



JEFF BECK OXBLOOD

EPIPHONE'S REPLICA OF THE ICONIC '54 LES PAUL



MOLLY TUTTLE LESSON

THE ACOUSTIC SENSATION ON BLUEGRASS BASICS



Guitarist

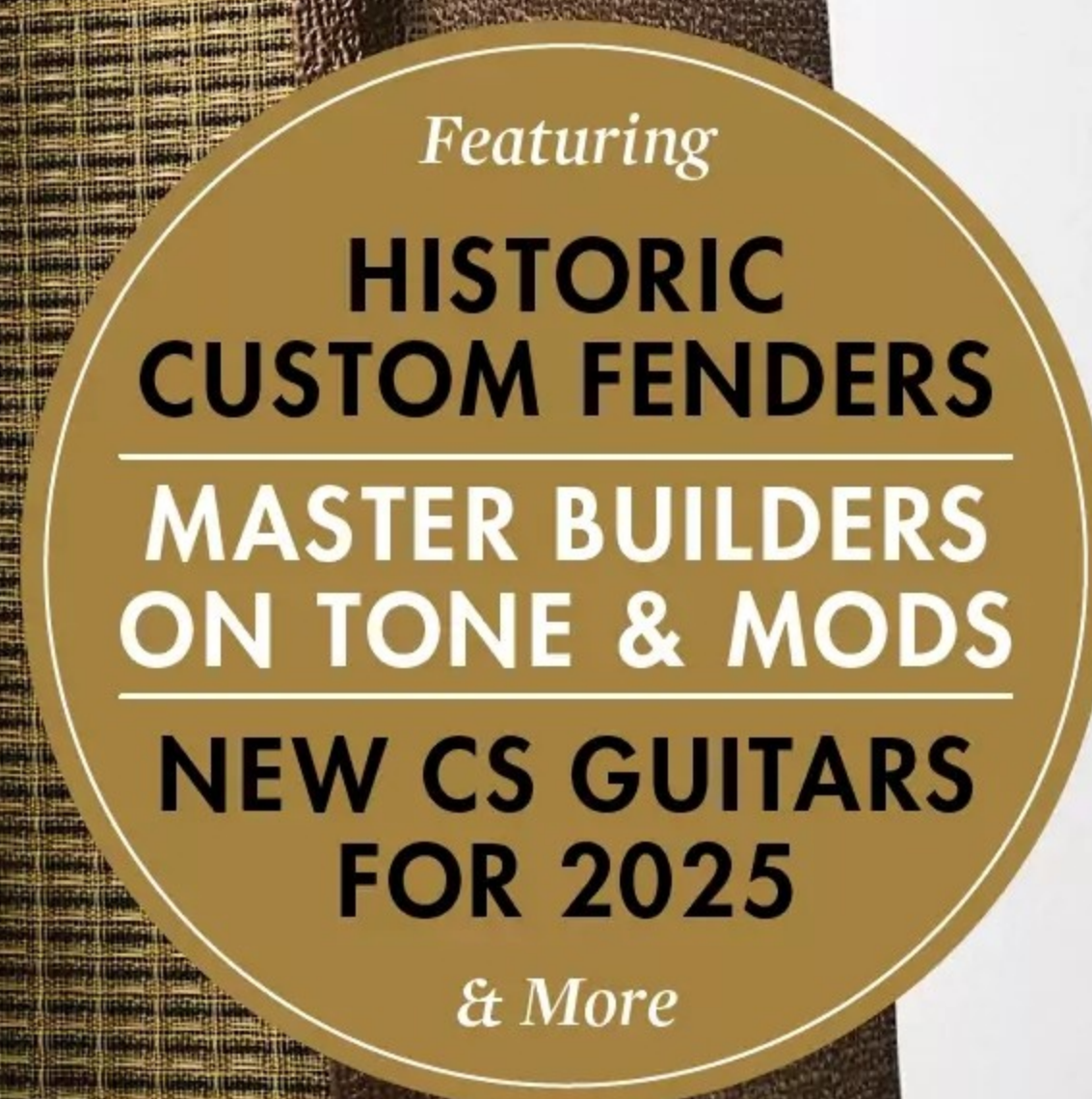
Issue 527

SUMMER 2025

CUSTOM

THE HISTORY OF FENDER'S ELECTRIC DREAM MACHINES

SHOP



JEFF 'SKUNK' BAXTER

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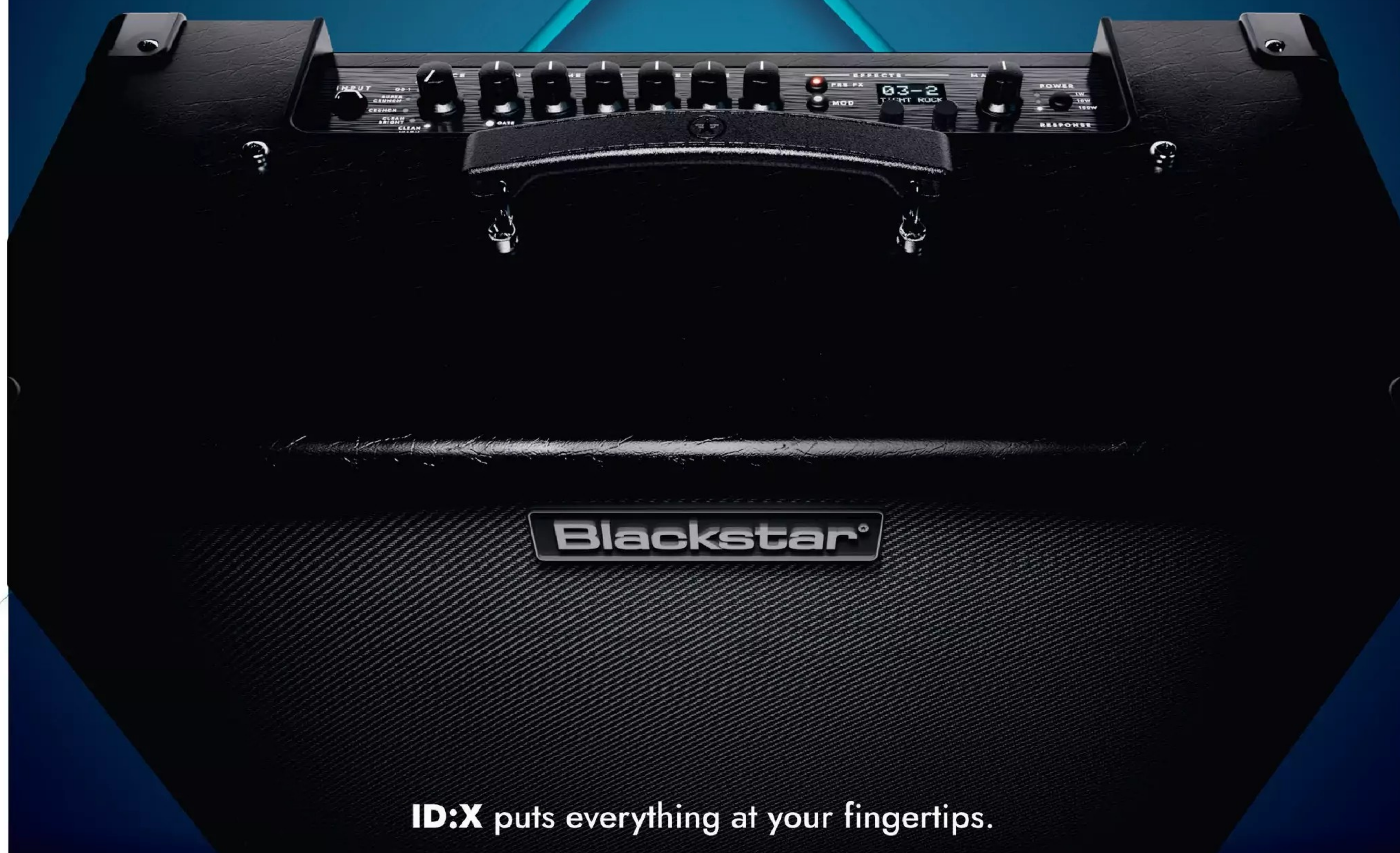
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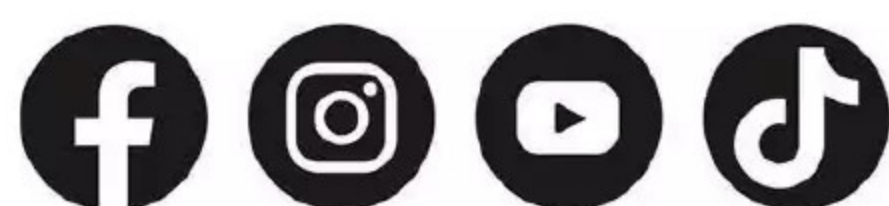
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Have It Your Way



This month's cover feature on customisation brought to mind all of the wonderful things – but also the potential pitfalls – of having everything your way when it comes to guitar design. Neville Marten correctly points out that one of the problems can be that, presented with the chance to do anything you want, you end up designing a guitar that's decked out like a Christmas tree with a motley of disparate pickups, off-the-wall finish, bonkers wiring options and all the rest – and yet somehow it ends up being less than the sum of its parts.

But if you approach customisation less like a buffet and more like making a favourite dish exactly to your taste, things can work out beautifully. I think that's because the harder we try to meet all our potential needs, both now and in the future, by slathering on options, the further we move away from the simple ingredients of an inspiring playing experience and the more we risk paying for redundant capabilities we never, in the end, come around to using.

I had this feeling when gigging and recording with amp by a famous brand known for offering all the buzzers and bells: voicing switches, extensive EQ options, multiple channels. I had fun playing around with it all for a day, then hit upon a combination of settings that I liked and... I never touched the dials and switches again! I might as well have found an amp that just did what I personally liked and done away with the cost and complexity of all that 'choice'.

So what would I choose if I were spec'ing out a Custom Shop guitar? Here goes: double-bound '59-spec Tele Custom with the nitro version of Fender's Texas Tea finish, which looks black but comes up goldish in certain lights, Twisted Tele pickups with switchable choice of serial or parallel wiring when the selector is in the middle position, light ageing, 9.5-inch radius and a bridge that lets you either top-load or go through body. Now all I've got to do is work out how to pay for it! Enjoy the issue.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Jeff 'Skunk' Baxter

Session legend, pragmatist and no snob, Jeff's playing has graced some of the finest records ever made. He talks about guitars on **p112**



Oxblood Test

Jeff's original was a mongrel that became an icon – can Epiphone's new replica of that famous Lester really do it justice? **p92**



Molly Tuttle

Like so many great talents to emerge from the Americana scene, Molly's crossover appeal is only just getting started over on **p48**



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FEATURE



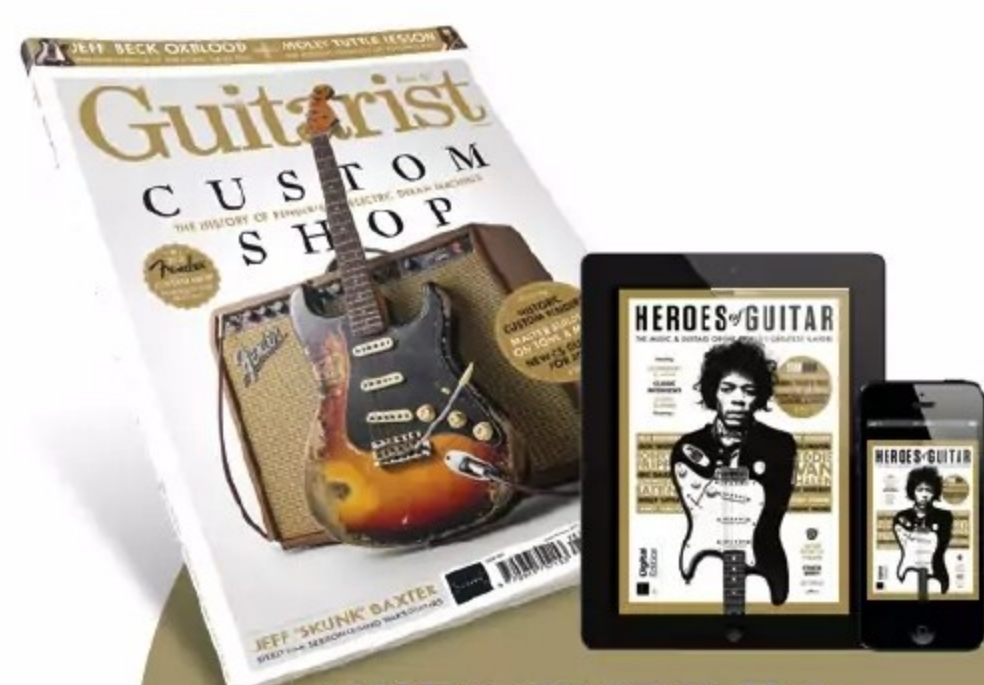
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REVIEW



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FIRST PLAY



IVISON DAKOTA STANDARD £4,495

WHAT IS IT? Superb retro-aimed, professional-level solidbody that recalls 60s-era Gibson

High Flyer

Used by big names such as Richard Fortus and Audley Freed, and made here in the UK, Ivison guitars recall the lost art of the ‘golden era’ but in very original dress

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

It might look like another very cool vintage guitar, but, no – this new-for-2025 Dakota Standard is the work of Worcestershire-based illusionist Neil Ivison. Arriving in its very practical logo’d cream Hiscox case (like many quality UK builds do), it just doesn’t prepare you for the time-warp vibe of the guitar itself.

The Dakota came from a desire to create a more usable version of Gibson’s classic Firebird: “There must be a way I can make this more ergonomic but still keep the sound...” Neil mused when we spoke to him, back in issue 508 in 2023, about the origins of the design. Since that time, the Dakota has more than earned its place in the Ivison line-up alongside the Hurricane, and it now comes in single-pickup One format and also with korina replacing the all-mahogany build of the model we have here. In fact, for 2025, the Dakota Standard gets in-house Ivison pickups (originally the model used Sunbears), plus an optional bound, coloured top with natural-back style, which means new colours can be added, and our review piece shows that off with Neil’s take on Cadillac Green. Finally, you can now order your Dakota with either the Faber wraparound you see here, a vintage-style ABR-1 tune-o-matic and tailpiece, or with a short Maestro vibrato.

Based around a short scale length taken from a 50s Gibson Les Paul Junior, it’s a simple guitar, though more like a Junior







1. The heel looks like classic Gibson, although the body is lightly chamfered, and reflects the old-school long-tenon neck joint. The neck is 'old stock' Honduran mahogany, too, quarter-sawn and one-piece with a vintage-spec single-action truss rod

or Special than that oversized Firebird. The single-cut shape really isn't a million miles from our 50s Junior in outline, with the exception of the rounded and more stylised treble horn. It's slab-bodied, albeit with that nod to the Firebird with its slightly raised centre section, which adds subtle form to the otherwise flat front and is a platform for the twin pickups and wraparound bridge to be mounted on. It also provides a straight line to which the reverse pickguard can be lined up.

This isn't a unique-to-Ivison idea, of course. Most recently Eastman's Juliet design from 2022 featured a similar raised centre motif and was a nod to a more

Junior in colour. The African mahogany body (which appears to be one piece) has a very striped, straight grain, and there's some light chamfering to reduce the body bulk where the neck meets the body. We have a standard depth of 45mm at that centre section, slightly thinner at 42.5mm for the body flanks.

The neck is classed as quarter-sawn 'old growth' Honduran mahogany and fits original Les Paul style with a long tenon extending under the neck pickup, while the truss rod is old-school single action. The clever design of the three-side, lightly back-angled headstock means it looks familiar, classic even, without being a

2. This classy back-angled headstock holds the lightly aged Gotoh tuners and a superbly cut and highly polished buffalo bone nut

This Dakota does not feel remotely like a brand-new guitar. But it doesn't feel overused or abused, either

playable Firebird. This is particularly evident on the more recent Henry James signature model, which uses a pair of Firebird-style mini-humbuckers.

The single-ply edge binding might be optional, but to our eyes it just seems to elevate the design above a Junior or Special. The back, sides and neck-back all take on that dark chocolate hue, which is virtually identical to our reference 1957 Gibson Les



knock-off. The heel, like the majority of the build, is very old Gibson-like, too.

Overall, the Dakota really does come across as a Special-meets-Firebird circa 1963. Surely, the teams at Gibson built one of these, didn't they? The illusion is enhanced when it comes to the hardware, which is all very authentically aged – from the Faber bridge, and the mini-humbucking covers and mounting rings, to the Gotoh tuners, three-ply pickguard, screws and small Gibson-like strap buttons. And while there's no obvious ageing to the control knobs, hey, is there a cooler knob out there?

Feel & Sounds

This light ageing of the finish and hardware shouldn't affect the playing feel, but it really does: this Dakota does not feel remotely like a brand-new guitar. But it doesn't feel overused or abused, either; if you like classic instruments, the neck and fretwork might well sway you before you've even plugged in. This is lovely, unfussy craft with a very good choice of wire gauge, which is spec'd by Jescar at 2.54mm wide by 1.14mm high. In practice, it's slightly lower but feels far from modern yet perfectly playable. The fret ends are nicely domed, the binding edge slightly rounded but not overdone. In terms of depth, the neck is slightly slimmer than previous Ivison Hurricanes we've played – 21.3mm at the 1st fret, 23.2mm at the 12th with a pretty standard nut width at just a shade under 43mm, which gives the neck that classic 'C'. Not too thick, not too thin.

Weight-wise, the word 'perfect' springs to mind. Playing seated or strapped on, the Dakota just disappears. It doesn't slip off your lap and it doesn't drag on your shoulder, and after a few unplugged strums you know it's game-on. It's quite loud for starters, with a big ring. It's interesting to compare the Dakota, unplugged, with that '57 Junior reference, which has more of a midrange push; the Dakota sounds a little brighter and lighter.

Previous Ivison builds we've played have featured Sunbear pickups, and this is the first time we've heard the in-house designs. These follow the Firebird style but with a few changes (see Under The Hood, right). It's certainly quite the sonic stew with the bridge pickup, by design, aping the girth and slight compression of an overwound P-90, although here it's a little milder in output (certainly compared with our '57 Les Paul Junior), which balances rather nicely with that 'big Tele'-like neck pickup. There's a lot of ring and chime to the guitar, though it's subtly rounded and fuller than our own Tele reference, plus we're feeling 'Gibson' even if what we're hearing is a little more California. As we've discussed on plenty



Like many top-end makers, Faber is the choice for the bridge here. This wrapover looks like it was made in the 50s, apart from that more contemporary compensated ridge

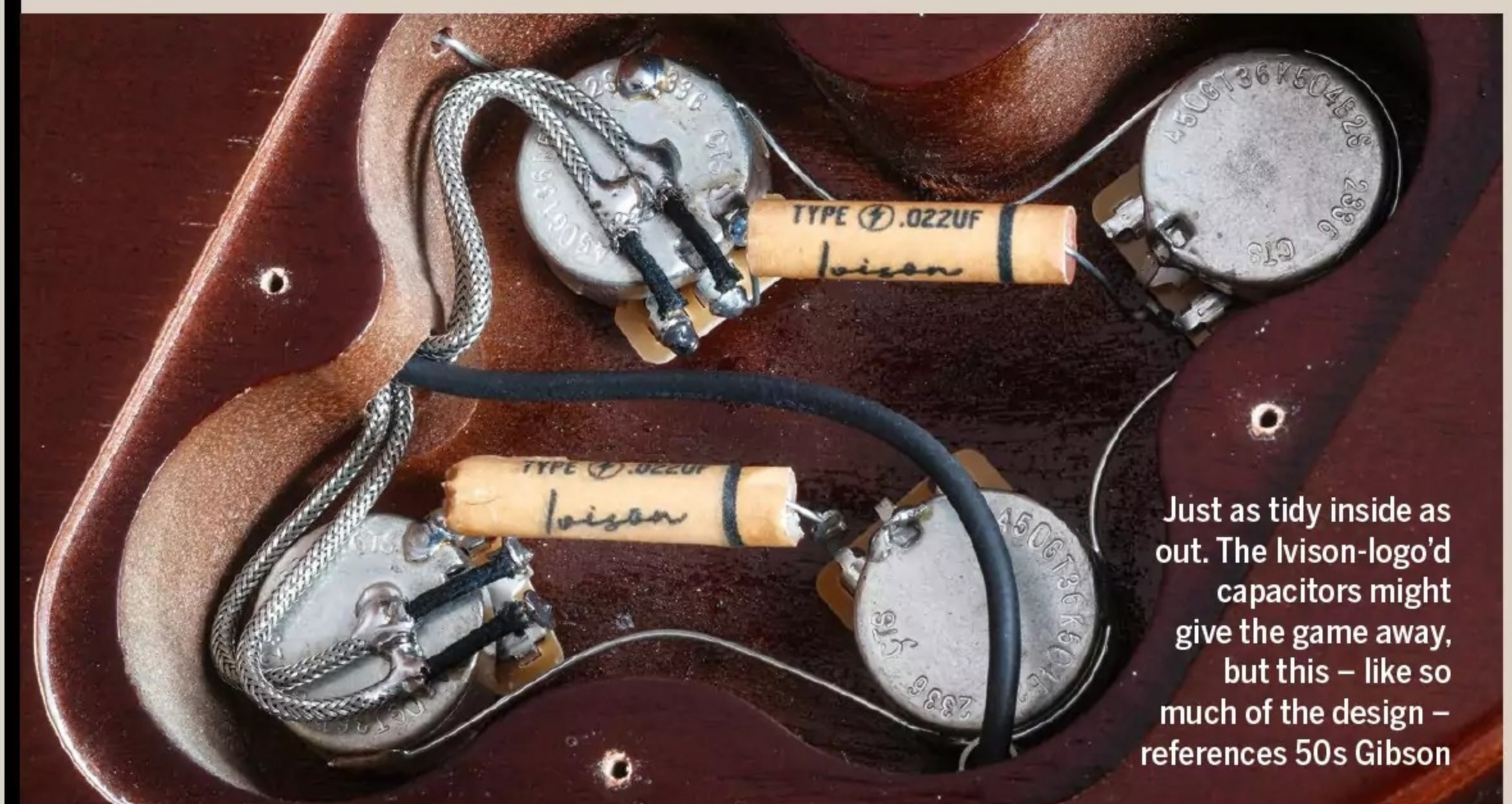
UNDER THE HOOD

Remove the backplate and go back in time...

It's little surprise that, with such a high attention to detail in the build, the actual hidden electronics should be as tidy and detailed as everything else. Like an old Gibson from the 50s, there's no screening in the cavity or on the back of the control cover. But the wiring is immaculate and stylised in its layout using 500k CTS pots, with perfectly placed bare ground wire and a pair of old-looking capacitors that emulate the blue ink Grey Tiger types used

by Gibson from 1952 to '56. They're valued at .022μF, but the neat thing is that they have a Ivison logo.

As to the pickups, these are the Ivison Freedbird set that were designed and wound for endorsee Audley Freed, who basically wanted the look of a Firebird's mini-humbuckers but with the "extra grunt" of a proper P-90 in bridge position. Both use Alnico II magnets with DCRs of 6.2kohms (neck) and 8.1k (bridge).



Just as tidy inside as out. The Ivison-logo'd capacitors might give the game away, but this – like so much of the design – references 50s Gibson

TAKING OFF

With new staff, in-house pickups and the continuing success of the Dakota, there's plenty to discuss. We grab Neil Ivison for a quick chat

We last caught up with Neil just over 18 months ago and quite a lot has changed and evolved since then. Fundamentally, Ivison is now making its own pickups in-house, quite an undertaking for such a small operation. Neil explains: "Basically, I took on Paul Cross to help me build the guitars and he wound his own pickups, so it made sense – if we now had someone on staff who can wind pickups – to make our own.

"For most guitar makers, if you buy in a pickup set, they cost so they'll go on the guitar. But now we have this little rehearsal room right next to the workshop where we have my touring gear all set up, so we can take a guitar in there and put some pickups in, and if we feel for that piece of wood the pickup needs a bit more zing or maybe the opposite, this one's a little top heavy, we can swap them for another set. Paul can literally go and wind a new set to more suit the guitar. It does make it a bit more long-winded, but we just feel the guitars are going out sounding their optimum, really."

One fan, of course, is Audley Freed, who now has his own pickup set. "It's a bit mad, really," says Neil. "I've been an Audley Freed fan for years, in The Black Crowes and even Cry Of Love before that. Then you get these emails saying basically they'd like to try a guitar and meet up and you think, 'Well, it's not going to be *that* Audley Freed, is it? There must be umpteen Audley Freed's in America!' Then the penny drops that it is that Audley Freed. But you just find with all of these people, they're just guitar geeks like us. We were talking about Firebird pickups and how that

bridge can be really spiky – famously Allen Collins put a dog-ear P-90 in the bridge [position] on his Firebird. We told Audley we were developing a P-90 that fits into a Firebird case, so you still get the look, but it's actually a P-90 and it takes away that harshness and there's a bit more middy grunt of a P-90. Audley was keen to hear them, so we wound him a set and, although it was our first go, he was over the moon. I think I delivered him a set on a Wednesday and the following night he was using them with Sheryl Crow."

What about selling the Ivison pickups aftermarket? "At the moment, it's a no," Neil tells

"The Dakota is our biggest-selling guitar and it's a great platform for different styles"

Neil Ivison

us. "But never say never! It's just the two of us building the guitars, so it's über-boutique, really, and we're both flat out five or six days a week.

"I tend to handle all the woodwork and finishing," continues Neil, "and then Paul does the pickup stuff. We're making around 40 instruments a year, so it's still very small numbers. Moving forward, we're looking at the finishing process – we could really do with someone [to help] on that



Neil Ivison has now brought pickup-making in-house, handled by Paul Cross

– because at least half of the build time goes on finishing. I seem to spend most of my time in the spray booth right now. I'd rather get back to the sawdust and muck," he laughs.

A big part of the demand comes from the Dakota itself. "It's our biggest-selling guitar, about three times more than anything else we do. It really is its own thing now. I'm still waiting for someone to say, 'Oh, that was my design,' but I sort of think it was there for the taking – surely someone has done this before? This can't be mine," he laughs. "To be honest, I've seen a few that have come after the Dakota, but instead of getting angry I'm actually quite flattered.

"There are a few more iterations on the Dakota platform we're planning to do. We've had a few requests for a reverse-headstock version and we're doing one of those for Richard Fortus at the moment – a sort of scaled-back version of a Firebird headstock that's completely our own. Obviously, with the '25-spec Standard you have there, we've done the bound top edge, which I think really works, so we're looking at different colours and perhaps sparkle tops with Filter'Trons, that sort of thing.

"It's nice that the Dakota outline shape has been so accepted as it's a great platform for different styles. We might try a Jazzmaster vibrato, but it's doing so well at the moment that I'm loath to change it too much. There are definitely things we can try, for sure, but if it ain't broke, don't fix it!" [DB]



All the hardware, including these pickup covers and mounting rings, is beautifully aged. These are Ivison's Freedbird set, designed and wound for endorsee Audley Freed



This style of black 'top-hat' silver reflector knob was used by Gibson from late 1960, and it's no surprise to find a very classic 50s-style circuit inside



IVISON DAKOTA STANDARD

PRICE: £4,495 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: African mahogany with raised centre and bound edge (optional)

NECK: Quarter-sawn Honduran mahogany '59 profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625.5mm (24.625")

NUT/WIDTH: Polished buffalo bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Cream bound AAA rosewood, vintage pattern celluloid dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium (Jescar 45100)

HARDWARE: Faber TPWC-'59 compensated wraparound bridge/tailpiece; Gotoh SD90 Kluson-style tuners – aged nickel plating

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Ivison Firebird set (Firebird-style humbucker at neck; P-90 in Firebird-style cover at bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.47/7.63

OPTIONS: Vintage pattern trapezoid inlays; Ivison pickups (P90Bird, PAFBird, P90 soapbars and '59-spec Patent Applied For style)

RANGE OPTIONS: Single-pickup Dakota One (£3,495, available with mahogany or korina body) and Korina (£4,495, with korina body)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Cadillac Green (as reviewed), Tobacco Sunburst, Pelham Blue, other colours on request – lightly aged nitrocellulose gloss

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PROS Everything! Seriously good vintage-informed craft, immaculately presented in a used but not abused fashion; superb 'old Gibson' feel and far-reaching hot pot of vintage sounds; a modern classic in the making

CONS Er, no!

of occasions, the 50s- or vintage-style wiring just seems to increase the colours: pulling back the tones thins the voice, while the top-end of the volumes morph intuitively from 'rhythm' to 'lead'.

Overall, it's a rather beguiling sound, seemingly not quite one thing nor another yet the quality and musicality is hugely evident. On the one hand, that bridge pickup wants to sound like a P-90, but it sits so well as a lower-powered, not over-bright humbucker that sounds like instant Mike Campbell to this writer – an illusion not helped when you play some of his classic slide motifs (oh yes, the Dakota is a superb slide guitar!). It sits very well in a simple guitar-band mix. It's jangly whenever you want, but it loves a little dirt, and then that neck pickup is super soulful – pull back the volume and it almost does 'acoustic' jazz. We haven't mentioned the pickup

Everything about the build oozes quality and classic craft, with a wonderful feel and sounds to match

mix. Needless to say, it's stupidly good – a little soul and funk in there, but add some slapback and you're in Memphis.

After initially tuning up and just stretching the strings in, did we tune the guitar again during our lengthy sound test? Not that we can remember. Everything about the build oozes quality and classic craft, topped off with a wonderful feel and sounds to match. Another level.

Verdict

While Ivison might not be the only maker, large or small, that has considered a more ergonomic Firebird, the Dakota is a real class act: very easy on the eye, not to mention in the hand or on the ear. The vintage-informed craft is exceptional, but this is also a very clever original design, albeit one that could easily have come out of the Gibson factory in the early 60s. That's not easy to do as convincingly as this. It's this originality – rather than just being another replica or clone – that is so attractive. The Dakota has already engaged with some big players, as has the Hurricane, so clearly we're far from the only ones to enjoy the ride. And that demand is very evident: it took us some time to get this Dakota and no sooner than we did it was needed back as a pretty major artist was interested. Frankly, we're not surprised. **G**

FIRST PLAY



TWO NOTES TORPEDO RELOAD II £849

.....
WHAT IS IT? Reactive loadbox
with dual-mono 215 watts
(per channel), stereo effects loop
and expanded connectivity

Lock & Load

French loadbox leader, Two Notes, releases the Swiss Army knife of amplifier attenuation and connectivity – we witness the results

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Matt Lincoln

Those of us who revel in the glorious saturation of a valve amp running full-clip will be all too familiar with the eardrum-splitting consequences. Certainly, many of the higher-wattage amp behemoths only reach their overdriven best at volumes considered unusable in non-stadium environments.

Way back in the 70s, load resistors could be found in the toolboxes of amplifier technicians, allowing them to work on valve amps without speakers connected, and occasionally bespoke designs would be found in the rigs of touring musicians. In 1980, Boston guitarist and technical wunderkind Tom Scholz, inventor of the Rockman line of portable amp-related products, released a pioneering loadbox in the form of the Power Soak. Various companies have subsequently produced such devices; however, the potential for catastrophic amp damage is always a simple mismatch away, and loadbox designs have a chequered history for safety.

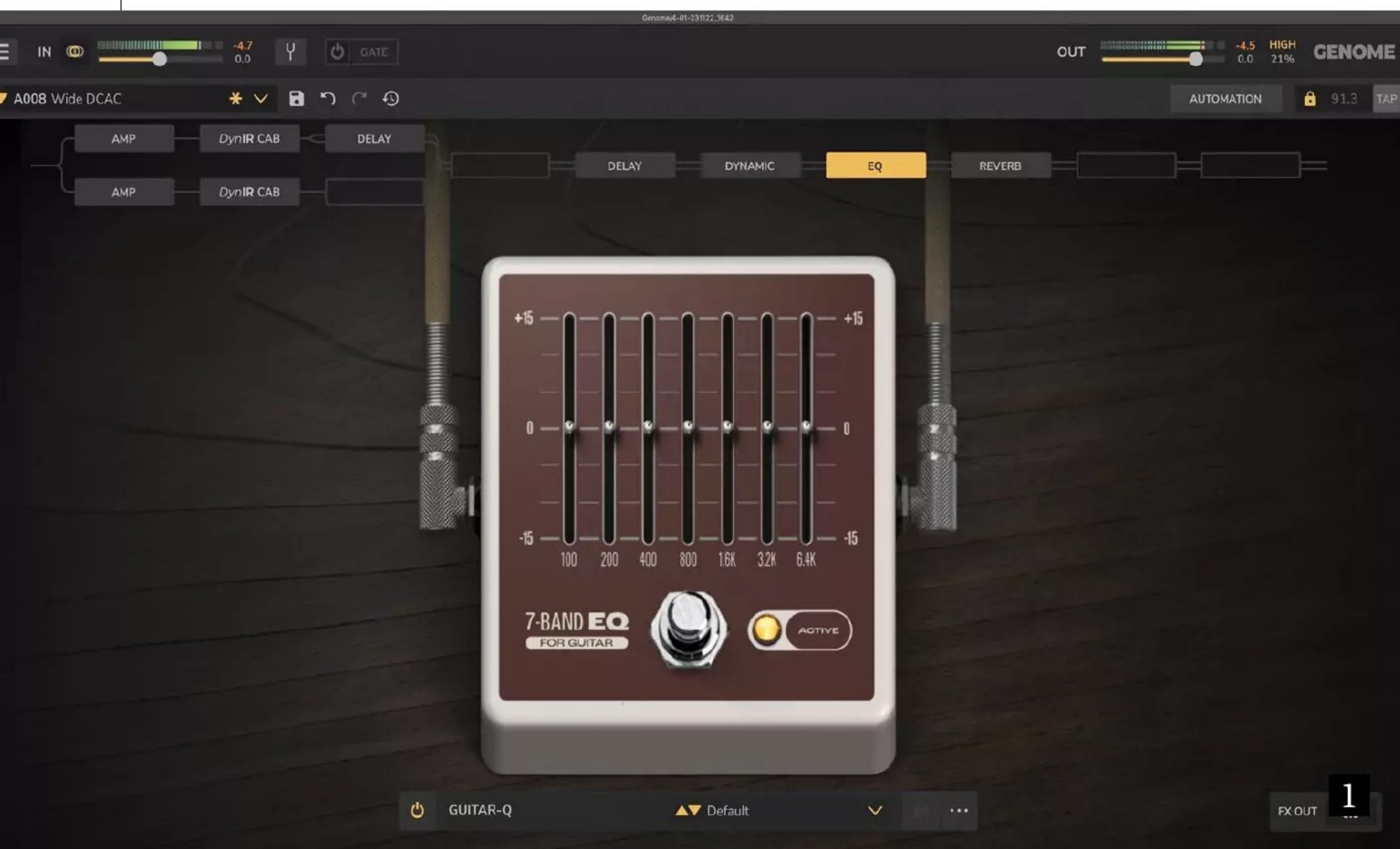
Thankfully, the concept of loadboxes has evolved over the decades, and the current generation of reactive devices – where a dynamic response curve more accurately

The smart, heavy duty steel chassis has wooden end-cheeks that can be swapped with the supplied rack ears





1. The Genome software is an ecosystem of virtual rigs, with a huge range of amps, pedals, cab IRs and studio effects, plus AI in the form of Codex to reimagine and adapt existing sounds
2. The rear-panel of the Torpedo Reload II houses the control section for the effects loop, mix pots, dual-mono switchability and assignable bypass footswitch jack input
3. For optimum response from the Celestion-approved response curves, an input calibration section shows signal level via three stages of LEDs adjustable via an input trim pot
4. Tone-shaping controls include Depth and Presence, bringing modern high performance to any amp. The Mojo control adds a 'loudness' boost similar to hi-fi systems



SOFTWARE IMAGE: TWO NOTES

replicates the speaker's behaviour – are now considered industry standard. During the pandemic when us noisy guitarists were forced to play at neighbour-friendly levels, Two Notes released the Captor X. This reactive loadbox with a variety of selectable IR speaker simulations in a small desktop form-factor was greeted with great enthusiasm and led to the Two Notes team setting its design-sights on creating a Swiss Army knife of amplifier connectivity, culminating in this Reload II.



While the Captor X has a diminutive stature, the Reload II's attractive wooden-end cheeks that frame the brushed metal chassis evoke the look of high-end bespoke recording studio equipment. When taking your rig to the stage, rack-ears can replace the wooden panels for a professional touring solution.

The Reload II packs quite a feature set, including inputs switchable for either amplifiers or line-level devices such as modellers and preamps, a Celestion-approved reactive load, two 215-watt channels of 'dual mono' power, stereo effects loop, tone-shaping controls and recording outputs. Included in the offering is a licence for Two Notes' Genome amp modelling and speaker IR software application.

In Use

Beginning our tests with the basic application of valve amp attenuation, the output of a hand-wired Marshall 1959 was plugged into the amplifier input and a 4x12 cabinet with Celestion Greenbacks was plugged into Channel A's speaker output. With the rear-panel impedance selector matched to our amp, we dialled in the very useful amplifier input calibration, consisting of three level-indicating LEDs and a trim pot that enables fine-tuning for maximum performance from those Celestion-approved reactive loads. The cranked Marshall character came through

fully intact while attenuating all the way down to just whisper quiet.

The tone controls – Depth and Presence – impart the type of low-end resonance and top-end sparkle found on modern high-performance amplifiers, bringing a modern aggressive edge to the Marshall's classic sound. Similarly, the Mojo button punches the guitar sound forward in a similar way to a hi-fi's loudness button.

The fabled wet-dry-wet configuration, made famous by legends including Eddie Van Halen and Steve Lukather, where stereo effects feed two outside cabinets leaving the original dry signal in the centre cab, is possible by connecting stereo cabinets to the Reload II and a further mono cabinet to the 'mother' amp. A truly huge three-dimensional tone is created that flatters and impresses in equal measure. Perhaps overkill for a pub jam but highly worth the effort for the right opportunity and setting.

More than pleased by the tonal neutrality of the attenuation, we progressed to the effects loop, which has level matching, stereo ability and a mix control. Using either an analogue Roland RE-301 Space Echo or a digital delay, there was seamless integration with no degradation of tone.

The direct signal from the amp, in its raw state, is sent to the stereo pair of recording outputs in the form of balanced jacks and XLRs. Since the unit itself has no in-built cabinet impulse responses, we needed to



TWO NOTES TORPEDO RELOAD II

PRICE: £849

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Reactive load with dual mono power amp

OUTPUT: 215W per channel

DIMENSIONS: 365 (w) x 220 (d) x 89mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 6.9/15.2

CHANNELS: 2

CONTROLS: Amp in Level, Cab Volume, Output Level, Depth, Presence, Dry/Wet

FOOTSWITCH: Assignable loop bypass (footswitch not included)

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Includes Two Notes Genome software suite

OPTIONS: None

Two Notes

support@two-notes.com

www.two-notes.com

boot up the included Genome software and select from the range of 24 cabinet simulations to complete the rig. We found the realistic nature of these captures quite the joy to behold, with plenty of microphone and position options to perfect your virtual speaker.

Delving deeper into the software, the wide range of modelled amps, effects and speakers impressed us with definition and realism, making this a first-choice for our software amp and speaker emulation needs. The bass SVT rig sound was particularly lifelike. Very inspiring!

Verdict

While this is a complex and critical product due to the potential for amplifier damage resulting from improper loading, Two Notes has a best-in-class reputation for reliability and safety and the Reload II's plethora of attributes are excellently engineered. Nevertheless, it would be remiss not to mention a couple of minor quibbles here.

First, the position of the effects loop's mix knob on the rear panel makes setup tricky, and it's likely that rack-mounting the unit would further decrease accessibility. Also, it seems an unusual decision on the part of Two Notes to omit onboard cabinet IRs, which were included on the cheaper, less fully featured Captor X. Had these been included, we would have the complete one-stop shop, without any need

Delving into the software, the range of modelled amps, effects and speakers impressed with definition and realism

for a computer. This is less of an issue for the home recordist using a DAW with the included Genome software, but for the many bands that send guitar signals direct from modeller/amp to the PA, an additional IR-loading device will be needed to complete the virtual rig.

In contrast to other attenuators that use the loaded amplifier's reduced output to drive the speakers, this unit reamps the input signal through its onboard power amplifier at all volumes. Happily, this is a great-sounding amplifier, handling guitar signals in a very sympathetic and familiar way. The nearest competitive unit, the Boss Waza Craft Tube Amp Expander (£1,123), has a 100-watt limit, making it unsafe for 100-watt heads, such as Marshall examples, which can output in excess of 150 watts at full clip. The Waza Craft is also mono throughout, without the stereo effects loop or dual mono amplifier capabilities of the Reload II.

Still, as long as onboard IRs aren't needed, this Swiss Army knife for amp connectivity is simply the best in its class. **G**

**Guitarist
CHOICE**

9/10

PROS Safe impedance-loading for amps with power ratings up to 200 watts; transparent, continuous attenuation and stereo power amplification; feature set enables live/recording integration for amps and line-level preamps/modellers

CONS The mix knob is difficult to access and set from its rear-panel position; lack of onboard cab IRs slightly reduces its potential to be a 'does everything' box

FIRST PLAY



**TAYLOR BUILDER'S
EDITION 514CE
KONA BURST
£4,019**

WHAT IS IT? Cutaway electro-acoustic with numerous whistles and bells as befits Taylor's Builder's Edition designation

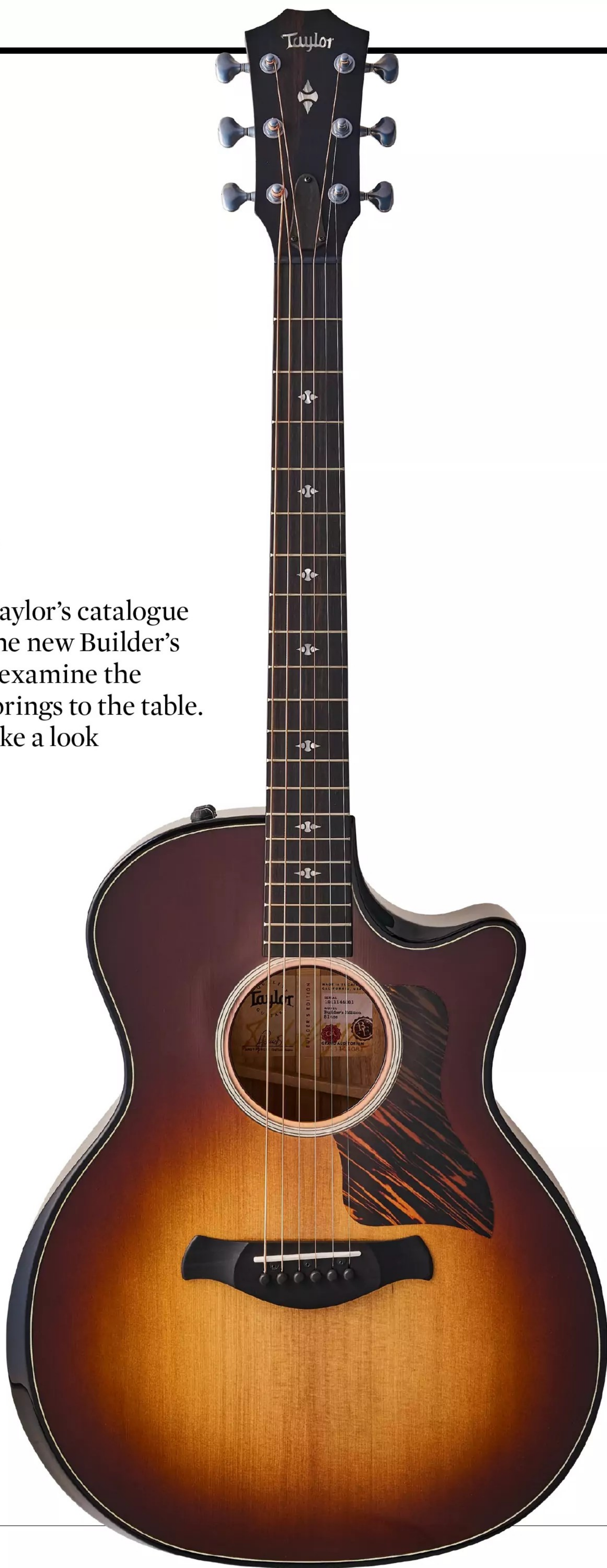
Grand Parade

As the 514ce is retired from Taylor's catalogue in Europe, we take a look at the new Builder's Edition of the same model to examine the upgrades and refinements it brings to the table. A worthy alternative? Let's take a look

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

Originally, we were going to take a close-up look at two Grand Auditorium Taylors and compare the upgraded Builder's Edition to its rank and file sibling. But then we heard the news that the 514ce is being retired in Europe and so our review has changed tack accordingly. Taylor never stands still for long and the company's ongoing mission to review, upgrade and remodel its inventory is typical of a brand that is intent on remaining at the cutting edge of acoustic guitar design and manufacture. According to our records, the last time the 500 Series enjoyed a refresh was in 2022. Three years later and there's movement within the line once again.

The 500 Series has proved to be a popular one among players internationally and so it's really no surprise that change is afoot in this quarter. Furthermore, the Builder's Edition we see here is a rather splendid-looking beast with considerable visual impact from the moment it's drawn from its hard case. We've seen plenty of Builder's Edition instruments from Taylor pass through these pages before, celebrating models from the catalogue with upgraded





The upgraded and refined
514ce Builder's Edition
succeeds the recently
retired rank and file
514 model in Europe

1. One of the upgrades for the Builder's Edition model is a set of Gotoh 510 Antique Chrome tuners, which gives the guitar a classy, vintage vibe

2. Back and sides on the latest release are Shamel ash, a comparatively new tonewood taken from urban trees that line the streets of California



features and constructional fillips such as bevelled arm rests and refreshed tonewood partnerships. Of this particular 514ce, Taylor says: “The Builder’s Edition 514ce Kona Burst embodies Taylor’s commitment to innovative craftsmanship, player-friendly guitar designs and sustainable sourcing.” Interest piqued? So is ours.

