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Issue 538

JULY 2026

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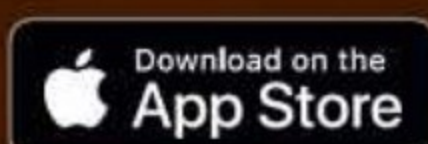
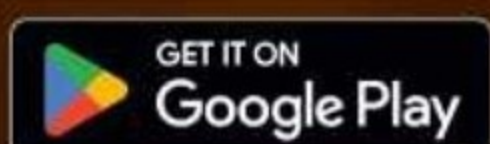
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Flat Earth



Archtops may have ushered in the guitar's 20th century dominance as a soloing instrument, but it was the flat-top acoustic that arrested our hearts. And while songs on acoustic archtops might have romped and stomped dancers through the jazz era, try to imagine Neil Young on an archtop, or McCartney's *Blackbird* or Joni's *Amelia*? Put it this way: if every songwriter in 1970s Laurel Canyon had played an archtop it would have hit very different, to say the least. Yes, there are surprisingly resonant and sonorous archtops – but the sweetness, harmony and shimmering sustain of the steel-string flat-top form the very vocal chords of modern song. And few are sweeter than the dreadnoughts, jumbos and parlours made over the past century by Gibson.

Having just highlighted the differences between the two styles of guitar, let it be said that one of the most remarkable aspects of the evolution of Gibson acoustic guitars is how the Kalamazoo company translated popular archtop models into even more successful flat-top acoustics – as with the L-5 and its flat-top jumbo cousins (see page 64). So while Gibson might initially have been playing catch-up to Pennsylvania competitor Martin, its ingenious efforts were rewarded with some of the most loved and oft-recorded flat-top acoustics in history, notably the workmanlike J-45, whose warm, resonant voice seems to suit a multitude of styles of music. And while Martin's dreadnoughts – with the exception of Style 42 and 45 instruments and suchlike – have a timeless simplicity that borders on austerity, Gibson acoustics have also always possessed a visual richness that suited the rock 'n' roll era so well.

Also, this month, we learned with great sadness of the passing of yet another leading light of British guitar making, Alan Entwistle, rightly celebrated for his work on pickup design in particular. Our thoughts are with his family, friends and colleagues – look out for a full tribute next issue. Enjoy this edition and see you next month.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Eric Bibb

A deep scholar of American blues, Eric tells us about his rich acoustic sound and the revived Larson Bros brand guitar he now plays **p52**



Chris Buck Revstar

The most long-called-for Yamaha signature model we can remember is now here, along with a high-spec Anniversary model **p104**



Tough Job

Changing pickups on a 335 is a notoriously tricky task – in NittyGritty Huw Price offers some pro tips to make delving a little easier next time **p120**

Guitarist

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I'm beyond excited to introduce the next evolution of the MT 15, now featuring a push/pull overdrive control on the Lead channel and a half-power switch, giving players even more tonal flexibility to shape their sound with a compact amp. Can't wait for you all to plug in and experience it!"

– Mark Tremonti



Photo by Chuck Brueckmann



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ANCOATS GRANADA SPECIAL
£1,494

WHAT IS IT? Lightweight, original retro-modern bolt-on design with 'Future Relic' finish

What's On TV?

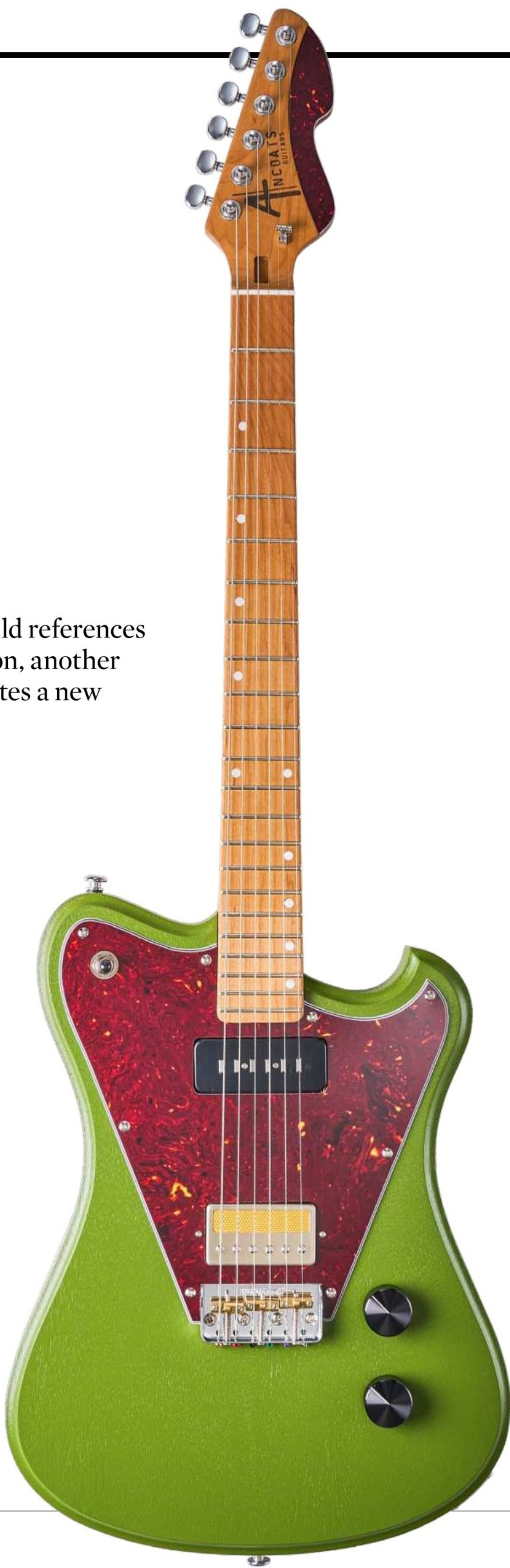
Dave Roberts' latest Ancoats build references the long-gone Granada Television, another Mancunian enterprise, and creates a new spin on the T-style. Why not?

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Matt Lincoln

The current Manchester-made Ancoats line-up consists of just three guitars: the original New Islington, the NQ and the latest Granada as we have here. But it's far from what you see is what you get as each model can be very much custom tailored to what you want. For example, the standard Granada starts at £1,099, including a gigbag, and is a more T-style version of what we have here.

"This is a Granada Special," confirms Ancoats founder, Dave Roberts. "This is 'Special' because I've moved the pickup selector switch to the top horn as the traditional placing on a Telecaster can get in the way of strumming for some people. These guitars are normally more expensive than the 'standard' Granada because it takes more work to rout the rear cavity for the controls – I do this by hand in my workshop, not on the CNC.

"This exact guitar, if ordered as a custom build, would currently be £1,494," he tells us, "but it's actually a part of a small batch where I got the body made at the same place I get my necks made [Dave uses a local CNC manufacturing partner to make the very repeatable necks]. This cuts down the work







1

1. The GoldFoil HB may be a standard humbucker, but that cover adds to the retro vibe – and it has a nice kick. It's said to use an oversized Alnico V magnet and has a measured DCR of 8.31k. The 'cut-off' design Wilkinson bridge, meanwhile, is pretty classy, with its intonated brass saddles. Perhaps oddly for a guitar that is inspired by the Telecaster, you can only top-load your strings

2. These large-diameter control knobs really define the style – they look like they came out of a TV or radiogram from the 60s. Either way, they're really comfortable to use and cool to look at!

time so these are available from £1,350, plus there's 10 per cent off if you join the mailing list, so it actually works out at £1,215. It's exactly the same materials and guitar as the custom jobs, but I get to choose the components – bulk order to save money – and it cuts down build time, so I can offer them a bit cheaper."

That sense of value for money pervades the build. One change here is that the body wood has switched from obeche to the more mahogany-like okoume (korina and swamp ash are the Ancoats standard), here with an overall depth of 40mm,

and a top edge-only 'German-carve' to the edge that is nicely done and suits the style. Ancoats is another new brand that uses proper threaded bolts (not screws) to attach neck to body. There's a classy-looking aluminium neckplate, while the neck here is a clean caramel-coloured roasted plain maple, like the separate fingerboard that has those neat offset dot inlays.

Overall, there's an appealing clean craft, not least to the satin finish neck and more textured 'open-pore' finish to the body, which Dave has coined 'Future Relic': "This is my answer to pre-relic'd or roadworn guitars," he says. "It's probably not that novel of a concept, really. It's basically a thin-skin, water-based finish from Little Greene Paint Company in Manchester with a secret colour underneath. If you play it hard enough the paint will wear naturally and you will have a naturally worn instrument in a few years. If you want to keep it pristine, just don't play it hard and look after it."

The hardware is a little more everyday, not least the die-cast non-logo tuners that provide little behind-the-nut string angle. The 'cut-off' T-style bridge is by Wilkinson, with compensated brass saddles, but perhaps oddly doesn't offer through-body stringing, just top-loading. That's not the bridge's fault; the body simply hasn't been drilled for the former.



2



The Green Pickups Staple P90 is standout, percussive and hollowed – a pickup you might centre a whole build around

The big change over the standard, more T-style Granada is the pickups, typically wound by Green Pickups, again based in Manchester, which move away from the T-style single coils to this humbucker/P-90 setup. Controls are simple: there's the shoulder-placed toggle switch selector paired with a simple master volume and tone, and side-placed output jack.

Feel & Sounds

Just as its 'Special' specification moves this version away from the T-style, it also results in a feel that's nicely original. Yes, on your lap the guitar neck dives a little, but strapped on it feels purposeful with an excellent weight only slightly heavier than the previous obeche New Islington model we looked at a couple of years back in issue 512. The nicely done neck again follows a relatively thin-depth/full-shoulder profile, the medium-gauge frets are nicely finished, too, with good height on the 350mm (12-inch) cambered fingerboard. These fine details, like the satin Osmo oil finish, are all done by Dave, creating a great feel with an almost bare-wood vibe.

3. The Green Pickup Staple P90 uses Alnico V magnets with a measured DCR of 7.58k. Quite a trendy pickup these days, but this one is highly recommended. Again, there are plenty of options if you want something different

4. The headstock here is pretty classy, the dual level face giving a more expensive boutique vibe. You can order a colour-matched face, too – just one of the many options



Does it feel like a vintage Fender? No, but there's nothing that feels 'wrong' and there's an inviting clean ring unplugged.

We've spent a little time with Leigh Greenhough's Green Pickups, and these seem well suited to the Granada Special. The Staple P90 at the neck is standout, percussive and hollowed – it might well be a pickup you'd centre a whole build around. On this platform it's a beautifully funky, choppy rhythm pickup, but pull the volume back a little and there's old-school jazz roundness with just enough clarity. The GoldFoil HB at the bridge is a great match, too. Less a classic 'Gold Foil', more a relatively clean and clear 'bucker with enough clout and midrange for some pretty gained lead voices, it sounds as good as it looks. If this were our order, we'd be requesting a coil-split, though, to create a more T-style single coil at the bridge and

This 'Special' version moves away from the T-style [and] results in a feel that's nicely original

another texture for the nicely jangly mixed position. But, as standard, this is a well-voiced and surprisingly versatile pickup set that really suits the guitar's potential.

Verdict

There's an increasing number of UK makers, from Fidelity to West Valley, who are creating quite original guitars based less on the well-worn classics and more on an often unique style. Ancoats certainly fits into that area. And while the new standard Granada model is more T-style alike, this Special is a little more unique without the bridge or control plate that we've been looking at for decades. There's plenty to customise, too, via the neat webpage configurator and, while we've evaluated this piece at its top price, there are clearly deals to be had.

The style and craft is good. A few minor points could be addressed, but – particularly due to the simple construction and really good pickup set – this is a pretty stylised, classy piece. And along the way it places the heritage of Manchester centre stage. We look forward to seeing and hearing more from Ancoats. **G**



ANCOATS GRANADA SPECIAL

PRICE: £1,494 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Lightly double-cut bolt-on solidbody electric

BODY: Okoume

NECK: Roasted maple, medium 'C' profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Roasted maple, white dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Wilkinson 'Short Bridge' w/ compensated brass saddles, non-locking die-cast tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Green Pickups GoldFoil HB (Bridge) w/ Staple P90 at neck, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone with over-sized control knobs.

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.90/6.38

OPTIONS: Lots! The Ancoats configurator will tell you all you need to know. All models start at £1,099

RANGE OPTIONS: Other current models are the New Islington and the NQ. All share the same base price and wide option palette

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price

FINISHES: Jewel Beetle Green (as reviewed) from huge choice of water-based colours – open-pore 'Future Relic' finish

Ancoats Guitars

www.ancoatsguitars.co.uk



PROS Unique modern-retro design; good weight; plenty of options; good-sounding UK-made pickups; smart water-based Future Relic finish

CONS For a UK-made instrument at this price, it's hard to criticise



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FIRST PLAY



MARTIN 0-10E RETRO
JASON ISBELL
£1,075

WHAT IS IT? Small-body, all-mahogany electro-acoustic model for the Americana star

Little Wonder

This characterful all-mahogany Americana workhorse lands in Martin's Road Series line-up at a sensible price – and with a vibey artist tie-in

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Matt Lincoln

Unless you've been living in the woods, you're probably aware that Jason Isbell is one of modern Americana's biggest stars – although his rootsy new signature Martin 0-10E would be ideal company in a backwoods log cabin.

Isbell's third Martin signature model (there's an 0-17 and a D-18 to his name, too) is, Martin tells us, inspired by the 1940 0-17 he used to record his recent solo album, *Foxes In The Snow*. For the uninitiated, the letters in a Martin model name (in this case a single '0') indicate the body shape and size, while the number after the dash denotes the 'Style' – typically the woods used in its construction along with the guitar's level of ornamentation.

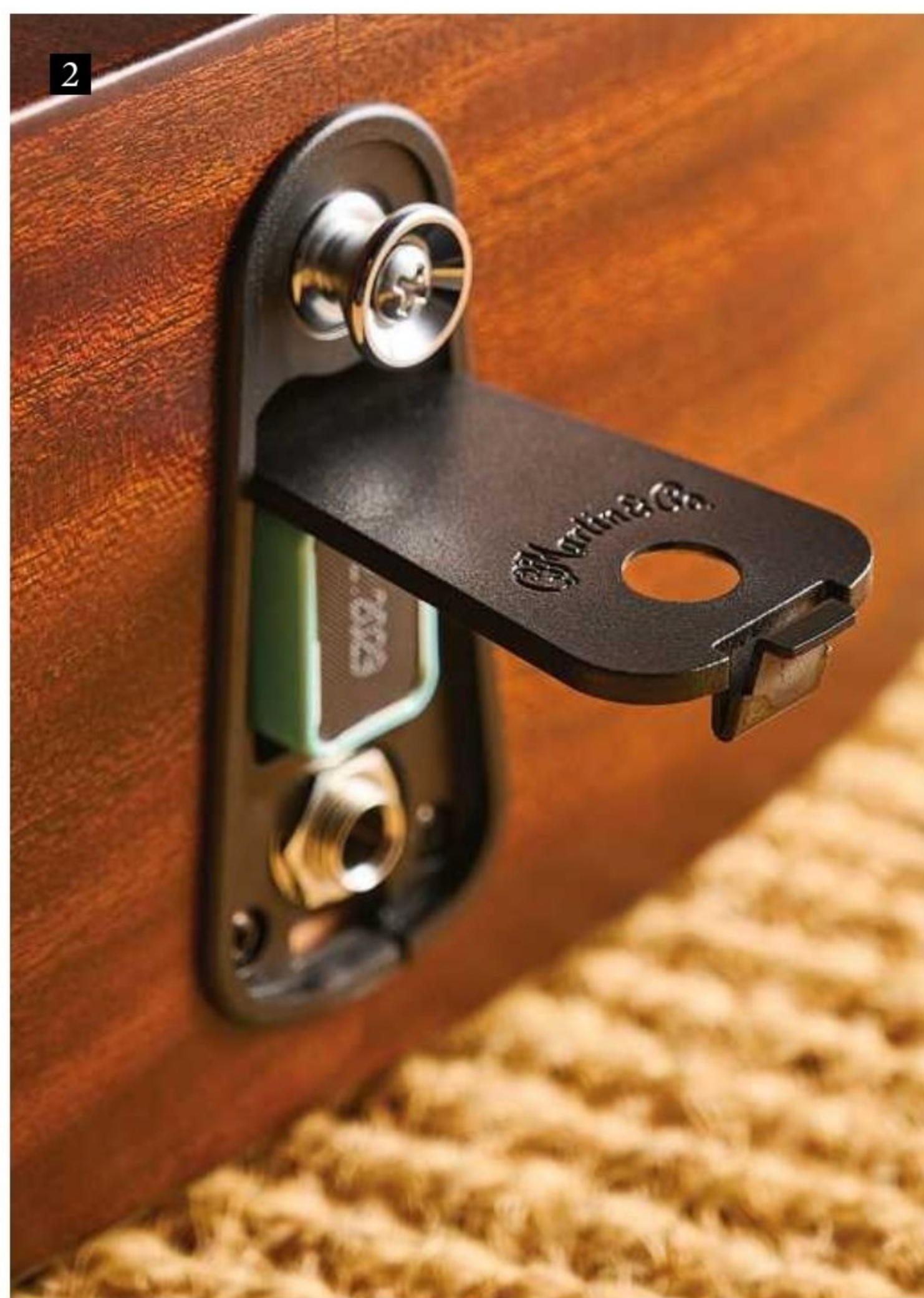
Style 17 guitars with a mahogany top, back and sides and no binding date from the 1930s, and this 0-10E outwardly resembles that classic look, featuring solid mahogany back, sides and top – not the cheaper sapele wood that's been used on similar Road Series instruments in the past. That's a big perk if Martin's sonic heritage is important to you – and narrows the gap with Isbell's limited-edition, high-end 0-17 signature model.







1



2

1. Open-gear tuners have the vintage look and perform accurately and without fuss
2. The combined end-pin and jack unit also houses the battery compartment for easy changes

Martin has, however, made O-10E's neck from 'select hardwoods', a catch-all term for mahogany-like tonewoods such as Spanish cedar, sapele and sipo, which Martin sometimes uses in place of true mahogany to keep costs down. Whichever has been used here, it certainly looks the part, with no jarring grain mismatch with the body. Meanwhile, the slender Performing Artist profile of the 14-fret neck – with just a faint suggestion of a V – feels slinky and comfortable, especially with its silky satin finish. East Indian rosewood looks and feels a great fit for the fingerboard and bridge here, and there's just a real feeling of poised and polished competence about the build. Rounding out the package is Martin's E1 pickup system with built-in tuner, its display tucked discreetly just inside the soundhole.

Feel & Sounds

Taking the O-10E out of its attractively plush gigbag, we're struck by the tactile appeal of the body's satin finish, thin enough to subtly reveal the grain pores but liquid smooth. At 1.7kg (3.7lb), the guitar is strikingly light and the lap-friendly ergonomics of this compact guitar are as comfortable today as they were a century ago. The 20 smallish

frets are tidy and inobtrusive, and the open-gear nickel tuners fulfil their role smoothly and effectively. Inside the body very clean kerfing and bracing work can be seen, with no glue dabs or smears at all.

The ornamentation of the guitar is simple to the point of austerity, with no binding and a single-ring fibre rosette round the soundhole. But the overall build quality is top-drawer, elevating the simple appointments of the guitar into something a little greater than the sum of its parts.

3. A 632mm (24.9-inch) scale length and 20-fret neck make playability positive and precise
4. The guitar's solid mahogany top, back and sides echo the pre-war guitars that inspired this model and are a tidy upgrade over sapele

The build quality elevates the simple appointments into something a little greater than the sum of its parts

The O-10E has a relatively short scale-length of 632mm (24.9 inches), which should offer a slightly looser action than longer-scale acoustics. In practice, the O-10E still has that hallmark Martin feel – slightly stiff but precise – that rewards good technique but exposes untidy playing. The nut width of 44.5mm (1.75 inches) is a little wider than on traditional Martins, in step with changes made to

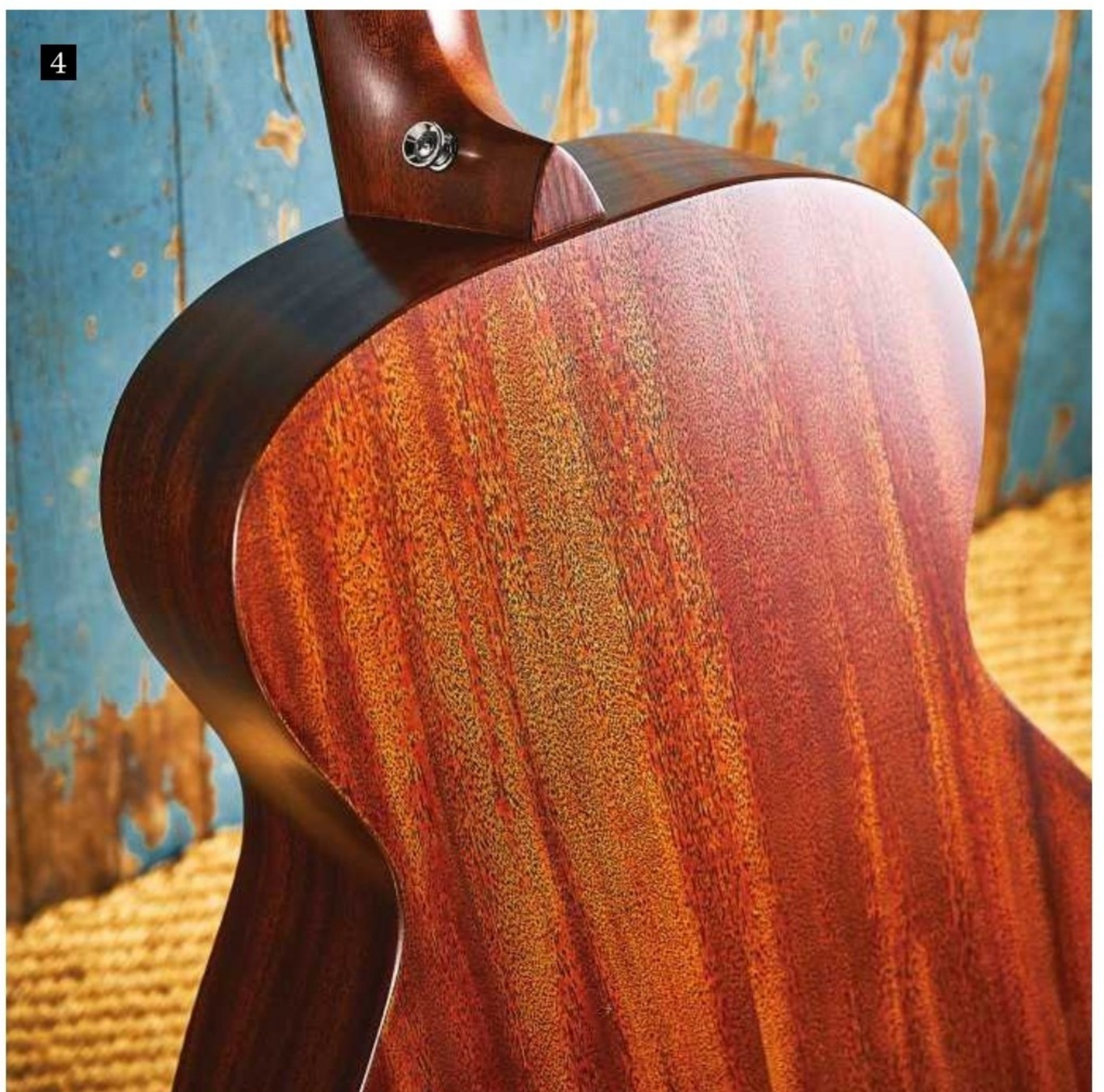


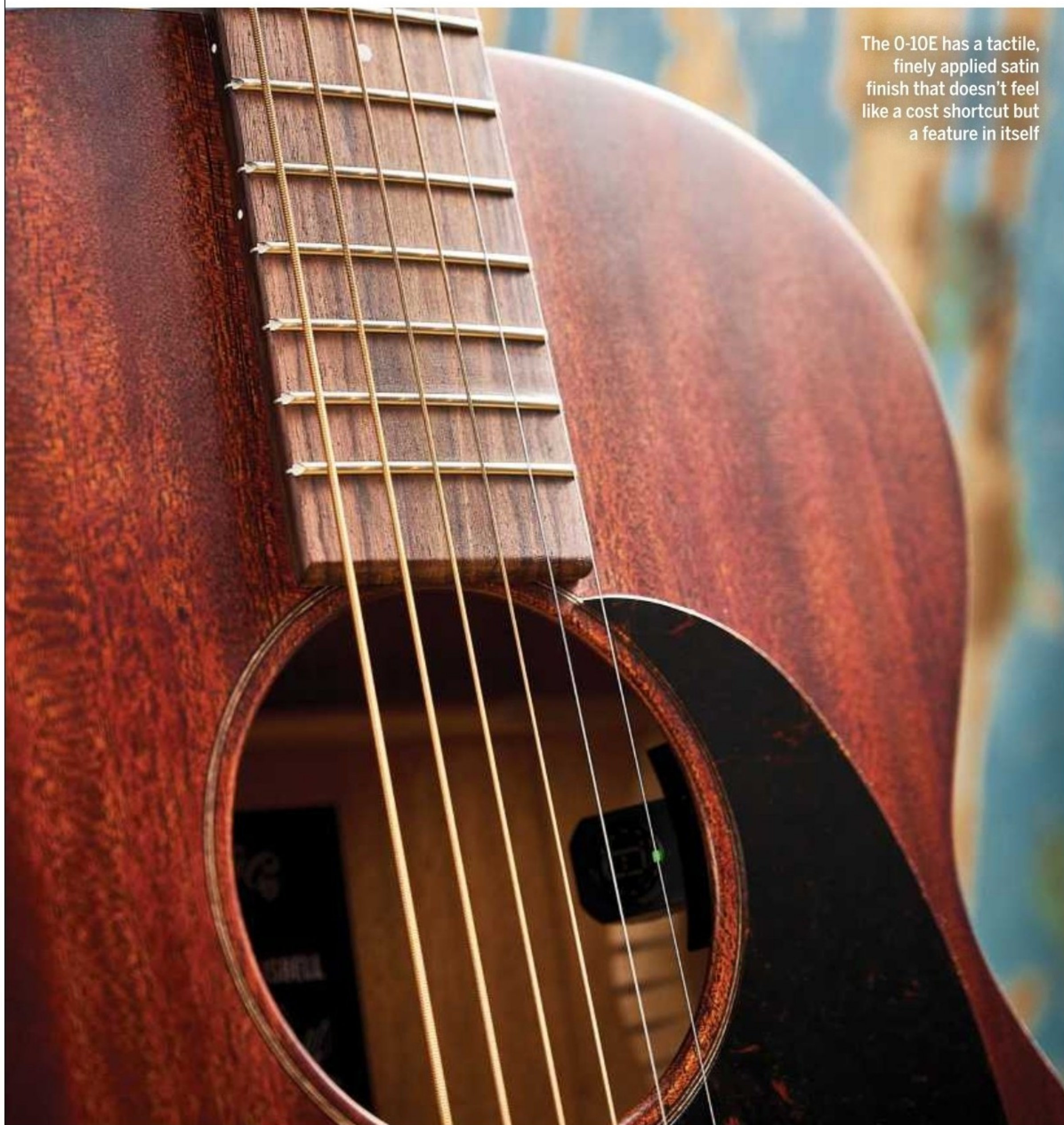
the Reimagined series in 2018, making the 0-10E perfectly comfortable for fingerstyle or strumming.

As you might expect for a guitar that aims to sound like a vintage 0-17, there's plenty of midrange punch and woody twang on offer here. It isn't the broadest of voices in terms of frequency range, but it is very characterful and it cuts through like a charm. If old-school country or fingerstyle blues is your thing, the voice of this guitar will really speak to you. If you play softly, its sustain and sweetness blooms – but hit it hard and its immediate attack snaps into focus, making it a dynamic, exciting instrument to play.

Time and use should open up this guitar's voice further and the compact lightness of the build encourages you to pick it up every time you flop onto the couch, meaning it should get every opportunity to mature the natural way, by being played a lot.

Plugged in, Martin's E1 system yields a pretty faithful acoustic tone. With our Boss acoustic combo's EQ set flat, we only needed to add a touch of bass and treble to de-emphasise the midrange to achieve an amplified sound that was warm and naturally expressive, rather than being too honky and forward.





The 0-10E has a tactile, finely applied satin finish that doesn't feel like a cost shortcut but a feature in itself



MARTIN 0-10E RETRO JASON ISELL

PRICE: £1,075

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: 'O' size Concert acoustic

TOP: Solid Mahogany

BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 108mm/4.25"

MAX BODY WIDTH:

344.4mm/13.5"

NECK: Select hardwood/
Performance Artist profile

SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")

TUNERS: Open-gear nickel

NUT/WIDTH: Corian/44.5mm

FINGERBOARD:

East Indian rosewood

FRETS: 20

BRIDGE/SPACING: White Tusq/
10mm

ELECTRICS: Martin E1 pickup
system

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.7/3.7

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Jason Isbell
0-17 and D-18 models also available

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes

FINISHES: Natural mahogany

Westside Distribution

0141 248 4812

www.martinguitar.com

Verdict

At this price, the 0-10E is a bit of a steal. The use of solid mahogany for the body of the guitar is a tidy upgrade over sapele and the build quality is impressive. The guitar is light, comfortable in the lap and performs well amplified.

Martin's Standard Series guitars are quite a pricey proposition for most players, so at this price the 0-10E Retro Jason Isbell puts plenty of ticks in boxes, including the added cachet of Isbell's moniker. Artist-affiliated instruments tend to hold their value well and even increase if and when a particular artist model is discontinued. Far more importantly, it's a musically engaging guitar: punchy when you need it to be and yet warm and intimate in quieter moments.

