

Guitarist

Issue 531

DECEMBER 2025

T - B O N E

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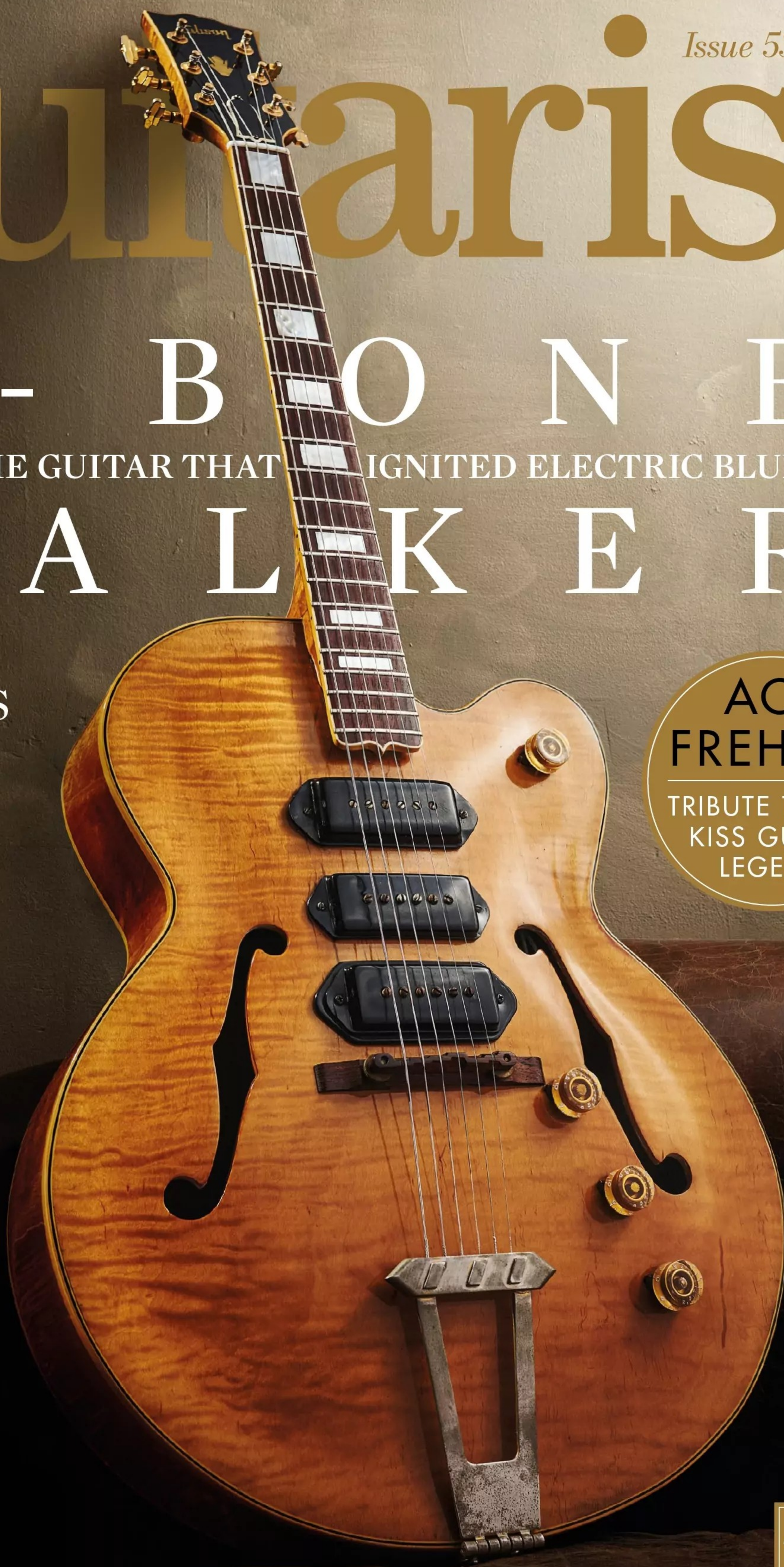
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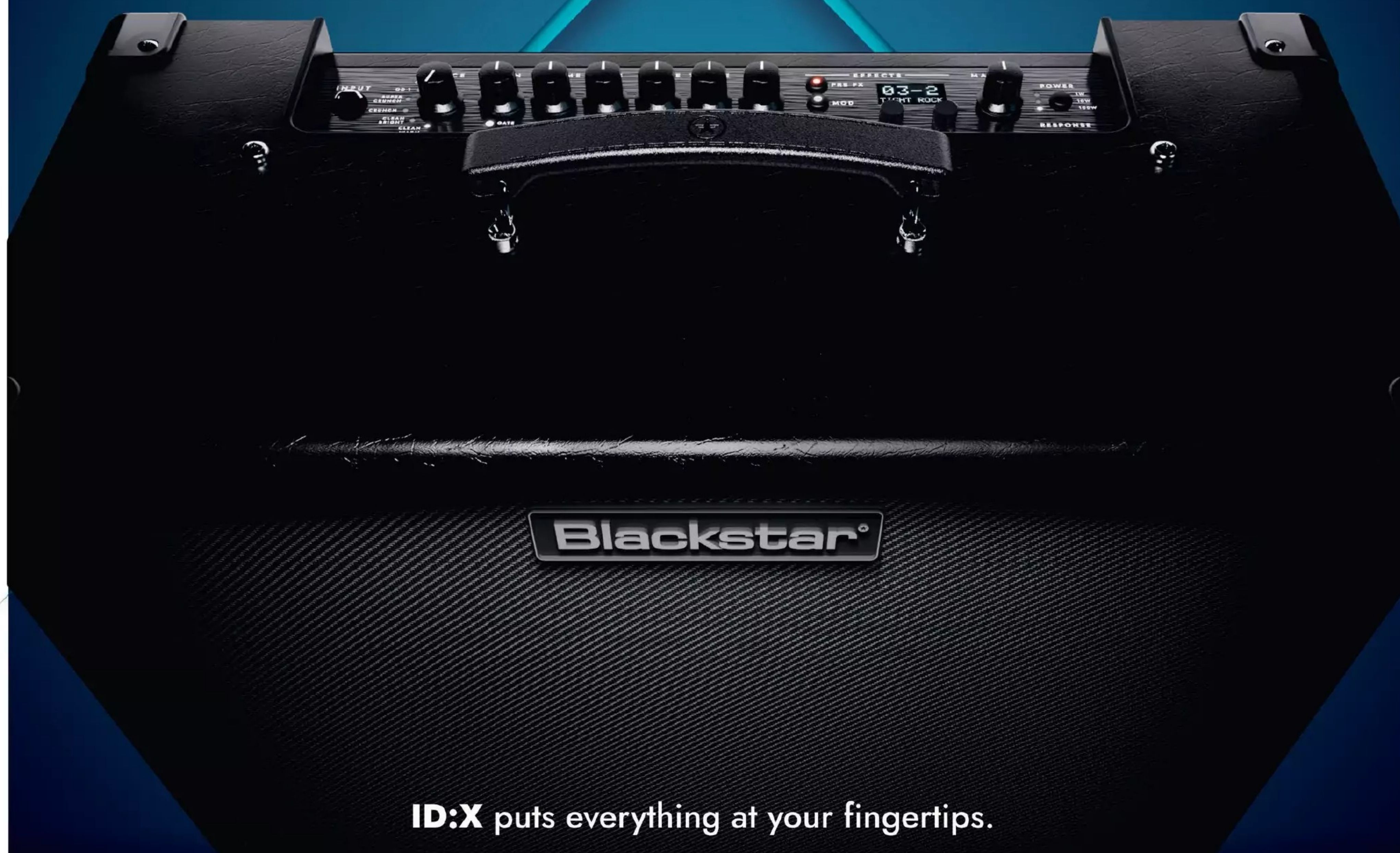
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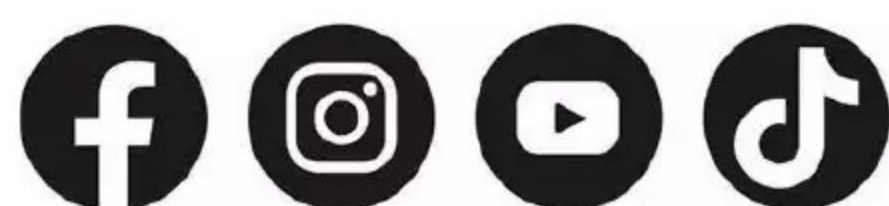
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Bad To The Bone



This month's cover feature on T-Bone Walker and the birth of electric blues couldn't help but remind us what a foundational role T-Bone had on shaping the modern language of guitar. Most of what we call blues guitar today contains high-energy echoes of his licks, along with plenty of drama, angst and bombast, which is a newer addition. Blues, for T-Bone, was as smooth as cat's fur and he never overplayed his hand: his blues was languid, classy and able to laugh at itself a little but still deeply anchored in profound emotion and raw experience. His signature tune, *Stormy Monday*, is a masterpiece in understated, somnolent melancholy. If it were covered today, I wonder who, among the current crop of blues stars, would have the class and restraint not to play it as a chest-beating solo-fest? I could imagine Warren Haynes performing it beautifully, to be fair, and I'm sure there are others.

But on the whole, going back to the early years of electric blues, I'm struck by how centrally important the vocal is: guitar is the response to the voice's call, not the main character. So as much as I love blues-rock at its best, it's restorative to go back to the seminal 50s recordings of electric blues and hear how much poise and class those musicians had – somehow cutting deeper, emotionally, for their restraint and soulful musicality and for that very human emphasis on the voice and lyrics that make the song come to life in your heart.

Another lesson from early electric blues is the importance of harmony. The archtop guitars of the era, as lovely as they are, have a relatively short sustain, so there was no leaning into yearning bends that sustain endlessly, a hallmark of much modern blues. Again, there's nothing wrong with that, but the 1950s blues masters had to really understand and play the changes deftly to sound good; sustain wasn't there as a catch-all strategy for emotive soloing. So although it'd probably feel like going cold turkey, playing like the 50s masters did might do our blues playing a service. Enjoy the issue, see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Oasis Of Tone

Love the band or loathe 'em, there's no denying that the three new Oasis guitars from Gibson and Epiphone are supersonic **p90**



Joanne Shaw Taylor

The Birmingham-born, Nashville-based guitarist and songwriter talks about her love for Esquires and Fender Bassmans **p58**



Southern Comfort

Huw Price's triumphant restoration of a classic 60s Gibson acoustic reaches a transformative climax with a very careful refinish on **p122**



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REVIEW



PHOTOS BY PHIL BARKER



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FEATURE



PHOTOS BY MATT LINCOLN

A tough watch to advertise.



The **C63 Sealander Extreme GMT** is a GADA watch. But harder. Born to beat the elements and thrive in high-impact environments, its marine-grade steel case prevents water ingress down to 150-metres. Built with an anti-shock movement holder, it also sports a sandblasted, ceramic 24-hour bezel. And a dial designed for maximum day or night-time legibility. Unsurprisingly, the only component that isn't over-engineered is its price.

Do your research.



christopherward.com



FIRST PLAY



JET GUITARS JT-350
BKM H
£359

.....
WHAT IS IT? With obvious inspiration, this model features all roasted woods, good-sounding humbuckers and very good playability



JET GUITARS JJ-300
P90 SFG
£285

.....
WHAT IS IT? This start-up level is no slouch on spec with roasted woods, full-sounding single coils and a two-post S-style vibrato

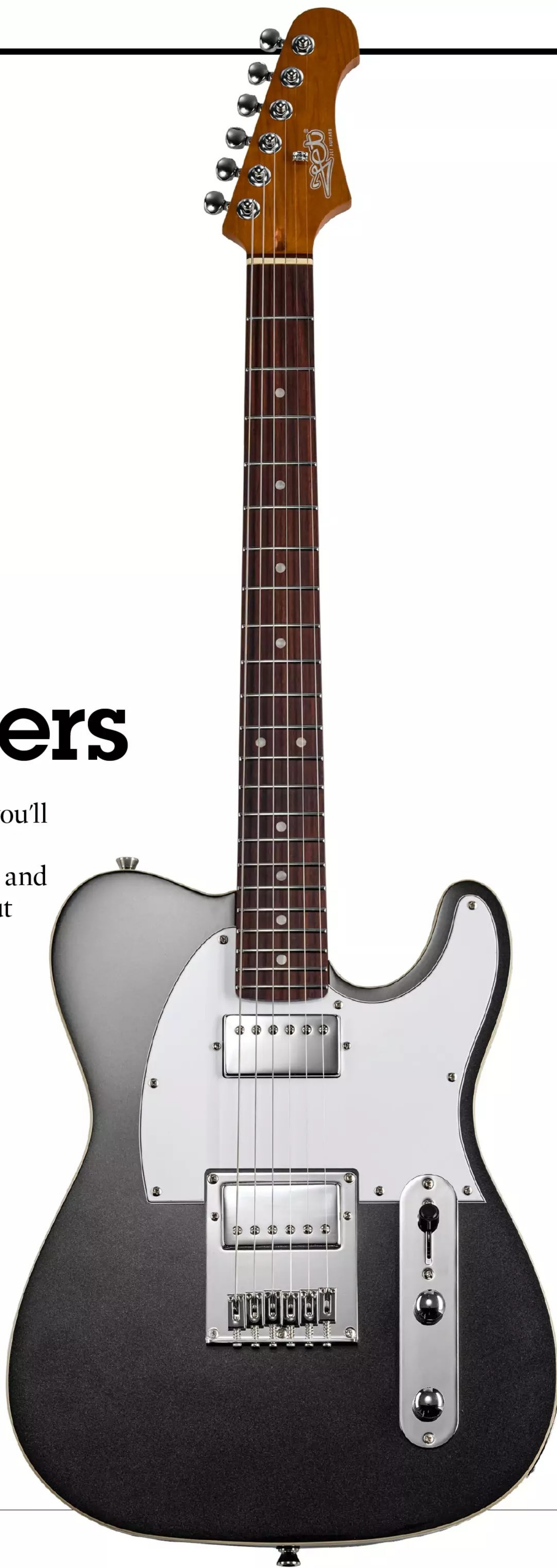
High Flyers

These guitars have outlines that you'll recognise, but their meagre price points surely belie the set of specs and level of build quality? Let's find out

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

Regular readers will know that we seldom feature cheapo copycat guitars in these pages. While it's true that top boutique makers whose instruments we *do* cover commonly base their own ranges on these same designs, they almost always bring some new aspect to the table. This can be build quality that larger lower-end manufacturers just can't match, bespoke or custom pickups and hardware, or sometimes the facility for the buyer to spec the instrument directly with the builder.

So why are we looking at this pair of Jets? Who even is Jet Guitars? And what have these models got that's made us change our minds? Well, we last caught up with Jet back in issue 485 when we evaluated the JS-800. To recap, the brand was born





in 2020 and is a wholly family-owned concern, the brainchild of Slovenian instrument designer Primož Virant, and the guitars themselves are built by his company's partner factory in China.

The two models you see before you are clearly inspired by designs that came out of Fullerton, California, in the 50s and 60s – their 'T' and 'J' prefixes removing any doubt. But with the JT retailing at just £359 and the JJ a staggering £285, they fall squarely in the 'cheap as chips' category, but straight out of the box you'd be hard pressed to tell.

First off, the JT. With its smooth-as-silk metallic black body neatly top-bound in cream, bright chrome hardware and what looks like a tinted maple neck topped by a rosewood fingerboard, first impressions are excellent. That neck, however, is not stained but genuine roasted Canadian maple. The guitar's poplar body is also torrefied, and the 'board hewn from genuine rosewood. On instruments at this price point, while heat-treated timbers are not exactly unheard of, all the same it's an impressive feat that should ensure neck stability, and is also likely a contributory factor in both guitars' very reasonable weights.

The pickups are specifically designed for each Jet model, not OEM items bought

off the shelf. So on the JT we find twin Alnico humbuckers, the bridge unit splittable via a push-pull switch on the single tone control. Master volume and three-way selector complete a simple but versatile control setup. Tuners are locking units with knurled thumbscrews on the back, and the truss rod on both guitars is accessible via a hex-key access point behind the artificial bone nut. There's

More than anything else, the overall quality on display here took us totally by surprise

no neckplate on the JT; instead, the four screws holding the two components together sit in individual metal ferrules. The body has also been sculpted back with a dressed-away heel for upper-fret access, while a belly cut means the guitar's body tucks neatly into your own.

The JJ, like its sibling, also features roasted timbers – again, poplar for the body and a maple neck – this time with a glued-on roasted maple fingerboard featuring an overhang for the last of its

1. We like the Jet Guitars headstock design, as it's difficult to find something fresh that's not too radical but almost familiar. Truss rod adjustment is via the hex key receptacle. Tuners are quality enclosed six-a-side units

2. The shape is familiar, of course, but the control layout is simple, logical and intuitive. The cool green finish looks great with the large torty pickguard and cream P-90-style pickups





22 medium jumbo frets. Here, the pickups are cream P-90s that look great against the tortoise-style pickguard. Controls are again simple: master volume and tone with cream knobs, and a three-way toggle switch mounted on the lower horn. Tuners here, though, are non-locking, which is a trifle odd given that this model is vibrato-equipped while the JT is not. The vibrato bridge itself is a two-point floating system with a push-in arm.

Feel & Sounds

What so impressed on removing both guitars from their cardboard boxes (no gigbags at this price) was how well set up and perfectly in tune they were. Strung with slinky 0.009-gauge strings, the medium jumbo frets and 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius on both guitars lends a smooth and pliable feel on their modern C-profile necks. What's more (and, again, at this price point it's uncommon), the edges of the JT's rosewood and the JJ's maple 'boards have been rolled for superior fretting-hand comfort. Both instruments are a joy to play, with no hint of their budget price in evidence; their necks accommodate bends and vibrato with no choking or buzzing to be heard.



3. The P-90 pickups sound fat but articulate, while the two-post vibrato is great for wobbles, light dives and Gilmour-style heavy vibrato

4. String changes are simple due to the open backplate, and the belly cut makes the JJ comfy to play standing up

5. Three-way toggle action supplies all the usual neck, both pickups together, and bridge options. The switch knob, too, looks cool in aged cream plastic



6

6. The bridge pickup sits in a modern T-style bridge plate with six individual saddles. It's splittable for a more 'classic T' bite, rather than full-on humbucking tone

7. That aforementioned coil-splitting is achieved by pulling up the push-pull pot on the tone control, furthest away from the three-way pickup selector

With its two-point floating vibrato bridge set for musical wobbles and light note dipping, a few waggles of the push-in arm and a yank or two at the strings had our JJ playing perfectly in tune. The system works smoothly and makes for an intuitive addition to the instrument's appeal.

Save for the JT's rosewood fingerboard, the two guitars feature the identical timber combo of roasted poplar body and similarly heat-treated maple neck. Of course, they look radically different and Jet has ensured they sound distinct from each other, too.

Through a Mark I Reissue Mesa/Boogie combo, the green guitar's P-90s deliver exactly the tones one would expect: fat and a tad gnarly but also chiming and articulate, due in part to their single-coil construction but broad physical footprint. Backing off the guitar's volume, the single-coil nature comes to the fore, whereas cranking the wick on both amp and guitar pushes things more into humbucker territory. The neck unit is warm but not mushy, the bridge exudes a dark and snarling growl when pushed, but both pickups on is where the more jangly, funky tones reside.

While an initial glance tells us the JT-350 is a twin-humbucking guitar, pull out the tone control and the bridge pickup is split to provide brighter tones. As such, it offers a markedly different sonic palette to that of its sibling. Bolt-on humbucking instruments are usually lighter and brighter-toned than their glued-on cousins. So, here, we encounter clarity and separation when played clean, with overdrive tones that are neither mushy nor flabby – but articulate and focused. Pull the tone pot and the bridge pickup's voice becomes more 'classic T' than Tele Deluxe in nature. Indeed, there's a plethora of fine sounds to explore on the guitar's simple but versatile layout.



7



Verdict

This duo from Jet Guitars has surpassed every expectation. From the obvious style that Primož Virant has imbued in his instruments (given that beneath their skin lie designs from elsewhere), to their materials, quality of construction, super necks and playability, they were a revelation. Sure, the pickups aren't what you'd get in instruments from Anderson, Eggle, Schecter or other 'boutique' makers, but they offer a range of classy tones that suit each instrument well. And, as Jet itself says, these guitars are eminently pimpable.

8. Note the dressed back cutaway and rounded heel, with four separate screws in metal ferrules holding the neck to the body. The metallic black finish is tasty, too

Both instruments are a joy to play, with no hint of their budget price in evidence... They surpass expectation

More than anything else, though, the overall quality on display here took us totally by surprise. Had we been told the guitars cost £600, £800 or even £1,000 we would have had no reason to doubt it. So should you be after a new guitar with a bit of a 'T' or 'J' vibe, offering sirloin steak quality for chicken nuggets price, then take it from this veteran *Guitarist* reviewer that Jet's JT and JJ models should be very high on your list. **G**



JET GUITARS JT-350 BKM H

PRICE: £359
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Single-cut solidbody electric
BODY: Top bound roasted poplar with belly cut
NECK: 1-piece roasted Canadian maple
SCALE LENGTH: 648MM (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Artificial bone (polymer fibre)/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with pearl dot inlays, 9.5" (241mm) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: T-style 6-saddle bridge and pickup housing, T-style control plate, 4x countersunk neck screws, locking tuners, knurled volume and tone knobs, all chrome
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Specially designed Alnico humbucking pickups with chrome covers, master volume and tone plus 3-way pickup selector. Bridge pickup splittable via push-pull pot on tone control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.44/7.9
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: JT-350: T 'Deluxe' style with S+H Alnico pickups, roasted maple neck, rosewood 'board (£329-£475). Elite JT-30: quarter-sawn roasted maple neck and 'board, alder body, Alnico pickups (£669)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Metallic Black (as reviewed) and Vintage Burst



PROS Surprising quality at a ridiculously affordable price; excellently shaped neck with slinky, pliable action; sensible splitter option on bridge pickup; looks great!

CONS Really nothing to quibble about here, but down the line one might upgrade the pickups



JET GUITARS JJ-300 P90 SFG

PRICE: £285
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Offset solidbody electric
BODY: Roasted poplar
NECK: Roasted Canadian maple
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Artificial bone (polymer fibre)/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Roasted Canadian maple, 9.5" (241mm) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 2-post floating vibrato, non-locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: 2x P-90 pickups, master volume and tone controls, 3-way toggle selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.41/7.51
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: JJ-350 - HH, roasted maple neck, available in Black or Green, £319. JJ-350 Baritone - 27" scale, H+P90, roasted maple neck, rosewood 'board, Moonburst finish, £429
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Sea Foam Green (as reviewed), Black and White



PROS Superb-looking guitar (we like the Jet headstock design, too) that punches so far above its weight it's hard to believe; fantastic neck, butter-like playability and typically musical P-90 tones

CONS Again, some players might look at upgrading the pickups

FIRST PLAY



**BAD CAT MOD SHOP
BLACK CAT 30**
£2,299

.....
WHAT IS IT? A modified,
limited-edition 30-watt 1x12 dual-
channel combo with reverb and
bias-modulated tremolo

Talking 'Shop

Remixed and refreshed by the late,
great amp-guru Mark Sampson,
this Black Cat has two more valves,
10 more watts and a whole new voice

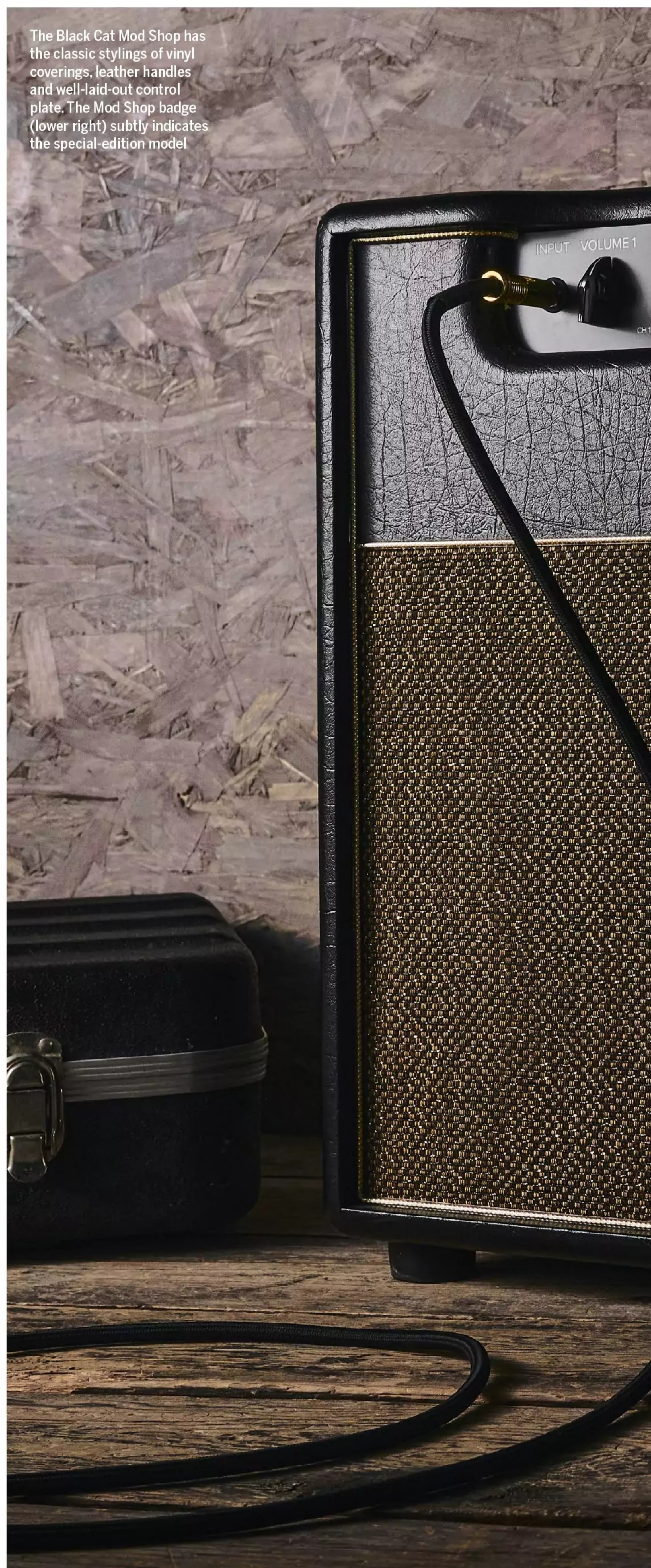
Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

Hard to believe, perhaps, but Bad Cat has already enjoyed a quarter of a century as one of the world's foremost boutique guitar amp companies. Its much-loved product line, comprising a lower-priced Player Series II and the premium Hand Wired series, is now augmented by both Lunchbox range and the Mod Shop series we're looking at here – Bad Cat's creative creche where designers and players tweak existing Bad Cat circuits into inspiring variations for small production runs.

To celebrate the opening of the Mod Shop comes the Black Cat 30 Mod Shop Edition fresh from the Costa Mesa, California, HQ. Before his death earlier this year, amp-design legend Mark Sampson, who's long been associated with the Bad Cat brand, took a Black Cat 20 from the Player Series II range of more affordable, hand-crafted (but not hand-wired) amps and Sampson-ised it. This is the result.

Construction-wise, we have a hand-built, two-channel amp housed in a solid birch ply cabinet, covered in high-quality Tolex

The Black Cat Mod Shop has the classic stylings of vinyl coverings, leather handles and well-laid-out control plate. The Mod Shop badge (lower right) subtly indicates the special-edition model





1. Bad Cat produces its own custom-wound mains and power transformers. The design and construction of amp transformers contribute hugely to the headroom, response and tone of amps, and thus the distinctive Bad Cat sound
2. Celestion Vintage 30 speakers have long been used by Bad Cat but not before modifications to remove the doping agent, allowing for more sensitive high- and low-end response. Celestion now makes 'undoped' drivers for Bad Cat
3. A brace of 12AX7s are on preamp duties here, while the standard pair of EL84 power valves from the original version is augmented by a further pair to produce the classic 30 watts' output – with all the additional headroom that brings



with the traditionally illuminated Bad Cat faceplate logo. Departing from the original 20-watt, two-EL84 layout, the modified version now has four EL84s that provide 30 watts of all-valve power through its custom 60-watt 12-inch Celestion Vintage 30 speaker.

A quick word on the modified nature of the Celestion speaker. During his Matchless years, Mark Sampson discovered that the sound of the Celestion Vintage 30 could be moulded more to his tastes by manually removing the doping substance that is often applied to dampen excessive high-frequency overtones. While this messy business originally brought disapproval from Celestion, the

sales of the amps over time proved to be substantial enough to cause a rethink, and now Celestion custom-builds 'undoped' drivers specifically for Bad Cat.

In addition to the increased wattage derived by the additional pair of EL84 power valves, the tone-stack has been redesigned in the style of a Vox '64 Top Boost. In this circuit the treble knob progressively rejects bass and mids to reveal more treble, in contrast to the original version's more orthodox additive-nature. Finally, we find upgraded filtering has been deployed, we assume partly due to the increased demands of the additional output valves. Let's find out what all this adds up to, sonically.

Feel & Sounds

Beginning with our beloved Stat we were immediately struck by how much body and depth this amp has. The clean channel's gain ranges from crystal-clean Fender 'silver-panel' territory through to Vox-style, edge-of-break-up, all imbued with Bad Cat's distinctive full-bodied character. The tone controls, shared by both channels, have a powerful and highly usable range. It was certainly possible to tame the bottom-end considerably, pulling the bass control back to levels that might make other amps sound anaemic. Alternatively, pushing the treble progressively reduces any excess flub in a way that suited our Les Paul, which already has bottom-end aplenty. Meanwhile, the treble-cut allowed for instant high-end taming, effective for your brighter-sounding guitars.

Switching to the lead channel, we're greeted with a lively, responsive leap in the gain stakes. The amp has that undefinable expensive-sounding note separation, along with silky smooth transitions between clean and overdriven that boutique amps are known for. Indeed, the range of gain on tap begins with 'clean with pushed mids' sound into increasing midrange growl and high-end harmonics. The guitar's characteristics shine through at all settings, including full lead-channel gain, to the point at which it almost sounds like a clean signal is being subtly reproduced alongside the saturation. Traditional-spec Patent Applied For-style pickups





Mark Sampson took the Black Cat apart to breathe new life and sounds into the format. The tone-stack was replaced with a Vox '64 Top Boost-style array of treble, bass and tone-cut controls



BAD CAT MOD SHOP BLACK CAT 30

PRICE: £2,299
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: All valve, 1x12 combo
VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 4x EL84 power section
OUTPUT: 30W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 603 (w) x 263 (d) x 482mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 22/48
CABINET: Baltic birch ply
LOUDSPEAKER: Celestion 1x12, 60W custom Vintage 30
CHANNELS: 2
CONTROLS: Gain, Volume (per Channel), Bass, Treble, Cut, Tremolo intensity and Speed, Reverb depth
FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch (supplied) changes channels and toggles tremolo function
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Buffered series effects loop, bias-modulated tremolo, studio-quality digital reverb, fixed level line out
OPTIONS: The Mod Shop Black Cat 30 head costs £2,099. A 1x12 extension cabinet that matches both the Black Cat 20 and 30 is £799
RANGE OPTIONS: The unmodified 20-watt Black Cat is available in head (£1,899) and 1x12 combo (£2,099) versions

Bad Cat
www.badcatamps.com



PROS Features that classic Bad Cat note clarity; deep but tight bass response; beautiful studio-quality reverb; luscious and hypnotic valve-biased tremolo

CONS Pops can be incurred when channel switching is at high reverb levels; some minor construction details could be further refined; it's weighty!

will likely push this amp into the kind of overdrive you might associate with classic rock and Americana, with all the sizzling harmonics and sustain you'd wish for.

The studio-quality digital onboard reverb is a standout here, sounding just as usable as a mild halo around lead notes through to a fully flooded surf sound at flat-out settings. The drippy nature of this effect is every bit as evocative as many of the analogue spring reverb tanks found on other manufacturers' models. This feature isn't footswitchable, unfortunately; however, the channel switching and tremolo functions are.

Now, the aforementioned valve-biased tremolo sounds absolutely glorious, either at subtle or extreme depths. We really appreciate the range of speeds, from mildly pulsing through to mesmerisingly rapid. Unfortunately, we did find it possible to create quite a pop when switching between channels at higher levels of reverb, only in certain circumstances depending on the gain and master levels being switched between.

In comparison to the original Black Cat model with all its refined sparkle, this Mod Shop version now has a throatier midrange and a gutsier roar that pairs well with the increased wattage and headroom. This is a bolder-sounding amp that can hold its own even under an SRV-style barrage, and if you found yourself getting lost on stage amid drums and keyboards, this amp will certainly reclaim the midrange territory for us gigging six-stringers.

Verdict

This bolder, louder version of the classic Black Cat amplifier retails for a couple of hundred pounds more than the original and is well below the cost of the Hand Wired series. For this outlay you get a tighter, louder and gutsier tone from an already stellar-sounding amp.

In comparison to the original with its refined sparkle, this version has a throatier midrange and a gutsier roar

Some minor niggles to mention include a couple of the chassis screws, which were loose and hard to tighten upon arrival, and the cup washers beneath them were already biting through the Tolex – surely a handful of washers perhaps wouldn't stretch the budget too wildly?

That said, all the chime-y, clean to edge-of-break-up sounds you'd expect from a Bad Cat are contained within this lil' beauty alongside a gutsier, untamed roar and smoother high-end. These massaged sonic elements might be of particularly interest to the blues fraternity, where lower mids have room to grab attention.

All in all, this initial Black Cat Mod Shop edition is a hugely desirable combo befitting of both Bad Cat and Mark Sampson's legacy. **G**

FIRST PLAY



**BOURGEOIS SLOPE D
STANDARD T/S**
£2,899

WHAT IS IT? Eastman and Bourgeois collaboration on a slope-shouldered dread with a buy-into-boutique price tag

Maine Lines

The latest in Bourgeois' Touchstone range has shades of Gibson's J-45. Will it live up to expectations and carve a legendary niche all its own?

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

The Touchstone acoustic series is an alliance that's oceans apart between Eastman's facility in Beijing, China, and the workshop of Dana Bourgeois in Lewiston, Maine, USA. And if anyone is unfamiliar with his name, Dana is one of the world's foremost luthiers and his guitars sell at a premium price. The Touchstone Series came about when the Eastman guitar company – no slouches at turning out very high-quality acoustics under its own name – came aboard and a whole new streamlined production process was put into place.

It works like this: Dana and his team source, brace and voice the guitars' tops in Maine and ship batches of them over to Eastman's workshops in China. There, the backs, necks and so on are put together in accordance with a strict brief from Bourgeois back in the USA. Quality control is tight, with every process carefully monitored to ensure that each instrument is of the best possible quality. Certainly, when we reviewed a pair of Bourgeois/Touchstone acoustics in issue 501, we were mightily impressed by the overall sound and build quality, the OM scoring 9/10 and the dreadnought getting full marks with a straight 10.

Of course, Eastman and Bourgeois joining forces in this way means that instruments can be manufactured more







1

1. The top is torrefied Sitka spruce and we hear that Bourgeois flew a craftsman over from Eastman's workshops in Beijing to learn how to spray the sunburst to Dana Bourgeois' exacting standards

2. Bourgeois chose ziricote for the fretboard timber, whereas you might have expected to find either rosewood or ebony. Ziricote is often referred to as 'Mexican ebony', although it is not a true member of the species

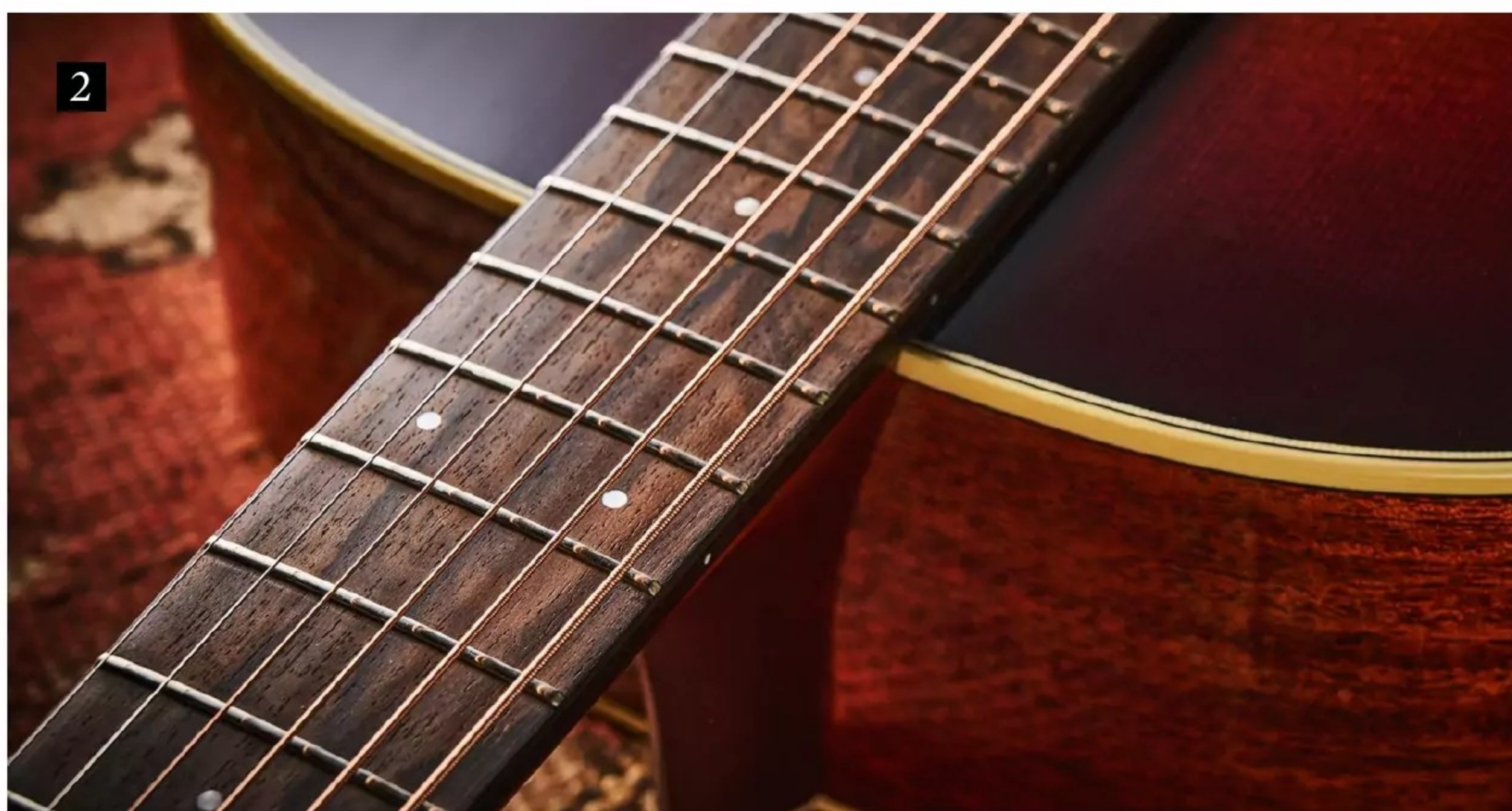
cost-effectively, making it possible to buy into one of the top brands at a greatly reduced cost. Dana Bourgeois is rightly proud of the quality that this partnership has achieved – and you'll note that it is the Bourgeois brand name that sits atop the headstock on these instruments, rather than Touchstone or Eastman.

The Slope D Standard is a relative newcomer to the Touchstone stable and, as you can see from the pictures, has the air of a J-45 about it. It's not our imagination, either – on its website Bourgeois states: "The Standard breathes new life into a classic design that has earned its reputation as the 'workhorse' of acoustic guitars."

The J-45 acquired the nickname of 'workhorse' after its entry into Gibson's catalogue in 1942, subsequently becoming a dependable go-to choice for instrumentalists across the decades. The principle giveaway is the sunburst finish, but maybe not so much the neck inlays or that smaller, squared-off headstock. Speaking of the finish, we are told that in order to get the 'burst on the tops dead right, a craftsman from the Eastman factory was flown over to Dana's workshop in Lewiston to be shown precisely how it was to be applied. That's attention to detail if ever we heard it.

Needless to say, the actual spec of the Slope D traces that of the J-45, with a Sitka spruce top (which has been torrefied to simulate a top that has been played in over time), and mahogany back and sides. Both body woods look to be of premium quality, the spruce with that characteristic cross-grain shimmer to it, the mahogany with an attractive, stripy grain pattern.

Moving onto the neck, here again the choice of wood is mahogany with what appears, at first sight, to be quite a slim profile. The fingerboard, which would be rosewood on a J-45, is ziricote here; it's a wood that is sometimes referred to as 'Mexican ebony', although it is not a true ebony. However, ziricote is often used as a perfectly able substitute for ebony and, although it doesn't share that



2



3



4

We're faced with quality at every turn – the inventory reads like an instrument that would cost twice the price

timber's black appearance, is renowned for its 'spiderweb' grain pattern. At the headstock end, we find a bone nut with a set of Schaller GrandTune tuners and the subtle pearly Bourgeois logo.

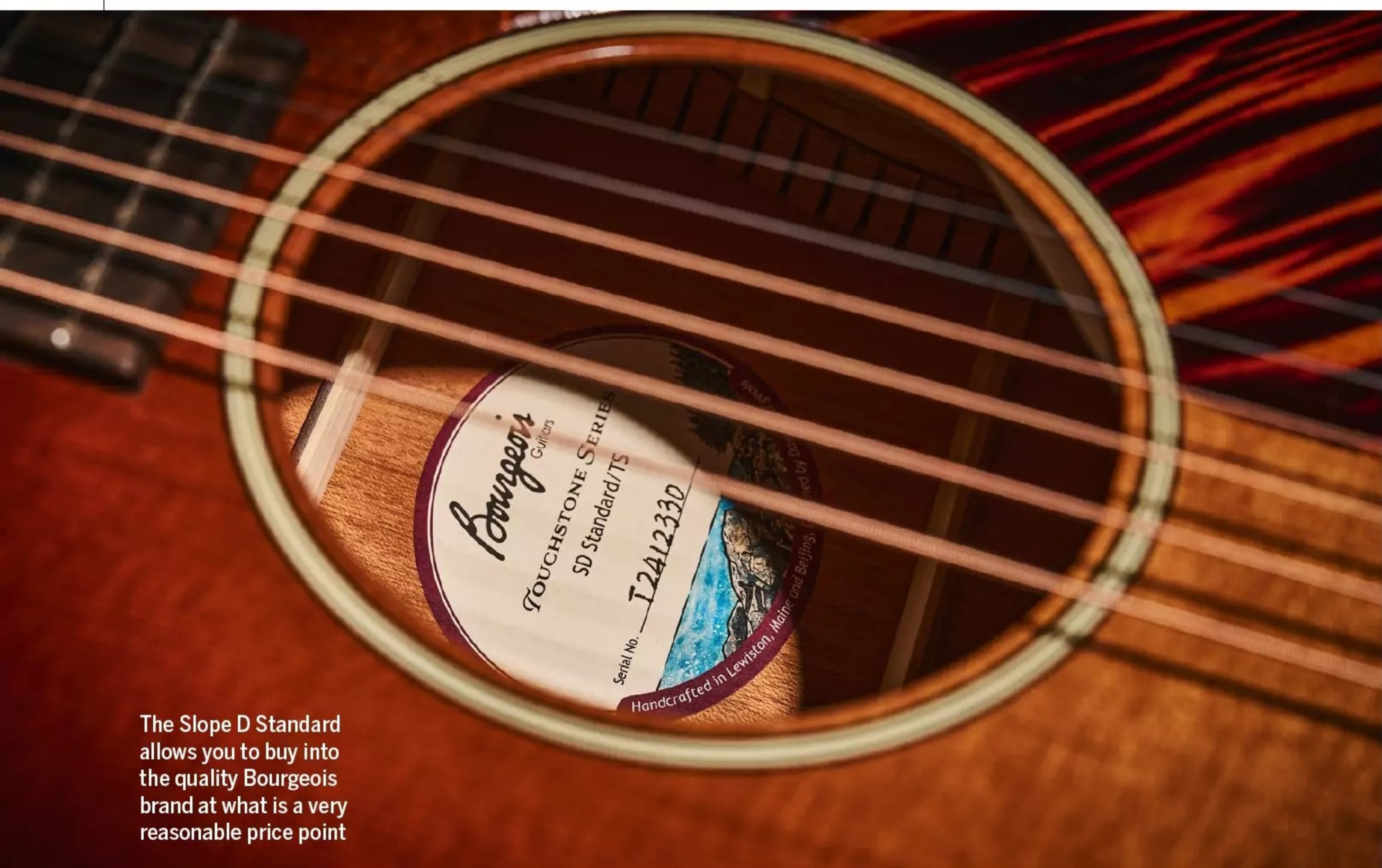
With spec like this, you'd be hard-pressed to see where any cost-cutting has taken place, as we're faced with what appears to be top-notch quality at every turn. In fact, the inventory reads like an instrument that would cost at least twice the price.

One difference from the J-45 spec we noticed is that the scale length is 635mm (25 inches) as opposed to Gibson's 629mm (24.75 inches), and Bourgeois has trimmed a fraction of a millimetre off the nut width, too. These things are probably all but imperceivable in practice, but it's interesting to see where these fractional differences lie, all the same.

Apart from the minutiae above, we have 20 very nicely seated and finished frets, a perfectly cut nut, a flamey scratchplate and a compensated bone saddle that sits amid a ziricote bridge, which itself is finished with a set of six ivoroid bridge pins.

3. The tuners atop the mahogany neck are Schaller's GrandTune nickel with antique-looking ivoroid buttons, which add an additional layer of class to this wonderful instrument

4. Ziricote turns up once again for the bridge timber and is completed by a compensated bone saddle and ivoroid pins



The Slope D Standard allows you to buy into the quality Bourgeois brand at what is a very reasonable price point

All things being considered, at this point we were keen to hear what the Slope D had to say for itself...

Feel & Sounds

The first impression was that we were right about the neck; it's slim but a fairly deep and generous C at the same time, and so it feels instantly familiar in the hand. Another, though, was that the 43.6mm nut-width might deter any adventurous fingerstyle, but we were wrong here, too, as any shortfall in width was never a problem during our play test.

Then there's the sound. When we first opened the case, the guitar had probably not seen the light of day since it began its journey across oceans to the *Guitarist* studios and so we detected a slight compression in the trebles. However, after putting it through its paces and replacing it in its case, when we returned to it 24 hours or so later, the sound had bloomed noticeably. It was as if the guitar had woken up from a long sleep and was ready to give us its all. And what a sound it is. The chords are rich and full of harmonics, basses are controlled but full at the same time, and the sustain and volume are really quite remarkable. But it was our endeavours with fingerstyle that really allowed the Slope D to shine. There's a great deal of clarity and separation between the notes and the dynamics – playing soft to loud and vice versa – are very good indeed. There was no sign of brashness when played hard, and even the gentlest strum

It was as if the guitar had woken up from a long sleep and was ready to give us its all

or fingerstyle was greeted with sweetness and a hi-fi response.

A good yardstick with which to measure the quality of an instrument is the amount of time we end up playing it after we've collected all the necessary data to write the review. Such was the case here – it really was that hard to put down.

Verdict

When faced with the idea that it's possible to get an extremely high-quality instrument for a fraction of the price of a bespoke handmade affair, you'd be right to be cynical. After all, we know that if something seems too good to be true, it often is just that. But that's not the case here. Bourgeois and Eastman have managed to produce a guitar that sounds far more expensive than its price tag would indicate.

Does it sound like a J-45? No. It lacks that smokey woodiness for which Gibson's workhorse is renowned. Instead, you get the impression that the instrument has been reimagined through the lens of a master craftsman and has gained a voice that is not only its own but something really fabulous at the same time.

Seek one out – but hold onto your socks, because they're likely to be blown off! **G**



BOURGEOIS SLOPE D STANDARD T/S

PRICE: £2,899 (inc hard case)

ORIGIN: China/USA

TYPE: Slope-shouldered dreadnought

TOP: Torrified Sitka spruce

BACK/SIDES: Mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 124mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm

NECK: Mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm

TUNERS: Schaller GrandTune nickel with ivoroid buttons

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.6mm

FINGERBOARD: Ziricote

FRETS: 20

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ziricote w/ bone saddle/55.8mm

ELECTRICS: N/A

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.9/4.2

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The Standard range also includes a L-DBO 14 (£2,899)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not as yet

FINISHES: Natural High gloss with a satin feel neck

Bourgeois Guitars

<https://bourgeoisguitars.com>



10/10

PROS Beautifully constructed and finely wrought acoustic with a purity to its voice at a very fair price point

CONS We'd really have to dig deep to find anything we don't like

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FIRST PLAY



**ELECTRO-HARMONIX
PICO SWELLO**
£119

.....
WHAT IS IT? The New York pedal
maker puts its POG2's Attack
slider in a Pico pedal



Swell Shaper

Electro-Harmonix takes one of the best-loved features of its POG2 and puts it into a standalone pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln

1. The Filter button enables the low-pass filter and chooses the filter resonance with subsequent pushes
2. An LED displays both pedal on/off status and filter status: green signifies that the filter is disabled; orange shows the low-resonance filter, and red is the high-resonance filter
3. This Mod knob controls the depth and direction of the filter envelope: upward sweep to the right of the neutral noon position, downward to the left

First seen in the POG2, the Attack slider is a feature that has particularly hit the spot with players, adjusting the note envelope for swelled or bowed sounds whether or not you're using the pitch aspects of the pedal. Now, that specific effect has been made more accessible to all in a dedicated pedal in Electro-Harmonix's diminutive Pico range. The Swello is designed to slow the volume envelope of your playing to create swells, something it does polyphonically, so chords as well as single notes get the full treatment. It also has an optional low-pass filter that can be used for polyphonic envelope filter effects.

An Attack knob increases the attack time as you turn it clockwise, while a Volume knob sets the output volume – and those two are all you need for straight swell effects, which start from a subtle shaving off of the transient and run to a slow ramp up to full volume. The pedal seems to be set up just right to react to dynamic nuances, no matter how hard or soft you play: no need to mess with any sensitivity knob! It applies a volume swell to each note played and does not retrigger existing sound when a new note is played, so playing is very smooth and natural, with the excellent tracking handling fast passages with ease. Violin- or cello-like sounds are possible depending on where you play on the neck, and some doublestops and judicious bending can get you close to cool pedal-steel sounds.

If you want extra colour, you can bring in the filter with a choice of a low- or high-resonance setting (either of which can be adjusted from the factory settings to your own preference if desired) and set a cut-off frequency with the Freq knob, effectively using it as an EQ control. For movement in the sound, the Mod knob can dial in a degree of upward or downward filter sweep, allowing you to explore a whole range of altered sounds, including wahs, distinct filter sweeps and reverse effects via various juxtapositions of the Attack, Freq and Mod knobs.

