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A Year In Guitar

This year, at *Guitarist*, we really took a deep dive into tone, starting with a compendious survey of the best new effects pedals of the past five years. Pedals have really exploded almost as a pursuit in themselves – and little wonder, as even high-end pedals tend to be priced in the hundreds rather than thousands of pounds and, if you ever tire of them, there's a lively secondhand market on which you may well get back a good portion of what you paid for the pedal in the first place. And while we may obsess about exactly the right set of pickups for our guitar, a change of pedal can bring about tonal transformations that are truly revelatory. That's why our round-up of hot pedals was a shoo-in for this year's *Guitarist Annual*.

But the in-depth stories in the following pages also try to summarise important pillars of today's guitar culture – which is why we have the pleasure to present Tony Bacon's absorbing history of Japanese guitar making in the 'lawsuit era' and beyond, and also get an exclusive look behind the doors of Fender's revered Custom Shop, tracing its history back to the first custom options offered by the company back when Leo was at the helm, to the state-of-the-art modded guitars being made at the Custom Shop in 2025.

But what would guitars be without the inspiring musicians who play them? We're pleased to present the cream of a year's interviews at the magazine, especially our engaging and candid encounter with Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders, who looks back on her huge hits and the sometimes turbulent history of the band in company with her superb guitarist and co-writer James Walbourne – read about it inside this year's *Annual*. We also have a searching interview with Brian May, who reflects on the blood, sweat and tears of making Queen's debut album and much more besides, befitting a colourful and interesting year in guitar, here at *Guitarist* magazine. Enjoy the edition and see you next time!

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Guitarist
ANNUAL

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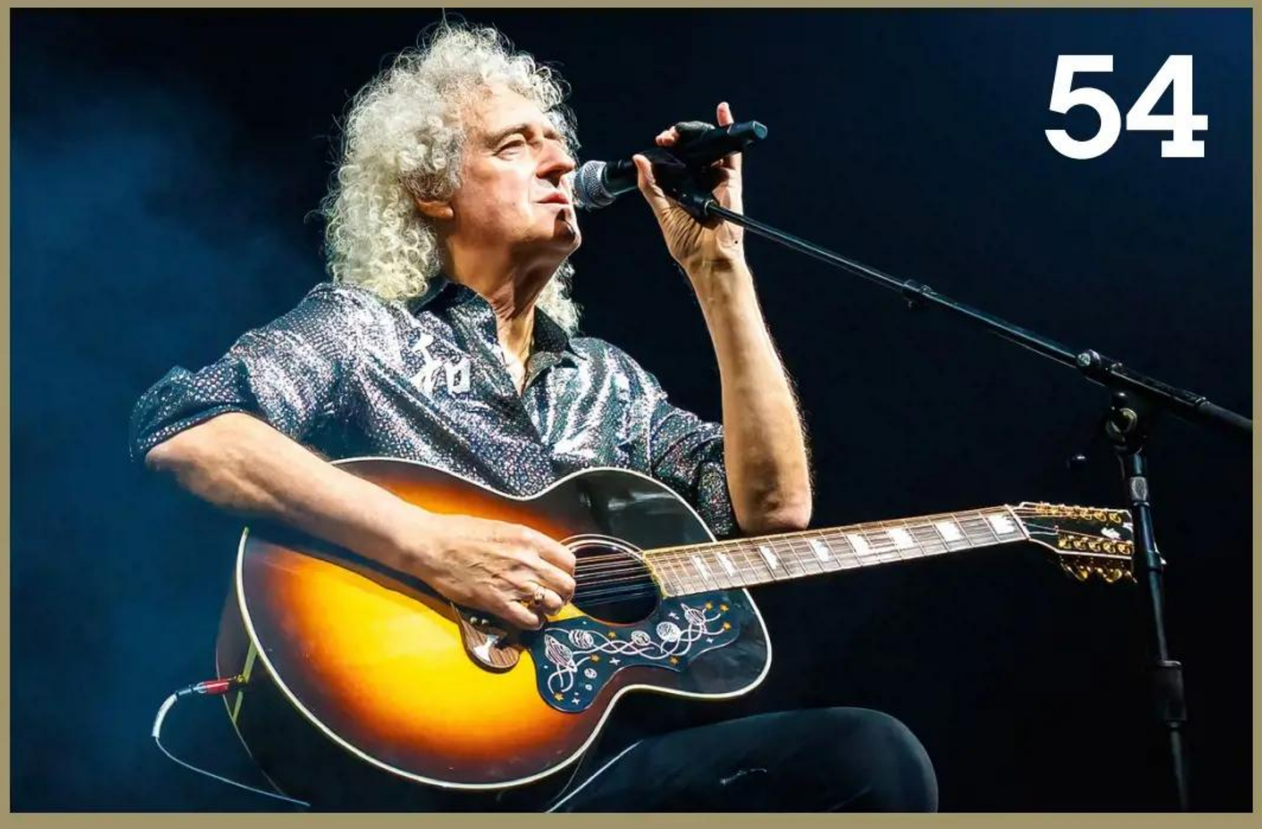

PHOTO BY BOJAN HOHNJEC © MIRACLE PRODUCTIONS LLP

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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

Molly Tuttle

Words David Mead
Photography Phil Barker

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."

1

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

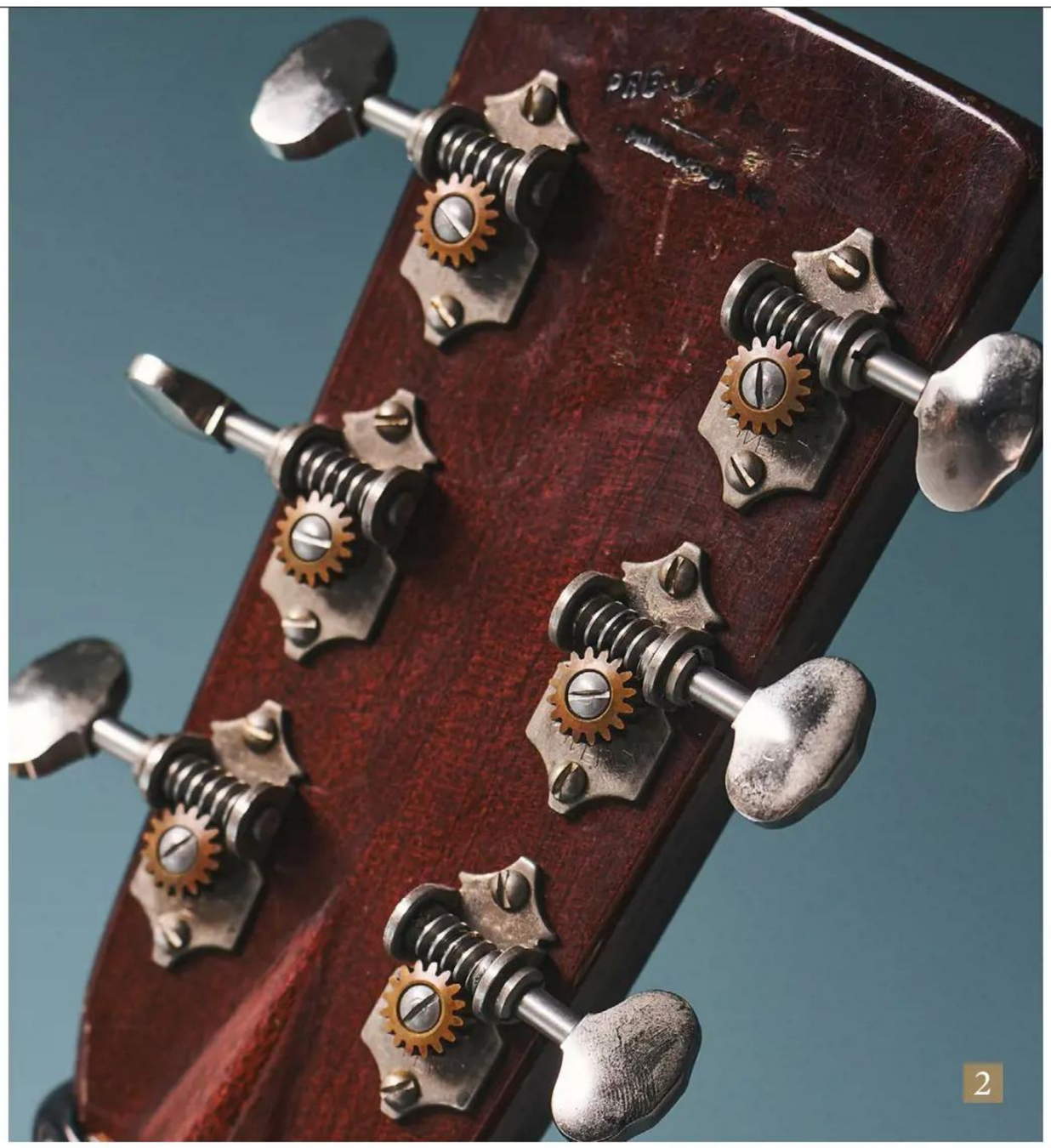
"And then fast forward five years, I'd still been writing constantly and I finally felt like I had this other batch of songs that I wanted to record with Jay, and his production ideas were amazing. He was so fun to work with. But we've literally been talking about doing this for five years, and so I'd 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

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



2

"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 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."

"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.

"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"

3

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 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."

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

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 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

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

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

www.mollytuttlemusic.com

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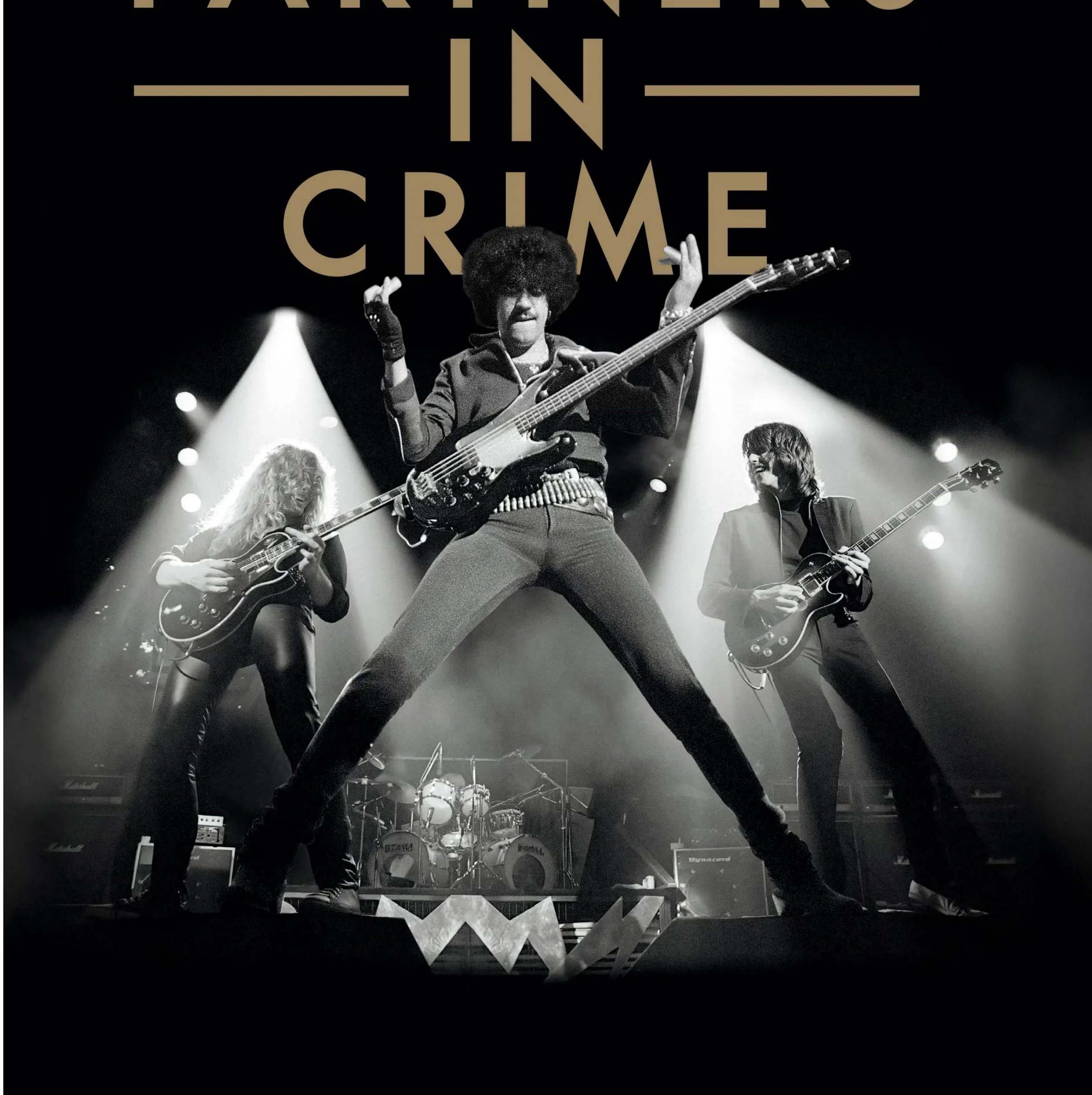


FOR A HALF-CENTURY AND COUNTING, THE THIN LIZZY SOUND HAS BEEN FORGED AND RECAST BY SCOTT GORHAM AND THE GREATS WHO PARTNERED HIM ON DUELLING LES PAULS, INCLUDING THE LATE JOHN SYKES. GORHAM LOOKS BACK ON THE HIGHS, LOWS, JOY AND PAIN OF HIS CLASSIC PARTNERSHIPS

Words Henry Yates **Photo** Harry Potts

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

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

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

BRIAN ROBERTSON

1974-1978

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

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

"I had 30 days left on my visa or they're gonna throw me out of the country," he remembers. "I was late and the first guy I meet is [frontman] Phil Lynott, who goes, 'Let me introduce you to the guys.' So we walk in and Phil goes, 'Hey, everybody, this is Scott,' – and Robbo and Brian Downey [drums] just go, 'Yeah, yeah.' I didn't know they'd already auditioned 24 guitarists, and here comes number 25. I guess they thought, 'Well, here's another one we're going to reject.' So they didn't want to get too friendly."

Likewise, Robertson had no patience to walk yet another hopeful through the set. "Robbo showed me the first song really quickly and said, 'You got that?'" explains Gorham. "Then we're off and running and I'm watching Robbo's hand on the neck, trying to follow every move, barely making the changes in time. But I'm realising, as I'm struggling with these chord patterns, that these guys are really good. And it was probably after the third song, I said to myself, 'I gotta be in this band.'"

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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

SCOTT GORHAM

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

PHOTO BY ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

Yet the musical harmony didn't extend to band relations. While Gorham deferred to Lynott, Robertson never accepted the hierarchy. "Brian didn't like to take orders," sighs Gorham, clashing his fists together. "It was the masculine struggle of who's gonna be the dominant person. Well, we all knew who the dominant person was. It was Phil! 'Dude, he was the guy who hired your ass! He's already got three albums under his belt. This is your first album, so why are you coming out with the attitude? Come on, settle down.' Well, he did for a while, then he kicked off again."

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

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

ART ATTACK!

Scott showcases his latest artworks

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

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

Check out Scott Gorham's latest artworks at www.scottgorhamworld.com

JET SETTING

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

Words Naomi Baker

In July 1979, Thin Lizzy were riding high following the release of ninth studio album, *Black Rose: A Rock Legend*, and taking what many felt was their best shot at breaking the US. Gary Moore's mid-tour departure (see page 20) was not in the script.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How was the atmosphere within Lizzy?

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

"I had turned up with a Yamaha SG-2000. I did the first few shows with that until, unbeknownst to me, it was deemed not cool enough for a band like Thin Lizzy to have a Japanese guitar. They were fantastic guitars, and still are, but it was suggested I use a very old Les Paul Junior, which obviously looked the part. I looked like I'd been beamed down from *Star Trek*, standing on stage with these guys with their studs and armbands, flicking their hair – there I was, with my pointy sideburns, sucking my cheeks in!"

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

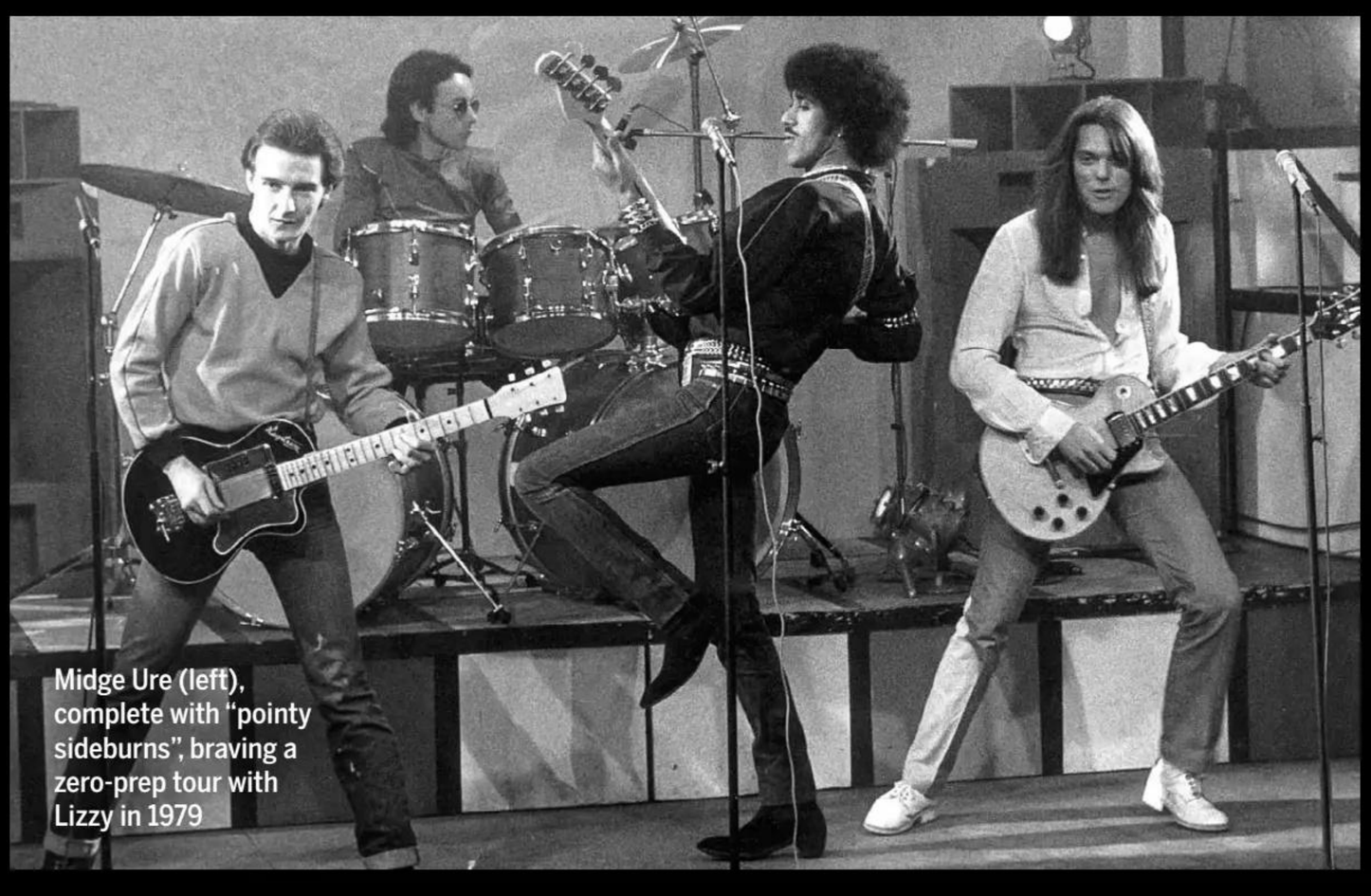
"I found out many years later from Scott that Philip had convinced the guys I knew all the songs. Scott said he'd never seen anyone thrown so deep into the deep end, having to learn an hour's worth of material on the plane, and learning it well enough to get on stage in front of 30,000 people and play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

How did playing in Lizzy shape you?

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

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

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



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

PHOTO BY JÜRGEN & THOMAS/ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY IMAGES

SOUND AS A BELL

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

Words Andrew Daly

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

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

Asked if he regrets how things ended, Bell says: "I did at first, but the passing of time has changed my mind. If I'd stayed, I'd be dead, like fucking hundreds of other musicians. It got to a point where I was smoking dope and drinking while recording and playing live. I had to stop... I had to walk away. I have no regrets."

How did you meet Phil Lynott and form Thin Lizzy?

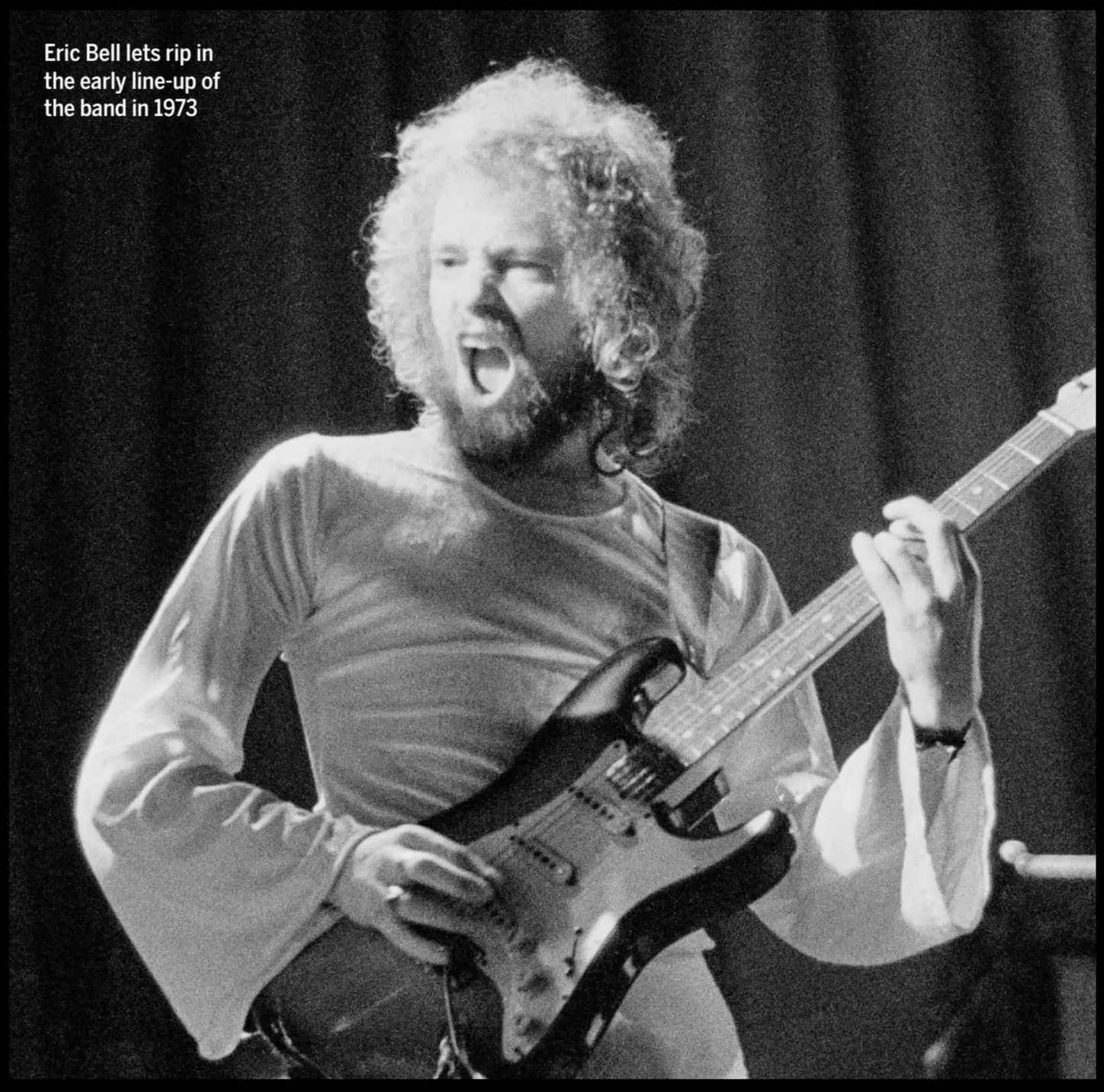
"I was at a club amid my first LSD trip. There was this band playing, which had Phil as the singer, though he wasn't playing bass. I was sitting there watching and the LSD began to kick in – but I could tell Phil was special. He had these impressive vocal chops and great charisma. I thought to myself,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

"So when they took a break, Phil went to the dressing room and I followed him. He said, 'Can I help you?' I said, 'I'm looking to form a three-piece band.' At this point, I was laughing at everything I saw around the room. Phil looked at me like I'd just escaped an asylum and asked, 'Are you okay?' I said, 'It's my first trip on acid,' and we kept talking. He told me about a drummer called Brian Downey and he said to go to the Zodiac Club and find him there.

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

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

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



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

PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

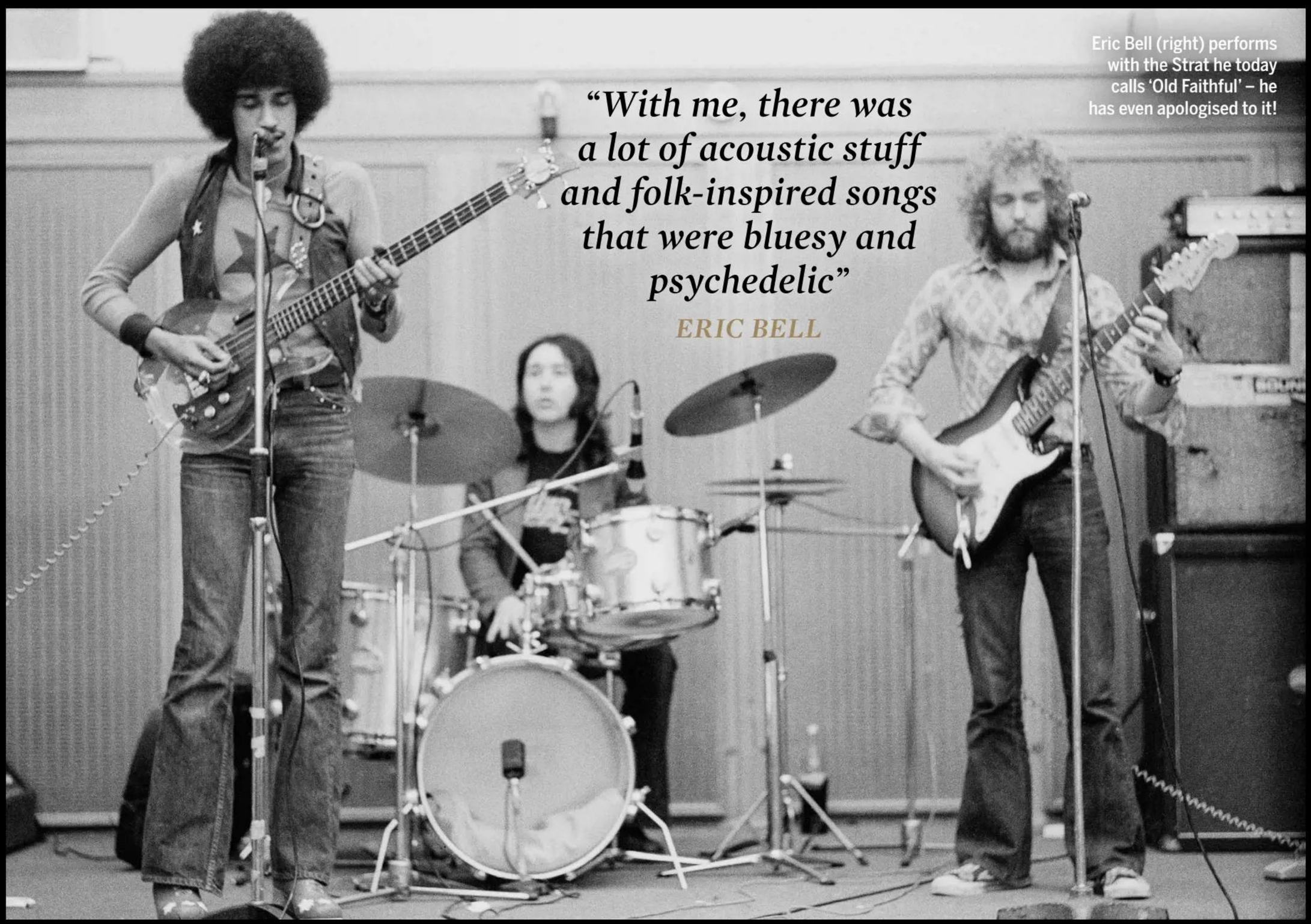
After Thin Lizzy, the band moved from Ireland to London for *Shades Of A Blue Orphanage*. Why?

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

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

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

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



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

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

ERIC BELL

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

What gear did you use?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GARY MOORE

1974, 1977, 1978-1979

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

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

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

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

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

Live shots from the period show both players jousting on Les Pauls in front of a wall of Marshalls. "Yeah, Gary was already playing his Peter Green Les Paul, and I'd finally got my 1957 Les Paul, which I bought in Boston," says Gorham. "Every once in a while, he had an SG he would pull out. But 90 per cent of the time, it was the two Les Pauls. You have to remember, with the Queen tour, we only had 45 minutes, so there's not a lot of switching guitars, detunings and all that crap. It was just like, 'Boom – let's go!'

