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Guitarist

Issue 534

MARCH 2026

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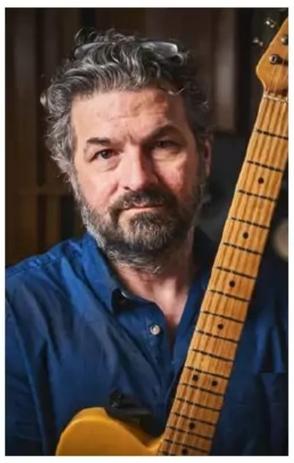
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Fit For A King



Blues guitar has come to mean many things – and everyone's interpretation of the term varies. Some might see authentic blues as Piedmont-style fingerpicking or open-chord slide playing on a resonator. Others get their satisfaction in blues from viscerally exciting modern players such as Jared James Nichols, whose work is really hard-charging, soulful rock wearing a bluesman's suit. None of those interpretations are wrong, all are welcome in the remarkably broad church blues guitar has become. But when we speak of 'blues guitar' we might be ignoring something fundamental – for the most influential blues guitarists in history were also powerful singers, and really the interaction between the story of the song, the emotion in the voice of the singer and the answering call from the guitar are the three pillars of what makes blues truly great, truly enduring.

No player understood that – and lived it – better than BB King. His playing was, and remains, utterly distinctive. There is no waste in his playing, each note is a word in an eloquent sentence. But his singing voice was majestic, too. Combined together, the effect is moving, thrilling and soul-satisfyingly sincere. And the force of emotion BB King was able to bring to all of his songs was rooted in experience. By the end of his life, he was playing the world's great concert halls. But he began life with very little, lost his mother young and knew what poverty and backbreaking agricultural work really meant to those who had to endure both before he was out of his teens.

Last year ushered in what would have been BB King's 100th birthday, and that milestone has been richly and fittingly saluted with the new tribute album. Unlike so many guest-artist tribute albums, there's real depth, sincerity and fire to each player's contribution, and the sense from the artists we interviewed about it is that all felt they had to raise the level of their playing to the standard set by BB's life and music. Such is the legacy of true kings. Enjoy the issue and see you next month.



Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Practical Classics

Every acoustic player should have a J-45 or a J-200, but reissues can prove pricey – enter Epiphone with this compellingly priced duo **p8**



The Next Stage

The original Line 6 Helix was a watershed bit of kit for many players. So is the next-gen Stadium XL Floor worth the upgrade? **p100**



Jason Isbell

The American alt-rock songsmith talks about his characterful new Martin signatures and their place in his musical world **p108**

COVER IMAGE: BB KING: DEBORAH FEINGOLD/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES ABOVE: EPIPHONE J-45 STUDIO & J-200 STUDIO PHOTO AND LINE 6 HELIX STADIUM XL FLOOR PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN JASON ISBELL PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN GUITAR

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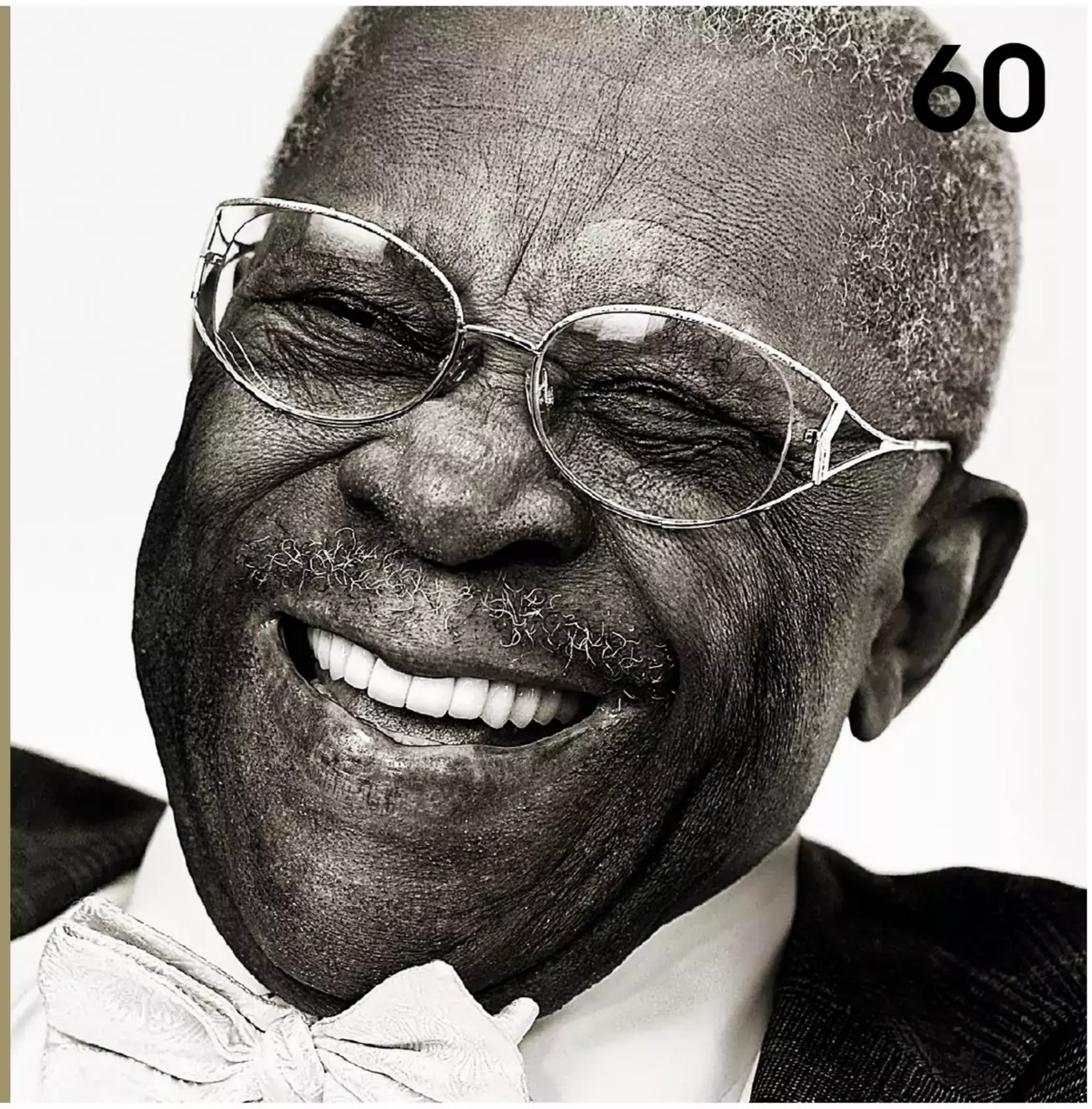


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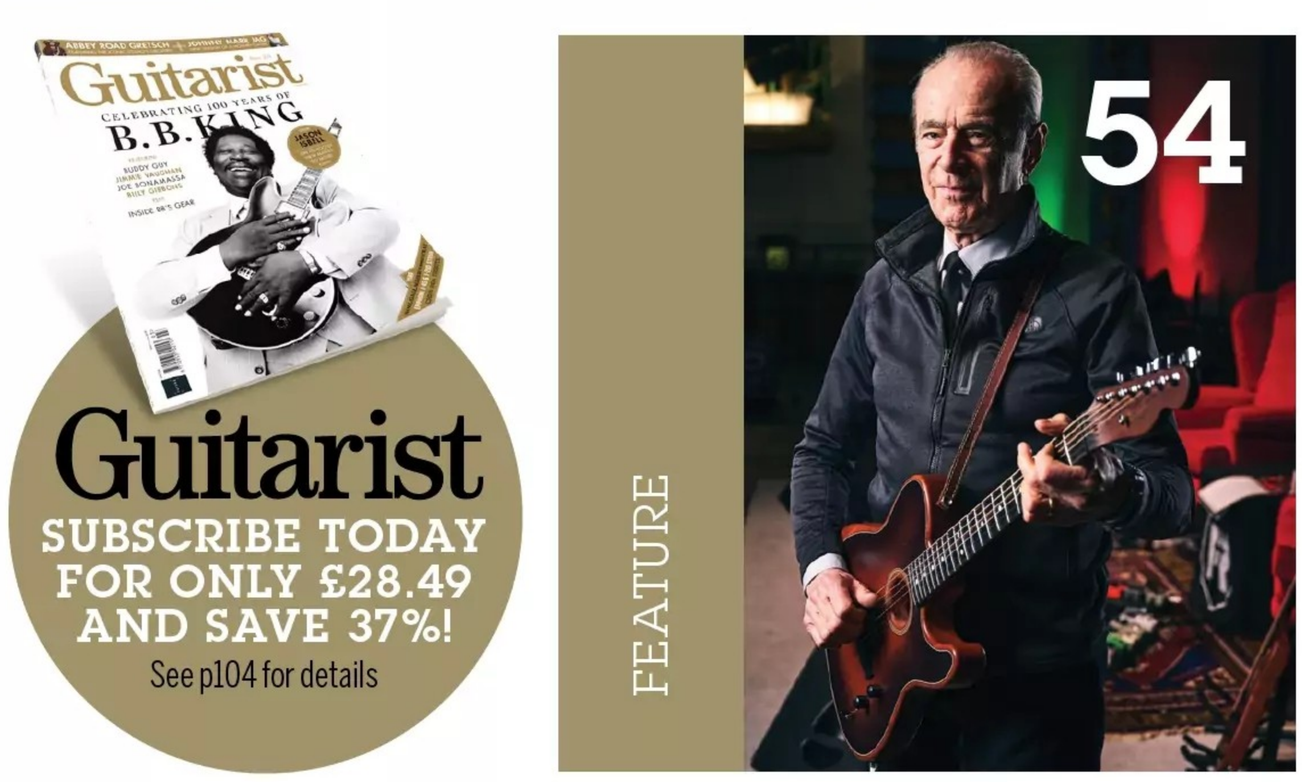


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EPIPHONE J-45 STUDIO
£449

WHAT IS IT? Cut-price electro version of Gibson's 'acoustic of the people' that's also available with a cutaway



EPIPHONE J-200 STUDIO
£499

WHAT IS IT? This 'king of the flat-tops' is a long-scale looker, again an electro with cutaway option

Dirt-Cheap Doppelgangers

A brace of familiar Gibson acoustic designs bearing the Epiphone brand name and a price tag of around one tenth of an original

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Matt Lincoln



1. The J-45 Studio's back and sides feature layered mahogany and do a convincing job of mimicking the higher-price-ticket original



In recent times we've examined a host of Epiphone guitars, both acoustic and electric, many of which have exceeded the magical £1k barrier. In the main, they've proved to be superb instruments that, in some cases, have caused us to question why we'd part with a load more cash for something with that 'other' name on the headstock.

Here, though, we find two unashamedly budget guitars, neither of which busts even the £500 ceiling. It will be interesting to see how the degree of cost-cutting required to hit this price point affects the build, playability and sound.

Checking over the big-bodied J-200 Studio reveals that it's very tidily built, both inside and out. While a five-ish grand Custom Shop Gibbo is constructed using solid, and often finely figured, maple for its back and sides, here we find what Epiphone calls 'layered' (we might say laminated) plain maple. Solid spruce, however, is employed for the guitar's top. It has to be said that the orangey ageing looks a little garish and unsubtle, but at this price point one can't really expect hand-rubbed toner.

The neck – which on a 'real' J-200 would be flamed maple with a rosewood centre strip and a black 'stinger' painted on the rear of the headstock – here is some kind of unspecified mahogany. In order to save timber and therefore cost, the headstock has been scarfed on, and the heel is a two-piece affair. Rosewood is the timber of choice for the bound fingerboard with its 20 fine to medium frets. It's dark and nicely grained and the general fit and finish hereabouts is really very good.

Gibson's super jumbo is recognised as one of the handsomest instruments around and Epiphone has had a pretty good stab at replicating that – the essence of it, at least. The fingerboard carries one of the original model's most famous trademarks, its graduated crown inlays, and while they're not real mother-of-pearl here, they do offer a passable facsimile. The flower-emblazoned scratchplate on the other hand, which is where these things often fall down by looking thin, cheap and poorly painted, is thick and smoothly bevelled, and looks particularly classy. The guitar's moustache-style bridge, also from rosewood, bears four fake pearl inlays in a style that looks familiar but is not an authentic Gibson design.

Due to its ultra-simplicity, the J-45 manages to do a more convincing job of looking original than its sibling. The dotted



rosewood fingerboard is dark and matches the solid spruce top's tobacco sunburst finish perfectly. The 'belly up' bridge (again rosewood) looks dead right and, to be honest, from the 10th row the guitar – with its short Epi headstock – could easily be mistaken as the real thing. The body's back and rims, this time of layered mahogany, receive a dark stain that's very convincing and does a better job than the J-200's aged blonde polyester of hiding the neck's heel and headstock splices.

Overall, the build quality of both guitars is very good indeed, and attention to detail excellent. Although it's obvious they've been built to hit a certain price point, Epiphone has cleverly managed to avoid the instruments coming across as bargain-basement fodder.

Feel & Sounds

In the bad old days, the playability and sound of cheap imported guitars was often questionable, to say the least. Today, however, American parent companies keep a close watch on their partner factories' production and quality control. So we're delighted to report that our Epiphone J-200's action is spot on, right out of the box. Around the nut area the strings are low and it's easy to fret chords and single-note lines. Venture further up the neck and barre chords don't fight back, while lead licks come out cleanly with absolutely no fretbuzz. Epiphone calls the J-200's neck's shape a "1960s SlimTaper D profile", but it isn't particularly D-shaped, more like a shallowish C. Whatever you call it, it's very comfy and a real pleasure to play.

With a slightly more vintage-profile "rounded C" neck, the J-45 Studio feels like an old pal. As with its stablemate, the action is perfectly set and, while neither guitar has the fingerpicker's beloved 44.5mm nut width (both are typical Gibson fare at 43mm each), picking and strumming are equally well served. The J-45's shorter 629mm scale means it handles string bends – should you attempt them – a little better than the 648mm scale and slightly tauter feel of the J-200. But, frankly speaking, neither instrument could be faulted from a playability point of view, most especially at this price.

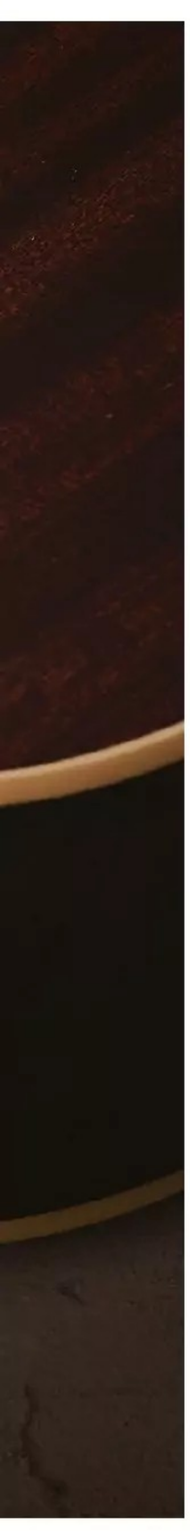
Sonically, while it didn't match the similarly sized 1995 Taylor jumbo we had to hand as a comparator, our big Epiphone did a brave job of trying. There's not the big, booming bottom-end you might expect from a guitar of this size, but it's perfectly acceptable, and thankfully the treble side isn't harsh or tinny. In fact, overall the tone is balanced and pleasant, whether picking or strumming, and anyone buying this guitar would not be disappointed from either its playability or sound perspective.



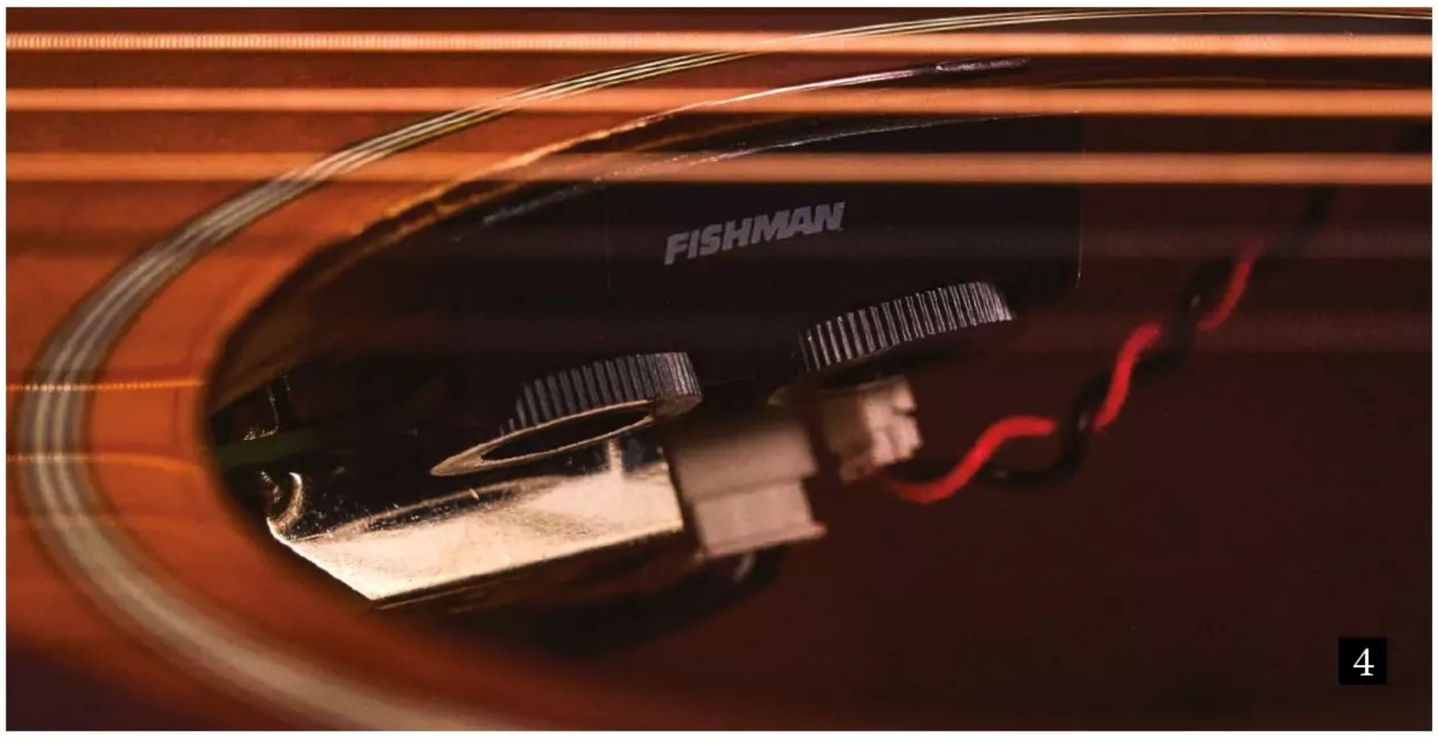
2. There's no denying that, even in its low-cost Epiphone guise, the J-45 is a fine-looking instrument. And the Indonesian factory has done a commendable job with the sunburst finish to the solid spruce top. Add in the vintage vibe of the headstock and you'll agree it's hard to find fault with anything about it. And all for under £450!

3. Rosewood is the timber of choice for both guitars' fingerboards and bridges. Here's the J-45 Studio's 'belly up' bridge with its compensated (albeit plastic) saddle

4. Both instruments feature a Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickup and Presys VT preamp with soundhole edge mounted controls







Our J-45 kicked out a well-balanced tone when strummed, and a sweet woody tone when fingerpicked

5. While the J-200 Studio's tinted blonde finish is not overly authentic looking, one can't expect Custom Shop hand-rubbed toner at these prices. It's still a great looker nonetheless. Also note the pre-installed strap button on the J-200's neck heel

6. A scarfed-on headstock is not uncommon on guitars in this price range. It saves money but also adds strength. Nice quality tuners, too

7. Both instruments feature onboard electronics. Here, we see the J-200's volume and tone controls hidden inside the soundhole's edge

8. An endpin jack is the commonest way to both connect your guitar and fit it to a strap. With the heel-mounted button, it makes these budget-friendly instruments stage ready



Tonally, the J-45 seems to have a little less in the top and bottom than the J-200, making it a tad more focused but at the same time a little less open-sounding. It's not half bad, though, and while it seems a little more 'enclosed' against a Martin OM-28, at £449 one would have to be the harshest of critics to complain.

This model was always the perfect all-rounder, and while the laminated bodies of both guitars are bound to restrict their sonic depth and openness, our J-45 kicked out a good level of well-balanced tone when strummed and a sweet if not overly rich and woody tone when fingerpicked. Its shorter scale length will also doubtless contribute to the less snappy sound.

We have to remember these instruments' lower price tags. And with that in mind we can state that anyone starting out their acoustic journey on either model will enjoy a positive and rewarding experience. With their onboard Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickups plus soundhole-placed volume and tone controls, each of these guitars is ready to hit the stage when you are.

> Anyone buying this J-200 would not be disappointed from either its playability or sound perspective

Verdict

It's easy to imagine that expensive US- or European-made acoustics are all individually craftsperson-made, while cheap East Asian ones are spat out of machines with never a hand touching them in the process. Truth is, you can't build an acoustic guitar at any price without a good degree of hands-on work. And from their setup alone, we can tell that these guitars – even with their sub-£500 tickets – have been built with some degree of care and expertise. They play extremely well, and while they won't scare your Custom Shop Martin, Collings or Breedlove in the tone stakes, they'll do a darned fine job of fulfilling the dreams of any aspiring acoustic guitarist. And if you're a seasoned electric player seeking out a good-looking, playable and not-half-bad-sounding knockabout flat-top in either of these legendary Gibson styles, then look no further. G

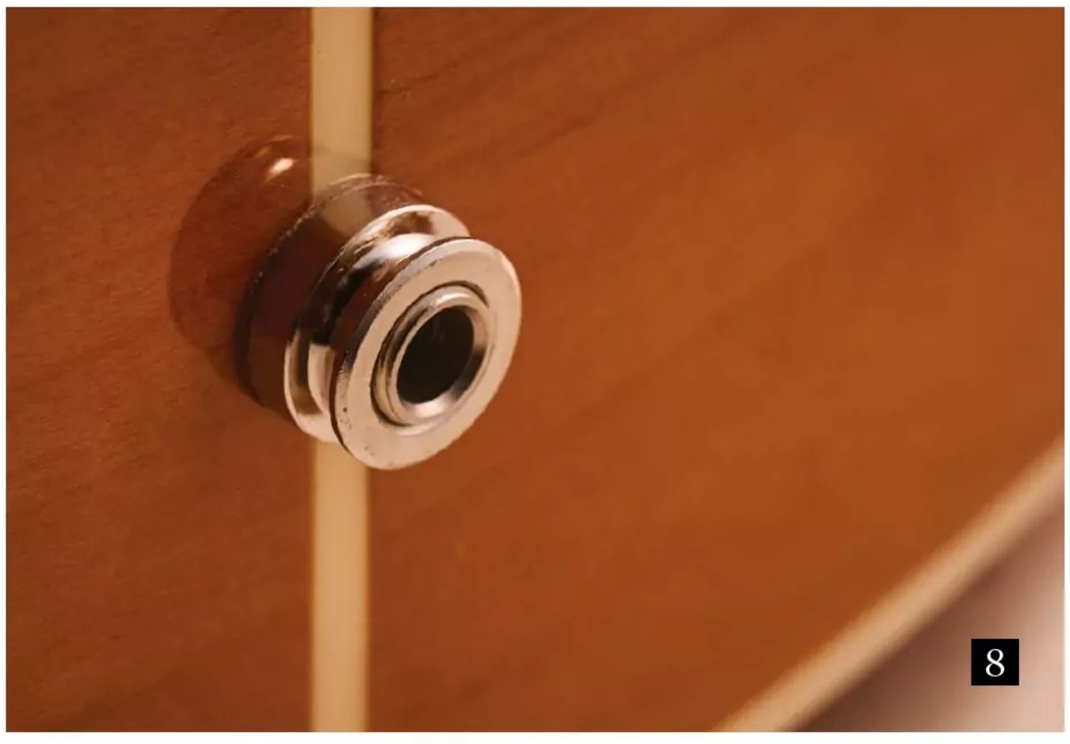




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EPIPHONE
J-45 STUDIO

PRICE: £449 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Round-shouldered steel-string flat-top acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK/SIDES: Layered mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 106mm (4.173")
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm (15.98")
NECK: Rounded C profile, mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628.65mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Vintage 'Kluson' style with cream plastic buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/43.815mm (1.725")
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Belly-up rosewood with compensated plastic saddle/54mm (2.125")
ELECTRICS: Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickup with Presys VT preamp and soundhole volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.1/4.629
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Of the vast choice in the Epiphone Studio range, highlights include: cutaway and left-handed versions of the J-45 Studio (both £449); the Hummingbird and Dove (both £449; and available in cutaway and left-handed); the parlour-sized Blues King (£349, right- and left-handed, not cutaway)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISHES: Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Epiphone Natural

8/10

PROS Well set up straight out of the box; nice build for price; stage ready; decent strummer or fingerpicker

CONS With its laminated back and rims, the guitar lacks the openness of an all-solid instrument



EPIPHONE
J-200 STUDIO

PRICE: £499 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Jumbo, non-cutaway acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid spruce with 4-ply binding and floral J-200 pickguard
BACK/SIDES: Layered maple
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm (4.48")
MAX BODY WIDTH: 431mm (17")
NECK: 1960s slim taper, D profile, mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Nickel Kluson style with plastic 'keystone' buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/43mm (1.69")
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with graduated crown inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood 'moustache' style with pearloid inlays, compensated plastic saddle/54mm (2.125")
ELECTRICS: Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickup with Presys VT preamp and soundhole volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.2/4.85
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See J-45 Studio (left)
LEFT-HANDERS: Available (£499)
FINISHES: Epiphone Natural (as reviewed), Vintage Sunburst

Epiphone
00800 44427661

8/10

PROS Impressive looking; perfectly set up; good tone for the price; stage ready with built-in pickup

CONS Blonde finish looks a little garish; for a large-bodied instrument, it lacks the bottom-end boom one might expect



PRS DGT 15 COMBO
£1,449

WHAT IS IT? All-valve, cathode-biased combo with a single 12-inch Celestion Vintage 30 speaker

American Beauty

The latest in the DGT family is this handsome 15-watt combo. But do its sounds match its good looks?

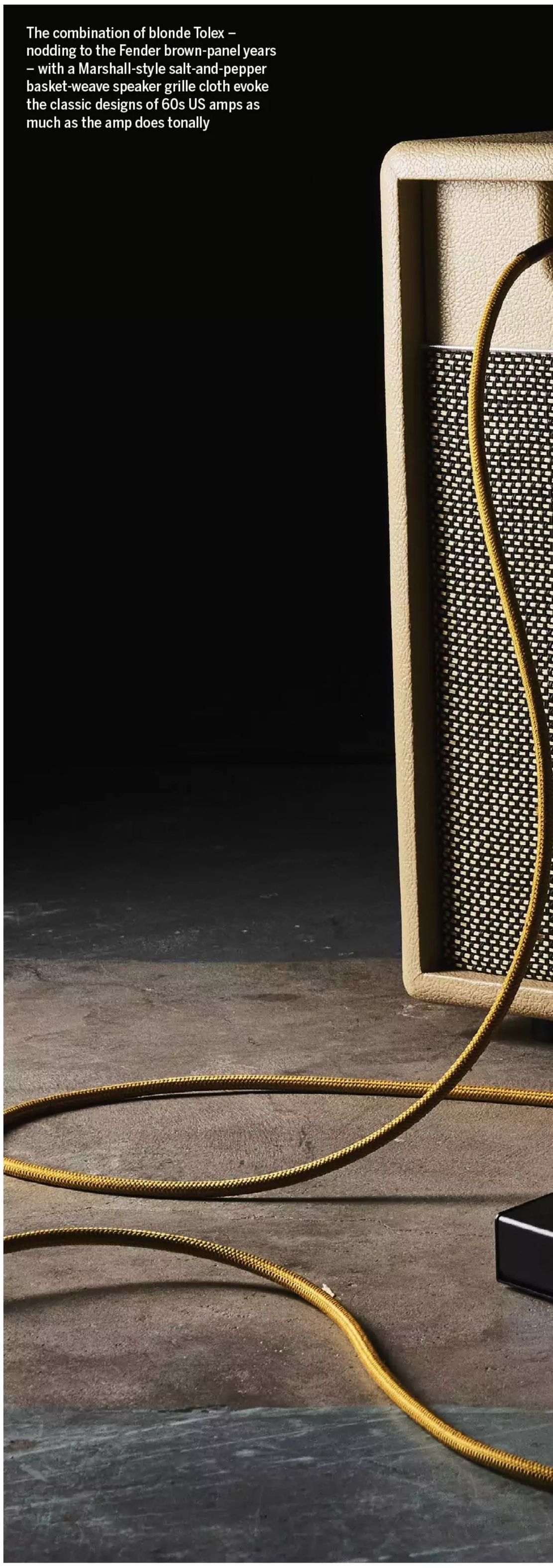
Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

Texas bluesman and session legend par excellence David Grissom has a firm and long-standing bond with PRS. Legend has it that company founder Paul Reed Smith attended a gig where David was whipping up a storm and soon snagged him as a tone-advisor for the brand as well as a signature artist. And, after the completion of his signature guitar in 2007, David set about creating an amplifier in conjunction with PRS head designer, Doug Sewell, tuned to the guitarist's exacting tastes.

Following David's penchant for preamp simplicity and power amp saturation, a number of high-quality amplifiers bearing his initials have reached the market with details tweaked to achieve consistent tone in different wattage packages. Conjuring the characteristics and peculiarities of David's four favourite classic amps, a magic blend was concocted – the aim was to achieve the top-end of his tweed Deluxe, the midrange of his Hiwatt, and the low-end courtesy of both his JTM45 and AC30.

This single 12-inch Celestion Vintage 30-equipped 15-watt version is the first

The combination of blonde Tolex – nodding to the Fender brown-panel years – with a Marshall-style salt-and-pepper basket-weave speaker grille cloth evoke the classic designs of 60s US amps as much as the amp does tonally




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BOOST
REVERB
TREMOLO

1. A three-spring reverb tank sits at the bottom of the cabinet's semi-sealed rear. Controlled by a single Depth knob or the footswitch (below), a longer, studio-like reverb is produced that's not especially springy in nature

2. The tone stack (Treble, Mid, Bass) is augmented by additional controls: Bright switch accesses a Fender sparkle, Top Cut mixes high-end negative feedback to 'phase-out' top, and Presence increases high-frequency energy in the amp

3. On the rear panel are an additional speaker output and impedance selector for different cabinet hook-ups. Despite the amp being self-biasing, the bias probe point provides the ability to test valve performance



1



2

combo in the DGT lineage and, as such, received a great deal of attention in order to achieve a tight but full bottom-end. With its two EL84 power valves and a valve rectifier, power-stage saturation is clearly a key feature as is needed to achieve the gutsy tones favoured by David.

It certainly looks the part, too, clad in a blond Tolex covering with a black front-panel and salt-and-pepper basket-weave grille cloth. It cuts the dash of a vintage classic without steering too close to any particular brand's aesthetics, and it's a reasonably lightweight cabinet that's definitely not a back-breaker.

Under the hood we find a printed circuit board construction, which is no bar to great tone. As ever, we recommend a reasonable amount of care with board-mounted valves and pots, although this type of build is quite standard at the price point and PRS does back it with a five-year guarantee.

Alongside the amp is a heavy-duty black three-way, LED-illuminated footswitch for boost, reverb and tremolo deployment via the included 5.3-metre five-pin MIDI-style cable. The front-panel mini-switches modify the footswitching options, allowing the master volume and Bright switch to be instigated via the Boost switch.

Feel & Sounds

Having had the pleasure of spending some time with the DGT 15 head, setting these controls felt like familiar ground. Perhaps the best way to appreciate how this amp wants to work is to switch the master volume out of the circuit – using its mini-toggle – and set the input gain as if it is the sole volume control. This gives the output valves priority in terms of supplying saturation and harmonics. While this may be the reverse to how master volume amps are often used, it affords a more muscular and physical experience.

Using the non-master mode described above and with the usual six-string suspects lined up, we opt to begin with our Telecaster. Sounding immediately detailed yet gutsy, it's a full-bodied tone with an inherent low-end that fills any gaps in the sound of single-coil guitars. With the input gain set low we still find an exceptional amount of sustain, alongside the bell-like clarity. Switching to the Tele's infamous bridge pickup, we get a gnarly early break-up with teeth.

Alongside Bass and Mid controls, we are blessed with four ways to modify the top-end: Treble, Top Cut, Presence and the Bright switch – providing the maximum flexibility to dial the sound to perfection. It's worth mentioning the chosen Celestion Vintage 30 12-inch speaker in this combo is capable of a little extra detail perhaps than the more traditional Greenback. This is a



3



Great efforts were made to achieve a tight yet combo-style bottom-end, with a Celestion Vintage 30 placed in a semi-open-backed enclosure constructed of high-grade ply

great match for the size of cabinet and amp output and it will compress nicely at higher levels, especially once the speaker has become 'broken in'.

Time for our Les Paul Custom with Patent Applied For-style humbuckers, and as we push the input gain to halfway, we soon hit an appreciable seam of rich sustain and sizzling chords. With a push of the Boost footswitch, lead fluidity and controlled feedback are accessed, building on the same core tonality but this time with increased gain and sensitivity.

The default nature of the DGT 15 combo is raw, honest and unaffected. It is not about a pristine clean sound or a highly overdriven lead tone; this is very much a 'set and forget' platform, where further changes only need come from its three-button footswitch or your favourite pedals. Utilising the guitar's volume controls, it's possible to achieve a huge amount of dynamic and tonal variation for rhythms or solos in the classic manner employed by Grissom and many other legendary blues-oriented players.

The onboard reverb is well tuned to provide a long and transparent halo, though it doesn't sound particularly springy, despite its classic three-spring format. Switching in the tremolo effect and we're met with wobbulations of the smooth and vibey kind. It has a wide range from slow to fast and from mild to deep, something not all tremolo-equipped amps can achieve.

> This is a 'set and forget' platform, where further changes come from the three-button footswitch or your favourite pedals

Verdict

While for every player there is an amplifier, some amplifiers please more people than others. It's important to judge this one on its intended function as a bold, classic tone-machine aimed at vintage-appreciating, feel-based players. In this light, armed with a bunch of your favourite tone-bending pedals, this amp really is a people-pleaser. Matching its tonality and gain to a variety of instruments and styles was effortless, but it's at its best reproducing the classic sound palette of the 60s and 70s, albeit with a more extended and defined low-end and modern construction.

It's a happy marriage of tone, power and portability and resides at the higher end of the market before reaching the realm of boutique pricing. But its tonal *quality* is a match for the more boutique offerings from smaller high-end manufacturers by virtue of the extensive research and development it has received.

For those with classic tastes and an ear for the magic that power-section saturation brings, we'd say that you owe yourself a date with the DGT. G



PRS DGT 15 COMBO

PRICE: £1,449
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: All-valve single-channel combo
VALVES: 2x EL84, 3x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7
OUTPUT: 15W
DIMENSIONS: 622 (w) x 267 (d) x 470mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 19.05/42
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: 1x12" Celestion Vintage 30
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Volume, Boost switch, Treble, Mid, Bass, Bright switch, Master, Master switch, Reverb, Top Cut, Presence, Speed, Tremolo switch, Depth
FOOTSWITCH: 3-button included
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switching configurability options. Bias terminals
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Head-only version £945

PRS Guitars
01223 874301
www.prsguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Perfectly tuned blend of vintage tones coming from an all-valve design; relatively light portable package; amazing sustain and saturation on tap

CONS Nowhere to store the footswitch and cable due to the sealed-back design; a cover would be a nice addition

FIRST PLAY



GRETSCH LIMITED EDITION ABBEY ROAD RS201 STUDIOMATIC
£1,249

WHAT IS IT? A tie-up between Abbey Road Studios and Gretsch featuring a recording-aimed circuit inspired by the studios' Rumble Filter



Those Were The Days

One minute Gretsch wants to be the guitar for the 'new generation' and the next it releases an instrument with roots in the recording studio scene of early 60s. Help!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Matt Lincoln

Abbey Road Studios is probably the most famous recording facility in the world. While it was opened with a concert by Sir Edward Elgar on 12 November 1931, its international fame can be traced back to four Liverpudlians who first entered the building in 1962 and changed everything: The Beatles. George Harrison's 1957 black Duo Jet guitar was probably the first Gretsch electric to make music there and was certainly used to record *Please Please Me*, the band's first No 1 single (according to some charts, though officially *From Me To You* takes that honour) and their debut album of the same name. Harrison acquired more Gretsch guitars and The Fabs continued to record at Abbey Road.

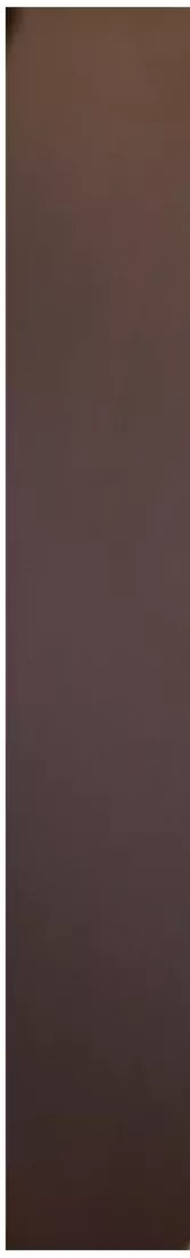
While Gretsch still offers the type of guitars that Harrison played all those years ago, the recording studio and the technology within have changed dramatically since those pioneering days. Today's 'studios' for the vast majority of recording musicians are rather different. And with AI already impacting music creation, not only are recording studios being seen as a thing of antiquity, hey, maybe we don't even need musicians any more!

It seems, then, an unusual time to celebrate this near obsolete world, but that's exactly what we have here with this limited release: a partnering of two very well-known brands.


GRETSCH
RUMBLE
FILTER
Bigsby
LICENSED







1. Essential for any Gretsch we'd say, the V-cutout B60 Bigsby provides quite light-travel shimmer, and once the strings were bedded in our sample stayed nicely in tune

2. The rectangular nameplate is used throughout Gretsch's history and here it ties in with the unique collaboration behind the guitar. The rear-lock tuners aren't really necessary, but they do help restringing with that sometimes troublesome Bigsby

The Studiomatic gets its own 'RS' number, "the first time in history that Abbey Road's legendary 'RS' numbering has been awarded to a musical instrument", says Gretsch. Plus, it features "a circuit inspired by the classic RS97 Rumble Filter, a technology designed in the 1950s by the EMI team at Abbey Road to remove very low-frequency and mechanical vibrations from recordings".

Whatever the backstory, the package is rather good. The hard case – which takes its deep-red outer shade from Abbey Road's furniture and the blue interior from a paint scrape on a studio door – is pretty classy, as is the timeless elegance and show-off style of the guitar inside. It might be called the Studiomatic, but there's no mention of Electromatic anywhere, which is the Gretsch level we're talking about: a pretty crisply executed Chinese build based on the only double-cut Electromatic in the Hollow Body series, the G5422. And while we have no idea what 'limited' means in numbers, the sense of occasion is nicely referenced by the small nameplate on the headstock bearing the model name, which – like all the hardware – is gleamingly gold-plated.

Colour-wise, don't get too excited: it's Classic Walnut Stain-only. In lower lights, it could be seen as black, but the finish is actually translucent so you can see some subtle wavy grain of the laminate maple body. It's a big guitar, around 403mm (just under 16 inches) across its lower bouts and about 58mm deep at the rim, which tapers to 53mm by the tip of the rounded horns.

It's a true hollowbody, too, without any support under the bridge (unlike the Electromatic G5422, which uses the trestle block), having two parallel longitudinal spruce bracing bars – you can just about see them if you peer through the unbound f-holes. You can also see a very clean internal construction; the neatly kerfed lining strips give more glueing area to join the top and back to the sides. Classic stuff. Outwardly, it's very clean, too, especially

3. Both 'custom' Filter'Trons sit quite high from the body face. They also feature two screws on the bass side so the pickups can be tilted to match the string angle

4. This two-position rotary switch moves between two levels of bass-cut. It's engaged via pull-switches on both tone controls, and the circuit is inspired by Abbey Road Studios' Rumble Filter, one of many recording gizmos created by those brown-coat boffins back in the day

The bass-cut tones both become a sort of character switch, tailoring those frequency cut areas to suit





3

the cream plastic edge-binding around the body with its inner black/white/black purfling strip.

The neck is spec'd as maple with a headstock that's scarf-jointed under the 1st and 2nd frets, while the fingerboard is a lightly striped deep brown/black ebony with a single strip of cream binding, just like the headstock, with those classy pearloid thumbnail position markers. The Luminlay side dots give a nod to the modern age.

If the actual finish seems a little dowdy, then remember it's the perfect backdrop for that gleaming hardware, which includes the licensed Bigsby B60 vibrato, tune-o-matic bridge (Adjusto-Matic in Gretsch-speak), G-Arrow metal knobs and rear-locking tuners. The gold-plated pickup covers are very visible as they sit some way out of their gold-coloured plastic pickup mounting rings due to the height of the pinned wooden foot-bridge base.

Feel & Sounds

As an example of just how good Chinese guitars have become, the Studiomaster is pretty much fit for purpose from the off. A quick check reveals the need for a slight truss rod tweak and a slight reset of the string heights, which is easy enough. While we might be tempted to slightly round the square edges of the fingerboard binding, the overall fretwork is good, aside from a couple of slightly scratchy fret tops and a few sharp ends. There's good height to the medium-gauge frets, and overall, not least due to the

UNDER THE HOOD

A different Gretsch with some simple circuitry

With a history of unusual control circuits and switches, Gretsch was no different from plenty of 60s brands. Today the 'Tone Pot' circuit is used on many modern Gretsches and refines those more experimental circuits of old into a very usable setup of master volume (with treble bleed), individual pickup volumes, master tone and a three-way toggle pickup-selector switch.

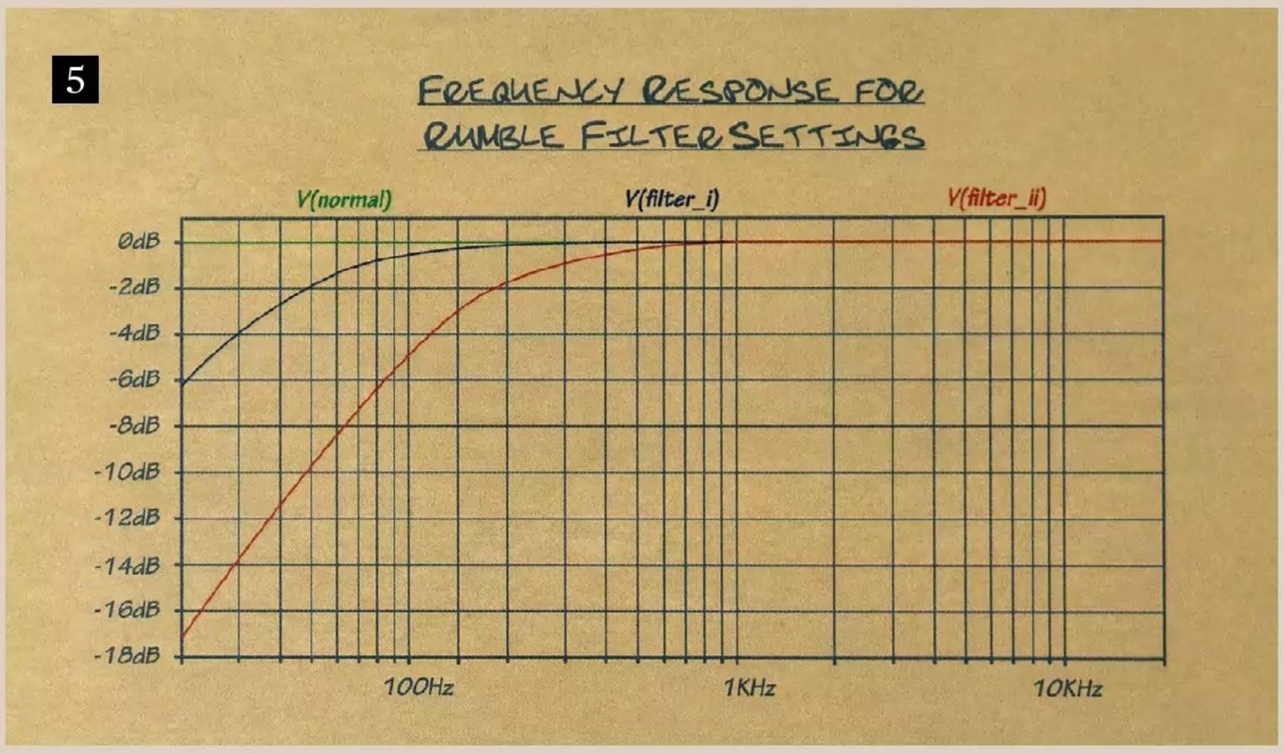
The different layout and function of the Studiomatic's controls, however, retains the positions of the three-way toggle pickup selector and master volume on the two horns, but then we have individual pickup *tone* controls each with a pull-switch to engage the Rumble Filter. Its settings, I and II, are selected by the unique two-position rotary switch placed closest to the bridge.

Uniquely, Gretsch shows us the wiring diagram on its website, plus a frequency chart (see below) that illustrates the different bass roll-offs of the milder position I and more extreme position II. The wiring diagram features a dual-gang master volume that uses two 500kohms audio (log) pots; the tone pots are the same value but with a linear taper, each with a .015µF capacitor. Position I of the Rumble Filter engages a 8,200pF capacitor, placed in series, for each pickup; position II uses the lower value 2,200pF. For reference, certain Fender Jaguars, such as the Johnny Marr signature, use a 3,300pF cap for its 'bright' switches.

It's far from new science, of course, and quite often a resistor is added in parallel to the capacitor to effectively lessen the bass-cut effect. This is exactly the concept behind Yamaha's Dry Switch, which uses a 3,300pF capacitor and a 330k resistor, and PRS's EQ switches, which use a 820pF capacitor and a 230k resistor. Both mods are intended to offer a thinner, more single-coil-like sound, while the pickup remains humbucking (Yamaha also uses its Dry Switch with P-90 single coils).

The 'custom' Filter'Tron humbuckers have 'BHK' labels, made by BooHeung Precision Machinery in Korea, which plenty of brands have used over the years. Gretsch says they were "voiced and studio-tested in collaboration with Abbey Road sound engineers" and "feature Alnico V magnets and a vintage-inspired voice that delivers quintessential Filter'Tron chime, balance, and articulation". They certainly have pretty typical DCRs for Filter'Trons of 4.57k (bridge) and 4.35k (neck), measured at output.

5



6



5. Along with the circuit diagram available on Gretsch's website, the brand has also shared this frequency response chart for the two Rumble Filter roll-offs that show the low-end attenuation

6. While the baseplate label tells us the pickup position and origin, there's no ID of the pickup itself

FREQUENCY RESPONSE CHART COURTESY OF GRETSCH



Mounted on its pinned wooden foot, the tune-o-matic-style bridge sits high off the body, all part of this Gretsch's old-school charm

comfortable and well-shaped Classic 'C' neck profile, it's a great player. Yes, these are bulky guitars, but that's all part of the appeal. And while plenty of similar builds do feel like bygone 'jazz' guitars, the small-travel Bigsby shouts time-warp rockabilly, early rock 'n' roll and twang. Hey, it's a Gretsch!