First of all, though, and in order to appreciate the embellishments present in its slightly more lavish companion, we’ll just take a look at what the standard 514ce comprised in terms of its sum of parts, as it will then provide a context for the changes Taylor has made to the model’s spec.

Taylor has always held conservation close to its heart and painstakingly sought out woods from sustainable sources, and the outgoing 514ce’s back and sides tonewood is a great example of this. Here, it was red ironbark, sourced from urban trees in California that were reaching the end of their city life. It’s a wood that, according to Taylor, has “the warmth and clarity of Indian rosewood”, and that “strummers will appreciate the volume and projection, while fingerpickers will enjoy the definition and dynamic range”. Paired with torried Sitka spruce for the top and master builder and company CEO Andy Powers’ revolutionary V-Class internal bracing, we found a real musical chameleon in our

Shamel ash does indeed seem to inhabit the same sonic space as a good mahogany

hands. Its sound has warmth but with the necessary balance and brightness to cut through in a stage environment, a situation that is further enhanced by its Expression System 2 internal pickup and preamp. In truth, the Builder’s Edition is going to have to take some long strides, sonically speaking, to beat what we’ve heard so far.

It’s a very easy guitar to play, too. We’ve often waxed lyrical about how Taylor’s neck profiles make a player – who is perhaps more used to playing electric guitar than they are acoustic – feel immediately at home and such is the case here. Good looks, good sounds and an easy ride. We really couldn’t ask for much more.

So let’s see what’s cooking with the Builder’s Edition. Obviously, the actual Grand Auditorium body profile is consistent between the two models, but otherwise the changes come thick and fast. For starters, there’s the warm look to the Tobacco Kona Sunburst, which gives the

guitar a sort of Gibson J-45 kerb appeal, although the sunburst here is perhaps a little more reddish-brown than on a J-45. It’s a good look, but if a sunburst finish is a total dealbreaker for you, then there is a natural finish Builder’s Edition on offer, too.

The top is, as with its sibling, Sitka spruce, but the spec we have available doesn’t disclose if it has been subjected to the torrifaction process – and it’s darned hard to tell from just the appearance of the wood itself. For the back and sides, Taylor has gone for Shamel ash, another urban timber from trees that are needing removal owing to age or safety concerns. This particular timber is sourced from West Coast Arborists, a company that specialises in tree maintenance in cities across California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas. Taylor tells us that Shamel ash “produces midrange power and balance comparable to Honduran mahogany”, a bold claim, seeing that Honduran mahogany is hailed as a prince among tonewoods. If it can live up to the claim, this is timber recycling at its finest hour. Under close inspection, the timber has a lively grain pattern similar to that of figured maple, but it’s all but hidden by the dark finish, which, to be honest, is really a bit of a shame.

The Builder’s Edition appointments are more pronounced at the guitar’s body end



Rolled edges with armrest and cutaway bevels both seek to enhance player comfort on the upgraded 514ce Builder's Edition



TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 514CE KONA BURST

PRICE: £4,019 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Grand Auditorium

TOP: Sitka spruce

BACK/SIDES: Shamel ash

MAX RIM DEPTH: 112mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 402mm

NECK: Tropical mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

TUNERS: Gotoh 510 Antique Chrome with antique chrome buttons

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/44mm

FINGERBOARD: West African Crelicam ebony

FRETS: 20, medium

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony/56mm

ELECTRICS: Expression System 2

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.13/4.7

OPTIONS: Builder's Edition 514ce in Natural costs £3,899

RANGE OPTIONS: The Legacy 514ce (£3,899) combines Western red cedar with neo-tropical mahogany, X-bracing and LR Baggs Element VTC electronics

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Tobacco Kona Burst gloss

Taylor Guitars

00800 23750011

www.taylorguitars.com



9/10

PROS Expertly crafted acoustic from a quality brand with a wide palette of sounds

CONS Price, as always, is a major consideration

with chamfered edges, plus mahogany forearm and cutaway bevels, and so playing comfort has been optimised. The mahogany neck and West African Crelicam ebony fingerboard and bridge are common to this model and its 514ce sidekick, but tuners here have been upscaled to Gotoh 510 Antique Chrome, which offers a little vintage chic to the overall picture.

Onstage duties are managed by Taylor's proven Expression System 2, but first things first: it's time to listen to what the upgraded 514ce has to offer acoustically.

Feel & Sounds

Once again, Taylor's super-friendly neck profile offers us a warm welcome on freeing the guitar from its case, the matt finish to the back of the neck aiding smooth sailing up and down the fretboard. Initial strums reveal a surprise in that Shamel ash does indeed seem to inhabit the same sonic space as a good mahogany; there's that distinctive dry, woody flavour to open chords. There's plenty of midrange punch, too, with volume to spare. Everything from gentle fingerpicking to abandoned chordal strumming is ably catered for, with a bass response that sits in between a dreadnought's bloom and an OM's slightly more compressed output. Generally speaking, the Builder's Edition is extremely

well balanced with no evident peaks or troughs detected during our play test.

The Expression System 2 proves its worth once again when we plugged the guitar into our trusty AER Compact 60 amp. Despite what might appear to be only scant control over the sound with volume, treble and bass rotaries, everything we needed was there. With only a very slight amount of tweaking, we were able to conjure up everything from good ol' rock 'n' roll to sensitive fingerstyle with no trouble at all.

Verdict

Okay, so at a price tag that clocks in at just over £4k, this isn't a purchase that you'd enter into without giving it a lot of thought and a long audition beforehand. But real quality of this nature rarely comes cheap, and when you consider that you're getting something that runs the gamut of acoustic styles as well as a strum 'n' go no-fuss pickup system, it's definitely worth some serious thought.

Meanwhile, the red ironbark variation is still out there for as long as stock lasts in retailers in Europe, and if the frills like a bevelled armrest and chamfered edges don't bother you, there are probably bargains to be had. It might be a slightly different hue, sonically speaking, but the build and sound quality is all there. **G**

FIRST PLAY



**THORPYFX HANAMI
GERMANIUM FUZZ**
£329

WHAT IS IT? Four-knob fuzz
with germanium transistors



In Bloom

ThorpyFX’s latest stacks up the germanium transistors for full-fat vintage tone in a functional modern setting

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

- 1. There’s none of the usual ThorpyFX military visuals here – it’s cherry blossom all the way with this pedal’s graphics, which are inspired by the Japanese tradition of ‘Hanami’
- 2. This Boost control turns up the fuzz quota for sure, but it also changes its character, adding presence and getting progressively more aggressive
- 3. The treble and bass knobs are neutral at their midday point, but they provide boost when turned clockwise or reduce those frequencies anti-clockwise

There’s something delightfully different about ThorpyFX’s latest pedal: instead of the usual military-derived theme, this one is decorated with a floral graphic. The pedal takes its name from the Japanese custom of ‘Hanami’, where people gather to enjoy the transient beauty of cherry blossom season. But plug it in and you’re more likely to be enjoying the transient beauty of a ripping guitar solo – this is one powerful fuzz pedal!

New fuzz pedals don’t appear in a vacuum, they are usually an evolution of a previous design, and Thorpy describes the Hanami as “a natural successor sonically from where the Boneyard left off... [sitting] perfectly between the Boneyard and the Fallout Cloud”. Now, the fact that the Boneyard was based on Tone Bender sound and the Fallout Cloud channelled the vibe of the very first (Triangle) Big Muff makes the Hanami a very interesting sonic prospect.

The circuitry here features four NOS military-specification germanium transistors and a NOS germanium diode, plus there’s a transformer isolated input, which means you can place the pedal where you want in the signal chain, rather than directly after your guitar like many fuzzes. Unity gain is around 10 o’clock, leaving plenty for a boost should you want it.

This is a pedal that sounds smooth with loads of girth in the midrange and it has a really low noise floor compared with most fuzz pedals. The Boost knob doesn’t just increase the fuzz, it also changes the tonal content, bringing in more presence and saturation until beyond three o’clock. And while still retaining the thickness, it transitions into a sizzly, more aggressive rasp, with great note definition all the way.

In an A/B test, Tone Bender and Big Muff characteristics were in evidence, but the Hanami is its own thing and had an advantage over our vintage examples in interactive treble and bass knobs, which are not only ideal for carefully tailoring your fuzz experience to suit your guitar and amp but also capable of shaping the midrange profile for more radical transformations – without ever getting anywhere near an unusable sound. The circuitry doesn’t allow totally smooth clean-up with guitar volume, but you can drop the volume down to get more of a glitchy gated-fuzz sound.

Verdict
With low noise and real-world tonal flexibility via the treble and bass knobs, ThorpyFx’s Hanami is a class act, delivering fat, smooth and richly textured fuzz that can attain a fierce edge. **G**



THORPYFX HANAMI GERMANIUM FUZZ

PRICE: £329
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Boost, Treble, Bass, footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 35mA
DIMENSIONS: 65 (w) x 125 (d) x 53mm (h)

ThorpyFX
www.thorpyfx.com



PROS Compact size; solid build quality; flexible placement opportunities; practical EQ; great fuzz sound; low noise

CONS The quality is worth paying for, but unfortunately it won’t be affordable for all players



THE RIVALS

ThorpyFX has other fuzz pedals in its roster: the Field Marshall Fuzz MKII (£219) is a revamped version of the Lovetone Big Cheese, while the Fallout Cloud (£199) is based on Electro-Harmonix’s Triangle Big Muff. For more Big Muff sounds, EHX has many variants of Big Muff available, such as the Triangle version (£99). Browne Amplification’s T4 Fuzz (£169) is also worth a look. For a fuzz with plenty of sonic versatility, the Walrus Audio Eons Five-State Fuzz (£235) puts five different flavours of it in a single pedal, and for reimagined Tone Bender pedals check out Warm Audio’s Warm Bender (£149) and the Keeley Fuzz Bender (£149).



T4 Fuzz: Browne Amplification’s take on a four-transistor fuzz

FIRST PLAY



WALRUS AUDIO
CANVAS REHEARSAL
£249

WHAT IS IT? Headphone amp
with metronome and music input



Best Practice

Walrus Audio's new utility pedal is designed to sit at the end of your pedalboard and deliver silent practice options

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The screen displays the beats per minute and time signature for the metronome by default, but it can also show the other two metronome parameters and items in the Settings menu
2. Turning the Screen Control encoder will modify the value of the selected parameter. Pressing down on the encoder will cycle to the next modifiable parameter. A press-and-hold of two seconds takes you to the Settings menu
3. The footswitch basically stops and starts the metronome, but if you press and hold for two seconds you will enter tap tempo mode
4. While your guitar signal is always present at these outputs, you can choose whether to send the metronome or Aux signals (or both) to them

The latest of Walrus Audio's rapidly expanding Canvas range of utility items is the Canvas Rehearsal, which the company is promoting as an all-in-one rehearsal tool. Its basic remit is that it allows you to plug in and listen to your instrument through headphones or a connected sound system, playing along to its built-in metronome and/or any tracks you care to send into it through a mini-jack stereo input or wirelessly via Bluetooth. While you can plug a guitar straight in, the natural place for the unit is at the end of a chain of effects pedals to give you a more inspiring sound, particularly so if there's an amp-in-a-box pedal involved. Walrus Audio sees the Canvas Rehearsal as the ideal companion for the guitarist with a pedalboard who wants to practise or work up new material.

The footswitch stops and starts the metronome, and you can set its tempo via the rotary encoder by using the Tap button that flashes at the set tempo or via the footswitch in tap tempo mode. The encoder can also deliver a choice of four time signatures, a range of divisions for the tap tempo, and turn on an accent at the beginning of each measure. There's also control via MIDI.

Getting external music into the unit is as simple as pairing it with your streaming device via Bluetooth or running a mini-jack stereo cable in for a physical connection. Three small knobs mix the guitar/metronome/music blend that you hear in your headphones – just set a mix that works for you and turn up the large HP knob to set the overall volume, which, incidentally, we needed to set quite high to get a reasonable vibe going through our particular 'phones.

Playing along to streamed music works a treat and, while a straight dry click would not necessarily be everyone's favoured rhythmic practice choice, it's a useful facility. And with various options available as to what you send out of the main outputs, it could be sent to a rehearsal room PA as an aid to band practice.

Verdict

There are various ways to take care of private practice needs, and Walrus Audio's Canvas Rehearsal expands that range of options. As a practical widget with a specific feature set that will have definite appeal to some players, it could be a useful adjunct to your pedalboard. **G**



WALRUS AUDIO CANVAS REHEARSAL

PRICE: £249
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Stereo practice tool
FEATURES: Metronome with tap tempo, tempo range 40-250bpm, Bluetooth, MIDI
CONTROLS: HP output, Screen Control encoder, Guitar volume, Click volume, Aux volume, Tap button, footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (Left/Mono, Right), standard outputs (Left/Mono, Right), TRS Stereo 3.5mm Aux input, TRS Stereo 3.5mm headphone output, MIDI IN, MIDI THRU, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 300mA
DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 122 (d) x 57mm (h)

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



THE RIVALS

While the Canvas Rehearsal has its own unique feature set that can be an adjunct to your familiar effects signal chain, there are other tools that can fulfil a portable practice role, not least a looper with built-in drum rhythms such as the Boss RC-5 (£175). For a lot less outlay if you don't need a metronome or rhythms, there's the type of headphone amp that you just plug into your guitar – the Fender Mustang Micro (£85) is one such option with onboard amp and effects sounds that supports Bluetooth audio streaming, and the Boss Katana:Go (£109) is of a similar ilk.

8/10

PROS Compact size; metronome tap tempo; wireless and physical music streaming; headphone and standard jack output options

CONS A bit pricey for what it is; we'd have liked to have more headphone volume



the Wishlist

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

Martin OM-28E Standard with LR Baggs Anthem £4,099

CONTACT **Westside Distribution** PHONE **+44 (0)141 212 0087** WEB **www.martinguitar.com** WORDS **Neville Marten** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

Martin has recently upgraded its Standard Series. Gone is the 'Reimagined' moniker but retained are all of that range's upgrades, plus many more that are significant for looks, playability and tone. "One of the key updates," says Martin, "is the use of Sitka spruce Golden Era [GE] top bracing, as featured on the Modern Deluxe Series. It offers a more vintage, 'breathy' tone with enhanced sustain."

Along with this comes a GE modified low oval neck profile, "optimised for vintage appeal with minimal increase in total mass". Other playability enhancements include a thinner fingerboard with comfort bevelled edge, and more smoothly contoured belly bridge with bone (or sometimes ebony) pins. Aesthetic updates include a long diamond volute, angled bone nut and a sleeker-looking heel. A big usability hike is that the jack socket, end-pin and flip-top battery compartment are mounted on a plate at the base of the body. So no more scrabbling around trying to fish out that dead battery.

The OM-28's staple ingredients remain, of course, such as Indian rosewood back and sides, Sitka spruce top, 'select hardwood' neck, an ebony 'board with

abalone 'diamonds and squares' inlays, ebony bridge, herringbone purfling, rosewood headstock overlay, and gold transfer decal. Tuners are Waverley-style open gear.

LR Baggs' renowned Anthem system combines a studio-quality condenser mic with Baggs' Element pickup to provide a transparent tone that's good enough to plug directly into a recording desk or to supply a brilliantly balanced out-front sound.

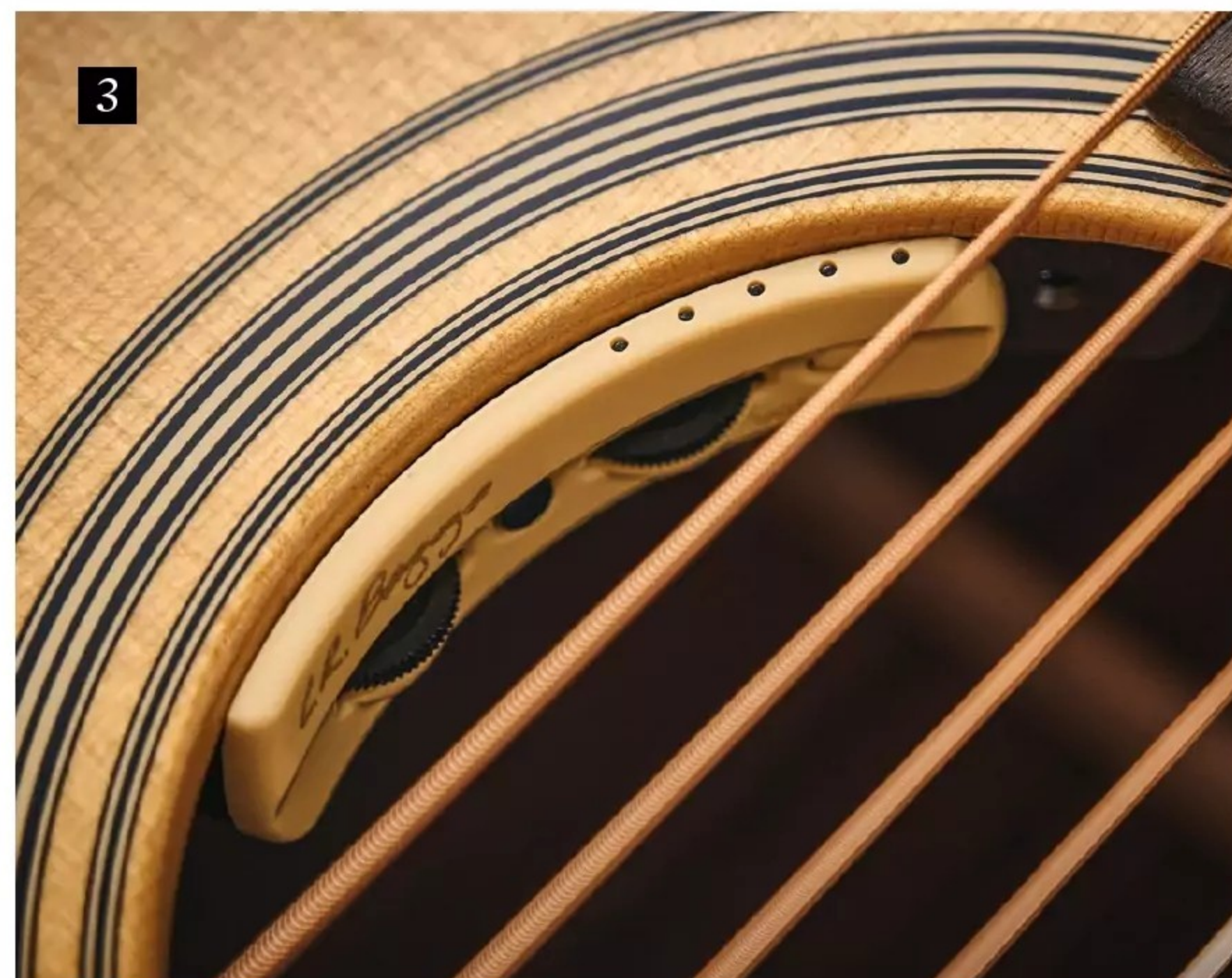
While Martin's 000 and OM models share the same body shape and size, the OM's scale length is 645.2mm (25.4 inches) compared with the 000's 632.5mm (24.9 inches). That extra half an inch provides a slightly tauter feel, for a snappier tone with strong lows and mids but plenty of top to cut through. Fingerstylists love OM's for their clarity and projection, plus the wide 44.45mm nut. But they remain great strummers, too.

The thinner, bevelled-edge 'board and lower action, plus all the other little tweaks that Martin has applied, leave the smallest ever quality gap between these instruments and Custom Shop models costing way more. While four grand is no snip, this is everything one could want in a top-grade electro-acoustic guitar. **G**

1. The OM's long diamond headstock transition is a throwback to when the headstock was a separate lump of wood glued onto the neck via this pointed V joint. Note the classy Waverley-style open-gear tuners

2. This small plate houses the guitar's output jack, separate end-pin and simple flip-top battery compartment

3. The Anthem from LR Baggs is one of the most revered acoustic guitar pickups of all. On the control plate are a mix control for the mic and pickup, phase inverter, battery level check, master volume, and microphone level (adjusted using a flat-head screwdriver)

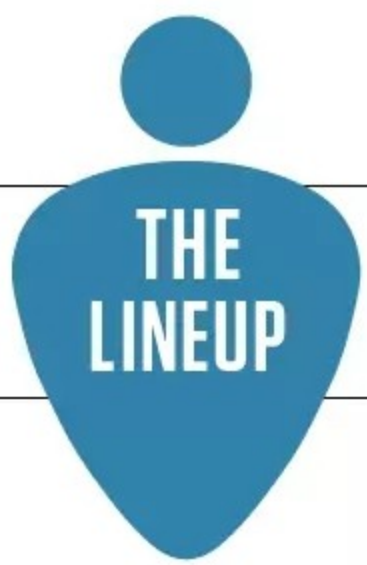


4. A slightly thinner ebony fingerboard, with comfort bevelled edges and considerably lower action than before, makes the new Standard range a joy to play. Note the lovely 'long pattern' diamonds and squares inlays in abalone

5. Clearly visible are the bold herringbone edge purflings and multiple soundhole rings. Hidden is the Golden Era X-style bracing in scalloped Sitka spruce

6. Further upgrades include the more finely sculpted and finished Golden Era belly bridge, and the pins themselves, which are either bone (as here) or ebony





Gas Supply

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

Gibson Les Paul Music City Special £1,599

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

JARGON CRUNCHING B-Bender

The B-Bender was designed to emulate pedal-steel-type intervals and works by mounting hardware into the body of the guitar. Joe Glaser's design offers arguably the least intrusive and most discreet implementation. Using a guitar strap as leverage, applying downward pressure to the neck operates a lever, which pulls the pitch of the B string up a tone for faux-pedal tones.

That looks just like a Flying V headstock, what's going on?

This is the Gibson Les Paul Music City Special, released to commemorate 50 years of Gibson guitar production in Nashville. That headstock (as well as many other design points) come from the Gibson Marauder, which has been mashed up with the Les Paul Music City Junior.

Okay, what's a Marauder?

The Gibson Marauder was the Big G's mid-70s attempt to strike directly at the hearts of Telecaster players. Both big brands were in what are now viewed as slightly fallow years, Fender under the ownership of CBS and Gibson in its Norlin era. Designer Bill Lawrence, who had already delivered the Gibson L6-S, was tasked with coming up with the Marauder, which took the Les Paul-derived outline into bolt-on territory. Construction-wise, it was something of a mixed bag, with body woods ranging from alder to mahogany and maple, while the maple neck was fitted with either rosewood or maple and inlaid with dots

for the most part but sometimes trapezoids. It featured Lawrence-designed pickups: a humbucker in the neck and an angled, noiseless single coil in the bridge to lure in the twang fans. Just over 7,000 were made in total before Gibson ditched the design in 1979.

So what's going on with this new release?

Well, this isn't a Marauder by name, although it does owe most of its design points to Bill Lawrence's 70s guitar. Gibson has unified and standardised the spec for a limited-edition run of 500 guitars. The body is made of lightweight poplar, while the maple neck (crucially) is glued in as per Les Paul tradition.

It doesn't really scream 'sell your Telecaster!'

No, and the quirky pickups have been replaced here for a more traditional setup comprising a pair of 70s Tribute humbuckers. Sticking with the stripped-back vibe, they're wired to a three-way switch but with a simplified control layout that has master volume and master tone controls.

PICKUPS

Gone is the Tele-apeing angled single coil, replaced by a more familiar pair of 70s Tribute humbuckers, a three-way switch and master volume/tone controls



WORKHORSE FEATURES

No chunky inlays, a full-face scratchplate and three meat-and-potatoes finishes make the Music City Special appear like a workhorse guitar, ready to throw boots in a rowdy bar brawl



Bill Lawrence's original Marauder design took inspiration from the Flying V when it came to the headstock. Here, Gibson has revived this one-time vision of the future for the Music City Special

I've heard the Music City Junior had some freaky string-bending hardware...

It did! The B-Bender and G-Bender. But on the 50th Anniversary Les Paul Music City Special, Gibson has strayed from these and from the Marauder's 'Harmonica' bridge in favour of the classic tune-o-matic (Nashville profile, of course) and aluminum stopbar.

So I don't need to play country to buy one of these guitars?

Not at all, although we dare say that if you do happen to play both country *and* Western, then you'll be able to do so and a lot more. The full-face scratchplate, dot inlays and three finish options – Tobacco Burst (pictured), Wine Red and Ebony – complete the all-rounder theme, and the pickup configuration is your classic Gibson layout, also making this a potential workhorse for indie, punk, classic rock, bluesers and beyond. It comes with a hardshell case, but you'll need to jump on it quick with the limited-edition numbers. **[SW]**

LIMITED EDITION

Gibson has created this guitar to celebrate 50 years since it started building guitars in Nashville. As such, the Music City Special will be limited to 500 pieces worldwide



ALSO OUT NOW...

PRS SE NF 53 £979

For 2025, PRS is scheduling new releases every month. The latest to lift its embargo is the SE NF 53, which, of course, takes its inspiration from the US-made Core line NF 53. PRS is often generous with its SE versions when it comes to specs, and here we have a similar sheet. There's a spine-saving swamp ash body, paired with a bolt-on maple neck along with a maple 'board (set at a traditional T-style 648mm/25.5-inch scale length). The pickups follow suit, too, with 'S' versions of the Narrowfield Deep Dish models found in its US counterpart, wired to a three-way blade, and master tone and volume controls. The PRS SE NF 53 comes in three finishes – Black Doghair, White Doghair (pictured) and Pearl White – and it's available now.

www.prsguitars.com

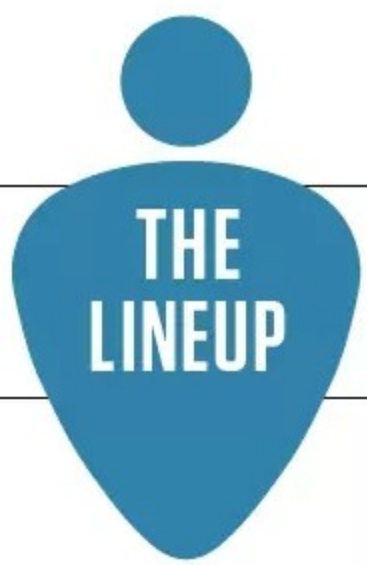


BLACKSTAR ID:X FROM £292

Blackstar's latest looks to span the trifecta of practice, recording and live use with the introduction of two 1x12 combos: the ID:X 50 (£292) and ID:X100 (£379), which are designed to pair the power of DSP with the familiarity and intuitive nature of a traditional amplifier. Along with an OLED display, the ID:X is loaded with six channels, over 35 effects, virtual valve responses and Blackstar's ISF control. What's more, sounds can be edited further via Blackstar's free Architect software, and the dedicated CabRig output can be customised in software for tailored IRs, mic placement, ambience and more. There's a USB audio interface, effects loop and MIDI control (on the ID:X 100). They're available now.

<https://blackstaramps.com>



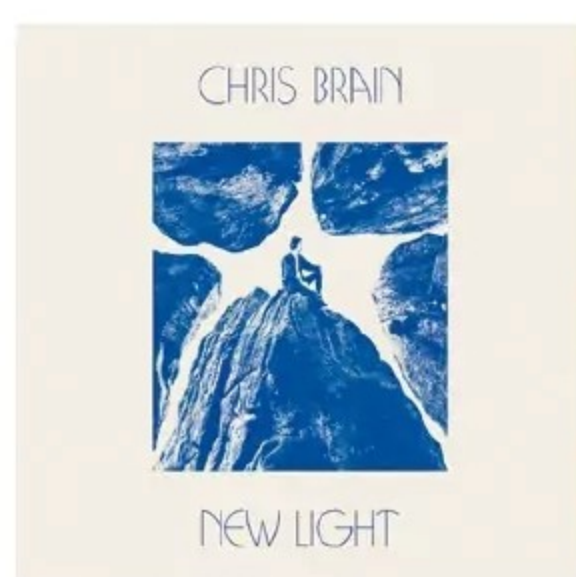


Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Chris Brain

Album: *New Light* (Big Sun Records)



Chris Brain's third album was recorded between his allotment shed and The Nave Studios in Leeds chrisbrainmusic.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS BRAIN

Fingerstyle players from James Taylor to Davey Graham and Nick Drake have influenced Chris over the years

Chris Brain is a folk singer from Leeds, whose latest album, *New Light*, and engaging live shows have been causing ripples throughout folk circles and beyond. Chris's songs have a pastoral warmth to them that his understated yet precise fingerpicking accentuates. "*Angi* [by Davey Graham] was the first major fingerstyle song that I learned," he tells us. "My friend told me that if I go to a folk club I have to know how to play *Angi*." When I played it at a club, they said they haven't heard it in 10 years!"

Style For Days

Chris is a technically accomplished guitar player with a fairly unassuming approach that belies the depth found in his range of styles. "[After *Angi*] I learned *Fire And Rain* by James Taylor," he continues. "He has this really open and non-structured fingerstyle that I love. And then I learned songs like *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right* by Bob Dylan, which is Travis picking. That felt like a culmination of a lot of things coming together, and I like the freedom of playing in all different styles with my right hand. It just started seeping in as I learned John Martyn, Nick Drake and Joni Mitchell songs, but I would say that Nick Drake is the main influence on my guitar playing."

Walking The Talk

As with many players who learn through listening, Chris felt his own style emerge over time. "It took me a long time to realise that simplicity is key," he admits. "Because you can do so much and the limits are endless, sometimes you have to rein it in. That happened with my voice, too; I used to sing in a completely different way, but when I started going to folk clubs, I realised that people sing in their accents. So I started singing in my accent and my talking voice. I can belt out folk tunes and get up in those registers, but I listened to people like Dylan and John Martyn and it's their character that is within their voice. Their speaking voice and singing voice are all one thing melded together. It feels really natural and they never do too much. That really spoke to me."

Laying The Groundwork

Chris spent his formative years practising his chops on the streets. "I busked for about seven years, playing my favourite songs," he says. "When Covid hit I couldn't busk any more, so I recorded the songs; people listened and I got reviews and then it just shot off. I got on the [BBC Radio 2] *Folk Show* and played a gig where 40 people turned up. It was pretty crazy, but those years busking – I did it full-time – made me feel really comfortable and it just happened over a long period of time."

Keeping The Songs

As much as Chris has come a long way since his days busking and now has three albums to his name, he is still careful to ensure that his sound is not too embellished. "I always say when I'm recording that my voice and the guitar are the focal point," he says. "We'll add things, but nothing will take away from the melody. It's all written in this room on the guitar and I put words to it..."

"But sometimes," he says with a grin, "you add some strings and think that sounds pretty naughty, maybe I'll put a few more on there... A couple of songs [on *New Light*] have been built up a bit more, for radio and new ears, but my favourite tracks are the ones that are stripped back. I recorded some of this album in my shed at the allotment, so it's natural sounding and I really wanted it to feel like that." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Sit And Wonder Why*

For fans of: Nick Drake, John Martyn, Bert Jansch, Anne Briggs

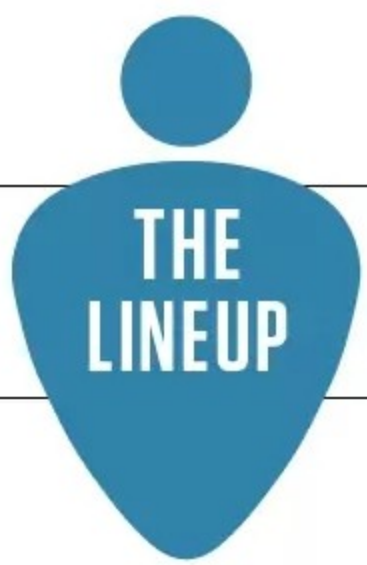


“When I’m recording, my voice and the guitar are the focal point. We’ll add things, but nothing will take away from the melody”

12 FRETS & THE TRUTH

Chris has found his toolkit in two Sigma models

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chris’s choice of guitars is quite modest, with him favouring sturdy but humble Sigma 12-fret models. “I think I was drawn to [12-frets-to-the-body guitars] after seeing Bob Dylan playing one,” he says. “My 000[R-28VS] is very warm sounding, but the 00[R-28VS] feels very accurate. I’ve taken the 000 around the world and it’s pretty beaten up. I think a guitar that’s played in is better sounding. It needs to be a workhorse and like a tool, really.”



Albums

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

Molly takes her virtuosic skills to new heights – and genres – on her latest release



PHOTO BY EBRUYILDIZ

Molly Tuttle So Long Little Miss Sunshine

Nonesuch Records (available 17 August)



Boundary-stretching album from the bluegrass queen

As you'll have gathered from reading our interview on page 48, the element of surprise plays a key role in Molly Tuttle's playbook. Indeed, her current mission is a self-proclaimed "keep them guessing" when it comes to her recorded output

– and a title like *So Long Little Miss Sunshine* is another clue that this album might just represent a change of tack for the bluegrass star.

Following Grammy success for her two previous releases, 2022's *Crooked Tree* and *City Of Gold* a year later, the new album swerves gently away from pure bluegrass and reroutes into a glorious array of different genres while keeping that distinctive Americana flag flying. The singles from the album that have already hit the airwaves have drawn practically unanimous praise from all quarters, including pop/rock superstar John Mayer who applauded Molly's guitar chops on *That's Gonna Leave A Mark*.

The album comprises 12 tracks, including an unexpected cover of Icona Pop and Charli XCX's *I Love It* with some superb airy vocals and subtle guitar. Country rock makes an appearance on *Old Me (New Wig)*, which is "about leaving all these things behind that don't serve you any more", while things become semi-autobiographical with *Story Of My So-Called Life*, which is peppered with some characteristic virtuoso-level guitar playing. But it's the opening track where we hear Molly's guitar chops to their fullest extent, with super-clean picking and the fluid phrasing on *Everything Burns*, guaranteeing another nomination to the realm of Grammy-laden superstardom. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Everything Burns*

For fans of: Eagles, Emmylou Harris, Billy Strings

Mac DeMarco Guitar

Mac's Record Label (available 22 August 2025)



Romance and regret, slacker style

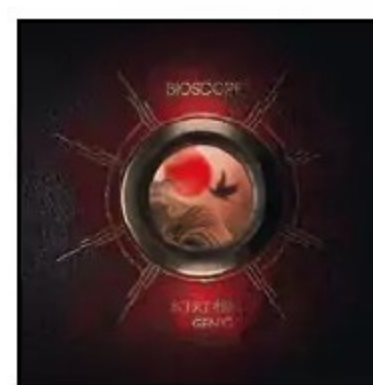
We confess that Mac DeMarco has been a recent gem of a find for us. The Canadian songsmith – now a resident of Los Angeles – has a trademark sound that's awash with warm, woozy Boss VB-2 vibrato and tales of love, loss and regret that have the sleepy charm of Brazilian bossa nova but the dry, urbane observational style of American indie at its introspective, quirky best. And while there are no face-melting solos here, the album's title is still apt. DeMarco's playing style is a mixture of easygoing slide and harmonically rich chord changes that somehow reference everything from Hawaiian traditional music to John Lennon's solo work. It's completely distinctive and rather beguiling, especially on standout tracks such as the somnolent *Holy* or the dreamlike, romantic melancholy of *Rooster*. Taken as a whole, *Guitar*, DeMarco's sixth studio album, is rather more serene and thoughtful than records such as his excellent 2012 debut, *2*, but enchants throughout. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Rooster*

For fans of: Aldous Harding, John Lennon, Pavement

Bioscope Gentō

earMUSIC (available 22 August)



Prog and ambient worlds collide

Bioscope is a meeting of musical styles and sensibilities between Marillion's Steve Rothery and Tangerine Dream's Thorsten Quaeschning and, with the help of neo-prog band Elbow's Alex Reeves on drums, they have produced an album that sits astride progressive rock and analogue synth-powered ambient territories. Unashamedly retro in nature, with Thorsten's layered synth landscaping predominant and Steve's guitar adding decor and the odd swooping guitar solo, the purely instrumental album comprises five lavish outings. Opener, *Vanishing Point*, is inspired by the cult 70s movie of the same name and clocks in at a Floydian opus-like 20 minutes, *Kaleidoscope* finds Steve with overdrive engaged, and the sequencer-rich title track, *Gentō*, is apparently a translation of the English term 'magic lantern', which is the perfect description for what is on offer here. Music to chill and thrill by! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Bioscope*

For fans of: Tangerine Dream, Marillion, Pink Floyd

PHOTO BY ROB BONURANT



The SoCal rockers are back with album number nine

Robert Jon & The Wreck

Heartbreaks & Last Goodbyes

Journeyman Records (available 22 August)



Southern fried rockers hit the mark

There's a decidedly old-school feeling to Robert Jon & The Wreck's latest album, and it's no surprise to find that the band took themselves off to a residential studio

in Savannah to write, live and collaborate on the album during its production. "This record really represents who we are right now, both musically and personally," frontman Robert Jon Burrison tells us. "We stepped away from our day-to-day and just focused on the songs, and you can feel that in every track." Guitar duties in the band are handled by Robert Jon on rhythm and Henry James on lead and they get to shine on rockers like *Dark Angel*. But it's not all 'everything on 11' by any means; *Ashes In The Snow* finds the band in rock-ballad mode, complete with a catchy singalong chorus. Good rockin' stuff. **[DM]**

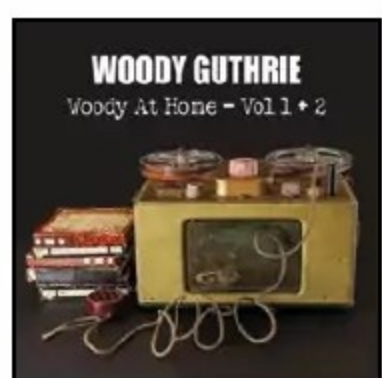
Standout track: *Ashes In The Snow*

For fans of: Lynyrd Skynyrd, Allman Brothers

Woody Guthrie

Woody At Home: Vol 1 + 2

Shamus Records (available 14 August)



Visions of a free and fair America

With his sleepy voice but iron resolve to denounce injustice and invite the listener to dream of a fairer future, Woody Guthrie was the prototypical folk-poet

of working America. This intimate collection of home recordings puts him into the room with us once again at, arguably, a more relevant moment in history than any since these songs were recorded 75 years ago. The track *Deportee (Plane Wreck At Los Gatos)* tells the story of undocumented labourers who died in a plane crash while being deported – only to be buried in an unmarked grave far from home. "Just call me one more deportee", Guthrie sings on behalf of people whose lives and deaths were considered unworthy even of a name by the officialdom of the time but whose backbreaking labour was accepted to keep fruit farms profitable. There's also illuminating monologues by Guthrie, as in the song *Jesus Christ*, a poignant reframing of the story of the crucifixion in an American setting: "Jesus was a carpenter by hand / a hard-working man and brave..." Guthrie sings, inviting us to recognise the sanctity and sacrifice of honest labour. An important collection, even seven decades on. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Deportee (Plane Wreck At Los Gatos)*

For fans of: Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Billy Bragg



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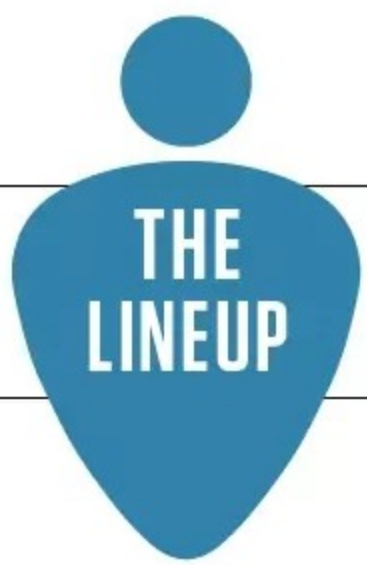
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Tones Behind The Tracks

On his second solo album, **Mark Morton** steps away from metal and towards Southern rock with a host of guest stars joining him on the way

Artist: Mark Morton

Album: Without The Pain (Snakefarm Music)



Mark Morton's second album, *Without The Pain*, was produced by Lamb Of God collaborator Josh Wilbur

With Lamb Of God, Mark Morton has chugged and shredded away while running the thrash, groove and death-metal gamut. He dropped his first solo record, *Anesthetic*, in 2019, which was a little different in sound. But even then, influences outside of heavy metal weren't so apparent... until now. Morton tells *Guitarist* that the Southern rock and blues vibes inherent in his latest solo record, *Without The Pain*, have always "kind of been there" for him, adding: "I was probably tuned into this kind of music even before heavy metal. Lamb Of God is a big band. It's well known. I'm certainly most known for that work, and that's awesome. I'm grateful for that and I still love doing it, but this stuff has always been there for me."

Without The Pain features an all-star cast of Morton's friends, including Jason Isbell, Grace Bowers, Charlie Starr and Cody Jinks. But beyond the guest stars, Morton's bluesy chops and soulful solos make it stick. In fact, he enjoyed the process so much that when he's not doing his thing with Lamb Of God, he plans to lean into his roots even harder – but that doesn't mean he doesn't still love playing heavy metal. "For me, it's both," he says. "I have so much experience touring and writing and recording with Lamb Of God, and that stuff certainly comes naturally, but this stuff is really how I play on my own time. That's equally as valuable to me. I just love playing guitar, man."

Morton brings a flavour of the South to the album: "Stylistically, it feels like coming home," he says

Why dig into Southern rock with your new solo album, *Without The Pain*?

"It's a long time coming. This album reflects the kind of music that I play at home. So, in that sense, it's natural for me – but it is new in the sense that I'm recording and releasing this style of music. That part is fresh and new. But, stylistically, it feels like coming home."

Did listening to Southern rock growing up shape you as a player?

"If you grew up where I grew up [Williamsburg, Virginia], this music was all around you, you know? I mean, the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Molly Hatchet, 38 Special, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and all that kind of stuff was my early musical foundation."

What makes now the right time to reveal this side of yourself?

"I put out *Anesthetic* a few years back, and it was closer to what we do with Lamb Of God. But there were parts of that record that flirted with and pointed in this direction. Knowing I could record on my own, without the banner of Lamb Of God, and do something outside of that, and have it exist authentically and find an audience for it, I gained confidence and independence. It allowed me to stretch out even further and that's what you see in *Without The Pain*."

What sort of rig did you put together for *Without The Pain*?

"We recorded the basic tracks for this record at Studio 606, the Foo Fighters' studio out in the Valley in LA. But I live in Virginia, so I flew with a Les Paul and that one guitar is on a bunch of songs. When I got into the studio and started digging through what they had, we landed on an earlier mid-70s Marshall with a Friedman mod."

"I borrowed an ES-335 from Gibson, and I had the Les Paul, so that was the main rig. It was the Les Paul straight into a Marshall, and for a few songs I used the 335 through a mid-60s Fender Bassman with an EarthQuaker [Devices] Acapulco Gold [distortion] pedal. The signal path was simple and straightforward."

What's the story behind *Hell & Back*?

"That's one of the songs I did at my house. We had the basic tracks recorded and I still had some leads left to do. It's a stretch to call it a 'studio', but I have a workstation at my house and can do guitars."



PHOTO BY TRAVIS SHINN

“Knowing I could record on my own without the banner of Lamb Of God, and have it exist authentically, I gained confidence”

“That solo is my 1963 ES-335 plugged into some modeller. I don’t even remember which – and, honestly, I don’t even think it’s a model, I think we just plugged in direct – but that guitar sounds so good. For solos, I tend not to work stuff out; I jam until I start to feel something is happening. And that one came off pretty quick.”

After writing and recording heavy metal solos with Lamb Of God for so long, how does shifting gears in the studio feel?

“For people who might be familiar with my work with Lamb Of God, I tend to play pretty bluesy, particularly when it comes to lead stuff. Sometimes, I’ll go outside of that – I’m not the shreddiest player. But it’s metal, so sometimes I’ll work stuff up that’s shreddy. But 80 per cent of the time, even in Lamb, I just come in and jam, so it’s not all that different.”

What was it like working with Jason Isbell on *Come December*?

“What a thrill it was to have him on that track! Jason and I had met once, and corresponded more than a few times, but I wasn’t in the room with him when he did it. I hit him up to see if he would play on the track, and was really grateful – and a little bit surprised, as busy as he is – when he said he’d do it. He recorded the solo remotely and sent it to me. It’s just... obviously Jason is, well... I had no notes [laughs]. It was perfect.”

You had Tyler Bryant playing on *Forever In The Light*, too.

“We wrote that song on the spot. I showed up at Tyler’s house and he handed me that famous pink Strat. He sat at his mixing board, I sat on a stool, and he plugged me in. I hit the guitar and the riff you hear in that song is the first thing I played. So he turned around, and was like, ‘What’s that?’ I said, ‘I don’t know... but it’s pretty cool huh?’ He’s like, ‘Let’s get that,’ and I started building the song right away. It was literally the first thing I played when I sat down, so I think his pink guitar had that riff in it. I’m lucky to be the guy it came out for.”

How was it trading solos with Tyler Bryant?

“The solo section was fun but was quite an experience. I was definitely intimidated to cut heads with Tyler – but I will say that I’m thrilled with the result. Tyler cut his solo section on that song in about 20 minutes and I spent about two hours [laughs].”



PHOTO BY TRAVIS SHINN

Grace Bowers plays on *Dust*. How did the slide and non-slide parts work out there?

“She’s phenomenal. She came in and we cut that together, but the slide stuff is me and the non-slide is her. We were on stools next to each other, going back and forth on the parts in front of the board. That was the first time we’d met, but we’d followed each other on Instagram, liking each other’s posts and saying, ‘Hey,’ that kind of thing.