Verdict

A really musical effect, perfectly implemented in a convenient tiny footprint, the Pico Swello is a joy to use and is capable of giving you an alternative voice whenever needed. **G**



ELECTRO-HARMONIX PICO SWELLO

PRICE: £119

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Attack envelope pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, user-adjustable resonance settings

CONTROLS: Volume, Attack, Frequency, Mod, Filter button, bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied) 100mA

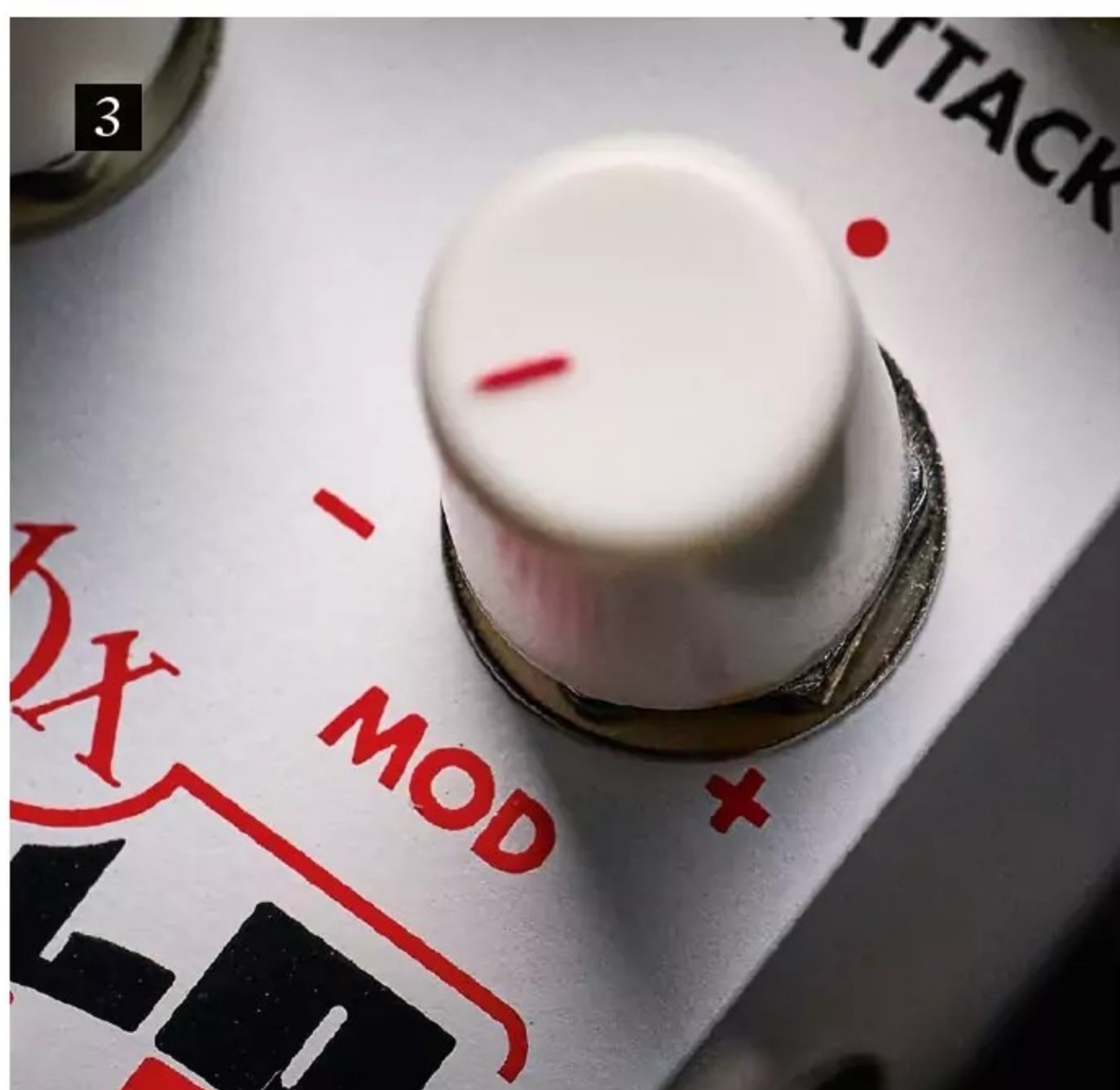
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 91 (d) x 47mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com



PROS Really compact size; smooth operation; variable attack for different applications; optional filter

CONS A momentary action footswitch would be a cool feature



THE RIVALS

Besides the POG2, Electro-Harmonix has other pedals that are related to the Pico Swello, notably the Attack Decay (£120) and its smaller Pico Attack Decay (£105) sibling. Elsewhere, Pigtronix describes its Gloamer (£98) as an “all-analog[ue], polyphonic amplitude synthesizer that alters the attack and decay time of any sound source”. It also features an optical compressor. The rare Boss SG-1 Slow Gear pedal has a new lease of life as one of 16 digital effects in the new PX-1 Plugout FX (£229, right) compact pedal. Less expensive offerings are the Mooer Slow Engine (£59) and TC Electronic Crescendo Auto Swell Pedal (£25).



FIRST PLAY



**WALRUS AUDIO
CANVAS POWER USB**
£169

WHAT IS IT? Converter to enable a pedal power supply to run from a USB source



1

2

2

Power Up

The latest in Walrus Audio's Canvas accessory range enables your pedalboard to run from USB power delivery

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The Canvas Power USB has a very slim profile that fits under flat Pedaltrain 'boards. It comes with brackets and accepts M3 screws for mounting
2. Power comes in from a power brick providing 24 volts or via USB. The 24V Thru connection powers your compatible pedal power supply unit
3. You can power a single pedal from this pedal output, and the toggle switch sets its voltage. It delivers 500mA at nine volts, 375mA at 12 volts or 250mA at 18 volts

Whether you're running just a few pedals or have a mega 'board in action, a decent mains-powered pedal power supply with multiple outputs is essential – just plug it into the wall socket and you're good to go. However, there may be occasions when you *can't* easily plug it into the wall socket and, that's where Walrus Audio's latest widget, the Canvas Power USB, comes into play. This compact converter box enables certain standard pedal power supplies to run from USB power delivery, which could be supplied by a laptop charger, high-powered phone chargers or, for truly portable operation, by a USB PD (Power Delivery) battery pack.

The Power USB is part of the Canvas ecosystem and so it's designed to be used with power supplies in the range, including the Canvas Power 8, which takes power from a 24-volt input, rather than an IEC cable. It will also work with other manufacturers' 24-volt EIAJ-compatible supplies, such as the Strymon Ojai – you simply connect it from the Power USB's 24V Thru to your supply's 24V In socket using the included EIAJ cable. The Power USB also has a 24-volt input, so, as well as from USB, it can take its power from Walrus Audio's mains-powered Canvas Power Brick or a similar unit. It prioritises DC brick power when available, seamlessly switching to USB PD input when no brick is detected. Consequently, the belt and braces approach to cover all contingencies would be to have all of this mounted on your 'board: the Power USB inserted between a brick and your pedal power supply, with a battery pack connected to the Power USB.

Besides powering another power supply, the unit also has one output to power either a nine-volt, 12-volt or 18-volt pedal, with 500mA of current available at nine volts. This reviewer found this aspect of it particularly convenient in connecting to his desktop phone charger when just wanting to try out single pedals.

Verdict

When paired with a suitable USB PD battery pack (a minimum of 30 watts is required), the Canvas Power USB could make your pedalboard truly portable with enough power to get you through a gig, functioning as an essential backup if there is any difficulty with onstage socketry. That, along with the ability to power one extra pedal, could make it a very useful addition to your rig. **G**



WALRUS AUDIO CANVAS POWER USB

PRICE: £169
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Pedal power supply component
FEATURES: 24V power supply to a compatible pedal power supply unit, switchable 9/12/18V supply to a single pedal, mountable under a pedalboard
CONTROLS: Pedal supply voltage switch (9V, 12V, 18V)
CONNECTIONS: 24V In, 24V Out, USB C input, pedal output
POWER: This will take power from a brick with 24V output, USB laptop charger or a USB PD battery pack
DIMENSIONS: 93 (w) x 53 (d) x 25mm (h)

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

8/10

PROS Very compact; can use with existing power supply (if 24-volt EIAJ-compatible); one extra pedal output; multiple power options (brick, charger, battery pack)

CONS Great for Walrus products but only works with a limited number of other manufacturers' power supplies with a 24-volt input; extra purchases needed for true portability



THE RIVALS

For pedal power supplies that don't require a traditional mains outlet, the Engl Amps Power Tap Portable (£13, right) can connect to any regular power bank (five to 18 volts DC) via USB and can power two pedals. Elsewhere, Mission Engineering's Expression 529i USB Power Supply (£199) can power eight pedals, and Big Joe has a choice of rechargeable lithium battery power supplies: the PB-109 Power Box Li2 (£129) can power up to two pedals; the iSO4 (£169) and iSO8 (£249) can power four and eight respectively. D'Addario's XPND Pedal Power Battery Kit (£185) is a rechargeable power supply with a cable to daisy-chain pedals.



PHOTO: ENGL-AMPS.COM



the Wishlist

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

Lowden F-50C £10,895

CONTACT **Lowden Guitars** WEB www.lowdenguitars.com WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

Earlier this year we caught up with a new and relatively affordable Lowden guitar, the bolt-on F-12, which, along with the F-10, kicks off the acoustic range at £3,400. From the 12 models you move up in numbers and specification until you land here: the 50 Series, which tops the Lowden line (with the exception of the ultra-limited Master Series).

George Lowden places the guitar in context: "Our F model, which is our mid-size guitar, was actually the second guitar I designed, way back around 1980, then I adjusted the shape at the end of the 80s. The 'F' was originally used because I designed it specifically for flat-picking; I was hoping to get a little bit more punch. I wanted the F model to be a little bit more focused and more suitable for flat-pickers. But plenty of fingerstyle players will choose the F, as well as players who use a flat-pick. It's turned out to be our most versatile body size and is still probably our most popular model, despite what I originally designed it for," he laughs.

"The '50' level uses the choicest of all the woods we have and it has quite a lot of tasteful inlay work around the binding and so on," George continues. "I would say around 25 per cent [of the guitars the company manufactures], possibly a little bit more, perhaps 30,

are the 50 Series. It seems to be the end of the market we have excelled in and built up a reputation in."

Offering the key Lowden body sizes, from the smallest WL to the largest O, the 50s can be ordered in a variety of Master-grade wood combinations that pair some nine different back-and-sides woods with a choice of six top woods. This is augmented by cutaway and onboard pickup options, plus left or right orientation. Ours is a cutaway sinker redwood/African blackwood combo.

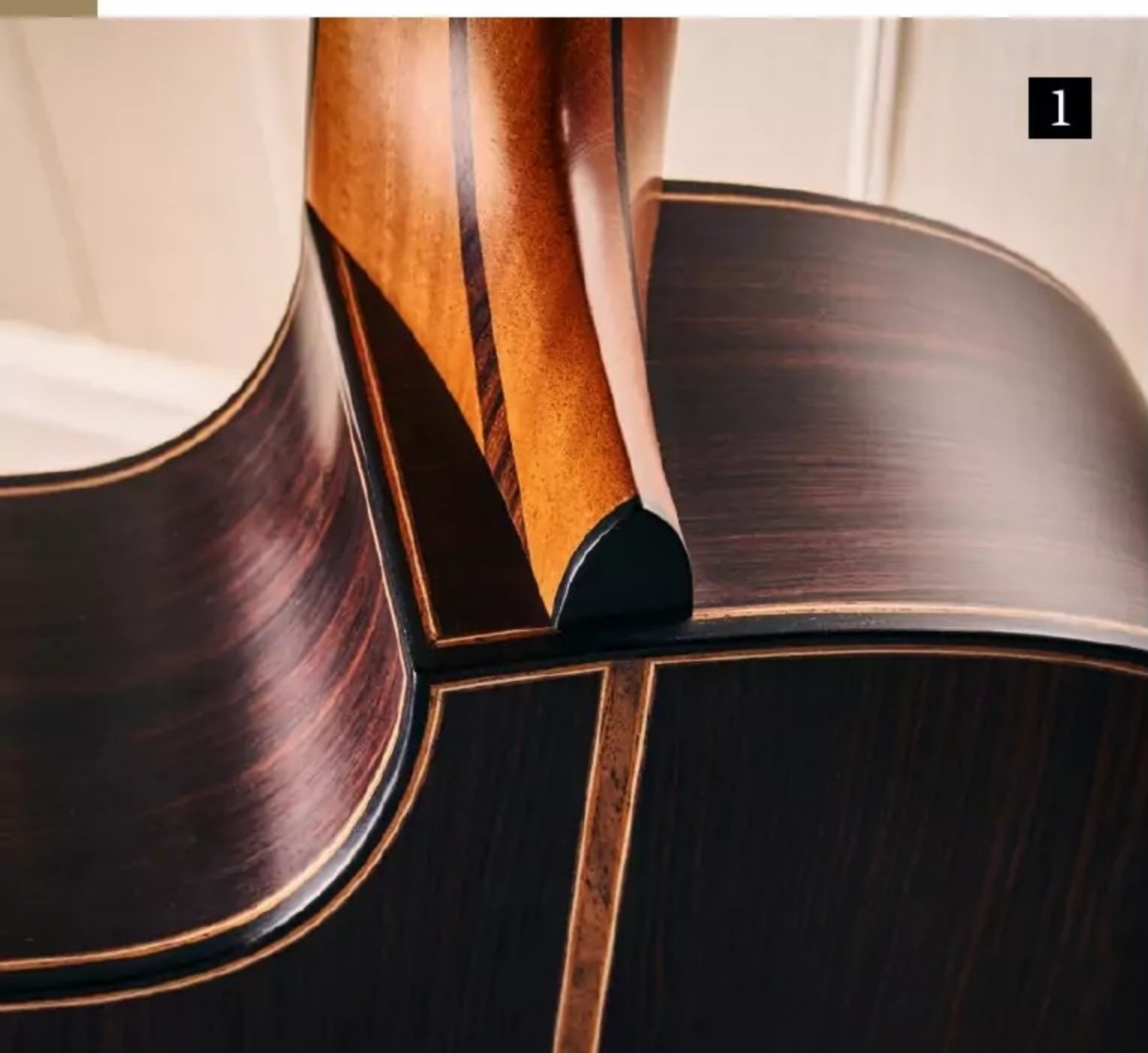
"I discovered African blackwood probably around 20 years ago," remembers George. "The first guitar I made with it was paired with a cedar top and the volume blew me away. That combination produces an incredibly loud guitar! With the redwood top, however, you keep the power of the blackwood and the purity and cleanliness of the sound that the blackwood gives you, but the redwood warms that up. It's a very nice combination."

Our acoustic guru David Mead agrees: "The sinker redwood seems the perfect foil for the African Blackwood as the combination sums into an acoustic sound with plenty of harmonic complexity but with a considerable amount of warmth at the same time. Chords ring out and sustain well, and fingerstyle playing benefits from clarity, sweetness and plenty of punch." **G**

1. The base price for this wood combo is £9,910; the cutaway adds £985. The neck is a five-piece construct of mahogany with rosewood splices, and ebony is used for the fingerboard and binding

2. At 402mm (15.83 inches) across its lower bouts and 120mm (4.73 inches) deep, it also uses the 'long' scale length of 650mm (25.6 inches). At every level from the satin-smooth finish to this demure ebony edge bevel, this high-level craft is rarely matched

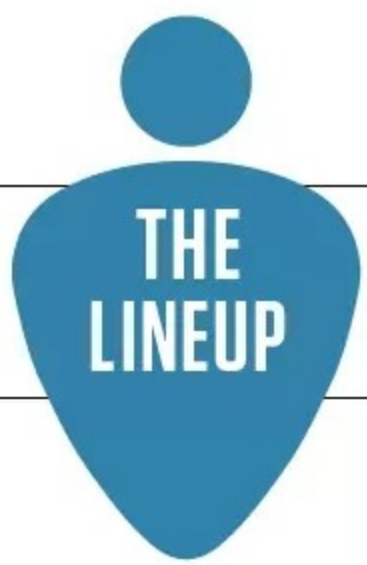
3. African blackwood has an "incredibly fine texture", says George Lowden. "When you sand it and polish it, it feels like silk. It's very expensive to buy in the high grades that we need – we can only use it on the 50 Series, really"



4. George Lowden came across redwood around 1990, but 'sinker' redwood refers to "the logs that were floated down the rivers in North California to the saw mills, which were always at the coast", George explains. "Inevitably, the odd log would get stuck and eventually sink to the bottom of the river. I found a guy in Northern California who, when he found one, he'd go out in a raft with a winch and a diver, and the diver would go down to a point when the winch might be able to lift the log up.

"When they opened the redwood logs they would find that the wood was very dark in colour," he adds, "and often with black streaks through it. But when the wood dried out it was very light in weight – a lot of the resins had been leached out during all that time under water. So the properties of the sinker wood are fantastic"





Gas Supply

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

Gibson Les Paul Double Cuts **From £1,499**

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

JARGON CRUNCHING **TV Yellow**

The origin of Gibson's TV Yellow finish is much debated. One theory is that the yellow worked better on black-and-white TV broadcasts. Another is that it matched the 'limed' finish of the then cutting-edge futuristic television sets. Meanwhile, some people believe it was a way of diverting potential flip-flops to Fender Telecasters. The truth? We're not sure, but if you're reading in black and white, the TV Yellow is pictured next to the Vintage Cherry.

Ooh, Gibson Double Cuts. Let me guess, they're top-end limited editions finished in unicorn lacquer?

Hang on one second because we think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Besides, everyone knows Gibson stopped using unicorn-derived finishes in 1959... No, in an age of stainless steel, graphite reinforcement and mirror-finished high-performance guitars, Gibson is seeing out 2025 by reissuing two models that punch right to the core of both rock *and* roll: the Les Paul Junior Double Cut and Les Paul Special Double Cut.

Right, I've seen a million Les Pauls and they don't look like this.

Well, Gibson first adopted the Double Cut design for the Les Paul Junior in 1958, so there have been a few of them. You might have seen them in the hands of Keith Richards. Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong is a fan, too, and most recently YouTube's walking, talking encyclopedia of musicology Rick Beato put his name on the Les Paul Special Double Cut. Which raises an interesting point: there have been no production-model Double Cuts in the Gibson USA catalogue – until now.



'STUDENT' MODELS

As with so many instruments inspired by yesteryear, the Les Paul Junior and Special Double Cuts were first marketed as affordable 'student' models. Nearly 70 years later, these guitars have carved out their own place in rock 'n' roll history

PICKUPS

Both feature a P-90 as their mouthpiece and, in a nutshell, the biggest difference between the Junior and Special lies in the electronics – a single pickup in the Junior and more traditional two-pickup layout for the Special

WRAP-AROUND BRIDGE

By incorporating the bridge and stop bar into a single unit, Gibson shaved material and production costs from the original Juniors and Specials. This remains true today, and wrap-around bridges have a tone and feel of their own

THRILLS NOT FRILLS

The Double Cuts form the proto-SG formula with a slab-mahogany body, mahogany neck and simplifications across the board. But don't be fooled by the lack of bling: these guitars have a well-earned reputation as dependable conduits for everything from soul to punk



The single- and twin-pickup Double Cuts come in a trio of the same colours

They look sort of simple, though?

These are straightforward models, for sure, but combined with the massively versatile range of sounds they're capable of providing, that's why they've been so well loved and used by players across many different genres. Les Paul Juniors and Specials were originally introduced as Gibson's more affordable versions of the Les Paul, and just a few short years after the single-cut models were introduced in 1954 and 1955 respectively, Gibson made its student model even more adaptable by giving the body an easy access

These models are straightforward, but they're capable of providing a massively versatile range of sounds

double-cut shape in 1958. A slab of mahogany – uncontoured for the Junior – forms the body without any of the flashy maple tops or body binding. The neck is mahogany, too, and in the case of these 2025 models, it features Gibson's SlimTaper carve. Sticking with the no-frills approach are the dot inlays and a combined wraparound bridge/tailpiece to terminate the strings while maintaining sustain.

What's the difference between the two?

It's pretty easy – the Junior has a single dog-ear P-90 mounted in the bridge position, but if that's a little too utilitarian, then you can bag a neck pickup, too, with the Special. With this additional pickup comes a doubling of the control set, offering volume and tone controls for both and, of course, a three-position toggle switch. Other refinements to the Special model over the Junior include a bound fingerboard and inlaid (rather than printed) Gibson logo on the headstock.

What colours do they come in?

You have a choice of three colours for each model – Ebony, Vintage Cherry and TV Yellow – and both guitars come with a hardshell gigbag to safely transport your workhorse during its commute. The Les Paul Junior Double Cut costs £1,499, and the Les Paul Special Double Cut is £1,699, which brings them in at less than half the price of their Gibson Custom VOS counterparts. They'll be available by the time you read this, so check them out at a retailer near you. [SW]

ALSO OUT NOW...

PEAVEY PREAMP PEDALS £182

Cast your memory back to January and you may recall Peavey announcing its five-strong line-up of preamp pedals. And if good things do indeed come to those who wait, we're about to be rewarded for our patience as the pedals are finally arriving on these shores! Included in the collection are front-ends lifted from classic models including the Bandit Supreme, VTM, Rock Master, Session and Josh Homme-approved Decade. Each pedal aims to recreate its original counterpart faithfully, and every design features a hard bypass switch along with an anti-click footswitch. They retail for £182 each – for a full list of stockists, head to the Peavey website.

www.peavey.com

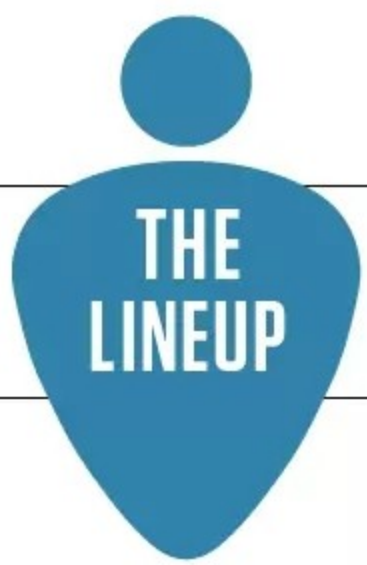


SEYMOUR DUNCAN JOE BONAMASSA 'BOLIN BURST' HUMBUCKER SET £409

You don't have to sit still for too long before a Joe Bonamassa tour, album or signature product release comes along (so much so, that we're not sure when the blues ace finds time to sit still himself). Hot on the heels of his most recent Epiphone Les Paul Custom signature, comes Joe's new Seymour Duncan Custom Shop pickups. These covered humbuckers are based on the pups found in JoBo's 'Bolin Burst' – the 1960 Les Paul formerly owned by the great Tommy Bolin. They feature Alnico II magnets, with a DC resistance of 8.66k (neck) and 8.13k (bridge). Both have aged nickel covers, and the first 500 sets are signed by Joe and Seymour Duncan, with a portion of the proceeds of every set being donated to the Tommy Bolin Endowment and Tommy Bolin Memorial Fund.

www.seymourduncan.com



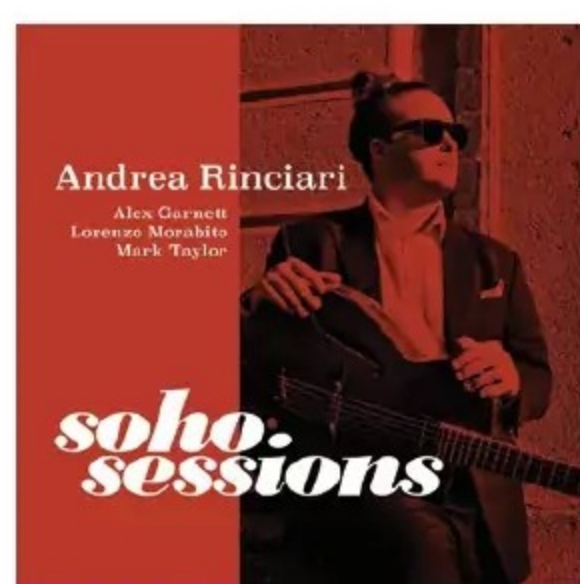


Fretbuzz

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: Andrea Rinciari

Album: *Soho Sessions* (Andrea Rinciari Records)



The London-based jazz musician has been guided by 20th century jazz, and this collection pulls from his residency at Soho's Piano Bar
www.andrearinciari.com

Andrea's Fibonacci Ambassador is always by his side, and on these sessions he's joined by Alex Garnett on tenor saxophone, Mark Taylor on drums, and bassist Lorenzo Morabito

On his latest release, *Soho Sessions*, Italian jazz guitarist Andrea Rinciari is paying tribute to the music that's been performed with his quartet on a weekly basis over the past few years. Included within the eights tracks are his versions of *Bean And The Boys*, covered by one-time mentor Barry Harris, as well as other standards like *Tea For Two*, *I Can't Get Started* and *Carvin' The Rock*. The performances across the board are stellar, though it's chemistry between Andrea and tenor saxophonist Alex Garnett that shines through most, with the pair serving up melodies together or taking turns to finish each other's musical sentences.

Round Midnight

This album, says Andrea, is the product of having learned a comprehensive amount of music to play live: "It came naturally after years of performing in a specific way," he tells us. "This band was a result of those residencies. What you hear on the record is a very small portion of the material we learned. There was a whole book of sheet music we had under our belts, varying from American Songbook standards to more intricate compositions that were tricky to play on guitar."

A Day In The Life

When Andrea decided to focus on jazz guitar, it was Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass who taught him the fundamentals of the style. "Transcribing their parts really helped me on my journey," he continues. "You can see the amount of joy they were bringing to the music. That's

something that still gets me. Even later in their careers, though they'd been doing it for so long and so well, they never stopped sounding fresh or inspired. Both of them taught me how to target certain notes around chord changes. Wes was really pure and creative when it came to this, while Joe was methodical."

My One & Only Love

It's perfectly natural for any guitarist to have that one instrument they pick up more than anything else. For Andrea, it's his Fibonacci Ambassador, custom-designed into an unofficial signature. "It's a beautiful guitar with 20 frets that was made to my specifications. It has this rare floating Charlie Christian pickup that's no longer in production. The amp I use is a Henriksen Blu, which has a lot of clarity while maintaining enough punchiness to cut through. I prefer to use the reverb of the room, which is more natural sounding."

You Don't Learn That In School

It was American bebop legend Barry Harris who took Andrea under his wing and gave him the tools to develop. "I was lucky to learn from him in person," says the guitarist. "His method helped me understand how jazz works. I would comp along to a solo before transcribing the lead. You have to put yourself in the music. It's a game of repetition – right now Charlie Parker's solo on *Cherokee* is my warm-up. You don't want to think about the notes, it should be like a reflex. After that, take phrases and mess them up. Change the start and end, change the rhythm or change the direction of the lines. Eventually, you build your own language."

Less Is More

When you listen to *Soho Sessions* you'll notice how a big part of the sound comes from playing just a select few notes. "That comes from Jim Hall, as well as my piano influences," Andrea tells us. "I'm a fan of Sonny Clark's comping. He could've played 10 notes at a time, but he'd choose two or three; Thelonious Monk was the same. I wanted to translate that onto guitar, taking small clusters and finding my own spread voicings. I will usually play one bass note with the pick then a couple of higher notes with my fingers, simulating what a piano player would do." **[AS]**

Standout track: *John's Delight*

For fans of: Joe Pass, Wes Montgomery, Charlie Christian

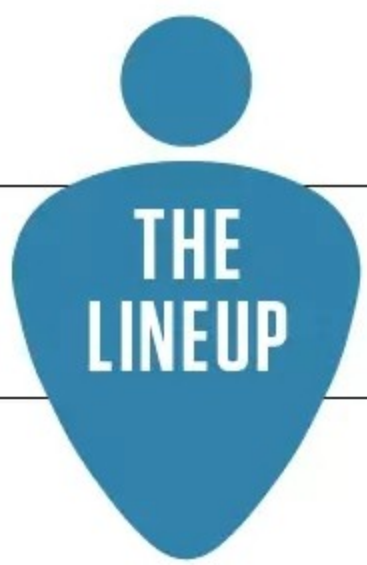


HOW HIGH THE MOON

Andrea Rinciari on his rendition of 'Polka Dots And Moonbeams'

"It was covered by my hero Bud Powell on his 1954 album, *The Amazing Bud Powell, Vol. 2*, which is one of my favourite records. It's a challenging arrangement. I was trying to emulate his piano movements on the guitar. There are chords moving with counterpoint melodies that were difficult to replicate, but anything is possible with the right amount of practice. I love how he almost wrote fugues for these tunes, giving them a classical feel."

"Transcribing Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass really helped me on my journey. You can see the amount of joy they were bringing to the music"



Albums

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



PHOTO BY CHUCK BRUECKMANN

The release of Myles Kennedy, Mark Tremonti and co's latest marks over 20 years since their debut

Alter Bridge

Alter Bridge

Napalm Records (available 9 January)



Acclaimed rockers return with eighth studio album

Whether they're pounding stadiums together with Alter Bridge or fronting their own side projects, guitarists Myles Kennedy and Marc Tremonti are a force to be reckoned with.

Now, after two decades of touring and making music together alongside bandmates Brian Marshall on bass and Scott Phillips on drums, the dynamic duo returns with Alter Bridge studio album number eight.

This self-titled effort features 12 tracks that trace the characteristic sonic blueprint for which the band has become so revered by fans worldwide. Recorded over a two-month period at the acclaimed 5150 Studios in California, the producer's chair was occupied by the eminently capable Michael 'Elvis' Baskette (Tremonti, Limp Bizkit, Slash), ensuring every atom of AB's hard-rock thrust is captured.

Hardcore fans have already witnessed the release of the album's first single, the album's opening track, *Silent Divide*, which pretty much lays out what's in store from the rest of the album. Here, Tremonti and Kennedy fire up their PRS signature models and duel on a fearsome drop-tuned riff with an all too brief harmony guitar solo. But the fun doesn't stop there. *Trust In Me* is an instant stadium rocker with a catchy chorus and flailing guitars, *Tested And Able* strays into Nine Inch Nails muted riff territory at the start before it blossoms into a strong melodic opus with a great solo. *Hang By A Thread* is the album's strong ballad, but the nine-minute-long closer *Slave To Master* is epic both in quality and execution. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Slave To Master*

For fans of: Metallica, Creed, Tremonti

Bob Dylan

Through The Open Window

Legacy/Columbia Records (available now)



Sketches in the jotter book of genius

With any musician of the huge cultural significance of Bob Dylan, ever-deeper delves among the archives for unheard or overlooked recordings are more or less guaranteed these days – especially with the powers of sonic restoration that are now possible at the world's top studios. At their best, such collections of bootlegs and demos help us understand musicians in the process of becoming great or reveal intimate portraits of them in their most unstudied, authentic state. This hefty eight-CD set (volume 18 in the Dylan Bootleg series) "chronicles early years of Dylan in Greenwich Village" and "includes unheard home recordings... coffee house and nightclub recordings". What we get is indeed an absorbing if sketchwork portrait of a developing, epochal talent – it's fascinating to hear Dylan evolve across these recordings from a stumbling, sometimes awkwardly derivative ingenue into a stark, distinctive artist who become one most important voices in all of modern music. **[JD]**

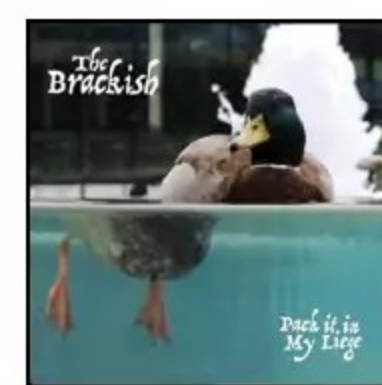
Standout track: *House Carpenter*

For fans of: Woody Guthrie, Stephen Stills, Neil Young

The Brackish

Pack It In My Liege

Stolen Body Records (available now)



Brutal, intricate post-prog brilliance

Regular readers will know we've been fans of Bristol outfit The Brackish for some time, but the faintly mediievally named *Pack It In My Liege*, their sixth album, may well be their best yet – and by some margin. The group play facetious song titles off against the dark, intricate gainscapes they create on the album so hard that some of the names feel like an act of creative self-vandalism. For example, standout track *Dessert For Days* is one of the most awe-inspiring post-prog tracks we've yet heard, its bleak but immersive fields of feedback and barbed melody rolling on like a landscape swept by a gale. Equally sombre but more somnolent, *Prisoner* is like walking through a hall of broken mirrors – grotesque yet strangely beautiful by turns. Luke Cawthra's guitar playing is inspired, never once settling for a cliché but always reaching at something beyond. Anyone with a taste for dark abstraction in music should hear this. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Dessert For Days*

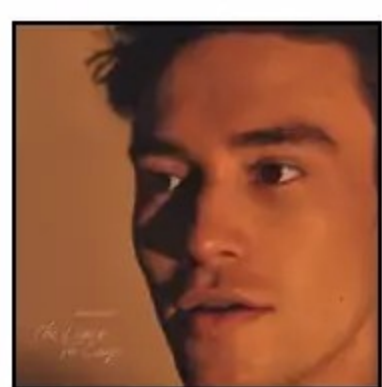
For fans of: Tortoise, Zappa, Swervedriver



Jacob Collier shows just what a five-string guitar is capable of

PHOTO BY THEO BATTERHAM

Jacob Collier
The Light For Days
Hajanga/Interscope/
Fontana (available now)

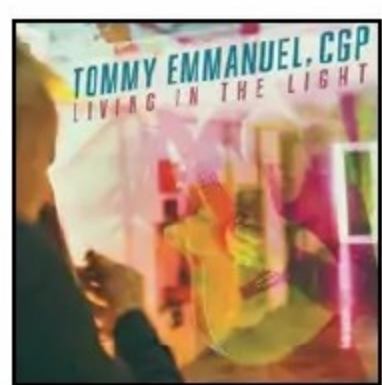


Multi-Grammy winner releases intimate guitar-centric album

At the age of 30, Jacob Collier has already achieved so much. Apart from his significant Grammy success, the multi-instrumentalist – who seems to be at home in just about every genre – has startled audiences worldwide with the sheer musicality of his work. From early YouTube covers to guesting with jazzers Snarky Puppy and releasing his own series of *Djesse* albums, he has turned his attention to acoustic guitar – a five-string Taylor, to be precise – for *The Light For Days*. The album comprises a mix of favourite songs by various artists, plus six originals. Taking on songs by James Taylor, The Beatles, John Martyn and The Beach Boys would be a bold step for many, but Jacob manages to get right to the heart of songs such as *Norwegian Wood*, *You Can Close Your Eyes* and *Keep An Eye On Summer* and dusts them with some fresh magic of his own. Simply wonderful. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Fairytale Lullaby*
For fans of: James Taylor, John Martyn, John Smith

Tommy Emmanuel
Living In The Light
CGP Sounds (available now)



Virtuosic acoustic guitar from Australia's greatest export

With strings that sizzle and spark under his fingertips, acoustic guitar wizard Tommy Emmanuel returns with his first solo album in 10 years. As you'd expect, the record is packed full of dazzling displays of fretboard agility and strong melodic compositions, but there are a few surprises along the way, too. For instance, Tommy's cover of Sharon O'Neill's *Maxine* finds Tommy on vocals but also on electric guitar and bass, and the album's closing track, *Ya Gotta Do It*, crosses over into rap territory – well, almost. "As I get older, I find myself taking a lot more risks and having a lot more fun in the process," he tells us, and that's certainly evident here. But it's beautiful tracks like *Scarlett's World*, dedicated to his granddaughter, and *Little Georgia* that are the man's real heartland. You can catch Tommy on his UK tour dates in January. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Little Georgia*
For fans of: Chet Atkins, Billy Strings, Molly Tuttle



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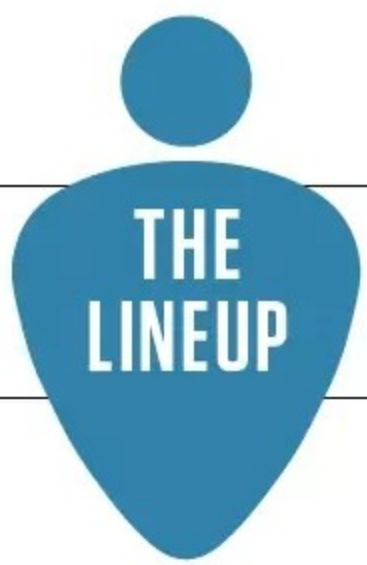
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Tones Behind The Tracks

Celebrating 20 years as a pro musician, singer-songwriter **John Smith** reimagines personal- and fan-favourite songs for his latest album

Artist: John Smith

Album: *Gatherings* (Commoner Records)



John Smith gets reflective on his latest studio outing, revisiting his back catalogue of 20 years

The reasoning behind John Smith's new album is really quite straightforward. After 20 years in the business, he decided it was time to celebrate by looking back to his early albums and selecting some songs that he feels have taken off in new directions after playing them for so long on the road. To embellish things still further, he enlisted the help of some of the top folk artists on the circuit today, including The Staves, Siobhan Miller, John McCusker and Lisa Hannigan. The result is a wonderful revisiting of some of John's early repertoire.

"When you hear songs that don't stand up to the standard you hold 20 years later, it can be a little painful – but mostly it was very enjoyable"

What inspired the idea behind *Gatherings*?

"I thought it'd be nice just to actually celebrate and reflect on the songs from the first three albums that I feel maybe have changed shape so much that I hear them completely differently now. Or perhaps the first time around they weren't quite ready to be

recorded and I didn't do them justice. I got playing and thinking about these songs and I realised, actually, that there was quite good ground there for exploration. So I dug into songs from *The Fox And The Monk*, *Map Or Direction* and *Great Lakes*, and recorded 10 songs for this album."

What was it like going back and reviewing your back catalogue in that way?

"When you hear songs you've written that don't quite stand up to the standard you might hold 20 years later, then that can be a little painful – but mostly it was very enjoyable. I found myself kind of falling in love with some of these ideas all over again and getting excited about digging into them as though they were new songs. It was more about capturing them as I hear them now. You know, 'If I were to walk out onto a stage tonight, how would I play something compared with how I played it in 2005?' It's quite different, so I wanted to just get a sense of that."

How did you go about picking the tracks?

"I had two criteria. The first was I wouldn't record one that I felt didn't need re-recording. There are some of those songs that I just felt, without wanting to blow my own trumpet, were pretty good the first time around and they don't really need further exploration. The second one was to pick songs that I play a lot now and that people have heard me play quite differently from how they were recorded. Between those two goal posts there was a selection of about 15 songs and I picked the ones that I liked the best."

Was it difficult to go about reimagining them?

"Well, I sort of reimagine them every night on stage anyway; I never play anything the same way twice. So I just leaned into that and made sure that when I was in the studio I was well practised and well rehearsed and not thinking about it too much. I didn't have the burden of learning all new songs, I was just recalling from memory things I already knew. I made sure that I was playing as loosely as possible so that I could have fun with the songs. That was the main thing. And then I set myself some technical limitations as well..."

In what way?

"Well, I had this 1960 Martin D-28 that I put an Eric Galletta soundhole humbucker in and I thought, 'Okay,

"I never play the same thing twice," says John of his onstage performances. And so he explored his old material in the studio with this reimagining in mind

“I’ve changed tremendously. I’m a lot more disciplined, and working with Joe Henry [long-standing producer] has really sharpened me up”

well, if I put this through a Strymon Deco and straight into an amp, and then record the acoustic guitar properly, I’ll get a really interesting, quite chorus-y, widescreen guitar sound, and I’ll work with that.’ And that is 80 per cent of the record. There’s a couple of songs on the Mule Resophonic guitar, and there’s one on my big Fylde Falstaff that needed a lower tuning, which the old D-28 couldn’t quite hold.

“My initial idea was just to record it all on the D-28 and then, as we got into it, things changed a little bit and I ended up bringing in a couple of other guitars, but I set myself a very simple, quite a linear path. You know, ‘I’ll use this guitar, this effect, get rid of all of the various effects that I used on the previous record, keep it really simple and invite a few friends to duet with me.’ As those duets were formed, I started hearing, ‘Maybe there’s a string part there, maybe there’s a horn part here.’ I talked myself down from most of that, but a few made it onto the record.”

Which studio did you use for the recording?

“There’s a great little studio in Frome called Indefra that is run by my friend Sebastian Brice, a Danish musician and recording engineer. He turned his garden outhouse into a really high-functioning studio with not too much gear. He knows it all really well and it’s a really good space to go and record a solo record. So I hunkered down and we made the record in about five days and then I sent it off to Chicago for Ryan Freeland to mix.”

In the past you’ve used Fylde acoustics – what’s the story regarding the Martin D-28?

“Well, I’m always using the Fylde live, but I was looking for something because I thought I was going to write a country record at the start of this year. Then the *Gatherings* idea came to focus, and I thought, ‘What if I were to use a dreadnought for *Gatherings* and just take things in a different direction?’ I didn’t want it to sound like anything I’ve done before from the guitar perspective, and all my records have been made on Fylde guitars, you know? So I went to see Tony [Werneke] at Replay Acoustics [near Sevenoaks, Kent], took down a couple of vintage guitars and said, ‘These have stopped giving me songs. What have you got?’ He pulled out this D-28 and it sounded kind of magical, so I took it home and I started playing my songs on it and it just felt really, really good. It felt like this is the path that I needed to be on. I committed to it completely.”



PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRAMALL

What was this recording experience like compared with when you first laid these tracks down?

“I think I’ve changed tremendously. I’m a lot more disciplined, and working with Joe Henry [long-standing producer] has really sharpened me up. When I go into the studio I’m looking to cut three or four songs in a day. But early on I’d just work on one song – that’s because I was in my early 20s and you do a lot of messing around. The second album [*Map Or Direction*, 2009] I made out of the back of a truck driving around Texas and Mississippi, and that was a completely wild situation. The third record [*Great Lakes*, 2013] was recorded in a dark, damp studio in North Wales and I didn’t yet have the kind of insight that I have now.

“I understand a lot more about the technical side of things. I can work a lot faster because I’m a lot more proficient with my guitar and songs. Nowadays, I’m looking to work quickly. I keep it light-hearted, but I make sure that I’m never recording anything more than three times or four times because if you sail past it, you’re never going to see it again. So move on. Keep moving on and keep it fresh and inspiring.” **[DM]**

John called in a little help from his musical friends, with The Staves, Siobhan Miller, John McCusker and Lisa Hannigan joining him on the re-recordings



John Smith’s new album, *Gatherings*, is available now via Commoner Records

<https://johnsmithjohnsmith.com>



All That Jazz

Neville Marten catches up with Essex jazz-rock legends, and gets wiped out by selfie hunters at Ronnie Scott's with Guthrie Govan

Around 40 years ago I used to go and watch a fantastic jazz-rock band in Essex called C Level. This set of amazing musicians included Alan Clarke on drums (who I later played alongside in country singer Diane Solomon's band), Alan Forman grooving on bass, Gary Plumley wailing on tenor sax, the devastating keyboardist Pete Jacobsen who's sadly no longer with us, and good friend Tony Sandeman playing insane guitar. These guys were young, eager, excited about the music, pushing technical boundaries, full of youthful exuberance and relished showing off to dazzled audiences across the county.

I tell you this as just this week I visited Southend-On-Sea to watch C Level 2. Their latest incarnation still features Alan and Tony, but on sax was the stunning Zak Barrett (who also plays with Guthrie Govan in The Fellowship), brilliant bassist Terry Gregory, and on keys

compete." He's right. Even Zak, who with The Fellowship is an extremely 'notey' player, fell in with this more relaxed approach. Not to say there weren't blistering technical displays; they abounded, and that's partly why the event was so well attended by Essex's jazz lovers. But I'm sure more thought went into the note choices, with less 'showboating' in evidence but respect for each other clear for all to see.

The Govanor

Actually, it's been something of a jazz-rock month, as the week before C Level 2 I attended Ronnie Scott's in Soho to see bassist Shez Raja featuring Guthrie Govan on guitar and Soweto Kinch on saxophone. It was a far higher-octane affair than the Southend gig, and the band and its individuals were on fire. Guthrie, naturally, was stunning. It's almost unfathomable the level of musical ingenuity and technical mastery that he possesses. And he just keeps getting better.

I texted Guthrie before the show to let him know I was attending the first of the evening's two houses, and went out to grab a few words between sets. He started to tell me how he was struggling with a new hi-tech gear setup for dates with Hans Zimmer in November and December. Trouble is, such a legend is he now that our words were continually disrupted by selfie hunters, whom GG handled with his usual good grace. He did, though, say to one guy, "I'm trying to talk to *thiiiiis maaaaan!*" We'd not spoken in person for some years and it became so frustrating that I told him, "Break a leg" for the second house, wished him good luck for tomorrow's Hans Zimmer rehearsal and bade him farewell.

The selfie mob aside, it was great to catch up with all my fine musical friends, and to watch them being appreciated by packed houses in both the capital and the provinces. And while all these guys have toured the world with big star names, they remain my local legends. Any players near you that deserve a *Guitarist* shout out? Let us know, and I'll see you next month. **G**

"I'm sure more thought went into the note choices, with less 'showboating' in evidence but respect for each other clear for all to see"

the effortlessly musical Sam Edwards (whom I worked alongside for a Marty Wilde tour or two).

It was a fantastic night. The guys played superbly, just as I was expecting. But they are somehow mellower and more mature and not needing to show how good they are because that fact was established decades ago. Their musical interplay was a thing to behold, with lots of eye contact, nods, smiles and a genuine appreciation of each other's playing.

I had gone with a group of muso friends, two of whom had, like me, been followers of the original line-up. In talking about this more mellow delivery, my mate said, "Think of when Ry Cooder discovered the Buena Vista Social Club guys in Cuba. Some of them were in their 70s, but Cooder saw in them this quiet ability, the assuredness of age and the lack of any need to

The Peavey Classic has proved itself to be a solid, stylish choice for the stage

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH Classic Tones

What? Peavey Classic 30 II 112 TW **Where seen?** thomann.co.uk **Price?** £744

My friend Tony in C Level 2 used a minimal setup, his Epiphone Sheraton through a pedal or two into a Peavey Classic 30 amp. My own first 'name' amp was a Peavey Classic 50 4x10, David Mead had a Delta Blues 2x10, and 'Snail's-Pace Slim' of The Hamsters was a Deuce fan. With 30 watts of switchable EL84 power driving a single Celestion Midnight 60 speaker, a straightforward three-band EQ section, channel and boost push switches, spring reverb and effects loop, it's a great little amp. It also comes with a two-button footswitch and slip cover included (well done, Peavey!), and evocative 50s-style tweed finish. It looks cracking, Peavey's reliability record is enviable, plus it'll break neither the bank nor your back!





Taking 'Stock

Alex Bishop explores the art of repairing the notorious guitar headstock break, and why it's different every time

They say you reap what you sow. A few months ago one of my videos of a repaired headstock break started doing the rounds online, and I guess it was no surprise to see a glut of guitars shipped to me from various parts of the country over the following weeks – all were in need of some kind of headstock fix. Interestingly, no two breaks were exactly the same and I realised that my approach on each one would have to be different.

I was taught that in order to aspire to a perfect repair job, one has to understand the source of the problem. In the case of headstock breaks, the commonest cause can be anything from a friend's misplaced derrière to a reckless baggage handler. It's pressure from behind the headstock that is far worse than impact from in front, since the strings contribute by pulling the headstock forwards. Most guitars have headstocks grafted to the neck by a scarf joint – a simple angled cut through the timber that relies solely on the power of glue to keep everything together.

The easiest breaks to fix exhibit as a hairline crack through the wood, following in the direction of the grain. One-piece necks without a scarf joint make the manufacturing process easier. However, the grain direction of the wood makes the headstock inherently weaker. The right kind of glue (aliphatic resin glue) squeezed right up into the opened crack and a well-placed clamp are normally all that's required to get things back on the road.

Everything changes as soon as the front headstock veneer is compromised; with a completely detached headstock, a glue and clamp approach alone simply won't work. On most guitars there is a very thin (0.5mm) piece of plastic, fibreboard or – if you're lucky – wood spanning the scarf joint, adding lots of strength due to its large surface area. If this is sheared through then a thicker 2mm hardwood veneer is required. At this point, we are deep in the realms of skilled woodworking: material must be removed from the face of the headstock so the final headstock thickness is the same as before or else the tuners won't fit.

The challenge gets harder when the break is not only through the front veneer but so bad there are small pieces missing and cross-grain damage. Wood is an incredible material, but it does not do so well once messily broken across the grain. In this instance, I go for a belt-and-braces approach by adding a rear veneer, which most guitars don't tend to have. The force from the strings actually pulls a rear veneer into tension, so it is significantly stronger than the front veneer, which deals with a compression force. This is especially helpful when the break runs through or near the tuner holes, as the rear veneer will also hide a lot of the damage – very handy when working with natural finishes.



Break Point

Unfortunately, it's possible to experience even worse scenarios than this. The most difficult breaks to fix are cross-grain breaks that are close to the nut, far from the tuner holes. This is an especially weak area on many guitars because truss rods require the excavation of a lot of valuable wood from this part of the neck. Most rear veneers won't reach far enough to make a significant contribution to the strength of the join, so

A pair of immaculately fitting hardwood splints provides support for the neck and headstock across this break

“Wood is an incredible material, but it does not do so well once messily broken across the grain. Here, I go for a belt-and-braces approach”

a different approach is needed here. In this instance, I installed a pair of hardwood splints deep into the neck and headstock, comfortably spanning the join. This also removes most of the original wood from the neck either side of the truss rod channel in the process. These splints have to be a perfect fit: too tight and they may push all the glue out; too loose and they will separate under tension.

Once everything is structurally sound, the difficult job of refinishing begins. Natural finishes present the biggest challenge in this process, relying on skilful craftsmanship during the glue-up to hide any evidence of the trauma. In the end, however, every headstock break tells a story – but each careful repair gives the guitar a second life. **G**



Fit To 'Burst

Last month, **Jamie Dickson** got up close with seven original 'Bursts from '58 to '60 in London. Here's what was learned...

It's not often we get to play with one genuine vintage Les Paul Standard built between 1958 and 1960. However, when *Guitarist* partnered up with Gibson Garage London in October for an evening event celebrating the 'Burst, we were surprised – and even slightly terrified – that, with the help of friendly owners, we were able to assemble not one but seven of the things for the evening event attended by a packed room of guitar lovers.

On hand to show off how these landmark instruments sounded was stellar bluesman Aynsley Lister, who – like the true gent he is – had just come back off an exhausting European tour at two in the morning the night before, but still turned up to thrill the audience with his playing. And, to be fair, the tools he had to use weren't too shabby. Lined up on stage were two '58s; an ex-Mick Taylor '59; the celebrated and stunning beautiful 'Minnesota' '59 'Burst; the equally well-known 'Grainger' – a 1960 'Burst made to '59 spec; and a Bigsby-equipped 1960. Oh, and we also had a '54 Goldtop on hand for good measure and to compare how the Patent Applied For pickups of the 'Bursts sounded versus the soapbar P-90s they replaced. Finally, we had a very special 'guest' guitar to show off, thanks to Bonhams auction house – Gary Moore's celebrated 'Stripe' '59 'Burst.

As Gibson was our host for the evening, we selected a very nice Mesa Fillmore 50 combo to play the 'Bursts through. Powered by a pair of 6L6s, this amp has a nice clear voice with just enough suppleness and juice to bring guitars to life. And, in very general terms, it isn't a million miles from the Marshall Bluesbreaker combo of the 60s in that it isn't a high-gain amp but really sings when you push it a bit, either with the amp's volume control or with just a touch of drive from a dirt pedal, which is how Aynsley chose to use it.

Aynsley kicked off the night with a beautiful '58 'Burst that was in remarkably clean condition, with a still-vibrant cherry sunburst that hadn't faded much at all. The cherry colour that is especially vivid in '58s was created with a dye-based colourant with just a touch of blue added to the red to deepen its hue. The cherry of the sunburst was sprayed over a base coat of lacquer and yellow pigment-based colourant. We can differentiate pigment from dye-based colourants by the fact that pigments are composed of larger colourant particles than dyes. Crucially, the pigment-based yellow colourant of the base coat remained (along with the final nitro topcoat, which also yellows with age) much more resistant to fading than the cherry red dye,

Guitarist Aynsley Lister, left, played a bevy of original 'Bursts at 'The 'Burst Experience' event at Gibson Garage London on 10 October with incredible flair, while editor Jamie and Nev Marten (right) listened in something close to awe



hence the phenomenon of 'Unbursts' – original Les Paul Standards whose whole top is a uniform honey colour with no visible cherry tones left.