The hollow construction means it's reasonably loud unplugged with a practice-aimed archtop-y like quick attack. Plugged in, there's a good overall depth to the voicing, which gives a solid foundation to the bright and quite attacking bridge pickup. There's old-school honk here, a good character to the midrange response, and the brightness seems well tamed; the neck pickup retains some of that cut but with more depth.

For many, the classic Gretsch voice is with both pickups on, and here it's hollowed with rich basses and that classic snap to the highs. Clean and loud with just a little reverb, it produces sounds you've heard on plenty of occasions – a sort of Telecaster twang and bounce with pulled-back spike and some added fullness. But it's not a guitar that's locked in the past: there's quite a pushy presence to the voicing, less 'vintage Filter'Tron' to our ears, a little more standard humbucker perhaps, and one that likes some crunch and fuzz. Things can get lively with the hollow construction, but musical feedback is easy to coax at relatively low levels, which supports a recording aim.

The two bass-cut tones (see Under The Hood, page 21) pull back that depth in different shades. In position II the effect is obvious, pulling down the low-end and into the lower-mids for a leaner, slightly quieter voice. Position I is more subtle, there's less effect – in fact, both become a sort of character switch, tailoring those frequency cut areas to suit. There's no change in the upper-end response, so, like the Jaguar's bass-cut 'bright' switch, the Rumble Filter voices helps focus the voice of the guitar by *cutting*, not boosting frequencies.

Verdict

The Studiomaster is well put together and is the most affordable double-cut Gretsch with fully hollow construction and its parallel tone bars. The double-cutaway style nod to the early 60s suits the Abbey Road tie-up, although that does elevate the price, of course, as does the posh, considered case. And while the two levels of bass-cut don't exactly replicate the original Rumble Filter, the simple circuit (while far from new) works well to clean up and focus the fairly big voice, helping on your recordings and also live.

As many of us record music with little more than an audio interface and a DAW, it does celebrate a bygone time when we trouped off to a recording studio. And nothing quite sounds or looks like a classic Gretsch, does it? This Studiomatic ticks those boxes: a very good guitar with an evocative backstory. G



GRETSCH LIMITED EDITION ABBEY ROAD RS201 STUDIOMATIC

PRICE: £1,249 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Laminated maple with parallel tone bars to the top
NECK: Maple, 'Classic C' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq XL/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, pearloid Neo-Classic thumbnail inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Adjusto-Matic bridge (on pinned wooden foot), Bigsby B-60 (with V-cutout) vibrato, enclosed rear-locking tuners – gold-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Custom Filter'Tron humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume, individual pickup tone controls (w/ pull-switch to engage Rumble Filter), 2-position Rumble Filter selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.37/7.4
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The only other double-cut in the Electromatic range is the G5422T (£1,039), also available as the 12-string G5422G-12 (£1,039)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model, but there is the G5422TGLH Electromatic (£1,039) in Snow Crest White with gold hardware but no Bigsby
FINISH: Classic Walnut Stain – gloss polyester

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.gretschguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Good build-quality and attention to detail; pretty classic voicing enhanced by the two-position Rumble Filter bass-cuts

CONS Minor fret finishing issues but otherwise perfectly set up; the special package elevates the price; just one colour

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JHS PEDALS 424 GAIN STAGE
£190

WHAT IS IT? A pedal that replicates the sound of a vintage multi-track recorder's gain stages in a more convenient package

Tascam Tone

The latest from JHS Pedals captures the sound of plugging your guitar into the input stages of a vintage multi-track recorder

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln



1. The artwork depicts a Tascam Portastudio 424, the iconic self-contained four-track multi-track recorder/mixer that used a compact cassette

2. The Gain 1, Gain 2 and Volume knobs all work together to replicate the signal path of the Portastudio 424 Mk1

3. This XLR socket can be used as a direct out straight into a mixer or interface. It can be used simultaneously with the other output

Those of us who used a Portastudio multi-tracker back in the day might have thought we'd heard the last of it... But now JHS Pedals has released the 424 Gain Stage, a new pedal that replicates a Tascam 424 MkI Portastudio's signal path using its original op-amps. The pedal is said to have been largely driven by artists such as US guitarist/producer Michael Todd Gordon – better known as Mk.gee – who employs a Tascam at the core of his rig. This musician was also name-checked by Eric Clapton, who said "[Mk.gee] has found things to do on the guitar that are like nobody else".

The pedal has an output to an amp but also an XLR DI output that can be connected to a mixing desk or audio interface. The basic sound is arrived at via two gain knobs. Gain 1 sets how much preamplification is added to the signal and is the equivalent of the Trim knob on the input of a 424. The original's channel fader, providing a second gain stage, is represented by the Gain 2 knob. The signal can be tweaked by Bass and Treble knobs, and exits the pedal via a Volume knob, which equates to a Portastudio's master fader.

This new pedal offers plenty of creative opportunities for recordists via its XLR output. It starts out delivering some clean but warm sounds, and when you experiment with various juxtapositions of the gain knobs you can start to add in grainy lo-fi grit until the whole sound is suffused with it. This can lead to some gnarly clipping distortions commensurate with pushing circuitry to its limits. Turned up full, it's like a particularly snarky fuzz.

All of this is delivered with a degree of expressive dynamics that can see a cleanish sound transition into distortion with harder picking. Into an amp there's plenty of output to use the pedal as a conventional boost with tonal options. And there's a whole area of dirt to be explored by blending your amp sound with the 424's dirtier tones.

Verdict

The 424 Gain stage probably exists due to the success of Mk.gee, and anyone wanting to cop some of that flavour will find the pedal useful. It's a somewhat different take on a dirt pedal, and probably not designed for chasing what we generally think of as traditional guitar/amp tone. But it offers an alternative set of flavours and textures and is especially useful for anyone who records DI guitar. More colours in that paintbox ain't no bad thing. G

JHS PEDALS 424 GAIN STAGE

PRICE: £190
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Multi-gain stage preamp pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass,
CONTROLS: Volume, Gain 1, Gain 2, Bass, Treble, Ground Lift switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, XLR output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 50mA
DIMENSIONS: 66 (w) x 124 (d) x 55mm (h)

JHS Pedals
www.jhspedals.info

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Compact size; solid build quality; XLR output; range of sounds that you don't get from mainstream dirt pedals

CONS It's fairly niche – the harsher clipping sounds won't suit every player



3

THE RIVALS

Other pedals that aim for the same sound are the Porta424 Channel Strip Distortion (£130, right) from MXNHLT Effects, and the Mid-Fi Electronic' Demo Tape Fuzz ($225), which "emulates the distortion created by running an instrument direct into a four-track/mixer/mic pre – from gross to gorgeous". JHS Pedals also has other preamp pedals – the Crayon (£152) and two versions of the Colour Box (£341), which it describes as a "full-fledged studio-grade preamplifier, EQ, and distortion generator". Also, a shout-out to the MXR Rockman X100 (£219), which revives more vintage gear, offering clean and distorted tones.



PHOTO BY MXNHLTEFFECTS.COM



LAZY J X THORPYFX THE J
£329

WHAT IS IT? Analogue amp emulator based on the Lazy J J 20 amplifier

1

2

3

Need For Tweed

ThorpyFX team up with Lazy J to put the amp brand's signature take on the Fender tweed sound into a pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker



1. The X/Y switch allows you to select the emulated input valve – 12AX7 for medium gain tones and 12AY7 for lower-gain drive

2. The Supply knob emulates the Voltage attenuation control – full clockwise is full voltage, anything below this emulates voltage attenuation

3. The left footswitch turns the pedal on and off. The right footswitch toggles between the Normal (Green LED) and Bright (Red LED) channels

4. For The J, Adrian Thorpe has collaborated with Jesse Hoff of Lazy J to create what Thorpy calls a "tone multiplier for your 'board"

ThorpyFX's latest pedal is a collaboration with British boutique amp manufacturer Lazy J. And the intention here is to recreate both the sound and feel of the amp brand's J 20, a modern evolution of the 1950's 5E3 Fender Deluxe amp – an object of desire for many guitarists.

The J pedal offers the sound of two different amp channels – Normal and Bright – with footswitching between the two. Both channels have their own control knobs, increasing volume and gain, feeding an overall output level knob, which has a little extra headroom for a boost if required. The option of swapping the preamp valves in the real amp is duplicated here by a toggle switch that lets you choose between the lower gain 12AY7 or the 12AX7 for more drive if you need it.

For tonal tweaks, the Tone knob is pretty standard bright or dark EQ, but you also get a Response knob, which subtly dials in the presence, all combining to carefully match the pedal to your own rig. Further tonal variation is delivered via the Supply knob, which emulates voltage attenuation. Fully clockwise is full voltage, but the sonic and feel variations from a drop in voltage are recreated as you wind it back.

Plugged into a clean amp, The J offers all the complex harmonic texture and warm midrange expected of a tweed amp and delivers it with really nuanced control over the sound from the aforementioned array of controls. Both channels can go from clean to fully driven, but the Bright has more gain and a little extra bite.

Like the original amp, the channel knobs are interactive, so you can adjust the volume of the other channel to subtly tweak the tone and tightness on the one you're using. There's great touch sensitivity here, too, with the feeling you're plugged straight into an amp, rather than a pedal, especially so if you roll back the Supply knob for some natural compression.

Verdict

The fact that it took the combined talents of Adrian Thorpe and Lazy J's Jesse Hoff several years to create The J suggests that it was always going to be something very special – and it does not disappoint. A vintage tweed Deluxe or the Lazy J J 20 is beyond the wallet of many guitarists, but The J can give you that essential flavour with your own amp. Instantly familiar classic tones on demand. G

LAZY J X THORPYFX THE J

PRICE: £329
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Amp emulation pedal
FEATURES: True bypass, 2x channels
CONTROLS: Output, Response, Supply, Tone, Normal, Bright, X/Y switch, Channel footswitch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 50mA
DIMENSIONS: 100 (w) x 125 (d) x 53mm (h)

ThorpyFX
www.thorpyfx.com

Guitarist GOLD

10/10

PROS Compact size; solid build quality; tweed sound; two channels; quiet operation, Supply knob voltage variation; takes drive pedals well

CONS Nothing to report



4

THE RIVALS

Origin Effects has specialised in analogue amp emulation and its take on the Fender tweed sound is the Deluxe55 (£279, right). Like the Lazy J, it has a 12AY7/12AX7 preamp choice. It also has a Post EQ circuit, which is a filter placed after the amp recreation circuitry to aid compatibility with a variety of setups. The Universal Audio Woodrow '55 (£299) is a digitally modelled emulation of a mid-50s American tweed amp and includes speaker cabinet, mic and room tones if you're not plugging into an amp. Elsewhere, Wampler's Tweed '57 ($169) is a limited edition direct from the company.



PHOTO: WARMAUDIO.COM

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

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

New releases From £169

CONTACT **Various** WEB **See below**

It's that time of year again! While we eagerly await the changing of the clocks, there's a glimmer of light shining from the gear industry – as it once again converged for the NAMM Show at the end of January (just after we went to press with this issue). That can only mean one thing: we're about to experience a GAS leak. This month and next, we'll be bringing you the new-release highlights, starting with this lot as an appetizer. There's plenty to get excited about, with big-name acoustics, affordable ranges and a whole lot of effects, so stay tuned. **[SW]**



FAITH PJE LEGACY FG4
£1,565

If you know about Faith, you'll know that its PJE series leans into Patrick Eggle's pedigree as one of the leading acoustic-guitar builders in recent decades. Now, the PJE series gets a new addition in the Legacy FG4, which adopts Eggle's 'Earth' body shape. Pairing a solid, torrefied Sitka spruce top with solid African mahogany back and sides, the FG4 is a premium guitar made from premium ingredients. It continues with Indonesian ebony fingerboard, bridge and scratchplate, as well as ebony-buttoned Grover tuners and an unbleached bone nut and saddle. Electronics come courtesy of a Fishman Flex-T, incorporating an under-saddle pickup, internal condenser mic and preamp. Sounds expensive? Well, it's not cheap, but relatively speaking it looks well stocked at £1,565.
www.faithguitars.com



TAYLOR NEXT GENERATION FROM $2,499

The Grand Auditorium is Taylor's calling card, and this year sees it get an overhaul, starting in the 300, 400 and 800 ranges, including Standard and Builder's Edition models. The Next Generation GA models (from $2,499) receive a number of upgrades, including Taylor's new Action Control neck. This long-tenon design extends further into the body for increased sustain, but it comes with the benefit of being able to tweak the truss rod direct from the soundhole. Its V-Class bracing has undergone some revision, too, with Taylor's lightning-specific bracing points with scalloping to allow the top to move more freely. Finally, there are all-new electronics with the Claria under-saddle pickup and preamp system, which offers tone and mid-contour controls for the easy dialling in of tones.
www.taylorguitars.com



PRS CORE, S2 & SE UPDATES
£VARIOUS

After a relentless 2025 release schedule for its 40th anniversary, we'd forgive Maryland's finest for taking a bit of time off. Instead, it's straight back to it. First up is the addition of the DGT Semi-Hollow to the US-made Core line (from £4,420, above), which maintains the 22-jumbo-fret/635mm (25-inch) scale length fingerboard, signature DGT neck profile and DGT pickups of David Grissom's Private Stock model. Next, the S2 Vela gets a spring in its step with the PRS Patented Tremolo-equipped Vela HHT (from £1,789). Finally, the SE line-up sees some subtle upgrades courtesy of PRS' 'Wing Button' tuner design, which PRS says is a tonal – as well as aesthetic – improvement due to the tuner button's lighter weight. A further upgrade is that the SE range will also feature sloped pickup rings. Slick.
www.prsguitars.com



EARTHQUAKER DEVICES ZEQD-PRE £399

"We love it when brands come together," or whatever the A-Team said. Here, effects bizarre-o EarthQuaker Devices has joined forces with boutique ampster Dr Z to create the ZEQD-Pre. The valve-driven preamp pedal centres around an EF86 preamp valve and offers three-band EQ, a switchable boost and an all-analogue speaker-emulated DI output over XLR, the idea being that it can sit at the end of your signal chain to impart valve tonality before hitting a digital modeller. "It's starting to bother me that there is a whole generation of kids that have never plugged a guitar into a tube amplifier," says EarthQuaker's Jamie Stillman. "I hope a pedal like this could be a turning point for players and make them realise there is something special about analogue technology that they've been missing."
www.earthquakerdevices.com



This Telecaster and Stratocaster are just two guitars among the eight in Squier's affordable Sonic series that are seeing updates for 2026

SQUIER SONIC SERIES UPDATES **£189.99 EACH**

Remember the Squier Bullet? Well, three years ago Fender/Squier revamped its affordable line-up and gave it the Sonic moniker. 2026 brings another raft of changes as it unveils eight new tweaked guitars in the Sonic range. There's the meat and potatoes Sonic Stratocaster featuring three single coils and a vibrato (above), the bridge humbucker-equipped Stratocaster HSS, hardtail Stratocaster HT, and hardtail single-pickup Stratocaster HT H. In addition, you'll find a Sonic Telecaster (above), Esquire H and Mustang, plus the dual-humbucker Mustang HH. The most you'll pay for one is £189.99, and the new additions will be available this summer.

www.fender.com



BOSS GX-1 **£225**

With so much competition at the higher end of the modelling world, the 'real world' sometimes gets overlooked. Not so in the case of Boss, whose big news to kick off the year is the GX-1. This affordable modeller hosts 23 amps and 140 effects, with each preset allowing you to use up to eight 'blocks' to build your sound. There's an expression pedal for foot-manipulated effects, and around the back we get simple connectivity with input, L/R outputs, a footswitch socket and a USB C interface. Boss has also launched a free editor for making tweaks via your phone over Bluetooth or USB connection to a desktop computer. It's out now and we'll be taking a look soon.

www.boss.info

ALSO OUT NOW...

BLACKSTAR TV-10 & ID:X FLOOR FROM £169

Almost 20 years on from Blackstar's inception, the company's product range has expanded from all-valve amps to a wide-ranging catalogue incorporating digital modelling, software and audio interfaces. This year, for the traditionalists, there are additions to the TV-10 range of valve amps. The TV-10 is a Class A single-ended design featuring clean and drive voices, and comes in two flavours, both at £499: TV-10AH (6L6 power stage, below) and TV-10BH (EL34 power stage). For the more contemporary-minded, the ID:X Floor releases place the digital-meets-analogue familiarity of its ID:X series amps in a floor unit, with three to choose from: Floor One (£169) delivers 12 component-level-modelled guitar and bass amps, plus pre-FX, modulation, delays and reverbs in a compact unit; the Floor Two (£219) adds an expression pedal; and the Floor Three (£279, below) has all of the above, more comprehensive switching and MIDI capability.

www.blackstaramps.com





PJD ORIGIN SERIES CAREY APPRENTICE & ST JOHN APPRENTICE £499 EACH

PJD's ascent continues for 2026 with a new line-up based on the existing single-pickup Apprentice models. The PJD Origin Series Apprentice sees the one-pickup theme continue, but this time it brings the PJD design ethos to a lower price point than ever. First out of the gate are the single-cut-shaped Carey and offset St John models (both £499). Aside from their body shapes, spec-wise, they're identical, with open-grain finishes, Indonesian mahogany bodies, maple necks and Indian rosewood fingerboards on the final production models. Both have a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length and come equipped with an Alnico V humbucker, a single volume and single tone control.

www.pjdguitars.com



THE LINEUP

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: Jussi Reijonen

Album: Sayr: Salt | Thirst (Unmusic)



Jussi Reijonen's *Sayr: Salt | Thirst* album is part of a series of releases, including *Sayr: Kaiho – Live In Helsinki*, that focuses on the Arabic music concept of 'sayr' or 'motion'
www.jussireijonen.com

There's something wonderfully enchanting about the latest studio album from Finnish musician Jussi Reijonen. After spending the last two decades experimenting with the Middle Eastern flavours of the oud, he's come back to his steel-string acoustic – which he likens to a wise old friend for deep conversations over a cup of coffee. The 40-minute recording comprises just two tracks, which feel incredibly intimate and in the moment, almost placing the listener in a flickering candlelit cabin right next to the player himself. With its genre-defying mishmash of Western folk and Arabic dissonance, it's the kind of music that will leave you transfixed for hours on end.

Coming Home

For Jussi, these latest recordings felt like coming full circle – and in more ways than one. "I recorded this album in my home studio in Helsinki after 16 years away. I can definitely hear reflections of Finnish nature in its use of space and silence," he says of the guitar used on this album, "and even abstractions of folk instruments like the kantele – as well traces of other places I've lived in Jordan, Tanzania, Oman and Lebanon. Something in this old instrument awakened all these memory references to places, people and sounds from my journey. It completely changed my approach to playing fingerstyle. I'd never played quite like that, somehow refracting sonic memories of other string instruments. The flamenco-esque pulgar techniques are a good example since they sound more like an oud or sintir."

Old Friends

The vintage instrument he speaks of is a late-1940s Gibson LG-2 steel-string acoustic that was gifted to him by a former student. "It was her grandfather's guitar – this gorgeous and resonant old Gibson acoustic," Jussi explains. "She left to study abroad and I ended up being offered the guitar because her family wanted it to go to a good home where it would actually be played. So I became its new guardian. I still can't believe her generosity. The serial number is too worn to tell the exact year. Something in its resonance seems to pull different musical ideas out of thin air... it's like speaking to a wise storyteller or elder."

Arabian Nights

Though he grew up loving rock music, it was musicians like Paco de Lucía and Camarón de la Isla who turned Jussi on to flamenco, which paved the way to more worldly sounds. "Their music can convey such intense, vivid moods and colours in terms of expression, especially with Arabic-influenced melodies in the mix," continues Jussi. "When I lived in Amman, Beirut and Muscat, Arabic melodies and rhythms were everywhere in my environment. I will never forget the warm feeling of hearing Fairuz or Umm Kulthum through distorting transistor radios on the streets.

"Arabic music deeply resonates with me," he adds. "Pulling on this thread led me to buy my first oud in Morocco in 2003 and study the modal system of Arabic maqamat."



Jussi's music is infused with influences from the music of various Middle Eastern countries in which he has lived

PHOTO BY VILLE TANTTU

Heat Of The Moment

As Jussi goes on to explain, the music was improvised live in one take as the tape kept on rolling. In that sense, it's as honest as a recording can get. "I wanted to keep this as raw and intimate as possible and retain its untouched form," he admits. "It's almost an honesty manifesto in this era of heavy editing, AI, Photoshop and Instagram filters. There are no edits on the album except for the removal of one sneeze, and even the silences between the different arcs of music were left exactly as they happened. The album was mixed and mastered by Luis Bacqué who was surgically careful in treating the music so it wouldn't lose its raw immediacy and live feel." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Thirst*
For fans of: Paco de Lucía, Omar Khorshid, Lenny Breau

PAPERBACK WRITER

How the poetry of TS Eliot informed a lot of the music heard on *Sayr: Salt | Thirst*

It was a handful of lines from *Burnt Norton*, the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, that provided a lot of the inspirational framework behind Jussi's latest compositions. "I was creating music that was minimalistic," says Jussi. "Eliot's writing about the still point and the dance, like sound and silence, absence and presence – it's all counterpoint. The paragraph about the still point of the turning world – 'neither flesh nor fleshless; neither from nor towards' – is what resonated with me at a particularly introspective time of my life."

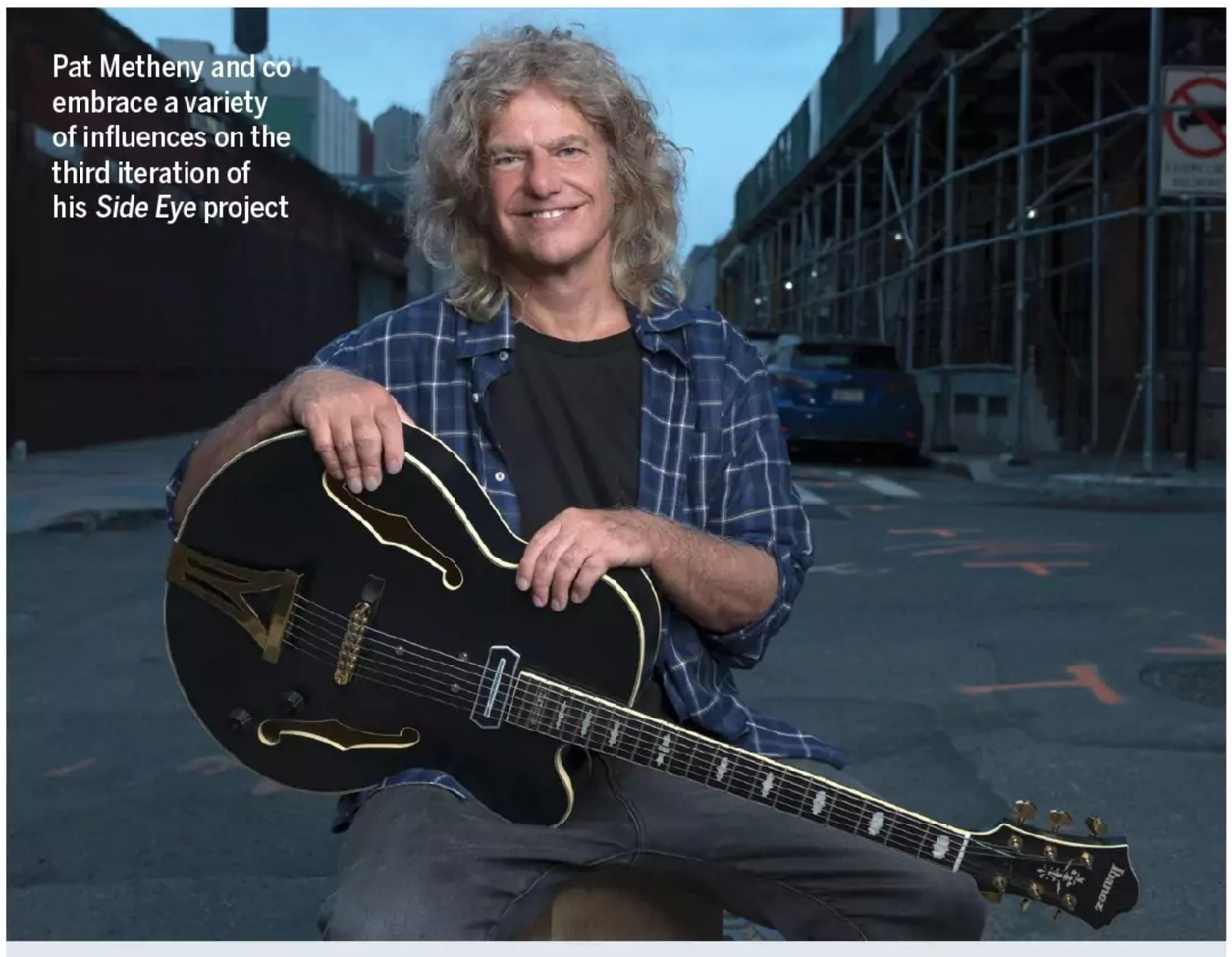
"Something in this old instrument awakened all these memory references... It completely changed my approach to playing fingerstyle"

PHOTO BY VILLE TANTTU

THE LINEUP

Albums

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



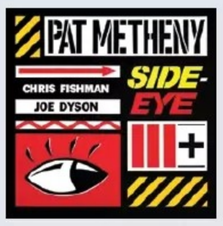
Pat Metheny and co embrace a variety of influences on the third iteration of his *Side Eye* project

PHOTO BY JIMMY KATZ

Pat Metheny
Side Eye III

Uniquity Music (available 27 February)

Guitarist CHOICE



Emerging jazz talents join the master on magical form

If you haven't been following it so far, Pat Metheney's *Side Eye* project is an interesting concept. The now three-strong series of *Side Eye* albums is intended to provide a platform for emerging young jazz talents who join, each in their turn, a malleable band line-up that changes with each *Side Eye* record.

Metheny is, of course, the lodestone of the whole thing and a constant throughout – bringing his cerebral yet beautiful and wide-ranging presence on guitar to exciting ensemble performances that include re-workings of milestone compositions from earlier in Metheny's career, jazz standards turned on their head and more. This latest foray in the series offers an unfolding, enriching journey through a sun-lit landscape of sound that somehow embraces, harmoniously, influences as disparate as gospel, electronica, bebop, blues and contemporary composers. Witness the elegant tension and carpet-like unrolling of long melodic structures in *Risk And Reward*, mixed with surprisingly Benson-like lines in places to add a subtly bluesy inflection here and there. Chris Fishman on keys and Joe Dyson on drums flow with Metheney's effortless progress through this interesting terrain, complete with fusion-esque synth interludes. The more anthemic *Make A New World* brings choral voices into the mix opening up the canvas hugely and evoking jazz-soul tracks such as *Black Gold Of The Sun* by Rotary Connection. Fresh in spirit yet powerfully poised and accomplished, this is an album to savour when you have time to drink it all in like fine wine. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Make A New World*
For fans of: John Scofield, Herbie Hancock, Roy Ayers, George Benson

Spencer Mackenzie
Empty Chairs

Gypsy Soul Records (available 20 February)



Power-packed blues rock from one of Canada's finest

Canadian-born Spencer Mackenzie is no stranger to accolades for his incendiary blues-rock performances, having won a Maple Blues Award and a nomination from Canada's JUNO awards, too. If Spencer is at all renowned for his high energy on the live stage, then we're pleased to report that something of his reserve of sheer six-string firepower has transferred to the new album, *Empty Chairs*. It's a pretty relentless affair, with intensely powerful tracks like *Trip* and *Don't Know Where I'm Going* displaying artful composition and slick guitar playing. Things cool down temporarily for the soulful, brooding *Til I Get To You*, but it's straight back to full throttle with the following track, *Frozen Hearts*. If blazing guitar with no holds barred blues-rock is your kind of thing, then this album should definitely become part of your life. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Shoot Me Down*
For fans of: Walter Trout, Joe Bonamassa

Francis Rossi
The Accidental

earMUSIC (available now)



Quo motormouth brings the melodies

Elsewhere in this issue (see page 54), Francis Rossi protests that *The Accidental* was a flash of dumb luck that he didn't even want to record. In fact, this excellent solo album – the Status Quo man's first slug of new material since 2019's *We Talk Too Much* – sounds energised and ambitious, the work of a veteran refusing to be preserved in aspic. A decade since the death of Quo wingman Rick Parfitt, Rossi splits guitar duties with Hiran Ilangantileke, and while the bones of songs such as *Go Man Go* and *Be My Love* ride on that familiar piston-pump right-hand rhythm, his melodic instincts always keep things fresh, spicing singalongs like *Oh So Good* with just a speck of sadness and dropping *The Weight*-style harmonies on the brass-bolstered *Dead Of Night*. Here's to plenty more happy accidents. **[HY]**

Standout track: *Go Man Go*
For fans of: Status Quo, Dr Feelgood, ZZ Top



Robben Ford's latest album features a mix of vocal and instrumental tracks

PHOTO BY ROB BLACKHAM

Robben Ford
Two Shades Of Blue

Provogue Records (available 27 March)

Guitarist CHOICE



Guitar mastery from iconic bluesman

Originally conceived as a tribute to the late Jeff Beck, *Two Shades Of Blue* takes the form of an even mix of vocal and instrumental tracks. To serve his mission, Robben went out and bought a Strat and commissioned TheGigRig's Daniel Steinhardt to build him a pedalboard that might capture some of Beck's tone. The other driving force was via Robben's online teaching channel, The Guitar Dojo, which reinvigorated his desire to write instrumental music. "I wanted to do something different, set myself a challenge," he tells us. Checking into London's Eastcote Studios with a set of hand-picked musicians, Robben kicks up the dust with tracks such as Lennon's *Jealous Guy* and the album's first single, *Make My Own Weather*. The instrumentals are, as you'd expect, an exercise in funky, jazz-influenced artistry with tracks including *The Light Fandango* leading the charge. Excellent! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Black Night*
For fans of: Larry Carlton, Robert Cray

Bill Frisell
In My Dreams

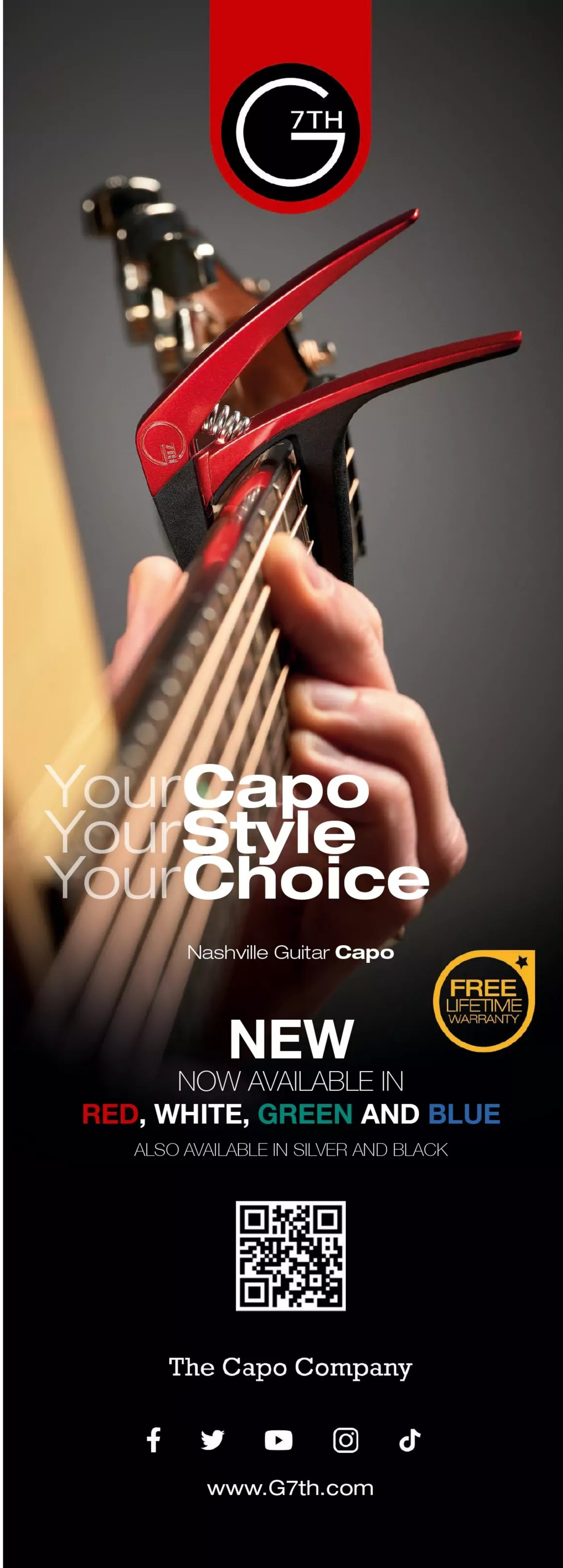
Blue Note (available 27 February)



Leftfield jazzer bewitches

Released to coincide with his 75th birthday celebrations, this latest record from frequent John Zorn collaborator and Grammy-winning guitarist Bill Frisell is veiled in ethereal charm. For the sessions, the jazz legend assembled a sextet out of some old friends and re-examined a handful of jazz and Americana classics, as well as a few of his own songs from the past. The results are undeniably spellbinding thanks to the free-flowing conversation between the guitars and string section, at times moving away from more traditional in favour of mystifying meditations that delve deep into the avant-garde. Highlights include a dazzling rendition of 1967 Duke Ellington track *Isfahan*, as well as older originals such as *When We Go*, *Again* and *Small Hands* – all of which reworked and reinterpreted to the point where they are unrecognisable from their existing forms. A thrilling display of creative ingenuity. **[AS]**

Standout track: *In My Dreams*
For fans of: Pat Metheny, John Scofield, Jim Hall



THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

On his latest record, *A Tribute To LJK*, **Eric Gales** is reminding us exactly why he's one of the most potent forces in modern blues

Artist: Eric Gales

Album: A Tribute To LJK (Provogue)



Eric Gales' latest album is a 10-track homage to his late brother Manuel Gales (below), also known as Little Jimmy King



PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

Little Jimmy King – a left-handed player, like his brother – fronted the Memphis Soul Survivors and had also toured with Albert King

Eric Gales no longer stands as the underdog threatening to take the world by storm. Why? Because he's already done it and is now enjoying recognition with Grammy nominations and sold-out performances across the globe. But Eric is keen to acknowledge that it might have been a different story had his older sibling not shown him the musical ropes from an early age. Eric's latest album, *A Tribute To LJK*, acts as a doff of the cap to his brother.

The record starts with a familiar voice saying, "All hail, a tribute to our brother Manuel Gales, also known as Little Jimmy King," followed by 47 minutes of the most life-affirming blues. As the leader of the Memphis Soul Survivors, Little Jimmy King enjoyed a successful career in blues, having cut his own records with Stevie Ray Vaughan's rhythm section, performed in Albert King's band and toured with Buddy Guy, until Manuel's life was tragically cut short by a heart attack at the age of 37 in 2002.

A Tribute To LJK was co-produced by Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith, and is the sound of Eric reimagining his sibling's music and celebrating his memory through the medium of electrifying noise. A fitting tribute.

What was the vibe like in the studio while you were cutting this record?

"Pretty straightforward. Just me plugging my Magneto guitar into my DV Mark amp, as well as one of Joe's Dumbles. That was the bulk of the tone. I used one of Joe's Les Pauls for a solo or two, maybe a rhythm here or there. It was my normal pedalboard running in front, nothing had changed. There's no sense in messing with things when they're working fine. So that's what we did. We just kept the tape rolling."

Was it strange plugging into a Dumble amp that didn't even belong to you?

"It worked well with my DV Mark. It was a suggestion from Joe that he first floated when we did the *Crown* record; it's good to have that sonic contrast. I can't remember which Dumble it was exactly, but we dialled in a tone, it sounded great and we got busy. There was no extravagant story behind it. We switched it on, turned some knobs, heard a good sound and started tracking."

Why do you think Alexander Dumble's amps are so highly revered?

"To be honest, I don't know. There's a bit of a taboo fascination with them. Obviously, they are highly respected and deeply admired for the sound they make, but I don't see the big draw factor. Sure, they sound great, but I've heard other amps that sound great. I'm very honoured and privileged to have plugged into one a few times, but it wasn't like a 'heavens opened up' sort of moment. I'm not speaking bad about them, I'm just saying there's nothing the Dumbles did for me that other amps hadn't done before, you know? I was just going off a suggestion and I trusted Joe enough to go with it. He has plenty of Dumbles and runs through them pretty rigorously. I had no reason to go against it. If it was the only amp that was there and my DV Mark wasn't around, I'm sure I would have been fine.

"I have some really nice amps, like my Two-Rock, and the Dumble did nothing less than that. If it wasn't as good, then I wouldn't have used it on the record. I remember it had great sustain and delivered every single nuance I put through it. At the same time, my DV Mark was doing the same thing. Both amps were standing tall beside each other, doing a great job in giving me what I needed to accomplish this record. That's all I can ask for."

"I decided to keep things traditional. This record was a homage to my brother, who was more old-school"



Your sound lives on the funkier side of blues. You have a cleaner and more spanky tone than most of your contemporaries.

"That's what I prefer. I am known as a blues-rock player, but I am probably less rock than other people. It all depends on the style of the song and the feel or vibe that I'm going for. I'm not a typical I-IV-V slow-blues kinda guy. There are different variants in what I do. I like a crystal-clean tone for a lot of the music I write, especially if it's more chordal. In those situations, I'm not looking for any break-up. When I need a little more grit, I'll use my MXR Raw Dawg pedal or whatever other drive I have lying around to get the sound I'm looking for."

You've been very loyal to the Mojo Hand Colossus fuzz over the years.

"It's my go-to because of its warm and milky tone. There are so many boutique pedals I haven't even had the opportunity to plug into yet. I'm not one of those guitar players who sits there testing them all out. If one thing is working well, then I'm fine with that. Opportunities for a big shoot-out are rare, so I have to apologise to all the people who give me pedals. I will definitely try them out at some point. The Mojo Hand is just what I've been going with.

"The last one that impressed me was the Pedal Pawn Fuzz from the UK. It sounded really, really good. They make some nice stuff. A few weeks ago I was gifted a handmade pedal and the builder told me the schematics were exactly like Eric Johnson's fuzz. He even wrote 'LJK' on it, which made it awesome and memorable. I haven't plugged into it yet, but I'm sure it'll sound amazing because everybody knows I'm a huge Eric Johnson fan. I hope to be blown away by how beautiful it sounds."

Your current wah of choice is a Buddy Guy Cry Baby. What do you like about the sound of that one?

"I was running a different wah and having some issues. Then Buddy Guy's tech Connor [Korte] happened to have a spare one fresh out of the box, so I put it on the 'board and it never left. All of the ones I've used come from the Jim Dunlop company and this one just happens to be the one I stick with. If it ain't broke, there ain't no need to switch it out. I didn't use my Whammy because it didn't call for it. I guess there could have been room, but I decided to keep things traditional – if it's even safe for me to use that word because I don't consider myself that traditional. This record was a homage to my brother, who was more old-school."

Buddy appears on the final track of your album, titled *Somebody*. That must have meant a lot to you because not only is he blues royalty, but he's a friend and also knew your brother.

"When I heard what he played on that track, I was blown away. He knocked it right out of the park. I sent a reference track over with the general direction I was going for and he gave me exactly what I was looking for. When I pressed play, I heard the work of a legend. He made the track what it was. It would not have sounded as good without him. My brother did a miraculous job on the original version and Buddy was the perfect person to help me recreate that kind of vibe all these years later."

A Tribute to LJK features Eric Gales' Magneto Sonnet RawDawg model, as well as a special '54 Goldtop belonging to co-producer Joe Bonamassa. Gales has also recently added a Kiesel signature model to his collection

PHOTO BY KATRENA WIZE



PHOTO BY JIM ARBOGAST

When it comes to gear, Eric Gales is resolute on being his own man: "Nobody has forced their exclusivity on me. I don't like being told what to play, especially if my heart is telling me to use something else"

Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram cited your brother as a big hero of his, and you invited him to play on *Rockin Horse Ride*.

"That was intentionally done; I wanted to incorporate people who had a connection to my brother. I wanted to nod to the older generation and the younger generation, bringing it all full circle in memory of my brother. I wanted to acknowledge the impact that he had on the blues world and try to keep some of that alive. Through Kingfish, his music still lives. Young people are taking notice of this style of music that was around way before their time. We can leave it in the hands of Kingfish and know that everything will be taken care of well."

"I wanted to [bring in] people who had a connection to my brother... to acknowledge the impact he had on the blues world and to keep some of that alive"

Which Magneto guitar do you record with the most?

"It's my Magneto Sonnet RawDawg. The neck has a flat radius, so it feels great in my hands. It's something I can play all day long and the tone is just immaculate. The owner Christian [Hatstatt] is an amazing guy who has always been in my corner, even at times when a lot of people weren't. I have great relationships with other companies who understand that I might play different guitars for different things. Nobody has forced their exclusivity on me. I don't like being told what to play, especially if my heart is telling me to use something else. Magneto have always understood that and been very understanding. They're a great company to work with.

"I also have a new signature model through Kiesel that comes with all the bells and whistles in this lovely gold finish. It turned out really dope, man."

You used one of Joe's vintage Les Pauls, a 1954 Goldtop, on the album. How different was that for you?

"That guitar sounded great. I've never said I don't like humbuckers or Les Pauls, SGs, Flying Vs, Explorers, Firebirds, Telecasters, Jazzmasters, Mustangs, 335s or whatever. They're just not the normal go-to for me. Joe said, 'Check this out,' and had the tone dialled in, so that's what I used on my solo for *Don't Wanna Go Home*, as did Joe. It worked great for that song. It just so happened to be a quarter-of-a-million-dollar guitar that got the job done. Could a guitar worth 200 bucks have also been good enough? I think so. Equipment plays a part in things, but I've always been a die-hard advocate of 'it's all in the hands of the player'. That's what ultimately determines what you hear coming out of any instrument. So much depends on the human being."

Was it scary holding a quarter-of-a-million-dollar instrument that doesn't belong to you?

"No, not at all [laughs]. I wasn't afraid."

How different did it make you play, though?

"I find using humbuckers instead of the usual single coils can shift where I'm coming from, mentally. The approach, feel and tone can end up a little different. But at the end of the day, it's all down to whatever comes out of my mind. That's what determines what comes out. I'm not uncomfortable playing anything, unless there's an outrageous setup that prevents me from doing what I usually do – things like extremely high action or action that's too low to get a good sound. I like my action as low as I can get it without buzz. Normally, it only takes me a few minutes to get myself acclimated to any instrument."



PHOTO BY KATRENA WIZE

"This record gave me the avenue to dive into different areas of my brother's career. Then I chose to give these songs a new vision"

You, Joe and Josh Smith have such distinct voices on the guitar. It's very easy to tell who is playing on *It Takes A Whole Lotta Money* – you might be more twangy, Joe might be more thick-sounding and Josh has more of a country-fusion feel.

"Yeah, Josh definitely fiddles around in that world. On that track, it was all intentional. You've got three players who want to sound different to each other. I've heard that some people struggle with hearing the differences between me and Joe. There's a lot of similarity at times, maybe in how we do runs or riff. Both of us are highly influenced by Eric Johnson, so that's always going to seep through at points. But I think on this record, the distinction of who's who is made pretty clearly, especially with Josh because he chose to set himself apart purposefully. He went in a different direction to add something completely new. That guy can adjust, shift and shape into any kind of style. He always makes the right decisions."

What have you learned about the art of recording guitars since working with Joe and Josh?

"Honestly, I don't get too involved. I'm in a session right now and my engineer toys around with the mics and placements. I always have to ask him what we're using. Right now, he's telling me that it's some new Roswell Cab Mic that we are trying out. I leave that whole world to the experts: I sit in the control room listening in, saying what sounds best to my ears. I don't really have much desire to change anything there. I don't have the time to learn about this stuff, either. I hear things in my head and always try to get it as close as possible. That's the goal for me. How it gets done is semantic, but working with good engineers and assistant engineers definitely makes the process a lot easier. I don't even know what my mic preference is. If I'm by myself, I'll just pick something up, put it in front of a speaker and take it from there."

Your guitars come with the five-way pickup selector that's typical for an S-style design. Which positions do you use the most?

"I use them all. It's quite a subconscious choice, going back and forth between the different tones. It's so random for me. It's all done in the moment in real-time. If I have the gas pressed pretty hard, I might be on the back pickup because of the high energy and intensity. If I want something warm, I might be on the front. If I want a Stevie Ray sort of tone, I'll go for the front two pickups, and if I want country and western it might be the back two pickups. It just depends on what I hear in my head. Using your volume control is also an art form. You can go from full-on to something way cleaner without even thinking of your pedals or amp channels, you just roll that knob down and end up with a completely different kind of sound."

Do you mess with the tone knob much?

"Not much, really. The only times I do, is if I'm trying to do some jazz stuff or emulate a warm, milky fuzz tone with a distortion or overdrive pedal that isn't a fuzz."

So what do you think Manuel would say if he heard this record?

"I think he'd say, 'Great fucking job, little bro!' I really do. All of the songs came out really well. I love the ride-out solo in *You Shouldn't Have Left Me* because it sounds really intense with this strong blues shuffle that had horns and everything. I like the flower power feel to *Blues Been Too Good To Me*. We had a lot of fun on that track. I was really happy with *Somebody*, which I played a PRS parlour acoustic on. *Baby Baby* came out great. It's hard to single out one song that I would leave off the album, to be honest. This record gave me the avenue to dive into many different areas of my brother's career. Then I chose to give these songs a new vision through my own eyes." **[AS]**

As well as producers Josh Smith and Joe Bonamassa, *A Tribute To LJK* features appearances from Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram and Buddy Guy



Eric Gales' new album, *A Tribute To LJK*, is available now via Provogue

www.ericgales.com

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE



Let's Stay Together

Neville Marten watches a music legend and is reminded how a band of long-standing members beats a group of thrown-together super musos

I've never been a fan of big jam sessions, especially with super-technical players. While they no doubt include incredible displays of dexterity and cleverness, they usually leave me wanting, since all the players can really do is show off. It's thrilling for a minute or two but quickly becomes boring. Put those same virtuosi in their own bands, though, and it's a different story.

So my preference has always been for groups, be they self-contained rock, pop, blues and jazz outfits, or solo artists who create a cohesive sound using a well-established 'family' of players. I've seen James Taylor many times and his 'A-plus' line-up has remained stable for years – Michael Landau, Steve Gadd and Jimmy Johnson anyone?

> "My preference has always been for groups or solo artists who create a cohesive sound using a well-established 'family' of players"

Like JT, when other superstars assemble their bands they go for the top musos available. And if they maintain a long-term band due to great pay, real community spirit and, of course, mutual respect – as we see with Taylor, Clapton, McCartney or Elton John, for instance – these 'family member' musicians will be far less prone to jumping ship. It could be said that these line-ups are the Arsenals, Bayern Munichs and Paris Saint-Germains of the music world: namely, tight, cohesive units where each player instinctively knows what the next is doing and responds accordingly. It makes for a great team – or indeed a great band.

