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Guarist

Issue 536

MAY 2026

75TH

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Iron Horse



This month we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Telecaster (see page 58), the ultimate workhorse of the guitar family. Most of us have had conversations that go something like: “If you could only have one electric guitar for the rest of your life...” It’s remarkable how often the Tele wins that ‘desert island’ scenario. On the face of it, it seems unlikely. Firstly, it has only two pickups, and quite a few people aren’t big fans of the traditional Tele neck unit to begin with (though I personally love it) – and while the remaining bridge pickup has bags of raw character, it’s sharp enough to scrape wallpaper with in some cases.

So why do people like the Tele so much when other guitars offer ‘more’? The answer, of course, is that the Tele’s very simplicity is its strength. The sense of connection and chiming sustain you get from that simple bridge screwed into a slab of a body is unrivalled, and the resulting harmonic detail gives a clue as to why sensitive, nuanced players such as Bill Frisell, John Scofield and Julian Lage have all been drawn to the Tele in their time. Like an acoustic guitar, the Tele simply invites us to play and let its clarity reveal what we have to say. Over seven decades on, that’s still an irresistible invitation.

Of course, plenty of other guitars have shaped the sound of rock – and even niche designs such as Gibson’s reverse-body Firebird have had their influence, not least the circa 1964 Cardinal Red Firebird VII belonging to Phil Manzanera, who used it on many of Roxy Music’s biggest hits. Phil has long told the story of buying it from a well-to-do West London residence after answering a classified ad. A while back, we made a video of Phil telling that story. Remarkably, the (previously unidentified) original owner of the guitar turned up in the comments section this month to explain why he’d sold it and many more fascinating bits of hitherto undisclosed backstory for this legendary guitar. As Phil himself commented, “Wow, that’s brilliant!” As always, with guitars there’s always more to discover. Enjoy the issue and see you next month.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor’s Highlights



Smith/Kotzen
Iron Maiden’s Adrian Smith has long been one of metal’s most eloquent players and he teams up so well with Richie Kotzen on **p50**



Mike Vernon
All at *Guitarist* were saddened to learn of the passing of celebrated British blues producer Mike Vernon. Tribute on **p46**



Eric Johnson
He’s not only one of the world’s greatest players but legendarily fussy about gear. He talks about guitars loved and lost over on **p118**

Guitarist

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FEATURE



Guitarist

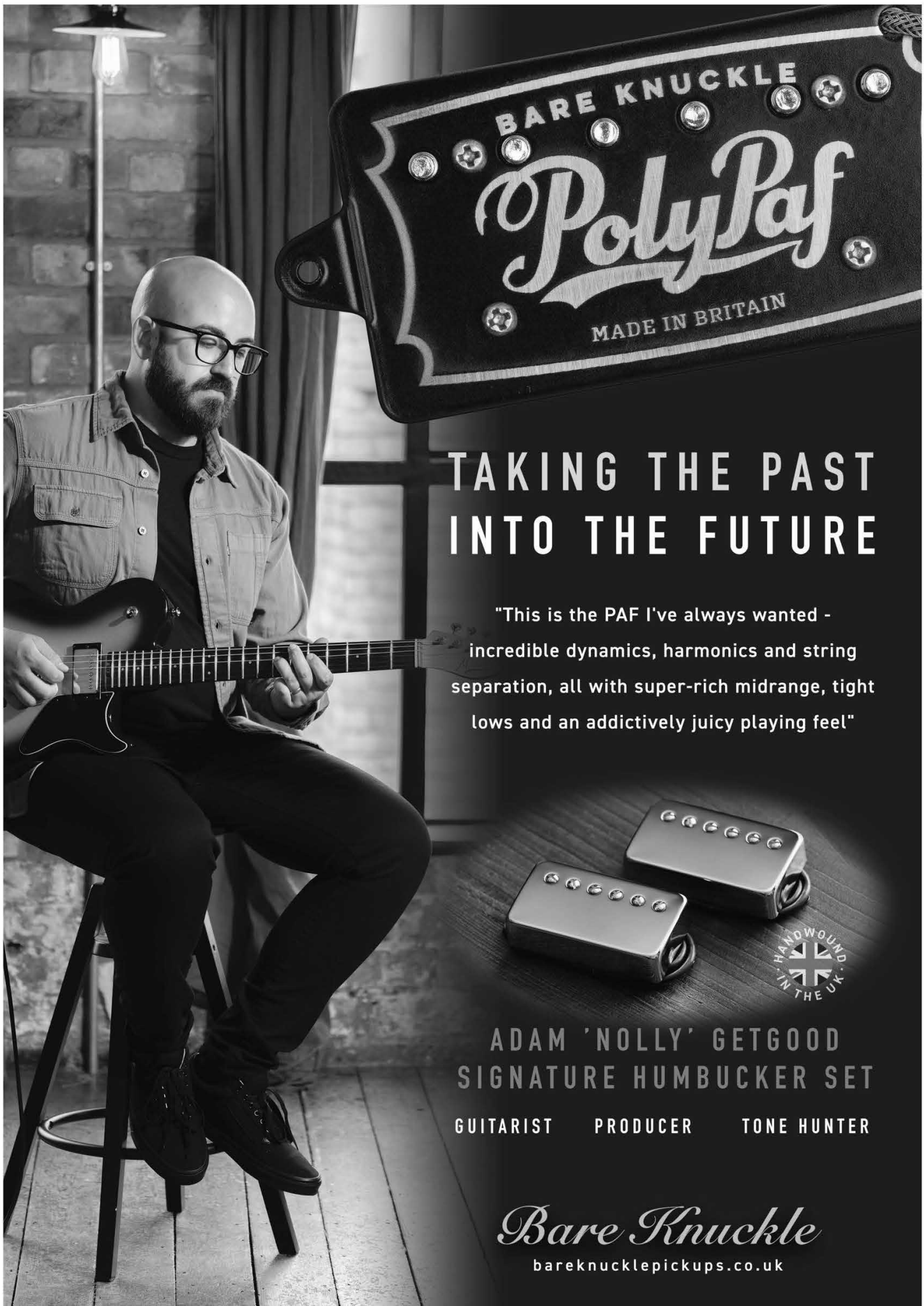
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REVIEW



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TAKING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

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separation, all with super-rich midrange, tight
lows and an addictively juicy playing feel"



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FIRST PLAY



CREAM T CROSSFIRE LT £879

WHAT IS IT? Chinese-made hardtail pickup-swapping offset with three Seymour Duncan and Guitar-X pickups included

New Breed

The latest Brit brand to head overseas, Cream T releases the new LT range, made in China, and aims to make instant solderless pickup-swapping even more attractive

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker

Imagine a guitar where you can change pickups in seconds without soldering and move from an old Patent Applied For pickup to a mega shred-tastic hot 'bucker, for example. One guitar, limitless possibilities for the tonal investigator or any player that simply has to cover a lot of sounds. Well, the technology to do exactly that has been with us for some time. Developed by the now-defunct Relish Guitars in Switzerland, it was subsequently purchased by Cream T and rebranded as Guitar-X.

But we're not exactly discussing household names here, are we? While Cream T offers Standard pickup-swapping models at £1,499 and Custom models from £1,999 upwards, these well-made UK guitars are only available in limited numbers and it's fair to say that, despite the potential, the pickup-swapping concept hasn't exactly taken off.

In an attempt to give the concept a shot in the arm, Cream T's latest venture is to attack the price point and go to China, not the UK, to produce its new LT range. Currently, there are two models (both of which we've seen in the UK line-up): the offset Crossfire and the S-style Polaris.

Each model is available in three 'packages', which ascend in price and include three humbucking-sized pickups; common to each one is a Guitar-X humbucking-sized P-90 single coil. The Guitar-X package (£749) adds two







1

1. Becoming quite a popular through-strung bridge for lower-end builds, the unnamed design is clearly inspired by Hipshot's Fixed Guitar bridge. No spec is provided on the materials used

2. Like the UK-made Cream T, the modern style continues with this easy access spoke-wheel truss rod adjuster. Because of the open-hole Guitar-X mounting, the neck pickup sits a little further back than usual

uncovered Guitar-X Tribute humbuckers, the Seymour Duncan package (£879) swaps those for the uncovered Seymour Duncan Hot Rodded humbucker set (JB and Jazz), and the Cream T Custom Shop Package (£999) has a set of Cream Of The Crop 'buckers and also comes with a premium logo'd gigbag (the other two are more standard). The lowest-tier package is only offered in metallic black, the other two in four different colours per model.

Aiming for the middle ground, our review model is the Seymour Duncan package Crossfire. The downsized offset-meets-Surfcaster Crossfire has graced our pages before, and pulling it from its decent gigbag, at just over half the price

As an instrument, the Crossfire LT comes across as perfectly good. But in reality, the 'great' lies in the pickup swapping

of the UK-made Standard model, initial impressions are very good. The glossy Inferno Red (one of four Chrysler Crossfire colours) is quite a deep-hued metallic and is contrasted by the large and bright-white pearloid scratchplate. It's far from a vibey new look and shouts production (rather than boutique), which it is, of course, while the classy Suhr-inspired headstock is colour-matched with a clean and simple white logo. All good.

Under the body finish is poplar, a wood favoured by contemporary makers such as PRS for its SE Silver Sky, with standard contours, a round-nosed heel and regular thickness (45mm). The neck is a dark caramel-coloured slab-sawn roasted maple with some wavy grain but no figure. Both this and the Polaris use a full Fender scale length, the neck here – like the UK Crossfire Standard – with a spoke-wheel truss rod adjustment at the end of the rosewood fingerboard. Hardware is equally utilitarian: die-cast tuners, plus the rather neat through-strung six-saddle

3. The UK Crossfire Standard uses a Free-Way pickup selector, but here it's just a standard three-way type. Both volume controls have pull switches to voice a coil-split for each humbucking pickup

4. While not contoured, the round-nosed heel is pretty comfortable. Unlike the UK models, there's no cover for the open cavities on the back. It does make pickup swapping even faster, though! Along with the two Seymour Duncans, you also get a humbucking-sized Guitar-X P-90 (far left)





3

bridge we've already seen on Shergold's Telstar and PJD's Indonesian Origin Pro series guitars.

Yet if this all seems pretty run of the mill, the unique aspect, of course, is the pickup swapping. Flip over the guitar and we have two cleanly milled open holes, with no cover like the UK models. This means you can instantly see the pickup back and the Guitar-X mounting frame, as well as the large brass screw-height adjustor. Give that frame a pull and the pickup (though firmly held via small magnets) comes free and you can pop another in its place.

Feel & Sounds

The Crossfire's nicely ergonomic take on the classic offset is a lovely weight, really comfortable seated or on a strap. Playability is not much different. The guitar arrived with a pretty standard mainstream setup, ready to go, no tweaks required. In terms of shape, the LT neck isn't miles away from the UK Crossfire, a sort of slim classic 'C' with Fender-like width, a depth of 20.9mm at the 1st fret, 22mm at the 12th. The neck back has a light satin finish, too. Fretwork is very good from a medium gauge with just enough height for those more energetic string bends (2.4mm by 1mm) and each fret has been mirror-polished. There's a sight



4

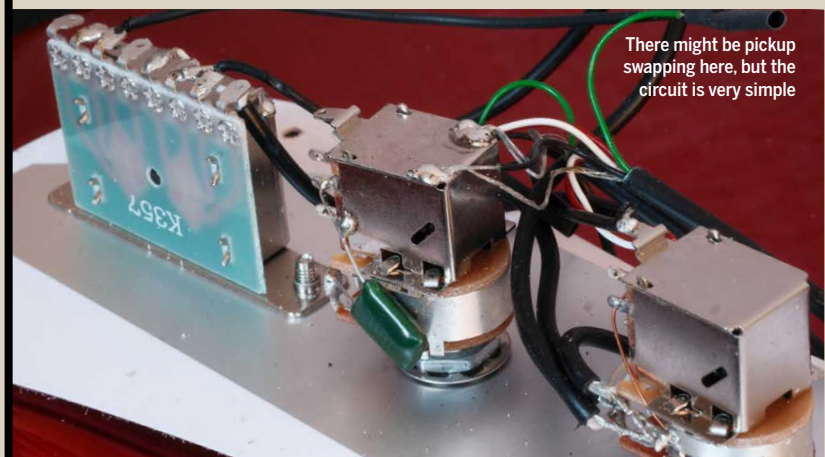
UNDER THE HOOD

What's under the big scratchplate?

Despite the guitar-swapping innovation here, there are no fancy electronic tricks. Each pickup joins the circuit via four small contacts on its mounting frame that connect to the fixed socket – one for each pickup – mounted in those large cavities. These then join the K347 box-style three-way lever selector switch, then the 500kohms volume and tone controls like any other simple circuit. The unmarked mini-pots, of course, have pull-switches to allow the coil-splits: the volume splits the neck pickup, the tone the bridge pickup, voicing the slug coils of each humbucker. For the tone controls, there's just a simple green Mylar cap rated at .047 μ F, a little high for humbuckers, which typically use .022 μ F or .033 μ F. There's no treble bleed cap, either – another simple addition that would be welcome.

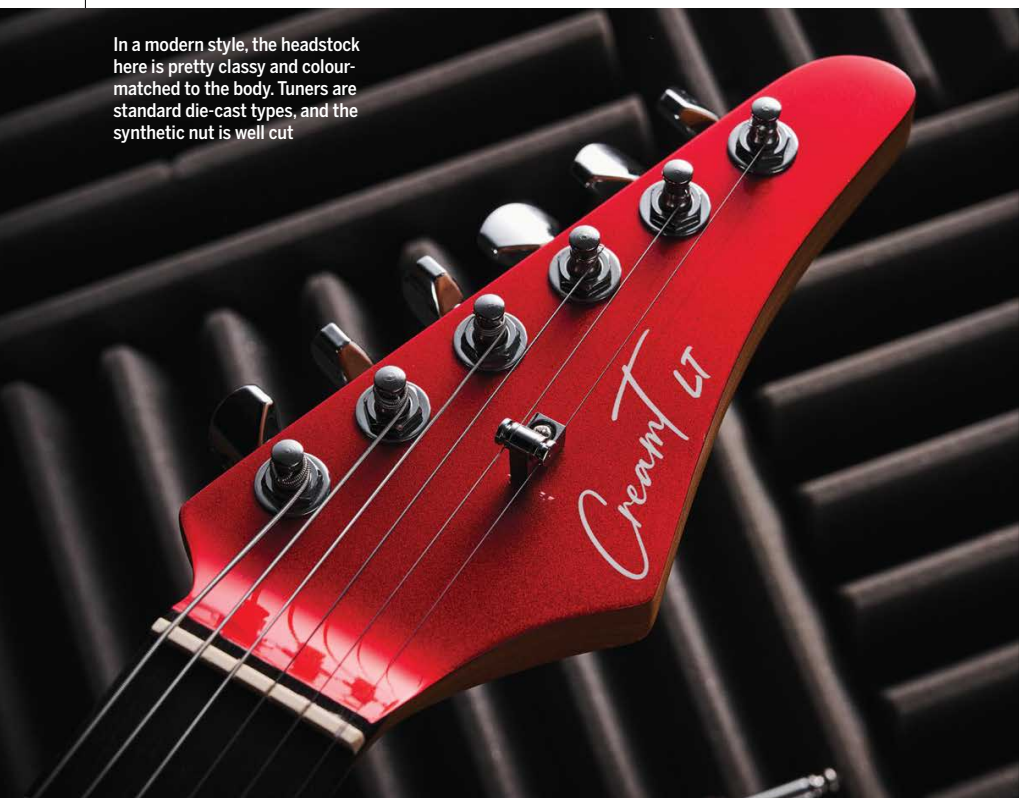
The Guitar-X system only supports humbucking-sized pickups, and while there's a good selection of compatible pickups from Cream T, Seymour Duncan and Guitar-X's own brand, the only proper single coils (aside from P-90s) are the Cream T Single Shots.

The JB is a true aftermarket pickup classic and, like the Jazz Model, goes back to the beginnings of Seymour Duncan in the 70s. Both use Alnico V bar magnets with nickel-silver baseplates. Measured at output, our JB is 15.94k, 8.03k when split; the Jazz measures 7.22k and 3.66k. Guitar-X pickups are designed as a lower-priced alternative to both Seymour Duncan and Cream T. The included humbucking-sized P-90, which has a measured at output DCR of 7.37k, uses two Alnico V bar magnets and aims for a similar voicing to Cream T's The Duchess and Nidge.



There might be pickup swapping here, but the circuit is very simple

In a modern style, the headstock here is pretty classy and colour-matched to the body. Tuners are standard die-cast types, and the synthetic nut is well cut



in-curve to the edges of the fingerboard and a little rounding of the top edge, while the radius sits somewhere between 305mm and 356mm (12 and 14 inches) when measured. While some of us with more vintage tastes might prefer a slightly fuller, rounder neck with a smaller radius, you can't knock this.

You're not going to get any complaints from us in regard to the pickup choice of this package, either: probably two of the best-known and most-used humbuckers out there. The JB with its pushy midrange nose pulls off any manner of thicker classic rock and is perhaps a little overlooked as a great rock rhythm pickup. The Jazz, well, it's not only a perfect foil but very Patent Applied For-alike, almost bell-like played clean and really emotive yet clear for those gurning blues solos. There's more, though, as we have coil-splits for each pickup (voicing the slug coils), and another 'trick' of the JB is how Strat-y it sounds but without the piercing high-end, and it mixes really well with the Jazz.

Now, while the JB has a 'bridge' label and the Jazz says 'neck', the beauty of the pickup swapping is that you can ignore that! If you want a more classic Patent Applied For voice, just put the Jazz in the bridge position (and quickly adjust the height): it's a little brighter, more open roots-rock. With the included and well-voiced Guitar-X P-90 at the neck, we now have a *completely* different guitar in terms

of what we're hearing, not least mixing that with the coil-split Jazz at the bridge. Want to change back to the original JB/Jazz? No problem, it's done in seconds.

Verdict

As an instrument, the Crossfire LT comes across as perfectly good, if a little everyday. The weight is good, the neck is good, the playability is good. But in reality, the 'great' lies in the pickup swapping. If you've ever swapped a pickup and given a lesser or unused instrument a new lease of life – or you just fancied a sonic change – you'll know how the concept works. With the Guitar-X system, you don't need modding skills or a repair person to do it for you. You can swap away to your heart's content.

The LT brings Guitar-X to a new, lower price point, and this Seymour Duncan package certainly aptly illustrates the potential for recording where you can revoice the guitar – without even unplugging it – to suit a song or part. Live, too, you could voice this for your funk band or swap out the pickups for your rock covers gig. Same guitar: different pickups.

One neat thing about this new launch is that if you buy any LT guitar and like the concept, but you want to upgrade to a UK-made Cream T model, just send back the guitar (keep the pickups) and you'll get £500 credit towards that higher-spec model. Tempted? **G**



CREAM T CROSSFIRE LT (SEYMOUR DUNCAN PACKAGE)

PRICE: £879 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Double-cutaway, offset solidbody electric

BODY: Poplar

NECK: Roasted maple, C profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/41.82mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Hardtail bridge with open block saddles and through-body stringing, die-cast tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: Seymour Duncan Hot Rodded Humbucker set – uncovered JB (SH-4) at bridge and Jazz Model (SH-2) at neck – w/ 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (both with pull-switch coil-splits for neck and bridge respectively). Also included is a Guitar-X P-90 (humbucking size w/ chrome cover

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.22/7.1

RANGE OPTIONS: LT range starts with Guitar-X package (£749): metallic black only, 2x Guitar-X '50s Tribute humbuckers and P-90 (humbucking size). Cream T Custom Shop package (£999): 2x Cream T Cream Of The Crop humbuckers and Guitar-X P-90 (humbucking size). The more S-style Polaris comes in the same 3 packages

LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently

FINISHES: Inferno Red (as reviewed), Aero Blue, Black Metallic, Graphite Metallic – gloss finish body, satin neck back

Cream T Custom

01695 338900

www.creamtcustomshop.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

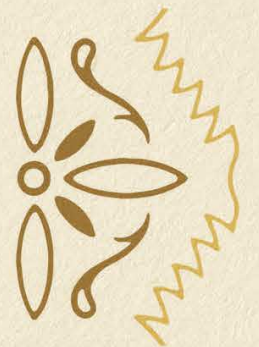
PROS Comfortable downsized offset style; good weight; nice fretwork and setup; simple hardtail style with solid tuning stability; pickup-swapping potential

CONS Be nice to see a two-piece scratchplate; limited single-coil Guitar-X compatible pickups

Acoustic Guitar Strings by Ernie Ball



Earthwood



ERNE BALL

FIRST PLAY



**TAYLOR NEXT
GENERATION 324CE**
£2,975

WHAT IS IT? A revised and upgraded version of Taylor's renowned 324ce Grand Auditorium acoustic

Sweet Clarity

Taylor has introduced a raft of changes into its Grand Auditorium range, including revised bracing, an easily adjustable neck system, and a new pickup

Words David Mead **Photography** Matt Lincoln

That old quote 'standing still is the fastest way of moving backwards in a rapidly changing world' couldn't apply more in today's ultra-competitive guitarscape. This is why we see companies such as PRS and Taylor – to name but two – continually tweaking, upgrading and refining their instruments in order to stay ahead of the game. Taylor in particular has been relentless in its pursuit of tonal enhancements and improved playability, driven by its tireless CEO and chief designer, Andy Powers. "As guitar makers, we see the ever-wider variety of players and styles," he tells us. "This means different types of sounds, feels and aesthetic presentations, all in step with the creative world of today's players."

With this in mind, Taylor has turned its attention to its popular Grand Auditorium model and is currently in the process of giving it a refresh across the range. The GA has enjoyed the position of being one of Taylor's defining models for 30 years, with its comfortable body size, lively tone and everyman appeal, but now it's receiving a set of new features to satisfy the needs of the new breed of acoustic player.

First and foremost is the tonal engine room, also known as the soundboard







1. The 324ce's sapele back and sides is a perfect tonal foil for its neotropical mahogany top

bracing. Back in 2018 Andy Powers introduced V-Class bracing to the Taylor range, claiming it enhanced playability, tone and even tuning. Although dubious at first, the guitar world listened and decided that there were indeed benefits to the new bracing design. Now, Andy has taken things one step further by employing a scalloped version of his creation. This subtle change, we're told, enhances the guitar's lower register, adding more oomph to the bass response.

You can literally feel the body resonate – the extended neck tenon and marriage of body woods are working their magic

Elsewhere on the guitar the neck joint has been revised with a longer tenon that extends deeper into the body “for dramatically enhanced sustain, warmth, and resonance”, Taylor claims. Not only that, it has a further trick up its sleeve in the form of easier adjustment in order to combat climate changes that bring about action height tweaks on the road. Basically, there is a nut inside the guitar's body at the neck joint that you access with a “quarter-inch nut driver” tool (a little like a socket wrench on a long flexible arm) or the truss

rod wrench. Turn it to the right to lower the action, turn to the left to raise it. It's as simple as righty-tighty, lefty-loosey, and if you use the nut driver you don't even have to loosen the strings, whereas using the truss rod wrench means you would have to slacken them off in order to get your hand inside.

The chances are that players in the UK could set and forget the action, but those living in a country with a whole range of climate differentials might need to equip themselves accordingly. If this sounds like a faff, we can assure you that our 324ce came with a perfectly set up action and we didn't need to go and rummage through the toolbox.

The third and equally significant change for Taylor is a brand-new pickup system called Claria. Gone, it seems, is the Expression System 2, to be replaced by a simplified setup comprising an under-saddle piezo with specially tuned EQ controls located in the top rim of the soundhole. What's new? Well, Taylor tells us that it offers “discrete soundhole-mounted volume, mid-contour, and tone controls [that] enable a wide range of tone-shaping. Players will find it easy to quickly dial in their preferred sound in any type of performance venue, offering remarkable plug-and-play utility.” Naturally, the volume and tone controls

2. The controls for the new Claria pickup system lurk almost unseen on the upper side of the guitar's soundhole

3. Complementing the body's subtle Edgeburst finish, the Taylor's headstock, tuners, truss rod cover and nut maintain a dark theme



2



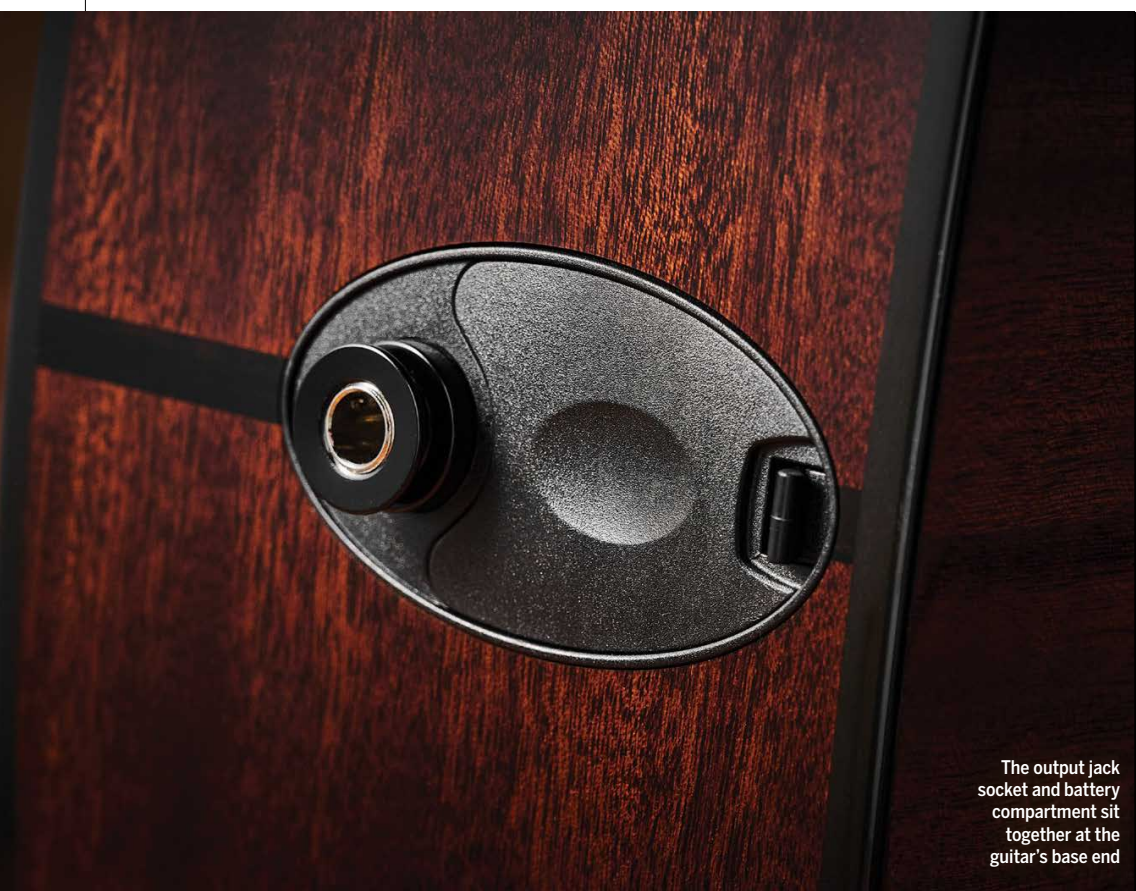
3

speak for themselves, but the mid-contour is interesting. Along its travel you have a scooped midrange at one end, which broadens to full-fat mids at the other. In theory, this covers pretty much all bases.

Of course, all this new innovation is all well and good, but the guitar itself has to be able to cut the mustard and so let's briefly consider its sum of parts.

We begin with a mahogany top. Now 'hog', as it is often called, is known for its warmth and midrange bite and so we're beginning to see a theme developing here with Taylor wanting to push the bass and mids of the Grand Auditorium to the forefront, while keeping the trebles clear and vibrant. Indeed, the choice of sapele for the back and sides confirms this as Taylor claims that this particular tonewood will add sparkle to the instrument's soundscape.

The neck is mahogany once again, with a scarf joint just below the headstock, topped with an ebony 'board that sprouts 20 medium, nicely polished frets. Tuners are Taylor-branded matt black with black buttons, which sit nicely with the black Tusq nut and ebony veneered headstock. Along with the dark Edgeburst finish, it seems that the 324ce is set up for stealth manoeuvres. Let's see how it registers on our tonal radar.



The output jack socket and battery compartment sit together at the guitar's base end



TAYLOR NEXT GENERATION 324CE

PRICE: £2,975 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Grand Auditorium

TOP: Neo-tropical mahogany

BACK/SIDES: Sapele

MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm

NECK: Neo-tropical mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

TUNERS: Taylor logo'd satin black with satin black buttons

NUT/WIDTH: Black Tusq/44.4mm

FINGERBOARD: West African

Crellicam ebony

FRETS: 20, medium

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with Micarta saddle/55mm

ELECTRICS: Taylor Claria pickup system

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.04/4.5

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Taylor's Next Generation 300 range includes the Builder's Edition 324ce (£3,695) and the 314ce Studio (£2,255).

See website for more details

LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently

FINISH: Gloss medium stain with shaded Edgeburst top

Taylor Guitars

+31 (0)20 667 6033

www.taylorguitars.com



9/10

Feel & Sounds

We've been fans of Taylor's neck carve for as long as we remember. It's comfortable and fits the hand well, and if you've been playing a C-profiled Strat all day and you pick up a Taylor you're instantly at home. Simple as that. Our first probing strums reveal a clear and rich tone, with very good separation – every note within a chord remains crystal clear. Furthermore, there's no mud at the bass end of the spectrum.

But what about that midrange and bass enhancement that Taylor has made? We were surprised that we could actually feel the bass vibrate throughout the guitar's body. You can literally feel the body resonate as you play it and so we'd assess that the extended neck tenon, combined with the marriage of body woods, is working its magic. But the enriched bass response isn't at the expense of the trebles. There's a lot of sparkle and sweetness there, adding up to a very full tonal range.

Plugging the guitar into our Boss Katana-50 EX on the acoustic setting, it wasn't long before we were totally at home with the variations in the mid-contour control and were very quickly able to set on a sound that was full, vibrant and warm. Adding a dash of reverb on the amp, we were happy with what we heard and confident that a perfectly giggable

A perfectly giggable sound is well within reach in a very short time for live gigs

sound would be well within reach in a very short time on open mic nights, gigs or just fooling around at home.

We'd suggest that the soundhole-mounted controls are a mite more fiddly to use than Taylor's more old-school rotaries that accompanied the Expression System 2, but we soon got the hang of them.

Verdict

There's no doubt that the thought Taylor has put into the upgrades on its Grand Auditorium guitars has paid dividends, if the 324ce is anything to go by. Acoustically, it really does have the capacity to suit nearly all styles and the plugged-in sounds are easily manageable, too. At just shy of £3k it might sound a little upmarket for anything other than a dedicated acoustic guitarist, but we've seen shops selling it for around the £2.5k mark. Taylor has said that this is easily its most plug-in-and-play version of the 324ce and we'd heartily agree. It will certainly take some beating. **G**



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FIRST PLAY



**BLACKSTAR TV-10 AH
& TV-10 BH HEADS**
£499 each

WHAT IS IT? Classic-styled 10-watt Class A amp heads with minimal controls, reverb and cab emulation and, respectively, USA and Brit flavours

Transatlantic Style

Can this pair of new compact heads from Blackstar – the US-styled TV-10 AH and its British-counterpart, the TV-10 BH – deliver those classic tones?

Words Martin Smith Photography Matt Lincoln

Since Blackstar's inception in 2007, its amplifiers have become synonymous not only with relative affordability but also the wide range of progressive features to be found onboard, such as impulse response outputs and USB computer control. But back in the summer of 2024 Blackstar launched the simplistic 1x12 TV-10 A combo that "with its 6L6 power valve and boutique aesthetics, promise[d] authentic American tones and vintage styling". Following later that year, the EL34 TV-10 B did the same trick but with a British flavour. Now, for 2026, Blackstar has added a head version in both flavours, with matching cabinets.

This pair of amp heads is so basic in its controls, it's impossible to imagine greater simplicity. In full disclosure, your humble reviewer was not entirely convinced, merely from the specifications, that these amplifiers would be cause for huge excitement. However, from the moment the packing was unsealed, all expectations were thoroughly exceeded. Let's take a closer look.

First off, sat atop their colour-coordinated cabs, these handsomely finished outfits look stunning. The beautifully detailed and constructed blonde-covered TV-10 AH head and TV-112 A cab setup has more than a whiff of vintage Fender to its aesthetic, while the UK-oriented TV-10 BH and 112 cab, in its subtle deep blue, has a regal air all its own. These diminutive setups, while compact, are stylishly designed and appointed, right down to the soft and comfortable leather-style handle. Construction quality appears top-notch, too, with some thoughtful yet invisible inclusions, such as solid-backed screw cups for the backplate that prevent the vinyl being cut over time. The valves used are from the reputable TAD (Tube Amp Doctor) brand, produced in China.

Under the hood, both amps employ single power valves: a 6L6 for the TV A and EL34 for the TV B, both operating in Class A configuration. This method is known to provide a more touch-sensitive chiming quality, imbued with plenty of high-frequency harmonic magic – with



The aesthetics of this TV-10 range really hit the spot with a sloping speaker grille and gorgeous colour schemes – the boutique looks belie the amps' price point. The construction quality further matches their looks and proves beauty need not be skin-deep

1. The incorporated rear-panel effects loop's send and return jacks are accompanied by a Level control for taming the return from high-output effects such as rack-mounted studio processors as well as regular, guitar-pedal-style units
2. Minimal controls disguise the sonic abilities of both versions. A single tone control orientates the amps' tone bass-wards or treble-wards. Luckily, the core tone is tuned perfectly, and this simple control helps accommodate a variety of instruments



a trade-off by way of a reduction in clean headroom. This style of circuit design is often employed by boutique amp builders whose customers are prepared to forgo high headroom in favour of a sweeter overall tone.

The minimal control panel features just four knobs – Master, Reverb, Tone and Gain – with a push-button for the Drive feature. The only extra accoutrements are the post-power amp, cab-emulated jack output, for isolated PA and recording uses, and the included one-button Drive footswitch, while its pre-set speaker outputs provide for 16- and eight-ohm cabinet impedances.

Sounds

Kicking off with the TV A mini-stack, our Fender Telecaster immediately sprang out with an instantly recognisable American twang, chiming sympathetically to the touch and softening any potentially icy sounds produced by the Tele's famously brusque bridge pickup. The high-end sparkle promised by the Class A circuitry is a joy to hear, bringing harmonic excitement without sharp, ear-poking transients. Dialling in the onboard digital reverb, an entirely believable spring-styled medium length halo bathes the notes via a single control for depth.

Incidentally, the timing of this review coincided with this writer's production of a country album for UK artist Russel Kitchin. With a roomful of classic

Fender amps, from the historic to the contemporary to choose from, perhaps surprisingly, it was this Blackstar TV A setup that was the most-used Fender-styled sound of them all.

Eager to see what other tricks the TV A is capable of, we pull out a humbucker-equipped Stratocaster. As we push into break-up, the smoothness available is a wonderful surprise. Fender amplifiers are not known for their inherently pleasing overdrive; however, this proves an incredibly inspiring playing experience. With the boost engaged, there's more than enough gain for solo sustain and heavy riffage. The matching 1x12 Celestion Type-A equipped speaker cabinet plays its part in the sound by way of its slightly softer midrange, possibly due to the cab's MDF construction. It's an effective choice to lessen any pokey harshness, though possibly at the expense of producing strong, beaming mids. That said, funk and country players will likely be delighted by the subtle accommodation for their peakier transients.

Over to the TV B rig and, with a Les Paul in hand, we find the amp has similar chiming overtones yet a more filled-in midrange, bringing a gutsier heft to chords and sinuous single notes. The range of the gain control begins fully clean with the sustaining midrange of very British derivation, rapidly moving through to the onset of classic crunch. These semi-distorted tones are delivered with a silver

3. The robust and attractively finished footswitch provides control over the drive circuit of each amp via the rear panels' quarter-inch socket. The attached cable is more than sufficient in length for the intended studio and home use, and would be plenty for smaller stage use as well

4. Each colour-co-ordinated 1x12 speaker cabinet has an MDF open-backed construction with well-finished detailing and construction. An appropriately designed Celestion speaker has been picked to match each of the amps' tonal styles, an A-Type for the TV-112 A and a V-Type for the TV-112 B





4

lining of euphonic Class A high-end, adding life where comparable non-Class A amps can sound somewhat dry and unresponsive. The higher end of the gain range brings the kind of levels we might expect from a 70s-era master volume British amp head: it's full-bodied with a tight feel under the pick. Pushing the Boost button delivers a slab of extra gain that'll have those 80s and 90s riffs leaping from your strings.