“She was in town and I had a spot on the session, and we were filling out leads, so I was like, ‘Do you want to jam on this thing with me?’ She was like, ‘Hell, yeah, I’ll be there!’ She showed up and just ripped, man. She brought that cool early 60s SG she was playing for a while. I think she leaves it at home now, probably smartly, because she’s touring so much. But watching Grace just blow up in front of the world and become a superstar has been super fun. I’m so thrilled to have her energy on this record.”

***Without The Pain* is home for you, but it’s a different world from Lamb Of God. Is this a direction you plan to continue on?**

“I think so. It’s definitely reflective of the kind of music that I like to pursue when I’m not doing metal. I don’t feel like I’ve exercised it completely, you know what I mean? I feel like I enjoyed the process and would love to do some more, and probably will at some point.” **[AD]**

The album features special guests including Jason Isbell, Mastodon’s Troy Sanders, and Grace Bowers, of whom Mark says: “I’m so thrilled to have her energy on this record”



Mark Morton’s latest album, *Without The Pain*, is available now on Snakefarm Music

www.markmortonmusic.com



Shop Talk

Neville Marten talks about a couple of recent in-store guitar purchases and laments the demise of several much-loved music shops

Over the past couple of years I've regretted the sale of a couple of guitars. One was a Martin D-28 and the other a '52-style Telecaster. The Martin, constructed with hide glue, struggled with my flat's underfloor heating so had to go, while I simply didn't play the Tele for a year. Anyway, I got online and narrowed down my choices to a Standard series Martin D-28 at Andertons in Guildford, and a Fiesta Red '59 Light Relic Tele from Peach Guitars in Colchester.

"In various shops I met Alvin Lee, Tony Hicks, Seymour Duncan, and a Beatle paid £10 towards a friend's bass when he didn't have enough cash"

Calling in to Andertons one Sunday afternoon, the place was heaving. The shop's acoustic expert Paul came over and – once the acoustic room was vacated by another eager Martin fan – sorted out the two I fancied trying. One was the aforementioned D-28, and the other the OM-28E from this issue's Wishlist (see page 26). I quickly realised that, while the dread was nice, it wasn't exactly 'speaking to

me'. I then picked up the OM and it was instant. I loved everything about it. Paul went through all the Standard range's upgrades and I was sold.

A few weeks later I made an appointment with Peach Guitars to check out the red Tele. Glen was there to ably assist me, plugging my Tele into a Friedman amp and leaving me to my devices for half an hour. I liked the guitar, but, again, was not instantly smitten. In the rack I spotted a three-tone sunburst version of the same model; Glen unfastened its security lock and plugged me in. It looked better, felt better and sounded better (for me), and within five minutes the deal was done.

I tell you this not to show off, but to explain how important it is, for me anyway, to try before I buy. I knew what I wanted in the case of both these instruments, but walked out with completely different guitars. I also like to interact with the guys in the shop, to avail myself of their product knowledge and advice. Within a week I'd used the Martin in the studio and the Telecaster on a gig.

Open All Hours

Recently and not so recently some pretty big musical instrument dealers have gone to the wall. The once-omnipotent PMT closed all 11 stores, while GAK, that bastion of Brighton's music scene, also shut its doors for the last time. Manson's in Exeter went some time back, too. In the Netherlands, the great Bax-Shop has gone, and in New York the legendary Sam Ash is no more.

Of course, the internet has changed things beyond recognition. It's so easy to buy with the click of the mouse or the tap of a screen. But if you haven't visited a bricks-and-mortar guitar store for a while, why not nip into your local emporium and have a look around. Or jump on the train to London, Liverpool, Cardiff, Glasgow or wherever for a guitar expedition. That's what I did when I was young, pre-internet. It was thrilling. In various shops I met Ten Years After guitarist Alvin Lee, Tony Hicks of The Hollies, a young Seymour Duncan, and a Beatle actually paid £10 towards a friend's Fender Jazz Bass when he didn't have quite enough cash (see left).

Like everyone, I buy bits and bobs online, and good friends have had great experiences making serious guitar purchases without ever touching the instrument. But in my case every time I've tried doing so it's been disappointing.

There are still some fantastic independent music shops across the UK, and while buying online is great (it's often their bread and butter, too), you can't beat sitting down in a proper guitar shop, plugging in a great guitar and playing. Anyone know the *Stairway* chords? **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

All That Jazz

What? Squier Classic Vibe 60s Jazz Bass LRL, 3-Tone Sunburst

Where seen? gear4music.com **Price?** £389

My mate was in a London music shop in the early 80s to buy a 1974 Fender Jazz Bass. But the price was £10 more than he had, even after a haggle. Another guy had been perusing the store and heard my pal's distress. All of a sudden he came up to the counter and handed over £10 to make up the difference. It was a Beatle. I won't say which one because I can't verify the story. But what a lovely gesture. The Classic Vibe Jazz from Squier is plenty good enough for most bass-playing guitarists. Three-tone sunburst with a dot-inlaid laurel neck (not bound and block inlaid rosewood like my mate's), twin Jazz single coils, two volumes and Blend control, 'elephant ear' tuners and tortoise-style pickguard – it's a 'fab'-looking thing.



The Jazz Bass is an enduring model, ideal for when swapping six strings for four



Fret Or A Promise

This month **Alex Bishop** unravels the intricate fretwork of a century-old concert mandolin

If there's one thing I've been reminded of this week, it's that the frets on your instrument are not to be underestimated. Most players understand that those little strips of metal spanning the fingerboard are important when it comes to pinpointing tuning and shaping the playability of an instrument, but what is less obvious are the different skills the experienced luthier must develop in order to repair and replace the frets on the multitude of instruments out there.

With the history of fretted instruments stretching back at least as far as 1500BC, there have been as many ways to fret an instrument as you can imagine. Wood, metal and animal intestines have all been used to create stopping points along the strings, initially tied onto the neck (as with lutes, allowing adjustability for different tunings) but also inlaid into the fingerboard at fixed positions. Technological innovations in the 20th century paved the way for the widespread use of hardened metal frets – which we are more familiar with today – extruded from nickel silver with a barbed tang to grip the fingerboard and a wide rounded top for accurate intonation.

These 'T' shaped frets have remained largely unchanged for the last 100 years. However, before the 1920s most guitars were fretted with bar frets. Unlike their modern counterparts, these 'I' shaped bar frets are made from flat stock and rely solely on a compression fit to hold the fret in place. My big project this month – a Neapolitan concert mandolin dated

'1900' – has 24 such frets, all original but now worn out and in desperate need of replacement. Along with some serious inlay work and structural body work, getting it playable again was going to be no mean feat.

The first task was working out how to remove the existing frets. Normally, I would apply some heat to soften the wood and any glue, getting under the head of each fret with my nippers and walking them carefully out of the slot. I soon learned this approach would damage the delicate fingerboard, which, at only 2mm thick, was unlikely to survive the usual abuse. Instead, I sharpened a bradawl to a narrow point and gently hammered the ends of the frets, tapping them out of the neck sideways and avoiding any splintering of precious hardwood in the process.

For replacement frets, however, I would need to make my own from scratch. I rustled about in my offcuts drawer and pulled out some 1mm sheet brass. Cutting 24 individual strips with a jeweller's saw was fairly gruelling, but they were a very close fit to the open slots on the neck.

Older instruments with bar frets tend to have been made before the conception of truss rods, and it was the compression effect of tight-fitting frets that created the back bow in the neck to counteract the pull of the strings. The result is a straight neck, but it required great skill from the maker to ensure the perfect setup. Luckily for me, short-necked mandolins don't tend to suffer from the unpredictable stability issues that arise

Alex made 24 replacement frets by hand using thin sheet brass for this antique Neapolitan concert mandolin



"This beautiful instrument came from Naples. Even in something as simple as replacing frets we can feel a connection to the past"

in longer-necked guitars, so I opted for loose-fitting frets by sanding them down a tad and applied a little superglue to seat them. *Et voilà*, one straight neck, a happy mandolin and a relieved luthier.

With the frets in, all that was left was to level everything off to get the action as low as possible. A flat file did most of the work, with crowning files and sandpaper as usual to finish them off.

The intricate label inside tells me that this beautiful instrument came from the workshop of Giovanni Minieri in Naples, about whom we know very little. However, even in something as simple as replacing the frets we can build a story and feel a connection to the past. I hope he would have appreciated my efforts to reconstruct his work, and maybe one day my own instruments will get the same treatment. I certainly hope so – I can't think of a greater compliment. **G**

Head to [instagram.com/alexbishopguitars](https://www.instagram.com/alexbishopguitars) to see more of Alex's work on the Giovanni Minieri mandolin



The Art of Holding On

Charlie Wilkins explores why guitarists crave sustain, how to get it and why some guitars sustain better than others

'Sinker' is a term used to describe a prized timber that has been submerged for an extended period. Taylor describes the sinker redwood of its 50th Anniversary 814ce Builder's Edition as "cedar on steroids", and its V-Class bracing further enhances tone and sustain

One of the first things I do when picking up a guitar is play it unplugged. Before I even think about plugging into an amp, I want to feel how the wood responds, hear how long a note rings out and sense whether the guitar has that certain spark, like it's alive in my hands. In my experience, natural sustain and resonance begins with the guitar itself, not the gear it's plugged into. If a guitar doesn't speak to me acoustically, I'll probably move on to something else.

Sustain and resonance are some of the most sought-after qualities in a guitar, giving the player more expressive control, dynamics and tonal richness. Simply put, sustain is how long a string vibrates after being plucked. Resonance refers to how freely that vibration travels through the body and neck. Together, they shape the instrument's voice. While many players chase sustain through pickups, amps and pedals, most of the magic (or lack thereof) happens before your signal ever hits a cable.

So why do some guitars seem to sustain and resonate better than others? The short answer is: it's complicated. Sustain is the result of many interwoven factors including wood type, construction quality, hardware, setup and even the strings themselves. But when you strip it down to the essentials, I believe it mostly comes down to the wood and the strings.

Each type of wood influences tone, sustain and resonance in its own distinctive way. Mahogany, for example, is dense and warm with excellent sustain. Ash is brighter, with good snap and moderate sustain. Rosewood is lush and harmonically rich, with deep bass and long note decay. But wood choice alone doesn't tell the whole story. How a guitar is designed and assembled matters just as much.

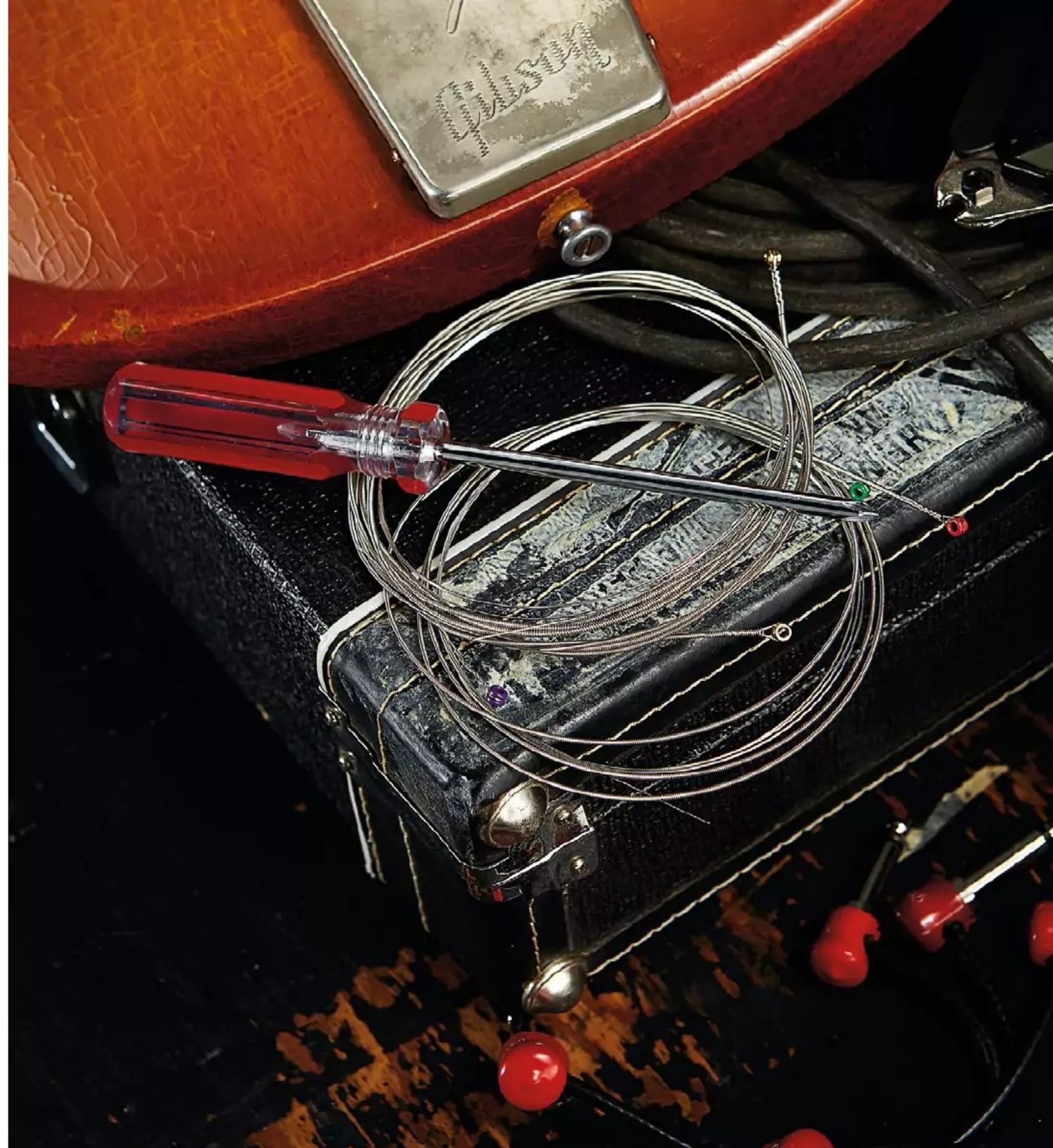
A guitar's body plays a major role in how it sustains. Acoustic guitars, with their hollow bodies, are built for projection and resonance. They're often louder than electrics, but because their tops vibrate so freely, much of the string's energy is transferred into the air – so great for volume and projection but not for sustain. Solidbody guitars preserve string energy; their dense, rigid construction minimises energy loss and allows notes to ring out longer. Semi-hollowbody guitars strike a middle ground, blending acoustic resonance with the sustain of a solid core.

Sustainability

There's a common misconception that acoustic guitars have better sustain than solidbodies because they are typically louder. Volume and sustain are often mistaken for each other, but they're very different things. I've played cheap acoustics that were loud and projected well, but natural sustain was short and notes died quickly. Meanwhile, a well-constructed solidbody, even unplugged, lets a note bloom and hang in the air. When a string is plucked on an acoustic guitar, much of its vibrational energy is quickly transferred to the top (soundboard), which moves the air inside the body and pushes sound through the soundhole. Much of the string's energy is lost in the process, resulting in shorter sustain.

Digging deeper into the topic of sustain, I spoke with Matt Hughes, founder of Banker Guitars, and PK Pandey, founder of SonoTone Strings. Both know a thing or two about chasing great tone at its source. Hughes told me about building a D-18-style acoustic from sinker mahogany (wood that has been submerged, usually at the bottom of rivers or lakes for decades or even centuries): "I didn't expect much at first, but when I strung it up, man, that guitar just sang. The minerals it absorbed changed the way it vibrates. It's got warmth, clarity and sustain that it shouldn't have, but it does." Environmental factors such as exposure to water, soil and years of natural ageing can dramatically alter a wood's density, ultimately affecting resonance and how it sustains.





Good wood lays the foundation, but construction and attention to detail are just as critical. For example, Hughes swears by constructing guitars with hide glue for tight neck pockets. “Hide glue actually shrinks as it dries, pulling the pieces tighter together,” he tells me. “That’s part of the magic.” He also emphasised how setup details can make or break sustain. “Nuts and saddles should act almost like knife edges with minimal contact. A well-cut nut with the right break angle helps preserve string vibration. A well-built guitar lets the string vibrate unimpeded for as long as possible.”

Strings are the unsung heroes of sustain. SonoTone’s PK Pandey spent over three years refining materials and winding techniques to create strings that increase sustain

Materials and winding techniques used in the creation of guitar strings can all affect the overall sustain of your guitar

“While many players chase sustain through pickups, amps and pedals, most of the magic happens before your signal ever hits a cable”

and feel better under the fingers. Pandey adds: “It’s all about purity of the metal and the tightness of the winding. We use a special grade of stainless steel for our string cores and a proprietary process to make them. Most companies won’t do this because it’s too expensive, but we do it because it works.”

He adds that a string’s core shape matters, too: “Round-core and hex-core strings produce different sine waves so they yield different fundamental tones, which also influences resonance and sustain depending on the guitar.”

Although we’ve only scratched the surface, you should now have a better sense of what really shapes a guitar’s fundamental ability to sustain. Natural sustain varies due to wood density, construction quality, materials and strings. Guitars with well-seasoned tonewoods, solid neck joints and minimal energy loss allow strings to vibrate longer. A well-built guitar lets sound resonate freely, while poor materials or sloppy construction absorb vibration and kill sustain prematurely. In the end, a truly resonant guitar with good sustain feels alive. It breathes with you and inspires you. The next time you’re checking out a guitar, play it unplugged and listen. If notes hang in the air and come alive under your fingers, chances are you found a good one. **G**

THREE TO GET READY

If your notes can’t hang, look no further



Fender Fatfinger Guitar Sustain Enhancer £33

This compact clamp-on accessory boosts sustain and resonance by adding mass to your guitar’s headstock, which improves vibration transfer, enhances harmonic richness and helps each note bloom with clarity and depth. You’ll notice fuller tone, longer note decay and better overall response. It installs in seconds, requires no wiring or modifications, and it works with most guitars, electric or acoustic.



Stringjoy Signatures Nickel Wound Strings £10.99

If your tone feels flat or uninspired, it might be time to upgrade your strings. Stringjoy’s nickel-wound Signatures are crafted with premium materials and advanced winding techniques for maximum clarity, sustain, resonance and feel. Whether you like your strings light, heavy or somewhere in between, Stringjoy offers a set that’s perfect for your guitar. String ‘em up. Strum unplugged. Make your guitar come alive.



TC Electronic HyperGravity Mini Compressor £69.99

Not getting enough natural sustain from your guitar? Well, there are other ways to get it. This ultra-compact compressor offers exceptional clarity, sustain and dynamics control. With TC’s powerful TonePrint technology, you can dial in presets via mobile device for instant access to artist-designed sounds or create your own. If your sustain won’t stick around, a good compressor may be able to squeeze out a little more.



Open D Tuning

This month, **Richard Barrett** grabs his acoustic and shows you another way to expand your chord vocabulary

Open tunings are very popular with slide players as they offer the facility of playing triads with one finger (or slide), giving convenient groups of notes with which to build licks and patterns. In this way, open tunings differ from ‘alternate’ tunings, which don’t give us an open chord. Either way, open or alternative tunings provide the opportunity to create wide-ranging, piano-style chord voicings that aren’t available to us in regular tuning.

Though they have frequently been used on electric guitar (think Keith Richards and Jimmy Page), open tunings are particularly effective on acoustic guitar (look to Joni Mitchell, Nick Drake, Nick Harper, Jimmy Page and so on). For this reason, the examples here have been recorded on acoustic. They’re designed to give a useful vocabulary of major and minor chords, mostly featuring a mix of open and fretted strings. However, there are many more chord shapes hidden away in this open D tuning – and don’t forget you can move shapes around for some nice surprises. **G**



PHOTO BY ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS

Joni Mitchell exemplifies effective use of open tunings on acoustic guitar and has ventured into open D for some of her most memorable songs, including *Big Yellow Taxi* and *Both Sides Now*

Example 1

This Dadd9 is simplicity itself – the only way to get simpler is to play all the open strings for a D major chord. As with all the examples here, do experiment with moving shapes/notes around. Random is fine, that’s how the happy accidents happen, as well as learning what’s available to you in this tuning.

Dadd9

0 0 0 0 0

D A D F# A D

Example 2

Apart from the open low D, this Dm7 chord is movable to any key; it just seemed to make sense to use that open root note as it was there. Having said that, you might want to try keeping the low D and moving the rest of the chord around for some interesting slash chords.

Dm7

0

D A D F# A D

Example 3

Here’s a nice Joni Mitchell style Gadd9/D, using the shape that would give us E7 in standard tuning. This is a great example of the complex-sounding voicings that can be created with a minimum of effort using open/alternative tunings. Try moving this around for some nice variations on the theme.

Gadd9/D

0 0 0 0

D A D F# A D

Example 4

This Gadd9 doubles up on D, with the 5th fret of the fifth string and the open fourth string sounding in unison, for a touch of chorusing. This is another shape that can be used elsewhere – though, of course, the changing relationships/intervals between the fretted and open strings will give a variety of names!

Gadd9

0 0 0

D A D F# A D

Example 5

This is the same as Example 4 but with a ♭3 (B♭) on the 4th fret of the third string. Having this string tuned down to F# can take some getting used to, but it’s also a really good way of avoiding unconscious patterns and approaching shapes with an open mind. Once again, don’t forget to check if this can work in other positions.

Gadd9

0 0 0

D A D F# A D

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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Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.

Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

STAR LETTER

CLOSING DOWN



Brick-and-mortar stores are an important part of the purchasing experience

Driving in Salford recently I saw that PMT (Play Music Today) was closed, I later discovered that they had gone into administration. I bought all five of my guitars from them, plus my amp, straps, capos, tuners, strings and other bits and bobs. I also had my guitars maintained at the tech shop next to their store. These larger stores may not be to everyone's taste, but they provide a service to many. I spent hours picking my instruments, and the staff were patient and knowledgeable. Sadly, this is a sign of the times; too many use high street shops to try out guitars and other instruments, then after having their fill, they go and buy online just to save a few quid. Now what will happen when the last music shop closes?

I love reading reviews, especially non-biassed ones like those *Guitarist* does, but they are only a person's opinion. Who in their right mind would buy a guitar without playing it? Written reviews only give an indication and what to expect, watching a YouTube video is not much better. You don't get the feel or usability and most certainly not anywhere near an accurate representation of the sound; you just get the views of the person at the other end. You wouldn't go out and buy a car purely on a magazine review or the word of a salesperson, you would drive it. With PMT's demise another valuable resource has gone. Unless people support their music shops, large or small, others will follow and where will you go then?

Nigel Greensitt

Thanks for your perspectives on a sad subject, Nigel. Firstly, we'd like to say our sincere sympathies go out to all who have been affected by PMT's closure. As Neville Marten rightly observes in his column on page 36, there's a good chance of being disappointed when you buy a guitar online – or, more likely, you might get a guitar that is enjoyable to play but unknowingly denied yourself a moment of joyous connection with a guitar that seems tailor-made for you, which you might have discovered in person at a guitar shop.



KORG

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

SIMPLY RED

As an amateur luthier OAP who doesn't possess a spray booth and is rubbish with a rattle can, I like to finish my guitars in wood stain, Danish oil and carnauba wax. Simples! But where have all the vibrant wood stains gone?

In issue 516 you kindly published my five-string Keefkaster guitar, which I finished in a glowing fire engine red that I got from Liberon... but they don't make that colour now. Similarly, I finished several guitars in a fabulous peacock turquoise that I got from Wizart in the Eastern Mediterranean, but they are no longer contactable. So for my lefty Frenchy Jazzmeister I was recently making from a pitch pine body, where could I look for an exciting fire engine or post box red? Couldn't find one anywhere, whether from luthier supply companies or DIY outlets. In the end I settled on Northwest Guitars' Empire Red. As you can see from the attached pics [below], the guitar looks sort of all right, but it's more like oxblood or dirty ruby than 'here comes Fireman Sam'.

In these worrying times we need some bright, jolly colours to cheer us up. Come on, industry – surely you can do better?!

Rod French (aka Jon Chaplin, The One-Armed Luthier)

Thanks for your thoughts, Rod. Have we entered a drab age in which vibrant guitar colours are no longer in vogue? Strange to say, Fender Custom Colors such as Shell Pink are far more popular today than they were back in the 60s when many male players found them too feminine for their tastes in that more socially conservative era. So why are the wood stain makers of the world holding back? If anyone can suggest colourful alternatives for Rod to try, send them in and we'll print the best.



Reader Rod French looks to wood stains when finishing his guitars



The JVM label on Alan's birthday treat is the icing on this marvellous Marshall cake!

ROCK ON, TOMMY!

On the 19 May this year I shared an 80th birthday with Pete Townshend and my twin sister, Carol. Like most of us, those 80 years have been peppered with highs and lows. But one truly lasting joy has been my total obsession with guitars.

It all started with a trip to my grandmother's in 1956. She owned a small black and white television. That night we were watching a programme hosted by Jack Payne called *Off The Record*, in which a young Tommy Steele made his first TV appearance. His song *Rock With The Caveman* didn't really inspire me, but the guitar he was playing, which I later found out was a Höfner, made a huge impact.

With some 80th birthday money recently I thought a good idea would be to find a book about Höfner guitars and I found a really nice one called *German Jazz Guitars* by Cameron Brown, and there on page 110 was a picture of Tommy playing that very guitar. As soon as I saw it the image hit me; it was so powerful even after almost 70 years. All I can honestly now say at this point in my life is, 'Thank you, Tommy.' This whole guitar passion has been fabulous and has generated some fantastic times with so many friends as well as getting to play in some really great bands.

Colin Howell

Thanks so much for that memory, Colin – it's surprising how far a single, inspiring image can carry us. In your case it launched a lifelong passion for guitar. You don't mention which Höfner Tommy was playing when you had your epiphany. 1956 would have been too early for a 335-style Verithin, which debuted in 1960, but could it have been the popular President, which was highly popular around that time and appeared in twin-pickup format in 1955? Do let us know, we'd love to find out. The editor of this tome has owned two vintage Höfners over the years – an acoustic archtop Congress and an early Verithin – and enjoyed both, though they were not without their quirks by modern standards, to be sure. Anyway, we're glad your Höfner experience is still inspiring you today!



PIECE OF CAKE

Wondered if you guys wanted to see the epic Marshall cake my lovely wife got me for my 55th birthday. Even managed to get my white Custom in on the act. Tasty!

Alan Burdon

Thanks Alan, what a lovely birthday surprise! Marshall cakes seem to be a bit of a thing as other readers have shared pics of similar confections in the not-to-distant past. But we have to say yours has raised the bar as it is a specific model (JVM) and has lightning bolts on the top. I think we have a winner!

WORKING FOR PEANUTS?

As a recent subscriber to *Guitarist*, after a break of 25-plus years, I was interested to see the readers' guitar builds that come up occasionally in the letters pages. I thought I'd share a photo of my guitar completed in June this year [above]. My first guitar was a Gordon Smith and I've owned an Epiphone Broadway since 1998. An interest in Stratocasters led to the purchase of a Starcaster at my local auction, with the intention of a customisation using signwriting enamels. I love *Peanuts* (Charlie Brown and the gang) and thought the two US icons would be a good fit.

The Fender on the headstock is more prominent, and the Starcaster label hasn't been seen since February! Not quite in the same league as Crispian Mills' Peacock Strat (Kula Shaker, a personal favourite), but it was fun to do, sounds good with all new electrics and I'm enjoying playing it.

Matthew Stevens

Bravo, Matthew – what a professional job you've done of the artwork and you've really carried it through to every area of the guitar's finish, so kudos for the effort made to create a unique tribute to this classic comic strip. What other comics (outside of the well-worn Marvel universe) would look good on a guitar, we wonder? We'd quite fancy a Gary Larson one themed around *The Far Side*, but perhaps readers have some even better suggestions or even completed projects to share?

Check out Matthew's vibrant tribute to the *Peanuts* comic strip, which covers the entire guitar. Bravo!

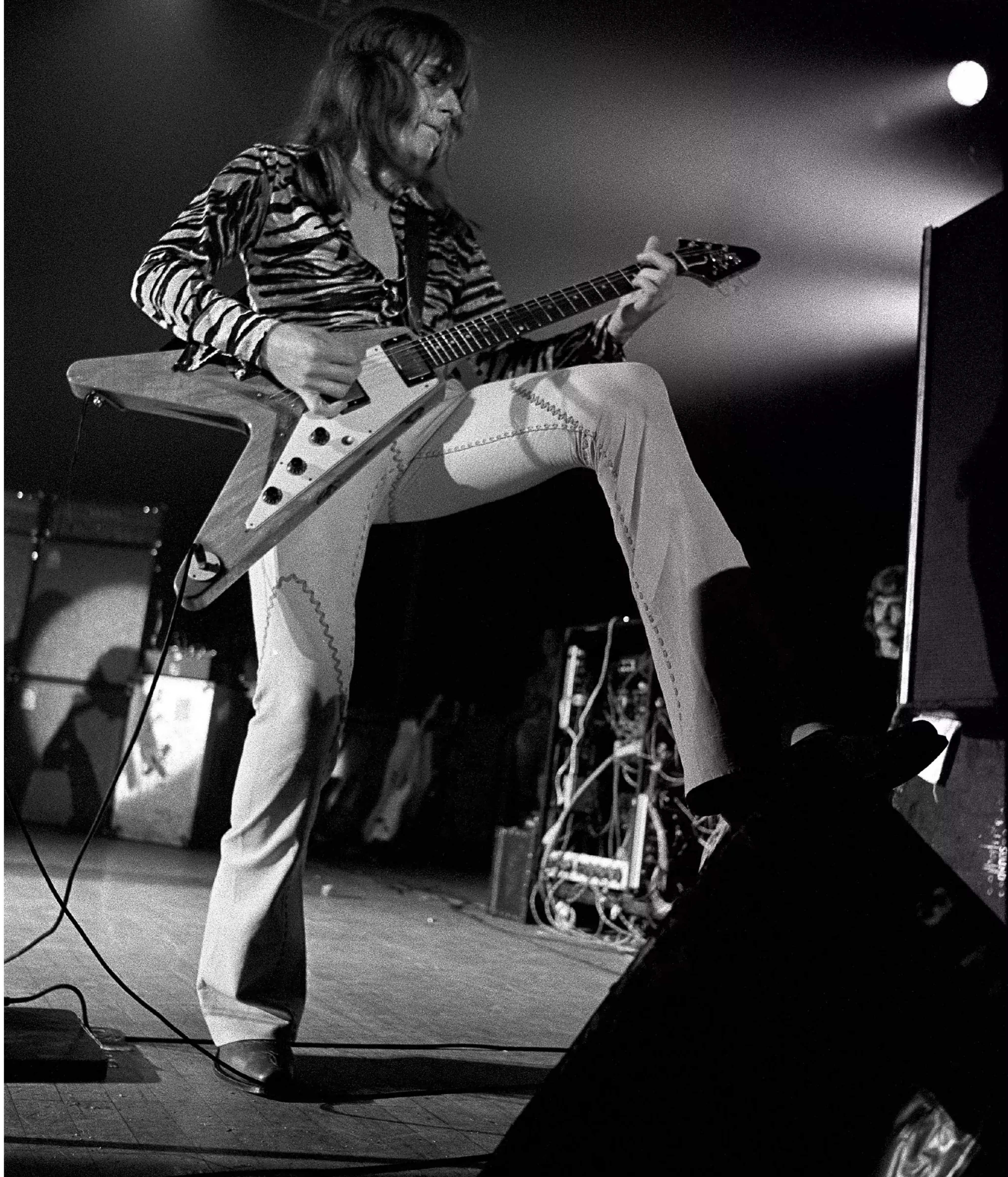
Send Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

MICK RALPHS

1944-2025

We bid farewell to Mick Ralphs, the highly innovative founding guitarist of Mott The Hoople and Bad Company

Words Amit Sharma



MICK RALPHS

March 1944 – June 2025

On 23 June, it was announced that English guitarist Mick Ralphs, famous for his work with Mott The Hoople and Bad Company, had passed away at a care facility in Henley-On-Thames, aged 81. He will be remembered as one of the most influential rock guitarists to emerge in the late 60s and 70s, though he continued writing and recording with Bad Company through the 80s and 90s, and even released a pair of albums with his own blues band in times more recent.

Born in 1944 in Stoke Lacy, Herefordshire, Ralphs picked up the guitar as a teenager and began his career playing in bands like The Buddies and Mod Doc Thomas Group, the latter of whom would go on to rename themselves Mott The Hoople in 1969. Their self-titled debut album of that year opened with an



Mick Ralphs, photographed for *Guitarist* in 2013

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND

“He has left us with exceptional songs and memories. He was my friend, my songwriting partner, an amazing and versatile guitarist” **PAUL RODGERS**

instrumental version of *You Really Got Me* by The Kinks, Ralphs using a 1961 Gibson SG/Les Paul with a sideways vibrola – acquired during his time backing reggae pioneer Jimmy Cliff – through a wah pedal to replicate the vocal melodies heard on the original.

“We were quite outrageous in the Mott The Hoople days, but it was more like a punk band than a glam-rock band,” he told *Guitarist* in 2013. “It was just full-tilt rock because I remember people like Mick Jones of The Clash used to come and watch us play a lot in the old days.”

The band became household names in 1972 when David Bowie produced their fifth album, *All The Young Dudes*, and even went as far as writing its title track, underlined by some phenomenal fretwork from Ralphs. “[Bowie] basically saved the band,” he once told *Guitarist*. “We didn’t really know him at all, and we were at a low ebb and felt that we weren’t getting anywhere. We always had a good live following, but we weren’t very good at making hit records. And then Bowie heard about the fact that we were thinking of packing it in and he wrote a very nice letter saying, ‘I really love your band and hope you won’t break up: but if you’re going to,

would you consider doing this song?’ And he sent a little reel-to-reel tape with *All The Young Dudes* on.”

Similar high praise could be afforded to the group’s sixth album, *Mott*, on which the guitarist played keyboard and organ, following Verden Allen’s exit a year prior. The release included one of the group’s biggest hits *All The Way From Memphis*, partly inspired by one of Ralphs’ guitars getting stolen in Long Island before a gig in Memphis.

That same year, he left Mott The Hoople and formed Peter Grant-managed supergroup Bad Company with ex-members of Free and King Crimson. Their debut self-titled full-length of 1974 remains one of the most important hard rock albums of the mid-70s, perfectly encapsulating the jaw-dropping versatility in Ralphs’ comprehensive range of talents. Hit tracks like *Can’t Get Enough* and *Movin’ On*, both penned by the guitarist, saw him using an open C tuning (CCGCEC) to get the right kind of response and ring. It’s a high tuning that makes the strings feel very tight, he once admitted, while explaining how those songs never sounded quite right in standard. Closing track, *Seagull*, is based

around a simple D chord strummed on an acoustic guitar during the verses with a major triad shifted around the 7th, 10th and 5th frets during the choruses. It was famously covered by Joe Bonamassa on 2007 fan-favourite *Sloe Gin*, showing how the music had remained relevant and influential several decades on from release.

Later on in his career in the mid-80s, Ralphs was recruited by David Gilmour to perform in his solo band on the *About Face* tour, which spoke volumes about his stature within the guitar community. In the years that followed, he kept busy with his own solo music as well as reunions with both of the bands he was best known for.

Following the announcement of Ralphs’ death, less than five months before Bad Company are due to be inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in November, tributes came in thick and fast to celebrate the life of a man who changed the world with his guitar. “He has left us with exceptional songs and memories,” wrote Paul Rodgers, describing his Bad Company colleague as “my friend, my songwriting partner, an amazing and versatile guitarist who had the greatest sense of humour.” Joe Bonamassa remembered Ralphs as “one of the greatest to ever do it”, praising him as a “wonderful kind man with the greatest rock and roll Les Paul tone”. And KISS guitarist Tommy Thayer mourned the loss of “one of the all-time greats”, noting how “one of my biggest influences has left the stage”. **G**



RICK DERRINGER

1947-2025

While never a household name, the Ohio guitarist was one of rock's most adaptable talents and the catalyst for albums by Johnny Winter, Steely Dan and more

Words Henry Yates

RICK DERRINGER

August 1947 – May 2025

If the old joke has it that Hollywood journeyman Kevin Bacon can be linked to anyone in the film industry within six moves, the same was surely true of Rick Derringer's thumbprint on the rock 'n' roll scene of the 70s and 80s. The Ohio-born guitarist – who died in May aged 77 – was never a household name (although he came close with 1965's *Hang On Sloopy* and 1973's *Rock And Roll, Hoochie Koo*). But as a songwriter, producer, sideman, gun-for-hire or guitar designer, Derringer was never far from the A-list, making vital contributions to the work of such notables as Johnny Winter, Steely Dan, Ringo Starr, Alice Cooper, Meat Loaf and 'Weird Al' Yankovic.

Inspired by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, and declaring himself "a natural" on his first Harmony electric guitar, Derringer was just 17 when his band, The McCoys, topped the Billboard chart with 1965's *Hang On Sloopy* (a song that had sunk a year earlier when released by R&B vocal group The Vibrations). "That was one take," he reflected of the song's precocious lead break. "They said, 'Now it's time to play the solo.' I just came up with it on the spot."

Rick Derringer lent his talents to myriad big names throughout his career – here he is on stage as part of the Ringo Starr & His All-Starr Band in 2011



PHOTO BY MAURICIO SANTANA/GETTY IMAGES

"Rick produced my first six albums and played guitar on my earliest recordings. He had an enormous impact on my life and will be missed greatly" 'WEIRD AL' YANKOVIC

Subsequent covers of Peggy Lee's *Fever* and Ritchie Valens' *Come On, Let's Go* also flew – while David Bowie would later put his spin on the group's own *Sorrow* – but The McCoys' attempts to rebrand as a serious psychedelic act fell flat and the guitarist (along with brother Randy) found refuge as Johnny Winter's backing band. "It was a contest every night to see who could play the best," reflected Derringer in one of his final interviews. "Suddenly I was playing with a legit guy. That opened the doors for me. Johnny asked me to produce his records."

As well as manning the desk, the new boy also wrote *Rock And Roll, Hoochie Koo*, and loaned it to the Texas bluesman for 1970's *Johnny Winter And* album. The song raced to US No 23 when Derringer did it his way three years later, on solo debut *All American Boy*, but while this breakthrough should have put the guitarist in the fast lane, he'd never hit

such heights again (at least, not with his own name on the marquee).

Instead, Derringer settled into his enduring role as catalyst to the stars, from producing Johnny's brother Edgar (on hits like *Frankenstein* and *Free Ride*) to bringing Yankovic to the MTV generation. "Rick produced my first six albums and played guitar on my earliest recordings, including the solo on *Eat It*," wrote the parody-rocker in one of the first eulogies to appear online. "He had an enormous impact on my life and will be missed greatly."

Derringer's varied commissions also included penning wrestler Hulk Hogan's flag-waving ring anthem, *Real American*, touring with Cyndi Lauper and punching up material as eclectic as Alice Cooper's *Killer* and Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse Of The Heart*. He cited his own favourite guitar solo as Air Supply's *Making Love Out Of Nothing At All*, but

he could handle high-brow muso gigs, too, popping up on various Steely Dan albums – and nailing his parts so well that the notoriously demanding Donald Fagen and Walter Becker never asked him to revisit them.

His talents even extended to guitar design, Derringer hoping the BC Rich Stealth he conceived in the early 80s would make a Les Paul-style impact on the industry (it didn't, but it's still sold by the company to this day). "People have become infatuated with heavy solidbody guitars for no real reason," he told *Guitar World* of the svelte starfish-esque design. "This is a lightweight, modern-looking guitar. It's sleek, and the girls tell me it's sexy-looking. I'm one of the few guitarists who has designed an instrument from inception."

In the end, though, Derringer's legacy is a thousand flashes of brilliance, rather than one defining statement. It means his passing will be more quietly mourned than his more visible peers, but his DNA swirls in some of the best rock music out there, and it would have sounded different without him. "Rest in peace my friend," wrote Joe Bonamassa. "It was an honour to know you, work with you and call you a friend." **G**



THE
Guitarist
INTERVIEW

With her diverse new album full of amazing playing, there are changes afoot for the Grammy Award-winning acoustic-guitar virtuoso as she takes a few steps away from her bluegrass roots

Words David Mead
Photography Phil Barker

Molly Tuttle

We first interviewed Molly Tuttle in issue 449 back in 2019 when she was playing a tiny venue in Bristol. In those days, she was beginning to gain recognition through YouTube videos that displayed her stunning acoustic-guitar technique, but she still wasn't very well known on this side of the Atlantic. Since then she's become a regular at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry as well as the annual Grammy Awards, having won Best Bluegrass Album for two consecutive records, *Crooked Tree* and *City Of Gold*.

When we met up with her in London in May, she was about to play at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the Highways Festival and was eager to talk about her new record, *So Long Little Miss Sunshine*. It's an album that signals a stylistic gear shift, funnelling pop, rock and country genres into her own unique Americana-rich style. It's a somewhat interesting tactic for an artist who has so far forged an amazing career on the bluegrass circuit, but as she tells us, these days her maxim is "keep people guessing and keep it full of surprises!"

With an album title like *So Long Little Miss Sunshine*, are we about to see a new side of Molly Tuttle?

"It's a line from one of my songs called *Old Me (New Wig)*, and that song also has the line in it, 'Breaking up with the old me...' So I think it's, in a way, a little bit of a wink to the fact that the new album is really different musically from my last two records, which were pretty straight-ahead bluegrass. My first album [*When You're Ready*, 2019] was a little more in the Americana or pop vein, and then I did a covers album [*...But I'd Rather Be With You*, 2020] that was all over the map, genre-wise.

"I really like to be a chameleon and change my sound. The last few years have been so fun playing bluegrass, and that's the music I grew up with. It's a huge part of who I am, but it's not the only thing I do or the only way to express myself. So I feel like this new album incorporates bluegrass elements, and there's even one or two songs that could have been on a bluegrass record. I'm playing banjo, and there's still fiddle and mandolin and all that stuff. But it's also pushing into new territories with the songwriting and the production."

"Bluegrass is a huge part of who I am, but it's not the only thing I do or the only way to express myself"

You've said that some of these songs were written five years ago.

"This record was a long time in the making. During the pandemic I was writing non-stop, and I felt like I had two paths I could go down: I had this bluegrass album I'd written that became *Crooked Tree*, and then I had this other record that was more unknown – I didn't know what it was going to turn into. I started talking to a producer, Jay Joyce, in Nashville, about making a record, and this was five years ago. I sent him some songs, but ultimately I felt like I didn't have the material that stood alone as a record. I had this other batch of songs that ended up on *Crooked Tree* that I felt really strongly about, and I knew I wanted

VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!

Watch Molly's exclusive *Guitarist* video lesson on basic bluegrass technique
www.bit.ly/guitaristextra



1

to record them. That's just the door that opened up to me creatively at the time.

"And then fast forward five years, I'd still been writing constantly and I finally felt like I had this other batch of songs that I wanted to record with Jay, and his production ideas were amazing. He was so fun to work with. But we've literally been talking about doing this for five years, and so I'd say maybe, like, four or five of the songs are from that original batch that I had been working on during the pandemic. I've been writing songs all along the way since then, and probably the bulk of them I've written in the past year or two, but there are still those ones that I really loved from back then that I ended up recording."

What's the songwriting experience like for you?

Can you sit down to write on automatic or do ideas just come to you out of the blue?

"I fall somewhere in between. There are certain songs that I write from a little idea that maybe I wrote down in my phone or in a notebook somewhere, and I'll just collect these little song nuggets as I go throughout my life. I don't always have time to sit down and write an entire song, so that's really helpful to just have a running list of ideas. Some of them are total garbage and I look back and go, 'What was I thinking?' But if I don't write them down, I'm never gonna remember the good ones.

1. When we met up with Molly in May this year she was poised to play at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the Highways Festival

INTERVIEW | Molly Tuttle

Molly's main stage guitar is this Pre-War dreadnought, which has recently been fitted with an internal mic





2

“Other times I just sit down and write something from scratch, and that always takes a long time. I’ll work on it over multiple days, but it’s always really satisfying when it’s finally finished. Once I start a song, I don’t like to halfway finish it and then come back to it later. There are songs on the new record that were just kind of sitting there, and I came back and rewrote entire sections of them. So sometimes songs will go through, like, five different iterations.”

You have a beautiful new custom Martin acoustic with you. What’s the story there?

“Well, I actually met a woman in Nashville who works with Martin and she reached out and said, ‘Do you ever play Martin guitars?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I started out when I was 12.’ I’d saved up \$2,000 just from busking and playing gigs and asking my grandparents for money at Christmas and stuff. I went into the music store where my dad used to teach and they had this Martin HD-28V that [had] an Adirondack spruce top. I was coveting this guitar; I always really wanted a Martin. I started out on a Baby Taylor, and then I graduated up to Blueridge guitars. But I coveted Martins because that’s what all my favourite guitar players had. So that was my first nice guitar that I ever bought as a kid. Then I bought a vintage Martin when I went to college – a ’48 D-18. That was another Martin I loved, but I sold both of them. I sold my first ever Martin to my aunt and now it’s in the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.”

Did you tour with Martins earlier on in your career?

“The old vintage Martin I had, I toured with it for a while and it was really hard to tour with. I felt like I was damaging it because of all the travel and the wear and tear. You go to different climates and those old guitars don’t have an easy way to adjust the action because they don’t have truss rods. So eventually it just wasn’t practical, and I kind of needed the money, so I sold it and ever since then I’ve been playing different guitars.