Speaking of which, I recently watched an Elton John concert on Sky Arts. Recorded live in Las Vegas in 2012, it was a huge affair with strings, horns, percussion – the whole shooting match. However, at the core was his long-time live and recording band. Guitarist Davey Johnstone was musical director, with original members Nigel Olsson (drums) and Ray Cooper (percussion) also present. Sadly, Elton's powerhouse bassist Dee Murray had died two decades earlier, but Bob Birch (who passed away later that year) did a fine job in his stead. Let's also not forget what a brilliant pianist Elton is. He's a world-class musician and was clearly driving this fine ensemble from behind his massive Yamaha grand.

The concert was a typically fantastical affair. But it soon became clear that this was primarily due to the beating heart at the centre of it all: a fantastic, united, musically aware, technically able (but never overtly flash) rock 'n' roll five-piece. So sticking together really does work – even 'new boy' Ronnie Wood has officially been with The Stones for 50 years this year!

Farewell, Chris Rea

The world said goodbye to Chris Rea in December (see page 48 for our obituary). Mark Knopfler paid tribute: "He was a humble, engaging and genuine artist, dedicated to the craft of writing, recording and performing his songs, nothing more or less." And who can't concur with all of that?

I interviewed Chris a couple of times for *Guitarist* and he was always kind and humble. We talked over eggs and bacon in a cafe round the corner from his London office, and he used the transcript of our interview as the backdrop to his *Auberge* tour brochure. I even wrote, asking if I could be considered as rhythm guitarist on the tour. He kindly replied that Robert Ahwai had already got the gig (no competition there, then!).

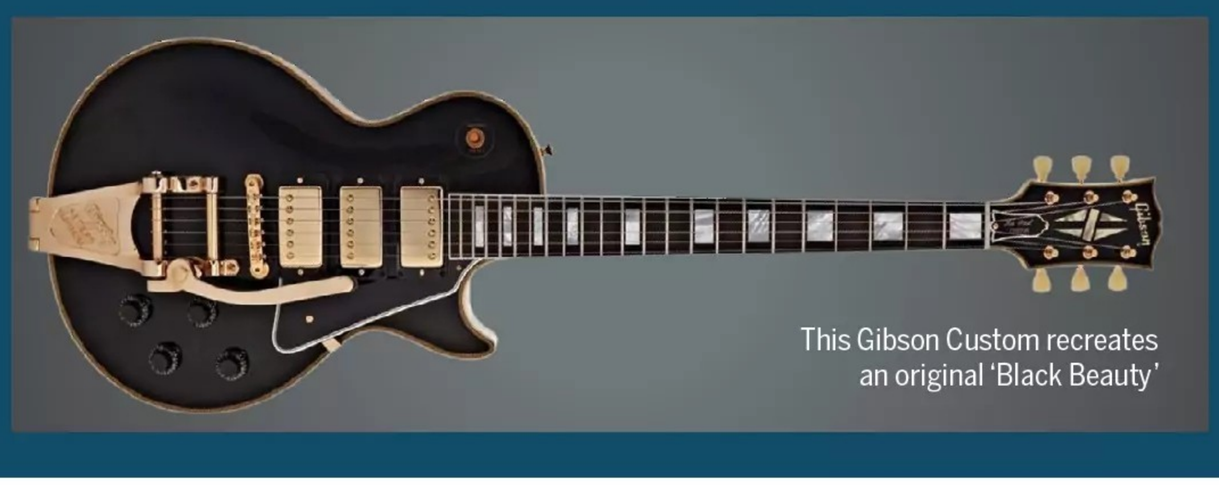
When I told him what a rubbish slide guitarist I was, he demonstrated how a strong vibrato makes the note sound in tune, since the ear focuses on the intended target note in the middle. He generously let me play his beautiful 1962 Strat 'Pinky' with the map of his favourite island, Formentera, on it, too (which inspired the track *On The Beach*). I loved Chris's songs, his playing and, of course, that fabulous gravelly voice. Another one is gone. What a shame. See you next month. G

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Customs Union

What? Gibson Custom 1957 Les Paul Custom Reissue 3-Pickup VOS, Ebony
Where seen? gear4music.com **Price?** £6,499

Elton John gave Davey Johnstone his own (bought as a house ornament!) gorgeous three-pickup Les Paul Custom when Davey's guitars were stolen. Built from all mahogany (no maple cap), this example features pearl block inlays on the ebony fingerboard and headstock, multiple binding all round, and comes fitted with triple Gibson Custombuckers, gold played hardware and tune-o-matic bridge with stop bar tailpiece. While a genuine Custom Shop Gibbo is, of course, a pricey guitar, a brilliant alternative (I spotted one on Reverb for around £1,200) is the Epiphone Joe Bonamassa take on the same guitar. There are even cheaper two-pickup Epi Customs, too, should you not like the middle humbucker. Grab any of these cool guitars and your Saturday night will definitely be all right!



This Gibson Custom recreates an original 'Black Beauty'

PHOTO: GEAR4MUSIC.COM



Back To Basics

Alex Bishop attempts to learn more about the tone-producing role of an acoustic guitar's back

Without doubt, one of the most enjoyable aspects of building an acoustic guitar is the shaping of the guitar's internal braces. Whether it's the scalloping of the ends, the profiling of each brace, or the exact positioning of the struts, every maker has their own signature style, which I believe greatly contributes to the sound of the guitar.

When it comes to tonal analysis, most of the focus tends to be on the guitar top (the 'soundboard') and its delicate balance between supporting the pull of the strings and letting the instrument vibrate to its full sonic potential. But what considerations should we makers give to the back of the instrument?

In contrast to its X-braced partner, typical acoustic guitar backs are ladder braced, with four evenly spaced softwood braces running perpendicular to the wood grain. This arrangement is perhaps the most obvious, given that wood already has plenty of strength along its grain but will easily flex when stressed laterally. Without any obvious forces in play on the back, it would be easy to move on and accept there is nothing more to see here. However, perhaps it's possible that the backs of acoustic guitars might just contain the secret sauce when it comes to chasing the Holy Grail of guitar tone?

Giving Back

In a world where most off-the-peg guitars are probably a little bit overbuilt to survive the rigours of life on the road, some small-shop builders (including myself) subscribe to the idea of an 'active back'. This is where the back of the instrument is built more lightly – perhaps with less reinforcement, a thinner plate or more severe profiling of the braces – to encourage more vibrational potential. Roughly speaking, more vibrating means more sound, so I'm a big fan of this approach because one of my goals when it comes to lutherie is to hear the influence of the wood choices. By making the back an active participant in the production of sound, the overall tone of the instrument is more obviously shaped by the choice of tonewoods.

My preferred way to achieve this is by taking the backplate's thickness down as far as I dare to. Really, the main consideration is stability, and some woods deal with thinning down better than others. Common hardwoods such as mahogany, walnut and maple are all pretty stable, especially when compared with their brittle and crack-prone exotic counterparts such as cocobolo, rosewood and ziricote. However, bracing also plays a part; I prefer to scallop the ends of my braces more aggressively than most, which allows the back to flex more easily at the edges where the back meets the sides. Graduating the thickness of the back also helps for the same reason, keeping the mass in the middle where it's needed and allowing it to push the air more freely, like the springs around a trampoline.



Brace thyself! Alex places lateral support perpendicular to the wood grain to strengthen a pair of guitar backs

An equally valid approach would be to make the back (and sides) especially stiff. I think of this as the 'snare drum' approach, whereby the vibrations in the top are contained in the top as a result of a stiff back and sides constantly reflecting energy back into the top. Although there is less of a tonal influence from the back and sides wood here, this approach results in a more powerful, focused sound – great for consistency across multiple builds and putting greater importance on a well-voiced top.

As a guitar maker, it's easy to believe there is a 'perfect' sound, and it is helpful to have an idea in one's mind of what kind of sound you're striving for when building guitars. But the reality is there is more than one approach and, ultimately, neither the active-back nor the stiff-back philosophy is inherently right or wrong – they are simply different tools in the luthier's kit. What matters most is understanding what each structural choice brings to the instrument and how it aligns with the maker's tonal goals. For me, the back is far more than a closing panel. By paying closer attention to its thicknessing, bracing and material behaviour, we open up another powerful avenue for shaping the voice of the guitar. G

PHOTOS BY ALEX BISHOP

RAISING THE TONE



Tail Blazing

Rob Laing discovers how a whole wave of inspirational pedals owes a debt to EarthQuaker Device's Jamie Stillman and a happy accident

As founder of EarthQuaker Devices, Jamie Stillman hasn't just been at the forefront of the boutique effects boom, he's shaped its direction with a spirit for leftfield turns. None more so than with his trailblazing approach to reverb that manifested with the Afterneath. First released in 2014, with a few iterations since, it did more than change the scale of EarthQuaker's operations – based in Akron, Ohio, under Jamie and CEO (and wife) Julie Robbins – it inspired other makers to explore new realms of creativity with reverb pedals.

"My approach is hands-on, especially with the reverb side of things," Jamie tells us. "I know what I like – I like a giant, massive canyon and cathedral-style reverb with a lot of high-end content and reflections all over the place. That's what I personally like. But I also know that's not what everybody likes. So if I've got this idea for a reverb pedal, I start where I like and then I dial it back."

EarthQuaker's work with digital time-based effects allows for easier editing in the design process, but that doesn't mean it's a speedy process.

"I find that none of the reverb development is ever quick," Jamie says. "I usually spend six months off and on, sometimes a year. I'll take it around to a bunch of amps and a bunch of guitars and be like, 'We've really got to rein this in.' Then once you dial in that sound, a lot of times I'm looking to do something a little bit more experimental with it. So maybe it could be adding in octaves or adding in modulation. And then that's where I'll start to investigate."



EarthQuaker CEO Julie Robbins with her husband and company founder Jamie Stillman

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

But the Afterneath pedal was different: a delay-based reverb capable of delivering the huge soundscapes that Jamie loves as a designer and musician but with a twist or three. We're now used to seeing leftfield pedals like this from boutique and mainstream brands, but they simply weren't on the market before the Afterneath caused a huge stir upon its release.

Jamie says: "The Afterneath is an interesting one. When it came out, I don't believe there was any experimental reverb pedal category like there is today. I feel like it's the first. Quote me on that, I guess! But this is exactly how I describe it – it was kind of experimenting with reverb.

"We had this processor that I was using a lot for other pedals," he explains, "and I stumbled across what I think is the selling feature, the kind of repeating, almost multi-tap delay. But, really, it sounds like reverb with all these – for lack of a better term – 'pinging reflections' that come in and out. So I stumbled on it by accident. I changed something in the code, went and tested it and was like, 'Oh my God, this is not what I wanted to happen... but this is amazing.' And then I figured out how to exploit that a little bit further."

Rapid Expansion

The Afterneath remains a bit of an anomaly for an EarthQuaker Devices reverb, as Jamie explains: "This pedal actually came together pretty quickly, and I don't know if I've ever been more excited by a product in the development stage. Where it's like, I got it to this point and I'm not touching a thing. And I'm going to show it to people and see what they think. Everybody who got to play it was kind of mesmerised by it."

It quickly became a significant hit with players, especially in alternative post-rock circles. So much so, the company had to change the way it operated.

"We had to bring in eight employees – eight new employees on one day just to keep up with the production of it when it came out," Jamie says.

The Afterneath's legacy wasn't just one that concerned the company's scale (EarthQuaker now employs more than 30 people) but how Jamie moved forward with boldly ambient effects alongside EarthQuaker's overdrive and fuzz catalogue.

"It seemed like permission to do other really weird things," he reflects. "We had already done the Rainbow Machine, and it was really starting to catch on at that point when it came out, but the Afterneath kind of opened the door to doing other stuff, such as the Transmisser, Arpanoid and Data Corrupter, and eventually the Astral Destiny. Because up until that point, the more esoteric pedals did well for us, but it was always the 'bread and butter' pedals that brought in the money to keep the lights on and keep our employees paid.



PEDAL IMAGE COURTESY OF EARTHQUAKER DEVICES

"But I do feel like the Afterneath put us on the map for people to say, 'Okay, they can make experimental stuff that is really musical and useful.' You don't just have to be a weird noise musician to use them – they can find a place in traditional music, too"

As for the legacy of pedal builders impressing him on the reverb side of things these days, Jamie is full of praise for this era of experimentalists.

"I think the last year has been one of the best years for pedals. There have been some really interesting things around, such as the Kinotone pedals. I think they're gonna be huge at some point. But I just found them on Reverb – the Ribbons pedal is really cool. Old Blood Noise Endeavors put out a pedal called Bathing [Liminal Delay] that I love. And Chase Bliss's Lost + Found – that thing is pretty mindblowing, too. I watched videos on it and then I bought one."

Jamie Stillman stumbled across the Afterneath's 'pinging reflections' after he accidentally changed the code in the development of the pedal

> "The Afterneath put us on the map. You don't have to be a weird noise musician to use them – they can find a place in traditional music, too"

These pedals hone in on specific sonic realms for players to explore, and this is happening while do-it-all effects and amp modellers continue to grow and evolve. But there's still a healthy appetite for the simpler and "more manageable" devices, and Jamie has had an increasing sense of that recently.

"Speaking as a player and a judgmental person," he says, "everything has gotten so complicated. Last year it was like, 'Well, if it's not an iPad with a bunch of switches on it, I'm not interested.' I feel like everyone thought the next thing should be one thing that does it all for an extraordinary price tag. Of course, there's a market for that, but I don't think that's the answer to creativity. I think the less complications there are between you and actually creating art with it, the better." G

www.earthquakerdevices.com

THREE TO GET READY

Jamie on some EarthQuaker essentials



PHOTOS COURTESY OF EARTHQUAKERDEVICES.COM

Afterneath Enhanced Otherworldly Reverberator £229

"This current revision is a buffered bypass, so it'll tail, and it has expression control over the Drag, which then operates in a couple of modes. But it's a confusing thing to explain because it's like a change in pitch, but there's actually no pitch shifting happening in the audio path. It's the sound of the clock changing the processor, right? But we figured out what frequency ranges create notes out of it. So that's how it's changing."



Dispatch Master Digital Delay & Reverb £205

"The Dispatch Master is a mainstay for us. You can put the controls anywhere – it sounds good. It's been used on everything from chaotic noise to death metal to being a secret weapon in Nashville studios for pedal steel. It's a great platform for delay and reverb. And also, when it came out there was no option for a compact delay and reverb pedal. There was the Boss RB-3, but it was out of production."



Rainbow Machine Polyphonic Pitch Mesmerizer £245

"This is one of our most misunderstood pedals. A lot of people know it for what I like to call 'the magic pixie dust sound', but it can do a whole lot more. Part of the key is understanding what the controls are doing. The weird control is Secondary: it takes that primary output signal and feeds it back through. So you're getting something that is similar to an octave of that primary output, and a harmony of it at the same time."

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Altered Chords

Don't be too intimidated by these naming conventions, says **Richard Barrett** – we're simply moving notes out of the 'parent' scales

Recently, we've been exploring extended chords, and while we did touch on some altered chords, this is a fuller explanation with tips on how to avoid some common pitfalls with the naming conventions. That being said, it's important to remember that the names are only an attempt to describe/itemise the different sounds available to us. Altered chords aren't necessarily extended, but this can be the area that spawns the most intimidating names, some of which we'll attempt to demystify here.

Let's start by defining exactly what 'altered' means in this context, which is: moving a note within a chord out of the 'parent' scale. For example, a C augmented (usually written as 'aug') triad contains C-E-G# (Root-3rd-#5). The 5th has been raised (augmented) by a semitone, giving us a G#, which is not found in the C major scale – and is great for adding tension. It really is as simple as that, even though some of the names can seem a little daunting at first glance (see Example 5). G



PHOTO BY KPA/ARTHUR GRIMM/UNITED ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Joe Pass, who was certainly no stranger to altered chords, seen here laying down the harmony in a duet with indomitable Ella Fitzgerald

Example 1

You'll see the similarity to a regular C major chord, but that #5 (G#) on the third string takes it somewhere else – perhaps it can resolve to an F major, or maybe raise that G# another semitone to A at the 2nd fret, giving us C6? Altered chords are all about the context.

Example 2

Having raised the 5th in Example 1, we're lowering it in this C7(♭5). It's also a 7th chord, which adds a more jazzy feel. Take care to mute the fifth string and you can move this chord to any key. This would resolve well to C7 by raising that ♭5 on the second string a semitone.

Example 3

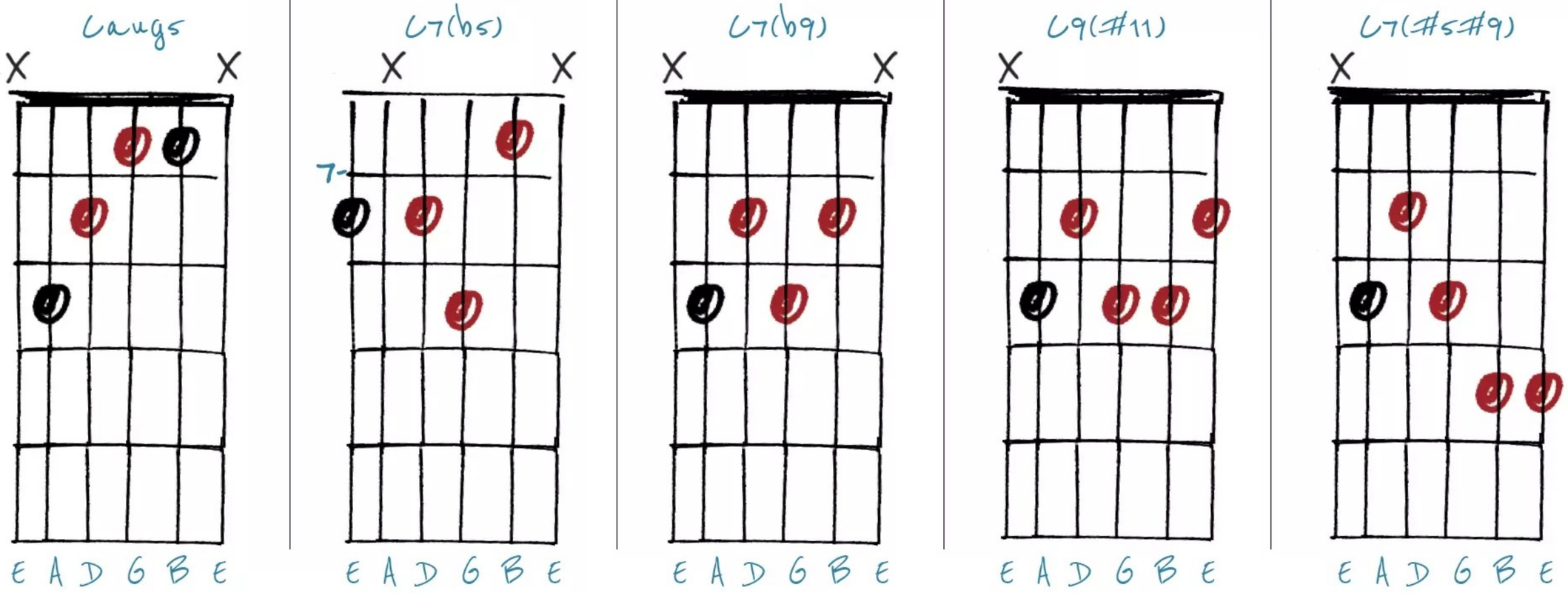
The same overall principles apply when looking to alter extended chords. This C7(♭9) is a classic jazz chord, with the ♭9 (D♭) appearing at the 2nd fret of the second string. Raise it a semitone to the 3rd fret and you'll find a D, giving us a nice resolution to a C9 chord.

Example 4

If we build further on the ideas in Example 3, we might make this dramatic C9 (#11) chord. The #11 itself (F#) is found at the 2nd fret of the first string. They're both F#/G♭, so why a #11 rather than a ♭5? Because we also have the 7th and the 9th here, making this an extended chord.

Example 5

The classic Hendrix chord gets an extra note here, the #5 (G#) above the more often heard #9 (D). You can add this by simply flattening your fourth finger across the first and second strings. This sets up a nice resolve to F13, but why not experiment and see what else sounds good to you?



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STAR LETTER

UNSUNG GIBSON?



Gibson's Les Paul Music City Special pays homage to the 70s Marauder model

I was interested to read your piece on the Gibson Les Paul Music City Special and the backstory of the Marauder and other Bill Lawrence designed guitars (issues 527 and 530). I quite liked these guitars back in the day but couldn't afford Gibson prices back then.

Fast forward to a trip to Denmark Street a couple of weeks ago in search of a Strat for my son's 40th birthday when I came across a mint condition '73 L6-S, which ended up coming home with me. These guitars are a bit quirky but very versatile with series/parallel and in/out of phase configuration, as well as a mid roll-off control and 24 frets.

This was one of Gibson's attempts at a 'do everything' guitar (other examples would be the Nighthawk and the Les Paul Recording model), and as I was musing as to why they weren't more popular, it occurred to me that, although it can produce a very wide range of tones, it doesn't really sound like a Gibson. The all-maple construction and Bill Lawrence 'Super Humbuckers' give it a very bright sound that is perhaps more Fender than Gibson. It is also worth noting that the rotary pickup selector is difficult to operate on the fly (the individual neck and bridge pickups being positions 2 and 4 respectively), making it perhaps a better proposition for the studio than the stage. Having said that, it is very comfortable on a strap, like an SG but without the neck dive, and was half the price of my son's '73 Strat.

I'm really enjoying getting to know it and so perhaps it's time to re-evaluate some of these quirky designs from the much maligned Norlin era?

Tim Bliss

It's always great to hear that all the popular myths about Gibson's mid-70s guitars can sometimes be blown apart by finding a gem like your L6-S. In fact, we've recently made a video on the Norlin-era guitars, which is doing good business on our YouTube channel (head direct to https://bit.ly/git_norlin to watch it). And they sound absolutely fantastic!



KORG

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

BOUGHT & SOLD

Neville ended his 'Neville's Advocate' (issue 533) piece by asking about readers' 'turn on a dime' purchases. In 2008 I finally saved up enough money to buy a serious guitar. I had always wanted a Les Paul Standard, so went to my local Dawsons ready to pull the trigger. The beautiful Cherry 'burst was hanging up waiting at £1,599 and my cash was burning a hole in my pocket. About 90 minutes later I walked out of the shop... with a brand-new Fender Baja Telecaster in butterscotch and a brand-new Fender Jaguar HH in black!

18 years later, the Baja is still a perfect guitar that I love, the Jaguar long ago moved on. I did eventually buy a Cherry 'burst Standard, and that only stayed for a couple of years. I purchased both Fenders for less than the price of the Les Paul and have bought and sold scores of guitars since, but the Baja is a true gem that I'd never part with.

Dave Poustie

What a marvellous story. The Baja Tele was one of Fender's great ideas and is an amazing instrument with some very usable tones above and beyond the norm. Good choice!

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

It's not easy to obtain your magazine here in the colonies, but when I do I read them to tatters. I did manage to snag the *Guitarist Annual*, which included Tony Bacon's piece on Japanese guitars of the 60s and 70s. I was fortunate enough to obtain a new 1977 Yamaha SL (Studio Lord) in 1978 – how it got to Connecticut I'll never know, but I'm glad it did. It was as close to a Les Paul as you could get and $200 (three weeks' pay at the time). It was, without a doubt, the finest guitar I have ever owned and was part of a package deal with a Fender Super Reverb for the then princely sum of $525. The amp? Okay, it was great. But the Yamaha was sublime and made me sound like a far better player than I was.

Then the inevitable: boy meets girl, he goes crazy over her, she wants to play guitar, he trades the Yamaha for a decent but unremarkable acoustic. You can imagine the rest.

I miss that guitar so much, I think of it daily, and if I am ever lucky enough to get a hold of one again, I will never let it go. The point being that the Japanese guitar manufacturers were making products as good, if not better, than the domestics. That is the real reason for the lawsuits. The Japanese were simply making better products.

But my small part of the drama ended well. I married that girl, we have three wonderful children and five

magnificent grandchildren, and we will be celebrating 50 years of wedded bliss next year. But good lord in heaven, I miss that Yamaha!

Tim M Lohnes

Ah, those guitars that got away. We all have stories about the guitars we should have never let go. But we're happy to hear that there was a positive outcome and would like to wish you and your wife the happiest of 50th anniversaries.

HAVE A CIGAR

I thought you might be interested in another of my guitar projects. Fed up with the usual Strat/Tele/LPs, I thought I would do something different, so here is my version of a four-string cigar box/slide guitar: made from 7mm ply with an Ibanez GRG 131 pickup, plus my attempt at pyrography front and back, the pickup is wired straight to the jack socket. The body is 185mm wide by 305mm long and 90mm deep. The sides of the body are covered in a veneer (not sure what wood it is). The neck is 54mm long, 45mm wide and 20mm thick. All I have to do now is learn how to play slide!

Anthony Lloyd

We've seen Samantha Fish in action with her cigar box guitar and were totally blown away by the enormous sound it produced. We hope that your slide endeavours prove fruitful and your home-made guitar sounds just as good.



Anthony Lloyd's cigar box guitar, ready to rock



FEEDBACK



As reader Abhinandan Ghosh points out, players such as Molly Tuttle and Tommy Emmanuel exemplify the magic that's possible with just an acoustic guitar (and a heavy dose of talent!)



Chris Read's new Taylor PS14ce, purchased from Peach Guitars

ECHOES OF GARY

Like I imagine many of your readers, the late great Gary Moore was a huge influence on my playing and so when I saw the final auction of Gary's estate advertised, I was determined to pick up a bit of memorabilia. After watching the guitars and amps very quickly go way out of my budget, I thought I was wasting my time. I did, however, notice one item that hadn't met its reserve on the online auction, so I contacted Bonhams and asked if I could purchase it. A couple of emails later and I'm now the proud owner of one Alesis Quadraverb and two Roland SDE Delays, previous owner Gary Moore.

The reason for me writing in is that the units also came with some footswitches and, knowing that there were people who knew and played with Gary who read the magazine, I was hoping somebody could shed some light on what they were used for? I'm especially interested in what the 'Self Destruct' switch does!

John Marshall

It must be amazing owning gear that once belonged to a legend like Gary Moore. Does anybody know what John's acquired footpedals might have been used for? That 'Self Destruct' one in particular intrigues us.

TAYLOR MADE

Reading Neville's trip to 'Europe's premier guitar store' (issue 532) reminded me of my own experience last May. I auditioned a Taylor acoustic at PMT in Norwich, intending to return that week to make a purchase. Unfortunately, PMT closed permanently before I returned. However, my wife, Ann, felt sorry for me and Googled 'Taylor Guitars' and found Peach Guitars of Colchester. I booked an appointment straight away and two hours later we arrived at the store.

I was totally amazed at its size! We were met at the door by Alan, the co-proprietor, who then took us to the vault where he had lined up several Taylors for me to try. After nearly two hours I chose a PS14ce, which, according to Alan, was Taylor's presentation model at the NAMM Show in California. I also bought a Circa 74 amplifier for my sins. Usually, Ann is bored senseless when we visit a guitar shop, but we both had a great time meeting Alan and having a tour of the store.

Chris Read

That Taylor looks the real business, Chris. And if it sounds as good as it looks, then Peach Guitars did you a tremendous service. Have any readers had a similar experience where a retailer has provided the guitar of their dreams? Let us know.

ACOUSTIC BLISS

I have seen guitarists play electric guitars using a lot of effects that produce a plethora of sounds. Some sounds are interesting and unique and blend well with the songs played. However, I feel using fewer effects can also produce great sounds. Acoustic guitars are an example where simplicity creates something magical. They require no or basic electronics and simply depend upon the player's skill. They have a natural sound, which is something I feel is enough to feed the soul. Strumming hard, playing using palm-muting techniques or strumming near the bridge produces beautiful sounds without the use of any effects.

I have been listening to Billy Strings lately and he is one of the finest acoustic bluegrass guitarists today who uses no or minimal effects. Tommy Emmanuel and Molly Tuttle are some of the artists who are innovating the way acoustic guitar is played, too.

Abhinandan Ghosh

We heartily agree. An acoustic is very much an *au naturel* type of guitar and, despite the fact that some players still call upon a pedalboard to enhance their sound, its purity in the hands of true mastery is unsurpassable.

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

HALCYON

Thinking outside the box



Mike Stringer
signature humbucker set

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

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Bare Knuckle

CHRIS REA

1951-2025

A slide master with a voice like life, the Middlesbrough bluesman hated the spotlight – and deserves notice beyond his perennial Christmas hit

Words Henry Yates

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

CHRIS REA

March 1951 – December 2025



Chris Rea playing his Italia Maranello live in Berlin, 2012

PHOTO BY FRANK HOENSCH/GETTY IMAGES

It is a curious truth of the music industry that while some artists chase fame their entire careers, others are dogged by the megastardom they never wanted. Chris Rea – who died shortly before Christmas at the age of 74 – was the most reluctant of rock legends, comparing himself to a captive monkey in one interview with this writer and bemused by the gulf between the music he really wanted to play (deep slide-blues) and the clutch of chart hits that made him one of the bankable names of the late 80s and early 90s.

Born in Middlesbrough on 4 March 1951, Christopher Anton Rea was the son of an Italian ice cream mogul with whom he had a strained relationship ("Dad was a distant figure," he said, "a cross between the Pope and Mussolini"). First obsessed with race cars, which he recalled as the sole flash of colour in the industrial north, Rea didn't start playing his first Höfner Verithin until he was 21, inspired by contemporary slide masters Ry Cooder and Lowell George, alongside the Delta giant Charley Patton.

"I heard him accidentally, on me mam's radio in her bedroom," he told *The Blues* magazine of the latter. "My God. It was one of those unbelievable sliding-door moments, an emotion that clicked with me. I'd always thought, 'Well, I could never be a singer with this horrible voice.' I always hated it. But his voice sounded like mine."

> *"I'd always thought, 'Well, I could never be a singer with this horrible voice.' I always hated it. But [Charley Patton's] voice sounded like mine"* **CHRIS REA**

Despite that late start, Rea proved a supple, soulful player, even if he shrugged off such praise in person ("I don't think I'm any good, really"). Yet from his earliest days as a signed artist, he felt thwarted by industry forces, hating 1978's debut-album single, *Fool (If You Think It's Over)* – "It's the only track I never played guitar on, which tells you something about the spirit of it" – and looking enviously across the studio floor at Dire Straits when they appeared together that year on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*.

"I knew that was what I should be doing," he told *Classic Rock*. "But it was too late. If Mark Knopfler had asked me to join that night, I would have. And I'd have gone to court with my record company. But they'd have let me starve, rather than let me go."

Rea's commercial boom years were musically more satisfying, broadly spanning from 1986's *On The Beach* (home to the earworm title track), through 1989's *The Road To Hell* (its glowering travelogue a classic rock perennial), to 1993's *Espresso Logic*. He didn't sniff at the royalties for 1988's inescapable *Driving Home For Christmas*, either ("If I don't hear it, it means I can no longer go on holiday"), but considered his best work to have gone unheard at the band's bluesy soundchecks ("We're playing away, happy as pigs in shit").

All the while, Rea cultivated his image as the anti-rock star. Visiting his home in rural Berkshire, journalists would find him slouched in a paint-flecked t-shirt, manning a chaotic music space that looked like a teenager's bedroom – the priceless Strat he had played on *The Road To Hell* often just lying there among the detritus. He hated photoshoots, but as an interviewee Rea was unforgettable: plain-spoken, damningly clear-eyed about the business and long past the point of fearing recriminations. With the exception of David Gilmour, he told this writer, most top-flight musicians were "c***s". He promised me: "I will one day write the book that shows just how massive some of these egos are."

Rea said his long-standing health issues – which included pancreatic cancer in 2001 and a major stroke in 2016 – had been the making of him, softening him from an angry, paranoid curmudgeon to a man who suddenly saw what mattered in life ("Before I was ill," he told *The Blues*, "I was extremely intolerant, very aggressive"). Yet these warning shots also lent his death on 22 December a sense of the inevitable. Regardless, and much as he'd protest, Rea will be remembered as one of the big figures of late 20th century British rock, with a catalogue that deserves far deeper drilling. G

BOB WEIR

1947 – 2026

The Grateful Dead co-founder, songwriter and rhythm guitarist, and legend of the San Franciscan psychedelic scene, dies aged 78

Words Andrew Daly

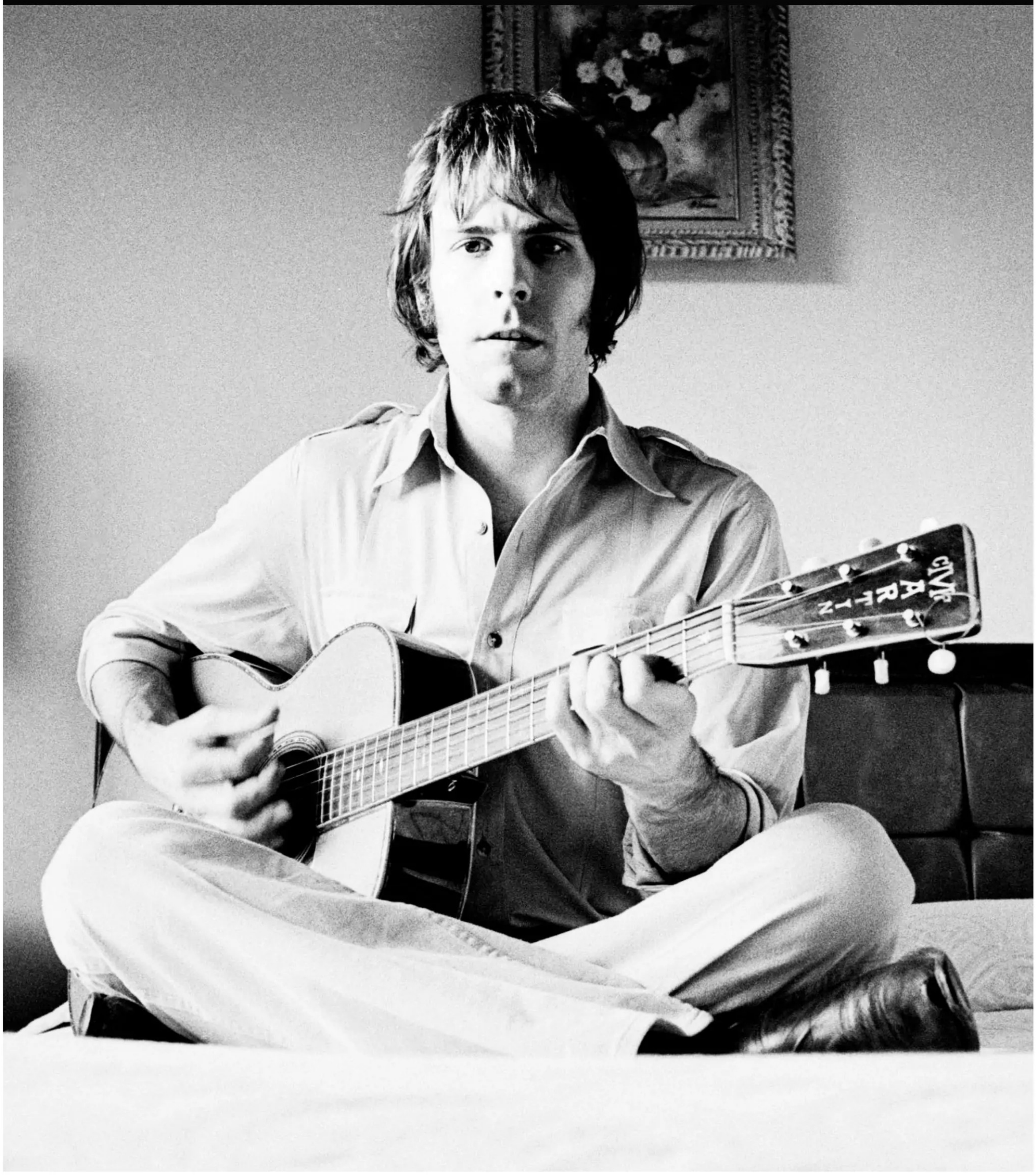


PHOTO BY MARK SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

BOB WEIR

October 1947 – January 2026

Most would label Jerry Garcia the 'frontman' of the Grateful Dead, a Bay Area band born out of 1960s counterculture. But Bob Weir's importance cannot be understated. Weir shared writing credits on *Truckin'*, *Sugar Magnolia*, *Looks Like Rain* and *Hell In A Bucket*, and his laid-back style of rhythm (and occasionally lead) guitar made him indispensable to the Dead – especially after Jerry Garcia's drug addiction took hold.

Robert Hall Weir, to whom we'll refer as 'Bobby' from here on, was born on 16 October 1947. He was 78 when he died on 10 January 2026 after he "succumbed to underlying lung issues" that followed a cancer diagnosis in July 2025, said an official statement.

Bobby was born in San Francisco, an area that helped influence a life spent mainly in Birkenstock sandals with a guitar slung over his shoulder. His biological father, John Parber, and mother, Phyllis Inskeep, gave Bobby up for adoption, and he was adopted and raised by Frederic and Eleanor Weir, who encouraged him to play guitar at age 13. This came after Bob had dabbled with piano and trumpet – and was expelled from school, stemming from a case of undiagnosed dyslexia.



Bob Weir on stage in Los Angeles, January 2025

PHOTO BY MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE RECORDING ACADEMY

> *"We were unlikely partners and that was part of our magic... Bob took a chance on me. He gave me musical community. He gave me this community"* JOHN MAYER

Bobby probably shouldn't have been so easygoing, but he was. By 1963, a 16-year-old Bobby was digging deeply into music. He met Jerry Garcia, who was 21 – five years his senior. The pair hit it off after an all-night jam session, forming Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions, a band that would become named the Warlocks and eventually the Grateful Dead.

Following 1967's self-titled debut, by the early 70s the Dead – who now consisted of Weir, Garcia, Ron 'Pigpen' McKernan, Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann, Mickey Hart, and Keith Godchaux – had cemented themselves as staples of the Flower Power era, reeling off a string of classic records in 1970's *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, 1973's *Wake Of The Flood*, and 1974's *From The Mars Hotel*. But there were issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse – especially surrounding Garcia, who picked up a nasty heroin habit.

But Bobby dug in as a player. He expanded his skillset, becoming a fabulous slide player. Then came Weir's first solo record, 1972's *Ace*, which actually featured the Dead as his backup band.

Speaking to *Guitar World* in 2024 about his playing, Weir said: "I just keep changing. I wake up in the morning and I'm kind of different. You take all those mornings that I woke up kind of different, and you add 'em together, and after a while you start amounting to a different guy." An interesting outlook on life and music – and perhaps one that helped him weather the ups and downs of a life in music.

By the 1980s, the Dead were on hiatus from recording, and Bobby formed Bobby And The Midnites. Then came the Dead's final albums: 1987's *In the Dark*, a big hit, and 1989's *Built To Last*.

After Garcia's death in 1995, Bobby soldiered on with RatDog, the Other Ones, Furthur and, finally – alongside John Mayer – Dead & Company, who toured until the end, fitting for a man who spent so much of his life on stage.

When Weir performed his final show at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park on 3 August 2025, he was home – doing what he loved, surrounded by friends he saw as family, relaying the songs that he helped make famous to Deadheads.

Bobby put it best while speaking with *Guitar World* in 2024: "For what it's worth," he said of the Dead's resurgence, "these are the same songs we've been playing all along. People from other cultures may have heard us in the past and maybe were not really able to relate. I think we could do better now."

Following Bobby's passing, Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio shared memories of his "sweet, kind, gentle friend": "Bobby was completely allergic to compliments. I'd say, 'Man, that guitar riff you were doing on that song sounded really killer,' and he'd respond, 'Well, I'm sure I'll fuck it up next time.' I loved that about him... Mostly, he just loved playing."

John Mayer, among other musicians and some 25,000 fans, paid tribute to Weir during a public memorial in San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza one week after his death: "We were unlikely partners and that was part of our magic... Bob took a chance on me. He staked his entire reputation on my joining a band with him. He gave me musical community. He gave me this community." G



MICK ABRAHAMS

1943-2025

A powerful, lyrical bluesman, the founding Jethro Tull and Blodwyn Pig guitarist always played music his way – even when it hurt his career

Words Henry Yates

PHOTO BY JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

MICK ABRAHAMS

April 1943 – December 2025

Rock history is littered with the guitarists who left before their bands exploded. Mick Abrahams – who died on 19 December aged 82, following years of ill health – was only with British prog giants Jethro Tull for 1968's debut, *This Was*. Yet his lyrical blues playing left a vital mark, while the guitarist escaped footnote status by immediately founding a second notable outfit, Blodwyn Pig, whose powerful, roots-melding albums twice visited the UK's Top 10 at the turn of that decade.

Michael Timothy Abrahams was born on 7 April 1943 in Luton, Bedfordshire, and it was there that he fell into band life with McGregor's Engine, before joining frontman Ian Anderson, bassist Glenn Cornick and drummer Clive Bunker as the nucleus of the future Tull. Signing to Island, his playing was the driving force on their first material, from the folksy trill of *Love Story* to *My Sunday Feeling*'s tempo-shifting pentatonic riffs. "Someone played a guitar solo to me the other day and I liked it," he reflected in 2016. "I asked where he got it from and he said, 'It's you!' It was the solo from *Love Story*."



Blodwyn Pig (with Abrahams second from left) circa 1970

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

> *"[Blodwyn Pig] could hold our own with any company. It didn't bother us if we were put on the bill with Crimson or Zeppelin. Nothing phased us"* MICK ABRAHAMS

Abrahams' showcase on *Cat's Squirrel* – a twisty instrumental worthy of mention in the same reverential breath as Clapton's *Hide Away* – was a highlight of both the album and Tull's early shows. While dazzling, it underlined the growing taste divide between the guitarist and his frontman. "I wanted to embrace broader musical influences," wrote Anderson, "while Mick – died-in-the-wool rocker and blues man – wanted to stay with the more traditional style of our first album."

Matters came to a head ("How can you fire me when I quit three weeks ago?" Abrahams raged at Tull management). But the guitarist already had other plans, fronting Blodwyn Pig for a brace of hit albums – 1969's *Ahead Rings Out* and 1970's *Getting To This* – that finally scratched his itch for blues spiced with roots.

The line-up took pride in rocket-fuelling these songs live at seminal happenings such as 1969's Bath Festival Of Blues and the Isle Of Wight Festival. "We could hold our own with any company," Abrahams told *Prog*'s Malcolm Dome in 2018. "It didn't bother us if we were put on the bill with Crimson or Zeppelin. Nothing changed for us, and nothing phased us."

Blodwyn Pig's potential seemed dizzying – until Abrahams once again lost control. Saxophonist/flautist Jack Lancaster had vindicated his more orchestral vision with the chart success of *Getting To This*, and one morning in September 1970, the guitarist called up bassist Andy Pyle to discover his services wouldn't be required for the upcoming US tour.

Abrahams was surprisingly philosophical about being ousted from his own band: "I couldn't be bothered to get into a legal fight with them over it, and it soon fell apart anyway." But while he took a stab at a solo career, periodically revived the Pig and was namechecked by everyone from Aerosmith to the Ramones (early favourite *Dear Jill* even featured in Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*), the guitarist never seemed at ease with the dance it took to remain at rock 'n' roll's top table.

Scared of flying, wary of the business and only active in fits and starts, he was arguably just as good as any of Britain's 60s class, but never gained the same notice and gradually retreated from view. The chances of Abrahams adding to his own legend were nixed by two simultaneous heart attacks and a stroke in November 2009.

"I watched a DVD recently of me on stage with Blodwyn Pig," he told interviewer Malcolm Dome. "I found myself saying, 'Blimey, that guy can play a bit!' Because it seemed as if I was watching a different person. These days, I can join in a bit on guitar with others but nowhere near the level I was once able to achieve. That upsets me."

For connoisseurs of British blues-rock's golden age, Mick Abrahams made an important contribution and will be sorely missed. "I'd like to be remembered for making good, honest music," he once said, "without any prejudice." G



THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

FRANCIS ROSSI

The Quo's motormouthed frontman had no intention of releasing a new solo album. But with *The Accidental*, Francis Rossi tells us he's stumbled across his best work yet

Words Henry Yates **Portrait** Phil Barker

Francis Rossi, as you might be aware, is a talker. By the end of our allotted hour with the Status Quo lifer, we have enough material to fill this entire magazine – and still he wants to keep going ("Until I tell you to fuck off, you're fine").

Most of it is unusable, of course, consisting of silly voices, off-the-record slander and his sweet-but-infuriating habit of twanging a guitar to illustrate his point. But Rossi does want to get at least one serious message across: he is inordinately proud of his new solo album.

And why wouldn't he be? Co-produced by Andy Brook, *The Accidental* is a potent collection of driving boogies and instant melodies – drawing a line under Rossi's recent run of mostly acoustic music – to reconnect with the power of a revved-up electric guitar. And at 76, he sounds as surprised as anyone by this late-career miracle baby that he has delivered.

So you've gone and recorded an album by accident?

"Yeah. I didn't want to make it. One of the guys I did this with – Hiran Ilangantileke [guitar] – went to school with my son. They were in bands together and I've known this kid since he was 11. Hiran was always a whizz-kid guitar player. But I said to him, 'You've got to learn to play in time.' Fantastic lead guitar player, but he was all over the place. So then he went away for three years, practising with a click track.

"This year, Hiran asked me if I fancied doing something. I really enjoy conversing with the bloke – he's highly intelligent, compared with me, anyway. So he came around with an Acoustasonic, we started playing and we wrote three songs in a couple of days. He asked, 'Do you want to record them?' I said, 'Not particularly. Why would I want to do that?' Then I went off ranting about how we make quarter of a penny per download. I told him, 'You've missed the boat. People don't sell records now.'"

Digital-era incomes are a bone of contention for you?

"To me, there's something wrong with making a product and not earning from it. I use the term 'product' in the face of other musicians, who like to pretend that's not what it is. Please yourself, my son. You like to pretend you're not in showbiz? Then get off the fucking stage. This has been my living since I was 16. Back in the 70s, the German [record executives] used to say, 'I think music should be free.' And I'd say, 'Well, fair enough, I've got three kids, do you want to pay for their education? And I like a BMW every new year. If you want to make free music, go ahead, you please yourself.'"

But back to the album's inception...

"So we recorded those first songs anyway, then my wife said, 'Why don't you write some more?' And I said, 'Because it's fruitless.' I'm not one of those people who [records for my own pleasure]. I need more than that. It's the insecure show-off in me. But I did agree to record some more songs. Then I went full tilt ahead. And lo and behold, I suddenly had an album I thought was truly tremendous. And it so happens that probably half-a-dozen people think the same."

Where did you end up recording *The Accidental*?

"My studio in the garden. It's a large Swiss-chalet-type place, with a

Harrison console, Logic software. I wasn't planning to use John Edwards on bass. But he asked, 'Can I play on a couple?' That's John all over. He walked in and he played, and I've used a couple of other guys, but John is a brilliant player, there's no two ways about it. So is Leon [Cave, drums]. When he first started playing with us, the difference behind me was like, 'Wahey!' You can feel the happiness in his drumming."