You can't really call it a true all-rounder because its voice has such a mid-focused, rootsy character; it's not the right tool for those AOR-style strummy D-28 moments. But for players who are typically drawn to this kind of guitar, that's a feature not

a glitch. Looking around at the acoustic scene, it feels like Depression-era American folk and the present-day music inspired by it are having a bit of a moment, which gives this interesting little guitar some zeitgeist appeal beyond its artist

It's a musically engaging guitar: punchy when you need it to be and yet warm and intimate in quieter moments

association, too. Combined with its comfortable, lightweight handling and the fuss-free, quality build, it feels like a very well-pitched and well-priced product. Martin's affordable all-mahogany guitars have always punched above their weight – and the 0-10E Retro Jason Isbell jabs a little harder still. **G**



10/10

PROS Great quality and heritage for the price; characterful folk-roots voice; tasteful artist tie-in

CONS Not really a do-it-all guitar – not much else to report!



CENTURY ACOUSTICS

CENTURY ACOUSTICS L-00 Century 12-FRET | J-45 CENTURY 12-FRET | J-185 CENTURY 12-FRET



From campfires and front porches to the world's biggest stages, Gibson flat-top acoustics have shaped the sound of music for 100 years. In celebration of this milestone, we are proud to introduce the Century Collection, a beautiful assortment of 12-fret Gibson acoustic guitars channeling the minimalist elegance of early 20th century design and handcrafted in Bozeman, Montana. Pick one up today to feel and hear the difference.

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FIRST PLAY



BAD CAT PUREPATH
£439

WHAT IS IT? All-analogue, passive mono speaker simulator with a physical reactive load

Path Of Least Resistance

Premium amp company Bad Cat dives into the speaker-simulator market with an all-analogue plug-and-play solution

Words Martin Smith Photography Adam Gasson

Not content with its position among the top tier of boutique amplifier manufacturers, Bad Cat has branched out to introduce a passive, all-analogue reactive-load speaker simulator, which was awarded one of the 'Best In Show' winner slots at this year's NAMM Show in California. An impressive start.

But first a little background. Recognised as one of the world's first speaker simulators, the original Palmer PDI 03 was released upon an unsuspecting world in the late 80s. It soon became a familiar component in the touring rigs of famous artists including Edward Van Halen, and later Joe Bonamassa. The groundbreaking possibilities offered by a speaker-less system led to applications such as direct-to-console and silent amps for recording or stereo setups.

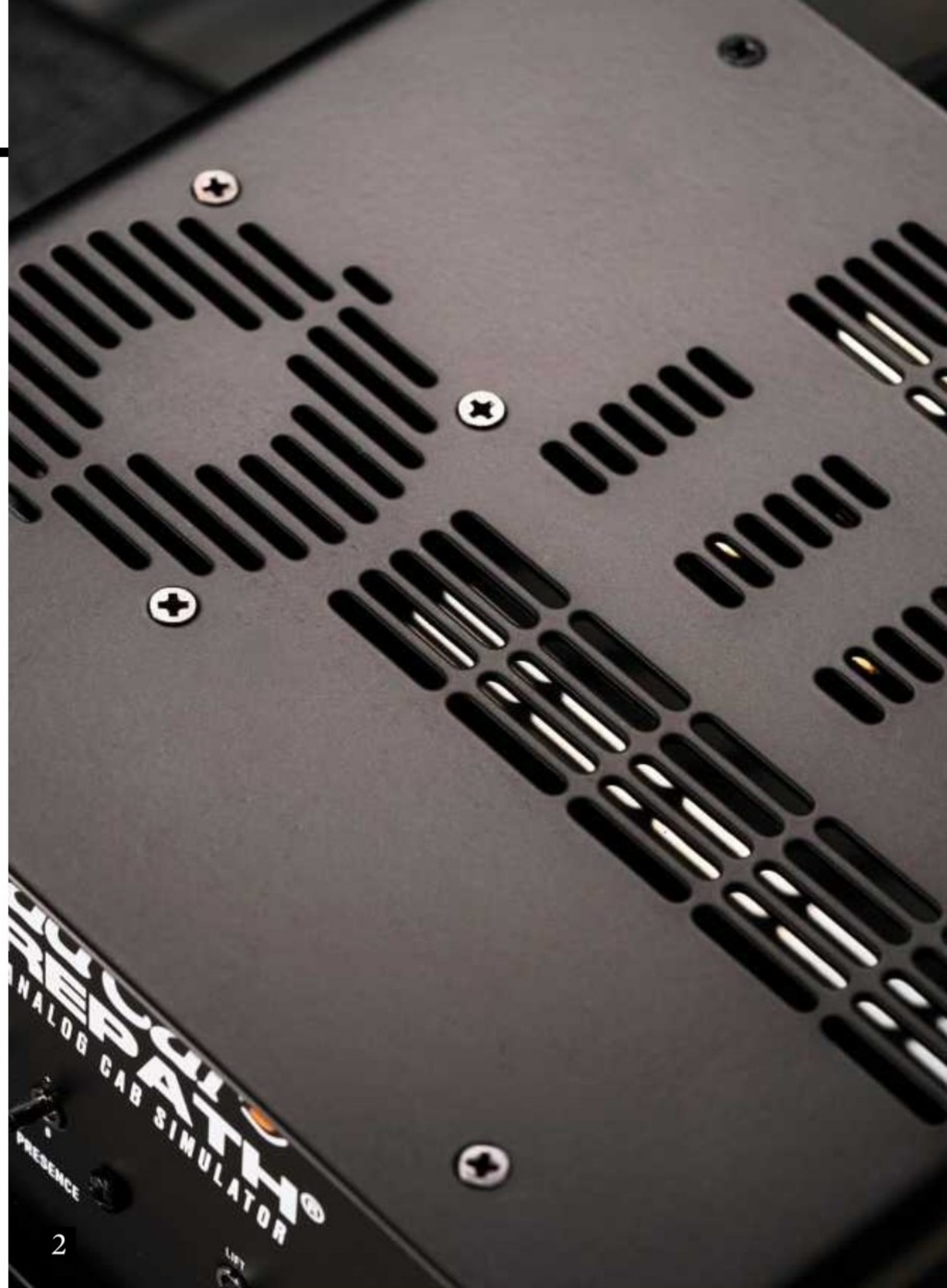
However, many players found the resulting tone a less than perfect replica of a *real* speaker. Another issue was that not all early speaker simulators had adequate internal speaker-load protection, leading to instances of transformer damage, so it's always important to be aware of that: all amplifiers need a speaker load (or an alternative load of equal impedance).

The next evolution of the speaker simulator came in the late Noughties via the reactive load-style devices such as those by Two Notes Audio Engineering. The company was widely credited with pioneering the concept of the digital loadbox in 2008, combining high-quality analogue reactive loads with Impulse Response (IR) technology.

From here on, the trend has been towards DSP-based processing to provide simulations via impulse responses, run either within the loadbox or a computer. In the past decade, computer integration in the guitar industry has become commonplace, and yet a great many players – including Bad Cat's own John Thompson – sometimes just want to plug in and play without any computer faff. John began discussing this with whizz-designer Bruce Egnater and progress began on what would become the PurePath.

This stocky little militaresque unit achieves both a reactive load and cab emulation in the analogue domain via cleverly implemented componentry. Its simplicity is central to its design: to have a working setup in seconds, rather than loading and auditioning a menagerie of

1. Safety is the primary concern when running your favourite amplifiers without a physical speaker – a short moment of convenience can become a lifetime of regret! Thankfully, Bad Cat has designed a load capable of safely handling 150 watts
2. This heavy-duty perforated-steel enclosure allows the heat created by the physical resistive load to dissipate naturally, leaving the unit cool to the touch where typically these kind of devices can get fairly hot
3. Unlike a real cabinet, where you can't quickly switch between Alnico and ceramic magnets, or open- and closed-back designs, Bad Cat's PurePath can achieve large tonal variation with its well-tuned control switches



IR options. With the PurePath, all that's necessary is to plug into your amp's speaker output, set the rear-panel impedance to match, likewise the front-panel level switch, and you're off.

It will run with a continuous load of up to 150 watts, so you should be good with most guitar amps (though probably not a 300-watt Ampeg SVT). There are two other utilities, a Ground-Lift switch and a Phase-Reverse switch for matching the phase polarity, both being invaluable in

a rig with more than one audible output, such as when running the PurePath together with a speaker. The phase relationship may need flipping to find the strongest, most phase-coherent signal. Of course, it's easier to hear changes in a real-time analogue context than on a computer where latency delays make for a slightly more taxing cognitive experience.

Finally, in terms of features, we have four tonal options designed to simulate the variables one may encounter when

mic'ing a real cabinet. Our first choice is an Edge or Centre position for our virtual microphone. Simply put, the centre of the cone produces brighter frequencies than the edge, where more warmth and body can be found. Our Cab switch offers open-back or closed-back variations. Generally, open-backed cabs have more of a 360-degree projection in a room because different signals emanate from the front and rear of the amps and blend together in the acoustic environment. Conversely, closed-back cabs punch their more focused midrange purely from the cab's front.

Next, the speaker type is regularly discussed in our reviews. The American Alnico-style speaker magnets, often used by Fender, are more responsive at the top and bottom of the frequency spectrum, whereas the English-style ceramic-magnet speaker, typified by the Celestion brand, tends to push the mids forward with more rasp and grit but less of the 'hi-fi' range of the A-types. Finally, a Presence control selects between a flat or boosted high-end zing.

Feel & Sounds

To really assess the PurePath's abilities we chose three amplifiers with very different characters. First is our Fender Twin – a steely clean classic that naturally produces a bold bottom-end and a top-end with





Integration to the outside world is enabled by the output controls comprising Phase, Ground-Lift and the XLR output socket. The Phase-Reversal function comes into use when setting the PurePath alongside a physical speaker to achieve the strongest-sounding phase relationship



BAD CAT PUREPATH

PRICE: £439

ORIGIN: Vietnam

TYPE: Passive analogue speaker-cabinet simulator

DIMENSIONS: 61.6 (w) x 27.3 (d) x 53.3mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.72/6

CABINET: Steel

CHANNELS: 1

CONTROLS: Level, Mic, Cab, Speaker, Presence, Ground, Phase

FOOTSWITCH: None

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

Impedance options: 4, 8, 16ohms, Load Selection (Silent or Extension Cab), Line Out, Input from amp, Output to speaker

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: None

Bad Cat

www.badcatamps.com

oodles of twang due to its fast transient response. Setting the PurePath to most accurately mimic the Twin's real speaker involved using the Alnico speaker type and open-backed cabinet style. We could then tweak the Presence and Mic position switches to best present the resulting sound. Outside of the impedance load selection, there are no hard and fast rules, however, and we enjoyed the closed-back option in combination with the Twin for punchier applications.

For the midrange, our Suhr Badger serves up thick 6V6-induced mids and a wide dynamic playground for edge-of-break-up fun and games. This amplifier's range was extended by the open-/closed-back and Alnico/ceramic permutations. It really is a great way to broaden the tonal palette of your amp collection without modifications or speaker transplants.

Finally, an Orange OR30 should allow us to hear how the PurePath handles filthy gain with savage top-end. It was rendered so well that we hardly needed to engage presence. The solid wall of overdrive is reproduced with all its ferocity. Heavy drop-tuned riffs sounded every bit as punchy, and the sizzle was just as aggressive as a real cab. The ceramic-speaker setting brought out all the grinding mids, too, but if you prefer a more polite version, the Alnico option has you covered.

You can record your ideas instantly... it really does have the sparkle and punch you'd expect from a real speaker cab

Verdict

They say the best camera in the world is the one you have on you when the moment strikes. Well, the same goes for your ability to capture sounds when *inspiration* strikes. Rather than trawling through amp models and perhaps forgetting your amazing new riff, you can record your new idea instantly with the PurePath.

Under heavy use, the unit emits a whizzing sound akin to a tiny mouse inside the box blowing a miniature party whistle... As it turns out, it's simply a quick-acting fan that's cooling the resistor elements down. When the playing stops, so does the fan, but if this becomes distracting you could just pop the PurePath behind your amp or somewhere else out of earshot.

Tonally, it really does have the sparkle and punch you'd expect from a real speaker cabinet. That, combined with its over-spec'd load-bearing capabilities, justifies its award-winning position as one of NAMM's 'Best In Show' acts. **G**



10/10

PROS Natural speaker sound with all the punch and sizzle of a real-life cab; filter switches produce purposeful, well-tuned sonic options akin to cab variations that can even expand the tonal options of your amplifier

CONS No cons from us, but we do have a request – a stereo version would be nice!

FIRST PLAY



FLATTLEY THE JOKER
£259

WHAT IS IT? Drive and distortion pedal built on FET-based valve simulation



Wild Card

The latest from the UK-based pedal company gives you licence to rock with the choice of dirt or filth

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker

1. Dirt or Filth? It's up to you. Flattley says the Filth option has been added to the pedal to allow gain/distortion for rock fans
2. This edition of the pedal features green-burst holographic chrome metal flake and UV printed graphics with a green custom-etched aluminium foot-topper
3. The green halo light-ring surrounding the footswitch is designed to diffuse the light when playing live, avoiding any off-putting brightness

Be it overdrive, distortion or fuzz, pedals of a certain nature fall into the catch-all category of 'dirt' pedals, and The Joker, the latest offering from Flattley, is certainly of that ilk – it even says so on the front panel! What you have here is a pedal with two toggle-switched modes, the aforementioned Dirt and, to take things a stage further, Filth.

Flattley tells us the pedal was inspired by a simple question: what happens if you add controlled distortion to a normally clean booster? And to that end, the designers developed a pedal with a FET-based 12AX7 valve simulation with the aim of achieving a similar sound to an overdriven single-valve amp. However, this pedal takes it a stage further by adding the Filth mode for more gain and distortion.

In Dirt mode with the pedal's Gain knob at minimum, the Volume knob (starting from silence) hits unity gain at around 11 o'clock, so anything beyond that will give you a boost – not squeaky clean but with a touch of grit to it and coloured by whatever you have dialled in on the tone knob. To our ears, that knob is at its most neutral at minimum position, but advancing it starts rolling off bottom-end, and from the midpoint onwards there's increasing top-end emphasis, heading right into classic treble-boost territory towards its end point. All good stuff for hitting the front-end of your amp in exactly the right way or pushing another dirt pedal.

When you start advancing the Gain knob there's plenty of those 'just beyond clean' tones to explore as you move through low-level break-up and into the more crunchy arena with the flavour of a small valve amp that's being driven hard. It's all very playable with fully exploitable dynamic response, pulling back from the dirt to cleaner tone with a softer touch. Switching to Filth mode, the starting point is somewhere towards the upper end of Dirt mode, so there's some crossover between the two, but Filth moves very naturally from that crunch into a more compressed, gainier (but not overly saturated) version of it.

Verdict

A practical range of gain, from clean-ish through to raunch, combined with a Tone knob that focuses it to push the right buttons, make The Joker a versatile boost/drive asset for your signal chain. **G**



FLATTLEY THE JOKER

PRICE: £259

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Overdrive pedal

FEATURES: True bypass

CONTROLS: Volume, Gain, Tone, Dirt/Filth switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output

POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 50mA

DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 120 (d) x 57mm (h)

Flattley Guitar Pedals

07802 455127

www.flattleyguitarpedals.com

8/10

PROS Two modes; cool artwork; halo light ring

CONS It's not for the budget-conscious among us



THE RIVALS

Here are some dirt pedals with a good clean-to-dirty range that we've previously reviewed. The Dinosaural Hypoid Drive (£182) is the standalone version of the central drive section of the Cogmeister (£299) and features a choice of three distinct midrange contours. Crazy Tube Circuits' Venus (£235), a modern take on the classic BK Butler Tube Driver, is a valve-based pedal with a very effective EQ section. Also check out Gurus' SexyDrive MkII (£179) for good gain range and EQ, with a Balance knob to blend dry and driven sounds, mixing articulation and pick attack in with the dirt.



Dinosaural Hypoid Drive offers classy sound with flexibility

FIRST PLAY



**WALRUS AUDIO
CANVAS VOLUME**
£279

WHAT IS IT? A hi-tech volume pedal with adjustable parameters

1

2

3

Simply Swell

Walrus Audio gives the humble volume pedal a hi-tech makeover, making it customisable to every player's needs

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Matt Lincoln

1. The four sockets allow three connectivity options: mono in/mono out plus tuner, stereo in/stereo out, or mono in/dual mono out
2. By default, the treadle has a smooth but firm action – you can adjust the stiffness using an Allen key on the base of the pedal
3. Adjustment is carried out by two buttons. The four LEDs above them show which parameter is selected for editing, and the line of eight LEDs indicates parameter value

A volume pedal adds great practicality to any rig, whether it's used for creative swells or as a simple interface that regulates the volume going into your amp. While there are plenty of volume pedals on the market, each has its own characteristics and possible drawbacks – but Walrus Audio addresses the whole picture with the Canvas Volume, quite possibly making it the one pedal that you could substitute for all the others.

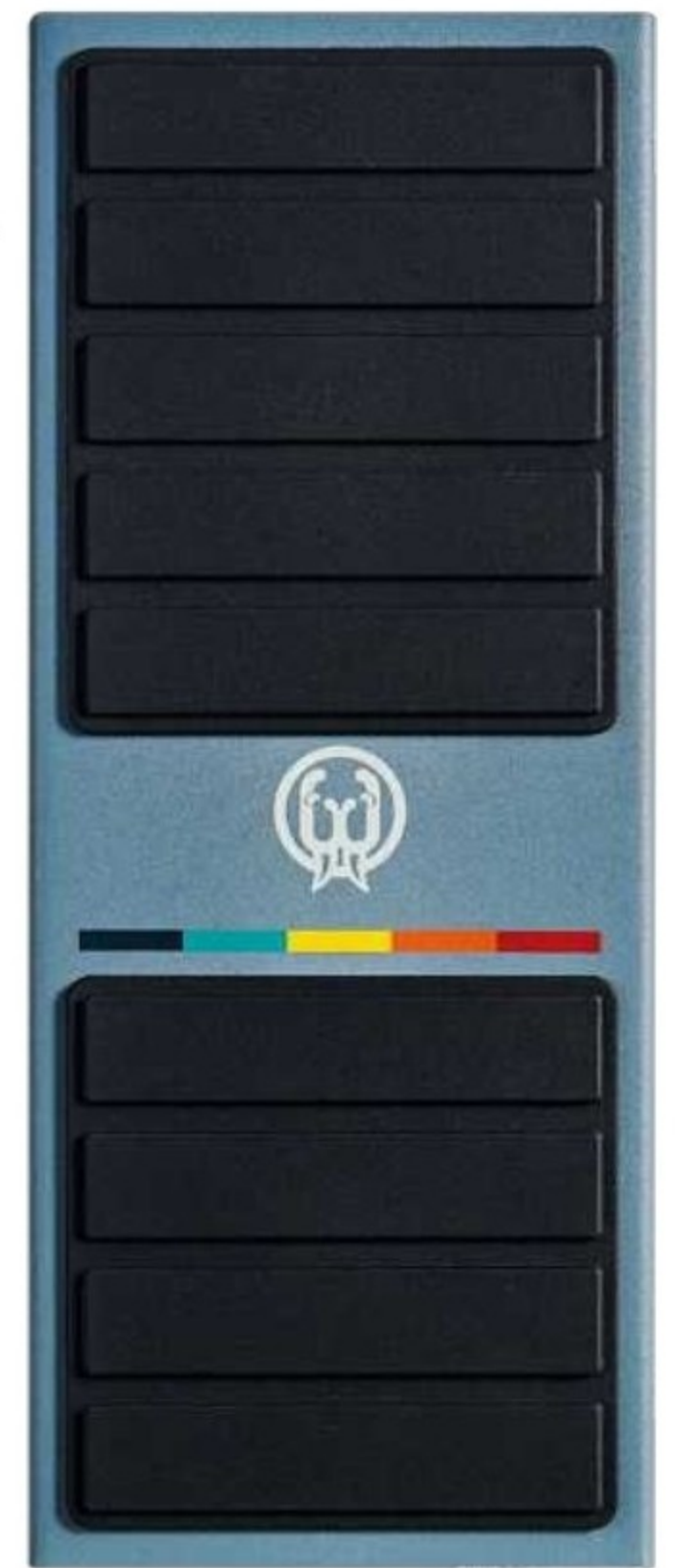
Sidestepping the traditional drawbacks, the Canvas Volume's only moving part is the treadle, so there are no mechanical components that can wear out. The pedal uses contactless position-sensing for volume changes in the all-analogue signal path via VCAs (Voltage Controlled Amplifiers). Providing flexibility in where you place it in a signal chain, the pedal supports stereo operation as well as mono. Most players will gravitate to mono in/mono out with a separate output for the tuner, but you can also use it as stereo in and out, or mono in with dual mono out to send the signal to two sources or start a stereo effects chain. Not everyone will like all the sockets on one side, but it will be appreciated by pedal steel players for keeping things neat underfoot.

One important factor of how your volume changes across the pedal's sweep is addressed by the provision of eight different tapers. Volume curves derived from the most popular competitors, such as Ernie Ball and Lehle, are available, as well as more linear tapers preferred by steel players.

The range and increase of gain through the pedal is also adjustable. Rather than complete silence for the heel-down position, you can set a defined minimum starting level and change the default unity gain at toe-down to be lower than unity or provide a useful boost of up to 9dB. A final layer of control is Lag, which introduces a delay (up to 2,000ms) to the volume response of the pedal; it's largely about feel, although it's quite possible that some players will find a creative use for the altered envelope of longer delays.

Verdict

The Canvas Volume may simply be a box that makes things quieter and louder, but it is the most hi-tech one around, with all the parameters you need to set feel and response exactly to your needs. Bespoke excellence! 



WALRUS AUDIO CANVAS VOLUME

PRICE: £279

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Volume pedal

FEATURES: mono or stereo operation, tuner output, 8x selectable tapers

CONTROLS: 2x buttons

CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L & R), standard outputs (L & R/Tuner), USB-C (for firmware upgrades)

POWER: 9V adapter (not supplied) 300mA minimum

DIMENSIONS: 91 (w) x 225 (d) x 48mm (h)

FACE bvba

+32 3 844 67 97

www.walrusaudio.com

THE RIVALS

Currently regarded as some of the best around, the Lehle range of volume pedals incorporates a magnetic sensor enabling almost wear-free operation: two popular models are the Mono (£199, right) and Stereo (£249). Elsewhere, Ernie Ball volume pedals have been a historically popular choice: the brand's 6180 VP JR (£139) is a mono pedal with a tuner output and a choice of two tapers; the 6203 VPJR model (£219) incorporates a tuner. Something to consider is that volume pedals can take up plenty of pedalboard space. There are a few smaller options, such as the Dunlop DVP4 Volume (X) Mini pedal (£145) and the DOD Mini (£104), that can maximise your 'board real estate.



PHOTO: WWW.LEHLE.COM



PROS Rugged chassis; no mechanical parts to wear out; stereo operation; selection of tapers; boost available; tuner output; controls tucked safely away; no tone suck

CONS Socket placement won't please everybody; adjustment could be fiddly on the fly, but most players will 'set and forget'



the Wishlist

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

Furch Red Deluxe GC-LI α 2026 FROM €6,265

CONTACT **Furch** PHONE +420 910 902 139 WEB www.furchguitars.com WORDS **Jamie Dickson** PHOTOGRAPHY **Matt Lincoln**

When we visited Furch's guitar-making facility near Brno in the Czech Republic a couple of years ago, we were struck by how unapologetically progressive the brand's approach was. When we asked if its guitars were all about handmade tradition, the company's CEO Petr Furch smiled and cheerfully shook his head. Plenty of artisan-quality handwork goes into every Furch guitar, but Petr prefers robots to do the lutherie processes that require total precision and consistency – such as making the company's innovative neck joints. Therefore, he dismisses the idea that acoustic lutherie is a technological cul-de-sac fenced in by immovable tradition, and instead views it as an open road towards ever-improving playability and tone.

This spirit finds its highest expression in the Red Series guitars. Furch's ranges are categorised by colour, with Red being the highest quality guitars made by Furch outside of the company's custom-order department. The Deluxe tier within this series is, therefore, intended to be a bit special – and this guitar doesn't disappoint.

Among many features unique to Furch, the most recent innovation that appears on this model is the Booster Soundport on the shoulder of the upper bout.

Soundports are nothing new, of course, but Furch has designed its own to be an attractively understated array of slots, rather than a yawning hole in the side of the guitar. Turning to fundamentals, the guitar's body is made of Malaysian blackwood, which somewhat resembles a rich rosewood, while the soundboard is made of Alpine spruce. Furch analyses and individually voices each of its soundboards for optimum resonance – a high-end process it performs even on its cheaper lines. But on this Red Series guitar the back is tuned, too, a further mark of its top-tier grade.

Furch is a very detail- and engineering-oriented maker, so even the Full-Pore High-Gloss Finish lacquer that clads this guitar was developed in-house to optimise volume and resonance. The finely sculpted armrest on the top edge of the guitar's body is complemented, unusually, by a belly cut on the rear – a doubly ergonomic feature that Furch has dubbed the Bevel Duo.

Ornamentation is also top-notch here, with koa binding and soundhole rosette, the latter with abalone inlay, plus a decorative koa wedge at the tail of the guitar. Figured ziricote is used, meanwhile, for the bridge, fingerboard and headstock face. It adds up to a seriously elegant, feature-rich and capable instrument. **G**

1. The gothic-script Furch logo is understated but very classy in pearl inlay. Gotoh 510 Silver Patina machineheads complete the look with smooth, accurate functionality to boot

2. Furch's innovative CNR Active system is a state-of-the-art truss rod and neck-joint mechanism that automatically adjusts to changes in humidity and temperature to keep your preferred setup rock-solid stable

3. Turning the guitar over reveals the rib contour that is part of Furch's Bevel Duo feature, including a forearm bevel on the front of the guitar and this belly carve on the rear, which enhances player comfort and the premium lutherie vibe





5

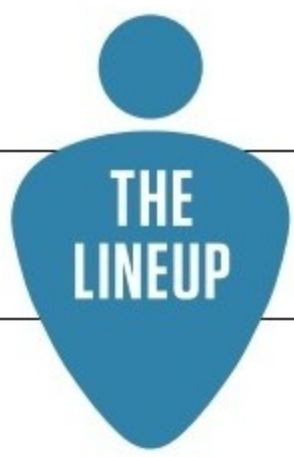
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4. Furch individually voices and tunes its soundboards (and also the guitar's back on this model) using a resonance analysis process unique to the brand for optimum tone

5. The shoulder of the guitar's upper bout features Furch's vent-like Booster Soundport that directs more of the guitar's full voice back towards the player than an unported design

6. As a high-end model, the Red Deluxe GC-LI a 2026 makes opulent use of pearl inlay – but function is never far behind at Furch as the guitar's ultra-thin proprietary Full-Pore High-Gloss finish has been engineered to improve resonance and volume



Gas Supply

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

Fender Vintera III From £1,049

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

JARGON CRUNCHING

Slab vs round-lam

Vintera III models come with either slab or round-laminated fingerboards. What's the difference? Slab 'boards are thicker and feature a flat bottom, while round-laminated are thinner veneers, pre-profiled to match the radius. Fender used slab 'boards in the late-50s to mid-60s, changing to round-laminate in order to improve stability.

More Custom Shop models?

No, these are Fender's brand-new Vintera III guitars. We're sure you're familiar with the Vintera and Vintera II line-ups that came before, as well as the Vintera Road Worn models we've seen over the last couple of years. But if not, in a nutshell, these are Fender's 'affordable vintage-style' guitars, and the brand has just overhauled the series to make the guitars – you guessed it – even closer to the vintage models they're based on.

Do we detect a hint of sarcasm?

Not at all, more sympathy for the designers at Fender who are tasked every year with reinventing the wheel while being required to simultaneously keep it precisely as it was

when bananas were still scarce. The good news is, they appear to have done it, at least on paper.

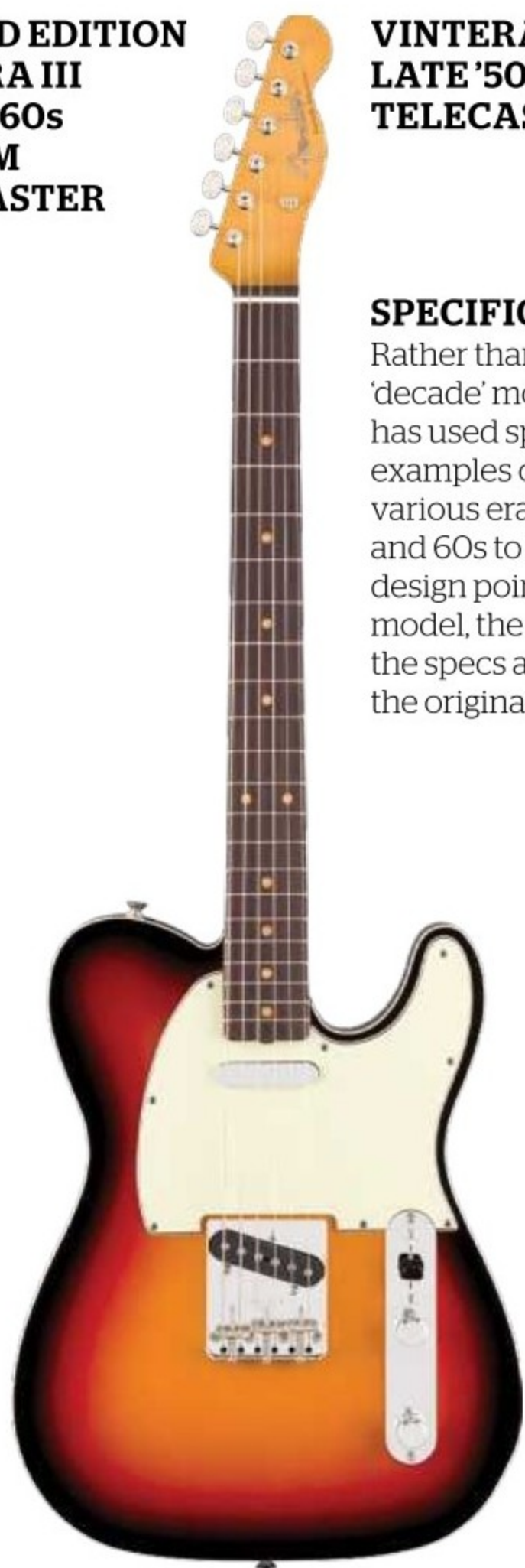
How so? More accurate colours and some new pickups?