Interestingly, when Gibson changed its finish formula to a non-dye-based colourant in 1960 to avoid issues with fading, it also dropped the blue component of the 'cherry' sunburst, meaning many of the 1960 'Bursts had a distinctively different tone to the finish, which some have called 'Tangerineburst'.

Hearing Aynsley play the two '58s so well – the second of which belongs to *Guitarist* contributor Bob Wootton – we marvelled in that fierce howl from the Patent Applied For pickups that miraculously seems to have plenty of bite without any frequencies that hurt the ears. It's simply one of the most thrilling sounds there is. Prior to the event, we ran into Stuart Robson of Sunbear Pickups who explained that original pickups were predominantly made with Alnico II and Alnico V magnets, with a smattering of III and IV – with the latter two magnet types being possibly a little more common in 1957 when the Patent Applied For was newly debuted on Goldtops. He added that, as hand-wound pickups, the output of Patent Applied For units varied – but surviving examples, in his experience, never put out more than 9k and never less than 7k.



Mighty Minnesota

Moving onto the '59s, starting with the ex-Mick Taylor 'Burst followed by 'Minnesota', it was interesting that Aynsley didn't feel a significant difference in the neck profiles, which have the reputation of being somewhat clubbier on the '58s than on '59. Sound-wise, too, that sweet but savage bite from the Patent Applied For pickups was fairly consistent, with slight differences between those four guitars – for example, the ex-Mick Taylor '59 stood out as having the most chewy, dirty voice whereas the first '58 Aynsley played was full of crisp but warm clarity.

Above: Surprisingly few original 'Bursts were made with any figuring in the top and even fewer survive with a nice vivid cherry sunburst – making 'Minnesota' a rare (and historic) beauty indeed

Below left: A 1960 LP Standard with Bigsby – the neck was slimmer and the finish a different hue, but the tone was pure 'Burst

"Of the 1,200 'Bursts made, less than a third had any visible figuring in the top at all... making 'Minnesota' a unicorn among unicorns"

One way in which the 'Bursts did vary, as alluded to before, was in the colouration and level of figuring in their tops. Today, most Gibson reissues have a degree of flame or other figuring in the top, and it has become part of the mystique of the 'Burst. But in reality, of the 1,200 or so 'Bursts that are estimated to have been made between 1958 and 1960, less than a third had any visible figuring in the top at all, and only a very small percentage had strong flames or other vivid figuring in the maple cap, making 'Minnesota', which has a stunningly figured top, a unicorn among unicorns at our 'Burst event. Nonetheless, by rights, most 'Burst reissues should be plain tops – but that's not quite how popular taste and market forces work!

The other strongly (if irregularly) figured top '59 we had to show off on the night was Gary Moore's famous 'Stripe' Les Paul, and while it wasn't possible to play it, Claire Tole-Moir, head of popular culture and science sales at Bonhams, explained its fascinating backstory and key place in the Final Encore sale of Gary's guitars taking place on 20 November. The imperfectly symmetrical top on 'Stripe' reminds us that, back in the late 50s, even fancy maple 'boards weren't necessarily put together with perfect bookmatching as a priority. We might also note, in passing, that 'Stripe' outlived 'Greeny' in Moore's





Gibson Garage London was the very apt venue for the 'Burst Experience' event and there were many beautiful creations of the Murphy Lab on show besides the original 'Bursts' – revealing how close Gibson's aged reissues now get to the legend

collection, lending weight to the notion that Moore felt 'Stripe' was the better all-round performer and, ultimately, the 'keeper' of the two, despite the tremendous sentimental attachment 'Greeny' must have held for him.

Finally (well, not quite finally – but we'll come to that shortly), Aynsley was passed the Bigsby-equipped 1960 Les Paul Standard owned by collector Peter Hall. This time, he did remark on the difference in neck profile, noting that as a player with big hands that slimmer necks weren't necessarily more comfortable. Sonically, however, the guitar still had that evocative, jagged song in its voice that united all the 'Bursts' we played that night. We know for a fact that not all 'Bursts' were great-sounding, but the surviving examples we played at Gibson Garage London certainly lived up to the legend.

"The fierce howl from the Patent Applied For pickups miraculously seems to have plenty of bite without any frequencies that hurt the ears"

So what was the surprise of the night? Well, as a wildcard, owner Paul Johns also brought along his 1954 Goldtop with soapbar P-90s, whose sound many believe the Patent Applied For pickup was based upon (minus the hum). That legend wasn't quite borne out as the '54s P-90s proved a touch pokier and plummier played side by side with the 'Bursts' – but Aynsley pronounced that it was his favourite sound of the night! So much for progress...

All in all, it was a great night and we'd like to thank everyone who came along, plus our gracious host, Gibson Garage London, who provided the perfect setting for our 'Burst Experience'; Bonhams for sharing Gary's Moore's incredible '59; and, of course, the very kind 'Burst owners who made it possible to share these sounds at glorious volume on the night: Andrew Raymond, Peter Hall, Simon White, Paul Johns and Bob Wootton. Let us know if you think we should do another one in future and maybe we will gather the 'Bursts to ride again... **G**

Right: Aynsley doesn't often play Les Pauls, but you'd never have guessed it from his blazing performance. Do check out his brilliant, current album, *Along For The Ride*

www.gibson.com / www.bonhams.com

THREE TO GET READY

A trio of 'Bursts on a budget



Epiphone IGC 1959 Les Paul Standard £959

Part of the compelling Inspired By Gibson Custom range, this neatly built Lester (pictured in Factory Burst) boasts a very capable pair of Gibson Custombucker pickups, the famous 'open book' R9 headstock shape, CTS pots, 50s-style wiring and a host of other top-drawer bits at a tempting price.



Gibson Les Paul Studio Figured Top £1,699

Okay, it's not a reissue and doesn't even have binding on the body, but this Bourbon Burst finish option on the Les Paul Studio Figured Top looks the part nonetheless. With a brace of Burstbucker Pro pickups and an AA-grade maple top (not the AAA-grade veneer over a maple top of the Epiphones), it's a sharp-looking 'Burst-a-like and a 'real' Gibson.



Epiphone Les Paul Standard 50s £559

It may not have the Gibson-style headstock, but this capable and attainably priced Epiphone is a decent choice for an inexpensive 'Burst-style LP, featuring Epiphone Probucker pickups, a long-tenon neck joint and CTS pots. The fingerboard is laurel, not rosewood, but buy it in this Washed Cherry Sunburst finish and it'll get the job done with aplomb.



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Chord Names: maj9 (PART 1)

In the first of this mini-series, **Richard Barrett** gives you the essential tools to understand the world of complex chords

When naming complex extended chords, there are various conventions and abbreviations. These are helpful when reading or writing a chord chart, but can seem like mysterious jargon to the uninitiated. The aim of this article is to demystify some of these terms and give you tools to name the weird and wonderful chords you may encounter on the fretboard. The maj9 chord is a helpful example because it demonstrates how a complex extended chord can be described in concise terms.

Let's reverse-engineer a maj9 chord to start with: Root-3rd-5th-7th-9th. The 'maj' in maj9 refers to the 7th, though this is indeed a major chord. A minor chord with a maj7 is possible (see Example 5 for Amin/maj9), but maj9 is shorthand for a maj7 chord with a 9th. A regular 9th chord is: Root-3rd-5th-7th-9th (eg, A9, B9 and so on). As you can see, it contains a flat (not major) 7th. 9th chords are a common sight on chord charts, but it turns out they have an even more abbreviated name... **G**

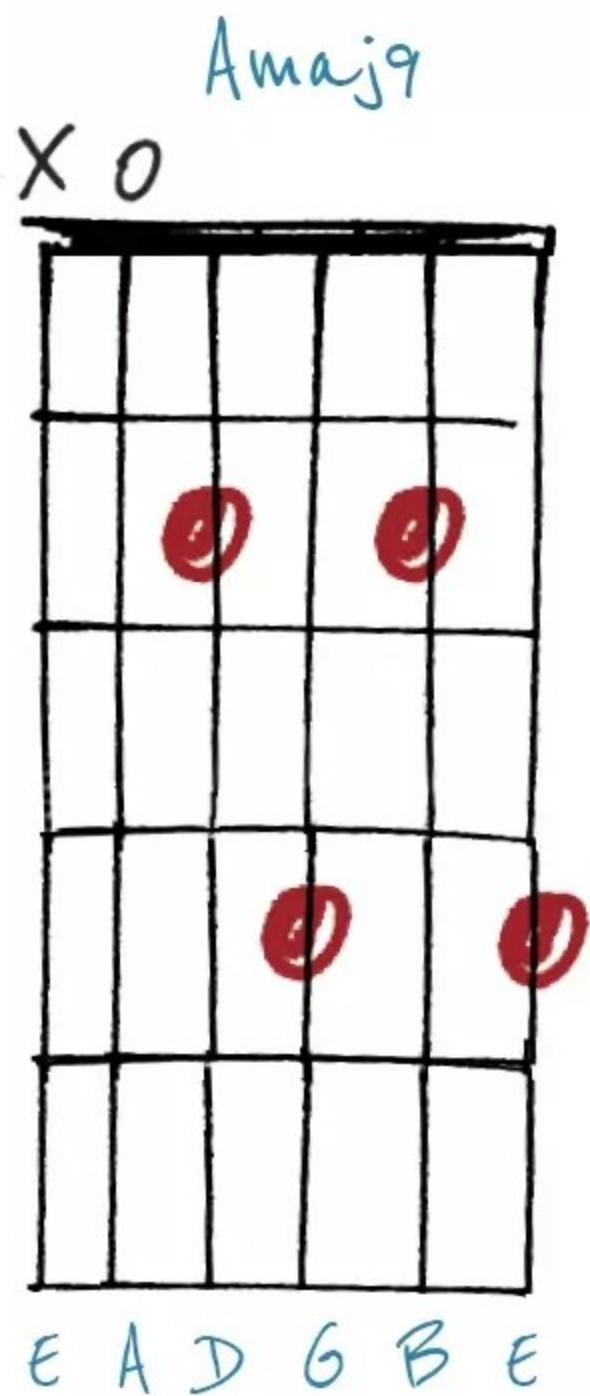


PHOTO BY PAUL NATHAN/GETTY IMAGES

Stevie Ray Vaughan used some beautiful extended chords on songs like *Riviera Paradise*

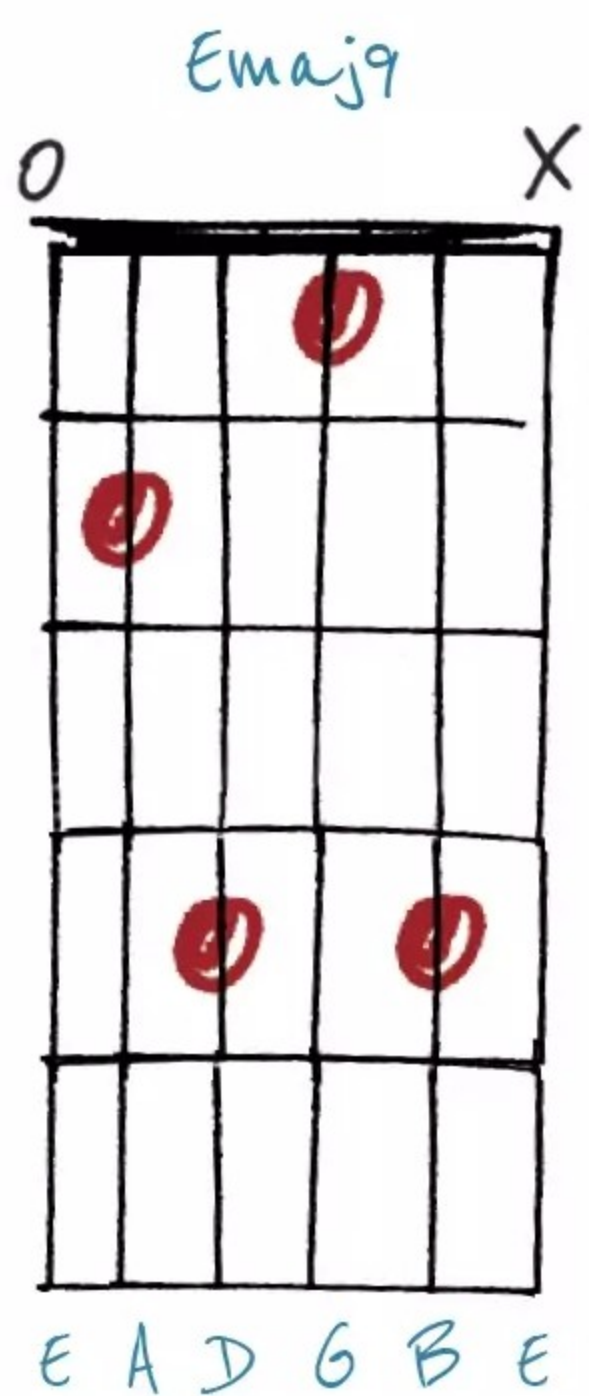
Example 1

Though this Amaj9 features the open fifth string as its root, this can be omitted to move to any key – albeit relying on the bass or another instrument to provide the root. It isn't always easy to visualise the structure on the fretboard, but the 5th (E), 9th (B), 3rd (C#) and major 7th (G#) appear on the fourth through to first strings respectively.



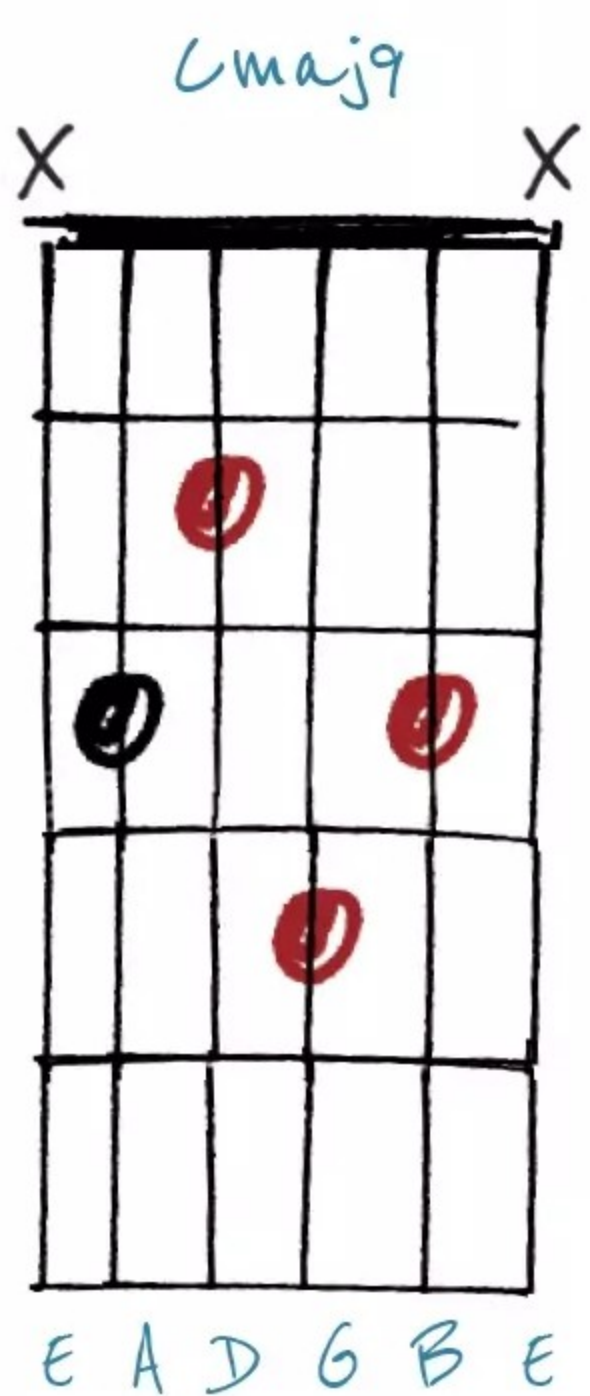
Example 2

A little bit of a stretch at first, this Emaj9 can be moved to other keys, but you'll need to mute the sixth (E) string and let another instrument carry the root. Moving down through the fifth to second strings, we find the 5th (B), 9th (F#), 3rd (G#) and maj7th (D#).



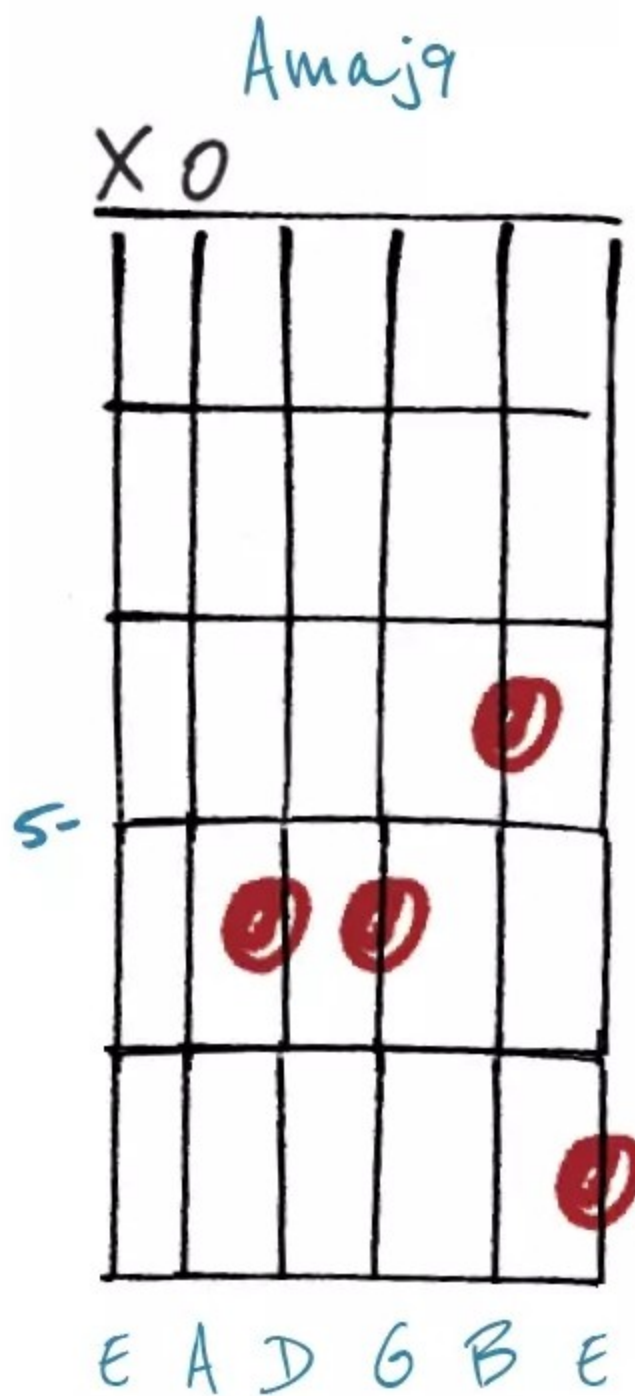
Example 3

Much loved by Stevie Ray Vaughn, this maj9 shape (in this case, C) is movable to any key, complete with root. Raking through the fifth to second strings, we find the root (C), 3rd (E), maj7th (B) and 9th (D). The 5th is omitted, which is quite common practice in extended chords, especially on the guitar.



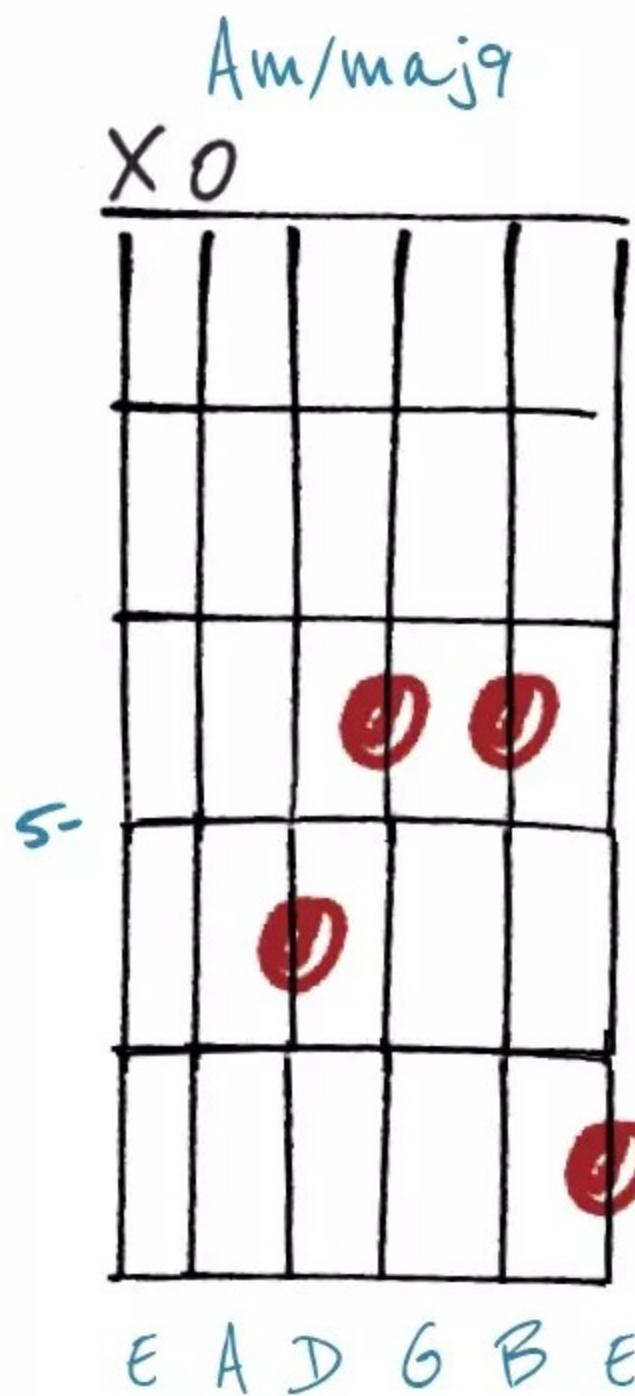
Example 4

Here's another maj9 voicing you may find useful. In this key (A), we can use the fifth string as the root, but to move to other keys you'll need another instrument to cover this. Having said that, you may find in a solo performance that the other chords will give sufficient context.



Example 5

Adding a maj7th and a 9th to a minor chord/triad gives the infamous 'Bond theme' style min/maj9. The only difference between this Amin/maj9 and the Amaj9 in Example 4 is that the 3rd (coincidentally, played on the third string) is flattened here to C natural, the minor 3rd, hence the name.





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Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.
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STAR LETTER

MAKING MEMORIES

Open mic sessions and pub sets are a great way to challenge yourself – and to have fun!



I read Neville Marten's piece, 'The Learning Curve', (Neville's Advocate, issue 530). I'm glad it's not just me who is having problems learning songs. Neville is an accomplished player, so it was encouraging to hear he has difficulty getting them to stick. I am recently retired on medical grounds, due to a spinal condition and taking a pasting during Covid, which left me with breathing issues, and, for quite a while, some ridiculous brain fog.

Being a bedroom player for many years and enjoying jam

sessions with friends, I decided to throw my hat in the ring and perform at my friend Steve's open mic, held on the first Wednesday of the month at the Futurist Cinema, Kidderminster. It took me ages to get three basic songs down, but I did it, as well as playing harp on a couple of Steve's songs. It was great, and now my name is on the back wall of the stage, and the bucket list is ticked. But the buzz was infectious and I went back the following month to have a go at some open-D slide.

The point I'm making is I have learnt more in these last few months by challenging myself to perform a set, and consequently forcing myself to put the time in, and it's been an absolute joy. I realised I spent way too much time widdling about, and bouncing from one YouTube video to another without any focus.

I would encourage any budding musician to find a welcoming open mic where anyone can have a go. Then focus on learning a three-song set. Do this for a few months and do an accumulated practice now and again, and pretty soon you've got a gig-worth of songs.

Paul Perry

Congratulations on taking the plunge, Paul. We've long said that the best way to get the most enjoyment out of your guitars is to go and do a gig – any gig. It's what they're made for, after all. The feeling of accomplishment is thrilling and, as you've found, can be rather addictive. Plus, one very useful by-product is that the material tends to stick once it's been practised in earnest for a performance. To inspire you to further, you win this month's Star Prize



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STAR GUITARS

It was a pleasure to read Neville's latest column in issue 529, always an interesting read.

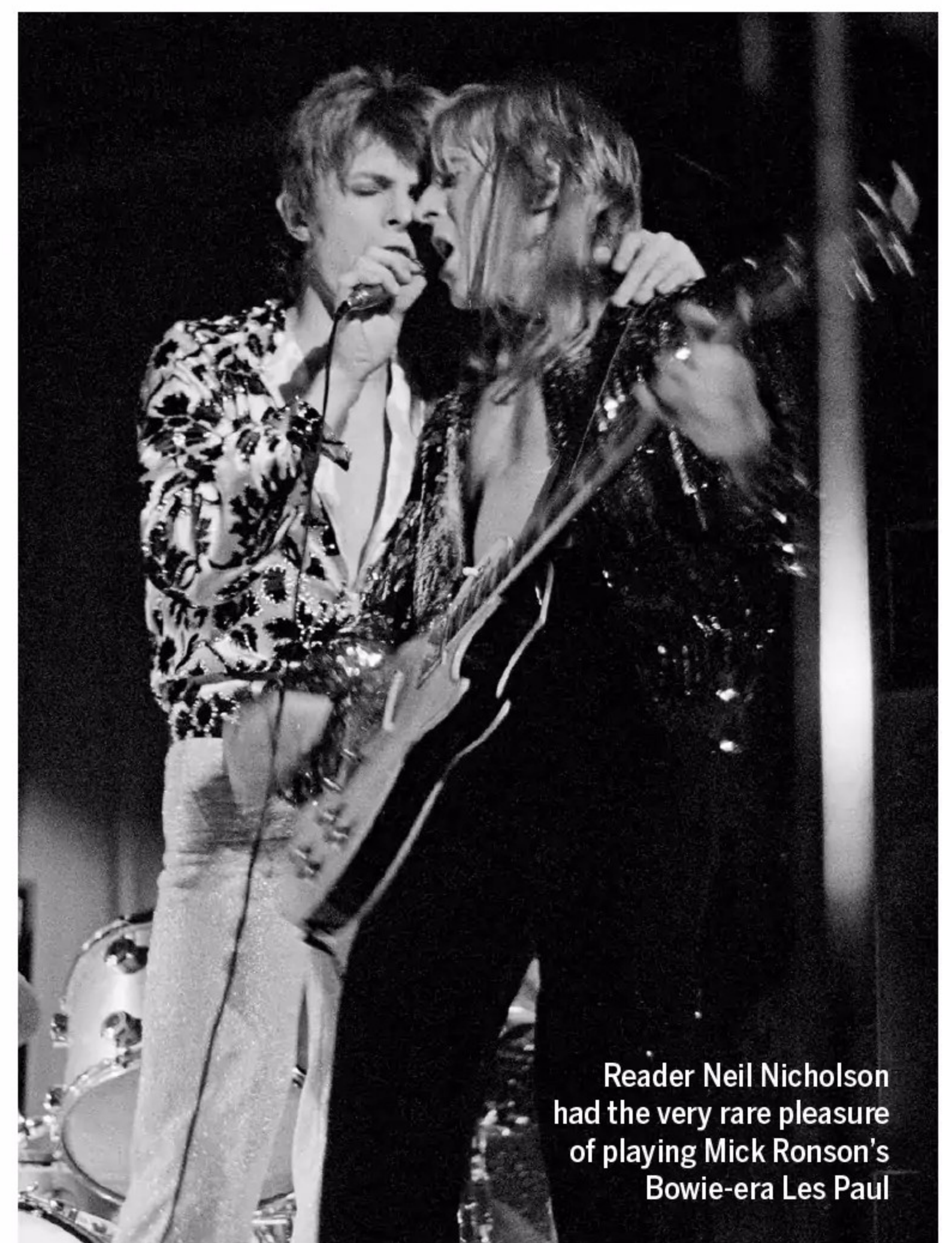
Regarding the question, 'What's the most famous guitar you've ever played?' I played Mick Ronson's Bowie-era Les Paul and he showed me how to play harmonics à la Jeff Beck, something I later developed and featured in a particular solo of a song I was playing around the time. Basically, Mick was very generous to 16-year-old me!

Neil Nicholson

Wow! That really is a special one to have had a go on – and how good of Mick to have taught you a few tricks on it as well. It's always a very special moment to play a famous guitar – you can't help thinking of the music made on it, the gigs played with it – and hoping maybe just a tiny pinch of that magic rubs off on you!

HH AMPS

I am in my 70s and still perform live, and remember the huge clean sounds from my Marshalls. Once I had an HH IC100 amp head, new, back in the day. It was extremely loud and I never got to give it its head. I have noticed them in recent pictures and articles



Reader Neil Nicholson had the very rare pleasure of playing Mick Ronson's Bowie-era Les Paul

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

of rock bands from the 70s: Gentle Giant, Thin Lizzy, T.Rex, etc. It was a game-changing amp, but the built-in distortion was a bit 'buzz saw'. I wonder what these bands used for their rock tones? Maybe an article/ interviews and video demo would be of interest?

Nigel Adams

Thanks for the memories of the mighty HH IC100, Nigel. There was a definite period of the late 60s and 70s when giants walked the earth in terms of loud, clean amps. Neville Marten, of this shire, often tells tales of his silver-panel Dual Showman rig that was loud enough to damage masonry, practically. We've also noted that Dave Brock of Hawkwind, who gets a huge live sound, has done so for many years via potent HH combos. And then, of course, there's the Fender Twin and – God help us – the terrifying 180-watt Fender Super Twin, which must have been louder than Concorde passing overhead.

But while volume and clarity is never a problem for such amps, getting a good drive tone often is. The aforementioned Dave Brock uses, of all things, an early Line 6 Pod to get his big, monolithic distortion tones live and, never forget, the volume levels of a big gig (especially in the 70s) will make any large amp begin to operate in its sweet spot, even a solid-state one. As drive pedals were rather less common then, we'd have to assume a little bit of fuzz was used – T.Rex certainly comes to mind there – but we'd also like to be sure the HH in such photos was really being used for guitar, not pressed into service for bass or keys.

Although the HH model you cited is solid-state, it's worth adding for the owners of powerful valve amps, that Orange's amp design guru Adrian Emsley thinks the high, clean headroom of such amps doesn't allow for power valve distortion to happen so easily as he believes that this (added to simpler distortion from the little preamp valves) is what creates a truly complex deep, amp-overdrive tone. If we were unable to turn a high-wattage amp up to apocalyptic volume levels, we'd ideally want to wake up the amp's power stage a bit with a boost that flatteringly colours the midrange, such as Xotic's EP Booster, and then run that into a good, amp-like overdrive pedal – something like a Nobels ODR-1 or a King Of Tone, or something of that nature, with the gain set not too high. That way, by blending the push of the boost pedal with a little extra level, gain and break-up from the overdrive we can begin to evoke some of that deeper, harmonically richer drive tone associated with cranked amps without actually deafening people with the full volume capability of your clean machine. Add a little bit of reverb and we think you'll have quite a credible drive tone that way, especially when the amp is turned up a little louder.



CALL OUT FOR PUPLETT CUSTOMERS

As many of your readers will know, Bill Puplett sadly passed away in November last year after many years of luthiery for a significant client base, amateur to professional. The reason for my letter is that Bill's family wants to ensure that any instruments and parts held on behalf of clients are returned to their owners. To that end, if you believe that you may have anything in his workshop, please contact me at chris.mobile@btinternet.com. I will liaise with you on behalf of the family to arrange collection.

Chris Pearce

Many thanks for sharing this information, Chris, and for opening a line of communication to any readers who may be in this position. Everyone at *Guitarist* will always remember Bill's outstanding contribution to British guitar and the care shown to his customers in this letter does his memory credit.

Hawkwind's Dave Brock is one proponent of the mighty sound of HH amps, fondly remembered by reader Nigel Adams



The late Bill Puplett (far right) with Johnny Marr and engineer John Moore in 2011. Bill's family is keen to reunite the remaining guitars and parts in Bill's workshop with their owners, so please contact Chris (details above) if you believe this concerns you

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



ACE FREHLEY

1951 – 2025

The consummate showman and KISS's 'Spaceman' guitarist dies aged 74, following a fall at his home

Words Andrew Daly

ACE FREHLEY

April 1951–October 2025

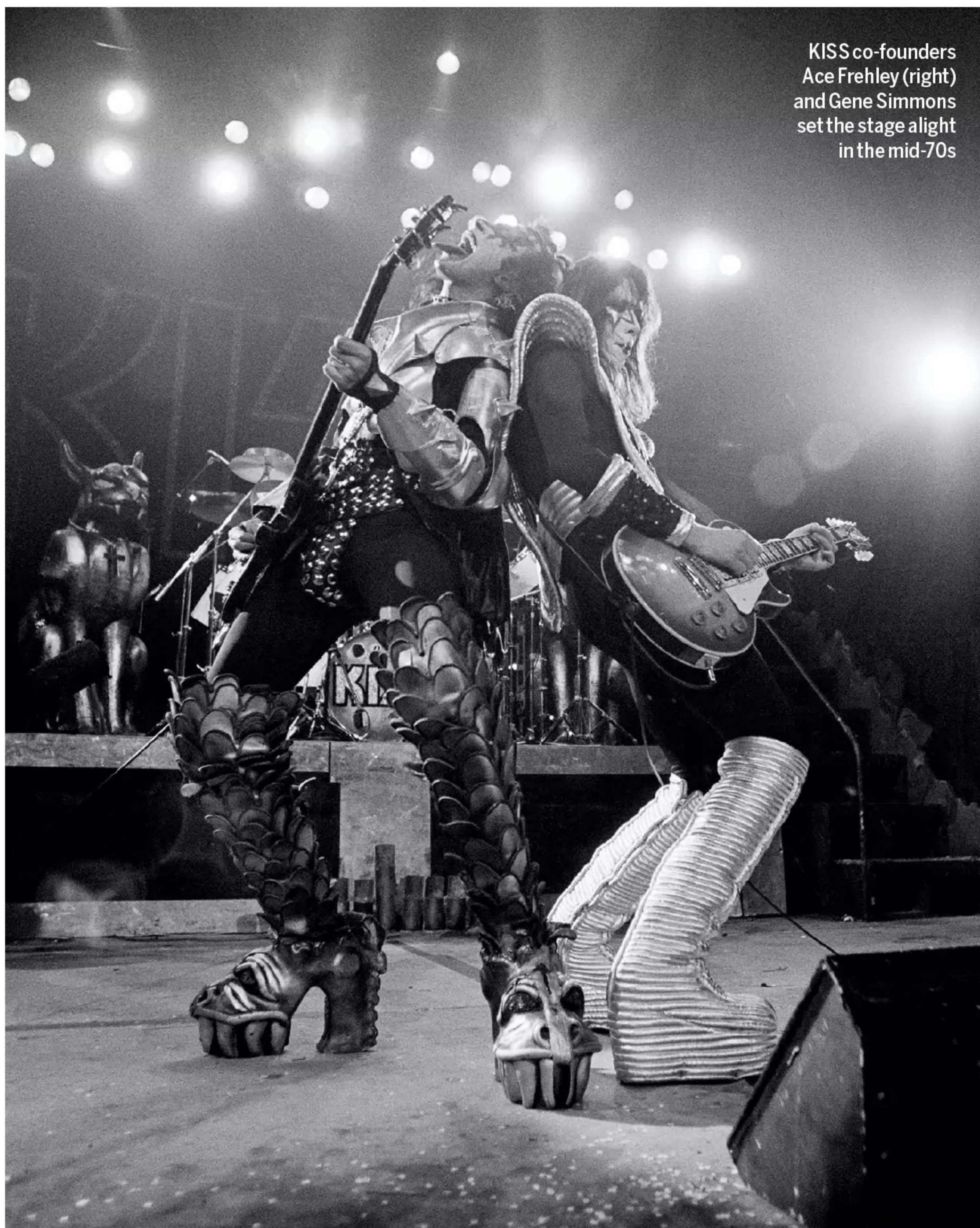
Paul Daniel Frehley was born on 27 April 1951 in the Bronx, New York. He had a tough childhood, leading to him joining a street gang in his early teens. If not for his love for British Invasion players such as Page, Beck and Clapton, life might have been very different for Frehley.

Frehley picked up the nickname ‘Ace’ during adolescence, reportedly because he was a bit of a ladies’ man. What he also picked up was the rock ‘n’ roll scene, leading him to drop out of school and pursue the possibility of music full-time. By his early 20s, Frehley was a New York City cabbie. It was around this time that he saw a now iconic ad in *The Village Voice*, which read: “Lead guitarist wanted with flash and ability. Album out shortly. No time wasters please. Paul 268-3145.”

Frehley responded. An audition for the then-unnamed band eventually made him famous after the group was renamed KISS. But before that could happen, Frehley – who walked into his audition on East 23rd Street wearing one red sneaker and one orange – had to connect with his would-be bandmates, Gene Simmons, Peter Criss and Paul Stanley. He did. And KISS was born.

After joining KISS in late 1972, Frehley designed the band’s iconic lightning bolt logo, his Spaceman make-up design, and lent a hand to Stanley’s Starchild design, too. These contributions, along with his off-the-beaten-path style, gave KISS the proverbial ‘it’ factor.

Sadly, this didn’t help KISS, who rattled off three records after signing with Neil Bogart’s Casablanca label: 1974’s debut



KISS co-founders Ace Frehley (right) and Gene Simmons set the stage alight in the mid-70s

PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

“Without [Ace], I don’t know whether I would’ve ever wanted to play guitar. KISS was the supernova that made me light up” **TOM MORELLO**

KISS, *Hotter Than Hell* from that same year and 1975’s *Dressed To Kill*. While it’s true that songs like the Frehley-penned *Cold Gin* and the sizzling *Deuce* were classics in the making, at the time people didn’t get it.

But things changed after a last-ditch effort to save KISS and Casablanca manifested in 1975’s live album for the ages, *Alive!*. Speaking to *Guitar World* in one of his last interviews in 2025, Frehley said of *Alive!*, “We felt that our studio

albums were good, but they didn’t capture the essence of our concerts. I think *Alive!* did. And a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon.”

Alive! vaulted KISS to platinum-level status and made Frehley a young guitar god overnight. The only problem was that Frehley had developed a nasty drinking habit, making him unreliable during the recording of 1976’s *Destroyer*.

Destroyer’s producer, Bob Ezrin, wasn’t having it. “Sometimes, I showed up late

because I had a hangover from the night before,” Frehley told *Guitar World* in 2024. “Everybody knows I was an alcoholic. Bob was a guy who liked to get things done quickly.”

Destroyer was another hit. More success followed via 1976’s *Rock And Roll Over*, and 1977’s *Love Gun*, the latter of which featured *Shock Me*, a song with a killer solo. What’s more, it was Frehley’s first-ever lead vocal. *Shock Me* gave Frehley confidence, tempting him to leave the band. But KISS was a money-making machine and that machine wanted him in place. This led to a break, marked by four self-titled ‘solo’ albums under the KISS members’ names in 1978.

KISS went disco in ’79 with *Dynasty*, tried their hand at power-pop in 1980 via *Unmasked*, and decided to make a prog

ACE FREHLEY

April 1951–October 2025



record in '81 with *Music From 'The Elder'*. But Frehley was still unhappy. This led to him leaving KISS in '82, before the *Creatures Of The Night* sessions.

Frehley's solo career failed to launch until '87, when Megaforce Records' Jon Zazula and Eddie Trunk took a chance on him. The early returns were good, with 1987's *Frehley's Comet* nearly going gold on the strength of *Rock Soldiers*, but Frehley's demons were apparent throughout.

Second Sighting and *Trouble Walkin'*, which came out in '88 and '89 respectively, were strong, but Frehley's solo career subsequently went dormant in the 90s, save for live shows in smaller venues.

Things would change again, though, as his old pals in KISS reconnected with Frehley for a taping of MTV's *Unplugged* in 1995. The 90s hadn't been so kind to KISS, and the writing was on the wall for a reunion. This led to one of the biggest concert tours of 1996 to '97, which saw Frehley back on stage with Stanley, Simmons and Criss.

The vibes were immaculate early on, but issues with substance abuse and finances cropped up once more. Still, Frehley hung around for 1998's reunion album, *Psycho Circus*, and subsequent tour. But things were bad enough that, by 2000, a supposed Farewell Tour was announced.

The wheels came off here, too. Criss didn't make it across the finish line, though Frehley, who was reportedly succumbing to addiction behind the scenes, did. He quit KISS again in 2002, but didn't sober up

until 2006. This led to a strong solo career resurgence starting with 2009's *Anomaly* and sadly ending with 2024's *10,000 Volts*.

Toward the end of his life, Frehley was nothing but grateful, telling this writer in 2024: "I got rid of my demons. I used to be a bad drunk and did a lot of drugs. I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if I didn't get sober 17 years ago. When I talk to young musicians, I always tell them, 'Don't fall into the pits I did.'"

He was even open to smoothing things over with KISS, as he told *Guitar World* in August 2025: "I'm the kind of guy that never says 'never'. [But] at this point, I'm having too much fun doing my own thing. Maybe I'll get inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame as a solo artist!"

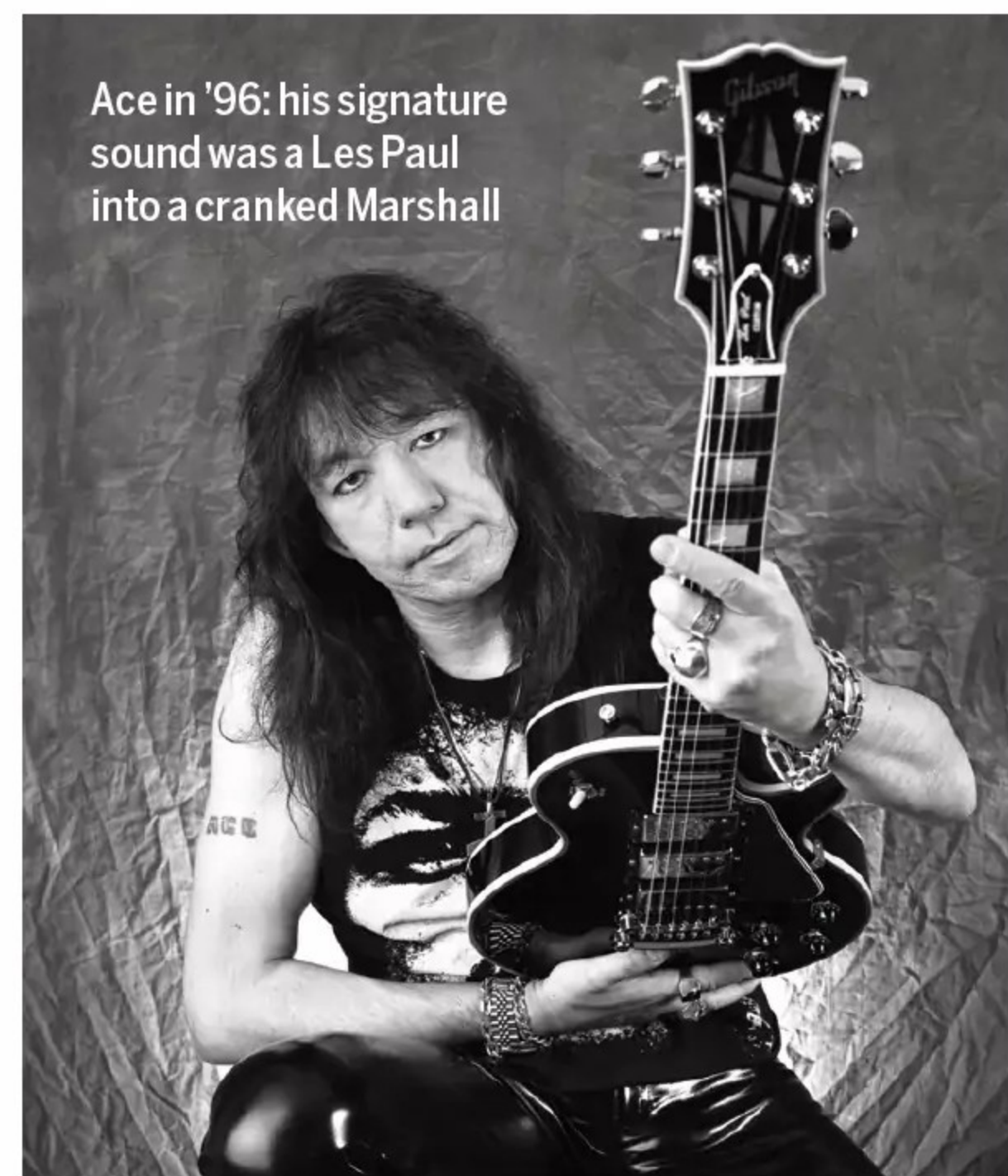


PHOTO BY ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"He inspired generations of guitarists, myself included, to chase greatness. It's been an honour to walk in his footsteps" **TOMMY THAYER**

Frehley clearly had more to do, which makes his death all the more tragic. After his passing, Simmons posted on X: "Our hearts are broken. Ace has passed on. No-one can touch Ace's legacy. I know he loved the fans. He told me many times. Sadder still, Ace didn't live long enough to be honored at the Kennedy Ctr Honors event in Dec. Ace was the eternal rock soldier. Long may his legacy live on!"

On Facebook, Stanley posted an old photo of himself and Frehley laughing, with the caption: "I remember 1974 being in my room at the Hyatt on Sunset in LA, and I heard someone playing deep and fiery guitar in the room next door. I thought, 'Boy, I wish *that* guy was in the band!' I looked over the balcony... He was. It was Ace. This is my favorite photo of us..."

Even Tommy Thayer, KISS's second Spaceman, posted across social media: "A legend who will never be forgotten. He inspired generations of guitarists, myself included, to chase greatness. It's been an honor to walk in his footsteps. His legacy will live forever. Rest in peace, Ace."

Looking back on Ace Frehley's career, the positives outweigh the negatives when it comes to the Space Ace. The Les Paul-toting guitarist left us with boatloads of fabulous music and solos, in and out of KISS. Ace jokingly told *Guitar World* in 2024: "If I'd known I was gonna influence thousands of players, I'd have practised harder." He inspired droves of young people to pick up a guitar, including Richie Kotzen, Mike McCready, Marty Friedman and Tom Morello, who recently said, in tribute: "Without him, I don't know whether I would've ever wanted to play guitar. It was totally formative. KISS was the supernova that made me light up." **G**



PHOTO BY ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

Following KISS's Farewall Tour of the early Noughties, Ace had enjoyed a thriving solo career



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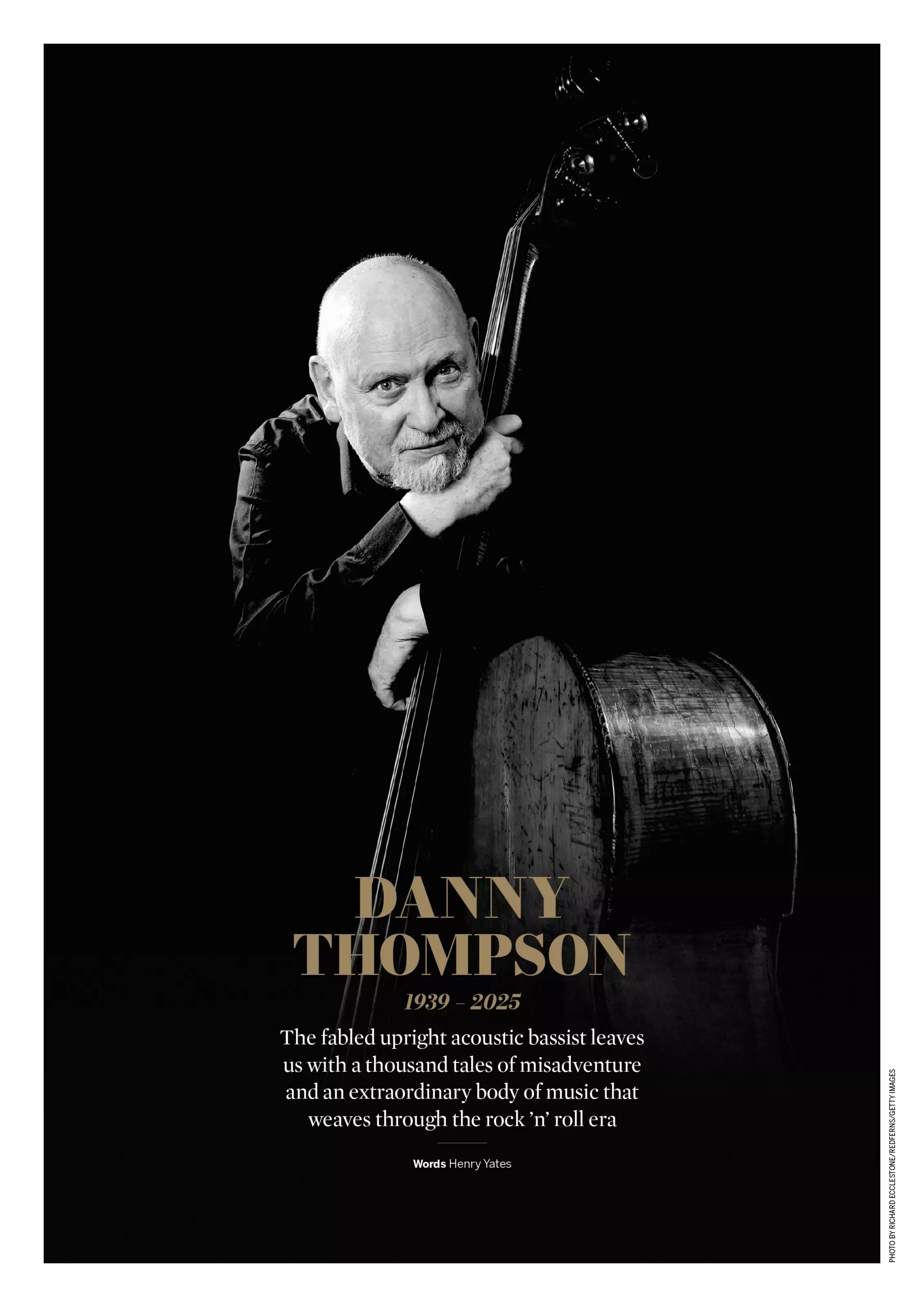


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DANNY THOMPSON

1939 – 2025

The fabled upright acoustic bassist leaves us with a thousand tales of misadventure and an extraordinary body of music that weaves through the rock 'n' roll era

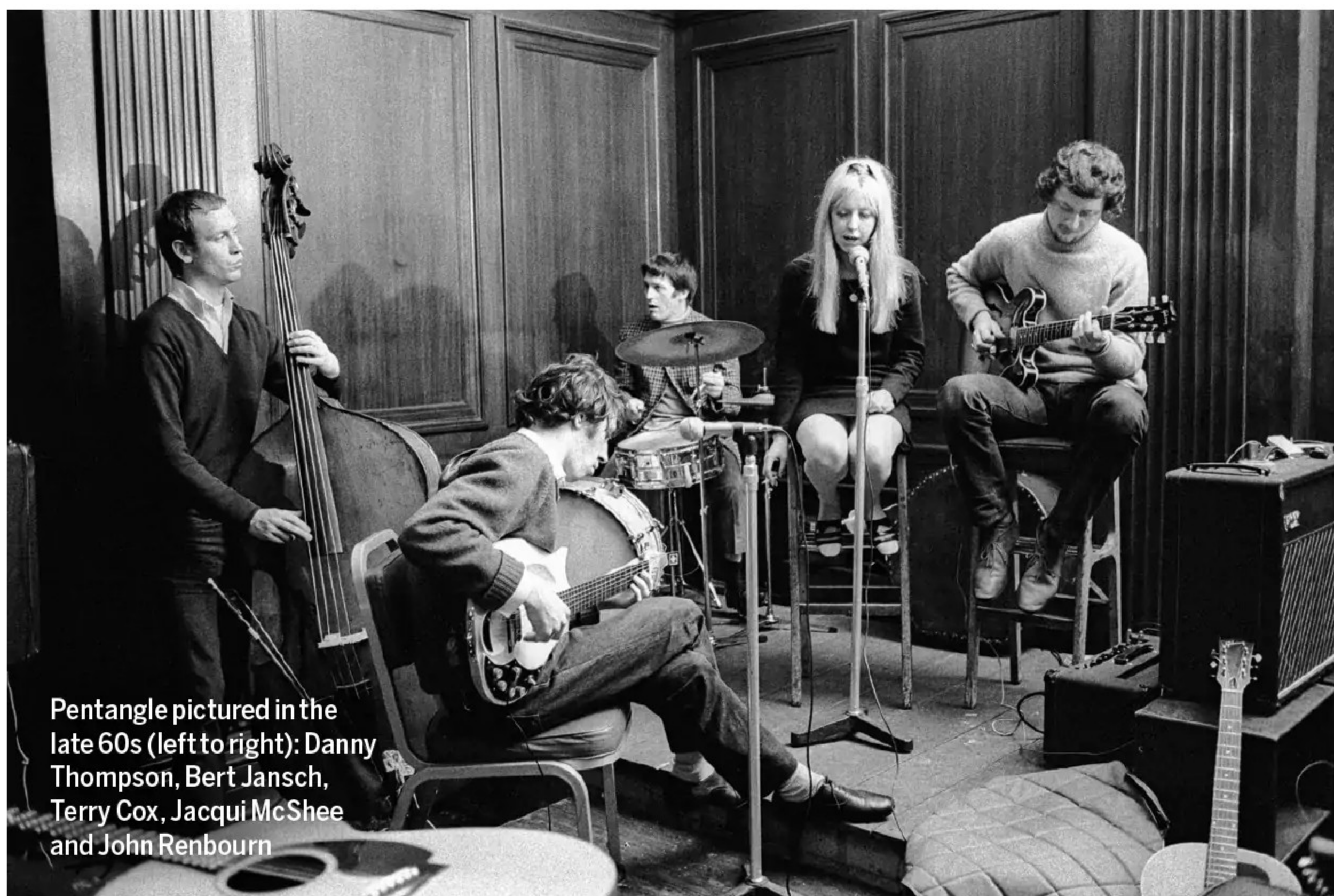
Words Henry Yates

DANNY THOMPSON

April 1939 – September 2025

First, a disclaimer: any attempt to exhaustively chronicle the life and times of the late Danny Thompson is a fool's errand. The talismanic British upright bassist – who died last month at the age of 86 – filled his years with music and misadventure on the grandest scale, lending the fluid throb of his instrument (a great brown barge nicknamed 'Victoria') to a head-spinning thicket of projects and collaborators.