“So I told all that to [the woman I met in Nashville] and she set me up with the Martin folks. I talked to them about building this guitar, which is a custom: it’s Madagascar rosewood on the back and sides. They sent me a bunch of pictures of different wood and I liked this cool stripe that this one had down the middle. And it has my logo. When I made *Crooked Tree*, the guy who designed it made this cool ‘MT’ logo out of branches, so I sent that to [Martin], because we were going back and forth about inlays, and then they had the idea to make these branches that get more and more crooked. That goes with my song, *Crooked Tree*, and I went with this sunburst, which is kind of unusual to see on a Martin. It’s sort of like a J-45 sunburst.”

Did you ask Martin for any particular specifications?

“For the neck size, I went with sort of a V-shaped neck and a 1 11/16-inch size [nut width], which is what I usually use. I got it last summer. I was playing in Pennsylvania, near where the Martin factory is, and I remember I went there as a teenager with my dad. I think we were visiting relatives in the Midwest, and we took a little side trip to go see the Martin factory and it was so cool. So they came down to the show that we played in Pennsylvania last summer and brought me my

“I started out [on Martin guitars] when I was 12. I coveted Martins because that’s what all my favourite guitar players had”

2. The Pre-War has a spruce top with Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides

3. Molly wrote an excerpt from a Grateful Dead lyric inside her Pre-War guitar: “A lovely view of heaven... but I’d rather be with you”

guitar and I got to play it there at the show for the first time, which was really exciting.”

Have you had a pickup installed in it?

“Right now, this one has an LR Baggs HiFi pickup. I think it’s just the HiFi – they have a HiFi and a HiFi Duet. I’ve been playing this on stage for when I go to clawhammer guitar, which is kind of a percussive style of guitar playing. And this pickup and guitar combo sounds pretty good for that.”



3

INTERVIEW | **Molly Tuttle**

Molly's custom Martin features in her stage set during the more percussive clawhammer-style songs, and you can hear it in our exclusive video lesson!





Do you use a mic for the guitar as well as on stage?

“Yeah. In my other guitar that I play on the flatpicking stuff, I actually just got a microphone put inside the guitar and it was kind of a complicated process. So now I have a pickup in that guitar, under the saddle, and a mic in the soundhole. I have the pickup jack [in the end-pin] and then there’s actually another hole drilled inside where the mic comes out, so I can run two lines from that guitar. The pickup is really helpful because it doesn’t feed back; you can get it really loud. So no matter where we’re playing, if we’re playing in a small club where the audience is really noisy, or if we’re in a

“We had no intention of making an all-female band. It was literally just the best people for each position in the band”

big arena, I can still get the guitar at the right volume and I don’t have to worry about feedback or it sounding washy. But then the mic helps make it sound like a natural-sounding guitar. I’m still kind of figuring out if I want to put it in this [guitar], or start putting one in all my guitars. It’s a little bit of a commitment because you’re literally drilling a new hole into the wood of your guitar.”

Do you have preferences for woods, for the backs and sides of your guitars?

“It really just depends on the guitar itself. This is the only one I have with Madagascar rosewood. I think it sounds really cool, but I didn’t really know what to expect because all my other guitars are either mahogany or Indian rosewood. Rosewood is more piano-like to me because you have all these other reverberant notes around it. I actually just bought a 1943 D-18 that’s mahogany and I love it. It’s like it’s a mahogany guitar, but it sort of has some of that



4. After being shown pictures of timber for her new guitar, Molly was drawn to this stunning set of Madagascar rosewood

5. The new all-female band line-up (left to right): Ellen Angelico, Mary ‘Mair’ Meyer, Molly Tuttle, Vanessa McGowan and Megan Jane

6. The twisted branch ‘MT’ on Molly’s Martin was inspired by a logo specially designed for her Grammy-winning *Crooked Tree* album

resonance of a rosewood guitar, and I’m debating if I want to take it out on tour. I bought it to be my studio guitar for when I record albums or go play on other people’s records.”

Along with the new record, you have a new band, too.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be super fun. One of the musicians is Mair [Mary Meyer]; she’s gonna be playing fiddle and she might play some banjo. We had our first rehearsals about a week ago, and she was playing fiddle, mandolin and keys. It’s fun because she’ll be switching instruments mid-song. Ellen Angelico is playing with me, and she plays electric guitar, but she also plays dobro and banjo and pedal steel. So there’s a ton of options there. Megan Jane is playing drums and percussion; she’s really great. She can strip down to a washboard for the more rootsy stuff, or play full kit. She has made a little kick drum out of an old suitcase with just one hi-hat on it. So we’re experimenting with different ways to break down and play a little bluegrass set in the middle of the show. And then, finally, Vanessa McGowan is an amazing bass player. She’s going to be playing upright and electric, depending on what the song wants.

“We had no intention of making an all-female band. It was literally just the best people for each possible position in the band and the instrumentation that I needed. And then all of a sudden we’re like, ‘Wow, we got an all-female band. That’s pretty cool.’ It’s like an added perk.” **G**



Molly Tuttle’s new album, *So Long Little Miss Sunshine*, is released on 15 August via Nonesuch Records

www.mollytuttlemusic.com





ABOVE AND BEYOND

Fender's Custom Shop may have opened its doors in the late 80s, but, in some ways, it was an extension of the company's ethos since the beginning – developing bold new designs in response to the needs of musicians. We take a journey into the colour, craft and sonic soul of Fender's most revered workshop

Words Tony Bacon, Jamie Dickson & Neville Marten

Photography Phil Barker

ANY WAY YOU WANT IT

Fender's Custom Shop had a precarious start in the mid-1980s, but the story of its formative years is full of big ideas, some bizarre instruments, and a queue of famous guitarists

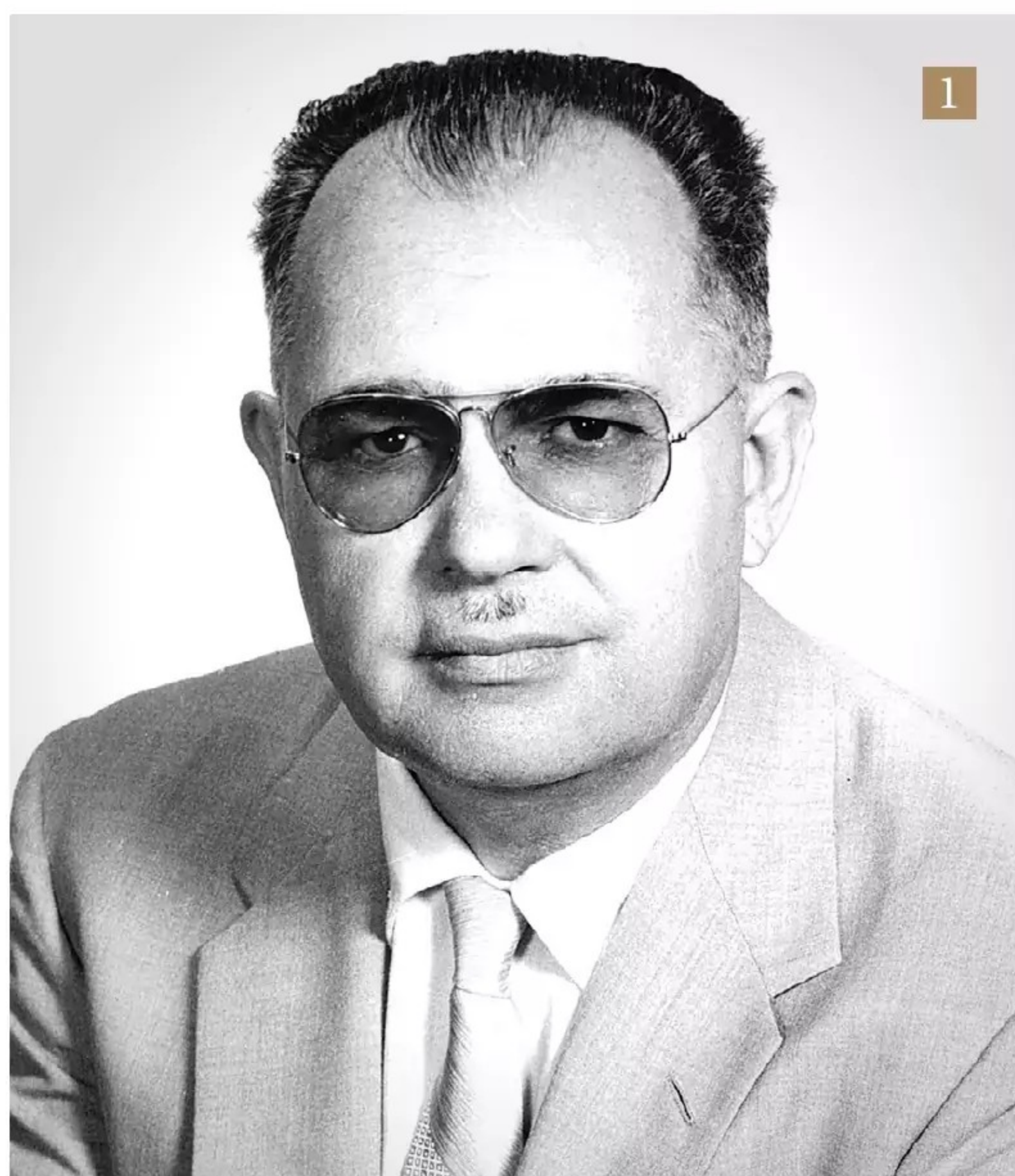
Words Tony Bacon

A customer walks into a shop. Nothing unusual about that, did you say? Well, the customer talks to the man behind the counter. And that man is Leo Fender. The customer has an acoustic guitar but wants to be able to plug it into an amp. He's heard Leo might be the guy to make it happen.

This apparently unimportant event happened around the start of the 1940s at Leo's Fender Radio Service store in Fullerton, Los Angeles. But this walk-in would result in a guitar with a retrofitted pickup – in other words a customised guitar. And all this happened many, many decades before the Fender company opened an official Custom Shop, and indeed a number of years before the Fender company even existed.

Of course, Leo himself wouldn't have described that instrument as a 'custom guitar', not least because the term hadn't been invented yet. However, he did create a special piece for a specific *customer*, which is where the term 'custom' originates from.

What makes a guitar a custom guitar? It has to be individual, set apart from regular production models. There's an emphasis on the handmade aspects of guitar making, and sometimes personal attention from a named builder. Sadly, there will also be a difference when you come to pay the bill. But let's get back to Fender, a company now under way and gradually picking up business as the 50s loomed ahead.



CUSTOMARILY COLOURFUL

As Fender began to grow into the early 50s, and with the addition of the Tele, P-Bass and Strat expanding beyond the firm's original steels and small amps, the emphasis remained firmly on production of a set line of distinct models. Each of those models was offered in a standard finish, either blonde or sunburst.

Any notion of customising at Fender in the 50s was largely confined to non-standard colour finishes. This happened on a casual basis, and sometimes it was for local musicians who deserved something special. For example, Bill Carson and Rex Gallion, who helped with

the advent of the Stratocaster, were awarded splendid red-finish Strats for their trouble, while Eldon Shamblin of the famous Western swing band led by Bob Wills landed an even more impressive gold-finish model.

As the 50s rolled on, Fender began to hint publicly yet discreetly in its catalogues and price lists at the availability of colour options, at first at "an additional five per cent cost". You may want to sit down for the next piece of information. That small price uplift meant a gorgeous brand-new Custom Color Strat could have been yours in 1957 for a few cents short of \$288.

There was more. First seen on an early '57 price list was a "Stratocaster (with tremolo) in Blonde with 14 Carat Gold-Plated

A small price uplift meant a gorgeous brand-new Custom Color Strat could have been yours in 1957 for about \$288

1. Before the Fender company was even founded – or indeed the term 'custom guitar' became a 'thing' – Leo Fender was fulfilling specific requests for his customers during the 1940s at his Radio Service store in California

Hardware" and a price of \$330. This was the model that became known as the Mary Kaye, thanks to the Detroit-born singer and guitarist who appeared with just such a blonde-body/gold-hardware Strat in a series of photos that ran in Fender promo material. Kaye appeared in the movie *Cha-Cha-Cha Boom!*, released late in 1956 and with three featured performances where she played that now-famous Strat – a guitar she never

PHOTO COURTESY OF FENDER

“We were going to start a Custom Shop at Corona to build special projects for artists to make certain that the prestige was still there for the company”

DAN SMITH

This unique 1959 Stratocaster in an early guise of Fiesta Red (complete with matching headstock before those were available as an official finish option) was presented by Fender to Western swing guitarist Bill Carson, prefiguring the work of the Custom Shop by many decades. It was shot at David Davidson's Well Strung Guitars on Long Island for a *Guitarist* feature in back in 2022



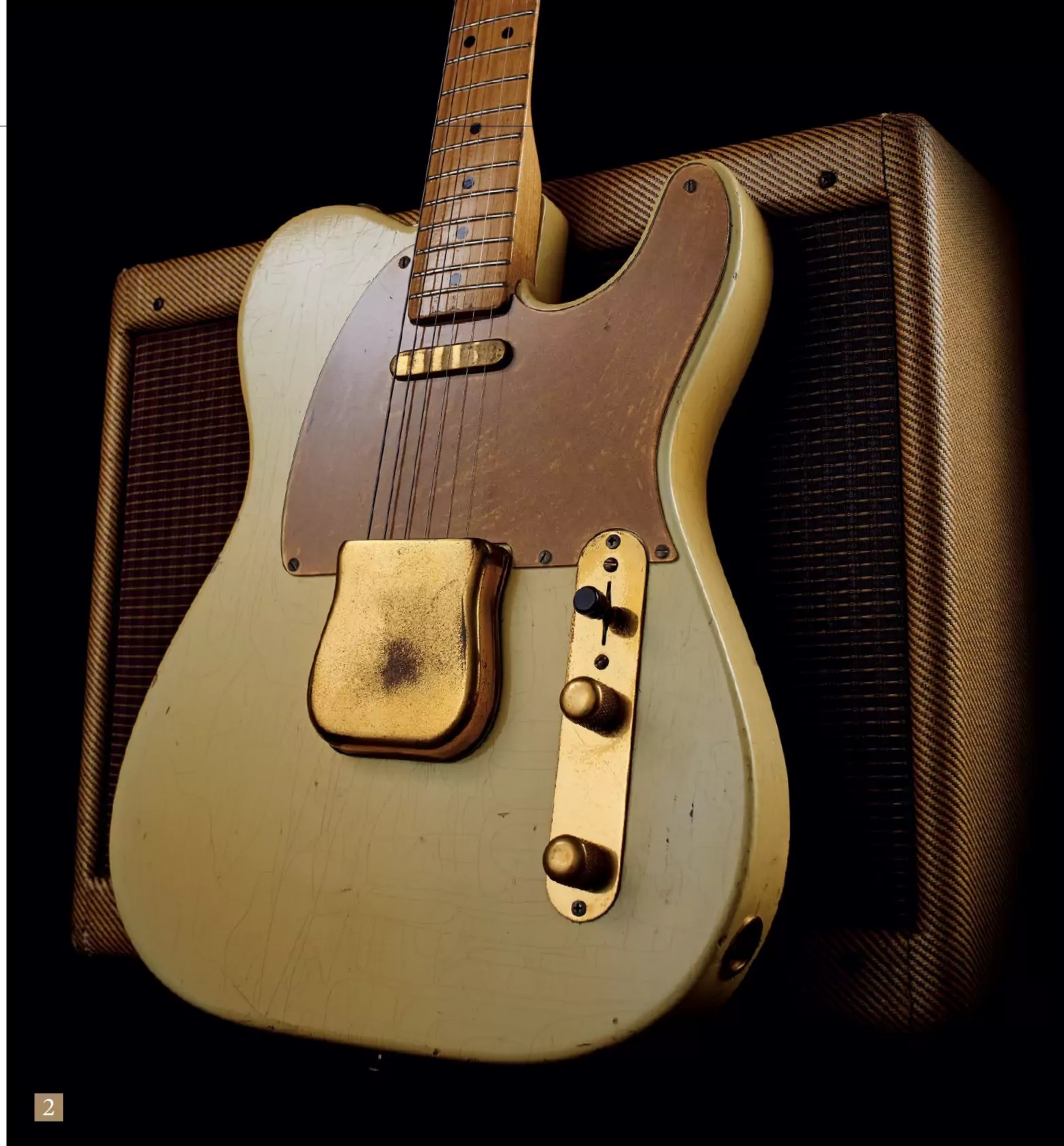
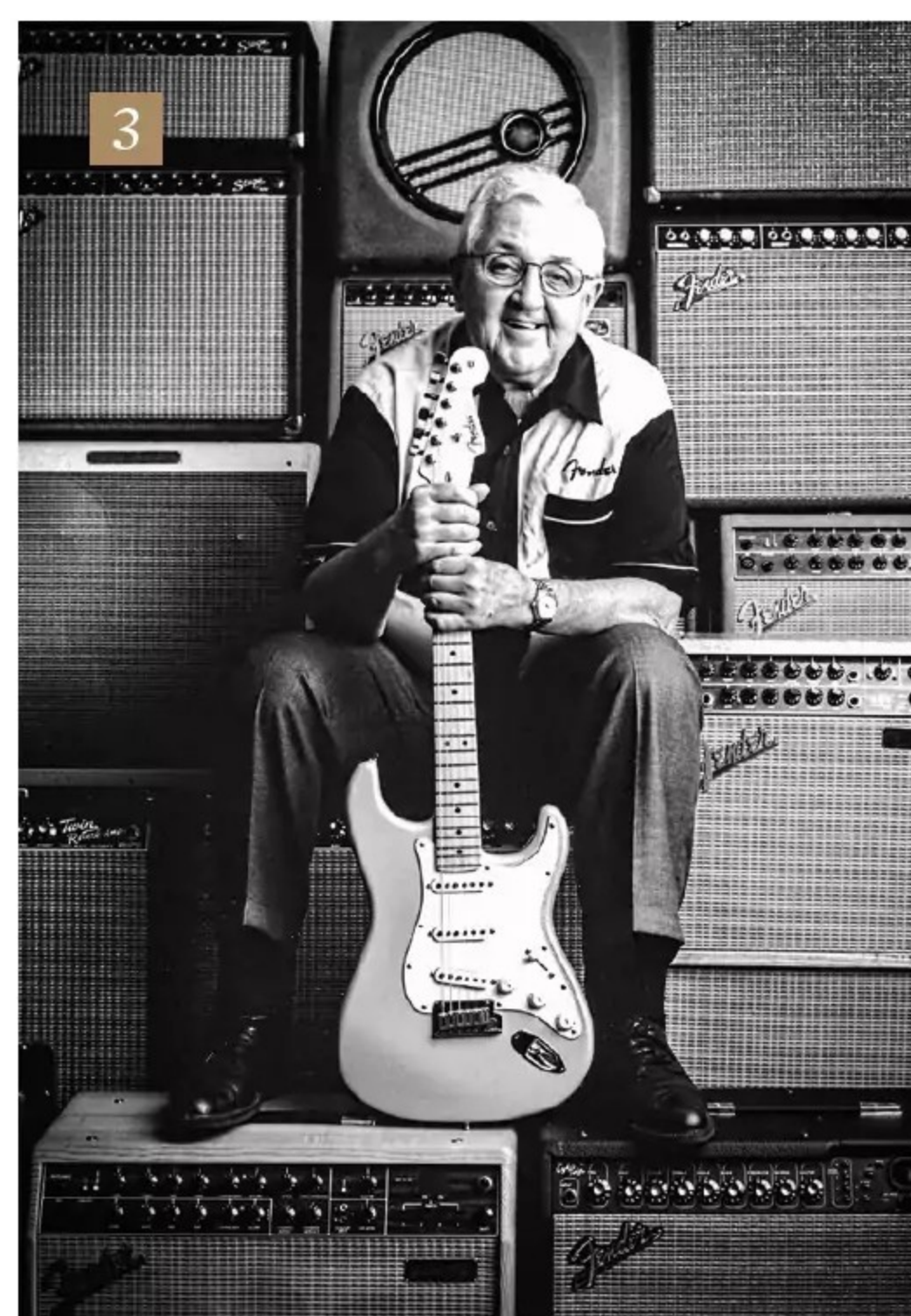
possessed for longer than a few hours at a time.

Beyond these rare early sightings, Fender eventually came up with a defined list of officially available Custom Colors, and in the 60s, when the firm was making many more coloured guitars, it issued colour-chart pamphlets to publicise and help select the various shades, from Dakota Red to Shoreline Gold Metallic, Daphne Blue to Teal Green Metallic. It was an early sign that custom choices could be made to work for a mass-production maker.

CUSTOM PRELUDES

Long before Fender had its own official Custom Shop, some guitars were nothing like production Strats, Teles, Jags or Jazzmasters, and therefore qualify as early examples of Fenders that might deserve the custom name. One such was a Jaguar specially built by Fender for a ludicrous 1963 movie called *Bye Bye Birdie*. In it, a rock 'n' roll star briefly strums a luscious black-finish Jag that sparkles with gold fittings and has a body decorated to incorporate his (fictional) name – Conrad Birdie. 60 years and more later, however, we are still awaiting a Conrad Birdie signature Jag.

Later in the decade, Fender's maverick designer Roger Rossmeisl was let loose on the short-lived Montego and LTD, introduced in 1968. They were archtop electrics, quite the antithesis of Fender's regular fare,



although both kept the customary bolt-on neck. Rare and unusual – so certainly candidates for early custom models.

CBS had been Fender's new owner since 1965, and evidence of the new overseer wringing every drop of potential income from the factory came with the Swinger and the Custom. That's right: one of them was called the Custom, the first time Fender had used that word as a model name since the double-bound Custom Tele and Esquire of 1959.

Following pressure from CBS to stop wasting spare parts, Fender's product manager created the Swinger by teaming unused Musicmaster or Bass V bodies with unpopular short-scale Mustang-style necks, and the Custom (aka Maverick) by converting disused Electric XII necks, bodies and pickups. Both were shortlived, but the idea that it's possible to rearrange existing materials and styles into something new and potentially successful would become central to at least one strand of custom building.

2. This 1951 Fender 'Nocaster' was built as a special order for Nat King Cole's guitarist Oscar Moore and is clad in what the Songbirds Museum in Chattanooga believed was the first custom colour to be used on a Fender electric

3. Bill Schultz, the man who led Fender's 80s renaissance and headed up the management buyout that saw the company pass out of CBS ownership into an era of strong resurgence

PHOTO COURTESY OF FENDER

Fender's UK distributor CBS/Arbiter opened the Fender Soundhouse superstore in London in 1973, and the boss, Ivor Arbiter, invited a sculptor friend Jon Douglas to come up with something unusual. He made a replacement Strat body from cold-cast bronze, with a metallic layer over a fibreglass shell. A small batch of these Rhinestone Stratocasters was offered for sale at the Soundhouse in '75, but a fire destroyed the premises soon afterward. Apparently, two had already sold, but the rest probably perished in the flames. Douglas would make fresh moulds for a further small run in the early 90s, but the originals were arguably the first of Fender's "art guitars", a category that would later find a suitable home at the Custom Shop.

WHAT WE NEED IS A CUSTOM SHOP

At the start of the 1980s, CBS management needed fresh blood to energise Fender. The brand's income had climbed spectacularly – in 1980, it tripled 1971's figure

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS



PHOTOS BY OLLY CURTIS

of \$20 million – but reinvestment in the company had wavered and Fender’s reputation for quality was in poor shape.

In 1981, CBS headhunted an experienced team from the American musical-instruments division of Yamaha – Bill Schultz, Dan Smith, John McLaren and Roger Balmer – who joined Bill Mendello from the existing setup, all charged with guiding the firm to better things.

The following year, the new team created Fender Japan, a joint venture with two Japanese distributors. Fender USA licensed Fender Japan the right to have Fender guitars built in Japan – initially only for sale on the Japanese market – which led to the first Japanese Fender vintage reissues and the Squier line of guitars.

However, the improvements were not enough for CBS, and in 1984 it put the Fender name and business up for sale. There were several bidders, but the Mendello/Schultz/Smith/Balmer team won, and in January ’85,

Rearranging existing materials and styles into something new would become central to at least one strand of custom building

4. Perhaps surprisingly, the now-ubiquitous black was not originally a standard finish but one of Fender’s Custom Colors, for which there was an upcharge, seen here on a 1966 Jaguar with matching headstock, like Bill Carson’s Strat created six years prior. This guitar was shot at ATB Guitars

5. Though not a custom order as such, the Telecaster Custom debuted in 1959, offering double binding and other upgrades that set it apart from standard Teles. This example, shot at ATB Guitars, is one of the earliest surviving examples

almost exactly 20 years since the corporation had acquired it, CBS confirmed it would sell Fender to “an investor group led by William Schultz, president of Fender Musical Instruments”.

It was during the months and years of upheaval and uncertainty following the management buyout that Fender’s official Custom Shop was born. The intention at first was for a facility that would build one-offs and special orders for players with the money and the inclination.

Dan Smith said that in the absence of the Fullerton factory, which was sold separately from the Fender name and business, the buyout team reckoned their limited resources would stretch perhaps to making just 10 vintage reissues a day at their small new premises in Corona

(about 20 miles east of the defunct Fullerton site).

Meanwhile, the revived Fender operation’s primary source of production guitars was from the Japanese Fuji-Gen Gakki factory via the Fender Japan deal. “So we were going to start a Custom Shop at Corona to build special projects for artists,” Smith explained, “to make certain that the prestige was still there for the company.”

ARTIST SPECIALS

George Blanda was the guitar builder hired by Fender in 1985 to make special guitars for artists, effectively starting the idea of a Custom Shop. An early job led to one of Fender’s first signature guitars, the Eric Clapton Stratocaster. Clapton had discovered that his faithful old ‘bitsa’ Strat, Blackie, was coming to the end of its useful life, and he began discussions with Fender about a modern replacement.

“The big thing was the neck shape that Clapton wanted,” Blanda recalled. “Dan Smith and I made about a dozen neck

samples for him to play. He ended up liking two and couldn't quite decide between them: one was like a pre-war Martin he had, with a very deep V shape; the other was a kind of soft 'rounded V' like Blackie, whose neck had become pretty thin through so many refrets."

Fender had given Clapton one of its Elite Strats a few years before, and he liked the sound of the guitar's active circuit. He wanted something similar but with more boost, which he called compression. With all this in mind, Blanda and Smith delivered prototypes to Clapton in 1986.

“Then he was on the road for some time, over a year, and we didn’t hear much back,” Blanda said. “At some point, he had a problem with the prototype he had been playing most, the one with the neck like the Martin with the deep V, and he sent it back to us to be fixed. We had done all our drawings and tooling and were ready to make this deep-V guitar for him, but then he started playing the other one, like Blackie – and said, ‘Yes, I like this a lot better.’ So we ended up changing back to that for the signature model! It was a very long process because he was on the road so much – his career was having a renaissance.”

The final design eventually went on sale to the public in 1988 as a regular Fender factory model, the Eric Clapton Stratocaster. Clapton retired Blackie around this time and soon began playing his new signature models. (An actual Custom Shop Clapton Strat would have to wait until 2004,

when it joined other Custom Shop signatures such as the Albert Collins Tele and the Ritchie Blackmore Strat.)

AT LAST: A CUSTOM SHOP!

George Blanda moved to R&D and that left the idea of a Custom Shop up in the air. Fender had discussions with guitar maker Michael Stevens and with Fender's former R&D man John Page, who had left the company a year earlier to concentrate on his music. The result was that in January 1987 Stevens and Page joined up to properly start Fender's Custom Shop, gaining space later that year in an area within the Corona factory and later moving to various separate Corona buildings nearby.

One of the Shop's first official orders was to make two left-handed guitars for Elliot Easton of The Cars, a Thinline Tele in Foam Green and a '57 Mary Kaye Strat. The order was placed at the end of February 1987 and completed by John Page later that year. Other guitarists who lined up for the Shop's work in its early months included Robert Cray, Steve Cropper, Jerry Donahue, Robben Ford, Eric Johnson, Yngwie Malmsteen, Cesar Rosas, Arlen Roth and Keith Scott, along with a slew of switched-on Fender dealers.

The Shop turned out its first numbered limited edition, the 40th Anniversary Telecaster, in 1988 (a few years early – vintage lore knew no better at the time). Another historic moment marked by the Shop was the Pine Telecaster & Amp set, issued in

a limited edition of 50 in 1996 to celebrate the 50th birthday of the Fender company. The set recreated the original solidbody prototype, with its steel-like headstock shape and angled control plate, alongside a replica of an early Model 26 amp.

More guitar builders were added to the Shop's growing staff. Fred Stuart's Egyptian Telecaster, made in 1994, was the first Custom Shop art guitar. Stephen Stern took responsibility for the D'Aquisto hollowbodies when they moved that same year from Japanese production to the Custom Shop. And around the same time, Larry Brooks helped Kurt Cobain create

“The big thing was the neck shape that Clapton wanted. We made about a dozen neck samples for him to play” **GEORGE BLANDA**

6. A chimerical beast made of surplus spare parts, 1965's Custom model electric nonetheless set a precedent for off-piste reinterpretations of Fender DNA

7. Aged guitars are now one of the main products of the Custom Shop, but when they were first conceived in the late 80s, they were thought of as a sideline project

8. The concept of a Custom Shop evolved from making special guitars for top artists, notably Clapton

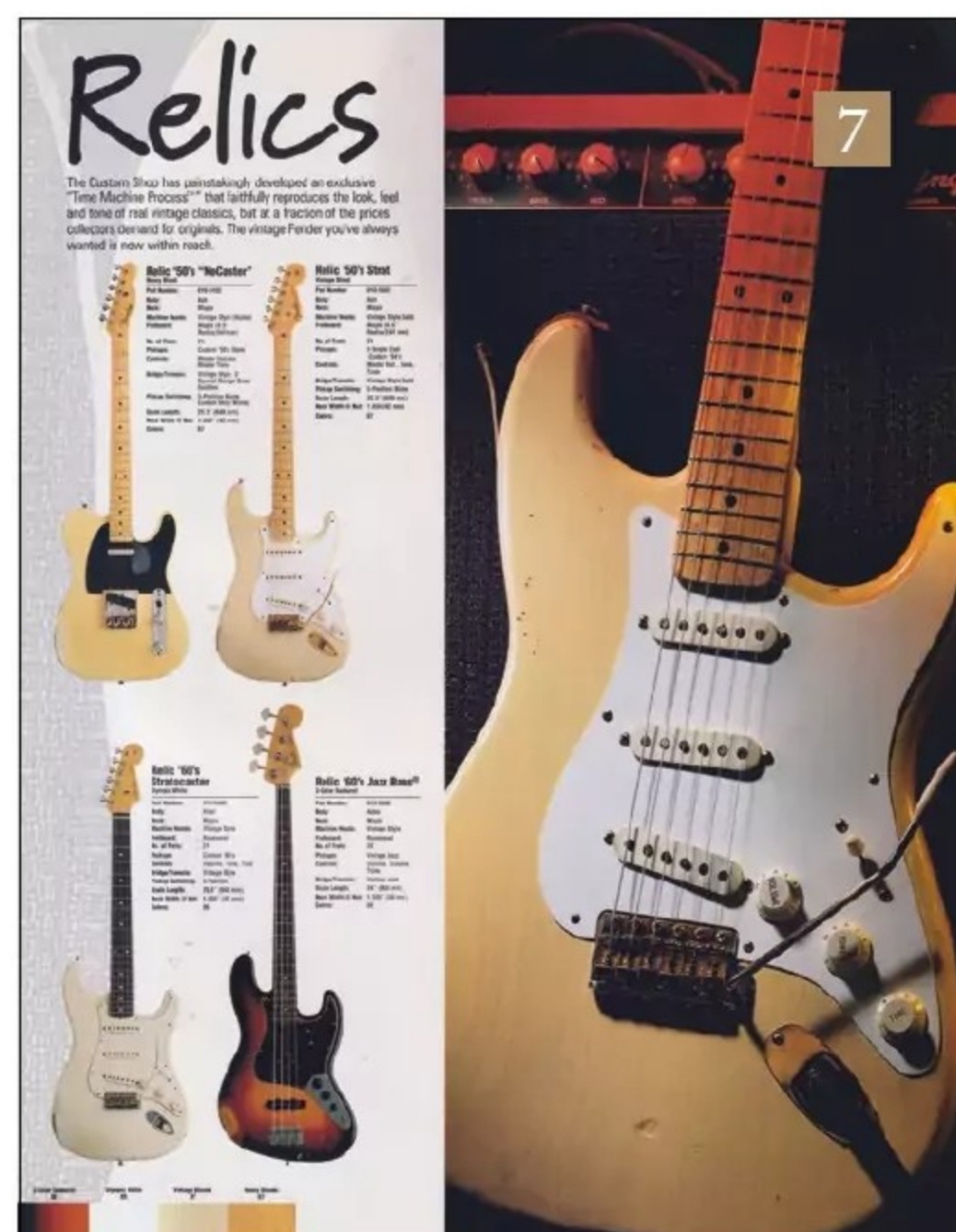
the Jag-Stang from cut-ups of his fave Jag and Mustang.

The expansion of the Custom Shop's business prompted various moves, notably in '93 to new buildings still close to the Corona factory, providing extra space and a shift to better efficiency. When Fender's new plant on Cessna Circle in Corona was unveiled five years later, the Custom Shop moved there.

AGEING GRACEFULLY

JW Black had started at the Custom Shop in 1989, and one day he saw a Strat that a friend of his, Vince Cunetto, had made with an aged finish. He showed it to John Page and they

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TONY BACON COLLECTION



agreed it was interesting. Black suggested offering aged replicas, called Relics, as a regular line in the Custom Shop catalogue. "It started almost as a tongue-in-cheek thing," Page said, "like worn-in Levi's or something. It would look cool – and in the first three rows, it would look like you're playing a valuable Nocaster. But only you know that it's not really. That was how it started."

Black and Cunetto set about making a couple of aged 50s-style guitars as samples. One was a Nocaster, the transitional Broadcaster/Telecaster with removed model logo, the other a Mary Kaye blonde-and-gold-metalwork Strat. Fender took them to the winter '95 NAMM Show and displayed them like works of art. Page said: "Visitors would come along and say, 'Oh, that's really cool: you brought original ones as a tribute.' And we were saying, 'Er, yeah – how many do you want?' People went nuts! It was amazing."

Back at the Custom Shop, plans were quickly under way to offer an initial line of a Relic Nocaster and a few 50s and 60s Relic Strats, and this soon expanded to include a 60s Jazz Bass and options of various sunbursts and colours. Cunetto and a small team started work in the summer of '95 at his workshop in Missouri, receiving bodies, necks and parts from Fender, shooting nitrocellulose lacquer and then setting about the ageing processes. The pieces would then be returned to the Custom Shop for final assembly and setup.

Lightly aged vintage reissues such as this 1956-spec Strat, which belongs to former *Guitarist* editor Neville Marten, have become the bread and butter of the Custom Shop in recent times

At the start of the 90s, the Shop built about 2,500 guitars a year; by '96 that had risen to 7,000



Fender moved everything in-house and introduced the Time Machine series in 1999: the Relic (heavily worn); the Closet Classic (as if played a few times and then forgotten in a cupboard); and the NOS (New Old Stock, as if bought in the 50s or 60s and then magically transported to today).

By now, the Shop had a growing catalogue of regular items, aside from the one-off work, and in 1996, as well as four Relics, it comprised 12 Namesake (signature) guitars, six Set Neck and Contemporary models, and no fewer than 28 vintage-style Custom Classics, plus six amps. At the start of the 90s, the Shop built about 2,500 guitars a year; by '96 that had risen to 7,000.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Custom shop boss John Page talked to this author in the early 90s about the types of instruments his team were producing at the time. "There are the absolute vintage reproductions," Page said, "and we've found that people want everything just so. Obsessive, almost. But great, you know? One example: Elliot Easton had a '62 or '63 left-handed Burgundy Mist Strat that was, like, priceless. He wanted to play it, but he didn't want to play it – you know what I mean? So we duped the guitar for him and he liked it so much better that he sold the original."

"[Relicing] started almost as a tongue-in-cheek thing, like worn-in Levi's or something. It would look cool" **JOHN PAGE**

Next up in our 90s chat about Custom Shop categories were what Page called quasi-exact reproductions. "Anything where the guy doesn't necessarily want to be exact – he wants it to be close and he wants that vibe. He wants to stand on stage and make it look like it's a 50s Esquire, but he wants a fatter neck, hotter pickups ... so that's another vein."

As for the Shop's one-offs, Page reckoned the sky was the limit. He recalled leather-tooled body covers, checkerboard binding, B-Benders, a 30-inch-scale



9. Heavy Relics such as this Dale Wilson Master Built Strat, shot at World Guitars, represent the fullest extension of the Custom Shop ageing process. Today, Wilson is among the most sought after of the master builders for orders specifying heavily worn finishes

Telecaster, an electric banjo with pedal-steel tuners on the floor, eight-string Strats, quilted-maple Jazzmasters with Floyd Roses, bizarre headstock inlays, and many, many more examples in out-there territory. "Oh, and did I mention the Rocketcaster? That was a three-tone Jazzmaster that looked like an old 50s Oldsmobile, all the brass handmade, lots of chrome strips, and the knobs off a Rocket 88 cigarette lighter."

Page left the Custom Shop in 1997, and Mike Eldred took over the running of the place. But one of the questions Page had to answer regularly when he was there concerned the difference between a factory Fender and a (much more expensive) Custom Shop Fender. "Normally, I tell people if they can't tell the

difference when they pick up and play the guitar, then they should buy the cheaper one," Page said, smiling.

But he knew that for people who *could* tell the difference, it was like night and day. "I had a couple of gentlemen here yesterday that I was showing an instrument to," Page said in that '92 interview. "They were asking what we were doing on a particular model – they were businessmen, not players. They took a look at the guitar, and I can tell in their eyes it's like, 'Well, this looks like everything else.' And yet two days before that, I had a couple of players in here, and they asked the same question. I handed them the guitar and they just about creamed themselves. They couldn't quit playing it." **G**

PHOTO BY JOBBY SESSIONS



TAKING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

"This is the PAF I've always wanted -
incredible dynamics, harmonics and string
separation, all with super-rich midrange, tight
lows and an addictively juicy playing feel"



ADAM 'NOLLY' GETGOOD
SIGNATURE HUMBUCKER SET

GUITARIST PRODUCER TONE HUNTER

Bare Knuckle

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CUTTING-EDGE CUSTOMS

Nearly 40 years on from the Custom Shop's inception, its creations are more ambitious than ever. Find out how the team walks the tightrope between 'canon' and 'cannot', and where its guitars are heading next

Words Jamie Dickson

For almost four decades, the guitars that live closest to the edge of dreams at Fender are those built by the Custom Shop. What began as a means to give players the highest-quality classic electrics money could buy has become a place where Fender heritage is studied and venerated but also combined with the bleeding edge of tone-making tricks and mash-up aesthetics. And the hill of innovation keeps getting steeper as players become ever-more savvy to the options they could order for their dream guitar. Let's find out what the state of the Custom Shop's art is in 2025.

How has the Custom Shop evolved over the past 20 years?



Paul Waller (master builder):

"I would say that when I started, we didn't have the

amount of limited-edition replica guitars that we're making now. Back then, they were just starting to come into their own, with the Jaco [Pastorius] bass and stuff. But then we really started doing a lot more of that as artists were coming into the fold and seeing what the potential was. So I think it just elevated our status [and showed] how good we've gotten at doing relic guitars and emulating old guitars. It's really a statement, like planting a flag on the hill saying, 'We are really good at it.' That evolution has really helped to boost the status of the Fender Custom Shop, in my opinion."



Chase Paul (director of product development):

"For me, the Shop has always been the

pinnacle of Fender instruments. So we can build a perfect replica of either an artist model like a signature guitar, or something historic – whether it's an early 50s Blackguard or a mid-50s Strat... Those things have always been the touchstone for the golden era of Fender in a lot of ways because the guitars have always been built the old-fashioned way. So, for me, it's kind of been this peak of what Fender instruments should be. And then over the past 10 or 15 years it's really taken on this 'if you dream it, we'll build it' kind of mentality. Where customers can come up with things, dealers can

come up with things that make guys like Paul or Dennis [Galuszka, fellow master builder] be like, 'Yeah, let's try that.' Those are guys who've been building guitars here for 20 years or more. I think it's always been – and hopefully will always be – the absolute aspirational peak of what Fender instruments are. But I think [its role as a] playground for the builders to perfect guitars that they dream up, or that customers have come up with... Hopefully that never changes."

Do customers want different things from CS Fenders than they did a decade ago?

Paul: "Yes and no. I mean, in some cases, we follow trends just like fashion. One of the bullet points to that is colour. We'll see specific vintage colours come in and out of fashion, Shell Pink being one of the statement [custom colour finishes]. It's really popular for a couple of years, then we won't

1. Master builder Paul Waller at work in the Custom Shop. He says everything made here is guided by Fender heritage, even the more out-there builds

"We want to be as respectful as we can to the past, but move it forward so it's a better playing experience" **CHASE PAUL**

build one for a while, and then it'll get so popular that Chase will inevitably have to spec one out at a Team Built level just to keep up with the demand. And then it just falls off again. The same thing with sparkle finishes and some others – usually the greens and some of the blues.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FENDER

*“The Custom Shop is
the pinnacle of Fender
instruments... There
are no limits. If you
dream it, it will be”*

CHASE PAUL

The Custom Shop
Limited Edition Dual
Mag II Stratocaster
Super Heavy Relic on
this month's cover
features pickups
with a blend of Alnico
V magnets on the
low E through G and
hand-bevelled Alnico
II poles on the B and
high E to promote
balanced tone



“The ones that always get built are the blonde Teles, the black Strats, sunbursts... We make those in the same quantities no matter what is in fashion. It’s interesting to see all that stuff happen, but the thing that has evolved is the players. They have a more discerning taste and can hear a lot more of what we’re throwing [into the design of the guitars] in terms of pickups and tonewoods, specifically [through the use of] the roasted maple and alder and ash bodies. Those that are in the know and seeking out that tone can find it through some of those avenues. And, again, it can be a trend that might fall off or it might stay in – but we’re a made-to-order shop, so we just make what people are ordering.

“So the trends are a big part of what we do – and staying in front of them and making sure that we have good communication with our dealers. I always tell people I’m kind of living two years in the past because a lot of my orders are two years old. So it’s nice to have events where I can talk to dealers and see what’s currently the hot trend.”

Fender’s online Mod Shop tool now makes production-line guitars customisable. Have you repositioned what the Custom Shop offers because of that?

Chase: “Interesting question because [Mod Shop offers] personalisation to a much more accessible price point. But Custom Shop is the upper echelon of guitar making at Fender – so what we do in the Shop is rely on our creativity to push the boundaries

2



“Players today have a more discerning taste and can hear a lot more of what we’re throwing [into the designs]” **PAUL WALLER**

of what Paul was talking about – [making guitars with] new pickups, new tonewoods, things like that. We continue to explore [all the possibilities] every time we’re in a room together and you get three, four or five of us talking about stuff: ‘What if we tried this or this?’ Within Mod Shop, however, there’s a finite number of options, right? There are things that rotate in and out, so it’s [a

2. This electric was spec’d in Fender’s Mod Shop. The visualisation above was created by Neville Marten using the online tool set

3. And here is the actual guitar in finished form. Though beautiful, such Mod Shop builds aren’t aged and have limited customisation options

case of]: here’s the platform, here are the things you can spec out. It’s a really cool tool to access and see how you can build a guitar that’s personal for you.

“But within the Custom Shop, there are no limits. It’s basically: how long will it take and how much is it going to cost? Those are the two things we have to figure out. But we’ve had people literally send us lumber from a tree taken down on their own property, and asked us to build a guitar body with it. We will absolutely do that – we’ve just got to figure out how. For us, if you dream it, it will be.”

Over the years, the Custom Shop has forensically examined hundreds of vintage Fenders in order to make its own reissues more accurate. But does that process uncover any surprises about the way Fender made guitars back in the day?

Paul: “You know, Leo was a frugal person and so he didn’t throw anything away. There’s a lot of misconceptions around this – today, when a new car comes out, that new model is the new model [with fixed, uniform features for



3



CUSTOM OR BUST?

JAMIE DICKSON WEIGHS THE OPTIONS IF YOU WANT A FENDER THAT’S A LITTLE DIFFERENT

“There’s an undeniable allure to owning one of Fender’s top-tier guitars, but the cost isn’t trivial, to say the least. Even fairly ‘vanilla’ CS guitars that have been spec’d out by Fender for off-the-peg sale in retail stores typically top the four-grand mark these days.

“If you’re determined to take the plunge and custom-order a guitar that meets your exact spec, you need to download the current year’s Design Guide from www.fendercustomshop.com then choose between Custom Built or Master Built. The latter is a markedly more expensive option, but it ensures your guitar is built from headstock to end-pin by one of Fender’s top luthiers, many of whom – such as Todd Krause – will also be building guitars for major artists. The downside is that Master Built guitars start around £7k with the more heavily hand-aged versions costing nearer 10 grand, which is not chump change, for sure.

“Custom Built guitars, by contrast, are made by multiple members of the wider Custom Shop team of luthiers – but still bringing the Custom Shop’s long experience of ageing,

high-level craft and accurate replication to the build. In both cases, you’ll also need to specify the degree of ageing you want to be applied to the guitar, which also affects the final price, with heavier Relics costing substantially more.

“If those options and a variable wait for the guitar put you off, you can always try the secondhand market; in-store prices for used CS Strats start around £2.5k and average nearer £3k, though you may be able to find cheaper private sales. But then, of course, you lose the ‘custom’ part of the equation as you’re buying someone else’s dream-guitar spec.

“If aged finishes aren’t essential, you could try spec’ing out a brand-new production line guitar in Fender’s online Mod Shop, which offers the chance to choose your preferred finish, hardware, pickups and so on from a limited but decent range of options for a few hundred quid more (depending on options chosen) than an equivalent American Pro II series guitar – the online configurator is fun to play with, too; try it at <https://uk.fender.com/pages/fender-mod-shop>.”

