopped playing and touring in 1983 and decided on a change. I visited a small guitar shop in Chester called Colte Music and I saw what I thought was a white Strat on the wall priced at £120, but it turned out to be an Antoria S-type. As soon as I held it I wanted it. Having played it for a few weeks it didn't hold tune very well and the bridge was a bit rough.

Various companies advertised in *Guitarist* at that time and there was a company called LA Guitars located on the outskirts of London that specialised in servicing, maintaining and improving guitars. So I travelled from North Wales to see them. My initial question to them was, 'Is this guitar any good and is it worth upgrading?' I went for a coffee and returned after about 30 minutes awaiting the responses. The two luthiers said, 'This guitar is amazing and it is definitely worth upgrading.'

It was made in Japan in 1972, and according to these guys, the guitars coming out of Japan at that time were superior to those in America. I left it with them for two to four weeks and when I returned they had installed a new high-class bridge, USA Sperzel tuners and given it a pro setup. I still own it and it plays and sounds as good as any top-class Fender Strat. Without your magazine I wouldn't have found LA Guitars!

Douglas Pond

Thanks for those brilliant memories, Douglas – and your story really does highlight why the embattled US major brands of the 1970s got rattled by the rising Japanese makers with their astutely built clones of famous electrics. And the fact you still own and play it all these years later is the most convincing testament to that quality. We wish you many more years of happy motoring with the Antoria!

CLAY-CM 900

As may be the case for many of us, guitar playing (or perhaps guitar 'research' ahead of some retail therapy) can quickly lead to a one-track mind. This became evident at my kid's birthday party, where everyone selected a teapot, unicorn, mug or coaster to happily paint in various bright colours!

James Wright



Left: James Wright's latest gear acquisition is somewhat flat in tone...



Haha, very good James – we take it we are looking at a ceramic coaster that you made and decorated (above) while the ‘children’ turned their hand to unicorns? We only have one question: does it go up to elevenses?

THE SOUND OF BELLS

Dear *Guitarist*, while cleaning out my small untidy shed, I found some guitar parts that I forgot I had. ‘Do I sell them or do a project,’ I wondered? I decided on a project. Not wanting to do a usual Strat, Tele or Les Paul-style body shape, I had a look through my guitar books and found two potential candidates – a Burns Flyte and a Danelectro Bellzouki. In the end, I chose the Bellzouki, so here is my version of a Bellzouki.

It took a little longer to build because of my arthritis, but I finally completed it. The body is not painted or stained, just left natural, while the neck is unbranded with a large paddle headstock cut to shape. The body is actually two pieces of wood glued together, while the centre ‘soundhole’ is my attempt at pyrography (the outline of the hole is not perfect due to shaky hands). And, yes, it works, although the pots are not connected – the pickups being wired directly to the jack socket.

Anthony Lloyd

Thanks for sending in the pics of your fabulous creation, Anthony – and kudos for doing something a little different. That’s a really cool body shape. We also salute your willingness to get stuck in despite the challenges you encountered with arthritis. We’re fascinated to know what the guitar sounds like. We’re thinking lively and resonant with that bare-wood finish - dare we even say, bell-like? Enjoy the fruits of your labour!

HANG THE EXPENSE?

I have subscribed to *Guitarist* for decades and I always look forward to the next edition landing on my doormat. I have been gigging since 1963, and over the years I have built my dream collection of Gibsons and Fenders. I am also the proud owner

of a custom-built DC made by AD Finlayson – an amazing instrument that came to me with a perfect setup out of the case. I would recommend you look at his lutherie and the possibility of an article on his work in a future issue.

However, with the most recent issue of the magazine I started to ponder how most of the reviews were for gear and instruments that command prices way beyond the reach of the average guitarist. The same goes for effects pedals; you could buy a decent amp for the price of three or four of the pedals featured in this issue. Perhaps you could categorise your reviews by affordability, or suggest suitability for beginner, intermediate and advanced players? YouTube is awash with demos of affordable gear yet very little of it appears in your pages.

I remember as a young guitarist, eager to progress and looking longingly at guitars hanging on the walls of music shops that were way beyond my ability to buy. Fortunately, this is no longer the case and there is plenty of choice to acquire affordable instruments that play really well. All instruments are worthy of a review, not just the elite, surely?

Tony Konieczny

Thanks for your thoughts, Tony. Ultimately, we aim to provide readers with information on the gear and guitars they’re interested in. Feedback like yours is extremely helpful in defining that, even as tastes, fashions and economic climates change. But with that said, what people want from the reviews coverage in the mag can vary tremendously – for example, we had one reader write to us asking for an extended feature on custom-built flight cases as he had a collection of very expensive guitars that he wanted to gig with whenever the mood took him. So between the budget-conscious appeal of entry-level guitars and, at the other end of the scale, having guitar cases custom built, there’s a path we try to walk.

In last year’s Gear Of The Year edition the cheapest guitar that took an award was £449 and the most expensive was £3,940. So quite a broad church. But the mag’s here for you, so, readers, if you want more at the affordable end of things (or the opposite), let us know.

A decluttering of the garden shed led to Anthony Lloyd creating a version of a Danelectro Bellzouki complete with pyrographed ‘soundhole’



Smart in looks, sounds and cost, the Vintage REVO Series Trio – a top pick in 2024’s Gear Of The Year selection – was just £449

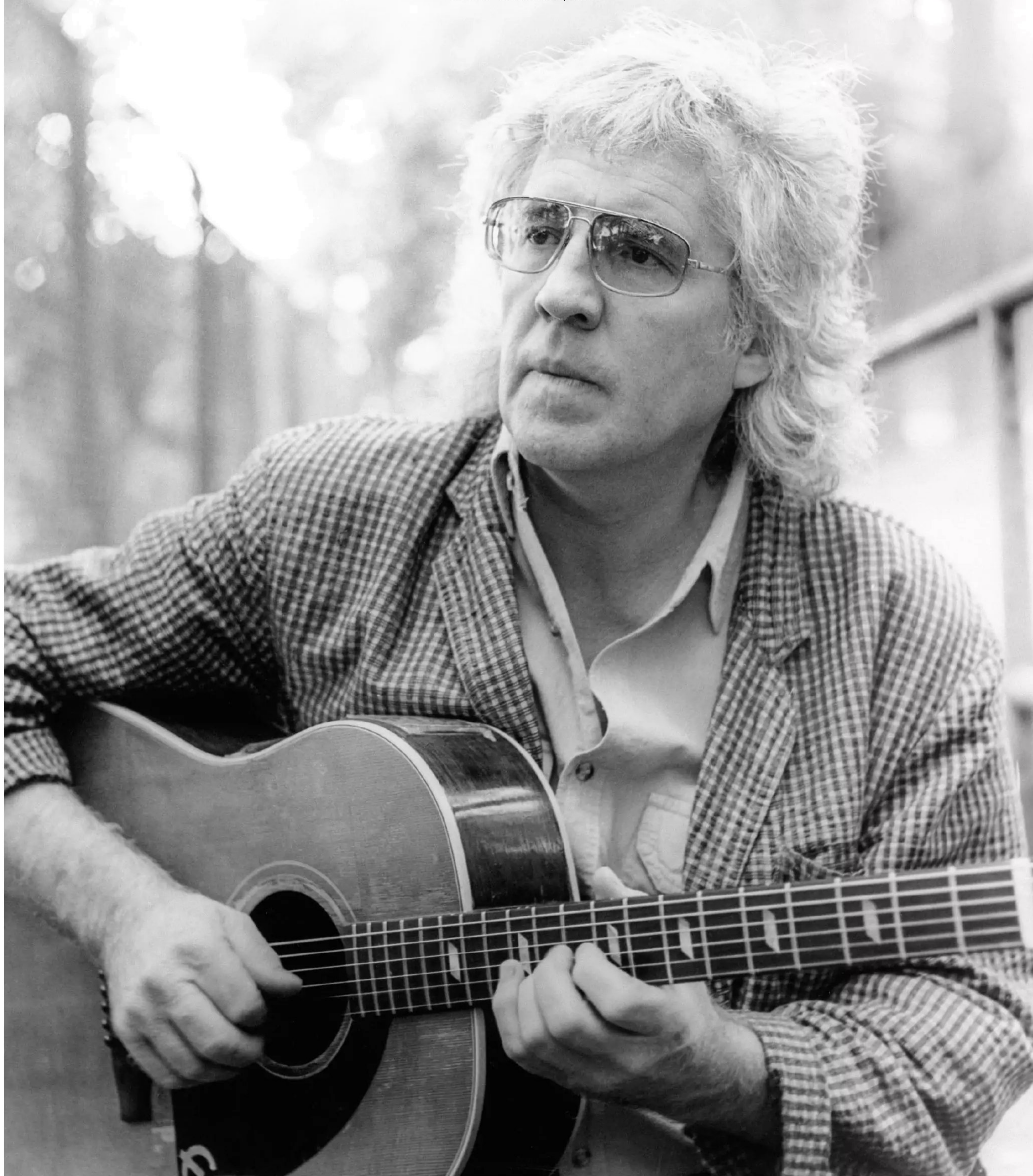
Send Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

WIZZ JONES

1939 – 2025

The Surrey-born beatnik folk pioneer, who influenced players as significant as Keith Richards and Thurston Moore, and played alongside Bert Jansch and John Renbourn, has died at the age of 86

Words Glenn Kimpton



WIZZ JONES

April 1939 – April 2025

Born Raymond Ronald Jones in Thornton Heath in 1939, Wizz Jones was given his nickname – Wizzy The Wuz – by his mother, due to his fondness for magic tricks. He was influenced early by musicians such as Big Bill Broonzy and Woody Guthrie, and was also affected by Jack Kerouac and his seminal book *On The Road*, leading him to embrace the beatnik era and grow his hair long, a look that would accompany him throughout his life. Says Keith Richards in his autobiography, *Life*: “Wizz Jones used to drop in [to art college] with a Jesus haircut and a beard. Great folk picker, great guitar picker.”

Although Wizz didn’t gain the same recognition as contemporaries like Eric Clapton, he quietly made his name performing in clubs throughout London, most notably the famous Les Cousins club in Soho’s Greek Street. This decision to



Wizz Jones was beloved by the folk music world where his influence runs deep

“Your influence on my music means that some of your musical DNA is always with me and the countless others who have learned from [you]” **RALPH MCTELL**

pursue fame less avidly took a bit of time to accept. “I regretted my own laziness at one point...” he told the *Kingston Guardian* in 2008. “It was in my 40s, I had a chip on my shoulder, I wanted to be a guitar player like Eric [Clapton] – he did what I’d been doing and really moved it on... But when I got to my 50s, I realised what I do is all right, you know, I really enjoy it.”

If fame eluded him, Wizz’s influence on other musicians was significant and he was considered among the greats by his peers. Indeed, Bert Jansch once said that Wizz was “the most underrated guitarist ever”. Martin Carthy told *Tradfolk* that “Wizz Jones had a huge repertoire that went across from trad English stuff to written stuff... [He] went right across into blues and jazz.” Thurston Moore was also a fan and had invited Wizz on a tour with Sonic Youth in 2001 – which had to be cancelled due to 9/11, news of which came when Wizz’s plane was forced to change course mid-air.

From this recognition came great friendships, perhaps most notably with Ralph McTell, who shared some of his final chat with Wizz following his passing: “Your influence on my music means that

some of your musical DNA is always with me and the countless others who have learned from your wonderful unique approach.” Wizz had once invited Ralph down to his beloved Cornwall to play some gigs and the pair were friends for decades afterwards, releasing duet albums *About Time* (2016) and *About Time Too* (2017).

Wizz’s output was extensive, beginning in 1969 with his self-titled album and running through the 70s with well-known releases such as *When I Leave Berlin* in 1973 (the title song was covered live by Bruce Springsteen in 2012) and *Happiness Was Free* in 1976. His early work also included 1966 album *Sixteen Tons Of Bluegrass* with banjoist Pete Stanley, and Clive Palmer’s *Banjoland*, which was recorded in 1967.

Wizz’s most cherished guitar was an odd one. In 1959, he was walking past Lew Davis guitar shop on the Charing Cross Road and spotted ‘La Foley’, an unusual, 1930s or 40s guitar made by George Foley. “It was priced at £20,” he told *Folk Roots Magazine*. “Both Long John Baldry and Davy Graham had been into the shop and played the ‘La Foley’ and were thinking of buying it.” Wizz ended up with the

guitar, which was in good shape when he bought it, but it suffered the rigours of a performing musician and ended up being held together by pieces of Wizz’s belt, which he stuck to the body to stall the damage.

Eventually, the instrument was deemed barely playable and subsequently retired. Apparently, Ralph McTell suggested Wizz buy a second guitar and he succumbed and got a 1963 Epiphone Texan after Ralph spotted it in a London guitar shop. The instrument quickly became his mainstay and was as synonymous with Wizz as Ralph’s 50s Gibson J-45 is with him.

Wizz’s later career contained several highlights. In 2013 at London’s Royal Festival Hall, Wizz contributed stunning performances of *Weeping Willow Blues* and *High Days* at the *Celebration Of Bert Jansch* tribute concert, which was followed by tours with John Renbourn and an album – 2016’s *Joint Control* – that would be John’s final recording. He also released *Come What May* in 2017 with his son Simeon and Pete Berryman. Simeon’s son Alfie played on *Moonshine*, with the multi-generational Joneses even performing live together.

Wizz Jones will be remembered as one of Britain’s most talented and well-loved musicians, and as “an amazing guitarist and storyteller”, as guitarist John Smith said in his own recent tribute. Wizz is survived by his wife, Sandy Wedlake, their four children and four grandchildren. **G**

PHOTO BY C BRANDON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

LA LOM

This trio of Los Angeles musicians fuse the rhythms of Havana, Medellín and Lima with the sounds of 60s surf music – though their sound has more in common with Latin folk music than Dick Dale. We join them to talk about their debut album, fibreglass guitars and tropical psychedelia

Words Jamie Dickson

Photography Phil Barker



**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVE!**

Watch LA LOM play live in
our exclusive video filmed
at Dawsons in London
www.bit.ly/guitaristextra



A while ago, growing bored of familiar tunes, we asked British jump blues guitarist Chris Corcoran for his recommendations: “Check out LA LOM,” was his unhesitating reply. We did so and weren’t disappointed – the band’s music, captured in what looks like 50s Technicolor on their artfully shot videos – sounds like something you might have heard in a dockside bar in Havana sometime back in the day. Sultry, percussive and irresistibly melodic, the shimmering, mirage-like sound of guitarist Zac Sokolow, the pulsing bass of Jake Faulkner, and the complex, compulsive rhythms of percussionist Nicholas Baker conjured up a world of chrome bumpers, sweltering heat and vintage dancehalls. We joined the band as they passed through London on their recent European tour to find out more about the deep roots of their sound.

How did you originally form and come up with such a unique sound?

Nicholas Baker: “I got a gig for us and I needed a band, really, because [a promoter had said] ‘Hey, let’s put a night together.’ So I hit up Jake...”

Jake Faulkner: “Zac and I have been working together since we were teenagers. We were looking for a way to keep it small – a trio at best – and so we needed a melodist. And the best guy I knew was Zac.”

Zac Sokolow: “Me and Jake, we’ve been playing a lot of rockabilly and stuff that was leaning towards

1. Percussionist Nick Baker relies on rhythmic traditions drawn, in much of LA LOM’s work, from Cuban folk and dance music

2. We met Zac Sokolow and the band in the comfortable upstairs guitar gallery of Dawson’s music store on Denmark Street in London, though Zac’s guitar work evokes much sunnier climes!

country music and bluegrass, playing in a lot of different groups together that did that kind of thing, since we were about 16 or 17. But when we started playing with Nick, his background is more like Afro-Cuban percussion and we just started out by finding a repertoire that worked well together.

“A lot of the first music we played was classic Latin music from the 30s – mostly Mexican boleros and stuff like that. A lot of Cuban music, too. There was a group called the Lecuona Cuban Boys that we all really liked and we were learning a bunch of their tunes. Actually, the second song we played [on the video accompanying this feature], *Ghosts Of Gardena*, was inspired by the Lecuona Cuban Boys.

“We were looking to keep it small – a trio at best – and so we needed a melodist. And the best guy I knew was Zac” JAKE FAULKNER

“So we went from playing more background-music type gigs to playing bars and playing in front of people, and playing for dancers – that’s when we started bringing in more *cumbia* [traditional Colombian dance music] and working out our arrangements of covers and writing – and things took off from there.”

How do you write your material together?

Zac: “I think a lot of the best stuff we play – the original songs – we came up with from playing in front of dancers. We try to keep stuff really spur-of-the-moment, really improvisational when we play. And sometimes I’ll be playing a solo or something that will turn into some little melody that we’ll all remember and we’ll play next time, you know?”

Jake: “Or sometimes live, he’ll find a riff that he likes, and because it’s just the three of us, he can say, ‘Hey, do those chords again.’ We’ve been playing together for so long that on a good night, I can just follow where he wants the melody to go. Actually, *Ghosts Of Gardena* started like that.”

Zac: “Yeah, I mean, all our songs have melody. They almost have the form of real songs, as opposed to instrumentals. We think in terms of verses, choruses, bridges; even though no-one’s singing, we still think of the form that way. So there will be a few different melodies, and then within that there’s room for me to mess around a little bit. And I’ll take solos or little improvisational breaks in the middle of it.”

The other half of the equation is, of course, the languid Cuban-style percussion that underpins the melody. What rhythmic styles from Cuba are important in LA LOM’s sound?

Nick: “The first one I learned is a rhythm called *tumbao*, but you can add a lot of it, especially for what we’re doing – but that’s the basic beat. I would say that there’s three beats I take from the most, and that’s *tumbao*, *mozambique* and *guaguancó*. Those are three foundational rhythms for a lot of different Afro-Cuban music. And then, of course, the *clave*, which holds everything together. So, within all our music, there’s definitely a *clave* in my head going throughout the whole song.”



**“A lot of the best
stuff we play – the
original songs – we
came up with from
playing in front
of dancers”**

ZAC SOKOLOW



The melodies of your music recall the great instrumental guitar hits of the early 60s – how did you develop such a great feel for melody, Zac?

Zac: “I grew up playing music with my dad – he plays mandolin, banjo and that stuff. So really the banjo was my first instrument, and then I switched over to playing mandolin a lot, too. A little bit later, when I was a teenager, I started playing fiddle and learning hundreds of tunes that are just melodies where, you know, it was like an A, B, maybe a C section, and you just play the melody with very little improvisation. So I got really obsessed with little catchy melodies. I think that’s informed everything I play now. I’m definitely not much of a riffer or shredder or guitar solo-y kind of person – I mostly like sticking the melody. These guys have convinced me to stray from the melody every once in a while and solo a little bit [laughs]. But yeah, that’s my background.”

“There are also some really great musicians who became mentors to me in LA, where we all are from. There’s this guy Tom Marion, who’s an old Sicilian-American musician from Northern California. I learned a lot of melodies on the mandolin from him, And he learned it all from fishermen who’d come in, and barbers [laughs]. So a lot of the way I play guitar is modelled after the way he plays.”

Jake: “You know, I always think about how people hear surf guitar in our music, but I think that

3. Bassist Jake Faulkner’s playing has to be keenly alive to shifting rhythms and intricate melody, but he’s developed a real affinity with Zac’s guitar playing over the many years they’ve been playing together in groups

[perception] comes more from the fact Dick Dale was Greek and so *Misirlou* was a Greek tune. I think [our own approach comes] more from that generation of thinking – of applying accomplished folk playing to the electric guitar – as opposed to taking surf guitar and learning that.”

Zac: “Yeah, I definitely don’t really listen to any surf or care about it very much! But yeah, people often say that [my playing] sounds like surf.”

So what are the real influences on your sound on the new record?

Zac: “One huge influence on our music is what they call *chicha*. It’s like the *cumbia* that came out of Peru in the late 60s and it blends a lot of elements – more traditional Peruvian melodies, known as *huayno*, which they then mix with the *cumbia* beat from Colombia. Psychedelic American rock ’n’ roll also has a lot of that influence in the *chicha* sound, too.”

Jake: “Yeah, I think *chicha* is a really good example of folk melodies coming into rock instruments because *huayno* is so based in beautiful Andean and Peruvian

“Everything from bells from all over the world to Fisher-Price organs found their way onto the record” JAKE FAULKNER



melodies that when you [translate them to] electric guitar and then you get psychedelic, that’s a whole other world of it.”

The record sounds really natural and organic – how did you record it?

Zac: “We started out by just doing a live session, playing a lot of these songs pretty much the way we had been playing them in bars and stuff, with the three of us, although some of them had two or three other musicians. There was Dominique Rodriguez playing the bongos and shaker, and sometimes our friend Cody Farwell playing steel, as well as a really great musician from LA, Joshua Kaufmann, playing piano and some stuff. We just had the five, sometimes six, of us and recorded about 12 songs in a day, right?”

“We were sitting on this stuff for a while and then we met up with [producer] Elliot Bergman, and he convinced us to add a lot of interesting sounds over these recordings – to layer more cool sound effects and different tones and organs and different kinds of analogue keyboards and stuff. That really helped shape the sound that we wound up with.”

Jake: “We’d done the basic tracking in a studio called Big Bad Sound in Los Angeles, and we brought Elliot the board mixes and he said, ‘We can do so much more with this. Let’s make an album. These are recordings of you playing at the bar. Let’s take it somewhere else.’ And he did.”

“Elliot has a kind of curiosity cabinet of wonderful instruments – everything from bells from all over the world or that he’s made himself, to Fisher-Price organs that found their way onto the record. So getting to play with all of his wonderful analogue toys was really helpful. Also Zac, as long as I’ve known him, has



Zac's early 60s Val-Pro 82 is a fibreglass-bodied electric similar to those played by Rory Gallagher among others. He says it is a dark-sounding guitar that is best paired with bright amps



Jake initially played a Kay Speed Demon bass in LA LOM but needed something more assertive for *cumbia* music and adopted a P-Bass owned by Nick Baker's brother before Fender sent him this gorgeous Olympic White example



Although Zac's guitar often sounds clean, it typically has a little overdrive 'hair' on it plus some spring-style reverb or analogue delay



The vintage sounds of the upright bass are handled by this Johnson instrument, which was customised for rockabilly and country by a luthier in Altadena, California



gone around the world making recordings of street musicians or bells from churches – I think there’s some English church bells on the record [laughs].”
Zac: “And I think there’s even recordings of coyotes and stuff, too...”

4. Despite the diversity of influences that the band draw upon, LA LOM’s sound is coherent and compellingly listenable

“Because so much of our sound originated in Colombia and *chicha* stuff, it’s really a dance party” *ZAC SOKOLOW*

You’ve got a guitar collection to match your vintage sounds, Zac – what were your go-to guitars for the album? And what’s the red guitar you’re playing today?

Zac: “So that’s a Val-Pro 82 – 82 is not the year, that’s just the model number. I think it’s from around 1960 to 1962. Val-Pro was made by Valco and I guess Valco was the parent company that had National, Supro and Airline. It’s a fibreglass guitar that’s hollow in the middle and it has all these knobs on it that were supposed to do something at some point, but they don’t work any more. So I just have a volume. It had a capacitor that would darken the tone to pretend like you had different pickups – but I short it all out.

“This guitar is pretty dark and muddy sounding. Usually, when I play through a Twin or Deluxe, which are pretty bright amps, I’ll put the treble all the way up or close to it. That’s kind of what makes the guitar sound right because it’s pretty dark [laughs].”

We’ve seen you play a nice block-inlay Fender Jaguar, too, on some of your videos.

Zac: “Yeah, I sometimes use a Jaguar, I like the tremolo bar on that. And then I play a Kay Style Leader from around the same time, like 1960, and that’s my second favourite guitar.”

With bands such as Khruangbin garnering a mainstream audience, it feels like instrumental music – especially instrumental guitar music – is having a bit of a moment.

Nick: “They’re very talented and [Khruangbin guitarist Mark Speer] is able to evoke emotions just through melody. I think it’s very rare for guitars to do that – but obviously there’s a pretty good one right here, too [laughs].”

Zac: “It’s rewarding to see people so engaged with instrumental music. I think one of the things that we’re bringing, that other groups maybe are less focused on, is sort of a dance concert. Whereas a lot of the other instrumental bands bring more of a groove and a vibe and people can move to it – which is fantastic. But because so much of our sound originated in Colombia and *chicha* stuff, it’s really a dance party [laughs].” **G**

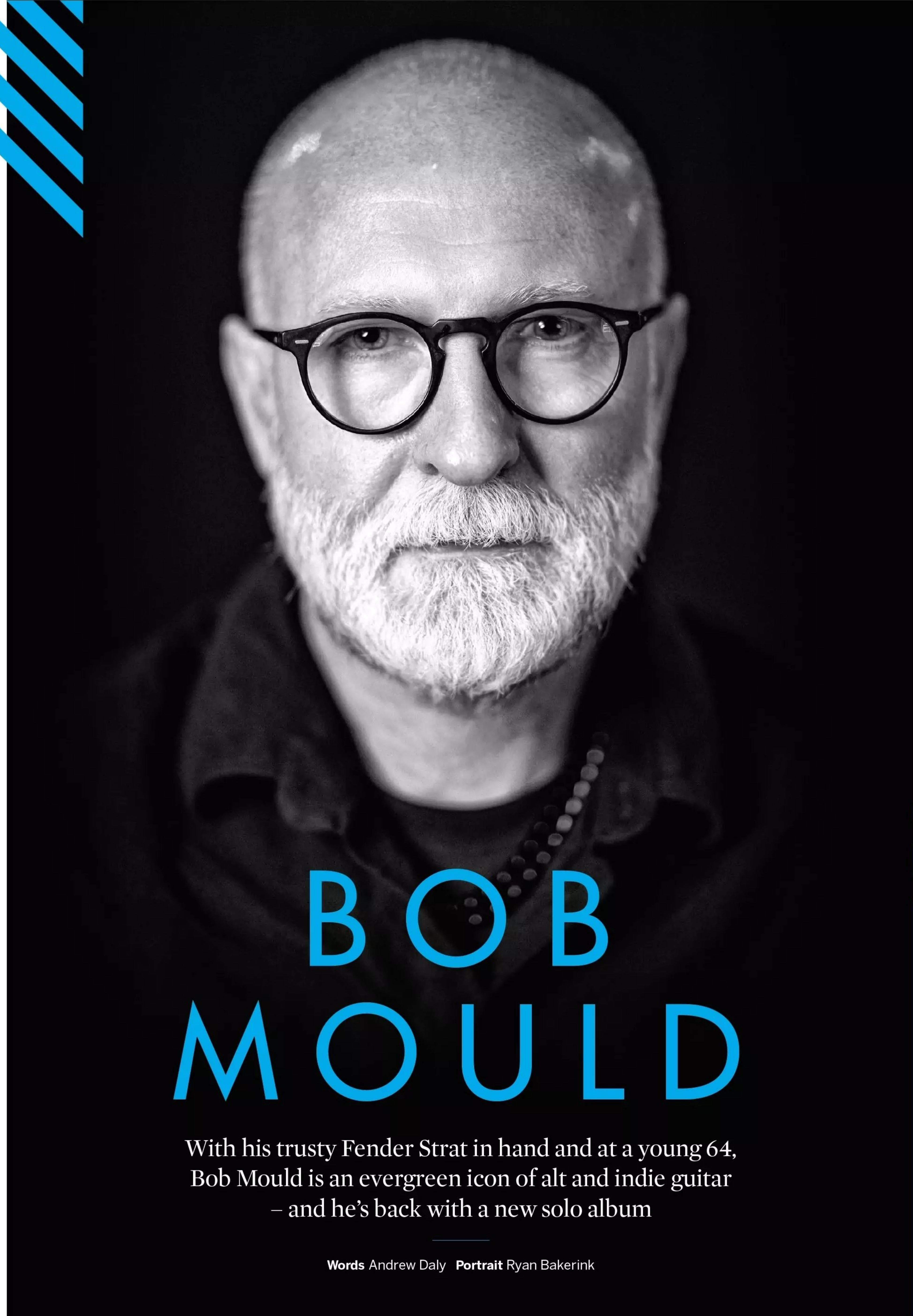


LA LOM’s eponymous debut album, *Los Angeles League Of Musicians*, is available now on Verve

www.thelalom.com

Lowden
GUITARS





BOB MOULD

With his trusty Fender Strat in hand and at a young 64, Bob Mould is an evergreen icon of alt and indie guitar – and he's back with a new solo album

Words Andrew Daly Portrait Ryan Bakerink

Bob Mould's ferocious wall of sound has been cited as an influence by everyone from J Mascis of Dinosaur Jr and Joe Genaro of The Dead Milkmen, to Dave Grohl of Foo Fighters. It all started with Hüsker Dü, a punk-meets-college-rock assault that Mould recalls as being akin to "three fighter jets racing to get there first". Though in all fairness, fans of classic records such as 1984's *Zen Arcade* and 1986's *Candy Apple Grey* might liken those records to more than speed-racer pyrotechnics.

Of particular note is Mould's adoption of Yamaha's G100 solid-state amp with two Fender Concert heads up top. That, along with various distortion and chorus boxes hooked up with his beloved blue Strat, not only created Mould's sound but one that would be mimicked by going on two generations of indie-rock-loving players. Mould, of course, knows this, even though he describes his playing as "pretty unremarkable". But he does admit there's a certain nuance that can't be described, telling *Guitarist*: "I can't take out a protractor and tell you how I do it, but it's everything in between. My left hand is unremarkable. A lot of the stuff that I do with my right hand... it's really the stuff between the notes that I don't even know that I'm doing."

He explains further: "It's not muting, it's not harmonics, but there's things when I hold the pick and then I look at the

"This is probably the most rhythm guitar-centric record I've written in ages, which is a thrill for me"

battle scars on my thumb and forefinger, like how the pick is almost a prop, and my hands are wrecked. It's whatever's in the right hand and it's between the notes."

That assessment checks out. What also checks out is how Mould describes the "refinement" (no pun intended) of his playing with Sugar, his post-Hüsker Dü group that's lauded for quiet-loud dynamics, more wall-of-sound rhythms, simple leads and one particular banger of a record, 1992's *Copper Blue*. To this day, Mould, who isn't copying that record, notes its importance on his sound. "I did some more electronic-based records using guitars as information that I could sample or chop up to do different things, you know? The results were mixed, but there's some nice playing there."

"But since 2012, it's been back to celebrating *Copper Blue*," he admits, "and writing complementary records that had an adjacent hook and feel. I don't think I've tried to copy that, but I tried to remember

and let that be a sort of shadow template. So here we are, here and now."

Speaking of here and now, Mould has a new record out called *Here We Go Crazy*. True to form, there are sheets of rhythm guitars, big chunky sounds and lyrics that cut into one's soul like a hot knife through butter. "The record deals with a lot of the uncertainty of the early part of the decade," Mould says. "It deals with harsher, darker images. And then they get escalated through act one, and then act two really goes low and digs into heavier, psychological and emotional areas. Then act three lifts people out of it. It's sort of, 'Okay, here we are. We're at the home stretch. Let's try and get out of this gracefully as we shine up.'"