Actually, for the Vintera III range, Fender has zoomed in on the details. So instead of giving us a broad-stroke average of 50s, 60s and 70s design points, the team set its sights on specifics. The result is an eight-strong core line-up of guitars, plus a pair of limited-editions.

What are the models?

It'll come as no surprise to learn that we're talking about the staple Fender shapes: the Stratocaster, Telecaster and

LIMITED EDITION VINTERA III EARLY '60s CUSTOM TELECASTER



VINTERA III LATE '50s TELECASTER

SPECIFIC ERAS

Rather than catch-all 'decade' models, Fender has used specific examples of guitars from various eras of the 50s and 60s to inform the design points on each model, the idea being the specs are closer to the original guitars.



VINTERA III MID '60s TELECASTER

CUSTOM COLORS

As with previous Vintera models, the finishes are based on the hallowed non-standard (at the time) 'Custom Color' charts. Here, Fender has worked with the Custom Shop to bring them even closer to the older hues.



VINTERA III LATE '50s STRATOCASTER

NECK PROFILES

The neck shapes cover classic Fender profiles, from a late-50s soft V to early, mid- and late-60s C-shaped profiles. The headstock sizes change to match, too.





VINTERA III
MID '60s
JAGUAR

VINTERA III
MID '60s
JAZZMASTER

Fender has gone all out to ensure the guitars match their descriptions with hardware details and appointments chosen to reflect the correct time period. Even the inlays differ depending on the model

Jazzmaster take the 'full-size' slots, with the Jaguar and Mustang in the short-scale options. As we've mentioned, though, these are more era-specific than an entire decade, so in the Stratocasters line-up we get Late '50s, Early '60s and Late '60s models (£1,049), for Telecasters you'll find Late '50s (£1,099) and Mid '60s models (£1,049), while the Jazzmaster, Jaguar (both £1,149) and Mustang (£1,049) are all Mid '60s offerings. Meanwhile, the Strat range also includes the Limited Edition Late '50s model, and there's a Limited Edition Early '60s Custom Telecaster (both £1,199), too.

Wait, so the Late '50s Strat is a Limited Edition model but also in the 'normal' range?

We're jumping off to the side for a moment with this one, but yes. The Limited Edition version features an ash body, finished in White Blonde with gold hardware.

Okay, so what makes these so much more 'vintage correct' than the Vintera II series?

We'd need a few more words to properly delve into these details. But what we can say in answer to that question is, there's a lot! Here goes: body woods (alder/ash), neck profiles (V/D/C shapes), fingerboard radius (184mm/7.25 inches), construction (slab or round-laminate rosewood, maple) and tall frets all meet in different combinations to bring some choice marks on the spec sheet. Add in some refined appointments such as period-correct inlays (clay, pearloid or black), decals applied over (rather than under) the headstock finish, and real bone nuts instead of synthetic, and you can see that Fender is pushing the boat out in terms of accuracy.

But the electronics would need to match, too, surely?

Yep, and while we're yet to try them, Fender is claiming "era-correct magnets, wire and construction" for its Vintera III pickups, each of which is matched to the period of the guitar you go for.

What about the colours?

They're 'Classic Custom Colors', just as with previous Vinteras, but this time Fender enlisted the Custom Shop team's help to improve the hues of the finishes, which are designed to resemble the fresh finishes, as they'd have looked when the guitars were first in production. They're out now, and we'll be reviewing them shortly. [SW]

ALSO OUT NOW...

BLACKSTAR BEAM MINI £169

The mini-amp market is huge and in recent years we've seen plenty of innovation to take your practice to the next level. Now, Blackstar has rejoined the mission, and it could be set to rattle Positive Grid's prolific Spark series. The Beam Mini comes out swinging, boasting 12 component-level amp models and 35 studio-quality effects. There's Bluetooth and stereo operation from a pair of 60mm full-range drivers, two bass radiators and Blackstar's room-filling Super Wide Stereo technology. But it's not stopping there: the brand has loaded it with the ability to import Tone3000 Neural Amp Modelling captures, and the same Moises AI stem separation employed in JBL's BandBox (although we'll need to wait until an update in August for this). It's out now.

www.blackstaramps.com

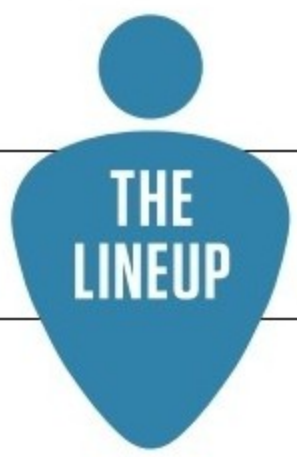


EPIPHONE FUTURA SERIES £849

Epiphone has announced the revamp of its Futura Series, which takes classic Gibson designs and gives them an intentionally modern makeover. For 2026, the series comprises seven models: ES-355, Explorer Custom, Firebird Custom, Flying V Custom, Les Paul Custom, RD Custom (pictured below) and SG Custom. Across the board we get Chromashift iridescent finishes, speedy Modern C-shaped necks, Grover locking Rotomatic tuners, Graph Tech nuts and stainless-steel frets. Each of the models comes equipped with Epiphone's new ProBucker Ignite pickups, which offer "clarity and punch for lead and rhythm without ever getting muddy". In addition, Epiphone has included push/pull coil-splitting and phase-shifting. All models come with an Epiphone gigbag, and each guitar is priced at £849.

www.epiphone.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: Opal Ocean

Album: Temple Of The Stars (Independent)



Opal Ocean's *Temple Of The Stars* is out now. For tour dates, masterclasses, merch and more visit the band's website at: opaloocean.com.au

Australian duo Opal Ocean have steadily been making a name for themselves in the world of acoustic guitar since 2015. The pair have gathered momentum online with videos of their busking gigs, and have also received time in the spotlight with thrilling stage performances including at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix in 2021. Having enamoured crowds on their inaugural UK tour earlier this year, Alex Champ and Nadav Tabak continue to deliver the pace with their latest album, *Temple Of The Stars*.

Written and recorded at home in Melbourne, the tracks feature a kaleidoscopic blend of traditional and contemporary playing, bringing instrumental flamenco virtuosity into the modern age. And it all stems from Alex and Nadav's love of players such as Al Di Meola, Paco de Lucía and other more eclectic influences.

All Styles Welcome

The pair cite Mexican duo Rodrigo y Gabriela as a source of inspiration, along with heavier bands such as Dream Theater and Opeth. "We love how Rodrigo Y Gabriela blend styles and techniques like rumba flamenca and *rasgueado* strumming with rock and even metal influences," says Nadav. "We try to fuse our own influences from Gojira to Daft Punk, using those percussive guitar techniques to build a rhythmic foundation. You can essentially create a full rhythm section on the guitar. You've got a kick, snare, and even hi-hat elements just from how you strike the guitar. Using nylon-string guitars also adds a natural distortion on the lower strings when you dig in, which really enhances the sound and speaks to what we love."

Nadav Tabak (right): "You can essentially create a full rhythm section on the guitar. You've got a kick, snare, and even hi-hat elements just from how you strike the guitar"



Godin To Go

Alex and Nadav recently signed a deal with Godin guitars, which led to the development of their Opalburst and Oceanburst signatures, fitted with a custom-voiced LR Baggs system. "They're perfect for touring – lightweight, durable and great-sounding," says Nadav. "Since we travel a lot by plane, one of the biggest advantages is the bolt-on neck design. Godin added machine inserts especially for us so we can remove the neck and pack the guitar safely into a Mono case along with our Quad Cortex, and take everything in the cabin. That makes travelling so much easier. For strings, we use D'Addario, as they hold up really well on tour and maintain a great tone."

Voice Of Reason

The Opal Ocean approach to writing a good instrumental track is to treat your melodies more like a vocal line. "While we love riff-based instrumental music, when it comes to choruses or key themes, we aim to make them memorable and singable," say Nadav. "The idea is not to overcomplicate things because if you think of your favourite songs, you can usually hum them. A lot of virtuosic players these days write music that most people would struggle to sing back. Our writing balances more complex, riff-driven sections with melodic parts that feel like a voice. That contrast is really important to us. But we still take a lot of inspiration from fast players such as Al di Meola, particularly in the precision and alternate picking. Ultimately, our style comes from a mix of everything we grew up listening to."

Midnight Tango

The harmonic minor scale plays a big part in flamenco music. For the duo, it all started with jamming over flamenco chord progressions and figuring out which notes worked best and when. "It's a very distinctive scale, but once your ear and fingers get used to it, it starts to feel very natural," says Nadav. "In fact, when we first got into it, we used it a lot. It's quite addictive and some of the stretches on the fingers are pretty fun. If you're used to the pentatonic scale, it's a nice change. Repetition and exploration are key. The more you immerse yourself in those progressions, the more intuitive it becomes." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Stargazer*

For fans of: Rodrigo Y Gabriela, Paco De Lucía, Al di Meola

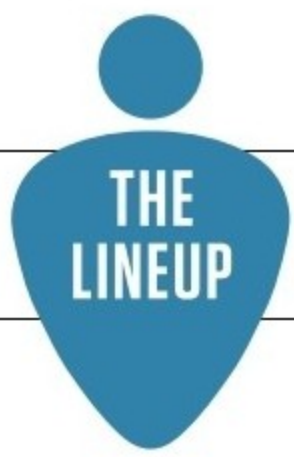


THE GOD OF FLAMENCO

Why Paco De Lucía sits at the top of the list for Opal Ocean

“Paco De Lucía is the king of the genre,” says Nadav. “He had an incredible ability to push the genre forward while maintaining deep musicality and emotion. His technique, especially his *picado*, was phenomenal but what really stands out is the passion and intensity in his playing. If you watch his live performances, you can feel how present and committed he was in every moment. He was doing those crazy runs on *Friday Night In San Francisco* without breaking a sweat, all with just his fingers.”

“Our [Godin signature guitars] are perfect for touring - lightweight, durable and great-sounding”



Albums

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



PHOTO © GOTTlieb BROS

Yes Aurora

Inside Out Music (available 12 June)



Legendary band light up with latest album

"We're not trying to echo the past; we're carrying the spirit of Yes forward and turning it into something new," says Steve Howe of the band's 24th studio album, *Aurora*. Steve is, of course, the only remaining member from what many fans regard as the golden era of the band in 1971/'72 with the line-up of Rick Wakeman, Chris Squire, Bill Bruford, Steve Howe and Jon Anderson creating masterpiece albums *Fragile* and *Close To The Edge*, the latter being lauded as pretty much perfect prog.

Much has changed in the intervening years with revolving-doors line-up changes that saw members leave, rejoin and then leave yet again. But those times are in the past and the current roster has remained static for a few years. We now have Steve Howe (guitar), Geoff Downes (keyboards), Jon Davison (vocals), Billy Sherwood (bass) and Jay Schellen (drums) leading the charge on *Aurora*. It would be tempting to make comparisons between the band of 50-plus years ago and this current manifestation, but that would be unfair.

So, what exactly have we got on *Aurora*? Steve's distinctive guitar, dreamy keyboards, whimsical lyrics and Roger Dean artwork are all present, and songs such as *Love Lies Dreaming* or the 13-minute epic, *Countermovement* and the symphonic *Ariadne* have the stamp of Yes all over them. Fans who have followed the band since the beginning or hopped aboard during the *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* mid-80s era will be delighted that the prog torch remains in safe hands. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Ariadne*

For fans of: Genesis, Pink Floyd, Camel

Def Leppard

Greatest Hits

EMI (available 12 June)



Hits package pre-empts UK live dates

There have been greatest hits albums from Def Leppard before now, but this one sets itself apart by being a vinyl-only release. Available in two formats – standard black and blood-red marble vinyl with different covers – it finds the Lepps up to their reliable tricks with stadium-friendly rock 'n' roll as they've been doing for decades. It's always a great to revisit the classic 80s material as produced by Mutt Lange, with songs such as *Photograph*, *Animal* and *Love Bites*, and to reconfirm the fact that Def Leppard are a simply fabulous band. The album mixes old and newer material and includes *When Love and Hate Collide* from the previous *Vault* greatest hits collection. Watch out for live UK dates this summer for a chance to see the band in their natural setting. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Love Bites*

For fans of: Whitesnake, Bon Jovi

Mark Lettieri & Purbayan Chatterjee

Feathered Creatures

GroundUp (available 5 June)



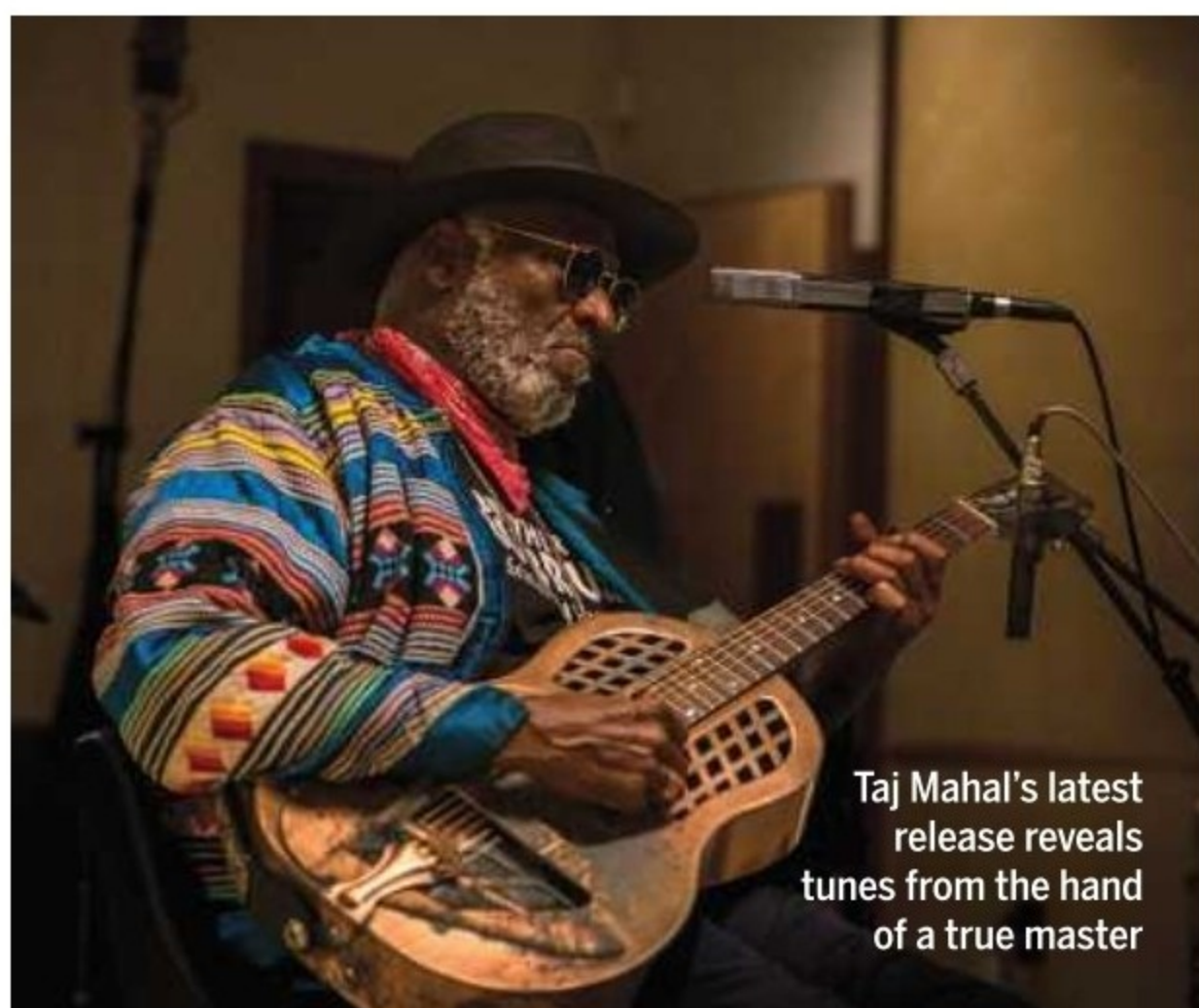
Entrancing meeting of musical cultures

It feels like genuinely interesting instrumental guitar albums (in this case in duet with sitar) are having a bit of a resurgence. From the Afro-Cuban stylings of LA LOM to this absorbing Texas-meets-Mumbai longplayer from sitar maven Purbayan Chatterjee and Snarky Puppy guitarist Mark Lettieri, there's been much to enjoy. Chatterjee and Lettieri handle their East-meets-West musical encounter with a light, inventive touch here. On opener *Rise Enshrined*, Chatterjee's sitar opens up a starlit vista of sinuous melody while purposeful electronic, rhythmic elements provide a firm pulse for Lettieri's lithe improvisation. Meanwhile, on the superb *9,000 Miles*, Lettieri channels his inner Vai to deliver rippling, tasteful shred in and around Chatterjee's intricate web of sitar lines. Egos have been left at the door throughout and music is the winner. Recommended. **[JD]**

Standout track: *9000 Miles*

For fans of: Nitin Sawhney, Snarky Puppy, Steve Vai

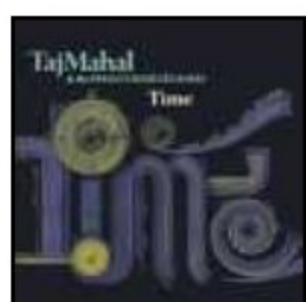
PHOTO BY MIKE COEYMAN



Taj Mahal's latest release reveals tunes from the hand of a true master

Taj Mahal & The Phantom Blues Band Time

Resonatin' Records/30 Tigers (available now)



A masterclass in blues-roots music

Accompanied by The Phantom Blues Band, blues veteran and 2025 Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award honouree Taj Mahal shows us all how it's done on

Time. Just a glance at the artists Taj has collaborated with over the years – a list that includes The Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton and Etta James – certifies him as the real deal. Often genre-defying but with a distinct blues core, it's rumoured that Taj has mastered no fewer than 20 instruments during his long career.

The centrepiece of the new album is its title track, *Time*, an unpublished and never-before-heard Bill Withers composition that was brought to Taj's attention by producer Steve Berkowitz. And it is delivered here with due soulful reverence. If a blend of styles that includes reggae, rock, bar room blues and more – all delivered by the hand of a true master – is your thing, then there's much to enjoy here. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Sweet Lorene*

For fans of: Ry Cooder, Eric Bibb

Tom Moriarty

Chapters

Liberty Music (available 5 June)



Soulful, satisfying roots-rock

If Springsteen gave up small town America to live in the wilds, his music might sound like that of Tom Moriarty. Since his debut LP, *Fire In The Doll's House*, was released

in 2013, the acoustic has defined Moriarty's music – and it's only now, with fifth studio album *Chapters*, that he's adding electric guitar to his sound, to powerful effect. Grizzled and soulful, Moriarty's songs are searching, hard-driving ballads – opener *Enemy Inside* sets the tone with its restless, propulsive inquisition into inner conflict. His vocal presence is weatherbeaten and powerful, especially when driven along by the deft, purposeful drumming of Evan Jenkin (Eric Clapton, Van Morrison). There are more reflective moments, too, as on the yearning ballad *Born Again*. Songs like these are built to last, and this is a fine, cathartic journey to the wilder shores of the human heart. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Enemy Inside*

For fans of: Bruce Springsteen, Ray LaMontagne, Pearl Jam



Performance 3 Guitar **Capo**

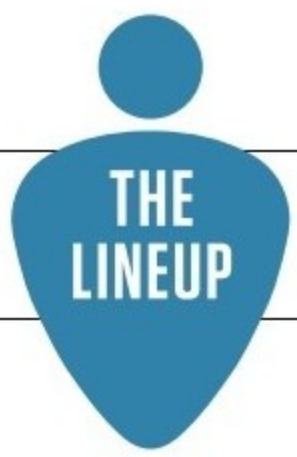
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Tones Behind The Tracks

Nine years on from tragedy, **Barrie Cadogan** shares the story of his trio's new album, the joy of vintage fuzz and the genius of John Squire

Artist: Little Barrie

Album: Gravity Freeze (Easy Eye Sound)



Gravity Freeze is the band's first studio record since 2017's *Death Express*

Moving on from the 'little', these days Barrie Cadogan is a towering presence on the scene. A first-call collaborator for his impeccable tone and touch, and spotted on the stages of giants from John Squire to The Black Keys, our Zoom call finds him rattling around a New York hotel on a day off from his alt-blues trio's US tour.

Indeed, the 51 year old's work-rate and visibility is such that you might not have noticed the near-decade silence from the band that made his name. Now, though, Little Barrie are back with *Gravity Freeze*: a sixth album whose joyous soul-rock grooves sound like a band feeling its way back to the light after a period of deep personal trauma.

Gravity Freeze has been a long time coming. How have you evolved as a player?

"This is the first Little Barrie album since 2017's *Death Express* – Virgil [Howe, drummer] passed away the day before the tour, so we never toured it. I'm still infatuated with the guitar. I guess it's just honing it, seeing where your interests go. I wanted to make this album personal, try to make music that had spirit to it."

Lewis Wharton on bass and Tony Coote on drums make up the band with Barrie Cadogan: "There's something exciting about the minimalism [of a trio format]," he says

What subjects did you write about?

"I wrote the title track about sleep paralysis. When I first got it, I thought I was having a fit – it was scary. But I guess this album was documenting the things we were coming out of and processing losing Virgil. I try not to force it, but I had a conversation with my friend Jim Jones and he said songwriting is like showing up for work. Sometimes it doesn't happen, but you have to actually show up and be ready to receive things from the universe."

How did these songs come to you?

"Some were written coming out of Covid. A friend of mine, who's an artist and musician, let me use his studio in East London. He had a music setup – some drums and amps, a laptop and microphones – and I'd go in and make demos. I was surrounded by all his art equipment: brushes, glue, bits of wood, plastic and metal. He was making sculptures, developing photographic film, it was an inspiring place. I'd close the door and just kick ideas around. Sometimes I'd start off playing a terrible bit of drums to make a loop."

Do you have favourite guitar moments?

"*Coralisa* is kind of a groove, but the outro guitar was something different for me. *Luggin' Hurt* came out good; we just carried on jamming after we'd finished the arrangement and it became this kind of cool, funky boogie. *More Bad Miles Of Road* had a good spirit: it's a very rhythm-section-driven song, keeping the guitar super minimal. I wanted to make a guitar-heavy record but not a stereotypical rock record."

Where did you make the album?

"We recorded it all in a tiny mixing room in Hornsey [North London]. We tipped the sofa on its side to fit the drum kit in there, and when we were getting the drums down, because we wanted a live feel, me and Lewis [Wharton, bass] played into amp simulators, so we didn't have any spill. Then we reamped Lewis's bass and my guitar, and then I'd do overdubs."

What amps did you use?

"One we used a lot was a custom 212 combo built for me by Frank Cooke of JPF Amps. I wanted something that was voiced more British, like the mid-60s Marshalls that ran on KT66 tubes. They have a beautiful kind of hi-fi tone, and the way they



PHOTOS BY LEE VINCENT GRUBB

“It can feel vulnerable at first, but there’s so much dynamic scope in a trio just by holding back and not always playing at full velocity or volume”

feed back is like that ‘Beano’ sound. Then I used my ‘62 brown Fender Super, a [black-panel] Bandmaster and an old copper-panel AC30. We ran all Lewis’s bass through the JPF as well, and used the AC30 on *More Bad Miles Of Road* because we wanted the bass to sound blown out.”

You’ve never been a massive pedal fan, have you?

“There’s a couple of fuzz boxes. I used the germanium Fuzz Face, the Dennis Cornell one. That’s on *Luggin’ Hurt*. I used a MkIV Tone Bender. But the song *Wire*, that’s just the trem on the Super. We threw up a bunch of mics in this small room. So sometimes we were using closer mics, and sometimes we were opening up the more ambient mics, just to see how much air we wanted in the sound.”

What were the key guitars?

“It varied. On *More Bad Miles Of Road*, I used the white custom-built guitar I had put together a while ago [made by Philippe Dubreuille]; it’s a bit like a Jazzmaster, with P-90s and a Bigsby. I used my old Casino on *Coralisa* and *Wire*. *Luggin’ Hurt* was my Black Beauty Custom with that Cornell fuzz. For *December*, I used my 60s Kay Red Devil – it’s got those Speed Bump pickups. On *It Isn’t Soul*, it’s an Esquire into a fuzzbox as I wanted it to be kind of wiry.”

What do you like about the trio format?

“There’s something exciting about the minimalism. Working with the space – there’s something liberating about it. I’ve always been as much inspired by rhythm and drums as by guitar. So I try not to approach playing rhythmically in a rock way, y’know, I don’t really fill out songs with tracks of rhythm guitar. I tend to hold out and play around the vocal. Like *More Bad Miles Of Road*, I’m just singing off the bass and drums.

“With a trio, you learn how to pull things back because if you go out on your first song playing at full velocity, you’ve got nowhere to go. You have to learn how to leave space. With a lot of modern production, it feels like people just fill everything out with hundreds of tracks. The confidence in the space is something that takes a while to learn. It can feel vulnerable at first, but there’s so much dynamic scope in a trio just by holding back and not always playing at full velocity or volume.”



The latest album took shape from songs written over the past several years, while processing the loss of their bandmate Virgil Howe in 2017 – and it was informed by the desire “to make a guitar-heavy record but not a stereotypical rock record,” says Barrie

How does your approach vary when you play with other musicians?

“One key thing you have to be conscious of is that not everyone wants to play at the same volume. If I work more as a sideman with other people, the volume tends to be lower. But with bands like The The, I’m playing louder than with Little Barrie. Probably the loudest band I’ve ever played with was Primal Scream. We were using Super Leads and cranking them. Or you might need a certain effect, like when I worked with Edwyn Collins and he used the Mu-Tron, so I had to have that in the chain.”

You’re a lifelong Stone Roses fan. What was it like being in John Squire’s band with Liam Gallagher?

“I never could have imagined it as a kid, with Stone Roses posters Blu-Tack’d to my wall. When I played bass on that Gallagher/Squire tour, it was a lot of fun switching hats. The parts were quite riffy and melodic. Y’know, John said he wanted that movement from the bass because it was a single-guitar band. And the way John plays, he doesn’t need a second guitarist. He’s one of those guys – he can cover it all.” [HY]



Little Barrie’s new album, *Gravity Freeze*, is available now on Easy Eye Sound

www.littlebarrie.com



The Size Of It

Neville Marten ponders the miniaturisation of equipment compared with the giant stacks of amps that guitarists of yore felt obliged to use

In the above strap line I say “felt obliged to use”, whereas in fact there was no other option when playing large venues, as Cream, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin or Deep Purple did in the 60s and 70s. This was largely before the days of mic’d up cabinets, and certainly prior to the comprehensive sound mixing we take for granted today. Quite a few live Cream and Hendrix performances have popped up in my feeds lately, and their tones were indeed immense. Hendrix on *Machine Gun* – blimey!

While we do still see bands using huge amp backdrops, usually the heavier guys for whom image plays an important part, mostly it’s smaller combos. I’ve seen the Eagles a couple of times, and tweed or black-panel Fender Deluxes were ubiquitous.

“The modelling thing still raises hackles in certain quarters, but ultimate controllability is key – and where modelling comes into its own”

Then, of course, there’s the modelling thing, which still raises hackles in certain quarters. But since even semi-pro bands often go through an out-front mixing desk, or perhaps run things themselves from the stage, ultimate controllability is key. And here’s where modelling, or pedalboard amps, come into their own. Plus they take up minimal room, won’t break your back and are arguably less prone to breaking down.

I know I’ve bored you to death with my little covers trio, but interestingly we are doing a few gigs in Greece during July. My two pals in the band have been holidaying there for years and they have already set off to motor across France, Switzerland and Italy, then ferry over to Greece for a two-month stay in the sun. During this stint I’ll nip over for our week of gigs. It’s only bar stuff, so no big deal.

Of course, it means I have to travel light. They loaded their car with our Bose PA, a keyboard and my Strat, and the entire charabanc is winging its way, *Grapes Of Wrath*

style, as I scribble. Gear-wise, I’ve decided to use either my Blackstar Amped 2, or perhaps make up a small ‘board with a TC Electronic tuner, Dunlop Junior wah, Fulltone OCD, Strymon Brig delay, Providence Anadime chorus, and a DSM/Humboldt Simplifier pedal amp. Either would go straight into the mixer and be controlled from the onstage desk. One is totally self-contained while the other is a collection of bits, which – while it may well sound superior – is possibly more prone to connection problems and glitches.

Horses For Courses

But hang on, it’s a few hotel bars filled with oiled-up revellers who couldn’t give a monkey’s what the guitarist is playing through. And it’s funny because writing this down has just about made my mind up for me – and it’s one of those times when ease overrides everything. And anyway, my Amped 2 actually sounds fantastic.

