

Guitarist

Issue 529

OCTOBER 2025

60TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE YEAR THAT CHANGED FENDER FOREVER

1965

Fender
FEATURING

THE SURPRISING
TRUTH ABOUT
FENDER'S CBS ERA

1965-1970

60s STRATS, TELES,
JAGS & MORE!

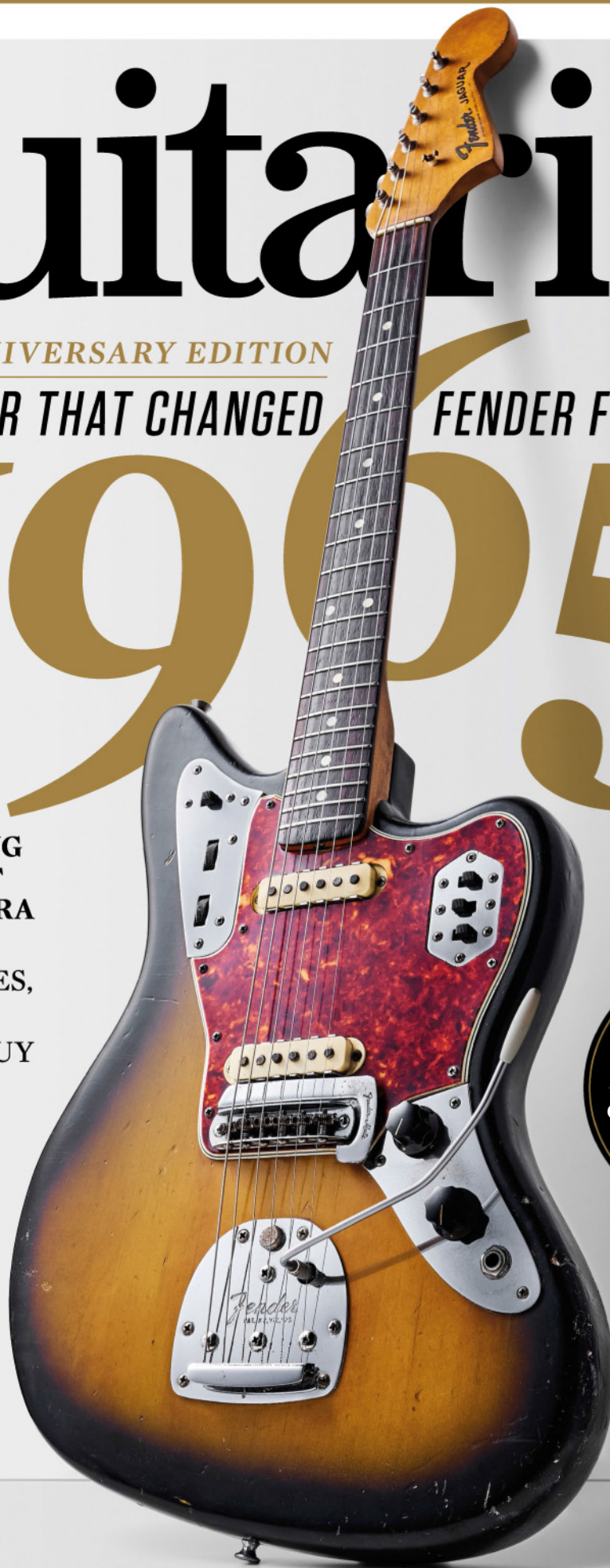
MODERN BEST-BUY
REISSUES

& MORE



FENDER'S NEW
ULTRA LUXE
VINTAGE RANGE!

1965
FENDER
JAGUAR
In Tobacco
Sunburst



DON
FELDER

ON HIS LIFE IN THE
FAST LANE WITH
THE EAGLES



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Not-So Horrible Histories



This month's cover feature on the first five years of Fender's CBS era reminds us that, over time, all historical stories get reduced to simplistic clichés that help us sum up a period of complex activity in a single phrase. The trouble is that these distillations of history into easily digestible bites mislead as often as they illuminate. For many years now, it's been pretty common to hear people say post-CBS Fenders aren't as good as pre-1965 Strats, Teles and so on. Now, if we were talking about post-CBS Fenders from the late 70s, that statement might hold largely true. How about guitars from 1966, though? Or 1969, the year Hendrix made some of the most exquisite electric guitar tones in history at Woodstock with a large-headstock Strat? Come to think of it, haven't we played quite a few great-sounding 70s Strats, like Aynsley Lister's 1970 Lake Placid Blue model?

All of a sudden, the glib judgments of 'received wisdom' don't seem so clear-cut. Or wise. That's why it was so interesting to read Tony Bacon's nuanced account of the first five years of Fender under CBS, 60 years on from that sea-change in the company's history – and, of course, it was a pleasure to host the colourful and vibey Fenders of the era that we shot for the cover feature. All of these things served to reinforce the view that very few eras of guitar history can be summarised accurately by neat 'cookie cutter' judgements, either positive or negative – and that the real story is often far richer than our inherited 'rules of thumb' might suggest.

Elsewhere in the issue, we find history repeating in the present, with the ongoing revival of the Stromberg brand – highly respected in its 1920s heyday, though somewhat obscure in posterity – in the form of a classy new semi-hollow Monterey electric that tips a nod to the jazz era but offers plenty of potential for blues and even classic rock, too. Also dipping their toes into the past, in this issue, are Fender and Framus – so it's very much a case of 'let's put the future behind us' in guitar land this month! Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



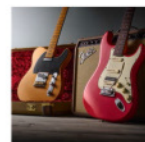
Page's Gretsch

Jimmy Page's playing drew heavily on rock 'n' roll, so it's almost a surprise he didn't play more Gretsches like this 6120. Learn more on **p78**



Don Felder

The former Eagles guitarist talks about improvisation, his rich and varied solo career, and recovering from an onstage collapse **p50**



Brand-New Vintage

Fender's new American Ultra Luxe Vintage range marries vintage tones and looks with very modern comforts and functionality on **p94**

Guitarist

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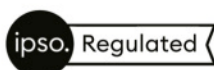
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Contents

COVER FEATURE



56

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

REGULARS

- 030 Gas Supply
- 032 Fretbuzz
- 034 New Music
- 036 Tones Behind The Tracks
- 040 Opinion
- 044 Substitute
- 046 Feedback
- 048 Competition
- 110 Subscribe
- 112 Bought & Sold
- 114 The Mod Squad
- 120 Nitty Gritty
- 124 Vintage Icons
- 130 Next Month

FEATURES

- 050 Don Felder
- 056 Fender's CBS Era
- 072 Dire Straits: *Brothers In Arms* 40th Anniversary
- 078 Historic Hardware: Jimmy Page's 1957 Gretsch 6120

NEW GEAR

- 008 Patrick James Eggle Oz-t Cabronita Thinline
- 014 Blackstar DA100 Ruby
- 018 Stromberg Hanover Street Monterey
- 024 Keeley Manis
- 026 Diamond Boost/EQ
- 028 Giordano Tributo 58
- 084 Framus Hootenanny 12-String & 6-String
- 094 Fender American Ultra Luxe Vintage '50s Telecaster & Vintage '60s Stratocaster HSS
- 106 Boss RT-2 Rotary Ensemble

TECHNIQUES

- 126 Blues Headlines with Richard Barrett

VIDEO & AUDIO

To enjoy all of the video and audio content in this issue, type the following link into your browser and follow the instructions in the post entitled 'Guitarist video and audio': <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



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FEATURE

72



PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS SKY PHOTO BY SHOWS UDDIN/GETTY IMAGES

24

REVIEW



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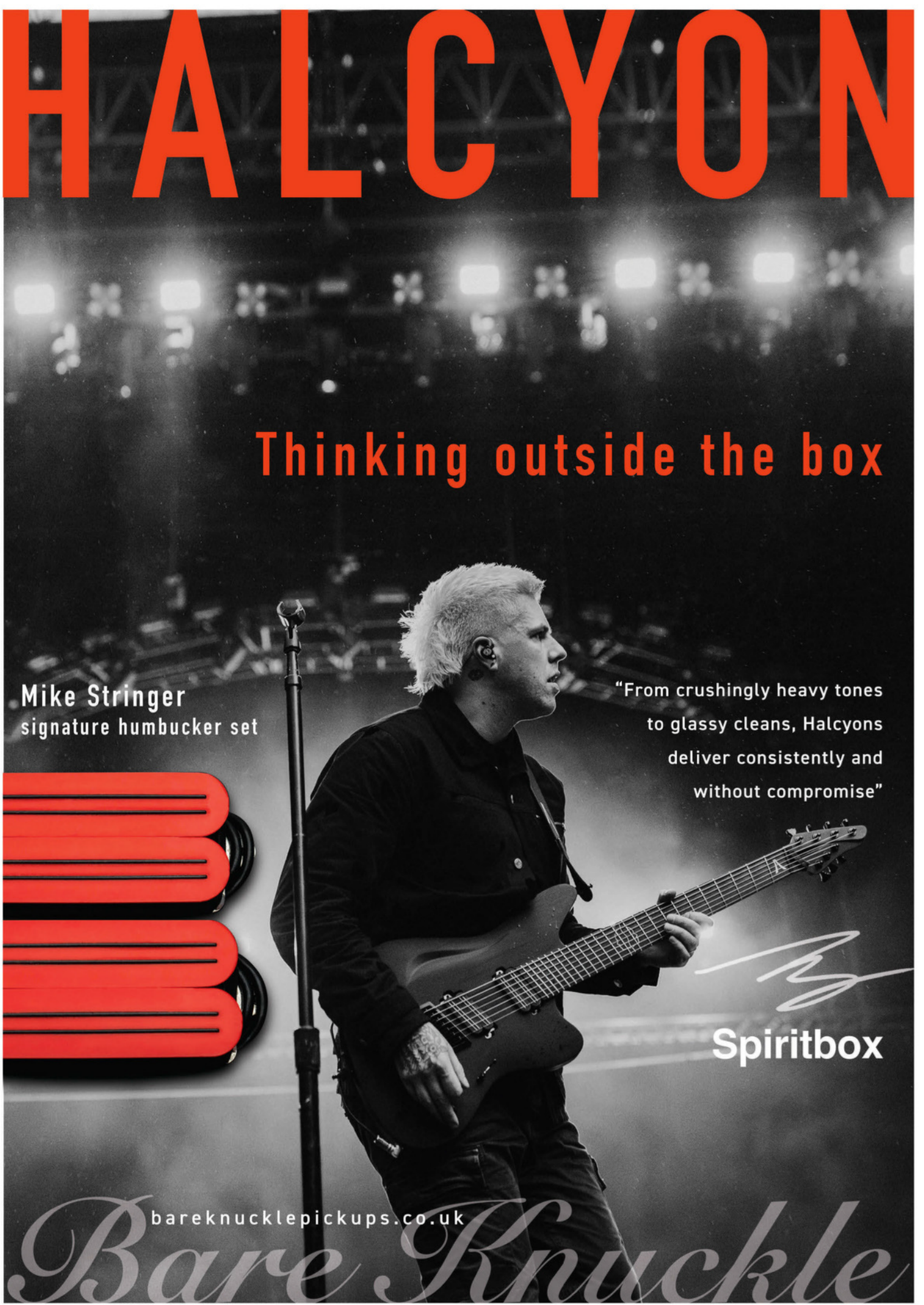
See p110 for details

HALCYON

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signature humbucker set

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to glassy cleans, Halcyons
deliver consistently and
without compromise"




Spiritbox

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FIRST PLAY



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE
OZ-T CABRONITA
THINLINE
£3,260

WHAT IS IT? A gorgeous stripped-down but highly detailed build from one of the UK's most experienced and respected makers

Class Act

Upholding the craft of the luthier, Patrick James Eggle's latest build is another reason to look closer to home if you want the best

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

Such is the modern world, we were scrolling through Instagram and stumbled across a delicious-looking Patrick James Eggle Oz-t. A quick “can we get one?” request and a little while later, once Patrick and his team had made another, here it is. There's no launch embargo date to follow. No PR to wade through. Just another jaw-dropping example of home-grown craft.

Increasingly, those of us who enjoy über-quality are looking beyond the big guns' Custom Shops and Private Stock programmes. Nobody is saying £3k is cheap, but it's considerably less than those obvious Custom Shop models, not least if you want some bespoke features that suit you.

Like many, many makers worldwide, Patrick's range centres on guitars inspired by Fender favourites: the Tele-style Oz (named after the location of Eggle HQ), as here, and the more Strat-aimed 96, while the Macon covers more Gibson-like style in its various configurations. So, while there's no new outline for your eyes and hands to adjust to, Patrick's main USP is simply the hugely detailed craft honed from vast experience in both the electric





Xxxx
xxxx
xxxx
Xxxx





1

1. Featuring a new-design headstock logo, the headstock face can be custom-sprayed to match the body finish. The headstock here and the heel area of the neck are sprayed in nitro then rubbed back. We also get a perfectly cut bone nut

and acoustic worlds. And when we say 'hugely detailed', we really mean it. This is masterpiece level.

From the off, the experience of unboxing a perfectly packaged instrument is illustrative that the details go beyond the guitar itself. Opening the classic-style hard case, we note that the guitar is shipped with a fretboard protector, and the whiff of quality is hard to miss. As you pull the

domed and lightly knurled control knobs, again lightly aged like the original P-Bass-style control plate they sit on.

Suiting the aged style is the old-looking single humbucker at the bridge – a Wide Range-style pickup, wound by Mojo here in the UK. There's no need for a pickup selector switch, but you can split the humbucker via a pull-switch on the master tone control.

2. The rounded neck heel and inset neckplate are typical of PJE's obsessive attention to detail. The roasted maple has a vibrant figure and the neck-back has no finish apart from gun-stock oil

Patrick's main USP is simply the hugely detailed craft honed from vast experience. This is masterpiece level

guitar out, it's not only a beautiful light weight for the style, but we're drawn to the pristine condition and lightly aged hardware, not to mention the look of the roasted, figured maple neck-back and the deep brown/orange of the tortoiseshell pickguard and top-edge binding. There's no ageing to the perfectly glossed nitro body finish, though; its dark 2-Tone Burst over the vertically striped swamp ash seems somehow opulent but in very classic rock 'n' roll style. It's perfectly matched by the stripped-down dress: the cut-off bridge with its big brass saddles, and the



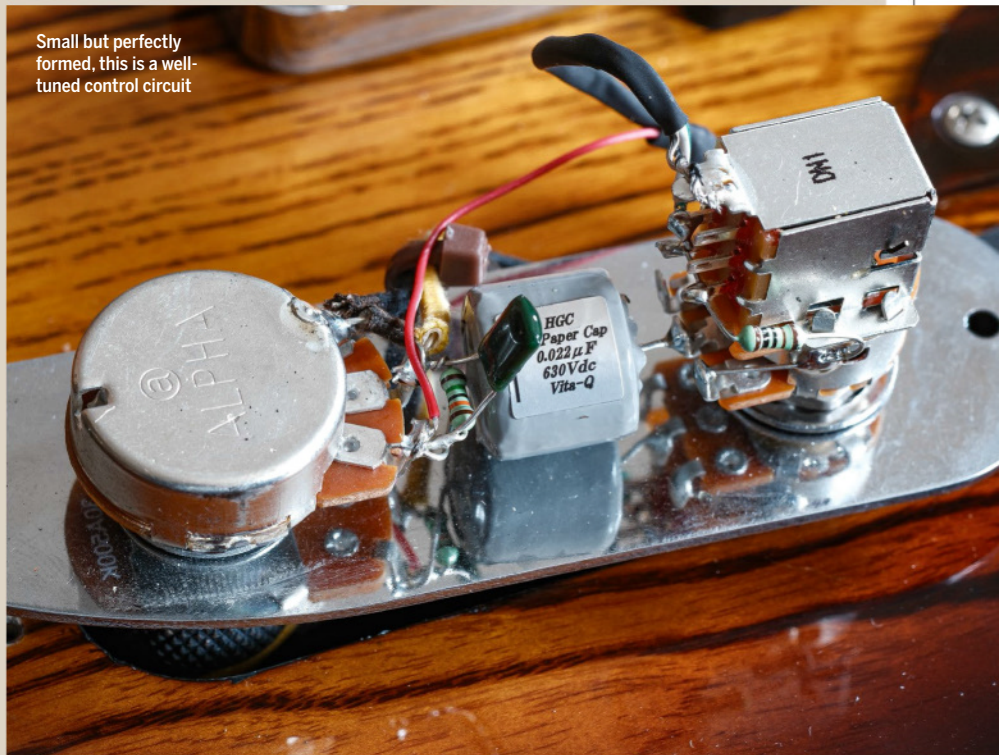
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UNDER THE HOOD What's inside this beauty?

The control cavity under the metal top plate is pretty small, but the simple circuit is perfectly done and uses a full-size Alpha 500kohm taper volume pot with presumably the same value pull-push tone pot. Typically, we have a treble bleed circuit on the volume control that consists of a .001 μ F cap and 150k resistor wired in parallel. The large grey HGC Vita-Q 630-volt paper-in-oil tone capacitor is rated at .022 μ F, plus there's a 1k resistor for the partial split that voices primarily the neck-facing coil with a little of the usually fully dumped coil in circuit. The cleanly cut cavity is coated with conductive screening paint and the metal top plate helps with the shielding, too, of course.

Of the Wide Range-style humbucker, Mojo's Marc Ransley says: "It's as if a humbucker and a Strat pickup had a cool, talented kid. This is my take on the 70s classic but in a humbucker/Patent Applied For-sized format." Like the original Fender pickup, it uses threaded CuNiFe magnetic polepieces – six per coil – and is wound with 42 AWG wire. At output, the full coil measures 10.17k and 5.96k when split.

Small but perfectly formed, this is a well-tuned control circuit



Both volume and tone controls are super smooth in use, plus we get a pull-switch on the tone control to split the Mojo humbucker

Feel & Sounds

There's obviously a familiar feel here to the slab-bodied guitar, which weighs in at 2.97kg (6.54lb). It's a great seated player and feels like part of your body when strapped on. But not for the first time with a PJE guitar, it's the neck feel and fretwork that's truly exceptional. There are no tricks. The oil/wax finish to the neck-back feels as good as the roasted maple looks, which is technically rift-sawn with a lovely strong flamed figure. It's only a shade lighter in colour than the deep brown rosewood fingerboard with its simple clay-like dots to the face (the side dots are quite large-diameter Luminlay), while the narrow/tall fret gauge seems perfectly suited, especially with the 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard radius. Those frets are beautifully smooth with rounded ends, and the very straight neck has a pretty low action: 1.27mm on the treble side and 1.53mm on the bass side.

Of course, the heel is rounded, too, and the neckplate inset, which all helps the guitar to disappear in your hands. Nothing gets in the way. The neck profile is classed as a 'soft V' and there's good depth – 22.8mm at the 1st fret, 23.4mm by the 12th – but the trim shoulders make it feel thinner to your hand.

ON BRAND

We catch up with Patrick James Eggle and reflect on boutique building in the modern world

Based in Oswestry, Shropshire, Patrick James Eggle is the definition of the modern small-shop 'boutique' guitar maker. It's some 31 years since he left the large-scale guitar manufacturing company that bore his name, and after stints in the USA where he focused on acoustic building, as well as designing guitars for both Faith and Shergold, Patrick and his small team currently build around 150 electrics annually, fewer than in past years, but that's the plan.

You've downsized a little recently in terms of staff and the number of guitars you make. Why?

"I could very easily go out and find two or three more people to hire; we've got the space here. I could then spend a bit of time calling the dealers and up my trade sales and put more guitars onto more shelves in more shops. That wouldn't be particularly difficult. I'm not saying it's easy to find the right employees; it isn't, it's really difficult. But I'm looking at where we are and it's nice at the moment. We sort of bumble along and build around 12 guitars a month on average. It feels good.

"We're building a higher proportion of instruments for stock these days, too, which is basically because I'm not chasing people down for orders – the dealers, I mean. We're just building the instruments how we want to build

them. So when we have a spare slot we might just go, 'Okay, let's build this.' It gives us the opportunity to build what we want to build, guitars that we think are cool.

"You see, I've done orders for people to their specifications that I really wish I'd never built, so we made a decision a while back not to build any more like that. Sometimes we get orders for instruments that are on the cusp, where we're not sure if we want to build it. To be honest, we can usually talk them round, steer them away from 'Planet Tacky' just enough. But quite often people don't understand that and then a couple of weeks later that guitar is on Reverb with whatever dodgy colour or feature – a guitar you didn't really want to build is out there with your name on it."

Speaking of your name, you now have a new headstock logo.

"We were looking at the whole branding thing. For years, we built bolt-on neck guitars with a script logo, basically my signature, which is now illegible [laughs]. It's always bothered me that we don't have the same logo on all the guitars. If you see an Oz or a 96 being played on a stage from a distance... I can tell what it is, but it's not really obvious. So we thought it'd be good to get a stronger piece of branding on there.



Patrick is focusing on builds he's proud to put his name to, steering clear of custom wildcards

"I was a little concerned about [the new logo] because it's off the beaten track in the way in which it's done: it's a spray mask, not a rubdown decal. So the bit that says 'Patrick James Eggle Custom Shop', that's a decal, but then the main logo on the top of the headstock is a spray mask. It's quite cool, really, as if I'm spraying, say, a Lake Placid Blue body then I can do the same thing with the logo, I can match it. It gives me a bit of freedom to do cool and interesting things."

Are you more comfortable with the stripped-down style of a guitar like this Oz-t?

"Yes, probably. Not least that you're not in a maple-buying arms race, which is a

"We're building a higher proportion of instruments for stock these days... [and not] orders I really wish I'd never built"

Patrick James Eggle

diminishing resource. If we're building a Macon carved top and the piece of wood for the top is very expensive – and decent cuts of figured maple are becoming increasingly expensive – sometimes you just don't need that added pressure, especially as I'm the one that always does the top staining and colouring of the 'bursts. Sometimes I just don't want the pressure of having to perform [laughs]."

Is there ever going to be an original PJE shape?

"Yes and we've got it to the design stage. I can't really show it to you yet as it's not built. But it is happening!" [DB]



Even the metal jack plate is lightly aged, while the tortoiseshell celluloid top-edge binding adds about the only bling there is. Incidentally, the pickguard is acrylic with beautifully hand-rolled edges



Gotoh hardware is used throughout and the 'chopped' style bridge uses In-Tune brass barrel saddles



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE OZ-T CABRONITA THINLINE

PRICE: £3,260 (inc case)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Single-cutaway, semi-solid electric

BODY: 2-piece swamp ash back w/ swamp ash top

NECK: Figured roasted maple, soft V profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, ivory coloured face dots w/ Luminlay side dots, 304mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22 medium (Jescar 55090)

HARDWARE: Gotoh 'chopped T' bridge with intonated brass saddles, Gotoh SD 91 tuners – aged nickel-plate

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm

ELECTRICS: Mojo CuNiFe Wide Range-style humbucker. Master volume and tone (w/ pull-push coil-split)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.97/6.54

OPTIONS: The base price is £2,990: 2-piece swamp ash body construction adds £100; single-ply tortoiseshell pickguard adds £60; body-edge binding adds £200

RANGE OPTIONS: Solidbody T-style Oz (from £2,900) is joined by Oz Contour Top (from £3,400) and Oz Carved Top (from £4,300). Aside from these standard models, PJE also offers a full custom service (£POA)

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes

FINISH: 2-Tone Burst (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose body; satin nitro to headstock and heel with 'worn through' neck back

Patrick James Eggle

01691 661777

www.eggle.co.uk



10/10

PROS Super top-tier build; light weight; deeply coloured single-pickup guitar; top-edge binding; great neck feel and playability; Mojo split-able humbucker

CONS Er, nope!

The chambering is mostly on the bass side, which not only reduces weight but we get a good acoustic volume and pretty much halfway between a solid- and hollowbody response.

Not everyone will get on with a single-pickup guitar, of course, and you can order the Oz-t with a neck pickup. But us Les Paul Junior or Esquire fans have no complaints and, sound-wise, this Oz nods more to the latter than the former. If you find a humbucker a bit too 'big' and a single coil too 'small', then this Mojo 'bucker might appeal. It's pulled back a little from the Patent Applied For clone we have on our reference PJD Carey Standard – a similar chambered swamp ash/maple build – but it's got a smooth, lean voice here that, for some, could be a hot country classic. It's a very vibrant and ringing voice at full volume and keeps its clarity under some tougher gains, but as any single-pickup player will know, your volume control is your friend. Here, the guitar cleans up nicely and actually leans into a more twangsone zone. Set up your sound with that rolled-back volume then

pull it back up for your riffs and leads and we're right into a near-perfect roots rock Americana ballpark.

With the pull-switch engaged, though, which voices primarily the neck-facing coil, there's an almost Gretsch-like sparkle, lower in output with less thickness but bags of bite that can easily be rolled back with the tone control. Throw some chorus into the mix and if we were told this was a signature pickup for Johnny Marr or the late, great James Honeyman-Scott, we'd believe it. But it's just as valid for your 60s power-pop or clean and stinging' righteous blues. One pickup, a host of sounds. Superb.

Verdict

A first-class build that's impossible to fault, this almost demure Oz-t is yet another illustration of why Patrick James Eggle is held in such high regard. But it's no posh case-queen; it would be criminal if this didn't hit a stage. It might *just* be a single-pickup guitar, but when one sounds as good and is versatile as this, do you really need more? **G**

FIRST PLAY



BLACKSTAR DA100 RUBY
£1,249

WHAT IS IT? A feature-rich three-channel 100/10-watt high-gain head with IR recording outputs and plenty more

Red Alert

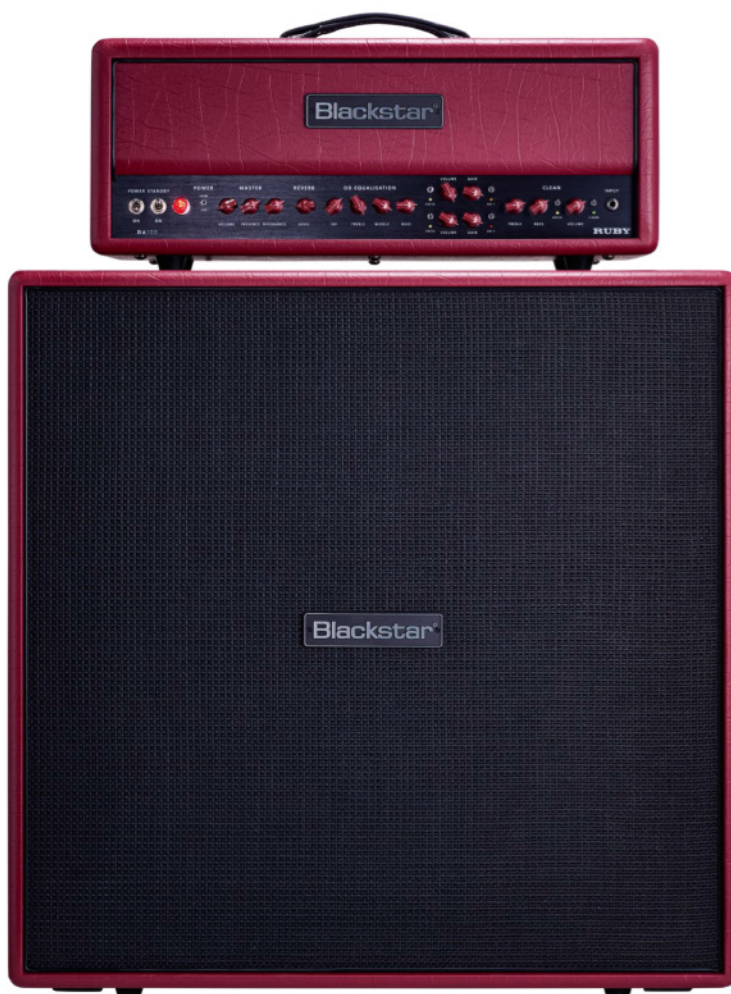
Blackstar created this fire-breathing signature head for guitar icon Doug Aldrich. But does it rock our world?

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Matt Lincoln

British amp company Blackstar was founded in 2007 by ex-Marshall engineers with the aim of updating traditional circuits with fresh, innovative technologies. Designed in the UK and manufactured in China, Blackstar's amps come to market at surprisingly low price points, and the brand has been warmly embraced by bedroom players, rehearsal rooms and touring professionals alike. Indeed, gathering a roster of varied luminaries – spanning Phil Collen to Gaz Coombes, Neil Schon to Bob Mould – requires wide-ranging, first-class tones alongside ruggedly reliable construction.

Former Whitesnake gunslinger Doug Aldrich began using Blackstar's HT Stage 100 head with his band The Dead Daisies in 2023 and as the relationship between player and brand grew, conversations regarding a signature model culminated in what we have here: the Ruby. Based around his HT 100, some personalised tweaks were incorporated into the tone and the cosmetics, resulting in this crimson-clad, high-gain beast.

Coupled with its matching Celestion Vintage 30-equipped 4x12 cabinet, this stout and powerful-looking half-stack cuts a classy-yet-authoritative dash. The Vintage 30's ability to present a wider range of frequencies than the classic Greenback option made this a more suitable match for the Ruby's clean-to-dirty tonal palette.



The matching Ruby-coloured 4x12 cabinet is equipped with specifically selected Vintage 30 speakers made by Celestion. Extensive listening tests revealed that the extended frequency range of these drivers matched well with the Ruby amp's wide tonal range



1. A wide spread of controls allows for independent EQ control of the Clean and Overdrive channels. The Voice controls add increased gain and tonality for each channel, and the master section includes Presence and Resonance controls for additional sparkle and thump
2. The full output of 100 watts RMS might only be welcome in a handful of venues, but the master volume allows for heavy gain at lower volumes. It's also possible to switch the amp's output down to 10 watts, making a less daunting platform for home-based players
3. Comprehensive software programmability is unleashed by connecting the amp's USB-C port to a computer running the Architect app. Two cab and mic setups can be selected from the options, and both the reverb character and effects loop fade-out time can be tailored to suit



In Use

The three-channel architecture of Clean, OD 1 and OD2 belies the wealth of options the Ruby has to offer. Let's begin naturally with the Clean channel, which is based on a Fender black-panel circuit, known for high headroom, sparkle and full bottom-end.

The Ruby certainly achieves the clarity and springy articulation, especially with a hearty measure of the onboard digital reverb. With its highly touch-sensitive and delicate tones (rare qualities in an ostensibly high-gain oriented amp), there's plenty to enjoy. The Clean channel's bass and treble controls offer some fairly

powerful tone-sculpting, too, taking us from glassy 80s brightness to jazzy warmth.

The digitally derived reverb has two rear-panel-switchable flavours, Light and Dark, allowing for either the longer, brighter, more Fender-like character or a shorter, darker, less obtrusive variant more suitable for overdriven tones. The reverb can be further tailored independently for both the Clean and OD channels using the rear-panel USB-C connection to the free Architect software editor.

Engaging the Voice switch transports us into chime-y, full-bodied Vox territory, bypassing the negative feedback circuit

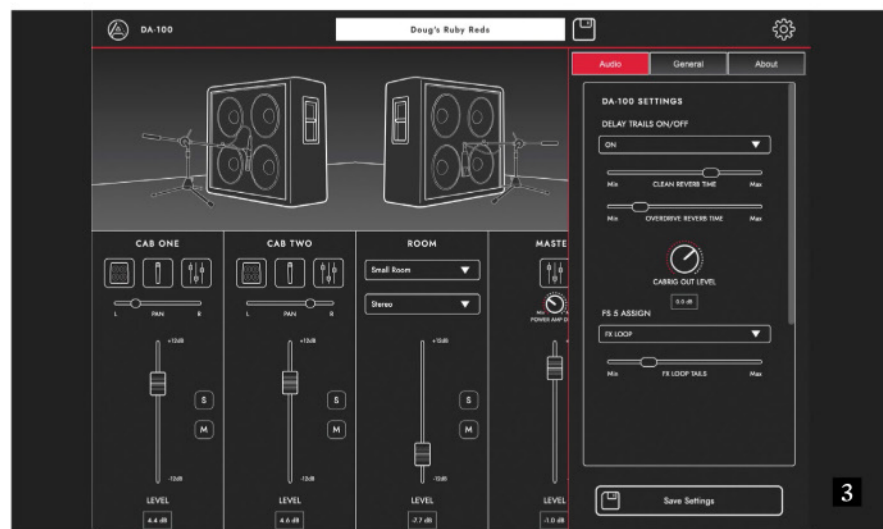
and relocating the position of the tone controls to a post-valve position. With the noticeably increased gain and lower mids enabled by this Voice switch, it's quite possible to achieve AC/DC levels of classic rock crunch with this channel alone.

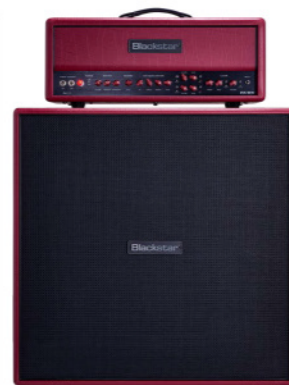
OD 1 progresses our gain journey into some chunky, Marshall-like crunch and sizzle. Simultaneously rich yet articulate, it shines when presented with 'buckers or single coils. The bottom-end is somewhat richer and fuller than that of a traditional Marshall-style circuit without flub or congestion. Quite a feat!

The bass response can be further enhanced by way of the master section's Resonance control. This channel has a slightly rounder, more traditional overdrive profile when compared with OD 2, but deploying this channel's Voice switch unleashes an extra level of modified-Marshall style overdrive.

We arrive in the final realm in gain with the OD 2 channel where harmonically rich slabs of chunky tone can sustain infinitely, though not at the expense of string separation. Single notes soar while pick harmonics leap out at the slightest invitation. Background noise is noticeably quieter than similar high-gain circuits.

All channels can be kicked up via the footswitch by 4dB, providing a solo boost function without changing the inherent tone. Speaking of the footswitch, a five-button black-metal type comes as standard,





BLACKSTAR DA100 RUBY

PRICE: £1,249

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: 3-channel valve head

VALVES: 2x ECC83, 4x EL34

OUTPUT: 100/10W

DIMENSIONS: 591(w) x 225 (d) x 245mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 17.5/38.5

CHANNELS: 3

CONTROLS: Clean Channel – Bass, Treble, Volume, Voice; OD 1 & OD 2 – Volume, Gain, Voice; OD EQ – Bass, Mid, Treble, ISF; Master section – Reverb, Resonance, Presence, Volume, Wattage Selector (100/10W)

FOOTSWITCH: 5-way included

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Boost and effects loop (foot-switchable). Programmable via USB-C and Architect software

OPTIONS: The matching DA412B (£1,199) 4x12 (as pictured) with MDF/birch-ply construction in matching Ruby Tolex is loaded with Celestion Vintage 30s

Blackstar Amps
www.blackstaramps.com



PROS Packed with well-implemented features; fantastic tones at all gain levels; computer-based tweakability via Architect software; surprisingly low price

CONS Alas it doesn't include Doug's hands!

allowing control of the channels as well as the boost and loop functions.

Both overdrives share an EQ section comprising bass, middle, treble and Blackstar's ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control that provides fine-tuning of the midrange response – the effectiveness of this control is heightened with lower midrange settings in the EQ section. The ISF control can take the tone from a UK 70s classic rock midrange character in its clockwise settings to a more carved-out, Sunset Strip 80s tone in the anti-clockwise settings. Clockwise settings also add some solid midrange to single-coil pickups.