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

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

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

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

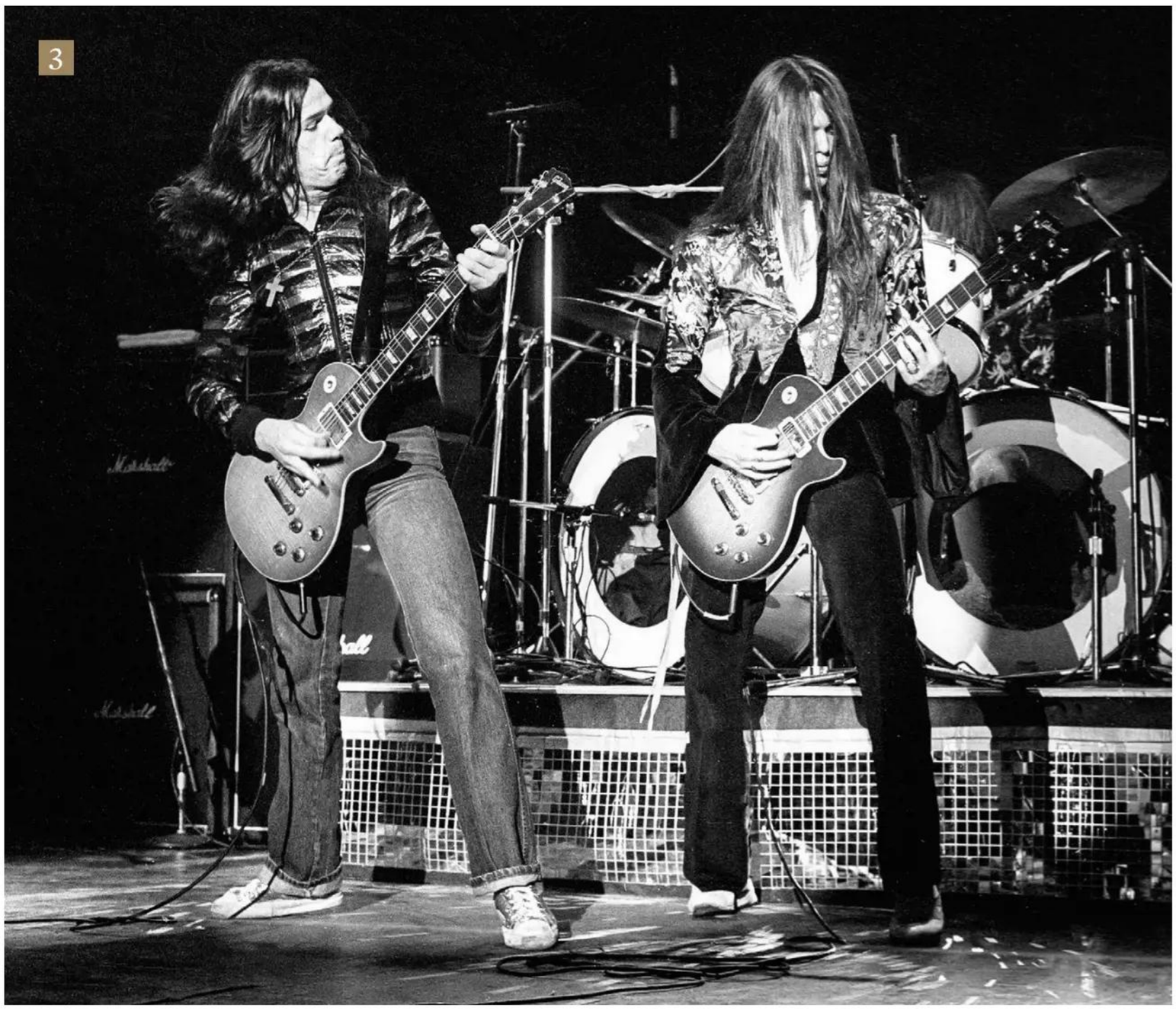


PHOTO BY LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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

SCOTT GORHAM

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

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

PHOTO BY ROLF ADLERCREUTZ/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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

JOHN SYKES

1982-1983, 1996-2009

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY RICHARD ECCLESTONE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"John's strength was the quickness. He wasn't about subtleties. Every track he wanted faster"

SCOTT GORHAM

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

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

THEY ALSO SERVED

Scott Gorham on four more Lizzy guitar partners

SNOWY WHITE (1980-1982)

"I liked Snowy a lot. I also liked his playing. He was a much bluesier player than all the rest of the guys. For us to ask him to rock it up, it was a bit of a stretch for him. Not that he couldn't do it. But his comfort zone was really based around the blues feel.

"*Chinatown* was my favourite track we did because that was his riff. We were just in the rehearsal room one day and he was playing that and I said, 'Hey man, that's kinda cool.' 'Yeah, I've been beating this one around for a while.' I said, 'Well, let's try to get something together.' We got Phil in and that's how it happened. Both he and I play lead guitar: he played the first solo, I play the second one.

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

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

SCOTT GORHAM

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

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE

PHOTO BY SIMON LEES

VIV CAMPBELL (2010-2011)

"Vivian was the guy who helped me get that last version of Lizzy going. I had no idea who to get on that right-hand side. And then I get a phone call from Joe Elliott from Def Leppard. He says, 'Scott, I hear you're putting a band together. Vivian would like to know if you would consider him being in Thin Lizzy for a while.' I went, 'Are you kidding me? Hell yeah!' And that freed me up to start thinking, 'Okay, I'll get Marco Mendoza on bass, this other guy on drums...' So Vivian was a great starter for me. I've always admired his guitar playing. And I always liked him as a guy, too."

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON

RICHARD FORTUS (2011)

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

PHOTO BY REED R RADCLIFFE

DAMON JOHNSON (2011-2019)

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

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON

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

Even with considerable pedigree in the line-up, remembers Gorham, the first day felt off. "I remember being in that studio and nobody wanted to pick up a guitar, in case this was not going to work out. I finally said, 'Fuck it, I've flown 6,000 miles, let's get into this. We'll start out with *Jailbreak*, okay? If it's shit, then we'll just pack up. So we played *Jailbreak* and at the end, we looked at each other and said, 'Actually, that sounded pretty damn good.' Before we knew it, we had a full set that everybody felt confident in."

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

While some fans never accepted the switch, the Sykes-fronted Lizzy lasted until July 2009 – when this career journeyman rolled on for a stuttering solo career, while the band drafted gunslingers like Viv Campbell, Richard Fortus and Damon Johnson. When Sykes died of cancer in December 2024, Gorham felt a terrible sense of déjà vu. "I got so many requests: 'Hey, Scott, let's do an interview.' 'No thanks, it's too soon.' The same thing happened when Phil died. I didn't want to go through all that again. I kinda wish I hadn't been such a prick about it and done some of these interviews, for John's sake."

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

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

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

JOE BONAMASSA

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

Words David Mead **Portrait Photography** Phil Barker **Gear Photography** Jesse Wild

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

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

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

"A friend and I were able to get all the big stuff out," he continues. "The Flying Vs, there were nine sunburst Les Pauls at the house at that time, a fancy Martin, the Broadcaster... all the big stuff went. We only had one shot and it was like, I think, 55 guitars and a Dumble and a Trainwreck. My manager [Roy Weisman] was there a couple of weeks later for the Grammys, and he was at my house. He's like, 'Wow, you really did a good job putting everything back after you were evacuated.' I said, 'Roy, this is what I left behind.' I mean, I have 400 guitars there and probably 300 amps; there was just no way I could take all of it. It would take a week to move it."

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

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

JOE BONAMASSA

VIDEO EXCLUSIVES!

Over four videos, Joe shares his best gear-buying advice, tips on LP setups and more

http://bit.ly/gitannual2026

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

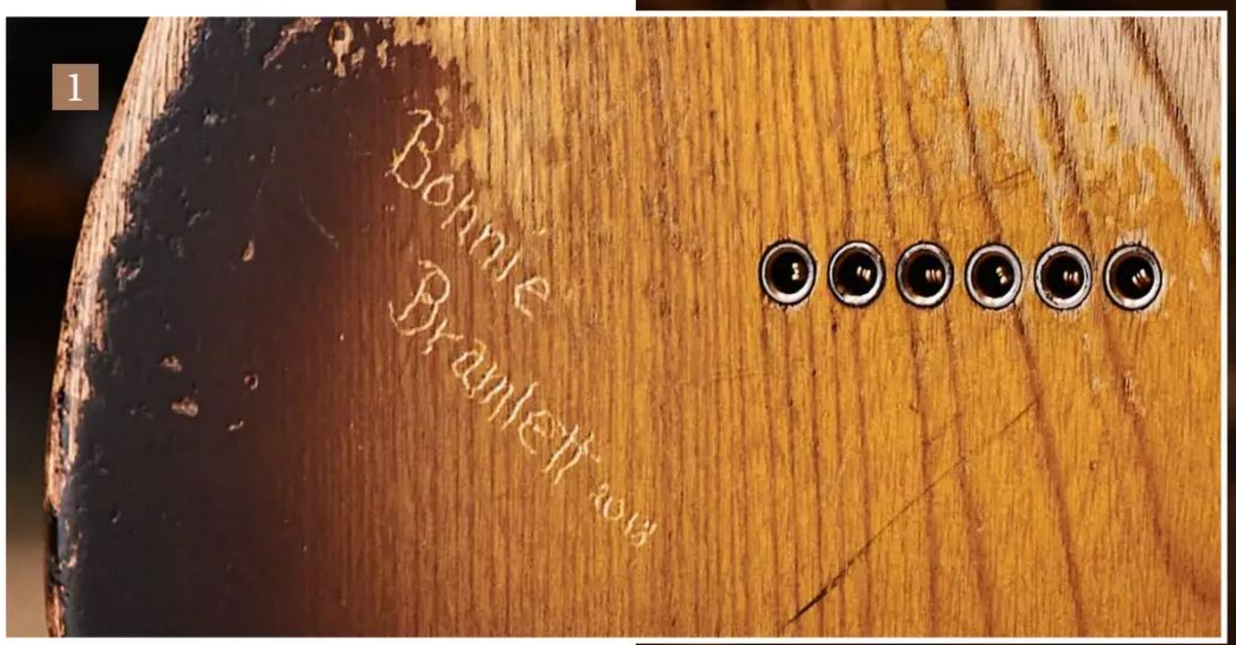
There's a Les Paul with a little switch on the pickguard...

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

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

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

“The ‘Royal Albert’ is the one that Mike Long from ATB Guitars found – it was under a staircase for 50 years”



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

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

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

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

Tell us about 'Bonnie', the 1955 Strat.

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

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

3

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

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

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

4

5

The purple Telecaster with the Fender full-range humbucker on it looks interesting. It looks like somebody has tried to respray it Burgundy Mist?
"It's purple. Somebody painted over the original blonde and it's a maple cap neck. It's a '68 and they put a Seth Lover Fender humbucker in it. Seth Lover designed that pickup for Fender; he switched teams and went over to Fender. Those kinds of things are right up my alley. I love those guitars. Are they honest? You know, people modded like that back in the day

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

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

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

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

6

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

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

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

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

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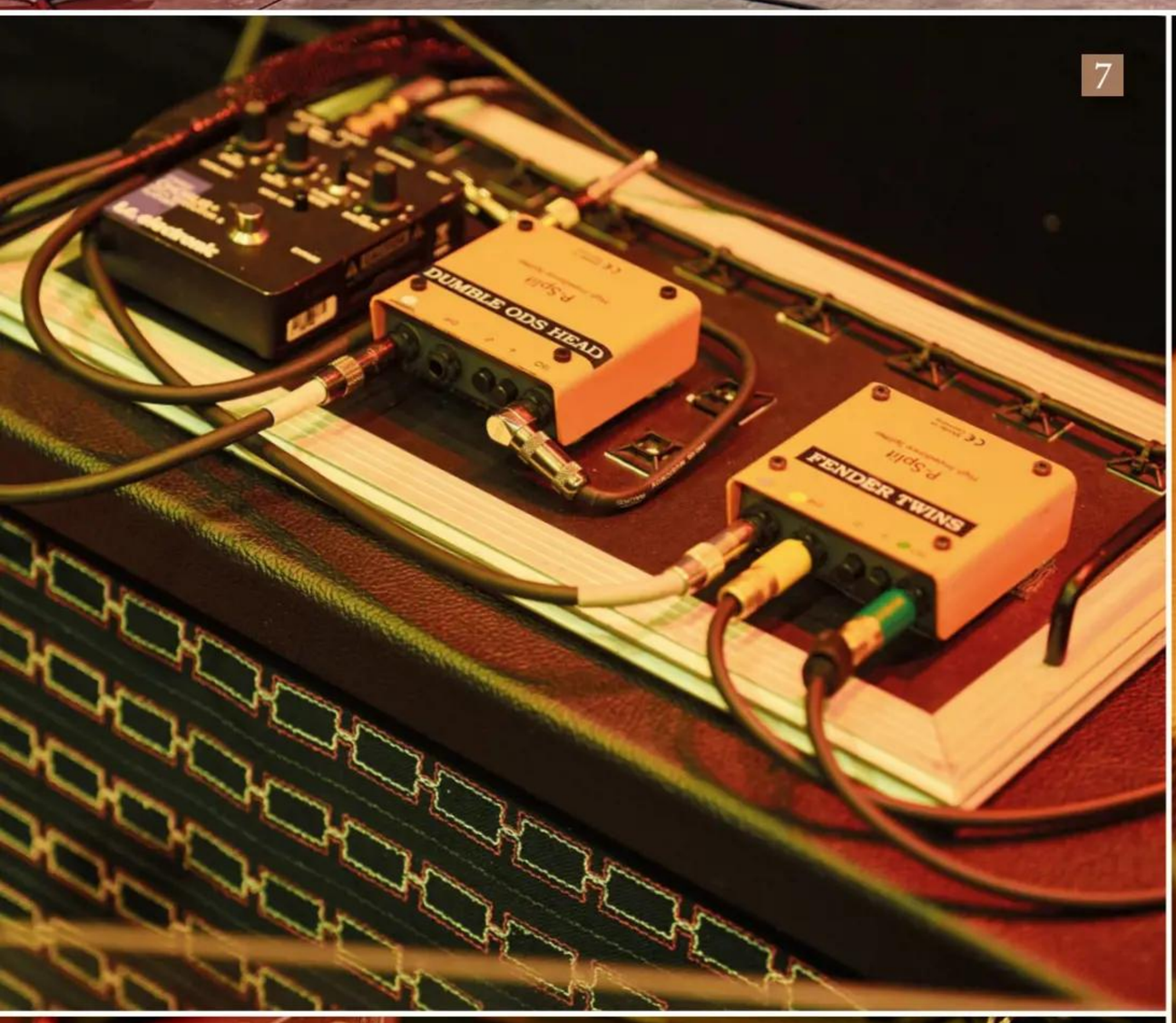

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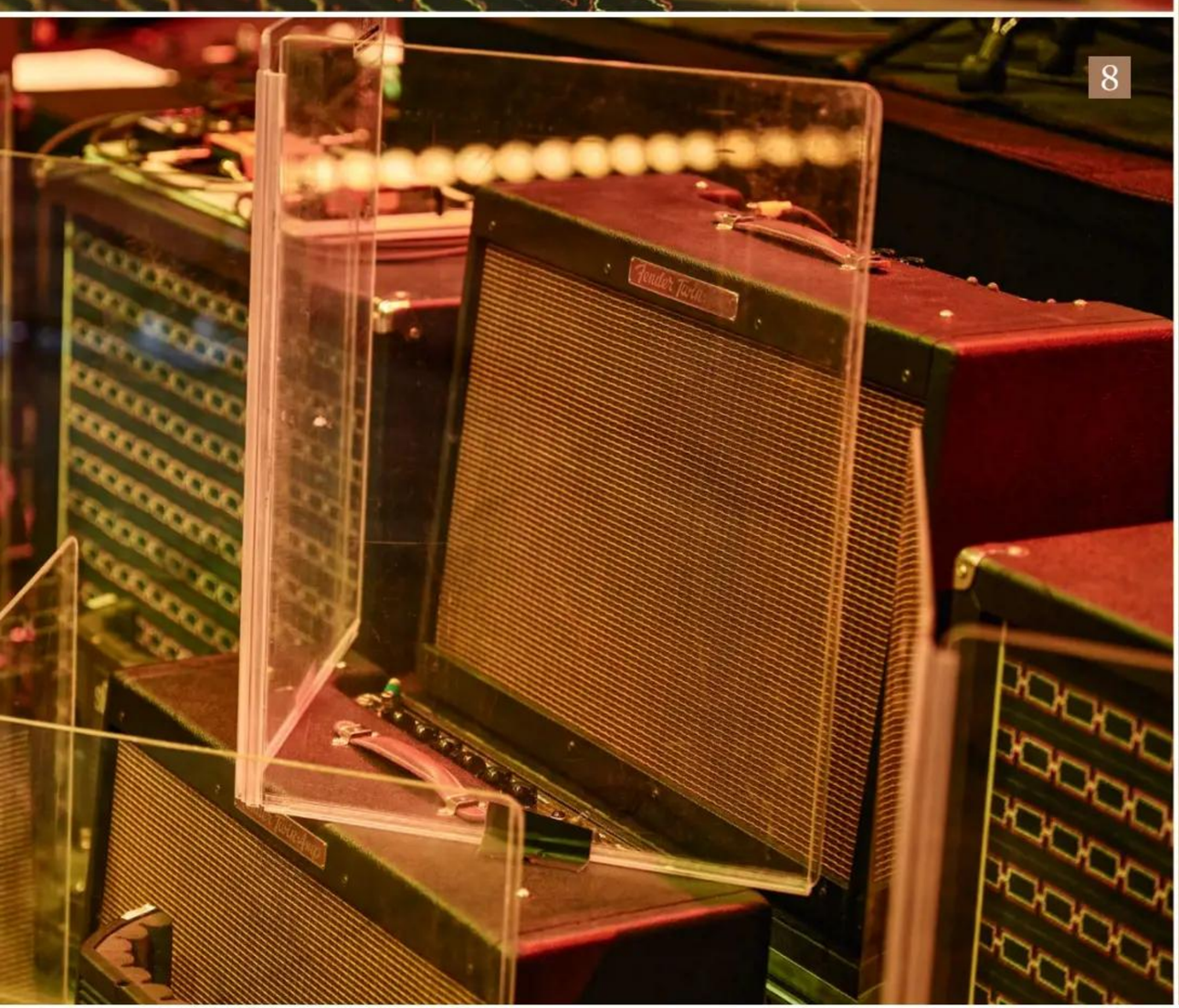

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Looking at your stage rig, what model is the Dumble amp on the far left?
"That's an Overdrive Special from 1983 that I bought from the original owner; he paid $3,000 in '83 and he sold it to me for significantly more. The cabinet is a 90s Dumble 2x12 with Electro-Voice 12L speakers. That's next to a Leslie speaker [marked Benson] – that's a rotating speaker but with a 12[-inch speaker] instead of a 10, right?"

The two 4x12 cabinets towards the centre of the backline look like they have the old 1960s WEM (Watkins Electric Music) speaker cloth in them.
"Yeah, those cabinets were built by Peter Van Weelden in 2006 and that's original WEM grille cloth that he found – like New Old Stock – and those have four EV 12Ls in them. Both cabinets are Electro-Voice. The two Fender amps in the middle are Joe Bonamassa High Powered Tweed Twins, only Fender built me black cases for them so it matches the rig. It looks nicer and they do actually sound different. With the black Tolex versus the tweed, they're actually a little brighter and more open, believe it or not. It does affect the sound."

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

Moving over to the side of the stage, there are some more amps. Can you talk us through them?
"Sure. On the left there are two Marshall heads: one's a 1987 Silver Jubilee and one's a 1988 2555, both 100 watts. They're the exact same amp – one's obviously silver one, one's a black one – and they're always on. And then I have a [Lehle] switcher on the pedalboard: setting A is the two Marshalls and the two Twins; setting B is the two Marshalls and the two Van Weelden Twinkle Lands, which are basically Overdrive Special copies, and that's basically both cabinets running at the same time; setting C is the two Marshalls and the Overdrive Special. So they're not all on at the same time. Generally, it's four on at the same time, sometimes three."

Why did you go for a separate rack for the off-stage amps?
"The reason why I racked the amp heads is I found out, when we put the original amp shanty together, that the amps are way more reliable because they're riding in shockproof cases, right? They're not getting bumped around as much as they would if we had to pull them out of cases, stack them up on cabinets, pull them back down. It just simplifies the wiring and makes reliability much better. It's important to note that I'm crazy enough that there's two of them, the amp shanties, and a whole different rack of guitars. So we're just talking about the stuff that's on tour now in Europe. This is the European one for this year, and everything comes back at the end of the year to Nashville. Normally, we have to leapfrog rigs and so I have two sets of guitars, two sets of amps, two sets of everything."

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

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

PHOTOS BY MIKE SAVOIA

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

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

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

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

Looking at your pedalboard now, the switch at the far left looks like it could be the controller for your rotary speaker?
"Yeah, that's the on/off and the fast/slow speeds for the rotary cabinet. Then there's the Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere, which is the fake Leslie – that goes through the Marshalls. Then there's a Boss DD-2. The Hughes & Kettner and the Boss both go through the effects loop of the Marshall."

Then we've got an MXR Micro Flanger. Have any of the effects been modified or tweaked in any way?
"Nope, standard issue – I buy them out of Sweetwater. There's a Tube Screamer that is either an '80 or an '81. A Micro Pog and a Fuzz Face that goes through the Twins. Then the switcher and the wah and the Fulltone [Supa-] Trem and a Way Huge Conspiracy Theory. The rest of it's just junction boxes, you know: inputs for the amps, and a junction box, basically, to get to the switcher and out, and then there's the two boxes that power everything."

Looking at your amp settings, it's very much a case of everything on 11 in many ways.
"Everything is set as loud as it can go without collapsing, you know what I mean? I am not subtle at all and I do not subscribe to the 'low volume sounds bigger' method. I've got to move air. All my heroes played loud: Clapton played loud, Jimi Hendrix played loud. Everybody played loud at one point. There's a symbiotic relationship between volume and the guitar. I generally don't solo on 10 all night. Very rarely do I go full up on the guitar. I will go full up, and then back it down a number or two. And that little bit of capacitance from the pot really just makes it super articulate and really fat. You get a little hump on the mids around 250Hz. They're the original pots, which makes a huge difference, because the difference between modern pots and old pots is significant."

CTS pots and Orange Drop capacitors have become something of a mantra for guitarists chasing vintage tone these days. What is the difference between old and new?
"Well, they may *say* CTS and they may *look* orange, but they're not made to the same specs as they did in the 50s, and it's no fault of any manufacturers – it's just what's available. The taper on a modern pot is so different from a taper on a vintage pot, you know? I mean, even pots from the 70s don't taper the same way. You get good pots until about 1968 or 1969 and then things start going off the rails a little bit.

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

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

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

The new album sounds like it has the occasional drop-tuning on it. Would that be the baritone in action?
"Sometimes I just tune the guitar down a little bit. I mean, the tuning stays pretty solid down to about D, a full step down. If you have to go below that, I'd rather just capo a baritone. It's just for tuning. Guitars tend to like to live in A440. That's when I find them to be more solid, tuning-wise. Tuning down, sometimes you have to back the truss rod down slightly just to create tension on the neck that doesn't exist in the strings."

Being on the road so much, when do you actually get time to write new material?
"I write when I have to, you know? I get six weeks out from a record and I just start writing it. But this one we did over two years, so we wrote it in chunks and recorded it in different studios: we did some in Greece, we did some in Nashville, we did some in LA."

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PHOTOS BY MIKE SAVOIA

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

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

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

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

As a renowned collector, have you been shopping on this trip?
"I have not bought an instrument. I bought an amp and a Klon – that's the only two things that I got. I bought a really cool 1966 JTM45, one of the first 100-watters. I got it through a friend in the UK and I picked it up in Brighton."

Only we noticed that ATB Guitars has an original 1959 Lifton Les Paul case that used to belong to Martin Barre...
"And I'll give you one shot to guess who just paid £2,500 for that particular case. One guess..."

It wouldn't be you, would it?
"Probably! [laughs] I've known Martin for 25 years and I still think that Martin's sunburst Les Paul tone with Jethro Tull is, to me, one of the finest Gibson-through-a-Marshall rock guitar sounds that I've ever heard in my life. I mean, just a beautiful, rich, clear, nice bite but not too bright, distorted Marshall. When I think of a Les Paul through a Marshall, I think Clapton and the 'Beano' album, I think Billy Gibbons, I think Jimmy Page, I think the early Jeff Beck stuff. And I think Martin. So to have a little piece of Martin's past is cool." G

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

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PHOTOS BY PAUL VAN KAN

Motörhead
Chrissie

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

LAST OF THE INDEPENDENTS

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

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Joby Sessions

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

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

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

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

What's your working relationship like recently?

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY ALDARA ZARRAOA/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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

CHRISSIE HYNDE

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

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

PHOTO BY GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chrissie: "Well, there was one

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

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

JAMES WALBOURNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

James: "No."

Do you do what just feels natural over the music?

James: "Yeah."

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

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

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

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

Chrissie: "Wow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTO BY KI PRICE/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHRISSIE HYNDE

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

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

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

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

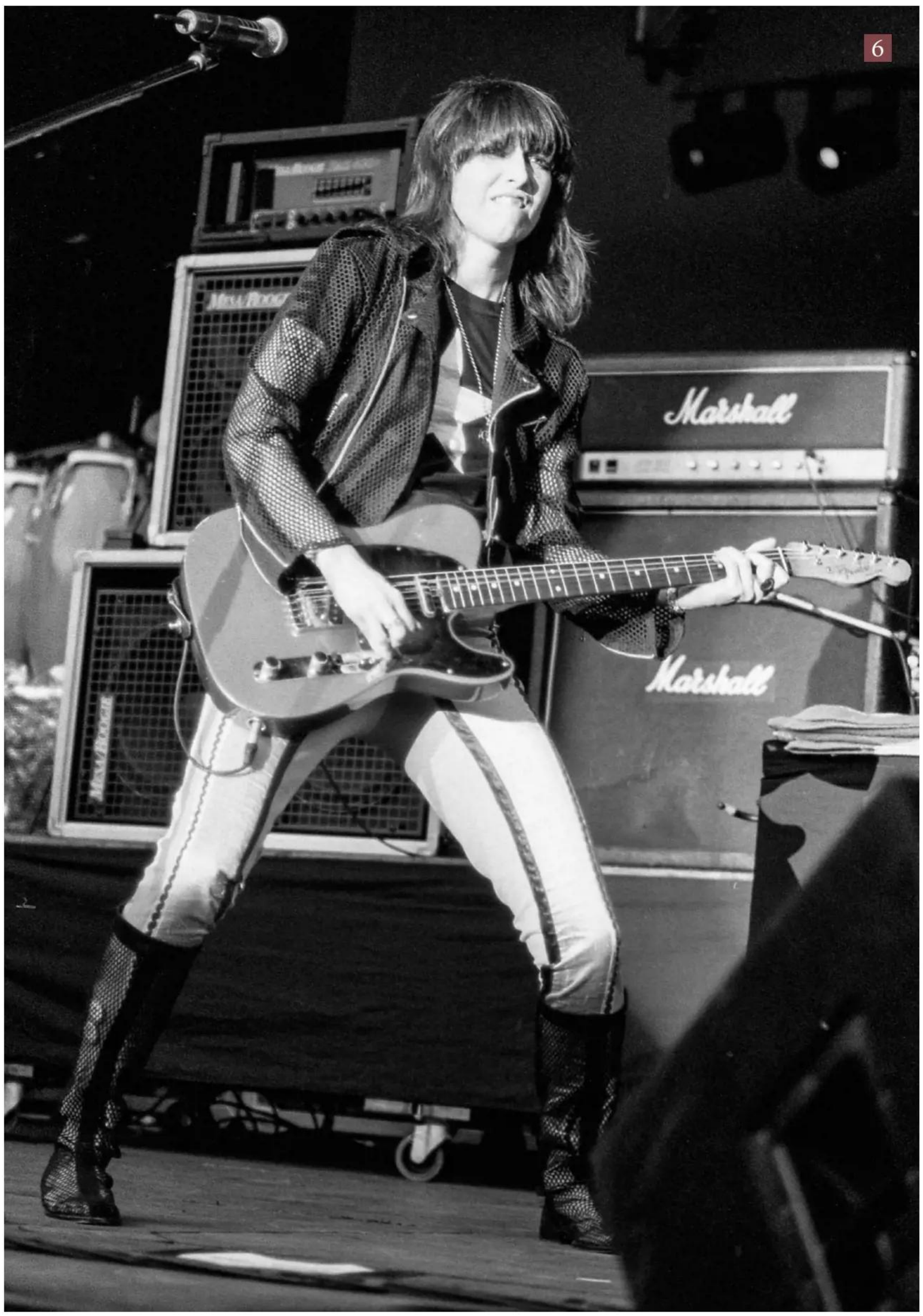

PHOTO BY INDEPENDENT NEWS AND MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

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

"So we did a whole tour of clubs, and then when we played The Social here in London, our agent came down and my manager – they stood back and they went, 'Okay, we get it now. We get it now.' Because what you get in the club with the band, you don't get it anywhere else. And if a band is playing only stadiums and arenas, if they want to do a club, it becomes a special show. But I thought, 'No, we're not doing that. This is us.'"
James: "One night we played this mega-dome somewhere. And the next night would be the 7th St Entry in Minneapolis, which holds about 200 people at a push. And so it was a very strange tour."
Chrissie: "But what it did for us is it made us feel like a band again, so we kind of knew what we were doing. And it informed the way we were writing..."
James: "And we hated each other at the end of it [laughs]. So we really did a good job."

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

CHRISSIE HYNDE

"When I joined the band, Chrissie said, 'I don't want you to play what's on the record.' It was music to my ears – I find it difficult to be constrained"

JAMES WALBOURNE

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

7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chrissie: "Oh, big-time."

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

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

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

EXCLUSIVE!
FREE TRACK DOWNLOAD

After sitting for this interview, Chrissie kindly offered to make a track from the stunning new live album, *Kick 'Em Where It Hurts*, available exclusively to *Guitarist* readers. To add it to your music collection today, enter the following link into your preferred browser or scan the QR code to download the zip file, then open the zip and save the mp3:
https://bit.ly/git523_pretenders

QUEEN

BATTLE ROYAL

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

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

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

Appearing on our Zoom call in a halo of grey curls, May can smile about it now, knowing what lay ahead. In spring '72, the band cut their first chink in the industry's formerly impenetrable armour as they were granted nocturnal recording sessions at the famed Trident Studios. And with precisely nothing to lose, the music flooded out, with the visceral gallop of *Keep Yourself Alive* leading them across the gamut of soul-metal (*Doing Alright*), proto-prog (*My Fairy King*), acoustic percussive tapping (*The Night Comes Down*), even flashes of flamenco (*Great King Rat*).

The first Queen record is a head-scratcher, though. Selling modestly on release, for 51 years, it has been the closest thing this all-conquering band had to a curio, its tracklisting unfamiliar to fans who know every note of, say, *A Night At The Opera* or *The Works*. In that same period, the band, too, had an uneasy relationship with their opening gambit, frustrated by the album's dry, distant sound. It's a thorn plucked in style, however, by the new *Queen I* boxset: a paving slab-sized vinyl/CD package whose remastered and expanded treatment finally reveals these songs as sunken treasures to rank among the band's very best.

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

Your stroke must have been frightening. Did you wonder whether you'd play guitar again – or was that the least of your worries at the time?
"It went through my mind. When I suddenly couldn't control this left arm, it was quite scary. I had no idea what was going on. I phoned my doctor and she said, 'Okay, I think you're having a minor stroke. Dial 999, get in the ambulance and I'll see you there.' But even at the worst time, although I couldn't control where the arm was, I could control my fingers. So I thought, 'I'm probably not really in danger.' I'm all right now. I'm just taking it slow."

The first Queen album is largely a story of struggle, isn't it?
"It was very tough. And I sometimes wonder if that helped to shape us because everything was a fight. It was a fight to get into a studio. It was a fight to get our own way – and we didn't, entirely, because we were just boys and everyone else was more powerful. It was a fight to get it released – and then it got completely slaughtered by the music press. But later I learned we weren't the only people being hit by those destructive arrows. In fact, that's one thing that cheered me up. I remember they gave Led Zeppelin a bad review, and I just thought, 'Well, Jesus Christ, if they don't understand that [throws up his hands]...'"

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

Perhaps it's no surprise your father didn't approve of your musical career. But could he really complain, given that he helped you build the Red Special?
"Well, you wouldn't think he could complain – but he did! He liked helping me with my hobby, but when the hobby became my career, he was very unhappy. I think he also felt he'd sacrificed a lot of his own life to enable me to take my education so far. Me giving that up was the worst thing he could imagine. So it was hard for him. It took a long time to sort that out. It only got sorted when I flew him to Madison Square Garden on Concorde, sat him down and said, 'Okay dad, what do you think?' A great moment. I think we all need that approval from our parents, don't we?"