This record sounds like you've fallen back in love with the electric guitar.
"Oddly enough, I played this black Status Slipstream. It's a one-piece neck, carbon fibre body... everything that makes guitarists of my generation go [pulls pained face]. Everything about it, for traditionalists, is wrong. It's not American. It's not got [Patent Applied For pickups] from 1932 or whatever. I think the humbuckers are possibly Chinese. These guitars are two-a-penny. They're not old – you can knock them up any time you like. But that's my baby. The custom green Status I had built a few years ago is great, too. Why not the old Quo-era Telecaster? It's been sold because it would not go in tune. The bolts on the back of the neck, we kept reseating them. It was getting worse and worse."

When you play acoustic these days, what do you reach for?
"These are lovely [holds up a Fender Acoustasonic Telecaster]. However, [I find them] difficult to keep in tune. The piezo crystal piece is a little short. In fact, they sound better acoustically than when you plug them in. I'd like someone to give it a twist on the truss rod. And maybe have something done to the nut to lift the B and E strings. Just to give it a bit more zing. But there are also some truly beautiful, wonderful things about these guitars. We've got five of them out on the road, and they all vary."

More generally, what are the best pieces in your guitar collection?
"Other than this particular black Status Slipstream, probably the Gibson Stereo that I made *Matchstick Men* on. That's the one I swapped for a Grimshaw with Pete Ham from Badfinger."

How about your amps?
"I'd been getting a great noise in my back bedroom on this baby Vox [VX15 GT]. So we sampled that, put it into the Kemper and I used that on the last Quo tour. Again, a person of my generation would normally say, 'Oh no, I'm not using that modern shit.' Which is a bit of a dickhead attitude. It's very much head-in-the-sand. So we had the Kemper in the studio for this album and I kept coming back to that sound: the Vox via the Kemper."

You've always worked particularly hard at your guitar technique. Do you think you have breakthroughs that are still to come?
"I practise every day, except Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. But I still fuck up, badly

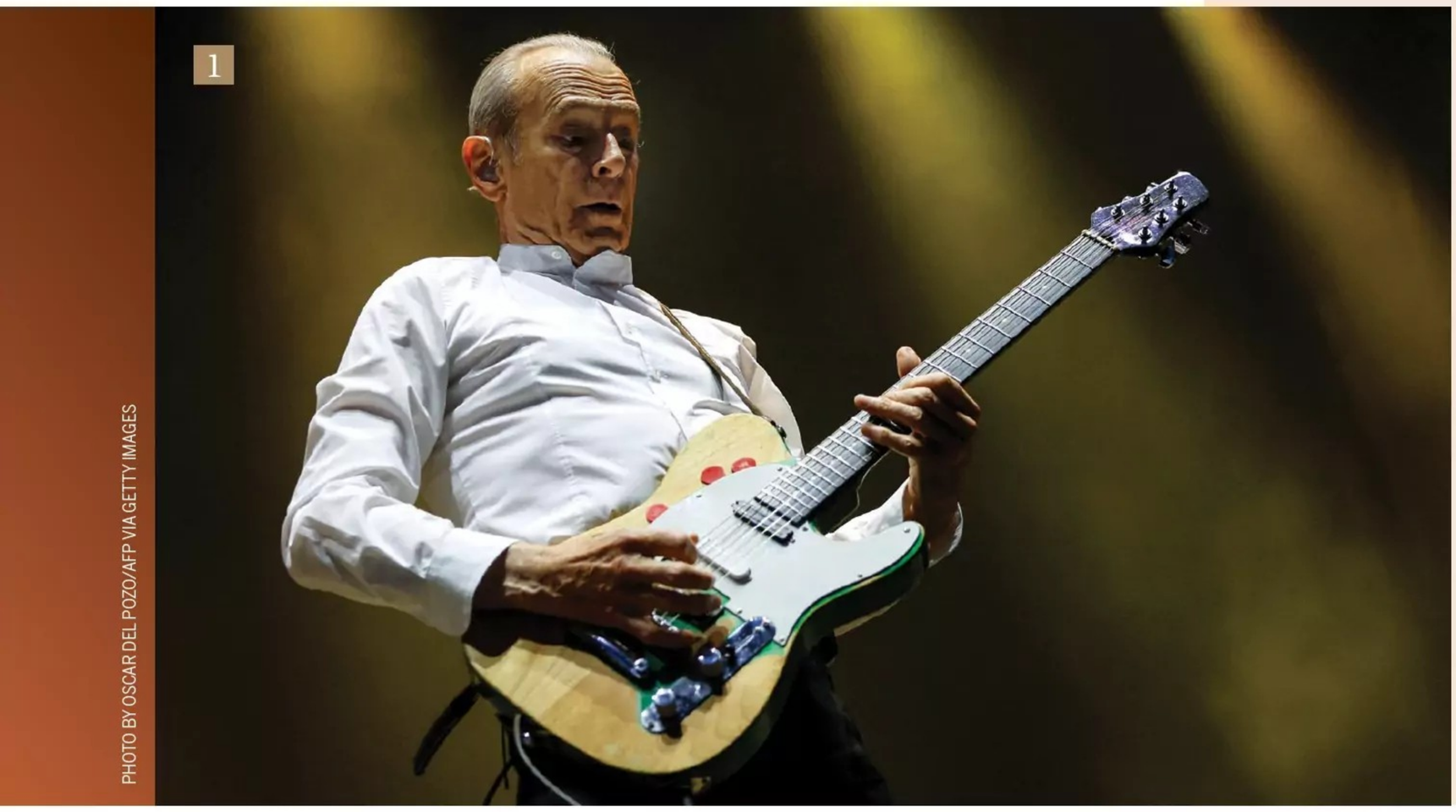


PHOTO BY OSCAR DEL POZO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

1. Rossi rocking out with Quo on stage using a custom Status built for him by Rob Green, which bears a resemblance to the infamous green Tele that was a staple in Francis's rig for years



Co-producer Andy Brook engineered and mastered the new album, as well as playing on the record and co-writing three of the tracks

THE ACCIDENT...

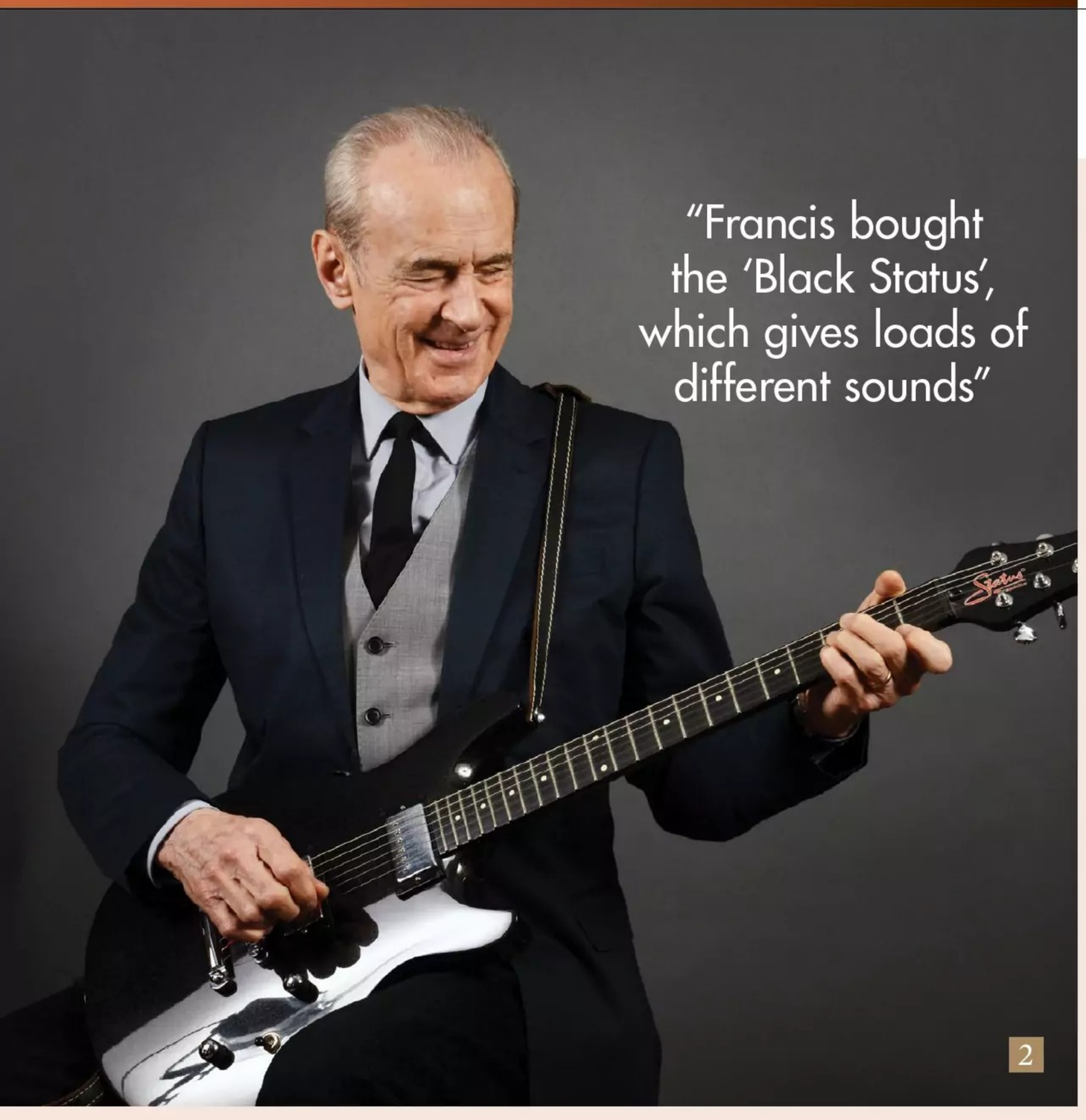
There are a few surprises regarding the gear Rossi used on the new album, as co-producer and engineer Andy Brook reveals

Which amps were used on *The Accidental*?
"We'd just come off the road doing the festival season with Status Quo, and at the beginning of that tour we decided we'd try moving over to the Kemper for stage performances for Francis. So in the studio prior to that, we modelled his Marshall JCM800, which he used for years on stage, and also his Vox AC30. Then, in addition to that, he started using this little amp, which is a Vox VX15 GT. It's a practice amp for the bedroom, but he loved the sound that he got out of it. We modelled those three amps, and that's what we used on the entirety of the recording.

"So everything that you hear has been played through the Kemper but using a model of one of his previous amplifiers. Predominantly, it's not the 800, it's not the AC30, it's not the big amplifiers – it's a model of the little baby amplifier that's used on pretty much everything, with the Status guitar that he was using."

Tell us about the guitars that were used in the studio.
"He had two green Statuses built for him by Rob Green of Status Guitars. There was the original model that he was presented with, but then we went back to Rob and he was given the second model, and that's the one that he uses primarily for Status Quo. More recently, Andrew Bown of Status Quo purchased a [Status] Slipstream, which is a full carbon-fibre model. It's a one-piece, molded resin. So Francis just bought one of those and that's what he calls the 'Black Status', which gives you loads of different sounds."

So they're the two main guitars.
"There's one track in particular, *November Again*, where you'll hear a lot of acoustic guitar, and that's the Fender Acoustasonic [Telecaster]. Both Francis and Hiran play on that and it was tracked live. We had them in the studio playing the embryonic part of the track, which is the two acoustic guitars, and for the four or five other songs





Guitarist and songwriter Hiran Ilangantileke recalls that the sessions for the new album included moments of high comedy

...WAITING TO HAPPEN

Hiran Ilangantileke kickstarted the whole album project with Rossi and lent his songwriting and guitar skills to the recording, too

Looking back, how did the idea for *The Accidental* begin?

"I've known Francis for a long time. I think it was during Covid that I kind of cheekily thought, 'He's going to be at home, everything's just shut down and I only live about 20 minutes from him.' So it was like, 'Do you want to write a few songs? You know, if you're bored?' So really, I think that was it.

"It was as far back as then, maybe '21, that a few songs went in. And simply, it was just that we enjoyed it. He then got back out on the road and so it weaved into moments where we were both in the same place. I don't know when we thought it was going to turn into an album; I think we just ended up talking about music that we both love and then playing a little bit in his living room. That's how it came together. So I'm glad to have done the convincing. But, honestly, it didn't feel like that."

"During Covid I cheekily thought, '[Francis is] going to be at home.' So it was like, 'If you're bored...'"

What was your involvement with the recording?

"My guitars are on probably six or seven of the tunes that I co-wrote. When we were in the studio, it was me and him in the live room and we recorded beds of acoustics together and built tracks like that. We'd play rhythm tracks mostly together so it had a nice gel. Then I was like, 'Come on, mate, just finish the album. Don't wait for me.'"

What's Francis like to work with?

"Honestly, it's just so funny. It's constant piss-taking. I can't repeat a lot of it. I'd be in his big live room – which is a lovely studio – and he was in this annex, this kind of amp room, if you like, when we're doing the acoustics, so we weren't bleeding. He would pretend to fall asleep, so you look over and [wonder]. It's just comedy." **[DM]**





PHOTOS BY JAMES-ECKERSLEY/EARMUSIC

that Hiran was involved in songwriting, it was the same process. So you have this embryo that you work from, this nucleus, and everything springs from that. Then you layer things: you add keys, you add the bass, you add the live drums." **[DM]**

2. After Quo's Andy Bown purchased a Status Slipstream, Francis was so impressed that he bought one himself and used it extensively on the new record

3. Another Status built specially for Francis by Rob Green

4. This Fender Acoustasonic model can be heard on *The Accidental*, too. A Tele, of course!



5

and regularly. Like on *Matchstick Men* [plays it and fumbles it]. I played it at 32 shows this year, no problem. Then we came back out for six shows on the trot – and I fucked it up. Isn't that guitar part hardwired into my brain by this point? Yeah. So why does it go wrong?

"On the new album, there's a nice solo on *Beautiful World*. It's nice to be able to listen to oneself. But I'm not that good a guitar player. There are players where I'm sat there thinking [jaw drops]. My son said he's thinking of going over to Nashville. I told him, 'I wouldn't go there again.' He said, 'Why not?' And I said, 'Everywhere you go, everyone can play the arse off you.' Jesus. I've still got a long way to go. I won't live long enough to get that good."

But you've been a professional musician for over half a century.
"People think I'm being overly modest. No, I know what a good guitar player is – and I know what my limitations are. And I'm a lot better than I was, but I am still not where I should be. I'm still frustrated by that. There was that period – from the late 60s into the early 80s, you could say – when there were just so many players who became legends. You had Free, Pink Floyd, Deep Purple – just band after band after band. We just knew them as bands on the circuit. It's only 35 years later that you realise: 'Shit a brick, there's never been that amount of quality music again.'"

Your sense of groove is unsurpassed, though. How do you get it so tight?
"It's very hard not to have your heart running at the bpm the last song was played at. Hence, we started using clicks with Quo because Rick [Parfitt] would be all over the place. Some nights, if he'd had a downer, we'd start with *Junior's Wailing* and it'd be [treacle-slow groove]. 'Rick, for fuck's sake! What have you had?' So that was it. I said, 'We're having a click in our ears.' You need to have a reference point because it's very difficult to control where your heart is. Have you not found that when you've tried to get to sleep at night? You're like, 'Shit, my heart is going fast...'"

> "People think I'm being modest. I know what a good guitar player is – and I know my limitations"

A decade since his death, have you got used to playing guitar without your Quo wingman, Rick Parfitt?
"Rick did not want to be a twosome any longer, a long time ago. I dreamt of him last night. I dream of him a lot. And I only dream of the positive stuff. But it's the negative stuff that hits me in reality. The first night he joined, he came up to me and said, 'I haven't learnt the songs...'

"Rick and I as a twosome were great, but he had this whole 'number one/number two thing'. And once he was settled in the band, he was like, 'No, I want the other position.' That's where it became so acrimonious between us. Rick was never going to be happy because he always wanted what was over there. I kept saying to him, 'The trouble with over there is, everywhere you go, there you are.'

"Rick always needed to be the loudest thing in the room. One of the joys of playing with Richie [Malone, late-period Quo guitarist] is that you can say, 'Turn it down, Richie.' And Hiran wants to be Hiran; there's very unlikely to be a competition because there's so many years between us. He always respects that I'm the older person. I miss the days when Rick and I were very, very close – but they weren't there at all at the end."

Do you feel more creatively free when you're not recording as Status Quo?
"Oh, definitely. And that's understandable, isn't it? But still I want to be fair to the band – it may have been me that put those shackles there."

Do you think *The Accidental* is up there as the best guitar performance of your career?
"Without a doubt. And people will think, 'Well, you would say that.' Yeah, true. But whether or not it sounds like I'm full of shit, I don't think I've ever been as pleased with an album."

Do you have particular commercial aspirations for it?
"Well, unless you have a ticket, you're not going to win the lottery. But if you buy just one ticket, then you can fantasise. Even if nothing happens, it's still a lovely record. I don't know if I can turn out stuff that good again – but I damn well hope so."

Finally, are you more nervous before a playing gig or a talking gig?
"Neither. I'm extremely comfortable at both. I don't know what I'm going to say some nights. But I tell the audience, 'If I repeat myself, just tell me to fuck off...!'" G

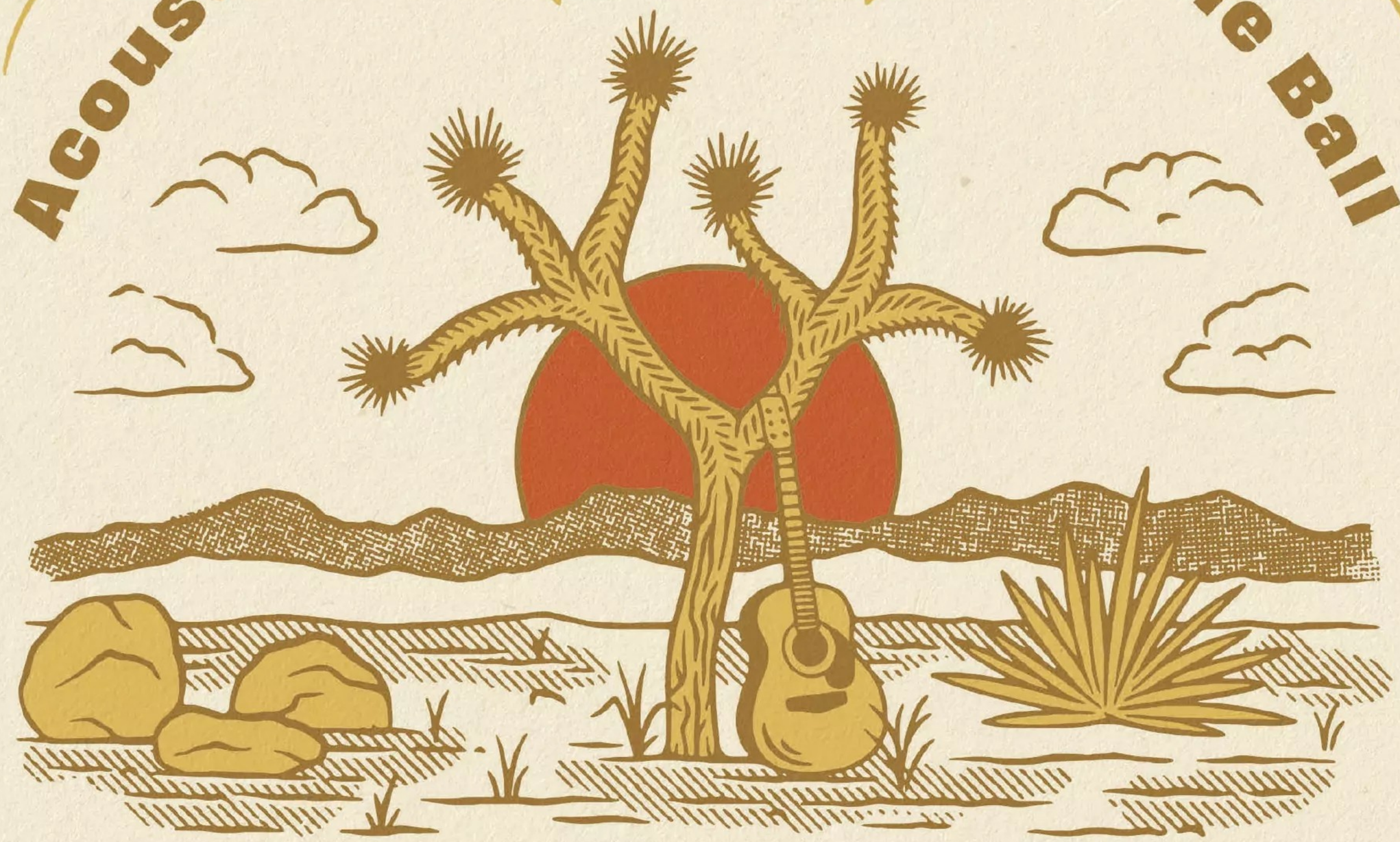
5. Francis Rossi sits at the desk of his garden recording studio where the new album came to life

PHOTO BY JAMES-ECKERSLEY/EARMUSIC



Francis Rossi's new album, *The Accidental*, is available now through earMUSIC
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B·B·KING

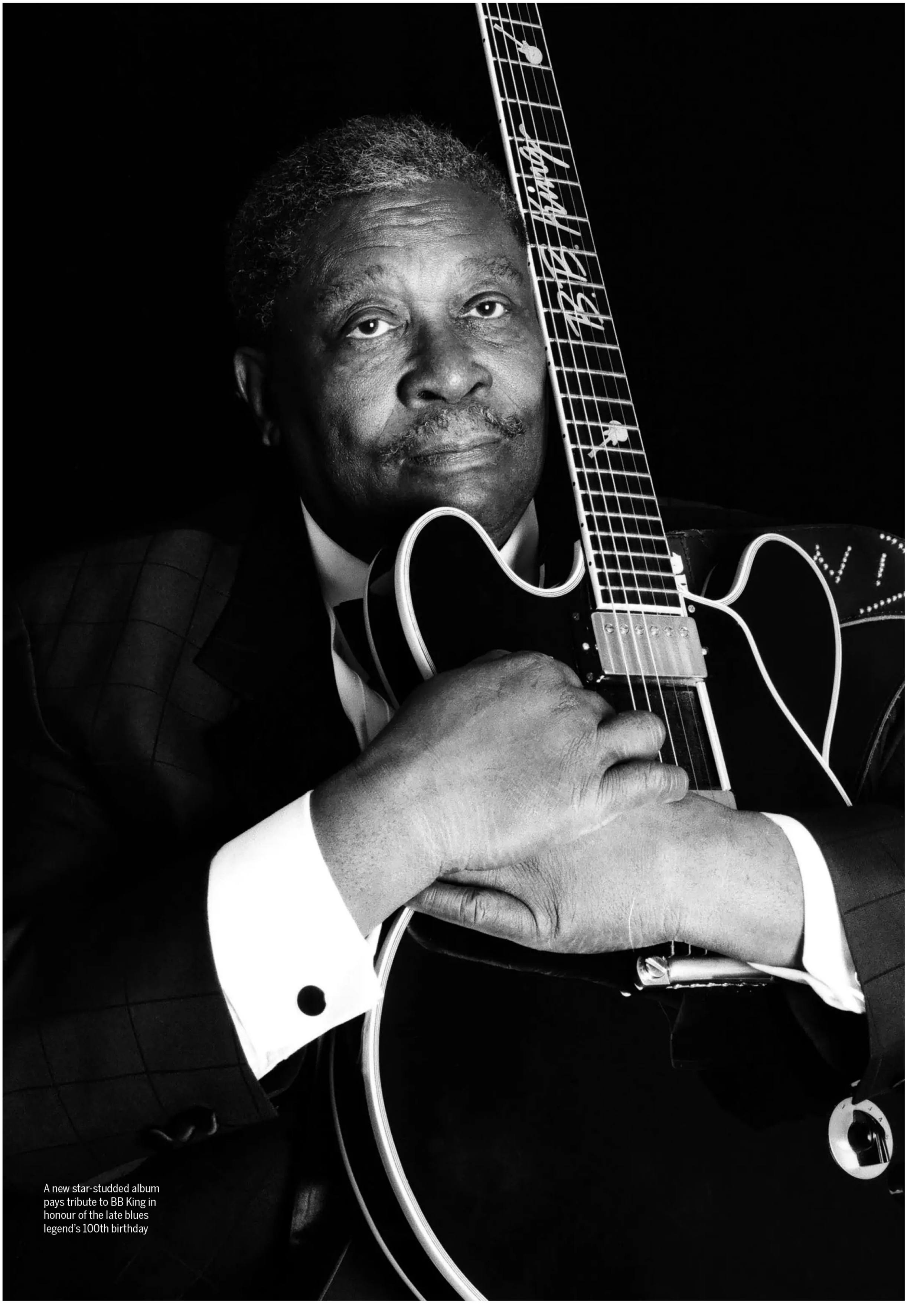
No musician embodies a century of American music as BB King did. When he was born, on 16 September 1925, he got his earliest inspiration from music heard on his aunt's Victrola gramophone. By the time he died in 2015, Spotify had been in business for nearly a decade. His voice was tender yet fierce and every note from his guitar was like a quivering barb of sound – but soulful instead of sharp. Now, a heartfelt new BB King tribute album, featuring some of today's greatest blues players, attempts to capture King's crowning, century-long legacy...



Words Jamie Dickson



PHOTO BY DEBORAH FEINGOLD/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



A new star-studded album pays tribute to BB King in honour of the late blues legend's 100th birthday

RIDING WITH THE KING

BB King would have celebrated his 100th birthday in September last year. But when Joe Bonamassa discovered that the centenary was going almost unnoticed by the music industry, he swung into action and produced the tribute album to end all tribute albums

Words David Mead & Henry Yates

The double-CD and three-LP release in honour of BB King's 100th birthday, *BB King's Blues Summit 100*, was a labour of love for Joe Bonamassa. To say that the album features a who's who of blues guitarists young and old is really only the tip of a very large iceberg. Indeed, when Joe announced the project to the blues guitar world, it expanded exponentially, such was the clamour it created. Artists including Marcus King, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram, Larkin Poe, Jimmie Vaughan, Warren Haynes, Dion, Aloe Blacc, Kirk Fletcher and not forgetting Eric Clapton were eager to lend their hands – and guitar playing – to a selection of songs that BB had made famous throughout his long career. And what a joyous celebration of one man's contribution to music and popular culture it is.

Joe met BB King 36 years ago, but the meeting holds such significance, to him it seems like it was only yesterday. "I met him at the Lilac Festival in Rochester, New York, May 24 1990," he tells us. "My band was booked to open up for him. I was a kid and he took an interest in my career, or just my playing. This was all pre-internet, so it wasn't like he had watched my videos on YouTube or Instagram. Back then you had to discover things as they were happening. We just started a friendship."



Did BB offer you advice on how to develop your playing style in those early days?

"No, but you couldn't help but watch him and learn. He was always very encouraging, like, 'Just keep doing what you're doing and don't change.' I can't think of another guitar player that with a single note is that identifiable, you know what I mean? Maybe Albert King, but Albert King really would require a two- or three-note phrase. But BB King could just play one note, and it's like you know who he is, and those are the players you can't help but pay attention to and understand and learn from."

Did you continue to play with him often?

"Technically, the last run I did with him was about 10 years before he died. That was the last time. That was the last tour. We did a couple of shows in Europe, at the Ahoy Arena in Rotterdam, and the last time I saw him was right before he came off the road in 2014 at the Canyon Club in LA and he literally picked up our conversation from where we'd left off. He was just like, 'Are you still dating that girl?' He knew everything. He was so hip, and

PHOTO BY AL PEREIRA/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

then he came off the road maybe a few months later."

Have you got any favourite BB King anecdotes?
"Well, he showed me how to drag songs from a computer into an iPod when he was 80 years old! I didn't know how to do that and he's like, 'Here, son, this is how you do it.' How sad is that? I was 28 or something and he was 80. But he was a consummate professional. I remember one time in Charleston, West Virginia, there was a big snowstorm, and the governor of West Virginia called specifically to ask BB King to postpone the show and he wouldn't do it. He goes, 'I told them I'm going to be here in March and I'm here.' They're like, 'But Mr. King, it's unsafe.' He said, 'Well, *I* made it!' So that was him, man."

Did BB's work ethic of always being on the road influence you?
"Yeah, he was always touring. I mean, he would do those summer runs and then go right back on the road in theatres and he was very much a road dog and he loved it a lot. I mean, he always said, 'I want to die on the road, doing what I love,' you know? But he didn't know any other life. You're talking about somebody who started working that much in the early 50s and never stopped for anything."

"My favourite track has always been 'The Thrill Is Gone'... Strings and blues? That was revolutionary" ***JOE BONAMASSA***

Thinking about BB's use of 'Lucille' Gibson ES-355s, were you inspired to include that model in your collection?
"I have a couple of 355s. They tend to be stereo, but I actually have a couple of mono ones, which are great because you get an ebony fingerboard, mono, no Varitone – it's like the coolest 335 you've ever played. It was the late 70s when the first Lucille came off the line. Some of them were red, and they were like 1978 to 1979, and he was the one that said, 'I don't want the f-hole, make it more of a solid thing.' And that was one of Gibson's longest-running signature models, other than the Les Paul, which is a signature model guitar."

1. Joe Bonamassa's band recorded 34 backing tracks for the album, of which 32 ended up being used for the final release

Did BB like to play loud on stage?
"When I first started opening for him, he was using a Twin Reverb and a lot of times we would supply the backline. He liked my 1970 or '72 Twin Reverb. It had mismatched speakers in it, but it was a great Twin. He liked it because it was loud and punchy. Then as the years went on, he ended up graduating to the Lab Series L5, which is basically like a solid-state 100-watt Twin. So he played loud. It wasn't quiet on stage; he cranked. He had a big sound. All of the Kings had big sounds. Albert had a big sound, Freddie had a big sound – and they played loud, which was great."

How did you go about assembling the players that you've got on the new tribute album?
"It escalated. We had a wishlist and we originally cut 20 or 22 songs and we thought that would be enough. Then as it escalated



PAYING TRIBUTE...

JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR

TRACK: BAD CASE OF LOVE

"I played on *Bad Case Of Love*. You're kind of spoiled for choice because I was in early, obviously, being part of the label. I knew of the project before they approached their wishlist of artists.

"Thinking back to the first time I met BB, it was actually one of the first gigs my parents took me to when I was really getting into blues. He played at the NEC in Birmingham, and he was handing out guitar picks at the end of the night. My dad was like, 'Go and get a guitar pick.' And I was quite shy, I was like, 'No, no...' My dad said, 'Look, out of all the people here: there aren't many 13 year old girls in the audience. Trust me, he wants you to have a guitar pick.' So I legged it down to the stage as quickly as I could and, unfortunately, when I got down there he'd left the stage, but he happened to turn around. So I just waved at him and he came back onto the stage and knelt down in front of me. I remember he had these massive hands and they'd got massive ruby rings on them. He said, 'Howdy young lady, I'm BB King.' I said, 'Mr King, my name is Joanne and I'm 13, and I think I'm going to be a blues guitarist. Do you have a guitar pick I could have?' But he'd run out of guitar picks. So he took his necklace off and put it on me.

"Three years later, I was opening up for him. I did a few dates with him through Europe in 2001, I believe. It's a massive privilege to be able to say that, but that night, I kind of felt like that was a seal of approval in my little 13-year-old mind that I told BB King I was going to be a blues woman, and he gave me a necklace. So I thought I was the chosen one!"

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN

"He didn't try to follow disco or any trends... Be good. That's all that matters. He's the first one who taught me to be myself"

BOBBY RUSH



PAYING TRIBUTE...

WARREN HAYNES

TRACK: HOW BLUE CAN YOU GET

"Joe Bonamassa and I go way back, so when he told me about the BB tribute, I was like, 'Yeah, sounds fun.' I used to cover *How Blue Can You Get* in the 70s, so I was glad they suggested that song because it would have been my first choice, for sure. I heard it first on *Live In Cook County Jail* [1971], then *Live At The Regal* [1965]. You can hear BB's connection with the audience on that song – it always brought the house down. My favourite line is: 'I gave you seven children, and now you want to give them back.' And, of course, with our version we had to update the price of the dinner. In the original, it's $10, which at this point would barely cover a McDonald's!

"When they sent me the track, it was complete other than my guitar and vocal. I was at the Power Station in Connecticut, so I overdubbed my parts. To tip the hat, I played with a little more homage than I normally would, so I busted out the one-note vibrato. But I also threw a few curveball licks in there, just to liven up the party. Again, I wanted to honour his sound and personality, so I played my 1961 ES-335, and the amp was a combination of a Gibson Falcon and my Alessandro.

"I saw BB for the first time aged 19, and he gave me a guitar pick that I carried in my pants pocket for years until it eventually got lost. Then when I joined the Allman Brothers, we played with him in Texas. During the show, BB invited Gregg to sit in, and he went up to the mic and asked, 'Anyone else want to join me?' More than anything, I wanted to go, but I'd never met BB and thought he'd look at me like, 'Who the hell are you?' So I just froze. It was years later that I finally got another opportunity to play with BB, and I have to say that was an extremely proud moment.

"My other memory was in Memphis. The Allmans and BB were staying at the same hotel. There was a fire alarm and we had to evacuate. So I rode down in the elevator with BB in his pyjamas, and we were stood next to each other on the street, wondering if this hotel is going to burst into flames!" **[HY]**

PHOTO BY CHUCK FISHMAN/GETTY IMAGES

BB King preaching the blues on stage at Northern Illinois University in 1971

WARREN HAYNES PHOTO BY JOHN ATASHIAN / GETTY IMAGES

"I had all BB's 60s albums as a teenager and he was a giant influence. I basically learnt guitar from playing along to 'Live At The Regal'"

JIMMIE VAUGHAN

This special ES-355 commemorating BB King's 100th birthday was released on 16 September 2025

PHOTO: GIBSON



2

PHOTO BY EDU HAWKINS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

and things got more involved we ended up having to cut another dozen. We had cut 34 and we're using 32. Some of the collaborations you're like, 'Why did you have Michael McDonald, Derek [Trucks] and Susan [Tedeschi], do the one song?' Well, it's because they all called that song. So you get these happy accidents, you know?"

Was the process of matching artists to tracks fairly straightforward?

"We had to do *When Love Comes To Town*. I mean, it's one of BB's biggest songs. But you're like, 'Well, who's going to sing it?' You've got to split the vocal. So I came up with this idea of asking Myles Kennedy to sing it, Slash to play guitar, and Shemekia Copeland to do the BB bits. And it came out great.

"Once you start getting into these things, you get Chris Buck with Pat Monahan [of Train] and it was just like, 'Oh, Chris, you want to play on the record? We got a spot for you on this song...' Then the crown jewel was having Chaka Khan and Eric Clapton on *The Thrill Is Gone*. Paul Rogers wanted to sing *Night Life*, and he wanted a very specific version; he wanted to sing the *Blues Is King* version. No problem. Got you covered.

"From start to finish, [the album] took eight months, which is like warp speed. And we were doing it on the road" ***JOE BONAMASSA***

"To be honest with you, a lot of times we had this list of songs – because you've got to do these songs, you can't leave them out – and a lot of times I was just going to these artists, I'm like, 'Hey, man, I'm sorry. I know it's a big thing. What key do you want it in?' And they're like, 'Okay, I'll do it.' We had heard Marcus King sing *Don't Answer The Door* before, so we knew he was game for that. And Keb' Mo' did *I'll Survive* and he did a great job. So some of this stuff plugged in fast, and then some of the stuff we ended up waiting around and retooling, but it got done."

2. Buddy Guy features on *Sweet Little Angel* on the album. He says in tribute: "I'm remembering you, B. You know that. I can't do it like you, but I can try"

So basically it was your band laying down the tracks with the guests recording their parts in different studios?

"Yeah, this thing would not have been possible if we had



PAYING TRIBUTE...

JIMMIE VAUGHAN

TRACK: WATCH YOURSELF

"Joe Bonamassa and his band had already cut the instrumental track of *Watch Yourself*, so I just brought my horn section into the studio and played it how I felt. I mean, you can play BB's licks, but it would be silly to mimic him, even if you could. So I didn't play a Gibson semi-hollow, either, because what would that get me? Instead, I took my white Strat, and for my amp I played two of the new Fender Bassmans.

"*Watch Yourself* [1968] is just one of BB's many beautiful songs. I had all his 60s albums as a teenager and he was a giant influence. The first one I bought was *Easy Listening Blues* [1962] and I basically learnt guitar from playing along to *Live At The Regal* [1965]. He was all over the guitar. I loved the way he would trill and vibrato the note – I've read interviews where he said he learnt that from Django Reinhardt. Later, I remember listening to *The Thrill Is Gone* when I was working as a garbage man in the city of Irving, Texas.

"I was 13 when I saw BB for the first time, at the Central Forest Club in Texas, which was an old movie theatre. He was playing there all weekend. So I'm standing out front and the Sunday matinee show had already started, but I was too young to get in. But then T-Bone Walker walked by with two little girls – his granddaughters, I suppose – and said, 'Well, let me talk to 'em, son, see if we can get you in the side door.' So that was my first time seeing BB and he was absolutely fabulous that night.

"I went on tour with him several times, and when we did the Austin City Limits tribute to my brother Stevie [in 1995], we had BB King, Eric Clapton, Robert Cray, Buddy Guy. And just to watch BB playing close up was amazing. I'll always remember how nice he was, too. He was a fabulous guitar player and a great singer, but he was never stuck up. He would always go the extra mile. He would always talk to you, ask you what was going on.

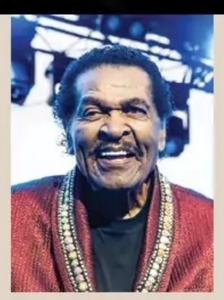
"Does it feel strange that BB King has been gone for a decade now? Well, he's not gone to me. I still listen to him, all the time. He was my hero, y'know?" **[HY]**

PHOTO BY PER OLE HAGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"You can hear BB's connection with the audience on ['How Blue Can You Get'] – it always brought the house down"

WARREN HAYNES

Recording at Olympic Studios in June 1971 for the album *BB King In London*, which also featured Peter Green, Ringo Starr and Steve Winwood



PAYING TRIBUTE...

BOBBY RUSH

TRACK: WHY I SING THE BLUES

"I went to Indianola, Mississippi, in 1948 and BB King was in Greenville working at Ruby's Place. He came over to introduce himself to me and we've been friends from that until he passed. When he passed, they asked me to have a word to say on his behalf at the funeral. I was the last man they called up to speak about my relationship with BB and his life, and then someone come to me and said, 'Listen, we're going to take his body to Indianola. We'd like you to lead the hearse down to Indianola'. The relationship I had with him through the years, we continued being friends for 69 years. I don't think there's nobody living today that knew him as long as I did.

"If you saw him from 1950 until he passed, he'd maybe added a song or two to his show, but his show never changed. He didn't try to follow disco or any of the trends that everybody was doing. That's what he taught me. I don't try to change anything about what I'm doing. If you like what I'm doing, fine. If you don't like what I'm doing, I'm good at what I do. Be good. That's all that matters. That comes from BB King. He's the first one who taught me to be myself."

PHOTO BY LIONEL FLUSIN/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNSGETTY IMAGES



Chris Buck joins Train's Pat Monahan on *Think It Over*, a track co-producer Josh Smith referred to as an "under-the-radar BB song"

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

done it Quincy Jones *We Are The World* style. It'd be physically impossible. As it was, from start to finish, with artwork and everything, it took eight months, which is like warp speed. We were tasked as a band to go in and just cut tracks. Sometimes we had to change keys. And we were doing it on the road. I mean, we recorded most of it in Los Angeles, some of it in Buffalo, New York, some of it in Atlanta, and I think one song in Nashville. We just had to be flexible."

What's your favourite BB King track these days?

"My favourite track has always been *The Thrill Is Gone*. I know it's cliché, but, to me, it was the perfect blues song and it was a hit. And BB got a lot of shit when it came out because [producer] Bill Szymczyk put strings on it and they thought it was too sophisticated and that they had sold out. He was so ahead of his time. You know, strings and blues? That was revolutionary."

With *The Thrill Is Gone* having been taken by Clapton, how did you end up contributing *Playin' With My Friends* to the album?

"I always said I'm going to take what's left over because this is a guest-star record. There are probably five songs that I sang and did bits on, but finally I just said to [co-producer] Josh [Smith], 'I'm sick and tired of this shit. Let me do mine right at the end when there's a leftover. I feel like I'm cutting the whole album.'"

Which guitar did you use for your contribution?

"It's all 335. They do that thing, you know? But BB had a lot of different sounds throughout his career because we covered stuff from the 50s all the way through to his modern work. I mean, you could tell when he was using the ES-5 in the 50s. Even some of the songs, you go, 'Man, I think that's the Esquire,' because it's really Fender-y. By '64, his sound was more like what you would have expected it to sound like – usually a 335 or some sort of archtop. But we didn't want to do sound-alikes, either. We wanted to make them our own." G



BB King's Blues Summit 100 is released on 6 February via KTBA Records
www.joebonamassa.com



Win! A BB CD!

BB King's Blues Summit 100 really is a star-studded affair and a fabulous tribute to one of the principal architects of electric blues. As Joe Bonamassa himself says: "When BB was alive and active, he *was* the blues – he was the sun which all planets rotated around." And now, in collaboration with Bonamassa's Keeping The Blues Alive record label, we have 10 copies of the CD to give away. To be in with a chance to win one, all you have to do is solve the brain teaser below, follow the link and send us your answer before the closing date of 1 April. Good luck!

Where was BB King Born?

A) Mississippi
B) Texas
C) Missouri

To enter and for full terms and conditions, scan the QR code or go to: **http://bit.ly/git534bbking**

MY KIND OF BLUES

BB King reflected on his life in guitar many times across the decades. Here, he paints a nuanced, surprisingly humble portrait of himself in quotes selected from milestone interviews with *Guitarist*

Complied by Jamie Dixon

WALKING THE TALK

(Guitarist, December 2011)

"I've never been a real hot player, and a lot of kids are hot players. I'm slow because I walk slow, talk slow, sing slow – the whole works. It isn't because I feel that way, that's just the way I am."

DIVINE INSPIRATION

(Guitarist, December 2011)

"My mother's brother was married to a sanctified preacher's sister. And when I heard him play the guitar, that was the nicest thing ever. That's about the first time I started paying attention."

HALLMARK VIBRATO

(Guitarist, December 2011)

"When the Hawaiian people would play, it was so mellow, so good to your ears. Every time I'd get a guitar, I'd always trill my hand and it became a habit. Guys would say, 'How'd you do that?' I'd say, 'Like this!'"

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF T-BONE WALKER

(Guitarist, August 2009)

"The greatest thing for me was to hear T-Bone Walker, and the first time I ever heard him, he was playing *Stormy Monday*. He was a driving force in my learning to play and I would've married him! He was playing one of those big-bodied Gibsons [an ES-5], and you could hear it cutting right above the band, so that was always my idea, too; putting the microphone on the amp just gave me the little boost I needed. The trouble was every time I had a guitar in my hands, the notes that T-Bone and the others used just didn't seem to be on the neck."

THE HARD LIFE OF A TOURING GUITAR

(Guitarist, August 2009)

"I was just a sucker for any guitar I could get and manage to hold on to! I was from the country and we didn't have money like people did in the towns; you could save and save but still rarely get enough money to buy a nice guitar. I bought my first electric guitar when I moved to Memphis, a Gibson with a DeArmond pickup, which I used with a small Gibson amplifier. But sometimes they'd get busted up, people would steal 'em and one time I even had a car wreck when an 18-wheeler ran into the back of me. At least that time I had a chance to get a new guitar on insurance."

"The greatest thing for me was to hear T-Bone Walker. He was a driving force in my learning to play" ***BB KING***

FINDING AMPS THAT SING

(Guitarist, August 2009)

"I like to use tube amps and I've always been crazy about Fender Twins; as long as they're in reasonable shape, they'll give me what I want. I like to have the volume and treble up all the way and bass at about number 6, with just a small hint of reverb. If I have the amp set up like that, I find I can change the sound to suit the hall if I need to, just by adjusting the controls on my guitar. I've always used those old Gibson Lab Series amps, too – you don't see them around too much these days, so every time I see one for sale I just buy it!"

1. BB King in 2011, photographed backstage at the Royal Albert Hall for *Guitarist* magazine

DOING THE WORK

(Guitarist, August 2009)

"If I'm lucky maybe I'll sit down with my guitar for half an hour a day [when out in the tourbus] – that's all. But it always felt as though I've had to work harder at it than other people. I've never really been able to play chords and that's why I've always had my band play the rhythm while I play the lead – I started out that way and I guess I just got lazy. I wouldn't want to sound just like T-Bone Walker or Barney Kessel, but it would be nice to feel sometimes that at least I was their equal."

NO QUITTING

(Guitarist, December 2011)

"It [the passage of time] made me know that I couldn't play very well. I hear some people playing so good – I hear them and say to myself, 'Oh God, I might as well quit.' Then the other half of my mind says, 'Well, how you gonna eat?' [laughs]. So that's one of the reasons I haven't quit."

