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Guitarist

Issue 530

NOVEMBER 2025

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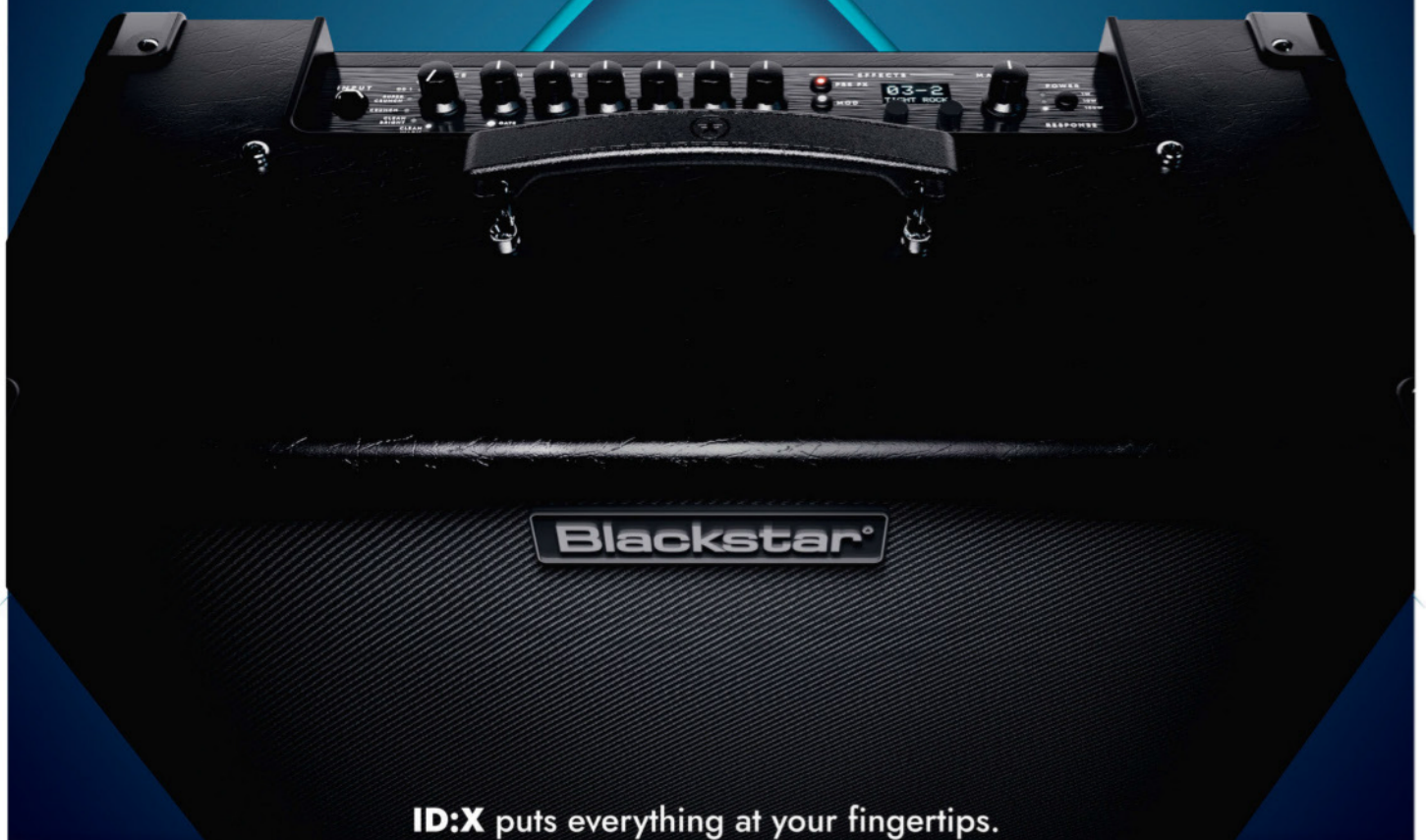
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Shades Of Gary...



Jamie has asked me to share a few reminiscences about Gary Moore this month, to tie in with this issue's cover feature, as our paths crossed several times during the 90s and early Noughties. I first met Gary soon after I took over as editor of *Guitarist* in 1994 when he asked me to write the liner notes for his *Blues For Greeny* album. This involved us having lunch together in a hotel in Holland Park where he told me how important the album was to him as it formed a tribute to one of his principal influences – not forgetting, of course, that Peter had virtually given Gary the famous 'Greeny' Les Paul in exchange for Gary's Gibson SG many years previously.

After that initial meeting, Gary got in touch and asked me if I'd like to come up to the studios where he was recording the album to listen to a rough mix. Naturally, I agreed pretty much without hesitation. On the day, I checked into the studios, which I believe were Sarm West in London, where I was treated to my own private listen-through of the album. Afterwards, I went into another studio in the building where Gary was waiting. We had a chat about what I thought of the album and so on, but out of the corner of my eye I couldn't help noticing that 'Greeny' was there on a stand in the middle of the room. I tentatively asked Gary if I could "have a go" and he said, "Of course." All I remember was that it was one of the lightest Les Pauls I have ever picked up. And what do you play in front of one of rock's acknowledged master guitarists? I have no idea. Probably some self-conscious blues noodling. But being invited to play 'Greeny' was definitely a highlight for me personally.

And talking of Les Pauls, Gary was directly responsible for me buying my own LP Standard in 2001. We played together (along with Neville Marten, Bernie Marsden and a few others) at a charity gig in Bath. *Everyone* that night had a Les Paul... except me. Indeed, when I opened the case of my chosen guitar for the gig, Gary came over and said, "What the fuck's that?" I started looking for a Les Paul the very next day!

David Mead Deputy Editor

Editor's Highlights



Introducing Bioscope

Marillion guitarist Steve Rothery tells all about his new recording venture with Tangerine Dream's Thorsten Quaeschning on **p38**



Sound Of The 70s

Celebrating the return of the Les Paul Custom to Gibson's USA roster. Do they still have that magic – and are they still as heavy? **p86**



Birthday Blues

The 30th anniversary of the Fender Blues Junior valve combo comes with a number of special tweaks and it's dressed for a party! **p8**

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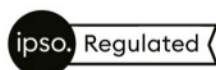
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PHOTOS BY PHIL BARKER

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The time of sands



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Do your research



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FIRST PLAY



FENDER BLUES JUNIOR IV 30TH ANNIVERSARY

£959

WHAT IS IT? Celebratory edition of the long-running, all-valve, 15-watt 1x12 combo with reverb

Junior Senior

Decked out in tooled western-style livery with a saddle bag's worth of speaker and circuit upgrades, this anniversary edition stands strong in the lineage of the classic benchmark combo

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

Since its birth in 1995, the Fender Blues Junior has matured into the small valve combo to judge all others by. It found its niche as a cost-effective, all-valve, spring-reverb-equipped combo with the authentic Fender sound in a throw-and-go, pub-gig-sized format. The amp's inception serendipitously coincided with the winds of change blowing through guitar music at that time, away from the clinical and processed tones of the prior decade towards a looser, more organic flavour as heard in the US grunge movement and the UK's Brit-rock scene. These sounds were well suited to the amp's comfortable range of classic clean to 'edge of break-up' tones.

Judging by its popularity alone, it's clear that the 15-watt 1x12 package found a niche in the amp world by balancing the factors of cost, loudness and portability without forgoing the famous clean tone that made the Fender sound the stuff of legend. Critics over the product's lifespan have occasionally made mention of sonic shortcomings, such as the potential to sound boxy and the ability to display some

The sound of the authentic spring reverb unit, positioned in the amp's base, has benefitted from amendments to the original circuit. The complaint of reverb hiss has been addressed by repositioning its circuit placement and the reverb's tone has been sweetened







1. Built by Fender Mexico, this Blues Junior has a compact layout that is based around a valve line-up comprising three 12AX7s and two EL84s, and produces 15 watts of power. The EL84 is a much-loved British valve most known for its appearance in the legendary Vox AC30

overly assertive high-end. While it may be harsh to criticise an entry-level combo of this size for indeed being a small amp, this latest version aims to improve the preamp circuit for fullness, and offers a premium Celestion A-type Creamback speaker, improving the performance within the existing cabinet.

This diminutive standard-bearer has enjoyed four revisions and numerous special editions over its 30 years with some circuit improvements, numerous speaker models and a variety of cosmetic flourishes. So this particular celebratory and limited-edition amp is based on the mark IV incarnation (see spec list on page 12), and Fender has clearly built what it believes to be its best-in-class Blues Junior.

The valve line-up has remained constant since its inception with its trio of 12AX7s

A player-pleasing set of improvements really does make an appreciable difference to the quality of tone on offer

and the pair of EL84s. The use of this British output valve, also used to power the classic AC30, is often thought to impart a softer, chime-y quality and could contribute towards a rich midrange tonality.

Along with the Fat push-switch, the polished chrome top-panel features Reverb, Master, Middle, Bass, Treble and Volume controls, all topped with black plastic chickenhead knobs to complete the vintage styling. The vinyl bling of the patterned faux-leather covering – somewhat evoking the tooled leather of cowboy boots, perhaps, or other such country and western attire – is augmented by the stylish vintage leather handle. It's certainly eye-catching!

Some construction details – such as the somewhat hidden position of the footswitch socket and a trailing loop of reverb cable in the rear recess – might require a modicum of care on gigs, though, so as to not unduly stress the components.

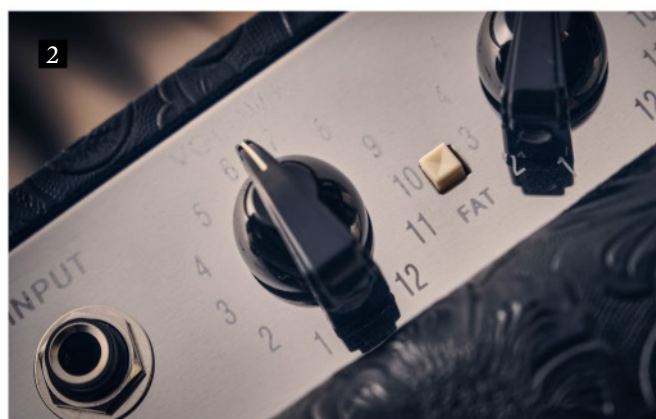
Feel & Sounds

In a leap of faith we embarked, Junior and pedals in-hand, to play a smallish gig where the amp immediately received compliments in soundcheck for its rich

2. The footswitchable Fat switch boosts the gain with a broadish-midrange push. The level of boost it creates is akin to an overdrive pedal with the gain set low and a little twist of extra output level

3. The styling of this incarnation evokes an almost gothic country and western hybrid. The tooled leather-look vinyl certainly catches the eye and is set off by the polished chrome top panel. Black chickenhead knobs complete the look

4. A veritable 'who's who' of 12-inch guitar speakers have been offered with the Blues Junior over the years, including various models by Jensen, Eminence and Celestion. In this edition we find the Celestion Creamback 65-watt A-type speaker





3



4

tone. The improved midrange response from the circuit and the speaker improvements impart a greater depth to vintage-output Stratocaster pickups than one might expect, adding up to a great playing response for fluid solos. The Fat circuit further opened up the hallowed gates of sustain.

This amp seems most comfortable operating around the edge of break-up, a tone some lesser amps can struggle with. At high levels of gain the amp's response will loosen (think Neil Young as opposed to Angus), so depending on your needs this could be just the ticket. It's fair to say there are some sounds that may inevitably fall outside of its comfort zone, and it's unlikely to be replacing anyone's 5150 for tight and chunky distortion. That said, all good designs should fulfil a particular requirement and our small test-gig likely represents the kind of scenario it was conceived for.

Switching to our traditional twin-humbucker guitar, the increased mids and power provided an opportunity to visit the EQ section for some tailoring. A little bass and gain reduction tightened up the response nicely, though deployment of the Fat switch might bring fewer benefits to guitars with higher output levels.

Dialling in the controls you notice a wide range of usable bass, which provides plenty of depth, even at higher settings. Experienced Blues Junior players will no doubt notice that the Treble and Middle



This sturdy leather handle complements the look of the western tooled vinyl and recalls those found on early Fender amps



FENDER BLUES JUNIOR IV 30TH ANNIVERSARY

PRICE: £959

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: All-valve portable combo

VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 2x EL84

OUTPUT: 15W

DIMENSIONS: 457 (w) x 249 (d) x 406mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 14/31

CABINET: Particle board w/ 'Black Western' textured vinyl covering

LOUDSPEAKER: Celestion G12M-65 Creamback 12"

CHANNELS: 1

CONTROLS: Reverb, Master, Middle, Bass, Treble, Fat switch and Volume

FOOTSWITCH: 1-button footswitch included for Fat boost

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: None

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The non-Anniversary Blues Junior IV and Blues Junior Lacquered Tweed (both £739)

Fender

0333 200 8765

www.fender.com

controls deliver an appreciably softer top-end on this Anniversary edition than on previous models, which is again thanks to the preamp circuit refinements Fender has made.

A recommended setup tip is to place the master volume at a higher level than you might expect (this thing actually goes to 12!) and balance the channel volume and the guitar's volume control in order to get the most responsive dynamics possible from the amp. This approach allows the EL84 power valves to contribute more of their harmonic overtones, rather than depending on the preamp gain alone for your saturation needs.

Particularly enjoyable is the improved smoothness of the reverb sound, especially in terms of dwell and response, and while perhaps not being the drippiest of verbs, it certainly sounded every bit the authentic springy Fender tone. The reverb's position in the circuit has moved from its previously noisy location after the master volume, to a quieter location for a welcome improvement to signal-to-noise ratio.

In accordance with Fender's reputation for producing pedal-friendly hosts, this amp presents no exception. It really shines when fed by a quality overdrive pedal, although with its relatively modest headroom and power-handling, it may be prudent when using gain pedals to select types that have less bottom-end so as to not overly tax the amp with energy-sapping low frequencies.

Verdict

Fender has marked this 30th anniversary of the Blues Junior with a player-pleasing set of improvements that really do make an appreciable difference to the quality of tone on offer. The modifications made to both the preamp and reverb circuits, in addition to the upgraded speaker, have

No matter your tastes, it's hard to deny how impressively this amp punches above its weight

brought out a richer, more responsive presentation from the amp, putting some inspiring air under your soloing wings, so to speak. The Fat switch offers the kind of mild boost one might normally expect to be provided by a light overdrive pedal or coloured boost, for instance – potentially saving you from carrying an additional pedal. And the reverb now shines clearly, with the improvement to the noise floor and its smoother-sounding top-end.

No matter what your personal preferences and tastes may be, it's hard to deny how impressively this amp punches above its weight in terms of bold, authoritative valve tone. Its balance of practicality with great tone underscores its reputation as the standard-bearer against which to judge all small combo amps. May it enjoy many more anniversaries to come! 



PROS Impressive full-bodied midrange through specific circuit tweaks; upgraded Celestion Creamback A-type speaker; spring reverb sounds better than ever

CONS Some tidying up of the reverb leads could remove them from potential harm when stowing away the mains cable



PEOPLE GET READY

BREEDLOVE 

FIRST PLAY



PJD CAREY PRO
£799

WHAT IS IT? All-solid Indonesian-made version of Brit-maker's original Carey model in its Custom Shop Elite level



PJD ST JOHN PRO
£799

WHAT IS IT? A classy offset gets the more affordable offshore treatment, still with the top-tier UK Elite style

Gloves Off

Known for its finely made production-led UK builds, PJD Guitars is now aiming for the mainstream with a range of Indonesian-made solidbodies and its lowest price points yet

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker

It's hard to keep up with York-based PJD Guitars. Only recently it restored one of its original models as the Carey Classic to celebrate the company's 15th anniversary, but behind the scenes Leigh Dovey and Josh Parkin have been working on a new project: finding a partner in Indonesia that could replicate their UK craft at a considerably lower price point.

Now, this is no unique vision. Manson Guitar Works, as just one example, has successfully outsourced builds to Indonesia alongside building an increasing number of all-UK-made models, and plenty of UK-designed brands bypass any kind of UK building and go direct to Asia. The 'offshore' model for the big boys goes back decades, of course, but many of those, not least Fender and Gibson, are aiming to replicate very well-known heritage





1. We've already seen this bridge on Shergold's Telstar model, and although we have no specs (it's not steel), it's a very comfortable design with no height-adjustment screws poking out from the saddles

2. The standard PJD headstock outline is retained here, except the decal logo is silver, not gold like the UK models. The single string-tree will be replaced with a more modern style on the production models

models. As good as the brand is, and with an ever-increasing fanbase, PJD is still a small fish in a big pond.

The Indonesian-made guitars will fall under the 'Origin Series' title, with these two Pro models, which aim to clone the UK Elite models, topping the initial new range. We can look forward to PJD's other shapes, the York and Woodford, plus St John and Carey, appearing as the new Standards at £599 in solid gloss colours, while the Carey and St John Apprentice will start things off at £499.

As to the UK, well, the customisable Elite models will stay the same at £3,199. There will be new Vintage models (Valhalla, York, Woodford, St John and Carey) with gloss NOS nitro finishes, while the St John and Carey Classic models, with their chambered swamp ash bodies, will replace the current Standard models at £1,899. A new, more modern-rock design called

These Indonesian-made Pros aim to clone the style of the high-end UK PJD Custom Shop models

the Romulus will be £1,899 with vibrato, and the fixed-bridge version will be the new start point of the UK range at £1,699.

What's that song? When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

In Build

Not sure what to expect when two boxes turned up at *Guitarist* HQ, we were a little surprised. At first glance both the new Origin Pro models initially looked like the UK-built Elite models, which is no bad first impression for actual guitars that cost less than a quarter of their price. And that's the point: these 'offshore' Pros aim to clone the style of the high-end UK PJD Custom Shop models.

Rather than the shiny mirror gloss favoured by many, both guitars come in a classy overall satin, the backs are more open-pore in style, and the guitars have good weights between 3.26kg (7.17lb) and 3.42kg (7.5lb) – the offset St John being the lighter of the two. PJD is known for using lightweight chambered swamp ash and solid obeche, but the Pros are crafted from solid mahogany (also used on the UK Elites): the bodies are three-piece, topped with a thinly flamed figured maple veneer and cleanly scraped cream plastic binding, with an overall thickness of 40mm.



The necks virtually match the colour of the mahogany bodies but are actually slab-sawn dark-roasted maple. One difference here is that instead of using machine bolts that thread into inserts in the neck (a standard feature of PJD's UK builds since day one), the Origins use standard neck screws which sit in recessed washers on the lightly dome-edged heel.

Despite the different outlines of the UK models, they all use the same 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length, and again that's replicated here along with the same distinctive Fender-style headstock. One obvious identifier of the Origin models is the silver PJD logo; the UK ones use a gold decal. These initial Origin designs come with rosewood fingerboards only (ours are a decent-looking deep brown), while the PJD hallmark hollow rectangle face inlays are used, albeit of slightly lower contrast to the UK ones.

The style of the six-saddle string-through bridge of the UK models is retained, although the bridge here – inspired by a Hipshot design and one we've recently seen on Shergold's Telstar – is actually quite classy with its rounded walls and 'hollow' block saddles. The tuners are an arguable upgrade over the non-locking vintage style used on the current UK



Standards: these are rear-locking with black coated metal buttons.

PJD's style is cloned with the bridge humbucker sitting in its own oversized mounting ring, while the neck pickup is mounted to the laminate scratchplate, the same material as that pickup ring. The Carey's rear-mounted volume and tone controls are widely spaced, the pickup selector toggle on the upper horn, while the St John's controls are more closely spaced and the toggle moves to below the tone control – again, just like the layout of

3. The country of origin decal says it all: these aren't made in the UK! And while neither really needs locking tuners, the style here makes string changing fast and helps with the tuning stability, as do the very well cut nuts on both our samples

4. No surprises under the hood, but note the tidy, simple circuit on this St John Pro

5. There's no specific ID to be seen on these pickups, but they're based on the UK-wound Wadfather set



UNDER THE HOOD

Fit for purpose? Very much so



It doesn't get more simple than the circuits here. The two pots have different logos: the volume is 'Made in Korea Alpha', and the tone pot reads 'Made in Korea Jinsung' (both with a nominal value of 500kohms) with a small green Mylar .022μF cap. There are no tricks, but everything functions well, likewise the standard toggle switches. Thousands of guitars out there have components like these and similarly competent wiring, but little touches such as the proper mounting of the control knobs that sit close to the face on each guitar make a difference.

As to the pickups, these are made in Indonesia and "have been voiced with our UK Standard humbucker models in mind", explains PJD's Josh Parkin. "The bridge pickup uses 43 AWG with an Alnico V magnet and has a medium output allowing a good balance between clean and gain tone. The neck pickup, wound with 42 AWG and again an Alnico V magnet, is comfortably in the vintage [Patent Applied For]-style range, allowing for beautiful and vocal clean tones as well as juicy blues." We'd agree!

Aside from 'B' and 'N' stamped into the brass pickup baseplates, there's no other ID. Measured at output, the bridge pickups read around 13.9k, the neck pickup is closer is 7.2k.

6. The chrome-covered humbuckers are made in Indonesia and approved by the PJD team, especially Josh Parkin who looks after the UK pickup production. The neck pickup is quite vintage-y; the bridge goes for more heat

the UK models. Both guitars also use what looks like the same style chromed metal 'football' jack plate, firmly side mounted and very gig-ready. Overall, these are classy designs with echoes of the past but a nicely contemporary presentation.

Feel & Sounds

While both guitars feel and weigh more like the solidbodies they're compared to, our original semi-hollow Carey Standard (5.79kg/12.8lb), they both feel a little more conventional, too. Both have well-shaped neck profiles very similar to PJD's standard profile: the St John measures 20.5mm at the 1st fret, 22.9mm at the 12th, while the Carey is 21mm at the 1st and 22.1mm at the 12th. The shapes, too, are very subtly different with the Carey a pretty classic medium C and the St John with a very slightly flatter back. Both have the same very Fender-like width, though: 42.4mm at the nut and averaging 51.6mm at the 12th. Despite the very small differences, not least with their satin backs, both feel very good, certainly more modern than vintage-style big.

The fret gauge is a little bigger in width (2.89mm) than the Jescar wire used on the UK models, but it still has a good

height of approximately 1.4mm, once more giving these Pros a slightly more contemporary rock feel. The fingerboard radius measures 254mm (10 inches) and the setups on both are really good. The frets are well polished, and while the fingerboard edges aren't really rolled, they're not sharp, either.

Both our samples have a pretty similar acoustic response, a lively, strong-sounding yet subtly smooth ring with clear but not overpushed high-end. Plugged in, it's obvious that PJD is shooting for a rockier intention with the bridge pickup's overwound midrange punch, which sits just as well with lower-gain classic rock amp voices as it does with heavier metal tones. Pull back the volume and it rounds out a little for chunky rhythm, while the pickup mix adds some sparkle. The neck pickups on both guitars certainly aren't

PJD's style has always been about unfussy function, credible sounds and good playability



overpotted and produce some heavier blues wails with some appealing snap on cleaner tones. In fact, the three sounds here are all pretty credible, and in use both guitars are simple and fast drives. Neither guitar would be our first choice for jangler 'single coil' duties, of course, but you might be surprised by the overall range of voices, clean or driven. At this price point, we really have no complaints.

Verdict

There's plenty of modern, boutique-like style here. And while it doesn't quite match the detail of PJD's Elite UK level, visually they're pretty close in looks and, importantly, not a million miles away in playing feel. It makes both instruments very fit-for-purpose and gig-ready and, to be honest, we're struggling to find any negatives. Yes, the sounds may be a little generic, but they're also reassuringly familiar; they're nicely in-tune and stable guitars and, irrespective of their origin, we really can't knock the craft.

PJD's style has always been about unfussy function, credible sounds, good playability and tuning stability, and these guitars uphold those key elements very well. An impressive debut with a lot more to come. **G**

7. PJD's UK builds always feature threaded bolts that screw into metal inserts in the neck. Here, we have standard neck screws. If it's good enough for Fender...

8. Despite the different positions of the two guitars' controls, it's a simple volume, tone and pickup selector setup. No tricks but plenty of modding potential



PJD ORIGIN SERIES CAREY PRO

PRICE: £799 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Single-cut solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with cream bound thin maple top and 5A figured maple veneer

NECK: Roasted maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, rectangular pearloid inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium-jumbo

HARDWARE: Through-strung walled bridge with 6x hollow saddles; rear-lock tuners with black metal buttons – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm

ELECTRICS: 2x PJD-designed Wadfather 'Origin' covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.42/7.5

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: The new Indonesian-made guitars will start with the St John and Carey Apprentice (£499), while the York, Woodford St John and Carey Standards will retail at £599

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Sea Blue (as reviewed), Original Burst, Forest Green Burst, Charcoal Burst – all satin polyester with open grain back



PROS Clean build with roasted maple neck; good light weight; neck shape and playability; locking tuners; rock-aimed voice; gig-ready; price point

CONS Coil-splits would be good



PJD ORIGIN SERIES ST JOHN PRO

PRICE: £799 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Offset-shaped solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with cream bound thin maple top and 5A figured maple veneer

NECK: Roasted maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, rectangular pearloid inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium-jumbo

HARDWARE: Through-strung walled bridge with 6x hollow saddles; rear-lock tuners with black metal buttons – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm

ELECTRICS: 2x PJD-designed Wadfather 'Origin' covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.26/7.18

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: See Carey Pro

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Original Burst (as reviewed), Sea Blue, Forest Green Burst, Charcoal Burst – all satin polyester with open grain back

PJD Guitars
07891 201729
www.pjdguitars.com



PROS It's the same level build as the Carey with classy, slightly downsized offset outline

CONS As with Carey, it would be good to have coil-splits



FIRST PLAY



FURCH PIONEER-ER A
€1,149

WHAT IS IT? A travel-ready guitar with onboard tech to maintain consistent playability wherever you may roam

Travellin' Light

The latest travel guitar from the renowned Czech builder may look small, but it packs a punch and benefits from some revolutionary new technology

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

Back in issue 517 we reviewed Furch's innovative Little Jane travel guitar, which came with a detachable neck that fitted inside the instrument's body. It also came with a diminutive gigbag meaning it was possible to stow the guitar away in an aircraft's overhead locker and avoid the somewhat capricious attitude that some airlines have towards passengers travelling with guitars. What made the Little Jane even more remarkable was that when you reassemble the guitar it stays in tune. We tested it and, sure enough, once the neck was reattached to the body, and with only the very slightest tweak, it was up to pitch and ready to play.

The guitar itself was a joy to spend time with, experiencing none of the tonal compromises inherent in some of the travel guitars that have ventured our way. At the time, we thought that it would be a great little instrument even without the detachable neck side of things. And that's almost exactly what we have in the Pioneer-ER a. But even here, Furch's boffins have not rested on earlier laurels







1. Furch's Pioneer comes with a Booster Soundport, comprising five slots cut into the upper bout, which, the company says, reduces air pressure in the body and allows the top to move more freely

and the guitar comes with a device built in to combat the changes that sometimes happen when a guitar is exposed to variations in humidity or temperature levels. According to Furch, along with a dual-action truss rod encased in a rigid carbon structure, "the system is further enhanced by a solid-wood expansion element that automatically adjusts the neck angle to maintain consistent string

action over time. It minimises the need for costly, time-consuming neck resets and eliminates maintenance concerns."

If you look at the diagram here (above right), you'll see that the Furch CNR System Active comprises a block of wood that will expand or contract according to the ambient humidity level and automatically adjust the neck as it does so. A special tool to set your required action height, plus a measuring gauge, is supplied with the guitar. If this sounds like a lot of faff, then be reassured that it looks like a case of set-it-and-forget-it to us.

But we wouldn't be doing a thorough job unless we took this system out for a test drive. Needless to say, we couldn't simulate a change in humidity to see if the automatic side of the CNR System Active does its thing. But we could certainly engage the tool to see just how simple it is to make an adjustment to string height to enhance playability. In actual fact, the Pioneer's action was spot on when we first took it out of its gigbag, which means that it had survived the rigours of being transported from Furch's Czech Republic workshops to the UK by various means. However, you may prefer a slightly higher or lower action to suit your playing style and so we brought the special tool into

2. The guitar is made in the Czech Republic and is aimed at players who want to take their guitars with them on their travels. It comes with a rugged gigbag, too!

3. The heart of Furch's new humidity-defying tech is the small block of wood at the base of the neck joint. As the humidity increases, the wood expands and automatically resets the neck to keep playing action at optimum levels

4. It's difficult to assess from the photographs, but the Pioneer really is very petite, with a body about the size of a Les Paul but with a neck that's a lot shorter

5. This is the tool for adjusting the guitar's action to taste. We found it a bit fiddly to begin with, but it doesn't take long to master the knack





3



4



5

IMAGE COURTESY OF FURCH

play. Normally, an adjustment such as this would comprise a combination of a possible truss rod tweaking and the sanding down or replacing the guitar's saddle, depending on whether you wanted to raise or lower the action. Here, you merely insert the tool through the strings – there's no need to slacken them first – and mate the tool to the adjusting socket on the guitar's neck block. We have to admit that our initial attempt was a little ham-fisted from the point of view of inserting the tool, but experience is a great teacher and pretty soon we were able to achieve the desired result. Once the tool is connected, you merely turn the handle one way or the other – depending on whether you're raising or lowering the action – and that's it. Job done. If you're thinking that you've seen this kind of thing before then, yes, it's a little like Fender's neck tilt system from the 1970s, which is, of course, used on the much more contemporary Acoustasonic guitars.

If you're based in the UK then it's unlikely that you'll need to engage the tool on anything like a regular basis. However, if you were looking at a busking adventure that would take you from Florida to Alaska at any point, further genning up might be advisable.

The open-pore finish on the neck is suitably woody and wonderfully smooth in the hand

The other thing to note is Furch's Booster Soundport, which consists of five slots cut into the upper bout of the guitar. Other makers have installed similar ports in the form of holes on their instruments, but here it looks more like a small grille. Furch says: "This innovative feature reduces internal air pressure within the guitar's body, allowing the top board to move more freely and produce a stronger, fuller sound with the same strumming effort." Sounds logical to us.

Innovation aside, what exactly is on offer here? To begin with, we find a guitar with some travel-friendly dimensions inside a rugged and potentially roadworthy gigbag. The guitar measures 935mm (approximately 36 inches) from tip to toe with a body size that comes in at 325mm (12.7 inches) at its widest point and 430mm (16.9 inches) long – about the same as that of a Gibson Les Paul.

