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Issue 526

AUGUST 2025

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Views From The Top



It's always interesting to hear what someone who can have any gear they want has to say about sounding good, as with this month's cover feature interview with Joe Bonamassa (see page 60), who has one of the most coveted vintage gear collections in the world. Given that he's devoted so much time to finding and buying 'unobtainium' guitars, it's surprising to hear him voice the opinion, with apparent sincerity, that "it's a mistake to try to keep up with the Joneses... because sooner or later, you wake up and you realise that you hate the Joneses." In other words, play whatever gear you get off on – and don't worry too much about the name on the headstock or what others may think.

This theme was repeated in a video demo we did of the Epiphone Inspired By Gibson Custom 1962 ES-335 reviewed on page 20. In the comments section of the video, which is live now on YouTube, viewers debated whether £1,009 is too much to ever pay for an Epiphone. The question shows how entrenched (for some people) the idea is that Epiphone is a budget brand. That's especially ironic given that, when Gibson bought the brand in 1958, it wanted Kalamazoo-built Epiphones to offer more upmarket versions of Gibson models and put its best craftspeople on the Epiphone line. But prejudices or, perhaps we might say more charitably, 'ingrained perceptions' about brands are hard to shift.

All I can say is that quite a few people I've met who've tried a lot of Holy Grail guitars – such as people who've worked in vintage-guitar retail for a long time – are often surprisingly open-minded about cheaper guitars, if they're vibey and sound good. That is to say, while we might still choose to play a 'Burst if one were gifted to us, we shouldn't dismiss liking what we like, regardless of its supposed cachet or lack thereof. Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Ship To Shawn

Shawn Lee is reviving Yacht Rock but in sincere, beautifully crafted style. We find out more about Young Gun Silver Fox on **p54**



Here Be Dragons

The meticulous recreations of Jimmy Page's Zep-era amps made by Sundragon may be the nearest mere mortals may get on **p80**



Gentle Giant

Still much-loved, decades on from their split: guitarist Gary Green looks back on the challenge of playing intricate music live in the 70s **p40**

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REVIEW



PHOTOS BY PHIL BARKER



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FIRST PLAY



**MARTIN DE RETRO
PLUS MAHOGANY**
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WHAT IS IT? Mahogany
'Style 18' dreadnought with
onboard pickup and torrefied
spruce top

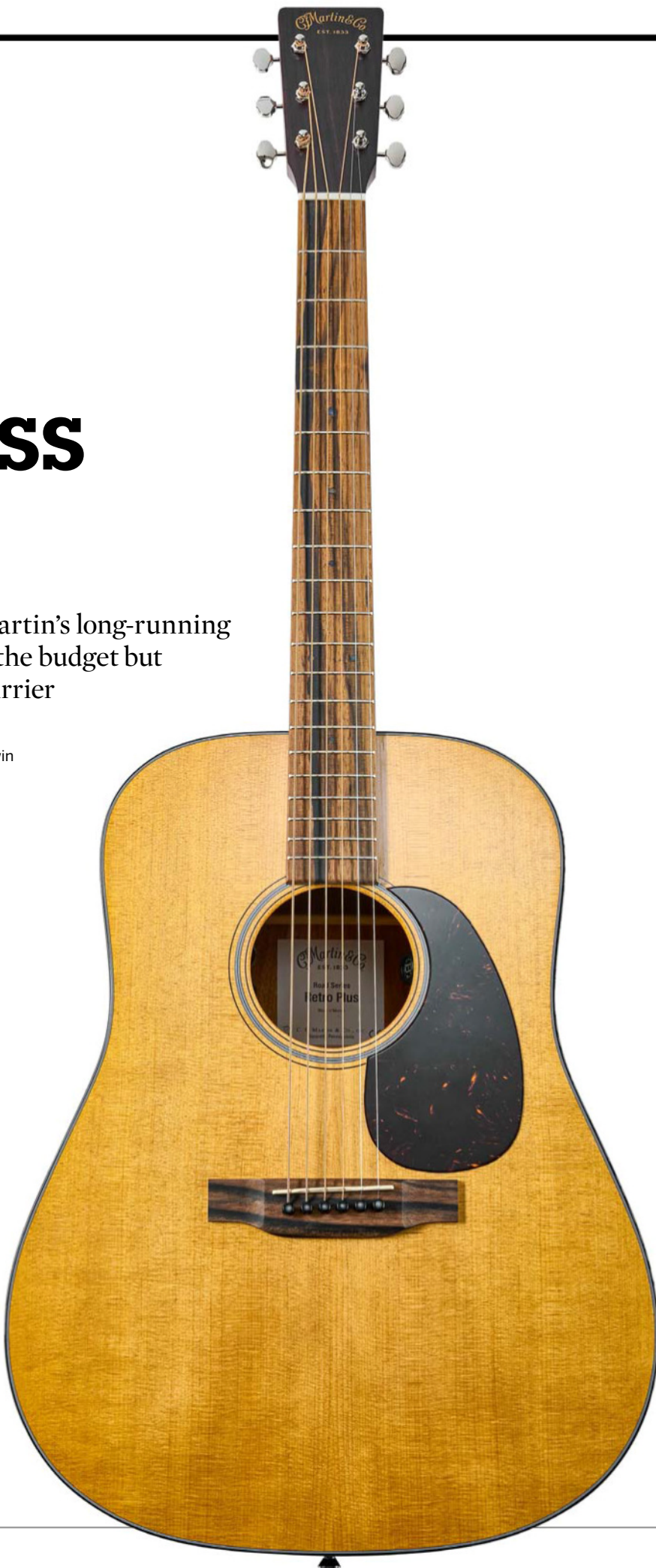
Timeless Tone

A brand-new model from Martin's long-running Road Series that won't bust the budget but might just break the tone barrier

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Neil Godwin

If you know your Martin guitar models, you might initially say, "Oh, it's a D-18 but with an unusually grained fingerboard and bridge." Well, no, it's not a D-18, but it's certainly a dreadnought and follows that legendary model's features pretty closely. As for the fingerboard and bridge, like the D-18 they're ebony, although here it's 'striped'. Striped ebony is just as hard and just as toneful as the pitch-black variety, and those markings are merely due to the fact that Martin is happy to use different cuts of timber from the same Gabon ebony tree.

Company chairman, Chris Martin, elaborates: "Striped ebony is a sustainable option because harvesting it involves the utilisation of all parts of the tree. The streaks appear due to the species' light-coloured heartwood; by using the lighter colour, we can employ more of the harvested wood. Using all colour variations allows for more lumber from the tree to be transformed into guitar parts, keeping the harvesters and mills from scrapping more material and putting more money into their supply chain. Less wood scrapped means fewer trees are cut down."







1

1. The close-grained spruce top is thermally aged to add decades of natural mellowness and warmth while retaining the snap for which a mahogany dreadnought body is renowned. The simple soundhole rosette and unfussy bindings fit the model's understated aura perfectly

2. A heel-mounted strap button helps make your Retro Plus stage ready. Genuine mahogany is used for the body, while 'select hardwood' is the neck timber of choice. This could be the real stuff, nato, Spanish cedar or other woods that Martin has in its lumber store

There's really nothing not to like about that, is there? We will mention, though, that not all Retro Plus guitars' 'boards and bridges have as much going on as this one, so if the multi-coloured look is not your thing, just shop around until you find one that's more to your liking.

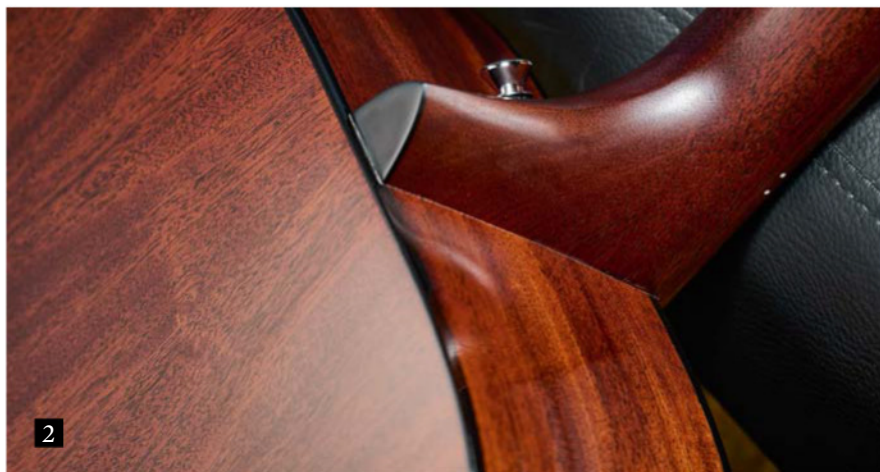
Another important fact about Road Series models is that they're made in Martin's factory in Sonora, Mexico, where the company has had an operation since 1989. The use of this Mexican production base reduces the price of these guitars massively, from around £3,000 for a Nazareth-built D-18 Standard (with no

pickup), to £1,899 for a stage-ready Retro Plus (that you shouldn't be scared to take out on the road).

With back and sides of solid mahogany, a tinted and torrefied spruce top with scalloped bracing, and what Martin describes as 'select hardwood' for the neck, it's a recipe that has generated fine acoustic tones since Martin first combined the ingredients in dreadnought guise back in 1931. By the way, the neck's 'select hardwood' reference means it could be genuine mahogany, Spanish cedar, nato or any similar available timber that Martin has in its current stockpile. It's attached to the body with a traditional mortise and tenon joint, and satin finished in dark mahogany stain.

The body is natural gloss save for the top's tinted toner; it's most likely urethane, but it appears pretty thin-skinned and not at all shiny or plastic looking. It's great, too, to see the use of quality Grover open-gear tuners, which add to the guitar's understated but classy vintage vibe. Other details include white Corian nut and Tusq saddle, rosewood headstock facing with water-transfer Martin logo in old-style script, faux-tortoiseshell pickguard, and subtle binding and soundhole rosette.

What's not at all vintage is the onboard E1 pickup and preamp with built-in chromatic tuner. A useful feature is that,



2



From inception, the Retro Plus was designed for super-comfortable and efficient playing

when plugged in, the tuner shuts off the output for silent operation on stage (although the guitar doesn't need a jack plug inserted to activate it).

A clear digital read-out faces the player from the far side of the soundhole, while on the upper edge we find volume and tone rotaries, plus a phase reversal switch for feedback suppression and a bit of bass boost. There's a separate input socket on a plastic escutcheon housing the end-pin and a flip-up battery compartment, plus you'll find a second strap button on the heel's underside so your Retro Plus is ready to go.

Feel & Sounds

From inception, the Retro Plus was designed for super-comfortable and super-efficient playing. We've long been fans of the Performing Artist neck profile with High Performance taper. It's a comfy medium-to-shallow C shape, around 21mm (1st fret) and 23mm (10th), whose width narrows from just under 54mm at the 12th

3. This classic Martin headstock design dates back to the 1850s and here features a water transfer script logo on a rosewood veneer, with open-gear'd 'butterbean' Grover tuners to add the final vintage touch

4. Mounted under the soundhole's top edge are the E1 pickup/preamp system's thumbwheel rotaries and switches that operate volume, tone, phase and tuner

5. On the opposite side sits a clear digital read-out that lets you know if your Retro Plus is in tune. Once activated it's silent in operation so you don't annoy your bandmates or audience. Luckily, though, for home use it works without the need for a jack plug to be inserted



The fingerboard timber follows Martin's traditional choice of ebony, but this is the stripy variety – same tree, different look!



MARTIN DE RETRO PLUS MAHOGANY

PRICE: £1,899 (with padded gig-bag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Non-cutaway acoustic-electric

TOP: Torrefied spruce

BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 107mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm

NECK: Select hardwood, Performing Artist profile w/ High Performance taper

SCALE LENGTH: 645.2mm (25.4")

TUNERS: Grover butterbean 'Waverley' open-back style

NUT/WIDTH: White Corian/44.45mm

FINGERBOARD: Unbound ebony (light toned w/ dark streaks), with faux abalone dot inlays

FRETS: 20, fine gauge

BRIDGE/SPACING: Modern belly style in streaky ebony w/ white Tusq/54.8mm

ELECTRICS: Martin E1 pickup/preamp w/ volume and tone controls, phase switch and electronic tuner

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.086/4.6

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Martin 000E Retro Plus (£1,899) – all specs as DE other than smaller 000 body and shorter 632.6mm (24.9") scale length

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes

FINISH: Gloss top (with ageing toner) back and sides; satin finish to neck

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0141 248 4812

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9/10

PROS Superb-sounding and superb-playing instrument based upon one of Martin's legendary designs but costing a whole lot less

CONS Nothing to complain about here, though an ultra-picky player might desire a better pickup (but that player would probably buy Standard Series or Custom Shop anyway!)

fret down to 44.45mm at the nut. Designed for effortless playability in almost any style, the guitar's 645.2mm (25.4-inch) scale length also provides a fast and snappy tone that the mahogany body, with its thermally aged spruce top, projects warmly on to your audience.

There's definitely something to be said for our guitar's torrefied top and scalloped X-bracing. Right out of its dark-grey Martin padded bag it sounds completely played in, with not a hint of sharpness or 'budget guitar' brashness (not that this is exactly a budget guitar). And whether picked or strummed, the Retro Plus kicks out a rich and wholly satisfying tone that punches well above its pay grade. As for the E1 pickup/preamp, while no LR Baggs HiFi Duet, it's an all-encompassing system that does a fine job of amplifying the Retro's natural acoustic tone. Your front-of-house engineer or that open-mic audience are unlikely to complain.

The instrument is beautifully set up, too, and that wide nut is perfect for dextrous folk forays or fingerpicked instrumental passages in open tunings. But as a big, bold strummer the dreadnought is pretty much peerless, and the Retro Plus matches almost anything we've played in quite a while. It's a most impressive beast and an extremely likeable guitar.

Picked or strummed, the Retro Plus kicks out a satisfying tone that punches well above its pay grade

Verdict

While a £100 or so below two grand is hardly cheap, in Martin terms it represents serious value for money. Chris Martin saw many of his competitors making guitars based on his company's own original designs but undercutting these premium instruments by handsome margins. He decided to do something about it and so the Retro Plus was born.

The use of quality timbers, including that torrefied spruce top, plus fantastically playable necks and a simple but solid pickup system work hand in hand to create an instrument that we just couldn't put down. Nothing about it says 'budget'. Instead, you simply feel proud to hold it in your hands – a *real* Martin and one based on one of the most successful acoustic guitar designs in history. And to answer that question you haven't even asked us: yes, almost two centuries of guitar building know-how really *does* show! **G**



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FIRST PLAY



PJD CAREY CLASSIC
£1,899

WHAT IS IT? As part of its 15th Anniversary, UK maker PJD revisits one of its past glories. A favourite returns!

Master Maker

While international trade is causing concerns, we look to the York-based guitar maker to cut to the chase. Maybe the best guitars out there are under our noses...

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

If you think you've seen this guitar before, you're almost right! The style goes back to 2020 and was called the Carey Standard – a more utilitarian take on PJD's then top-line Carey Elite and the 10th Anniversary Carey Custom. As we've documented in previous reviews, it's been a rocky ride since then for the now 15-year-old brand, not least battling through the pandemic and a failed guitar-making hub, UKGB.

But since 2023's reboot, a more stable course has emerged with a new factory and the very production-aimed Standard Series (which includes the Carey, St John offset, original T-style York, classic S-style Woodford and original offset Valhalla models), as well as the newly formed Custom Shop, which produces the higher-end Elite models, customer one-offs and our Carey Classic.

This new model is based on that early Carey Standard we reviewed back in issue 465; PJD co-owner Leigh Dovey believes it was the first one he made. That guitar has been on a bit of a long Longtermers test here at *Guitarist*. It was this writer's lockdown buddy that I eventually got to gig and I've barely used anything else since (slide guitars excepted) for a fair number







1

1. A major change is that, since 2023, PJD now makes its own pickups in-house such as this D-90 soapbar. Also note those rectangular fingerboard inlays that featured on the original guitars

of 'no idea what we're going to play' pub gigs, the occasional street party and plenty of recordings and practice.

Pulling the new guitar out of its PJD-logo'd Hiscox case it's clearly a close cousin but not exactly a 'reissue'. That's not the point. Instead, the original-style Carey has grown up a bit and employs many of the tweaks and subtle improvements that PJD used at both its Standard and Custom Shop levels. As PJD's Custom Shop luthier, Josh Parkin, comments: "We tried to keep the essence of the guitar the same as the old specs but

with all the niceties and details we've been improving on over the last few years."

The new Carey goes back to a semi-solid chambered swamp ash body with that distinctive thin, translucent white nitro finish that's open-grained but smooth, and yet it's slightly heavier and marginally less 'semi' now as we have a ribcage contour on the back (though the front stays flat). There's nice contouring around the heel, too, and the body edges have slightly larger rounded-edge chamfers that are a little smoother than the sharper-edged original. Obviously, with this high-contrast colour scheme the pickguard plays an important part visually, and the stylised Les Paul Junior single-ply 'plate looks identical to the original, although now it's attached with six screws instead of four.

The neck eschews screws and is attached with proper Allen-key bolts, like all PJD models, and it follows the style of those original builds, too. It's a lovely looking piece of quarter-sawn roasted and figured maple with beautifully understated flaming on the back and a super-smooth satin finish that, like the original, will no doubt burnish up to more of a gloss with use. The original rectangular fingerboard face inlays are retained, but the oversized



2

The original-style Carey has grown up a bit and employs many tweaks and subtle improvements

black side dots of that earlier guitar are now a more regular diameter. Also, instead of the laser-etched original logo, here it's a proper decal, and the truss rod access hole is now round, not square-edged as it was. Like we say, more refined craft.

While Gotoh hardware is still employed, here at the Custom Shop level it's that smart 510 FX-6 hardtail through-strung bridge with light walls to the brass top-plate and steel block saddles, while the more Fender-style split-post tuners change to Gotoh SG510 18:1 ratio tuners with ebony buttons.

The Carey originally shipped with Bare Knuckle Boot Camp Old Guard pickups: a covered humbucker at the bridge and black covered soapbar at the neck. PJD then also offered original Cream T pickups, which have been on this writer's original these past years. But as of 2023 PJD is now producing its own pickups in-house (see Under The Hood, opposite); the partial cover and dual screw coils of the bridge humbucker give a different look from the original's classic Patent Applied For style.

2. On the original Carey Standard, the precursor of this 15th Anniversary Classic, the headstock logo was laser etched; today, we get a classy gold water-slide design. The Gotoh 510 tuners with ebony buttons are another upgrade

3. This Alnico V B-Bucker was created for these 15th Anniversary Classics. Here, it uses a partial frame cover with black fascia and dual screw pole coils. The mounting rings and scratchplate are cut in-house, too



3



Feel & Sounds

At 3.28kg (7.22lb), the new Carey feels a bit more regular than the almost too-light original that weighs in at just 2.63kg (5.79lb). It's still beautifully weighted for the bolt-on style, however, and hangs perfectly strapped on. Dimensionally, the neck itself also measures very close to that original model: a little fuller in the hand than the very mainstream profile of PJD's Standard models. Here, we have a nut width of 42.3mm and a 1st fret depth of 22.2mm, which only subtly fills out to 23mm by the 12th, and a profile that feels more like a C-meets-D – there's a little more welcome girth here.

The Jescar fretwire is the same gauge, medium with a good height (2.28mm by 1.25mm), but now the tangs are notched so you don't see the fret slots from the fingerboard edge like you do on the older model. Another progression is that all PJD guitars now go through a Plek process, adding a subtle level of refinement and consistency to the feel and playability, while the 254mm to 305mm (10- to 12-inch) lightly compound radius of the original is retained.

There's certainly an inviting, lively acoustic ring to the unplugged voice; there's little doubt that the acoustic side of the instrument is all working as it should. Here, the low strings have a little more zing and twang than the subtly rounder response

from the original model, but all of this translates to a very vibrant-sounding guitar plugged in.

There's a good reason why plenty of makers favour this pickup style. It works so well, not least if you have to cover a few different styles. The D-90 soapbar is a good example: pull back the volume and you've got a jazz/blues 'thinline' voice that's hard to argue with and doesn't sound over-muted in the least. The tone control is well voiced, too, and the control setup remains really fast in use. The bridge B-Bucker falls nicely into the classic Patent Applied For territory, with a subtle injection of heat, and covers a huge range: from slightly honky (in a good way) cleaner blues, 60s garage rock to 90s grunge (with some gain, of course) – and, really, it's even near-perfect for that woody, resonant early Van Halen-style voicing. At full tilt, it comes across as a real hot-rod.

But throughout there's a good character to the voice, plenty of bite if you need it; it's almost Telecaster-y with reduced guitar volume and a level boost from your 'board. Again, pull back the volume and round the tone a little and you're in jangle central, not least with the dual-pickup mix selected. At stage volume, it's certainly pretty lively, and whether that's the 'semi' construction, the light weight or whatever, we don't care. It's just a great place to be.

UNDER THE HOOD

What's under the wooden backplate?

It might be a simple modern-wired circuit here, using cloth covered old-style wire, but the cavity is screened with conductive paint and there's copper foil on the underside of the black-stained ash backplate. As before, PJD has used CTS audio taper 550k pots for the volume and tone here, with a 1940s-style 600-volt Jupiter Comet paper-in-mineral oil cap rated at .022μF – a nice boutique touch.

PJD's Josh Parkin looks after the pickup production and co-builds in the Custom Shop with founder Leigh Dovey. What's going on with the pickups? "Well, the new pickups are based on the pickups in your old Standard that you sent in for measurement, but then I tweaked the design to bring them a little closer to the kind of thing we make here in the Custom Shop now," explains Josh. "Both pickups are made around Alnico V magnets and wound with 42 AWG plain enamel wire. The neck pickup we're calling a D-90, and the bridge pickup is the B-Bucker." And, of course, the similarity between those prefix letters and this writer's initials are purely coincidental.

In terms of DCRs, these new pickups are very similar to the old Standard, around 8.2kohms for the B-Bucker and 7.25k for that D-90.



The simple modern-wired circuit (with its boutique tone cap) allows a simple, effective and fast drive

CAREY ON!

The return of one of our favourite PJD models and a decade and a half of UK guitar-making needs a bit of a celebration. We pop a cork with PJD's founder, Leigh Dovey

Creating a business is the easy bit. Staying in business is a whole other ball game, and PJD has certainly had its ups and downs over the years. The new foundation is the Standard Series guitars, which were unleashed in 2023. Very affordable for UK-built electric guitars, but the chambered bodies of the original Standards were replaced with solid (but still lightweight) obeche, and the roasted and figured maple necks swapped to industry-standard plainer and unroasted maple.

Leigh opened the Custom Shop in 2024, allowing the return of the Elite models such as the original Carey, but despite requests the original Standard (Carey and St John) – which had many fans, not least this writer – was out of production until now. The company's 15th anniversary seemed the perfect time to bring back this underground favourite.

Where do you place the start point of PJD Guitars as a company? Was it from the time you made your first guitar?

"No, it's not. I had been doing stuff two years before that start date [of 2010]. So 15 years that marks this anniversary is counted from the point that I could make a guitar that someone wouldn't pick up and go, 'What the heck is this?' I was still in London at that point and then moved up to York in 2017."

So, if this 15th Anniversary limited run aims to replicate the original Carey Standard from 2020, are you still using swamp ash for the chambered bodies?

"Yes, we only used swamp ash back then, so the original Carey Standard you have is definitely swamp ash. Then we switched to American white ash, just because swamp ash became incredibly expensive for a while – it still is and it's not particularly easy to get in any quantity. When we needed to make quite a few, we realised it was totally unrealistic to use swamp ash. But now with the Classic, yes, we wanted that to be swamp ash."

What about colours?

"The plan is to do them in the white you have there, but I think Andertons, for example, will order something different. I've kind of said if you want to order them you can have them in different colours. Certainly anything like a translucent black, white, a TV Yellow – anything that looks really classic."

One of the differences with the new guitar is that you're using your own in-house wound pickups.

"It was during 2023 that we really got into the in-house pickups. The first ones were on the current Standards, although Josh [Parkin, who joined PJD full-time in 2022] had been making a lot of one-offs before then. We've never looked

back, to be honest – it's just so much easier and less expensive. We've now got real control of how our guitars sound, too, and now that we've done it, it makes perfect sense."

One thing you've replicated pretty much is that original PJD neck profile.

"Yes, it is a different profile from our current Standard necks – which will stay the same – and very close to the original. We've actually had quite a few people say that they have an older Standard and they really liked the neck profile. We're just calling it the PJD Classic neck profile and it'll go into our options list for any Custom Shop model. There were a few things we wanted to iron out, but it really is very close, certainly more than a nod to those early guitars. I understand why players like that early profile and we really want the new Classic to have that essence of the old Standard."

Where are you now with staff and output?

"We have four people working on the Standard line – Harriet Dovey [Leigh's wife], Lauren Varley, Luke Bushby and Ray Kilvington – and then Josh and myself handle the Custom Shop. I final QC absolutely everything on the Standard production now, which I did at the beginning, but I lost touch with that and I think that was a mistake. But now, absolutely everything goes through my hands."

"With our in-house pickups, we've now got real control of how our guitars sound" Leigh Dovey

Obviously, I don't need to QC Josh [laughs], and on the Standards the final setup is usually done by myself, too. I'd rather blame myself if something goes out that's not 100 per cent.

"Currently, we're making around 250 to 280 Standards annually. In the Custom Shop we're doing around 50 to 60, but that completely depends on what they are. We can obviously make the new Classics faster than the Elites as there's quite a bit more involved with the binding and finishing."

"We appointed a new European distributor at the end of 2024 and he's done a fantastic job, so now pretty much 50 per cent of what we can make goes to Europe. Germany and Austria are big for us – they always were, and now that we've reignited those areas, the numbers have come back." [DB]



Leigh Dovey (left) with Custom Shop luthier Josh Parkin

PHOTO COURTESY OF PJD GUITARS

4. As this is Custom Shop level, the block-saddle bridge is upgraded to the top-line Gotoh 510. It's through-strung like a Telecaster and uses steel saddles with a brass top-plate

5. PJD has always used proper bolts (not screws) to attach the neck to the body. The heel is now also contoured and more comfortable, less primitive than the original guitar



4



5

Of course, comparing the voice with that of the original guitar is like comparing a couple of very similar Stratocasters: very close but with subtle differences. If we had to split hairs, the new guitar almost edges into a rockier character, but they're very close siblings for sure, and once again it's the wide range of voices that impresses. Old or new, these are far from one-trick ponies.

Verdict

As we hopefully illustrate on a regular basis, there's no shortage of UK makers covering pretty much every style you can imagine: from vintage clones to modern and retro-styled original designs, with or without exotic woods, and quite a lot in between. Where does PJD fit? There's a very functional, fit-for-purpose style that runs through the various models. The start-up Standard range, retailing from £1,299, is hard to argue with, while the direct-only single-pickup Apprentice models have to be the best value UK-made solidbodies out there at just at £899.

Moving into the Custom Shop level, the prices rise but so does the detail. When we

No fuss, no bling... this is one of the most fit-for-purpose class acts we've encountered

reviewed the slightly posher Carey Elite in issue 515, it scored a 10/10 Gold Award, a pretty perfect journeyman guitar, and this new Classic is only £100 more than the original model when it launched in 2020.

But like that Carey Elite, this nod back to PJD's past is equally hard to fault. There's no fuss, no bling, but the player-led presentation remains one of the most fit-for-purpose class acts we've encountered. It's hugely stable and in tune, resonant and lively with a range of sounds – from jazz age thin-line to classic rock – that are easily accessed from the toggle switch, volume and tone controls. As that grab-and-go gigging and jamming guitar, not to mention the perfect at-home unplugged 'acoustic', it's all that many players could need. **G**



PJD CAREY CLASSIC

PRICE: £1,899 (inc case)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Single-cutaway, chambered body electric

BODY: 2-piece swamp ash back (chambered) w/ separate 2-piece top

NECK: Quarter-sawn roasted figured maple, Classic profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Quarter-sawn roasted figured maple, rectangular black acrylic inlays, 254-305mm (10-12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium (Jescar FW55090)

HARDWARE: Gotoh 510FX-6 string-through 6-block saddle bridge, Gotoh SG510 18:1 ratio tuners w/ ebony buttons – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: PJD D-90 soapbar single coil (neck) and B-Bucker (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.28/7.22

OPTIONS: Not on this 15th Anniversary run

RANGE OPTIONS: The Carey Standard with solid lightweight obeche body is £1,299. In the Custom Shop, the Carey Elite is £3,199

LEFT-HANDERS: Not in this 15th Anniversary spec, but standard models are available to order at the same price

FINISHES: Translucent White (as reviewed) – thin satin nitro cellulose

PJD Guitars

07891 201729

www.pjdguitars.com



PROS Crisp, detailed build and finishing; the neck plays as well as it looks; excellent weight, expansive and quality sounds from classic pickup set and simple controls; Custom Shop quality at production price

CONS Might be too utilitarian-looking and simple for some tastes, but that's sort of the point; very hard to fault

FIRST PLAY



EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY
GIBSON CUSTOM 1962
ES-335 REISSUE
£1,099

.....
WHAT IS IT? Epiphone's take on
the legendary Gibson semi, in
Sixties Cherry finish with quality
electrics and hardware

Cherry Picker

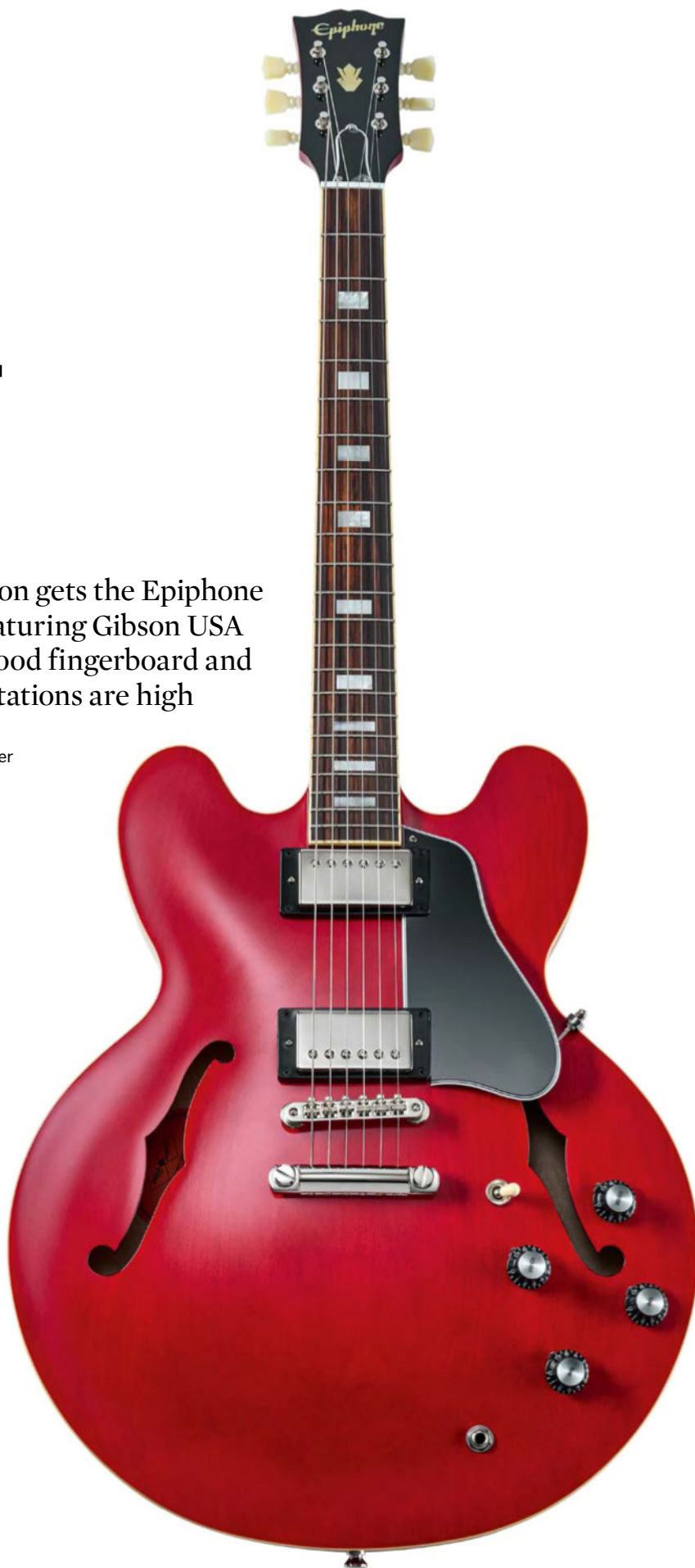
Ted McCarty's finest creation gets the Epiphone 'Inspired By' treatment. Featuring Gibson USA Custombuckers, real rosewood fingerboard and top-notch hardware, expectations are high

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

Any guitarist that doesn't know the Gibson ES-335 story must have been living on planet Zog for the past 67 years. Therefore we won't insult you with a full-on history and description. Let's simply remind ourselves of how this legendary model's semi-hollow – laminated thinline construction with solid centre section, two deep cutaways and a set of powerful humbucking pickups – made it one of the best-sounding, most versatile and nicest playing guitars of all time. It's up there as one of the coolest lookers, too.

As we've seen for some time now, Epiphone loves to get in on the act. And some of the instruments we've plugged in and played in recent years, especially the Joe Bonamassa models and these 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' offerings, have been mightily impressive. The fact that they consistently fit Gibson USA pickups, and use top-flight hardware and electrics gives them a great advantage over much of the competition in this hotly contested sector.

For this new 1962 Reissue, Epiphone offers the two most popular ES-335 colours: Sixties Cherry and Vintage Burst.







1

1. The rear of the headstock features the Inspired By Gibson 'double diamond' logo. Notice, too, the double-ring keystone tuner buttons on the good-quality Epiphone tuners

And featuring as it does the Gibson-style 'open book' headstock shape it takes a second or two to realise it's actually not the genuine article. Timber-wise, it gets pretty close, too. A cream-bound, laminated maple and poplar semi-hollow body with solid maple centre section is mated to a one-piece mahogany neck with bound genuine rosewood fingerboard and mother-of-pearl small block inlays (original Gibsons only had pearloid).

Everything looks and feels solidly made and the Vintage Gloss finish, though not nitrocellulose, is convincing enough with its slightly matted-off look, not dissimilar to Gibson's own VOS treatment.

Where Epiphone has the potential to trump the competition is, of course, in its use of parent company Gibson's pickups. Here, they're the most excellent Custombuckers, said to offer tones redolent of the Patent Applied For double-coils fitted to ES-335s from 1958 until '62 and even sometimes beyond. Electronics and hardware are the good stuff, too, with CTS pots, Black Beauty paper-in-oil



2

2. Just like the real thing, the Epiphone ES-335 features an orange oval label inside, detailing model name, serial number and other details. The f-hole edges have been neatly painted in black, too

capacitors, genuine Gibson ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, and Gibson lightweight aluminium Historic Reissue stud tailpiece. Tuners are Epiphone Deluxe 'Kluson' type with keystone buttons, while the knobs are period-correct top-hat with silver reflectors. With 22 medium jumbo frets making up the final piece of the puzzle, our 1962 ES-335 Reissue looks ready to rock.

Balancing the pickup selections and riding the controls offers a wealth of totally believable rock, pop, jazz and blues voices

Feel & Sounds

Epiphone calls this neck the 1960s SlimTaper C-shape. Not to be confused with the scarily skinny necks found on ES-335s of the previous year (this reviewer owned one and it would give an Ibanez 'dinky' a run for its money), the SlimTaper boasts an elegant shallow C profile with a depth of around 20.5mm at the



3



4

1st fret and 22.5mm at the 12th. It's a happy compromise between super slim and, say, the Les Paul's '59 profile that's a generally chunkier affair.

Although the general setup is excellent, with a perfect action height for comfortable, buzz-free playing, the fret ends are a little sharp in places, especially further up the neck. It's a minor annoyance but one that could be easily fixed at final setup with a few minutes' more attention. To play devil's advocate, though, it could also be as a result of slight fingerboard shrinkage after leaving the factory in China. Some guitarists won't want to tackle a job like this themselves, so if you try one and love it, but it suffers the same minor malaise, ask nicely and the store's technician will do it for you. Other than that we can't fault the playing experience. At 3.75kg (8.2lbs) the guitar is not overly heavy, and ES-335s balance superbly on a strap or in your lap, so this one has all the model's positives going for it.

That's equally true when it comes to sounds. It's pure ES-335 from the moment

3. Gibson Custombuckers are a great addition to this guitar, bringing it a wealth of authentic clean and dirty tones. Also check out the nicely grained rosewood fingerboard with real mother-of-pearl inlays

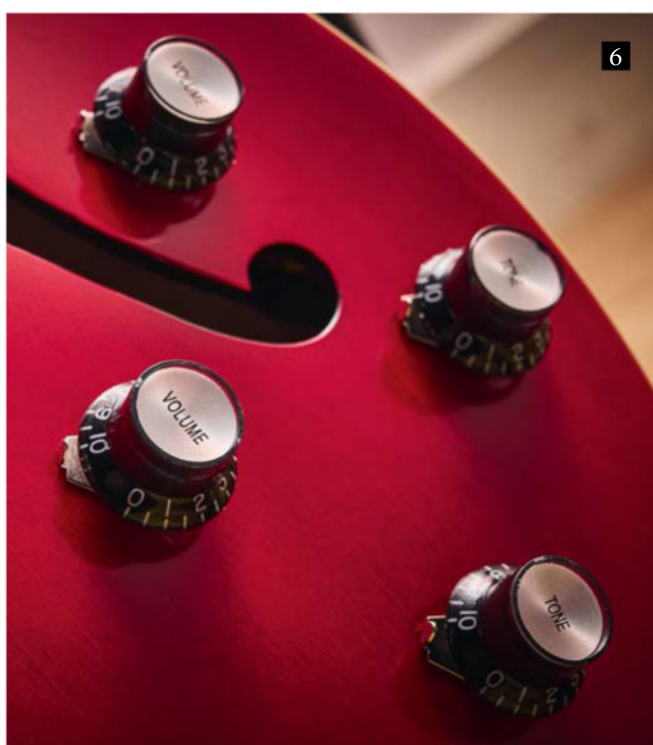
4. Gibson's 'open book' headstock design looks pretty natty with the Epiphone logo in pearl, as well as the crown inlay and bell truss rod cover, although here it's a three-screw one, not two as on a Gibbo



5. Although not a nitro finish, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was. It's good to see the grain of the maple/poplar/maple laminate showing through, too, and the neat cream binding

6. The top-hat knobs with silver reflectors are period correct for our 1962 model, as are the metal dial pointers

7. In addition to the Gibson Custombuckers, the Epiphone also carries Gibson's ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge and lightweight aluminium tailpiece, plus CTS pots and paper-in-oil caps



you plug in. The bridge pickup played clean puts us in mind of Robert White's famous riff on The Temptations' *My Girl*. Although White played it on his Gibson L-5 jazz box, both tones have the same characterful honk. It's a great tone, too, for clanging open chords, or George Harrison-style riffy rundowns. No wonder Gibson and Epiphone semis were the darlings of the British Invasion groups.

Flip across to the neck and we're in 'thick Strat' or 'light jazz guitar' territory. Again, it's a versatile set of sounds that benefits from the ES-335's oft-touted 'airiness'. It's certainly distinct from a Les Paul. And then we have that quacky middle position. Is it a bit Tele? A bit Gretsch? Possibly both, but there's a twang to it that you could easily hear on a Monkees' record. And that's only the clean tones!

Think of the legions of ES-335 players that have dug dirty, dark and graunchy tones from their semis. From Clapton to Warren Haynes, Eric Johnson to Gary Moore, Alvin Lee to JoBo, Chuck



EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON CUSTOM 1962 ES-335 REISSUE

PRICE: £1,099 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Double-cutaway thinline electric semi

BODY: 5-ply layered maple/poplar with solid maple centre section

NECK: 1-piece mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: GraphTech /42.87mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with small pearl block inlays

FRETS: 22 medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Gibson ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, Gibson Historic Reissue aluminium stop bar, Epiphone double-ring 'keystone' tuners, aluminium strap buttons, black top-hat knobs with silver reflectors

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson USA Custombucker humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.75/8.2

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: There are many semis in the 'Inspired By Gibson' collection, including ES-335, ES-345, ES-355, Dave Grohl DG-335 and more, but in the 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' range as yet the only option is the same guitar in Vintage Burst (£1,099)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Sixties Cherry (as reviewed); Vintage Burst – Vintage Gloss

Epiphone
www.epiphone.com



PROS The look is great and the tones are exemplary; totally authentic and way more expensive-feeling than the guitar's meagre price tag would suggest

CONS Several sharp fret ends, but they certainly didn't destroy the playing experience and would be a quick and easy fix

Berry to Larry Carlton, it's a salubrious list and all those sounds live here. The pots taper gradually, so balancing the pickup selections as well as riding the controls offers a wealth of totally believable rock, pop, jazz and blues voices. You won't be disappointed.

Verdict

Well, Epiphone has done it again. In many ways the semi is ideal for the Epi treatment. Essentially, it's a plywood box (although rather nicer than the stuff you use to shore up a broken window), so it's not reliant on the pure vibrations of Brazilian rosewood and Adirondack spruce on a £10,000 acoustic. But it still possesses that aforementioned airiness, which, combined with the solid maple centre block here, provides perhaps the ultimate mix of sonic subtlety and brutal brawn.

We must also reiterate the use of those superb Gibson USA Custombucker pickups, plus equally classy hardware and electrics. Sure, we encountered a slight

It possesses an airiness, which, combined with the maple centre block, provides the ultimate mix of sonic subtlety and brutal brawn

issue with sharpish fret ends, but that could have arisen due to natural causes and a quick 30 minutes on a technician's bench will have the guitar back in tip-top playing condition.

In the final analysis it's the authenticity of the tones we love most. Even plugging it into a humble little Yamaha THR10 amp begets a wondrous palette of sounds that makes you forget the fact that one of these will cost you a fifth of what you'd pay for something with the Gibson Murphy Lab moniker on it. Do go and try one. We think you, too, will be smitten. **G**

FIRST PLAY



DANELECTRO SPRING KING JUNIOR
£199

WHAT IS IT? A real spring reverb that's easy to cram onto your pedalboard



Bounce Back

Danelectro brings back its real spring reverb pedal in a more compact 'board-friendly form

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The footswitch is a soft switch so you don't need to give it a hefty wallop. This means you can generally turn the effect on without an unwanted thump through the springs
2. The rubber Kick Pad has an adhesive backing so you can place it anywhere on the pedal, although the small end by the footswitch is recommended for the closest proximity
3. The Spring King Junior is quite a tall pedal with the socketry high up on the side – this allows more space for the springs, which are suspended just above the baseplate

There's no doubting that spring reverb and electric guitar go together exceedingly well, and those players who have it built into their amps can take full advantage. If you don't have this setup, however, but still want the real electro-mechanical thang, rather than a digital emulation, there's always the option of an amp top-box or a pedal – usually one with a large footprint due to the space needed to accommodate the springs. Now, for anyone who has passed on having real spring reverb on their 'board because of size restrictions, Danelectro has come up with a solution in the Spring King Junior, which is housed in a chassis that's slightly narrower than a Boss Compact pedal and about an inch longer.

The Junior is based on the original Spring King that first appeared in 1999. That was a much larger pedal at about five times the width and equipped with Volume, Tone and Reverb knobs as well as a Kick Pad for anyone who might enjoy the sound of the springs crashing. Of course, anyone can knock a reverb tank, violently disturbing the springs to get that thunderous sound, and that's certainly true of the Spring King Junior. But Danelectro has revived the Kick Pad idea with a rubber stick-on illustration of a boot, which the brand encourages you to attach to the small end of the pedal near the footswitch.

Inside the pedal is an Accutronics-Belton spring tank with three short springs, aided with a delay chip in the circuitry. While it doesn't give you the expansive depth of a large spring tank, such as in a Fender 6G15 outboard unit or certain amp models, it does give the Spring King Junior a consistent sound with plenty of vintage flavour. That sound is dialled in with just two knobs: Reverb adds the 'verb into your dry sound through amounts that'll add depth to a non-reverb amp (up to a maximum that works fine for those Dick Dale-style heavy surf sounds); while the Tone knob tempers the overall sound very effectively, travelling from the darker end of things to bright and splashy.

Verdict

What's not to like about proper spring reverb that should easily fit on any pedalboard? In our view, not a lot: the Spring King Junior is a solid implementation of a great idea. **G**



DANELECTRO SPRING KING JUNIOR

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Spring reverb pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 50 mA
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 151 (d) x 70mm (h)

John Hornby Skewes
 01132 865381
<https://danelectro.com>



PROS Compact size for a real spring reverb; standard nine-volt operation; soft-touch switch

CONS We'd be mindful of placement due to the risk of springs crashing during any onstage disturbance



THE RIVALS

The most recent real spring reverb pedal that we've reviewed is the Crazy Tube Circuits White Whale V2 (£299), which also features tremolo. La Grotte (£350), a new analogue spring reverb by Anasounds for Third Man Hardware (as seen in issue 524's 30 Best New Pedals issue), was designed in close collaboration with Jack White and features an integrated three-spring tank, an internal preamp based on Tampco's Tone Oven preamp and two-band EQ. For a digital emulation of spring reverb in a compact package, try Source Audio's True Spring Reverb (£350), which features three reverb and three tremolo effects, or the simple single-knob Boing (£139) from J Rockett.



La Grotte by Anasounds/Third Man Hardware is a feature-packed pedal with real springs

FIRST PLAY



SHAFTESBURY DUO FUZZ HERITAGE EDITION £349

WHAT IS IT? An accurate reproduction of a late-60s fuzzbox, handmade in the UK



Dirty Duo

Rose-Morris resurrects a long-gone brand in conjunction with ThorpyFX for a reissue of a vintage fuzz pedal

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. Add more gain and saturation to the fuzz sound for a thicker, sustained tone with the Expander knob, which is found on the side of the pedal, along with the Tone switch and Balance knob
2. The Tone slide switch gives you access to two distinct tones, each with a different midrange characteristic – one scooped, one forward
3. The battery sits in a plastic tray that's easy to unlock and pull out without the need for tools

Besides the big-hitters such as the Fuzz Face and Tone Bender, there were also a host of lesser-known fuzz pedals that had their genesis in the 1960s. One such was the 1968 Shaftesbury Duo Fuzz, which was available from Rose-Morris who had a showroom in Shaftesbury Avenue (the store is now around the corner in Denmark Street). The Duo Fuzz design was developed by the Shin-Ei corporation in Japan who knew it as the FY-6 and made it in several guises for a large number of different companies – it may, in fact, be better known as the Univox Super-Fuzz. Notable users back in the day were Pete Townshend (it's all over The Who's *Live At Leeds* album) and Steve Hackett of Genesis.