The early 70s was the golden era of blues-rock. And Queen were definitely not that.
"There were a lot of people staring at their feet on stage. I don't know if that made it easier or harder to break through. We just knew what we wanted to be. It was very arrogant of us, but we had big dreams. We wanted to give people the experience we'd felt watching The Who at Regent Street Polytechnic. They were an hour late, and when they finally got on stage, it was like an earthquake. We wanted to give people that same intake of breath. The sound, the lights, the performance, the clothing, the drama – give them everything we had. And, yes, it was very different from the mood of the day. It also wasn't glam-rock. That was going on at the same time and it's very much about the glitter or whatever. Which we weren't."

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

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

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

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

2

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

"Okay, there was one predecessor, when I did a two-part harmony on *Earth*, a single we did as *Smile*. But the three-part harmony is the big deal. Because things suddenly get colourful if you use three parts in creative ways. Not just parallel 3rds and 5ths, which is an easy trap to fall into; I never wanted to do that. I always wanted the tensions and colours of dissonance and counterpoint. Everything that an orchestral arranger needs to know, you have to get in your head if you're going to do something that endures."

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

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

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

"We were pretty jolly. This was an amazing opportunity, and we were all leaving our supposed careers behind. In a sense, we were aware we were leaving our families and friends behind as well. Because once you put a foot on that road, it takes you a long way from everything you know. But we had each other and our belief that we were doing something special that nobody else could do. We had that insane optimism.

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

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

BRIAN MAY

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

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

Could you immediately relax as a studio player or did that take time?
"There's a definite learning process. I remember finding that with the backing tracks you could immerse yourself and let go fairly quickly. Overdubbing is actually harder to keep the spontaneity. Because you're standing there with your headphones on. Your guitar is revved up. And you're waiting for your moment. It feels unnatural. But I got into this little trick where I fooled myself into thinking I was playing live, and when the moment hit, I was on stage and there were people out there watching."

"Making that album was an amazing exploratory process. It's like giving a sculptor his first bit of clay" ***BRIAN MAY***

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

Would you play anything differently if you were tracking that debut album now?
"Actually, no. We're rebuilding the sound on the boxset. But we didn't feel the urge to change any of the performances. It would be different, but it wouldn't necessarily be better. I honestly wouldn't change a note – and we didn't."

That was the first run-out for your homemade Red Special. Wasn't there pressure to use a standard production model?
"Not at the time. I remember, much later, when we did *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, I said, 'I want a James Burton atmosphere on the solo, so I'm going to make my guitar sound like a Telecaster.' And the producer, Reinhold Mack, who's a dour old sod, said, 'Well, why don't you just play one?' But that's probably the only time in my whole career when I've given way.

"The Red Special held up surprisingly well. I did have doubts in the early days because I knew it sounded different from what everybody else was using. It was different from a Strat: it's warmer. It's different from a Gibson: it's got more top-end. It's got a very wide sound. But hearing it back through the speakers was thrilling. Everyone had told us, 'Nah, it's never going to work.' But hearing that stuff coming back, we thought, 'We can conquer the world.' We weren't a modest lot [laughs]. But that self-belief has to be there. It has to be the source of your power.

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

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

BOXING CLEVER

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

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

"I think in all of our minds – and that includes Freddie – we always felt this first album was... Yes, we were proud of it, but we didn't like the way it actually sounded, particularly the drums. We liked the performances, we liked the songs, but as far as the actual sounds, it didn't feel like we were in the room with you, and that's what we always wanted, for it to sound like the live situation. So now we were able to achieve that, by various dodgy means! Again, we've altered the guitar sound on the *Queen I* boxset and made it more like how I would record it these days.

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

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

PHOTO BY GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

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

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

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

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

"It did – but it was a false call! I remember, we played one show at Olympia. Top of the bill was Jimi Hendrix and everybody essentially played through the same gear. So I plugged into a Marshall stack with my guitar and treble booster. Turned it all the way up – and it sounded so awful. I could hardly play. I didn't know what to do. It sounded like an angry wasp. It didn't have any depth or articulation, I couldn't play chords. It was a really hard experience for me.

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

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

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

How did Roy Thomas Baker record your guitars?

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

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

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

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

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

Brian's use of acoustic guitars has been a little more diverse than his electric guitars over the years – here, he is pictured with a custom Gibson J-200 12-string while performing with Queen + Adam Lambert in Baltimore in October of 2023. On *Queen I*,

"You could fashion that [rhythm and lead guitar] performance to make people feel they'd heard an orchestra"

BRIAN MAY

PHOTO BY BOJAN HOHNJEC © MIRACLE PRODUCTIONS LLP

4. PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN MAY

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

What are your own favourite guitar moments?

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

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

"With the new 'Queen I' boxset, I get a feeling of completeness. You know, now you can leave it to posterity" BRIAN MAY

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

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

4. Brian says that this "unorthodox guitar" is responsible for the sitar-like sounds at the beginning of *The Night Comes Down* – it belonged to a school friend and received the 'May-modding treatment'

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

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

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

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

Mission Critical

Manic Street Preachers' new album, *Critical Thinking*, is by turns vitriolic and graceful, its sense of drama and unflinching portraits of modern life powered in no small part by the superb playing of guitarist James Dean Bradfield. We join him in the band's studio to hear how they crafted their sweeping sound the old-fashioned way in an era of throwaway content

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

It's a characteristic of the best bands that they are loved by millions but also completely unique. It's a trick that Manic Street Preachers have pulled off for years, from the angular, agit-rock of *The Holy Bible* to the beauty and tragedy of their breakthrough 1996 album, *Everything Must Go*, recorded in the wake of lyricist and rhythm guitarist Richey Edwards' disappearance, their sound is instantly recognisable and wholly their own.

Today, with the release of their 15th album, *Critical Thinking*, that vital spark of originality and vivid honesty is undimmed – even if the band do the shopping on the way home from sessions these days, following the establishment of a permanent studio near their homes in South Wales. We join guitarist James Dean Bradfield at the studio, to hear how *Critical Thinking* was made on classic foundations: with James, bassist Nicky Wire and drummer Sean Moore feeling their way through material, jamming and experimenting – allowing the best ideas to rise to the surface. We also have a close look at an eclectic and stunning-sounding selection of James's guitars that call the studio home.

The new record took shape right here, didn't it?

"Yeah. The way we work now is just different. Like, back in the day, up until, I'd say, *Send Away The Tigers*, you'd do some rough demos. I'd do acoustic demos, Nick would do a little acoustic demo. We would just actually go around each other's houses, play to each other. But usually, we'd just give each other acoustic cassettes and then we'd hire a rehearsal room [to complete the songs before recording them] and we did it that way until *Send Away The Tigers*. Then we got our own studio.

"Starting an album would be a gradual process after that – previously, you'd book a studio and you'd do an album in four or five weeks. But ever since *Send Away The Tigers*, every album has started with a gradual process of doing the demos in our own studio. Sometimes the demos have become the masters and sometimes you've got all the demos, but you do the mastering in the same place that you did the demos.

"All the lines are blurred, in terms of where the demos end and where just recording the album begins. It's been like that since about 2007. So I'd say one of the oldest songs on this new album is two and a half years

VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!
James Dean Bradfield takes us inside the Manics' 1996 alt-rock masterpiece, *Everything Must Go*
www.bit.ly/gitannual2026

old. We did do two weeks in Rockfield Studios for some finishing sessions, but most of the recording on the album is myself, Nick and Sean coming in [to our studio] at 10am, and then clocking off at 5pm to go home and have tea with the family. Sometimes I'd come back at night, when you're really going at it."

Having your own studio has clearly given you the freedom to work at your own pace, but it's interesting that you still used Rockfield to give a little extra kick to the final stages of the recording process. Do you think that working in a particular space imparts a unique energy to what gets recorded there?

"Well, *The Holy Bible* was recorded in a gritty little studio in Cardiff [Soundspace Studios]. That did rub off on it a bit, definitely. Because you'd go out late at night, two o'clock in the morning, and a pimp would be collecting money in the courtyard where the studio was, where you'd walk out the door at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and somebody would be sniffing glue. It did rub off on the gnarliness of *The Holy Bible*. But that may have been there already – I might be romanticising it. I think it was more important how we recorded it in a very sparing way. So, location, I'm not sure if it ever affects it."

Do you tend to write with a specific album concept in mind? Or do you just keep writing songs with an open mind until the shape of an album emerges?

"It's strange. I think with *The Ultra Vivid Lament*, everyone was coming out of the pandemic and, God, it was quite strange. It felt like a very confusing political time – look where we are now. It just gets worse and worse. But Nick was trying to create a window where [listeners] could almost intrusively look into the way we were thinking and just actually hope that it would reflect the way other people felt, too, because we'd all been through this thing. There was an MO to it.

"A lot of times, [when starting a new recording project] Nick will give me and Sean a mission statement. And back in the day, Nick and Richey would have a mission statement about what they thought the album should be, whether it be *The Holy Bible* or whatever. You'd have a loose framework – dare I say a concept – to hang a record off. It's harder doing that, I think. Now, we tend to coalesce around stuff that we find we want to play more than three or four times in a row when we're doing early versions of it. I think that's enough of a reason for an album sometimes. So this album has been like that: if a song refused to go away, we carried on working on it. As simple as that.

1. Eastman's Juliet electric, with its Firebird-like raised centre section to the body, has become a go-to guitar for James

2. James's Juliet looks stunning in its black Antique Varnish finish and vintage-looking tortoiseshell plastics

"Even though I've got lots of guitars, I've never really dwelled upon them. But on this record I was having epiphanies all the time"

"*Decline And Fall* was an early song, *People Ruin Paintings* was an early song, *Dear Stephen* was an early song. This is really silly, but years ago there were certain albums that I had on cassette first because it was cheaper, but then when I went and bought them on CD or vinyl, they weren't as good [laughs]. I know that's such a nebulous thing to try to describe, but some of my favourite 'cassette albums' were *In My Tribe* by 10,000 Maniacs, *Fables Of The Reconstruction* by REM, and *London Calling* on cassette – never sounded as good on vinyl. I'm sorry, but they just didn't. *This Nation's Saving Grace* by The Fall is fucking amazing on tape, absolutely amazing. That little bit of compression on tape made it feel more personal somehow.

"So after we'd made demos of those three songs, I thought, 'This feels like a cassette album.' Then I'm thinking, 'Don't be such a dick' [laughs]. But that feeling has never gone away. It feels like a cassette album, it does. I like that. It's nice."

Tell us about the title track, *Critical Thinking* – it's a straight-for-the-jugular song about society losing its way in the era of social media.

"That's another one of Nick's songs. He brought all the music, and I just had to be the guitarist and come up with the parts. The demo of it was just bits of programming and Nick's vocal and a bass. But I thought, 'Oh, God. The words are brilliant.' It's like Nicky Wire's *Falling Down* moment – without the guns. I thought, 'The guitar has got to be like a small

lieutenant: it's got to be snapping at the heels of everything he says.' So I did a 'white funk' guitar kind of thing and I used the Guild. It was the only guitar that worked on it – I loved playing that. I loved just being the guitarist and just finding my own space, and having to find different things within four chords or even three chords [laughs]. I love doing that."

Your sound has a touch of chorus on it and it kind of reminded us of Geordie Walker from Killing Joke in places.

"Yeah, Geordie... God. I remember somebody telling me once that his guitar sound was two Burman amps out of phase to each other. I did use one of my Burmans on a couple of tracks. But they just burn – they just go up in flames! I took them out on the road and there'd be fucking flames coming out of back [laughs]! But three gain stages. You can't turn that down."

Did you use a particular chorus pedal for the album?

"I use the Electro-Harmonix Neo Clone and the Fender [Hammertone] Space Delay. That particular delay pedal has got modulation on it, too, and it's brilliant. Live, if I'm struggling – if it feels like the guitar is not flying – I just put that on and it's great. Who cares if there was no modulation on the studio version of the song; there is now [laughs]. I gave one to Richard [Oakes] from Suede when we toured with them. I had a spare one and I gave it to him... I said, 'Just try this pedal – but be careful. Once you buy it, you'll want to put it on everything.'

3. James with acoustic maker Martin's EM-18 solidbody electric from the late 70s. The model represented a short-lived attempt to break into the electric guitar market and was only made between 1979 and 1982

4. The EM-18 design is typical of late-70s trends, with a rather lavish nine-piece maple and rosewood body, two open humbuckers and a set neck

5. The scroll-like headstock is perhaps a nod to Martin's 19th century Stauffer-inspired origins. The guitar was designed by Martin's Dick Boak

So there was a bit of that [on *Critical Thinking*] – it was just a bit of modulation from the Fender Space Delay. They're really good, those pedals. They're so simple because there's not too much on them.

"I do use a hint of [pure] chorus on stuff sometimes, especially when playing clean and when playing live. But often, I'll have the chorus set at the lowest possible setting, so it gives it a little bit of spread, just like Robert Smith used to use it. Rob Smith is a really underrated guitarist. There's footage of him on Belgium TV doing the live version of *A Forest* from the mid-80s and it's fucking amazing. So many guitarists – like Stuart Adamson, Robert Smith, John McGeoch – they all used quite sneaky, surreptitious bits of chorus and that kind of thing. Obviously, Bill Nelson as well. Loads of those guitarists I loved."

What were your go-to guitars and amps on the record?

"My 1990 Les Paul Custom – my 'Faithful' – runs through the record, and it averages every other track: it's the main guitar on *Decline And Fall* as well. Richey's old Telecaster Thinline always finds some places on each record. Since the start, those two guitars have been on every album, just about.

"But on this album, it's the Guild S60-D. Basically, I found that guitar halfway through the record, and then I started putting it on everything, even if it was just a little tiny bit. It was our soundman [Robb Allan]'s guitar and it used to live in Maida Vale. I've stayed friends with him, and he's Massive Attack's soundman now.

"He finished sound with us around about 2001. Anyway, when he first became our soundman, he saw us in Camden Underworld on the 'Motown Junk' tour. He's a great Scottish guy and he was the in-house sound man there at the time – but he was really good to us and afterwards he just said, 'I want to go on tour with you.' So we became friends with him and we'd go to his flat, where he used to have this guitar, the Guild. I used to play it and I was like, 'You've got to let me take this on tour one day.' But he said, 'Nah, no fucking way. I've seen the way you treat guitars, man [laughs].' Then subsequently, he moved to Spain, just outside Barcelona. I played the guitar again over there and I said, 'One day, Rob, you're going to give this to me.' But he was like, 'No way.'

"Anyway, I hadn't seen him for, like, seven years and I hadn't played the guitar for 20 years. But I was back over there, so I said, 'Where's the Guild?' and he was like, 'I don't know.' I was like, 'What the fuck? That's my birthright, that guitar,' and he said, 'It might be in the garage downstairs.' So we go and look in the garage and it was there. It hadn't been looked at for 20 years and was sad and falling apart. It was like, 'Help me!'

"So I told Rob: 'This is an intervention. You've got to let me take this guitar to get it refurb'd and everything.' I think he was slightly ashamed, so he said, 'Yeah, okay, okay.' [Laughs] So I took it away and got it refurb'd and when it was finished I said, 'Can I use it to take on the road?' And he said, 'Yes. Game over. It's yours for now.' It's fucking amazing. You can get any sound on it. Plus, it doesn't quite sound like any other guitar, which is brilliant. I think Graham Coxon would love it."

What other gear was crucial on this album?

"I used that through the Blackstar St James amp, which is fucking amazing. I was having moments of clarity on this record, just loving gear. Even though I've got lots of guitars, I've never really dwelled upon them too much. I just play them and use them. But on this record I was having epiphanies all the time. So that Eastman Juliet... I used that lots. It's got a lovely spread to its sound, and the bridge pickup is really creamy and beautiful. I also used an acoustic that was made by Richard Meyrick. He's a bespoke maker at Abergavenny, and that was all over the record. What else? The Troublemaker Telecaster, and an old Gordon Smith, before they flipped over to new ownership."

Tell us about the track *Being Baptised*. It's a really amazing piece of music.

"That was one I wrote in its entirety. It was about a day spent with Allen Toussaint [the Meters, Dr John et al] when we did [BBC Four's] *Songwriters Circle*. I've had that moment many a time where I meet somebody and I can tell after five minutes they're like, 'Get me away from this nutter.' [Laughs]

"I actually had that with Jim Kerr in Rockfield. I was a massive Jim Kerr fan when I was young and he was in one side of Rockfield and we were in the other part, and he came into the studio one morning and he was like, 'Okay, chaps?' I was like, 'What the fuck is going on?' So I said, 'All right, Jim?' and he was like, 'Yeah, sorry, I was just stealing some milk.' But I was like, 'I've got to tell you. I'm a massive fan – *Race Is The Prize*, *Real To Real Cacophony*... what a fucking record...' I saw this look in his eyes [laughs].

"I had the same with Allen Toussaint because I sat there with him and he was such a graceful, kind of regal presence. He had that suit on and he looked so cool, and he had his wife with him. I was sat there and I was trying to restrain myself for, like, three minutes. Then I was like, 'Fuck. I've got to tell you. I've been listening to *Holy Cow* since I was seven years old. My mum loved that song. I absolutely love that song. Do you mind me asking? What did you think when you first heard Glen Campbell's version of *Southern Nights*?' But I saw that after 15 minutes, he was like, 'Get this guy away from me.' [Laughs] But I went and got a cup of coffee and came back, and he was lovely, he kept talking about stuff. It was one of those days where you actually spend some time with somebody, and you feel like you've learnt something at the end – about the way to act, be a bit calmer, say less." G

6. James's Alpine White Les Paul Custom – now nicely mellowed to a yellowed-nitro hue – was bought from Macari's in 1990 and features on all his major recordings

Manic Street Preachers' new album, *Critical Thinking*, is available now on Columbia Records

www.manicstreetpreachers.com

7. James used the rarely seen Guild S60-D (left) as one of his main electrics on the new album, after patiently persuading a friend to part with it over the course of several years and then restoring it to playing condition. It's seen alongside a matching Guild B-302 bass here

"I found [the Guild S60-D] halfway through the record, and then I started putting it on everything. It's my birthright, that guitar..."

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PRE-CBS SUNBURST STRATOCASTERS

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

Words Huw Price **Photography** Olly Curtis

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

1957

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

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

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

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

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

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

1960

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

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

1964 & 1957

“When you take into account the whole of the pre-CBS era, there really is something for everyone”

STEVE HOVE

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

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

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

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

"Rosewood is a hard-wearing wood, and traditionally rosewood fretboards weren't lacquered. Maple is hard, too, but the lacquer Fender applied over it tended to wear off, and finger marks weren't perceived as a good look in those days. Negative customer feedback and numerous warranty repairs may also have prompted the changeover.

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

The lacquered fretboard shows relatively little playwear, but most maple-'board 1950s Strats are 'battle scarred'

1962

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

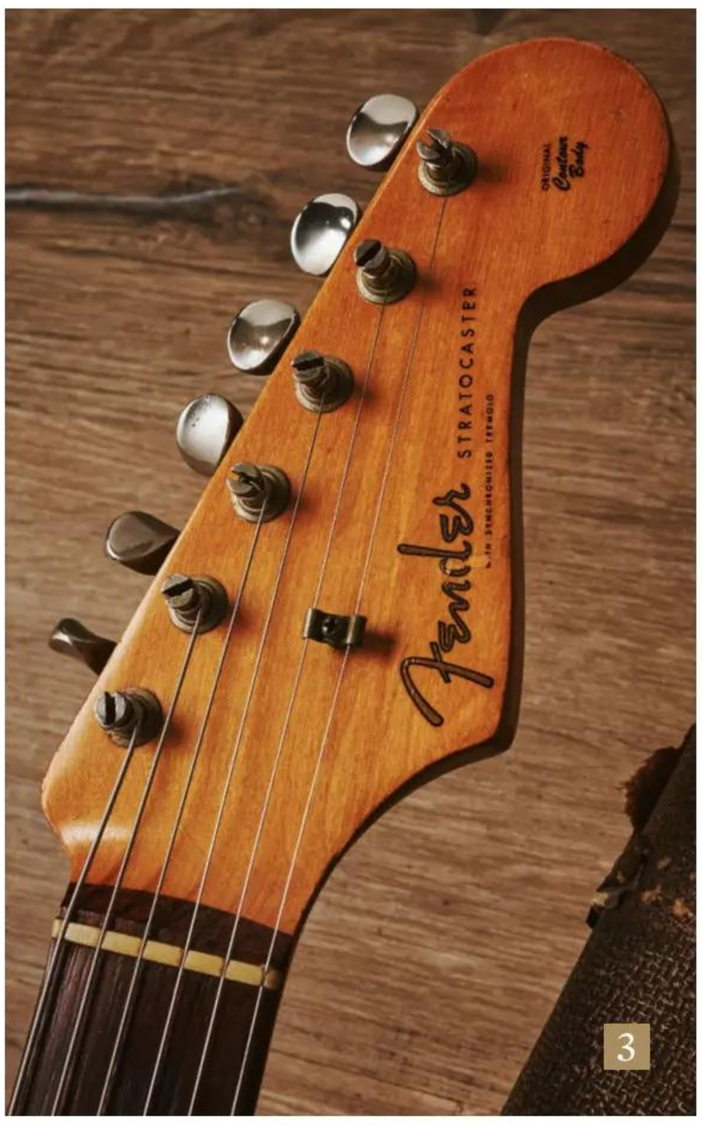
"The yellow also looks far more vivid, and it's interesting to note how the width of the very dark brown band around the edges always varied. It could be that wider bands were applied to mask flaws in the alder, or maybe the look differed depending on which employee was spraying the finish.

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

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

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

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

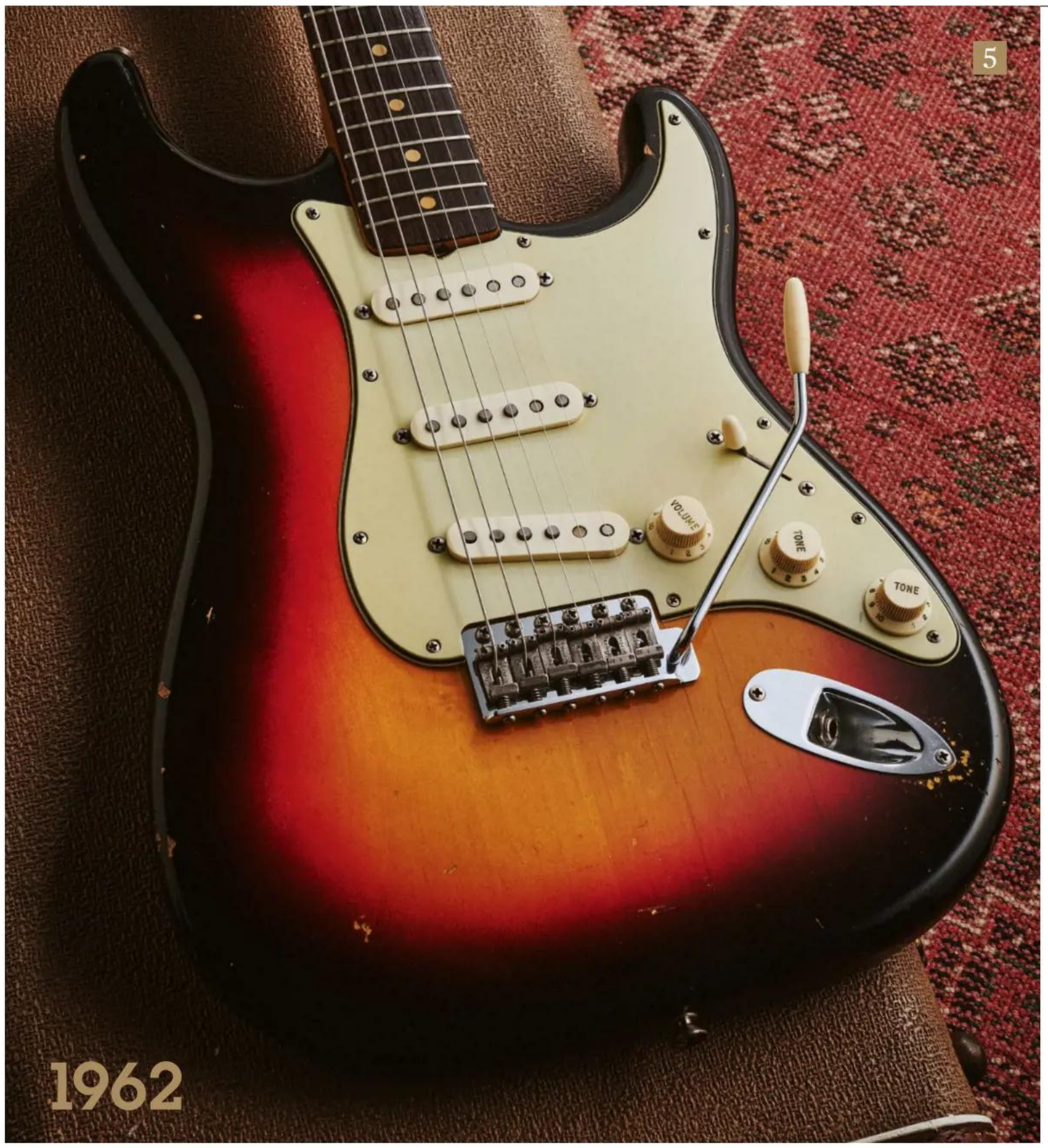


1963

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

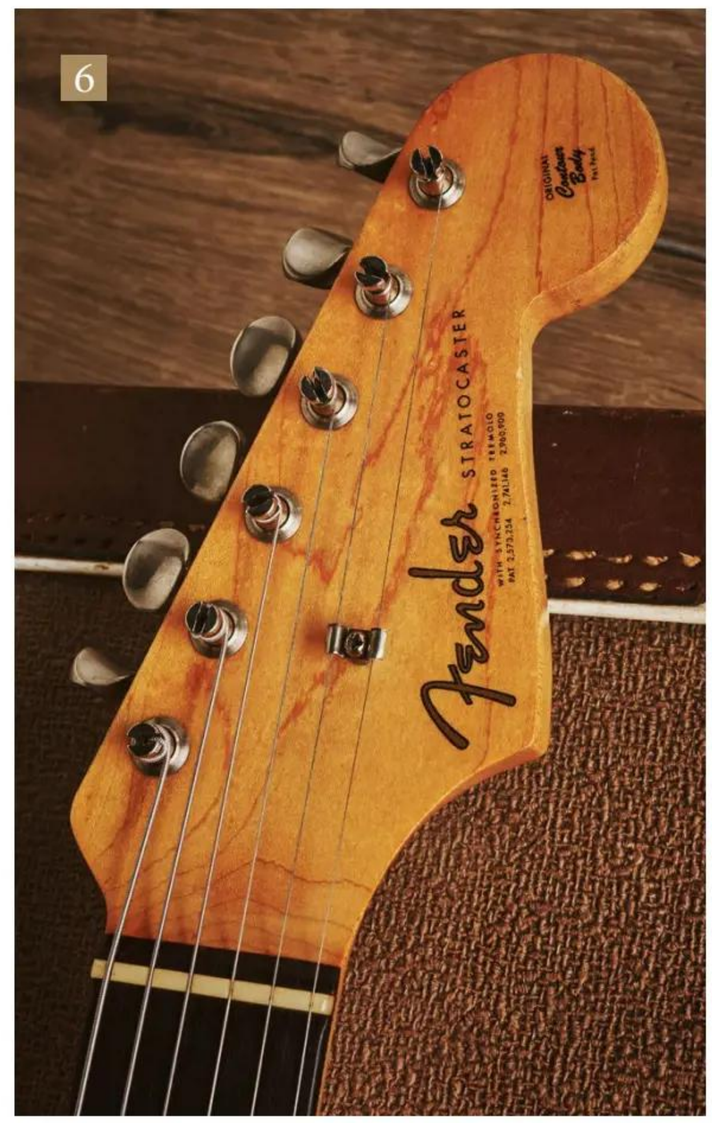
"Some people assume it was a Fender product because Fullerplast relates to Fullerton, California, where the Fender factory was located. In fact, the product combined the name of its inventor, Fuller O' Brien, with the dreaded word 'plastic'. People often assume that all vintage Strats had 'breathable'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

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



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

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



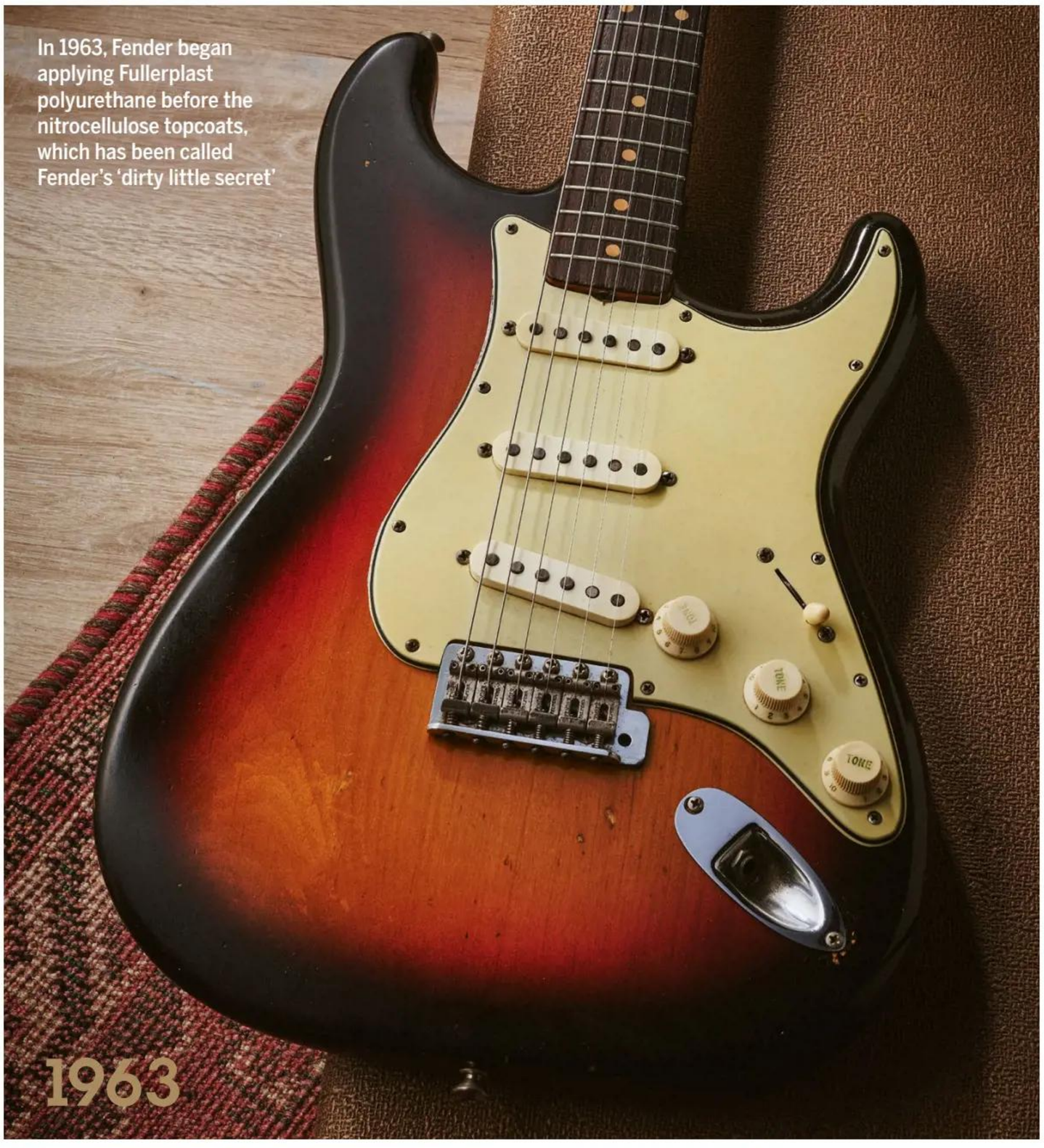
"The pickguard screw later underwent a subtle change 1963. This guitar has an earlier-style 'guard with a screw hole equidistant between the neck and middle pickups, but later that year Fender moved the screw hole closer to the middle pickup as you can see on the 1964 example."