As for where Mould goes from here, one could assume based on track record, but given that same track record, one should look out for curveballs. Mould has his tried-and-true reliance, but he's never been afraid to deviate and has no preconceived notions as to what the future looks like. "Do I get louder?" he questions. "Do I get quiet? Do I get introspective? Do I get outrageous? I don't know what life will bring. I think the next few months will sort of be the wind in the sail. I guess we'll figure out what direction the sail is going to go. I don't have anything mapped out. I'm just sort of taking the temperature right now and getting the prognosis. I'll operate after that, I suppose."



Bob Mould performed *When Your Heart Is Broken* from his 15th solo release, *Here We Go Crazy*, on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* earlier this year

Hüsker Dü (left to right):
Grant Hart, Greg Norton
and Bob Mould in 1987



PHOTO BY JIM STEINFELD/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

If every album tells a story, what is your latest, *Here We Go Crazy*, saying?

"This is probably the most rhythm guitar-centric record I've written in ages, which is a thrill for me. I have never fancied myself a guitar virtuoso; I have a pretty unique style, which is obviously an amalgamation of others who have come before me. But the guitar playing on this is very simple, so there's not a lot of fireworks on display. Guitar-wise, it's written from a very simple point of view."

How would you describe your point of view as a player?

"Just letting the songs do the work. When I start flexing solos... that just wasn't part of this process, you know? There's always the temptation to make more icing than the cake actually needs, but I really backed away from that. I relied on two guitars, one left and one right, small amps and a distortion box."

Does that process differ much from how you usually operate?

"It's very different from the other records that I've made in the last decade, where it was walls of 4x12s and lots of compression up front. For this, I just plugged into the amp, so it's a tighter sound. I hear the difference in eliminating the big amps – especially in the centre of the mix – because they take up so much space."

While listening to *Here We Go Crazy*, a sheet of guitar sounds washes over you, like you'd hear on *Sugar's Copper Blue*.

"Sugar was a refinement of my writing and playing... With Hüsker Dü, it was like fighter jets trying to outrace each other!"

Are you using any of the same amps that you used back then?

"The plan was to take the big stacks out and clear out some of the fat that can muddy things up. I've been using Blackstar Artisan 100s, which is such a great sound. It is my sound, but for this I went quieter with the Blackstar stuff; I got an Artisan 30, which instantly brought things into focus. Then I've been enhancing the Blackstar sound – I've gone back to [Fender] Silverface Deluxes. You brought up *Sugar*, but bringing back the Silverface is more in line with 1985 or '86 Hüsker Dü."

Is that when you developed the tonal recipe that became synonymous with you?

"The genesis of that sound would have been when I started using the Yamaha G100 solid-state head. I would have two 4x12s and then I would have a pair of Fender Concerts on top of that. The idea, which I really refined during the *Sugar* era, was to allow the solid-state amp to push the lows and mids and then rely more on a tube amp to take all the top stuff off and have the mid-harmonics.

"Then, with *Sugar*, I had gone to Roland JC-120s, running 4x12s with Fender Concerts on top. That's when the sound becomes the sound you're describing now. And then came the Blackstars, which is a Class A valve amp, though you've got to be careful with the saturation. But that marriage is how I put that sound together."

One song that encompasses that ethos on the new album is *Fur Mink Augurs*. What's the story there?

"The way I construct albums is there's a tent pole and then you drag the fabric out with some really strong stakes, then you sort of colour up the fabric. So I usually have a side one opener and closer, and a side two opener and closer, and *Fur Mink Augurs* had that side one closer spot because I knew that song would have a long wind-out.

"My description of that song, beyond the sonics, you know, the emotional content is: 'How the fuck did I end up here?' In our lives, we all make these choices, some are big and we give them a lot of thought, and others are impulsive. Sometimes, we end up in situations where we're in a mad place, and I ask myself, 'How did I end up here?' It left me with this conundrum..."

What was the conundrum?

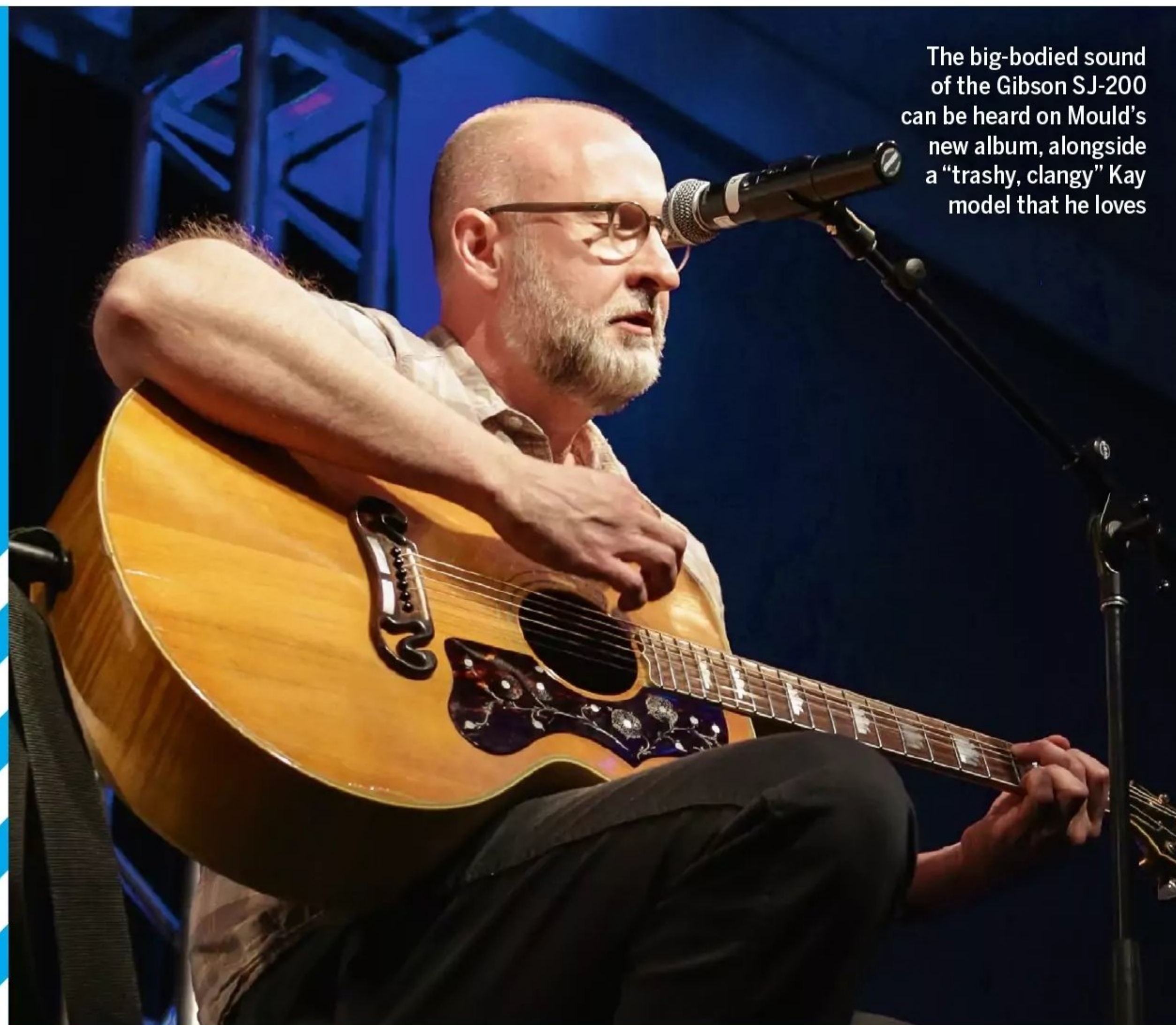
"What do I do after that? [laughs] When somebody flips the album over, what you hear is it immediately segueing into me getting myself in position in a wooden chair to record. *Lost Or Stolen* is essentially a solo song that I wrote during overdubs – that's not a band track."

PHOTO BY SERGIONE INFUSO/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

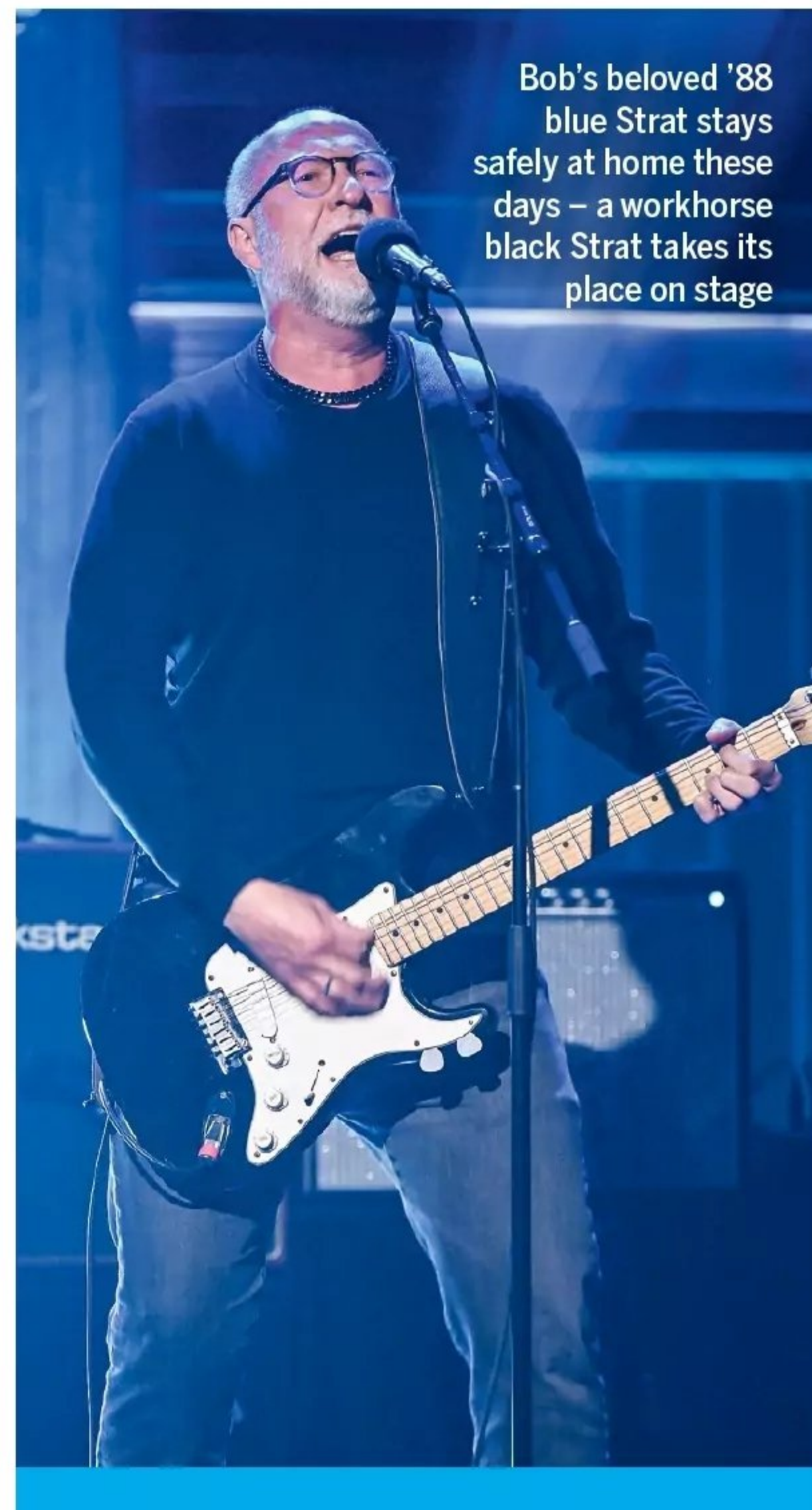
"[This record is] very different from the other[s] where it was walls of 4x12s and lots of compression up front. For this, I just plugged into the amp, so it's a tighter sound"

Over the years, Bob has refined his backline, going from his idiosyncratic Yamaha G100/Fender Concert combination, to today's more focused Blackstar Artisan 30, which he complements with silver-panel Deluxes

PHOTO BY EARL MCGEE/GETTY IMAGES FOR SXSW



The big-bodied sound of the Gibson SJ-200 can be heard on Mould's new album, alongside a "trashy, clanky" Kay model that he loves



Bob's beloved '88 blue Strat stays safely at home these days – a workhorse black Strat takes its place on stage

PHOTO BY TODD OWYOUNG/NBC VIA GETTY IMAGES

In creating the guitar sounds on this new record, what guitars did you lean on the most?

"It's Strats. The original blue Strat that I bought in '88 became the sort of 'Bob guitar' that everybody thinks of. I mean, that one doesn't leave the house any more. So when I'm up North and that guitar is around, I play it. And I've got a black and a grey Strat that have been my workhorses for the last decade, so a lot of stuff gets written on those. Then I've got an old Gibson J-series acoustic with a big body and a little pickup in it. I write a lot on that, too. That's a nice 'parlour' guitar.

"So it's the two Strats, the black and grey, the old Gibson – and I've got an old Kay acoustic. It's such a trashy guitar [laughs]. I love it, it's just so clanky, you know? It doesn't have a lot of body and just sounds like metal rattling around in a box."

Here We Go Crazy is a reminder of your enduring influence of indie and alternative guitar music. A lot of players from that scene often namecheck you – and the gear you've described above. That has to be very gratifying.

"I'm always thrilled to hear that. When people say, 'Your sound got me started,' or, 'Your sound took me in a direction,' God, when I look back on how I got to my sound... I think of [Pete] Townshend, Johnny Ramone and Johnny Thunders, you know? The Beatles, too, but more for songwriting and the structure of songs."

"When I construct albums, there's a tent pole, then you drag the fabric out with some strong stakes and colour up the fabric"

You mentioned that blue Strat and your Yamaha amp earlier. Do you still identify with the player who brandished that gear?

"With the beginning of the blue Strat and the Yamaha, that was when I started reinventing the way I looked at guitar. That was a big upgrade. I think Sugar was a refinement of my songwriting and my playing. I learned so much and took that knowledge, and I could feel that I was way more in control of my playing. With Hüsker Dü, it was like fighter jets trying to outrace each other [laughs]!"

How so? And aside from the obvious, how was Sugar different?

"If you listen to Hüsker Dü, there's no foundation at all. That's not a knock; it's just three jets racing to get there first. That's what that band sounds like. But with Sugar, it was like this large sort of fighter ship that you would land those jets on. It was very slow. It was very stable. It was hard to move it. I had to learn how to do that just by the way those guys played. That was a big jump for me."

So, you've got Hüsker Dü, Sugar and what you're doing now. Is this sort of your third – and longest – iteration as a guitarist?

"I went through that and now there's this third iteration, yeah... I learned a lot leading up to it. Maybe I've just been treading water since [laughs]. But no, I've learned other stuff. But if you go back and listen to the Sugar records, really, that's the real refinement of that 'sheets of rhythm guitar' sound. Those records had much sparser leads, too. It was a lot of octave lead stuff. The first solo at the end of *Copper Blue* on *Man On The Moon*, that fixed position moving through the neck is something that I started; I sort of came into that there. That became a blueprint for me to work with for solos. It's a comfortable position that allows me to ring other strings around it, so that became a feature at that point."

Where do you go from here?

"I don't know. When I finish interviews today, I'm going to go out in the sun and get some exercise [laughs]. After the in-stores, the promo, radio and the band tour... I mean, we'll see how people are feeling. We'll see what people think. By then, we'll have a prognosis on the campaign emotionally and spiritually, and we're just trying to figure out where to go next with it." **G**



Bob Mould's latest album, *Here We Go Crazy*, is available now on Granary Music/BMG Records
<https://bobmould.com>

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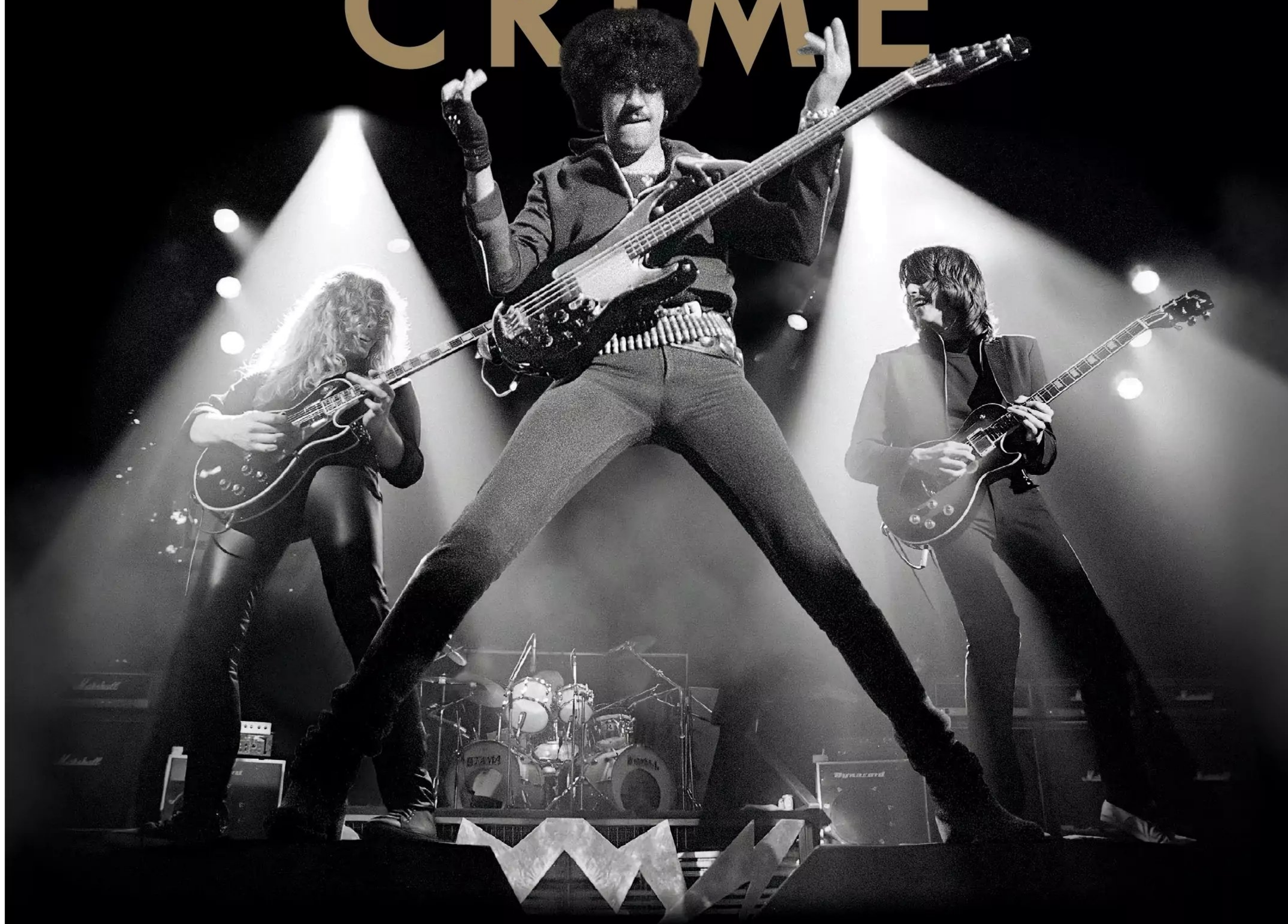
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PARTNERS — IN — CRIME



FOR A HALF-CENTURY AND COUNTING, THE THIN LIZZY SOUND HAS BEEN FORGED AND RECAST BY SCOTT GORHAM AND THE GREATS WHO PARTNERED HIM ON DUELLING LES PAULS, INCLUDING THE LATE JOHN SYKES. GORHAM LOOKS BACK ON THE HIGHS, LOWS, JOY AND PAIN OF HIS CLASSIC PARTNERSHIPS

Words Henry Yates Photo Harry Potts

You'd like Scott Gorham. As countless rock writers have discovered since the mid-70s, an afternoon with the Thin Lizzy guitarist passes in a happy haze of dirty jokes, political potshots, flumes of e-cigarette smoke and drawled war stories (some more libellous than others). If we weren't talking on Zoom, you suspect the conspiratorial Gorham would suggest ditching the interview and hitting the pub – although had you accepted that invitation back in his hellraising days, you might never have never made it home.

That industrial-strength likeability isn't just a gift for journalists; it's also helped Gorham keep the wheels on a band whose combustible chemistry meant a line-up shift was never far away. By our calculations, the band's 74-year-old custodian has partnered no fewer than 12 other guitarists in Lizzy, finding common ground with such disparate characters as Gary Moore, Brian Robertson, John Sykes, Midge Ure and Viv Campbell.

But bonhomie can only get you so far. The fact that every incarnation of Lizzy has produced great music

is testament to Gorham's sympathetic, sharp-eared playing and his desire to recruit foils who push him beyond his comfort zone. "You want to play with people that are better than you," he shrugs, as we open the history books. "It doesn't do any good to be the best guy in the band because you're not gonna learn anything. That's why I loved playing with all these guys we're gonna talk about – because I could watch what they were doing and build my own curriculum. This whole thing is a giant learning system. Hopefully, you never stop..."

BRIAN ROBERTSON

1974-1978

Wind back the clock to '74, then, and imagine yourself a fly on the wall at the London supper club where the Irish band had set up auditions for a second guitarist to partner their latest recruit, the fiery, soulful Scottish gunslinger, Brian Robertson.

Born a world away in California, and moving to England in 1973 with vague hopes of joining his brother-in-law in the Supertramp line-up, Gorham was now flailing on the pub circuit. He knew nothing of Lizzy, except that they'd had a minor hit two years earlier with the old Irish traditional *Whiskey In The Jar*. But it was either: take the audition or crawl home with his rock 'n' roll dreams dashed.

"I had 30 days left on my visa or they're gonna throw me out of the country," he remembers. "I was late and the first guy I meet is [frontman] Phil Lynott, who goes, 'Let me introduce you

to the guys.' So we walk in and Phil goes, 'Hey, everybody, this is Scott,' – and Robbo and Brian Downey [drums] just go, 'Yeah, yeah.' I didn't know they'd already auditioned 24 guitarists, and here comes number 25. I guess they thought, 'Well, here's another one we're going to reject.' So they didn't want to get too friendly."

Likewise, Robertson had no patience to walk yet another hopeful through the set. "Robbo

"You want to play with people that are better than you... This whole thing is a giant learning system" **SCOTT GORHAM**

1. In a line-up still well beloved by fans, Brian Robertson, Phil Lynott and Scott Gorham proved to be a classic hard-rock guitar triumvirate, performing here at the Wembley Empire in 1978

showed me the first song really quickly and said, 'You got that?'" explains Gorham. "Then we're off and running and I'm watching Robbo's hand on the neck, trying to follow every move, barely making the changes in time. But I'm realising, as I'm struggling with these chord patterns, that these guys are really good. And it was probably after the third song, I said to myself, 'I gotta be in this band.'"

Robertson was arguably the strongest link in the chain: a startlingly mature player whose fluid phrasing and ear for harmonic extensions was a product of his upbringing. "This guy was younger than me, but he had so much more musical knowledge," says Gorham. "Brian's father played saxophone in Art Blakey's jazz band, so he grew up in this atmosphere of scales, tones, all that. He was absolutely more technical than me and our styles were different, but we had to put our egos aside and toe the line."

So began the duelling harmony guitars of Lizzy MkII. "We were all 5ths and 3rds, that was our whole thing," explains Gorham. "The metal way of playing harmonies is 7ths and 9ths, but that tweaks my ear. We always tried to hit the sweet spot, and the 5ths and 3rds are the most pleasing to the ear. You can crank it up, or go to the middle setting on a Les Paul at low volume, and those harmonies are still sweet as hell."

Beyond note choice, even the minutiae of Gorham and Robertson's touch needed dialling in. "You're not only trying to get the notation right; you're trying to



PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

“Brian’s father played saxophone in Art Blakey’s jazz band, so he grew up in this atmosphere of scales, tones, all that”

SCOTT GORHAM

Volatile genius: Brian Robertson on stage with Thin Lizzy in Bristol in 1976

get the vibrato in time. Because if one guy has a slow vibrato and the other guy is fast, that's not gonna work. A lot of people don't even think about that. But to get a tight sound, those vibratos really have to be together."

That quest for synergy also led the pair to twin Les Pauls. "I had a really cheap-ass, no-name Japanese Les Paul copy," says Gorham. "That's one of the first things Phil said to me: 'Okay, you're in, but we gotta change that guitar.' So we went to Edgware Road and I bought my sunburst Les Paul. But even before he had the stompboxes and all that, Robbo had some great tones coming out of that guitar."

Many fans would argue Lizzy's best output came in that period. *Nightlife* (1974), *Fighting* (1975), *Jailbreak* (1976), *Johnny The Fox* (1976): all are showcases for the pair's fist-tight interplay. But Gorham believes the partnership kicked hardest on the boards. "The album takes, they're a little slower and more pedestrian,

"It was the masculine struggle of who's gonna be the dominant person... Well, the dominant person was Phil!" **SCOTT GORHAM**



PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

2. Gorham admired Brian Robertson's playing and acted as peacemaker when the impetuous 'Robbo' and Phil Lynott butted heads. But in the end, Phil was the man in charge – and Robertson had to go

whereas on *Live And Dangerous* [1978], we kicked it up a gear. The song that Robbo really stamped his personality on was *Rosalie*. It's one of his simpler solos, but he really got his point across. While he was playing that, I was playing all the high parts – and the most bitching chords you can ever imagine in your life [laughs]!"

Yet the musical harmony didn't extend to band relations. While Gorham deferred to Lynott, Robertson never accepted the hierarchy. "Brian didn't like to take orders," sighs Gorham,

clashing his fists together. "It was the masculine struggle of who's gonna be the dominant person. Well, we all knew who the dominant person was. It was Phil! 'Dude, he was the guy who hired your ass! He's already got three albums under his belt. This is your first album, so why are you coming out with the attitude? Come on, settle down.' Well, he did for a while, then he kicked off again."

Anything could set Robertson off. "I remember our first radio show. We'd just had two weeks off and Robbo had grown a beard. Phil says, 'I'm the only one with facial hair, man – you gotta shave that thing off.' Of course, Brian's going, 'Fuck you, man!' 'Well, if you don't, you're out of the band!' How trivial can you get? So Robbo says, 'All right, I'm quitting the band!' And I'm going, 'Whoa, I just quit my band, put all my eggs in this Thin Lizzy basket, and now we're breaking up over a fucking beard...?!'"

By 1978, even Robertson's sublime playing couldn't stop the axe dropping. "He got back into the band for *Bad Reputation* [1977]," recalls Gorham of the Scotsman's last stand. "I had left a whole load of parts for him. He did most of it. But then he said something to Phil, and that was it. Phil had had enough. It was like, 'Scott, I told you he was gonna do this – he's out.' I'm like, 'Okay, man.' I couldn't say anything at that point. I'd already got Robbo back into the band and now he'd done it again. It was a real shame."

ART ATTACK!

Scott showcases his latest artworks

Back in issue 513, Scott Gorham unveiled the top-secret surrealist pencil sketches he'd worked on while touring with Lizzy. Now, buoyed by the glowing response to that first wave of drawings, the guitarist is set to share a new series. What can he tell us?

"I've got, like, 40 years' worth of stuff. But – and you'll hear this from a lot of people in the art world – not everything you want to show people. But I'd say my success rate is maybe one out of five, so I'm hoping that's a good ratio. At the end of April, we're putting out four new images [pictured right] and seeing what people think. A couple will be brand-new, there'll be one from the 80s and another one from the 90s. I'm trying to span the decades a little bit because I like the idea that we can all do these things at different times in our lives." **Check out Scott Gorham's latest artworks at www.scottgorhamworld.com**



JET SETTING

Midge Ure, the Live Aid orchestrator and Ultravox synth-pop pioneer, looks back at his trial by fire with Thin Lizzy – and why he told Phil Lynott: “I’m not the guy you should be asking”

Words Naomi Baker

In July 1979, Thin Lizzy were riding high following the release of ninth studio album, *Black Rose: A Rock Legend*, and taking what many felt was their best shot at breaking the US. Gary Moore’s mid-tour departure (see page 66) was not in the script.

When he walked out for the third and final time, they needed to find a rapid replacement to complete their dates with Journey. They turned to a guitarist who, today, might seem an unlikely choice. “I thought Phil was out of his fucking mind,” Scott remembers. “‘Midge Ure? He’s a keyboard player!’”

“He was really brave, I have to admit. And I’ll tell you, at the end of the night, when Midge got introduced and Phil explained what he had done, the audience just exploded. He got this huge ovation, which he really deserved. And he did play really good guitar.”

Midge Ure was at work in his London studio when Lizzy leader Lynott called from Arkansas. “My initial reaction was, ‘You’ve got the wrong number. I’m not the guy you should be asking,’” says Ure. “I went back to my little flat and there was a plane ticket, a bunch of cassettes, a setlist and an itinerary saying, ‘A car will pick you up in the morning and take you to Heathrow.’ I found out they’d put me on Concorde, so I had no time to learn any of the songs!”

What were your first steps to learning the Thin Lizzy tracks?

“A ghetto blaster and big headphones. It was pre-Walkman. I sat on Concorde, sipping vintage Dom Perignon – which I’d never had before in my life – trying to get the structures in my head.

“The first time I touched a guitar to learn the chord sequences was in the hotel room with Scott Gorham. Every song had a guitar harmony to go with it. There was no rehearsal – we ran through some songs at soundcheck the next day: ‘You’ve got that; it’ll be fine. Get changed, get on and do your set.’ It was petrifying. Utterly petrifying. Thin Lizzy were a big band and I’d never been to America before.

“Musically, my first impression was, ‘God, they’re loud!’ We had two massive Marshall stacks each. When you stood in front of your stack you couldn’t hear anybody else. I had to keep going over to Brian to check I was in time. It was an emotional turmoil of fear and excitement – just bizarre.”

How was the atmosphere within Lizzy?

“Panic, more than anything. *Black Rose* was a really important record. It’s very difficult to promote an album that’s just covered in Gary Moore when you’re a three-piece without him.

“I had turned up with a Yamaha SG-2000. I did the first few shows with

that until, unbeknownst to me, it was deemed not cool enough for a band like Thin Lizzy to have a Japanese guitar. They were fantastic guitars, and still are, but it was suggested I use a very old Les Paul Junior, which obviously looked the part. I looked like I’d been beamed down from *Star Trek*, standing on stage with these guys with their studs and armbands, flicking their hair – there I was, with my pointy sideburns, sucking my cheeks in!”

Why do you think Phil chose you to replace Gary Moore?