It speaks to Thompson's versatility that fans have long debated not only the main event of his six-decade career, but even the genre he operated within. Should the headline be his provocative late-60s work with prog-folk iconoclasts Pentangle? The seminal *Five Leaves Left* (1969) and *Solid Air* (1973) albums recorded respectively with the ethereal Nick Drake and Thompson's fellow carouser, John Martyn?



Pentangle pictured in the late 60s (left to right): Danny Thompson, Bert Jansch, Terry Cox, Jacqui McShee and John Renbourn

PHOTO BY BRIAN SHUEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"I love the physical thing of holding a double bass and searching for the right note. To me, it's almost an animal thing" **DANNY THOMPSON**

Some will point to the belated solo jazz albums or late-period partnership with Richard Thompson (no relation). Still others – while claiming ignorance of Thompson himself – can't have missed the decade-straddling A-list sessions fairydusted by his lyrical low-end, from Rod Stewart's *Maggie May* (1971) and Kate Bush's *Hounds Of Love* (1985), to *Amplified Heart* (1994) by Everything But The Girl and Graham Coxon's *The Spinning Top* (2009). "Danny brought greatness," said the Blur guitarist, "to everything he played."

Thompson himself had to laugh during a 2012 interview with *Prog* magazine, as he thumbed through a back catalogue spanning from Cliff Richard's *Congratulations* to the *Thunderbirds* theme. "It is mad, isn't it? If you go folk or blues or jazz or rock, I've actually been there. And I'm still there."

Born in Devon but brought up kicking a ball against the tenements of post-war Battersea (he was briefly on the books for Chelsea), Thompson built his first bass aged 13 from a tea-chest and stolen piano wire. "I always wanted to be the best at whatever I did," he told Sid Smith. "I put up a sign above my door which said

'Practice'. So whenever I left the room, I'd see that sign and it'd remind me what I was meant to be doing."

Having met his own high standards, and with his national service out of the way, Thompson was soon known as a capable player and pragmatic freelancer. He played electric bass for the first and only time with Roy Orbison in 1963, before paying £5 for Victoria from "some old boy" and instantly warming to the challenge of feeling his way fretless through a piece. "I love the physical thing of holding a double bass and searching for the right note," he explained. "To me, it's almost an animal thing."

Filling his diary with Soho strip clubs, US army bases and studio work, the trial-by-fire forced him to become adaptable. "The phone would ring," he told interviewer Mike Barnes, "and it would be, 'Can you get to Olympic Studios for 10 till one, and then EMI for two to five?' They whack the music in front of you... You got three hours to do that piece and if you muck it up you've got an orchestra looking at you. It's frightening."

Weighing up his career in retrospect, it's clear Thompson naturally operated as a lone wolf, but there were periods when he seemed to crave the camaraderie of a

band. In the mid-60s, he lent his talents in the longer term to Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, and by 1967 he and that band's drummer Terry Cox joined Pentangle's original line-up, the bassist asserting himself even among the boggling guitar lines of Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. "Soon I had letters threatening me with death," he told Q of the experimental group's ruffling of folk-purist feathers, "for getting Bert to play through an amp."

As the decade turned, Thompson played beautifully on *Five Leaves Left* – try his propulsive contribution to *Three Hours* – but never understood Drake as a man ("I tried everything with Nick; I was horrible to him, I was nice to him, I was patronising to him, anything to try and get something out of him").

With Martyn, the bassist later confessed, he clicked a little too readily. The pair's under-the-fingernails talent and innate chemistry meant they could perform half-cut and still bring the house down (1976's *Live At Leeds*, Thompson reckoned, "was the high point and it was done drunk"). But by the late 70s, the bassist was a raging alcoholic and knew only a clean break would give him a chance of sobriety.

"We were all completely and utterly out of it," Thompson told *Prog* of his combustible brotherhood with Martyn. "Brandy and crème de menthe, I remember very well – Pernod and Irish whiskey was another one. People used to say, 'How on earth did you put up with

DANNY THOMPSON

April 1939 – September 2025



him?” I said, ‘How did he put up with me?’ It wasn’t one-sided.”

While Martyn never quite kicked his habit (and died in 2009), Thompson fired up his old competitive streak, pledging “that when I did give up the drink I was going to be the best at it”. But the bassist’s wild living had burned plenty of bridges and he credited Donovan’s invitation to play on 1981’s *Love Is Only Feeling* for pulling him out of the mire. “A lot of folkies were snotty about him, but he’s the one who got my confidence back in the early 80s.”

Thompson worked hard and fast after that, pinballing between projects for Bush (“Just a great creative process... she was definitely in control”) to David Sylvian (“I said, ‘What key is this in?’ and he said, ‘I don’t know.’ I said, ‘Not another guitar player who doesn’t know what chords he’s playing!’ But he was very sweet and we both laughed”).

Thompson even relished the challenge of communicating entirely through his fingers alongside the late Malian kora player Toumani Diabaté and Spanish flamenco duo Ketana, in the late-80s project Songhai. “It’s totally musical because we can’t talk to each other,” he told Q. “People call it world music, but it’s simply music from the heart. I listen to Toumani play and it’s instant.”

Given the demands on his time, perhaps it was understandable that Thompson took until 1987 to release his debut solo album. When it finally arrived, *Whatever* was as gloriously obtuse as his career to date: an Atlantic-crossing collision of English folk and Crescent City jazz, always anchored by the by-now roadworn double bass he held on the sleeve. “I’m so grateful that I’ve been able to make my own albums and show that what I love is all beautiful, soppy tunes,” he reflected in 1989. “Now it’s this open sound that I’m after, no drums and more space to hear the harmonies and melodies that are mostly English, without getting all nationalistic about it.”

“If I listen to some of the stuff I did in the early days, I think, ‘Blimey! I was all over that!’” he told *Prog* in 2010. “Whereas maturity brings a bit of simplicity. It’s harder to be simple. Hopefully, I’ve matured as a player. When people ask you to play on something, and they may be fans who’ve heard me on something, you go in and do something which you think is perfect for the song; but they’re expecting you to fly about like a demented lunatic because they’re paying what they think is good money for this bloke who has this unbelievable reputation.”

Witty, candid and self-deprecating, Thompson was quick to puncture any

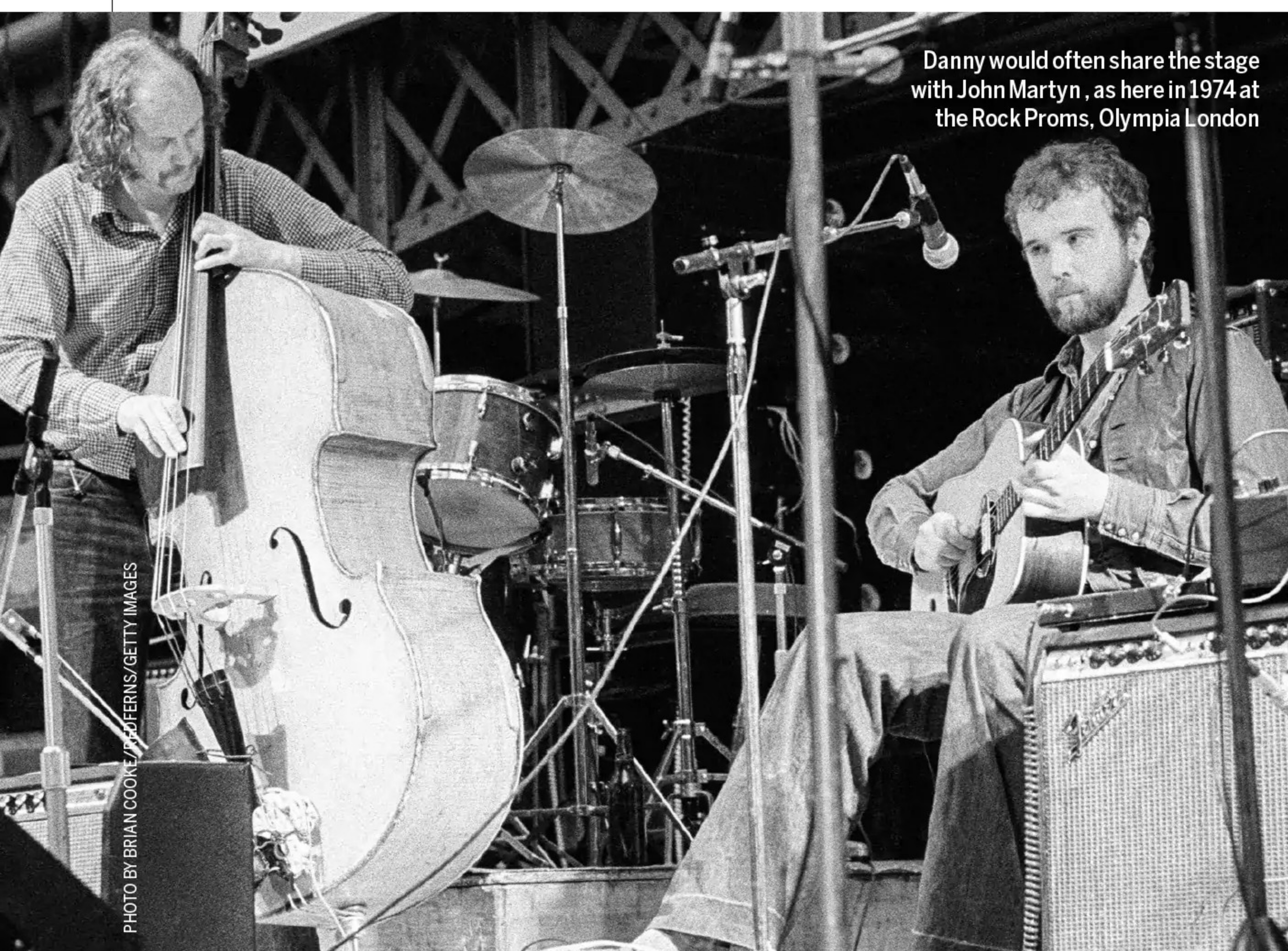
“He was an extraordinary individual, and his bass sounded like no other. It had a resonance and emotional dynamic all of its own” **JAKKO JAKSZYK**

Staying in high demand as a guest player until the wear-and-tear of age slowed him down, Thompson retained a keen sense of when to shine and when to support. He was well capable of virtuosity, but increasingly preferred to weigh each song and dig out sympathetic parts than spray meaningless flurries.

importance attributed to him (“I always knew my role – how could I play with Tubby Hayes and be big-headed?”). But that “unbelievable reputation” was writ large in the pan-generation, genre-crossing tributes paid to the bassist when news of his death broke on 23 September. “A player who served the song and who enriched the lives of every single person he met,” ran the official statement, “Danny was a force of nature.”

Thompson’s death feels like the sudden snipping of a thread that has weaved through the entire rock ‘n’ roll era. And while he was declared “such a fine musician” by fusion giant and 60s collaborator John McLaughlin, and as “one of the best upright bass players I’ve ever worked with” by Bowie producer Tony Visconti, perhaps his loss is best expressed by great friend and King Crimson guitar wizard Jakko Jakszyk, in a personal statement shared with *Guitarist*.

“He was an inspiring, warm, very funny and extraordinary individual, and his bass sounded like no other. It had a resonance and emotional dynamic all of its own. And all together it made a total one-off. And he himself seemed indestructible somehow. And so I thought he would live forever. I loved him dearly. And the loss is completely heartbreaking. I will always miss him.” **G**



Danny would often share the stage with John Martyn, as here in 1974 at the Rock Proms, Olympia London

PHOTO BY BRIAN COOKE/JOFFERINS/GETTY IMAGES

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KEN PARKER

1952–2025

One of the guitar world's most visionary makers, who took the archtop guitar to unimaginable levels and also created the radical Parker Fly, has died aged 73

Words Dave Burrluck

Ken Parker's archtop quest can be traced back to a 21 year old taking guitar lessons with a jazz player named Dick Longdale in Rochester, New York. He became fascinated by his teacher's Gibson L-12, an early 40s non-cutaway archtop that "sounded fantastic", Ken remembered in a video interview last year for D'Addario's Work/Shop feature. "I couldn't believe how great it sounded." He looked but couldn't find an archtop that sounded as good, so that's when he concluded that he'd have to make one. He also realised that the Gibson was an outlier, an exceptional guitar that left Ken to ask the question: "Why don't they all sound that good?"

By the mid-70s he'd built his first archtop in a Long Island workshop



Ken Parker pictured in his workshop in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 2024

PHOTO BY D'ADDARIO & CO. / SHAM HINCHEY

"I'd never seen anything like [the Parker Fly]. It was a solidbody six-string bass that weighed about 4lb! It sounded like God playing the piano..." **LARRY FISHMAN**

he shared with a lute-maker, Robert Meadow. He showed the guitar to Matt Umanov at his store in Greenwich Village, who is reported to have told him it looked like something a hippy had made, but Jimmy D'Aquisto, who had apprenticed under John D'Angelico, told him that his archtop was the best first guitar he'd ever heard. "You're crazy if you stop building," he said.

But back then Ken had no clients, no market: "I couldn't get arrested," he told *The New Yorker* in 2007. Like many wannabee makers, he took a job in the repair shop of Stuyvesant Music, on West 48th St in Manhattan, from 1979. A few years later he moved to his grandfather's house and workshop in Seymour, Connecticut, where he continued to repair, design and study, not least old instruments such as the lute, which dramatically informed the future construction of the lightweight Parker Fly, a model that, some 30 years on, still looks radical and otherworldly.

The concept was "an archtop guitar without a body... a top without a back or sides," Ken told D'Addario. This led to the "exoskeleton" design of the Fly whereby the neck was covered back and front with a composite material – "either fibreglass or carbon fibre and epoxy, or both", he said. "Just like a cicada or a lobster, all the strength of the structure is right at the outside surface... Most of the loads are being taken by the 'skin' of the structure."

The 'Super Fly', as it was originally called, premiered at the NAMM Show in 1992, by which time Ken had partnered with Larry Fishman. The pair had met in the early 80s.

"Ken pulled this instrument out of this blanket and I was astonished, my jaw hit the floor," Larry told this writer in the mid-90s. "I'd never seen anything like it. It was a solidbody six-string bass that weighed about 4lb! It sounded like God playing the piano..."

Fishman contributed the acoustic transducer and more to the design, while

financial backing from Korg paid for patents and the establishment of the factory to build the hugely complex design. "We developed all the processes and machinery at Parker to build the Fly," Larry told D'Addario.

By 2003 and some 30,000 instruments later, Ken had left the company he'd co-founded and then returned a while later to building archtops, utilising his by-then immense knowledge of acoustics, alternative materials and sound, exemplified by his 2006 'Olive Branch' modern archtop, with its light weight and uniquely adjustable neck.

Long considered an authority, his *Archtoppery* video series, which kicked off in 2020, is a must-watch for the modern guitar maker. It's little surprise, then, that New York's Metropolitan Museum Of Art has two Ken Parker guitars on permanent display: an original pre-production Fly prototype from 1987 and a later 2016 acoustic archtop. "It's pretty great," he told D'Addario. "I'm in there with Stradivarius and Amati products. It's quite an honour."

"Ken's probably the most accomplished guitar builder in the world today, I think," long-time friend and co-conspirator Larry Fishman told D'Addario last year. "If you look at what he does, no-one else can do it, no-one else can conceive it." **G**

CHRIS DREJA

1945–2025

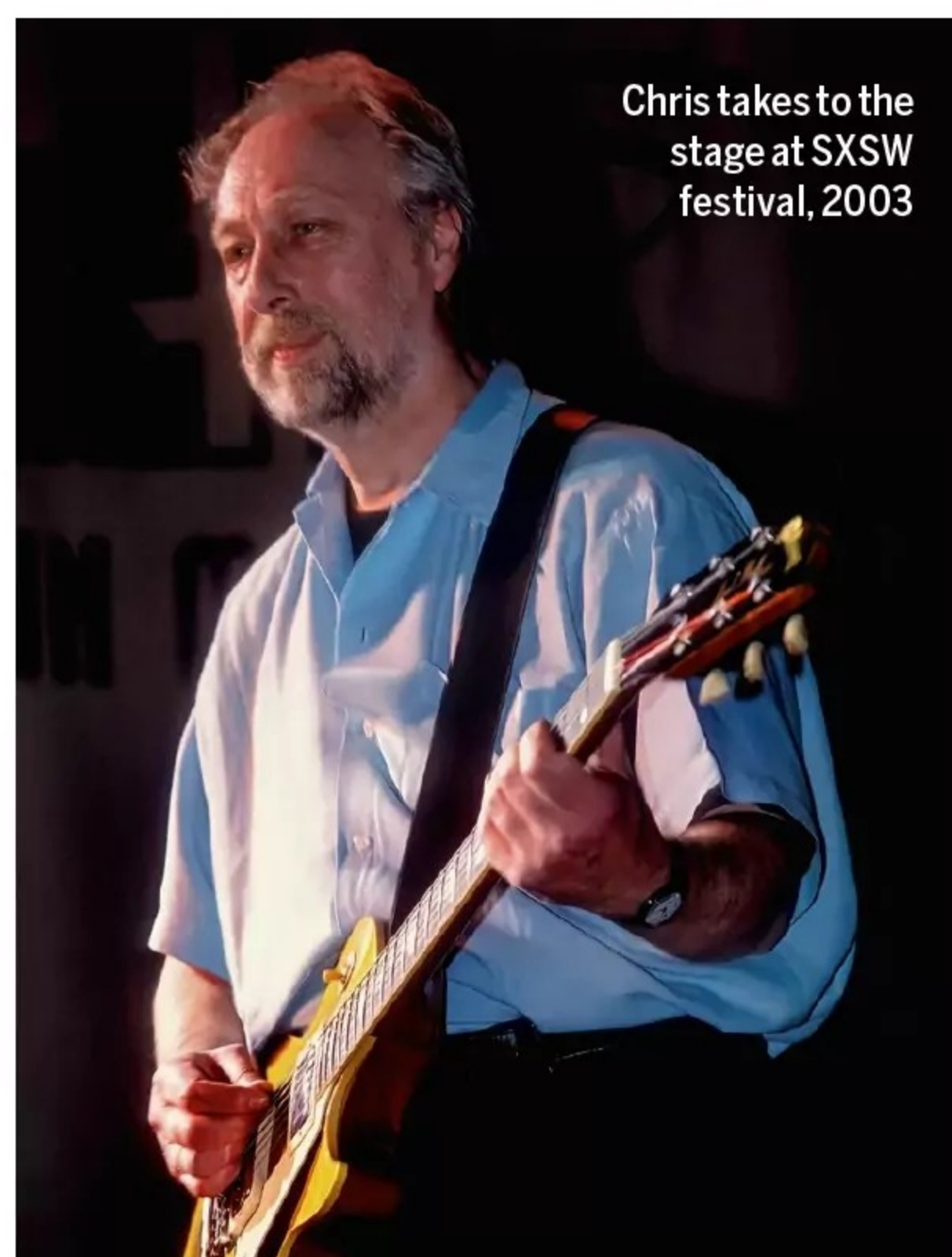
Co-founder of The Yardbirds, Chris Dreja – who supported Clapton, Beck and Page on rhythm or bass guitar, then went on to become a photographer – has died, aged 79

Words Neville Marten

Born in Surbiton, Surrey, on 11 November 1945, Christopher Walenty Dreja was the son of Polish airman Alojzy Dreja and Englishwoman Joyce Guillan. While at Kingston School Of Art, Chris met fellow guitarist Anthony ‘Top’ Topham. The two jumped on the bandwagon of electric rhythm and blues on which The Rolling Stones were riding high.

Dreja and Topham formed The Metropolis Blues Quartet, adding drummer Jim McCarty, singer/harmonica player Keith Relf and bassist Paul Samwell-Smith, and changed the group’s name to The Yardbirds. Still only 15, Topham quit when the others ‘turned pro’.

Although overshadowed by three legendary lead guitarists – Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page – Dreja was an



Chris takes to the stage at SXSW festival, 2003



The Yardbirds, 1964 (left to right): Chris Dreja, Keith Relf, Paul Samwell-Smith, Eric Clapton, Jim McCarty

Chris was a stabilising influence, hailed for his gentle manner, and, even among these mega talents, his musical contribution was never questioned

essential core member who co-wrote many of the band’s songs. He was a stabilising influence, hailed for his gentle manner, and, even among these mega talents, his musical contribution was never questioned. He viewed his role as the glue that held the often-fragile elements together.

“I’m part of the rhythm section,” he explained to ClassicBands.com. “My ears have to be open to all the nuances going on with the lead player. I guess like John Lennon and Brian Jones, we’re not up front, but we kind of keep it all sticking together.”

Regarding his star lead players, Dreja told *Vintage Guitar* magazine: “I had a close kinship with Eric as our art-school background was the same and we had a similar sense of humour. Jeff, on the other hand, was quite a moody guy, and his main conversation was through his guitar. As a natural guitar genius, when he was ‘on’ it was a privilege to jam behind him. Jimmy was a real professional. I liked that period because we became a four-piece and I got to play my bass really loud!”

In 1966, Samwell-Smith left The Yardbirds to work in music production, and Page took over on bass. He and Dreja swapped roles when Beck became ill, and it stayed that way for a brief but legendary moment in pop history. Beck left at the end of 1966. Dreja inherited Samwell-Smith’s Epiphone Rivoli bass from Page, but a Cherry Red dot-neck Gibson ES-335 was his primary six-string, sometimes alternating with a Fender Jaguar or Jazzmaster.

Dreja played on all The Yardbirds’s hit singles, including *For Your Love* featuring Clapton; *Evil Hearted You*, *Heart Full Of Soul*, *Shapes Of Things* and *Over Under Sideways Down* with Beck; and *Happenings Ten Years Time Ago*, which made the Billboard Hot 100 with Page on lead. The original Yardbirds only released two albums, *Five Live Yardbirds* and *Yardbirds*, better known as ‘Roger The Engineer’ after Dreja’s innovative cover artwork.

Chris Dreja remained a Yardbird until 1968 when the band became The New Yardbirds and then Led Zeppelin. Page

offered him the bass guitarist’s role, but Chris chose to pursue photography. He took the group shot of Led Zeppelin for the band’s debut album, and in his New York studio captured Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, The Righteous Brothers, and Ike and Tina Turner, among others.

In 1983 Dreja, McCarty and Samwell-Smith formed Box Of Frogs with Medicine Head’s John Fiddler on lead vocals. They produced two well-received albums, *Box Of Frogs* in ’84 and *Strange Land* in ’86, that included Beck, Page, Rory Gallagher, Graham Gouldman and Steve Hackett.

In 1992 Dreja and McCarty reconvened as The Yardbirds, with Ray Majors and then Dr Feelgood’s Gypie Mayo on guitar. Steve Vai’s Favored Nations label released *Birdland* under The Yardbirds moniker, with Dreja and McCarty, plus Mayo and guitarists including Vai, Joe Satriani, Steve Lukather, Jeff ‘Skunk’ Baxter, Brian May, Slash and Beck.

Dreja had a history of cardiovascular issues, and a series of strokes saw him retire in 2013. He died of strokes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in London on 25 September 2025.

Jimmy Page said of his old friend: “Chris Dreja ... passionately played with the iconic Yardbirds on rhythm guitar and then the bass. I hadn’t seen him in a while, and I wish I had. RIP Chris.” **G**



JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR

In a journey from classical guitar via Stevie Ray Vaughan, the soulful blues-rocker explains how the blues helped her find her voice, and why Teles will always be her number one

Words David Mead Photography Matt Lincoln

Renowned for her stinging Albert Collins-inspired lead lines and powerful vocal style, Joanne Shaw Taylor flew into town in September for a few live dates in the UK and Europe. Now living in Nashville, Tennessee, but formerly from The Black Country, Joanne recently released her 10th studio album, *Black & Gold*, to great critical acclaim. She joined us in the *Guitarist* studios, bringing her touring rig along for an exclusive shoot and video walkthrough. Ordinarily, Joanne's miniature Dachshund, Hank, would come along for the ride, too. In fact, he's no stranger to the limelight himself, with an online presence that rivals her own; he even has his own Instagram account, where he's been known to troll Joanne's close friend and sparring partner, Joe Bonamassa. Sadly, her four-footed friend had to stay home this time, and while Joanne reveals later that a career in canine care is the only thing that could pull her away from the life of blues-rock stardom, we're keen to hear how this journey began...

So you originally came from a classical background?

"Sort of, yes. I had classical guitar lessons at school, and then when I was 10 I was put up for an audition for the Birmingham Youth Ensemble and passed. That was my intro into guitar. I wouldn't say I was particularly good at it – and I'm not sure a career would have been viable in classical music – but it certainly gave me the confidence to know that I liked playing guitar. I also

think, to be honest, it's the reason I probably fell in love with blues because it was such a juxtaposition.

"[Classical guitar] was such a disciplined world to come from. Players like Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jimmie Vaughan are a great example of two guitar players who were raised in the same household at the same time and yet they couldn't sound any more different – because it's really just about injecting your personality. I think that really propelled me to blues, the fact that you could actually inject so much of your personality into it, and there weren't really any rules, as long as it sounded good or sounded like *you*. So I think the classical thing was an important part of the journey."

Was there a specific fork in the road for you with blues when you thought, 'Oh, this sounds interesting...'?

"I have a lung condition called bronchiectasis, which is from a really bad reaction to the whooping cough vaccine when I was baby, and it scarred my lungs. So, unfortunately, about once a year I get a really bad chest infection. When I was 13, I was off school for about three months and had to keep going back to the hospital. I remember lying on the sofa with my dad – I was feeling particularly ill and I'd fallen asleep, or he thought I'd fallen asleep – so he turned off whatever I was watching and put on a Stevie Ray Vaughan DVD. I woke up and saw it and that was the, 'Oh, you could play guitar like that?' moment. My older brother was playing guitar and he was very much into Steve Vai,

“What propelled me to blues was the fact that you could inject so much of your personality into it, and there weren’t really any rules”

VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!

Watch Joanne demonstrate ‘Junior’ and coax some amazing sounds from her touring pedalboard
<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



Joanne flew into the UK recently for some live dates and popped into the *Guitarist* studios for a catch-up



Yngwie and Dave Mustaine, so I knew there were other guitar genres out there, but I hadn't found anything that I connected with. That was pretty immediate."

How old were you when you started gigging?

"About 14. There was a blues band at my dad's work and he asked them if they could be my backing band. We started getting some pubs and clubs, then I gave a demo CD to Mike Hamblett at the Robin Club and he gave me all the support [slots] for all the touring blues artists that came through from the States – the first big break."

The second big break would have been through The Eurythmics' Dave Stewart. How did that come about?

"Dave Stewart came about because, unfortunately, my mom had breast cancer when I was 15 and she was part of a support group, and the wife of one of the chaps from UB40 was in it and they wanted to do a fundraiser, so they asked me if I wanted to play. A friend of Dave's was there, so we did the gig and he got hold of our demo CD and passed it on. Dave phoned the house, spoke to my parents and we were off to London the next day to talk about a record deal. I had no idea who he was. I'd heard of Annie Lennox, but I had no idea who Dave was, which his wife found very funny. He got me out with BB King doing some shows, but the most important thing was that he was really the first guy to tell me he didn't think I was just a guitar player; he thought I was going to be a songwriter and singer that played guitar."

You're over in the UK for a tour at present. What gear have you brought with you, apart from 'Junior', your faithful old Fender Esquire?

"This [Junior] was a guitar I bought when I was 15 years old. I'd been playing guitar for about a year or so, and I was

1. Joanne's touring 'board has a new addition in the form of a JHS Pulp 'N' Peel compressor (second from right), which she uses to warm up her tone

2. 'Junior' is a battle-scarred 1966 Fender Esquire that has been on every one of Joanne's albums, as well as being a staple in her live act

3. This Custom Shop Les Paul comes into play on stage for the heavier moments, but it's always 'Junior' that sees the bulk of the live action

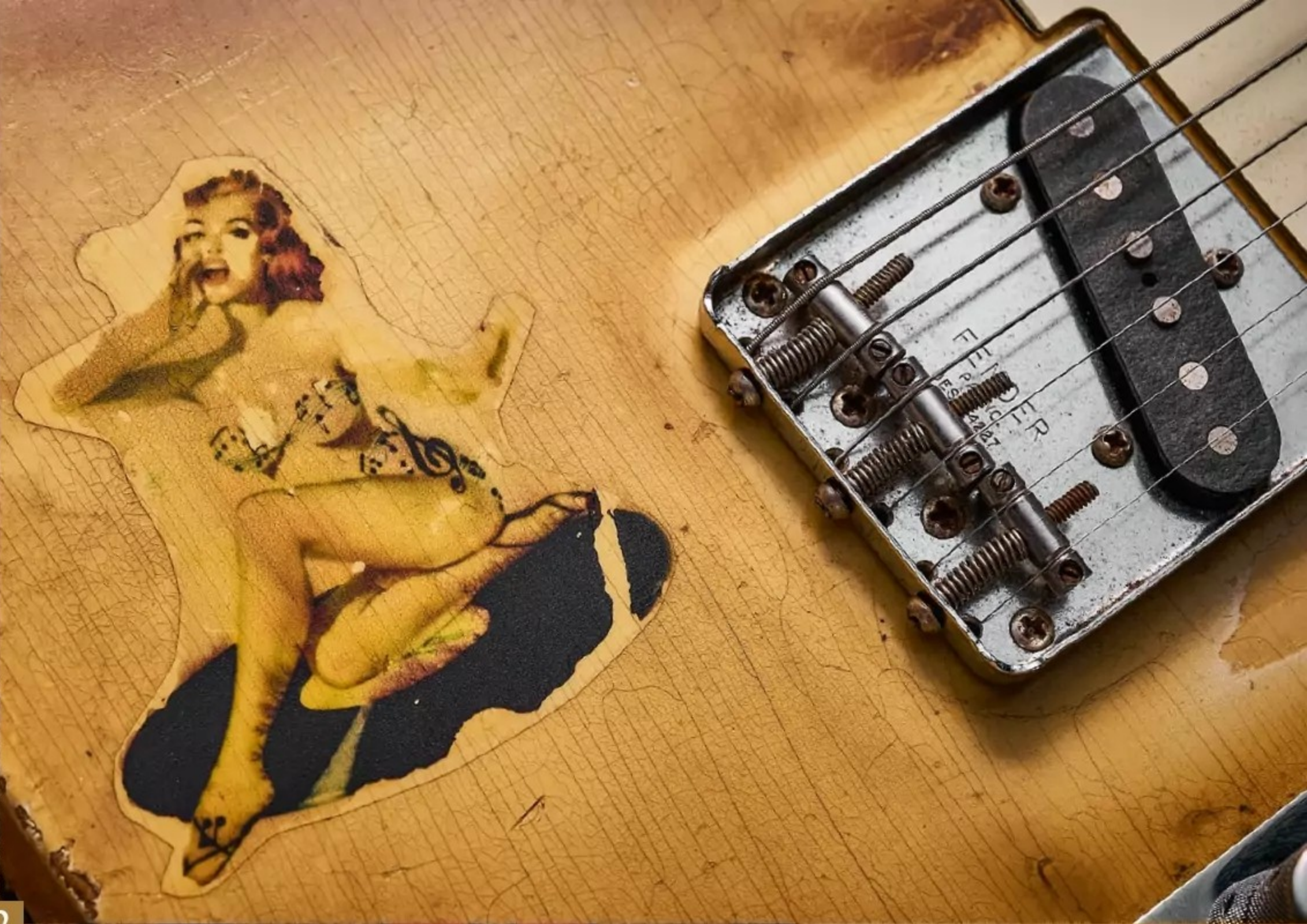
gigging. I had a Mexican Strat and I wanted something a bit more pro. My grandmother, bless her, said, 'Whatever you save up, I'll match.' I think I'd got about £700 together and so I went down to Denmark Street on the train with £1,400 and [bought] this 1966 Fender Esquire. I managed to get it quite cheap because somebody butchered it with a knife at the neck pickup. So I had the humbucker put in. It's got a five-way pickup selector now, but he's been with me ever since. It's been on every gig, every album. It's pretty much the number one, the baby."

You have a smaller, cut-down pedalboard. What are the essentials you've brought with you?

"A Boss chromatic tuner, a JHS compression pedal [JHS Pedals Pulp 'N' Peel compressor] that we've recently added this week, just to warm up my tone a little bit – I'm absolutely loving it, so far. An Ibanez TS9 Tube Screamer that I stole off my older brother when I was 15. That's been a staple on my board for 25 years;

"Dave Stewart was the first guy to tell me I was [more than] a guitar player; he thought I'd be a songwriter and singer, too"

it's my main overdrive pedal. TS808 Tube Screamer, the second one here, which usually I just run as a bit of a clean boost. A JHS Oil Can delay, which I leave on for pretty much most of the gig, just very low in the mix to boost up the mids for me. Then [an Electro-Harmonix] Holy Grail reverb pedal because I play vintage Bassmans – I don't have the matching reverb tanks and I'm a sucker for a nice bit of reverb, both on vocals and guitar. It's pretty basic, to be honest."



4. 'Junior' in action: surprisingly, Joanne never uses the neck pickup, despite the guitar having been modified with a five-way selector switch and other sundry whistles and bells

5. The Fender Custom Shop Albert Collins Telecaster was a gift from Joanne's old friend Joe Bonamassa after a NYC deal didn't end up going quite the way she intended

You're using two Fender Bassman amps, obviously hired for the tour. But do you have your own Bassmans back in the States?

"Yep, two 1962 'piggyback' Fender Bassmans, nicknamed Sirius and Severus for the Harry Potter fans. I think it was always a bit of a dream amp of mine. We had a Fender Bassman reissue at home that I grew up playing and that was my first gigging amp back in the Birmingham Black Country pub and club days. So I was always a bit of a Bassman aficionado. There's something about a tweed amp for me anyway, whether that's a Vibro-King or a '62 Bassman, it's a bit of a guilty pleasure. And I think it's also 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', you know?"

What is the other Tele you have with you?

"It's an Albert Collins signature model that was gifted to me by Joe Bonamassa about 15 years ago. I flew to New York to see Joe for a few days. He was rehearsing for the first time with Black Country Communion. I went to, I think it was, Manny's [Music, previously on West 48th St NYC] and in there they had an Albert Collins signature model that was signed by Albert. Other than Steve Ray Vaughan, he's my number one

influence. I think it was for sale for about \$5,000, so I went back to Joe, and I said, 'I found this Albert Collins signature model. It's my dream guitar and it's signed by Albert, but I don't have \$5,000.' He's like, 'Okay, well, what do you have?' I said I could probably get together about four. He's like, 'All right, well, come back with me. They'll probably want a photo of me, but I could probably get it for you for four.' So we go back to the guitar shop, he plays the guitar, and he's like, 'How much?' And the guy goes, 'Okay, four grand and a picture of you buying it.' So we did the deal... and then he kept the guitar for himself! [Laughs]

"About a year or so later, I talked to his dad and mentioned this, and Len [Bonamassa] was furious. So Len must have phoned him and read him the riot act because I got a text the next day saying, 'Remind me of your address,' and then this was delivered in the post."

With its likeness to Junior, can we assume that Telecasters are your comfort zone?

"Yeah. Which is funny, actually. I could never play a Strat because I think [with] SRV being my first dominant influence, every time I revert to playing a Strat it's like I'm 13 years old again, trying to hack my way through *Pride And Joy*. Whereas Teles always seem to suit me."

Your album *Black & Gold* was released earlier this year and you're touring it over here at present. How are audiences receiving it?

"It's gone really well. It's been really well received by fans, it seems, which is why I do it, you know? It was a bit of a different album for me. It was the 10th studio album and I was also turning 40, so I was going into a fresh decade of life as well as a fresh decade of a recording career. So it felt like, 'Well, what haven't I written that I wanted to write that maybe didn't fit on other albums?' Because I've always tried to straddle different genres, in that I think I'm a blues guitarist that's a soul singer that likes writing pop-rock songs."

"I've always said I think I would have been a very different artist if I'd have been born a man – because I learned to play guitar, which was a gender-neutral instrument, so I could borrow bits from Albert Collins and Stevie. But when I wanted to teach myself to sing, I was never going to sound like Albert Collins or Freddie King or Luther Allison or Howlin' Wolf. So I had to find female vocalists to try to emulate and they tended to be outside of the blues world. You know, Tina, Mavis [Staples] into Bonnie Raitt, the pop, rock, soul world."

And the plan is to keep recording and touring?

"For the rest of my life, hopefully... unless I earn enough money to get the land I want and get the dog sanctuary off the ground. I just want to be that person that the local dog shelter phones and goes, 'We've had this 15-year-old geriatric Basset Hound come in that's blind and no-one's going to take him.' And I'll be like, 'I'll bring the van around in the morning. He can come here.'" **G**

"Teles suit me. I could never play a Strat... it's like I'm 13 years old again, trying to hack my way through *Pride And Joy*"



PHOTO BY JOHNNY GALLIANO



New album, *Black & Gold*, is available now on Journeyman Records. Joanne Shaw Taylor is on tour in the UK from 25 to 30 January 2026. Tickets available from www.joanneshawtaylor.com

"This Albert Collins signature model is my dream guitar. Joe Bonamassa [helped me get a deal on it]... and then kept the guitar for himself!"



5







Wolfgang Van Halen

As the son of one of the world's most influential rock guitar players, it's understandably taken Wolfgang Van Halen some time to feel comfortable in his own skin as the creative visionary behind Mammoth. This year's third full-length, *The End*, is undoubtedly the sound of his confidence growing stronger and stronger

Words Amit Sharma

He may have kickstarted his career playing bass alongside his dad in one of America's most important rock bands, but over the past four years Wolfgang Van Halen has proven he's very much an artist in his own right. So much so that he's written and recorded everything you hear on the three Mammoth albums released thus far – including latest full-length, *The End*, which sees him taking his songwriting to new creative peaks.

Naturally, the son of Edward Van Halen is no slouch on guitar. You can hear plenty of fret-burning wizardry on the title track and other impressive cuts such as *Same Old Song* and *I Really Wanna*. But it's the sheer quality of his compositions that's helped set him apart from his peers, reimagining the stadium-conquering hooks of groups like Foo Fighters and Alter Bridge through his own melodic lens, often with staggering results. This album, he explains, came from a more relaxed state of mind, having already escaped the preconceptions that go hand-in-hand with having one of the most instantly recognisable surnames in rock 'n' roll...

The top-line melodies on this latest album could be your catchiest ones yet. How do you go about finding the right hooks?

"Honestly, that's one of the most important things for the average listener. They tend to listen to the vocals and main melodies. I have fun with the instrumentation and that's always there for the

musicians who want to hear something fun with the riffs here and there. But at the end of the day, the melodies are the most important thing about my music. That's what I tend to toil [over] most."

Can you envisage where the notes are before you even pick up the guitar?

"Sure, there's a lot of stuff that comes like that. Some of the best ideas come so quickly you almost feel like you're this vessel for the music, rather than the person creating it. Bob Dylan had this great quote where he once said, 'If I knew where the good songs came from, I'd go there more often!' It's like he was saying it's not even a choice. These ideas come to you and reveal themselves to you as you keep working on them until you deem them ready enough. I'm not the world's biggest Bob Dylan fan – obviously he's an icon and a legend – but I really loved and related to that quote."

How do these ideas usually present themselves to you?

"It's just any time, really. You just have to be ready to get it down, which is why my list of voice memos is in the thousands. I have a button on my iPhone that goes straight to voice recording because the ideas can come fast. I might hum them in, but if I'm lucky enough to have a guitar nearby I will pick that up – and the same goes for drum beat ideas. You always say, 'I'll remember it,' and then you forget within two minutes."

It's interesting how you sometimes only use parts for very specific sections. *Something New*, for example, has these higher-string dyads that only come in at the very end before the closing stabs.

"It's all about using the right things at the right time. If you do certain things too much, then you're overdoing them. It's nice to sprinkle these little ideas in that make people want to go back and relisten to the song. Over-seasoning music can make things quite repetitive and boring."

You've worked with Michael 'Elvis' Baskette as your producer on every album so far. What have you learned from him about the art of capturing and blending sound?

"He's the other half of the band, so to speak. Even The Beatles had George Martin. It's important to have an outside perspective to keep the artist from second-guessing. I trust him explicitly and could never see myself doing it without him. I don't ever take in much information in terms of what I'd do in the future without him because I'll always let him handle that stuff. I focus on the writing and the playing. I leave the capturing of it all to him. I trust him more than I trust myself when it comes to production."

Do you listen to The Beatles much, then?

"For sure. It might be a bit overplayed, I guess, but I would say *Abbey Road* is a really special album to me. Front to back, I really love everything about it. *I Want You (She's So Heavy)* was like metal before heavy metal existed, you know? I love that album. Everybody has a Beatles phase at some point and there will be one album they couldn't live without. For me, it's definitely *Abbey Road*, with maybe *Revolver* not far behind."

You released your signature EVH semi-hollow back in 2024. Is that what we're hearing on the album?

"Yeah, it was the gold relic EVH SA-126 that I got last year. That guitar ended up being the backbone of this whole record, going through the 5150 III 6L6. I used it for 95 per cent of what you hear. I got the Frankenstein out for the tapping part on *The End* and the slap part, but other than that, it really was just one guitar. With

"I have fun with the instrumentation. But the melodies are the most important – that's what I tend to toil [over] most"

the second album, it was a different guitar but still the second or third prototype of that SA-126. I've come to know what works best for Mammoth and that's my semi-hollow through the 5150 III, for sure."

A lot of your leads are based around the minor pentatonic scale. Which blues players left the biggest mark on you?

"It's funny, I wasn't much of a blues guy to begin with. But I think out of all the blues-based players, I really love Angus Young from AC/DC. He sticks to what is generally pentatonic stuff but has this anarchistic way of attacking it. That's what makes it so attractive to me. It's almost like he doesn't know what he's doing and it's all about the way he does it, rather than the notes he's playing. When you listen to him, it's incredibly blues-based, but it's the aggression he plays with that makes me enjoy it. I guess it was the same kind of thing with my dad."

Which album do you find yourself listening to the most?

"*Powerage* is one of my favourite records. In *Down Payment Blues*, right after the first chorus, there's this solo where he plays just one note for eight bars. It's how he's playing, instead of what he's playing. Stuff like that is so badass. It doesn't need to be complicated. You can hit one note with attitude and that's all that matters. And Angus's tone is unbelievable, with all those Marshalls just cranked to hell. The last time I saw AC/DC was on the *Black Ice* tour. They leave you deaf for days – it's the best! I don't think I've ever been at a show that loud; it must have been around 120dB. It was otherworldly. I started bringing earplugs to shows after that, but it's okay if it's Angus – he's earned it."

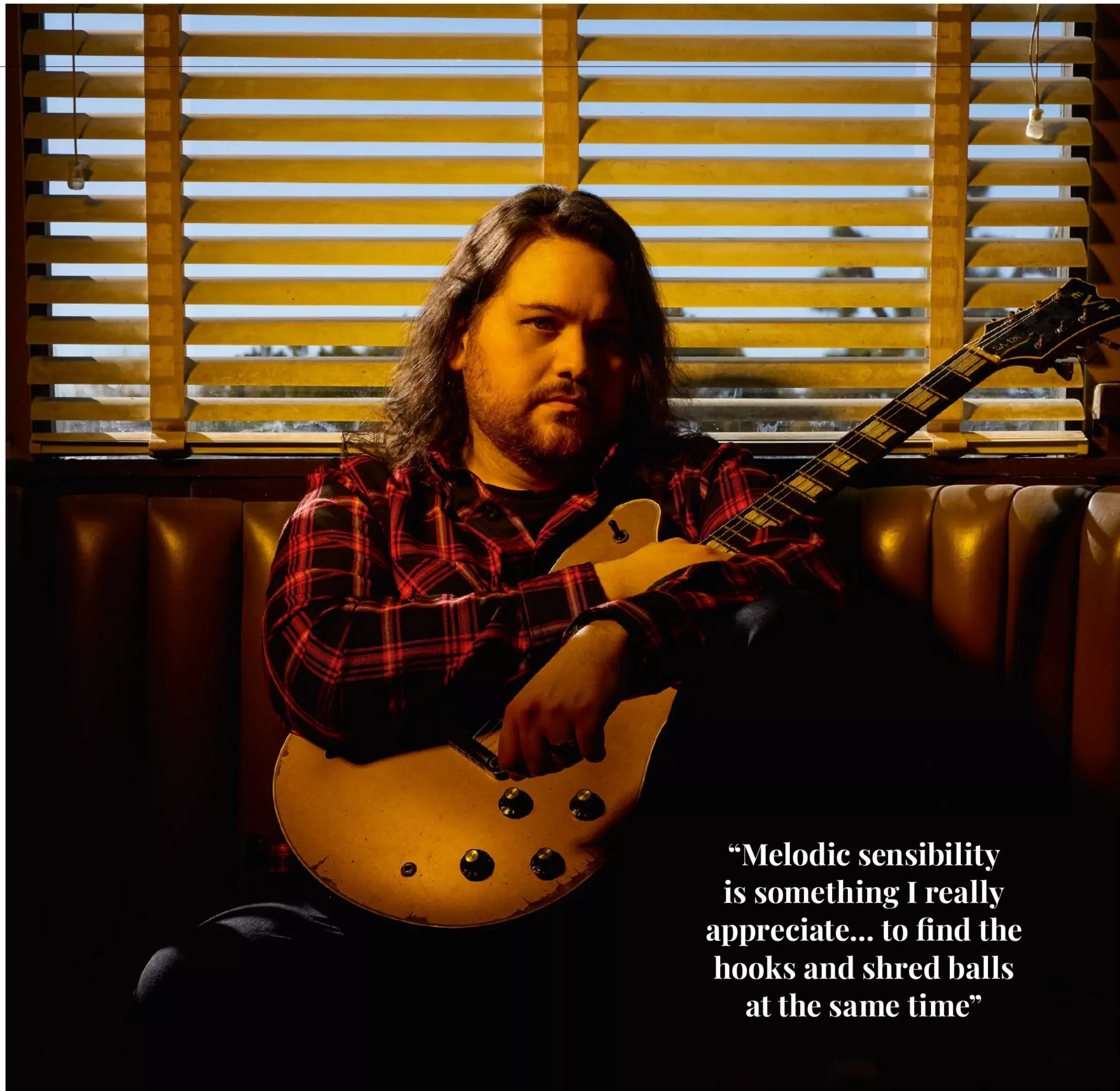
What kind of riff do you play to test out a guitar?

"I think it would be something by AC/DC. I'll usually do *Night Prowler* because it has those big chords, which can tell you a lot about guitar. And then for single notes

1. On record, Wolfgang handles guitar, bass, drums and keys, and for live shows his touring line-up steps up (left to right): Frank Sidoris on guitar, Ronnie Ficarro on bass, drummer Garrett Whitlock, and guitarist Jon Jourdan



PHOTO BY MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES



“Melodic sensibility is something I really appreciate... to find the hooks and shred balls at the same time”

T H E R E G O E S M Y H E R O

Wolfgang opens up on his modern guitar influences

“Aaron Marshall from Intervals is one of the few modern metal hero guys that isn’t afraid to throw in a bluesy riff every now and then. You have all these modern players, people like Tim Henson from Polyphia who are amazing musicians playing crazy stuff that sounds incredible, though they very rarely choose to bend anything. That’s why Aaron is my favourite. He has this iconic and recognisable voice on guitar. His melodic sensibility is

something I really appreciate, especially considering he’s making instrumental music. He’s practically the singer in the band as well as the guitarist. He has this ability to find the hooks and shred balls at the same time, and it’s always very tasteful. I can’t get enough of it. He’s just the best in my opinion.

“I also think what Misha Mansoor has done with Periphery is amazing. He has his own sound and it’s very iconic. I love

how he’s able to merge his unabashed love for Meshuggah with his other influences. I don’t think people give Misha enough credit. He’s got the riffiness, but holy shit, he’s a shredder that can do the craziest stuff. He’s a great dude, too. I just love seeing how modern tech metal bands from Animals As Leaders and Intervals to Periphery and Tesseract have translated what Meshuggah do in their own unique way as songwriters.”



I might do *Beating Around The Bush* or something like that. I think those classic open chords can show you what a guitar is about right away. You can hear how the acoustics resonate together.”

Your first big gig was playing bass in Van Halen. A lot of the material probably came very easily to you, but what would you say were the more challenging songs on the setlist?

“I think it was mainly a matter of delving into the feel. The big hits were about the groove and locking in with my uncle [Alex Van Halen on drums] to create a great rhythmic base. Me being a drummer first helped because

2. Wolfgang and his father, Eddie, on stage at Madison Square Garden in 2012. While Wolfgang is now treading his own path, his father’s legacy and influence remains with him

“Dad let me organically follow whatever I wanted. That was his main mantra: ‘Just play.’ It’s that simple”

I could understand what was needed. I also had to keep dad in check whenever he made a mistake. On the last tour in 2015, I really tried to get the guys to play every single B-side we possibly could, stuff like *Dirty Movies*, which is a really unique song. Michael Anthony [bass] was doing these interesting harmonics for that intro. Stuff like that was really experimental and I don’t think he gets enough credit for what he did. His contributions to that track in particular were quite out there for a person who is usually holding down the groove. *Dirty*

Movies was one of those tracks where I had to really remember how it was played on the record and check myself every time in order to ensure I didn’t mess it up.”