Our review sample has an Engelmann spruce top with Indian rosewood for the back and sides – hence the ER suffix in the guitar's name – but if this particular cocktail doesn't suit, then the Pioneer is available with other wood combos (see Range Options over the page). While we're here, it's worth noting that Furch is very quick to point out that these are all solid woods, unlike many other mini acoustics in today's marketplace.

The Pioneer's neck is made from African mahogany, with an ebony 'board that has a flattish 400mm (15.7-inch) radius and microscopically small position markers. The body is bound in black and the top has an almost invisible transparent scratchplate and a very subtle rosette.

As is typical of Furch instruments we've seen in the past, the overall design is very pleasing to the eye and the open-pore satin feel to both body and neck is set to enhance the playing experience still further. Workmanship is first class throughout – and so the next thing is to hear what this little traveller has to say for itself.

Feel & Sounds

With all of the CNR System Active gubbins onboard, the Pioneer is prone to neck-dive when playing seated, but this is entirely



Our review sample has a rosewood back and sides, but other wood combos are available in the range



FURCH PIONEER-ER A

PRICE: €1,149 (inc gig bag)

ORIGIN: Czech Republic

TYPE: Travel guitar

TOP: A-grade Engelmann spruce

BACK/SIDES: Indian rosewood

MAX RIM DEPTH: 104mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 325mm

NECK: African mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 615mm (24.2")

TUNERS: Furch chrome: gear ratio 1:18

NUT/WIDTH: Black Tusq/45mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony

FRETS: 19

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with Tusq saddle/55mm

ELECTRICS: n/a (see Options)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.5/3.3

OPTIONS: 43mm nut model available, LR Baggs EAS-VTC pickup (€194 upcharge)

RANGE OPTIONS: Pioneer-CM a (cedar top, mahogany b/s €1,098), Pioneer-EM a (Engelmann spruce top, mahogany b/s €945), Pioneer-MM a (mahogany top and b/s €1,025)

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes

FINISH: Open pore

Furch

+420 910 902 139

<https://furchguitars.com>



9/10

PROS Well built and superbly thought through travel guitar that is easily adjustable and sounds great

CONS Slight neck heaviness and a learning curve with the adjusting tool

manageable and something that you forget after only a very short time. As we've said, the open-pore finish is suitably woody and wonderfully smooth in the hand. This is particularly noticeable on the neck where the fretting hand is free to travel without any of that resistance that you can occasionally find with a gloss finish. But then there's the sound. What surprised us was the depth of bass and midrange present here. Perhaps this is the science behind the soundport coming into play, but whatever the reason, it really does sound like you're playing a much bigger-bodied instrument. There's certainly none of that boxiness that you find with smaller instruments, and there's plenty of tone-rich volume to be had here, too.

Our little Pioneer didn't come fitted with a pickup (Furch will fit an LR Baggs EAS-VTC for an upcharge), but we would imagine that if you chose to install one, and busking is your thing, then this would be a perfect travel companion once matched with a suitable battery-powered amp.

What surprised us was the depth of bass and midrange. It sounds like a bigger-bodied acoustic

Verdict

As you can probably gather, we were mightily impressed with the Pioneer. Everything here has been well thought through, from the rugged gigbag to the innovative climate-defying facilities and, most importantly, the sound. Looking around on the internet the Pioneer-ER a seems to street around £900, which means it's a costlier prospect than other small-bodied acoustics such as the Baby Taylor or Sheeran By Lowden, but we think that the extra is well worth paying for the sheer quality in terms of build, solid woods and that huge sound on display here. If you're heading off on holiday any time soon and want a guitar-shaped companion with a good pedigree, look no further. **G**

HALCYON

Thinking outside the box

Mike Stringer
signature humbucker set

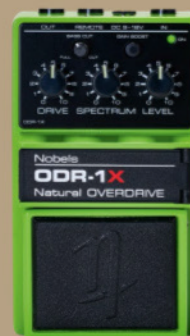
"From crushingly heavy tones
to glassy cleans, Halcyons
deliver consistently and
without compromise"


Spiritbox

bareknucklepickups.co.uk

Bare Knuckle

FIRST PLAY



NOBELS ODR-1X
£129

WHAT IS IT? Augmented version
of a classic drive pedal



Flex Factor

The little green pedal loved by Nashville session players gets a reboot with added versatility

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln

1. Lift the hinged black plastic cover to reveal the battery compartment and a new toggle switch that selects true or buffered bypass
2. The Spectrum knob changes the amount of deep-mid and treble frequencies at the same time. The 12 o'clock position offers the most neutral sound
3. This Gain Boost switch increases the distortion level of the pedal. Its central LED is off in its normal position but turns red if you press it for more gain

The Nobels ODR-1 overdrive flew under the radar for quite some time, but that's no longer the case as its well-documented use by a coterie of US session players, particularly in Nashville, has increased awareness and take-up of the 'other' green pedal. We last looked at a Nobels in issue 464 with the release of the ODR-1 BC (BC standing for bass-cut), which featured a dip switch in the battery compartment to attenuate the bottom-end. This latest iteration offers more flexibility on that bass-cut by giving the facility its own mini knob. What's more, it also can deliver more gain than previous ODR-1s via a Gain Boost button.

The ODR-1X has standard Drive and Level knobs, but like its predecessors it facilitates EQ changes with a Spectrum knob, a double filter tone control that simultaneously cuts/boosts lower mid and treble frequencies, and is very effective whether you're going for pushing the clarity of your top-end or calming it down for a mellower vibe. This works well in conjunction with the Bass Cut control. The pedal is endowed with a substantial bass content that may suit some players but not others (things could get a little bit muddy for humbucker users or with certain amp setups), so to have the ability to roll that off to your exact needs is a very practical asset and a distinct upgrade on a purely switched bass-cut.

Keeping the Drive control at minimum and pushing the Level to somewhere in its final quadrant delivers a useful clean boost. But it's really in the just-beyond-clean and low-level crunch where the pedal truly excels, making it a shoo-in for completely natural drive sounds that don't mess with your core tone. Of course, it is also capable of more substantial drive, too, especially so with the gain boost, which basically puts the gain knob into a higher range and can take things into cranked-amp classic rock territory. Adding a remote footswitch will give you switchable gain boost, although to our ears the jump is a little too much and we'd rather do it by stacking another boost pedal.

Verdict

The ODR-1's long-term efficacy as a transparent drive pedal is all still here in the ODR-1X edition, freshly enhanced with fully adjustable bass-cut, but the extra gain on tap adds a flexibility that means it's capable of going beyond that traditional role. **G**



NOBELS ODR-1X

PRICE: £129

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Drive pedal

FEATURES: Selectable True/Buffered Bypass, 18V operation for extra headroom, integrated Mounty-P mounting plates, glow-in-the-dark pointer knobs

CONTROLS: Drive, Spectrum, Level, Bass Cut, Gain Boost switch, True/Buffered bypass switch, bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, Remote (TRS)

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

DIMENSIONS: 73 (w) x 127 (d) x 55mm (h)

Audio Distribution Group
<https://nobels.de>



PROS Compact; easy access battery compartment; natural drive sounds; Bass Cut; selectable bypass modes; greater gain range

CONS Gain Boost adds to the flexibility, but it may be too much of a jump as a footswitchable boost



THE RIVALS

There are other variations of the ODR-1 around, albeit without the Gain Boost, including the smaller ODR-MINI2 (£69) and a gold limited-edition 30th Anniversary model (£149), both of which have a Bass Cut knob; the ODR-1BC (£99) has a Bass Cut switch. The Wampler Belle Overdrive Mini (£139) is based on the ODR-1, while the Keeley Noble Screamer (£189) features circuitry that channels both ODR-1 and Tube Screamer sounds and lets you mix and match elements of both. The twin-footswitch Browne Amplification Protein Dual Overdrive (£349) features two drive circuits: one based on the ODR-1, the other on a Bluesbreaker.



FIRST PLAY



WALRUS AUDIO XERO POLY LOOPER £285

WHAT IS IT? A dual-channel
stereo looper with creative options



Xero Hour

Walrus Audio's new stompbox looper offers a smart option for unlocking your creativity

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. The two Channel Select LEDs here indicate which channel is being controlled by the footswitches. If both are lit red, then both channels are being controlled simultaneously
2. These Channel LEDs are multi-coloured and display red, green and white for recording and playback controls, plus cyan, pink, yellow and blue for different speed effects
3. The Speed and Forward/Reverse buttons on either side of the pedal can be used to set playback speed (Half, Normal, Double) and loop direction (Forward or Reverse). Their actions can be put under footswitch control

Walrus Audio's first foray into looping is the Xero Polylooper, a dual-channel stereo looper that the brand says is designed to fully explore the creative possibilities of multiple loop channels. It's a practical-sized pedal that offers two identical looping channels with three available modes to determine how the two are synchronised. Each channel has its own volume slider, plus a Pan knob to fix its own location in the stereo field – a great feature that can deliver a real sense of space and clarity if you're running in stereo. For effect, each channel can be independently switched to run in reverse and/or at half or double speed with the consequent octave pitch change.

The control surface of the Xero is simple enough with no menus to navigate, but the two footswitches have to take care of a lot of functions via various presses-and-holds on either single footswitches or both simultaneously. Subsequently, it can take a little time to become fluent with your feet and get your head around the visual cues provided by the seven different colours in the multi-coloured LED allied to each footswitch. Operational ease can be improved by adding an external dual footswitch or via MIDI for full control of functions and clock sync.

Sync mode offers pretty much standard looper operation with both channels locked to the same length and time base, while Unsynced sees both channels operating fully independently so any loops will drift in and out of sync, which can create some mesmerizing effects if you're recording ambient pad-type sounds. The third mode, Poly, lets you record loops of different lengths that stay rhythmically sync'd. Recorded loop lengths will automatically quantize to a multiple of the shared time, so you can have a mixture of short and long phrases, or do the actual polyrhythmic thing by recording a three-beat pattern against a four-beat pattern, for example.

The pedal delivers plenty of possibilities for practice, solo performance or songwriting, whether you're just laying down a chord sequence to solo over or getting into building something more complex where the footswitchable loop speed and direction changes are a real bonus, facilitating sonic explorations that could trigger even more creativity.

Verdict

While the Xero is initially a little complicated, once you get the hang of it, this looper has many practical applications and is a fun creative tool. **G**



WALRUS AUDIO XERO POLYLOOPER

PRICE: £285

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Looper pedal

FEATURES: True bypass, up to 3 mins' looping, 2x channels, variable loop speed, loop reverse, loop panning

CONTROLS: Pan (1&2), Volume slider (1&2), Speed switch (1&2), FWD/REV switch (1&2), Mode switch, footswitch 1, footswitch 2

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs Mono (L) & Stereo (R), standard outputs Mono (L) & Stereo (R), EXT switch, 1/8" MIDI In, 1/8" MIDI Thru, USB C (for firmware updates)

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

DIMENSIONS: 100 (w) x 118 (d) x 57mm (h)

FACE bvba

www.walrusaudio.com

8/10

PROS Compact size; stereo panning; WYSIWYG operation; three operational modes; loop speed and direction flexibility; external footswitch option; MIDI

CONS It's a bit of a learning curve



THE RIVALS

The Xero pretty much does its own unique thing, but if we're looking at other dual-channel loopers, the Sheeran Looper + (£279) features Ed Sheeran's looper workflow in a compact and portable chassis that can be powered by batteries. It features four looper modes and can record up to 128 loops and store over three hours' worth of audio samples. The triple-footswitch Pigtronix Infinity 3 (£339) features approximately three hours of recording time on up to 50 loop pairs that can be played either in series or parallel. For those on a stricter budget, check out the Valeton VLP-200 (£99).



The Sheeran Looper + is a dual-channel looping option that's both compact and portable



the Wishlist

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

Martin GPE Inception Maple £4,349

CONTACT **Martin Guitars** customerservice@martinguitar.com WEB www.martinguitar.com WORDS **Jamie Dickson** PHOTOGRAPHY **Matt Lincoln**

Maple has long been a bit of a puzzler for acoustic-guitar makers. It's attractive and fairly abundant compared with tropical hardwoods and is thus both more sustainable and less likely to be subject to restrictions such as the CITES controls imposed on rosewood a few years ago. And though instrument-grade maple has been growing harder for luthiers to get their hands on, both Taylor and now Martin have seen potential for it to be useful for more than just J-200s.

The problem is that, when used as a body wood for flat-top acoustic guitars, maple tends to generate a clear but not very complex note – useful for archtops perhaps but less so for instruments intended to be rich, resonant, long-sustaining tone machines. Martin's Fred Greene describes the problem thus: "Maple can sound a bit stiff. You get a strong, quick fundamental note... then it decays quickly and you just don't get a lot of nuanced overtones over the top of that."

Enter the Inception series of guitars. The cutaway GPCE model, which launched the range last year, is now joined by the more traditionally styled non-cutaway GPE model seen here. To get round some of the traditional limitations of maple as a bodywood,

Martin built a beautiful curved, wedge-shaped panel of black walnut into the back of its Inception guitars to lend a softening effect to the guitar's tone.

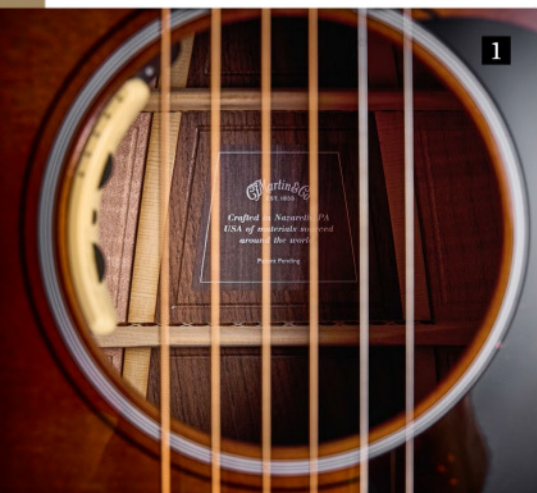
The real innovation takes place beneath the European spruce top, however. To voice the maple body differently from conventional models, Martin uses what it calls "skeletonized X-bracing" to support the soundboard. Instead of the sculpted bars of solid spruce we might customarily expect, this bracing has a honeycomb structure that offers huge strength and a different degree of stiffness to standard bracing, and has been used as one of the means to voice the top, to bring out the most from the maple body. Additionally, Martin has cut "tone channels" into key areas of the soundboard's underside. These shallow grooves allow the most resonant areas of the top to vibrate more freely, opening up the potential of that maple body further to produce a rich, complex voice.

What results is a guitar with a bell-like, long sustaining voice that works well for Celtic fingerstyle on the one hand, or lively, harmonics-rich strumming on the other. It suits a player with a confident touch, but if you click with this guitar, it delivers thrilling sonic performance in an elegant package. **G**

1. Martin used what it calls "skeletonized X-bracing", which has a honeycomb structure, to support the soundboard. The guitar also features an LR Baggs Anthem pickup system – combining an internal mic with an under-saddle pickup – and we like how Martin has kept the input separate from the endpin, avoiding an outsize button

2. The GPE has been fitted with phosphor bronze strings as standard, a sensible move that departs from the GPCE launch model's choice of excellent but rather niche Luxe Kovar strings

3. The wedge of black walnut on the back looks spectacular flanked by figured maple under an Amber Fade finish





4. The 14-fret black walnut neck features a 645mm (25.4-inch) scale and a fairly shallow, slender profile that Martin calls a GE Modified Low Oval. And we're struck by how nice the rolled-in fingerboard edges feel. Combined with the satin finish on the neck, it's an immediately engaging, tactile experience

5. The Sloped Modern Belly bridge is FSC-certified ebony, in-keeping with the sustainability theme of the guitar

6. The maple body itself is attractively flamed, the rich, rippling patterns of the wood just visible beneath the smoky Amber Fade Sunburst finish



Gas Supply

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

Gretsch Synchronomatic Nashville & Falcon £1,149 & £1,299

CONTACT **Fender GBI** PHONE 01342 331700 WEB www.gretschguitars.com

JARGON CRUNCHING Synchronomatic

You might recognise the Synchronomatic from its previous incarnation as an affordable Gretsch series, but the name itself originates in the 1930s with Gretsch's Synchronomatic 300 archtop. Like the Falcon, it featured a 17-inch wide maple body and spruce top with 'cat's eye' soundholes and a 'lightbulb' headstock.

Gretsch Synchronomatic? I'd forgotten about these!

Yep, at the tail end of last century, Gretsch repurposed the Synchronomatic name – taken from its archtop model of the 1930s – and used it to usher in a more affordable range of imported guitars. Now, after a couple of decades of us becoming familiar with the Electromatic and subsequent Streamliner series, the Synchronomatic name is back and it's brought two models with it (to quote their full names): the Synchronomatic Nashville Hollow Body Single-Cut with Bigsby and the Synchronomatic Falcon Hollow Body Single-Cut with Bigsby.

Falcon? As in, the Gretsch model I've always wanted but could never afford?

That's the one. Previously, it's been caged as the reserve of players such as Neil Young, Billy Duffy, John Frusciante and more. But the Synchronomatic Falcon puts Gretsch's big bird within the wingspan of us normal folk. And as well as that we get the Nashville, an affordable take on the classic 6120.

Crikey. You'd better start at the beginning, then. How affordable are they?

Well, let's get the business sorted first. The Nashville has a retail price of £1,149 and the Falcon comes in

HOLLOWBODY DESIGN

The Synchronomatic line-up currently comprises comparatively affordable versions of two of Gretsch's most sought-after hollowbody models: the Nashville (below) and Falcon (right)

SEMI-ARC BRACING

Gretsch has developed the Semi-Arc bracing to be a best-of-both between its trestle and parallel bracing methods, offering sustain while reducing feedback

ELECTRONICS

Both models feature Alnico V Hi-Fidelity Filter'Tron humbuckers, wired to individual volume controls, a master tone knob and a master volume control complete with a treble bleed circuit

BIGSBY

Okay, so it's a licensed Bigsby, but something's got to give. Both guitars feature blingy gold hardware and the tailpiece has the distinctive V-shaped cutout on the tailpiece. Nice





The multi-ply gold sparkle binding seen on the necks of the new Gretsch guitars extends to the neck and headstock

slightly higher at £1,299. Both come with hardshell cases and two colour options.

That's still not cheap, though...

No, but the times they are a-changin', and as we've seen over the past year or so, higher-spec guitars made in Eastern Asia are becoming the new 'workhorse' models with upgraded spec and closer detailing. These guitars are on the shelves for less than half the price of their Japanese-made counterparts. Plus, have you seen the price of bread lately?

The Synchronomatic Falcon puts Gretsch's big bird within the wingspan of us normal folk

Fine, so what's the spec?

Well, first, the Synchronomatic guitars are made in China. Both models feature a similar base construction recipe of a 63.5mm (2.5-inch) deep laminated maple body. The necks are maple with a 'C'-shaped profile and 304.8mm (12-inch) radius ebony fingerboards. The Nashville has a 625mm (24.6-inch) scale length, while the Falcon is 648mm (25.5 inches). Gretsch has added new bracing, too, with its Semi-Arc design, along with Hi-Fidelity Filter'Tron pickups on both models. And, of course, they both come with a Bigsby.

Semi-Arc? Ah! So these are centre-blocked?

Not at all. If you've ever seen Gretsch's elusive 'trestle' bracing, you'll be familiar with the two hefty U-shaped chunks of wood that run from the neck join to the bridge in parallel with each other, either side of the pickups. The bracing makes contact with the body at four points (around the neck join and bridge), adding sustain while controlling the notorious hollowbody feedback at higher volumes. Semi-Arc borrows part of this design to offer the same body dampening and sustain but does away with the 'feet' at the neck block end. So what we're hopefully getting is a beefed-up version of soundpost bracing, with the tonal benefits of the trestle design.

What about those colour options?

The Synchronomatic Nashville is available in 50s Orange Stain and Cadillac Green (far left), and the Falcon comes in Snowcrest White (near left) and Black. [SW]

ALSO OUT NOW...

BOSS XS-1 & XS-100 £198 & £311



Boss knows a thing or two about pitch-based effects, and now it's unveiled two new polyphonic pitch pedals with the XS-1 and XS-100 Poly Shifter. The XS-1 is a compact-sized unit with a dedicated control offering retuning of your guitar by +/- 1 to seven semitones, or one to three octaves. You can blend the balance of the effect with your original signal, plus there are sockets for external foot controllers, including an expression

pedal. The XS-100, meanwhile, offers expression-controlled pitch bending and jumping from -4 to +4 octaves with semitone increments available. There's a dry-through output for running your effected signals in parallel, as well as 30 user memories and MIDI in/out.

www.boss.info

POSITIVE GRID BIAS X \$149

Artificial intelligence is taking over nearly every area of our lives, but before we all become cloud-based algorithms, it's also going to help us create better guitar sounds. Positive Grid's latest Bias X software does exactly that. It's an amp-modelling plug-in available in VST/AU/AAX formats, equipped with 33 amps, 25 cabs and 63 effects. And the brand has added the ability to instruct the plug-in to create the sound you're looking for. It does it in a number of ways: Text-to-Tone, which responds to written descriptions; Music-to-Tone, which analyses and replicates existing audio; and Creative Prompts, which can take an abstract phrase and design a signal chain it deems appropriate. It'll tweak and retweak your sound until you're content, so says Positive Grid: "Bias X understands the sound of every genre, era and technique – so you can explore tone without limits." Now, can someone just do the same for technique?

www.positivegrid.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: Laura Cox

Album: *Trouble Coming* (earMUSIC)

Anglo-French guitarist Laura Cox garnered millions of views on YouTube as a young player before she made the leap to playing live on stage

You don't have to be a blues fanatic, or even a guitar player, to enjoy the latest release from Anglo-French singer-songwriter Laura Cox. On album number four, titled *Trouble Coming*, she's penned her most universal collection of songs to date – traversing her way through swampy vintage blues into contemporary rock. The Parisian started her career on YouTube with note-perfect renditions of classics by Lynyrd Skynyrd and Guns N' Roses, but in recent years she's established as an artist in her own right. Her latest efforts will broaden those horizons even further.

Swamp Music

While she'd be the first to admit she's still making guitar-oriented music, this latest body of work sees Laura focusing more on the songs at the heart of the fretwork. "I wanted to take my music somewhere else in the hope of reaching people who aren't musicians or guitarists," she explains. "Some songs don't even have solos, which is a first for me. I was more focused on the rhythms, melodies and vocals. And now it's like I can enjoy my music from a distance, as if I wasn't the composer."

Anything Goes

To ensure she was covering new ground, Laura chose to mix things up and recruit some different personnel around her – which is why *Trouble Coming* documents a new chapter of her career. "For the first time I didn't record with my band," she reveals. "I collaborated with a French duo called No Money Kids who reminded me of The Black Keys, playing bluesy rock with a modern edge. I recorded at home for the demos, and we ended up keeping some of those recordings. There are even vocals where you can hear the TV in the background. After all, the right take isn't the one you record with expensive gear in a nice studio; it's the one with the right intention."

Cherry Bomb

In the video for lead single *No Need To Try Harder*, Laura can be seen playing a Gibson Les Paul Junior in Maraschino Cherry. "I started playing Juniors in 2019 and ended up looking for more," she says. "I found this one on Reverb and it turned out to be Billie Joe Armstrong from Green Day's signature. I love it because it doesn't look like other Juniors. It has a humbucker, which suits my style, and the red finish against a white scratchplate makes it look like a Fender guitar. It's very special."



PHOTO BY LIRODAGIL

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

Another favourite in Laura's collection is her Gibson 1961 SG reissue in TV Yellow. "I love this finish because it's not the traditional red," she says. "TV Yellow feels like a Telecaster colour. I love the neck, it's larger than what I usually go for, but it works well. And the stock Burstbucker pickups sound great. I used to play Les Pauls earlier on in my career. More recently, Gibson sent me this SG to try out and I couldn't send it back. If you are coming from Les Pauls, SGs feel so easy."

Slide Away

Being a fan of Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers Band, it should come as no surprise that Laura's albums tend to feature a healthy dose of slide guitar. "The most important thing with slide is finding the right finger and size," she says. "I feel comfortable using my middle finger, which is not the case for most people, and I prefer thick ceramic slides because they seem to resonate more. Muting with the index finger is important to stop other strings from ringing. It's nice to explore different tunings. Doing that helps you discover new ideas – it can be hugely motivating when you're stuck in a rut." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Trouble Coming*

For fans of: Rival Sons, The Black Keys, ZZ Top



Laura Cox's fourth studio album is due for release on 31 October
www.lauracoxmusic.com

**ALL YOU NEED
IS FUZZ**

Laura on the
SoloDallas Orbiter:
the fuzz pedal that's
always by her side

"At first, I got to know SoloDallas because of the AC/DC connection. Eventually, they asked if I wanted to try their Orbiter fuzz and I thought, 'Why not?' I've tried many fuzzes and not all of them work well with my rig. Fuzz pedals can be sensitive – some are only good at a certain gain level or volume. The Orbiter really impressed me."

"The right take isn't the one you record with expensive gear in a nice studio; it's the one with the right intention"



Albums

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

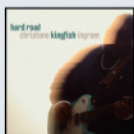
Kingfish elevates his sound and storytelling on third studio album



Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram

Hard Road

Red Zero Records (available now)



Impeccable, impassioned phrasing ignites what could have been a journeyman modern blues record

A couple of years back, this writer was pottering about at home when he suddenly became aware that whoever was on the radio in the other room was playing seriously great blues guitar. At the end of the song, the announcer revealed the guitarist was Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram. What stood out then, as it does now, was what brilliant timing and feel this young man has – as well as a fusillade of very tasty faster licks he can call down on command, it seems.

His latest, *Hard Road*, does nothing to disappoint those high expectations, though one still senses an artist trying to find his strongest suit in terms of songwriting. Opener, *Truth*, lays down a solid funk groove as Christone tells his story of upbringing in the Delta and the meaning of blues music in his life, letting rip with the wah pedal on a typically fluent, propulsive solo. As affecting as the song's origins story is, we can't help feeling he's on even richer musical ground on the soulful *Standing On Business*, with its touches of gospel and sharply observed 'better off without you' break-up story. It's intriguing stop-start groove feels more distinctive than some of the skilled but mainstream blues-rock numbers on the album. Likewise, the striding shuffle of *Hard To Love* sees Christone dig really deep on guitar over its soul-influenced minor blues that's played with an intriguingly upbeat vibe that lifts it above the conventional. Quality work from a real-deal blues talent who shines brightest when he departs from the script. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Crosses*

For fans of: BB King, Joe Bonamassa, Eric Gales

John Smith

Gatherings

Commoner Records (available now)



20th anniversary reimagining of earlier works

Singer-songwriter John Smith decided on a very special way to celebrate his 20th anniversary as a professional musician. He took a look at his first three albums, selected some tracks that were both personal and fan favourites, and headed off to the studio to reimagine and re-record them. This was no solo affair, either, as John took a few special friends with him on his quest, including Lisa Hannigan, The Staves, Siobhan Miller and Dan Mangan. Of this enterprise, John says: "I've learnt as time goes on that the songwriter isn't necessarily in charge of the songs. Sometimes it feels as if it's the other way round, that a song will reveal itself fully when it's ready to be sung." The results here are wonderful re-tellings of tales through the eyes of a performer two decades further down the road, and the collaborations with other artists lend extra zest. Marvellous! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Salty And Sweet*

For fans of: John Martyn, Nick Drake

Marcus King

Darling Blue

American Records/Republic Records (available now)



Country rocker reunites with touring band for dynamic album

The story goes that Grammy-nominated guitarist and songwriter Marcus King took the decision to reunite with his touring band in the studio for the first time since 2018, and the result is a masterclass in Southern country rock at its finest. "We put everything we had into making something that we love," Marcus says, "and we have faith that the audience will feel that and love it, too." There's a cohesion that comes with a band that spends years on the road – and that's the thing that really ties the whole of *Darling Blue* together. Songs such as *Heartlands* recall the glory days of the Eagles with solid arrangements, singalong choruses and memorable guitar playing. And check out the groove and dynamic build of *Carolina Honey*, proving Marcus's songwriting expertise extends to soul, too. First single, *Honky Tonk Hell*, has already racked up over a million streams at time of writing and we predict the album is headed for Grammy success. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Levis & Goodbyes*

For fans of: Eagles, Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Band



Laura continues to hone her rock guitar voice

PHOTO BY LIRIODA-GIL

Laura Cox

Trouble Coming

earMUSIC (available 31 Oct)



Rising star refocuses on fourth album release

You'll have already met Laura Cox in this issue's 'Fretbuzz' (page 34) and heard about her rise to fame via social media, particularly her covers of classic rock songs on YouTube. Now, having launched herself onto the world's stage, she's set to release album number four. *Trouble Coming* finds her focusing more on the songwriting side of things, rather than fretboard gymnastics, and the album is altogether more cohesive as a result. Take her pounding, fuzzed-up Gibson rhythm on *Inside The Storm* or the fast pace and deft slide work on *Dancing Around The Truth*, while things take a heavy turn on *Rise Together* complete with its head-turning fiery solo. All evidence of a renaissance from online star to mature songwriter and performer who has found a balance in her work and is, we suspect, destined for great things. [DM]

Standout track: *The Broken*

For fans of: Samantha Fish, ZZ Top

The Barr Brothers

Let It Hiss

Secret City Records (available now)



Intriguing alt-folk from Montreal-based brothers

Brad and Andrew Barr formed indie-folk outfit The Barr Brothers in Montreal in 2006, alongside bassist Morgan

Moore, pedal steel player Brett Lanier and harpist Eveline Gregoire-Rousseau. Debut album, *The Barr Brothers*, was released in 2011 and award nominations soon followed. The band was hailed for its electric and acoustic take on Appalachian folk, skilfully blended with influences from Delta blues and classical music. Known for combining homemade percussion instruments with quirky arrangements, the band soon began an intensive touring schedule. *Let It Hiss* was eight years in the making, owing to the many side projects the brothers are involved with – Andrew has been playing drums with Mumford & Sons, for instance. The songs here are enchantingly leftfield but with strong melodies, atmospheric breathy vocals and catchy choruses. Maybe not so well known in the UK, but it's only a matter of time. [DM]

Standout track: *Moonbeam*

For fans of: John Lennon, Neil Young



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Tones Behind The Tracks

When two prog giants collaborate, you know you're in for a mesmerising experience. Bioscope's **Steve Rothery** shares the story of *Gentō*

Artist: Bioscope

Album: *Gentō* (earMUSIC)



The album was mainly recorded at Quaeschning's studio in Berlin bar one session at Marillion's Racket Club in London

Gentō is a new album by Bioscope, a collaborative project from Marillion's Steve Rothery and Tangerine Dream's Thorsten Quaeschning. The pair first met aboard ship during 2014's *Cruise To The Edge*, which saw a variety of prog bands perform on the high seas in front of a hoard of like-minded music fans. Later on it was mooted that a possible musical alliance might be forthcoming and now the project has come to fruition, with a little help from Elbow's Alex Reeves on drums. The album is an immersive experience with broad cinematic soundscapes conjured from Thorsten's bank of analogue synths and Steve's ever melodic guitar. But let's start at the beginning...