Various clones and evolved versions have been readily available, but the Shaftesbury Duo Fuzz is now officially back in two new iterations put together by ThorpyFX for Rose-Morris. We have the Heritage Edition here, which follows the wedge-shaped form-factor of the original pedal and features germanium diodes. There's also a more pedalboard-friendly Standard edition with concessions to modernity.

This is octave fuzz with seemingly just the right proportion of the upper octave embedded in the fuzz, which comes delivered in two flavours – Tone 1 and 2. A Balance knob controls output volume, while the Expander control turns up the intensity with more prominence for the octave at higher levels.

Tone 1 is less aggressive – it has a scoop in the midrange so the low-end is a more dominant factor, and the octave really comes across with clarity. By contrast, Tone 2 has a much more forward presence with upper-mids pushing through with something of the resonance of a cocked-wah or ring modulator. Both are super responsive to picking dynamics and exhibit smooth volume knob clean-up. Truly excellent stuff!

Verdict

A classic and great-sounding fuzz with two distinct flavours makes a welcome return. We totally get the thinking behind the Heritage Edition's adherence to the original form factor and components, making it available for those who appreciate that aesthetic (especially seeing as an original Duo Fuzz unit is now rare and expensive). However, for those of a more practical bent, the Standard Edition's size and footswitching flexibility will be the go-to for adding this particular fuzz flavour to your rig. You choose! **G**



SHAFTESBURY DUO FUZZ HERITAGE EDITION

PRICE: £349

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Fuzz pedal

FEATURES: True bypass

CONTROLS: Balance, Expander, Tone 1/2 switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V battery or 9V adaptor (not supplied) 120 mA

DIMENSIONS: 110 (w) x 165 (d) x 45mm (h)

Rose-Morris

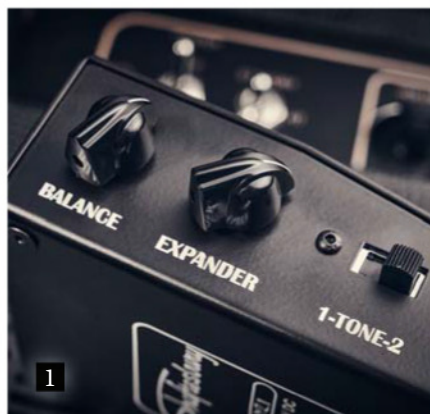
020 7836 0991

www.rosemorris.com



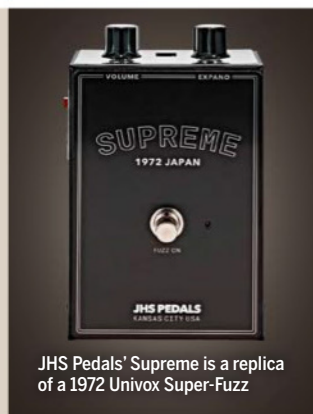
PROS Resurrects the tones of vintage equipment; two distinct tones; sticks with the original form factor; battery or adaptor power

CONS No bypass LED; large enclosure; knobs on the side



THE RIVALS

As we mention, the new Standard edition Duo Fuzz (£249) is more practical with its smaller enclosure, which puts two tones under footswitch control with LEDs. Another homegrown pedal is the Fredric Effects Super Unpleasant Companion (£200), which puts Shin-Ei FY-2 Companion Fuzz and FY-6 Superfuzz clones in one enclosure. The JHS Pedals Supreme (£159), based on a 1972 Univox Super-Fuzz, adds a JHS Mode for a more pronounced octave-up effect, thicker midrange and more available volume/boost. For something more affordable, try the Behringer SF300 Super Fuzz (£20).



JHS Pedals' Supreme is a replica of a 1972 Univox Super-Fuzz



the Wishlist

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

PRS Charcoal Phoenix Limited Edition £7,999

PRS Europe PHONE 01223 874301 WEB www.prguitars.com WORDS Dave Burrluck PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Barker

Released in February on Paul Reed Smith's birthday, the Charcoal Phoenix is a highlight of this year's 40th Anniversary celebrations for PRS. With a limited run of 150 pieces, it's the guitar Paul himself plays, having road-tested it over the past year, refining its design and tone. If you caught the PRS 40th Anniversary concert at this year's NAMM, you'll have seen Paul in action with this guitar, demonstrating more than 40 years of craft in one instrument.

Although based on the Paul's Guitar model, it seems the 2023 Private Stock John McLaughlin Limited also paved the way for this new guitar. "I was inspired by its exceptional sound and playability," says Paul. "For the Charcoal Phoenix, I wanted something as remarkable but with a Stoptail bridge. Using chaltecoco for the neck and ziricote for the fingerboard, I achieved an instrument that sustains beautifully and rings with clarity."

Here, the Private Stock-grade two-piece centre-joined figured maple top is spectacular with its fine fiddleback grain-striping, finished in dark black/grey 'micro burst' high-gloss nitro (including the top's edge). The one-piece mahogany back and Pattern-profile chaltecoco neck – a wood related to Brazilwood/pernambuco – are a translucent deep-cherry that nods back to PRS's past.

Another example of 40 years of progress is that every visible part (with the exception of the Switchcraft toggle switch) is a proprietary design. This includes the latest TCI mini-humbucking-sized pickups, which date back to the original 408 model's neck pickup and were also used on the various Paul's Guitar models.

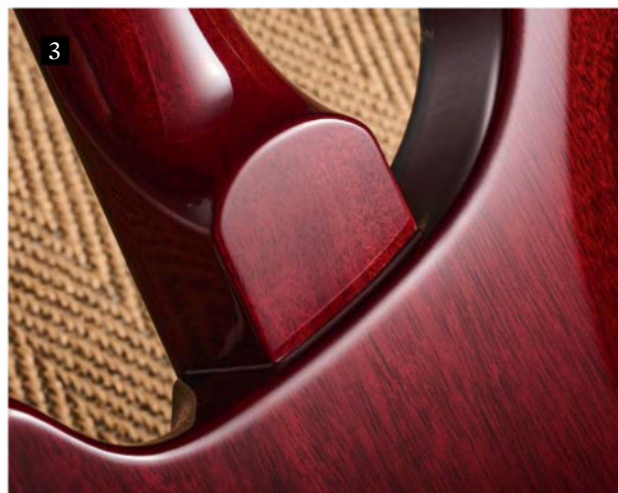
We also get the mini-toggle EQ high-pass filter switches, as first used on the John McLaughlin guitar and now featured on other 2025 models. Typical for classic PRS style, the ziricote fingerboard is unbound and has a mottled colouration resembling a dark stormy sky behind those birds in flight.

As with the original '94 McCarty Model, the Charcoal Phoenix also features a thicker 'fat back' body compared with a Custom. Alongside our reference and well-gigged 1994 Custom 22, the Phoenix brings into focus the constant evolution in parts and craft that's become the hallmark of the brand. Consider its excellent 3.53kg (7.7lb) weight, the strong unplugged ring, through to the fat, rich and huge-sounding sustain-for-days humbucker voices that clean up beautifully with the EQ switches, and the volume control (a whisper to a roar)... and we have to ask: can the electric guitar get any better? **G**

1. Super-smooth wing-button, open-back Phase III tuners – now used on the majority of the USA Core and S2 models. The nut is superbly cut bone

2. Ziricote, a hardwood from Central America and Mexico, is used for the unbound 'board. The Charcoal Phoenix uses a 635mm (25-inch) scale length with a 254mm (10-inch) fingerboard radius and Pattern neck profile. The 'old-school' block bird inlays are ripped abalone

3. The shorter 22-fret neck and its extended heel reduce the unsupported length of the neck and increase stiffness. This was a fundamental change to PRS design in the early 90s, although the 24-fret models, like the Custom, still remain player favourites



4. Plenty of companies reaching their fifth decade reissue original glories. And while early PRS Customs sell for a pretty penny today, we asked Paul Reed Smith why he's never revisited those original guitars (aside from occasional order-only Private Stocks): "Look, if what I made today wasn't as good as what we made then, I would want to go back and make those," he says. "I would do it immediately if I thought that the '85 guitars played better and sounded better and were better guitars; I would go back to the old drawings and just recreate them. But that's not my experience and that's not the experience of the artists I work with. I don't have one request in the building at this moment to do a 1985 reissue"

5. Unlike the vibrato-equipped Private Stock John McLaughlin Limited Edition that inspired this model, the Charcoal Phoenix features the PRS Sptail, here with brass inserts under the string break points and steel posts

Guitarist would like to thank Wildwire Guitars for the loan of the featured guitar
www.wildwireguitars.com



Gas Supply

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

New Releases **From £Free**

CONTACT **Various** WEB **See below**

Somehow, we're already at the mid-point of the year, and with the NAMM Show firmly in our rearview mirror, it seems the industry isn't resting when it comes to new ideas. The autumn/winter previews are beginning to appear and, in some cases, they're already being

announced as you can see from this new selection we've rounded up here. From revamped digital modelling to mobile recording, vintage-inspired electrics to do-it-all workhorses, here's the proof that our gear-buying habits continue to be well catered for. **[SW]**



LANEY LIONHEART
FOUNDRY
SUPERTOP **£329**
Laney's Lionheart
Foundry Supertop sees
the brand's beloved
Lionheart valve amp

tone transposed into a lightweight, all-analogue 120-watt head. On top of the dual-channel, four-voice design, it's equipped with plenty of extra features including a dedicated boost circuit, plus a modulation section that is switchable between Tremolo and Spiral Chorus settings, with Rate and Depth controls. This is derived from Laney's BCC Spiral Array chorus pedal and is joined by the spring reverb algorithm from the BCC Secret Path. Around the back, there's plenty of footswitch capability, as well as an effects loop and power switching to less than one watt. What's more, Laney has equipped the Supertop with its LA-IR impulse response technology, which offers cab-emulated direct output via an XLR socket for going straight to a PA or recording device. It's available now.

www.laney.co.uk

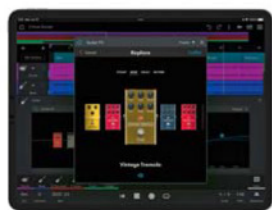


KEMPER PROFILER
MK 2 FROM **€699**

The Kemper Profiler has taken over stages of all sizes since its release, and now Kemper has dropped the next evolution in its Profiler Series, the Kemper

Profiler MK 2, which incorporates Player (€699), Head (€1,310, pictured), Rack (€1,310), Stage (€1,466), PowerHead (€1,466) and PowerRack (€1,699) versions. There's a host of new features including seven new effects slots offering dynamics, gain, modulation and filtering, which brings the total audio-block count per patch to 20. Elsewhere, there's processing upgrades, giving us boot times of around 20 seconds along with faster switching of a UI response; Enhanced Profiling with greater detail; an upgraded looper with up to two minutes of recording time; and an eight-channel audio interface for multi-channel recording and reamping. What's more, Profiler Player users will be able to access all the benefits from their existing hardware, which Kemper tells us has been 'MK 2-ready' all along.

www.kemper-amps.com



FENDER STUDIO **£Free**

The age-old puzzle of recording your guitar might have just become a lot less taxing thanks to Fender's introduction of Fender Studio, a free DAW app for iOS, Android, Windows and Mac OS. It comes with eight-track recording capabilities, and two

amps and five effects from the first download, but it's expandable to 16 tracks with an additional five amps and six effects when you register the app with your Fender Connect account. If you already have a compatible interface, you can connect your guitar straight away, but Fender has also launched the Link I/O. This single-input 24-bit/96kHz interface features a stereo headphone output, LED signal indicators, hardware monitoring blend control and a -9dB pad for attenuating the input. The Fender Link I/O costs £74.99; head to your app store to download the Fender Studio app for free.

www.fender.co.uk



ELECTRO-HARMONIX
OCEANS ABYSS **£475**

If you're looking to up your reverb game, then Electro-Harmonix has announced the release of the latest in its Oceans series of ambience effects, the Oceans Abyss. Described as an 'Advanced

Reverb Laboratory', this new unit is packing two stereo reverb engines, each comprising 10 reverb types. As well as the reverbs, there are additional effects blocks for delay, modulation, EQ and bitcrushing/saturation effects, with each patch capable of loading eight blocks at once in a customisable order. Around the back you'll find that there's comprehensive connectivity with L/R stereo outputs, and effects loop, expression pedal and footswitch sockets as well as MIDI I/O. Check back next month when we'll be taking a deep dive!

www.ehx.com



The S2 Special Semi-Hollow (above) and SE Studio Standard are among PRS's new triple-pickup releases

PRS S2/SE TRIPLE-PICKUP MODELS **From £999**

PRS has unveiled not one but five triple-pickup equipped guitars across the brand's more accessible S2 and SE lines. Three solid-bodied Studio models – S2 Studio (£2,749), SE Studio (£1,125) and SE Studio Standard (£999) – meet a pair of Special Semi-Hollows – S2 Special Semi-Hollow (£2,899) and SE Special Semi-Hollow (£1,180). The Semi-Hollow models offer a combination of dual-humbuckers (58/15 LT on the S2; 58/15 LT 'S' models on the SE) and the beefed-up tones of PRS's Narrowfield design (Narrowfield DD 'S' on the SE) in the middle position. A pair of mini-toggles allows for splitting of the 58/15 coils, adding up to a dozen tone selections on each guitar.

Onto the solidbodies and PRS has adopted the HSS format throughout. The S2 Studio comes with a 58/15 LT in the bridge position, with Narrowfields in the middle and at the neck. Similarly, the SE Studio and SE Studio Standard feature a 58/15 LT 'S' each and two Narrowfield DD 'S' versions, plus a five-way selector, and all Studio models feature a push-pull tone control offering seven sounds in total. There are glued maple necks all round, with the exception of the bolt-on SE Studio Standard. The new range is available now.

www.prsguitars.com



EPIPHONE JEFF BECK OXBLOOD 1954 LES PAUL **£1,199**

Jeff Beck's modded 1954 'Oxblood' Les Paul is one of the late guitar hero's most distinctive guitars, and now Epiphone has made it the focus of its latest recreation. Coming in at an increasingly regular £1,199, the Oxblood has all the calling cards of Beck's original. First is that chocolate-coloured, red-ish brown paint job. The body is joined to one of the chunkiest 50s-style Les Paul necks we've ever got our mitts on and, as per Jeff's guitar, the bridge is a single-piece wraparound. In the driving seat, we've got a pair of Gibson Custombuckers (the same pickups we raved about in our recent 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' 1952 Goldtop review), faithfully recreating the sound of Jeff's Patent Applied For models. The Epiphone Oxblood will be available by the time you read this – read the full review in our next issue!

www.epiphone.com

ALSO OUT NOW...

CHARVEL PRO MOD PLUS SAND DIMAS STYLE 1 HH **From £1,049**

Charvel has introduced three Pro Mod Plus models, offering upgrades and design tweaks to its San Dimas Style 1 HH models to enable "lightning-fast playing with cutting-edge features". All three guitars feature the classic pairing of Seymour Duncan JB and '59 humbuckers with a five-way switch and a no-load tone control. Caramelised maple necks join to the alder body with a 'Hand Shake' contoured heel, and also feature Luminlay side dots. The San-Dimas Style 1 HH FR E (£1,149) and HH HT E (£1,049, pictured below) are fitted with ebony fingerboards and a Floyd Rose 1500 or Charvel hardtail bridge, respectively, with two solid finish options each. Meanwhile, the San-Dimas HH FR CM (£1,199) features a Floyd Rose 1500 and caramelised maple fingerboard, as well as a pair of trans finishes over a quilted maple veneer.

www.charvel.com



EVH 5150 ICONIC COMBO **£649**

Eddie Van Halen's 5150 amp is known for its ability to flap trousers and melt faces, but what if you want searing gain at lower volumes? Enter the 5150 Iconic Combo. This 15-watt 1x10 combo features a single EL34 valve in the power section, while a pair of ECC83 valves propel the hybrid preamp design, continuing the Iconic range's quest to deliver 5150 tones at lower power – and a lower price. It's got two channels with additional voicing on each, as well as a three-band EQ, Reverb, Presence and Resonance controls. Elsewhere, there's an effects loop, aux input, emulated line out and the ability to run the amp at quarter power for increased flexibility.

www.evhgear.com



Climate Control

Eliminating the need for setup and ensuring consistent playability night-after-night, Furch's new CNR System® Active neck joint has solved an age-old problem for acoustic guitarists. We take a closer look at the trailblazing technology that optimises your instrument in real-time

Imagine an acoustic guitar that never needs setting up. An instrument that delivers the same optimised playability whenever you open the case. A neck with consistent action and intonation, whether you're playing a winter club show or a summer festival. No wonder that for hardened acoustic musicians, frustrated by changing environmental conditions playing havoc with their instruments, Furch's new CNR System® Active neck joint has been hailed as a game-changer.

Since 1981, Furch has produced some of the world's finest acoustic guitars from its

headquarters in the Czech Republic. The luthier's core values of craftsmanship and innovation are evident in groundbreaking features spanning from its resonance-enhancing finishes to proprietary individual soundboard voicings. But the newly designed CNR System® Active neck joint is perhaps Furch's boldest concept yet and a true industry milestone.

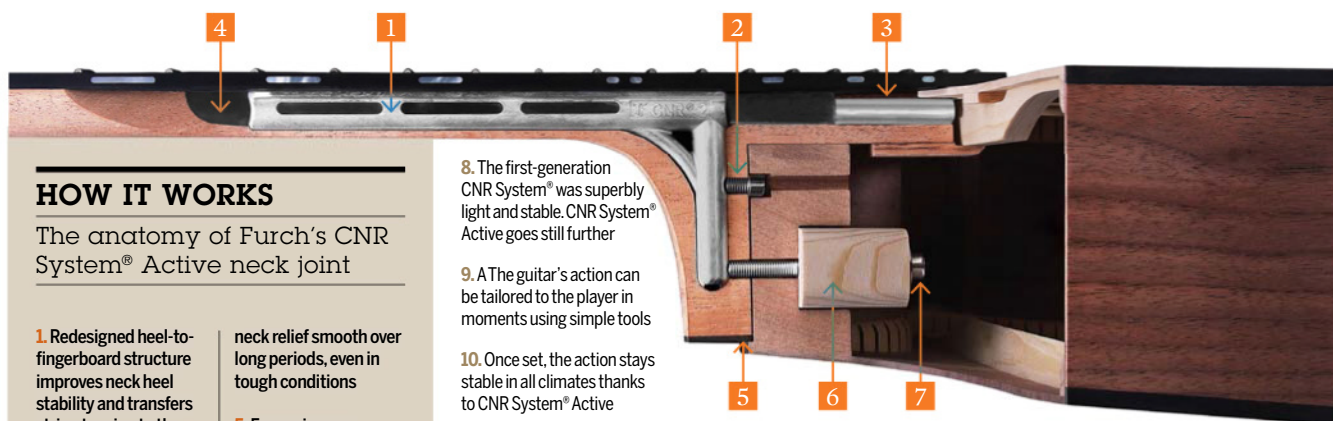
"The beauty of the CNR System® Active lies in its ability to address two major challenges faced by acoustic guitar players," explains CEO Petr Furch. "First, it allows players to set up their guitar in

seconds, eliminating the need for costly, time-consuming and risky neck resets. Second, it automatically maintains your preferred setup condition, even in varying environments such as summer or winter indoor climates. With the CNR System® Active, your guitar will always feel and play exactly the way you want."

Furch's original CNR System® of 2016 already solved one major issue, mitigating the damaging string tension inherent in an acoustic guitar by reinforcing the neck with a two-way adjustable truss rod embedded in a carbon fibre casing, alongside an



František (left) and Petr Furch are the father-and-son team behind Furch's innovative designs



HOW IT WORKS

The anatomy of Furch's CNR System® Active neck joint

1. Redesigned heel-to-fingerboard structure improves neck heel stability and transfers string tension to the expansive element and adjustment screw. Its length and rigidity ensure optimal neck geometry and excellent playability
2. Eccentric screw secures solid lateral position of the neck
3. Two-way adjustable truss rod allows for precise adjustments of your neck relief
4. Carbon fibre truss rod casing keeps your neck relief smooth over long periods, even in tough conditions
5. Expansion gap accommodates neck angle movement due to humidity changes
6. Expansive element is the heart of CNR System® Active, responding to ambient humidity by expanding or contracting to maintain consistent neck performance
7. String action adjustment screw allows fine-tuning of your string action for personalised playability

8. The first-generation CNR System® was superbly light and stable. CNR System® Active goes still further

9. A The guitar's action can be tailored to the player in moments using simple tools

10. Once set, the action stays stable in all climates thanks to CNR System® Active

L-shaped alloy heel structure (the 'L' is now 60mm longer and 45 per cent stronger in the new CNR System® Active for enhanced neck stability and string tension transfer). Over 68,000 guitars were produced using the first-generation design, and the updated version builds on this legacy, incorporating extensive data gathered from user feedback and long-term observation of the original system's behaviour.

But the trump card of this new technology is its elimination of a second age-old problem. "With the CNR System® Active," says Petr, "our team focused on

However, the tension of the strings and the transfer of acoustic waves primarily occur in the upper part of the neck. We ensured that resonance is channelled effectively through this area, particularly beneath the fretboard."

In day-to-day use, the CNR System® Active delivers optimised playability with no need for setup. But when you first take ownership of a new Furch acoustic, you'll naturally want to personalise the instrument to your playing style. Fortunately, with the luthier's new technology shipping on all guitars with serial number 126,202 and above, the

"With the CNR System® Active, your guitar will always feel and play exactly the way you want" **PETR FURCH**

addressing the other half of the equation, the top itself, which naturally expands and contracts due to humidity."

Rather than employ excess soundboard bracing – and compromise the instrument's resonance – the CNR System® Active takes an entirely fresh approach. The cross-section diagram above shows the solid wood expansion element in the neck heel joint. Uniquely, this expands and contracts in sync with the natural movement of the soundboard, reacting in real-time to the environment you're performing in.

"The type of wood, its position, length, grain orientation, and the humidity level at the time of installation are all meticulously controlled to allow it to expand and contract in response to humidity changes, mirroring the natural expansion and contraction of the soundboard," explains Petr. "This movement is then transferred to automatically adjust the neck angle, ensuring consistent string action. So players no longer need to worry about fluctuating playability due to weather changes."

Meanwhile, Furch's rigorous testing confirms sound quality is unaffected. "We naturally had concerns about how the system might impact the sound," says Petr. "Introducing an expansion gap behind the heel could theoretically affect resonance.

process has never been easier, with a string-action adjustment screw letting players minutely tweak and tailor playability using a standard Allen key (no saddle sanding required).

"Customers can either adjust the action themselves to suit their preferences once the guitar arrives," says Petr, "or specify their desired action to the retailer, who can set it up quickly and easily prior to shipping. This gives customers greater confidence in buying their first Furch guitar online."

The concept is mindblowing – but does it work? The effusive reaction from the acoustic scene speaks volumes, while the real-world value of the CNR System® Active was neatly summed up by the events at NAMM 2025. With a freak temperature drop to 16°C (60°F) and a plunge in humidity to just 18 per cent – for reference, acoustic guitars should be stored at between 45 per cent and 65 per cent humidity – neighbouring exhibitors saw their instruments warp and crack. Yet the Furch acoustic guitars featuring the new CNR System® Active held firm.

As Petr notes with satisfaction: "It's one thing to design and test new technology in a controlled environment, but the real test comes when that technology is exposed to the unpredictable chaos of the real world..."





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: Morganway

Album: *Kill The Silence* (Earache Records)



Kill The Silence is album number three for the band, who released their self-titled debut in 2019
www.morganway.co.uk

Blending vintage Americana with elements of British folk and alternative rock, Morganway are a British six-piece who borrow from an impressively wide net of influences. On their third full-length album, *Kill The Silence*, they're sounding bigger and better than ever, thanks to more six-string input from singer SJ Mortimer, whose rhythmic strums provide the perfect bedrock to her husband Kieran Morgan's inspired fretwork. This new dynamic between the pair is most evident on new tracks such as *Feels Like Letting Go* and *I Feel The Rain*, which could very well be anthems in the making.

Get Back To Where You Once Belonged

Inspired by the spontaneous creativity of The Beatles, a lot of the new tracks were only half complete when the band arrived at the studio. This led to fast decision making and more impromptu collaboration. "We wanted to capture our live sound and energy," says SJ. "We were working off each other just to see what came out without pressure. You can really hear the room on these recordings, which makes it extra special."

"We'd been watching the *Get Back* documentary," adds Kieran. "I was inspired by how a lot of these amazing songs started off in the studio, where a member of the band would show the others an idea and two hours later they'd have a finished recording."

Go Your Own Way

"I was brought up on classic rock like Queen and Bon Jovi," says SJ. "I also love Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles. Those are my main influences, as well as modern stuff like Haim and Boygenius. Those bands made me want to play guitar and figure out my own sound. Sometimes I laugh because we're too rock for country and we're too country for rock!"

"This band is a melting pot," agrees Kieran. "It's a bit rock, a bit folk, a bit Americana, a bit country. It depends on what song you fall on. I love the Eagles and Tom Petty. My biggest influence is John Frusciante, which is why my solos are typically quite fuzzy and minimalist in structure."

Double Trouble

The two guitarists add their own sonic contributions to the mix and stand out from one another by using contrasting gear and approaches. "It's nice to play the same part slightly differently using alternative tunings or different positions to create depth," continues SJ. "It's that 70s retro thing The Rolling Stones were doing – using two guitars to make one part bigger. It's not like The Strokes, where there are two distinct parts. We're aiming to sound more like one and a half players than two!"

"SJ prefers the sound of a Strat, so she sticks with her PRS Silver Sky," reveals Kieran. "My background is more Teles, and my PRS Vela S2 falls somewhere in between a Gretsch and a Tele. I want one guitar that can do everything. The combination of SJ's single coils through a Mesa/Boogie and my fat humbuckers with a Twin seems to work well for us."

Country Fair

In 2023, the group were invited to perform at Fairport Convention's Cropredy Convention, which – as well as being recorded and released – remains their favourite gig to date. "That was the best show of our lives," Kieran recalls. "It was so lovely to get an opportunity like that, playing to 20,000 people. We were floating our way through it."

"Afterwards, Fairport told us there was a special energy to our set," adds SJ. "Our fiddle player Nicole [Terry] ended up having a jam with their fiddle player a few months later. But we'll always play to our strengths: when we supported Skunk Anansie, we played our heaviest songs; with Fairport, it was all about the folk vibes." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Feels Like Letting Go*

For fans of: Haim, Fleetwood Mac, Fairport Convention

The six-piece line-up is a family affair, formed by twin brothers Callum and Kieran Morgan, with Kieran's wife, SJ Mortimer, on vocals and guitar

PHOTO BY ROGERSARGENT



"Sometimes I laugh
because we're too rock for
country and we're too
country for rock!"

SJ Mortimer

PRIDE & JOY

Meet the one guitar SJ couldn't live without

A lot of the acoustic on the album was recorded with SJ's Koa Series Taylor, which she says has a beautiful sound that's bright and soft at the same time. "I've had her since I was 16 and she still sounds great," SJ explains. "I think there's a lot of acoustic on our albums because most of the songs start out that way. Even if we go electric, we try to keep that original sound in the mix."



Albums

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

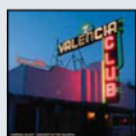
Chris Buck brings his expressive phrasing powers to album number two



PHOTO BY MARK HILTON

Cardinal Black Midnight At The Valencia

Thirty Tigers (available now)



Yearning, emotive rock with a virtuosic touch

Chris Buck has long been one of our favourite guitarists – you won't have to look far to find him, if you're unfamiliar, as he's interviewed on page 74. One of his great strengths is the fluid, vocal quality he brings to his playing, and that serves him so well, here, on the second album by Cardinal Black – the Welsh three-piece fronted by vocalist Tom Hollister with Adam Roberts on drums and the aforementioned Mr Buck on guitar. Beyond this nucleus, the band's live line-up is expanded to include Sam Williams on bass, Gregg Hollister on keyboards and Tay Cousins on supporting vocals, so they have been able to paint on a big canvas with *Midnight At The Valencia* without fear of being unable to reproduce it live. The result is an album that is soulful and poised but with enough raw emotion to give it an edge. It belongs to the same broad genre that John Mayer made his own – confessional, masculine songcraft with a tender heart and tasteful underpinnings of country, soul and rock, but with a spark of Celtic passion igniting its sweeping ballads and songs of heartbreak, resilience and regret. It speaks well of the band's discipline and sense of service to the songs that they don't overuse Buck's prodigious talents on guitar – he's just as often providing tasteful, understated rhythm chops here as he is letting rip on solos. With that being said, when Buck does let fly, it's a beautiful sound and totally appropriate, as on standout track *Breathe*. Like a nicely aged whisky, the album provides plenty to savour with just a little burn on the way down. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Breathe*

For fans of: John Mayer, Chris Stapleton, Gary Clark Jr

His Lordship

Bored Animal

Psychonaut Sounds (available now)



Sleazy psyche-punk with a 50s vibe

Better known as the guitarist with The Pretenders, James Walbourne's other band, His Lordship, is a more anarchic affair altogether, straddling punk, rockabilly and garage psychedelia – with a twist of Johnny Kidd & The Pirates chucked in. It's a heady brew indeed, but fortunately Walbourne's monster chops (he's a very fine player indeed) are up to the job, and the result is both bracing and unpredictable: this is proper rock 'n' roll, as pungent as paint thinners and propulsive as a V8 engine. Yet there is breadth here, too. The title track hits like a slap in the face with its Buzzcocks-style energy, but the brooding, biker-psychedelia of *Derek E Fudge* is like a page from a Hunter S Thompson book. The track that closes the album, the excellent *Gin And Fog*, however, is a beautiful piece of pure melodic guitar that evokes the jagged beauty of early 60s guitar instrumentals. Entertaining, acerbic, agitated and yet oddly nostalgic, *Bored Animal* is a welcome jolt of raw voltage on a guitar scene that too often plays it safe. **[JD]**

Standout track: *The Sadness Of King Kong*

For fans of: Buzzcocks, Dead Kennedys, Link Wray

Jakko Jakszyk

Son Of Glen

InsideOutMusic (available now)



King Crimson man goes solo

Having been serving in the ranks of the mighty King Crimson since 2013, you might expect Jakko Jakszyk's first solo release since the band went on permanent hiatus to be something of a prog opus. And in many ways, it's exactly that. But don't expect angular riffs in odd time signatures and epicly dissonant soloing à la Crim; everything here is decidedly introspective. In fact, it's aimed at being something of a soundtrack to Jakko's biography, *Who's The Boy With The Lovely Hair?*, which was released last autumn. The book details Jakko's childhood adoption and his subsequent search for his own identity, and the album is lyrically in sync. Take the opening track, *Ode to Ballina*, a gently lilting instrumental picture of his birth mother's homeland. The theme develops from there with strong songwriting and, of course, virtuosic guitar playing. Excellent. **[DM]**

Standout track: *How Did I Let You Get So Old?*

For fans of: King Crimson, Rush, Steve Hackett



Fire and feeling:
Ally Venable is
coming to the UK

Ally Venable
Money & Power
Ruf Records (available now)



Texas blues and so much more

Hailing from Kilgore, Texas, Ally Venable has had a guitar in her hands since the age of 12 and she released her debut album, *No Glass Shoes*, in 2016. Fast forward to today and *Money & Power*, her sixth release, is possibly her strongest statement to date. The album dips in and out of the heavier side of blues, taking in many different stylistic colours during its 12-track journey. As an example, whereas the title track sounds like what would happen if Oasis wrote a Black Sabbath song, the temperature cools right down for *Do You Cry*, a beautifully sentimental ballad about dealing with loss and grief. Move on a few tracks and *Unbreakable* has an infectious groove with some excellent wah-wah guitar. And the following track, *Steeping Stone*, smoulders with soulful vocals and bluesy guitar fills, topped off with a spirited solo. Ally tours the UK this autumn, kicking off in Manchester on the 14 October, when audiences will be able to sample her live fire in action. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Do You Cry*
For fans of: Samantha Fish, Ana Popović

Jimmie Vaughan
Do You Get The Blues?
Last Music Co (available 25 July)



**Grammy-winning album receives
25th anniversary re-release**

Technically a 24th anniversary, Jimmie Vaughan's *Do You Get The Blues?* was overshadowed by events on its original release date of September 11 2001. Promotional activities were halted out of respect for the horrendous situation in New York that day, but despite this the album went on to win the Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album. It was given a vinyl re-release to coincide with Jimmie's 70th birthday in 2021, but is now being made available once again on CD and digital. This is a blues album very much in the traditional vein, delivered with none of the face-melting potency of brother SRV but leaning stylistically towards the genre's founding fathers like Muddy Waters or Lightnin' Hopkins. Tracks such as *Without You* and *Robbin' Me Blind* come across as the real deal – and so if traditional electric blues is your thing, look no further. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Don't Let The Sun Set*
For fans of: Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Cray



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www.G7th.com



Tones Behind The Tracks

With Gentle Giant's legendary *Playing The Fool* receiving a remix, the band's **Gary Green** reminisces about playing during prog's golden age

Artist: Gentle Giant

Album: *Playing The Fool: The Complete Live Experience* (Chrysalis/Alucard)



Gentle Giant's 1977 live album, *Playing The Fool*, has been fully remixed and adorned with extra tracks

To say that Gentle Giant are a cult phenomenon would be an understatement. Despite the band splitting in 1980, the fanbase is still active and ever hungry for recent studio album remixes, courtesy of Steven Wilson. *Playing The Fool*, the band's 1977 live album, has now received similar treatment in the hands of Dan Bournemark and, for an album that is 48 years old, the result is nothing less than remarkable, with modern technology offering the listener the virtual experience of being present in the audience. Recorded during the band's 1976 European tour, the full setlist has been restored for the first time, too. Guitarist Gary Green joins us for a trip down Giant's memory lane.

What was the idea behind the complete remix of *Playing The Fool*?

"The idea was to try to give the listener the experience of being at the gig, you know? Run the whole show with all the bits and bobs in between and make it feel like you're sitting in the audience. I think that's been successful to some degree; it feels like you're immersed in it, which is always a great thing to hear on a live album."

Can you paint a picture of what it was like touring with Gentle Giant in the mid-70s?

"Looking back, we were devoid of great equipment for monitoring purposes and such like. But, of course, back in the day, you thought it was all new technology, so you just got on with it. It was a fantastic time. We always felt we were pretty solid as a live band, and when we

made *Playing The Fool*, it was after *Interview* [1976], on which, for some odd reasons, I think we felt we hadn't quite nailed it. You know, it seemed like we had done it a bit in a rush, and it wasn't quite up to our own internal standard, if you like. So we were kind of treading water a little bit. We thought, 'Let's do a live album...' because it'd be great to capture the band in the mode that we were in, which was a strong live act."

The playing on the live album is very complex. How did you get around the poor monitoring situation if you could hardly hear each other?

"The music was very dependent on accurate timing and so we always tried to set up very early on. We tried to establish that we could always be in the same relative positions to each other. If it was a big stage and we were spread out, it was just murder for us. Kerry [Minnear, keyboards] was, like, 40ft away and I'm supposed to be playing something intricate with him. It was ludicrous, you know? So we opted for a stage plot that kept us within scratching distance. We'd have very close eye contact all the time – me and John [Weathers, drums], me and Kerry – especially me and Kerry, because we were so far apart. 'Is this where we are?' Nod, 'Yeah, right.' It was tricky. Nowadays, you can be spread apart because you've got in-ears, everybody's locked in and it's a lot easier."

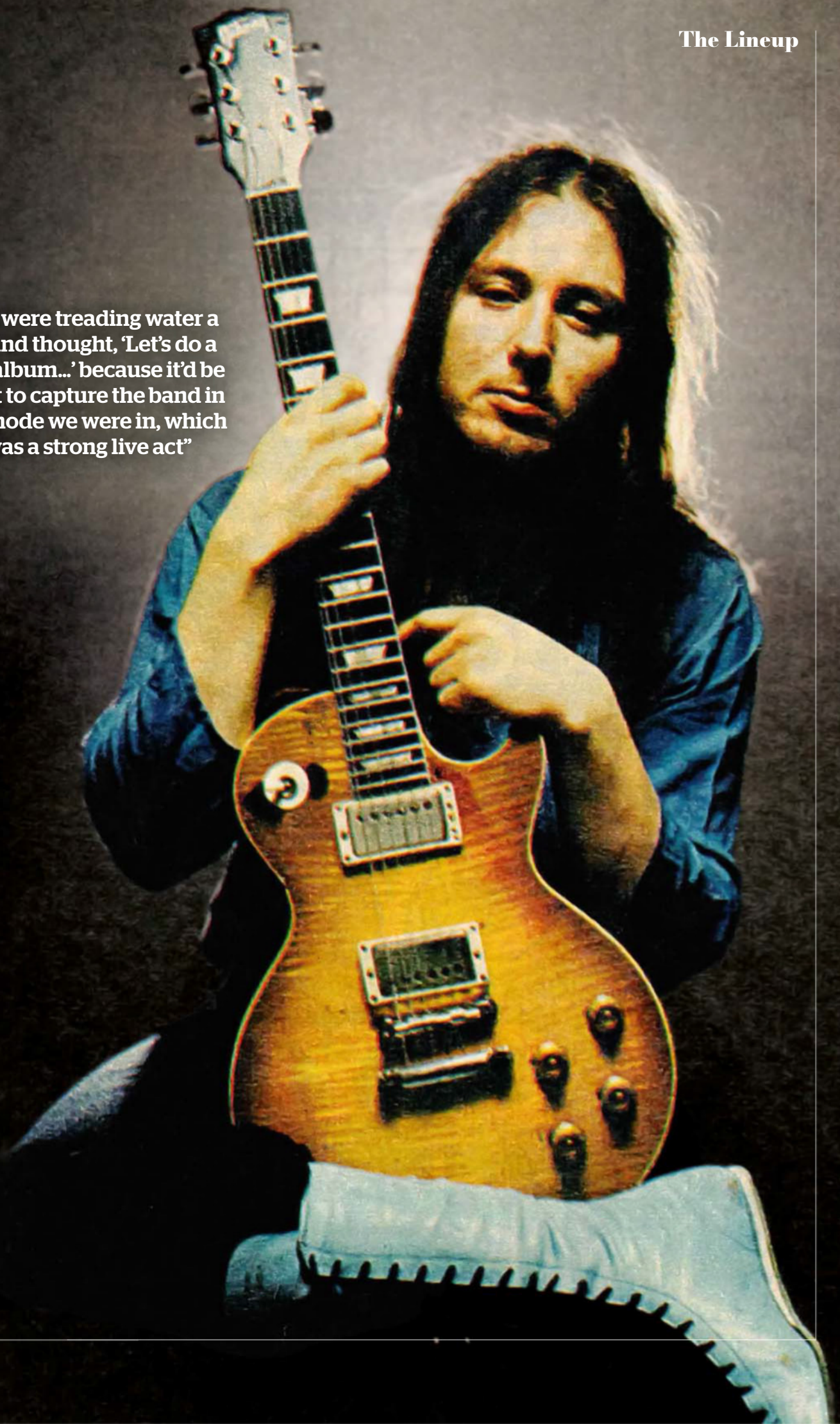
Looking at the gear you used back then, you had a beautiful Les Paul. How did that come about?

"I don't really know. We might have just completed a record deal, got an advance and thought, 'Okay, we better up our game a bit. We need to get some decent gear.' So we were up in London gear shopping. We were in Kingston-upon-Thames of all places. We went into a music store and wandered all around the shop looking at great stuff. I saw this guitar on the wall and thought, 'I've gotta try that.' I loved it and, thanks to the management who put down the deposit and contracted for the hire purchase agreement, we bought the guitar. It was £360. It was a great instrument to play, but towards the end I began to realise that it could be worth a lot of money, and then you start to become very protective of it and make sure that you're going to keep it in sight and all that. I sold it in 1993. So while it's gone, I don't really regret it."



Gary Green played guitar throughout the career of Gentle Giant: from the first album in 1970 to the last recording in 1980

“We were treading water a bit and thought, ‘Let’s do a live album...’ because it’d be great to capture the band in the mode we were in, which was a strong live act”





Gentle Giant's *Playing The Fool* line-up (clockwise from back-left): Gary Green, Kerry Minnear (keyboards), John Weathers (drums), Derek Shulman (vocals) and Ray Shulman (bass)

And your other stage guitar was a 70s Telecaster, wasn't it?

"It was a '72; I bought it new. Again, it was some music store off the A3 on the way up to London. I can't remember the name of it, but they had a stack of Telecasters and I played 15 or so of them and settled on that one. I didn't know what I was doing, really. It's not a fabulous guitar, but we needed a different sound from my Les Paul. Ray [Shulman, bass and violin] had a nice old Strat, which was a 60-something-or-other and sounded lovely. But, I mean, we didn't have a billion guitars, maybe five or six."

You also used a 12-string acoustic on stage, didn't you?

"It was kind of a hangover from their time as Simon Dupree And The Big Sound [the 1960s band from which Gentle Giant evolved]. It was the Hagstrom, I guess. It's a Hagstrom on the first album [*Gentle Giant*], on *Funny Ways*; early stage versions of that was that Hagstrom, and that was a really nice guitar. It got stolen at a gig in Chatham, unfortunately, and then we replaced it with a... you know what? I don't know what brand it was! We had a Fender 12-string acoustic, for a while, which was not very nice sounding."

"We had a whole backline of Laney 100-watt heads and two 4x12s each. I think Kerry had four 4x12s. It was a sort of Spinal Tap array of cabinets!"

Acoustic guitars were a nightmare to amplify on stage in the 70s. How did you manage to get around the problems?

"I just saw a picture of one of my first gigs. I've got my Hagstrom 12-string with a 70s curly lead straight into an amp, all stretched out – could have pulled out any second. It had a pickup on it, like a DeArmond or something. But we ended up using microphones for the acoustic guitars on stage, which is problematic if you're going to use them within the whole band – like in the *Octopus* medley where there's loud stuff behind the acoustic guitar. Other than that, it was acoustic guitars without noise [from the rest of the band]."

Gary's treasured 1960 Les Paul was bought during a shopping trip in Kingston-upon-Thames and became his main stage guitar



PHOTO COURTESY OF GENTLE GIANT

So not too bad, but it was still difficult trying to amplify them loud enough in a decent-sized place. That was a constant battle. But that's the fun of the 70s, you know?"

Which amplifiers were you using back then?

"Early on we had Laney amps, again a holdover from Simon Dupree. We had a whole backline of Laney 100-watt heads and two 4x12s each. I think Kerry had four 4x12s. It was a sort of Spinal Tap array of cabinets! After looking around at a bunch of different gear I opted for an HH solid-state amp and I used that for a lot of live gigs. I don't remember what amplifier I had for the live album. I think it probably was the HH, and coupled with that, I had a rear-facing folded horn: 15-inch, probably an EV speaker, I think. And that's what I used mostly. Up on 11 pretty much."

What about effects?

"Very early on all I had was a volume pedal and a wah-wah on the floor, I think. Then the very next pedal I got was an MXR phaser – I think I'd use that on *Just The Same* in the middle, that sort of lyrical instrumental line. Then I had an [Electro-Harmonix] Electric Mistress flanger, which was very nice, and an MXR Micro [Amp] boost, just a little signal boost for solos and passages you wanted to come out a little more. But it wasn't any more sophisticated than that."

Are you happy with the new version of *Playing The Fool*?

"I am. This one has really opened up the stereo panorama. And it truly feels immersive to me, which was the point of it: it puts you there at the gig. I like that effect of it a lot, plus we've got a couple of extra tunes in there that weren't included on the original release, including Ray's violin solo, which was always a signal for John and me: it was just about a two-Heineken solo, generally!" [DM]



Gentle Giant's *Playing The Fool: The Complete Live Experience* is out now via Chrysalis/Alucard

<https://gentlegiantband.com>

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Sunny Skies

Neville Marten recalls interviews with one of his musical idols, the singer-songwriter supreme and total legend, the great JT himself

James Taylor was the reason I got into playing fingerstyle acoustic, and why I purchased my first half-decent one, a Japanese Epiphone Texan, in 1970. I heard *Fire And Rain* and instantly switched from loving electric blues and rock to this, with its major and minor 7th chords, delicate trills and introspective lyrics that no lovelorn 20-year-old could resist. I learned *Sunny Skies*, the B-side to the single *Country Road*, then spent literally months trying to master the intricate *You Can Close Your Eyes*, which remains one of my few party tricks.

"I heard *Fire And Rain* and instantly switched from loving electric blues and rock to this, with its delicate trills and introspective lyrics"

The first time I met James was in a posh London hotel where I was due to interview him. I'd primed my Sony Walkman with a new tape, had my questions all written out, and a copy of *Guitarist* with Mark Knopfler on the cover, as the two had recently collaborated on Mark's song *Sailing To Philadelphia*.

James was late due to previous items running over, so my time was cut short when the PR came in and

said, "Five minutes, gents," to which James jokingly retorted, "I'm enjoying this; we don't have to listen to her." The stern response was: "Actually James, you do; you're live on BBC Radio 2 in 30 minutes."

Back in those heady days *Guitarist* had a covermounted CD and my ploy was to record our cover star saying, "Hi, [artist name here]. Welcome to this month's *Guitarist* CD." However, I was not sure if someone this exalted would acquiesce to my request. So I could hardly believe it when James reached over to the guitar case sitting opposite, lifted out his Olson acoustic, and played 20 seconds or so of improvised chordal noodling. He then said, in that unmistakably mellifluous tone, "Hi, James Taylor here. Welcome to this month's *Guitarist* CD." We bade our farewells, I checked that my recording had worked (it had!) and I made my way back to our offices in Ely, grinning all the way.

Your Smiling Face

The next time we crossed paths was in 2015 when James agreed to an interview and video lesson, which, for me, was a huge coup. I went with photographer Joby Sessions and videographer Martin Holmes, two trustworthy pros who always do a perfect job with no fuss. I had taken my Martin OM-42 so the guys could use me as a photo prop until the main event turned up. It was leaning against the wall when James walked in and nonchalantly ran his fingers across its strings. I said hi and introduced everyone. Throughout the fairly long and drawn-out proceedings he referred to each of us by our first names, gave a fantastic video lesson, then thanked Joby and Martin for making the session less of a chore than it might otherwise have been. He said to me, "I learned many years ago that if we all get along, I have a good time, you have a good time and we get a really nice result out of it." We certainly do, and at the time of writing that lesson has received 3.9 million views on the *Guitarist* YouTube channel.