*“Leo was a frugal person
and so he didn’t throw
anything away... When
they had parts left over,
they used them up”*

PAUL WALLER

This stunning Bigsby-equipped '76 Tele Deluxe Closet Classic features the so-called RSD (Research Special Division) J-bridge, devised to look classic but offer the player modern functionality



This Custom Shop
Limited CuNiFe
Telecaster Custom
Journeyman Relic
is finished in 'Pink
And Purple Stardust',
showing the breadth of
design tweaks possible
with custom orders

*“Specific vintage colours come in
and out of fashion – such as with
Shell Pink and sparkle finishes”*

PAUL WALLER



that year]. But in the past, when they had parts left over, they used them up. So '58 decals would get used on '59 guitars. 1959 was an example of what we call transition years, where there's a little bit of both. And actually '59 is an interesting year because a lot changed in that year with overlaps of specs. So you'll see different variations of scratchplate – from single-ply to three-ply, different screw-hole patterns. Rosewood was introduced in 1959, too, but some of them were still made with maple necks. It's just [the product of] what they had left over when they were putting guitars together, to move them out.

“Those are the interesting anomalies that we see because as they begin to move through the production years [the specs associated with a given iteration of a model] stayed pretty tight for a couple years at least after that. Sometimes, it's fun to mess around with some of those transition years. As a builder, I might say to myself, 'I'm going to call this a '59, but it's going to have a maple neck and a single-ply pickguard or a different decal,' or something like that. So there's a little bit of room to work in.

“But for the most part, a lot of what we do is vintage – so we're

“Pickups have always been a big thing for me because I think the heart and soul of a Fender is the pickup itself” **PAUL WALLER**

kind of in a box. But, to go back to my other point about doing a lot of replica guitars, modifications were frequently made [to famous guitars used by famous artists], so now modifications are becoming the norm. For instance, a humbucker in a Strat in the bridge position is now widely accepted and almost demanded in a modern Strat. Same thing with a different neck pickup in a Telecaster. Some of those vintage drifts have become standard practice in the factory, and even some of the models that are being spec'd out currently in the Custom Shop. So [it's about] following the trends in customer demands, while staying true to the vintage but providing



4. The RSD J-bridge incorporates thick brass saddles and Fender claims it offers enhanced intonation and sustain. It's primarily used on Jazzmasters but here appears on a Bigsby-equipped Telecaster

5. Headstock finishes that match the body paint first appeared on 50s-era Fenders and they still announce a guitar's custom credentials today

a modern instrument for players that are looking for something a little bit more refreshed.”

Chase: “What's fun, too, is there are two ways that we get to see these [unusual or one-off] guitars. One is through these artist replicas, where we'll have artists bring in their instruments and we'll do what we refer to as an 'autopsy', where it's a full inspection of the instrument. You get to see pencilled neck-dates on instruments, where you're like, 'Wow. I thought for a long time this was a '59, it's actually a 1960,' – and so there are all these things that you get to see hands on, through artist models.

“And then, being in Southern California, we're so close to where a lot of these guitars basically stayed once they were originally sold in the 50s and 60s. There are all these great independent guitar stores nearby, and something that we saw recently was a 1968 custom Tele, right? Double-bound, three-colour sunburst... Traditionally, in the mid-to-late 60s, those would have had rosewood fingerboards. Or if they had maple fingerboards, they'd have the big 7mm dot inlays. This one was a maple-cap neck, so it was like a standard '68 Tele, but it had quarter-inch dots instead of 7mm dots. And it was at a store that we trust, where we knew that this was original and that they've done the full inspection on it. A friend of mine and I were



literally in there with calipers, measuring the dots, like, 'There's no way those are the quarter-inch dots!' And we're like, 'Holy shit. I've never seen this guitar before.' So even on a daily basis, we're exposed to things that can inform our ability to be the stewards of the Fender past. We can release something and confidently say, 'This existed like this.'

“To Paul's point, there were no real, clear lines in the sand where they said, 'We stopped using this material or this spec on this date, and everything after that was a new material or a new spec,' or whatever it is. These transitions lasted a long time. I'm sure that that guitar existed because they just found a stash of old black dots before they transitioned to the larger dots and decided to use them up.”

Custom Shop hardware such as the RSD Stratocaster vibrato and RSD Tele bridge – to name but two designs – add cool aesthetic and functional twists to familiar designs. Who comes up with those bits of hardware?

Paul: “A lot of that stuff that you're referring to is designed and built by Scott Buell. He's kind of a mad genius in the Shop and he's also like the godfather of the Shop. He's been here since the beginning days of the Custom Shop. And that's exactly what it is – trying to make it look vintage but have a more modern spec and

a more beautiful feel to it as well. That's the kind of stuff that we love to do when we have free time and we're not too terribly busy. I mean, the demand for J-bridges right now... I almost feel like it sells more guitars because of the bridge alone. That's how good it is. And then, if customers are leaning towards a modern spec, I'll say, 'Why not try the RSD bridge?'"

Chase: "An important thing for us is trying to elegantly push things forward, and Scott has been such a huge part of being able to look at a vintage design and approach it using the design language of, 'How would this have been done if this was originally implemented in late 50s or early 60s? What's the problem we're trying to solve, and how do we fix it in a way where it feels authentic to the design of the instrument?' Because one of the biggest things for us is, it's not just one spec that makes a guitar – it's, how does the entire guitar come together? And what is the full picture of what that instrument is supposed to be? So using new hardware is a way of informing that whole broader point of what that instrument is supposed to become – and things

like the RSD Strat tremolo are the perfect example of this.

"If you see it on a guitar hanging on a wall in a shop, it looks like a vintage Strat bridge, but it has slightly more narrow string spacing, so it's a little bit more comfortable for people who are doing fast picking or have more intricate picking patterns – things that modern music is calling for. But it still has the steel plate, it still has the bent steel saddles, it still has a cold-rolled steel block. The arm is a pop-in arm and you can adjust the tension on it so it'll sit right where you want it to, instead of having to hope that when you screw it in it's gonna hang where you need it to hang when you're not playing it.

"It's about making really thoughtful improvements on the original design while retaining the original character. That's the lens we try to use as we're looking at new product – whether it's pickups, hardware... We want to try to be as respectful as we can to the things in the past and still honour the legacy of what it is that we're doing, but move it forward incrementally so it's a better playing experience for the artist."

"On a daily basis, we're exposed to things that can inform our ability to be the stewards of the Fender past" CHASE PAUL

The Custom Shop has developed some pretty amazing pickups, many of which can be bought as standalone parts. What's in the pipeline on that front?

Paul: "Pickups have always been a big thing for me because I think the heart and soul of a Fender is the pickup itself. I think everyone's aware that we're the biggest electric guitar manufacturer on the planet. And I say, 'Well, that also makes us the biggest pickup manufacturer on the planet, and we make a pretty good one.' We've been doing it a long time, and there's generations of people that have been working in the factory since the 50s and 60s that are still doing it. To me, that's super important; that's the quality ingredient that goes into it. I draw a lot of inspiration from the hot-rod world, where you want to make it look like it's an old part, or make it look like it existed back

6. Neville Marten's treasured Custom Shop Strat was designed around classic features that have stood the test of time (and changing fashion), ensuring it's a lifelong keeper, not an oddball design that quickly loses appeal



6



JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN...

NEVILLE MARTEN'S THOUGHTS ON ORDERING A CUSTOM SHOP GUITAR TO BE PROUD OF

"As well as owning many Custom Shop guitars over the years, including Teles, Strats, an Esquire and even a Jazzmaster, I did actually order one to my own spec. In reality, it was based on the first Stratocaster I ever played. I've said many times that if you give someone some coloured pencils and ask them to draw an electric guitar, it would be Strat shaped and it would be red. So that's what I ordered. My list was simple: lightly reliced, faded Fiesta Red finish, 9.5-inch radius, dark rosewood fingerboard with large frets, Fat '60s Custom Shop pickups, and quarter-sawn neck on a medium-weight alder body. I also stipulated no ugly volute.

"For anyone embarking on the same journey: don't go silly! Don't order a Burgundy Mist Starcaster body with P-90, humbucker and Tele pickups, gold Jazzmaster vibrato, and mother-of-pearl tuner buttons on a hockey stick headstock. First of all, it will be a terrible guitar. It won't work as a cohesive whole as it's a mish-mash of different designs that were

never meant to cohabit. Plus, you'll hate it within six months then have trouble selling it because no-one will want such a monstrosity.

"Colour-wise, go for a classic like two- or three-tone Sunburst, Arctic White, Sonic Blue, Fiesta or Dakota Red, Black or perhaps a metallic like Lake Placid Blue or Candy Apple Red. Play lots of guitars to see what neck profile suits you best, but I'd warn against extremes. You could bling up the neck with flamed or birdseye maple, which can look lovely.

"Then there's the thorny issue of ageing. Remember, Fender does a wide variety of finish styles, from no ageing at all, to light Journeyman, all the way to full Rory if you want. Again, I'd urge caution. Also consider the weight. Light guitars aren't all great and heavy ones aren't all bad. Fender tends to prefer its CS instruments somewhere in the middle, as did I with my red one. Fender told me it would arrive in six months. It took three. It was exactly what I ordered. I love it and will never sell it."

This beautiful Custom Shop Vintage Custom 1965 Jazzmaster in Lake Placid Blue shows how Fender's Custom Shop can subtly tweak its own heritage, as well as do brave new designs

“It’s about making really thoughtful improvements on the original design while retaining the original character”

CHASE PAUL



While Fender dreams up quite radical guitars in the Custom Shop, some – like this Vintage Custom '57 Stratocaster NOS in Aged White Blonde – are timeless designs with minimal ageing

“Balancing the monotonous work and being creative is probably the hardest part”

PAUL WALLER



PHOTO BY MARK KERALY COURTESY OF FENDER

in the day but modernise it. And I employ that kind of same idea to the pickup.

“Currently, I’m working on a humbucker that’s a more Fender-ish sounding humbucker that would work well in both the neck position in a Telecaster and the bridge position in a Strat, and doesn’t have that high volume when switched between the two, and then in the middle position, it makes it a lot sweeter and more balanced as well. So that’s

“Generations of people have been [winding pickups] since the 50s and 60s. To me, that’s the quality ingredient” PAUL WALLER

what I’m really focusing on right now, in terms of pickups. It’s a Josefina [Campos] hand-wound humbucker that I’ve been putting in a lot of builds for my customers. I would hope that we could develop some other platforms to get it out there in wider use – just because of the high price point of a Master Built guitar – so the average guitar player can pick one up and try it for themselves. That’s maybe in the works in the future, wink, wink...”

In recent times we’ve seen the Custom Shop work with an increasing range of non-canonical tonewoods such as okoume, redwood and pine. What’s the scope for further evolution in that area, do you think?

Paul: “Personally, I don’t get too far away from the vintage stuff.



7. The Custom Shop embodies decades of collective experience in how to hand-build Fender guitars

8. Neck profiles are one of the key ways in which Fender designs can be individually tailored to the player who has ordered the guitar according to their preferences

9. The Custom Shop’s creative approach to pickup design means guitars can look classic but pack a unique sonic punch



PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI COURTESY OF FENDER

My thing is, that’s the music that we’re all emulating – the day that we start emulating something that is not [performed on a guitar with] an ash body or an alder body, and that’s when the trend will heavily shift, but that’s the music we’re emulating. I’m now seeing this new generation kind of ripping off 60s and 70s music and 90s music. And so I’m happy to hear that because that means there’s going to be another future generation of rock ‘n’ roll guitar players coming out because that’s what’s cool. As long as that stays true, then I will always have a gig at least as long as I’m alive! For me, being a traditionalist, those few tonewoods that we mostly use are still tried and true.

“I will say that redwood makes for an excellent-sounding guitar and so does pine, but pine can be a bit unstable and cause cupping and some issues with that, and then there’s consistency in weight and grain and all that. I think that’s why we use the woods that we use, and that’s why Leo used the woods. From his standpoint, he

was choosing materials that were inexpensive, readily available and painted well. Ash was one of those materials that was plentiful, but it didn’t paint very well, so I believe that that was a big part of the push to move to alder – it just painted way easier. There was no need for grain-fill and the shrinkage wasn’t as bad, so the guitars looked better longer. I also believe that if Leo knew about urethane, or had access to urethane in the 50s and 60s, he probably would have used it because it would have made a nicer finish.

“But we get stuck in this vintage thing of ‘it has to be lacquer’. The reality is we can actually spray urethane to half the thickness of lacquer and achieve a beautiful finish that’ll last longer. And it’s more durable – it’s just a better material for what it is we’re doing. But we can’t get away from lacquer because of the vintage thing that we’re doing. So we need both.

“When it comes to [progressive] tonewoods, I do like roasted [wood] as it gets it more into a

PHOTO BY MARK KERALY COURTESY OF FENDER



vintage sound, and I like redwood. But I'm not a big fan of quilt-top guitars, personally. I think it adds too much brightness. But it's amazing how much the pickup does – arguably most of the work – but it is flavoured by the wood that surrounds it, for sure.”

Chase: “We’re trying to emulate the sound of these instruments that have been revered for decades, right? So you can’t step too far outside of [that] when you start using different materials. I think we end up experimenting here and there, with roasted woods or figured tops on some things – or combinations of woods – to try to emulate the sound that you would get from [traditional Fenders] but have it look a little different.

“At the end of the day, that’s the key: how does it sound? The reality is that the recipe of Fender style – single-coil pickups with a bolt-on neck that’s mostly maple or all maple... there’s a finite number of things you can ‘drift’ before it starts to not sound like that any more. And that’s okay, but it has to be an intentional choice to make it sound different.”

The archetypal Fender tobacco sunburst has to be the most iconic finish of all time. What’s your favourite version of it, Paul?

Paul: “Oh, boy, I kind of like the ‘day-glo’ 60s-style ‘bursts where the yellow is really bright [in the centre]. I think it’s because, when I was a kid, print ads in the 80s

“Trends are a big part of what we do – and making sure that we have good communication with our dealers” **PAUL WALLER**

and the 90s weren’t as good as they are now and there were no digital platforms. But that’s how you would see guitars if you didn’t actually go to the store, and the print ads would always make those sunbursts look really vibrant. I know that most people don’t like the ‘day-glo’ style of sunburst, but to me that’s a 60s guitar – with the bright yellow and the real contrast with the red and everything.

“Of course, I’m not building what I want. I’m building what somebody else wants, so I have to



10. Whether a period-correct reissue or a one-off reimagining of a Telecaster, the big challenge for Custom Shop luthiers is keeping the quality consistent while keeping the spark of creativity alive, too

be very careful about not steering somebody towards my [preferred] direction. I’ve got to make sure I’m building *their* guitar because I pride myself on building somebody their No 1 guitar: I don’t want to give them my guitar; I want to give them their guitar. But if I get an order for one of those, man, I get excited because I love that ‘day-glo’ ‘burst.”

Tell us something we don’t know about the Custom Shop.

Paul: “Bunch of clowns [laughs]. We have a lot of fun in the Shop, but we also work really, really hard and put in a lot of hours. It’s very stressful. Unlike the production line, we don’t have the option of just pulling another body or neck to facilitate a quota. We only have one chance to make that guitar because almost every guitar is completely different, unless we’re doing batching.

“With all that, plus the fact [we’re essentially] a group of artists, we have our moments of just being silly and I think it’s a necessary part of the creative environment that we all work in.”

Chase: “You took the words right out of my mouth. It truly has the dynamic of a family atmosphere, where you might have the crazy uncle, you might have the siblings who have a rivalry... But everybody knows how to have fun with each other at the right time and place. It’s an inspiring atmosphere.”

On the one hand you’re trying to accurately and consistently recreate classic Strats, Teles and other Fenders, day in day out, to exacting standards and with a big reputation and a lot of heritage to uphold. But you also have to be imaginative and take risks. How do you square that circle?

Paul: “Interesting you say that because it is probably the hardest part. Balancing between getting the sometimes monotonous work done and being creative... it’s almost like you have to bank the creative [ideas when they occur] because you can’t go looking for it; it just comes out of the sand. Then, once you have a moment where you can say, ‘Okay, I’ve finished my ‘have to dos’, now I can do some of my ‘wanna dos’, you can take another look at what you banked and say, ‘What do I have time for?’

“Sometimes [those stored-up creative ideas] stay there for a while before they get made into something, but sometimes it’ll be a brand-new thing and I just execute it straight away. It is difficult, but that’s the part that comes with experience. What we try to impress upon the next generation of master builders that are in the Shop currently is [that you need to be] able to spin all those plates simultaneously while riding a unicycle over a shark pit, juggling chainsaws on fire! Just don’t forget to be creative...” **G**

www.fendercustomshop.com

PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI COURTESY OF FENDER

“It’s not just one spec that makes a guitar – it’s, how does the entire guitar come together?”

CHASE PAUL

This Limited Edition '59 Journeyman Stratocaster belongs to deputy editor David Mead and was ordered to mark a special occasion – after years of playing Strats he opted for this more traditional spec





Dave Stewart

Returning with an album of man-and-guitar Dylan covers, the Eurythmics legend's playing has never been laid so bare. He tells us about gigging folk clubs underage, the blues in his palette, and a memorable night on the tiles with Robert Zimmerman himself

Words Henry Yates



PHOTO BY KRISTIN BURNS



‘Underrated’ seems a strange word to use about a musician who has sold 75 million records. And yet there’s a case that Dave Stewart has never quite received his due as a guitarist. Perhaps this oversight is understandable. Partnering the androgynous, octave-straddling Scottish vocalist Annie Lennox on Eurythmics’ chart-topping dash through the 80s would put anyone in the shade. Nor did the multi-instrumentalist Stewart feel the need to constantly flex his guitar

“It feels very natural for me to [sit with an acoustic and play blues]. I never went away from that, even all through the 80s synthesiser period”

chops, driving many of the duo’s biggest hits – like 1983’s icy *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* – on synth and programmed drums.

And while Stewart has been hugely prolific as a producer, songwriter and music-industry Swiss Army knife since Eurythmics’ dissolution in the 90s, he’s never attached himself to another full-time project in quite the same way. As such, the 72-year-old’s new release – a fantastic collection of Bob Dylan covers snappily titled *Dave Does Dylan* – is a welcome reminder of Stewart’s generational guitar skills, showcasing his supple fingerstyle and lived-in vocal on songs that take him right back to the start.



How do you feel about *Dave Does Dylan*? Are you pleased with it?

“Well, yeah, considering I wasn’t even making an album at first. What happened was, whenever I was in a hotel room or whatever – you know, that ‘hurry-up-and-wait’ thing when you’re doing shows – I’d just sing one of the Dylan songs that I used to play in the folk clubs when I was 15. There were no amps – every song was just one live take filmed on an iPhone with a couple of mics going into a laptop. All the videos are on Instagram and the album is those actual recordings. I didn’t change anything. So that’s how the album came out sounding stripped bare. It was about a quarter of the way through posting these things that people started saying, ‘I want to get this as an album.’”

How did you discover Dylan’s music in the first place?

“My brother left me a couple of Dylan albums when he went to college, so that’s what I learnt guitar from. Before that, I wasn’t interested in music. I just wanted to play football for Sunderland. But instead, I had my knee broken

by this kid on the football field. That was the same month my mum left my dad, so he was totally depressed. I just remember looking out of the window at these slate-grey Northern skies and thinking, ‘I’m fucked...’

“Then the postman came with this box that my older cousin had sent me from Memphis. Inside was a pair of Levi’s and under that were two blues albums. So now I had my two Dylan albums and these US blues records – I think one of them was Robert Johnson. And when I switched on the radio that day, it was The Kinks with *You Really Got Me*, followed by The Stones, The Who, The Beatles. I was like, ‘Holy shit!’

“So I tried to learn it all. I remembered that my brother had a guitar with about five strings on it in his wardrobe, so I hobbled to his room and got it. I didn’t have a tuner, but I learnt some two-note blues riffs. But when my brother came back from college, his mate said, ‘It’s not tuned right.’ So he tuned it all normal. And I went, ‘Oh, fucking hell’ because I couldn’t play the thing again!”



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Guitar tech Jesse Samler curates Dave Stewart’s collection...



1. GIBSON LG-2

“This 50s parlour-sized guitar was used on a few of the *Dave Does Dylan* songs. It has a high-voiced register that sits well with Dave’s voice on the record. Incredibly comfortable to play.”

2. MARTIN CUSTOM SHOP STYLE 18

“This uses something called sinker mahogany. This wood is from the 17th and 18th centuries from the lumber operations in Central America. Wood was floated downstream and the heaviest logs sunk underneath the water. This wood has been recovered and has been used on a select few of the Martin Custom Shop guitars. Sounds incredible, absolutely incredible.”

3. TAKAMINE EF391MB

“This is the guitar that Dave bought in Nashville in the late 80s. It has a beautifully voiced active pickup system that really represents Dave’s articulate playing. It stays in tune like it’s not from Earth, and it never feeds back – it’s a tour warhorse.”

4. FENDER CUSTOM SHOP STRATOCASTER

“This is an Art Nouveau Stratocaster masterbuilt by JW Black in 1993 (Fender Custom Shop). The entire body is chrome-plated aluminum and is quite heavy. It has a birdseye maple neck and a rosewood fretboard with mother-of-pearl inlays. The entire guitar is engraved by Ron Chacey, who also made the artistic inlays on the fretboard. There are only four guitars from this series on Earth. One of the other three were made to the personal specifications of Bob Dylan and his then-guitar tech, César Díaz.”

5. DUESENBERG ALLIANCE SERIES STARPLAYER TV MIKE CAMPBELL 30TH ANNIVERSARY

“Mike Campbell personally gave this guitar to Dave. Dave brings it with him on every tour, along with the Silver Strat. It’s got a beautiful tone and has held up incredibly well to the road. Dave makes it sing with its Diamond Deluxe vibrato system.”

6. RICKENBACKER 370/12 ELECTRIC 12-STRING

“Dave has three of these. One of them was personally gifted to him by Roger McGuinn – this one has the prototype compressor circuit underneath the pickguard that’s responsible for that famous jangly tone. It also has stereo outputs that are quite fun to record and create with. Incredible guitars with an incredible history.”



PHOTO BY TYLER AUBREY

PHOTO BY KIM MANCUSO



Could you tell us about when you were playing Dylan on the Sunderland folk circuit?

"They wouldn't let me in for ages. I was about 12, so I'd stand out on the street playing until the really lovely guy who ran this folk club – called The George And Dragon – eventually let me in. I had to stand at the back until he says, 'This kid has been standing outside in the cold every week, let's give him a chance.'

"The first two songs I sang were *To Ramona* and *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right*. My voice had broken, but I looked like a tiny kid. The songs



"Our receptionist rang through and said, 'Bob Dylan's on the phone for Dave Stewart.' I thought it was just Feargal Sharkey larking about..."

they were singing in that club were things like *Shipbuilding*, y'know, old English folk accompanied with the hand over the ear. So they didn't really know these Dylan songs and they were a bit taken aback. But the guy allowed me to come back.

"All the pubs realised that folk music brought people in to drink. I remember one club just outside Sunderland. I went along with my guitar and there was just one guy drinking his pint in front of these four crates that had been put together for a stage. I didn't care,

The Duesenberg Blackbird Dave Stewart Signature: "Only 52 of these guitars were made," says tech Jesse Samler. "Only one of these guitars has a vibrato system built into it – and that is Dave's personal guitar. It has a beautiful tone"

I just wanted to play, so I got up and this sweet guy was clapping on his own. But as I was singing the second song, I had my eyes closed and I felt this tapping on my hand. It was the guy. He goes, 'I'm sorry, son, but I've got to catch me bus.' He probably didn't know what to do because I was probably singing a Dylan song with 30 verses."

Dylan is sometimes accused of just being a campfire strummer. Do you rate him as a player?

"You listen to any of the early albums, most guitarists, no matter who they are, if you say to them, 'Well, go on then, fingerpick that Dylan song and sing at the same time' – it's not easy. We both love Mississippi John Hurt and older blues guys like that. When he's playing electric, he likes things to be kind of raggedy on purpose. But if you see him play *Like A Rolling Stone*, his guitar playing is great; it's just that he's unpredictable. I was great friends with the Heartbreakers. They were on tour with him, and they said he'd suddenly play the song in a different key, or he decides to miss out a verse."

You became friends with Dylan too, didn't you?

"The story is nuts because, having been such a fan, in 1985 I was in the studio with Feargal Sharkey. He

went out and I was sat in the control room when our receptionist rang through and said, 'Bob Dylan's on the phone for Dave Stewart.' I thought it was just Feargal larking about. Anyway, when I picked up the phone, it was one of those voices that nobody could imitate. That night, we met up, had a meal, drank sake. Later, when he came to England, we'd be sitting around my kitchen table. It just slowly became normal.

"I've been on stage with him a few times. I've got this great film of us in Tokyo. I've got this tiny video camera and I'm about 12 inches away from his face as he's singing *Like A Rolling Stone*. When it gets to the chorus, I swing it round to the audience and all these Japanese people scream: 'How does it feel?' Amazing."

How did you decide which acoustic guitar to use?

"It depended on where I was. I think there were about seven guitars on the album [see previous pages]. I used a tiny 12-string miniature called a Maton on *Shelter From The Storm*. I used this Martin Custom Shop, which is made using wood from the bottom of a ship that sank in the 1800s. There was a tiny Gibson LG-2 parlour guitar. And then I used my blue Takamine that I bought in the 80s. I played that on just about every Eurhythmics tour. It's almost got a hole through it now, like Willie Nelson's Trigger."



PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

Do you play more acoustic guitar than people realise?

“Yeah, at the end of the day, I always just sit with an acoustic guitar, noodling about, and often with a slide, playing some blues. It feels very natural for me to do that. And I never went away from that, even all through the 80s synthesiser period. People would say, ‘Oh yeah, Eurythmics, they’re a synth-pop duo.’ But, actually, I would write on whatever the song required.

“A lot of those songs started with me playing electric guitar and making a riff, like *Would I Lie To You?*, *Missionary Man* or *Thorn In My Side*. Even *Sweet Dreams* is a blues song, really. It just stays on this groove, it hardly changes. That’s why the label didn’t put it out until the fourth single. They said, ‘We don’t understand, where’s the chorus?’ I’ve played it before with electric guitar and slide and somebody singing it like a blues song. And then, obviously, Marilyn Manson really changed it.”

What were the core guitars you used with Eurythmics?

“That blue Takamine was very important because Annie and I would often do an acoustic set, although I used a Guild F412 from 1974 on *Thorn In My Side*. I’d also use Fender Strats. But there were different periods of Eurythmics. It depended how much money we had. Because when you get a record deal, you don’t instantly get money – you wait ages. And when you play live, you’re losing money at first. But what’s really nuts about when you become a famous artist is that you’ve been broke and living in a squat – and now you’ve got money and people are giving you things. It’s like, ‘I wish you could have given me that before.’ My Silver Strat is what I use now for Eurythmics songs. I also have an amazing Duesenberg signature guitar called the Blackbird – it’s beautiful.”

Do guitars still excite you? What would happen if we were to walk down Denmark...

“[Interrupting] Don’t let me walk down Denmark Street!” 



Dave Does Dylan is available now on Surflog Records

www.davestewartent.com



This silver Strat was made by the Fender Custom Shop in the early 90s and is still Dave's go-to for Eurythmics songs today

PHOTO BY KI PRICE/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES





Triple Treat

Along with its specific 40th Anniversary models, PRS is cranking out the new releases this year, not least with two new three-pickup Special Semi-Hollow models in the S2 and SE line. We compare those with the longer-running Core version

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker



PRS SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW, S2 SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW & SE SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW

£5,169, £2,899 & £1,180

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

Not too long back, the majority of new guitars and gear were launched around the USA NAMM Winter and Summer Shows. Now it seems they're coming thick and fast every month or so! We've already lost count of the new models PRS has released in this significant anniversary year, but its latest five-strong wave adds the original-style PRS HSS Studio to the S2 and SE lines (along with an SE bolt-on Studio

Standard), while the S2 and SE range also get a Special Semi-Hollow, which has been a USA Core model since 2021.

If you're not *au fait* with these different PRS levels, the USA Core range is the top tier before you go into the exclusive Private Stock custom shop. The S2 models are also made in the USA, in the same factory alongside the Core models, but use a simplified production path and, up until recently, the same hardware and pickups

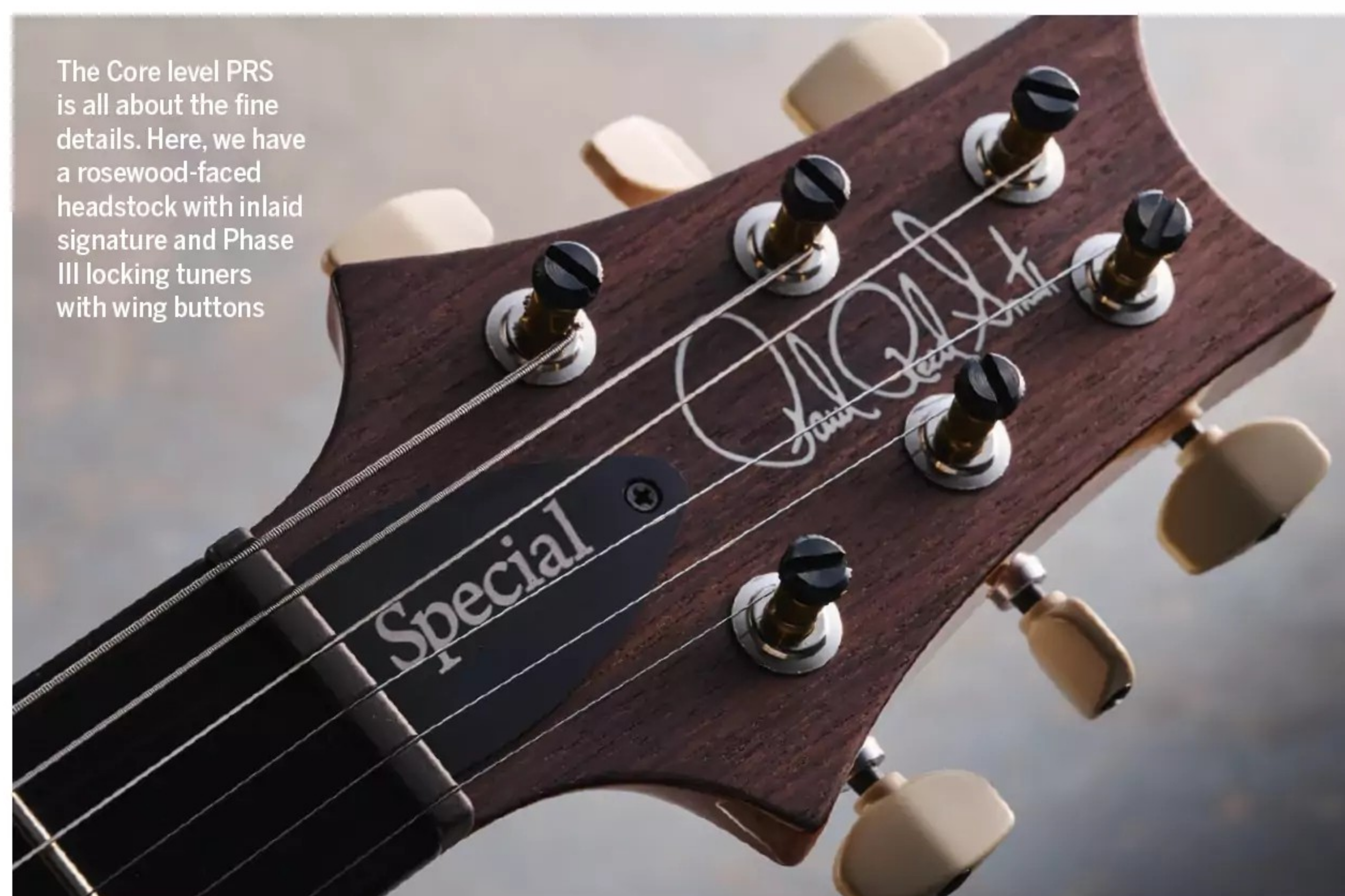
as the start-up SE models. These SEs are primarily made in Indonesia by Cor-Tek and are the entry-level models, starting currently with the bolt-on SE CE 24 Standard Satin at £520.

So, with a three-pickup Special Semi-Hollow in all three ranges, a comparison was too good to miss – not least that, as you can see, our three guitars range from £1k to £5k. Good, better, best? Let's find out...

Special Semi-Hollow

Although a PRS Special first appeared in 1987 (a twin-humbucking Standard with a vibrato up-rout and some natty colours) and 'Special' has been used over the years to denote three-pickup models such as the Swamp Ash Special, the Special Semi-Hollow has its roots in the Private Stock Super Eagle (2016) and Super Eagle II (2017) limited runs, a design created for John Mayer's tours with Dead & Co. These led to a simplified limited-edition version between 2018 and '19 and a full production version that joined the Core line in 2021.

As befits its price tag, pulling this from its smart moulded case, not only is the guitar light in weight, it's just a beautiful example of why we're still writing about PRS after all these years. While all our trio use the same original PRS scale length and 22 frets, really, that's about all each



The Core level PRS is all about the fine details. Here, we have a rosewood-faced headstock with inlaid signature and Phase III locking tuners with wing buttons



1. The Gen III is the latest version of the vibrato that Paul Reed Smith has used since 1985. The all-brass design is well tested and very in tune. The bridge McCarty III pickup is a new addition for this year

2. PRS calls these 'coil-tap' switches, but they use the company's long-running partial split, which voices primarily the slug coil of each humbucker with a little of the screw coil still in circuit



of the models has in common. Perhaps surprisingly bearing in mind its Semi-Hollow status, the body is the original depth (49mm overall), not the deeper McCarty spec. The back is one piece and seems mainly hollowed out on the bass side and behind the vibrato, while the figured maple top is machined away under the f-hole area and has the classic 'violin' top carve with indents for the volume and tone. There's very little radius to the top edge,

the back edge is more rounded, and we also get a light ribcage cut-out, of course.

Each of our models uses a different 22-fret glued-in neck construction. Here, the Core neck is one-piece, quarter-sawn mahogany, with its unbound dark rosewood fingerboard and the fanciest bird inlays with vintage ivory acrylic outlines and green abalone centres. Each neck profile is different, too; the Core model here has the Pattern profile.

While the Gen III vibrato has been in place for some time, the locking Phase III tuners were upgraded last year with the wing buttons, and virtually every visible part is proprietarily designed. It might not be a cheap date, but the design, craft and execution remain faultless.

Typical of the ever-evolving specification, for this year the Special features the new McCarty III humbuckers (the neck is reversed so the screw poles face the bridge), which are also now standard on the other McCarty models and in the bridge position of the Studio. Visually quite different, but still a humbucker, is the Narrowfield in the middle position with its flush slug poles and a downsized mounting ring.

Control-wise, all three of our models share more similarity and here the five-way pickup selector voices bridge, bridge and middle, bridge and neck, middle and neck, and neck pickup only, while those 'coil-tap' switches move between full humbucker and single coil (voicing the slug coil, hence the reason for reversing the neck pickup so that coil sits closest to the neck).

S2 Special Semi-Hollow

The mid-tier Special arrives in a pretty rugged 'premium' gigbag, as opposed to that new moulded case of the Core model,

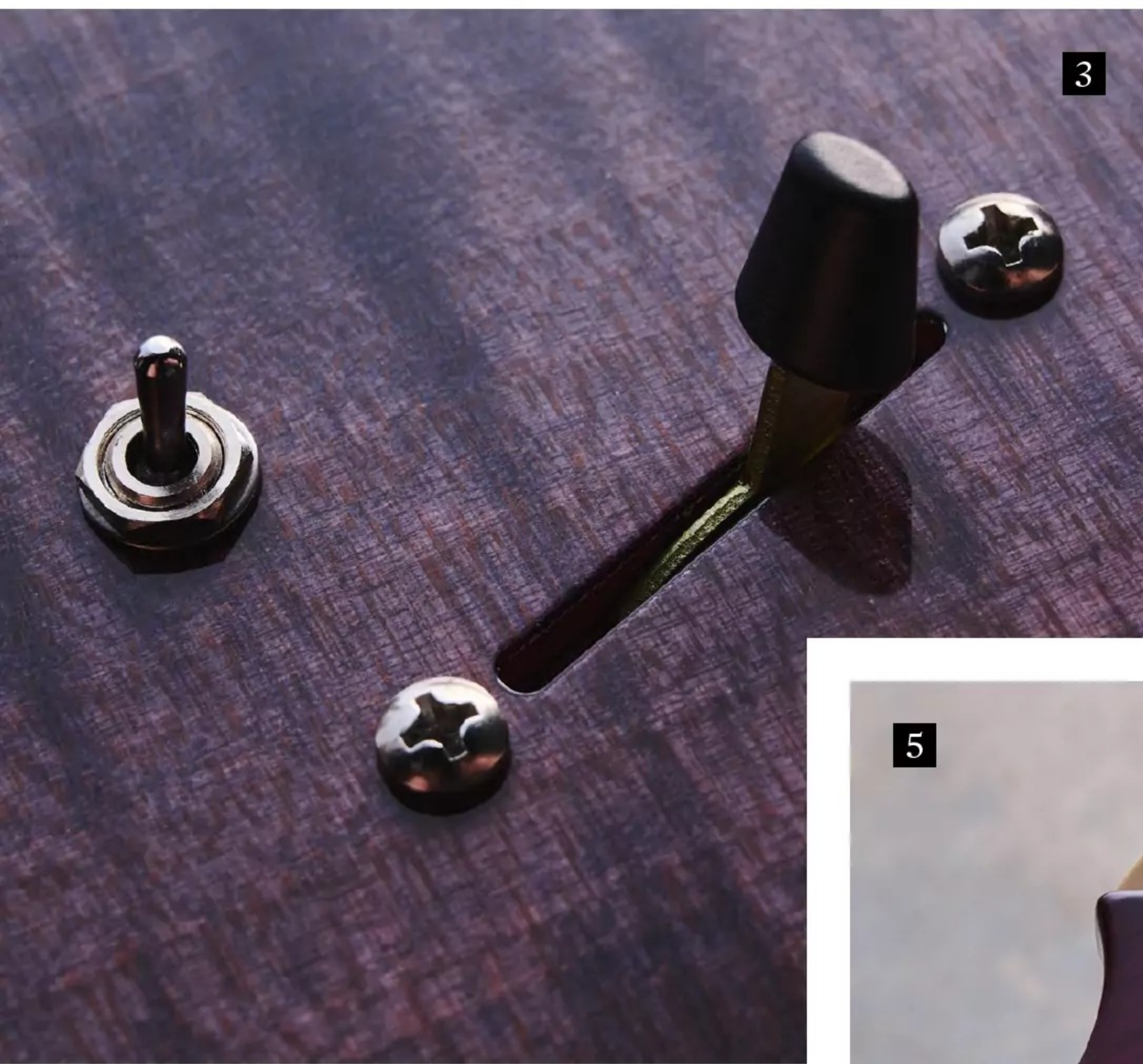


The neck-position McCarty III is reversed so the slug coil faces the fingerboard. Like the original Super Eagle, the middle pickup here is the PRS Narrowfield

3. All the Special models use a five-way pickup selector switch that, with the mini-toggle switches, provides you with a total of 12 sound options

4. Again, the neck pickup on the S2 model is reversed, and the Narrowfield here is the same pickup that is also used on the higher-level Core model

5. The S2's headstock is unfaced and colour-matched with the back colour. A raised signature logo is used, but the tuners and nut are the same as the Core guitar



and from the off comes across as a little less posh. Through the translucent colour you can easily see that the back remains one piece, but here we have a mainly flat top with the edge chamfering – or, in PRS-speak, ‘asymmetric bevel’. Overall depth is 45mm, the rim depth slightly more than the Core model at 38mm. There are no indents for the controls, and while we have a similar rear ribcage cut, the back coverplates aren’t recessed like the Core’s.

The gloss nitro finish goes over the headstock face, and like the Core model there’s no rosewood veneer facing. Here, the rosewood fingerboard has a decidedly reddish hue, quite different from the almost black fingerboard of the Core model. The birds are solid (vintage ivory acrylic) and more utilitarian looking, and the signature headstock logo is a raised gold-coloured motif; the Core’s signature is inlaid. Cosmetics aside, the headstock is spliced here, plus there’s a heel stack, but through the dark translucent body and neck back you can barely see those details. The Pattern Regular profile is different, too.

The tuners, however, are now the same as the Core model. The cast vibrato is the same as used on the USA bolt-on guitars and the SEs; it’s all-steel and a very fit-for-purpose piece. We get the same USA Narrowfield in the middle position, while

the brushed nickel-covered humbuckers here are the 58/15 LT units – one of our favourite vintage-inspired PRS designs. Again, that neck pickup is reversed, and the control selections are the same as on the Core model.

SE Special Semi-Hollow

Shaving £1.7k off the price of the S2 guitar, the SE looks far from cheap, a real testament to the increasing quality and clever specification of the SE models. That impression is enhanced by the proprietary pickup rings here (like those used with the smaller 408/TCI-style pickup on the Core Custom 24-08, for example) and the amber lampshade knobs, even though the rugby ball-shaped output jack and the non-locking tuners look more generic. The top is a figured maple veneer over a solid maple cap, and compared to the USA models, the figuring – while striking and attractive – doesn’t move in the light. The high-gloss

finish is faultless, as is the natural edge ‘binding’, and while the inside edges of the f-hole look less neat, it’s far from shoddy.

It’s marginally heavier than the USA models, with an overall depth of just over 45mm. It’s taller at the rim because the maple top is primarily flat with just a little fall away at the edges: this ‘shallow violin’ carve is aptly named, much less dished than the Core model and less stylised than the chamfering to the S2. That’s observation not criticism. Some might simply prefer the SE’s style.

The Wide-Thin profile neck here swaps to maple, though you can’t see that or the body back under the opaque deep brown finish. PRS calls it a ‘multi-ply’ construction, which we understand means a three-piece longitudinal laminate. Another difference is that the rosewood fingerboard is actually bound with a thin strip of matching rosewood, the fret tangs are hidden (unlike the USA models), while

UNDER THE HOOD All three Specials have very similar circuits

As we discussed with Paul Reed Smith earlier this year, one recent improvement to the Core models is that the cavity, under the top, is now screened with a nickel-based screening paint, which connects to the copper foil-backed plastic control coverplate. The pots appear to be CTS 450 series with a nominal value of 500k, while both 'coil-taps', as PRS refers to them, are actually the long-running partial coil-splits, voicing primarily the slug coil but leaving a little of the dumped screw coil in play. This is achieved by passing each pickup signal through a simple resistor: the treble pickup uses a 2.2k resistor and the neck is 1.1k. As ever, there's a small 180pF treble bleed cap on the volume with an IC .033µF 630-volt polyester film tone cap.

The 2025-build S2 circuit and components look identical to the Core model, with the exception of the large Orange Drop .033µF and, unusually, we have the same value 2.2k resistor on both the mini-toggle partial-split switches.