In Mammoth you are very much going for a modern rock style that’s notably different from the sound your father pioneered in Van Halen. But the rhythmic slap and harmonic idea from *The End* is something that could have sat on 1981’s *Fair Warning*, with a *Mean Street* kind of feel.

“Totally. It’s very percussive. It’s funny because it wasn’t supposed to be a *Mean Street* thing. It was actually a slap bass part. I was showing Elvis this idea but only had a guitar, so asked him to imagine it on bass. And he told me it sounded cool on guitar. It was his idea to have it carry on through the verse. That’s when I asked him how the hell I’m supposed to sing and play it all on stage and he said, ‘That’s a problem for future you!’ So while I was writing the melody, I was trying to play the part without thinking and eventually got it right where I was able to separate what I’m singing from what I’m playing. I think it helps that I’m a drummer first because I’ve gotten used to that kind of separation. It was tough, but I figured it out. We’ve been playing it live and I feel confident enough.”

You have forged your own path as a musician, but were there any things your dad showed you early on, to help speed up the process?

“Dad never really pushed me in any direction. He just let me organically follow whatever I wanted. That was his main mantra – ‘Just play’ – that’s why I’ve got it tattooed on me in his own handwriting, which came from a Christmas letter he gave me. That’s as detailed as it gets. Just play. It’s that simple, really. You need to enjoy yourself and follow what makes you happy. That’s what music is all about. It should give you purpose and make you happy, and help forget about all the bullshit.”

What do you remember about your first guitar?

“I remember that dad got me a custom-made little Wolfgang for when I was 12. Later on, when I was in middle school, I really liked the band System Of A Down and got an Ibanez Iceman because their guitarist Daron Malakian had one. So I got one of those and had fun playing along to old-school riffs like *Toxicity*.”

Your dad took a lot of influence from jazz fusion mastermind Allan Holdsworth, who also inspired some of the modern metal players you would later listen to.

“My dad and him were very close. Allan played an incredibly avant-garde and dissonant style of guitar. I think his whole approach was so cool. I love how Allan was very much himself. He never tried to follow any trends; it was always about his own vibe, which was very abstract and experimental. That’s why his legacy is so apparent when it comes to players like Fredrik Thordendal in Meshuggah, who are one of my favourite bands. Allan was always very much his own artist, and truly one of a kind.” **G**



Mammoth’s latest album, *The End*, is available now via BMG

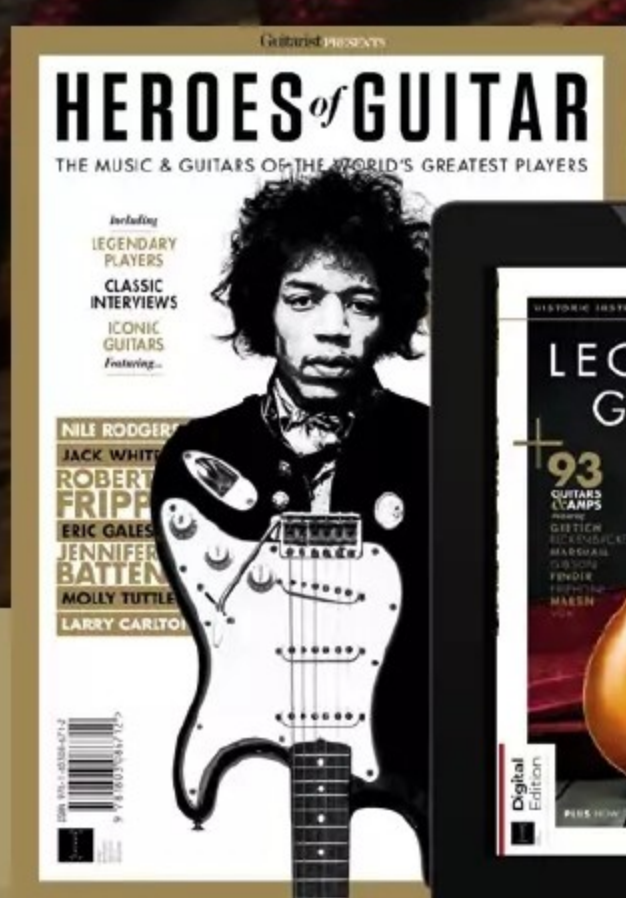
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DEEPEN YOUR GUITAR KNOWLEDGE

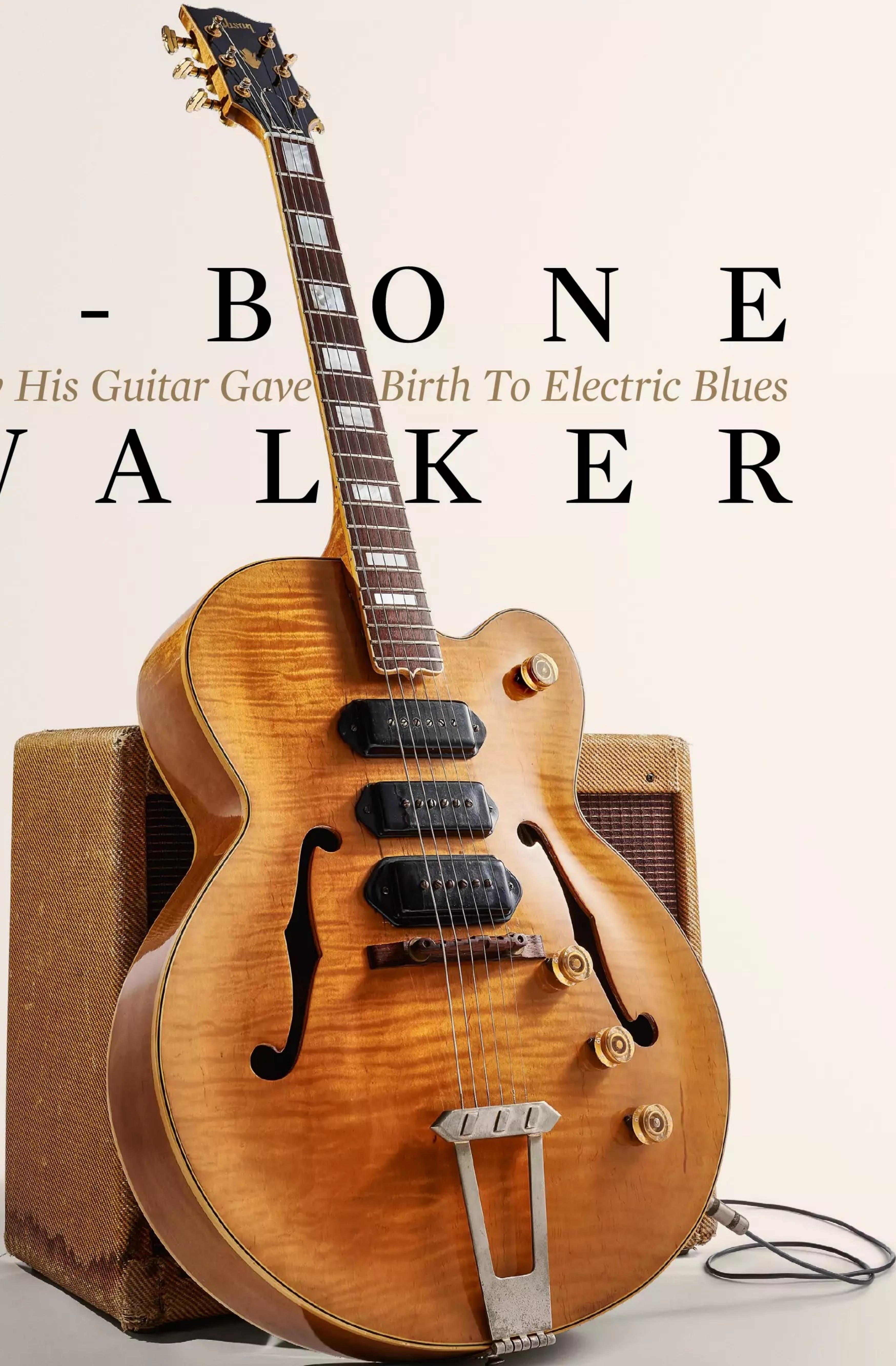
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T - B O N E

How His Guitar Gave Birth To Electric Blues

W A L K E R



SUAVE, STYLISH AND A CONSUMMATE SHOWMAN, T-BONE WALKER KICKED OFF THE ROCK 'N' ROLL ERA WITH HIS ICONIC 1949 GIBSON ES-5N. WITH AN IMPORTANT NEW BOOK CHARTING HIS EPOCHAL PLACE IN MUSIC HISTORY, WE GET UP CLOSE WITH T-BONE'S LEGENDARY GUITAR AND EXPLORE HOW (AND WHY) BLUES WENT ELECTRIC...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis
T-Bone Walker Photo by David Redfern/Redferns



THE BIRTH OF ELECTRIC BLUES PERFECT STORM

As the author of the newly released *Electric Blues! T-Bone Walker & The Guitar That Started It All*, Tony Bacon joins us to spotlight T-Bone's personal contribution to the creation of this genre-changing style

Photography Olly Curtis

As is often the way, my latest book began with a guitar. It's a gorgeous '49 Gibson ES-5N, the one that T-Bone Walker played longer than any other guitar in his career. It's not hard to see why he loved it so much – and not hard to understand why he was so distraught when it went missing during a tour of France in the late 60s.

As the years dragged on, T-Bone's Gibson was thought lost forever. A few years ago, however, it surfaced at an auction in France. Its new owner, Patrick Racz, asked me if I'd be interested in writing a book about the guitar and about T-Bone. I didn't take long to answer. And so began a long and happy journey into the world of T-Bone Walker, with plenty of surprises and revelations along the way – and the ultimate realisation that T-Bone was one of the greatest and most influential blues musicians who ever lived.

ELECTRIC BLUES!

T-Bone's glorious Gibson ES-5N wasn't his first electric. That

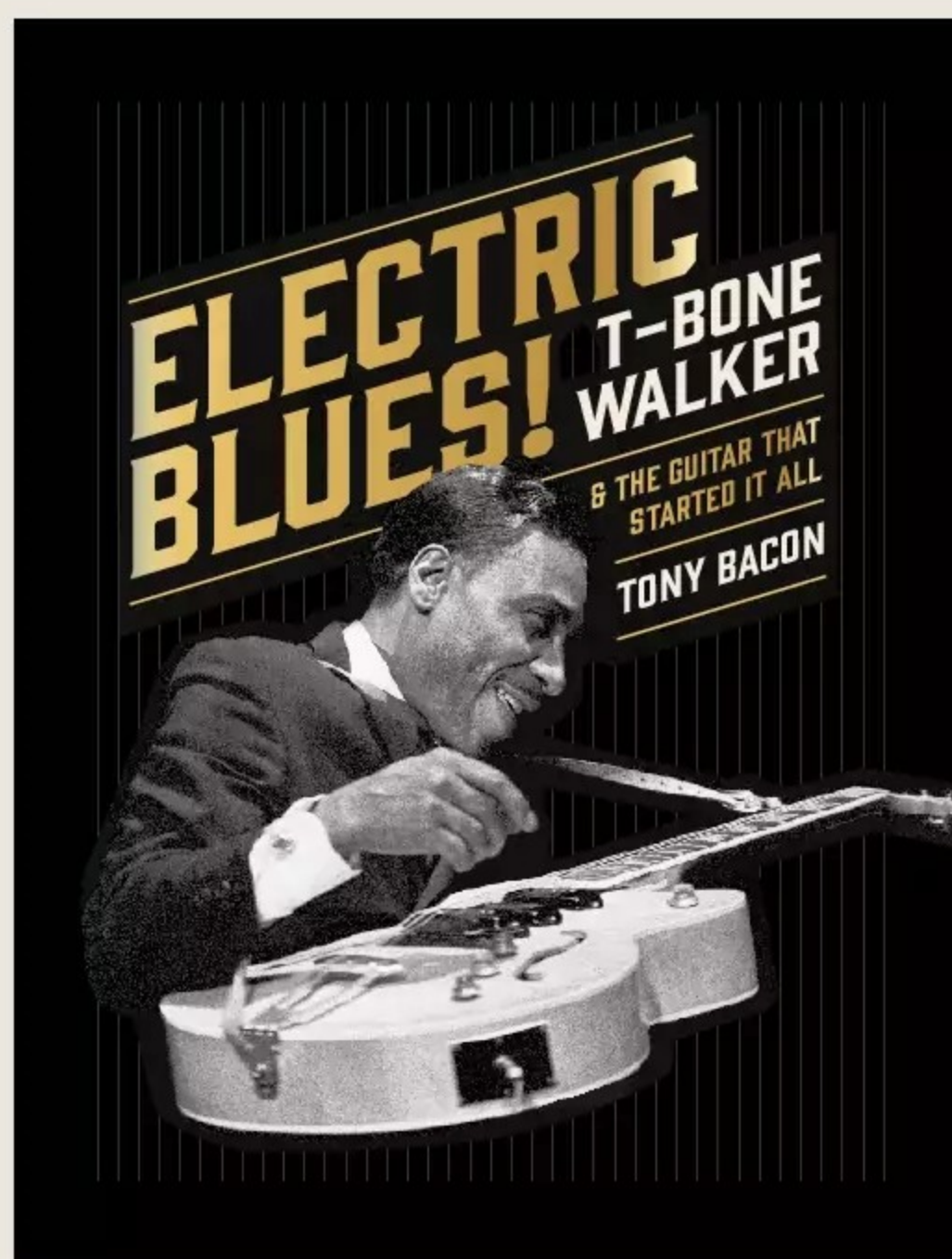
honour goes to an ES-250 that he acquired, probably in New York City, around 1940. Gibson had started to ship this new model a year earlier, and it was the company's first professional electric archtop Spanish guitar, marking a distinct upgrade from the groundbreaking ES-150. Only around 90 were built.

T-Bone made great use of his 250, and it's significant as the first electric he played in a recording studio. At a Capitol Records

session in 1942 with the boogie-woogie pianist Freddie Slack and his big-band, for two tracks the band was slimmed down to T-Bone and his guitar, plus piano, bass, and drums. *I Got A Break, Baby* and *Mean Old World*, credited to their composer Aaron T-Bone Walker and unreleased until 1945, were like nothing that had gone before.

Before T-Bone steps forward to sing, on each one he solos for more than a minute, playing independently of the beat, bending strings, repeating phrases for effect. None of this was standard fare at the time. He plays double-time. He slides unison notes. He generally has a natural ball! His expressive electric playing, more like a horn player in its fluidity and melodic invention, marked a brand-new kind of blues-guitar work. There are few instances in music where it's possible to pinpoint the start of something big, but this is one of them.

During the 1930s and into the early 40s in the United States there were a number of early adopters playing electrics, many



Electric Blues! T-Bone Walker & The Guitar That Started It All by Tony Bacon is available now in a numbered limited-edition 160-page hardback book with slipcase from Regent Sounds, London for £45 – email publishing@regentsounds.com or see <https://gibsones5.com>



but not all of them lap steels. I devote a whole chapter to this fascinating period in the book, but for now let's just mention Alvino Rey. He was one such pioneer, and his instruments – including a Vivi-Tone Spanish and an Electro steel – were probably the first electric guitars that many Americans heard when he played them on national radio, the Electro in a weekly show on NBC with Horace Heidt & His Musical Knights.

A name we all know that looms large in the story of early electric players is Charlie Christian. In 1939, Christian joined Benny Goodman's hugely popular multi-racial swing big-band, with whom he recorded that same year the astonishing *Flying Home*. "Amplifying my instrument has made it possible for me to get a wonderful break," he told *DownBeat*.

Remarkably, according to T-Bone, the two guitarists who

T-Bone, pictured in full flight in 1966 on the Jazz At The Philharmonic TV show with the ES-5N that is now in the keeping of Regent Sounds in London

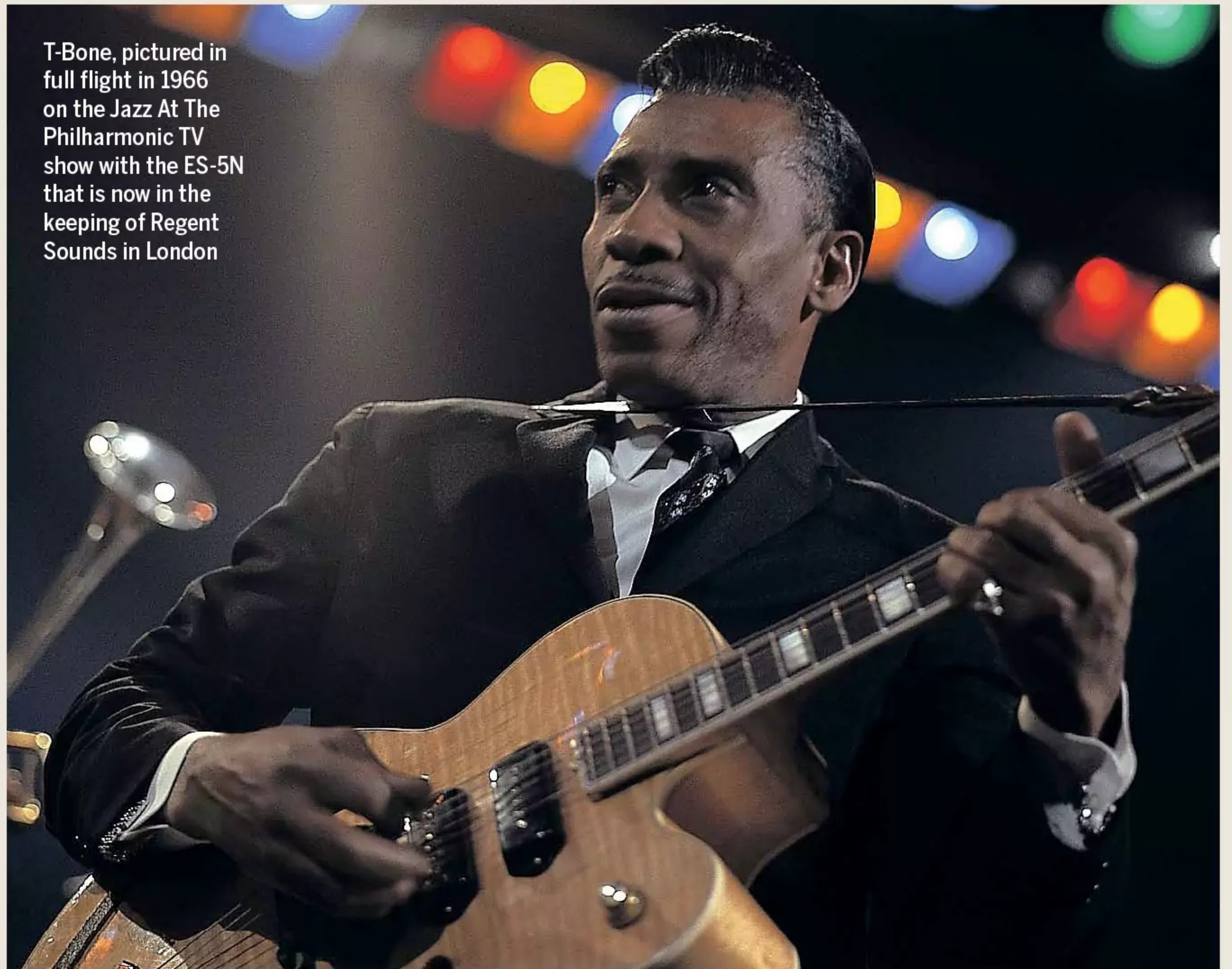


PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/GETTY IMAGES

There are few instances in music where it's possible to pinpoint the start of something big, but this is one of them

would go on to define and develop the role of electric guitars in jazz and in blues were young friends who grew up together in Texas. "We was really drop-outs," he said in a 1972 interview. "Because we were making money, we wouldn't go to school. We'd go dance and pass the hat and make money. We had a little routine of dancing that we did. Charlie would play guitar awhile and I'd play bass, and then we'd change and he'd play bass and I'd play guitar. And then we'd go into our little dance."

T-Bone may not have been the first musician playing an electric guitar on disc. But with those two tracks he cut in '42 for Capitol with Freddie Slack, what matters is what he achieved – nothing less than to show the way forward to a new style: electric blues guitar playing.

T-BONE GETS HIS START

T-Bone had left his native Texas in the mid-1930s and settled in Los Angeles, figuring this was

the place to make his name. And perhaps more importantly for a newly married musician in his mid-20s, LA seemed a likely base from where he might earn a decent living.

Soon he was dancing, singing, playing guitar and MC-ing with the Jim Wynn band at the Little Harlem club in Watts. But it was in Chicago in the early 40s where T-Bone found his first real taste of fame, landing a long-running residency at the Rhumboogie. He worked on and off at the club for the next three years, back and forth as extra work drew him elsewhere, and a local paper reported long queues outside the Rhumboogie almost every night.

Even critics who couldn't yet see the attraction of amplification were swayed by T-Bone's mesmerising performances. "One of the finest blues exponents in the business, T-Bone plays electric guitar and shouts the blues," Dixon Gayer reported in *DownBeat*. "His blues library could keep him going all night if he could hold out that long. Although I have always been a sincere believer in pulling out the plugs of all electric guitars, I will say [that] as well as an electric guitar can be played, T-Bone plays it."

T-Bone was doing far better than that. He was developing the language of electric blues guitar. He was refining his distinguished vocal skills. And he was honing his live performances as he noted which of the novelties pleased his audiences – playing guitar behind his head while doing the splits perhaps, duck-walking across the stage, or using a long cable so he was heard before he appeared. He looked the part, too. One observer described the always immaculately dressed T-Bone as the epitome of the slick uptown sophisticate.

T-Bone knew his time at the Rhumboogie had been a crucial stepping stone, recalling later: "This was really where I got my start – 1942." Now, however, he needed a sympathetic record label and a hit. It was time to return to LA and consider his options.

CLASSIC CUTS & A NEW GUITAR

When he signed to the Black & White label in 1946 and then Imperial Records four years later, T-Bone cut around 50 singles that together form the defining work of his career. His biggest hit was, of course, *Call It Stormy Monday But Tuesday Is Just As Bad*, but if you don't know the rest, there's

1. T-Bone's ES-5 was from the model's debut year, 1949, and featured three dog-ear P-90s and a compensated rosewood bridge

2. The model featured a 17-inch body with rounded cutaway and triple-ply binding on the top and back

3. The 1949 ES-5 had a single-bound headstock with a central crown inlay

4. Another key part of the jazz-era styling of the ES-5 is its elegant trapeze tailpiece with pointed ends and a trio of raised parallelograms



much more about them in the book, from *T-Bone Shuffle* to *I Know Your Wig Is Gone*, *Life Is Too Short to Tell Me What's The Reason*. I urge you to dig into this treasure trove of some of the finest and most influential electric blues-guitar playing ever captured on record. You certainly don't have to hear much of Chuck Berry's guitar work to know that he'd studied these cuts closely.

Around the time T-Bone made the deal with Imperial in 1950, he decided to treat himself to a new guitar. He'd replaced the earlier ES-250 with an experimental Gibson best known as an ES/L-7. That didn't last long, and now he changed to a splendid ES-5N, which he would use for about 18 years, far longer than any of his other guitars. For amplification, too, T-Bone moved on from his earlier Gibson combos (notably an EH-150) to several Fenders: mostly a TV-front Pro model, and into the early 60s a narrow-panel Bassman.

Production began in June '49 on the ES-5, the industry's first commercial three-pickup guitar, which sat at the top of Gibson's electric archtop price list: the \$375 ES-5 in regular sunburst finish; the \$390 ES-5N, like T-Bone's, in premium natural (blonde) finish. These original-style ES-5s

"The blues is the blues, regardless of where you play it. It's nothing new. If you play good, you play good" T-BONE WALKER

continued in production until 1955, when Gibson revised the model's controls and renamed it the ES-5 Switchmaster.

T-Bone's guitar had a luxurious vibe, the flame maple top layer of its laminated body positively glowing through the blonde finish, set off by the gold-plated metalwork and the pearl block markers in the Brazilian rosewood 'board. Its three P-90s were controlled by three corresponding volume knobs down by the bridge and a master tone up at the cutaway.

It was a flamboyant guitar ideally suited to a flamboyant performer, and it served him well for the great Imperial recording sessions and the live shows of the early 50s, and all of his studio and stage work that followed, right through to the late 60s. Notably, he played it at a Manchester date in 1962 where future British rock royalty turned out to see in person the guitarist they'd heard so much about. If one guitar screams T-Bone, it's this one.

5. The 1959 version of the ES-5 featured a three-piece laminated neck that saw the two outer maple sections sandwich a darker hardwood strip that ran down the centre

6. The f-holes of 1949 ES-5s typically had a bound edge, making T-Bone's a rarer early example without f-hole binding, as some were

7. Vibey vintage and rare guitars at the resurgent Regent Sounds store

THE REGENT RETURNS

THE BRITISH MUSIC LANDMARK THAT'S HOME TO T-BONE'S GUITAR IS HAVING A RENAISSANCE

Denmark Street is the epicentre of British guitar music – and no location within it has as much history as Regent Sounds. The site of a historic recording studio where The Rolling Stones recorded their debut album, it has also long been a destination for guitar buyers thanks to the dazzling array of carefully selected Fender and Gretsch guitars in particular that the present-day Regent Sounds store is famous for.

The pandemic as well as the heavy redevelopment of Denmark Street saw the retailer go through a challenging spot, but fresh investment has seen it flourish anew with a complete refurb – with even bigger plans for the future, says proprietor Crispin Weir: "The refurb has just been such an amazing thing to have. The future of the shop is very exciting because we've got so many things we can do there now."

While stunning ranges of new Fender, Gretsch and Gordon Smith guitars continue to be a big draw, a major part of the store's rebirth is a recent move into vintage instruments. Crispin says that everything from Holy Grail 50s and 60s pieces to vibey player-grade guitars will be on offer.

Patrick Racz, a prime mover behind the renaissance of the store, explains: "Traditionally, Regent Sounds has been about new guitars. We're transforming that and we're making a major play into the vintage space. The T-Bone Walker acquisition is part of that and it's drawing so many people into the shop."

Patrick hints that further big moves in the vintage sphere are afoot, so watch this space... [JD]



LOST IN FRANCE

In 1968, on tour in France, T-Bone lost his treasured ES-5N. The circumstances are wrapped in mystery – some reports hinted at rumours of a theft, perhaps, or the settling of gambling debts, or the meddling of hangers-on. I unravelled much of this in my book, and in the process I asked T-Bone's daughter, Bernita Ruth Walker, if she recalled him talking about the loss of that precious guitar. "All I can tell you is what my father said to me: 'Someone stole my guitar off the stage.' Those were his exact words," Bernita said. "He was very upset – especially the fact that he couldn't find another guitar just like it."

With such a high bar set from his earlier recordings, T-Bone never quite hit the same high spots by the time the album era arrived with its shifts in audience tastes. His finest LP



***"I knew that nothing about guitar blues would ever be the same... I felt T-Bone Walker leading me into the future"* BB KING**

is *T-Bone Blues*, released on Atlantic in 1959, which Michael Bloomfield succinctly praised as the "best album he ever made in his life". When The Allman Brothers Band included a nearly nine-minute interpretation of *Stormy Monday* on their live album *At Fillmore East* in 1971, it should have opened up yet more opportunities for T-Bone. But by then his health was failing, and he died a few years later at the age of just 64.

NEW LIFE FOR A LEGENDARY GIBSON

As for T-Bone's beautiful Gibson ES-5N, following its disappearance in 1968, the guitar was thought to be just one more to add to the rather long list of instruments presumed lost forever. But in 2015, a man walked into François Charle's music shop in Paris with a Gibson ES-5N. He said a mutual friend (and professional guitarist) had suggested it could be the one T-Bone used to play.

8. The consummate showman, T-Bone Walker's flamboyant stage presence set the stage for Hendrix and other 60s blues-rock guitarists who recognised the element of theatre that could be brought to a guitar performance

Charle was an expert in American stringed instruments for La Compagnie Nationale des Experts, a French society that brings together experts from various fields across the arts. To cut a long story in the book short – including a deep dive into an erroneous serial number – Charle managed to verify that this was indeed the long-lost T-Bone guitar by matching its distinctive maple figuring to photos of T-Bone in action with it.

In 2023, the guitar made its way to auction in France, where it was acquired by Patrick Racz. He was on a quest to apply technology to the problem of lost guitars, with plans to launch the Registry, a central repository to interpret, store and present data collected from 3D computed tomography scans of instruments, and Ikonik Legacies, which will offer opportunities for fractional ownership of precise replicas of famous instruments by using those scans for reverse-engineering.

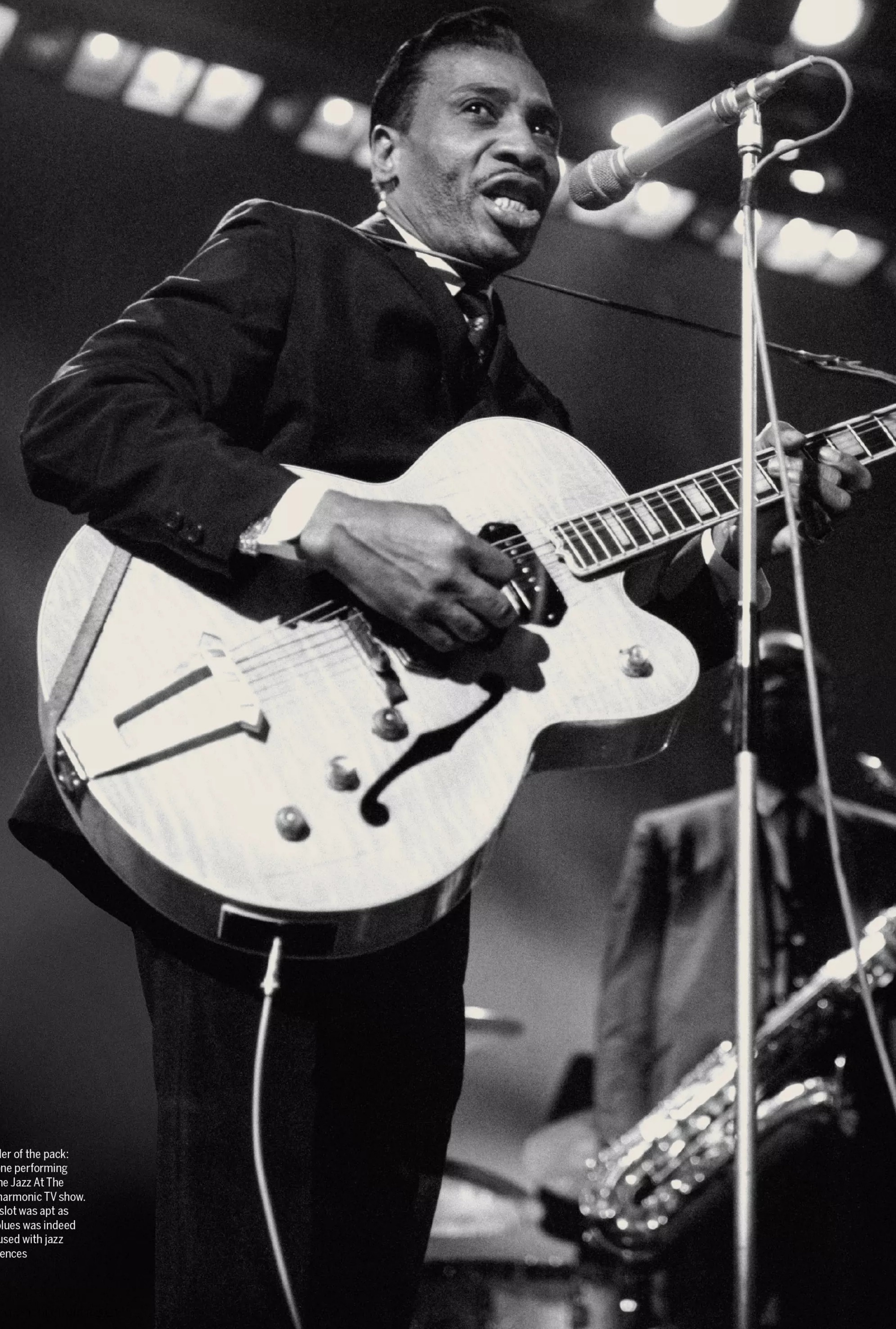
What Racz lacked was a guitar important enough to embody and demonstrate all these ideas. Enter T-Bone's ES-5N, which fit the bill perfectly. The guitar now has a new home at Crispin Weir's Regent Sounds guitar

store in London, where it's set to enjoy a whole new life at the centre of many new adventures. Denny Ilett [who pens the second part of this feature] played it brilliantly at the launch of my book at Regent Sounds a few months ago, proving that the guitar still has the power to inspire great playing.

Today, T-Bone himself remains an abiding inspiration to anyone who leans into the blues on an electric guitar. He put it this way: "The blues is the blues, regardless of where you play it. There's no such thing as the Texas blues or the Chicago blues and all that stuff. It's nothing new – that's a whole lot of talk. If you play good, you play good; if you don't play good, you don't play good."

BB King was a young wannabe when he first heard T-Bone. "I knew that nothing about guitar blues would ever be the same," he recalled. "I didn't know this man – I wouldn't meet him till years later – but I felt T-Bone Walker leading me into the future." **G**

***Electric Blues! T-Bone Walker & The Guitar That Started It All* by Tony Bacon is available now in a numbered limited edition from Regent Sounds, London – email publishing@regentsounds.com or see <https://gibsones5.com>**



Leader of the pack:
T-Bone performing
on the Jazz At The
Philharmonic TV show.
The slot was apt as
his blues was indeed
suffused with jazz
influences

THE BIRTH OF ELECTRIC BLUES

T-Bone Walker may have been the first true hero of modern electric blues, but he stood upon the shoulders of jazz and blues giants, as we explore in the following pages

Words Denny Ilett

Let's begin with a simple fact: T-Bone Walker wrote the dictionary on electric blues guitar practically single-handedly. The licks and techniques he invented – or, at the very least, popularised – are still heard in almost every amplified blues guitar solo, whether said soloist knows it or not. Listen to Jimi, Eric, SRV, BB or Bonamassa for more than a few seconds and you will hear something T-Bone played way back in the 1940s.

This revolutionary electric guitarist was the one that took the instrument, which was still in its infancy, to a place it had never been and would never return to. It was a place previously dominated only by horn soloists – at the front of the band wailing over the rhythm section and the brass riffs. Along with jazz genius Charlie Christian, T-Bone scared the hell out of the trumpet and saxophone stars. Their time was almost over, and within a decade they were the ones backing the guitar solos.

T-Bone Walker was *the* cutting edge of a coming-of-age for the guitar, the effects of which are still being felt today.

By the time of Walker's peak in the late 1940s and early 50s, most blues guitarists were plugging it in and turning it up. So what made T-Bone Walker special? After all, hadn't performers of equal stature such as Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker both 'gone electric' by then? Yes, but T-Bone's guitar was new – *brand-new*.

Waters and Hooker were, arguably, still speaking the same Delta-based language that had made them famous, and this time round they were merely louder. T-Bone's guitar playing was as modern as the electric guitar itself. And it was as if he needed the electric guitar and the electric guitar needed him. They were made for each other.

At times, his guitar borrows more from the language of a saxophone than it does a guitar. His concept and phrasing drew from jazz in a way that the work of other blues musicians didn't.

That's what made it sound fresh then and, indeed, now. His solos bounce and swing like jazz, but they're still the deepest and most authentic blues. Nothing like it had been heard before. It was, quite simply, the most forward-thinking development in blues since its inception.

The guitar itself seemed to undergo a series of musical identity crises in the first third of the 20th century. As jazz groups became larger it was too quiet to compete and found itself relegated to a role as a purely rhythm instrument. Here, it spent many a year thrashing out chords, four beats to the bar, alongside the upright bass and drums.

By the 1920s and 30s, many jazz and pop guitarists abandoned the guitar in favour of the banjo – a much louder instrument. For the early blues players it fared better as it was used almost exclusively as the sole accompaniment for a vocalist and could therefore be heard. Another musical strand was the hugely popular

Hawaiian style, which eventually birthed the Dobro, National, and lap and pedal steel variations on the traditional or 'Spanish' guitar.

It certainly seemed like it would never be able to hold its own out front. But, eventually, microphones connected to primitive PA systems were used to boost the guitar's volume – and this, in turn, led to the development of a dedicated system for amplifying them. Initially, the first 'real' electric guitars were amplified Hawaiian steel guitars. But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves... because without the musical foresight of certain acoustic players, there may not have ever been a need for the electric guitar, and we may not have had T-Bone Walker as a result.

For everything from classical to folk, blues and country music, the acoustic guitar was all that was needed. Many pop and jazz



PHOTO BY OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY/GETTY IMAGES

Charlie Christian helped to popularise the ES-150 before his death in 1942 – the year of T-Bone Walker's first electric recordings

guitarists used something akin to the Gibson L-5, a large-bodied acoustic archtop that produced enough volume for most settings, albeit rarely as a solo instrument. Archtop design hasn't, in the many years that have passed since, managed to improve much on the initial design of the L-5.

Other jazz musicians settled on the banjo, which could cut through a loud frontline of trumpet, trombone and clarinet with relative ease. Meanwhile, blues artists tended to work solo with the guitar as accompaniment to a vocalist – often themselves – and would only have to compete with a pianist, at most.

It's really for the benefit of a single-string soloist in front of a band that the guitar amp finds its place, and there are a few pioneers that we need to thank for bringing the guitar out of the rhythm section and into the spotlight.

Arguably the first true guitar-hero in the modern sense was Nick Lucas, with titles such as *Teasing The Frets* and *Picking*

1. Charlie Christian's stunningly inventive use of the ES or 'Electric Spanish' guitar for his vastly influential jazz soloing gave the electric guitar a new role and standing within music. He died young in 1942, aged just 25

The Guitar going back to the very early 20s. Jazzman Johnny St Cyr waxed several short solo passages in the mid-20s as part of Louis Armstrong's revolutionary Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings. But, arguably, it's the quite incredible set of records made by Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson in 1928 and early '29 that really opened the door for a generation of six-string soloists. Both of these musicians were stars in their own right, working in a variety of settings, but it's with these handful of recordings that their guitar prowess caused such a radical stir.

Other names were gradually changing the general perception of the instrument as the 1930s dawned. Guitarists such as Teddy Bunn, Carl Kress, Dick McDonough, Eddie Durham and, of course, Django Reinhardt were proving that six strings could deliver just as much expression as the best horn players of the day could.

However, with the exception of Lonnie Johnson, none of these were dedicated bluesmen. It was in the world of jazz that the guitar as a single-note solo voice seemed to be making leaps and bounds. In the blues world, the guitar was in danger of being left behind.

TAKING THE LEAD

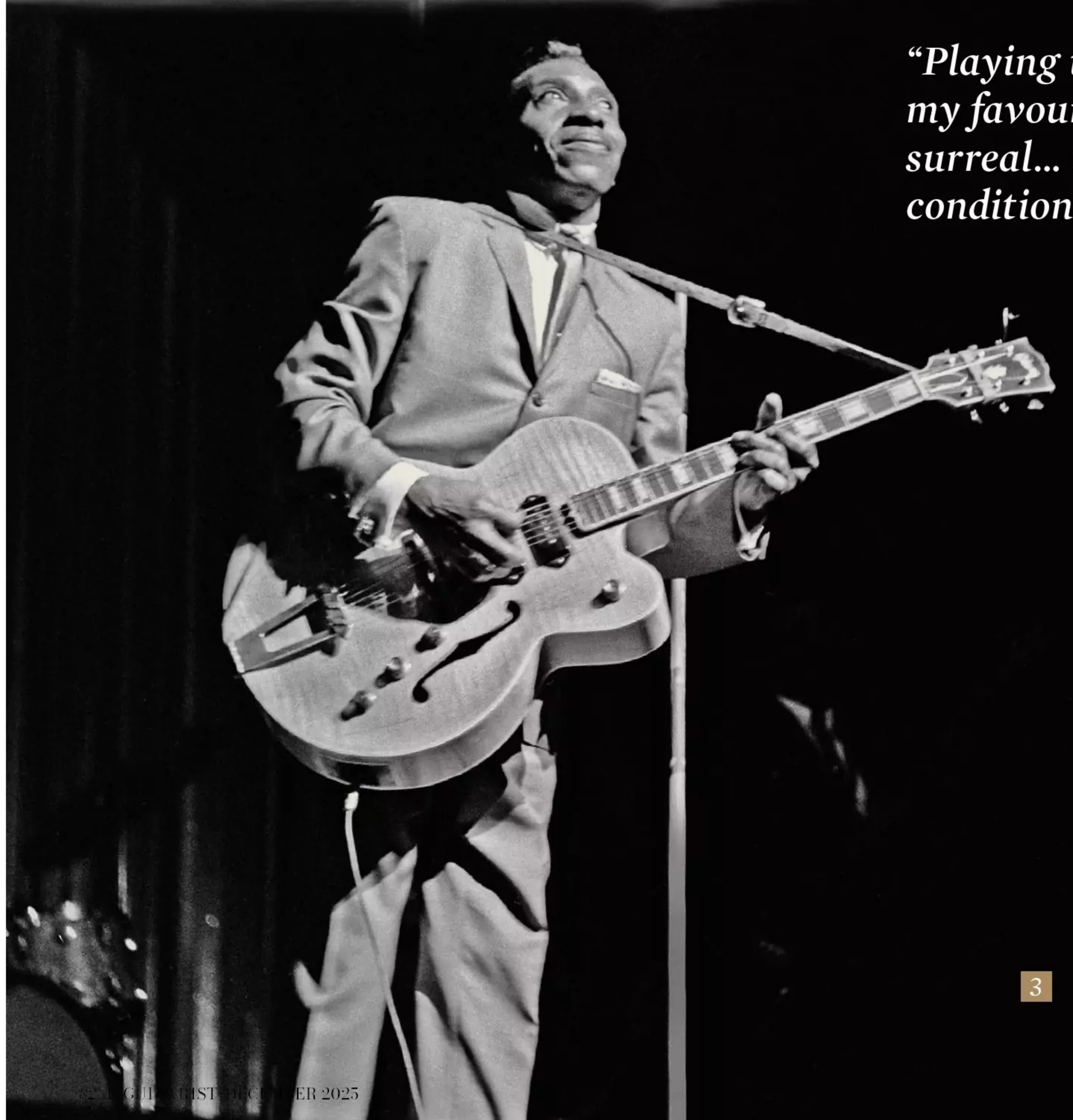
It was the Rickenbacker company that produced the first commercially available electric guitars with its now-legendary lap steel 'Frying Pan' appearing in 1932, meaning that the first electric players were indeed from the Hawaiian school of playing. Next, the Electro-Spanish Ken Roberts model from 1935 was the first guitar with a 25.5-inch scale and, incredibly, even featured an early incarnation of the vibrato arm. It's hard to see what it was designed for in those early days, other than to maintain a loose connection to Hawaiian style, but it was certainly one of the world's first whammy bars.

However, despite Rickenbacker being innovative and pioneering, it was the appearance of the Gibson ES-150 in 1936 that really set the wheels in motion for the electric guitar, changing music history at the same time.

'ES' stood for Electric Spanish; there was still a need to distinguish between a 'regular' guitar (or Spanish) and a Hawaiian (or slide guitar). The '150' was the price, in dollars, for the full guitar, cable and amp package. That's about \$3,500 in today's money. This is the guitar that history remembers as the

Calling the future:
T-Bone's fusion
of jazz and blues
helped establish the
language of modern
blues-rock guitar licks





THE T-BONE SHUFFLE

OUR WRITER, DENNY ILETT, PLAYS A PIECE OF HISTORY

On 25 September, Denny had the honour and pleasure of playing a whole set of T-Bone Walker tunes on his legendary 1949 Gibson ES-5 at the launch of Tony Bacon's new book, *Electric Blues! The Guitar That Started It All*, at Regent Sounds on London's Denmark Street.

"Playing the guitar that made my favourite blues records was surreal... it is in remarkable condition" **DENNY ILETT**

"T-Bone's music was the first electric guitar that I ever heard," says Denny. "My dad had a record called *The Blues Of T-Bone Walker*, a compilation of late-40s gems that I later learned was the first LP release of his music in the UK. I would have heard it around 1969 or '70 as a kid, and I love that music as much today as I ever have!

"Playing the guitar that made many of my favourite blues records was surreal, but within a couple of tunes I'd forgotten I was holding such an important instrument. Considering what it's been through, it plays incredibly well and is in remarkable condition. T-Bone himself clearly looked after it and cared for it deeply. I'll never get used to not having a pickup selector switch, though!"

2. British jazz guitarist and *Guitarist* writer playing his hero T-Bone Walker's '49 ES-5 in London

3. Charismatic and sophisticated, T-Bone elevated the image of the bluesman in the public eye to that of a true music star

model that sported the ‘Charlie Christian’ single-coil pickup, designed by Gibson employee Walt Fuller. As the jazz giant that he was, it was Christian himself who helped popularise the instrument before his tragic death at the age of just 25 in 1942 – incidentally, the year of T-Bone Walker’s first electric recordings. The ES-150 was also the precursor to the ES-250, which appeared at the tail end of the 1930s and was Walker’s main guitar for the next decade.

As for early electric blues recordings, many have claimed Bennie Moten’s 1929 *Every Day Blues* with Eddie Durham on guitar as the first electric blues guitar record. It’s a fantastic record, but it isn’t blues, and also the guitar resembles a mic’d-up Resonator, rather than an actual electric. Another Durham offering is 1935’s *Hittin’ The Bottle*, which also sounds like a mic’d acoustic over a chord sequence that isn’t blues.

One early recording that *is* authentic blues is Andy Kirk’s 1939 track *Floyd’s Guitar Blues*,

There was nobody else like him... T-Bone Walker took blues out of the country and into the city, and made it jump and swing

which features Floyd Smith playing very horn-like phrases in the Hawaiian style on what could therefore be a lap steel.

Another cut from a few years earlier in 1937 is *Blue Guitars*, recorded by the Western swing group The Light Crust Doughboys with Zeke Campbell playing an early electric blues solo. Big Bill Broonzy’s 1938 track *It’s A Low Down Dirty Shame* features a 16-year-old George Barnes, a future jazz star, playing electric blues guitar.

In 1942, by the time T-Bone had recorded his own electric for the first time, there had been several sides produced featuring the new-fangled instrument in a blues setting. But, important as these records are, none display the swagger of T-Bone’s playing or the depth of his connection to the blues. In fact, none even get close.



PHOTO BY JP JAZZ ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

TRUE ELECTRIC BLUES

All this is to make the point that T-Bone Walker was not just a pioneer; he was unique, and remains so, too. There was nobody else around at that time who sounded like him. Blues in the mid- to late 30s was still very much an acoustic Delta-based idiom performed by the likes of Charley Patton, Son House, Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson and Bukka White.

T-Bone Walker took blues out of the country and into the city, and made it jump and swing. From this perspective, he owes more to blues-influenced jazz artists such as Count Basie than he does to the Delta. The secret to T-Bone’s individuality is perhaps owed to combining the sophisticated swing of the big bands of the day – Basie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Jimmy Lunceford et al – with raw, pure blues. Here, he created something completely brand-new that evolved through the 40s into the rhythm and blues revolution that, in turn, gave the world rock ‘n’ roll.

T-Bone was now alongside other R&B stars such as Louis Jordan, Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris, but Walker was the only frontman during this period that was also a guitarist; the others were sax players or vocalists. Also, many

of the early rock ‘n’ roll stars such as Fats Domino, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis were pianists. T-Bone’s position as the number-one blues guitarist went unchallenged throughout the 1940s until the mid-50s when an explosion took place that produced the likes of BB King, Elmore James, Johnny ‘Guitar’ Watson and Hubert Sumlin, alongside country-influenced rockers such as Scotty Moore and Chuck Berry.

Within just a handful of years, the impact that Walker had over the evolution of the electric guitar had spawned the first wave of rock guitarists. The young Becks, Pages and Claptons would have seen T-Bone on the hugely successful Folk & Blues Revival shows that toured Europe throughout the 60s bringing T-Bone, now in his role as elder statesman, to new audiences eager to discover the roots of rock.

Even today, T-Bone’s influence is still wholeheartedly felt, despite his importance sometimes being overlooked. As fellow Texan Jimmie Vaughan said: “You look at everyone who’s ever stood in front of a band playing guitar and it all traces back to one man. It’s impossible to spend an hour in a blues club and not hear dozens of T-Bone’s inventions.” **G**

4. If T-Bone was the leader of an electric blues revolution, Lonnie Johnson, born in 1899, could be considered its godfather, laying the foundations in the 1920s and continuing to perform during the 60s blues boom, touring Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival in 1963 before his death in Toronto in 1970

Jared James Nichols

With a new album and a new range of signature guitars lined up, the next 18 months are looking busy for this American blues hotshot

Words Amit Sharma



We live in a world where almost every guitar player will tell you how they are ‘old-school’ in some way, shape or form. But very few live up to that term as sincerely as Wisconsin-born, Nashville-based blues dynamo Jared James Nichols. By his own admission, he’s a man of simple pleasures – give him a guitar with only one pickup, an overdrive pedal and an amp that responds in a similar way to his signature Blackstar JJN 50, and he’s ready to hit the road for months on end.

Now in his mid-30s – and a decade into his career as a recording artist – Jared has become a true successor to those legendary sonic minimalists who electrified the world by wrangling magic out of the guitar. And he’s more than aware that it’s uncommon for players of his generation to be quite so vintage-minded and spirited...

“Just the other day, I met a kid who wanted to get a picture and talk about gear,” Jared tells *Guitarist*, not long before embarking on an extensive European and UK tour to promote new single, *Ghost*. “After a few minutes, he admitted he’d never actually played through a real amp. That made me feel old, man, even if I’m still pretty young for the blues scene. I’ve always been old-school, but I’m heading more and more that way these days.”

Your signature models all have a single P-90 in the bridge position. How does that affect what you play?

“You almost have to think of your guitar as a singular tool. It’s like being handed a hammer and then being asked to build a whole house. You need to get crafty with it. Funnily enough, people that have never played a Les Paul Junior usually think it’ll only make one sound. But then they’ll notice that they can control way more than they thought by attacking harder or softer, changing where they pick or backing down the volume.”

So having less to work with inspires you to get even more creative?

“It’s like living out of a duffle bag. You make the most out of what you have and ultimately that helps you realise what’s important. All the dynamics and variations are important for blues, jazz, country, rock and even metal. Simplicity helped me find my voice. I’m not reliant on anything. I could pick up anyone’s guitar and still know how to sound like me. Needing less gear sets me free. I’m not chained down. It’s all a means to an end.”



PHOTO BY MARTY MOFFATT

PHOTO BY MITCH CONRAD

1. Jared James Nichols rocks the live stage alongside drummer Ryan Rice and Brian Weaver on bass guitar

Out of curiosity, have you always been like that?

“When I first started touring, I’d build pedalboards with a wah, tuner, fuzz and various drives on there. Things would go wrong, probably down to my own stupidity. So that pedalboard got smaller and smaller. By the end of the tour, it would be just a Tube Screamer into the amp because I knew I could play a whole set without any problems. I didn’t need all the extra crap. Just give me a single-P-90 guitar and a Tube Screamer and I’m ready to play the Royal Albert Hall. It’s like sink or swim.

“I’ve started backing off the dirt because you get extra clarity with more volume and less drive. Some players don’t realise that – they stack a bunch of pedals, which is cool and I’ve done that myself, occasionally. But sometimes a good guitar and amp pushed to the limits will get you the fattest tones.”