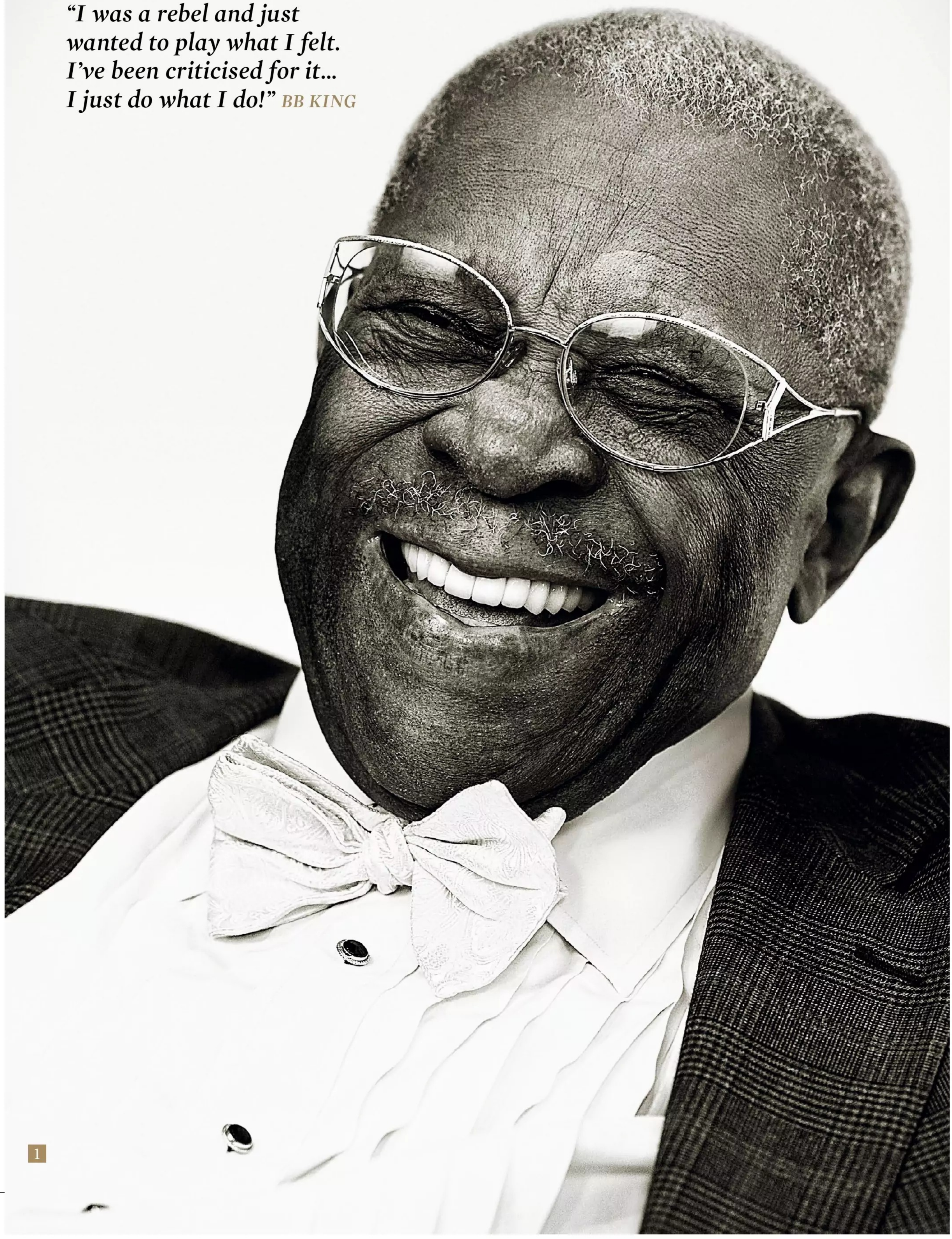
FEELING THE WAY

(Guitarist, August 2009)

"I wanted to play like Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson – even Jimmy Rogers did things I liked. I loved Django Reinhardt as well, but when T-Bone Walker came up with that single-string playing on the electric guitar, that did it – I just went crazy. I never really wanted to play just like them; I was a rebel and just wanted to play what I felt. I've been criticised for it and even read recently that I played 'watered-down blues'. Well, if they think that, they can write it – I really don't mind. I just do what I do!" G

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON

"I was a rebel and just wanted to play what I felt. I've been criticised for it... I just do what I do!" **BB KING**





BB King poses for a portrait at WDIA radio in Memphis, Tennessee, circa 1948. It was as a DJ here that Riley B King found his enduring stage name

REIGN SUPREME

Toasting BB King's centenary, Joe Bonamassa's A-list tribute album is no less than this titan deserves. We rewind the reels of a life story that's equal parts pain and redemption...

Compiled by Henry Yates

You suspect BB would smile to see it, maybe break out that warm butterscotch laugh – then give a disbelieving shake of the head at all the fuss. As Joe Bonamassa gathers the great man's acolytes for the all-star *BB King's Blues Summit 100*, it calls to mind the Charles Darwin quote that the company a man keeps is the best measure of his worth.

By that metric alone, King is a giant. And yet, to thumb through the guitarist's back pages is to be reminded of a towering figure in his own right: not just a player who changed the possibilities of his instrument, but an instrument of social change himself.

Immortality wasn't on the cards when Riley B King took his first breaths on 16 September 1925. Born some 20 miles from Indianola, Mississippi, the boy's lowly status was deepened by his parents' separation, and when his mother sought work on a farm in the hills of Kilmichael, seven-year-old Riley grew up fast, working corn and cotton fields, snatching at strands of education and the transcendence of the Elkhorn Baptist Church.

Riley's introduction to the guitar, too, had something of the spiritual about it. Some 80 years later, King could still picture the day a local reverend came calling and left his guitar unattended. Caught red-handed by the preacher man, King recalled his expectation of a scolding and his surprise at being encouraged to fret his first notes instead.

As for repertoire, the field hollers were a starting point, as were the sounds of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson crackling from Riley's Aunt Mima's wind-up gramophone. No coincidence that his later style would sit squarely between them, with a third flavour from Bukka White – a cousin of his mother and a future star – who impressed the boy with his mesmerising slide touch.

Riley soon found himself seeking solace in music for intensely personal reasons, having lost his mother and grandmother in quick succession (while still scarred from the death of his two-year-old brother, reportedly from eating glass). It fell to the orphaned 12 year old to survive alone in a cabin in the woods: a period when he withdrew from the world to silently process his grief. Mercifully, the farm owner had advanced the boy his wages, enabling Riley to buy his first guitar, a red Stella acoustic.

That instrument would be cruelly stolen, but when King joined another aunt and uncle in the Mississippi Delta, he saved for another six-string, put to good use upon joining The Famous St John's Gospel Singers. Soon, having secured a better-paid job as a tractor driver, Riley had the means to travel to Indianola on the weekends, soaking in the music that coursed through the city, while adding his own thumbprint as a busker.

FROM FARM TO STAGE

As an agricultural worker, Riley was ruled out of military service and by 1945 had become jaded by

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

his life as a sharecropper. Yet it took a happy accident to get him moving. Returning from the field one day, he watched in horror as his tractor surged forward and snapped its exhaust against the barn's doorframe. Panicking, Riley split for Memphis, the city whose fabled music boulevard, Beale Street, had appeared to him in dreams.

Hooking up with his cousin, Bukka White, 23-year-old Riley found work by day and filled his evenings with music. Already mesmerised by the electric sounds of Charlie Christian, now he picked up on Django Reinhardt and T-Bone Walker, while seeking an audience with the great harp-blower Sonny Boy Williamson II, whose radio spot made him a local kingmaker.

Riley got in front of Williamson, who recommended him for a regular gig at the 16th Street Grill in West Memphis. The weekly pay was $72 (which was a leap from the $22 he'd made on the tractor), but it came with a condition – Riley had to gain radio exposure and plug the eatery on air. The logical first stop was WDIA – programmed for African-Americans – and King couldn't believe his luck to be offered a daily 15-minute spot.



1

PHOTO BY COLIN ESCOTT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

It was around this time that Riley became BB, albeit by degrees. Each of the DJs had nicknames, and the new kid evolved from 'Beale St Blues Boy' to 'Blues Boy', then 'Bee Bee', and finally 'BB'. Just as vital to his identity, meanwhile, was the first guitar billed as 'Lucille' (a Gibson L-30 archtop, by all accounts) after a fracas at an Arkansas nightclub.

"Two guys started to fight and one knocked the other onto this big garbage can full of kerosene," King once told *Guitarist*. "When I got outside, I found out these two guys was fighting about a lady in the nightclub. [Her] name was Lucille. But then I realised I'd left my guitar inside. So I went back in for it – and I named it 'Lucille' to remind me not to do a thing like that again. And I haven't!"

1. Getting a 15-minute spot on WDIA radio was a lucky break for the young BB – or 'Bee Bee' as he is referred to here

2. BB poses with a Fender Esquire during a photoshoot in 1955

ABOUT TIME

Through his WDIA connections, King began his recording career in 1950, cutting a few sides with little success. The breakthrough came with 1951's *3 O'Clock Blues*, supposedly tracked at Memphis's Black YMCA using portable recording equipment and blankets on the windows to deaden traffic noise. It gave the 26 year old his first No 1 on the Billboard R&B chart in February 1952 – 10 further singles would hit the Top 20 by 1955 – and unlocked a higher orbit of venues that King travelled between in a tourbus he proudly nicknamed 'Big Red'.

But as the decade unfolded, rock 'n' roll began stealing his audience, and a disaster in 1958 almost put him back to square one, as Big Red was involved in a serious collision with a butane truck near Dallas. While the musicians survived, two truckers died in the fireball, and it transpired that King's insurance was invalid, leaving the bandleader personally liable. Deep in debt and robbed of the funds he'd earmarked for taxes, IRS agents began showing up at gigs to demand money – BB claimed he was then paying himself just $75 a week.

Each of the DJs had nicknames, and the new kid evolved from 'Beale St Blues Boy' to 'Blues Boy', then 'Bee Bee', and finally 'BB'


2

PHOTO BY GILLES PETARD/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Nothing to do but work his way out of the hole. As the 60s got underway, King was relentless as a road warrior and businessman, switching to ABC Records in 1962 in the hope this bigger label could take him to the next level. From King's standpoint, there was nothing particularly special about the show of 21 November '64 at the Regal Theatre in Chicago. Uniquely, however, that



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

concert was recorded and his 1965 release, *Live At The Regal*, would go on to rank among the best live albums of all time – a masterclass in one-note shiver and showmanship.

More significant for BB personally, however, was the February 1967 show at San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium, promoted by Bill Graham. The suburban audience gave the guitarist a standing ovation before he'd played a note, reducing King to tears; white hippy kids appreciating the rhythm and blues of a black man was entirely new territory.

King's exposure to this new demographic came courtesy of a fresh generation of electric blues stylists. Eric Clapton had re-energised the genre in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers; likewise Michael Bloomfield with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. That both of these hip young players, among others, tipped their hats did no harm for BB's profile. Coupled with a new manager in Sidney Seidenberg – "the smartest career move I ever made" – the fruitless work and financial hardship of the late 50s and 60s were finally receding.

3. The story of BB's 'Lucille' guitar has entered blues folklore and, in fact, all of his 335s and 355s bore that name. But this ES-330 with P-90s was, seemingly, the bluesman's choice when this picture was taken in 1969

WHAT A THRILL

The big pay-off came in 1970. A year earlier, King had hit the studio with producer Bill Szymczyk to record *Completely Well*. One track – *The Thrill Is Gone*, written in 1951 by Rick Darnell and Roy Hawkins – was a curveball, far from the standard I-IV-V structure. Szymczyk even added strings, marking a sonic departure for BB and giving the song true mainstream appeal. *The Thrill Is Gone* duly achieved King's highest-ever chart placing and won that year's Grammy for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance, with the bluesman's crossover confirmed by his appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, reaching an estimated audience of 20 million.

In 1971, for the first time, King toured overseas and was amazed to find fandom as far as London, Japan, Australia and Africa

With so many seminal bluesmen dying unknown in penury, it's heartening that the second half of King's life – from his mid-40s to his death at 89 – was an extended lap of honour. In 1971, for the first time, he toured overseas and was amazed to find pockets of fandom as far-flung as London, Japan, Australia and Africa.

The 80s were heralded by King's induction into the nascent Blues Foundation Blues Hall Of Fame, while Gibson honoured him with his own Lucille signature model (an ornate



4

PHOTO BY TT NEWS AGENCY/ALAMY

4. Part of BB's brief to Gibson for his signature ES-355 was no f-holes and a TP-6 fine-tuning bridge

ES-355 without f-holes and the addition of a fine-tuning bridge).

In 1987, King accepted a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, while a year later he met a new generation thanks to *When Love Comes To Town* – the duet sung with Bono on U2's *Rattle And Hum*. When the Irishman suggested they might bash through the song on acoustic guitars before recording, King politely demurred: "Gentlemen, I don't do chords..."

The 90s, too, began in auspicious fashion, with the guitarist awarded a National Medal Of The Arts by President George HW Bush, before opening the first BB King Blues Club on his beloved Beale Street. Having visited the White House a second time in 1995 to be honoured by President Bill Clinton as a Kennedy Center Honoree, two years later BB would even meet Pope John Paul II at the Vatican – and gift him a Lucille.

In truth, King's late career was more about his shows and ceremonial role than breaking ground in the studio. Yet there were bright spots: 2000's double-header with Eric Clapton, *Riding With The King*, earned double-platinum sales and a Grammy for Best Traditional Blues album (King's second win in the category, following 1998's *Blues On The Bayou*, among a lifetime haul of 15).

Few of the founding post-war bluesmen crossed over into the new millennium, but for a time, BB defied his advancing years. In 2004, he was presented with the prestigious Polar Music Prize – not to mention a cool one million crowns – by the King of Sweden. Closer to home, the following year saw officials break ground in Indianola for the BB King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center. Even 2006's purported UK 'farewell' tour – with support from Gary Moore – proved nothing of the sort, with 2011's Glastonbury Festival transported by his Pyramid Stage set. "At times, his playing is staccato and stripped-back, punctuating songs with curlicues of melody," wrote *The Guardian*. "At others it's mellifluous and masterful, showcasing shimmering vibrato."

Few of the founding post-war bluesmen crossed over into the new millennium, but for a time, BB defied his advancing years

But King was by then deep into his 80s, and so came a succession of 'last times'. Four days after Glastonbury, King would play the Albert Hall and meet *Guitarist* for our final interview.

In 2012, he paid a last visit to the White House, performing *Sweet Home Chicago* with President Barack Obama on guest vocals. On 3 October 2014, he stepped offstage at Chicago's House Of Blues to be diagnosed with dehydration and exhaustion, the eight remaining shows struck off.

King would never perform again, and died at the age of 89 in Las Vegas on 14 May 2015. The news was inevitable yet unthinkable, the sudden shattering of a tenet in all our lives as music lovers.

Writing in *The Guardian*, perhaps Bonamassa put it best: "The sun will rise and fall and BB King will play the blues. To say his loss is devastating to the blues community is an understatement. He defined the blues. He was the blues..." G

GREEN GUITARS

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SHARP DRESSED MEN

At the age of seven, witnessing BB King in action lit the path for Billy Gibbons' journey into blues guitar. Here, the ZZ Top legend shares BB's lasting impact and what happened after the great man said, 'Light is all right!'

Words Andrew Daly

As a young boy, by way of his father who was involved in the music business, a young Billy Gibbons got the chance to sit in and watch BB King do his thing live and in the flesh while in the studio. Surely, this would have impacted anyone, let alone an aspiring young six-stringer. But judging by Gibbons' ZZ-Top catalogue, which includes big-time hits and even bigger and very old-school bluesy-meets-rock licks, one could say that said studio foray impacted Gibbons more than most.

As for what he learned as a child watching a legend like King, Gibbons tells *Guitarist*: "The importance of some serious professionalism at that moment took hold. BB and company were, well... they were gettin' down to business with no foolin' 'round."

Later in life, Gibbons got to know King on a personal level, as well as a professional one. It was only then that he learned the veteran blues icon wasn't just a hell of a player but a quality person to boot. "BB was all about respecting the opportunity to become a spokesperson of a style [that] was inherited," Gibbons says. "And then, he developed that style to the level that enthralled friends, fans and followers at every turn."

Nowadays, Gibbons is the old-guard professor with a guitar in hand who's impacting millions. It's the way of things – a proverbial passing of the blues-guitar torch. But even now, when he has a quiet moment, Gibbons still looks back on King's body of work. "The early releases found from the Kent label's catalogue are all worth a deep review," Gibbons says of his favourites. "The classic shapes of tone and feel continued to surround BB's works right up to the climax of his output. Great stuff, all[-around]."



1. Now a player of his own renown, Billy Gibbons was shaped as a fledgling guitarist when, at just seven years old, he encountered BB King live and in his element

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

You have a history with BB King. For those who don't know, how did you end up sitting in on a session with him as a young boy?

"Interesting encounter, to say the least! A visit to Bill Holford's ACA Studios in Texas allowed me to jump aboard my dad's ride to make the trip. Upon arrival, my dad said, 'Take a seat over in that chair as a band is coming in to make a record!' Next thing I knew, some guys came in and began arranging some gear, and then I spotted a guitar case entering through the side door... carried by none other than BB King. I remained quiet, yet at the same time something exciting was unfolding. When they kicked it in, I knew that was for me!

"Gotta say, at seven years old, everything's still quite new, and being in that room at that moment was simply beyond."

Did sitting in on that session with BB do anything to stoke your passion for guitar, or was that a runaway train, so to speak?

"No question about it. The impact of that event zeroed in on the sound of electricity and hasn't changed since. Coincidentally, [at a much later point in time] the sound of an unexpected BB shout-out stretched across an avenue in Las Vegas and, as it turned out, we were both residing just a stone's throw down the same lane! Upon invitation, we immediately gathered round and reignited a serious friendship, taking on the troubles of the world [laughs.] And then began delving into the depths, going way, way back, touching on Texas, Memphis and Mississippi. Then there was the impact of some solid spiritual meaning, which appeared to have taken us both to that thing we called 'the burden', aka the electric six-string. Great tales ensued and the exchanges became ingrained with a sense of a righteous appreciation of this great American art form, the blues."

As you got older and more experienced as a listener and player, what did you notice about BB that perhaps an average listener wouldn't?

"Well, it's fair to say just about anyone feeling the genuine



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PHOTO BY TOM HILL/GETTY IMAGES

delivery from BB and his entire outfit could take note that something of value was unfolding. BB exuded some honest enjoyment while working through years of delivering his inimitable style and savviness."

2. Live on stage with ZZ Top in the mid-70s, Gibbons – like BB before him – learned to play with an authenticity that helped listeners connect to the music

"When BB asked to try a few licks on my guitar, he quickly smiled and asked, 'Why you working so hard?'" BILLY GIBBONS

Have you ever tried to play any of BB's music?
"For the recent 10 years, an annual holiday gathering in Texas, known as 'The Jungle Show', takes the stage alongside Jimmie Vaughan, Mike 'The Drifter' Flanigin and Chris 'Whipper' Layton, where we open the performances with our version of one of BB's great numbers [from the 60s] named *The Jungle*.

"We're doing our best to remain interpreters within the scope of the originator. It's nothing short of a blast."

There's a story that, as adult, you met BB properly when you were 22. Did he remember you from the session you sat in on as a child?
"Oh, yeah! In Las Cruces, New Mexico. We met somewhat informally while sharing a dressing room prior to the show, which sparked some lively discussions surrounding guitars. The recollection of that day back in the 50s from the ACA session in Texas came much later when we gathered to join the tribute recording as BB was celebrating turning 80!"

That same story says that BB asked to play your guitar and commented on how heavy your strings were. Is that true?
"Yes. At the time, using heavy-gauge guitar strings was thought necessary for getting a big tone. When BB asked to try a few licks on my guitar, he quickly smiled and asked, 'Why you working so hard?' He then laid it down to show off a new set of his super-light-gauge strings. It was at that very moment that everything turned around. As BB then said, 'Light is all right!' [laughs]"

How important was that switch to lighter strings when it came to harnessing your tone?
"Ironically, the switch to lighten the load, so to speak, was automatic. First came the set of nines, then eights. And now, thanks to Jim Dunlop, we've slithered down to sevens. They stretch, stay in tune and they don't break. BB, we thank you!"

If BB were here now, what tone secret or recommendation do you think he'd make?
"Prior to his departure, BB kindly took time to offer encouragement with enthusiasm toward keeping an eye on authenticity. In as much as one would suspect, BB left his mark through so many superb recordings and shared that specialness with many."

From your standpoint, how do you recreate BB's tone?
"Getting close to creating something of a BB tone is more about taking time to allow some soul searching and inspiration. T'ain't easy, yet BB would be first to offer a word of appreciation to go ahead with it." G

WELL PLAYED

When Jerry Jemmott was drafted in to play bass on the *Live & Well* sessions in 1969, he would find himself in awe of BB King's adventurous spirit – and part of a dynamic band that would produce three albums' worth of material

Words Andrew Daly

When Jerry Jemmott got the call to work with BB King on his *Live & Well* record in 1969, he was far from a new kid on the block. Jemmott was a go-to session bassist for Atlantic and so was brimming with confidence when he slung his bass over his shoulder and hit the studio.

"I was a jazz cat, but I grew up knowing BB King as The King of the Blues," Jemmott says of his early impressions of the guitarist. "He was dedicated to it down to the bone, but he liked jazz also. I found him to be humble, fearless, intuitive and quick-witted."

Jemmott recalls working on the *Well* side of *Live & Well* over two nights in New York City. He, along with several other studio aces, laid down so much music that King ended up with enough material for two follow-up records: 1969's *Completely Well* and 1970's *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*.

After that, Jemmott didn't see BB until 1982, when they rekindled their friendship, which lasted until the end of King's life. As for how working with King impacted him, Jemmott smiles, saying: "I would go on from there to record *My Way* with Irene Reid, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* with Gil Scott-Heron, and the *Live At Fillmore West* albums with Aretha and King Curtis. But bringing BB King's music and legacy to the world of popular music was an honour I will treasure and something he would never let me forget."



1. A personal snapshot shared by bassist Jerry Jemmott, who says he "grew up knowing BB King as The King of the Blues"

PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY JEMMOTT

What led you to work with BB in the late 60s?

"Bill Symzyck was producing the BB King 'live at the Village Gate' album, *Live & Well*. He said that he had only 20 minutes of good, quality-sounding material and convinced the record label to produce a studio album to complete the time needed for a full album. He called on drummer Herb Lovelle, who – with bassist Leonard Gaskin – had made Bob Dylan's first successful studio album, *Free Wheelin'*. They ended up calling me to play bass for the *Well* side of the record, which was in the studio."

It must have been a thrill to get that call.

"I got the call to do the session from Herb Lovelle at Jerry Ragovoy's legendary Hit Factory on 47th Street, where we often worked and were booked for two nights from seven to 10 at night, and 11 to two in the morning in the summer of 1969. These were normally live sessions with charts, no tracking. We all went down together: rhythm section, horns and vocals."

"His aura was something to behold, standing in front of me with Lucille and a legal pad full of lyrics" JERRY JEMMOTT

What was it like working with BB on those sessions, and what tracks did you work on?

"These 1969 sessions, where *Why I Sing the Blues* and The *Thrill Is Gone* were recorded, demanded my utmost attention and were so much fun. His aura was something to behold, standing in front of me with Lucille and a legal pad full of lyrics on a music stand, playing and singing with the conviction that is common among all great artists."

Did the songs come together off the cuff, or did BB have pre-written ideas for you to play?

"He was the only one who had anything written out initially, and we would write out stuff once we established our parts as needed. Herb Lovelle, Hugh McCracken, Al Kooper and later



2

PHOTO BY STEPHEN PALEY/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Paul Harris co-signed my unique interpretation of his music.

"When [BB] said in an interview for *Guitar Player* that "[Jerry] never does anything just because it's right to do, he likes to do it because it feels good doing it", it reminded me how perceptive and adventurous he was during those sessions that were so much fun."

What was BB like when he put his guitar down?

"We had a good time groovin' with The King. I remember him telling me that Billy Butler was the [soul/jazz] guitar player whom he admired most, and that he would put a lot of treble on his amp to get the sound he wanted out of Lucille. Working and being in his presence was magical."

How do you look back on your playing during those sessions with BB?

"Well, Bass *Player* magazine would go on to say, 'There is a problem in analysing Jerry Jemmott's transcendent funk-blues grooves with BB King; it's tough to maintain focus while you're shaking your butt off!" [laughs] Contrary to what Bill Symzyck has said, we were not 'young blues musicians'. Except for the keyboard players, me, Herb and Hugh had recorded together in a variety of genres quite often. And it was Herb's idea – who assisted in all of the mixing from the very first session onward – to put strings on *The Thrill Is Gone* when they were mixing and contracted the brilliant arranger, Bert DeCoteaux. Take note that after BB sings the first two bars, Herb plays the back beat only on beat 4, which complements my relentless samba groove, and he continues this pattern when BB sings, to the very end. This gave BB the support he needed to tell his story.

"There was a method to our madness! Between those June and November sessions, we recorded so much music that there was enough left over to go onto two albums, *Completely Well* and *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*."

Did you get to hook up with BB again later in life?

"It wasn't until 1982 that we would meet again. I went to his show in Newark, New Jersey, and as I entered his dressing room after the show, he announced to everyone who I was, got down on his knees and bowed, waving his arms up and down [laughs]. I was never so embarrassed, but he was that passionate and true in his sincerity.

"Over the next 30 years, I would check in on him every so often. Anybody who's worked for him will have a similar story to tell of his vast expressions of honesty and compassion." G

2. Pictured here in New York City's Atlantic Studios in 1969, Jerry also played sessions with Aretha Franklin, Chuck Berry and Mike Bloomfield, among many others

"[BB was so] perceptive and adventurous... Working and being in his presence was magical" ***JERRY JEMMOTT***

LUCILLE'S LEGACY

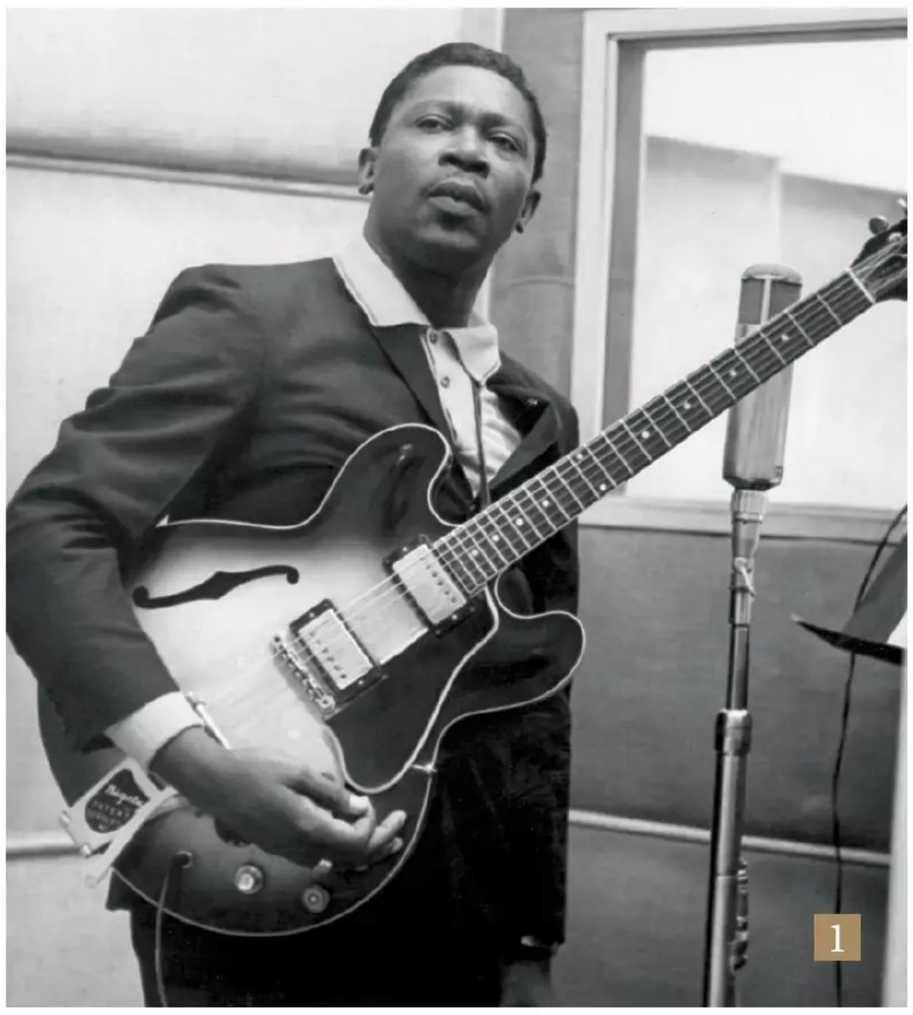
BB King will forever be known as the great bluesman who always played a Lucille. But what kind of guitar was BB's Lucille?

Words Tony Bacon

It's safe to say that BB King was a Gibson man through and through. Aside from his brief dalliance with a Fender Esquire in the 50s, BB's favoured first-call guitars all started their lives at a Gibson factory.

The teenaged Blues Boy's first instrument was a modest L-30 f-hole acoustic bought around 1940, soon going electric with a retrofit DeArmond pickup. In the 50s, as well as that Fender Esquire, he played a few other Gibsons, including a Byrdland, an ES-125 or an ES-175, as well as an ES-5N – influenced by his hero T-Bone Walker, who used an identical instrument.

By the early years of the 60s, BB had settled on a sunburst ES-335 with Bigsby, a custom order with a 345-style Varitone switch and stereo wiring. Occasionally, he played a regular 345, but this 335/345 was clearly a favourite of BB's, likely the guitar he played on his legendary *Live At The Regal* recording in November '64.



Quite how many Lucilles there were is unclear, although in BB's 1996 autobiography he was already up to number 16...

Later in the 60s, BB shifted to the model that's now most associated with him. Gibson's top semi-solid, the ES-355, was a luxurious guitar that seemed the right kind of high-end instrument for a musician considered by then to be one of America's most impressive bluesmen.

BB continued to attract new fans, swelling the ranks of the blues faithful, and maintained his seemingly endless life on the road and in the studio. Meanwhile, Gibson decided to build on its successful endorsement deal with BB to develop a signature model, thanks mostly to the enthusiasm of the company's R&D boss Bruce Bolen and salesman Dennis Chandler.

The first signs of this closer link to BB had come in the shape of a one-off guitar that Bolen presented to BB in 1978. This ornate 355 had floral fingerboard markers like those of the contemporary Les Paul Artisan, and engraved into the tailpiece cover was a touching message: "To BB King: An artist's music represents his sensitivity, growth, and way of life. A legend in your own time, this guitar is a symbol of our growth together. With sincere appreciation, Your friends at Gibson."

BB played that guitar for a few years, but by summer 1980 he'd switched to another new Gibson, a prototype much closer to the forthcoming signature model. Bolen had explained to BB that its body would not have f-holes, to allow for more volume with less feedback – and the visual bonus of a sleekly distinctive look.

Production versions finally appeared during 1981: the BB King Standard, with a list price of $1,389, and the BB King Custom, at $1,789. They had several Gibson high-end features, including Crank fold-out tuner winders, a TP-6 fine-tuning tailpiece, a Tune-o-matic mounted into Sustain Sisters brass studs, two 'Pat-Appl-For' humbuckers, and stereo circuitry. The Custom boasted gold-plated metalwork and a Varitone, while the Standard had chrome-plated hardware and regular controls. The Standard lasted only a few years, but a Custom-like model is still in the line today as the BB King Lucille Legacy, alongside an Epiphone BB King Lucille.

Through most of his long and successful career, BB played a series of 355s, each one in turn known to him as Lucille. Quite how many Lucilles there were is unclear, although in his 1996 autobiography BB said he was already up to Lucille number 16.

Back in 1969, when Gibson and BB signed their endorsement deal, BB soon began to appear in publicity material. A striking ad from the early 70s celebrates "the man and the woman" – BB King is the man, of course, and "Lucille, the King's Gibson guitar" is the woman. "They've been places few ever dream of getting," ran the ad's copy. "To the bluest. The lostest. The downest. To the top of the heap. The mountain. The world. If you're going places on the guitar, wouldn't it be great to travel with a woman like Lucille?" G

1. After playing a variety of different models, including an ES-175 and ES-5N, by the early 1960s BB settled on the guitar type he would always be known for

2. This limited-edition Gibson Custom tribute to BB's *Live At The Regal* ES-335 features a mono Varitone switch – King was apparently a big fan of the 'honky' position 2

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



Tony Bacon's latest book is *Electric Blues! T-Bone Walker And The Guitar That Started It All*, available exclusively from **regentsounds.com**

By the early years of the 60s, BB had settled on a sunburst ES-335 with Bigsby, clearly a favourite and likely used on 'Live At The Regal'

BRITPOP BEAUTIES

A 1963 Fender Stratocaster and 70s Höfner 500/1 violin bass guitar recently went under the hammer with interesting connections to Noel Gallagher and Ocean Colour Scene respectively. We discover more...

Words Huw Price **Photography** Matt Lincoln

Many vintage Strat fans will have a favourite year, and 1963's features tick a lot of boxes. Of course, having a famous owner never does any harm to a guitar's value and – although not best known as a Strat guy – Noel Gallagher owned and played this one. Gardiner Houlgate's dedicated guitar auctioneer Luke Hobbs takes up the story.

"The Strat has had a body refinish and a replacement pickguard. There are some body stamps under the 'guard with four numbers and the initials 'BK'. Somebody suggested to me that they might indicate a factory refinish, but I don't believe that.

"The electrics are largely original and there's no evidence that the pickups have been rewound, but the volume pot has been replaced. The original has been retained in the case, and the potentiometer codes are dated the ninth week of 1963. The saddles and tuners are original, but the strap buttons have also been changed, and it comes in a 1990s-era tweed hard case bearing an Oasis stencil.

"Besides the Noel Gallagher connection," Luke continues, "it's basically a player-grade '63 Strat, but it benefits from a really good refret with larger than vintage wire that enhances playability. The neck profile is absolutely classic for the year and the one that everybody seeks. It has a bit of chunk, but nothing too much, and it's just edging towards the bigger '64 profile.

"We have no information about what records it may have been used on. The guy who is selling it was after an early 1960s Strat, went into Vintage 'n' Rare in Bath and the guitar just caught his attention. There was no mention at all of Noel Gallagher when he was trying it out and it was only after he had paid for the guitar that they brought the case out and he saw the stencil.

"The shop told him that it had allegedly been one of Noel's guitars, but they hadn't mentioned it since he was an older gentleman and they didn't think he'd have any interest in Oasis. Later on, Andy Lewis at Vintage 'n' Rare was sent a letter from a company of solicitors with an attached photograph purporting to show Noel Gallagher's Stratocaster propped up against a Marshall stack. They also apologised for taking so long to locate the photo and hoped that it could be passed on to the new owner. The photo has the guitar's serial number inscribed on the back, along with a note saying 'demos for the new LP'. Also inside the case is a hand-written Bill Puplett job ticket that shows the guitar's serial number and the name of Jason Rhodes; he was Noel's guitar tech at that time.

"So with the case stencil, solicitor's letter, photograph and job ticket, we think it's highly probable that it was Noel's guitar. Through people I know who have done work for him, I have tried to make contact with Noel's camp to glean some further information, but as always with these famous-artist things it's like hitting a brick wall.

"Funnily enough, when the owner first contacted me a couple of years ago, he just said he had a '63 Strat he was thinking about selling and I gave him a hammer price estimate of £6,000 to £8,000. He didn't even mention Noel Gallagher until he brought it in for evaluation and that's when I had to raise my estimate quite substantially.

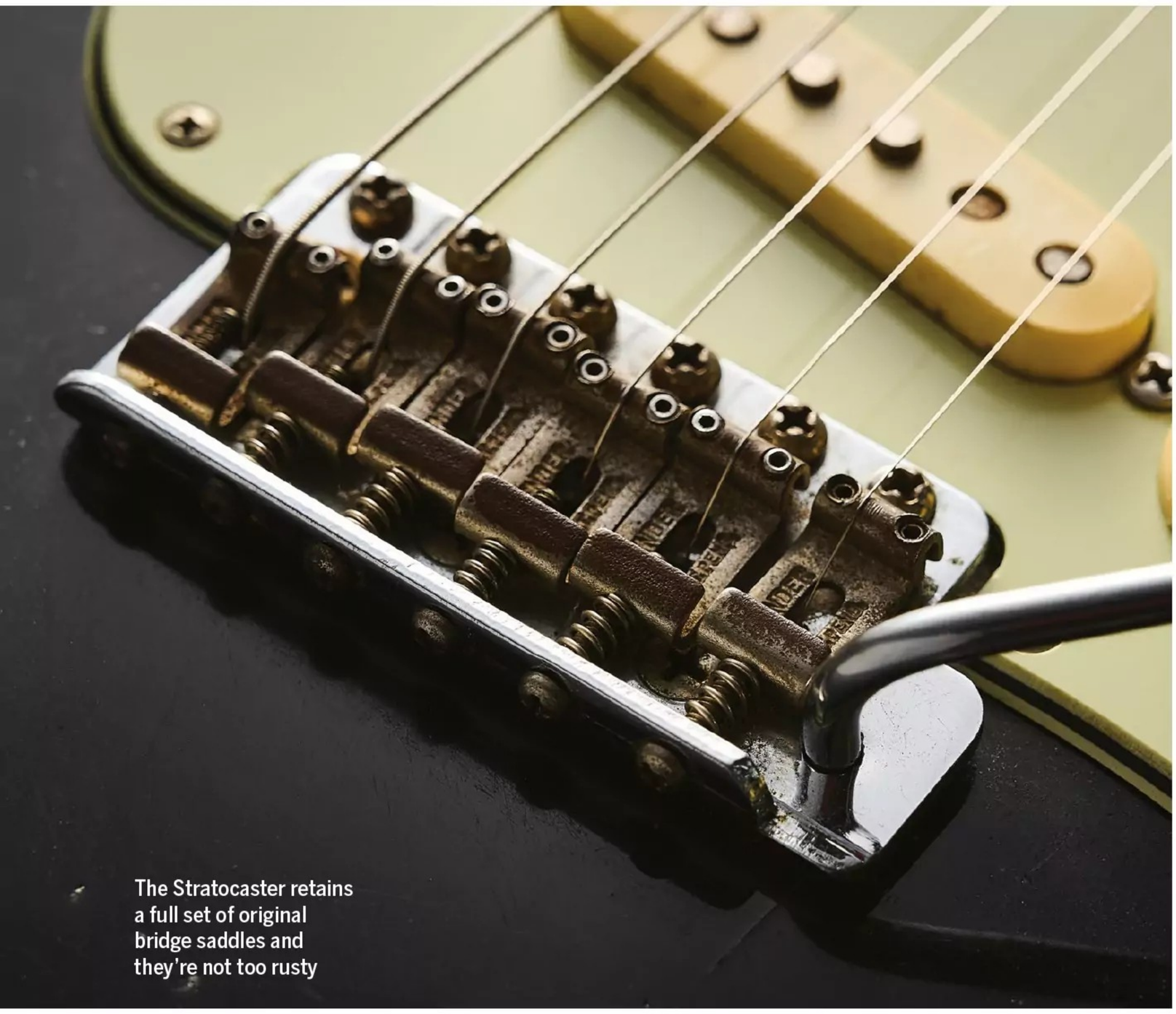
"He was also moving on an ES-335, and when I gave him my initial estimate he wasn't that interested in selling the Strat because it does sound excellent and he thought he'd have trouble finding another one that good. But with a potential hammer price several thousand pounds higher, he changed his mind.

"Oasis are hot at the moment [due to the 2025 tour], and a lot of Oasis-related gear

"[The owner] didn't mention Noel Gallagher until he brought the guitar in for evaluation, and that's when I had to raise my estimate..."

LUKE HOBBS

Both these guitars have been owned and played by well-known British guitarists and come with the provenance to prove it



The Stratocaster retains a full set of original bridge saddles and they're not too rusty

has come up for sale. So you could argue that the market has been a little diluted by excess stock, but there can't be that many pre-CBS Strats that were owned by Noel."

Höfner 500/1 Violin Bass

Höfner violin basses will forever be associated with Paul McCartney, but as with so many of the Fab Four's iconic instruments, the Beatles association has never resulted in stratospheric market values or collector frenzies. Very decent and original Gretsch Duo Jets, Tennesseans or Country Gentlemen, Epiphone Casinos or even Gibson J-160Es can still be purchased for less than the cost of pre-CBS Strats or early 60s ES-335s.

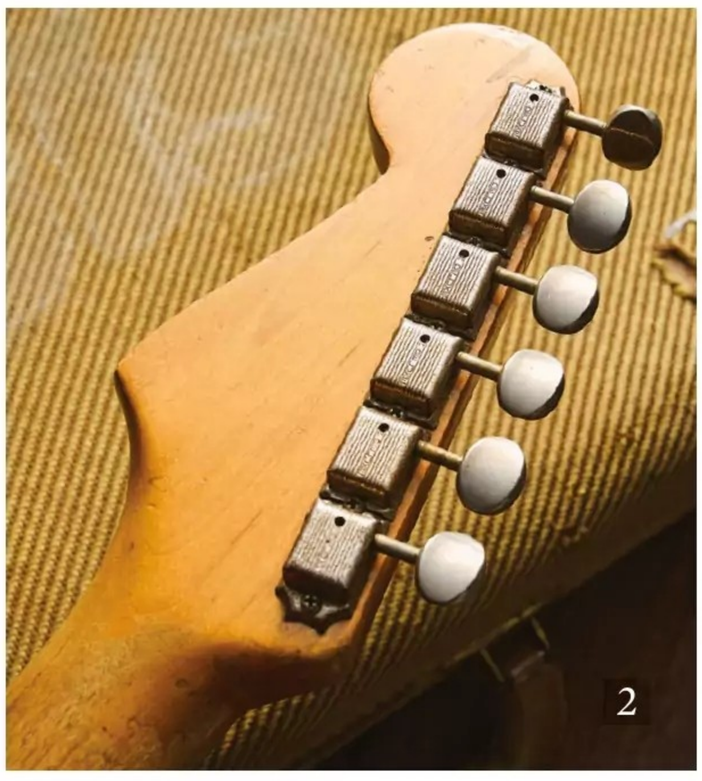
With Fender's first electric bass appearing in 1951 and the Gibson EB-1 following in

"The neck profile of this '63 Strat is absolutely classic for the year – it has a bit of chunk"

LUKE HOBBS



1. Both the tremolo block and spring claw appear original here on this '63 model, and the tremolo is set up with three springs

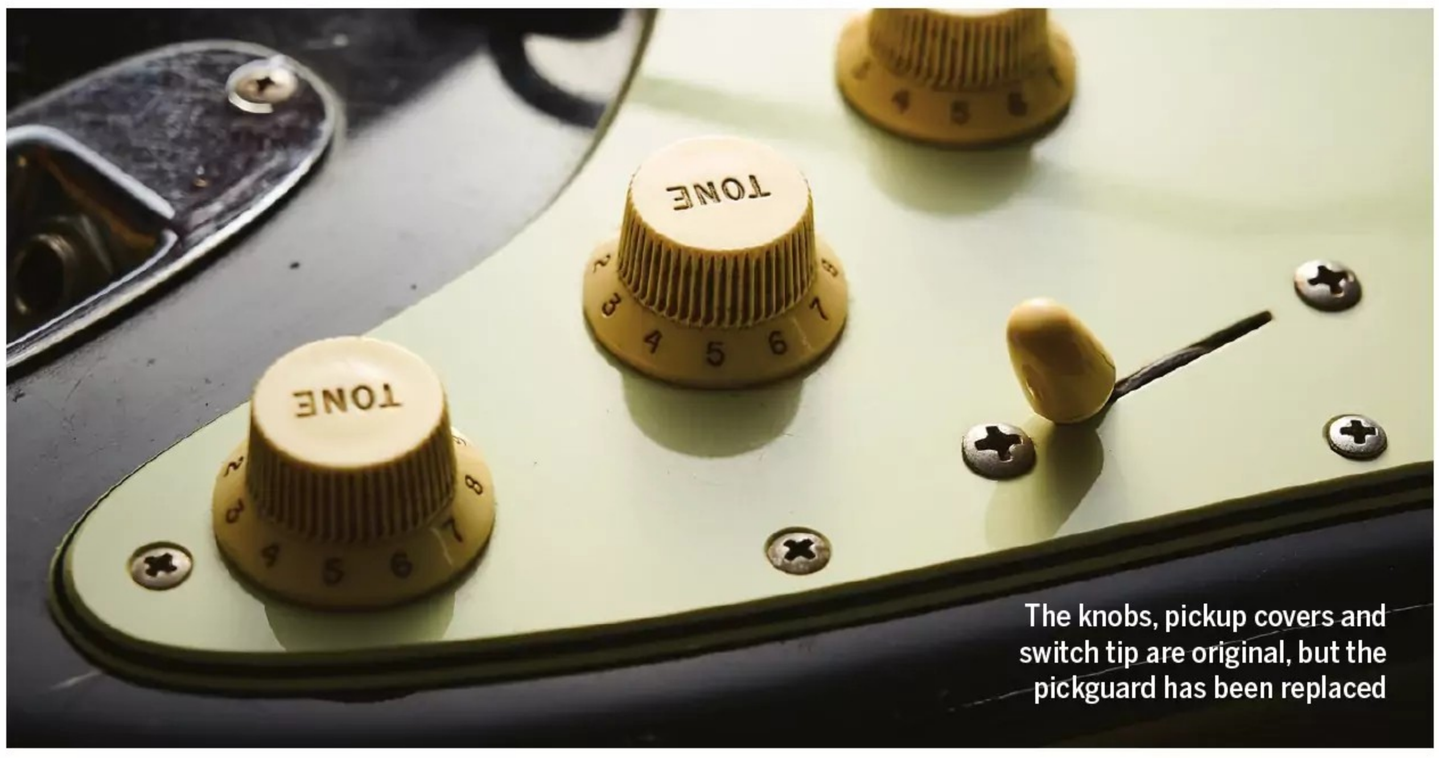


2. A period-correct set of single-line Kluson tuners is fitted to the neck and there is no evidence of aftermarket units having been fitted

1953, Höfner wasn't too far behind. Höfner was a long-established maker of violin family instruments and Walter Höfner had the idea of marrying a maple guitar style neck to a bass viol-shaped body. The resulting 500/1 Violin Bass was launched at the 1956 Frankfurt Muiskmesse in Germany, and glossing over its physical resemblance to Gibson's EB-1 is probably the most diplomatic option.

Bodies were made from laminated wood pressed into arches both front and back – although earlier backs were flat. On the back the outer layer was generally figured maple (or possibly sycamore) and on the front it was spruce. Early models had an oval control plate, but by the time the future Sir Macca acquired his, 500/1s had the better-known rectangular version with two volume control knobs and three switches.

If you've never played a 500/1, the switches can be somewhat baffling. The Bass On switch actually turns the bridge pickup off, and the Treble On switch turns the neck pickup off... The uninitiated may assume that these switches should be in the 'on' position in order to hear both pickups together, but there won't be any sound at all. To get the pickups working together both switches must be in the off position. The Rhythm/Solo switch promises a bass boost in the solo position, but in actuality it merely bypasses the Rhythm mode's preset bass cut.