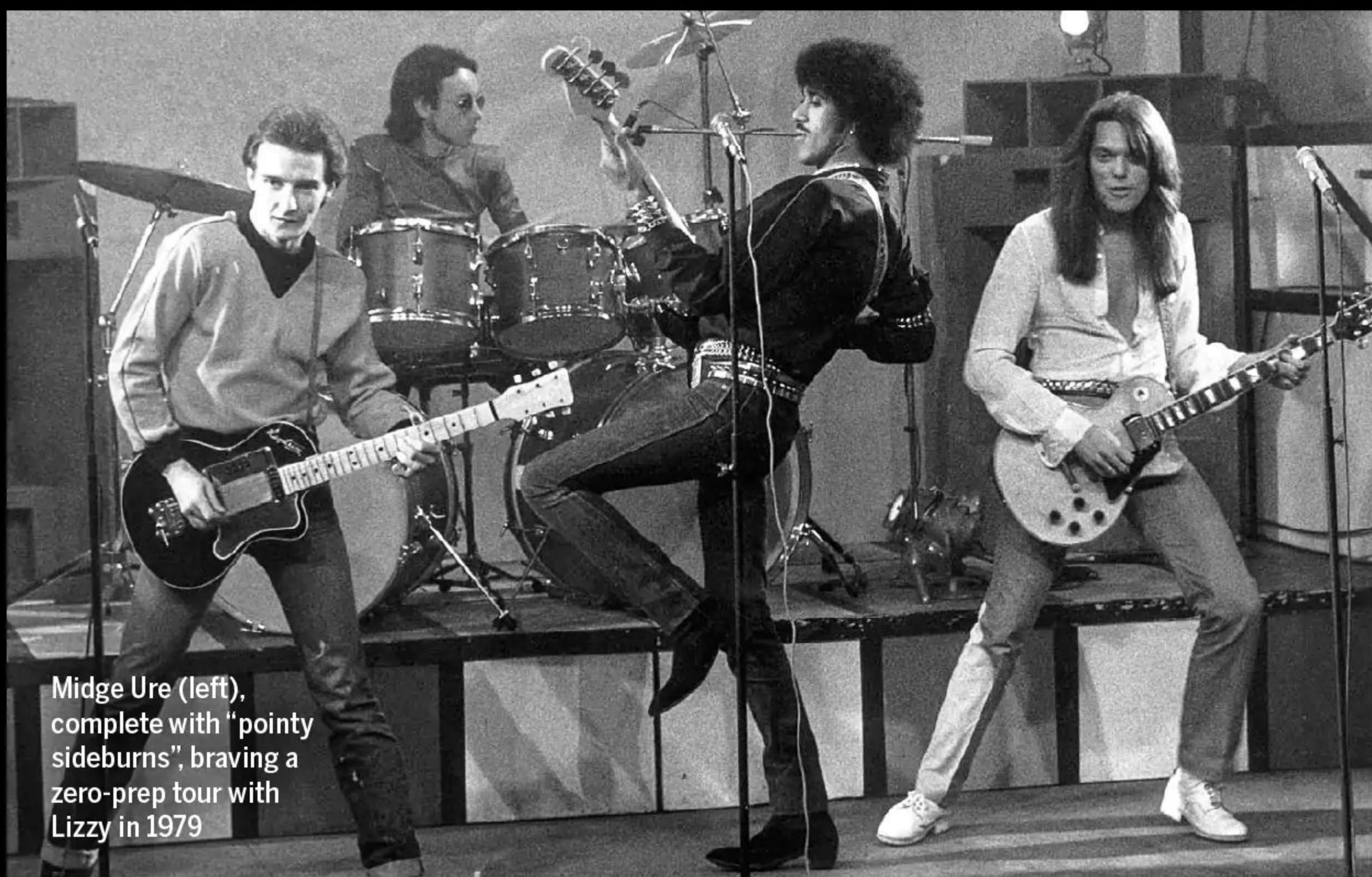
“I found out many years later from Scott that Philip had convinced the guys I knew all the songs. Scott said he’d never seen anyone thrown so deep into the deep end, having to learn an hour’s worth of material on the plane, and learning it well enough to get on stage in front of 30,000 people and play all these harmony guitar parts. *Black Rose* was the only track we couldn’t play live. We spent three weeks trying to learn it, but nobody was fast enough to do those Irish jig-type licks – which was a real skill.”

How did playing in Lizzy shape you?

“It gave me confidence as a guitarist, but it was odd because it wasn’t my music. My heart laid in Ultravox. We all took turns playing cassettes in the limo. They’d be playing ZZ Top and Bob Seger – very American stuff – and I’m saying, ‘Have you heard Kraftwerk?’ Poor Scott would be sitting there pulling his hair out. But Philip would go, ‘Hold on a second, what’s this?’ He was a magpie – he always wanted to be associated with what was happening at the time.

“It made me more money than I’d ever seen in my entire life, and that gave me the wherewithal to get Ultravox up and running. I think I was better as a fan – I felt more comfortable watching Lizzy, rather than being up there doing it. My head was full of electronic synthesizers and combinations of guitars.

“Lizzy were an incredibly important band. Whether you’re a rock musician or not, you cannot deny that Philip had a unique voice, he was a great songwriter, and that Lizzy live were one of the best things you could ever possibly see.”



Midge Ure (left), complete with “pointy sideburns”, braving a zero-prep tour with Lizzy in 1979

SOUND AS A BELL

When the Irish band were a folksy blues three-piece, it was Eric Bell who defined Thin Lizzy on their 1971 self-titled debut and early 70s follow-ups, *Shades Of A Blue Orphanage* and *Vagabonds Of The Western World*

Words Andrew Daly

In 1969, a colourful encounter between Phil Lynott and Eric Bell in a Dublin club sowed the seeds for the formation of the original three-piece Thin Lizzy line-up, with Lynott's long-time friend and previous bandmate Brian Downey on drums. Bell proved to be a consummate songsmith with licks for days. He also provided unforgettable tone, demonstrated on iconic tracks like *The Rocker* and *Whiskey In The Jar* – later to be covered by Metallica on *Garage Inc* in 1998.

But Bell was hampered by drugs and alcohol. During a New Year's Eve show in Dublin in 1973, he stopped the show, threw his Strat in the air, tipped over his amps and then collapsed. He quit the band the next day, ushering in Thin Lizzy's hard rock-based era.

Asked if he regrets how things ended, Bell says: "I did at first, but the passing of time has changed my mind. If I'd stayed,

I'd be dead, like fucking hundreds of other musicians. It got to a point where I was smoking dope and drinking while recording and playing live. I had to stop... I had to walk away. I have no regrets."

How did you meet Phil Lynott and form Thin Lizzy?

"I was at a club amid my first LSD trip. There was this band playing, which had Phil as the singer, though he wasn't playing bass. I was sitting there watching and the LSD began to kick in – but I could tell Phil was special. He had these impressive vocal chops and great charisma. I thought to myself, 'Man, if only I could find a guy like that.'

"So when they took a break, Phil went to the dressing room and I followed him. He said, 'Can I help you?' I said, 'I'm looking to form a three-piece band.' At this point, I was laughing at everything I saw around the room. Phil looked at me

like I'd just escaped an asylum and asked, 'Are you okay?' I said, 'It's my first trip on acid,' and we kept talking. He told me about a drummer called Brian Downey and he said to go to the Zodiac Club and find him there.

"As I was leaving, Phil said, 'I want to play bass and I want to write my own songs.' I said, 'Yeah? Okay – quit your band.' From there we met for a rehearsal; it was very shaky, but I knew there was something there and we stuck with it."

What was it like working with Phil on the first Thin Lizzy record?

"We took a lot of risks; I'd only known Phil for about six weeks then. I remember sitting in the pub and he said, 'Fancy getting a house together to work on music?' Many bands were doing that and we figured it was easier than going into a rehearsal space. We got this space in Dublin and many of the earliest Thin Lizzy songs were written there."

After Thin Lizzy, the band moved from Ireland to London for *Shades Of A Blue Orphanage*. Why?

"We'd begun to cause some waves around Ireland. We went from having no-one at gigs to having a huge line out the door. I took it for granted, but we kept getting bigger. Our manager said to us, 'There's nothing more here for you – you've got to move to London.'

"So we went and started playing six nights a week. But no-one knew who we were. We started from the bottom all over again and that's when we went in to do the second record. The thing was that we didn't have enough songs, and since we were working so hard, we didn't have time to arrange things. The second record was literally made up on the spot."

Whiskey In The Jar was released as a single in late '72. Tell us about the recording.

"That was the hardest piece of music I've ever worked on in my life. We'd been messing with it in rehearsal. But I thought, 'This isn't blues. It's not funk. It's not jazz. It's an Irish folk song – and I don't know how to approach it.' [Working up the solo] was unreal. I'd get

Eric Bell lets rip in the early line-up of the band in 1973

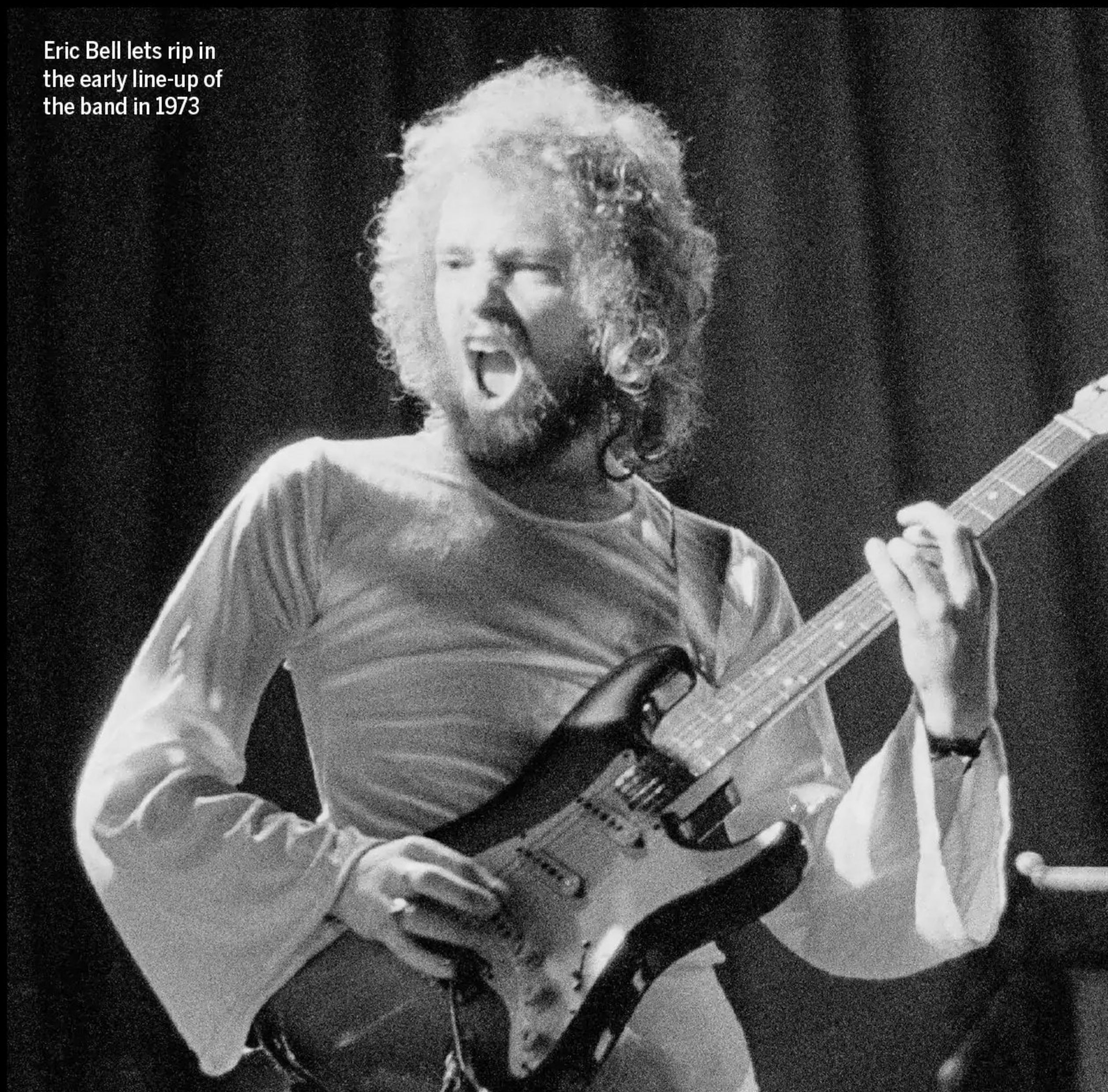
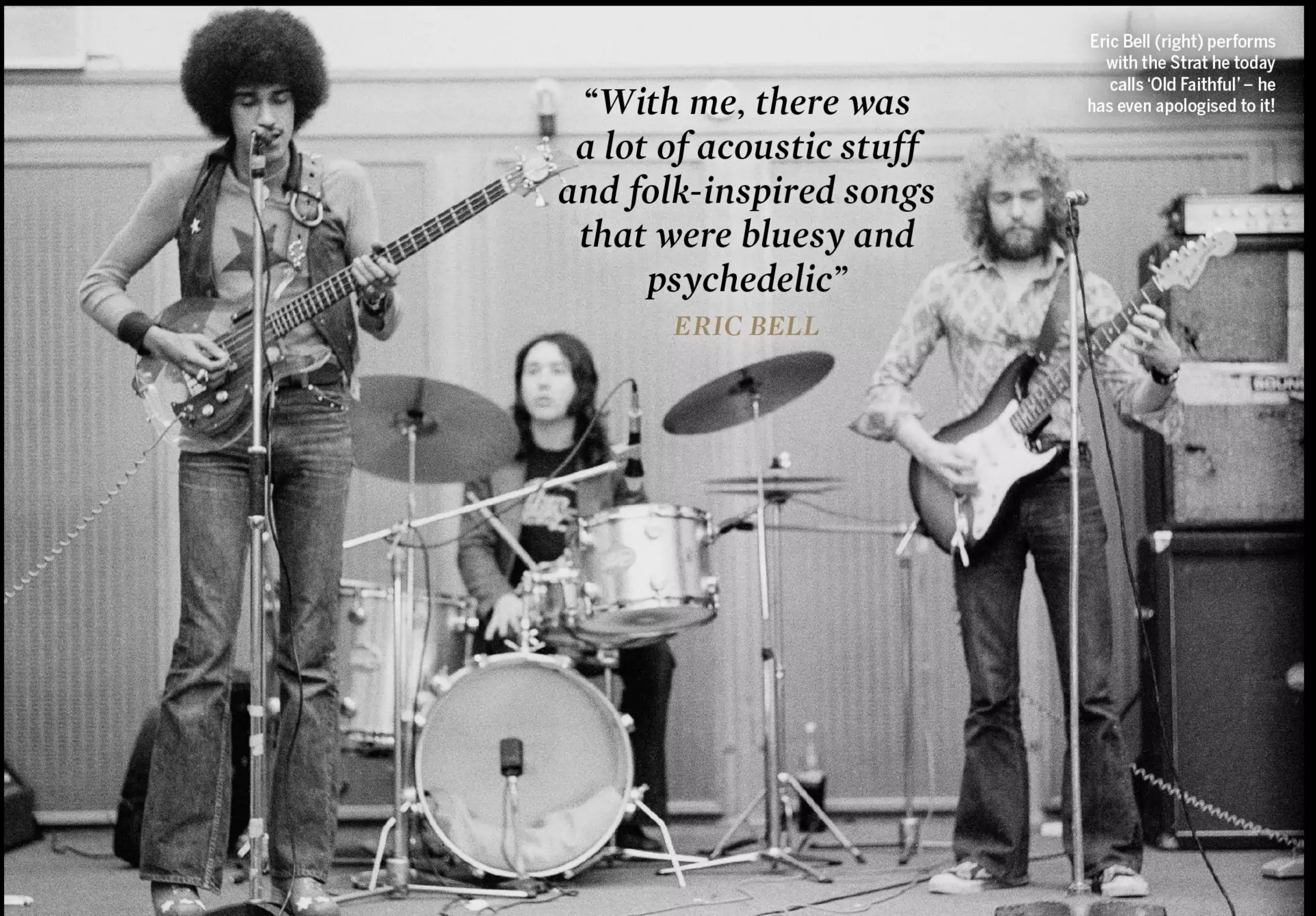


PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Eric Bell (right) performs with the Strat he today calls 'Old Faithful' – he has even apologised to it!

“With me, there was a lot of acoustic stuff and folk-inspired songs that were bluesy and psychedelic”

ERIC BELL

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

up each morning, go to the guitar – and couldn't think of anything. It went on for weeks, then Phil started calling: 'We need this done!'

“One night we played in Wales and while driving home I was sitting in the back seat. I went into this dreamlike state and started thinking about Irish pipes. I said, 'Right, forget about the guitar. Let's run with this.' I heard Irish pipes in my brain and the solo started forming in my mind. I'd never thought that way before. Once I'd gotten into the song and the solo was underway, I hit it hard as it was happening. It was just one of those special moments where every note worked. It was very unusual.”

What gear did you use?

“I had a very strange setup. When I got to London, I had a Vox AC30, but it went missing. I was trying a lot of different amps and I ended up trying a Vox with two PA speakers. I tried a Hiwatt and a Marshall, but I didn't like them. Our manager got me this transistor amp and when I plugged it in Phil said, 'There's no valves!' It had a treble booster that I paired with this echo chamber. I plugged the Strat in, cranked the volume to the edge and off I went.”

***Vagabonds Of The Western World* showed promise, but it all came crashing down during the band's New Year's Eve show in '73.**

“A lot had happened by that point. I was only in my 20s and we'd ended up in London, which I hated. I couldn't handle it being so different from Ireland. I went down a slippery slope of drinking and drugs, and we were hardly making any real money.

“So we get into Belfast, our hometown, and I'm on a lot of drugs before the show at Queen's University. It was sold out and I drank half a bottle of whiskey to calm down. Then it was time to go on – and I couldn't do it. Drinking all the whiskey had me feeling like a giant was smothering me; I could barely raise my arms, let alone play the guitar.

“I said, 'Eric, you should not be doing this gig. You're not capable.' So Phil and Brian launched into the set – and by the third song I was gone. This voice in my head said, 'Get out of here. Leave this situation, or you'll be dead.' Then the voice said, 'Throw the guitar in the air, kick the speaker over and fucking get out.' Before I knew what I was doing, I saw my guitar in the air in slow motion, and I went and pushed my amp over.

“People thought it was an act, but I collapsed under the stage. And the crew ran over, yelling, 'Get back out there!' But I said, 'No, I've had it. I've left the band.'”

Did you agree with the direction that Phil took Thin Lizzy?

“It was a different band. With me, there was a lot of acoustic stuff and folk-inspired songs that were bluesy and psychedelic. But Phil leaned on harder stuff with Brian [Robertson] and Scott Gorham in the band. Don't get me wrong – those albums were excellent, just not how it might have been. Thin Lizzy became a superb band, just a completely different one than I was in.”

Do you still have the Strat you tossed into the air during your final show with Thin Lizzy in 1973?

“I do! I have other guitars, but my main one is the same Strat I used with Thin Lizzy. I've had it for about 50 years and I play it daily. I call it 'Old Faithful' because it never lets me down. I had a drunken conversation with it one night where I said, 'I'm sorry I threw you up in the air in Belfast. Can you please forgive me?' I believe it has.”

GARY MOORE

1974, 1977, 1978-1979

Moore's on/off relationship with Lizzy is one of the great flirtations in rock 'n' roll, the storied Belfast guitarist passing by like a meteor for three blink-and-miss-it shifts in the 70s. Moore was a master technician who pre-dated Gorham's tenure (and played on the sublime *Still In Love With You* from 74's *Nightlife*), so did the Californian ever feel threatened by his return? It's the only time he shows a flicker of irritation.

3. Gary Moore and Scott Gorham combining the might of their Les Pauls at the Memorial Auditorium in Sacramento, California, in 1977

"Gary would attack the guitar with different velocities to bring out different tones. He was so inventive" SCOTT GORHAM

"Y'know, I've been asked that before and actually I don't get that question. I was *thrilled* that this guy was gonna come into the band – because I knew what he could do. I knew that, once again, here was a guy I could feed off and learn some really great shit off of him, right? Gary was one of those absolute natural-born guitar players."

Just as important, as the band embarked on 1977's US tour supporting Queen, was that Moore had two functioning hands – Robertson having ruled himself out after a brawl at The Marquee. "Because Gary had played with Lizzy before, he knew the songs," reasons Gorham, "and if you threw something new at him, he was gonna get it really quickly. Which is what we needed. Because Robbo had busted his hand, we were on the plane and we were like, 'Gary, we gotta get this shit done, man!' And he did."

Live shots from the period show both players jousting on Les Pauls in front of a wall of Marshalls. "Yeah, Gary was already playing his Peter Green Les Paul, and I'd finally got my 1957 Les Paul, which I bought in Boston," says Gorham. "Every once in a while, he had an SG he would pull out. But 90 per cent of the time, it was the two

Les Pauls. You have to remember, with the Queen tour, we only had 45 minutes, so there's not a lot of switching guitars, detunings and all that crap. It was just like, 'Boom – let's go!'

"Pairing Les Pauls works because they both have similar sounds," he continues. "The difference comes from the way the player attacks the strings. Gary was great with that. He'd attack the guitar with different velocities to bring out different tones. He was so inventive. I remember, he came up to me one day and said, 'Check this out – doesn't this sound like bagpipes?' I was like, 'Goddamn, it does! What are you gonna use that for?' And he said, 'Nothing, I just wanted to see if I could do it.' I don't think Gary really liked repeating himself every night on tour, but you kind of have to in those situations."

Without guitars in their hands, however, Gorham says it was harder to bond with the Irishman. "I can see why people would say Gary was a hard guy to get to know. If Phil and I were going to a club and Gary came out with us, he'd sit on his own and wouldn't engage. After a while, he stopped coming out. He just stayed in the

hotel. It was always me and Phil hanging out and he might have felt a little excluded."

In the studio, Moore made his defining mark on 1979's *Black Rose: A Rock Legend*. "My favourite track has gotta be *Black Rose*," says Gorham. "Gary came up with that whole middle section. I've played it with other guitar players and they just couldn't handle it, John Sykes being one of them. There's a whole ton of harmony work going on. You've gotta be on your game to pull that song off. There's no resting point. Once you hear the '1-2-3-4', you're in it, man! *Waiting For An Alibi* is another one. I took the solo on that, but it was Gary who came up with the little melody at the end. I'll admit, when I first heard it, I went, 'Goddammit Gary, we're gonna have to pull that off every night!'"

Plainly, there was gas in the tank. But Moore's third and final exit left a sour taste, the Irishman quitting midway through a US tour in July 1979. Lizzy never regained their Stateside momentum and Gorham was justifiably furious. "I think, towards the end there, Gary really did want to play all the guitars," he reflects. "He just wanted it



PHOTO BY LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

*"Here was a guy
I could feed off and
learn from. Gary was
an absolute natural-
born guitar player"*

SCOTT GORHAM

to be him and him alone. And y'know, that would have been fine [for him to leave for a solo career]. Both Phil and I would have been, 'Okay, cool. This is not a jail sentence. No band is.' But you gotta quit at the right moment, and Gary did the worst thing any band member can do. I was angry, man. You just don't do that. All the work we'd put in and you just stepped out the back door? Like, what the fuck, man?"

It took the 1986 death of Lynott to mend fences between the two guitarists, and when Moore himself passed in 2011, they parted as friends. "In the ensuing years, Gary kept trying to apologise to me. When we did the tribute to Phil in Dublin, he pointedly asked me to come over, and he just couldn't apologise enough for quitting the tour. So I said, 'Well, it was a dick move. But hey, you've apologised and I forgive you – let's just walk away from that one.' And we were friends after that, y'know?"

PHOTO BY ROLF ADLER/REUTZ/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Gary Moore in full flight (before taking flight) on the *Black Rose* tour in 1979

JOHN SYKES

1982-1983, 1996-2009

Lizzy rolled with the punches on 1980's *Chinatown* and 1981's *Renegade* (both featuring the bluesier Snowy White on guitar). But in 1982, Gorham called a crisis meeting. "I told Phil we had to stop this whole thing. The drug addictions. Phil losing his voice. The mistakes we were now making on stage: that really hurt because we were a band that just did not make mistakes, then you hear a recording and you go, 'What the hell was that?' So I said, 'Let's wrap this thing up. Let's get our shit together and when we both get healthy, we'll hit everybody over the head with a fucking sledgehammer.'"

4. Latter-day Lizzy: John Sykes and Scott Gorham on stage at in Norwich in 2006. Many years after Phil Lynott's death, Sykes fronted a revivalist line-up of the band for a time, pictured in action here

"John brought in that metal edge. He had a fiery style, and I stepped up my sound to match his" SCOTT GORHAM

Instead, the bandleader made a counter-offer. "Phil says, 'Let's do one more album and world tour. I know this kid. He's really good. He's with Tygers Of Pan Tang.' I'd heard the name in magazines but never heard anything they'd recorded. Phil says, 'I promise you, you're gonna like him, and if you don't, we'll look for somebody else.'"

"So John Sykes comes down and I couldn't fault him in any way. I really wanted to say, 'See, there's nobody out there, so we gotta walk away from this.' But I couldn't. He was a great player. He was a one-guitar guy: never, ever did I see him play anything but his black Les Paul. And he looked great on stage, too. So what was not to like?"

While the songs for 1983's *Thunder And Lightning* were complete (barring the Sykes co-write *Cold Sweat*), the new boy quickly asserted himself with a fierce vibrato and shrieking harmonics that pushed Lizzy in a new direction. "We were not a metal band," reflects Gorham. "But John brought in that metal edge. He had a fiery style, and I stepped up my sound to match his. Really, his strength was the quickness. He wasn't about subtleties. Every track he wanted faster. He'd turn around to Brian Downey and say, 'Hey man, can you kick it up a couple?' And I'd have to say, 'John, it's getting out of control.' He wanted to show everybody just how fast he was. But he was an excellent player, no doubt about that. Our best track together was *Cold Sweat*. But there was no middle ground with *Thunder And Lightning*. Lizzy fans loved it or hated it."



PHOTO BY RICHARD ECCLESTONE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

*“John’s strength
was the quickness.
He wasn’t about
subtleties. Every track
he wanted faster”*

SCOTT GORHAM

Sykes performing with
a rejuvenated Thin
Lizzy – the band was
buoyed by his energy

THEY ALSO SERVED

Scott Gorham on four more Lizzy guitar partners



SNOWY WHITE (1980-1982)

"I liked Snowy a lot. I also liked his playing. He was a much bluesier player than all the rest of the guys. For us to ask him to

rock it up, it was a bit of a stretch for him. Not that he couldn't do it. But his comfort zone was really based around the blues feel.

"Chinatown was my favourite track we did because that was his riff. We were just in the rehearsal room one day and he was playing that and I said, 'Hey man, that's kinda cool.' 'Yeah, I've been beating this one around for a while.' I said, 'Well, let's

"I loved playing with all these guys – I could watch what they were doing and build my own curriculum"

SCOTT GORHAM

try to get something together.' We got Phil in and that's how it happened. Both he and I play lead guitar: he played the first solo, I play the second one.

"Snowy says he left because he was too quiet for Thin Lizzy? Oh yeah. Like you wouldn't believe. Phil had to force Snowy to move on stage. He was always the background guy, never a spotlight kinda person."

PHOTO BY SIMON LEES



Richard Fortus and Scott Gorham duking it out on a 'pile-driver' of a tour

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE



VIV CAMPBELL (2010-2011)

"Vivian was the guy who helped me get that last version of Lizzy going. I had no idea who to get on that right-hand side.

And then I get a phone call from Joe Elliott from Def Leppard. He says, 'Scott, I hear you're putting a band together. Vivian would like to know if you would consider him being in Thin Lizzy for a while.' I went, 'Are you kidding me? Hell yeah!' And that freed me up to start thinking, 'Okay, I'll get Marco Mendoza on bass, this other guy on drums...' So Vivian was a great starter for me. I've always admired his guitar playing. And I always liked him as a guy, too."

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON



RICHARD FORTUS (2011)

"Richard somehow got my phone number and called me up. And I said, 'Y'know, Richard,

I really do know your pedigree and how good you are. I'll tell you what: Vivian's gotta go back on tour with Def Leppard – can you fly to blah-blah-blah city and we'll have two days of rehearsal and then pile-drive straight into the tour?' He said, 'Absolutely.' I sent him the setlist and a plane ticket and that was Richard Fortus in the band for the next two months or so. It was a really good experience. He's a great player, too."

PHOTO BY REED R. RADCLIFFE



DAMON JOHNSON (2011-2019)

"Damon's a really great player. If he's being really honest, he'd be more on the country-rock

side of things, if he's going to be really comfortable. But he can play the heavier stuff, too. He's a really well-rounded player. The only problem with Damon is that he's so fucking tall. I said to him, 'Damon, when you come over to my side of the stage, spread your legs, okay? Make yourself a little shorter.' He was also the only other Thin Lizzy guitar player that played golf. So he and I could go out and play golf together."

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON

Either way, Lynott's death meant that 12th album became Lizzy's studio swansong (a status it holds to this day). As far as Gorham was concerned, without their talismanic frontman, Lizzy was over as a touring outfit, too. But in the mid-90s, Sykes pitched his former wingman an initially jarring idea. "We both sang background, but I'd never heard John sing solo. I had no idea he had three solo albums. I listened to them and I thought, 'Hey, where's he been keeping this?' So I said, 'Okay, I think we can give this a shot. I'm still not sure if this is the right thing to do, but let's see what happens.'"

Even with considerable pedigree in the line-up, remembers Gorham, the first day felt off. "I remember being in that studio and nobody wanted to pick up a guitar, in case this was not going to work out. I finally said, 'Fuck it, I've

"I'm waiting for the right player. I don't want to break the chain of great guitarists coming through Thin Lizzy" **SCOTT GORHAM**

flown 6,000 miles, let's get into this. We'll start out with *Jailbreak*, okay? If it's shit, then we'll just pack up. So we played *Jailbreak* and at the end, we looked at each other and said, 'Actually, that sounded pretty damn good.' Before we knew it, we had a full set that everybody felt confident in."

While some fans never accepted the switch, the Sykes-fronted Lizzy lasted until July 2009 – when this career journeyman rolled on for a stuttering solo career, while the band drafted gunslingers like Viv Campbell, Richard Fortus and Damon Johnson. When Sykes died of cancer in December 2024,

Gorham felt a terrible sense of déjà vu. "I got so many requests: 'Hey, Scott, let's do an interview.' 'No thanks, it's too soon.' The same thing happened when Phil died. I didn't want to go through all that again. I kinda wish I hadn't been such a prick about it and done some of these interviews, for John's sake."

Where does that leave Lizzy in 2025? Four decades since the last studio material – and with no live dates in the diary – a betting man would say the fabled Irish band is all over. Don't be so sure, smiles Gorham. "I'm waiting for the right calibre of player. I can't just pick somebody off the line. For me, there's gotta be something special about them. I don't want to break the chain of great guitar players coming through Thin Lizzy. I know they're out there. So hopefully, it's not gonna take too long for something to happen..." **G**

5. Keeper of the flame: Scott Gorham has been the backbone of the band through victory and tragedy – and he isn't ready to quit yet, either



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER



PRE-CBS SUNBURST STRATOCASTERS

Five Stratocasters, all sunbursts and all different – so what is the best vintage if you’re craving a classic?