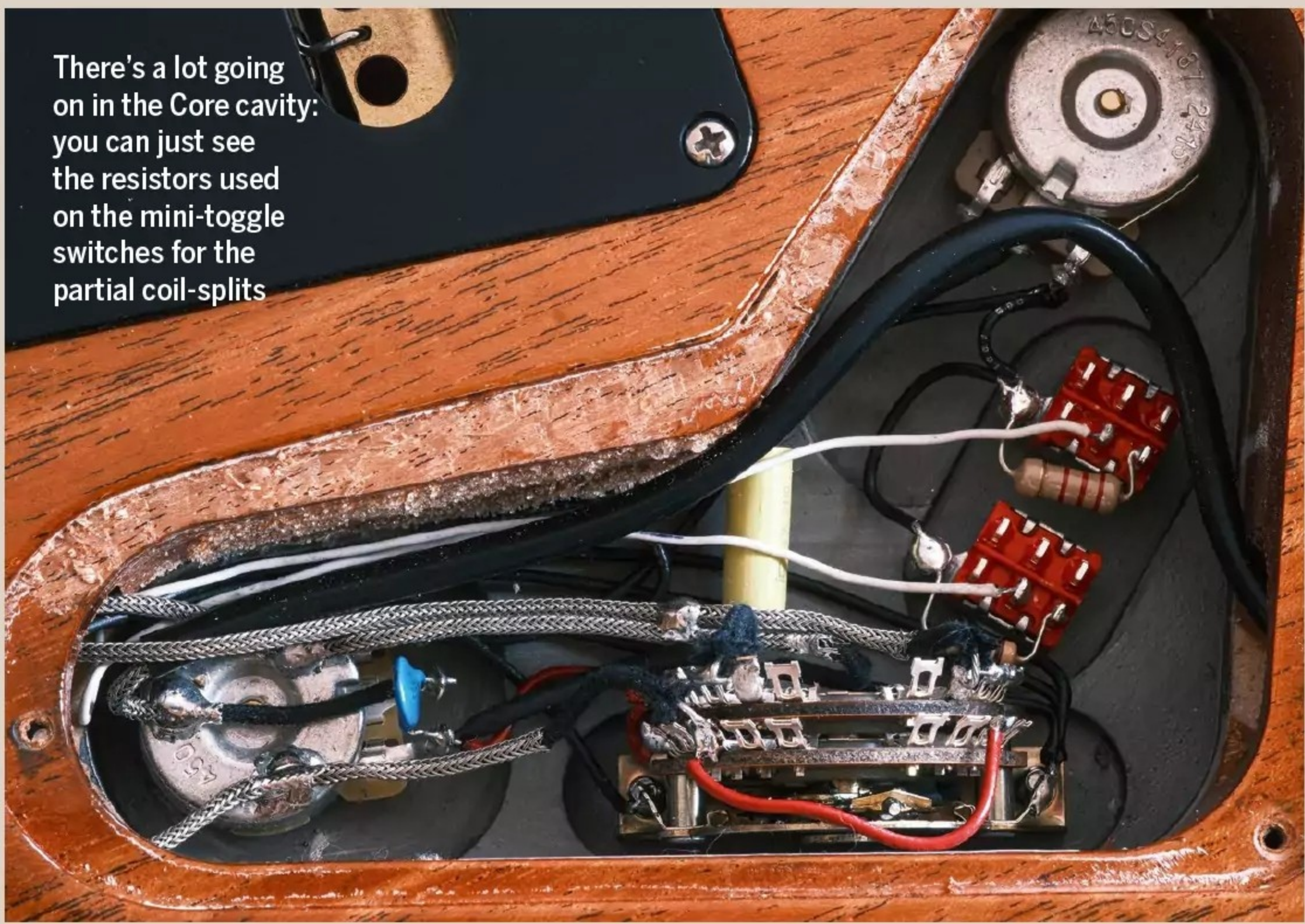
Perhaps not surprisingly, the SE's cavity doesn't look quite as tidy as the USA guitars and uses Alpha 'Made in Korea' 500k pots and a more generic four-pole pickup selector switch. The partial coil-split resistors are the same value as the Core model, however; likewise, the small ceramic disc treble bleed and the tone cap, which is hidden under the pickup wires. The shielding is a little less

The 2025-build S2 circuit and components look almost identical to the Core model

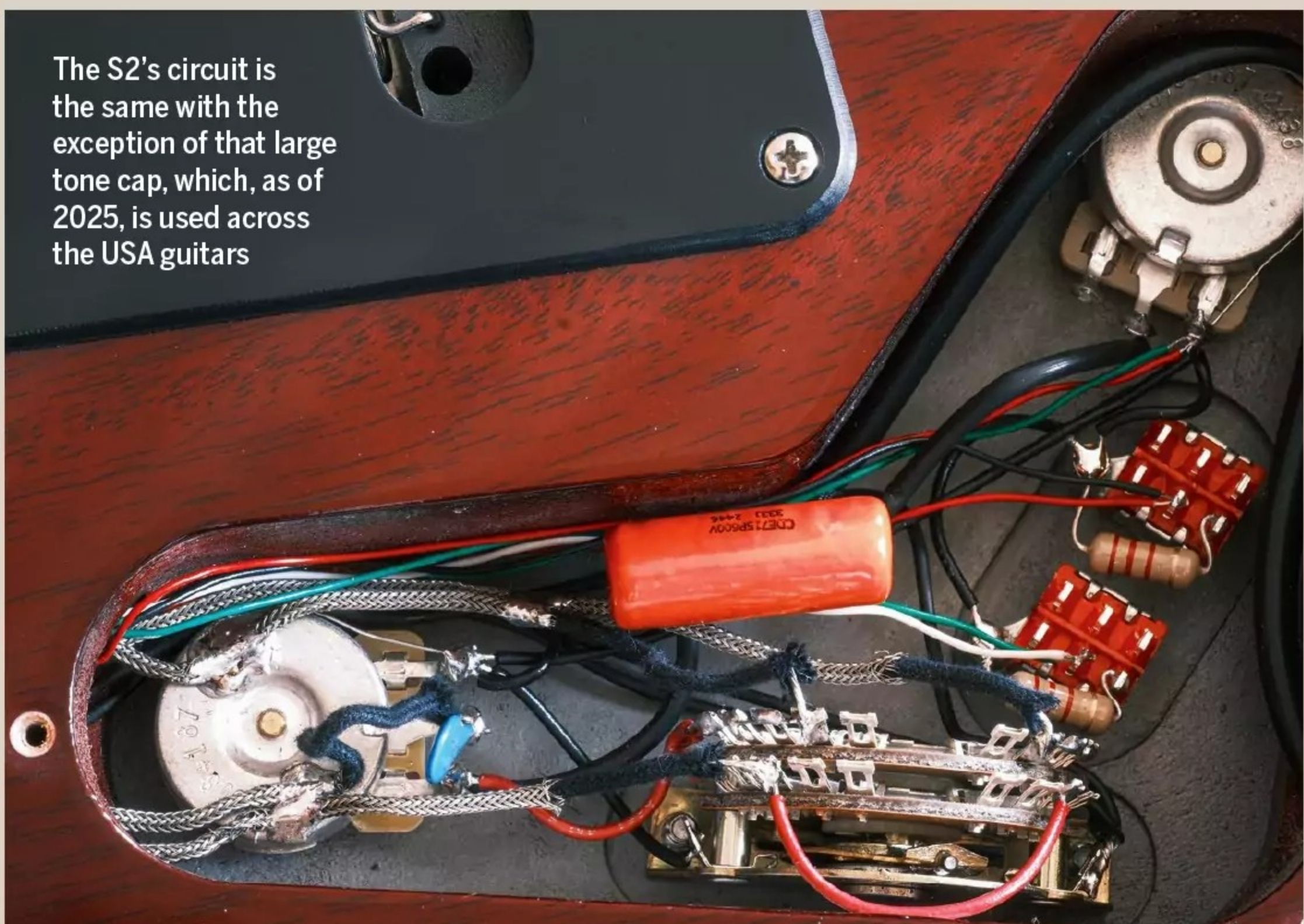
sophisticated here, too, but as all three pickups are humbuckers you're never stuck with just single coils if you run into a hum problem on those difficult gigs.

One thing you can easily see with the rear plates removed on all three guitars is that the body chambering isn't just on the bass side of the body but extends up towards the treble horn, too.

PRS never gives much away regarding its pickups, but the new McCarty III humbuckers – which PRS says “are vintage-inspired humbuckers that bring a vocal clarity to their full, warm tone” – use American Alnico II magnets in both bridge and neck position. At output, they have measured DCRs (hum/split) of 7.71/5.25kohms at the bridge and 7.84/4.78k at the neck. The S2's 58/15 LTs are a lower-output version of the original 58/15s, which have clear vintage inspiration. At output, ours measured 7.26/4.99k at the bridge and 7.24/4.56k at the neck. The Indonesian 'S' versions of the same bridge and neck humbuckers are used on the SE: the bridge measures 7.51/5.16k and the neck 7.43/5.1k.



There's a lot going on in the Core cavity: you can just see the resistors used on the mini-toggle switches for the partial coil-splits



The S2's circuit is the same with the exception of that large tone cap, which, as of 2025, is used across the USA guitars



Slightly less tidy, the SE's cavity uses the same circuit just with slightly different components



6

6. This all-steel vibrato – pictured on the S2 model – is also used on the USA Bolt-On CE 24 models as well as the SE guitars. It's a more basic version of the Gen III vibrato but functionally excellent. As of last year, the S2 line uses USA pickups such as the vintage-y 58/15 LT's shown here

7. Onto the SE model and the tuners here are more generic and non-locking (and can be upgraded), but the overall in-tuneness and tuning stability is typically good

the fret ends sit over the binding. It's very neatly done, although the fingerboard edges don't quite have the same in-curve as the USA guitars or as much rolling to the top edge.

Another primary difference is that the SE uses PRS-designed, made-in-Indonesia 'S' pickups. At the bridge and neck are these versions of the 58/15 LTs, and the middle pickup is the humbucking Narrowfield DD ('Deep Dish') 'S'. This 'S' version of the pickup was developed for the USA NF 53 and was first used on the three-pickup NF3 released last year. It also features in the middle and neck positions on the brand-new SE Studio, Studio Standard and SE NF 53. Another minor point is that the neck pickup here isn't reversed, so, when split, the voiced slug coil faces the bridge, not the neck as it does on the USA models.

Feel & Sounds

By the nature of the partially hollow design, all of our trio sit under 3.5kg (7.5lb) in weight; the Core model is the lightest and feels almost delicate. Despite the three different neck profiles, there's a lot of similarity here and, dimensionally, they're pretty close, too. The Core's Pattern profile is definitive PRS and based on the previous Wide-Fat. Although dimensionally the deepest, it also has that



7

hint of a V that tapers the shoulders and reduces the apparent bulk in your hand. The S2's Pattern Regular is marginally narrower in width and feels slightly more rounded, while front-to-back it's slightly thinner in depth. The SE's Wide-Thin actually feels a little bigger as it's quite full shouldered – as we've said in recent reviews, it does feel a bit bigger in the hand than the older Wide-Thin.

Don't forget we have the same scale length and fingerboard radius on all three, the same frets on the USA models (which are marginally wider and lower on the SE), the bridge string spacing is the same on all three, and both USA guitars have the same string spacing at the nut, the SE just a millimetre wider from E to E string. Close cousins? Yes.

Unplugged, the Core model exhibits typical balance and depth without a particularly 'hollow' character. The S2 is very similar, perhaps with a little more push and attack, while the SE actually sits closer to the Core model with very marginally less clarity.

8. This vibrato – pictured on the SE – is the same design that's used throughout the SE range and on the S2 models. While the bridge pickup here is the 'S' version of the USA 58/15 LT, the middle pickup is the Indonesian-made Narrowfield DD 'S' that we first saw on the SE NF 3 – it's now used on an increasing number of SE models

The new S2's streamlined construction produces a more cost-effective guitar that feels a little less precious – in a good way



But plugged in, the Core Special is just one of those guitars you get lost in. If there's a bad sound here, we didn't find it. The McCarty IIIs, in combination with the build, pull back the mid-focus of PRS guitars of old and, played clean, the bridge has a well-behaved honk that sounds, to our ears, like a well-behaved Patent Applied For as you up the gain. The neck is very well matched in output: perfectly plummy with the volume full up, and nice and snappy with it rolled back. Here, too, the dual-pickup mix in the centre position of the five-way has clarity and edge that nods towards a classic Gibson thinline when played cleaner.

That trio of sounds – especially the clear voicing with the volume pulled back – would get you through a huge range of styles, but pull those mini-switches up towards you and these positions don't sound like afterthoughts as the character shifts to a much more Fender-y clarity with bite and a detailed high-end that is clear but not oversharpy, typical for post-TCI PRS. Pulling the volume slightly back rounds the response, too, and we're certainly not reaching for the tone control as we kick in a level boost for a bit more hair.

Tracking the same position, just with the mini-toggles switched, is a great recording trick, creating a perfect texture of thickness and clarity. The neck split

certainly heads towards Strat territory with its percussive chop; the neck-and-middle and middle-and-bridge reinforce the illusion, while in the middle position you can play with humbucker/single-coil mixes for more subtle blends. Perhaps oddly, you can't voice the Narrowfield on its own, but then again with the expansive voicings as is that might be overkill.

Of course, the S2 and the SE have the same selections but with different pickups – and the S2 doesn't disgrace itself in the least, the 58/15 LTs displaying a slightly less-refined voice with a little more grit and attack. If you're working with lower light-crunch gains, this might be home. And the SE? It doesn't have quite the clarity of the S2 or perhaps the refinement, but that slightly thicker voicing does add a bit of 'dirt', and running in the split-coil modes perfectly captures the two-guitars-in-one vibe.

PRS's vibrato needs no introduction and all three here worked effortlessly. It's worth also mentioning that the overall in-tuneness and tuning stability are typically superb straight out of their gigbags or case. While that should be expected on guitars that cost as much as the USA models here, it's not always the case with guitars around the £1k mark, which often need a little after-purchase work. Worth bearing in mind.

THE RIVALS

While the obvious competition to the Special recipe are the numerous HSH models from the likes of Ibanez and Charvel, they typically feature a middle single coil, virtually all are bolt-ons (not set-necks), and semi-hollows are virtually non-existent. PRS itself provides considerable three-pickup options, such as the Core Modern Eagle V (albeit with a mid-placed single coil) and the Studio with McCarty III standard-sized humbucker at the bridge and Narrowfields in middle and neck positions. In the USA Bolt-On range is the Swamp Ash Special, with 58/15 LTs in bridge and neck, and a Narrowfield in between. The SE range has even more three-humbucking-pickup choice: set-neck Studio, bolt-on NF 3 and Studio Standard, and HSH Swamp Ash Special with a single coil in middle position (from £999).

Wildcards? Vintage's REVO range offers some retro flavour with guitars like the set-neck Custom Supreme (£749). At the other end of the market, the three-humbucking Gibson Les Paul Classic Supreme (£3,999 online exclusive) comes with Ultra-Modern weight relief and coil-tap switching.



Good to see proprietary 'lampshade' knobs on the SE models, as well as the unique pickup rings that are similar to those used on the current Core Custom 24-08, for example

Verdict

Three guitars with pretty much the same sonic range: which is best? Well, that could lead to quite a discussion. Assuming we all have £5k to drop on a new guitar, the Core model is a stunning, detailed build, hugely refined, and very in tune, stable and musical. It's a top-line PRS and deliciously light in weight. The new S2's streamlined construction produces a more cost-effective guitar that, while far from entry-level, feels a little less precious – in a good way – and it's the one we spent the most time playing. The neck feels very 'classic PRS', not least if you've played 'em from day one. And, as big fans of the 58/15 LTs, we can say that its sounds are just as valid. The SE has a lot to live up to, and while it's slightly less refined in terms of its sounds and build, we'd take this on a gig any day – it's a heck of a lot of guitar for the money.

However, the hot-rod modded appearance of the mismatched pickups won't be to everyone's taste and, add in those extra switches, not to mention the f-hole and indeed the figured tops, and these are very busy-looking guitars. And for those of us with more classic tastes, the only Special that has solid colour options is the Core model, which is offered with an opaque Antique White or Black top.

These aren't the only three-pickup models across the ranges, or the only Semi-Hollows, but – for 40 years and counting – PRS is still providing a dizzying choice of multi-toned instruments. We doubt these will be the last! **G**



PRS SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW

PRICE: £5,169 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cut semi-hollow
BODY: 1-piece mahogany back w/ 'violin' carve figured maple top w/ f-hole
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, Pattern profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/ 43.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, outline bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato Gen III, PRS Phase III locking tuners with wing 'buttons' – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS McCarty III Treble and Bass covered humbuckers, Narrowfield humbucker (middle), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone w/ 2x mini-toggle 'coil-tap' switches
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.1/6.75
OPTIONS: 10 Top with hybrid hardware (£5,975)
RANGE OPTIONS: Studio (from £4,939); Modern Eagle V (from £5,169). Bolt-On series: Swamp Ash Special (£3,160); JM Silver Sky (£3,300); Fiore (£2,779)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Carroll Blue (as reviewed) from 14 solid and translucent colours – high-gloss nitro



PROS Superb craft; light weight; neck feel and playability; expansive humbucker/single-coil tones; tuning stability – faultless

CONS Big investment



PRS S2 SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW

PRICE: £2,899 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cut semi-hollow
BODY: 1-piece mahogany back w/ 'asymmetric bevel' carve figured maple top w/ f-hole
NECK: 3-piece mahogany (scarf construction), Pattern Regular profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/ 42.6mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, acrylic 'old-school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS Phase III locking tuners with wing 'buttons' – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS 58/15 Treble and Bass covered humbuckers, Narrowfield humbucker (middle), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone w/ 2x mini-toggle 'coil-tap' switches
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.21/7.1
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: There's only one other 3-pickup S2, the new Studio w/ 58/15 LT at the bridge and 2x Narrowfields (£2,749)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Faded Gray Black Purple Burst (as reviewed) from 6 translucent colours – high-gloss nitro



PROS Same level craft as Core model; light weight; USA pickups and equally expansive sounds – the player's Special?

CONS Shame there are no solid colour options available



PRS SE SPECIAL SEMI-HOLLOW

PRICE: £1,180 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cut semi-hollow
BODY: Mahogany back w/ 'shallow violin' carve maple top, figured maple veneer w/ f-hole
NECK: Maple, Wide-Thin profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/ 42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid 'old-school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS 58/15 'S' Treble and Bass covered humbuckers, Narrowfield DD 'S' humbucker (middle), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone w/ 2x mini-toggle 'coil-tap' switches
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.48
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: Other 3-pickup SE models: bolt-on NF 3 (£1,039), Swamp Ash Special (£1,020), Silver Sky (£1,039) and Studio Standard (£999); SE Studio set-neck (£1,125)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Orange Tiger Smokeburst (as reviewed), Lake Blue, Charcoal Burst – high-gloss polyester/acrylic



PROS Detailed craft; quite light weight; classy appointments; similarly expansive sounds – a lot of guitar for the money

CONS Limited colours; no solid finishes; non-locking tuners

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The Thick Of It

We've had 'Greeny', now it's the 'Oxblood' – the most expensive Les Paul ever sold at auction. After the recent wave of reissues, Epiphone is on a roll and this unshowy historic repro might be the best yet

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker



EPIPHONE JEFF BECK OXBLOOD 1954 LES PAUL £1,199

CONTACT **Epiphone** PHONE **00800 4442 7661** WEB www.epiphone.com

What You Need To Know

1

Another Epiphone?

Well, yes. The Epiphone division has certainly been busy. Not long after a raft of eight new 'reissue' vintage repros we saw earlier in the year, this replica of Jeff Beck's fabled guitar was released at the end of June. It's not officially limited, but we're told once they've gone, they're gone. What's next? The Epiphone Jeff Beck Yardburst? Here's hoping!

2

Didn't Epiphone do one of these Jeff Beck Oxblood editions a few years ago?

Yes, in around 2010 we believe, a pretty limited model by all accounts. That guitar would have had the then standard Epiphone headstock, too.

3

Hasn't Gibson done one, too?

There was the limited-edition 2009 Gibson Custom 'Inspired By' 1954 Jeff Beck VOS Les Paul. Only 100 guitars with the VOS finish were made. Then there have been various limited runs that don't mention the great man's name but have similar specs.

1. As per its pre-tune-o-matic style, the Oxblood uses a lightweight aluminium wrapover bridge. Like the original, the bridge pickup is placed very close to the bridge and, of course, replaces the original P-90 soapbar

Fans of the late, great guitar wizard Jeff Beck will know all about the Oxblood, a modded '54 Les Paul that he bought in 1972 and which saw heavy live use until the mid-70s and, of course, was pictured and used on the all-time classic and hugely influential masterpiece *Blow By Blow*. After last year's £8k replica of the Les Paul known as the Jeff Beck Yardburst by the Gibson Custom Shop, this altogether more everyman replica – a collaboration with Gibson Custom – is a fraction of that price. However, like the recently introduced Reissue Les Pauls, it boasts a high spec that includes the correct Gibson headstock,

proper Gibson USA Custombuckers, 50s wiring, excellent-quality components, a return to rosewood, and a low-gloss 'used' finish – all packaged in a good case, and it even comes with a period-correct strap. You can't criticise Epiphone for trying.

Despite the magic made on the original, the opaque very dark chocolate brown finish is really far from a show-off and more like the classic black of the Les Paul Custom with (fingerboard excepted) not a sliver of wood on show. In keeping with its original manufacturing date, Gibson hadn't quite got to the tune-o-matic yet, so Beck's guitar always featured the wrapover (or wraparound) one-piece



1



2

2. As with the recent Epiphones, we have the Gibson-style headstock, and there's only the brand logo in place as on the original Oxblood

3. A very common mod back in the day on hard-working Les Pauls was to replace the plastic output jackplate with an aluminium plate. The Oxblood follows that with this chromed metal plate

bridge. It's the only Epiphone model to do so, and if you want a carved-top Gibson Les Paul with one you'll have to go over to the Custom division.

One of the pre-Beck mods were the humbuckers, which replaced the original P-90s and – typically for Beck – the pickup covers didn't last long. Apparently, the pickup conversion was crudely done and one result is that the bridge pickup sits very close to the bridge with barely room for the mounting ring. That move south leaves a gap in the pickguard that's replicated here: hardly high-class lutherie.

More than a handful, the neck is huge; dimensionally, it's the biggest neck of any production guitar we've ever played

But pre- and post-purchase tweakery aside, this repro might well be one, if not *the* best Epiphone we've ever played. How so? Well, the first thing you notice is the weight. Compared with the heavy-for-the-style '57 Goldtop we wrestled with back in issue 525, our Oxblood is relatively lightweight for a non-weight relieved or chambered Les Paul. It's a big difference. And speaking of big, so is the neck. More than a handful, it's huge; dimensionally, it's the biggest neck of any production guitar we've ever played.



3



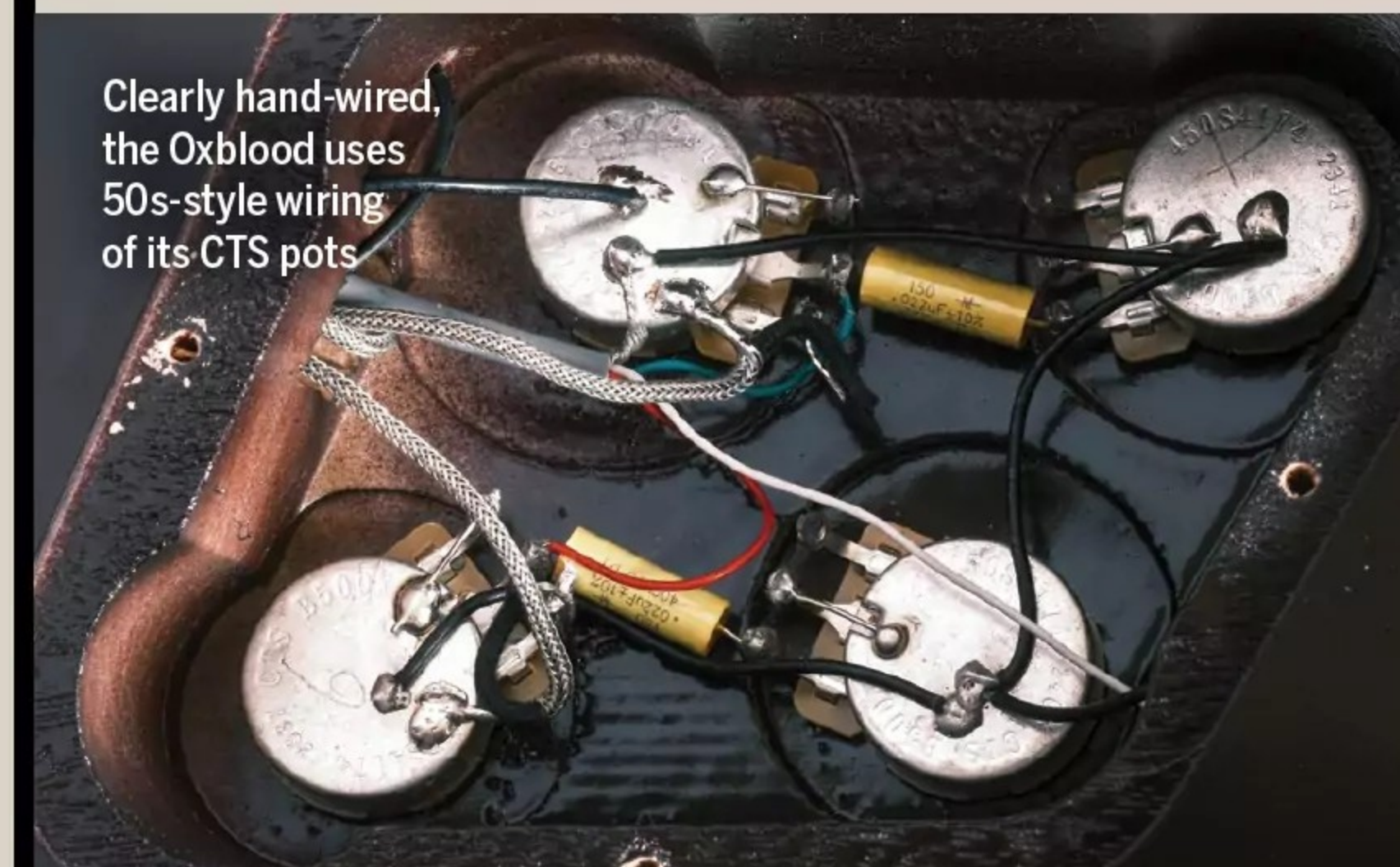
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UNDER THE HOOD

Are the secrets of Jeff Beck's tone hidden in the control cavity?

Just like the recent reissue '57 Goldtop, the control cavity apes a 50s Les Paul in that there's no shielding and the wiring follows 50s style. Once again, we get decent CTS 500k short-shaft pots, a Switchcraft toggle switch, and instead of the vintage-style 'bumblebee' replicas we get a pair of .022µF Mallory 150 series 400-volt polyester capacitors.

Exactly what pickups are in that mucked-about-with original Oxblood isn't documented, but these USA A3 Custombuckers (the humbuckers used across all of the new Epiphone reissues) are a wise all-round choice. They're not hot, just in the pretty classic Patent Applied For range, and don't appear overly wax-potted, if at all. Measured at output, the DCRs here are identical for the two: 7.92kohms. Just like old days!



Clearly hand-wired, the Oxblood uses 50s-style wiring of its CTS pots

While those two fundamental elements have quite an impact on your initial engagement with the guitar, the rest of the build seems virtually identical to the spec and standard of those recent Reissues. Placement aside, the pickups are the same, as is the clean and dark rosewood fingerboard with relatively small medium-gauge frets. The Graph Tech nut looks too modern in its shaping, but tuning proves very stable, especially considering the mass and rigidity of that neck.

Beck's original was modded with Schaller M6 tuners and that's what we're supposed to have here, according to the pre-launch spec. Checking in with Gibson, they're actually Grover Rotomatics, albeit with Schaller-style buttons, not the usual kidney beans. We also get a proper chromed metal jackplate.

Feel & Sounds

So, just how big is this neck? Well, Gibson USA's 50s profile, which is a pretty big rounded handful, comes in at around 22.7mm deep at the 1st fret and 25.5mm by the 12th, pretty similar to that Epiphone '57 Goldtop Reissue. The Oxblood doesn't change the width, but at the 1st fret it measures 23.4mm and by the 12th it's 27.6mm! There's no attempt to shave the shoulders, either; it really is big. And if that's your taste, well, you'll love it.

The fretwork is very similar to that previous Reissue, too. The wire feels

4. Along with the other new Epiphone reissue models, the Oxblood uses Gibson USA Custombuckers (see Under The Hood, left)



5

5. Oddly, our guitar has Grover Rotomatic tuners, not the Schaller M6s that should feature on the guitar according to both the spec and Gibson itself

vintage-y and relatively small, and you can certainly feel the fingerboard as you bend. But not only is everything nicely level, the tops are a little smoother compared with that '57 Goldtop we had, too. Only the fret ends remain a little sharp when you run your finger over them, but they certainly don't protrude and they're barely noticeable when you're playing. The setup is very mainstream, but a slight tweak of the truss rod to get it virtually straight and

Suspecting slightly domed string grooves, we ran a fret file through the slots making sure the grooves fell away to the tuners correctly, and after a few minutes' work, that sharpening problem was cured.

There's little doubt that this Oxblood is really working as it should. Despite the bulk of the design, it's surprisingly resonant and alive. Strum a 1st position E chord and touch the body base and the tip of the headstock and you can certainly feel

6. The gold 'speed' control knobs are another detail that has been recreated to match Jeff's original Oxblood model

The combination of the excellent weight, that big neck and those USA Custombuckers elevates this guitar into the big league

just raising the string height a fraction has quite a positive effect, rounding the attack.

Now, without individual string adjustment at the bridge you can't precisely intonate the guitar. As supplied, though, it was close when we checked it through on our Peterson Strobe tuner. This revealed that the G and wound strings were coming back a little sharp at the 1st fret, although the strings do sit close over the 1st fret, as they should.

THE RIVALS

Another Epiphone that really impressed us was the recent Joe Bonamassa 1955 Les Paul Standard Copper Iridescent (£799), which you may still be able to find in-store or online. The unique colour comes from a small run that Gibson apparently made for the 1955 NAMM Show. A sleeper.

Gibson has a few carved-top Les Paul options – though none with the wrapover bridge. For example, the online exclusive Les Paul Standard 60s Plain Top Dark Walnut (£2,599) or the regular Les Paul Standard 50s (from £2,799), which is available in Translucent Oxblood.

Gibson Custom does make a 1954 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue with wrapover bridge and dual P-90s at a cool £4,499, which will give you an idea of where this story started. You could even mod it...!



EPIPHONE JEFF BECK OXBLOOD 1954 LES PAUL

PRICE: £1,199 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with bound carved maple top

NECK: Mahogany, Jeff Beck Custom large 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/42.82mm

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

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Historic aluminium wraparound bridge/tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic tuners w/ chrome buttons – nickel plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

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

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.89/8.56

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: There's plenty of Epiphone Les Paul choice, from the Kirk Hammett 'Greeny' (£1,499) to the new 'Inspired By Gibson Custom' Reissues such as the '59 and '60 Les Paul Standards and 1957 Les Paul Goldtop – all £1,199. The Gibson USA Les Paul Standard 50s, in some 9 colours including Translucent Oxblood, costs from £2,799

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Oxblood (as reviewed) – vintage gloss



9/10

PROS Great weight for the style; big neck; excellent tuning stability; vintage-feeling rosewood fingerboard; Gibson USA Custombuckers and vintage-style wiring

CONS Not everyone will enjoy such a big neck and the wraparound bridge is not 100 per cent in tune, but, hey, it was good enough for Jeff!

the vibrations. The unplugged response is very balanced, too, a little less honky than our Les Paul Classic but with similar depth and a treble response that's not oversharpe. Played seated, the good weight means it doesn't immediately drop off your right leg like that 10lb '57 Goldtop, which really needed a strap at all times.

Plugged in and listening clean with the volumes pulled back a little, that balance is very evident. It's a beautiful jazz tone at the neck, and nicely touch-sensitive with snap aplenty in the mixed pickup position. The bridge pickup played like this is bright and there's a little Telecaster in here but smoother, and for ringing cleans, well, the word 'exceptional' comes to mind.

Setting your amp up so that you have slightly crunchy lead tones with both volumes full up, you really have the keys to the kingdom. Not least with the 50s wiring, as you pull back the volume and tone it all cleans up beautifully, and riding the controls just adds more colours. But you don't have to do that. Plug into a 'Plexi'-type amp voice and it's classic rock all day. That bridge pickup is easily tamed by rolling back the tone a smidge, while the neck pickup sounds as big as the

neck itself. Add in that exceptional tuning stability and this is not only a timely homage to Jeff Beck, it's a cracking and very classic-sounding Les Paul that easily holds its own against our double-the-price USA Classic in terms of its core sound.

Verdict

Rather like Epiphone's 'Greeny', the Oxblood might have a significant history to Jeff Beck devotees, but none of that matters when you're considering whether a Les Paul like this is 'the one.' It's certainly less posh-looking than the new '59 Reissue and less classic than a Goldtop. The all over black/brown low-gloss finish gives it a used-looking utilitarian workingman vibe that many prefer, as with a Custom. But here, the combination of the excellent weight, that big neck with its superb tuning stability, and the sounds we hear from those USA Custombuckers and the 50s wiring elevates this one into the big league. Some might balk at the price – 'I'm not paying that for an Epiphone!' – while others, and that would include us, might simply conclude it's knocking on the door of the USA 50s Standard that, at list price, is well over twice as much money. **G**

Goin' Down To Memphis

Will we ever know the true story of this fabled guitar? For some it's iconic, for others it was simply a cobbled together working tool for a master...

Words Dave Burrluck

It's far from easy to tell the definitive tale of any guitar that was used by a famous artist back in the day. The Oxblood is no exception, not least that it's pretty much 50 years ago that Jeff Beck retired it. What we do know for a fact is that the guitar was auctioned at Christies on 22 January 2025 and sold for £1,068,500, making it the most expensive Gibson Les Paul ever sold at an auction.

Of course, that huge sale price has little, if anything, to do with the instrument itself. Imagine rocking up at a well-regarded vintage guitar dealer with a similar piece and asking for a valuation. The *devaluation* of what was once, purportedly, a 1954 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop would be colossal, wouldn't it? There's the overall brown/black refinish for starters. The P-90-to-humbucker conversion for another. Non-original pots, caps and wiring, Schaller tuners... If it hadn't already had a headstock break before you'd purchased it, not to mention a slimmed down neck, it had definitely had one at the end of its working life – not just a head repair but a totally new neck. And its overall condition was, at best, shoddy. “Basically, what you've got there is the body and perhaps the fingerboard of a '54 Les Paul,” says our hypothetical dealer.

Yes, our tongue is in our cheek, but that's the reality, isn't it? There are still questions

around the origin of the guitar, who did the conversion/repair work, and what pickups were in the guitar on purchase. There's even some dispute over when Jeff bought it.

What can be classed as hard evidence is the much better documented use that Beck put it to. From the original outings with Beck, Bogert and Appice – the reason he needed another Les Paul – to guesting on the encores of Ziggy's last gig in July 1973, the Oxblood was played with Stevie Wonder, Billy Preston, The Rolling Stones and many more. And let's not forget its use on and appearance on the cover of seminal album *Blow By Blow*. That's not in dispute.

How he got the guitar – and even when – still is, some would argue. A young Memphis guitar fanatic, Buddy Davis, had befriended Jeff when he was still in The Yardbirds: “I had met him at about 13, he was 20, and playing with The Yardbirds at a skating rink in Memphis,” he states in *The Jeff Beck Bulletin #15*. “In 1972, Charlie and Chris at Strings & Things were stuck with the '54 Oxblood when the person they built it for decided he didn't want it. That guitar was mine, I bought it from Robert Johnson ... who auditioned with Jeff and Rory Gallagher and Wayne Perkins for The Stones. He had two of them he got from George Gruhn in Nashville. One went to me, one went to Marc Bolan of T.Rex. I have a picture of Marc with his. [NB: an

image exists of Robert Johnson with Marc Bolan and an oxblood-coloured Les Paul with P-90s still in place. Two Oxbloods?] I loved the neck on mine, but did not like the noisy standard pickups. I traded it to Chris and Charlie. Then they had a man named Teddy Paige, who worked for them, customise it. The customer who it was customised for backed out.”

The aforementioned Robert Johnson – now CEO of Florida's Regent Sound studio and who has a more than enviable CV as a player and producer – is the subject of a story provided by Regent Sound that appeared on PR Newswire on 30 January 2025 (after the Christie's auction sale), which states that Johnson bought a '53 Les Paul Goldtop from a Memphis music teacher in June 1972 and that “Johnson had John Evans, the former Boxtops keyboardist, modify the pickups and bridge, and Tom Keckler spray-painted the guitar at Strings & Things Music Store using auto-paint to match Johnson's 1960 Oxblood shoes.” The resulting colour was not to Johnson's liking, apparently, and the guitar was put on consignment.

The story continues on 7 November 1972: “Johnson drove to Little Rock to see his friend Billy Gibbons and ZZ Top open a show for Beck, Bogart [sic] and Appice, all acquaintances of Johnson. Johnson sold Beck a 1967 Fender guitar in 1971 and had



PHOTO BY WIKTOR SZYMANOWICZ/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

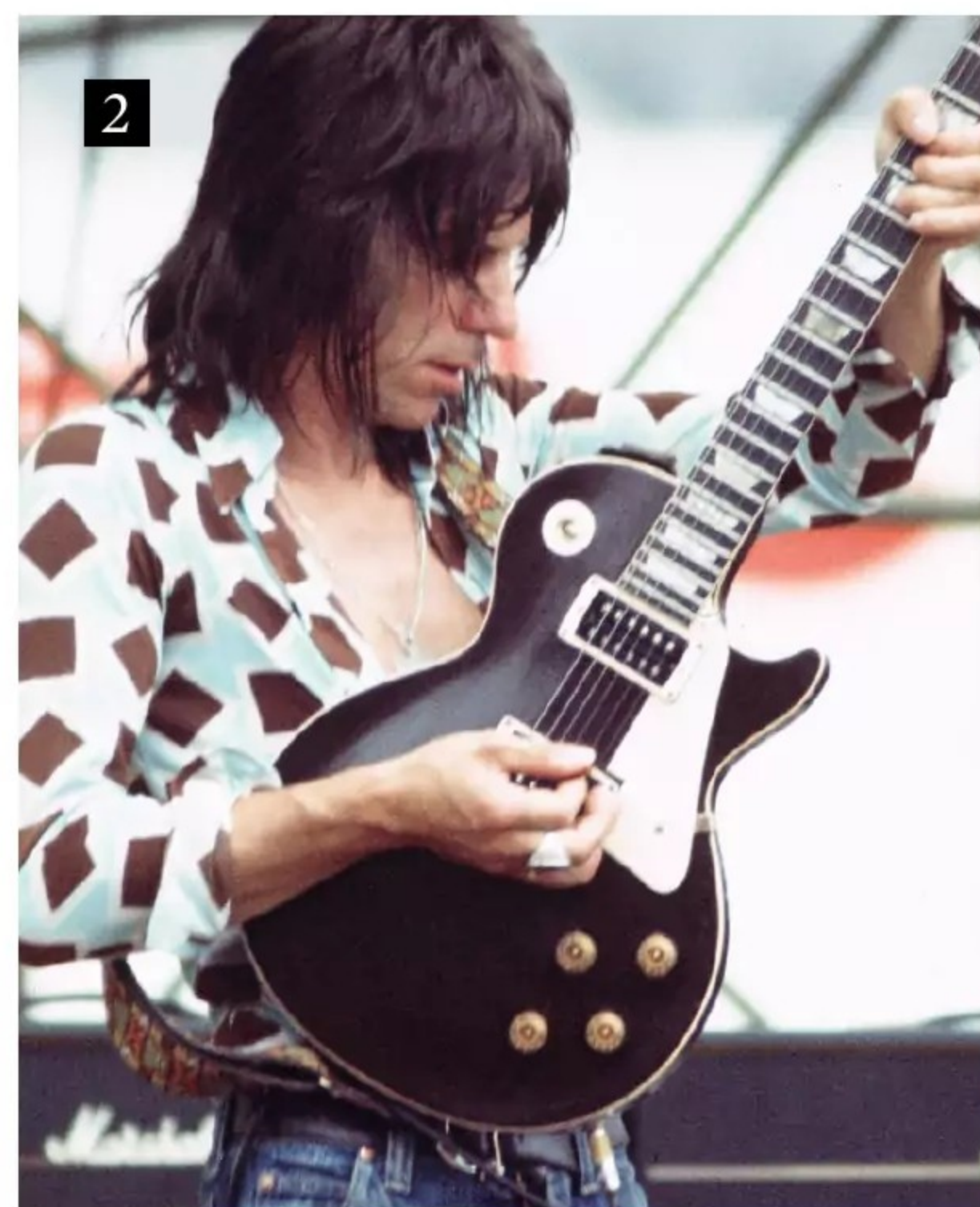


PHOTO BY KOH HASEBE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

1. A staff member of Christie's London holds the 1954 Oxblood Gibson Les Paul in mid-January 2025, prior to the Jeff Beck: The Guitar Collection auction. On 22 January the historic instrument would sell for a record-breaking £1,068,500, making it the most expensive Les Paul ever sold at auction

2. Jeff Beck pictured on stage in Tokyo in August 1975 with the Oxblood Les Paul, which featured on *Blow By Blow*, released that same year

3. Another oddity is how the pickups are set in the original with reverse tilts and very raised screw polepieces on the bridge pickup

played a studio session with Beck previously in NYC. Beck asked Gibbons and Johnson about any good guitars for sale. Johnson replied that he had 17, including the Oxblood Les Paul at Strings & Things. Beck had a friend take him to Strings & Things the next day. Beck loved the Oxblood Les Paul and his manager bought it.”

Buddy Davis was at the same Little Rock gig, so perhaps he was the “friend” the Regent Sound story refers to, and the way Davis tells it is that Jeff called him the following day. They did a tour of Memphis music (and car part) stores, but Jeff reportedly had his eye on Buddy’s Oxblood, which his manager bought.

But what about the customisation? Aside from the pickup-modding keyboard player mentioned by Johnson, he also namechecks Tom ‘TK’ Keckler, a well-known figure who started customising guitars in the late 60s, then worked for Mike Ladd’s Guitar City before joining up with Strings & Things in,

Imagine rocking up at a vintage guitar dealer with a similar piece and asking for a valuation...

we believe, 1972. He then worked with Schecter and founded the St Blues guitar company. TK posted an image of Beck on Facebook in 2019 with the following caption: “The famous Jeff Beck Oxblood 1954 Gibson Les Paul – restored by me in 1971. The instrument had suffered a broken headstock, was completely refinished, refretted and P-90s replaced with humbuckers. Jeff was in Memphis to record the self-titled LP the *Jeff Beck Group* [aka the ‘Orange Album’] – tried the guitar and loved it!”

In a video interview (*TKs Guitar History-Episode 2* on Tom Keckler’s YouTube channel), TK says: “It was a trashed Les Paul... We rebuilt it. When it came to the paint job, I was striving for a kind of a brown tint... About that time, Jeff was in

town recording the ‘Orange Album’ [which began in January ’72 and was released in May/June of the same year].” TK’s video host, Richard Wilson, explains that Jeff came to Strings & Things to check out the guitar, liked it and bought it. “[I’d put in] full-size humbuckers,” says TK. “I’m sure they were Patent Applied Fors or something, back then they were a dime a dozen. The headstock was broken; it was trashed.”

If the origins of the guitar are still open to conjecture, there was at least one more serious repair noted in the essay by Christie’s for the auction catalogue (a very good read!): “At some point between the three North American legs of the [BBA] tour [in 1975], the headstock of the Les Paul was broken on a PanAm flight back to London. Whilst with Gordon Wells at Knight Guitars for repair, Jeff took the opportunity to return the neck to its original size, retaining the guitar’s original fingerboard and faceplate.”

“Yes, my dad Gordon Wells did the work,” confirms Rob Wells today. “The headstock had been broken and Jeff said he didn’t really like the neck, so my dad actually made a new neck for the guitar – bigger!”

As far as we know, that was the last of the Oxblood’s repairs and modifications.

“After the tour, Jeff largely retired the Les Paul in favour of the Strat,” continues Christie’s, “and although it was taken out on subsequent tours during the later 1970s, it appears not to have been played live.”

It would be a good two decades before the Oxblood was “dusted off by Gibson’s master craftsmen in 2008 in order to recreate the iconic instrument for their limited-edition [2009] Jeff Beck Oxblood Les Paul signature model”, concludes the Christie’s essay.

The 2009 Gibson Custom Shop ‘Inspired By’ 1954 Jeff Beck VOS Les Paul was a limited run of 50 aged pieces, signed and played by Jeff Beck, and a further 100 unsigned pieces in a more standard VOS finish. The PR for that release goes some way to supporting some of TK’s story: “While recording in Memphis, Beck paid a visit to a popular music store called Strings & Things to check out the stock. The guitar that caught his attention was a ’54 Gibson Les Paul.”

For this 2025 release, we’re told that “Epiphone collaborated with the Custom Shop to develop the Epiphone version, using the 2009 Custom Shop model as the reference point. The neck profile was derived from the specifications listed on the 2009 CS spec sheet and is loosely based on the 1954 shape”. The new model’s launch PR side-stepped any mention of its history, aside from referring to it as “the heavily modified 1954 Les Paul that was immortalised on the cover of his groundbreaking 1975 album, *Blow By Blow*”. And so it goes...

We can only hope you can weave your own tales wielding this new Epiphone. And if a crumb of Jeff Beck’s magic rubs off on you, that can’t be bad, can it? 



PHOTO BY BEN BENTLEY



The Deep End

Electro-Harmonix releases its most ambitious reverb pedal to date – and it goes way beyond 'verb to offer myriad sound-sculpting opportunities

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker



ELECTRO-HARMONIX OCEANS ABYSS £475

CONTACT **Electro-Harmonix** WEB www.ehx.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 Another Oceans reverb pedal?**
Well, Oceans is the family name for EHX reverbs, but this does more than its closest sibling, the Oceans 12. Naming it Abyss is about right as this thing goes deep!
- 2 Deep? Does that mean it has a lot of adjustable parameters?**
Yes, but there's more to it than that: as well as two reverb engines, it has additional effects blocks – such as delay, modulation, gain and EQ – that can be placed into the signal path.
- 3 So, it's more multi-effects unit than a reverb pedal...**
In a way. It offers composite effects that combine a number of types in a chain, but it will also do single effects other than reverb.

While some players are totally sorted by having a spring reverb integral to their amp, there are plenty of others who embrace reverb as a creative effect and many companies out there are ready to cater to those desires with a range of pedals that can supply all manner of ambiances. To date, Electro-Harmonix has been scratching that itch with its Oceans 12 pedal, and that dual stereo reverb now has a sibling in the form of the Oceans Abyss, which, as the name implies, takes a deeper dive into the world of ambience.

This triple-footswitch pedal features two full-stereo reverb engines that can be combined into a signal path comprising up to eight blocks and encompassing several other effects including delay and modulation, all with a range of routing options. Add a stereo send/return loop to incorporate other pedals to that signal path and EHX's description of the pedal as an "advanced reverb laboratory" makes perfect sense.

In Use

The Oceans Abyss has a clearly laid out user interface: the essential hands-on controls for Reverb A are on the left; those for Reverb B are on the right. Between the two, there's a display showing signal path and adjustable parameters, and a NavCoder knob with rotate, push and tilt actions that does all the hard graft of addressing what's shown in the display and setting up your sound.

Any sounds you create can be saved to 128 preset locations, and the unit comes with 100 of those already loaded with factory-programmed sounds.