The next time we spoke was over the phone when James released *American Standard*, his album of jazz classics done in his own inimitable way. He remembered me, asked how I was, and a couple of my questions went something like, "These American songbook standards, done your way, sound like they're your compositions," and, "There's so much space in your music; sometimes it seems like it's almost as important as the notes themselves." He said, "Only a musician would ask questions like that," which I took as a huge compliment.

I'm not sure when James will revisit the UK, but when he does I'm hoping we can get to chat again. I'd definitely go to see him, though, as his live shows are always pure class, especially with his all-star band which includes Michael Landau on guitar and Jimmy Johnson on bass. Here's hoping. See you next month. **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

How Sweet It Is

What? Taylor Gold Label Collection 814e Super Auditorium Natural
Where seen? www.sparsmusic.co.uk **Price?** £3,999

See what I did there? Given that even used James Olson JT models fetch \$25,000, this 'Taylor' model might provide a sensible alternative. Broadly similar in size to James's guitars, the 814e is Taylor's 'Super Auditorium' configuration. This one features a Honduran rosewood back and slides, Sitka spruce top, neo-tropical mahogany neck, and attractively inlaid West African Crelicam ebony fingerboard. The nut is white Tusq, the bridge Honduran rosewood with white micarta saddle, and the guitar comes with built-in LR Baggs Element VTC. The bling quotient is similar to that of JT's Olsons, too, so if that's the vibe you're after, you've certainly 'got a friend' here (yawn!).



The Gold Label 814e is also available in sunburst and koa-topped variants



Operation Bridge

This month, **Alex Bishop** considers the importance of guitar bridge design and its impact on tone

More than once in the past month I have had customers bring me guitars for relatively small repair work, only to discover there was a more pressing issue with their beloved instrument. It's left me feeling like a doctor who has to deliver bad news to a patient after discovering they have months left to live when they only came in for a routine check-up.

The lutherie equivalent to this morbid scene can be found when ill-fitting acoustic guitar bridges subtly begin to peel away from their mooring on the soundboard. Most commonly the ends of the bridge show light between the top, but also the area around the bridge pins can show a gap, as the front of the bridge dips into the body and the back lifts up, putting immense pressure on the glue join holding everything together. This can be checked by sliding a piece of paper into the join – sometimes it runs much deeper than you think it will.

When one comes to think about it, the bridge is one of the most fundamental and hard-working parts of a guitar. As the name suggests, it transfers the vibrational energy in the strings to the top of the guitar, passing energy from one side to the other. An optimised guitar bridge will do this with as little energy loss as possible, maximising tone. But what does it take to make and design an effective bridge?

Stress Test

The bridge has to contain the saddle, essentially the surface that the strings sit upon. It helps if the saddle is adjustable in some way (as in many electric guitars) or can at least be removed for modification or replaced (like acoustic guitar bridges). Given the problem that wood will expand and contract in different conditions, and that there is not always much room in front of the saddle, there can be prone to hairline cracks along the saddle slot, messing with intonation and causing all sorts of stability issues – a problem that is normally terminal for the bridge and requiring replacement.

A lot of guitar bridges also act as the anchor point for the strings, needing to withstand the pull of about 80kg of tensile stress. It's a lot to ask of a modest 15 grams or so of wood, especially in the case of pin-less acoustic guitar bridges; it's really a testament to the quality of the fit between the bridge and the slightly domed top of the guitar that determines the longevity of the join. Skilled luthiers will spend many hours refining this join to ensure that there is as much surface area in contact with the top as possible. I start with a cabinet scraper, gently removing material from the underside of the bridge, and then chalk-fitting it against the top by rubbing it against a sheet of sandpaper sandwiched in between. Once the chalk



on the underside of the bridge has been fully removed, the fit is as close to perfect as one could hope.

This helps to explain why acoustic guitar bridges seem much larger than they need to be. The additional surface area of the 'wings' increases the strength of the glue join with the top without adding too much unnecessary mass. The long-accepted Martin and Gibson style bridges with scalloped ends reduce mass, just like soundboard bracing, but without reducing the

This 1940s Gibson L-00 was recently entrusted into Alex's care for a 'just in time' bridge refit

"A lot of guitar bridges also act as the anchor point for the strings, needing to withstand the pull of about 80kg of tensile stress"

footprint of the bridge. My own bridges take this idea further, tapering the wings of the bridge to only 2mm throughout, and then curving up tightly to the bulk of material in the central section. String ramps cut in front of the bridge pins help to provide the right angle for the strings to pass over the saddle and into the pins.

It was a beautiful 1940s Gibson L-00 that received our bridge refitting treatment last week, having begun to gradually peel itself away over the past few years. Luckily, its owner had been spared the harrowing sound of their guitar bridge being spontaneously ripped off by its own strings, and now surgically refitted it will hopefully live on for another 80 years. **G**



Rosewood Or Mahogany

Michael Watts reflects on how the choice of the two most popular back and sides woods affects your acoustic sound

The flat-top acoustic guitar is a finely balanced system of parts and forces, each of which has a profound knock-on effect on the others. From scale length to bracing, neck carve to bridge weight, the instrument we love can be remarkably sensitive to the choices and intent that goes into its creation.

As such, there is a temptation – wherever acoustic guitarists gather – to philosophise passionately about every part of the instrument. This is useful. As something of a pontificator myself, it is comforting to know that there are places we can go. This column being one of them. That said, before addressing one of the most hotly debated and subjective topics in the acoustic guitar world, let's start with three objective truths. These will give us something to cling onto as we go: one, wood of any species is nothing more than a source of potential; two, the acoustic properties of individual pieces of wood can differ wildly within the same species and genus of tree; and three, as every guitar is different so, too, is every player.

Bearing these three precepts in mind – and assuming that all hypothetical guitars I mention have soundboards voiced to bring out the best of each instrument – let's take a look at the differences that the choice of rosewood or mahogany back and sides will have on your experience as a tone-generating 21st century organism.

Fundamental Or Complex

The finest mahogany guitars that I have encountered have had several characteristics in common. The most immediate of these is the 'fundamental' character of the sound. You get the note itself and maybe a touch of sympathetic resonance from open strings – especially in tunings like DADGAD – but on the whole the voice is pure and unadorned. It is a sound we could describe as 'dry' or 'woody' without fear of contradiction.

I have found mahogany guitars to be friendly things, warm and immediate to the touch. They can be powerful, breathy, forgiving when it comes to finger noise and string squeak. They can also soften the attack of a hard pick, making for a more intimate sound. It's a gentle conversation between friends, rather than a job interview.

By contrast, the best rosewood guitars I have played lean into the reflective properties of this harder, vitreous wood for a sound that is heavy in upper partial harmonics and internal reverb. At its best, this can be a life-changing experience, the guitar rising up to meet the initial attack with a similar effect as good amp reverb – bold, lush and glorious.

This spectacular 'choirs of angels' timbre can come with drawbacks. In some guitars the voice can be lost in indistinct white noise as everything is amplified to the same degree. If you are having a good day and playing with your usual effortless, fluid mastery then a fine rosewood guitar can gild your playing with new and beautiful textures, rather like singing in a cathedral.

If you're out of practice, trying to master a new piece or distracted, then a rosewood guitar can be guaranteed to throw every imperfection in your sound into sharp relief. Sloppy fingering, inaccurate bends and string squeaks – we're still in a cathedral, but that's not singing.

History In The Making

The chances are that your first experience with a serious acoustic guitar was an instrument that originated in either the Martin or Gibson factories. Martin has made the majority of its guitars from either rosewood or mahogany. This has allowed players around the world to express a preference – 18 or 28 – and it can become a part of our identity. While there are many lovers of mahogany Martin guitars, the fact that only the rosewood instruments got the premium 42/45 style package speaks volumes about perceptions of both woods among players.

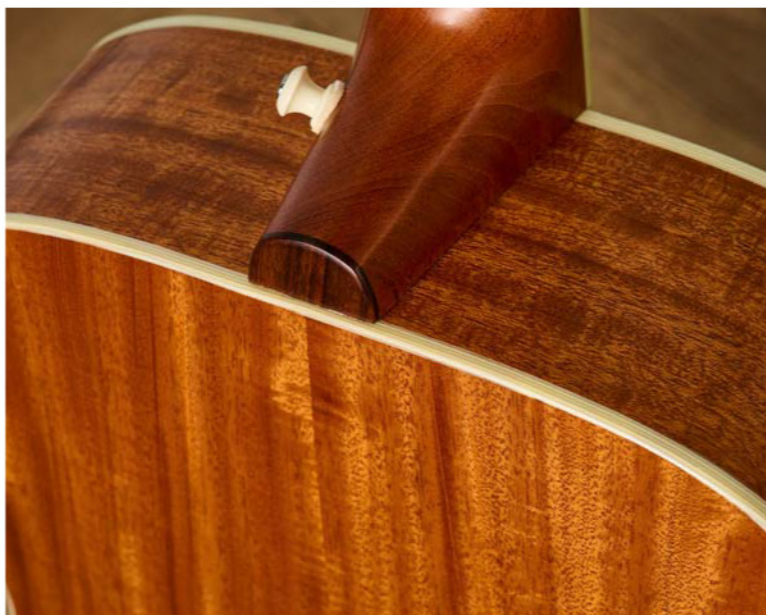
Gibson found that its sound depends more on the winning combination of a shorter scale length and dryer back and side woods. There is a reason why the J-45 is revered among singer-songwriters. Rosewood Gibson acoustics are relatively rare, but they are sought after and tend to command a premium.

Vintage instruments with decades of ageing and playing in them are often extremely desirable. There's something



This Turnstone TG, crafted by luthier Rosie Heydenrych, includes a set of superbly figured Madagascan rosewood for its back and sides

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN



about the patina of an old finish, the repairs, the subtle indications of a life spent making music. But what are the implications of ageing in a guitar of each wood?

There are those who believe (Michael Millard of Froggy Bottom Guitars being a vocal advocate) that as instruments age they move in the opposite direction – rosewood guitars calming down and getting more focused on the fundamentals, while mahogany instruments gain a richer harmonic voice as they open up. This doesn't help.

In the past five decades the acoustic guitar has experienced an evolutionary spike due to the burgeoning

JWJ Guitars' Orchestra Select with a Honduran mahogany/Adirondack spruce combo earned itself a coveted Gold-status in issue 521: "The sheer musicality of the tone was a real joy," we said in our review

"As every guitar is different so, too, is every player... The way that a guitar responds depends as much on us as the instrument itself"

popularity of luthier-made instruments for an individual player. These unique creations can often feature rare and exotic woods. Some such as quilted mahogany from The Tree and Shipwreck Brazilian rosewood command eye-watering prices and elevate the instrument into the realms of bespoke luxury.

Others such as sapele and Indian rosewood are offered as more accessible alternatives. Either way – financial considerations aside – your choice is still primarily between a fundamental sound or one that adds colour to the principal frequencies.

It's Not Me, It's You

Every player is different. The way that a guitar responds depends as much on us as the instrument itself, and the best thing we can do is listen objectively and critically as we play. Hand position, use of dynamics and phrasing, our own individual sense of taste and the way that we perceive sound all have a role to play in this choice and what instrument best suits us.

To be aware of our own touch and how it works within the context of different instruments is a vital skill that comes with time and experience. Learn what you love. **G**

THREE TO GET READY

Superlative tonewoods in action



Gibson Murphy Lab 1960 Hummingbird Heavy Aged £6,699

A short-scale, square-shoulder mahogany dread is a joyful thing for fingerstylist and flatpicker alike. They can be hard to come by, though. Here, Gibson's Murphy Lab adds torried woods, a fixed saddle and subtle finish checking to the classic Hummingbird design making for a superbly woody all-rounder if you can get onboard with the extroverted visuals.

www.gibson.com



Turnstone Guitars African Queen – TG Model £17,880

Yes, African Blackwood is a member of the rosewood family and, while it originally came to prominence as a substitute for Brazilian rosewood, it has its own sonorous personality. In the hands of UK luthier Rosie Heydenrych of Turnstone Guitars it is coupled with a soundboard of moon-harvested Alpine spruce in a powerful mid-size instrument. It comes at a premium, but if you're going there, you might as well go there!

www.turnstoneguitar.co.uk



Greenfield G2 The Tree From \$60,000

To many connoisseurs, an instrument such as this represents the ultimate mahogany guitar. Montreal-based luthier Michael Greenfield's G2 design is a powerful take on a modern dreadnought design available in a variety of rare woods. In this case quilted mahogany from The Tree is paired with a moon spruce soundboard. A sublime example of what is possible in modern acoustic guitar lutherie.

www.greenfieldguitars.com

PHOTO BY TURNSTONE GUITARS

PHOTO BY GREENFIELD GUITARS



Tension & Release (PART 2)

In the second part of this lesson, **Richard Barrett** asks you to lend your ears to the sounds of the silver screen for real-life context

In the second part of this series discussing the creation and resolution of tension in harmony, we're getting more into altered chords. An altered chord is one that contains notes from outside its scale of origin – chords such as $\flat 9$ or $\#5$ are frequently seen examples of this. What the example chords are designed to demonstrate is how we might set up a dissonance or 'tension', which can then resolve to a more harmonious conclusion. As an interesting side note, film and TV music will often leave a dissonant chord hanging unresolved to underline the tension of what's happening on screen.

Whichever way you choose to approach this, a deep knowledge of chord construction and harmony will aid your creativity in composition, melodic invention and arranging other instruments such as strings or brass. Though some of the chord names can seem a little daunting, remember that this is simply an attempt to label a sound. Even if you can't work out the name for a chord, that's no reason not to use it! **G**

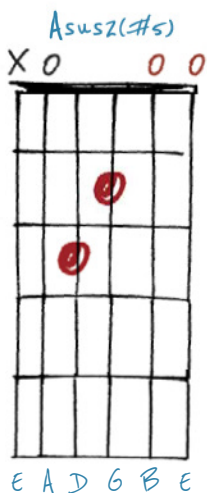
Jimmy Page often employed dissonant chords in Led Zep's music – check out the end of *The Immigrant Song* where he introduces an altered-sounding chord into the tune's main riff



PHOTO BY WATA/ASANUMA/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

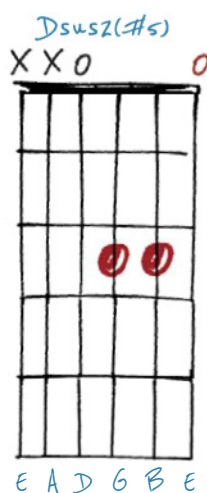
Example 1

This $Asus2(\#5)$ chord is based on $Asus2$, which is already setting up an expectation to resolve somewhere – usually to an A major or minor chord. In this example, it also features a $\#5$, which adds a less subtle layer of tension into the mix. Try alternating this with an $Asus2$ to hear the tension and release in action.



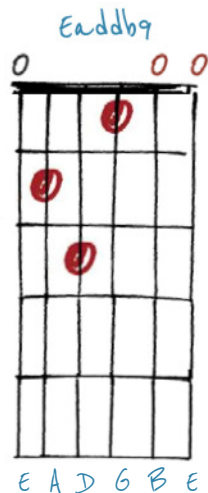
Example 2

Shifting to D, this $Dsus2(\#5)$ is another useful chord shape. Could this be how the intro to ABBA's *Mamma Mia* was written? Either way, that sharp (sometimes called augmented) 5th adds a real sense of anticipation, especially when left hanging without resolve. Watch out for this in TV and film music.



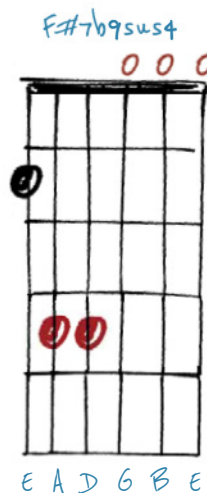
Example 3

This $Eadd\flat 9$ shifts what would be a duplicate root (E) in a regular E major chord up a semitone. Or, looking at it another way, an $add9$ ($F\#$) down a semitone to F natural, giving a flamenco (or Spaghetti Western) twist that is often heard as a hanging chord but resolves nicely to E or E7.



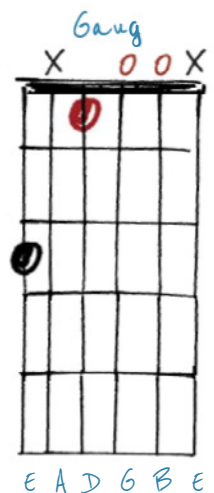
Example 4

Here's where chord-naming can tie us in knots! This is actually simple to play, combining an $F\#$ powerchord with the three open strings at the top – think Alex Lifeson on Rush's *Hemispheres* album. The name is $F\#7,9sus4$ (though opinions vary). Try resolving to an $F\#$ major to hear how it sets up tension.



Example 5

The simple name for this is G augmented (shortened to G aug) – a G major chord with a $\#5$. Whether to refer to this as 'augmented' or ' $\#5$ ' is purely a matter of preference. Some jazz chord charts call this ' $+5$ ' as it's easy to write and read quickly. Try it before a G major for Jimmy Page *The Rain Song* vibes.





TAKING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

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STAR LETTER

YOU GOT THE POWER?



A good isolated power supply can make all the difference

I read with interest last month's feature on the 30 best new pedals [issue 524]. I would like to add my own experiences, in the hope of saving other readers some heartache.

I have played in cover bands for over 20 years, initially as a rhythm guitarist, but for the last three years as a lead guitarist. As I made the step up to lead guitarist I was forced to confront the murky waters of effects pedals.

As I proceeded I noticed my tone had become muddy and bassy, whether pedals were engaged or not. It was not so apparent at practice, probably due to a concrete floor and reduced volume. At gigs

it got so bad, in the end I was just using a Telecaster for all gigs, on the cleanest channel with all of the bass EQ'd out of the equation. I put new valves in my Marshall head, had it serviced, renewed my leads and patch cables, all to no avail...

One day at rehearsal my trusty power supply began to buzz. It was one of those inexpensive daisy chain affairs, feeding five nine-volt pedals. I persevered, but like most things it did not cure itself. I decided to invest in an affordable Harley Benton ISO power supply. What a difference! All of the muddiness was gone – it was like someone had taken the 20-tog duvet off the speaker cab, and all of my pedals were doing their jobs better than ever. God knows what the old power supply had been up to!

So I would recommend upgrading to a decent power supply to everyone as a first step to improving tone. I feel so stupid for not suspecting the cheapest component in my equipment first, but I fell into the trap of 'if it's working, it's okay'.

Tim Robinson

Thanks for sharing your lightbulb moment, Tim. Over the years we've talked to many effects experts. Most, when asked for their best tips for improving pedalboard performance, will say: 'Get a good-quality isolated power supply.' It joins the long list of not-very-sexy items of kit that nonetheless play a bigger role in promoting great tone than that high-end overdrive you were craving – or whatever it may be. We'd also include the following on that list: premium-quality strings, decent and not over-long cabling, a good-quality attenuator (if you have to play at relatively low volume), and maybe some form of end-of-chain buffering if you have lots of pedals on the 'board, especially if they are all true-bypass when not engaged. In other words, no piece of kit is an island, and a signal chain is only as strong as its weakest link. So set aside a little budget for boring but useful utilities as well as the shiny tone toys and your ears will thank you.



KORG

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

TWO BASS HIT

As much as I hate to correct the always excellent Neville Marten, he's not quite correct about Pino Palladino standing in for John Deacon on Queen's rehearsals at Nomis Studios for the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert in April 1992. I had been asked by Brian May to deputise for John for the second week of rehearsals as he had booked a family skiing holiday for that period. I dropped in during the first week to get familiar with the setup and meet everyone involved, though many of the big-name guest artistes only came to the final week of rehearsals at Bray Studios, so I only got to play with Tony Iommi and Paul Young, though, of course, all the songs for the show were played many times (though not the *Lord's Prayer*!). It was promised that I would play on one song at the actual show, though sadly that didn't happen, but I did get to hang out backstage. A good warm-up for playing with the Brian May Band then on about 3,000 performances in *We Will Rock You*!

Neil Murray

Neville replies: Oh my goodness! Of course, Neil is correct. My sincerest apologies, therefore, go to both he and Pino. I must be conflating that incident with the time I bumped into Pino at the Royal Albert Hall, having gone there to hopefully interview Eric Clapton. The Eric interview didn't materialise, but I did have a brief chat with Pino in the corridor afterwards. What's nice is that Neil, who's played bass with virtually every guitarist of note over his own stellar career, has put me right on my appalling recall, but also shone a light on the mystery of why one musician would be depping for another on a rehearsal for such an important event. Neil and I were only nodding acquaintances, but we did indeed have a brief chat that day. What scares me is what else I've misremembered over these past decades! That time I jammed with Hendrix?

JUST THE FACTS

In your most recent issue, you had someone suggest an article on amps and how to use the various functions on them to best effect, which I would also appreciate. I am wondering if you could extend the article to pairing with effects (there is a dizzying selection of pedals available), and also what the options are for small-scale home recording (ie, for the person with just a guitar and an amp). What kit would be required, what are optional extras, etc.

I appreciate that may be too much for a single article, but for those of us who have returned to playing after a significant break, equipment and systems have moved on quickly and a recap would be helpful.

Mike Lording



Martin Simpson gave us a tour of his collection in issue 505, including his main stage guitar, the pictured Taran Tirga Mhor – designed by luthier Rory Dowling and inspired by a 1931 Martin 000-18

JARGON BEGONE!

Further to a reader's letter re beginners' guides, it's a great idea. I'm not a beginner by any means, but some sort of jargon-busting article would be excellent.

Brian Riordan

Thanks Mike and Brian, it seems our suggestion (inspired by an earlier reader letter) to do a back-to-basics column has some fans. It's settled, then – we'll think about the best format and range of topics and get it started soon.

WIZZ JONES

Thank you for your heartfelt tribute to Wizz Jones in your recent edition. To my shame, I only discovered Wizz's wonderful music after reading his obituary recently in a national newspaper, which in turn prompted me to visit Spotify to discover more. I have since been enjoying listening to his extensive back catalogue. Such talent! It's almost scary to consider all those great musicians that could easily pass us by in our musical journeys were it not for serendipity and the good offices of *Guitarist* magazine!

David Hughes

It was a sad loss indeed to learn Wizz had passed, David, but we're gratified to hear that it spurred you on to check out his wonderful body of work and dive into listening to it. We can think of no finer way to celebrate his memory.

ACOUSTIC BLISS

I recently attended a Martin Simpson gig in the Great Hall on the Dartington Estate in Devon – I've enjoyed and admired his music since hearing the *Righteousness & Humidity* album. He was playing some back-catalogue songs, one Woody Guthrie song, which sounded totally contemporary, but mainly songs from the latest album, *Skydancers*. The latter song was commissioned by Chris Packham about the endangered harrier. He told us that one key line there was supplied by his mate Richard Hawley.

Simpson was alone on stage, just amp and guitar and voice. No Marshalls or fussy pedalboard, just one cable from the guitar. My partner asked him about his guitar the next morning in the Dartington White Hart breakfast bar and Martin told her it was made by Taran Guitars in Fife. In one interview he said that when he's playing the guitar, the guitar plays right back, and who could ask for more? He has also said that the

Taran has perfect intonation and incorporates modern approaches to guitar building in the body. It uses a K&K Trinity system with an under-saddle transducer.

The evening was a welcome break from too much white noise, or the endless wrangling over the perfect pickup configuration, or how much I wanted to be able to afford to bid for Jeff Beck's Oxblood Les Paul. I have to thank Martin Simpson for reminding me about the pure, rippling, cascading peace found in a top-range acoustic guitar and, of course, his ability as storyteller, folk historian and spot-on vocalist.

Chris JP Smith

We heartily agree about the beneficial effects of attending a Martin Simpson gig, Chris, as he is a masterly acoustic player and storyteller through timeless songcraft. We say this often, but if any readers have fallen out of the habit of attending gigs, let this letter serve as a spur to get out and about again – live gigs really are the best way to feel the magic guitar can conjure from thin air. In the past month or so we've seen Little Barrie and Manic Street Preachers and come away from both gigs feeling exhilarated and in love with guitar all over again!

IN MINIATURE

Does everyone else collect little bits of ephemera to do with guitars and amps, too? I found this Strat in a charity shop for £15. It's a scale model by the Fender Club and comes in a cardboard pretend guitar case.

Landan England

Collecting guitar ephemera has become a real pastime in itself in recent years; guitar-branded bits and bobs from matchbooks to catalogues and retail displays have become highly collectible (and sometimes pricey). Any readers got any particularly cool stuff they'd like to share pics of, like Landan?



How much guitar paraphernalia do you have in your home? Send us your pics and we'll print the best!

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

MIKE PETERS MBE

1959 – 2025

Following 30 years of living with blood cancer, Mike Peters – frontman of The Alarm – has died at the age of 66

Words Bob Hewitt



MIKE PETERS MBE

February 1959 – April 2025

Mike Peters was a man of passion: for music, for his beloved home country of Wales – and especially for his family. Influenced by the Sex Pistols and the punk movement of the 1970s, he formed The Toilets, a short-lived band that later changed line-up to become '17', before morphing into The Alarm with pals Eddie Macdonald on bass, Dave Sharp on guitar and Nigel 'Twist' Buckle on drums. From early days playing the pub and club circuit, the band from North Wales would go on to achieve hit records and success, sharing stages worldwide with the likes of U2, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Queen.

The band's first major hit, *Sixty Eight Guns*, released in 1983, gave The Alarm extensive exposure, and after catching the attention of radio presenter John Peel they soon became favourites both here in the UK and across the Atlantic. The hits kept on coming: *Strength*, *Spirit Of '76*, *Rain In The Summertime*, and their bestseller *Sold Me Down The River*.

Fellow Welshman James Dean Bradfield of The Manic Street Preachers told me: "Mike Peters and Eddie Macdonald had written three stone-cold classics by the time they were 25. They showed amazing maturity in their early songwriting."

Peters loved his guitars, and although frequently seen playing either Gibson or Guild acoustics – as well as a Fender



Mike Peters and Bob Hewitt pictured in 1990 discussing plans for the North Wales flood disaster relief fund concert

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIP MICHEU

"Mike Peters and Eddie Macdonald had written three stone-cold classics by [age] 25. They showed amazing maturity in their early songwriting" JAMES DEAN BRADFIELD

or Gretsch electric – he struck up a relationship with Auden Guitars in recent years, endorsing its electro-acoustic models and having his own signature model named 'The Deceiver'.

Mike and I first met in the 1970s, when I photographed his band '17'. Being from the same town, we quickly became friends. Over the years we would go to see concerts together and I'd photograph many Alarm gigs, as well as sharing the stage on numerous occasions to play guitar or harmonica with the band. In 1990, Mike phoned me from his tour in Germany to see if I could organise an Alarm fundraising concert for the victims

of the North Wales coastal floods. This was typical Mike; he loved, and never left, his Welsh hometown of Rhyl and wanted to do something to help the disaster fund.

Mike Peters surprisingly quit The Alarm in 1991 and went on to form a new band, The Poets Of Justice. This short-lived line-up included Mike's wife, Jules, on keyboards and Ethan Johns on guitar – but eventually Mike and Jules resurrected The Alarm name using new musicians. Just four years later, Mike was diagnosed with lymphoma.

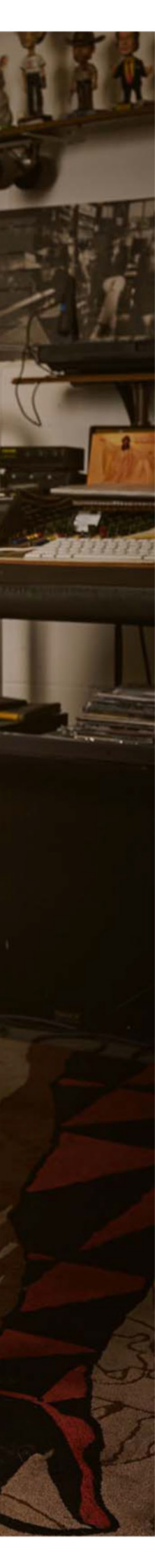
This didn't slow down his musical ambitions and – in typical, brave fighting spirit – Mike and Jules formed the

Love Hope Strength Foundation to help recruit bone marrow donors and support other sufferers. LHS became a worldwide phenomenon with Mike and Jules (who was diagnosed and successfully treated for breast cancer) campaigning vigorously between their busy touring and recording schedule. Mike said: "If I keep on running, maybe the cancer won't catch me."

Sadly, earlier this year Mike became very ill again and was diagnosed with aggressive Richter's syndrome lymphoma. He was treated at Manchester's Christie Hospital, before passing away on 29 April.

Tributes have poured in from fans worldwide, along with fellow musicians and musical collaborators – words perhaps best summed up by Spandau Ballet's Tony Hadley: "Very sad to hear about my good friend Mike Peters – he was a true gentleman in every way, and a great and talented musician." 





Silver Machine

Taking cues from Steely Dan but bringing their own unique vibe to the 70s AOR genre, Young Gun Silver Fox have grown a devoted fanbase.

We join guitarist and co-founder Shawn Lee to see how rare, oddball and collectible guitars have powered their sound

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Olly Curtis

Tucked away in a studio complex in London, you'll find an enchanted grotto of weird and wonderful guitars, musical curios and vintage synths. Duck under Brazilian percussion chimes, oddball guitars and tiger masks and you'll find the genial owner of this cave of tone – Shawn Lee, the guitarist and co-songwriter behind Young Gun Silver Fox. The band, who recently had a breakthrough performance at the Royal Albert Hall, have revived the yacht-rock genre that Steely Dan and Michael McDonald polished to such a high art in the 70s, bringing their own fresh, contemporary energy to it and attracting a rapidly growing international fanbase to their beautifully crafted grooves and harmony-rich songs of heartbreak and hedonism.

Intrigued, we journeyed down to catch up with Shawn, who also collaborated with Little Barrie for their excellent Ultrasonic Grand Prix album, *Instafuzz*, which sounds like the soundtrack to a lost Italian heist movie from the 70s. Shawn's very happy to keep things varied, he says – though it's clear that Young Gun Silver Fox have resonated with plenty of listeners starved of classy chord changes and lush vocal harmonies.

As the excellent new album entitled *Pleasure* is out now, we sat down with Shawn to talk recording, influences and head-turning Japanese guitars...

You're five albums in now with Young Gun Silver Fox, but it seems like things have reached critical mass recently, with sold-out US tours and a show at the Royal Albert Hall. What's your perception of the band's path to success?

"I think it's a very slow, gradual, organic thing with Young Gun Silver Fox. I think the Royal Albert Hall was a moment. I mean, I had never played there – and I had always wanted to play there, so I felt the gravity of it.

When I was on stage, it felt like, 'Wow, this is amazing,' and a couple times I got a bit choked up [laughs]. I always felt that I would play there at some point, but to do it with my own project is another thing again.

"It started like everything that I do: because I wanted to do it. Kind of like, 'Wouldn't it be nice to do this?', you know? When I met Andy [Platts, Young Gun's frontman], I saw somebody that, if we put it together, it could be kind of like a Steely Dan situation. He understood all the musical reference points and I just thought we would make some nice music together. So, eventually, we started to do it with no expectation other than making the music and the pleasure of writing and recording it.

"I didn't ever have any expectations of it, beyond 'I'll make a record because I want to make it and then I'll put it out, however I put it out, and then whatever happens with it is what happens with it,' you know? And sometimes I have a feeling that one of my records might appeal to more people than a little niche thing – although if it is a little niche thing, it's fine, I know that. But it's been really nice to see it blossom and to see it resonate with people – the kind of thing that you can't really engineer."

You can hear lots of musical influences from the yacht-rock era in Young Gun Silver Fox – was there a particular musical touchstone when you were starting out?

"I remember thinking that *Aja* by Steely Dan is kind of the blueprint – I mean, if you could make records that musical and with great musicianship, and be on the radio and be popular... that was kind of the highest, you know? If there was a formula for every kind of success that you could have in music, that record embodied it."

1. Shawn's studio is an eclectic treasure house of musical instruments and curios from around the world

2. Shawn's 1978 ES-335 is his 'one and done' go-to guitar from his work in Young Gun Silver Fox

3. This unusual Fresher Strat-style electric is the same model once used by James Brown guitarist Jimmy Nolen

"I'm trying to refine the vocabulary I already have – it's about getting as close to being myself [musically] as I can"

4. This 1977 Ovation Balladeer is something of a secret weapon, Shawn says, as the vintage Schaller soundhole pickup lends it a vintage hollowbody-style sound, to a remarkable degree

5. Shawn's devotion to the music of Prince is reflected by his purchase of this HS Anderson Mad Cat Tele-style electric, as used by Prince

The new album sounds in-keeping with your previous four records, but this one is maybe a bit more immediate and punchy.

"I think the way we made it was a big difference [from the process adopted for previous albums]. Side one was written and mostly recorded at Andy's in Norfolk, so I just went up with my 335 and that little pedal I showed you earlier, the [DiCosimo Audio 360+ Bass Preamp] Acoustic 360 thing. I used his acoustic and his basses, his drums and his pedals... I had him plugging stuff in for me, like, 'What do you need on this?' It was cool. Obviously, we played at the same time and wrote at the same time, so it was really organic. And we never made a record like that before. With the other records, I've done stuff here [in London] and sent it to him, and he's done stuff and sent it to me."

What's your approach to guitar? With jazz-rock inspired music, there's always the risk of succumbing to self-indulgence...

"The way that I play any musical instrument is always to serve the song, so it's very functional and part-driven. I mean, I appreciate more complex things, but I'm always trying to take something that has a richness to it and distil it down to just what needs to be there. Just the right notes – even if it's just one note. It's kind of being efficient and it's about refinement as well. I feel like the more I do music, the more I'm trying to do it simply."

"I'm trying to just get to the point. Some people try to extend their vocabulary, but I'm trying to refine the vocabulary I already have – it's about getting as close to being myself [musically] as I can, which is a fluid, evolving thing."

"But I think it's also about what you don't do, as much as it is about what you do. I think the real challenge [when performing the songs] live is to distil down all the parts – playing the rhythm parts, the lead parts – while singing loads of BVs and changing sounds on the pedalboard. It's like being on the high wire. And just to be able to nail that consistently, that's a real challenge."

What's your main guitar for Young Gun Silver Fox work?

"That 1978 ES-335 is my Number One, man. It's been on the most records, it's been on all the touring. It's like the 'one and done' guitar. It has a coil-tap, so you can get a really good, almost Strat-type sound, which is what I mainly use for the Young Gun thing. So the switch on the horn is for the coil-tap, and the pickup selector is down in the usual spot. I actually have another guitar, which isn't here, that I had modded to replicate it. I have that as a second guitar, or for when we're flying and stuff like that. But I'm still not ready not to play that [original] 335, though I sometimes feel I shouldn't be taking it everywhere all the time."

"I've slightly cleaned it recently, only slightly – but it was just so ridiculously dirty. I've had strings on that guitar for 10 years. You know, I never break strings on that guitar, but then I broke the string on it twice and it put the fear into me. It happened on a Young Gun gig, and then it happened on another gig, and it was so sweaty that I couldn't change the string [laughs]. But even now I still don't change strings very often. I'll maybe do three or four tours and rehearsals on the same set without changing a thing. I hate the sound of new strings and the feel of them, the zinginess – it's just horrible!"

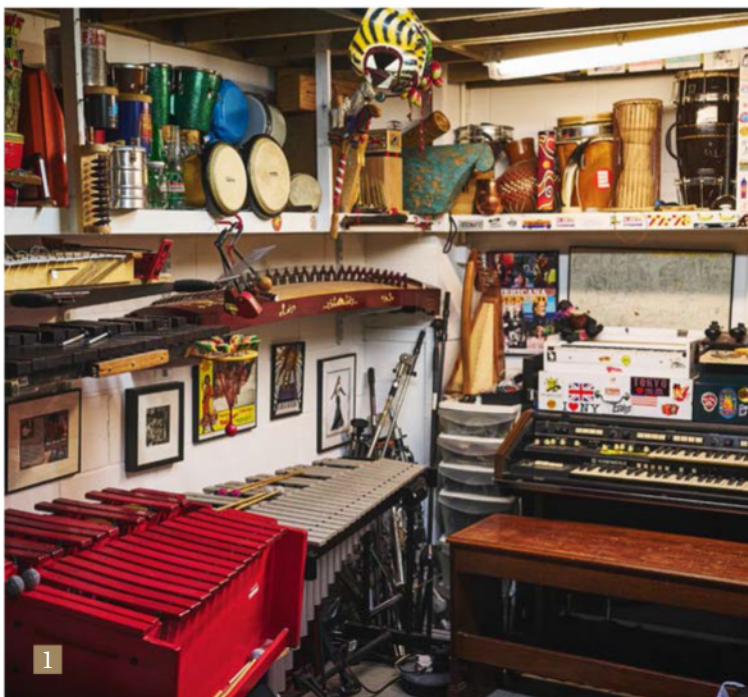
Where did you get it, originally?

"I got that in 1992 it in LA at a place called Guitars R Us on Sunset, which was sort of opposite Guitar Center, for \$1,200. Now that guitar's worth probably anywhere from six to 10 grand, depending on condition. I saw one for just under seven grand, just like my one but really clean – I think it was in Rotterdam. Anyway, I'd love to have two of them, but all the 70s stuff is going up. People are really revisiting it because you can't touch the 60s stuff [because of the prohibitive expense], no way."

How about amps – do you go the route of classic valve amps or do you use other methods?

"I go direct for a lot of the Young Gun stuff. So the amp has become more like a pedal [in how I use it in my music]. I'll do it if that's the right thing, or I'll re-amp [the original direct recording] and if it sounds better, then I'll keep it – but it's a choice to do so. Prince was a big influence for the whole DI thing, and some guitars just sound great 'in'. And then once you hit tape or compressors and EQs and pedals and things, you start to get a cool sound."

"But I do use a Jazz Chorus 50 for Young Gun. It takes pedals really well and it gets nice clean sounds, which most amps don't do. But it's a tough-sounding amp – it's got balls, man, and I prefer it to the JC-120, which is big and doesn't sound as good as that. I mean, over half the latest Young Gun album is recorded through an amp, actually, which is a bit of a difference – that was Andy's Jazz Chorus 40."





One of the delights of visiting you here in your London studio is the array of both classic and oddball guitars. What's that blue Strat-style guitar with all the knobs on it? We're intrigued...

"This is a 70s Japanese Fresher Strat[-style Straighter electric], which is also known as a Jimmy Nolen model. It's got all the effects on it – a distortion, auto-wah, phase shifter and sustainer. It's really heavy because of all the effects, but the phaser on it is really good."

The guitar industry goes through fads of putting effects into guitars.

"Well, I've got a few: I've got the Vox over there, which I used on the [Ultrasonic] Grand Prix record, the Kay Effector, and there's also a Kimbara [S-type] similar to that, which has got all the effects on it. And at one time I had a Gretsch Super Axe; I wish I still had that."

"I like a gimmicky guitar – I like something that does a 'thing'. I've got the 335 that's kind of 'one and done'. But then it's also nice to have lots of little stunt guitars that might be a one- or two-trick pony, but they're quite nice if you want that particular thing."

Tell us about that vintage Vox semi, which also has onboard effects, by the look of it.

"Tone-wise, that's another 'one and done' guitar – it really just has the sounds, that guitar. That was on the

cover of the Ultrasonic Grand Prix album [which Shawn made in collaboration with Little Barrie]. Yeah, that's a cool guitar – it was only made in 1967."

It's a really interesting collection.

"Yeah, I try to go for more interesting 'beyond-the-obvious' type shit, usually. But then every now and again my tastes align [with the mainstream] and then it's kind of like, 'Do I really want to spend that much money on that thing?' I mean, I got an HS Anderson Mad Cat Tele[-style electric, as played by Prince] after not having a Tele for a long time and I was watching out for one of those for years. Eventually, I found the cheapest one I'd ever seen. But even then, it was the most expensive guitar I'd ever bought at the time."

"But I've always had a love for Japanese lawsuit-era copies and I've been buying them for a long time. Now they've gotten more and more expensive, and some of them are super sought-after. And it's like, 'Oh no, it's too late.' The last guitar I bought was that Ibanez L5 copy, which is a super-lovely guitar and I got that for under two grand. There's just so much guitar for the money. I mean, I'm not gonna buy any modern reissue-y things or Custom Shop stuff."

There are dozens of guitars here – it's hard to imagine not having every single niche tool you might need for tracking. Is there anything you don't have that you wish was in the collection?

"The one I really regret [missing out on] was a Vox 12-string that Andy Hackett had back in the mid-90s. It's a white one with a Bigsby on it and all the effects: it had the Repeater and the fuzz and the treble boost and stuff. I actually went to go get the money out from the bank – and it was, like, \$1,000, right? – then I came back to the shop to get it and it was gone. I was like, 'Where's the guitar, man?' And the guy behind the counter said, 'Oh, the drummer from Dodgy came in and bought it.' I was like, 'I went to the fucking bank!' [laughs] I never saw another one for yonks – for over 10 years – and then when I finally did see one it was like, 'Nah, I'm not paying that.'"

"The one drawback for me with that guitar is that it's just a bit hard to play. The neck is a bit narrow, which is what makes it hard, especially for live work. If it was my main guitar then maybe I'd look at doing something about its playability. But sometimes I actually think it's good that guitars are hard to play. There's something good that comes with that, you know, because you really have to articulate and play cleanly."

"I don't really like guitars that are too easy to play. I feel like they need to have a bit of resistance; they need to be solid-feeling. That 335 for me is very buttery to play, but it didn't used to be. It's been refretted – I finally had to refret it – and I've been fighting to get it to feel like it used to. I dial it back and get it feeling better for me, but then it always just gets really easy to play. It's just *too* easy to play, actually. I want to play the guitar – I don't want it to play me!" 

6. Shawn Lee says he seeks song-supporting simplicity in the parts he plays rather than dazzling complexity – especially as he knows he'll need to perform everything live while doing harmony vocals

7. This impressive looking hollowbody is a 1967 Vox Grand Prix that, like the Fresher, boasts a raft of onboard effects



Pleasure by Young Gun Silver Fox is out now on Blue Elan Records

www.younggunsilverfox.com



3



JOE BONAMASSA

Amid the mayhem of his European tour, Joe takes time out to give us a guided tour around his 2025 live gear, delivers the lowdown on some of his more storied guitars, and tells us why his mighty multi-amp rig has to run at breaking point in order to make the earth move and those riffs resonate...

Words David Mead Portrait Photography Phil Barker Gear Photography Jesse Wild

Let's face it, this year didn't exactly get off to a good start for Joe Bonamassa. For the first time, his renowned collection of guitars and amps at his LA home, known as Nerdville West, was under threat via circumstances that were raging completely out of his control. January's wildfires in California came way too close for comfort, and suddenly the whimsical question that we've asked many players in these pages regarding which instrument they'd save from a burning building became not only personal but horrifically real.

"I mean, I got evacuated and a lot of stuff had to be moved around," he tells us. "It's something I'd care not to go through again, but a lot of people lost everything, so I consider I'm one of the lucky ones."

At the time, Joe posted on social media a film of him standing by a fully laden van, saying that he'd done all he could while preparing to drive some of his more irreplaceable instruments and amps to safety.

"A friend and I were able to get all the big stuff out," he continues. "The Flying Vs, there were nine sunburst Les Pauls at the house at that time, a fancy Martin, the Broadcaster... all the big stuff went. We only had one shot and it was like, I think, 55 guitars and a Dumble and a Trainwreck. My manager [Roy Weisman] was there a couple of weeks later for the Grammys, and he was at my house. He's like, 'Wow, you really did a good job putting everything back after you were evacuated.' I said, 'Roy, this is

what I left behind.' I mean, I have 400 guitars there and probably 300 amps; there was just no way I could take all of it. It would take a week to move it."

Moving forward to happier times, we encountered Joe three times on the recent tour, in Cardiff, Liverpool and Antwerp, Belgium, where we were introduced to both the intricacy of his current touring rig – "It's not complicated, it's just vast..." – and some of the guitars that play a role in the current setlist. Meanwhile, there's a new album waiting in the wings; *Breakthrough* will be released this July and Joe offers some insight into the instruments that accompanied him to the studio. So buckle up, gearheads, you're in for a treat.

A full-length portrait of Joe Bonamassa standing against a black background. He is wearing a blue checkered suit jacket over a black shirt, black-rimmed glasses, and black sneakers with white soles. He is holding a Gibson Les Paul guitar with a sunburst finish. A bright light source in the upper left creates a starburst effect.

*“Everything is set
as loud as it can go
without collapsing.
I am not subtle at
all and I do not
subscribe to the
‘low volume sounds
bigger’ method. I’ve
got to move air”*

JOE BONAMASSA

**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVES!**

In a trio of videos, Joe shares
his best gear-buying advice,
tips on LP setups and more
<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



Joe photographed at
Cardiff's Utilita Arena
in April: as Bonamassa's
recent tour blasted its
way through the UK and
Europe, we caught up
with the man himself
to talk guitars, gear
and hear about a recent
celebrity Lifton guitar
case purchase...

One of Joe's prized road 'Bursts, the 'Snake Bite', serial number 9-1948, is so called owing to the holes left by a Bigsby that was installed at some point in its lifetime

"A guy in North Carolina bought 'Snake Bite' in a pawn shop for \$700 in 1985. I got it from him for \$120,000"

Selecting some guitars from the rack, first off is a Les Paul with a nice faded sunburst...

"That's the 'Snake Bite'. I've had it for a long time. It's a '59 Standard. A guy in North Carolina bought it in a pawn shop for \$700 in 1985 and I got it from him for more than \$700 but less than most. At the time, I think it was \$120,000 or something like that. It's one of my favourite road guitars. I love that guitar. I mean, it's beautifully worn in and it's obviously not mint, but it's a great Les Paul."

Next in line is a Gibson ES-335 with a Bigsby.

"That's a '63. Nice guitar. I've owned that for years. I have two rigs, you know? There are two versions of all this. I needed a 335 with a Bigsby and so this one just hit the mark nicely. I think it's one of the last [335s] with two Patent Applied For pickups, which is rare to see for early '63, but they do exist. I use it for *Dust Bowl* and for *Driving Towards The Daylight*. One's a capo on the 5th fret and one's a capo on the 1st fret."