Words Huw Price Photography Olly Curtis

If Leo Fender really did get everything right the first time, then why did flagship models such as the Stratocaster continually evolve? By the close of the pre-CBS era, the late-1964 Stratocaster differed significantly from the Strat ‘prototypes’ that began appearing in the first half of 1954. Steve Hove of ATB Guitars in Cheltenham has brought along five pre-CBS Stratocasters to guide us through the changes that occurred between 1957 and 1964 and tell us about recent market trends.

1957

“Ash is an open-pore wood that needed to be grain-filled. After the very earliest Strats, which just had a natural finish with the dark perimeter, Fender sprayed the centre section yellow. In 1955, they began applying a sealer called Homoclad over the grain filler before spraying the yellow.

“Alder bodies became standard towards the end of 1956 and they didn’t require grain-filling. Fender started dipping bodies in yellow stain before applying the sealer and then spraying the edges and topcoats. This 1957 is a good early example of an ash body sunburst where we can see all the finishing stages that are correct for the year.

“Some people may regard Strat necks from 1954 as being a bit big and unrefined, and this continued into 1955. By 1956, Fender had phased in a soft V profile and during 1957 the V became more pronounced. This 1957 has the ‘harder’ V, but in the scheme of things it’s still relatively soft and nothing like the almost triangular cross section that some Gibsons had in the pre-war era. The soft V is a desirable profile these days and it’s the one a lot of Fender’s reissues are based on.

“The pickups in this guitar are all original and feature the black fibreboard bobbin material that lasted until 1964. During the pre-CBS era the pickups were scatter-wound with the wire guided onto the bobbin by hand, so they do tend to vary. The heavy Formvar insulated magnet wire was also inconsistent, so the pickup resistance tends to range from the high 5ks to low 6ks.

“Two-tone sunburst Strats are also synonymous with single-ply ABS plastic pickguards that retained their white colour pretty well. The look is quite austere and basic, but they stood up to warping and shrinking better than the later nitrate guards.

“This guitar is somewhat rare and unusual because the body is dated 9/57, but it’s ash – rather than alder. Fender never stopped making ash Strat bodies, but they were generally reserved for translucent blonde-finished guitars like the Mary Kaye model.”

1960

“1958 saw the introduction of red into Fender’s new ‘two-tone’ sunburst, and it first appeared on the Jazzmaster. They were still staining the bodies before spraying the dark edges and the red. Like the red in Gibson’s sunbursts, Fender’s red was prone to fading and it’s often more vibrant under the pickguard and jack plate. This guitar has faded into something resembling a two-tone.

“The slim D neck profile was introduced in 1958. Earlier examples were still one-piece maple necks, but later that year Stratocaster followed Jazzmasters in getting rosewood fretboards. This profile was retained until around 1961, and from 1959 onwards they can be quite skinny. These earlier rosewood necks have thick ‘slab’ boards, where the fretboards were flat on the underside and radiused on top.

1964 & 1957



*"When you take into
account the whole of
the pre CBS era, there
really is something
for everyone"*

STEVE HOVE

These two Stratocasters
from 1964 (top) and 1957
bookend this selection and,
while superficially similar,
they differ significantly



1. This near-mint 1957 Stratocaster retains its ashtray bridge cover. Note the yellowed plastic parts, which are typical for later '57 guitars

2. By 1957, a 'butterfly' string tree had replaced the earlier round type. The walnut plug here indicates one-piece neck construction



“One way to identify original necks is to look for the rosewood cutting across the top of the truss rod access hole. If you see maple in a gap between the top of the hole and a slab 'board, it's not a pre-CBS neck. There should also be router template locating pin holes under the D tuner and on the heel. This neck has no pencil date, which is typical for the mid-1959 to early 1960 era.

“Rosewood is a hard-wearing wood, and traditionally rosewood fretboards weren't lacquered. Maple is hard, too, but the lacquer Fender applied over it tended to wear off, and finger marks

weren't perceived as a good look in those days. Negative customer feedback and numerous warranty repairs may also have prompted the changeover.

“Early three-tone sunbursts with maple and rosewood necks still had single-ply 'guards, but by 1959 celluloid nitrate three-ply guards became standard. These 'guards are prone to shrinking, and cracks are often seen by the neck pickup height adjustment screw, switch and treble side horn. They're known as 'green' 'guards, but the shade can differ considerably depending on environmental factors.”

1962

“It could be that this 1962 example had less exposure to UV light or, like Gibson, Fender began using a red pigment that was less prone to fading. Either way, the vibrant red on this guitar provides some indication of how the 1960 may have looked when it was new.

“The yellow also looks far more vivid, and it's interesting to note how the width of the very dark brown band around the edges always varied. It could be that wider bands were applied to mask flaws in the alder, or maybe the look differed depending on which employee was spraying the finish.

“Fender introduced the veneer 'board around July 1962 and that seemed to coincide with the necks becoming a bit fatter. But the changes between 1958 and 1965 were far less noticeable than those between 1954 and 1957. In my experience, the early veneer 'boards tend to be a bit thicker, but fretboards that have been over-sanded when being refretted can confuse the issue.

“Slab- and veneer-'board necks were made in a slightly different way. For veneer-'board necks, like this one from October '62, the maple was radiused and the veneer was clamped to conform to the curve as it was glued on. Again, this streamlined the production process, and since rosewood was probably Fender's most expensive wood, using less of it may have reduced costs.”



3. Even if you can't see the heel end, a slab 'board neck, as on this 1960 model, can be identified by the rosewood curve below the nut

4. The earliest rosewood-board Strats had single-ply pickguards, but by 1959 they all featured three-ply nitrate 'green' pickguards



1963

"A big change in Fender's finishing method occurred in 1963 when they began using dipping bodies into Fullerplast. Again, this was probably motivated by the desire to simplify and streamline the process, and in turn reduce costs. Fullerplast was a quick-drying clear polyurethane base coat that was applied after the stain. It was easy to sand and provided an even surface for nitrocellulose colour coats. It also prevented expensive nitrocellulose lacquer from soaking into the wood, which meant that fewer coats were needed.

"Some people assume it was a Fender product because Fullerplast relates to Fullerton, California, where the Fender factory was located. In fact, the product combined the name of its inventor, Fuller O' Brien, with the dreaded word 'plastic'. People often assume that all vintage Strats had 'breathable' nitro finishes, but from 1963 onwards the nitro was sprayed over poly.

"Fender's switch to rosewood 'boards meant they could rout the truss rod channel into the top, rather than the underside of the necks, because the fretboard covered everything up. This allowed them to dispense with the walnut skunk stripe and headstock plug that feature on the 1957.

4

"One way to identify original necks is to look for the rosewood cutting across the top of the truss rod access hole"

STEVE HOVE



1960



5. Unlike the 1960 model before it, the red area in the sunburst remains strong and unfaded here on this 1962 example



6. The straight rosewood line beneath the nut signifies the thicker early veneer 'boards of '62. Patent numbers feature on the decal

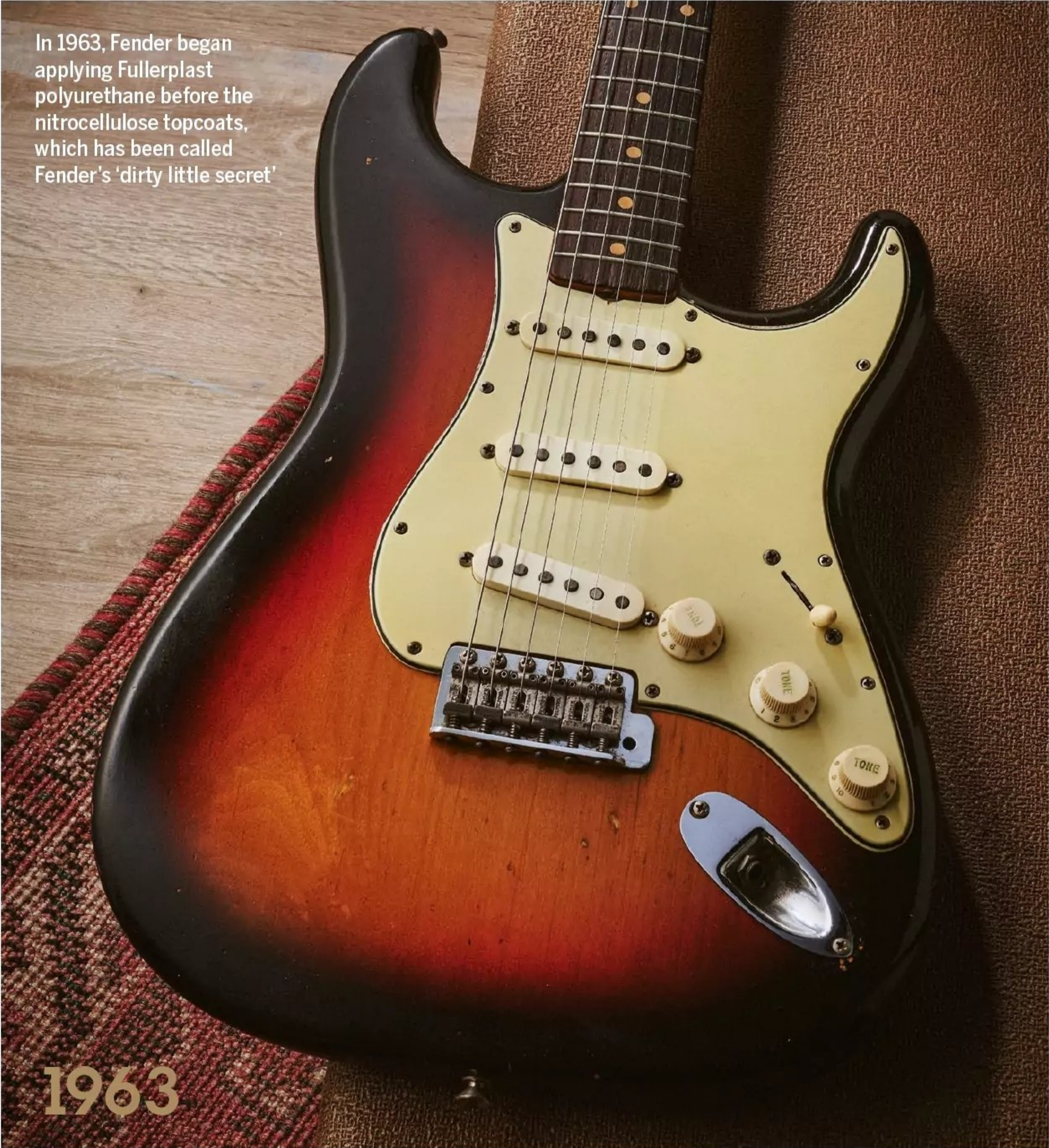
“The pickguard screw later underwent a subtle change 1963. This guitar has an earlier-style 'guard with a screw hole equidistant between the neck and middle pickups, but later that year Fender moved the screw hole closer to the middle pickup as you can see on the 1964 example.”

1964

“In late 1964 Fender stopped staining the bodies and went back to spraying the yellow section. By that time, they were sometimes using lesser-grade alder that wasn't as visually appealing, so they added white to the yellow to make it less see-through. This would conceal smaller knots, mineral streaks and joins in bodies that would previously have been set aside for solid custom colours.

“This unfaded 1964 example has the more opaque yellow and, rather than blending into one another, each colour band is distinct and separate. It's the style known as the 'target 'burst' that ushered in the CBS era.

“Fender's other big change was made to the pickups in late 1964 when fully automated machine-winding replaced hand-winding. The pickup readings became far more consistent and the windings were no longer 'scattered'. These pickups can be identified by their grey bottoms, although black-bottomed pickups can sometimes be seen in 1965 and 1966 Strats.



In 1963, Fender began applying Fullerplast polyurethane before the nitrocellulose topcoats, which has been called Fender's 'dirty little secret'

Towards the end of the pre-CBS era, Fender's 'target 'bursts' featured semi-opaque yellow mixed with white and three distinct colour bands

"In late 1964, the fully automated machine winding of pickups replaced hand winding"

STEVE HOVE

1964

"They also changed to plain enamel insulated magnet wire, which has a brownish purple look, rather than the reddish copper colour of Formvar wire. In 1964, Fender started applying yellow date stamps to black-bottom pickups, which is the case with this guitar, and they continued doing this with the grey-bottom pickups. To my ears, the grey bottoms sound a little bolder and more punchy than the Formvar ones, with extra fatness and less midrange scoop."

Market Movements

"There's a lot of choice out there, and people lean towards various schools of thought. Some prefer the earlier slab 'boards with the slimmer necks from around 1960 and 1961, others prefer two-tone sunbursts with fatter maple necks. When you take into account the whole of the pre-CBS era, there really is something for everyone."

"Within that you have to factor in the overall condition and originality, which dictates the price you have to pay. There are so many variables in the vintage market and it does help if you can visit a shop like ATB that has a really good selection of vintage Strats for you to try. Two guitars from the same year can actually look and sound very different, depending on how they've aged and how much they've been played. Some of our buyers prefer guitars that are worn and look like they've had a life. Others are prepared to pay a premium for guitars that are collector grade and in near mint condition."

"With rosewood necks, slab 'boards seem to have greater desirability and they tend to be priced higher. Maybe people gravitate towards them because it's a bigger piece of a premium tonewood that's indicative of a certain period of pre-CBS manufacturing and it resonates with a lot of people. Some believe the slab 'boards have a different tone to veneer 'boards, but others think it's more of a visual thing."

"Refinishes are an interesting part of the market, too. Not that long ago you could get a refinished pre-CBS Strat at a relatively affordable price, but prices have recently been going up a lot. A lot depends on the quality of the refinish and how the ageing sits with the guitar – nice ones will now run to five figures. They have maybe doubled in value and then some over the last decade. With original Strats hovering around £25,000 it just drags up the values of player-grade guitars." 

Guitarist would like to thank
ATB Guitars of Cheltenham
www.atbguitars.com



Larry DiMarzio

From his early days in the repair shop to heading up one of the world's leading pickup brands, the master pickup maker tells us how his problem-solving mindset led to him working with some of the biggest names in the biz, and why he humbly still seems himself as "crew"

Words Andrew Daly

As a young man in New York City, Larry DiMarzio was a guitar repairman with a big vision. "What I was after was really making a better rock 'n' roll pickup," DiMarzio tells *Guitarist*. While that may sound simple in theory, it wasn't in reality. From DiMarzio's perspective – which was gleaned through years of repairing used guitars, which he found to be of increasingly poor quality – major brands that he grew up loving had lost the "process for building the pyramids".

Essentially, by DiMarzio's estimation, the halcyon years of the 1950s and early 60s, which produced some of the most prized Les Pauls, Stratocasters and Telecasters ever produced, were a distant memory. In their place were quality control and tonal issues. The concerns with the build quality were one thing, and not necessarily DiMarzio's priority. But the tonal needs were another matter entirely.

First came DiMarzio's FS-1 pickup, which essentially replaced the stock Fender Strat bridge pickup. Early adopters were David Gilmour, which was fantastic, of course, but this was only the beginning. Elsewhere, players such as Earl Slick, Gene Simmons, Paul Stanley, Ace Frehley, Al DiMeola and Joe Perry hipped themselves to DiMarzio, who, in addition to the FS-1, had developed the iconic Super Distortion humbucker, changing the face and sound of rock 'n' roll in the 1970s.

Slick specifically was one of DiMarzio's earliest supporters as DiMarzio modded his guitars. "If you

listen to early Aerosmith records, you can tell between Joe and Brad Whitford's stuff," Slick says. "The sound was coming out of Joe's pickups. They added punch. They weren't just louder, they were sonically different, with more midrange."

Larry DiMarzio chuckles when he looks back on the inherent differences between his product and what was available at the time, saying: "It's the difference between supermarket-baked bread and a good bakery. That's not what guitar players need. They need a good, honest product built from the ground up."

Indeed. To that end, DiMarzio's product reshaped hard-rock guitar in the 1970s and kept on doing so into the 80s and 90s. His pickups can be found in guitars of all shapes and sizes, making their way under the hands of everyone from Randy Rhoads and Paul Gilbert, to Kurt Cobain, Dimebag Darrell, Nita Strauss and Matteo Mancuso.

Now in his mid-70s, Larry DiMarzio no longer needs to work. And he certainly doesn't need to invent any more iconic pickups – but that's not stopping him. It's not his style to sit back, and it's definitely not his style to sell out, regardless of how many legacy brands are scooped up by major players around him. Moreover, he's certainly not about to start believing his own hype, no matter how many iconic players champion his creations. "I've never asked those questions directly," he says. "My attitude was that I'm crew. I'm happy to do the job, you know? I'm the guy who walks in and fixes the problem."



1. Larry photographing the guitar repair and storage room upstairs at Eddie Van Halen's 5150 Studios, Los Angeles, in 1993

What led you to become a guitar repairman in New York City in the early 70s?
“Maybe we should start with fantasy versus reality. I grew up having teachers who had interesting guitars. One of my earliest teachers – and I must have been 15 – had an original mid-50s Strat with the V-shaped neck and stock Strat pickups. That guitar was very special; it was better than anything I could

“My attitude was that I’m crew. I’m happy to do the job, you know? I’m the guy who walks in and fixes the problem”

make sense? So the reason that I refer to ‘fantasy’ is that you have an idea in your mind, which may not be true and very often isn’t. Coming at it from the point of view that there were things that stood out because you didn’t own them, you had a fantasy about them.”

How did that fantasy merge with your reality?
“I started working at the Guitar Lab around ’71 or ’72. I was going to work at a professional guitar shop around the corner of 48th Street [in New York City] and I suddenly had access to tons of guitars that were coming through the shop for repair. Or I’d go down to Manny’s, pick up a Stratocaster and say, ‘This is like a dead tuna,’ you know?”

afford and was available to me. Having said that, some of the early guitars that I owned were broken or falling apart, so I wound up fixing those guitars.”

Once you got rolling, what were your observations of guitars in the 60s and 70s?
“In my mind, there were always the famous... it was really a matter of there was something different between the guitars that my teacher had, and the new guitars that were being produced through that period of time. Does that

2. Larry’s hot-output Super Distortion changed the face of the pickup industry in the early 1970s

DiMarzio picks up where the others leave off.

Rick Derringer

Al Di Meola

Laurie Warfield

Earl Slick

Aerosmith

Blackfoot

Blue Oyster Cult

Brownsville Station

Dan Hartman

Danny Johnson

Steve Kahn (Brecker Bros)

Carol Kaye

Jefferson Rowley (Mae Davis)

Kiss

Lynyrd Skynyrd

Bob Maun (session man)

Nazareth

Mick Ronson

David Sancious

DiMarzio, the “Pickup People” offers a complete line of guitar and bass pickups. All high output DiMarzio pickups feature a dynamic range unmatched by any other pickups on the market. Their exclusive Tailored Frequency Response achieves optimum sound from your instrument. And there’s no technical expertise required to install them.

Check out the Pickup People. Hear how DiMarzio picks up where the others leave off.

Super Distortion Humbucker

The SDPH combines a tailored frequency response with extremely high output, making it much more sensitive to string vibration than any standard unit on the market. The SDPH is the exact size and hardware replacement for large Gibson humbucking pickups, and greatly improves the sustain and output capabilities of the guitar.

Features:

- 12 individually adjustable pole pieces
- Dual cross-colored coils
- Special magnet structure minimizes string damping
- High temperature shielded cable

Dual Sound Humbucker

This deluxe version of the SDPH shown above, features both the hot sound of the SDPH plus a second sound similar to that of a Stratocaster or Firebird. This allows the guitarist a choice of two distinct tones, providing greater flexibility. The installation of switch provides for the selection of a “hot” or “mild” mode in humbucking.

Features:

- Same construction as SDPH
- Special wiring allows two separate sounds
- Foil wrapped three conductor cable.

And pickups were the way you compensated for that?
“Yeah, pickups seemed to be the way to compensate for the shortcomings of new guitars. When I first started working on pickups, the first pickup that got built was a Strat pickup just because I had Strats at the time.”

That was the FS-1, right? What went into putting that together?
“I had this fabulous old Telecaster. It was very acoustic and it rang beautifully. But it

PHOTO BY LARRY DIMARZIO / ADVERT COURTESY OF DIMARZIO

Earl Slick on Larry DiMarzio

The Bowie and Lennon collaborator looks back on his early years amid the New York City guitar-modding scene

Tell us how you first met Larry DiMarzio?

"I was looking for a luthier and somebody pointed me toward Larry. That's how I met him. We became friends, but he was already messing around with pickups on people's guitars."

And when did you start working together?

"My problem was that I kept getting fired from clubs because I played so loud. Back then, there were no master gain controls on amps, which I still don't use, but in these clubs, a 100-watt Marshall was so loud. So Larry was overwinding my pickups to get more kick, which let me break up my amps at lower volume since I didn't use pedals."

Did you find Gibson and Fender's stock pickups to be inferior in quality?

"Not really. The biggest difference was the amount of kick I was getting and volume. One thing I did notice, which is in hindsight, is that once I got things loud enough [with the stock pickups], I'd lose some of the quality and nuances of the pickups. A full stack of Marshalls would peel the paint off the wall, but with Larry's pickups, I couldn't get kicked out of the club."

Where might you have been as a young player without Larry's pickups?

"No disrespect to Larry, but I'm a solutions guy; I would have figured something out. But it's a hard question to answer because, let's say, there was no Larry, it probably wouldn't have been a thought. I never in a million years would have thought, 'Let me see how I can get this guitar to break

the amp up with an overdriven pickup.' I had no idea. I was 20 and didn't know anything about that."

Before Larry, was the guitar-modding scene heading in a particular direction?

"It was headed in that direction, Larry just beat everybody to the punch. We looked at Melody Makers, for example, and said, 'Okay, it's a cheap guitar. I can get one of those, which have lousy pickups, put some new humbuckers in there and get some extra grease out of it.'"

"A full stack of Marshalls would peel paint off the wall, but with Larry's pickups, I wouldn't get fired for playing too loud"

Having said that, how do you measure Larry's importance?

"I would give Larry DiMarzio the No 1 spot. Period. No 1. He's the one who went after it. People would ask me about the sound I was getting, and I'd say, 'You've got to call this guy, Larry. He's really good.' Larry was the cat. He was the first one. You could buy pickups from the manufacturers, like Fender and Gibson, but you couldn't buy what Larry was making. He really opened the door. No-one in New York City was doing anything like that besides him." [AD]



With the help of Larry's pickup innovations, Earl Slick was able to bring a new sound to the New York club scene of the 70s

3. Early adopter: David Gilmour championed the evolved FS-1 Strat pickup design by DiMarzio

wasn't the sound that I was hearing on Eric Clapton records. Being in the city with a lot of professional players, you quickly learn that – like the pros did – you could figure out hardware that worked in certain ways."

David Gilmour was an early adopter of the FS-1 pickups in his Strats. That must have been a big boost for you.

"I had no direct relationship with David; that was something that he just bought. But again, the idea was, how can I get this overdriven sound that I'm hearing from Clapton, Beck and Page, without destroying the environment in terms of small clubs and places that are serving drinks?"

"Pickups [were] the way to compensate for the shortcomings of new guitars... People want a product with integrity and intent"

How did the FS-1 do that as an alternative to Fender's typically shrill bridge pickups?

"The first solution that I came up with was, of course, to increase the output of the Stratocaster pickup. But I also EQ'd it in a different way. If you're playing in clubs, there are common problems, so what rapidly

happened was – and as you said, which was spot on, I was a guitar repairman – people came in and wanted them, which eventually led to me opening my own shop."

On the Super Distortion side of things, how important was it for you to have young players like Joe Perry, Ace Frehley and Paul Stanley equip their guitars with DiMarzio pickups as an alternative to using early fuzz pedals?

"Everybody is different. All your clients have requirements and needs, and sometimes you get friendly. A lot of what we did was in an effort to try to show people that there were obvious differences. Gibson had lost the recipe, not only for guitar building but for pickup making based on their original designs. What I was after was really making a rock 'n' roll pickup."

With such young stars as Earl Slick and Al DiMeola also using your pickups, was it apparent that you were making a dent in the market?

"I didn't look at it like I was suddenly making an impact, you know? I try not to believe my own publicity [laughs]. During that period of time, we were trying to make everything better, right? But it became obvious to me that a lot of people liked what I was doing, and that was really nice."

Is it true that Ace Frehley and the guys in KISS started using your pickups because you grew up with Gene Simmons?

"Ace found out about me because of Gene. I went to school with Gene and I went to college with Gene. And, oddly enough, I was invited to be the guitar player in Wicked Lester, the pre-KISS band. But I wanted to be in a Top 40 band, so I was like, 'I gotta work,' you know? I wanted to be working."

In many ways, DiMarzio reshaped the sound of rock guitar in the 70s, and that kept up in the 80s, with players like Randy Rhoads and Paul Gilbert championing your pickups.

"As the guitar playing changed, you know, the pickups were very good and applicable for what was going on. It had a lot to do with the fact that everybody started building multiple gain stage amplifiers."

How did Randy end up using DiMarzio pickups?

"I was called up by Karl Sandoval [who built Randy Rhoads's Polka Dot V], and I didn't know Karl at the time. But Karl has always been a fan of the pickups; he liked the way they sound. He's a guitar player and he recommended them. A lot of people were recommending the product because they liked it and used the product themselves."

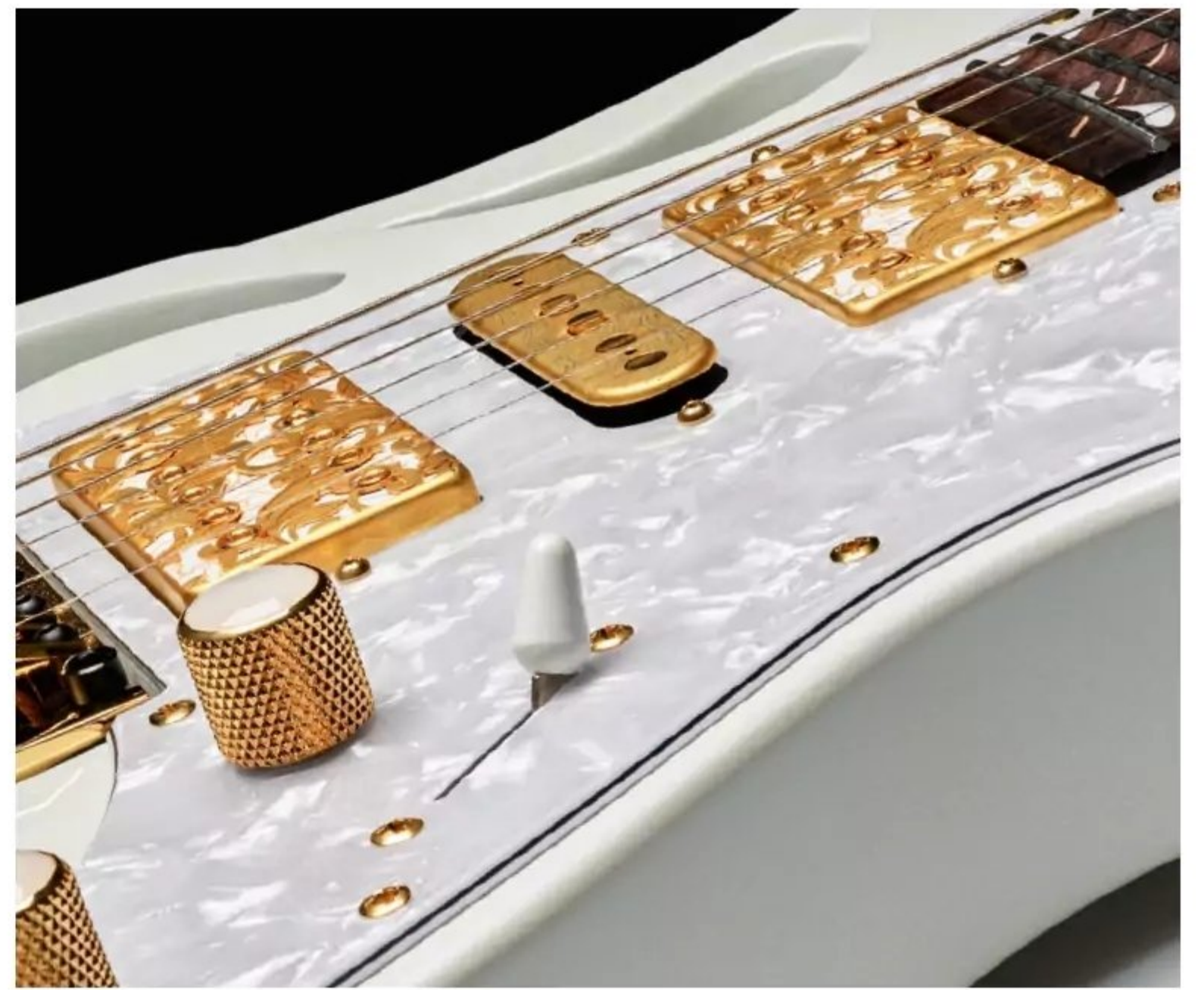
You also contributed to the evolution of shred guitars by redesigning the Strat bridge in the 80s – how did you do that?

"Yes, around that time I redesigned the Fender bridge. Fender decided to start casting Stratocaster bridges and I remember thinking, 'Wow... that's how you screw up a really good product.' So I redesigned the Stratocaster bridge, and guess what? The first



PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

STEVE VAI PHOTO BY STEVE CRISSE; PIA PHOTOS COURTESY OF DIMARZIO



thing I did was reduce the string spacing. I went from 2 1/4-inch to 2 1/8-inch. So I literally made the change that Eddie [Van Halen was known for and] was thinking about. He twisted the pickup to try to get the string balance right because, of course, the polepieces don't line up properly with a 2 1/4-inch bridge."

How is what DiMarzio did different, aside from not twisting the pickup?

"The solution is to change the outside string alignment, which also makes the strings go up the neck better. It's more of a straight line from the bridge to the tuning pegs and, of course, through the nut. So the entire bridge works better. And we put tracks on the original DiMarzio bridges so that bridge saddles didn't slide around, so when you use the tremolo, the guitar would come back into tune. Needless to say, Floyd Rose's solution worked way better, but it also changed the sound of the guitar, which I didn't like."

In recent years, you worked with Steve Vai's Ibanez PIA guitar, which features a beautifully engraved set of DiMarzio UtoPIA pickups.

"Everyone can get their own thing – and way. I'm not locked into any particular thing. When we worked on the Steve Vai project, for example, the most recent PIA project, we knew that we could get the sound that Steve wanted, but I also wanted to do something very different cosmetically to the pickup. We wanted to integrate the cosmetics of the pickup to the overall look of the guitar, you know? And since I do a lot of photos, I can think of a way to begin that and add to the overall look of what we're doing."

In an age where there's no shortage of replacement pickups on the market, what continues to set DiMarzio apart from the pack?

"We're always making little improvements. I continue to introduce things that I think will make a better product. And again, the goal is to never skimp: the goal is to build something where the guitar players can rely on it."