"Thorsten would set something going with some interesting chords and I would come up with melodies and arpeggios and textures over that"

Steve, how did you meet Thorsten?

"We both did this progressive rock festival at sea that sailed from Miami around the Caribbean for about five days in 2014. So I saw Tangerine Dream perform then. I mean, I listened to Tangerine Dream when I was 15 or 16 – *Ricochet* and *Stratosfear*. Then [Thorsten] asked to come to the Marillion concert in Berlin in December 2018 and we met up for a coffee and discussed the vague notion about maybe trying to work together one day, and eventually that happened.

The name for the band – which comprises Steve Rothery (below) of Marillion, Tangerine Dream's Thorsten Quaeschning and Elbow's Alex Reeves – came from 19th century cinema

"In March 2020 he was over for a solo show in London, and he came up to the Racket Club – the Marillion studio – with all this gear. We had several hours of experimenting, and it was pretty obvious that there was a good chemistry there. It was a bit 'when two worlds collide', but it worked really well."

So you were a Tangerine Dream fan from way back?

"Yeah. I wasn't a *huge* fan, but I really liked what they did. You know, that whole genre of music I loved; Vangelis, especially his soundtrack for *Blade Runner*. We struck up a really good creative relationship, really. It's no egos, just a love of music and creating. It's been about six years for the album to come together, but if you add up the amount of time we've been in the same room it's probably only five weeks."

Where did the name of the band come from?

"As we were listening to the music, when it was progressing, it was all very cinematic. One of the times I was in Berlin I did some research about what to name it because the option of Rothery and Quaeschning sounded like a firm of accountants! So I was researching the early cinema and I came across 'bioscope', which was one of the early film projection systems developed in Berlin in the 1800s – I thought that could be a really cool name for the band."

Did the music emerge from jamming together in the studio?

"Everything we've written has come out of improvisation. We only did one session at the Racket Club and every other session has been at Thorsten's studio in Berlin. But it was just very easy, you know? He's a master of the analogue world: lots of analogue synthesizers, modular systems, analogue sequencers. He would set something going with some interesting chords and I would come up with melodies and arpeggios and textures over that. It was like a musical conversation, really."

Did you overdub your guitar parts or was it all spontaneous collaboration?

"No, it was all born in the moment from the very first note we played together. He'd set something going and I'd play something on the top of it, and he'd change it and I'd follow. Some of the tracks, like *Kaleidoscope*, we



PHOTO BY ANNE-MARIE FORNER

“We struck up a really good creative relationship, really. It’s no egos, just a love of music and creating”

decided we were going to try to write something a bit more uptempo to a loop, and I came up with the guitar riffs. And eventually the track developed from what it was.”

How did the sessions contrast with the way you work in Marillion?

“Oh, very different. The way that Marillion have written, really, for the last 20 years of our 45-year career, is that we tend to write by jamming, and the producer will sift through the ideas and upload the best moments to a SoundCloud link, and we all listen and make judgments on those and put the best moments together eventually. But it’s quite a long, slow process. Whereas with the Bioscope project, it was a lot quicker to develop. There were no committees involved.”

What gear did you use for the album?

“For the session at the Racket Club, I used my backline. So it’s a whole range of stuff: Blade S-types, there’s this Ibanez Artist that I used on that session. I used a Telecaster [style model]... all sorts of things, but mainly three different Blade S-types, one with EMG SA pickups. At the Marillion studio, my backline is all sorts of things. A couple of [GigRig] G2s controlling racks of gear from a Groove Tubes Trio preamp, a Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere, which is a favourite of mine. Lots of tremolo pedals, different modulation effects, a Pitcher amp, which is a bit like a Dumble – a great clean sound. Various Free The Tone delays, some special reverbs... all manner of things. The Meris Enzo is on there, and one of the ones I used quite a lot on the record is the Eventide H90 pedal. As things developed, I used it as an excuse to buy more and more pedals. So I’ve probably spent all my royalties on the endless pedals that arrive at the door to my wife’s displeasure.”

At what stage did you get Elbow’s Alex Reeves involved?

“The last session we did last December in Berlin, we kind of took stock of our situation and thought, ‘Well, we’re pretty close to having an album here, we should really try to finish it.’ We thought it’d be great to have some live drums on this and we spent several hours trawling through YouTube for different drummers we’d consider working with. A friend of mine, Matt Prior, who plays guitar with Bonnie Tyler, had worked with Alex on some sessions and really recommended him. So I emailed Alex and I sent him some of the ideas,



PHOTO BY THOMAS ECKE

and he got straight back to me and said he loved it and would love to be involved with the record.

“Thorsten flew over in March of this year and we both went to Alex’s studio in North London. He recorded all the drums on the album in two days, which was quite a remarkable achievement. He just doesn’t seem to make a mistake, you know? In fact, he’s playing with us live when we go out in December for some European shows.”

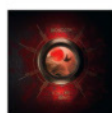
How are you going to rework the material for live performance?

“Well, my good friend Dave Foster, who plays in my solo band, is going to be playing second guitar. I’ve played live with Tangerine Dream several times, so I understand the kind of system that Thorsten uses in that live environment. It’s going to be very exciting having Alex with us. I think it’s going to add a really interesting dimension. We’ve got a great light show with amazing videos for all the tracks. We have a huge video wall behind and this great live sound engineer, Ian Bond, who normally does Porcupine Tree and Steven Wilson, so it should look and sound fantastic.”

Are there any plans to perform in the UK?

“Yes. These shows we’re doing, which are two in the Netherlands, two in Germany and one in Warsaw, the only reason I could do those is because Marillion stops for Christmas, basically. So as soon as Marillion stops, I put these shows in. I’d like to think we can do some more shows next April, and I’m planning at least two, hopefully three, UK shows then.” **[DM]**

Steve in the studio with a Reverend Greg Koch Gristlemaster, which was joined by a selection of Blade S-types – and a truck load of guitar pedals



Bioscope’s new album, *Gentō*, is available now via earMUSIC

www.bioscope.music



The Learning Curve

Neville Marten bemoans his lack of music-reading skills as he and some 'old' mates attempt to compile songs for an upcoming gig

I recently moved from Bath back to north Essex where I lived on and off from infants' school up to my late 30s. Bath, of course, is beautiful and I have some great friends there. But here is where my oldest mates and colleagues reside. Already, I'm collaborating with a few to get the creaky wheels oiled and to climb back on that musical horse – to mix a metaphor or two.

Our research suggests that many readers fall, as I do, into the 'people of a certain age' category. So my minor struggles with learning new songs for this project made

"My biggest regret was not learning to read music. This was partly because I misguidedly believed that reading damaged a player's 'feel'"

me ponder whether you experience the same issues I do. I've said before how my single biggest career regret was not learning to read music. I'll confess that this was partly because back then I misguidedly believed reading damaged a player's 'feel'. I mean, Eric and Jimi didn't read and it didn't hurt them, did it? Luckily, guitar magazines quickly knocked that nonsense out of my head, but I still didn't bother to do it.

The other 'problem' is that I found learning the guitar relatively easy, so I became good enough quickly enough to get asked to join bands. Then I stopped getting better because in those bands I didn't *need* to be better. I have, of course, learned tons in the intervening years, especially the theory side of things, and hopefully by way of note choice.

Anyway, back to these songs, almost all of which I've never played before or thought about working out. Had I bothered to master even basic reading skills, this little venture would have been so much easier. I can pick out chords, licks and solos easily enough; it's remembering the arrangements – verses, choruses, middle eights, how many bars between each section, and so on – that's the issue.

The three of us have a weekly get-together. I take a Strat and my Yamaha THR10, my mate plays his wondrous Montage keyboard, Julie sings and we add harmonies and the occasional lead vocal. Between us we make a satisfying sound when it all comes together. I'll nab a Helix 2 when they finally emerge, so my range of sounds should be all encompassing.

Back To The Drawing Board

I'm sure you're familiar with 'great rehearsal, rubbish gig' syndrome. In a way, it's the same for me here. At the first rehearsal I get *this* right and *that* wrong, then we routine it until we have it down. But by the second rehearsal I've forgotten most of the things I got right last time so it's almost back to the drawing board. I don't like crib sheets as they can become a security blanket, so my only choice is to commit it all to head and muscle memory.

Another exacerbation is that I'm simply not playing enough guitar. From when I started back in my teens up to around the first lockdown, I picked up an acoustic or electric every single day. But as I write this I have a Les Paul, Strat and Martin languishing on a stand just feet away. I do sit down between rehearsals and bone up on the songs. But perhaps, subliminally, I'm presuming the speed of recall I possessed 40 years ago still remains, so a quick run-through will suffice. Truth is, I need to work longer and harder on this stuff now, and this whining confessional has made me realise that!

Being significantly younger than Clapton, McCartney, The Stones and so on, I'd love to know how they cope. I don't think our facility is reduced. In some ways I'd say it's greater than ever. But changes do naturally happen and we have to face them.

I hope this doesn't read like a litany of excuses for my indolence. But I swear I can hear the voices of *Guitarist* and *GT* music editors saying, "Listen old chap, you just need to get off your arse and put the bloody hours in!" And, of course, they're right. See you next month. **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

One For The Birds

What? Epiphone Inspired By Gibson Custom Shop Hummingbird Deluxe EC
Where seen? www.musicradar.com **Price?** £1,099

I just reviewed this guitar for our sister website and was so impressed that I thought I'd point you in its direction. It's a fabulous-looking cutaway electro-acoustic that sounds superb, is built impeccably and plays great. With rosewood back and sides, torrefied spruce top, mahogany neck and ebony fingerboard with real mother-of-pearl double parallelogram inlays, it looks cracking. The built-in LR Baggs Element Bronze pickup means it's stage-ready, too. My verdict of "not only is it one of the handsomest guitars around, it plays great, punches well above its weight in the tone stakes, and sounds like an instrument of genuine quality" says it all. Check it out!



When it comes to looks and playability, this Hummingbird has wings



Shape Up

Alex Bishop reshapes a guitar neck this month - but will he destroy a pristine new guitar in the process?

Perfect guitar tone, string gauges, capacitor values, pickups... There is barely one aspect of the guitar that isn't subjective to each and every musician's personal taste and opinions. It's part of the joy of the instrument that innumerable design configurations will shape the playing experience and sonic palette of each and every instrument out there. Guitar-forum junkies may debate everything from capacitor values to restringing methods, but it's a certainty that no two players will agree on the ideal neck profile. So, as a luthier, how does one go about shaping the perfect one?

Recently, a customer of mine dropped into the workshop with an emergency repair. An endorsed client of his had received a brand-new guitar just in time for a big tour, only to find that he really couldn't get on with the shape of the neck. The instrument in question was based on a vintage 1930s Gibson L-00 (one of which, serendipitously, had passed through the workshop only a couple of weeks before). Those early truss-rod-less guitars relied solely on neck girth to keep the neck straight, and while this meant they could more readily survive the harsh conditions of steel strings and life on the road, they were never the easiest guitars to play. My challenge was to shave the neck down to modern specifications, and then refinish it to disguise the fact it had ever been modified. With only 10 days until the first show, it was not going to be an easy task...

Discomfort Zone

The first thing to do was establish what made it feel so uncomfortable. A neck profile is simply a combination of its thickness, width, taper and profile. So I plucked my trusty vernier calipers from the tool wall and took some critical measurements. A fairly typical acoustic guitar nut width measures 45mm, narrowing to 42mm for electric guitars and reaching a whopping 54mm on some classicals. However, with frets flush to the edges of the fingerboard, modifying the width of a guitar neck is almost never a sensible option.

Conversely, the thickness of the neck is more easily altered and often proves to be the reason for a peculiar neck profile. A measurement of 21mm in the middle of the 1st fret is typical of most acoustics and electrics, tapering to around 24mm just in front of the heel. However, the fretboard takes up around 6mm, and with most truss rod channels running up to 12mm deep in the neck there is rarely more than 3mm of wood spare at the thinnest point. So it's not a good idea to carve beyond 21mm, unless you want to run the risk of wrecking the structural integrity of the neck.

The vintage specs of the guitar in question, however, had the neck measuring 25mm beneath the 1st fret. As it was more baseball bat than guitar, I surmised that the



next step would be to level the back of the neck with a rasp followed by chisels and planes to keep everything true. A centre line was added and reprofiling from the fingerboard edges to this new surface commenced.

Once the width, thickness and taper are established, the resulting profile will vary from a lightly shouldered 'D' profile right through to an almost triangular 'V', as can be found on some of the more unusual vintage guitar necks. This is where player preference steps in, with larger hands finding reassurance with a more rounded profile, and shorter digits preferring a more

Alex takes the vintage "baseball bat" spec (right) down to more modern territory and refinishes the reshaped neck in black nitro lacquer (left)

"To suppress the terror as one files through the pristine lacquer coating the back of the neck, it's important to have a plan for refinishing"

streamlined shape. In order to suppress the feeling of terror as one files through the pristine lacquer coating the back of the neck, it's important to have a plan for refinishing. In this instance, I knew I would be spraying black nitrocellulose lacquer, which would be fairly involved, but fortunately I had experience from previous repairs and guitar builds on my side.

Most of the work was completed within 48 hours, giving the lacquer as much time as possible to cure before collection and eventually facing the rigours of a busy touring schedule. A guitar's voice may start with its strings, but its soul lies in the neck - shaped to fit the hands it was destined for. **G**



A Little Pick Me Up

Michael Watts explores solutions to the challenge of amplifying acoustic guitars over the decades – are we nearly there yet?

Soundhole-mounted pickups became a viable amplification solution from the 1980s onwards for acoustic artists such as Michael Hedges, pictured here in 1992

The first time I had a pickup fitted to an acoustic guitar was a disaster. I didn't know any better. It was an instrument that I loved and I had been looking forward to an amp'd up version of its voice, maybe a splash of reverb, some delay – keeping it tasteful, of course. Instead, what I got was the malignantly ugly quack and logarithmic anti-dynamic range of a primitive under-saddle pickup. Marvellous.

Upon discovering that the installation had also affected the acoustic sound, I ripped it out with my bare hands and vowed never again. It was at that moment that I joined the legions of acoustic guitarists searching for a workable, musical plugged-in sound.

I recognise that some readers will be hoping for hard and fast answers to this puzzle. I don't believe there are any – I've looked. There are no shortcuts, either – I've looked there, too. What I can offer is some advice from my own experience and that of other guitarists I have spoken with.

Prior to the one-two punch of Tracy Chapman's debut album and Eric Clapton's MTV unplugged, the acoustic guitar had languished in the hair-metal doldrums for years, consigned to duty as a laminated stage prop to be wheeled out for the erogenous moments, and sadly not everyone was writing ballads of the calibre of Extreme's *More Than Words* or Mr Big's *To Be With You* (that Paul Gilbert solo remains a sublime masterclass).

A common element of the above examples is a distinct lack of the plastic piezo ping that children of the 90s had learned to accept as inevitable. Instead, these recordings have a natural sound – actual air molecules being shifted by a braced wooden soundboard. Just delicious.

There remains a place for that piezo voice, though. In a loud band context very few systems can provide the volume necessary while remaining resistant to feedback like an under-saddle pickup. There are even some (admittedly rare) musical contexts where the sound just works: imagine the dark majesty of Wyclef Jean's *911* recorded on a Fylde Oberon or a pre-war D45, rather than a Fender Stratacoustic – all wrong.

Animal Magnetism

While initial forays into acoustic guitar amplification such as the Gibson ES-150 and Martin D-18E (which coincidentally was used by Tracy Chapman long before Kurt Cobain got his hands on one) featured magnetic pickups, it wasn't until the advent of Jim Kaufman's Sunrise design in the 1980s that a soundhole-mounted humbucker became a serious option for players such as Michael Hedges, Richard Thompson and Phil Keaggy.

Hot on its heels came Mike Vanden's slimline Mimesis model – now made under licence as the Fishman Rare Earth in a variety of permutations – and the LR Baggs M1A with its floating coil, which can pick up body taps as well as the string sound without the feedback potential of an internal mic.

Soundhole pickups have several advantages; the initial attack is a lot more rounded and warmer than a piezo, but sometimes that translates into a voice that's closer to that of an archtop than a flat-top. They are also a strong choice for players dealing in extended techniques such as tapping and slapped harmonics – in particular, they eliminate problematic wolf tones from tapped notes on the 12th fret.

By the late 90s, acoustic guitarists had a dizzying array of choices and custom hybrid systems comprising multiple sources had become *de rigueur*. It was not unusual to see an instrument with more than one output jack. Internal mics by Sony and DPA were also popular with players such as Isaac Guillory and Pierre Bensusan – in conjunction with a piezo or soundhole humbucker. But without a feedback buster, they could be asking for trouble. Ironically, the quest for a natural sound increasingly meant filling a guitar with wires, batteries and circuit boards.

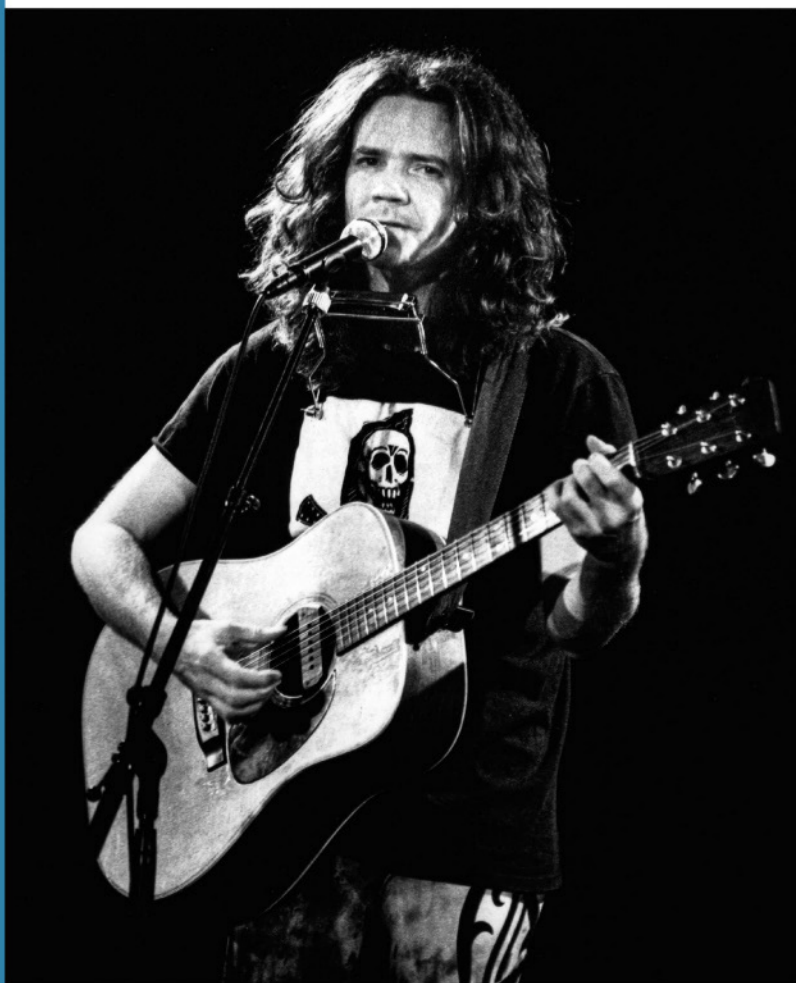


PHOTO BY PAULO FRIDMAN / GETTY IMAGES



Under The Bridge

The burgeoning global acoustic music scene and resulting spike in interest in luthier-made steel-string guitars of the early 2000s provided fertile ground for a renaissance in pickup technology. While some companies pushed things to extremes with complex active electronics, multi-band EQs and blenders and so on, others concentrated on simplicity. Enter the under bridge-plate transducer.

This technology had been around since 1963 in the form of the Barcus Berry 'Bug'. It was revived with the creation of the now legendary FRAP transducer system

Fingerstylist Andy McKee uses a K+K Pure pickup system in his custom Greenfield acoustic

"Ironically, the quest for a natural sound increasingly meant filling a guitar with wires, batteries and circuit boards"

beloved of Neil Young, but these were expensive, fiddly and often overly dependent on active preamps to kick the required amounts of arse/ass. The same was true of the first generation Trance Audio Amulet.

The now ubiquitous K+K Sound Pure pickup was first developed in 1996, but it took a little while for the acoustic guitar community to catch up. This elegantly simple system is based on three sensors mounted under the bridge plate and it allows the true voice of a fine handmade instrument to shine through with an expressive dynamic and timbral range – which is ideal for fingerstyle players.

I was intrigued to hear from Andy McKee that he is now using the passive version in all his Greenfield guitars through a Neural DSP Quad Cortex when playing live. Alan Gogoll also favours this design in his new Åstrand guitars signature model. Other similar systems such as the McIntyre Feather and Dazzo offer their own tweaks and have found vocal supporters clubs on guitar forums around the world.

And In The End

Amplifying an acoustic instrument is always a fine balance. Much depends on the player and instrument in question. There are now more options than ever, and even cheaper systems can work well. The most natural sound may not be the most practical, but if you think of a pickup as a camera lens and decide what aspect of the guitar you want to focus on, there will be something out there that does the job! **G**

THREE TO GET READY

Modern pickup systems



PHOTO: KKSOUND.COM

K+K Sound Pure Mini £130

Regarded by many modern fingerstyle players as a vital part of their sound, this bridge-plate-mounted transducer system has become the industry standard for a natural, woody plugged-in voice. Responsive and musical, the Pure Mini is an ideal choice for high-performance luthier-made guitars – on its own or as part of a hybrid solution.

www.kksound.com



PHOTO: STORE.NVTONE.COM

NV Tone Swan \$286

Made in Ukraine, this soundhole-mounted condenser mic system delivers the sort of extraordinary detail and nuance you'd normally expect from an external studio mic. Lightweight, easy to install and well made, the NV Tone Swan has already been seen in the guitars of extraordinary players such as Antoine Boyer and Kent Nishimura.

www.nvtone.com



PHOTO: LR BAGGS.COM

LR Baggs Anthem SL £249

LR Baggs has been a major player in the acoustic pickup world for decades, and while its revolutionary M1A humbucker is a solid choice, the Anthem SL hybrid system combines the volume level potential of an under-saddle pickup with a Tru-Mic condenser mic mounted under the bridge plate. Active electronics with minimalist controls – and why not!

www.lrbaggs.com



Third Inversion Chords

In the third instalment of this series, **Richard Barrett** demonstrates how third inversion and slash chords can lead the way in popular music

Previously, we've looked at what happens when you swap around the notes in a triad and put the 3rd at the bottom (first inversion), or the 5th at the bottom (second inversion). In this next instalment, we'll look at third inversion chords. To create these, we add a dominant (aka flat) 7th to a triad/chord and move that to the bottom. In practice, these are generally notated as slash chords. For example, in an A/G chord (see Example 1), the $\flat 7$ (G) is moved to the bottom. Like suspended chords, this definitely feels like its leading somewhere – try following up with a D/F# (D first inversion) and you'll recognise a very popular chord move, heard across multiple genres.

Slash chords are a convenient way to notate the various inversions, but with chords it's always good to know the 'whys and wherefores'. Having said that, there is a lot of fun to be had by putting random alternative bass notes under a chord! Hope you enjoy and see you next time. **G**

Sounds of the 60s and 70s: Pete Townshend, Ray Davies (pictured) and David Bowie can all be heard using third inversion chords

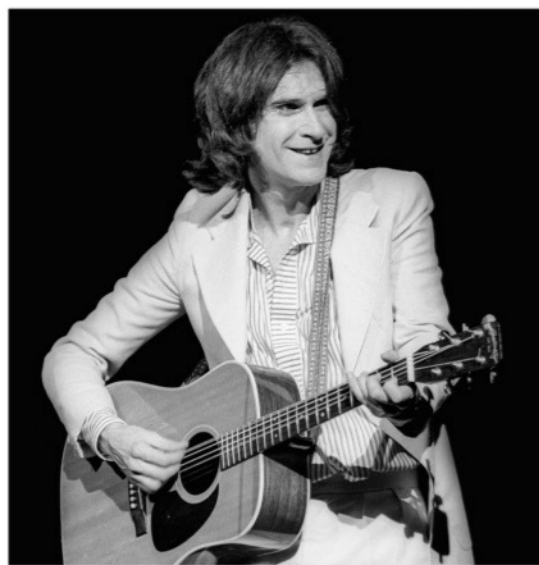
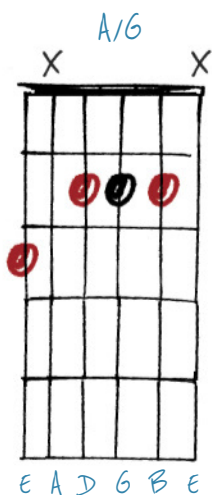


PHOTO BY RICHARD E. AARON / GETTY IMAGES

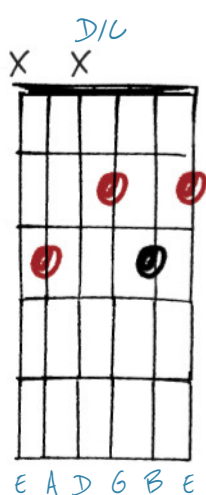
Example 1

This A (third inversion) is given the more modern name of A/G, but knowing the traditional chord theory highlights that the reason it sounds the way it does is the dominant 7th at the bottom. This is a movable shape, though care needs to be taken with muting the unwanted strings.



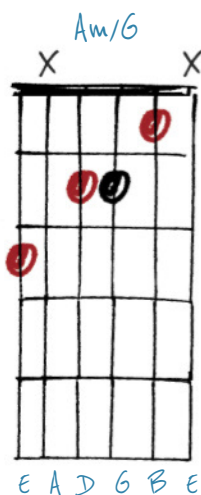
Example 2

This D/C (D third inversion) is another movable shape requiring careful muting. You can really hear that it wants to lead us somewhere; perhaps G/B (G first inversion) would be a good place. You can hear Pete Townshend experimenting with third inversions at the beginning of The Who's *See Me, Feel Me*.



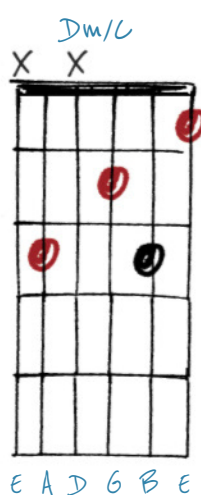
Example 3

This Am/G demonstrates that this approach doesn't only apply to major chords. Here, the $\flat 7$ (G) is moved to the bottom, giving the feeling it should be leading somewhere. For a good example of this in the wild, check out the chorus of David Bowie's *Starman*, where it leads to C major.



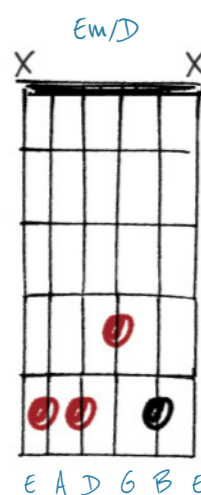
Example 4

Here's another movable minor third inversion shape, in this case Dm/C. Now you know about these chords, you'll start hearing them everywhere – for instance, as a key part of the descending progression in The Kinks' *Sunny Afternoon*, *Holiday* by The Scorpions and *Dear Diary* by The Moody Blues, among many others.



Example 5

This Em/D sounds like something Nick Drake might have used, albeit in a non-standard tuning. Like Example 4, see if you can find/create examples of a descending pattern in the bass. This can be done under a static chord (fingers permitting) or by combining other chords/inversions.



INTRODUCING

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STAR LETTER

MAGIC MOMENTS



Neville Marten
interviewing Gary
Moore in 2008

Neville Marten's recent article in *Guitarist* issue 528 in which he described celebrities enacting a 'moment' for the onlooker put me in mind of an experience that occurred a few short years ago. In my capacity as a sales consultant working for a well-known guitar retailer in the South East of the UK, I was privileged to meet many talented guitarists at all levels, from amateur to semi-pro and professional.

One of our regular high-profile customers who, I am somewhat flattered to say, I was on first name terms with, was the late great Gary

Moore, who would often visit the store and try out various bits of gear, sometimes at gig volume! One day Gary came into the store, and I remarked to him that Allan Holdsworth was due to play in Hastings the following week, and, quick as a flash, Gary was on the phone to his manager to secure tickets for himself and his partner.

To cut a long story short, Gary secured tickets and, unbelievably to me, suggested that on the eve of the gig both my friend Rod and myself should meet up with him at his home, from where we would all travel to the event together.

So, the night of the gig came around and we eagerly strode up the short hill to Gary's home and rang the doorbell. We were directed down the hall and emerged into the living room where Gary was sitting on the sofa with a Les Paul in his hands, absolutely ripping through a humble solid-state Marshall MG10 practice combo at full tilt, and making it sound fantastic! This was the 'moment' where he was being Gary Moore as most guitarists would recognise him, and, similar to Neville's experience with Paul McCartney, it's a treasured memory that is indelibly etched into my brain.

Dave Williams

What a wonderful memory to have, too – and we wonder whether that Les Paul was the famous 'Stripe' that you'll find examined on page 70 of this issue. Apart from being an outstanding guitarist, Gary was known for his generosity with both fans and acquaintances alike. Check out *dep ed* David Mead's reminiscences about Gary in this month's *Welcome* on page 3.