Some impressive design and engineering can be found in the implementation of the software-tweakable parameters, again accessed via the rear-panel USB-C port and the free Architect software. By placing the amp in standby mode, it's possible to run silently while the IR outputs remain activated and can be edited in real-time using the application. Two virtual speaker channels can be assigned cabinets from a large range of profiles ranging 1x12 open-back vintage speakers to a large retinue of 4x12s. Mics can be selected on or off axis and blended to perfection.

A feature new to us is the effects loop fade-out, where delay tails can be tailored to fade out after switching off the loop, adding production-level finesse to changes. Three onboard IR profile options can be stored and selected via the three-

Even switched to 10-watt, the amp has volume and depth for home, rehearsal and studio scenarios

position IR switch and outputted via the rear panel's choice of XLR or jack. The amp even has built-in speaker protection to defend the transformers should a momentary aberration leave you running the amp without the speaker connected.

It would be remiss not to mention that the wattage can be switched from the full 100 watts down to a much more manageable 10 watts. Even at the 10-watt setting the amp has enough volume and depth for many home, rehearsal and studio scenarios.

Verdict

The sheer wealth of features present in this amp, from the channel variations to the advanced programmability, is astounding but equally impressive is the way they've been implemented in such an intuitive and guitarist-friendly manner. We're impressed to find the law of 'more knobs equals less tone' has been redrawn, and all three channels sound alive with responsiveness and fluidity.

It's an amp that represents a new benchmark for heavy guitar sounds at a relatively accessible price point. Another hit for Blackstar. **G**

FIRST PLAY



**STROMBERG HANOVER
STREET MONTEREY**
£1,999

WHAT IS IT? A semi-hollow,
centre-blocked 'jazz box'
with a vintage aesthetic and
contemporary features

Jazz & Beyond

Bringing a brand with a 100-year heritage back to life, Stromberg's Hanover Street Monterey combines traditional style with modern ease

Words Peter Emery **Photography** Phil Barker

It's no secret that a lot of us guitarists tend to have a bit of a penchant for instruments with a few years on them. Perhaps it's because of the tonal effect age has on wood, or maybe it's the specifics behind older construction methods, or the direct connection to the innovators of our instrument. But sometimes, it's just because they look cool. Whatever your reason, there is something fulfilling about owning a guitar with real heritage.

Equally, builders with that heritage can hold the same appeal, and Stromberg, with its USA origins dating back to the 1920s, certainly ticks that box. Starting out as a builder of banjos, the company soon pivoted to guitars as music and tastes began to change. Firmly aiming at the jazz market, this proved to be a good move with the likes of Count Basie's Freddie Green and Duke Ellington's Fred Guy adopting Stromberg's renowned archtop acoustics.

Sadly, following the passing of founder Charles Stromberg and son Elmer, the company ceased production in the 50s. But not forever. While there have been a couple of minor attempts to breathe life back into the name, now, 70 years later, Aurora Music Works is more seriously reviving the brand and introducing a







1. Adorned with a Gotoh bridge and tailpiece, the Stromberg pulls no punches when it comes to hardware. It's also available with a Wilkinson roller bridge and Bigsby vibrato

series of Czech Republic-made Hanover Street electric guitars – named after the Boston location of Stromberg's most famous workshop – one of which is our review model, the Monterey.

Looking at the specification, you'd be forgiven for making comparisons to a certain semi-hollow Gibson of the double cutaway variety (a double-cut is offered in this range as the Fremont), though clearly our Monterey is a single-cutaway

guitar, albeit with the same 406.4mm (16-inch) wide body and solid maple centre block. Not least with the quite busy headstock logo, multi-ply binding to the ebony fingerboard and its block inlays, the Monterey nods back to the guitars of the jazz age. The maple laminate construction shows off strongly figured veneers to the outside, and the twin f-holes are cleanly bound, too: a tidy job.

The Monterey moves further away from its 'jazz box' illusion with good-quality Gotoh hardware (a tune-o-matic style bridge and stud tailpiece) but again references a fancier style with the Kluson 'waffleback' tuners. Powering comes from a set of Cream T Hanover Street humbuckers, a variation of Cream T's existing Cream Of The Crop set, which have been slightly tweaked to suit the Stromberg, plus we have individual coil-splits accessed by the pull-switch volume controls.

Feel & Sounds

Enclosed within a sturdy case that already sets the bar high for its contents, the immediate impression of the Monterey is one of class. Our sample is lightly aged (you can go heavier or completely unaged, too), and although the actual relicing with a few cracks in the finish is tastefully done,

2. To relic or not to relic? No matter what side of the debate you fall on, the checking on the Stromberg Monterey is undeniably tasteful and brings some vintage class to a modern player

3. A fine case goes a long way to creating an impression of a high-end instrument, and Stromberg has pulled out the stops here: it's sturdily built with a striking metal embossed logo and classy green interior. Nice!

4. Cream T rightfully enjoys a well-earned reputation for great tones. Here, we have a tweaked version of its Cream Of The Crop pickups to create the Stromberg's Hanover Street humbuckers. Measured at output, the DCRs read 8.3kohms (bridge) and 6.98k (neck)





there are dings around the inside of the binding that look a little too severe to have come from general wear and tear.

But playability is more contemporary than the style suggests. With 20 flawlessly finished medium-jumbo frets that are combined with the 628mm (24.72-inch) scale length, 305mm (12-inch) fretboard radius and medium-low action, this guitar feels effortlessly smooth under the fingers. The neck profile, however, isn't dissimilar to Gibson's current 50s profile, slightly less rounded but a good handful, and it's a nicely in-tune guitar, too, with stable tuning as you'd expect at this price.

The body size, centre block and overall construction means the Monterey is no featherweight, and played seated it's quite a bulky proposition. Unplugged, though, there's reasonable acoustic projection, while into a clean amp the neck pickup's sound is jazzy-warm but with a bite that prevents it from becoming too woolly.

There's good contrast at the bridge with a characterful Patent Applied For honk that hits the 'old clean blues' mark nicely, while both pickups together have a real classic bounce and funk that's a cornerstone of so many styles. It's obviously very Gibson-esque; add some overdrive or switch to a crunchier amp voice and we're definitely into ES-335/Les



It's a classic setup with volume and tone for each pickup, and individual coil-splits to bring in some single-coil flavour. The palette of sounds available here is pretty vast and should satisfy even the most discerning of tone tweakers



STROMBERG HANOVER STREET MONTEREY

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Czech Republic

TYPE: Lightly aged, semi-hollow, centre-blocked electric

BODY: Laminate maple with figured maple over veneers; solid maple centre-block

NECK: Hard maple, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.72")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, m-o-p block inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 20, medium-jumbo

HARDWARE: Gotoh GE103B-T bridge and GE101Z stud tailpiece, Kluson 'waffleback' tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Cream T Hanover Street humbuckers, individual pickup volume (with pull-switch coil-splits) and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.7/8.2

OPTIONS: New or heavy-aged finish. Bigsby vibrato w/ Wilkinson roller-saddle bridge (£2,299)

RANGE OPTIONS: The Hanover Street range also includes the double-cut thinline Stromberg Fremont (£1,999; w/ Bigsby at £2,299), plus the deeper hollow-bodied single-cut Montreux and non-cutaway Newport (both £1,999)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Translucent Red, Translucent Honey, Black – light-aged nitrocellulose

Aurora Music Works

01695 338900

www.auroramusicworks.com



9/10

PROS Traditional looks with modern playability; buckets of sonic versatility; an excellent setup

CONS The relicing won't be for everyone; wiring needs a bit of tidying up

Paul territory with that vocal neck voicing playing well with the bridge's slight kick, bite and balanced clarity. Neither pickup sounds overly potted, either.

The coil-splits (which voice the slug coils of each humbucker) revoice the Monterey with a drop in output but more single-coil cut. Back to a clean amp and we lose some of the thickness and girth, but these are very usable sounds, and in combination with the individual volume and tone controls, they add considerable colour, not least to shade the dual-pickup mix: another stand-out sound here.

So, yes, the Monterey might appear to be just a jazz-style electric, but it's a lot more than that, with some big and more classic blues-rock voices and a centre-blocked

construction that can easily handle a band situation without any feedback issues.

An appreciated touch is the volume pots' relatively loose feel compared with the tone pots' reassuring resistance, making volume swells easy while keeping the tone adjustments accurate. Beneath those pots, though, the wiring is a little untidy on this test model and sits exposed within the f-hole, drawing the eye a little bit more than we would like.

Verdict

Stromberg, then, a name with a 100-year heritage, is clearly not afraid to add some modern touches to its new instruments. The combination of modernity and tradition is not at all jarring; instead, it's a rather absorbing experience.

The Monterey nods to the company's history, with a look that oozes traditional class, but pick it up and get stuck in and this old-school aesthetic is contrasted by a modern playability that is effortlessly smooth. And with its centre-blocked style and those Cream T 'buckers, it does a lot more than just clean jazz. The light ageing might not satisfy everyone, but the sounds and playing feel are much more believable. There's plenty of potential here. **G**

The combination of modernity and tradition from Stromberg is not at all jarring; it's a rather absorbing experience

Pure dodecadence?



The Twelve 660's profile is a minimalist 6.6mm. Accentuating its understated elegance is the absence of a date, second hand and luminescent paint. We re-engineered the bracelet. And re-sculpted the clasp, as the original would be taller than the new case. Yet the watch's distinctive DNA remains, in architectural elements like the dodecagon-sided bezel and lock ring. And glass-box sapphire crystals. The rear of which reveals the slim Sellita SW210 manual movement. Made slimmer still with a custom-designed, custom-made train bridge. In summary: same, different, less and more. Decadent design or perfected purity? You decide.

Do your research



christopherward.com



FIRST PLAY



KEELEY MANIS
£209

What is it? A versatile, evolved take on the Klon circuit that can adapt to your rig



Living Legend

Keeley's Manis is a Klon-type pedal with a twist, where you get the option of transistors or diodes

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln

1. The Ge Trans/Ge Diode switch selects between two clipping modes: germanium diodes for the standard Klon sound and germanium transistors for more compression and saturation
2. Holding the footswitch down for two seconds will toggle the pedal between true and buffered bypass – the LED will blink either twice or thrice to indicate which is active
3. If you'd like a little extra girth to the sound, this Bass+/Stock switch can bring in 3dB of low-end for enhanced bass response

Once a particular drive pedal has been established as an icon of guitar tone, it's inevitable that other manufacturers will spawn copies and evolved versions. While we're still witnessing new variations on the Tube Screamer and Bluesbreaker, it seems like the Klon Centaur has been in the ascendant these last few years, spawning the alliterative 'Klon Klone' as a whole new genre. Of course, an exact clone isn't necessarily what's on offer, bearing in mind the difficulty in matching precisely the so-called 'magic' diodes of an original. So what we have instead are variations on the theme, and the most interesting of those are the ones that can match the original sound but increase the versatility by adding new features. The Keeley Manis falls firmly into that latter camp with an inspired option of using transistors as an alternative to the stock clipping diodes.

Sporting the expected Tone, Level and Drive three-knob configuration, the Manis has a pair of two-way toggle switches for a total of four sonic combinations. One switches between the germanium diodes and transistors, while the other brings in a bass boost with an extra 3dB of low-end that adds girth to the sound and is a particularly potent resource if you'd like something a bit beefier from your single coils. Both switches down (diodes and no extra bass) is the setting for the sound of an original Klon and, to our ears, nails it. The Volume knob has loads in reserve if needed, but from about 10 o'clock and with a little on the Drive knob you find the signature cleanish boost with midrange enhancement that many will use this pedal for. Further advancement of the Drive knob yields some very natural open-sounding driven tones.

Switching to the transistor mode there's more of a valve-like feel as those driven tones become a little more saturated and compressed. This is very natural overdrive that's more squashy under the fingertips and lends itself to playing styles that would benefit from a richer sound.

Verdict

Robert Keeley has taken the basic Klon architecture and come up with something with much more versatility in a pedalboard-friendly package. There's that traditional Klon voice, but there's also another version with more gain in a pedal that has plenty of adaptability to various amp and guitar combinations. **G**



KEELEY MANIS

PRICE: £209

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Voltage-doubled hard clipping clean boost pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True/Buffered Bypass

CONTROLS: Tone, Drive Level, Bass+/Stock switch, Ge Trans/Ge Diode switch, bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor (not supplied) 15mA

DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 127 (d) x 67mm (h)

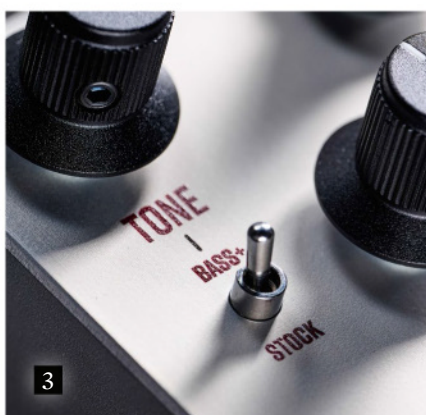
Audio Distribution Group
www.robertkeeley.com



10/10

PROS Compact size; accurate Klon sounds; transistor mode for more saturation; extra bass if needed

CONS Nothing



THE RIVALS

This is an evolution of the Klon design, so let's focus on the options with added flexibility over the original. The Wampler Tumnus Deluxe (£189) expands on the Klon feature set with a Hot switch for extra gain, and more detailed EQ adjustment with Bass, Mids and Treble knobs. The J Rockett Archer Select (£299) offers the ability to select seven diode clipping options with foot-switching between two of them, Ceriatone's Horse Breaker (£249) puts Klon and Bluesbreaker circuits in a single chassis, and don't forget you can still get the Klon KTR (£375) from the original manufacturer.



Ceriatone's Horse Breaker puts Klon and Bluesbreaker tones in one neat package

FIRST PLAY



DIAMOND BOOST/EQ
£215

WHAT IS IT? A pedal combining boost and EQ with a side order of drive



Shining Example

A practical pedalboard asset is the focus of our first look at a Diamond pedal since the brand's relaunch

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln

1. This Tilt EQ knob sets the overall spectral tilt pivoted around a fulcrum frequency of 800Hz. Clockwise raises high-end and cuts low; anti-clockwise raises low-end and cuts high
2. The centre-detented Mids knob cuts or boosts the midrange by up to 10dB around 800Hz. Turn it left to cut and right to boost
3. You can find clean boost in the up position of the Boost/OD switch. The down (OD) position adds in soft clipping diodes to create overdrive

Based in Canada, the original Diamond Pedals company launched in 2004 and is probably best known for its Memory Lane delay pedal. It closed down during the pandemic but is now back, having been revived by Greg Djerrahian of SolidGoldFX in 2023, and initially relaunching with five new pedals that built on the brand's original designs. The latest edition to the roster is the Boost/EQ, which revamps an older version of the pedal from circa 2007.

Two toggle-switched modes of operation are on offer here. You can use the pedal as a straight boost or you can flip the switch down to bring some soft clipping diodes into the equation for more driven tones. Two knobs adjust the EQ, both with neutral central notched detent positions. One knob is a tilt EQ that basically works like a seesaw, tipping to the right to raise high-end while cutting the low-end, or to the left for the opposite effect. The pivot point for this is the midrange frequency of 800Hz. Working at the same 800Hz frequency point, the other knob cuts or boosts the midrange by up to 10dB.

This two-knob array works really well as a simple system to quickly zero in your tone, with the Tilt taking you straight to your treble/bass balance and the Mid either scooping out some body or pushing through a mid-hump for more punch in the mix. It's a flexible facility that can encompass subtle enhancement and more radical shifts whether you're coaxing an amp into a preferred tonal zone, giving a drive pedal a different voicing, or dialling in a specifically targeted boost for solos.

In Boost mode, using the Level and Gain knobs together can deliver a massive amount of clean boost. There's 20dB available, which should easily cover all contingencies. In OD mode, the Gain knob turns up the drive. At zero, there's unity gain on the Level knob at about 11 o'clock, but with both Level and Gain a little higher you'll find 'clean boost with hair' that, combined with a little top-end Tilt, could be a useful always-on signal sweetener. Further travel on the Gain knob delivers some practical low-to-medium drive tones that can be voiced to taste with the EQ.

Verdict

The Diamond Boost/EQ is a supreme utility pedal capable of a host of practical applications in any signal chain. **A**



DIAMOND BOOST/EQ

PRICE: £215

ORIGIN: Canada

TYPE: Boost and EQ pedal

FEATURES: True Bypass, soft-touch relay switching

CONTROLS: Level, Gain Mids, Tilt, Boost/OD switch, bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor (not supplied) 18mA

DIMENSIONS: 67 (w) x 122 (d) x 58mm (h)

Audio Distribution Group
www.diamondpedals.com



PROS Compact size; boost and EQ in one pedal; easy-to-use two-knob EQ section; OD switch for extra grit

CONS OD Gain can be a little fizzy when turned up full



THE RIVALS

If you like the sound of the EQ of this pedal but would prefer to pair it with a compressor, Diamond's Comp/EQ (£229) has the same Mids and Tilt EQ with two optical compression modes. Elsewhere, Revv's Tilt Boost (£169) provides up to 20dB of boost with a Tilt EQ control and Drive and Tight switches, while the Electro-Harmonix LPB-3 Linear Power Booster (£119) features an active EQ with a parametric Mids control and up to 33dB of boost. For more outlay, there's the Empress Effects ParaEQ MKII Deluxe parametric EQ (£339), which features three fully parametric EQ bands with a separately footswitched boost.



Electro-Harmonix LPB-3
Linear Power Booster



the Wishlist

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

Giordano Tribute 58 €5,600

Giordano Guitars EMAIL giordanonicholas35@gmail.com WEB [instagram.com/_giordanoguitars_](https://www.instagram.com/_giordanoguitars_) WORDS Dave Burrluck PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Barker

Based in the Motor Valley region of Northern Italy, 29-year-old Nicolas Giordano has been building guitars professionally for five years, although he made his first instrument when he was 15. "I'm surrounded by car manufacturers – Ferrari, Lamborghini and so on. It's been like that since the 30s, so there's a big history of manufacturing here. It's where I'm from as well.

"I've always been passionate and at times obsessed by vintage guitars," he continues. "I wanted to be able to replicate all the details and the feel of vintage guitars. I did start by building replicas. I think that's quite common for people building vintage-inspired guitars because, at first; you really have to understand the history behind you. There is no point in changing a formula unless you've found what's not working. Les Pauls are, of course, perfect guitars – there is no need to change anything because they made history that way. But from my own perspective and point of view, I wanted to make a few changes, but those are based on aesthetics. Basically, a Tribute is a vintage Les Paul with a different shape. I wanted to have my own recipe, you know?

"Of the Tribute you have there, which I built in 2023, all the specs have been taken from a '59 – the neck

shape, the thickness of the body, the carve of the maple top, the scale length. So let's say it's based on a '57 to 1960 Les Paul."

Shape aside, the illusion of age is remarkable and it's not just the worn and cracked nitrocellulose finish. "I mix my own unplasticised lacquer – a component of the lacquer that keeps it elastic and can follow the wood movement without actually cracking – and you get, in my opinion, those beautiful lines. That's what I wanted to recreate. It took a lot of research, a lot of trial and error, and I'm still trying new things in order to get the result I'm looking for. It is a learning process."

With one assistant, Nicolas builds around 50 instruments a year, in numerous styles including his latest Veloce, with a wait time of around eight to 10 months.

At 3.67kg (8.1lbs), this Tribute is a beautiful weight with not only a big neck but a big rich voice, too, that instantly recalls the guitars it's based on. The bridge pickup sounds almost underwound and seems the better for it, while the neck humbucker is very well matched, output-wise, with that typical tonal contrast that's so much a part of the classic recipe. Vintage values with a unique style? Here's a maker on the rise. **G**

1. This headstock on this clever redesign of a classic has an inlaid Giordano logo and faded Tribute Model decal, while old-looking tuners are joined by a perfectly cut 6/6 nylon nut (although Nicolas prefers and typically uses bone)

2. The thinly bound Madagascar rosewood fingerboard features celluloid nitrate inlays and very well-fretted Dunlop 6105 frets

3. Wherever possible, Giordano follows the 'Burst recipe. Both the back and neck are one-piece stock, and the neck profile is that large rounded handfl (42.6mm at the nut, depth of 22.75mm at 1st fret, 25.7mm by the 12th). "I usually do rather chunky necks," he says



4. "The good thing about not building replicas is that I'm free to use any kind of wood I want to," says Nicolas. "Obviously being inspired by Gibsons from the 50s, I stick to mahogany. But for the bodies of my guitars, instead of South American mahogany, which was used in the 50s, I use African mahogany – which is not actually a mahogany. It tends to be lighter and there is more choice because it's more abundant than South American mahogany, which I do use for my necks. Also, it tends to be more mid-pronounced, sound-wise, which helps it stand out in a mix."

5. Nicolas uses Stuart Robson's Sunbear pickups exclusively. The 58 Archive SB-PAF humbucker set graces this Tributo, inspired by "friend and *Guitarist* magazine contributor Bob Wootton's own wonderful 'Burst! [The bridge pickup] is one of the best I've played," says Stuart. Its replica is spec'd with an Alnico II magnet and has a DCR of approximately 8.1kohms: "Turns per layer, coil build/shape, internal coil start lengths, coil offsets, low-carbon steel parts and so on are all taken into account," he adds. The neck pickup uses Alnico III with a DCR closer to 7.4k





Gas Supply

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

PRS S2 Mira 594 From £1,699

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

JARGON CRUNCHING 594

PRS's '594' refers to the 24.594-inch scale length of guitars bearing this name. But what is its significance? Well, 24.594 inches is actually the measurement of many-a-vintage Gibson guitar. So, by adopting this measurement, PRS is aiming to offer a 'true vintage' feel from these models. In metric, it's a much simpler 625mm, shorter than PRS's standard scale of 635mm.

Mira, Mira, on the wall...

"What is the most affordable US-made guitar to come from Paul?" Funny you should ask, actually. Because it's this one. PRS has been on a relentless quest to ply us with new releases every month in its 40th anniversary year, and the start of autumn sees it reflecting (we'll stop now) on a model that has been absent for some years.

Yeah, I remember this - and it's affordable, you say?

Well, that's all relative, but we'll get to that in a mo. The Mira is back as the S2 Mira 594, which, as we all know, is PRS-speak for its 24.594-inch (625mm) scale length. It's pushing this as a blue-collar model - one that shotguns a beer, lights up and plants its flag in the turf of rock, blues, garage and punk.

I'm not sure dentists are allowed a mohawk - or to smoke and drink at work for that matter!

Now, now. That's enough of the ribbing, and let's not forget that the most famous punk band of all time was propelled by Gibson's 'Tuxedo' model (more on that below). What we're saying is this is likely about as close

as we're going to get to the 'anti-PRS', and, frankly, we're all for it. It's available in two nitro finish types: Satin and High-Gloss, with the former priced at £1,699 and the latter at £1,999, where its current Satin-finished S2 Standard siblings begin.

The Satin looks like a textured finish, what's going on there?

PRS calls it a 'Sinky' finish due to the open-pore of the wood not being filled prior to the paint going on. It's the same principle we've seen from plenty of manufacturers before, and has been increasingly popular in recent years as a way of removing manufacturing processes (and therefore production costs) from guitars while still providing a decent finish.

You have my attention. What's the deal?

Regardless of which finish type you go for (there are six colours available in both the High-Gloss and Satin models), the ingredients are the same. It's a one-piece 43mm thick mahogany body with an asymmetrical top carve, paired with a Pattern Thin mahogany 'scarfed' neck and rosewood fingerboard.

SATIN OR GLOSS

The new High-Gloss-finished Mira 594 comes in six colours (Antique White, Black, Black Rainbow Holoflake, Dark Cherry Sunburst, Platinum Metallic and Vintage Cherry), as does the Mira 594 Satin (Cloud Burst, Matcha Green, Mavis Mint Metallic, Metallic Midnight, Dark Cherry Sunburst and Red Apple Metallic)

ELECTRONICS

No frills' isn't really in the PRS lexicon, but this is designed to be a workhorse model. That doesn't mean features are overlooked, though. Both models have 58/15 LT humbuckers and mini-toggles for splitting the coils independently voicing the slug coils - the reason the neck pickup is flipped





There are six finishes to choose from in both the High-Gloss and Satin ranges

Sounds straightforward, but I'm seeing toggle switches...

Yes, those are for applying coil-splits to the humbuckers, which in this case are the USA 58/15 LT pickups, the same found in the S2 Standard and other McCarty 594 models. In combination with the three-way pickup selector, you get a total of eight possible voicings from the guitar.

What about the hardware?

There are no big surprises on the hardware front here, just the tried-and-true PRS formula we're used to. The bridge is a combined compensated PRS Stoptail with brass inserts with PRS's wraparound design and two brass studs to keep it in place. At the other end, you'll find PRS's Phase III non-locking tuners with cream 'wing' buttons.

It's still got the PRS birds, though!

What did you expect, a punk flock? So, yes, the birds are present and correct. Each guitar ships with a PRS Premium gigbag, too, and these will be, er, winging their way to dealers by the time you read this. [SW]

PRS HARDWARE

Continuing the theme of 'understated but still high-spec', both Mira models are equipped with PRS hardware, faux-bone bound rosewood fingerboards and, of course, old-school bird inlays

MIRA SHAPE

The Mira first appeared back in 2007, various versions followed, and the stripped-back style formed the basis of the S2 line, which launched in 2013. An SE version came next, but that was suspended by 2023. Now, it's back, equipped with the PRS '594' scale length



ALSO OUT NOW...

NEWMAN TORN AND FRAYED FROM £3,299

"Just a dead beat right off the street" goes the first verse of The Stones' song. And that's sort of what we're looking at here from Newman Guitars. The Butterscotch Blonde heavy-aged nitro finish shouts 'Keef', but the body shape could nearly scream 'Kurt'. It's a slab of obeche, tooled up with a Cream T Banger & Mash humbucker – two T-style neck pickups combined, designed specifically at the request of Mr Richards himself and fitted to his 'Gloria' Tele – in the neck position, alongside the new Cream T Mint T at the bridge. The maple neck is fitted with a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale maple fingerboard and 24 Jescar frets, while the bridge and tuners both come courtesy of Gotoh. We'll be checking one out shortly, just as long as the guitar plays...

www.newmanguitars.com



GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM 70s £3,499

At the time of writing, there are no less than 214 Les Paul models in the Gibson USA line-up. But here's a shocker: not a single one of them is a Les Paul Custom. That's about to change, though, because for the first time in 20 years, the Les Paul Custom has rejoined the Gibson USA range. Based on the revived 1970s guitars that Gibson started making in Nashville after shifting from Kalamazoo, the Les Paul Custom 70s features the same design tweaks as when the brand brought back the model for the first time, with a three-piece maple top, maple neck and a 70s neck profile including a volute. There's binding-a-plenty, with a five-ply scratchplate and the entire outline highlighted and, of course, we get that all-important 'Split Diamond' on the headstock. The pickups are T-Types and the new model comes in a choice of Ebony, Wine Red, Buttercream Top and Tobacco Burst finishes.

www.gibson.com





Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Nicolas Meier

Album: *Last Sunset* (MGP Records)



Last Sunset by Nicolas Meier brings together influences far and wide from rock and jazz to Indian classical
www.meiergroup.com

Not many guitar players can say they were personally recruited by Jeff Beck to join his band for a world tour. But, in the case of Nicolas Meier, UK-based musician, the invitation is hardly surprising as this Swiss-born, UK-based musician has such a unique talent and sound.

This year Nicolas is releasing *Last Sunset*, a collection of songs inspired by his experiences and memories working alongside the much-missed guitar hero. On tracks such as *Plan 9*, *Strange Sensations* and *Bosphorus*, it's easy to gauge what a profound effect Beck had on him, with the tracks also mixing together elements of instrumental rock, jazz and world music into one breathtaking package.

Freeway Jam

It was by pure chance that Nicolas joined Beck's band. Nicolas was performing at Ronnie Scott's in London and the jazz-rock pioneer happened to be in attendance. "We met after the show and I could see he was interested in my influences," says Nicolas. "I was using nylon strings and fretless. He liked the music because it was a different approach to harmony. The more I got to know him, the more I could tell he was interested in [different] sounds, from Indian classical to Middle Eastern. That's what made him Jeff Beck. He would learn things then do it his way."

Blow By Blow

The opportunity to play some of Beck's most impactful instrumental guitar pieces is something Nicolas has never taken for granted. "I loved playing *The Pump*. It

has this lovely groove underneath Jeff's wonderful touch. My favourite track to play was *Where Were You*, because of Jeff's harmonics and the sound he created with the whammy bar. I would play the chords underneath on a synth guitar, which was a challenge because a lot can go wrong. It took a lot of concentration. Another favourite was the Charles Mingus cover *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, which would lead into *Brush With The Blues*. It's hard to pick because Jeff had 60 years of great music!"

International Influences

There are many stand-out guitar moments on *Last Sunset*, but Nicolas points to *Yemin* as one that holds great importance for his life and career. "Jeff saw me perform that track, which led to him becoming interested in [my playing]," says the guitarist. "It was written in Turkey, so it has that influence mixed with fusion and rock. The melody is strong and there's a crescendo before the chorus. Then it calms down and there's space for improvisation in G. It's not minor or major, you can do whatever you like with it, from Western or Indian or just stick to the blues."

Over The Rainbow

As its name would suggest, the final track on the album, *The Eye Of Horus*, has a North African twist. "I was thinking of Egypt and being around the pyramids," says Meier. "It needed a rock riff and then some of the melodies go towards that part of the world, before getting into more crazy fusion. Jeff and I worked on that track together. I remember we were on the top floor of his house playing really loud while his wife Sandra was dancing. We even ended up playing it live a few times."

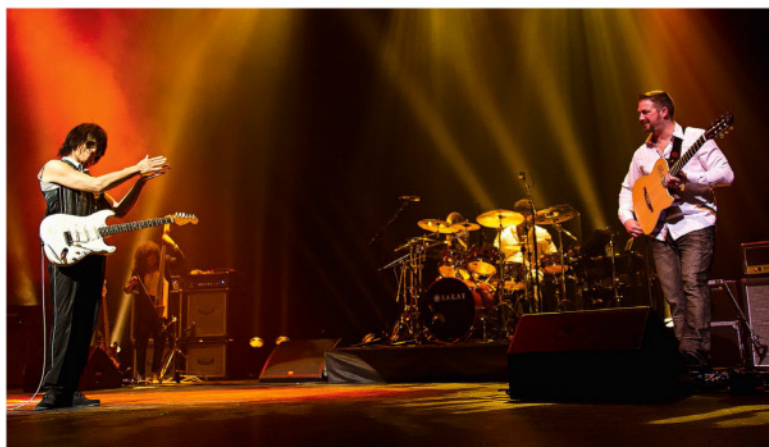
Guitar Shop

"For the acoustic parts, I used my Godin nylon-string and 12-string to make a nice carpet," reveals Nicolas. "I also used a Godin synth guitar. The leads were done on my 2014 Ernie Ball Music Man John Petrucci signature. I usually run two Fender Bassbreaker amps for a stereo sound. People seem to enjoy the extra dimension to the chorus and delay with that kind of rig. My main overdrive is the Analog Man King Of Tone and I used the Electro-Harmonix Pitch Fork on *Plan 9* and their Attack Decay tape reverse simulator on *Bosphorus*." [AS]

Standout track: *Yemin*

For fans of: Jeff Beck, Andy Timmons, Steve Vai

The mutual appreciation between Nicolas (right) and Jeff Beck ran deep



“Getting into Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin and Paco de Lucía was a big moment for me”

Nicolas Meier

WIRED

Nicolas Meier on the other guitarists who inspired his sound

“Getting into Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin and Paco de Lucía was a big moment for me. I loved hearing Al’s tango compositions combined with his incredible picking. Paco was using flamenco harmony but improvising like a jazz guy. John had this trio with Trilok Gurtu and Jeff Berlin who knew how to explore the line between jazz and rock, using Indian-style harmony. Around then, I met my wife who is Turkish and started listening to fretless players like Cenk Erdoğan and Erkan Oğur.”



Albums

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

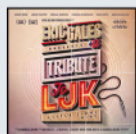
Eric enlists an A-list line-up in honour of his late brother on *Tribute To LJK*

PHOTO BY JIM ARBOGAST



Eric Gales Tribute To LJK

Provogue Records (available 24 October)



Outstanding playing on guitar master's touching tribute to his brother

A new album from Eric Gales is always something to celebrate, but *Tribute To LJK* has a shadow of sadness cast over it as it forms a tribute to Gales' older brother

who died in 2002. "This record has been a long time coming," Eric tells us. "I wanted it to be the ultimate tribute to my late brother, Little Jimmy King, to keep his memory alive... All of these songs, except one, are his originals. I wanted to deliver his tunes to the world through my eyes. And I wanted it to be badass!"