"We're always making little improvements [to] make a better product. The goal is to build something guitar players can rely on"

Have you gotten to the point where you can reflect on the legacy of DiMarzio?

"Good question. You have to be very careful with who owns a brand, and I would rather just continue doing what I'm doing. I don't have to work, but I have a commitment to the company and my clients. The legacy of building high-quality guitars is an American artform. You're always dealing with skimping, penny-pinching and manipulation, and that destroys the integrity of the product. People want to play a product that is designed with integrity and intent."

Is steering away from those sorts of things what you're most proud of?

"It's tough. I would probably say [it's] the fact that I haven't sold out, you know? I've always just tried to stick with what I did well. I get up every morning and I just try to figure out what I'm doing today." **G**

www.dimarzio.com

4. One of DiMarzio's more recent signature collaborations is the UtoPIA pickup set designed for Steve Vai's Ibanez PIA guitar





Wild Wood

An Australian brand with a burgeoning reputation down under takes its first steps into the limelight in the UK with a pair of hand-built acoustics that incorporate premium tonewoods and a sharp eye for design

Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker



FENECH VT CAMPHOR LAUREL AUDITORIUM & VT PROFESSIONAL BLACKWOOD DREAD D78

£2,499 & £2,999

CONTACT **Aurora Music Works** PHONE **01695 338900** WEB <https://fenechguitars.com.au>

What You Need To Know

1 Fenech Guitars? Not familiar with the name...

To be honest, neither were we. But the man behind the brand, Aaron Fenech, has a background in science and engineering, beginning his career in the late 1990s with an apprenticeship in automotive refinishing. A number of twists and turns led him to fixing and then forming a company to build guitars.

2 Where are they made?

The guitars are made in Queensland, Australia, and, according to the company website, the workshop is located “just metres away from the sun-kissed shores of Australia’s famous Gold Coast surfing beaches”.

3 Are the guitars all handmade?

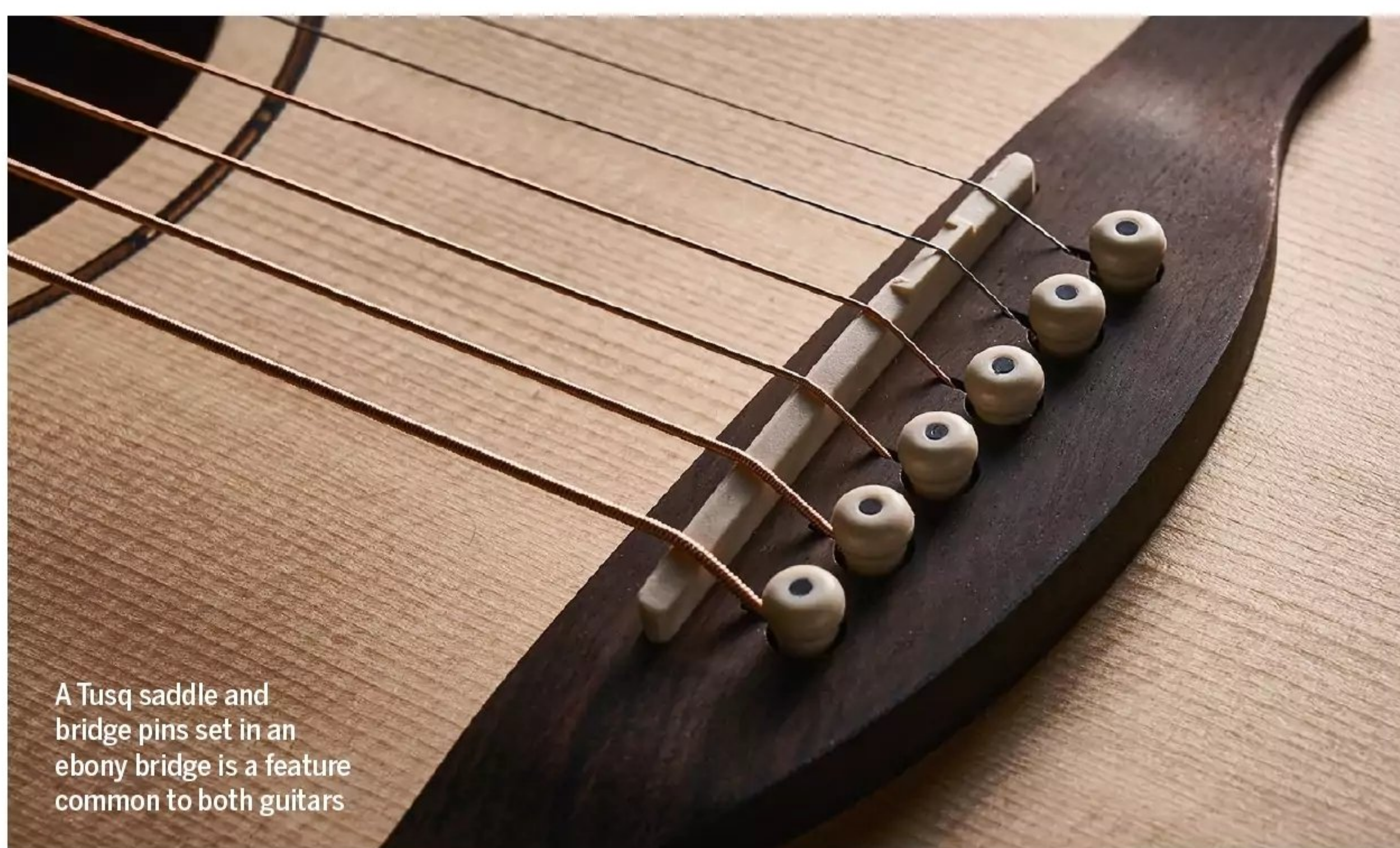
All the guitars are what Fenech describes as “bench-made” one at a time, by a team of skilled luthiers with a focus on wood choice, sound, innovation and design principles.

We were introduced to Fenech’s guitars at this year’s NAMM Show in January, where they were added to our shopping list of instruments we’d like to take a closer look at. A few months later and here we are with two contrasting models from the Fenech range, and it’s been an interesting time getting to know them.

A quick tour of Fenech’s backstory – we take a deeper dive in the interview that follows this review – circles around Aaron Fenech, whose workshop is in

Queensland, Australia. Aaron began with an apprenticeship in automotive engineering, moving on to carpentry. After completing a BSc in environmental science, oceanography, material science and engineering, his passion for music soon led him to taking on instrument repairs, blossoming later into instrument building and the creation of Fenech Guitars in 2016.

In the years that have followed, the brand has become known for the use of lesser-known exotic timbers, a finite



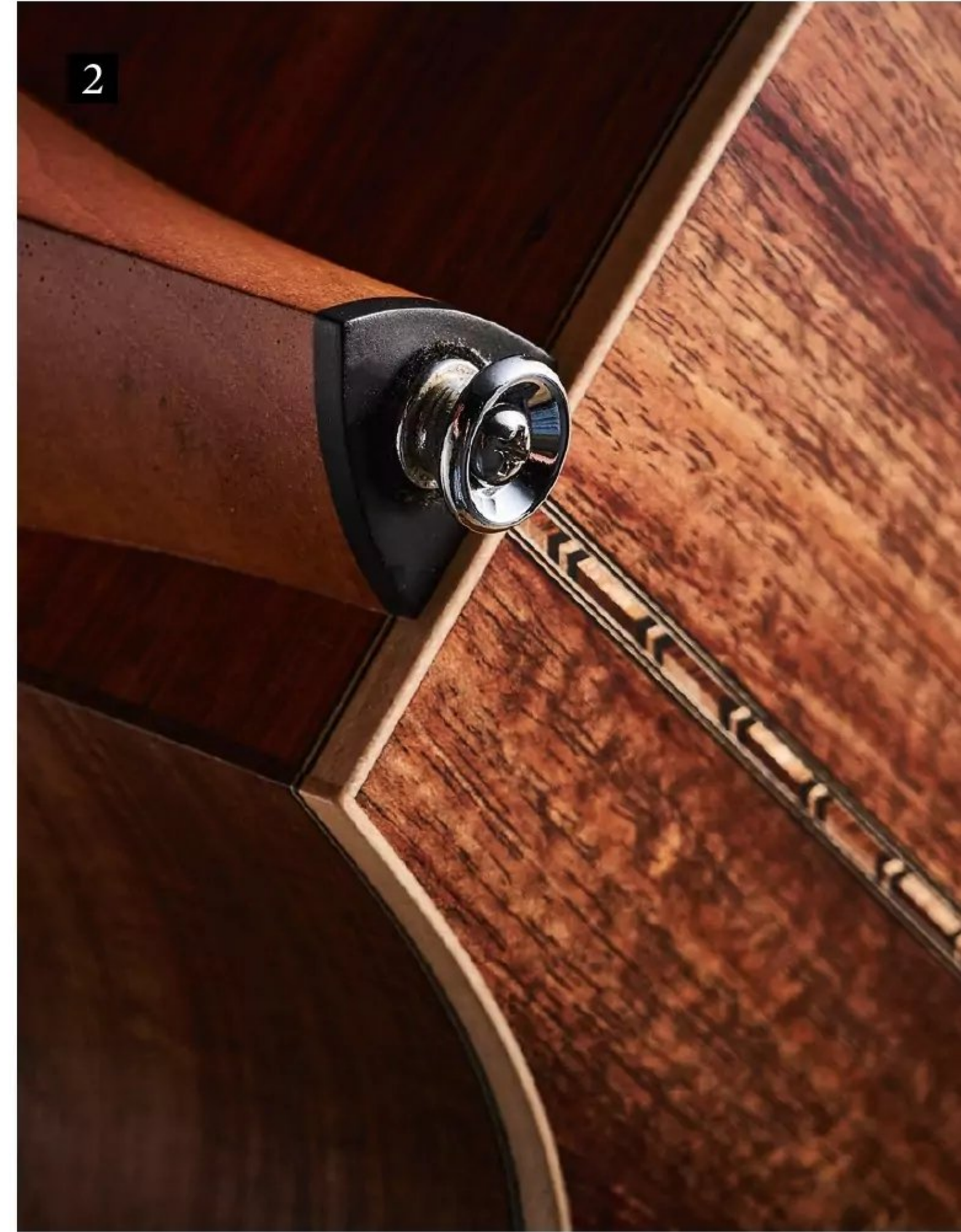
A Tusq saddle and bridge pins set in an ebony bridge is a feature common to both guitars



1

1. Fenech's Camphor Laurel Auditorium has a fine Sitka spruce soundboard that is pale at present but will darken down to an amber hue in time

2. The Blackwood dread, as the name suggests, has Australian blackwood back and sides. Fenech uses indigenous woods wherever possible



2

understanding of acoustic guitar building that embraces style and sophistication along with superior tone. Since opening the workshop doors, an assembled cast of players have taken to using guitars from the Fenech range, although the guitars themselves are not that well known this side of the globe.

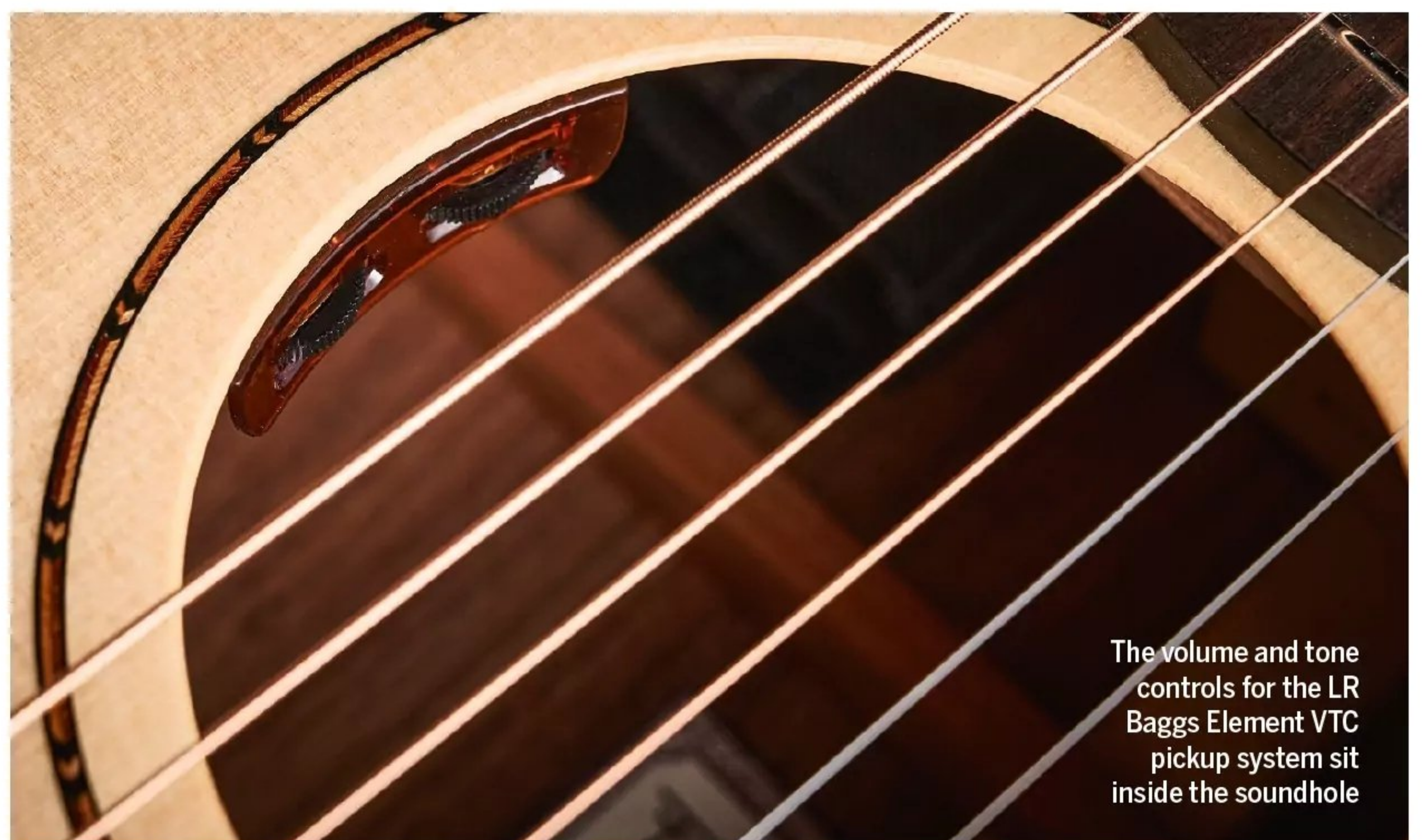
Fenech has a custom shop, where all instruments are bench-made to customers' requirements, but Aaron's team of highly skilled luthiers also make a standard range of instruments that end up at retail outlets. Such is the case here, where our two review samples are representative of an extensive range of variations on a central theme. One dreadnought, one Auditorium. Let's move in for a better look.

We'll begin by looking at the VT Camphor Laurel Auditorium and kick off by saying that if you were associating 'Camphor' with camphorated oil and its use in both medicine and aromatherapy, you'd be dead right. There was definitely that distinctive scent when we first opened the guitar case and it has since filled the room with its menthol-like bouquet. Camphor laurel is certainly a wood we haven't come across before and a little research revealed that its highly figured appearance is complemented by tonal characteristics that boast a crisp, warm midrange with a good proportion

of bass. Something we'll confirm or deny when we get to the play test a little later on. Meanwhile, we have to admit that this little Auditorium scores highly for visual appearance, which is something to bear in mind if figured wood is on your wishlist.

It's always interesting to see what a manufacturer says about its own instruments, and in the case of the Camphor Laurel Auditorium, Fenech reports that its "Auditorium model is a culmination of years of experience making and voicing smaller-body guitars

It's amazing how sometimes you can take an unfamiliar make of acoustic guitar and befriend it almost immediately



The volume and tone controls for the LR Baggs Element VTC pickup system sit inside the soundhole



Camphor laurel has an incredibly striking appearance – and quite an aroma, too!



The Blackwood Dread has Gotoh tuners, complete with antique-style cream-coloured buttons

to produce exceptional volume and tone. Although similar in size to a classic OM, our design differs aesthetically, allowing for a sweeter and more modern blend of curves, and tonally by producing an articulate voice with rich overtones while retaining an impressive midrange response and focused projection.” We’d have to agree that the actual size of this Auditorium model is closer to an OM, with an upper bout measuring 280mm, a lower bout at 381mm and a depth varying from 100mm at the neck joint and 120mm at the tail end. Meanwhile, its air of compactness is accentuated by a tight 220mm waist.

The soundboard here is Sitka spruce, which is still very pale in appearance, but the years will see this journey on to that

Digging in with a hard strum, there’s a boisterous energy to the dread that remains toneful without ever becoming harsh



classic amber hue. The furnishings on the guitar's topside are refreshingly simple, with a subtle rosette and a faux tortoiseshell pickguard. Ebony is the choice for the bridge (with a compensated saddle and bridge pins courtesy of Tusq), and the same timber is used for the fingerboard, with circular mother-of-pearl position markers. The neck is a finely crafted one-piece mahogany affair with a volute at the base the headstock, which itself bears a set of Gotoh tuners.

In terms of stage readiness, the Camphor Laurel comes fitted with the excellent LR Baggs Element VTC pickup system, with its volume and tone controls tucked away on the player's side of the soundhole.

Switching over to the VT Professional Blackwood now, it's apparent from the offset that the same quality of workmanship and 'simple but functional' design ethos exists here, too. This time the star of the tonewood show is Australian blackwood, and the Oz variety is one of a few similarly named woods on the world stage and shouldn't, for instance, be confused with African blackwood, which is a member of the rosewood family

(*Dalbergia Melanoxylon*), while Australian blackwood is a form of acacia (*Acacia Melanoxylon*). It has a look similar to mahogany, or perhaps a lightly shaded Indian rosewood. In terms of what we can expect tonally from this particular timber, it is known for its warm midrange and is often compared to koa in this respect. A little known fact is that Australian blackwood's heartwood fluoresces under blacklight. Who knew?

Fenech's VT Professional range – VT stands for 'Volume and Tone', incidentally – is slightly higher up the ladder in terms of fixtures and fittings, but we find Sitka spruce once again for the top wood, with one-piece mahogany for the neck and ebony for the fingerboard, this time with oblong mother-of-pearl position markers and upgraded Gotoh tuners with vintage-style buttons.

The dreadnought style is iconic in the acoustic guitar world, and Fenech has very sensibly left the formula alone, telling us: "Our version of this beauty has become renowned for producing a guitar with spades of low-end power, a sweet throaty midrange and brilliant trebles. It's this unique combination of balance and power mixed with exceptional note separation that makes this guitar a must-have for

3. We were amazed by the volume and projection from both the Fenech acoustics, the dread having considerable grunt in the lower mids

4. The LR Baggs pickups on both gave an accurate reading of the guitars' tonal qualities through our test bed AER Compact 60 amp





5

THE RIVALS

If you're looking for hand-built quality at down to earth prices, then look no further than JWW Guitars. Prices for a JWW OM with either Honduras mahogany or Indian rosewood for the back and sides start at around the £2k mark with a LR Baggs Hi-Fi pickup onboard, and a Select Series dread goes for around £2.3k.

When we first laid eyes on the Fenech acoustics we thought they shared cosmetic similarities with Furch, where a Vintage 3 OM-SR clocks in at £2,269 (without a pickup installed) and a Vintage 2 Dc-SR SPE dreadnought cutaway with an LR Baggs pickup streets at around £2,266.

If the big names of the acoustic world are more your thing, then Martin's 000-18 Retro Plus comes ready loaded with the company's E-1 pickup at £1,999, and the range of dreadnoughts is plentiful, with the industry standard D-18 moving up a price band, costing in the region of £3,279.

any guitarist's collection." Once again, it certainly looks like it means business in its demure and understated way and so it's time to take both these instruments out for a spin and see what we find...

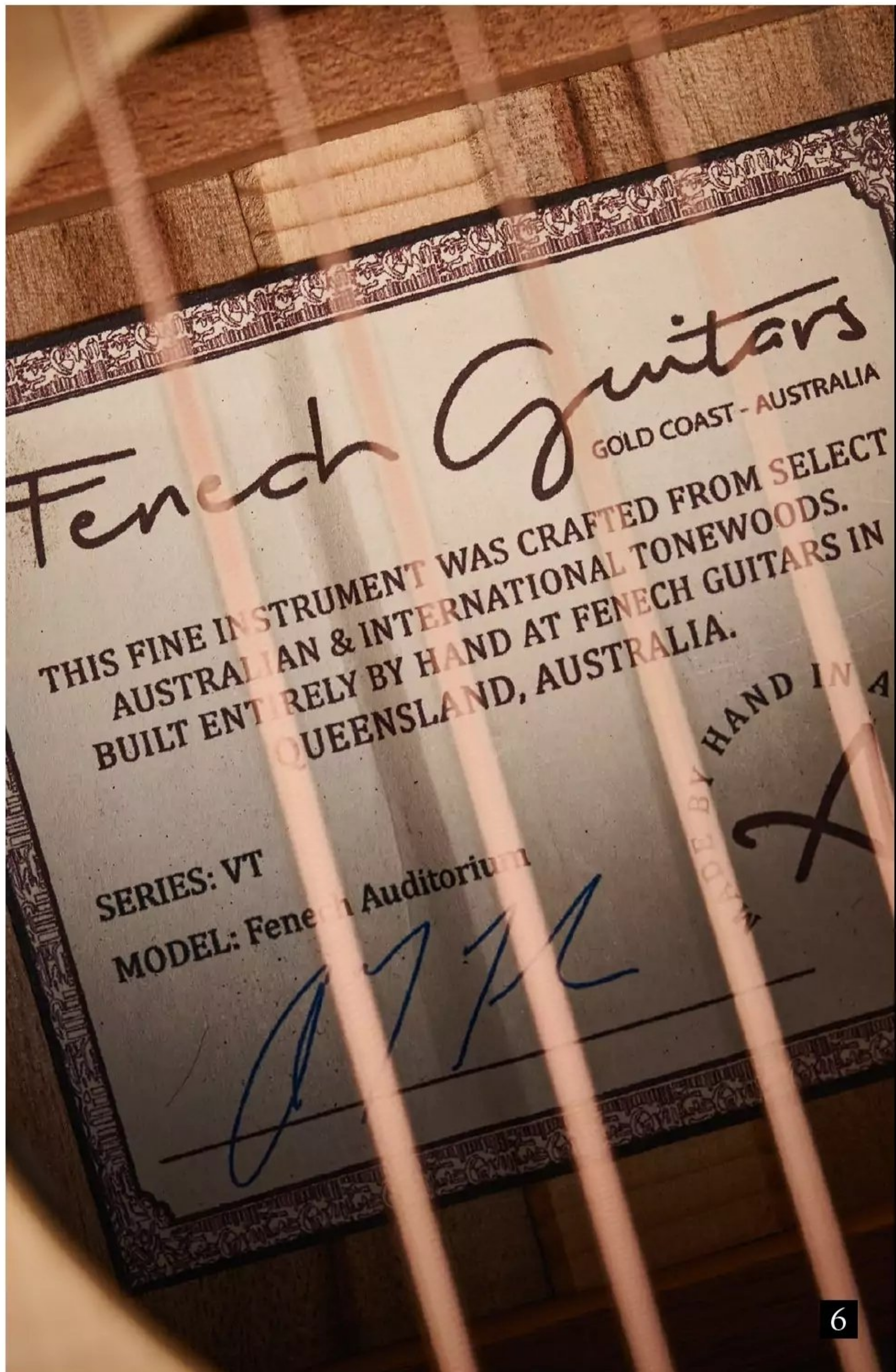
Feel & Sounds

Returning firstly to the Camphor Laurel, the guitar is perfectly balanced in the hand, with a great-feeling neck, the profile of which is that midway point between chunk and slimmness, with neatly manicured and finely polished frets. With the 'Volume And Tone' prefix in mind, we took our first strum and were rewarded with just that: an amazing amount of volume from such a trim body shape. The whole frequency spectrum is very well represented, too, with a very good amount of growl to the bass end but shimmering, shiny trebles as well. And everything Fenech says about the warm midrange characteristics of the camphor laurel is right on the money. It really is an engagingly friendly instrument to play – not too big for sofa noodles but just about right for any stage setting with

a voice that flies in the face of its body size. We can sum it up by saying it's a fingerpicker's delight.

Back to the D78 and we anticipated more of the same and were not disappointed. The bigger body size means a bigger bottom-end, but there's all the fullness you'd expect from a dread and also something extra in the form of depth and breadth. Digging in with a hard strum, there's a boisterous energy that remains toneful without ever becoming harsh. Lighten up on the right hand and you're on a more subtle soundstage, with everything neatly drawn back, frequency-wise, but still fully represented. A singer-songwriter would delight in the power and tone present here.

As you might suspect, firing up the LR Baggs VTC on both added yet another blade to their Swiss Army knife set of tonal attributes. The D78 positively sang with the kind of richness and fullness that only a dread can give, and the Camphor Laurel proved to be a little fireball, too, with all the note separation and clarity you'd expect from a really good OM/auditorium.



5. Fenech might be a comparatively new name to the UK market, but we think more and more players are destined to discover the brand's excellent workmanship and enchanting tone

Verdict

It's amazing how sometimes you can take an unfamiliar make of acoustic guitar and befriend it almost immediately. The warm wash of top-class tone we experienced from both these guitars was impossible to resist and we found ourselves playing for fun, above and beyond what was necessary

The Camphor Laurel is a little fireball, with the note separation and clarity you'd expect from a really good OM/auditorium

for writing this review. And that speaks volumes. Both models are imbued with a high degree of playability and an easy ride, neither of them putting up a fight in any respect, which is exactly what you want before taking the stage with an instrument.

Fenech might still be a new name this side of the world, but we suspect that it will quickly become one that is on every serious player's want list! **G**

6. The labels inside the guitars' soundholes remind us that they are hand-built and very proudly Australian



FENECH VT CAMPHOR LAUREL AUDITORIUM

PRICE: £2,449 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: Australia
TYPE: Auditorium
TOP: AA grade Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: AA grade camphor laurel
MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 381mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm
TUNERS: Gotoh
NUT/WIDTH: Tusq/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony/53mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.76/ 3.9
OPTIONS: Fenech makes an extensive range of custom orders plus a number of 'off the shelf' models available every year See <https://fenechguitars.com.au> for further details
RANGE OPTIONS: Fenech's Auditorium body size is available in its Standard and Select Ranges, as well as the bespoke Custom Shop Masterbuilt Series. See website for more details
LEFT-HANDERS: To order, no upcharge
FINISH: Super satin



PROS Well made, attractively spec'd guitar and some great tones at a price point that is very reasonable indeed

CONS Not every player wants the wildness of the wood – or the subtle fragrance of camphor



FENECH VT PROFESSIONAL BLACKWOOD DREAD D78

PRICE: £2,999 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: Australia
TYPE: Dreadnought cutaway
TOP: AAA grade Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: AAA grade Australian blackwood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 397mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm
TUNERS: Gotoh
NUT/WIDTH: 45mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony/55mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.86/4.12
OPTIONS: See Camphor Laurel Auditorium
RANGE OPTIONS: Fenech's D78 dreadnought is available in its Standard and Select Ranges, plus Custom Shop Bluegrass and Masterbuilt Series. See website for more details
LEFT-HANDERS: To order, no upcharge
FINISH: Super satin



PROS A dread to be reckoned with: all the power, volume and tone you'd expect from this iconic body size

CONS Perhaps the newness of the brand name on these shores might deter shoppers who are hoping to maintain a higher resale price

The Fenech Connection

We take a deeper look into the history and building philosophy behind Australian brand Fenech Guitars by talking to the luthier at its helm

Words David Mead



Aaron Fenech's workshop is based in Queensland, on the eastern seaboard of his native Australia

Based in Queensland on the eastern seaboard of Australia, Fenech Guitars has been around for nearly 10 years, but it's a name that is only just beginning to be known on our shores. And, as you will have read in the previous pages, we became very quickly impressed by not only the build quality but also the feel and tone of both the samples we looked at. Aaron Fenech has a background in carpentry and science, having gained a BSc that "looked at engineering principles but really focused around ocean environments and a lot of mathematics, a lot of physics", he tells us. Factor in a fascination for the acoustic guitar and the idea for a business took off...

What inspired you to launch Fenech Guitars in the first place?

"I've always had a deep connection to the guitar, not just as a player but as someone fascinated by how they're built and how every element contributes to its sound and character. What started as curiosity

"What started as curiosity turned into a passion, then an obsession, and eventually a business"

turned into a passion, then an obsession, and eventually a business. I've been very fortunate, I suppose, to stand on the shoulders of some of these giant companies like Martin, Gibson and Taylor, as well as some of the broader, bigger American guitar companies that have been around a long time. And then, I looked at some of our unique Australian timbers and how I was able to voice my guitars a certain way."

Camphor laurel is a new tonewood to us. What made you use it for your guitars?

"The Camphor Series VT guitar is one of our proudest achievements. Camphor laurel is a unique and lesser-known tonewood, particularly outside of Australia, and it offers a lot of distinct



The Fenech range extends from standard models up to bespoke Custom Shop guitars

advantages. Visually, it's stunning – each piece of wood has a swirling grain pattern and rich, warm hues that make each guitar a true work of art.

“Tonally, it delivers a balanced and responsive sound with a beautiful warmth. It's not too overpowering but still has a rich character that resonates well with players looking for something unique. Over the years, we've dedicated significant research and development into understanding how camphor laurel behaves acoustically, especially in relation to our custom bracing and body shapes.

“The history of camphor laurel is interesting, too. It was introduced to Australia in the 1800s from Asia, and while it's often considered an invasive species, we saw an opportunity to repurpose this

timber into something meaningful. We're in a unique position to use it because it is local, within 200 to 300 kilometres; all around where my workshop is, it's in abundance. We're the first to use camphor laurel at scale across our entire model range, and it's been incredible to see the positive response from players who appreciate its distinct tonal qualities.”

Our other review guitar, the VT Professional, has Australian blackwood for its back and sides.

“Australian blackwood is one of our favourite native tonewoods to work with. It's incredibly versatile – visually striking with rich, golden-brown hues, but it also delivers a warm, articulate tone with great projection. It has a natural musicality that suits a wide range of playing styles. Using blackwood is also part of our commitment to showcasing the richness of Australian materials in high-end guitar making.”

Do you mainly produce custom guitars, or do you offer a standard range?

“We offer both a standard range and fully custom guitars. Our standard range is built by our expert luthiers, and each guitar is bench-made, one at a time. Fewer than five sets of hands touch every instrument, ensuring that each guitar maintains the same high level of craftsmanship and attention to detail.

“In addition to the standard range, we have our Custom Shop, where everything is fully customisable. These guitars are crafted with the utmost care, and the

“Blackwood is visually striking with rich, golden-brown hues, but it also delivers a warm, articulate tone”

entire process is personally overseen by me. Whether it's selecting unique tonewoods, customising finishes, or refining tonal characteristics, the Custom Shop is all about creating something truly bespoke for the player.”

What's your philosophy when it comes to guitar building?