KORG

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

ALL SHAPES & SIZES

Late to the party, here's another entry in your run of mini-guitars (*Guitarist* 528). I've long said that I wanted to have a bespoke guitar made for my 50th birthday, but that never happened for tedious financial reasons. Unknown to me, my mother decided to fill the gap by having an acquaintance hand-make a miniature guitar as a present. Although she provided a picture of my cherry sparkle Epi Les Paul to work from, the maker delivered a red Strat-alike [below left]; my late father was a massive fan of Hank Marvin, so the guitar has a little of both my parents in it, which is lovely.

Knowing that I wouldn't be able to buy my dream guitar this year, I've made it an ongoing project to renovate a guitar which has been in the pages of *Guitarist* before. Doctor Phibes [below right], a heavily modded 1996/1997 Squier Strat, appeared in the 'My Guitar Is...' feature, way back in the Summer 2000 issue. I dug out my soldering iron and treated the Doctor to a complete electrical overhaul including new pickups and a revised control layout, and had a roast maple and rosewood replacement neck installed by my local luthier. It sounds and plays better than ever, and there's a real sense of satisfaction to playing an instrument that I've worked heavily on myself. The downside is that, having unlocked a new hobby, I'm now going down the rabbit hole of constantly tinkering with the electrics in search of the perfect sound...

Paul Birkett

When we think of Dr Phibes we're reminded of the horror film from the early 1970s starring the wonderful Vincent Price as the classic mad medic. But your guitar is anything but a horror story as it looks simply fantastic – we love that scratchplate, too!





TAKING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

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This custom hand-build was a very special guest at the debut gig of reader Greg Murray's band



SUSTAIN FACTOR

I'm a guitar player since 1970 and current owner of a Fender Stratocaster, a Gibson Les Paul, a Martin D-28 and a few others. I'm also a retired mechanical engineer who worked for 30 years in power plants all over the world, with a specialty of vibration analysis and modal testing.

I must disagree [with 'Raising The Tone', issue 527]. There are two major factors why some electric guitars sustain better than others: they don't have whammy bars and their sustain-reducing springs and associated hardware, and they have set necks and not bolted-on necks. All the rest, like wood types, is all but irrelevant in solidbody electric guitars.

The physics: good sustain in any stringed instrument is mainly the result of the stiffest possible boundary conditions to the string suspension at exactly two locations: the nut and the bridge. A solid – stiff – connection of neck to body is a secondary consideration.

I laugh every time I hear someone refer to the "tonewood" of a solidbody electric guitar. Seriously, people have made great-sounding electric guitar bodies out of metals, lucite, square hollow wooden boxes, baseball bats, hardwoods, soft woods and all kinds of things.

Jim Krizek

Thanks for your input into the great debate about guitar sustain, Jim. Alas, we feel that this subject will haunt forums and magazines until the end of time as instruments will often contradict science. For instance, we have at hand a Fender Strat with a trem that out-sustains our Les Paul with a fixed bridge. And yet, another nearby Strat's sustain falls away relatively quickly, despite its nigh on identical spec. An ongoing mystery, for sure.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

I just finished building a guitar that was inspired by Dave Burrluck's 'Mod Squad' and used it for slide at my band Vinyl Drift's first ever gig. Key specs are:

a Warmoth T-type thinline body (mahogany with mahogany top, pearloid front binding), a Warmoth neck (Gibson scale length, tiltback Warmoth-style headstock, roasted flame maple shaft and fretboard, Graph Tech nut), Schaller M6 tuning machines, hardtail 'through bridge' with cut-off Tele-style bridge hardware. Neck pickup: Kinman Crunch & Bite P90; bridge pickup: Kinman Big Little Ripper humbucker, Kinman TK3 3-position switch.

Greg Murray

That's a very fine-looking instrument you have there, Greg. And if it sounds half as good as it looks, then job done. Congrats!

NO SUBSTITUTE?

Well over 30 years into my guitar and bass journey I'm still wanting to learn. Yet every month I get confused by Richard Barrett's chord diagrams. They show red notes and black notes on the fingerboard but never any explanation of the difference. Do I play all of them? I was even more confused in the October edition to see what looks like a standard Am chord described as Am/E. Please help.

I learnt long ago that "there's no such thing as a silly question", so I hope you don't mind me asking.

Matt Dover

You're right; as far as music theory is concerned, there are no silly questions as it's a prickly labyrinth to navigate through. To begin with, the black notes on the fretboard diagrams are the chord's root note – that's the note that gives the chord its name. So, in a chord like C major, all the C notes in the diagram would be black, whereas the other notes in the chord would be red. You would indeed play all of the notes, both red and black, to hear the full chord.

As far as the Am/E is concerned, these are known informally as 'slash chords', but they are often a shorthand way of letting you know that the chord is an inversion. In other words, the chord is a good old-fashioned A minor, but the bass note is an E instead of an A as you might have expected. If in doubt, play the chord and leave the bass note to the bass player.

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

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WITH THEIR 10TH ALBUM, 'FUTIQUE', BIFFY CLYRO REMIND US EXACTLY WHY THEY ARE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ROCK BANDS OF THE MODERN AGE...

Words Amit Sharma Photography Phil Barker

CLYRO

In their three decades of playing together, Kilmarnock trio Biffy Clyro have become one of the most cutting-edge and far-reaching rock acts of their generation, blessed with an ability to write stadium-conquering anthems that thrill and mesmerise in equal measure. Their Strat-wielding frontman, Simon Neil, is someone who understands the power of the riff, as well as the importance of the musical information above it – with a proven track record for striking a perfect balance between intensity and melody.

On this year's 10th full-length album, *Futique*, it's noted how the group still finds new ways to stretch that formula and experiment with the equation,

dazzling and surprising us without ever running the risk of losing their identity. Early singles such as *A Little Love*, *Hunting Season* and *True Believer* have a familiarity that would convince any listener that these tracks have existed for years and years. In fact, the same could be said for the album as a whole.

Working with producer Jonathan Gilmore for the very first time also allowed Simon to spread his wings and innovate, moving away from the classic trio format to embrace more layers and orchestration. When you're building music, the singer/guitarist explains, there's a point where it can all "start to shrink", so it's best to handle grand designs and high ambitions with great care...

"I'VE GONE FROM USING THE
SMALLEST AMOUNT OF GEAR TO
MAKE THE BIGGEST SOUND, TO
USING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE
WITH THE SAME END GOAL"





'I'VE EMBRACED OTHER GUITARS, BUT THE STRAT IS MY DEFINING SOUND. IT SPEAKS TO ME WHATEVER'S IN THE MIX"

Simon, you've always been a Strat man. What is it about the original double-cutaway that does it for you?

"The Strat is everything to me. My favourite model is the Michael Landau signature. I stumbled across one about 10 years ago and it just spoke to me. That's the guitar I usually play in the studio, a reissue of his 1968 original. I actually ended up buying two of them. Those Strats are absolutely gorgeous and very much the foundation of everything we do, every time we record."

That said, you're happy to experiment in the studio...

"I flirted a bit with a small and boutique UK company called Fairlane Guitars. I've used their Zephyr model, and I've also used a guitar made by Novo in Nashville. My tour manager bought one and I pinched it off him for this record. Believe it or not, one of my main guitars for this record was this wee Fender Champ..."

The one with the built-in speaker?

"Yeah! It was released in Japan back in the 90s. A tech had one, which played and felt so real and right, plus the sound that comes out of that speaker is just dynamite. You can get this really sludgy tone. Obviously it's quiet, but we mic'd it up for a few songs to get some cheap-sounding warmth. I've definitely embraced a few other guitars, but the Strat is my defining sound. It always speaks through whatever's in the mix, no matter how thick it might be."



1

1. The new album's title, *Futique*, is a blend of the words 'future' and 'antique' – a call, Simon Neil has said, to savour moments as they happen, instead of wistfully looking back from a future time. Here's Simon in the moment on the Pyramid Stage of this year's Glastonbury

You're no ultra hoarder like Slash or Bonamassa, but you must have some nice guitars knocking around.

"I wish I had the money to collect like they do [laughs]. But I did treat myself to a nice guitar not long ago. It was one of the Custom Shop [Kirk Hammett] 'Greeny' [1959 Les Paul Standard] reissues, which I picked up in Nashville. I hummed and hawed because it was a lot of money. I'm a Fender Strat man through and through, but I'm also a big Metallica fan. I've seen Kirk playing it over the years and know what a big deal that guitar is. I do like the sound of Les Pauls and find them extremely useful in the studio, but the act of putting one on feels wrong for me. It's like I'm wearing someone else's clothes."

"I have a '77 Les Paul, which got used on a couple of records. I also have a '63 SG that I bought from Norm's Rare Guitars. I tried to play it live a few times, but it struggles to hold tuning. That's my pride and joy – a work of art that makes me sound like Angus Young. I use it to write, and the same goes for my White Falcon."

But did you use the 'Greeny' on the record?

"It popped up on a couple of tunes: *A Thousand And One*, *It's Chemical!* and *Woe Is Me*, *Wow Is You*. But I'm nervous of that guitar because it's so expensive. I can barely look at it. I don't know if I've overstepped my limit. But I love that middle pickup position where it goes out of phase. It's so fucked up and cool, it's almost Strat-y."

What were your go-to effects and amps in the studio?

"The main amps were a Fender Twin Reverb and a big Marshall JCM800. We also used a Sears amp, this old

cheap bugger that sounded dynamite when you turned it up, loads of character, though it was a little hit-and-miss in terms of how it reacted to pedals. I also used some Audio Kitchen stuff, like this amp they make called the Little Chopper and a pedal called The Big Trees preamp. We did more DI and post-effects stuff this time, which I haven't done a lot of in the past. I like to hear the air moving, but because we were working with a new producer, this album ended up with more of a modern approach."

What exactly were the benefits of doing that, then?

"Normally, I'm too scared to DI anything, but it actually does bring a different quality. I used a few Chase Bliss pedals for textures in the background. This was the first time I wanted to make sure that what we recorded wasn't necessarily the sound of what was on the floor. In the past, it's been important to mainly capture us three playing together. This time I wanted everything shifting right there at the front."

"On other albums, we've done everything so minimally, often using one microphone and one amp making one tone for an entire song. This time, I wanted layers. I didn't want to sound too organic. *It's Chemical!* ended up sounding really chorus-effected, but it's actually more like 100 tracks of guitar doing different things. I've gone from using the smallest amount of gear to make the biggest sound, to using as much as possible with the same end goal. And, actually, sometimes you can over-record guitars and the mix starts to shrink."

That's interesting. You can end up becoming a victim of your own ambition?

"Without Jonathan's expertise, that's where I've often ended up, at demo stage. I think I can add things and grow the song, but at a certain point it stops growing and starts to shrink. Jonathan kept us on that precipice of making it sound big enough without being swallowed by its own thickness. And even on the albums that don't always sound like a three-piece, it's important for the songs to work stripped-back. We still prepare the same

PHOTO BY KIRI PRICE/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



way. I still have my Marshall and Fender, plus my Boss Metal Zone and delays. They are on everything. That's how we check that the songs are going to work – if they can exist with a basic setup, it doesn't matter how we record it, we know it'll translate."

A Little Love is all about big chords and even bigger hooks. What do you remember about writing it?

"As soon as I went from minor to major, that's when I knew the song was complete. It's in DADGAD, which is one of my favourite open tunings because it can make chords sing. With just one or two fingers, you can have such a big impact, given how the voicings can change and reflect this deep sense of emotion. There's something really liberating about big open sounds like that, making the earth fucking shake with just one finger. DADGAD is a lot easier than some of the open C tunings I've used, which guitars usually don't like because strings go from loose to tight. It can become a nightmare!"

You and your tech, Richard Pratt from Gone Fishing Effects, unveiled the first batch of Boooooom Blast overdrive/fuzz pedals back in 2020. Are there any plans to do more?

"Yeah. That got used as well. To everyone reading this, it's an absolute killer, so make sure you get it on your records, too [laughs]. We're still making them. It's a fine line, though. We thought about doing a wider release, but I like doing smaller batches. Richard personally builds every pedal. If something – God forbid – goes wrong, people know they can send it back, get it fixed and returned. I feel like when things go to wider manufacturing, maybe the quality level dips a little. This is all made to order in someone's shed."

"I'M STILL ENTHRALLED BY THE MAGIC OF THE GUITAR, PROBABLY BECAUSE I NEVER CONQUERED THE TECHNIQUE SIDE"

It's interesting how higher-gain pedals can work wonders on lower settings. Eric Clapton and David Gilmour were once using the Boss HM-2, which is mainly associated with extreme Scandinavian metal...

"Isn't that bonkers? It's the sound of bands like At the Gates and Entombed, yet Clapton was plugging into one. We all use gear in different ways, sometimes for things beyond what it may have been designed for. I used to think you needed someone's rig to sound like them, but actually it's all about the expression through your fingers. I'm still enthralled by the magic of the guitar, probably because I never conquered the technique side. It's this box of wonder that I approach as a creative instrument. A lot of songs on this record are in standard tuning, though a couple were standard a step down. I know I'm about to go down a creative period where I start fucking with tunings. I needed a wee break from the guitar before this album."

Why would you say that?

"We'd released two records during the pandemic and my guitar was my companion through that [so] I couldn't look at my guitar for a year after that; I was



2. Simon has become synonymous with Fender's finest: "The Strat is everything to me," he says

scared of it. I felt this responsibility, where I had to write music every time I picked it up. So instead I went away and made some heavy metal music in Empire State Bastard [with Mike Vennart]. As soon as I came home, I picked up the guitar and the songs started to come out. It was playtime again. Being a novice when you are creating is actually a good place to be. You can have too much knowledge. Again, it's that battle I'm having between being a better player and not ruining the creative relationship I have with my guitar."

So how do you go about evolving as a player?

"I'd like to think I'm getting better as a player, though sometimes I think I'm only getting better as a songwriter. I guess they go hand in hand. Whenever I start to advance my chops as a guitarist, I end up stumbling upon a new idea and writing a new song instead of doing my exercises. But I'm at a stage where I really want to become a better guitarist."

What would you like to work on in the future – would it be anything like jazz comping, blues noodling or classical flamenco?

"Definitely nylon! I'd love to become a proper fingerpicker. I've learned a few folk techniques over the years, but I've come to realise I haven't progressed. I'd probably need to stop writing songs for a little while. As a person in my 40s, I really should be further along, you know? I feel like I missed a few years of learning other people's tunes. Even for our very first show, we played nine songs and seven of them were our own."

Which guitarists do you look up to, then?

"It's a cliché, but I heard about Django Reinhardt and his missing fingers early on. I tried to learn a couple of his tunes when I was around 13 and didn't realise how much it opened up a part of my brain. What Django did for guitar was incredible. I love the pieces he wrote, despite the hindrances. He was a bit like Tony Iommi in that regard; he overcame his injuries and basically invented a whole genre of music. They both created something essential." **G**



Biffy Clyro's new album, *Futique*, is available now on Warner Records. Visit the band's website for 2026 tour dates and more www.biffyclyro.com

GARY

THE FINAL ENCORE

MOORE





NEARLY 15 YEARS AFTER HIS PASSING, THE
LAST OF GARY MOORE'S GUITARS WILL GO
UNDER THE HAMMER IN NOVEMBER,
INCLUDING HIS ICONIC 'RED STRAT'. HERE,
WE EXPLORE THE FINAL TREASURES OF
GARY'S COLLECTION AND WHAT THEY
TELL US ABOUT THE MUCH-MISSED
KING OF BLUES-ROCK AND HIS MUSIC

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker
Gary Moore Photo Jesse Wild

BACK ON THE STREETS

Almost 15 years on from his death, the last of Gary Moore's guitars are set to go under the hammer. We join Claire Tole-Moir of Bonhams and Neville Marten, former *Guitarist* editor and friend to Gary, to examine his extraordinary collection of instruments

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

Some guitarists are remarkable for making their name with one guitar that is synonymous with their whole identity as a musician. Brian May, or perhaps Hank Marvin and his Red Strat come to mind. Other players loom larger than individual instruments they own, or even genres. By turns taciturn and ablaze with feeling, Gary Moore shifted stylistic gears with remarkable ease. From his

roots in Belfast blues with Skid Row to barbed Celtic rock in Thin Lizzy and a 90s return to his roots in Peter Green's sound, Moore's intensity lit up any track he played on. It was this burning thread that tied together the whole tapestry of his career.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, his guitar collection kept pace with his changing sound. He was a prolific collector, though always to a purpose, and since his passing

1. Gary Moore sets Madison Square Garden ablaze with Thin Lizzy in 1977

2. Gary pictured in Tokyo in '84 with the 'Red Strat' (serial 55108) that Greg Lake rejected but Gary eagerly acquired. While it's often cited as a '61, the neck date of 11/60 has now seen it listed in The Final Encore sale as a '60

in 2011 it's taken three rounds of major auctions, all of which have been handled by Bonhams of London, to come to the final treasures of his guitar collection – and this November sees the most revered and loved of his guitars go under the hammer, including his treasured 'Red Strat'.

"Bonhams has been privileged to offer the entire Gary Moore collection over the last 10 years," reflects Claire Tole-Moir, who is Head of Science and Popular Culture at Bonhams.

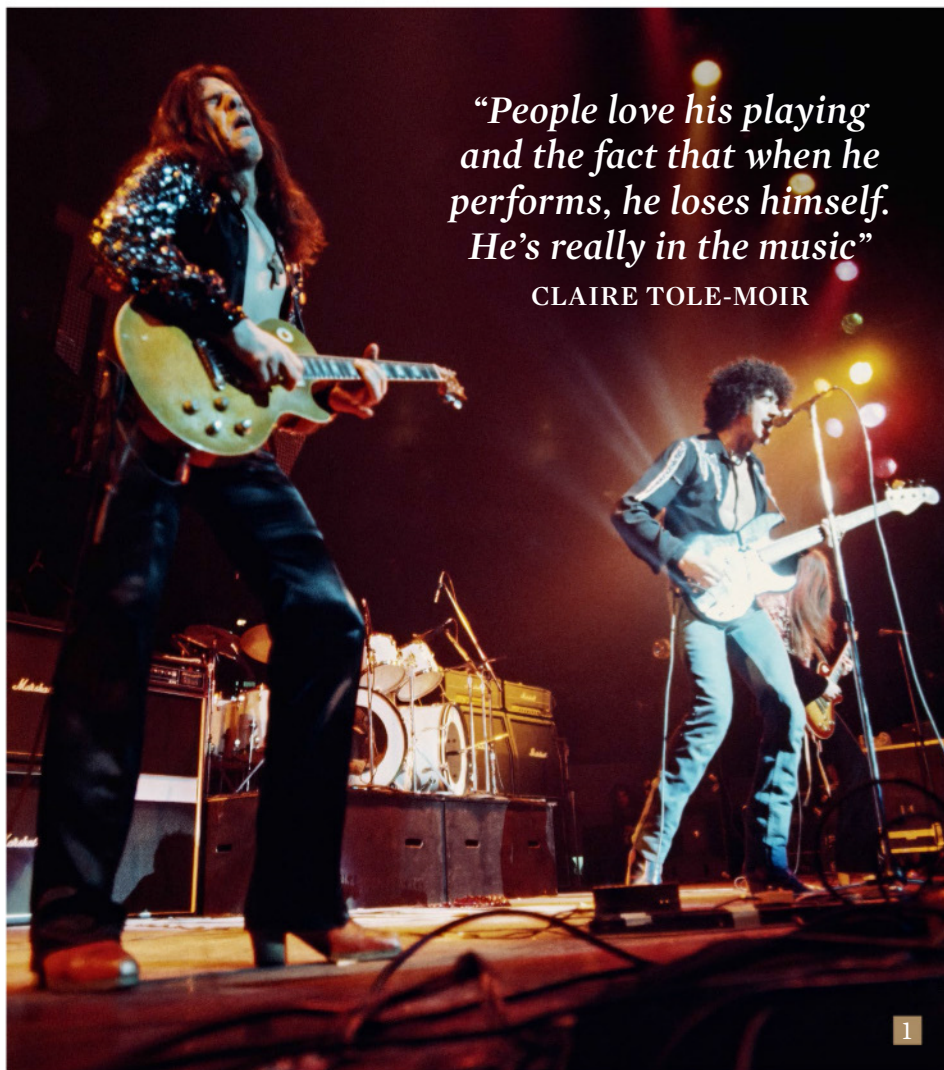
"I think our first sale was in 2016 so it's actually quite an honour to be offering the last of it. We're calling it 'The Final Encore'. And so the sale has about 30 guitars and 45 to 50 amps. And we've also got a large selection of pedals, effects, tape recorders and stage clothing as well, which we're working through now. That part of the collection we haven't offered before, so it's nice to give [people] a bit of everything from what's left in this collection. Prices start at £100, and obviously the top piece is his 'Red Strat', and that's in at £200,000 to £300,000 – so there is something for everyone. It's really broad," she says.

Claire agrees that it was the intensity of Gary's performances that still kindles devotion among fans and collectors, over a decade after his death.

"He's just revered – and so well respected," she reflects. "And people really loved his music and the transition, over the years, from Thin Lizzy to his solo career and they've been quite loyal to him. Obviously, there's a blues foundation through everything. But then there's this rock side to him, and you've got the Northern Irish inspiration coming into a few tracks. But even as he changes style or look, people have

"People love his playing and the fact that when he performs, he loses himself. He's really in the music"

CLAIRE TOLE-MOIR



1

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



RELATIVE VALUES

Claire Tole-Moir of Bonhams explains how the devotion of fans can see extensively modded stage guitars reach unexpected heights at auction

How do you begin to estimate the value of a guitar that has a timeless connection to much loved music – but that, as a vintage guitar, may be extensively non-original and heavily modded?

“I think obviously, when you’re met with a vintage guitar like [‘Stripe’ or the ‘Red Strat’], you’re already looking at something that you know is of significant value and prestige, and it has international collectibility. But then you add on the celebrity and what’s amazing is then you get this emotional connection to it. People have seen it being used in videos or on stage or witnessed it being used to play their favorite song – and so they attach to it in a very different way. It becomes a lot more emotional, nostalgic or sentimental on top of [the guitar being] very commercially valuable.

“And so the combination is what makes it really exciting. Then you can start looking at figures that are way beyond what just a vintage piece would be worth. But like you say, these celebrity-owned guitars, they’ve been changed, they’ve been customised. They’ve been adapted according to the artist’s music, their style, their look and everything. So then you’ve suddenly got a really unique, customised piece. [That’s another reason why] we have to pay attention when we’re valuing because it might well not be how the factory sent it out.

“You just don’t know what you’re going to find or how things are going to be rewired, or perhaps something else has been changed, or the necks are different... Suddenly, you have a customised piece that is totally connected to that celebrity, that musician, on top of the fact that it’s from, say, 1959 or 1960. So, yeah, it’s layered.

“You’ve got to really, really love the artist that you’re buying something [connected with] because you know that it won’t necessarily be like other Les Pauls. It may well have been customised to fit that person’s style and playing.”

PHOTO BY HIROYUKI YOSHIMAKI / SHINKO MUSIC / GETTY IMAGES

"It's actually really rare that you get a collection this sizable and this varied. He was a proper collector" CLAIRE TOLE-MOIR

The Final Encore sale at Bonhams not only includes iconic guitars such as the 'Red Strat' but also deeper cuts such as this 1984 Hamer Custom Gary Moore double-cut electric with twin DiMarzio humbuckers that are marked '1984'



stood by him – they just love his playing and the fact that when he performs, he loses himself. He’s really in the music and you go through it with him.”

Former *Guitarist* editor Neville Marten was fortunate enough to know Gary personally, and he says the instruments Gary acquired over his lifetime reflected his musical priorities and the curious mix of reverence and unsentimental pragmatism with which he approached guitars. Neville recalls how a difficult first meeting with Gary thawed into a warm friendship after Gary discovered that Nev was a fellow student of the blues – and of guitar tone.

“I had to go and interview him about his *After The War* album,” Nev recalls. “It was one of those rock albums back in the 80s, quite early on in *Guitarist* history, really. I had my questions prepped and everything, but, initially, Gary was very frosty, very spiky, which he could be with people he hadn’t met before.

“And so I was asking my questions and he was answering them perfunctorily well but really just going through the motions. But I’d noticed that on one of the tracks there was this little lick with an out-of-phase Les Paul sound on it. So I said, ‘On this track, you used the ‘Greeny’ Les

“Gary used what [guitars] he needed at the time and what he felt suited the image that he was trying to create” NEVILLE MARTEN

Paul, didn’t you? Because I love that little out-of-phase sound.’ And his eyes lit up – he suddenly realised that I knew a little bit about what I was talking about. And from that point on, we were kind of all right.

“We were a very similar age and we often discussed what it had been like hearing blues music for the first time,” Nev continues. “Our mutual introduction to blues had been the *Blues Breakers* [‘Beano’] album. And he said, ‘I remember that my friend put it on and [I was hooked from] that ‘jank’ sound when Clapton slides the first note up the neck on *All Your Love*,’ which is the first track. And I was the same: a friend of mine put it on and I thought, ‘Bloody hell, what was that?’ That was kind of it – we just hit it off.

“He later invited me on stage to play with him in Bath,” Nev recalls. “It was bloody great – Bernie Marsden and Gary and David Mead from the mag got up and played together. He was always complimentary about stuff and I think he treated me, in a way, as an ally in a world where

he might not have allies. As you know, the press can be a bit hostile to certain types of people, certain types of music, but he knew that *Guitarist* was an ally to him, completely.”

MUSICAL PRAGMATIST

Although Gary is perhaps best known for his work with Gibson Les Pauls, Nev says Moore wasn’t wedded to any particular approach, make, model or style of guitar – and although he loved vintage Gibsons and Fenders, he wasn’t afraid of modernity, either.

“I think Gary very much chose the instrument for the type of music he was playing. For instance, when he got into the rock stuff. I went to see him rehearsing in Sheffield once and he was just playing a huge white Gibson Explorer – it was a modern one, not even a posh one, just one off the shelf. It wasn’t an overly special guitar, but it suited his purpose visually and sonically. But then when he wanted to do the blues albums, in deference to Eric and Peter and the others, he got out the Les Paul,” Nev says.

With such a pragmatic outlook – plus the means, motive and opportunity – it’s unsurprising, says Claire Tole-Moir of Bonhams, that Gary amassed a huge collection of gear during his 43-year career.

3. The Hamer Custom is a typically 80s hybrid of Les Paul Junior styling cues and shred-era innovations, including the ubiquitous Floyd Rose locking trem

4. Detail of the reverse of the Hamer Custom shows the 412263 serial number and a battle wound in the form of a deep neck crack, infamously common with a locking nut. This was left as found as part of the guitar’s story in Gary’s ownership



"I think Gary was one of these guitarists who had an absolute love for collecting," she says, "and there's not that many who could do it. Because I think when he started collecting, it was a pivotal time in the vintage guitar market when you could [because vintage classics were more affordable earlier on], although he collected right up until 2010, [the year before] he passed away. And that is a luxury nowadays. If we look at how many of his guitars we've offered over 10 years, it's amazing that we still have 30 guitars in this last tranche... It's actually really rare that you get a collection this sizable and this varied. He was a proper collector and he loved it."

A mixed portrait of the man emerges from his relationship with guitars – pragmatic about the tool value of guitars yet in love with the musical heritage they represented. Did Gary simply regard guitars as a means to get a job done or was he sentimental about some of them, we ask Neville Marten.

"Absolutely both: he loved and was totally sentimental about the 'Greeny' guitar and about the other Les Paul that he had ['Stripe', a '59 Standard currently being offered for private sale POA via Bonhams, see page 70]. Likewise, his '63 335. He was very, very sentimental about things like that. But then he would go and buy a brand-new Les Paul off the shelf because he wanted to put Bare Knuckle PG Blues pickups in it to get to the out-of-phase sound in a modern guitar. So, again, he used what he needed at the time and what he felt suited the image that he was trying to create."

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HEROES

One thing that unites Gary's guitars with his recorded output is a love of 60s blues. The electrifying sound of the 60s blues boom was where he started and it was a touchstone he returned to for his celebrated 1990 album, *Still Got The Blues*. Few guitarists are immune to the magnetic pull of

"Gary was very sentimental about [some guitars]. But then he would go and buy a brand-new Les Paul off the shelf" NEVILLE MARTEN

emulating their heroes and Gary was no exception. Nev says this inevitably influenced his go-to instrument choices.

"Everyone wants the guitar that your first heroes played," Nev argues. "And, you know, he got the Les Paul because of Eric and Peter. He also got the 335 because of Eric – who in turn had got the 335 because of Chuck Berry and BB King and Freddie King. So I think that's kind of it. But Gary was also great on a 335 – he really pulled the expression out of that guitar. He used the controls so well, he would turn the Les Paul down to 2 and coax the sweetest tone out of it. Then he'd whack it up to 10, and flip the pickup from the neck to the bridge, or bridge to the neck, to get this vast change in character that he wanted. And he was very clever at that."

Despite the preponderance of Les Pauls in Gary's guitar collection, the star of the November auction is undoubtedly his red 1960 Strat, which features on the cover of this issue.

"The Fender Strat stands out because it's only one of two Fenders in the collection of 30 that we have and, again, he is photographed extensively with it," Claire Tole-Moir says. "It was a go-to, after 'Greeny' and 'Stripe'."

The Strat has remained a lodestar for fans, many of whom associate it with an absolutely incandescent performance of Hendrix's *Red House* that Gary put in for Fender's 50th Anniversary gig at Wembley Stadium in 2005.