The knobs, pickup covers and switch tip are original, but the pickguard has been replaced



While the neck retains its original finish, the body has been treated to a black refinish



In addition to retaining its original decal, the headstock has never had a second string tree added



Earlier Höfner 500/1 basses had open-geared tuners, but these are covered and were probably made in Germany



It may just seem like a 'Beatles bass', but Höfner 500/1 pickups, layouts and controls underwent numerous changes

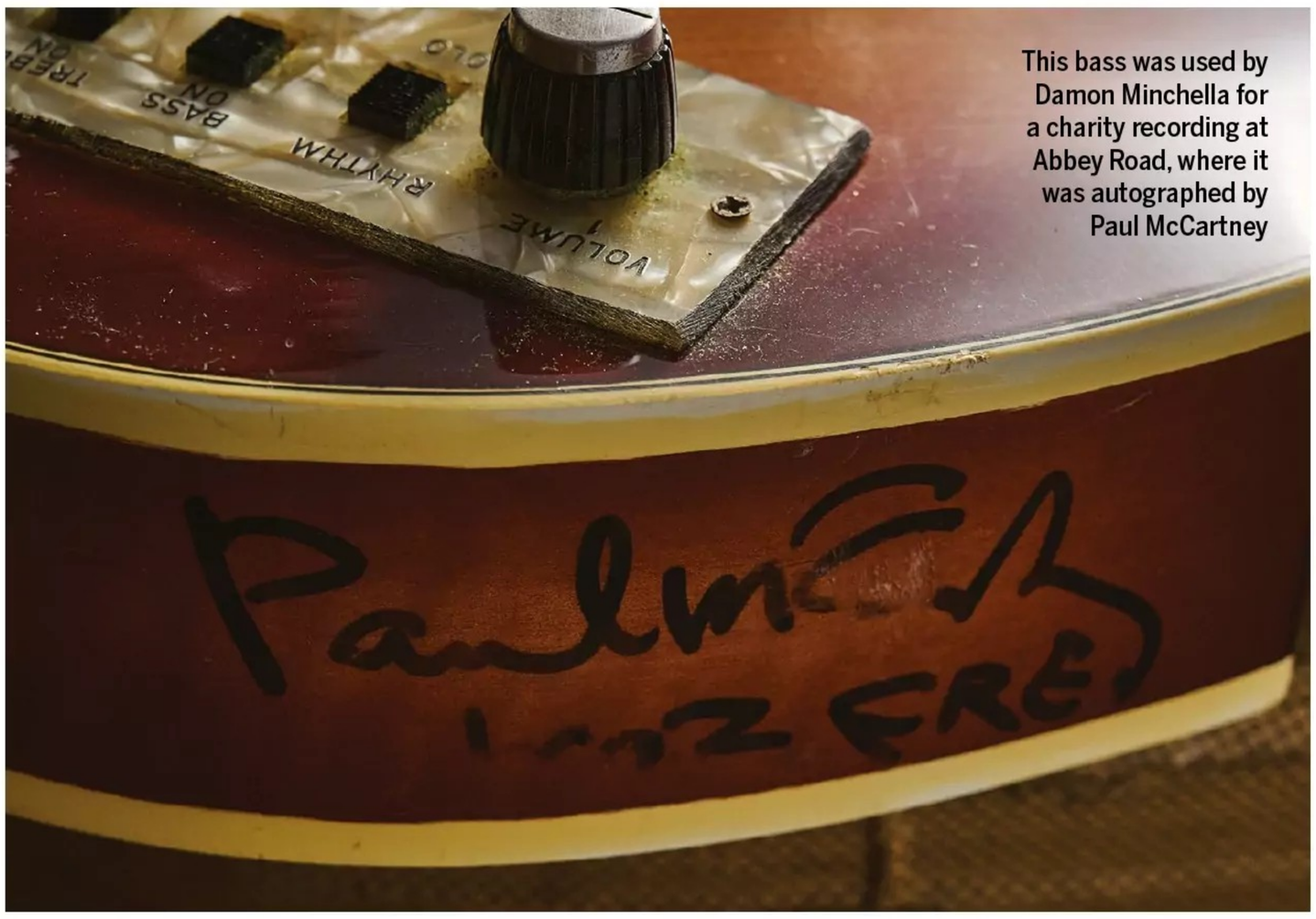
Earlier 500/1s had closely spaced single-coil pickups with black plastic covers before Höfner introduced metal-covered 'toaster top' pickups around 1960. The following year Höfner changed to a 'diamond' top design, and in 1962 the pickup spacing was widened to give each pickup a more distinct voicing and increase the tonal range.

The 511 pickup arrived in 1963, with distinctive 'staples', threaded steel pole screws and Alnico magnets. In 1967 Höfner introduced the "high efficiency" 513 'blade' pickups with ceramic magnets for increased output that are fitted to this example.

The 500/1's switches can be baffling. Bass On turns the bridge pickup off, and Treble On turns the neck pickup off

Violin basses started out with traditional dovetail neck joints and they are prone to failure. No doubt Höfner became aware of the problem because sometime during the 1960s the joint was changed to a mortice and tenon design with a greater surface area for the glue.

Most modern bassists would probably regard Höfner 500/1s as novelty instruments that can provide a distinct sonic flavour once in a while, but not everyday players. But their short 762mm (30-inch) scale, lightweight construction and engaging unplugged tone makes them ideal for the guitarist who likes to dabble with bass.



This bass was used by Damon Minchella for a charity recording at Abbey Road, where it was autographed by Paul McCartney

This pictured bass was formerly owned by Damon Minchella, of Ocean Colour Scene fame, and used on the *Moseley Shoals* and *Marchin' Already* albums. "The main bit of provenance, however," Luke Hobbs tells us, "is that Minchella used the bass at Abbey Road Studios on a recording of *Come Together* [for *The Help Album*], a 1995 charity album Paul McCartney was putting together. McCartney was playing and producing, and the band included Paul Weller, Noel Gallagher, Steve Cradock and Steve White, performing as supergroup the Smokin' Mojo Filters.

"There's a video of the session and the Höfner bass Minchella was using had blade pickups just like this one. He was also able to confirm that Paul McCartney autographed the body at the session. The signature and the fact it was used on a charity record with links to The Beatles adds more to the value than anything else in the Höfner's history.

"It's actually a 1970s 500/1 model with its original Selmer case in good unmodified condition. Everything works and it doesn't appear anything has been changed. There are a few dings and marks, along with some minor fretwear. It is what it is and this type of instrument tends not to get battered."

Both instruments sold at Gardiner Houlgate's December 2025 auction with the 1963 Stratocaster achieving a hammer price of £9,000 and the Höfner bass £7,200. G

Guitarist would like to thank Luke Hobbs and Gardiner Houlgate
www.guitar-auctions.co.uk



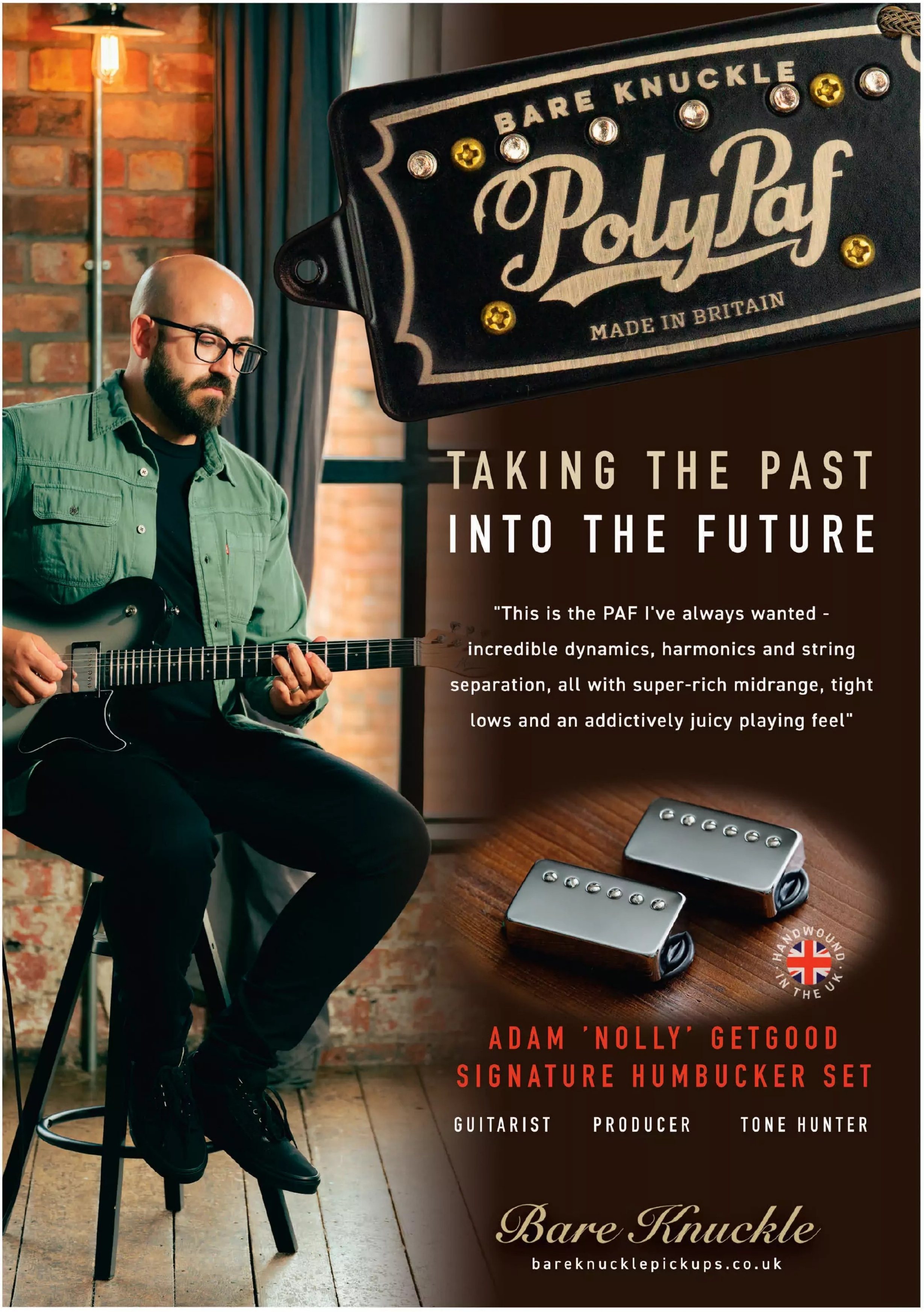
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3. As a 1970s example, this 500/1 model has widely spaced 513 'blade' pickups with ceramic magnets

4. The control panel has later-style knobs, but it does retain Höfner's confusingly labelled switches!


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More Marr

It's been 13 years since we saw the first Johnny Marr Jaguar, and with little fanfare his second signature landed at the end of 2025. What's changed?

Words Dave Burrluck
Photography Neil Godwin



FENDER JOHNNY MARR SIGNATURE SPECIAL JAGUAR £2,949

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

What You Need To Know

1 That looks a bit different from Johnny's first signature Jaguar.
Yes, it's only offered in one colour this time around and it's 'limited', although Fender doesn't say if that's a specific number or limited simply to demand. The big difference here is the trio of lipstick single-coil pickups.

2 So, Fender is now making lipstick pickups, then?
No, these come from Kent Armstrong and are referred to as 'custom designed', but Fender doesn't give us any more info or specifics. Don't forget the first JM Jaguar used Bare Knuckle-wound Jaguar-style pickups, so the new model continues that theme.

3 There's a third switch on the control plate next to the low E string. What does that do?
While the upper two switches are the same bright switches from the original model, the lower switch is specifically for the middle pickup, which can be switched off, on or solo'd. We'll explain in the review.

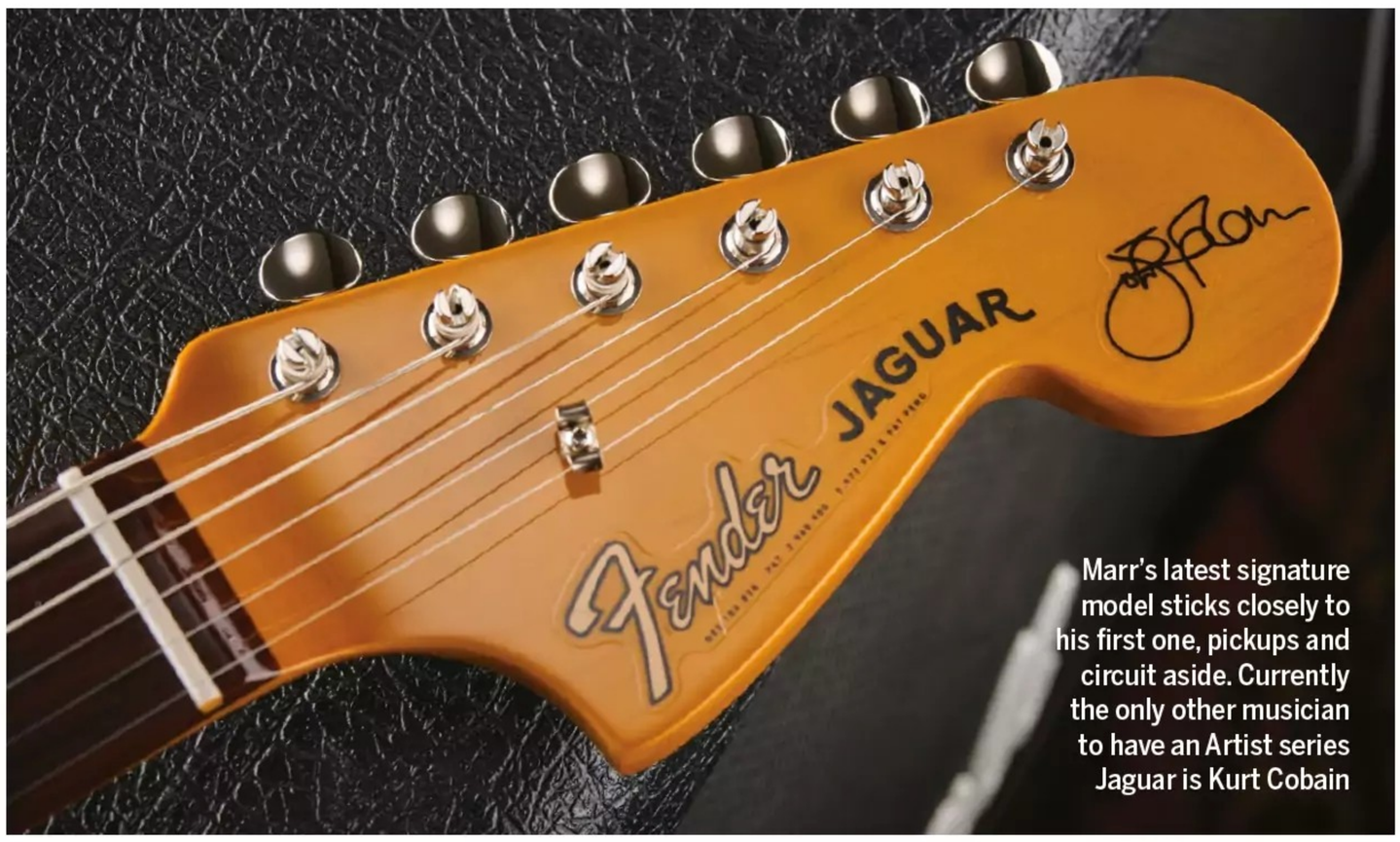
Johnny Marr's first Fender signature was a celebration of the Jaguar but also with a hint of, 'okay, let's fix the bits that don't work'. This new Special Jaguar follow-up doesn't really change the sentiment except for the obvious addition of three lipstick pickups (that we associate with Danelectro, of course), which replace the custom-wound Bare Knuckle Jaguar-style pickups of the original.

You're certainly not going to mix up the iterations; the lipsticks' unique appearance in their domed split-tube chromed covers almost adds a boutique-style mash-up vibe. The bright plating also matches the guitar's lower control plate and upper shoulder 'rhythm circuit' plate, plus the additional treble-side chrome plate, which originally held three slide switches to switch each pickup on/off, and the classic 'strangle' switch, which mounts the four-way lever switch for pickup selection here.

It's not the only change as, like the original, there's no rhythm circuit: that bass-side chromed plate holds the 'universal' bright switch and another bright switch for the lever switch position 4 (bridge and neck in series). On our new model the addition is the lowest-placed third switch, a three-position switch specifically for the middle pickup: off, on and solo'd.

Pickup and control changes aside, the guitar follows the original JM Jaguar with its all-nitrocellulose gloss finish, although this time the only colour offered is black. Its offset body is still alder and also features subtly enhanced body contours, while the maple neck retains its vintage style with the body-end truss rod adjustment and a profile based on Johnny's 1965 Jaguar, like the original.

While vintage-style 'small' frets are retained, this time they're on a more modern 241mm (9.5-inch) radiused



Marr's latest signature model sticks closely to his first one, pickups and circuit aside. Currently the only other musician to have an Artist series Jaguar is Kurt Cobain

1. One of Marr's changes here and on the original model is the Mustang-style bridge saddles. For this model they have slightly narrower 'modern' string spacing

rosewood 'board; the first version used the original 184mm (7.25-inch) camber.

Another area that Johnny tweaked was the classic offset bridge and vibrato tailpiece. The former swaps the individual threaded-rod height-adjustable saddles for the Mustang style, which uses three different-diameter solid-brass barrels (each with a central string groove) to create the string camber, which can't move. The original signature had wider vintage-style string spacing of 56.5mm; here that's narrowed to 52.5mm and, as a result, the outer strings sit in a little more.

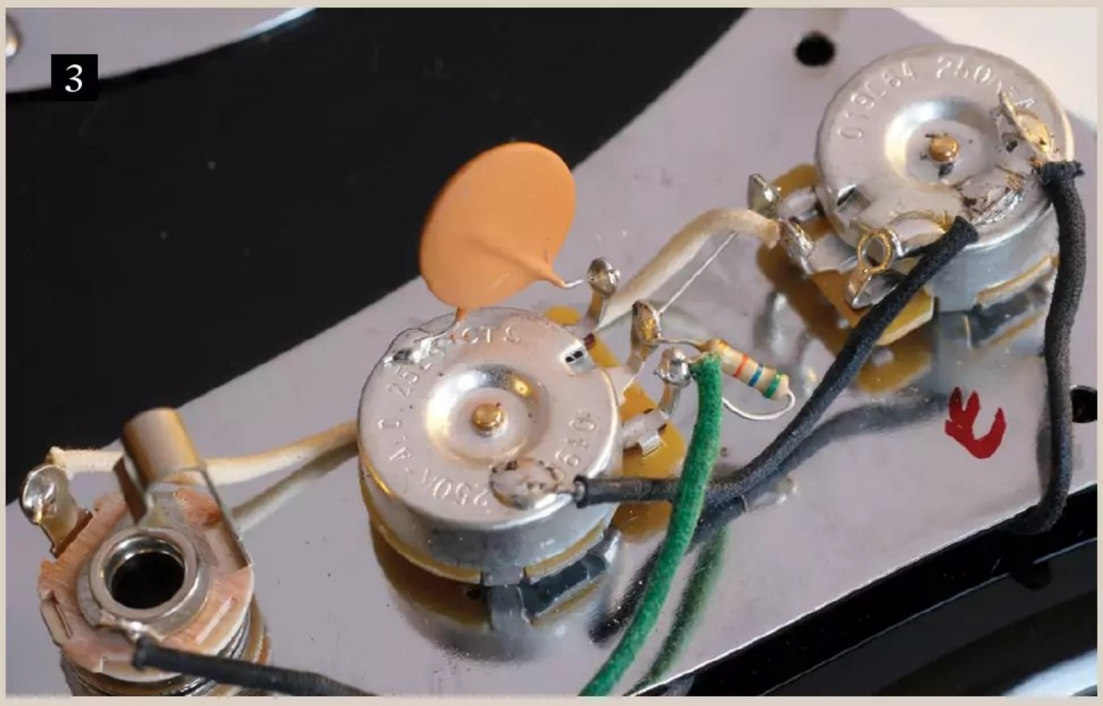
Another tweak is the nylon 'locks' for the bridge's needle-point height-adjustment screws, which stop the screws moving as the originals tend to. Here, these are stainless steel and larger in diameter than the standard Fender screws. There's also another nylon collar for the push-in vibrato arm, which means it's not only tight-fitting, but it stays put where you want it and is also really responsive to the lightest of touches.

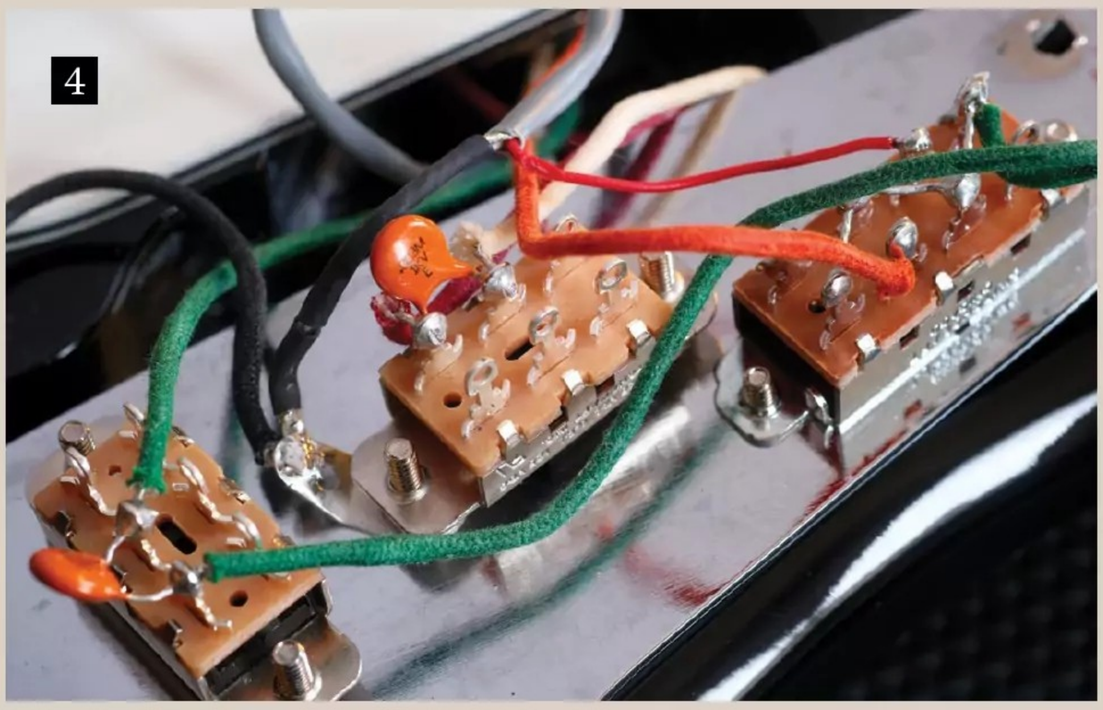
Many of the tweaks for the original guitar – and that feature on this new Special, too – were conceived with the help of the late Bill Puplett, Johnny's long-time repair person of choice. For example, Johnny shares that it was Bill who suggested swapping to Kent Armstrong lipstick pickups for this Special. Meanwhile, the hardware tweaks, such as those bridge-post locks and the vibrato arm stabilisation, were conceived by engineer John Moore of Staytrem fame.

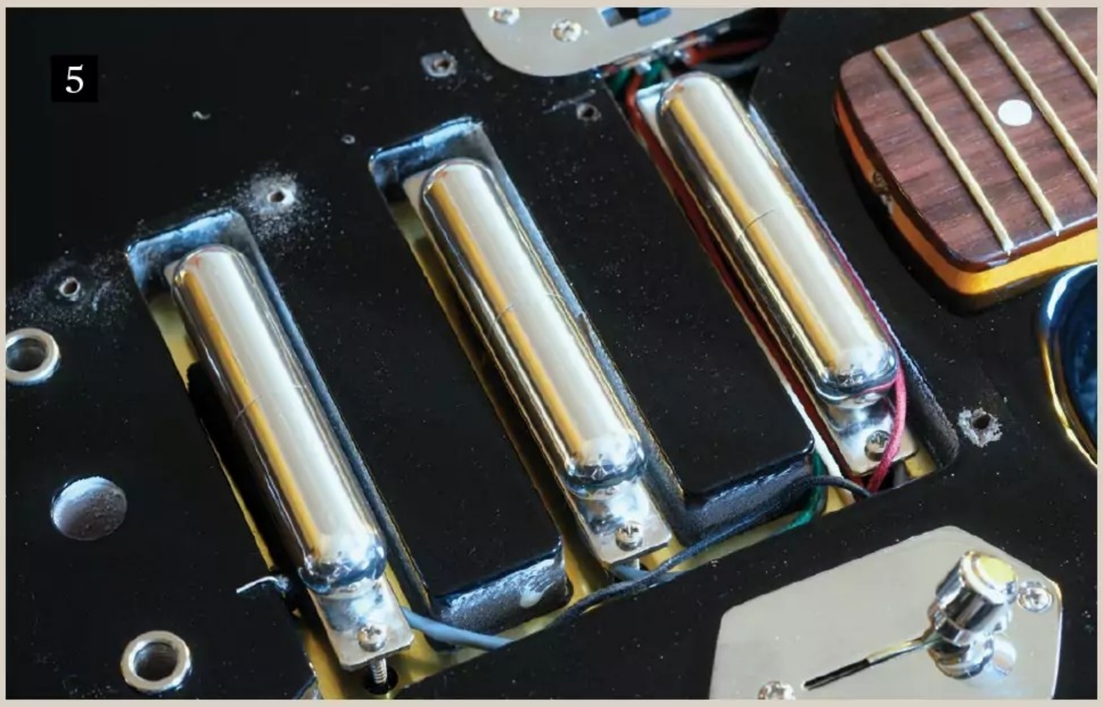
2. The Marr Jaguar dispenses with the original's dual circuit; this four-way lever switch allows neck and bridge pickup in series



Many of the tweaks were conceived with the help of the late Bill Puplett, Johnny's long-time repair person of choice


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UNDER THE HOOD

A unique guitar that rightly deserves its own circuit

The conventionally placed control plate houses the master volume and tone, plus the output socket. So, as ever, a right-angled jack helps prevent your lead from getting in the way. Both control pots are 250kohms audio taper. There's a large ceramic disk capacitor (103k code) rated at .01µF, too, quite a light value that doesn't over-darken the sound and fully 'off' it's usable. But there's also a small 56k resistor placed in series on the tone control from where the universal bright switch's hot output joins the pot to where the signal passes out to the volume control from the centre lug. You'll see this on certain vintage-spec Jaguars and also on the original JM Jaguar – and exactly what it does is both quite complex and highly debated. But, sonically, it does seem to be very reactive, slightly pulling down the volume as you roll it back and, as we say, it's very usable across its whole travel.

As to the bass-side panel, here we see three Switchcraft slide switches, and both the upper switches each use the same .003µF capacitor to achieve the bass-cut of the bright switches (aka the 'strangle' switches). Again, these are the same value you'll find on the vintage-spec models and the first JM Jaguar.

Another oddity of the design is the lipstick pickups. We didn't notice immediately, but unlike a classic Strat single coil, there's no obvious way to adjust them in terms of height. Even investigating how the pickups are mounted isn't straightforward, as although the 10-screw off-white plastic scratchplate looks easy enough to remove, because the bridge mounts over the 'plate you have to remove (or slacken) the strings and *then* the bridge before you can get it off.

With the 'plate removed you can see the pickups are direct-mounted to the body, rather like the original mounting of the Telecaster's neck pickup – namely, to adjust that you have to remove the scratchplate. Of course, you can remove the 'plate, replace the bridge and re-tension the strings and then tweak your pickup heights to suit (the bridge pickup certainly was a little low on our sample) then slacken the strings, pull out the bridge again, re-screw the 'plate, re-mount the bridge and re-tension the strings and you're back to where you started! It's all a bit of a faff.

But with the bridge removed you can also see the difference with the posts here, which each have a nylon insert – the 'locks' – and you can see those adjustment screws are actually larger in diameter than the original screw and, of course, have a needle point so the bridge still 'rocks' as the vibrato is moved. Incidentally, the bridge here is stamped 'M' underneath, while the standard Fender American Professional Jazzmaster/Jaguar is stamped 'P'.

Fender offers no details on the Kent Armstrong 'split-tube' single coils. We suspect they follow the vintage spec with Alnico magnets and a slightly hotter wind. Our trio is graduated in output, measuring 5.64k (bridge), 5.45k (middle) and 5.11k (neck).

3. There's no treble bleed capacitor on the volume, but there is an additional resistor on the tone control (centre)

4. On the bass-side control plate are three push switches with the lower, larger switch (right) controlling the middle pickup in the circuit

5. With the scratchplate (and the bridge) removed you can see the direct mounting of the single coils

6. With the bridge removed you see the nylon locks and larger-diameter adjustment screws of the JM bridge (right) compared with the Fender Am Pro offset bridge

7. These custom-wound Kent Armstrong lipstick single coils are the main change to the new model, although the style dates back to the 50s and Danelectro

8. Unlike many more boutique-style offset designs, there's no contouring to the original-style neck heel

Feel & Sounds

Offsets can be heavy thanks to their enlarged bodies, and this sample isn't the lightest we've played, though it is trimmer than the original 2012 sample we had for evaluation. Strapped on, it has a very centred balance and, while it has that shorter scale, it doesn't feel small. It's a very comfortable feel. The same can be said for the neck profile, which is quite full in the hand, even in lower positions where it's a lot thinner, depth-wise, at 21mm than it is by the 12th fret, where it measures 25mm. This vintage-style profile is also structurally very sound and there's zero neck-flex here.

You really need to get your head around the expansive possibilities that the array of switches offer – particularly before you head off to a gig. First of all, it might have three pickups like a Stratocaster, but you can also run it as a two-pickup 'Telecaster' (like the original JM Jaguar), and that depends on where you set the lower-placed three-position push-switch on the bass-side panel. Pushed up towards the headstock, the middle pickup is out of circuit so the four-way switch on the treble side gives us bridge, both, neck, and neck and bridge in series like a Telecaster, with the four-way switch series mod. Move that lower push-switch to its centre position and the middle pickup is now added to the first three selector-switch positions, creating bridge and middle, all three, and neck and middle, while the previous series sound is now just the middle pickup. Finally, with the switch pushed down towards the bridge, the middle pickup is solo'd in all positions of the four-way switch.

Then we have the two bass-cut switches: the universal bright switch (the top one) moves left to right, or treble to bass side. In the treble-side position it's bypassed; in the bass-side position it's active on all selections on the four-way selector. The middle switch is another bright-switch, but for the bridge/

9. The classic Fender offset vibrato is again slightly tweaked with its nylon insert, which means the arm stays in place where you want it

10. The standard tuners are non-locking, but with the updates to the bridge, overall vibrato return-to-pitch is spot on. The system has a very smooth feel, too



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neck series sound. To add to the confusion this switch moves north to south, or up and down: in up position it's on; in down it's off.

To warm up our test amp, we use a '69 Telecaster with its long-serving Fender Custom Shop pickups and four-way lever switch to add the bridge/neck series voice. And the Special sounds a little polite in comparison. That's no bad thing, though, as the lipstick voices have something of a purity to them. There's a lot of attack, but at the bridge there's a relatively smooth high-end. The snap continues with the neck pickup, although it's a fuller and richer sound, of course. Quickly soloing the middle pickup – and, yes, it sits nicely between those two extremes – it's easy to hear why Johnny Marr wanted to effectively highlight this voice.

Bridge and neck in series is the biggest voice on the guitar, but it only appears with the middle pickup out of circuit. Switching the middle pickup to on (but not solo'd) we get bridge and middle (in parallel), which adds some Strat-y bounce. Likewise, neck and middle while all-three on (again in parallel) is a subtle shade in between: all three selections are a little softer sounding. We're beginning to feel spoiled for choice. The two bass-cut bright switches obviously thin out the low-end and enhance the honk.



Despite its tricky switching, the Marr just uses a master volume and tone control. The latter is very well voiced and really helps to tune the sound, not least at the bridge with some crunchy gain

If you're after articulate clean jangle and chime, well, this is your vehicle, not least with some – or quite a lot of – modulation. But while that may be a major draw, the Special works extremely well with some much more gained sounds, like a good Danelectro, from spluttery fuzz to heavier and much heavier voicings. Here, again, those bass-cut switches really work, tightening the low-end, and are a great tool for band playing and recording, helping to focus the sound.

One thing to note is that the tone control – which is wired a little differently from standard, and has a lower value capacitor – gives a very usable range and seems to slightly reduce the volume as it's initially rolled back. Subtle, yes, but another useful sonic-shaping tool.

Verdict

It certainly does what it says on the tin. This really is a Johnny Marr tool with all the brightness and articulation his style demands, but it's far, far from limited to our man in terms of its potential use. It also builds on the sonic options of his first signature: there's a bit more Strat in here, plus that 'all round' middle pickup, which can be solo'd. Yet dig a little deeper and there's a lot more to enjoy, especially when you get your head around the switching options, not to mention the very usable tone control, which does a pretty usable jazz-box impersonation when rolled down, before you turn it back up and launch into Spaghetti Western twang. It loves a pedalboard, too, and takes on yet another character with fuzz and overdrives.

> It remains a beautifully crafted piece with very sensible upgrades and stellar sounds

At the time of writing (at the end of 2025), it is the most expensive USA production Jaguar – nearly double the price of the recently introduced Professional Classic – so its considerable appeal will be somewhat limited, but it remains a beautifully crafted piece with very sensible upgrades and those stellar sounds. A serious outlay, then, but also a very serious and considered pro-level and quite unique instrument. G



FENDER LIMITED EDITION JOHNNY MARR SIGNATURE SPECIAL JAGUAR

PRICE: £2,949 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, custom shape (based on Marr's '65 Jaguar), bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.6mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'ivory' dot inlays, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, vintage style
HARDWARE: Fender Jaguar bridge with Mustang saddles and vintage style 'floating' tremolo tailpiece, split-post tuners — nickel/chrome plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 3x custom-wound Kent Armstrong Johnny Marr single-coil lipstick pickups, 4-position lever pickup selector switch, 3x slide-switches: Universal Bright Switch, Bright Switch for lever switch position 4, middle pickup off/on/only. Master Volume, Master Tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.89/8.56
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Original Johnny Marr Jaguar (£2,619) features a pair of Bare Knuckle Jaguar-style single coils and is available in Olympic White and Metallic KO (red)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black – gloss nitrocellulose neck/body

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
Tel 01342 331700
www.fender.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Very tidy build; nitro finish; expanded sounds from the three lipstick pickups and additional switching; superb vibrato/bridge improvements; very stable, tuning-wise

CONS No idea what 'Limited' means; you'll need to learn what the switches do; considerable outlay at nearly £3k

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FRIDAY 06 NOVEMBER **NEWCASTLE O2 CITY HALL**
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SUNDAY 08 NOVEMBER **LIVERPOOL EMPIRE**
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Jangle Belles

Lipstick single coils aren't common, but plenty of guitars use 'bright switch' style switching. Here's a selection

Words Dave Burrluck













YAMAHA REVSTAR ELEMENT RSE20 **£439**

This second-wave Revstar model retains the Dry Switch of the original series, which is very similar to the Jaguar's bass-cut control. Used here to create a more single-coil-like (but still hum-cancelling) optional sound to the full Alnico V humbuckers, this RSE20 is a good-sounding guitar that comes in a choice of five smart 'café racer' colours with chambered body and quite unique style. At this price, it's a good option as a modding platform, too.

https://uk.yamaha.com

DANELECTRO TRIPLE DIVINE **£750**

As the home of the lipstick single coil, Danelectro has been using these pickups since the 50s. The Triple Divine sports three Vintage 50s Lipsticks, the bridge pickup is overwound, while the switching is done Strat-style via the five-way lever switch. Nice touches such as a bone nut and Gotoh vintage-style tuners elevate this instrument from the more 'economy' style the brand is known for into something with that bit of extra class. Does it jangle? You bet!

www.danelectro.com

GRETSCH LIMITED EDITION ABBEY ROAD RS201 STUDIOMATIC **£1,249**

Reviewed on page 18 of this issue, this unique Abbey Road/Gretsch collaboration uses two Jaguar-style 'strangle' switches to emulate an Abbey Road piece of kit from the 50s called the Rumble Filter. Paired with 'custom' Filter'Trons, the two bass-cuts act like character switches for each pickup, trimming the lows and focusing the sound. Aimed at recording musicians, it's a classic early 60s-style Gretsch with a classy presentation.

www.gretschguitars.com







FENDER PROFESSIONAL CLASSIC JAGUAR **£1,599**

Introduced towards the end of 2025, the Professional Classic range is the entry point of Fender's USA production. Less expensive than Marr's vision, it's a viable modern/vintage hybrid with dual Coastline '65 Jaguar single coils and classic offset vibrato, but the circuit is simplified with Tele-style switching, the bass-cut 'bright switch' and modern playability with medium jumbo frets and a 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius. There's a choice of vintage-inspired colours, too.
www.fender.com

RICKENBACKER 330/6 **£2,299**

Every jangle-aimed popster needs a Rickenbacker, and while the brand keeps a low profile, models are still readily available. The semi-solid 330 needs little introduction and, of course, is available as a 12-string, too. The construction is all maple with a 21-fret, gloss-finished chechen fingerboard. The Hi-Gain single coils are a slight misnomer but provide classic cleans and more aggressive crunch. Rickys have quite a unique playing feel, but, really, every collection needs one of these!
www.rickysounds.co.uk

PRS S2 CUSTOM 24-08 **£2,299**

A typically well-turned-out PRS that's manufactured in the USA, this more affordable-level model covers a lot of sonic ground from its (also) US-made 58/15 LT humbuckers. The neat thing is that each humbucker has its own 'EQ' switch that provides single-coil chime (and stays humbucking). Then you have the excellent playability and the very in-tune vibrato. There's no 60s style, of course, but the sounds are there. There are also plenty of three-pickup Special models in the current PRS range, too.
www.prsguitars.com

More On The Floor

It's been a long time coming, but Line 6 has introduced its new flagship floor processor – promising advanced amp modelling technology and improved usability

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln



LINE 6 HELIX STADIUM XL FLOOR £1,980

CONTACT **Yamaha UK** WEB **https://line6.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **A new Helix? It's about time!** The original Helix has been around for 10 years, and although there have been various HX models in between, Line 6 has finally unveiled the official successor of its large floor processor.

2. **The competition has got a lot more sophisticated in the past decade.** That's true, and this new model reflects the tech changes with touchscreen operation, improved amp modelling and Wi-Fi, among other innovations.

3. **Is there more than one version?** Yes, this is the XL model, but there is also the Stadium Floor, which loses some of the socketry and doesn't have the treadle and scribble strips.

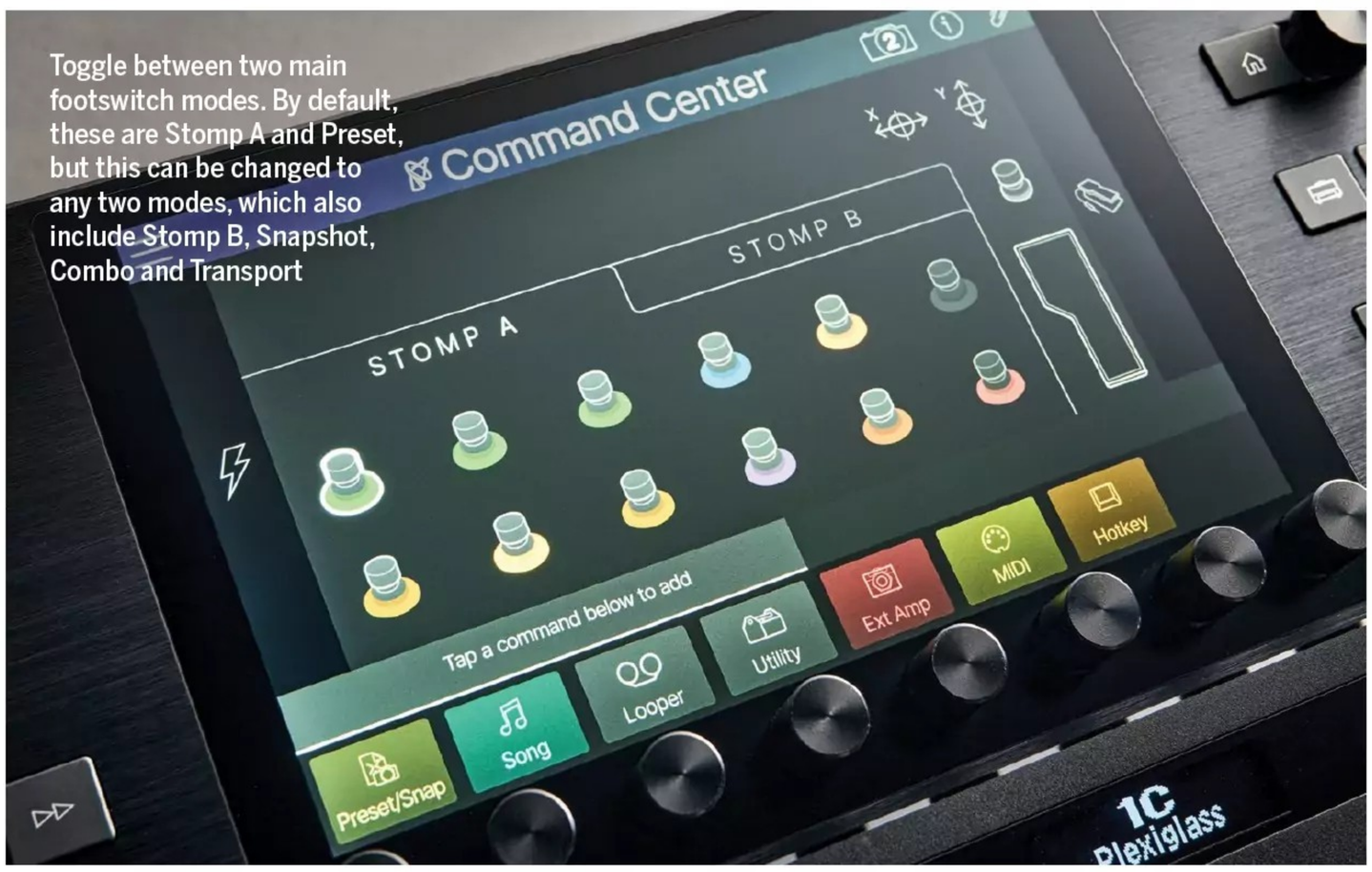
When Line 6 introduced the Helix in 2015, our review described it as the most advanced floor processor we'd seen – and it has successfully graced stages worldwide ever since. However, over the years, other companies have taken advantage of technological advances and introduced their own large floor processors that have found favour with many players. This means the new long-awaited version of the Helix had better up its game... and, thankfully, it has!

The Helix Stadium XL Floor is a more compact unit than the original and takes the feature set into new realms. The brand's aim is to make this version viable for a long time, and Line 6 plans a series of firmware updates. At the time of writing, the latest of these updates includes a Showcase feature and some new amp models, while amp capture is said to be coming with the Proxy amp, cab and effect cloud-based cloning engine updates.

This latest iteration, then, is a large floor-mounted amp, cab and effects modelling unit that can be used for live work (either with an amp or direct into the PA), recording or practice. It's based around user-programmable presets that are built from amp model and effects blocks placed in a signal chain with various split, merge and parallel routing options. There are flexible footswitching options so you can select presets, switch snapshots ('a preset within a preset') for gapless sonic changes, or switch individual effects.

This new version has all the amps and effects of the original but adds new Agoura amp models, which are said to offer an upgrade in sound and feel, something aided by updated inputs with more dynamic range.

> The Helix Stadium XL Floor is a more compact unit and takes the feature set into new realms



Toggle between two main footswitch modes. By default, these are Stomp A and Preset, but this can be changed to any two modes, which also include Stomp B, Snapshot, Combo and Transport

While the Stadium XL has absolutely enough sounds onboard for use in a completely standalone context, you can add more variety to the signal chain by using external pedals via its four effects loops. In fact, it can be at the heart of a larger system in several ways through MIDI connections and control jacks, which can be used for switching signals to external amps, among other things.

In Use

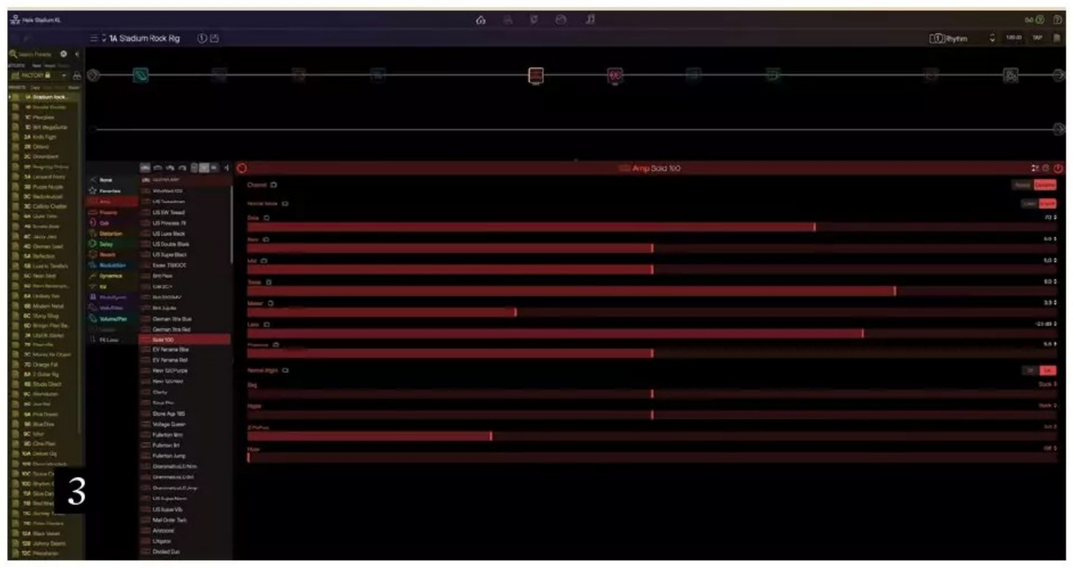
The Stadium XL has more encoders and shortcut buttons than previously, but it's the new eight-inch touchscreen that immediately grabs attention. Where the



1. The footswitches offer capacitive touch functionality, letting you lightly touch a footswitch with your finger to jump to its assigned block, parameter or command. The 12 OLED Scribble Strips show each footswitch's current assignment



2. This control turns up the output volume. Press one of the three buttons to select an output: standard output, XLR or phones. Each output has its own cue mix, controlled from a matrix mixer screen



3. The Helix Stadium app comes free as part of the package and is available for MacOS and Windows. It is accessed from the Helix via Wi-Fi or Ethernet. Besides editing, the app can be used for uploading songs to the unit

editing could be laborious on the original Helix hardware and best carried out with the computer-based editing software, here it's an absolute breeze. The touchscreen is clearly laid out with blocks that can easily be dragged around the signal chain. Touch any block for its parameters to appear at the bottom of the display and adjust them via the soft knobs.

To quickly try out and zero in on a sound, you can touch the Lens icon to bring up the Focus View, whereby you get a realistic graphic representation of the selected amp or effect and can adjust the sound by moving your finger on the screen. The typical sound sits in the centre, but there are descriptive words at the four corners, and dragging around in real-time will adjust several parameters simultaneously while you listen to the changes. Also very useful is that every factory preset comes with an associated guitar or bass sound-clip onboard for auditioning the sound.

The Showcase live automation/playback engine could be a gamechanger for anyone who uses backing tracks in their live shows, but it also has real practicality as an aid to home practice. Showcase can play back up to eight internal stereo audio tracks that you store on a micro SD card. An onboard Matrix mixer for the tracks lets you specify what goes to which physical output, so you can send a click track to a drummer, for example, or have

The Showcase live automation/playback engine could be a gamechanger for anyone who uses backing tracks

THE RIVALS

These units come with no treadle but would work with an external expression pedal. The touchscreen-equipped Neural Quad Cortex (£1,449) is described by the brand as "the most powerful floorboard amp modeller on the planet" with processing capacity that can provide "limitless sound design possibilities". Fender's take on the genre is the Tone Master Pro (£1,399), also with a touchscreen, which it says features more than 100 of the world's most popular amps and effects, including all the classic Tone Master Fender models. Finally, with its roots in Fractal Audio's flagship Axe-Fx III, the FM9 MkII Turbo (£1,949) is another model to check out and is the company's most powerful floor unit to date.



This XL edition comes with the treadle/toe-switch built in, while the EX2 expression pedal can integrate with the smaller version of the Helix Stadium Floor

backing tracks going to a PA while the guitar sound goes to your amp.