“Great guitars come from a harmony of precision, intuition and purpose. We don't build instruments just to look beautiful; we build them to inspire. Every decision, from wood selection to bracing design, is made to elevate the musical experience for the player.

“What sets us apart is our commitment to consistency and quality across all of our series. Whether it's a Player Series or a Masterbuilt, you're getting the same level of care, craftsmanship and tonal integrity. We're also proud to embrace Australian tonewoods and blend traditional lutherie with modern production techniques to ensure every instrument meets our exacting standards. It's this balance that allows us to create guitars that feel as great to play as they sound.”

<https://fenechguitars.com.au>



Aaron aims to use as many indigenous woods as possible in his guitars



The Prettiest Star

With a nod to Bowie style, this latest Knaggs Hollowbody creates one of the finest Kenais we've played over the past 15 years. The Genie is truly out of the bottle!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



KNAGGS KENAI HOLLOWBODY GENIE £5,500

CONTACT **Peach Guitars** PHONE **01206 765777** WEB **www.knagsguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1 That's a unique-looking guitar!
Yes, it's a bit of a homage to David Bowie. "In December, anticipating the January 2025 birthday bash in NYC [*The Sound And Vision Of David Bowie* show], my wife, Sylvie, had the idea to make a Kenai Hollowbody with a lightning bolt f-hole and colour scheme inspired by *Aladdin Sane*," explains Peter Wolf, co-founder of Knaggs Guitars. It's ended up as a limited run of 15 pieces.

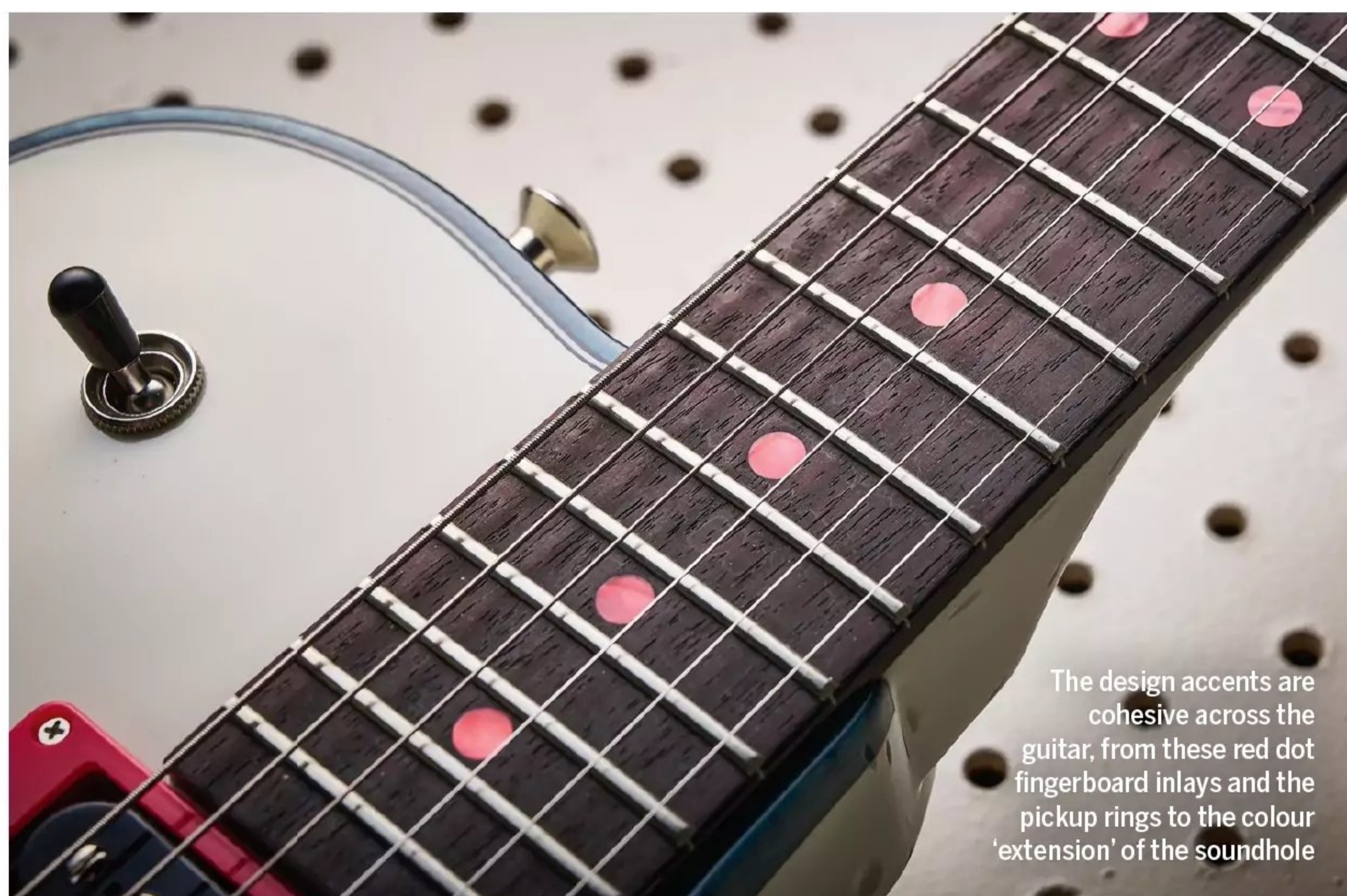
2 Right, are we talking Joe Knaggs, one-time PRS alumnus?
Correct. Luthier Joe and sales and marketing expert Peter left PRS and opened their new 'shop in Greensboro, Maryland, in 2009 and starting shipping guitars in early 2010. At PRS, Joe was heading up the elite PRS Private Stock team and had instigated many PRS designs such as the Archtop, Hollowbody and SCJ, plus the Mira and Starla models.

3 These aren't cheap. Hasn't Knaggs got its own offshore line?
No, and we doubt we'll ever see that happen! Knaggs is the epitome of classic high-end guitar craft; many of its staff also worked with Joe at PRS and they make approximately 45 guitars a month. They're just as happy building simple guitars like the start-up Kenai-J or fabulous-looking custom dreams based on their extensive model line-up.

Named after an Alaskan river, the Kenai is Knaggs' 'Les Paul', a cornerstone of the range these past 15 years but far from a copy with a redrawn headstock. Yes, it's a single-cut and uses the time-honoured ingredients – mahogany back, maple top, a glued-in mahogany neck with a rosewood fingerboard, not to mention its dual humbuckers, shoulder-placed toggle pickup selector and that classic four-control layout – but in outline there's a definite taste of Telecaster, isn't there? And while the top carve to the 52mm thick body is beautifully contoured, the back is heavily chamfered on the bass side and base, which not only reduces the bulk of the rim but comes across as rather more toned than the good ol' porky Les Paul.

The Kenai also forms the basis for other models: the simplified slab-bodied J and J-MT designs, for example, as well as the more opulent Eric Steckel signature model. It's little surprise, then, that in all its variants this is now the best-selling Knaggs model. Each of the models, like any in the range, has an extensive options list and huge colour choice, including aged finishes. And if you really want something very special, there's the Creation Series level.

This Genie version of the Kenai is a great example of this custom 'anything is possible' ethos, but, unusually, there's no wood on show, with the exception of the deep, dark brown of the East Indian fingerboard and glossed ebony headstock face. Nevertheless, under the



The design accents are cohesive across the guitar, from these red dot fingerboard inlays and the pickup rings to the colour 'extension' of the soundhole



1

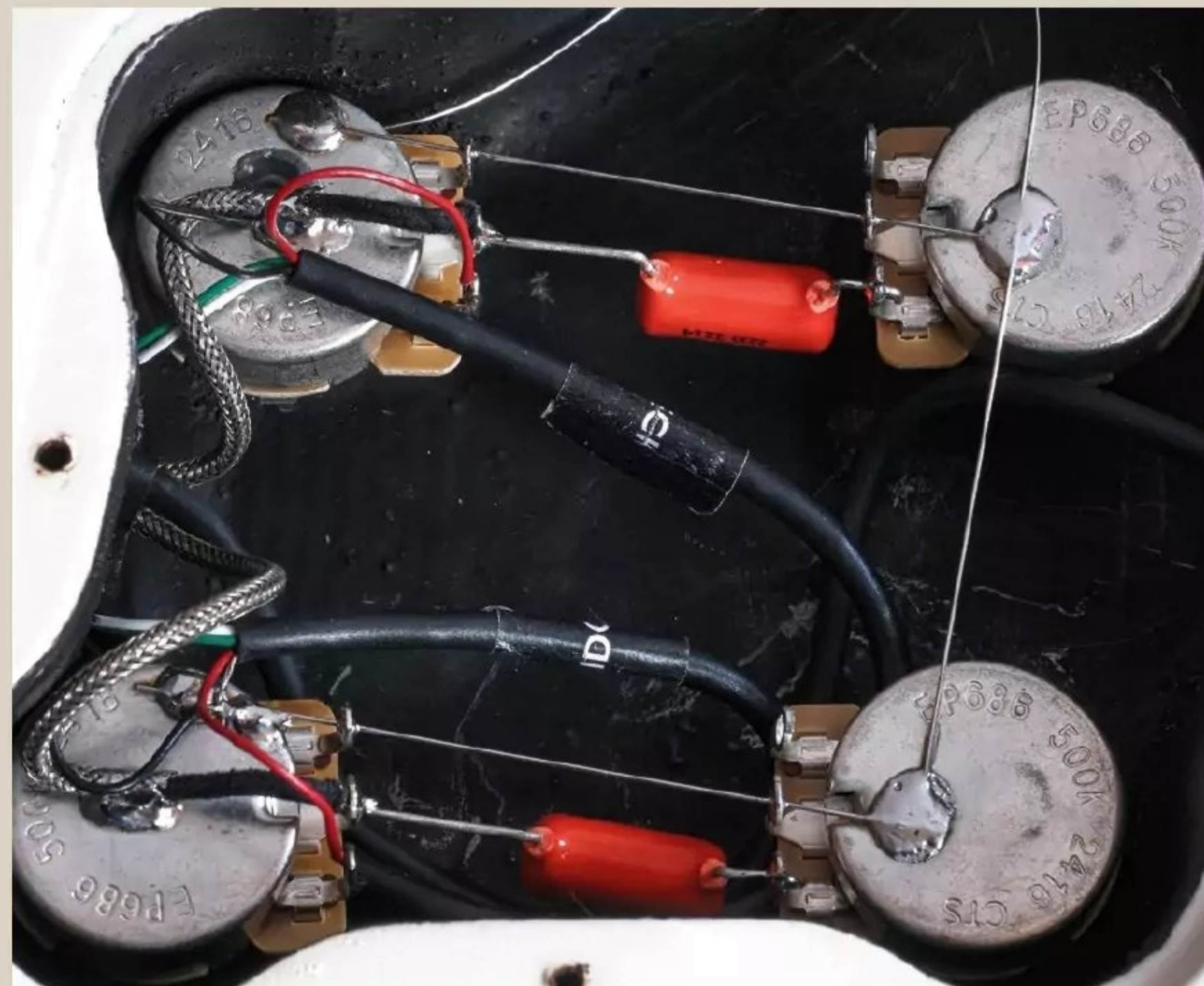
UNDER THE HOOD

Simple dish, quality components!

Even though few players will ever bother to peer into the control cavities of their guitars, if you did here you'll see this very tidy, stylised wiring, which wouldn't look out of place in a boutique hand-wired effects pedal. The circuit simply nods back to that of a 50s Les Paul and uses long-shaft CTS pots with nominal values of 500kohms, plus two Orange Drop .022µF, wired vintage-style between each volume and tone control. The cavity itself appears to be covered with conductive paint, although the plastic coverplate isn't screened.

Each Bare Knuckle Mule is four-conductor so you could expand the wiring with coil-splits or out-of-phase at a later date. The Mule set, of course, has long been a cornerstone of Bare Knuckle's range and the set "harks back to the summer of 2003", remembers Bare Knuckle founder, Tim Mills, today. "It was one of the first sets I released after spending most of 2001 and 2002 working on the designs and the launch of Bare Knuckle. I based the voicing on an original late-'59 pair of [Patent Applied For pickups] that a very good friend and mentor loaned me. They had this incredible almost three-dimensional quality and such a touch-sensitive feel that I used as my benchmark and set me on my tone quest for The Mule set.

"The Mule spec is unaltered regardless of who orders them and has been since day one," Tim adds. "The only addition has been to offer either wax-potted or unpotted coils. The bobbins, baseplate, cover, spacer, pole shoe, winding wire and hook-up (braided) are all 100 per cent vintage-correct to those late 50s units. We do anneal



our pole shoes, and I designed my own pole screws many years ago with a slight tapered draw and deeper head, all from electrical steel.

"The Mule is powered by Alnico IV magnets, an isotropic Alnico. Bare Knuckle was one of the first pickup makers to introduce this form of Alnico consistently into their range since Gibson, who used a variety of Alnicos, namely II, III and IV, in the late-50s pickups.

"As with all of our pickups, The Mule is totally wound by hand on the same winders I started out with, and the humbuckers are hand-assembled, too, in our Cornwall workshops," Tim concludes.

Our set measured 8.09k at the bridge and 7.05k at the neck.



paint, it sticks to those classic ingredients and you can see a glimpse of mahogany through that lightning bolt soundhole. As the name states, this is the Hollowbody version of the typically all-solid Kenai (an option first introduced at the end of 2024), although 'semi-hollow' would probably be more accurate as the air seems to be primarily on the bass side and behind the bridge. It's nowhere near as hollow

1. The Knaggs Influence series models such as our Kenai use this three-a-side headstock as standard with its Morning Star inlay, but on non-limited models the Severn series six-in-a-line headstock is optional

The Genie is superbly alive-sounding, but it still has that hallmark Knaggs ring and sense of strength

as the slightly larger and deeper-bodied Chena model. And what appears to be quite chunky body binding is, in fact, the natural edge of the quite flame-y maple top, which is blue-stained before a violin-like purfling strip barriers the opaque, slightly off-white finish.

In style, it's little surprise that the neck construction is similar to that of Joe's former employer (one-piece stock, the full width fitting into the body), but here the body extends out in a boat-bow point to form the heel. Then there's the very

2. Of Joe's break from PRS Guitars he said: "I just wanted to design my own guitars; I wanted to sign my own paintings." And he still does!

3. This boat-bow style heel is one of many far from classic design elements that make up the Kenai, not least the chamfering to the back, which improves comfort and reduces bulk



4

classic splayed and back-angled three-side headstock – slightly shorter than a Les Paul’s – that wouldn’t look out of place on an old archtop. You’ll see and feel a slight in-turn to the fingerboard edge, the fretwork is perfect, and if you want to learn how to perfectly cut and finish a bone nut, here’s how it’s done.

Designed to maximise resonance, the Influence 2-in-1 bridge has been a part

of Knaggs since day one. The bridge is a regular tune-o-matic type that is co-joined to the rear string anchor, rather than being separate like the classic Gibson setup. This gives the guitar another unique spin.

There’s no truck with coil-splitting or expanded sounds here. What you see is what you get and that’s a pair of Bare Knuckle Mules and a classic volume and tone for each. That shoulder-placed toggle switch is another option to consider; it can also be placed by the rotary controls in more SG-like style.

4. While Knaggs has used various pickup makers and Joe remains a big fan of Lindy Fralin’s Blues Specials, today the UK’s Bare Knuckle supplies many of the humbuckers, including the signature pickups for the Steve Stevens SSC and The Mules here

5. This lightning bolt soundhole has been used on other Knaggs builds, but it suits the *Aladdin Sane* inspiration perfectly

THE RIVALS

Nik Huber’s extensive German-made range can be custom ordered from a dealer. The long-running Dolphin outline is the more T-inspired shape and appears on the stripped back Krautster III (from approx. £4k) and the semi-hollow Surfmeister (£5POA).

We have plenty of high-end custom craft here in the UK, from the guitar-making legend that is Patrick James Eggle to more stylised builds from Seth Baccus. Patrick uses pretty classic outlines, but then anything is possible. The T-style Oz, for example, can easily be spec’d with a carved top and semi-solid style (from approx. £3k); likewise, the single-cut, semi solid Macon (from approx. £5.5k). Seth Baccus cleverly uses his original single-cut shape on his bolt-on Shoreline models, plus the sumptuous carved-top Nautilus. Aside from considerable options, Seth offers a full-custom build service, but there is a waiting list! To get an idea of style and price, head over to Seth’s website.

Feel & Sounds

This writer has never played a guitar Joe Knaggs has had his hands on that isn’t very fit for purpose. This Kenai maintains that hard-earned impression, and the semi-solid design just seems to enhance the response compared with our solid-bodied Kenai reference. This Genie is superbly alive-sounding but still has that hallmark ring and sense of strength that comes with the Knaggs name. Unlike a Les Paul, it’s very well balanced played seated, slighter lighter in weight at 3.2kg (7lb) compared with our solidbody, and strapped on it seems to stick to your body. It’s a deceptively clever design.



The neck shape is typical Joe Knaggs, too: a pretty full 50s-style handful (43mm wide at the nut with a depth of 22.7mm at the 1st fret and 25.5mm by the 12th), but with a hint of a V that makes it feel a little smaller than the dimensions suggest.

Paired with the Mules, it's like hearing an old friend. It's obviously in the Les Paul camp yet slightly trimmer with

We don't know about Mick Ronson, but we're hearing Mick Taylor in his regal Stones period

good definition in the high-end. As ever, evaluating what the semi-solid construction brings to the plugged-in voice is harder to define, but compared with our reference there's just a little more give, a little more looseness – we'd swear we were listening to a much older guitar – that benefits its cleaner jazz duties as much as it does its power-rock bluster. The vintage-wired controls mean that the guitar responds really well to a little volume and tone reduction, which clears the voice,

sounding more like we're listening to single coils but sweeter with a balanced clarity that's never oversharpe. This style of wiring really suits the guitar and the Mules, and hugely broadens the sounds we hear.

All in, we don't know about Mick Ronson, but we're hearing Mick Taylor in his regal Stones period. We can only wonder where a guitar like this would take us?

Verdict

What might be considered as a whimsical homage to Mr Bowie hides the simple fact that this is one of the best Kenais we've had the pleasure to play over the past decade and a half. It sits perfectly in terms of voicing between the all-solid model and the true hollowbody Chena – a real journeyman instrument that channels the Gibson classics yet ends up very much its own thing. As we said, the Kenai is a deceptively clever design and to our hands and ears the semi-hollow version here just takes it up a level – or even two.

There will be plenty of coughing and spluttering about the price, of course, but the vast accumulated experience of Joe Knaggs and his team oozes from every pore, plus you can tailor your Kenai to precisely your taste. Simply great craft on every level with sounds to match. **G**



KNAGGS KENAI HOLLOWBODY GENIE

PRICE: £5,500 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, carved top, hollowbody electric

BODY: 1-piece mahogany with carved maple top

NECK: Mahogany, Knaggs C w/Slight V profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.04mmmm

FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, red pearloid dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Knaggs Influence 2-in-1 combined bridge/tailpiece Kluson Revolution tuners w/ 'keystone' buttons – all nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm

ELECTRICS: Uncovered Bare Knuckle Mule humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.2/7

OPTIONS: Not on this limited run but plenty on the standard model. The basic spec Kenai starts at £5,600 (SRP); the Hollowbody variant adds £519. Options are vast including wood choice and grade, finishes, purfling and binding, plus pickup layout, which includes HSS (with Fralin Blues Special single coils) and H/P90

RANGE OPTIONS: The more Junior/Special-style all-mahogany Kenai-J starts at £3,899; the J-MT adds maple top from £4,599. The Kenai is the basis for the Eric Steckel signature at £6,999. The slighter larger, all-hollow Chena starts at £5,999

LEFT HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Genie Crème (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose finish with blue stained binding



9/10

PROS Typically faultless build; great weight and semi-hollow response; classic voicing from Bare Knuckle's Mules; a modern classic single-cut in anyone's book

CONS This level of experience and quality costs!

Design For Life

This signature collaboration with Yvette Young incorporates chorus, delay, grain effects and reverbs for atmospheric soundscapes

Words Trevor Curwen
Photography Phil Barker





WALRUS AUDIO Qi ETHEREALIZER £449

CONTACT **FACE bvba** PHONE **+32 3 844 67 97** WEB **www.walrusaudio.com**

What You Need To Know

- 1 Fancy artwork! What's that?**
 This is the Qi Etherealizer, a multi-effects pedal described as a "creative playground for atmospheric exploration". It's a collaboration between Walrus Audio and Yvette Young, who also created the artwork. If the terracotta doesn't grab you, it's also available in black.
- 2 Who is Yvette Young?**
 She's the leader of math-rock band Covet and known for her innovative and explorative fingerstyle playing technique and love of guitar pedals.
- 3 It looks a bit complicated...**
 Yes, but it's actually logically laid out. Each vertical row of knobs relates to a distinct section of the pedal: chorus, delay and granular effects and an output section with reverb.

With 'Soundscape Generator' pedals such as the Lore and Fable, Walrus Audio has form when it comes to creating ambient sounds. So what better company for Yvette Young to turn to when looking for a signature pedal? The result of the collaboration is the Qi Etherealizer. The Qi part, alternately spelt as chi and pronounced 'chee', relates to vital life energy and is reflected in the pedal artwork, which depicts a body with energy flowing around it.

This is essentially a multi-effects unit with four effects – chorus, delay, grain sampler and reverb – that interact in either a serial or parallel configuration. It's a true stereo pedal, though it can be run in mono, and features three onboard presets. There's no provision for an expression pedal, but the multi-tasking footswitches can provide a range of performance options, such as ramping up the reverb or tipping delay repeats over into oscillation. MIDI is implemented, giving access to 128 presets and control of most parameters.

In Use

If you're trying to build a composite sound, the first decision you have to make with the pedal is whether you want the effects to run in series or parallel because each can deliver a different sonic outcome. In series, each effect feeds the next like separate pedals on a 'board. The order logically runs from right to left: chorus, delay, grain and reverb.

The Chorus, Delay and Grain sections each have their own Mix knob to proportionally add effect into the signal chain, which then hits the reverb that is controlled by a Space knob that increases the reverb size from a room-like space to

This pedal takes you to the heart of the ambient action with an almost limitless palette of sound



This footswitch is dual-function: a tap sets the delay time (at the selected timing division), while a press-and-hold takes the delay feedback control to its maximum value, causing the delay effect to oscillate

humongous ambience. After the reverb is a tone knob that can roll off top-end, and finally you get a Mix/Dry knob that sets the blend between 100 per cent dry and 100 per cent wet at the output.

In parallel mode, the chorus, delay and grain effects process the dry input sound separately, and the individual effects are summed together via their particular Mix knobs, passing through the reverb and the tone knob to the output. The Mix/Dry knob in this instance serves to add dry sound into the mix and runs from 100 per cent wet to a point where the dry signal is at unity. Both instances allow you to dial in an individual effect or any combination using the Mix knobs, but you can also turn the chorus, delay and grain effect

THE RIVALS

In a similar spirit to the Qi Etherealizer is the Hologram Microcosm (\$459), described as a “granular effects pedal that rearranges and reinterprets your sound in new and exciting ways using a variety of sampling, pitch-shifting, delay and looping techniques”. Elsewhere, Crazy Tube Circuits’ Sidekick Jr (£249) offers modulation, delay and reverb in a compact twin-footswitch pedal, though there are no grain effects. Chase Bliss’s pedals are known for their merits in ambient music – check out the Mood MKII (€469), as well as the company’s Onward (€469), which is said to offer “glitching dreamscapes”.



1. The Flow button switches between series (one effect feeding into the next) and parallel modes (effects summed together). The other three buttons select between options for their related effects (grain, delay and chorus) but can also turn their effect on and off with a long press
2. Pressing the Freeze switch freezes the grain buffer to sustain a sampled moment in time from your playing, which you can then play over. A long press then will ramp the reverb to 100 per cent, and a subsequent long press releases the reverb ramp. A short press kills both. You can scroll through the presets by pressing the Bypass and Freeze footswitches at the same time. The three presets are indicated by the colour of the LED above the Walrus logo, which lights up red, green and blue; live mode is white

on or off by a press-and-hold on the button below its knob array.

The chorus has the usual Rate and Depth knobs and offers a choice of Tri chorus with three delay lines, or Stereo chorus, both of which sound suitably lush. You can also get vibrato in Stereo mode by turning the Chorus Mix knob fully clockwise. The delay offers up to two seconds of delay time and has a pleasantly voiced crisp repeats. Besides using the Time knob you can also set the delay time via tap tempo with three different tap divisions available.

While chorus and delay should be familiar to all players, grain is more of an outlier in guitar effects. Basically, it works by sampling portions (grains) of your playing and playing them back, not unlike a trail of delay repeats but a bit glitchier. Hearing the effect prominent and dry, it’s a bit of a head-scratcher, but it really becomes effective and starts to make sense when an appropriate amount is fed into a big reverb and you start hearing intricate ambient soundscape washes and shifting pad sounds, which are all the more intricate if you have the chorus and delay active.



You get a choice of two modes, the most intuitive in our view being Grain Cloud. This triggers small samples randomly and is controlled by the X knob, which determines the length of time between grains. Phrase Sample mode triggers grains rhythmically from peaks in your playing, but it seems a little more random than just responding to playing dynamics. The X knob controls the tempo at which they will be played back, and in its minimum position synchronises the

3. This Playback knob selects the five modes that dictate different ways the grain samples are projected: normal speed, double speed and an octave up, half-speed and an octave down, reverse playback, and random playback
4. Yvette Young proudly exhibited her new signature pedal at this year’s NAMM Show





WALRUS AUDIO QI ETHEREALIZER

PRICE: £449

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Ambience pedal combining chorus, delay, granular effects and reverb

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 3x onboard presets, tap tempo, selectable trails mode

CONTROLS: Mix/Dry, Tone, Space, Grain Mix, X, Playback, Delay Mix, Time, Feedback, Chorus Mix, Rate, Depth, Flow switch (Series/Parallel), Grain switch (Grain Cloud/Phrase Sample), Delay switch (Quarter/Dotted Eighth/Eighth), Chorus switch (Tri/Stereo), Bypass footswitch, Freeze footswitch, Tap/Osc footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (Mono L & Stereo R), standard outputs (Mono L & Stereo R), MIDI In, MIDI Thru, USB-C (for firmware updates)

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 300mA

DIMENSIONS: 148 (w) x 124 (d) x 58mm (h)

repeated grains in time with the delay repeats to great effect.

Whichever mode you choose, a major role in the sound of the effect is the choice of five playback modes. We really liked the shimmer effect of the X2 mode's double speed and a pitch shift up of one octave, and the psych-sounding Reverse mode. The central Freeze footswitch works in conjunction with the grain effect: a press will freeze the grain buffer to capture a section of your playing, so it will loop as

Bringing in the grain effect endows a more otherworldly textural element to the soundscape

long as you want, allowing you to play over the sustained foundation.

While WYSIWYG immediacy and no menus is one benefit of the Qi, there's plenty to get your head around and it may take a little time to get used to how to best combine the effects, in particular

understanding how the four Mix knobs work together in series and parallel. Once up to speed, though, there's a huge range of sounds to explore. Combinations of chorus, delay and reverb may give you all the traditional and, indeed, spacey sounds you want. However, bringing in the grain effect can either add some underlying ear candy, endowing a more otherworldly textural element to the soundscape, or can be a more prominent and off-the-wall effect that grabs the attention.

Verdict

The whole atmospheric/ambient thing may not be for everybody, but for those who wish to embrace it this pedal will take you straight to the heart of the action and give an almost limitless palette of sound. Looking at it from another angle, just because it can do the wacky and wonderful doesn't mean it has to all the time – if you have the money (and let's face it, this isn't a budget pedal) this could be a flexible asset for your 'board to deliver conventional single or combined chorus/vibrato, delay and reverb effects when desired and the occasional composite fairy dust if the need arises. **G**



PROS A flexible range of effects in one pedal; practical combination options for sonic exploration; hands-on WYSIWYG operation; onboard presets; tap tempo

CONS Grain may be one effect too far for some players; it's a significant investment

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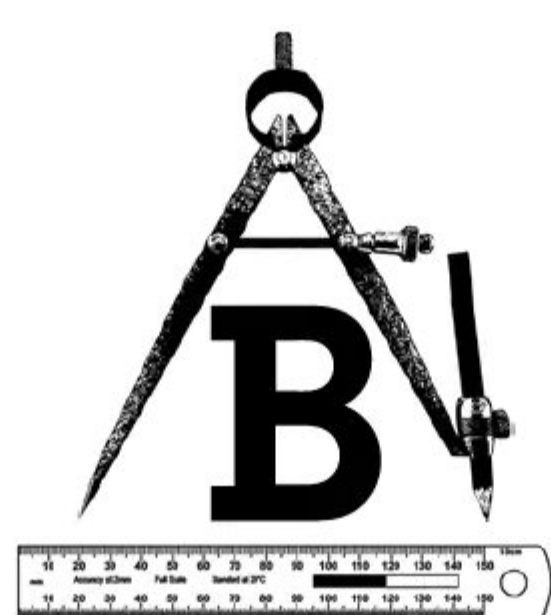


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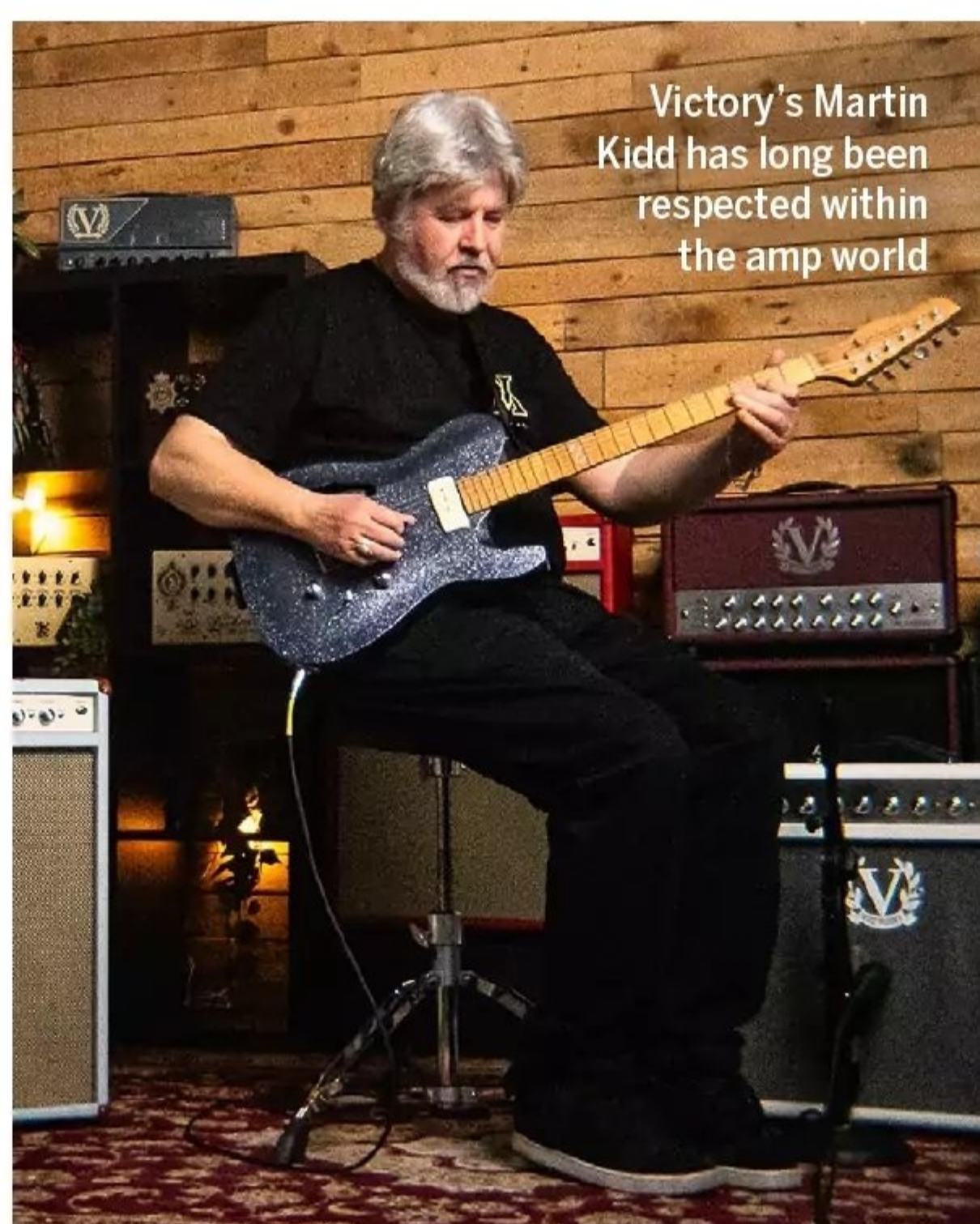
A year after their debut at NAMM 2024, the Victory MK Clean and MK Overdrive are the toast of the high-end valve scene. Chief designer Martin Kidd unfurls the schematics

Words Henry Yates Photography Neil Godwin

When Victory Amps launched the MK Clean and MK Overdrive at NAMM 2024 – the culmination of a four-year project helmed by chief designer Martin Kidd, with the guiding ethos “no restrictions, no limits, no compromise” – expectations were understandably high. Since his start in the industry in the early 90s, Kidd has earned serious kudos. Having served as the brain and soldering iron behind Cornford’s most famous designs (while advising giants including Ampeg and PRS), he’s guided Victory from UK start-up to global contender in a little over a decade, attracting endorsers as eclectic as Guthrie Govan and Graham Coxon to the cause.