"He played it at Fender's 50th anniversary [gig] and did a version of *Red House* that actually tore the house down – it was staggeringly good," Nev Marten recalls. "What was remarkable was he told me he'd just come back from a hand injury. He'd had something wrong in his hand, and it'd been operated on, and he'd got what he described to me as a kind of topical form of MRSA, like a local infection of the hand. It was

5. Though Gary was a Marshall man through and through, The Final Encore sale does shed light on some of his ventures into other tonal areas, including this brown-panel 2x10 Fender Vibroverb reissue, serial AB00699

6. Gary was an eclectic user and collector of guitars. Here, he leans into the twin-pronged guitar sound of Thin Lizzy beside Scott Gorham, playing a Gibson Melody Maker



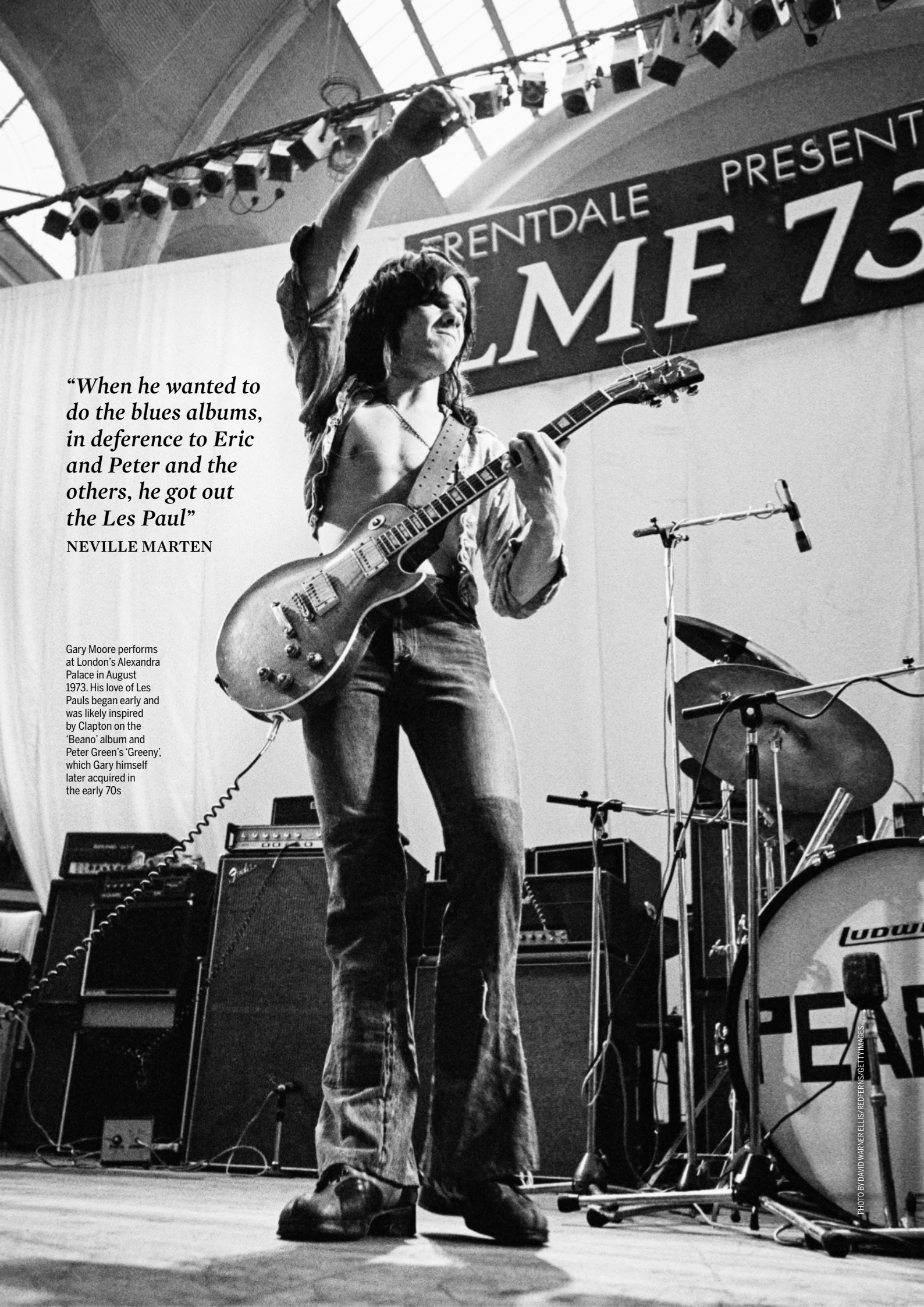
*"[During] the transition,
over the years, from
Thin Lizzy to his solo
career, [people have]
been loyal to him"*

CLAIRE TOLE-MOIR

“When he wanted to do the blues albums, in deference to Eric and Peter and the others, he got out the Les Paul”

NEVILLE MARTEN

Gary Moore performs at London's Alexandra Palace in August 1973. His love of Les Pauls began early and was likely inspired by Clapton on the 'Beano' album and Peter Green's 'Greeny', which Gary himself later acquired in the early 70s





very bad and he had to cancel the summer's worth of work.

"I think he used nines on the Strat and Gary was a 10s player, mostly – so the nines on a Strat, for Gary, was pretty light. But he absolutely smashed that version of *Red House*.

"Obviously, he was a big Jimi fan. And he always told me, 'I can do a Jimi, you know? I can actually pull out the Jimi licks, but I don't do it because it's not for me to do that – but I can do it.' And I fully believe that. But he used a modern Strat on the rocky stuff; he wouldn't bring the old 'Red Strat' out for that so much. He'd use a modern white Strat because it was a brighter, modern, more forceful sound."

"Gary was very much a Marshall guy. He had a Soldano phase, but he always went back to the Marshalls" NEVILLE MARTEN

7. Gary's 1972 Marshall Model 1992 JMP Super Bass 100-watt head, serial number SB/A 5725D, is part of the sale. Marshalls were the mainstay of his sound

8. The open-back panel of the Marshall hints at the easy access approach needed when kit was being toured hard and needed regular fettling

However, Nev adds that when it came to amps, Gary was much more settled in his preferences.

"He was very much a Marshall guy. He had a Soldano phase, but he always went back to the Marshalls," Nev explains. "He had a particularly bashed-up 50-watt combo that he went back to time and time again. You often find that a certain guitar will gel with a certain amp and he had that with his Les Paul and Marshall combination, especially the 50-watt. But, again, Gary probably got the 50-watt combo because of the 'Beano' album."

Though Marshalls may have been the sonic lens through which Moore most often focused his talents, they didn't restrict him and, as mentioned, his work was stylistically wide ranging. So what period of Gary's work does Neville think showed Gary's truest colours?

"Blimey, that's so hard because he had all these phases, all the

eras," Nev reflects. "He did the rock thing, which I wasn't the hugest fan of, but he did do it very, very well. I did like it when he did the blues albums – *Still Got The Blues* followed by *After Hours*. It was him going back to his formative influences – and he was very, very deft as a blues player. He did overplay sometimes and he admitted it. He said to me, 'BB King told me to play every other note,' which is quite nice, but he had that ability to absolutely milk a few slow notes. Played them beautifully. He once said to me, about playing fast: 'People try to play fast before they can play slowly. If you don't learn to play slowly, your fast licks will be badly played.'

"So the thing about Gary, for me, was the way that he could milk the sounds out of the guitar. You know, it wasn't just a neck pickup, bridge pickup, it was, 'What can I get out of what can I make this guitar do?' For me, that's what it was all about." **G**

The Gary Moore Collection: The Final Encore goes on sale 20 November, starting at 14:00 GMT. For more info and to register to bid, visit www.bonhams.com





1960 FENDER STRATOCASTER

Gary's iconic early custom colour Strat is a fascinating timepiece forever linked to that blazing Fender anniversary performance of *Red House*

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

Steve Clarke has one of the best – but most exacting – jobs in the vintage guitar world. The author of *Famous Frets* is Bonhams' authenticator for guitar collections such as Gary Moore's and also sympathetically prepares the guitars for auction. Having featured guitars for major auctions such as the much-publicised sale of Rory Gallagher's Strat, his workbench is no stranger to high-profile instruments. But Gary Moore's 'Red Strat' is surely up there with anything he's examined before in terms of iconic electrics.

Looking at the guitar with the naked eye, a patch of forearm wear seems to show two distinct tones of red paint, one applied over the other. This has led some to theorise, over the years, that the relatively milky red that forms the visible majority of the guitar's paint today was applied over a bolder red finish that lies beneath – plausibly, some have suggested, a Fiesta Red sprayed over the less commercially popular Dakota Red to factory-convert the guitar to a more saleable finish. Others have contended that the apparent milkier coat of red paint on top was applied later, possibly after importation to the UK. There have even been theories that underneath everything lies a Tobacco Sunburst finish.

Steve says, though, that however tempting any 'sunburst' theories may seem to some, they were not borne out by his close inspection of the Strat.

"Now, the interesting bit for me is that, probably like yourself, I'd heard these rumours that 'it's even been a sunburst'... I've read that one, too. But I could find no evidence of this. I peeled back a little bit of the copper tape underneath [applied as shielding for the electronics] and you could see, consistently, that all over the guitar – from the front pickup to the back where the bridge would be – was this sandy-colour undercoat. Because they did spray what you call Desert Sand as an undercoat. Sometimes they didn't, but with the red guitars, they'd either use a white or a Desert Sand [base coat] on earlier examples. This being relatively early [for a custom colour red guitar], it would

fall in line with that. And that was all over. But I couldn't see any flecks of black [sic; ie, dark brown from a 'Burst] anywhere.

"So I couldn't see any [evidence of] sunburst or anything like that. That yellowy colour [visible at the fringes of scratches on the guitar's body] might have been why people have said, 'Oh, it's been sunburst,' and I've even read that in a magazine ages ago. But I think that's the Desert Sand undercoat because it's all over. If you take the strap buttons off, you'll see it there and in the bridge cavity and around that area – it's all over the guitar. And you see it on the top where there's a big scratch."

Steve goes on to explain that the Fender custom colour known as Fiesta Red is something of a shifting sand itself. Not only was it likely not to have been consistently calibrated as a hue, especially in the early years of its use at Fender, he says it can be among the most volatile of colours in terms of vulnerability to fading or discolouration due to environmental factors.

"It's the most reactive paint you can have to UV exposure, and heat [from contact with the player's body] can accelerate that and actually change the colour."

Steve's inspection also threw up other interesting points. Graham Lilley, Gary's former guitar tech and road manager, has gone on record in the past to say the neck

pickup was rewound by Seymour Duncan in 1998, while the middle pickup was replaced by a Seymour Duncan Antiquity single coil in 2003. However, Steve found that the guitar, in its current configuration, has a different pickup in the middle today.

"My notes and photograph show it now to be a Lindy Fralin Blues Special. The wire has been cut instead of desoldered and black insulation tape has been wrapped around the Fralin and joined to the remaining wire! I also found an original Stackpole pot inside the case in an envelope – the number is 304-6043. This is very likely the original one fitted as it was very stiff to turn until I did some work on it."

Beyond these points on the finish, pickups and wiring, Steve

"It's a very nice guitar to play, really nicely set up. The action was pretty good straight out of the case" STEVE CLARKE

1. The 'Red Strat' is often cited as a '61, but the neck date 11/60 may indicate late-1960 origins. The pots fitted are replacements, but a 1960-dated pot was present in the case

2. Some Fiesta Red Strats of the era had a nitro clearcoat that can darken with age, while Steve says red paints can also be susceptible to environmental factors

says the neck, which is stamped 11/60, is very playable even today.

"It's a very nice guitar to play, really nicely set up. The action was pretty good straight out of the case. These things have a uniqueness about them. I had a '56 Strat a few years ago, a George Harrison '56 Strat, and that was so vibrant. And I've picked up others where they're not; they were like a piece of plywood. But not this one. Lovely guitar, got a character all of its own, and I thought it was just wonderful." 





1959 LES PAUL STANDARD AKA 'STRIPE'

After the fabled 'Greeny', this was Gary's go-to 'Burst

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

“Stripe? Oh, my God, was that something else!” Steve Clarke chuckles, referring to Gary’s well-played and honey-toned ’59 Les Paul Standard, which does not form part of the Bonhams auction of Gary’s gear per se but is being offered for private sale POA via Bonhams instead, at the behest of the estate. The origins of its nickname ‘Stripe’ remain obscure, but, thankfully, the rest of its particulars were easier to pin down.

“Well, firstly I can give you some pickup measurements,” Steve says. “The bridge is 7.74k and the neck is 7.36k. That’s what they come out at,” he observes, agreeing that this is incidentally similar to how manufacturers would balance the windings of a pickup set today; typically, if you have a neck and bridge pickup of equal output, the neck will sound louder due to the greater stridency of string vibration near the end of the fretboard as opposed to closer in to the bridge. Thus, modern balanced sets of pickups often feature a bridge pickup that’s wound slightly hotter to compensate and avoid a volume mismatch with the neck.

Steve’s measurements also shed light on a lesser known feature of some ‘Bursts of the era. The headstocks often taper longitudinally, being slightly thicker at the nut than at the ‘logo’ end to add a little extra strength to the notorious weak spot where the neck transitions into the headstock.



“I took a measurement from the headstock thickness on the low E tuner side, and it was 16.56mm, tapering to around 15.9mm by the D tuner on the same side,” Steve explains. “It’s got Grovers on it, obviously, and it’s got a later-type ABR-1 bridge on it [post-1962], the one with the retaining wire over the saddles. So that had been changed from the original. But it’s clearly been a long time [since the update] as it’s quite worn out.”

Steve adds that, like many guitars that have been played hard in a professional context, some of the electronics have been swapped out for replacement parts, presumably due to component failure on the road or in the studio.

“It’s got a later-type ABR-1 bridge... but it’s clearly been a long time [since the update] as it’s quite worn out” STEVE CLARKE

1. The neck pickup is a touch weaker than the bridge, making it effectively a balanced set

2. Grovers replace the original Klusons – a very common roadworthy mod

3. An extraordinary amount of ‘buckle rash’ is testament to the use Stripe has seen



“The neck volume and tone [pots] have been replaced. But the bridge volume and tone are original; they’re the ones.”

Steve adds that preparing such historic and valuable guitars for auction often involves sympathetically (and very carefully) attending to minor faults that prevent the guitar being used and enjoyed – always providing its provenance or originality isn’t adversely affected by any remedial work. Such was the case with Stripe’s neck pickup. But while completing minor repairs, he does get the chance to further record subtle idiosyncrasies of the guitar’s construction.

“When I picked it up, the neck pickup wasn’t working – very intermittent, it just wouldn’t come on. So I took it apart and looked, checked all the parts. There was a lot of gunk in there, the usual thing. But I got it working in the end, after cleaning it up. But in the process I made a note that the neck pickup has got the early brass bobbin attachment screws, whereas the bridge pickup has got the steel screws on the plate at the bottom. So two different [screw types] and, again, that was a transitional thing.”





1963 FENDER TELECASTER

The only other Fender in The Final Encore collection is this modded firecracker of a Tele

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

Though Gary Moore clearly gravitated to Gibsons for much of his work, Fenders nonetheless play a significant role in his music, including this intriguing '63 Tele. Acquired by Gary at some point prior to 1988, it has a '63 body with a replacement neck and was used on the opening track of Moore's much-loved *Still Got The Blues* album, a song entitled *Moving On*.

Steve Clarke picks up the interesting story of this modded workhorse. He begins by explaining that he initially recorded quite a mismatch in the outputs of the bridge and neck pickups, which gave readings of 6.32k and 3.59k respectively.

"What I found quickly with that Telecaster is that the front pickup seemed to be dead, but I fixed it. And I found there was a short on it that was coming from the [selector] switch."

Despite the neck being a replacement, the frets on it are original, Steve says – putting the Tele at odds with the majority of Gary's guitars, which were often refretted with chunkier wire.

"The Tele has 2.12mm fretwire, unlike most of his guitars, which had jumbo wire on. These look like original frets, in fact – the edges were nice and sharp, there was no over-sanding. There were none of those telltale signs that might have said to me, 'Oh, yeah,



this has had new frets.' It was like he'd left this one as it is."

The only other Fender, besides Gary's 'Red Strat', in the Final Encore sale, the guitar was something of a mongrel but Gary enjoyed its player-grade charms all the same, telling *Guitar Buyer* magazine in 2007 that "it's got a later neck on it that someone put on before I bought it, but it's got character and it really works. You can get some very mournful sounds out of it as well as a hard, in-your-face sound. It's a real old battle-axe." It was used on multiple appearances on German television and appears on

"You can get some very mournful sounds out of it as well as an in-your-face sound. It's a real old battle-axe" GARY MOORE

1. Abundant lacquer checking covers the butterscotch-hued body that evokes a 50s 'Blackguard' as much as the 60s Tele it is

2. Staggered poles on the bridge pickup, with its "mournful" tone

3. The rosewood-'board neck is a later addition to the guitar

versions of the tracks *Hard Times*, *Thirty Days*, *If The Devil Made Whiskey* and *I Had A Dream*.

Steve Clarke reports that the electronics have had minor mods, including alterations to the tone control that mean it functions rather more like the peaky sweep of a wah pedal – just another quirk of this idiosyncratic but clearly much-loved Tele. **G**





This guitar formerly belonged to a friend of Gary's, Johnny Fearn of the band Horslips. Gary had said: "It's an incredible guitar and sounds a bit like a Les Paul"

During our interview about Moore's career, Neville Marten said, "Gary was great on a 335 – he really, really pulled the expression out of that guitar." And it's likely this particular 335 to which he was referring.

Steve Clarke measured the guitar's pickup output and says "the bridge is 7.32k and the neck is 7.16k", a vintage output that partly explains the punchy but expressive performance of the humbuckers that Gary liked so much. And at 8.32lb (3.8kg), it's as light as many Strats of the era.

"The ABR-1 bridge has no retaining wire on it," says Steve, which would most probably make it a replacement part; Gibson introduced the retaining wire in 1962, a year prior to this guitar's manufacture. "And it's also been refretted with 3.08mm wire. You've got two black coils [on the humbuckers] and the covers have been removed."

Steve adds that this guitar seemed to be in good playing condition, even years after Gary last used it, needing very little fettling in preparation for the sale.

"I did a slight truss rod adjustment from memory – it was a little bit bowed – [but] it worked. I didn't really have any issues." 

GIBSON 1963 ES-335TD

Gary Moore was a master at coaxing tone from this workhorse semi

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker



“It’s got the [Patent Applied For pickups] in it,” Steve Clarke remarks of Gary Moore’s exceptional 1960 ES-355TD, the Cadillac of Gibson’s range of thinline semis of the late 1950s and 1960s. “The humbuckers have the brass screws [on the bottom plates of the pickups], for what it’s worth,” Steve observes. “And, again, it was initially dead on a couple of the [pickup/Varitone] selector positions when I first looked at the guitar. The rotary was very intermittent, and I had to get a straw inside there and give a blast of switch cleaner.

“The guitar’s had a really good refret, but the nut needed a bit of TLC because it was buzzing a bit on the B string, but I sorted that out. I also did a truss rod adjustment on that because it was back-bowed, so [the strings] were touching the 1st fret – you play an E chord and it’s rattling. So I backed it off a bit on that one.

“Once I got everything working on this thing, I took my tiny little Fender amp that I use for testing out and I plugged it in and thought, ‘Oh, this thing has got such a range of tones.’ It’s a really beautiful-sounding guitar and it’s such a nice colour as well. It’s a really lovely instrument.” 

Multi-ply binding that has now taken on a lovely aged yellow tint, plus that ornate split-diamond headstock inlay, show why the ES-355 was the upmarket brother of the 335



GIBSON 1960 ES-355TD

Serial number A33857, this stunning semi was top-of-the-line in its day

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker



1962 GIBSON LES PAUL

Gary Moore's SG-shape Les Paul is in remarkably clean, original condition

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

While it will always seem incongruous to modern eyes, the first SG-shaped twin-humbucker electrics Gibson made were, of course, originally badged as ‘Les Pauls’ before Lester’s name was removed in 1963 and the model became the SG proper. Gary possessed a notably clean example, Steve Clarke explains.

“This is a lovely guitar,” he says. “Again, you’ve got [Patent Applied For pickups] on it. The bridge pickup is 7.53k and the neck is 8.45k. Really nice nickel plating [on the covers], by the way. It’s also got the retaining wire on the ABR-1 bridge [first introduced in 1962] and I also made a note that the bridge is showing signs of dipping in the middle, so that would need straightening. I have straightened [old ABR-1s] a few times; it’s a bit tricky. You’ve got to be careful it doesn’t crack – and it’s a chance you take. I’ve not broken one, but you still hold your breath! But yeah, this one’s got the dip in the middle.”

Steve says that among the often heavily modded guitars of Gary’s collection, this SG-shape Les Paul is in clean, relatively original shape.

“It’s got a long neck tenon and none of the solder joints [on the pots] look like they’ve been



changed. They’ve not come off, which is another nice thing to see. Plus those pickup covers have never come off. That was another thing I noticed.”

Not quite everything is bob-on original, though, and at least two very common mods that made the guitar more usable in the line of professional duty have been made to the guitar.

“It’s had a refret and the current frets are 2.64mm wire. The tulip-button Klusons are repros, too.”

Steve adds that the weight of the SG-shape Les Paul is a feather-like 2.8kg (6.12lb) – and conjectures

“The bridge is showing signs of dipping in the middle. [Straightening old ABR-1s] is a bit tricky!” STEVE CLARKE

1. The Klusons are repros as the originals typically crumble and perish over time. Heavier Grovers were eschewed, however

2. The guitar’s vintage ‘buckers are – not unusually – rather different in output. The neck is hotter than the bridge

that this light weight and the desire to avoid the infamous neck-dive sometimes experienced with this model might partly explain why repro plastic Klusons are fitted on this guitar, rather than the chunky (and relatively heavy) Grovers that Gary sometimes favoured when fitting replacement machineheads. **G**





MODIFIED 1982 CHARVEL SAN DIMAS

Hasty mods made to this Charvel made it a choice workhorse for Gary in the early 80s

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Phil Barker

Some of the guitars in Gary's collection represent the deep craft of heritage makers such as Gibson during the golden era of 50s and 60s lutherie. Others, however, reflect the road-forged pragmatism and rough prototyping that progressive musicians sometimes demand of their gear. This much-modified 'bitsa' Charvel San Dimas is a perfect example of musicians and their techs jury-rigging guitars to meet needs not catered to by off-the-peg instruments or the pressing needs of busy touring, recording and promo schedules.

And it's fair to say that this particular guitar gave authenticator Steve Clarke more headaches than some of the others, partly due to its hastily fitted mods.

"It was faulty straight off," Steve smiles. "Plugged it in, dead. So the 'plate comes off and I have a look around, see what's going on with this. And, again, just because it's been left around and it's gunked up, I started to spray the pots [with contact cleaner] because the volume had seized up a little bit. It freed up and it started to come back to life, but I then found the jack socket was faulty and I had to sort that out – I think I resoldered that one.

"Now, the EMG pickup that was on it, I eventually got a reading of 16.53k [in output]. But when I first opened the battery compartment, it was a gooey mess. The battery had

been left in, gone green and burst," Steve adds, ruefully. "Fortunately, I had spare connectors, so I cut the wires off and reconnected a new battery terminal to it. Bingo, it comes to life.

"But when I looked inside [the guitar more generally], I was amazed it even worked... the scratchplate looked like somebody had used a hacksaw [to shape it] around the pickup but didn't have an eye for finesse. So it was probably a bit 'put together' for Gary. The gap between the pickup and the scratchplate was larger on one side than the other, the jack socket was misaligned, and the pickup wasn't straight [in other words, it was diagonally angled in the way a Strat bridge pickup

***"The scratchplate looked like somebody had used a hacksaw around the pickup... and the pickup was angled"* STEVE CLARKE**

1. The Jackson neck was fitted after the guitar appeared on Gary's 1983 album, *Dirty Fingers*

2. The Floyd Rose vibrato and EMG were imperfectly but effectively installed

is, though to a far subtler degree – Ed], so if you put the guitar in front of you, you're, kind of, thinking, 'Is that deliberate?'"

The guitar is also fitted with a Jackson-branded neck, not an original Charvel example, but despite all these many ad hoc changes that may have been made under time pressure, Steve says the guitar represents a snapshot of an artist and his rapidly changing needs. The guitar was initially used during Gary's time in the band G-Force, from 1979 to 1980. It can be seen, in an earlier configuration with twin humbuckers, on the cover of Gary's 1983 album, *Dirty Fingers*. Those pickups were subsequently removed and replaced by the single EMG that it now possesses. Gary later praised EMGs to *Music Maker* magazine, saying: "I find that for live work they're the best pickups I've ever heard. They really cut through."

Steve Clarke reflects: "I suppose, at the end of the day, Gary must've just plugged it in and thought, 'Yeah, it sounds great.' He's not going to take it apart – he's not going to look inside or think, 'Is it me or is that pickup a little bit wonky?' Those guys were a different breed, you know?" **G**



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Stephen Dale Petit

Grave illness and a broken heart have tested Stephen Dale Petit – but the bluesman tells us that completing his Clapton-bolstered masterpiece, *Be The Love*, is all that matters

Words Henry Yates

For Stephen Dale Petit, new album *Be The Love* holds a Molotov cocktail of emotions. The Anglo-American bluesman takes a deep breath and decides which one he'll dredge to the surface first. There's pride in an album that is hands-down the career peak of the man once dubbed a "blues hooligan" by *Mojo*, who has revved and ripped up trad-roots since he debuted with 2008's *Guitararama*. There's heartbreak bleeding across seven tracks that kick the hornet nest of a failed relationship.

Alongside that, there's gallows humour, which the 56-year-old draws upon more each day as he battles a life-threatening illness. "I didn't start out trying to make a masterpiece," he reflects. "But I was diagnosed with cancer in November 2022, within months of starting *Be The Love*. It certainly occupied my mind, the premise that this album wouldn't get finished. So music became everything. I thought, 'Fuck it, I'm not going to try to please anyone – the songs are the songs, and this album is me.'"

The songs on your new album, *Be The Love*, aren't written about your illness, are they?

"No, I wrote them from a whole different place. The relationship I was in broke up, earlier in 2022. She also happened to be in my band. It was all unclear for a few months. And when I established what the new reality was, I literally broke down. Then I grabbed a guitar and *Cherish A Ghost* came out.

"They say there are five life events that are all equal as emotional minefields. Birth, death, marriage,

divorce and moving house. This relationship might as well have been a divorce. We were so close. And I wrote *Cherish A Ghost* from the wound, when it was still a wound, in the process of healing. I cried and cried. But you go through every emotion under the sun. *A Better Man* is almost like a rediscovery: 'Okay, there is no us, so what's my identity?' All the songs are about her, except one – *Sky Scraper* – which is about another person. That's the 'new beginning' song."

What makes great guitar playing for you these days?

"Since I was 12, I've been a guitar player. And you want to get better and better, but the whole rating system is like in football. You know, who's faster? Who's technically better? Or whatever the category is. It's the way it's always been. But it's a nonsensical quest. So my priority as a player now is emotion. Being able to move people. Which is akin to the same thing – but not exactly. Because you can move people with excitement and exhilaration as much as you can with passion, sadness, poignance and pathos."

What were the key guitars and amps on this album?

"The main amp was my '65 Marshall JTM45. It's a musical instrument in itself. All the amp makers who advertise in the magazine will hate this, but I consider most modern amps sound processors. I like the ones that use hand-wiring and hand-everything. No digital. PCBs are a no-no. I used a Budda wah on *Low And Tight*. That's a killer track. I'll put it on in my car and just think, 'Fuck.'"



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 333 RECORDS



1. Among all the guitars used on the new album was this Gibson L-4 CES. Traditionally a jazz guitar, it shows that it can rock with the best of them!

2. Stephen considers his main amp, a '65 Marshall JTM45, "a musical instrument in itself". It's pictured here with a Gibson Memphis ES-355 Walnut Maestro VOS Varitone Reissue that also features on the album



PHOTO BY KOEHN POEM/COURTESY OF 333 RECORDS

"Guitars? The tracking was my red 355. I have two of them, but the one I used, I think it's a 2008. And then I have a reissue of the walnut 70s 355 that BB King played a lot. I played my 2008 Firebird, too.

"The electric guitar tone is pretty fucking cool on *Sky Scraper*. The dirt is ferocious. But it's never like metal. Because a lot of metal guitar is so compressed that it gets quite squishy, actually. I used a L-4 CES for the basic track. For overdubs, it was a 2012 three-pup Firebird Non-Reverse with a Zvex Woolly Mammoth, and the rest was my red 355. I used a Small Clone with a Mojo Vibe for the flange/chorus and a Klon for the solo. I also used a Lazy J 20 and J 10, separately, for everything amplified."

"Clapton was standing 2ft from me at Hoxa HQ. When he was done, he said, 'What do you think?' And I said, 'I want to cry'"

We associate you with a Firebird. What's the appeal?

"In the beginning, it was because I'd seen people play Firebirds and thought they looked mindblowing. You know, visually, it's a wing, it's flying, it's freedom. I remember Eric Clapton and Johnny Winter playing them. There's also something about the Firebird that works with my frame. I can be ever-so-slightly leaning forward and it just hangs as if it's on a platform, like it's weightless. And the accessibility to the upper frets is astonishing."

What guitar sounds do you consistently look to for inspiration when writing?

"There was something about the 60s. You had the coolest guitar sounds in a Top 10 song. The feedback on *I Feel Fine*. The stabs on *She's A Woman*: fucking great. The riff on *Paperback Writer*: fucking phenomenal. *Heart Full Of Soul*, any of the Yardbirds ones. You know, Hendrix and *Sunshine Of Your Love* were in the charts. I sometimes use this as a thought exercise to sonically free up people when I'm working with them: imagine it's 1965 and *Satisfaction* doesn't exist, then you hear it for the first time. That Gibson fuzz pedal – that would have been the most mindboggling sound coming through the radio. And they played Firebirds as well."

What was your most formative experience as a young player?

"It was magical being a teenager in Huntington Beach watching the blues guitarists at The Golden Bear. Like Albert King. He played left-handed and he was doing shit where I was just, like, 'What? How?' You know, two-step bends with total pitch-perfect accuracy."

***Sky Scraper*, your "new beginning" song, is such an ambitious track, how it shapeshifts...**

"I love tempo changes because you have to be a real band to pull that off. Like, people who play in the pit of a West End show – those parts can be written out, but it's never the same as when it's done by feel. When you know what direction it's going, but you don't have



“My priority as a player now is being able to move people... with excitement, passion, poignance and pathos”

3

exact measurements, that's the magic. Because it morphs organically and becomes – in our instance – a three-headed creature, moving as one.

“*Sky Scraper* and *Low And Tight* are head arrangements, nothing written down, not even charts. The bass player, Jim Mortimore, and drummer, Sam Walker, have been playing together since they were teenagers and that generates musical magic as there's tangible telepathic communication. Jim is a sound engineer as well – about 40 per cent of the overdub sessions were with him. The wild, discordant guitars in the *How Much Love?* outro were from a session with Jim, and I'd never before experienced the adult version of toddlers playing with paint on unlined paper – that sheer innocent joy.