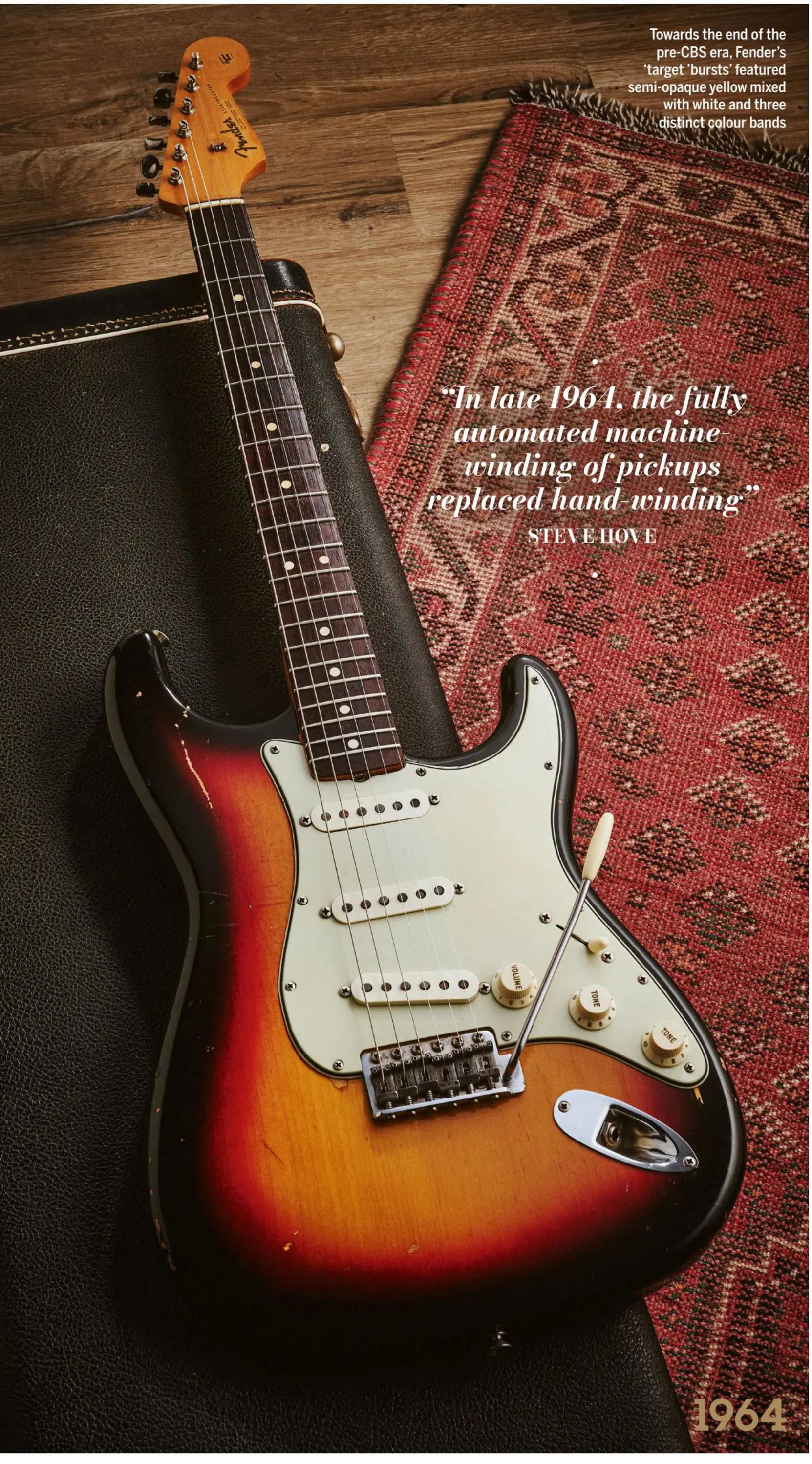
1964

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

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

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





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

Market Movements

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

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

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

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

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

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EPIPHONE RIVIERA

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

Words Bob Wootton **Photography** Phil Barker

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Welcoming The Riviera

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

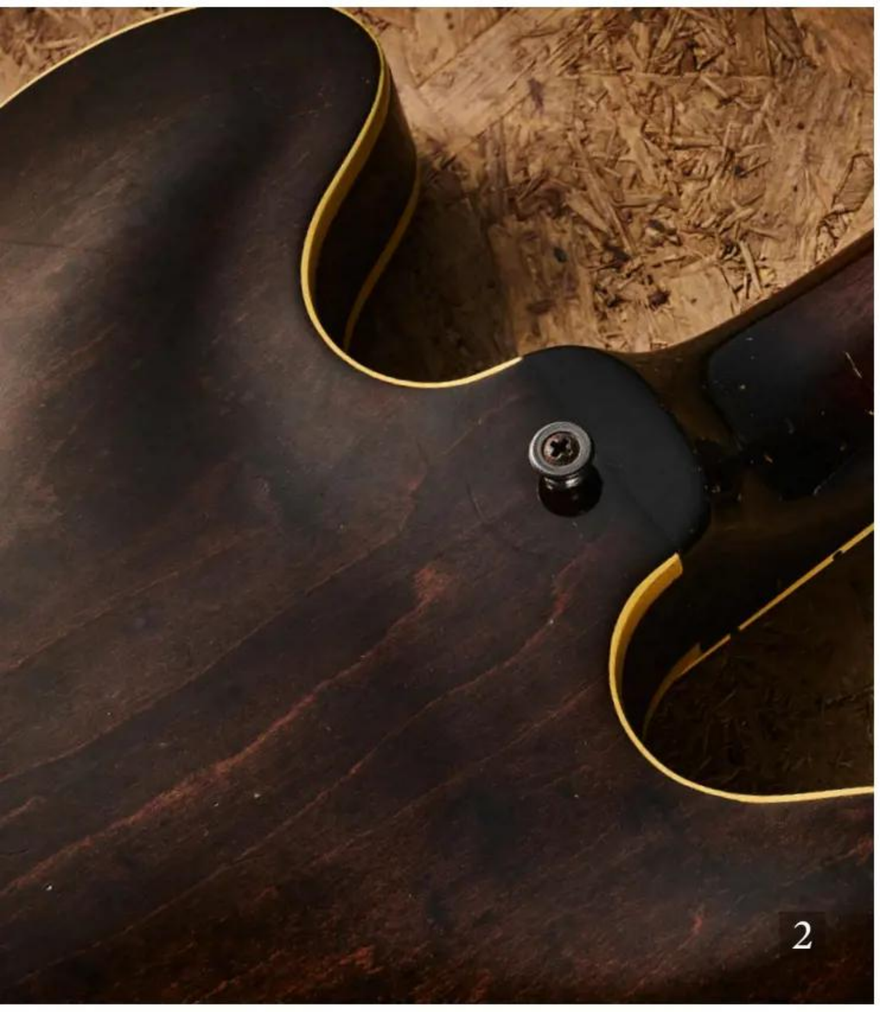
The 335 had Gibson's full-size humbuckers, which designer Seth Lover reportedly considered too large. In

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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

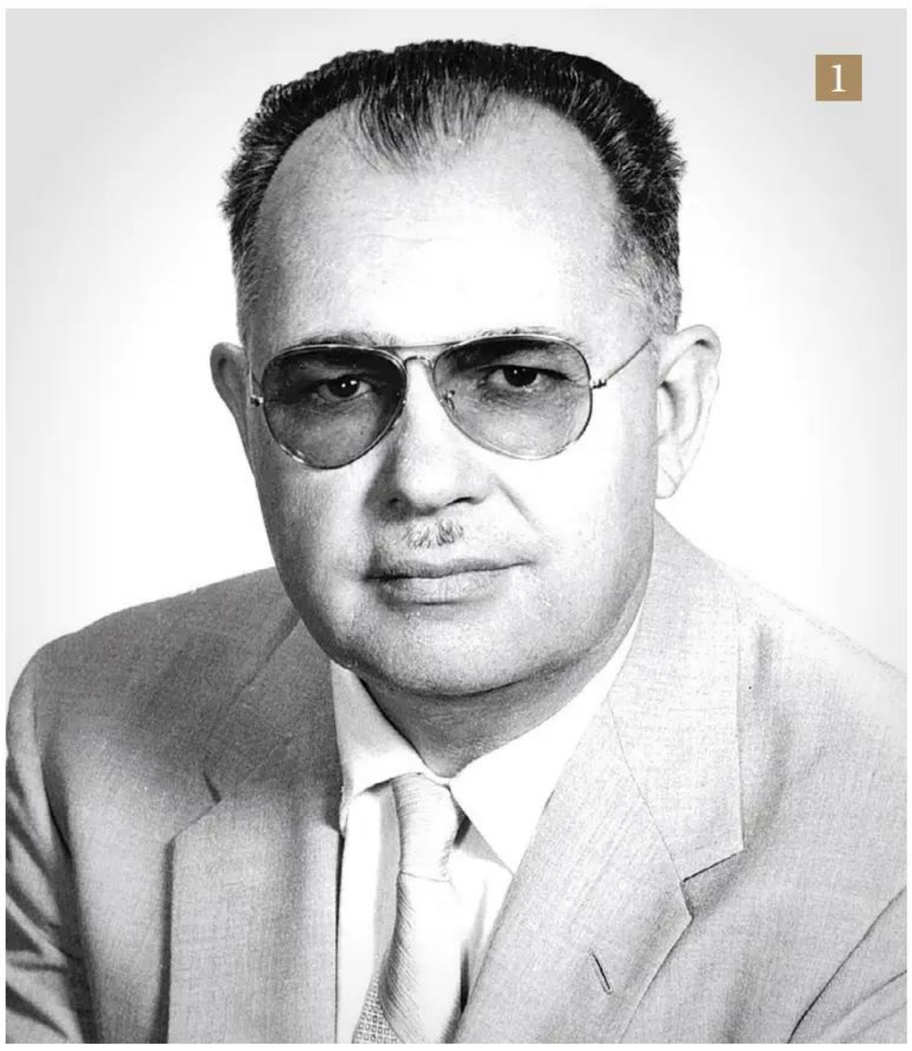
Words Tony Bacon

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.



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

PHOTO COURTESY OF FENDER

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 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

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

“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

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

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 BY JOBY SESSIONS

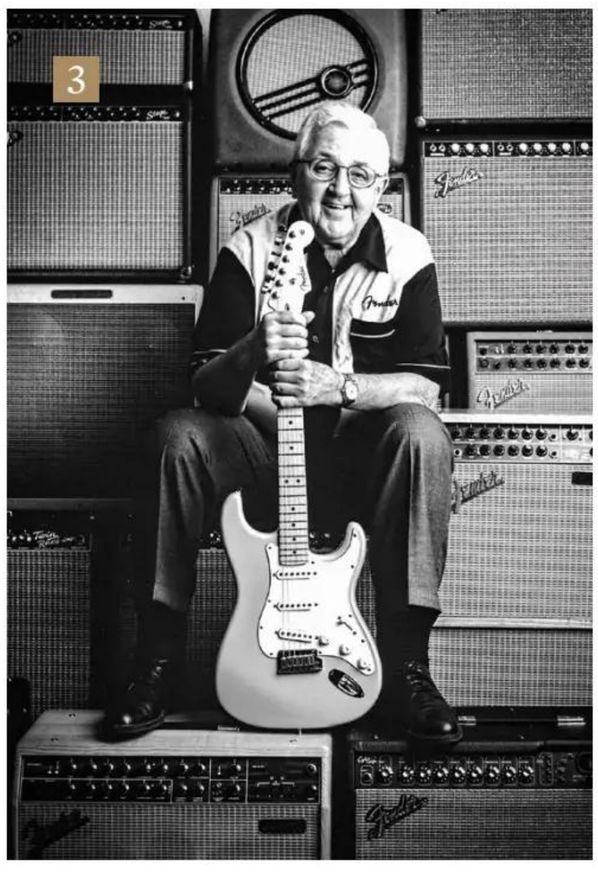


PHOTO COURTESY OF FENDER

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

4

5

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, 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".

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

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

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

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

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

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TONY BACON COLLECTION

PHOTO BY LUCIANO VITI/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

"There are the absolute vintage reproductions, and we've found that people want everything just so. Obsessive, almost"

JOHN PAGE

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."

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PHOTO BY JOBBY SESSIONS

"[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 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

9. No area of the guitar is overlooked in the ageing process, and the Fender team examine pictures of real guitars to provide a template for their aged finishes – even the very heavy ones

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.

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

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FENDER

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."

"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***

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 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.

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

CHASE PAUL

This Custom Shop Limited Edition Dual Mag II Stratocaster Super Heavy Relic 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 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 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.

"Players today have a more discerning taste and can hear a lot more of what we're throwing [into the designs]" PAUL WALLER

"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

2

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

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

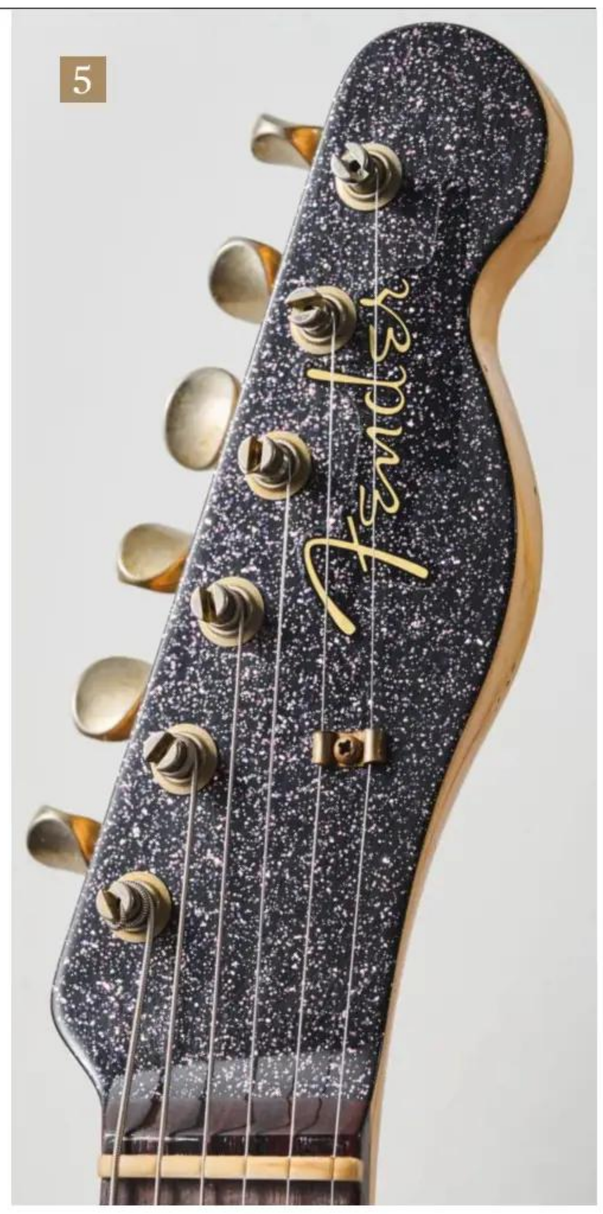
"Specific vintage colours come in and out of fashion – such as with Shell Pink and sparkle finishes"

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



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

"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***

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.

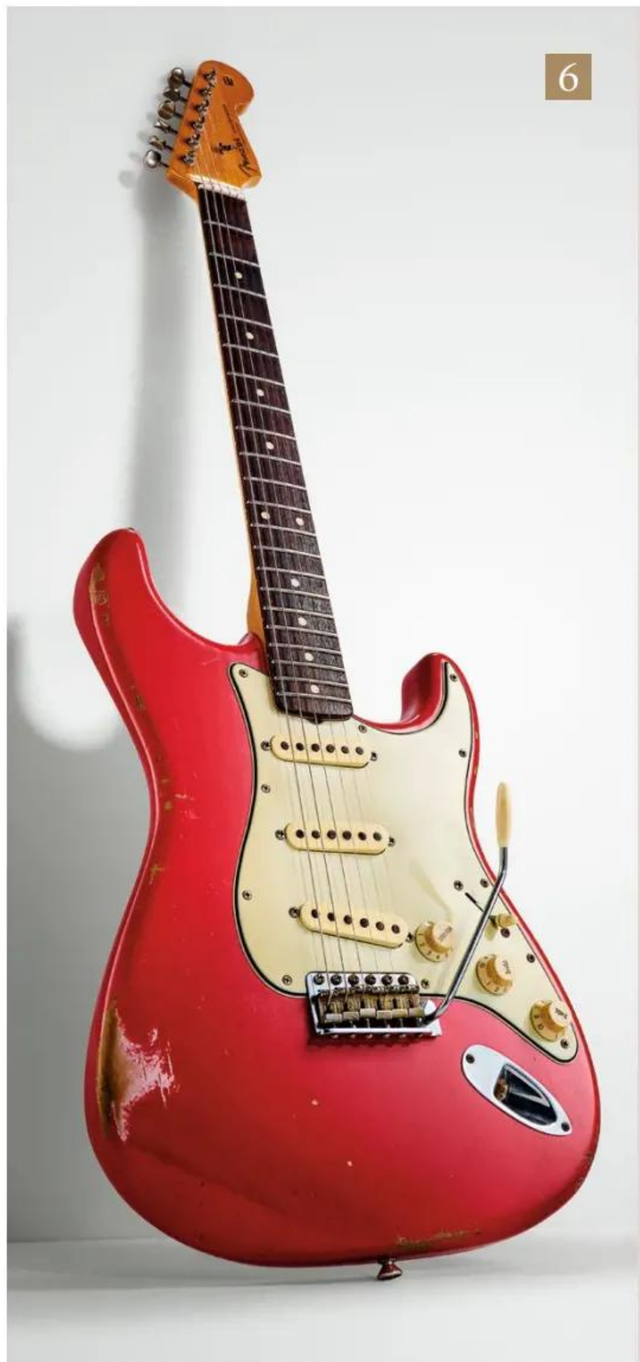
"If you see it on a guitar hanging on a wall in a shop, it looks like a vintage Strat bridge, but it has slightly more narrow string spacing, so it's a little bit more comfortable for people who are doing fast picking or have more intricate picking patterns – things that modern music is calling for. 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

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 RYAN PIORKOWSKI 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 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..."

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

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

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. 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."

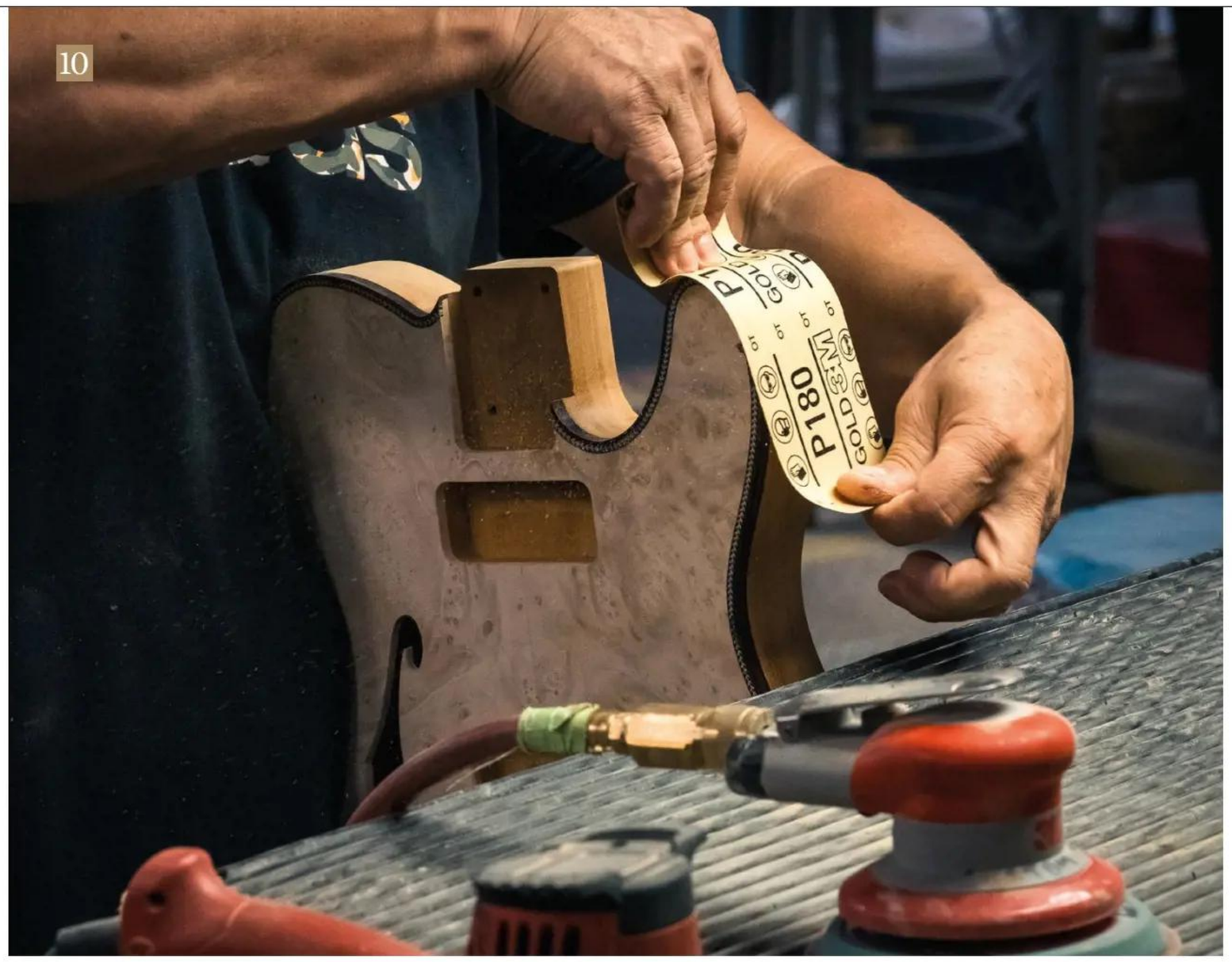
Chase: "We're trying to emulate the sound of these instruments that have been revered for decades, right? So you can't step too far outside of [that] when you start using different materials. I think we end up experimenting here and there, with roasted woods or figured tops on some things – or combinations 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 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 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."



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

PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI COURTESY OF FENDER

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

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

“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

MADE IN JAPAN

We dig into the Japanese guitar industry of the 1960s and 70s and find notable brands, mischievous copies, diligent makers and original designs that led to the electric guitar's renaissance in the 1980s and beyond

Words Tony Bacon **Photography** Phil Barker

It's the late 70s, and Paul Stanley of KISS tells an interviewer about the band's great successes – he guesses they've sold something like 20 million records, and they're just back from a Japanese tour. It was there, he says, that he found out more about the abilities of Japanese guitar makers. He discovered they have the skills, as he puts it, "to make anything". That's a lot more than can be said for America at the moment, he adds. "Japan," Stanley concludes, "really is the country of the future."

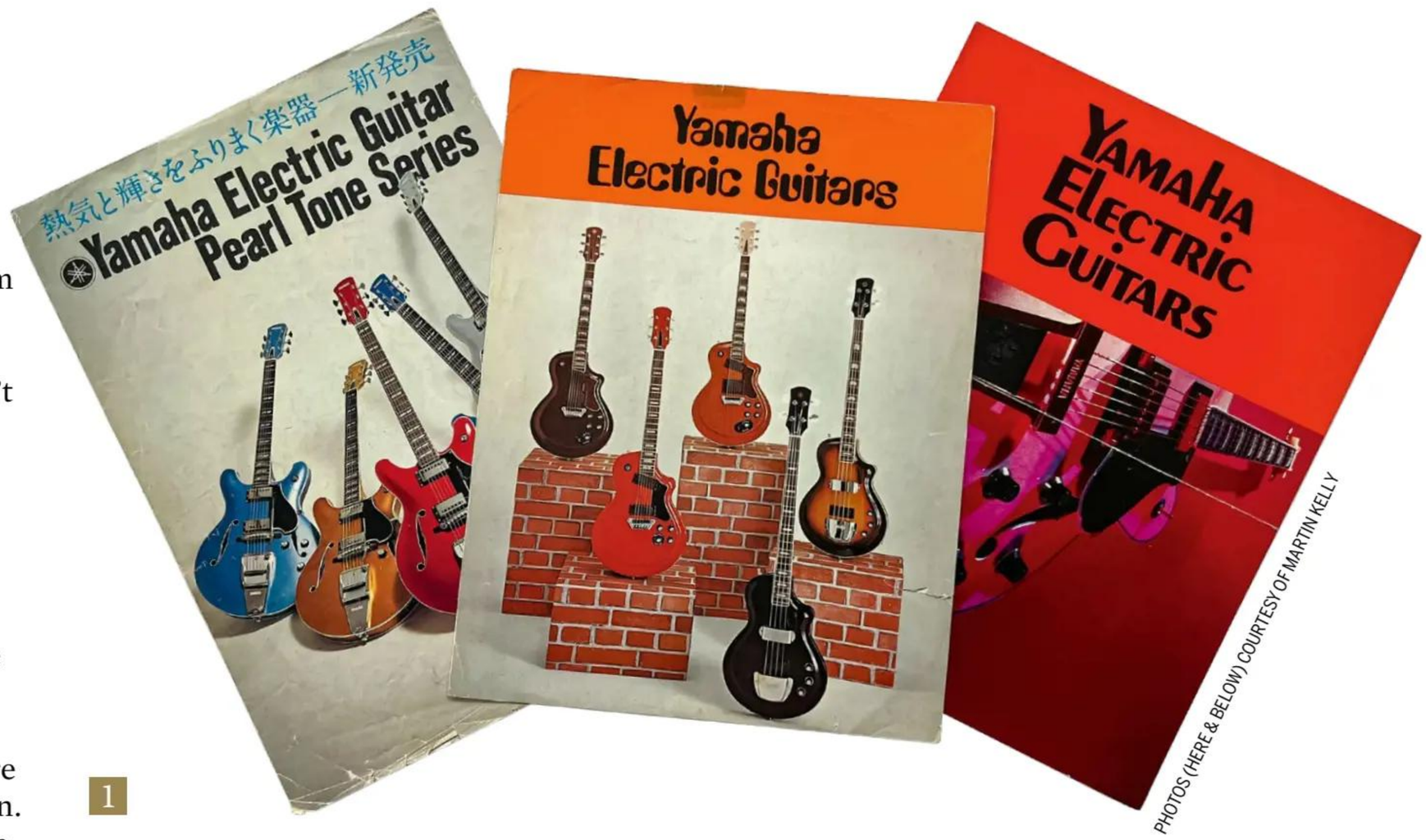
Japan's guitar industry was certainly healthy when he made those comments, and it surely had no reason to doubt that the future would be just as rosy. It had overcome a shaky start, when critics said it simply copied well-known designs, and it had weathered some crippling ups and downs. Now, though, Japanese companies were showing themselves in many cases to be the equal of American makers – and in some cases perhaps to have overtaken them. Let's take a look at how that came about and who made it happen.

Early Originals

The origins of perhaps the most famous Japanese guitar brand, Ibanez, lie with its parent company, Hoshino. Matsujirou Hoshino started the family business around 1900 in Nagoya, about 175 miles west of Tokyo, when he opened a store to sell books and stationery. He soon added a section for musical instruments run by his son, Yoshitarou, who set up Hoshino Gakki Ten – the Hoshino Musical Instrument Store company.

Following a tour by the great Spanish classical guitarist Andrés Segovia in 1929, which inspired many Japanese people to take up the instrument, Hoshino began importing Salvador Ibáñez guitars from Spain. The Spanish factory closed by the late 30s, so Hoshino adopted the name for itself and made acoustic guitars in Japan, at first branded as Ibanez Salvador and soon simply as Ibanez. The company began to offer electric guitars around 1957, and from then until the mid-60s Hoshino made some instruments itself in its new Tama Seisaku Shone factory, set up in 1959, but also

This 1988 Fender Japan Jazzmaster in Candy Apple Red, currently at Gas Station Guitars, is very early for an official Japanese Fender offset but was the fruit of a long process of evolution in Japanese lutherie



PHOTOS (HERE & BELOW) COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

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1. Yamaha was a 60s success story and pace-setter for original guitar designs made in Japan. Other brands either took a more quirky approach to designing new guitars or, more frequently, cloned the work of big US brands – setting the scene for landmark legal battles

bought in guitars from other Japanese firms.

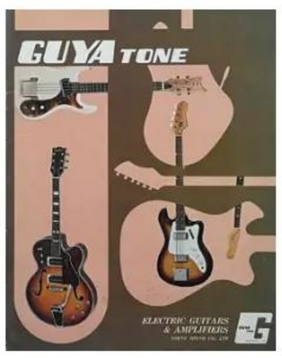
Some of the early Japanese guitars from this time had features loosely borrowed from American Fender and Gibson, say, or British Burns models. Not exactly copies – they didn't duplicate every detail of an existing model – but more like Japanese interpretations of Western designs with touches of Eastern taste.

In Japan in the 60s, many budding young guitarists were just as keen to form groups and find stardom as anyone in America, Britain – or anywhere else that the pop bug had bitten. In Japan, the scene was known as Eleki and then Group Sounds, and bands such as The Spacemen, The Blue Comets, and The Jacks enjoyed success.

Japanese companies, including the big names like Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez, not only sold electrics to that growing home market but also began to actively export instruments, notably to wholesalers in Europe, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. And a complication arises here for anyone trying to grasp the ins and outs of Japanese guitar history.

It ought to be simple: companies manufactured guitars and either sold them at home or exported them. However, many of the foreign customers who bought instruments from Japan had their own brand names put on the guitars. This is often called OEM – original equipment manufacturer – which means a company that makes a product to be sold by another company under its own name. It meant nearly identical instruments being sold in various locations bearing different brands and, conversely, guitars with one brand originating from a variety of sources. Add to this an array of often interrelated factories and sales agents and distributors, and the picture can be a baffling one.