Victory has already chalked up several modern classics (as a metal player, you haven’t lived until you’ve unleashed the Kraken). But Kidd’s audacious design brief for the MK series was simply to build the best single-channel clean amp and multi-channel overdriven amp of his career – and the reaction leaves no doubt he succeeded.

Expensive? Oh, yes: you won’t get much change from five grand. But when talk turns to a desert island amplifier, these stunning hand-wired valve heads have to be in the conversation.



The twin philosophies behind the MK Clean and MK Overdrive seem to be ‘shoot for the moon’ and ‘spare no expense’. Is that how you remember your vision for these amps?

“Yes, it was largely that. I’ve been pleased with the response to the MK Series. One reason being that, when I was thinking about how much disposable income people have, I did have my concerns. But I think I’m just a bit ignorant when it comes to that section of the market. I think perhaps people who have lots of money... they’ve always got lots of money!”

The conceptual jump-off for the MK Overdrive was a classic amp you’d built earlier in your career – the Cornford MK50. But how did that design evolve?

“Whatever you make, there are always going to be people who would prefer some things to be different. So with the MK Overdrive, I was trying to remember what people liked about the Cornford MK50 – and any feedback or comments they gave me – and address that with this amplifier. For instance, the MK Overdrive has two separate gain controls that are independent of each other, whereas with the Cornford MK50, you had a single gain control on the overdrive side. I also dispensed with the second effects loop that was on the MK50 because most people thought it was a waste of time, and so I just made the one loop switchable so you can switch it off.

“The voicing of the MK Overdrive, it’s tighter than the MK50. And if an amp is going to have a high-gain overdrive, I like it if that can be used for a lead guitar sound, so you don’t need pedals. That’s probably how the Voice switch came about because that tightens it up and adds a bit more upper mid. I wanted this amp to be versatile and also sound nice at low levels. So I came up with the Presence circuit, where you can actually dial back and make it quite smooth if you want, without having

PHOTO OF MARTIN KIDD COURTESY OF VICTORY AMPS

"You need to have an
amp that can cope
with various scenarios,
and when it comes to
live work, you want
it to pack a punch"





1

to turn the treble off or whatever. So it's definitely a case of wanting to get as much as possible from one circuit.

"I think people expect dedicated EQs from this kind of twin-channel amplifier. You can have very powerful EQs, but the basic tone stack you'd find in a Fender or Marshall – I don't really think you need to deviate too much from that because it works nicely for what guitarists need. They don't need to have an 11-band graphic equaliser – and you can get some horrible sounds from that as well, if you're not careful!"

Likewise, what were the guiding philosophies behind the MK Clean?

"Lots of people were saying that we needed to give the MK Clean super-high headroom and make it super clean. Initially, the MK Clean had a lot more gain than I was expecting, so I dialled that back. But it's a fine balance between having a clean amp that's sterile and a bit boring, and one that has a nice harmonic content but isn't dirty. I wanted this to be a hand-wired amp with turret board construction, but I didn't want the bird's nest of wiring that you've probably seen inside old Fenders and Marshalls. So the power supply is actually track, not wires. I'd say the MK Clean is Fender-inspired, the reason being that the EQ section comes after the first gain stage, like an old Fender."

"It's a fine balance between a clean amp that's sterile and boring, and one with nice harmonic content but isn't dirty"

The MK Clean also features the Bright and Bass Shift switches.

"With a clean amplifier, I don't mind if the bass is a bit fuller and looser. But it depends what kind of player you are. I thought, 'I wonder if having a tighter bass response might make it feel nicer under the fingers.' So that's where the Bass Shift came about. As for the Bright switch, it does much the same as any other, but I wanted to come up with a circuit that still has an effect even when the preamp volume control is all the way up."

There's also an Accutronics reverb tank, fitted upside down...

"Yes. We tried everything, really. I didn't mind what we had in there, but some people who were involved said, 'Oh no, it's got to be Accutronics.' Because that still seems to be [the gold standard]. Even though, from my days at Cornford, around 2007 all of a sudden their long tanks didn't sound as good because they'd

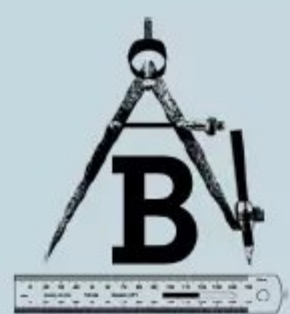
changed something. But that seems to have been addressed now. So we thought, 'Accutronics, that's the one.' All tanks are subtly different in the way they sound, and the Accutronics is really bright."

The MK amps took four years to develop. What were the challenges along the way?

"Particularly with the MK Overdrive, I remember it was a challenge to cram in all this stuff while keeping the background noise levels down. Because it's a fairly small package compared with a standard 100-watt amp. You know, if you had a Mesa/Boogie, a Soldano or a Marshall, the chassis is probably six inches longer. And because the MK amps are hand-wired,



2



1. Martin Kidd used the Cornford MK50 as a springboard for the 100-watt MK Overdrive design

2. The MK Series are handmade and hand-wired in the UK

3. The preamp uses four 12AX7 valves, with four 6L6s in the power stage

4. A two-channel amp, the MK Overdrive succeeds in offering a versatile package with low background noise



3

there's room for someone to put a wire somewhere different and throw a spanner in the works.

"I remember, we had to send the MK Overdrive off because we were going to launch these amps at NAMM 2024. And you know, NAMM is a strange environment; there's a lot of background noise. So you can end up with an odd perception of things. But when I heard the amp at the show, I thought, 'I don't know... it sounds a bit strange.' Part of it was that we were using an active guitar to demo the amplifier. So there was phenomenal sustain coming out of it, but I was thinking: 'It sounds a bit small, like it needs to breathe a bit more.' We got very

good comments at the show. But, really, the amp wasn't signed off. So then we came back and thought, 'We need to make sure this is absolutely what we want the production amp to be.'"

So what were the final tweaks you needed to make to the MK Overdrive?

"I'd been trying to smooth the sound out a bit too much, so I'd included something that was on the MK50: a little capacitor across an anode feed resistor, just before the cathode follower that drives the tone stack. It rolls off a tiny bit of top-end, smooths it off. So it was about taking out the capacitor to make it a little hairier or raspier, without making it offensive.

"The other thing was, the amp wanted more balls. You need to have an amp that can cope with various scenarios, and when it comes to live work, you want it to be able to pack a punch. There are some very well-respected amps out there, in my opinion, where the sound kind of falls down – it doesn't project as far as one might like. So I just gave the power amp a bit more gain. That was literally a resistor change. So it was fairly minimal. But when you get to that stage, the last little bit makes a real difference."

What can you tell us about the corresponding 112 and 212 MK cabinets that would influence the design?

"We do a blind listening test, so we don't know what speakers are in the cabinet. We've just got six cabinets with different speakers in, and we plug them in and say, 'I think I like that for the clean sounds, but that one's better for the overdrive.' We narrow it down and then go away for a sandwich or whatever, then come back and see if we still think the same. Then we look to see what speaker we've decided upon. And in this case, it was the most expensive, unfortunately – the Celestion Gold. That might not be everybody's choice. But you can have the MK cabinet with any speaker you want. So if you wanted to put Electro-Voice speakers in it, you could."



4



5. Bright, Bass Shift and Voice switches augment the tone-shaping abilities of the 100-watt, high-headroom MK Clean

6. This custom single-button footswitch controls the reverb

7. You can customise the look of the amps, from the leather covering to the panel colouring



There's some scope for personalisation with the MK amps. For instance, you can specify a custom Muirhead leather finish in the shade of your choice.

"I think it was just a case of, these amplifiers are a lot of money, and if we could offer them with Muirhead leather, then we should. With the vinyl that we're used to buying, you've probably got to buy 500 metres of it. Whereas with these leather finishes, it's a single hide – I think it's an Aberdeen Angus – so people might as well choose what colour they want it. Because we're not buying it in large amounts, we can buy all the pretty colours,

"When [you] keep playing it, that's the sign: you haven't got your soldering iron out for half an hour, so it must be right"

and we don't have the problem of having to stock 500 metres of 25 colours. We literally buy in one or two hides of that colour.

"And then, in terms of the faceplates, you can have stainless, black or cream. That wasn't difficult. We don't do any tweaks to the circuitry, though. Because I've heard of other companies who tried to



offer that kind of service, where it was like, 'Oh yeah, we can customise your sound for you.' And they do. And the customer goes away. And then two weeks later, they're back: 'Oh, I don't know... can I have more treble?' The trouble is, then you make a rod for your own back. At what point is your customer going to be satisfied?"

How do you know when an amp is finished – who gets the final say?

"These days at Victory, it's much more of a team effort. You know: 'What do we think of the sound?' et cetera. It's not just me, as it was at Cornford, when the amp was ready when I decided it was ready. And that would normally be when I kept playing it, rather than getting my

soldering iron again. That's the sign: you haven't got your soldering iron out for half an hour, so it must be right. It was the same thing with the MK amps.

"But you can go deaf. It's the same with mixing tracks in the studio. People will spend all day doing that and they'll be there at three in the morning, thinking they've got it. But then at 11 o'clock the next morning, they come back into the studio and realise they haven't and they have to start again. A lot of these amps would probably take another year to come out to the market if I was left to my own devices. I think somebody has to say, 'No, that's fine, Martin – we'll leave it there...!'"

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CHARLIE STARR

Blackberry Smoke's guitarist reveals his greatest guitar triumphs, the pitfalls and blessings of his Les Paul Junior addiction, and his outright disdain of "bad amps"

This 1967 Gibson Hummingbird is one of a few fortuitous gifts that Charlie has received, alongside a '58 Les Paul Custom and '56 Les Paul TV Junior

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

"I bought a 1978 Gibson SG with the harmonica bridge. It was a really horrible brown colour, but it didn't have a narrow nut. It was a nice-sized neck, and it was sort of a thin profile – but it had a wide, normal nut width. So I guess that was a plus."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last guitar that I bought was a 1956 Gibson Les Paul Junior. The reason why is just because I love them! I feel like I need to gather all of them unto me [laughs]. Every one I pick up is very much like snowflakes in that they're all so different. But the one commonality they share is they feel so lived in. For some reason, more so

than any other guitar, that's the case – and I don't know why. I mean, they're not all great, but I've never picked one up and just hated it. I feel like there were so many of them, and they were student model-type guitars that were affordable compared with the Les Paul Standard and Customs of the day. Maybe they just got a lot more action. I don't know that to be a fact, though.

"And I love a P-90; they're just big, round, broad, and muscular. I always think of Leslie West's big, fat, broad tone that he had with a Les Paul Junior. Pretty much any amp you plug into, you know, you turn that volume down, and it gets more and more like a Telecaster. It's magical."

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

"I was gifted a 1958 Les Paul Custom, which is probably the most extravagant gift I've ever received. I was also gifted a 1967 Gibson Hummingbird and a 1956 Les Paul TV Junior. I don't even know how you reconcile that; like, a thank you is not enough. But I've found some good deals [myself] over the years – but

"A bad amp is probably worse than a bad guitar – you can fight something out of a bad guitar"

those days are almost over, thanks to the internet. Within seconds, you can find everything there is to know about an instrument, so the crazy good deals are not easy to come by. But if someone gets desperate and they don't care if they make a profit, who knows?"

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

"I can't say that I've ever had buyer's remorse. I don't buy things frivolously. I'm pretty patient and I'm pretty shrewd. Well, I guess there was this one... a newer [Gibson] Everly [Brothers] acoustic that I bought. I was thinking of it as a road guitar, and I bought it online without having played it. It got to me and it just wasn't a good one. It just was really bad. I instantly felt some remorse then and knew what I had to do. I was like, 'Oh, I have to sell this because it sucks.'"

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

"Many of those! I had a '54 Les Paul Junior that I let go that I wish I hadn't. I had a 1969 Telecaster with a Bigsby that I liked; that era is how a Tele is supposed to sound. I had a '67 and a '69 that were Bigsby Teles that I really, really liked... I don't know why I sold either one of them."



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLIE STARR

CHARLIE'S GO-TO RIG

"I've been using various 50-watt tube amps. I've been using a Germino Lead 55 and a 1960 brown Fender Concert; both are on all the time. Those are my two absolute favourite amps in the world at the moment. George Alessandro went through the Concert and tightened it up for the road. He did a marvellous job – it's magical. As for guitars, I've got lots of Les Paul Juniors, a handful of Fender Esquires, and a really good '64 Gibson ES-335. "For pedals, I love everything that AnalogMan has, like the King Of Tone and the modded [MXR] Phase 45. I also love the Wampler Faux Tape Echo because it just seems to be the right length of delay. It's long enough and works every time I put my foot on it."

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

"Be patient. That's really the only advice I have. I know impulse buying is definitely a big thing for people buying guitars out there, and I'm guilty of some impulse buys from time to time, but more often than not, try to think about it because you want to play it. It's a little risky to buy a guitar sight unseen, touch untouched. The funny thing about vintage guitars is that they're not always great – but most of them are. But from time to time, you get a dud, something that's dead. But I don't know... I'm guilty of usually finding something I love about them."

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

"I was looking at Gibson Les Paul Goldtops, just because they're Goldtops [laughs]. They're great! And, man, I was just looking at some Gretsch White Falcons for a minute, and then I wound up getting one. I got an early 70s White Falcon, one of the double-cut ones. I love it; it's fantastic."

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 don't like either of those choices [laughs]! It's just disappointing. There are people who would say – and I've seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears

"Every Les Paul Junior I pick up is very much like snowflakes in that they're all so different"

– that some people sound better than all of us playing a cheap Squier Stratocaster, you know? Some people can do that, but I don't enjoy that or even the idea of trying to do that.

"And bad amps... oh, man. Bad amps are just the worst. A bad amp is probably worse than a bad guitar because you can fight something out of a bad guitar sometimes. But a bad amp is just, well, it's as bad as it gets. I can't get down with that."

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

"Probably humbuckers. They just may be a more versatile pickup – and I stress *maybe*." [AD]



Blackberry Smoke's latest album, *Be Right Here*, is available now via 3 Legged Records. The band tour the UK in July. See the website for info www.blackberrysmoke.com

Charlie's love of Les Paul Juniors knows no bounds: "I feel like I need to gather all of them unto me!" he laughs

IN THE HOUSE

Why are more and more guitar builders making their own pickups, wonders Dave Burrluck, and does it affect us players who are used to decades-old designs road-tested by giants?

Many moons ago I remember asking Paul Reed Smith why he didn't use pickups made by the likes of Seymour Duncan. My thinking was that while Paul had studied and learned the guitar-making craft of the greats, hadn't Seymour Duncan done the same, focusing on the pickups they used? The question came out all wrong. "Don't you *like* my pickups, David?" No, that wasn't what I meant.

Today, though, we all have easy access to the parts needed to make a pickup: the bobbins, the magnets, the wire and even mainstream luthier suppliers such as StewMac will sell you a pretty good pickup winding machine. You certainly don't have to start like Seymour Duncan did with a record player's turntable. Follow some basic and well-documented rules and you, too, can be a pickup maker. Now, if this sounds like a bit of a slur towards the diligent people that make superb pickups, it's not meant to be. It's just that things are changing.

Case In Point

Ruokangas has been making guitars since 1995 in Harviala in the south of Finland. If you've ever been lucky enough to get your hands on one, you'll know they represent extremely high craft and quality.

"We could approach the craft of pickup making from a different perspective"

Juha Ruokangas

From a base range of models you can typically spec up your custom dream and, to be honest, even if you have no intention of doing that I'd highly recommended a visit to Juha Ruokangas' (pic 1) website, which is crammed full of hard-earned tips, advice and a lot more.

But recently I received notification that Ruokangas was now in the pickup-making game. Soon, Juha Ruokangas and I were back in contact and he said he'd love to send over a set. Now, the two humbucking pickup set – VÄINÖ (bridge) and AINO (neck) (pic 2) – come in a pretty wide range of options, from uncovered with bobbins in black, cream or white with a choice



Finnish guitar maker Juha Ruokangas has also turned his attention to pickup making

of nickel, gold or black poles (offered on all styles), through to standard nickel or gold-covered pickups (with or without the engraved Ruokangas 'R'). The third option is partial covers, or frames, that can be nickel, gold or black-plated, like the poles. These then come with a choice of 12 faceplates: from Arctic Birch to Brown Tortoise (pics 3 & 4). Not entirely sure what guitar I'd audition the pickups on, I ordered up the nickel open frame with a satin black face and nickel-plated poles.

I had plenty of other things on the work schedule, so I put Juha Ruokangas and his very Finnish-named pickups to the back of my mind until they arrived a

little while later in a small, unassuming cardboard box. As you can see, each is hand-signed on the back (pic 5), while the actual pickups appear very well made. They both come with four-conductor hook-up wire, the red and white wires are joined for standard humbucking function, black is hot, and green and the uncovered stranded wire go to ground.

The brief bit of reading I'd done about these new pickups pitched them as not another Patent Applied For clone set but certainly within that classic style. Checking the DCRs, both are under 8kohms and have a slight coil offset, too. That doesn't tell us what they're going to



"This set is very musical, open and responsive, with a near-perfect high-end"

This old PRS CE 24 has a new lease of life now that it's fitted with Ruokangas humbuckers



All the way from Finland, the smartly made VÄINÖ and AINO humbuckers



Not only can you choose the hardware plating colour but with the open-frame pickups you can select from 12 faceplates, including the pictured Arctic Birch option



A selection of the available humbucking faceplates on the bench



They each come with four-conductor wiring and a hand-written message

“There’s an openness and clarity here that can certainly blues-wail and yet sounds really sweet”

sound like, but it does give an idea of what to expect and, in my case, the sort of guitar to listen to them on. I’d stopped using an old PRS CE 24 a while back because it wasn’t quite fitting the gig, which was a shame as it’s a lovely player, and with a now 20-year-old Clive Brown goldtop relic refinish, it’s really quite the looker – almost as vintage as its owner.

Testing, Testing...

With a standard PRS master volume and master tone circuit and a three-way toggle pickup selector switch circuit, the new pickups were a simple install (pic 6). And after a play-testing over a few days, with a lot of comparisons, what I can say is that Ruokangas is very much in the pickup business. If your tastes lie on the more classic, lower-output side of the tone tracks, you really have to hear these.

What’s different from a plethora of similar designs? Well, the wheel hasn’t

been reinvented, but this is a very balanced set with three distinct voices. The bridge is most important to me and the word ‘organic’ springs to mind; it’s a really good classic rock pickup that’s very musical, open and responsive, with a near-perfect high-end that’s neither oversharper nor brittle yet has beautiful clarity. Now, the PRS is a 24-fret guitar, so you’d expect the neck to sound a little brighter than on a 22-fretter and, again, there’s that openness and clarity here that can certainly blues-wail and yet sounds really sweet. The mixed pickup selection will be influenced by the pickup placement, but here it’s a standout: funk, bounce, almost Strat-y.

But something else is going on here. These pickups sound lively and airy like unpotted pickups, but they’re not conventionally potted and I’m not missing anything over other non-potted pickups that I’ve accessed for comparison. How so? Well, let’s find out...



New pickups installed: maybe we should have asked for a relic finish to match the cracked and crazed nitro

A Different Path

Juha Ruokangas is extremely passionate and proud of the guitars he and his small team have hand-built over these past 30 years. But why get into the pickup business after all this time?

“When I was a young guitar maker – I started my business in 1995 – it was clear to me I could do anything that I wanted, but I couldn’t do everything because I just didn’t have the time” Juha tells us. “At that point, making pickups wasn’t an option. Also, back then the only way I could have started to make pickups was winding them myself by hand – I’d have to figure it out the hard way. In order to be able to master this I’d need to wind hundreds, thousands. And even if I did figure it out, how could I tell someone else who I might employ how I wanted them to be wound? If I’m going to take all the time to learn this, then pickup making, not guitar making, is going to be my career.

“We could lose the microphonics but still keep that ‘air’ in the sound”

Juha Ruokangas

“But around four or five years ago I started flirting with the idea again,” he continues. “Now, we make guitars totally by hand; we don’t have any CNC or other technology of any sort. But I’d started seeing these companies – there’s one in the UK, for example – that make super-efficient pickup winding machines that are fully automated and you can do the wire tension, you can simulate the scatter-wind... all these processes. But, importantly, you can record these things and programme them down to the finest details: you can refine recipes for pickups.

“I started to realise we’d entered an age where it would be possible to enter the craft of pickup making from a totally different perspective. That’s when, let’s say, the coffee table talk started at our ‘shop. Me, my wife [and business partner, Emma Elftorp] and the rest of the guys started discussing it: ‘What if we got one of these machines? We could start a pickup-making hobby.’ Not to take it too seriously but to start understanding how pickups can be made in the modern world. They’re not cheap machines, but they are accessible to a small business. So we got a machine a couple of years ago and started playing with it [pic 7]. I invited a Finnish luthier who had been hand-winding pickups all his life to come and spend a couple of days with us.”

After plenty of trial and error over the course of eight months or so, typically making a new set most mornings and then listening to and comparing them with



Emma Elftorp, Juha's business partner and wife, at the coil-winding machine

other pickups as the day went on, Juha and the team were happy with the pickups – except for one thing...

“Then we hit the real dead-end, which was the potting,” Juha reveals. “We almost gave up. I knew I didn’t want unpotted pickups, but I didn’t want potted pickups, either! [laughs] When I designed my [single-cut] Unicorn model in 2008/’09, the first humbuckers Harry Häussel [one of the many respected

“If your tastes lie on the more classic, lower-output side of the tone tracks, you have to hear these”

pickup makers Juha has used over the years] made for that guitar were unpotted because I wanted that nuance and element to the sound. But immediately I ran into the problems. With my own band, a three-piece, we play in a rehearsal studio and I’d crank up my Marshall JCM800 and I couldn’t deal with the microphonics. So we had that conversation – yes, we can pot them. Again, it was either/or. You see, all the early versions of the pickups

over those eight months were unpotted, but when we thought we’d created what we really liked, after potting them they became, well, just like ordinary, regular humbuckers.

“That’s when I talked to my friend Lassi Ukkonen who helped us with our Valvebucker circuit years ago – he’s a retired electronics engineer who has worked all his life with guitar and hi-fi audio. I unloaded my frustrations on him. Well, he started talking about coils, inductance, capacitance, Q factor... and all these things in mathematical terms and I’m like, ‘Whoa!’ I said, ‘Look, I want to keep the cake and eat the cake!’ But it was Lassi who brought up the idea of trying to do it in a controlled manner: choose part or parts of the coil during the process of winding – either at the beginning, the middle or the end, somewhere – to solidify a certain amount of the coil. I’m not going to be totally open about it obviously, but he had the theory and believed there was a chance to lose the microphonics but still keep that ‘air’ in the sound.”

On the evidence we’ve heard, the resulting Flux-Coil Stabilisation really does seem to keep the life of the sound but cure the microphonics. Maybe guitar makers turning to pickup making isn’t such a bad thing? **G**

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: Ruokangas VÄINÖ bridge humbucker

PRICE: From €190

TECH SPEC: Ruokangas Flux-Coil Stabilisation, slightly asymmetrically wound coils, 4-conductor wiring

MAGNET: Alnico IV

DCR: 7.95kohms

OPTIONS: Uncovered, covered or open-frame with 12 different faceplates, polepiece and cover/frame plating

PRODUCT: Ruokangas AINO neck humbucker

PRICE: From €190

TECH SPEC: As VÄINÖ (above)

MAGNET: Alnico II

DCR: 6.9kohms

SKILL LEVEL: Easy to fit if you can solder; coil junction leads are pre-soldered so all you need to do is solder the hot and ground wires

WEB: <https://ruokangas.com>

PROS & CONS

PROS Classic, slightly underwound humbucking pickup set with wide range of appearance options to suit your guitar; Flux-Coil Stabilisation really sounds quite unpotted but with zero microphonic issues

CONS Nope, not when they sound this good!

Guitarist
GOLD
10/10

Guitarist

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Huw Price's *Nitty*Gritty

50s Flying Vs out of reach? Upgrading an Epiphone gets you closer than you'd think

Epiphone Flying V



PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

A nitrocellulose refinish, upgraded hardware and electronics can transform 'budget' guitars like Epiphones into spectacular instruments

Soon after joining *Guitarist*, I was assigned to interview Joe Bonamassa and he began telling me about an amazing guitarist called Chris Buck. Rather than let Joe carry on, I felt obliged to tell him that Chris and I were so well acquainted, I was even friends with his dad, Dory, who had been talking about giving Chris a special guitar. Dory and I eventually settled on a plan to refinish and upgrade his Epiphone Flying V.

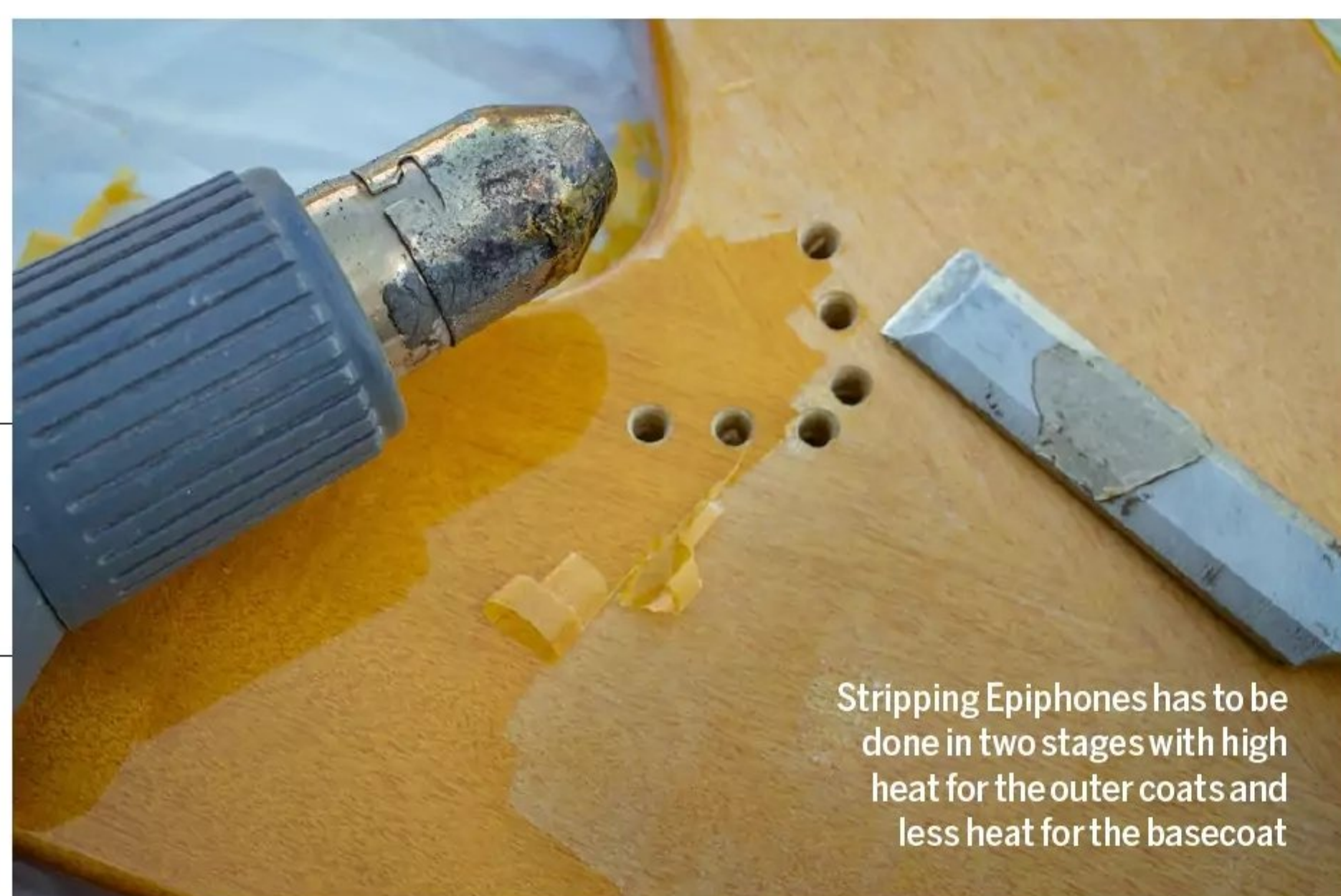
If you ever feel the need for an armour-plated vehicle, just send your regular car to Epiphone for a respray... Epiphone guitars have a two-layer finish, with glossy colour coats sprayed over a transparent base coat. You can get them off, but different techniques are required to do so. The topcoats come off easily enough if you use a hot air gun set to its higher temperature. The trick is to leave the base coat intact and not to try to get straight down to the wood. Too much heat will cause the base coat to blister and burn, which can char the timber. A lower heat setting softens the base coat and causes it to turn powdery as it's scraped off.