For an average Joe I’ve been lucky enough to play some great amps over my long gigging history. The first serious one was a 1963 Vox AC30; then I had a Marshall 100-watt half-stack for, believe it or not, a Top 40 covers band; my wonderful mahogany and wicker Mark II Mesa/Boogie combo came next, and I used that for years until the glorious green Matchless DC-30 turned up. I could go on.

So I wholly understand that feeling of trouser legs metaphorically flapping in the wind from your speakers. I still have valve amps (well, one, a Mark I Boogie), and there’s no better onstage feeling than when all the elements are in sync so the sound carries you aloft. But these days I’m equally happy to go the modelling or pedal amp route if it gets a convincing job done more simply. And if you know how to get a satisfying sound out of a piece of kit – and I hope I can say I do – the right horse for the right course is how I prefer to ride these days.

Are you resolutely in one camp or the other, or perhaps more of a fence sitter like I’ve become? Do let me know, and I’ll see you next month. **G**

NEV’S GAS OF THE MONTH Hello Wembley!

What? Line 6 Helix Stadium Floor XL

Where seen? www.yamahamusiclondon.com **Price?** £1,980

Having used the original Helix Floor for almost 10 years, I can attest to how good it is. Featuring an all-new Agoura modelling system, this version is yet another leap forward in the quest for ultimate reality and super ease of use, while possessing a world of great amp, speaker, cab and effects models. Check out the Line 6 website where demonstrator and super guitarist Paul Hindmarsh puts it through its paces in easy-to-understand language. Question is, would one of these fit under the seat of an EasyJet flight to Greece?



PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



High Praise

This month, **Alex Bishop** goes in pursuit of setup perfection with an invasive classical-guitar repair

Over the years, without quite noticing, I have performed around a thousand guitar repairs. One of the benefits of spending so much time developing one's skills is the natural increase in confidence that occurs over time. This is especially handy when it comes to the most crucial step in repairing anything: the appraisal.

More than half the success of a repair can be down to using the right approach from the start. But when the natural conclusion is dramatic invasive action, it can be tempting to take the easy way out and suggest that the guitar 'just needs a setup', and that you'll do your best and work with what you've got. But I've never been one to shirk from a proper challenge, and after an honest appraisal last month I was tasked with resetting the neck on a classical guitar.

A Pain In The Neck

One of my better-known customers famously said 'the first cut is the deepest', and that couldn't be more true when it comes to messing with the neck geometry of acoustic guitars. In most cases, a neck reset is required when (after a proper setup) the saddle of the guitar is too low to adjust any further, and the action of the guitar is still high. It is reserved as a last resort, and requires steam to be injected into the neck pocket to break down the glue, and serious clamping pressure applied to pop out the neck.

This course of action is not for the faint-hearted, and Spanish-style classical guitars are built differently to their steel-string counterparts. The neck wood extends as one piece into the body, with the ribs fitting into slots in the side of the neck. With the neck angle too shallow, I was going to have to find an alternative way to somehow change the projection of the strings towards the bridge.

In this situation, one potential solution is to shim the fingerboard with a thin layer of matching wood. This newly elevated position might now give the strings a closer action, but doesn't necessarily solve the problem of a low saddle, and will do nothing to improve the sound. Furthermore, the increased thickness of the neck makes this approach somewhat impractical, as any gain in playability is offset by an uncomfortable, chunky neck profile.

Another approach is to shave down the bridge, and deepen the saddle slot. Sometimes this works with oversized bridges, although it's important to realise that the bridge itself is a brace. Taking off too much material destabilises the top, and can make a heavily loaded bridge so delicate that it will split over time. With the bridge on this guitar in the 'goldilocks' zone of 12mm total height, I didn't want to take a chance and potentially cut this instrument's life short.



Instead, I removed the back of the guitar. Anyone who has built a guitar will know that until the box is closed, there is a surprising amount of flexibility in a guitar's front and sides. After successfully prising the binding from the edges, I removed the back from the internal linings and clamped the guitar to a simple jig that would align the top of the frets with the top of the bridge. Knowing this would result in my client's ideal setup, I reglued the back into this newly tweaked position to make the change permanent.

The final challenge was to refit the original binding to the now subtly distorted shape of the back. With the

Resetting the neck on a classical guitar is not a job to be taken lightly, but Alex's forethought and planning won the day

"The repair was a victory; with a taller saddle in place, the guitar had undoubtedly gained more projection and a robust tone"

binding channels cleaned up, certain areas had excess space. This needed to be filled with tapered slivers of rosewood (matching the back) to ensure the bindings ended up running perfectly flush with the sides of the instrument. I certainly wanted to avoid as much refinishing work as possible, hoping to simply French polish any areas that needed attention.

In reflection, the repair was a double victory; not only was it significantly more playable, but with a taller saddle in place, the guitar had undoubtedly gained more projection and a robust tone. It just goes to show that a good outcome is rarely an accident – it's the result of getting the first step right. **G**



Sayce's Strats

Stratocaster-slinger Philip Sayce shares his Fender tone secrets and best-loved amps with **Charlie Wilkins**

From sideman to solo artist, Philip Sayce has carved his own lane, with his explosive blues-rock guitar playing and a soulful singing voice that follows close behind. With more than two decades of touring under his belt, an electrifying live show, and a string of critically acclaimed albums, one enduring feature of Sayce's playing is his affinity to the Fender Stratocaster, a tool that helps him continue his journey as an artist guided by heart, soul and authenticity.

What is it about your '63 Stratocasters that makes them so special to you?

"There's just something about the '63s from that era. I always felt like Fender hit the sweet spot with those guitars. You'd pick one up and go, 'Oh, that's a pretty good one... here's another pretty good one.' There was a consistency in the neck shape, the way they felt physically and how they sat when you played them. The two that I have are from August and September '63, and even though they're different, they both just feel right. The pickups in both guitars are also outstanding. There's one that I call 'Big Daddy' and it's just the biggest, widest,

meanest-sounding Strat I've ever heard. It just spans. The other one, that I call 'Mother', has a slightly different thing going on. It's got '58 pickups in it now, so it's a little more airy and sparkly but still has that '63 chunk."

Have you done much to them in terms of modifications or maintenance?

"Yes, a little bit. I refretted them several times with pretty much the widest, tallest fretwire I could find. Because most of my vocabulary is around bending, it's better for the feel and it holds up longer. I tried to keep the original pots in there as long as possible, even to the detriment of the tone, but at some point they got so bad that I had to replace them. Some of the saddles also got to a point where they just wouldn't move any more, so I had to replace a few of those, too."

How did you first get turned on to vintage Strats?

"It was always a dream. All my heroes – Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Knopfler, Buddy Guy – they were playing those guitars. I had been hearing from players and collectors over and over again that the '62s and '63s were

Below: Philip's 1963 'Big Daddy' model is "the biggest, widest, meanest-sounding Strat I've ever heard", he says

Below right: The PRS Silver Sky joins 'Big Daddy' on the road – bringing its complementary modern performance to Sayce's rig



the sweet spot for vintage Strats. A friend of mine helped me find my first one. The second one, the 'Big Daddy' Strat, was actually a guitar I missed out on years earlier. Then 10 or 15 years later, a buddy called me and said, 'Hey, I just saw this guitar and it made me think of you.' He sent a picture and it was the exact same guitar. So I sold a bunch of stuff and bought it. That one felt like it was meant to be."

Why do you think modern guitars still haven't quite captured the tone and feel of vintage guitars?

"I don't think modern builders are getting it wrong or missing anything. The wood on a vintage guitar that's 60-plus years old is dry and settled. When those guitars were made, that wood might've already been 100 years old. You can get really close now, but there's maybe that last five or 10 per cent where it comes down to the resonance and the age of the wood. The pickups make a huge difference, too. Some people have this idea that overwinding a pickup is better, and that's not always true. The pickups in 'Mother' are from '58. They're slightly underwound and sound great. We also did a project with Seymour Duncan, recreating the pickups from 'Mother', and it was fascinating, just really getting into the details of what made them sound that way. The Seymour Duncan team did a fabulous job and the Duncan Mother pickups sound fantastic."

How does your PRS Silver Sky fit in with your vintage Strats?

"It's really its own thing. It's not competing with the '63s; it's got its own lane. It's incredibly comfortable, it stays in tune and it just goes where you want it to go. I always say that vintage guitars are like muscle cars. You hear that rumble, and you just know what it is. The Silver Sky is like a modern performance car. It's got all the bells and whistles and it handles the corners really well. It doesn't fight you at all. It's like the wind is at your back when you're playing it."

Do you play differently depending on the guitar?

"Not really in a big way. I mean, the feel is a little different, but it's more about what the guitar gives you and how it responds. With the old guitars, once you get them dialled in with a good luthier, they just feel like an old pair of jeans or an old baseball glove. Nothing feels quite like that. The Silver Sky is really comfortable, too, and I actually like to warm up on it."

Which guitars do you take out on the road these days?

"Most of the time I'll bring 'Big Daddy' and the Silver Sky, so just two guitars. Sometimes I'll bring another guitar, but those two cover a lot of ground. In a perfect world, I'd bring 10 guitars, but you gotta make it work with what you can carry."



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIP SAYCE

When did you start seriously exploring tone beyond just guitars?

"Playing beside Jeff Healey kind of forced it. His Marshalls sounded huge on stage, and I needed something that could keep up. Not just in volume but in the way it responded. While I was out on the road with Jeff, I contacted Cesar Diaz [legendary amp tech], who had worked on Stevie Ray Vaughan's amps. I sent him a late-60s 100-watt Fender Dual Showman head, and when I got it back it was insane. The best amp I'd ever heard with unbelievable punch, sustain and clarity."

Another '63 Strat, 'Mother' features underwound '58 pickups, which have been recreated by the Seymour Duncan Custom Shop

"All my heroes - Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Knopfler, Buddy Guy - were playing those guitars. The '62s and '63s were the sweet spot"

"Later he invited me to stay at his place for a few days, so I brought a Super Reverb and a Bassman for him to work on. I got to spend time in his 'shop while he built some pedals for me as well. It was very hands-on where I would play, give him feedback and he would mess with the amp. He dialled in my Super Reverb in about 20 minutes [laughs]. He was amazing."

"We worked on getting my guitars and Fuzz Face to interact with the amp the right way. I was also looking for clarity with almost a hi-fi sound but not harsh or



PHOTO BY IAN FRASER

Philip's early initiation to the live scene with Jeff Healey inspired him to up his game in the amp stakes. Today, his backline benefits from the expertise of Cesar Diaz and Tommy Cougar

shrill. Cesar approached amps the way a tailor fits a suit. Watching him work was like seeing magic happen before my eyes [smiles]."

Did that experience also influence your choice of speakers from there on out?

"Absolutely. When I brought the Super Reverb to Cesar's shop it had 40-watt Naylor 10-inch speakers in it. Cesar thought they sounded good but knew I would need something better. That's when he turned me on to Electro-Voice speakers. I eventually started using EVM12Ls in most of my touring cabinets with Jeff Healey and later with Melissa Etheridge because they were so strong and reliable. Once you feel a 4x12 with EVs, it's hard to go back.

"The amp has to react to your hands. When that relationship works, you stop fighting the instrument and start communicating through it"

"For the past 15 years or so I've also worked closely with amp designer Tommy Cougar [of Custom by Cougar] in Sweden. He's incredible and, in my opinion, the best living amp guy in the world right now. Tommy studied Cesar's work as well as Alexander Dumble's. He also turned me on to JBL speakers, which I use today in my Super Reverb. That approach really comes from the lineage of players like Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimmie Vaughan, Albert Collins and Freddie King. Those guys were all using big JBL speakers to get that sound. To get my sound, I typically go for high-headroom Fender or Marshall style amps. I keep them clean and push the front-end with a pedal, rather than relying on heavy preamp gain."

Did that experience shift how you think about tone?

"Yeah, it taught me that tone is really about response. The amp has to react to your hands. If you play softly it opens up, and if you dig in it pushes back. When that relationship works, you stop fighting the instrument and start communicating through it." 



Philip Sayce's new album, *Scorched Earth: Volume 2 Live in LA/London*, is available now via Atomic Gemini Records. Philip tours the UK until 3 June www.philipsayce.com

PHOTO BY ROBERT SUTTON

THREE TO GET READY

Sunburst 60s Strats For All Pockets



Squier Classic Vibe '60s Stratocaster £405

Squier's vintage reissues have been seriously impressive for the money and this one's a banger, featuring Alnico pickups and a sensible-compromise 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fretboard, though in laurel, not the more classic rosewood.



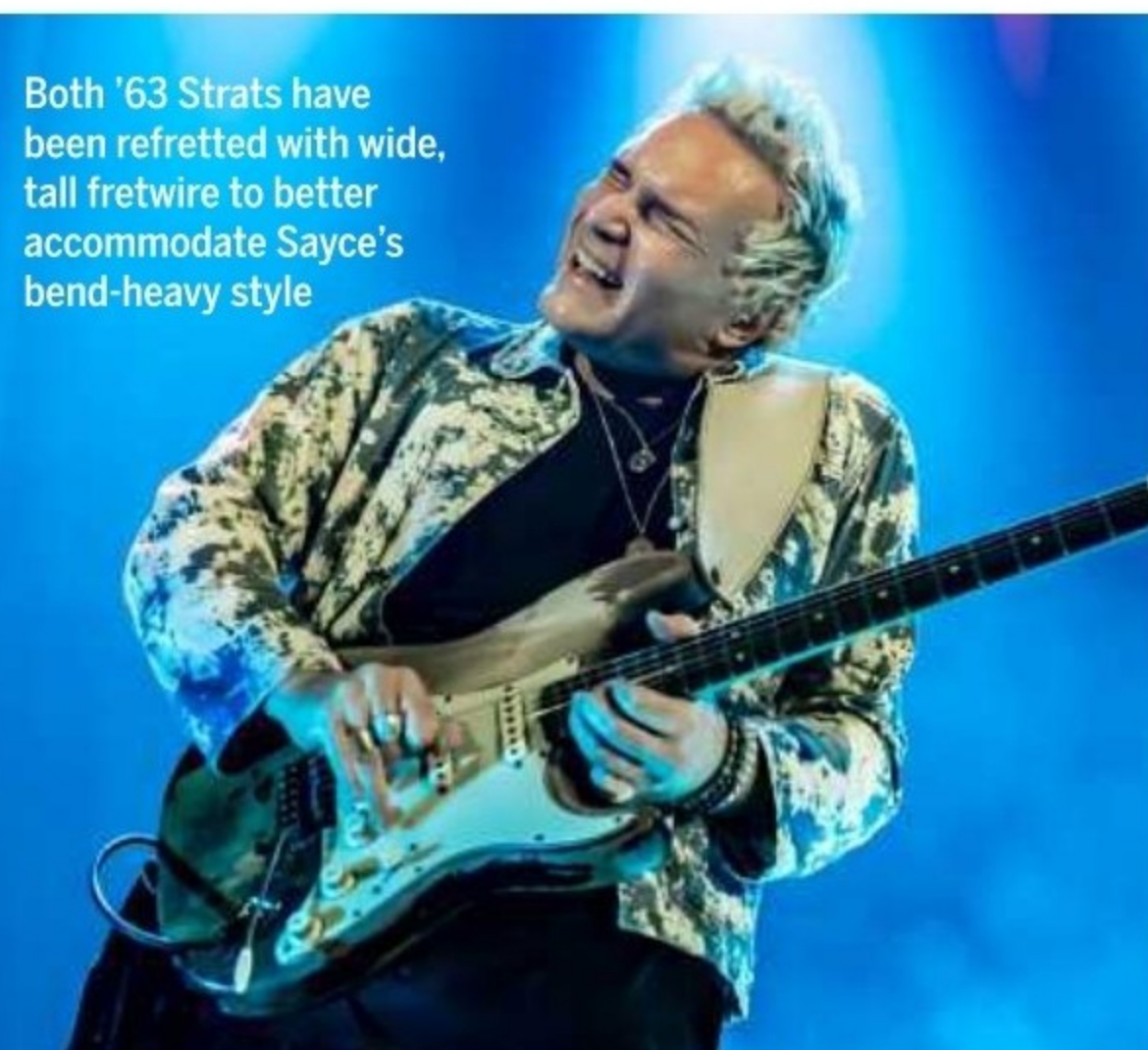
Fender Vintera II '60s Stratocaster £949

Last year *Guitarist* did a video shootout pitting real vintage 50s and 60s Strats against each other, with a Vintera as a wildcard... that came perilously close to winning. A very capable, classic-looking and sounding Strat for a reasonable outlay.



Fender American Vintage II 1961 £2,199

After a brief diversion into more generic US-made vintage reissues with the American Original Series, Fender has gone back to its roots with American Vintage II and delivered a vintage experience not far shy of Custom Shop quality – and, though modelled on the Strat spec of 1961, this comes very close to Sayce's '62/'63 ideal.



Both '63 Strats have been refretted with wide, tall fretwire to better accommodate Sayce's bend-heavy style

IGF CHELTENHAM 2026

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Songwriter's Chords

A memorable chord voicing can be the key to a song's impact. **Richard Barrett** suggests some more unlikely contenders to try

The old adage is 'a good song can stand on its own played on acoustic guitar'. But is it really that black and white? A specific chord voicing can make a significant contribution to the feel of a song. For example, if the Beatles' *The Fool On The Hill* started with a regular D major, rather than D6, it would definitely lose something. The common thread linking together all the examples this issue is that they are what we might call a 'deluxe' alternative to the regular major and minor chords we hear every day, particularly on acoustic guitar.

Another thing they all have in common is the use of open strings, even if that's just a single string. Acoustic guitar chords always seem to jangle and jump out of the mix better when they feature open strings. Finding voicings that do this in keys such as F and B $\flat$ can be a challenge, so the examples are aimed at some of these less obvious keys. Chords that stray from the mainstream can really make a big difference! 

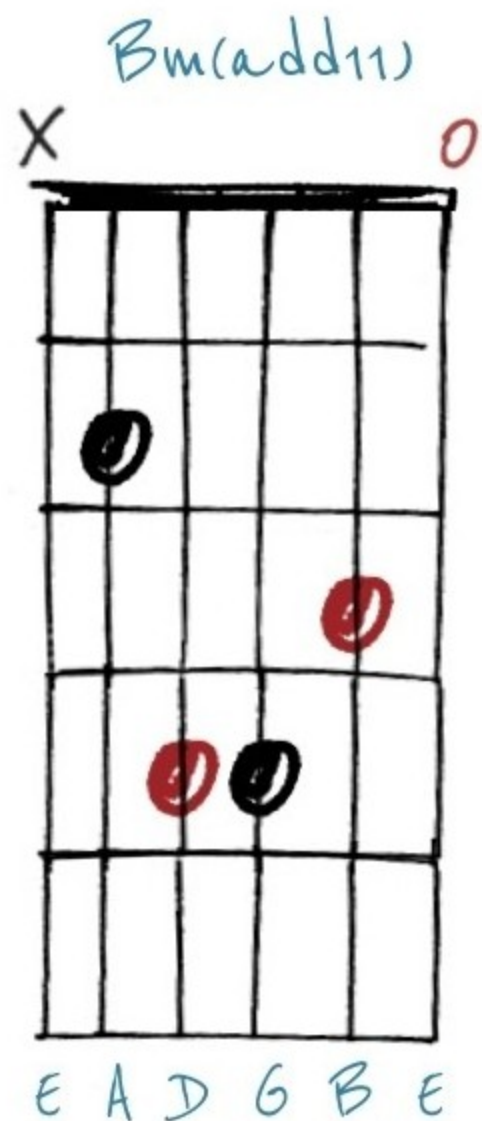


PHOTO BY BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

Despite the 'four lads from Liverpool' tag, The Beatles used some very sophisticated chords in many of their songs

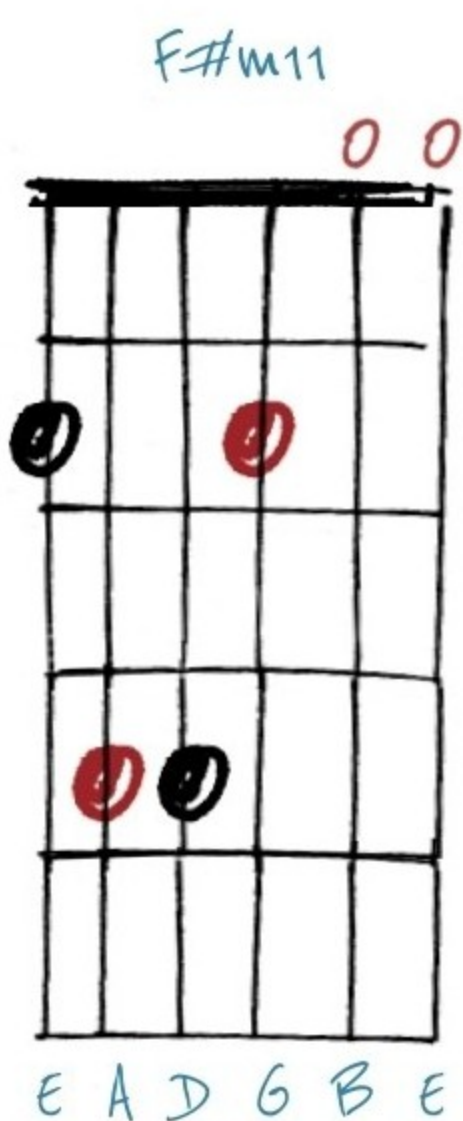
Example 1

This B minor omits the usual barre at the 2nd fret, so we get this nice ringing E at the top. If this were a Bm7, we'd call it a Bm11. However, there is no 7th (A), so we refer to this as a Bm(add11). It can go wherever a regular B minor goes if you fancy a change.



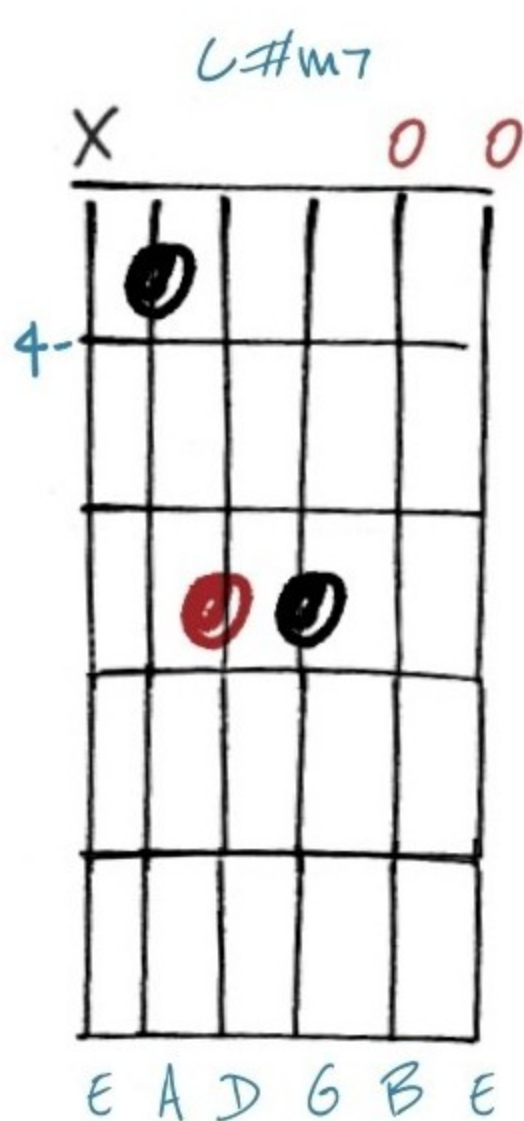
Example 2

This F#m11 is another that would normally be a barre chord, but instead we're making use of the open first and second strings to give us an 11th (B) and 7th (E) respectively. The Root note (F#) on the sixth string is optional, but it's a nice finishing touch. Try using your thumb (Hendrix style) or a spare finger if you're feeling nimble.



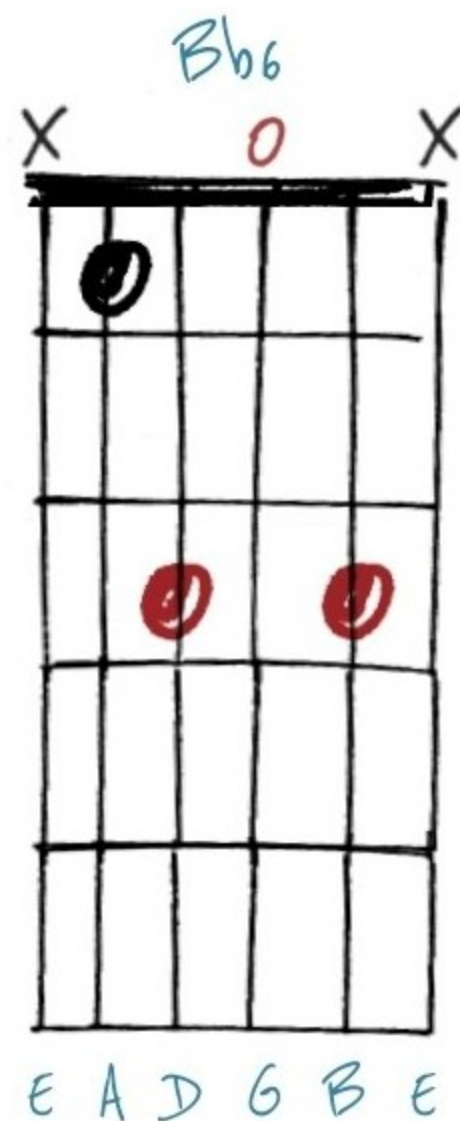
Example 3

This C#m7 adopts similar thinking to Example 2, using the open first and second strings to add a jangly extension at the top. In this case we're adding the 7th (B) on the second string and the minor 3rd (E) on the first. Moving this shape around the fretboard will also give a few more useful ideas.



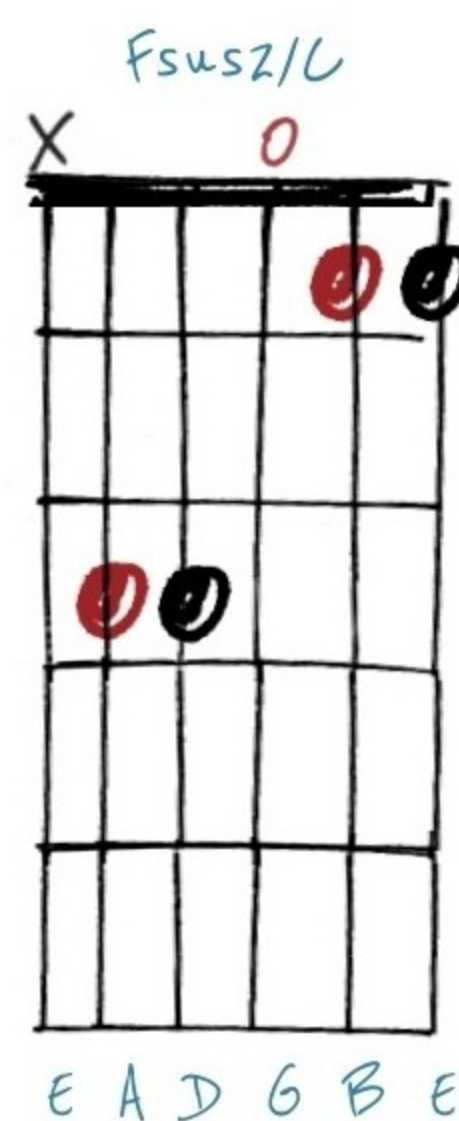
Example 4

This B $\flat$ 6 isn't the most jangly of the examples, but it does give us a nice alternative to the regular B $\flat$. As in Example 3, you can move this shape around for some nice variations. You can also get a B $\flat$ m6 by shifting from the 3rd to the 2nd fret on the second string.

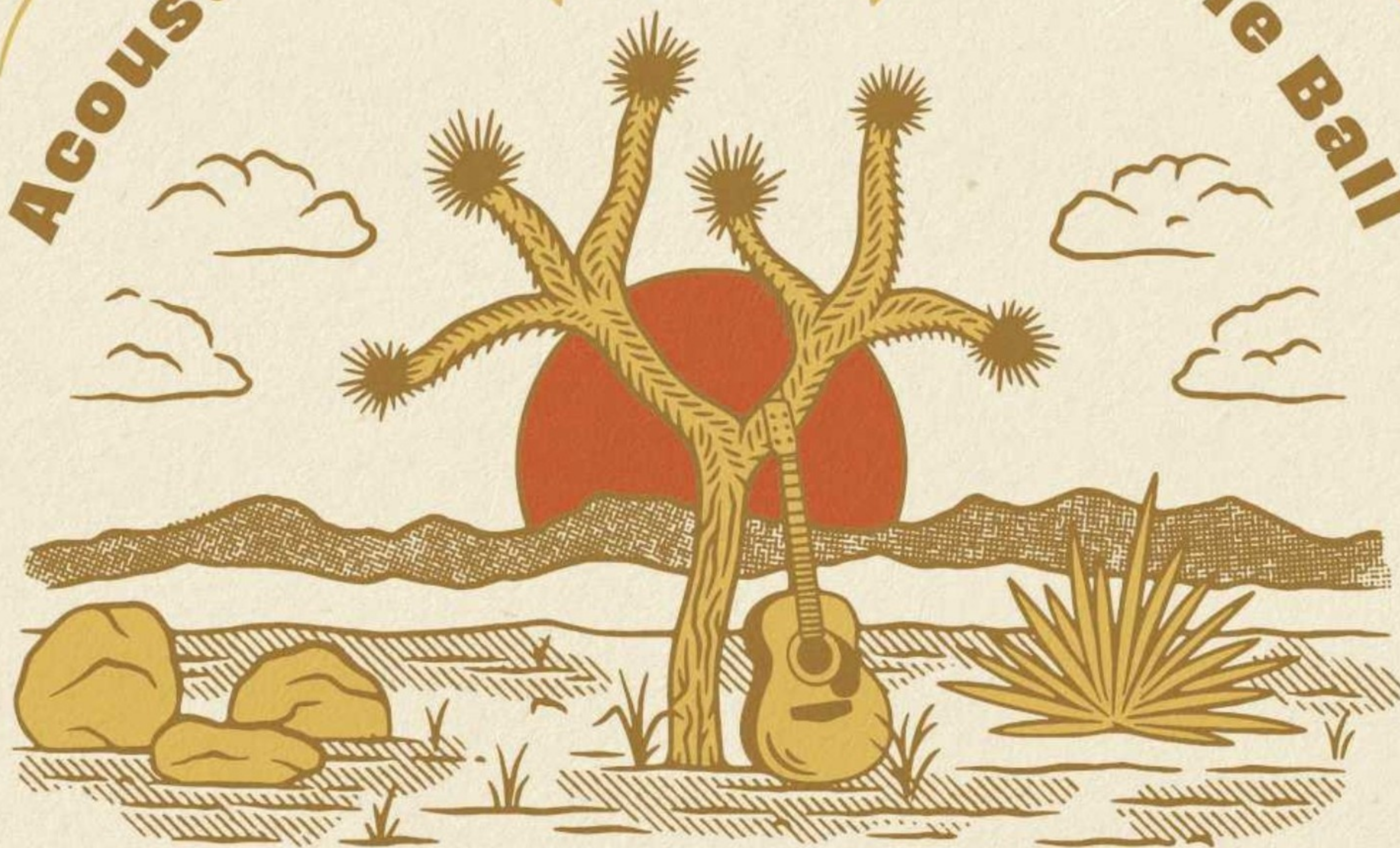


Example 5

F can sometimes sound a bit 'blocky' when used together with other open position chords. This version leaves the third string open for a sus2 voicing (over C). This can be used instead of F major or F minor. You can also leave the first string open to add a major 7th. You could potentially add in the Root (F) at the 1st fret of the sixth string – if your thumb will comply!