Japanese companies like Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez sold electrics to the growing home market and also actively exported instruments



Guyatone instruments enjoyed some success in the hands of blues and rock guitarists such as Rory Gallagher, but the company was founded in the 1930s

For example, the American and British firms that bought from Hoshino in the early days used brands such as Antoria and Star in the UK and Maxitone and Montclair in the USA, among several others, although some guitars did have Ibanez on them. Some Ibanez catalogues from the period feature guitars with blank headstocks, accentuating the 'your-name-here' policy.

There was similar OEM activity at Teisco – a firm born in Tokyo in the 40s, adding guitars in 1952 and electrics a couple of years later. Its exports to Europe and America had brand names such as Audition, Top Twenty, Gemtone, Jedson, Mellowtone, Kent, Kingston, and Norma. Teisco also sold a line of models at home with its own Teisco brand and, from around 1965 in the USA, Teisco Del Rey.

Teisco had success through its American distributors – at first Westheimer, who later bought from Kawai, and then WMI, who came onboard around the time the Teisco Del Rey brand name appeared. The Sears, Roebuck mail-order catalogue company was another US customer for Teisco, who provided some of the guitars Sears sold with its own Silvertone brand.

And here's another wrinkle: as with many of the firms for whom Teisco made guitars, the Silvertone models exported to America by Teisco were sometimes almost identical to a Teisco-brand instrument sold at home. An example of this is the mid-60s four-pickup Silvertone 1437, which in the homeland was the Teisco ET-440.

In 1965, Teisco sponsored a movie, *Eleki No Wakadaisho* ('The Young Electric Guitar Wizard'). It starred guitarist Yūzō Kayama as a member of the fictional Young Beats group, who entered a battle-of-the-bands competition – and, naturally, they all played Teisco guitars through Teisco amps. Despite such cultural landmarks, as well as the opening of a new factory in Okegawa and the export of instruments to Britain, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the US and elsewhere, Teisco battled with financial problems. It declared bankruptcy early in '67 and was bought by Kawai, which continued to use the Teisco brand for a few more years.

GUYATONE, KAWAI, YAMAHA, ARIA

Rivalling Teisco and Hoshino/Ibanez as the big name in 60s Japanese guitars was Guyatone. It was founded by Mitsuo Matsuki in Tokyo in the 1930s, introduced its first solidbody electric in the mid-50s, and its LG models in particular proved popular in Britain and elsewhere toward the end of that decade. These early LGs were sold in America by Buegeleisen & Jacobson (as Winston), and in Britain by Arbiter (as Guyatone) and JT Coppock (as Antoria).

Guyatone's range and quality expanded during the 60s, with models such as the LG-160T,

There was boom and bust in the Japanese guitar business in the period from 1966 to '68... resulting in a reset of the industry

Space oddity: this Teisco SS-3L, up for sale with guitar auctioneer Gardiner Houlgate at time of writing, typifies the experimentation going on at Japanese guitar firms in the 60s – unsure of what would work, they tried everything from novel switching to all-new body styles and pickup designs

complete with a handy body-hole, as well as a couple of SG and MG hollowbodies, and the LG-200T, which had four pickups and multiple push-button selectors.

Probably the best-known Guyatone today is the Sharp 5 signature model, introduced in 1967. The Sharp 5 band, part of the Group Sounds trend that spread across Japan at this time, was led by Munetaka Inoue and guitarist Nobuhiro Mine, and their break came in '67 when they signed to Columbia Records. Guyatone saw an opportunity for a liaison with the band, renaming its LG-350T guitar as the Sharp 5 model. Mine played the 350 Deluxe, with blue finish, three pickups and gold-plated metalwork.

Kawai dates back to the 1920s, when Koichi Kawai started a keyboard company in Hamamatsu. The firm began making guitars in the 50s, expanding its Kawai-brand lines during the next decade and exporting widely to OEM customers. Among the brand names used in the US were Domino, Kent, Kimberly and TeleStar. By the late 60s Kawai had become another big player in Japanese guitar making.

These companies still competed for attention in the home market, and a notable new contender in the mid-60s was Yamaha. It was, of course, an old name, founded in the 1880s as a keyboard manufacturer and diversifying as the decades went by into many other areas, not least motorcycles.

The first Yamaha budget electrics appeared in 1964, and then the better SG models two years later. Among these early SGs were the conventionally shaped and Fender-inspired SG-2 and 3, along with the reverse-body Mosrite-influenced SG-5 and 7, with an extended lower horn to the body and a long, slim headstock. The flipped-body style of Mosrite's Ventures model was a popular shape among Japanese makers following the American band's successful tour of the country in 1964.

2

2. Rory Gallagher's 1965 Teisco TRG-1, which, with its Gold Foil pickup and internal loudspeaker, typifies how Japanese makers of the era tried to win over players with unusual features, styling and sounds

> Tokai in particular made players think anew about what 'Japanese guitar' could mean – and sent shockwaves through the industry

The Arai company, founded in Nagoya by the classical guitarist Shiro Arai in 1956, made classicals at first but added electric guitars in the early 60s, soon using the Aria and Aria Diamond brands. In the 70s and later the company would become better known for its Aria Pro II brand. Aria was the Japanese distributor of Fender guitars in the late 50s, so it's not surprising that some of its own models were Fender-like in appearance.

The Japanese Guitar Game

Let's step aside for a moment and play 'Loser, Looker, Player'. We'll tell you ours, to get things going, and then you can have a go.

LOSER: Our choice is an Ibanez copy of a Gibson double-neck. Did you say 'so what'? Ibanez introduced the line in 1974, about six years after Gibson had dropped its SG-style originals, and offered a six-string plus 12-string (model 2402) and a six-string plus bass (2404). So far, so Gibson. But here's our choice of Loser: Ibanez Model 2406 boasted two six-string necks. Correct, two six-strings on one (rather heavy) body. Gibson had never made such a thing, of course, but Ibanez had other ideas. This guitar, it enthused, would be good to have to hand in "open-tuning slide guitar and standard tuning". We rest our (rather large) case.

Quaint designs, such as this Californian Rebel by Domino, aimed to capture the free spirit of American rock – but looked like nothing else. Today, they have cult appeal

LOOKER: An impressive example of over-the-top Teisco Del Rey style was the solidbody Spectrum 5, introduced in 1966. It was a luscious creation, with a thin, curving, sculpted mahogany body, covered with what Teisco claimed as "seven coats of lacquer", parachute-shape fingerboard inlays, a spring-less vibrato, two jacks for mono or stereo output, and three pickups, split so as to assist with the Spectrum 5's stereo feed when required. The model name derived from what Teisco described as "five different basic colour tones [that] can be produced with this unusual guitar", indicating the colourful pickup and phase switches on the upper part of the model's pickguard. Spectacular!

PLAYER: How about a Tokai Les Paul Reborn? The firm began soon after World War II in Hamamatsu and launched Tokai electrics in 1967. 10 years later, the copies began. Yes, there were many copies about, but Tokai in particular and its Les Pauls-styles (and Strat-styles and more) made players think anew about what 'Japanese guitar' could mean – and sent shockwaves through parts of the instrument industry. The Les Pauls came with a few different names during the key period from 1978 to '85 or so, and they looked the part, too, some bearing 'wow-could-it-be-a-'59' flamey tops, and many found them to be great players at decent prices. One of Tokai's cheeky British ads turned the tables with a headline that read: "Beware of imitations." This did not go unnoticed.

Copycat Crazy

There was boom and bust in the Japanese guitar business in the period from 1966 to '68. One of the factors may have been the USA's doubling of customs duties on imported electrics, and domestically some makers were caught with excessive stocks when demand died, at home as well as abroad.

Whatever the causes, the bust toppled Teisco, Guyatone and others, resulting in a reset of the industry. Some of the stronger businesses survived, including

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

It was in the early 70s that a wider move to copies began in Japan. Interpretations of the real American things, there was no doubt about the inspiration

There's no getting away from the fact that many major Japanese brands gained ground by cloning US designs, even fairly niche ones such as this 1972 Ibanez 2380 – a copy of the Gibson Les Paul Recording model of the era

Aria, Fujigen and Yamaha. But the upheaval at this time provides yet another complication for anyone expecting a straightforward situation where guitar A was made by B, has the brand C, and was sold by D. The rest of the alphabet will come in handy if you want to dig deeper.

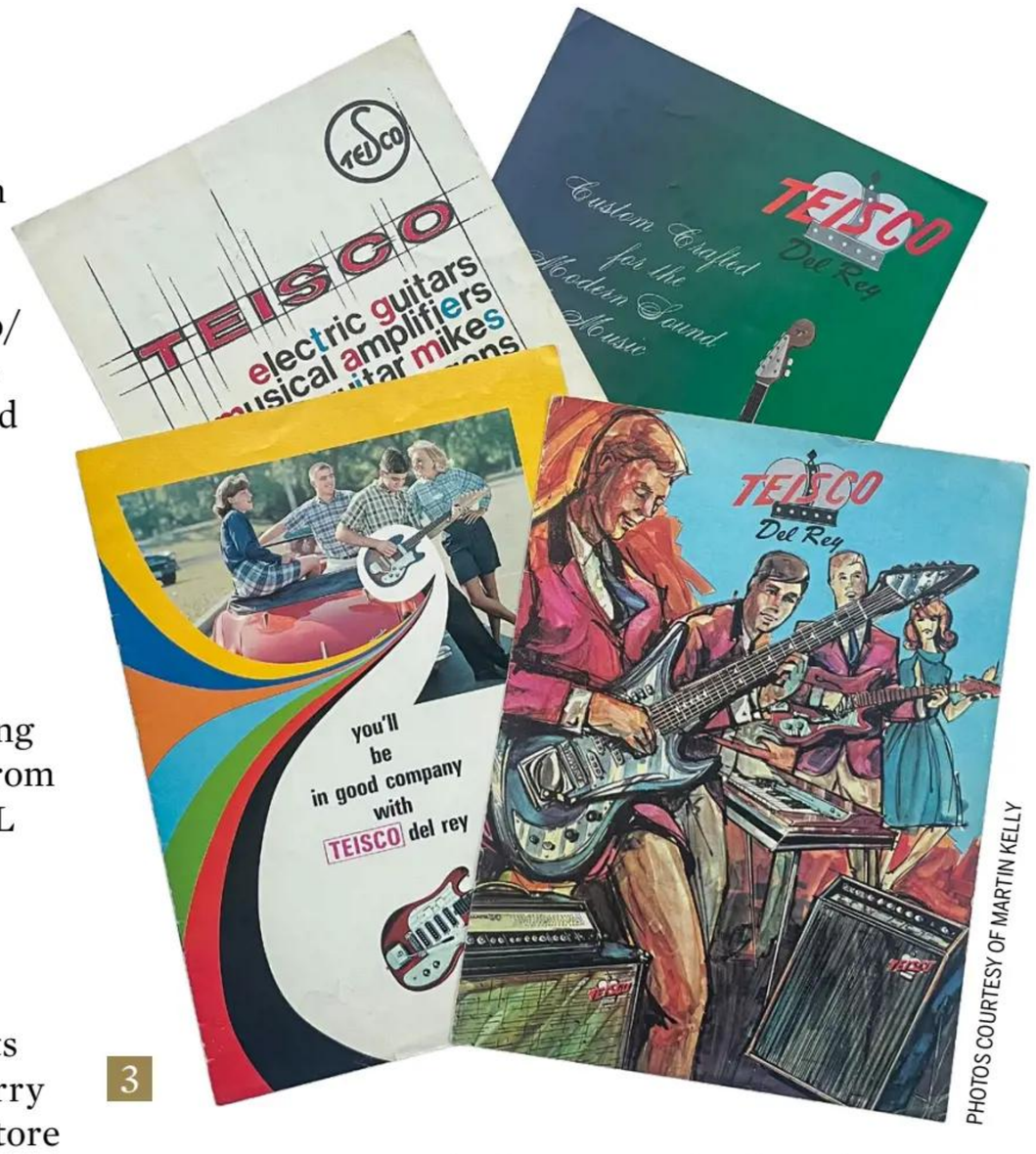
To generalise, then, it was in the early 70s that a wider move to copies began in Japan. These could still be described as interpretations of the real American things, but now there was no doubt about the models that provided the inspiration. Hoshino had been sourcing guitars from Teisco and Fujigen Gakki since it shifted its Tama factory to drums only in 1965, and by 1970 Fujigen was its main supplier, coinciding with this emphasis on copies. Hoshino continued as a trading company, one that buys and sells products without manufacturing anything itself.

Fuji Gen Gakki Seizou Kabushikigaisha – the Fuji Stringed-Instrument Manufacturing Corporation – was started by Yuuichirou Yokouchi and Yutaka Mimura and produced its first guitar, a basic nylon-string acoustic, during 1960, adding electrics three years later. It had a new factory operational by 1965, based in Matsumoto, home to several furniture makers and guitar builders. As well as its OEM work, Fujigen had its Greco brand, in partnership with distributor Kanda Shokai.

Fujigen's Greco and Hoshino/Ibanez copies were among the most popular of the period, and some of the initiative to make and develop them came from American and British outlets. The first British distributor to buy Ibanez-brand guitars from Hoshino was Maurice Summerfield, who started doing business with them in 1964. From the early 70s, he added the CSL brand for electrics alongside Ibanez, and then the Sumbro brand as a cheaper line below Ibanez and CSL.

In America, one of the outlets Hoshino worked with was Harry Rosenbloom's Medley Music store in Philadelphia, and his Elger Company became Hoshino's eastern US distributor for Tama and Elger guitars, Elger banjos and Star drums. In 1972, Hoshino and Elger set up a joint venture to become the American distributor of Ibanez guitars as well as Hoshino's other brands and instruments, and a few years later Hoshino took sole ownership of the operation that had become its valuable American HQ.

Staff at the new offices, both Japanese and American, noticed that at first the quality wasn't great on some of the guitars shipped over to them, and they fed regular suggestions and ideas back to Japan, many of which were used to broaden and improve the lines.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

3. Teisco Del Rey's marketing brochures promised popularity through music made on its striking guitars

4. This Teisco Del Rey Spectrum 5, which belongs to Andy Fairweather Low (see interview, page 74), has stood the test of time as one of the more usable, even low-key iconic, original designs from 60s Japan

Maurice Summerfield in Britain recommended that Hoshino add to the line a copy of a Gibson Flying V, recently given a low-key revival by Gibson. As with the original Les Pauls, players at the time were rediscovering the excellence of old Vs. Ibanez launched a Flying V copy in 1973 based on a late-60s original that Summerfield sent to them,

Some of the initiative for Fujigen to make and develop copies during the 60s came from American and British outlets

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and soon a Gibson double-neck copy appeared, again thanks to Summerfield's encouragement.

By 1976, Les Paul copies were the most numerous in the Ibanez catalogue, with more than 20 varieties on offer. In the USA, they were pitched from the cheapest, the best-selling bolt-neck $260 Les Custom 2350, through the $299.50 Les Deluxe 59'er 2340 in sunburst and the $340 Sunlight Special 2342IV, and up to the most expensive – a set-neck version of the 2350, the $495 2650CS Solid Body DX. That same year, Gibson's regular line of five Les Paul solidbody models ranged from the $599 Les Paul Deluxe to the $739 Les Paul Custom, so it's not difficult to understand one of the prime attractions of the

You won't get far in the world of Japanese electric guitar history without coming across the word 'lawsuit'

Typical of the so-called 'Lawsuit Era' electrics made in Japan is this 1975 Ibanez copy of a Gibson ES-335, which at time of writing is up for auction at guitar sales specialist Gardiner Houlgate as part of a collection of Japanese guitars

copies, beyond any considerations of accuracy or quality.

There were many other Japanese companies making copies, of varying quality and exported with any number of brands, including Penco, Mann, Jason, Kasuga, Heerby, Burny, Tokai, Fernandes, Honey, Conrad, Ventura, Fresher, Electra and HS Anderson. Fujigen and Kanda Shokai's house brand, Greco, was in the upper bracket of quality, and by 1981 Greco's Stratocaster copy line ranged from the SE-380, which retailed at 38,000 yen, up to the SE-1200, at 120,000 yen. A straightforward conversion into US dollars of the time provides an equivalent range of about $260 to $530. That same year, Fender's cheapest Stratocaster retailed for $720.

LAWSUIT? WHAT LAWSUIT?

You won't get far in the world of Japanese electric guitar history without coming across the word 'lawsuit'. In the 70s, Ibanez in particular and Japanese brands in general were irritating the hell out of Gibson, Fender and the other US companies targeted by the copyists.

It wasn't until 1977 that Gibson made a legal complaint to Ibanez (through its US arm, Elger). Gibson and Ibanez/Elger settled out of court, with Elger agreeing to stop infringing Gibson's trademarked headstock design and to stop using Gibson-like model names in sales material. In February 1978, Gibson's complaint was closed.

In fact, Ibanez was already using a new headstock design, and had been offering some original-design guitars for a number of years. That term 'lawsuit' stems from this brief legal spat and is often used these days to describe any Japanese copy guitar of the period, whether or not the brand suffered legal action. Oddly, it's gained a cachet, presumably because 'lawsuit-era guitar' sounds more dramatic than '70s Japanese guitar'.

One of the reasons Fender chose Fujigen to manufacture its first Squier guitars in the early 80s was because Fender's strategy to beat the Japanese copies was simply to make better copies itself, with the added prestige of its own brand. And Fujigen's existing Greco guitars proved that Fujigen was already good at what Fender required. Gibson later reset its Epiphone brand in similar ways – and Epiphones had first been made in Japan way back in 1969. These developments, and guitars such as Yamaha's SG2000 in the 70s and the Ibanez Steve Vai-related JEMs of the 80s, would underline a new confidence among Japanese makers.

PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

5. Ibanez made a stunningly succesful pivot from copyist to a genuine innovator with a new generation of original models made for high-performance players that redefined guitar design, such as this original 1987 JEM in sought-after Desert Sun Yellow finish, shot at World Guitars

One of the original designs that Ibanez (and Greco) introduced well before the Gibson legal complaint was The Flash, introduced in 1975 and soon renamed the Iceman (Ibanez) and M series (Greco). There were influences at work, for sure, the body looking as if someone had given a Firebird a curved, pointed base and added a Ricky-like hooked lower horn. But it added up to an attention-grabbing original. And in 1978, a signature version for Paul Stanley appeared. Ibanez also made him a custom PS10 with a cracked-mirror front, providing sparkling reflections at KISS's already dazzling shows. No wonder Stanley thought that in the guitar-making world, Japan was the country of the future. G

6. A new generation of 80s synth-pop acts inspired new designs from Japanese makers such as this Fernandes Art Wave electric, currently residing at Gas Station Guitars in Somerset

> Ibanez was already using a new headstock design, and had been offering some original-design guitars for a number of years

With thanks to Gardiner Houlgate (www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk) and Gas Station Guitars (www.gasstationguitars.com) for allowing us to photograph these guitars

Fender's strategy to beat the Japanese copies was simply to make better copies itself, with the added prestige of its own brand

Bold colours, locking trem and humbuckers signalled the priorities of the shred era. Fender turned to Japan, with its extra freedom to depart from canon, to make this 1985 ST-555 Boxer Series Telecaster finished in Torino Red and made by Fujigen

CLONE WARS

The 60s might have given birth to the Japanese guitar industry, but things got really interesting in the 80s when ever-more accurate and high-quality copies of classic US electrics emerged and even received official sanction from some US guitar brands. Keith Anderson of Japanese specialist Gas Station Guitars picks up the story

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

The 1960s and 70s were formative years for the Japanese guitar industry, but they really hit their stride in the 80s with official Fender reissues, accurate clones of Les Pauls and the like. What models stand out, for you, from this period, we ask Keith?

"The late 70s through to the early 80s is when Japanese brands like Tokai and Greco really got their act together with the Les Paul clones. Tokai, from around '78 to about '85, were doing the LS Series, which was originally called the Reborn series – a range of Les Paul copies – though after a while they changed the name to Love Rock. But the original LS series, from the LS-50 all the way to the LS-120, are amazing guitars. The LS-50 that was built from the late 70s to the early 80s was the entry-level model, basically a three-piece-top Les Paul clone. I get them every now and then. They put to death any theories that Les Pauls shouldn't have a three-piece top because they're amazing guitars. And that was only their entry-level model, you know? They still stand up today.

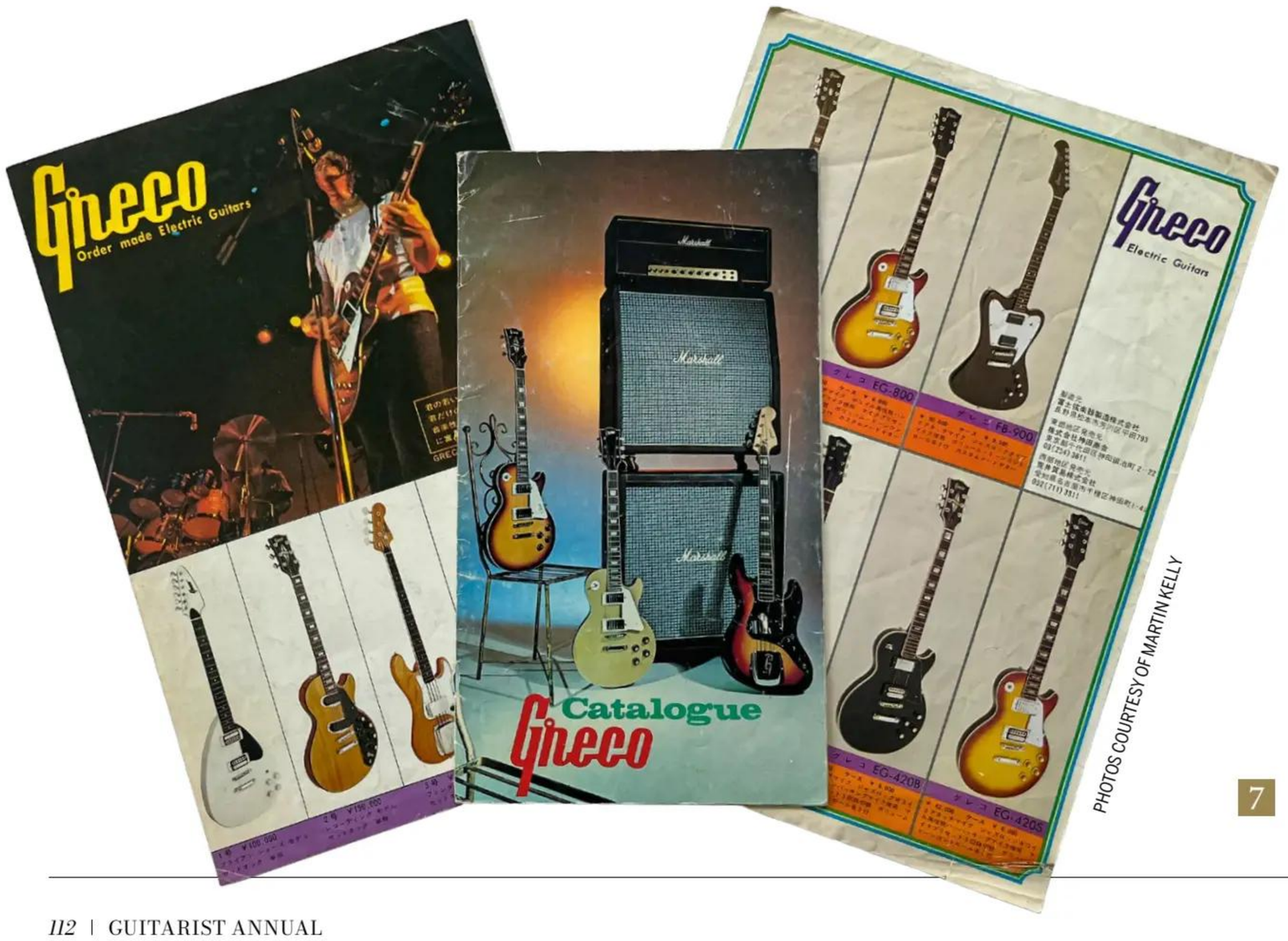
"Then Tokai went to the LS-60, which was a step above and had a two-piece top. Again, a really good guitar. And then there was the LS-80 and they went to a two-piece top with a nitro finish for that. After that they had the really high-end stuff: an LS-120 that was nitro finished and made around 1983/'84. For some reason, the Japanese would put veneer tops on the higher-end models, like the [Greco] EGF-1200, just so they could get a really good-looking maple flame. So they kind of deviated a bit from the standard build by putting this veneer over the top – which was kind of weird because those were their highest-quality models, although, to me, they still sound great. However, there are some solid-top EGF-1200 Grecos and they're really, really collectible. But most of them you'll find will have the veneer top on because they could choose a better flame for that.

"Another thing that probably sets the Greco apart a little bit from the Tokai is the pickups they were using. So the EGF-1200 came as stock with Dry Z pickups from Maxon, which are fantastic pickups. I think a lot of people look out now for EGF-1200s purely for the pickups, which command a really high price on their own."

> "Tokia's LS series are probably the best-built Les Paul-style guitars that have ever come through my shop" KEITH ANDERSON

Of the better quality clones did one brand – Tokai or Greco, for example – stand out as better than the others for quality?

"No, I don't think so, although personally I prefer the Tokais. In that period between '78 to about '85, the LS series were absolutely amazing guitars. Regardless of the electronics, they're probably the best-built Les Paul-style guitars that have ever come through my shop. If they ever come up for sale [in Japan], I buy them and I've got quite a few in my own collection. For build quality, they were the best there was at the time. It should be said that the pickups on the entry-level models, like the LS-50, weren't great. But if you swap them out for something better you've got a fantastic Les Paul-style guitar that you never want to let go."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

7. Greco and Tokai both specialised in clones of well-known Fender and Gibson electrics. The main problem this posed for the US firms was that their offerings were well built and very competitively priced. Eventually, both Fender and Gibson (via its Orville By Gibson sub-brand) realised that to beat them, they'd need to join them and launch officially sanctioned Japanese production models themselves

"Something that probably sets the Greco apart a little bit from the Tokai is the pickups they were using" KEITH ANDERSON

This top-spec Greco EGF-1200 was "almost considered royalty when it comes to vintage Japanese Les Paul clones", says Keith Anderson of Gas Station Guitars

How about on the Fender side of things – how did the copyists come to make official Fender Japan guitars?

"Japan was doing a lot of Fender copies throughout the 70s, to varying degrees of quality – they were a bit hit and miss. But it was Tokai that Fender noticed. Basically, Fender said, 'Hang on a minute: these are really good.' I believe Fender were originally thinking they had to have a presence in Japan because the clones were getting so good. And I think it was their intention to use Tokai to start making Fender guitars. But in the end, it went to Fujigen, who basically started building the first Fenders for them.

"At the time, in the late 70s, I think the costs of building guitars in Japan was significantly less than it was in the US. So it was the two reasons, really: to get the cost down, and also to actually have a presence in Asia where – kind of like China is today – they were just cloning everything with varying degrees of success. But Fender identified Tokai as the best.

"At that point, they were building the 'Springy Sound' Strat clone and Fender must have felt, 'They are as good, if not better, than we are at doing this. So let's go to Japan to start building Fenders [under licence]'. I don't know why, but in the end they did end up going to Fujigen [rather than Tokai] and they built Fenders up until that ended in 1997. Tokai took over production briefly – literally just for a few months – until Dyna Gakki could handle the full level of production that Fujigen had been producing."

Were the vintage-style Fender guitars they made pretty faithful to the originals?

"I don't think Japan ever really set out to make exact replicas of classic American models. But they would give them a name that would hint at that – so the model name ST 62 would be basically saying that this is a version of a 1962 Strat, and there'd also be an ST 65 and an ST 72, for example. But Fender Japan never really had a custom shop together in the same sense that the US did. So I don't think it was ever really about creating the exact replicas of the classic guitars, just having a version that evoked a certain era and that they believed would be more appealing to Japanese people.

"For example, the range of finishes was miles better than the US and I think it still is, to be honest – which really appeals to the culture. They also used a lot of different tone woods for the Japanese guitars. So the earlier models would start off with basswood and then go to alder and ash for the Telecasters. A lot of the Japanese guitar necks vary a lot from the American necks – and I find they tend to be on the slimmer side, especially on the offsets."

Did Fender Japan make the full range of classic models right from the start?

"No, in the early days it was mainly Strats and Telecasters. The offsets didn't really get into production till the early 90s, I would say. They didn't start churning out Jaguars, Jazzmasters or Mustangs until then, and grunge and Nirvana had something to do with that. But they were building the odd Jazzmaster and Jaguar in the 80s. We've had a few through and they're a little bit different from the ones they put into mass production in the 90s. For example, they were made from sen ash, whereas later all the main production offsets – Jaguars and Jazzmasters – were alder-bodied. But the earlier ones had sen ash bodies, and they had things like Fender-stamp neckplates, which they removed from the main production models of the offsets.

"Outside of that, it was mainly Strats and Teles in the 80s. There were lots of PL 52s as they call them, which was basically their version of a 52 Telecaster. They also did a few 52s with a humbucker, a kind of unofficial version of Keith Richards' Micawber. At the time, Fujigen had a stock of what they called white ash – and the guitars they made out of it were good, but they're absolute boat anchors. So these old Micawber Telecasters will give you back injuries if you play them over the long term! They're like 4.5 or 4.6kg – way heavier than a Les Paul. They got a bit lighter in the 90s, though.

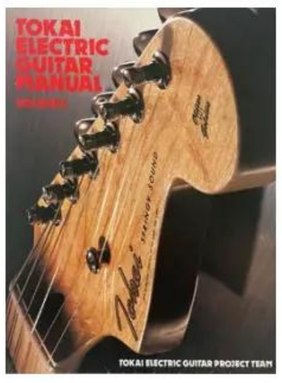
"They also made a few cool things that they didn't really do subsequently. In the 80s, they made a really nice Esquire Custom, an amazing guitar. They're really, really good quality. Although my favourite period of all, for outright quality, is the CIJ Q-serial period between 2002 and 2004, built at Dyna Gakki.

"In conclusion, Fender Japan had a mixed reputation back in the 80s and 90s. I got into them because they were cheap and I was quite heavy-handed on stage and did wreck a few. However, since main production has now mostly moved to Mexico, people are beginning to understand that Fender Japan guitars were on the whole beautifully crafted guitars with excellent quality control. Which has led to them being more sought after today." G

www.gasstationguitars.com

8. Fender Japan initially concentrated on Strats and Teles, but, partly driven by the popularity of grunge, offsets followed in the 90s, such as this 1966 Reissue Jaguar with matching headstock, kindly loaned by Gas Station Guitars

"The range of finishes was miles better than the US and I think it still is – which really appeals to the culture" KEITH ANDERSON



A Tokai headstock on the cover of an 80s publication shows the extent to which Fender's original was aped. Note the round string tree

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN KELLY

"Fujigen had a stock of what they called white ash – the guitars were good, but they're absolute boat anchors" KEITH ANDERSON

This ash-bodied Fender Japan 'Micawber' style Telecaster was not an official Keith Richards signature model, but its inspiration is clear!