“Just give me a single-P-90 guitar and a Tube Screamer and I’m ready to play the Royal Albert Hall. It’s like sink or swim”

Speaking of amps, you’ve been very loyal to Blackstar over the years.

“It’s crazy how good that stuff is. I sometimes get the impression people scoff at me, like, ‘Oh Jared, you still using those Blackstars?’ And the answer is ‘yes’ because I love the company and they’ve been so supportive, but more importantly there’s never been a point where I’ve wanted to play anything else. At home, sure, I have a 1968 Plexi and Leslie West’s old Sunn amp, which Joe Bonamassa gave me, but there’s never been a time where I was playing through my Blackstars and wished it was a Deluxe.”

Joe’s a big fan of the Silver Jubilee. Have you ever tried one?

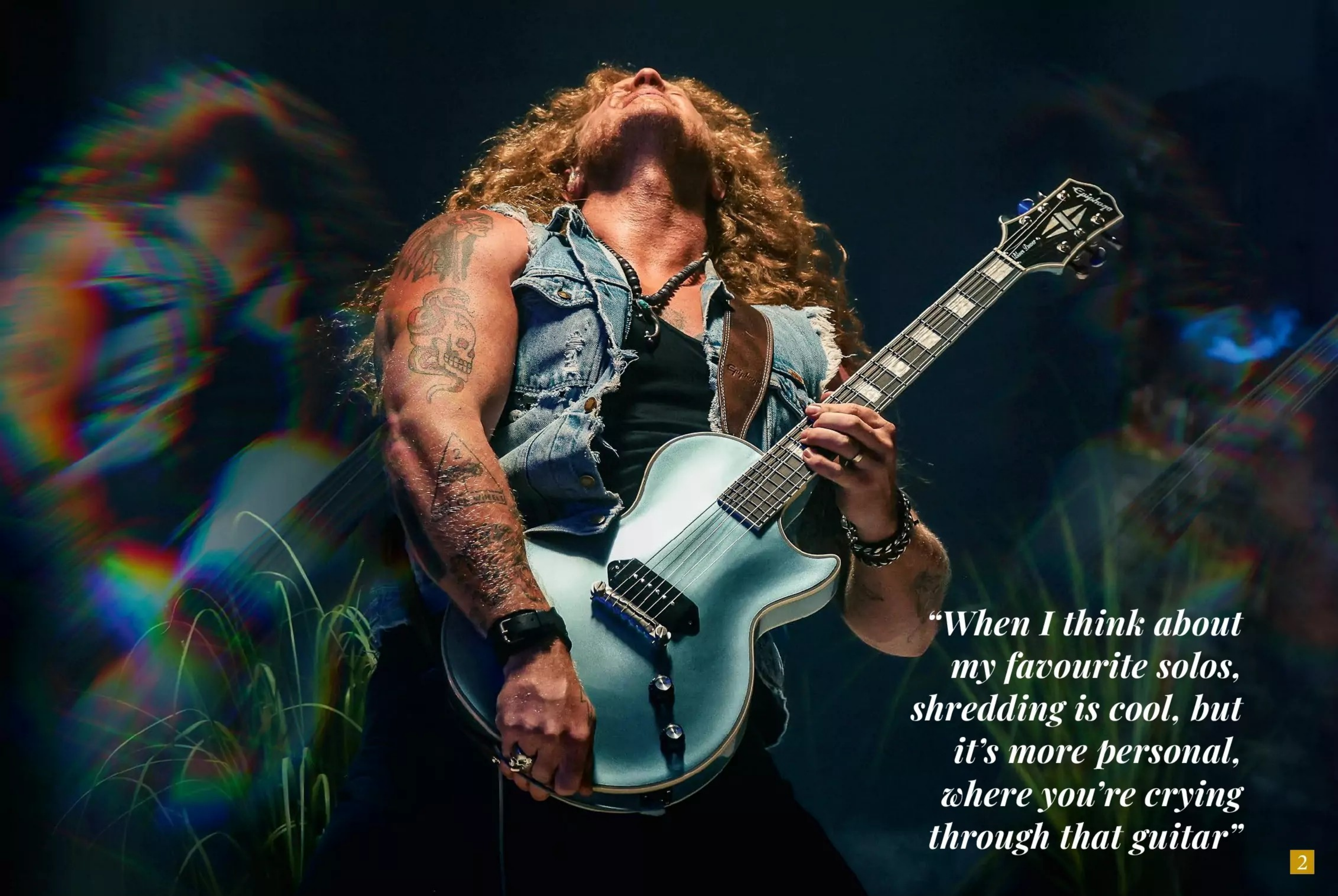
“Richie Faulkner from Judas Priest lives close to me and he’s got loads of Marshalls. I haven’t tried many, so I asked if I could come over. One of them was the Jubilee, which is an amp I’d never played before. I never understood why they were so highly rated, especially when you have people like Bonamassa swearing by them. And after plugging in, I *instantly* got it. That amp is super good and actually a bit different to the other amps Marshall is known for.”

Even the guitars you play – from the 1952 Goldtop you named ‘Dorothy’ and the refinished 1953 Goldtop you named ‘Ole Red’, to your three Epiphone signature models – are very classic designs. There’s no special circuitry or push/pulls...

“When I was younger, I’d watch videos of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Hendrix, any of the old blues guys, and I could see they had basic setups. I quickly realised the difference was in *how* they were playing. I was inspired to learn all those little nuances through touch. I dipped my toes into pedal land, but I never went far because I’d feel like the pedal was controlling *me*, rather than the other way round. To this day, I cannot use a delay pedal. I just can’t set them right. I don’t like it when the emphasis shifts from the notes I play to the gear I’m using.”

There’s been a lot of rumblings about a new signature to follow on from your 2023 Epiphone ‘Blues Power’ Les Paul Custom in Aged Pelham Blue.

“Yeah, there are a *lot* of rumblings right now. The main one is a new version of my first signature, a single-pickup Les Paul Custom in black, a replica of the 2008 ‘Old Glory’ Custom I modded myself. Apparently,



“When I think about my favourite solos, shredding is cool, but it’s more personal, where you’re crying through that guitar”

2

people keep asking for it. So I had a meeting with Gibson and they suggested putting it back out, maybe starting with a run of Custom Shop models because that’s something that’s never been done. There’s also the 75th anniversary of the Les Paul, which isn’t far off. I have ‘Dorothy’, which is one of the first Les Pauls ever made. One thing I’m noticing about Gibson/Epiphone right now is that they’re fearless. I was trying one of the [Epiphone] Inspired By [Gibson Custom] models the other day, and I could not believe how good it sounded. If Epiphones were like that when I was 15, my God, I would’ve been a happy kid. But in the early 2000s, you didn’t know what you were getting.”

You also tend to be relatively minimalist in terms of note choices – but then again, a lot of players would struggle to get the same amount of mileage as you from the pentatonic scale!

“I wanted to learn how to sing through my guitar. What helped was listening to people like Gary Moore and Albert King, and trying to soak up their simplicity. When I think about my favourite solos, sure, shredding is cool, but it’s more about that personal thing where you’re crying through that guitar. I want all the emotional shit to come out. The pentatonic scale is the simplest language for that. I might bring in other notes occasionally, but it’s better to be patient and tactile. I see great players every day online who make me think, ‘This person just played more notes than I have all week!’

“I was playing *Come Together* with Paul Gilbert recently and he did this insane solo. The solo I chose to play was literally the vocal melody, but I did it in a way that sounded disgusting and made me people pay attention. Paul looked at me as if to say, ‘You fucker!’ Sometimes in music, it all comes down to that human touch.”

You don’t lean too heavily on pedals, but your Klon and Tube Screamer usually travel wherever you go.

“I’ve had that 1982 Tube Screamer since I was 15. The great thing about those pedals is they’re *all* cool. You can pick up a TS9 from GuitarGuitar and it does the job. Even Bonamassa will tell you that. A Tube Screamer is a Tube Screamer. It’s one of the great cons of the guitar industry. Basically, they got all these dirt boxes right the first time around.

“The Klon is its own beast, there’s something slightly different in the sauce. Something nobody talks about is the floor noise. If you have the drive past halfway with your volume down, you get all this unwanted noise. I ended up taking the Klon off. Sure, I could throw a noise gate on there, but I shouldn’t need to. And taking Klons on the road isn’t fun. I always have to pull it off the ’board after soundcheck and bring it with me because a Klon sitting in a club is an easy nick. But nobody is going to steal your Tube Screamer, you know?”

2. Jared says that his signature Epiphone ‘Blues Power’ Les Paul Custom is set to be joined by another guitar with his name on it – a Gibson replica of his 2008 ‘Old Glory’ Les Paul Custom in black

3. ‘Dorothy’, one of the first Gibson Les Pauls ever made, was badly damaged in a tornado in 2013. It was subsequently restored by luthier Joel Wilkins of JW Guitar Restorations



3

PHOTO BY LOUISE PHILLIPS



PHOTO BY HALUK GURER

4. Jared acquired this early 1957 Les Paul Standard in 2023. It features a set of double-white Patent Applied For pickups and was refurbished and refinished by Joe Riggio of Riggio Guitars and John Ladas of Black Magic Vintage Guitars

You also just released a new single, *Ghost*, co-written with Tyler Bryant. Tell us about that.

“The plan is to keep pumping out singles until the album comes in May. Before my last record, the self-titled one from 2023, I noticed people would say, ‘Man, you sound incredible live, but I don’t like the sound of your records – it just doesn’t translate!’ It was like a backhanded compliment that made me go, ‘Thank you... I guess!’ So I was hell-bent on making an album that was just three dudes in a room cut to tape at Blackbird Studio in Nashville, which is what we did on that self-titled one. I love how it came out, but one thing about that record – and it was my own fault – was that I was trying to find a hole in the sky in terms of all the shit I loved. I was trying to capture lightning in the bottle.”

“If [your] setlist ebbs and flows, you can make your show feel like a great movie – there’s drama, anger, happiness”

So how exactly does this next album differ?

“This time I’ve dipped into the community of songwriters here in Nashville because the level and list of talent is insane. I know some mega-successful songwriters that have written tons of hits. Tyler Bryant is a good friend [and] every time we hang out, we can structure a song within minutes. In Nashville, it feels like everyone is collaborating all the time. For this record, I wanted to emphasise the songwriting. I’ve been playing tracks to Zakk Wylde and Bonamassa, friends who have a good idea of what to expect, and they’ve all told me, ‘Damn, I *really* like this song.’ It’s almost like ‘Wait? A guitar player actually putting out a good song?!’ That’s where my head was at.”

What other insights have you collected over the last decade of touring?

“Dynamics are so important. When I started playing, I thought I could take my guitar and beat people up for 90 minutes. By the end, everyone would be exhausted. But if you curate a setlist that ebbs and flows, you can make your show feel like a great movie. There’s drama, anger, happiness – you name it. One of the worst feelings on stage is when there’s no connection. People start walking out to get a beer, which leaves you thinking, ‘Shit, that’s not the point!’ You want everyone in the palm of your hand. Even if people don’t know the song, you have to keep them entertained to the point where they *want* to know the song.”

Finally, if you could have a lesson with anyone, living or dead, who would you choose?

“Leslie West was one of my biggest heroes. We were forming a relationship right as he passed and I even got to jam with him. I still find those records he made all those years ago so inspiring. They leave me wondering how he played those licks or dialled in those tones. He’s someone who was jamming with Hendrix back in the day.

“Jeff Beck is also on top of that list. Not long ago, I got to sit down with Tommy Emmanuel. He was two feet away, playing guitar and hanging out. It was like a religious experience – I’m not religious, but he put me in a trance. That’s the power of music. I can only imagine what it was like when Hendrix was playing. It must have felt like something from another world.” **G**



New single, *Ghost*, is available now on Frontier Records srl. Jared tours the UK from 26 November to 6 December with special guest AfroDiziac
www.jaredjamesnichols.com

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What's The Story?

Three new signature models for team Oasis. Valid instruments or another cash-in? Let's examine the evidence...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker







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What You Need To Know

- 1

So what is the story?

In an attempt to boost guitar sales just like they did back in the day, the reunited Oasis boys all get their own model. Noel has one already, and has had a few over the years, but it's a first for Bonehead and Gem Archer.
- 2

But doesn't Noel's signature cost almost £20k?

Well, yes, the one released earlier in the year was listed at £17k, but here we have the guitar for the masses from Gibson USA, not the Custom Shop.
- 3

That Sheraton looks cool...

We agree – it's based on one from the late 60s, but at the Masterbilt level it also has Gibson USA mini-humbuckers and a lower-gloss finish. Don't dismiss Bonehead's Riviera, though – it's based on the post-USA Japanese-era guitars and is a cracking workhorse guitar!

You don't need us to tell you that Oasis are once again the biggest guitar band in the world. And, as with any touring band, merch is all a part of the income stream. It was probably one of the world's worst-kept secrets that Gibson would be offering an affordable Gibson USA version of the 25-only £17k Gibson Custom Noel Gallagher Les Paul that launched back in August and sold out immediately. More surprising, though, are the Epiphone artist models for Noel's bandmates: long-time Gallagher sideman Gem Archer and

Oasis's original co-founder, Paul Benjamin 'Bonehead' Arthurs.

While those latter two Epiphones are based on guitars that both Gem and particularly Bonehead have used considerably over the years, Noel Gallagher's signature is the outlier: it's the standard production version of that Gibson Custom Les Paul purpose-designed for the reunion tour. We'll take a closer look at the backstory of these and other Oasis models later on, on page 98 – what we're concerned with here is, Oasis or not, are these any good?



Aside from the pimped parts, Noel's Les Paul follows the build style of Gibson USA including the binding 'nibs' at the fret ends



The chromed hardware follows Gibson's Modern style, though the chromed metal pickup covers are actually unique to this model

Gibson Noel Gallagher Les Paul Standard

The backstory here might be more interesting than the guitar itself. Effectively, it's a pimped version of the Les Paul Standard 50s P-90 with some chrome soapbar covers, a chromed jack plate (as used on numerous Modern Les Pauls) and toggle switch surround, a pickguard nicked from a Les Paul Custom, all completed by a set of black silver-topped reflector knobs and Noel's preferred SlimTaper 60s neck profile. Job done.

In line with the other Les Pauls in the Original line-up there's no weight relief, and this one – at a full-fat 4.56kg (10lb) – is almost a two-handed lift from its case. That aside, the black 'n' chrome scores plenty of rock 'n' roll points. It's a looker!

Obviously, there's no change in the recipe here, and, although you can't see the wood under the opaque finish, we have the usual blend of mahogany back (probably two-piece), centre-joined maple top and one-piece mahogany neck. The finishing is crisp, and the cream top-edge and fingerboard binding is clean, plus there's no 'ledge' on the sides of the neck that has plagued Gibson in the past. The hardware follows the Modern line-up with the slightly wider-travel Nashville bridge, a lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece and Grover Rotomatics.

Why P-90s? "We have been working on this guitar for at least 18 months," says Lee Bartram, the head of commercial, marketing and cultural influence at Gibson EMEA, specifically referring to that Gibson Custom limited-edition. "It really came from a conversation around creating a Les Paul that would accommodate P-90s, which Noel was playing a lot with Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds at the time, favouring Epiphone USA Casinos at high volumes, without compromising on the sound and tone of the pickup."

Fair play, but it's hardly a unique idea – the mid-50s transition specification of the Les Paul combined the new tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece with the last of the P-90s before the humbucker took over.

Epiphone Masterbilt Gem Archer Sheraton

Gem is certainly a man of many guitars, and this Sheraton replicates one owned by Noel (late-60s, USA-made) and loaned to Gem, who started using it in 2017. It's seen use on the reunion tour, along with a modern replica – presumably this signature. Epiphone says that this Masterbilt level "represents the highest standards of build and componentry for Epiphone... built to the same standards as our Inspired By Gibson Custom models

THE RIVALS

If soapbar Les Pauls are of interest, Gibson has the recent Warren Haynes LP Standard (£2,399), which features noise-cancelling soapbars and an active boost. Epiphone's Joe Bonamassa 1955 Les Paul Standard Copper Iridescent (£799) is a cracker with Epiphone P-90 Pro single coils.

There are plenty of copycat designs of our trio, although similar USA-level Les Pauls aren't that common. Maybach in the Czech Republic is known for its good-quality builds (its Lester models come in around £2,200), as is Eastman with its Chinese-made single-cuts such as the SB56/TV (approx. £1,800).

In the lower-end of the market Vintage offers the V100P with dual soapbars in Boulevard Black (£489). Staying with Vintage, its slightly offset VSA500 ES-335-alikes come in plenty of styles between £479 and £719. If you fancy something that won't break the bank but with a little actual history, check out the Guild Newark St models like the Starfire IV ST (approx. £1,200) with its LB-1 mini-humbuckers, or the more affordable Starfire I DC (approx. £490) with its full-size HB-2 humbuckers.

and includes the same etched Double Diamond stamp on the headstock rear", which, of course, all adds to the price. But like the slew of upper-end Epiphones we've looked at recently, the big upgrade is the Gibson USA pickups and electronics, and our Sheraton sports its period-specific mini-humbuckers, also used on the USA Les Paul 70s Deluxe.

The soapbar P-90s on Noel's guitar sound like the scruffy brother of a good Patent Applied For

While a guitar such as this would originally have featured the offset Freqsensator tailpiece or a vibrato, the more generic 'raised diamond' tailpiece here imitates the one on Noel's guitar. But this top-of-the-line spec (now and back in the day) is pretty classy, isn't it? The guitar, like all our trio, is only offered in one colour. This Cherry finish is similar to what we've seen on the Inspired By Gibson and Gibson Custom upper-end Epiphones, and it's pared back to an older-looking lower gloss. There's subtle orange-peeling in places, which suggests it's an off-the-gun finish, too.

1. Gem's Sheraton is a repro of a USA Epi gifted by Noel. The tailpiece is likely a later addition that replaced the offset Frequensator tailpiece or a vibrato of the original

2. The Sheraton appeared in '58 as Epiphone's upmarket 'ES' model. Along with the distinctive V inserts in the inlays, the original featured this 'oak-leaf' headstock inlay

3. This upmarket Epiphone uses two Gibson USA mini-humbuckers and features upgraded electrics. The Cherry finish is also an older-looking lower gloss

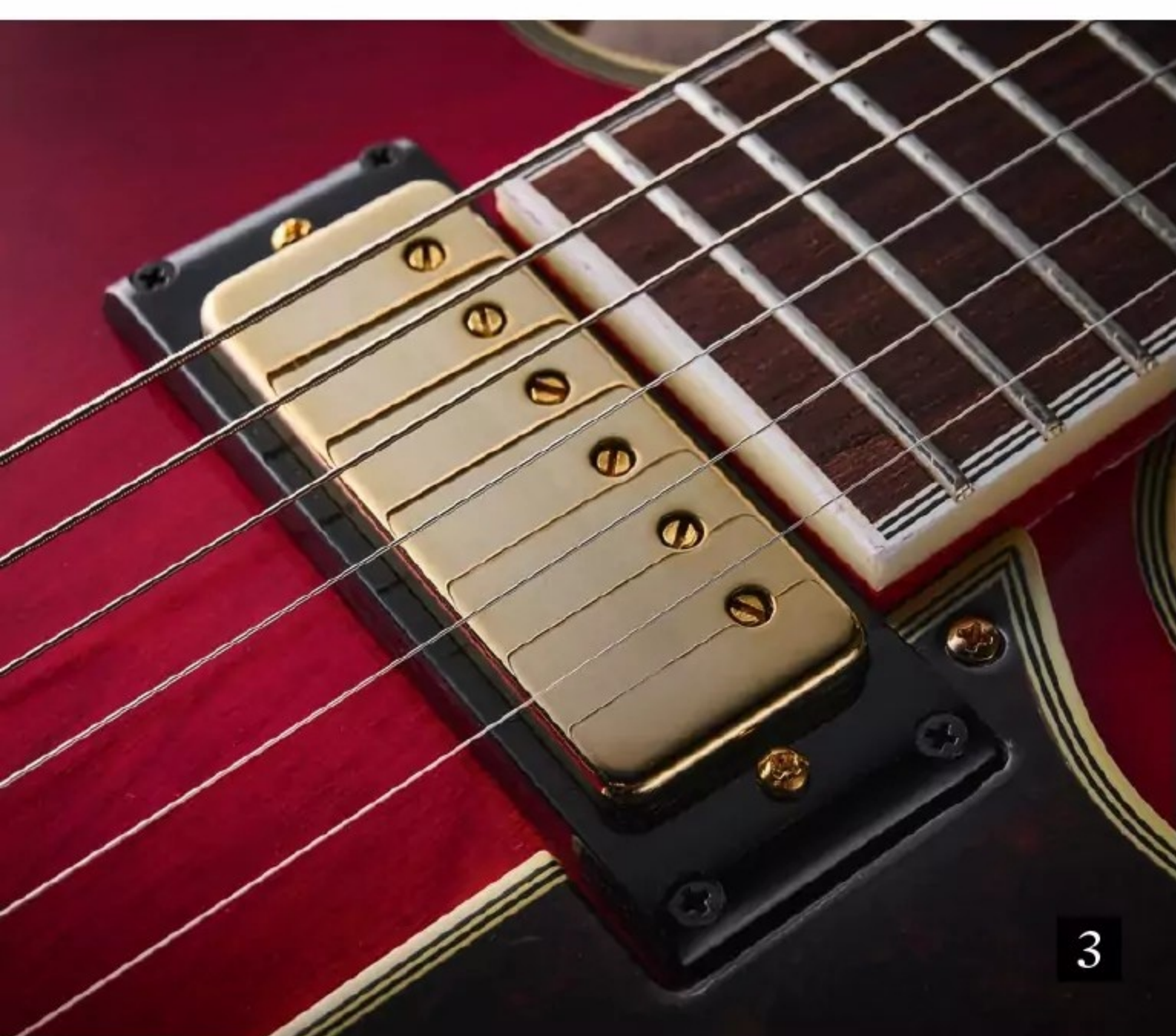


Offsetting the Cherry is the binding and inner multi-band purfling around the top edge of the body, which is toned by the finish, as is the single-strip edging on the back. The headstock is white bound like the fingerboard, which adds that multi-band purfling and this is replicated on the pickguard. We have the usual layered maple body construction with maple centre block, and those f-holes are neatly black painted. The pearloid block fingerboard

inlays with their 'V'd abalone insets add to the opulence, but they stop at the 15th fret (and there's no V in the final inlay). Even back in the 60s, Gibson realised there's no money to be made up the dusty end!

The neck here is spec'd as mahogany. The headstock is pretty long and has a classy looking black 'stinger' on the back and bears Gem's signature in gold, matching the hardware. The headstock face features what was originally known as an oak leaf inlay – also used on the Kalamazoo-made original and the pretty rare Epiphone Emperor and Howard Roberts – and looks like a throwback to a bygone age.

Here, we get a standard ABR-1 narrow tune-o-matic, although the spec description of the Grover Rotomatic tuners with their 'milk bottle' buttons is inaccurate: 'milk bottle' referred to the slightly harrower shape of the tuners' body, not the buttons, which are standard kidney bean types. Other quibbles? Well, the cut-outs in the pickguard to surround the treble side of the uniquely shaped pickup rings are a little scrappy, while the gold-topped black reflector knobs sit rather high, especially the neck pickup's volume, which looks a little rushed.



Epiphone Bonehead Riviera

There's a strong argument that this Riviera is really the key Oasis guitar used extensively live and in the studio in the early days – and pretty much the guitar our man of the people has played throughout his career. So it's a Chinese-made replica of a Japanese-made replica of the original USA Epiphone, which was a rebadged replica of the Gibson ES-335!

At this lower, non-Masterbilt level, like Noel Gallagher's own current Epiphone Riviera, the guitar looks and feels like it might well have come from a different factory compared with the Sheraton. There's the overall thick-looking gloss polyester finish, but the deep colour is good, as is the 'bursting, and the bright white E-logo'd pickguard and truss rod cover give quite the 60s look.

A major difference here compared with Gem's guitar is that the neck is maple, following the early-to-mid-80s era of Bonehead's original: three longitudinally joined pieces with a volute behind the truss rod access cavity. It's actually classic archtop-like, and we'd lay bets that it's a lot stronger than the Sheraton's neck. Again reflecting the period of the original guitar,

the mini-humbuckers had changed to full-size 'buckers and here we get Epiphone's Alnico Classic Pros.

Again chromed-plated, the hardware is a little more generic, certainly the ABR-1 style narrow tune-o-matic with its spring retainer for the saddles and its large slot-head posts. Both bridge and tailpiece are Epiphone's LockTone type, too, which means they don't fall off when you restring, unlike the others. The tuners are E-logo'd die-cast types with smaller oval buttons, but they do the job. The heights of the witch-hat controls knobs vary quite a bit, but with a dark rosewood 'board, well-fettled frets and a nut that's finished a little more neatly than the Sheraton's, there's a lot to like here.

Feel & Sounds

Aside from the weight, there's little to dislike about Noel's Les Paul, either. The SlimTaper neck isn't to everyone's taste, but the subtly flat-backed classic 'C', which feels a lot less 'clubby' than the fuller 50s profile, is perfectly good. Size-wise, it measures 43.46mm wide at the nicely cut Graph Tech nut, 20.9mm deep at the 1st fret and 23.6mm by the 12th.

Typically, the binding 'nibs' form the fret ends and the medium-gauge wire used by Gibson isn't over tall – you can certainly feel the rosewood fingerboard as you bend. We'd be tempted to give the fret tops a bit more of a polish, though.

The Sheraton has a really sophisticated voice, cleaning up that Les Paul bluster and adding clarity

After the heft of the Les Paul, Gem's Sheraton feels positively lightweight, while the body is much larger in size at 16 inches across its lower bouts, just like an ES-335. The neck with its quoted '60s C' profile is different, too. It's subtly narrower, measuring 41.34mm at the nut (which, while well cut, is left a little high) but virtually identical in depth: 21mm at the 1st fret and 23.3mm by the 12th. It's profile is close to the SlimTaper, slightly less flat on the back but pretty similar.

While very slightly narrower in width, the frets here are a little higher and these fractions do make a difference. With all of our trio set up to the same parameters, this Sheraton plays a little more cleanly and positively than the Les Paul. The frets are smoother and more polished, plus the ends sit over the fingerboard binding.

UNDER THE HOOD

What's the Masterplan here, then?

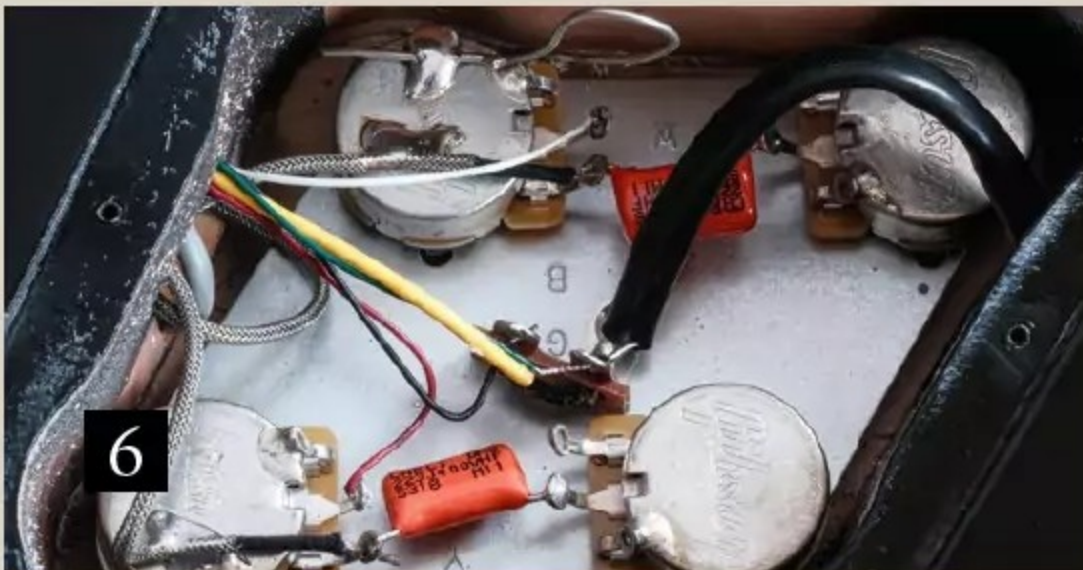
According to Gibson spec, Noel's soapbar single coils use a pair of Alnico V magnets in each, are wax potted and have a nominal DCR of 8kohms, although ours measure 7.82k (bridge) and 7.77k (neck) at output. They're neatly mounted: two small-diameter bolts pass through the thin metal cover and pickup, and thread into a purpose-designed baseplate with a pair of springs as the 'cushion'. That baseplate also has holes to mount Gibson's mini-humbucker, which, in its supplied surround, should just drop into these soapbar cavities if you fancy a change, not least that the soapbars are single coils, are not hum-cancelling in the mix position and, yes, they can pick up hum and noise.

The modern-wired circuit is the same as numerous contemporary Les Pauls we've seen: the Gibson logo'd pots have a nominal 500k value and are mounted to a metal screening plate; the tone caps are 400-volt Orange Drops with a value of .022µF.

The Sheraton's Gibson USA mini-hums use Alnico II magnets in each and the DCRs are the same measured at output, pretty much bang on 6k. Again, they're wax potted and we presume are the same pickups used in the Gibson USA Les Paul 70s Deluxe. While we didn't pull out the pots and switch, the guitar is spec'd with USA components, too, and you can see that the toggle switch is clearly labelled Switchcraft.

The Riviera's Alnico Classic Pros appear tidily made with a nickel silver baseplate that has a printed code ID. Exactly what's under the hood is harder to determine as specifications seem to vary. At output, ours measured 7.88k at the bridge and 7.57k at the neck, which are in the lower Patent Applied For range.

With the pickups removed on both semis, you can see in the cavities how the centre block is very similar to Gibson style with the spruce 'cushions' sitting above and below the maple centre block. It's very neatly done.



4. Quite rare on standard USA models, Gibson's P-90 pickup is cleanly built and has a long history

5. This mounting plate means that bolts are used to mount the pickup, not screws. We presume the outer holes are for mini-humbuckers

6. The Les Paul's control circuit is very standard for USA models; cleanly done, too

7. The Gibson USA mini-'bucker is like a full-size one but smaller. It's different from the Firebird pickup, which has the same footprint

8. The Riviera's Alnico Classic Pros were USA-designed, although accurate specs are hard to find

9. The simplified Riviera headstock, which here uses the Gibson 'crown' inlay, is the same size as the Sheraton's but features a strengthening volute behind the truss rod access cavity

10. Like Noel Gallagher's signature Riviera, the model that Bonehead puts his name to features the same bridge setup and standard-sized Alnico Classic Pro humbuckers

11. The pots and switches might not be USA level on this model, but with its ES-335-style control layout, Bonehead's Riviera guitar packs plenty more styles than just Oasis covers



9



10

Technically, the fret ends are left a tad sharp, but there's an easy fix and you don't really notice them when you're playing. Although the top edges of the fingerboard binding are lightly rolled, the actual side edge is very square and would benefit from a little in-curve. But straight out of the case this one plays really well, not least with the 0.010-gauge strings that give a nice 'fight' to the feel in combination with that 'dead' string length behind the bridge.

Marginally lighter than the Sheraton, the Riviera is also well set up. The frets follow the slightly narrower/taller style of the Sheraton and, to be honest, it plays

So how do they sound plugged in? Well, don't blame us if you strap on Noel's Les Paul and write off the rest of your day. We reminded ourselves of the power of the P-90 from our dirty rocking '57 Les Paul Junior, and the NG takes that up a level adding some higher-end lift and sharper clarity while still retaining that grainy, throaty midrange. These aren't high-output pickups, but they sound like the scruffy brother of a good Patent Applied For unit – a bit rougher. There's a little more bite to the all-important mixed pickup sound, and the neck voice is really quite fluid; it's Les Paul soupy

with just a little edge. Clean, there's good 60s snap and character at the bridge, the mix is deliciously funky, and the neck is a near-perfect jazz/blues voice. The four controls allow plenty of shading, with both volumes just smoothing the high-end as you pull them back. It's dangerously close to rock 'n' roll heaven.

Playing the Sheraton through the same clean/crunch setups, we hear quite a difference. The output is slightly lower with less low-end and midrange, but there's a really characterful voice that jangles beautifully in the mix position. There's cutting clarity at the bridge; the neck sounds

Bonehead's Epiphone Riviera is a bit of a surprise: it's full of very usable voices, with obvious attitude

just as well. It's marginally wider at the nut (43.14mm) than the Sheraton, and is the thinnest-depth neck here by a fraction: 20.1mm at the 1st, 22.6mm at the 12th. Its profile is quoted as SlimTaper 'C', but it has the flattest back of our trio. Does that matter? Not in the least. Like everything else about this guitar, it might not have the highest spec, but it's just as gig-ready.



11



clearer, more defined. A really sophisticated voice, cleaning up that Les Paul bluster and adding clarity without overdoing it.

The Riviera doesn't lack poke or sizzle at the bridge and, while it's not the most refined voice we've heard, it's punky-bright and attacking, and is instant early Oasis through any overdrive. Perhaps it's that clarity we hear at the bridge as the pickup mix is a really strong hollowed voice with beautiful depth and sparkle – a standout sound. At the neck, it's righteous and bluesy like the Gibson it emulates. A bit of a surprise, this one: full of very usable voices, with obvious attitude and plenty more.

Verdict

Rather like Oasis, Gibson and Epiphone are on a bit of a roll. Each guitar has a sound and character that goes way beyond the style of music that the signature artists publicly play. The Sheraton, for example, is not only well made, but it's got a unique voice that somehow hangs on to the 60s with jangle and snap, and played clean on the neck you can fill your jazzier boots.

Noel's Les Paul sounds beautiful, too – a nod to the long-running P-90, but it has little heritage in the Oasis camp. It's also heavy.

And while we'll probably get pilloried for giving Bonehead's Riviera a Gold award, it's undoubtedly the most Oasis guitar here. No fuss, smartly built: a guitar that'll take you way beyond the Oasis roar. **G**



GIBSON NOEL GALLAGHER LES PAUL STANDARD

PRICE: £2,699 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany (no weight relief) with carved maple top
NECK: Mahogany, SlimTaper profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/ 43.46mm
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound Indian rosewood, acrylic trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stud tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic tuners w/ kidney buttons – chrome plated
BRIDGE/SPACING: 51mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson Soapbar P-90 single coils w/chrome covers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.56/10
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The Les Paul Standard 50s P-90 is available in-store and Exclusive (online) from £2,299 in ebony and other colours. It has the 50s vintage neck profile with cream pickup covers and scratchplate
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISH: Ebony (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose



PROS Good build and classy pimped appearance; great sounds from the quite-rare-today soapbar single coils

CONS Heavy; we wish those frets were a little taller; P-90s can hum and pick up noise



EPIPHONE MASTERBILT GEM ARCHER SHERATON

PRICE: £1,199 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway, centre-blocked thinline electric
BODY: 5-ply maple/poplar laminate body with maple centre block
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, '60s C' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/ 41.34mm
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, mother-of-pearl block inlays with abalone triangle inserts, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge, raised diamond tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic 'milk bottle' tuners w/ kidney bean buttons– gold-plated
BRIDGE/SPACING: 51mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson USA mini-humbuckers w/ gold-plated covers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.93/8.65
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The standard Sheraton with Frequensator tailpiece and Probucker mini-humbuckers is £879 in Vintage Sunburst and Natural finishes, and comes with a gigbag, not case. It's also available left-handed
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISH: Cherry (as reviewed) – gloss



PROS A big step up from Epi's standard level: vintage-looking finish, Gibson USA pickups and electronics and a cool evocative voice; hard to put down and extremely close to a 10!

CONS Minor fit/finish quibbles



EPIPHONE BONEHEAD RIVIERA

PRICE: £849 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway, centre-blocked thinline electric
BODY: 5-ply maple laminate body with maple centre block
NECK: 3-piece maple w/ volute, SlimTaper 'C' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/ 43.14mm
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, pearloid parallelogram inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece, die-cast tuners w/ oval metal buttons – nickel plated
BRIDGE/SPACING: 51mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Epiphone Alnico Classic Pro humbuckers w/ chrome/nickel-plated covers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.56/10
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The Noel Gallagher Riviera is very similar and costs £879. The non-signature model with Frequensator tailpiece and mini-humbuckers is £709
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISH: Dark Tobacco Sunburst (as reviewed) – gloss



PROS Smart build, with wide-ranging voices that'd certainly work in your tribute band or just as well at your blues jam

CONS Nothing, it's a great version of a truly iconic guitar – buy one and write some songs

Three Here, Now

Gibson and Epiphone's latest signature models have been chosen for their specific roles in the Oasis history book

Words Stuart Williams



Performing in 1994, Noel plays his black 'The Queen Is Dead' Les Paul Custom, prior to changing the pickups to P-90s

Noel Gallagher's love of the Les Paul spans all the way back to a pre-fame Oasis, where – as is the case for many aspiring rock stars – he toted an Epiphone Les Paul Standard as his main guitar. With a record deal under his belt, you might expect that to have changed in an instant, but check out the video for Oasis's first single, 1994's *Supersonic*, and you'll see the Cherry sunburst Epiphone taking pride of place.

However, Noel, who had struck up a friendship with former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr, was 'gifted' not one but two Les Pauls from Marr himself. The first is a Standard, which began life as a Goltop and had the honour of being owned and smashed by Pete Townshend before Marr acquired it, and the second is a Les Paul Custom. The Custom features an additional toggle switch for splitting the coils, which at first appears curious, but Noel removed the humbuckers and replaced them with P-90s, lifted from one of his Gibson Firebirds. In 2023, he told *That Pedal Show*: "It was only [years later] that [Marr] said, 'Oh, that's *The Queen Is Dead* guitar,' and I was like, 'Could you have fucking told me that earlier, before I butchered it?!'"

Which brings us to the Noel Gallagher Les Paul Standard, which is based on the Made To Measure Gibson Custom guitar that Noel has been playing on the Oasis Live '25 dates. If you weren't one of the 25 punters with the readies to splurge on one of the £17,500 replicas, this is a much more 'real world' opportunity to get close to Noel's stage guitar. With a pair of P-90s, it's from the same tonal lineage as the 'Marr' Les Paul Custom, initially causing some fans to set the online comments sections alight with comparisons to the Custom – as well as legitimately pondering whether this was Noel's homage to the 'Old Black' Les Paul of his hero Neil Young.

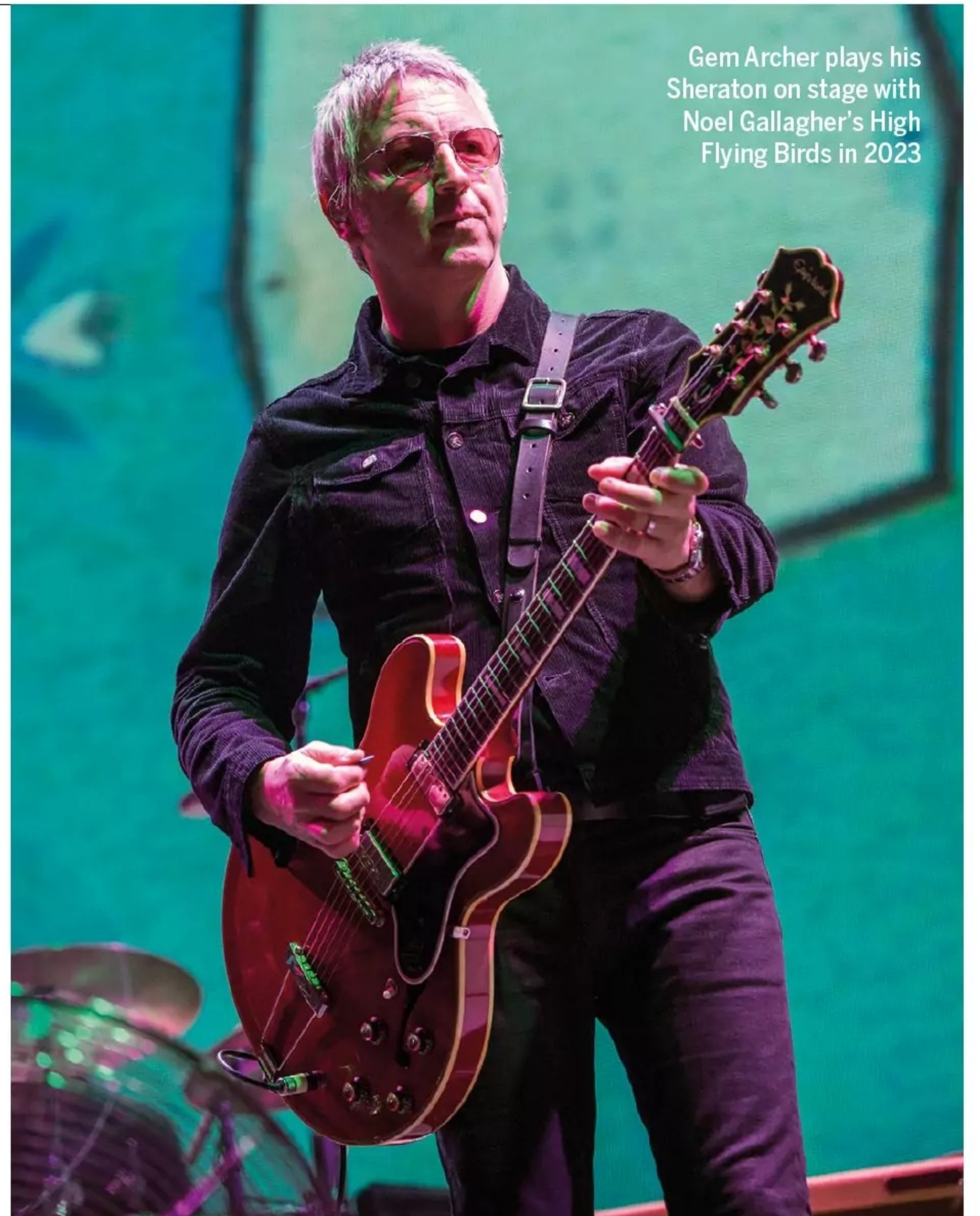
Down The Riviera

Gibson and Epiphone semi-acoustics play an integral part in the band's golden era sound, particularly Paul 'Bonehead' Arthurs' Epiphone Riviera; it's certainly a constant of the Oasis guitar canon. From

PHOTO BY JOSHUA HALLING/@JOSHUAHALLING COURTESY OF GIBSON



The Made To Measure version of Noel's new signature has made plenty of appearances during the Oasis Live '25 Tour



Gem Archer plays his Sheraton on stage with Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds in 2023

PHOTO BY STEVE THORNE/GETTY IMAGES

some of the band's smallest gigs at 'toilet-tour' venues like Camden's Water Rats to the record-setting Knebworth gigs in front of a collective quarter-of-a-million fans over two nights, find a picture of Bonehead on stage, and you can, with confidence, bet your 335 that he'll be clutching his Antique Burst Epiphone Riviera.

The story, as told to *That Pedal Show* in 2023 (before Oasis confirmed they would reform in 2025), goes that Bonehead and Noel paid a joint trip to Manchester institution Johnny Roadhouse Music to look for guitars. "We were such Beatles fanatics, we were into Epiphones," says Noel. "We both bought Epiphones [Rivieras]. He's got a brown Tobacco one, which, funnily enough, when the band split up, he didn't take with him – so I've got it now."

The guitars in question were both made in the 80s and are often referred to by Epiphone fans as 'Matsumoko' models, owing to the fact that they were produced by the manufacturing company of the same name. Both guitars forgo the traditional Riviera configuration of mini-humbuckers and a Frequensator tailpiece, in favour of a tune-o-matic/stopbar and full-size 'buckers, bringing this era of Riviera more in line with Gibson's ES-335. Noel's Riviera remains 'stock' to its factory build, which included Maxon MMK-61 pickups, with Bonehead's Riviera very likely to have featured the same models.

Noel's Riviera, famously used as one of his main guitars during the *What's The Story...?* sessions, was recreated as an Epiphone signature model in 2022, and while the Wine Red model from the

Don't Look Back In Anger video makes less frequent appearances, Bonehead has been using his Riviera since joining Liam Gallagher for the *Definitely Maybe* 30th anniversary dates, and once again in Oasis for the reunion tour.

Hidden Gem?

Gem Archer has continued the Oasis tradition of semi-hollow guitars, both as Bonehead's replacement from 1999 to 2009, his tenure in post-Oasis band Beady Eye, as a member of Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds and once again as a member of the three-guitar line-up in the reunited 2025 incarnation of Oasis. During this time, one of his most-favoured guitars was a US-made late-60s – according to Gem's tech with NGHFB, Dave White, when we interviewed him in 2018 – Epiphone Sheraton, which was actually (and remains) one of Noel Gallagher's guitars. Despite a few years away from the Sheraton, Gem was reunited with the guitar when joining NGHFB in 2017. "He just goes, 'What guitars do you want to borrow?'" Gem told us in 2018. "I was like, 'Well, I've played that one and it's incredible.' It's 60s, but I'm not sure of the exact year. I was going to buy one, but it was about seven grand!" It is, of course, this guitar that forms the basis for the Epiphone Masterbilt Gem Archer model, which, like the original, features a trapeze tailpiece, rather than the Frequensator or vibrato-equipped models. Luckily for Gem (and the rest of us), we don't need £7k to bag the recreation. **G**

PHOTO BY IAN DICKSON/GETTY IMAGES



Bonehead on his Riviera upfront at Camden's Water Rats venue in early 1994





Strat Attack

Two new lower-end, similarly priced Stratocasters cater for both vintage and more modern tastes and blur the line between Fender's USA and Mexican manufacturing. Which one has your name on it?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



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What You Need To Know

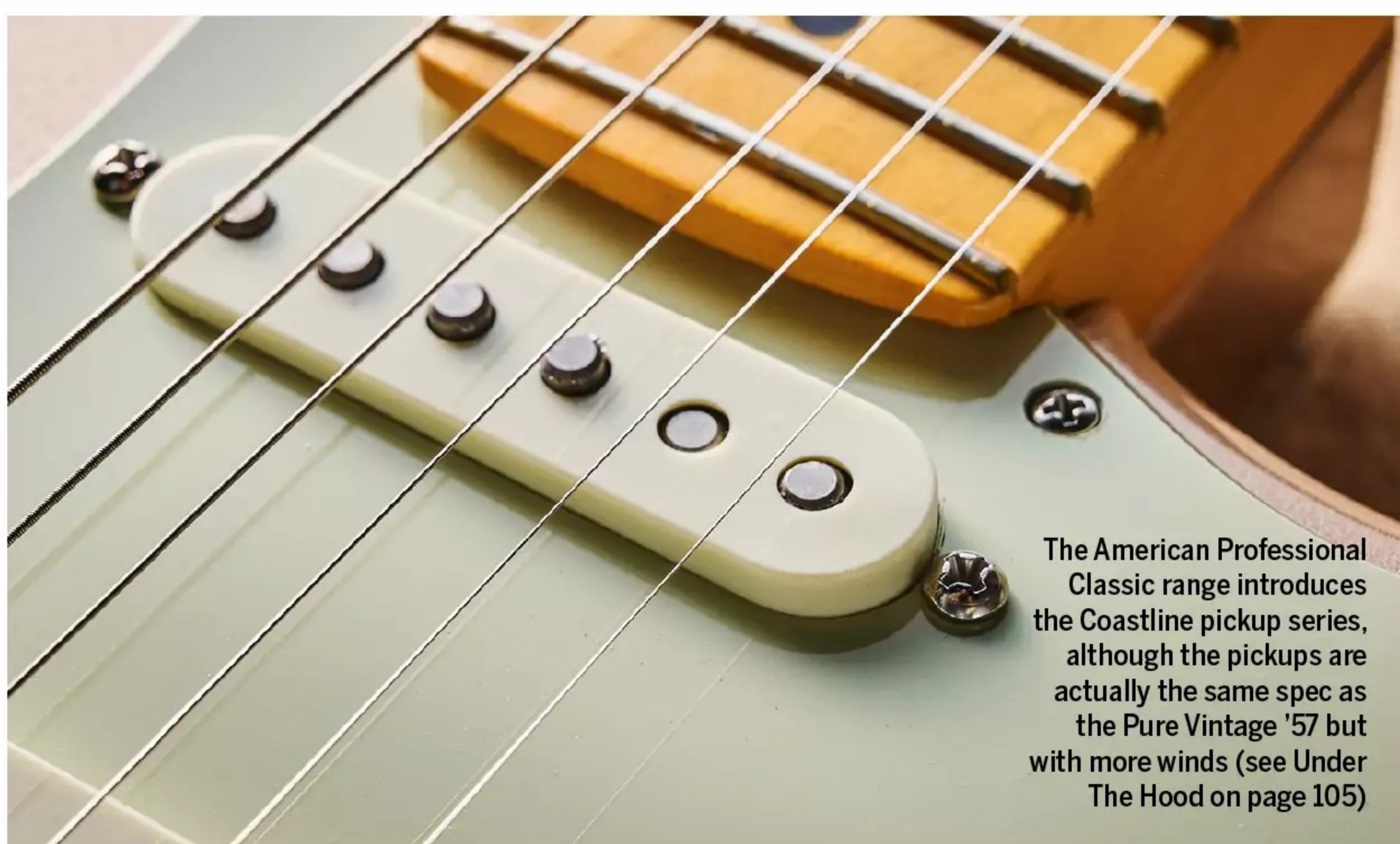
- 1 American Professional Classic – that sounds new?**
Don't worry, as is usual after four or five years, Fender likes to refresh or replace its ranges. So the new American Professional Classic replaces the American Performer range, which came along in 2019.
- 2 Why should we be interested?**
Well, these new models sort of bridge the gap between vintage style and overly modern, and come in lightly faded gloss colours. Along with our standard Stratocaster, there's an HSS version, a Telecaster, a 'Hotshot' Tele that blends in some Strat, a Jazzmaster and a Jaguar, plus Precision, Jazz and Mustang basses.
- 3 And the Road Worn models are back again. This one doesn't look very worn, though...**
This latest limited run of the Road Worn series uses a proper nitrocellulose finish, which is lightly cracked, and a lower gloss. Any more ageing and dings are all down to you.

Although Fender has had a busy year with plenty of artist models and special-run guitars, there's been considerable speculation about what changes will be made to its core USA- and Mexican-made ranges. The modernist American Ultra II range, for example, recently got a sibling, the American Ultra Luxe Vintage mini-range, which adds in the lightly-aged 'Heirloom' nitro finishes to those modern specifications.

This old-looking-Fender vibe continues with the most recent return of the

Mexican-made Road Worn models, which originally appeared back in 2009. There are just four limited models – the '60s Strat we have here, a '60s Tele and P-Bass, and a '50s Jazzmaster – that augment the ongoing Vintera II line-up and introduce another new-style lightly aged nitro finish.

Finally, the 2019 released American Performer range gets the boot in favour of the new American Professional Classic line-up. Modern in style with some vintage flourishes in terms of faded but full gloss finishes and with new 'hot vintage'



The American Professional Classic range introduces the Coastline pickup series, although the pickups are actually the same spec as the Pure Vintage '57 but with more winds (see Under The Hood on page 105)



Coastline pickups, these are now the entry point for Fender USA.

We had fun with a pair of the American Ultra Luxe Vintage models in issue 529, so here we're taking a look at the other new entries via a pair of classic Stratocasters.

American Professional Classic Stratocaster

This new-level Stratocaster might represent the start-up USA range, and is the only one that comes with a gigbag not a case, but there's outwardly nothing remotely cut-price about what we have in our hands. Our Faded Firemist Gold gloss finish is rather opulent and very well applied, although it does hide any indication of the actual number of pieces used for the alder body. The 'Classic' part of the name seems to reference the mostly more vintage-y details, certainly compared with the higher-tier American Professional II. The neck heel is the classic rectangle, as is the neckplate, unlike the Pro II's sculpted, round-nosed heel with its Micro-Tilt adjustment. The classic body contours are slightly more sculptured here and more vintage-like than on the Road Worn model, too. It's very nicely done.