To check the performance of the series effect loop, with a simple digital delay plumbed in, a healthy dose of solo gratification can be achieved via a subtle 600ms repeat, which is rendered cleanly with minimal noise. The emulated output is perhaps the only feature that left us slightly underwhelmed since it sounds somewhat less than lifelike. Nevertheless, a more usable sound can be achieved by processing externally using a further cab-IR profile.

Verdict

Both amps dazzle equally in their own distinct ways. Blackstar has captured the very essence of the most recognisable UK and US amplifier styles and distilled them into these budget-friendly studio, rehearsal and small-gig companions. Taking up almost no space in a studio, this pair alone could cover the lion's share of guitar sounds that are commonly called for.

Worth mentioning is that a slight hum, not dissimilar to mains hum, was audible

Blackstar has captured the very essence of the most recognisable UK and US amp styles

upon plugging in our guitar, irrespective of settings or guitar volume. It wasn't loud enough to present an issue at reasonable volumes, but it was noticeable at quiet volumes.

The cabinets and speakers sound smooth and almost like they've already been broken in. That smoothness might lack enough bite for darker-sounding guitars, but trying different speakers can coax a wide range of tonalities from each of these amplifiers, depending on your needs. If you're looking for a tighter sound, a closed-back design may be needed for the low-end punch.

But it's the beautiful, classic valve tones produced that make the TV range so appealing. These are not merely budget approximations of classic sounds but fully inspiring tone machines packed with sparkling harmonics and juicy valve overtones and compression. Whether your appetite is whetted by Blackstar's American cousin or its British compatriot, the chances are every studio would do well to grab the pair and be secure in the knowledge that you're covered for pretty much every tonal eventuality. **G**



BLACKSTAR TV-10 AH

PRICE: £499
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: All-valve compact head
VALVES: 1x EEC83
 1x 6L6
OUTPUT: 10W
DIMENSIONS: 404 (w) x 203 (d) x 230mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 9/20
CABINET: MDF
CHANNELS: 1 with Boost
CONTROLS: Master, Reverb, Tone, Gain, Boost switch
FOOTSWITCH: 1-button included
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, speaker-emulated output
OPTIONS: Matching TV-112 A cab with Celestion A-Type speaker (£379)
RANGE OPTIONS: TV-10 A combo (£579)



9/10

PROS Authentic Class A American tones; nicely tuned onboard digital reverb; excellent overdriven sound; well priced for this quality of sound

CONS Slight hum when guitar is plugged in, despite volume on zero; emulated output isn't quite as great as the speaker sound



BLACKSTAR TV-10 BH

PRICE: £499
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: All-valve compact head
VALVES: 1x EEC83
 1x EL34
OUTPUT: 10W
DIMENSIONS: 404 (w) x 203 (d) x 230 (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 9/20
CABINET: MDF
CHANNELS: 1 with Boost
CONTROLS: Master, Reverb, Tone, Gain, Boost switch
FOOTSWITCH: 1-button included
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop, speaker-emulated output
OPTIONS: Matching TV-112 B cab with Celestion V-Type speaker (£379)
RANGE OPTIONS: TV-10 B combo (£579)

Blackstar Amplification
 01604 817817
 blackstaramps.com



9/10

PROS Ditto the TV-10 AH model, but with typically British-flavoured tones

CONS Again, both that minimal hum and rather lacklustre emulated output of the TV-10 AH are evident here

FIRST PLAY



DOD BADDER MONKEY
£129

WHAT IS IT? An evolved version of the DigiTech Bad Monkey drive pedal



Go Bananas

From Bad to Badder, DOD revives DigiTech's drive pedal and gives it increased versatility

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln

1. Behaved, Bad or Badder Monkey? Select the circuits individually, dial in a favoured blend or have all three in parallel
2. The Mood section features a dual concentric EQ control. The outer (Grunt knob) tweaks low-end and the inner (Screech) knob adjusts upper/mid-EQ
3. The reversible bottom 'StagePlate' has a hook-and-loop fastening (pictured) on one side and a skid pad on the other for convenient pedalboard mounting

DigiTech/DOD discontinued its always affordably priced Bad Monkey drive pedal back in 2015, but renewed interest in it grew after Josh Scott of JHS Pedals posted a video in 2023 suggesting that the Bad Monkey could ape the sounds of both the Ibanez TS-10 Tube Screamer and the Klon Centaur. Now, there's a revamped version, the Badder Monkey, that may just take the edge off that increased demand for vintage units.

While the pedal has the sound of the original Bad Monkey at its heart – with the same overdrive circuit, gain range and EQ frequencies – it also adds two new overdrive signal paths: one more extreme (Badder) and one more subtle (Behaved). The really clever thing about the pedal, though, is how these three can be used singly or combined. A continuously variable Barrel knob has three notched detent points (Behaved, Bad and Badder) that select the individual sounds of each circuit, but positions between these detent markers allow blends of any two circuits. A three-way toggle switch lets you do this, blending with the Bad circuit either in phase or out of phase with the other two circuits, while its third position brings in Troop mode, bypassing the Barrel knob and giving you the three parallel overdrive circuits at the same time, blended evenly together.

As was the original, Bad is in the same sonic ballpark as a Tube Screamer but has more control over the bottom-end with its Grunt knob, Badder offers an increase in gain, while Behaved is cleaner and could be useful for clean boosts – it's lighter in the midrange, but the Screech and Grunt knobs can compensate if needed. A bit of EQ tweaking with the Bad setting will also get the pedal sounding like a viable substitute for a Klon. Beyond the three standard settings and Troop mode, which instantly gives you something between Bad and Badder with a touch of extra clarity, there's a world of drive to be explored with Barrel knob blends, including some useful fuzz-like textures.

Verdict

DOD probably could have simply reissued the original pedal and satisfied demand, but this reimagining is by far a better proposition. Because of the many more options onboard than your standard drive pedal, there is a learning curve, but what you're getting is a versatile workhorse that can be finely dialled in to cover a myriad of needs. **G**



DOD BADDER MONKEY

PRICE: £129

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Overdrive pedal

FEATURES: True bypass, reversible StagePlate

CONTROLS: Bananas (Gain), Curiosity (level), Barrel (Blend), Grunt (Low EQ), Screech (Mid/High EQ), Blend Mode toggle switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 25mA

DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 118 (d) x 55mm (h)

440 Distribution

0113 284 2342

www.dod.com



9/10

PROS Compact size; three drives in one pedal; two-band EQ; flexible pedalboard mounting options

CONS Central controls are very close together



THE RIVALS

The Wampler Triumph (£99) is based around the DigiTech Bad Monkey and the Boss SD-1 with additional EQ stages for variety; it features toggle-switched Smooth and Punch modes. A versatile Tube Screamer-style pedal is the Warm Audio Tube Squealer (£139), which offers three selectable voicings: 808, TS9 and TS10. If you like the idea of having both Klon and Tube Screamer sounds available, there's the Nordvang Gravity V2.5 (£331), albeit for a lot more outlay, a dual overdrive with K-style and TS10 circuits. The Beetronics Wannabee Beelateral Buzz (£299) is similarly inspired by Bluesbreaker and Klon tones, and can be run in parallel.



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

FIRST PLAY



**ELECTRO-HARMONIX
PICO INTELLIGENT
HARMONY MACHINE**
£119

WHAT IS IT? A Pico-sized version of the New York pedal maker's harmoniser



Pocket Harmony

EHX shrinks another pedal as the Intelligent Harmony Machine joins the ranks of the pedalboard-friendly Pico range

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln



ELECTRO-HARMONIX PICO INTELLIGENT HARMONY MACHINE

PRICE: £119

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Pitch-shifting pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass,

12 selectable keys, 10 single intervals, 10 dual intervals

CONTROLS: Volume, Mix, Key, Interval, Natural/Sharp or Dual button, bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied) 100mA

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

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com

8/10

PROS Compact; solid build quality; tight tracking; solid collection of harmonies in all the keys

CONS Selecting the correct key and interval can be a bit fiddly

1. The 'hashtag' (#) button sets whether the key is natural (green LED) or sharp (red LED). A long press calls up Dual mode, which adds a second voice for three-part harmonies

2. This Key knob selects your key from C at full left through D, E, F, G, A to B at the fully clockwise position

3. Turn the Interval knob to select 10 different intervals, from octave down at fully left to octave up fully clockwise

New from Electro-Harmonix is the Pico Intelligent Harmony Machine, a pedal that puts some of the functionality of its larger namesake into a diminutive Pico chassis, which could easily slip into any vacant pedalboard gap. The pedal's function is to create two- or three-part harmony in any key over a range of different intervals.

Volume and wet/dry Mix knobs complement two more rotary knobs that set the Key and Interval. These two are not detented, but each different pitch or interval resides in a particular segment of their arc of travel and the LED will flash briefly as you move from one segment to the next. The Key knob has the keys clearly marked, but there is no legending around the interval knob for the eight single intervals between the octave-down and octave-up at the two extremes of its travel. A button determines whether a natural or sharp key is selected, and it has a secondary function that brings in Dual mode where the Interval knob selects two different intervals simultaneously.

First impressions are that the tracking seems really good – instantaneous and solid with no lag to the pitch-shifted notes. The pedal is designed to work with single notes only but will go polyphonic if you choose an octave interval, which means you can dial in an approximation of 12-string jangle with the upper octave and the Mix knob set appropriately low. Choose the octave down, turn the Mix knob up full and you'll be able to play basslines if needed.

The main attraction, though, is the harmonies. For the single harmonies you can choose 6th, 4th and 3rd down, plus 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th up. There is a metallic tonality to the pitch-shifted voices in isolation, but the pitching is close enough and, in the proper context, mixed proportionally with your dry sound, they are very effective in the blend. We particularly liked the musicality and extra thickness of the Dual harmonies, most notably the ones that combined pitched-down with pitched-up intervals. Pick your key, stick to the notes in it, and you'll be rewarded with tight harmonies that can sound like two (or three!) guitars playing together.

Verdict

If you want to bring harmonies into your playing, the Pico Intelligent Harmony Machine will do the job without breaking the bank or eating up too much of your pedalboard real estate. **G**



THE RIVALS

If you don't mind a larger footprint, the EHX Intelligent Harmony Machine (£179) has easy operation and more features, including momentary footswitch action and a separate dry output. The Boss PS-6 Harmonist (£169) creates two- or three-voice harmonies and features detune, pitch shift and pitch bending. TC Electronic's Brainwaves (£99) has individual knobs and switches to set the interval and direction of pitch for two separate voices, plus detune and Whammy-style effects. If you're on a tighter budget, the Mooer Pitch Box (£59) offers Harmony, Pitch Shift and Detune effects; pitch is dialled in with a single knob.





Gas Supply

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

Fender John Osborne Telecaster £1,849

CONTACT **Fender** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB www.fender.com

JARGON CRUNCHING B-Bender

The B-Bender was first known as the Parsons/White Pull-String after guitarist Clarence White tasked Gene Parsons with building him a device to aid in executing a bend that allegedly required a third hand to realise. It's the secret weapon of country-guitar playing, and this is the only guitar in Fender's current line-up to include one.

Wait, John Osborne? Isn't that...

No, this is not an Ozzy signature model. Besides, you should know the surname is spelled differently. This fine guitar here is a signature model for John Osborne of Brothers Osborne fame. In case you somehow missed it, as this issue is celebrating, 2026 marks the 75th anniversary of the Telecaster, what is for many the only electric guitar you'll ever need. John's Tele forms part of the celebrations and also marks the first time Fender has produced its own take on the B-Bender. Let's dive in!

For starters, what's a B-Bender - and how does it work?

A B-Bender is a device that's designed to emulate a pedal steel guitar – and in a world increasingly dominated by emulations and digital products, Fender has opted to head the other way with its mechanical combination of rods, strings and levers to introduce the first ever Fender B String Bender.

The operation of a B-Bender quite literally hinges around your guitar strap, or rather the strap button on

the shoulder of the guitar. Open up the back of the John Osborne Telecaster and you'll see a large amount of material has been removed to house the contraption, which links the second string on your guitar to the strap button. In short, the button sits in a channel, with the sprung arms keeping the guitar in standard pitch. When you apply pressure via the strap, the pitch of the second string is raised by up to a tone, allowing you to emulate pedal steel-style bends without affecting the pitch of the rest of the strings.

Ah, yes, I've seen these. So is this the only Tele model with it on?

Fender has offered B-Bender-equipped Telecasters in its production catalogue on and off over the years, with models such as the American Standard B-Bender Telecaster and more recently the American Nashville and Mexican-made Deluxe Nashville Telecasters. John Osborne's new signature model is Mexican made and is currently the only off-the-shelf Telecaster to come loaded with a B-Bender.



JOHN OSBORNE SIGNATURE MODEL

You'll know John Osborne from the country band Brothers Osborne. Here, Osborne is paying homage to the Telecaster and B-Bender's influence on the genre with a pure old-school Tele

CUSTOM APPOINTMENTS

It's a signature model and, as such, features a custom scratchplate designed specifically for John Osborne. Likewise, the pickups have been custom wound for extra output and a "Hi-Fi-like" tonality

Housed in the back of the guitar is one of the most interesting hardware modifications the electric guitar has seen. Think of it as one of the earliest effects, except it's 100 per cent mechanical and operated by a guitar strap



Right, so is it just a regular Tele with a clever contraption installed?

It's more than that. First, it's undergone Fender's Road Worn treatment, which we've seen scaled back in recent 'aged' models. Here, we get what we'd call a 'medium' relic in Olympic White nitrocellulose lacquer. The neck (which is also Road Worn) is based on a 1968 C shape and features a slight taper as you move towards the 12th fret. It's topped with a maple fretboard and finished in oil on the back.

What about the rest of it?

Well, as you can see from the image below, there's a custom scratchplate, and Fender has fitted the guitar with custom-voiced John Osborne single-coil pickups as well, which are described as "higher output and HiFi-like". The bridge here features a three-saddle (brass) configuration, while at the other end we get a bone nut and Fender vintage-style tuners. The Fender John Osborne Telecaster is available now, priced at £1,849, including a Fender hardshell case. [SW]

ROAD WORN

Fender's Heirloom finishing process might have tamed things a bit (as has the ageing on the Vintera series), but if you're after some harder knocks, the company is proving that it's still not afraid to punish a neatly applied finish into vintage-looking territory



ALSO OUT NOW...

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX ONE DOUBLE SPECIAL €149/€249

IK Multimedia's Tonex One has seen a number of limited-edition runs, and now it's had a makeover to match the all-new Double Special collection. It's a two-parter, with the software available separately (€149) and ready to load over 40 Tone Models featuring IK's own pair of Dumble Overdrive Special combos into your Tonex hardware. As well as the amps, there are signal chain Tone Models including a Klon, Tube Screamer TS10 and JHS Morning Glory. Newcomers to the Tonex ecosystem can bag the software along with the Tonex One, complete with 20 presets not included in the Double Special software collection for €249.



www.ikmultimedia.com

VICTORY POWERVALVE 200 £499

Digital modelling is everywhere now, but if you ever find your digital approximations lacking in the sort of harmonic detail that our coveted valves provide, Victory reckons it has the answer. The PowerValve 200 is designed to sit between your digital gear and a traditional (rather than FRFR) speaker cab, imparting valve-amp response and dynamics into your chain. It's 200 watts at four ohms, and features a switchable Valve React Circuit (CV4014 valve), Resonance, Body and Presence, controls, along with a speaker-emulated (switchable) XLR output, master volume control and headphone amp.

www.victoryamps.com



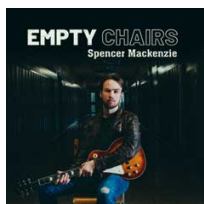


Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Spencer Mackenzie

Album: *Empty Chairs* (Gypsy Soul Records)



Empty Chairs, Spencer Mackenzie's fourth album, is produced by the Emmy award-winning Ross Hayes Citrullo
www.spencermackenzie.ca

Inspired by the greats, Spencer Mackenzie is now developing a flavour of his own that cuts between up-tempo and soulful with nuanced sonic experimentation woven in

On album number four, *Empty Chairs*, Canadian singer and guitarist Spencer Mackenzie is dialling up the intensity and embracing more of an up-tempo, darker shade of blue. But there's still plenty of soul encased within the new music, which sees him experimenting with dynamic nuances and sounding more sonically versatile than ever. And then there's his rousing cover of Rory Gallagher's *Don't Know Where I'm Going*, transforming a lesser-known 1971 acoustic cut by the Irish great into a big-band extravaganza.

That's Progress

Now in his mid-20s, Spencer is starting to branch out from the classic blues that made him fall in love with music in the first place. "The thing that's cool about this album is that there are chord progressions I've never used before, including some chromatic movements and ideas that stem from outside of the blues," he explains. "I grew up listening to the greats like Stevie Ray Vaughan and Albert King, but this album is more of a hybrid between blues and rock. The songs are a bit grittier and more in-your-face, which resulted in more energetic guitar playing. One thing I've learned recently is the amount of subtlety between big solos and shorter verse leads. Don't use the ginormous lead sound one minute into the song. It's better to go with a light boost and save the bigger tones for later."

Embrace The New

Modern players like Joe Bonamassa, Gary Clark Jr and Marcus King have also shown Spencer how the blues has evolved with the times. "What I love about Gary in particular is how he brings traditional playing into the modern age," says Spencer. "I love the amount of freedom in his solos, he just goes off because his leads are open-ended. Leads should also be intentional, otherwise people can get bored. One of my favourites is Derek Trucks' solo on *Midnight In Harlem* from the first Tedeschi Trucks Band live album [*Everybody's Talkin'*, 2012]. It goes on for quite a while, but every second counts. It would be easy for a player to get lost in a situation like that, but Derek never has that problem."

Electric Upgrade

There are many Rory Gallagher songs Spencer could have covered, but he ended up choosing *Don't Know Where I'm Going* because of its relative obscurity. "I didn't know much about Rory until I went to music college," he says. "I just fell in love with his style right away, especially as I grew up as a Strat guy. I chose this song because it's an acoustic thumb and plucking thing from his second album [*Deuce*, 1971] that isn't as well known as classics like *Bad Penny* or *I Fall Apart*. I love how stripped-down it is – there's almost this old-timey Robert Johnson feel. Then I chose to turn the song on its head and record an electric version with more intensity and soloing."

Different Shades Of Blue

This latest release also sees Spencer switching from his ES-335 to a Les Paul. "I didn't want to take my 335 on a plane," he says, explaining how he "needed something with humbuckers" and stumbled upon a secondhand 60s Standard Iced Tea Burst Les Paul. "I loved the finish and thinner neck, though it didn't feel too thin like an SG. It was 12 hours away from where I live, that's part of the struggle of being left-handed. I brought an amp, played it in a parking lot and brought it home. It ended up becoming my number one because of its versatility. The difference from nine to 10 on the volume is huge. I sometimes use that instead of gain-staging pedals. You can control a lot of sound through the guitar, dialling down the lead tone to find the rhythm tone." [AS]

Standout track: *Till I Get To You*

For fans of: Joe Bonamassa, Joanne Shaw Taylor



PHOTO BY STEPHANE BOURGEOIS

BLUES DELUXE

Spencer Mackenzie on how he dials in his sound

Like a lot of blues guitarists, Spencer doesn't need a great deal in terms of pedals: "I just want a few that work well with my Vox AC30," he says. "I use a Boss ES-5 to switch through levels of gain. The first patch is just my Fender Engager Boost, the second one is my Analog Man Prince Of Tone, and the third is both of them together. Number four is my Fulltone OCD, and the final setting is the OCD with my Prince Of Tone for a rip-your-face-off sound."

"The songs [on *Empty Chairs*] are a bit grittier and more in-your-face, which resulted in more energetic guitar playing"



Albums

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



PHOTO BY LARRY DIMARZIO

Matteo Mancuso keeps the bar skyscraper-high on his new release

Matteo Mancuso

Route 96

Music Theories Recordings (available 24 April)



Sicilian virtuoso's follow-up to his stunning 2023 debut

It's very difficult to place 29-year-old Matteo Mancuso's musical style into a neat pigeonhole. There are elements of Gypsy jazz, flamenco, jazz fusion and hard rock blended so seamlessly together that it becomes tempting to say

that, genre wise, he stands pretty much alone. If you've missed out on the guitar world's stunned silence that Matteo's 2023 debut album, *Journey*, caused, then to say it took the globe by storm is still a superlative or two short of the truth.

Hailing from Sicily, Matteo boasts a phenomenal fingerstyle approach to playing that shook fellow players to the core. Let's just pause to contemplate the fact that, yes, those lightning fast, crystal clear runs that could challenge Steve Vai on a good day are all done with his fingers, classical-style. In fact, Vai joins in on the fun on this new album's opening track, *Solar Wind*, where 32nd notes stun the senses.

Unlike *Journey*, however, which was completed over a three-year period, *Route 96* was done and dusted relatively quickly. "I had to squeeze it all into 2025," Matteo explains. "Everything you hear on the album was recorded last year. It was so much faster, and I think it was for the best because the album came out more homogeneous and uniform." And so it is that the album weaves its way through nine tracks of truly amazing guitar playing on tunes including *Black Centurian* and *LA Blues One* and remains exciting and engaging even after the final notes of the frenetic last track, Pee Wee Ellis's *The Chicken*, have faded away. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Black Centurian*

For fans of: Al Di Meola, Pat Metheny, Guthrie Govan

Little Barrie

Gravity Freeze

Easy Eye Sound (available 22 May)



Cinematic, flick knife-sharp riffs with 60s soul

Little Barrie have been going for a surprising 26 years now and their blend of classic R&B, guitar lines that seem lifted from a 60s Italian crime movie, and more esoteric psyche influences remains unique – and uniquely engaging. Their latest, *Gravity Freeze*, adds emotional depth to this already heady mix. As always, guitarist and vocalist Barrie Cadogan's guitar lines are sparse but so classy, contributing to coolly sinister grooves that seem to echo down the streets of an imaginary San Francisco of the 60s. The propulsive, shuffling drive of *Luggin' Hurt* is a perfectly poised slice of psyche-soul, while the meditative blues of *Talk It Up Like It's Wanted* reels the listener right into its melancholy cool like the flickering neon sign of a sidestreet bar. Classy stuff. **[JD]**

Standout track: *It Isn't Soul*

For fans of: Lalo Schifrin, Grant Green, late-era Howard Roberts

Robin Trower

Live! 50th Anniversary Edition

Chrysalis (available 3 April)



A fan favourite, remixed and complete

This is the third in the series of reissues for the iconic blues-rockers and focuses on the live album originally released in 1976, having been recorded in Stockholm the previous year. It's already a firm favourite among Trower's fanbase, and the good news here is that this new release features the entire concert recorded that night, as opposed to the '76 original, which was presented in edited form due to the time restraints posed by vinyl. Furthermore, the album has been remastered by Richard Whittaker and will be available in two-LP, two-CD and full digital formats. The new remaster has given the album a new lease of life and the extra tracks, which include *Confessin' Midnight*, *Gonna Be More Suspicious* and *Bridge Of Sighs*, add weight to the experience. Needless to say, Robin's playing is top-notch throughout. Completists rejoice! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Lady Love*

For fans of: Jimi Hendrix, Mountain, Rory Gallagher

PHOTO BY LYNETTE GIESBRECHT



You can literally feel the energy on Ariel's new release

Ariel Posen

Bannatyne

Dine Alone Records (available now)



Canadian rocker's heaviest album yet

We were curious as to the title of Ariel Posen's new album, but it turns out that *Bannatyne* has some very personal connections. "It's a street in Winnipeg where I'm from," Ariel tells us. "It isn't the street I grew up on. It is a street that has memories for me, so I used that name as an overarching theme to represent home." All that aside, it has to be said that the guitar sound on this album is absolutely amazing. Ariel's new drop-tuned signature model growls, graunches and grunts through many of the 12 tracks on the new album, aided, no doubt, by a who's who of contemporary amps and effects. Check out the single, *Future Present Tense*, and the simply thunderous *Vagabond*, both of which remind us of the fabulously eruptive and seismically powerful guitar sounds on the King's X album *Dogman*. Great songwriting, too. Bravo! [DM]

Standout track: *Vagabond*

For fans of: Joey Landreth, Derek Trucks

Gong

Bright Spirit

Kscope (available now)



Daavid Allen's worthy inheritors shine on

The current incarnation of Gong, the seminal psyche-rock band born in France in 1967, may be like Trigger's Broom in terms of line-up, but the spirit, so to speak, remains alive and remarkably true to Daavid Allen and Gilli Smyth's wayward, lysergic vision for the band. *Bright Spirit* completes the trilogy that started with 2019's *The Universe Also Collapses* and continued with *Unending Ascending* in 2023. Always more jazzy and musically agile than the bikers-on-acid space dirges of Hawkwind, the Gong tradition of tight, ambitiously syncopated drumming is present here in admirable style on the track *Mantivule*, an oceanic journey into inner space stitched together by frontman and guitarist Kavus Torabi's accurate, intricate dotted-eighth riff – with just a hint of sometime tourmates Ozric Tentacles about it. *Stars In Heaven*, meanwhile, recalls Robyn Hitchcock and Syd Barrett in its off-kilter cosmic balladry. Fine stuff. [JD]

Standout track: *Stars In Heaven*

For fans of: Ozric Tentacles, Hawkwind, Steve Hillage



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Tones Behind The Tracks

Veteran jazz-man **Bill Frisell** toasts his 75th birthday with a stellar line-up and questing new album, inspired by a dream from the past...

Artist: **Bill Frisell**

Album: *In My Dreams* (Blue Note)



In My Dreams brings together live concert-venue recordings of Bill Frisell with some of his favourite musicians

No wonder Bill Frisell had to pinch himself when he assembled the line-up for *In My Dreams*. After half-a-century pushing the envelope of modern jazz, the Baltimore-born band leader had played in practically every format, from airtight duo to opulent chamber orchestra. But the 75 year old is still buzzing from taking the stage last year with a wishlist sextet of his all-time-favourite collaborators – Jenny Scheinman (violin), Eyvind Kang (viola), Hank Roberts (cello), Thomas Morgan (bass) and Rudy Royston (drums) – to record this live album for the esteemed Blue Note label.

“[We’re] improvising the arrangement, so the lines between ‘solo’, ‘accompaniment’ and ‘orchestration’ start to blur and the music takes on a life of its own”

Tell us how this amazing line-up came together for the album.

“I’ve been playing a lot as a trio with Thomas and Rudy. But it had been some years since I played with Jenny, Eyvind and Hank. I just woke up one day and had this idea of putting both things together. It’s not like I’m out in front of the band, like, ‘This is my thing and I’m the soloist’. What gets me excited is being in the midst of it, and it’s a conversation we’re all having together.”

Bill centre stage with his dream ensemble (left to right): Jenny Scheinman, Eyvind Kang, Hank Roberts, Thomas Morgan and Rudy Royston

How free-form is the band’s performance on this album?

“At the beginning, I’ll write out the music and everyone is looking at the same score, and maybe there’s some discussion, like, ‘Oh, you should play this part or that part.’ But I know these people so well and we trust each other. So what happens after all these years is they start making choices themselves. That’s what’s so exciting. It’s like they’re actually improvising the arrangement, so the lines between ‘solo’, ‘accompaniment’ and ‘orchestration’ start to blur and the music takes on a life of its own.

“And there’s no such thing as a ‘mistake’. If somebody goes off the edge, you help them back on, rather than call them out. A recording is like a snapshot of what happened in that one moment. But that’s not the end of it. That’s just the beginning. The next time we play, we’re trying something else. Even if we play the same songs in the same order, we just keep looking for something else to happen.”

How does it feel when the band really falls in step?

“It’s like there’s an actual physical sensation when I’m playing with them. Like, if I play a melody with someone else and it really locks in, there’s this amazing thing that happens. You can actually feel it in your fingers, and you’re breathing together and it’s like your fingers start melting into the fingerboard or something. And it makes a sound where it’s not them and it’s not me – it turns into another instrument. But it’s always weird when I try to describe what happens when we’re playing. I don’t want to mess up the magic. You try to analyse it, but I want there to be some kind of mystery and not lose that.”

Did you test yourself and your playing on this album?

“Hopefully, I’m testing myself every time I play. It’s an ongoing thing. From the first moment I ever picked up a guitar, every time you play, you’re taking one more step. With music, I’ll never get to whatever it is I’m trying to get to. But you’re just constantly reaching.”

Can you tell us about the dream that loosely inspired this album?

“It could be 40 years ago, but it’s so vivid. I go into this old house and up this dark stairway into a kind of library. There are these little people with brown hoods and they



“What gets me excited is being in the midst of [the ensemble performance] – it’s a conversation we’re all having together”

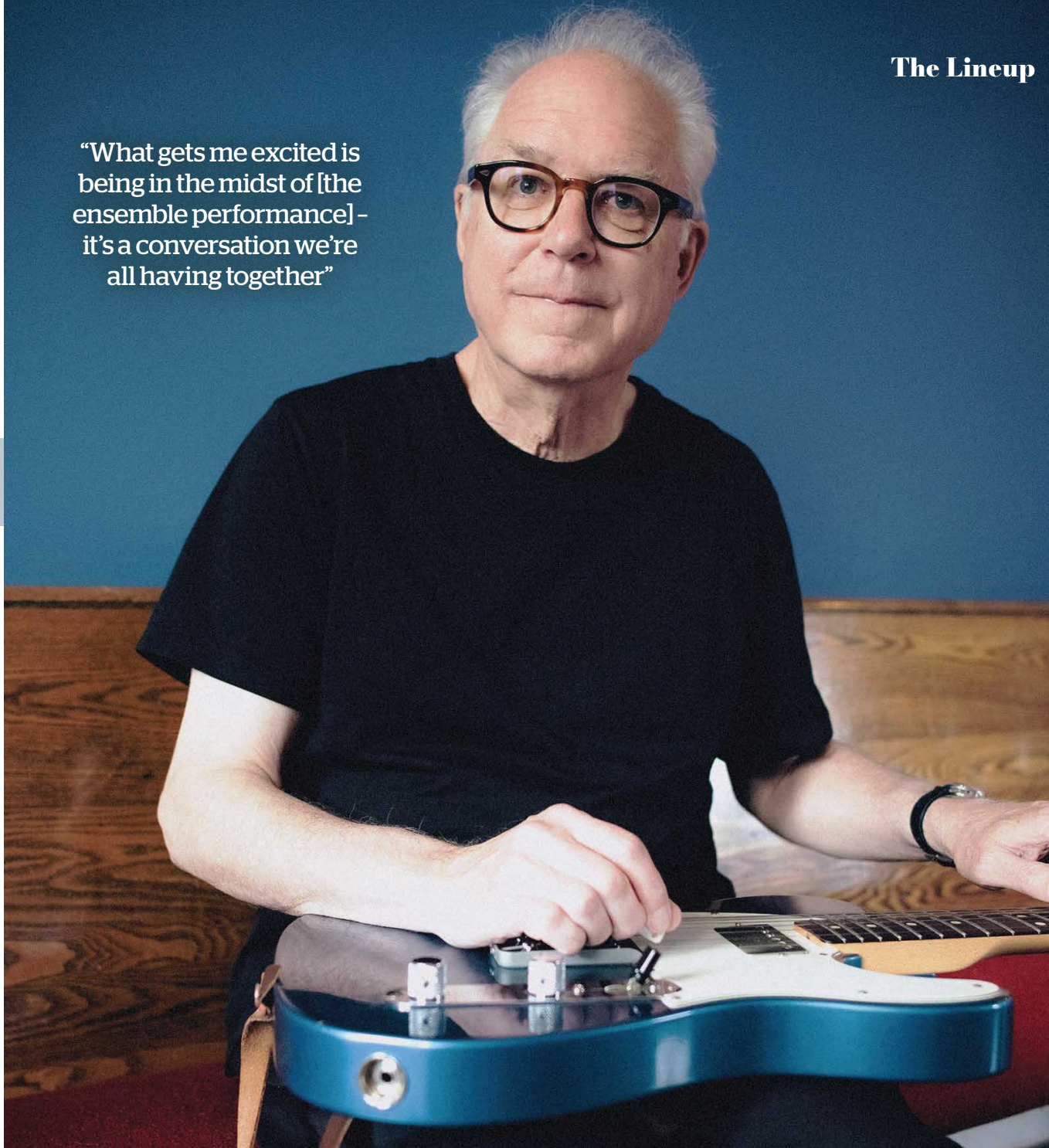


PHOTO BY MARIKO MIJALCOVIC

welcome me. First, they say they want me to see what colours really look like. So they pull out this red cube and it’s so intense, a red like I’d never seen before.

“Then they want me to hear what real music sounds like. Suddenly, there’s this drill going through my forehead into my brain and every musical sound I’ve ever heard in my life is happening simultaneously but with this incredible clarity. It wasn’t chaos – everything was focused into this amazingly beautiful sound that was so complex and so many things moving, but I could hear every little detail.

“That dream has stayed with me all this time. And it’s not like I achieved that goal on this album, but it’s somewhere in the back of my mind as something to strive for.”

Do you think there are parallels between dreaming and performing music?

“I think about that a lot. When you wake up from a dream, whatever was happening, whether it was good,

bad, scary or happy, it just evaporates. It’s gone. And that reminds me of what it’s like when we’re playing. When you’re really in the music, it’s like, the moment you become aware that it’s really happening, it evaporates.”

It’s an ensemble, of course, but what are your own favourite guitar moments?

“I was really happy with *Isfahan*. I have such respect for Billy Strayhorn as a composer that it’s like sacred ground, and just the fact I could somehow make a statement with that song, with these people, I guess I’m proud of that. It’s taken me years to even feel worthy to play it on a concert.

“It’s extraordinary, if you look at it in just a mathematical way, analysing the harmony, melody and the notes he chose. But what takes the time is to get past that and for it to just become part of my blood. So when I’m playing it, I’m not thinking, ‘Well, this is a B,’ but getting to a point where you feel like you’re singing the melody on guitar.”

The complex, intense and beautifully clear sound of ‘real music’ once came to Bill in a dream: “That dream has stayed with me all this time... it’s somewhere in the back of my mind as something to strive for”



What do you remember about recording the album?

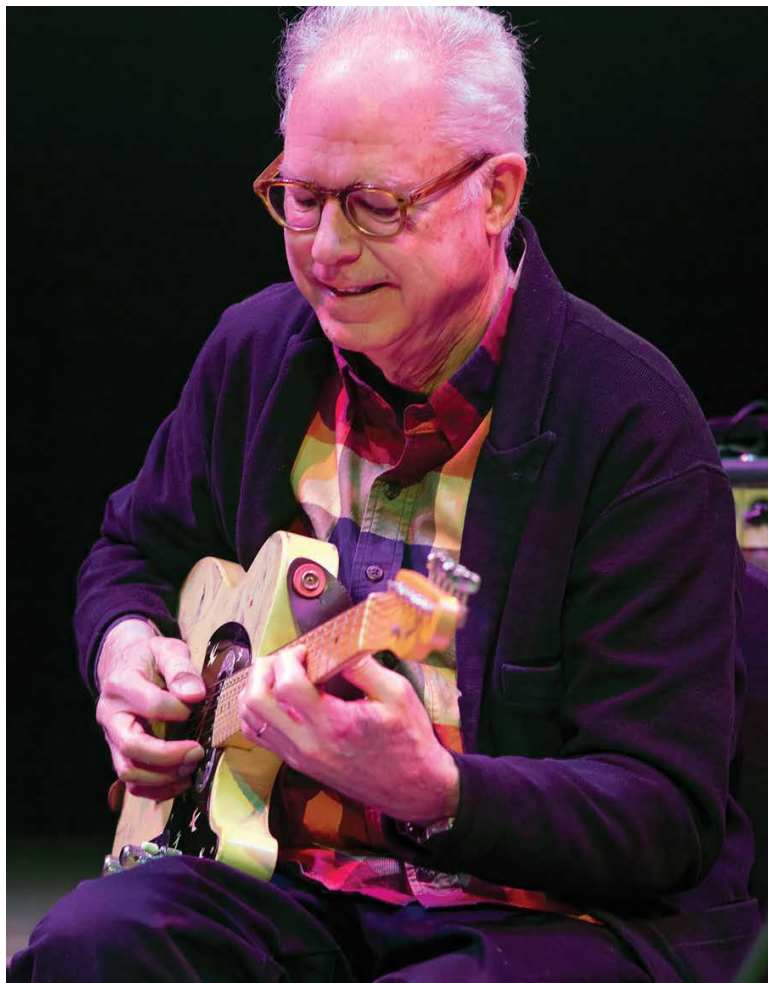
"The recordings came from three different sources: this really nice old hall in Brooklyn called Roulette, another small place in Connecticut, and a concert in Denver, which the band didn't even know we were recording – which was kinda great. Then we had to edit it all together, and I never did anything quite like that before, where there'd be one melody from Brooklyn, another from Denver, and the engineer found a way to make it sound like it was all coming from the same place."

"Every time you play, you're taking one more step. With music, I'll never get to whatever it is I'm trying to get to. But you're just constantly reaching"

You exclusively used your modded JW Black Telecaster. Why is that such a good recording guitar for you?