There's enormous potential to sculpt esoteric sounds, but it's also a flexible single-box solution



The A and B footswitches bypass/engage all effects blocks in group A or B respectively; a press-and-hold will trigger infinite sustain for the corresponding reverb. They can also be used in conjunction with the Effect footswitch to scroll through and load presets

The full architecture of the signal path is that of two rows of four effects blocks – the top row associated with Reverb A, the bottom with Reverb B – with loads of different serial and parallel connections available between them, although you can also have just a single linear chain with both Reverb A and Reverb B blocks in it. Furthermore, a preset doesn't have to be centred around reverb. In fact, you don't have to have a reverb effect block at all. While there's an overall effect bypass footswitch, the A and B footswitches bring the A and B associated blocks in and out.

The reverb algorithms on offer are your standard Room, Hall, Spring and Plate, while Reverse, Dynamic, Auto-Infinite,



THE RIVALS

Perhaps a recognised multi-effects pedal capable of building composite effects might be a valid alternative for some pedalboards, but we'll just concentrate here on dedicated multi-reverb pedals. Strymon seems to be the industry standard for the genre, and for two simultaneous stereo reverbs like the Oceans Abyss, there's the BigSky MX (£699). Elsewhere, the Meris Mercury X (£599) combines eight custom Meris reverb algorithms and incorporates those into a modular system, and while Source Audio's Ventris (£399) may be lacking the extra effects and routing flexibility of the Abyss, it does offer dual stereo reverbs and 14 reverb types in a compact package.



1. The brightness of an illuminated slider represents its parameter's value. If a slider is moved after loading a preset, its LED will blink, indicating that its value no longer matches the value in the preset but is now based on its physical position
2. The NavCoder knob navigates menus, parameters and presets, and adjusts settings. It has three basic actions: rotation (for scrolling through values, presets and lists), press (for choosing menu options) and tilt (four-way directional pad for navigation around menus and screens)

Shimmer, Polyphonic and Resonant make up the more esoteric contingent. Other blocks in the chain can deliver delay (Basic, Analog and Tape), modulation (Tremolo, Chorus, Flanger and Phaser) or utility effects (Graphic EQ, Saturation, Bit Crusher, Volume and the send/return effects loop). Besides the hands-on dedicated knobs and sliders for the two reverbs, there are other adjustable reverb parameters available in the menu, plus parameters for all the other effects blocks. To set up and edit your sounds you'll need to get the hang of getting around the screens, menus and parameters with the NavCoder, but there's a useful Home button to take you back to the main screen at any point. The complexity here would, of course, benefit from a computer-based editor/librarian, and hopefully EHX will have its forthcoming USB-connected EHXport app up and running to take care of all that by the time you read this.

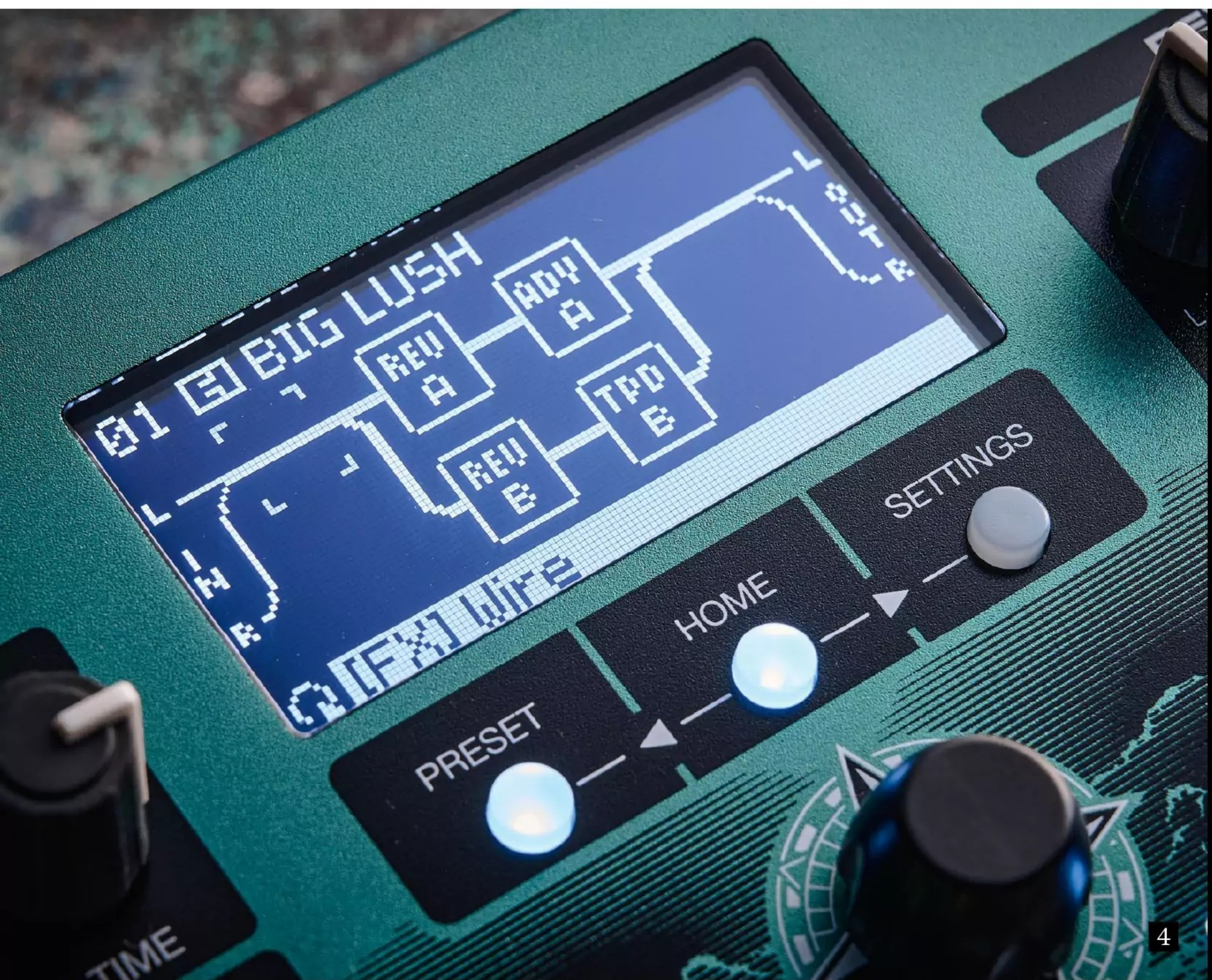
Sounds

As usual with a pedal like this, trying out all the factory presets is the best way to get the measure of what it can do, as well as giving you some useful starting points for creating your own sonic preferences.

There's plenty to take in: from basic meat-and-potatoes reverbs utilising a single effects block, through simple combinations such as a delay block feeding a reverb block, to esoteric ambiences taking full advantage of routing the signal through numerous blocks. The standard reverbs all deliver the sense of space that you'd expect and are easily tweaked to get them how you need them. The Spring reverb can get the 'drip' that surf guitarists seek out, while the other reverbs have plenty of creative potential with liberal amounts of fairy dust in the likes of the Shimmers's octave-shifted wash and the dual bidirectional pitch shifts of the Symphonic reverb.

3. The send and return jacks are TRS so you can have a full stereo effects loop if required. The USB connection is a conduit to the EHXport editor app, which will also facilitate firmware upgrades (but it was not available at the time of writing)
4. The OLED display offers five main views that can be scrolled through with the buttons below. The default view is the Signal Path (always returned to with the Home button), which shows all of the preset's effects blocks and their connections





ELECTRO-HARMONIX OCEANS ABYSS

PRICE: £475
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Reverb pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 128 presets, tap tempo
REVERB TYPES: Room, Hall, Spring, Plate, Reverse, Dynamic, Auto-Infinite, Shimmer, Polyphonic, Resonant
CONTROLS: NavCoder, Preset button, Home button, Settings button, Reverb A controls (Pan, Pre-Delay, Time, Blend, Low, High, Edit button, Moment button, Tails button) Reverb B controls (Pan, Pre-Delay, Time, Blend, Low, High, Edit button, Moment button, Tails button), Effect footswitch (bypass), Footswitch A, Footswitch B
CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L & R), standard outputs (L & R), Standard TRS Send, Standard TRS Return, EXP, Footswitch, MIDI IN, MIDI OUT, USB
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied) 500 mA
DIMENSIONS: 180 (w) x 150 (d) x 65mm (h)

The delays and modulations amply cover familiar territory and – while modulation, delay and reverb combinations may be standard fare in some quarters – you also have the saturation and bitcrusher blocks here to grunge things up. Two saturation blocks in series make a convincing Big Muff, especially coupled with a Graphic EQ block to really focus the frequencies.

Referencing other EHX pedals, you get Small Stone and Memory Man presets here, and there's some creative use of just delay in two presets that utilise all eight blocks to construct some really interesting reverb effects – one stacking up eight blocks of the Analog delay type all feeding into each other, the other similarly using blocks of Tape delay.

For onstage use you can swiftly move from preset to preset with presses on the A or B footswitch simultaneously with the effect footswitch, or, to make things really simple, if you just want to use two different sounds during a gig, you could set them up as parallel A and B chains in a single preset and engage them as needed. There's also a press-and-hold function to trigger infinite sustain for the associated reverb.

There's provision to incorporate up to three external footswitches and assign them to a number of functions such as

From the simplest reverb to complex shifting ambiances, there's something for everyone

loading presets, tap tempo and even sending an impulse, which simulates kicking a spring tank! You could also add an expression pedal for control over parameters in any effects block, and there's comprehensive MIDI capability for recalling presets, control over nearly every available parameter, and clock sync.

Verdict
 The big-box reverb has become a thing in recent years and this latest Electro-Harmonix entry into the area doesn't disappoint: from the simplest reverb to complex shifting ambiances, there's something here for everyone. As much a sound designer's playground as a guitarist's onstage resource, the Oceans Abyss offers enormous potential to sculpt some really esoteric sounds if you want to get into that, but it's also a flexible single-box solution for providing a bunch of switchable reverbs, delays, modulations and more to get you through any gig. **G**



PROS Not too massive in size; customisable signal path; effects loop; varied reverb types; range of effects other than reverb; presets

CONS Learning curve to get around the menus

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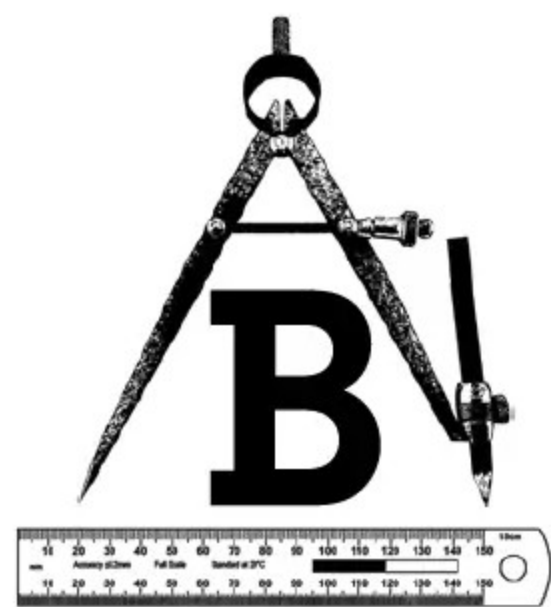
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« BLUEPRINT »

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Mike Zaite explains how a background in electronics and a front-row seat to the British Invasion of the 1960s led to the formation of Dr Z Amplification – and why the sonics always lead the schematics

Words Charlie Wilkins Photography Peach Guitars

In a world full of digital modelling and mass-produced amplifiers, Dr Z has built a reputation the old-fashioned way: by building hand-wired valve amplifiers that players fall in love with and never let go. Before he was building amps for Joe Walsh and Brad Paisley, Mike Zaite – better known as Dr Z – was just a Cleveland guy chasing better tone...

What inspired you to start Dr Z amps and what was your vision in the beginning?

“My dad was a TV repairman, so the basement of my house kind of looked like what my shop looks like now, with tubes and chassis and things spread out and all over. I was fortunate enough to have a father who was very generous with his knowledge and loved to share it with me. Before he started his business, he was in the Navy where he worked with communications information for naval ships. So early on, I kind of fooled around with different things and learned the basics of electronics.

“This was in the mid-60s when the British Invasion exploded in the United States. After watching The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in February 1964, everyone wanted to be in a band and I was no different. I started playing in basement bands and we would practice at my house. Whenever guests or the guys that I played with would leave their equipment behind,



I would start messing around with their guitar amps. If they only knew some of the things I did [laughs]. So that's what kind of got me interested in amplifiers.

“Later on, I went to college and got a degree in Electrical Engineering. After graduating, I started working for GE in their Medical Systems division. Back then, in the early 70s, they weren't really teaching you about tubes any more. They taught you about chips, transistors and modern electronics. Tubes were antiquated and they didn't spend much time talking about them. I was fortunate because I already had a background in tubes that I got from my dad.

“During my 15 years at GE, not only did I get to work in electronics everyday, but I also learned how a large, successful

corporation operates. I learned how to manage people, how to source and buy parts and components, how to interact with suppliers and all that stuff. My job was to source and find parts for guys in the field that repaired and maintained X-ray machines. Everything that I learned at GE was very helpful when I started my own business and I had good connections for parts and electronics.

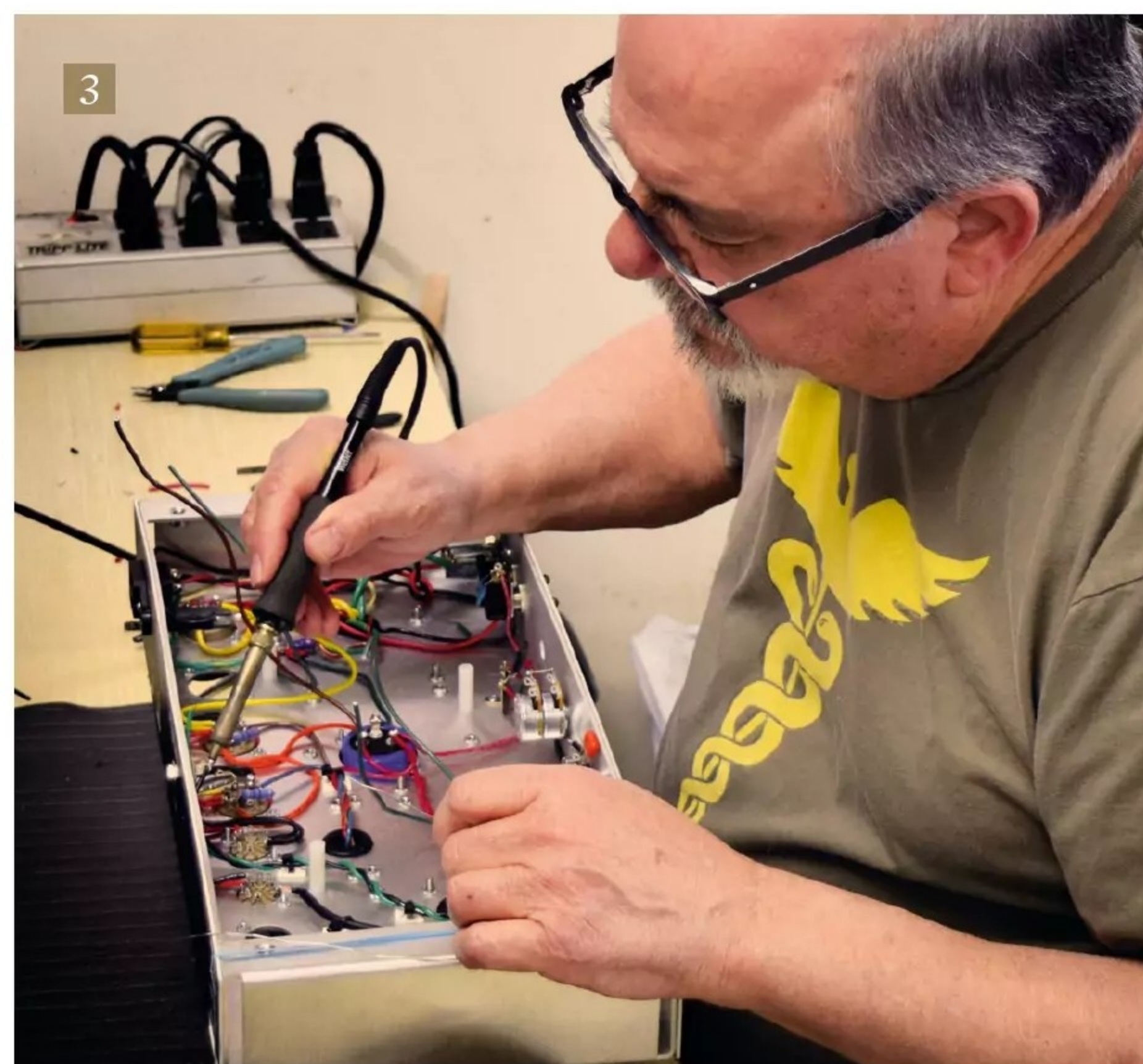
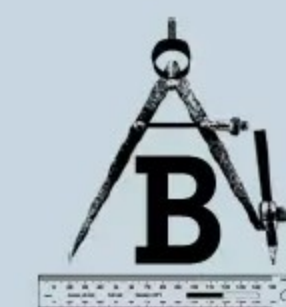
“I've always loved music and electronics and I've been able to make a life by incorporating both. I'm really grateful for that. I'm 73 years old now, and I still come in to work every day. I still enjoy designing new amplifiers and playing that first chord. I try to make the best amps that I can and offer the best customer support. If the phone rings and I'm at my desk, I'll pick it up and freak people out [laughs]. They don't expect me to answer.”

How do you approach designing a new amp? Does it start with a sound that you have in your head or is it more of a technical concept?

“There are a lot of things that I think about. You know, there are a lot of guys that will take a Fender or a Marshall schematic and try to recreate the sound as closely as possible to the original. Some guys do this very well, but that's not me; I won't just copy something. Those guys will always have to deal with someone that has an original, trying to tell you what your version should *really* sound like.



The Octal Six is typical of Dr Z's refreshingly different approach to design, with a unique preamp stage



1. The Octal Six uses an unusual complement of valves but sounds like “tweed on steroids”

2. Simple I/O at the back of the head shows this is a no-messing amp for valve fans

4. Mike Zaite hand-wiring one of his creations in the workshop. His amps are easy to service

“I try to listen to bands or music with a sound that’s really cool or unique and then start wondering what amp they used. I’ll take an amp apart to understand how it works, but I’m more interested in the sonic characteristics as opposed to the schematic. Because I have a pretty deep knowledge of electronic design, I can kind of create similar tones and sounds that make up the amp using my own design criteria. I’ll take bits and pieces of other designs, throw them in the pot and stir it up. A perfect example is the Maz 18. It’s kind of the Holy Trinity where you can get Vox, Fender and Marshall tones if you adjust it correctly. It has its own unique Dr Z sound as well.”

What would you say is the ‘Dr Z sound’?

“My amps have to have great clean sounds and they have to be pedal-friendly. From there, I’ll make adjustments down the line to dial in more of their unique tone. Most players today use a wide variety of tones and everyone has a pedalboard. There are plenty of distortion and overdrive pedals, but there’s no pedal that says, ‘Plug into this and you’re going to get the most amazing clean tone.’ All my amp designs overdrive nicely, too, but I always start with a great clean sound.”

You’ve collaborated with some great artists on some of your amps such as Brad Paisley and Joe Walsh. What was that process like?

“In the late 80s or early 90s, there was a music store called Mike E’s outside of Nashville. Mike travelled around and would find esoteric guitars and amps for his store. They had a reputation as the place to go if you’re looking for something unique. Dr Z amps were the only new gear that Mike E’s carried. So one day Mike called and said, ‘You’re not going to believe this, but Brad Paisley was just here and he bought one of your amps, a Maz 18.’ I had no idea who Brad Paisley was [laughs]. They knew him in Nashville, but in Cleveland, I had no idea. From there, Brad and I connected and became friends. We’ve collaborated on several amps over the years including the Prescription Extra Strength, Stang Ray, Z Wreck and the DB4. Brad is a unique person and he’s very loyal. He played a DB4 2x12 combo at the last Grammy Awards show, which is his favourite Z amp, by the way.”

“Joe Walsh and the James Gang got their start here in the Cleveland area. Back around 1968, there was a battle of the bands and my band was in it along with the James Gang and, of course, they won

“I’ve always loved music and electronics and I’ve been able to make a life by incorporating both”

[laughs]. So Joe and I go way back. He was the nicest guy. He was always very humble and very kind. In 1995, I was able to get a head and cabinet to Joe. I knew some of the guys in his crew and they helped me get the amp to him. The next thing I know, I get a call saying that I need to build another head and cab because Joe is going to use it on the Eagles *Hell Freezes Over* tour and he needs a backup.

“Since 1995, Joe has always had some sort of Z amp on stage with him. We collaborated on the Dr Z Z-Master amp, which was inspired by a 1959 Bandmaster 3x10 that Pete Townshend gifted to Joe but with some added tweaks and modern enhancements to fit Joe’s style. Most recently, we collaborated on the Octal Six amp. Joe needed something to play at the Sphere in Las Vegas and it had to be unique because there aren’t any amps on

MIKE ZAITE PHOTO COURTESY OF DR Z AMPLIFICATION



The Z-40 is a cathode-biased, EL34-based amp that is keenly priced and is a scaled-down version of the powerful Z-80

Zed Head John Priest of Peach Guitars on why he’s long loved Dr Z amps



You were instrumental in getting Dr Z amps over to the UK years ago. What attracted you?

“What always drew me to them was the tone and the value for money because Z [Mike Zaite] designs everything with readily available parts that are easy to service and thoughtfully laid out on the board. And they’re just really, really great workhorses and always sound so amazing.”

Dr Z has brought out such a diversity of designs. What, for you, is its all-time best?

“For me, the ‘Hall of Fame’ amp that he makes is the Maz 18. When I go back to that amp, after all the other things that I’ve tried over the years, it’s still up there with the best tones for any country, jazz, blues, roots... anything aside from metal,

basically! These amps can hang with the best of them. They’re so, so good.”

Tell us about the distinctive Octal Six.

“The Octal Six is not your traditional [valve amp design]. So it’s got a pair of octal preamp tubes, the 6SL7 and 6SN7, and it’s got the 7591 power tube. Until this amp came along, I didn’t have a clue what they were! We all know guitar amps to have EL84s, EL34s, 6L6s... and you just think everybody’s going to go round the houses on those ones for forever and a day. But Z will always try to do something a little bit different.

“So the Octal Six is really an unsung hero in the range that hasn’t had the attention it deserves – perhaps because everybody that’s played through it has been blown away by it. It’s an easy amp to play, and it’s a really fun amp to play, too. It’s just got a classic, you know,

‘tweed on steroids’ kind of tone. It’s a phenomenal amp.”

What are the best-selling Dr Z amps, based on your years of experience stocking them at Peach Guitars?

“The Carmen Ghia and Maz 18, without a doubt. Out of every 10 Dr Z amps we sell, probably eight of them are a combination of Carmen Ghias and Maz 18s. The Maz 18 is great as a pedal platform, but it’s also great if you wanted to take it to a blues jam with just a boost pedal – you can get so many different tones out of the one amp, and it’s the right volume level for pretty much any application.

“But one of my favourite amps they used to make was the EZG-50, a pokey black-panel-Fender inspired amp designed for SRV tones.” www.peachguitars.com

stage. The amps are backstage and they are using in-ears to monitor. Joe called me up and said, ‘Z, for 60 years, I’ve never played without an amp behind me.’ So we talked and he wanted something with octal tubes. It’s a unique design and there’s a whole story to it, but basically it has a harmonic complexity and a thickness that really catches your ear and feels great under your fingers.”

What are your thoughts on digital modelling amps versus valve amps?

“I have some thoughts on this. I go to shows and go backstage and I see these amp modellers. I understand that it’s so much easier to take a Kemper or whatever to a show or on the road. They’re reliable and no tubes to go bad. You can dial in the sound that you want and it goes right to front of house. It’s not the same as playing through a tube amp. It’s not the same feel or playing experience, but to the audience, what they hear sounds great. Modellers are easy, practical and they work. There are a lot of sophisticated electronics in these units, so I gotta tip my hat to that.

“Do modellers have a place? Yes. Are they going to put me out of business? I don’t think so. Tube amps will always be coveted

“I’ll take an amp apart to understand how it works, but I’m more interested in the sonic characteristics”



for their sound and feel. A Stradivarius violin will always be coveted. A ’59 Les Paul will always be coveted. I see that samplers and modellers are getting better and better, so to do my part I’ve taken on building modelling patches of Dr Z amps. I sell them and they do well. All I have to do is send a file. There’s no packing, no shipping, no testing. I’m not opposed to modelling. I see it as an advancement to amp products and I’m working on some things that integrate that technology.”

Dr Z amps have built up sort of a cult following over the years. Was there a moment when you realised your amps had made it – that you had made it?

“Yeah, there have been some memorable moments, but, honestly, I feel like I’m still fighting to be more accomplished and recognised. I’m not at the top of the

mountain yet in my mind. You know, I want to be humble and not sound like I’m blowing smoke, but I do remember sitting there watching the Eagles on their *Hell Freezes Over* tour, hearing Joe Walsh play the Hotel California solo on an SRZ-65 through a Z Best cabinet. That made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“It was the same kind of feeling seeing Brad Paisley at all the awards shows, and even playing the national anthem at the World Series with a Dr Z amp right there behind him. The whole world is seeing this. It was like, ‘Holy shit, look at that.’

“Whenever I hear that a record was recorded with a Z amp or hear that an artist is playing one on tour, it’s satisfying. It makes it feel like every day, even with my 24/7 work schedule, is worthwhile.” <https://drzamps.com>



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JEFF 'SKUNK' BAXTER

The ever-active session legend on his love for cheap guitars,
Roland gear, and modding his pickups

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

"That would probably be a Fender Jazzmaster. Because number one, when you grow up in Mexico, American guitars were so expensive. But I'd always wanted a Jazzmaster because Bob Bogle from The Ventures had one. I'd sent him a fan letter and he told me to buy one, but they were just too expensive. So when I went to the United States to go to school when I was around 13, I went to Manny's [Music in New York City] with all the money I'd saved up and bought a Jazzmaster. And I still have it today. I love that guitar; I think it's one of the coolest guitars ever."

What was the last guitar that you bought, and why?

"The last guitar I bought... for myself? Because I buy a lot of guitars for veterans' charities and stuff like that. But let's see... the last guitar I bought for myself, I think, was a Squier Telecaster that has a Jazzmaster pickup

This recent acquisition is a sub-\$200 Squier Tele with a factory-fitted Jazzmaster pickup, which Skunk set up himself in-store

installed for rhythm. It's a great guitar. I bought it just for the hell of it. I saw it and thought, 'Wow, a Jazzmaster pickup,' and it was put in at the factory. I played it and really loved it, so I told the guy at Guitar Center, 'Pull down that '58 Telecaster you have up there,' which cost about a bazillion dollars, and I spent about an hour setting up the [Squier] guitar.

"They had a guitar repair guy there and I asked if I could use his tools and set up the guitar myself. And very quickly, I compared the two, and the \$140 Squier Telecaster, to me, sounded better, so I bought it. I said, 'Yep, gonna have one of these,' so I think that's the last guitar I bought."

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

"In terms of value for money, that would be a Burns Baby Bison guitar that I bought for 35 bucks. I ended up using it on the Donna Summer album [*Bad Girls on Hot Stuff*] and also started playing it in the studio as well as playing it live. It was a hell of a deal."

"The \$140 Squier Telecaster sounded better than the bazillion dollar '58 Tele, so I bought it"

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

"I don't think I've ever had buyer's remorse. Because if I bought something that I wasn't happy with, I would just rip it apart and put it back together [laughs]."

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

"That's an interesting question. I don't think so because, luckily, I never *had* to sell a guitar. But I remember John Entwistle and I were at the Rainbow – which is a restaurant and bar right next to The Roxy in Los Angeles, in Hollywood – and we were talking about all the guitars we had. John had like 400 or 500 and I had about 200. We just looked at each other and said, 'You know... we're idiots. We have all these beautiful instruments sitting in a warehouse, and that's probably a sin that we should probably go to hell for. It's a terrible thing.' We said, 'There's all these instruments that want to be played – and should be played by other people.' So he ended up getting rid of 80 or 90 per cent of his guitars, and I got rid of most of mine as well. But I didn't regret selling any of them.

"A lot of it was, you know, when you're a kid, and you don't have a lot of money, you dream about how many guitars you can have. And then when you get to that point, I think it starts to get obsessive. I used to push my face up against the plate-glass window at Casa Veerkamp, the main guitar



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF 'SKUNK' BAXTER

Jeff's do-it-all Roland G-5 is a Fender Strat with modelling capabilities that gives him all the sounds he needs

Co-designed by Jeff, the Sparkle Clean Tone Capsule onboard Roland's Blues Cube (below) unlocks a range of clean tones

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF SKUNK BAXTER



JEFF'S GO-TO RIG

"My main guitar is a Roland G-5, which is a Fender Stratocaster that has modelling electronics in it. It's a project we did some years ago at Roland because I got tired of carrying different guitars with me. I can have an electric 12-string, drop it down to a baritone, be able to have a nylon-string guitar, be able to just hit the switch and go to an open G, to be able to play slide, to have humbucking pickups, a Telecaster or a Stratocaster.

"Having a number of different guitars and instruments in one guitar makes life delightful, especially when playing live. Sometimes you just want to get that nylon-string feel and sound, or you want to be able to go to an electric 12-string or an acoustic 12-string, you know? So that's my go-to instrument as far as the guitars are concerned.

"For amplifiers, it's the Roland Blues Cube Artist because, again, I spent a lot of time working on that design with Roland and customising it – especially with the specific Tone Capsule and to be able to reconfigure the electronics of it, so it's exactly what I want.

"And as far as pedals are concerned, many, many years ago, one of my first projects with Roland was to develop the GP-10 [Guitar Processor] multi-effects pedal.

And to this day, I still use it.
So I love it."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROLAND

Bought & Sold

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROLAND



Above: Pedal steel features on numerous sessions performed by Jeff over the years, notably with Steely Dan and The Doobie Brothers

Left: Jeff's Burns Baby Bison was produced after the company was acquired by Baldwin in 1965 (note the plate on the top horn). It was an absolute steal at \$35 and would feature on Donna Summers' *Hot Stuff* album

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF 'SKUNK' BAXTER



store in Mexico City that had American guitars, and look in. I'd think, 'I don't know how I'm going to do this, but one of these days, I have to get one. I have to do this.' And so, I guess, it was one of those obsessive things. But I don't regret that at all. As a matter of fact, it took a huge burden off me to get all that stuff out the door."

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

"The first thing I would say for sure is that, if you can, ignore everything and just play it. And if it plays great, then it is great. Whether it's a Squier as opposed to, like, an expensive Fender special, custom – whatever. This is not to say that you shouldn't buy quality instruments, that's not the point. The point is that whatever guitar feels good to you is the right guitar. Don't buy it for any other reason."

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

"Well, it's a lot of amplifiers. The first amplifier I bought brand-new was a Fender Vibroverb, and it was a wonderful amplifier. It was the first amplifier that Fender had designed and built with built-in reverb, and it was, and still is, a wonderful amp and great for steel guitar. They have a nice big 15-inch speaker, and as soon as I bought it, I replaced the speaker with a JBL speaker. They're just wonderful amps."

"Whatever guitar feels good to you is the right guitar. Don't buy it for any other reason"

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?

"Well, it depends. If the cheap guitar is a good enough platform that I can customise in the way I want, then I'd buy the cheap guitar and a great amp. But when you say 'great', do you mean great-sounding, or expensive? [For example,] I've been working for Roland for 50 years, so I have a place in my heart for them [as an example of an affordable amp maker]. As a matter of fact, when I play live, I use a pair of Roland Blues Cube Artists because I had a lot to do with designing those amps. So, absolutely, if I had to choose [between a Roland amp and a Fender Princeton, for example], it would be the Katana."

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

"Oh, I would absolutely take the humbuckers, take them apart, rewind the bobbins, coil-split them and then have the best of both worlds [laughs]." **[AD]**



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PERFECT DAY

If guitars are actually getting better by the day, us modders will have nothing to improve. Is it the end of the line, wonders Dave Burrluck, when he gets a new guitar on the bench

'Made in Hurry' is a whimsical put-down we often use to refer to a guitar that's less than perfect. The good old 'guitar-shaped object' is another. But while those far-from-complimentary terms see occasional mention in our review pages, we have to admit both are getting rarer. I can certainly remember, in the not-too-distant past, having to 'sort out' a guitar or three before I could actually attempt a review. Recently, well, it's the exception.

Now, we are talking about lower end guitars, but even that's changing. Guitars are not getting cheaper. Have the price rises coincided with a better quality instrument? In some cases, yes, but even that's not straightforward as, increasingly, the prices we're given for new large-production guitars can sometimes bear little resemblance to what you might actually pay in-store or online.

One of our stand-out guitars of 2024 in this area was PRS's SE NF3, which I was told (unofficially) was the three 'single coil' guitar the company was planning to make

before a certain John Mayer came along. At review, we were given a price of £979 with the caveat, "It'll be £799 in-store." That proved true at the time of writing, but a year after the guitar launched you can now pick one up at Andertons or Peach for £499! *Guitar Techniques* alumnus Jason Sidwell bought one after reading our review; he knows his guitars. Our Neville Marten, another guitar long-termer, was equally impressed, as was his bandmate and original *Guitarist* scribe Eddie Allen.

Since then, PRS has been on a roll. Along with specific 40th Anniversary models, in June this year PRS dropped five new Special Semi-Hollow and Studio models in its USA S2 and 'offshore' SE ranges. While

"The NF 53 is a retooling of the Fender Telecaster, a cover version of a great song"

we cover a trio of those elsewhere this issue (see page 80), we'd barely filed our copy before another one launched at the start of July: the SE NF 53.

On The Bench

This new SE, like the USA model it's based on, is a bit of a departure for PRS, based as it is on the classic Fender Telecaster. But just as the world doesn't need another one of those, the NF 53 (like the previous Silver Sky) is a retooling of that ancient design, a cover version of a great song. Yes, the body shape is in the ballpark, the obvious differences being the forearm and ribcage contours, plus that scoop to the treble cutaway and the outline is lightly offset. Under the perfectly glossed opaque finish is a swamp ash body: we obviously have no idea if that's two or more pieces, and all we really know is that it's a perfectly good solidbody bolt-on weight at 3.33kg (7.33lb).

A quick tune-up and you'll soon work out that it holds its tuning well, plays very cleanly and – rather importantly – plays very well in tune, too.



There's no truck with fancy facings – the headstock is left *au naturel*, with just that 'SE' logo giving the game away. The nut is left typically high with deep string grooves, but it's otherwise perfectly cut



PRS's NF 53 model, now in SE guise as here, was inspired by one of Paul Reed Smith's vintage guitars from the early 50s

2



The lightweight tuners now have the wing-style buttons of many of the USA models

With its full Fender scale, rather than PRS's shorter 635mm (25 inches), it feels very familiar, while the relatively narrow width and full depth feels comfortably big in your hand (41.65mm wide at the nut with 35mm string spacing; 22.7mm deep at the 1st fret filling out to 25mm by the 12th). The finish feels very thin, almost raw-wood unfinished, and although we have a headstock scarf joint, it's well done – you have to look to see it [pics 1 and 2]. A little more in-curve to the fingerboard edges

and slightly more edge rolling wouldn't go amiss, but, as is, the overall feel has to be commended.

As to the supplied setup with 0.010s, there's minimal relief to the neck. String height is bang on $\frac{1}{16}$ th of an inch (1.59mm) on the treble side at the 12th fret, very slightly more on the bass side. The strings are very low over the 1st fret, and bending behind the nut each string comes back in tune; the string grooves are perfectly cut.

Speaking of frets, the size measures slightly wider and a fraction lower than the USA standard wire, but these are very cleanly installed, and the ends of the slots are filled to match the maple. The ends are rounded, too, and the tops are smooth. Checking over the 'board with a Fret Rocker shows they're near-perfect flat. Not quite Plek level, but with such clean playability, I had zero issues.

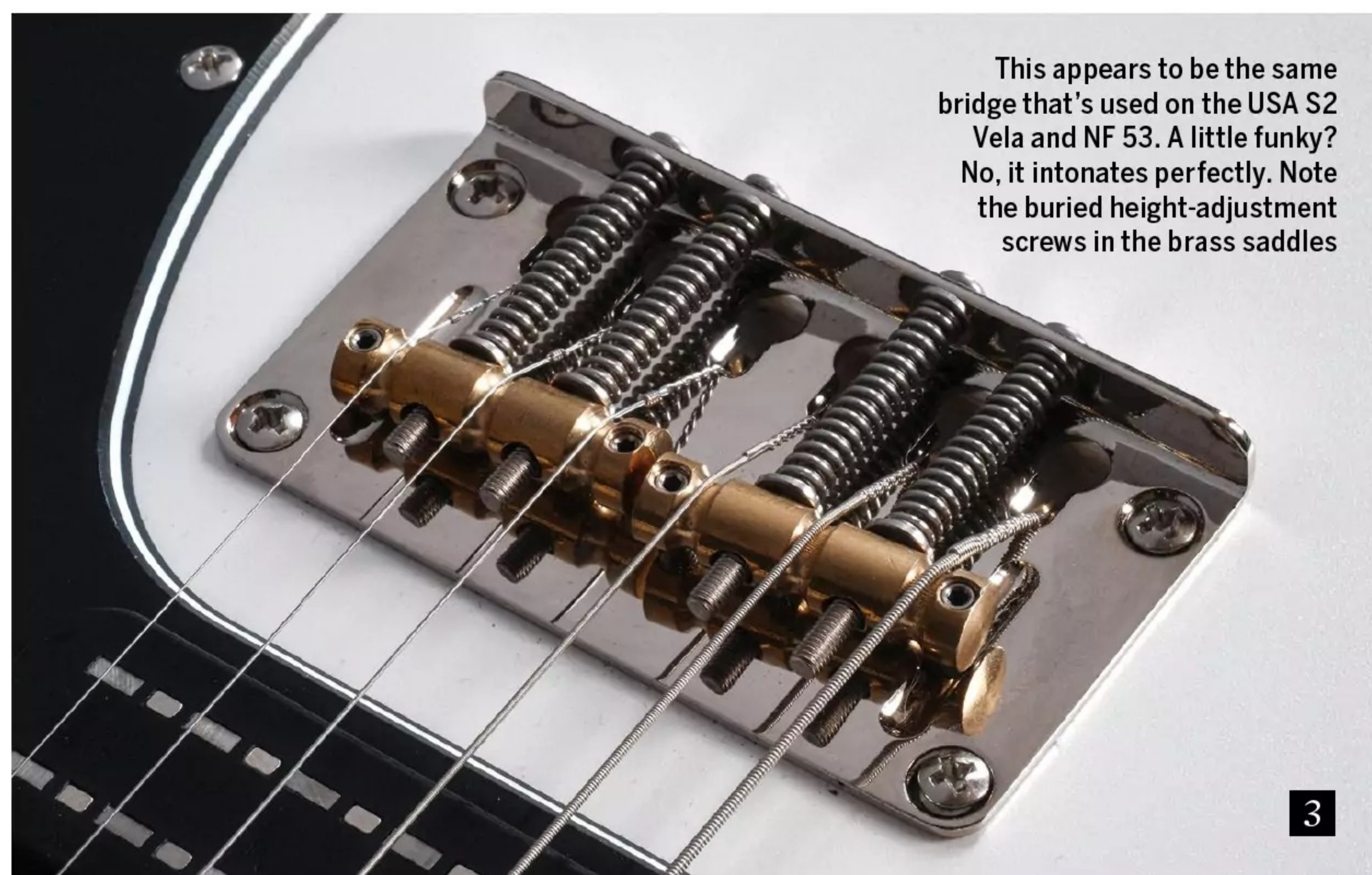
Part of the in-tune-ness we often mention about PRS guitars is that

"The way these Narrowfield pickups sit between both classic camps is part of the appeal"

they always, and still do, use a slightly compensated nut placement: the nut is moved a gnat's closer to the 1st fret, which helps stop the lower-position notes from playing sharp.

But what about the bridge [pic3]? This plate-style construct, which sort of nods back to Paul Reed Smith's pre-production designs, first featured on the S2 Vela. It was then used on the 2023 USA NF 53. The strings technically top-

This appears to be the same bridge that's used on the USA S2 Vela and NF 53. A little funky? No, it intonates perfectly. Note the buried height-adjustment screws in the brass saddles

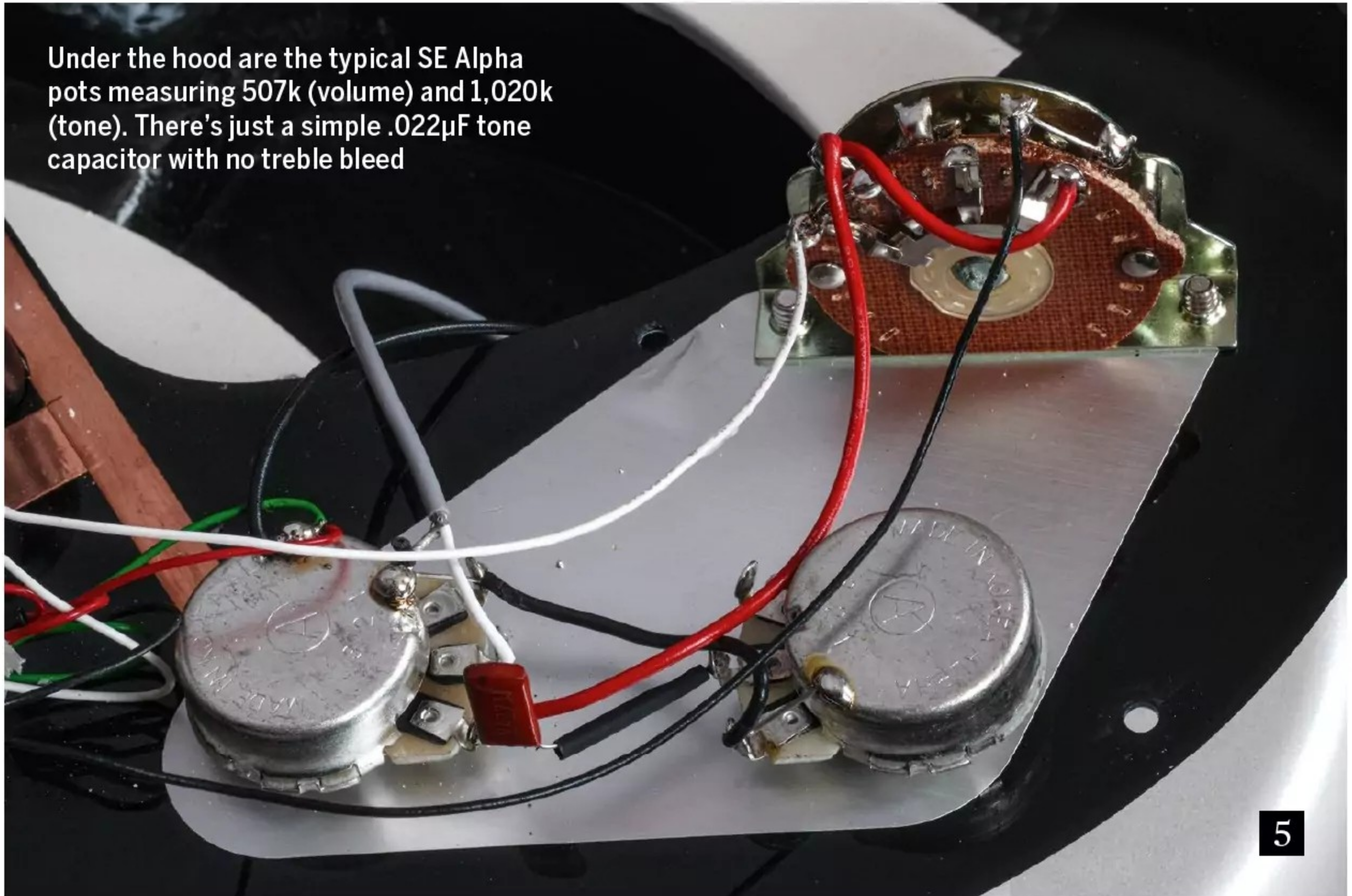


3

4



Based on the USA Narrowfield DDs, these Indonesian 'S' versions, with their additional steel slugs between the flush magnetic poles, really capture a fat 'single-coil' voicing, despite being narrow-aperture humbuckers. DCRs measure 9.1k at the bridge and 8.15k at the neck



Under the hood are the typical SE Alpha pots measuring 507k (volume) and 1,020k (tone). There's just a simple .022µF tone capacitor with no treble bleed

load (they don't pass through the body like a Telecaster) and are held in small keyhole cut-outs in the nickel-plated steel baseplate. Then, unlike a Telecaster, we have two (not three) brass saddles, each with two screws to set the intonation and two height-adjustment screws per saddle, which are buried in the saddles and don't protrude.

Now, rather like a Telecaster bridge, this can't possibly intonate as accurately as a six-saddle bridge, for example, can it? Checking the guitar's intonation with a Peterson Strobe tuner, well, it's near-perfect. I didn't touch a thing. You might think those two straight-topped saddles wouldn't give you the correct radius, but the string arch sits between 10 and 12 inches and, personally, as I said, I didn't change a thing.

Technically, the vintage-style tuners here with the wing buttons don't feel as smooth as the Phase IIIs we've had on the USA guitar. Aside from being light in

weight, they do the job and, really, you'll barely use them. As I said, this is a *very* stable guitar.

Buying any guitar with non-standard pickups means you can't change them without some often irreversible alteration. The Narrowfield DD 'S' humbuckers here [pics 4 and 5] are a case in point, not least that they're mounted on the scratchplate, not through a mounting ring.