“So if at any point I sound like a big-head, then none of this is, like, ‘I did it on my own.’ I worked with some bona fide grade-A geniuses. My co-producer, Vance Powell, listened in Nashville to my unamplified guitar and vocal melody ideas as iPhone recordings and we'd talk through each song. Charlotte Glasson was the icing on the cake, arranging strings and horns on four songs – and playing on *Sky Scraper*.”

***Diamond* is another standout on the album – and a more positive song?**

“I thought, ‘I don't want a whole song cycle of intractable sadness, bitterness and invective. There were a lot of amazing times, too – so let's celebrate them.’ That's what *Diamond* is. There's a section of acoustic chords I'm really pleased with. Those

big strums are Boz Boorer's '70s J-200. Gorgeous guitar. I just strummed it into the air and said, ‘This is going on the recording.’ That instrument at the top of *Diamond* is a bass diddly-bow – an ‘E’ bass string nailed to a piece of wood, with fret markings made with a Sharpie, played using a very heavy slide. I got the intonation in about 10 minutes and away we went. Boz plays the lovely floaty fingerpicked pattern in the second verse.”

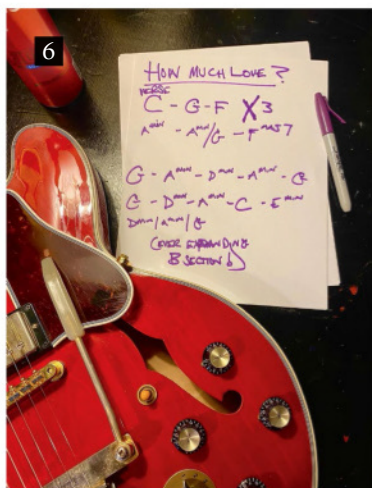
And Boz is one of several special guests?

“Yeah, Albert Lee plays the Fender tones on *How Much Love?* – let's not forget him! We recorded that at Hoxa HQ, and it doesn't do half-day hire, so after a four-hour session with Albert, I was on a creative high and set about creating the outro slide part on my 355. I was just throwing myself off of the cliff – I had no idea what it was going to be – but it's my favourite slide playing I've ever done. I also like the solos on *Gift Horse*. The middle one is wild, then for the end one, it's Sam the drummer, who goes feral and I get to be more nuanced.”

And then there's the guest solo that Clapton contributed on *A Better Man*...

“It just felt totally right. I had built this two-and-a-half minute section of music for him. We recorded the song and I just told everybody, ‘There'll be a solo there from a special guest.’ Nobody really interrogated me. I sent Eric a rough mix and he came back to me, a bit grumpy. He said, ‘Well, lockdown is finished and now

3. The Modern Flying V is a divisive design, but its lightweight, ergonomic build makes Stephen a big fan. It was specially made by Gibson's Custom Shop and features a solid mahogany body, rosewood fingerboard – plus Stephen's initials as part of the serial number



4. Eric Clapton joined Stephen at West Hampstead's Hoxa HQ to contribute an "insane" solo to the track *A Better Man*

5. Albert Lee was another guest star, in addition to Clapton and Boz Boorer, to join Stephen in the studio on the new album

6. Hear Albert Lee on *How Much Love?*, plus the "wild, discordant guitars" of bassist/sound engineer Jim Mortimore

7. In the studio (left to right): co-producer Vance Powell, Jim Mortimore, Stephen and drummer Sam Walker

I'm getting inundated.' So I thought, 'Oh well, that's his way of saying no.' But he got back to me the next day and said, 'Look, I don't mean to be a grump, but it's going to be a long wait.' I was just getting ready to start chemo, so I thought, 'Well, fine, I'm in no hurry.'

What do you remember about the session?

"He was standing 2ft from me at Hoxa HQ, facing the speakers. When he was done, he said, 'Well, what do you think?' And I said, 'I want to cry.' Because I was so moved. But there were some quick glances between Eric and his tech – like, 'Er, what does he mean?' – so I quickly said, 'No, no, I mean that in the best possible way!'"

"His solo is fucking insane. That bit where he locks in and repeats a phrase – I'm not saying he didn't know what the fuck he was doing. He did map out certain bits. But he turned off his thinking brain and turned on his channel – his brain is literally a conductor, channelling the energy from Pluto, Uranus, Jimi Hendrix..."

What guitar did Eric use?

"A Strat. Which one? Well, he's got a few, doesn't he? He'd also brought an acoustic and a 60s brown sunburst 335 – it was gorgeous. We did two days in the studio and normally they'd take the guitars home overnight, but I trusted the place so he left them. I asked Eric, 'Can I play them?' And he said, 'Yeah, of course.' So he went home and I had full licence to play his guitars. If that isn't guitar-player love, I don't know what the fuck is."

You and Eric are old friends. Would you ever have considered joining his band?

"I would watch him get a new guitar player and feel a little bit... whatever. And just think, 'Well, he's better for Eric because of this or that, fine, fair enough.' I mean, Derek Trucks is astonishing. Doyle Bramhall II – he's a great player, but I look at him and think, 'There's not much I can't do that he's doing.' The truth is, I was never in circulation as a gun-for-hire. Eric doesn't want someone who's going to be showboating. But we're just talking about idle daydreams – I never really thought I should be in Eric's band."

You sound omnipotent on the album. But has illness made it harder to sing, play, record?

"Not yet. At the moment, I'm going through some weird thing with my ear, which, if it's not sorted, could threaten things. I've got peripheral neuropathy, which is a side effect of chemo. But we'll figure it out."

Do you think you'll make more albums – or play any live shows again?

"The truth is, you just don't know with these things. I've had a rough few weeks. I've been to A&E, in and out of hospitals, bedridden, suffering the side effects of chemo and immunotherapy. But I want to play these songs live. I'd love to. So watch this space..." **G**



Stephen Dale Petit's new album, *Be The Love*, is due for release in November 2025 on 333 Records

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Seventies Chic

After some considerable time, the Les Paul Custom returns to Gibson USA's production line-up in classic 70s style, while the lesser Marauder is celebrated with a limited throwback design. Time to investigate!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker





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What You Need To Know

1 Isn't the Les Paul Custom a standard model?

It is now! For the past 20 years, the Les Paul Custom has only been available from Gibson Custom, not in the more production-led Gibson USA line-up. But you can now get your hands on a Custom in 70s dress for considerably less than one from Gibson Custom. About time!

2 What's with the Music City Special?

This homage to the Marauder – which had its moment back in the day – is a celebration of Gibson's Nashville factory, which opened 50 years ago. It's limited to 650 pieces worldwide in each of its three colours.

3 Maple necks on Gibsons? That's so wrong...

The 70s were a time of huge upheaval for both Fender and Gibson with ownership changes, production cost-cutting and a bit of a desire to do something different. Gibson turned its back on its past by using alternative woods, laminated mahogany and maple necks, 'pancake' bodies, hotter pickups and, on occasion, some pretty wacky circuits. Oh, how we laughed.

Although the Les Paul Custom was 70 years old in 2024, this new release from Gibson USA celebrates the return of the model in 1968 after it had been replaced by what we know as the SG in 1961. Back then, it was the only 'proper' Les Paul with full-size humbuckers, and as it edged into the 70s it saw considerable use by the likes of Carlos Santana, Mick Ronson in his hugely influential Ziggy era, and Steve Jones even used a couple to create Sex Pistols' classic-rock inspired punk onslaught, as Mick Jones did, too, with The Clash. Other

mentions in any users of the 70s Custom list has to include Randy Rhoads, and Lindsey Buckingham who employed a Custom with the rejuvenated Fleetwood Mac during their *Rumours* era. There are plenty more examples. The guitar itself went through numerous changes during the decade and Gibson's new release certainly references those, not least the Custom's post-'68 maple neck and T-Top inspired T-Type humbuckers.

Under new ownership, Gibson's Norlin era (from 1969) isn't always looked back on with too much love, but plenty of new



Another upgrade that goes back to the first Customs is these classic block inlays. Here, they're bright mother-of-pearl perfectly inlaid into the single-bound ebony 'board



models appeared during the 70s in step with the pioneering spirit of the decade. The L-6S was introduced in late '73 and the less-expensive L-6S Deluxe followed in '75, which made their mark, then Gibson 'did a Fender' and introduced its first bolt-on neck models: the Midnight Special with standard humbuckers, the Marauder with a neck humbucker and slanted single-coil-sized blade pickup at the bridge, and the three-pickup S-1, with the pickups designed by Bill Lawrence. It's these styles – plus the obscure 2013 Music City Junior that featured a B-Bender – that form the inspiration for today's Music City Special. Let's take a look...

Les Paul Custom 70s

Irrespective of its colourful history, today's Les Paul Custom 70s is a surprisingly valid intro to the Gibson USA line-up. The other 70s champion, the Les Paul Deluxe, rejoined the USA line-up a couple of years back and was simply a standard Les Paul 50s P-90 with its single-coil pickups swapped for mini-humbuckers. The new Custom, however, is quite a departure from either the current 50s or 60s Les Paul Standards. And credit where it's due: the Custom that turned up on our doorstep is really sharply crafted. Game on.

So what's different? Firstly, the neck is maple, one-piece (not the three-piece laminate offered in the later 70s). Another

70s-ism is the protruding volute behind the nut/truss rod access cavity, which was intended to strengthen the weakest point of the neck – and this is accurately reproduced here. Through our sample's Tobacco Burst finish (one of four offered), you can clearly see the three-piece plain maple top, too, although it's nearly invisibly joined. The back appears to be one-piece mahogany and there's no weight relief, so, intentionally or not, the weight here chases the 'boat anchor' heft of its decade.

There are plenty of other nods to 70s Custom style, from the big bound

1. The edge-bound large headstock (which measures 85mm wide across the top and 184mm from the back of the Graph Tech nut to the tip) was a feature from the first Custom in 1954. This is also true of the five-piece split diamond inlay, which was previously only used on Gibson's Super 400. Our new model uses a five-layer (instead of seven) purfling strip inside the bound edge

2. The protruding volute here was intended to strengthen the weakest point of the neck, but it proved unpopular with customers. As ever, all the hardware is gold-plated and you can clearly see the one-piece maple neck

THE RIVALS

Maybach Guitars, which manufactures from the Czech Republic, offers one of the cheekiest Custom clones, the Lester Black Velvet '57 (£2,199), of course referencing the original LPC, although it does feature a maple top in either 'new' or aged nitro finishes, plus Amber 'Spirit of '59' humbuckers and the all-essential block inlaid ebony 'board.

ESP's long-running single-cut Eclipse is available at various levels, but the Japanese-made E-II (approx. £2.7k in store) has plenty of Custom-like 'posh' style. It's actually a through-neck design with classic mahogany/maple construction, the top is multi-bound quilted maple, and with a modern aim it also

features stainless-steel frets on an ebony fingerboard, with Fishman Fluence Modern active humbuckers.

One of the closest brands to Gibson's past remains Heritage, who still makes a wide range of Gibson-style electrics. There's Custom style with models such as the Custom Shop Core Collection H-157 Ebony (£4,499, Dawsons price), not least with its block inlaid ebony 'board and multi-bound (albeit it small) headstock. It's powered by Custom Shop 225 humbuckers with gold-plated covers and numerous fine details.

See the gallery that follows this review for start-up Gibson Les Paul options.

3. Not only is the multi-piece binding fancier here than on a Les Paul Standard, it also runs around both the top and back edges. These diamond-shaped 'Posi-Lok' strap buttons are brought back here and on the Music City Special model

4. Hardware on the Les Paul Custom 70s is standard Gibson USA with the Advanced Plating wider Nashville-style tune-o-matic and lightweight stud tailpiece. The plain maple top is a three-piece, but the joins are very discreet



headstock with its sizeable 'split diamond' inlay and the body's double edge binding with its inner multi-layered purfling strip, to the 'witch hat' control knobs, the gold-plated hardware and pickup covers, and the bound ebony (not rosewood) fingerboard with its bright mother-of-pearl block inlays. It's quite a different beast from the regular USA Les Paul Standard.

Les Paul Music City Special

Just like London buses, we've just had one maple-neck Gibson and now another one comes along (although the wood is hidden under the opaque black finish that covers all of the guitar with the exception of the lightly 'burst' top). These are the only two maple-necked Les Pauls in the current USA line-up. Unusually, too, for a 'low-end' Gibson, the Music City Special also features an ebony fingerboard (with 'student'-style dot inlays), which Gibson calls "striped", although the black colour of ours is very even; the only striping, a lighter brown streak, lies directly under the A string and is barely visible. It's unbound, though, and aside from the V-style headstock the guitar comes across as a cut-price take on the single-cut

Les Paul Special, not least with its large scratchplate onto which the pickups (uncovered black bobbined 70s Tributes), master volume, tone and three-way toggle pickup selector are mounted. Only the output jack is side-mounted as usual, here on a metal plate that's chromed like the rest of the hardware, which includes the same Nashville tune-o-matic and lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece as

Maybe we're swayed by the crisp build, but the sound of this Les Paul Custom 70s is really beautiful

the Custom, while the tuners are smaller-bodied and presumably lighter Grovers with downsized 'kidney bean' chromed metal buttons.

It's the body here that's quite the outlier. It's a thin 40mm deep slab of poplar with slightly SG-like edge chamfering on the bass side of the face and just a light ribcage cutaway on the back. Through the light 'burst' of the top finish you can see some

mild grain and what looks like a three-piece spread, but again it's cleanly done.

Another unusual feature is that both guitars have diamond-shaped 'Posi-Lok' strap buttons with pretty sharp pointed tips, presumably intended to stop your strap slipping off as with the small-diameter vintage style. Just be careful not to catch one of those on your 70s satin or cheesecloth shirt...

Feel & Sounds

Reflected in their retail prices, there's obvious cost saving to the Music City that's illustrated with the finishing, which is first class on the Custom and a little hurried-looking here – it's less flat and in places less smooth. And as we said, the Music City is mostly opaque whereas the Custom is not only beautifully sunburst on the front and back but also the sides. Likewise, the main piece of the neck is a light amber/yellow where you can see a light and attractive figure, then the headstock back and that volute are hit with a vibrant dark brown, like the heel area, almost conjuring the look of a classic Gibson archtop. It's a proper job, no question.



UNDER THE HOOD

Any surprises inside?
Let's take a look...

Just like the overall build, the Les Paul Custom's circuit is all neat and tidy, albeit with no surprises. It uses four Gibson logo'd CTS 500kohms pots with Orange Drop .022µF caps on the tone controls. The wiring is standard modern-style (as used on the USA 50s and 60s Les Paul Standards), and aside from the grounding/mounting plate there's no other screening in the cavity.

The first thing you see when you remove the Music City's large scratchplate is that it's routed for *three* humbucking-sized pickups, which might suggest there are more models planned in this style. The circuit is very simple, using CTS 500k pots for the master volume and tone, and a micro-sized blue tone cap with a .022µF value and a short-length Switchcraft toggle pickup selector switch. The 70s

The Les Paul Custom 70s' T-Type covered humbuckers aren't overhot and they certainly aim at its earlier T-Top inspirations

Tribute Lead and Rhythm pickups, with long legs, look pretty classic, although the outer taping of the coils is a little messy and very visible on the bridge (Lead) pickup that sits nearly full depth out of the scratchplate. Also, all three controls were a little loose on the scratchplate and needed tightening up.

The two-conductor T-Type humbuckers pickups are "a nod to the T-Top pickups that Gibson made between 1966 and 1979", we're told and "use polysol wire and Alnico V magnets just like the original T-Tops and have nickel covers and balanced coils... Like the originals, they are left unpotted for vintage-correct tone." At output, our calibrated set measured 7.38k at the bridge and 7.07k at the neck.

Gibson says that these 70s Tribute humbuckers "are a nod to the hotter pickups that Gibson released in the mid-70s as a new breed of hard-rockin' players started to emerge on the scene, with lots of attitude, warmth, punch, and increased output". These use 'strong' Alnico V magnets and are wax-potted. Clearly using thinner coil wire, they measure 15.87k at output at the bridge and 14.37k at the neck.

5. It's a standard circuit for the Les Paul Custom

7. The Music City's circuit is even simpler than the LP's

6. The Music City Special is routed for three humbuckers. More models to come, we wonder?

8. These 70s Tribute humbuckers are just one of the many pickup sets offered by Gibson's Pickup Shop



The other major difference here is the weights, exactly a kilogram apart. So while the Custom is a bit of a beast, the Music City feels positively featherweight in comparison.

Width-wise, there's little difference to the necks, and in lower positions both have a similar front-to-back depth of just under 21mm, which fills out to 23.3mm by the 12th on the Music City and slightly bigger at 24.5mm at the same position on the Custom. In the hand, the Music City's SlimTaper profile seems to have marginally more shoulder to the shape, the Custom is a little more classic full C – more of a handful as you move up the neck, too. As to setup and action height, again they're similar with the same-gauge fretwire that's pretty nicely fettled. Nevertheless, the Music City's frets span the whole width of the fingerboard, and the Custom's stop short with the usual binding 'nibs' forming the fret ends.

The differences continue playing each guitar unplugged. The Music City has quite Junior/Special vibrant midrange-y push, while the Custom has possibly less acoustic volume but considerable smoothness to the attack – almost like some kind of built-in compression – and a deeper low-end.

Along with the different controls, the pickups are rather different, too, which creates two disparate-sounding Les Pauls when combined with the different construction. To be honest, this version of the Custom is a welcome break from the 'Does it sound like a 'Burst?' comparisons that seem to obsess players and guitar makers. Maybe we're swayed by the crisp build, but the sound of this 'Paul is really beautiful, and it's that seemingly smoother attack and long sustain that underpins what we hear. The T-Types aren't overhot and certainly aim at its earlier T-Tops inspirations.

Part of the original 50s-era Custom was its 'tuxedo jazz' intention and this handles those duties effortlessly. If you live on the clean side of the tracks, do yourself a favour and try this. There's immense jangle that loves a little modulation with both pickups on, and, as we said earlier, you'd swear you'd kicked in your compressor pedal. Dial in some dirt, however, and it's gloves off: full-fat creamy sustain for days. And while it seems like an odd guitar to kick out your punk anthems, just ask Steve or Mick Jones. You can't ignore the weight, but with sounds like this, we're not sure we care.

For comparison, we loaded up a set of T-Types into our reference Les Paul Classic with its mahogany/rosewood neck and nine-hole weight relief. The two are close cousins, but the Classic seems to have a little more midrange colour and a subtly crisper attack.

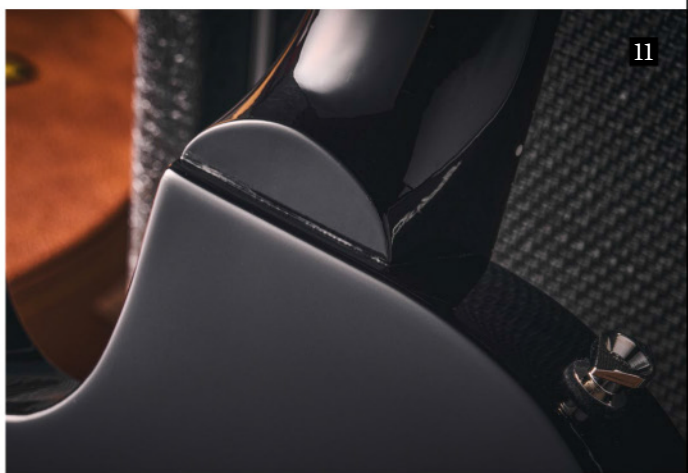
Plug in the Music City Special and it's a very different animal. With the volume full up, the high-end is a little rounded, but there's a big increase in poke with a fatter midrange – a very different colour from the Custom. But combined with the more lightweight Junior/Special feel, it's got a serious rock 'n' roll attitude and loads of hot-rod 70s vibe. It's less obviously a clean machine, but pull the volume back and lower your gain and you might be surprised, not least by the plummy jazz voice at the neck. It's a shame we have no coil-splits here – the pickups are only two-conductor, so that's not possible – but there is plenty of choice out there if you fancy a bit of modding, and with the endearing vibe of the guitar, we'd be very tempted.

Verdict

There's already a huge amount of choice in Gibson USA's Les Paul line-up, but this is the only Custom, and our sample is not



10



11

The Music City Special is a very different animal... It's got a serious rock 'n' roll attitude and loads of hot-rod 70s vibe

9. Having the controls and pickups scratchplate-mounted on the Music City speeds up production a little, but it means the bridge pickup sits out nearly full depth. That coil tape looks a little messy, too. Elsewhere, through the finish you can see the three-piece poplar body, and, plating aside, it uses the same USA-made bridge and tailpiece as our Custom

10. Like the 70s Marauder and S-1, the Music City Special has the large Flying V headstock. This limited model also celebrates 50 years of guitar-making in Nashville

11. The guitar's inspirations employed bolt-on necks (a very un-Gibson feature!) and, although the original choice of maple is retained here, the neck is glued-in

only very well put together, but there's something about the different materials married with the lower output T-Types that give it a very viable place. True, it's no lightweight, but it sounds glorious, and while it's pretty much £2k less than a Custom-division Custom, it is quite an uplift in price over the numerous USA Les Paul Standards.

The Music City Special? Not everyone will enjoy the V headstock, but the throwback style is surprisingly valid. On the one hand, it's a big mid-focused rocker, but pull the volume back and a slightly different character emerges. While not actually featherlight, it's a great gigging weight that plays really well with stable tuning. We can't help thinking we might see more of these.

As we've reported, there's a noticeable rise in quality of the Les Pauls we've had in our hands over recent times. There's a colossal choice, too. What's your flavour? **G**



GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM 70S

PRICE: £3,499 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric

BODY: Double edge-bound mahogany (no weight relief) with carved plain maple (3-piece) top

NECK: Maple, '70s' profile with volute, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.2mm

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound ebony, mother-of-pearl block inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stud tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic with metal keystone tuners – gold-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 50mm

ELECTRICS: 2x calibrated Gibson T-Type covered (gold-plated) humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.42/9.72

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: The Gibson Custom Les Paul Customs start around £5,399. The starting 'proper' Les Paul in the USA line-up is the Standard 50s or 60s Faded at £1,999

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model

FINISHES: Tobacco Burst (as reviewed), Wine Red, Buttercream Top (w/ ebony back and sides), Ebony – gloss nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS Overall 70s Custom style; superb craft and sunburst finishing; low-output T-Type humbuckers create an expansive-sounding 'Paul; a superb player

CONS Not everyone will enjoy the weight or that polarising volute; yes, it's fancy, but that comes at a cost



GIBSON LES PAUL MUSIC CITY SPECIAL 50TH ANNIVERSARY

PRICE: £1,599 (inc soft shell case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric

BODY: Poplar

NECK: Maple, Slim Taper profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.6mm

FINGERBOARD: Striped ebony, acrylic dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stud tailpiece, Grover Mini Rotomatic with metal button tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 50mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson 70s Tribute open-coil humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.42/7.5

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: See our Gibson gallery over the page

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model

FINISHES: Tobacco Burst (as reviewed), Wine Red, Ebony – gloss nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Clean build; good weight with a lively resonance; streamlined controls make for a fast drive; no-nonsense aesthetic; big 'rock and beyond' voice

CONS A few details, like the pickup tapping, could be improved; that V headstock might be a dealbreaker; coil-splits would be nice – there's potential for a different LP flavour

The Low Down

Affordable Gibson USA Les Pauls? No problem, here are your choices...

Words Dave Burrluck



LES PAUL MODERN LITE £1,159

Currently the entry point into Gibson USA (aside from online only 'Exclusives'), the Modern Lite uses a thinner all-mahogany body with quite trendy satin 'open-grain' finishes, with matching headstocks, in a choice of some six hues (from £1,159). Unlike the Music City Special, we have four controls for the well-loved 490R 'Modern Classic' and 498T 'Hot Alnico' uncovered buckers. And while it's not the sharpest craft, it's got some SG-like raw power. A good starter or gigging spare.



LES PAUL JUNIOR £1,499

Launched the same year as the original Les Paul Custom, the single-pickup Junior is an undisputed classic of simplistic 'student' style. Offered in gloss nitro Vintage Tobacco Burst and Ebony, and TV Yellow (at £1,599) finishes, the current Junior remains a hard-to-beat rock 'n' roll axe for, frankly, not a huge outlay. The slab-body, all-mahogany construction with its 22-fret rosewood 'board ticks the tone boxes, and many of us enjoy Gibson's now positively ancient P-90 single coil. A must-try!



LES PAUL STUDIO £1,499

Pictured here in gloss Smokehouse Burst, this hits the same price point as the LP Junior (as does the Tobacco Burst in this model; other colours are from £1,599), but it's a proper plain-maple-topped if slightly thinner-depth Les Paul, with Ultra-Modern weight relief. There's no body binding here, but the covered Burstbucker Pros provide a slightly hotter vintage voice, plus we get 'coil taps' for more P-90-like optional sounds. A deservedly long-time favourite.



LES PAUL SPECIAL £1,699

This price gets you a two-pickup Junior in TV Yellow or Vintage Cherry, while you'll pay £100 less if you opt for the Ebony finish. There's plenty of vintage style here, too, from the plastic-button tuners to that one-piece wrapover bridge. Plus, of course, the four-control layout means it plays more like a pukka 'Paul. Like the Junior, the Special uses Gibson USA's P-90 pickups and has been played by countless pros over the years. We're still in love...



LES PAUL STUDIO SESSION £1,899

As an upgrade to the Studio, the Session piles on the style with its figured maple top over the Ultra-Modern weight-relieved body, which additionally has the Modern Contoured heel. Like the Studio, there's no body binding, but we get 'coil taps', as well as out-of-phase and pure bypass options from the four pull-switch controls. Gibson's 57 Classic and 57 Classic Plus humbuckers provide the power. A serious guitar offered in four translucent colours.



LES PAUL STANDARD 60s FADED £1,999

Just before we get to the real Standards, the 50s and 60s Faded models trim a little off the price. The finish is actually satin nitro (not gloss) and we get a lightly figured AA maple top with edge binding (at last!). The 60s uses 60s Burstbuckers with a SlimTaper neck profile; the 50s has a 50s Vintage neck profile with Burstbucker 1 and 2s. There's no weight relief and limited colours, but this is the real deal with vintage vibe and feel.





Rock 'N' Roll Star

Originally introduced 18 years ago, the celestially named PRS Mira is back in both gloss and satin nitro finishes with a very aggressive price point. Still valid? Oh, yes!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Matt Lincoln



PRS S2 MIRA 594 GLOSS & S2 MIRA 594 SATIN

£1,999 & £1,699

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

What You Need To Know

1 This isn't really a new guitar, then?

Well, yes and no. It goes back some years in PRS's history to 2007, but this new version was launched in September 2025.

2 Why isn't PRS calling it a 'reissue'?

Unlike plenty of brands edging into their fifth decade, PRS has never gone down the reissue route (aside from very limited Private Stock runs of early style Customs, for example). The reason is simple: PRS is constantly improving what it offers, as Paul Reed Smith recently told us: "If what I made today wasn't as good as what we made [back] then, I would want to go back and make those. I would do it immediately. But that's not my experience and that's not the experience of the artists I work with"

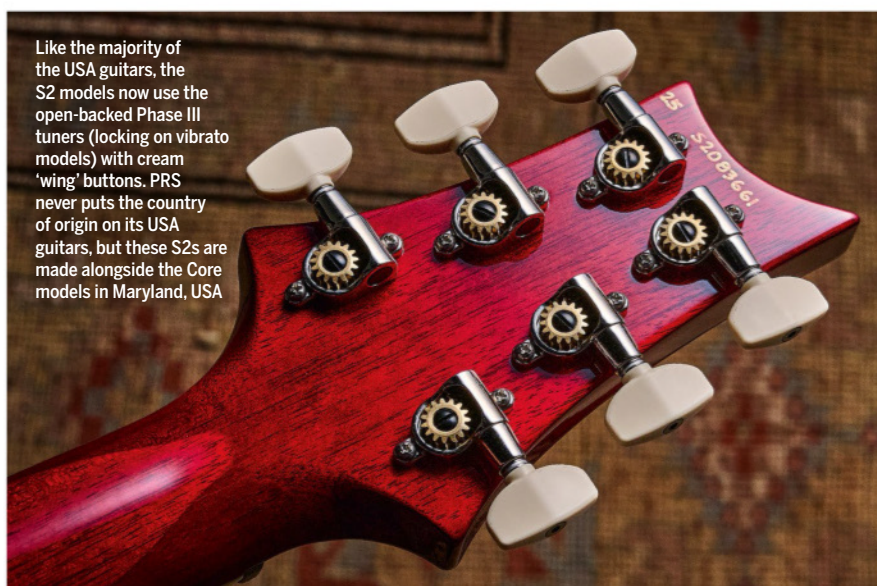
3 The two new Miras here have quite different prices. What's the deal?

Simple: the new Mira is offered in either satin or gloss nitro colours. It's the same guitar in two different finish types and the satin finish model (pictured on the previous page in Matcha Green) costs less.

If you think you've seen this guitar before, you'd be right as the Mira dates back to 2007 when it was unveiled at PRS's Experience event before joining the USA line-up the following year. It was primarily designed by Joe Knaggs (who at the time was head of PRS's R&D and Private Stock programme) with an outline shape based on the Santana guitar and a thinner 'slab' body with its SG-like contouring. It was the first PRS glued-neck guitar to feature a scratchplate on which its controls were fitted, although

the uncovered humbuckers were mounted in standard rings and the output jack was side-placed as usual. It was originally 24-fret only with optional moon or bird inlays and the standard PRS 635mm (25-inch) scale length.

Clearly designed to be more cost-effective to produce, the original Mira was then the entry point into PRS USA with a UK retail price of £1,349, lower than both the all-mahogany Standard and bolt-on CE. It offered a different, simplistic and even retro vibe to the



Like the majority of the USA guitars, the S2 models now use the open-backed Phase III tuners (locking on vibrato models) with cream 'wing' buttons. PRS never puts the country of origin on its USA guitars, but these S2s are made alongside the Core models in Maryland, USA



classic carved maple-top PRS style and was aimed at a potentially different audience, too. It's "for today's players... a new voice to the PRS line-up", ran the marketing blurb.