"It's super comfortable, for one thing, with that slightly shorter scale than a regular Fender. I don't think I use the bridge pickup at all; it's all the TK Smith neck pickup. I don't understand the inner workings. It's a single coil, but there's no noise. There's some kind of metal ring around it – I don't know if that's something to do with keeping it quiet. I mean, I love the sound of

Bill's Tele was modified by former Custom Shop Master Builder JW Black with a 24.75-inch neck. It features a TK Smith neck pickup and pickguard, with artwork by Terry Turrell and additional setup by Eric Daw and Tom Crandall



PHOTOBYKRAKVERNO

single coils, like P-90s or whatever. But sometimes they're so problematic in different rooms with buzzing and stuff. But this TK Smith pickup is completely quiet. And then it has a lot of low-end, but it's very clear at the same time. It's very warm, it's not muddy and it's not shrill, but there's real definition.

"For a number of years now, I've also been using flat-wound strings instead of round-wound. I think that has a lot to do with the attack on the lower notes."

What amp and pedals did you lean towards for this material?

"At the gig in Brooklyn, I was home, so I just used my own amp, which is a Carr Sportsman. It's kinda like a Princeton, that amount of power – maybe a little more – but with one 12-inch speaker. But then, at the other concerts, I borrowed a Fender Deluxe Reverb reissue. With pedals, it's not a lot. There's a Strymon Flint. There's some loops and weird stuff that I used the Line 6 DL4 for – it's the newer one that's sort of smaller. I had the Jam Pedals Rattler, and sometimes I'll also use [an MXR] Carbon Copy."

This album heralds your 75th birthday. Do jazz players get better with age?

"I hope so. I hope I'm not getting worse! I just keep trying. I never really intentionally go back and listen to things I did long ago, but sometimes, something will turn up on YouTube and it's like, 'Whoa, how did I possibly [do that]?' I don't know if I got better or worse. It's like, sometimes I can't believe the things I was able to play years ago. But then I'm also like, 'Wow, what was I thinking?' Y'know, about some stupid thing I was playing."

Do you recognise that young player from the ECM label in the 80s?

"Kind of, yeah. But it's a double-edged thing. All this time, what I've been trying to do is make what I'm doing clearer and clearer, try to get rid of all the excess, whatever doesn't need to be there. Sometimes, I'll hear a recording from back then and it's like, 'Wow, that's too much.' Or it's the sound. I used to use a volume pedal all the time and it kind of drives me crazy when I hear it now."

You've said in the past that players put too much emphasis on gear.

"For sure. I think our mind is the most powerful pedal you can get. Our imagination, y'know? Really, if you have the music in your head, that's the most important thing."

When all's said and done, are you pleased with *In My Dreams*?

"As pleased as I can ever be. The music is always moving and changing, so it's something I have to get used to, that thing of, 'Okay, we need to stop now, we've captured that moment.' So I'm very happy with the album. But it's always, like, as soon as I'm done, I'm moving on to the next thing." [HY]



Bill performs at Cheltenham Jazz Festival (April/May), Love Supreme Jazz Festival (July) and North Sea Jazz Festival (July). *In My Dreams* is out now on Blue Note Records www.billfrisell.com



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Did You Make It Yourself?

Neville Marten recalls with a tinge of cringe how he stumbled into a humiliating gear blunder back in his school days...

I'll tell you that story in a moment, but let me say in this issue's celebration of that wonderful thing that is the Fender Telecaster, that this very model was my own first 'proper' electric guitar. When I trekked to London from Witham in Essex that day in 1970, my mind was wholly focused on buying a white Gibson SG Custom. I and my brothers and friends were enraptured by Alice Cooper's fabulous album, *Killer*, featuring rhythm guitarist Michael Bruce on cherry red SG Standard, and brilliant lead man Glen Buxton on the aforesaid ghostly, bison-horned beauty.

"I had no desire to own such a silly, simple guitar. Where was the gold plate? The lyre vibrato? The bound ebony 'board and pearl blocks?"

Catching the early train (I had to get back to Chelmsford for my 2pm-to-10pm shift at the cardboard factory where I worked alongside no less than Guthrie Govan's dad, Jock), so time was of the essence. Trawling round every shop along Shaftesbury Avenue and Denmark Street, not a single SG came to light. Then, in Guitar Village (not to be confused with that excellent emporium in Farnham, Surrey), I saw a

natural-bodied rosewood fingerboard Tele. It was a 1967 model and the price tag read £105.

I had no desire at all to own such a silly, simple guitar. Where was the gold plate? The lovely lyre vibrato? The bound ebony fingerboard and pearl blocks? Could I even bear to try the stupid thing? It didn't even have any finish on it, for goodness' sake! Luckily, the very knowledgeable assistant knew that if I tried the guitar I'd be sold. He plugged me into a Marshall 50-watt half-stack and that was it. Cash changed hands and I hurtled back to work, just in time to queue for clocking in. "What you got in there, then?" someone in the line probed. I pulled my Tele from its blanket (no case, either, for my 105 quid) to the immediate riposte of, "Did you make it yourself?" "No!" I snorted back, my pride wounded and my new first good guitar deeply insulted!

That Tele proved to be a stupendous instrument. Through my RSC Bass Regent amp atop its 1x15, 1x12 cab it produced the most wondrous noise, and I've been a mega-fan of the model ever since.

But where I began with this was that, back in February 1966 I was watching *Ready Steady Go!* and saw The Mindbenders performing their hit single *A Groovy Kind Of Love*. I was transfixed by guitarist Eric Stewart's instrument (he, later of 10cc) and couldn't take my eyes off it.

Next morning in class at school in Alnwick, where I was in sixth form with several fellow neophyte pluckers, I blurted out excitedly, "Did you see The Mindbenders on TV last night? The guy was playing a homemade guitar!" "You complete idiot," they howled with ripe Geordie derision. "It was only a bloody Fender Telecaster!" Suitably admonished by those far more in the know than me, I skulked away red-faced, never to make that same mistake again.

The Tables Turn

Some years ago a good friend at work was leaving. Mick Taylor, plus my lovely but sadly late mate Roger Newell, drum industry legend Lee Worsley and I had a great pub-rock band called Deluxe. So we decided to book a local hostelry and be the house band for anyone who wanted to come and guest at her farewell bash. It was a great night, a highlight of which was when another late, great friend Chris Bird of *Total Guitar* played the solo to Queen's *I Want To Break Free* on guitar synth. An epic moment. Anyway, my guitar of choice that evening was my white blonde 1952-style Custom Shop Tele, with maple neck and white pickguard. After our soundcheck, I was gazing at it, posed proudly on its stand, when someone, who I won't name and shame, came over to me and sprang the question, "Did you make it yourself?" And that's all I have to say on the matter! See you next month. **G**

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Blonde Bombshell

What? Fender Custom Shop 1952 Journeyman Relic Telecaster

Where seen? www.peachguitars.com

Price? £4,699

This is exactly like the mistakenly 'homemade' guitar I played at the pub gig mentioned above. But wow! They've gone up since then. It was a fabulous guitar, though, with see-through white blonde nitro finish, gently aged Journeyman style (my favourite Relic option these days), and a body of nicely figured ash. It's well weighted at 7.65lb, and with a beautifully shaped, not too chunky neck. Featuring the awesome '51 Nocaster bridge pickup and Twisted Tele at the neck, it'll sound huge. That single-ply white pickguard does give it an air of deceptive simplicity, but beneath that meek exterior lies a monster just waiting to unleash its terror. It's a ton of cash, but if you want the best...



Zero flash needed here: the Tele's masterful tones do the talking



Keeping It Swede

This month **Alex Bishop** tackles a soundboard restoration, stabilising a shattered 1960s Hagstrom guitar years after a devastating accident

Earlier this month, in the middle of running my weekly guitar-making evening class, I heard, above the cacophony of power tools and planing, the shrill tinkle of the workshop doorbell. At the door a solemn-looking customer clutching a guitar asked me if I might be able to help with a repair. He explained that the instrument, which had belonged to his father who had recently passed away, was played for many decades until a catastrophic skiing accident crushed the top in dramatic fashion. This was no normal repair ticket, but an object of memory and family connection.

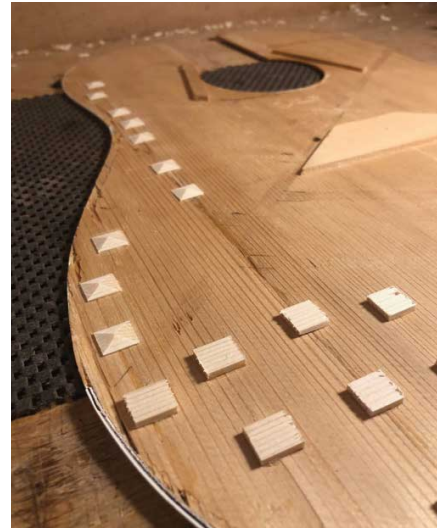
The instrument in question – a 1960s Hagstrom guitar – was built in Sweden at a time when the identity of the acoustic guitar was very much in flux thanks to big leaps in electric guitar design. Acoustic guitar manufacturers in the 60s seemed to be experimenting with ways to integrate new hardware into their instruments, and Hagstrom attempted this by combining a tune-o-matic-style saddle and elaborate tailpiece with a traditional wooden bridge and standard X-bracing. These guitars are rarely museum pieces, but they are working instruments, often lived hard and well loved.

A repair had been nobly attempted long ago, but it had subsequently failed under the pressure of the strings without the proper reinforcement from inside. The repairer had done what they could without removing the top, but it was clear to me that the soundboard would need to be detached and given proper treatment if the instrument was ever to sound again. A glance inside the instrument showed that not only was the structurally critical X-brace almost entirely detached, but other braces had either split in two or were missing altogether. A full re-bracing of the top would be required, but the exceptionally fragile soundboard – replete with plectrum marks and crinkled lacquer – had to be preserved.

Cracking Down

Fortunately, the bolt-on neck design of these unconventional acoustics would make the removal of the top a little easier than usual, eliminating the need to detach the tongue of the fingerboard from the top. However, the strong Swedish glue behind the binding had not relented, so this had to be removed by cutting it off with a router, in the same manner as when cutting binding channels on a new build. Now I had access to the join between the top and the sides, which I duly separated with a sharpened palette knife.

Once fully detached, the braces were separated from the top and the cracks could be properly addressed. I made up a custom clamping board with wooden wedges that could be inserted to close up the cracks as much as possible. This was then inserted into my



'go-bar deck', which also applied downwards pressure to encourage the fibres back into alignment. Before everything was glued up it was essential to clean out the old glue and dirt in the cracks where previous repairs had been made. Some recently acquired engraving tools were great at this, their narrow sizes helping scrape out the old glue to create proper wood-on-wood contact.

Once everything had dried it was essential to stabilise the soundboard with cleats – small cross-grain patches spanning each split to prevent movement and crack propagation. Each luthier has their own style of cleat,

Alex places cleats on the soundboard to stabilise it and prevent any further cracks creeping in

“[Though still pending final checks,] there is already an emotional resonance, a feeling of the instrument being *almost* itself again”

and one can take the opportunity to show off their craftsmanship by carving each one into a mass-reducing pyramidal form. New braces were then glued down – slightly curved on the bottom to push the top outward into a curve for extra strength – and lightly profiled to match the old braces. Scalloping the ends of each brace encouraged the top to vibrate without compromising structural integrity, especially in the areas close to the major splits.

Currently this is how the top exists on my bench, pending final checks: final voicing, clamping strategy and alignment of the top to the sides. There is, however, already an emotional resonance, a strange feeling of the instrument being *almost* itself again. In a way, it feels fitting that the guitar isn't finished yet... some things just take time to heal. **G**



Origin Of The Species

The first Patent Applied For humbuckers were rather different to what followed. Stuart Robson of Sunbear pickups tells **Jamie Dickson** why

If there was such a job as 'tone archaeologist', Stuart Robson of Sunbear Pickups would qualify. His forensic examinations of vintage pickups have led him down many an interesting path in the design and development of his own pickups. His latest prototype, however, tells a particularly interesting story. While Gibson's fabled Patent Applied For humbuckers of the late 50s are endlessly discussed and copied, less light is shed on the earliest examples of the breed – the 1957 examples that, as Stuart explains, were built just a little differently from the ones that followed and had a sound all of their

“The coils were effectively fluffier, looser and more naturally scattered by the way that the machine delivered the wire to the to the bobbin”

The KZ 57 SB PAF model humbuckers by Sunbear capture the looser wind associated with Gibson's early (and rattly) Geo-Stevens winding machine

own – quirks that he has sought to faithfully emulate in his latest vintage-inspired humbucker. What's the story?

“Well, they're called the KZ 57 SB PAFs and they're designed to mimic the winding pattern and coil structure of the coils produced by the very first machine that was used by Gibson in the 50s. This machine was used

to wind the majority of the of the 50s P-90s but also some of the earliest Patent Applied For pickups,” Stuart explains. “The winding machine [used for 1957 Patent Applied For humbuckers] was made by Geo-Stevens – in fact, it was the earliest winding machine produced by that maker. Geo-Stevens carried on making winders that were quite similar looking for many years after. But the original one is a little bit janky – it's early and it's quite rattly and it's got a specific lobeless cam set up on it. And, basically, that means the way that it lays wire backwards and forwards on the bobbin is quite specific in terms of the turns per layer and will fill the bobbin more for the same number of turns of wire that the later Leeson machine would do. So that just gives a specific character to the pickup.”

So what did that all mean for the sound of the earliest Patent Applied For humbuckers?

“They tend to be slightly airier,” Stuart argues. “They have more detail in the low-end, not necessarily more tightness but more transients, more harmonic content in the low-end than the coils off of the Leesonas tend to. And they just tend to be a little bit airier, a little bit sweeter. So they're more like a humbucking P-90 in character than the later Patent Applied For pickups tend to be,” he explains.

It's A Wind-Up

While the output of Patent Applied For humbuckers wandered about between 1957 and 1962 when they transitioned into being 'Patent Number' humbuckers, Stuart adds that the first ones wound on the Geo-Stevens machines were restricted to a maximum ceiling in output more than later examples.

“People try to make generalisations, like, 'Oh, I think the ones from '59 are a bit hotter. But, honestly, you get ones in '59 that are anything from the lowest to the highest outputs [that are considered typical]. What [the use of] that very early Geo-Stevens machine did mean, though, was that you really couldn't get a hot Patent Applied For off of it. If you think about the spec of 10,000 turns on a P-90 being split to around 5,000 turns per coil on a Patent Applied For pickup, you would not get *more* than that onto the bobbin from the KZ 115 Geo-Stevens winder because the coils were effectively fluffier, looser and more naturally scattered by the way that the machine delivered the wire to the to the bobbin [compared with coils made on later Leeson winders] – so you wouldn't get one that was over 8.2k, generally speaking. And that's part of their character as well – the fact that the coil is, frankly, a lot less tidy than the later coils are. So you won't get a hot Patent Applied For humbucker out of it, but you will get up to the idealised 8k-ish range.”

It's certainly an interesting little nook of Gibson pickup history – but what inspired Stuart to want to make his own take on the early '57 style of Patent Applied For?





"I find them really interesting to make because it's a very specific coil type that no-one really talks about," he reflects. "There's lots of direction towards the Leeson-style coils [among modern makers of vintage-style humbuckers]. But people generally don't talk about the actual coil build because to know about that, you either need to have the original machines – good luck! – or you need to be taking apart the original coils and lucky enough to be doing repair work on the originals," he says.

Fortunately, his own work in pickup design and repair has granted him the necessary insights, but he cautions against taking 'handmade' to mean better when it comes to vintage-correct Patent Applied For-style pickups.

"'Scatter-wound' is obviously a thing that people talk about in pickups – too much," Stuart observes. "But all Patent Applied For humbuckers were machine-wound. So, the idea of a hand-wound Patent Applied For, which you see in the market all the time... if we're being brutally honest, it's not a thing. Because you can't hand-wind a Patent Applied For with the kind of consistency that makes it sound like [a vintage original]." 📺

www.sunbearpickups.com

Deftly done ageing of the covers is one of the options available to those interested in Sunbear's recreation of the early Patent Applied For humbucking pickups



Listen to Stuart Robson and Jamie Dickson talk about and demonstrate Patent Applied For style humbuckers in our exclusive video at <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>

THREE TO GET READY

Inspired by classic 50s Gibson tones



Sunbear Pickups KZ 57 SB PAFs From £375

Hot off the winder at Sunbear Pickups is the subject of this article – a faithful recreation of 1957-spec Patent Applied For pickups. The prototype set of KZ 57 SB PAFs we examined here has an Alnico V bridge giving an output of 8.1k and an Alnico II neck pickup with a DC resistance of 7.3k, making this a touch-sensitive and classic set to savour.

www.sunbearpickups.com



PHOTO COURTESY OF BARE KNUCKLE PICKUPS

Bare Knuckle Mule humbuckers From £350

A well-liked take on the classic Patent Applied For sound by the thriving Cornish maker, the Mule is wound using "butyrate bobbins, maple spacers, nickel-plated slugs and Fillister no.5 pole screws... and Sand cast Alnico IV magnets". Output is similarly classic at 8.4k for the bridge and 7.3k for the neck. An old favourite for many players of maple-top single-cuts.

www.bareknucklepickups.co.uk



PHOTO DIMARZIO.COM

Dimarzio PAF 57 £89 (each)

Wound on Alnico II magnets, Dimarzio says its PAF 57 pickups "paint an auditory masterpiece – creamy tones, flawless hum cancellation and a crystalline top-end". Available in a range of finishes (black, relic white or cream butyrate bobbins, or nickel covers), this major maker rarely disappoints, offering another window on early Patent Applied For tone to consider.

www.dimarzio.com



Open-Sounding Chords

Richard Barrett reveals some hidden treasures from the fretboard that avoid the typical pitfalls of playing chords in open tunings

An alternative title for this feature could have been: 'a selection of chords that sound like they're in an open tuning (but aren't)...' In the search for fresh and unusual sounds while preserving the much loved timbre of the acoustic guitar, many resort to alternative or open tunings. Think Jimmy Page, Joni Mitchell, Nick Drake and so on. There's no doubt that this is a proven way to expand one's chord vocabulary and make hitherto physically impossible chord voicings available.

But before you reach for your tuners (and brace for the expense of more frequent string changes), why not have a look at these unusual open-sounding chords, which avail you of some similar textures without the inconvenience of having to retune. There's no getting away from the fact that the use of open strings does limit our possibilities somewhat, but there is more hidden away on the fretboard than many of us presume. Enough to keep us coming back for decades, in fact. **G**

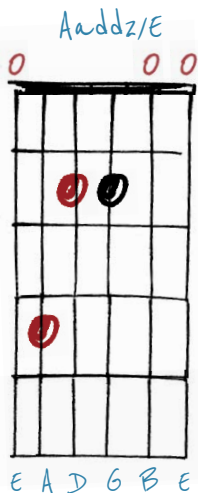


PHOTO BY JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES

Joni Mitchell has used a vast array of open tunings during her long career

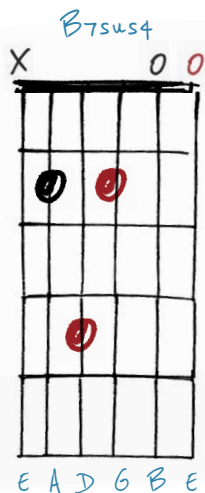
Example 1

This Aadd2/E is one of those chords that is far easier to play than the name may suggest. It has a lot in common with Asus2, but the addition of the 3rd (C#) on the fifth string makes this an add2, as sus2 has no 3rd. The open sixth string gives us the /E.



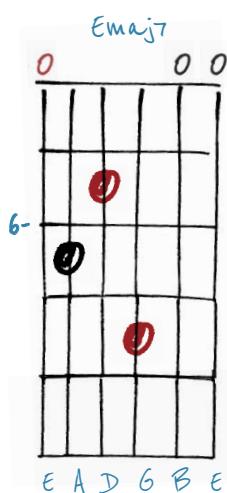
Example 2

There aren't too many open-sounding B chords available in standard tuning, but this B7sus4 is one of the nicest. As with all these examples, the first and second strings are open, but in this case the sixth is muted, making this the only one of the five examples that doesn't use all six strings.



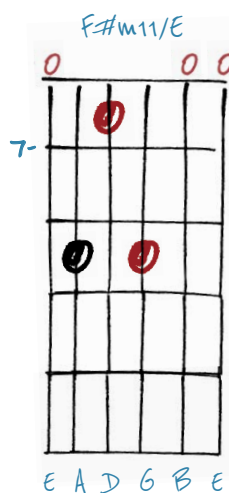
Example 3

This open Emaj7 would be very at home on an early Genesis album – played on a 12-string guitar, even more so! As with many of these examples, it's well worth moving them around. Also, shifting a note up or down a semitone here and there will yield a few nice surprises.



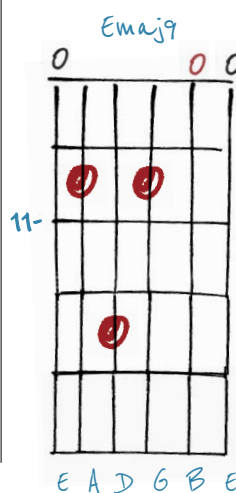
Example 4

This F#m11/E is one of the many chords that can be found when shifting shapes around with a modification or two (see Example 3). Again, we've had to jump through some music theory hoops when naming it, but don't let that be an obstacle – many well-known players create beautiful music without analysing it in this way.



Example 5

Hidden away in the upper reaches of the fretboard, this Emaj9 is a test of your tuning and intonation, but it gives such a nice Joni Mitchell vibe that it's well worth the risk! You'll notice once again that this could be regarded as related to both Examples 3 and 4 when moved and subtly altered.



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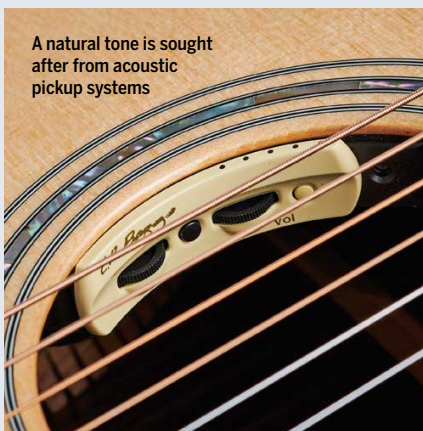


Feedback

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

STAR LETTER

UNLOVED UNPLUGGED?



A natural tone is sought after from acoustic pickup systems

I've been playing for about 55 years and reading *Guitarist* for the last 25 of them. I look forward to the arrival of a new issue for the new equipment reviews and in-depth interviews with prominent guitarists. However, as a mainly acoustic guitarist, I see little attention paid to the issues that crop up the most in acoustic guitar forums.

Top ones are: 1) Pickup systems, both OEM and retrofit, and how to get an

amplified tone near to the natural unamplified sound. Different systems for, say, dreadnought, OM size and parlour; 2) How to cut through when playing acoustic in a band, while avoiding feedback; 3) How to reduce pick and finger noise from amplified guitars. Apart from technique, what about lubricants, EQ, different strings, pedals?; 4) Best pedals for acoustic, both single and multi-effect; 5) String gauges for various sizes of guitar and the differences possible with changes of gauge; 6) Humidity control, when, how and is it really necessary in the UK's climate? 7) Fingerpicking development.

Keep up the good work – but please engage with us acoustic guitar players a little more.

Chris Hallsworth

Thanks for the kind words, Chris, and the thoughtful observations from the acoustic player's point of view. While Michael Watts did make an interesting foray into the world of recording acoustic guitars in our Raising The Tone column a few issues ago, acoustic pickup systems are an area that consistently frustrates players and your idea about optimal pickup systems for different body sizes and materials is very interesting subject matter. On the handling noise front, we have to say we're completely converted to the latest generation of coated strings, not only because of the reduction of finger squeaks but the balanced, rounded tone the best sets give. If you've steered clear of coated strings in the past, now might be a good time to try...

STIRRING CREAM

The Cream issue brought back many memories. I followed their career closely after hearing their first album, *Fresh Cream*, from a friend while still in high school in 1966 or '67. I was fortunate enough to get tickets to hear them at the Forum in LA during the 'Farewell' tour (1968). My memories of the show are: loud? Yes! I was curious about Clapton's Firebird. I thought, 'Huh, must be some kind of custom guitar, made just for him.' Their live music was extremely complex during the extended jams, not easy to take in. Many years later I bought a red 335 having forgotten seeing Clapton playing one. Amazing!

Bob Gervais

Thanks for your memories, Bob. We can't resist repeating, as we have before in these pages, that our very own Nev Marten suspects he was offered Clapton's Firebird I at a Denmark Street store shortly after Eric stopped using it, back when a Firebird I in London was a rare bird indeed, no pun intended. At the time, Nev wanted a three-pickup guitar like a Strat and so he turned it down. So we'll never know if it really was EC's Cream guitar... But what a time to be growing up, musically!

BACKING AWAY?

Alex Bishop's piece on guitar backs in issue 534 was particularly interesting to me as I had been pondering this question from a slightly different angle for some time. I noticed that the bass response of my '59 Höfner President archtop improved dramatically if there was a bit of space between me and the guitar back. This led me to listen more closely to my other guitars and I found the same phenomenon with my Guild D25 12-string (which has an unbraced, arched back). The difference was much less noticeable on my Gibson flat-tops, however, despite one of them (EC-10) having the same type of back as the Guild.

All this suggests to me that, as my normal practice is to play standing up with the guitar on a strap, it is better to avoid guitars with resonant backs to avoid compromising the tone. Many mandolin players attach a frame to allow the back of the instrument to vibrate freely, but I've never seen anything like this for guitars. Am I overthinking this or is it worth further discussion?

Tim Bliss

Thanks for your interesting observations, Tim. Contact between a vibrating object, such as a tuning fork, and an energy absorbing material (such as a guitarist's belly) has the potential to dissipate energy without turning it into sound – could a similar process be dampening some of those guitars' sound? We await an answer from our resident luthier, Alex...

KORG

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a Korg PitchStrap strap-mounted tuner!

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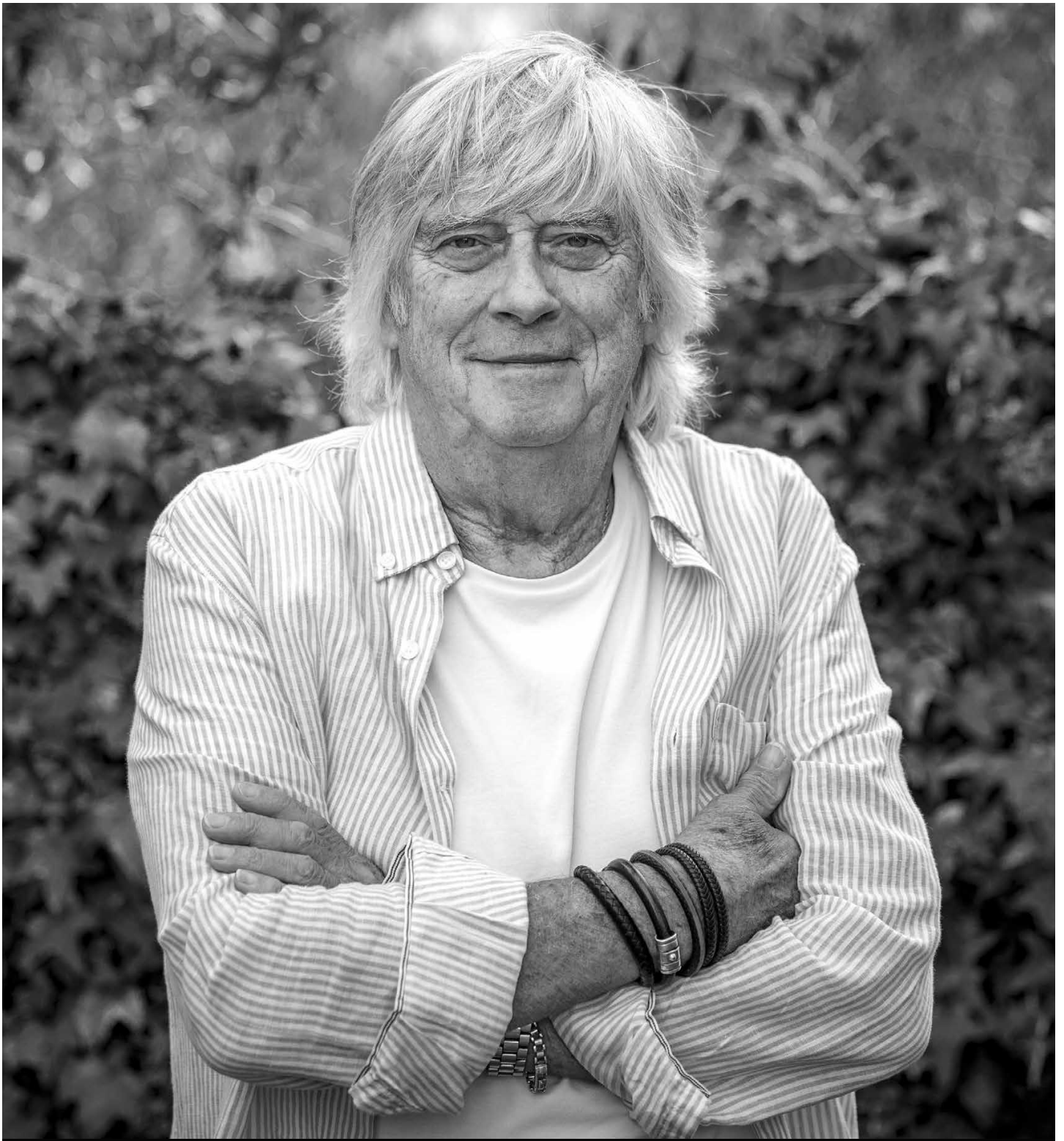
SE

FIND YOUR TONE

PRS SE Acoustics come in three body shapes and an array of wood options. Each combination has its own unique voice, and PRS's hybrid X/Classical bracing system ensures that voice is bold and resonant. Angelus Cutaway, Tonare Grand, or Tonare Parlor. Mahogany, maple, ovankol, and zircote. Go to your local PRS dealer to find the instrument that connects with you or visit prsguitars.com/acoustics to explore more.



Photography by Dumadag



MIKE VERNON

1944-2026

The producer of vintage Fleetwood Mac and Bluesbreakers
– and sculptor of Eric Clapton and Peter Green's seminal
tones – was one of British blues' towering figures

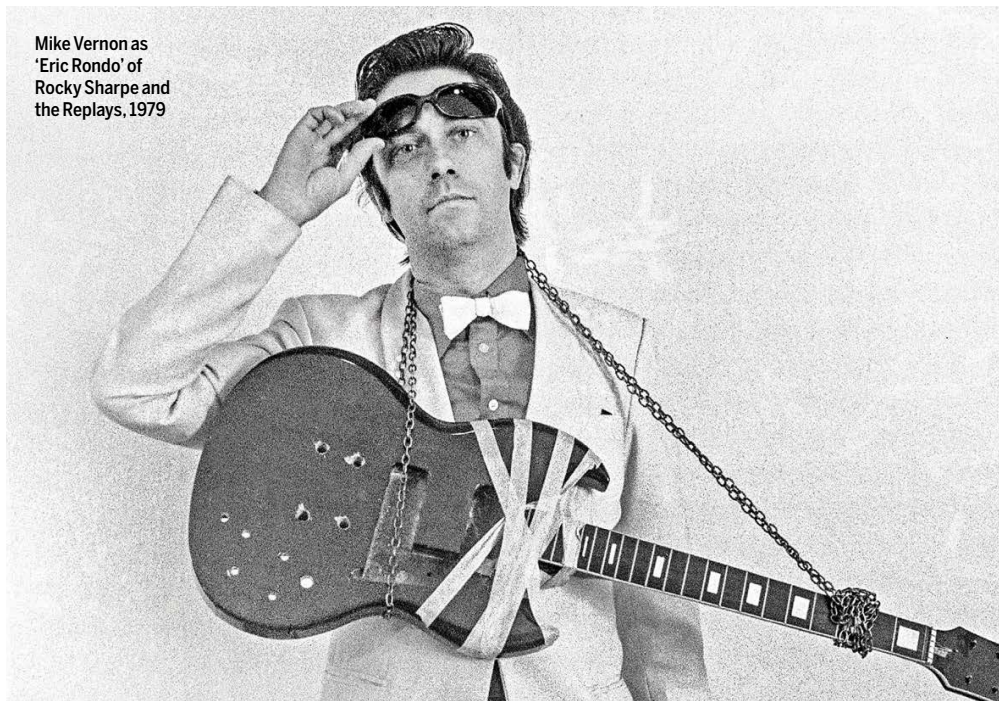
Words Henry Yates

MIKE VERNON

November 1944–March 2026

By his own admission, Mike Vernon was no more than a competent guitarist (“I didn’t play anything particularly well”). And while his eponymous Mighty Combo of later years certainly lived up to the billing, it could only ever be an addendum to Vernon’s wider contribution to the British blues scene and, in particular, his showcasing of the great players during the 60s boom. As producer of *Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton*, and such Peter Green-era Fleetwood Mac masterpieces as *Albatross* and *Black Magic Woman* – among countless others – there’s an argument that nobody ever caught better electric-guitar tone in the bottle.

Born in November 1944, Vernon’s youth echoes many of that era’s rock galacticos: a childhood in Surrey, an early shift in the school choir, the epiphany of imported American rhythm and blues, then a shift to the big city with his studies at Croydon Art College. It was here that Vernon



Mike Vernon as 'Eric Rondo' of Rocky Sharpe and the Replays, 1979

Mike Vernon’s production of the ‘Beano’ album caught all the fit-to-burst intensity of Eric Clapton’s Les Paul and Marshall combo

began following the bands of homegrown movers ‘n’ shakers Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies – and soon the younger man proved equally influential, co-founding the tastemaker fanzine *R&B Monthly* with his brother Richard, widely read across the London scene.

After blanket-bombing the capital’s record labels with job applications – and landing an A&R assistant post at Decca in 1962 – Vernon pitched himself as producer for John Mayall’s so-called ‘Beano’ album of 1966. The material and personnel were solid-gold, with the wily bandleader recruiting the unfeasibly talented former Yardbird Eric Clapton and setting him loose on standards like Freddie King’s *Hide Away* and Memphis Slim’s *Steppin’ Out*. But a vital element, too, was Vernon’s production, which caught all the fit-to-burst intensity of Clapton’s Les Paul and Marshall combo.

“Nobody had ever made that kind of noise on record before,” he told this writer. “It was such a huge noise. Eric put the cornerstone down. There it was. Y’know,

‘That’s how it’s supposed to be.’ And everyone just followed him.”

When ‘Beano’ unexpectedly hit UK No 6, making a star of Clapton, Vernon’s career was off to the races, too. And as the Bluesbreakers line-up evolved – with first Peter Green, then Mick Taylor, taking the spot of the Cream-bound Clapton – the producer showed a sharp ear for the sonic landscape each player needed to shine.

Alongside his own hugely respected Blue Horizon record label – co-founded in 1965 with Neil Slaven – Vernon was drafted to work on Green’s post-Bluesbreakers project, Fleetwood Mac. “I barely knew Peter when I made the Bluesbreakers’ *A Hard Road* album. He wasn’t as assertive during the course of that album as he became once he had his own band. Peter, of course, was outrageous, just the most wonderful player. He was special. There’s no doubt about that.”