There's a Les Paul with a little switch on the pickguard...

"That's the 'Royal Albert'. That's the one that Mike Long from ATB Guitars found – it was under a staircase for 50 years. The story was that the [original owner] saw Cream in 1967, wanted a Les Paul and he found one for sale in the classified section of *Melody Maker* and bought it for about £50. [After he died] his family brought it to Mike, thinking it could be worth as much as £5,000. He was the one to tell them that, 'No, it's actually worth more than that...' It's an early 1960, what they call a 'double-O' because it still has the fat neck and the long neck tenon, like a '59, but they were made in 1960 and, generally, in that era you see double whites and zebras [pickup bobbins]. So it makes sense."

This early 1963 ES-335 is practically unique in that it has two Patent Applied For pickups: "It's rare, but they do exist," Joe tells us. By '63 it would be more common to find 'Patent Number' humbuckers on Gibsons



The 'Royal Albert' Les Paul has a switch installed on the pickguard that has long since been disconnected. Joe suspects that it was originally to give a Peter Green's 'Greeny' style out-of-phase option

"The 'Royal Albert' is the one that Mike Long from ATB Guitars found – it was under a staircase for 50 years"





The switch would have been too early for a coil-tap – do you know what it was?

“It was probably a phase switch because they ran the wires through the pickup ring into the channel route and then to a volume pot. So it was probably just a phase. I don’t think they knew what [a coil-tap] was back then. But it’s the original pickguard, and that switch has been on there for a long time. You can tell that.”

Tell us about ‘Bonnie’, the 1955 Strat.

“I’ve had that guitar for years; I’ve probably done 1,200 gigs with it. Up until 2018 it didn’t have a name, it was just my number one road Strat. I love it. It’s a hardtail and I got it from Trevor Boone at Emerald City Guitars years and years ago. It’s called ‘Bonnie’ now because when Bonnie Bramlett – the legend – sang on Reese Wynans’ record that I produced [*Sweet Release*, 2019], she brought her guitar that she had had everybody from Jerry Garcia to Kris Kristofferson carve their name on with a knife over the years. And she wanted me to carve my name on it. At first I was like, ‘Bonnie, I don’t deserve to be on here.’ But she insisted. And I have a rule: I never argue with a Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame member and a woman holding a knife. So I’m like, ‘All right, Bonnie, I’ll bite...’

“So when she came in a few months later – she came and sang with us in St Louis – I said, ‘Bring your Dremel. I want you to sign a guitar.’ So I just picked that guitar and she Dremel’d her name in the back of it, so it’s forever known as the ‘Bonnie’ Strat.”

1. Bonnie Bramlett’s signature carved into the back of Joe’s ‘55 Strat: “I never argue with a Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame member and a woman holding a knife”

2. Originally Joe’s unnamed number one road Strat until the incident outlined above, ‘Bonnie’ has clocked up well over 1,000 gigs



3. Joe's 1968 Telecaster has been heavily modded in the past. Originally, it was a blonde until a previous owner decided they wanted a purple guitar!

4. Still fighting fit and ready for the road, the Tele's headstock shows some wear and tear, and, of course, a 70s decal

5. Apart from the refinish, the intervening years have also seen a Seth Lover-designed Wide Range pickup installed in the Tele's neck position



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The purple Telecaster with the Fender full-range humbucker on it looks interesting. It looks like somebody has tried to respray it Burgundy Mist?

“It’s purple. Somebody painted over the original blonde and it’s a maple cap neck. It’s a ’68 and they put a Seth Lover Fender humbucker in it. Seth Lover designed that pickup for Fender; he switched teams and went over to Fender. Those kinds of things are right up my alley. I love those guitars. Are they honest? You know, people modded like that back in the day

“I bought the ’53 Blackguard in 2008 after I turned a decent profit for the first time. I thought it looked like Danny Gatton’s guitar”

because they thought the guitars weren’t worth anything, you know? And they just wanted the humbucker, and they wanted it purple. So they came up with some sort of Burgundy Mist. That paint’s been on there for 50 years, and that pickup has been in there for just about as long. It’s a great road guitar, and I use it on the last song [in the set].”

You have another Telecaster, too, and this one looks more original. What’s the story there?

“Yeah, that’s a ’53 Blackguard. I bought that guitar in 2008 after I turned a decent profit on a tour. It was the first time I made what I thought was real money and I treated myself. I bought it from Buzzy Levine at Lark Street Music because I thought it looked like Danny Gatton’s guitar. I stared at that guitar on Buzzy’s website for months and months and months and I finally bought it. I usually use it on *Mountain Time* and for *The Heart That Never Waits*. It weighs, like, six-and-a-half pounds. Really, super light. It’s one of the lightest Blackguards I’ve ever felt.”

The '53 Blackguard was originally bought at Buzzy Levine's Lark Street music store in New Jersey and clocks in at an incredibly light 6.5lb

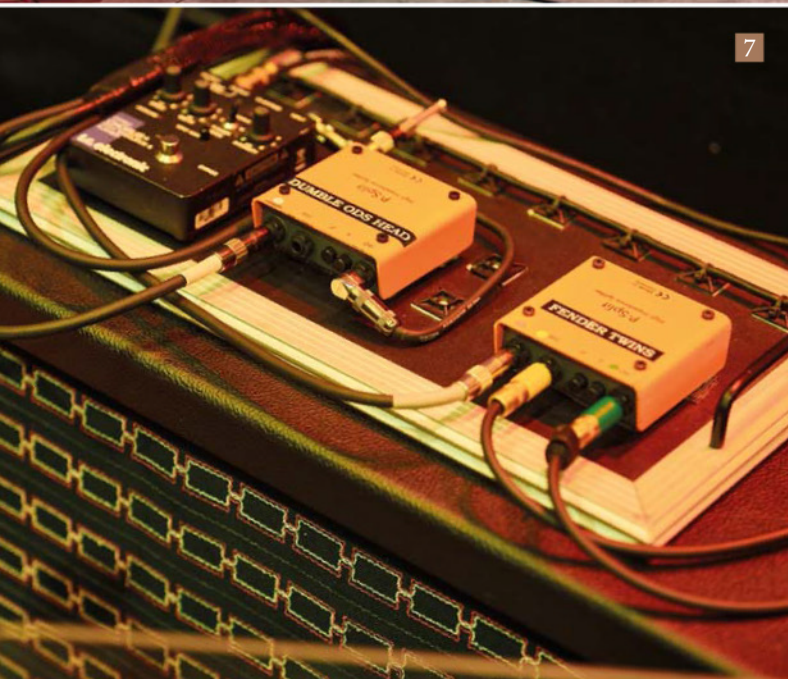


6. The power and the glory of Joe's mighty onstage rig: "Everything is set as loud as it can go without collapsing"

7. The rig uses a complex routing system that enables Joe to use various combinations of amps and effects

8. A pair of Joe Bonamassa Fender High Powered Tweed Twins with custom black cabs sit at the centre of the rig

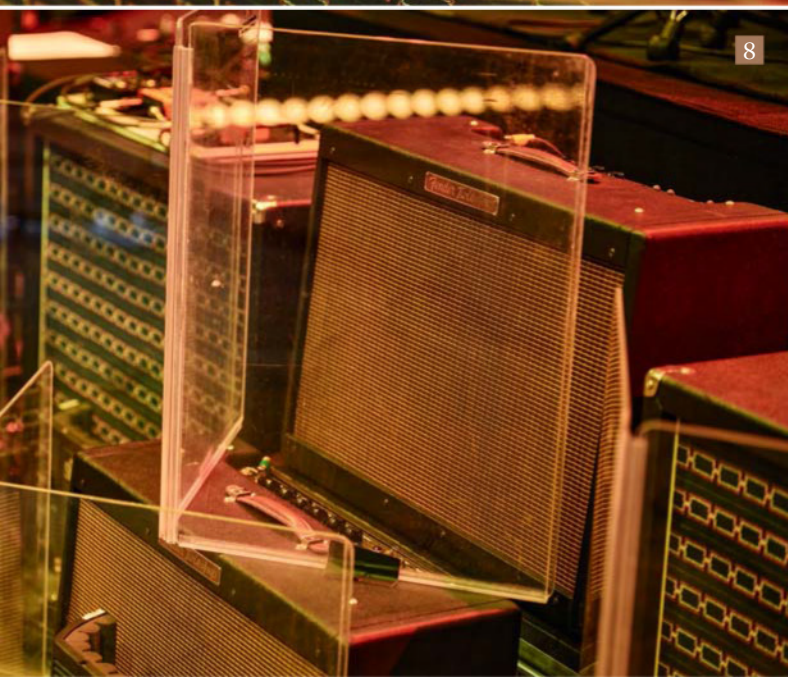
9. The Benson cab hosts a 12-inch rotating speaker, with the speed controlled via a switcher on Joe's pedalboard



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Looking at your stage rig, what model is the Dumble amp on the far left?

“That’s an Overdrive Special from 1983 that I bought from the original owner; he paid \$3,000 in ’83 and he sold it to me for significantly more. The cabinet is a 90s Dumble 2x12 with Electro-Voice 12L speakers. That’s next to a Leslie speaker [marked Benson] – that’s a rotating speaker but with a 12[-inch speaker] instead of a 10, right?”

The two 4x12 cabinets towards the centre of the backline look like they have the old 1960s WEM (Watkins Electric Music) speaker cloth in them.

“Yeah, those cabinets were built by Peter Van Weelden in 2006 and that’s original WEM grille cloth that he found – like New Old Stock – and those have four EV 12Ls in them. Both cabinets are Electro-Voice. The two Fender amps in the middle are Joe Bonamassa High Powered Tweed Twins, only Fender built me black cases for them so it matches the rig. It looks nicer and they do

“I racked the amp heads when we put the original amp shanty together – the amps are way more reliable riding in shockproof cases”

actually sound different. With the black Tolex versus the tweed, they’re actually a little brighter and more open, believe it or not. It does affect the sound.”

Moving over to the side of the stage, there are some more amps. Can you talk us through them?

“Sure. On the left there are two Marshall heads: one’s a 1987 Silver Jubilee and one’s a 1988 2555, both 100 watts. They’re the exact same amp – one’s obviously silver one, one’s a black one – and they’re always on. And then I have a [Lehle] switcher on the pedalboard: setting A is the two Marshalls and the two Twins;



10. Joe takes to the stage with Josh Smith (right) on rhythm guitar and Calvin Turner on bass

11. The rack at the side of the stage is home to two Marshall 2555 Silver Jubilee heads on the left and two Van Weelden Twinkle Land amps on the right. The units on top of the cab (right) are a pair of Van Weelden Twinklelators – which are buffered effects loops for the Twinkle Land amps

setting B is the two Marshalls and the two Van Weelden Twinkle Lands, which are basically Overdrive Special copies, and that’s basically both cabinets running at the same time; setting C is the two Marshalls and the Overdrive Special. So they’re not all on at the same time. Generally, it’s four on at the same time, sometimes three.”

Why did you go for a separate rack for the off-stage amps?

“The reason why I racked the amp heads is I found out, when we put the original amp shanty together, that the amps are way more reliable because they’re riding in shockproof cases, right?

They’re not getting bumped around as much as they would if we had to pull them out of cases, stack them up on cabinets, pull them back down. It just simplifies the wiring and makes reliability much better. It’s important to note that I’m crazy enough that there’s two of them, the amp shanties, and a whole different rack of guitars. So we’re just talking about the stuff that’s on tour now in Europe. This is the European one for this year, and everything comes back at the end of the year to Nashville. Normally, we have to leapfrog rigs and so I have two sets of guitars, two sets of amps, two sets of everything.”



Joe's pedalboard is a lot less exotic than you might think, comprising (left to right): the control for the Leslie (Benson cab), a Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere, Boss DD-2, MXR Micro Flanger, Ibanez Tube Screamer, Electro-Harmonix Micro Pog, Fuzz Face, a Dunlop JB Signature wah, the switcher unit (to control which amps are on at any one time), a Fulltone Supa-Trem and Way Huge Conspiracy Theory. Simples!

"All my effects are standard issue – I buy them out of Sweetwater. The rest of it's just junction boxes"

“I’m very blessed to use very nice, valuable old guitars as my daily drivers. I don’t look at them like museum pieces”

Looking at your pedalboard now, the switch at the far left looks like it could be the controller for your rotary speaker?

“Yeah, that’s the on/off and the fast/slow speeds for the rotary cabinet. Then there’s the Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere, which is the fake Leslie – that goes through the Marshalls. Then there’s a Boss DD-2. The Hughes & Kettner and the Boss both go through the effects loop of the Marshall.”

Then we’ve got an MXR Micro Flanger. Have any of the effects been modified or tweaked in any way?

“Nope, standard issue – I buy them out of Sweetwater. There’s a Tube Screamer that is either an ’80 or an ’81. A Micro Pog and a Fuzz Face that goes through the Twins. Then the switcher and the wah and the Fulltone [Supa-] Trem and a Way Huge Conspiracy Theory. The rest of it’s just junction boxes, you know: inputs for the amps, and a junction box, basically, to get to the switcher and out, and then there’s the two boxes that power everything.”

Looking at your amp settings, it’s very much a case of everything on 11 in many ways.

“Everything is set as loud as it can go without collapsing, you know what I mean? I am not subtle at all and I do not subscribe to the ‘low volume sounds bigger’ method. I’ve got to move air. All my heroes played loud: Clapton played loud, Jimi Hendrix played loud. Everybody played loud at one point. There’s a symbiotic relationship between volume and the guitar. I generally don’t solo on 10 all night. Very rarely do I go full up on the guitar. I will go full up, and then back it down a number or two. And that little bit of capacitance from the pot really just makes it super articulate and really fat. You get a little hump on



12. The ‘Royal Albert’ Les Paul acquired its name because Joe bought it backstage at the Albert Hall around three years ago

the mids around 250Hz. They’re the original pots, which makes a huge difference, because the difference between modern pots and old pots is significant.”

CTS pots and Orange Drop capacitors have become something of a mantra for guitarists chasing vintage tone these days. What is the difference between old and new?

“Well, they may say CTS and they may look orange, but they’re not made to the same specs as they did in the 50s, and it’s no fault of any manufacturers – it’s just what’s available. The taper on a modern pot is so different from a taper on a vintage pot, you know? I mean,

even pots from the 70s don’t taper the same way. You get good pots until about 1968 or 1969 and then things start going off the rails a little bit.

“I’m very blessed to use very nice, valuable old guitars as my daily drivers. I don’t look at them like museum pieces, they’re what I use. But if you spend enough time with them, you do notice a bunch of things when you play a modern guitar. You’re like, ‘Man, I know my volume’s down and between 0 and 2, but there’s nothing happening.’ Then when you hit 2 on the [volume control] the whole thing, it just jumps up. It’s not a complete taper from 10 down, you know what I mean?”

“We did this album over two years, and recorded it in different studios: in Greece, Nashville and some in LA”

What do you take with you into the studio these days?

“I take less now than I used to. I take fewer guitars now, too. I use six guitars, maybe eight tops, in the studio. A couple of acoustics. I’ll bring a Brazilian rosewood Martin. I’ll bring a mahogany D-18 or a 000-18 and a 000-45 or a 00-42, something like that. Different colours, you know? Mahogany sounds different on a microphone than Brazilian. And then I’ll bring a rosewood-[‘board] Strat, I’ll bring a maple-[‘board] Strat, some facet of a Telecaster or two. I generally like maple necks on Teles because it just sounds the way I think a Tele should sound. I’ll bring a Les Paul Standard, a 335, maybe an SG, and then a baritone... and something with a Bigsby, like a Gretsch 6120, or something like that.”

The new album sounds like it has the occasional drop-tuning on it. Would that be the baritone in action?

“Sometimes I just tune the guitar down a little bit. I mean, the tuning stays pretty solid down to about D, a full step down. If you have to go below that, I’d rather just capo a baritone. It’s just for tuning. Guitars tend to like to live in A440. That’s when I find them to be more solid, tuning-wise. Tuning down, sometimes you have to back the truss rod down slightly just to create tension on the neck that doesn’t exist in the strings.”

Being on the road so much, when do you actually get time to write new material?

“I write when I have to, you know? I get six weeks out from a record and I just start writing it. But this one we did over two years, so we wrote it in chunks and recorded it in different studios: we did some in Greece, we did some in Nashville, we did some in LA.”



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13. Probably known more for playing Les Pauls, Joe also favours Gibson ES-335s – with or without a Bigsby

14. Not only a favourite on the road but also in the studio, the 1955 ‘Bonnie’ Strat is always centre stage

15. Joe’s ultra-rare 1963 DeArmond-equipped Guild Duane Eddy DE-500N signature in Blonde

16. In mid-flight with the Marshall 2555s ablaze during the sessions for the new album, *Breakthrough*, which will be released on the 18 July

As a renowned collector, have you been shopping on this trip?

“I have not bought an instrument. I bought an amp and a Klon – that’s the only two things that I got. I bought a really cool 1966 JTM45, one of the first 100-watters. I got it through a friend in the UK and I picked it up in Brighton.”

Only we noticed that ATB Guitars has an original 1959 Lifton Les Paul case that used to belong to Martin Barre...

“And I’ll give you one shot to guess who just paid £2,500 for that particular case. One guess...”

It wouldn’t be you, would it?

“Probably! [laughs] I’ve known

Martin for 25 years and I still think that Martin’s sunburst Les Paul tone with Jethro Tull is, to me, one of the finest Gibson-through-a-Marshall rock guitar sounds that I’ve ever heard in my life. I mean, just a beautiful, rich, clear, nice bite but not too bright, distorted Marshall. When I think of a Les Paul through a Marshall, I think Clapton and the ‘Beano’ album, I think Billy Gibbons, I think Jimmy Page, I think the early Jeff Beck stuff. And I think Martin. So to have a little piece of Martin’s past is cool.” **G**



Breakthrough, is available on 18 July via J&R Adventures <https://jbonamassa.com>

PHOTOS BY MIKE SNOVA



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Chris Buck

With their 2022 debut album, *Cardinal Black* showed the world how the budding guitar hero in their ranks could thrive in a band environment. Here, Chris Buck explains how its follow-up has taken his playing and songwriting to the next level

Words Amit Sharma & Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

There has been many a great player emerging out of the blues scene over the past decade or so, though young Welshman Chris Buck could very well be the cream of the crop. His phrasing is exceptional, he never overplays but still knows when to utilise technique, and every note is struck with the utmost control and no shortage of charisma. His tones are equally as jaw-dropping, and while he's been spotted with all kinds of Fenders and Gibsons over the years, it's his custom Yamaha Revstar goldtop that is more often than not seen in his hands, going through an elaborate pedalboard he jokingly refers to as "50 shades of gain" and into a Victory V140 or MK Clean. A full package in every conceivable way, it's no wonder guitar greats like Slash and Joe Bonamassa have continually namechecked him as one of the most exciting talents around.

This year he's back with the second album from his band Cardinal Black, titled *Midnight At The Valencia*, which benefitted from more confidence and focus in the studio.

What does the title of your second album, *Midnight At The Valencia*, mean to you?

"I wish there was a good explanation behind it. We were struggling a bit; no immediate themes leapt out from the record lyrically. Out of nowhere, our drummer, Adam [Roberts], was doom-scrolling through Instagram and came across this photo of a place in California called Valencia Club. It seemed to represent everything we'd done on the way up, every club and neon-lit dive bar we'd played. The stuff we'd been doing over the years – our 10,000 hours, in essence. It really tied in with the journey."

How does this material move the conversation on for the band?

"We were conscious of the bizarre circumstances around releasing our debut, starting with the age of the material. Some of it was 12 years old, some of it was 12 months old and some of it was 12 weeks old. Stylistically, in terms of maturity, some of the songs felt like older things we'd written in our late teens and others felt like more recent ideas written by adults. The challenge was making it all sit together as one body of work. Our manager joked we couldn't have worked with a producer back then because we were so close to the songs. It felt like an album of greatest hits that nobody had ever heard! This album felt like a fresh start. We wanted to make a cohesive record with a consistent sound, feel and vibe. It had to elevate us higher up the chain, higher up that level of conversation."

You've obviously learned a lot through touring, too.

"We've been touring heavily – as headliners as well as supporting people like Peter Dinklage, Myles Kennedy and The Struts. We knew these songs had to be better in terms of craftsmanship. There was something weirdly liberating about starting afresh. There was as much focus on the audio perspective as the songs. We spent a lot of time choosing the right studio and producer, thinking about the record from a sonic sense."

So how exactly did these new songs come to you?

"I'm not someone who can sit down and write on command. Tom [Hollister, vocals] is like that, while I have to be caught when I'm least expecting it. Ideas

A portrait of Chris Buck, a man with dark hair tied back, looking upwards and to the left. He is wearing a thick, olive-green wool coat with large buttons. He is holding a light-colored electric guitar with a dark fretboard. A black guitar strap with a floral pattern and a patch that says "ERNEST HILL" is visible. The background is a dark, textured grey.

“[Over time] you
realise you are not
the arbiters of what’s
good and what’s bad.
You have to leave it
to the fans”

**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVE!**

Chris Buck joins us in the
Guitarist studios to reveal
the phrasing tricks behind
his vocal-style solos
www.bit.ly/guitaristextra



might come when I'm watching telly. It's strange how progressions and melodies can come out of nowhere. But we didn't have the luxury of time. The only thing I could do is go through a drawer and dig out my last four iPhones, and start going through the voice notes. Mercifully, there were a lot of ideas – an album's worth of material built up over years. Some were more like full demos, others were me whistling in a supermarket."

That must have been quite amusing to listen back to!

"The funny thing is they always sound great in the moment. I'll have this big idea that feels symphonic, but then I'll listen back and it's just me blowing noises while going through checkout. You wonder what the fuck you were thinking and why on earth you marked it 'Brilliant, must use.' I already had the bare bones of *Your Spark (Blows Me To Pieces)*. The same goes for *Push/Pull*. I actually had more material than I realised."

Does the experience of engaging with audiences affect the writing process, when you've benefitted from seeing the whites in their eyes?

"Not consciously, but it does filter into your thinking. One thing I've learned from being in bands is you never know what's going to get a good response. We've had tracks in the past that we've felt strongly about, ones which we were sure would resonate with

people, but when we got round to it, the songs were met with indifference. It makes you think maybe the music wasn't quite as good as you'd thought. Likewise, there might be songs you care less for that somehow really hit a nerve with audiences. Things like that help you realise you are not the arbiters of what's good and what's bad. You have to leave it to the fans. If I tried to write to a brief or on command, I wouldn't be good at it. I have to write what flows and comes naturally."

"This time we were invested in the idea of getting away and fully immersing ourselves into the process [of recording]"

1. A motley of speakers is mounted in the back of Chris's much-modded Super Reverb. He says, at first, it didn't sound quite right but was found to be running single-ended – namely, not using its full complement of power valves, which was fixed

2. The Normal channel is clearly marked as the preferred input, with Chris's chosen levels and settings taped on

We interviewed Chrissie Hynde recently. She had an interesting take – artists should stick to making what they feel is right. That said, she also recognised why people turn up for the hits. There needs to be balance.

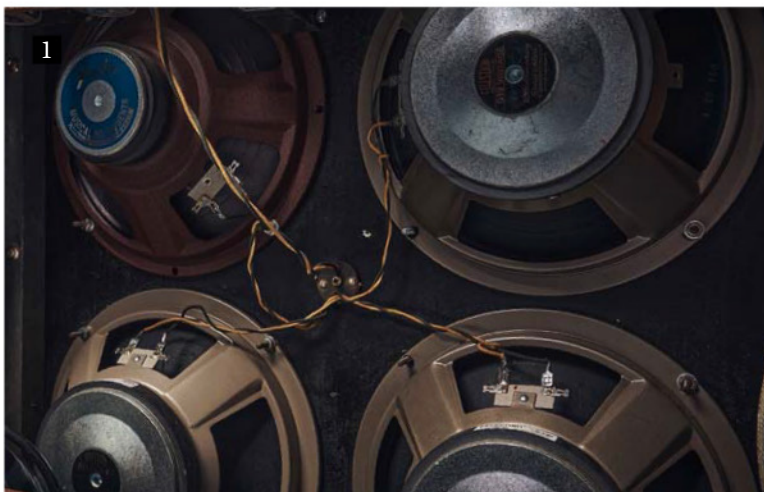
"Absolutely. When we craft our setlists, there are tracks people always want to hear, ones that we couldn't get away without doing. That also trickles down into my playing. There are some solos where I like to have the freedom to go off-piste every night, playing whatever I feel inspired by in that particular moment. But there are other solos like *Tell Me How It Feels*, which people seem to have connected with. The amount of Instagram covers I'm getting tagged in daily reflects that. If I don't play it note-for-note, there will be snide comments. There are moments where you have to swallow your artistic pride and play the hits as people want to hear them."

How does it feel to have so many other guitarists learn and play your material like that?

"It's surreal. At every juncture, we've been taken aback by how much people seem to enjoy us. We did three US shows last summer, having never been there before. We had zero idea as to whether anyone wanted to see us. All we could go off was our Spotify metrics, the people watching my YouTube channel or where merch had been sent. We booked a Nashville venue called The Basement, which holds 150 people. It being a guitar player's town, I reckoned there would be a fighting chance we'd get a crowd down. It was all done direct, with no agent or promoter. It was basically me phoning the guy at the venue asking how much and him telling me, 'Your funeral if it doesn't work out.'"

So what happened next?

"It sold out in two hours. The guy called back asking, 'Who the fuck are you guys? I've never heard of you. How come people have bought every one of your tickets?' I didn't know what to say. He then suggested we add a matinee slot or move up to the bigger 600-cap sister venue The Basement East. It's very indicative of our journey in this band. We hope for the best, things go better than expected, and we figure: 'Let's keep doing it.' Whether it's covers of my solos or full bands tackling entire songs on YouTube, we can't believe it. We saw one recently of an Arkansas group who had chosen to cover an obscure song, rather than one of the 'hits'. It's bizarre and awesome."



“Gear isn’t the be all and end all, but it’s nice to have a vision for a track and then be able to bring it to life without restriction”

Chris’s brown-panel Super Reverb, bought from MotoMusic in Cardiff, is an amp that, as he says, “shouldn’t exist” and in fact it possibly started life in the silver-panel livery you might expect of a later Super Reverb model from ‘67, a date suggested by some of its components. However, if it wasn’t a factory custom job, someone went to great lengths to convert it quite early on in its life, over in the USA





3. You won't see nitro lacquer checking like this on Yamaha's impeccably turned out production Revstars, but we rather like the road-worn vibe of Chris's main squeeze

4. Chris's custom Revstar takes most of its features from the excellent 502T model, but things like the gold finish and split parallelogram inlays are custom touches

5. Plenty of road-rash on the back of the guitar attests to how frequently Chris uses this guitar

6. Yamaha's classic 'tuning fork' logo, often seen on its motorbikes, adorns the headstock

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You mentioned how much thought you paid to the producer and studio for this album. Who and where did you end up choosing?

“We went to a studio just outside of Zurich called Powerplay because Switzerland is famously cheap to live and work in [laughs]. We did a live session there in late 2022 that was filmed, cut to tape and then pressed to vinyl for the 50 people watching. Quite an intimidating experience, but we had such a blast. It was a beautiful place with amazing accommodation. Our first album wasn’t residential. Every day we’d roll out around midnight and head home, wake up and do some daddy daycare before trying to reinvigorate ourselves, heading back around midday in the hope of tracking something good. This time we were invested in the idea of getting away and fully immersing ourselves into the process, hoping it would be reflected in the music.”

Well, it seems to have played out rather well...

“Everything about the studio was perfect. It’s situated on a lake and the manager Cyrill Camenzind, who engineered and produced the record, genuinely loves us. In terms of gear, you’re not going to get anything better. Cyrill is a big guitar head, so there are Blackguards and a lot of pre-CBS stuff knocking around, plus old Gibsons. One guitar that got used a lot was an ex-Keith Richards 1956 TV Yellow Junior. It sounded awesome. I know it falls into the cliché trap about old Gibsons, but it was just a fucking great guitar. Even the desk at the studio was a big old Neve that originally came from Disney before Stevie Nicks bought it and then whoever bought it from her sold it to Cyrill. There’s so much cool gear in there. Not that gear is the be all and end all, but it’s nice to have a vision for a track and then be able to bring it to life without restriction.”

So you found that there were more restrictions with the first album, then?

“The debut was done in a local studio that didn’t have much gear. We were begging, stealing and borrowing to get what we needed. One friend would have a Neumann mic, someone else would have old preamps in a lockup somewhere, and someone else would have this or that. This time we were drowning in amazing gear.”

“I like to have the freedom to go off-piste... But you have to swallow your artistic pride and play the hits as people want to hear them”

What were your other go-to guitars for the sessions?

“It was an eclectic mix of guitars. There was a Harmony Stratotone, a black sparkle thing that was a 60s catalogue guitar with Gold Foil [pickups]. My Revstar got played a lot. My Panucci goldtop came with me; it’s a bit like a Les Paul, basically. Maybe that’s the only hole in Cyrill’s incredible collection: he didn’t have a great Les Paul. He had a couple of 70s Deluxes, but nothing that was like, ‘Okay, *that’s* the Les Paul.’ But there was a 1963 Jazzmaster that was awesome. I felt insanely guilty because it was quite reliced at the time, but it’s now heavily reliced because of my sleeve button ripping it to pieces. Sorry, Cyrill. He was cool about it, saying I’d left my marks and its story was now part of the record.”

7. Chris sits atop his ‘mongrel’ Super Reverb, which has become his go-to amp – though much of the new album was recorded with classic valve amps belonging to the Swiss studio where the album was recorded

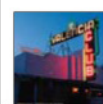


And what kind of amps did you plug into?

“It was pretty much exclusively a 1965 Deluxe Reverb and, just to throw some unobtainium in the mix, a 1963 Vibroverb – which was awesome, though we nearly blew it up. Again, in testament to Cyrill, he was like, ‘It’s there to be used, turn it up,’ even though he knew we might need to worry in an hour’s time after all the fuzzy solos. I definitely rattled that thing half to death because we went to record a quieter track later and there was the sound of a bird chirping coming from inside the amp. Again – sorry, Cyrill.”

There’s always some rustling to be heard and fussing to be had with old amps.

“Bizarrely, we sent the tracks off to be mixed. *Push/Pull* had this super-sensitive quiet riff and the first thing we noticed was the rattle that sounded like a bird chirping. We were all wondering where it was coming from and Cyrill suggested switching to the Deluxe, but we were like, ‘No, it sounds too good with the Royer and 57, that’s just the sound of the amp breathing.’ Probably a bit of a romantic take. David Benyamin is an incredible mixer and engineer who won a Grammy for the [*Blood Harmony*] Larkin Poe album. We left it on, but he did some magic to get rid of it. Part of me thought the noise was cool, but the other part knew it would’ve annoyed people, so it was probably for the best.” **G**



Cardinal Black’s new album, *Midnight At The Valencia*, is available now via Jump In Records/ Orchard. The band tour the UK & Ireland in October www.thecardinalblack.com

QUALITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
★ *Original* ★
**HISTORIC
HARDWARE**
100% GUARANTEED
★★★

SUNDRAGON AMPS

It's not guaranteed that they'll make you sound like Jimmy Page, but Sundragon's fastidiously accurate replicas of two of his favourite amps may well get you close

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

There is a time in most guitarists' development when they become fixated on replicating the tones of their favourite players. In pre-internet times we might have searched for snippets of information about guitars, amplifiers and effects in magazine interviews or scrutinised grainy video footage for clues. This later evolved into sifting through interminable newsgroup discussions while trying to distinguish between nuggets and nonsense.

Those innocent times had an aura of mystery, and artists could often be evasive. Few bands could match Led Zeppelin's mystique, and countless Zoso wannabes have tried to decipher Jimmy Page's tone secrets. His favourite guitars are now well documented, the

trick wiring in his Les Pauls has been unravelled, and his fuzz favourites have been analysed down to component level.

The only remaining bone of contention was his Zeppelin-era amplifiers, but it's now widely known that two of Jimmy's most favoured amps were a 100-watt Marshall Super Bass and a Supro. Both were modified and, until relatively recently, there was uncertainty about which Supro model he used.

That changed in 2019 when Jimmy agreed to the amp, along with several guitars and stage gear, being included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 'Play It Loud: Instruments of Rock & Roll' exhibition. It was subsequently displayed at the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, and the mystery Supro turned out to be a modified 1959 Coronado 1690T.

The Sundragon and Super Dragon are recreations of Jimmy Page's most significant Zeppelin-era amplifiers, which we tested out using Andrew Raymond's early 1960 'Grainger'



1. Though not visually identical to a vintage Supro Coronado 1690T, the Sundragon is close
2. With both the speaker and cone manufacturer having ceased trading, the Jensen P12Q was the closest match to Page's re-coned 12-inch Oxford
3. The production version features JJ 6L6s and a GZ34 that bumps up the B+ voltage
4. The control panel is just like the original; with all four inputs voiced differently, the Sundragon is impressively versatile



Chasing The Dragon

Guitar collector, studio owner and vintage guitar mover and shaker Perry Margouleff was involved in curating the exhibition, and he happens to be friends with Jimmy Page. Naturally, he was keen for Jimmy's 1959 Telecaster to be included because it was used for Zeppelin's first album and featured in so many early concert clips.

Jimmy had mixed feelings because, decades earlier, while he was away on tour, a house-sitting acquaintance had stripped the hand-painted dragon off the body. Perry suggested that Jimmy should consider restoring the guitar and he eventually did so with help from Fender. The restored guitar ended up in the exhibition and Fender released a replica.

It occurred to Perry that the Supro amp was so closely associated with the '59 Telecaster that it should be reissued, too. This is when amp builder and former executive vice president of Korg, Mitch Colby, came onboard. Mitch had previously done some amp restoration work for Jimmy and he and Perry set about analysing Jimmy's Supro to determine what gave it such a unique tone.

During the early 1960s Jimmy had taken his Supro on tour with Neil Christian & The Crusaders and it sustained damage when it fell out of the van. After some running repairs, the Supro was taken to a local tech who fixed it up using components that were available in the UK during that time.

When Jimmy sent his Supro over to Mitch's workshop, Perry and Mitch



discovered that the preamp valves were Mullard ECC83s and the 6L6 power valves were made by General Electric. The Mullard GZ34 that had replaced the stock 5R4 rectifier had also bumped up the B+ voltage. The Supro would have had two 10-inch speakers, but the repairer installed a new baffle for a single 12-inch Oxford Alnico speaker. This had been repaired with a non-original Pulsonic cone with a smaller-diameter voice coil than the Pulsonics commonly used in Celestions.

While he had the amp, Mitch was able to go through the circuit and identify components that had drifted out of tolerance but were contributing to the tone. He was also able to tell that Jimmy's onboard step-down transformer gave

out 120 volts of mains voltage, rather than the 110 volts the Supro was designed for.

Through a combination of circuit analysis and careful listening tests, Mitch and Perry were able to modify a vintage Supro Coronado 1690T belonging to Perry to sound exactly like Jimmy's. The speaker presented difficulties because the manufacturers of Oxfords and Pulsonics had both ceased trading. After extensive testing, they discovered a current production Jensen P12Q was the closest match.

Once Jimmy had given his nod of approval, they all banded together to form a company called Sundragon Amplifiers to produce their replica of Jimmy's Supro. A limited-edition run of 50 amps was made



4

with New Old Stock electronic components and valves, and each one was signed by Jimmy himself. Despite a \$12,500 price tag, they all sold in two days.

After this, Sundragon began offering a 'budget' version with selected JJ valves and modern components. The transformers from Jimmy's amp were sent to the original manufacturer for analysis and they were able to recreate them. Retailing at \$3,875, this is the version we're trying out.

O Suproman

The cabinet shape, control panel and mix of large, rounded pointer knobs and smaller tremolo knobs all capture the vintage Supro spirit. The covering and handle are in keeping, rather than vintage-accurate, but the split amp sections, with the preamp at the top and the power amp on the bottom of the cabinet, are faithful to the originals.

Each of the two channels has dual inputs and a dedicated volume control. The tone control is shared, and the tremolo channel has speed and intensity controls, with the former doubling up as an on/off switch. There's also a top mounted socket for a tremolo footswitch, along with a three-way power switch for on/off/standby modes.

A paraphase inverter feeds a pair of cathode biased 6L6 power valves, and the tremolo is applied to the cathode of the tremolo channel's first amplification stage. But one feature that sets the Supro circuit apart is the way that the inputs are configured.

Mitch Colby and Perry Margouleff set about analysing Jimmy's Supro to determine what gave it such a unique tone

Supro inputs are labelled Treble/Normal and that's a fair description of their sounds. As Mitch Colby describes it: "One input is full and the other has a little more top-end with a cut in the bass. Both channels are voiced differently, and the tremolo channel has less bass than the other. Jimmy said he used all four inputs when he recorded Zeppelin's first album."

Another difference is that the input jack signal connections don't short to ground when there's no cable plugged in. Most manufacturers ground unplugged inputs to minimise noise, but the Sundragon's input wiring is true to the original.

In use, there are distinct differences between the two channels. Channel 1 has the purer sound and overdrive increases gradually. Beyond a quarter turn it doesn't become that much louder but instead gets more compressed and saturated. There's a tweed-like interaction between the volume and tone controls, with higher tone settings sounding more gainy as well as brighter.

The tremolo channel sounds less clear, a bit more ragged and raw. It provides a

useful contrast with the bluesy, expressive and vocal characteristics of Channel 1. Even flat out the Sundragon has little in common with the raspy and fuzzy ferocity of a 5E3 Deluxe and instead allows the natural tone of a guitar to come through with the bass end holding together well.

The tremolo isn't the swampiest, but it has a very useful speed range that generates a thick pulse at lower frequencies and graduates to a 'Bang Bang' flutter at full speed. There's ample intensity, but it never swallows the front of notes and always remains playable.

The Sundragon delivers all its goods at volume levels that are comfortable even in close proximity. It's easy to imagine 60s studio engineers sighing with relief when Jimmy rocked up to sessions with his Supro because he would have been so easy to mic up, and spillage would have been manageable.

Super Sizing

Given the close association with Jimmy Page, it's hardly surprising that Sundragon has also recreated his other iconic amplifier: a 100-watt Marshall Super Bass that remained his studio and stage favourite from 1969 onwards. Jimmy told *Guitar World* that it was "the main one I would play all the way through my career. It was just the best amp I'd ever had... and it was so roadworthy. It did all those Led Zeppelin tours and all the recordings."

Given that it was a standard production model from an amp industry giant, most



5. At first glance the Super Dragon appears familiar, but Sundragon's logo and textured Tolex give it a distinct look

6. We're not sure what 'JPP' stands for, but we're going with 'Jimmy Page's Plexi'

7. The limited-edition Super Dragons feature NOS valves and components, and a numbered plaque signed by Jimmy Page that's protected by a clear plastic sheet

Guitarist would like to thank Andrew Raymond for kindly allowing us to photograph these amps and the 'Grainger' 'Burst

guitarists will be more familiar with the basic specs of a Marshall than a Supro. Of course, things are never that simple because very soon after he acquired it Jimmy had the amp 'hot-wired'. He took Jeff Beck's advice and employed a US tech called Tony Frank who had also worked on Hendrix's amps.

Hot-wired Marshalls are usually associated with higher gain, but Frank's mods were designed to do the opposite. Jimmy told *Ultimate Guitar*: "After recording the first Led Zeppelin record

The Super Dragon is dynamic and punchy, but not in the spiky way that some high-powered Marshalls can be

and creating sounds that define rock guitar, I needed an amp capable of reproducing this broad palette of sounds, including the light and the shade in the studio and a live setting."

The exact nature of the modifications has never been made public, and Mitch Colby is understandably reluctant to divulge details. We can report, however, that Frank replaced the stock EL34s with 6550s. Mitch also describes the voicing as being somewhere in between a Super Lead and a Super Bass.

Sundragon's Super Dragon replica features recreated transformers by Heyboer, New Old Stock GE 6550 valves, Allen Bradley and Iskra resistors and Philips 'mustard' capacitors.



After extensive testing, custom-made Warehouse speakers were chosen for the matching 4x12 cabinet because they were the closest match to Jimmy's Celestion Greenback G12H30s with their 55Hz resonance.

Breathing Fire

As with the Sundragon, the test guitars we used were an early 1960 Les Paul Standard and a 1961 Stratocaster belonging to the owner of these amps, Andrew Raymond. Through the matching cabinet the Super Dragon sounded breathtakingly loud and powerful.

Channel 1 is extremely bright and we were soon dialling out most of the treble and presence with both guitars. Even so, clean Strat tones exemplify the sweet and crystalline sparkle of the very finest vintage Marshalls. The Super Dragon is certainly dynamic and punchy, but not in the spiky way that some high-powered Marshalls can be.

Both channels remain clean until the volume controls are pushed beyond halfway, but sheer volume and concern for our hearing prevented us from exploring the full gain range. To tame the level,

we resorted to Andrew's Pete Cornish-modified Marshall 4x12 cabinet with all but one of its vintage Greenbacks disabled.

Channel 2 provides a fabulous contrast because it's easier to push into a smooth overdrive and its naturally darker tone opens up the full potential of the Treble and Presence controls. The Middle control has tremendous range and is very precise in the way it allows you to sculpt the sound. The amp can roar with real gravitas in the low mids and bass that is humongous but well controlled.

Clean-up is particularly impressive, with small volume-control adjustment taking the Les Paul from ferocious to chiming cleans. When overdriven, some Marshalls steal the show by imposing themselves on guitars and players, but the Super Dragon complements, rather than dominates, and allows individual instruments to shine.

Currently listed at \$22,500 on Sundragon's website, Super Dragons are still available and no 'budget' version is currently on the market. But having had access to Jimmy Page's original and his stamp of approval, there's no doubting the authenticity of the sound. **G**

www.sundragonamps.com

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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California Dreamin'

Last year's D'Ambrosio series guitars signified numerous firsts for Eastman, not least that they were US-made with boutique prices to match. These new FullerTones capture the magic at a fraction of the price

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



EASTMAN FULLERTONE SC '52 & DC '62 £799 & £899

CONTACT **Eastman** PHONE +31 36 5404478 WEB www.eastmanguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1 Doesn't Eastman just make old-style archtops and Les Paul copies?

Harsh but fair! That was pretty much what the brand was known for until it turned to original designs with the Romeo, Juliet and D'Ambrosio series – and now these FullerTone models.

2 Why 'FullerTone'?

It's actually the name designer Otto D'Ambrosio gave to the unique neck joint used on his eponymous series guitars. Those are made in the USA in pretty small numbers, but the guitars you see here are Chinese-made and similar in design, including the neck joint, which gives the new line its name.

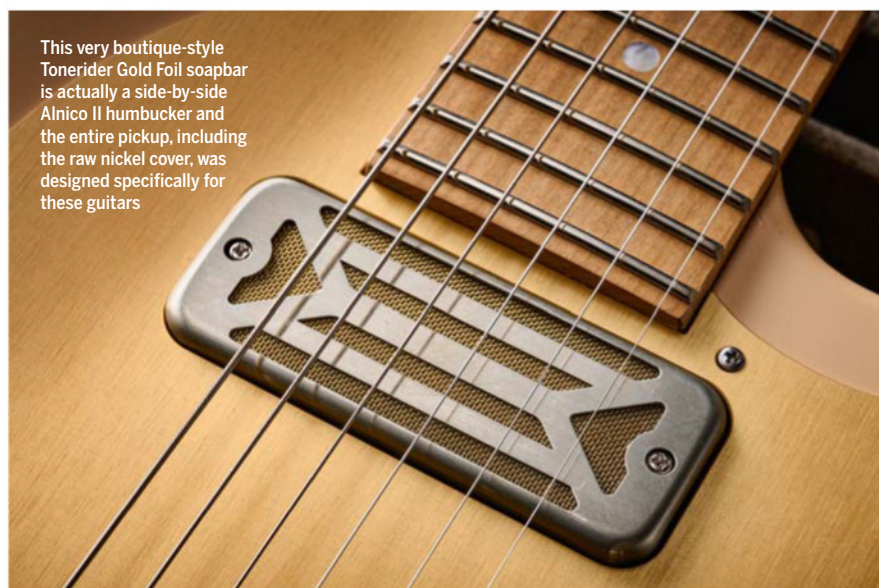
3 Tonerider pickups? Doesn't Eastman use Lollar, Seymour Duncan and Bare Knuckle?

Correct, but Eastman actually already uses Tonerider pickups on the archtop AR372CE-P90, which features two Vintage 90s, and Eastman has also used the Alnico 2 Classics. Tonerider pickups are designed in the UK and made in their own exclusive factory in China, and are known for excellent sounds at sensible prices.

Eastman is one of the few brands we can think of that, having built its empire on heavily inspired-by designs, has turned its back on those to create a new, original path. Yes, many of those older designs are still in the catalogue, but the new-design wave began with the Romeo, in 2019, an original thinline that nodded back to the jazz age but moves effortlessly into 60s style with models such as the Romeo LA. Juliet followed in 2022, rather rockier with a raised-centre solidbody and a single-cut

outline that shares a strong family resemblance to Romeo. These models achieved the often difficult balance of being original in style but seemingly rooted in the past.

Primarily designed by Otto D'Ambrosio, who heads up Eastman's LA custom shop, these new creations were joined in 2024 by his eponymous series, which expanded on the Juliet outline with a trio of designs: DC (double-cut), SC (single-cut) and Offset – made in the USA, not Beijing, China. Very much California boutique in quality and



This very boutique-style Tonerider Gold Foil soapbar is actually a side-by-side Alnico II humbucker and the entire pickup, including the raw nickel cover, was designed specifically for these guitars

Both guitars have the same master volume and dual-tone control setup (for neck and bridge pickups) mounted to the anodised aluminium scratchplates. They use identical circuits, except the three-pickup DC '62 has a five-way lever pickup selector and the dual-pickup SC '52 has a three-way



style with prices to match, it was only a matter of time before the 'D'Ambrosio for the people' was introduced. Earlier this year a pair of Chinese-made FullerTone models joined the increasingly expansive Eastman electric line-up, named after the unique neck joint of the D'Ambrosio series with a nod to Fullerton where the Fender story started, around 20 miles away from Pomona where Eastman USA is based.

At under a quarter of the price of the USA D'Ambrosio models, these FullerTones might lack some of the upmarket details,

"This two-bolt neck-to-body construction gives you more tone, more sustain, more stability" *Pepijn 't Hart*

but both new models still come across as very inspired and original takes on the primarily Fender recipe, which starts with that longer 648mm (25.5inch) scale length.