The badass factor is certainly set to stun as Eric delivers a masterclass in modern blues-guitar playing. Over the course of 10 tracks, he mixes the genre's glorious past into an intoxicating cocktail with influences from Albert King to Jimi Hendrix and SRV blasting from the speakers. He didn't undertake this powerful tribute single-handedly, either, as the guestlist is a who's who of immense talent, including Joe Bonamassa, Buddy Guy, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram and Josh Smith. And with a line-up like that, you can hardly miss. In fact, there is so much amazing playing on display here, it's difficult to pick out highlights. But tracks such as *Don't Wanna Go Home* (featuring Bonamassa) dive so deeply into rollercoaster virtuoso territory the listener is left at once stunned and delighted. *Something Inside Of Me* is another tour de force, while Buddy Guy's playing on album closer, *Somebody*, is simply sublime. Just... wow! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Something Inside Of Me*

For fans of: Joe Bonamassa, SRV, Buddy Guy

Manzanera Mackay

AM PM Soho Live

Expression Records (available now)



Immersive, explorative live grooves from Roxy Music stalwarts

In an era obsessed with ruthlessly efficient pop, it's a real pleasure to find music that explores broad landscapes of sound, avoiding well-trodden paths in favour of a long walk in the wilds of improvisation. Such is *AM PM* by original Roxy Music members Phil Manzanera (guitar), Andy Mackay (sax) and drummer Paul Thompson. Recorded at three gigs in a screening theatre in Soho in 2024, this absorbing set of immersive grooves, over which Mackay's sax floats like a mysterious ribbon of sound, is one to enjoy when you're in the mood to be transported far away from the clatter and hustle of everyday life. Manzanera's guitar provides just the right amount of edge and urgency on tracks such as *Blue Skies* – the slow, steady pulse of the beat providing a broad canvas to paint sound upon. Opener *Ambulante* leans more into ambient textures, drawing the listener in through veils of ethereal sound. We're also treated to a synth-propelled reworking of *Love Is The Drug* that's more cyberpunk than 70s. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Ambulante*

For fans of: Roxy Music, Gong, Jah Wobble

Beat

Beat Live

Inside Out Music (available 26 September)

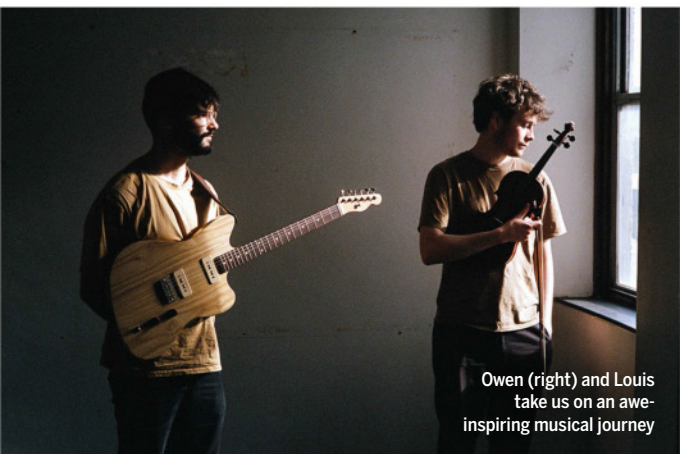


1980s King Crimson celebrated by all-star line-up

Take two former members of King Crimson, add Tool's drummer and the incomparable Steve Vai and simmer gently on an extensive US tour. Then decant the results into a double-CD package... and here we are, with *Beat Live*. Now, it takes a brave band to tackle Crimson's material, but with Adrian Belew and Tony Levin as aural anchor points on effects-jamboree guitar, vocals and bass/Chapman Stick respectively, you're more than halfway home in summoning up the spirit of 80s Crim. Danny Carey is possibly the only musician who could take over Bill Bruford's drum stool, but how does Vai fare with Fripp's enigmatic guitar parts? You know what, he does a sterling job with a mix of faithful reproduction and the occasional diversion into the sonic vocabulary that is all his own. Excellent. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Frame By Frame*

For fans of: King Crimson, Steve Vai



Owen (right) and Louis take us on an awe-inspiring musical journey

PHOTO BY LARA LAE/RENEZ

Spafford Campbell

Tomorrow Held

Real World (available now)



Deep-folk duo produce something truly different

Every so often an album comes along that stands out as being truly original in both concept and execution. Violinist

Owen Spafford and guitarist Louis Campbell, both conservatoire-trained musicians, have combined their talents to produce an album that almost escapes definition in terms of genre. Folky, minimalist, ambient, with the occasional musical glance in the direction of jazz and classical music, *Tomorrow Held* is a mesmerising journey into a musical landscape all the duo's own. Guitarist Campbell has a thoroughbred CV, having played in Martin Simpson's touring band as well as accompanying folkies like Sam Sweeney and Sam Lee. Tracks move between the wistful and melodic *All Your Tiny Bones* to the meandering and hypnotic 26. The guitar work is decorative and atmospheric, beautifully sculptured and always in service of the melodicism of Spafford's fiddle. The duo tours the UK this autumn. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Tomorrow Held*

For fans of: The Breath, Eliza Marshall

10 Years After

SSSSH

Chrysalis Records (available 31 October)



Stove-hot British blues freshly polished up and as exciting as ever

Hot on the heels of our recent interview with the affable Leo Lyons, the bassist with Ten Years After in their peak late-60s

years, comes this very welcome boxset treatment of their seminal 1969 album, *Ssssh*. Comprising three discs, the first features the album as it was originally recorded and mixed on an eight-track desk, the second features Charlie Russell's present-day remix – revealing fresh nuance and detail – while the third showcases a rollicking live performance recorded in Helsinki in 1969. The overall effect is absorbing and exciting in equal measure, as TYA stride through propulsive, prog-tinged numbers such as *The Stomp* and lazier, bluesier grooves such as *Two Time Mama*. The 2025 mix is well worth it, making the whole picture clearer – like looking through a recently cleaned window. The live disc, meanwhile, reveals the raw energy of Alvin Lee's improvisational playing in fine style. **[JD]**

Standout track: *I Can't Keep From Crying Sometimes*

For fans of: John Mayall, early Fleetwood Mac



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Tones Behind The Tracks

A residential studio experience with its access to vintage kit has shifted gears for **Robert Jon & The Wreck** on their latest release

Artist: Robert Jon & The Wreck

Album: Heartbreaks & Last Goodbyes (Journeyman Records)



For *Heartbreaks & Last Goodbyes*, the band booked into producer Dave Cobb's residential studio in Savannah, Georgia

If you've never heard Robert Jon & The Wreck in action, then imagining the boogie of ZZ Top combined with the Southern twang of Lynyrd Skynyrd would be a good place to start. Renowned for impactful live performances, the band have gone from strength to strength in recent years – and being signed to Joe Bonamassa's Journeyman record label has guaranteed them their rightful share of the limelight.

For the new album, they booked themselves into producer Dave Cobb's residential studio in Savannah, Georgia, in order to live and breathe the music they were creating. We rounded up the band's guitarists – rhythm ace and vocalist Robert Jon Burrison and Epiphone Firebird and Gibson SG Special-toting lead player Henry James Schneekluth – to find out more.

How did the experience of recording at a residential studio work out for the band?

Henry James Schneekluth: "It definitely makes things feel a bit more homey. And I think having the studio and the living quarters together brought cohesiveness. If I had a random idea or whatever, it's like, the guitars are right there, you know? I didn't have to wait to go to the studio and plug anything in to hear what I wanted to do."

Robert Jon Burrison: "The nice part about being out there together is that we were fully immersed in the record. You know, if we had an idea at night, the studio's

downstairs. We didn't have anything other than the record to focus on, which I think was a great way to do it. If I could do it like that again, I would."

Did you write in the studio or go in with the songs fully prepared?

Robert Jon: "We did a lot of writing in the studio and we changed a lot of stuff around, too; that's kind of how Dave Cobb does things. We came in with some songs we had fleshed out already and even those changed a lot, too. We were writing lyrics at night, upstairs. It was just like this machine that was working all around the clock every day. It was great."

Henry James: "Every song was so unique, so there were no two songs that were exactly the same as far as process goes. Maybe one or two of them were more or less accurate to what we had been working on, and then when we got to the studio, it was pretty much like 'cut and paste'."

Do you think this is an avenue you'd like to explore again, maybe for the next album?

Henry James: "Yeah. I've actually done this a couple times before with previous bands, where we either set up a studio in a house or rented somewhere where it was like a home studio setup. So it's not unfamiliar to me and I definitely enjoy it. It definitely makes things much easier."

What gear did you take into the studio?

Robert Jon: "I used my Eastman Juliet. In the past, I've taken in a handful of other guitars, just to give all the guitars some love. I have an Epiphone Sheraton, too; that is just a workhorse. I put TV Jones pickups in it and it sounds great. It's just not very versatile when it comes to touring around the world. But on this one we mostly had just our road gear with us."

Henry James: "I was very excited to bring my own signature model into the studio, which I have with Eastman guitars. It's a Juliet – Robert also plays a Juliet, but this one is the Henry James Signature Juliet – and it's got mini-humbuckers, just like a Firebird, and a Bigsby-style vibrola tailpiece. That made its way on just as many tracks as my Firebird. Those were the main two guitars that I brought into the studio. Aside from that, I used a lot of Dave's gear. He has a ton of vintage guitars and Gibson Custom Shop stuff and vintage Fenders, and so it was those two guitars and a lot of Dave's stuff."

Vocalist Robert Jon Burrison (right) plays an Eastman Juliet and Henry James fires up his 2016 Gibson SG Special



"Every song was so unique, no two songs were exactly the same as far as process goes"

HENRY JAMES



Did you take your own amps into the studio or use the ones Dave Cobb had to hand?

Henry James: "Yeah, a lot of Dave's amps and things like that. I also brought some of my own pedals, but, really, most of the tones on the record were the guitar straight into the amp. I mean, there's really very few tracks on the record that aren't just a guitar straight into an amp, or maybe with a boost or a fuzz on it, and then there's occasionally a wah-wah. On the title track, we actually had a '64 Fender Strat and figured out how to rig it into an actual Leslie speaker. That kind of Beatles, Clapton-y sort of sound was very cool."

Robert Jon: "We had, like, an amp village in another room with every amp, I mean, every amp, that they had at the studio, plus our amps. And we were just trying out which one made the most sense on whatever track. So I couldn't tell you exactly which amps were used more. I have a Vox AC15 that I usually bring into everything, and it's my standard go-to option unless we're looking for something completely different."

So, Robert, with the Vox AC15 amp, were you channeling that Jimmy Page 'small amp, massive sound' approach?

Robert Jon: "Yeah, yeah. I mean, it breaks up a lot quicker than even an AC30 and nowadays, with the way mics and the PAs work, usually the sound guys don't want you to be too loud on stage because they want to be able to control it a little bit more. So it's always worked for me live and in the studio, too."

Do you also go for smaller amps in the studio, Henry?

Henry James: "Yeah, I tend to lean towards smaller amps in the studio, too. Tend to size it down. I don't like to use anything bigger than a single 12-inch speaker [cab] in the studio. Maybe occasionally I'll run a 2x12, but, yeah, I just use small amps. I have a couple of Supros that I record with that have just one 10-inch speaker. And those are the amps that I tour with in the States. They make wonderful recording amps when you

Henry James (left) has modified his Epiphone Firebird with a Graph Tech bridge, a Duesenberg tailpiece and a pair of Seymour Duncan mini-humbuckers



turn them up as well. And then I've also got a vintage National amp that's got two eight-inch speakers in it, and it records amazingly well. There was this low-wattage Marshall head, the Lead And Bass 20-watt model, and apparently it had been modded by Dumble, from what [Dave] was telling me. I plugged that into one of my single 12 cabs, put a mic on it and it just sounded incredible. And that is on a lot of the lead guitar tracks on the album, a lot of the solos use that. Then Dave also had this little Benson combo amp – it couldn't have been more than five watts – and that was on quite a few things as well."

Did you use pedals in the studio?

Robert Jon: "I use them live, but not in the studio. You know, being a rhythm player, you need to have that solid rhythm in the back and then, if we need to overdub any of the fun stuff, we'll just play around with what pedals Henry brought. But live, I use a Fulltone Full Drive, just for a little more crunch, a tuner, and then a MXR Micro

"Playing live is where it's at for me. That's everything. But everyone's different, everyone has their own love of the game" *ROBERT JON BURRISON*

Robert Jon (top right) and Henry James (below) play live aboard ship on Joe Bonamassa's Keeping The Blues Alive At Sea cruise

[Amp] Boost. And that's my entire pedalboard. I just use the boost when I need it."

Henry James: "I'm always kind of tweaking. At the moment I have a Silktone Fuzz+, and I've got a couple of pedals from this brand called Isle Of Tone that are really, really great. And then for my wah pedal, I've been using the Xotic XW-1 for years. It just does the Clyde McCoy, Hendrix-y thing, really, really well."



PHOTO BY DENIS CARPENTIER

Do you find that songs that you've written evolve when you play them live?

Robert Jon: "Oh yeah. And we let them evolve, you know? We let them breathe a little bit. When you're in the studio, you're in the studio; you're hoping that it sounds good. But when you play them live, you actually get to feel a response from people and you can feel like, 'Well, let's let that solo move a little bit more. Let's take our time.' Or, 'Let's let the ending ramp up into something completely different.'"

Some players say they enjoy the studio experience, while others say it's just the live experience that does it for them. Which side do you both lean towards?

Henry James: "I think because we tour so much, it gets to a point where the live thing wears itself out after a certain point. Not that I don't love doing it, but I think every studio experience is very unique, and I think it's taught me to really savour that moment of the creative process and really live in the moment with the music and the creation of it. I've found as time has gone on, I've gotten a lot of satisfaction out of creating, so at this exact moment I would actually say I lean slightly more towards the studio."

Robert Jon: "Playing live is where it's at for me. That's everything. But everyone's different, everyone has their own love of the game, and that's why I think Covid was a whole different world because we weren't playing live. We were just like, 'Well, we can take this time to write...' And I'm like, 'But why? We can't go play live.' Playing live is definitely where my joy comes from." **[DM]**



PHOTO BY DENIS CARPENTIER



Robert Jon & The Wreck's new album, *Heartbreaks & Last Goodbyes*, is out now on Joe Bonamassa's Journeyman Records. UK tour: 14 to 19 April 2026 www.robertjonandthewreck.com

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Big Apple Pie

Neville Marten recalls a once-in-a-lifetime trip to New York featuring a missed encounter, a magical gig and a whole bunch of Clapton photos

I may have mentioned this before, but recently I was recalling a moment that, had I not worked for *Guitarist*, could never have happened. In 1999, when Eric Clapton sold 100 guitars to raise money for his Crossroads charity, David Mead and I were entrusted by Christie's auction house in London to verify the instruments for the sale catalogue. To undertake this we would fly to New York to see our late friend Virginia Lohle at her Star File photo agency. We were also invited to the auction house in London to

"We marvelled at how this 55-year-old guy exuded so much power and confidence. We had witnessed a magical experience"

peruse some of the sale guitars. As two EC acolytes, this was a massive privilege. However, to our equal shame and delight – and like two naughty kids – David and I couldn't resist playing Layla on 'Brownie', the 1956 sunburst Strat on which Eric had recorded his signature song.

Back in New York, over two long days we sifted through hundreds of photos. The purpose was to match the identity of the guitars Eric was playing so the pictures could be used as catalogue shots for

the instruments going into the sale. Luckily, we also had another couple of less arduous things to do. First, David had arranged to interview Jennifer Batten at the Waldorf, plus she'd invited us to see her playing in Jeff Beck's band at New York's infamous Roseland Ballroom. It was all quite a buzz for two young(ish) Essex boys.

Walking through the Waldorf's plush bar on the way to the elevators, we spotted a scruffy-looking guy with a huge beard and beanie hat; he was sitting on a stool in the corner, nursing a drink. We commented on why a salubrious establishment like this would allow such a character to take up residence in its bar. After ascending lord knows how many floors we arrived at Jennifer's door. She opened it excitedly: "Wow, guys. Did you see Billy Gibbons downstairs in the bar?" Whoops! You won't be surprised to hear that these two experienced guitar journalists elected not to reveal how we'd failed to recognise the legendary ZZ Top six-stringer. Sorry, Billy!

Beck, Batten, Brownie

The Jeff Beck gig was amazing. We knew of the Roseland Ballroom, which was infamous for its 80s disco nights when two people were shot in and around the venue at separate times. Thankfully, there was no such trouble on the night we attended. Instead, we enjoyed privileged views from the private balcony upstairs. Jeff was incredible, as always, but Jennifer – using a Roland GI-10 MIDI converter, Akai samplers and a Roland JV-1080 sound module – created flawless and incredibly complex keyboard sounds. Jeff was clearly impressed, too. David and I marvelled at how this 55-year-old (!) guy exuded so much power and confidence in his performance. We had witnessed a wholly magical experience.

The subsequent article in *Guitarist* stretched to many pages. Apparently, Eric approved, so asked to see me at the auction preview in London. His assistant said I was to talk to him at such and such a time and place, where he duly came over and thanked me for what we'd done. A huge fan since the *Beano* days, you'd think I would have so much to say. But no, I was stumped. I didn't want to enter 'interview mode' or turn into gibbering fanboy, so I spluttered a few inanities and said my goodbyes.

'Brownie' sold at Christie's in 1999 for \$497,500. The guitar has been on view to the public at Seattle's MoPOP (Museum Of Pop Culture), but David and I often muse about how we had our little moment with it, too. And we got to see Jeff Beck in New York. Those sure were the days!

What's the most famous guitar you've ever played? Do let us know. **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Junior's Wailing

What? 2021 Gibson SG Junior **Where seen?** www.reverb.com/uk **Price?** £1,199

Looking through the 1999 sale guitars I stumbled upon a 1962 Gibson SG Junior. Estimated at £3,000 to £5,000, it eventually fetched £34,500. This one on Reverb is rather more attainable but still effortlessly cool. With its all-mahogany construction save for the dotted rosewood fingerboard, its neck joins the body at the final fret so access is total, and one powerful P-90 pickup is all you need to extract the finest tones. The simple wrapover bridge adds its own contribution to the sound, while the swirly pickguard adds to the charming whole. And if a Junior was good enough for Eric, what are you waiting for?



This slick 2021 SG Junior oozes charm in sound and looks



Trust The Process

Alex Bishop begins three new guitar builds, guided by a lesson drawn from playing the instrument itself

In lutherie, finishing a project is always a big moment. In my case I'm normally building guitars for other people, and it's not so much about satisfying myself as it is about making sure the client is happy. I've always found that moment of unveiling a customer's guitar for the first time quite excruciating, and the big sigh of relief only happens once they have left the workshop with their treasured new axe and a big grin on their face.

By the time the sawdust has settled, though, I'm always grateful to greet the exciting new projects coming over the horizon. And, in this case, there are not one but three instruments to start planning. But where to begin?

Think Ahead

I always start with a good plan. An easy win for the beginner luthier is simply to buy guitar plans online. These days most drawings are sufficiently detailed and there are lots of options, but not everyone wants to build from someone else's design (myself included!). I prefer to draw up my guitars on the computer in 2D, which, while time consuming, also provides a hidden benefit: the very process of bringing different components together on the screen is the closest you can get to understanding guitar construction without actually touching a piece of wood.

Two of my new builds – Gypsy jazz guitars – are familiar to me, but the other is a variant on a new electric guitar design that I started building last year. It's sufficiently different to demand a new plan drawing, but superficial appointments such as binding and purfling schemes, inlay designs and even pickups don't need to be pinned down right now. What does need pinning down are the fundamental components of guitar design: scale length, neck dimensions and body shape. By incorporating the right hardware (particularly the bridge) into the drawing, the neck angle can also be established at this stage. This is a crucial step in understanding the process as getting it wrong can cause a lot of grief much further down the line.

Once these key parts are established, my favourite part of the process begins: choosing wood. Whether acoustic or electric, timber selection is essential in getting the best results. There are sonic implications for choosing one wood over another, and aspects such as weight, balance and feel also play a part.

Speaking to other makers is a great way to build a picture of what woods work best where and why, although I'm never afraid to try out something a (little) different here and there. After all, it's a handmade object that deserves to stand out.

For acoustic guitars, I've learned that if you're willing to stick to a good softwood top, sonically you

can afford to be more experimental with the back and sides. Like pickups on an electric guitar, the beating heart of the sound is the top; spruce or cedar normally produce excellent results. I think of the rest of the timber selection like adding spice to a curry – you dial in your preferences by throwing in a little bit of this or that, but as long as you play by the rules it's going to work out well.

"I'm never afraid to try out something a (little) different here and there. After all, a guitar is a handmade object that deserves to stand out"

Electric guitars are no different, with wood selection playing a key part in the overall feel of the finished instrument. The reassurance of dense hardwoods like maple or mahogany can give a gutsy tone, whereas lightweight body tonewoods such as obeche and korina offer an airiness and assist playability.

Room For Improvisation

Embarking on a handmade guitar build is an ambitious and exciting prospect and one can spend a long time ruminating over it in advance. But as a teacher I've always made sure my students leave a bit of wiggle room in their designs. Some of the best guitars I've made were the result of shooting from the hip: a spontaneous inlay here, a last minute arm-bevel there. Just like playing guitar, leaving a little room for improvisation helps glue the whole thing together. 

Alex draws up plans to help him understand the construction of his guitar-to-be and avert potential disaster down the line





Tailored Tone

Ariel Posen talks **Jamie Dickson** through the creation of his new signature Strat that thinks it's a Jazzmaster

Most of us have modded guitars at some point, but only a select few have had their own signature model factory-built for them with mods included from the word go. Canadian guitarist Ariel Posen, who has garnered a worldwide following for his lyrical, expressive playing style, has now joined that exclusive club. Recently honoured with his own Fender Custom Shop signature model – the Limited Edition Ariel Posen Stratocaster – the story of its creation is a model of how, when offered the chance to have anything you want, understanding what you need and keeping things simple can yield the best results.

Tell us about your new signature model – it's a blend of quite a few things.

"Well, it's a Stratocaster, but it's based off of two Fenders of mine that I own. One is my '68 Custom Shop [Strat], which I've had for 15 years. And I really wanted to make sure [this new guitar also possessed] that guitar's neck profile. I've always loved that neck profile, which is a '69 'U' back shape. When I had my Jazzmaster built about six

years ago, I specifically sent them the serial number of that Strat so they could match its neck shape.

"I ended up loving so many things about that Jazzmaster because, of course, it's Fender-y, but it always felt more open-sounding than a Strat. And whenever I play a three-single-coil normal Strat, I just never felt like I fully sound like myself. If you put it on the fourth or second position [on the pickup selector] you immediately just want to play like a great blues player – but I'm not a blues guitarist. The Strat always has such a voice.

"So I wanted to combine those two guitars. And I've always been truly a Strat guy; I never identified as an offset guy. So when this opportunity came up and they asked me, 'What do you want?', first of all, it took a good minute to think about it, but I really just wanted to combine those two guitars. I wanted to combine the feel and the shape and the majority of the elements of what you get from a Strat. But on the electronic side, I wanted to lean more into the Jazzmaster, and I wanted to lean into all these other Strats that I was experimenting with. Which is an important part of discussion – because

"I wanted to combine the feel and shape of a Strat but lean more into the electronics of the Jazzmaster"

I had a couple of Strats that I'd set up similar to how I have my Mule where I have a volume, tone and then the pickup switch where the second tone control would be. And I was using 'cupcake' knobs, like the Harmony ones, because they have such a good grip and I use the volume so much. Cosmetically, it looks cool, too. But it was primarily about function."

The basic 'chassis' of the guitar is that of a Strat, but clearly the pickups are rather different from usual.

"I did most of the experimenting with the pickups [during this guitar's design process]. I considered Gold Foils and stuff like that, but I didn't want to do a 'Coodercaster' thing – I really wanted to do my own thing. In the discussions with Tim Shaw, he was like, 'How do you want this to sound?' So I said, 'Well, I know for a fact that I just love the sound of the Jazzmaster neck pickup. Can I give you the serial number of that and can we just rewire that as close as possible to the spec of that [pickup from my earlier Jazzmaster]?' He's like, 'Great, no problem.'

"But I didn't want to do a Jazzmaster bridge pickup because it's always a little too thin, in my opinion. And obviously a Strat bridge pickup is also very thin. But I didn't want to do a humbucker or a mini-humbucker and I didn't want to do a Gold Foil, either. So he was like,

Ariel looked to two of his favourite custom Fenders when it came to designing his dream signature





THREE TO GET READY

Sig Models With A Twist



Epiphone Emily Wolfe 'White Wolfe' Sheraton £969

Blending Trini Lopez styling cues with a Sheraton works really well on this Aged Bone White signature model for the American rock songsmith. At its heart is a pair of Alnico Classic Pro humbucker pickups controlled by CTS pots, while Grover Rotomatic tuners and a GraphTech nut keep things harmonious.



Charvel Henrik Danhage Limited Edition Signature Pro-Mod So-Cal Style 1 HS FR £1,399 (approx)

There's something cool about a shred machine with battle scars and, since its launch in 2021, that's what Charvel's Henrik Danhage signature has offered with its purposeful pairing of a Seymour Duncan JB TB-4 humbucker at the bridge and a DiMarzio Area 67 humbucker in single-coil size at the neck – plus that roadworn finish.



Fender Limited Edition Ariel Posen Stratocaster £5,699

It's undeniably pricey, but Ariel's Custom Shop modded signature Strat is a workhorse with thoroughbred DNA, with its pair of AP-90 pickups, stripped-down controls with 'cupcake' knobs, roasted alder body and a tone-sustaining vintage hardtail bridge.

PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI COURTESY OF FENDER

'How about a P-90?' Traditionally, I haven't loved P-90s, but I think it's primarily because I've played them in guitars like Les Paul Specials and stuff that's very dark and has a specific sound that was never quite my thing. So I said, 'Let's try it.'

"The first set that he sent, with the prototype P-90 in the bridge and the Jazzmaster in the neck, he'd nailed it. It was perfect – it was the sound. It still sounded like a Fender, but it sounded more like me, and it sounded just... elevated. It was still low output [for this pickup configuration], but it was more output than I needed from a normal Jazzmaster or Strat, if that makes sense, totally and together. I mean, I'm biased, but I think they sound really great together. It's a very simple setup and a very simple guitar, but it still has a lot of versatility to the sound, and you can get a lot out of it.

"I'm a very 'set it and forget it' kind of guy. It's a tool to me, you know? It'd be great if someone thinks it's cool and wants to use it for themselves, but, primarily, the point of doing a signature instrument is that it's for you. I wanted this to be a reliable tool and I love simple; I don't want five switches, I don't want a DIP switch here or a DIP switch there. It's too 'micro' in the moment. I tend to not even use that kind of stuff. So bridge, middle, neck, no nonsense, no treble bleed, just one tone, one volume. That's what works best for me. I just love that."

www.arielposen.com / www.fendercustomshop.com

P-90s aren't typically a go-to for Ariel, but these custom AP-90 pickups, designed by Tim Shaw, hit the spot: "It still sounded like a Fender, but it sounded more like me, and just... elevated," says Ariel



Second Inversion Chords

This month **Richard Barrett** demonstrates how changing the order of the notes in a chord can open up a lot of harmonic possibilities

When we learn about creating a chord from a scale, we list the notes in order of appearance: Root, 3rd, 5th. However, swapping this order around can sometimes be really effective. Shifting the 3rd (or ♭3) to the bottom gives what classical composers call a 'first inversion', which is what we looked at last time in issue 528. This time around we're going to move the 5th to the bottom, making a 'second inversion'. It's still the same chord, but the emphasis shifts from the Root and gives the chord a slightly different feel.

For example, play a regular C major chord and follow up with a G major. This is all fine, of course, but maybe there's more we can do with it... How about using a second inversion for that C chord? In practice, this means swapping the 5th (G) to lowest note instead of the Root (see Example 1 below). These days, we'd usually call this C/G – and it really sets us up in a grand way for that G chord. **G**

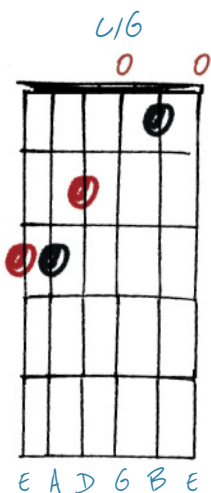
Squeeze's Glenn Tilbrook knows a thing or two about using inventive and interesting chord voicings in the band's songs



PHOTO BY MIKE PRIOR/GETTY IMAGES

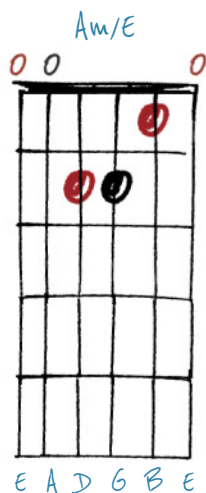
Example 1

This is a C chord with the 5th (G) on the bottom. Its 'official' name would be C (second inversion), but you'll usually see it referred to as C/G – a slash chord. This is worth experimenting with in the context of a chord progression: for example, before a standard G chord. Hear it in action on *Pulling Mussels (From The Shell)* by Squeeze.



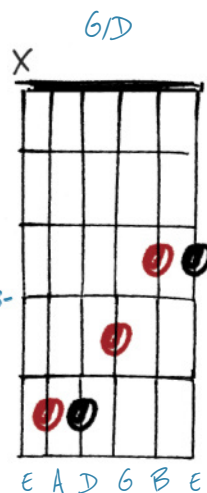
Example 2

The inversion/slash chord approach can be applied to minor chords, too, as demonstrated by this Am/E (aka A minor second inversion). This leads beautifully into a standard E major, or maybe try a D major first inversion (D/F#). You could potentially expand from here to form a counter melody in the bass – like Bach!



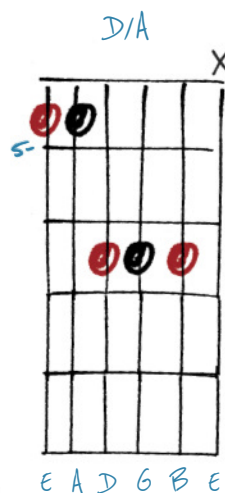
Example 3

Here's another shape that gives us a second inversion, in this case a G/D. We've simply omitted the root, leaving the 5th (D) at the bottom. Obviously, if the bassist plays a G root under this it won't be particularly effective, but on the flip side you could ask them to play a D under your regular G chord or powerchord.



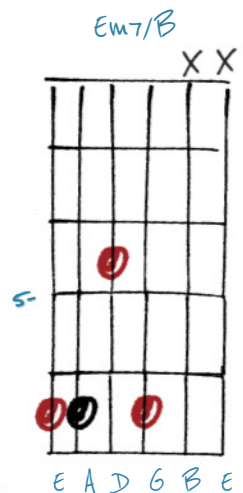
Example 4

Here's another shape that you'll find useful for exploring the second inversion sound – in this example, a D/A. It's a darker, more grandiose sound than a regular D major. This could be the perfect way to give a more standard chord progression a lift, without getting too complex or losing its character.



Example 5

This movable shape allows us to play a second inversion minor 7 chord anywhere on the fretboard. It's an Em7/B. In this position, you could allow the open first and second strings to ring. Give it a try – while this won't work everywhere, there are some nice surprises lurking.



Horace Bray plays the AMERICAN ULTRA LUXE VINTAGE 60s Stratocaster® HSS in Fiesta Red.



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Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.

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STAR LETTER

TROUBLE IN STORE



I was particularly interested to read Neville Marten's 'Neville's Advocate' column in the Summer edition [issue 527] about regretting letting guitars go and the demise of guitar stores. The closure of the PMT chain and GAK was mentioned in Neville's piece. Your Star Letter from Nigel Greensitt in the same edition also bemoaned the closure of guitar shops.

I have a particular reason to connect with all of this. Back in 2008 I purchased a wonderful new Gibson sunburst J-185 with a Madagascan rosewood fingerboard and bridge from GAK in Brighton. Later, in 2010, I was visiting the PMT store in Birmingham where I spotted a new Martin HD-28V hanging on display. After

playing it, I had to have it. This unfortunately meant I had to part-exchange the J-185 to purchase the Martin. By 2017, the action on the HD-28V became so high, the guitar became almost unplayable and I really regretted letting the J-185 go. I took the Martin back to PMT in the hope that they could sort out the playability problem. A sales person, together with Gary, the then store manager, examined the guitar with the suspicion that the guitar top may have 'bellied up' contributing to the causes of an unacceptably high action.

What happened next amazed me. PMT sent the Martin back to Westside Distribution (the distributors of Martin guitars in Britain) for a thorough inspection and setup. The Martin came home to me via PMT like a completely different guitar and was, and remains, a joy to own and play. Furthermore, I was not charged for the work, even though I was initially told that there would be a charge.

My story is dependent on the fact that I was able to take the Martin back to Birmingham's PMT store and discuss its problems with shop staff in person; something that could not be done now. By the way, I would love to still have that J-185 – as well as the Martin!

Geoff Collins

Thanks for your perspective on an important issue, Geoff. The fact is that a low price tag alone does not (necessarily) guarantee a purchase will be satisfactory. As you found, the personal touch at a bricks-and-mortar store can really make all the difference. In your case, quality customer service meant you got a guitar that was all you hoped it would be and is with you still, years later. It's also a timely tribute to PMT, which sadly closed its doors for good recently. Have any other readers got any outstanding examples of above-and-beyond service from stores?



KORG

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

I ROBOT

Upon retirement I added a garden home studio to our new house. Sheer bliss not having to pack everything away after every session. I enjoyed many months of playing and was noticing an improvement in my technique and enjoyment.

I have constantly rearranged the limited space to accommodate my lifetime collection of acoustic and electric guitars together with relevant pedalboards. This month I again decided on a totally new layout and completed the huge task of laying out the power leads, pedalboard power supplies and guitar leads to avoid trip hazards. I decided on a definite 'acoustic only' and an 'electric only' area and was so relieved when I ended up with a much better work space that is more inviting to play and record in.

I confidently turned on my acoustic amp only to be shocked to hear a horrible, loud unearthly ticking and scratching noise emanating from the speakers. I thought it was isolated to just that amp and tried my trusty Katana, but the awful sound was even worse! Using some noise gate settings on the amps had only a minimal effect.

So I methodically unplugged every lead and went back to the start painstakingly connecting up each piece of equipment and checked every plug for bad wiring. When I finished I plugged in again and was horrified that the sound was even worse.

I was annoyed and sweating from the task so I threw open the door of the studio for some air. It was then that the recently purchased robotic lawnmower serenely passed by on its route around the garden. Suddenly, I had a moment of clarity. I ran to turn off the robot and also the power supply to the signal-emitting wire laid all around the studio and the lawn.

When I plugged in the guitar and flipped on the amp, what a sweet reward: just the sound of a little blues lick and nothing more!

Gerry Donnelly

Ha! Thanks for sharing your amusing story of man versus mower. It reminds us of a droll quip the technology tutor at editor Jamie's music college once made. Seeing a student puzzling over an amp that was refusing to produce any sound, he had a quick look round the back. "I think you have an air-gap resistance problem," the tutor said, deadpan, holding up the amp's plug, which the student had failed to insert into the wall socket.

Have any other readers got any amusing or perplexing stories about gremlins in kit that turned out to have a simple solution? Send them in and we'll print the best. You might just help out a fellow player!



TOMMY STEELE'S HÖFNER

You published a letter from Colin Howell in the latest edition [issue 527], about Tommy Steele's Höfner, and asked which guitar Colin had seen in the book *German Jazz Guitars*. As the author of the book Colin mentioned I can tell you it was an early Committee. Your readers may be interested in the book. It is the first one to be published covering the mid-20th century archtop guitars from the makers in both West Germany (nearly all refugees from Czechoslovakia) and East Germany, in southern Saxony.

Cameron Brown

Thanks for solving the mystery, Cameron – we did wonder which it was! And congratulations on penning what sounds like a fascinating book that sheds light on an interesting and oft-overlooked arena of 20th century lutherie.

MAGIC MOMENT

Having read Neville's 'Price Of Fame' article in issue 528, I thought I'd share my Alex Lifeson story. Rush have been my favourite band since first hearing *All The World's A Stage* way back in '76 and I was part of the small team that published the *Spirit Of Rush* fanzine. When the band announced their *Roll The Bones* UK tour dates, the mag's editor (the late, much missed Mick Burnett) contacted Andrew MacNaughtan (the band's PA/photographer) to arrange a meet-up in Sheffield, the first date of the tour. Andrew very kindly gave us a couple of aftershow passes, so I got to meet Alex and Geddy. Geddy seemed a little preoccupied, but Alex was as friendly and funny as one would hope.

It wasn't until I got back home that I noticed that he'd written in my tour book: "All the best Chris, Alex Lifeson." I thought that was a nice personal touch (that would prove to be very significant, two nights later at the NEC gig). So I had a front row seat at the NEC and next to me was my brother, Mike, to whom I'd not had a chance to mention my meeting with Al and Ged. Anyway, about halfway through the show, Alex wandered to the front of the stage, looked down and said a clearly audible, "Okay, Chris?" I just gave him a thumbs up and turned to look at my brother, who had the best 'WTF?' face you'll ever see! I just nonchalantly shrugged my shoulders and carried on watching the gig. Now, my brother would swear that black is blue just to wind me up, but whenever I tell this story even he admits, "Yup, Alex Lifeson said 'hi'



Far left: Tommy Steele, whose Höfner Committee guitar inspired reader Colin Howell, is pictured at Cafe de Paris in London, January 1957

Left: Chris Reid's 12-year-old son, Jacob, is giving him a run for his money on stage already. Bravo, Jacob, and keep up the great work!



to my brother from the stage of the NEC." Thank you, Alex, for my 'moment'.

Christopher Loydall

That's a maximum-score moment for any fan, surely – and your brother's face must have been an absolute picture! Have any other readers had any amazing experiences with rockstars going out of their way to honour fans?