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STAR LETTER

TELE VISION



I thoroughly enjoyed your feature on Telecasters in issue 536 and thought you might like to hear about my fourth and current Tele. I saw an advertisement by Trans-Am Guitars of Southend-on-Sea in *Guitarist* back in 2005 for Japanese Fenders. It stated that Fender Japan produced two ranges of guitars in those days: one going for export, and a more exclusive range for

home-consumption only. It asserted that the home-consumption only models were built to a much higher standard and contained models that were exclusive to Japan and had no Fender USA equivalent. The export range had perfectly good Japanese pickups, but the home consumption range had imported upmarket USA pickups. I visited their website and there I found a beautiful solid walnut Tele, a model, which, at that time, had never been made in North America. It came with Fender USA Texas Special pickups, and I bought it for £695.

Also in the same issue of *Guitarist* was an advert for hand-tooled leather pickguards made by El Dorado guitar accessories in Pasadena, California, which looked beautiful, so I bought one of them as well.

Having collected my new Tele from Southend I made a few modifications that improved it dramatically. It had a bridge with raised sides, which I replaced with a flat Gotoh version. Having experienced repeated string breakages (especially B strings) on all my previous Teles, new Graph Tech saddles were fitted. A new, genuine Fender four-way switch replaced the original three-way version. A Dunlop Straplok system replaced the original buttons and a more robust two-screw retrofit jack plate was fitted. I have never seen another Tele like it, and it is greatly admired wherever my band plays.

Graham Thomas MBE

Thanks for sharing, Graham. It goes to show that you can obtain a unique guitar from a major maker without going down the expensive Custom Shop route or making major mods. Fender Japan has long ploughed its own furrow. Special runs of guitars with unique specs made for the larger Japanese retailers were (and are) quite common and, we learn from an importer of Japanese guitars, historically very little formal record was made by Fender Japan of such special run guitars – making it possible to find some really unusual, near-unique and very cool guitars (like the one you found). Adding a few sympathetic upgrades and tweaks of your own clearly made that Tele everything you needed.

KORG

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

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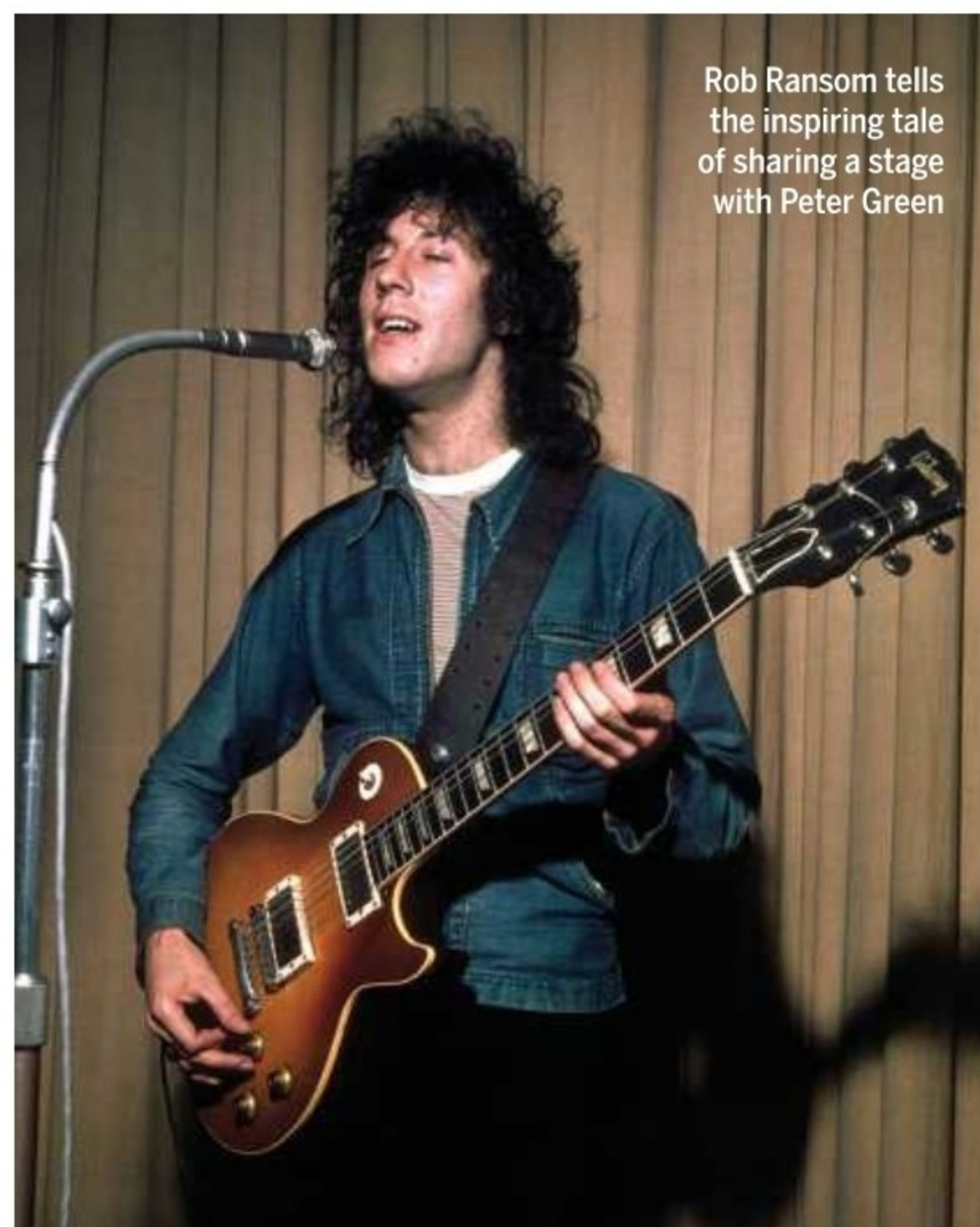
CLUB DATE

I recently read your feature on the Höfner Club 50 (issue 535, The Mod Squad). I thought you might be interested in how my Club 50 got to make an appearance on stage with Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac!

When I was at university in Birmingham in late '65 I visited a pawn shop and saw a Les Paul-looking guitar in the window. A few minutes later I came out of the shop as the proud owner of an early 60s Höfner Club 50. Fast forward to August 1968. I was staying at my parents' house in Deal, Kent, during vacations and travelled up to Margate to see Fleetwood Mac at Dreamland. I'd already seen the Mac at several London venues since their formation in late 1967, and I was familiar with Peter Green from his Bluesbreaker days, so I was already a huge fan.

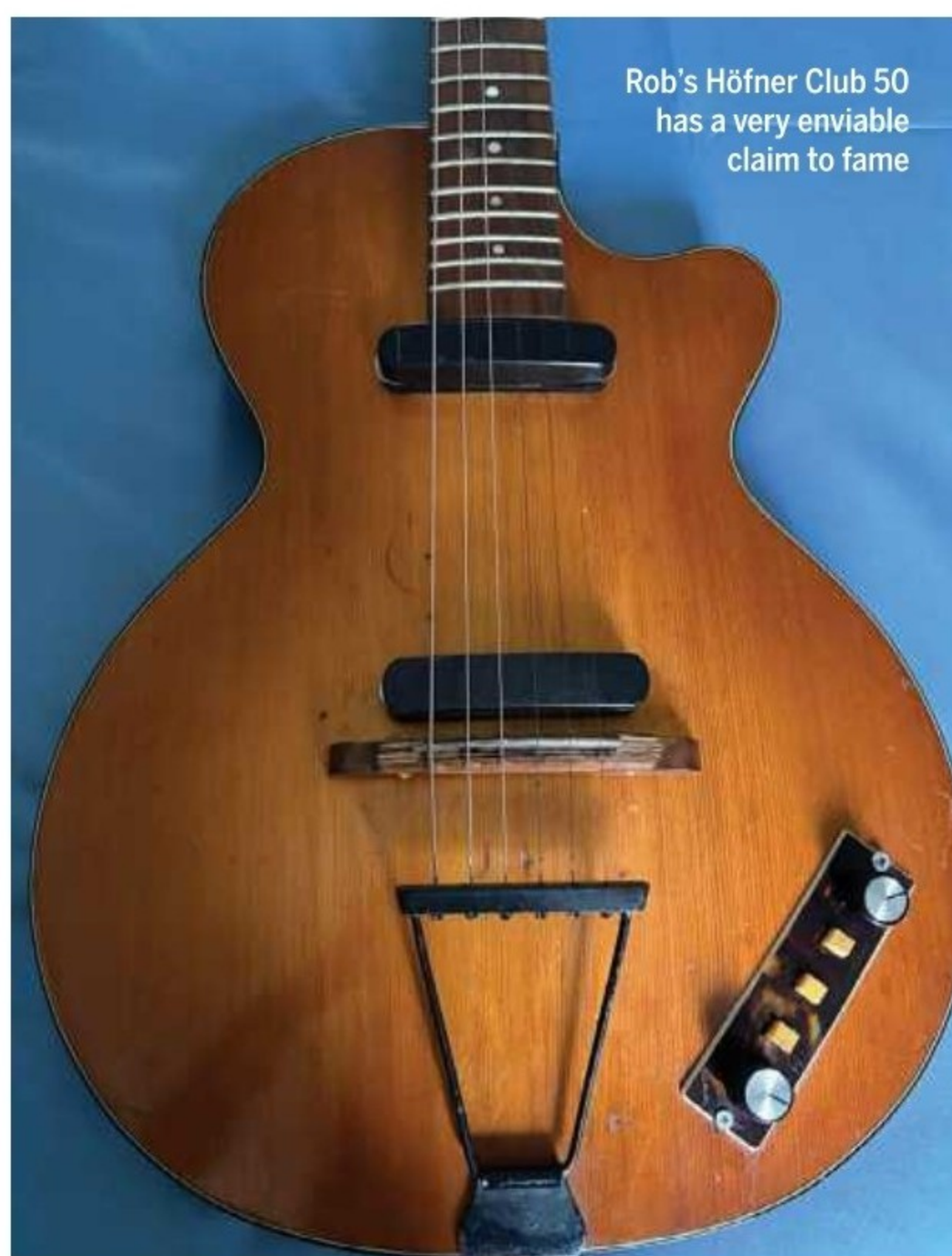
After the gig, I found myself in a short line of fans waiting to have a word with Peter Green. The conversation went a little like this: "Hi Peter, I really enjoyed your playing – I'm a blues guitarist, too! I see you are playing in Folkestone next week, any chance I could come and sit in with you?" And, to my shock, his response was, "Yeah, that would be cool, see you there!"

What was I thinking? I'd never played either in a practice session, let alone on stage, and here I was committed to appearing with a famous band. A week



Rob Ransom tells the inspiring tale of sharing a stage with Peter Green

PHOTO BY GEORGE WILKES/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES



later I arrived at the Leas Cliff Hall in Folkestone, armed with my trusty Höfner guitar, and went around to the stage door. I told the guard there I was with the band and they let me in; no security checks or ID badges back in those days. I found myself in a largely empty dressing room with just a fold-up table and a few chairs. Mick Fleetwood and John McVie were there and I told Mick that Peter had said it was okay if I played with them. Apparently, Peter was very generous about allowing guest artists to play.

Soon, Jeremy Spencer came into the dressing room and took a liking to my Höfner. While I was chatting about guitars with him, Peter arrived. He remembered me from Dreamland and asked me what I wanted to play. The band took to the stage and invited me up to join them in the middle of the first set. I looked out into the audience and saw a few hundred people. Given that this was my first time on stage I wasn't too nervous, and I plugged into a Fender Twin in the backline. Peter called out for a blues shuffle in G and just like that my first ever performance was under way. The Höfner's volume was turned down so low that I'm not sure the audience could hear much of what I played, and after a couple of tunes I exited the stage and packed up the guitar in the dressing room.

Unknown to me, several of my friends and girls that I knew were in the audience, and I became a mini celebrity among my peers as the story spread. For sure, I wasn't the next blues sensation, but I'd proved to myself that I could get up and play with a band. I didn't know at the time that I wasn't to take the first step of joining my own band for almost 30 years.

After moving to the US in the early 90s, my time as a wannabe blues guitarist finally kicked off and I founded several blues bands including Royal Blues Machine and Eddie And The Heifers (performances on YouTube if you want to look). The Höfner? It's languishing in my sister's attic down in Somerset, retired, but I'm sure still remembering its one night of fame...

Rob Ransom



Well, we reckon that's the best first gig story we've ever heard, Rob – and what a testament to Peter Green's musical generosity that he'd just let you sit in without ceremony. Different times, but it's a real tonic to hear about a legend of blues guitar sharing his stage with a hopeful. The 30-year hiatus until the next band appearance was at least 'paid for' by the glory of the first!

THE LOW-DOWN

Your excellent mag shows lots of gorgeous, exotic guitars, often at eye-watering prices. However, in fairness, you often also acknowledge how good budget guitars have become in recent years. This led me to think, 'How low can you go?' As a lefty I was intrigued to see a lefty T-style Bax/Fazley for £77.40 including free p&p. Inspired by a few tinnies I thought, 'Why not?' So I bought it. It arrived swiftly, looked gorgeous, played superbly and sounded great. Well, except the neck pup was a bit weak.

Your wise tome is always extolling the virtues of P-90 pups, so I invested a mighty £17.39 on eBay for a Wilkinson P-90. On taking the black pickguard off I was amazed to find the gorgeous bookmatched pretty grained wood went under the 'guard. Why hide it? So I scratch-built a transparent 'guard from an acrylic picture frame glass and, hey presto, you can see the amazing bookmatched wood, and the neck pup now has a superbly big voice. Chuffed to bits or what?

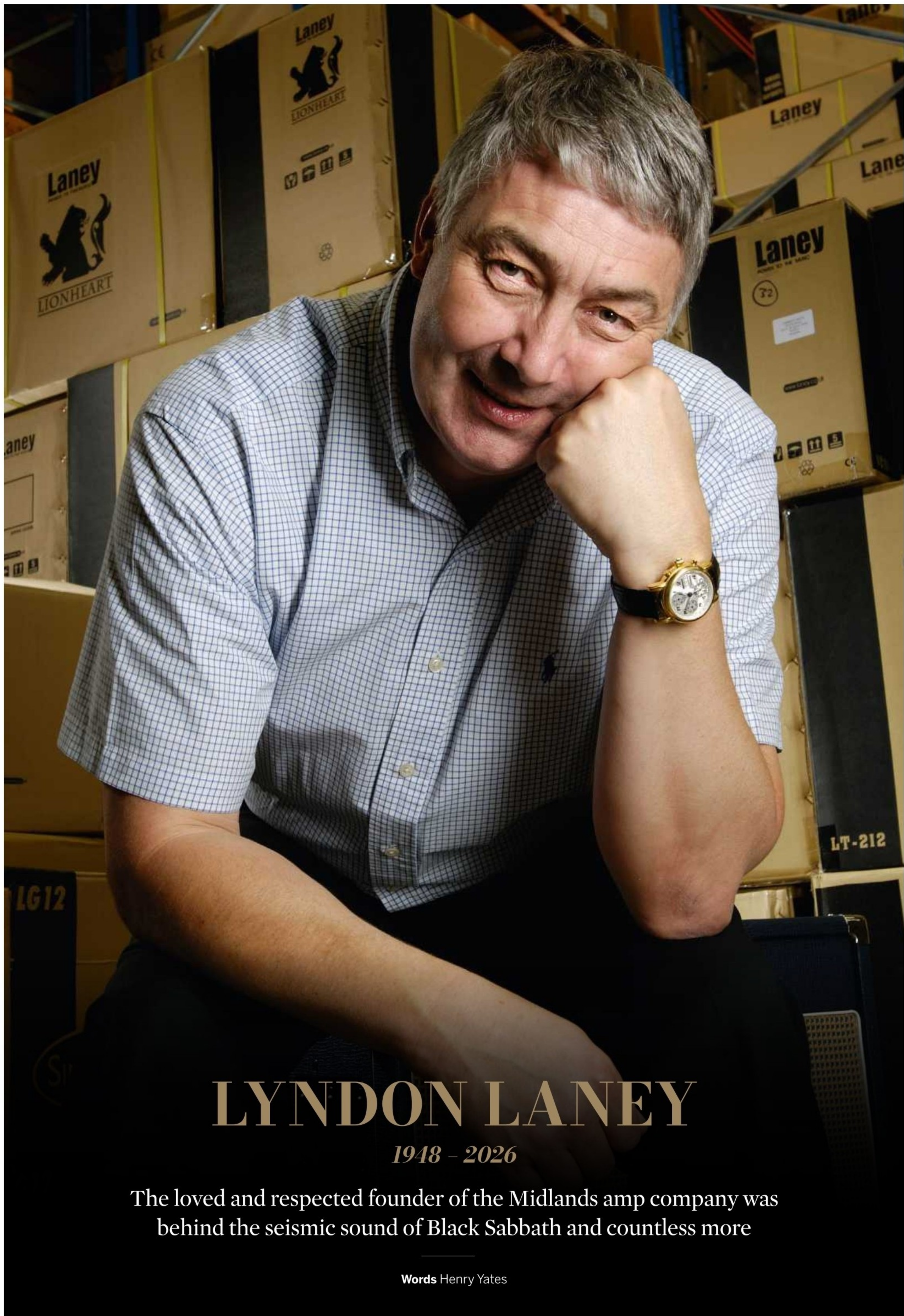
Postscript is I've just bought another from Bax for £57. Crazy, eh? Couldn't buy the wood and bits and make it myself for that.

Jon Chaplin

The bar for entry to the quality-guitar club has never been lower, as you have discovered. And you found a lefty, too – something many major mainstream makers could take note of! As always, one or two judicious mods can elevate the sound and playing experience of cheaper guitars immensely, though it's probably wise to seek out things like good replacement pickups at the best price you can, lest they end up costing more than the guitar itself!

Jon Chaplin bought a sub-£100 lefty and updated it to his taste with a Wilkinson P-90 and a homemade pickguard

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



LYNDON LANEY

1948 - 2026

The loved and respected founder of the Midlands amp company was
behind the seismic sound of Black Sabbath and countless more

Words Henry Yates

LYNDON LANEY

May 1948 – April 2026

Even if he had achieved nothing else as an amp builder, Lyndon Laney's legend status was cast in stone on 13 February 1970. That was the day that Black Sabbath released their self-titled debut album, driven by a tone so heavy, crushing and malevolent that it seemed to capture the doomy clank of Birmingham's sheet-metal factories (an industry that had already cost Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi two of his fingertips).

Of course, that call-to-arms for heavy metal couldn't have happened without Iommi's vision and riffs. Equally, there's a case it wouldn't have landed so hard without the guitarist's custom Laney LA 100 BL: among the first of many fabled amplifiers created by the Midlands-based company following its formation in 1967.

"You used to be in there night and day, dedicated to it," reflected Iommi in a recent head-to-head interview with his great friend Laney, who died in April at the age of 77. "I'm not going to



Lyndon Laney and his son, company CEO James, with Tony Iommi in 2025

"[Lyndon] used to be in [the workshop] night and day, dedicated to it. Without [him], [Black Sabbath] wouldn't be here" **TONY IOMMI**

use anything else and, without you, we wouldn't be here."

In fact, Laney achieved plenty more, both before and after his association with Sabbath. Born in 1948, by the mid-60s he was playing bass with The Band Of Joy – familiar to Led Zeppelin scholars as the proving ground for vocalist Robert Plant and drummer John Bonham. But it was the art of valve-amp tone that held the greatest fascination, and so Laney began working on early designs in his father's garage, fine-tuning the punch and character of his circuitry to stand out in a market already dominated by Vox, Marshall and Fender.

What seemed like a huge gamble – "Two days before I was due to go to university to study electronic engineering," Laney recalled, "I decided to carry on for a couple of years making amplifiers, see how it went" – soon paid off. One of the young engineer's first commissions was building the PA for Zeppelin's first US tour of 1968, while word-of-mouth saw his powerful, affordable amps proliferate on home turf.

The quality of Laney's tone was such that it even drew Iommi away from his original Marshall backline, the Sabbath man settling on six 4x12 cabinets fed by four 100-watt heads. Perhaps there was also an element of Black Country solidarity. "I switched to Laney because they started up around the same time as us and they're a Birmingham company," the guitarist told MusicRadar. "To be honest, they offered to give us all this gear when nobody else did. What do you say to that? 'Okay!' So I used them."

It was typical of a canny operator who went on to prove both his innovative spirit and head for business. With Laney's finger on the pulse, 1973's KLIPP amp range was the first of its kind to feature a boost channel, while the early 80s saw the firm develop the AOR series whose extra stage of pre-gain was a favourite among the Sunset Strip set.

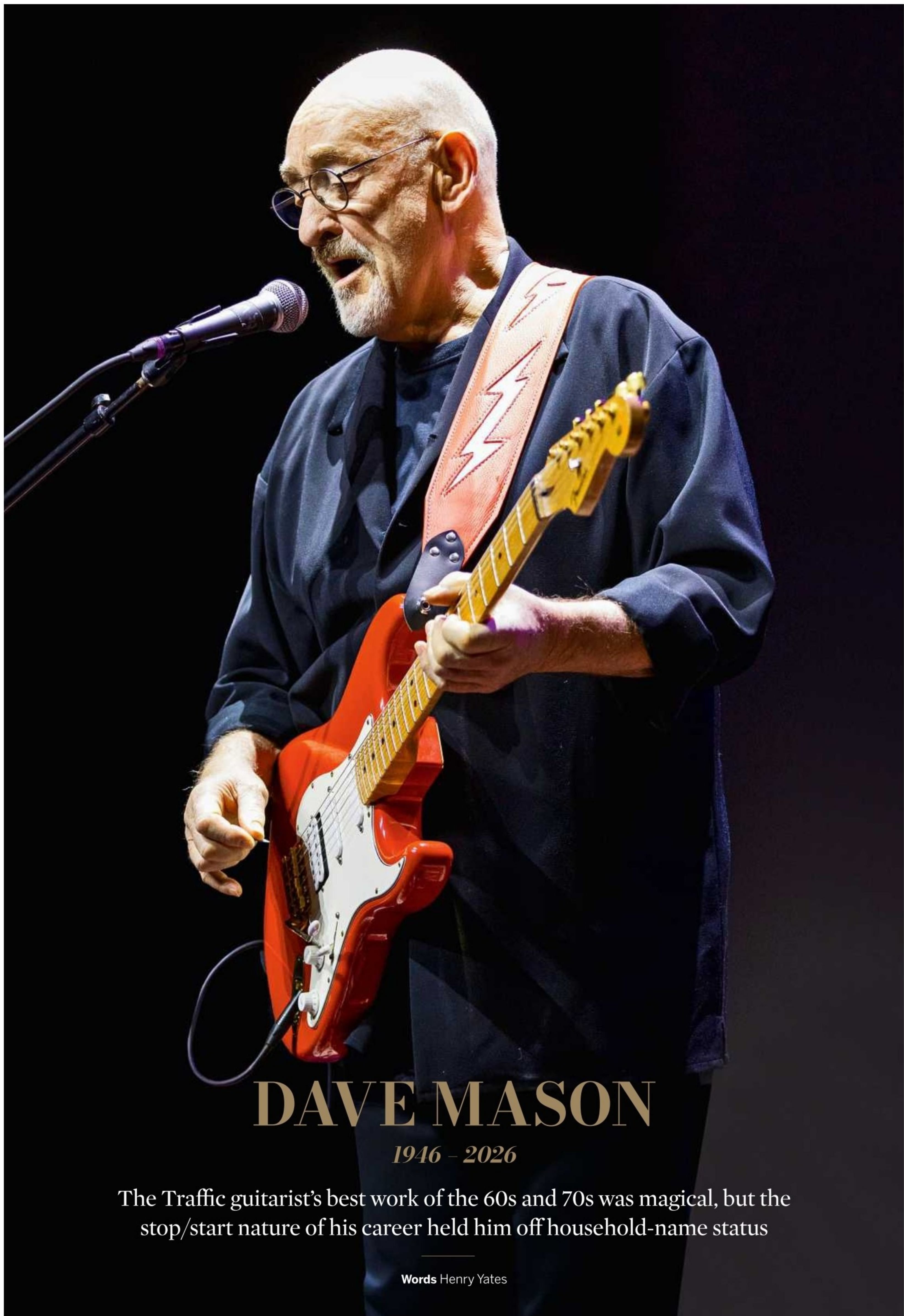
In the 90s, the British builder scored again with the VC range of retro-styled Class A valve combos, while developing hybrid amplification with the Tube

Fusion series. By that decade's end, Laney counted Joe Satriani, Nuno Bettencourt, Frank Gambale and more among its A-list endorsers (today the roster includes Billy Corgan, Vernon Reid and Guthrie Govan).

Post-millennium, Laney added the Class D bass amps to its remit, later joined by further guitar-sector successes including the Lionheart, Ironheart and A acoustic ranges. Moving with the times, 2015's T-USB-equipped L5-Studio interfaced directly with DAW, before the Bluetooth-compatible MINI series shrank signature Laney tones into an ultra-compact, desktop-ready, battery-powered chassis. Most recently, the brand diversified again with its Black Country Customs pedal range, while the Laney Sound System series tapped into the lucrative Bluetooth speaker market, snapped up by many non-musicians for partying, not playing.

None of these career milestones, it seemed, went to Laney's head, with the founder remaining a warm, hands-on presence on the MI scene while passing more responsibilities to his talented son, James (who took control of the company several years ago). His loss is profound but his legacy undeniable – and while Iommi declared himself "devastated" in a farewell post, during their shared interview, Laney had nothing but happy memories of his life less ordinary: "We've had some fun along the way..."

PHOTO COURTESY OF HEADSTOCK DISTRIBUTION



DAVE MASON

1946 – 2026

The Traffic guitarist's best work of the 60s and 70s was magical, but the stop/start nature of his career held him off household-name status

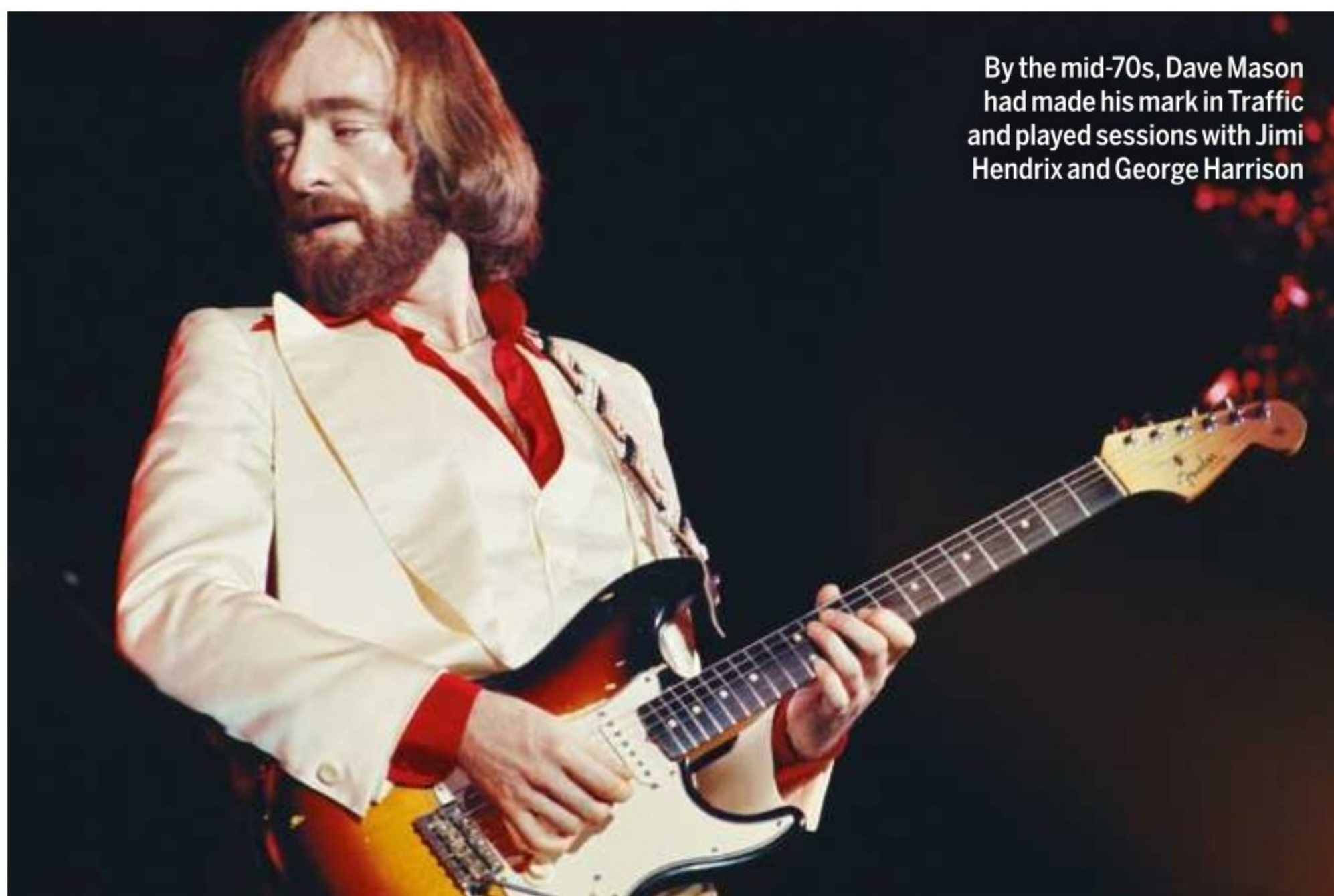
Words Henry Yates

DAVE MASON

May 1946 – April 2026

The six-decade career of Dave Mason – who died on 19 April, just a few weeks off his 80th birthday – was equal parts fantastical and frustrating, but never dull. For many, his defining work came in the late-60s progressive-rock group Traffic, though you could also point to his serendipitous thumbprints on the albums of Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, George Harrison, Eric Clapton and Fleetwood Mac.