30 BEST NEW PEDALS

THERE'S BEEN A REVOLUTION IN EFFECTS PEDALS IN RECENT TIMES. HERE'S OUR PICK OF THE BEST FROM THE PAST FIVE YEARS – ALONG WITH EXPERT TONE ADVICE FROM TOP PEDALBOARD PROS...

Words
Trevor Curwen
Jamie Dickson
Connor Flys
Charlie Wilkins
Stuart Williams

Photography
Olly Curtis

ANASOUNDS/THIRD MAN HARDWARE LA GROTTE

TYPE: ANALOGUE SPRING REVERB

THIRDMANSTORE.CO.UK

Spring reverb pedals with genu-wine springs in 'em seem to be making a comeback at the moment via interesting pedals such as Crazy Tube Circuits' White Whale and Gamechanger Audio's Light reverb. But neither go quite so far into a dark and stormy night of jagged sound as La Grotte (French for 'The Cave') made by Anasounds in collaboration with Third Man Hardware and Jack White. Both the sonics and the features are brilliant, starting with a great-sounding internal preamp based on Tampco's Tone Oven. The three-spring reverb tank itself is a quality Accutronics / Belton unit and there's a two-band EQ that influences only the reverb itself. Lastly, it can be run in either true bypass or buffered mode: with the former, the reverb is shut off abruptly when the pedal is bypassed, but in buffered mode, as Anasounds charmingly puts it, "we leave the tails [to] die with elegance". Wild, unmissable and worth it. **[JD]**

PRICE: £350

WEB: https://thirdmanstore.co.uk

BEETRONICS LARVA MORPHING PHASER

TYPE: PHASER

You couldn't walk over any guitar player's stage in the 1970s without tripping over a phaser, and they are still popular. However, with all the different modulation effects available these days, many of them packaged in multi-effect pedals, any company bringing out a new dedicated phaser had better make it a bit special – and that's exactly what Beetronics has done with the Larva Morphing Phaser, a six-stage analogue phaser with an element of digital control. The sounds here are classic 70s phasing or vintage vibrato with adjustable rate and depth, and a resonance knob for greater intensity, all coupled with a preamp that can be turned up to build in valve-like overdrive. The star feature, though, is that you can footswitch between two presets with a user-selectable ramp shape and speed for the transition for standard switching between the two, evolving transitions from one to the other, or quick momentary blasts. **[TC]**

PRICE: £239

WEB: www.beetronicsfx.com

BENSON STONK BOX

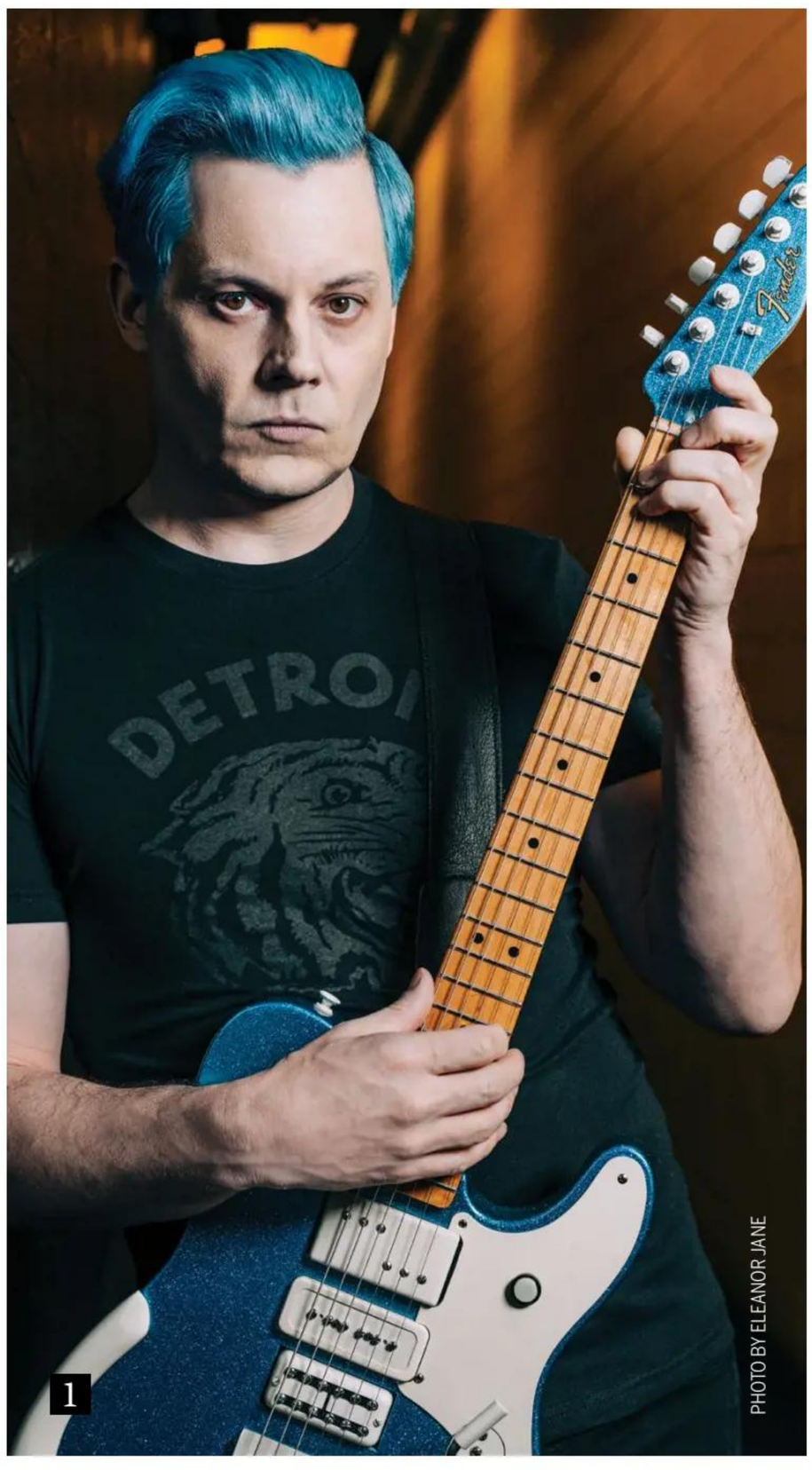
TYPE: FUZZ

BENSONAMPS.COM

The Benson Amps Stonk Box is a meticulously crafted fuzz pedal that revives the iconic tones of the 1960s while addressing the quirks and inconsistencies of vintage designs. Inspired by the MKI Tone Bender, it incorporates Benson's Automatic Thermal Bias technology, continuously monitoring and warming its germanium transistors to ensure consistent performance regardless of external temperatures – this innovation eliminates the notorious temperature sensitivity associated with classic fuzz circuits. The Stonk Box offers an expanded control set beyond the original MKI, featuring Filter and Volume knobs, along with added tone and Trim controls. This allows for a versatile range of sonic textures, from subtle boost to aggressive, searing fuzz or smoother more refined tones. Never harsh nor congested, tone remains clear, articulate and musical at any gain level. The Stonk Box offers a full spectrum of stunning vintage fuzz tones with warmth, clarity and stability. It's the fuzz pedal you didn't know you needed. **[CW]**

PRICE: £289

WEB: www.bensonamps.com



1. Jack White's collaborations with various effects makers via Third Man Hardware have been unexpected, unusual but always sonically thrilling as with the La Grotte spring reverb pedal by Anasounds

PHOTO BY ELEANOR JANE

No other pedals go quite so far into a dark and stormy night of jagged sound as La Grotte (French for 'The Cave')

BOSS BP-1W BOOSTER/PREAMP

TYPE: BOOST

There has been a long history of guitarists taking advantage of the preamps in certain equipment – sometimes while using the effects in that unit, sometimes not. Two 70s Roland/Boss units that fall into the category are the CE-1 Chorus Ensemble and RE-201 Space Echo. While peak-condition original vintage units may be hard to find, not to mention expensive, Boss has made the sound of its preamps accessible to all using analogue circuitry in the Waza BP-1W Booster/Preamp. A three-way toggle switch lets you choose either preamp or a natural transparent sound, while a gain knob can add grit to the Level knob's output volume. In the world of boost pedals, the choice of three boost options – particularly the two preamps each bolstering the midrange while adding their own distinct character – makes this not just versatile but also a gateway to some vintage tone enhancement for your signal chain. **[TC]**

PRICE: £149

WEB: www.boss.info

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX ONE

TYPE: AMP SIM & DRIVE PEDAL

Why you want it: a universe of amp models for £149

J ROCKETT PXO

TYPE: DRIVE & BOOST

Why you want it: it's a versatile, stadium-tested drive and boost powerhouse

BEETRONICS LARVA

TYPE: PHASER

Why you want it: a vintage phaser with shapeshifting powers that inspire

BOSS SDE-3

TYPE: DELAY

Why you want it: a legendary 80s rackmount delay in a compact pedal

Boss's SDE-3 is a source of classic 80s digital delay sounds with instant hands-on tweakability that will fit on any pedalboard

BOSS HM-2W HEAVY METAL

TYPE: HIGH-GAIN DISTORTION

The word 'icon' is much over-used, but the original Boss HM-2 truly deserves it. Made in Japan then Taiwan, from 1983 to 1991, it found its calling in the nascent Swedish death metal scene of the early 90s, and its uniquely malevolent 'chainsaw' sound is still coveted among metallers. Unlike the tight and focused noise-gated metal distortions on the current market, the HM-2 sounds more like the unholy union of a cranked Rat and an old Shin-ei fuzz, with a staggeringly powerful two-band EQ and an avalanche of barely controllable, seething distortion. Made in Japan once again, Boss's superb Waza Craft reissue recreates the HM-2 to modern standards – with more volume, better buffering and less noise – while also adding a whole new Custom mode that caters to down-tuned players with increased low-end punch. Nothing blasts its way to the front of a mix quite like it. **[CF]**

PRICE: £159
WEB: www.boss.info

BOSS SDE-3 DUAL DIGITAL DELAY

TYPE: DELAY

The SDE-3 stands apart from other compact delays in that it can give you two delays in parallel, the second one offset from the first by a user-adjustable amount. It is based on the classic 1980s SDE-3000 rack mount unit and features the warm and smooth sound found in the 16-bit original. There's 1,600ms of delay in mono, 800ms in stereo, modulation with Rate and Depth knobs plus the usual delay Time and Feedback knobs, and a Hi Cut control for the repeats to make subsequent repeats darker, enabling a long trail of repeats to better blend into your sound. Whether you dial in chorus and flange sounds, very short offset delays for thickening things up, or a longer offset where the relationship between the two delays can deliver a distinct pattern, you're getting a source of classic 80s digital delay sounds with instant hands-on tweakability that will fit on any pedalboard. **[TC]**

PRICE: £162
WEB: www.boss.info

BROWNE AMPLIFICATION PROTEIN DUAL OVERDRIVE V4

TYPE: DUAL OVERDRIVE

The Protein Dual Overdrive V4 houses two independent overdrives: the 'Blue' side, inspired by the Marshall Bluesbreaker, and the 'Green' side, modelled after the Nobels ODR-1, both with tweaked circuits and more gain. These can be used independently or stacked for a total of three different gain levels. This fourth iteration of the Protein introduces a three-way Hi-Cut switch to the Blue side for more tonal options and versatility. Unlike many overdrives that sacrifice bottom-end for definition, the Protein retains a full-bodied low-end while keeping note articulation intact and never becomes overly compressed or lifeless. What truly sets the Protein apart is its transparency, which makes it feel like a natural extension of your amp without feeling like you're playing through a pedal. The Protein isn't just about more gain, it wakes up your amp adding depth, sustain and responsiveness without losing what makes it special. **[CW]**

> What truly sets the Protein Dual Overdrive apart is its transparency, which makes it feel like a natural extension of your amp

PRICE: £339
WEB: www.browneamps.com

2. Boss's 80s innovation, the SDE-3000, has been used by guitarists as diverse as Eddie Van Halen and Ed O'Brien – and now the SDE-3 brings digital benefits to the iconic sound

2

PHOTO BY MAT HAYWARD/GETTY IMAGES

CAROLINE GUITAR COMPANY WAVE CANNON ZERO

TYPE: DISTORTION

First of all, who wouldn't want a pedal called the Wave Cannon on their 'board? Second, it's a versatile, beautifully made and highly original distortion that sounds amazing at any level of gain, from jangling light overdrive to a crushing wall of noise. While loosely based on classic op-amp distortion circuits such as the DOD 250 and Pro Co Rat, the Cannon adds extra controls for shaping the

CAROLINEGUITAR.COM

I AM THE WALRUS

Colt Westbrook of innovative US indie effects maker Walrus Audio on the pedals he relies on most – by Walrus and other makers

"When it comes to Walrus pedals that I really love and that I use constantly, there's three of them. I use the 385 Overdrive all the time; it's modelled on the audio section of an old film projecter. I also [constantly use] the Monument tremolo, and then the Julia for vibrato – it's just always on.

"And then when it comes to stuff by other manufacturers, I love what Chris Benson is doing. I've got the [Benson Amps] Preamp, the Germanium Boost, and his Delay. I think Chris Benson is really innovative. I also think Source Audio [maker of the Collider delay/reverb pedal] has some of the best algorithms out there – in fact, Source Audio and Eventide have some of the best DSP engineering sounds in the whole game. And then there's other fun ones: some [pedalboard] staples for me are the EarthQuaker Bit Commander and the JHS Color Box is also incredible, [JHS's] Angry Charlie, too – all that stuff's not going away."

3

EQ and the gain structure – and then there's the Havoc switch. Originally a happy accident on the workbench, this is a secondary footswitch that generates wild feedback, warped and shifted by the knobs or even your guitar's controls. The latest Wave Cannon Zero offers a voltage starve control for those dying-battery fuzz sounds, as well as a whole extra control specifically for tweaking the Havoc feedback – for those who tend to close their band's set by kneeling down on stage, creating apocalyptic noise. **[CF]**

PRICE: £279

WEB: https://carolineguitar.com

3. The Monument tremolo pedal (and variants like the Monumental harmonic tremolo above) is a favourite of Walrus Audio's Colt Westbrook – but he has plenty of admiration for the work of other makers

4. Source Audio's pedals come recommended across the industry, notably by legendary players such as Johnny Marr, who has had a Collider on his pedalboard – and the quality of the DSP engineering is one of the reasons

CHASE BLISS AUTOMATONE PREAMP MK II

TYPE: PREAMP PEDAL

This groundbreaking collaboration with Benson Amps integrates Benson's preamp circuitry with advanced digital control. The sleek brushed aluminum chassis and wooden side panels give the Automatone a high-end, studio-grade aesthetic reminiscent of vintage recording consoles, while motorised faders for EQ, volume and gain physically adjust to match saved presets, delivering instant visuals of your settings. The pedal features MIDI, 30 presets and extensive tonal shaping via push-button switches – Jump, Mids, Q, Diode and Fuzz – each with three distinct settings. These controls allow for extensive customisation of gain staging, midrange, bandwidth, clipping diode configurations and fuzz, while delivering exceptional sound quality. Dialing in tones from clean to fuzz is incredibly easy and it's certainly a blast watching the faders move by themselves when a preset is selected. The Automatone MK II redefines stompbox preamp functionality, making it one of the most advanced pedals for stage or studio. **[CW]**

PRICE: £580

WEB: www.chasebliss.com

4

PHOTO BY C BRANDON/REDFERNS

COPPERSOUND/THIRD MAN HARDWARE TRIPLEGRAPH

TYPE: DIGITAL OCTAVE/KILLSWITCH

Gear that's associated with Jack White is almost guaranteed to be brilliantly strange, and the Triplegraph – designed by CopperSound Pedals and Jack White – is no exception. What we have here is a triple-width unit boasting three large and elaborate piano pedal-esque footswitches, controlling an advanced DSP unit that offers a perfectly tracking lower octave, upper octave and, most interestingly, a kill circuit to cut out the dry signal of your guitar, leaving only the effect signal. Then, when combined with the pedal's built-in effects loop, you can use the killswitch to hear momentary bursts of your other pedals, in parallel with the octave signal. Combine the Triplegraph with modulation for organ-esque sounds, or with fuzz for instant octave-doubled sludge, or any number of more leftfield effects to create... well, who knows? The possibilities for sonic experimentation are endless, and there are sounds to be found here that you simply may not be able to achieve by any other means. **[CF]**

PRICE: £325

WEB: https://thirdmanstore.co.uk

COPPERSOUNDPEDALS.COM

CHAIRMAN OF THE 'BOARD

Daniel Steinhardt of *That Pedal Show* and The GigRig has an intriguingly innovative new range of pedalboards out this year. We join him to talk 'boards, tone and his personal Top 5 pedals from the past five years

Words Jamie Dickson

Daniel Steinhardt is well known for co-presenting YouTube tone-advice channel *That Pedal Show*, along with former *Guitarist* editor Mick Taylor. And while Dan keenly shares his favourite pedals with us from the past five years (see opposite page) – to give you something inspiring to put on your 'board, regardless of origin – his deep well of knowledge comes from decades of building pro-grade effects gear with his company The GigRig. Now, for the first time, he's built a range of pedalboards with uniquely practical features only a pedal obsessive would think of.

"Everything that I've done has always landed on a pedalboard," Dan reflects. "And there's just been a couple of things that have always niggled me, that I always had at the back of my mind, and had thought, 'One day I'll find a solution'. Then that day happened after a period of insomnia and a strong cup of coffee [laughs]. Bang: I had this idea for the second tier on the sliding rail."

As always with Dan, we go straight down the rabbit hole into the exacting needs of pedalboard users. The GigRig's new pedalboards have a modular design that allows you to position pedals and/or an effects-switching system, such as The GigRig G2 or G3 units, at floor level with an elevated deck or 'tier' above it to mount further pedals on. Traditionally, that upper tier of pedals sits above internal cabling, power supplies and any switcher operated pedals that are hidden inside the pedalboard itself.

On other pedalboards, access to these internal devices is typically via a hinge at the back of the top tier that allows you to open it like a car bonnet to give access to the

DANIEL STEINHARDT PHOTO COURTESY OF THAT PEDAL SHOW

1. The GigRig ethos is "all about finding a sound that inspires you", and to that end the company's new range of modular 'boards makes it even easier for you to assemble – and switch up – your current roster of pedals

2

space below. But on The GigRig's new UK-built range of 'boards, you're offered a host of options. You can choose to have the upper tier hinge open at the back or the front, according to taste, or you can remove it completely in seconds via quick-release fastenings. Furthermore, on selected models a unique rail system allows you to simply slide the front row of pedals on the top tier forwards (towards the user) to give access to the space below with no hinging involved. This can reduce the amount of internal cabling needed by up to 15ft on larger 'boards, Dan says, compared with opening the whole tier like a hinge, which requires you to fit a surplus length of cable between the pedals and the switcher or I/O sockets to permit the tier to open fully.

2. A flexible hinge system allows you to lift the upper tier of pedals from the front (as shown) or back – with additional options including a sliding rail

> "A couple of things have always niggled me... and then I had this idea for the second tier on the sliding rail" DANIEL STEINHARDT

The range offers four sizes of 'board: Small, Medium, Large and Extra Large – though a 'double tier' of two rows of pedals on top is only available on certain models, as Dan explains.

WWW.CHASEBLISS.EU

DAN'S TOP 5 PEDALS OF THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Via his roles at The GigRig and *That Pedal Show*, Daniel is in the priveleged postition of being surrounded by the best pedals, every day

1 CHASE BLISS MOOD MKII

TYPE: AMBIENT MULTI-EFFECTS

"Okay, so the first one is the Chase Bliss Mood MKII – and if the original Chase Bliss Mood had been made in 2020 I would have said that. But, thankfully, the Mood MKII came out in 2023! What I love about this pedal is that it puts you in a very different place as a guitar player, right? So many of us work so hard at trying to play a certain way and we all need to do that and find our own voice. But you plug into this thing and it just starts creating sounds that puts you in a very creative space.

"You can absolutely master it and find out exactly how it's doing that, or you can just plug in and have fun. And there are a lot of pedals that have done this in the past – whenever we bought our latest multi-effect, and we'd sit down and plug in and go through the presets, and there'd always be some wild and wacky things in there, and they are fun but relatively pointless. But the thing about the Mood is that the soundscapes that it creates are firstly so inspiring and secondly sound flipping awesome."

2 KEELEY HALO ANDY TIMMONS DUAL ECHO

TYPE: MODULATED DUAL ECHO DELAY

"Lots of guitar players are defined by their gain-staging [stacking sources of gain such as multiple drive pedals], and Andy Timmons' gain-staging is as good as they come. But there have been things that he's always achieved with his delays, these otherworldly effects... and the name Halo is just perfect – people have been having a go at [replicating] it for a long time.

"Andy hasn't been that secretive about exactly how he's done it, but it's been a very hard thing to try to replicate. In fact, I introduced Andy to Robert Keeley back in the day because Andy had asked who'd be a good fit [to make a signature delay for him]. Robert is a dear friend and he is a genius. But also, I know Andy's standards: there's no compromise with Andy Timmons on anything, right? That's why he is the player that he is. His motto is 'the best sound on the day, wins'. It took them years of working together to get these sounds dialled in.

"It's my favorite compact delay pedal. Sonically, it's astonishing. You plug in, turn it on and there it is – there's the Andy Timmons sound. But if you dive a little bit deeper in it, there are so many other things in there that it can do. It's so clever."

3

3. The GigRig's new pedalboards come in four different sizes, with the two largest formats also available in double-tier (extra-deep) configurations

"Small only comes in a single-tier version, and the Extra Large only comes with a double tier. The Medium and Large are both [available in single-tier and double-tier configurations]. Also, if we have a look at our Large pedalboard, for example, I can put in a thing we call the 'wah wall' [a divider that creates an alcove for a wah or expression pedal] then put a smaller tier beside it [to act as a platform for compact pedals] and there's a riser, too, that you can use [to bring the wah up to the same height as the upper-tier pedals]. And this all comes with the pedalboard as standard."

> "On our Large pedalboard, I can put in what we call the 'wah wall', plus a smaller tier and a riser – all as standard" DANIEL STEINHARDT

It's a level of attention to the practical needs of pedal-loving guitarists that you'd expect from one half of *That Pedal Show*, and it stands out from the common run of perfectly usable but workaday pedalboard systems.

www.thegigrig.com

WWW.JAMPEDALS.COM

3 JAM PEDALS DELAY LLAMA XTREME

TYPE: ANALOGUE DELAY

"I love Jam, they are the best people. I love their build philosophy; their passion for sound is just as good as it gets. The smaller version of the Delay Llama was already great, but the Delay Llama Xtreme adds the modulation in – but then it does these amazing things where it will automatically halve the delay speed or double the delay speed, throwing it up or down on octave. And it does these random steps in there, so it almost becomes like a pseudo harmonizer – and all this in an analogue delay.

"Now, there are pedals that do similar things, but something about the Delay Llama Xtreme [is that] there's a quality to it that's just so organic and fun. It doesn't take long to get your head around the UI of it and so you can just use it as a straight-sounding, awesome analogue delay pedal with beautiful modulation on the trails. Or you can just go trippy with it. It's really, really fabulous."

4 THORPYFX HEAVY WATER DUAL HIGH HEADROOM BOOST

TYPE: DUAL BOOST

"I think this started life as the boost side of the ThorpyFX Dane [overdrive and boost] and then they added another boost to it. I thought, 'What the hell is heavy water?' But I plugged it in and the richness of the boost just has a clarity to it that is completely dynamic off the volume control, so beautiful. So that in itself is winning. But when you combine the boosts together, and you get the stacking of the gain stages, you get this really beautiful, organic drive sound. You know, every time that we've used it, it's always made things sound better. If you're the sort of player that has a Deluxe Reverb, a simple amplifier you've turned up with a bit of reverb in there or whatever, and you're just looking to punch it a bit... in those situations, overdrive pedals really might not be the answer. This thing, though, if you plug it into an amplifier that's working [turned up a fair bit] it's far out – absolutely wonderful."

5 CUNNINGHAM AMPS DUAL RANGE FUZZ RCA GERMANIUM

TYPE: FUZZ

"I've got to throw a fuzz in here. There's an amp company in New Zealand called Cunningham and they sent us a bunch of stuff to try. We really like fuzzes and we have them on the [*That Pedal Show*] show a lot. We try to look at as many different fuzz variants as possible – and there are loads. But when we plugged this Cunningham Dual Range Fuzz in, it's just that instant connection. It sounds great with humbuckers and single coils and is made by someone who really cares. As soon as you take it out of the box, there's an aura around the thing – you can just tell every little detail is looked after. Build quality is second to none. But we have pedals through with amazing build quality that might sound fine, but this is my favorite fuzz pedal in recent memory. It sounds absolutely killer. Because it's made by a company that makes amps, they know how to put these things together using awesome components. But there's obviously someone there who is a great guitar player, too. Because there's no way you end up with a fuzz like this that hasn't come from a great guitar player."

WWW.CUNNINGHAMAMPS.CO.NZ

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS HI POWER

TYPE: DRIVE/BOOST

David Gilmour's soaring leads and glassy cleans are legendary, and Crazy Tube Circuits' Hi Power attempts to bring those tones straight to your pedalboard, combining a Hiwatt-style preamp with a Colorsound Power Boost recreation. The Amp section models the Hiwatt DR103 and DR504, offering Normal and Bright channel inputs along with a Linked setting that blends the two channels for increased gain and punch. The Boost circuit lets you choose between 18 volts for aggressive drive and a nine-volt Overdriver mode for smoother break-up. Other features include four-band EQ on the Amp side, Bass/Treble controls on the Boost side, Master Volume, and a send/return loop to integrate other pedals. The moment you engage the Boost, those familiar soaring lead tones pour out of your speakers with endless sustain. With the Hi Power, you're practically getting a Gilmour tone cheat-code – it's got punch, sustain and an expressive lead voice that never stops singing. **[CW]**

> The Hi Power has punch, sustain and an expressive lead voice that never stops singing – it's like getting a Gilmour tone cheat-code

PRICE: £235
WEB: www.crazytubecircuits.com

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS WHITE WHALE II

TYPE: TRUE SPRING REVERB & TREMOLO

"My multi-effects unit has spring reverb in it, though!" Not like this, it doesn't. Crazy Tube Circuits' White Whale II squeezes a genuine spring reverb tank into a pedalboard-friendly format. But it's not just taking inspiration from vintage amps for its 'verb sound; CTC is also looking to the 50s and 60s for its tremolo sounds, too. The reverb features a triple-spring tank that can provide 'short', 'medium' (both using two of the three springs) and 'long' reverb times. You can adjust the Dwell control to send more or less of your guitar signal into the springs, and the tone control can take you from bright and bouncy to smooth and vintage, with a Mix control blending the reverb amount. Pair it with the three-mode tremolo, which now includes a golden-era-inspired Harmonic mode, and you've got authentic depth and character to hand for any amp. **[SW]**

PRICE: £299
WEB: www.crazytubecircuits.com

DINOSAURAL COGMEISTER

TYPE: DRIVE PEDAL

Gain-staging by stacking up several complementary drive pedals is the route to flexible tonal nirvana for many guitarists. But what if all the gain stages were in one box, rather than separate individual pedals? That is exactly what the quite unique triple-footswitch Cogmeister gives you. At its heart is the Drive section with a three-position Shift switch for three distinct midrange contours reminiscent of different amp types, and that is preceded by the Push 60s-style silicon transistor treble booster and tailed by the Solo section for boost and/or extra gain at the end of the chain, both with eminently practical EQ options. The three sections can be used singly or in any combination and – set up to complement each other – could provide all your shifting gain needs on stage. Beyond that, the pedal is also capable of building a massive range of composite drive, distortion and fuzz sounds. **[TC]**

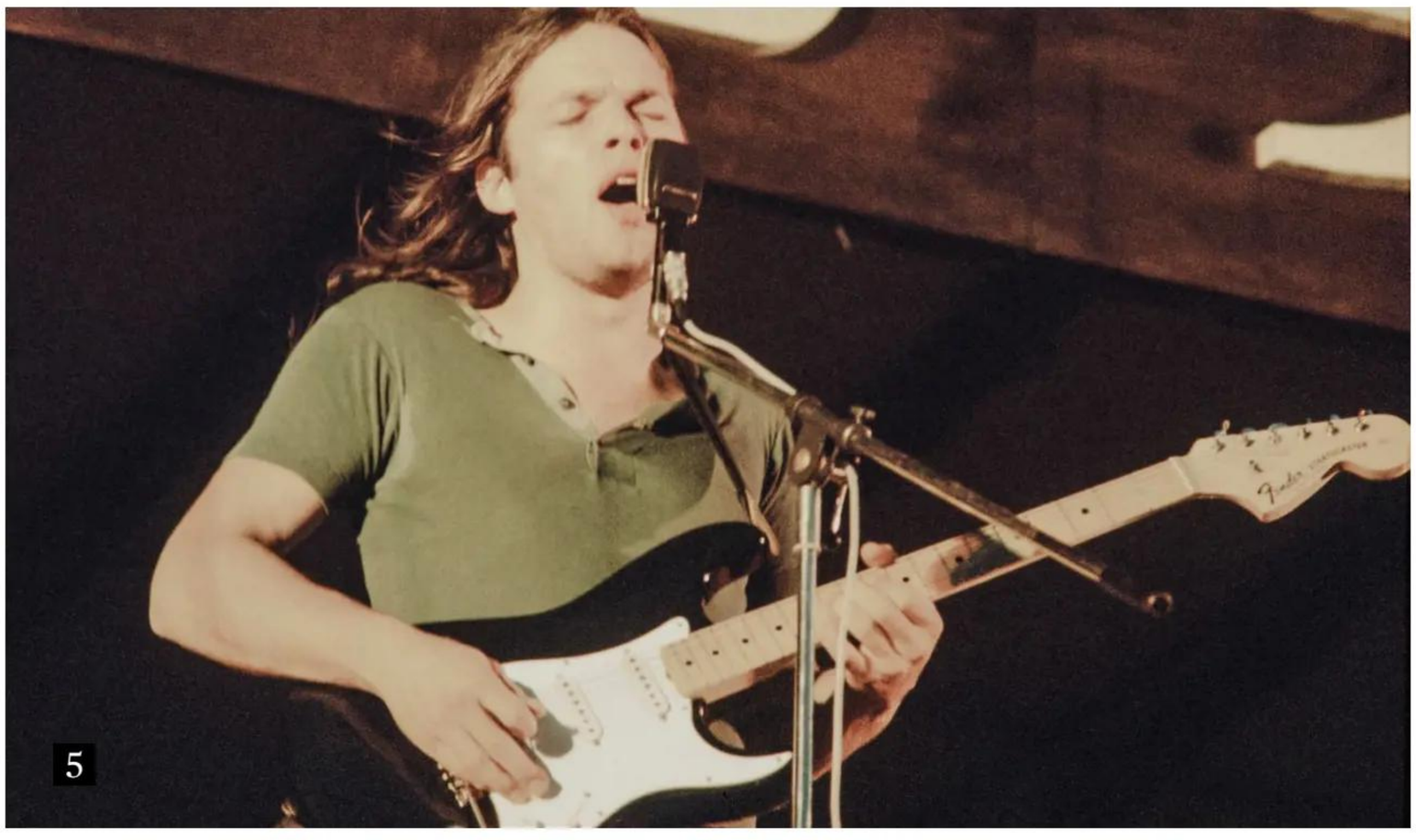
PRICE: £349
WEB: www.cogginsaudio.com

DIRTY BOY CO DIRTY BOY PREAMP

TYPE: ANALOGUE PREAMP PEDAL

Based on an amplifier designed by Alex Saraceno (father of guitarist Blues Saraceno), the Dirty Boy all-analogue preamp pedal is a flexible powerhouse with a variety of roles. Essentially an amplifier simulator in pedal form, the Dirty Boy preamp features two outputs. The first delivers the raw sound of the preamp for use with a power amp and speaker setup, plugged into the effects return of a conventional guitar amp, or as a conventional boost/drive stompbox in front of an amp. The other output, featuring speaker emulation based on a 4x12 Celestion Greenback cabinet, is for connection to a mixing desk or PA for live use, or to send a signal to a DAW for recording. The sound is that of rock tones from cleanish through to full-on raunch, tempered via a tone knob and a Variac knob for simulated voltage variation. Slip one of these into your gigbag and you'll be covered for responsive amp/drive sounds in any situation. **[TC]**