All of this is tempo-sync'd, so with your track waveforms showing on the screen, you can insert flags into an event sequencer to initiate changes such as recalling presets and snapshots. Any sonic changes that you need through a song can thus be automated, so instead of stomping on footswitches, your sounds can be selected automatically as the song progresses, freeing you up to concentrate on your playing and stage moves.

This also goes for home practice: you can load songs you want to play along with and then dial up the appropriate sounds for each song section to be recalled as you play. There's also the helpful facility of being able to cycle song sections and record your playing with a looper. In addition, you can insert MIDI commands to control other pedals in your system, and you can even automate lighting and video rigs, and external amp switching.

In terms of sound, the effects and legacy amps are as good as they ever were, but the new Agoura amps have to be the focus here, and while there aren't a vast amount as yet, there are options for nicely authentic emulations of classic Fenders, Marshalls and more that feel really good to play through. There's also plenty of adjustment available for the amps, including the aforementioned Focus View, but also new is the Hype parameter, which can move the sound away from its 'authentic' base sound by adjusting EQ and compression for a more 'idealised' sound (and more like something you'd hear on a finished recording). Overall, this is a massive tone machine that will let you dial in sounds to cover all genres.

Verdict

While the Helix Stadium XL Floor is a substantial purchase, it is also a solid upgrade on its predecessor. The Showcase facility makes it a machine that really pushes the envelope when it comes to showing what floor processors are capable of. But at its heart it still has the basic sonic ability and functionality that current Helix users enjoy and appreciate.

That all this is enhanced by vastly improved ease of use, better amp models and the promise of much more to come may be enough to make current owners consider changing up. But for anyone venturing into this area for the first time, the XL has to be a definite contender. G



LINE 6 HELIX STADIUM XL FLOOR

PRICE: £1,980
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Floor processor
FEATURES: 512 user preset locations, 8" touchscreen, editing software, removable 32GB microSD storage, built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, 4x effects loops, 4x external expression pedal connections/4x external amp control outputs/4x dedicated drum trigger inputs, 8-in/8-out audio interface, preset audition audio clips, Showcase automation and playback engine, expression treadle, tap tempo, looper
CONTROLS: Volume knob and assignment buttons, Transport control, 2x encoder knobs and associated buttons, 8x soft knobs, 12x footswitches, treadle
CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs 1 & 2, XLR Mic input, standard outputs L/Mono & R, XLR outputs L/Mono & R, Phones output, 4x standard Send, 4x standard Return, Control A/B, Control C/D, NEXUS, S/PDIF In & Out, MIDI In, MIDI Out/Thru USB A, USB C, Micro SD card slot
POWER: IEC mains cable
DIMENSIONS: 490 (w) x 260 (d) x 90mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Comprehensive set of facilities; flexible connectivity; large touchscreen; great range of sounds; in-built treadle; constant upgrades are promised

CONS Long boot-up time

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Introducing

New gear from unsung luthiers as they step into the spotlight ...

Swannell Guitars IA £3,700 (INC CASE)

Contact EMAIL **jamie@swannellguitars.co.uk** WEB **www.swannellguitars.co.uk** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Matt Lincoln**



Specialising in high-end, impeccably made acoustics, Ely-based Jamie Swannell currently has one electric model in his catalogue, and he explains that it is named after "St Ia, who floated across the Irish Sea on a leaf. She landed in Cornwall and gave her name to St Ives, the town I grew up in." It was there that Jamie made his first electric guitar, while still at school, in his dad's shed. Some years later his decision to follow the guitar-making life led him to Newark School of Musical Instrument Crafts where he graduated in 2015 with a Distinction and was invited to teach, which he did before totally focusing on his own guitars – mainly acoustic, with the exception of this very classy IA.

The 40mm deep body is actually constructed more like an acoustic, which accounts for its light weight of 2.31kg (5.1lb) with hand-bent ribs from cherry, like the back, which he laminates himself. "It's not a fully acoustic resonating top," says Jamie. "It's more like an ES-335 as there are two braces that come down either side of the neck and bridge blocks that are made from obeche. The rib structure is actually one piece of wood, which joins only at the base end of the guitar. It's fun to make, but it means you don't have a join in the heel area of the guitar. That upper bout that sweeps into the cutaway style was inspired by my mentor at Newark, Adrian Lucas, and he was inspired by Andy Manson."

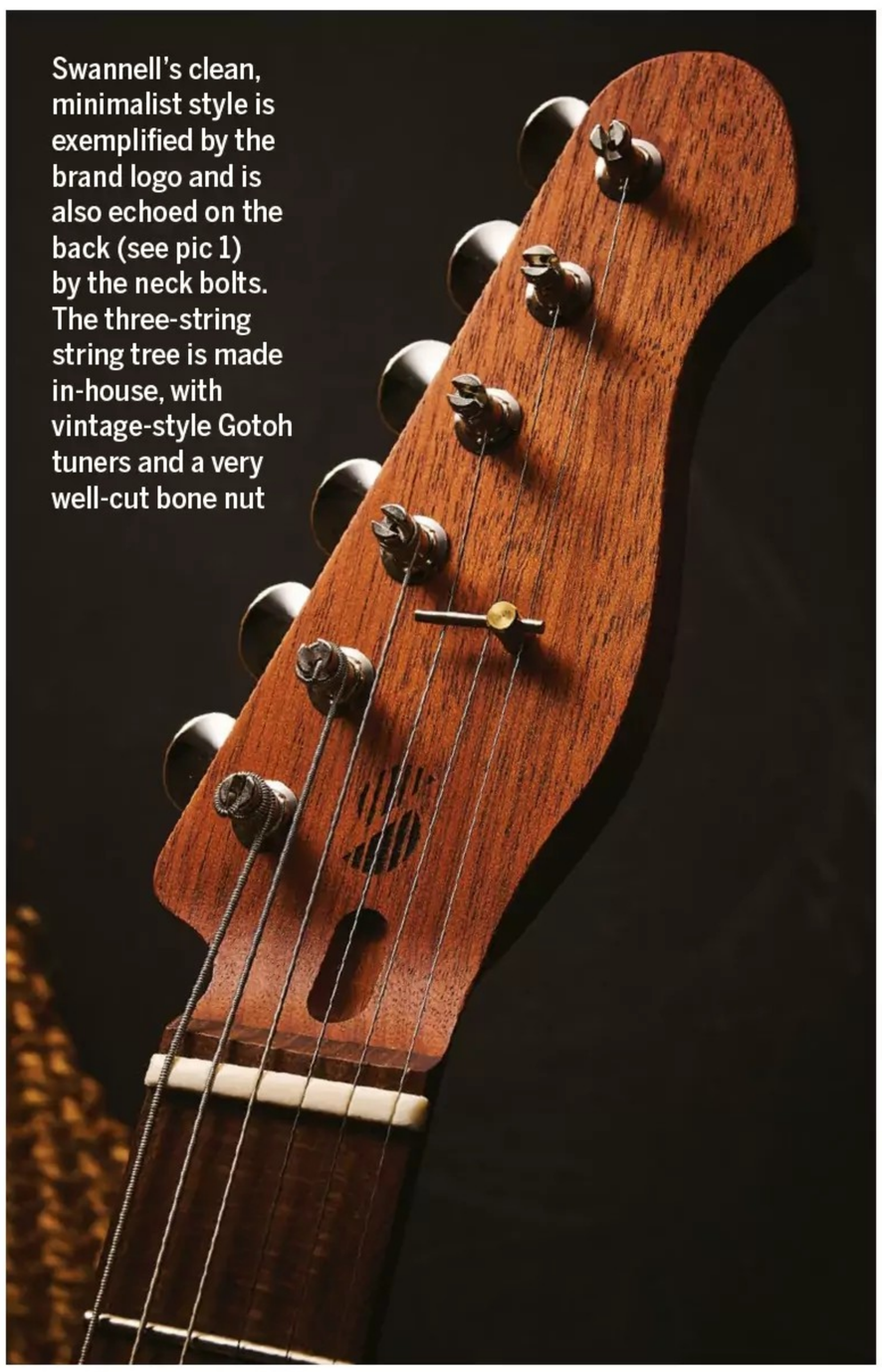
The neck is attached with three bolts and is made from reclaimed rift-sawn mahogany, while the compound radius fingerboard (241mm to 356mm/9.5 to 14 inches) is 'fumed' laburnum with a 635mm (25-inch) scale length.

Powering comes from three Sunbear Sunbird Firebird-style mini-humbuckers. These are mounted on the matt black Bakelite scratchplate with a simple five-way lever selector, master volume and tone. The craft is faultless, very clean and precise, with superb fretting from medium-gauge wire with perfectly domed 'hot dog' ends. The IA uses Jamie's standard neck profile, quite a wide-feeling shallow C that feels slightly asymmetrical.

There's a touch of hollowbody snap to the response of the IA, but the instrument's construction blurs the lines a little and the range of sounds that it can produce is quite extraordinary. There's characterful, bright old-blues honk at the bridge and lounge jazz at the neck, contrasted by a strummier Britpop jangle in the middle. Cranked up a bit the Sunbears seem to retain a bell-like chime and there's a good dynamic range: it's a very responsive guitar. It laps up some milder overdrive, which drops right into dirty blues and alt-rock and – not least due to the easy top-fret access – makes for a rather serious slide machine. The more we played it, the more sounds we found. Superb. G

BUILDER PROFILE

NAME: Swannell Guitars
FOUNDER: Jamie Swannell
LOCATION: Ely, Cambridgeshire
STATUS: Founded 2016, now fully pro
EMPLOYEES: None
FIRST GUITAR SHIPPED: 2016
CURRENT OUTPUT: 8 instruments per year (total of 70 so far)
STYLE: Currently offering 4 acoustic guitar models; our featured IA is the only electric with 10 made so far
CAD/CNC: Yes, "a happy mixture of old and new technology"
PICKUPS/HARDWARE: Mojo, Sunbear or customer's preference
FINISHING: In-house
REPAIRS: Yes
CUSTOM ORDERS: Yes, based on the pictured model/outline
DEPOSIT/BUILD TIME: 25% deposit, approx 1 year to 18 months' lead time
WAITING LIST: Approx. 1 year
DEALERS: Not currently
PRICE-RANGE: Acoustic models from £8k; the IA starts at £3,500



Swannell's clean, minimalist style is exemplified by the brand logo and is also echoed on the back (see pic 1) by the neck bolts. The three-string string tree is made in-house, with vintage-style Gotoh tuners and a very well-cut bone nut



1. Despite a classy solidbody look, its acoustic-like construction results in a light weight and informs the guitar's response. The top is finished in a gloss polyurethane with hand-rubbed sunbursting; the neck, back and ribs in Osmo oil and wax



2. The IA typically uses two pickups, but three Sunbear Sunbirds here capture an evocative 'big single coil' tone (these are humbucking). They use calibrated winds with Alnico V magnets. The through or top-loading cut-off bridge uses Gotoh In-Tune brass saddles

« BLUEPRINT »

SOMETHING TO LOVE

Country star Jason Isbell has played Martins ever since he was bailed out by the company after his van was looted… And now he presents new signature models based on his rare pre-war 0-17

Words Henry Yates

We always knew Jason Isbell could play. But even long-standing fans who remember the Alabama country star's twisty fingerstyle on 2013's *Southeastern* were stopped in their tracks by last year's *Foxes In The Snow*. Inspired by his divorce from former bandmate Amanda Shires and new relationship with artist Anna Weyant, this 10th album found Isbell relieving his trusty backing band, The 400 Unit, in favour of a virtuoso man-and-guitar format.

And as the 47-year-old tells us today, the model he chose proved pivotal, with Isbell not only tracking every song on a 1940 Martin 0-17 at Electric Lady Studios, but using that example as the jump-off for his two new signature acoustics designed alongside the Pennsylvania luthier.

What can you tell us about the pre-war 0-17 you used on *Foxes In The Snow*?

"I was spending a lot of time in New York, staying in my girlfriend's apartment. Down here in Nashville, I've got a bunch of guitars. But up there, I just had space for something small. The shop that I love in Brooklyn – RetroFret – had this 1940 0-17. So I got that just to write and practise and have something to sit around and play.

"When I went in to make the record, I took a few different acoustics – a pre-war D-18 and a couple other things – but pretty quickly figured out that the 0-17 did a better job than anything else. I think it was partially because of the sonic space that guitar takes up. Y'know, it's not big or boomy, and in a mix when it's just guitar and vocal, I think sometimes that works better. The D-18 just sorta overpowered everything."



What was it about the 0-style shape – as opposed to a dreadnought – that you wanted to pursue for your signature model?

"Well, I'm a pretty big guy – I'm 6ft 1in. And honestly, just from a logistical standpoint, playing a dreadnought on a recording while I'm singing is pretty difficult because that guitar takes up a whole lot of room. If you're making a guitar-focused record and doing a lot of instrumental stuff, the single-0 size works really well for me. I think this new signature guitar will be really good for singer-songwriters who go out and perform unaccompanied because it's not dwarfing the vocal."

Let's talk about your premium 0-17 signature model. The body is solid sinker mahogany, isn't it?

"Yeah. The wood was underwater for a long time – we're talking thousands of years – and then I guess they pull the log out of whatever river bed it's in and dry it over a period of time. It's pretty shocking that it works as well as it does. I've got a lot of old acoustics, but I don't tour with them, so if I can find a new guitar that resembles them sonically, it's very convenient. This 0-17 doesn't have the harsh, brittle upper midrange of a new guitar; it retains the volume and punch of a newer piece of wood, but it sounds warmer."

Despite the compact size, it seems like your 0-17 has punchy projection.

"Yeah, they scalloped the bracing on this one. It's plenty loud enough. I mean, it's one of those things where you look at the guitar and think, 'This doesn't look big enough to put out that much sound.' But you can do pretty much anything with it. I'm sorta obsessed with guitars, so I try to have at least one really good example of every different type of tool I need. But if I was just going out by myself and playing solo acoustic shows, this would be a perfect guitar to take."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN GUITAR

Jason Isbell's 14-fret Martin signatures (0-17, left; 0-10E Retro, right and inset left) are inspired by the 1940 0-17 used on 2025 album, *Foxes In The Snow*

"You look at it and think, 'This doesn't look big enough to put out that much sound.' But you can do anything with it"



1


2

1. Limited to just 50 pieces, this 0-17 features Waverly open-back tuners and a bone nut

2. The back, sides and neck are made from sinker mahogany, offering a premium vintage feel

3. The 0-17 has a suitably high-end spec, including Brazilian rosewood for both fretboard and bridge

And the 0-17 neck is sinker mahogany, too?
"Yeah, with the Brazilian rosewood 'board and bridge. The tough thing about the neck for Martin was getting the shape because on those pre-war guitars they were all hand-shaped. My original 0-17 has a really interesting shape – the 'V' is more intense as you go further down the neck. So it took some work on the part of the folks at Martin to get that just right. But they got it. They nailed it."

That's some pretty fluid fingerstyle on the *Foxes In The Snow* album. Do you think this acoustic will deal with more advanced picking?
"Well, there's enough space. The nut width is wide enough to where I can get my fingers in between. And it's balanced. To me, that's so important because if you're strumming, you're not hearing individual notes like when you're playing fingerstyle, obviously. So you don't want the B to be quiet compared with the D. You need everything to have a uniform volume and intensity coming out of the instrument, almost like a piano."

Are there any differences between the original 1940 0-17 and your signature?
"The pickguard on my pre-war 0-17, apparently, somewhere within the first

> "This 0-17 retains the volume and punch of a newer piece of wood, but it sounds warmer"

few years of that guitar's life, somebody switched it out for one that was just a tiny bit larger. And so when they went to make this one, Fred Greene from Martin called and asked if I wanted my signature model to have the 'proper' pickguard. But I said, 'No, let's use the one that's on the 0-17 that I own because I want it to be as close a replica as we can possibly get.'

"The only other difference that I know of is the finish. It's super close, but it's impossible to exactly replicate the lustre of a guitar that old. It'll get there in time."

Was it important to you to offer a cheaper version of your signature in the form of the 0-10E Retro?
"Yeah. I've played both of them a whole lot since they got finished and, truthfully, the less expensive model is a really great guitar and I'm not missing anything when I'm playing it. It intonates well. It plays well. The neck is a little bit smaller and faster – I think that's probably because it was factory-made, rather than handmade.

"When I put out my signature D-18 a few years ago, that was a really expensive guitar and made for a very limited run. And with these guitars, I don't want to split the difference. I'd rather have one that's more collectible and made in smaller numbers, then another that's accessible to everybody, rather than just do something in the middle that doesn't quite capture either of those categories.

"So I'm very happy about the 0-10E Retro, too. Actually, I was shocked when I got it, at just how good it sounded acoustically. But it's got the tuner and electronics, too, and sounds really good plugged in. It's very, very usable."

Did it take a lot of meetings and prototypes to get these guitars over the line?
"No, with just a handful of conversations, we were able to narrow it down. A lot of that is due to Fred. We've worked together on a lot of guitars in the past and he knows where the line is for me. Y'know, if we're going to replicate something, then I like it to be done as closely as possible. And he knows my preferences, as far as vintage guitars. He knows I like things that feel and sound old. So it didn't take a whole lot of





4

4. It was important to Jason to offer an accessible signature option and the Road Series 0-10E Retro model fits the bill with its mahogany top, back and sides, a select hardwood neck, and East Indian rosewood fretboard and bridge

5 Jason's new signature series Era strings occupy that elusive 'Goldilocks' sweet spot – not too fresh, not too played-in



5

back and forth. Maybe part of it is also due to the fact that Martin's just doing really, really good work right now."

You have a slightly quirky tradition of blasting your new acoustics with loud music. Does that actually help bed in the tone?

"I mean, I don't have any real way of quantifying it, but when I take a new acoustic guitar out of the case for the first time, it sounds new to me. So I leave it in front of the speakers and play some music – something with a lot of bass, like Outkast – just to keep the wood moving. I think there are devices that do it now, where you can put them in the soundhole and they'll just constantly keep the vibrations going. I used to set the guitar out on a table and prop an EBow up on either the D or G string and just leave it there until the battery ran out. I've done no scientific testing, but I think it helps to bring it in a little quicker."

Alongside the two acoustics, you're releasing signature strings in Martin's new Era range.

"The thing with acoustic strings is that they sound so different when they're new on the guitar. That has sorta driven me crazy over the years. I hate that

> "I was shocked when I got the 0-10E Retro, at just how good it sounded acoustically"

brand-new out-of-the-box sound. To me, it's kind of like an avocado – you have five minutes when it's perfect and then you're either too early or you're too late...

"With the silk wrap on these strings, it helped make them sound a bit broken in. And that window – where the strings don't sound too new and they're not dead yet – has been extended because they're treated."

You've also specified your usual 0.012 to 0.054 gauge.

"Yeah. I do a bit of bending and I don't hit it quite as hard as a real flatpicker, but I'm also not a soft-touch player. So 12s have just always worked for me on an acoustic, and I use 10s on electric. And it's, like, the least exciting gauge because everybody wants to say, 'Well, I use 13s,' or if you're a Billy Gibbons fan, then 7s or 8s or something. But I'm right in the middle of the road as far as the gauge goes."

Do you have a particular personal history with Martin?

"I've always held Martin in the highest regard. When I was a kid, I had a lawsuit guitar – y'know, one of those from the late 70s when everybody was ripping Martin off. And then there was an uncle of mine who had a herringbone D-28 he would bring by, and everybody would pass it around and play it. I just remember feeling, like, 'Oh, this is as good as it gets. This is the best possible guitar you could play.'"

Do you remember the first Martin you actually owned yourself?

"I sure do. Our van had gotten broken into in Dallas and my acoustic guitar was in the gear that got stolen. So I contacted Martin to see if they would send me a loaner, and they suggested we do an artist deal. So the first Martin I had was a D-41 that I used on the road for a long time. It was just a little too much inlay for me. I've gone to D-18s since then because I like it to look a little more simple. But that was the first one. I think I paid half price for it – because I wasn't helping Martin sell any guitars back then!" G

***For more on Martin's Jason Isbell signature guitars and strings, see* www.martinguitar.com**

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HELIX STADIUM

Leveraging powerful DSP and the entirely new Agoura™ modeling methodology, Helix® Stadium processors deliver extraordinary sound and responsiveness, a sophisticated yet intuitive user interface, and unparalleled control capabilities. The family comprises the **Helix Stadium XL Floor** and **Helix Stadium Floor** processors, the **Expand D10** digital I/O expansion unit, the **EX2™** expression pedal, and the **Helix Stadium Backpack**.

LINE 6

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CORY WONG

The modern-day funk maestro on Strats, creative gear solutions, and why not to be swayed by the "mystique of gear"

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

"That depends. It's kind of a deep question because what qualifies as a serious guitar? To me, the first serious guitar that I bought with my own money was my first electric guitar, which was a Gretsch Traveling Wilburys [TW-100T] model that I got for $45 bucks at a pawn shop down the road from where I lived. It was serious because I was like, 'I'm finally gonna play guitar.'

"But in the way that you're probably asking, my first serious guitar was a Highway One Stratocaster. I still have it to this day; it's my blue Strat. That was the first one where I was like, 'I really want to do this thing.' I played that Highway One Strat for years and still play it all the time when I'm not using my signature Strat.

"I love it to this day. It was one of those things where it was the first American Strat – and the only one – I could afford. I don't claim it to be a perfect guitar, I've done a ton of mods to it. And I'm playing my signature guitar a lot more because it fixed a lot of the problems that one Highway One guitar had."

What was the last guitar that you bought and why?

"I bought an old 1940s Martin from Carter Vintage Guitars in Nashville. I made the mistake of going into the vintage room... that's where I get tempted. I played this guitar and kept thinking about it. I was like, 'All right, man, my rule is I gotta give it 24 hours.' I told the guy, 'Hey, can you just set this aside and give me one day to think about it?' I went home and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I went back the next day, brought my other acoustic to see if I was solving a problem I couldn't with my current guitar, and I was like, 'Yeah, it's got this thing to it. It's a different sound.' So I had to have it."

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

"This is also the one guitar I wish I'd never sold, and the best find I've had. I was going up to Northern Minnesota for a camping trip with friends. On the way up to the North Shore, I went to this little music shop – like a used shop, if I remember right, they were selling records and instruments – and there was a 1970s Gibson S-1 in a butterscotch colour. Now, I'm not a Gibson guy. I'm a Fender guy through and through. But I was like, 'Oh, that's a weird guitar. It's cool.' I played around with it. The pickups were unique and it had this cool vibe to it. So I'm playing it, and I'm like, 'Dang, this thing is a sick vintage guitar.' I'd never had a vintage guitar. I was 22 and never owned a vintage guitar in my life. I just figured they're way too expensive. So I get up to the counter and the guy's like, 'Ah, you know what? I just don't like that guitar. I'll give it to you for a few hundred bucks.' So I bought it for 300 bucks. I loved that guitar. It was amazing. But coming out of college, I didn't have any money and needed to sell some gear to be able to pay my rent. Unfortunately, that was one of the casualties. The legend of rent is way hardcore, as they say in *School Of Rock* [laughs]."

Cory is a single-coil guy through and through, but his signature Music Man StingRay II scratched a humbucker itch



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

"Find the gear that gets you excited to play and is most effortlessly able to express your voice"

What's your best buying tip for somebody looking to buy their ultimate guitar?

"You don't need to use a piece of gear just because somebody else uses it. Certain gear is right for some people and not others. Some people have very specific ways they play or approach things. So whatever works for you, gets you excited and gives you those butterflies in your stomach, that's the right gear for you.

"We're enamoured by the mystique of gear. Like, yeah, I've played through real Klons, and guess what?



CORY'S GO-TO RIG

"I have two different guitars. One is the Fender Cory Wong Signature Stratocaster. The second guitar is a Music Man StingRay II; that's my humbucker guitar. I use a [Shure] GLXD16 wireless unit, which has a tuner on it that goes into a Neural DSP Quad Cortex, and I'm running the Archetype Cory Wong plug-in on that. That's my amps, cabs and some effects.

"But in the effects loop of the Quad Cortex I have the Hotone Wong Press volume/wah pedal, which I helped develop with them. It's my favourite volume/wah on the planet by far. And I have a Wampler [Cory] Wong compressor, which, go figure, I worked on with Wampler. It's my favourite compressor out there and it also has a clean boost and a DI out if you want. That goes into the Jackson Audio Optimist, which is a dual overdrive and EQ. There's two sides of the overdrive that go into each other. Then, if you press the two buttons, there's an EQ function to it, which, honestly, is amazing. From there, it goes into the effects loop and returns back to the Quad Cortex, and the Quad Cortex goes direct to front-of-house. That's what I use."

Corey's signature Fender Stratocaster was modelled on his original blue Highway One model, which he's still very fond of today

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

They're great. But I've played through other overdrives that have given me that feeling in my stomach where I'm like, 'Oh, my gosh, this is great.' And that's nice because now I have an overdrive that's less expensive than a Klon [laughs].

"I've played through really expensive amps – and it's cool that other people like these amps and that famous people like these amps – but they're not really the thing for me. So my biggest piece of advice is to find what gear gets you excited and motivated to play. And buy what's most effortlessly able to express your voice on the instrument. That's the gear for you."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"Well, I've been trying to prevent myself from doing this lately! The last piece of gear I was actually looking at and interested in was that 40s Martin I mentioned earlier that I bought. But I mean, I look at every pedal that comes out. So if there's a pedal, a new amp or a guitar that comes out, I'm checking all of them out. That's just because we're guitar players, and we just love gear [laughs].

"But also, as someone who's in the industry and in the business, I'm curious: 'Why did those companies make this thing? Does this solve an issue? Is this a creative endeavour or is this a money-making thing?' If it's any of those, that's okay. But as a consumer and as an industry person, I'm interested in: 'What problem does this piece of gear solve? Why do we need this?'"

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?

"What level of cheap are we talking about here? [laughs] I have to say I'm gonna go with a nice guitar. At the end of the day, I can always go direct; I can always just pass through the amp. The way I play, a lot of times, I just like DI guitar tone, anyway. The type of tone I'm looking for is pristine, like the highest quality clean tone. So if I have a nice guitar playing through a relatively inexpensive amp, I can normally make the amp work.

"What ends up happening in the end to the listeners is I can make it sound pretty good, whether it is a combination of amp settings, the mic placement, or how you EQ the mic in the PA. With those things, I can do a lot.

"But I definitely want a nice guitar. I want it to feel good under my fingers. I want it to stay in tune. Because as nice an amp that you can have, it doesn't matter if the guitar doesn't play in tune up and down the neck. The amp is not going to fix that."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"That's easy – single coils. I'm a Strat guy." **[AD]**



Cory Wong's new album, *Lost In The Wonder*, is out now on Roundwound Media

www.corywongmusic.com

The MOD SQUAD

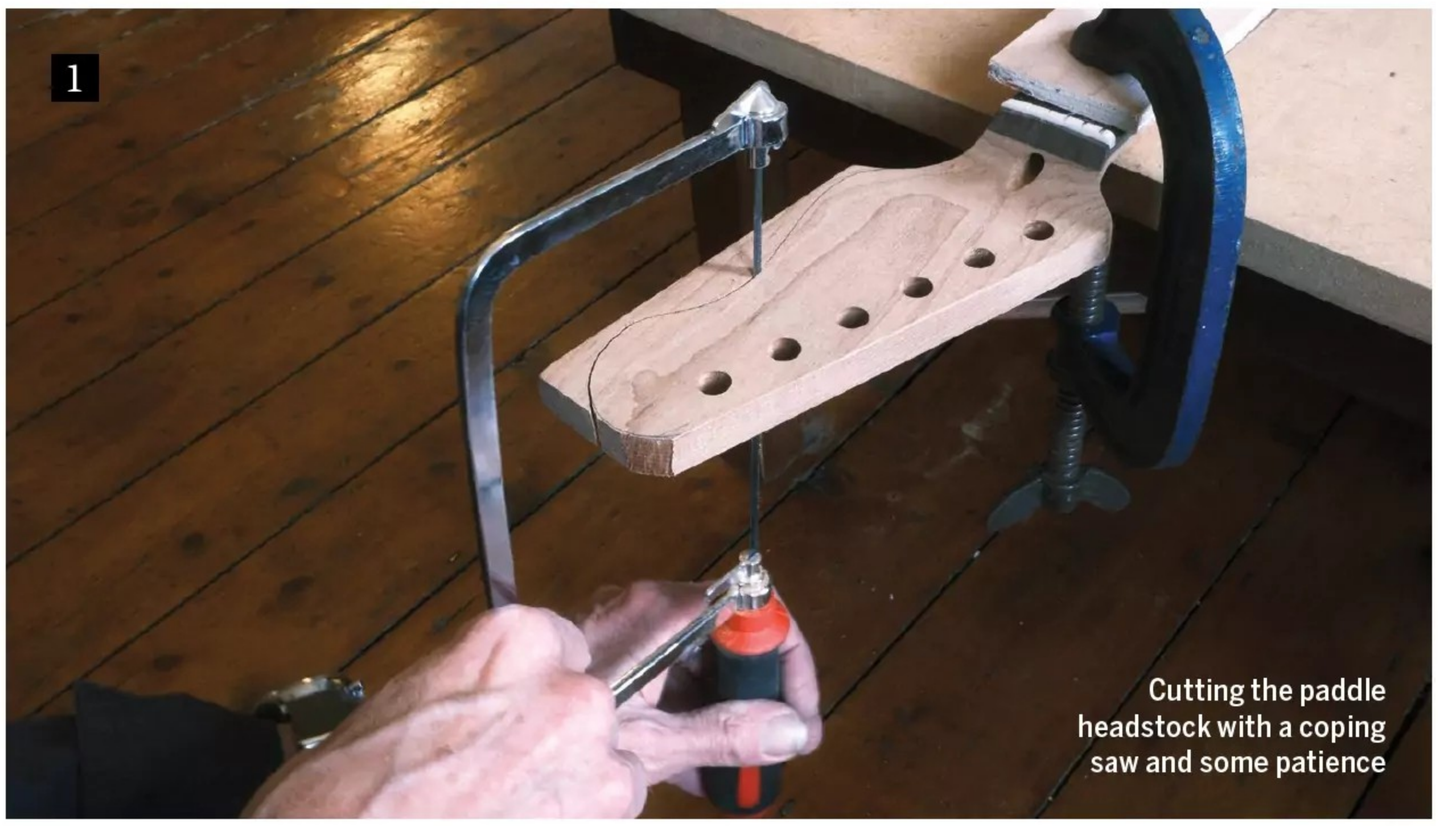
BITS 'N' PIECES (PART 2)

Back in issue 532, Dave Burrluck had a bag of bits he hoped to turn into a guitar. Well, we're still waiting...

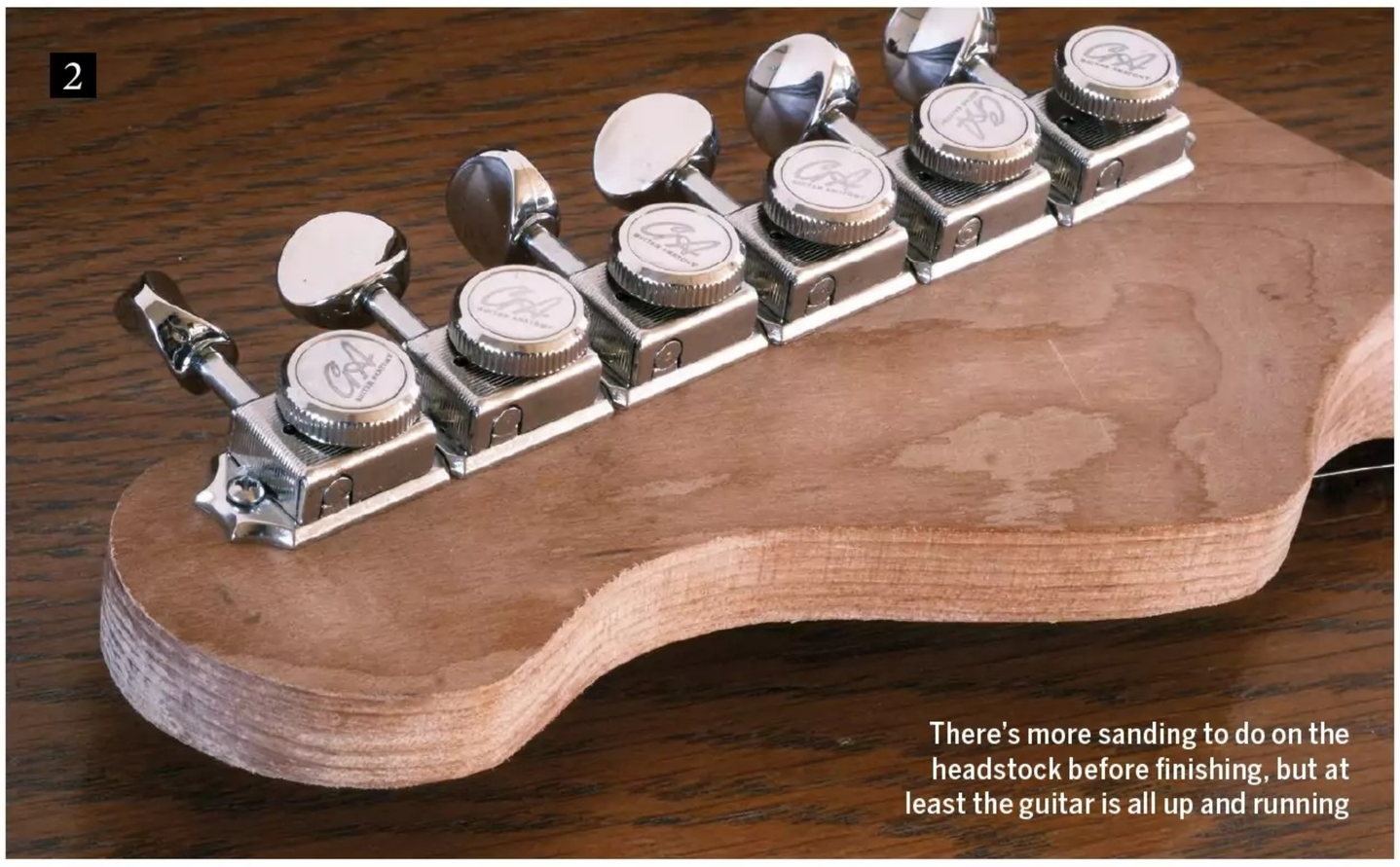
Assembling any array of disparate parts into a usable instrument is always a bit of a leap into the dark. If you're careful and stick closely to a specific style, you've got more chance of success. But combining, as I did here, a refinished Fender Road Worn Stratocaster body with a new-to-me Guitar Anatomy neck and staple-magnet pickup from Green Pickups in Manchester, I had no idea of the outcome.

As I mentioned in the first part of this adventure in issue 532, I was a little concerned about the flatter end-curve of the GA neck as it fits into the body. Visually, it'll be hidden by the fretboard overhang, but the flatter curve could mean it sits too far north. Using a Wilkinson 21-fret vintage neck as a template, I marked the correct curve onto the GA neck's base, and with a sharp wood file just rounded the marginally different curve so the new neck butts right up to the curve of the body's cut-out.

As ever, we're talking domestic modding and assembly here. I have no workshop and everything is done on the kitchen table with pretty much basic DIY hand tools. If I can do it, so can you.



Cutting the paddle headstock with a coping saw and some patience



There's more sanding to do on the headstock before finishing, but at least the guitar is all up and running

Starting Point

The fundamental job with any partscaster build like this is to accurately marry the neck to the body. And because the Guitar Anatomy neck comes with a paddle headstock, its actual outline needs to be cut by hand with a coping saw [pic 1] and some patience, then the rough edges need to be smoothed with a wood rasp or file, followed by coarse-to-finer grade glass-paper. With that done, I could load on the tuners – I'm using a donated set of Guitar Anatomy vintage-style with rear locks [pic 2] – then install the vibrato and springs to the body. Using a G-clamp to hold the two parts together, I put on the two outer strings so I can make sure the alignment is correct [pic 4]. Then, simply using one neck screw, I can tap mark the position of the four holes needed for the screws in the neck [pic 5]. Drill those [pic 6] and screw the neck on – a little bit of lubrication like Wilkinson Slipstick is useful here [pics 7 & 8]. If you're looking for guidance, nip over to StewMac where you'll find build instructions for those highly recommended Wilkinson guitar kits. To be fair, it's a process I've done plenty of times and, for once, although quite time-consuming, it proved pretty straightforward.

> "The fundamental job with any partscaster build is to accurately marry the neck to the body"

One thing to consider with your Strat-style builds is whether you go with a 21- or 22-fret neck. With the latter style there's that overhang at the end of the fingerboard to allow for the extra fret, but that means you can't get a loaded scratchplate on or off the guitar without loosening the neck screws. If you plan to experiment with any circuit mods or different pickups, I'd suggest 21 frets are best. Something I should have considered.

Electrics & Setup

I'm keen to hear the Green Pickups Strat-sized Staple in action, so I load that into an unused vintage-style scratchplate with an old-looking patina to suit the relic finish of the body. I add a jumper wire to the five-way lever switch so Tone 2 works on both the middle and the Staple bridge pickup, although at this stage I'm not too bothered by the middle or neck pickups themselves. But I do need an output jack loaded into the aged Gotoh cup: I wire that in, then add a ground wire to the spring claw. A quick plugged-in tap test and everything's working [pic 9].

Aside from checking the frets were level when I started this now seemingly quite





PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

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The aged finish looks very realistic, matched by the aged hardware and scratchplate

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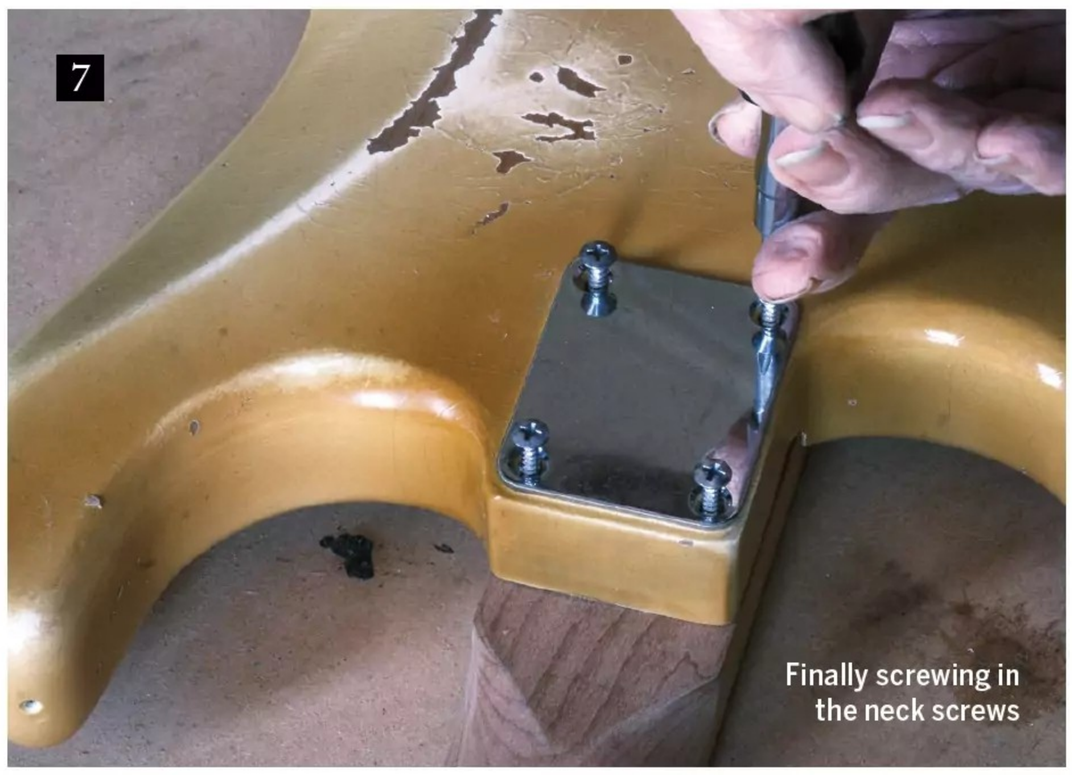
Using the two outer strings as a guide, I can line up and clamp the neck position

5

With the clamp still tight, turn over the guitar and mark the positions for the holes to take the neck screws



With the neck firmly clamped, and using an old right-angle square as a guide I hand drill the pilot holes for the neck



Finally screwing in the neck screws



There's no finish on the neck at the moment as there's a little more work to do to shape the curve of the neck as it flows into the heel



With the loaded scratchplate fitted and strings on it's time for a play test and set the pickup height to taste

ambitious build, there's been little thought about setup. So with strings on and tuned to pitch I can see the neck needs a slight tweak to straighten it (no surprise there), and with a capo at the 1st fret I rough in string heights and intonation. Surprisingly, not least after my concerns about the base curve of the GA neck, it's all about right and I can recheck the neck relief and cut the nut.

At 3.48kg (7.65kg), it's bang-on my previous estimation – 3.5kg (7.7lb) – and the now christened 'Staplecaster' feels good, nice and business-like. It also feels and looks like a rather old, well-used Stratocaster thanks to Matt Withey's superb vintage refin (at Jozo Reece Guitar Relics). And now, as part of the nearly finished guitar, it looks even more realistic. To be honest, I've had plenty of way more expensive relics in my hands that look like child's play in comparison.

While you might think I should have an old-looking Fender neck here, I'm not disagreeing – but that wasn't the genesis of this piece. As is, although there's no finish on the neck, its muted dark, almost caramel colour adds a slight boutique vibe, and after spending a little more time working on the fret ends and overall smoothness, and carefully fine-tuning the nut (which works like a crisp bone), I'm pretty happy.

Sound Conclusions

The black, textured cover – not to mention those staple magnets – give the bridge pickup a very 'hot rod' vibe, almost adding to the guitar's invented backstory: an old re-necked Strat from back in the day with a custom-made bridge pickup to replace a non-functioning original.

Visually, the Green Staple does look like it might be a more contemporary (than vintage) high-output pickup, but that's not what it sounds like. Using those large Alnico V rectangular magnets, it's wound with 43 AWG plain enamel wire, and ours measured 8.6kohms, although output-wise it balances nicely with the other two early 60s-style single coils, retaining quite a wiry and classic Strat bridge voicing. But there's a definite subtle smoothness to the dynamic response that nods to something like a Firebird's mini-humbucker. Adding a little heat to the signal, there's noticeable clarity to the lower midrange, too, while the higher central mids are characterful and quite pushy.

If this is beginning to sound like an episode of *Master Chef*, well, that's down to Green Pickups' Leigh Greenhough, who's certainly packed some tasty flavours here: a re-seasoning of a classic, if you like, that has both style and substance. We'll be going back to this restaurant as soon as we can...

As with any self-build, after a period of back-patting, you really need to evaluate what you've done, the bits that are right and those that are less so. It can be quite painful getting a mate or band member to play your new friend: "Oh, I'd have done this, that or the other. Why didn't you use this?" But plenty of times those other hands, eyes and ears might spot something you hadn't considered. If you want to get better, you have to listen to evaluation.

You also need to learn to trust what you see, hear and feel yourself because it's a part of your style – and that's important. Personally, I don't need another 'vintage' Stratocaster (does anyone?), and having been introduced to Green Pickups, I'm rather taken with the idea of Leigh's 'The Red' SRV-Inspired lipstick pickup at the neck. I'll keep you posted! G

For more information, head to the following sites: Green Pickups (www.greenpickups.com), vintage refinishing by Jozo Reece Guitar Relics (www.instagram.com/jozoreece), Guitar Anatomy (https://guitaranatomy.com), Armstrong Music (www.armstrongmusic.co.uk) and Wilkinson guitar kits (www.scan.co.uk)

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK



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Huw Price's Nitty Gritty

This guitar is in great cosmetic shape but needs work to make it a playable proposition

1956 Harmony H44 Stratotone



An up-bowed neck and high action needed attention on this almost completely original H44

PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

Fender quickly backed down when Gretsch raised objections to the use of the Broadcaster name, and Harmony may have had similar grounds for complaint. After all, the H44 Stratotone predated the Stratocaster by two years. With its no-truss rod through-neck construction, a poplar body, Waverly tuners and a single DeArmond 'Hershey bar' pickup, the H44 has acquired a cult following among retro blues and Americana pickers. Prices have climbed accordingly, but most of these instruments need a fair bit of work to make them playable, and this example is no exception.

The most obvious issues with this Stratotone were an up-bowed neck and fairly high string action. Some work was needed to establish the cause and severity of these problems, but, like most luthiers, I have a special tool for gauging neck relief. It's a straight edge with two sets of notches cut out to clear the frets so the edge can

> "Prices have climbed, but these instruments need work to make them playable and this is no exception"

sit flat on any fretboard with a Fender or Gibson scale length.

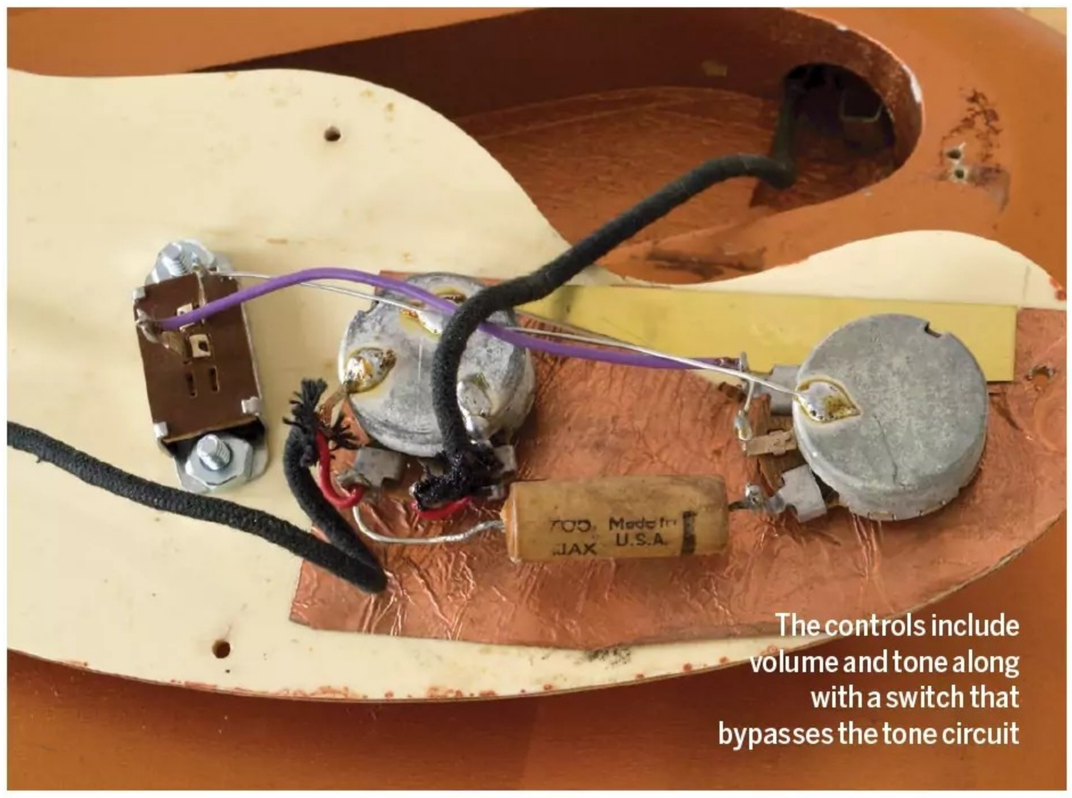
This Harmony's scale is a nominal 25 inches, so using the notched straight edge wasn't an option. Instead, I used a regular straight edge, but placing it over the frets again wasn't an option because they were nowhere near level. Instead, I lined it up along the bottom edge of the fretboard binding and measured the visible binding where it was at its widest at the 7th fret. Under full string tension it was 1.1mm and without string tension it reduced to 0.97mm.