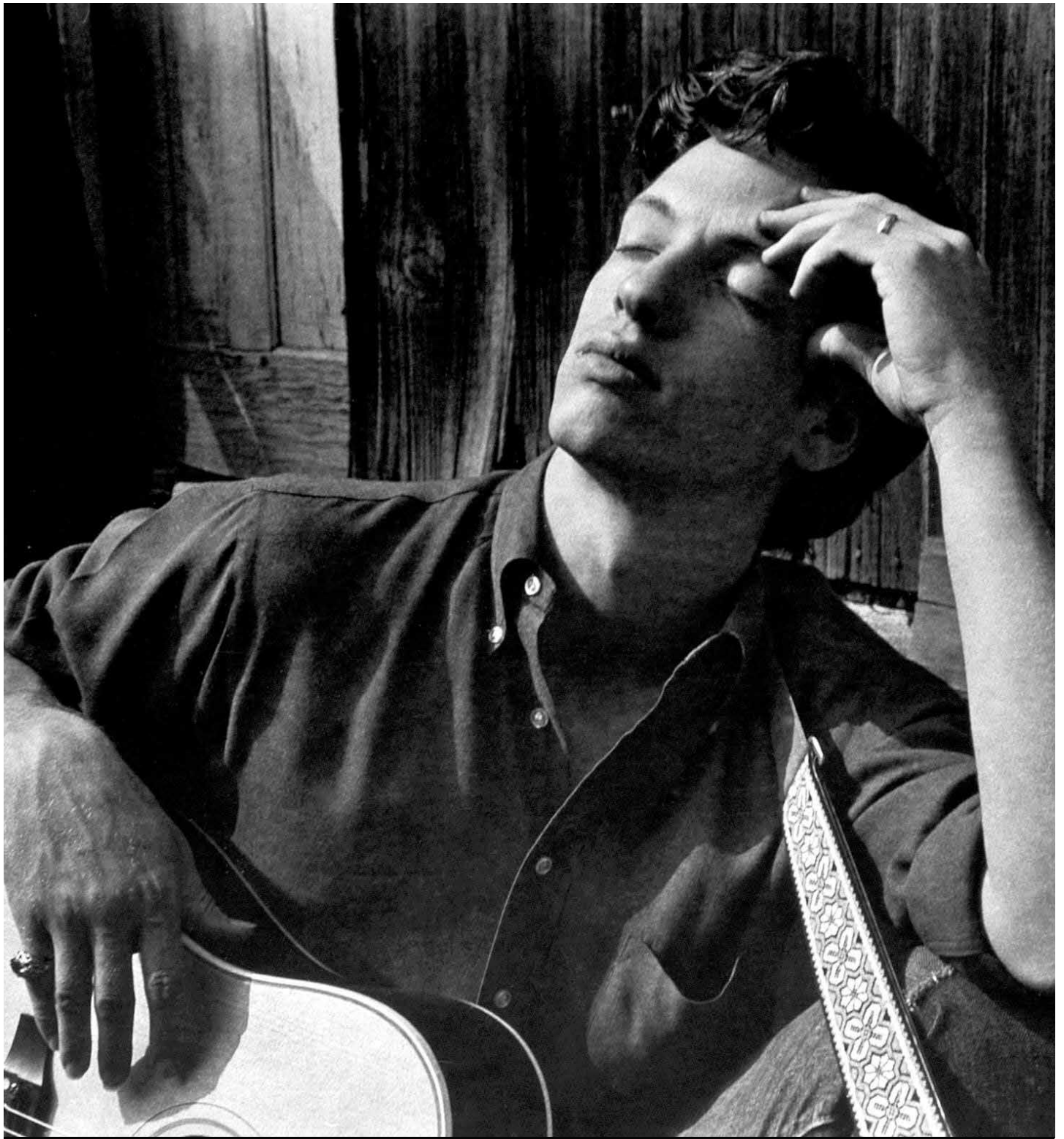
Vernon went on to produce British stalwarts like Savoy Brown, Ten Years After and Chicken Shack, while Blue Horizon gave a valuable platform to such

seminal-but-fading US blues titans as Otis Spann, Bukka White and Lightnin’ Slim. “In those days, Freddie King never really made the same sound in the studio as he did live,” he remembered. “So when I had the opportunity of working with him, we made sure the sound got bigger.”

Even after moving to Spain in the post-millennium, Vernon could occasionally be tempted back into the fray when he recognised a stellar talent, manning the desk for Oli Brown’s *Heads I Win Tails You Lose* (2010), Dani’s Wilde’s *Shine* (2011) and Laurence Jones’s *Take Me High* (2016). “Everyone does the copy-and-paste thing now,” said the latter. “But I don’t think anyone else can make an old-school record.”

Looking back in an interview that same year, the only job Vernon squirmed over was the 1967 debut by a then-unknown David Bowie. “I hate talking about it and, to be really truthful, when it was all done and dusted, I was rather glad it was over. It just didn’t do anything for me. I just wanted to get to my next blues session.”

Mike Vernon was a joy to interview – friendly, funny and wearing his fathoms-deep knowledge lightly. But make no mistake: this was one of the chief architects of perhaps the most compelling British guitar movement in history, and it simply wouldn’t have sounded as urgent or exciting without him. **G**



JOHN P HAMMOND

1942-2026

The New Yorker will be remembered as a master
of acoustic barrehouse and an interpreter of Delta blues
who performed like a man possessed

Words Henry Yates

JOHN P HAMMOND

November 1942–February 2026

The great black post-war bluesmen are almost gone now, and the passing of John P Hammond – from a cardiac arrest in February at the age of 83 – is a stark reminder that time is also running out for the hip white kids who followed their lead. “I’ve lost my best friend,” wrote the Grammy-winning guitarist’s frequent collaborator, Paul James, in the first of many tributes. “The blues world has lost a giant.”

From his birth in New York on 13 November 1942 – the eldest son of the noted Columbia Records producer John Henry Hammond, and a drop in the blue bloodline of the unfeasibly wealthy Vanderbilt dynasty – Hammond seemed destined to leave his mark on the world. His middle name was a hint at the family’s connections, nodding to singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson. But it was a meeting, in 1949, with another associate of his father – the blues giant Big Bill Broonzy – that proved his awakening.

“By the time I was in my early teens, I was a blues fanatic,” Hammond once



John P Hammond, pictured here in New York in 2013, was a prolific live performer

PHOTO BY MICK GOLD/REDFERNS GETTY IMAGES

“I’ve never witnessed anyone as swept up and away as John playing his music live. He was the inspiration for teaching myself blues guitar” **BONNIE RAITT**

said, citing titans such as Lead Belly, Josh White, Brownie McGhee and Chuck Berry, alongside Jimmy Reed’s seminal 1961 *Carnegie Hall* album. “When I got a guitar, that was it.”

Quitting his studies at Antioch College, Ohio, Hammond performed at the Newport Folk Festival before debuting with 1963’s self-titled album on Vanguard Records (notable as one of the first full-length white folk-blues releases). And while he was not yet much of a songwriter – for now covering the standards of Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Son House and Lightnin’ Hopkins – his interpretative skills were clear.

By the mid-60s, Hammond was a fixture in the coffee houses of New York’s Greenwich Village, where for a time he seemed like the connective tissue between every artist who mattered. In 1965, his *So Many Roads* album featured not only Mike Bloomfield but future Band principals Levon Helm, Robbie Robertson

and Garth Hudson (it was largely down to Hammond that Bob Dylan chose them as his backing group). Three years later, at the city’s achingly cool Gaslight Café, he was flanked by both Clapton and Hendrix. In 1969, he was briefly bandmates with Duane Allman.

Hammond was arguably just as arresting a live performer as any of the above, ultimately settling on a solo man-and-guitar format that gave full rein to his head-turning acoustic attack (for this, his most famous tool was an ancient steel-bodied National). “Not only was John a virtuoso on guitar, harp, singing and choosing songs, to me it felt like he was totally possessed by the blues,” wrote Bonnie Raitt. “I’ve never witnessed anyone as swept up and away as John playing his music live. He was the inspiration for teaching myself blues guitar and learning how to sing these songs we loved so much. He made it cool and all right.”

In truth, Hammond never became quite as celebrated as his 60s peers, especially outside the States. Yet, unlike many bigger names, he survived the decade and proved a long-term talent. BAFTA-nominated for his soundtrack to 1970’s Dustin Hoffman movie, *Little Big Man*, he won a Grammy for 1985’s *Blues Explosion*, and had released some 34 albums when the books were balanced at the time of his death.

The shows he played across those six decades, meanwhile, were beyond calculation. “Since I don’t make rockstar money, I have to play a lot,” reasoned Hammond in a 1995 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. “I play smaller theatres and clubs. With experience, you learn how to maintain your energy and not blow it.”

A marathon runner in an industry of sprinters, Hammond was a lifelong ambassador for the blues. He was happy to pass the torch to rolling generations of younger players – but not afraid to occasionally pull rank. “The first time I met John was on New Year’s Eve in 1991 when he was opening up for Buddy Guy at Irving Plaza in New York,” posted Joe Bonamassa on the day the sad news broke. “I was asked to sit in with Buddy that night. John handed me his 1930s National with 14-gauge strings on it and smiled while I struggled to get anything out of it...!” **G**



SMITH/KOTZEN

With second album, *Black Light/White Noise*, confirming the hard-rock duo as a project with legs, we meet Adrian Smith and Richie Kotzen to hear about volume abuse, the perfect length for a solo, and the white heat of improvisation

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates Photography Olly Curtis

When does a side-project become the main event? As we set up the photoshoot for Adrian Smith and Richie Kotzen at Bristol's O2 Academy, it seems a pertinent question to contemplate. Back in February 2020 these two star players traded riffs for the first time on the Turks and Caicos Islands – of course, a few days later and the pandemic would have scuppered the project before it even began. However, six years on and Smith/Kotzen have a brace of acclaimed albums under their belt, from 2021's self-titled debut to last year's *Black Light/White Noise* (by comparison, Smith's mothership, Iron Maiden, haven't recorded since 2021's *Senjutsu*).

Having completed soundcheck and now settling on a leather couch, the pair display a complementary chemistry: Kotzen is happy to hold court, while Smith prefers to sit back, hat pulled low, and chip in as necessary. But as they explain, it's their opposing guitar styles that has made Smith/Kotzen such an enjoyable enterprise, with both musicians happy to be nudged from their comfort zones.

How does the second album progress from your debut?

Adrian Smith: "We actually recorded it in two parts. We did about six songs, then I went on tour with Maiden and Richie went off with his band. Then we came back together the following year. So it gave us the opportunity to let the dust settle and think, 'What do we have here?' I think it's a more focused album, more 'up', more cohesive. You know, we're developing a writing and playing relationship. It's more of the same – but a progression."

When did you realise that you clicked as a partnership?

Adrian: "The first time we got together at Richie's studio. I've sat down with other guitarists and you just end up playing blues licks all day and not writing anything. But Richie and I went to work straightaway. I had the riff and he came up with the chorus for *Running*. That was it – 'Bang!' – in a couple of hours. We did jam, too, and came up with *Scars*."

Richie Kotzen: "To me, the creative process is the most important aspect. Even more so than playing, if I had to choose. That's why I kept at playing the guitar because I wanted to make original music. Out of everything, I get most satisfaction from an idea coming out of the speakers and going, 'Yeah, that's what I was hearing in my head.' So that's the part we connect on, the core of what this is. Because anybody can go jam some covers."

Have the songs evolved as you play them live?

Adrian: "Yeah, to see that song breathing and living in front of an audience..."

Richie: "The songs take on this whole other life. And I've never done this, but it'd be interesting to write a bunch of music, have the band learn it, then take it on the road and play it for a year – then record it."

Adrian: "The trouble is, if you do anything now, it's on the internet the next day."

Richie: "That's true. The creepy, evil internet!"

How do you approach the solos in this band?

Adrian: "Richie and I are very different. I've been playing in Iron Maiden for such a long time, and the solos are part of the song. Almost without exception, they're 16 bars and that's it. There's no extended solos."

**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVE!**

Watch Adrian and Richie talk about their soloing styles, gear, approach to riff-writing and the new Smith/Kotzen album
<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



“We went to work straightaway. I had the riff and he came up with the chorus. That was it – ‘Bang!’”

ADRIAN SMITH



And most of the solos I play with Maiden [live] are the same as on the record because that's what people want to hear, especially with old stuff like *The Trooper*. But the way Richie plays is much more improvisational and it's encouraged me to be more like that in S/K. Trying to keep up with this guy, y'know? And I'm getting more confident about branching out. I've only got three solos in the whole set that I play the same every night. The rest is off the top of my head."

Richie: "That's the way I've been doing it since I started recording myself. Like, 'Well, I don't know what I'm gonna do, but let's see what happens.' I'll do a take and typically I'll hear a melody in my head. Then I'll go off from that, record it and say, 'Okay, I liked the way I started and ended, but I got lost in the middle. Let me see if I can pull this off.' So I'm kinda constructing in real-time."

"On the other side of the coin, there are solos, like, at the end of a song, where I'll just go for it. That's a lot of fun. I grew up playing with guys that would jam and improvise, so that's relatively easy for me. I know a lot of guys that sit at home and write out the solo: 'Okay, I'm gonna play this, let me practise it seven times then I'll go to the studio...'. I've never done that. Maybe I should. But it's a different approach."

It helps that you have a killer rhythm section...

Richie: "They're fantastic. Julia Lage is the bass player and Bruno Valverde is playing drums, and they just really lock in and make it so easy for us. Especially on the solos where we're improvising. You need a support mechanism. And that was a great thing that I learnt

1. Adrian Smith still loves playing all the Maiden classics in his 'other' job – but says the Smith/Kotzen project has allowed him to develop a spontaneous side to his playing

from my short time with Stanley Clarke's band. We had a band called Vertú in 1999, which seems like a thousand years ago. But I learnt that when someone's soloing, everybody else is there to support. You don't go, 'Look what I can do!' when someone else has the floor. When the four of us play together, we have that same mentality. So the solo at the end of *Running*, Adrian can go for as long as he wants and the foundation is always gonna be there."

What particular guitars have you brought with you on the road, Adrian?

Adrian: "This is my Jackson San Dimas signature model. It's a slightly later one because it's got the adjustable truss rod that you can get at more easily. It's a great working guitar. Stays in tune. Sounds great. It's light, easy to play, big frets. That's a Seymour Duncan JB at the bridge. It's a slim neck. I don't really like chunky necks. That's why I don't like old, old Les Pauls. This has a kind of flat profile. When I first hooked up with Jackson, I took an old Strat to the factory and they copied the neck dimensions because it was so comfortable."

"I also use this Les Paul Classic. When I was a kid, I had a black Les Paul copy. It was my first guitar and I loved it, and I modded it and put in Gibson pickups."

"The way Richie plays is much more improvisational and it's encouraged me to be more like that" ADRIAN SMITH



I just maxed it out as much as I could. But, eventually, I sold it. I wish I still had it. But this one, I bought in New York. It's not an old guitar. I think it might be a reissue. I use it for a few songs and it's got the mojo factor. I suppose you play it a certain way, get more sustain, so you can maybe play a little less if you want and get away with it."

"And then, this Les Paul Custom, Gibson gave me a few years ago. It's my favourite guitar, looks-wise. Just absolutely beautiful. But it's got slightly smaller frets. My hands were slipping, so I'm going to put bigger frets on, then it'll be back in action. The tuning can be volatile because it's not got the locking nuts. But it's a lovely guitar."

Talk us through your guitar rack, Richie.

Richie: "This is my signature Fender Telecaster. My 'main' Telecaster is at home, and the reason is because that guitar stays tuned at 440 [standard tuning] – whereas with S/K we tune down a half-step. So this is the dedicated Telecaster for everything Smith/Kotzen, and it's completely stock, off the rack, with the exception that I take sandpaper to the neck – I just like the way that feels. The pickups are a DiMarzio Chopper T with a regular replacement Tele single coil. And that's not a tone dial – it's a series parallel knob."

"I only have two guitars on this tour – and the other one is my signature Strat, in this one-off custom baby-blue colour. They used a really nice piece of maple for the neck. It almost looks like birdseye and it's not quite as chunky as the Telecaster. And, you know, I love the gold hardware and DiMarzio pickups. I play both



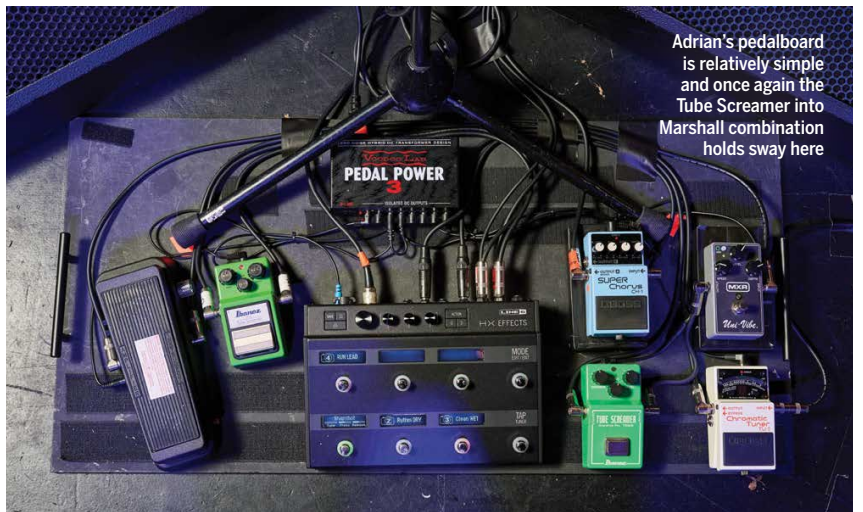
Adrian uses a more modern-style Marshall JVM210H head than the 'Plexis' that Richie Kotzen favours, making the most of its burning lead tones on tour



Adrian takes Jackson signature models, such as this white example, on tour with him – tuned down a half-step – plus a Gibson Les Paul Classic and a black Les Paul Custom



Adrian's maple-board Jackson signature model has a Seymour Duncan JB humbucker in the bridge. This later version has truss rod adjustment via an easy access wheel at the base of the neck



Adrian's pedalboard is relatively simple and once again the Tube Screamer into Marshall combination holds sway here

guitars almost equally in the set, but I finish the show with *Running* on the Strat.

“I’ll tell you something: all the decisions with my gear were made very early on, very deliberately, because my focus has always been, ‘What am I going to write,’ y’know? I don’t like to exhaust too many resources mentally on gear because I like to reserve that for my creative process.”

And all the S/K guitars are dropped a semi-tone?

Adrian: “Yeah. Tuning down was more for the vocals. It’s just the way Richie and I started working together. We immediately dropped. I mean, he’s got more range than me, but it helps me. So this white Jackson, for example, it’s the equivalent of a standard tuning drop D, but this would be a C#. So you get that heavy kind of barring situation. The one-fingered bandit, I call it.”

The way a guitar interacts with a physical amp is such a big part of the excitement of rock ‘n’ roll. What’s your take on that?

Adrian: “With S/K, we’re pretty old-school. We both use amplifiers. I mean, a lot of bands now just don’t use backline: it’s all processed and they’ve got in-ears. We’ve got the wedges and half-stacks and we just go for it. And there’s so much choice of amps these days. Back when the electric guitar came to the fore – the 60s and 70s – there wasn’t much around. You really had to work to get a sound. Having said that, a lot of it is in here [holds up hands] and in here [points to head] and what you feel. You’ve just got to have something that enables you to express that.”

2. Richie Kotzen’s intense and agile soloing style involves super-fluid tapping, sweeps and lightning-fast legato runs with intriguing hints of ‘outside’ playing adding spice to his huge rock vocabulary

Richie: “It doesn’t have to be loud to be good. A lot of times, being loud can be a problem.”

Adrian: “And if I go to see a band, I don’t like ‘em to be too loud.”

Richie: “I want them to be good.”

Adrian: “Exactly!”

What was your go-to amp for the album, Richie?

Richie: “In the studio, I had my four-input Marshall Super Lead 1959 Handwired. Adrian was using it as well. I plugged into the top-right input, which is the ‘normal’ channel. And then the cabinet is obviously in another room with microphones on it. I’ve got a lot of Marshall heads. I have one from 1967, a Super Bass. I bought it when I was in my early 20s at a guitar show in Texas. And back then, I paid, like, \$1,100 – now I see ‘em go for 12 grand. But I haven’t recorded with that in years because it was blowing fuses.

“On the road, I’m using reproductions, like this 1959 HW. When I plug into it, I know what I’m in for. It’s not a guessing game. Again, my concern isn’t gear. It never was. It’s like, ‘Let’s get to it, let’s make music.’ This is the most responsive head I’ve ever played through. If I hit it hard, it barks. And it takes pedals really well.

“I don’t use a lot of wah in Smith/Kotzen, so my signature Tech 21 [RK5 Fly Rig] pedal is not with me on

“I don’t exhaust too many resources mentally on gear, I like to reserve that for my creative process” RICHIE KOTZEN



the road. But I have my Fly Rig, and this one is modified with more switches for my Leslie simulators. Then there’s the SansAmp, which is how I get a bit of rock ‘n’ roll grit in the sound and not have it absurdly loud. And just as I said that, my tinnitus just kicked off, like it knows that I’m talking about it [laughs].”

How about your backline, Adrian?

Adrian: “A lot of my equipment is in England and we record in America. And I lost a bit of gear in the LA fire last year as well. So I do some stuff at home with a JVM. But mainly I used Richie’s amp because it’s so easy. It’s so fast: you’ve got an idea, plug in and ‘bash’. Maybe I put a Tube Screamer with that amp [on the road, Adrian is using a Marshall JVM210 with 1960A and 1960B cabinets].”

So what’s next for Smith/Kotzen?

Richie: “Well, we’ve got more shows and we’re very excited about how well received the album was. It’s a great creative outlet and something that I think both of us would like to see carry on, right?”

Adrian: “Yeah, I’m having a great time on the road. I love taking these songs on stage. I’m up there and I’m lost in a world where I get to play solos and rhythm, sing, do harmonies – there’s so much going on. It’s so fulfilling.”



Kotzen’s latest album, *Black Light/White Noise*, is available now on BMG

www.smithkotzen.com



Richie Kotzen has long been a devotee of the Telecaster, even during the shred years of the 1990s. His signature model Tele features a DiMarzio Chopper T humbucker in the bridge position



Hand-wired 100-watt Marshall Super Lead heads give Kotzen the sound he likes on tour, but he still cherishes a vintage Super Bass that he has at home, despite the old amp's reliability issues



Kotzen is unusual in having been honoured with both a signature Telecaster and a signature Strat. The one he's brought out on tour has a unique blue finish over figured maple



Kotzen's highly effective Fly Rig multi-effects unit by Tech 21 now features a rotary-style effect that can be heard on many of the tracks performed on tour

Gina Gleason plays the 75TH ANNIVERSARY AMERICAN ULTRA II TELECASTER® in Liquid Gold.





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ULTIMATE TELECASTERS

It seems strange to say, but a literal lifetime has passed since the Telecaster (initially named the Broadcaster) debuted at the NAMM Show of 1950. Remarkably, its relevance has only grown during the seven decades that have passed since then. Perhaps that's because the Telecaster's simplicity has always meant that it becomes what you bring to it, meaning it could never truly go out of style.

What began as a niche guitar developed for Californian country musicians has become the musical equivalent of a universal wrench: from metal to jazz, from bubblegum pop to grindcore, the Telecaster is all over the map of modern music. Gadgets and gimmicks arrive in a fanfare and leave in a commercial hearse – but raw utility never dates.

In the following pages, we examine the technical evolution of the Tele, cast the spotlight on some Holy Grail vintage models that mark the mileposts of its long life, and evaluate the latest incarnations of what many still consider to be the best electric guitar ever built.

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Matt Lincoln



2024
Fender
TELECASTER
Limited Edition Custom Shop
'59 Telecaster Custom
Super Heavy Relic

TELEVISION

The Fender Telecaster remained a work in progress throughout the vintage era, and as part of our 75th anniversary celebration we chart the changes in construction, controls and electronics

Words Huw Price

THE PROTOTYPES

In 1943, Leo Fender and his future business partner Doc Kauffman built their first lap steel, and applied to patent a pickup design the following year. This instrument is now known as the 'Radio Shop guitar' and more refined lap steels followed. Leo assembled his first six-string guitar prototype during the summer of 1949. The laminated two-piece pine body shape was almost identical to the production models, with a bolt-on neck and top mounted metal control plate. However, it featured a three-per-side 'snake head' headstock that was similar to those of Fender's lap steels. Leo completed the second prototype around the autumn/winter of that year, complete with the now iconic headstock shape and cut-down bass-side-only Kluson tuners.

Both 1949 Fender prototypes were single-pickup guitars, but Leo gifted a two-pickup prototype with a lap steel pickup in the neck position to Sam Hutton, who was one of Fender's amp technicians. He apparently kept it hanging on a nail in his workshop for testing purposes.

PRODUCTION BEGINS

Fender's first production guitars were made during the spring of 1950 and the model was dubbed the 'Esquire'. These days the Esquire is considered a single-pickup Telecaster, but shortly after its release, Fender began offering Esquires with an optional neck pickup. The earliest models had black lacquered pine bodies and white fibre pickguards. By the summer, Fender was using ash for the bodies with a translucent blonde finish and a contrasting black fibreboard pickguard.



Fender sprayed and polished the 'guards, and while the earliest ones were glossy front and back, the team soon realised it was wasting lacquer on the side nobody would ever see. Instead, the 'guards were placed on a paint tin for spraying, leaving a circular lacquer 'shadow'. The 'Blackguard' era lasted from 1950 to 1954.

SPARE THE ROD

At first, Leo Fender was convinced that chunky maple necks would be sufficiently robust to remain straight under string tension. However, touring musicians who were road-testing the earliest Esquires began reporting problems. Travelling from the heat of the deep south to the Canadian cold caused the necks to flex, with string action becoming uncomfortably high and buzzingly low, depending on conditions. Leo bowed to the inevitable and purchased truss rod tooling in October 1950.

NAME CALLING

Esquire production was paused between late summer 1950 and January 1951, and Don Randall came up with the name 'Broadcaster' for the dual-pickup model. When Esquire production resumed, the name was reserved for single-pickup guitars.

In his book *The Blackguard*, Nacho Baños estimates that no more than 250 Broadcasters were produced between October 1950 and February 1951. Fender received Gretsch's telegram asserting an infringement of its trademark and scissored off the 'Broadcaster' section of the remaining decals, rather than waste them. Guitars with these chopped decals became known as 'Nocasters' and, once they had run out, Fender began using decals bearing a new name devised by Don Randall – and the first guitars with 'Telecaster' logos appeared during the late summer of 1951.

Broadcasters, 'Nocasters', early Telecasters and Blackguards continue to occupy top spots for vintage Telecaster fans. We turned to busy session player

1. Roy Buchanan on stage as part of a show with Albert Collins and Lonnie Mack at Carnegie Hall in New York City, 1985. Buchanan's yearning, weeping bends on Telecasters remain among the most emotive in all guitar music

"Everything about the Tele is so simple. Everything you need is right there. I just have an instinct for all of them" **BILL FRISELL**

Eddie Tatton and rockabilly virtuoso James Oliver for some owner insights.

"I ended up buying a '52 from ATB," Eddie recalls. "It was relatively affordable because it's an Esquire with a factory added neck pickup. GE Smith also has one like mine, and Fender apparently charged around \$15

PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



1950s TELES DEMO!

Watch our editor-in-chief play-test a 1950 Broadcaster plus 1954 and 1955 Telecasters from ATB Guitars' collection <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>



1950 FENDER BROADCASTER

"They're rarer than 'Bursts,'" says Steve Hove of vintage guitar retailer ATB, where this grandfather of the Tele family currency resides. The period in which the 'Tele' was named the Broadcaster was brief (around four months) but influential. "I think they made less than 300 during that time, something like that," Steve says. "So, yes, they're rare beasts. And it was the model that kicked everything off for Fender – not something we see every day, certainly. There's quite a prominent midrange. It sounds quite

bassy – it does have that twang, but it's not like the later models, which can be a bit glassy, very direct. I think this Broadcaster has a more well-rounded sort of tone – more even across the strings. It's tricky to describe generic [characteristics] of Broadcasters because they do vary quite a lot. The one we have is a really lightweight one, but they can be quite heavy. And the neck profile is not as chunky as you might think. It's got a nice soft V to it – really, really playable." [JD]

for the upgrade. It's an incredible working instrument and it's probably my favourite guitar."

James's '54 example is his favourite, too, and it's been his main gigging guitar since its purchase three years ago. "Although it's a refinish, the parts are original and it's fairly light," James tells us. "The bridge pickup died while I was touring Scandinavia and I finished the tour on the neck pickup. Most of what I play is twangy rockabilly and blues, and I like a bright and clean sound. The wiring has been updated, so I use the middle position if I'm playing T-Bone Walker-type stuff, but I'm usually on the bridge pickup and I never use the neck on its own."

Like 50s Les Pauls, there is no definitive look for Blackguards – much depends on environmental factors and amount of playwear

BODY BUILDING

Body construction evolved throughout the vintage era. To get the neck pickup wires to the controls, Fender's first method was drilling a hole from the neck pocket straight through to the bridge pickup cavity. The radio repair guy in Leo Fender must have baulked at having to remove the strings and bridge for maintenance.

Towards the end of the Broadcaster run, Fender began making a one-inch 'doughnut rout' halfway between the two pickup cavities. One hole was then drilled from the neck

2. Arguably the greatest Tele player of all, Danny Gatton puts a beer bottle to alternative use while performing with Robert Gordon at The Ritz, New York, in 1981



1954 FENDER TELECASTER

"1954 was right at the transition where they were going to the 'Whiteguard' models," says Steve Hove of ATB of this beautiful late-period Blackguard. "But the '54 doesn't have that kind of wheatey, yellowy sort of finish [of the earlier Broadcasters]. There are a few other details that had evolved in terms of the nerdy elements, so things like Phillips versus flathead screws, plus the earlier Broadcasters didn't have a channel rout [a wiring pathway to the control cavity] in between the two pickups. That was first introduced as a doughnut rout and then the channel that the '54 would have. The neck profiles – from memory – are fairly similar, not too chunky – a soft V-shaped neck profile but very playable. The one that we've got, the very late Blackguard model, has got transitional elements. It's not like a '52 Telecaster or a Nocaster; it's in a slightly different place from a collector's point of view." [JD]

pocket to the doughnut, and a diagonal hole was drilled from the doughnut to the control cavity. By this time, Fender was also cutting a notch between the neck pocket and neck pickup rout.

Fender eventually settled on a diagonally routed channel connected to the neck pickup and control cavities by drilled holes. This lasted until 1968 when the company began drilling the wire channel from the corner of the neck pocket through to the control cavity – catching the treble side of the neck pickup cavity along the way.

Fender routing templates were pinned onto body blanks and the holes were plugged with dowels prior to finishing. These plugs were on the rear centre line and started out with a 3/16-inch diameter before reducing to 1/8-inch in 1953. Fender also struggled with through-body

stringing, and it took a while to get ferrule holes lined up and evenly spaced.

There was considerable weight variation, and fully assembled Blackguards range from just over 6lb through to 9lb. Finding reasonably light ash in sufficient quantities became an issue during the late 1960s, and Fender tried removing wood under the pickguard area for weight relief. Guitars with these chambered bodies became known as 'Smugglers' Teles'.

IMMORTAL COILS

The bridge pickup was basically a Fender lap steel pickup with a three-screw bottom 'flat' and an inductance plate to increase output. Early Blackguard bridge pickups read between 6kohms and 9k, but higher values do not indicate overwinding. Fender transitioned from 43 AWG plain

PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



1955 FENDER TELECASTER

“The most significant change for the 1955 Telecaster was simply the colour of the pickguard,” says Steve Hove of ATB, “which is relatively small change, but it does affect how collectible it is and its value – but, sonically, there’s not too much difference between

a '54 and a '55. Neck profiles might vary a little, but they’re quite similar. The Tele was obviously available in a blonde finish, but in the mid-to-late 50s it became a white blonde [tint], rather than the wheaty, yellowy blonde that we see on earlier models.” [JD]

enamel wire to thicker 42 AWG during 1951, and thinner wire offers higher resistance for the same number of turns.

Flat-pole Alnico III magnetic slugs were used until Fender changed to Alnico V in 1955. Shortly afterwards, the slugs became staggered, bringing Tele bridge pickups in line with Stratocaster pickups. White parcel string was wrapped around the exposed coils for protection, which turned black in the potting wax.

Unlike the bridge pickups, the neck pickups remained largely unchanged. Plain enamel 43 AWG was the magnet wire of choice along with non-staggered Alnico V slugs. Lacquer was used for

The Esquire's wiring had a certain logic, providing owners with the potential for three sounds from a single-pickup guitar

potting, rather than wax, and a chrome-plated brass cover protected the coil.

A significant change occurred around 1965 when Fender ceased the practice of hand-guiding magnet wire and fully mechanised the process. This coincided with the appearance of grey bottoms, and during the late 1960s Fender transitioned from wax to lacquer for potting coils, which solidified them and changed the tone.

CONTROL TWEAKS

Wiring Esquires with a preset treble-roll off in one position, a tone control connected in the middle position, and no tone control in the back position had a certain logic. It provided owners with the potential for three sounds from a single-pickup guitar, although most found the pseudo 'bass' setting excessively dark.

Leo Fender clearly thought otherwise because he retained the treble roll-off with dual-pickup models. At first, the settings were neck pickup with treble cut, then neck and bridge pickups with no tone control. There was a volume control, but the second knob blended the

bridge and neck pickups in the back position. "My '52 has the blend knob and it's a super-cool thing to [use]," Eddie says. "You can just add in a bit of neck pickup to soften the sound. Having the bass setting is fun, but it's too dark, even for jazz solos."

Fender introduced a second wiring scheme in 1952 with a conventional tone control that worked on both pickups. But the 'bass' setting was retained, and getting both pickups working together meant finding the switch's in-between position.

Despite widespread unpopularity, this wiring lasted until around 1968. CBS's management made one of its rare popular decisions and standardised the factory wiring to neck/both/bridge with master volume and tone controls. Unfortunately, they simultaneously changed to bright-sounding 1mega-ohm pots with a treble bleed capacitor on the volume control. James has reservations: "I have a rosewood-board '69, which I don't think is very good. The neck feels very nice – it's actually thicker than my Blackguard – but I'd describe it as a harsh and shrill-sounding guitar."



BILL FRISELL ON TELECASTERS

"My first guitar I ever got was in the summer of '65 – a Fender Mustang – but soon after that I went into the pawn shop and saw a late-50s Esquire that was \$75. I thought, 'Oh, that looks cool, I'll get that.' With the Telecaster, it's like, they got it just right at the beginning, y'know? Everything about it is so simple. Everything you need is right there. I have a number of Teles now, and some of them have different pickups or whatever. But I just have an instinct for all of them. I know where the volume knob is, where the pickup switch is – I don't have to reprogram my brain if I switch between them.

"Some of my guitars are just straight Telecasters, but the design is so easy to mess with. With my main instrument, it's basically a Telecaster, but it comes from a bunch of different models, all put together by JW Black, who was one of the first guys that worked at the Fender Custom Shop. So he's serious about Telecasters, knows them inside out and restores old ones. We have a sort of a dangerous relationship because he'll always get some idea, like, 'Oh my God, what if we

put this pickup in this guitar...?' So my main Telecaster is a shorter Gibson scale and the neck pickup is made by TK Smith – I guess he was inspired by those old Bigsby pickups. It's painted by my friend Terry Turrell, and the bridge pickup is a Seymour Duncan, a Little '59 or something. That Telecaster was the only guitar I used on my new album, *In My Dreams*.

"I have to say, I love playing archtops. Like, I have a Collings I-30 that I love. But it's harder to travel with those. I don't have a crew and roadies, or a truck with 50 guitars. When I travel, I carry one guitar and I end up checking it in under the plane. With a Telecaster, you can pretty much just throw it down there in the hold and it'll survive somehow. And even if it doesn't survive, you can just get a screwdriver and screw it back together. So there's this practical thing about the Telecaster for travelling. I'd love to go out with a Gibson L-5 or something, but you just know it would be destroyed in a matter of minutes by the airlines!" [HY]

BLONDE ON BLONDES

Like 50s Les Pauls, there is no definitive look for Blackguards and much depends on environmental factors and how hard they have been played. Some of their finishes have a dirty and brownish look that is commonly referred to as 'butterscotch'; others are more of a yellowish cream, and there are all shades in between.

An absence of tan lines under the pickguard on early guitars suggests that Fender sprayed translucent colour coats but little or no clear lacquer over the top. The amount of visible grain varied, and the blonde was generally applied more thickly around the edges to disguise body joints.

During 1954, Fender introduced the Stratocaster and Forest White was recruited to run the Fender plant and oversee an increase in production. Big changes were made to the Telecaster, too, with a modernised facelift bringing an end to the Blackguard era. With a white blonde finish and a single-ply white plastic pickguard, Esquires and Telecasters from this era became known as 'Whiteguards'. Again, Fender sprayed the translucent coats heavier on the sides and edges to create a subtle white



1959 FENDER ESQUIRE

“There are a lot of players who just love the single-pickup thing and the simplicity of it – and the Esquire obviously sits in that bracket,” says Steve Hove of ATB. “I mean, they’re pretty versatile things. Even without the neck pickup you can get lots of different sounds out of them. A lot of people think the absence of a neck pickup has an impact on the way that the string

oscillates and, ultimately, the sound that you get out of them. So they sort of do their own thing away from the Tele. The '59 neck profiles are pretty skinny – it’s right on the sort of transition into rosewood fingerboards and they generally have quite slim profiles. So it’s got a very different feel to the 1955 model or the Broadcasters, for example.”

'burst. Not all Whiteguards were blonde, and starting in 1955 Fender would occasionally spray Telecasters sunburst.

HARDWARE-ING

Early guitars feature flat-head screws throughout – including the truss rod adjuster. Fender began a slow transition to crosshead screws during 1951, and by 1952 it was common to see a mixture of both as the company used up its remaining stock. The transition was complete by the end of 1953.