PRICE: £264
WEB: www.dirtyboy.co



5. Pedal companies are increasingly emulating famous players' tones: Crazy Tube Circuits' Hi Power is a case in point, channelling David Gilmour's favoured Hiwatt amp and Colorsound pedal tones

PHOTO BY KOH HASEBE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES/ DEATH BY AUDIO TIME SHADOWS II

TYPE: MULTI-DELAY

WWW.EARTHQUAKERDEVICES.COM

Plugging into the Time Shadows II feels like stepping into an alternate sonic dimension. A wild collaboration between EarthQuaker Devices and Death By Audio, this pedal isn't just about delay; it's about warping time and exploring uncharted territories. The three-way Mode switch is the heart of this adventurous pedal. The EQD Mode twists notes into a sub-octave, fuzzed-out cluster, while the DBA Mode ricochets echoes into filter-drenched chaos. And then there's the way out there !i mode, where each repeat warps unpredictably, morphing into an infinite loop of altered, psychedelic chaos. With six preset slots and intuitive knobs for Time, Span and Filter, sculpting sound and bending reality is effortless. Pushing gentle repeats into swirling textures or creating ghostly overtones is not only a breeze, it's downright addictive. Conventional delay lovers beware: this one doesn't just repeat your notes, it mutates them into lovely unexplainable madness! **[CW]**

PRICE: £249

WEB: www.earthquakerdevices.com

EMPRESS EFFECTS ZOIA

TYPE: SYNTH PEDAL

The Zoia is unlike any other effect pedal you've seen. Instead of a normal array of knobs and switches, there's a grid of 40 buttons. The reason for this is that the pedal is effectively a modular synthesizer and each button represents a module that you can link to another. Basically, these are the building blocks for creating whatever custom effect you want, and 22 of the modules currently cover all standard guitar effects including an EQ, overdrive/distortion, fuzz, compressor, noise gate, phaser, flanger, chorus, vibrato, Uni-Vibe, tremolo, envelope filter, ring modulator and cab simulator, along with three delays and five reverbs. The Zoia excels at large, complex sounds and uniquely detailed effects of an experimental nature that you can save in 64 onboard memories. There's a bit of a learning curve here, but stick with it and this one pedal that can really take your musical vision to another creative level. **[TC]**

PRICE: £539

WEB: www.empresseffects.com

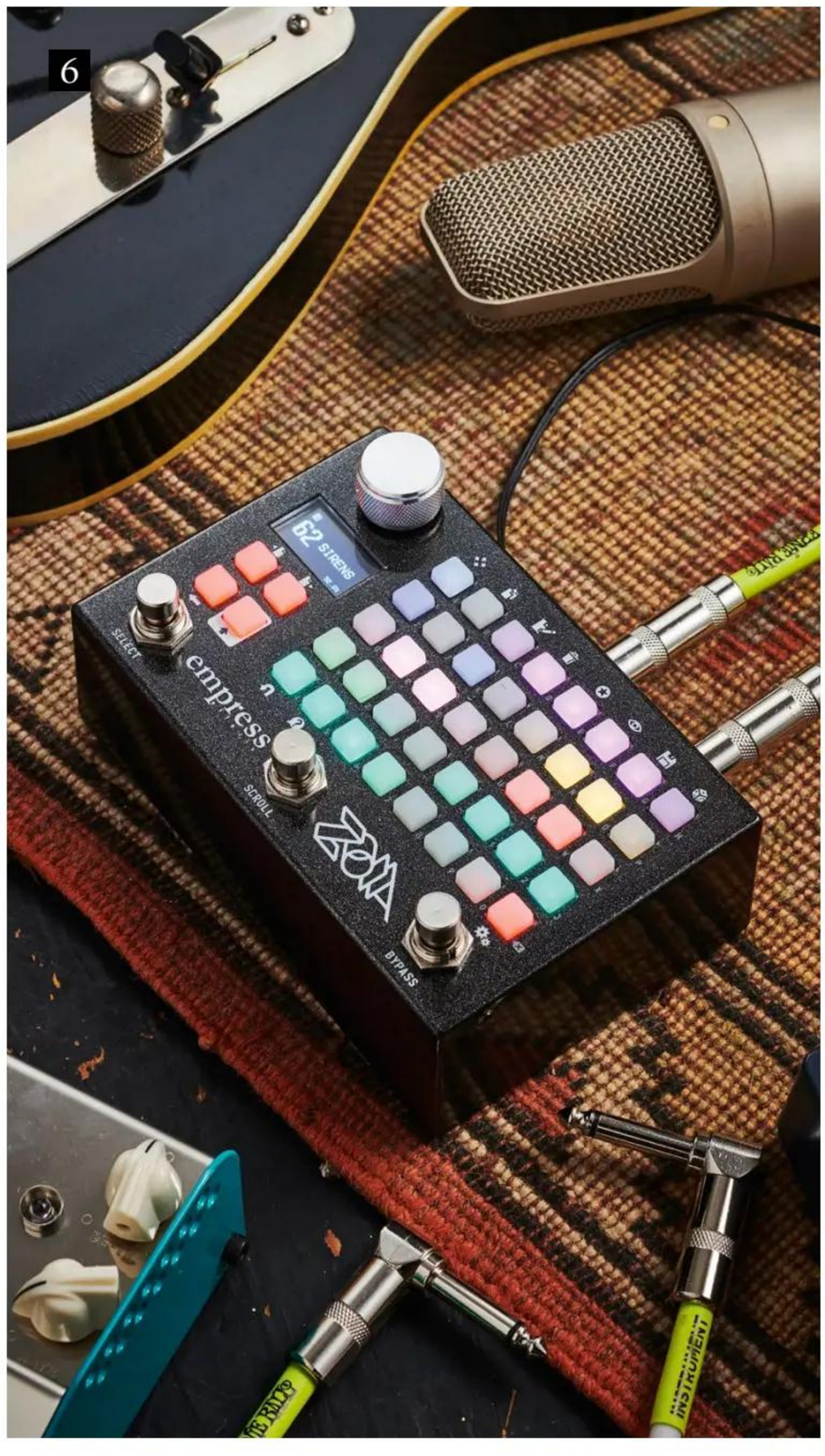
FRIEDMAN IR-X

TYPE: VALVE PREAMP PEDAL

The growl and feel are right, but the amp is nowhere in sight. The Friedman IR-X is a pedalboard-friendly amp-in-a-box, designed for direct-to-PA and recording setups, featuring two high-voltage 12AX7 valves delivering British high-gain tones that Friedman amps are known for. It's loaded with features combining two channels (Clean and Overdrive) with independent gain, volume, EQ, IR loader, effects loop, DI, MIDI, headphone outputs and Boost switch. Power Amp Simulation helps the IR-X create authentic valve amp response that pushes air and feels great under your fingers, while Bright and Tight switches allow further tone shaping. The impulse responses are incredibly realistic and quite convincing through studio monitors or a live PA system. This pedal easily captures the feel, dynamics and responsiveness of a cranked valve amp. In fact, it's so close to the real thing that you may question whether you really need that full stack. **[CW]**

PRICE: £419

WEB: www.friedmanamplification.com



6. The Zoia by Empress Effects deserves praise just for the breadth of its ambition and limitless flexibility

The Time Shadows II pedal isn't just about delay; it's about warping time and exploring uncharted territories

FRIEDMANAMPLIFICATION.COM

HAMSTEAD/THAT PEDAL SHOW REDWING

TYPE: MODULATION

There are many ways to get your modulation sounds running – from dedicated single effects pedals to all-encompassing multi-effects units – but the Redwing is something quite different. This all-analogue stereo modulation pedal offers instant hands-on control of all the parameters you need to dial in your own modulation effects. Inspired by BBD devices such as Boss's CE-1 Chorus Ensemble and the Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress flanger, it can deliver those classic tones and beyond while being much better suited to function within a modern rig than vintage pedals. The unit creates variations on flanging, chorus, vibrato, ring modulation and rotary speaker sounds by using two independent BBD delay lines that are modulated by analogue waveform generation. There's a massive range of subtlety in what you can create here, whether you're trying to emulate a vintage effect or are looking to create something that fits your exact sonic needs. **[TC]**

PRICE: £429

WEB: www.hamsteadsoundworks.com

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS WHITE WHALE II

TYPE: TRUE SPRING REVERB & TREMOLO

Why you want it: all the retro ambience

The White Whale II isn't just taking inspiration from vintage amps for its 'verb sound; it also looks to the 50s and 60s for its tremolo sounds, too

BOSS BP-1W BOOSTER/ PREAMP

TYPE: BOOST

Why you want it: classic, tone-flattering 'always on' preamp sounds

WALRUS AUDIO QI ETHEREALIZER

TYPE: MULTI-EFFECTS

Why you want it: the endless soundscapes

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX ONE

TYPE: AMP SIM & DRIVE

The Tonex One is a real gamechanger – a tiny pedal that uses 'AI Machine Modelling' technology for access to a massive range of rigs and stomps for use in different scenarios. The software captures the sound of rigs comprising various combinations of amps, cabinets and drive pedals, and Tonex One will let you incorporate those into your rig for use on stage and beyond. It comes supplied with the Tonex SE software, which offers instant access to 200 of IK's Tone Models but also gives you access online to ToneNET where unlimited Tone Models are created and shared by other users. You can feed amp and cab sounds directly into a PA, use it for recording via its USB output, or even practice via its headphone output. Alternatively, it can act as a standard fuzz/distortion/drive pedal on your 'board. **[TC]**

PRICE: £149

WEB: www.ikmultimedia.com

J ROCKETT PXO

TYPE: DRIVE & BOOST

This signature pedal for Bon Jovi guitarist Phil X features independently-footswitched Boost and Drive sections that can be stacked in any order. Two-band EQ in the drive section offers a practical range of tones to match pickups and amp, and the range of drive runs from low-level raunch through to full-on cranked-stack rock sound with plenty of compression. Tonal variation via the boost section's Tilt EQ offers an easy way to set a treble and bass balance for the boost that runs from unity gain to oodles of poke. Combining the two sections, a Pre/Post switch determines whether the boost pushes the Drive section that little bit further into distortion or comes after it to give you a lift in volume, both instances having the benefit of that EQ tilt if needed. With more flexibility than most in its genre, this is a very practical addition to your pedalboard. **[TC]**

PRICE: £359

WEB: https://rockettpedals.com

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES

7. Bon Jovi's Phil X needs a lot of flex in his drive pedals as he transitions from stadium and session work to the high-energy exuberance of his own band, The Drills. The PXO drive by J Rockett covers it all, he says

KEELEY NOBLE SCREAMER

TYPE: MULTI-MODE OVERDRIVE

Overdrive fans often get caught in the same debate: Nobels ODR-1 or Ibanez Tube Screamer? Keeley's answer? The Noble Screamer! Here, Keeley has combined two classic overdrive circuits, but there's a twist. The Noble Screamer can mix 'n' match the clipping and tone sections of each of its inspirations, offering a four-in-one overdrive. The clipping mode switch takes you from hard diode clipping in the OD setting, to more gentle, soft clipping in the TS position. Similarly, the OD/TS toggle in the tone section changes the tone control's response from a flat-to-smiley-face EQ in the OD position, to a low-pass filter for removing high-end when TS is selected. It can be buffered or true bypass (switchable without having to get inside the pedal casing) and maintains the simplicity of a three-knob (gain/volume/tone) overdrive. We've got one in our shopping cart for under £200 as we type – and, at that price, it's worth every penny. **[SW]**

PRICE: £199

WEB: www.robertkeeley.com

KEELEY OCTA PSI TRANSFIGURATING FUZZ

TYPE: FUZZ/PITCH-SHIFTER/OCTAVER

Fuzz and octave effects are a classic pairing, but Keeley's Octa PSI takes things to a whole new level. First up, we get a 100 per cent analogue, multi-stage transistor-based fuzz circuit with gain, level and tone controls. In addition to this, a toggle switch gives instant access to three tonal shapes (Punch, Scoop and PSI). Then there's the polyphonic octave/pitch-shifting side of the pedal, which gives plus/minus two-octave range. A second toggle allows for up/down and dual modes, but the real fun comes when combining the two sides. Here, we can change the signal chain order, configure the output to all wet or dry/wet, and engage the pitch side momentarily (including ramp speed) for instant Whammy-style pitch jumps. Keeley has taken the fuzz/pitch combo and bundled it into a new, highly flexible and creative pedal that serves up more beef than McDonald's. **[SW]**

PRICE: £265

WEB: www.robertkeeley.com

KEELEY IMAGES: ROBERTKEELEY.COM

Keeley has taken the fuzz/pitch combo and bundled it into a new, highly flexible and creative pedal with the Octa PSI fuzz

ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

Buckingham-based Origin Effects makes some of the most detailed and authentically amp-like drive pedals anywhere in the world. Product manager, John Dines, explains how it's done

Words Jamie Dickson

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1. What sets Origin Effects apart from the rest, it says, is that its pedals – such as the pictured RevivalDrive – contain a complex array of components to recreate the sound of classic amps in staggering detail

Origin has been praised for how authentic its pedals based on classic amps are, even in a crowded field. What makes your approach different?

"The Origin Effects way of doing things is basically going to lengths that a lot of people would think are too far in service of recreating something very specific and vintage. That's how the company kind of started, really with Simon Keats, who started Origin Effects, just chasing after this 1176 compressor slide tone and not finding it in a pedal. He basically then made it his goal to get that from a pedal. Other people kind of agreed that it was worth doing, and he started taking orders for them. The rest is history. But, yeah, it's definitely all about going to ridiculous lengths to recreate classic stuff."

So how do you even approach that?

"I mean, Origin approaches it by just building the entire thing in a pedal. There's no other way to describe it, which is why if you look inside an Origin pedal, there's hundreds of components and loads of stuff going on. It's why they come out on the more expensive end of things as well because you've just got to cram so much into the box to do it right. There are loads of good amp-in-a-box pedals or preamp-type things on the market, but when we looked at it, we still thought there was some detail and weird stuff that vintage amps do that wasn't quite captured accurately in most pedals.

"All our amp recreations, such as our original RevivalDrive, have an entire amp circuit miniaturised inside the pedal. So that's preamp, phase inverter, output stage, reactive load, rectifier, sag – even the mains ghosting thing you get in old vintage amps was in the RevivalDrive, and that had a load of controls to adjust that stuff on the surface as well. So we were quite brazen about how much detail was going into recreating all of the parts of a vintage amp circuit."

The Deluxe55 is one of the most recent amp-replicating pedals Origin has made. How did you go about recreating that famously characterful combo?

"Well, what we've done in previous pedals is continued in the same way in the Deluxe55 – it's just a very different amp that's being recreated. So something like the RevivalDrive was very much about doing those classic 'big amp' sounds: Fender Twin, Marshall 'Plexi', a bit of Vox-y [flavour] as well, depending on how you set the controls. But the Deluxe55 is just 100 per cent 1955 Tweed Deluxe, which is a weird little amp with a lot of quirks, so the pedal sets about recreating every single quirk that amp had: there's the sag and the way it kind of collapses and turns into a fuzzy tone, the effect of swapping preamp valves [for higher or lower-gain versions].

"I think that when we got hold of the real Deluxe to test and measure it and base the pedal off, we were kind of surprised how versatile that amp is. We already knew it was more versatile than the 'Neil Young about-to-explode' thing, but it's just hugely useful for all kinds of genres – and not because it makes a lot of different sounds, just because it makes a couple of sounds that are really at home in a huge amount of styles. It was all about making the most accurate version of that amp possible in a pedal."

2. Origin's Deluxe55 pedal is a direct replica of Fender's 1955 Tweed Deluxe, complete with all the quirks of the original

Many players still doubt that the subtleties of real valves can be recreated with solid-state circuits. How you tackle that problem?

"I can't give too much of the game away about the exact way that they're done... but it's a JFET-based circuit. It's mainly about recreating every single part of the amp, plus there's a lot of test and measurement and stuff as well. A real valve amp begins to distort as you crank it up, but it all happens at different times. So the power amp will start to distort first, then the phase inverter and then the preamp. And the intermingling of how those different stages distort is what gives it its character. That's where the time goes into designing one of our pedals to make sure that all of those individual stages break up at the same time and in the same way as in the real amp."

https://origineffects.com

3. Product manager John Dines emphasies Origin's attention to detail, saying: "It's all about going to ridiculous lengths to recreate classic stuff"

JOHN DINES PHOTO BY JACOB HOLDSWORTH

ORIGIN EFFECTS REVIVALDRIVE COMPACT

TYPE: DRIVE

There are myriad digital amp-simulation pedals out there using modelling, but what makes the RevivalDrive Compact stand apart from that crowd is that it recreates amp sound by replicating every stage of a valve amp's signal path using all-analogue components. A smaller, more pedalboard-friendly version of the 'big box' RevivalDrive, the Compact has a much more streamlined set of controls, making it easier to dial in the sounds you need while retaining the essence of its sibling's sound and exhibiting the same excellent touch-sensitivity. Amp sounds from clean to cranked are available, including vintage Fender and Marshall flavours, while a Dry knob opens up a world of blends if you'd like to retain more of your own amp's character. Add this superbly engineered pedal to your rig to get some authentic-sounding vintage amp tones and overdrive that's entirely in tune with the sound of your own amp. **[TC]**

PRICE: £329

WEB: www.origineffects.com

8. Soulful, vocal and endlessly sustaining, Chris Buck's playing style is a delight to the ears – and the Electric Lightning by ThorpyX has been designed to drive his sound with real valves at work

The Thermion Stone Age is a rich suit of fuzz tones with all the tailoring tools you need to cut your cloth exactly how you like it

SOLDANO SLO PEDAL

TYPE: AMP-IN-A-BOX OVERDRIVE

Mike Soldano's SLO (Super Lead Overdrive) amp has been revered since the 80s thanks to its high-gain performance: dripping in thick harmonics while maintaining definition and power, it's sure to feature on the Mount Crushmore of gain. But it's 2025 now and our backs hurt... Never fear, the SLO Pedal is here. Built to replicate the amp's response, the pedal makes use of cascading gain stages to build up the heavy without compromising on clarity and detail. This means that even if you're not looking to singe Spandex, you can still achieve the thick, smooth gain we're used to from the SLO's amp counterpart. It's a relatively straightforward pedal in terms of operation, delivering the familiar gain, volume, three-band EQ and Presence controls as found on the amp. One input, one output and a power jack later, and you can be enjoying the Soldano sound straight from your 'board. **[SW]**

PRICE: £199

WEB: www.soldano.com

THERMION STONE AGE

TYPE: MULTI-FUZZ

There's so many fuzz pedals out there that it's almost a relief Spanish effects maker Thermion has put nearly everything you could possibly want into this hugely versatile pedal that covers the classic sounds and throws in a few more tone-sculpting tools that weren't around in the 60s. It offers four brilliant-sounding fuzz voices that roughly equate to an early 60s fuzz voice, a Maestro FZ-1-inspired fuzz, a Fuzz Face and a Big Muff-style distortion-fuzz. But it's the added features that really make the Stone Age a treat – there's a footswitchable 'Add Clean' control that allows you to blend back in some of your dry signal for overdrive-like hybrid tones, High and Low Cut controls, plus a footswitchable Octave effect – for those fluting, robotic *Purple Haze* solo sounds. In short, it's a rich suit of fuzz tones with all the tailoring tools you need to cut your cloth exactly how you like it. **[JD]**

PRICE: £249

PRICE: www.thermion.eu

THORPYFX ELECTRIC LIGHTNING

TYPE: VALVE-BASED DRIVE & BOOST

The design brief for this Chris Buck signature pedal was for a one-box solution to deliver Chris's own sound no matter what backline he had access to. The result, the Electric Lightning, features a valve-based overdrive circuit fed by a high-headroom clean boost, each independently footswitched. Covering a wide range of tonal outcomes with a three-knob EQ similar to a Marshall tonestack, the Drive runs from a just-beyond-clean crunch right through to full-on heavy raunch, all with crisp string articulation and an excellent dynamic response that lets you coax out the cleaner sounds with softer strokes while digging in for the dirt. The Boost has plenty to kick that up a notch and features a Lows knob that can roll the bass off for something leaner and tighter. Delivering real valve sound in a practical package, you can pair this with just about any clean amp to deliver all the drive sounds you'll need. **[TC]**

PRICE: £429

WEB: www.thorpyfx.com

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS HI POWER

TYPE: DRIVE/BOOST

Why you want it: classic Gilmour tones in a box

DIRTY BOY CO DIRTY BOY PREAMP

TYPE: ANALOGUE PREAMP PEDAL

Why you want it: vibey drive utility

Delivering real valve sound in a practical package, you can pair this Chris Buck signature with just about any clean amp

THORPYFX ELECTRIC LIGHTNING

TYPE: VALVE-BASED DRIVE & BOOST

Why you want it: impeccably engineered real-valve drive tones

PATCH THINGS UP

A rising British maker has a neat solution to making patch cables

If you've got a good pedalboard and plenty of great effects, it pays to connect everything together with quality cabling. While there are plenty of pre-assembled patch cables out there, they tend to be made to fixed lengths, which can be a bit restrictive as sometimes a bit of creative cabling is required to make everything fit your 'board, especially if you have a diverse selection of pedal sizes and input/output sockets to accommodate.

Visiting the recent UK Guitar Show, we were impressed by British solder-free patch cable maker PedalPatch, who supplies high-quality kits with various numbers of connectors and cable lengths.

All you have to do is cut the cable to length with a craft knife, push it into the jack terminal and bend it 90 degrees before replacing the end cap and fastening it tight with an integral screw. Making up custom-length patch cables by this method is a doddle and, in terms of pricing, PedalPatch offers a kit of 10 connectors and three metres of cable at £42.99, or 20 connectors and eight metres of cable for £79.99, with other kits available, too.

We also rate similar high-quality solderless kits by Boss, Lava Cable and Evidence Audio, but PedalPatch has a bit of an edge on value-for-money, so is well worth a look. **www.pedalpatch.co.uk**

UNIVERSAL AUDIO STARLIGHT ECHO STATION

TYPE: DELAY

The Starlight Echo Station is a studio-grade recreation of classic tape, analogue and digital echoes crafted with Universal Audio's legendary precision. With three different echo/delay emulations – Tape EP-III, Analog DMM and Precision – the Starlight captures everything from warm, warbling tape echoes to lush analogue repeats and pristine studio-grade delays. The Time, Feedback and Mix controls shape your echoes, while the Color knob dials in tape age, modulation or other tone characteristics depending on the mode. Additional features include tap tempo and preset storage. Unlike many time-based effects, the Starlight sounds astonishingly good in the effects loop or in front of your amp. Each emulation is alive with nuance, capturing the quirks, warmth and characteristics of iconic delay units. Tape EP-III (Echoplex-style tape delay) has one of the warmest, smoothest echo effects for nailing those hard-to-recreate tones from the early Van Halen records. The Starlight nails it! **[CW]**

PRICE: £379

WEB: www.uaudio.com

VERTEX STEEL STRING SUPREME

TYPE: AMP-STYLE PREAMP

With news that Dumble amps are to resume production in extremely limited numbers, it's an apt moment to try this superb pedal inspired by Dumble's legendary 150-watt Steel String Singer amp – of which only 12 examples were made, most famously used by Stevie Ray Vaughan. Vertex Effects of California built on its already great Steel String MKII amp-in-a-box pedal to expand the tonal nuance of this concept in the Steel String Supreme (Slight Return Edition), which features two rows of controls. The bottom three are the same as those that featured on the original Steel String (Level, Filter, Gain), controlling the same circuit, but above these are five new controls governing tonal qualities such as the depth, fatness and brightness of the tone. Nuanced, airy, dynamic and rich, this is a Dumble-apeing preamp everyone should try, and it can be used direct into cab sim/IR loaders, too. **[JD]**

PRICE: £227

WEB: www.vertexeffects.com

WALRUS AUDIO QI ETHEREALIZER

TYPE: MULTI-EFFECTS

Developed with guitarist Yvette Young, the Walrus Audio Qi Etherealizer multi-effects pedal combines chorus, delay, grain and reverb into a highly versatile sound-shaping tool. With 12 rotary knobs and three footswitches, it may look intimidating, but it's actually easy to use. Two chorus modes provide immersive modulation, while the delay provides up to two seconds of repeats. The grain effect creates glitchy textures using Grain Cloud and Phrase Sample modes – and twisting random knobs can be quite entertaining, yielding a wide variety of unexpected sounds. Additional controls include individual Mix knobs for each effect, Dry/Mix knob for series/parallel routing, and Space and Tone for shaping Reverb. With MIDI support, preset storage, freeze function and stereo capabilities, the QI Etherealizer unlocks limitless creative potential. Its innovative fusion of synthesized sounds, modulation and time-based effects pushes the boundaries of sound design, inspiring everything from ambient textures and dreamy soundscapes to unpredictable experimental sounds. **[CW]**

PRICE: £449

WEB: www.walrusaudio.com

> The Qi Etherealizer's fusion of synthesized sounds, modulation and time-based effects pushes the boundaries of sound design

9. The agile, highly creative approach of US fingerstyle player Yvette Young gave rise to the expansive, otherworldly sounds of the Qi Etherealizer

PHOTO BY ELI CHAVEZ

WALRUS AUDIO SLÖER

TYPE: REVERB

For musicians looking to explore their creative boundaries, a good reverb pedal can open up a world of tonal possibilities. The Walrus Audio Slöer is an ambient stereo reverb pedal that offers an impressive range of tonal possibilities for those looking to explore atmospheric soundscapes. It includes five distinct reverb modes (Dream, Light, Rain, Dark and Rise) that bend and shift time into unique textures. The X and Stretch sliders allow for fine-tuning effects like vibrato depth and decay times, while a three-way toggle lets you choose between wide, medium and narrow stereo width. For a quick burst of effect, the Momentary Switch function activates the Slöer only while you're pressing the footswitch. Additionally, three presets can be accessed via footswitch for easy recall. With every twist of a knob, the Slöer transforms and delivers deep, complex, haunting yet beautiful ambient textures that never fail to surprise. **[CW]**

PRICE: £339

WEB: www.walrusaudio.com

WALRUS AUDIO IMAGES: WALRUSAUDIO.COM

WALRUS AUDIO SLÖER

TYPE: REVERB

Why you want it: the perfect tool for reverb dreamscapes

This all-analogue stereo modulation pedal offers instant hands-on control of all the parameters you need to dial in your own effects

HAMSTEAD/THAT PEDAL SHOW REDWING

TYPE: MODULATION

Why you want it: gutsy, organic modulation machine

JHSPEDALS.INFO

ACCESSORY ALL AREAS

Gadgets and extras to finesse your effects experience

If you've got your pedals, cabling and 'board sorted, there are still a few things that can help your effects rig feel a little slicker. For those who like to play with bare feet, Barefoot Buttons – available from the website of pedal maker ThorpyFX – offers a mushroom-shaped anodised aluminium dome that fits over your existing footswitch giving a wider contact area that's easier and more comfortable to hit in the heat of the moment – available in various colours from £9 each.

If you're making up your own patch cables you might find it handy to use a Patch Cable Stripping Tool like the ones available from The GigRig for a princely £2 to help you neatly expose wire for fitting into connectors, solderless or otherwise. Also available for around the same price from online electronics retailers.

Meanwhile, if recording is your thing, check out Walrus Audio's Canvas Passive Re-Amp (£133). The company says it's "a studio tool designed to send recorded guitar, drums or other instrument tracks from your recording session through pedals and effects, or different amp combinations", unleashing the sonic sculpting powers of your pedalboard on all kinds of recorded tracks.

Finally, as users of vintage fuzzes can attest, the sound of a fading battery can really produce some weird and wonderful tones. As such, JHS Pedals designed the Volture (£57.99, left), which lets you "precisely trim the input voltage [of pedals] to replicate the tone of a dying battery effortlessly. Designed for versatility, it works wonders on any fully analogue pedal, unearthing trippy sounds lurking within your favourite overdrive or distortion."

20 WAYS TO GET MORE FROM YOUR PEDALS

From tone-tailoring to buying what's right for you, here's our guide to putting more of what counts on your 'board

Words Jamie Dickson

1 DON'T OVERLOOK MAINSTREAM PEDALS

There's been such an explosion of interest in boutique pedals that it's easy to forget the big names in the effects industry got big for a reason. A great example of top-notch sonics in a mainstream package is the TR-2 Tremolo by Boss. This unassuming, three-knob trem can be bought for under £100, but it's still one of the best-sounding examples of the breed we've found. As always, buy with your ears and feeling of connection with the gear – try plenty and rule nothing out.

2 FIND YOUR TRIBE

Effects makers, if they're worth their salt, will make sure their design philosophy flows consistently through all their products. So if you really like one pedal by a particular brand, there's a good chance you'll like the sounds, vibe and usability of other effects they make. That's not to say don't explore more widely than one maker (you definitely should), but a brand you really 'click' with can provide a rich seam of satisfying musical experiences and offer a good starting point for auditioning new pedals when expanding your pedalboard.

3 REVISIT OLD PEDALS WHEN YOU CHANGE AMPS

Some pedals suit particular amps better than others. So if you change your amp from, say, a Marshall to a Fender, don't forget to dig out pedals that you'd previously set to one side and give them another try with the new amp. For example, a drive pedal that might seem OTT in terms of mid frequencies when paired with a Marshall, might be a perfect balance with the 'scooped' sound of a Fender. We found this approach paid dividends with the Free The Tone CC1-B Crunchy Chime boost, which sounded good into a British-voiced Laney Cub Super but absolutely outstanding into a Fender Hot Rod DeVille, softening up the glassy attack of the latter by just the right amount.

4 GET A GOOD PEDALBOARD

We've known outstanding players who use very basic pedalboards (sometimes just a bit of wood with pedals Velcro'd to it). But thoughtfully designed pro-grade 'boards make life easier – they typically have well-thought out provision for mounting power supplies and cable routing, allow easy foot-access to each pedal through well-designed tiers or risers, and come in a case that has dedicated space for cables and more. Brands such as RockBoard by Warwick offer modular, user-customisable builds, while top-flight offerings from premium makers such as Schmidt Array are made from scratch to your exact 'floor plan' of pedals and in custom finishes. Do watch out for overall weight, though, as some tour-ready pro 'boards can be chunkily built and weigh a lot with pedals added.