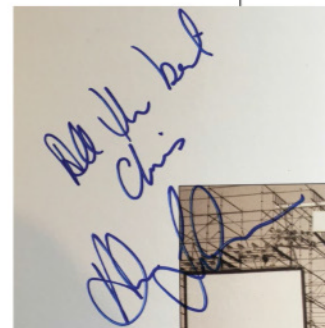
BONA-FIDE READING

Hi, just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the August issue [526, featuring Joe Bonamassa on the cover]. I recently took my 12-year-old son to his first gig, Joe Bonamassa in Nottingham, which was awesome.

It's been a while since I've bought a guitar and I have thoroughly enjoyed the issue – having a physical copy, the look and feel of it and lots of really good articles, so thanks! I definitely agree regarding how rosewood can expose your playing [see 'Raising The Tone']; I have found it really led me to improve (and realise how much I needed to!). Also, I can't quite beat your 4.72kg record for the heaviest guitar [see 'The Mod Squad'], but I do have a Wesley guitar that I picked up from a charity shop that is Perspex and weighs in at 4.7kg, so pretty close!

Finally, here's my son Jacob, [pictured above] at the recent Bosworth Festival – he's already playing to bigger crowds than me!

Chris Reid



Above: Christopher Loydall's signed Rush tour book from the early 90s and a snap with Geddy Lee accompany a hard-to-beat story of meeting your heroes (and wowing a sibling in the process!)

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The circuits of these three pedals share which characteristics?

- A) Digital and true bypass
- B) Analogue and true bypass
- C) Digital and buffered bypass

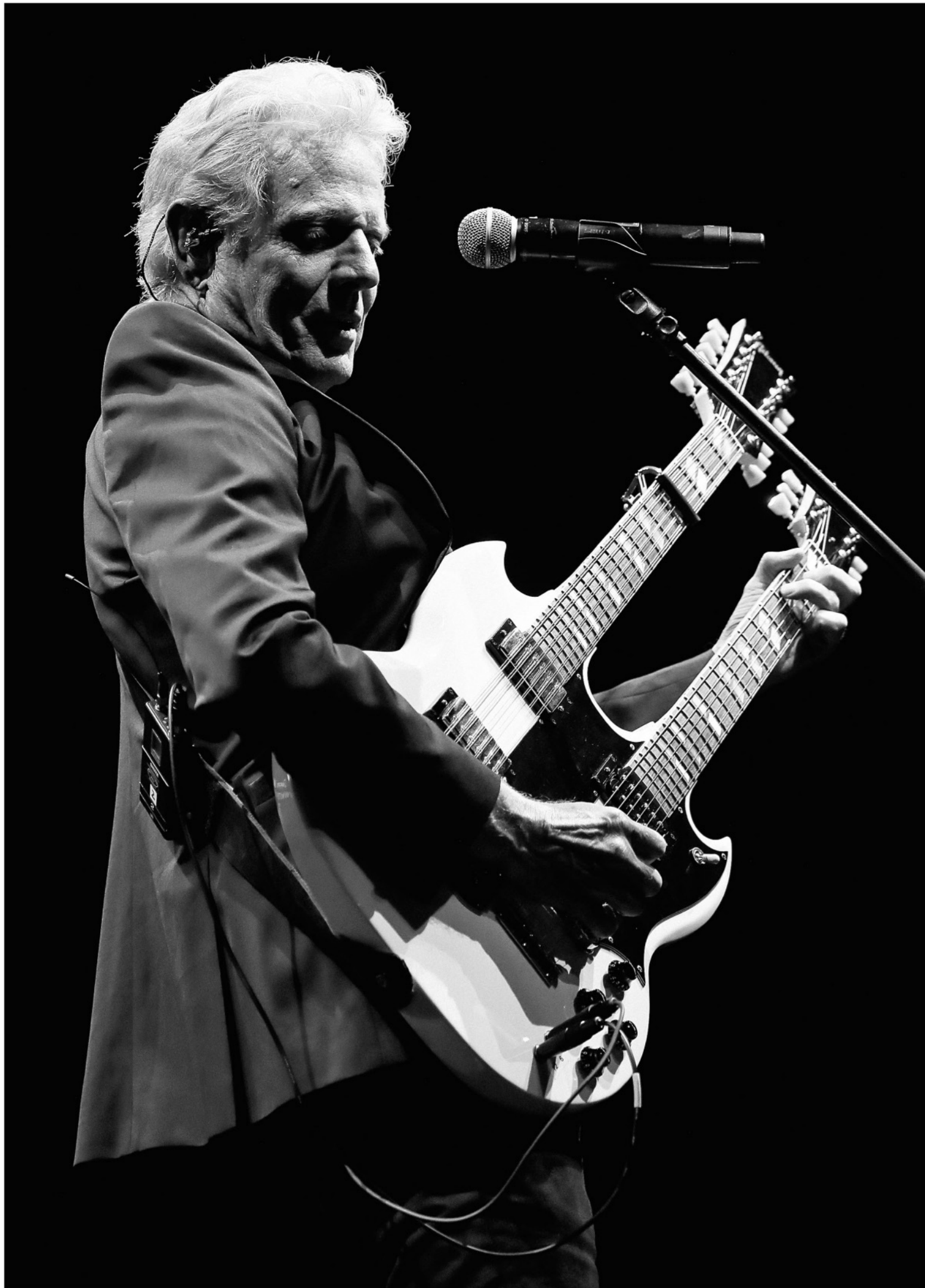
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GUITARS





DON FELDER

On *The Vault – Fifty Years Of Music*, the ex-Eagles guitarist marks a career milestone by bringing lost demos to life and re-recording the hard-cruising *Heavy Metal*. But Felder is clear that this is no swansong: “I’m going to rock till I drop”

Words Andrew Daly

Don Felder is 77 and in February of 2025 he had a health scare, collapsing on stage due to dehydration. You’d think he’d be mulling the idea of slowing down, but when Felder talks about his career, there’s an urgency to his voice. “I’ve got to work and produce as much as I possibly can while I’m still in good health, and still happy and inspired by it.”

To that end, Felder is holding up his end of the bargain, releasing *The Vault – Fifty Years Of Music* earlier this year. The album is a collection of old, new and reworked material. “I walk into my studio with it being totally dark, [thinking], ‘I have no idea in the world what I’m going to do,’” Felder tells *Guitarist*.

His approach seems a bit whimsical, if not entirely romantic. But given his prowess – which has produced classic solos on songs like the Eagles’ *One Of These Nights*, *Hotel California* and his beloved cut on *Heavy Metal* – who can argue?

But that’s not to say that Felder isn’t without a plan. In fact, he’s downright techy: “I open up Pro Tools and I’ve got everything set up,” he says. “Then I grab an electric guitar and see what comes out.”

Though many of Felder’s iconic solos present as pre-composed, it’s his underrated improvisational nature that guides his playing. “I love walking into my studio and going, ‘Let’s try this....’ The worst thing that can happen is it goes to digital heaven. But I don’t erase anything, to tell you the truth.”

Felder’s solo career is booming, with his live shows well attended, but there’s no denying his association with the Eagles, a band he left under difficult circumstances in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, the veteran guitarist is past all that and keeps a cheery

outlook bred through the Malibu sunshine he finds himself in while off the road. And unlike the Eagles, who are currently playing out a residency at Las Vegas’s Sphere following the ‘Long Goodbye’ tour, Felder isn’t hanging up his six-string anytime soon. “It’s a great life,” Felder says. “I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to do this. I’m still in good health and writing and recording good stuff, so I’m going to keep doing it. My philosophy is: I’m going to rock till I drop.”

You had a health scare mid-performance earlier this year. How are you feeling now?

“I’m feeling fantastic. I didn’t realise what dehydration is, or what it could do to you. When it hit me in the middle of the set on that cruise ship, I had no idea what was going on. It was like somebody reached over, took the light dimmer and just slowly dimmed it down to zero.

“I was holding onto the microphone stand just to keep myself from collapsing when Jaden [Osborne], my girlfriend, who was on the side of the stage, recognised it immediately and came over to help me get off the stage. Ironically, there happened to be a paramedic in the crowd from Gainesville, Florida, of all places – where I come from – who came backstage and took me down to the medical place.

“They gave me an IV and 30 minutes later I was back, saying, ‘Let’s go finish the set.’ But they said, ‘No, everybody left,’ so I took the rest of the day, and the next day I continued the show. But I didn’t realise how important it was to stay hydrated, especially at sea. I don’t drink alcohol or do any drugs, so I couldn’t figure out what the hell it was. But it was just a total matter of not drinking enough electrolytes. So I’m back to 100 per cent.”

You have a new record, *The Vault – Fifty Years Of Music*. What's the story there?

"I lived in Malibu for 29 years and after the fifth major forest fire running through, though I'd never lost a home, I was at the point where I was tired of the roads closing and the mud slides from the rain. I said, 'I'm just going to move into town.' So I packed my studio up and carted it into town, and in 2000 we put it all in a storage unit.

"I hadn't seen anything in that storage unit for over 20 years, and about four or five years ago I took a look and found a huge box of four-tracks, cassettes and CDs. I thought, 'I don't even know what this stuff is...' but as I played them, I kept hearing some of these ideas, which were great. They were just thumbnail sketches of song ideas, so I took those and finished them – and also wrote two new songs."

You've got a reworked version of *Heavy Metal* on the record. What led to that?

"After listening to it since 1981 or '82, just the tonality and the quality of it sounded kind of dated, you know? I thought, 'I really like that song. I love playing it, and I play it at almost every one of my live shows. I just want to do a fresh version of it.' I used 96k Pro Tools and with the remastering that we have today you can make things sound really great. So I went back and re-recorded it. It was fun to do and it just sounds a lot better to me."

Is it true that *Heavy Metal* was a song that started with the Eagles but found life after you broke out the solo?

"It was going to be a follow-up on *The Long Run* to *Hotel California*. It had a real kind of heavy hand to it and I wrote it so that Joe [Walsh] and I could play even harder than we did, or edgier than we did on *Hotel*, against

"I found thumbnail sketches of song ideas in storage, so I took those and finished them"

each other. It had harmony parts, trading-off solos and a much harder rock edge. We went in and recorded the basic track for *The Long Run* but never got around to finishing the lyrics. So we had a basic track, but it just died in the Eagles' vault until I got a call years later about doing a song for the *Heavy Metal* movie [released in 1981].

"Without the title *Heavy Metal*, that song could have, and should have, in my opinion, been finished on an Eagles record with Joe and I following up on *Hotel* with some dazzling guitar solos and stuff. It didn't happen, we just didn't have time. We had a tour booked and planned, and we were just dying to get through this record [*The Long Run*], the final mixes, cleaning up vocals, mastering, artwork. We just didn't have time to do everything we needed to do. There were a lot of dropped ideas along the way, but I took the idea and turned it into *Heavy Metal*."

How about the opening track, *Moving On*, which dates to 1974 when you first joined the Eagles?

"It was the first demo I wrote for the Eagles as a contender for a song that might wind up on an album. Bernie Leadon, my high school friend and [Eagles] bandmate told me, 'If you want to write songs for the Eagles, don't write lyrics, only write music, like a song structure.'

"So it was like intro, first verse, second verse, chorus, third verse, chorus, solo, chorus, chorus, chorus, outro, right? Every time I would write song ideas, I wrote them with no lyrics, no vocals, no nothing. Don Henley loved that song, it was just that we had no time to actually do a basic track of it.

"We were interested in finishing an album, getting it out and getting back on the road, doing promotion and live shows. That song literally sat in that cardboard box since 1974, I guess, until I pulled it out, and said, 'What is this?' I listened to it, and went, 'Oh, yeah, I remember this... this was a great idea.' That's how I breathed new life into some great old ideas."

On the subject of the Eagles, people often talk about your *Hotel California* solo, but you had a lot of improvisational moments with the band, too.

"I guess my most famous improvisation was the introduction on the acoustic version of *Hotel California* for *Hell Freezes Over* [1994]. We had worked it out at rehearsal, and Henley said we needed an acoustic version because everybody was doing the unplugged thing back in the mid-90s."

It seems precarious to alter such an iconic song, especially given the reunion nature of *Hell Freezes Over*.

"I worked up an arrangement where I didn't use steel-stringed acoustic guitars because we'd have sounded like a bunch of flat-top country pickers [laughs]. I have pretty good acoustic chops on nylon-string guitar, so when we went and got on stage, we were ready to do the soundcheck, Henley says, '*Hotel* needs a special introduction.' I said, 'Well, what are you going to say?'"



Felder's zest for music remains strong: "There's nothing more fulfilling in life than writing, recording and touring"

In the studio, Felder loves to explore as he creates. "The worst thing that can happen is it goes to digital heaven," he says, "but I don't erase anything"

Are you going to talk about how it came about or what it means?" Henley said, 'No, no, it needs a musical introduction. Make up something.' So I'm sitting on stage, there are about nine to 10 cameras, and an orchestra behind us all sitting there waiting for me to make up the introduction of *Hotel California*...

"I said, 'Well, okay, you guys play a chord and I'll diddle with this chord and then I'll diddle some more.' I played a chord, diddled all the way up to the end of it,

"I have to play [Eagles material] pretty much verbatim [so] to open my creativity in my studio is really a blessing"

and when I hit the last note, I said, 'I want you guys to strum the last chord and then we'll start percussion.'

"We did that, made two takes of it – because we did two shows in the same outfits and clothes so we'd have a lot of footage – and when we got to the studio, we listened to it and that one was the one, the first one was what wound up on the record. A lot of times, my first shot from the hip is the best thing that I've got."

Your acoustic work on *The Sad Café* from *The Long Run* seems to have an improvisational quality to it. Was that the case?

"The ability to just make something up on the spot and being able to improvise has just been a wonderful thing for me to explore. But when we were doing *The Sad Café*, I'd been playing acoustic on it and Don said, 'Why don't you do a guitar solo here?' I said, 'Well, I can't do an electric guitar solo in the middle of that song. Let me come up with something that's an acoustic solo.' It was the first time I had multi-track harmony acoustic guitars playing a solo. It was just something new, different. I said, 'Let's try this...'"

Given that your fans expect you to play a lot of well-loved Eagles material live, are you able to improvise as much as you'd like?

"When I walk out on stage, I have to play a lot of things that I recorded and wrote with the Eagles and co-wrote with those guys. I have to play it pretty much verbatim. I can't go out and jam on the end of *Hotel California*; people will go, 'What is he doing? That's not like the record!' So I've got to play stuff like people have heard it for the last 40 or 50 years. To be able to open my creativity in my studio is really a blessing and I love doing it."

We've heard a lot about your Gibson Custom Shop guitars in recent years, but what else are you using these days?

"I have a little over 300 guitars and just about every name, brand and model you can think of. I met Leo Fender out in Corona at the Custom Shop when he was still alive, and I'd go out there, grab four or five necks out of the trash can and they'd give me unfinished bodies. If I wanted to have pickups, I'd go up and see Seymour Duncan, my buddy, and we'd wrap some pickups up there, which I still do.

"So I'd build these Strats – I've probably got six or eight Stratocasters that I just built out of parts



PHOTO BY PAUL NAKIN/GETTY IMAGES

that are in my locker. That, to me, is really kind of fun because I'm building things that are totally different from what you've ever seen, heard or used in the past. It's a different-sounding Strat. I love experimenting with just building stuff."

Do you have one guitar to rule them all, so to speak?

"My original '59 Les Paul that I spent \$1,200 on. When I bought it, I got it from a guy named Tony Dukes in Texas. Every time [the Eagles] came through Texas, he would show up with either a station wagon or a pickup truck full of old Telecasters, Stratocasters, Les Pauls – you name it. And we'd buy everything he had.

"I bought that Les Paul for \$1,200, brought it to soundcheck, opened the case and Glenn [Frey] went, 'Wow, that's really nice. What'd you pay for that?' I went, '1,200 bucks...' Now, that was a lot of money then and so Glenn said, 'Cheap...' in a very kind of derogatory way. So I have always called my '59 Les Paul 'the cheap Les Paul'. But now, today, it's probably worth well over a million bucks, if not more. I think it was a good investment at the time [laughs]."

How do you view your solo career versus your work with the Eagles?

"Looking back, the Eagles were a very controlled environment. We were all trying to do the absolute best that we could do, from writing lyrics, vocal tracks, guitar parts – everything. And whoever was the one who came up with the strongest idea and had the

Playing in the Eagles (alongside Joe Walsh, pictured above right), Felder had to follow the group's ideals. Solo, he relishes his improvisational spirit

greatest energy in a certain direction, that's what we followed. But it wasn't like I could walk in and say, 'Hey, I've got this rough idea for a song here,' and I'd start playing a groove and have everybody just jump on it. It didn't work quite that way. A lot of what happened was under a kind of group control, if you know what I mean."

"Looking back, the Eagles were a very controlled environment. We were all trying to do the absolute best"

What does the future look like for you in terms of live performances and new music?

"The future looks really bright. I love touring, despite the fact that when you tour, you spend more time every day tracking than you do actually playing music. That's why when I'm going from A to B, I always break out a laptop and start writing down song ideas. I hate to have that time just evaporate and not be productive. I got to the point where there's nothing else I would rather do, and there's nothing more fulfilling, exciting and that I'm more passionate about in life than writing, recording and touring." 



Don Felder's album, *The Vault – Fifty Years Of Music*, is available now on Frontiers Music Srl

www.donfelder.com

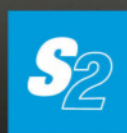
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THE BIG DEAL





1965 – the year that the giant CBS Corporation bought Fender. For many, that moment marks the start of rot setting in at California's finest electric guitar maker. But is that judgment fair? A fresh look at the early years of CBS ownership, 60 years on, reveals a more nuanced picture, one that helps us properly understand Fender's place at the eye of the rock 'n' roll hurricane that was transforming American culture. We join historian Tony Bacon and guitar restorer Huw Price to learn why post-CBS Fenders deserve more kudos than they sometimes receive...

Words Tony Bacon, Jamie Dickson & Huw Price

Photography Phil Barker

RISING TIDE

During its long history, Fender has navigated several tricky turning points, but 1965 marks for some the start of a decline from the standards set by Leo's original company. Is that view still justified?

Words Tony Bacon Photography Phil Barker

By 1964, Fender was a few years away from its 20th anniversary, business was strong and fine guitars and amps continued to pour from the company's Fullerton factories in California. Around 600 people worked there – the majority in manufacturing, spread across the 29 buildings that had appeared as demand grew through the years.

Forrest White, in charge of production, recalled that by the end of '64 his workers were making 1,500 guitars a week, compared with just 40 a week when he'd joined Leo's small setup 10 years earlier. As well as the electrics and amps, Fender's catalogues and price lists from the mid-60s also featured acoustics, effects, accessories and Fender-Rhodes electric pianos.

"There's always this suspicion when a big company takes over that they're going to make a lousy product..." DON RANDALL

Don Randall, who headed the sales side of Fender, remembered writing a million dollars worth of wholesale business during his first year in the 50s, but by the mid-60s he had helped multiply that figure by 10, which in turn translated to about \$40 million worth of retail sales. The beat boom, triggered by The Beatles and the so-called British Invasion, had begun its sweep across America. In short, electric guitars were at a peak of popularity, and Fender was just about their biggest and most successful producer.

Then, in January 1965, came the big surprise. *The Music Trades*, the prime American magazine for the instruments industry, was



1. This 1966 Strat in vivid Lake Placid Blue was the product of ever-increasing demand for guitars during the mid-60s boom of rock music. It was this growth that CBS hoped to capitalise on when it bought Fender for a record sum in 1965

clearly shocked by the news of Fender's acquisition by the mighty Columbia Broadcasting System Inc, better known as CBS. "The purchase price of \$13 million is by far the highest ever offered in the history of [this] industry for any single manufacturer," it reported.

"The acquisition, a sterling proof of the music industry's growth potential, marks the first time that one of the nation's largest corporations has entered our field. With sales volume in excess of half a billion dollars annually, CBS currently does more business than the entire [US musical instrument] industry does at retail. Actual purchase of Fender was made by the Columbia Records Distribution Division of CBS, whose outstanding recent feats have included the production of *My Fair Lady*."

This was at a time when economy wonks were busy advising big corporations like

CBS to diversify and gobble up firms from a variety of different businesses. It's not hard to imagine their advice: finance and streamline the new acquisitions and rich pickings will follow. That seems to be what Goddard Lieberson, the boss of Columbia Records, thought. He described Fender as "a fast-growing business tied into the expanding leisure time market" and said he expected the industry to grow by 23 per cent in the next couple of years.

SOLD TO CBS

So why did Fender sell up? Leo Fender was by all accounts a hypochondriac – Randall said he was a faddist and that he would regularly go on what he called health kicks. And it was Leo's health worries, notably the staph infection in his sinuses that troubled him for many years, that led to Leo's decision to sell Fender, along with his nervousness about expanding the company further. Looking back later, he said he felt he wasn't going to be in good enough health to be able to carry on.

Randall handled the sale of Fender to CBS and early in '64 talked to the Baldwin Piano & Organ Co of Ohio as well as an investment bank. He found Baldwin's attitude unsatisfactory, and the bank suggested that Fender go public, which didn't appeal to Leo or Randall. Then the bank offered CBS as a potential purchaser.

Eventually, the negotiations with CBS led to what Randall considered an agreeable price. In the year following its acquisition of the Fender companies for \$13 million, CBS published a survey that estimated the number of guitar players in the USA at nine million and placed total

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS



1965 FENDER JAGUAR

This beautiful sunburst Jaguar, currently at ATB Guitars, was marketed at the time as being 'easier to play' due to its shorter scale length, a selling point likely aimed at encouraging newcomers to get into guitar. Tuners are original Kluson double-line examples.

American retail sales of guitars during 1965 at \$185 million, up from \$24 million in 1958. What could possibly go wrong?

MEANWHILE, BACK IN CALIFORNIA...

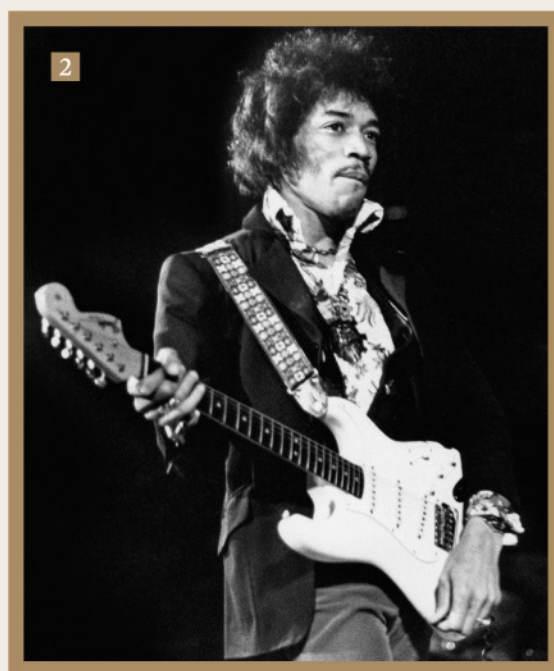
As you might imagine, this change of ownership was not universally applauded in the factories and offices in Fullerton. There seems to have been a clash of cultures. The new CBS people – often trained engineers with college degrees – had a firm belief in high-volume production. Fender's old guard, meanwhile, were long-serving craft workers without formal qualifications.

Anyone who noticed a particular job advert in the *Los Angeles Times* would be forgiven for thinking that it summed up the changes under way. The ad was for a Systems Analyst to oversee a computer feasibility study at Fender for a "management information system" covering "sales order processing, material control, manufacturing systems, and accounting systems". "You see? They want to run the place with computers! Whatever next!"

Years later, this writer asked some of the old guard about the effect on Fender's guitars, from their point of view, of the takeover by CBS. George Fullerton, who had various roles at Fender, said management was first alerted to criticisms when the firm's sales reps began to feed back complaints from their dealers. "They'd say the guitars don't play like they used to, they aren't adjusted like they used to be," Fullerton remembered.

One of the top sales reps, Dale Hyatt, reckoned the quality stayed relatively stable until around 1968, and then quality-control deteriorated. He said it got to the point where he didn't enjoy going into stores any more because he regularly found himself defending some poor piece of workmanship. "They got very sloppy with the finish, with far too many bad spots," Hyatt recalled. "They created their own competition, letting the door wide open for everybody else, including the Japanese."

Under the new owner, Randall became vice president and general



2. Hendrix's use of the Strat during the CBS era was a shot in the arm for Fender's three-pickup flagship, which had plateaued in popularity

manager of Fender Musical Instruments and Fender Sales, both of which became part of the new CBS Musical Instruments Division. To him, it was a fallacy that quality deteriorated when CBS took over. He found that CBS was just as interested in quality as he and his teams had been, and that CBS spared no time or effort to ensure the quality was there. "There's always this suspicion when a big company takes over that they're going to make a lousy product and sell it for a higher price," he said, "and that's not true here." However, there was more.

"The other problems that existed were multiple," Randall added. "After interviewing all my people, they wrote job descriptions for everybody. We didn't need that sort of thing – we knew what we were doing. And I have to admit, it wasn't a very sophisticated operation we had, but it worked. But they divided everything into its cost-centre, down to the last nut, bolt and screw. We had more cost-centres than you could ever imagine. Everything had to be moved from one cost-centre to another cost-centre for corporate bookkeeping. The burden became horrendous."

These job descriptions complicated things further, too. "Everyone went back to work," Randall recalled, "and they'd be saying, 'Don't tell me to do

that, that's not my job!' Before, everyone worked as a team, pushed the product through. Anything that went wrong now, it was, 'Well, that's not my job: you take care of it.' This led to a lot of problems. One thing after another, and finally I wasn't a corporate kind of guy. I'd been too independent all the time. They paid me the balance of my contract and that was it."

It was 1969 when Randall resigned from CBS, and he went off to form Randall Electric Instruments. He was by no means the only one of the original team to leave. CBS retained Leo Fender's services as a "special consultant in research and development". The corporation's confidential pre-sale report into Fender concluded that Randall was a necessity to run the business – but not Leo. It said "a competent chief engineer" could move products forward, but that it would be "highly desirable, at least for a period of four or five years, to maintain the active interest and creativity of Mr Fender".

In other words, they didn't want Leo taking his ideas elsewhere, but didn't particularly want him getting in the way of the newly efficient Fender production machine. So they set him up away from the main buildings, where he was allowed to tinker as much as he liked – with little effect on the product.

In the vintage world, "pre-CBS" – made before the Fender takeover – has a magical ring about it. And increasingly unreal prices

A CBS brochure of 1965 illustrated key personnel at Fender, and Leo Fender, the firm's founder, was listed way down in 18th place among the 28 management posts. A couple of years after the sale to CBS, Leo found a new doctor who put him on antibiotics and cured his sinus complaint. He completed a few projects for CBS but left when his five-year contract expired in 1970, going on to spearhead Music Man and then G&L. Forrest White left CBS in 1967, George Fullerton in '70, Dale Hyatt in '72.



1965 FENDER MUSICMASTER II

The second version of the Musicmaster model had a longer scale length as standard than its predecessor, increasing from 22.5 inches to a 24-inch scale. In 1965 specification it was offered in either blue, red or white finishes. The model itself lasted until 1969.

PRE-CBS VERSUS CBS

In the vintage Fender world, “pre-CBS” has a magical ring about it. And increasingly unreal prices. And yet no-one is likely to suggest that, say, a Tele made toward the end of 1964 is going to be much different from one made in the early months of ’65. Nonetheless, that first one would be tagged as pre-CBS, in other words made before the takeover of Fender by CBS. The one shipped in early ’65, however, is a CBS.

Many will agree that, over a period of time after the sale, CBS introduced changes to the production methods at Fender and that a number of those changes were detrimental to the quality of some instruments. Fender’s production and sales certainly increased and profits went up. Randall recalled income almost doubling in the first year that CBS owned Fender.

Leo said he didn’t think the changes made by CBS had lowered Fender quality. “They weren’t trying to cheapen the instrument,” he told *Guitar Player* in 1978. “Maybe they tried to accelerate production, but it was natural for them to do that because on one instrument alone – I think it was the Mustang – we were back-ordered something like 150,000 units. On a back-order of that size, and there were others, too, you can’t just sit around.”

Fender’s first CBS-era price list, dated February 1965, boasted a fine line of electrics with retail prices

“They weren’t trying to cheapen the instrument. Maybe they tried to accelerate production, but [that] was natural” LEO FENDER

that had been stable for several years. A regular sunburst Strat with trem listed at \$289.50, a regular blonde Tele \$209.50. The bound-body Tele Custom listed at \$239.50, the Esquire Custom \$199.50. The Musicmaster was \$129.50, the Duo-Sonic \$159.50, Mustang \$189.50, Jazzmaster \$366.97 and Jaguar \$398.49. Where available, a Custom Color finish – which included blonde for Strat, Jag or Jazz – added five per cent, with a gold-hardware option also for those three.



3. The Thinline Telecaster was arguably Roger Rossmeisl's greatest contribution to the Fender canon and incorporated design cues carried over from his days with Rickenbacker

A new model, the Fender Electric XII, finally hit the music stores a little later in ’65, although it was on the drawing board before the CBS sale. There were few surprises in the XII’s offset body, but its long headstock, necessary to carry the extra tuners, terminated in a distinctive curve we now know as the hockeystick. The 12-saddle bridge, too, was a clever touch for the time, but the initial 12-string craze was peaking and the Electric XII proved shortlived, lasting in the line only until ’68.

A further development planned before CBS took over was another new Fender factory, completed in 1966. The plant cost \$1.3 million of CBS’s cash and sat next to Fender’s existing buildings on its South Raymond site in Fullerton. Clearly, the new owner was increasing production, but alongside that push, changes were happening on the factory floor.

An evident design change that has come to distinguish Strats made following CBS’s acquisition of Fender was a broader headstock, borrowed from the Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Also that year, Fender added binding to the edge of the fingerboards of the Electric XII, Jaguar, and Jazzmaster, and in ’66 block-shape fingerboard markers appeared on those three in place of the traditional dots. The brand’s three-

layer pickguards shifted to single-layer white versions, also in ’65.

ROSSMEISL ADDS SOME AIR

Leo had brought Roger Rossmeisl into the company in ’62 to design acoustics, and Rossmeisl was responsible for a line of new electric-acoustics. He was the son of a German guitar maker and had come to the States in the 50s, at first working at Gibson but soon moving to Rickenbacker where he designed the classic 330/360 instruments.

Rossmeisl’s Fender Coronado thinlines were launched in ’66. Despite their conventional double-cut bound bodies with large stylised f-holes, they stick with the standard Fender bolt-on neck and headstock design. Options included a new vibrato tailpiece, and a 12-string borrowed the Electric XII’s hockeystick head. A later problem in production, where burns marked the guitar during the binding process, led to the introduction in ’68 of a special white-to-brown shaded finish, named Antigua, intended to obscure any scorchers.

Alongside the regular sunburst and cherry, Fender had added another unusual finish option for the Coronado models, known as Wildwood. The effect was made by injecting dyes into beech trees during growth that produced in the cut wood a unique coloured pattern following the grain. “They were beautiful guitars,” Randall remembered, “but they never went any place. Never caught on.” Which was true of the feedback-prone Coronados in general, and the various models were all dropped from the line by 1971.

Following the Coronado thinlines, Rossmeisl designed a full-depth hollow electric, the short-lived Montego, which came in single- or two-pickup versions. The high-end Montegos were by far the most expensive models in Fender’s catalogue at the time, along with Rossmeisl’s related LTD, effectively an acoustic hollowbody that had a single floating pickup with pickguard-mounted controls.

The Thinline Telecaster, introduced in 1968, was yet



1966 FENDER ELECTRIC XII

Considerably rarer than the more typical sunburst finish found on this model, the black finish of this example also extends to the matching headstock. Like all its kin, however, each string had its own adjustable saddle for accurate intonation.

another Rossmeisl creation, designed in collaboration with Fender's product manager of stringed instruments, Virgilio 'Babe' Simoni. It had three hollowed-out chambers inside the body, made in Rossmeisl's Rickenbacker style by taking a slice off the back, routing out the cavities and then glueing the back in place. The guitar had a modified pickguard shaped to accommodate the single f-hole. At first the Thinline retained the regular Telecaster pickup layout, although later it would gain humbuckers.

PSYCHEDELIA & COST-CUTTING

Around 1967, Fender changed the control wiring of the Telecaster, altering the unusual circuit that had been used since 1952. Now, the Tele operated as you'd expect for a two-pickup guitar, the three-way selecting rear pickup, both or neck, along with a regular master volume and tone. Also in '67, Fender's budget line for beginners gained the Bronco, another relatively straightforward guitar with single bridge pickup and basic vibrato bridge, and with Fender's medium 24-inch scale. At first, it was also offered as a set with a little matching Bronco amp.

Fender's high-gloss "thick skin" polyester finish would become a characteristic sign of a 70s Fender electric guitar

The following year, psychedelia hit Fender. The company's designers had fun with self-adhesive paisley and floral-pattern wallpaper, presumably to increase flower-power appeal. The Paisley Red and Blue Flower Telecasters could hardly be described as examples of a boring approach to guitar design by CBS.

Fender's high-gloss "thick skin" polyester finish, which started to appear in the late 60s, would become a characteristic sign of a 70s Fender. Pre-CBS guitars were customarily painted with nitrocellulose lacquers, but CBS considered poly as a better (and safer) option in its drive for expanded production.



4. Just as Gibson tried to outdo Fender's Strat with its Firebird model, Fender tried its hand at making Gibson-like jazz guitars with its short-lived Montego and LTD guitars

A clear sign of the new owner's cost-cutting came in the unusual shapes of two shortlived 'bitser' models, the Swinger and the Custom, jigsawed together from unused parts that CBS did not want to waste. For the Swinger (aka Arrow or Musiclander), Simoni put together Musicmaster, Bass V and Mustang parts, adding a curve to the body base and shaving the headstock into an arrowhead. For the six-string Custom (aka Maverick) he carved Electric XII bodies to a revised shape, adding a Mustang vibrato and a XII neck. Neither lasted long in Fender's lines.

Meanwhile, a feeling was setting in among guitarists that Fenders (and other American guitars) were not made like they used to be. More top musicians were being seen playing old guitars, which were starting to be called "vintage" instruments, alongside a growing impression that numbers might now be more important to Fender than quality. Some players were coming to the conclusion that older instruments were somehow more playable and sounded better than the new guitars.

That attitude has softened in the decades since, and while pre-CBS guitars certainly can be great instruments for those able to afford them, the musical worth of many late-60s Fenders is now much better understood.

Around the time he bought his '56 Brownie Strat, Eric Clapton was clearly an early convert to the idea, declaring in a 1967 issue of *Melody Maker*: "When you're starting, always buy a secondhand guitar because it will be 'broken in' and easier to play, apart from the fact that the older the guitar, the better it seems to have been made." Contrast that with an image of Jimi Hendrix creating a supreme interpretation of *The Star-Spangled Banner* at Woodstock a few years later, performed on his 1968 white Strat. It may be a cliché, but let's say it anyway: Jimi didn't do too badly with CBS Fenders.

And how does all this sit today? As ever, with any guitars you want to try or to compare, there's only one test that matters. Of course! Have a look at them, have a feel, plug them in, play them. If you're lucky, you could set up a blindfold test with a pre-CBS and an early CBS Tele, or whatever model you favour. It's the sort of thing that can have surprising results and upset long-held beliefs and suppositions. But we'll leave that kind of thing to your hands, your ears and your head. It's personal, after all. **G**

Guitarist would like to thank ATB Guitars of Cheltenham for the kind loan of these CBS-era instruments for photography www.atbguitars.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF TONY BACON



1967 FENDER TELECASTER

The Tele may have had its roots in the 1950s Californian country scene, but by 1967 it was a highly popular model for the burgeoning rock movement. This example, currently at ATB Guitars, features a scarce Ocean Turquoise finish (successor to Sherwood Green) and has a transitional logo.