Fender fitted Kluson tuners from the 1940s until the late 1960s. Those used up to 1951 had 'Patent Applied For' stamps on the undersides and the closed shell cover. The following version lost

Roger Rossmisl and Phil Kubicki devised a semi-hollow bodied Telecaster to use up heavier ash and mahogany blanks

the cover stamp and the single-line Kluson Deluxe lettering, and they were used up to 1952.

Kluson then changed to an open shell cover, with the gear shaft protruding from one side, and the Kluson Deluxe stamp was reintroduced in 1956. A patent number stamp began appearing in 1958 and, starting in mid-1964, the Kluson Deluxe lettering appeared in two lines, rather than one. Fender stopped using Kluson tuners during 1967 and began having its own 'F'-stamped tuners manufactured by Race & Olmsted using machinery purchased by Fender.

Until mid-1954, 'Fender' was stamped on each bridge plate with a serial number. That wasn't an option for Stratocasters, however, so serial numbers were stamped on the spring covers instead. Eventually, somebody realised that stamping neckplates would resolve the problem for every Fender instrument.

The only significant change Fender made to the chrome-plated cold rolled steel Telecaster bridge occurred between 1958 and '59 when Fender abandoned through-body stringing. Instead, strings were threaded through holes drilled into the

bridge's rear lip, adjacent to the intonation screws.

Knobs went through several changes, with variations in the knurl, the domed top and the diameter of the flat spot in the centre. These changes were mostly manufacturing inconsistencies, but things settled in 1957 when Tele knobs were changed from milled brass to moulded zamak with flat tops.

The earliest saddles were cut from 5/16-inch steel rod with the bottoms ground flat, but Fender changed to brass around the autumn of 1950. In 1954, Fender reverted to steel saddles, with a 1/4-inch diameter, and they lasted until 1958 when threaded steel saddles appeared. Opinions differ regarding their impact on tone.

"A '63 was my main guitar before I bought my Blackguard," James Oliver recalls. "I think its steel saddles sound different from my '54's brass saddles, but on gigs I barely notice."

"To my ears, saddle material does have an influence and brass has a really nice smooth sound," Eddie Tatton observes. "I also have a '55 with a flat-pole Blackguard-style pickup and steel saddles, rather than brass. It sounds thinner than my '52, but it has more top-end."

In 1968, smooth saddles with string grooves appeared. They're often assumed to be steel, but since they're non-magnetic, they're more likely plated zamak.

LOOKING ROSEY

The first significant change in the way Telecaster and Esquire necks were constructed occurred in 1959 when they acquired rosewood fretboards. The necks lost their 'skunk stripes' because truss rods were installed from the top, rather than the back – and Eddie is a fan of the era: "My 1960 is amazing and sounds more like a classic Telecaster than my Blackguard," he contends. "With Blackguards, there's something going on that's just otherworldly, but the 1960 sounds a bit fuller and the top-end is more prominent. It's not as easy on the ear as the '52, but the '60 cuts through very well and it's nicely balanced with a non-muddy neck pickup. It's basically the Robben Ford sound."

In 1962, the fretboards changed from a thick slab to a thin veneer, but maple fretboards remained an option and were applied in the same way as rosewood. "My maple-cap '66 Tele sounds a lot twangier than my Blackguard,



GEAR THAT GOES WITH TELES

The Telecaster has such a distinctive voice that it's no surprise that certain amps, overdrives and effects really seem to click with it. In fact, some bits of gear were designed specifically with Teles in mind (though they work great with other things, too), such as Analog Man's sought-after King Of Tone overdrive, designed by tone maven Mike Piera for Tele-wielder Jim Weider, who joined The Band as Robbie Robertson's replacement. Weider had been using a TS808 Tube Screamer but disliked how it shelved off too much low-end. Piera designed him a new two-channel drive, based in part on an 18-volt Marshall Bluesbreaker overdrive, that played nicely with Teles, sounding natural and amp-like.

The many versions of the KoT can be pricey on the used market (from around £400 to over a grand), and there's a multi-year waiting list for new ones. If you don't fancy that, you can get the tonal essence of Piera's masterpiece in the single-channel Duke Of Tone pedal built in collaboration with MXR for £184, though it often streets cheaper. Also worth a look is

Free The Tone's RJ-1V 'Red Jasper' low-gain overdrive (around £259), designed to be a good organic-sounding match with Teles.

As far as amps go, it's hard to beat a black-panel Fender Deluxe Reverb – tremolo and reverb being ideal companions for any Tele – and the current '65 reissue can be had for £1,699 from mainstream stores. If classic rock is more your thing, the bright voice of the Tele also makes a juicy match with lower-wattage, vintage-voiced Marshalls that are easy to push into natural break-up – the company's Studio JTM ST20H head (£899) really impressed us with its swampy, 60s tones that should balance nicely with the cut of a Tele.

Speaking of tremolo and reverb, while there are abundant all-in-one-pedal examples, notably the Strymon Flint (£329), real springs can't be beat – unleash your Tele's wild side with the Third Man Hardware x Anasounds La Grotte spring reverb pedal (£350). We've never heard such stormy, visceral reverb sounds, so if you like your Tele tones raw and Link Wray-approved, it's well worth trying out. [JD]



1968 TELECASTER THINLINE

"Thinlines sit in their own bracket, in terms of Telecasters," Steve Hove of ATB says. "Obviously, you've got the semi-hollow body construction and that has its own impact on the sound when it's plugged in. There's a different aesthetic here – the Thinline marks a period of experimentation for Fender with the Tele Deluxes and Customs slightly later on. It was Fender branching out, increasing

their product range, and trying to put a new kind of spin on the Telecaster, which wasn't at its most popular during the 60s because of the prevalence of the Strat. This is the Type 1 [Thinline Tele] design, which transitioned to the Type 2 [with Dual Wide Range humbuckers] in 1972. We have examples with both ash and mahogany body construction." [JD]

and it's really toppy," James assures us. "A few serious Tele players have told me they think mid-60s maple caps are the best Teles Fender ever made."

From 1956, Fender offered custom colours at a five per cent upcharge, but they are rare. Fender's first colour chart appeared in 1960, with 14 options, and it was revamped in 1963. Fashions shifted to natural wood during the late 60s, and by 1974 there were only six finish options.

From late 1956, Stratocaster bodies were made from alder, but Fender continued making ash Telecasters throughout the 50s and into the 70s. Alder

3. Rory's Gallagher's 1969 Telecaster, with a rosewood fretboard, was a much-used counterpart to his black Esquire, which was modded for two pickups. Both guitars saw heavy use in his hands, typically for slide work



"My early '69 Custom has a lovely sustain and resonance. It's great for jazz – the neck pickup sounds so solid" EDDIE TATTON

Tele bodies were also made, but many would have been concealed under sunburst and custom colour finishes.

"Alder-bodied Teles haven't got that classic Tele sound," Eddie believes. "They're a bit darker and more rounded, but they don't have the sweet top-end zing of the ash-bodied ones."

THE CUSTOMS

Telecasters and Esquires with front- and rear-bound alder bodies appeared in June 1959. They also featured the new three-ply green nitrate pickguard and subtly altered decal reading 'Custom Telecaster' in a slightly gothic font. Two 'Tuxedo' Customs models followed; Syd Barrett played a black one with white binding. There was also a white version with black binding and some ever rarer custom colour Customs were made.

"I've got an early '69 Custom with an alder body and a nice thick U-shaped maple neck," Eddie tells us. "It has an early poly finish and it's just glorious with a lovely sustain and resonance. Funnily enough, it's great for jazz because the neck pickup sounds so solid and it isn't too bright or bold."

FLOWER POWER

Fender's response to the hippy era was its 'Blue Flower' and 'Paisley' models. These were stock Telecasters with patterned paper covering the front and back of their alder bodies. The Blue Flower got metallic blue sides and the Paisley metallic pink, which lipped over the edges for a 'burst effect. Clear gloss was applied, along with clear pickguards for the patterns to show through. Made between 1967 and '69, the Blue Flower version is the rarest.

THINLINES

Roger Rossmeisl and Phil Kubicki worked on special projects for Fender and devised a semi-hollow bodied Telecaster to use up heavier ash and mahogany blanks. The Telecaster Thinline appeared in 1968, with a specially designed pickguard, slanted controls and a single f-hole. Unlike George Harrison's solid rosewood Tele, the production versions of these were constructed much like Thinlines, with a rosewood sandwich body and a thin maple filling.

WIDE RANGERS

CBS commissioned Seth Lover, the man behind Gibson's iconic Patent Applied For pickup, to design a humbucking pickup.

His 'Wide Range' humbucker featured CuNiFe magnets with offset pole screws and first appeared in the double-humbucker version of the Thinline Tele in 1971, featuring in the company's catalogue in 1972, its first full year of production. Also in 1972, Fender acknowledged the popular preference for humbuckers in the neck position and introduced a redesigned Telecaster Custom with a Wide Range humbucker and a traditional bridge pickup. A Telecaster Deluxe with two humbuckers, a Stratocaster-style headstock and a hardtail bridge followed in 1973. These were the final Telecaster variants of the vintage era and, since James Oliver owns both, we'll leave the last word to him.

"I bought my '74 Tele Deluxe because of Mick Green from The Pirates. I love it because the pickups sound so clear and bright. Mick actually played a Custom, so I got a '76, but I don't like the bridge pickup and the instability of the three-screw neck attachment drives me nuts." **G**

With thanks to ATB Guitars, James Oliver (www.jamesoliverband.co.uk) and Eddie Tatton (Instagram @eddiatattonguitarstuff)



1974 TELECASTER CUSTOM

"This is a really good example and it has a nice light weight," says Steve of the Tele model made famous by Keith Richards. "With the 70s Teles, the weights can be a big thing in terms of value and desirability because some of them can weigh an absolute ton. The Wide Range pickup at the neck gives a really interesting sound. It has quite a hi-fi kind of sound quality and it

was quite a departure from anything Fender made up until that point. They found favour with a lot of the shoegaze bands back in the day, and they're great pickups. The string-to-string definition is really good, and that was part of the design; having individual magnets for each of the strings aided that string separation, so you get a lot of clarity." [JD]



LOU REED'S CIRCA 1992 'GOLDIE' TELECASTER

Lou Reed and Danny Gatton aren't two names you see mentioned in the same breath as guitarists too often. But they are united in this beautiful Tele built in Fender's Custom Shop in the early 90s. Clad in what Fender dubbed Frost Gold, the instrument is in fact a Gatton signature model – minus the twin-rail Barden pickups the Maryland virtuoso was known for using. Reed, who doesn't strike one as a natural Gatton fan, nonetheless enthused about the instrument in a 1993 *New York Times* interview, in which he described it as “a really great guitar” (he'd just bought it, along with a blonde-finish Gatton

Telecaster) and he liked it enough to use it for live performances on his Ecstasy World Tour from March to November 2000.

Dubbed 'Goldie', the guitar is accompanied by a hardshell case inscribed with the following words in silver pen: “Gatton Tele Gold / Lou Reed DG0036” and “Lou Reed / Locker #15”, giving (one presumes) his techs an easy time when storing and retrieving the guitar. This Tele was, until it went under the hammer at Christie's, part of the late Jim Irsay's mega-collection of historic instruments. It fetched \$330,200 when it was sold in New York in March. [JD]

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THINLINE TONIC

David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars describes how, during 1967, Fender got busy developing an alternative to heavy ash Telecaster bodies

Words Huw Price

Both of these guitars were 1967 prototypes for a lighter version of the Telecaster that became the Thinline. The spruce-fronted model doesn't have f-holes, but it is fully hollow, except for a block in the area where the bridge mounts, and it barely weighs 3lb. It has three-ply binding on the front and single ply on the back, so it's a little fancier than a regular Telecaster Custom. The spruce doesn't have eight grain lines per inch or anything like that, but it's not bad. There's some lacquer checking but no cracks, and the zebra wood back looks fantastic.

"The string ferrules are sunk into the body, and by 1967 they weren't like that on production Telecasters. There's also a little metal plate at the end of the heel where they mounted the strap button; the sides are so thin that the button would have pulled straight off the guitar if it was in its usual position. The sides are stained

dark brown, so I can't tell what they're made from, but the thinness explains why there's no jack plate or cup, and the jack socket is fixed through a drilled hole.

"The maple-cap neck has a very standard C-shaped profile for the transitional logo period, and the control circuit is just regular Telecaster spec for the post-1966 era. There's no trace of wax potting, so it's possible the pickups were lacquer potted and they're extremely microphonic.

"It's a fancy guitar that was made to make an impression. I suspect Fender decided against building Thinlines with this specification because they would have been too expensive to manufacture. Instead, they went for ash and mahogany, and sometimes combinations of both.

"Despite appearances, I think the green prototype is far closer to what Fender was trying to achieve and

1. At this stage of the prototyping process the Thinline's controls retained a traditional Telecaster layout

2. With two f-holes, there was little room left for the controls – and only one appeared on the production model

it has a lot of interesting features.

The bridge and vibrato are from a Mustang, and they cut down a Telecaster bridge plate then elevated it on three rubber bushings. I can't imagine why they experimented with a decoupled pickup holder, but it actually plays really well and sounds exactly like a Thinline Telecaster.

"The neck is a Jazzmaster blank with crushed pearl inlays and a no-decal headstock face that's painted green to match the wildwood ash body. The sides are painted Sherwood Green and the fretboard is heavily lacquered. It has faded very slightly, but the colour remains strong.

"Despite appearances, I think the green prototype is far closer to what Fender was trying to achieve" DAVID DAVIDSON



"With two f-holes, I think they struggled with mounting the controls, and there's a huge three-way toggle switch – I've never seen one on any other guitar, but it's good quality. The strings load through the body and it has a standard jack cup. I think they just decided to make this prototype with whatever parts they had laying about the shop.

"Apparently, Fender had to source the coloured wildwoods overseas because the environmental protection agency prohibited injecting dyes into living trees. This could be an old wives' tale, but I'm told the wood came from Sweden or Switzerland. This guitar is also light, but the additional components and the fact that it's not spruce make it heavier than the other one. I can't say I find it attractive, but I do find it very cool.

"Roger Rossmeisl had been put in charge of making a lightweight Telecaster and he originally planned to make a very small archtop, but



3. A conventional appearance disguises the semi-solid body, and the spruce top with multi-ply binding was abandoned

the cost factors would have been too great. Phil Kubicki [was made assistant to Rossmeisl in the R&D department] at Fender in [the late 60s], and I think both these guitars reek of his work. I've owned quite a few guitars made by Phil and I can recognise the patterns. The green one may not have been the final Thinline prototype, but I can guarantee it was close to the end of the process.

"I'm sure when they made the body, they routed out the cavity and glued the back on last. When we had to pull the pots out to verify the dates, it took way over an hour because everything had to exit through the bridge pickup hole. Both read as the eighth week of 1966, which is pretty common because Fender bought a huge number of pots that were made that week and used them for years afterwards.

"Fender would often hang onto prototypes for a very long time, and a lot of them ended up getting dumped onto the market in the late 70s and early 80s. That's when they started appearing in books, but I've never seen any others like these two." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563



4. Although this prototype looks fairly outlandish, David feels that it's actually closest to the Thinline's finished version



TELE MODS

Players were already modifying their Telecasters in the 1950s, and a thriving aftermarket parts industry provides countless ways to enhance playability, reliability and tone

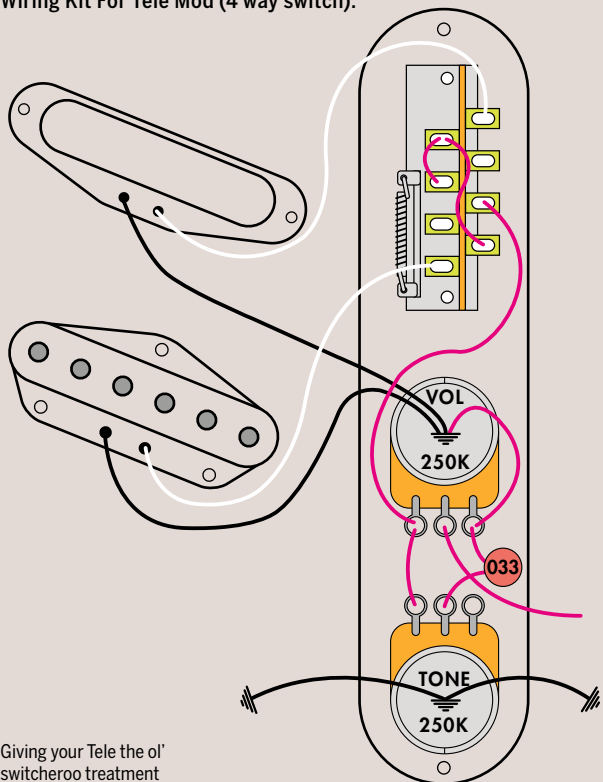
Words Huw Price

So long as you can overlook his reluctance to install truss rods, a stubborn attachment to two self-sabotaging wiring schemes, plectrum obstructing bridges, spiky saddle screws and a superfluous bridge cover, Leo Fender famously got everything right the first time round. With our tongues firmly pressed against our cheeks, however, we readily acknowledge that Leo nailed all the important bits.

Refinements followed over the years and, in addition to being the quintessential country guitar, the Telecaster has been the instrument of choice for blue-collar stadium rockers, punks, contemporary jazzers, bluesmen and even metal shredders. The Telecaster is all things to all guitarists, and of all the classic guitar models, it's arguably the best platform for modifications.

1 SWITCH SOLUTIONS

There are a few different ways to combine two pickups, and installing a four-way or five-way switch makes it easy to access them all. The stock middle setting puts the pickups in parallel, but the extra option on a four-way switch can combine them in series, like humbucker coils, for a beefier and louder tone. A five-way switch makes an out-of-phase setting possible, too. Rather than change the stock switch, you can instead change one or both of the stock potentiometers to push/pull or push/pull switch pots to achieve the same results. Search online for wiring diagrams, like the one below, adapted from Allparts' Wiring Kit For Tele Mod (4 way switch).



Giving your Tele the ol' switcheroo treatment adds to its tonal range

2 VINTAGE/MODERN WIRING

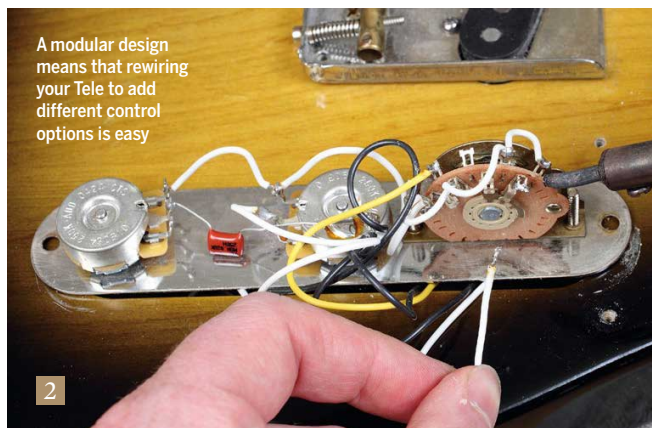
Rewiring the controls for neck/both/bridge switching with master volume and tone controls was probably the earliest Telecaster modification. Broadcaster, Nocaster and early Telecaster controls were configured for 'neck with a preset treble roll-off' and 'both pickups individually with no tone control'. The second knob was wired as a 'blend' control for the neck and bridge when the switch was in the back position.

The second version, which lasted until 1968, retains the muffled neck setting with both pickups active in the middle position, and bridge only in the rear position. There is renewed interest in the earlier circuits, and wiring schematics are available online if you fancy trying them. Rather than rewire your existing controls, order up a second control plate and the requisite

parts, or buy a pre-assembled 'plate so you can exchange circuits depending on your mood. Swapping controls is quick and easy thanks to the Tele's modular design.

3 ELDRÉD'S ESQUIRE

With stock Esquire wiring, Fender attempted to give owners three distinct tones from a single-pickup guitar. The neck position had a preset treble roll-off, the middle connected the pickup to the tone control, and in the back setting the tone control was out of circuit for that wide open Esquire sprang. The front position was always way too dull-sounding, so Fender Custom Shop employee Mike Eldred devised a wiring mod to give this position a thicker cocked-wah P-90-ish tone, along with improved cut-through. Tele players can get that biting Esquire tone by installing a no-load tone potentiometer.



A modular design means that rewiring your Tele to add different control options is easy

4 GET ON TOP

Jimmy Page and Jim Campilongo fans might consider trying a 'top loader' bridge. Between 1958 and 1959 Fender used bridges with six holes drilled adjacent to the intonation screws to anchor the strings. This was a simpler and cheaper alternative to making bodies with holes and ferrules for through-body stringing. Some equate top-loader Teles with twangier tone and a slinkier feel, and it's easy enough to drill six holes in the back of your bridge if you want to try this. You can also experiment with top-loading the wound strings and loading the plain strings through the body – or vice versa.



5 TAKING CONTROL

The Fender company was fairly responsive to player input during the early days, and the Stratocaster's control layout was clearly an attempt at improved ergonomics over the Telecaster. Fortunately, Tele players are no longer stuck with the classic configuration. Rockinger offers a control plate with the volume knob shifted towards the tone control so it's out of the way of the switch. You can also buy 'plates with an angled slot to make pickup switching a bit smoother.

Blank 'plates are available for you to drill your own holes with the knob positions and spacing you prefer, and maybe a three-way toggle switch. A more traditional mod involves flipping the stock 'plate to bring the controls within easier reach for Bill Kirchen-style swell trickery – but don't forget to reverse the control pots and flip the switch over, too.

6 SOLID SOCKETS

Fender's earliest jack cups were individually milled and friction-fitted into bodies, but they must have been costly to make. A cheaper pressed cup was introduced with a sort of 'butterfly' clip that opened out as the jack socket nut was tightened to grip the sides. This idea turned out to be the worst of both worlds because they're tough to remove when you need to get them out and prone to falling out when you need them to stay put.

Plenty of modern Telecasters still have them and they can be a liability. The Retrofit Jackplate offers a permanent solution because two diagonal countersunk screws fix it onto the body,

and jack sockets screw straight into the cup. Retrofitting one requires no soldering; all you need is a screwdriver and you can choose between aluminium, chrome, nickel, black and gold. It's also a fully reversible mod.

7 INTONATION ENHANCEMENT

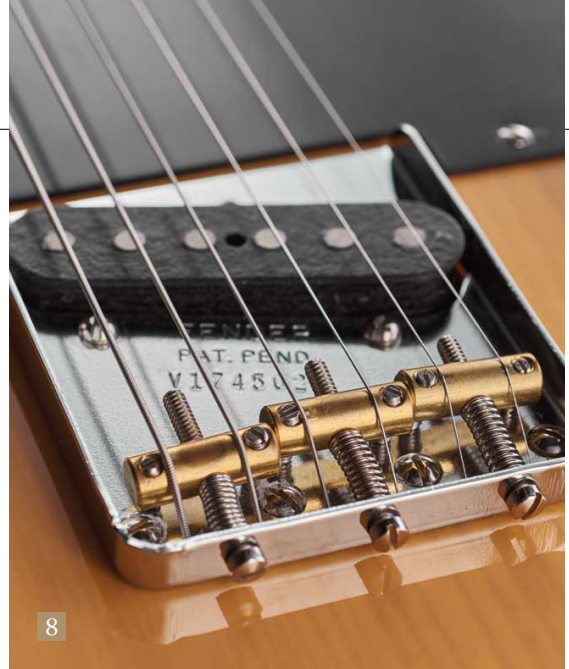
Although Tele purists might insist that three saddles are the best choice for tone, it's harder to make the case when it comes to intonation. Pragmatic players may opt for a six-saddle bridge conversion, but there are options if you prefer the look and sound of three saddles.

Various companies offer slanted saddles that may look wonky but can improve intonation. For finer control, check out the swivel saddles offered by Mastery and Wilkinson. If you prefer the square saddle look, staggered notched saddles from Wilkinson, Gotoh, Glendale, Rutters and others can provide a workable compromise.

8 SADDLE UP

Making a Telecaster sound good unplugged can improve its plugged-in tone, too, and saddles can play a crucial part in that. Vintage Telecaster variants were all fitted with a surprisingly wide variety of saddles over the decades, in a variety of materials and sizes. You could try Broadcaster spec 5/16-inch diameter steel or brass, or the later 1/4-inch brass and steel saddles.

Modern options include twangy but mellow aluminium and brighter-sounding titanium. You may also consider whether notches might help to stabilise spacing



8. Saddles play an important role in fine tuning Tele tone. A set of brass saddles, for instance, can thicken and darken your sound. As ever, experimentation is a vital key

9. Bridge plates are another variable to consider when upgrading your Tele. There are options available, including the chopped version shown here

10. A Bigsby on a Tele is a 'Marmite' option – some players love it, while others think it's, quite simply put, a bridge too far

12. Possibly the most invasive mod you can do to a Tele, a B-Bender requires some serious carpentry. Be afraid!

and prevent string slide. There are some very high-quality but expensive options out there, but you can also find saddle sets for around £15 on eBay.

If you're thinking of trying a different type of saddle, buying one of these cheap sets will allow you to see if you like the tone change before shelling out for a fancier version. Brass tends to sound thicker and darker, while steel is zingier and more biting. Some players enjoy a mixture of both to bolster the plain strings while keeping the low strings twangy and snappy.

9 BETTER BRIDGES

Players have often complained about the raised sides of vintage-style bridges obstructing their picking, so bridges with scooped sides – or no sides at all – offer potential solutions. Vintage-spec bridges are chrome-plated steel, but brass and aluminium can provide different tone, twang and sustain characteristics. Chopped bridges can be mounted using the regular screw spacing and they allow the bridge pickup to be mounted directly onto the body. This may reduce squeal if rubber screw spacers and placing dampening foam under the induction plate have failed to cure the problem.

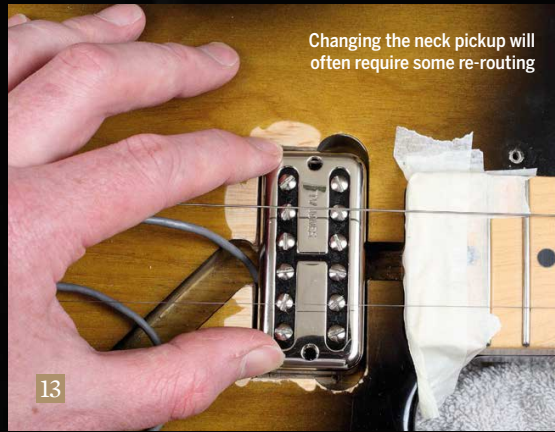
10 BIGSBY OPTIONS

Leo Fender and Paul Bigsby were well acquainted, and by 1953 Bigsby had developed a vibrato specifically for Telecasters. The B16 kit replaces the stock bridge entirely and includes a 3/16-inch aluminium shim for the neck pocket to compensate for the raised bridge pickup. The B16 is still available, along with Bigsby's B5 kit, which features a front roller, a redesigned bridge plate and a six-saddle rocking bridge. Fitting a B5 requires drilling holes for the bridge posts, but if you want to avoid extra holes, check out the fully reversible Vibramate V5-TEV Stage II B5 Bigsby mounting system.





12

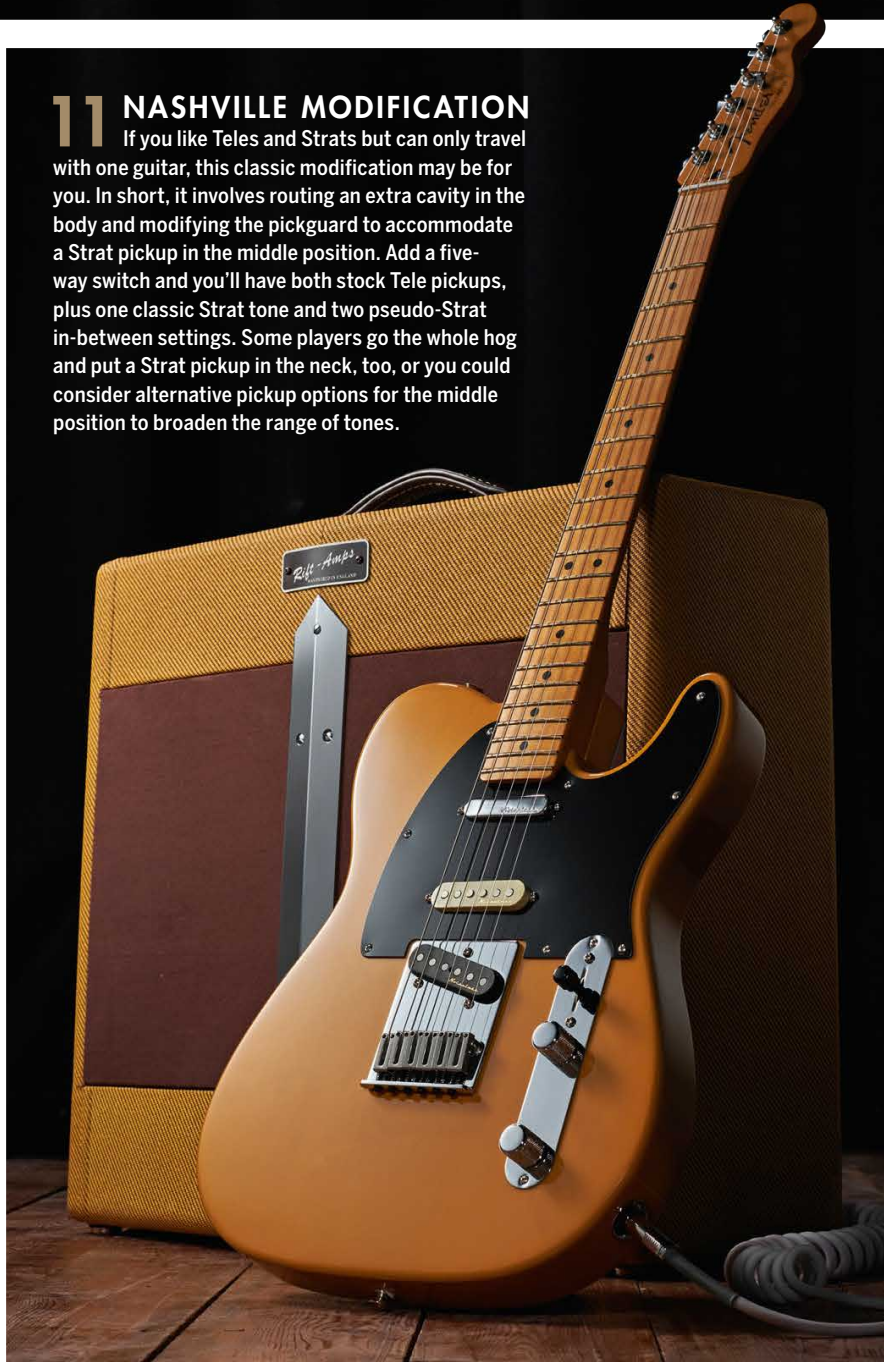


13

Changing the neck pickup will often require some re-routing

11 NASHVILLE MODIFICATION

If you like Teles and Strats but can only travel with one guitar, this classic modification may be for you. In short, it involves routing an extra cavity in the body and modifying the pickguard to accommodate a Strat pickup in the middle position. Add a five-way switch and you'll have both stock Tele pickups, plus one classic Strat tone and two pseudo-Strat in-between settings. Some players go the whole hog and put a Strat pickup in the neck, too, or you could consider alternative pickup options for the middle position to broaden the range of tones.



12 STRING BENDERS

Pedal steel licks and Telecasters are a perfect match, but they can be tough on the fingers. Country rock pioneer Clarence White collaborated with his Byrds bandmate Gene Parsons to create the Parsons/White string bender. Requiring extensive body routing to install it, this mechanical device had a strap button at the neck end and was operated by pulling the neck down to raise the pitch of the B string by a tone.


The current Parsons Green system is lighter and less cumbersome. Neither the Hipshot String Bending System, which can be operated via the rear strap button or by palm levers, nor the Peters and Certano, which has individual palm benders operating on the G and B strings individually, require routing for installation.

13 NECK PICKUPS

Players began replacing Telecaster neck pickups during the 1950s, and the classic choice remains a Gibson-style humbucker. If you do this and find the humbucker sounds too dark, try installing a 500k volume pot and then solder a 470k resistor between the bridge pickup's hot connection on the switch and ground.

While you're at it, try swapping the tone pot wire from the outer to the middle tag of the volume pot. This mimics Gibson's 50s wiring and you might be able to get by without a treble bleed capacitor. So long as you're comfortable with having a routed body, the sky's the limit. P-90, Gold Foil, Charlie Christian, Strat, Firebird and Filter'Tron pickups have all proved popular, but there are also drop-in options that don't require routing.

14 BRIDGE PICKUPS

Whether you're chasing more authentic vintage tones or looking for something entirely different, there's a vast range of aftermarket bridge pickups to choose from. Oil City's Wapping Wharf is a particularly interesting vintage option with a tapped coil that delivers beefy early 50s tones and twangy mid-50s tones from a single pickup. For quieter, more hi-fi tones, check out Danny Gatton's preferred Joe Barden pickups. Humbucker fans might enjoy DiMarzio's Chopper T or Seymour Duncan's Little '59, and if you're prepared to rout the body and buy a different bridge, standard humbuckers, P-90s and Filter'Trons can also be installed. 

GOLD RUSH

Fender 75th Anniversary American Ultra II Telecaster £2,899

Words David Mead Photography Matt Lincoln Contact Fender Musical Instruments EMEA Phone 01342 331700 Web www.fender.com

You have to sympathise with the folk at Fender in their attempts to add whistles and bells to a guitar design that many regard as having been practically perfect when it leapt off the drawing board in Fullerton, California, 75 years ago. But it has to be said that with this 75th Anniversary American Ultra II Telecaster, virtually everything has been tweaked or upgraded in the name of versatility and enhanced tonal capacity. Even the well-established body shape has now been graced with comfort contours and a chamfered heel. The spec is as impressive as the eye-catching urethane Liquid Gold metallic finish, as you'll see from a tip-to-toe rundown of this vibrant new model.

Beginning at the headstock end, we find a set of locking tuners, a Tusq nut and an ebony 'board – as opposed to the more regular maple or rosewood – which has a compound radius moving from 254mm to 355.6mm (10 to 14 inches).

The modern D-profiled maple neck is quarter-sawn and finished in satin urethane. Special “lap steel” inlays and 22 medium jumbo frets along with side-mounted Luminlay dots for low light navigation complete the picture.

The Ultra's body is select alder with a black single-ply anodised aluminium pickguard, but it's the pickups and switching system where things begin to get really interesting. The neck pickup is what Fender calls “75th Anniversary Ultra Noiseless” with a bladed Fastlane humbucker in the bridge.

There's a modern bridge plate loaded with six raw brass adjustable saddles and the usual through-body stringing, plus a control panel that

1. Six raw brass string saddles are ready and waiting for precise intonation duties on the bridge plate. Meanwhile, the Fastlane humbucker and S-1 switching system add an additional tonal array to the Tele's menu

2. A chamfered heel and additional depth to the cutaway both ensure that upper-fret access is not going to be a problem

3. A set of locking tuners sit atop the American Ultra II Tele's headstock. Note also the special 75th Anniversary decal

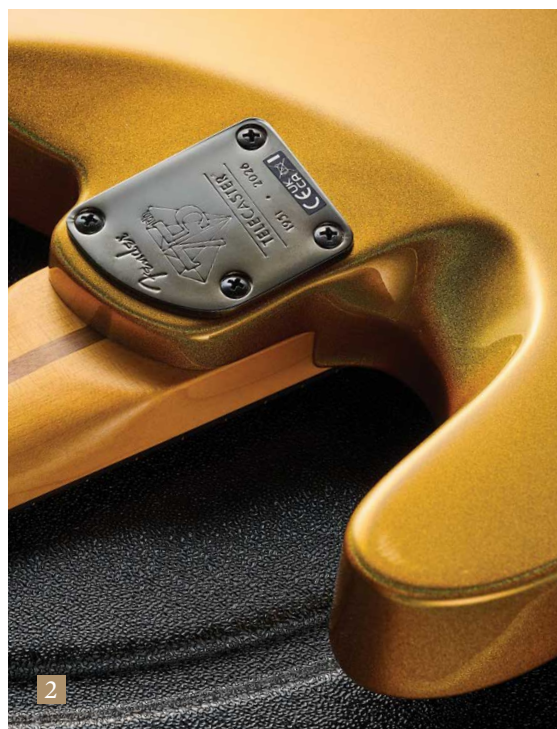
has the customary volume and tone array, with an angled pickup selector. But here's where the fun starts. Both the aforementioned controls have separate S-1 switching: the volume control places the pickups in series mode, as opposed to the standard parallel, and the tone control toggles series/parallel for the bridge humbucker. As you can imagine, this adds to the Tele's portfolio of sounds quite significantly, even with the blade switch's standard bridge/both/neck configuration.