The first major change, however, is the body wood, which – while hidden from view under the opaque satin finishes – is spec'd as roasted black limba. Limba is also known as korina, and it's the wood with darker figuring that's known as the black variant; if it's lighter, it's called white. It's Fender-standard at 45mm thick with quite

a shallow and straight forearm contour and a more pronounced cutaway on the rear.

The outlines are virtually identical. The SC seems close to the Juliet, albeit with more rounded lower bouts, and its bass-side shoulder is fuller, joining the neck at the 16th fret; the DC joins at the 18th. But like the original D'Ambrosio models, both are 24-fretters, so although it looks like the neck sits into the body slightly more than a Telecaster, the curve of the cutaway actually lines up with the same 21st/22nd fret. Less obvious until you look is the more pointed heel on the DC.

While the neck-to-body join is unique (see A Different Fit box on page 92), at the other end of the neck is the stylised six-in-a-line headstock, which is back-angled so string trees are unnecessary. Here, the main shaft is near perfectly quarter-sawn roasted maple, the lower tips of the headstock are additional pieces, plus the raised main section of the headstock is actually a thick, nearly 3mm facing. The access to the dual-action truss rod (the D'Ambrosio models use a single-action rod) is via that long open hole between the G and D strings, and a large L-shaped Allen key is included for any adjustments. The headstock here isn't quite as exotic-looking as the pukka D'Ambrosio models, but it ties in with the family, which, of course, includes the Juliet series models.

The Moss Black and Ice Blue Metallic finishes come with a 'silver' anodised

THE RIVALS

Fender's Player II Telecaster (£709 to £789) comes in a whopping 11 colours that tie in with the solid alder, chambered ash or chambered mahogany bodies. Colour-dependent maple or rosewood fingerboards, with Fender's modern 241mm (9.5-inch) radius, and Alnico V single coils complete the package. The double-cut Player II Stratocaster (£709) has similar appointments and a wide colour/body-type choice.

Revolta's affordable boutique designs, a collaboration between Dennis Fano and Eastwood Guitars, include the Fano-meets-Rickenbacker Combinata, with humbuckers or P-90s, at around £1.2k (street prices lower).

For something a little different, the Vintage REVO range has a host of bolt-ons that mix up the recipes: the Surfmaster offset (£499 to £549) has a few different pickup configurations, while one of our favourites is the T-inspired Trio (£499) with three P-90s and offset vibrato.

Sire has some quirky designs, like the Larry Carlton I5L (£499) with a trio of lipstick tube single coils on a slab-front single-cut outline, while the L3 is a classy-looking single-cut with a single P-90 or dual 'buckers from around £349.



1 The DC '62's soapbar is a slightly hotter wind, but it's otherwise the same as the SC '52's neck pickup. Recognise the vibrato? It's very similar to PRS's SE vibrato. Hmm...

The pickups are designed in the UK by Tonerider, who has made quite a name for itself with its affordable, high-quality range

aluminium scratchplate; the Desert Sand model uses the same material, but it's gold coloured. The shapes vary on the bass side and, of course, for the different pickup complements. On the SC '52, only the controls, switch and output jack are suspended on the 'plate as the neck pickup direct-mounts to the body and the bridge pickup is mounted within the Tele-style bridge plate. The DC '62's scratchplate suspends the neck and bridge single-coil-sized humbuckers, while the soapbar-sized humbucker is direct-mounted again.

You may not have heard of Aumsen hardware – we hadn't – but a quick call to Trev Wilkinson confirmed they're a rather good Chinese-based 'shop making a wide range of guitar parts and bridges, including copies of the Wilkinson VS-100 and, as you can see on the DC '62 here, a version of the PRS SE vibrato bridge including its notched pivot screws. However, unlike that bridge, this one uses a brass block as you'd find on the Core-level vibrato. The SC's T-style bridge has quite attractive thicker walls, the side walls slope down to the front, and the

three brass saddles are compensated – the outer two also have domed ends just like the 'bullet' saddles on Fender's American Professional II Telecaster. As supplied, it was strung through the body, but you can top-load it, too.

The pickups are also Chinese-made but designed in the UK by Tonerider, who has made quite a name for itself with its affordable, high-quality range. The 'single coils' on both models are actually new stacked humbuckers, and the soapbar with its Gold Foil face that's visible through a very detailed and smartly cut partial cover (designed by Otto) is a side-by-side humbucker. Both guitars also feature a trio of controls with amp-style skirted knobs: master volume with tones for bridge and neck pickups; the DC '62 uses a five-way selector for its three pickups and the SC '52 only needs a three-way switch for its pair.

Aside from the clever original design here, the craft is very sharp. These might be the first electrics Eastman has brought to market under £1,000, but there's nothing 'cut-price' about any detail.

UNDER THE HOOD What's under those big ol' scratchplates?



With the anodised aluminium acting as a shielding plate, it's no surprise to see there's no other screening on either guitar, plus there are no actual single-coil pickups, either. The circuit is dead simple using 250k CTS pots and a small Orange Drop cap with a marked .022µF value. The cream-and-black cloth-covered wire won't help your tone, but it looks good, with a nice vintage vibe. Why not?

"We've been working with Eastman on a few projects already," explains Tonerider's Andrew Cunningham, who is supplying the pickups for the new guitars. "For example, Eastman's AR372CE-P90 features two Tonerider Vintage 90s, and they've used our Alnico 2 Classic

1. The circuit on both guitars is the same – they use the same components and a clean and tidy approach with a vintage vibe
2. The 'single coil' pickups are noise-cancelling stacked humbuckers. They're very cleanly made
3. The anodised coverplates are very well machined, and on the DC's spring coverplate there's a sticker with the serial number and country of origin. Nice!



"We've been working to get the perfect balance of punch and 'air'"

Andrew Cunningham

humbuckers on a few instruments. Those instruments very much 'followed the rules' for electric guitar design, but for the FullerTone we went back to a clean slate and thought about the best way to update the classic California designs.

"We've been working on the noise-cancelling single coils for a few years now," Andrew adds, "trying to get the perfect balance of punch and 'air' into the tone, without the annoying midrange honk that a lot of stacked single coils have. So it's a twin-coil design with a relatively slim upper coil for string sensing that uses AWG42 single build [insulation layer] wire, much like a late-60s Fender coil. The hum-cancelling lower coil is wound with less than 50 per cent

of the turns of the upper coil due its efficient design, meaning we can use a thicker, lower-resistance wire to achieve the noise-cancelling effect. [These hum-cancelling single coils all use] Alnico V Rod magnets, of a similar length to what we use in our P-Bass pickups – around 14mm."

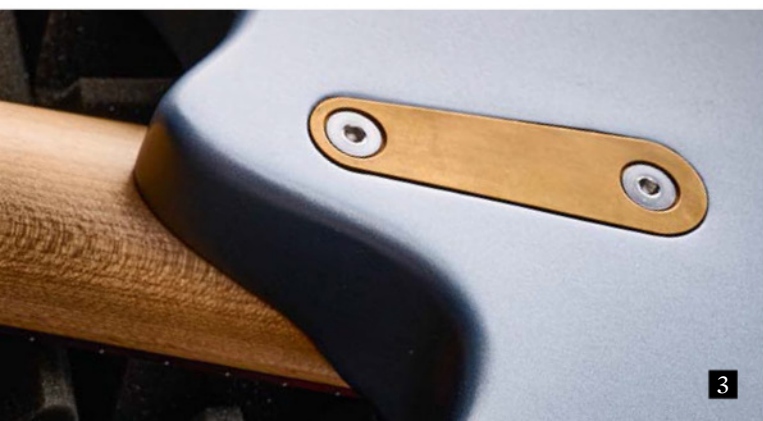
Tonerider will be launching its own range of hum-cancelling single coils under the 'Apex' banner, which should be available by the time you read this. But Andrew already admits: "I actually prefer the noise-cancelling Tele-style bridge pickup to our normal Tele replacement bridge pickup. Sometimes you make an improvement to solve one specific issue like noise, for example, and with the Apex Tele bridge pickup it makes it really playable. There's maybe a tiny bit of compression, or it holds your hand a little bit. It makes the guitar easier to play; you just keep playing! And there's the party trick of having some gain, then just stopping the strings and it's silent."

What about the soapbar-sized humbuckers? "These are based on our Alnico 2 Classic Patent Applied For-style humbucker [Tonerider's best-selling pickup] as both

Otto and Pepijn at Eastman really like that particular bridge pickup sound," continues Andrew. "The main visual difference is, of course, that great raw nickel-silver cover with a gold foil underlayer. It's a pretty unique look for a production guitar and a first for us to manufacture. The pickup doesn't use adjustable polepieces; we've used two rows of slug polepieces, rather than one with screws, and this allows for perfect hum-cancellation as the inductances of both coils are matched to within one per cent of each other.

"So these are underwound versions of our Alnico 2 Classics to match up with the 'single coils', which are a little bit hotter than vintage, and the soapbar is a little lower than [Gibson] Patent Applied For [units] but with a modern full strength Alnico II magnet in there – they are stronger than old Alnico IIs for sure, around 30 per cent stronger. Basically, it's underwound but with a modern magnet."

Tonerider is planning to launch the soapbar-sized humbuckers later in the year, although if you want the fancy raw nickel cover and gold foil underlay you might have to buy an Eastman guitar, too!



2. Stylised and very practical, this headstock unifies the FullerTone, Juliet and D'Ambrosio models. It's lightly back-angled so there's no need for string trees, plus the bone nut is perfectly cut

3. The DC '62 uses exactly the same neck join as the SC '52, but the heel area is quite different

4. The SC's bridge pickup looks like a classic single coil, but it is a stacked humbucker. It's a design Tonerider has been working on for a number of years and it will be available in the company's catalogue shortly as the Apex series, which will also include the S-style stacks used on the DC '62 model

Feel & Sounds

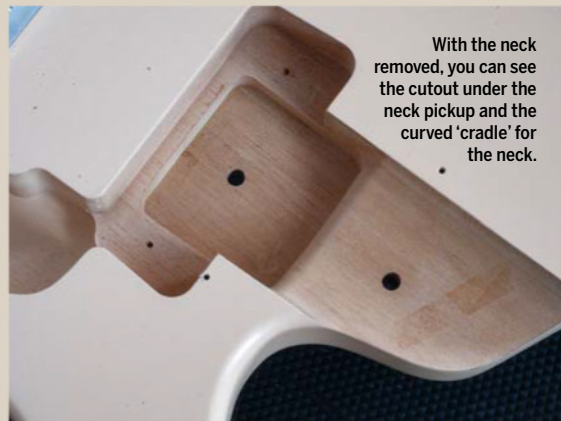
Despite the different outlines, the guitars do feel very similar seated or strapped on due to the similar geometry of the standard strap button positions. That said, our DC is noticeably heavier, although far from overweight, at 3.34kg (7.35lb); the SC is lighter at 2.92kg (6.42lb). To be picky, the upper-position access is marginally better on the SC through its sloping heel, rather than the more pointed version on the DC, but that's as much to do with hand position and what you're used to, and neither is a problem.

As you'd expect, with the same medium round neck shape, 305mm (12-inch) radius fingerboard and medium-jumbo frets, they really feel similar. There's good fretwork, slightly rolled and in-turning fingerboard edges, and a pretty mainstream setup shipping with D'Addario NYXL strings in 0.010 to 0.046 gauges.

That said, that extremely PRS-esque vibrato seems a little out of place in this sea of originality. Although, to be fair, the D'Ambrosio DC model uses a

A DIFFERENT FIT

These guitars get their name from the unique neck join



While the FullerTone neck-to-body join isn't the first we've encountered with just two screws or bolts (Tom Anderson has long had his A-Wedgie neck join), it does appear rather unique. Firstly, like a typical bolt-on, the full width of the neck goes into the body. The main portion of the neck ends just after the 24th fret, but a small foot extends into the neck pickup cavity, rather like PRS's original bolt-on neck. But up until the 22nd fret the neck back remains curved and that sits in a curved 'cradle' cut into the body. Meanwhile, that extending foot fits very snugly into a matching hole in the body. Even with the two attachment Allen key bolts removed, it's more like a tight-fitting joint on a glued-in neck guitar, and there's no way it can move from side to side as a Fender neck certainly can. Helped by the clearly very thin finish on both the body and neck, all this joinery is very tight fitting.

"This two-bolt neck-to-body construction has 30 per cent more contact between the body and the neck, and just simply gives you more tone, more sustain, more stability," states Pepijn 't Hart, Eastman's director of fretted instruments, who worked closely with Otto D'Ambrosio to bring these guitars to market.

"This is the real reason why these guitars exist," he continues. "There are more than enough bolt-on guitars in the world. But because Otto designed this major improvement to the original brilliant [Fender] design, we decided to go ahead with this project: first with the California-made D'Ambrosio series and now with the launch of the FullerTone series."

MannMade PRS-style vibrato; John Mann was an important part of the PRS story helping to create and manufacture the original vibrato used on PRS guitars. Here, the vibrato doesn't float above the top as it does on a PRS; it's screwed flat to the body at the front with very little up-bend, although the limited travel is

The SC '52 especially feels and to a certain extent sounds like a vintage piece that has been played in

perfectly good for a shimmer or two. There's little to criticise with the SC, but those pearl dots on the face of the maple-only fingerboard do tend to disappear in playing position. Just saying!

'Medium round' is a pretty accurate description of the neck shape, but it falls into a bigger category than many modern bolt-ons in this price area. The nut width

is a shade over 43mm with good 36mm string spacing across the well-cut bone nuts. We start with a deep C profile in lower positions that measures 22.3mm in depth, and from there we get to a pretty big 25.9mm by the 12th fret. The shaping is well done without over-filling the shoulders, otherwise it really would feel massive.

Exactly what the neck joint brings to the table is harder to quantify. Of the two, unplugged, the SC is slightly more alive and slightly crisper sounding than the DC, which is far from an inert lump, but, as we said, they do have different weights. Comparing these with a few other bolt-ons, well, guitars have a habit of all responding in subtly different fashions, don't they? If one of your criteria is that a guitar needs to vibrate and feel alive in your hands, then these certainly do.

Plugged in and using a PRS SE Silver Sky to warm up the test amps, the DC '62 holds its own rather well. There's slightly less sparkle to the neck, middle and mixes compared with the PRS, but it still shouts 'Stratocaster', and these

stacked humbuckers really are quiet, a big advantage on those difficult gigs, not to mention if you're using a dollop or three of gain. The soapbar-sized humbucker is very nicely voiced, too: it's got plenty of clarity and really suits the 'single coil' character, subtly smoother but far from a 'rock' HSS 'bucker. It just gives a little more to that often over-bright/weak Strat bridge position. It'd be great to hear a FullerTone with a pair of these in the bridge *and* neck positions.

We can, of course, hear the latter on the SC '52, which is where we start. Sometime later we're still at it and can only conclude that this guitar might well be a roots-rock masterpiece. The neck humbucker balances clarity and depth as it should; pull back the volume and there's an evocative blues/jazz character, a real old sound. But then the band kicks into a country rock tune and the bridge pickup, which isn't over-hot, jangles and bites. Roll back the tone and kick in a little level boost and you're doing your early Patent Applied For voicing rather nicely. Then there's the pickup mix – the neck is



Clever design, stylised finishes, and excellent hardware and pickups are bundled in with a real old-school big-neck vibe

5. As we explain in the 'A Different Fit' box on page 92, this is the FullerTone neck join that uses two Allen key bolts, a long brass neckplate and a unique long-tenon fixing

slightly hotter and we left it like that as it's a pretty classic humbucking 'Tele' sound with ring, chime and depth.

What we see, hear and feel doesn't match the prices we've been given. Has someone slipped up?

Verdict

Does the world really need another pair of bolt-ons based on Fender's finest? We wonder how many times we've written that. But a good guitar is a good guitar, right? And these FullerTones are good guitars. From the clever design to the stylised finishes, excellent hardware and pickups bundled in with a real old-school big-neck vibe, these guitars – especially the SC '52 – feel and to a certain extent sound like vintage pieces that have already been played in. And that feel is important to the proposition. These guitars really come across as a very boutique, artisan pair of instruments, rather than an exercise in hitting a production-line price point. Above all, they're not just another copycat design. Inspiring craft that won't break the bank? We're onboard! **G**



EASTMAN FULLERTONE SC '52

PRICE: £799 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Offset single-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Roasted black limba

NECK: Roasted maple, 'medium round' profile, '2-bolt long tenon' body join

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/36mm

FINGERBOARD: Roasted maple, pearl dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 24, medium-jumbo (Jescar 47104)

HARDWARE: Aumsen thick walled bridge with through-body stringing, 3x compensated brass saddle, unlogo'd Kluson-style tuners – chrome/nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm

ELECTRICS: Tonerider TQ1B-BK staggered pole Noiseless Singlecoil (bridge), Tonerider Soapbar Humbucker w/ custom Goldfoil cover (neck), 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, individual tone controls for neck and bridge pickups only

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.92/6.42

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: Other original solidbody Eastman designs include the glued-neck, hardtail Juliet with P-90s or humbuckers (£1,649)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Desert Sand (as reviewed), Ice Blue Metallic, Moss Black – Truetone satin



PROS Continuing originality from Eastman and a genuinely vibey boutique-on-a-budget guitar; it sounds as good as it looks, too

CONS Low-contrast position markers? Pah! We'll live with those



EASTMAN FULLERTONE DC '62

PRICE: £899 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Roasted black limba

NECK: Roasted maple, 'medium round' profile, '2-bolt long tenon' body join

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearl dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 24, medium-jumbo (Jescar FW47104-P)

HARDWARE: Aumsen 6-post walled vibrato with individual saddles and brass sustain block, unlogo'd Kluson-style tuners – chrome/nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Tonerider Soapbar Humbucker w/ custom Goldfoil cover (bridge), Tonerider SQ1-WH, staggered Noiseless Singlecoil (middle and neck), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, individual tone controls for neck and bridge pickups only

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.34/7.35

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: The Juliet LA with Göldo vibrato costs £1,749 and with Bigsby is £2,129

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Ice Blue Metallic (as reviewed), Desert Sand, Moss Black – Truetone satin



PROS Excellent reworking of Fender's finest into a very unique and really good-sounding instrument; noise-cancelling pickups are a real plus at this price point, too

CONS Odd to see that extremely PRS SE-esque vibrato here

lowden
GUITARS





Classics Reboot

Vox aims to take us back to the sound of its illustrious golden-era with this re-engineered family of Hand-Wired amplifiers. We listen in for that elusive and very classic AC30 tone

Words Martin Smith Photography Phil Barker





VOX AC30X, AC15X & AC4 HAND-WIRED

£2,199, £1,599 & £929

CONTACT **Vox Amps UK** PHONE 01908 304664 WEB www.voxamps.co.uk

As creator of some of the most recognisable sounds in guitar history – etched onto vinyl by legends as diverse as Hank Marvin and Brian May and many, many more – Vox has created a sonic fingerprint that can be heard across countless musical genres. In the 90s the brand was adopted by indie bands and the grunge movement alike for its signature chime and bloom, and has subsequently found a home in Nashville, providing that much sought-after ‘edge of break-up’ sound heard in modern country and Americana styles.

It would be fair to surmise that the specific overtones and frequencies these

amps produce have proved to be uniquely appealing to the human ear ever since their inception in the late 50s.

In common with amp standard-bearers such as Marshall and Fender, consistently producing its recognisable tone throughout decades of shifting technology, fashions and economic environments has proved no mean feat. Just like the aforementioned brands, Vox has had moments of variability, shall we say, so it’s great to see the company now producing this impressive fleet of hand-wired AC classics to get us back to the authentic jangle. According to Vox, meticulous research and development

went into specifics such as the output transformer, rectification and cabinet construction to yield the distinctive sag and bloom of the early versions. Let’s find out if these modern incarnations can summon up the magic of the originals.

AC30X Hand-Wired

We begin our investigations with the classic model. Something about the form factor of this amp just feels right: large enough for club gigs but with car-boot portability. The copper-red top with oxblood diamond grille cloth evokes the cosmetics unique to the Vox brand, referencing the original colours from what

Vox has managed to reformulate its own unique DNA with this handsome family of amplifiers

may be considered its golden era. The Top Boost channel one would expect from this model is in evidence, augmented by some great additions to widen its sonic offering. We now have a high-quality spring reverb unit to add dwell and space to the sound, in addition to a bypassable integrated effects loop with switchable level-matching, located on the rear panel.

The valve line-up is taken from the early 60s AC30 incarnation when ECC83 preamp valves replaced the EF86 pentode, which had been the cause of reliability





2

1. The early 60s livery of black Tolex, gold badge and a deep-red control panel has been reprised through the AC Hand-Wired range. The original cabinet design has been analysed and reproduced as per the original in respect to both the tone and the aesthetics

issues for the company in the late 50s. The ECC83 valves used in the preamps of this range impart a direct, energetic upper midrange, in comparison to the deeper and more refined sound of the discontinued EF86. A pair of 12-inch Celestion Alnico Blue speakers has been selected for their ability to pump out the appropriate chunk and chime and sit beside additional speaker output jacks.

AC15X Hand-Wired

In its single-speaker equipped cabinet, the AC15X offers a very appealing size and wattage combination, perfect for recording, rehearsal and smaller gigs.

2. The spring reverb incorporated into the Hand-Wired series has a full-bodied, long dwell that sits back nicely from the dry tone, adding an unmistakably classic ambience to the well-heard formula

3. A fully bypassable effects loop is now incorporated with a level-matching selector for +4dB or -10dB levels, allowing for the integration of either guitar effect pedals or line-level rack effects

The two-channel layout has the same reverb and effects loop features shared with the other Hand-Wired models; however, we also have a Boost switch alongside the Bright switch, providing a kick to the lower-gained Normal channel. A single 12-inch Celestion Alnico Blue speaker complements its compact stature.

AC4 Hand-Wired

The baby of the family is this single-channel, Celestion Greenback-equipped unit that is designed to offer a more personally voiced output level, perfect for home use. We still enjoy the updated features of footswitchable spring reverb



3

THE RIVALS

The Matchless DC30 was the original boutique Vox amp designed by Mark Sampson in the 90s, which became a much-requested sound in studios and on stages worldwide. It's famously the amp heard on the *Friends* theme tune, *I'll Be There For You*, by The Rembrandts. It's still available for sale in the UK, at Music Street, for £5,050. Badcat's Era 30 (retailing at £3,399) was Mark Sampson's final design before his passing this year and represents exhaustive attention to construction, reliability and sound quality. It features the EF86 valve in its Channel 1, an ECC83 in Channel 2, and allows for both channels to be mixed for complex and pleasing sonic blends.



and bypassable effects loop together with a stripped-down control layout of dual High/Low inputs, Volume, Treble, Bass, alongside Reverb and Master level control. This unit is a semi-sealed design with a vented panel across the rear that should provide a little more focus to the sound, if at the expense of some three-dimensional sound projection. Let's take a listen...

Sounds

Having experienced the majestic tone of classic 60s AC30s and also some later, perhaps slightly less wondrous incarnations, it will be very interesting to hear how close Vox has been able to get to its own hallmark sound. In contrast to the sparkle of Fender and the crunch of Marshall, players go to Vox for the classic 'chime'. It's a simple description for a set of complex phenomena that result in an enveloping halo of warmth and high-end sparkle without brashness or harshness.

Eagerly plugging in a Strat with medium-output, vintage-style single coils to the Top Boost channel of the AC30X, a recognisable bloom and sparkle greets

our ears. Subtle degrees of dynamic gain are produced by balancing the channel volume with the master volume – a hallmark of the model that is very much in evidence on all three models.

Opening up the master volume unleashes the EL84's characteristic firepower; it's a lively response that gives way to beautiful note bloom and glorious

Offsetting the Treble control with the Tone Cut control opens up a rich world of top-end tailoring

harmonic feedback at high levels. The bold power and headroom of this 30-watt flagship are a real wonder to behold at full volume where the amp begins to become one with the guitar as a single, singing voice.

The footswitchable reverb certainly earns its place on these amps with a

lengthy dwell and subdued tonality, delivering an unobtrusive yet glorious ambience well suited to the AC character.

The unique ability to offset the Treble control with the Tone Cut control on the 30- and 15-watt models opens up a rich world of top-end tailoring, too. A nudge of the Tone Cut control and our Telecaster's bridge pickup was singing beautifully, fully devoid of that dreaded ice-pick tone, while our ES-335-style guitar regained some wonderful clarity with a lower Tone Cut setting.

Warmth and body are synonymous with this circuit, and Vox has managed to reproduce the glorious AC30 midrange here in all its majesty across all three models. Obviously, the four-watt 1x12 speaker model will not produce the physical experience of air movement, but it's perfectly scaled down to impart all the desired chime and bloom. The core tone of all three amps delivers that magic air around the notes that not only sounds sublime but yields an effortless touch response that you'll have to prise yourself away from.



4. Vox has created a range of AC-style amps covering various volume and size needs. Starting with four watts up to the full 30-watt powerhouse, the brand has packaged the classic tone in the perfect format for your needs

5. The almost fully closed-back cabinet design of the AC4 Hand-Wired coaxes more midrange punch from the 12-inch Celestion Greenback speaker. Should more dispersal and coverage be required, an additional speaker cabinet can be incorporated

6. The Tone Cut control provides for precise adjustment of the high-end in conjunction with the Treble control and can be very useful to tame overly present guitars and pickups



12-inch Celestion Blue Alnico speakers are fitted in the 30- and 15-watt models, whereas the four-watt version features a single 12-inch Celestion Greenback speaker. An additional speaker output is now found on the rear panel for further sound dispersal

The footswitchable reverb earns its place on these amps, delivering an unobtrusive yet glorious ambience

Verdict

While boutique amp makers have built a variety of amplifiers inspired by or based on the Vox circuit – widening the palette in a variety of ways with a plethora of expanded features – Vox itself has managed to reformulate its own unique DNA with this handsome family of Hand-Wired amplifiers. The addition of spring reverb and effects loop, expanding the possibilities for delay and modulation effects, is well implemented without any impediment to the core sound. The design and build quality is impressive, and the efforts Vox R&D has put into replicating the power section performance of the originals, with less interference, has paid off sonically.

The retail price is significant in comparison to that of the more modest Custom models in the Vox catalogue, but these amps are still significantly cheaper than well-known US boutique offerings. Every bit of that legendary sound is ready and waiting to be coaxed out of these amps, and the actual playing experience will surely have you grinning, ear to ear. Our only issue is deciding which size is just right. **G**



VOX AC30X HAND-WIRED

PRICE: £2,199
ORIGIN: Designed in UK, built in Vietnam
TYPE: All-valve dual-channel combo with spring reverb
VALVES: 4x ECC83/12AX7, 1x ECC81/12AT7, 4x EL84, 1x GZ34 (rectifier)
OUTPUT: 30W
DIMENSIONS: 705 (w) x 263 (h) x 567mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 32/70
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: 2x 12" 8ohms Celestion Alnico Blue
CHANNELS: 2
CONTROLS: Normal Channel: Volume, Bright switch; Top Boost Channel: Volume, Treble, Bass; Reverb: Tone and Level; Master: Tone Cut, Volume (master)
FOOTSWITCH: For reverb (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, speaker output
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The AC30 Custom costs £979 with Celestion G12M Greenbacks and £1,599 with Alnico Blues



10/10

PROS The legendary tone is here! The effects loop brings the amp into the 21st century and the well-matched reverb further expands the tonal options

CONS It's heavy, but then it always was...



VOX AC15X HAND-WIRED

PRICE: £1,599
ORIGIN: Designed in UK, built in Vietnam
TYPE: All-valve dual-channel combo with spring reverb
VALVES: 4x ECC83/12AX7, 1x ECC81/12AT7, 2x EL84, 1x GZ34 (rectifier)
OUTPUT: 15W
DIMENSIONS: 610 (w) x 260 (h) x 550mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 22.8/50
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: 1x 12" 16ohms Celestion Alnico Blue
CHANNELS: 2
CONTROLS: Normal Channel: Volume, Bright switch, Boost switch; Top Boost Channel: Volume, Treble, Bass; Reverb: Tone and Level; Master: Tone Cut, Volume (master)
FOOTSWITCH: For reverb (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, speaker output
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The AC15 Custom (with Greenbacks) costs £679. It's also available as the AC15 Custom Twin with dual Greenbacks at £789



10/10

PROS That tone in a more portable, rehearsal-sized package; retains features such as effects loop, reverb and additional speaker output; Boost switch on this model's Normal channel expands gain options

CONS None



VOX AC4 HAND-WIRED

PRICE: £929
ORIGIN: Designed in UK, built in Vietnam
TYPE: All-valve single-channel combo with spring reverb
VALVES: 2x ECC83/12AX7, 1x EL84
OUTPUT: 4W
DIMENSIONS: 405 (w) x 260 (h) x 450mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 13.5/29
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: 1x 12" 16ohms Celestion G12M Greenback
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Volume, Treble, Bass, Reverb Level, Volume (master)
FOOTSWITCH: For reverb (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, speaker output
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The fourth amp in the Hand-Wired line-up is the AC10 (£1,179).



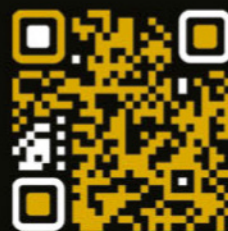
9/10

PROS The same classic sound in a handy-sized package, plus we still get the effects loop, reverb and additional speaker output

CONS Half-power or one-watt switch would be really useful for home use

GA

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Echoplex Evolution

Strymon's standalone emulation of an Echoplex offers a host of adjustable parameters to tailor your sound

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker



STRYMON EC-1 SINGLE HEAD DTAPE ECHO £279

CONTACT **Strymon Europe** WEB www.strymon.net

What You Need To Know

- 1 EC-1? Is this an Eric Clapton signature pedal?**
Nope, it's a different EC. This pedal emulates tape echo and is modelled on vintage Echoplex units.
- 2 Hasn't Strymon already done tape echo emulation?**
Yes, we first saw it in the company's El Capistan pedal, which is currently available in V2 guise.
- 3 So how is this pedal different?**
Well, where the El Capistan modelled fixed-, multi- and single-head echoes, this pedal focuses purely on the single-head type. The starting point for its development was the algorithm in the El Capistan pedal, and this evolution puts it all in a nicely compact enclosure.

The Echoplex single-head tape echo is right up there in the pantheon of iconic guitar effects, not just for its obvious echo functionality but also the sound of its preamp, used by players like Jimmy Page and EVH, to enhance guitar tone with or without the echo. Strymon has previously released pedals offering the tape echo sound – in particular the twin-footswitch El Capistan that features three different tape echo types, including single-head – but the company has now released a smaller pedal, the EC-1, which puts the focus solely on that single-head sound, building on the algorithm and the 'dTape' technology used in El Capistan.

Where other popular tape echoes worked by having a fixed-position recording head and several fixed-position playback heads, the Echoplex had just a single-playback head (hence the single-head classification), but it had a moveable recording head that slid on a rail so that the distance between the two heads

determined the delay time, the tape speed being constant. It was available in different iterations over the years, most notably the EP-2 with a valve preamp, and the long-running solid-state EP-3.

Strymon has modelled the new pedal on a unit in its possession: an EP-2 that was modded by the legendary technician Cesar Diaz for a warmer sound that is closer in frequency response to an EP-3 – effectively, says Strymon, putting the best aspects of the various vintage Echoplex models into a single unit.

In Use

The EC-1 pedal has TRS jacks and you can set it for mono operation, mono in/ stereo out or full stereo via a three-position switch on its rear panel, taking it beyond the capabilities of an original mono Echoplex. It has a simple hands-on control surface, though it does have a few secondary functions that involve holding down the footswitch while



The EC-1 is modelled on an EP-2 modded by legendary technician Cesar Diaz for a warmer sound

turning a knob – one of which is selecting the preamp sound. It's possible to use the pedal's preamp solely for its tone-shaping capabilities if you keep the Mix knob at zero for a purely dry sound. There are two different preamps available as well as a 'preamp off' setting: an original EP-3 preamp with accentuated highs will give



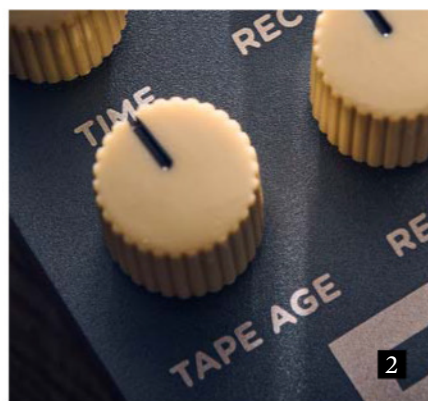
1. The pedal features TRS jack sockets that can be used with both mono and TRS jacks, and this rear-panel switch configures operation so you can have standard pedalboard mono operation, mono in with stereo out, or true stereo operation. The EXP/MIDI input allows the connection of a TRS expression pedal, Strymon MiniSwitch or MultiSwitch Plus for tap tempo or infinite repeats functions. Alternatively, you can use it for a TRS MIDI connection

an enhanced presence to your sound, while the modded preamp (the default option) offers a more balanced frequency response that fattens things up nicely. Both feel good to play through, and in addition you can set a volume boost up to a maximum of 6dB.

The actual echo is adjusted by the usual delay Time, dry/wet Mix and Repeats knobs that you'd find on any delay pedal, but you also get three choices for how the signal hits the virtual tape if you want a more saturated sound. The Low setting represents unity gain with optimised tape bias and will give you the cleanest sound.

THE RIVALS

If you like the idea of modelled tape delay but want other options alongside it and don't mind a bigger pedal, then check out Strymon's El Capistan V2 (£349) and Volante (£399). There are plenty of older compact pedals that aim to deliver that Echoplex sound: the Catalinbread Belle Epoch (£179) is well respected, while Jim Dunlop now owns the Echoplex name and has the EP-103 (£205) pedal. More recent is Universal Audio's UAFX Orion (£149) with a similar set of adjustable parameters to the EC-1. If you just want the sound of an EP-3 preamp, look no further than the Xotic EP Booster (£129).



2. Tape Age represents how the bandwidth of a tape would change over time as the tape gradually wore out and eventually needed replacing. At its lowest position, this offers the sound of fresh tape, but higher frequencies are reduced as you turn the knob

3. The Rec Level switch sets the gain and bias level of the signal being recorded to the virtual tape. Low (unity gain/optimised bias) is the cleanest sound, Medium (6dB boost/increased bias) is slightly saturated, and High (12dB/high bias) is heavily saturated

4. You can add artefacts to the sound such as mechanically related speed fluctuations and tape irregularities using the Mechanics control. The first half of the travel gradually introduces the sort of modulation caused by tape motor variations. Beyond that, there are a mixture of artefacts



Medium increases the saturation with a 6dB input signal boost and increased tape bias, and the High setting's 12dB boost and higher bias deliver the crustiest repeats. Working really well in conjunction with all this is the Tape Age control, which progressively subdues the repeats' top-end.

Plenty of variation, then, to tweak the sonics to best suit your needs, but in all cases the repeats blend really well with guitar sound, the trail fading away organically with a tonal degradation that ensures they don't get in the way of your playing. What's more, there's a sweet segment on the Repeats knob's travel that allows you to employ a really long chain of repeats before it reaches the point where they spiral off into oscillation.

Further sonic adjustment is available from the Mechanics knob, which replicates the common mechanical idiosyncrasies of a tape delay as well as instances of out and out broken behaviour. At lower levels, there's tasty pitch modulation as it reproduces a tape transport's wow and flutter, running from a frisson of interest to a washy sound. As you advance the knob beyond its mid-point those fluctuations are reduced and added to by faster disturbances reminiscent



STRYMON EC-1 SINGLE HEAD DTAPE ECHO

PRICE: £279

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Delay pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True or Buffered bypass, Tap Tempo, tempo can sync to MIDI Clock, 300 preset locations via MIDI, infinite mode, 50ms to 1s delay time, spillover mode

CONTROLS: Time, Mix, Tape Age, Repeats, Mechanics, Rec Level (Low/Med/High) switch, Mono/Stereo switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard TRS input, standard TRS output, EXP/MIDI, USB

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 250 mA

DIMENSIONS: 69 (w) x 117 (d) x 64mm (h)

of tape crinkle and splices, and capstan slippage. Towards the end of the knob travel you get the wow and flutter added in more prominently until you get the sonics of a well-knackered unit, which will be anathema to some, as players with tape echo machines usually strive to keep them in tip-top condition.

The point, though, has to be that it's good to have all of these options. If you use an original tape echo machine, you get the sound that is dependent on the tape and the machine's condition at that moment in time. But, here, you can benefit from large amounts of variation to carve out the consistent, exact sound you need. That, an expanded delay range and stereo options make this a really evolved take on the Echoplex.

Hands-off functions include tap tempo with a choice of four tap divisions, from the pedal itself (Tap Tempo mode is entered by holding down the footswitch) or by adding an external footswitch. You can also sync the pedal to a MIDI clock signal. In fact, MIDI is fully implemented in the pedal, giving you control of parameters and access to a massive 300 presets. The addition of an expression pedal is supported for parameter changes

Strymon's EC-1 lets you benefit from large amounts of variation to carve out the consistent, exact sound you need

or you can add a footswitch, not just for tap tempo but also to provide infinite delay repeats by holding down the switch.

Verdict

There are any amount of all-singing, all-dancing multi-delay pedals around, not least Strymon's own excellent TimeLine, but often these are overkill when it comes to the essential gear most guitarists would need to get through a gig. More often than not a simple delay with the basic controls will do the trick, and the EC-1 not only fits that bill, it also sounds wonderful. This pedal offers loads of subtle variation on a sound that has a real connection to the past, and its stereo option makes it more compatible with modern rigs. What you're getting here is a perfect melding of vintage sound with modern practicality. **G**



10/10

PROS Compact size; accurate emulation of Echoplex sound; stereo operation; range of adjustable parameters; tap tempo; MIDI

CONS The secondary functions can be a faff

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« BLUEPRINT »

BROTHERS IN ARMS

AnalogMan's commander-in-chief, Mike Piera, explains what happened when he and Joel Korte of Chase Bliss combined two of the finest circuits in the game and merged them into one gain pedal to rule them all – the Brothers AM

Words Andrew Daly Photography Phil Barker

When you think of AnalogMan and Chase Bliss, two of the finest independent pedal makers in the game today, the first thing that springs to mind probably isn't journeys to Asia to source New Old Stock. But that's just what happened when AnalogMan's Mike Piera and Chase Bliss's Joel Korte got together to build their ultimate gain-inducing stompbox, the delightfully amp-soaking Brothers AM, which launched this year and, thus far, seems to be one of the most sought-after overdrive pedalboard solutions this side of the iconic Ibanez TS9 Tube Screamer.

The Brothers AM pedal takes elements of the classic AnalogMan King Of Tone overdrive and blends its circuitry with the best bits of Chase Bliss's Brothers analogue gain stage pedal. With a heritage like that, the Brothers AM was born to be a hit. As for Piera, a man – and guitarist – who knows a thing or two about stacking one's gain stages, he shrugs when asked if he and Korte have crafted a near-perfect pedal. "Steve Hackett from Genesis gave us a great quote for our vintage effects guide," he tells *Guitarist*. "Steve told us: 'There is no such thing as a useless effects pedal, you just need to find how to apply it.' But I think the opposite is also true. There is no perfect pedal because they can be used poorly."

Piera goes on to explain that while the Brothers AM is a valuable tool, it's not

for everyone. "A beginner player, playing softly in their bedroom with a solid-state amplifier, probably doesn't need the Brothers AM or a King Of Tone," he says. "Though a Duke Of Tone or a Prince Of Tone could come in handy!"

How did this AnalogMan/Chase Bliss collaboration come about? And what did you envisage that the King Of Tone circuitry could bring to the previous Brothers iteration?

"It came about after [Chase Bliss founder] Joel [Korte] emailed me in early 2020 about a possible collaboration. He said that he was going to discontinue his current Brothers [analogue gain stage] pedal, and thought the King Of Tone circuit would be perfect for that layout."

And why was that?

"Because it has two separate pedals, each with full external control, presets and MIDI control. Our pedals – except for our Amaze1 delay controller – are all analogue, so they cannot store presets or talk to MIDI equipment directly.

"At the time, I was also working with Dunlop on the MXR Duke Of Tone, which was a smaller, cheaper version of our circuit. The Chase Bliss [iteration] would be a more powerful version, with more features, but mass-produced. This meant that it would not cost significantly more than a King Of Tone with many options."

Once you agreed, what were your hopes for the project?

"My aim with both the Duke Of Tone and the Brothers AM was to get our pedals in the hands of more players, who could try them at guitar stores all over the world. We don't advertise or even pay for website placement, as I prefer people to find our pedals themselves or through friends, or especially from professionals who use them.

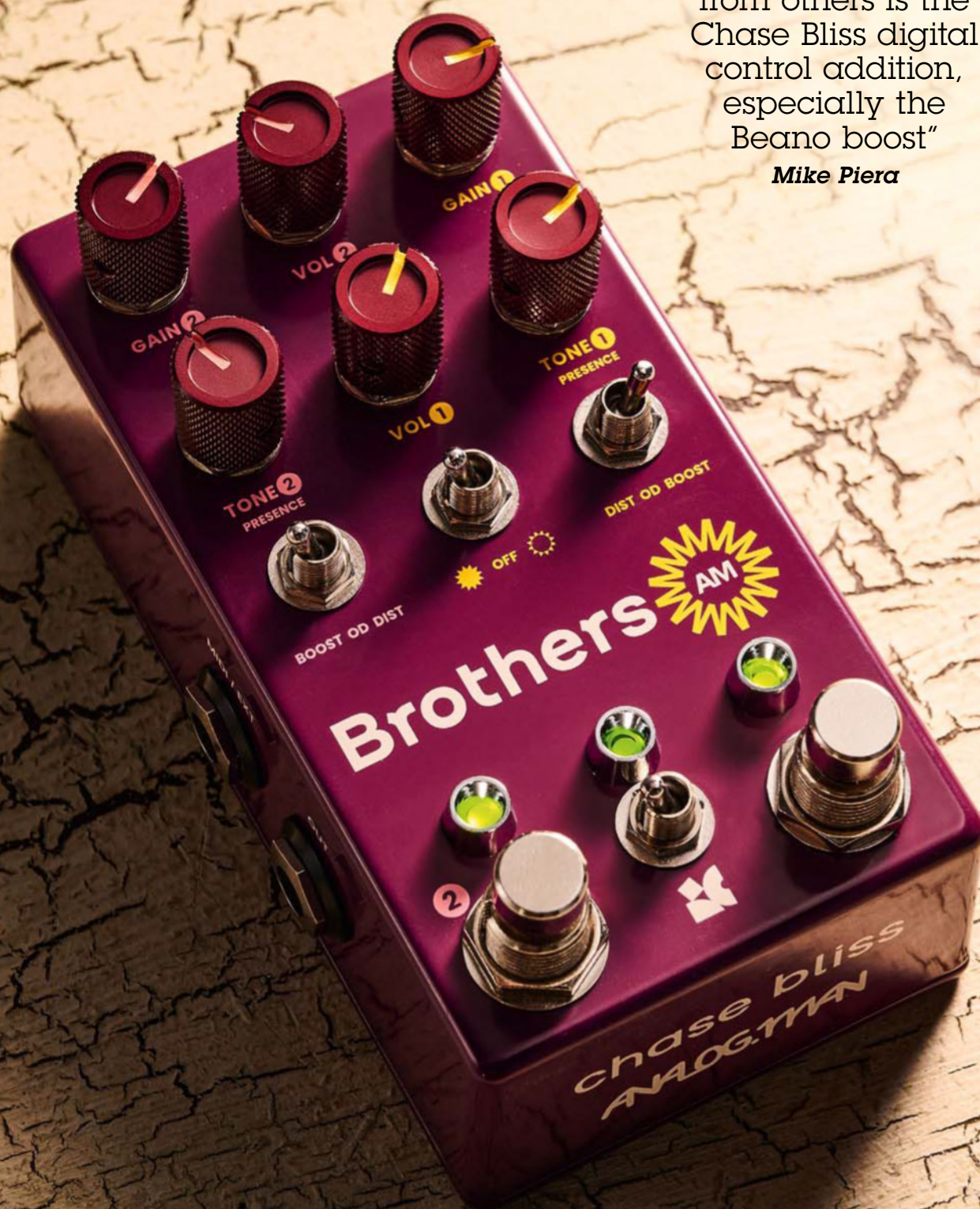
"Joel was not happy with some aspects of the existing Brothers pedal. He was intrigued with the King Of Tone circuit and how it could work with their layout and features. The King Of Tone has three basic settings – Clean Boost, OD and Distortion – all of which have the same basic volume, tone and drive controls. They stack very well. I think that most people, like me, like to run the boost after the overdrive for a thickening and volume boost, while others like to run the boost into the overdrive to add more distortion without too much additional volume. This allows many tones and levels of distortion as you can stack any mode into any other mode."

Once you and Joel got rolling, how did the partnership pan out? Who did what?

"Joel and his crew did all the heavy lifting, as they had their architecture and digital voodoo, and I provided our circuit to integrate. They brought prototypes to me to try and we tested them in Madison

"What really separates this pedal from others is the Chase Bliss digital control addition, especially the Beano boost"

Mike Piera



Chase Bliss's Brothers AM combines the coveted King Of Tone circuitry with its original Brothers pedal to offer a "triple stack of saturation", says the company



Square Basement with my setup, which I have been playing for a long time, against my personal King Of Tone, which I built about 20 years ago.”

The Brothers AM was five years in the making. What technical challenges did you encounter during that time?

“From the first prototype, I was confident that the tone and feel were there. They had to make many choices to try to get the sound they were looking for: they could not use the exact parts we used for several reasons, like availability, SMT versus through hole, and so on.”

You took a trip to Tokyo, Japan, where you ventured to source vintage parts. Joel is quoted as saying: “Rummaging through the same bins 40 years later, I found a part that would solve our final and biggest challenge on Brothers AM.” Tell us more!

“The second time Joel visited our shop, he was fidgeting and finally asked me a serious question: ‘What is the best pedal to pair with the King Of Tone?’ I immediately replied: ‘Our Beano Boost – the Rangemaster/treble boost into the King Of Tone is my favourite sound. It’s thick and crunchy with lots of harmonic content that mates perfectly with a band.’ Joel was extremely happy to hear that as he was thinking of adding a Rangemaster Treble Booster-type circuit to the Brothers AM pedal. I knew it would make the pedal really special, and I was all for it.