For many modders, then, a guitar like this isn't going to satisfy our endless pickup-swapping fantasies, and obviously if you're chasing the tones of a '53 'Blackguard' then this isn't the guitar for you. But how often have many of us tried to actually use a 'vintage' Telecaster on those tricky function/cover-band gigs where you're leaping from clean jazz/blues to gained modern rock with the one guitar, while the venue's flashing Christmas lights mean you're constantly battling hum? The SE NF3 is as quiet as a mouse.

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: PRS SE NF 53

PRICE: £979 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

BODY: Swamp ash

NECK: Maple (scarf construction), NF 53 profile, bolt-on

FINGERBOARD: Maple, abalone bird inlays, 254mm radius

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/41.65mm
FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: PRS 'plate style' bridge w/ brass saddles, PRS-design vintage-style tuners with wing buttons

ELECTRICS: 2x PRS Narrowfield DD 'S' humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.33/7.33

FINISHES: Pearl White (as reviewed), Black Doghair, White Doghair

WEB: www.prsguitars.com

PROS & CONS

PROS Clean build; good weight; big neck; excellent setup; Narrowfield DD 'S' humbuckers; wide-range voicing

CONS Nothing for The Mod Squad to do here!

Guitarist
GOLD
10/10

Unplugged, there's an encouraging ring and vibrancy to the guitar, and amp'd up you hear a Tele-like spank at the bridge if you pull the volume back and pick close to that bridge. There's quite a big depth at the neck that nods towards a more muscular standard neck humbucker, and the mix is clear and spanky. But overall, it's the way these Narrowfields sit between both classic camps that is part of the immense appeal.

Verdict

With a quoted list price of £979, we'll wager this SE NF 53 will be less in-store by the time you read this. We only get the Pearl White of our sample, plus the more USA-like Black and White Doghair gloss colours, but I'd rock any of those.

With a rehearsal and gig already under its belt, we're beginning to wonder if so-called lower-end guitars are getting too good. It's a 10 from The Mod Squad and we're officially out of business! **G**



Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

Can this early 60s Gibson Southern Jumbo be saved or has it gone belly up?

1961 Southern Jumbo Restoration Pt 1



With a strong aroma of cigarettes and some dubious 'tan lines', this 'player-grade' Jumbo is ready to be restored

Vintage dealers often place guitars into broad categories that correspond to their condition, rarity and originality, as well as the customers they attract. At the top end of the market, museum or collector-grade guitars may include highly original examples in outstanding condition or those that are exceptionally rare due to low production numbers or unique finishes. There are also those associated with famous players that command huge prices irrespective of modifications or refinishes.

At the other end of the market, we encounter vintage guitars euphemistically described as 'player grade'. These might include Stratocasters that once had locking vibratos, Telecasters with added pickups, and Juniors with tune-o-matic bridge conversions. With every pickup, bridge and parts replacement the value drops accordingly, and as a rule of thumb a refinish will be worth about half as much as an equivalent guitar with a factory finish.

So how can we categorise this 1961 Gibson Southern Jumbo? It's obviously not 'collector grade', and some might even say it barely qualifies as 'player grade', but looks can deceive. Vintage guitars in this sort of condition are a bit like houses that need updating. Not everybody is willing or able to see the potential, but if you can, there's joy to be had in turning a basket case into a thing of beauty.

Making The Grade

Any restoration project should begin with a detailed appraisal of the instrument. Gibson made the last of the slope-shouldered Southern Jumbos in 1962, after which the company introduced the square-shouldered body and, for a short time, the infamous plastic bridge.

By 1961, the Southern Jumbo was essentially a fancier version of the J-45/J-50. The upgrades were largely cosmetic, with multi-ply body binding, split parallelogram fretboard markers, inlaid headstock logos and individual Kluson tuners, rather than the three-on-a-plate version. It has also been suggested that Gibson reserved superior spruce tops for its prestige models.

This guitar's case is festooned with vintage stickers showing all the countries it has visited, and Holmesian powers of

PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

deduction aren't required to determine that it has lived a life. At first glance, the condition might be described as awful. The top has a dirty orangey brown appearance, and 'tan lines' reveal that it has had at least two pickguards since the original was replaced. None now remain.

The only trace of the Kluson tuners is their outlines imprinted into the lacquer on the rear of the headstock, and the guitar currently sports a set of Schallers. I'm fine with Grovers, but for some reason chrome Schallers on vintage Gibsons turn my stomach. There's a missing section of fretboard binding on the bass side, and,

"Not everybody will to see the potential, but there's joy in turning a basket case into a beauty"

although it's split into two parts, all the binding remains present on the treble side. But it's peeling away on both sides of the fretboard.

Although faded, the back of the neck retains its cherry brown finish, and the neck joint appears to be rock solid. The bizarre orange colouration on the rear body binding matches the top. This suggests a refinish, but it looks so much better than the top that I'm not so sure. Wiping a small area using methylated spirits on a cotton bud, I discover the surface layer comes off to reveal a yellowed layer of (presumably) nitro over the binding.

I suspect that the top was stripped and refinished with shellac, and whoever did it may have given the lacquer on the back and sides a once over to even out the colour. I definitely want to get the shellac off the binding, but it gets very gummy and sticky when it's wiped with meths.

I'm planning to try to 'polish' off the shellac using 0000 grade wire wool and compound, and hopefully that will reveal nitrocellulose lacquer underneath. I can report that it stinks of cigarette smoke and there are strips of tape residue on the back and sides. Maybe this was a previous owner's way of attaching setlists.



A set of chrome Schaller tuners has been fitted and the fretboard binding is peeling away by the nut



The outline of the original Kluson tuners can be seen and the headstock has never needed repair



Methylated spirits wipes away the dirty brown layer over the binding to reveal yellowed lacquer

Bound For Glory

Before bringing the strings up to pitch and assessing the guitar's structural integrity and tone, I decide that reattaching the fretboard binding will prevent any unfortunate accidents. Only the very end of the strips are coming away, but experience has taught me that even areas that seem intact are probably barely hanging on.

I begin on the treble side, and very little coaxing is needed for the binding to peel

away down to the split just beyond the neck join. There is a gap at the split, another one adjacent to the nut, and I can see that the surviving binding nibs don't quite line up with the frets. Rather than signs of a previous repair, this is more likely evidence of the shrinkage that caused the split in the first place.

Gibson used animal protein glue to attach binding, and all the factory workers would probably have had a pot of hot hide glue close by. It dries very hard and it's very easy



A sizeable section of binding is missing from the bass side of the fretboard

to scrape away as it flakes off and turns to powder. I use a sharp blade to clean up the binding channel and then scrape off any glue residue from the binding.

Mixing up and heating a batch of hide glue for such a small job would be a bit of a palaver, so I use fish glue instead. Many of the jobs that are traditionally done with hide glue can also be done with fish glue. It may not be quite as strong, but it's more

“Persevering with a broken bridge plate is like keeping leaky capacitors in a vintage valve amplifier”

or less the same stuff and you can apply it cold from the bottle. Best of all, it doesn't smell of fish.

After a dry run, I prep some strips of low-tack masking tape and brush the glue along the binding channel. Fish glue grabs nicely but still gives you plenty of open time, and once the binding is in position I use the tape strips to hold it down before wrapping the whole length using surgical tubing. After an hour or so, I remove the tubing and tape before flaking off any squeeze out.

Strings Attached

The guitar had arrived strung up but detuned by a couple of tones. It's often recommended that acoustic guitars should be detuned when they're put away in storage, but it can also be a sign that a guitar has issues. It's time to find out which way this project is headed next.

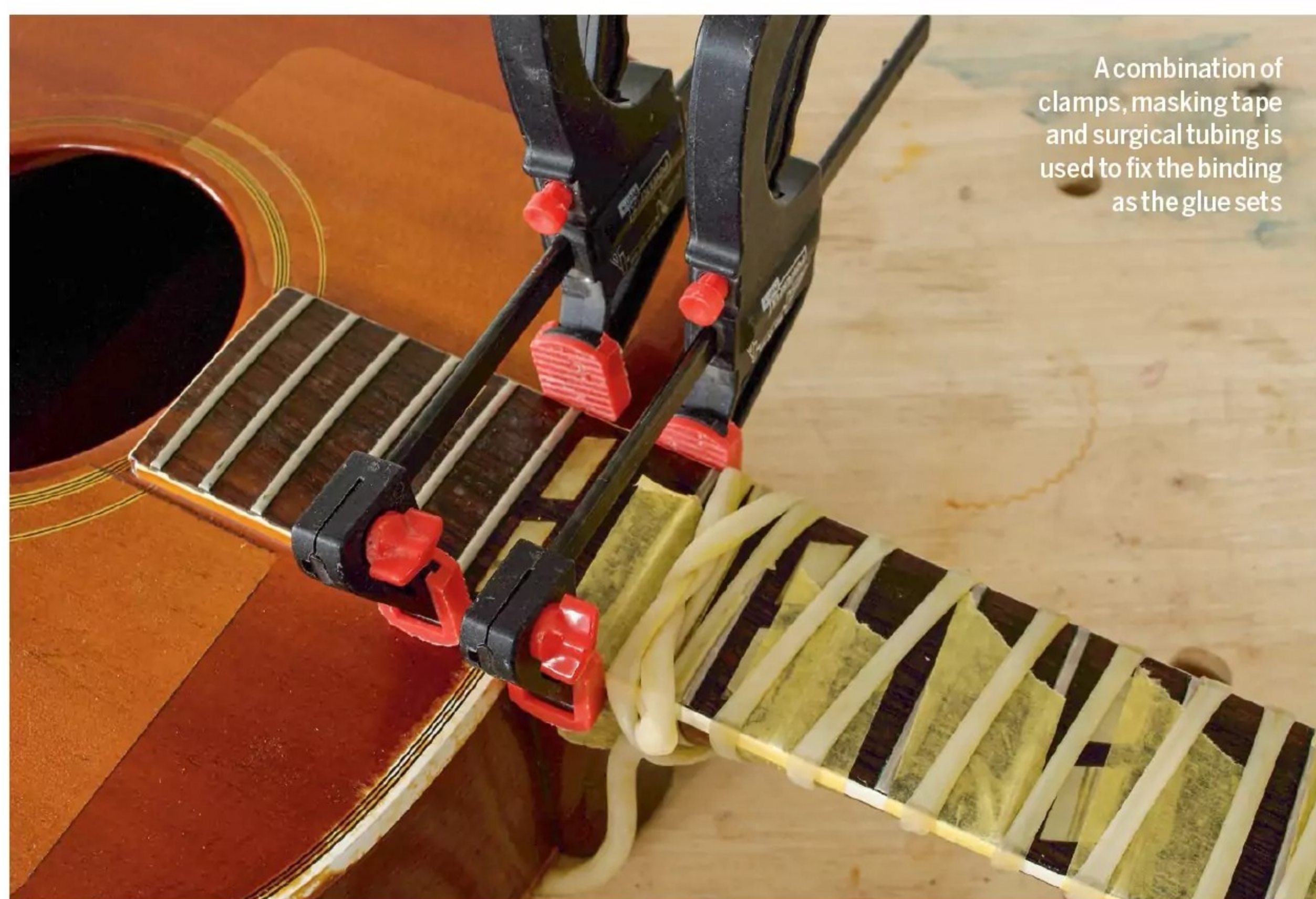
I gradually bring the strings up to concert pitch without hearing any creaks, cracks or any other warning sounds. My initial assessment proves encouraging because the neck joint is clearly solid, the action is on the acceptable side of medium-high and, even with a fairly dead set of strings, I can hear the unmistakable tones of a vintage Gibson acoustic. The lows have a rounded woody punch, the trebles are sweet and slightly attenuated, and the midrange is full. It sounds impressively loud, too.

A quick check establishes that the truss rod is functioning correctly, and when a long steel ruler is placed over the frets, it lands up about 1/16-inch above the top of the bridge. I decide to put the guitar back into its case and recheck it after a few days.

My concerns that it might belly up are confirmed by a bulge behind the bridge,



After peeling off the binding, a fresh scraper blade is used to clean the slot prior to re-gluing



A combination of clamps, masking tape and surgical tubing is used to fix the binding as the glue sets

The bone saddle may be original, and with such ample height there's plenty of scope for lowering the action

which is noticeably tipping forward. The action has come up slightly, but that's less of a concern because the saddle is quite high and there's plenty of room for adjustment. Even so, the top is bellying up more than I would like, so it's time to remove the strings and take a look inside.

Brace Yourself

Figuring out what's going on inside an acoustic guitar isn't the easiest of tasks, but flat-tops with round soundholes are a lot easier than f-hole archtops. You can use an inspection mirror on a telescopic arm, a smartphone camera, or you can get an arm inside to feel your way around.

The idea is to try to find any loose or cracked braces. A thin feeler gauge can be run along the braces where they're glued to the top, and anywhere it slides under

indicates a point of separation. So far as I can tell all the braces are solid, although I do notice white glue residue plastered around some areas, particularly beneath the one and only split in the top near the soundhole.

Then my phone camera reveals the more concerning issue of a damaged bridge plate. This plate is a fairly thin piece of wood that's glued in between the X-braces in the area under the bridge. It looks like Gibson used a small strip of maple, and the rear edge is cut so close to the pin holes that the back of the plate has splintered off.

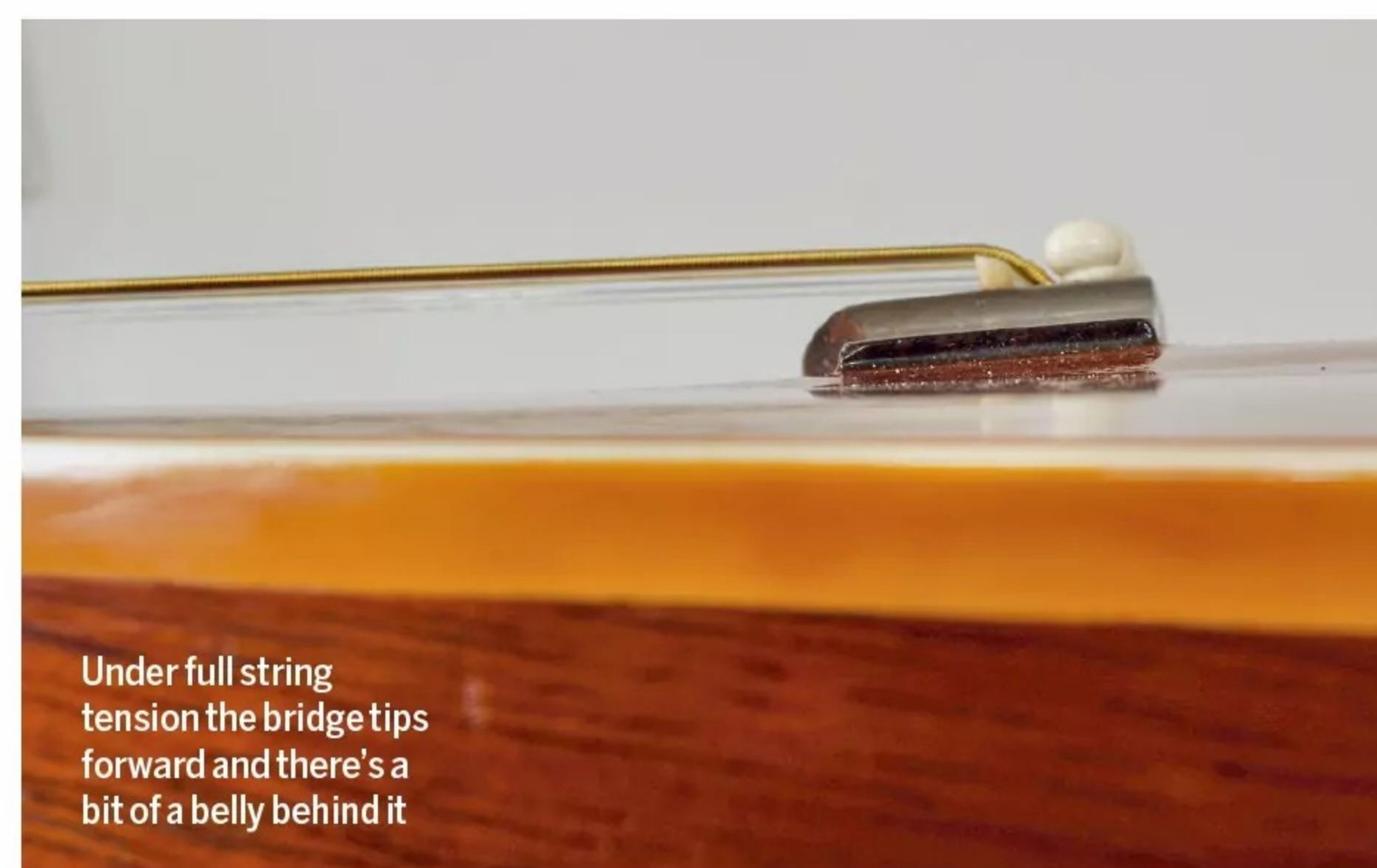
Planning Ahead

The most pressing concern is the bridge plate, and replacing it will be the luthier's equivalent of keyhole surgery. A replaced bridge plate can negatively

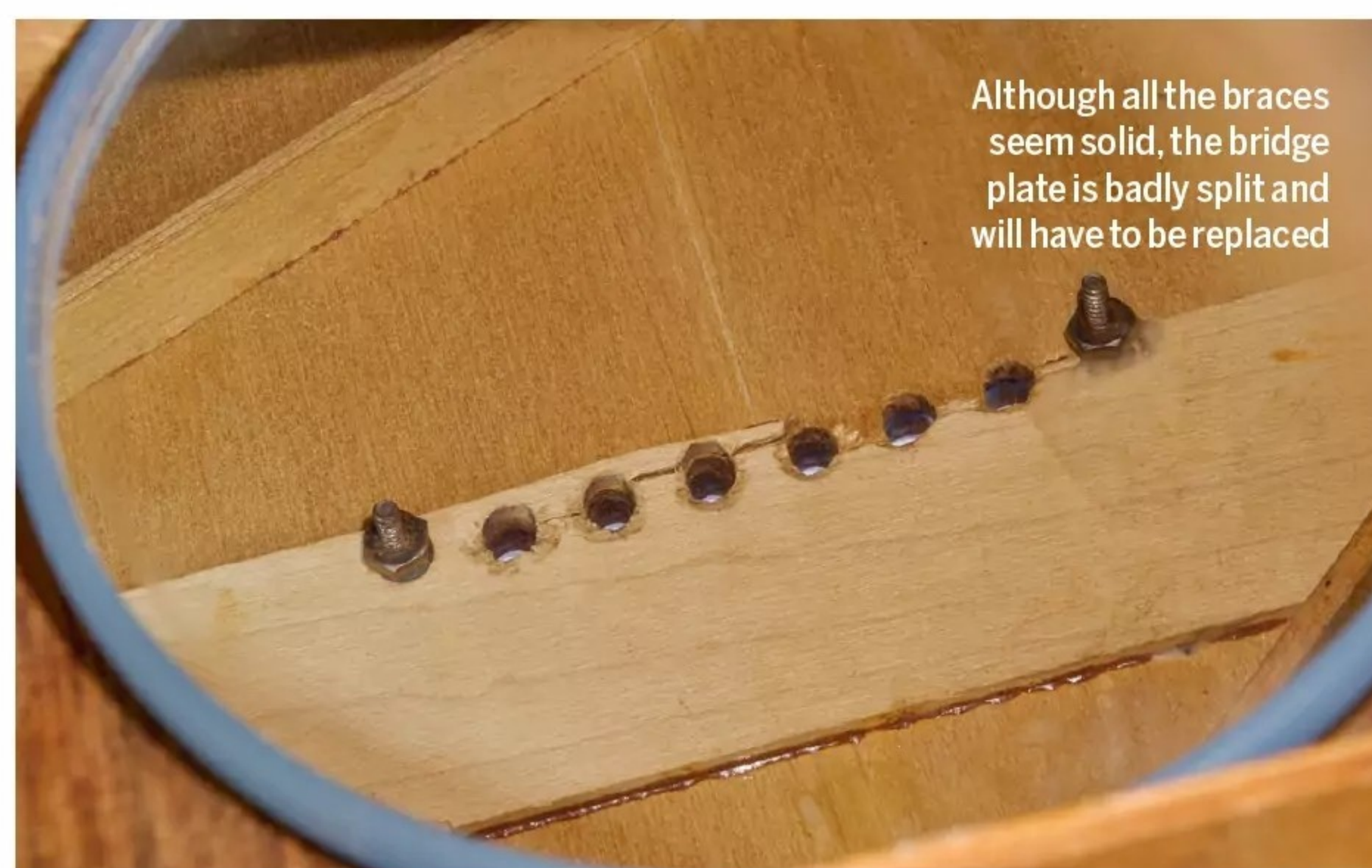
impact a vintage acoustic guitar's value, but persevering with a broken plate and a deformed top is comparable to the foolhardiness of keeping leaky capacitors in a vintage valve amplifier.

A set of vintage or repro Kluson tuners will be consigning the Schallers to Reverb, and I'll need to decide whether the original frets have one last levelling left in them or if they should be replaced along with the nut. The top will be stripped and treated to a sunburst refinish, and I'm hoping the pickguard shadows will disappear in the process. I can also see that the top was heavily sanded with the bridge in situ, so I'll most likely be removing the bridge to try to improve that before glueing it back on. It will need a repro pickguard, too, so it's going to be an adventure. 📷

www.huwpriceguitar.com



Under full string tension the bridge tips forward and there's a bit of a belly behind it



Although all the braces seem solid, the bridge plate is badly split and will have to be replaced



David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

Streamliners have been ever-present in Gretsch's catalogue, but this could be a one-off

1955 Gretsch Streamliner



Western motif fretboard inlays give this immaculate Jaguar Tan over Copper Mist 1955 Streamliner its unique selling point

This is a virtually immaculate Jaguar Tan over Copper Mist Gretsch Streamliner. There is absolutely no colour fading, and the best part is that it has Western motif inlays on the fretboard. That makes it such a cool and unique piece, and it may have been a custom order because I've never seen another one. Then again, it might have been a 6120 fretboard that was just laying around and they slapped it on there. After all, we are talking about Gretsch.

"Streamliners were not premium guitars in the Gretsch catalogue, but even so, you have to appreciate the attention to detail. Sometimes the cheaper Gretches were only some f-hole or fretboard binding away from being identical to the high-end models, and this Streamliner is essentially the same as a 1955 6120. The matching Copper Mist pickguard has almost no pick marks on it and is like brand-new, so I don't think this guitar has ever really been played. The binding has no cracks or rot.

"The neck angle is perfect, which is a real bonus. Whenever we have to reset a Gretsch neck, we never know what we're going to find when the neck comes off. We've had sawdust fall out, pieces of cork and even glue-impregnated cardboard. It was like the joints were routed with a spoon and they used whatever they could find just to fill the gaps. Fred Gretsch Jr once told me they would go out for three-Martini lunches and come back later in the afternoon to build guitars.

"Here, we have the Melita bridge with plastic feet and individual intonation adjustment for the strings. The only negative I can find is a bit of off-gassing on the pickup

"No other guitar looks or sounds like them... Every pro player should have a Gretsch in their toolbox"

spacer that's under the bridge pickup. This is very common on Gretsches from this era, and although it's holding together, it might need replacing in a couple of years.

"The guitar has the aluminium nut, arrow inlaid knobs and, besides the strings, it's basically 'new old stock'. There are no nicks or dents, no buckle rash, and the back of the neck has no playwear. The neck profile is basically a medium C and a little flat up near the 1st fret, but it rounds out by the 3rd fret. It plays extremely well, and while you might think that's only to be expected with a guitar that's almost untouched, I would say that 90 per cent of the Gretsches from the vintage era that have passed through my hands have had some sort of problem.

"The neck pickup is very mellow and bluesy, and it's a really beautiful sound. I find that when I roll back the volume controls both pickups sound even sweeter. There are master volume and tone controls, too, plus a three-way pickup selector switch. Most Gretsch fans tend to go for Filter'Tron pickups, but there is a crowd that prefers these DeArmond Dynasonics.

"I bought it from the original owner in 2002 and I'm very happy with this one, which is something that's rare for me to

say about Gretsches. It comes with the original snowflake case and there are some nice tags and the original cable in there.

"I think Gretsch was operating on a tight budget and competing against companies that could make much finer instruments, but they managed to find a niche. They may not have been the best guitars, but they left a giant mark and have influenced more than one generation of player.

"It's hard to say if vintage Gretsch guitars will ever become really popular again. I can report that they're hard to sell, particularly when they have issues. The only models that fetch a premium are the White Falcon and Penguin, and the 6120. All the other models tend to sit around the shop for a very long time and the longer they're out in the air, the worse it is for them. So we have to try to sell them on quickly because it's like musical chairs. If you're unlucky, a Gretsch will decide to fall apart while you own it, so you're stuck with the expense. But if you can move it on, it becomes someone else's problem.

"The old slogan they used was 'The Great Gretsch Sound', and there is no other guitar that looks or sounds like them; they're easy to identify on records. To my eye, a black Duo Jet with a Bigsby is a cooler-looking guitar than a Goldtop, and although a Gretsch would never be my go-to guitar, every pro player should have one in their toolbox." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
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"Sometimes cheaper Gretches were only some f-hole or fretboard binding or way from being identical to the high-end models"

Greening on the bridge pickup's chrome plating is a telltale sign of the celluloid spacer starting to deteriorate – and it will eventually need to be replaced

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Open C Tuning

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Atkin J45T
Difficulty ★★☆☆☆ | 30 mins per example

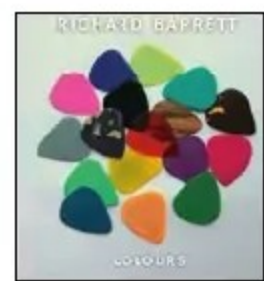
NON-STANDARD OPEN OR ALTERED tunings crop up frequently in blues, folk and country music. One reason for this is that they can greatly facilitate slide playing. But another is that unusual chord voicings and inversions, which would be impossible in regular tuning, can be played relatively easily – depending on the tuning, of course. This does come at the expense of regular chords and scale patterns, but the whole point here is to get into some fresh territory.

I've chosen open C (low to high: CGCGCE) for the example piece, inspired by Jimmy Page, who uses this tuning on the Zeppelin track *Poor Tom*. Honourable mention should also go to Justin Hayward, who used this tuning on a 12-string acoustic for The Moody Blues' *Question* where he gives Pete Townshend a run for his money concerning rhythm guitar chops!

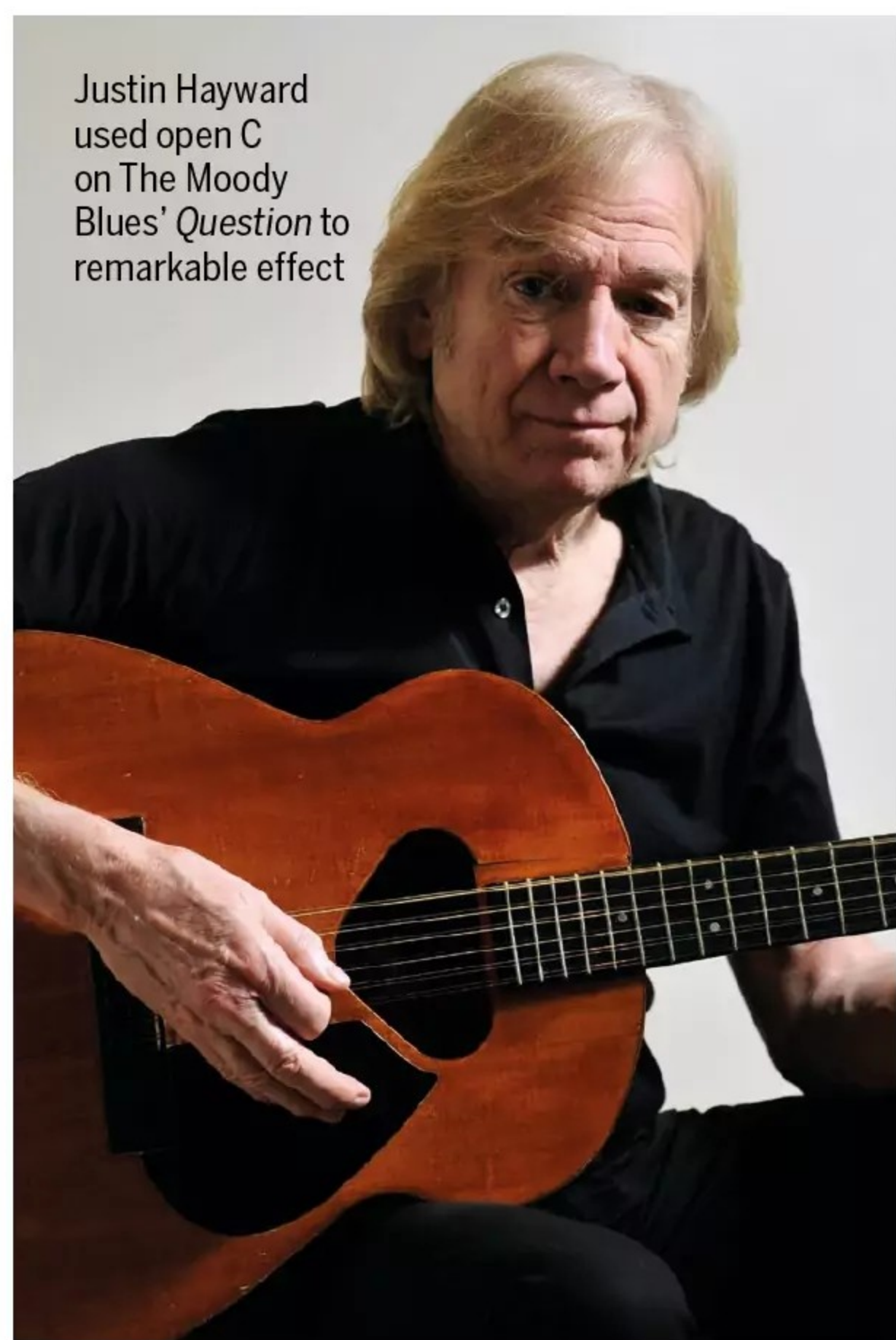
Compared with some of the more widely used alternative tunings such as DADGAD and open G, open C gives a wide range, with

the low E detuned by three whole tones (extra-light strings may not be the best choice for this) and the high E staying at its usual pitch. Jimmy Page uses a similar (C6) tuning for the tracks *Bron-Yr-Aur* and *Friends*, the difference being that he leaves the fifth string at standard pitch, giving (low to high) CACGCE.

I've tried to incorporate lots of useful chord shapes in the example piece to give you a good 'vocabulary' to have a play around with. Finally, don't forget that you're free to experiment by raising or lowering the pitch of individual strings to create your own custom tunings as Nick Drake would do. Just be aware that you'll get through more strings and you may need to carry a few more guitars around with you on tour... **G**



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon



Justin Hayward used open C on The Moody Blues' *Question* to remarkable effect

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND

Example 1

WE BEGIN WITH A RAKE across the open strings, then add in a series of hammer-ons and pull-offs, leaving as many strings ringing as possible. Leaving notes to ring wherever possible (particularly open strings) is a theme throughout the piece, helping to smooth transitions between melody and chords. Bars 1 to 2 and 5 to 6 are a good example of letting the ringing open strings 'fill in' behind the melody notes. The strumming rhythms can be varied at will. In fact, it's better to approach them this way. Attempting to duplicate the same parts every time could end up sounding a bit too regimented.

Open strings mixed with high fretted notes are a feature much of the time, leading to some quite unusual and complex-sounding chord names. Try not to let these put you off, though – these are simply names for sounds after all. Elsewhere, bars 9 to 10 are treated as a harmonised melody, rather than a chord progression. The final four bars momentarily venture away from open strings. And don't forget to slow down (marked 'ral') at bars 19 to 20. Remember that this isn't a classical piece, so feel free to take liberties and vary the themes!

♩ = 100 (approx)

C

Open C tuning (C - G - C - G - C - E)

E
C
G
C
G
C

1

B $\flat$ add9 **F** **C**

E 1 1 1 1 1 0 1 1 1 1 1 1
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 G 3 3 3 3 3 0 2 2 2 2 2 2
 C 3 3 3 3 3 0 2 2 2 2 2 2

E $\flat$ 6 **F** **C**

E 3 5 5 3 0 1 0 2 4 4 4 2 0 2 0
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

E $\flat$ 6 **F** **C**

E 6 6 6 6 6 8 8 8 8 8 8 8
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 G 8 8 8 8 8 10 10 10 10 10 10 10
 C 8 7 7 7 7 8 9 9 9 9 9 9

Cmaj7(no3rd) **Caddmaj7**

E 10/12 12 12 10 7 8 5 3 3 3 3 3 3
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 G 10/12 12 12 10 7 9 5 4 4 4 4 4 4
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B $\flat$ add9 **Gm11** **C**

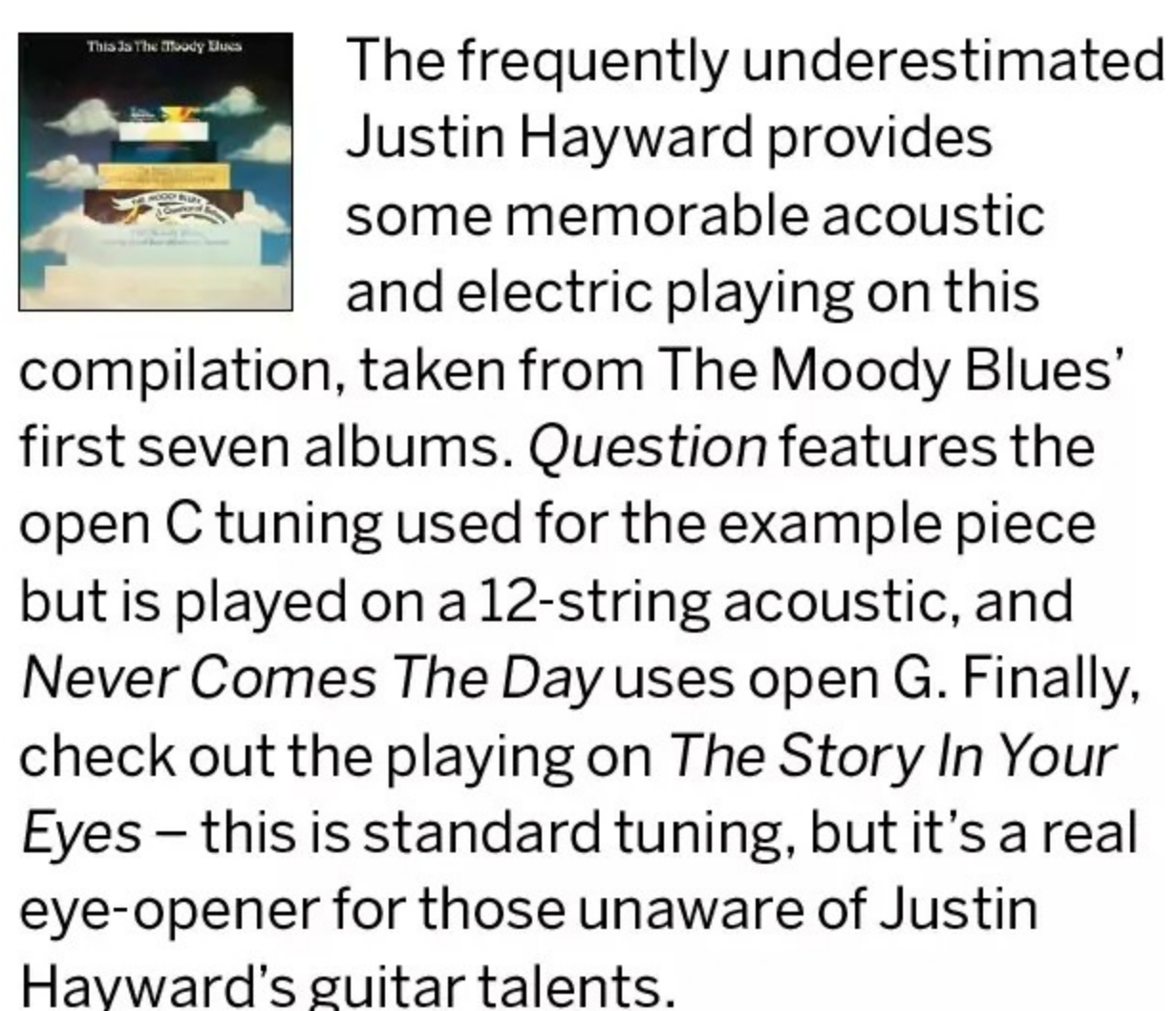
E 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
 C 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 G 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3
 C 3 3 3 3 3 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

Hear It Here

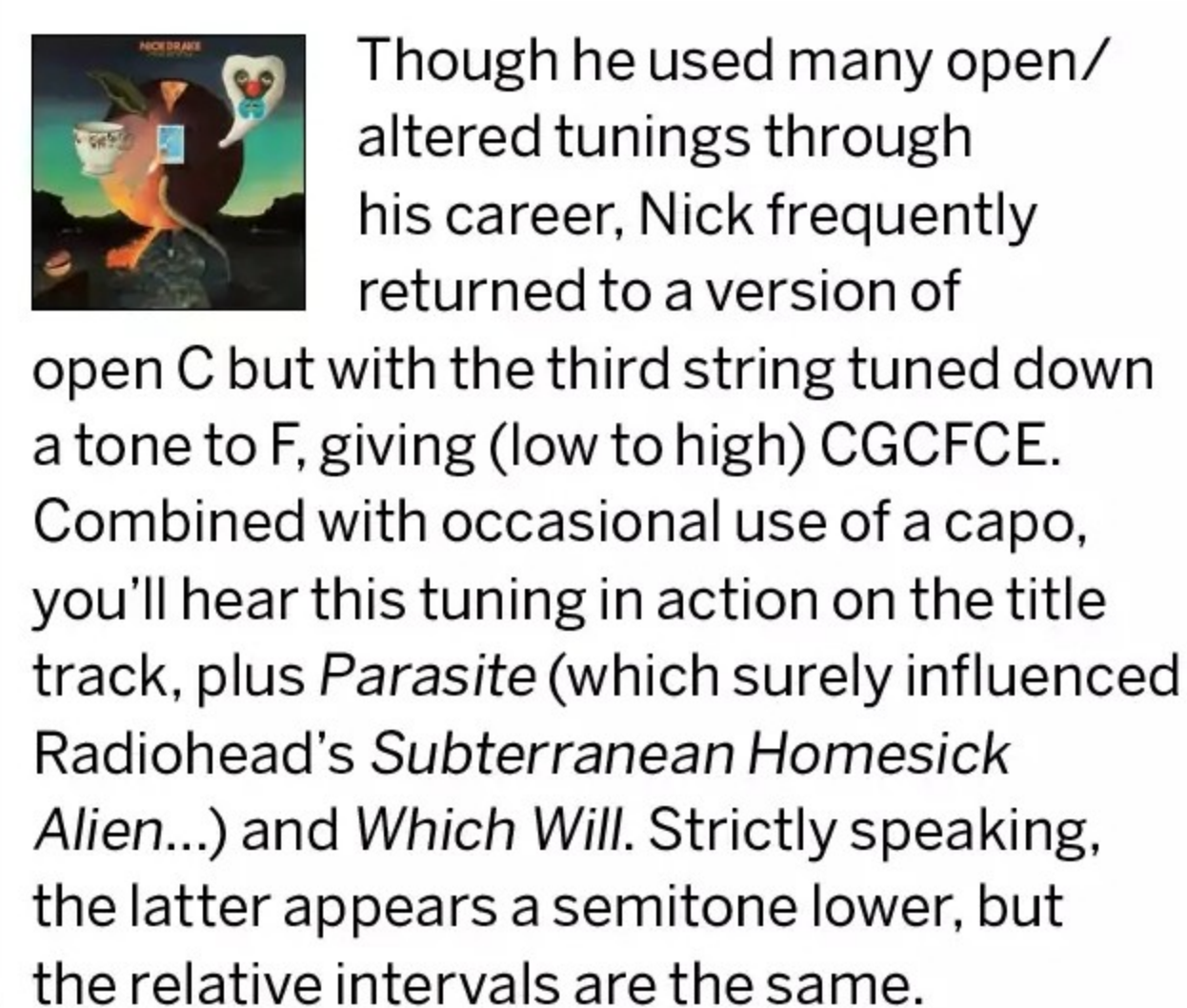
LED ZEPPELIN III



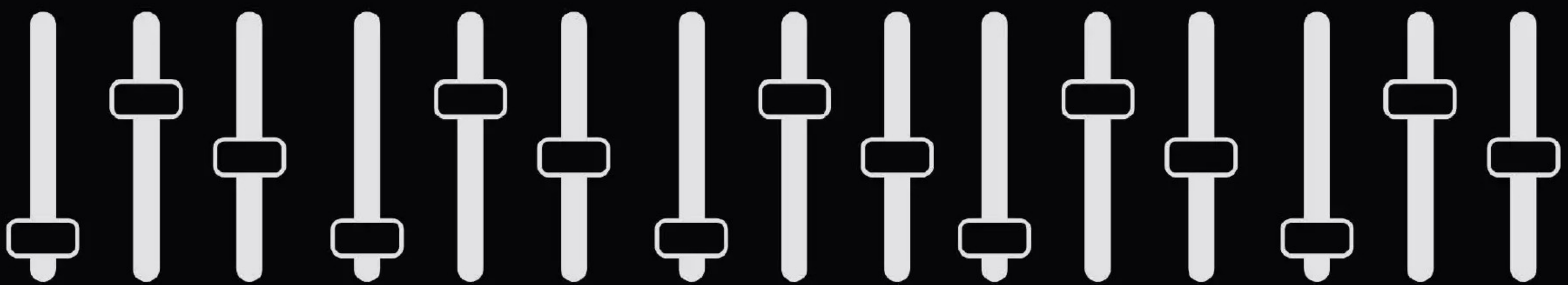
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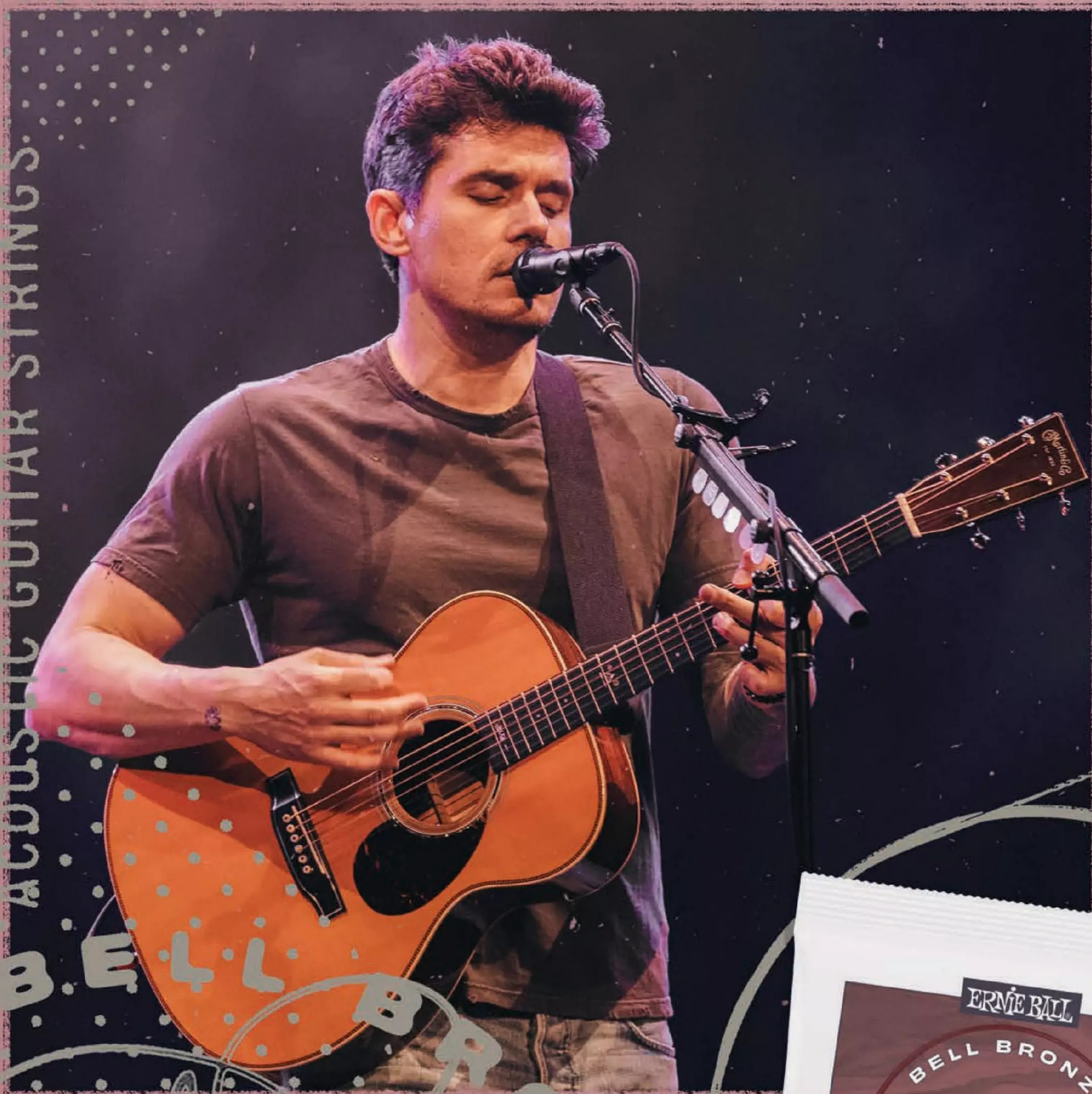


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