Fender describes the Fastlane 'bucker as delivering “sweet crystalline cleans, snappy Tele twang and beefy growl, all without a hint of hum”. And, as for the neck pickup, that familiar mellow, almost Straty tone is, like its companion, totally noise-free. We put the Ultra through a handy Blackstar combo and can confirm that the new pickups and switching system means that the tones available are both plentiful and luxurious. **G**

The spec is as impressive as the eye-catching urethane metallic finish – virtually everything has been tweaked or upgraded



1



2



3

4. A quarter-sawn maple neck with a modern D profile sits beneath a compound radius'd ebony 'board with what Fender refer to as "custom lap steel inlays" in the usual positions

5. A single-ply black anodised aluminium pickguard plays host to a special 75th Anniversary Ultra Noiseless neck pickup

6. The Ultra's pickup switching is taken care of by a more modern angled blade switch offering the usual bridge/middle/neck options

HEAR IT HERE!

Watch the 75th Anniversary American Ultra II Telecaster in action as Richard Barrett puts the new model through its paces <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>







DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

To mark the company's diamond anniversary, Fender has released a slew of celebratory models. Here's a brace of polar opposite but equally alluring Telecasters

Words Neville Marten Photography Phil Barker



Fender 75th Anniversary Vintera Road Worn 1951 Telecaster & American Professional Classic Cabronita Telecaster £1,599 & £1,799

Contact Fender Musical Instruments EMEA Phone 01342 331700 Web www.fender.com

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

1 Who is TV Jones?
Jones gained his name working on Brian Setzer's vintage Gretsches. He soon became famous for making hand-crafted versions of Gretsch Filter'Tron pickups. Billy Gibbons, Joe Perry and Noel Gallagher all love his products.

2 What does Road Worn mean here?
This is the term Fender uses to differentiate Custom Shop Relic guitars from Mexican-built 'aged' instruments. Both can produce varying levels of authenticity.

3 What's better: a 7.25- or 9.5-inch fingerboard radius?
Neither is better. The original 7.25-inch (184mm) is a good all-rounder, great for playing barre chords. The later 9.5-inch (241mm) radius 'boards (especially with big frets) are seen as best for fast licks, big bends and vibrato.

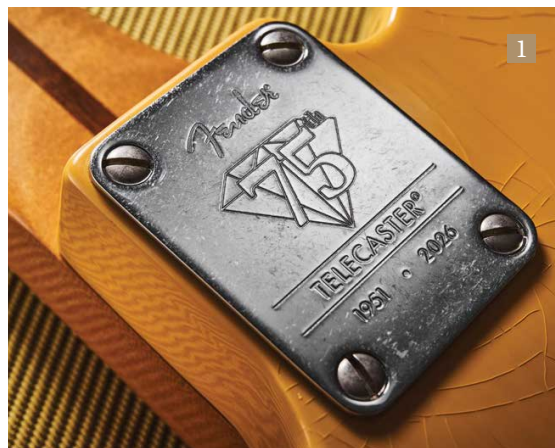
It seems almost inconceivable that a guitar we still view as cutting edge and modern first saw the light of day as far back as early 1951. To put that in historical context, six years ago in early 2020 Covid-19 was preparing to ravage the planet, whereas that self-same period prior to 1951 we had not yet emerged from World War II. That reveals just how advanced Leo Fender's thinking was, especially given that the guitars he saw around him were mostly large, old-fashioned, hollowbody jazz-style boxes.

1. Both our limited reissue Telecasters feature this celebratory 75th anniversary neckplate. You can also see the tweed case of the Road Worn butterscotch guitar peeking through underneath our shot

In its seven and a half decades, the original Tele has proved a brilliant workhorse that's found a home in virtually every musical genre. Yet it's also shown itself to be a superb platform on which to introduce special releases. Think of the Thinline Tele, Pink Paisley and Blue Flower models, as well as all-rosewood, humbucking, bound-bodied and so many equally enticing variations. Several of these have either remained in circulation, or seen limited-edition reissue success.

The instruments before us today traverse all of the Telecaster's glorious history: the 75th Anniversary Vintera Road Worn 1951 echoing the first 'Blackguard' instruments to roll off Fullerton's humble, hand-assembly production line; and the 75th Anniversary American Professional Classic Cabronita Tele sporting TV Jones Gretsch-style humbucking pickups, a belly cut, simplified controls and six-saddle bridge assembly.

Plucking the Cabronita from its impressive moulded flight case, we behold a beautiful thing indeed. Dressed in metallic Candy Apple Red, offset by a





This is about as classic a Telecaster as it gets. Nitrocellulose 'aged' butterscotch style finish, 'ashtray' bridge (its cover is in the case), chrome covered neck pickup, simple control and switch plate, and black plastic take on the original black bakelite/fibre pickguard



2



3

cut-down single-ply white version of the original Tele pickguard (with matching rear-mounted control cavity cover), those Filter'Tron-style pickups, and a set of attractive pearl-buttoned tuners on a tinted all-maple neck and fingerboard, it really is a thing to behold.

The guitar's alder body and maple neck are classic Tele fare, even though the latter's Modern C profile is pretty skinny and the fingerboard radius the more modern 241mm (9.5 inches). Its pickups, pearloid tuners, nickel/chrome brightware, and a finish of urethane – gloss for the body and satin on the neck

The Blackguard Vintera model brims with all those tones that have made it the stalwart of so many fabulous players

2. The recessed jack socket was one of Leo Fender's original design elements for his Telecaster. But its recessed nature means it's not the perfect fit for a few right-angled plugs

3. What a simple and elegant headstock this six-a-side design is. Certain players like Jerry Donahue, Jeff Beck and Danny Gatton realised that they could push the strings down behind the nut to create pedal steel-like bends

4. Check out that lacquer checking! From a metre or so away, it's very convincing. The recessed string ferrules mean that they bed down really hard to maximise sustain. Note the coloured ball-ends of the D'Addario 0.009s fitted to both guitars

– lend the instrument a definitely more 'today' vibe.

The switching is simple – possibly too simple as it involves just a single volume control but no tone. Hence you are always left with the pickups' tones wide open, when you may like to tame the top-end on rockier numbers where a bit of SG-like grunt might be welcome. Siting the switch Les Paul-style on the top shoulder and giving us that missing tone control would surely have been better?

The Road Worn, on the other hand, is the traditional, 'plain Jane' journeyman instrument adored by legends. Springsteen, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck, anyone? So what you see is what you get with this one. The expected ash body, whether it's two-piece or three, is almost impossible to tell, so perfectly matched and disguised it is beneath the butterscotch tinted and beautiful checked nitrocellulose lacquer. This is complemented by a similarly nitro-finished all-maple neck and fingerboard, a chunky 'U' shape

that's nicely aged in the familiar Road Worn fashion. Frets are 'tall narrow' style and the 'board the original 184mm (7.25-inch) radius. Tuners are six-a-side Kluson-alikes and truss adjustment is, as usual on vintage-style Fenders, via a cross-head bolt secreted at the body end of the neck. The pickguard is a plastic take on the original Bakelite/fibre one.

Pickups here are Fender Pure Vintage '51 Nocaster neck and bridge, the latter let into the bridge plate and offering three saddles, each carrying a twin set of strings anchored through the body onto rear-mounted ferrules. It's one of the simplest setups of any electric Fender, only the single-pickup Esquire trumping it in that regard.

Both instruments feature Fender's usual 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length, of course, plus we get genuine bone nuts and the company's exemplary zeal for fit and finish.

FEEL & SOUNDS

Grabbing the Road Worn first we find a chunky old baseball bat of a neck. While it does look scary when first gazing down at it on your lap, it's surprisingly comfy and not at all tiring to play, especially with the ultra-thin,



4



In the flesh this is one super-cool looking guitar. The TV Jones Filter'Tron humbuckers provide bright, sweet and musical tones and not the mush of some other pickups. But we do wish a shoulder-mounted toggle and the lacking tone control were there to add even more sonic versatility



5

Sonically, they're different beasts. The Blackguard model brims with all those tones that have made it the stalwart of so many fabulous players. You want twang? You've got it. Need sweet jazzy tones? No problem. Funky rhythm? Hell yeah! Dark, blues-rock leads? Just dial 'em in! You will need to be *au fait* with the guitar's controls, though, as they respond magnificently whether flipping between pickups or combinations thereof, or feathering the tone pot for warm neck-pickup jazz, throaty bridge-pickup roar or out-and-out banshee wail.

Although the Cabronita offers twin humbuckers in the form of TV Jones' remarkable Filter'Tron remakes, it's not the broody beast you might imagine. Instead, it's full of bright, musical sounds that would feel comfortable in so many musical settings. It's tricky to quantify these things, but while the sounds it emits are familiar and incredibly attractive, they're not pure Tele. Yet neither are they pure Gretsch. And definitely nothing like any Gibson we could mention. The big downside here is the lack of any tone modification. So while every clean, crunchy or dirty sound from neck, bridge or both pickups together is classy, distinctive and also great to play to, it would have been so nice just to back things off here and there.

VERDICT

There's no doubt that Fender has achieved exactly what it set out to do with these guitars.

satin-feel lacquer that apes the worn away look and feel of actual vintage guitars. Although you might presume it feels clunky and of its time, the small-radius fingerboard is definitely very comfortable and friendly to the rhythm hand than flatter 'boards, especially when playing barre chords where the first finger wraps over really nicely. Even big bends right at the top of the neck don't choke off here, reflecting the good setup.

The Cabronita couldn't be less rooted in the 50s. Its stated 'Modern C' neck feels very slender indeed, as far *this* way as the Road Worn is the other. Both

necks are sure to put certain players off, so perhaps Fender would have been better to meet somewhere in the middle. That said, give it a few minutes and it's certainly slick and quick. We didn't yet mention the guitar's 'secret weapon' 22nd fret located on a fingerboard overhang. While not something the average player will use every day, for that final full-tone bend to the octave E on the top string it's a godsend. The bigger frets, too, lend a distinctly different feel to that of the more vintage-flavoured Road Worn. And we love the body's belly cut, which, of course, Leo first used on his Stratocaster in 1954.

5. We love these pearl-buttoned and fully enclosed cast tuners (probably from Schaller in Germany). The warm tint of the satin urethane finish is in evidence here, too

6. These TV Jones Filter'Tron humbucking pickups not only look ultra smart, they also provide a range of tones (especially on a solidbody such as this one) that you won't hear on other guitars



6

THE RIVALS

Want a super-posh Tele but don't want to break the bank? Check out Squier's Limited Edition Classic Vibe '60s Custom Telecaster (£439) with gold parts, double-bound body and 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fingerboard. This is one mega-cool guitar!

Elsewhere, Eastman's FullerTone SC'52 (£799) is no slavish copy. With a Tonerider Gold Foil humbucker at the neck, a noise-cancelling T-style at the bridge and all roasted timbers, it's fabulous. One for the discerning player.

On these shores, Cream T's UK-made Astra (£1,799) is a T-style with a twist: you can swap its humbucking-sized pickups in seconds. You can choose the Cream T pickup set it comes with and build your collection from there.



7

One is the archetypal vintage workhorse, while the other – introduced as La Cabronita Especial by the Custom Shop in 2009 – aims to be a hot-rodded example that any custom builder might devise. They both look and sound fantastic, and let's remember these are limited editions for the 75th anniversary of this earth-shattering musical instrument. So it's perhaps

The Cabronita is full of bright, musical sounds that would feel comfortable in so many musical settings

churlish to score points against them based on what we'd want in everyday 'mainline' instruments.

However, were these indeed production models then we'd definitely suggest Fender met the skinny neck of the Cabronita and chunky bat of the Road Worn somewhere in the middle. We'd also advocate a tone control for the Cabronita, as this would make an already lovely guitar a great one. In fact, with a bigger neck, shoulder-mounted switch and tone control added, this reviewer's order would most certainly be going in today. **G**

7. The Candy Apple finish of the 75th Anniversary Cabronita is perfectly applied, and Fender also retains the walnut truss rod fillet here. There's no figuring to the maple neck, but the natural grain is still very pretty



FENDER 75TH ANNIVERSARY VINTERA ROAD WORN 1951 TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,599 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Ash
NECK: 1-piece tinted maple, 1951 'U' shape with walnut skunk stripe
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Integral maple with black marker dots
FRETS: 21, tall narrow
HARDWARE: Tele-style 'ashtray' bridge (cover in case) with brass barrel saddles, '75th Anniversary' neckplate, chrome control plate, knurled dome-style chrome volume and tone pots, rear string ferrules, single-ply black plastic pickguard
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Pure Vintage '51 single coil Tele (bridge), Pure Vintage '51 single coil Tele (neck), master volume, master tone, three-way pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7.39
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: In the standard Vintera II range there's the '50s Nocaster and '60s Telecaster (both £979), plus the Limited Edition Road Worn '60s Telecaster (£1,189)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Classic Butterscotch Blonde



9/10

PROS Reasonably priced and good take on Fender's original model; nicely aged; fabulous classic Tele tones

CONS Some will find the neck just that bit too big a handful, otherwise it does what it says on the tin



FENDER 75TH ANNIVERSARY AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL CLASSIC CABRONITA TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,799 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: 1-piece maple with walnut skunk stripe
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone /42.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Integral maple with black marker dots
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Cut-down hardtail bridge with 6x solid steel saddles, chrome neckplate with '75th Anniversary' model designation, knurled flat-top control knobs, rear string ferrules, single-ply white pickguard
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: TV Jones Filter' Tron Classic neck and bridge humbuckers, master volume, three-way pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The American Professional Classic Telecaster costs £1,509; a Limited Edition version in Mystic Ice Blue Metallic is £1,539
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Candy Apple Red (as reviewed), Ice Blue Metallic



9/10

PROS Fabulous-looking showstopper of a guitar; beautifully made with excellent-sounding TV Jones pickups and classy hardware (gorgeous tuners!)

CONS The relatively skinny neck won't please everyone; a shoulder-mounted selector switch and added tone control would increase usability and versatility

Bruce Watson

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Big Country guitarist Stuart Adamson's passing. His fellow guitarist and keeper of the Big Country flame, Bruce Watson, shows us his guitar collection and lets us into the secrets of the 'bagpipe guitar sound'

Words Scott Rowley Photography Mark Alexander

Bruce Watson is standing in what used to be Kenny's Music in Dunfermline, one of a chain of music shops across Scotland until it closed in October last year. Today, the shop floor is a hive of industry again. There are guitars *everywhere* – too many for one guitar shop – and we're adding to the chaos, with the guitars of Big Country founding member Watson being set up in the corner for *Guitarist's* photoshoot.

"I've been coming here practically every month since, fuckin' hell, 1973, I think," says Bruce. "Apart from when I've been on the road."

Watson has a studio downstairs in the same building. "It's part of my life," he says. "And we thought we were going to lose it." The current activity is down to new owners who bought the stock after Kenny's went under, and are reopening soon as Mo's Music. "And that's why they've got four shops' worth of gear in here," says Bruce. "The internet – it's killing guitar shops everywhere."

The building used to be studios, rehearsal rooms and a venue. Joe Cocker once played here. Stuart Adamson's first band, the Skids, rehearsed in the corner that now houses walls of Fenders, Squiers and Jacksons. Before Stuart asked him to join what would become Big Country, Bruce's band Eurosect recorded demos there, including a song called *Forbidden Whispers*. It was that song that made Stuart Adamson think that he and Bruce could work together. It became *Angle Park*, the first song they wrote together.

Stuart Adamson died by suicide 25 years ago this year, after succumbing to the alcoholism and demons that plagued him at various points in his life. For the first time, Bruce and his former bandmates – bassist Tony Butler and drummer Mark Brzezicki – as well as Adamson's family, and former bandmates in his first band the Skids, have opened up about the life of the man John Peel once called "Scotland's answer to Jimi Hendrix". There's an authorised

biography, *Stay Alive*, a new Stuart Adamson website, and a forthcoming documentary.

Bruce Watson has been celebrating the music he and Adamson made together since 2007, in a reactivated Big Country that initially included all the surviving members, with the late Mike Peters, singer of the Alarm, on vocals and Watson's son Jamie on guitar. When Tony Butler left in 2012 and Mike Peters soon followed, the band continued with a revolving cast, with Bruce and Brzezicki at its core.

It was when the drummer left last year that Watson decided it was time to make a change: the band – now fronted by Tommie Paxton of Big Country tribute band Restless Natives – has been rebranded as Big Country Redux. "Stuart's words, music and presence were at the heart of Big Country," said Bruce. "Without him, it can never truly be what it once was."

But the mission remains the same: to do justice to the music and memory of Stuart Adamson.



STARTING OUT

When he was 12 years old, Bruce Watson went with his parents to see *That'll Be The Day*, the rock 'n' roll coming-of-age movie starring David Essex. At the end of the film, Essex's character is transfixed by a red guitar in a shop window, a sign of what he has to do next: buy a guitar and join a band. It had the same impact on the young Bruce. "The movie ends on that and it was like, 'Fuckin' hell! I want one of them!'"

The guitarist for Scottish rockers Nazareth, Manny Charlton, was another inspiration. Charlton lived a couple of doors up from Bruce in Dunfermline and Bruce would see him pull up in a white BMW, dressed in platform shoes and a fur jacket, with a woman on his arm, and think, "I want some of that!"

He got a part-time job and bought a guitar and an amp from Woolworths: "It was called a Top 20 guitar, with an amplifier called Edition 30," says Bruce. He was listening to Be Bop Deluxe, the Sensational Alex Harvey Band and Led Zeppelin, but they seemed impossible to play on guitar. And then punk came along.

"Punk was easy to play," he says. "Not so much the rhythm and blues of Dr Feelgood or Eddie And The Hot Rods, but when I listened to The Clash, I thought, 'I can play that! I'm never going to be able to play like [Be Bop Deluxe's] Bill Nelson or Zal

[Cleminson, guitarist for SAHB], but this I can do."

When he turned 16, he got a job at the dockyard and started earning some money. He bought a Yamaha SG-85 from a guy he knew from the docks. The first new guitar he bought hung in the window of Sandy Muir's Record shop in town – a red Yamaha SG-500. It was his David Essex red-guitar-in-the-window moment.

"It was a real guitar," he says. "You couldn't get Strats or Gibsons anywhere at that time, even in the late 70s. Up here, apart from maybe [legendary Glasgow guitar shop]

"Stuart Adamson's words, music and presence were at the heart of Big Country"

McCormack's, you never saw Les Pauls. You could get these Carlsbro Stingray amps, but you never saw Marshalls – you just couldnae get them, so it was always Yamahas and HH amps." He pronounces this last brand as "Itch and Itch".

"I think it was the same in Manchester," he says. "I was talking to [Cult guitarist] Billy Duffy and they had Itch and Itches, too. The Buzzcocks were using Itch and Itches and the Gibson Marauder, and that's what Stuart used with the Skids on their first album."



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Bruce Watson talks us through his collection

1. YAMAHA SG500: "That was the one used on all the early tours and also on *The Crossing*." Bruce has fitted Ghost pickups by Wilf Vissengä, based in Whitley Bay: "He'll make them any way you want them. Gibson humbuckers can muddy a little bit; if you're playing a barre chord you don't get the definition of the strings. The Ghosts give you a bit of clarity. I like a bit of cleanliness as well, almost as if you were set up for country or funk."

2. GIBSON L6 DELUXE (left): "That's a recent acquisition. I think Keith Richards played the top of the range for a while. I tried one, but I never really got on with it – it's solid maple, so really heavy. But I like it because it has the extra frets if you want to go up the dusty end."

GIBSON MARAUDER (right): "That was a 1977/78. In the UK it's kinda seen as a punk-rock guitar. Stuart had it and it's the same setup as the Buzzcocks woulda had. Even though it's kinda classed as a budget guitar, it's great. It's no' a bonny-looking guitar, though. KISS made them famous in America. Paul Stanley used to smash one up at the end of the show."

3. DAVE GRANT CUSTOM (left): "This was custom-made by a guy in Dunfermline called Dave Grant. I had that made in The Buffalo Skinners period, early 90s. I wanted something that was a cross between a Brian May guitar and a Johnny Thunders guitar. It looks small, but it's a full Gibson-scale neck. I wanted something that I could take on the tour bus or to a hotel room – a lounge-about guitar. But I ended up using it on the album and for years on the road. It kinda looks like it's been distressed on purpose, but it's just gone like that over the years. I think it's because it was painted in his garden shed! It was pristine when it was made."

GIBSON SPIRIT (right): "Fantastic-sounding guitar from the 80s, very plain finish with no frills. Great for rhythm work but not great for dusty-end stuff due to where the neck joins the body. Great for playing melody lines up and down – very focused sounding."

4. FENDER JAPAN 50TH ANNIVERSARY TELECASTER: "My tech, Mup, made this one, but it's a Japanese 50th Anniversary Telecaster and one of my main guitars at the moment. It's a Tele, but I convert them all to Esquires. I just removed the neck pickup and made a new scratchplate. I only use the treble pickup; it's a humbucker just to keep the noise down. The older I get, I don't like mucking about with too many pickup options. I wanted a Telecaster for years, but I never really got on with them. You've got to be very precise when you're playing, whereas something with a humbucker you can fluff things a little bit. They're great for tuning 'cos there's no trem. [Leo] got it right first time, didn't he?"

Big Country in the early 80s (left to right): Tony Butler, Stuart Adamson, Bruce Watson and Mark Brzezicki



PHOTO BY MICHAEL COCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



Bruce formed a band with his pal Raymond Davidson. Raymond's sister Sandra was Stuart Adamson's then-girlfriend and later wife, so he got to see Adamson's rise with the Skids up close. He even went to an early rehearsal. "Stuart had a Gibson Marauder," says Bruce, "and an Itch and Itch amp that was sitting on its side, with what looked like a homemade speaker cabinet. It wasn't plugged in – just to sit the amp on. It was the first time I'd seen a band play live. They were so fucking loud."

When Stuart realised that Bruce was a guitarist, he offered him his guitar. "But I couldn't play it. It was uncontrollable, it was so loud. Just feedback. He had the distortion all cranked up and the valve sound in the amp – it was like heavy metal. I'm trying to control it and it's like, 'WHEEEEEEEE!' I'm like, 'How do you make it STOAP?!'"

The Skids' fourth single, *In To The Valley*, catapulted the band into the Top 10, and for the next few years Adamson was on a hectic schedule of tours and recording. In 1979 alone, the Skids released two full-length albums. By the time of the band's third and most accomplished album, *The Absolute Game*, Adamson was beginning to plan his exit.

Bruce had given Stuart the demo of *Forbidden Whispers*, and Stuart

was impressed. "It would be great to do something in the future," he told him. "I quite fancy a two-guitar kinda thing."

Bruce was flattered, but he didn't take it seriously. A year later, Adamson turned up at his house: he'd left the Skids and wanted to know if Bruce fancied forming a band. "There was no master plan apart from the fact that we didn't want to do the Thin Lizzy/Status Quo thing," says Bruce. "We didn't want to do that blues bendy kind of thing."

Thin Lizzy's twin harmony guitars and Phil Lynott's Celtic influence seemed like an obvious precursor. "If you were to pick a song, it would be *Whiskey In The Jar*," says Bruce. "That one would fit alongside *Fields Of Fire* or something. But it's more of a sound thing – the reverb on the guitars and a melody. There's a lot of melody in what [Thin Lizzy guitarist] Eric Bell's doing, but there's a bit of string bending and we didn't do that."

They made a rule: "Instead of bending, we'll just play the note. We'll slide up to the note, play that note and we'll no' bend up tae it, 'cos automatically you go into blues when you do that."

The punk-rock guitar players – Mick Jones, Johnny Thunders, Steve Jones – had actually been pretty traditionalist. There was always a guitar solo, string bending,

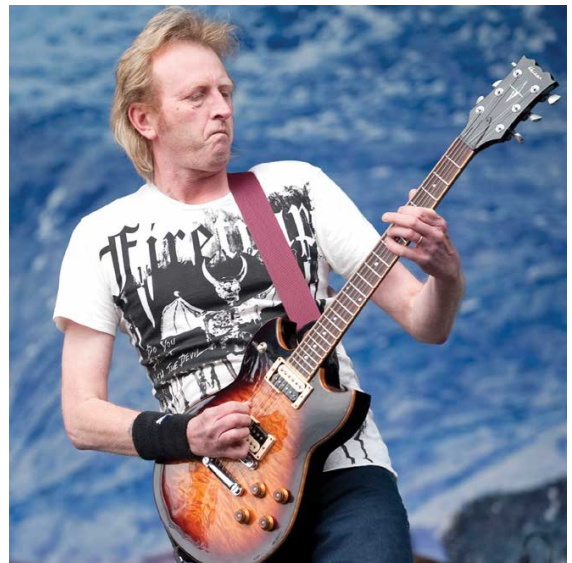


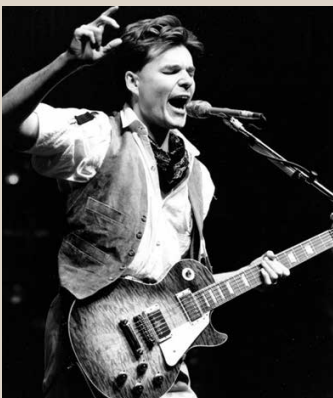
PHOTO BY ROSS GILMORE/REDFERNSGETTY IMAGES

The band continued to play live again from 2007 and this year renamed themselves Big Country Redux – Bruce is pictured here at T In The Park Festival, Kinross, 2011

a love of Keith Richards-style rock 'n' roll. "We didn't want to do that," says Bruce. They were anti-solo. "Guitar solos are meant to be almost free-form – you wouldn't play the same thing twice – and we wanted to keep everything *exactly* the same, so that when you played it live, it would be the same as how you recorded it. There was none of this, 'I'll just do a solo and busk it...'"

"Punk was easy to play. I listened to The Clash and thought, 'I can play that!'"

STUART ADAMSON'S 'PEACE IN OUR TIME' LES PAUL, 1982



In 1988, Big Country decamped to Los Angeles to record their fourth album, *Peace In Our Time*, an attempt to capture the American rock market. "I was in Norman's Rare Guitars in LA," says Bruce, "when I spotted the Les Paul. I played it for hours in the shop and nearly bought it, but I also loved this '61 Strat that was for sale. I had a couple of Les Pauls already, so I went for the Strat. I told Stuart about the Les Paul and he snapped it up."

Stuart used the Les Paul for the recording of *Peace In Our Time* and for their gigs later that year in Moscow. The guitar fell into the hands of local man Niall Fairlie in 2004, quite by accident. "A friend of a friend had it and I was looking for a good Les Paul at the time. When he opened the case, I was like [no hesitation], 'How much do you want for it?'"

The guy told him it had previously belonged to Stuart Adamson, but he took it with a pinch of salt. "And then I did a bit of research. Mup [Bruce's guitar tech] said, 'Is that the one from the Moscow show?' and there was a Big Country roadie that worked for GuitarGuitar – he could describe the dink on the top before I even showed him it."

Niall uses it in his cover band ("I bought it to play – it wasn't going to sit on a wall or something") and it's also appeared on stage with Big Country: he loaned it to Big Country Redux singer Tommie Paxton for a concert in Dunfermline a couple of years ago.

"Sound-wise, we didn't do a clean sound and a dirty sound, either. Both of our sounds were quite similar because we were both using similar amps. I had a Carlsbro at the time and Stuart had the pitch transposer that gives you all the different harmonies."

Adamson used an MXR M-129 Analogue Pitch Transposer. Intended as a rack-mounted studio unit, it became one of the key elements of what became known as Big Country's 'bagpipe guitar sound'. Producers John Leckie and Mick Glossop remember Adamson experimenting with it at various points with the Skids. "He had this blue rack-mounted thing, which gave it the chorus," says Leckie. "The bagpipe sound came from that harmoniser."

"It was absolutely the Big Country sound," says Glossop. "You could do octaves with it as well as slightly detune. He was really into it."

PHOTO BY DAVE HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES

5. MUSIC MAN AMP (left): “I bought it from Damian [O’Neill] from The Undertones. They had split up and were selling a lot of their equipment at John Henry’s rehearsal rooms. I always wanted a Fender Twin for clean sounds but could never find one that was roadworthy. This amp was in great nick and I used it on *Wonderland* and all tours and recordings after that, along with my Marshall 800.”

HH AMP: “The HH amps are VS Musician and IC 100. I used them all the time on shows and recordings. I brought them out of retirement a few years ago when the Skids got back together – it’s the sound of punk-rock.”

6. ESQUIRE-STYLE MODEL: “My tech, Mup, made this out of parts he had in his house. The body is made by MJT and the neck was made by Allparts. Mup assembles lots of Fender-style guitars from parts he buys online. He’s great at putting them together and setting them up. He always has a few lying around his house because he knows that I will pick one up and fall in love with it. He is a bastard and my wife hates his guts.”

7. FENDER STRATOCASTER: “The finish is called Antigua and is a ‘Marmite’ colour – people love it or hate it. This guitar is my main studio guitar and was actually custom-made for me by a luthier in Canada called Grant C Linc [H]. The serial number on the back of headstock says ‘Lola Rae 16.12.19’. That is my granddaughter’s name and birthday. I love them both very much, but my granddaughter is more fun to play with.”



“He had a pedal built so that you could use the presets live,” says Bruce, who still has one of the units today. “I was more into the echo thing, like Dave Gilmour and The Edge. So I was using more of the echo thing and he was using the harmoniser.”

The bagpipe sound came more from how they played: Stuart had used drone strings in his time with the Skids, leaving a lower string open and unfretted but hitting it consistently so that it rings out. As Bruce points out, Jimmy Page was famous for using it in Led Zeppelin, but it’s also a feature of bagpipe playing. Bagpipes have at least one pipe that is not played and sounds one consistent note throughout, with melodies played over the top.

Another element was the EBow. Be Bop Deluxe’s Bill Nelson had been a huge influence on Stuart’s playing, and had produced the Skids. During one of the sessions,

he’d given Stuart an EBow, a handheld effects unit that worked on the guitar like an electronic bow. You held it with your picking hand over the strings of an electric guitar and it reacted with the pickups, creating a field of magnetic energy and causing the strings to vibrate. With no picking involved, the notes sounded like they were being bowed.

BIG COUNTRY LIVES ON

All of these things combined created the Big Country guitar sound. It was rock music, but not the rock music of Led Zep, AC/DC or the Stones. It was modern, with guitar tones and effects that you’d find on records by U2 and New Order, but also harmonised guitar parts that evoked Thin Lizzy and Wishbone Ash, each song packed with cool licks and counter melodies and inventive rhythm playing.

Their debut album, *The Crossing*, went platinum on its release in

1983, and the band was catapulted into the kind of fame and gruelling schedule that Adamson was not prepared for. He struggled for the rest of the 20th century to reconcile his desire to live the life of an ordinary family man with the demands of the music business.

25 years after his death, the music he created with Bruce Watson still inspires passion. In 2024, readers of *The Scotsman* newspaper voted *The Crossing* the greatest Scottish album of all time, and Bruce’s band played to sold-out audiences across the UK, with people singing along to every word. The sound they created – with those Yamahas and those ‘Ttch and Itches’ – resonates still. **G**



Stay Alive: The Life & Death Of Stuart Adamson by Scott Rowley is out 26 March on New Modern. Thanks to Mup, Niall Fairlie, Ian Smith and the guys at Mo’s Music <https://bigcountry.co.uk>



GIBSON ES-175

In production for seven decades, this hollow-bodied electric was the perfect partner for jazzers of the 1950s and later found favour with players as diverse as Steve Howe, BB King and John Frusciante

Words Bob Wootton Photography Matt Lincoln

Of the many iconic guitars that became popular during the 1950s, Gibson's ES-175 is one of the most enduring. Launched in 1949, it holds the record as Gibson's longest electric model in continuous production – for 70 years until 2019. (The equally revered ES-335, which debuted in 1958, is showing no signs of obsolescence and so is likely to overtake it in 2028.) Also in 1949, Gibson introduced the 175's acoustic equivalent in the L-4C model, which had a premium carved spruce top more typical of the jazz guitars of the day. By contrast, the ES-175 has a laminated top reinforced with two parallel braces whose resistance to feedback proved popular with players as concerts got bigger and performances got louder.

Accordingly, the list of famous ES-175 players is long, with jazz virtuosos Herb Ellis and Joe Pass most strongly associated with the model. Many players used the double-pickup version, despite sticking to its neck pickup with the tone rolled back – and Pat Metheny famously took this all the way, removing the bridge pickup and controls and taping the vacant holes. His ES-175 has many other mods: a bound headstock (most likely a subsequent luthier modification not uncommon in the 60s and 70s), a toothbrush skewered through the

tailpiece to replace a lost end-pin strap button(!), an internal mic in the treble f-hole, and Grover tuners, a frequent upgrade back then. Nevertheless, the popularity of these models extends beyond jazz boundaries, with notable players including Steve Howe, BB King and even John Frusciante, while Scotty Moore is known for playing the 175's close cousin, the ES-295.

Comfort Zone

Professional jazzboxes of the pre- and post-war period were often large. Elmer Stromberg's celebrated instruments, such as the Master 400, were a full 19 inches wide, while Epiphone's Emperor lower bout measured 18 1/2 inches and Gibson's Super 400 also tipped the 18-inch mark. By contrast, at 16 1/4 inches and considerably lighter, the ES-175 was comparatively more comfortable for both the player and their wallet, with a price on release of \$175, reflecting Gibson's historic trend towards naming guitars after their launch price points. The first examples of the Gibson ES-175 had a single pickup, and either a rich sunburst finish or a Natural blonde finish, with a \$15 upcharge. While single-pickup models were discontinued in '71, the configuration reemerged in models such as the fancy 90s Herb Ellis ES-165 design. Twin-pickup models, the ES-175D and DN (such as the 1954

example photographed here), appeared in 1952 and came with an upcharge of around \$50. A very few special orders were produced in black, red and even white. The rockabilly-favourite ES-295 – in production from 1952, discontinued by '59 and reintroduced in '94 – was essentially a fancy gold-finished ES-175 with a different tailpiece and plastics.

A few ES-175s are known to have escaped the Gibson factory with the 'Alnico/Staple' pickups that featured on several high-end models and early Les Paul Customs, but the overwhelming majority carried 'dog-ear' P-90 pickups from launch until the new Patent Applied For humbuckers were introduced in 1957 across Gibson's middle and upper lines.

Many late-50s ES-175s were later stripped of these, alongside their tuners, control knobs and pickup switches, to refurbish or complete conversions and replicas of more valuable collectibles such as Les Pauls.

Early ES-175 knobs were a tall barrel shape with no numbers, whose early transparent plastic sometimes goes cloudy with age. These became slightly less tall and gained numbers to become more recognisable to modern eyes through to early '53, and knobs then followed Gibson's trend across all models ('speed' knobs in '53, 'bonnets' in '55, 'reflectors' in mid-'60 and 'witch hats' in '66). Similarly, Gibson



This natural-finished 1954 Gibson ES-175 was recently auctioned by Gardiner Houlgate – it has a maple body, mahogany neck and rosewood fingerboard with double-parallelgram inlays



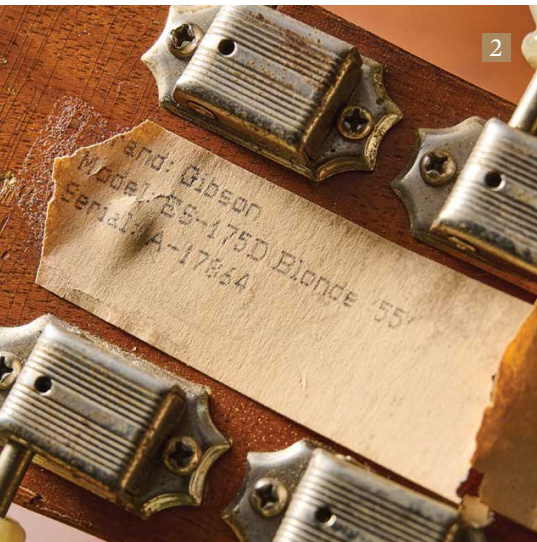
1

ES-175 pickup switch tips gradually got lighter and rounder across the 50s, and became noticeably whiter by the early 60s. The switch was mounted directly into the top on the upper bout, and the jack socket into the side of the lower bout. Both areas can suffer from splitting over time. Some players must have grumbled about the switch's acoustic clunk – because around '57 (as humbuckers were introduced) a rather clunky rubber mounting grommet was introduced on Gibson archtop models, in all likelihood to damp its mechanical noise.