SLOW BURN

If you always believed the CBS takeover transformed Fender guitars overnight, then think again because there were fewer changes than you might have imagined

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

CBS bought Fender because it saw the potential for a bigger market share and greater profitability in an era when guitars dominated popular music. Achieving those goals meant that CBS needed to increase production, streamline processes and lower costs – and that's what lay behind many of the changes that occurred post-1965.

Vintage Fender folklore might lead you to conclude that the CBS takeover was the lutherie equivalent of the Khmer Rouge's 'Year Zero', but nothing could be further from the truth. The quality of Fender guitars didn't plummet overnight, and arguably remained high for at least a decade.

Changes were made, but for the most part they were gradual and more cosmetic than sonic. Let's break things down and take a forensic look at the alterations CBS made to Fender's iconic models between 1965 and 1970, and the impact they had on the way the guitars looked and sounded.

NECKS

In the immediate aftermath of CBS's takeover, Strat and Tele necks remained much the same. Fender had already been producing these models in significant numbers, so it would have been madness not to use up the remaining stock of unused necks, rather than discard them for the sake of imposing a new brand image.

Construction methods continued as before, although Fender began using pao ferro and Indian rosewood instead of expensive and increasingly scarce Brazilian rosewood. Fender persisted with the 'veneer' method of applying rosewood and maple fretboards well beyond the

1960s, and after numerous refrets most veneer-board vintage Strats now have 22 individual pieces of veneer. So while pao ferro and Indian rosewood fretboards may appear lighter, they're unlikely to sound any different from the darker Brazilian ones.

One early change that CBS made was, in practical terms, an improvement. The 'clay' fretboard and side marker dots used prior to CBS's ownership tended to darken up, which made them hard to see. CBS began installing celluloid dots, which were more durable and provided greater visibility, and narrowed the dot spacing at the 12th fret. The offset models were treated to an upgrade in 1965

The quality of guitars didn't plummet overnight, and some might argue that it remained high for at least a decade

with the introduction of fretboard binding, and the following year celluloid blocks replaced the dots.

It's widely supposed that Fender introduced bigger headstock logos to increase brand visibility on television. Tele and Strat 'spaghetti' logos lasted until late 1964, when new 'transitional' logos were introduced. This was retained for the larger Strat headstock of 1966 and lasted until mid-1967, when a black logo with bigger lettering was adopted.

At the same time, Fender experienced incompatibility issues with water-slide decals after switching to quick-drying and non-yellowing polyester finishes in 1968. The solution was to spray headstock fronts with



1. The larger gold in-filled decal that replaced the original 'spaghetti' design between 1964 and 1967 is known as the 'transitional logo'

2. To improve brand visibility on television, in 1967 Fender introduced a larger black logo and lacquered over it for protection

3. The celluloid fretboard and side marker dots that replaced the 'clay' dots in 1964 offered improved visibility and durability



1969 FENDER STRATOCASTER

This late-60s Strat, currently residing at ATB Guitars, features the original grey-bottom pickups that the Cheltenham-based vintage retailer describes as "punchy, rich and dynamic". The general playwear is vibey and betokens a well-used and loved instrument.

nitrocellulose, which explains why big headstock faces generally look darker than the rest of the neck. In 1969 Fender also began spraying lacquer over the decals to protect them and achieve a smooth and glossy look.

Also in 1969, Fender reverted to the original one-piece neck construction method with the truss rod inserted from the back of the neck. These necks are easy to spot because there will be a skunk stripe on the back and a walnut plug on the front of the headstock. Maple- and rosewood-board Teles were made this way, as were maple-board Strat necks (but not the rosewood ones).

Across all models, the company's neck attachment method remained unchanged. Fender's four screws and a plate arrangement, which was first seen on Broadcasters, would last until midway through 1971.

BODIES

Most bodies remained largely unaltered throughout the 1960s. The CBS era is often wrongly associated with heavier bodies, but weight always varied considerably. Some early Blackguards are like boat anchors, and absurdly heavy Strats didn't become commonplace until the 1970s.

Alder had been the standard body wood for Strats since 1956, but ash still featured on many Telecasters. Fender must have had concerns about the weight of the ash it was sourcing because in 1967 its teams began routing weight-relieving cavities under the pickguard. Touring musicians must have twigged that these cavities provided a convenient way to conceal contraband, and they're still known as 'smuggler's Teles'. It is also thought that Thinline Teles were designed to work around the heavy ash issue.

Most dual-pickup versions of the guitar that became known as the Telecaster had a straight diagonal channel cut into the top of the body. One hole was drilled into the channel from the neck pickup cavity and a second from the channel into the control cavity to pass the neck pickup's wires through to the switch. Fender dispensed with

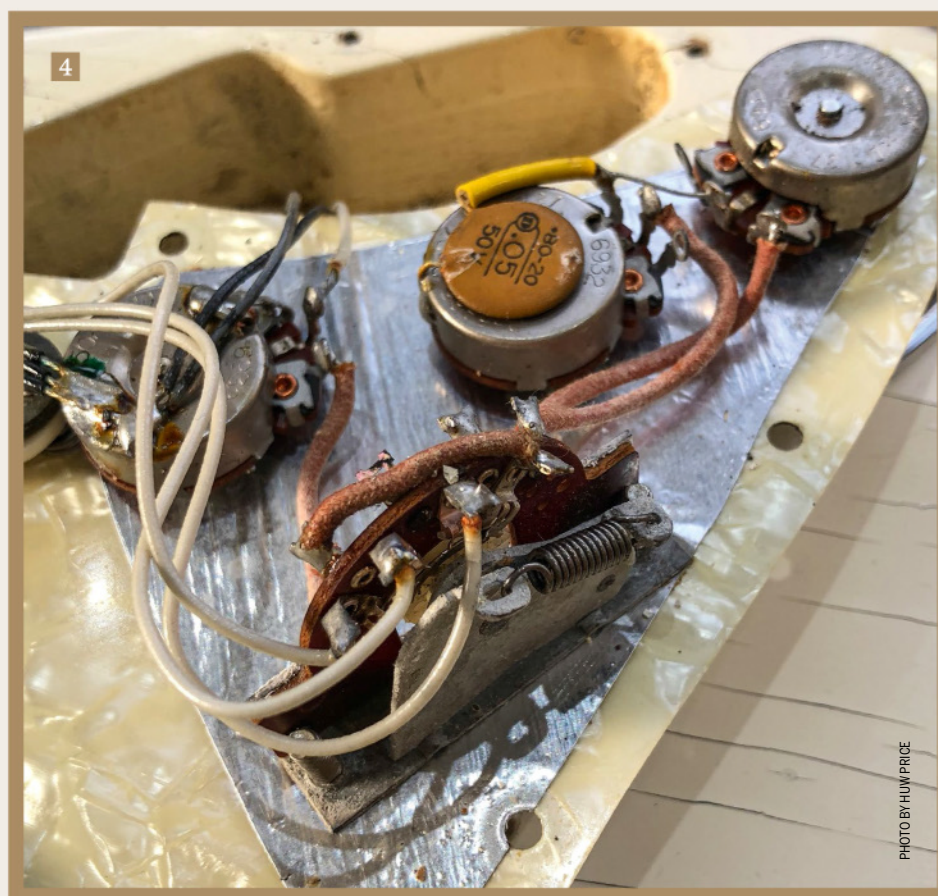


PHOTO BY HUM PRICE

the channel midway through 1969 and reverted to the original practice of drilling a wire hole straight through from the treble corner of the neck pocket to the control cavity.

The other change of note in 1969 was the squaring off of Stratocaster pickup cavities to create a bit more room. It was done due to the thickness of the new poly finish, and the cavities were made even larger in 1970. You may also observe that Strat bodies from the mid-to-late 1960s look a bit chunkier and less finely sculpted.

CAPS & CONTROLS

Strat control wiring continued unaltered, but the tone capacitor value was changed from 0.1 μ F to 0.05 μ F around 1968, which brightened the sound. The aluminium shield plate that has a sonic effect similar to (but subtler than) a humbucker cover was ditched in 1968.

In late 1967, CBS standardised Telecaster control wiring to the neck/both/bridge arrangement that most players had wanted all





black to grey bottom plates in 1964. You can tell the difference because formvar coils have a reddish-copper look, while plain enamel coils have a darker brownish-purple. Unless supply shortages obliged Fender to do otherwise, Telecaster coils were always plain enamel.

Coil-winding machines were used, but the operators guided the wire onto the bobbins by hand and deliberately randomised the coils. This is called hand- or scatter-winding and is believed to enhance treble response and clarity. Having standardised the use of plain enamel wire, CBS fully automated the winding process, thereby eliminating scatter and making coils far more even and consistent.

CBS also reduced the number of windings, which resulted in lower resistance readings. Although fewer windings tends to equate to brighter tone and lower output, the absence of scatter and the naturally full midrange characteristics of plain enamel wire balance things out to some extent. Remember,

along. It also added a 0.001 μ F treble bleed capacitor to the volume potentiometer. From 1965, CTS potentiometers gradually replaced Stackpoles all across the product line, and in 1969 1mega-ohm potentiometers superseded 250ks in Telecasters.

PLASTICS & HARDWARE

Once all of the celluloid nitrate pickguards had been used up, white/black/white PVC or ABS plastic pickguards became standard. Some Strats were fitted with four-ply tortoiseshell-fronted 'guards, and between 1968 and 1970 white Strat and Tele pickguards were pearloid on the underside.

Strat pots, switch tips and pickup covers made between '65 and '70 are virtually indistinguishable from those made earlier in the 1960s. In 1966, white witch-hat knobs appeared on Jazzmasters, and some custom-colour Jazzmasters and Jaguars got white 'guards.

Double-line Klusons replaced the earlier single-line version around 1964, but the change

was entirely cosmetic. Klusons remained Fender's standard machinehead until 1967, when tuners with 'F'-stamped covers, octagonal buttons and vintage-style posts were introduced.

The Telecaster was the only model treated to new hardware. By 1967, smooth saddles with string grooves had replaced the threaded rod saddles; they're non-ferric and have a slightly mellower response. Newly designed knobs with a slightly flatter top arrived around 1968.

PICKUPS

The main variables in pickup construction are the number of winds, winding method, magnet wire, potting method and magnet type. After CBS took charge, the only thing left unchanged between 1965 and 1970 was the magnets. By the mid-1960s Fender's standard magnet wire gauge was 42 AWG – or 43 AWG for Tele neck pickups – but for Stratocasters, the transition in the type of insulation from heavy formvar to plain enamel coincided with the switch from

After CBS took charge, the only thing left unchanged in pickup construction between 1965 and 1970 was the magnets

4. This 1969 Strat has a mixture of plastic and cloth insulated wiring, CTS potentiometers and a 0.05 μ F tone capacitor

5. Double-line Kluson tuners with two strips of lettering replaced single-line Klusons in 1964

6. In 1967 Fender stopped using Kluson units and swapped to bespoke tuners with hexagonal buttons and F-stamped coverplates

7. Fender never really settled on Telecaster bridge saddles, and by 1967 smooth alloy saddles with string grooves had the replaced threaded rod version

these were the pickups used by Hendrix and Gilmour.

Fender used formvar and plain enamel magnet wire for Jazzmaster and Jaguar pickups in the pre-CBS era. When CBS took over, the black flatwork changed to grey with dates stamped or written with pencil or black marker pen. In 1966, Fender began winding Jazzmaster coils with Polysol-insulated magnet wire and changed from wax to lacquer potting.

By 1967, Strat and Tele pickups were also being lacquer potted, giving them a shriller and some might say harsher tone. They were also more prone to microphonic squeal. The following year, plastic-insulated leadout wires replaced the cloth wires. Fender used various colours before settling on black and white. **GI**

SPIRIT OF '65

If you don't want to deal with the real thing, here's a selection of current Fender and Squier production models that will give you that '65 to '70 flavour

Words Dave Burrluck



SQUIER CLASSIC VIBE '60S MUSTANG £385

Introduced in '64, the Mustang lasted throughout the 70s and here's an affordable flavour of that style. Like the Jaguar, the scale length is 610mm (24 inches) and the body is poplar with a single gloss polyurethane colour, Sonic Blue. The Indian laurel 'board is flatter than vintage at 241mm (9.5 inches) with Narrow Tall frets, hardware includes the original-style floating bridge with 'Dynamic Vibrato Tailpiece', and the three-way slide switches allow on/off for each pickup and out-of-phase when combined. Check out more options in the American Performer, Vintera II and Made in Japan ranges.



FENDER VINTERA II '60S TELECASTER THINLINE £1,059

After experimenting with lighter-weight Teles, notably the 'smuggler's Teles', the Telecaster Thinline was launched in 1968. Aside from its semi-hollow construction and large-scratchplate design, it was the same as the standard Telecaster of the time but lighter in weight. This version from the Vintera II range uses an ash body in gloss polyester 3-Color Sunburst or Black, both with maple fingerboards with the original small radius and Vintage Tall frets. If you're on a budget or fancy a modding project, check out the Squier Classic Vibe '60s Telecaster Thinline (£379).



FENDER MIJ TRADITIONAL LATE '60S JAGUAR £1,399

Like its Jazzmaster sibling, the shorter 610mm (24-inch) scale Jaguar featured the bound fingerboard and block inlays from the same time. This new basswood-bodied Jaguar is currently only listed in Black, with matching headstock, and comes with the slightly flatter 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius. From the Made in Japan Traditional 2025 Collection, there's also a 60s Jaguar version in Black Pearl with gold hardware listed at £1,449. More affordable Jaguars include the Squier Classic Vibe '70s (£409) and the earlier-style Player II (£759).



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1965 STRATOCASTER £2,299

Encapsulating the state of the Strat as Leo left the building, this '65 repro is as close as you can get. It follows the round-laminated rosewood fingerboard and larger pearl dot inlay style, the maple C-shaped neck is still without the later skunk stripe, and we have the classic 'small' headstock. The original 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius is retained with Vintage Tall frets. Pickups are Pure Vintage '65 'Gray-Bottom' types, albeit with a five-way (not three-way) pickup selector. It's offered in Candy Apple Red, Shoreline Gold and Sonic Blue gloss nitro colours.



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1973 STRATOCASTER £2,239

Although we're focusing on the '65 to '70 period, this is the only current example of the large-headstock Stratocaster style and neatly illustrates the CBS changes from the start of the 70s. The large-head Strat originally retained the rear-end truss rod adjustment, but here we have the bold bullet-style adjuster behind the nut, the skunk stripe, and the three-screw neck attachment with its polarising Micro-Tilt adjustment. It uses an ash body in three gloss polyurethane colours: Aged Natural with rosewood fingerboard, and Lake Placid Blue and Mocha with a maple 'board.



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1966 JAZZMASTER £2,549

Plenty of players will argue that a Jazzmaster just isn't cool unless it features a bound-edge fingerboard with those bold block inlays that graced the guitar from 1965 and 1966 respectively. It largely avoided more changes until later in the 70s, and here the alder body comes in Sherwood Green Metallic, Lake Placid Blue and Dakota Red (currently unavailable) with matching headstocks, and the standard 3-Color Sunburst with uncoloured headstock – all are gloss nitro. From Fender's Made In Japan range, the Traditional Late '60s Jazzmaster (£1,399) follows similar style.

A resonator guitar, also known as a 'boogie' guitar, is the central focus of the image. It has a metallic, silver-colored body with a large, circular sound hole in the center, surrounded by a decorative pattern of small, dark, teardrop-shaped holes. The guitar's neck is dark wood with white frets and a dark headstock. The background is a vibrant sky with soft, pinkish-orange clouds and a clear blue upper portion. The title 'THE BOY CAN PLAY' is written in a large, black, serif font, with the words 'THE BOY' on the top line and 'CAN PLAY' on the bottom line, centered over the guitar's body.

THE BOY CAN PLAY

1985's *Brothers In Arms* reinvented Mark Knopfler's songcraft and guitar style – and rewarded Dire Straits with more fame than they could handle. 40 years later, in a rare interview, the band look back on the biggest British rock album of the 80s

Words Henry Yates National Resonator Photo Joby Sessions



DIRE STRAITS

BROTHERS IN ARMS

40TH ANNIVERSARY

These days, Mark Knopfler tends to keep his distance from *Brothers In Arms*. Dire Straits' all-conquering fifth album belongs to another time now, its songs to a 30-something gunslinger in a red headband whom the 76-year-old only half-recognises. Before he quit the road, six years ago, he'd pull out the occasional track at solo shows, treating Madison Square Garden to a valedictory blast through *Money For Nothing* in 2019. But Knopfler – press-shy at the best of times – has never gone deep on the '85 album that briefly made him the world's biggest rock star, whether he liked it or not (hint: he didn't).

"*Brothers In Arms* just happened to coincide with compact discs, and it was a sheer fluke," he shrugged in a 1995 interview with *Guitarist*'s David Mead. "If it hadn't been that album, it would have been something else. It was just an accident of timing..."

In the decades since then, Knopfler has kept his head down so doggedly on the subject of *Brothers In Arms* – while quashing talk of reuniting the band who split in '95 – that it's common to meet younger music fans who have never even heard of this 30-million-selling album. But times change. Given the spending power of Dire Straits' demographic, you'd anticipate a 40th anniversary *Brothers In Arms* reissue – and this year's boxset is a stunner, complete with pin-sharp sleeve art of that airborne '37 National resonator and a live disc of the band killing it in San Antonio.

Less expected is that Knopfler, his long-standing bassist and lieutenant, John Illsley – plus assorted members of the Straits' inner circle – have agreed to promo interviews at the guitarist's British Grove recording facility. And so, on a warm day in West London, *Guitarist* is led into Studio 2, where Knopfler awaits, looking owlish behind thick-rimmed glasses, while nursing an espresso.

WARMING UP

Knopfler is reticent to start with, but we break the ice over a joke that only guitarists would get – the impossibility of playing in a chair with arms – and he's off to the races, reaching back through the fog of four decades far more readily than we expected. "It's tempting just to say, 'Oh, it's nothing,' and downplay it," considers Knopfler, "but thinking about *Brothers In Arms* now, it seems like that record meant so much to so many people. I mean, that's why we're sitting here now..."

It wasn't a million miles from here – just a short tube ride to Holland Park, in fact – that *Brothers In Arms* became a notion, recalls Illsley, speaking to us separately. "We all got together in a little mews house, myself, Mark, Alan Clark [piano], Guy Fletcher [keys], and Terry Williams [drums] hitting a cardboard box. Mark slowly introduced us to the new songs, and it was a really good balance, from the seriousness of *Brothers In Arms* to the lightness of touch in *Walk Of Life*. What I'm doing on the bass, mostly, is complementing Mark's thumb work on the low strings. And that goes right back to the first album."

At first glance, the *Brothers* material shared little DNA. There was opener *So Far Away*, its warm lope offset by the space-age Synclavier that only Fletcher could wrangle. There was the jazz-inflected, woman-done-me-wrong film-noir of *Your Latest Trick*, and the fusion of Knopfler's rockabilly scuttle with a zydeco-inspired earworm on *Walk Of Life*. Among these, the clear standouts were the title track's molten anti-war polemic and the deceptively tricky riff of *Money For Nothing*.

"The lick is just a stomp, a two-fingered boogie," says Knopfler of the song he wrote while listening to a New York TV store's "bonehead" delivery man tear into the rock stars on the screens. "It's just picking that pattern, and you mask off a lot of the notes, try to play the right



1. Mark Knopfler at work in his British Grove studios in London. He is now 10 albums into a nuanced and musically rich solo career, but some fans may forever regard *Brothers In Arms* as his finest hour

2. John Illsley says Knopfler's magical phrasing on the album is deceptively hard to imitate

3. Needless to say, there's a lavish five-LP boxset to accompany the 40th anniversary of the album, featuring previously unreleased live recordings from 1985 as well as the original studio album



PHOTOS BY JOBY SESSIONS

ones. I was listening a lot to ZZ Top, things like *Gimme All Your Lovin'*. Boogie is a big part of where I'm from. You know, it almost comes from a fingerstyle perspective, just cranked up a little bit and smokin' along."

Illsley won't stand for his bandleader's modesty: "*Money For Nothing* is simple to play – but it's not. It's one of those odd things where everybody thinks, 'Oh, anybody can play that.' But actually, I've met very few guitarists who can play it the way Mark does. So that one stood out for me. The guitar lines that open *Brothers In Arms* are so subtle. You could think, 'Is that it?' but actually, it just worked so brilliantly with the chords."

Listen to the aforementioned live disc and you'll note that Knopfler rarely plays any lick by the book, endlessly tweaking the studio original. The opening to *Brothers*, he points out, was the only sacrosanct moment. "It's very interesting to me, the furniture of the title track. If you think about the first four notes I play on guitar: I've tried doing other intros live and they just don't work. People have bought tickets and you can see them thinking, 'That's not *Brothers In Arms*.' That's not to say you have to play the part the same way every time. Once I've played those four notes, then I can start to improvise."

By contrast, he says, most people miss the track's nuances. "Because it's quite deceptive. Each verse is slightly different from the one preceding it. These little variations are built into the song. I've heard classically trained musicians make the mistake of playing *Brothers In Arms* straight. You have to listen hard to figure out what's different from the third verse to the second, and the second to the first. It might be just one 'blue' note, but it changes the way you feel."

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

The material gave Dire Straits the confidence to book Montserrat's AIR Studios in winter '84. But there was trouble in paradise. Having shifted state-of-the-art digital gear down potholed roads to George Martin's plantation-style recording facility, tropical rain hammered the roof for six weeks while Knopfler's guitar tech of the period, Ron Eve, recalls producer Neil Dorfsman's growing frustration. "He was very unhappy because he felt there wasn't enough work going on. And during that recording, he was complaining that all the sounds were too 'dark' – and I think he was talking about the guitar."

PHOTO: STORE.DIRESTRAITS.COM

"It's tempting to downplay it, but 'Brothers In Arms' meant so much to so many people"

MARK KNOPFLER



PHOTO BY JIM STEINFELD/MICHAEL LOCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



Pre-*Brothers*, 'dark' was not a term you'd associate with Knopfler's fretwork. By that point, Dire Straits' 1978 hit *Sultans Of Swing* was still the band's signature song, and its flittering outro solo – recorded with a '61 Strat's three-way pickup selector jammed between settings – perhaps the quintessential example of a Fender's single-coil cluck.

Now, the '61 made the trip to Montserrat, but Eve believes it mostly stayed in the flight case. "I think Mark got it out once or twice. But I think, with some of the superb instruments he had by then, he was finding that Fender – which was a bit of a partscaster – quite limiting."

Instead, *Brothers In Arms* heralded the arrival of the 1983 Les Paul '59 Reissue whose thick, burnished tone drove the title track, and *Money For Nothing*. Knopfler can't recall exactly why he picked it up. "Maybe it was from listening to *Need Your Love So Bad* by Peter Green. And that wasn't a distorted guitar sound, but it was so powerful."

Eve fills us in on the model's provenance: "That Les Paul came from Rudy's Music in New York. I played it and the first thing I was conscious of was the neck. My comparison is always my own '65 SG, with the really slick neck, and this wasn't like that, but it wasn't like the plank necks some Les Pauls have, either, which I can't abide. After the recording, that reissue was also the one I converted the wiring on to do the out-of-phase pickups, going back to the Peter Green sound. I don't think I even asked Mark!"

Illsley – running his trusty '59 Precision, '61 Jazz and black Wal through an Ampeg Portaflex – believes Knopfler's gear choices and shifting style went hand-in-hand. "It's strange to think of a word like 'economical,'" he says of the title track's lugubrious lead, its swollen sustained notes the antithesis to *Sultans'* blurry bob 'n' weave. "The Strat is almost like a ballet dancer, whereas the Les Paul has a lot of emotional weight to it and seemed to be the absolute answer for *Brothers In Arms*, so it didn't need 15 notes in a bar. It just needed two or three."

Knopfler himself sees his *Brothers* lead work as a natural evolution. "My approach to solos was probably changing. You start to realise how much real estate there is in a bar – where you can put the notes or, if you have a band of that quality, where you can lean on the timing. But there wasn't really time to think about it. You're just moving on. The band had developed.

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS



4. Knopfler's cherry sunburst Les Paul, bought from Rudy's Music in New York, added "emotional weight" to his sound

5. Mark with the 1937 National Style O resonator, which became iconic on the album's cover and featured on *The Man's Too Strong*

It was a lot louder and more powerful, with keyboards becoming more important. That then makes you think in a different way – more inversions, perhaps. But I didn't force it. I didn't stop picking on country tunes. I was still doing rootsy things."

As he handed guitars to Knopfler across the studio floor, Eve was also noticing the Gibson's impact. "Mark's music had become more wide-ranging and moved away from the sound of the first two albums, which had that single-coil American sound, very clean, almost a surf-guitar sound, if you like. As he got into more complex arrangements, he knew the guitar

sound needed to fit what he was playing. And Mark always loved that Les Paul tone, it just wasn't really his style.

"It was up to him, of course," Eve continues. "But I confess I pushed him more towards the Les Paul sound. I felt a resistance early on. But I persevered. He'd be on the neck setting with the tone rolled

"I was complementing Mark's thumb work on the low strings. And that goes right back to the first album"

JOHN ILLSLEY



off, if I recall. Winding up the sustain. I can see him now, holding those notes. I don't think he could have played those parts on any other guitar, quite frankly. A Strat couldn't have done it at all. Not with all the pedals in the world."

AND THE REST

On the flipside, for other tracks, a Les Paul would have been dead wrong. The perky *Walk Of Life* demanded the articulation of Knopfler's '83 Tele-style Schecter ("That hunky, chunky Telecaster sound with that thumb-and-forefinger rockabilly rhythm," says Eve. "There's nothing like it, is there?"). The old-west metallic pluck of *The Man's Too Strong* proved the National wasn't just eye candy ("It's a lovely beast, that, and it's made for exactly Mark's style – you can either play those guitars or you can't"). And contrary to the nagging rumour, a Les Paul Junior definitely didn't feature on *Money For Nothing* ("No, rubbish. Mark has a Junior, but it certainly wasn't involved on the recordings").

Knopfler coaxed warmth and body from Eve's own Marshall JTM45 ("I think I got the idea from the Bluesbreakers album") into the studio's Laney 4x12, with the Cry Baby on *Money For Nothing* representing the only significant pedal. But the sessions' unsung gear curio, the tech points out, wasn't even played by the bandleader. "The Roland synth guitars of that time, someone like Mark would pick them up and say, 'I'm not playing that.' So he had one made, I'm pretty certain, by John Suhr. It was a beautiful guitar, but Mark never really mastered it. With his style, it was always going to be difficult. Because he's such a light player; his fingers just brush the strings. Back then, with a synth guitar, you had to pick a single note, really precisely and monotonally, then pick the next.

"My approach to solos was changing. You start to realise how much real estate there is in a bar"

MARK KNOPFLER

But because of how Mark played, with all the grace notes, the synth couldn't keep up. So [New York sessioner] Jack Sonni played the parts on *The Man's Too Strong*."

That anomaly aside, *Brothers* indisputably belongs to Knopfler, these nine tracks representing the collision of his finest songs and most emotionally charged playing.

So it's a strange thing to sit opposite one of the stone-cold British greats of the past half-century and hear him dismiss his own talent. The best Knopfler can say for his *Brothers* performance, he shrugs, is that he finally felt he was hitting his marks in the studio.

"Being called a guitar hero was just awkward. I gave up trying to be a great guitar player. I have enough to get by in the studio – that's how I see myself as a player. Not much more than that. If you're the one who wrote the songs, you're kind of allowed to be crap. Well, not to be crap, but you're given some leeway because you wrote the thing.

"[By *Brothers In Arms*] I was getting a little bit better," he continues. "I was still learning how to play in time, after years of working in studios with engineers who would say, 'You're rushing there.' And you'd say, 'No, I'm not.' And they'd say, 'Yes, you are.' Because you didn't recognise it. You didn't know it yet. You think you're playing in time – but you're not. You have to learn that. It takes a long time, especially if you're playing eighth and 16th notes with your thumb and fingers. I got away with murder..."

That's not how the world saw it, of course. Released 17 May 1985, *Brothers In Arms* quickly became inescapable, while Knopfler's fretwork enjoyed the kind of mass adulation that simply doesn't happen in

6. Dire Straits on tour in 1985. Gone was the more grassroots sound of their earliest albums, replaced by MTV-ready hits

7. John Illsley's 1961 Jazz Bass, which he used to record *Brothers In Arms*

8. Knopfler with the red Schecter Tele-style electric that is associated with the video to *Walk Of Life*, which sold for £415,800 when it went up for sale at Christie's in January 2024

9. Strats and Pensa-Suhr customs may be most closely associated with Knopfler's output, but this Steinberger had a stage role in *Brothers In Arms* concerts, too

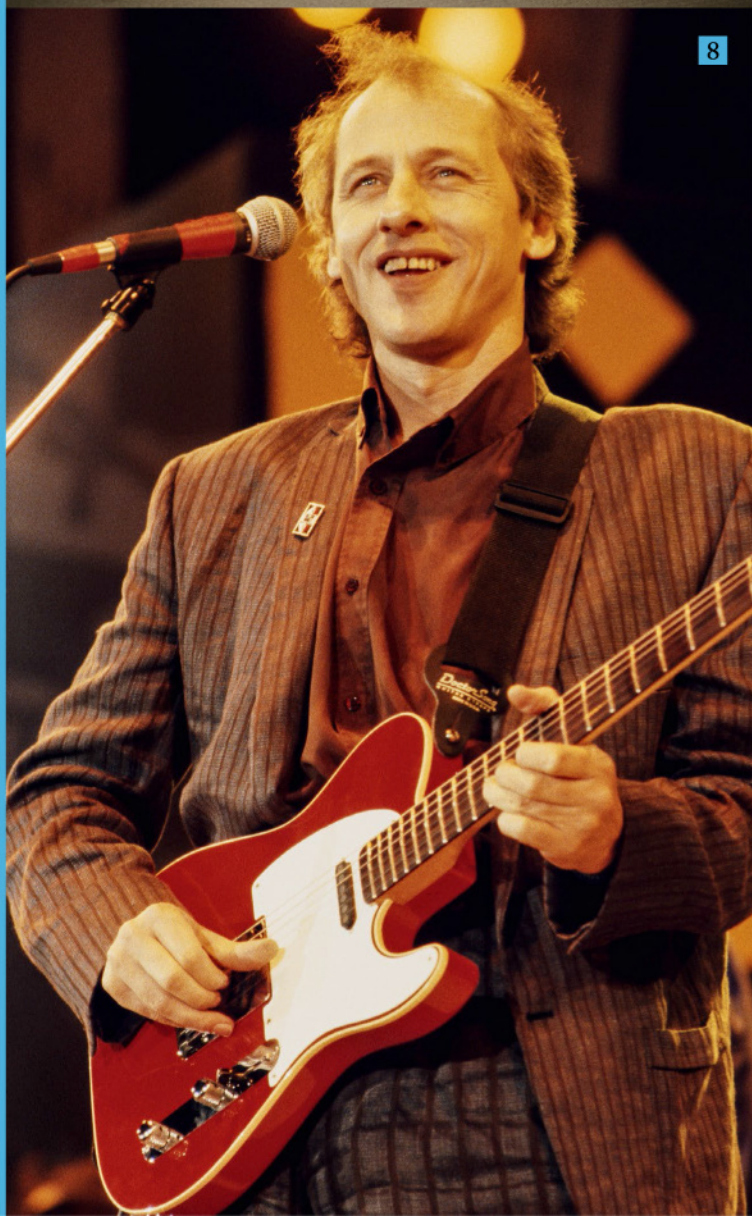


7



9

PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/GETTY IMAGES



8

PHOTO (ABOVE LEFT) BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO (ABOVE RIGHT) BY JOBY SESSIONS

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

the diffused post-internet rock landscape. Today, the guitarist and Illsley paint the world tour that followed as both enormous fun and intense graft. “It always sends a shiver down my spine when I think about it,” says the bassist. “The energy levels were just fabulous. There was nothing not to like about it.

“Of course, it’s bloody hard work,” he counters. “And we all realised Mark was getting most of the flak. Any sensible person doesn’t like the fame aspect because you can’t get a cup of coffee in Pret or go into a restaurant without someone saying, ‘Oh look, there’s so-and-so...’”

FROM THE TOP

Today, Knopfler carries himself with such everyman humility, it’s hard to believe he was once a target for the gutter press. “It was what we all wanted and had been chasing – I suppose you could also say the fallout was much bigger than anything we could ever have foreseen,” he says with a sigh. “There was one occasion when a youth in Manchester shouted out to me on the street, ‘You’re top, man.’ No, no, no. I didn’t feel as though I was top of anything. I never did.”

Knopfler’s manager enters the room: time’s up. 40 years later, then, has the guitarist made peace with the album that brought him both unimaginable success and intolerable scrutiny? Well, up to a point. Ask about the last time he listened to *Brothers In Arms* and the notion seems to fill him with horror. “Never, never, never. I don’t ever go home and play my own records. Life’s tragic enough without that adding to it...” **G**



Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* (40th Anniversary Edition) is out now on LP, CD and Blu-ray

www.direstraits.com



JIMMY PAGE'S 1957 GRETSCH 6120

1957 Gretsch 6120s in such super condition are scarce. But this example has the rare distinction of being the one that the Led Zeppelin guitarist gave away

Words Huw Price Photography Phil Barker

All the major electric guitar models evolved throughout the 50s and 60s, but Gretsch's changes tended to be more seismic than incremental. The single-cutaway 6120 era lasted from late 1954, when the first ones were made, through to 1961. In the intervening years, Gretsch gradually reduced the body depth, introduced two distinct variations of 'trestle bracing', transitioned from a dovetail to a mortice-and-tenon neck joint, adopted entirely new pickups and completely redesigned the wiring harness.

There were cosmetic changes, too, with cowboy kirsch fretboard inlays giving way to humpback and ultimately neo-classical thumbnail markers. Early 6120s had 'G'-branded tops, and there were variations in pickguard shapes and placement.

Batch Maker

Gretsch historian Edward Ball's scholarly reference book *Gretsch 6120: The History Of A Legendary Guitar* includes an exhaustively compiled analysis of Gretsch's production batches on a year-by-year basis. Jimmy Page's 6120 bears the serial number 23243, which places it about halfway through a 100-unit batch that rolled off the factory line midway through 1957.

The #232xx batch was one of eight 6120/6121 production runs Gretsch made for the 1957 model-year. Here's where it can get confusing. Because with vintage Gretsches, 'model-year' refers to a set of features and doesn't necessarily correspond with the year of manufacture. It has been established that the first two batches of the 1957 model-year 6120s were actually made towards the end of 1956.

The same thing happened a year later when the first 1958 model-year 6120s with Filter'Tron pickups were actually made in late 1957. Edward Ball observes that dealers and customers placing orders towards the end of any given year may have received 6120s that looked very different from those depicted in Gretsch's catalogue.

There would have been no surprises with this particular 6120 because it was made during 1957 and has all the features typical of the 1957 model-year. These included a non-compensated bar bridge and the G-indented control knobs, which replaced the earlier arrow-only design. Other 6120 features carried over, including the maple ply body, ebony fretboard and laminated neck construction. The placement of Gretsch neck centre-strips could be hit and miss, but it looks fairly central on this guitar. Gretsch also fitted screw-in strap buttons that work surprisingly well.