Others, however, felt Mason might have achieved rather more were it not for the acrimony between band members – and particularly with Steve Winwood – which slowed Traffic down and arguably denied them the immortality enjoyed by their peers. “On one level,” Mason told *The Guardian* in 2024, “I could hate every one of them.”



By the mid-70s, Dave Mason had made his mark in Traffic and played sessions with Jimi Hendrix and George Harrison

“His songwriting, musicianship and distinctive spirit helped create music that has lasted far beyond its era” **STEVE WINWOOD**

David Thomas Mason was born on 10 May 1946, in Worcestershire, and seemed a perfect foil to Winwood when the prodigious frontman quit the Spencer Davis Group in 1967. At first glance, it worked beautifully: the Mason-penned/sung early single, *Hole In My Shoe* hit UK No 2. But the rest of the line-up disliked its psych-pop leanings, and Mason was restless, too. “I realised I needed more life experiences in order to write stuff that would become timeless,” he shrugged, quitting shortly after the release of debut album *Mr Fantasy* (1967).

Having produced Family’s debut album, however, Mason was back for Traffic’s self-titled 1968 follow-up, on which the prolific guitarist once again threatened to steal the show with another enduring hit, *Feelin’ Alright?* (later covered by everyone from Joe Cocker to Paul Weller). But Mason would claim that Winwood “felt threatened”, and painted a cold picture of his sacking just months later. “I don’t like the way you write,” he was supposedly told by his frontman. “I don’t like the way you sing. I don’t like the way you play. And we don’t want you in the band any more.”

For a time, it seemed Mason would do just fine without them. Having played the

shehnai on the Stones’ classic 1968 single *Street Fighting Man*, he had the distinction of being one of the few guest guitarists to appear on a Hendrix track, strumming the deceptively tricky 12-string acoustic for *All Along The Watchtower*. “It took me 10 or 11 takes to get the timing on the intro right,” reflected Mason, “and Jimi easily could have just done it.”

After touring with Clapton associates Delaney & Bonnie, and blowing through the line-up of Derek And The Dominos, there he was again in the studio with the scattered Beatles, contributing guest guitar to George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass* album (1970) and Wings’ 1975 hit, *Listen To What The Man Said*. That same decade, Mason enjoyed US platinum sales for 1977’s solo album *Let It Flow*. But his hit-rate settled down in the 80s, while the star hook-ups became fewer and less fruitful (a mid-90s tenure with Fleetwood Mac – including the *Time* album – was remembered by Christine McVie as “very acrimonious”).

Mason kept busy in the post-millennium, even finding time to launch his own sustainable guitar brand, RKS, alongside designer Ravi Sawhney (deemed a “fucking impressive device” by Keith

Richards). “When Dave joined me to create RKS Guitars,” Ravi said in tribute following Dave’s death, “he didn’t show up as a rock legend looking to put his name on a product. He showed up as a builder... Dave was deeply involved in every part of that process. Not as a celebrity, as a creator. That’s what made him rare. [He was] a creative force who never stopped asking what could come next.”

But in September 2024, the guitarist revealed he was undergoing treatment for a serious heart condition, while citing “ongoing health issues” for the cancellation of last year’s tour dates. Hearteningly, it was Winwood who led the tributes when news broke of his passing.

“Dave was part of Traffic during its earliest chapter, and played an important role in shaping the band’s sound and identity during that time. His songwriting, musicianship and distinctive spirit helped create music that has lasted far beyond its era, and continues to mean so much to listeners around the world. His place in that history will always be remembered, and through the music, his presence endures.”

Meanwhile, the valedictory post by Mason’s family suggested he had found fulfilment at the end. “After cooking an amazing dinner with his wife, Winifred, he sat down to take a nap with his [pet dog] at his feet. He passed away peacefully, in his favourite chair, surrounded by the beautiful Carson Valley that he loved so much. A storybook ending. On his own terms. Which is how he lived his life right up to the end.” **G**



**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVE!**

Eric talks about his life in music,
how he developed his style and his
Larson Brothers acoustic guitar
<http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>





Eric Bibb

The country blues master recently paid a mid-tour visit to *Guitarist* to talk about the instruments he travels with and the foundation of his amazing fingerstyle technique

Words David Mead Photography Matt Lincoln

Growing up with a Broadway-singer father, whose musician friends were frequent visitors to the family home, meant a strong foundation for Eric Bibb's eventual musical path. The road ahead was a done deal when a school friend introduced him to influential artists such as Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Leadbelly, Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, and soon Eric was on course to become one of the most celebrated country blues artists around today.

Three times Grammy-nominated, Eric's albums are a masterclass in how the country blues genre can glide smoothly over to a modern audience. With velvet vocals and enviable fingerstyle, his music has become celebrated worldwide. Recently, his enthusiasm for seeking out new instruments to play on stage has led Eric to discover the rebirth of an old acoustic guitar brand, and an instrument he's keen to share with us.

Tell us about your new acoustic.

"This is a fairly new friend that's come into the family. It's a Larson Brothers OM model. The Larson brothers were two Swedish brothers [Carl and August] who immigrated to the States in the late 1800s. They made great guitars – I think Stefan Grossman might have one or two of theirs, they're hard to find these days. But not so long ago, I think a company based in Germany acquired the rights to use the Larson Brothers logo and they [iMusicnetwork, founded by Toni Götz, together with Nikolaus 'Klaus' Eilken, founder of Thomas Guitars] are making really high-end guitars, and this is one of my favourite guitars to tour with. I have another model that's all mahogany, but this is a spruce top. Just a lovely, lovely instrument."

How did you discover the Larson Brothers' guitars?

"Well, I was in Paris looking around for guitars and I spotted a Larson Brothers – the old mahogany one that I mentioned – in a shop window and the look of it just drew me in. I went in, I played it and I bought it. Then they got in contact and said, 'Wow, we're really pleased that you're enchanted with our instruments.'

"That first one was made by a known luthier, his name is Maurice Dupont. He makes mostly Maccaferri-type guitars, but he made that flat-top guitar and I loved it. The Larson Brothers company knows what I like. They sent me this guitar and I didn't send it back."

Is the OM a good body size for you?

"Yes, I'm not really a dreadnought type of guy; I like smaller body guitars. OM is a good size for me, or parlour guitars, you know? But this is about perfect for me."

What other instruments do you have on tour?

"It's always a challenge deciding what to bring. I have a lot of guitars. I have guitars I've toured with, guitars that are really precious, and I'm a little reticent about taking on the road because they go through a lot. I have the other Larson Brothers guitar, the all-mahogany one, which is tuned down a half step, so E is E $\flat$.

"I also have a thin hollowbody Takamine, another interesting guitar, which is tuned down a whole tone – this is just to accommodate my changing vocals. So, you know, songs I play in the 1st position, if I find my voice has dropped, then I need a guitar that's a whole tone lower. So I have one guitar in standard or drop D, I have another one half a tone down, and I have another one a whole tone down. Those three guitars more or less take care of what I need."

Do you have an amp on stage or do you go direct into the PA?

"I go through a DI. In the past I've used – as my own kind of side monitor – a Roland Jazz Chorus amplifier. My sound guy prefers the direct signal because then he can do what he wants with it out front. It was a bit of a crutch leaning on that amplifier by my side, but I just discovered that, actually, if the monitors are proper, then I don't really need it. It's enough to have just two wedges in front of me and a direct DI."

What pickup do you have in the Larson Brothers OM?

"I'm using the Blackstack by Fishman. I've had all kinds of soundhole pickups through the years, the Sunrise kind of started out as being the *de rigueur* option. It's a heavy pickup and I found that even though the sound quality was great, the independent standalone power box was difficult for changing batteries. I prefer a pickup where I don't have to think about battery changes; you don't want to be in the middle of a tune and it dies on you. So this is passive and it works."

Having relied on a Roland Jazz Chorus amp as a makeshift monitor for years, Eric now goes straight into the PA via a DI

"I'm not really after a pure acoustic sound."

Everybody's wanting to find the pickup, either bridge pickup or soundhole pickup, that really gives you the true sound of an acoustic guitar. I find, if I want that, I'll just stick a great microphone in front of the guitar, you know? But in a situation where I'm with a band on stage with a drummer, that is challenging, so you want a pickup that's going to break through all of that. This is the best solution I have. And with a magnetic pickup there's a kind of liquid sound that you get when it's through the DI; it's a little bit more fluid than just the sound you would get from a microphone, and that seems to suit my own stage sound. But in the studio I'll often just have great microphones in front of the guitar."

Do you use any outboard effects on stage?

"I used to. I used to use some chorus stuff and tremolo. But I'm really not a gear-oriented guitar player, so I had the most simple pedalboard with my Boss tuner. Maybe I'll have an A/B switcher if I feel like I need to do something like that. But, lately, I like a really stripped-

"I'm not really after a pure acoustic sound. In a band situation on stage with a drummer, I want a pickup that's going to break through"

down situation where I don't have to think about it. And I have a great sound guy out front, so I trust him. I usually have another guitarist with me in the band and they have pedalboards to die for. I don't know how they keep up with all this stuff, but I guess if that's your thing, you figure out a way. But they're like a ballet dancer, you know?"

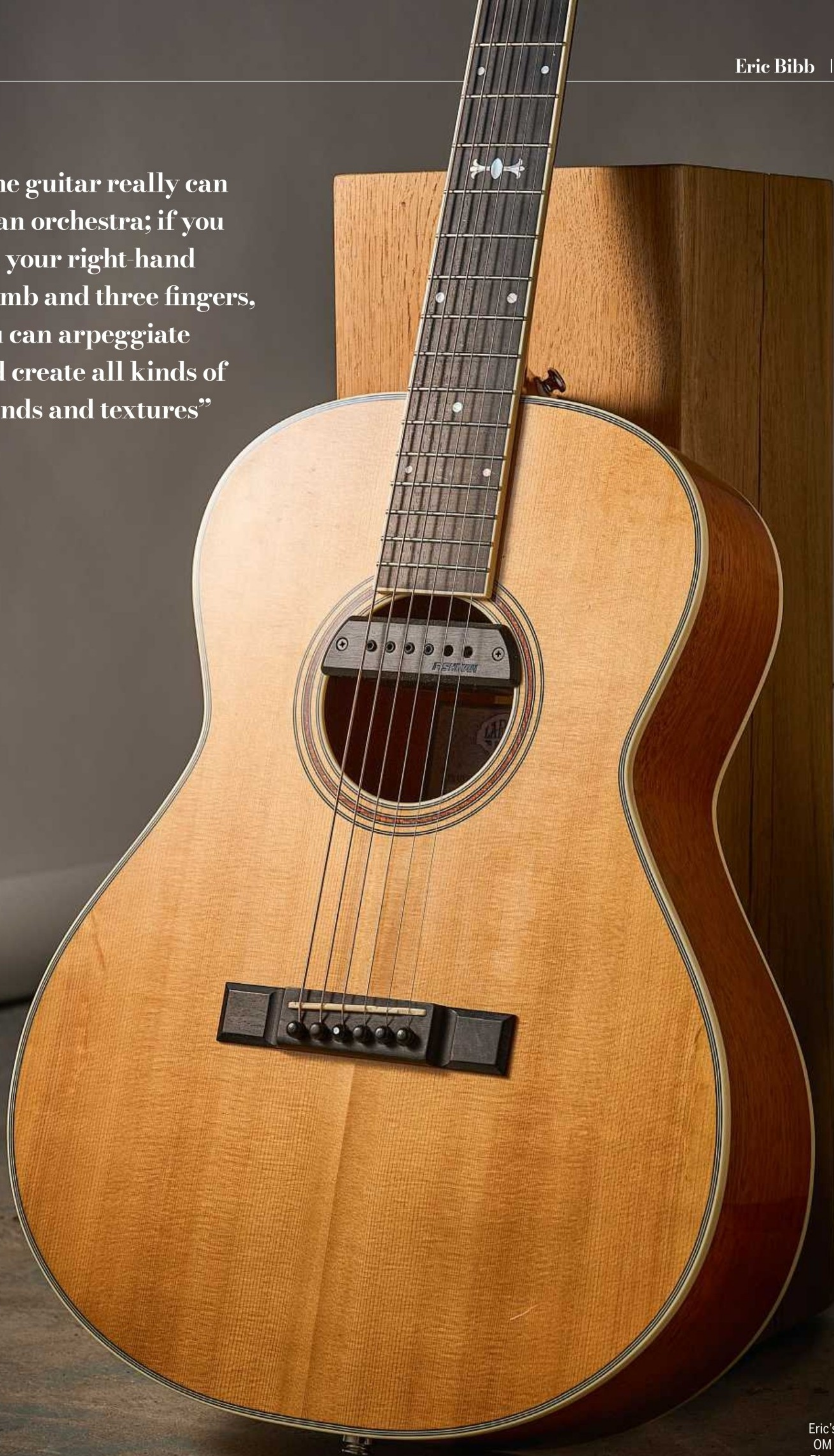
You had classical guitar lessons when you were young. How do you think that might have influenced your acoustic guitar technique?

"What it told me right from the start was that the guitar really can be an orchestra, and if you use your thumb and three fingers on your right hand, you can arpeggiate and you can create all kinds of different sounds and textures. It really helped me when I started discovering fingerpicking – you know, [Mississippi] John Hurt kind of stuff. I started out with Carcassi [Matteo Carcassi, 1792 to 1853, author of arpeggio studies still in use today], so all of that stuff sort of came together at a certain point."

"When I really focused on my own style of playing, I knew I wanted to fingerpick, I knew I wanted to arpeggiate. So all of that has come into my technique. I tried fingerpicks at one point, and thumbpicks, but they'd fly off. I'd get excited and sweaty, and they'd just fly off. But Ry Cooder once said there is really no better tool for the guitar than your right hand. There are so many ways you can approach the guitar with just your bare hands. I do have acrylic nail enhancement on three nails of my right hand because I found that, without it, I'm risking breaking a nail and then things get kind of complicated. I discovered the hard way that if I chipped a nail in the middle of a show, it was really going to affect my playing in a negative way. And you can cover your nails with hard polish, but I find that the best thing for me is the acrylic. I'm not sure it's really great for your health, but you sacrifice all for art."



“The guitar really can be an orchestra; if you use your right-hand thumb and three fingers, you can arpeggiate and create all kinds of sounds and textures”



Eric's Larson Brothers OM sports a Fishman Blackstack soundhole pickup, which, being passive, avoids tricky battery changes



PHOTO BY LEO AHMED

Have you ever experimented with slide?

“I love the textures that you can get and the sound, especially if you’re into country blues like I am. The slide sound is a part of the vocabulary, but I’ve never been one to dive deep into that. It’s almost like a separate universe. But I’ve always had guitarists close to me from very early days who were proficient at slide and bottleneck playing.

“I’m on tour at the moment with Robbie McIntosh, who’s a master. He not only has the whole country blues vocabulary of bottleneck guitar and slide, he’s just so lyrical, he’s so fluid and melodic. There are a few players who have mastered it to that level. He’s one of them, but there are not that many. He’s exceptional as a slide player and a player in general. I tend to be happiest when I have a really fine second guitarist in the band who has a huge understanding of blues first of all, but who is also familiar with other harmonies, jazz harmonies and that kind of thing.”

Do you ever play electric guitars or hollowbody jazz instruments?

“Well, I’m really not an electric guitar player. I find that the electric guitar is almost a separate species, you know? I have an old Danelectro solidbody that Hubert Sumlin signed the back of, so I love that guitar. I did a

Despite being an excellent picker himself, Eric always likes to tour with a second guitarist who is, currently, the great Robbie McIntosh

video of a song called *This One Don’t* and you can see that guitar. It was given to me by a wonderful bass player, Dave Bronze, as a birthday gift long ago.

“But I play electric guitars like I play my acoustic guitars, I fingerpick them. I’ve never played with a plectrum, you know? I’ve never really mastered or even really been attracted to that style of playing, although I have band members who are wonderful

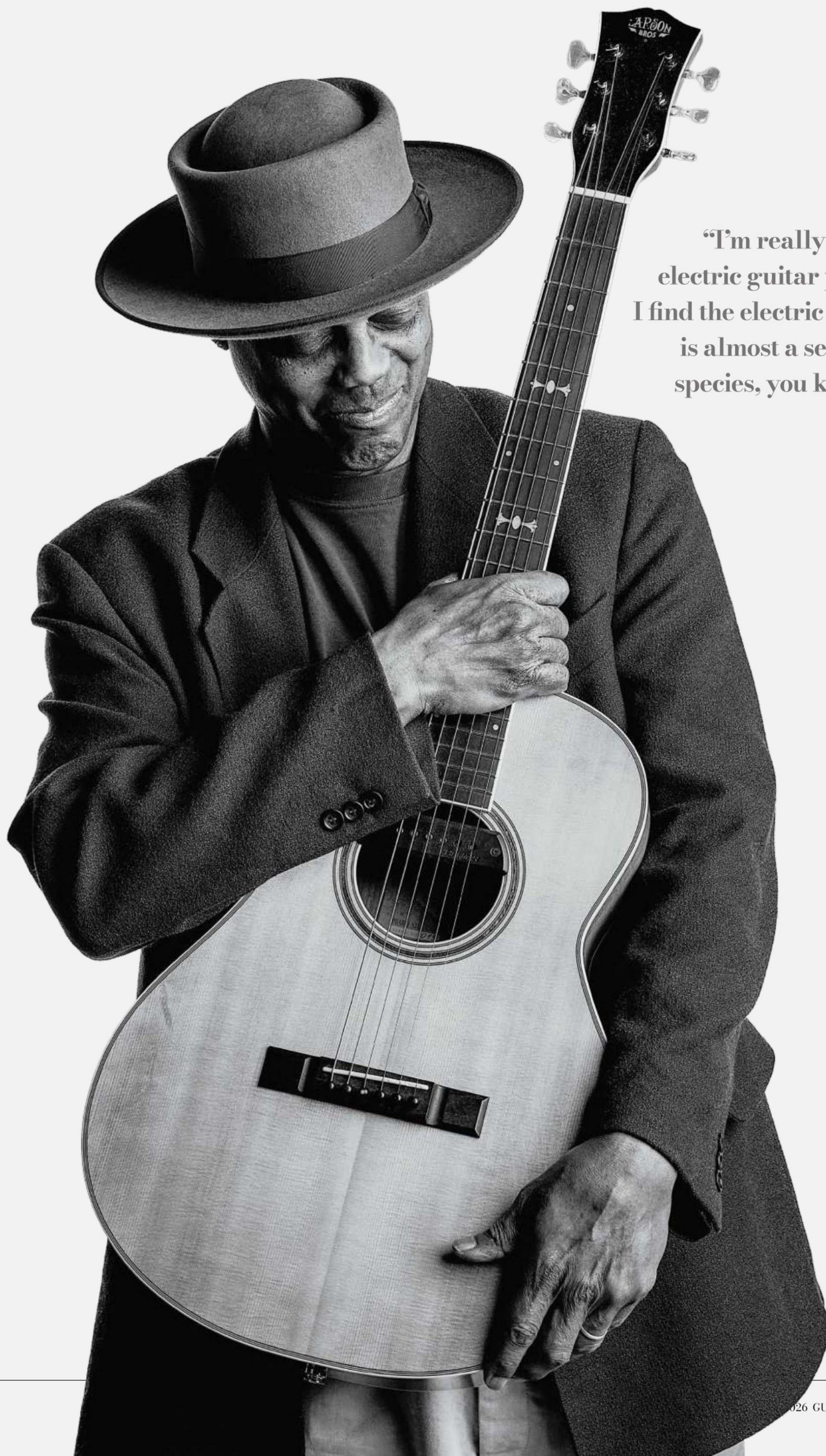
“I tend to be happiest when I have a really fine second guitarist in the band who has a huge understanding of blues and jazz harmonies”

players on electric guitar and who play with their fingers but also are masters of the pick. I do love older jazz big-body guitars. If I had an Epiphone Emperor, that big, beautiful blonde guitar that they made in the 30s, I’d hold on to that. But, yeah, a great acoustic guitar is the way to go for me.” 



Eric Bibb’s latest album, *One Mississippi*, is available now on Repute Records

www.ericbibb.com



“I’m really not an electric guitar player. I find the electric guitar is almost a separate species, you know?”



SLASH

The permanently behatted icon is still delivering legendary, blistering licks with Guns N' Roses on stages worldwide, but blues has always been at the core of his playing – and he says he has his grandmother to thank for that

Words Andrew Daly Portrait Jennifer Rosenstein/Guitar World

Back in the 90s, just after leaving Guns N' Roses, when he was slinging his Les Paul solo, Slash hit local LA bars and clubs playing blues standards. The project was called the Blues Ball and, according to the musician, it wasn't remotely serious. "It was basically just a drunken excuse to go out and jam," Slash tells *Guitarist*. But nearly 30 years later, his love for blues – and the gear that inspires it – has turned serious. The result was 2024's *Orgy Of The Damned*, a blues cover album featuring a who's who of all-stars – and plenty of vintage guitars and amplifiers, among them Magnatone combos that have replaced his beloved Marshall stacks. "[The Magnatone] just sounds so much fuller in the low-end, and cleaner," he says. "When you do a chord, you hear all the notes. It's been a huge shift for me."

Slash toured behind *Orgy Of The Damned*, resulting in a live album, *Live At The S.E.R.P.E.N.T.*

Festival, which captured the blues-laden magic he had been conjuring with a collection of blues standards and rock staples. The core band line-up comprised Teddy 'Zig Zag' Andreadis (keyboards, harmonica), Tash Neal (rhythm guitar), Johnny Griparic (bass) and Michael Jerome (drums). And with the festival's name bearing an acronym for Solidarity, Engagement, Restore, Peace, Equality N' Tolerance, the event also supported various charities.

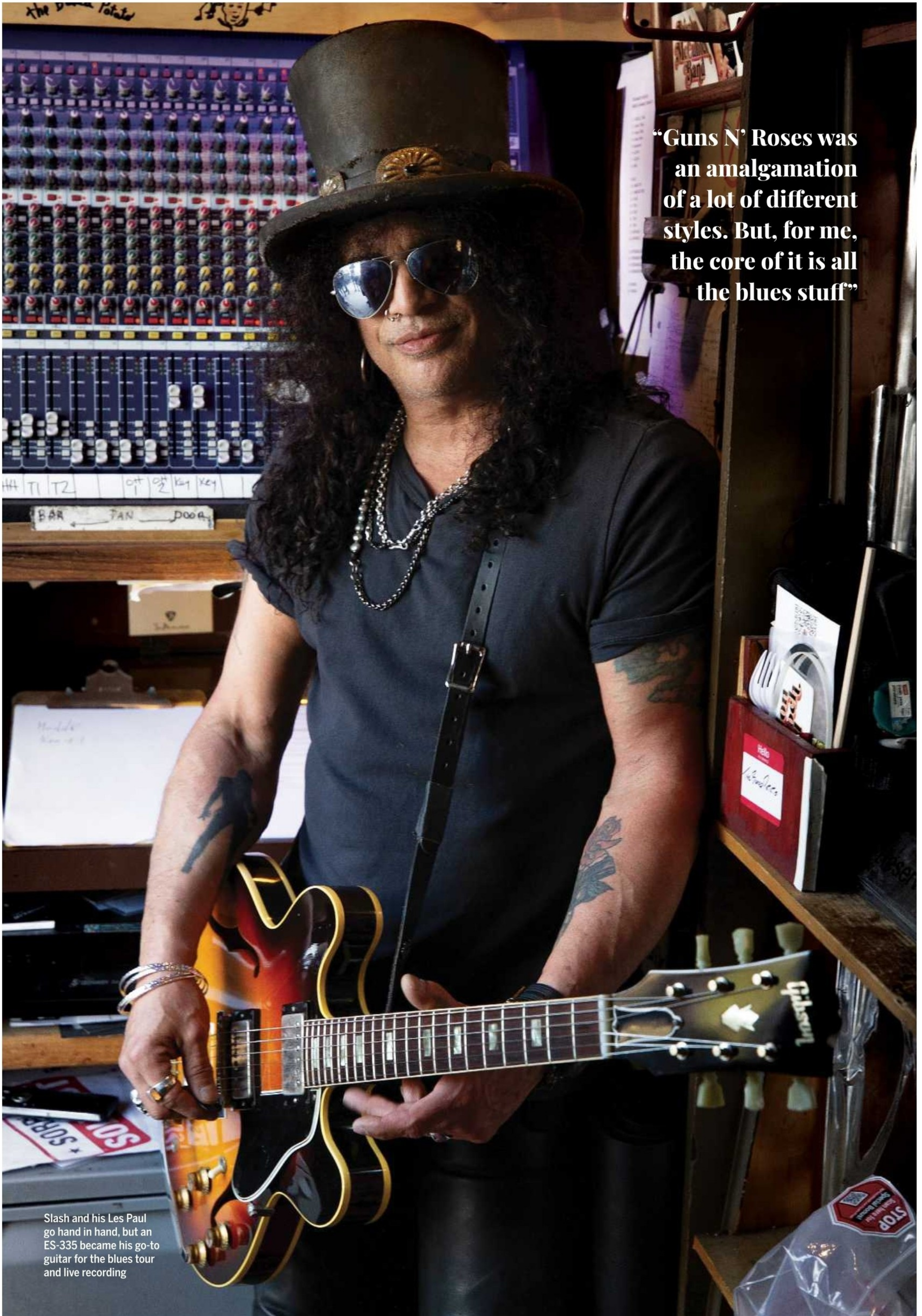
This endeavour is clearly more serious for Slash than his 90s bar days, of course – but he is still focused on fun. "I'm not trying to be a 'blues guy'," he says. "A lot of rock guys do that, where they're rock players and then suddenly they discover they're blues guys [laughs]. I'm just doing an interpretation of stuff that really had a massive impact and influence on me when I first picked up the instrument."

Slash's Blues Ball band (left to right): Michael Jerome (drums), Johnny Griparic (bass), Slash (lead and rhythm guitar), Tash Neal (rhythm guitar) and Teddy 'ZigZag' Andreadis (keys, harmonica)



“Guns N’ Roses was an amalgamation of a lot of different styles. But, for me, the core of it is all the blues stuff”

Slash and his Les Paul go hand in hand, but an ES-335 became his go-to guitar for the blues tour and live recording





PHOTOS © EARMUSIC

Blues has always been integral to your playing, but your live album, *Live At The S.E.R.P.E.N.T. Festival*, is a different level.

“You hit the nail on the head. When I started playing guitar, there were a lot of blues-oriented rock ‘n’ roll guys from the 60s and early 70s who were my first influences. But I got turned on to BB King right around that time by my grandmother, who was sick and tired of hearing me listen to all these blues guys [laughs]. She goes, ‘No, this is the real deal,’ so she really opened that door – the correlation between guys like Eric Clapton and where they got it all from. So it’s always been a major root of my playing.

“And then, with different things going on in the 80s, I incorporated my influence into playing with different kinds of musicians. When Guns N’ Roses came together, that was really an amalgamation of a lot of different styles that made that band. But, for me, the core of it is all the blues stuff.”

Do you see playing the blues as very different from playing heavy rock?

“I just approach the blues the way I approach rock ‘n’ roll: I play for feel. And I’m not what you call a huge blues purist or any of that kind of thing; I just do what I do. But it’s a lot of fun and a great release for me. Back in the 90s, we put together this band called The Blues Ball, which was a glorified cover band. We played around LA and then it turned into sort of a bar-circuit touring band. I was out of Guns N’ Roses when I did this, and I was in between solo projects, so this was a great sort of fun filler for me.