The single-cut Starla was similar in style and followed in 2008, and there were plenty of different Mira models that came after the original. But it was the overall style that formed the basis of the USA S2 range, which launched in 2013 with the Mira, Starla and Custom 24. The S2 Mira was now a 22-fret guitar with a larger

In Build

To focus in on its vintage-guitar-like aim, the new Mira falls into the 594 camp (the name derived from the shorter *actual* Gibson scale length of 24.594 inches/625mm), but it's the only one with that designation that uses the original PRS Stoptail bridge, here with the brass inserts under the string break points. All the other current 594s in both the S2 and Core ranges use a separate bridge and tailpiece. We do get the fingerboard binding, but it's also the only 594 with separate mini-

1. The machined aluminium PRS Stoptail wrapover bridge first appeared in the very early 90s on the Dragon I guitar. This later version uses brass inserts under the string break point. The pickup rings are proprietary, too, and each is lightly angled so the pickups follow the string angle perfectly. Typical PRS attention to detail!

2. Unlike the other 594s, the Mira has the standard PRS master volume and tone, and it's the only one with those two coil-split mini-toggle switches, too

There's something very working-guitar about this – the playing experience is simply beautiful

scratchplate that held both the pickups and controls. By 2020, the Mira and Starla moved to the SE range only, but they were dropped completely by the 2023 price list.

So, now, the Mira is back (no news on the Starla as yet) with a good choice of both gloss and satin nitro finishes (see spec list on page 102). Although this is not a 'reissue' of either the previous Core or S2 models, it's presented in a slightly different, updated style that's typical of PRS's ethos of continual improvement.





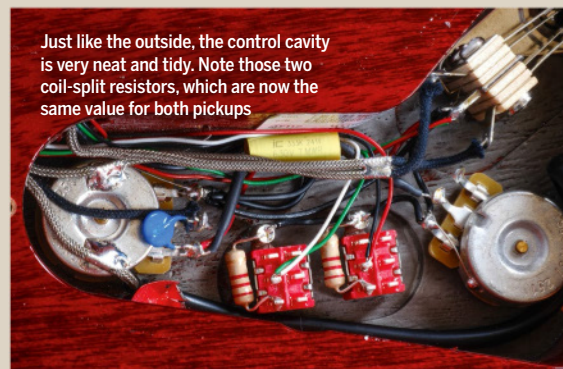
UNDER THE HOOD

We've seen plenty of changes in PRS's circuits over the years. What's inside here?

As with the other S2 models, the rear backplate isn't recessed, but that's about the only obvious cost-saving we can see. As we've reported, PRS is now screening the control cavity with a light grey nickel-based conductive paint that connects to the copper shielding on the underside of the backplate. Standard 500kohm pots (which measure slightly higher here) are used, the volume with the PRS-standard 180pF treble bleed cap. The IC .033µF tone cap isn't the larger Orange Drop style we've seen in recent models but is still rated at 630 volts, while the angled toggle switch is by Switchcraft.

The partial coil-splits are achieved by placing a resistor between the coil junction output and ground leaving some of the dumped coil in circuit – in this case, the screw coil. Here, both resistors are valued at 2.2k (typically PRS uses a 2.2k resistor at the bridge and a 1.1k at the neck).

Little technical info is provided in terms of the 58/15 LT ('low turn') humbuckers. PRS prefers the flowery description that they "are vintage-inspired pickups with exceptional clarity. Designed to capture the sweetness of vintage single coils and the warmth of late-1950s humbuckers, these pickups are lively and open with focused midrange and balanced treble and bass." Ours measured 7.62k (5.2k when split) at the bridge and 7.51/5.14k at the neck.



Just like the outside, the control cavity is very neat and tidy. Note those two coil-split resistors, which are now the same value for both pickups



3. For 40 years now the output jack plate has always been metal, very firmly screwed to the body and designed to endure a lifetime of use

4. With their brushed nickel-plated covers, these pickups have 58/15 LT engraved in one corner. The reason the neck pickup is 'upside down' is that, when split, the mainly voiced slug coil sits closest to the neck

5. There's no headstock facing here and the signature decal is colour-dependent, either gold (as shown) or black. The nut is a proprietary friction-reducing material that is nicely rounded and typically perfectly cut

toggle switches to voice the pickups in either humbucking or partial coil-split modes. Plus, here, we get the classic PRS drive: master volume and tone with the lower-placed toggle switch pickup selector. The other 594s use a four-control setup (which can split the pickups from the pull-switch tone controls) with an upper-shoulder-placed pickup selector toggle switch, with the exception of the S2 McCarty 594 Thinline, which has its toggle placed above its four controls.

That Thinline, then, is the closest cousin to the new Mira (with the exception of its standard PRS outline, control layout and two-piece bridge) as it has the same all-mahogany construction style, including the scarfed headstock and heel stack of all the S2 models, as well as the scale length, neck profile and pickups. In terms of outline, it's the bass-side upper horn where the biggest change occurs. Comparing the standard PRS shape with the Mira, its horn sits out further, adjacent to the 14th fret; the Mira's top horn is shortened, sitting adjacent to the 16th fret. The lower horns of both are pretty similar: the Mira's sits a little closer to the neck, plus we have a deep cutaway



here. The Mira's lower bouts look subtly more rounded and the lower waist a little fuller. The chamfering on the 43mm thick body hints at the PRS top-carve, and we're well used to this 'asymmetric bevel' style now with the other S2 models.

Another similarity with the other S2 594 models is the 58/15LT pickups – also used on the all-mahogany S2 Standards – although here the neck humbucker is flipped so its screw poles face the bridge, allowing the slug coil to sit closest to the neck when split.

Feel & Sound

As we've noted in our recent reviews of the S2 models, there is nothing remotely cut-price about these guitars. The gloss finish slightly sinks into the grain, but nothing like the intended 'sinky' finish of the satin-finish Miras. The classic translucent Vintage Cherry gloss finish really enhances the quite vivid grain of the mahogany body, which is one piece, and while you can see the headstock splice and the heel stack of the neck, you have to look closely. With our opaque satin-finish Matcha Green sample, you can't see any wood at all.

Both our samples weighed in at 2.86kg (6.3lb) and this light weight makes for a great at-home strummer. It 'disappears' on a strap and there's something very working-guitar about this – the playing experience is simply beautiful. From the slight incurve to the bound fingerboard edge to the perfect fretwork and setup, everything feels so well finished. Even the nut is more rounded and curved – less production-like, more boutique in feel.

That differing bass horn length means it does hang differently on a strap. The neck seems to stick out further, but it's not as extended as an SG feels or obviously a 24-fret such as the original Mira.

Overall, then, the guitar feels pretty familiar. The Pattern Thin (aka Wide Thin) neck profile is typically well shaped, just over 43mm at the nut (with 36mm string spacing) and a depth of 21.2mm at the 1st fret, 22.8mm by the 12th, with a classic, quite rounded C profile. We get the classic PRS control layout, and the two mini-toggle coil-split switches expand the sounds from the basic three humbucking voices to eight. Although the 58/15 LTs have been replaced in the Core range by McCarty IIIs, we have to

THE RIVALS

The obvious competitor here is Gibson, which has a lot of Les Paul choice in this price area, as we document elsewhere in this issue on page 94. Then there's the SG, which informs some of the Mira's style: the Gibson USA SG Standard (£1,699), for example, comes in three gloss colours (there's more with the Custom Colour model at the same price) with covered 490R (neck) and 490T (bridge) Alnico II humbuckers.

PRS already has a similar thinner all-mahogany guitar with the S2 McCarty 594 Thinline (£2,459) in gloss only and the standard PRS outline. However, it features PRS's two-piece bridge with four-control layout (with coil-splits) for the dual 58/15 LT 'buckers.

Gordon Smith's UK builds include the double-cut GS2 and the more SG-styled GSG2, which start around £1,000 and can be custom-ordered with plenty of upgrades, including wood type and finish options.



The Vintage Cherry gloss finish shows off the grain of the one-piece mahogany body, which is 43mm thick



PRS S2 MIRA 594

PRICE: £1,999 (Gloss); £1,699 (Satin) (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway, contoured-top solidbody electric

BODY: 1-piece mahogany

NECK: 3-piece mahogany, Pattern Thin profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.594")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction-reducing/43.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, vintage ivory acrylic old-school bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: PRS Stoptail bridge with brass inserts, PRS Phase III locking tuners with wing buttons

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x PRS 58/15 LT covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone, 2x mini-toggle coil-split switches

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.86/6.3

OPTIONS: Gloss or satin colours only

RANGE OPTIONS: The gloss-only McCarty 594 Thinline with 4 controls and 2-piece bridge currently costs £2,459; the S2 Satin Standard 22 and 24 with dot inlays cost £1,999

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Gloss: Vintage Cherry (as reviewed), Antique White, Black, Black Rainbow Holoflake, Dark Cherry Sunburst, Platinum Metallic

Satin: Matcha Green (as reviewed), Cloud Burst, Mavis Mint Metallic, Metallic Midnight, Dark Cherry Sunburst, Red Apple Metallic



PROS Perfect crisp, lightweight construction; very vibe-y style; USA 58/15 LT humbuckers; dual mini-toggle coil-splits are fast in use; excellent setup and playability; affordability; supplied with great gigbag

CONS Just remember the satin finishes will mark and wear relatively easily

say if your tastes lie on more classic lines, we're big fans of these.

For cleaner duties, they have good clarity with a smooth response and a good dynamic range, even on this all-mahogany platform. Turn up the wick and there's surprising thickness. No, it's not as 'big' sounding as a PRS Singlecut or obviously a Les Paul, but the subtly more mid-focused character gives it a distinct, quite pushy voice without any nasal spike. The sound of well-behaved Patent Applied For-alikes? Pretty much.

The coil-splits are very valid, too; they have a crisp edge and are not overthin. Running with both pickups split and a little gain boost, it's like we've crossed a double-cut Les Paul Special with a Telecaster – there's plenty of strummy jangle or just more twangsome bite, which might be a little too wiry for fuller lead lines, but that's where you just switch in the full humbucker tones. As ever, there's no one way to run a guitar like this. That's down to you.

Is there a difference in sound between the gloss and satin-finished guitars?

The new Mira has superb playability and a sound palette that's usable for a wide range of styles

Well, we'd swear the satin model is subtly crisper and less damped; the gloss-finish Mira seems slightly rounder in the highs. Put it this way, though: we'd give both a listen before we made a purchasing decision. And while this has nothing to do with the sound, it's worth bearing in mind that the satin finish will mark and age – we already have pick marks on the front and we've hardly been on a world tour.

Verdict

This new 40th Anniversary release feels like the return of an old friend. Without its previous scratchplate it comes across as a less-retro design, too, yet it still feels and looks very classic, not least in this Vintage Cherry gloss. The 'new' audience is catered for with the satin finish choices, as illustrated by our Matcha Green sample, which is a long, long way away in style from the classic maple-topped Custom. But despite the stripped-down style, the new Mira is very much a PRS: centring on four decades of precise craft with superb playability and a sound palette that's usable for a very wide range of styles.

It feels like the gauntlet has been thrown down. Not only are S2 models getting very close to the Core offerings in terms of fit and finish, if you think PRS just makes expensive, posh guitars then you need to reconsider. Neither of these are that, but they are perfectly made and timeless-sounding rock 'n' roll guitars. About time, we'd say. **G**

VINTAGE SPIRIT TIMELESS TONE



SE NF 53

The PRS SE NF 53 is a powerful, modern guitar inspired by classic tones and design. Built on the foundation of a swamp ash body and 22-fret, 25.5" scale length bolt-on maple neck and fretboard, the PRS SE NF 53 delivers articulate low-end with the snarl and twang you'd expect - all without the hum. This guitar is ready to work. Find out more at an Authorized Dealer near you or at www.prsguitars.com

PRS PAUL
REED
SMITH
GUITARS

SE

Landmark Designs

The entire history of PRS Guitars in six currently available models!

Words Dave Burrluck



PRS SANTANA RETRO £5,169

Before Paul Reed Smith started his production company in 1985, he made one-off guitars (with a couple of assistants) for many big names such as Ted Nugent, Howard Leese and, most famously, Carlos Santana. This current Retro model references that time with its pre-Custom shape and earlier headstock design. With the help of John Mann, Paul created his own vibrato 'system' with its slippery nut and locking tuners, initially to satisfy Carlos. Somehow, the Santana-style model didn't make the PRS production line-up until 1995.



PRS CUSTOM 24 FROM £4,589

From those early guitars Paul redrew the outline of what would become the classic curly-maple-topped Custom when he launched the company; the bird inlays were originally just an option. Over 40 years on that original unique outline is now a classic, referencing elements of both Fender and Gibson in terms of construction, as well as both humbucking and single-coil sounds and its 'halfway between the two' 635mm (25-inch) scale length. Over all these years, that outline has been used on the majority of PRS models. Gold dust!



PRS CE 24 £3,100

Only a couple of years into production, in 1988 PRS attempted to make a more affordable guitar that originally had a little more Fender flavour. We welcomed the Classic Electric (renamed the CE) with its bolt-on maple neck and alder body. Quite quickly, it followed Custom style with a maple-topped body and, by the mid-90s, a mahogany back. The current version returned to the line in 2016. There's a semi-hollow CE, too, and in the SE line the CE 24 Standard Satin is the entry point into the entire PRS line-up.



**PRS SE MCCARTY 594
SINGLECUT £1,125**

On its launch in 2000, the Singlecut model got PRS into hot water with Gibson for obvious reasons. It was suspended from production until the lawsuit was dismissed in 2005. Ironically, the guitar proved popular with artists but less so with PRS's customers. Today, there's only a single model in the Core and S2 ranges, and here, too, in the 'offshore' SE line-up, which kicked off in 2001 and has become a huge part of PRS's worldwide business.



PRS S2 VELA £2,349

After the Mira and the Starla were launched (in 2007 and 2008 respectively), in 2016 came PRS's third alternative new shape, the offset Vela. Unlike the previous two designs, this one has stayed the course as a S2 stalwart and is also now available as a semi-hollow model. The offset shape was originally conceived by splitting the Custom outline and moving the bass side up; it introduced new pickups and the 'plate-style' top-loading bridge later used on the T-inspired NF 53 and SE NF 53. An alt-rock favourite.



PRS SILVER SKY £3,300

The Silver Sky, the guitar that 'broke' the internet on its launch in 2018, was a highly successful attempt to satisfy John Mayer and kicked PRS into the big league. Over the years there have been plenty of artist models, from David Grissom's fabled DGT to the much-loved Bernie Marsden SE, not to mention Mark Tremonti's long-running Singlecut, Myles Kennedy's NF 53-alike and the very different-looking Chleo model for Herman Li, which was launched this year. Satisfying artists still remains central to Paul Reed Smith.



Deep Space

Crazy Tube Circuits presents a dual-engine ambient reverb workstation that spans the traditional and the esoteric

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker



CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS MIRAGE £285

CONTACT **FACE** *bvba* WEB www.crazytubecircuits.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 That looks like two identical pedals, side by side...**
Yep, that's about the size of it! The Mirage gives you two reverb circuits that can be used separately or together.
- 2 Are the reverbs in series when used together?**
Yes, it's about stacking reverbs for layered and evolving spaces, but this pedal has flexible routing options so you can also have independent left and right channels with a different reverb in each.
- 3 What are all those symbols around the Voice controls?**
We guess there was no room for conventional lettering – so each symbol represents a different reverb algorithm in the two banks of eight.

Technically speaking, Crazy Tube Circuits' latest pedal, Mirage, is a dual-engine ambient reverb workstation, although the company's founder, Christos Ntaifotis, describes it in one word – “shoegaze”. We can go for that; it can certainly create the dreamy, atmospheric quality that many would attribute to the word. Perhaps more telling is the inscription on the pedal's circuit board: “Music is a mirage that throws a party, nothing is real but everything grooves.” This is clearly a pedal that aims for the ethereal!

The Mirage comprises two fully independent reverb engines, R1 and R2, that can each load one of 16 distinct reverb algorithms. Those algorithms are collected in two banks of eight and displayed as symbols in two arcs around a rotary Voice switch. The outer arc has the more traditional and familiar reverbs – Plate, Cathedral, Hall, Room, Gated, two different spring reverbs (Spring and Springier) and Inchindown, based on

an oil tank – while the inner arc is host to modern ambient effects with various shimmer, modulated and infinite reverbs.

Each reverb engine has four dedicated adjustment knobs. While the Mix and Volume knobs have a fixed use, the other two are more flexible with function varying per algorithm. Swell controls the size or length of the reverb effect in most cases, whereas Excite is a context-sensitive control so controls brightness on some of the more conventional reverbs but has pitch-shift and modulation adjustment functions for others. Swell and Excite can also be put under foot control for performance options such as ramping

The Mirage positively celebrates being intuitive and hands-on with no menus. It's nicely compact, too



When used in XF mode, a press-and-hold ramps the selected control (Swell or Excite) to its maximum value. Releasing the footswitch ramps back down to the value set by the corresponding knob (lower knob settings result in faster ramping down times)

up the decay via a press-and-hold of the pedal's right footswitch for R1 – but only via an external expression pedal for R2.

R1 and R2 each have their own input and outputs. This allows you to use them as two independent mono reverbs if you're employing an external loop switcher, or in a stereo signal chain where the L and R channels are processed independently with different reverb types or the same reverb type (maybe with slight differences to widen the stereo image) in each.

The way to approach the pedal in a standard mono chain is to use the Master input and output so the signal runs in series from R1 to R2, allowing the reverbs – via the footswitches – to be used independently for different sounds

THE RIVALS

The Source Audio Ventriss (£379) is a dual-reverb pedal with a slightly deeper footprint than the Mirage. It has 14 reverb engines and cascading and parallel routing options for the two reverbs plus onboard presets. From Electro-Harmonix comes the Oceans Abyss (£475), recently reviewed in issue 527, which has independently programmable dual-reverb engines that can be placed into a customisable signal path with additional effects blocks such as Delay, Chorus, Tremolo, or Bit Crusher for building soundscapes. Elsewhere, Fender's Dual Marine Layer Reverb (£205) is not a dual-reverb but has three reverb types to choose from, with A/B footswitching between two different settings.



1. This IND SW switch assigns footswitch functions. In its up position (IND SW) each footswitch bypass/engages its associated reverb, but if pressed in (R1 XF) the right footswitch controls the Swell or Excite knob for R1, while the left bypasses/engages both reverb engines simultaneously

2. The rotary Voice switch selects from eight reverb algorithms within the currently active bank (represented by the outer and inner circle). The banks are toggled with the Shift switch. The outer circle holds classic reverb types, while the inner circle offers more esoteric types

at different times or stacked together for a composite sound. This configuration enables the use of a send/return loop for placing additional pedals between the two engines for further sonic creativity. There's also a mono in/stereo out mode available. A set of internal switches lets you set up for a chosen way of working with either true bypass or buffered bypass with trails, and whether the Mix knob runs to a maximum standard 50/50 wet/dry mix or to 100 per cent wet (Kill Dry).

In Use

Looking at the different algorithms individually, there's a lot of ground covered; the only thing we missed was reverse reverb. The reverbs based on conventional spaces (Room, Hall, Cathedral) all give a realistic sense of the ambience to be found in their respective locations, and each one has adjustable size/decay as well as tweakable brightness that can help tie it into the sound of your rig. The other emulated space, Inchindown, is inspired by Scottish oil tanks that are said to have the longest man-made reverb, and

it sounds really good with its decay turned right up for an atmospheric lingering reverb with a metallic edge.

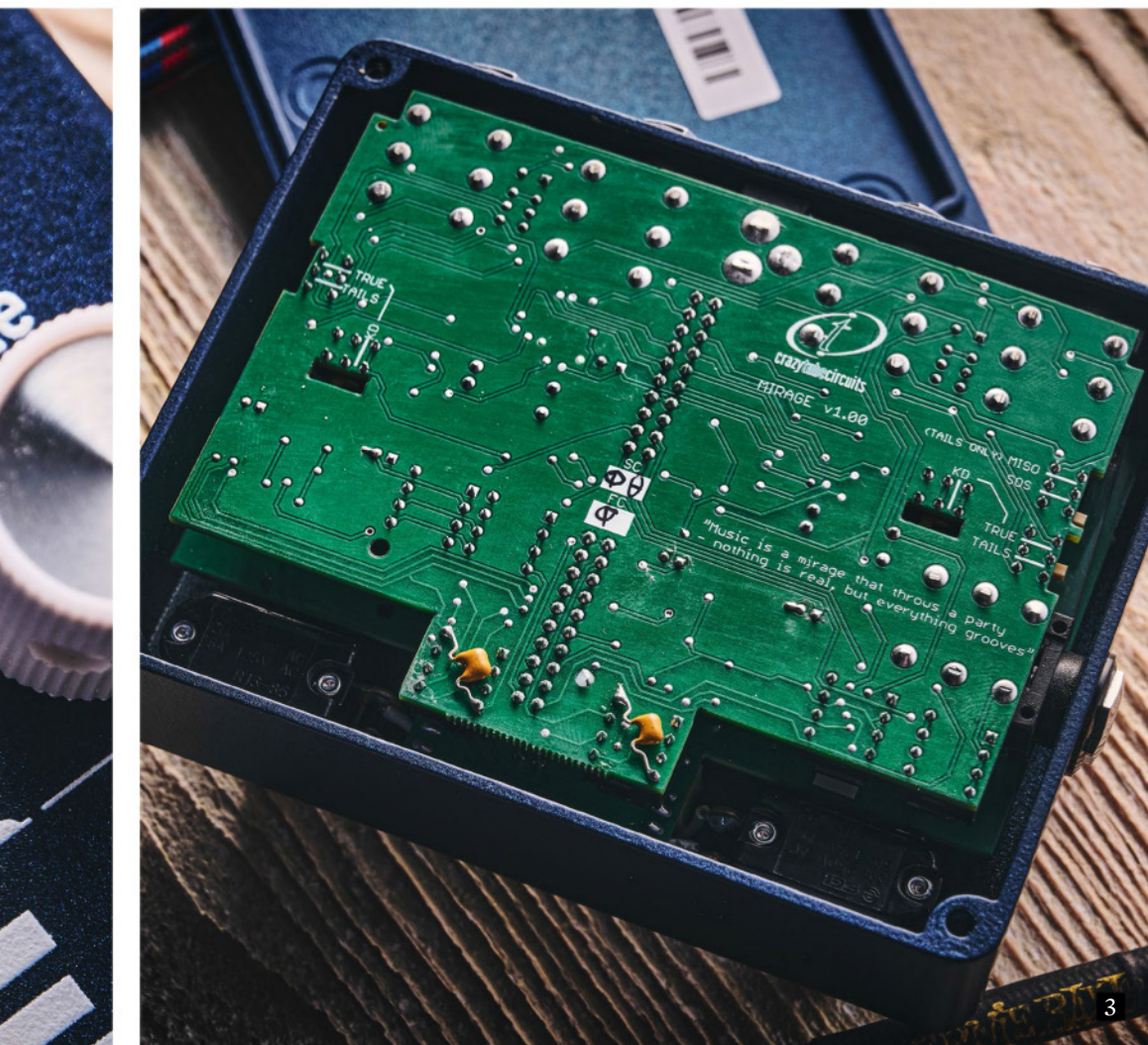
Of the electro-mechanical emulations, the Plate offers reverb with a solid density that sits well with guitar, while the two spring types are also a natural fit by their very nature, one doing a very usable recreation of classic amp reverb, the other representing an outboard unit with longer springs, revisiting early 60s surf guitar

3. Undo four screws and remove the baseplate and you'll find five switches to set up the pedal. R1 and R2 both have True/Tails and Kill Dry On/Off switches, and there's a separate MISO/SOS switch for setting the routing assignment of the two engines

With the pick 'n' mix selection of traditional and esoteric reverbs, there's plenty of scope to craft some unique ambient textures

with ease. The Swell knob mimics a Dwell control here, driving the reverb tank harder, and Excite dials in the splashiness. The Gated reverb has adjustable gate time for a short punch of reverb – useful as a substitute for a delay slapback.

There are four shimmer delays, all with adjustable decay. Three have the shimmer



CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS MIRAGE

PRICE: £285

ORIGIN: Greece

TYPE: Reverb pedal

FEATURES: Selectable true bypass or buffered bypass with trails, two independent reverb engines, 16 reverb types

CONTROLS: 2x each: Volume, Mix, Swell, Excite, Voice, Shift switch, Assign switch, IND/R1 XF switch, internal switches (Kill Dry R1 & R2, Bypass Mode R1 & R2, Routing Assignment), footswitches 1 & 2

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs 1 (master) and 2 (return), Standard outputs 1 (send) and 2 (master), XP expression pedal input

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 210mA

DIMENSIONS: 123 (w) x 97 (d) x 54mm (h)

pitched at an octave: one an octave up for that familiar shimmer sparkle; the second an octave down for a doomer vibe; and the third offering an adjustable crossfade between up and down octaves, which effectively lets you position your shimmer on a dark-to-bright arc. The fourth shimmer has a stable pitch-shift that you can set with the Excite knob, and using it with R1 and R2 together you can dial it in to be harmonious or discordant.

The Repeater algorithm is described as “echoes trapped in reverb” and offers an intriguing texture via rhythmic trail of reflections. With Moduverb you get reverb tails with a sense of movement through modulation. Depth and speed are tweaked simultaneously with the Excite knob, which delivers tasty chorusing at lower levels but can take things to a more seasick extreme.

Frozen Hall offers hall reverb, but turning up the Swell knob cranks the decay to maximum for endless sustain. Finally, Infinite captures and holds a reverb loop indefinitely, responding nicely to playing dynamics if you carefully adjust the threshold.

While all of the reverbs are available for individual use, it's the stacking of two together that's going to be the attraction here for players who like to get creative. With the pick 'n' mix selection of both traditional and esoteric reverbs (256 combinations with R1 and R2 used together!), there's plenty of scope to craft some unique ambient textures.

Verdict

The fact that there are so many sonic options but no memory storage might be a dealbreaker for some, but there are other pedals on the market for that. The Mirage positively celebrates being intuitive and hands-on with no menus. It's nicely compact, too, although that comes with its own compromises such as no room for more than two main parameters (pre-delay would have been useful) and hard-to-read voice selection. However, those are minor points compared with the routing flexibility, creative sonic potential and performance options that could make this Mirage a solid reality on your pedalboard. **A**



PROS Compact footprint; large range of reverb types; ability to stack two reverbs; send/return loop; footswitchable performance options; flexible routing

CONS No reverse reverb; no pre-delay parameter

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« BLUEPRINT »

TRUSTY STEED

Compact, affordable and full of Fender DNA, the Blues Junior celebrates 30 years as one of the company's most iconic and celebrated valve amp designs. Senior product manager, Rick Heins, joins us to mark the milestone

Words Charlie Wilkins Photography Phil Barker

When Fender unveiled the Blues Junior in 1995, few could have guessed it would become one of the company's most enduring designs. The 15-watt model launched as part of the Fender's 'Tweed Series', alongside the Blues Deluxe, Blues DeVille and Pro Junior, and was conceived as a compact, affordable way for working players to experience true Fender valve tone. With its EL84-powered circuit and simple controls, it quickly became the go-to amp for gigging guitarists who needed something portable yet versatile enough to handle blues, country, rock and more.

Now, with 30 years of continuous production and a devoted following, the Blues Junior has become a phenomenon. It is no longer just the 'affordable little brother' of the Fender amp family and is arguably Fender's best-selling valve amplifier of all time, appearing on countless stages, in studios and bedrooms and carving out a unique place in the company's history. For some, the Blues Junior will have been – or will become – their first valve amp; for others, it's a trusted partner they've carried from gig to gig for decades.

To celebrate, Fender has introduced the Blues Junior IV 30th Anniversary (reviewed in full on page 8 of this issue), dressed in Western-tooled vinyl, '59 Bassman grille cloth, a leather handle and loaded with a Celestion Creamback. It doesn't reinvent the wheel and it doesn't



need to. Instead, it celebrates what has made the Blues Junior so successful: portability, affordability, versatility and that unmistakable Fender tone.

To reflect on the history, legacy and future of this modern classic, *Guitarist* sat down with Rick Heins, Fender's senior product manager, for a deep dive into three decades of the Blues Junior.

Rick, take us back to the beginning of the process. What was Fender's vision or mindset while the Blues Junior was being designed back in the mid-90s?

"I wasn't there for the very first version. I've only been at Fender for 21 years so the original design was Mike Lewis's brainchild. Mike was an amazing player and mentor, and has his fingerprints all

over Fender's history, from the Custom Shop to Gretsch to ukuleles. Back in the early 90s, Fender was still kind of fresh out of the CBS years, when the tube amp line had been gutted. Mike saw that Fender's history was in tube amps like the old Deluxes and Princetons. Those were the glory years and he wanted to capture the essence of that era but make something new that was affordable and more flexible, tone-wise.

"As part of Fender's Tweed Series, the idea was to bring tubes back to Fender amps and make them affordable and versatile. The Blues Junior had the Fat switch, so you could engage a little boost, make it break up sooner or use it as a kind of lead boost. On the original Tweeds it was pretty much, turn the volume way up and then you get distortion. The whole concept with the Blues Junior was to give players classic Fender tone but also something that adapts to modern players."

So was affordability always part of the amp's concept?

"Yes. Mike really wanted tube amps to be affordable for gigging musicians. At that time, I think they may have been around \$399 retail. He wasn't trying to make them cheap; he just wanted working players to be able to afford them and for them to be road dogs that were gig-ready and reliable. We still try to keep them affordable today. The Blues Junior has often been someone's first step into the world of tube amps and we want to keep it that way."

"It's flexible, portable
and still has that Fender
DNA. It's got the cleans,
the reverb – it's the
classic 'American' tone"



Power trio: the 30th
Anniversary Junior
stands before its rank
and file stablemates



EL84s were unusual for Fender at the time. Why those valves?

“That’s a good question because Fender is known for 6L6 and 6V6 tubes. I think Mike loved the way EL84s sounded. They have sparkle, touch sensitivity and a dynamic response that really rewards players who use their volume knob and pick attack. 15 watts is also a sweet spot: loud enough for clubs if your drummer isn’t crazy and quiet enough for recording.

“[The aim was] to capture the essence of that [vintage] era but make something affordable and more flexible, tone-wise”

“There were also times when sourcing 6V6s or 6L6s was difficult. Tube shortages happen. I know even Marshall stopped using EL34s for a while because they couldn’t get them. So there may have been a practical reason, too. But the way Mike voiced it, even with EL84s, the Blues Junior still has Fender DNA. It’s got that clean-to-crunch character.”