The vintage-tinted maple neck, meanwhile, sits more in the modern camp. It's 22-fret with Fender's long-running Modern 'C' profile and bigger-

than-vintage medium jumbo frets on the 241mm (9.5-inch) cambered fingerboard face. Unlike the previous big-headstock 70s style of the American Performer Strat, the smaller gloss-faced headstock here is, well, more classic!

The aptly named ClassicGear tuners, which first appeared on the Performers, upgrade the original Kluson style with front nut 'modern' mounting (there are no screws on the back), and while they retain the classic split posts, they increase the ratio to a super-smooth 18:1. New here,

1. With its narrower 'modern' string spacing, this bridge has been used on plenty of Ensenda-made guitars. It's all steel, including the tapered block, while the arm simply screws in old-school style

2. Upgraded from the outgoing American Performer is the smaller, gloss-finished headstock with staggered-height ClassicGear tuners and just a single string-tree

THE RIVALS

If your tastes lie on the more modern side, then Fender's Player II Modified Stratocaster (£949) is well worth a look with its Modern 'C' neck profile and 22 medium jumbo frets, short-post locking tuners paired with the two-post, block-saddle vibrato and Player II Noiseless single-coil-sized humbuckers.

Up from the American Professional Classic Strat is the Fender American Professional II Stratocaster (from £1,829). This, of course, comes with a moulded case (not gigbag) and the Tim Shaw-designed V-Mod II single coils, plus plenty of neat upgrades such as its two-post vibrato with a cold-

rolled steel block, a Deep 'C' neck profile and contoured neck heel with Micro-Tilt adjustment. A real class act.

Considerably more expensive is the new American Ultra Luxe Vintage Stratocaster (available in '50s, '60s and '60s HSS variants, from £2,899), the only other production Fender range that uses an aged nitro finish, which Fender calls 'Heirloom'. Of course, if you want to go old-school and let time and playing age your guitar, the American Vintage II 1965 Stratocaster (£2,299) is more than worth a look. Huge vintage detail but with a pristine nitrocellulose lacquer finish.

Following vintage style, on the Vintera II model we get a 21-fret neck using 'Vintage Tall' frets on the original 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius. The edges of the dark rosewood fingerboard are lightly rolled



though, are the dual 'staggered' string-post heights: the top four tuner posts are slightly shorter than those for the low E and A strings. There's just a single stringtree, but another modernism is the open hole for the adjustment of the dual-action truss rod. Unlike the Am Pro II's two-post vibrato, this one uses the classic six-screw pivot with narrower-than-vintage string spacing like the Performer. The top plate and saddles are steel, as is the deep-drilled and tapered block; the arm screws are vintage style with no swing-tension adjustment.

The Performers introduced the Tim Shaw-designed Yosemite single coils, but here we drop back to "slightly overwound Pure Vintage recipes", says Fender. These so-called Coastline pickups feature across the range – our Strat has the '57 Strat types with a vintage stagger to the beveled rod magnets. And, again, while the Performer Strat utilised the Greasebucket tone control (for the bridge pickup only) with a pull-switch 'seven sound' mod, here we don't get any extra pull-switch sounds, but the Greasebucket circuit features on both tone controls.

Limited Edition Vintera II Road Worn '60s Stratocaster

While this Strat is all about the new version of the aged Road Worn finish, it's of little value unless the guitar it's applied on

The Road Worn's smaller 'board radius and Vintage Tall frets certainly tick the original box

fits the bill – and the Ensenada, Mexico-made Vintera II range simply features the best-value 'vintage' Fenders you can buy brand-new. By design, there are none of the upgrades we see on the Am Pro Classic. Here, with an alder body, it's a 21-fret neck with a proper rosewood slab fingerboard, a vintage-style 184mm (7.25-inch) radius, 'Vintage Tall' frets and, of course, body-end truss rod adjustment. The neck profile is a '60s 'C' and we get vintage-style '60s single-coil Strat pickups. The only modernisms are the five-way lever pickup selector and tone controls for the neck and middle pickups (Tone 1) and the bridge pickup (Tone 2), which you wouldn't have found on a real Strat from the 60s.

Hardware is vintage standard, too: the vibrato has steel saddles and top plate, but the full-size block is die-cast and, unlike the Am Pro Classic's vibrato, has wider vintage-width string spacing.

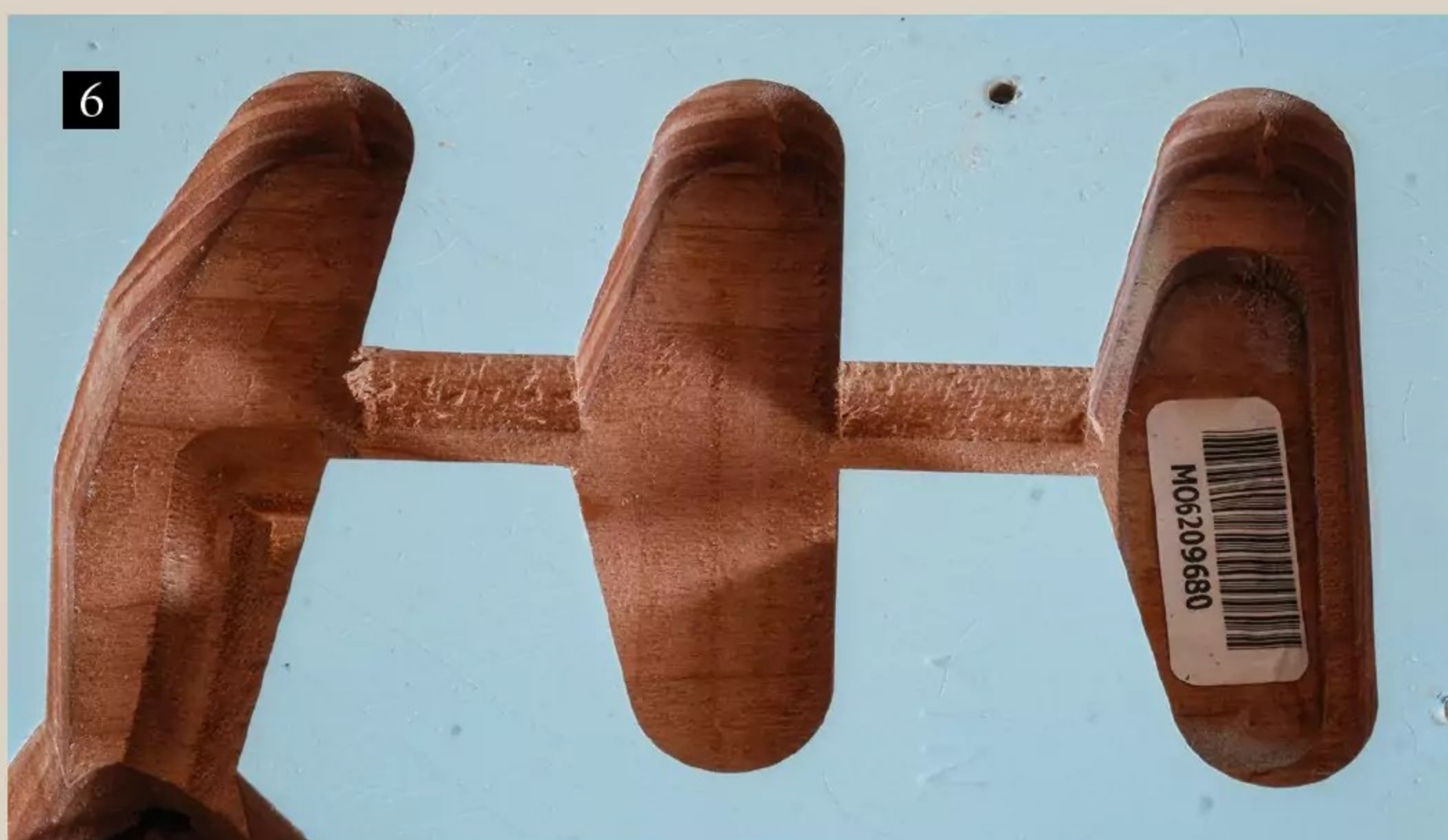
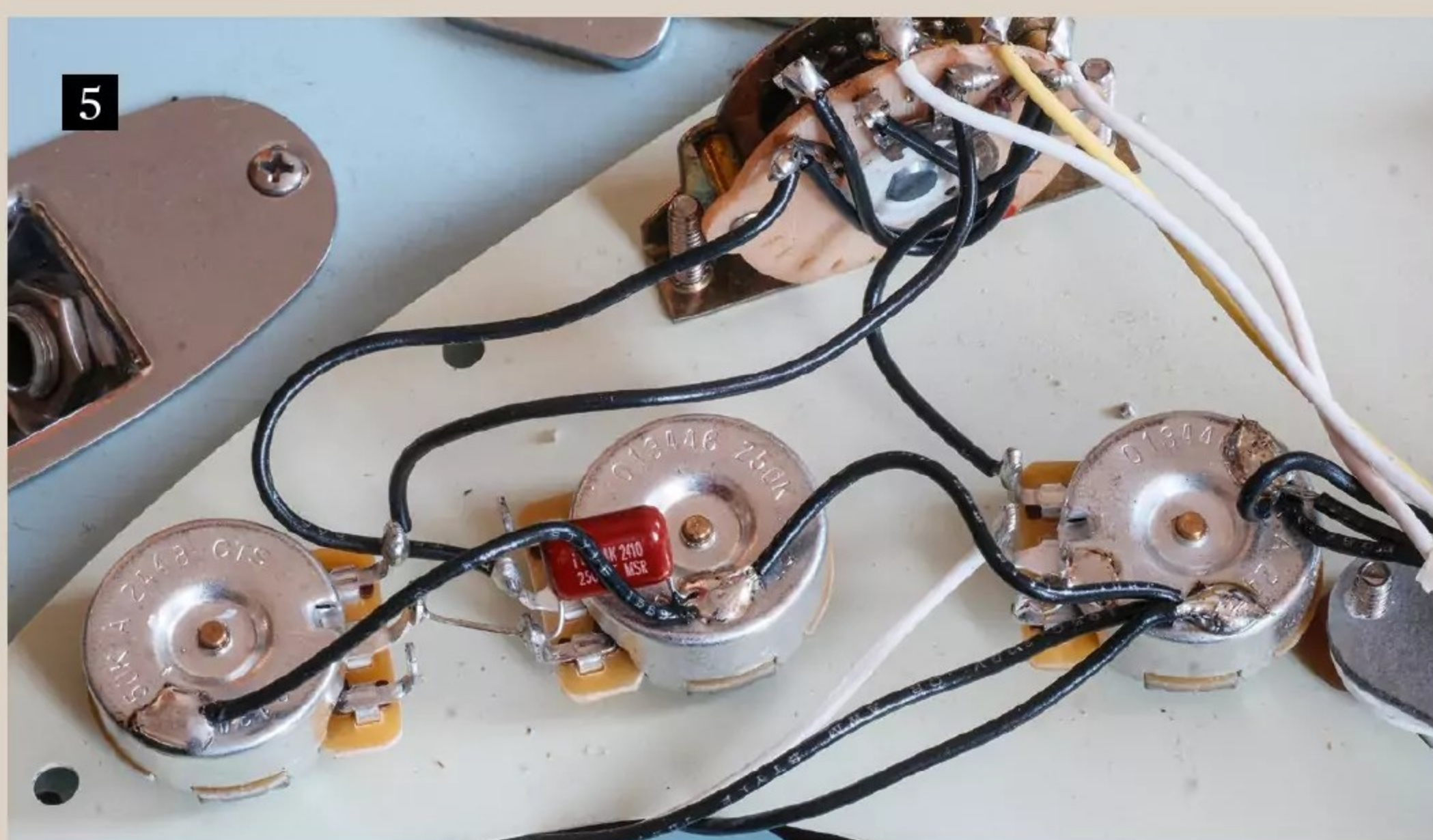
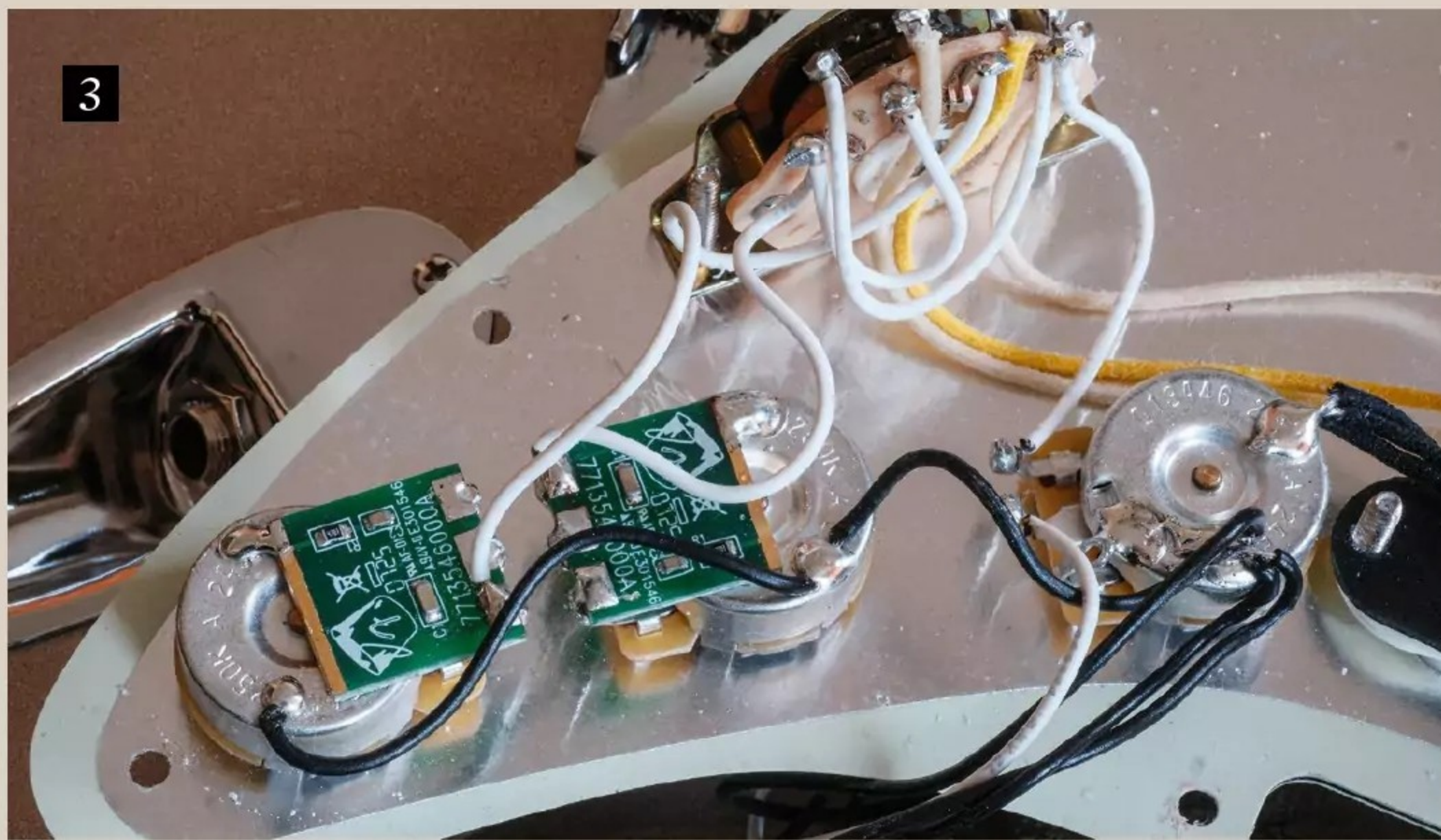
But it's the finish here that's the talking point. This new Road Worn is very

different from the originals, which looked like they'd been worn and on the road, if a little false in terms of their considerable wear. But look at this Strat face on from a little distance and it appears pretty much brand-new; there are certainly no dings. Look closer and from an angle, however, and you can see plenty of finish cracking on the body, likewise on the glossy headstock and around the heel area of the neck. Fender says it's a 'semi-gloss', but we might challenge that: it's more gloss than satin, that's for sure, and the plating to the hardware looks to be slightly pre-used, too, as if it needs a polish.

Of course, there's no gunk in these finish cracks, which you'd see on the real thing or on a higher-end Fender Custom Shop relic, and in effect this finish is sort of just 'broken in', allowing the player to continue to age it. It's certainly very different from the standard gloss polyester of the non-Road Worn Vintera IIs.

Feel & Sounds

Even before we get to the sounds, there's considerable difference here. Weight-wise, both are bang on in the sweet spot for the style, but it's the neck and fingerboard feel that are almost chalk and cheese. The neck sizes are obviously close, but the Vintera II is slightly narrower in width (42.2mm at the nut with 35.5mm string spacing), and



UNDER THE HOOD

Let's whip off those 'plates and take a look inside

The Am Pro Classic uses three standard CTS 250kohm pots, with a standard five-way lever pickup selector switch that's well used by Fender; the only shielding is the foil on the scratchplate. There's no treble bleed circuit here, but both tone controls use the Fender Greasebucket circuit board that utilises two surface mount capacitors and a single resistor, although Fender doesn't actually publish the component values.

The Coastline single coils have 'PR' and 'CL' letters hand-written in a silver pen on the black fibre pickup bases, and Fender confirms these are simply overwound Pure Vintage '57 Strat single coils, which use Alnico V bevelled magnets and Formvar-coated

By design, the Am Pro Classic's Coastline single coils give a bit more midrange fullness and a smidgeon of output boost, but it's not overdone

coil wire. DCRs (measured at output) are 6.10k (bridge), 6.15k (middle) and 6.17k (neck). The centre pickup is RWRP so the mixes are hum-cancelling.

The only body wood on show is in the neck cavity (there's no neck shim), and it's routed for HSH, which might hint at that configuration and indeed an HH version in the future.

Opening up the Vintera II we see exactly the same pots and lever switch, but the circuit simply uses one 0.1µF (104k) capacitor for both tones. There's no shielding on the scratchplate, either. Here, the grey fibre pickup bases of the '60s Strat single coils each have a six-digit number, written in black, ending in 800: the neck pickup starts 495, the middle is 496 and the bridge is 497. DCRs (measured at output) all read 5.32k. The pickups have the same polarity, so there's no hum-cancelling in the mix positions.

One difference with the Ensenada build is that the pickup cavities and the rear spring cavity are all unfinished bare wood. Clearly, these are cut after the paint has been applied, so there's none of the paint and polish residue that you can clearly see on the USA guitar.

3. Inside the American Professional Classic model are two Greasebucket circuit boards for each tone control

4. The Am Pro Classic is routed for HSH – good news for us modders!

5. The Vintera II's circuit is dead simple but uses the same controls and switch as the USA model

6. The pickup cavities and rear spring cavity are cut after the finish is applied and polished, leaving just the bare wood



while both measure pretty much bang on 21mm deep at the 1st fret, the Vintera fills out to 24.5mm by the 12th, a nice handful; the American Professional Classic is more modern at 22.3mm.

Both guitars ship with 0.009-gauge strings and the setups are pretty standard, but they benefitted from a little tweaking, not least to level the playing field. The Road Worn's smaller fingerboard radius and those Vintage Tall frets (which measure approximately 2.1mm wide by 1.1mm high) certainly tick the original box, and this will feel like home to those of us who have been playing Strats for longer than we might care to remember. There's only a whiff of relief, and with a pretty standard 1.5mm (0.06 inches) on the treble and 1.8mm (0.07 inches) on the bass, it plays pretty cleanly. The 'board edges are lightly rolled and the final fret-fettling is lovely. We made a few minor tweaks to the saddle heights, but that was about it. And once the strings have settled in, it's pretty stable, tuning-wise, with light vibrato use.

The Am Pro Classic, however, feels a lot more contemporary. Along with the neck size, the bigger frets (which measure approximately 2.5mm wide and 1.0mm high) on the flatter fingerboard feel really slinky with a little less perceived fight.

We've played lighter, darker, louder and quieter Strats, but this Vintera II Road Worn hits a 'sweet spot'

While the Am Pro Classic's satin neck-back feels super smooth, the Vintera's nitro was a little uneven and certainly not the bare-wood feel of the original Road Worns. We actually gave the neck back a rub with some 600-grit paper and then some 0000 wire wool, and suspect many owners will do the same.

Again, to level the playing field we set the pickups on both the same distance from the strings and plugged in. The Vintera II is going to be more than enough Strat for many, its five distinct sounds balancing clarity with good depth, as they should. Some purists may prefer the original tone-control setup with a tone control each for the neck and middle pickups but not the bridge, and that's easy to rewire here. But for many of us this modern tone control setup is just more usable, not least to lightly round the high-end at the bridge for raunchier tones. We've played lighter, darker, louder and quieter Strats, but

there's something 'sweet spot' about this one. From the woody depth at the neck to instant quack in the mix positions, the bridge is just the right side of bright and that often overlooked middle pickup is quite the all-rounder. Like the originals, the mixes aren't hum-cancelling, but that's all part of the vintage deal.

Some might be surprised that, in terms of feel and sounds, the Vintera II holds its own with this start-up USA Am Pro Classic. Yes, the neck and – to a certain extent – the playability feels easier and more contemporary, but it's hard to find a difference in the actual quality of sound. By design, the Coastline single coils (which include a RW/RP middle pickup so the mixes are hum-cancelling) give a bit more midrange fullness and a smidgeon of output boost, but it's not overdone. The bridge pickup really benefits, especially for lighter, crunchier amp voices; with a little tone roll-off, there's a hint of that classic Patent Applied For voice. The subtly less hollowed neck pickup sits rather nicely in a jazz/blues style played clean and laps up some overdrive heat for a very vocal lead voice. The mixes lose a little quack, perhaps, but still provide more than useful funk and bounce in context. The tone controls feel and sound pretty normal with a little roll-back, but



8



9

7. Sticking to vintage style, the vibrato here features the wider string spacing of the original specification. It uses a steel top plate and saddles, while the untapered block is die-cast and not deep drilled
8. Vintage-like Kluson-style tuners are used here, again with a single string-tree. The maple neck has a low-gloss, lightly tinted nitro finish with plenty of cracking. Truss rod adjustment is at the body end of the neck
9. From a little distance you can't see any finish ageing, but close up there are plenty of cracks like this over the body and neck

fully 'off' there's less mud, which gives the impression they're more focused on the usable midrange. And with some gain, certainly at the bridge, the tone control subtly alters the character, rather than just pulling down the high-end.

Verdict

It's interesting that two of Fender's recent launches – this Vintera II Road Worn and the Ultra Luxe Vintage series – feature aged nitro finishes: proof, perhaps, that many like their Fenders to look and feel a little used and worn in. We fall into that camp and can only conclude that this Road Worn model packs a lot of allure. It's a cracking 'vintage' Strat, and while the finish process clearly inflates the price over the standard model, it really doesn't seem expensive.

The American Professional Classic Stratocaster is accurately named, and while there's nothing really new here (with the exception of the new faded colour finishes), the recipe is well thought through. Tweaks to the already good tuners, not to mention the hotter Pure Vintage Coastline pickups, just add to the versatility and value. A real all-rounder modern/vintage hybrid that's impossible to put down. It's good to see, hear and feel that the Stratocaster is in good hands. **G**



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL CLASSIC STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £1,499 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, Modern 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/43.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Fender 'upgraded' vintage-style synchronized vibrato with 6x bent steel saddles, ClassicGear staggered-height tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 3x Fender Coastline 57 Strat single coils, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck/middle), tone 2 (bridge)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.43/7.55
OPTIONS: Colour and fingerboard
RANGE OPTIONS: New American Professional Classic: Stratocaster HSS (£1,549), Telecaster (£1,499), Hotshot Telecaster (£1,549), Jazzmaster (£1,599), Jaguar (£1,599)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not at launch
FINISHES: Faded Firemist Gold (as reviewed), Faded Lake Placid Blue and 3-Color Sunburst (maple 'boards), Faded Black, Faded Dakota Red, Faded Sherwood Green Metallic, (rosewood 'boards) – gloss urethane to body; satin urethane to neck with glossed headstock face



PROS Crisp modern build; Modern 'C' neck profile; big frets, flatter-than-vintage 'board radius; ClassicGear tuners; hot vintage voicing with Greasebucket tone controls; excellent colour choice

CONS Nope!



FENDER LIMITED EDITION VINTERA II ROAD WORN '60S STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £1,349 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, '60s 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.2mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'clay' dot markers, 184mm (7.25") radius
FRETS: 21, Vintage Tall
HARDWARE: Fender vintage-style synchronized vibrato with 6x bent steel saddles, vintage-style tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 56mm
ELECTRICS: 3x vintage-style '60s single-coil Strat pickups, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck/middle), tone 2 (bridge)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.54/7.79
OPTIONS: Colour and fingerboard
RANGE OPTIONS: Standard (non-Road Worn) Vintera II '60s Stratocaster costs £999. Other new Road Worn models include '60s Telecaster in Burgundy Mist Metallic and Blonde (£1,349), and '50s Jazzmaster in Fiesta Red and 3-Color Sunburst (£1,399)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not at launch
FINISHES: Sonic Blue w/ rosewood fingerboard (as reviewed), Black w/ maple fingerboard – aged nitro-cellulose lacquer



PROS Nicely detailed vintage-style build; light ageing; excellent neck shape; Vintage Tall frets on original radius rosewood fingerboard; classic voicing and good player

CONS Ageing increases price over standard model by 30 per cent; only two colours available



Master Chef

More aged nitro finishes and a new US-made line-up that pares back the modernisms. Are our tastes changing? Max Gutnik, chief product officer at FMIC, tells all

Words Dave Burrluck

One of our gear highlights of this year has to be Fender's American Ultra Luxe Vintage mini-range, which combines the modernist style of the ongoing American Ultra II models with a lightly bashed and aged nitro finish. While those guitars top the USA Fender line in price, the new American Professional Classic models – which replace the American Performers in the line-up – are effectively half the price, centring on that modern/vintage duality. Is there a theme emerging, we ask Max Gutnik, chief product officer at FMIC?

“Yes, the American Performer had pretty much run its course,” he confirms, “and we’ve been very successful with the American Professional II models. So the thinking was, instead of having

a different-tier guitar, could we have a different trim level but at the same level for the working musician in both cases? The American Professional Classic is a more traditionally styled guitar with vintage-y features like the ClassicGear tuners, the classic bridges and vintage-style pickups... but all with a bit of a modern twist.

“The Performer was a very modern guitar,” he continues. “A lot of folks were wondering which one they should be getting – the Performer or the American Professional II. We wanted more distinction for the player who wants this trim level but without necessarily a dip in quality. I mean, all of the American guitars still have some 150 hand-processes in the making of every one of these guitars; they’re really high-quality.”



Max Gutnik reckons a high-performance guitar with a more vintage-like finish is “the way to go!”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FENDER



While the new American Professional range introduces classic Fender colours in a knocked-back faded style, the exception are the non-faded Tele-specific Butterscotch Blonde and the 3-Color Sunburst used on all the new models

Does the hardware choice follow this same vintage/modern theme, too?

“Yes, you’ve got things like those ClassicGear tuners [which were introduced on the outgoing Performer], but this time we staggered them to give a better break angle [behind the nut]. You still get the 18:1 ratio, too, so you can really fine-tune them. With the Jaguar and Jazzmaster models, we’re using a traditional floating bridge but with Mustang saddles, which give a little more tuning stability and better intonation. We’re using barrel saddles on the Telecaster and, although they’re not compensated like the Am Pro II, they have slots for the strings so they don’t move around.”

What’s the idea behind the Faded colours on offer here – are they inspired by the Ultra Luxe Vintage guitars?

“They’re not like the Heirloom finish [used on the American Ultra Luxe Vintage] with any checking or ageing, but they’re faded to almost look like they’re aged yet they’re fully new gloss finishes. The exceptions to that are the 3-Color Sunburst and Butterscotch Blonde – those two aren’t faded. But we have things like a Faded Dakota Red, same with the Sherwood Green and the Firemist Gold, and it gives a unique vintage-y vibe.”

This range also introduces the new Coastline pickups. What’s the deal here?

“These are really interesting because basically they’re the Pure Vintage set – just like the American Vintage II guitars, but these are overwound a little to make them a little hotter. So you’re getting a very authentic vintage tone, but they take a little gain really well and they’re really good for that ‘on the edge of break-up’ tone.”

Our second Stratocaster on review is more closely allied to those Ultra Luxe Vintage models as the new Road Worn finish is lightly aged nitro. However, it’s made in Fender’s long-running Ensenada factory in Mexico, not Corona in California.

“You know, relicing is hard to do. It’s ironic because people think you can just drop it a few times and drag it down the street... but it’s actually a really intensive process that adds a lot of hours to the guitar. And trying to make the relicing *not* look uniform is really important. The processes we use have improved so much: you want the feel and the look of a broken-in guitar, but you don’t want anything actually broken! So we just keep improving that process, the lacquer and paint, especially in Ensenada.

“Ensenada has become a real high-end factory. 35 years ago, the reason for this factory was quite different from what it is today. You can get great guitars out of

“The American Professional Classic is more traditionally styled... but all with a modern twist”

Indonesia and Korea, whereas in the past you could only get great guitars out of the USA, Japan... Ensenada was, at first, an inexpensive way to drive volume. Today, we’re doing some of the most incredible guitars out of there – the George Harrison Rocky, the Jimmy Page Dragon, the Mike McCready – at a level we’ve never been able to do before. The artistry of the Ensenada factory is really incredible.”

The new Road Worn ageing is quite subtle. Why is that?

“It’s like getting a pre-washed pair of jeans: they’re broken in so they’re comfortable right out of the store, but they’ll continue to wear and become your own. That’s what’s so great about nitrocellulose lacquer. If you have to wait 25 years to get to that place, I mean, you might not get there! So starting that process and having the guitar feel super comfortable out of the gate is what we’re aiming for.”

Different Strats at similar prices. We’re not sure which one we’d go for!

“Well, take ‘em both! I think it’s a good problem to have if the guitars are exciting. How come we never get tired of seeing another amazing guitar? It’s like a great burger: no matter how many you’ve had, they’re still awesome. They all bring out something different musically; you pick one up and it inspires you to do something different – and that’s still the magic.” **G** www.fender.com



The presence of a Jaguar and Jazzmaster in the new Vintera II range proves the offset trend is ongoing



Special Source

Building on what it started with its Collider delay/reverb pedal, Source Audio delivers a close Encounter of the ambient kind

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln



SOURCE AUDIO ENCOUNTER £369

CONTACT **Audio Distribution Group** WEB www.sourceaudio.net

What You Need To Know

- 1 That looks a lot like the Collider...**
Yes, it's another Source Audio pedal packing delay and reverb in the same form factor, but this time it's aiming for the more ethereal world of atmospheric soundscapes.
- 2 Are there just six knobs for parameter adjustment?**
It's clever in that you can switch the six knobs between the delay and reverb sides, so that's effectively 12 on the surface, but you also get the Neuro 3 software editor, which can go really deep into adjusting the sounds.
- 3 You'll need presets, then, to save all of that?**
That's right – you have instant access to eight from the front panel and 128 if you're a MIDI user.

The Encounter is the fourth pedal to use the dual-footswitch form factor seen in previous Source Audio pedals. The Ventriss Dual reverb and the Nemesis delay were the first two and then came the Collider, which basically combined some of what those two provided in a pedal that offered individually footswitchable reverb and delay. The new Encounter is more of the same, but where the Collider led with the more traditional reverb and delay types, this time things get more esoteric with some reimagined and enhanced from the Ventriss and Nemesis, and some all-new engines developed by the Source Audio boffins.

You get six delay and six reverb engines in total, to be selected with the encoder knob. The two footswitches effectively give you two separate pedals that can be used individually or together, but while the two sides of the pedal may be marked on the front panel as Delay and Reverb, they are really Engine A and Engine B because

you can actually load any of the 12 engines into each side, allowing dual delay or dual reverb combinations. Whatever you set up can be saved as a preset and you can access eight of these from the front panel or a full 128 if you use MIDI.

In Use

With two inputs and two outputs there are various ways to connect the pedal, with combinations of mono and stereo depending on your needs. The control surface is pretty straightforward yet it still gives you plenty of hands-on adjustment over the sounds. A small toggle switch

Things get more esoteric with some reimagined delays and reverbs and some all-new engines



You can press and hold the Preset button to store presets. Short presses scroll through and recall the presets indicated by the red LEDs. Four presets are initially available from the front panel, but you can extend this to eight by pressing the rear panel Control Input button

assigns the six knobs to either the Delay or the Reverb side, or just locks them so they can't be accidentally tweaked.

While the Mix and Tone knobs are self-explanatory, the Feedback knob offers delay feedback or reverb decay and the Delay knob adjusts delay time and reverb pre-delay. The Control 1 and 2 knob functions are engine-specific, adjusting salient parameters for each engine – often relating to modulation. Some knobs also have a secondary Alt function accessed by holding down a small button on the rear of the pedal.

While all of that, and your choice of engines, offers plenty for creating sounds to store as presets, the clever way to do



THE RIVALS

From the Source Audio roster, the Collider (£379) is the close sibling of the Encounter and has five delay engines and seven reverbs. Other pedals with separately footswitched reverb and delay are the Keeley Caverns V2 (£199), with a choice of Spring, Shimmer or Modulated Reverb, and the Universal Audio Del-Verb Companion (£299) with Tape, Analog and Precision delays, and Spring, Plate and Hall reverbs. Fender’s Reflecting Pool (£260) is a larger pedal with separately footswitched reverb (Hall, Room, Special) and delay (Digital, Analog, Tape), plus a tap tempo footswitch. The Electro-Harmonix Oceans Abyss (£475) is a different beast, featuring independently programmable dual reverb engines that can be placed into a customisable signal path with additional effects blocks including delay.

1. The Control 1 and Control 2 knobs manage engine-specific parameters such as Modulation and Phase Shifter for the Hypersphere reverb, Tremolo Depth and Rate for the Trem Verb, or Wash and Rhythmic Patterns for the Drum Echo

things is via Source Audio’s Neuro 3 app on a USB-connected computer or phone. The app has all the basic parameters clearly laid out for quick and easy adjustment, plus a host of engine-specific Designer parameters beyond those found on the front panel. But it also unlocks other aspects of the pedal’s operation, notably setting the effect order, whether the two run in parallel, split stereo or the more usual cascaded mode where Engine A (Delay) feeds into Engine B (Reverb). Setting things up is a doddle here, and you can create presets and save them in your library ready to be put into your pedal. There’s also an online community here where you can get presets or share your own.



Looking at the Encounter’s 12 engines, three are brand-new. One is called Hypersphere, a magnificent reverb that definitely makes the pedal worth its asking price. It can cover a massive range of applications, from a basic room sound to huge shifting sheets of ambience. There’s pitch modulation to be dialled in, but we really liked the embedded phaser with plenty of parameters to be adjusted in the app, including a distortion knob. Shimmers is a new multi-voiced pitch-shifting reverb algorithm, composed of two adjustable pitch voices and an unmodulated reverb voice. Also new is Trem Verb: an ambient reverb that is cut up by a tremolo effect that’s ultra-adjustable with (among other parameters) various shapes and whether it’s applied to wet signal, dry signal or the mix – all with some great Spaghetti Western and surf potential. Besides those there are Reverse, Lo-Fi and Swell reverbs. Of the delays, Kaleidoscope is a cascading multi-tap delay with arpeggiating effects that can morph into diffuse reverb, while Helix offers all the oddity you might expect of adding pitch shifting to a glitchy reverse delay. Resonant has a BBD analogue delay base sound but comes with highly adjustable resonant filters. Drum Echo and Noise Tape have a retro

- 2. The Neuro 3 editing and librarian app unleashes the Encounter's full potential. This screengrab shows you the editor for the pedal with each engine represented as an icon at the top of the page – click on this to display all of its parameters
- 3. This Knobs switch determines whether your knobs are working on delay or reverb, but you can also switch it to the centre position to lock your controls in place, protecting your settings from accidental bumps in a live setting
- 4. You use the Control Input button to enable or disable external control. It can also control Alt parameters/functions on the surface of the pedal. Pressing-and-holding the button while turning a knob or hitting a switch accesses that knob or switches to the Alt function



SOURCE AUDIO ENCOUNTER

PRICE: £369

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Delay and reverb pedal

FEATURES: Selectable buffered or true bypass, expression control, external switching, complete MIDI functionality, editing app

DELAYS: Helix, Kaleidoscope, Echoverb, Drum Echo, Resonant, Noise Tape

REVERBS: Hypersphere, Shimmers, Trem Verb, Reverse, Lo-Fi, Swell

CONTROLS: Delay, Feedback, Tone, Mix, Control 1, Control 2, Engine selector, Knobs switch, Tap division switch, Preset Select switch, Control Input switch, Exp/Switch switch, Delay/Tap footswitch, Reverb footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input (1 and 2), standard output (1 and 2), MIDI In, MIDI Thru, Expression pedal input, control input, USB

POWER: 9V DC 400mA adaptor (supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 117 (w) x 114 (d) x 51mm (h)

aspect to them, the former expanding on the sonic abilities of a vintage Binson Echorec, the latter with tape echo sounds, complete with total optional adjustment of all associated artefacts. Echoverb is perhaps the most go-to utilitarian of them all, consisting of a clear digital delay with optional plate reverb.

A no-brain purchase for ambience freaks, shoegazers and experimentalists – and a practical unit, too

Performance functions are available from both footswitches. The Delay footswitch offers tap tempo in relation to three selectable subdivisions, while the Reverb footswitch can freeze the reverb tail indefinitely with a press-and-hold, allowing you to create a sustaining pad that you can play over.

There's also a comprehensive MIDI specification. Not only do you have access to 128 presets via Program Change, but many of the Encounter's parameters (even those that are not assigned to a control knob) are directly accessible via

MIDI continuous controller messages.

It is also possible to sync delays to MIDI Clock. An expression pedal can be added for on-the-fly adjustment of up to three parameters simultaneously. Alternatively, you can add an external footswitch for tap tempo or preset cycling.

Verdict

Having separately footswitched delay and reverb in a single compact pedal is a brilliant use of resources – use them separately or exploit the great creative potential of stacking them, particularly feeding delay into reverb. The sonic quality and range here is excellent and, although the engines offer the more 'out-there' sounds on the surface, there is real flexibility that goes beyond that. The fact is that you can get in and strip some of those engines of their more outré features – turning off modulation, for example – to give you a bunch of 'meat and potatoes' delays and reverbs for maybe more conventional guitar usage.

So while it is undoubtedly a no-brain purchase for the ambience freaks, shoegazers and experimentalists among us, the Encounter has wide-ranging functionality as a practical delay and reverb unit that may well be the only one any player would need on their 'board. **G**

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Two switchable reverb/delay engines in one compact pedal; great range of sound variation; presets; comprehensive software editor/librarian; MIDI; mono/stereo operation

CONS You need to use the app to unlock its full potential

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Guitarist

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KIKI WONG

TikTok sensation turned Smashing Pumpkins shredder talks cheap Hamers, Craigslist deals, and how her rig has evolved since she became a Pumpkin

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"I remember my first guitar was a Slammer by Hamer, which came in a beginner pack that essentially included a Fender 15-watt amp, a few picks, a strap and a whole lot of motivation to practise. I didn't have a clue about what pickups did or how necks feel; I honestly just wanted to play Metallica and heavy riffs since I had been learning on an acoustic guitar.

"Since the internet wasn't so handy as it is today, I really got my inspiration for gear from guitar magazines and frequent visits to Guitar Center. That's where I discovered this stunning Ibanez S series. I still remember the model number S40DXQM because I remember repeating it in my head over and over, knowing that it was the guitar I wanted.

"Eventually, I pooled enough cash together with my mom and myself and was able to buy it for my birthday. It was an absolute game-changer since it had a 'Z Tremolo' floating bridge that allowed me to poke around with Dimebag [Darrell] divebombs. It was absolutely my dream guitar in the flesh, and it was such a cool experience overall. Sadly, it was stolen out of my car in Downtown LA in 2015."

Revv Amplification's Generator 120 heads join Kiki on tour, but for videos on socials, her almost 20-year-old Line 6 Spider III does the job

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last guitar I purchased was actually a .strandberg* Boden Essential guitar for my incredible tech on tour [with the Smashing Pumpkins], Pat Ryan. He always goes above and beyond to ensure my gear is absolutely pristine on tour. He truly loves his work and he loves guitars, so I wanted to gift him something special that he could take on the road without sacrificing any quality of the instrument."

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

"This is more of an amp story. I remember that I had just joined the She Demons, a female punk-rock supergroup formed by a founding member of The Misfits, [bassist] Jerry Only. We were about to go on tour as direct support across the US and in Canada for a 34-date run. The gear I was using before was a hand-me-down Carvin Amp that I was borrowing, so I knew I had to get my own amp.

"With only 500 bucks in my bank account, I was scouring Craigslist for anything that would be up to par for the tour. Someone had listed a Marshall JCM2000 head and cab for \$1,500. I definitely didn't have the cash, so my brother Eric, who is a shredder and metal music

"There's nothing better than feeling absolutely inspired by the instrument you're playing"

fan himself, helped me pay half. We drove two hours down to Orange County and met up with the seller, who ended up being someone who worked on production for Slash. I told him about my situation and he agreed to sell the stack for 1,000 bucks because he believed in me and what I was doing. He gave me a really nice pep talk. It was really one of the first times I felt like I had really good gear for a show."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"When I was in high school, I always dreamed of having a Triple Rectifier Mesa/Boogie half-stack. It was clearly obscenely out of my price range. I opted for a Peavey Triple XXX 212 combo amp, which had a lot of juice and power. It wasn't that the amp wasn't good enough, I just wished I saved enough money to actually buy the amp I always dreamed of."

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

"I actually have a major issue selling gear in general. I'd like to say that I've at least attempted to live my



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIKI WONG

KIKI'S GO-TO RIG

"My pedalboard is powered by Voodoo Labs Pedal Power 3 Plus. And here's the signal chain into the amp input: guitar, Shure Axient wireless, followed by the Dunlop [Cry Baby] 95Q wah-wah, which goes into the Interstellar Audio Octonaut Hyperdrive. Then we have the Chase Tone Fuzz Fella, which leads into the Electro-Harmonix Pitch Fork. And then we've got the Axess Electronics Compatt/A [Input] Buffer, leading to the Analog Man Mini Chorus and then the amp input. "The signal flow in the effects loop is: amp send and then it's the Dunlop Volume Pedal and Boss TU-3S, then the Walrus Audio Lore pedal going into the MXR Joshua echo pedal with tap control, and then we've got the Axess Electronics Compatt/A [Input] Buffer and then amp return. "The signal runs into a Revv Generator 120 head going into a Marshall JCM2000 1960A cabinet in an ISO box."

life sort of 'minimalistically', trying to consume less. However, all of it is pretty much cancelled out by how many guitars I have! [laughs] That being said, I do remember when I was in high school, I sold my first guitar ever to my drummer in the little grungy metal band I was playing. He paid me 50 bucks for it, put a bunch of SpongeBob [Squarepants] stickers all over the fret markers, and then lit it on fire! It makes me laugh thinking about it, but it would have been nice, sentimentally, to still have it today."

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"Honestly, get the guitar. There's something really special, first, about musicianship and instruments. The best creations come from being in the right emotional state. There's nothing better than feeling absolutely inspired by the instrument you're playing, where you feel glued to it, thinking about it during your day-to-day, and looking forward to playing it next. If that's what drives you to practise, play and create, then get the damn thing! The longer you wait, the more likely it'll get snatched up."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"I'm currently on tour in Asia with the Smashing Pumpkins. We just had our Japan leg of the tour, and someone locally suggested going to check out Guitar Street [Tokyo]. My fiancé and two-year-old son were travelling with me, and my son is absolutely obsessed

with musical instruments – almost neurotically, where he can actually name all the instruments in an orchestra type of obsessed [laughs]. We walked along the streets, where they are filled with collector guitars, used guitars, special Japanese guitars, new and old, fancy and functional, the whole nine yards. My son loved it and so did I."

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?

"I am 1,000 per cent onboard with a great guitar and a cheap amp. Now, this obviously applies to me being home and playing. I've been playing out of a Line 6 Spider III 15-watt amp that I purchased in 2007. I've made about half of my TikTok videos with that amp, which is essentially where it got me today. People talk a lot of poo about my tone. But, honestly, it's what I love and have loved since I was a kid. Now, on tour, it's definitely a different story – you've gotta have all cylinders running. But, overall, I love a great guitar."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"1,000 per cent humbuckers. Again, it goes off of how much I like the dirty, grungy metal tone. You really can't achieve it without those humbies." **[AD]**

Find Kiki on her TikTok account, Kiki: Daily Metal Guitar Riffs, at www.tiktok.com/@kikiwongo and head to her website for more www.kikiwongo.com

Kiki Wong took to the stage with Smashing Pumpkins this summer wielding a Jackson Rhoads V-style guitar

CLEAN MACHINE

If the Fender Stratocaster is such a perfect design, why – wonders Dave Burrluck – is there a whole industry of aftermarket parts and pickups to improve it?

It's 71 years since the Stratocaster was unveiled to a less than rapt audience. Over those past decades, however, it's become the best-selling guitar of all time. Well, we suspect that's true. Many have lauded it as the 'perfect' design – 'Leo got it right first time!' – and countless non-Fender craftspeople have made their own-version 'Stratocasters' with just minor changes, or not. Yet, certainly from the early 70s, a whole slew of designers thought they could improve this perfect design, and today there are probably more aftermarket parts – hardware and pickups – to 'upgrade' the Stratocaster than any other electric guitar.

So what exactly was, and is, 'wrong' with the Stratocaster? There's not one single part, from string tree to strap button, that hasn't been 'improved' by someone. And then there's the Strat's 'Achilles heel': its single-coil pickups, which, as we all know, pick up hum that can ruin a gig or recording if you're unlucky. One very common fix is the reverse-wound, reverse-polarity (RWRP) middle pickup, which can at least provide hum-cancelling in the combined pickup positions.

"Bucking the hum has fuelled its own industry... but hum is part of the deal with Stratocasters"

Back in the day, this weakness didn't bother Fender who only got around to a humbucker in the early 70s, and that design hardly nailed 'the Fender sound'. But bucking the hum has fuelled its own industry of Clever Trevors and created hum-cancelling single-coil-sized pickups using two coils, stacked on top of each other or side by side, not to mention active humbucking designs from the likes of EMG and latterly Fishman.

There are other noise-cancelling tricks, not least using copper foil in the body cavities and around the pickup coils, dummy coils and circuits, like the Ilitch backplate hum-cancelling system. But few, if any, have replaced the classic Strat's unique timbre. Hum – or rather living with it – is part of that deal.

In fact, while Fender has employed plenty of hum-kicking pickups since those 70s Wide Range humbuckers – Lace Sensors, various 'Noiseless' pickups and so on – the company currently only uses its hum-cancelling Noiseless Vintage Strat pickups on the American Ultra II models, and just the Noiseless ones on the Mexican-made Player II Modified range. The recently released American Ultra Luxe Vintage models, for example, have plenty of modernist upgrades, but the pickups are old-school Pure Vintage '61 Strat single coils.

Hum-Free... Or Not

Tonerider pickups are designed here in the UK and manufactured in China. Designer Andrew Cunningham has been "playing around with dummy coils and noise-cancelling coils for the best part of 20 years, but other people got there first!" he says. "So I started making non-hum-cancelling pickups and they started selling. I kept asking people about the noise and they weren't too bothered. Plenty of rock guitarists simply went straight to humbuckers, but now I think



These classic-looking Apex Strat pickups are actually stacked humbuckers



With the cover removed you can clearly see those two stacked coils



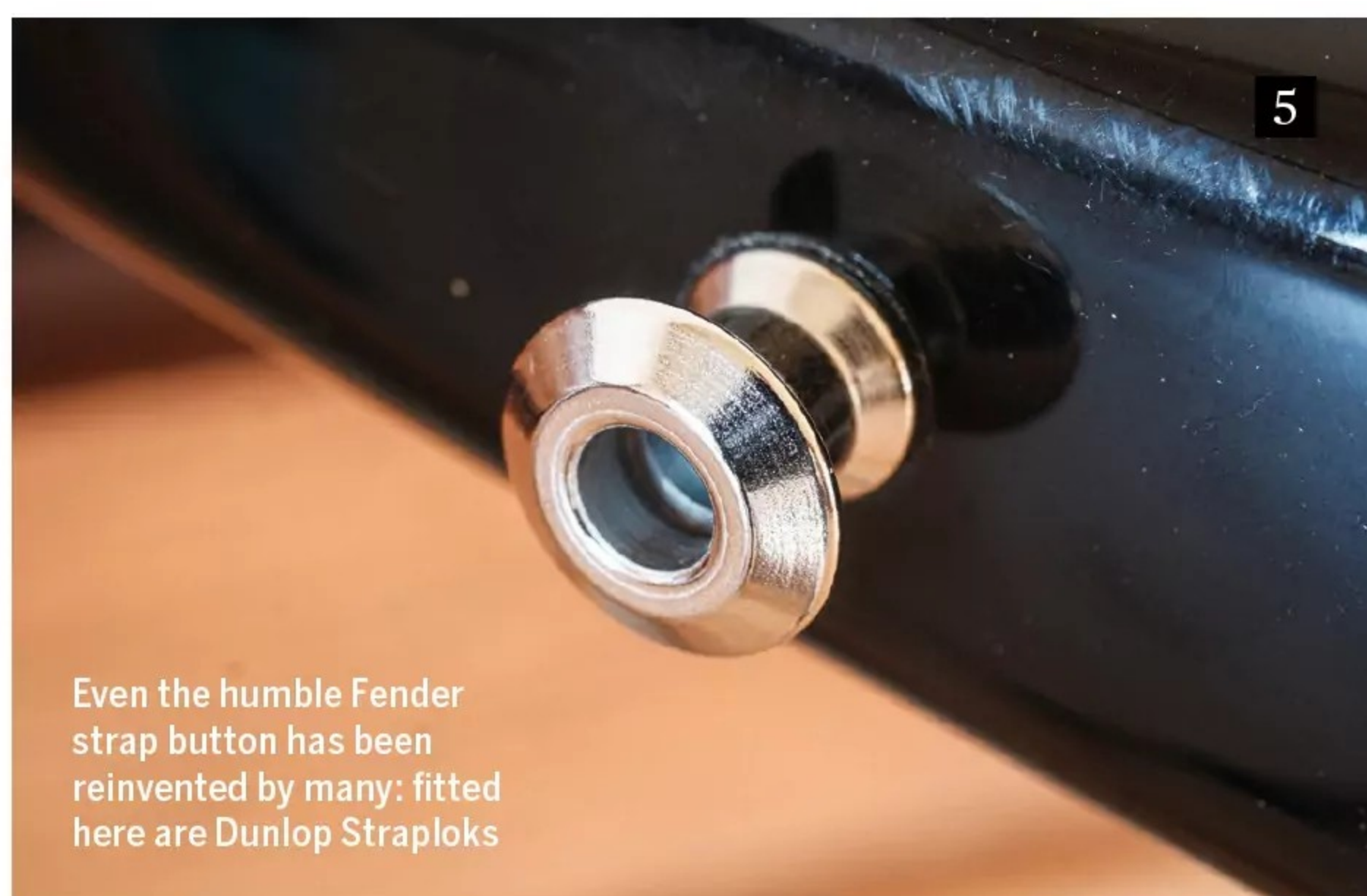
Each pickup is position-specific and clearly labelled



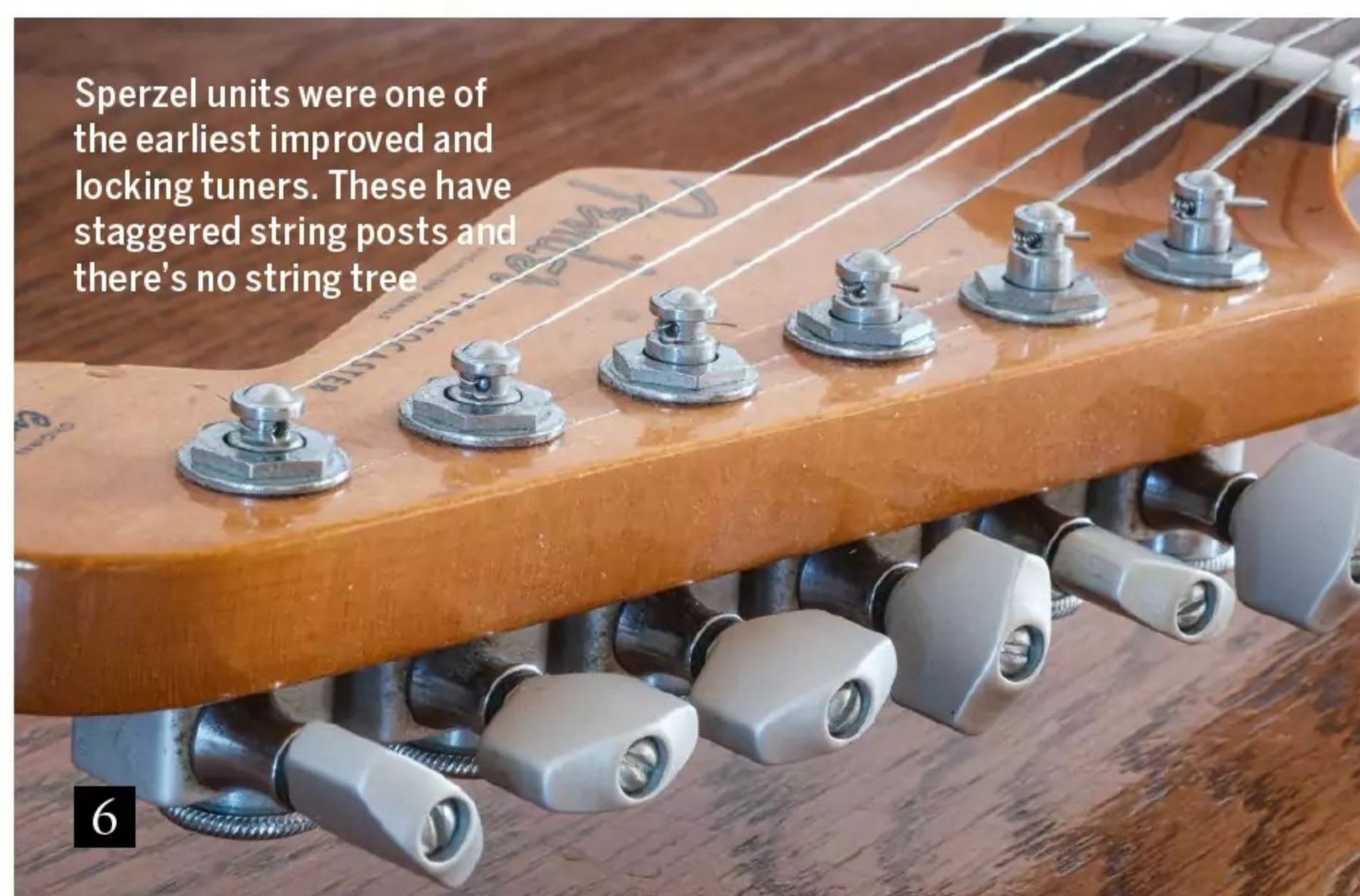
Our well-used Strat is full of upgrades such as this Wilkinson VSVG vibrato, set up here as a hardtail

It looks like any other sunburst Strat, but this 'partscaster' hides a host of improvements to the original Fender formula, including its new hum-cancelling pickups





Even the humble Fender strap button has been reinvented by many: fitted here are Dunlop Straploks



Sperzel units were one of the earliest improved and locking tuners. These have staggered string posts and there's no string tree

there's a central zone where not everyone wants to play humbuckers, and it just seems that if you can get that glassy tone, the bell-like tone and the dynamics, why not [use hum-cancelling]? It's just going to make your studio or live engineer's job easier. I guess some people might miss the hum, but that's like the crackle of vinyl – everyone to their own."