Unfortunately, the korina wood tends to stick to the finish and chunks can

"As a gift for Chris Buck, his dad, Dory, and I settled on a plan to refinish and upgrade his Epiphone Flying V"

come off as you're scraping. What's more, Epiphone Flying V bodies are veneered front and back, and heat can cause the glue to let go. If you encounter bubbled-up veneer, this can be fixed back down by heating the area with a clothes iron and then clamping it with a flat block.

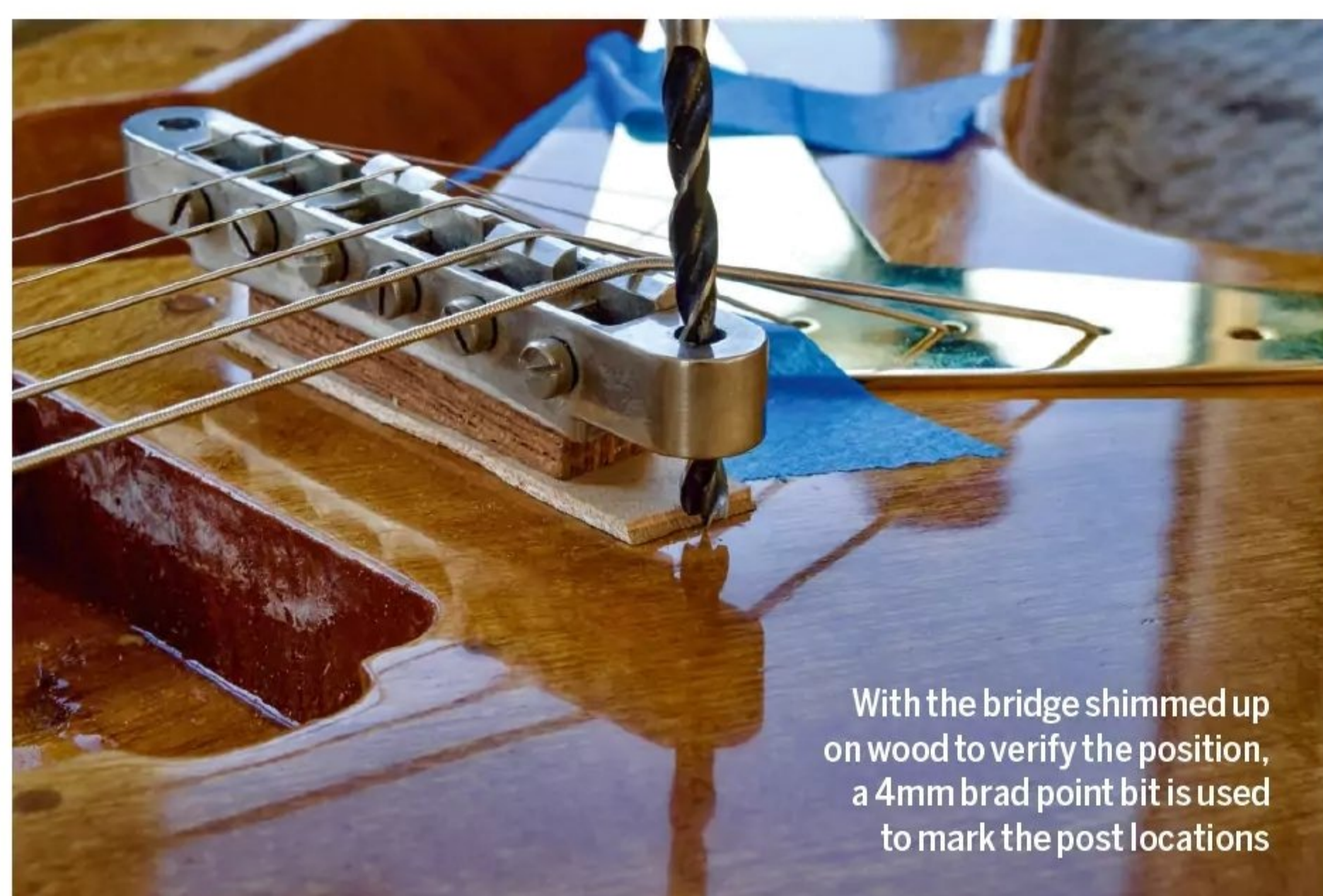
When it comes to necks, I prefer to use a scraper because I worry that excessive heat will bend or twist them. The upshot is that stripping an Epiphone is not for the fainthearted. While a regular Gibson finish can usually be peeled off in about 20 minutes, stripping an Epiphone can take days.



Stripping Epiphones has to be done in two stages with high heat for the outer coats and less heat for the basecoat



The refinished body is ready to be fitted with fresh parts and upgraded electronics



With the bridge shimmed up on wood to verify the position, a 4mm brad point bit is used to mark the post locations



After some selective scratching, the plastic parts are aged with diluted leather dye and oily grain filler

Body Modifications

The brief with this guitar was to make it as 50s-correct as possible, so modifications were required. Knowing that I'd be replacing the tailpiece and pickup rings, I plugged all the screw holes with dowels and sanded them flush. The treble-side bridge post was set directly into the wood, but Epiphone used a post bushing on the bass side. Again, I glued in dowels so I'd have the option of using different-diameter bridge posts and maybe relocating them if needed.

Epiphone's stock string ferrules are lipped and sit flush with the body, but 50s Flying Vs ferrules were narrower and recessed. I filed the lips off the ferrules, but I needed to ensure that string tension wouldn't pull them through the body. To achieve this, I glued dowels into the string holes, leaving enough room for the ferrules to be glued in afterwards. I then drilled new string holes through the body, taking care not to widen the holes in the ferrules.

The factory-fitted Grover tuners made this featherweight guitar somewhat neck heavy, so a set of vintage-style Kluson tuners was the preferred option. I also wanted to mount a 1950s-style truss rod cover, but because Epiphone's truss rod access groove extends all the way back to the nut, there's nothing for the truss rod screw to bite into.

The solution I came up with was to veneer the headstock and double up the

thickness in the area adjacent to the nut. Before gluing the veneer, I plugged the tuner bushing holes and sanded them flush. I used maple veneer here, rather than holly, because it's easier to source. Once I'd tidied up the edges, I opened up the truss rod access and drilled new bushing holes. Lastly, I drilled out the tiny white side dots to replace them with larger celluloid dots and then masked off the fretboard and nut.

Vintage Flying Vs always look as if the finish has sunk into the grain, and the wood looks so natural that I'm not convinced Gibson used grain filler. After staining the maple neck to try to make its tone a little better with the korina body, I sprayed the husk with Fiddes cellulose sanding sealer followed by high-build cellulose base coat. I also sprayed the front of the headstock black.

After levelling the basecoats I used StewMac's Vintage Amber and Medium Brown ColorTone Stains to tint Nitrolack Golden Age gloss lacquer and then applied several coats. I sanded these coats smooth and then melted out the scratches with a couple of flash coats. Flash coats are mostly thinners that are mixed with N-butyl retarder and a tiny dash of lacquer, and they flow out to leave a high-gloss surface that's almost ready to buff. After sanding with 1,200- and 2,000-grit wet and dry, the finish polished up nicely.

Fixtures & Fittings

Epiphone's 50s-style Flying V is a perfectly decent guitar that manages to emulate the spirit of the real thing without being completely vintage accurate. Gibson's '58 reissues cost several thousand pounds (the Custom Shop 1958 Korina Flying V Reissue was £9,699 at the time of writing), so upgrading an Epiphone or 'golden era' Japanese reissue is an affordable option. There's also a lot of enthusiasm for Precision Guitar Kits' V-Type kits, and the availability of high-quality 50s-spec parts indicates that some Flying V fans choose this route.

A 50s-correct brass tailpiece was needed to replace the Epiphone version, which is incorrectly shaped, secured by screws (rather than pin nails) and made from gold-plated steel. I ordered one from Crazy Parts, which offers a comprehensive range of 50s Flying V accessories.

Replica pickguards and jack plates are available in white and black, but I decided to retain the original because it can be made to line up fairly well. The parts list also included knobs, gold pointers, M69-spec pickup rings, a truss rod cover, Kluson single ring tuners, a gold jack socket and gold strap buttons. These are all generic and came from Allparts UK, except for the tuners, which were sourced from Music Store.

Chris supplied a used Gibson ABR-1 bridge, so I decided to string up the guitar

and locate the bridge. Before that, I needed to install the tuners. The post holes were a tad narrow, so I used a reamer to widen the diameter for the bushings. With a steel ruler lining up the tuners, I marked the screw locations, drilled pilot holes and mounted them onto the headstock.

This is when I encountered the only complication of this project. Crazy Parts' tailpiece is vintage correct, but Epiphone's string hole locations aren't, and the tailpiece's string holes didn't line up. In the end I had to widen the holes in the body, knowing they would be hidden, and slightly increase the diameter of the

"The easiest way to achieve checking lines across the body is to put the guitar into a deep freeze"

tailpiece string holes. With tape holding the tailpiece in position, I was finally able to see daylight through the holes.

With an ABR-1 bridge shimmed on a couple of pieces of wood, I could string up the guitar and verify that it would intonate with posts installed in the original locations. After drilling fresh post holes, I inserted the posts, mounted the bridge and gave the guitar a final play test.

In issue 523 I described my process for distressing the finish prior to inducing lacquer checking on my 1957 Strat restoration. In short, I put lots of tiny dents and chips into the lacquer by dropping handfuls of screws onto the guitar, then I add several larger dents using a nail punch and the rounded side of a small hammer.



With a splash of ammonia inside a sealed container, the fumes rapidly tarnish the brass nails and tailpiece suspended above

The difference this time was that I wanted the checking lines to form sideways across the body, rather than lengthways along it. The easiest way to achieve this was to put the guitar into a deep freeze – so long as you have one big enough. Nitorlack Golden Age is formulated for easy checking and it didn't disappoint. After three overnight sessions in the freezer, the checking ended up looking exactly as I'd hoped.

Relic 'N' Roll

The pickguard and jack plate looked too shiny and white, so I used 0000-grade wire wool and 4,000-grit micromesh to dull the surface. I followed up with Angelus Medium Brown leather dye

diluted with isopropyl alcohol to get more of a 'parchment' white colour. I then applied Morell's dark brown grain filler to dirty up the bevelled edges.

After dulling down with more wire wool, the knobs, truss rod cover and pickup rings went into a bag with some screws and I gave it a good shake to scratch them up. Wiping the leather dye onto the outer surfaces gave the knobs an amber look and gave the rings and cover an interesting patina. I used a file to induce some 'strategic' damage to the rings and applied more grain filler 'dirt' to the truss rod cover's white edging.

Most well-played vintage Flying Vs retain little or no gold plating on the pickup covers or the bridge. The tuners generally show more of their original colour, and there may be traces of gold surviving on the pointers, switch and output jack. But the parts we had all looked way too gold. Dulling the gold – or even removing it completely – can be done by rubbing it with a wad of Brasso. The pointers and jack were quite well plated and needed some effort, but the gold came off the tuner parts and switch with worrying ease. The plastic tuner buttons responded well to the wire wool, leather dye and grain filler treatment.

I gave the tailpiece a thorough wipe down with acetone to remove any greasy fingerprints before placing it into a sealed container with ammonia. It's an old antique restoration technique that produces rapid results, but it's important to always work outdoors and wear gloves, a respirator and eye protection because ammonia is dangerous.



Brasso can dull or even rub off gold plating as you can see by comparing the untreated tuners on the left with the aged ones on the right



Electronic upgrades include Bare Knuckle 550k potentiometers, a paper-in-oil capacitor and a set of Patent Applied For replica pickups

Electronics

While I decided to recycle the original switch, everything else in terms of electronics was upgraded. I'm partial to Bare Knuckle's 550k CTS potentiometers and find the 10 per cent taper responds similarly to vintage pots. The higher value also corresponds with vintage 500k pots, which tend to measure way above 500k – and sometimes even closer to 600k. To mount the pots, I had to widen the pickguard holes with a 9.5mm drill bit.

There are plenty of excellent Patent Applied For humbucker replicas on the market to choose from, but for this project I decided to make a set using vintage-correct parts and magnet wire. I used a brick red Soviet-era paper-in-oil capacitor for tone control, and all the connections

were made with vintage-style braided wire. Lastly, there's the all-important ground wire that goes under the tailpiece and through a hole into the control cavity.

After drilling pilot holes for the tailpiece nails, I fixed it onto the body but left the nails slightly proud for wiggle room. With the pickups in position, I soldered them to the volume pots and strung up the guitar so I could optimise the pickup placement and screw down the rings.

After adjusting the tailpiece and pickguard to optimise the alignment, I used masking tape to hold the pickguard in position and tapped the tailpiece nails all the way in. Once the pickguard was screwed down and the jack socket soldered on, I was finally able to tune up and hear the guitar for the first time.

V For Victory

I haven't spent sufficient time with 50s Flying Vs to become accustomed to their tone, but comparing Chris's model with some decent online demos, this example has some of the same characteristics. To my ears, they seem very clear, dynamic and expressive. Their woody tone almost slots in somewhere between an SG and an ES-335, with a splash of Strat-y twang.

When I'm aware of the history of guitars I'm working on, I often find myself thinking about the people who once owned them. Sadly, Dory Buck died in 2023, before I was able to finish his Flying V, but I hope he would have liked the way it turned out. **G**

Watch more on Huw Price's YouTube channel – Tone Twins TV



Final touches include glueing the anti-slip strip back onto the body and installing 6mm celluloid fretboard dots



Lining up the tailpiece is tricky, but once it has been reliced it contributes more than any other part to the vintage look



David Davidson's *Vintage* Icons

When David bought this 1960 ES-335, he was in for a surprise and a lesson in life

1960 Gibson ES-335



At first sight this 1960 ES-335 appeared to be an honest example, but there was a hidden feature

“I recently acquired a 1960 Gibson ES-335 and discovered something interesting that I’ve never seen before. Even after all these years collecting and selling vintage guitars, I learned it’s always possible to teach an old dog new tricks.

“When I got the guitar everything appeared completely original besides one of the control knobs, which had a late-60s-style deep reflector rather than the shallow style that is correct for the year. I wasn’t concerned because I knew I had some genuine vintage knobs, but when I pulled the knob off to replace it, I discovered the potentiometer shaft was nylon, rather than metal.

“As soon as I saw it my heart jumped into my throat because I’d bought it from a trusted guy and I couldn’t imagine that he would have done something improper. Then I pulled off the other knobs and found exactly the same thing. I started having a bit of a meltdown because I was kicking myself for not giving the guitar a thorough examination. I felt I should have known better and realised that the wiring harness must have been modified or replaced.

“My tech and I decided to pull out the harness and we discovered that nothing had ever been unsoldered or altered in any way. The potentiometers were odd looking, but the date codes indicated the 48th week of 1959. The manufacturer code was 235, which indicated the pots were made by Mallory, a company more closely associated with electrical components and batteries.

“I had never seen these before, but I was ready to bet my bottom dollar that they were original to the guitar. I started phoning around a few old timers, guys

“It’s important to understand that there are always anomalies and features not widely documented”

even older than me, to ask if they had ever seen potentiometers like this in a Gibson, but none of them had. Then I did a deep dive on the internet and after a few clicks I found a colleague of mine talking about a 1960 ES-335 that he found that had exactly the same pots.

“He had bought the guitar from its original owner in 2021 and it was quite intact. When he sent me some pictures I felt like I was looking at two identical guitars. Then we discovered the serial numbers were only two apart and both had FONs (factory order numbers) that corresponded to late 1960 and serial numbers that were very early 1961. With that slight discrepancy, you could call these guitars 1960s or 1961s.

“So I learned something new. And later on, I talked to another friend who’d had a 1960 Les Paul Special with Mallory pots. My theory is that Gibson bought a load of these pots, probably from a local electronics store, and they used them when they couldn’t get stock from their usual supplier to keep the production line moving. The Mallory pots are totally silent in operation and really good quality.

“One of the pickups had an opened cover, but there’s no evidence of repairs having been carried out. That one is a

‘zebra’ and the other is a double black. Sometimes people take the covers off hoping to find double white bobbins, but all you really need to do is remove the bobbin screws and use a flashlight. It had the dot fretboard markers, and the non-wired bridge has brass saddles, rather than the later nylon ones.

“It has the slim taper neck that’s typical for late 1960 and someone has refretted it at some point. It plays great and really rips if you plug it into a good tube amp. That’s why they’re called ‘burst killers’. It has a lot of play wear and it’s not too heavy. Sonically, it’s big, like most of them are, because that hollow body with the solid plank in the middle adds a sympathetic tone that solid guitars don’t have.

“When I finally established that the guitar was correct, I felt humbled. It proved to me once again that however many vintage guitars you may encounter in life, one day you’re going to get a surprise that will knock you over. This one just got me and I had no clue. I went from thinking that I’d got a raw deal, but it worked out fine and I know that for me the knowledge I gained was ‘the deal’.

“People who have been in the vintage world for some time occasionally get a little bored because they think they’ve seen it all. It’s important to understand that there are always anomalies, and features that are not widely documented can sometimes turn out to be original after all.” [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001(516) 221-0563

"I started phoning
around a few old timers
to ask if they had ever
seen potentiometers
like this in a Gibson"

David has now documented
four Gibsons from this period
featuring factory fitted
Mallory potentiometers
with nylon shafts



Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



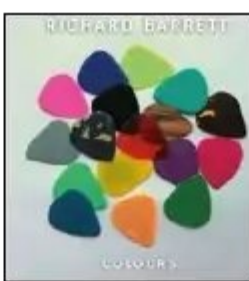
Buddy's Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank, Boss BD-2W Blues Driver & Fender Blues Deluxe
Difficulty ★★★★★ | 10 mins per example

THE BUDDY REFERRED TO IN THE TITLE is, of course, Buddy Guy: the pioneer who influenced Hendrix, Clapton, Page and Beck among others. His fiery playing (and equally impassioned vocals) remain as exciting today as ever. Like Eric Clapton, he was told early in his career that his playing was too loud, too strident and outside the accepted norms of the day. This necessitated him largely pausing his solo career after 1967's *I Left My Blues In San Francisco* to become a sideman for artists such as Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter, supplementing his income with club dates and working as a tow truck driver. Thankfully, he hung on in there, and though his recorded

output was minimal during the 1970s, his career really took off in the late 80s and early 90s and hasn't slowed down since. The focus in these examples isn't to perfectly imitate Buddy's playing because this would be an impossible task. Neither is it on extended scales, arpeggios or advanced music theory: everything is played within a few frets, using shapes 1 and 2 of the A minor pentatonic scale, with hardly any additions. There is complexity in Buddy's playing, but this is to be found more in the phrasing, particularly the rhythmic groupings. Longer held notes are deliberately contrasted with rapid-fire triplet bursts, taking pause between phrases for the vocals. Obviously,

demonstrating the silence between phrases would be of dubious benefit in this context, so please bear this in mind. The examples were recorded separately but with the intention that they could be heard and/or played together as a continuous solo. I'm using the neck and middle single coils together with a fairly hard, driven sound. A bit of reverb is always nice, but the idea is to squeeze a lot out of a little. Enjoy and see you next time! **G**

 Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Example 1

IN THIS OPENING PHRASE, there's an instant switch from shape 1 to shape 2 of the A minor pentatonic scale. You'll notice that the backing track is very major in its tonality, but blues often makes a feature of combining the two, or of treading a fine line between them. There's plenty of repetition here, with no hurry to burst into flurries of notes. There will be a little of that later, but this phrase is key to establishing the mood.

♩ = 64

A7

BU BD PB 10 BD PB 10 BD BU BD

10-(12) (11)-(12) (10)-(12) (10)-10-(12) (10)

8 10 10 10 10 8 10

8 10 10 X 10-(12) (10)-8 10-8-(10) (8) 10 9 10

8 10 8 10-8 9

3

4

Example 2

STAYING SQUARELY WITHIN A MINOR PENTATONIC shape 1, this example starts out in a similar fashion to Example 1 but then unleashes some faster triplets going into bar 2. The importance of absolute accuracy in this is debatable. While we don't want to drop the ball completely, being too slick seems to lose the quality we're after. Jimmy Page's playing in *I Can't Quit You Baby* is another example of this quality. Have a play and see what you think.

Example 2 musical notation. The first system is in 12/8 time and features a D7 chord. The second system is in 4/4 time and features an A7 chord. Both systems include fret numbers, bends (BU), and triplets.

Example 3

BACK TO SHAPE 2 to start with some repeated bends. Switching position for these is actually quite tricky, so after all that talk earlier of not being too accurate, this may be a surprise. We stick with a similar vocabulary and rhythmic groupings until the end of bar 3, when we slide down towards shape 1. Here's an example of how not to be too slick: my first instinct was to go back and not play that A over the final E chord in bar 4 but spontaneity would have been lost.

Example 3 musical notation. The first system is in 12/8 time and features an E7 chord. The second system is in 4/4 time and features an A7 chord. Both systems include fret numbers, bends (BU), and slides (BD).

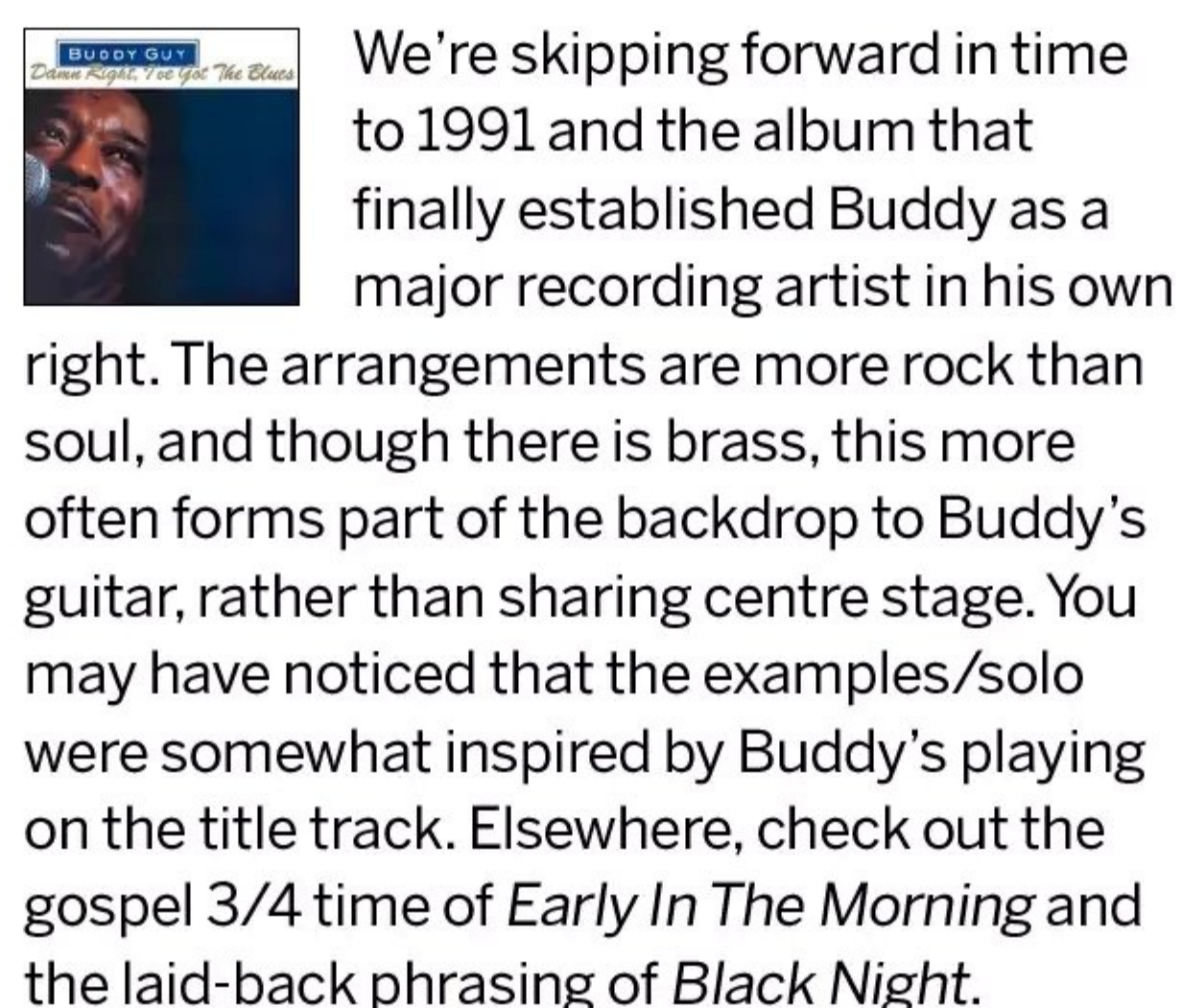
THIS IS AN ALTERNATE TAKE over the first four bars, pulling out a few more stops. Note the C# and C natural playing off each other in bars 1 and 2. This is a clear example of the major/minor interplay we see so often in the blues. The rest of this example reimagines some of the ideas we've already seen in a slightly different context, showing that there is always more than one way to deliver them.

Hear It Here

LEFT MY BLUES IN SAN FRANCISCO



DAMN RIGHT, I'VE GOT THE BLUES



THE BLUES DON'T LIE

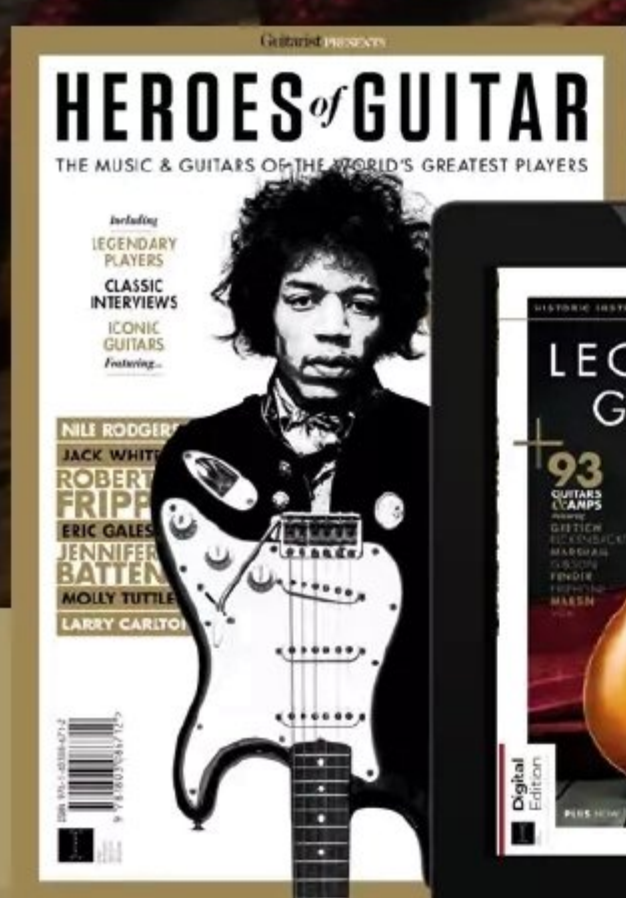


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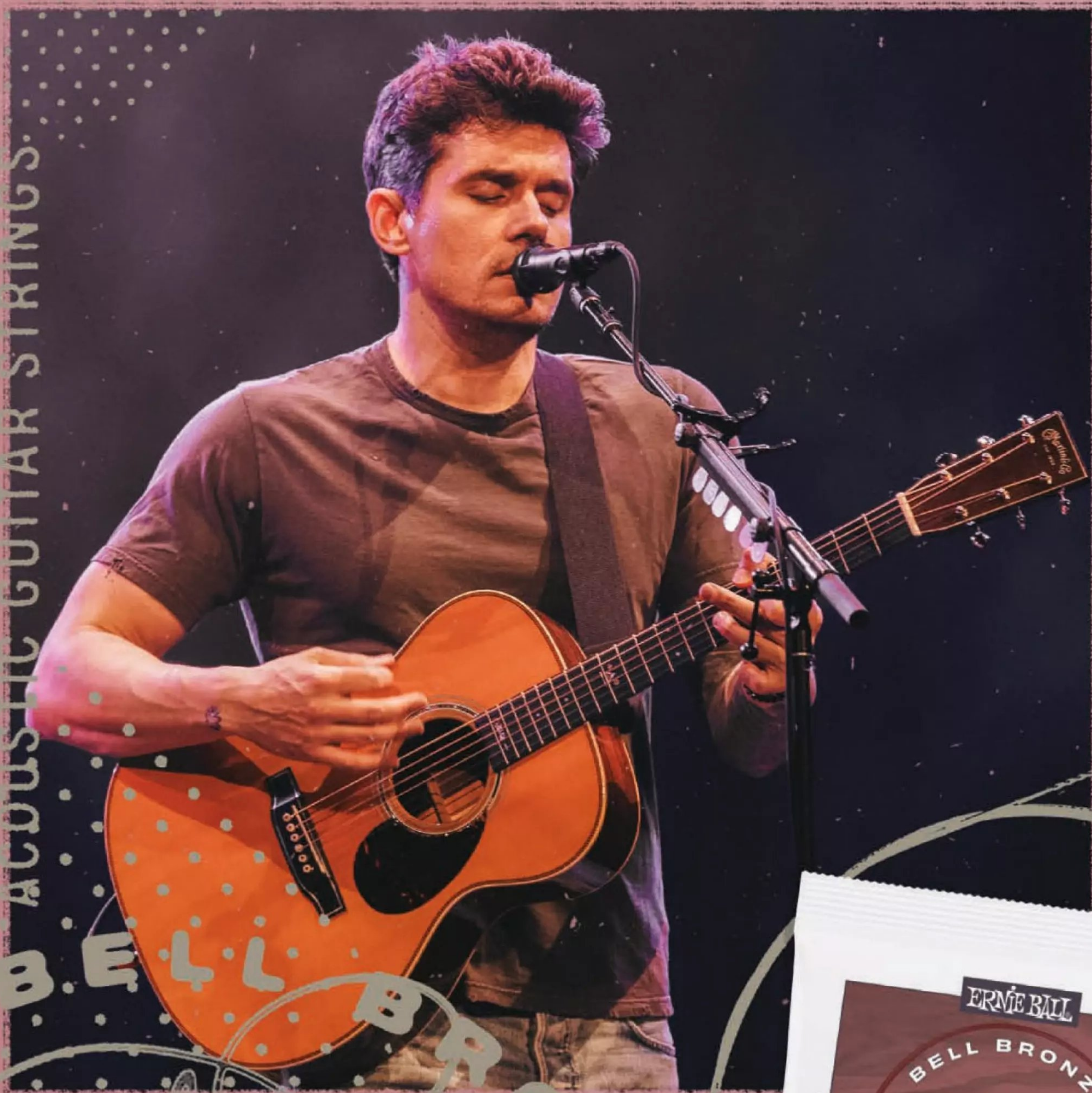


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