“Fast forward a bunch of years, I’m back in Guns N’ Roses and we had a break between legs. I thought, ‘You know, I’d really like to go and record some of those songs with those guys.’ So I called them up and we put together a bunch of those songs that we used to play, plus a couple of other ones, and made *Orgy Of The Damned*.”

“I approach the blues the way I approach rock ‘n’ roll: I play for feel. I’m not a huge purist... It’s a great release for me”

While recording the recent live album, and on your blues tour in general, you noticeably used a lot of gear that we don’t see with Guns N’ Roses. Does the blues bring that out in you?

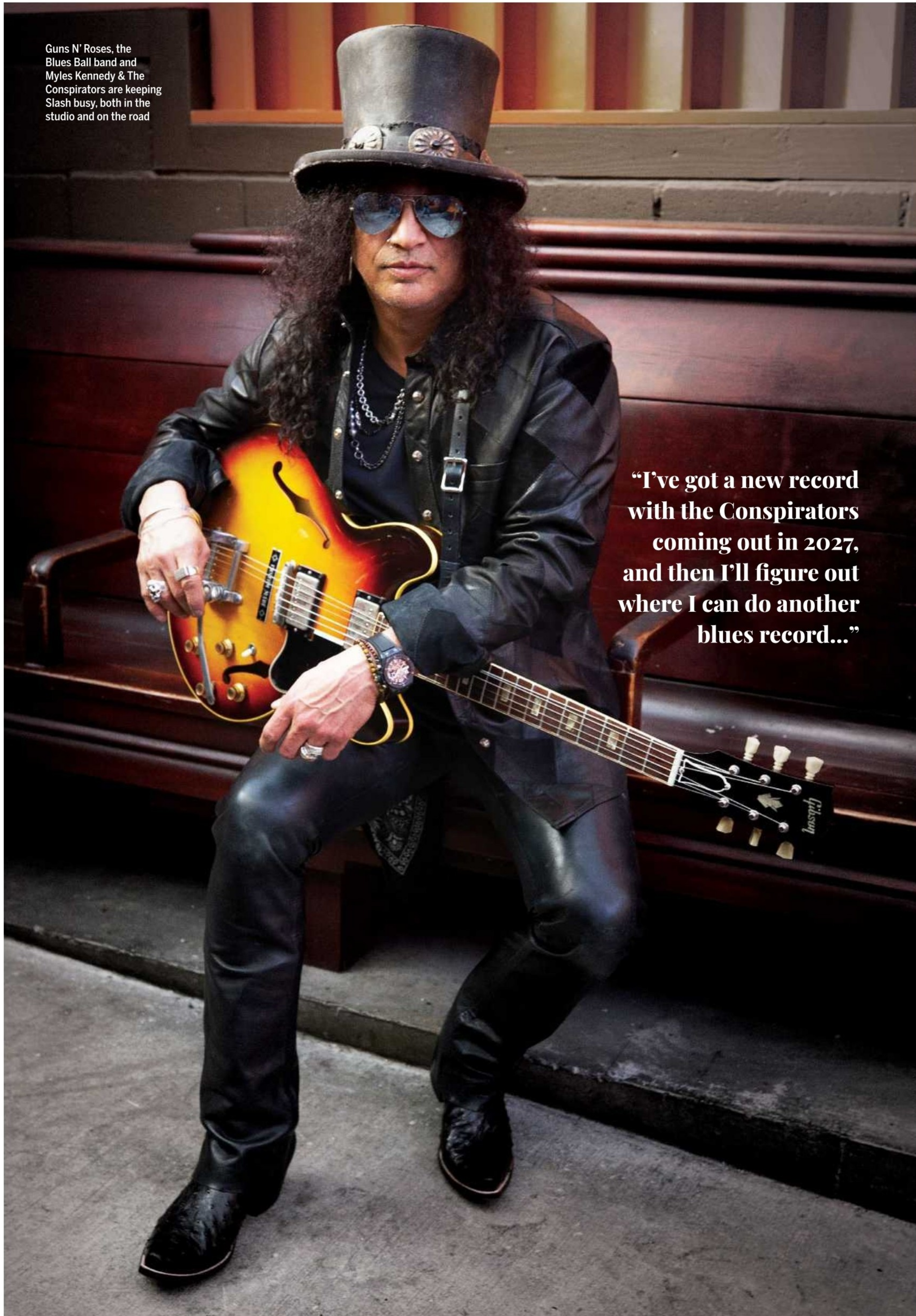
“Definitely. While making *Orgy Of The Damned*, I used a Magnatone combo that I just happened to have, which actually opened a whole door for me. And I switched amp companies [from Marshall] because of that M-80 combo that I had lying around. Then I broke out a lot of vintage guitars for this because I had an idea in mind of the kind of sounds I wanted.

“I picked up [a Gibson ES-335] maybe a year prior from Norm’s [Norman’s Rare Guitars] in the San Fernando Valley. So I pulled that out and I had a Strat, a Tele and a couple of old Les Pauls. I had an Explorer, a Firebird... That’s what I used to record the record. To do the tour, I didn’t take all of those vintage guitars out, but [used] facsimiles – Custom Shop reissues of

1. With Slash’s vintage gear safe in the studio, the blues tour saw him take out Custom Shop reissues of the Firebird, Explorer and a couple of Les Pauls

Guns N' Roses, the Blues Ball band and Myles Kennedy & The Conspirators are keeping Slash busy, both in the studio and on the road

“I’ve got a new record with the Conspirators coming out in 2027, and then I’ll figure out where I can do another blues record...”



said guitars. But I did have a 335 from there, which was really probably the go-to guitar for the whole tour and the live record, along with a couple of Firebirds.

“The Firebirds, with the P-90s, or whatever you call those – the mini-humbuckers, which are kind of like single coils – are great. And I only used two Les Pauls on the tour, a Standard and a ’59 reissue. The Explorer that I had on tour was a ’58 replica, which was an amazing-sounding guitar. I recorded *Born Under A Bad Sign* with that and took it on tour. Oh, and I had a Travis Bean for slide, and a Jackson pedal steel that I used for [*It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry*]. That covered it. That stuff, with the Maganatone M-80 2x12 combos, was the sound.”

Considering you’d used Marshall amps for so long, what caught your ear with the Magnatone?

“It was a big deal for me. When we went in to do the record and started pre-production, I started jamming these arrangements and I just didn’t want to use my normal Marshall sound. I had a couple of Fender Twins, a couple of Fender Deluxes, a Vox half-stack, and a vintage Vox combo. I did have my old 50-watt Marshall with me – and I had that M-80 Magnatone. What happened was, I went, ‘Okay, we’re going to do this song...’ and I imagined in my mind, ‘Let’s try this amp and this guitar.’ I went through different amps and when I got to the Magnatone, which had been given to me but I’d never used before, I ended up using it for every song.”

And now, you’re using it live for your blues tunes, and with Guns N’ Roses.

“It was a big revelation because it gave me the sort of power that I wanted, but it gave me a kind of clarity. I think I was starting to get tired – as much as I hate to say it – of the very predictable Marshall sound, which I’m sort of known for... but it was starting to wear on me. I’d been using Marshall for so long that I’d never listened to anything else. I never gave anything else a shot because it didn’t have the Marshall mid-punch, this or that. But something about the Magnatone really worked and so I recorded with it, and when we did the tour, I just took those out and it really worked.

“Unbeknownst to anyone else, I actually replaced my Marshalls on the next Guns N’ Roses tour with the Magnatones and that became my thing. I got together with Magnatone a little later and we designed the 100-watt [SL-100] model, which is what I’m using now.”

“We’re in a period for the blues now, more so than it has been in the last 20 years. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a renaissance”

You’ve noted being known for a specific tone, but you’re on stage paying homage to the likes of Peter Green, Albert King and other heavy hitters, while also being a notable player yourself. That’s a delicate balance to strike.

“Right! Well, this is a renaissance period for blues guitar. There are so many really amazing purist blues guitarists, like, very well studied, very educated, great musicians going out there and doing a lot of blues



2. Magnatone amps became part of the tour and live record’s defining sound, as Slash stepped away from his long-used Marshall backline

stuff. I think we’re in a period for the blues now, more so than it has been in the last 20 years. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a renaissance.

“But anyway, I just do what it is that I do. I don’t try to take it too seriously. That’s one of the reasons why some borderline corny covers have been done so many times in this performance. The whole thing is about the huge stepping stones for what I do, and I wanted to cover them. I just try to keep the melodies intact and honour the original compositions. We took those and then just did our own thing and really didn’t think about anything else. The guys in my band, this is what they do for a living. They play with Walter Trout, so they’re those guys – blues guys. I get to do what I do on top of that, so it’s fun.”

Listening to the live record, it’s clear that you had a blast on tour. Is there more blues in your future?

“Right now, I’m juggling being on the road with Guns N’ Roses and doing some recording. I’ve got a new record with the Conspirators that’s already done, coming out at the top of 2027, and then, somewhere, I’m going to try to figure out where I can do another blues record. There are some really cool tracks that I would like to go after with that, so I’m trying to figure out a window to do that. We need to take this to Europe because there’s a big demand.”



Slash’s *Live At The S.E.R.P.E.N.T. Festival* album and concert film are out now via EarMusic. Guns N’ Roses headline Download Festival on 13 June
www.slashonline.com

PHOTOS © EARMUSIC

100 YEARS OF GIBSON FLAT-TOPS





FLAT OUT

Gibson didn't want to make flat-top acoustic guitars at first, but guitars such as the J-200 and J-45 went on to become icons of the rock 'n' roll era. We join Gibson's Mat Koehler to find out how the brand reinvented its archtop roots to produce guitars that are still classics 100 years later...

Photography

Matt Lincoln, Olly Curtis & Adam Gasson

Words

Jamie Dickson

Flat-top acoustic guitars weren't really part of the plan for Gibson back in the pre-war years of the 20th century. The Kalamazoo-based company was known for its archtops, and Martin, over in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, had a big head start on them by the time flat-top guitars were becoming really popular in the 1930s. Yet when Gibson did embrace dreadnought and jumbo-style guitars in the 1930s, it led in time to the creation of some of the company's most iconic instruments – from the expansive-sounding J-200 to the sweet-toned Hummingbird.

We join Gibson's vice president of Product and de facto archivist Mat Koehler to explore how archtops literally gave shape to Gibson's most influential acoustic guitars.

So where does the story begin with Gibson flat-top acoustics?

"In the beginning, Gibson was consciously trying to avoid flat-tops because, obviously, Martin was present in the US, and flat-tops weren't Gibson's thing – archtops were Gibson's thing. But clearly, the demand for more folk-style guitars and singing-cowboy movement shaped how Gibson grew. But even before that there was Robert Johnson playing Delta blues on the inaugural 1926 L-1 model acoustic.

"But I think how the experimentation started involved the same principles that [archtop pioneer] Lloyd Loar employed: it was trying different things, like messing around with mandolins. You've probably seen the early 'Army-Navy Special' guitars [designed for WWI servicemen to buy affordably] that have those



Mat Koehler's official role at Gibson is vice president of product – but his ruling passion is the company's history, especially that of the Epiphone brand after Gibson acquired it in 1957. Flat-top acoustics are one of the most interesting topics in an already storied history, he says

interesting cat-eye f-holes – but that was a flat-top guitar. So there were lots of different types of flat-top guitars that they were experimenting with – and also flat backs, where they were putting flat backs on archtops. So they didn't dive right into it straight away.

"They definitely tried a bunch of different methods. And, to me, that's also part of the reason why I think they got it right the first time, when they finally had their range of flat-top guitars. The great luxury they had was to be able to use unique rim shapes that they originally developed for archtops. So, for example, the L-1 flat-top guitar had the same rim shape as the L-1 archtop guitar, and that has continued to this day. Likewise, our L-5 archtop and the J-200 flat-top use the same rim shape. That's how we got our flat-top shapes, by and large."



A time-weathered 1930 L-2, originally finished in Argentine Grey (though that has long faded) with a rare small volute. This particular guitar, was in the care of ATB Guitars in Melksham

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



1

What was the first Gibson flat-top acoustic model to really catch on?

“Probably the Jumbo, which debuted in 1934 and was the predecessor to the J-35 and then the J-45 after. [There was a 1936 transitional model that featured in the company ledger known as] the Gibson Trojan, and then it became a J-35 and the price was \$35. But whatever we call that model, that’s the one that really stuck – and we are still producing it today.

“There’s a common misconception that [the price-based naming convention] continued into the 1950s, but it was pretty unique to the 20s and

30s – and actually maybe just the 30s and possibly during wartime. I honestly don’t know! But I know that it wasn’t around in the 50s. So it was a short period.”

Tell us about the invention of the L-00. Its quaint parlour-style looks and sound strongly evoke pre-war musical styles and yet it’s still a pillar of Gibson’s acoustic line-up today.

“Yeah, to me, that is the perfection of those very first flat-tops: the L-0 and the L-1. Those were a little bit more crude and less refined because they had deeper bodies. And so the proportions – like the scale length and the bridge location – were

1. The headstock of this 1930 L-2 bears the remnants of an early ‘The Gibson’ logo. The word ‘the’ was dropped from the company’s headstock logos by the late 1930s

2. This simple label spelled out that, by 1930, Gibson was in the flat-top-making game in earnest



2

great, but the body depth was the place to improve. So, basically, an L-00 is an improved L-1 with a shallower body depth.

“The other key move there was the introduction of X-bracing. Early L-1 models did not have X-bracing, but that one evolution made for a really solid guitar that held up well. I mean, it held up good enough for Woody Guthrie to use it all through his early career. I have a 1930 L-00 12-fret, which is my go-to guitar. It’s great because it’s super lightweight. And I think there’s something about the feel of that guitar in your lap and its light weight. It’s so resonant and you feel that in your body. So if I had to guess

“The L-00 is super lightweight. There’s something about the feel of that guitar in your lap. It’s so resonant” **MAT KOEHLER**

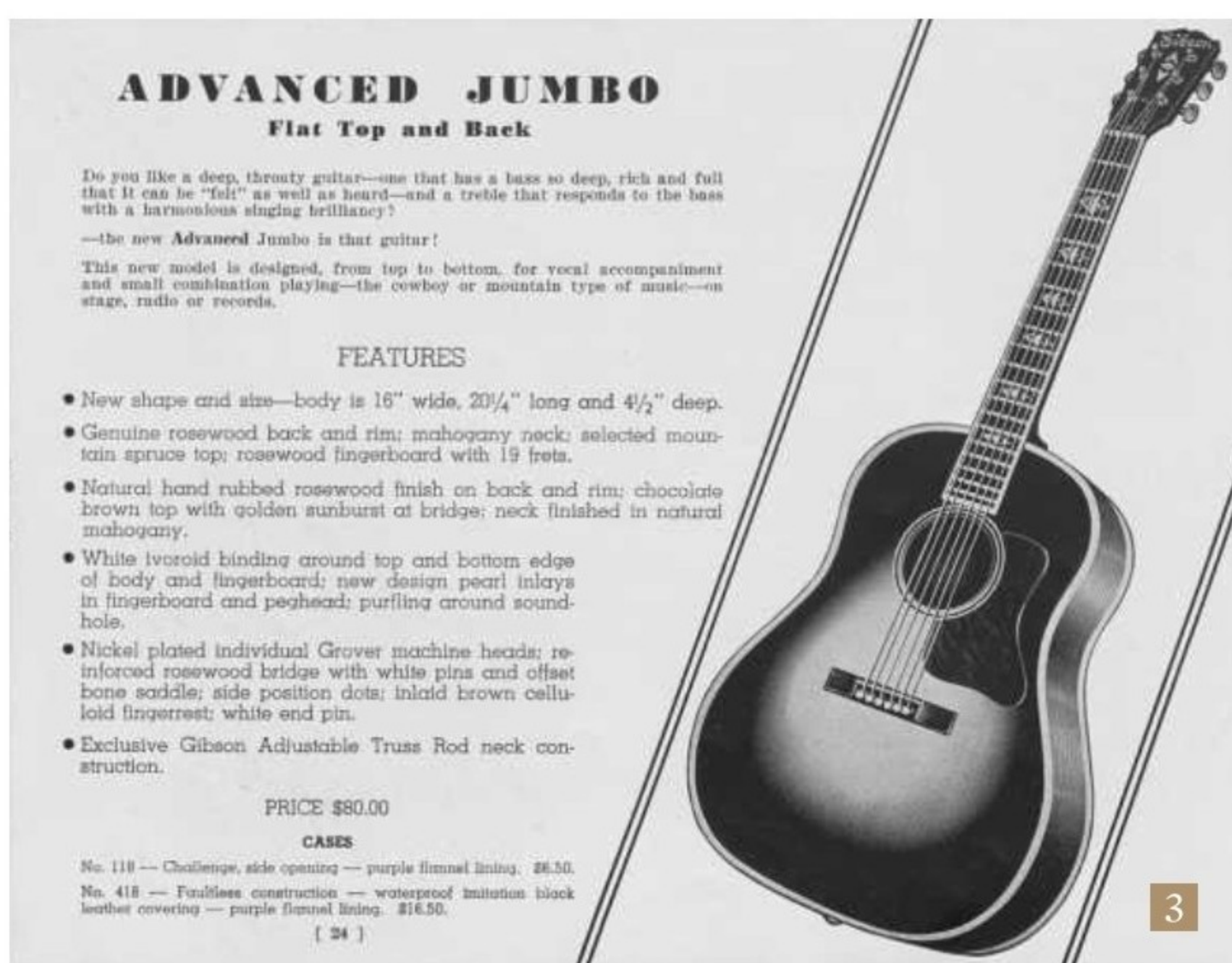
3. The Advanced Jumbo model debuted in 1936 to take on Martin’s D-28, and tellingly used a longer 25.5-inch scale length than that of the J-45, more in line with the Martin competition. The original production run numbered in the low hundreds and was made from 1936 to 1940, though it has since been reissued

why they’ve remained so popular, it’s not just because of the size, it’s because of the experience.”

We tried a vintage L-00 at Vintage Instruments in Philadelphia a few years back that almost seemed to defy physics in terms of how loud and resonant it was for its small size and feather weight.

“Was that a 12-fret or a 14-fret L-00? Because the 12-fret and the 14-fret versions are so vastly

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON



3



The J-200 was originally made, in its brief pre-war production phase, with mahogany back and sides but transitioned in the post-war period to the now more famous curly maple body style

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



4

different in terms of sound that if you get the chance to compare the two, you should – because they're both good for different reasons. You can play bluegrass on the 14-fret version; it's going to be more focused, it's going to bark. The 12-fret is more of a fingerstyle player's guitar, but it's also such a balanced, warm sound. And that kind of gets us into how we're celebrating [Gibson's acoustic heritage] today, which is the Century Collection – and that's a collection of solely 12-fret instruments at entry-level prices.

"Honestly, I think anniversary celebrations by guitar companies can be a little contrived, when

4. The J-200's 'moustache' bridge went through many changes, including the insertion of an integral, adjustable ABR-1 bridge to the wider wooden bridge assembly from 1961. Here, the Tune-o-matic looks to have later been replaced with a fillet of rosewood and a conventional saddle

5. Mother-of-pearl 'pineapple' inlays and bound headstock were premium features

6. Ted McCarty (centre) flying the flag for flat-tops in Berlin in 1958

"Once you had the [large] L-5 archtop, that rim shape was available to use in a flat-top [as in the J-200]" **MAT KOEHLER**

it's like the 65th anniversary or something – it's like, 'Okay, yeah, but it's not the 75th anniversary or the 100th.' So we're always looking for those opportunities to celebrate the 50th, 75th and 100th because those are real milestones, in my opinion, that are really worth celebrating – these quarter-century increments.

"So 100 years [of Gibson flat-tops] is definitely an occasion we're celebrating. And we also wanted to reassert ourselves and remind people that we're

the second-oldest acoustic company that exists and we have more shapes, more styles, more diversity of acoustic platforms than anybody else. We literally have something for everybody in our range. And 100 years ago, those very first guitars seemed to get it right and resonate with artists on the first try."

Moving from small to large guitars, the J-200 is undoubtedly one of the most iconic flat-tops Gibson has produced. It was originally rosewood-bodied but famously changed to maple back and sides for most of its production life. Why the switch?

"I don't have the 'why' very well sorted out, other than I know that at least one maple-bodied J-200 was made pre-war. I think, again, there were lots of experiments happening. I also think World War II definitely played a part in that



5

evolution – that's why we have the pre-war style in our line-up, which is rosewood-bodied, but also the post-war model, which is maple.

"In terms of how the model itself came about, we were talking before about the rim shapes [that Gibson had originally devised for archtops]. So you have archtops getting larger and larger at the same time that flat-tops are getting larger and larger. Basically, once you had the L-5 archtop, that rim shape was available to use in a flat-top. A lot of people think it was a case of, 'Well, the singing cowboys [a genre of Western-inspired popular music popularised by Gene Autry and others] needed bigger guitars to go on the horses.' Well, yeah, they definitely wanted that. But it was definitely the available rim shape influencing the guitar design more than it was the singing cowboys requesting it.

"So I think the ability to try something was, again, the determining factor in how the model was created. You know, if we went through our ledgers and logbooks, we'd probably see some of the very first entries, certainly in 1938 and I think at least one in 1937. At that time, it was not described as a J-200, or anything like that; it was called an 'Advanced' body shape flat-top guitar or 'Experimental'. So usually there was a customer on the other side of that, whether it was a custom order, or they had



6



The beautiful hummingbird design on the scratchplate of the eponymous model came from the pen of a Gibson employee called Hartford Snider



PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



an artist in mind, or it was borne of a dealer discussion, or they wanted to experiment with it, and then they wanted to pre-sell it. Because in that time, post-Depression, that was the other side of experimentation – they weren't going to waste materials.

"Again, the proportions evolved. The very first J-200s were 12-fret models and had the bridge placement in the centre of the body. And, unfortunately, on that big, giant body, a 12-fret is a little less [than ideally proportioned]. They sound amazing, but I think it was the right move to go to 14 frets with that big jumbo body. So that's another evolution point of that model."

How did the J-200's beautiful 'moustache' bridge design first evolve?

"We have the original blueprints for the moustache bridge – there were a few different designs – but [country singer] Ray Whitley personally influenced that bridge. So there was definitely an artist element there where he had custom-ordered a smaller-body guitar that actually we own now. You may have seen it at Carter Vintage years ago, it's a really cool guitar. Then the next one that he ordered was on that big, giant [J-200 size] platform. He got that first customer-order, small-body guitar, and then for a second guitar, he was like, 'Can

7. Like on many vintage Les Pauls, Grovers are today fitted to this beautiful Hummingbird, also from 1963, currently at Matt's Guitar Shop in Paris

8. The mahogany back and sides may have looked plain enough but granted sweet, sonorous tone

you do it with this [bridge]?' And so that wasn't the very first SJ-200, but it was among the first three and that was really the one that set the stage – plus, Ray Whitley was the biggest singing cowboy of the day."

The original bridge design for the J-200, with its delicate pattern of interlacing curves, looks really ornate. How was it made, back in the day?

"It was kind of a wild idea in 1960 to call a guitar a Hummingbird. As wild as calling your band The Beatles..." **MAT KOEHLER**

"Today, obviously, we can scan an original and CNC it, but I would have to think that it was all hand-shaped. I mean, even a rectangle bridge was hand-shaped back then. It probably was a template and it was cut out and then it was hand-shaped."

The apertures in the original J-200 bridge were later replaced by a 'solid' design with pearl inlays. Why did that come about?

"That occurred much later, into the 1960s, and definitely aligned with Ted McCarty's exit. Then, under Norlin ownership, those principles that were kind of in the ether as soon as Ted McCarty left in 1966 – simplification of processes and whatnot – those

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON





Gibson's round-shouldered J-45 dreadnought became, to acoustic players, arguably what Fender's Telecaster became for electric guitar players: a simple but sweet-toned workhorse that worked across genres

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



changes were well intentioned and some of those guitars are fantastic. But I think that is one thing that you see in that period: those really time-consuming processes were sacrificed in order to get the guitar complete sooner because there was a huge order book. I mean, this is like during The Beatles era, so the people wanted guitars.”

People often assume that the mid-60s shift away from the more labour-intensive aspects of production – which occurred at Fender, Gibson and other major makers – was about maximising profit. But they forget that demand went wild for guitars in the 60s and firms couldn’t make guitars fast enough to keep up.

“Nobody wants back-orders. If you build up a year of back-orders... you’re hearing about it from all of your dealers and customers constantly. We’ve been there, in modern history, and you definitely want to find a way to fulfill those orders. But cutting corners was not really the mentality – it was more like, ‘Let’s find processes that are maybe needless and just aesthetic-based.’ I would say that was probably one consideration. There’s probably also someone there like [Gibson president from 1968] Stan Rendell who’d argue there was more surface area to glue the bridge on [with the later, solid J-200 bridges].”

The round-shouldered dreadnought shape is indelibly associated with the J-45. How did it evolve?

“Again, it was directly influenced by archtop shapes. Certainly the Sears catalogue archtops [made for the giant US mail order goods company and its compendious catalogue] were a little bit different to other Gibson shapes on purpose, but those shapes lent themselves perfectly to

“In that time, post-Depression, the other side of experimentation [was that] they weren’t going to waste materials” **MAT KOEHLER**

flat-top guitars. At the same time, historically, Ditson was ordering similar shapes through Martin, so there was something about the slope-shoulder shape that was considered intriguing and interesting at that point in time. But, fortunately for Gibson, it was the brand that made it famous.”

Gibson’s Dove and Hummingbird acoustics, with their ornately decorated pickguards, are among its best-loved acoustic designs. How did they come about?

“There was a gentleman called Hartford Snider who was a pattern-maker at Gibson but also a keen birdwatcher, and eventually his [interest in sketching birds] came to the attention of Ted

9. The rosewood bridge on this 1963 J-45 looks to be a later replacement for the unpopular plastic bridges fitted in a short-lived trial to guitars built in that year. Such beneficial upgrades are typically well tolerated in the vintage market

10. Double-ring Klusons and a brass plaque fitted by a previous owner



McCarty and John Huis, who was Ted McCarty’s right-hand man, and they said, ‘Well, hey, you know you’re making these patterns, but we can see you’re sketching all these birds and stuff. Why don’t you make a pickguard design?’ So the very first one was the Hummingbird, and the next one was the Dove, and then came the Excellente, in the same year as the Dove, which had an eagle on a pickguard.

“He created all those pickguard designs, and I think the success of the Hummingbird in 1960 allowed Gibson to go back to the well and introduce a couple of more bird pickguards. Which was kind of a wild idea in 1960 – to call a guitar a Hummingbird. Back then, it was as wild as calling your band The Beatles, because in that era band names were usually something very conventional like ‘Marty and the something-or-others’. And in the same way, guitar names

11. A panoply of flat-top models developed as Gibson found its feet in a market it initially left to Martin – seen here being crafted in Kalamazoo in the post-war boom times



PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

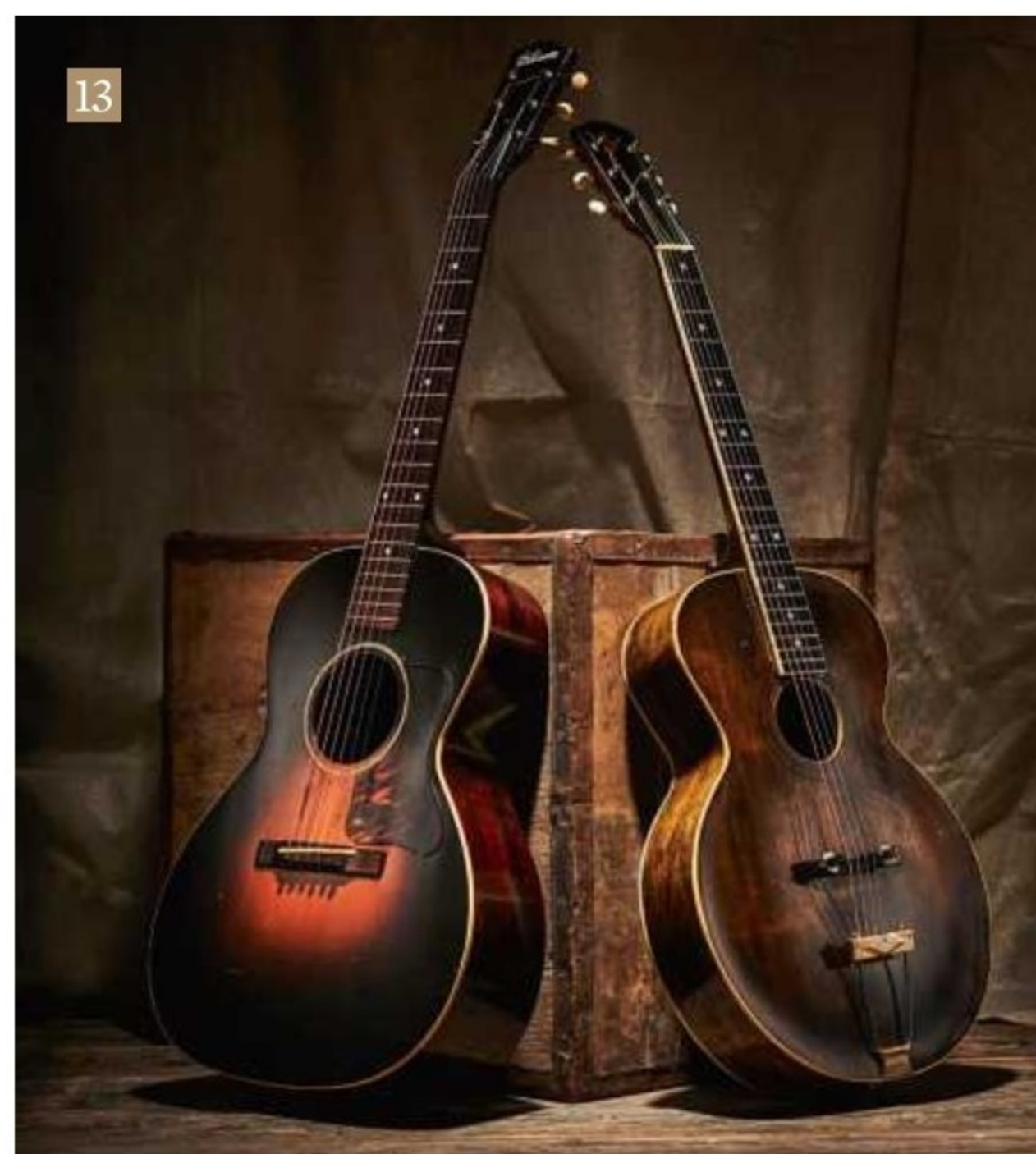


PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

were not typically words like ‘Hummingbird’, you know? So it was just such a cool move. And, again, it was testament to Ted McCarty and his team to empower the workforce and empower the talented folks within it, and they struck gold.”