“But our Beano Boost uses old germanium transistors that are temperature-sensitive. And the circuit needs to be tweaked for each individual transistor, so it was not a good idea for a mass-produced pedal.”

“I loved the King Of Tone right away and saw how well it would map onto the original Brothers UI”

Joel Korte

Are those the components you found while in Japan?

“When we were in the vintage surplus shop in Akihabara, we found a bin of transistors that looked germanium, in a big metal can, but we Googled and found that they were low-gain silicon, which could be great in this circuit, so Joel took some home. And although he may not have used that exact part, it allowed him to find an awesome-sounding transistor that is also in the big metal can, so he made room on

1. These dip switches provide more customisation and control options

2. The Brothers AM combines the King Of Tone’s dual overdrives with the Beano Boost, also found in AnalogMan’s classic Sun Lion



the circuit board for it. It’s activated by a toggle switch, which adds it to one side and can also be saved to any preset. One of the factory presets is ‘Mike’s Sound’, which is my favourite King Of Tone setting and makes it easy to use.”

Now that you’ve lived with the Brothers AM pedal for a bit, how do you feel about the final version?

“[Chase Bliss] were not aiming to get the *exact* same sound but the best sounds for the pedal in its configuration, with the familiar tone and feel of our Bluesbreaker-derived King Of Tone circuit. The digital part must have been very challenging also, as it’s easy to get weird noises and glitches when switching elements of the circuit. Also, getting the digital potentiometers to react like our analogue ones is not easy. And so far, from many players’ feedback, they did a great job!”

What do you think the new Brothers AM pedal will bring to guitar players’ respective tones?

“These are a great tool as two circuits can give any amplifier four channels. For example, on my settings I have clean – both off – boosted, overdriven, or boosted overdrive, with both on. These sounds will preserve the sound of your guitar

and amp; they just add levels of drive and compression. But it depends on mode and drive knob setting, and focus, reducing flubby low-end and messing with the bass or bass drum, which you have with some pedals. Also, adding the treble boost can turn a Fender amp somewhat into a Marshall [sounding amp].”

How would you say that the Brothers AM compares to others like it on the market, if there even is anything quite like it on the market?

“There are several King Of Tone-inspired pedals on the market from various manufacturers. But other than the cheap Chinese counterfeits, none of have them have the features of the three settings, and treble trim pot, plus the actual King Of Tone circuit. What really separates this pedal from any others is the Chase Bliss digital control addition, especially the Beano boost.”

Is there a guitar, amp or even genre that you feel the Brothers AM pedal works best with?

“I originally designed it with a [black-panel] Deluxe Reverb, but I have since tried it with many of my other amplifiers – and it really loves the Vox AC15. I just got one of the Jimmy Page Sun Dragon



Crowning Glory

Chase Bliss's Joel Korte shares more on the AnalogMan collaboration

What did you want to improve upon from the original Brothers design?

"The original Brothers pedal has always been a polarising device. Some people love it and absolutely swear by it, while others feel the opposite. The circuits in there are pretty unique, and they also have a bigger bass response than most overdrives and fuzzes out there. When we discontinued Brothers, it always haunted me. I really felt like the UI and workflow were great; it was just that people didn't gel with the circuits as much as I hoped."

How did the King of Tone become the missing puzzle piece?

"I started thinking of revisiting the concept around the same time I first played a King Of Tone. I loved it right away and immediately saw how well it would map onto the original Brothers UI while also adding a few things. I became obsessed with the idea and decided to reach out to Mike. I framed it like: 'Would you be open to this if I worked on a prototype?' That was over five years ago. It's been quite the journey."

What technical challenges did the Chase Bliss team need to overcome?

"Controlling analogue circuits via digital [means] is always a challenge, particularly when there's a lot of gain staging involved. For this project, we used digital pots, which was a first for us. In the past, we'd typically control our analogue circuits optically. One of the bigger challenges of the project came later on when we added the Beano-style boost. For reasons related to difficulties in sourcing and ambient heat considerations inside the pedal, I wanted to use a silicon transistor as opposed to germanium."

Did you struggle to find the right components for the project?

"I had a really tough time finding a transistor with the specs that I was looking for. As luck would have it, Mike and I got set down the right path when we were looking for parts in Akihabara, Tokyo. This was in the same area where Mike started working on guitar pedals back in the 80s. We didn't use the exact transistor we found there, but it made me aware of a family of silicon transistors in old-school TO-18 packages, one of which I found to be absolutely perfect."

Can you give a rundown of the three circuits onboard the new pedal?

"It's a Beano-style treble booster into a King Of Tone-style dual overdrive. We wanted to try to create the sound and feel of both of these pedals but use readily available, still in production parts so that we would be able to make a lot of them if the demand was there. The rest of the features really just attempt to give you easy access to all sounds with some additional features."

How does the Brothers AM mash-up give guitarists advanced control over their tone?

"Like all Chase Bliss pedals, you can save presets. This pedal is no exception since the all-analogue signal path is digitally controlled. There is an immense amount of tone and texture options in this pedal, so the presets can be really handy. The pedal can also be controlled remotely via MIDI. That said, I personally only use one preset for a more aggressive sound, and then I use the pedal in 'live' mode, where all the knobs and switches are 'what you see is what you get.'" [AD]



2

amplifiers, too, which is a modified Marshall. Though it's an amazing amplifier, I think it sounds better with the King Of Tone. Most of the Nashville session players are using a King Of Tone for country music and, of course, the blues artists use it a lot, too. It's also found in heavier rock, such as Dream Theater, Porcupine Tree and so on. I think jam bands may be some of the heaviest users. I think it works well with a wide range of other gear and genres because it doesn't do too much – it just adds some overdrive while preserving your other gear's tone."

This collaboration is a celebration of two great independent pedal makers, which is a feat in and of itself. To that end, what are the biggest challenges in the pedal-making game today?

"It has been nearly impossible to continue making the pedals we make without spending an inordinate amount of time on locating components. We still try to use a lot of New Old Stock components, but even the new capacitors we buy keep getting discontinued and we're struggling to find suitable replacements. Also, the counterfeits are coming in strong,

though I can get them taken off of eBay in a day or two. But it takes a lot of my time checking it and reporting the trademark infringement. And there's no way to stop the Chinese markets from selling counterfeits and shipping them into this country. The United States Border Control has our information and is supposed to be confiscating any pedals coming in from China with our trademarks. Still, every week, I get a few emails from people asking if the 'King Of Tone' pedal that they just bought is from us or if it's just a reproduction. Unfortunately, many of them are fakes."

Do you have further collaborations planned with Joel or other notable effects makers?

"I enjoyed this collaboration, not just for the pedal work but even more for the social aspect of meeting and working with new people and going to new places. The crew and associates at Chase Bliss could not have been more fun and relaxing. I also enjoyed working with Dunlop on the Duke Of Tone and would be open to future collaborations. I am currently working on a special short-run pedal for an amp builder who needs to make a pedal for the brand – I hope it will be out this year." [G] www.analogman.com/ www.chasebliss.eu

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHASE BLISS



ELLIOT EASTON

The former Cars six-stringer talks early guitar exploits, the golden age of vintage-guitar buying, and why he's not as jazzed about amps as he is about guitars themselves

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

"The first serious guitar I bought with my own money was a Favilla acoustic. There was a music store in Freeport, Long Island, called Gracin's Music. At the time, I had a cheap Japanese electric that I got for my bar mitzvah, and it was a really crummy guitar. I got a job working at a bakery making bagels, and I saved up my money for my first real guitar. It was all-mahogany, left-handed and one of their less expensive concert-style guitars. I still have it!

"My first good electric was a Telecaster. It seemed like most of my heroes were playing them, like Robbie Robertson, James Burton and Roy Buchanan. I just love Telecasters; there was something about them that just got me. They seemed so iconic – and I wanted one. So, through working at the baker and washing dishes after I got my worker's permit, I'd earned enough to buy one. I ordered this left-handed, blonde 1971 Fender Telecaster. I think it was \$220 with a case and tax."

Then and now: Elliot's bagel-making job afforded him the cash to buy his first "real" guitar, a mahogany Favilla model (left), while this Martin D-28 Bigsby is his latest addition; note the distinctive headstock of this left-handed model

What was the last guitar you bought and why did you buy it?

"A Martin D-28 Bigsby. It's like Merle Travis's D-28, which has a Bigsby neck with six tuners on one side of the headstock; it looks like a Fender. I just thought it was super cool. That guitar is just superb. I'll have to get it over to my favourite guitar guy in LA to have it set up."

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

"Gosh... Going back to the 70s, when The Cars first started making money, I could buy guitars and the prices weren't what they are now. The most amazing one – and this was part of a *Guitar World* centrefold – was a 1964 left-handed Stratocaster, which was Burgundy Mist coloured. It was in unplayed condition and it had a white Tolex case. It still had the tags and a little booklet hanging from the pegs. It even had the receipt inside that said that some young fella on an Air Force base bought it and had tricked it out in the coolest custom colour. I

"Even the most expensive guitars are only as good as their setup. That's my feeling"

paid \$2,800 for it at a vintage dealer. Now, I think the guitar would be worth six figures; it's so rare and pristine. It even had the original strings!"

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

"You know... I've gotten some great ones, so I don't know if I've ever had that. You can't believe the guitars that were flying around. At that time – and at that age – I don't know about other people, but I couldn't afford to have two guitars at the time; I had to get rid of a guitar to get a different guitar. I went through a bunch."

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

"Most of the ones I've let go I regret letting go because I sold them early and they're worth so much more now. I really wish I still had that Burgundy Mist Strat, a '54 Les Paul Goldtop and a Lake Placid Blue Tele that I had. But there are a lot of valuable guitars I've had – and still have."

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

"My best advice is to buy based on your budget. We live in a time when there are more great guitars available to us at lower prices than there ever were when I was a kid. The Epiphone and Squier guitars that you can



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ELLIOT EASTON

ELLIOT'S GO-TO RIG

"A lot of my gigs these days are one-offs. The last tour I did was filling in for Waddy Wachtel with The Immediate Family, and I was using a Les Paul because I was filling a similar sonic space as Waddy. That Les Paul was of my own design. It's a concept guitar [produced by the Custom Shop] based on a single question: 'If the single-cutaway Les Paul was not discontinued in 1960, what might a 1964 Les Paul look like?'"

"I went to the Firebird colour chart and chose Pelham Blue, with black hardware and the black chrome dome knobs that [model] had in the 60s, nylon saddles and double stingers in the headstock. I have a tiki character [on the headstock], it's like my little mascot."

"So I played that Les Paul, which has a thin 60s neck and is chambered. It's light. And with the amp, I just like a good sweet-sounding Fender with clean headroom; I needed that because I had to be able to get back to a pristine sound for some of the parts."

get now, with a good setup, will play great and sound very close to more expensive versions. So buy based on your budget – and buy the best one you can get because you won't grow out of it and get tired of it. You'll always play it and it'll always be good. Even the most expensive guitars are only as good as their setup. That's my feeling."

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

"Let me think about that... I was looking at some Epiphones and Gibsons the other day, like the Flying V and the copper-coloured Joe Bonamassa Epiphone [1955 Les Paul Standard Copper Iridescent] based on that rare copper metallic colour finish with P-90s that Joe has the original of. But the thing about being a lefty is there's not as much available. It's not like I can just go on a website, see a bunch of guitars, and think, 'Well, I'd like to get that one for me.' It's a different process."

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?

"That depends on the situation. I've got a ton of really good guitars and some great amps, too. If the situation is that I'm somewhere and I have to make a choice... well,

"If I could only have one electric guitar, it would be a Telecaster. It's kind of in my DNA"

it's a hypothetical question [laughs]. I can certainly say the passion I have for guitars is not the same for amps. I love great amps, but I don't know what 'rectifier' or 'tube' is in that one or this one. I'm not an amp geek in that way."

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

"Interesting question. I think it would be single coils. If I could only have one electric guitar, it would be a Telecaster. It's kind of in my DNA and it was my first good electric guitar. I just feel at home on one. You can fatten up a Tele and get it sounding close to a Les Paul, though it might have a different sort of character – but it's tough to get Tele tones out of a humbucker." [AD]

For more information on The Cars, check out the website <https://thecars.org>

Elliot's Custom Shop Pelham Blue Les Paul is a reimaging of the discontinued 1960 Les Paul Standard had it survived until 1964. Here, he's pictured with his signature model on stage with The Immediate Family in Los Angeles last year

PHOTO BY SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Time to put your soldering iron down and consider a few often overlooked facts and figures about the guitars we play. Dave Burrluck answers some questions...

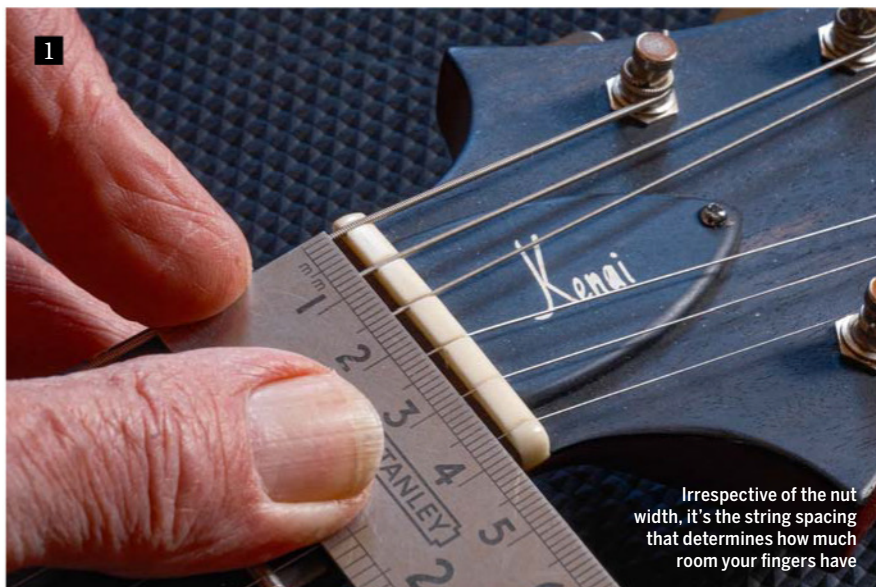
Q I've struggled with certain guitars over the years because the necks feel too small and I've got big fingers. I play electric exclusively and wondered if The Mod Squad could give me any tips. Are there certain guitars with wider necks?

Chris Morrison, via email

A Hi Chris, I'm sure you're not the only player, young or old, who's struggled with a neck that feels too thin, small or wide, too big or fat. But using the broad range of electric instruments we get in for review, there's perhaps not as much difference as you might imagine.

The thing I find interesting is that very few people talk about string spacing because, fairly obviously, irrespective of the width of the neck of two different guitars, if the string spacing is the same there won't be any more or less room for your sausage/needle fingers. Historically, Gibson used a wider neck when measured at the nut compared with Fender, and the perception is that it's still true today. But is it? And while plenty of people will quote you their preferred nut width, do they know what the actual string spacing is? To clarify, the string spacing is measured between the centres of the two outer strings [pic 1].

I spec out every review guitar that falls on my watch to review, as well as occasionally more historic pieces we



Irrespective of the nut width, it's the string spacing that determines how much room your fingers have

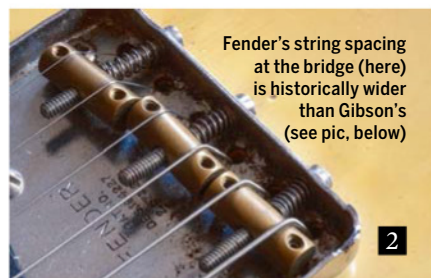
might be featuring. And from a selection of over 300 instruments I've measured over the past seven years, things are not quite what they seem. Regardless of the style or brand, the average string spacing from that considerable number is between 35mm, 35.5mm and 36mm, which means, theoretically, that there's a maximum of 0.2mm difference in width between each string pair, the equivalent to a 0.008-inch top E string. Typically, the smaller spacing will be on a neck with a thinner quoted nut width and vice versa, but that's not always the case, either.

Of course, this uniformity is created by the fact that the majority of larger makers will use a standard-sized nut with pre-cut or notched grooves, so their string spacing won't change. However, the way in which the actual neck is final-sanded and then finished can create more discrepancies – an acceptable tolerance that might mean a 43mm nut width on the specification sheet could be almost 0.5mm wider or narrower, sometimes more.

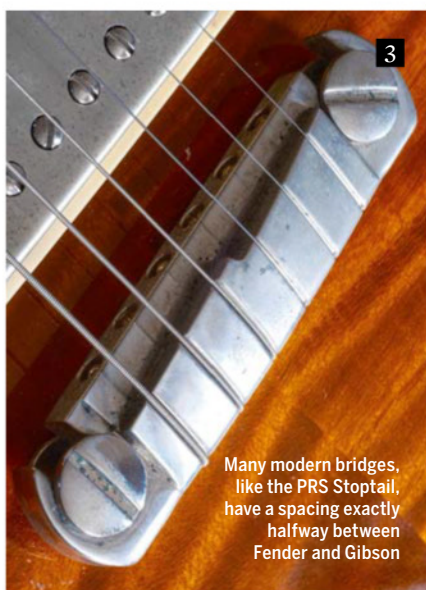
Back to the original perception that Gibson is wider than Fender, and at the other end – the bridge – it's actually

“A preference towards a certain neck width can have little or nothing to do with string spacing”

the opposite. Historically, Fender used a wider string spacing at the bridge of approximately 55mm, and Gibson used a narrower spacing closer to 50mm. So, again theoretically, on that Fender your left hand might be a little cramped, while there's more room for your pick or fingers at the bridge; the Gibson is the opposite [pics 2 and 2a]. In the more modern world, plenty of makers use a halfway bridge-spacing standard of 52.5mm, such as PRS, for example [pic 3].



Fender's string spacing at the bridge (here) is historically wider than Gibson's (see pic, below)



Many modern bridges, like the PRS Stoptail, have a spacing exactly halfway between Fender and Gibson

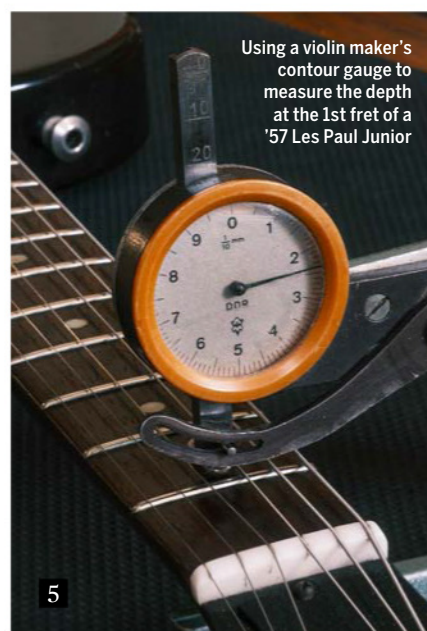


This recently released Epiphone Jeff Beck Oxblood isn't over-heavy at 3.9kg (8.56lb). It also has a very big neck. Read the full review in our next issue



This new Epiphone is spec'd with a 43mm nut width, but the actual width is slightly less

4



Using a violin maker's contour gauge to measure the depth at the 1st fret of a '57 Les Paul Junior

5

The reality is that when people say they prefer a 'big' or 'small' or even 'wide' or 'narrow' neck, that preference can have little or nothing to do with *actual* string spacing.

Shape Shifting

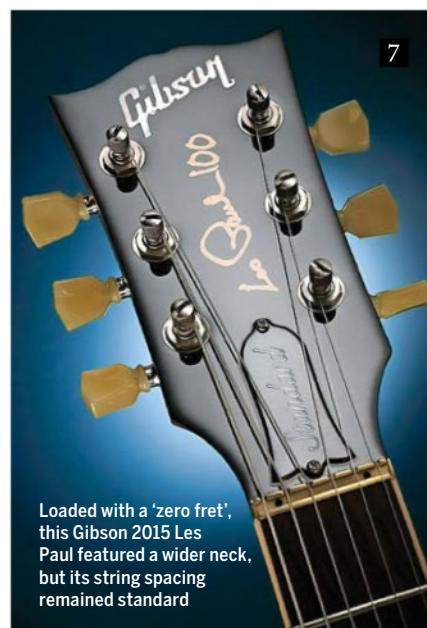
But does any of this really matter? Yes and no. Any of us can put our hand around a neck, play it a bit and conclude, 'Oh, it's a bit big for me,' or 'This feels too small,' when, dimensionally, they might be exactly the same: in width, measured at the nut [pic 4] and at the 12th fret; and in depth, typically measured at the 1st [pic 5] and 12th fret [pic 6]. But how so?

Well, the neck shape is crucial, too. Imagine a nice full C profile compared with the same width and depth but with a slightly V'd profile and, I'll wager, your hand will tell you the latter neck feels smaller because there is less shoulder to



6

Measuring at the 12th fret on the Junior, you can see the neck is typically thick at just over 25mm



7

Loaded with a 'zero fret', this Gibson 2015 Les Paul featured a wider neck, but its string spacing remained standard

"One way to get a bit more 'air' in the lower positions is to make a new nut with that wider string spacing"

the shape – it's less full feeling, even if it's a very subtle difference. Likewise, an asymmetric profile can throw another curveball. A neck might be fuller on the bass side and have less shoulder on the treble side, which can make it feel pleasantly big, not least if you wrap your thumb around the neck, whereas the

treble side feels 'smaller'. Sometimes it's the other way around.

Not many necks that we encounter in the mainstream electric world are much wider than 43mm at the nut, and the low E string will typically sit around 3mm from the fingerboard edge; on the treble side it's subtly closer, around 2.5mm. This would give you a potential string spacing of 37.5mm. Quite often, though, the actual string spacing is narrower.

One way to get a bit more 'air' in the lower positions is to make a new nut with that wider string spacing: the neck doesn't change, just the nut spacing. And it's worth mentioning that these seemingly small dimensional differences actually do make a difference to how you engage with the guitar and its playability.

Moving outside of the mainstream electric world, often jazz-aimed instruments do have slightly wider string spacing. For example, Eastman's Romeo and Romeo LA, certainly inspired by the jazz guitar, both use 37.5mm string spacing with nut widths of 44mm and 44.5mm respectively, pretty much the widest I've encountered.

One major exception to that, however, was Gibson in 2015 who thought that it was a jolly good idea to offer potentially sausage-finger-friendly wider necks on many of its models. But despite a width at the nut (actually, it was a brass zero fret) of approximately 45.5mm, these guitars retained their standard string spacing of 36.5mm at the nut and 50mm at the bridge [pic 7]. The reason escapes us. **G**

WEIGHT WATCHERS

When it comes to guitars, is there an optimum weight for the best playability?
Dave Burrluck pulls out the scales

Q You were quite critical of the weight of an Epiphone '57 Goldtop reissue you reviewed recently. Is there an official weight limit for guitars? I read somewhere that heavier is better. I'd be interested to know your thoughts.

Doug, via email

A Ha, no – there's not an official weight limit, but the bulk of any guitar, not least a Les Paul, can play a big part in your engagement and use. Many players will certainly say it doesn't bother them or, as you say, the heavier the better. The Les Paul is a bulky guitar and is always known as a heavier proposition to light ash-bodied Fenders, although there are plenty of exceptions to that generalisation.

But back to the Les Paul. In Jay Scott and Vic Da Pra's book *'Burst: 1958-'60 Sunburst Les Paul*, originally published in 1994, the authors state that "the perfect 'Burst follows the Rule of Eights

– a featherweight of 8lb and a resistance in each [Patent Applied For pickup] of 8kohms." In *The Beauty Of The 'Burst* by Yasuhiko Iwande, the 50 'Bursts that are spec'd out have a weight range between 8lb 1.4oz (3.67kg) and 9lb 11.4 oz (4.41kg).

So, yes, that 10lb (4.56kg) Goldtop that we reviewed last issue was certainly on the heavier side, especially bearing in mind its '57 reissue aim. But that's not to say there aren't any real '57s out there at that weight. Of course, head into the 70s and try to find a Les Paul Deluxe

"The bulk of any guitar, not least a Les Paul, can play a big part in both your engagement and use"

much under 10lbs! Good luck. They do exist, but they seem quite rare.

Today? Well, back in 2019 I reviewed a 10.39lb (4.72kg) Gibson Les Paul Classic, supposedly weight-relieved, only beaten over these past years by an all solid Fret-King Eclat Paul Rose GT, which came in at 10.43lb (4.74kg). Even an original Dan Armstrong Ampeg I was writing about, with its solid acrylic body, only weighed 9.68lb (4.4kg)!

Back to Epiphone, then, and the just-launched Jeff Beck Oxblood Les Paul turned up with a trim weight of 8.56lb (3.89kg) – well within the weight range illustrated by Yasuhiko Iwande and, personally, I find that very manageable for the style. And this is the point: checking or asking for the weight of a guitar isn't for cork-sniffers only; we all have our own preferences. But what about the sound? Does the new Oxblood sound 'lighter' than that Goldtop? You'll have to wait for our review in the next issue! **G**



Our review model of the Epiphone 1957 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue weighed in at a whopping 10lb

*That should give you something to think about till our next issue.
In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.*



Huw Price's *Nitty*Gritty

For something versatile or offbeat, reimagining a classic could be the way to go

Mongrelcaster Project



PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

A friend of mine already owns a fine selection of classic models, so he decided to put some of the parts he has collected back into use and create something entirely different. An ash Guitarbuild body finished in metallic copper caught his eye because it reminded him of the bronze-dipped Strat Robbie Robertson used for *The Last Waltz*. A roasted maple Musikraft S-type neck was also acquired, complete with an aged finish and a set of vintage style Kluson tuners.

For the electronics, a 1950s P-90, Seymour Duncan Lipstick and a vintage Japanese Tiesco Gold Foil pickup were earmarked for the bridge, middle and neck positions respectively, while a pre-CBS vibrato block was matched with a modern plate and set of steel saddles, and a three-ply white pickguard was sourced along with a set of Tele knobs. The most unusual twist comes from Six String Supplies in its 10-Way Stratocaster Wiring Harness, complete with 250k CTS potentiometers, paper-in-oil tone capacitors and a Freeway 5B5-01 pickup selector switch.

One In The Hole

I decided to fit the P-90 first and started by covering the pickguard in masking tape. I marked a centre line from the bridge to the neck and established the line where the P-90 pole screws would coincide with the middle of the stock bridge pickup. I placed a P-90 routing template over the pickguard and used it to draw the outline of the opening for the pickup cover. Routing

Routing pickguards can be a messy business, so I used my jeweller's saw to cut away the plastic

pickguards can be a messy business, so I used my jeweller's saw to cut away most of the plastic, staying about 2mm inside the marked line.

With the pickguard placed onto a couple of spacers, I aligned the P-90 router template and clamped everything down firmly. Using a bearing guided router bit in a palm router, I finished cutting the P-90



This collection of secondhand, vintage and new parts is ready to be assembled into a unique guitar

opening to size. When the pickguard was mounted on the body, I was able to mark the areas where wood needed to be removed for the P-90 pickup.

The body had already been modified for a bridge humbucker, and while whoever did it didn't use a router, they did a pretty decent job. The bottom of the recess wasn't level so I removed the pickguard and used the router to skim it flat. The P-90 router template was then repositioned, fixed down and used to cut out the pickup recess.

The hole was far deeper than P-90 cavities usually are, so regular P-90 mounting screws would be too short. It was also clear that the pickup would have

to be jacked up on springs or foam, and the wood was so thin that any mounting screws would encroach into the spring cavity.

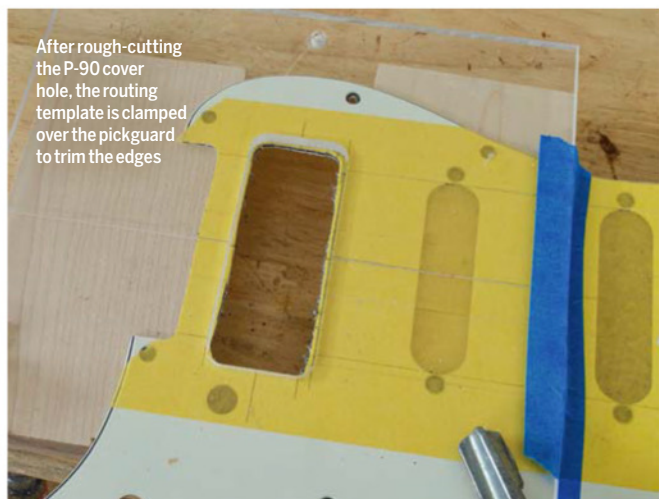
I decided to address this by making an ash plug to fit the P-90 section. Using the P-90 routing template, it was easy to draw the outline, and after a bit of sawing and filing, I had a 15mm deep plug that fit tightly in the hole. Unfortunately, the way that P-90s are constructed complicates matters.

The pole screws protrude significantly from the bottom of the baseplate, so the plug needed a channel cut through its centre line to provide clearance. Then there's the area where bobbin wires pass through the baseplate and are soldered to

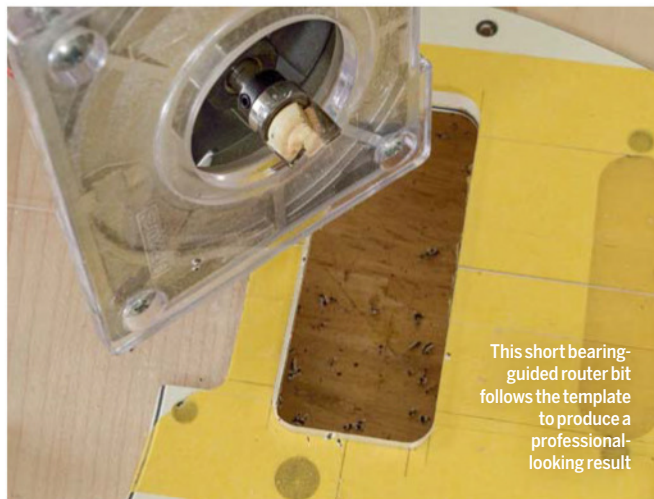
the braided lead. To accommodate this, I cut a shelf at the control end of the plug before glueing it in with Titebond Original.

Foiled Again

Mounting the Tiesco Gold Foil presented a different set of challenges. The most glaring issue was the pickup's baseplate, which extended so far beyond each end of the cover, it would protrude beyond the edge of the pickguard on the bass side. I decided to make a shorter baseplate. Many factors contribute to the tone, frequency response and output level of pickups, so I wanted to ensure I was replacing like for like. A magnet established that the Tiesco



After rough-cutting the P-90 cover hole, the routing template is clamped over the pickguard to trim the edges



This short bearing-guided router bit follows the template to produce a professional-looking result



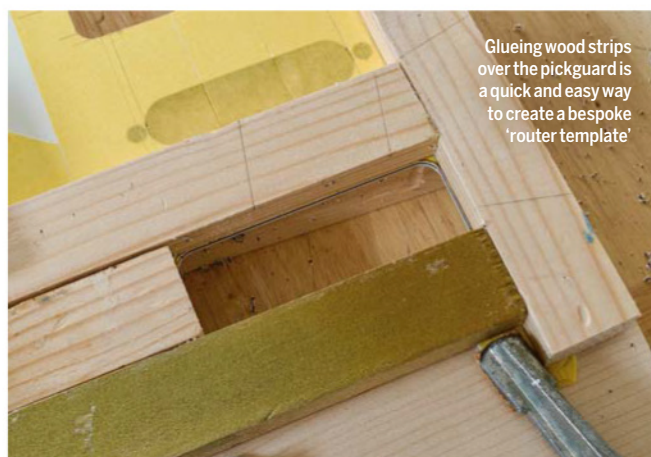
An ash plug with cutouts for the pole screws and wires is glued into the body to mount the P-90



The P-90 is installed and there's sufficient clearance to shim it up if necessary



The Gold Foil is disassembled with the new baseplate on the far left next to the original baseplate



Glueing wood strips over the pickguard is a quick and easy way to create a bespoke 'router template'

baseplate was steel, which contributes to the overall inductance of the pickup.

My local metal merchants had some 1mm thick steel sheet and cut me a piece measuring 35mm by 87mm. The cover and baseplate of this Tiesco Gold Foil are not soldered together like a regular Gibson humbucker. Instead, they're clamped together by machine bolts measuring about 1.5mm in diameter.

With the pickup disassembled, I placed the original baseplate over the new one,

marked the hole positions for the bolts and leadout wire and then drilled them to size. This left some sharp burrs, which I then smoothed off using a belt sander. However, anybody could do the same with a file and some sandpaper.

Mindful of the fact that the Gold Foil was likely to be lower in output than the P-90, I decided that mounting it as close to the strings as possible would be the best starting point. My plan was to rout a 1mm deep recess into the body to accommodate

the baseplate, with the pickguard pressing down and holding the pickup in place.

First, I needed to cut a Gold Foil-covered hole in the pickguard and I followed pretty much the same procedure as I did for the P-90. This time I didn't have a router template, but I made one by fixing strips of wood onto the pickguard. The trick is to apply masking tape to the pickguard and the wood strips before super-glueing them together. Glueing tape to tape holds things firmly, but it's easy to separate everything once you're done.

With the Gold Foil cover hole cut out, I applied masking tape to the body in the bridge pickup area, screwed down the pickguard and traced the opening onto the masking tape. After making another 'template' using the wood strips and super-glue method, I routed the recess for the baseplate, along with a freehand 'worm rout' for the leadout wire. The reassembled pickup fit snugly and the pickguard clamped it down.

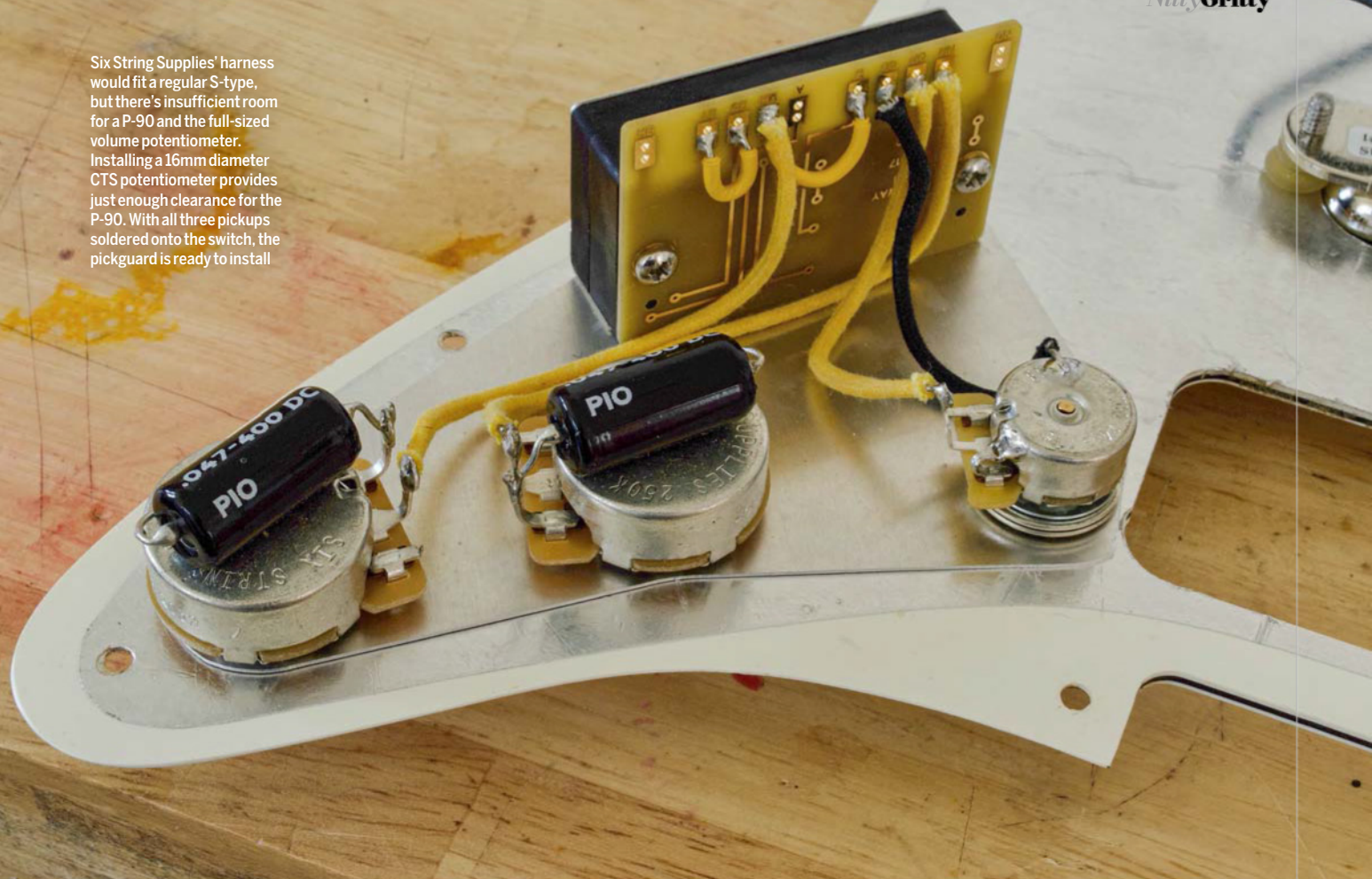
Pot Luck

Projects such as this always seem straightforward in theory, but attempts to combine components from various manufacturers invariably create complications. I knew what to expect with the P-90 and Gold Foil pickups, but I had assumed that mounting the controls would be straightforward.



A 1mm recess is cut for the new Gold Foil baseplate, along with a 'worm rout' for the leadout wire

Six String Supplies' harness would fit a regular S-type, but there's insufficient room for a P-90 and the full-sized volume potentiometer. Installing a 16mm diameter CTS potentiometer provides just enough clearance for the P-90. With all three pickups soldered onto the switch, the pickguard is ready to install



The first clue to the contrary came when I was lining up Six String Supplies' 50s-style metal shielding plate and one corner protruded beyond the edge of the P-90 cutout. I solved that by cutting away a small section of shield using my fret nippers, but when I mounted the controls, I discovered there was insufficient room for a P-90 and a regular-sized volume potentiometer with a 24mm diameter. Installing a 16mm wide CTS 250k pot solved that problem and I was finally ready to install the controls.

Years ago, 10 tones would have required an array of switches and a complicated rat's nest of wiring

Years ago, 10 tones would have required an array of toggle or push-pull switches and a complicated rat's nest of wiring. With the Six String Supplies harness, an integral PCB simplifies everything, and so long as you follow the instructions, connecting the pickups is even easier than hooking up a conventional five-way.

With three different pickups, my only concern was the phase relationships, so after mounting the pickguard I attached the neck and a couple of strings and had

a listen. It turned out that the P-90 was out of phase with the other two, so I loosened the baseplate and flipped the magnets.

Altering the Gold Foil's phase would have been riskier, so that was never an option. The Lipstick's leadout cable contained two signal wires and a braided shield to ground the cover. Had I needed to reverse the Lipstick's phase, too, I would have done that electronically, rather than magnetically, by reversing the hot and cold wires.

Getting Going

Whenever I'm assembling a guitar for the first time, or after a refret, I place a capo at the 1st fret, raise the bridge or saddles until the strings ring cleanly and tune them up. Then I adjust the vibrato springs if necessary, followed by the truss rod to set the neck relief. A gauge can then be used to set the action at the 13th fret, rather than the 12th. Only then is the capo removed to bring the nut back into the equation, and if the strings buzz against the 1st fret, it's new nut time. But if the action goes up, it means the nut slots can be filed deeper, and since the action has already been set, they're easy to dial in.

My educated guesses regarding pickup heights worked out well, although the Gold Foil's unpromising 5k reading proved to be misleading. Hitherto I've only tried reissues of Japanese Gold Foils and found them overly bright and a bit gutless. This vintage

one sounds super clear, generates intriguing harmonics and keeps pace with the 1950s P-90. The Lipstick is a bit underpowered in comparison, but it has a pleasingly chimey quack and combines well with the others in parallel and series modes.

Strings Attached

It could be that this project is complete, or it may continue evolving. The proximity of the volume control to the P-90 is a tad intrusive and may explain Fender's decision to choose lower-profile plastic knobs, rather than opting for the Tele knobs seen on early Strat prototypes.

Some of the pickup combinations provided by the 10-way switch are more useful than others. For instance, the series options provide a useful bump in output and midrange, and the parallel neck and bridge setting sounds excellent, but the three-in-parallel option sounds as underwhelming as always.

I suspect a regular Strat pickup with an inductance plate might prove more useful than the Lipstick, although it wouldn't look as good. Simplifying and shifting the controls, with a two-knob master volume and tone arrangement, could also be considered. But the beauty of projects like these is that you're never restricted by notions of originality or convention. It's a mod mod world. **G**

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David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

Once considered the runt of vintage LPs, first-year Goldtops could be the pick of the litter

1952 Gibson Les Paul



The very first run of Les Pauls had diagonally placed screws holding the bridge pickup, taller knobs and unbound necks without serial numbers

As one of the very first Les Pauls ever made, this one has the unbound neck with a slight V profile towards the nut end that feels really nice. It's like a 1956 wide-neck Strat V that begins to round off by the 5th fret. A lot of these early Les Pauls sound particularly good, and I wish Gibson had continued with the unbound fretboards. There's something about the feel of shoulders that are uninterrupted by binding that I really like because it is actually very Fender-like.

"It does have some playwear, but this is a completely original guitar with the long barrel 'tall boy' knobs and nothing has ever been altered or manipulated. The 'Patent Pending' stamp is on the tailpiece hinge, and the original bar bridge is still attached. I usually fit the MojoAxe conversion bridge to these guitars, but this one plays so well that I left it original. It sounds wonderfully bright, and as you're playing you can feel the vibrations everywhere. It has so much character, I'm loath to modify it.

"There has been a lot of debate about the diagonal screw fitting of the bridge pickup and why Gibson changed to two fixing screws in line with the pole screws. I think they had maybe bought a bunch of these covers with the screw holes and wanted to use them up. A friend of mine told me the reason they went to the centre screws is that it helped spacer foam under the pickups to expand more evenly and the pickups wouldn't twist off square when the height was adjusted.

"With the earliest ones, the pickguard is almost on top of the body because the bracket has virtually no elevation. Other features include the absence of

"Something about the feel of shoulders that are uninterrupted by binding is actually very Fender-like"

a switch washer or 'poker chip' and no-line Kluson tuners. This one comes with its original four-latch brown case with the pink interior.

"It's a funny thing that when I was a young guy, a 1952 Les Paul was not a cool guitar to own, especially when you could get a '54, '55 or '56 instead. The 1952s were considered cursed and they were very inexpensive. I remember these guitars trading on 48th Street for \$600 and hanging around and fading in shop windows for months on end. When I look back now, I wish I'd grabbed every one I could get my hands on.

"Les Paul designed the tailpiece and I think Gibson tried to accommodate him by making it work as well as it could. But that meant the strings had to wrap under the bridge, rather than over it, and they really weren't playable from day one. They were maybe rushed into production because Gibson was terrified by Fender's sales numbers.

"I think the difference is that Fender grew their guitars within the factory and they released them when they were pretty much perfected. In contrast, Gibson often put out new models too early and let them develop in the public's hands. For instance, the earliest 1953 wraptail Goldtops had

an unsuitable neck angle and many are in perfect condition because they were even less playable than the 1952s. No less than three neck angles were used for Specials and Juniors, and they even got the neck angle wrong on the first ES-335s.

"When guys started doing 'Burst conversions, they were buying Goldtops with bound fingerboards. The thing is that most of the bound ones had really big and clubby necks. They're nothing like the early ones, and although I've spoken to people who were close to the scene, nobody has ever been able to explain to me why the decision to alter the neck profile was made.

"I don't know if it was an executive order or maybe something one neck carver did and everybody followed suit. Perhaps it was customer feedback or just the guys in the factory realising that the clubby necks required less work and management allowed them to get away with it.

"To make a really nice V neck requires time, and the more finely crafted soft V profile does occasionally show up on later guitars including 'Bursts and Goldtops. I almost feel like when you get one of those, it was probably made for a VIP who requested it. You can pick up 15 Goldtops from 1956 and one of them might have that perfectly shaped neck. It certainly wasn't Gibson's standard profile, and that's one of the many things that make this Goldtop so special." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

"It sounds wonderfully bright, and as you're playing you can feel the vibrations everywhere"

Beyond its historical significance, the rare feature that enhances very early Les Pauls is a soft V profile that rounds out further up the neck

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Carlos Santana

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Les Paul Custom, Keeley Boss SD-1, Vox V845 Wah & Marshall JTM45 MkII reissue | **Difficulty** ★★★★★ | 15 mins per example

BORN IN MEXICO, CARLOS SANTANA

moved to the US with his family as a teenager and was in a unique position to combine his own musical heritage (partly gained from his father, who was also a musician) with the stylistic melting pot that was taking place in San Francisco during the 60s. Initially, his strongest influence was the blues; BB King, Mike Bloomfield and Peter Green, among others, inspired him to form the Santana Blues Band in 1966. Within a couple of years, his Mexican heritage began to surface and combined with the influences of Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, Tito Puente and Gábor Szabó.

By 1969, he had assembled the first line-up of the Santana band and was signed to

Columbia Records, recording their debut LP. Santana was an early adopter of the singing, sustained notes made possible by playing at high volume. Earlier gear setups included Fender amps and Gibson guitars, though he was quick to notice the potential of the Mesa/Boogie Mark I – and was allegedly responsible for part of its name by exclaiming the following while trying it out: “Man, that thing really boogies!”

These days, he is most associated with various models of his PRS signature guitar, using a wah pedal as a tone filter. This is often set at a fixed point – but not always.

The examples here are inspired by Santana’s soulful phrasing, combining long,

held notes with exuberant flurries of picking. Pentatonic ideas are mixed with a jazz influence, picking out minor 9ths, suspended 4ths and partial arpeggios. This is more about playing and embellishing a melody than thinking about music theory – and, as in Jimmy Page’s playing, the faster phrases are not intended to be perfectly ‘on the grid’ in terms of timing. Try that and you’ll find it loses something... I hope you enjoy these ideas and see you next time! 



Richard Barrett’s album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Example 1

THIS FIRST EXAMPLE establishes a melodic and rhythmic pattern that is embellished with bends, slides and rhythmic picking. There is a blues influence, but this isn’t a ‘straight’ blues. Check out the C minor arpeggio in the pick-up bar, then the brief B $\flat$ 7 arpeggio leading into bar 3, where the sus4 (A $\flat$) is stressed over the E $\flat$ chord. The tail end of the phrase in bar 4 is more of a blues motif with the ‘thrown away’ pull-off.