Action is assessed by measuring the gap between the underside of the strings and the top of the 12th fret, rather than the top of the fretboard. This is why action can appear dauntingly high on guitars with tall jumbo frets but may actually feel quite low when you're playing.

The reverse was true on this guitar because the factory fitted frets were very

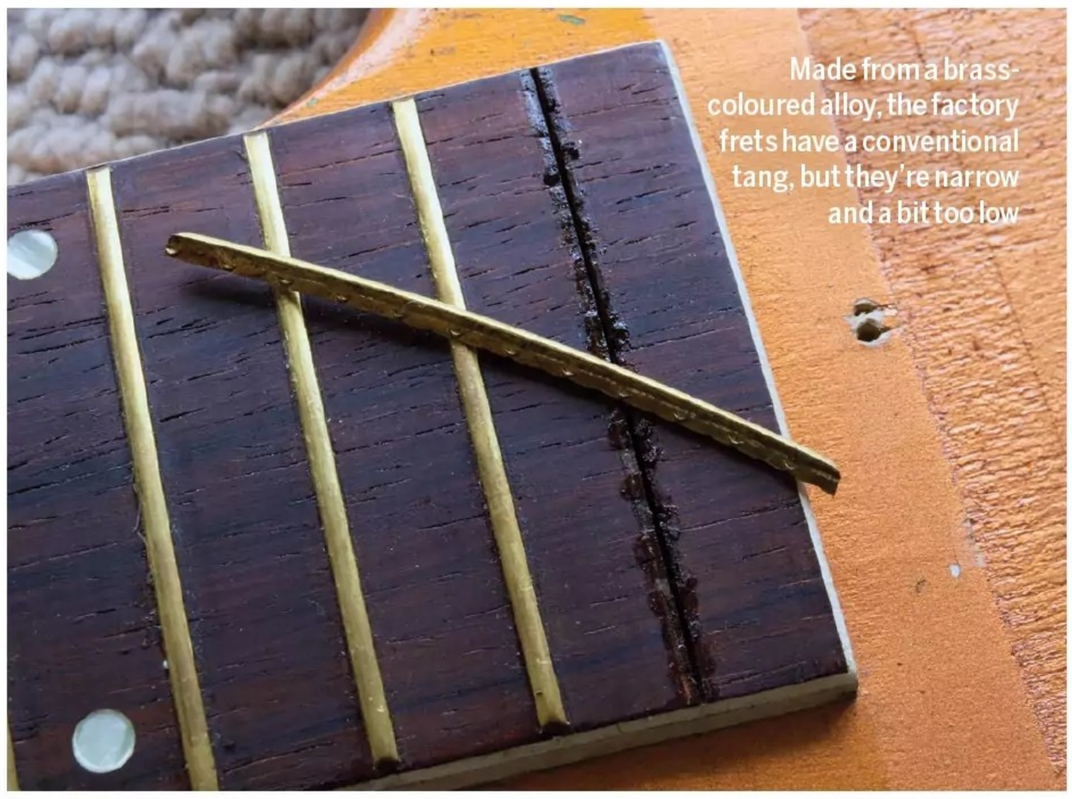


Produced between 1952 and 1957, the Harmony H44 Stratotone combined geometric shortcomings with innovative features


The controls include volume and tone along with a switch that bypasses the tone circuit



Running a straight edge along the bottom of the fretboard binding reveals the extent of the up-bow


Made from a brass-coloured alloy, the factory frets have a conventional tang, but they're narrow and a bit too low

low. E string action measurements at the 12th fret were 3mm on the bass side and 2.5mm on the treble side. With a capo at the 1st fret, the action dropped by about 0.5mm on both sides.

Taking readings all over the fretboard, I was getting crown height measurements around 0.7mm. To put that in context, a popular wire such as Dunlop 6105 has a crown height of 1.4mm. A difference of 0.7mm may not seem like a big deal, but in guitar setup terms it really is.

Installing taller frets would lower the action, and sorting out the up-bow and nut slots would bring it down even further. Having established a plan of action, I began by taking off the pickguard and electronic parts.

Straight Shooting

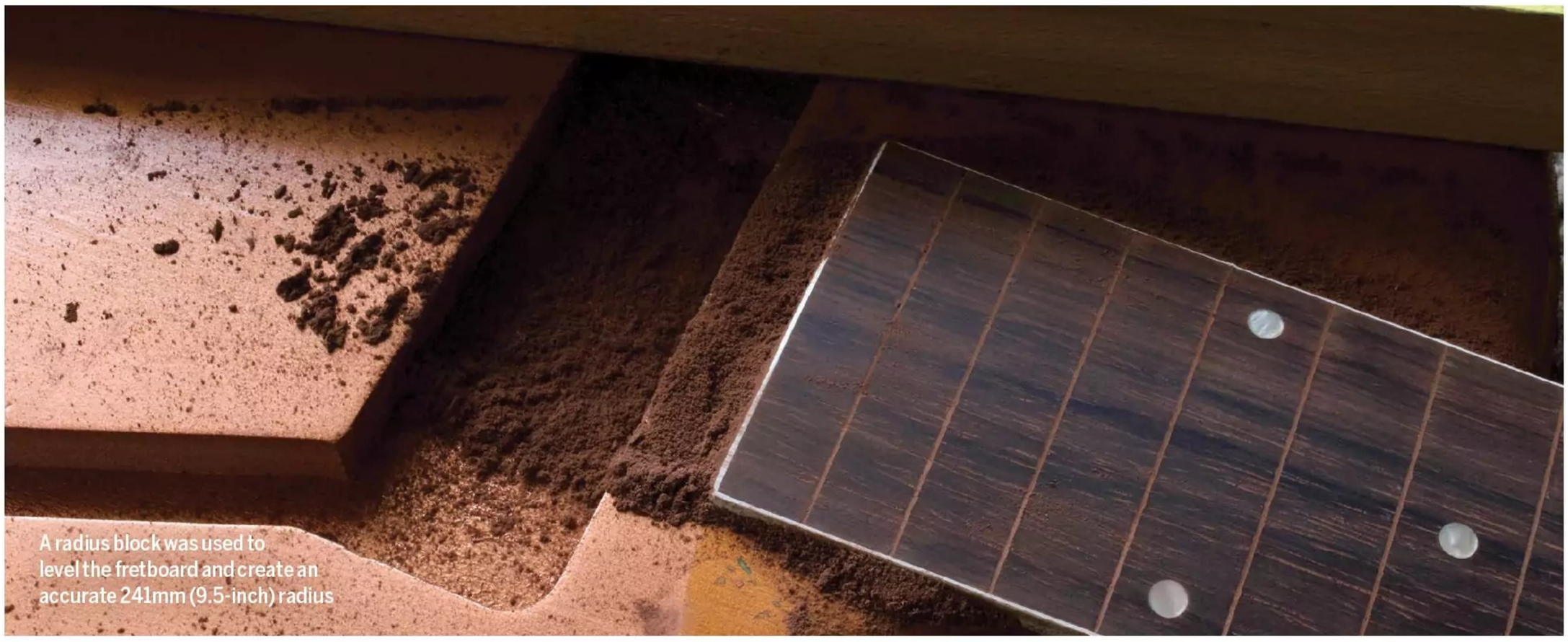
There are various ways to correct an up-bow when a neck doesn't have a truss rod. For extreme cases you can remove the fretboard, clamp the neck to pull it straight, inlay carbon fibre rods and then glue the fretboard back on. Another option is refretting with wire that has a wider tang than the existing wire. It's a process called 'compression fretting' and the cumulative effect of the wider tangs straightens out the neck.

You can also heat the neck and use clamps to pull it into a slight back-bow. The clamped neck is allowed to cool slowly and the hope is that it will end up straight. But since the up-bow on this guitar was relatively minor and the high action had more to do with the very low frets and the crude geometry of the design, I decided on a different solution.

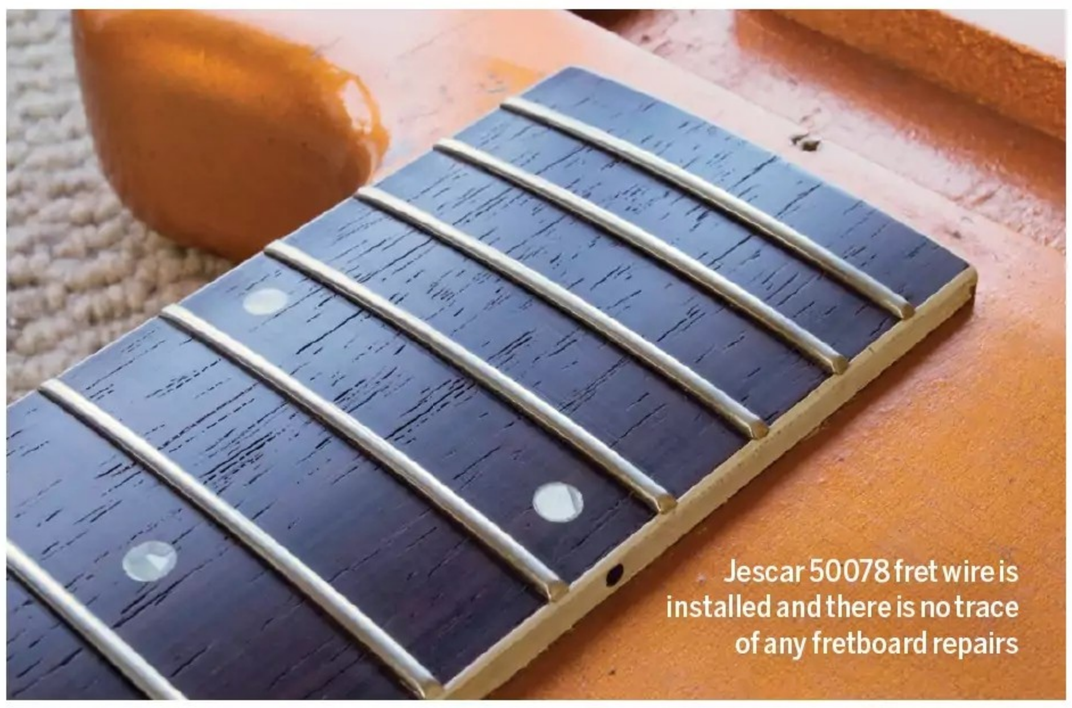
The owner had already given the go ahead for a refret, and when I pulled out the 20th fret, I found that the tang width was fairly close to modern standards. Compression fretting wasn't going to be an option, so instead I decided to sand the 'board level, rather than heat the neck.

I wouldn't need to remove that much material, and heating necks is sometimes just a temporary solution because up-bows can gradually return. I figured that over the several decades the neck had settled into where it wanted to be and removing about 0.5mm or so of fretboard thickness was very unlikely to weaken such a substantial neck.


Superglue was run along each slot edge to repair any chips after each fret was extracted



A radius block was used to level the fretboard and create an accurate 241mm (9.5-inch) radius



Jescar 50078 fret wire is installed and there is no trace of any fretboard repairs



The stock bridge is flat along the top, and the string radius actually curves the wrong way

Fret Not

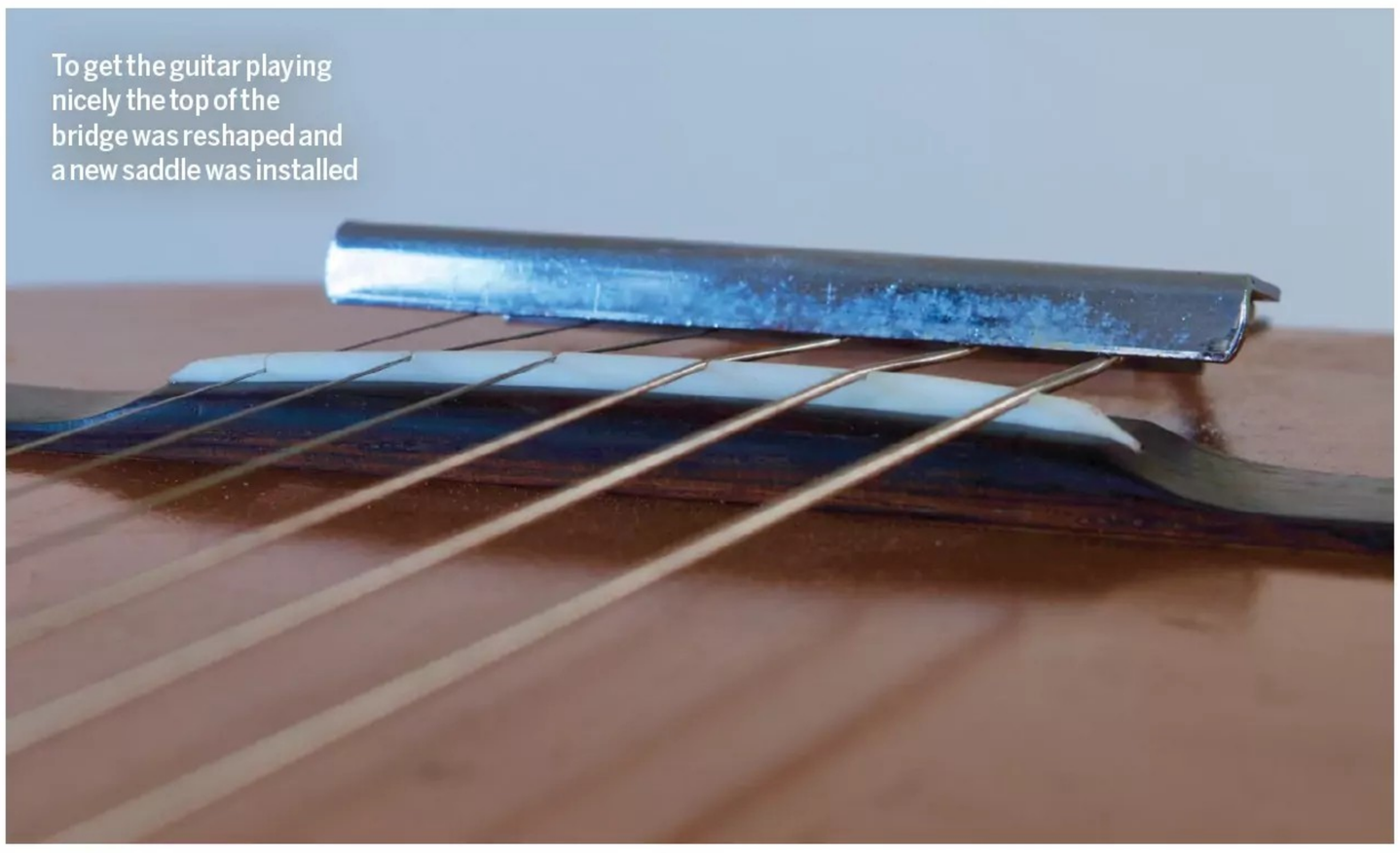
I quickly discovered that the brass-coloured alloy the frets were made from didn't conduct heat very efficiently. It's conventional practice to heat frets with a soldering iron before pulling them out, and running solder along the wire helps to transfer the heat. In this instance the solder was reluctant to flow unless I turned the iron temperature higher than I normally would. The danger of doing so with bound fretboards is that it's all too easy to melt the plastic. I just worked slowly and kept the iron tip at a safe distance from the fret ends.

When heating frets, old glue will sometimes bubble along the edges and the smell will tell you if it's protein glue or superglue. In this case I detected a bit of both, so some of the frets were probably glued back down at a later point in the guitar's history.

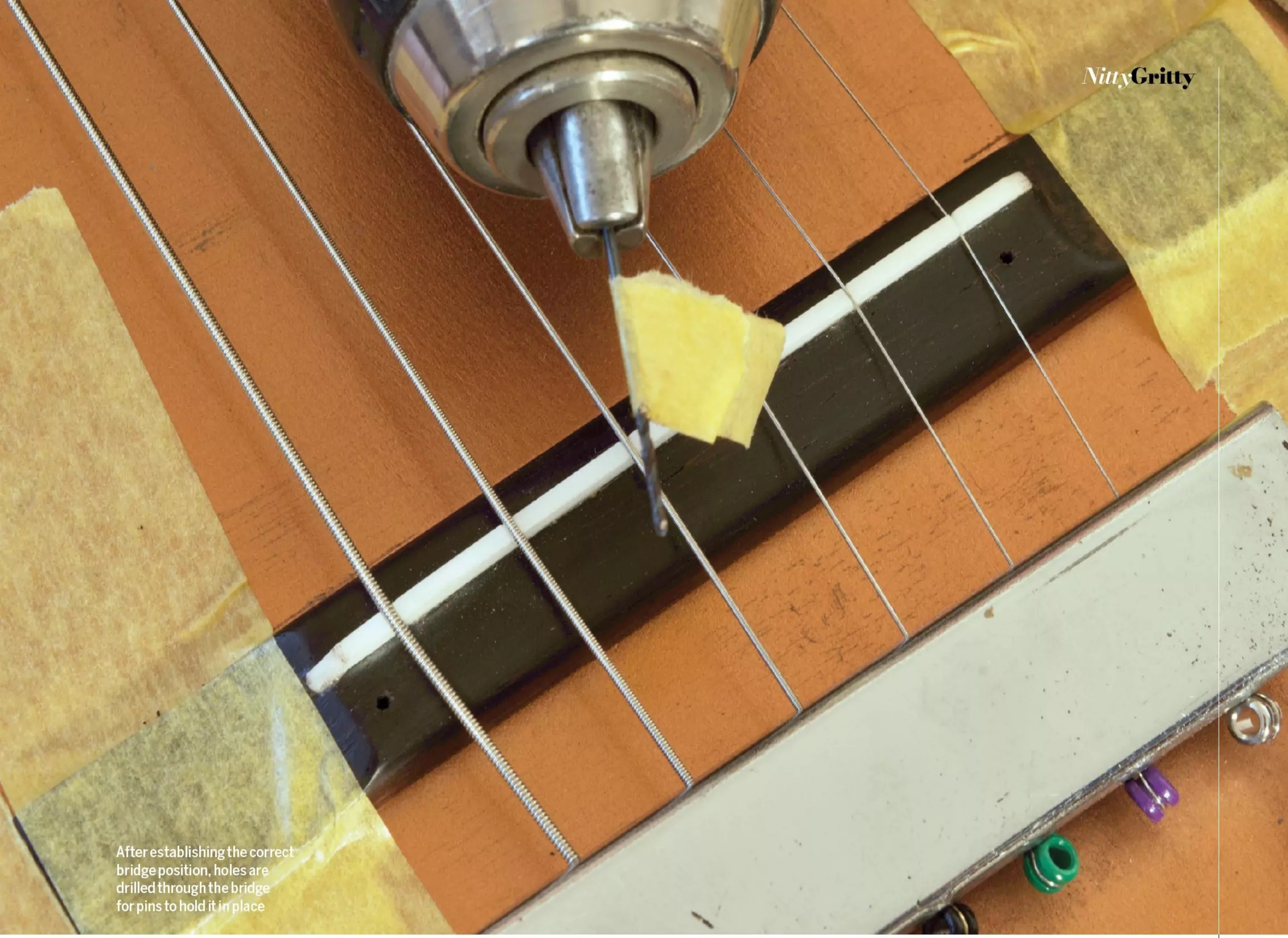
The rosewood was fairly dry and the factory frets were very well installed, so I ended up with a few chips. The key is trying not to press everything back down because you'll end up losing chunks of the fretboard. Instead, run water-thin superglue along both sides of the slot, taking care to keep it out of the slots, and then let it wick under any flakes and chips. It might look like a mess, but rest assured once you sand off the excess glue, the repairs should be invisible.

Like many vintage Fenders from the vintage era, the fretboard didn't have a consistent radius. I found it was nominally 10 inches, but the edges fell away dramatically, so I decided to sand the fretboard to a 9.5-inch radius using 180-grit paper attached to a full-length radius block with double-sided tape.

After tapping the nut off and supporting the neck in the middle, I began sanding. Avoiding excessive pressure and allowing the abrasive paper to do the work, I wound up with a dead straight fretboard and an even radius. After vacuuming most of the dust from the fret slots and scraping out the rest, I hand-sanded the fretboard. Starting with 400-grit, I progressed to 800-grit and 1,200-grit to give the rosewood back its super-smooth played-in feel. After a final dust removal, I ran fish glue into the slots and installed Jescar 50078 fret wire.



To get the guitar playing nicely the top of the bridge was reshaped and a new saddle was installed



After establishing the correct bridge position, holes are drilled through the bridge for pins to hold it in place

Action Stations

Having bevelled, levelled, crowned and polished the frets, I oiled the 'board, glued the nut back on and strung the guitar up. After some minor nut-slot adjustments, the neck relief measured 0.2mm and the action was 0.75mm lower on both sides. The Stratotone was definitely headed in the right direction, but bridge and saddle issues became obvious.

The bridge floats, but it's also slotted for a flat-top-style bone saddle. Harmony filed string notches in the saddle, and it's entirely possible that these slots were deepened in order to lower the action as the neck began to bow upwards. With the neck straight and taller frets installed, the A and B string heights were fine, but both E strings needed to be lowered, and the D and G strings were way too low.

> "Humongous neck notwithstanding, the Stratotone ended up playing like a conventional guitar"

The bridge's top was flat so the top E was almost touching the rosewood. At this point, I decided to carve a radius into the top of the bridge to give sufficient clearance in order for the top E string to be lowered. Furthermore, a new saddle was required to rectify the D and G string issues with low height.

Carving the bridge was quick and easy, but it took a fair bit of sanding to reduce a saddle blank thickness to 1.6mm. When slotting the saddle, I retained Harmony's 59mm string spacing and, using an action gauge as a guide, I filed the saddle notches to set each string to a 12th fret action of 2mm. The owner plans to use the guitar for bottleneck, so this medium action combined with a set of 11-gauge strings will allow for easy fretting as well as some clean sliding.

However, at this point, the bottleneck wouldn't be the only thing sliding around. With zero back angle on the neck and almost no break angle over the saddle, any attempt to bend strings set the bridge in motion. The best solution was to pin it down, which can be done almost invisibly.

After establishing the optimal bridge position for intonation, I drilled 1mm diameter holes through the bridge and into the body. I snipped the heads off two 1mm pin nails and tapped them through the holes then used a tiny punch to tap them beyond the surface of the bridge.

Superglue was wicked into the nail recesses along with some rosewood dust. Once dry, I filed and sanded the excess flush with the bridge and all evidence of the pins almost vanished.

Almost Perfect Harmony

Humongous neck notwithstanding, the Stratotone ended up playing like a conventional guitar. Its extreme natural resonance makes it comparable to a tuning fork with strings, and things get even better plugged in.

The DeArmond pickup has a very wide frequency range and is quite powerful. Disengaging the tone control enhances its almost hi-fi clarity and chime, and activating the tone circuit and rolling back the treble shifts the focus towards midrange snarl with softened transients that works perfectly for slide.

Ideally, there would be more break angle over the bridge. It's functioning fine, but I suspect that H44 user Joel Paterson's tailpiece modification may enhance stability and sustain. It needs drilled holes through the tailpiece and into the body for screws to hold down the tailpiece, but the owner has decided to leave it for now. G

With thanks to Simon Butler for allowing us to feature his guitar here.
www.huwpriceguitar.com



David Davidson's Vintage Icons

David Davidson sets the record straight on the much misunderstood Les Pauls of 1960

1960 Gibson Les Paul Standard



Although made in 1960, this stunning example has all the features commonly associated with 1959 'Bursts

"When is a '59 'Burst not a '59 'Burst? The answer is when it's a 'Double O'. Most people associate 1960 Les Pauls with vibrant cherry sunbursts that never fade, reflector control knobs and skinnier neck profiles, but those features were not introduced right at the start of the year. Well into 1960, Gibson continued building Les Pauls using necks, bodies and even pickups that had been made in 1959. These '59-spec early 1960 'Bursts have become known as 'Double O's because the first two serial number digits were zeros. That's why they look, feel and sound indistinguishable from 1959 Les Pauls.

"Gibson must have become aware of the fading finish issues. The aniline red pigment that most manufacturers used was not light-fast and would rapidly bleach out when exposed to sunlight. As hard as it is to believe nowadays, sunburst Les Pauls were not that popular because they were expensive and regarded as too heavy.

"Most players probably didn't understand what sounds you could get out of them until Keith Richards appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and then guys like Mike Bloomfield and Eric Clapton made them public. Many Les Pauls would have spent considerable amounts of time sunbathing in shop windows. When light-fast red pigment became available, Gibson stopped spraying aniline red and the unfaded late-1960s style of sunburst became known as 'tomato soup'.

"I've had this early 1960 for about seven years and the colour is very 1959. It retains a lot of very strong unfaded aniline dye, but it weighs 9lb 9oz. Despite being heavy, the guitar is pretty balanced so it doesn't feel like it's pulling on your shoulders too much. The back does show a little bit of playwear – I call them spaghetti marks – and there's some more wear on the rear upper bout to one side of the switch plate.

> "As hard as it is to believe, sunburst Les Pauls were not that popular – they were expensive and heavy"

"The neck pickup reads 8.23k and the bridge is 8.32k, so they're very well matched. Both pickups have double black bobbins and the covers have never been off. They sound pretty aggressive, but all you need to do is roll the volumes back to 9 or 8 and they clean up sweetly.

"The tuner buttons have been replaced with Uncle Lou's as they shrank and disintegrated, but everything on the guitar is original and there's no real wear on the fingerboard. At first glance I assumed it had been refretted, but these frets are actually original and in fantastic condition.

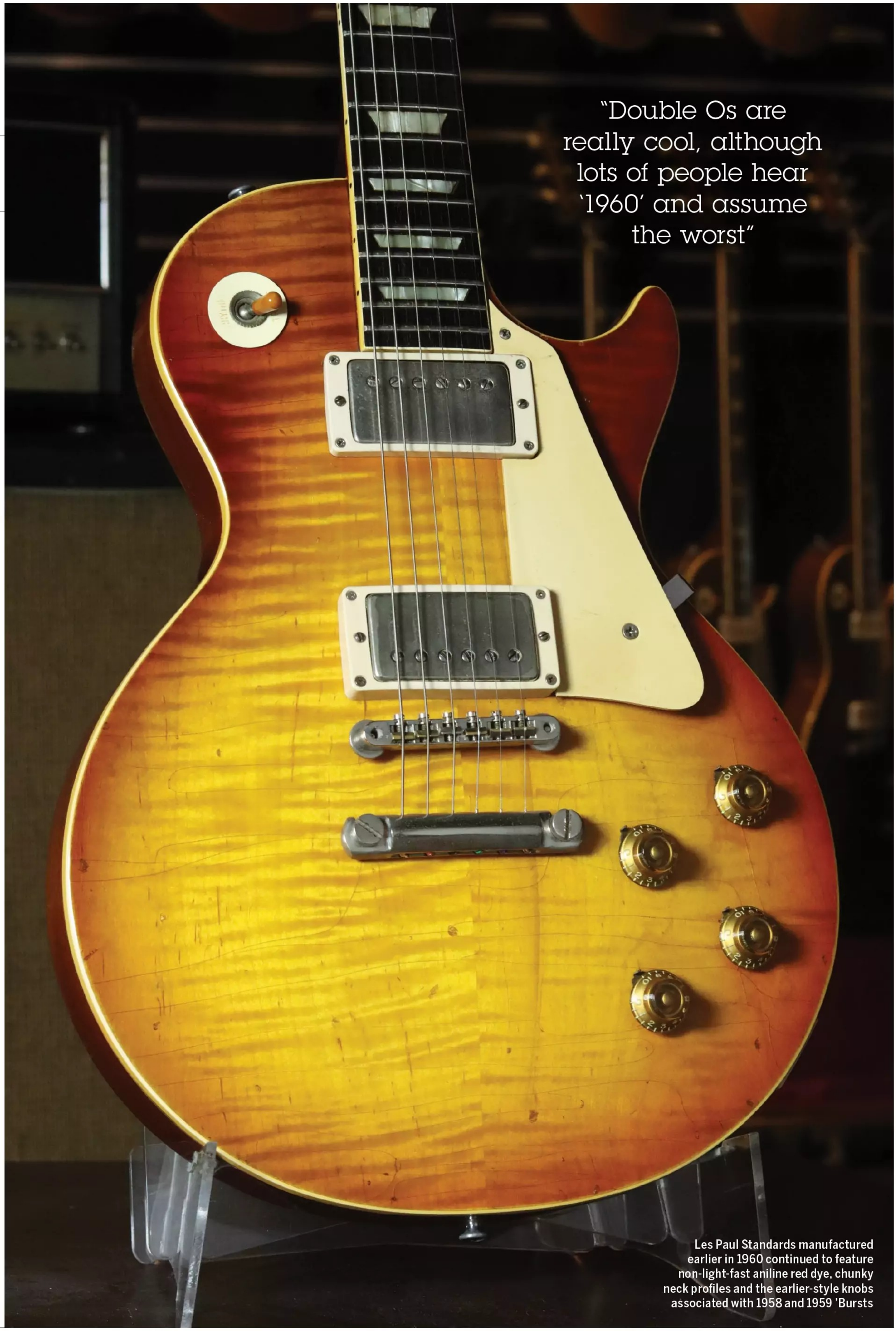
"I think Double Os are really cool, although lots of people hear '1960' and assume the worst. But when you have seen as many as me – and I currently have 12 1960s in stock – I can tell you they all vary. The earliest ones have fairly large necks that feel comfortable, but the neck of one very late 1960 that I have is absolutely tiny. It's like a blade in comparison, but Gibson didn't make all these changes overnight. It was a progressive thing.

"Some suggest that thinner necks make Les Pauls sound different, but you have to acknowledge that every piece of wood sounds different. I can't really comment on how neck thickness affects tone because I've had some skinny-neck 1960s that sound richer and fuller than some 1959s. I think it's more about the tonal characteristics and quality of the lumber.

"When the collector market was obsessed with 1959 Les Pauls, and it still is to some extent, nobody was paying much attention to 1960s for a while. I started buying them up and went on a run where I acquired seven or eight Double Os. I would hunt for them at guitar shows because back then people would simply classify them as '59s or '60s. I was particularly interested in the early ones, and the desirable 1959 specs were retained up to the point where serial numbers beginning with 02 started to appear.

"What I can tell you is that there are really good 'Bursts, average 'Bursts and some that are not that good at all. I would definitely place this guitar well above average, although I can't say it's the best one I've ever had. I do wish it was lighter and, although it's fine to use in the studio or play sitting down, I wouldn't want to do a whole gig with it standing up. There is such a wide variation in 'Burst weights – it just goes to show that Gibson made these in a factory with whatever materials were available at the time." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com /info@ wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563



Les Paul Standards manufactured earlier in 1960 continued to feature non-light-fast aniline red dye, chunky neck profiles and the earlier-style knobs associated with 1958 and 1959 'Bursts

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



One-Chord Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Stratocaster, Keeley-modded Boss SD-1 & Vox AC15 Hand-Wired
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

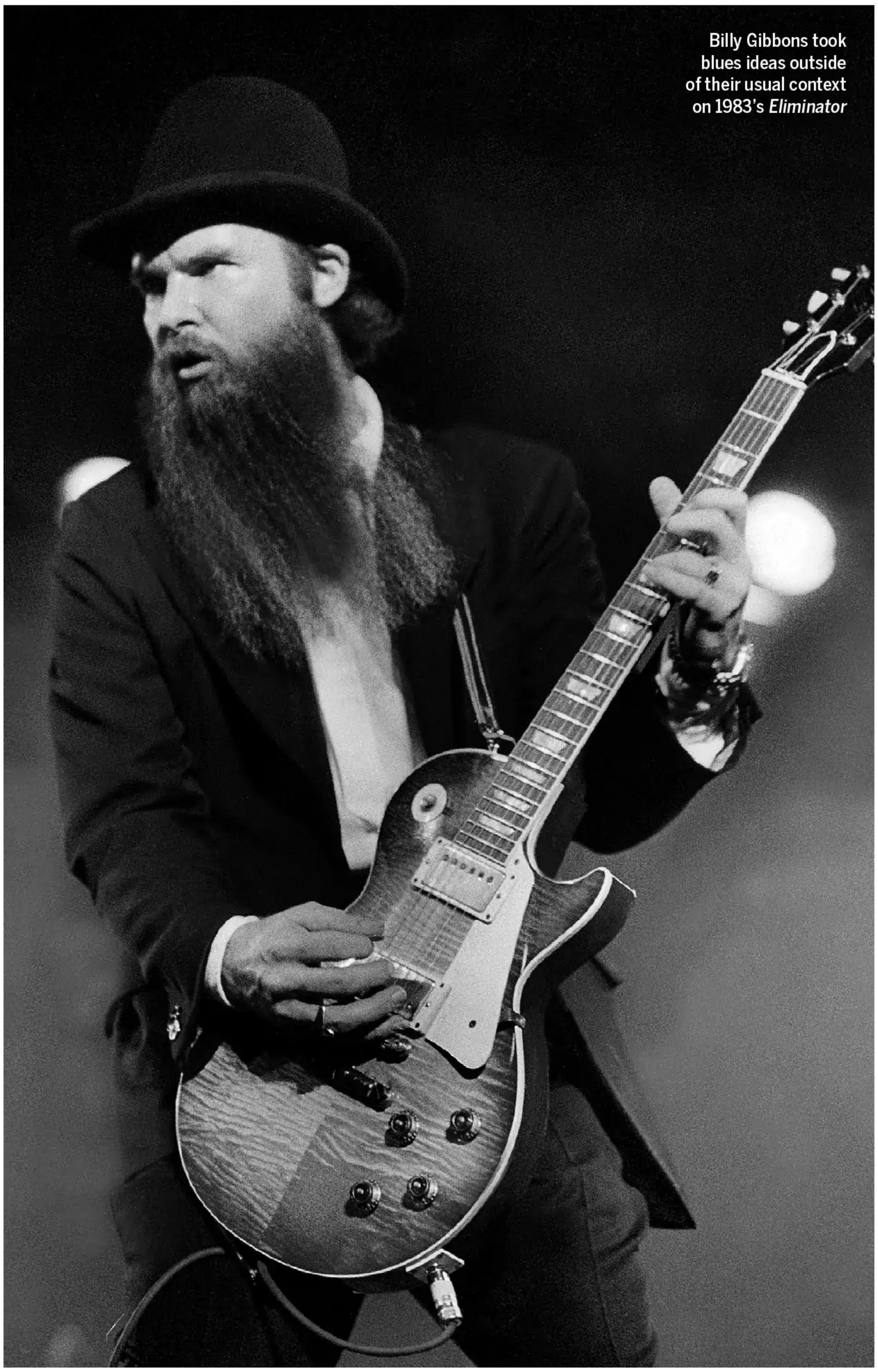
IN A WORLD where we're so often encouraged to expand our vocabulary, learn more scales, play over complex changes and improve our technique, this example solo takes the contrary approach of exploring simple bluesy ideas over a single chord. It does venture a little outside of the regular pentatonic shapes towards the end (check out Example 3), but this is the exception, rather than the rule. In this section we're looking for interesting melodic lines instead of deliberately referring to specific chord tones, but – deliberately or not – this is what's going on during the last four bars...

One of the advantages of staying with a one-chord 'drone' backing such as this is that we can experiment with different melodic ideas without having to consider the constantly 'shifting sands' of changing chords. This concentration on the melodic possibilities in a narrower context can be gradually expanded from a single chord to some straightforward changes at first, then gradually building in complexity as you become more conversant with the various possibilities.

Let's talk a little more about the example solo. It was played in a single pass but is divided up here into three four-bar sections. The first two of these stay within the accepted parameters of blues playing (albeit with a little more distortion than a 'classic' blues). After establishing a riff in Example 1, Example 2 plays around with the shape 1 A minor pentatonic box. None of this requires a huge vocabulary or theoretical knowledge; it's much more about melody and rhythm. While it's always good to expand our horizons, most classic solos aren't derived from exotic scales and arpeggios! That said, Example 3 does deliberately (and repeatedly) refer to the 6th (F#), culminating in a fiddly Am6 arpeggio idea. Hope you enjoy and see you next time! G



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

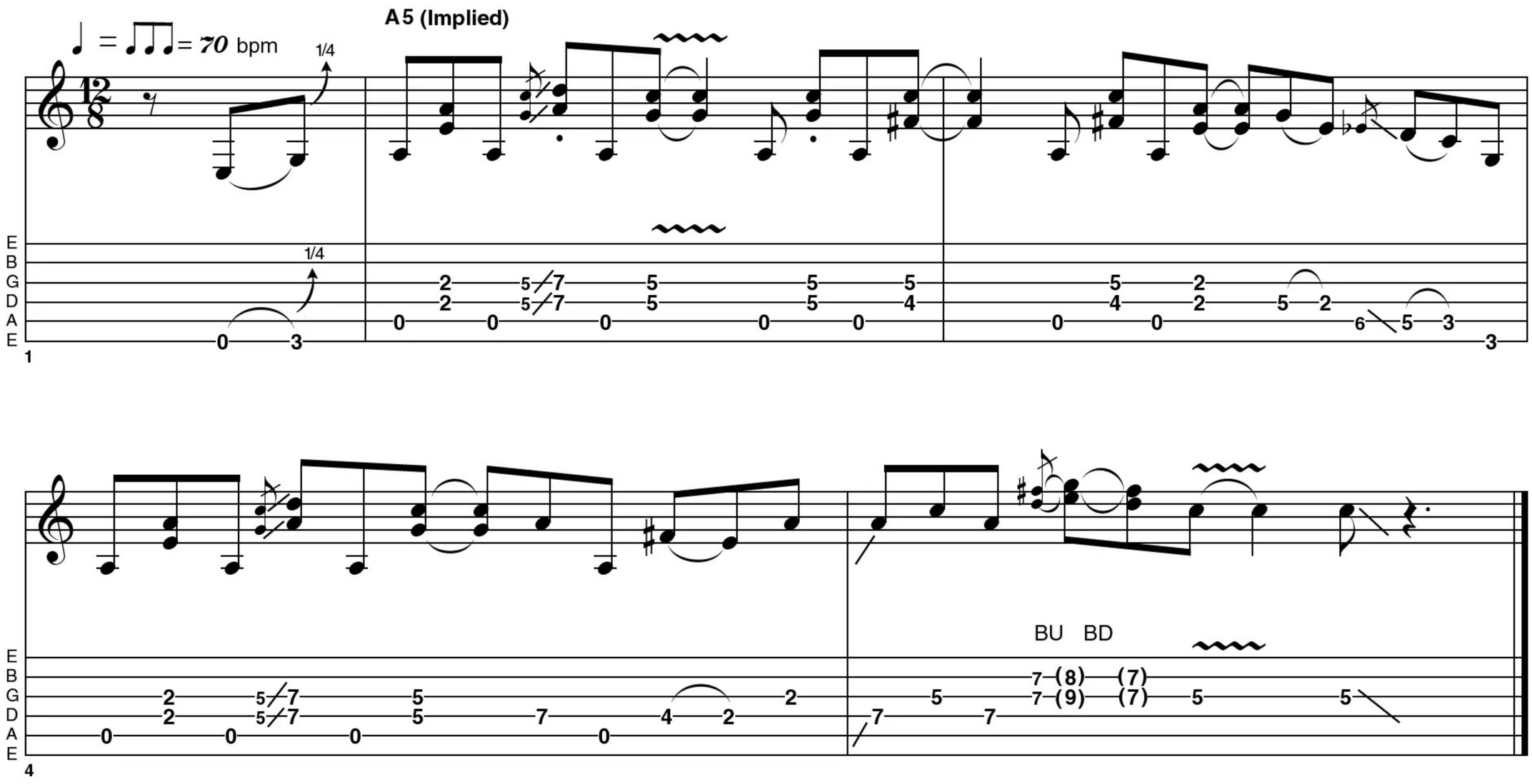


Billy Gibbons took blues ideas outside of their usual context on 1983's *Eliminator*

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

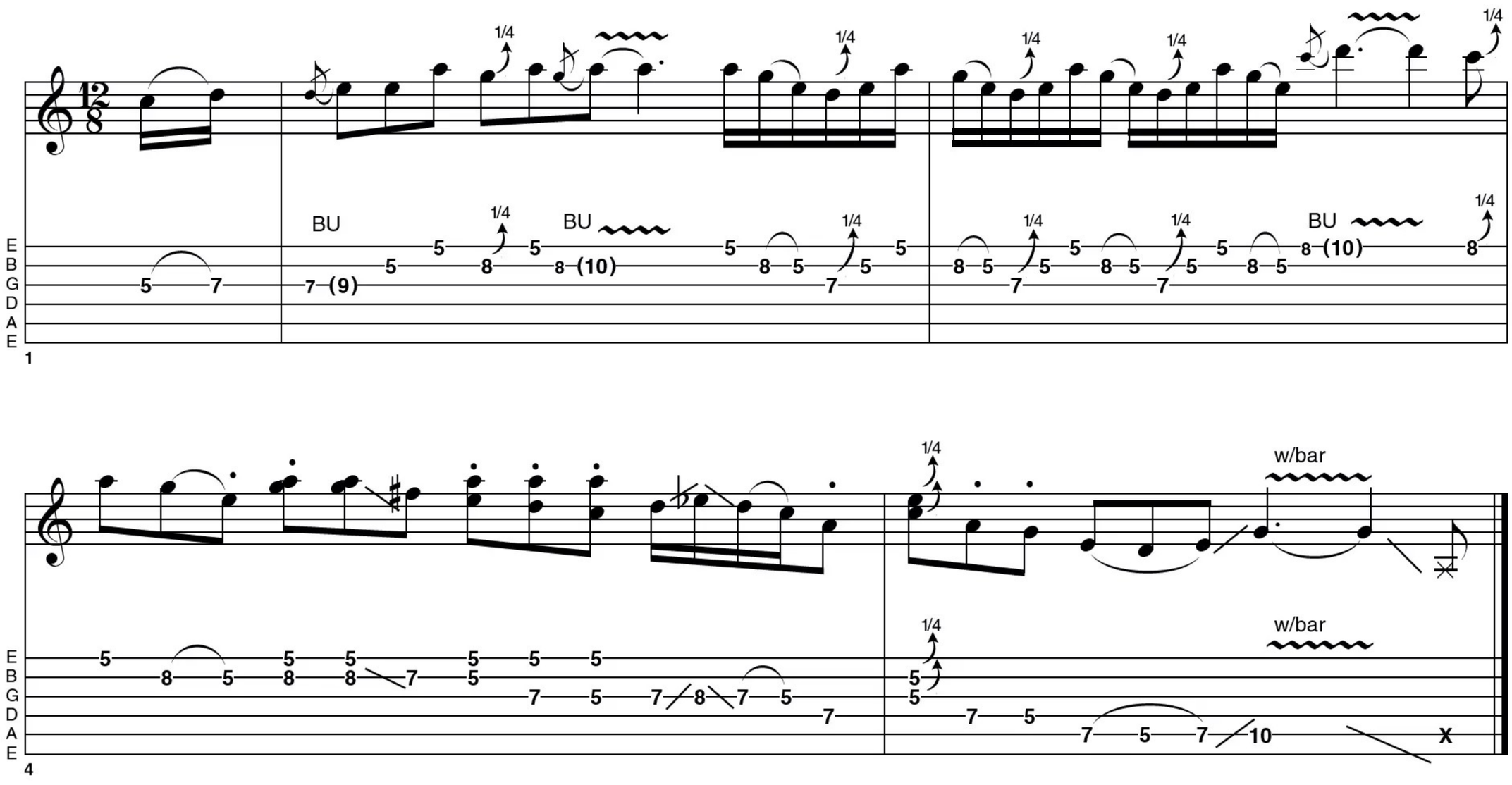
Example 1

THIS INTRODUCTORY PHRASE establishes a riff based around an A chord, though it progresses towards a more pentatonic 'lead guitar' approach by the time we reach bar 4. In terms of pentatonic positions, you could say this is based predominantly around shape 5 until bar 4, when we shift up to shape 1. I'm using fingerstyle to play this, but any version of hybrid or even flatpicking can be made to work. Try them all and see what you prefer.



Example 2

HAVING ESTABLISHED that bluesy groove, we're now 'lifting off' with some solo playing. We stay pretty constantly with the shape 1 A minor pentatonic we shifted to at the end of Example 1. This phrase isn't looking to push any boundaries harmonically – it's about building intensity via that repeated string-bending lick, then breaking it up with some rhythmic doublestops. Maybe a good way of viewing this is to think of Jeff Beck shifting to Billy Gibbons!



Example 3

HERE'S WHERE WE CHANGE from a more pentatonic-based approach to experimenting with 'outside' ideas – not in the hard bebop sense but non-pentatonic and arpeggio-based shapes based around Am6. This translates as including lots of F# (the 6th), along with the other notes from A minor (A-C-E). Looking closely, you'll also spot a good chunk of the shape 3 A minor pentatonic in there, too. Once again, it's your choice whether to use fingerstyle, pick or hybrid picking. Arguably, once you add enough gain, the tone difference is minimal, but how you attack the notes will influence your phrasing.



Hear It Here

JEFF BECK
JEFF BECK'S GUITAR SHOP



The title track of 1989's *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop* was definitely an inspiration for the riff in Example 1 of this issue's piece, though *Stand On It* is also in there, too. Staying with that same album, *Two Rivers* explores some unusual non-pentatonic ideas. Elsewhere, check out *Cause We've Ended As Lovers* from 75's *Blow By Blow* as this contains a mixture of melodic exploration and more recognisably pentatonic themes. A little of this creeps into Example 2 with its repeated string-bend lick.

ZZ TOP
ELIMINATOR



Billy Gibbons manages to take blues ideas and incorporate them into a non-traditional context without losing their essence. His riffs and solos on the tracks *Legs* and *Sharp Dressed Man* from 1983's *Eliminator* illustrate this particularly well, as all the other instruments sound very programmed and '1980s'. The same is true of *Rough Boy* from *Afterburner* (1985): the two solos in this track really show Billy stretching out and soloing in a way he doesn't allow himself on the other two examples.

OZ NOY
WHO GIVES A FUNK



Though he definitely comes from the more technical end of the spectrum, Oz Noy has an understanding of what makes the blues the blues, in the same way that Robben Ford does. In fact, you can check them out playing together on his version of *Ice Man* from 2016's *Who Gives A Funk* album. Elsewhere, check out *Come Dance With Me* from *Twisted Blues Vol 2, released in* 2014, or his incredible soloing on *Sit Tight* from the *Ha!* album, from earlier in his career in 2005.

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