6120 hardware was gold plated, but it tended to wear off and, like lots of mid-50s Gretsches, the hardware on this example looks more like it's nickel plated. While the brass nut shows some tarnishing, the original open-backed Waverly tuners escaped the 'upgrade' craze and appear elegantly aged.

The DeArmond Dynasonic pickups divide opinions, even among Gretsch enthusiasts, but they're known for their high output and near hi-fi clarity. Later wiring harnesses offered more options, including mute switching and the infamous 'mud switch', but the 1957 model retained the individual volume controls, plus a master tone and a master volume located near the cutaway. The single switch is a three-way pickup selector.

Gretsch's principal endorsee, the great Chet Atkins, was known to have felt embarrassed by Gretsch Western motifs and lobbied hard for Gretsch to ditch them. The previous year had seen the discontinuation of the steer's-head headstock inlay and the cow and cactus themed fretboard markers. For 1957, Gretsch replaced the transitional plain block markers with hump block inlays, put a more restrained horseshoe on the headstock and, no doubt to Chet's great relief, discontinued the practice of branding a G into the front of the body as if every 6120 was a prize heifer.

The guitar cost Jimmy Page £200 including shipping and customs charges, which he considered "very reasonable"

This Gretsch 6120 has all the features that are correct for a 1957 model-year example



The Giveaway

Tastes change and these days most vintage Gretsch fans would snap your Bigsby arm off for an early 6120. Even back in the early 1970s, Jimmy Page specified a G-branded example when he asked GTR in Nashville to find him a 6120 because Eddie Cochran was an early inspiration.

Jimmy told the story to legendary music journalist Nick Kent in an interview for the *New Musical Express* – now known as the *NME*. Apparently, the guitar cost him £200 including shipping and customs charges, which he considered “very reasonable” compared with the \$1,500 retail prices of 1950s Les Pauls during that time. The interview is a fascinating read, not least because it is so full of contradictions and misconceptions. But it's easy to forget that accurate information about 1950s guitars was hard to come by in the early 1970s. It was long before coffee-table guitar books began making sense of that era and the internet put all the information we could ever need a mere mouse click away.

For instance, Jimmy wasn't even clear on the model designation and believed its “technical name” was a “Chet Atkins Hollowbody”. He was aware that Cochran's had “an old block Gibson pickup by the neck” and had heard that there was another one just like it “somewhere in Tooting”. Jimmy also described his Gretsch as “a good all-rounder with good acoustics when it's strung up properly”.

In the same interview he revealed that he didn't own many guitars, so it was a generous gesture when Jimmy made his 6120 available as a prize in an October 1974 *NME* competition. In addition to Jimmy's Gretsch, the winner could



choose between £300 worth of Orange amplification gear or 10 “classy” new Fender acoustics.

After matching six close-up shots of guitars to the names of the famous guitarists playing them, entrants had to complete the sentence: ‘I loathe the *NME* because...’ in no more than 25 words, with obscenity discouraged and wit and originality being the order of the day. The winner was announced in the 18 January 1975 issue with the accompanying headline: “Stunned Paddy scores guitar, meets idol.” It speaks volumes about the era that ‘Paddy’ referred to the winner's ethnicity, rather than his name.

21-year-old Dubliner Charles Reid was pictured next to a smiling Jimmy Page and described as a “North London exiled guitar picker”. At the time he was auditioning with London-based bands

and he scotched a rumour that he was joining The Rolling Stones. In another photo Charles Reid is pictured with the Orange amps he wisely chose over the Fender acoustics.

The Wild Angel

No information about Charles Reid's musical career has come to light, but we do know that on 16 September 1990 he sold the guitar to Phil O'Donoghue for the sum of £2,000. In today's money, that would equate to over £6,250 so it wasn't an inconsiderable sum. A couple of years later Phil was considering the resale value and was advised to obtain documentation to prove it was the Jimmy Page competition guitar.

Phil wrote to Charles requesting a receipt and received one by post in April 1992. Phil O'Donoghue was a member of a



1. In 1965 an inlaid horseshoe logo replaced the earlier steer's-head design on 6120 headstocks

2. Pearl hump-block inlays were used in between the earlier cow-and-cactus engraved blocks and later ‘thumbnails’

3. It's rare to see a Gretsch centre strip that runs straight through the headstock and the screw plug on the heel

"A typical hammer price would be £7,000 to £9,000... We've put a £30,000 to £50,000 estimate on it"

LUKE HOBBS

The bar bridge and Bigsby are period-correct replacements and were on the guitar during Jimmy Page's ownership



long running rock 'n' roll band called The Wild Angels and he kept the guitar until his death. Phil's brothers inherited his instruments and they contacted Wiltshire-based auction house Gardiner Houlgate with the intention of putting it to market. We caught up with GH's auctioneer and head of guitar department, Luke Hobbs, for a detailed description of the guitar.

"It's actually quite phenomenal," he tells us. "The only thing that detracts is a bit of oxidation around the pickups, but we're not going to touch that because it has been there for so many years and it has that artist connection."

The guitar shows very little playwear, but Luke reports "the original thin frets are quite worn so it has clearly been played a lot, but there's no playwear on the back of the neck and it has been very well looked after. The finish looks great, so it has almost certainly been kept in its case because the orange colour is very bold and strong."

Luke's observation about the way the guitar was kept may also explain the oxidation issue, which is something many vintage Gretsch enthusiasts have experienced. It's caused by the celluloid pickup spacers degrading and emitting a gas that in turn degrades the gold plating on the pickups. It's very common with Gretsches from this era and it can get particularly bad when vintage Gretsches are kept in sealed cases because the gas can't dissipate in the atmosphere. The spacers can eventually crumble away, but you can buy or make replacement celluloid spacers, and it's far better to retire the originals than to risk damaging vintage pickups.

"Currently the action is set low and the strings are pretty light, so it's a very easy guitar to play," Luke continues. "It's extremely resonant, but the strings are so old I don't think we've heard it at its best and it's hard to give a definitive opinion. It certainly doesn't need a neck

reset, and the action is low with a bridge that is set fairly high, which is usually a sign of a solid neck joint.

"I've done what I can to trace Charles Reid, but I haven't had any success. But in some ways it's almost irrelevant because we have the letter from him to Phil O'Donoghue. We also have both copies of the *NME* that featured the guitar."

Rare Opportunity

It's interesting to consider how much value the Jimmy Page connection adds to the guitar. "Well, a typical hammer price for a Gretsch 6120 from the mid-1950s would be £7,000 to £9,000," Luke suggests, "but one in exceptional condition like this could even nudge the £10,000 mark. We've put a £30,000 to £50,000 estimate on it, but, to be honest, it's just a stab in the dark.

"So far as I'm aware, only three of Jimmy Page's guitars have ever come onto the open market. He's notorious

Charles Reid [NME competition winner] declared that "Page must be mental giving away such a terrific guitar"

for not selling or giving anything away. He certainly hasn't been in touch with us, and famous artists are never that interested. We often try to make contact simply for authentication purposes, but they don't want to get involved.

"I'm sure Jimmy has amassed a huge collection by now, but back then he didn't have that much stuff – just the tools he wanted for his arsenal – and in the *NME* article he indicated that he only had his iconic Les Paul, a backup Les Paul in case he broke a string, and his doubleneck. That's what he said he had been using, but he probably forgot to mention his Telecaster, and he referred to an acoustic that he no longer had."

Charles Reid declared that "Page must be mental giving away such a terrific guitar". At the time of writing, his old Gretsch was scheduled to be auctioned on 9 September so if you're reading this you can look up the result on Gardiner Houlgate's website to see how close Luke's estimate was. **G**

With thanks to Gardiner Houlgate for allowing us access to this guitar
www.gardinerhoulgate.co.uk



The gasses emitted as celluloid pickup spacers deteriorate often cause DeArmond metalwork to tarnish

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Help At Hand?

In the mid-60s John Lennon bought a Framus 12-string acoustic and used it with The Beatles in the studio. 60 years later the company has reissued the model in all its fab finery – and it now comes with a little help from a friend!

Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker



FRAMUS HOOTENANNY 12-STRING & HOOTENANNY 6-STRING **£1,050 & £809**

CONTACT **Framus** WEB www.framus-hootenanny.de

What You Need To Know

1 Is the 12-string an exact replica of John Lennon's own model?

Almost. Lennon's Hootenanny had mahogany back and sides whereas the reissue is sapele, a close cousin but not an exact fit. Without access to the original, it's difficult to detect any other minor differences, but it's pretty much spot-on from a cosmetic point of view.

2 Which Beatles tracks did the original guitar appear on?

Lennon bought the guitar in 1964 and used it on both the *Help!* and *Rubber Soul* albums, and it can be seen in the *Help!* film, too. You can hear it on *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away* and *Norwegian Wood*.

3 How much did the guitar sell for at auction?

The sale was held at Julien's in New York in May 2024 and initial estimates for the amount it would reach during the auction ranged between \$600,000 and \$800,000. On sale day it surprised everyone by reaching an amazing \$2,857,500.

The backstory to John Lennon's association with the Framus Hootenanny 12-String is covered on page 92. But the basic headlines are that Lennon bought his Framus guitar in 1964, allegedly inspired by Bob Dylan's use of a 12-string on a recent recording. It made its first appearance with The Beatles in the studio during the sessions for *Help!* and subsequently on *Rubber Soul*, and can be seen in the film footage from the movie *Help!* during the *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away* sequence. Subsequently,

the guitar was gifted to a friend and ended up packed away in an attic until its rediscovery and verification a few years ago. When it reached Julien's auction in New York in May last year, it went for an eye-watering \$2.8 million.

The good news is that Beatles fans without such deep pockets can now recreate their own fab moments thanks to Framus reissuing the exact model used on those historic recordings. And as a bonus, Framus has released a six-string Hootenanny from the same period, too.





2

Alas, this never featured in The Beatles' long and rich history, but it's nice to have it along for the ride.

Of the original Hootenanny 12-string, Julien's text accompanying the auction lot states: "When strummed, it immediately identifies itself as *that* guitar. If you know the chords, Beatles tunes fall out of the soundhole effortlessly. Like an audio time-capsule from 1965, the Framus is a direct link to those records." How faithful its 21st-century doppelganger is in that respect remains to be seen – and heard,

The 12-String has hallmarks of a different age and furnishings that help fix the Hootenanny to a point in time

of course – but our curiosity, particularly that of the ardent Beatles fans among our number, was stirred.

Obviously the star of the show here is the 12-String and so that was the instrument we first plucked from its case. The first thing that struck us was the 50s/60s look of the guitar. It definitely is a bit of a time capsule in its own right in that respect.

We're all used to contemporary acoustic designs, many of which, if not all, are based on guitars hailing from the big names in the USA. But back then there was a distinctly European flavour to the look of some acoustics.

For instance, how long is it since you've seen a floating bridge on an acoustic guitar? They were, and still are, commonplace on archtops but comparatively rare in the acoustic world. And metal string saddles are another mark of the past. Gibson experimented

1. The 12-String carries with it some features that you'd expect from a jazz player's archtop, like the floating bridge and trapeze tailpiece

2. The headstock features six-a-side Kluson-style tuners with vintage-inspired white buttons. Note the zero fret and embossed metal truss rod cover, too

3. The Sitka spruce top and ornate wooden rosette mimic John Lennon's own model, and as a finishing touch Framus has included a choice of two self-adhesive scratchplates in the guitar's case



3



4

4. Like its 12-String sibling, the Hootenanny 6-String has a zero fret, vintage-style tuners and a metal-foil truss rod cover embossed with the Framus logo

5. Lennon's original 1960s Framus had a back and sides made from mahogany, whereas here it's finely figured sapele

with adjustable saddles on some of its mid-60s acoustics and it's certainly true that the ability to raise or lower the action with a thumbwheel is less time-consuming than taking a trip to a luthier to shave a bone saddle to gain the same effect. Then there's the archtop-like tailpiece and zero fret to take into account. All hallmarks of a different age and furnishings that help fix the Hootenanny to a point in time.

Looking past the guitar's inherent quirkiness, we find a spruce top with

We immediately categorised the 6-String sound as being rootsy, bluesy with a touch of front-porch Americana on the side

sapele back and sides. Lennon's original had mahogany for its back and sides, but while this is a diversion from the 60s spec, sapele is a good enough substitute. Another surprise is the nitrocellulose finish throughout, and beyond that Framus offers a variety of different finishes for both models including sunburst, high polish or satin.

The neck is mahogany with a distinct wide and shallow D profile; it shares many characteristics with that of a classical



5



6. The bridge is height-adjustable via thumbwheels on both guitars— but the metal string saddle is an unusual, quirky feature

7. A variety of finishes are available: our 6-String comes in Vintage Sunburst Satin, and the 12 in Vintage Natural Nitro High Polish

guitar in that respect. And the likeness to classical guitars doesn't end there as the rosewood fingerboard is completely flat with no radiusing at all. While we're down the business end, we'll add that the frets are very low, too. Not 1950s Gibson Fretless Wonder low, but at 0.96mm they're on the skinny side. As a comparison, a Les Paul Standard we have to hand measures in at 1.29mm fret height.

The six-a-side tuners have Kluson-like casings and vintage-inspired white buttons and the truss rod cover is gold-coloured metal that has been embossed with the Framus logo. It's also a nice touch that both guitars come with a choice of two different self-adhesive scratchplates that you can choose between to complete that 60s look.

The spec sheet tells us that the Hootenanny is a “round-shouldered dreadnought”, but it's a little more trim than the standard 380mm to 400mm widest-point dread dimensions at 374mm. Once again, overall, the body doesn't look too far off from the outlines of a classical guitar, rather than the bulk of a contemporary D-18 or J-45.

Whereas you might expect the 12's six-string sidekick to be essentially more of the same, and this is true in terms of body furnishings and materials, it goes rogue when it comes to body shape. Once again the spec hails the six as a

“round-shouldered dreadnought”, but it is decidedly smaller.

To look at it without a tape measure in hand, you'd swear it was more of a folk size or a slightly more meaty 00. In any case, the Hootenanny 6-String arrives with an attractive dark sunburst and a satin finish. As we've said, many of the 12's construction details are to be found here, including the tailpiece, floating adjustable bridge, spruce top and sapele back and sides. It certainly maintains that unmistakable 60s vibe of acoustic guitars from Europe found on its sibling. Obviously, the neck dimensions are different – although we still have those low frets and flat fingerboard – but the profile is a more comfy C, rather than the 12's D.

Casting a critical eye over both instruments reveals that the build is good in both cases, but the crux of the matter is how they sound. Will we be able to summon up the 12-string spirit of Lennon and Harrison? There's only one way to find out...

Feel & Sounds

We've all heard the jokes about the time it takes to tune a 12-string, but we were a little taken aback with our initial experiences with the 12 in this respect. Having tuned each individual string with a Peterson tuner, our first exploratory

8. The picture of John Lennon's Hootenanny in the accompanying feature on page 93 reveals that the tuners on the original were slightly different – one of only a very few slight changes between the two models

chord was still way out of tune. Testing the guitar's intonation at the 12th fret we found that it was out by a semitone. In other words, instead of an E on the top string at the 12th fret, we were greeted by an F. Something was wrong here and, as always, the prime suspect was the position of the bridge and, sure enough, it was in completely the wrong position. This is something every seasoned archtop player will have encountered at one time or another and it's a relatively easy fix with a floating bridge... but it's a time-consuming bout of trial and error, nonetheless.

A little while later and everything was ship-shape in the intonation department and so we returned to listening to what the Hootenanny had to say for itself. Initial probing strums revealed a very bright sound, no doubt helped along by the zero fret at one end of the scale length and that metal saddle at the other. It's doubtless that the tailpiece and floating bridge contribute to the slight 'unamplified archtop' timbre we detected, too. We took a listen to The Beatles' *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away* and John's 12-string there does have that similar trebly edge to it and so this guitar passes the 'Fab Four' test.

As far as playability and feel are concerned, the wide flat 'board and those low frets take a little getting used to, but once we'd spent some time playing, we found we could pretty much forget about both these factors and get on with the job of executing just about every 12-string guitar part we could remember.

Over to the Hootenanny 6-String and we immediately categorised the sound as being rootsy, bluesy with a touch of front-porch Americana on the side. We're sure the tailpiece and floating bridge play a serious sonic role here as both guitars share very similar traits. If Delta blues is your thing, there's a lot to be recommended, but if you're looking for a more modern Martin/Gibson dread

THE RIVALS

Tricky one this... because if you're interested in the 12-string purely for its Beatles association, then the Hootenanny is literally incomparable. But if you're in the market for a similarly appointed 12 or its six-string sidekick in a similar ballpark in cost, then let's talk.

Your first stop would be to check out the Vintage brand's catalogue. Although it's looking at an uncertain future, owing to distributor JHS's decision to leave the marketplace, Vintage acoustics are very well regarded in the budget range – and, surprisingly, they have a pair of guitars very similar to those here. The 12-string Paul Brett 'Fret Dancer' V600 (£299) has a solid spruce top and mahogany back and sides, and the aged, open pore electro-acoustic model VE-600 (£349) comes fitted with a pickup that includes DSP effects featuring room reverb, hall reverb, chorus, delay. The six-string equivalents are the electro-acoustic VE600N (£319) and non-electro V600N (£269). Vintage's Statesboro Paul Brett 12 (£499) is well worth auditioning, too.

Other than Vintage, brands such as Sigma, Art & Lutherie, Guild and Martin all have 12-string models that circle the £1k price point. Google searching advised.



experience, you're not going to find it with the Hootenanny. However, we're happy that both instruments are exactly what they're set out to be: snapshots of the past.

Verdict

With instruments so specifically aimed at the target of yesteryear and with – as far as the 12 is concerned – a very specific instrumental voice, it's always hard to judge them without letting any prejudices inspired by playing and listening to big-league acoustics for many years cloud your vision. But that's really not what

9. If you're after the very particular sound of the 12-string on Beatles hits from *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*, the Framus will put you in the ballpark!

We took a listen to The Beatles' 'You've Got To Hide Your Love Away' and his 12-string does have a similar trebly edge

these Hootenanny guitars are all about. These are voices from the past and will appeal to players who are seeking the particular niche that they represent. It's true to say that there are guitars out there that would do a similar job – and many of them may cost less. But if it's the whole 60s chic, floating bridge, jazz-box tailpiece and (as far as the 12 is concerned) Beatles association that appeals to you, then we'd recommend you seek them out. 



FRAMUS HOOTENANNY 12-STRING

PRICE: £1,050 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: 12-string dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Sapele
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 374mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm
TUNERS: Vintage-style closed nickel, ivory-coloured buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/50mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 19
BRIDGE/SPACING: Height-adjustable rosewood with metal saddle
ELECTRICS: N/A
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.99/4.4
OPTIONS: Finishes only: Vintage Natural Satin or Sunburst Satin (£870), Vintage Natural High Polish or Sunburst High Polish (£960)
RANGE OPTIONS: Just the Hootenanny 6-String in either plain or sunburst finishes (as above)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Vintage Natural Nitro High Polish

8/10

PROS The Lennon association; vintage chic; bright, mud-free 12-string sound

CONS Small frets and flat fingerboard will take some getting used to; the price might be north of what you'd want to pay



FRAMUS HOOTENANNY 6-STRING

PRICE: £809 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Round shoulder dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Sapele
MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 372mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 643mm
TUNERS: Vintage-style, closed nickel, ivory coloured buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 19
BRIDGE/SPACING: Height-adjustable rosewood with metal saddle
ELECTRICS: N/A
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.45/3.2
OPTIONS: Finishes only: Vintage Natural High Polish or Sunburst High Polish (£899), Vintage Natural Nitro High Polish or Sunburst Nitro High Polish (£989)
RANGE OPTIONS: Hootenanny 12-String
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Vintage Sunburst Satin

8/10

PROS A time-capsule look and smokey blues den soundscape will delight niche players

CONS As with the 12, the flat 'board and small frets promote a different feel; slightly boxy sound won't suit everyone

A Right Knees-Up!

Never heard of a Framus Hootenanny? No, it has nothing to do with Jools Holland but a lot to do with a couple of mop-tops. We tell the story...

Words Neville Marten

The release of the Beatles' album *Help!* in August 1965 marked a significant shift in the group's sound. Their fifth LP release, it would also be their second film soundtrack, following *A Hard Day's Night* from July 1964.

The band had met folk singer-songwriter Bob Dylan while in America that same year, and been bowled over by the compositions on his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. In conversation (and after Dylan had introduced them to marijuana), the singer advised John and Paul to "stop writing for the meat market" and come up with more thought-provoking lyrics. This would contribute to making *Help!* a more acoustic-led affair, with songs that shifted away from the 'boy and girl, you and me' hit-making formula of *She Loves You*, *From Me To You* and *I Want To Hold Your Hand*.

It's said that John Lennon particularly liked the sound of the Framus 12-string and how it blended with George Harrison's Gibson

To this end, Lennon acquired his Framus Hootenanny 12-string on the band's return to London. The unspecified shop paired it with an Australian-made Maton case that can clearly be seen in photos from the *Help!* film set.

The Beatles already owned US-made acoustics – John and Paul had Gibson J-160Es and Paul had his Epiphone Texan. And at the height of Beatlemania Lennon was clearly flush enough to go this route again, or indeed that of Martin, but he obviously bonded with the German-built Framus. It's said he particularly liked its sound and how it blended with Harrison's Gibson. Also, with its adjustable bridge, perhaps the guitar was easier to manage than fixed-bridge models with 60s-style actions and the hefty strings of the day.



John Lennon's original Framus Hootenanny (pictured here) was sold for a staggering \$2.8 million at auction in May 2024



The guitar lay neglected in an attic for many years until it was restored by LA Guitar Repair prior to sale

You can see Lennon playing *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away* on his Framus in the film *Help!*

Let's also not forget that Framus was already a popular marque with UK groups. For instance, McCartney's own first instrument was a Framus Zenith, Bill Wyman of The Rolling Stones famously used a Star bass, and The Animals, The Herd and others also favoured the brand.

Both Lennon and Harrison played the Hootenanny on the *Help!* album: John and George on Lennon's Dylan-influenced *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away*, and Lennon using it to drive the wistful *It's Only Love* and the title track itself. You can also see John miming to the former track in the film, and noodling on the instrument in stills from the movie.

The guitar carried over to the following album, *Rubber Soul*, too. Lennon played it, capo'd at the 7th fret, on his soulful ballad *Girl*, while Harrison provided rhythm back-up on McCartney's uptempo *I've Just Seen A Face* and John's *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)*.

These were the last Beatles songs on which the Framus would be heard, since at the end of 1965 John presented the Hootenanny to Gordon Waller of Peter And Gordon. McCartney had penned hits for the duo (the other half of which, Peter, was the brother of McCartney's then girlfriend, Jane Asher), including *Nobody I Know* and *A World Without Love*. Waller later gave the guitar to his manager. He stashed it away in his attic, where it stayed for decades until being discovered, still in its 'original' Maton case.

When the decision to sell the 12-string was made, Julien's in New York proved to be the preferred auction house. Julien's liaised with Andy Babiuk, author of the well-respected reference work *Beatles Gear*, to verify this was John's instrument. Babiuk confirmed that Framus 5/024 Hootenanny, serial #51083, is indeed John Lennon's guitar. His detective work focused on comparable darker patches in the wood grain in the soundhole rosette, specific features on the guitar's top, plus likenesses in the swirl of the mock tortoiseshell pickguard.

As the Framus was in poor condition after years in an attic where huge temperature fluctuations can occur,

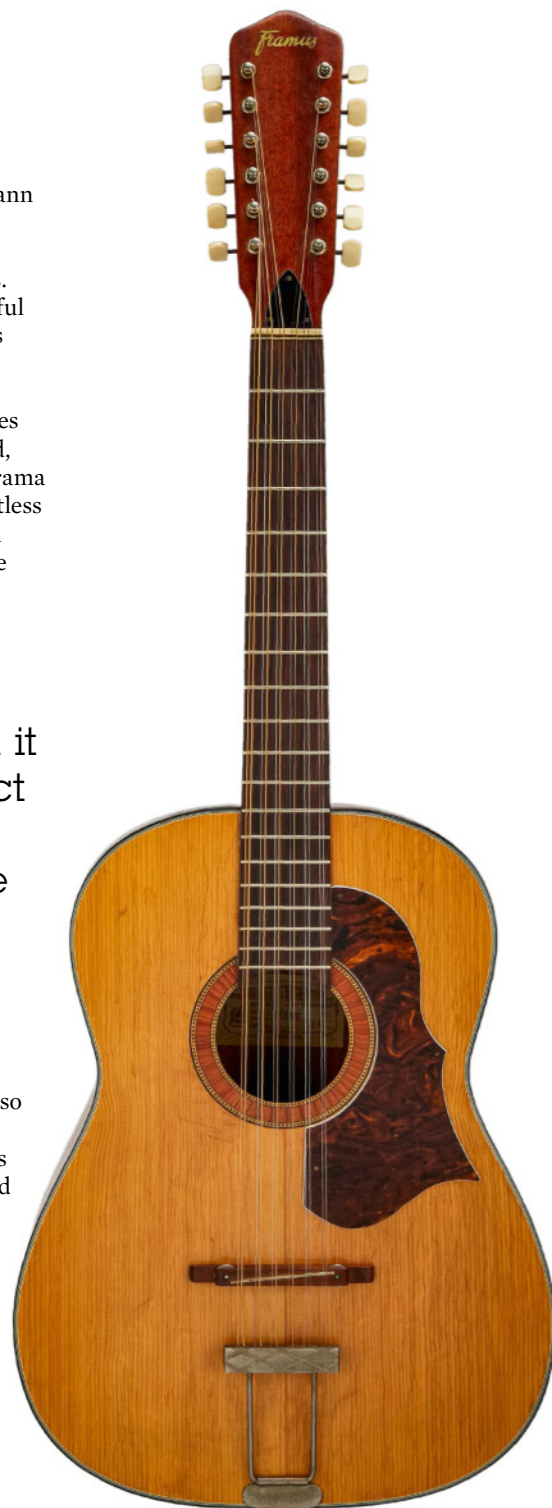
Julien's had to make a decision about restoring the instrument to playing status or leaving it as an unplayable museum piece. Deciding to restore, Julien's enlisted Ryan Schuermann of LA Guitar Repair to undertake the work. Among other things, Schuermann reset the guitar's neck, repaired the top, steam/heat-treated the warped bridge, and dressed its corroded frets. Julien's says it not only looks wonderful and plays fantastically well, but emits the exact tone heard on all those unforgettable numbers.

While several less auspicious Beatles instruments had previously been sold, including Harrison's Grazioso/Futurama and Maton Mastersound, and the fretless Bartell on which he played the solo in *Happiness Is A Warm Gun*, the release of something so well documented on

Julien's Auctions decided to restore the 12-string... and it now emits the exact tone heard on all those unforgettable numbers

both record and film was obviously going to cause a stir.

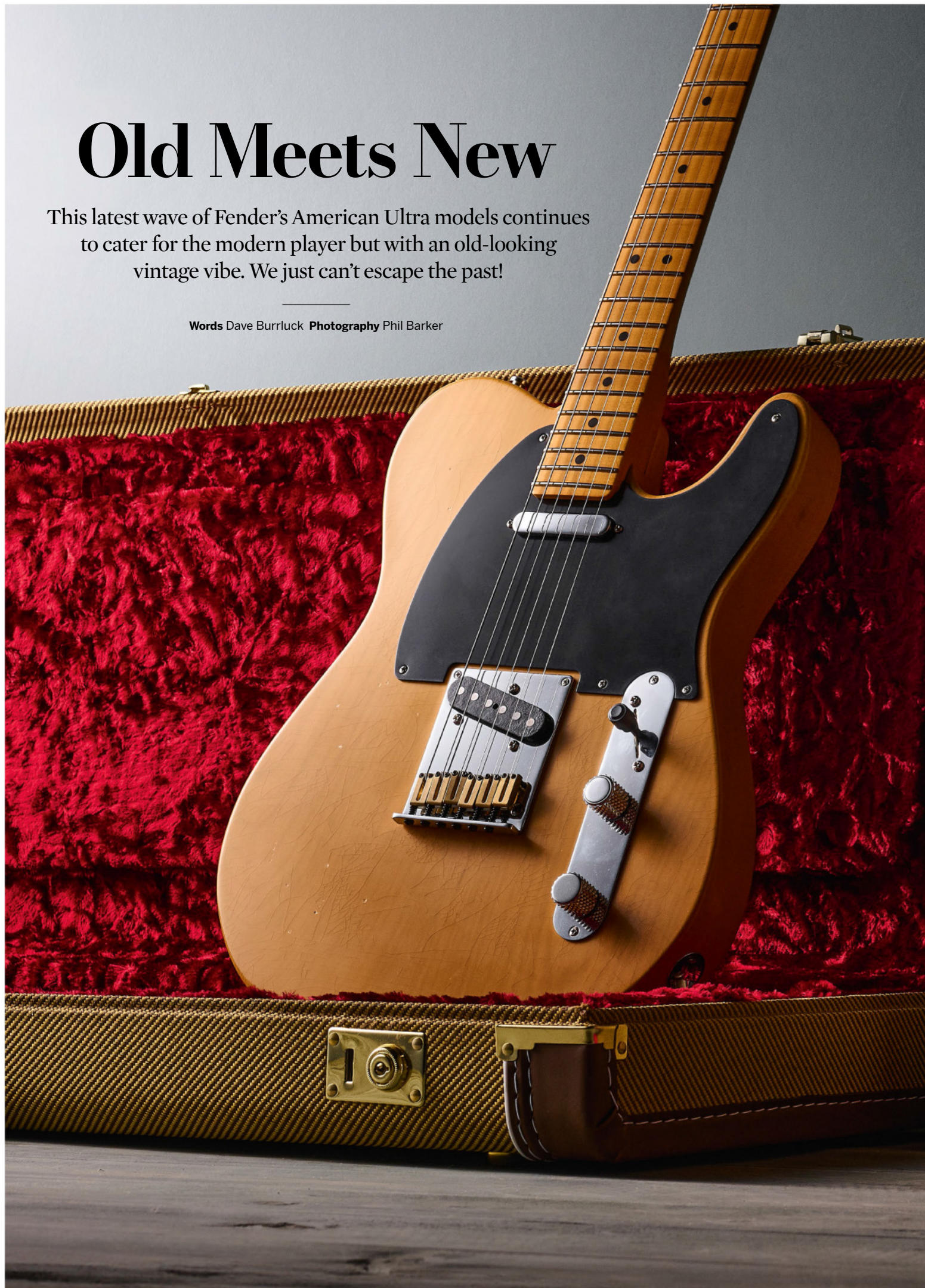
On sale day, 29 May 2024, an unspecified buyer dipped into their pocket for an amount of \$2,857,500 – so far a record for any guitar previously owned by a Beatle. With McCartney's 'lost and found' Höfner bass estimated to be worth £10 million, we shudder to think what his *Yesterday* Epiphone Texan, John's *Get Back* Casino or George's 'Rocky' Strat might one day fetch. Of course, there have been attainable reissues of all these models. And now that Framus has reintroduced the Hootenanny, you can grab a significant piece of Beatles history for a more manageable price. **G**



Old Meets New

This latest wave of Fender's American Ultra models continues to cater for the modern player but with an old-looking vintage vibe. We just can't escape the past!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker







FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA LUXE VINTAGE '50S TELECASTER & '60S STRAT HSS £2,949 EACH

CONTACT **Fender Musical Instruments EMEA** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB **www.fender.com**

What You Need To Know

1

More high-end Fenders? What's the deal?

These are part of the Ultra line, which was last refreshed to the Ultra II specification at the end of 2024. Effectively, these new Ultra Luxe Vintage models replace the previous Ultra Luxe mini-range.

2

What's the difference and what's 'Vintage'?

The big difference here compared with the Ultra II models is the new aged-looking 'Heirloom' finish: a low-gloss cracked and lightly dinged nitro finish in typical, if limited, classic Fender colours. Hardware is basically the same as the Ultra IIs, likewise the compound radius fingerboard, but these also have stainless-steel medium jumbo frets.

3

What about the pickups and controls?

The Noiseless single-coil-sized humbuckers revert to Fender's Pure Vintage single coils, but the control circuit and S-1 switching on both our review examples remains the same as the Ultra II models.

Originally introduced back in 2019, we last caught up with Fender's most advanced USA production models earlier this year (issue 520) after they'd received a Mk II refresh that was announced in October 2024. These American Ultra IIs are fine modern-style guitars that top the USA line with a choice of Telecaster, Stratocaster (including a left-hand model), Strat HSS and the more futuristic Meteora.

But you might have missed another modern strand in the form of the American

Ultra Luxe models that were actually launched back in 2021: four guitars with stainless-steel frets, the Ultra's compound radius fingerboard, and an 'augmented D' profile neck shape. The HSS Strat and dual-humbucking Tele featured alder bodies and Floyd Rose vibratos; the Strat and standard Tele used ash bodies with the same hardware as those refreshed Ultra II models.

Now, introduced just a few weeks ago are their replacements: the longer-titled American Ultra Luxe Vintage models (we



The bridge saddles are the same brass block saddles as the Ultra II but without the chrome plating. Two extra screws on the plate prevent any movement that can produce feedback under high gain

THE RIVALS

Improved classic F-style guitars are far from uncommon. Fender itself, of course, has the 'improved' American Ultra II models (see Range Options in spec list), as well as the contemporary American Professional II – the standard Tele there is £1,859 with V-Mod II single coils, and the Stratocaster is £1,869, both with a good colour choice. The vintage-aimed American Vintage II 1951 Telecaster costs £2,069 with gloss nitro finish and Pure Vintage '51 single coils, along with the original-style smaller frets and 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius; the 1965 Stratocaster is £2,299.

Of the many makers out there offering improved Fender-inspired models, Suhr's Classic S HSS costs around £3k in-store and a Classic Antique T in Butterscotch is £3,299 (both from GuitarGuitar). Looking to UK makers, Patrick James Eggle has the Fender-inspired Oz (from £2,999) and 96 (from £3,200), while Atkin Guitars makes some very fine electrics – and acoustics – that can be custom-ordered from around £3k. The tip of the iceberg!

understand the Ultra II models will be ongoing). This time we get five guitars: a '50s Stratocaster, '60s Stratocaster, '60s Stratocaster HSS, '50s Telecaster and '60s Custom Telecaster.

While there are plenty of modern features, the immediate difference – aside from the decade-specific names and headstock logos – is a new 'Heirloom' lacquer (aka nitrocellulose) finish with, as Fender states, "a meticulously aged lacquer finish that lets the tone wood breathe as it wears naturally and uniquely".

There's no truck with the noise-cancelling single coils of the Ultra II or prior Ultra Luxe models. The Luxe Vintage models return to Fender's long-running Pure Vintage pickups (with the exception of the Haymaker humbucker, which we first saw on the refreshed Ultra II's Strat HSS). But in contrast to this return to the past is a raft of modern features in terms of hardware (but no Floyd Rose vibratos) and stainless-steel frets – like the Ultra Luxe but not the Ultra IIs.