Tonerider's first noise-cancelling Apex Classic single coil set has been in development for a few years, says Andrew: "[We're] just trying to get the perfect balance of punch and 'air' into the tone, without the annoying midrange honk that a lot of stacked single coils have."

"Tonerider's Apex Classics get dangerously close to various single-coil Strats (some with pricey pickups)"

They actually appeared on Eastman's FullerTone models, in a slightly earlier incarnation, before the company had offered them as aftermarket sets. Reviewing those Eastman guitars back in issue 526, we found that the pickups really suited the DC '62 model where two of the Apex-style units are used in middle and neck positions along with a soapbar-sized humbucker at the bridge. On the single-cut SC '52 there's a T-style Apex in the bridge position that Andrew admitted he preferred to "our normal Tele replacement bridge pickup. Sometimes you make an improvement to solve one specific issue – for example, noise – and with the Apex Tele bridge pickup, it makes it really playable. There's a tiny bit of compression maybe, or it holds your hand a little bit. It makes the guitar easier to play – you just keep playing! Then there's the party trick

of having some gain and then just stopping the strings and it's silent."

Using new-design pickups such as these on new-design guitars like the FullerTones makes perfect sense: there's no actual reference and you're not comparing the sound of a new 2025 DC '62 with one made in 1962. But offering the Apex technology as aftermarket pickups for pretty much *any* Stratocaster is a different matter: we're comparing these new humbuckers to 70 years of *that* single-coil sound, hum included. And Tonerider is going for the sell, declaring that the Apex Classic set comprises "vintage-voiced hum-cancelling pickups for all Stratocasters. The ultimate glassy, bell-like Strat tone, now with studio-level hum reduction. Suitable for all blues, funk, country and more."

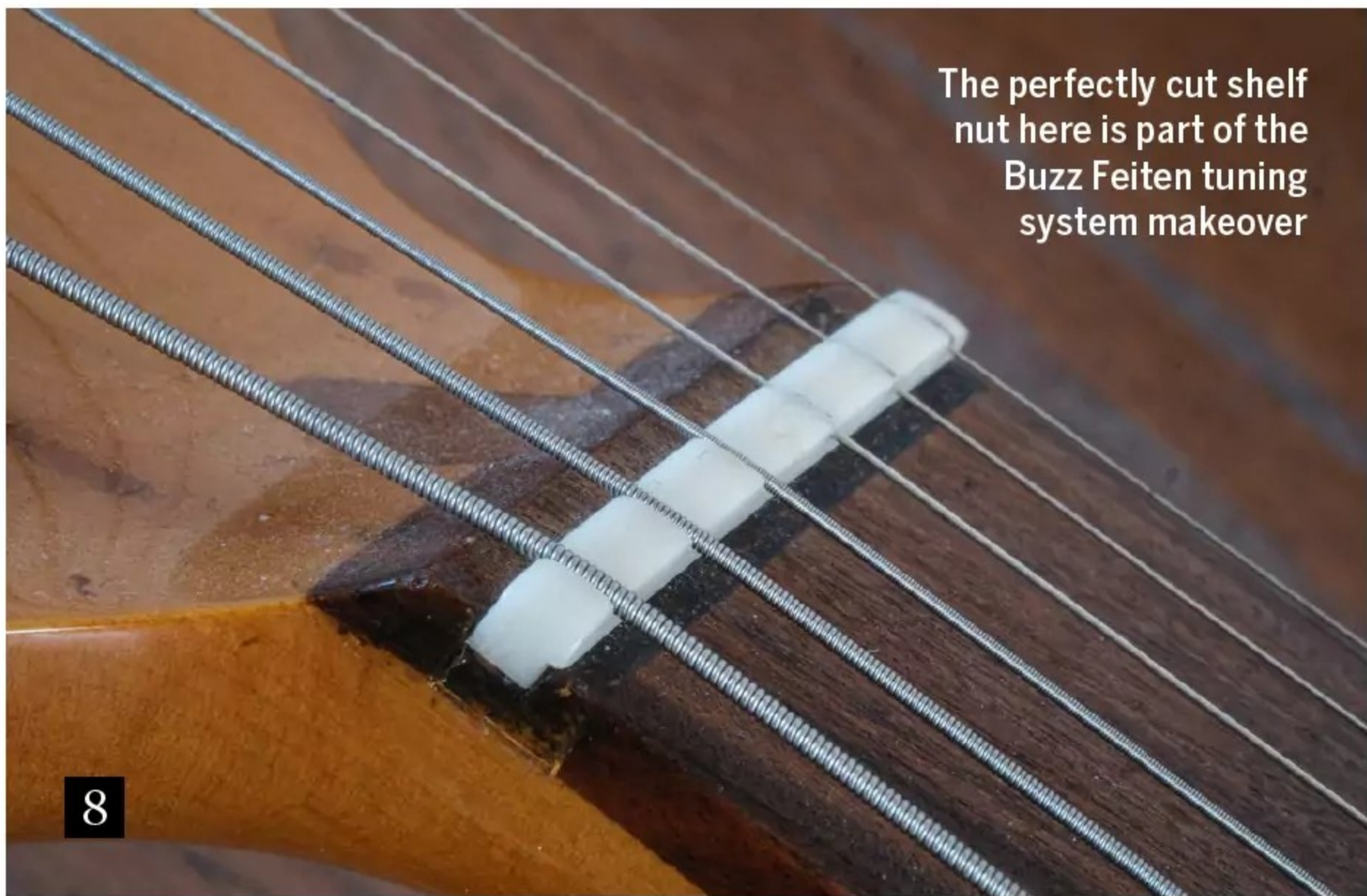
They are certainly nicely packaged and cleanly made, and, although they're a stacked design, their overall depth is 18.5mm with the cover removed (a standard-built vintage-style Fender pickup is closer to 15mm). They use standard-sized covers, too, and come

supplied with Tonerider's pearl white nylon types. You can clearly see the neat construction with the top coil approximately 10mm deep, the lower coil (separated by a hard plastic spacer) is around half that depth, and there's a steel baseplate that carries the position-specific legend. The staggered height Alnico V magnetic poles are cleanly edge bevelled, with an overall 5mm diameter. The top three poles (which all sit slightly above the face of the cover) look the same height; the D string is the tallest then the A and low E slope down.

Installing a whole set, the white or yellow (of the middle pickup) leads go to the pickup switch inputs, and the green and black wires to ground. If you're mixing the Toneriders with other-brand single coils and encounter a phase problem, you simply swap the white or yellow wires with the black ones. Good to know. The Apex pickups are also designed to work with standard Stratocaster pot values, so you don't need to install anything different and, of course, since the pickups are passive there's no battery to house.



Along with later stainless-steel frets, the guitar also employs the Buzz Feiten tuning system and has gone through the Plek process



The perfectly cut shelf nut here is part of the Buzz Feiten tuning system makeover



The original parts-build was carried out by the late, great luthier Sid Poole who very often liked to sign his work



Once installed, no-one would know these Toneriders aren't standard single coils

A Suitable Ride

I thought I'd give the Apex pickups a run on what I refer to as my 'modern' Stratocaster. There's not a Fender part on the guitar, however, and it's a pretty graphic illustration of the 'improvements' that many have offered for this hallowed design. The neck is from DiMarzio back in the early 80s, I believe, when the company was offering necks and bodies as well as pickups. Rumour had it that the wood parts were sub-contracted out to the likes of Grover Jackson and Stuart Spector. Whatever, the neck has been on various guitars since the early/mid-80s. It's paired with a swamp ash body from Warmoth (another pioneer of aftermarket bodies and necks), and in its current guise was assembled by Sid Poole whose scribbled name is clearly visible in the spring cavity.

Original to the build are the Sperzel rear-locking tuners, one of the first designs of the type that really caught on. This improved vibe continues with Trev Wilkinson's VSVG vibrato, one of my favourite vintage-voiced but improved designs, although I run the guitar as a hardtail with four springs and plenty of tension. Later mods in the hands of the team at Charlie Chandler's Guitar Experience are stainless-steel frets and a

Plek setup, and thrown in for good measure is the Buzz Feiten Tuning System.

In short, the new Toneriders are in pretty good 'upgraded' company and replace a set of darker-sounding aftermarket stacked single coils from a pretty big name. Plugged in, like a regular humbucker there's no hum – although it's not that unnerving silence of a set of EMGs – and with it a confidence of knowing that you won't run into problems on a gig. With gain, too, not to mention old-school fuzztones, there's no struggle to control or mute the guitar, let alone pick up the local takeaway or taxi service.

Now, the thousand dollar question is, does my improved modern Stratocaster sound like a vintage piece from the 1950s? Well, it certainly sounds like a Stratocaster – and a very good one at that. And in comparison to various single-coil Strats (with some pretty pricey pickups onboard in some cases), the Apex Classics get dangerously close. They seemed to benefit from being a little closer to the strings, too, in terms of height adjustment, and doing that narrowed the gap a little. If you play loud with some crunchy or heavier gains, the Apex Classics might be right up your street. Backing off the bridge-pickup tone control really gets into a more Patent Applied For-like zone, and the neck pickup

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: Tonerider Apex Classic set
PRICE: £140
ORIGIN: Designed in UK; made in China
TECH SPECS: Single-coil-sized stacked humbuckers, available with left, right or flat magnet stagger
MAGNETS: Alnico V
DCR: 7kohms (bridge); 6.3k (middle and neck)
OPTIONS: Magnet stagger, white, black, parchment or cream covers. Individual pickups cost £50
SKILL LEVEL: Easy to fit if you can solder!
www.tonerider.com

PROS & CONS

PROS Very affordable and well-presented hum-cancelling pickup set for Stratocasters with excellent voicing for both classic Fender-like cleans or with higher gains but zero noise!

CONS Probably not for true vintage buffs, but a no-brainer for working musicians anywhere

**10/10**

sings very nicely – it's full and quite fat but with that percussive clarity.

I can't help thinking some of us rockier types might enjoy a little more poke, particularly at the bridge – a spicy Hot Classic anyone? Well, Tonerider has us covered with the just-released Apex Plus, which the company says "deliver[s] midrange muscle while maintaining single-coil clarity". Apex HSS sets are launching in mid-October, too.

Rather like the Stratocaster itself, if you don't have any problems, you don't need the modern upgraded route. But if you've struggled with hum, with or without higher gains, these Apex Classics are definitely worth a shot, not least at their very attractive price. **G**



Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

As work continues, we get to hear the guitar for the first time in months

1961 Southern Jumbo Restoration Pt 4



Huw and the owner opted for a period-correct 'burst of dark brown and yellow with a reddish inner band

With most restoration projects there comes a point where the guitar looks worse rather than better. Although the look and feel of the back and sides was much improved, stripping the top had revealed two significant cracks and plugged pickup screw holes on each side of the soundhole. A couple more screw holes on the lower bout may be evidence of a pickup control module having once been attached, and there was a deep dent adjacent to the tailblock. Thankfully, the sunburst finish should conceal most of the damage.

Having been subjected to bleaching, dampening and several sanding cycles, the spruce top was ready for spraying. With sunbursts, the edge binding and soundhole rings have to be masked off. Conventional masking tape doesn't conform to curves, so I used 6mm vinyl tape instead. Rather than

"After bleaching, dampening and sanding, the guitar's spruce top was ready for spraying"

take it up to the inside edge of the binding, I used the innermost black layer as a guide for the tape. My plan was to scrape the binding after spraying the sunburst to reveal the innermost white layer.

The soundhole rings presented more of a challenge because vinyl tape in the UK comes in metric widths, but Gibson's materials all conformed to imperial measurements. Instead of importing vinyl tape from the US, I used 3mm tape and some thinner whiteboard grid tape for the wider ring, and I cut the 6mm tape down to the approximate width for the narrower ring. I also resigned myself to some tricky lacquer scraping to finesse the edges.

Lastly, I applied more vinyl tape around the fretboard binding and used low-tack masking tape to shield the fretboard. To protect the sides, I taped strips of printer paper over the body and wrapped more paper around the neck. For shielding larger areas, I prefer to use paper, not plastic, because lacquer sticks to paper

and stays put. In contrast, lacquer that dries on the surface of plastic tends to flake off and can mess up subsequent coats. Even so, pushing a partially inflated balloon or latex glove through the soundhole is ideal for preventing lacquer from getting inside the body. But judging by all the sunburst overspray on the braces near the soundhole, Gibson didn't bother.

Fit To 'Burst

With no early 1960s Southern Jumbo on hand to use as a colour reference, I relied on photos and a 1956 ES-225 that I own. The best example of a 1961 Southern Jumbo I found was on Chicago Music Exchange's website. Compared with Southern Jumbos from the 40s and 50s, the early 1960s sunburst was noticeably darker around the edges and had a distinct reddish band bridging the dark brown and yellow areas.

I can't say that I prefer this colouring to the older sunbursts, but the guitar's owner and I decided to try to make the top look as period-correct as possible. Spruce is quite porous, so the refinish began with a few coats of clear sanding sealer. For the centre of the sunburst, I tinted some lacquer with aniline yellow and a small dash of Chestnut yellow Spirit Stain for extra vibrancy.



Before spraying a sunburst finish, the body binding and soundhole rings need to be masked with flexible vinyl tape

The brownish black that I mixed up for my 1957 Strat restoration (see issue 523's Nitty Gritty column) was a perfect match for the tobacco brown of my ES-225's sunburst. Fortunately, I had loads left over so I filled my airbrush and sprayed the edges. With a couple of cracks and a filled dent to conceal, I made the dark edge around the lower bout a tad wider than the sunburst in the reference photo.

In the upper bout I brought the shaded area closer to the centre of the soundhole to obscure the plugged screw holes.

To complete the sunburst, I airbrushed StewMac's cherry red stain mixed with Nitorlack nitrocellulose lacquer to achieve a reddish blush, rather than a strong band of red. As always, a couple of clear coats melted the sunburst together and the colour coats were almost complete.



After spraying cellulose sanding sealer, 'bursting begins with aniline yellow mixed with a splash of Chestnut yellow spirit stain



Blackish brown lacquer is sprayed around the edges and all over the upper bout



For an early 60s look, light-fast cherry red is added where the yellow transitions to the tobacco brown

Bound Over

The following day I removed the paper shielding from the guitar and carefully peeled off the vinyl tape. When doing this, I recommend pulling the tape away from the line, instead of pulling it straight along it because the key is to avoid peeling away lacquer by accident. I also try to do it when the lacquer has dried but isn't fully cured.

A fresh blade was used to scrape the edge binding back to reveal the inner band of white and tidy up the soundhole rings. The finessed binding enhanced the sunburst, but it looked far too white on the front and the back. The binding and the top needed some tinted clear coats, so I mixed some ColorTone amber into clear lacquer and added a tiny drop of ColorTone medium brown.

Once again, I masked off the sides and popped the balloon back under the soundhole before spraying the tinted coats with my regular spray gun. The tinted coats mellowed the sunburst and greatly improved the binding. Once I had achieved the binding colour I was hoping for, I sprayed four or five coats of clear lacquer to build up the thickness and smooth out the step between the sunburst edge and the binding.

I finished up with flash coats to level the surface and make the cutting and polishing easier. Flash coats comprise mostly thinner and retarder with just a dash of lacquer and were a traditional stage in Gibson's finishing process. The final task in this partial refinish was to spray tinted lacquer over the rear binding.

"The guitar sounded even better than I remembered, and by the following day the bass-end was audibly punchier and deeper"

For this, I masked off the back and the sides, then used an airbrush to apply the tinted lacquer followed by flash coats.

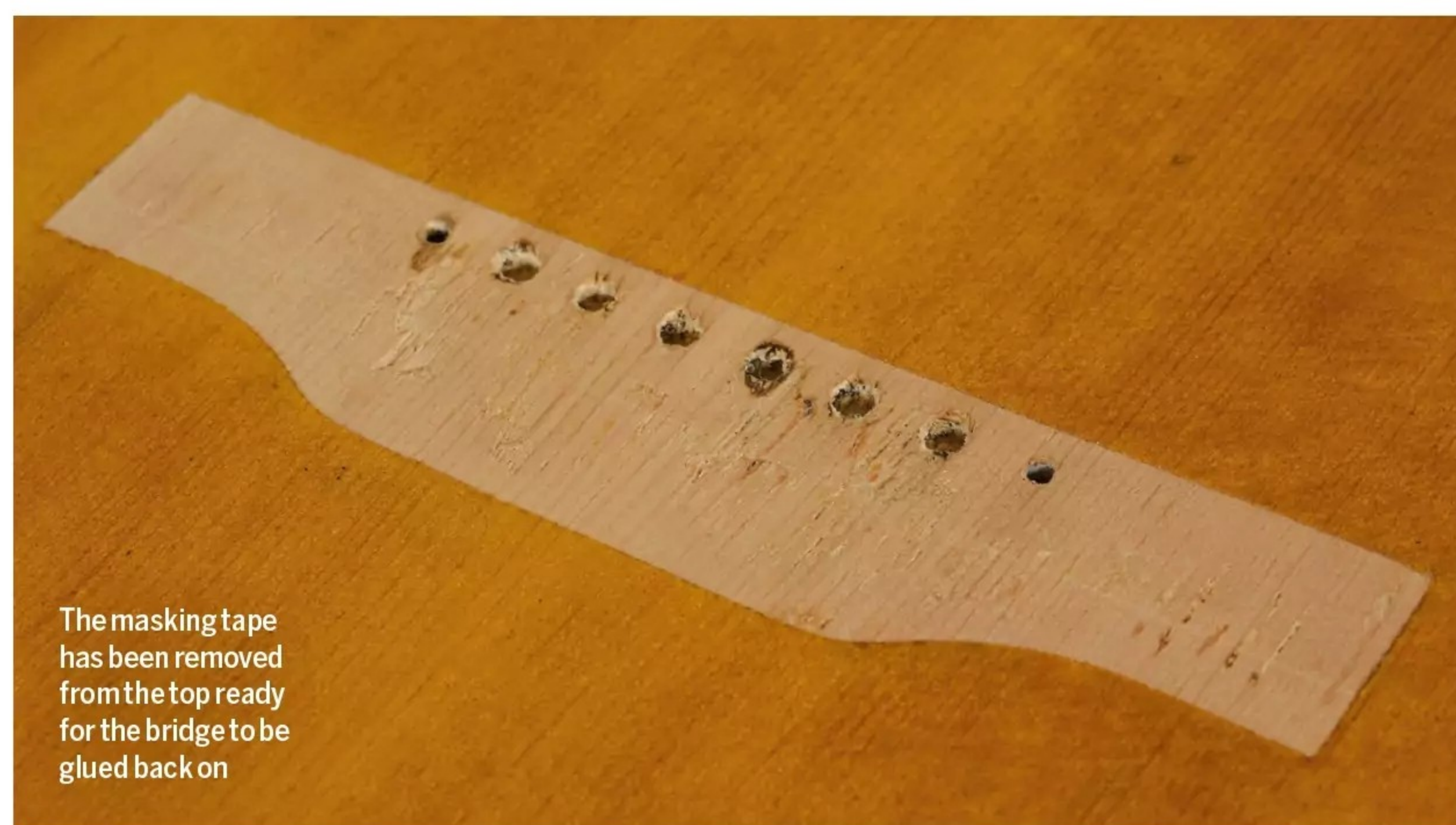
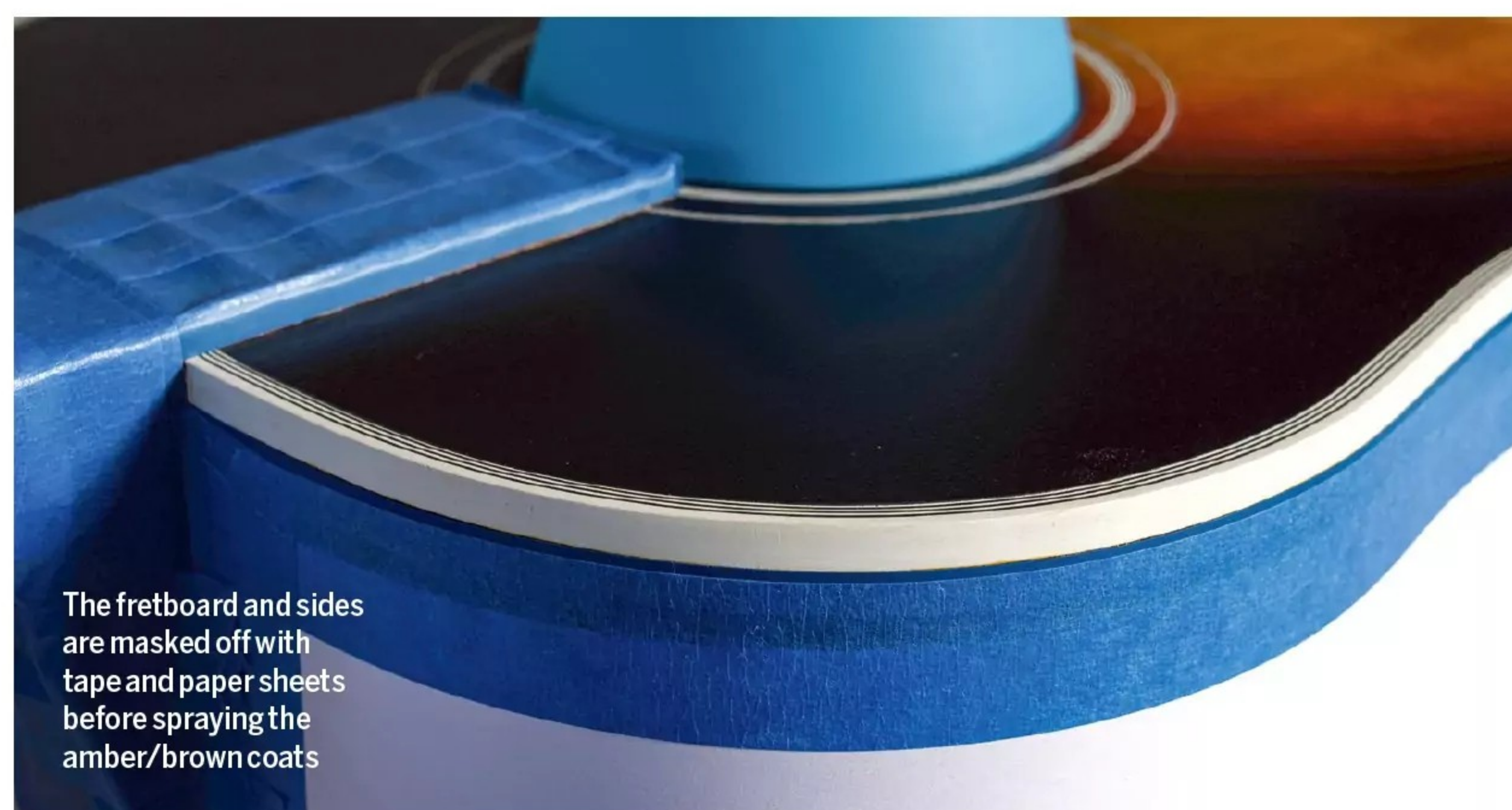
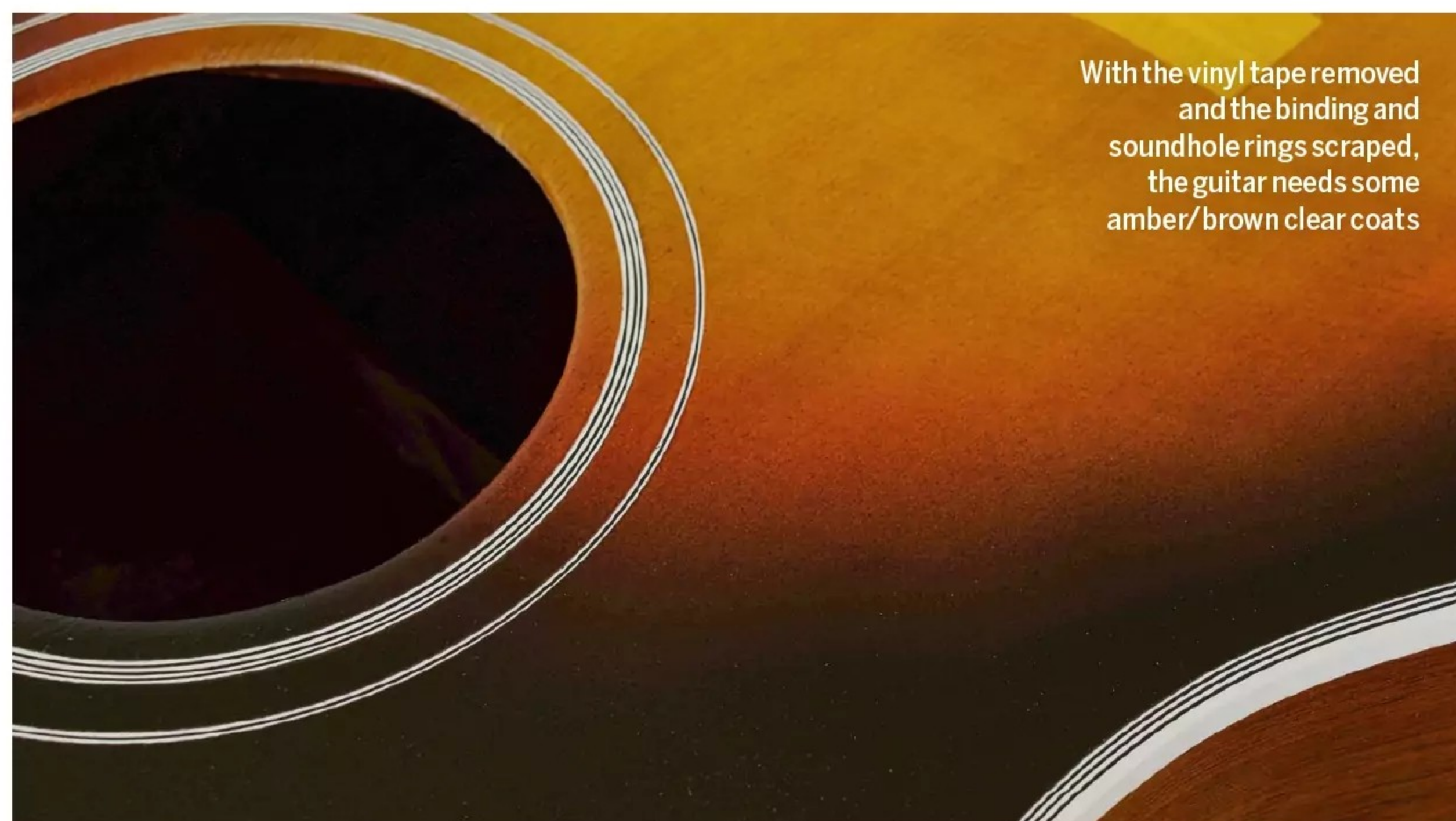
Rather than leave the lacquer to cure for several weeks, I wet-sanded and polished it after just one week. For an aged look I prefer the lacquer to sink into the wood grain and not remain perfectly flat, and in my experience cutting and polishing fairly soon after spraying speeds up the process.

After wet-sanding with 800-grit and 1,200-grit paper, I used Velcro-backed foam mops from Toolstation with an orbital sander to apply polishing compounds. You should keep different mops for each compound, and in order I used Farécla G3 and Meguiar's ScratchX, followed by Meguiar's Gloss Enhancer. Don't forget to put an old T-shirt or tea towel inside the body because the compound gets everywhere.

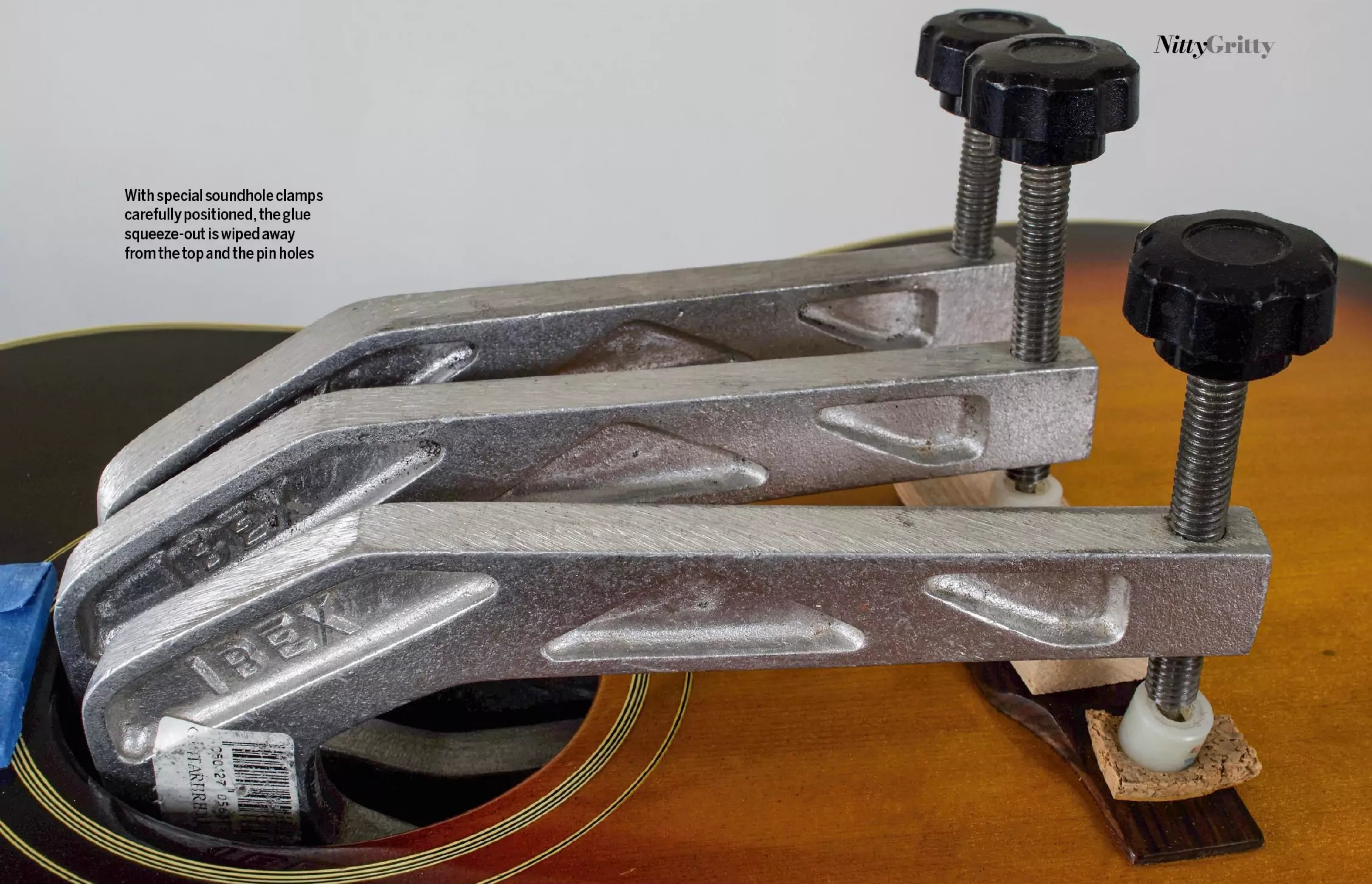
Bridge Bonding

With the top polished out, it was time to remove the masking tape covering the bridge area. I very carefully peeled it away, always pulling towards the centre to try to prevent lacquer chips. Thankfully, it came off cleanly to leave an area of bare spruce that was exactly the same size and shape as the bridge.

I had scraped some nasty varnish from the bridge straight after I had removed it, but many vintage Gibson bridges seemed to have a slight sheen. This suggested some



With special soundhole clamps carefully positioned, the glue squeeze-out is wiped away from the top and the pin holes



sort of coating, so I ran it by David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars and he suggested an oil finish for a vintage-correct look.

Gibson may have used boiled linseed oil, but I've had good results with Tru-Oil and decided to use that instead. Before applying it, I masked off the underside of the bridge so the oil wouldn't compromise the glue joint. I simply wiped it on with my finger, removed any excess and then twice repeated the process, leaving two-hour intervals between each of the applications. After drying overnight, I buffed the bridge to a soft sheen and the rosewood looked far nicer.

With some 180-grit paper attached to a flat marble block with double-sided tape, I sanded the underside of the bridge to remove any residual glue. The bridge's underside was slightly curved to conform to the top, so the 180-grit mostly cleaned up the ends, and I used a scraper on the centre section in order to retain the curve.

Some may be horrified that I decided to use Titebond Original, rather than hot hide glue. In the past I've used both, and while I've never had problems with neck joints when I've used hot hide glue, I once had to reglue a bridge. Plenty of top luthiers use Titebond, and for someone who doesn't regularly attach acoustic bridges, the longer open time makes the process far less stressful.

As it transpired, glueing this bridge was made easier by the machine screws.

I applied Titebond to the bare spruce and the bridge, and then placed it carefully in position using the screw holes as a visual guide. I pressed the screws through the holes and, in addition to aligning the bridge perfectly, they prevented it from sliding around when I applied my soundhole clamps. I carefully wiped away all the glue squeeze-out using a damp cloth and used cotton buds to remove any glue in the pin holes.

Before stringing up the guitar I had to make pin holes in the new bridge plate. It's important to minimise chip-out, so the approach I took was to start by drilling 2mm holes and gradually work through

my drill bits in 0.5mm increments until the diameters reached 4mm. At that point I switched to my reamer tool and carefully widened the holes until the bridge pins pressed in easily but snugly.

After reinstalling the original saddle and tuners, I was finally able to restring the guitar. At concert pitch there was barely any bellying behind the bridge and the action was noticeably lower. Best of all, it sounded even better than I remembered, and by the following day the bass-end was audibly punchier and deeper. There's still plenty to do, but after several months, the Southern Jumbo is a guitar once again. **G**

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After incrementally drilling the pin holes to minimise chip-out, a tapered reamer is used to fit a new set of bone pins

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Keeping It Simple

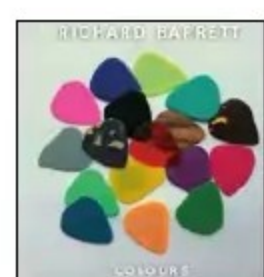
Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs SSC & Vox AC15

Difficulty ★★☆☆☆ | 10 mins per example

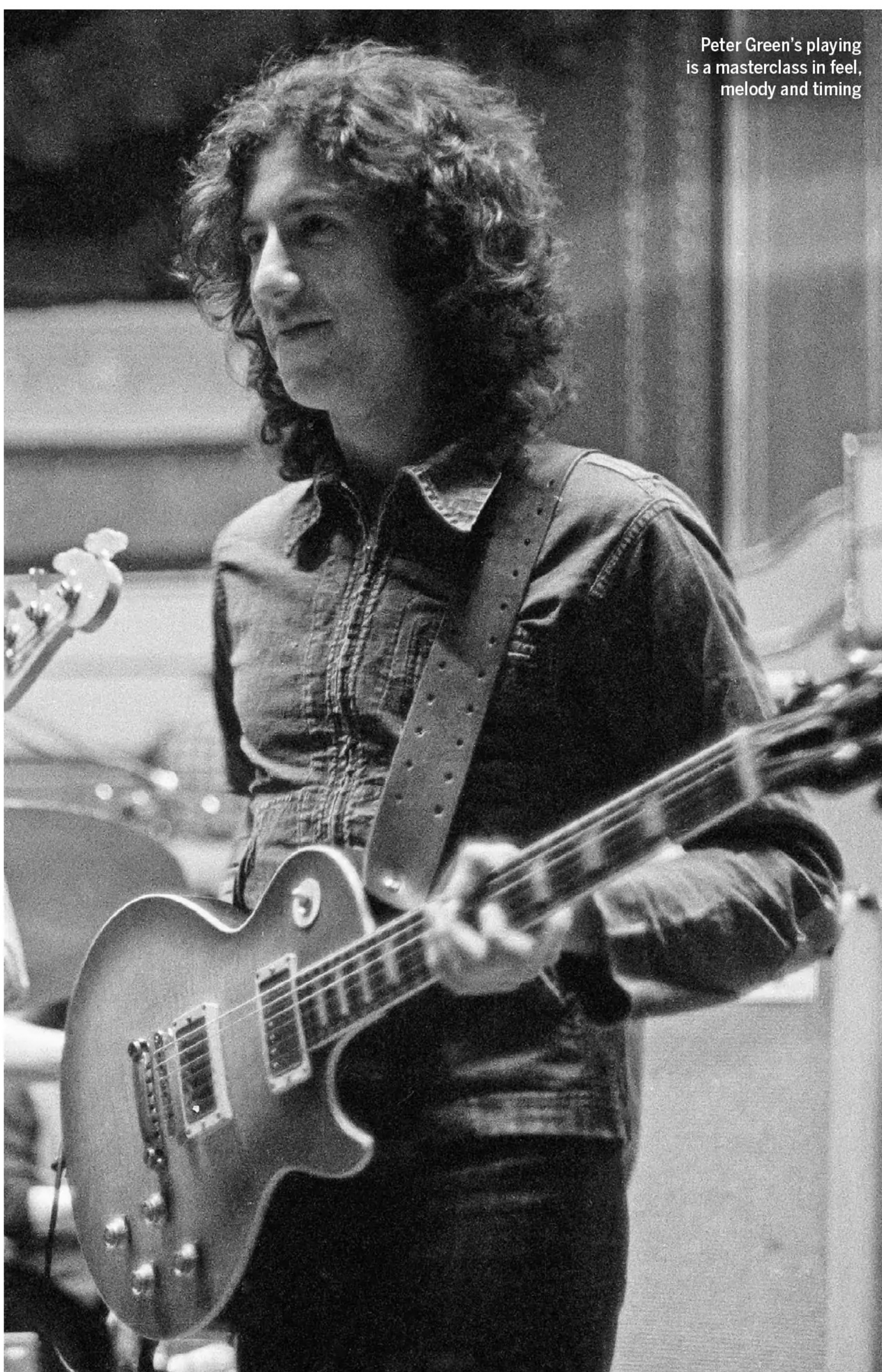
A COMMON PIECE of advice given to guitarists is play less. Albert King once advised Gary Moore to “play every other note”, for example. To be clear, this is not to say having great technique (and flaunting it) is a bad thing – there are few experiences more thrilling than hearing Gary Moore tearing around the fretboard at full speed – but even then it’s true to say the way he plays things is at least as important as what he plays. Obviously, a lot depends on the kind of music. It would feel strange hearing Yngwie Malmsteen play a minimal emotive blues over a neo-classical backing track, just as we wouldn’t expect David Gilmour to break into lightning speed arpeggios at the end of *Comfortably Numb*.

The idea of the solo/examples is twofold: to put some solid vocabulary and fresh ideas under the fingers of less experienced players, and to remind the more technically preoccupied player that a bit of light and shade enhances both sides of the spectrum. Working with slower phrasing (and at a slow tempo) is like putting a magnifying glass to details such as vibrato, pitching bends, rhythm and timing. There’s also the matter of melody, which is surely the most important detail of all. A lot of these ideas are pentatonic-based, but the slow-paced chord changes allow us to (literally) think outside the box.

Another often given but great piece of advice is to record yourself and listen back as objectively as you can. Pushing through any initial discomfort (we all go through that), you’ll learn a lot about playing with intent, rather than allowing habits to run the show. Surprisingly, what feels good to play isn’t always what we want to hear as a listener. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon



Peter Green's playing is a masterclass in feel, melody and timing

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

PETER GREEN IS A BIG INFLUENCE on this first example, following another great piece of advice: steal from the best! Things to be conscious of here are, first, vibrato; this is one of the more treacherous areas. It's all too easy to apply vibrato to everything by default, so try to be intentional about where you use it. Pitching of bends is self explanatory, but it deserves a mention. Some of the bends creep slowly up to pitch, while others are more incidental. Finally, don't miss the staccato notes and spaces in between phrases.

Example 1 shows a musical score for measures 1-4. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 12/8. The score is written for guitar, with a six-string staff. The notation includes various guitar techniques such as bends (BU), bends down (BD), and vibrato (wavy lines). The fret numbers are indicated on the staff lines. The first system covers measures 1-3, and the second system covers measures 4-5. The notation is written in a style that is easy to read and understand.

Example 2

ALL THE SAME ADVICE APPLIES to this second example, but note that it departs more from the pentatonic box approach. It also takes a few more liberties with timing here and there, usually erring on the side of behind the beat, rather than before. It's difficult to notate this precisely, so listen carefully to the audio and watch for the 'lay back' markings on the transcription. Having said that, please don't feel it's necessary to precisely duplicate this. There are a thousand ways to interpret it that can be equally valid.

Example 2 shows a musical score for measures 1-4. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 12/8. The score is written for guitar, with a six-string staff. The notation includes various guitar techniques such as bends (BU), bends down (BD), and vibrato (wavy lines). The fret numbers are indicated on the staff lines. The first system covers measures 1-3, and the second system covers measures 4-5. The notation is written in a style that is easy to read and understand.

Example 3

SWITCHING AWAY FROM THE ‘OUT OF PHASE’ middle position to the bridge pickup gives a bump up in volume and gain. This could also be achieved by flipping on an overdrive, or leaving a bit of headroom on the guitar’s volume control then maxing it for this part. There are a few more ideas from outside the pentatonic boxes here. Halfway through bar 1 there’s a bend to F#, which fits nicely over the D major chord, then the bend up to G at the 13th fret starts the phrase over the B $\flat$ and F chords. There is a conspicuous quarter-tone ‘blues bend’ at the end of bar 2, leading ultimately to a couple of D major-based doublestops.

8va

D

B $\flat$

F

C

Lay back

BU

BU

BU

BU BD

BU BD

10

10

13 (15)

10

12 (14)

12-10

13 (15)

13

10

13 (15) (13)

11

13 (14) (13)

11

1

(8va)

G

D

Let ring

12

12/14

15-14-12

12

12/14

12

14/16

12/14

15

14

4

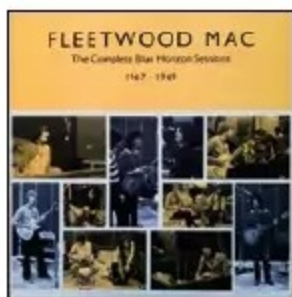
Hear It Here

DAVID GILMOUR THE WALL



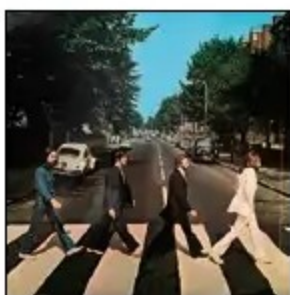
Okay, we’re going to go for the lowest hanging fruit first... Obviously, the solo in *Comfortably Numb* has the kind of power and self-assurance many more ‘technical’ players would kill for, but even the faster pentatonic runs maintain their poise. The two solos from *On An Island* on Gilmour’s third solo studio album are also a great demonstration of classy pentatonic playing with an awareness of melody. Finally, check out the phrasing towards the end of *Cluster One* from *The Division Bell*.

PETER GREEN THE COMPLETE BLUE HORIZON SESSIONS 1967-1969



It would be negligent to omit Peter Green here, as few players attract such universal reverence. *Need Your Love So Bad* is a clear example of melody and feel as primary considerations. The same can be said of *Albatross* (also acknowledge Danny Kirwan on harmonies). Finally, the original version of *Black Magic Woman* demonstrates that while Peter was more than capable of adding little runs to enhance the melody, his tone, timing and feel were always the priority.

GEORGE HARRISON ABBEY ROAD



In the context of a band primarily known for their songs, George Harrison’s refined guitar approach (and songwriting) was all too often unacknowledged. His solo on *Something* is as memorable as the vocals, with impeccable bends, vibrato and phrasing. Turning the clock back a few years, his Scotty Moore-style break on *All My Loving* is short but packed with sophisticated ideas. Finally, his rhythmic soloing in *Octopus’s Garden* suddenly makes a novelty track sound very cool!

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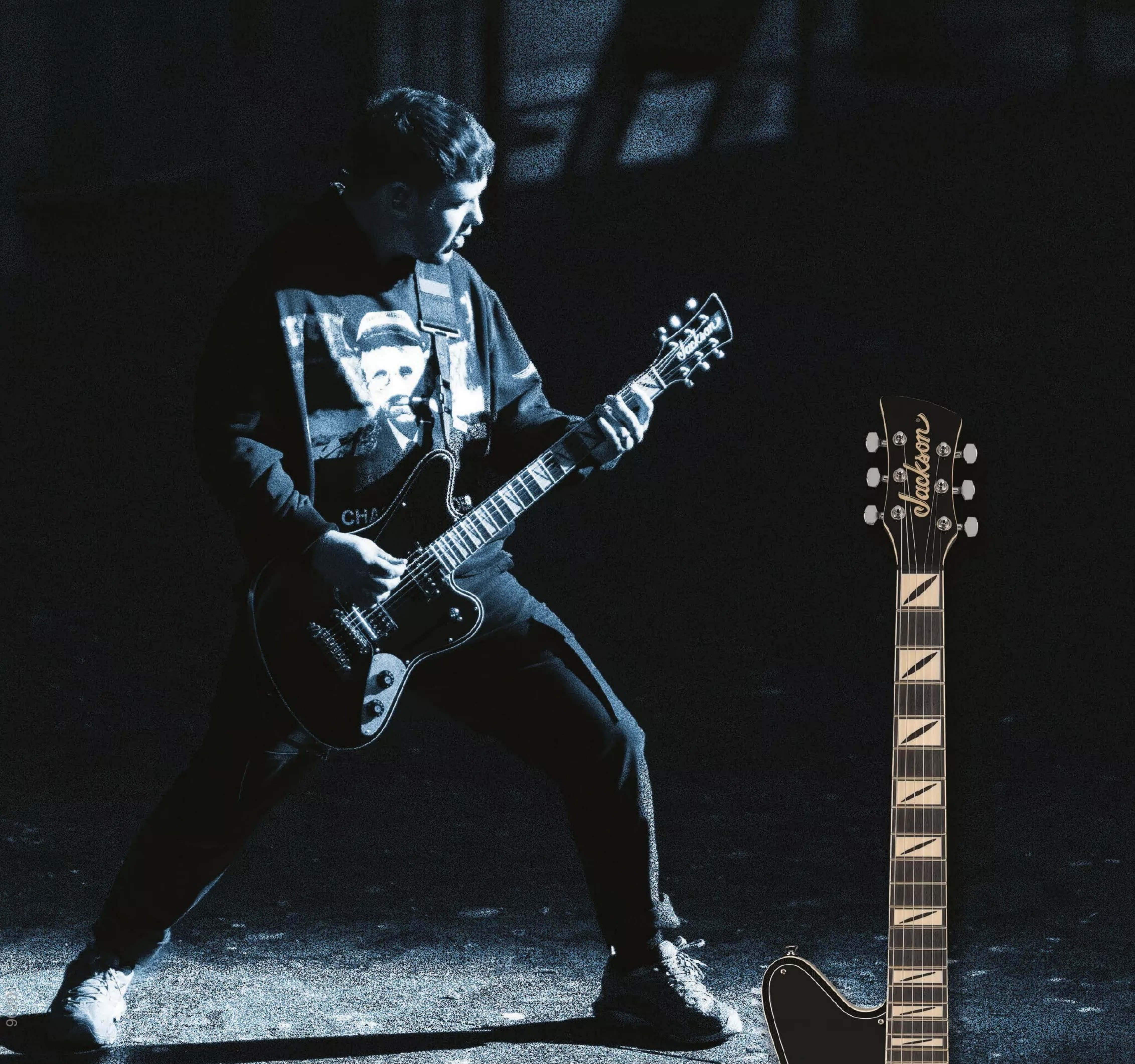


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