Cutting Edge

Whereas many Gibson archtops evolved through rounded (Venetian) and Florentine (pointed) cutaways to allow upper-fret access, the ES-175 always had a sharp cutaway, and this marked a first for Gibson. Adrian Ingram, professional jazz guitarist and author of *The Gibson 175: Its History And Its Players* (Centerstream Publishing), told *Guitarist*: “It’s alleged that the idea for the ES-175’s sharp [Florentine] cutaway was suggested when a young Kenny Burrell took one

The ES-175 was comfortable for both the player and their wallet, with a price on release of \$175



2



3

1. This trapeze tailpiece was later replaced by a zig-zag 'T'-shaped unit

2. A sticker on the back of the headstock suggests this blonde model is a 1955 production. However, the serial number dates it to 1954, which is what it was sold as at auction

3. These clear barrel-shaped 'speed' knobs are correct for the period – note how the numbers are visible

4. The unbound black-finish headstock features a pearl Gibson logo and crown inlays

5. Here you can clearly see the five plies (b/w/b/w/b) of the bevelled-edge pickguard. The bridge is a floating rosewood style



4

of his guitars – an early blonde L-5 that had been modified with a Charlie Christian pickup – to Gibson and asked for a deeper cutaway. It's anecdotal, but there are some pictures of him playing this guitar with a sharp cutaway. Sharp cutaways look great, especially on a smaller-bodied archtop like the ES-175.”

The one-piece ivoroid-bound mahogany neck joins the body at the 14th fret, like most flat-tops, and it originally had 19 frets, with a 20th being added in 1955. Double parallelogram markers guide the way from the 1st to 17th frets, while a crown inlay features on the headstock face alongside a pearl Gibson logo. Small frets were typical until 1959 when a wider, deeper fret profile was introduced. The neck profiles follow the trend across Gibson's range from a comfortable early full 'C' shape, through '59's famous 'D' shape, to 1960 to '62's flatter 'blade' profile, before thickening again in '63.

Kluson tuning machines with plastic tulip buttons and single rings feature



on ES-175s until the transition year of 1960, when the tuner buttons gained a second ring of ornamentation (again often scavenged to restore, convert or recreate Les Pauls). Many of these early plastics could be unstable, sometimes decomposing or disagreeing with the case lining dyes and glues of the day. These reactions produced gases that attacked and corroded metal parts, particularly gold-plated ones.

Regular production models featured a floating rosewood bridge, though some upgraded to the adjustable tune-o-matic unit introduced later to improve intonation. Most ES-175 players tended to use heavier strings with a low action for jazz, where string bending is less common. Muted jazz tones are often enhanced by using flat-wound strings with a wound third, so the change in bridge stagger required to correctly intonate plain third strings was not such an issue as it was (and is) on other contemporary models.

Strings were anchored by a trapezoidal tailpiece of flat nickel-plated brass with a

bar with pointed ends ornamented with two raised diamond shapes. Some tarnish, others retain their shine as their patina develops. By '57, the tailpiece became a central T-shape bar with a zigzag rod ornament to each side.

The top body edges are triple bound with white/black/white plastic strips, the f-holes are unbound, and the back edges are single-bound. The end strap buttons are ivoroid, and instruments quite often left the factory with no neck heel strap button as they were expected to be played sitting down. The pickguard is bevelled plastic, which can dish as its five plies shrink at different speeds with age.

The original single pickup is positioned about an inch away from the neck – neither right up against it nor in the middle position of, say, the somewhat later ES-225T or ES-330T. When double-pickup models entered in '52, a very few of the earliest double-pickup models left the factory without the 'D' designation on their labels.

Enduring ESES

ES-175s have a spacious, airy, woody amplified tone. Like most archtops whose designs stemmed from big band use, they have a longer throw than many flat-tops and their acoustic tone is focused in the percussive midrange. These guitars really were mainly used as hard-working tools, so very clean examples are quite unusual. Matching cases usually had brown exteriors (like that of the pictured model), but inside colours varied from early brown and green through mid-/late-50s pink, and even some maroon, before the standard early 60s black with yellow or sometimes purple linings took over.

The early humbucker variants from '57 to '60 command higher prices, not least from the parts-vultures who change their parts out onto Les Pauls for profit. But ES-175s with P-90s are still relatively affordable. And very good! 🎸

With thanks to Gardiner Houlgate for allowing us to photograph this model



The Long Game

Having established its sumptuous acoustic-guitar range on the world stage, Lowden introduced its first production electric model to the line-up in 2018. We check in on progress

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Matt Lincoln



LOWDEN GL-J FROM £3,950

CONTACT **Lowden Guitars** PHONE **02844 619161** WEB www.lowdenguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1 This looks like the GL-J you reviewed last year but with a different finish.

Yes, it is. Lowden is now offering a range of satin stain colours over a figured maple top. But our sample also features a new neck join, too. The original and ongoing GL-J (the 'J' stands for 'Jazz', although it's certainly not limited to that application) features a 16-fret neck join and an extended heel. This new version cuts back the heel platform and the neck joins the body at the 18th fret. You choose.

2 It's a lot of money for a downsized ES-335, isn't it?

George Lowden does cite the Gibson classic as an inspiration, but double-cutaway aside, it's a totally different design: all-solid wood and very compact. A lot of money? Check the price on a Gibson Custom ES-335...

3 Didn't Lowden make a more Les Paul-style electric guitar?

If you mean the original GL-10, yes, and that's very much ongoing. It is a single-cut design, but the shape is based on Lowden's Jazz model, not someone else's outline.

1. Following the original GL-J, which features a 16th-fret neck join, the neck of our new model joins the body at the 18th fret

Think 'Lowden' and you'll probably imagine an impeccably built acoustic guitar used by countless artists such as Richard Thompson, Alex De Grassi, Pierre Bensusan and Paul Brady. There's also Ed Sheeran and Myles Smith who have since given the Northern Irish brand, now into its sixth decade, huge mainstream visibility. And, as we've documented, it was actually Ed Sheeran who kickstarted our topic here: the Lowden electric guitar.

We last caught up with progress in issue 521, back in late 2024, some while after George Lowden had conceived and launched the first electric model, the single-cut solidbody GL-10. By then, that original model had been joined by the new

GL-J, a semi-solid design loosely inspired by George's love of Cream and all things Gibson ES-335. Inspiration aside, the GL-J has little in common with that classic Gibson, and a little over a year since its introduction it's evolved into the guitar we have here on review.

In Build

To recap, like the GL-10, the GL-J is centred around a 630mm (24.8-inch) scale length, which will feel very familiar to those of you who enjoy its initial inspiration. But measuring approximately 356mm (14 inches) across its lower bouts, it's a lot more compact, likewise its 37mm rim depth, while the overall depth is actually very slightly slimmer than a



1



Telecaster at 43mm. The guitar's back is centre-joined African mahogany topped with a variety of hardwoods such as Tasmanian blackwood, figured walnut, koa or maple, the latter of which is used here, with a fine, down-turning figure.

The back is flat, but the top is lightly arched, dropping away most noticeably behind the centre point of the bridge to the guitar's bottom edge. There is some light chamfering in the fairly small cutaways and on the back edge, creating a light ribcage contour. The back edges are also slightly more radiused than the top edges, but like every aspect of the design, it's all so considered and perfectly crafted. Internally, both the back and underside of the top are chambered – as you can see through the well-proportioned f-holes – leaving a solid centre section and plenty of air. It all results in a relatively light weight, part of the design rationale.

While all this 'electric' style might be alien to the many Lowden acoustic players out there, the five-piece neck construction is much more familiar. Here, the main three pieces are of a much lighter-coloured *Swietenia* genus mahogany and quarter-sawn, and they're laminated with two thin rosewood strips.

2. This new heel allows the neck to join the body at the 18th fret, as opposed to the 16th fret of the earlier GL-J design. You can also see the five-piece neck lamination and different colours of the various types of mahogany used for the body and neck

3. The humbuckers direct-mount to the body, but the fixing/height-adjustment screws are covered by these small 'ears'

4. The Gotoh tune-o-matic bridge is recessed into the body, creating a very low-profile playing feel



The front and back of the back-angled, classic Lowden-shaped headstock are faced here with a deep chocolate-brown ebony that matches the fingerboard, and that's bound with blackwood with an inner and lighter coloured coachline strip, again nodding to the acoustic craft. As with the acoustic models, there are only mother-of-pearl side-dot position markers here, and while face dots can be ordered, they will cost you more.

But what's changed about this GL-J? Well, it's all about the neck joint. "I've moved the neck joint from the 16th fret position [where the neck joins the body] to the 18th," explains George Lowden. Not only that but the bigger sloping heel of the initial – and ongoing – GL-J is slimmed as it slopes into the body. "It has worked out well, and everyone who's played it loves the little bit of

"Everyone who's played it loves the extra accessibility to the higher frets"

George Lowden

extra accessibility to the higher frets. When you look at the back of the guitar it looks a little bit more in proportion. It's a relatively minor thing, looks wise, though. I'm all about structure, playability and accessibility, and [so] looks are not so important for me. But I also think the original style GL-J with its 16th-fret neck joint is beautiful," says George.

It seems we now have a choice, which George underlines: "I took down the new prototype of the 18-fret GL-J and a 16-fret one to Bill Shanley in West Cork," he tells us. "Now, Bill is 'Mr Guitar' in Ireland, he plays guitar for *everyone* in Ireland and outside, too. Ray Davies, Roy Harper, Mary Black, Jackson Browne... the list goes on and on. But he's also a really nice guy and he actually chose the 16th-fret GL-J. Mind you, I think that was because he liked the look of it [laughs]. It was a blue-stained maple top with the grain coming through. Quite beautiful."

These coloured tops are another addition to the natural-wood look of the original guitars. Along with introducing a number of stained figured maple tops over the past year, our GL-J presents a new colour, Emerald Green Burst. "Yes, we are moving into colours," confirms George,

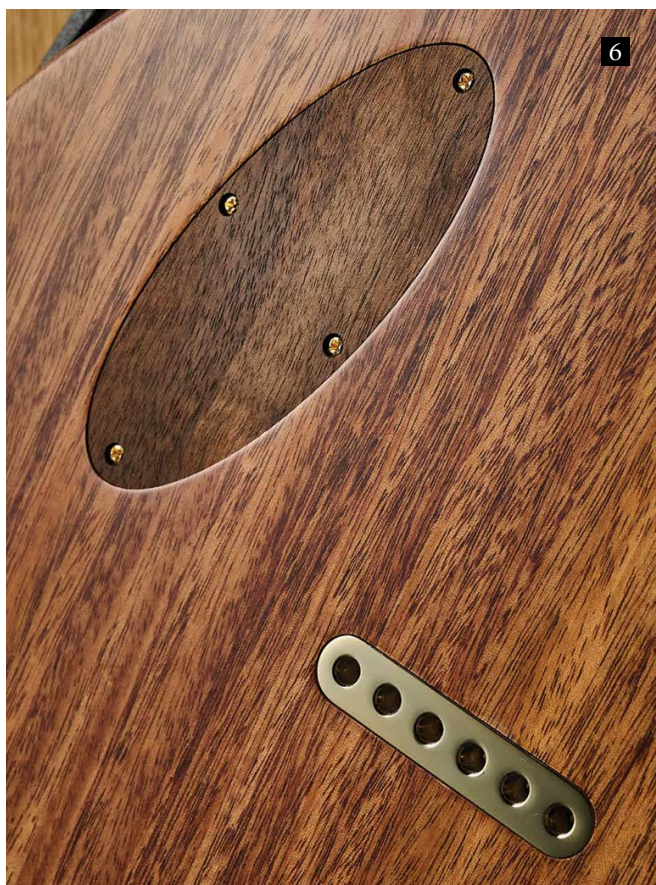
THE RIVALS

Gibson's classic ES-335 models from the USA production line-up start at around £3k, but those from the more exclusive Custom division are £5k upwards.

The slightly downsized ES-339 is only available in the USA line-up and again is around £3k.

PRS makes plenty of hollow and semi-hollow guitars, and new for 2026 is the David Grissom signature DGT Semi-Hollow (approx. £4,300), which has previously only been available via limited runs. Classic DGT specs, of course, with vibrato but with a chambered body and single f-hole. And good news if you're allergic to bird inlays – it's the only PRS Core model offered with moons!

Nik Huber's small-volume builds include plenty of semi-hollows, not least the Adam Miller Signature (£5,499, in-store) with a chambered mahogany back, flat redwood top and a single f-hole. It actually also features a bolt-on maple neck with a pair of Kloppmann mini-humbuckers.



“but it’s still a very translucent type of [acrylic] finish that we’re using – and satin, of course, one of our trademarks, really.”

What hasn’t changed though is the high-quality Gotoh hardware, not least the recessed tune-o-matic-style bridge with the distinctive string slots that pass the strings through hollow brass tubes to anchor on the back in a recessed brass sustain block.

The Lollar humbuckers direct-mount in the same fashion with small ‘ears’ (black painted here) that cover the height-adjustment screws. The three controls – volume and tone, with knurled metal knobs, and three-way toggle – all sit in recessed divots cleanly cut into the top. And as far as we can see, apart from the toggle switch cap, the GL-J is entirely plastic-free.

Feel & Sounds

If the build is nothing short of exceptional, so is the feel. It’s nothing like the bulk of an ES-335, more like a regular solidbody. Its weight matches that impression, too: at 3.27kg (7.19lb), our sample is actually slightly lighter than our previous review model, which had a Tasmanian blackwood top. The combination of the relatively thin body and the recessed bridge gives a very

5. It might be an electric model, but the headstock here is the typically understated Lowden style that adorns the acoustic models. The bone nut is also beautifully cut

6. An integral part of the Lowden electric design is the unique recessed string anchor that also acts as a sustain block

7. The controls sit in cupped recesses, again subtly lowering their height from the face of the guitar

UNDER THE HOOD

With such a considered design, what about the circuit and pickups?

The elegant simplicity of the GL-J is reflected in the circuit here, comprising a pair of CTS 500kohms pots, a .022 μ F capacitor wired modern-style, and what looks like a short-frame Switchcraft toggle switch. The pots also have different tapers: the volume is 'B' and the tone is 'A'. In CTS world, this refers to the percentage resistance at 50 per cent rotation – 15 per cent and the slighter faster rise or fall of 10 per cent respectively. The perfect soldering reflects the quality, but you'll notice that the recessed walnut coverplates are reinforced with carbon graphite, ensuring their structural integrity. The circular coverplate over the toggle switch is also engraved with the serial number, model and year of manufacture. Another, of many, neat and very considered touches.

The Lollar Imperial humbucker is an aftermarket classic and, not surprisingly, is Lollar's "best-selling humbucker – by far". Yes, it's based on the Patent Applied For pickup, of course, but "its medium output is in the vintage range with a hotter wound bridge pickup compared with a typical vintage set", says Lollar. "Our unbalanced

coils produce a tight bottom-end that complements the pickup's fullness and causes overtones to build after each note is played. Overall, it has a fuller bridge tone and a cleaner and brighter middle position. The neck is hot enough to play on the edge of amp distortion, or you can adjust your picking pressure to achieve a cleaner or dirtier sound as desired. [They're] made with

Alnico II magnets in the neck and Alnico V magnets in the bridge that are degaussed to specific levels unique to the neck and bridge positions. Covers are nickel silver." And, typically, the pickups are lightly wax potted.

From the selector switch, our Imperials measured 8.15k at the bridge and 7.58k at the neck, slightly lower than Lollar's published DCRs.



When a guitar works as well as this, a simple circuit is all you need. Note the carbon graphite that reinforces the walnut coverplate. It's all about the detail



If the build is nothing short of exceptional, so is the feel. It's nothing like the bulk of an ES-335

low-profile feel that hugs to your body. It's also very well balanced when played seated, too, or on a strap.

Wrapping your hand around the super-smooth neck back, you feel a very subtly V'd profile that feels smaller than it measures. It's spacious, with a nut width of 43.2mm (and string spacing of 35.5mm) and a depth of 21.8mm at the 1st that fills out to 24mm by the 12th. Great craft.

Likewise, the fretting is superb, the medium-jumbo gauge well chosen on the 305mm (12-inch) radiused face, and with a very clean setup it's one of those guitars that just 'disappears': nothing gets in the way. And that, of course, includes the new neck join, which provides more spacious upper-position access, although not everyone spends time up there, and the 16-fret guitars, not least with altered or dropped tunings, would suit many of us just as efficiently.

ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

What better guitar to match your GL-J than the original Lowden electric, the GL-10

George Lowden's original electric vision was going to have a unique outline until he realised: "There is a shape that we already do that I really, really like and that's the S Model or the Jazz model," he tells us. "So I used that shape, but made it a little bit smaller. And that's what it is – exactly the Jazz shape but smaller."

The single-cut GL-10 first appeared in 2018 and introduced the style that evolved into the double-cut GL-J. "The balance of the instrument, the balance of the mass that you have from the neck to the body, all makes a difference to the way the electric guitar sounds at the end of the day," says George. "If you play the electric guitar acoustically, you can get a pretty good idea of how it's going to sound when you plug it in."

"It was very important for me to have a guitar designed in such a way that the balance produced – the balance of the construction and design, I'm not talking about the treble and bass – helped the guitar to sustain naturally," he adds. "You know

how it is with a perfectly balanced machine: you turn off the power and it'll keep spinning for a very long time. It's the same with a musical instrument – acoustic or electric – if you get the balance right. And that can be quite an elusive thing sometimes, so you just have to keep working at it and hope you get it better and better. You never reach the end of the design process. But, anyway, it certainly did what I hoped it would."

While not overly heavy, the all-solid GL-10 was subsequently joined by the chambered 'C' version, while a 'Coil-Tap' option, using Lollar Eldorado humbuckers and two mini-switches, is a more recent

"It was important that the design helped the guitar sustain naturally"

George Lowden

option to augment the Imperial humbuckers or P-90 single coils.

It seems these different pickup options are engaging players, too. "Ed Sheeran bought one of our acoustics for Myles Smith," continues George. "Myles then got in touch with us and since then he and his band have bought around 12 guitars from us – both electric and acoustic – and they use them all the time. Their electric guitarist is Joe Devine and he's been using the GL-10, the GL-10 Coil-Tap and one with Lollar's Novel T humbucking-sized single coils. He also uses a GL-J. It's great to see that on stages and in stadiums. Fantastic!"

It's worth pointing out that other pickups and configurations can be requested. "In theory, any pickup variation can be ordered," says Lowden's head of Sales & Marketing, Steve Harvey. "If we haven't done a particular configuration before, there may be a slightly longer build time as new drawings and so on would need to be created, but 'mix 'n' match' is doable."



GL-10 Coil-Tap (left) is loaded with Lollar Eldorado humbuckers, while the GL-10 WA here has Lollar's Imperial units



Perhaps one day we'll be able to put it to the test, but we'd wager these instruments each have their own character, too. We could argue that this new GL-J moves a little more into the mainstream in feel, looks and sound. You hear the 'Lowden effect' immediately: balance, clarity, smooth and long sustain; even the simplest of chords seems to ring for days. And the refined (we've called them "regal" before) Lollar Imperials really suit these builds.

At the neck, well, there's smoothness, depth but with an uncongested clarity – the sort of sound that defines the Patent Applied For myth. At the bridge, yes, there's a little heat, but again that clarity is very evident, especially when you dig in. Use your volume control here and the sound cleans up a little but also pulls back the edge. Both positions are exceptional, while the pickup mix takes us on another ride: clear, bouncy, funky and soulful.

It's not reinventing the wheel and, rather like a good ES-335, it's a real journeyman guitar, covering pop jangle, smooth funk, ballsy classic rock, those Cream-y tones, snappier BB blues then back down to lounge Latin and jazz. We could go on.

As a whole, the instrument is very dynamic, too, and really responds to pick strength and position. The combination of the Lollar Imperials with this construction is very well chosen: a really broad canvas of beautiful sounds.

You hear the 'Lowden effect' immediately: balance, clarity, smooth and long sustain – even the simplest of chords seems to ring for days

Verdict

There are few instrument makers with the decades-long experience of George Lowden, and it's not only the superb finely honed craft that shines through; it's the considered sound-based design that makes these electric instruments rather special. Nevertheless, Lowden isn't afraid to evolve the design, as evidenced by this 18-fret GL-J: the wizard is constantly tweaking to improve the musical tools he creates.

The new neck join certainly suits the 'do-it-all' style, but for the moment, the earlier, more single-cut like version will still be offered. Having formed an unhealthy attachment to that late 2024 GL-J we reviewed, we can see why. Above all, though, it's the experienced craft and design that shines here, with a pared-back aesthetic and glorious sounds – a real musician's tool. **G**



LOWDEN GL-J

PRICE: From £3,950 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Northern Ireland

TYPE: Double-cutaway semi-solidbody electric

BODY: 2-piece African mahogany with stained figured maple centre-joined top

NECK: 5-piece mahogany w/ rosewood splices, 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 630mm (24.8")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.13mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Gotoh GE103B-T bridge w/ through-body stringing, Gotoh 510 tuners w/ ebony buttons – gold-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Lollar Imperial humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.27/7.19

OPTIONS: Top woods include stained figured maple (as reviewed, £4,150), figured walnut (£4,190), Tasmanian blackwood (£4,200), maple (£3,950) and koa (£4,450). Other options include m-o-p dot markers and falling leaf inlays, Lollar P-90 and Coil-Tap pickups, chromed-plated hardware, figured maple neck and shallow neck carve (all £POA)

RANGE OPTIONS: The GL-10 (from £3,650) and the GL-10C (£4,600). The 16-fret GL-J has the same spec/cost as our reviewed 18-fret model

LEFT-HANDERS: No extra, to order

FINISHES: Emerald Green Burst (as reviewed), Denim, Midnight Blue, Amber, Amber Burst, Charcoal, Translucent Black – all on figured maple only. Hand-finished acrylic satin lacquer



9/10

PROS Superb craft and innovative design; compact 'solidbody' feel and good weight; new neck join; superb neck shape and super-smooth hand-rubbed satin finish; expansive sounds

CONS It's a high-end, high-quality guitar – and that costs



Mighty Mini

It's a Quad Cortex, only smaller –Neural DSP presents the mini, which packs all of the power into a unit that's half the size



NEURAL DSP QUAD CORTEX MINI £1,129

CONTACT **Neural DSP** WEB www.neuraldsp.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 That looks stylish.**
Doesn't it just? The Quad Cortex mini is the latest from Neural DSP and it has all the power of the Quad Cortex in a much smaller footprint.
- 2 It looks like there's a footswitch on each corner?**
Yes, it's unusual, but it makes sense. That way the designers were able to retain the exact same seven-inch touchscreen while keeping the overall unit small.
- 3 There are fewer footswitches than the bigger QC. Are there any other compromises here?**
Besides the footswitching, which now requires holds-and-pushes on two footswitches simultaneously, the connectivity has been rationalised for a smaller unit. But all the essential stuff is still here.

Among the all-in-one digital rigs out there, the Neural Quad Cortex really caught the imagination of a large number of players. Since we first took a look at the Quad Cortex back in 2021, we've also seen the release of the Nano Cortex, which offered a smaller set of Neural sounds in a much more compact form. But the big news is this new 'mini' model: a full Quad Cortex in a package that's less than half the size of the original, allowing much easier transport as a portable rig – and making it ideal as a desktop device for recording/practice, as well as a better fit for pedalboards.

Like its larger sibling, the mini features Presets built on 'The Grid' with up to four rows of eight blocks, each hosting a virtual device, all with the ability to split and mix paths, so you can have anything from a simple signal chain to a complex rig. Onboard, you find 3,072 user Presets that you can populate with 90-plus amps and over 100 effects, as well as over 1,000 IRs and 2,000 Captures. What's more, Wi-Fi

connection to the Cortex Cloud allows access to thousands of Captures from the wider Neural community.

In Use

While the full sound, processing power and Neural Capture technology of the flagship Quad Cortex model is all present and correct here, shoehorning all of that into a chassis of this size has required a bit of jiggery pokery when it comes to the I/O connectivity and the footswitching. The connectivity here in the mini still provides massive flexibility, but some things have changed to fit into the available space.

There is now a single expression pedal connection (rather than two) and one of the two XLR/jack combi inputs has been replaced by a standard jack input, while the combi input migrates to the side panel. The full-size MIDI sockets have been replaced by the smaller 3.2mm (1/8-inch) connections, likewise the standard headphone jack is replaced by a smaller 3.2mm mini jack. You now get

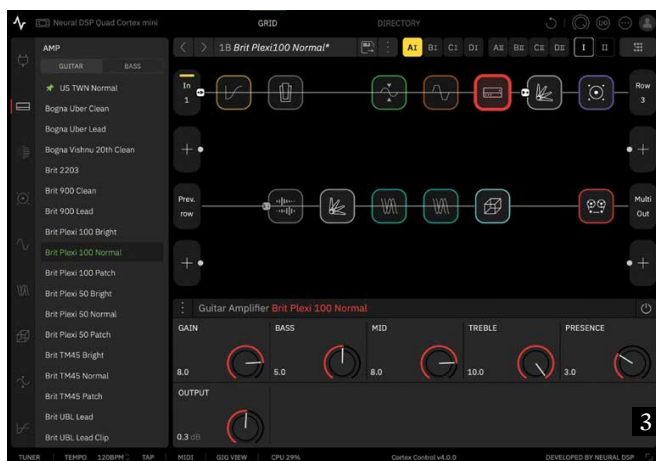


In Gig View, the display of the seven-inch touchscreen is arranged in four sections for clear onstage visuals of what you're switching with the adjacent footswitches

This new 'mini' model is a full Quad Cortex in a package that's less than half the size of the original

USB-C in place of the larger old-style USB connection, and while there are still two send and return loops, these are combined into single TRS sockets.

The salient difference between the larger Quad Cortex and the mini is the footswitch situation, with increased emphasis on press-and-hold operation here, and the use of two footswitches



1. Press footswitches A and C to access the tuner. You can set whether the signal will be muted when using the tuner, and you can adjust the reference pitch away from the standard 440Hz. Hold A and C to Bank Down in Preset mode

simultaneously. Rather than having a row of footswitches, Neural has opted for one at each corner, which may seem a little odd, but it makes perfect sense as the vertical alignment aids simultaneous footswitch use.

There are several ways to use the unit in a live situation with Preset, Scene and Stomp modes toggled by a quick press on footswitches B and D together. In Preset mode, the four footswitches simply select the four Presets in a bank. However, each Preset supports eight Scenes (Scenes

being variations on the Preset with altered parameters or different effects active). So, in Scene mode, if you want access to more than that you have to switch between the two sets of four Scenes (Page I and Page II) by holding down footswitch B, which may not be that convenient in the heat of a gig. The same goes for the eight options in Stomp mode, which acts more like a standard pedalboard with switching for individual effects. Of course, it all depends how you set up your unit, but the foot dances will take a bit of getting used to.

2. The Send 1/2 and Return 1/2 ports allow integration of external equipment. They use single TRS connectors but can carry two independent signals by splitting the tip and ring connections. This means that you can have one stereo or two mono loops

THE RIVALS

If you don't mind something a little bigger and would find the extra footswitches to be a more practical option, the original Quad Cortex (£1,449) is an extra £320. Fractal Audio has also been putting its Axe-Fx modelling into a smaller-footprint unit in the shape of the four-footswitch AM4 (£789), which features 104 presets, each with four blocks, four scenes and four channels per block. Line 6 has various iterations of its Helix modelling, but it's the three-footswitch HX Stomp (£549) that's comparative to the Quad Cortex mini in terms of size. For less outlay, IK Multimedia has the three-footswitch Tonex pedal (£329).

Away from the stage, there are no compromises. It's perfect next to your computer as a source of quality sounds for recording

Editing the sounds is easily taken care of via the touchscreen and the rotary encoders built into each footswitch cap. Touch any block onscreen and an editing window will appear. The C footswitch encoder will scroll through and select the parameter, while the D one will adjust the value. The B encoder can be used to

3. The Cortex Control software editor is a desktop application that lets you manage every feature and setting of the mini via USB. You can use it for organising Presets, Neural Captures, Impulse Responses and device settings



The right-hand footswitches have multiple functions: cycle modes by pressing B and D; press B to exit to The Grid; hold D to access the Tempo and Metronome menu; hold B to swap pages for the footswitch assignments for Scene and Stomp modes; and hold B and D to Bank Up in Preset mode



NEURAL DSP QUAD CORTEX MINI

PRICE: £1,129

ORIGIN: Finland

TYPE: Amp & effects modelling floorboard

FEATURES: WiFi, 8-in/8-out USB audio interface, tuner, MIDI, 3,072 Presets, capture facility, tap tempo, locking power cord, compatibility with supported Neural DSP plug-ins, XLR with phantom power

CONTROLS: Touchscreen, Volume slider, 4x footswitches, 4x rotary actuators

CONNECTIONS: XLR/standard jack combi input, standard input, XLR Main outputs (1/L&2/R), mini stereo phones output, standard Capture out, XLR Main outputs (1/L&2/R), standard outputs (3/L&4/R), standard Send (1/2), standard Return (1/2), EXP, MIDI In, MIDI Out/Thru, USB

POWER: Supplied adapter 12VDC 1.2A

DIMENSIONS: 228 (w) x 118 (d) x 65mm (h)

select the model for the block. It's intuitive and efficient, but you can also use the computer-based Cortex Control software editor for organising everything on a bigger screen.

If you wish to capture the sound of your own rig, the mini has you covered with two modes. Neural Capture V1 runs directly on the device for everyday use, while Neural Capture V2 uses Cortex Cloud to process Captures with a higher-resolution algorithm.

The Quad Cortex is known for the quality and playability of its sounds, and there are amps and cabinets here to cover most eventualities, alongside dirt pedals, modulation effects, delays and reverbs. There's plenty of scope for building your own sounds, for sure, but there's also loads that you can use straight out of the box. The carefully curated factory Presets start out with the first bank of four, which includes solid rigs built around a pair of Marshalls, a Fender Twin and a Roland JC-120. There's more to come, too, as the Quad Cortex operating system is subject to regular updates – the latest has added three new reverbs, including a vintage plate that sits very nicely with guitar.

Verdict

The Quad Cortex mini ticks many, many boxes. There's no denying the quality of the sounds it is capable of producing and its flexibility of use. Set it up to suit your needs and it could do a job on stage, either by itself or as an integral part of a larger rig, albeit with a little less ease in the footswitching than its larger sibling.

Away from the stage, though, there are no compromises to be found. This is perfect for sitting on a tabletop next to your computer as a source of quality sounds for recording as it has excellent capability as an audio interface. Its complement of eight channels in and eight channels out offers great flexibility, especially in recording tracks of processed and dry guitar simultaneously. It'll take care of practice needs, too, with use of its headphone output and looper.

If you already own a Quad Cortex for live use and have the funds, the mini is a shoo-in as an easily transportable belt-and-braces backup unit because Presets and complete system backups are able to move freely between the two models. For anyone else, the mini could well be the perfect gateway into the Neural universe. **G**



PROS Compact, portable size; sound quality; touchscreen operation; ease of editing; Neural Capture facility; Neural Cloud for file storage and download; good USB interface capability; versatile connectivity

CONS Only four footswitches; no momentary footswitch assignments here

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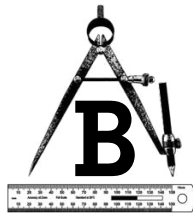
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« BLUEPRINT »

MASTER PLAN

With Fender's Custom Shop nearing its 40th anniversary, we catch up with two of its most sought-after Master Builders, Austin MacNutt and Andy Hicks, to talk Teles, Jazzmasters, mods and more

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Fender

Fender's Custom Shop is the home of the company's dream machines, which are built to the highest quality the California-based company can offer. But there are tiers within tiers even at this level, and the Custom Shop's Masterbuilt instruments offer the closest any large guitar maker can get to the hand-craft of master luthiers, with a small cadre of highly experienced Fender guitar makers personally crafting dream guitars from headstock to end-pin. Recently, we were lucky enough to sit down for a chat with two of Fender's most in-demand Master Builders, Austin MacNutt and Andy Hicks. Who better to ask about the sonic soul of Leo Fender's classic designs and the best ways to mod and maintain them for maximum performance – and also give their views on the way ahead for aged guitars, trends in custom guitar making at Fender and more...

It's the 75th anniversary of the Telecaster – so tell us, what's your best setup tip for the classic Tele?

Austin MacNutt: "If you're dealing with a vintage three-barrel saddle kind of thing, that's the first big thing that comes to mind. If you don't have compensated saddles, you're just kind of splitting the difference [in terms of intonation] – that's all you can do. So one's going to be a hair



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sharp, one's gonna be a hair flat on each of those saddles. But if that's not what you want to do, you can get the compensated saddles and then you're off to the races."

On Fender's recent American Ultra Luxe Vintage '50s Tele, we notice they used six individual block-style saddles but made them of brass, presumably to keep that classic Tele twang while offering more accurate intonation – do you think that style of bridge can offer the best of both worlds?

Austin: "I haven't been hands-on with that particular [type of bridge and saddle] myself yet, but from what I can see it's a great setup – because you still get the brass and you know it's still got that vintage DNA but just brought into the modern world a little bit."

How about Fender electrics with a vibrato – especially the Strat? How do you avoid niggling issues with the guitar not returning to tuning when you use the vibrato a lot?

Andy Hicks: "All the setups are going to start, for me, with making sure that your fret dressing is done properly. Because if you're having to fight that, then you're going to run into issues through a lot of your setup. There are different kinds of nut files – there are ones that have a flat, squared-off bottom, and then there are ones that have a curved bottom that more [closely] replicate the shape of a string. And that's what I like. It allows them to smoothly roll through the nut and return to the position that they want to be in. Also, when I cut the slot, I don't oversize it, but I do roll the file a little bit as I'm doing it – to remove any burrs, anything that could catch one of the winds on one of the strings. I'll also be making sure that all the strings are stretched properly and that there are no burrs on the saddles at the bridge as well."

"So many issues can be solved by just taking some small file and, without much pressure, dragging it across the surfaces where the strings are going to be – because you're catching these little metal fragments that bind the strings. What is causing the tuning issue is the string is being stretched or loosened, but then it's not returning to its original tension."



1. Austin MacNutt likes the precise intonation offered by compensated saddles for Teles

2. Andy Hicks says accurate fret-dressing is the starting point of all good setups

3. Ice-blue trans finishes over figured maple make these Strats by Austin MacNutt stand out





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How do you tend to tailor the break angle over the nut to optimise tuning stability?

Andy: “I’m pretty careful about cutting my nut slots so that the angle is going to be the natural angle of the string from the break point to where it’s meeting on the tuning key. If you’re slotting too steep of an angle, then you’re going to have a sharp point that the string is resting on again, and that’s going to be a binding point. If it’s not steep enough, then you’re going to have this area where it can slide and not really have a meeting point. So it takes a little bit of practice, but once you can really nail that angle, that also is doing a lot of the heavy lifting for making sure that you’re not having tuning issues.”

Austin: “It doesn’t matter if it’s staggered tuners or traditional tuners with a string tree; that angle needs to just match the natural path of the string.”

It’s surprising what quite subtle tweaks can do to optimise the overall performance of the guitar.

Austin: “Yeah. I do some setup work for session players out in LA and they’re always surprised that they’ll bring an instrument over and I’ll immediately know what the issue is. It’s just a case of

one swipe of a file, and they’re like, ‘That’s it?’ And I’m like ‘Yeah.’ And they say, ‘I could have done that.’ But [you couldn’t really fix it that quickly] unless you do this stuff enough to the point that it becomes second nature to you – and you can just hear or feel the problem and know pretty immediately what’s going on.”

How about classic offset designs like the Jazzmaster – anything you take extra care over in terms of setup for those?

Austin: “I think the first thing I would try to tell somebody who has a vintage Jazzmaster bridge and the tremolo that goes with that is, just understand what it is and what the pros of that are – and also that it wasn’t a perfect design. It’s still being fiddled with today. So, you know, there’s not really an answer for everybody’s playing style. But one of the things that I’ve found – and we do this [as a matter of course] in the Custom Shop – is that when you take the bridge out, you want to make sure that all the components fit properly. It’s all metal pieces that are acting on a pivot, and they can create these little burrs and bends. For example, sometimes, I’m taking the bridge off and filing the bottom of the screw for the

height adjustment. And just doing that a little bit can help with the tuning stability on the Jazzmaster.

“And I know this is not really what you’re asking, but if you’re talking about Custom Shop instruments – specifically Masterbuilt ones – the person who’s assembling the bridge is also the person who’s going to be setting the guitar up later and doing things to the components before they even assemble the bridge. When I’m undertaking that kind of work, I know what could potentially be an issue later. So it’s just an experience thing.”

How do you think what the Custom Shop offers to players has evolved over the past 20 years?

Andy: “Obviously, it originated as just strictly recreating examples of true vintage instruments, which we are still doing today. But then there are also [models we make] that are a little bit extra or that have weird colour combinations, stuff that is not vintage-correct...”

Austin: “Things that live in the world of fantasy a little bit.”

Andy: “Yeah, so it’s expanded to that and that opens up a lot of opportunities for really cool-looking instruments – you



4. The influence of shred is making itself increasingly felt in Custom Shop orders

5. Vibe ageing and a 70s-style metallic sunburst finish adorn this Andy Hicks HSS Strat

6. This purposeful twin-humbucker build from Austin MacNutt is full of retro touches

can really have a lot of fun getting some extravagant relicing or weird colours going. So it started from trying to recreate vintage stuff, which we still do, but now it's become its own thing, too.