"With the American Ultra Luxe Vintage series, we've redefined the balance between heritage and innovation," says Max Gutnik, chief product officer, FMIC, in the launch PR. "This collection honours our iconic legacy while pushing the boundaries of modern craftsmanship. Every detail is built for exceptional tone, feel and timeless style. We're proud to



1. Unlike the standard gold logo on the Ultra II, here we have the silver Fender logo of the early '50s Telecaster with the model name in black script. It's a single decal that sits on top of the finish

2. Aside from being a bigger-than-vintage gauge, unlike the Ultra IIs the material is stainless steel. Typically, we get black dots on the face, but the side dots are Luminlay

These come across as 'greatest hits' that pare back the modernism of the Ultra Luxe and II

offer players an elevated experience that respects tradition and sets a new standard for performance."

To us, these come across as a 'greatest hits' package that clearly pares back the modernism of both the Ultra Luxe and Ultra II models: a vintage-aimed aesthetic and voicing but with modern hardware and playability. Let's take a look at a couple.

American Ultra Luxe '50s Telecaster

If the overall old-meets-new concept can hardly be called unique, pulling this one from its tweed case there's a moment where we wonder if we've been sent the right guitar. The classic colour is here, but the Heirloom finish is a duller low-gloss with plenty of quite subtle cracks and a few minor dings; it almost has the appearance of a well-used but not abused instrument. It appears a similar finish is applied to the neck – because although it feels pretty similar to the satin sheen of the earlier Ultra IIs, there is some cracking around the portion of the neck before it's screwed in and behind the nut and lower fret positions. The chrome-plated bridge plate, the electronics control plate and even the neck pickup cover don't look aged, but they don't quite look box-fresh, either. And at the start of our test there were no pick marks on the five-screw single-ply black pickguard. Here, too,



3

3. Although the contoured neck heel is the same as the Ultra II, the stamped lettering on the neckplate changes

4. The Electrosocket-style output jackplate is held in place with two screws and is easier to mount than the original

The actual hardware choice follows the Ultra II closely and is pretty much the same as the original Ultra models

the pickguard of the Tele and the larger scratchplate on the Strat revert to classic-looking plastic instead of the Ultra II's anodised aluminium.

Of course, the guitar retains plenty of Ultra-isms. The classic Telecaster slab body is contoured in the usual Strat-like forearm and rib-cut positions, and another cutaway scoop is added behind the treble cutaway, while the heel is both chamfered and has a more rounded nose. You can also see the wavy ash grain through the translucent finish, as you should, and at 3.44kg (7.58lb) it's no boat anchor.

Like the Ultra IIs, the necks on both our samples aren't the trendy roasted maple but are lightly tinted, and both are

quarter-sawn as opposed to slab-sawn, which in theory should provide a little more stiffness.

The actual hardware choice follows the Ultra II closely and is pretty much the same as the original Ultra models. Although the brass block bridge saddles aren't chromed here, the rest of the parts look the same as the Ultra IIs: the rear-locking tuners have short posts, and the standard control plate has the angled pickup selector switch with heavily knurled control knobs.

As we said, the pickups change from the more modern Noiseless humbucking style to Pure Vintage '51 single coils: the push-in S-1 switch adds neck and bridge in series (with the pickup selector in *any* position) as it does on the Ultra II.

American Ultra Luxe '60s Stratocaster HSS

The modern antique illusion continues with this rather fetching Strat in the same lower gloss finish with its slightly pinkish hue. It also retains the same contouring of the Ultra II. The body wood swaps to alder with an overall slightly heavier weight of 3.76kg (8.27lb), which, for some of us, will be the top of the weight range for a good Strat.

The hardware continues to follow that of the Ultra II: the rear-lock tuners, the two-post vibrato and its stainless-steel saddles, cold-rolled steel block and push-fit tension adjustable arm. As with the Tele, the neck and middle pickups swap from Noiseless to Pure Vintage '61 Strat single coils with



UNDER THE HOOD Same as the Ultra IIs? Let's take a look

Removing the two screws to take off the Tele's controlplate, things look familiar with what appears to be the same circuit used on the Ultra and Ultra II Teles. It centres around the 250kohms four-pole S-1 switched volume control, which has a small PCB treble bleed circuit – 7711092001 REV A (same as Ultra service diagram) – with two resistors and one capacitor. The tone control doesn't feel like a No-Load type, while its cap is .022µF Orange Drop and the three-way lever pickup selector is a standard two-pole type.

The Strat HSS again appears to be identical to the Ultra II circuit; you even get a 'Ultra II' wiring explanation in the case. So we have the same S-1 switched volume control (with the same treble-bleed PCB as the Tele), plus this time a four-pole pickup selector that seems overkill as the only extra sound here is the bridge humbucker's coil-split. The middle-placed neck/middle pickup tone is a standard 250k pot, the lower bridge tone is a No-Load type; you can feel that and

see the small hole in the back of the pot that creates the out of circuit 'detent' position. As usual, the entire scratchplate is clipped onto the output jack wiring so it can be installed or removed without any soldering.

The Strat's body is also routed for an HSH pickup layout, and the actual finish looks very thin indeed with no obvious undercoat. There's no paint in the neck cavity, either, and no neck shim.

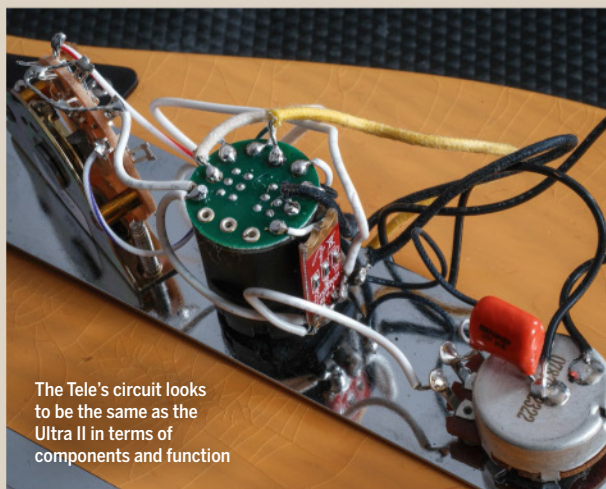
Of the Pure Vintage '51 Telecaster set, Fender tells us the bridge pickup uses Formvar-coated wire on the bridge pickup and enamel-coated wire on neck pickup; both use flush Alnico III magnets for

sweet midrange and tight bass. Measuring the DCRs at output, we find 7.71k at the bridge and 7.64k at the neck, and they're hum-cancelling in both the parallel and series mixes.

The Pure Vintage '61 uses Alnico V stagger-height magnetic poles and Formvar-coated magnet wire, which we're told "improves overall brightness". DCRs here measure 5.81k at the neck and 5.88k at the middle. There's no spec info on the Haymaker (it's not currently available aftermarket), but measured at output we get 7.15k with the full coil and 3.57k when split, which suggests a lower wind, confirmed by Fender (along with an Alnico V magnet) compared with the 10.93k we measured on the Ultra II Haymaker when we looked at that back in issue 520.

Typically, the neck and middle single coils are hum-cancelling when combined, as are the middle and bridge humbucker (full coil). Voicing the bridge on its own is hum-cancelling, though not when it's split.

Things look familiar with what appears to be the same circuit used on the Ultra and Ultra II



The Tele's circuit looks to be the same as the Ultra II in terms of components and function



It's the same Ultra II style for the Strat HSS, too



This Strat HSS body could just as easily be an HSH or SSS thanks to those pickup routes



Both new guitars revert to classic single coils. These are the Pure Vintage '61 Strat pickups

aged-looking vintage-stagger poles, while our HSS model has the open zebra-coiled Haymaker full-size humbucker in the bridge position. The knobs are those nice-feeling 'Soft Touch' types, with an S-1 push switch on the volume, which, when engaged (pushed down), simply splits the Haymaker to voice the neck-facing slug coil. No change there, then. Here, though, the ebony fingerboard of the Ultra II models changes to classic rosewood with subtle orange-hued stripes and almost pinkish clay dots. Another minor bit of 'modern-ish' to these models is the glow-in-the-dark Luminlay side dots, first introduced with the Ultra IIs.

Feel & Sounds

The Ultra II models, with a wide and quite modern colour choice, are in contrast to not only the finish type but the classic colour palette. So if your audience will think from a few feet away that you're playing an 'old' Fender, your hands will be telling you something different.

Both guitars use a bigger-than-vintage medium jumbo fretwire gauge that's quite wide and a good height, certainly on the rosewood-'board Strat. Technically, due to the finish on the maple-'board Tele, the fret height is microscopically reduced, but neither feel over-big; it's a good 'refretted' choice. On both guitars, too, the frets are well fettled and polished, a fairly mainstream modern setup with 0.009s, minimal neck relief and string heights at the 12th fret of 1.53mm on the treble and bass sides on our Tele, and fractionally higher on the bass side of our Strat.

Both guitars have lightly rolled fingerboard edges. The Tele's maple edges are a little neater; the Strat's are not as



smooth as perhaps you should expect on what is a nearly £3k guitar.

While there was some trumpet-blowing about the 'modern' compound fingerboard radius of the Ultra IIs, it's not mentioned in the launch PR here, but it measures the same 254mm to 356mm (10 to 14 inches). If you only play small-radius vintage-style Fenders with small frets then you're going to notice a difference, but Fender's standard 'modern' radius is 241mm (9.5 inches), PRS has pretty much exclusively always used 254mm (10 inches) and, of

course, Gibson goes for 305mm (12 inches), so this isn't exactly alien. Both guitars are really clean players.

The necks measure very closely to previous Ultra and Ultra II models that we've evaluated and are slightly wider at the nut, which measures just over 43mm on both our guitars, with a very similar depth of 21mm at the 1st fret and 22.4mm by the 12th. The 'modern D' profile could just as easily be called a fuller-shouldered C, which is what it feels like. Nothing radical at all.



The more refined feel means it's less of a struggle to produce pretty classic Tele tones

If the overall feel of both guitars is obviously very familiar, so are the sounds. As we prefer, we sound-tested both before we checked the pickup specifications and there's a very present contrast. The Tele isn't as beefy at the bridge as many early 50s examples and sounds lighter and considerably brighter. If you're looking for that steely Tele-bite and snap, it's here in spades. And, of course, you can just round-off the spiky high-end with the tone control. It's quite addictive, not least with a basic overdrive kicked in from our



7

pedalboard. The more refined feel means it's less of a struggle to produce pretty classic Tele tones, too.

The neck pickup isn't over-powered with a smooth top-end and a nice midrange character – the classic dual pickup parallel mix. Well, that's why many of us use Telecasters, isn't it? The extra sound – both pickups in series – adds considerable beef and a lift in output but still retains a more humbucking-like smoothness. Played clean with a little volume reduction, this series link is great for jazzier, bluesier styles, not to mention big, ringing and fulsome but jangly cleans. Sound-wise, then, it's not really reinventing any wheel and perhaps it's better off for that – a good-sounding, quite classic Tele with that extra bit of oomph if you need.

The slightly weightier, beefier feel of our Strat sort of comes over plugged in. There's a typically different response here with more bounce to the voice that's subtly less direct than the Tele. The impression that this HSS is the more powerful starts with the Haymaker: a pretty classic humbucker with good midrange thickness but plenty of definition to the high-end. It suits the hot-rod 'modded' style, but it's not too hot.

In contrast, there's slightly lower output but good depth to the neck – nice and choppy and with enough depth to clean up the overall voicing after rocking out on the Haymaker. There's a slight high-end lift to

5. The Alnico V Pure Vintage Strat '61 single coils are in the neck and middle positions

6. This two-post vibrato has long been used by Fender. The Haymaker bridge 'bucker is relatively new and was introduced on the Ultra II Strat HSS. It seems the Haymaker is a lower wind here; it certainly plays well with the Pure Vintage single coils

the tougher-sounding middle single coil, and both mixes do their funky job. Plus you have the choice of the fuller middle and bridge with the full humbucker, or slightly cleaner, snappier sound of the mix with the bridge humbucker split. Voiced in isolation, that coil-split is pretty usable, too – more classic, less rock, and well-balanced output-wise with those Pure Vintage single coils.

On both guitars the volume tapers feel good under the hand and retain clarity as you wind them down without becoming

7. Details such as 'Soft Touch' control knobs add to the improved vibe of the Ultra II Strats. The middle tone is for the neck and middle pickups, while the No-Load lower tone control is for the bridge pickup only

8. These F-logo'd rear-lock tuners are used on all the Luxe Vintage guitars. They feature short posts but still use a string tree on the top two strings



8



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA LUXE VINTAGE '50S TELECASTER

PRICE: £2,949 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Ash
NECK: Quarter-sawn maple, modern 'D', bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/43.2mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, Luminlay side dots, 254-356mm (10-14") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo, stainless steel
HARDWARE: Fender Tele bridge with 6x brass block saddles and through-body stringing, Fender Deluxe rear-locking tuners (short posts); nickel/chromed-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Fender Pure Vintage '51 bridge and neck single coils, 3-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.44/7.58
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: The American Ultra Luxe Vintage '60s Custom Telecaster (£2,949) features top-edge binding to the alder body, rosewood fingerboard and Pure Vintage '63 single coils in Lake Placid Blue and 3-Color Sunburst
LEFT-HANDERS: Not at launch
FINISHES: Butterscotch Blonde (as reviewed), White Blonde – lightly aged 'Heirloom lacquer' low gloss to body and headstock, satin neck back



PROS Inviting 'old' finish contrasts modern hardware style; excellent playability with classic sounds and added series/parallel switching

CONS Limited colour choice and hefty price tag



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA LUXE VINTAGE '60S STRATOCASTER HSS

PRICE: £2,949 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, modern 'D', bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/43.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'clay' dot markers, Luminlay side dots, 254-356mm (10-14") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo, stainless steel
HARDWARE: Fender 2-point Deluxe synchronized vibrato with stainless-steel block saddles and cold-rolled steel block with pop-in arm, Fender Deluxe rear-locking tuners (short posts)
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Fender Pure Vintage '61 Strat single coils (neck, middle), Haymaker bridge humbucker, 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck & middle), no-load tone 2 (bridge)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.76/8.27
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: American Ultra Luxe Vintage '50s Strat with Pure Vintage '57 Strat single coils and American Ultra Luxe Vintage '60s Strat with 3x Pure Vintage '61 Strat single coils (both £2,899)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not at launch
FINISHES: Fiesta Red (as reviewed), Sea Foam Green – lightly aged 'Heirloom lacquer' low gloss to body and headstock, satin neck back



PROS Well turned out with old-school modded vibe centred on playability; Haymaker 'bucker plays well with the classic single coils

CONS Limited colours

9. Rosewood is employed here, not ebony as on the Ultra II models. Like the Tele, there are stainless-steel frets and those Luminlay side dots

too shrill. Like the guitars themselves, these circuits and the sounds they produce are well sorted.

Overall, tuning stability is very good, too, and the well-proven vibrato on the HSS holds its tuning once everything has settled down.

The modernisms provide a nicely mainstream feel and playability, not least with the well-finished stainless-steel frets

Verdict

Presuming these new Ultras are intended to sit alongside the current Ultra IIs and offer an older aesthetic and more classic sound, they certainly achieve their goal.

The modernisms in terms of hardware, neck and fingerboard profile and overall playability provide a nicely mainstream feel and playability, too, not least with the well-finished stainless-steel frets. And whereas some of the more modern colour finishes of the Ultra II range might not appeal to all classic rockers, these more familiar hues certainly will.

There is a bit of a price hike over the Ultra II models, and we'd guess the Heirloom finish has plenty to do with that, but these are considerably less money than going down even the light-relic route in the Fender Custom Shop.

Ultimately, it's about choice and that's not lacking in Fender's USA production line-up. Which would you go for? **G**



TAKING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

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



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GUITARIST PRODUCER TONE HUNTER

Bare Knuckle

bareknucklepickups.co.uk

Flavours Of Fender

A look at some of the company's other American Fender options currently on the roster

Words Dave Burrluck



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II TELECASTER
FROM £1,859

NECK PROFILE: Deep 'C' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 241mm (9.5")
FRETS: 22, narrow tall
PICKUPS: V-Mod II single coils
HARDWARE: Top-load/string-through bridge with compensated saddles, die-cast tuners
FINISH: 10 colours; gloss urethane body, satin to neck back

A slightly updated Tele with a neat bridge and three brass 'bullet' saddles, extra fret and headstock truss rod adjustment. It uses Fender's 'modern' radius fingerboard with 'Narrow Tall' frets. Hard to argue with.



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1951 TELECASTER
£2,069

NECK PROFILE: 'U' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 184mm (7.25")
FRETS: 21, vintage tall
PICKUPS: Pure Vintage '51 Telecaster
HARDWARE: Brass saddle bridge, vintage-style tuners
FINISH: Butterscotch Blonde only; gloss nitro

If you want to experience some original Telecaster style, then this is the one for you. There's no modernism here, so it features the old-style body-end truss rod adjustment and a relatively big maple neck with small frets and fingerboard radius.



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA II TELECASTER £2,099

NECK PROFILE: Modern 'D' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 254-356mm (10-14") compound
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
PICKUPS: 2x Ultra II Noiseless single-coil-size humbuckers
HARDWARE: Modern bridge with 6x chromed brass block saddles, rear-locking tuners
FINISH: 5 colours; gloss urethane body, Ultra satin to neck back

Close to our Ultra Luxe Vintage for body contours, hardware and S-1 switching. No stainless-steel frets, but we get the modern compound radius ebony or quarter-sawn maple fingerboard.



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER £1,869

NECK PROFILE: Deep 'C' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 241mm (9.5")
FRETS: 22, narrow tall
PICKUPS: V-Mod II single coils
HARDWARE: 2-post vibrato with 6x bent steel saddles, die-cast tuners
FINISH: 9 colours; gloss urethane body, satin to neck back

The subtle upgrades have proved very popular, not least the two-post (but still vintage-style) vibrato. The slightly taller frets on the flatter-than-vintage radius fingerboard make for a more contemporary feel. Big colour choice, too. A great Strat!



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1961 STRATOCASTER £2,069

NECK PROFILE: Medium 'C' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 184mm (7.25")
FRETS: 21, vintage tall
PICKUPS: Pure Vintage '61 Stratocaster
HARDWARE: Vintage vibrato bridge, vintage-style tuners
FINISH: 3-Colour Sunburst, Olympic White, Fiesta Red; gloss nitro

Here's the real classic and it comes in a choice of colours, each with a rosewood fingerboard and alder body. Like the Vintage II Tele, there's no modernism, but that hasn't bothered many players over the years.



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA II STRATOCASTER HSS £2,129

NECK PROFILE: Modern 'D' shaped
FINGERBOARD RADIUS: 254-356mm (10-14") compound
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
PICKUPS: 2x Ultra II Noiseless single-coil-size humbucker; Haymaker humbucker (bridge)
HARDWARE: 2-post Ultra vibrato with stainless-steel saddles, rear-locking tuners
FINISH: 5 colours; gloss urethane body, Ultra satin to neck back

The Haymaker at the bridge provides a modded vibe. You get an anodised aluminium scratchplate, S-1 switching and a quarter-sawn maple neck. Great vibrato and locking tuners, too.



Spin Doctor

The latest addition to the Boss Compact pedal series channels the sound of a vintage Leslie rotary-speaker cabinet

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln



BOSS RT-2 ROTARY ENSEMBLE £229

CONTACT **Roland UK** WEB www.boss.info

What You Need To Know

- 1 Doesn't Boss already have a rotary pedal?**
Well, it used to have the RT-20, a larger dual-footswitch pedal, but that was discontinued. This new addition gives you a rotary pedal in the standard Boss Compact pedal format for the first time.
- 2 Does it have the same sound as the RT-20?**
Boss says the two have totally different algorithms; it's revamped the DSP engine and can now better reproduce detailed behaviours.
- 3 Can you change between fast and slow speeds with one footswitch?**
Yes, a long press does it, or you can do it with an external footswitch if you prefer.

The complex mix of spatially shifting audio effects in a rotary speaker is created by the physical rotation of a treble speaker horn and bass speaker drum. And it has to be one of the most intriguing modulation effects for guitar.

Very few of us, of course, have the luxury of being able to use the real electro-mechanical thing on stage, but there are pedals that aim to replicate the sound, the latest of which is this Boss RT-2 – the first dedicated rotary pedal in the Compact range's 48-year history. It's based on a full-size Leslie 122 cabinet with rotating horn and drum, rather than the smaller cabs without the horn like the Leslie 16 or Fender Vibratone.

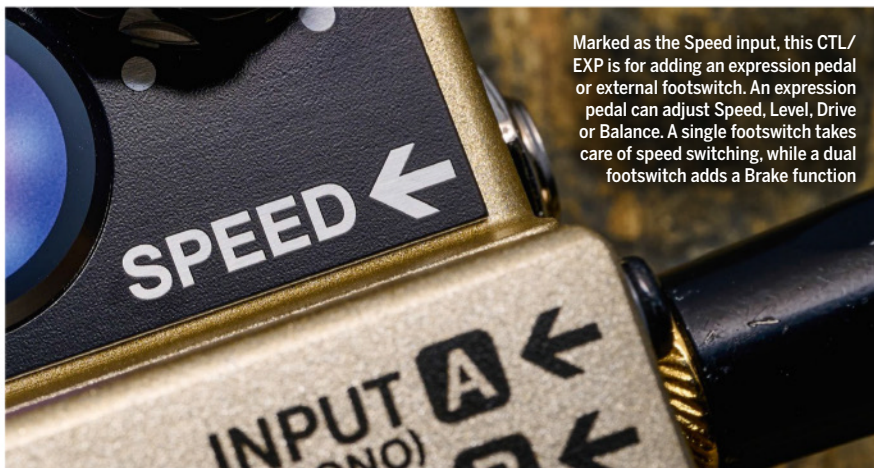
In Use

The RT-2 can be used in mono, mono in/stereo out, or in full stereo. If using in stereo, the default setting is for the effected sound at both outputs, but you can also set it up for dry sound at one output

and effect at the other. This option may suit anyone wanting to emulate the sort of onstage setup that combines standard amp tone with a rotating speaker, which David Gilmour has been known to use.

Dual-concentric knobs control the action. The Level knob sets the output level, with unity gain at around 12 o'clock allowing plenty of scope for a boost when the pedal is kicked in. Another knob, replicating the operation of the valve amps found in the vintage Leslie cabinets, adds drive to the signal. This control also has another function selected via a rear-panel toggle switch that allows it

The Boss RT-2 is the first dedicated rotary pedal in the Compact range's 48-year history



Marked as the Speed input, this CTL/EXP is for adding an expression pedal or external footswitch. An expression pedal can adjust Speed, Level, Drive or Balance. A single footswitch takes care of speed switching, while a dual footswitch adds a Brake function

to set the volume balance between the treble and bass rotors. It's a bit like an EQ adjustment and can get a little extreme, but we suspect most players will see it as a set-and-forget parameter. Chances are you'll find a preferred blend somewhere around the middle of the dial, and switch back to using the knob for Drive (the pedal will remember the Balance setting).

Another dual-concentric knob allows you to set the Slow and Fast speeds, and you can switch between them via a press on the pedal's footswitch or an external footswitch. There are two options for the transition between speeds set by another rear-panel toggle switch. It can be a five-second ramp between the two,



1. This circular window indicates the rotary-speaker speed as it spins. The inner red light is the treble rotor, while the outer blue light is the bass rotor. Dual-concentric knobs keep the interface neat. Here, this pair of Fast/Slow knobs sets the rotation speed. The outer/lower knob sets the Slow speed, while the upper/inner knob sets the High speed

which pretty much replicates how long it takes the physical components in the real thing to move between speeds, or you can have an almost instantaneous switch. It's always clear which speed you're at as the pedal's LED lights up green for Slow and red for Fast, while the large round display gives you a visual indication of the actual rotor spinning speed.

While the pedal's footswitch default setting is effect on/off plus a long-press to switch between the speeds, there is more flexibility in that you can also set it up for three other possible modes of action including some momentary switching between speeds.

Sounds

The pedal has three differently voiced modes of operation selected by a toggle switch. Mode I offers the classic rotary-speaker sound based on a Leslie 122, while the other two modes are described as "modern variations" developed for optimal performance when using the RT-2 with other pedals.

Starting with Mode I, there's no doubting the multi-faceted representation of rotary-speaker sound: it sounds great in mono and especially so when heard

in spacious stereo. Both Fast and Slow speeds give you an accurate impression of the real thing, and there's a realistic sense – when transitioning between the two – of the horn and rotor accelerating/decelerating at different rates. Turning up the Drive knob takes you through some textural grit to a smooth drive that's integral to the sound but never overstated.

Drive works the same in Mode II, described by Boss as having a "wider tonal range" than Mode I, which to our ears manifests itself as an airier, more spatial sound with increased clarity. Out of the three, it's the one we most gravitate

2. Mode I offers the sound of a classic Leslie 122 rotary speaker; Mode II expands on the classic sound; and Mode III is designed for greater presence in an ensemble setting

THE RIVALS

Neo Instruments specialises in rotary-speaker pedals and offers its flagship Ventilator II (£399), Mini Vent II (£314) and two versions of the Micro Vent, the 122 and the 16 (both £299). Two of the most popular rotary pedals are the dual-footswitch Strymon Lex V2 (£319) and Keeley Rotary (£289). The Strymon has a host of adjustable parameters and supports full MIDI implementation, while the Keeley has a more streamlined user interface. Both have a dry/wet Mix knob. For a different aspect on the rotary sound, the Dawner Prince Pulse (£291) is a revolving speaker emulator inspired by David Gilmour's rig.

3. The Rise/Fall switch sets the rate of change when transitioning between speeds by using a footswitch. The Slow setting gives a five-second ramp for the acceleration or deceleration. The Fast setting instantaneously switches between the two. The two-way Drive switch selects the function of the Drive knob: Drive adjusts the distortion, and Balance adjusts the balance between the treble rotor and bass rotor. Drive and Balance values from the last use are stored in the memory



towards and it also melds well with any drive pedal you care to put in front of it.

Mode III takes things into different territory with what is effectively an evolved version of rotary sound. What you're getting here is a tighter sound focused on the midrange that's mildly distorted from the outset and is tailor-made to cut through a band mix and make its presence felt. The Drive knob here covers the more potent range of a driven guitar amp – turn it up for a full-on psychedelic swirl.

One other aspect of rotary-speaker sound is the Brake setting. This is where the rotors are braked so they're not spinning at all, but the sound still passes through the cabinet and there's a sonic transition to be had as the rotation slows to a stop. The pedal supports this, but it's only possible to access it by plugging a dual footswitch such as the Boss FS-6 into the CTL/EXP jack. While the CTL1 function of a single footswitch or a dual footswitch can be used for the standard speed transition, the Brake is only available as the CTL2 function. The CTL/EXP jack can alternatively host an expression pedal that controls speed by default but can be assigned to Level, Drive or Balance.

While there's plenty of advantage in having a compact pedal, its size does give rise to a couple of compromises

Verdict

A dedicated, compact Boss rotary pedal is something that's been conspicuous by its absence, so the RT-2 is a very welcome addition to the roster. While there's plenty of advantage in having a compact pedal, its size does give rise to a couple of compromises: pressing and holding the footswitch to change speed is slightly clunky compared with those pedals that come with two footswitches; also some might be disappointed by the lack of a wet/dry mix knob to enable them to dial in a more subtler sense of movement, rather than the full-on Leslie sound. That aside, though, this is a pedal that is easy to use, and if you're looking for the traditional sound of a horn and rotor-equipped Leslie speaker you'll find it here with practical variations alongside another voice that pushes the rotary envelope. **G**



BOSS RT-2

PRICE: £229

ORIGIN: Malaysia

TYPE: Rotary-speaker emulation pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, noise suppressor, wet/dry output option

CONTROLS: Level, Drive, Fast, Slow, Mode switch (I, II, III), Rise/Fall Time switch (Slow/Fast), Drive Knob switch (Drive/Balance), footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs A (mono) and B, standard outputs A (mono) and B, CTL/EXP jack

POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 115 mA

DIMENSIONS: 73 (w) x 129 (d) x 59mm (h)



PROS Classic Boss compact format; three voicings; stereo operation; speed switching; onboard drive effect; cool display

CONS No wet/dry mix knob; Brake function only available via external twin footswitch

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PHIL X

The former session man turned Bon Jovi six-stringer dialled in with *Guitarist* to talk about his journey buying, selling, regretting and loving guitars

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

"I was 11 and I was washing dishes at my dad's restaurant, saving my money. My dad was like, 'Hey, you find a guitar and we'll split it. Whatever you have, I'll match.' So I took my 175 bucks, he matched that and we went to this weird guy's apartment and bought a secondhand Strat. Right now, that Strat is hanging up in my friend's bar in Burlington, Ontario, Canada. One thing that Edward Van Halen instilled in me was that you can enjoy and ruin. So that guitar went through four or five different necks, three or four different Floyd Roses, and like 75 pickups [laughs].

"As I honed my craft as a player, I also honed my craft as a tinkerer of guitars. I painted it many times. It went through many things and it's pretty crazy now that I think of it. I feel like I dug that guitar way more because I put my own money into it, you know? I feel like it wasn't just handed to me. It's something I worked hard for and I appreciated more. That gets missed a lot these days. You

Phil took a 360 approach to the instrument: "As I honed my craft as a player, I also honed my craft as a tinkerer of guitars"

know, when people are like, 'Man, I saw that you got a new pedal setup. But it's so expensive and I can't afford it.' I'm like, 'Go cut some lawns, man.' I washed dishes at my dad's restaurant – and that was gross!"

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"Oh, wow... this is going to be a good part of the story. There was a 1979 Stratocaster that I found in Florida in a vintage shop. And I bought it because it reminded me of that first Strat I told you about. The other thing is that when I put it in my hand, I felt like I was 11 again. It was the exact same neck, which is incredible, right? I was like, 'What do you want for this?' He goes, 'Well, it's this much... but you're Phil X, so I'll give you a deal.' [laughs]"

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

"There's always a bargain to be had, you know? Especially if you walk in and people say, like, 'Hey, man,

"There's something about Flying Vs and Explorers that smack me in the face. Man, I keep saying, 'Oh, I gotta get that'"

would you do a video for the store?' And I'm like, 'Well, I really can't because I'm under contract with...' But, for me, it's funny – I've had endorsements for so long, and some of the best guitars I've owned have been free!

"But, really, the truly special one is the one I'm working on with Gibson, which is a signature SG, so my favourite guitar right now is prototype number three. In Bon Jovi, I have to play, like, eight or 10 guitars because there's different tunings and sounds. I have that SG in rehearsals and I'll pick it up and go, 'Oh, my God... this guitar just feels like home.'

"We made the body an eighth of an inch thicker for me because I'm a bigger guy. And we put in a '57 Goldtop neck profile on it. And you can't beat that bargain!"

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"There was a 1964 SG Junior that I got and I loved it. A guy offered me way more than I paid for it and it was too hard to pass up the opportunity, so I let it go and then immediately regretted the whole thing.

"Oh, man, another one goes back years to when I was young. My dad brought home some really, really weird guitars – one was a Vox [V251] Organ Guitar. When I moved to LA in '97, about a year later in '98, it was getting really hard to pay the rent and I was working weird jobs.



PHOTO BY ESTELLE MASSEY



PHIL'S GO-TO RIG

"I've got an SG, for sure, especially that prototype that I was talking about. But I have another two SGs – one always has a P-90 in it, and one has a humbucker in it. Then my amp would be my [100-watt EL34-powered] Friedman X signature amp. And the pedal is my J Rockett PXO signature overdrive. So that would be my go-to rig. I have all that stuff when I play with Bon Jovi and with The Drills; it's my go-to for anything and everything."

But no matter how many weird jobs I had, I didn't have the rent for February, so I sold that Organ Guitar. That one really hurt."

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

"Play as many guitars as you possibly can. Even if you want to play a Les Paul or a Tele, play 10 Les Pauls and 10 Teles. Whatever you want to get, it's not going to be the first one you pick up. Maybe you won't like the colour, but you've got to hear it acoustically, and there should be mojo that you hear before you even plug it in."

"There's got to be something you feel in your hands where that guitar is screaming, 'Take me home!' That's the true connection."

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

"There's something about Flying Vs and Explorers that smack me in the face [laughs]. I have two Explorers and two Flying Vs, but they keep popping up! Man, I keep saying, 'Oh, I gotta get that.' [laughs]"

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"You know, what's in your hands is almost more important, but I think I'd have to get a better guitar and a cheaper amp. You can always get around on a cheaper amp or then go get a cheap pedal to make the cheap amp even better. But if you're playing a really shitty guitar, you're really limiting your progress."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils, which would it be, and why?

"Well, I still categorise the P-90 as a single coil, so that would be the one. It would be the P-90 single coil because when the volume is on 10, you get rock 'n' roll. And when you back it off to about 7, you could get Tele-ish, country-ish tones. And when you back it up to about 3 or 4, you get a beautiful, glassy clean sound." **[AD]**



Phil X & The Drills' latest release, *POW! Right In The Kiss*, is available now on Frontiers Records Srl

www.frontiers.it/album/6029

Phil with his trusty SG: "There's got to be something you feel in your hands where that guitar is screaming, 'Take me home!' That's the true connection"

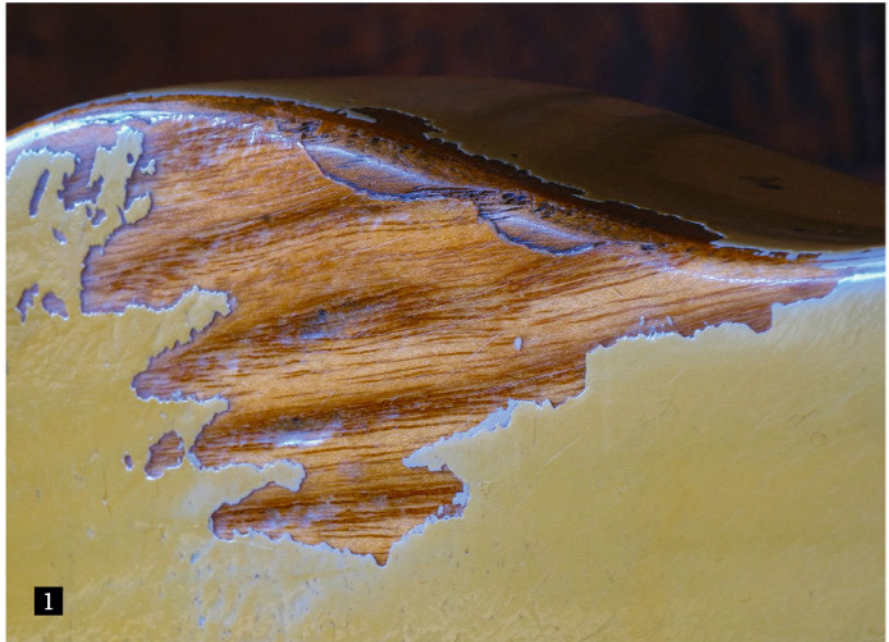
TELECASTER TALES

Not only does this 1969 Tele illustrate Fender's slowly changing post-Leo period, it also documents a lot of modding. Dave Burrluck should know – he was there!

I didn't encounter this guitar until the early 80s. Owned by a friend of a friend who'd purchased it in South London around a decade before, it had already seen service during the punk years and was settling into life in the more musical post-punk period. Establishing its date was an early job I was tasked with, followed by inevitable maintenance to a guitar that had been worked hard: from basic clean-up and setup, a fret level (eventually a refret), to servicing malfunctioning pickups and scratchy pots.