♩ = 74 8va

Fm B $\flat$

BU RP RP BU BU BD

13 11 15 13 (15) (15) (15) 13 (15) 13 (15) (13) 11 13 18 15 15 13 15 16

12 13

15 (16) 15 15 16 15 13 16 13 16

4

Example 2

AGAIN, THERE IS AN ARPEGGIO FRAGMENT leading into the main body of the phrase. This builds with some faster legato and picked repeated ideas. These are transcribed in strict time for ease of reading, but in reality this is more relaxed and pulls back a little against the beat. Try playing ever so slightly behind without going completely out of time, and you'll be in the right ballpark. Note that the wah is rocked slightly forward to add some extra expression at the end of this example.

Example 2 musical notation (Measures 1-4). The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 4/4 time signature. The guitar part features various techniques: arpeggios, triplets, and a 9:4 ratio. Chords indicated are Dm7b5, Gsus4, G, Csus4, and C. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for each measure.

Example 3

WE'RE REACHING SOMETHING OF A PEAK with the held and then tremolo-picked bend that starts this phrase, leading to more of a pentatonic feel in the follow-up. We don't stay pentatonic for long, though – a rapid-picked repeated phrase is followed by some more triplet-based ideas that mix staccato and held notes. Like Example 2, these are transcribed in strict time, but you'll want to experiment to get the right 'lilt' going on here.

Example 3 musical notation (Measures 1-4). The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 4/4 time signature. The guitar part features various techniques: arpeggios, triplets, and a 9:4 ratio. Chords indicated are Fm, Bbsus4, Bb, Ebmaj7, and Abmaj7. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for each measure.

Example 4

THIS CLOSING PHRASE returns to a more controlled feel, picking up on a few of the arpeggios for the underlying Gsus4/G chords, then emphasising the sus4 (F) over the final Csus4/C chords. You don't necessarily need to learn the arpeggio shapes for each chord, but it's fair to assume that Santana would have absorbed a lot from his eclectic influences going back decades. Also remember: sometimes one note played rhythmically can be all you need!

The musical notation for Example 4 is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-2) features a guitar line with a melodic phrase and a bass line with a rhythmic pattern. The second system (measures 3-4) continues the melodic and rhythmic development. Chord labels include Gsus4, G, Csus4, and C. Fret numbers are indicated for both guitar and bass lines.

System 1 (Measures 1-2):

- Guitar:** Measure 1 starts with a Gsus4 chord, followed by a melodic phrase. Measure 2 continues the phrase with a Dm7b5 chord.
- Bass:** Measure 1 has a rhythmic pattern with fret numbers 15, 16, 15, 18, 18, 16, 15. Measure 2 continues with fret numbers 18, (19)-(18)-16-18, 16-15, 17.

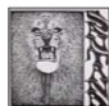
System 2 (Measures 3-4):

- Guitar:** Measure 3 starts with a Gsus4 chord, followed by a melodic phrase. Measure 4 continues the phrase with a C chord.
- Bass:** Measure 3 has a rhythmic pattern with fret numbers 15, 16, 17-15, 17, 16. Measure 4 continues with fret numbers 17-18, 17-(18)-(18)-(18)-17-(18), (17)-15, 17.

Hear It Here

SANTANA

SANTANA



The band's debut was released in 1969 just after their successful appearance at the Woodstock Festival.

There had not been a fusion of rock, blues and Latin sounds like this before. Though the guitar tone and overall production have become more refined over the decades, this is a definitive statement to start his career. With the heartfelt playing and emotional impact on tracks such as *Evil Ways*, *Soul Sacrifice* and *Jingo*, Carlos had already formed his own unique style.

SANTANA

ABRAXAS

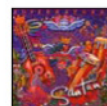


The follow-up to *Santana*, *Abraxas*, was released in 1970 and it's essential listening for anyone getting into Carlos

Santana. It contains his famous cover of *Black Magic Woman* segueing into Gábor Szabó's *Gypsy Queen*. *Oye Cómo Va* remains a well-deserved classic, showcasing Carlos's ability to quote from an impressive variety of styles in just one guitar solo. Finally, check out *Samba Pa Ti* – there's plenty to learn from the way he pushes and pulls the rhythms on this one.

SANTANA

SUPERNATURAL



Fast forward to 1999 and this nine-times Grammy Award-winning album (with featured special guests) thrust Santana

firmly back into the mainstream spotlight. Singles such as *Smooth* (featuring Rob Thomas), *Maria Maria* (with the Product G&B) and *Put Your Lights On* (featuring Everlast) showcase his playing, often in a more contemporary setting. And, suffice to say, it's lost none of its vitality over the ensuing decades; the tones are more refined, but the essence remains.

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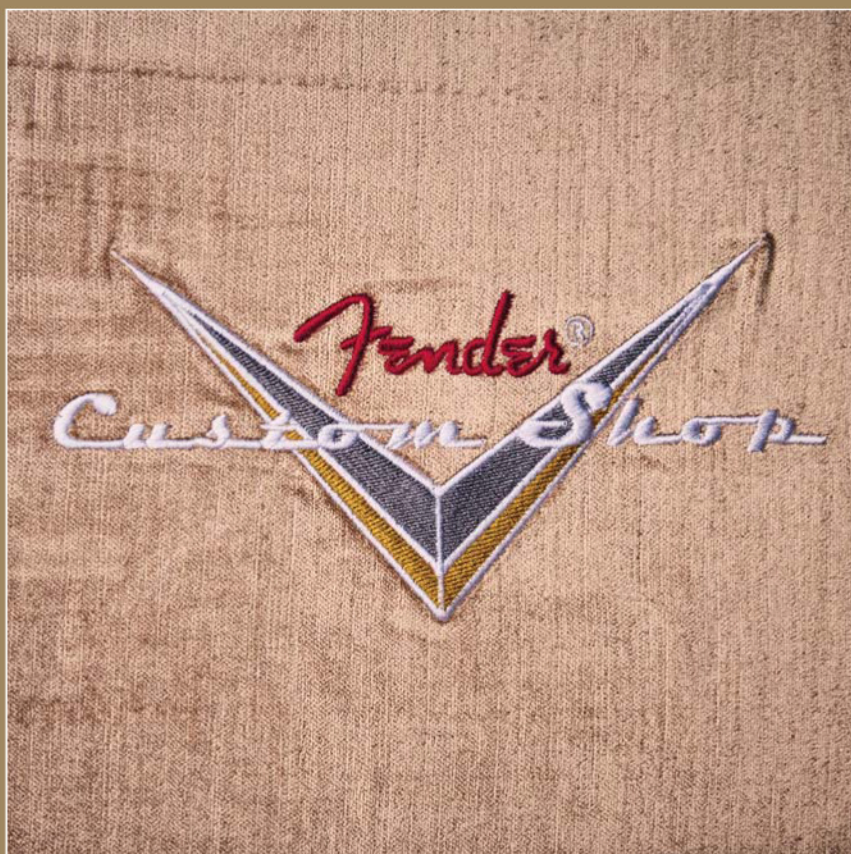
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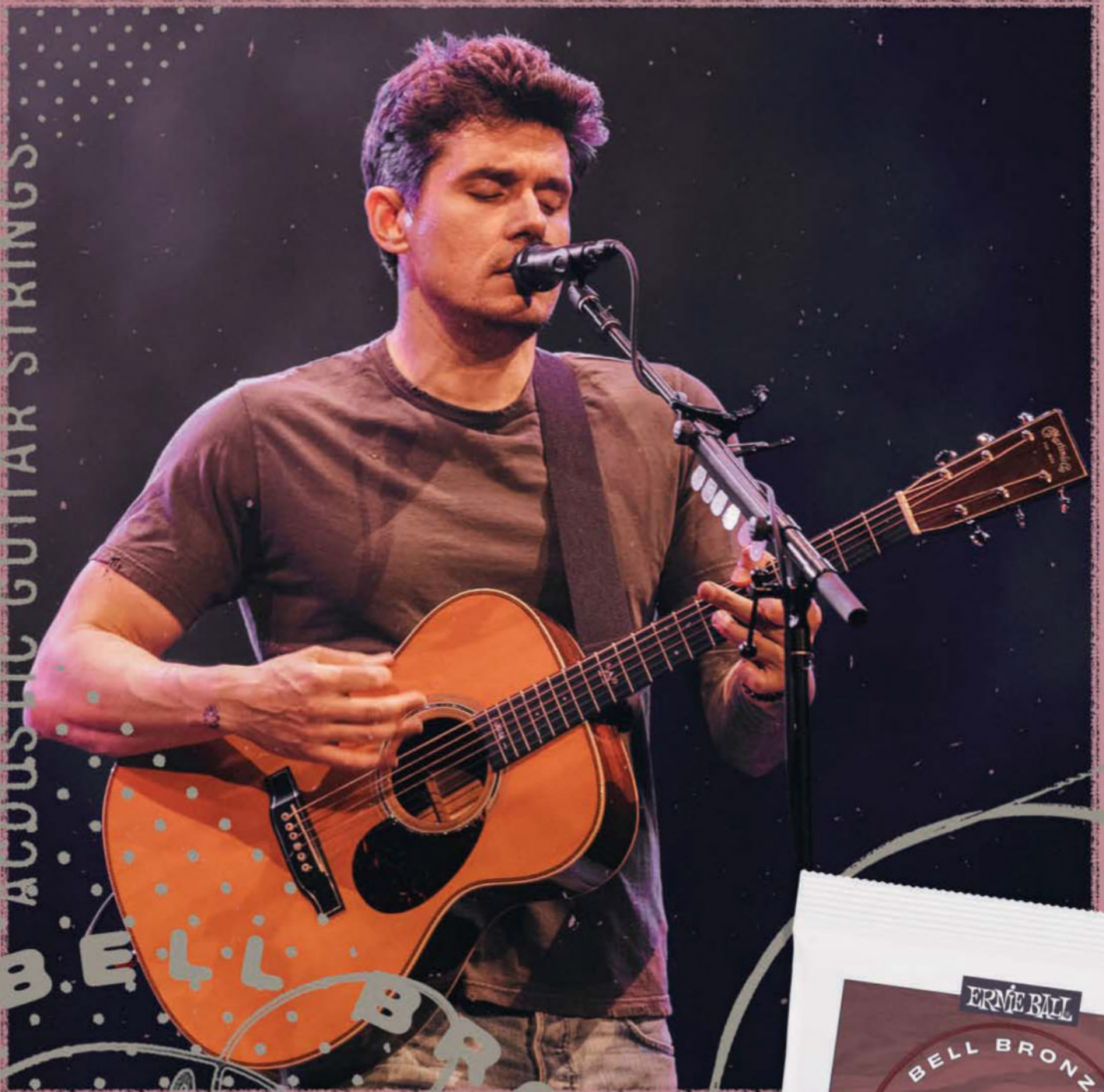


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Acoustic

A celebration of the rich heritage and exquisite sound of the acoustic guitar



Nowhere is the elusive magic of the past evoked so powerfully as in vintage acoustic guitars. And that magic is a thing not easily captured in a bottle. But, over the years, Gibson's Murphy Lab – the department responsible for producing the company's most lifelike recreations of golden era Gibsons – has been in operation, its team has learned an awful lot about the arcane art of making new guitars look and sound old. This issue's cover story offered us a fascinating window on that work,

as Robi Johns of the company's acoustic-making division in Bozeman, Montana, described some of the techniques and finesse work behind the newest Heavy Aged acoustics to emerge from the Murphy Lab – which undeniably look as if they've seen a lifetime of music-making already.

Elsewhere in this special edition, we catch up with the wizard of the dark art of acoustic-pickup making, Lloyd Baggs, to talk about his highly innovative AEG-1 thinline electro-acoustic, we discuss tunings with folk-rock master Richard Thompson, and we've also thrown in three themed buyer's guides to help you pick a keeper when you next make a purchase. Enjoy the issue, and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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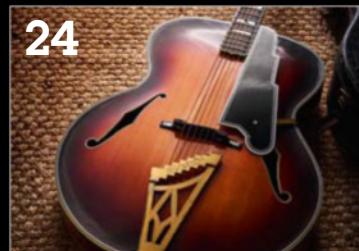
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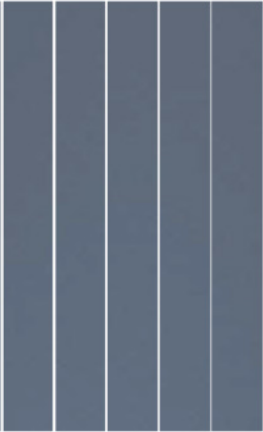
The Gypsy jazz exponent pays tribute to George Harrison

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER





TUNNING

Few guitarists are loved as equally for their acoustic work as their electric playing but such is the unique talent of **Richard Thompson**. We meet him to find out how he's preparing to go head-to-head with Tommy Emmanuel, chat about the end of his touring days, and talk alternative tunings

Words Andrew Daly Photo Olly Curtis

Dating back to his years with Fairport Convention and continuing through his solo career – which has included dozens of albums, memorable songs and notable collaborations – Richard Thompson has made a habit of upending the norms when it comes to folk music.

His use of altered tunings and a myriad of interesting arrangements has made him stand out as both a songwriter *and* a guitarist, since breaking onto the scene with his brooding, brilliant guitar playing with Fairport Convention in the 60s. To most, his prolific body of work in the decades that followed has been pretty damn innovative, but to Richard Thompson, not so much. “I suppose all these ideas are ideas that classical players have been using for hundreds of years,” he tells *Guitarist*. When prodded that most folk players aren’t quite as adventurous as he tends to be, Thompson acquiesces, if only a little, admitting: “In the realm of folk music, perhaps we’re still exploring some of these ideas.”

Ear-catching tunings aside, Thompson’s back catalogue is staggering. Boasting albums like 1972’s *Henry The Human Fly*, 1974’s *I Want To See The Bright*

Lights Tonight with then-wife Linda Thompson, and *Shoot Out The Lights* from 1982, to name but a few, you’ll find that not only is Thompson an ace in the hole when it comes to songwriting, but he’s a crack shot with a six-string – either acoustic or electric – slung over his shoulder. As for what he looks for in a guitar, Thompson keeps things simple yet visceral, explaining: “I think if a guitar gives you one sound, one really great tone, that’s the kind of place that you want to start.”

Thompson doesn’t tour much any more, instead picking his spots and doing select shows, such as the one he’s planned with acoustic master Tommy Emmanuel at Carnegie Hall in October. Elsewhere, he’s sitting on a cache of songs he penned while off the road during the Covid pandemic.

To that end, Thompson is eager to return to the studio to record a follow-up to 2024’s *Ship To Shore*, although logistics won’t permit it until the end of 2025. In the meantime, the venerable songsmith catches us up on what’s new in his ever-evolving musical world. “I’m just looking for that tone,” he says. “The kind of tone that speaks for you, that speaks for your soul.”

You've got a gig upcoming with Tommy Emmanuel. Are you ready for it?

"Well, it's just one show at Carnegie Hall and it's the first time that Tommy and I have been on the bill together, so that'll be fun. I'm sure that we'll play some stuff together, which will be challenging. I mean, he's a wonderful player. I should try not to be intimidated, as pound for pound, he's probably the most accomplished acoustic guitar player on the planet."

It's possible Tommy might be intimidated by you as you're also quite accomplished.

"Oh, we'll see. Hopefully, it's not a competition [laughs]. I think we'll have a lot of fun."

You're no stranger to collaboration. What's your secret?

"To keep it musical. I hate competitive music; I hate guitar jams because they usually get competitive. You have to really breathe and be true to yourself and just think, 'This has to be music. It has to have all the elements that good music needs.' That's my advice to myself, anyway."

You're known for using alternative tunings. What sparked your interest in that approach?

"When I was a teenager, I'd go to folk clubs in London and you'd see people using alternative tunings, and the first one I saw was DADGAD. This was back in the late 50s/early 60s, and I saw that it was a possibility. And as I started to play more acoustically solo, I was looking to make the sound bigger."

So the alternative tunings allowed you to enhance and thicken the sound?

"You know, it's one thing to strum, strum, strum, but it's another thing to think, 'Well, how can I get more sound out of a subtle instrument? How can I be more orchestral?' Obviously, fingerstyle gives you more



Richard Thompson will join forces with Tommy Emmanuel in October for one night only at New York's Carnegie Hall

PHOTOBYCOURTIS

Collaboration has been a large part of Thompson's career. Here, he performs with then-wife, Linda Thompson, at London's Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park, March 1975



"I'm just looking for that tone. The kind of tone that speaks for you, that speaks for your soul"

PHOTOBYBRIAN COOKE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

possibilities in that direction, but also I thought, 'Let me try some tunings and see what happens with that.'"

What were the first tunings you experimented with?

"I used drop D all the time; I play a lot of things in drop D. And I used DADGAD, but really, I tried not to use too many tunings. I used maybe three or four. The idea is you can have more strings ringing over, if you like. So, regardless of what you're playing, there will always be something ringing, either as a drone or as something that suspends on the top string of the guitar."

"The aim is to fill the room a bit more. And in some cases, to play more parts, or to have a bassline or drone, or a harmony at the same time. That tends to be able to keep something full going if you play solos on an acoustic guitar because you don't have to rephrase that for the bottom not to fall away as you play the solo; you can keep something going."

Do you find that your tuning explorations have kept your music from stagnating?

"Absolutely. Sometimes, a song will tell you what tuning it needs to be in. The song itself will suggest to you what harmony it needs, what overtones it needs, and that can lead you to a whole new tuning, perhaps."

Are you experimenting with any new tunings? If so, how are you applying them to your music?

"Oh, gosh [laughs], I can't really remember! I mean, I can give examples of a tuning that I use from time to time, which is basically the top four strings are in standard, the A string is down to the G, and the sixth string is down to C, and it gives you kind of a modal tuning. I also use this as a kind of rock 'n' roll tuning in the key of G. It's very, very versatile. I use it for a whole bunch of things, and even in more recent songs."

Since you don't tour much these days, how do you stay in good playing shape and keep from falling off?

"Well, of all the things that you need as a performing guitarist, or as a performing songwriter, or whatever, it's certainly good to be mobile. First of all, you need to be able to walk and be able to travel, and to keep your footing. If you're a guitar player, you know, think of all the muscles that you use just to stand up and then sit down. If you have arthritis or something like that, it's going to affect your mobility as a player. It can affect your skeletal structure, it's going to affect your muscles, and it's going to affect your ability to keep limber, stretching and building strength."

How do you combat that?

"I think stretching and strength training are equally important, really, to keeping everything working. And I, personally, don't notice a real falling off of ability. I mean, I'm 76, but I'm still able to do pretty much everything that I ever could. So that's a good thing."

Do you find that new gear doesn't have quite the same magic as vintage gear, or does that not matter to you?

"These days, I'm finding that new gear can actually sound really good, and that old gear can be really overrated. Again, sometimes it's down to things like the tubes and things like studio microphones. I mean, everyone loves the idea of a vintage 50s amp – but, yes, sometimes, you can't get the tubes that you used to be able to get



PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

for that. So, sometimes, a modern version will sound better. I think modern technology is fine; I'm just not a fan of digital versions of anything on the whole. I still tend to record analogue in the studio. I don't like digital simulations. I swear I can hear the difference."

Are there any modern guitar players that you've kept up with, and whose playing you really enjoy?

"Good question. This is going to sound self-serving, but my son-in-law is a really great guitar player, James Walbourne. He plays with The Pretenders, and he's a great, great player. He also plays with my daughter [Kami Thompson] in a band called The Rails. He's a wonderful guitar player. And my grandson, Zak Hobbs: if you asked me for some of my favourite guitar players in the world, those two would be in my Top 5."

You put out your latest album, *Ship To Shore*, in 2024. Are you working on new music?

"Well, because of Covid, I was off the road for two and a half years and I did a lot of writing then. I was just sitting at home writing, so I'm, like, way ahead on material. And so I can't wait to get back into the studio and record some more. But, practically, I probably can't do it until the end of this year. But yes, the answer is 'yes' – I just need the time to get in there and do it." 📺

www.richardthompson-music.com

Richard's signature Lowden features a AAAA cedar top, figured ziricote back and sides, and a five-piece neck

"Sometimes, a song will tell you what harmony or overtones it needs, and that can lead to a whole new tuning"



Richard Thompson's latest album, *Ship To Shore*, is available now on New West Records

UNPLUGGED GEMS

Three tracks that show why RT is an acoustic genius

Beeswing



Appearing on Richard's sonically progressive 1994 album, *Mirror Blue*, *Beeswing* – despite that setting – one of the most traditionally beautiful fingerstyle acoustic folk songs ever committed to tape. Charting the turbulent love story of the song's protagonist and a young woman trapped in factory-work drudgery, *Beeswing* shows off Thompson's dexterity and delicacy as a fingerstyle player but also his novelist's eye for character and human failings. Moving, heartbreaking even, this is an essential track for anyone wishing to understand why Thompson is consistently rated among the greatest songwriters working in the folk-rock sphere.

1952 Vincent Black Lightning



This track features on the 1991 album, *Rumour And Sigh*, and is arguably the equal of *Beeswing* as an acoustic performance and as a song – and also touches on the same themes of rebellion and tragic love. However, there's a kind of chrome-clad 1950s swagger to this story of a biker turned bankrobber and his red-headed love. Punchy and pugnacious where *Beeswing* whispers, Thompson almost rips the notes from his acoustic towards the tear-jerking conclusion of the song. Top marks for using a classic motorbike as the title, too!

Waltzing's For Dreamers



Recorded for 1988's *Amnesia*, this song shows off Thompson's talent for penning unflinching portraits of people trying to cope with loss and emotional defeat. This may be a song about heartbreak, but there's nothing saccharine in the plaintive end-of-dance lyrics: "I'm sad as a proud man can be sad tonight / Just let me dream on / Oh just let me sway / While the sweet violins / And the saxophones play / And Miss, you don't know me / But can't we pretend / That we care for each other / Till the band reach the end." Bittersweet in the extreme, this is songwriting of almost literary stature, while the acoustic accompaniment shows off Thompson's ability to support a story with restraint and sombre beauty. [JD]



Class of '25

This year's acoustic scene is in rude health, boasting innovation and classic craft

Words Dave Burrluck



GIBSON J-45 SPECIAL £1,699

A trio of Specials launched earlier this year – comprising a J-45, Hummingbird and L-00 – and they're more than just a price-point exercise in bringing a Gibson electro under £2k. 'Good guitar on a budget' sums up this Sitka spruce/mahogany J-45 with utile neck wood, which includes the LR Baggs Element Bronze system and its soundhole volume control. Our review sample came very well set up. It's a good player and exactly the sort of guitar to take on a gig: a versatile all-rounder with strong tonal projection. www.gibson.com



LR BAGGS AEG-1 £2,015

A brand that has powered many of the guitars we play surprised us earlier this year by not just creating a top-notch pickup and preamp system – but the whole guitar! The almost futuristic thinline design employs a poplar plywood body frame, torrefied spruce top and rosewood back. It's powered by the high-spec HiFi Duet, with its twin sensors and Silo mic, with a side-mounted preamp panel that's perfect for the performing player. We said: "Probably the most convincing acoustic tone from an electro we've yet heard." www.lrbaggs.com



JWJ ORCHESTRA SELECT £2,145

We have some superb guitar makers here in the UK, both old and new, and chef-turned-luthier Rich Jones falls into the latter camp with his JWJ brand. Every guitar we've seen from this company has knocked us out in terms of quality of build and sound, not least for the seemingly lowly prices. This Adirondack/mahogany OM was the highlight of a trio of models we looked at in issue 521. "The fact that we spent far longer playing the guitar than is strictly necessary for this review tells its own story," we said earlier this year. <https://jwjguitars.co.uk>



LOWDEN F12 £3,400

As a pillar of the UK's guitar-making scene over some five decades, Northern Ireland's Lowden needs no introduction. But this 2025 spruce-topped model (identical to the new cedar-fronted F10) uses simplified construction and a new lightweight bolt-on – as opposed to dovetailed – neck joint and with it a more affordable price point. "I wanted these guitars to be maybe the most versatile in terms of flat-picking, strumming or fingerpicking," says George Lowden, "so it's voiced somewhere between all of these styles."

<https://lowdenguitars.com>



**TAYLOR GOLD LABEL 814E SB
£5,735**

It's never easy to predict what master designer and CEO, Andy Powers, will come up with next. These new Gold Label models look back to old pre-war designs and yet they also introduce a number of new features: Super Auditorium body shape, 'old-school' Taylor logo, fingerboard inlays and bridge design. Internally, the V-Class bracing has been tweaked, too, and even the pickup/preamp system switches to the LR Baggs Element VTC. Made to the same exacting standards but with a new Taylor voice.

www.taylorguitars.com



**GIBSON CUSTOM SHOP BRIAN
MAY SJ-200 12-STRING £6,899**

An increasing part of brands like Gibson's new offerings includes rock-star tie-ups such as this rare SJ-200 12-string, which is limited in number but not in price. It has plenty of upmarket details with design flourishes from Brian himself, but a highlight of our year so far was listening to Brian play this cannon-like instrument at its launch: "I so wish my dad had been around to see it," he said, "because he would have been so happy and so proud. Even touching one of those things [a Gibson] back then was a dream."

www.gibson.com



Gibson
MURPHY LAB

OLD MASTERS

*When it comes to the art of guitar relicing, Gibson's Murphy Lab sets the pace. Senior product development manager, **Robi Johns**, told us why playing the new Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection is like stepping aboard a time machine*

Photography Olly Curtis
Words Henry Yates

Perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay Gibson's Murphy Lab Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection is that we are terrified to play them. Faced with the neckwear, soundhole scuffs and belt-buckle scratches of this five-strong historic line-up, the abiding impression is of inspecting the personal effects of some bygone billionaire collector in the moments before they are swaddled in bubblewrap and shipped to the auction house or family vault.

To lift such an instrument from its stand, to run your fingers over its blemished fretboard, to hear its ancient voice sing of centuries past is a heart-in-mouth moment, loaded with both joy and a faint dread that a curator is about to burst in and admonish you for handling it without white cotton gloves. The twist, of course, is that these guitars are in fact younger than yesterday, representing the latest cache of releases from Gibson's Murphy Lab.

The life's work of Tom Murphy surely needs no introduction in these pages. Now in his mid-70s, the undisputed godfather of guitar relicing has elevated the practice to a branch of science

(and changed the perception of pre-worn instruments from gimmick to art form). Since the luthier returned to Gibson at the turn of the decade to establish the Murphy Lab, we've seen some of his most mouthwatering treatments applied to a wishlist of electric instruments. But as senior product development manager, Robi Johns, tells us, Murphy's unprecedented swerve into aged acoustics since 2023 has added a whole new string to his bow.

"What's beautiful about this project is that it [allows] us to release models [from] new places in our history"

The Murphy Lab has been creating stunning aged electrics for a few years, but now the acoustic side of the operation is in full swing. Are you pleased with the output so far?

"More than pleased; I'm in awe. Because this has been an evolution. Tom Murphy created his finishes to make the electrics feel and look like road-worn instruments. Then Gibson said, 'Hey, let's do some acoustics this way, too.'

1. Robi Johns, who is a senior product development manager at Gibson's Montana-based acoustic 'craftory', says the Murphy Lab's heavy ageing work on its newest run of acoustic models is right at the pinnacle of what's possible in this field

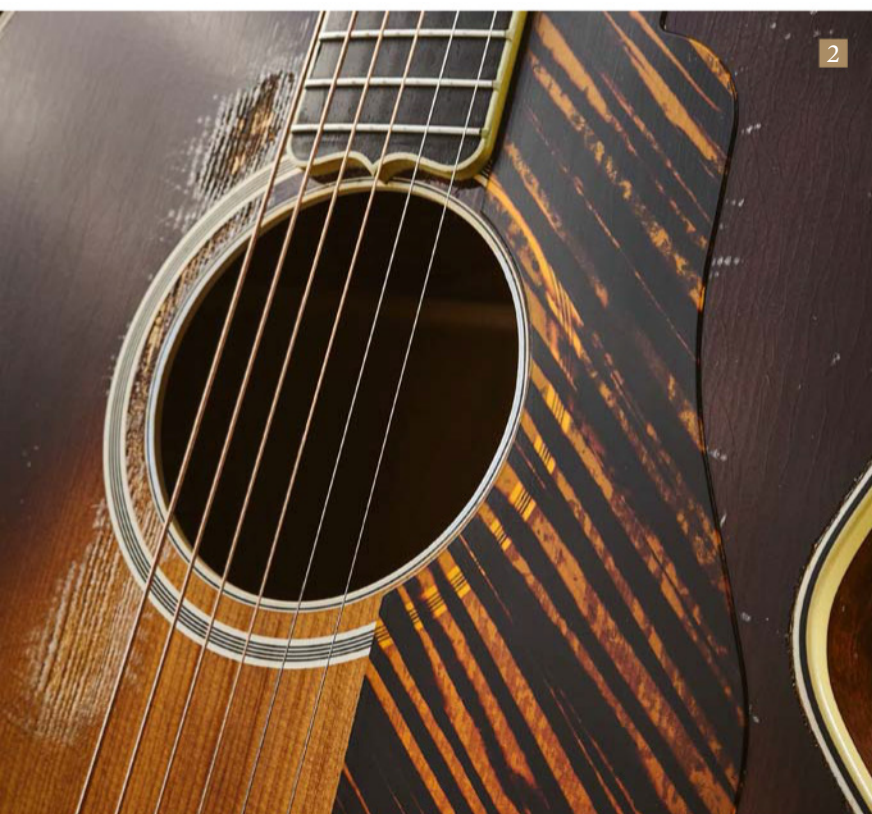


PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

That was about four years ago. My initial thought was, 'I don't know if people are looking for beat-up acoustics.' But we released five models with light ageing in 2023. Now, I hear from the connoisseur artists: 'I was down in Nashville and I ran into this Murphy Lab Light Aged Jumbo, and I can't sleep any more because I just gotta have it. But they said they couldn't sell it because it's a display model. Please can you pull some strings so I can buy it?' Last year, we announced the Murphy Lab Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection and they're just starting to hit the market. I actually said to Tom, 'Thank you, you've created a time machine for us.'"

2. Decades of top erosion from strumming is a very difficult thing to imitate accurately, but Gibson seems to have nailed it on this aged 1939 SJ-100

3. Headstock and logo designs from the pre-war era have all been faithfully reproduced





4

4. This beautiful Heavy Aged 1942 Banner J-45 replicates one of Gibson's most revered round-shoulder dreads of all time

5

5. Boasting those distinctive fretboard inlays, this Heavy Aged 1936 Advanced Jumbo replicates the precursor model to the iconic J-45

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIBSON



6

How were the five models that feature in the new Heavy Aged Collection selected?

"Well, the 1942 Banner J-45, that was the year of release and it became our bestseller, the bread and butter Gibson dreadnought – even though it was round-shouldered. Then there's the 1936 Advanced Jumbo, which was like the J-45 before the J-45 existed. And the reason we chose that for the Heavy Aged series was because it's definitely the most powerful. It's a long-scale instead of a short-scale and that makes it more projecting. And it has a wider X-brace. In the 1940s, we went to a more condensed bracing pattern, which growls and distorts a little more when you hit it. But when you play the Advanced Jumbo from the 1930s, with that wide X, it barks at you. You hit it harder and it definitely sounds gritty.

"Then, of course, there's the 1939 SJ-100. The SJ-200 was released in 1938, and then we released the SJ-100, probably because it was the end of an era of economic instability in America and we

wanted to get the prices down. So that model was \$100 in 1939, I believe, while the SJ-200 was \$200. The 1960 Hummingbird: that's the quintessential year of its release. When the 1963 Country Western was released, people wanted a natural-looking dreadnought, and we included it in the Heavy Aged Collection because people would not let us alone! It just kept coming back up. So it's society that has led us to these models because society responded to them."

What would you say are the key elements that go into Gibson's aged acoustics?

"They're not necessarily built differently. Every guitar has the old dovetail neck-to-body joint – we were already doing that from 1989 onward, when we started this craft. The luthiers at that time said, 'We gotta compete with the old guitars that are already out there since 1926.' We had a bar that was so high. Another of the key things – which a lot of people don't know – is that we dome the tops, even on a flat-top.

"When Tom created his new formula, it was just unbelievable. Even as a new guitar, it sounds 100 years old"

6. What degree of ageing you prefer is very much up to the individual player's aesthetic preferences, and the Light Aged finish on this 1957 SJ-200 headstock shows off all the ornate details beautifully



Tom Murphy is renowned for his exquisite ageing of Gibson electrics, and in 2023 acoustics received the Murphy Lab treatment for the first time

That gives us that really nice midrange, makes them sound really old. We use thermally aged tops to accelerate what happens to a piece of wood when it sits in a shop for 80 years. And we use hide glue on the braces of these guitars, both the Murphy Lab and Custom Historic models.

"So we were already doing a lot of this stuff to make our acoustics sound as vibrant as possible, and they already sounded pretty damn old. But the real magic of this collection is that up to this period of time we were using nitro lacquer, maybe 12 to 14 coats, with some sanding in between. But then we created a thinner version that was half as many coats. It wasn't as smooth-looking, but it allowed the guitar to vibrate even more because it was thinner. When Tom created his new formula, he took out all the plasticisers

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

This 1957 SJ-200 model is one of the first round of hand-built Murphy Lab acoustics, originally released in 2023, which received the Light Aged treatment

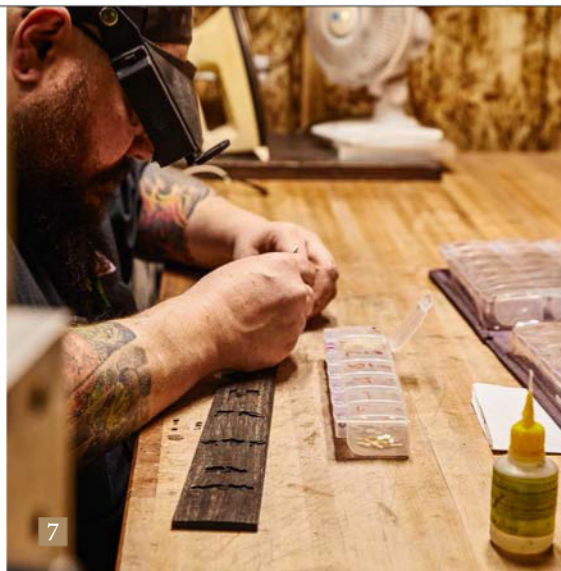


and other solvents. All we have left is the cellulose. We put it on there and we're listening to these guitars and it's just unbelievable. Even as a new guitar, it sounds 100 years old. So by the turn of the millennium, we were already saying, 'We're getting closer and closer to a 100-year-old tone.' But then, when Tom developed this finish we put on [the new collection], that was the last cherry on top.

"You know, a UV cure is a beautiful hard finish and I'm not gonna say it's 'bad', it'll just never change. That's good for some people. But with the Murphy Lab acoustics, I say to people: 'I'm sorry to tell you, but in about 20 years, your finish will probably crack because it's gonna get thinner and thinner. But when it gets thinner and it cracks, it'll sound better – so look forward to it!' I can't even imagine what these guitars will sound like in 50 years' time."

What are the processes by which you create the imperfections on these acoustics?

"It's very human. We cool the instruments in a refrigerator to create this beautiful hairline cracking. We know what



temperature, how long to do it, for which model. And then, it's human beings who are wearing off the belt spot in the back or scraping off the finish, rubbing it with different tools, to create the look and touch of where it would have worn off. The finish is very brittle once it's pulled out of the cooling chamber and we can crack it and peel parts of it off – or scratch it as if a pick was scratching against it for 40 years. Our technicians will use sandpaper, of course. But they'll also invent different ways to create those marks, like the pick scratching. They might even say: 'You know, when I use the end of my calliper, it looks good.' They'll

use anything to make it work. And that gives it the character.

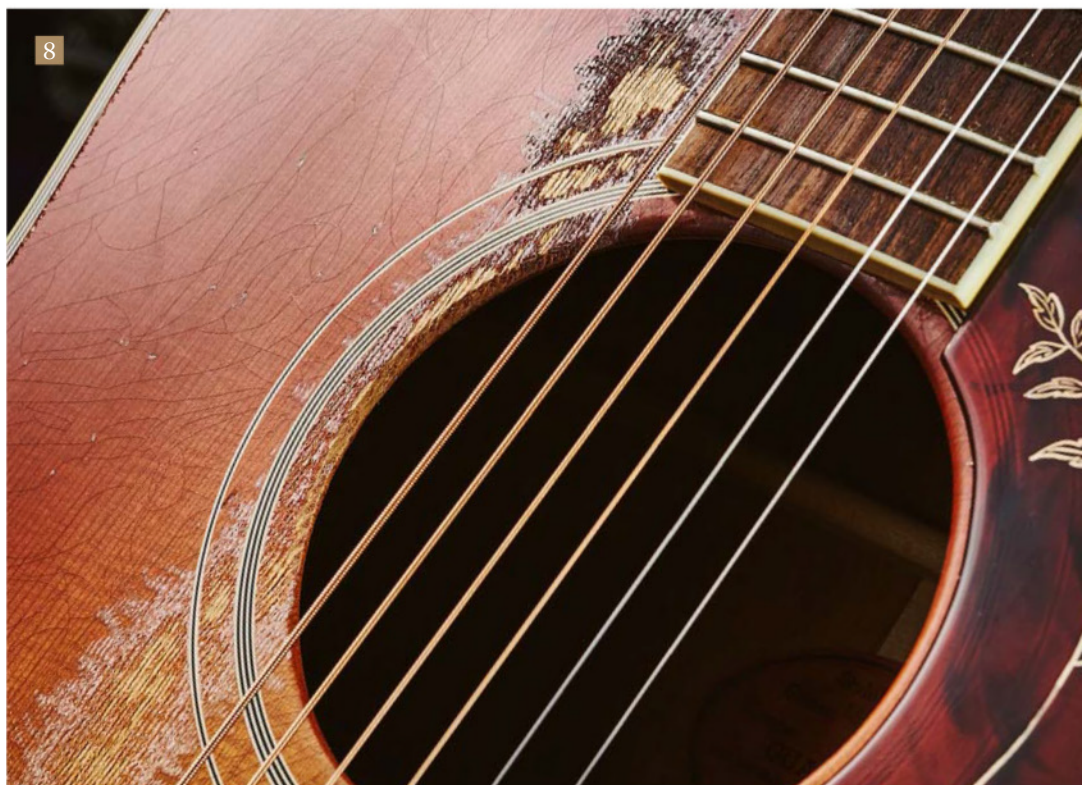
"Now, that's less about sound and more about the vibe and character of the guitar, which actually is psychoacoustic. The definition of that word is that you hear something based on the feel and the experience. It's like if you ride a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, it's noisy and it's loud, and it's not the most efficient motorcycle in the world, but it's the experience of sitting on that giant monster. But [ultimately] we design guitars for sound. We pull from our

"A lot of people don't know that we dome the tops. It gives a really nice midrange, makes them sound really old"

7. Patience, deeply researched attention to detail, top-notch lutherie and high-quality tonewoods are all part of the equation when making these guitars in Montana

8. The detailing on both the body and headstock of this Heavy Aged 1960 Hummingbird is superbly executed

history for the sound and feel of each instrument. Not just the fancy features. One of the things we profess is that when Orville Gibson made his first instrument, that we know of, in the late-1800s, he did it with one philosophy in mind: that when you build an instrument, the methodology of how you assemble it should enhance the performance. And we live up to that."



One of Gibson's squarer-shouldered dreadnought designs, this Heavy Aged 1960 Hummingbird looks like it has toured the States a few times and has an appropriately faded Washed Cherry Sunburst finish. Subtle doming of the top enhances its vintage tone, too



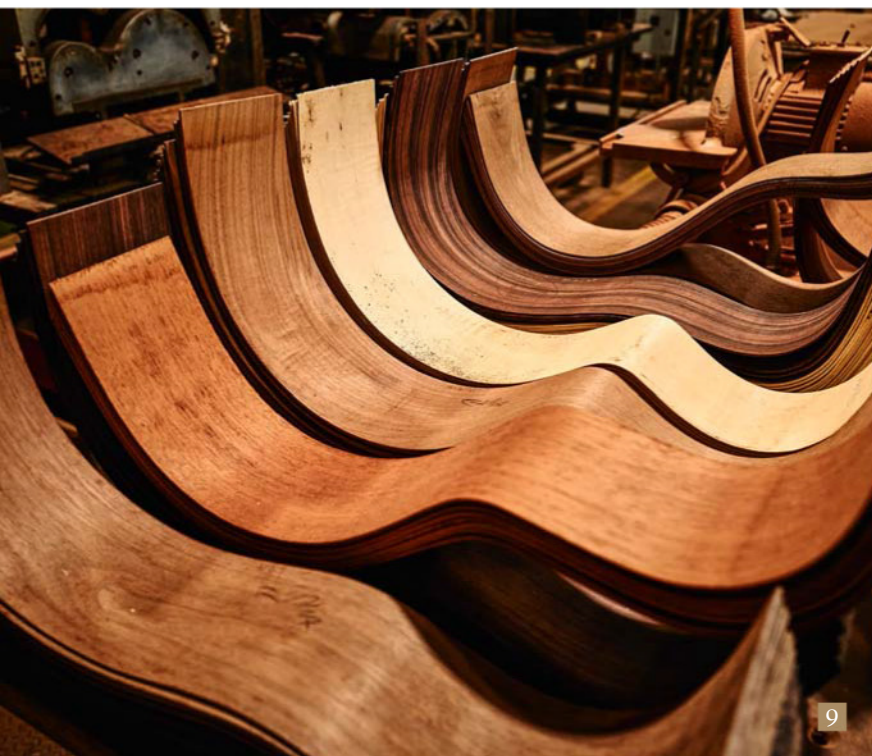


PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

What obstacles did the team encounter when creating the Murphy Lab acoustics?

“Well, we didn’t have a lacquer booth. We had to create a whole new laboratory here in Bozeman, Montana, which wasn’t too much of an obstacle because all we had to do was replicate what was already successful in Nashville. It’s a team of four, run by one of our best young builders called Madison Swords. We’re still a small company here building acoustics. But I will say that the Custom

9. Sides awaiting construction into guitar bodies. Hand-selected, carefully seasoned tonewoods are a key part of making guitars that sound great

10. Gibson’s history books are filled with interesting models and year-specific specs to explore, as evidenced by this Heavy Aged 1963 Country Western, with its elegant split-parallelogram fretboard inlays

“It’s actually psychoacoustic, which means you hear something based on the feel and the experience”

Historic and Murphy Lab stuff has become quite a large portion of our market demand and success in the last four or five years.

“Next, we had to discover what worked and what doesn’t work. We had to work with the temperature. The original tests were done by Tom Murphy himself. We couldn’t go as far with the ageing as with the electrics; we had to pull back with the acoustics because they’re thinner and more delicate.”

How do you see the Murphy Lab acoustics rolling out from here?

“Well, what’s beautiful about this project is that it gives us a channel to release models that are not always released, to touch all these new places in our history. And I can advertise, slightly, that we are working on five other models for release in September that will be Light Aged. In that batch, we said, ‘Hey, there’s a really cool SJ-200 with maple that everyone loves from around ’57, with a stinger on the back of the headstock.’ We’re going to do a ’63 Dove. We’re also going to do one of the very first flat-tops in our history, the small-body Nick Lucas model, which goes back to the 1920s. We’re gonna re-release the J-160E. We’ll have 15 Light and Heavy Aged models by the end of this calendar year. Where do you start and end with this? I can open a Gibson reference book and go, ‘Oh, remember that?’ There’s just so much fun stuff.”

Do you find that different markets have different attitudes towards aged guitars?

“The Japanese like newer stuff. They want the [vintage] sound, but they want it to look new. So they want the Ultra Light Murphy Lab stuff. We don’t mess with ageing

that too much, if at all, but it has the magic aged finish, which is basically cellulose.”

Do you think the Murphy Lab acoustics could fool a seasoned guitar connoisseur?

“Absolutely. And not only fool them. I just guided the building of a guitar for our friend Peter Frampton. He has a 1939 L-00. He wanted an L-00 from the Murphy Lab because he’s heard these things are magic. So I put together the design for him. We used a Light Aged finish. And I have his message on my phone: ‘Robi, I don’t understand, this sounds better than my ’39.’ I knew that he was right. With all of the elements that we’re doing today, we’re finding out that the overall effect is that they might sound even better than the ones from that era.”

Do you think there’s an end point to the guitar ageing process?

“When I’m looking at what we just did, I don’t know how much further we can go to get more magic out of these things. But I shouldn’t say that because I know there’s always more...” 📷

Gibson’s Murphy Lab Heavy Aged & Light Aged Acoustic Collections are available now from www.gibson.com



The nitro finish on this beautiful, honey-tinted Heavy Aged 1963 Country Western is fittingly called 'Smoked Natural'





New Directions

Forward-thinking acoustic guitars designed for today's musicians

Words Dave Burrluck



LAVA ME AIR £499

This other-worldly-looking electro breaks all the rules, as Lava has been doing since 2013. It's made of a carbon fibre composite for one, with a High-Pressure Laminate 'board. Using a magnetic pickup (plus 'acoustic simulation'), it offers digital effects – including chorus, delay, reverb, auto-wah and pitch-shift – that can be heard unplugged, too, similar to Yamaha's TransAcoustic. There's also Bluetooth for connecting to the Lava+ app, and an internal battery, rechargeable via a USB-C connection. A glimpse into the 'smart' revolution. www.lavamusic.com



FENDER ACOUSTASONIC STANDARD JAZZMASTER £549

The latest wave of Acoustasonics landed earlier this year, comprising this Standard Jazzmaster and an equally priced Tele version, which utilise a solid Sitka spruce top on a chambered nyatoh body with bolt-on Fender-scale neck and rosewood 'board. As the price suggests, these are the most simple of the range with a bridge-placed Shawbucker magnetic pickup and Fishman under-saddle transducer to morph from 'electric' to 'acoustic' sounds via the blend control. Potent and affordable. www.fender.co.uk



GODIN MULTIAC MUNDIAL £1,629

Introduced in 1993, the Multiac has long been the choice of players troubled by feedback in high-volume situations. The new nylon-string Mundial has a 14-fret-to-the-body neck join with 'crossover'-width Spanish cedar neck and hollow Silver Leaf maple body with a cedar top (in various colours). But it's the high-spec electronics that elevate the design; here, we have a Godin Double Source Custom preamp, allowing you to mix the under-saddle pickup with the body sensors. A class act. www.godinguitars.com



YAMAHA TAG3 C
TRANSACOUSTIC £1,699

Yamaha's TransAcoustic technology quietly started a revolution when we first saw it in guitar form back in 2016. It has since grown into a mini-range of quite serious guitars with other-worldly onboard effects, and now Bluetooth connectivity, too. With this TAG3 C you can use the guitar as a speaker to stream music, loops and backing tracks. And with improved effects (reverb, delay, chorus and looper with enhanced app-based editing features), this is far from just another electro-acoustic guitar.