The Blues Junior has seen several updates since its debut. Can you walk us through the key changes leading up to current version IV?

“The Blues Junior is like a Strat. You don’t mess with something great; you just refine it. Over the years we’ve made

small but important tweaks. Early ones ran hot, so we added an adjustable bias so they wouldn’t burn through tubes as fast. We worked on the reverb because with a smaller cabinet the pan is smaller, and players told us they wanted a more lush sound. We adjusted EQ here and there to bring out the best balance. There have been cosmetic changes, too, with different handles and small trim things. Sometimes they’re just subtle changes.

“I oversaw the development of the version IV so it’s kind of my baby. Now it has improved reverb, it runs cooler, slight EQ tweaks. Nothing radical but enough to make it feel more dialled in.”

How much of the amp’s evolution came from player feedback?

“A lot, actually. It was the players that told us the early ones were running hot, so we

added adjustable bias. They wanted more lush reverb, so we refined the circuit. Even small cosmetic changes like handles and trim came from feedback. We listen closely because the Blues Junior is a player’s amp. It’s not meant to sit in a glass case. It’s meant to be used and players aren’t shy about telling you what they need from it.”

Fender has released a lot of special runs over the years. Do any particular runs stand out?

“I’ve been the guy doing those FSRs [Factory Special Runs] for the past 15 years, and we’ve done a ton of different colours, speakers, coverings. The one that stands out most is the Whiskey Barrel Junior we did about a decade ago. We got old whiskey barrels from major distilleries, built cabinets from them, even added





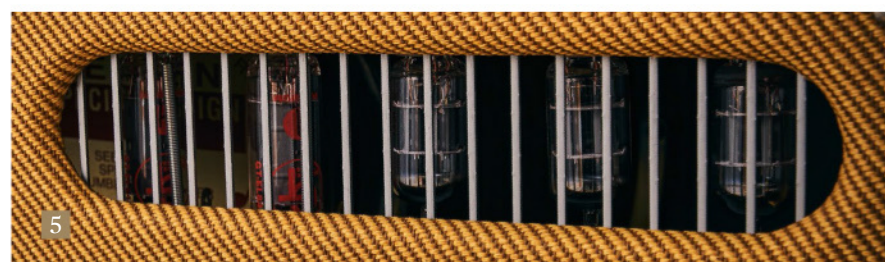
1. The Anniversary Junior sports a Celestion Creamback speaker

2. A Fat switch on the top panel adds a boost to the amp's output

3. Western-tooled vinyl and Bassman grille cloth complete the special Junior's look

"The Blues Junior is like
a Strat. You don't mess
with something great;
you just refine it"





4. The Blues Junior is far from being an entry-level amp as it's seen on pro stages everywhere

5. EL84s marked a change from 6L6 and 6V6 valves for Fender

"They're in clubs, backlines, studios – you see them everywhere... The Blues Junior deserves to be celebrated"

barrel bands, and then aged and patinated the amps so they looked amazing. That's one of my big regrets, not keeping one, because now they're really collectible.

"We've also used lots of different speakers: Celestion Greenbacks, Vintage 30s, Creambacks; Jensens, both Alnico and ceramic; Eminence Cannabis Rex, Red, White & Blues and so on. The speaker is the easiest way to change an amp's character. Each one imparts its own flavour. Personally, I like Celestions for my style, which is why the Anniversary model has a [G12M-65] Creamback. But we've worked with all the big three, Celestion, Jensen, Eminence."

There's a huge modding scene around the Blues Junior. What's your take on that?

"Diplomatically, I'd say people are always chasing tone. They think mods will get them closer to the sound in their head. I've played modded Juniors and they can be cool, but personally I've never needed to mod mine. I can always get what I need by adjusting knobs and my playing and with pedals. That said, I understand why people do it and more power to them. The only downside is you're out of warranty the

moment you start swapping parts, and safety is always a concern. But the fact that there's such a big modding culture shows how much people love the amp."

What made this the right time to release a commemorative edition?

"Well, 30 years is a long time for any amp! And the Blues Junior is probably the most-bought Fender tube amp of all time – and that includes the vintage ones. So it deserves to be celebrated. They're ubiquitous. They're everywhere. For this edition, we didn't touch the circuit. The changes are about appointments: Western-tooled black vinyl, '59 Bassman grille cloth, a leather handle, a commemorative badge and, of course, the Celestion Creamback. That speaker really elevates the amp and sounds really good. If you're running pedals or playing dynamically, it gives you great articulation and headroom. I've been playing one at home with both guitar and pedal steel, and it just sounds fantastic. We're only making them until the end of the year and they come with a certificate of authenticity. They'll be collectible down the line, no doubt."

Where do you think the Blues Junior sits in Fender's amp history?

"I'd put it right alongside any of the classic Fender amps. I think it earned that right. It's been around longer than some of those vintage production runs. They're in clubs, backlines, studios – you see them everywhere. It's also a great pedal platform amp. With pedals being so popular now, the Blues Junior gives you options: run it clean, run it dirty, let the pedals do the gain or crank the amp. It's flexible, portable and still has that Fender DNA. It's got the cleans, the reverb – it's the classic 'American' tone."

Why do you think the Blues Junior has endured for so long?

"I think because it strikes a balance. It's affordable but not cheap, portable but not underpowered, simple but not limiting. It's a grab-and-go amp that still sounds like Fender. If you're a pedal player, it's a great platform. If you're a plug-straight-in player, it responds to your touch. It doesn't pretend to be something it isn't. It just does its job really well. That's why you still see them everywhere." 

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ROGER MCGUINN

The Byrds' 12-string-toting folk hero talks Rickys, Roland JC-120s, JangleBoxes and more

PHOTO COURTESY OF CF MARTIN & CO



Roger has had two Martin signature guitars over the years – a 12-string model and this seven-string HD7

What's the first serious guitar that you bought with your own money?

"I bought it from Lyon & Healy in Chicago. It was a Martin 00-21 acoustic six-string. It cost me, like, \$165. At the time, I bought it because I was going to the Old Town School of Folk Music; [co-founder and folk musician] Frank Hamilton played one just like it, and so did Josh White [Jr]. I thought it was the quintessential folk guitar at the time, and I still have it! It's hanging on my wall, still plays and sounds really good."

Tell us about the last guitar you bought and why you decided to buy it?

"Well, I've got some signature models made up for Martin on both 12-string acoustic and seven-string acoustic, which I designed for them. And so, they give you half off on it, so I bought some of those. I guess that's the last thing I bought... I haven't bought any guitars for a while."

"I've got a JangleBox, which is good for anybody who wants that Byrds sound on a Rickenbacker"

What's the most incredible find or bargain that you've ever had when buying guitars?

"Bargain? Well, I got a Rickenbacker 360/12 for around \$600, which, as you know, is a pretty good price for those things! I haven't used it on any notable recordings, but I took it on the road when I opened for The Beach Boys some years ago. And Marty Stuart had a TV show a few years back and I played it on that. And now, I have it right here in my studio and I use it for practice."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse that you've had after buying a guitar?

"It was an Ovation 12-string. Ovations had just come out at that time and Glen Campbell was playing one, so Clarence [White] and I bought Ovations. The thing fell apart! The struts came out of the inside, it rattled... And besides that, the round back was hard to play because it gets in the way and you can't put it on your knee like a regular guitar. I don't remember what I did with it... I think I gave it away."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"No, I never really sold a guitar like that, but I've had them stolen from me. The one that was stolen was when I was playing with The Byrds, and we were at Fordham University [New York City] in 1965. We were in the dressing room and this guy walked in with a

ROGER'S GO-TO RIG

"I use a JangleBox when I'm home, but on the road you can't use the JangleBox because it'll pick up the 60-cycle hum from the lighting and different electrical interference that's out there. So I go through the soundboard when I'm on stage. And now, on stage, I carry my Rickenbacker 370/12 signature model, and I've got a Martin HD7 seven-string guitar that I helped design for Martin. Then I have the Martin D12-45 from 1970 that has a really good sound.

And then I've a five-string longneck banjo."



silver Rickenbacker case. I thought, 'Oh, it's just a fellow musician, that's fine,' and then he walked out with the case. And when I went to get my guitar, it was gone. Years later, it went up for sale and was sold in Las Vegas for some enormous amount of money. I think it ended up at the Experience Music Project in Seattle."

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking to buy their ultimate guitar?

"It depends on your price range. But make sure the action is good because the first guitar I had – and this is a common story – the action was too high and I couldn't really play it at all. Some look good, but they don't play. So make sure the action is less than a quarter-inch and you can play chords on it. That's my advice. And they make some really good inexpensive guitars, like Jasmine, a subsidiary of Takamine, which are made in Indonesia. It's like a \$100 guitar, but it plays really well."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"I really haven't been shopping for guitars. I've got enough guitars [laughs]. But gear-wise, I've been

looking at and I've got some little Roland amplifiers, which are good. And I've got a JangleBox, which is a good device for anybody who wants that Byrds kind of sound on a Rickenbacker."

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?

"Yeah, the guitar comes first. It's kind of like the microphone and it's the most important thing in the recording. It's your instrument. And for amps, I love the Roland JC-120. It's got a nice clean sound, the Rick just sounds really great through it, it's got some reverb, and you push a pedal and record like a basic track and then play over it. So it's got some cool things going for it."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would you choose, and why?

"Well, I like them both. They have different sounds, I think. And I'm not sure what it's called, but it's the 'toaster' pickup on my signature model Rickenbacker that has a mellow sound, which I like. And then the humbuckers have a more powerful sound." [AD]

That Rickenbacker 12-string jangle became synonymous with The Byrds in the 60s, and Roger's signature 370/12 remains a go-to on stage



Huw Price's *Nitty*Gritty

With bridge plate removed and back and sides cleaned up, it's time to tackle the top

1961 Southern Jumbo Restoration Pt 3



It's fair to say the Southern Jumbo is looking worse than it did before I started this project, at least from the front anyway. I was looking forward to stripping the top back to clean wood, and I was also hoping that those pickguards that were once added hadn't left telltale 'shadows' on the spruce. But first, I needed to make and fit a new bridge plate.

Despite the skewed placement of the original bridge plate, the fact it came out intact was a massive help in making a replacement. The ends provided an accurate indication of the position and angle of the X-braces, and the pin and machine screw-hole positions showed exactly where the bridge would need to be glued back on.

"I was hoping the pickguards that were once added hadn't left telltale 'shadows' on the spruce"

I decided to create a cardboard template before making the new maple plate. Placing the original plate onto the cardboard, glue side up, I marked the ends where the plate would butt up against the X-braces and the position of the screw and pin holes. I extended the brace lines then drew a line between the screw holes.

This allowed me to position the bridge accurately over the template, and tracing around the bridge showed where the bridge's front and back edges would be. I drew a dotted line between the X-braces $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch in front of the bridge position and a second dotted line $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch behind it so there would be an identical plate overlap both sides.

I carefully cut out the template using a fresh blade and a metal straight-edge. Ensuring that the template was the correct way up, I applied some double-sided tape to test fit it inside the body. This had to be done by feel before I checked the results using a strip of USB-powered LED lights and an inspection mirror. Having confirmed the fit was good, I removed the template, placed it

over a 3mm-thick piece of well-seasoned maple and scribed the plate outline onto the wood.

Although I cut the new plate using my band saw and trued up the edges on my belt sander, it wouldn't have taken much longer to saw it out by hand and finesse the edges with a block plane. I had carefully sanded and scraped off any glue-squeeze from the X-braces, but I still sanded slight chamfers at the ends of the bridge plate on the glue side to ensure they would butt up closely to the braces.

Sticking To It

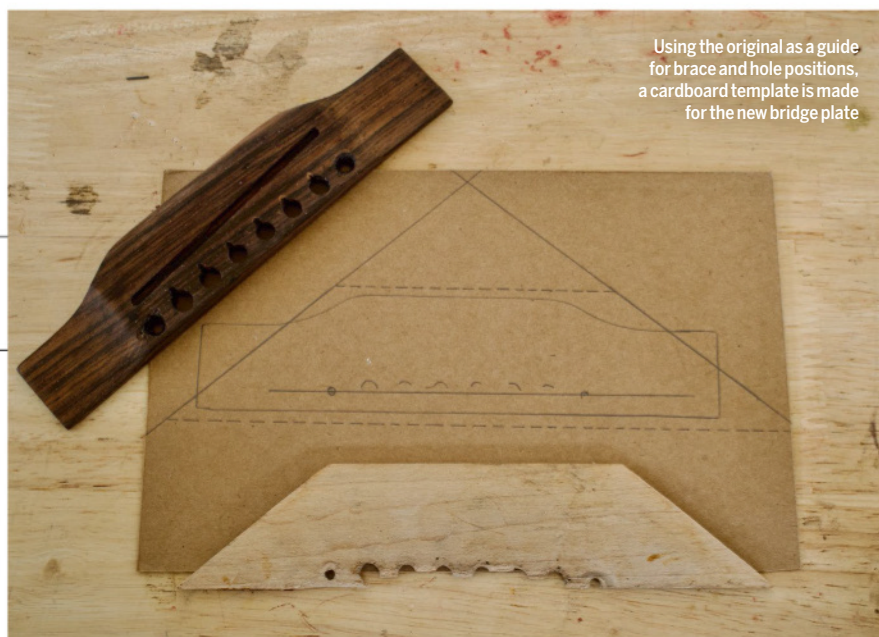
Do you remember those bridge screws and nuts? Given how tiny they are, it seems likely that Gibson used them to assist with bridge placement, rather than securing the bridge, and so I decided to do the same. I marked the screw-hole positions with the bridge plate held tightly in position then drilled 3mm holes through the plate. My plan was to secure the freshly glued bridge plate in position before applying the cauls and clamps.

On that subject, I needed to make cauls to distribute clamping pressure and hold everything level while the glue set. When the guitar first came to me, the top had a noticeable belly, but after removing the bridge plate, rehydrating the body and fixing the X-brace, that belly had substantially reduced. I was hoping that a larger and flatter bridge plate would complete the job.

For the internal caul I cut a piece of MDF to the same shape as the bridge plate, and the outside caul was rectangular. I drilled two 10mm holes in each caul to provide clearance for the screws and nuts and covered both with plastic packing tape to keep them from getting stuck.

Whenever doing a complex glue-up it's advisable to perform a dry run before applying any glue. In the process I discovered that tightening the nuts was easier when I fed the machine screws through the holes from inside the body, rather than outside. Once the plate was screwed in place, I was able to position both cauls and apply three bridge clamps before removing the nuts and tapping the screws through into the body.

Before glueing, I sanded and scraped the bridge-plate area to remove any



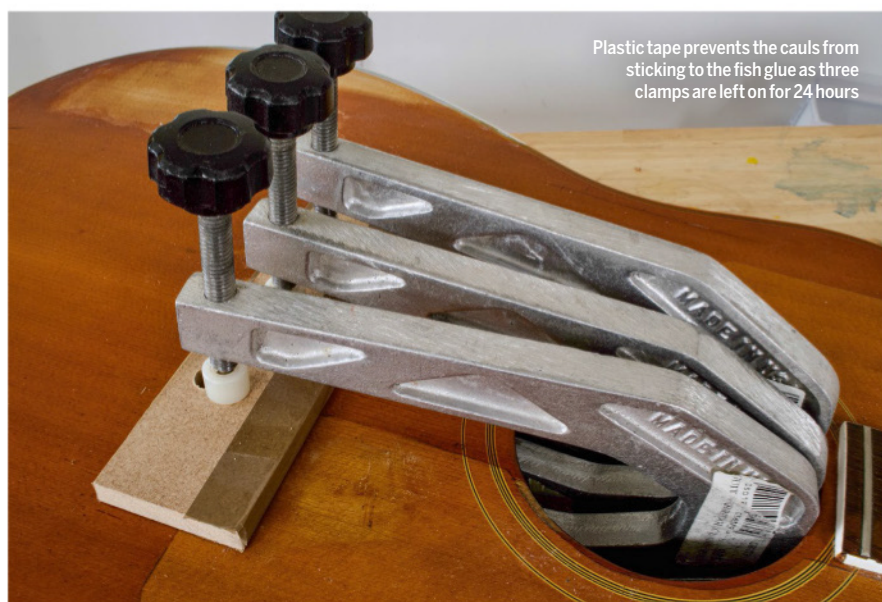
Using the original as a guide for brace and hole positions, a cardboard template is made for the new bridge plate



The new bridge plate has the same 3mm thickness as the original, but there will be more wood behind the bridge pins



Specialist bridge clamps are needed to glue the plate in position, but clamping cauls are easy to make



Plastic tape prevents the cauls from sticking to the fish glue as three clamps are left on for 24 hours

loose wood fibres and traces of old glue. I then wiped everything with a tack cloth followed by isopropyl alcohol on a paper towel to remove any dust. Titebond original and hot hide glue would both be suitable, although the short open-time of hide glue could make things stressful.

Bridge plates can wear out so I wanted to make things as easy as possible for a future luthier if this guitar ever needs another one. I decided to use fish glue because it's strong, it has a long open-time and it

"My expectation is that this Southern Jumbo will sound pretty lively when it's reassembled"



Green vinyl tape protects the binding from the varnish stripper and cling film prevents the stripper from drying out

releases like hide glue when it's heated. It also sets crystal-hard and doesn't creep like some wood glues. Unlike Gibson, I also applied glue to the ends of the plate so it would stick to the X-braces and tie the whole structure together.

Fish glue needs 24 hours to cure fully, and when I removed the clamps the belly had almost completely vanished. Tapping the top produced a range of clear and ringing tones, so my expectation is that this Southern Jumbo will sound pretty lively when it's reassembled.

Getting On Top

Whatever gunk I cleaned off the back and sides was also applied to the top, but with the Southern Jumbo sunburst long gone, there was nothing to restore or preserve. The top needed stripping back to bare wood, and having tested a small area on the lower bout, it quickly became obvious that sanding and scraping would be somewhat arduous.

Since the ban on methylene chloride, I haven't had much luck with liquid paint strippers. It hasn't inconvenienced me with nitrocellulose because acetone or a heat gun will get it off quite easily. But I'd already established that this finish was impervious to acetone and prolonged use of a heat gun would probably cause the guitar to fall to pieces.

Instead, I bought a tin of Barretts' Paint Panther paint and varnish remover and, to my astonishment, it worked. But before applying it, I tested the stripper on a scrap piece of celluloid and discovered it dissolved binding almost as effectively as it did the finish. As a precaution, I used plastic tape to protect the binding and took care to leave a 5mm gap between the stripper and the binding edge. After three



With the bridge screwed down tightly, a sharp blade is ready to cut away the excess masking tape

The masking tape is exactly the same shape as the bridge; preventing lacquer from covering the bridge area makes glueing the bridge easier



applications, most of the top was back to bare wood, but I was still left with the area around the soundhole.

Southern Jumbo rosettes are made from the same celluloid material as the binding, and I decided to take a slightly riskier and different approach. Masking off the rings and applying the stripper between them wasn't a viable option because they were too close together. Instead, I applied the stripper to small areas and scraped it off after about a minute. That way, I was able to remove the finish before the stripper began eating into the binding. Then, with most of the varnish removed, I finished stripping the soundhole area, the bits next to the fretboard extension and the perimeter of the body using a scraper.

I hand-sanded the top with 180-grit paper and then applied some wood bleach,

"Bleach lightens the spruce, making it easier to achieve the vintage yellow-gold look in the 'burst'"

which I made by dissolving acetic acid crystals in water. Bleach lightens the spruce, making it easier to achieve the vintage yellow-gold look in the centre of the 'burst, and it evens out the colour. The water raised the spruce fibres, so after drying out I hand-sanded with 320-grit paper and then repeated the bleaching and sanding process. To finish up, I applied water to neutralise the acid and gave the top a final sanding.

Crossing That Bridge

Flat-top acoustic guitar bridges are always glued onto the body, and for the glue to achieve a strong bond, the mating surfaces need to be bare wood. One option is to spray the entire soundboard and then scrape off the lacquer in the bridge area before glueing. It requires great care and accuracy to avoid damaging the freshly applied finish, so my preferred method is to mask off the bridge area with tape prior to spraying.

If you choose the tape option when building an acoustic guitar, you must establish the exact bridge position before masking off. But since the object here was to return the bridge to its original position,

those locating screws made things a lot easier. After applying low-tack masking tape over the bridge area, I positioned the bridge over the tape and fixed it down firmly using the original machine screws, nuts and washers.

The screw holes were undamaged, so there was barely any wiggle room for the bridge to become misaligned, but I still felt the need to verify its position by measuring the gaps between the 14th fret and the front edge of the bridge on both sides.

I used an extremely sharp marking knife to cut the masking tape tight to the bridge outline, but a craft knife or scalpel would also have been fine. The key is to press hard enough to cut through the tape – but not into the top – and then peel away the excess tape. Care must be taken to prevent spruce fibres peeling away as the tape is removed, which is why low-tack tape is typically preferred.

With the bridge removed and the masking tape shield pressed down firmly, the top is finally ready to be sprayed. Next time I will be spraying the sunburst, glueing the bridge and stringing the guitar up as the restoration reaches its final stages. **G**

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David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

It's double trouble this month as we examine a pair of twin-necked 60s Gibsons

Doubleneck Duo

The Polaris White one is a 1961 EMS-1235 with a regular six-string neck and an octave six-string neck, and its most interesting and unusual feature is the Bigsby on the octave side. Gibson made these with Venetian and Florentine cutaways, but this one is Venetian. It is a hollow-bodied guitar with a carved spruce top and a flat back, and all three pickups are [Patent Applied For units]. There's a single layer of white celluloid binding on the back and white/black/white around the top.

"Both necks are mahogany with Brazilian rosewood fretboards and parallelogram inlays, but they feel very different. The regular neck is really fat and it feels very good to play. The octave neck is tiny and the string spacing is so tight that it's quite tricky to play with big hands. But if you're used to playing mandolins and octave guitars, it would feel fine because Gibson installed mandolin-style frets.

"The heel starts at the 12th fret so although you can play up the neck, it's not really designed for you to go much above the 15th fret and it does start to get a bit cumbersome.

"This clean guitar shows some fretwear and small fretboard divots. The regular neck has bigger 'burst-gauge wire and it was obviously played the most. I was playing this through a Dumble amplifier and as I opened up the volume controls it got nice and snotty with the octave neck adding sympathetic overtones. You can do that because the three-way neck switch allows the sides to be active individually or simultaneously. The second switch is a three-way pickup selector for the regular neck.

"Because of the Bigsby, Gibson deviated from the usual volume control positioning where the controls would be grouped together. The regular six-

string side just has master volume and tone controls. The Bigsby itself is the 'horseshoe' type so Gibson installed a solid centre block under the top to support it – along with the pickups and the bridge. It's the same on the regular side, as well, and Gibson also installed braces.

"This 1966 EMS-1235 couldn't be more different. It has a full-scale four-string tenor neck that is so skinny, along with an eight-string mandolin neck. Gibson actually installed full-sized humbuckers, but they omitted the outside slugs and screws and used pearl dots to blank off the holes in the covers.

"Another cool feature is having the neck switcher on a plate towards the lower bout and the tenor's pickup switch by the cutaway, which is a totally custom design. It also has gold hardware, which looks very striking on any cherry guitar and it still looks almost brand-new.



Above: 1966 EMS-1235 with full-scale four-string tenor neck and eight-string mandolin neck
Below: 1961 EMS-1235 with a regular six-string neck and an octave six-string neck

“The condition shows this guitar was rarely played, but the finish has some beautifully fine and uniform east-west lacquer checking. This time the fretboards are made from ebony with mother-of-pearl blocks. Doubleneck headstocks always have ‘custom’ truss rod covers, but here we also have L-5-style ‘flowerpot’ inlays and binding.

“Although it’s a one-piece solidbody, at just over 9lb it’s only slightly heavier than the white one. There’s also the two cut-down ABR-1 bridges with four,

“It’s probably on some obscure master tape and nobody could ever identify what instrument was used”

rather than six, saddles. Gibson used two thumbwheels at each end, with the lower one setting the height, as usual, and the other screwing down on top of the bridges to secure them in position. Maybe they did this because there was insufficient string pressure to hold them down and it prevented them from rattling.

“I would probably say this is one of one because I have never seen or even heard of another one. Some readers might be thankful they only made one because Gibson didn’t waste any more wood. It might seem like the kind of instrument someone ordered and then regretted later, but consider the times – it was the folk and psychedelic era, and this guitar probably resides on some obscure master tape and nobody could ever identify what instrument was used to create that sound.

“Believe it or not there is an audience for these types of guitars, particularly down south on the country music scene where it’s regarded as a cool thing to go out on stage with something nobody has seen before. It generates a lot of interest and, let’s face it, these players are performers and they enjoy the attention instruments like these attract.” **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGEDAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

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With Triads In Mind

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Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

Look to Kirk Fletcher's playing for an expert in action, mixing triads and single-note lines



WHILE SCALES ARE GREAT for getting your fingers and brain in shape to play single-note solos and melodies, there are situations in which a knowledge of the chords you're working with is a big advantage. One good example of this is the trio format, where you might only have bass and drums for support. There is a limit to how much a bass guitar can convey harmonic details (such as a major or minor chord) without forfeiting its main function of keeping a consistent low-end, so it's down to the guitar in this context to provide more harmonic and melodic content.

A single-note solo played over just bass and drums runs the risk of sounding a bit empty and lacking in musicality after a while. The solution is to include some chord tones, fragments or arpeggios to help outline the harmony for your listeners. This isn't as daunting as it sounds. The key is being able to find the triads around the fretboard, then embellishing them. It's surprising how little it takes to transform a chord accompaniment into a 'featured' part.

If you break down the beginning of *Little Wing* by Jimi Hendrix, you'll see that's basically what he's doing. Larry Carlton takes triads and superimposes them over different chords to create a complex, layered harmony. You can also break the triads into arpeggios and spell them out a note at a time. This does sound like a lot to absorb, but these four examples are designed to give you some ideas to try covering each of these areas. You don't need to become a music theory genius to use triads in this way – just find a few go-to ideas and build from there using trial and error. Hope you enjoy and see you next time! **G**



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Example 1

THE ROOT NOTES PLAYED by the bass in this first example are A, D then back to A. Upon this foundation, I'm starting with an A7 triad but then taking a boogie-woogie piano-style movement to D, G and C triads where the bass is playing D. This gives a sense of movement and harmony, without clashing with the root on the bass. Bar 3 takes a similar approach by superimposing the triads of Gsus2, D and A. It's probably a good idea to treat this as a 'lick', rather than examine the chord/scale relationships too much.

Swung ♩ = 115

A7 D G D C D A7 Gsus2 D A

1

Example 2

HAVING ESTABLISHED some harmony with all those triads, this example starts with a short ascending chromatic run, leading to a single-note line based around a Dadd9 arpeggio in bar 1, which then turns into a melodic lick based on that same pattern. Bar 3 resolves back to A, with the guitar following suit, starting with a slide up to C#. The final lick is another piano-style idea, based around D major, but it could also be viewed as part of the A minor pentatonic scale, adding a brief E♭ (♭5) and a staccato C natural for a bluesy feel.

D (Implied by bass)

A D

1

Example 3

AFTER A BRIEF PICK-UP, these descending 6th chords are reminiscent of a lap steel but are played more aggressively. Shifting down chromatically from E6 down to C6, these triads are superimposed over the E and D notes from the bass. The beginning of bar 3 features the arpeggiated triads of A and G major. The beginning of what would be another A major triad is interrupted by the short, sharp G6 and A6 chords, then finishing with D-E♭-E in another chromatic run.

E6 E♭6 D6 C6 D6 D♭6 C6

G6 A6 D E♭ E

1

4

Example 4

HERE'S AN ALTERNATIVE TAKE ON EXAMPLE 1. The repeated triad triplets are a classic blues device, staying static for the whole of bar 1, then shifting to D for bar 2 and relenting slightly – a small detail, but this is the stuff that gives a good feel and avoids too much repetition. Bar 3 gets things moving with A7, D, A and D6 arpeggios superimposed over the A on the bass. The final bar is similar to how we came in on Example 1. The grace notes and staccato hits are an important part of the feel but allow a bit of looseness, rather than trying to be too exact.

The musical notation for Example 4 is presented in two systems. The first system shows the first two measures of a 4-measure phrase. The guitar staff (treble clef) features triad triplets in the first measure (labeled A7) and the second measure (labeled D). The bass staff (bass clef) provides a steady accompaniment with fret numbers 12, 10, and 11. The second system shows the next two measures. The guitar staff features arpeggiated chords (A7, D, A, D6, A, D, A7) and grace notes. The bass staff continues with fret numbers 12, 10, 11, 9, 0, 7, 5, 6, 7, 5, 6, 5.

Hear It Here

STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN & DOUBLE TROUBLE

TEXAS FLOOD



SRV manages to fill a lot of space – both harmonically and sonically. Check out his playing on *Texas Flood*, which establishes a strong sense of the harmony before breaking out into single notes. In fact, the whole of the *Texas Flood* album is a masterclass on how to play blues guitar in a trio format. Beyond this album, *Cold Shot* demonstrates how chordal accompaniment and a riff with fills can be one and the same thing. Finally, listen to how he integrates chords, doublestops and solo lines on *Lenny*.

KIRK FLETCHER

HEARTACHE BY THE POUND



As well as his own solo career, Kirk has worked with Charlie Musselwhite, The Fabulous Thunderbirds and Joe Bonamassa. He's comfortable both as a soloist and accompanist, who clearly knows his chords and triads back to front. Check out his playing on *Afraid To Die*, *Too Scared To Live* from *Heartache By The Pound* to hear him mixing triads and self-assured single-note lines. Elsewhere, try *Ain't No Cure For The Downhearted* and *Love Is More Than A Word*, both from the 2020 *My Blues Pathway* album.

JIMI HENDRIX

AXIS: BOLD AS LOVE



Jimi is a renowned master of creating sophisticated harmonic textures in a trio format. Have another listen to *Little Wing* on *Axis: Bold As Love*, and then *The Wind Cries Mary* and *Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland)* elsewhere. Admittedly, there seem to be a couple of layers going on here, but plenty happening in terms of superimposed triads, doublestops and embellished arpeggiated chords. Don't stop at these three tracks – there's a wealth of ideas on the original studio albums, and be sure to check out the live recordings, too.

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