"I think also there's always this thought of like, 'Will the relic fad go away?' And I don't think it will. When you're ordering that kind of instrument, it is – by its nature and how we do the work on it – a one-of-one instrument. So if you're getting a NOS [New Old Stock finish – namely, pristine and unaged] Candy Apple Red Strat, then you're going to see other Strats out in the wild that look like your Strat. But if you're having any level of relicing done on it, you can always pick yours out from the crowd. And I think for customers, especially if they're spending that kind of money on an instrument, it's like, 'My guitar is now one-of-one, just because it has this unique [artificial ageing] fingerprint on it that doesn't exist on any other guitar.'

It's like relicing has become a kind of aesthetic all of its own that goes beyond simply trying to make guitars look authentically old.

Andy: "Yeah, I mean, there are still people who want an instrument that looks like it's straight out of the early 50s, and then there are other people who see [relicing] just as another aesthetic part of the guitar."

"Just as people have favourite colours, they also have their favourite relicing level" Andy Hicks

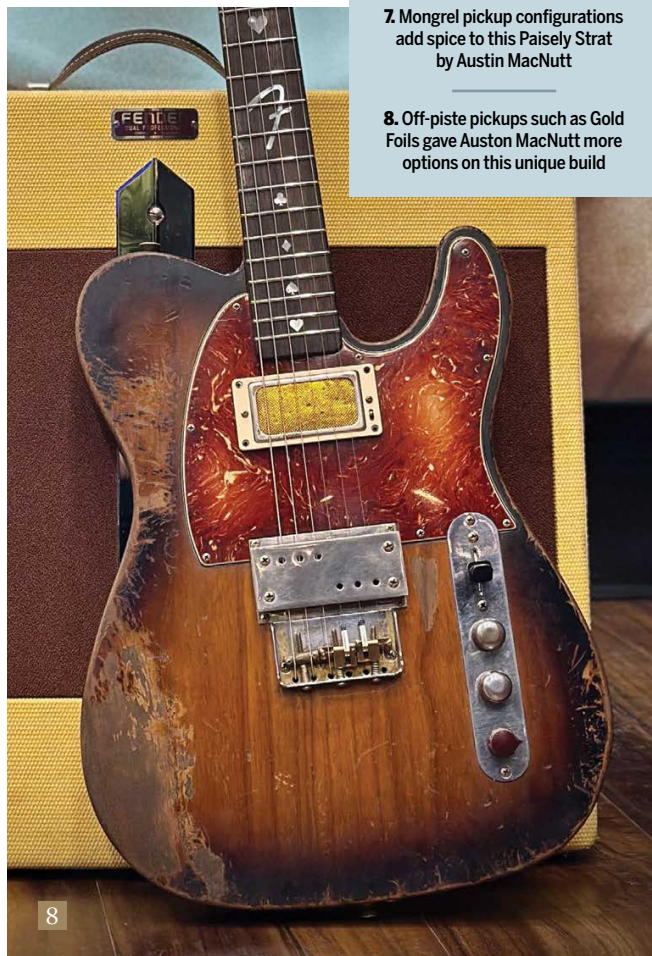
In just the same way as people have got their favourite colours, they also tend to have their favourite relicing level. And it's not about, 'Does it look like it actually happened to the instrument?' Something that you'll hear a lot of is that relicing is like 'stolen valour' – like, 'Oh, you didn't earn that relicing.' But I think people who like it are not thinking of it like that. They're not thinking, 'I want this instrument to look like I've played it for 60 years.' They just think it's cool. And I don't gatekeep that kind of [choice] because it's your instrument – and whatever makes you feel like you want to pick it up and play it, that's what you should do."

Austin: "I always tell people there's nothing stopping you from ordering a NOS [non-relic] guitar. I'm more than happy to not beat it up [laughs] – so you can have both."





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7. Mongrel pickup configurations add spice to this Paisley Strat by Austin MacNutt

8. Off-piste pickups such as Gold Foils gave Austin MacNutt more options on this unique build

As time goes by and children of the 1990s enter the market for high-end Fenders, do you notice an increase in shred-inspired orders in the Custom Shop?

Andy: “I would say that’s a pretty accurate assessment. I’ve done some more Floyd Rose stuff recently than I have in the past, for sure – there’s definitely more of that.”

Austin: “We’re entering the era where the guys who grew up listening to Eddie Van Halen, they’re the customer base now who are buying Custom Shop, and they’re not looking for their dad’s guitar. They’re looking for *their* guitar hero’s guitar. So I know that a big part of my clientele is our customers who want those ‘Super Strats’ and I probably do more Floyd Rose HSS than anybody else in the shop. It’s not surprising to me at all because guys who are my age and slightly older, I know that those are the instruments they grew up listening to: their dads grew up listening to stock ‘Blackguards’ and vintage Strats, and their heroes are screaming on high-performance instruments.”

What other interesting new avenues do you think Custom Shop guitars can go down?

Austin: “Well, there’s no shortage of interesting requests and it’s fun to fulfil

“If you take too much away from what makes it a Fender, it loses some of that soul” **Andy Hicks**

someone’s dream guitar. They might be the only one that has that idea or that specific group of specs on the guitar – so it’s always something new.”

Andy: “But there’s a balance you have to do with Fender because, at some point, if you take too much away from what makes it a Fender, it’s losing some of that soul. And Leo created these incredible instruments – and when I talk about Leo Fender and his early instruments, I compare him to somebody who invented the game of baseball, and then his very first turn at bat, hit a home run. He did it so well that even now, 70 years later, everybody still wants to have their version of the Strat and the Tele.

“And so [you ask yourself], ‘Am I at some point going to take away so many parts of the soul of the instrument that now it’s no longer a Strat?’ And if I’ve done that, I’m probably not doing my job correctly. There

are other brands under the Fender umbrella that maybe have the freedom to do that, but I try to always strike a balance with it.”

It seems like more and more guitar makers are now offering some form of aged finish for their instruments – obviously inspired by the Relic trend that Fender started. Does that increasing competition influence what you do to any degree?

Andy: “For me, I’m just so proud of the quality of work that all of the Master Builders are putting out, and the rest of Custom Shop, that I don’t spend a lot of time worrying about who else is chasing that look. If somebody else wants to try to do it and it benefits them, then great. But I’m not too worried about what somebody else is doing. I’m focused on my own builds and making sure that there’s a certain standard of quality that goes out. Everybody’s free to try it. It’s not as easy as they think. A lot of people say, ‘I can drag a guitar behind my car and then sell it for that price,’ and it’s like, ‘Okay, go do it then! [Laughs]” **G**

For more info on Andy and Austin’s incredible work at the Custom Shop see <https://uk.fender.com/pages/custom-shop>

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ERIC JOHNSON

The guitar-tone guru reflects on the instruments that have passed through his hands, and how vintage isn't always the way to go

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

"Let's see. What would that be? I would say it probably would be a '63 ES-335 like the one Clapton used at the Albert Hall [for Cream's Farewell gig in November 1968]. I found it in a music store for, like, \$300 many, many years ago. I had a '66 335 that my father helped me get when I was 12, but I found this other one when I guess I was about 18 or 19. At the time, I didn't know that Clapton had played a 335. I remember always thinking he played that painted-up SG ['64 'The Fool'] or a Les Paul.

“Just because it’s old, cool, original and worth money, [it doesn’t mean] you’re going to get the perfect guitar”

"I always loved 335s and I kind of fell in love with them before I knew that he played one. Then I was surprised to find out years later that he played one. I was listening to The Ventures and learned to play from Nokie Edwards and Brian Jones. Then I got into Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton, and that led me into going back and learning from BB King, Freddie King and Albert King and that kind of stuff. And then I just got interested in some jazz players, like Wes Montgomery and John McLaughlin – people like that."

What was the last guitar you bought, and why?

"The last guitar I bought was just a few months ago. I found this reissue Fender '54 Strat. I think they made it in the early 2000s and, I don't know, it was just a really nice guitar. So I got that and I've been enjoying playing it. It's an American Vintage Reissue: I guess it would have been the 50th anniversary of the '54 Strat. I think it was probably made in 2004. On a Strat, the bridge pickup is

usually too weak for me, so I usually put a DiMarzio HS-2 in that position, or sometimes I'll just put a higher-output single-coil pickup in. Then I take the tone control of the middle pickup, unhook it and put it on the bridge pickup and put a five-way switch in and have bigger frets put on the neck."

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

"Well, you know, probably my original [1954] 'Virginia' Strat. I think I paid \$175 for it, but that was many years ago, when they really were going for a few hundred bucks back in the late 70s. I mean, in today's money, it was still a good deal, but, yeah, you could just get them pretty cheap. Back in those days, I remember you could go into a music store and there'd be several old 50s Strats. You just took your pick, you know? They'd be under \$500."

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

"Yeah, a number of them [laughs]. I had a '54 Strat and, unfortunately, I sold it because the electronics got damaged and I had it rewired, but it never quite sounded the same. It was a wonderful guitar. I wish I had just kind of gone, 'Okay, just put it in the closet and someday you'll run into an old pickguard,' you know what I mean? 'Just don't freak out.' But I was like, 'Ah, it's no good any more. I've got to find another one.'

"Since then, I'd buy a '54 Strat and then I'd sell it, buy one, sell it... Just keep trading them off. And I've been disappointed in some of those. I don't think that every single old guitar necessarily means you're going to get the perfect guitar just because it's old and cool and original and worth money. I have bought vintage guitars before and you think they're okay, but once you start playing songs and playing with a band and doing what you do, you realise they're not really going with you like you need them to.

Amid the Stratocasters he uses on stage, Eric Johnson also uses an mid-60s SG (below left)



PHOTO BY MAX GRACE



Eric's signature Fender Thinline Strat was unveiled at Winter NAMM in 2018

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



ERIC'S GO-TO RIG

"I use a number of amps. They don't all run at the same time, I have an A/B switching system. So right now I'm using a couple of old black-panel Deluxe Reverbs for a clean tone with an Echoplex and a TC [Electronic] Chorus. Then I can switch over to a Bandmaster Reverb that Bill Webb has modified – kind of Dumble-ised – and I run that into a 4x12 Marshall cabinet with an old Arbiter Fuzz Face and a Tube Screamer for dirty rhythm. Then the third sound is either a 100- or a 50-watt Marshall into a 4x12 cabinet with a BK Butler Tube Driver. For guitars, I have one of my [Fender] signature models, but I've been using that 2004 '54 reissue a lot lately, and I have a '63 or '64 SG. I also have a Martin D-35 and a Maton acoustic."

Eric found his prized 'Virginia' '54 Strat in a guitar store in Austin, Texas, when he was in his early 20s

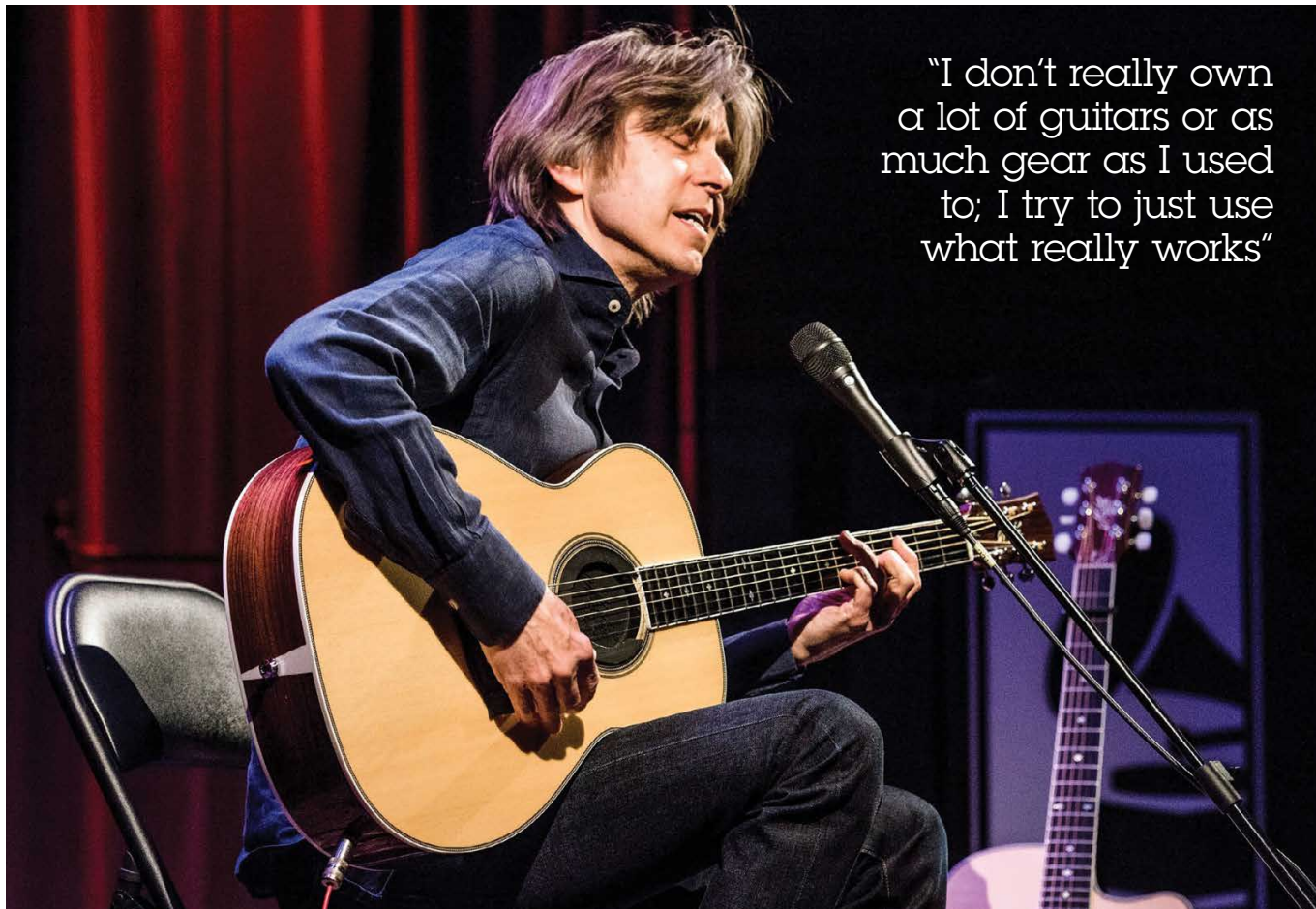


PHOTO BY TIMOTHY NORRIS/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

"I don't really own a lot of guitars or as much gear as I used to; I try to just use what really works"

Eric on stage during an acoustic moment, using one of his Maton guitars, which he currently favours for live work alongside a Martin D-35

"I'm not as picky about the originality of a guitar any more because I think that sometimes guitars that are all original and real collectible might not be the most magical instruments, so I try to just let go of that. And I don't really own a lot of those guitars any more. I don't own as much gear as I used to; I try to just use what really works.

"Also, I remember once I had a 1960 Sunburst Les Paul, amazing guitar, and I found this '58 black Strat and I wanted it so bad and I didn't have the money to buy it, so I sold the Les Paul so I could get this Strat... That was not the best idea in the world."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"Don't be swayed by the pedigree. I think I spent a lot of years collecting stuff: 'Oh, this thing's cool. It's all original. It's in great shape.' But I didn't really enjoy playing it because when I play it, I feel like I'm fighting it. I mean, if you're going to do it for investment, that's cool. That makes total sense. But I think if you're trying to make music, you want something that's not an impediment. You want it more like wind to your back. That's where the most inspiration is going to come from. Otherwise, it's kind of a mental thing. You can go, 'Wow, I got this cool thing,' which is fine if it's just investment. But if it's about music, that can actually be more of a hang-up."

Do you go window shopping for gear, either online or in music stores?

"Yeah, sometimes I just kind of look and see what's out there because you always wonder if there's something that sounds better. I don't really collect a lot of guitars that I don't use. A friend of mine has this old '55 Strat that I'm borrowing to see whether I want to trade one of mine and get it. If you just looked at the guitar you would never

want it because it's in terrible shape. So my mind goes, 'I don't want this thing.' But then you pick it up and plug it in and it just sounds great, it's amazing. So you have to make a choice: what's most important to you for what you're going to do?"

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?

"That's a great question because I think that the importance of a great amp is really underestimated. Of course, it depends on what you call great. I don't really use complicated amps that have a lot of channels and controls and stuff because I feel that it's wonderful to have all those options, but you pay too high a price for the sound. So I normally just go for a straight-ahead amp. Having said that, they vary so much. So I'd almost rather have a cheap guitar and a really good amp."

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

"Probably the single coils, although I sure like humbuckers for a lead line. But I would probably choose single coils because I think you have a little more versatility. If you have the right kind of overdrive, you can get pretty close to a humbucker sound with a single coil. But the other way around? You can get a nice jazz clean tone with a humbucker, but I've never been able to get some twangy country or Hendrix-type clean rhythm sounds with a humbucker." **[DM]**

Eric Johnson's Texaphonic 2026 UK tour runs from 22 July to 4 August. Tickets available from www.thegigcartel.com and www.ericjohnson.com

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INTRODUCING

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Huw Price's *Nitty Gritty*

It feels sad to ditch the magnet wire when a vintage pickup fails, but might it be saved?

1950s P-90 Restoration

My former editor, fellow guitar journalist and long-time friend Dave Hunter recently acquired a broken 1950s P-90. Dave wasn't concerned that the coil had no resistance reading because it was inexpensive and he only bought it to harvest the parts for humbucker modification experiments.

Having removed the magnets, pole screws and keeper bar, Dave was left with a useless bobbin, two bobbin screws and a baseplate he didn't need. Knowing that I enjoy working on pickups, he very kindly gifted the leftovers to me.

The baseplate looks very old and all the indentations are consistent with the look

of 1950s baseplates. Similarly, it has flat-head bobbin screws, which suggest a pre-1957 manufacturing date, along with an evenly wound coil, old-looking tape and black 'pigtail' wires. You can never say for sure, but there's nothing to suggest it isn't a 1950s P-90.

Dave had wrapped the whole assembly with masking tape in order to keep it intact on its journey over the Atlantic. With the tape removed, it was plain to see that the bobbin had shattered and the magnet wire was visible through the cracks. Vintage P-90s were wound onto styrene bobbins and this type of damage is not uncommon.

Twist In The Pigtail

Some pickup manufacturers argue that the magnet wire used to wind pickup coils during the 1950s and early 1960s is a key contributor to 'vintage tone' and, furthermore, modern magnet wire doesn't sound the same. I'll admit I'm not experienced enough to have a strong opinion either way, but this seemed like an opportunity to find out.

Rather than simply wind a coil onto a replacement bobbin with modern plain enamel wire, I thought it would be a fun challenge to try to unwind the broken bobbin and reuse the vintage wire instead. To my surprise (or maybe not), there is

"With the tape removed, you could see a shattered bobbin with the wire visible through the cracks"

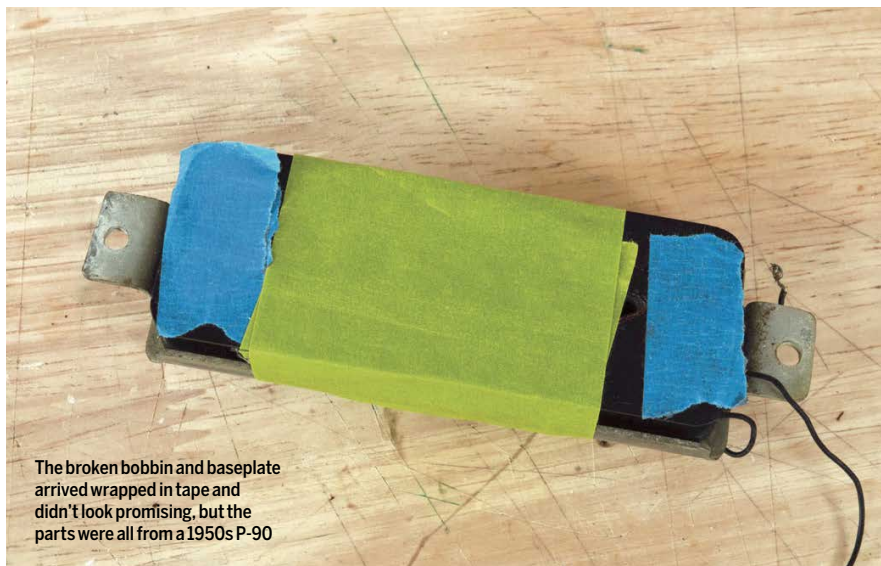
very little online information on how to do this, but I figured it would require a spinning jig for the bobbin and a take-up spool mounted onto my pickup winder.

Jig's Up

The bobbin had to be secured onto some sort of backing that could rotate freely in response to the pull from the winding machine motor. For this I cut a 100mm diameter disk from scrap plywood and drilled an 8mm hole through the centre. I then used a 20mm forstner bit to cut about halfway through the plywood so the head of the M8 coach bolt I planned to use as a spindle could sit inside the recess and allow the bobbin to be secured flat against the disk.

I marked the position of the two outer pole screw holes on the disk's centre line and drilled 3mm holes that would allow me to use the Mojotone pickup winder's screws and thumb nuts to attach the bobbin. I then had to make a stand for the disk to spin in line with the take-up spool on the winding machine.

Rather than try to describe what I did in excessive detail, you should be able to see from the photos. Suffice to say, the base measured 130mm by 80mm, and the



The broken bobbin and baseplate arrived wrapped in tape and didn't look promising, but the parts were all from a 1950s P-90

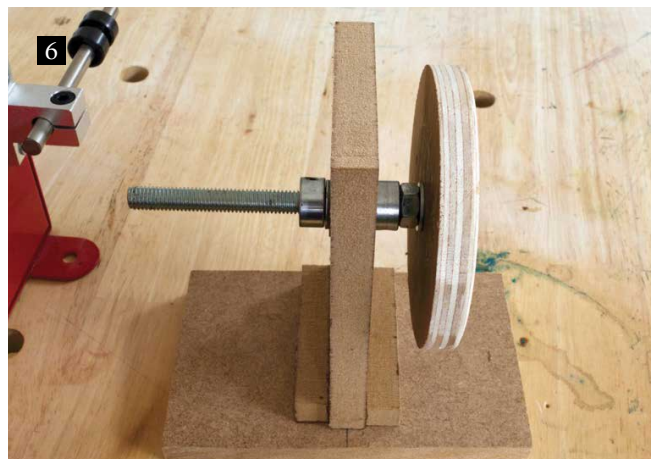


Things looked worse when the tape was removed to reveal a cracked bobbin and an exposed wire coil

Huw constructed a spinning jig to aid the process of unwinding the vintage wire from the cracked bobbin

"Some argue that 50s and 60s magnet wire is a key contributor to 'vintage tone'"





3. The baseplate was in good condition and the original tape was still wrapped around the coil

4. After warming with a hair dryer, the tape peeled away, leaving sticky residue on the coil

5. The unrolling jig was made from scrap wood and an assortment of ball bearings, locking collars, washers and a nut

6. Once assembled, the disk span with very low friction and a variety of different bobbins could be attached to it

upright was 120mm by 70mm. I didn't put much effort into this and simply used scrap pieces of MDF bonded with epoxy glue.

The only relevant part was the 22mm hole I drilled through the upright section to accommodate two sealed miniature ball bearings, which I glued into the hole. The internal diameter of the bearings was 8mm, and I also used three M8 washers, an M8 nut and two shaft collars with grub screws to fix them in position. The bearing and collars came from Bearing Boys UK and the result was a bobbin disk that span friction-free.

Prepping The P'up

Having separated the bobbin from the baseplate, I had to remove the paper tape from the outer coil. After 70 years, it was reluctant to detach, and tugging too hard risked damaging the wire. To ease the process, I gently heated the tape with a hair dryer and it then peeled off fairly easily.

The tape Gibson used was 1/4-inch wide and 18 inches long. It was wrapped in the same anti-clockwise direction as the

"Things quickly took a turn for the worst and proved infinitely more challenging than regular rewinds"

magnet wire with straight and square cuts at each end. The magnet wire to pigtail wire joint was protected by a 3/4-inch long piece of paper tape folded over the solder.

Black residue left over from the paper tape covered the coil and, having unwound a few turns by hand, I could tell it might be sticky enough to snap the wire. It had to be removed – and cotton buds soaked in naphtha lighter fluid proved effective. With that done, I mounted the bobbin onto the disk and covered the bobbin cracks with masking tape to prevent the wire from snagging.

Test Spin

While waiting for the arrival of an empty spool, I became impatient and used an empty solder spool instead. To attach it to the machine, I applied tape to both mating surfaces and then applied superglue to the tape. The tape is strong enough to hold the parts, and once you're done it's easy to peel it away, leaving the parts glue-free.

I clamped the bobbin disk jig to my workbench, wrapped a few turns onto the take-up spool and started the machine. The technique is very similar to pickup winding, with one hand used to guide the wire onto the spool, but it needs to be done at a very low speed to prevent the wire from snapping. As such, it takes an extremely long time and, with numerous sanity breaks thrown in, the whole process added up to over an hour.

7. A take-up spool was mounted on the pickup winder and the roller with the bobbin attached was clamped down in front of it

8. The plain enamel wire on the left and centre are from Allparts and Elektrisola. The Gibson factory wire can be seen on the rewound bobbin and the right spool

9. After a touch of light bobbin relacing, the P-90 is reassembled with A3 magnets and aged pole screws

10. Fresh two-strand braided wire was attached and masking tape will eventually replace the heat-shrink insulation



7



8



9



10

The original bobbin was way beyond saving, so I prepped a replacement. The most vintage-correct ones I know of come from Philadelphia Luthier Tools & Supplies. They have a smooth (rather than textured) surface and no extraneous notches. I just buff them up to give them a more vintage sheen and then score a line down the centre to replicate the vintage moulding mark.

Getting Wound Up

Everything up to this point had been going to plan, but the project quickly took a turn for the worst and proved infinitely more challenging than regular rewinds. The first thing I noticed was the fragility of the wire as I sanded off the plain enamel coating to solder the wire onto the start pigtail. It's easy to over-sand, making the copper almost too flimsy to wrap around the pigtail without breaking.

Then the wire snapped almost as soon as I started winding, and I realised the shape of the solder spool was preventing the wire from coming away cleanly. I tried mounting the spool onto my spinner contraption, but again the wire broke.

By this time the proper spool had arrived so I decided to transfer the magnet wire onto it. This proved relatively straightforward until near the end when the wire snapped again. This time the cause was the sticky tape residue that I hadn't completely removed.

After a splice repair, I was able to transfer a bit more of the remaining wire but gave up after it snapped again. Coincidentally, I had another 1950s P-90 in for repair that also had a broken bobbin. I confess I had to salvage another few thousand turns of wire from that, but it was a perfect visual match.

The proper spool made things easier, but this ended up being the slowest rewind I have ever done. I was far more focused on avoiding breakages than specific winding patterns, so the coil was looser than usual. Even so, there were more breaks and, while I usually find splice repairs straightforward, this vintage wire proved tricky to solder.

Although the vintage wire coil read 8k, I wouldn't have felt comfortable handing it back to a customer. With so many splices, it's anybody's guess how long it will last. For the other P-90, I wound an 8k coil onto a replacement bobbin in my usual style using modern Elektrisola wire. Both pickups were then reassembled with matching Alnico III magnets to be tested in the bridge position of my friend Ed Oleszko's 1957 Gibson ES-225.


The P-90 with the vintage wire sounded exactly like the P-90 in my own 1956 ES-225, which we used for reference. It was extremely open and clear, full of harmonic intrigue, and single notes had a very expressive vocal quality. Although

less pretty sounding, the Elektrisola P-90 had a tad more immediacy, a bit of extra push and marginally thicker single notes, but Ed and I struggled to distinguish between them.

Whether these slight differences can be attributed to the vintage wire, less tension in the coil or some other factor is impossible to say. Since they sounded virtually identical, it begs the question: was it all worth it?

Round Up

My conclusion is that this approach would only be worthwhile when preserving the originality of a valuable but non-functioning vintage pickup is paramount. I also suspect that Patent Applied For pickups would be more promising candidates than P-90s. And remember, this procedure would be impossible with potted pickups. Another thing to look out for is any evidence of glue around cracks and splits in the bobbin. Superglue, in particular, will wick its way into the coil and make it impossible to unwind. See glue? Forget it.

Anybody who can wind a pickup should be able to unwind one, too, but rewinding with salvaged vintage wire presents certain challenges. Sir Thomas Beecham famously suggested trying everything once – with two notable exceptions. I could suggest a third... 

Thanks to Dave Hunter and Ed Oleszko

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Getting Funky

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Stratocaster & Vox AC15 Hand-Wired

Difficulty ★★☆☆ | 20 mins per example

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PHRASING

on blues guitar, this can often translate to rhythm. It's possible to play a great solo without many notes if the rhythm is interesting. Obviously, the same goes for rhythm parts – so the example piece concentrates on this area but using a hybrid 'rhythm/lead' approach favoured by John Mayer, SRV, Nile Rodgers and Jimi Hendrix, among others. Blurring the boundaries between the traditional distinctions of rhythm and lead guitar also serves a trio format well, and, as you'll hear, the backing track consists of only bass and drums.

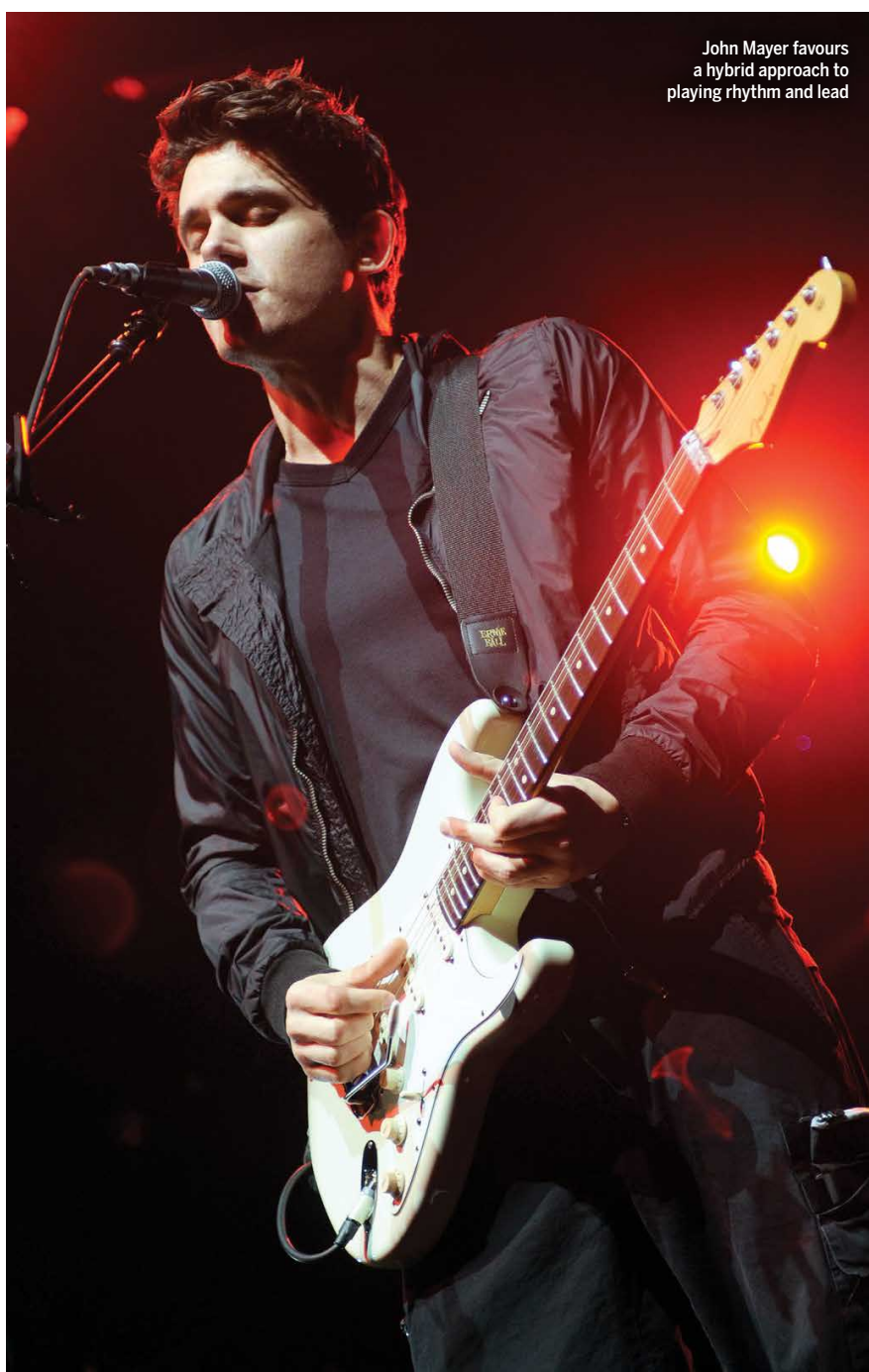
While we can be minimal at times, there is a responsibility (some might say freedom!) to fill the harmonic and/or rhythmic gaps. Not all blues is 'funky' per se, but there is a lot to be gained from understanding displaced/off-kilter rhythms, and this is what the example piece is designed to help you with.

A good starting point is to think of each beat in the bar as divided into four semiquavers. Initially, mute all of the strings then play alternating 'down-up-down-up' strokes, four per beat of the bar/16 to the whole bar. You'll sometimes hear this described as a '1-e-and-a' pattern. Accent the first downstroke on each beat of the bar, then try moving the emphasis around, maybe to the 'e' or 'a' on the upstrokes. This is the basis of the approach used in the example piece, though you'll notice I'm not playing every single semiquaver beat, even though my picking hand often goes through the motions.

Another thing to bear in mind is to keep it relaxed and don't hit the strings too hard. This is an easy trap to fall into when playing tight staccato rhythms. Finally, remember you can mute with both picking and/or fretting hands to control ringing strings. Hope you enjoy and see you next time! 🎸



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now to stream or buy from Amazon Music



John Mayer favours a hybrid approach to playing rhythm and lead

PHOTO BY TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

ALMOST EVERY BAR IS 'LOCKED-DOWN' with a double hit on an A5 power chord and a more rhythmic answering phrase in the subsequent three beats. This can often be a repeated phrase, but it's more useful to show you a range of options in this context. Though the muted hits are notated as faithfully as possible, this is not an exact science, so allow yourself a little flexibility, rather than attempting to duplicate anything precisely.

♩ = 98 A5

BU BD

Example 2

MOVING TO THE IV CHORD (D), this second phrase plays around with the initial chord hits, using a dotted rhythm. This is a bit of a liberty as the bass and drums stay with two straight quavers, but I think we'll get away with it... Concentrate on the drums to aim your accents/pauses as precisely as possible, and note that not every '1-e-and-a' space is filled, even if your picking hand does go through the motions to keep the timing.

♩ = 98 D5

BU BD

A5

BU BU

Example 3

THE C AND D CHORDS USE A SIMILAR PATTERN in this final example. Note the tied/held chords going across the rhythm – slow the whole thing down if that helps make sense of what's happening on the various subdivisions of the beat. Like Example 1 (and 2), the muted hits should be played without over-thinking which strings you're hitting – just make sure everything is muted and it won't matter too much. For the last bar, it was fun to change to the bridge pickup and go for a rockier feel. This is optional!

♩ = 98

C

D

Let ring

Change to bridge pickup

E5

D/E

E5

E
B
G
D
A
E

1

3

Hear It Here

JOHN MAYER TRIO

TRY!



Recorded live, this album is a particularly great example of what a trio can sound like – and it was a major inspiration for the example piece, especially *Who Did You Think I Was*. Also on this album, check out *I Got A Woman* and *Wait Until Tomorrow*. Bonus mention goes to *Another Kind Of Green* for combining *Little Wing*-type chordwork with a funky shuffle feel. There are a good many ideas waiting to be used here – it's an ample source of inspiration!

JIMI HENDRIX

BAND OF GYPSYS



Though he loved to overdub complementary rhythmic parts in the studio, Jimi was adept at making it work live, too. Check out *Freedom* from *The Cry Of Love* for an example of his studio savvy, then compare with *Who Knows* from *Band Of Gypsies* to hear it live in a trio format. Also, listen to *Message To Love* from the same album, with funky and unison riffing. This really makes the distinction between rhythm and lead guitar seem obsolete.

NILE RODGERS

VARIOUS



We're going unapologetically funk for the last suggestion here – and Nile Rodgers is still the definitive example of a funk rhythm player. Check out his work with Chic: *Le Freak*, *Good Times* and *I Want Your Love*. Alternatively, try Sister Sledge with *Thinking Of You*, *We Are Family* or *Lost In Music*. Elsewhere, why not check out *I'm Coming Out* by Diana Ross, or *Get Lucky* by Daft Punk. All these parts are based on the '1-e-and-a' rhythm described earlier.



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