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3. Switching up your backline? Be sure to dig out and demo your stash of pedals – some stompboxes reveal a whole new appeal when paired with a different amp

5 DON'T RULE OUT USING DELAY STRAIGHT INTO THE AMP

It's become received wisdom that delay pedals should go in the effects loop in order to avoid their repeats getting distorted by the preamp stage of your amp on the way through. But with effects, it's good to remember there is no right or wrong per se, only different creative choices – and sometimes the grainier, swampier sound of delay hitting a preamp with a touch of 'hair' on it can sound glorious. Try both ways and decide which works best for you.

6 TRY AN 'ALWAYS ON' BOOST

Not many people enjoy playing through a bone-dry, glassy-clean amp. Using a clean boost in such situations can create a more flattering, expressive tone by pushing the amp to work harder across the whole frequency spectrum, promoting natural compression and 'bloom' from the amp itself. Other pedals, such as preamps, can shape

6. 'Always on' pedals such as Xotic's Echoplex-inspired EP Booster can have a flattering effect on your overall tone

8

tone as well as giving the amp a kick, shelving off unneeded bass and plumping up your mids, which can also be useful. So why not use preamp, boost or compression pedals to introduce a 'shock absorber' of suppleness and warmth in front of your amp when playing with clean and near-crunch tones? A classic pedal for this 'always on' role is Xotic's EP Booster, based on an Echoplex preamp.

7 PUT FUZZ PEDALS FIRST – MOSTLY

We were lucky enough to put a Rotosound reissue of its 1967 RFB-1 fuzz pedal with NOS germanium transistors through its paces recently and it sounded glorious. But be aware many vintage and vintage-inspired fuzz pedals like the RFB-1 need to 'see' your guitar's pickups directly without a buffered pedal between them and the guitar in the signal chain. You simply won't get all the warmth and sweetly chewy expressiveness out of them otherwise, though some silicon-transistor fuzzes are more tolerant of having other pedals in front of them in the signal chain.

8 TRY USING MODULATION SUBTLY

As much as we love a lush, rippling 80s chorus, modulation pedals can also work wonders when they are used more subtly. A phaser or chorus set to low Depth settings and a relatively show Rate can provide a sense of space and subtle movement to clean tones that is very pleasing to the ear, even if it is barely perceptible. Also, some classic modulation pedals have tone-flattering preamps built in, a feature recognised by Boss who put the preamps of its CE-1 Chorus Ensemble and RE-201 tape delay into the BP-1W Booster/Preamp pedal simply because they make everything sound a little better.

9 TRY ANALOGUE, IT'S OFTEN WORTH IT

There is much to be said for digital effects – especially versatility and editability – and the best digital pedals can produce some truly stunning sounds. But do try genuine analogue-circuitry pedals as well. Sometimes they just have a certain something even very good digitally modelled effects lack. We found this when A/B'ing a J Rockett Tranquilizer phaser against a high-quality modulation pedal by a respected maker. The digital version was very usable, but the Tranquilizer just had a sonic charisma that, in the end, we found more inspiring than having multiple phaser models at our fingertips in the digital pedal.

10 DIAL IN SETTINGS AT GIG VOLUME

If you have a big gig coming up, consider hiring a rehearsal studio where you can dial in your effects at stage volume. Due to the way that sound is perceived and heard at higher volumes, and the performance characteristics of amps when working flat out (or something like it), you'll find that overdrive and gain settings that seemed perfect at a loudish home volume can sound blown out, mushy or harshly toppy at gig volume. By using a rehearsal space that allows you to run the effects and amp loud while you dial things in for live work, you can find settings that will sound great – instead of unexpectedly awful – when you hit the stage. Do watch out for your ears when testing at length, however!

Preamp, boost or compression pedals can introduce a 'shock absorber' of suppleness and warmth in front of your amp

8. Dubbed a 'sonic sweetener' by its maker, the Boss BP-1W imbues your tone with the character of classic circuits

9. A pro-grade pedalboard with good I/O, cabling and power is a superb tool

9

11 USE THE PENCIL ANALOGY

Some drive pedals, such as Free The Tone's Dumble-like SS1-V String Slinger, have abundant crispness and clarity to help you punch through a mix. Others, such as J Rockett's 45 Calibre pedal, offer a good blend of definition on the one hand and flattering, supple compression on the other. Fuzz pedals, meanwhile, offer messy, smeary, spattery sounds for when you want to go wild. Think of these three classes of drive like pencils:

11. Different drive pedals accommodate different needs. Free The Tone's String Slinger, for example, lends itself to crisp, clear guitar lines

> The treble booster is possibly the most misleadingly named effect as its real benefit lies in shelving off bass and boosting upper mids

the first is like your hard 'H' pencil for drawing sharp, clear lines; the second is like your all-rounder 'HB' pencil that can turn its hand to both lines and shading; and the third is more like a soft 'B' pencil or even charcoal – good for creative, smudgy stuff but not so good for clarity. Having all these 'pencils' present on your pedalboard means all bases are covered when it comes to drive tones.

12 FOUR-KNOB DRIVES WORK WELL

While we love classic three-knob overdrives like the TS-9 Tube Screamer, we've come to really value four-knob overdrives that offer EQ control over both bass and treble (or otherwise expanded tone-sculpting powers) as well as gain and level. Four-knob drives can often be dialled in to suit different amps and be paired up with other effects more flexibly than simpler drive pedals – the J Rockett Archer Select is a great example, as is the ThorpyFX Warthog.

12. Four-knob overdrives, such as the J Rockett Archer Select and ThorpyFX's Warthog, offer a flexibility that can really enhance your tone-sculpting abilities

13 HAVE A GRAB-AND-GO 'BOARD

If you're into pedals, you may well have a pretty comprehensive main pedalboard, stuffed with everything you need plus a few things you only use every now and then. That's great, but we've also found it's worth making up a much smaller, lighter 'board with no more than three core effects on it for those times you just want to jump in the car and join in with a jam down the pub. We'd recommend a three-pedal line-up of a good all-rounder overdrive, a tremolo, plus a delay (or a reverb pedal if your amp doesn't have it onboard). Small isolated power supplies that can power the whole mini-'board can be had very cheaply these days, so also budget for one of those.

14 COULD ONE PEDAL DO IT ALL?

Following on from the last tip, could one pedal do all the basics, obviating the need for a 'board at all? Obviously, compact multi-effects units such as the Line 6 HX Stomp are designed to do just this. But more traditional pedal makers such as Keeley also have some interesting takes on this concept such as the excellent DDR (Drive, Delay, Reverb), which gives you those staples of everyday tone in one compact pedal at a reasonable price of just under £200. With such solutions, your 'pedalboard' could be slipped into your pocket, not a gigbag!

15 USE YOUR VOLUME CONTROL

Back in the days of non-master volume amps, guitarists such as Rory Gallagher used to be adept at using the guitar's volume control to manipulate the gain of a cranked amp. This approach can yield rewards with pedals, too – Mick Taylor of *That Pedal Show* and former editor of this tome told us long ago that dialling back the guitar's volume when playing through a Fuzz Face yields a unique and very ear-pleasing clean tone that you wouldn't guess was there if using only the pedal's controls.

16 USE TRADITIONAL PEDALS WITH MOST MULTI-EFFECTS

If you have a digital multi-effects unit such as a Line 6 Helix or Boss's GT-1000 (to name but two), remember that most have an effects loop that allows you to utilise favourite stompboxes within the editable, internal signal chain of the multi-effects. So if you need

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the programmable versatility of an all-singing multi-effects but love the sound of a particular, much-loved vintage phaser from your pedal collection, for example, you can often have your cake and eat it.

17 VELCRO NO-GO? TRY GEL TO STICK PEDALS DOWN

Daniel Steinhardt of *That Pedal Show* and The GigRig says that he often uses gel-tape, such as Duck's Nano-Grab brand, to attach pedals to his 'boards. "It's a kind of double-sided tape, but it's gel so it doesn't take a crowbar to get the pedals off," he explains. "Also, if you just wash it with a bit of water, you can actually use the stuff over – and it sticks to rubber so it solves the dreaded Boss conundrum [of how to firmly adhere tape to the rubber base of Boss compact pedals]. I use gel tape for probably 80 per cent of the pedalboards I do now."

18 TRY A TREBLE BOOSTER

The treble booster is possibly the most misleadingly named effect out there, as its real benefit lies in shelving off bass and boosting upper mids, which can be fantastically effective when playing through cranked amps that have the potential to flub out when simply turned up loud with a guitar running straight into them. By pruning off what you don't need from the frequency spectrum, your tone cuts through where it counts:

Try all brands, including budget ones, and buy based on what gels with you, what excites you and what gets you writing new music

in the ear-pleasing mid frequencies. Brian May, Rory Gallagher and many more legends have relied on this useful effect for just this reason – so don't be put off by the name. Brill, not shrill, is what you'll get if you use a treble booster right, and there are many modern versions of the old-school Rangemaster out there, including the Mythos Cestus Treble Booster pedal to name but one.

14. All-in-one solutions come in different guises – from Keeley's versatile, compact DDR, to Line 6's all-singing HX Stomp amp and effects processor

19. Jam Pedals' Lucydreamer is a favourite of Kirk Fletcher and enhances your tone with its wet/dry capabilities

19

19 MEND IT IN THE BLEND

Some modern compression pedals and overdrives will let you blend in some dry (uneffected) signal in with the effected signal. You'll find this useful feature on pedals such as Origin Effects Cali76 Stacked Compressor or the Jam Pedals Lucydreamer overdrive, and it basically gives you a way to achieve a subtler balance of natural, clearly defined straight-into-the-amp guitar tone with just a little bit of compression or drive. If you crave natural sounds that flatter, sustain and boost in a very organic, touch-sensitive way, pedals with a wet/dry blend control are worth exploring.

20 TRY EVERYTHING

Just as with guitars, it's best to be neither a snob nor an inverted snob – try all brands, including budget ones (Jack White has a signature pedal out with affordable pedal brand Donner, after all), and buy based on what gels with you, what excites you, what gets you writing new music effortlessly. The beauty of effects is that they are, by and large, more accessibly priced than other key parts of a guitar rig, and they are easy to sell on without too much depreciation. So roam widely across the effects landscape and open your mind to the creative possibilities of every species of effect you encounter on your travels. G

Gibson MURPHY LAB

OLD MASTERS

*When it comes to the art of guitar relicing, Gibson's Murphy Lab sets the pace. Senior product development manager, **Robi Johns**, told us why playing the new Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection is like stepping aboard a time machine*

Photography Olly Curtis
Words Henry Yates

Perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay Gibson's Murphy Lab Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection is that we are terrified to play them. Faced with the neckwear, soundhole scuffs and belt-buckle scratches of this five-strong historic line-up, the abiding impression is of inspecting the personal effects of some bygone billionaire collector in the moments before they are swaddled in bubblewrap and shipped to the auction house or family vault.

To lift such an instrument from its stand, to run your fingers over its blemished fretboard, to hear its ancient voice sing of centuries past is a heart-in-mouth moment, loaded with both joy and a faint dread that a curator is about to burst in and admonish you for handling it without white cotton gloves. The twist, of course, is that these guitars are in fact younger than yesterday, representing the latest cache of releases from Gibson's Murphy Lab.

The life's work of Tom Murphy surely needs no introduction in these pages. Now in his mid-70s, the undisputed godfather of guitar relicing has elevated the practice to a branch of science (and changed the perception of pre-worn instruments from gimmick to art form). Since the luthier returned to Gibson at the turn of the decade to establish the Murphy Lab, we've seen some of his most mouthwatering treatments applied to a wishlist of electric instruments. But as senior product development manager, Robi Johns, tells us, Murphy's unprecedented swerve into aged acoustics since 2023 has added a whole new string to his bow.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

1. Robi Johns, who is a senior product development manager at Gibson's Montana-based acoustic 'craftory', says the Murphy Lab's heavy ageing work on its newest run of acoustic models is right at the pinnacle of what's possible in this field

"What's beautiful about this project is that it [allows] us to release models [from] new places in our history"

The Murphy Lab has been creating stunning aged electrics for a few years, but now the acoustic side of the operation is in full swing. Are you pleased with the output so far?

"More than pleased; I'm in awe. Because this has been an evolution. Tom Murphy created his finishes to make the electrics feel and look like road-worn instruments. Then Gibson said, 'Hey, let's do some acoustics this way, too.'

2. Decades of top erosion from strumming is a very difficult thing to imitate accurately, but Gibson seems to have nailed it on this aged 1939 SJ-100

3. Headstock and logo designs from the pre-war era have all been faithfully reproduced

That was about four years ago. My initial thought was, 'I don't know if people are looking for beat-up acoustics.' But we released five models with light ageing in 2023. Now, I hear from the connoisseur artists: 'I was down in Nashville and I ran into this Murphy Lab Light Aged Jumbo, and I can't sleep any more because I just gotta have it. But they said they couldn't sell it because it's a display model. Please can you pull some strings so I can buy it?' Last year, we announced the Murphy Lab Heavy Aged Acoustic Collection and they're just starting to hit the market. I actually said to Tom, 'Thank you, you've created a time machine for us.'"

4. This beautiful Heavy Aged 1942 Banner J-45 replicates one of Gibson's most revered round-shoulder dreads of all time

5. Boasting those distinctive fretboard inlays, this Heavy Aged 1936 Advanced Jumbo replicates the precursor model to the iconic J-45

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIBSON

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How were the five models that feature in the new Heavy Aged Collection selected?

"Well, the 1942 Banner J-45, that was the year of release and it became our bestseller, the bread and butter Gibson dreadnought – even though it was round-shouldered. Then there's the 1936 Advanced Jumbo, which was like the J-45 before the J-45 existed. And the reason we chose that for the Heavy Aged series was because it's definitely the most powerful. It's a long-scale instead of a short-scale and that makes it more projecting. And it has a wider X-brace. In the 1940s, we went to a more condensed bracing pattern, which growls and distorts a little more when you hit it. But when you play the Advanced Jumbo from the 1930s, with that wide X, it barks at you. You hit it harder and it definitely sounds gritty.

"Then, of course, there's the 1939 SJ-100. The SJ-200 was released in 1938, and then we released the SJ-100, probably because it was the end of an era of economic instability in America and we wanted to get the prices down. So that model was $100 in 1939, I believe, while the SJ-200 was $200. The 1960 Hummingbird: that's the quintessential year of its release. When the 1963 Country Western was released, people wanted a natural-looking dreadnought, and we included it in the Heavy Aged Collection because people would not let us alone! It just kept coming back up. So it's society that has led us to these models because society responded to them."

What would you say are the key elements that go into Gibson's aged acoustics?

"They're not necessarily built differently. Every guitar has the old dovetail neck-to-body joint – we were already doing that from 1989 onward, when we started this craftory. The luthiers at that time said, 'We gotta compete with the old guitars that are already out there since 1926.' We had a bar that was so high. Another of the key things – which a lot of people don't know – is that we dome the tops, even on a flat-top.

"When Tom created his new formula, it was just unbelievable. Even as a new guitar, it sounds 100 years old"

6. What degree of ageing you prefer is very much up to the individual player's aesthetic preferences, and the Light Aged finish on this 1957 SJ-200 headstock shows off all the ornate details beautifully

Tom Murphy is renowned for his exquisite ageing of Gibson electrics, and in 2023 acoustics received the Murphy Lab treatment for the first time

That gives us that really nice midrange, makes them sound really old. We use thermally aged tops to accelerate what happens to a piece of wood when it sits in a shop for 80 years. And we use hide glue on the braces of these guitars, both the Murphy Lab and Custom Historic models.

"So we were already doing a lot of this stuff to make our acoustics sound as vibrant as possible, and they already sounded pretty damn old. But the real magic of this collection is that up to this period of time we were using nitro lacquer, maybe 12 to 14 coats, with some sanding in between. But then we created a thinner version that was half as many coats. It wasn't as smooth-looking, but it allowed the guitar to vibrate even more because it was thinner. When Tom created his new formula, he took out all

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

This 1957 SJ-200 model is one of the first round of hand-built Murphy Lab acoustics, originally released in 2023, which received the Light Aged treatment

the plasticisers and other solvents. All we have left is the cellulose. We put it on there and we're listening to these guitars and it's just unbelievable. Even as a new guitar, it sounds 100 years old. So by the turn of the millennium, we were already saying, 'We're getting closer and closer to a 100-year-old tone.' But then, when Tom developed this finish we put on [the new collection], that was the last cherry on top.

"You know, a UV cure is a beautiful hard finish and I'm not gonna say it's 'bad', it'll just never change. That's good for some people. But with the Murphy Lab acoustics, I say to people: 'I'm sorry to tell you, but in about 20 years, your finish will probably crack because it's gonna get thinner and thinner. But when it gets thinner and it cracks, it'll sound better – so look forward to it!' I can't even imagine what these guitars will sound like in 50 years' time."

What are the processes by which you create the imperfections on these acoustics?

"It's very human. We cool the instruments in a refrigerator to create this beautiful hairline cracking. We know what temperature, how long to do it, for which model. And then, it's human beings who are wearing off the belt spot in the back or scraping off the finish, rubbing it with different tools, to create the look and touch of where it would have worn off. The finish is very brittle once it's pulled out of the cooling chamber and we can crack it and peel parts of it off – or scratch it as if a pick was scratching against it for 40 years. Our technicians will use sandpaper, of course. But they'll also invent different ways to create those marks, like the pick scratching. They might even say: 'You know, when I use the end of my calliper, it looks good.' They'll use anything to make it work. And that gives it the character.

"Now, that's less about sound and more about the vibe and character of the guitar, which actually is psychoacoustic. The definition of that word is that you hear something based on the feel and the experience. It's like if you ride a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, it's noisy and it's loud, and it's not the most efficient motorcycle in the world, but it's the experience of sitting on that giant monster. But [ultimately] we design guitars for sound. We pull from our history for the sound and feel of each instrument. Not just the fancy features. One of the things we profess is that when Orville Gibson made his first instrument, that we know of, in the late-1800s, he did it with one philosophy in mind: that when you build an instrument, the methodology of how you assemble it should enhance the performance. And we live up to that."

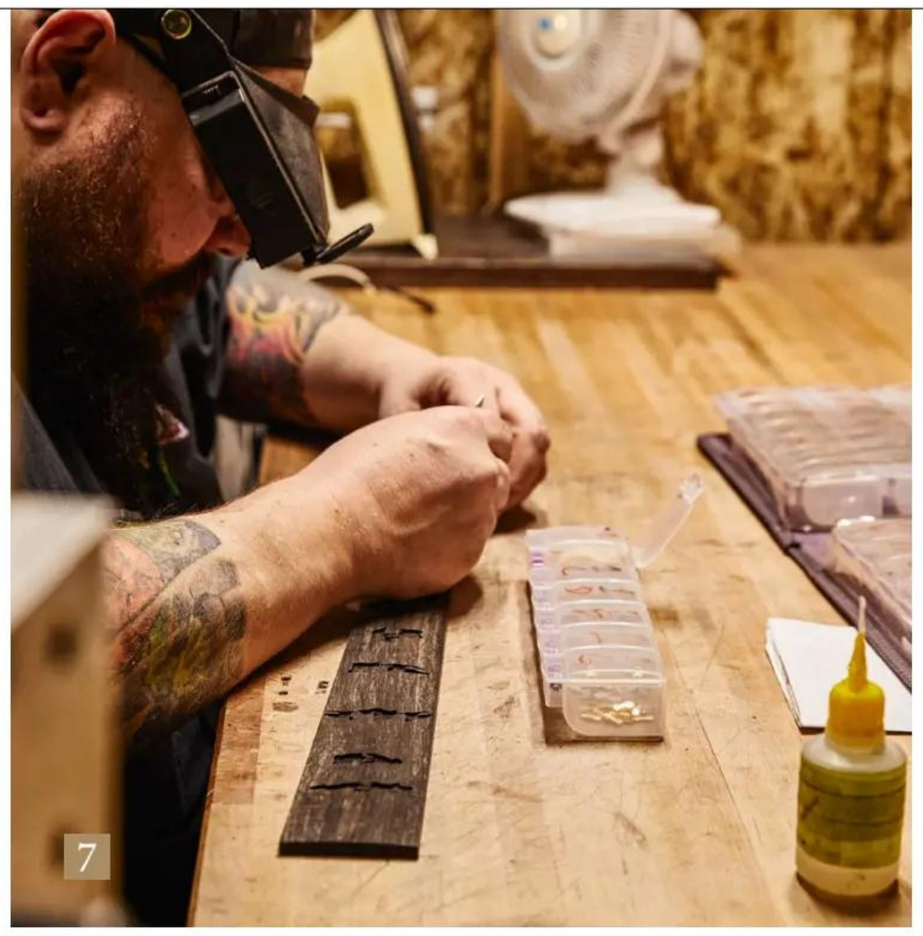
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PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

"A lot of people don't know that we dome the tops. It gives a really nice midrange, makes them sound really old"

7. Patience, deeply researched attention to detail, top-notch lutherie and high-quality tonewoods are all part of the equation when making these guitars in Montana

8. The detailing on both the body and headstock of this Heavy Aged 1960 Hummingbird is superbly executed

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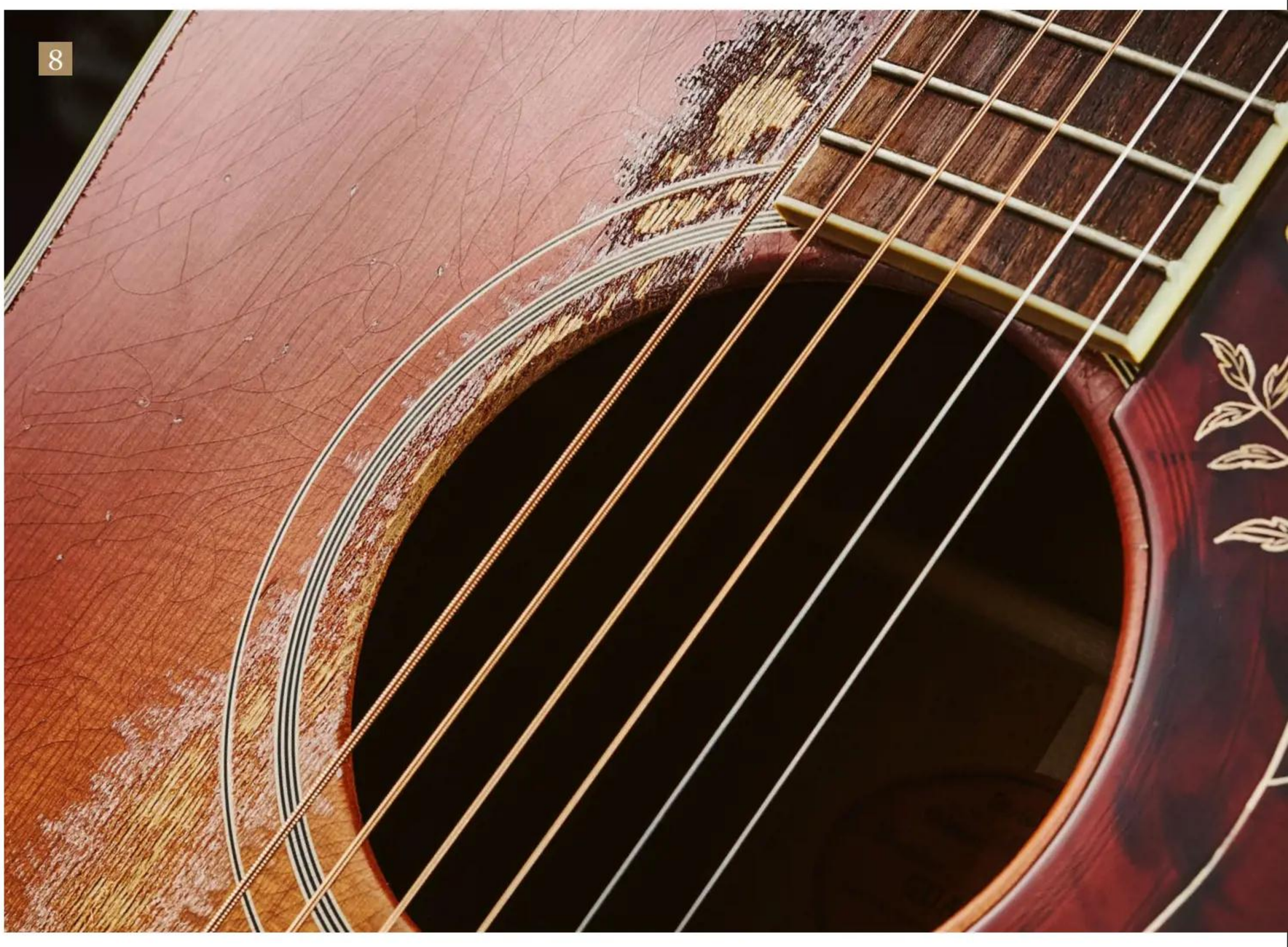
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One of Gibson's squarer-shouldered dreadnought designs, this Heavy Aged 1960 Hummingbird looks like it has toured the States a few times and has an appropriately faded Washed Cherry Sunburst finish. Subtle doming of the top enhances its vintage tone, too

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PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

9. Sides awaiting construction into guitar bodies. Hand-selected, carefully seasoned tonewoods are a key part of making guitars that sound great

10. Gibson's history books are filled with interesting models and year-specific specs to explore, as evidenced by this Heavy Aged 1963 Country Western, with its elegant split-parallelogram fretboard inlays

What obstacles did the team encounter when creating the Murphy Lab acoustics?
"Well, we didn't have a lacquer booth. We had to create a whole new laboratory here in Bozeman, Montana, which wasn't too much of an obstacle because all we had to do was replicate what was already successful in Nashville. It's a team of four, run by one of our best young builders called Madison Swords. We're still a small company here building acoustics. But I will say that the Custom

"It's actually psychoacoustic, which means you hear something based on the feel and the experience"

Historic and Murphy Lab stuff has become quite a large portion of our market demand and success in the last four or five years.

"Next, we had to discover what worked and what doesn't work. We had to work with the temperature. The original tests were done by Tom Murphy himself. We couldn't go as far with the ageing as with the electrics; we had to pull back with the acoustics because they're thinner and more delicate."

How do you see the Murphy Lab acoustics rolling out from here?
"Well, what's beautiful about this project is that it gives us a channel to release models that are not always released, to touch all these new places in our history. And I can advertise, slightly, that we are working on five other models for release in September that will be Light Aged. In that batch, we said, 'Hey, there's a really cool SJ-200 with maple that everyone loves from around '57, with a stinger on the back of the headstock.' We're going to do a '63 Dove. We're also going to do one of the very first flat-tops in our history, the small-body Nick Lucas model, which goes back to the 1920s. We're gonna re-release the J-160E. We'll have 15 Light and Heavy Aged models by the end of this calendar year. Where do you start and end with this? I can open a Gibson reference book and go, 'Oh, remember that?' There's just so much fun stuff."

Do you find that different markets have different attitudes towards aged guitars?
"The Japanese like newer stuff. They want the [vintage] sound, but they want it to look new. So they want the Ultra Light Murphy Lab stuff. We don't mess with ageing that too much, if at all, but it has the magic aged finish, which is basically cellulose."

Do you think the Murphy Lab acoustics could fool a seasoned guitar connoisseur?
"Absolutely. And not only fool them. I just guided the building of a guitar for our friend Peter Frampton. He has a 1939 L-00. He wanted an L-00 from the Murphy Lab because he's heard these things are magic. So I put together the design for him. We used a Light Aged finish. And I have his message on my phone: 'Robi, I don't understand, this sounds better than my '39.' I knew that he was right. With all of the elements that we're doing today, we're finding out that the overall effect is that they might sound even better than the ones from that era."

Do you think there's an end point to the guitar ageing process?
"When I'm looking at what we just did, I don't know how much further we can go to get more magic out of these things. But I shouldn't say that because I know there's always more..." G

Gibson's Murphy Lab Heavy Aged & Light Aged Acoustic Collections are available now from www.gibson.com

The nitro finish on this beautiful, honey-tinted Heavy Aged 1963 Country Western is fittingly called ‘Smoked Natural’

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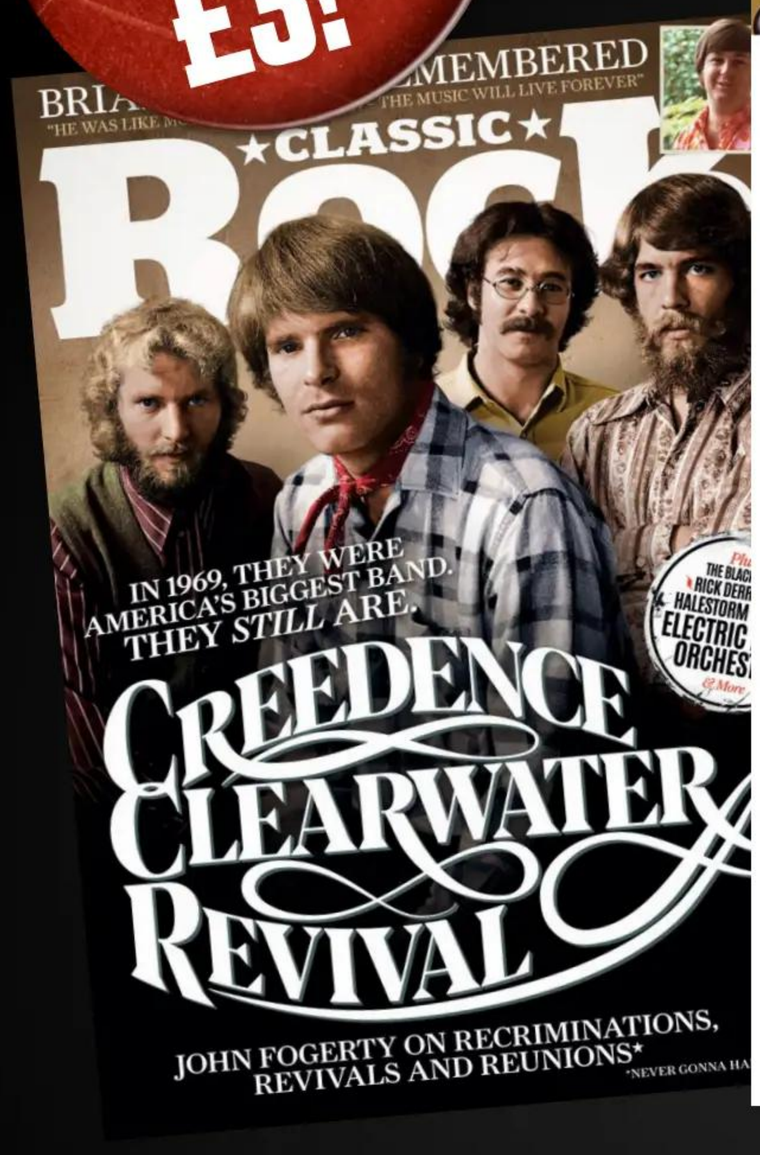

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