<https://uk.yamaha.com>



MARTIN M-7 JOHNNY MARR
\$4,999

Johnny Marr has been loyal to the Martin brand since he hired a D-28 back in 1985 (and refused to give it back), so we might ask what took so long for this signature – a unique seven-string with added octave G string (the six-string M-6 is available, too). “The concept intrigued me,” Johnny told us, “and I hoped it would ... behave like a regular six-string acoustic but have something that just delights your ear.” Unique, like the body shape – “with the front like a D-28 and back like a D-35” – and the man himself.

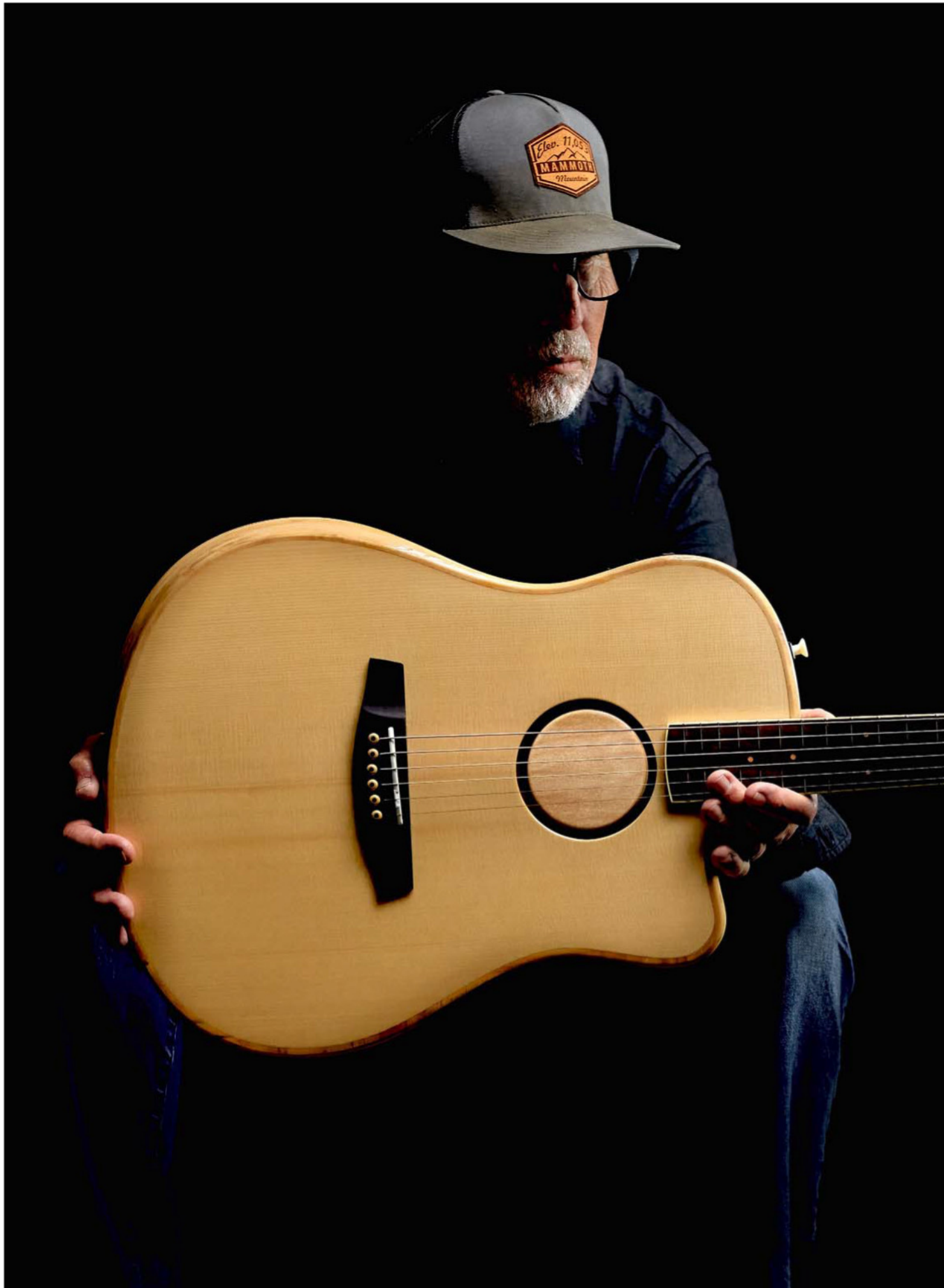
www.martinguitar.com



STROMBERG MASTER 400 £7,999

In today's comfortable world of efficient mini-PAs and discreet pickups and preamps, it's easy to forget that, back in the day, top players played in big bands to big audiences with next to no sound reinforcement. The archtop 'jazz' guitar was the answer and few came bigger or louder than the 19-inch-wide Stromberg Master 400. Stromberg models are now making a return, made in the Czech Republic; this Master 400 is the flagship for a mini-range – including much more affordable models – that recalls a lost age. Time to sharpen your jazz chops.

www.stromberg-guitars.com



WIRED FOR SOUND



Lloyd Baggs is the genial genius behind the mighty LR Baggs acoustic pickup company that today supplies some of the biggest artists and guitar brands in the business. We joined him earlier this year to hear how slide legend Ry Cooder inspired him to get the whole thing started – and learn why his new AEG-1 guitar may be a game-changer

Words Jamie Dickson Photo Mike Lockett

LR Baggs is one of the biggest names in acoustic pickups – but how did you originally get started on that quest?

“Well, I started making acoustic guitars back in around 1975, and I had some great clients. I made guitars for Janis Ian, Ry Cooder, Jackson Browne, Graham Nash... a whole bunch of the LA guys. Ry was one of the pioneers of amplified acoustic and he was always experimenting with stuff. He would come by a lot to my studio, and we would put the pickup system *du jour* in the guitar, and he had this rack full of equipment about the size of a little refrigerator that he had to tour with to make it kind of work.

“We prioritise feel over the sound because if it doesn’t feel right, you’re gonna get tired of it. You’re not gonna play your best. So we’ve been working on narrowing that divide”

“One of the early influences in what we do [today] was observing him swearing at the rack, right? I’d be over at his place and he’d be swearing at this thing – it was like he needed it, but he hated it. And so that experience of watching the pain that he went through in the early days, trying to amplify his instrument, really became our tent post. It was like, ‘Okay, we’re gonna make it simple and we’re gonna make it painless and we’re gonna make it work.’”

Despite your success in making acoustic pickup systems, we don’t envy you the job – getting a really good amplified acoustic sound seems such an elusive thing. Do you feel it’s a bit of a black art, or at the very least an especially challenging task?

“Well, I think it’s oxymoronic. The guitar is a speaker, so you’re putting a pickup on a speaker and you’re amplifying a speaker – but the ‘speaker’ amplifies [itself] anyway, so you’re amplifying an amplifier. It’s just really weird!”

An overlooked aspect of acoustic pickup design is how they can leave you feeling oddly disconnected from the guitar because the experience of playing an amplified acoustic is so very different from that of playing it at home, unplugged. How do you make that feedback loop between mind, fingers, guitar and amplifier feel more natural?

“That’s *the* key question, I think, besides the sound. In fact, I would say we prioritise feel over the sound because if it doesn’t feel right, you’re gonna get tired of it. It’s gonna wear you out. You’re not gonna enjoy yourself. You’re not gonna play your best. So that’s been a big part of what we’ve been working on: narrowing that divide. It started out as the Grand Canyon, but I think we’re getting closer to having something that feels and sounds organic and right.”

LR Baggs has really led the way in offering pro-grade alternatives to the ubiquitous under-saddle piezo pickup, such as the excellent HiFi system and now the HiFi Duet pickup – which adds a ‘Silo’ microphone to the equation – that’s been used so successfully on your new AEG-1 guitar. Tell us about the inception of that ‘piezo beating’ pickup.

“Thank you. Well, it started out with our HiFi pickups – and those are bridge-plate transducers. The under-saddle [piezo] pickup has [by contrast] become a useful necessity, but it’s not exactly a beloved thing, and installing it is always difficult. So we’ve been trying to make a bridge-plate pickup that worked [as an alternative to under-saddle piezo units]. Our first one was the iBeam, about 15, 20 years ago, and that sounded really good, but it wasn’t very stable. Play a coffee shop and you’re good. Record with it, you’re good. Put it on a big stage? Nah.

“So we just continued to work on it. I had something close to it about five years ago, and then I took it to Nashville to beta-test it, and it was kind of a failure. So I gave up on it at the time and our general manager, Bo [Radis], said, ‘Hey, mind if I work on it?’ And he figured it out. The thing that makes it different is that there’s a bunch of bridge-plate pickups, the acoustic Feather, K&K... but the typical bridge-plate pickup isn’t very dynamic and it feeds back early. So that was the goal.

“The big news about the HiFi is that it’s a bridge-plate transducer that is dynamic: we tested it against the Element under-saddle in 20-odd guitars and in every single guitar but one, it was 1dB or 2dB better [at resisting] feedback than the Element. So it’s not an under-saddle pickup. It’s got the advantages of an under-saddle pickup in terms of resistance to feedback and stability, presence and dynamics. But it’s non-invasive. You just stick it on underneath your saddle and drive it away.”



1. The bridge-plate transducers (above), preamp (centre) and Silo mic (right) that together give the HiFi Duet pickup system its rich sound

2. Slide legend Ry Cooder’s battle to get a good amplified acoustic sound inspired Lloyd to start the LR Baggs pickup company



PHOTO BY MICHAEL LOCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Tell us how the excellent new AEG-1 guitar design came about. It really does move the game forward for thinline acoustic-voiced guitars.

“So do you remember the Godin Acousticaster? That was my first acoustic electric – I built that guitar and licensed it to Godin. I was trying to make a good-sounding acoustic electric and it was an advancement. But from an acoustic standpoint, it still had that kind of midrange acoustic-electric, banjo twang. So about every couple of years, I would take a couple of days to a week and try to figure out how to make a really good-sounding acoustic electric. During Covid we were all working remotely and the guys from the workshop persuaded me to [have another go at the idea]. So I did the standard thing – I hollowed out a solidbody guitar and put a really good acoustic top on it and I thought, ‘This is gonna be really good.’ But when I tried it, it didn’t really sound good – it wasn’t thrilling. It still had that [banjo-like] midrange.

“Then I cut down a cheap 000-size Chinese guitar to the thickness of an acoustic-electric, and I put a bunch of heavy wood around the inside lining. And then I stuck the back on again. That sounded really good. Yeah, it didn’t sound quite as good as it did before I cut it down, but I thought, ‘That’s the ticket – it needs a free-floating back.’ I did all kinds of stuff like putting weights on the back, and when I got the back frequency below the frequency of the top, I started to get this really nice bass from it. I thought, ‘Okay, it’s got to have a vibrating back.’ Then the question was: ‘Well, if I put a vibrating back on the thing, the neck is going to be like a noodle because the neck attachment point is really important.’ So I wanted a bolt-on neck, but how the heck am I going to do that? And that’s where this thing [holds up the plywood body-frame of the AEG-1] came into existence.

“We’ve applied for a patent on this – this makes the neck super stable and drives more energy into the top. On a regular guitar, the [glued-on] top and the back are what’s holding the neck in place. So if you take the back off of the guitar, it caves in. But with the AEG-1, you can take the back of this guitar off and the thing stays in tune as well as if it had the back on. So that allowed us to voice the top independent of being a structural member. And with the back, we also have total freedom to voice it however we want.”  www.lrbaggs.com



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

3. The AEG-1's controls allow you to blend its internal Silo mic and HiFi Duet pickup for a strikingly natural sound

4. Lloyd Baggs holds up the skeletal plywood subframe of the AEG-1, which allowed the top and back to be voiced in isolation

5. Lloyd in his workshop crafting a prototype of the AEG-1





1942 D'ANGELICO NEW YORKER

Over the past 80 years this well-travelled archtop has had illustrious owners and featured on some landmark recordings

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

D'Angelico guitars have always been rare beasts and are even rarer in the UK than America. John D'Angelico and his various apprentices completed approximately 30 guitars per year between 1932 and his death in 1964. From company ledgers, it's estimated that around 1,164 guitars were built, with approximately 300 of those being D'Angelico's New Yorker model.

D'Angelico mostly built guitars to order, and this example from auctioneer Gardiner Houlgate is no exception. Originally commissioned by a jazz guitarist called Connie Wainwright, the New Yorker was collected from D'Angelico's workshop on 26 December 1942. Wainwright was a professional player who was described by his bandmate Cliff Smalls as "a little, short fellow". Consequently, Wainwright must have found the New Yorker's 18-inch-wide body a bit of an armful when he was playing in the Earl Hines Big Band. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s he performed and recorded with Billy Eckstine, Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis, Art Blakey, Hoagy Carmichael and others. Connie Wainwright is credited as the guitarist on

Miles Davis's *Boppin' The Blues* album – and although it can't be proved, it's quite possible that this New Yorker would have been used on the 1946 recording session.

Like so many special guitars, this New Yorker has led multiple lives. Sometime during the early 1970s it came into the possession of Leo Kottke, who wrote a note that's still with the guitar. In it he details the projects it was used on, including his 1975 album, *Chewing Pine*, and describes it as "the best-sounding New Yorker I've personally played".

The specs are fairly standard for a D'Angelico New Yorker, with an X-braced top carved from straight-grained spruce, and beautifully figured maple used for the back and sides. A stunning sunburst finish graces the front and back while enhancing the grain, and multi-ply binding surrounds the body.

The neck is carved from a single piece of figured maple, and the finish shading is applied to the heel and headstock. The headstock design isn't as extravagant as some D'Angelicos, but it's crisply carved, especially around the volute area, and retains the original gold-plated Grover Imperial tuners with 'stairstep' keys. The peghead face has a jet black ebony veneer

with more multi-ply binding, which allows the inlaid pearl logo and 'skyscraper' motif to pop. A triangular piece of pearl sits above the nut, and more pearl blocks with alternating single and double cutouts are inlaid into a bound ebony fretboard that culminates in a 'widow's peak'.

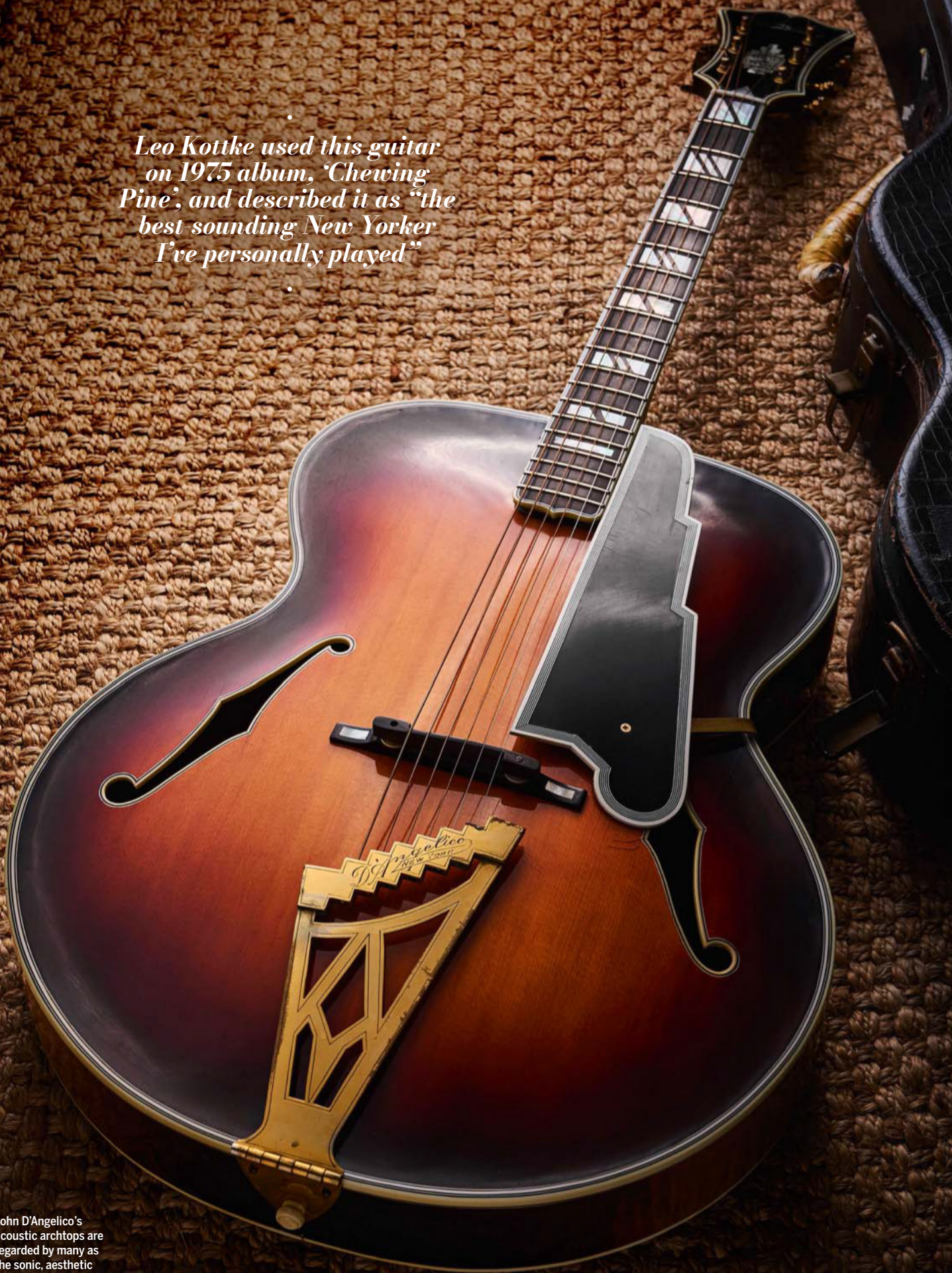
Although slightly tarnished, the original tailpiece survives, along with the original pickguard and what is assumed to be the original case with its 'gator skin' exterior. It's taped up in some places and has a replacement handle. Luke Hobbs from Gardiner Houlgate auction house collated more information about the guitar and was able to flesh out the story.

Timelines

"Gruhn Guitars in Nashville had this guitar in 2019," Luke tells us, "and Gruhn's letter of appraisal, which was included in the sale, states that 'the fingerboard of this guitar has been professionally refretted by Gruhn Guitars. Upon examination this guitar appears structurally to be in excellent condition. The neck and body have been professionally refinished. In other respects, this instrument conforms to the typical specifications for the model of this period.'"

•
*Leo Kottke used this guitar
on 1975 album, 'Chewing
Pine', and described it as "the
best sounding New Yorker
I've personally played"*
•

John D'Angelico's
acoustic archtops are
regarded by many as
the sonic, aesthetic
and technical pinnacle
of jazz age lutherie



1. D'Angelico used the highest quality materials, as these highly figured maple sides demonstrate; the finish retains its vibrant colour

2. The figured maple neck has a smaller than expected profile, and D'Angelico preferred rolled steel reinforcement bars to adjustable truss rods



1



2



Despite the multi-ply binding, inlaid script logo and skyscraper motif, this isn't even one of D'Angelico's fanciest headstock designs

"From there, the guitar was sold to a collector in The Netherlands who had some more refinishing work done on it," Luke continues. "We believe it may have been dropped and suffered a bash on its end. It was nothing too concerning, but it did cause some aesthetic issues, with finish cracks around the tailpiece. Now, the finish looks very vibrant and fresh, but it has been done so sympathetically that you may not realise it has been refinished unless you read Gruhn's description.

"Although the damage had already been repaired and there were no structural problems, the Dutch collector's additional spray work was only done to make the guitar more aesthetically pleasing. This was handled by a well-respected luthier over there called Frans Elferink. He corrected some small cracks near the tailpiece and the area around the strap button. There was a visible crack on one of the sides in the waist, which is stable and glued from the inside. Other than that, it's just a good, honest guitar with accompanying history that tracks back to Connie Wainwright in the official logs.

"Leo Kottke acquired it from a well-known dealer called Fred Walecki, and he used the guitar on his album *Chewing*

"This [refinished] New Yorker sounds as big and open as you'd hope"

LUKE HOBBS

Pine and other recordings. We haven't been able to determine if he sold the guitar through Gruhn or whether he had already sold it on to somebody else.

"The vendor, who auctioned the guitar through Gardiner Houlgate, got it from the Dutch collector. He's a collector of jazz guitars, and it's that familiar story where guitars like this can't remain in the same hands forever and he decided it was time to move it on, rather than leave it to be someone else's problem somewhere down the line. He enjoyed it for years and it was the crown jewel in his collection.

"It's a great player with a wonderful action. Sometimes a refinish can really deaden the sound of guitars – and I've found that's particularly true of vintage archtops – but this New Yorker sounds as big and open as you would hope and expect.

"The neck profile is actually quite small, and some might prefer it to be a bit deeper, but if Connie Wainwright was a smaller guy, maybe he specified a slimmer neck when he ordered the guitar. The most remarkable thing is that the neck doesn't have a truss rod. Instead, John D'Angelico was known to use a rolled steel reinforcement bar set into the neck. Despite being such a slim, non-laminated neck, the neck relief is perfect and vintage D'Angelico necks are renowned for their stability," Luke concludes.

Arch Rivals

By rights, hand-crafted archtop guitars from the top luthiers of the jazz era should be the most valuable vintage guitars of all. Consider the extraordinary skill levels needed to build them, with each top and back shaped and thickened to perfection using planes and scrapers, and then fine-tuned for optimal tone and structural integrity. Next, factor in the hours that were surely put into these guitars, along with the fabulous quality of the timbers and the intricacy of the pearl inlays – and added to that, there's the extreme rarity.

In many ways, archtop construction is more closely related to orchestral string



3

3. D'Angelico generally employed a recurring 'stairstep' motif, which features on the pickguard and the iconic tailpiece here

4. Split rectangular pearl fretboard markers adorn an ebony fretboard with multi-ply binding, adding to the model's distinction



4

instruments such as violins, violas and cellos than Spanish or American flat-top guitars. In fact, John D'Angelico started his working life in 1914 in the workshop of his great uncle Raphael Ciani, who specialised in mandolins and violins as well as guitars.

As with instruments of the fiddle family, it can take decades for an acoustic archtop guitar's voice to develop and mature. It's even possible that some 1930s and 40s archtops are only now reaching their peak, or even continuing to improve. So, why is it that they don't command 'Blackguard' or 'Burst' money?

Sometimes professional skills and traditions that have been developed over decades or even centuries reach a point where they are no longer needed; new technology comes along that renders them obsolete or offers acceptable alternatives at a lower price. A handful of dedicated craftspeople may continue to serve a dwindling number of customers or enthusiasts, but the glory days are over. Subsequently, there's no great demand for bow makers or fencing masters these days. Similarly, sound engineers no longer need to learn how to maintain and align tape machines, and the practical necessity for loud archtop acoustics no longer applies.

Simply put, they were designed for guitarists to get themselves heard when playing in big bands at a time when the guitar was strictly consigned to rhythm duties. They had to be played hard to achieve the necessary projection, and guitar solos were just a glint in Charlie Christian's eye because they couldn't generate single notes that were loud enough. Pickups and amplifiers changed everything because electrification allowed guitarists to cut through with minimal physical effort and even begin playing solos like the horn players. Our friend David Davidson at Well Strung Guitars is keenly aware of this and has often lamented the fact that, these days, very few guitarists develop a playing technique or repertoire of chops that can get the most out of large acoustic archtops.

And so the hammer fell at £15,000 when this iconic guitar was auctioned in December 2024 – hardly chump change but closer to what you might expect to pay for a refinished pre-CBS Strat these days and way below the market values of pre-war Martin dreads and OMs. For a rare, iconic example of jazz age American lutherie, some may consider that a bargain. www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk



Comeback Kids

New versions of historic models that continue to stand the test of time

Words Dave Burrluck



EPIPHONE 1942 BANNER J-45
£1,199

The ever-increasing 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' range has given us some corkers for not too much cash. This all-solid-wood J-45 is a favourite and it's stage-ready with onboard LR Baggs VTC. You can't expect the same quality level you'd get from a Gibson version at four times the price, and the fingerboard here is laurel, not rosewood, but the VOS poly finish looks a little old and the soft V neck profile adds to smart playability. "It's full and earthy with that characteristic grunty bass end," we said. www.epiphone.com



YAMAHA FG5/FGX5 RED LABEL
FROM £1,408

The 'Red Label' FGs date back to the 60s and were not only Yamaha's first steel-strings, they helped put high-quality Japanese manufacturing on the map, too; Bert Jansch was an early adopter. Today's range includes Chinese- and Japanese-made FGs in various formats. But it's the all-solid, vintage-styled FG5 Red Label that most closely emulates those past glories using Yamaha's high-tech ARE top treatment to help create an older-sounding, played-in guitar. Great craft and plenty of history. <http://uk.yamaha.com>



MARTIN DE RETRO PLUS
MAHOGANY **\$1,899**

Inspired by Martin's 18-style flagship models, this 2025 dread (also joined by the 000E) features a torrefied spruce top – a first for the Road Series. It's usually only seen on higher-end Authentic and Modern Deluxe instruments, and is key to this model's broken-in sound. Back and sides are mahogany with scalloped spruce X-bracing, the Performing Artist neck has an ebony 'board, and it's ready to plug in with the Martin E1 pickup and preamp with a built-in tuner. A road hog, we'd say. www.martinguitar.com



TAKAMINE LTD 2025 £2,495

Not a reissue as such, but as we've seen since 2022, Takamine has paid close attention to its own past with the reworking of its original FET preamp, known as 'brownie', which features on this latest limited model as the CTF-2N preamp. It's accompanied by the brand's Palathetic under-saddle pickup, which dates back to the late 70s. Takamine rightly states that it was the electro side of its guitars that attracted a host of players, not least Ry Cooder, David Lindley, the Eagles, James Taylor, Jackson Brown and Bruce Springsteen. Still rocking!

www.takamine.com



**ATKIN DUST BOWL 00014
£3,349**

They might be made in the UK, but Atkin's Dust Bowls, with their aged nitro finishes, are fashioned after the USA Depression-era instruments of the 1930s. As you'd expect, the spec is pared back, with African mahogany construction, Indian rosewood 'board and headstock facing and, usually, an ebony nut – what they used back in the day, according to Alister Atkin. It has a dark, moody, crazed finish with a sound to match, covering everything from "lazy, bluesy picking to animated strumming", we said.

www.atkinguitars.com



**GIBSON ACOUSTIC
HUMMINGBIRD STANDARD
ROSEWOOD EC £4,099**

Since its introduction in 1960, the Hummingbird has appeared in numerous guises. The latest tops Gibson's mini-range of cutaway electros with all-gloss-finished Sitka spruce/rosewood construction, a bound rosewood 'board with mother-of-pearl inlays, and LR Baggs' VTC (the volume and tone controls are hidden in the soundhole). It's quite the belter in terms of acoustic volume, and that tonal fullness and power holds strong in its plugged-in voice, too.

www.gibson.com

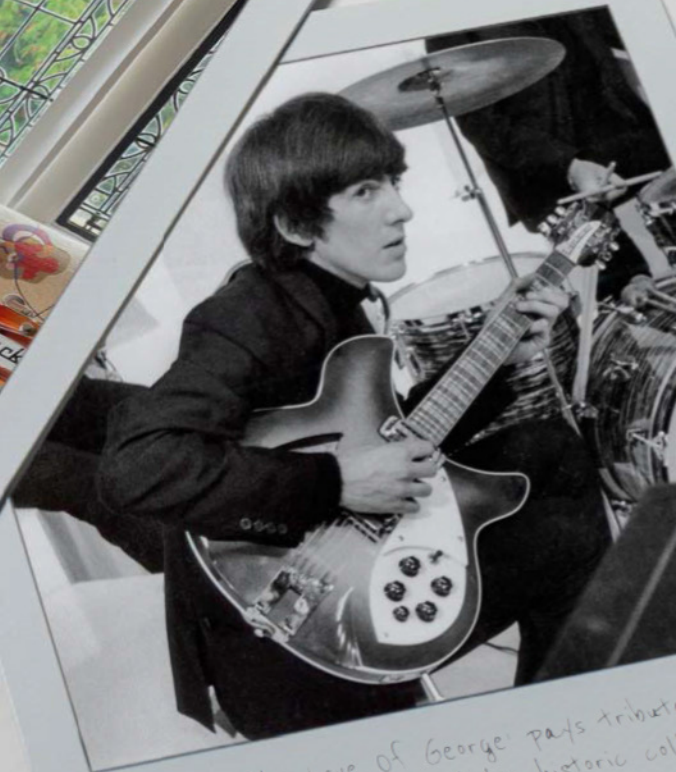
Robin Nolan

Recorded in George Harrison's home studio using his most famous instruments, Robin Nolan's Gypsy jazz covers album reimagines the quiet Beatle's best moments – and finally completes Harrison's 'lost' song...

Words David Mead & Henry Yates



Gypsy jazz guitarist Robin Nolan was granted access to George Harrison's legendary guitar collection at Friar Park, the Harrisons' home



'For The Love Of George' pays tribute to George Harrison and his historic collection of instruments, reimagined in Gypsy jazz

Under normal circumstances, a Beatles covers album might not be headline news. But *For The Love Of George* – the latest release from Robin Nolan, a player ranked among Britain's greatest exponents of Gypsy jazz for three decades – is the final link in a chain of events so fantastical, improbable and downright surreal that, even now, there's a hint of disbelief in his voice. The seed of this project was planted in the mid-90s, when George Harrison personally invited the then-busker to perform at his Oxfordshire estate, Friar Park.

Nolan's friendship with the family continued beyond Harrison's death in 2001. And after plucking up courage during one particularly convivial soirée, the guitarist shared his vision: a new studio album that reinterpreted the quiet Beatles' best moments in Gypsy jazz fashion, recorded on the fabled instruments in his music room.

Harrison's widow, Olivia, not only agreed but went one better, inviting the younger guitarist to deploy the chords scribbled on an envelope by her late husband as the jump-off for a brand-new song. "George's songwriting is so incredible," says Nolan. "He's obviously overshadowed by the other two [John Lennon and Paul McCartney], but it's just a joy to get his songs out there in this context."

How did you first come into the orbit of George Harrison?

"So I came to Amsterdam to busk after I fell in love with Django Reinhardt's music. I was living in London at the time, but it was challenging for playing this music. We didn't have any gigs and we couldn't really busk anywhere, but we heard about Amsterdam and there was this square called the Leidseplein. So we just turned

"One day in '94, one of George's gardeners was on holiday [in Amsterdam where we were busking]. He bought one of our CDs and then gave it to George back at Friar Park"

up there and started playing and never went back. We worked on the street every day for, like, 10 years, and that's how we learned and practised this music.

"One day in '94, one of George's gardeners was on holiday here and he bought one of our CDs, and then gave it to George and Olivia back at Friar Park, and they obviously loved it. And then, luckily, my number was on the back. So I got a surreal call from George and didn't believe it was him for ages."

Tell us about your earliest memories of meeting George in person.

"He wanted us to come over and play at a party he was having at Friar Park, which is this incredible Gothic mansion in Henley-on-Thames. So one minute we're playing under the tree on the Leidseplein; the next we're playing for The Beatles. And, you know, everyone is famous except for us: Tom Petty, the Heartbreakers, Ravi Shankar, race car drivers, Monty Pythons, you name it. It's that A-list kind of scene. We were just playing there in the background. And this kind of music, it's nice for a party, so that went down really well.

"George was so curious about the guitar. We played a bit together and it was like he just wanted to learn.

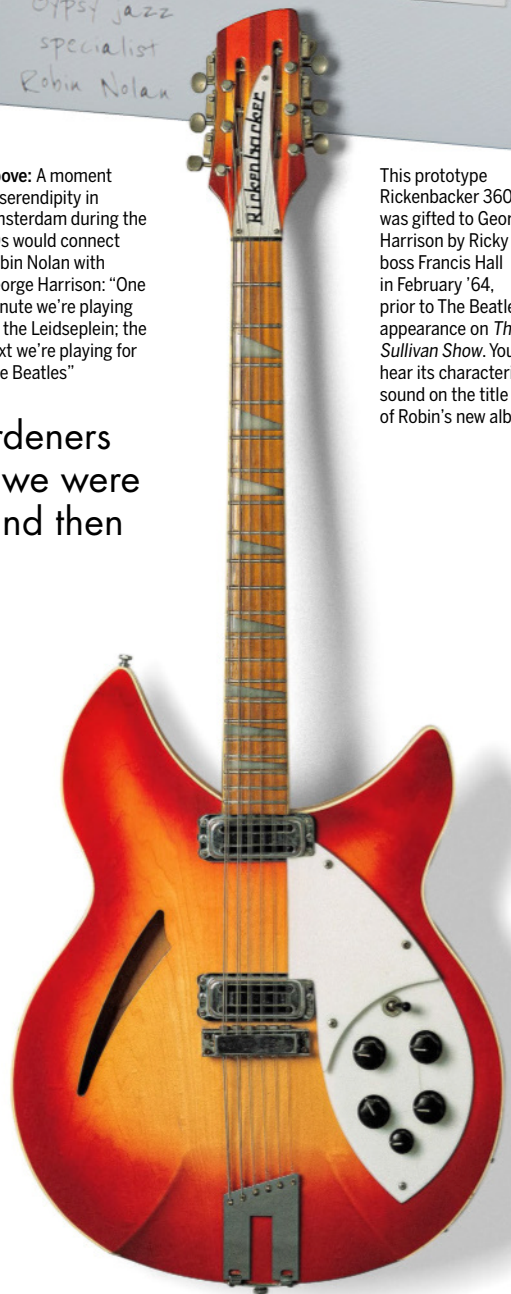


PHOTO BY JONATHAN HERMAN

Above: A moment of serendipity in Amsterdam during the 90s would connect Robin Nolan with George Harrison: "One minute we're playing on the Leidseplein; the next we're playing for The Beatles"

This prototype Rickenbacker 360/12 was gifted to George Harrison by Ricky boss Francis Hall in February '64, prior to The Beatles' appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. You can hear its characteristic sound on the title track of Robin's new album

PHOTO BY NIGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



He loved Django, Eddie Lang, and all that kind of stuff, and I think he liked us because we were kind of naive and just young kids. We weren't in the business; we just wanted to play. We had that spirit, which I think he found refreshing.

"That was the beginning of the friendship with him, and with Olivia and Dhani [George and Olivia's son]. We were kind of the house band at Friar Park. We would play at birthday parties or summer parties in the garden and it was always the same, like, 'Oh my God, is that Eric

Clapton?' Obviously, you're in a different world there. But we had a friendship going with his family and it was always something really special for me.

"Then George passed away in 2001 and we continued the friendship with Olivia and Dhani. In fact, the night before the *Concert For George*, held at the Royal Albert Hall [2002] a year after his passing, they had a special night at Friar Park where everyone was there, and we were playing. It was quite sombre and emotional."

What were the first steps towards making the album, *For The Love Of George*?

"A couple of years ago, I was there at Friar Park again, playing at a very small dinner party for Olivia. We were just hanging about after dinner. It was a really nice atmosphere. I've always wanted to do a George Harrison project, so I just plucked up the courage and

"George loved Django, Eddie Lang... and I think he liked us because we were kind of naive and just young kids. We weren't in the business; we just wanted to play"



George's Gibson J-160E appeared throughout
The Beatles' catalogue

George Harrison and John Lennon, with Paul McCartney, performing *I Want To Hold Your Hand* and *This Boy on Their Hand* on their big-bodied Gibson J-160Es for Granada Television's *Late Scene Extra* in Manchester, November 1963

I asked Olivia: 'I'd love to play on one of George's guitars,' because I knew they were upstairs. She just said, 'Of course – which one?' I just said, 'Erm, the Ramirez?'

"She dashed upstairs and came back a second later – and then suddenly I was standing there holding the Ramirez, the flamenco guitar that George used on *And I Love Her* and *Till There Was You*. Of course, first of all I played the intro to *And I Love Her* and then I used that guitar for the rest of the night. Everyone's sat around and we're doing a little concert. Everything came together: I was in George's house, playing the same notes on the frets where he played them, on that famous guitar. It was just an amazing feeling. It's like there's a vibe and a spirit you can't put your finger on, but it was really special."

It must have felt like a natural next step to suggest a studio album?

"Later on, I said, 'Wouldn't it be great to record an album on George's guitars?' Olivia thought it was a great idea. With all the logistics, it took a while to happen, but I did the backing tracks in Amsterdam and then eventually I came back to Friar Park with a recording guy and we were allowed into George's guitar room – you know, the inner sanctum, surrounded by Beatles history, all the guitars and everything from his life. I recorded the guitar parts on his Ramirez and Gibson J-160E, which is the only guitar to be on every Beatles album. And then, on the title track, I used the Rickenbacker 12-string, which is the *A Hard Day's Night* guitar. I felt a lot of responsibility. I know what George was like and he didn't suffer fools – and he knew if you were just trying to be flash – so I wanted to be sincere for him. I think that comes across in the music on this album."

"We were allowed into George's guitar room at Friar Park – the inner sanctum, surrounded by Beatles history, all the guitars and everything from his life"

It's amazing how well George's songs lend themselves to the Gypsy jazz treatment.

"It is amazing. When I look at it objectively, sometimes it's a challenge with epic songs like *My Sweet Lord* – you know, how do you turn that into a swing cover without being cheesy? I just managed to do it somehow on these songs, not falling into the trap of trying to mimic the song exactly but kind of making it a swing song or a Latin song. I was very careful to make his music sound beautiful in this context. I was really trying to be true to his melodies and his chords because they're so interesting. People are seeing his songs in a different light now and the feedback has been amazing."

The covers are fantastic. But this album also has an original song, doesn't it?

"Yes, the other really interesting thing is the title track, *For The Love Of George*, which is published, amazingly, as a Harrison/Nolan composition. The chords are from him and the melody is me. Olivia texted me a picture of an envelope [pictured overleaf] and it just had chords scribbled down by George, like, a B minor crossed out and an arrow pointing to something else."

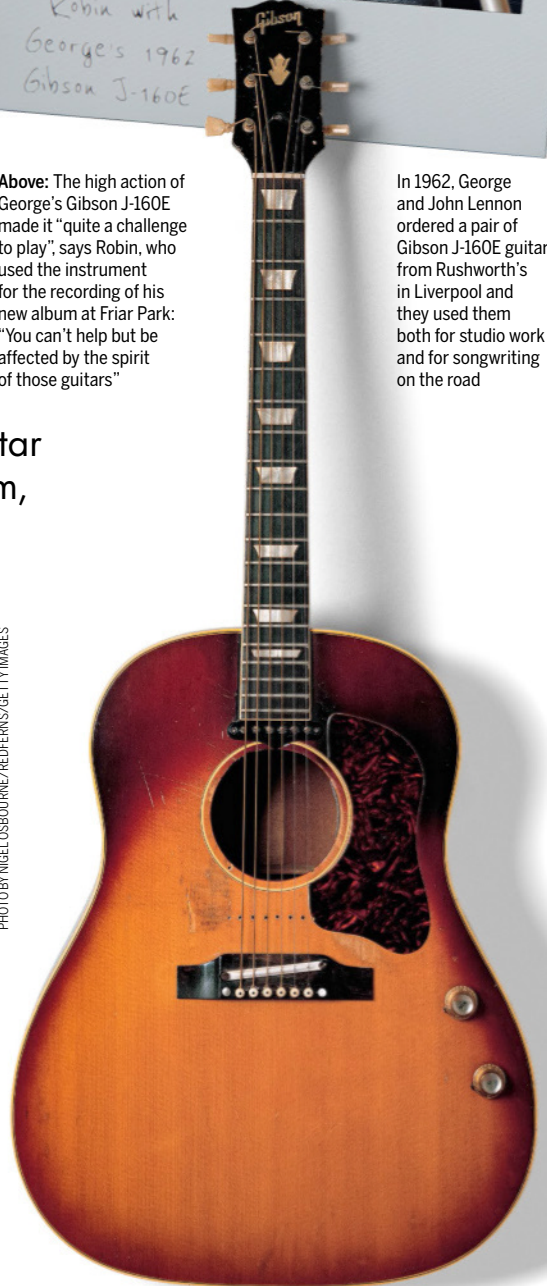


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBIN NOLAN

Above: The high action of George's Gibson J-160E made it "quite a challenge to play", says Robin, who used the instrument for the recording of his new album at Friar Park: "You can't help but be affected by the spirit of those guitars"

In 1962, George and John Lennon ordered a pair of Gibson J-160E guitars from Rushworth's in Liverpool and they used them both for studio work and for songwriting on the road

PHOTO BY NIGEL OSBOURNE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES





Left: Olivia Harrison granted Robin access to the José Ramírez nylon-string, which was famously used on *And I Love Her*

Right: George Harrison is pictured with the Ramírez at Twickenham Film Studios during the filming of *A Hard Day's Night* in 1964

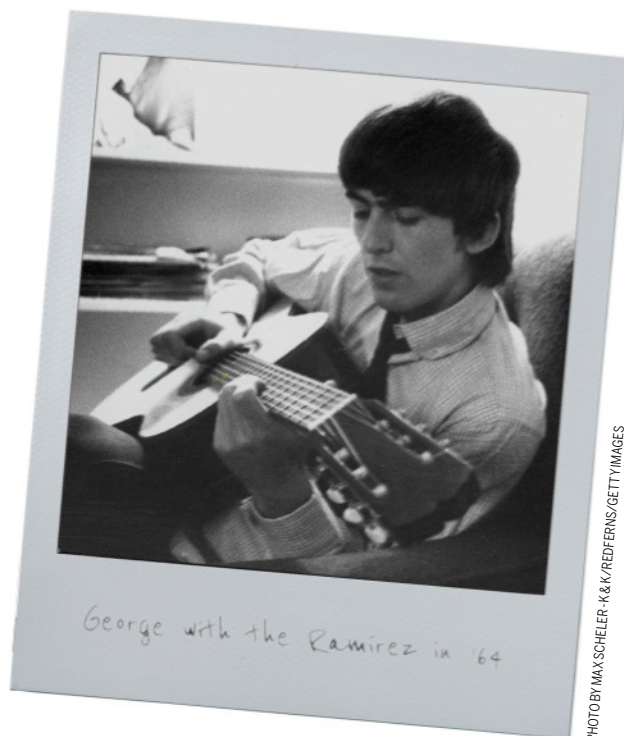


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBIN NOLAN

PHOTO BY MAX SCHULER-K&K/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

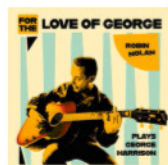
"She asked me: 'Do you think George ever did anything with this? Why don't you have a look?' So I was staring at it and I really started getting the vibe. Like, 'What did he mean here?' I started to get a little bit obsessed and I slowly pieced it together, like, 'Maybe this is what he was meaning?' and I put together the chord sequence and then added a melody on top. I was trying to get something that was really 'George'. I could kind of hear him humming this melody.

"Finally, I put the whole track together and then sent it back to Olivia, which was nerve-racking because she might not like it. But she said: 'Oh, it sounds so George.' That was really inspiring, you know? That song kind of spearheaded this project – and all three guitars are on that title track."

It must have been difficult to actually sit in George's studio and hold it together...

"I think, honestly, I just had one thing in mind, which was to make this album beautiful for him. I wasn't trying to impress any other guitarists. Just handling any of those guitars, I felt beyond nervous, but it was more like I was channelling something really special for him when I was in that room. It wasn't the kind of atmosphere where it was like, 'Oh, let's give it a couple of hours and

"I was in George's house, playing the same notes on the frets where he played them, on that famous [Ramírez] guitar. It was just an amazing feeling"



On For The Love Of George, Robin reinterprets 10 of George Harrison's classic tracks – including *And I Love Her* and *My Sweet Lord* – in his distinctive Gypsy jazz style. He brought the title track to life from chords that George had scribbled on an envelope (below)

come back.' I knew we didn't have unlimited time in there, so I just really did it as intensely as possible. It was a real relief listening back and hearing how we'd captured those guitars. Like, 'Oh yeah, that sounds good.' Because we didn't have a chance to listen back to anything at the time, I just did it with headphones."

Handling those guitars, it must feel like you're holding a piece of history.

"Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it was ridiculous recording *And I Love Her* with the Ramírez because it sounds exactly the same. And the *A Hard Day's Night* Rickenbacker just sounds like The Beatles, you know? Then the Gibson – I think Paul and John had written *I Saw Her Standing There* and some of the early classics on that guitar. It was quite a high action and quite a challenge to play that one as well. It had a real gnarly kind of feel to it. You can't help but be affected by the spirit of those guitars.

"You know, it might never happen again with those guitars. They're in that room, and it's basically like a museum – there's not people just playing them and recording with them. Not Clapton, not Jeff Lynne, no-one. They're just there and they'll still be there when we're all gone and someone will be curating them. It's rock 'n' roll history. It's just that I have this unique relationship and friendship with the Harrisons that, you know, I was in the right position and had the idea to do it. It all came together. And it easily might not have – but it did." 

For The Love Of George is available now on Dark Horse Records <https://robinnolan.com>

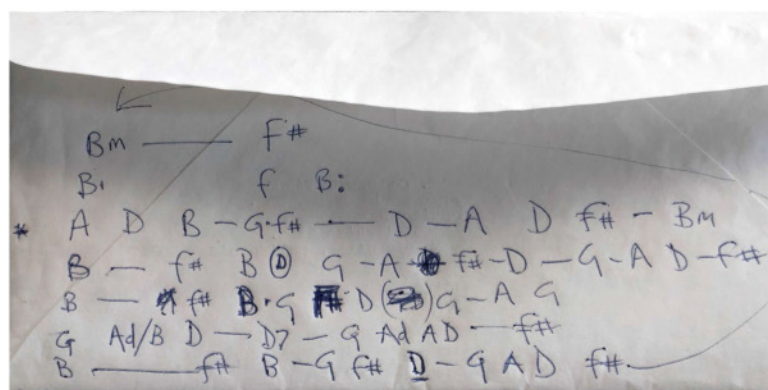


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