The 'vintage' guitar was a relatively new thing, of course, but even back then no-one considered the Tele as valuable. It was simply a working guitar, and a heavy one at that. At 4.19kg (9.22lb), the ash body certainly wasn't of the lightweight 'swamp' variety, but, again, no-one seemed to have a problem with that. Mind you, my mate and his bandmate (who swapped between guitar and bass duties) were both strapping lads.

Exactly how I 'purchased' the Tele I can't quite remember, but a few years on into the early 90s and its original owner was now the bass player in a harder rocking three-piece and, to cut a long story short, I was invited to expand the band. The Tele – which I seem to remember I swapped for an Ibanez bass – was pretty soon employed as a Keef-style five-string without the low E string and tuned to open G. This outfit was loud and sort of bundled up The Black Crowes with The Stones, plus some Billy Gibbons-esque virtuosity (not from me!), while I 'did a Keef' on the Tele and plenty of slide on a Gordon-Smith GS-1 '60'. Long hair and mascara were involved. Exact dates continue to escape me, but I do remember



1. You can see, through the wear, how the different layers of paint were applied to the body

swapping out the Tele's pickups for a Seymour Duncan Quarter Pound set during this rocking period of the Tele's life.

When that band came to a natural end, the Tele was largely unused until luthier and friend Sid Poole rescued it from obscurity with a typically excellent refret using narrow/tall Dunlop wire that replaced the previous pretty worn and quite low fretwire I'd used on it probably a decade or so before.

2. I don't remember fitting this metal output jack plate, but it looks like a quick (and successful) bodge that's now part of the guitar's story

3. It might have a four-way lever switch and new wiring (circa 2002), but the top-hat switch cap is the original, and flat-top knobs possibly are, too

"Back then no-one considered the Tele as valuable. It was simply a working guitar, and a heavy one at that at more than 4kg"





Up until the summer of '69, the Tele body featured a small diagonal channel between the neck pickup rout and the treble side of the bridge plate that's clearly not here



4. This gold-trimmed black 'CBS' logo first appeared in the autumn of 1967. The Graph Tech 'String Saver' nut and string tree (placed over the original) were added when the guitar was refretted in the 90s

5. These F-logo tuners came in during 1967 and were designed by Fender (but made by Schaller, apparently). Oddly, the string posts and ferrules are nickel plated and now aged-looking, while the buttons and covers remain bright chrome

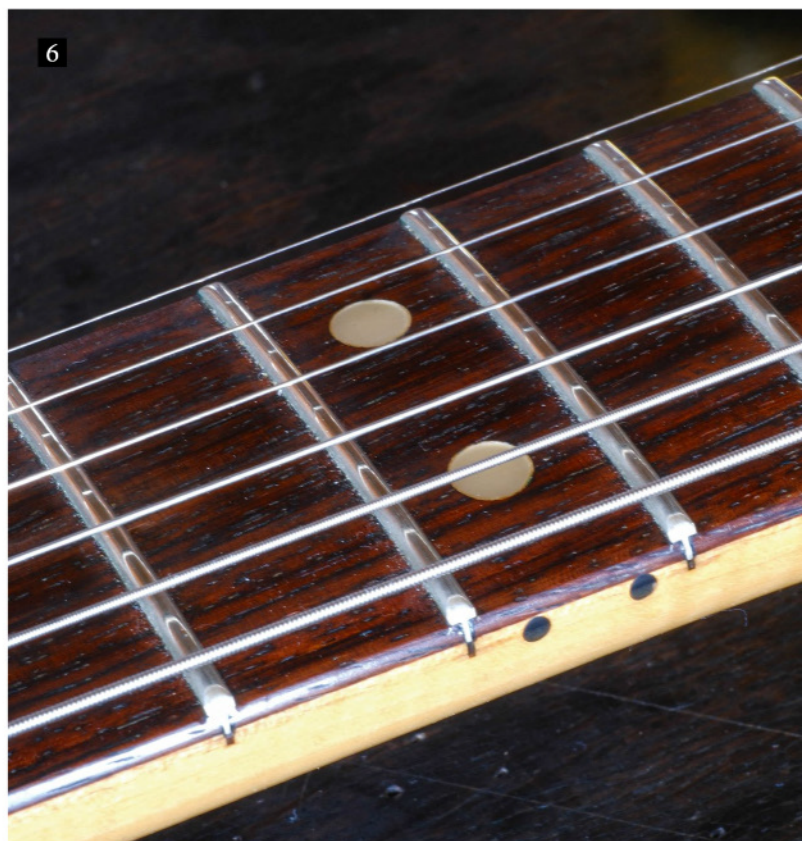
Sid added a Graph Tech nut and string tree, and I swapped back to a full set of strings: standard 10s, rather than the 11s I'd used during its 'Keef' days. A set of angled brass saddles – I have no idea where I got those – replaced the original steel type and today look far from new.

For a man with a soldering iron and a spirit of adventure, the Quarter Pounds weren't the only pickups that have graced the '69. Kent Armstrong did a beautiful rewind of the non-functioning original pickup, and I do remember trying a set of Joe Barden's side-by-side blade humbuckers. But I settled on a Fender Custom Shop Nocaster bridge pickup and

"For a man with a soldering iron and a spirit of adventure, the Quarter Pounds weren't the only pickups that graced the '69"

an Original Vintage neck pickup with a four-way lever switch to include the extra neck and bridge in-series sound (which I wrote about in issue 227 of *Guitarist*, September 2002). There seem to be quite a few differences in the specs of these pickups, and I believe the Original Vintage moniker became the current Pure Vintage.

Today, measured at output, the bridge is around 10kohms and the neck is 7.24k –



that's all I have to go on. I also removed the original circuit and replaced that with a more standard one with dual 250k pots (the original had a 1 megohm volume pot and treble-bleed capacitor). As an example of a successful mod, those pickups and that four-way switch have done good service since, providing classic (to me, at least) Tele tone with a good kick at the bridge.

The Setup

If Sid's refret transformed the guitar, it's another reminder of when to call in the pros. The round-lam fingerboard here is very thin and was already showing signs of wear. So we retained the original small radius, but it just shows – as with PRS's Silver Sky – that you can use a small radius and with the right frets and a virtually dead-straight neck there's none of the fretting-out problems you can get with smaller-height frets.

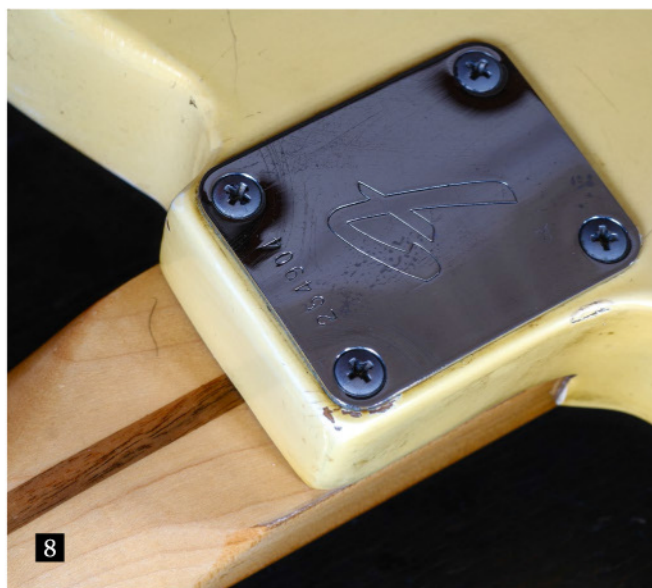
Another 'issue' is that the neck is relatively narrow – 41.35mm at the nut, with 34.5mm string spacing, and 50.4mm wide at the 12th fret. It means the high E is close – in higher positions – to the fingerboard edge that's lightly rounded from wear. Maybe it's simply familiarity, but I've never had a problem, and the combination of that small-radius fingerboard and quite a full 'C' profile (21.2mm at the 1st fret and 23mm by the 12th), the Tele plays very well.

6. The curved rosewood fingerboard 'vener' is very thin and was implemented in the early 60s (nothing to do with CBS), staying that way until 1983, like the pearloid position dots that replaced the clay dots in 1965

7. In 1969, Fender brought back the one-piece maple neck/fingerboard, which requires truss rod installation from the back, with the 'skunk stripe' to cover it. The same construction was used with the rosewood veneer necks, too

8. The chromed neckplate featured this reverse 'F' logo from 1965, and the stamped serial number loses the previous L prefix

9. A design classic, the stamped bridge plate hasn't been changed, although the brass barrel saddles, which are angled to improve intonation, have only been in place for a mere 30 years



As I said, it's a weighty Telecaster and I'm the first person to call that out in a contemporary review. But the thing I always found with this guitar is that it almost has a fifth gear. When you really dig in it kicks back; it doesn't compress, as is my experience with a lightweight body. It's another example of the varying flavours of a many decades-old design.

Finish Thoughts

A well-documented change from around 1968 is that the Fender finish swapped from nitrocellulose to polyurethane, we're told (some sources suggest polyester). The ageing to the body isn't like a classic nitro, but there's plenty of it, and the finish sinks into the ash grain, is quite mottled, and is worn away on the bass-side lower edge (under your forearm). On the back, behind the upper shoulder, there's more wear and you can see what looks like a clear coating over the wood, then the thin light blonde colour and finally a thin top coat that has clearly yellowed over time – without its scratchplate that's very evident on the front, too. It's far from the 'dipped-in-glass' polyester or polyurethane of a modern guitar, although the neck's clear finish is more like that. Aside from a ding or two and despite its age, it's quite clean and smoothly glossed, suggesting a different process and possibly a different type of paint to that used on the body.



I'm sure I could clean it up a bit, but I don't know... a 56-year-old guitar has earned its stripes, and out of respect an occasional wipe-down after use is all it gets. It's about character, isn't it? The absent scratchplate has been a feature of the guitar for quite a few decades now and enhances the brutalism of the Telecaster's design. The low E string F-logo tuner is noticeably bent, but that doesn't affect its function; the original output jack was replaced at some point with a metal plate (held on very firmly with two different-sized scratchplate screws). And despite the high-volume production nature of Fender's guitars at the time, there's a lovely soft flame to the sides of the slab-sawn maple neck – a subtle touch of class.

Sound Conclusion

For some players and collectors, it's all about originality and condition – that's the market. In the early 80s, then, when I

first came across this guitar, I should have advised its owner to put it in a case and go and buy a Washburn. In good original condition – even though it's the wrong side of that post-'68 change in finish type – it'd still fetch a pretty penny. Yet while its use and authentic ageing not only give it real character, I can't help concluding that a half-century of use, of being a guitar and played hard, has done something. It rarely needs tuning and has a tremendous ring and a vibrant response.

But the year it was made also resonates with me. 1969 saw The Beatles' last public live performance, Woodstock, Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon, we lost Brian Jones but The Stones kicked off a new era with the release of *Honky Tonk Woman*. My world was never the same again.

Dave would like to credit *The Fender Telecaster* by AR Duchossoir as a historic reference

IRON MAN

Tony Iommi rejoins Gibson and his original signature humbucker has just been relaunched. We take a look and listen

Despite creating and making the classic humbucker since the mid-50s, it wasn't until 1997 that Gibson launched its first signature humbucker. Created for Tony Iommi, it ran until 2016 and, ironically, it was based on a design created in the UK by Jaydee Guitars. It was also considerably different from the classic Patent Applied For design...

"It was a little over two years ago that our artist relations team asked if we could make Tony three sets for some guitars he was putting together," explains Gibson USA's Jason Davidson. "That started the conversation about bringing Tony back into the fold. We'd launched the Pickup Shop in October 2022, so had a lot of energy behind Gibson pickups at that time and Tony was back onboard. It was about getting the team back together that built this pickup. We now have some of the same people that built the originals."

The distinctive-looking pickup has no visible polepieces – the coils and magnets are all encapsulated in epoxy within its shiny chromed cover. But what's inside? "It's a secret," laughs Jared Brandon, the Pickup Shop's product manager and designer. "That's why we cover it up! It's actually a combination of Alnico II and ceramic magnets, which is well known. But we do kind of like to hide how we put it all together."

"There are blades, too [referring to the polepieces within the two coils], but you can see those if you look at the back of the

pickup, so that's not really a secret, either. What that does and the way it's structured, gives a certain amount of horsepower, I don't mean resistance I mean henrys [the measurement of inductance]. So it's got a totally different sound."

"The reason we use the blades," says Jason, "is because of the consistency they offer when you bend strings. There's no warbling or slight volume loss when you're bending: the magnet field stays consistent."

"The steel blades and magnets control the frequency response and have a good amount of henrys," says Jared, "which along with the DC resistance [around 16kohms] and the way the pickup is structured, are the three main keys to why it sounds like it does. We wax the coils first to eliminate feedback and then the epoxy holds everything together."

Jason continues: "I wouldn't say it's a fragile construction, but the way it's balanced, it's a lot of parts and pieces. I would say it's probably one of the most difficult pickups we manufacture. The team has to dedicate the line to that pickup because of the difficulty of keeping the parts in balance. And they have their own techniques and tooling to make sure the parts stay in place after the coils are wax-potted and the epoxy put in."

The single humbucker, designed for the bridge and/or neck, is four-conductor so you can also wire it in parallel, and/or voice either single coil, as well as the full-fat Iommi series voice.

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: Gibson Tony Iommi Signature humbucker

PRICE: £199

TYPE: 4-conductor blade-pole humbucker with hybrid Alnico II and ceramic magnet structure

QUOTED DCR: 16kohms, which drops to 4k in parallel

SKILL LEVEL: If you can solder, it's pretty easy although wiring mini-switches can be fiddly
www.gibson.com

PROS & CONS

PROS Distinctive midrange character in high-gain setting; parallel wiring produces bright scooped cleans; not a one-trick pony

CONS Not if you live on the dark side...

Guitarist
CHOICE

9/10

Sounds

You could argue this is all about the midrange character and how that works for you in a high-gain setting. It's got a real 'grrr' to the mids, the sizzle of a hot-rod Marshall is pulled back a little, while the low-end remains taut and very punchy.

Listening to other 'high-gain' classics is interesting: DiMarzio's Super Distortion thickens the Patent Applied For voice but retains more high-end; the mid-hump of a Seymour Duncan JB is closer to the Iommi, not quite as rolled back in the highs, the midrange peak sounding slightly higher.

Back to the Iommi with the same high-gain amp voicing and, again, the midrange character has that snarl to it that's unmistakable. Wired in parallel, though, and it's the opposite – brighter and more mid-scooped than pushed, and it plays very well with the Seymour Duncan '59 we had in the neck position.

Verdict

A great choice when working with higher gains, the Iommi is all about midrange character. It might surprise you played cleaner, too. A heavy riffing classic is back! **G**



*That should give you something to think about till our next issue.
In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.*

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Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

The restoration continues with some risky surgery, finish restoration and a brace repair

1961 Southern Jumbo Restoration Pt 2



Meticulous cleaning was needed to achieve the beautifully restored and now-shiny back

I'll admit that I wasn't looking forward to extracting the Southern Jumbo's broken bridge plate, and most luthiers would view this task with trepidation. But equipped with a StewMac bridge-removal chisel, a palette knife and a bridge-plate heating iron, I was out of excuses.

There was, however, a complicating factor that is peculiar to vintage Gibsons. In addition to glueing on bridges, Gibson bolted them down. If you refer to the photo of the bridge plate in the previous instalment of this Southern Jumbo restoration (see issue 527), you can see the nuts and washers inside the body and two machine screws that Gibson concealed under pearl dots.

Removing the bridge plate involves heating it up to soften the glue and then separating it from the body using the aforementioned chisel or a palette knife. Even with the nuts removed, having a pair of bolts in the way would only make things harder, so I decided to remove the bridge along with the machine screws.

When removing bridges, I protect the top using sheets of corrugated cardboard before placing a travel iron onto the bridge. Protecting the top is important when there's a finish on the soundboard because there's a risk of it melting or bubbling, but that didn't apply here. After heating the bridge for about 20 minutes, I was able to slide my palette knife under it. I carefully

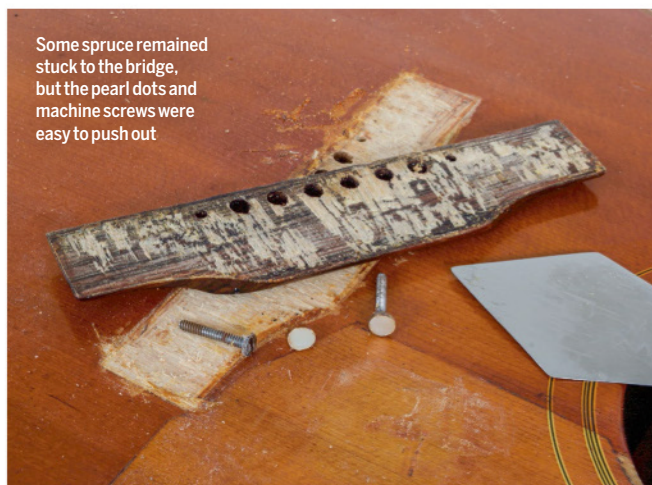
"I protect the top using sheets of corrugated cardboard before placing a travel iron onto the bridge"

worked the blade around the outside edges, applying more heat whenever I felt resistance. I also listened for the sound of wood splitting or tearing – the object is to separate the bridge while causing minimal damage to the soundboard.

Eventually, the bridge lifted off, along with the bolts. It wasn't the cleanest bridge removal I've ever done, so I had to clean some spruce fibres from the underside of the bridge before scraping the sticky finish off the rosewood.



With thick sheets of cardboard protecting and insulating the top, a travel iron is used to soften the glue holding the bridge



Some spruce remained stuck to the bridge, but the pearl dots and machine screws were easy to push out



Two bridge clamps are used to hold the bridge-plate heating iron in place



Seen here with the tools used for removal, the bridge plate came out very cleanly with no damage to the top

I had expected to drill out the pearl dots, but heating the bridge softened the glue holding them in and they pushed straight out. If I'm ever tasked with removing another Gibson bridge plate, I think that removing the machine screws without lifting the bridge would be preferable. Leaving the bridge in situ would reinforce the top and prevent it from flexing and potentially splitting during plate removal.

Chipped Plate

I took the brown squeeze-out around the bridge plate as evidence of hide glue. During the vintage era, hot hide glue was used by most guitar manufacturers, and in addition to forming strong joints, it's easy to release by applying heat and moisture. To get the plate wet, I cut a piece of sponge to the approximate size and shape of the plate, soaked it in water and placed it onto

the bridge plate with the guitar face down. The water soaked into the plate overnight, and after removing the sponge I was ready to apply some heat.

While regular clothes irons can be used for bridge and fretboard removal, a proper heating iron is needed for bridge plates and they're readily available. You can heat them up directly on an electric hob, but I chose to place mine in a cast-iron skillet over a gas hob.

Always wear protective gloves when inserting a hot iron inside a guitar body because it's easy to burn yourself. As the iron contacts the plate, you should hear sizzling, and steam may escape through the pin holes. A handle on the plate allows you to hold the iron in position, but I used bridge clamps because it's less tiring. After a few minutes I removed the iron and managed to get the palette knife blade under the plate.

To minimise soundboard flexing I clamped a piece of wood across the bridge area to keep it stable. As soon as I felt the glue joint offering resistance, I reheated the iron and applied more heat to the bridge. After four heating cycles, the plate suddenly popped loose and this time the result was very clean.

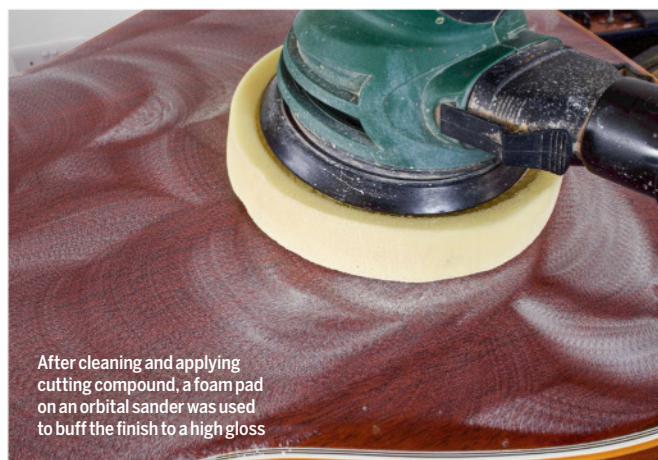
Having removed the plate in one piece, it was easy to see why it had split and



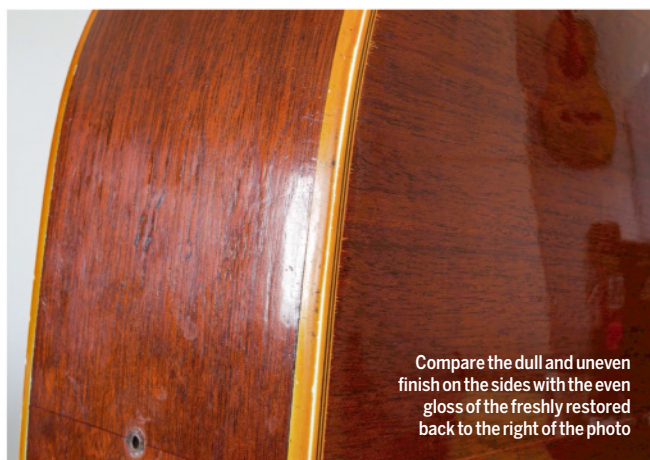
It's clear to see that the plate wasn't installed squarely and offered no reinforcement behind the pins



This top view shows how the plate protruded well beyond the front of the bridge but provided no support behind it



After cleaning and applying cutting compound, a foam pad on an orbital sander was used to buff the finish to a high gloss



Compare the dull and uneven finish on the sides with the even gloss of the freshly restored back to the right of the photo

the top had bellied upwards. The issues were threefold: the plate was too small, it wasn't put in straight, and it wasn't in the correct place. I could also see that the plate was only making partial contact with the X-braces.

The plate had been glued on so far forward and off-square there was less than 1/8-inch of plate material behind the bridge pins on the treble side and nothing at all behind the low E pin. Clearly, a new bridge plate was required, but, for the time being, I decided to let everything settle down and dry out while I turned my attention to the back and sides.

Sticking To The Sides

Just like the top, the back and sides looked extremely grubby and had the tacky texture and stale tobacco-smoke smell that sometimes comes with neglected and unrestored vintage guitars. Some might call it patina, but when your arms and clothes stick to the surface and you feel the need to wash your hands after playing, you may wish to ponder the distinction between original lacquer and vintage grot.

I love yellowed-up binding, but this guitar's binding was brick red and looked horrible. I could also see brush marks on the lacquer and residue left from sticky tape. I tried cleaning the surface with

various products, including naphtha and white spirit, but the only thing that made any impact was alcohol. This dissolved the outer coating leaving the underlying lacquer intact, but rather than wiping off I was left with an even more gooey mess.

My plan had always been to strip and refinish the top because it looked, felt and smelled horrible, but I liked the light cherry-brown colour of the back and sides.

I can't comment on the originality of the finish, but the colour looked very close to other early 1960s Southern Jumbos that I found online. My hunch was that maybe somebody brushed shellac or some sort of varnish over the original finish decades ago – probably when the top was stripped and refinished.

I decided to try to remove the added coating while leaving the lacquer intact.



The grimy overcoats were carefully scraped off the binding and 400 grit paper eliminated any chatter marks



After forcing glue into the gap, a flat piece of wood was placed over the X-brace and a clamp was applied

Starting on the back using Farécla G3 Regular Grade paste compound and 0000-grade steel wool, I was soon wiping significant quantities of brownish-grey dirt off the surface. In addition to cleaning up, the finish levelled out and the tape residue began disappearing.

I then applied Meguiar's ScratchX, which I buffed out using a Velcro-backed foam pad attached to my orbital sander.

"After subjecting the top to all that heat and steam, the braces needed a thorough inspection"

I followed this with Meguiar's Ultimate Polish Gloss Enhancer and a fresh foam pad. At the end of this process, I was left with a smooth and shiny surface that was no longer tacky or malodorous. All the products and equipment I used can be found at retailers such as Halfords, B&Q or Toolstation and are relatively inexpensive.

I followed the same procedure on the sides, and although the finish came up nicely, the binding still looked odd and unnaturally aged. Faced with the

prospect of spending several more hours buffing the binding and ending up with patchy results at best, I decided it would be preferable to scrape the binding clean and respray later on.

Single-sided blades make excellent scrapers and I worked my way very very carefully up to the edges of the wood. Any chatter marks from the blade were sanded out using 400-grit paper. It was a time-consuming job, but I found it enjoyable because the guitar quickly began to look cleaner and fresher. The plan is to mask off the cherry-red areas and airbrush tinted lacquer over the binding once I've refinished the top.

Brace Yourself

After subjecting the top to all that heat and steam, the braces needed a thorough inspection. Looking inside with an inspection mirror and light may help to identify braces that have completely separated from the top, but you probably won't spot areas where the glue has let go if the brace and top remain close together.

One way to check is to run a fine feeler gauge along the brace/top join lines. If there is a separation, the feeler gauge should slide into the gap. From the start of this project I had concerns about a slight ripple in the top just beyond the bass side

of the bridge and, sure enough, the X-brace was detached in precisely that area. Removing the bridge plate had probably made it worse.

The separation was approximately 30mm (just over an inch) long and I used the feeler gauge to dislodge any remaining glue residue from the gap. Once I felt the area was as clean as it could be, I inserted the feeler gauge under the brace from the plate side to open up the gap, put a dollop of Titebond Original glue on my finger and forced it under the brace.

This was repeated a few times on the basis that too much glue is preferable to not enough. I then wiped off the excess with a damp cloth, and after placing a flat piece of wood over the brace I applied a clamp through the soundhole. Checking inside with my mirror, it was encouraging to see glue squeeze out on both sides of the brace. After leaving the clamp on overnight, the brace repair was complete.

It's a pity that most of the action described here occurred inside the body and I wasn't able to take many photos. If it's any consolation, I was working 'in the dark', too. However, it will be different next time as I tackle the top and work towards recreating the original sunburst finish. 

www.huwpriceguitar.com



David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

This one-off guitar made for Tony Mottola has a unique combination of features

1968 Gibson ES-355TDR



Although similar to a Gibson Crest, Tony Mottola's guitar is essentially a rosewood ES-355 with Les Paul's low-impedance pickups

I've heard people call this a variation on Gibson's Crest model because of the rosewood body, but it's very much its own thing. The Crest was built more like an ES-330 with Johnny Smith pickups, but this one-off guitar that was made for Tony Mottola is basically a heavily customised ES-355.

"Tony was a very successful professional guitarist who played for Frank Sinatra among others, and he designed this guitar with Les Paul. His fingerprints are all over it, starting with the pickups, which appear to be the ones used for the Les Paul Personal, Professional and Recording models, as well as the early L-5S and Les Paul bass.

"These are known as 'low impedance' pickups designed for plugging straight into mixing desks, rather than amplifiers, so they aren't very popular. I first saw this guitar at Christie's and I think other potential bidders might have assumed it was a low-impedance guitar so they didn't take it out of the case. I got excited when I noticed the second output on the rim and, after trying it out, I immediately knew it had high- and low-impedance outputs.

"The front and back are carved from solid pieces of bookmatched rosewood and there's a marquetry strip on the back and a centre block inside. I think it's a mixture of Indian and Brazilian on here; looking at the top, the grain pattern looks like Indian, but the back has that obvious curl of Brazilian with blonde and very dark segments.

"It's a huge three-piece laminated mahogany neck with a 1 3/4-inch nut width, the earlier 17-degree headstock angle and a very deep and thick profile. All the binding

"Some [customs] were ground-up creations [that] went beyond the regular parts bin"

work is identical to what you'd see on an ES-355, and pre-1955 style block inlays are set into an ebony 'board. Far from being uncomfortable, the profile is like a chunky U-shaped 'burst neck.

"Other high-end appointments include waffle-style tuners and a bound rosewood pickguard, but for this guitar to be perfect it would have had a stud tailpiece. Instead, it has a modified early ES-175-style tailpiece with the three parallelograms and a rosewood insert with a pearl inlay bearing Tony's name.

"The gold hardware is really intact. There are numerous photographs of Tony playing this guitar and he was a well-dressed jazz player who didn't beat up the hardware or the lacquer. That's why the overall condition is exceptional. There's no Gibson label because the guitar was custom-made, but it features front and back on the cover of Tony's 1983 record *All The Way*.

"There are selectors on the front, as you'd find on a Les Paul Recording model, with a phase switch and a tone-modification switch. The knobs look conventional, but the one that would usually be the neck volume control is actually a nine-position rotary switch for the Varitone. That's why it has reflector knobs for split shaft pots, rather than the witch-hat knobs and solid shaft pots that Gibson was using by 1968.

"Although a lot of people knock these pickups, the guitar sounds really good. I couldn't tell you if Tony had his pickups modified, but plugged into an amp in high-impedance mode they are unbelievable. The tonal variation is unreal – they're very balanced and the guitar represents everything an ES-355 could have been.

"The mounting is interesting, too, because you can adjust the angle relative to the stings as well as the height. I've put it up against [Patent Applied For pickup]-loaded ES-355s and it holds its own, but I haven't been in a position to try the low-impedance output. I've been enjoying it through a Dumble we have here at the shop and it sounds like Madison Square Garden.

"It was obviously made up on the third floor by Gibson factory's 'custom division'. I think that lots of one-off guitars were made there and I've seen many of the blueprints that Gibson has kept. For instance, an ES-335 with an Epiphone 'batwing' headstock recently showed up, and I've seen a transparent blue L-5 with an F-5 mandolin-style scroll headstock.

"Sometimes they were just regular models in unusual colours, but some were ground-up creations where they went beyond the regular parts bin. We see them pop up occasionally, but Gibson made hundreds for well-known and professional players – and they are out there. They demonstrate what Gibson was truly capable of doing." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

"The tonal variation [of the pickups] is unreal. The guitar represents everything an ES-355 could have been"



Co-designed with Les Paul, the guitar features a 'stealth' Varitone, phase switching, a tone switch and individual high/low-impedance outputs

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Melodic Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Stratocaster & Vox AC15

Difficulty ★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

LEARNING SCALES AND patterns is perhaps one of the less exciting aspects of guitar playing – and, arguably, many of our heroes didn't approach their playing in this way, either. However, consider the process of writing and recording material, and rehearsing then touring, which obviously involves playing those same tunes night after night. This in itself can teach us so much about what works and what doesn't, simply through an intense process of trial and error.

If the old adage about one gig being worth a dozen rehearsals holds true, what are the benefits of a long tour? It's true to say that many professional musicians (myself included) come off tour able to play the set blindfolded, but feeling a bit rusty on anything else... However, this is temporary and the long-term gains are clear. But where does this leave everyone else?

It's possible to transform your playing without repeatedly going through the album/tour cycle, but it does take discipline to play and practise every single day and perhaps record yourself (in private – studio quality is not necessary!) then listen back with as objective an ear as possible. Yes, we are often our own harshest critics, but you can make this work for you by taking notes and deciding on positive steps to improve in any weak areas.

This brings us neatly back to the idea of learning scales and patterns, with the emphasis on the latter. A slow minor blues like the example solo gives us plenty of time to think about note choice and phrasing. Some of the ideas in the examples are derived from chord tones or chord extensions. But, if you prefer, they could also be regarded as embellished pentatonic/blues scale licks. Play these, or similar ideas, often enough and they will become part of your vocabulary. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

David Gilmour is a master of melodic bluesy phrasing



PHOTO BY CHIAKI NOZU/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

IN THE PICKUP to this first phrase, I'm spelling out part of an E minor scale, though you could also say it's an E minor triad (G B E) with an F# added before the G on beat 1 of bar 1. This gives us more detail than sticking solely to the pentatonic scale. The change to A minor then B minor in bar 2 is followed with an ear for their respective triads (A C E and B D F#) but without needing to change position on the fretboard. Oddly enough, the last two bars feature more movement between positions over a static chord, playing a similar idea over two octaves using the E minor pentatonic scale.

♩. = ♩♩ = 42 bpm

1

4

Example 2

SHIFTING TO A MINOR, this second phrase targets the 9th (B) in what would otherwise be a regular minor pentatonic phrase, albeit sliding between shapes 1 and 2. The brief excursions to C and D don't really ask anything too specific of us in terms of note choice, though perhaps it is worth experimenting with C and D triads? The next main chord is E minor. Nothing too fancy going on here, but there is a bend from F# to G in bar 3, emphasising the 9th in the key of E minor. Watch out for sneaky staccato notes!

1

4

Example 3

SWITCHING TO THE BRIDGE PICKUP for dramatic effect, this final example is perhaps the most obviously pentatonic, switching between shapes 4, 1 and 2. Somehow, the unembellished pentatonic sounds 'tougher' for this rise in dynamic... That's where we stay, being pretty and melodic sidelined in favour of a few more flourishes, before a short chromatic run up to B at the end. We don't always need to spell out each chord, but it's good to know what's going on harmonically so we can pick and choose. Allow yourself a bit of leeway for timing; this is transcribed as faithfully as possible but need not be set in stone.

The musical notation for Example 3 is divided into three systems, each with a standard notation staff and a guitar tablature staff. The first system is in Bm7, the second in C, and the third in Em. The notation includes fret numbers, bends, and chord changes.

System 1: Bm7. Standard notation: Treble clef, key of D major, 4/4 time. Tablature: E string (9, 8, 10), B string (10, 12, 10, 8, 10, 12), G string (14, 12, 14), D string (12, 14, 15), A string (12, 15, 12), E string (14, 15, 14, 12, 14). Chords: BU, BD, BU, BU, BU, BD.

System 2: C. Standard notation: Treble clef, key of C major, 4/4 time. Tablature: E string (15, 17), B string (12), G string (16, 15, 17, 17, 20), D string (17, 15), A string (16, 17, 16, 14, 12), E string (14, 14, 12). Chords: BU, BU, BU.

System 3: Em. Standard notation: Treble clef, key of E minor, 4/4 time. Tablature: E string (14), B string (14, 16), G string (12), D string (14, 15, 14, 12), A string (14, 12, 14, 12), E string (14, 12). Chords: Em, Am7, Em7, Bm7, B7 w/bar.

Hear It Here

JOHN MAYALL & THE BLUESBREAKERS

A HARD ROAD

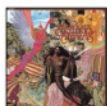


After Eric Clapton had recorded the infamous 'Beano' album and moved on to form Cream, there was a vacancy to fill.

Enter Peter Green. On this 1967 release, he shows himself very able to channel the spirit of Clapton on tracks such as *The Stumble* and *Another Kinda Love*. However, on *The Super-Natural* we really hear him coming into his own, having a profound influence on Carlos Santana, Gary Moore and many others in the process.

SANTANA

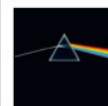
ABRAXAS



Released in 1969, this second album from the band features a cover of Peter Green's *Black Magic Woman*, alongside the well-known tracks *Samba Pa Ti* and *Oye Cómo Va*. In fact, we could probably have cited any of Santana's albums here, as his distinctive playing remains the centrepiece of his music, combining American and Mexican influences, while frequently using pentatonic lines but just as often adding melody via chord tones, arpeggios and long held notes.

PINK FLOYD

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON



David Gilmour is a very obvious name to put out there when thinking of melodic-blues-influenced players. Like Santana, you could approach any of the Pink Floyd or later solo material and find lots of examples. Of particular interest here, though, is how he fits his blues-based style into tracks such as *Time* and *Any Colour You Like* where he trades licks against himself in stereo. *Money* contains some more obviously bluesy licks, though still with lots of memorable melodic lines.

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