After 1957, Gibson also owned the Epiphone brand – and some great Epi flat-tops were produced, too. How did the Epiphone and Gibson flat-top ranges compare?

“Now we’re getting to the fun stuff [laughs]. I love Epiphone history. Some of my absolute favourite flat-tops ever are really early wartime Epiphone flat-tops, like the FT-79, so before it was ever a Texan FT-110, which was a beautiful figured maple back-and-sides [design]. And those were dreadnought styles, so they were very early, late-30s Epiphone dreadnoughts. They are super-cool instruments.

“But when Gibson purchased Epiphone in 1957, one of the first moves from Ted McCarty at the time was assembling a team – and we actually have the notes from the meeting – to create a whole unique line of instruments for Epiphone because they had all these parts, but they didn’t want to do the same thing [as Gibson models]. So they wanted to have this melding of Gibson forms and Epiphone parts to create a line of instruments.

“One unique instrument to come about was, again, a dreadnought – a square-shoulder dreadnought – so that debuted with Epiphone as the Frontier, a continuation of the FT-110... The 1958 Frontier comes about immediately. Ernest Tubb then popularised it and a lot of those Nashville and Bakersfield country artists were playing Epiphones, which is really a testament to a guy named Ward Arbanas really pushing the line at the time and helping to sell it. Those acoustic guitars – those Epiphone flat-top guitars

“We are still focused on those familiar shapes... and improving them aesthetically, ergonomically and sonically” **MAT KOEHLER**

– were managed like a unique product line because they were in different stores from Gibson. That was the whole strategy. It’s like, if you put Gibson in the mom and pop store across the street from the other brand, then you’re not going to be competing for the same hook share in the store. So that was the thinking.

“Other really cool models then developed. Another awesome square-shoulder dread was the Excellente, one of my absolute favourites. Again, that was kind of a collaboration between Andy

12. Gibson CEO (in post from 1948 to 1966) Ted McCarty inspects a sunburst spruce top with a critical eye at the Kalamazoo factory

13. Until its first flat-tops (the L-0 and L-1) arrived in 1926, Gibson’s L-series guitars were exclusively archtops, such as the 1918 L-1 on the right. The L-0 flat-tops followed in the early 30s – and the example on the left here is from 1934

Nelson, who was a salesman for Gibson and some artists. It was adopted by many artists, including Ernest Tubb. It was cool to see that Epiphone had its moment in the sun, especially in the 60s, with really influential folk and country players.”

What lessons from Gibson’s acoustic heritage does Gibson take most to heart today, 100 years on?

“How we think about innovation today is similar to how we developed the line over 100 years, but it’s become refined [to an understanding] that the success of those guitars in our past are what makes us great today. And that’s kind of true on the electric side as well. We know we don’t need to try to reinvent the wheel, but we are still focused on using those familiar shapes and the same iconic sounds that you’ve heard in records for the last 100 years, and improving them aesthetically, ergonomically and sonically: so basically working with those parameters of the shape and the basic principles of creating a great acoustic guitar, X-bracing, forward-shifted bracing and so on. And you could be experimenting with new materials, but if you’re keeping to those platforms and shapes and paying tribute to the originals in your experimentations, you’re usually on the right track to finding something cool.” **G**

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SALE OF THE CENTURY

Period-correct in (almost) every detail, the Gibson Century Collection's 12-fret format is addictively playable. And as senior product development manager, Robi Johns, tells us, it's all down to the Brits

Words

David Mead & Henry Yates

It's hard to imagine a world without the Gibson flat-top. But as senior product development manager, Robi Johns, reminds us, you have to wind back the dials of the time machine a full century to find the Michigan luthier on the brink of arguably its most exciting quantum leap (at least, until the electric revolution of the 50s).

"It's amazing to think that it's 2026 now," considers Johns, "and although they'd existed before that, for those in the know, the first time a flat-top appeared in a Gibson catalogue was 1926. I don't attribute the death of the banjo and the rise of the guitar so much to the crash of the US economy. I think it was influenced highly by the development of the radio in 1919. Most people didn't know the guitar prior to that."

From that leap of faith, the flat-top made a perfect landing.

Today, scanning the Gibson website reveals acoustics sprawling into the hundreds. And yet everybody still wants to own the models that made the legend, and the luthier's latest cache of vintage-modern collectibles will certainly scratch that itch (for those who can afford the ticket).

As the branding implies, the three-strong Century Collection – comprising the punch-above-its-weight L-00, populist J-45 and cult-hero J-185, each with a thin satin finish – salutes that formative era when it seemed that every year heralded another stone-cold classic. And while there are concessions to modernity, the period-correct authenticity spans from the minutiae (hide glue in place of PVC) to the freshly introduced 12-fret neck-to-body joint that gives these acoustics a striking look and feel.



Gibson's senior product development manager, Robi Johns, thinks that it was the rise of radio in the US that began the acoustic flat-top's popularity

First, let's talk about that 12-fret neck-to-body joint. It was ultimately overtaken by the 14-fret format, but what are the selling points of that earlier design?

"Number one, it's more comfortable. I mean, this is hypothetical – I'm not sure everyone would agree with that. But it's a little bit closer to the player. As you know, there's a [standard] scale length to the instrument, which is 24.75 inches for short scale and 25.5 inches for long scale. But when you get rid of a couple of frets and move the neck into the body, you have to move that bridge further out to make that 24.75-inch scale length.

"It's more than a theory. I've noticed over time that moving that bridge into the widest part of the lower bout just opens up the sound even more. It's much more responsive, more



1. First introduced in the early 1930s, Gibson's L-00 parlour acoustic is now part of the Century Collection

2. All three models in Gibson's Century Collection have the older style logo on their headstocks

3. Many traditional construction methods have been employed with the new guitars, including the use of hide glue and dovetail neck joints



resonant, more vocal-sounding – it just sounds better. That's why we went to the 12-fret Century Collection models. We wanted to make these amazing, early-designed guitars sound as beautiful and resonant as possible. And the 12-fret neck-to-body accommodates that, by virtue of its construction."

It's common to hear pre-war necks described as 'baseball bats'. But the Century Collection models have adopted the more modern Gibson SlimTaper.

"Yeah, it's much more comfortable for the player. Although the theory might be with some people that the more mass of a neck [the better]. Like, the 1928 models and the 1942 J-45 had some really big V necks. Now, some people like the V neck because of the way they can put their thumb over the top of the fingerboard. The resonance of that neck is something that can be attributed to a better-sounding instrument. The lighter neck works for us beautifully. However, some people say that the heavier neck transfers more of the vibration. There's more vibration going down that neck; it's like a giant wooden tuning fork, if you will. And it's vibrating into the body, which is why that dovetail is so important to transfer that into the body."

"Moving the bridge into the widest part of the lower bout opens up the sound – and it's more responsive" **ROBI JOHNS**

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These three Century Collection models look stunning, from the subtle finish to the old pre-war Gibson logo on the headstocks. "Well, [it's] the vibe of these guitars – and I say 'vibe' in the sense of the allure of the style of the guitar, and the simplicity of it, and the size of it. We put a light satin finish on them, which makes it sound even older because the old finishes kinda dissipate over time and therefore the body resonates even better. So we were very pleased."

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER



PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

Let's look at the individual models, where they fit into Gibson's history and how you've approached them for this new collection. Starting with the L-00...

"Well, the L-00 was an evolution, it seems, from the Nick Lucas Special and the L-1. It's a little bit elongated instead of round. That came out in 1932 – in my opinion, to supply the American market with a really nice, relatively affordable (at the time) acoustic guitar made by a manufacturer, with mahogany back and sides. The Nick Lucas Special was more expensive.

"The L-00 became one of the more long-term sustained models that we do. One of our most popular small-bodies today is the L-00, still. A lot of people like the L-00 because it's really comfortable to sit with. And it's so resonant, with that 12-fret body and its bridge pushed out. It's very popular with blues players – a very focused sound.

"The construction is virtually identical to what was happening in the 1920s or 1930s. That can be identified in two ways: we still

"The J-200 became famous as the big, extravagant model. But the J-185 is actually just a one-inch-smaller version" **ROBI JOHNS**

use the dovetail joint, and we still use organic hide glue to bond that neck to the body. Nowadays, it's PVC glue, typically, but in those days we used hide glue and we still use that. And we do that on our Custom Shop models so they sound even more authentic because of the bond between the hide glue and the wood – which is much more molecular than PVC glue."

With the next model, we're moving on a decade, with the iconic J-45.

"We had already developed the J-45 body. But it wasn't called a J-45 in 1934: to compete with our competitors, who were building bigger guitars at that time, it was called the Jumbo. This was the first round-shouldered Gibson acoustic. And it eventually turned into the J-45 by 1942.

"The J-45 is so versatile. You can use it for blues. You can use it for rock. It'll growl at you if you hit it hard. But it can also sound nice and warm and balanced if you play it lighter. You can fingerstyle it. So that round-shouldered dreadnought rose up from the 1930s, and by 1942 it became the J-45 – and it stayed and it's our biggest seller.

"My hypothesis is that the J-45 became embedded in society not just by virtue of its sound but because we saw it in the broadcasts of the early 60s. I was

4. All three guitars in the Century Collection are available in Vintage Sunburst, Vintage Amber and Ebony

5. Donovan – who was a great fan of Gibson's 'workhorse' J-45 early in his career – is pictured here in 1969



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES



just at the edge of that. And I have to attribute it to the Brits coming to America in the 60s with all this amazing music. I remember Donovan playing a J-45 on his legendary songs.”

There’s a Beatles connection with that model, too, isn’t there?

“Yeah. What did The Beatles use on the orchestration of *Love Me Do*, one of their first recorded songs? An acoustic guitar. And that acoustic guitar looks like a J-45 because it was a J-45, with a single-coil pickup, called the J-160E at that time. I think The Beatles had a lot to do with the exposure of the J-45 – even though it was a J-160E, which was the J-45 design.

“In 2026, we just re-released the J-160E in our core line-up. And it’s still revered. It’s kinda

retro for young people playing modern music. They say, ‘Oh, that’s kinda cool.’ It’s a very distinctive acoustic-electric sound: not fully acoustic, a little bit of both. That J-160E is still popular because of George Harrison and John Lennon – and rightfully so.”

Moving on another decade, we’ve got the J-185, which is probably lesser-known relative to the Hummingbird, Dove, J-45 and so on. It’s almost a bit of an unsung hero, isn’t it?

“Yes. It was released in 1951. From my perspective, the J-200 became quite famous from the 1930s on as the big, extravagant model. You know, Elvis played it. It was the biggest thing available, the most pronounced. But the J-185 is actually just a

The Beatles played their part in popularising Gibson acoustics: both John and George are shown here playing a J-160E, an early electro-acoustic model with a magnetic pickup positioned at the end of the fretboard

one-inch-smaller version of the J-200: the J-200 was 17 inches across, the J-185 was 16-inches across with the exact same proportions. So now you could have this J-200-looking guitar, beautifully balanced looking, pretty big sound but one inch less depth. And the idea was that it was a wonderful rhythm guitar. You have a little less bottom-end, which makes it very balanced in the lows, mids and highs – but the J-200 has more depth.

“And then, in the early 60s, the Everly Brothers wanted to use the J-200 as a [signature] model. But Gibson wisely said, ‘No, let’s leave that alone. Use this body instead, it’s a little bit smaller but it’s very balanced.’ So they used the J-185 body to create what was the Everly Brothers

model. Without that low-end – and due to the fact it had warm lows, mids and highs – it became an excellent rhythm guitar.

“But the other connection is that the body mould that was used for the original L-5 jazz guitar was also used for the J-185. That was 16 inches across, too, so we had that available. With the flat-tops, we didn’t want to get much bigger than 17 inches. I think that might have been risky. We did do the Super 400 [in 1934], which is 18 inches across – but that was an archtop. So, anyway, I like to say that the J-185 Century Collection model has all these connections to our history.”

How has the popularity of the J-185 ebbed and flowed over the years?

“When we first started this Gibson plant in Bozeman, Montana, in 1989, I was the only one here in sales and marketing because it was all builders. I was getting calls from the UK, from the wonderful artists there – George Harrison’s group and Eric Clapton’s group. They were working together doing some unplugged things. And what were they interested in? The J-180 and the J-185. That’s a fact. That’s what they were talking about. That’s what they wanted. I remember that vividly. It was the J-185 that all the artists were



PHOTO BY ANWAR HUSSEIN/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

“Why did these models become famous?’ It was [because of] the popularity of British music in the 60s onward” **ROBI JOHNS**

talking about, saying, ‘It was off the market for so long. Thank you for building it again, Gibson.’ That’s what I heard on the phone.

“And that wasn’t just coming from the Brits. There were American artists contacting me, too. I remember Jackson Browne calling me up because he’d heard a rumour that we were building the J-185 again.”

Are there more Century Collection models coming down the line?

“We have a few models prototyped, but what’s really happening is

6. Mick Jagger playing a Hummingbird in October 1973. The Rolling Stones’ use of acoustic guitar in their recordings was another boost to the demand for Gibson’s flat-tops

that our historic models – which started 100 years ago – are a part of our Custom Historic line-up in our Custom Shop, where we replicate as much as possible the sound, the feel and the look of those models back when they were first released. So what you’re really seeing is an extension of our historic revival of these models, going back to 1920.

“You know, we have a 1942 J-45, a pre-war Super Jumbo 200 like the original, a 1942 Southern Jumbo, a 1960 Hummingbird – which is when that model appeared. And that was made popular from The Rolling Stones playing a Hummingbird back in the day. So when people ask me, ‘Why did these models become famous?’ I always like to say – it’s your fault!

It was [because of] the popularity of British music in the 60s onward and the love that the British artists had for American blues and jazz. And, therefore, the interpretation of that coming from England is indelible.

“But, yes, we are going to continue this resurgence of the historic models. The Century Collection is limited to the models that reflect more of what was happening during what is typically called the Depression era. We wanted to capture the love of those old original models that came out closer to the beginning of the broadcast industry. Gibson grew out of that – which is why those models became so famous.” **G**

For more on the Gibson Century Collection, see www.gibson.com



YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

A pair of historic acoustics from Gibson's illustrious catalogue to celebrate the company's century of flat-top production. But wait, these are 12-fretters. What's going on?

Words

David Mead

Photography

Phil Barker





Gibson J-185 Century 12-Fret & J-45 Century 12-Fret £2,149 & £2,049

Contact Gibson Phone 00800 44427661 Web www.gibson.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 Another reissue of the J-45?**
Yes. And why not? The J-45 is Gibson's renowned workhorse acoustic that has been seen in the hands of many a legendary player, but here you have a few appointments that add a little twist to a familiar formula.
- 2 Why 12-fretters?**
Merely a variation on an established theme, plus it gives Gibson the chance to place the guitars' bridges at a wider part of the soundboard to increase sound transfer from the strings and embellish the tone. And, from what we've heard, it's a very positive move.
- 3 Not original spec, then?**
No. If you were to consult the vintage spec, you'd find quite a few differences, the most obvious of which is mentioned above. No baseball bat necks or "Only a Gibson is good enough" banner on the J-45's headstock. But does that really matter?

It was 1926 when acoustic flat-tops first entered the Gibson catalogue and so, to celebrate this really quite significant centenary, the company has released a trio of guitars, two of which we see here. In order of original production dates, the Century models comprise an L-00, which was first introduced in the early 1930s, a J-45 from

1. All three of the Century Collection acoustics bear the older, mid-40s Gibson cursive script logo

2. The 12-fret body join allows the guitars' bridges to be relocated in a wider part of the soundboard for additional warmth and enhanced tone

the 1940s and a J-185 from the 1950s. But these are not meant to be faithful recreations of those decades-old guitars, rather than a glance back at the past with feet firmly planted in the present.

Certain traditions have been observed, such as using hide glue in the construction, but modernity has crept in where the necks are concerned with Gibson





2

opting to install its SlimTaper profiles on all three models. But possibly the most obvious veer away from original spec is the fact that all three have necks that join the bodies at the 12th fret, rather than the 14th. This might seem to be a curious move to some, perhaps, but Gibson's reasoning is that these are "fresh interpretations" of these legendary guitars.

Of the pair we're reviewing here, the J-45 needs no real introduction from us, having reached the same workhorse status as Martin's D-28 throughout its long life. But, to recap, the J-45 was introduced in 1942 and, to quote Gibson itself: "Since the 1930s, Gibson's full-size, round-shoulder acoustics have shaped the sound of American music, becoming the most frequently recorded acoustic guitars thanks to their rich warmth, expressive character, and remarkable balance across every note. Among these celebrated instruments, the J-45 has earned iconic status." It has been seen in the hands of artists like John Hammond, Bob Dylan, Vince Gill and, legend has it, that



Gibson's J-45 flat-top has retained its reputation as a workhorse that will flatter virtually any style of playing



Monty Python's Eric Idle used a J-45 to compose *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life*. And you can't really get any more iconic than that.

The J-185 isn't quite as well known, but since its introduction in 1951 it has gained a lot of fans and is regarded as a sort of best-kept secret among the acoustic cognoscenti. Its body profile harks back to another Gibson legend, the L-5 from the 1920s, and could be looked at as being a slightly smaller and more compact version of the SJ-200. Like our J-45, this version of the J-185 has a 12th-fret body join, which Gibson tells us "shortens the neck and moves the bridge plate farther from the waist and closer to the body's widest point, enhancing top movement and improving playing comfort. The result is a warm, lively, and responsive voice that especially suits fingerstyle players and anyone with a lighter, nuanced touch."

Looking at specifics and turning our attention back to the J-45, we find that the build is pretty much standard fare for the model. But like everything that remains functional for decades, simplicity

3. The lesser-known J-185 has a very similar spec to the J-45 in terms of build, but benefits here from a dark sunburst finish

is the key here. With a top of Sitka spruce – a very nice bookmatched piece with characteristic rippling in the grain – and backed with mahogany, both woods are enhanced by the satin nitrocellulose finish that has been applied so thinly that it's almost possible to feel the grain under your fingers, especially on the guitar's back. It certainly promotes the 45's vintage ambience and actually feels very good under the fingers.

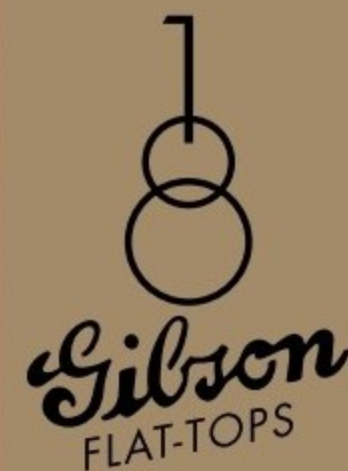
These are not faithful recreations of decades-old guitars, rather a glance back at the past with feet firmly planted in the present

This isn't the first time we've seen a 12th-fret neck join on a J-45, but Gibson tells us that such models have been limited to "artist collaborations or limited Gibson Custom runs", and so it looks far from being in any way odd or out of place. In fact, it has the effect of making the guitar look (and feel) more compact and, as we'll see later, it balances incredibly well, too.

Mahogany is used for the neck, with the aforementioned SlimTaper profile instead of the tree trunks of yore, and the fretboard is rosewood, as you'd suspect. The older Gibson logo sits atop the guitar's headstock, but without the banner found on originals that reads, "Only a Gibson is good enough". Tuners are the vintage-inspired 'Golden Age strap' variety with simple white buttons, and both nut and saddle are made from bone.

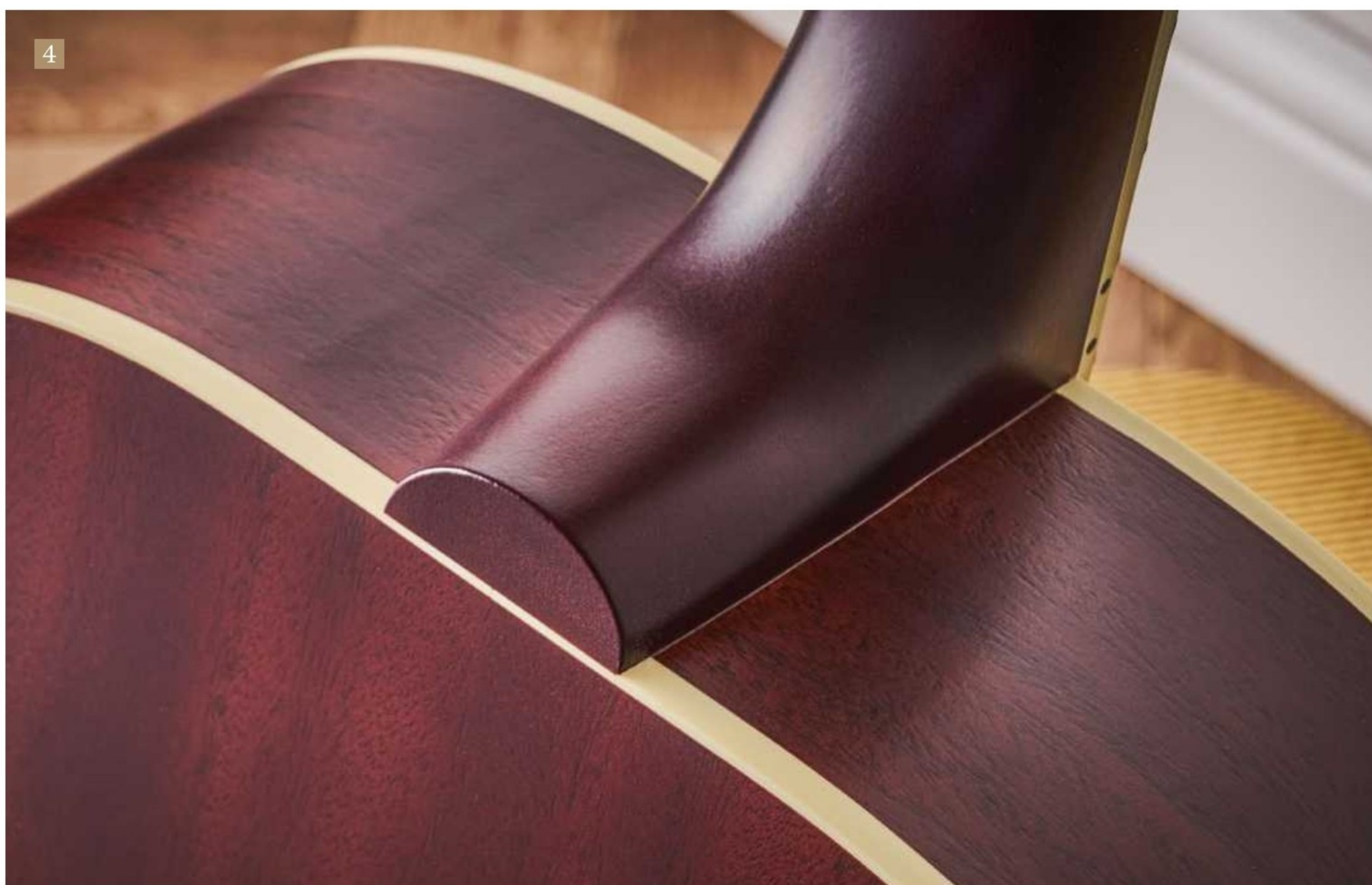
We noticed that there was no second strap button on the guitar's heel – an odd omission these days – but when we rifled through the glove compartment of the very nice purple-lined tweed case, we found that Gibson had provided one for the player to install if desired. That won't be anything other than a few minutes with a drill and a screwdriver for all the jolly modders out there, but if you're a little squeamish about wielding sharp objects around £2k guitars, it's probably best to have a professional do the deed for you.

Moving over to the J-185, construction details are very similar, with the same Sitka



*Singer-songwriters
would find a very
workable companion
in the J-185, and
fingerstylists alike
would possibly
find a soulmate*

Despite its jumbo
body size designation,
the J-185 was a little
lighter in the bass
department than its
better-known sibling



4. Hide glue is used for the dovetail neck joints on both guitars – another nod to Gibson's past

THE RIVALS

If you're seeking out alternatives to this pair of reimagined reissues and either yearn for something more historically accurate or are looking at a different price range, then it's best to start your search in Gibson's own backyard. Expect to pay in excess of £5k for a 1942 Banner J-45 or Murphy Lab model. But if the budget won't stretch that far then we were very impressed with the Epiphone Inspired By Gibson Custom J-45, which we've recently seen streeting at under £1k. Other Gibson J-45 models fall in between those two price points.

The J-185 is a harder one to find alternatives for as it's a comparatively rare model compared with its more illustrious sibling. However, the J-185EC Modern Walnut (available in rosewood, too) sits around £2.5k, and the non-cutaway, more vintage-spec version can be found in sunburst for around the £3k mark.

Other than that, Eastman's acoustic catalogue is well worth a look as we were really taken with the J-45-like E20SS at £1,859. The company's AC630 at £2,599 is a jumbo worthy of attention, too.

spruce and mahogany combo for the top, back and sides. The former is camouflaged in a very nicely applied vintage sunburst, which gives the guitar that extra dose of vintage chic and, looking at its outline, it's possible to see that family resemblance to the revered L-5. We'll admit that we're not as familiar with the J-185 as we are with the J-45, but concede that it's a very attractive-looking instrument without any of that bulbousness that jumbos can acquire. In fact, with that classic figure-eight profile, you wouldn't really think you were looking at a jumbo. It just looks classic.

Neither guitar comes with any electronics onboard, and so it's time to fire the guitars up and hear how they sound.

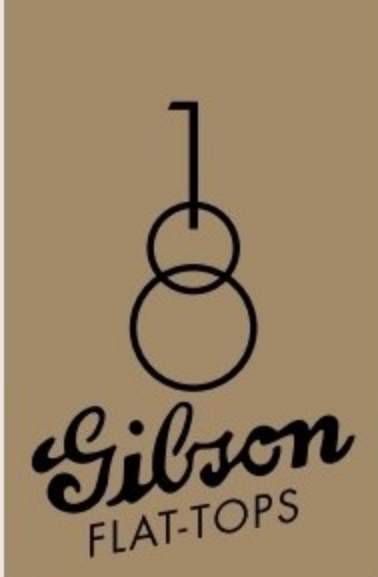
FEEL & SOUNDS

It's a very strange thing, but when we were fumbling with freeing the J-45 from its case, we balanced the guitar on our knees and it didn't budge. It was perfectly balanced and not a shade heavy on either the body or neck side. In fact, both guitars seem really light and would

There's bags of volume to that familiar J-45 woody growl and campfire chords ring out with complex harmonics and tons of sustain

almost disappear on a strap. So it might be time to consider installing that extra strap button, after all.

Strumming a few exploratory chords on the 45 was like putting on a pair of comfortable slippers. Everything we love about the model is present in spades. There's bags of volume to that familiar J-45 woody growl and campfire chords ring out with complex harmonics and tons of sustain. Gibson certainly got it right the first time with the J-45, and it's no wonder that the model is so revered among singer-songwriters and fingerstylists alike. We particularly liked the way we could feel lower mids and bass vibrate through the body – tone you can feel. And the range



The tuners on the J-185 are what Gibson refers to as the "Golden Age strap" variety. And if you're curious about the serial number, it tells us that the guitar was made on 15 December 2025



Both guitars arrived with us in these very plush purple-lined tweed cases

of dynamics is very good, too: played quietly, all the subtleties you need are present, but let it rip and there's all the toneful power you'll ever need. We very nearly had a 'Dear Santa' moment with this instrument...

The J-185 is a contrast in that the bass isn't quite so strident. It's more refined, more demure, and would definitely suit a fingerstylist who doesn't want the full-on bombast of a dread but still needs a reserve of power for those *fortissimo* moments in their set. Don't get us wrong, all the tone is there – it's just slightly more 'polished to a shine' than its

The modern touches on both acoustics have enhanced playability and aligned two vintage models with a more contemporary mindset

roguish stablemate. Once again, singer-songwriters would find a very workable companion in the J-185, and fingerstylists alike would possibly find a soulmate.

Did the SlimTaper necks interfere with our test drive? Not one whit. We didn't even think about it.

VERDICT

What can we say? Both these revisits to Gibson's acoustic heritage have hit the mark in their individual ways, and those modern touches have enhanced playability and aligned two vintage models with a more contemporary mindset. We thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent with them, and if we say that the J-45 just nudged past the winning post, be aware that it's merely a subjective opinion, based on that familiar woof and grunt that has served acoustic players for over eight decades. We'd urge you to check out both models and decide for yourself. Happy 100th, Gibson! **G**



GIBSON J-185 CENTURY 12-FRET

PRICE: £2,149 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Jumbo
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 123mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 405mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Golden Age strap
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 19
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/56mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.63/3.6
OPTIONS: Finish only – Vintage Amber or Ebony
RANGE OPTIONS: The third in this trio of Century Collection reissues is the Gibson L-00 (£2,049)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price
FINISH: Vintage sunburst satin nitrocellulose lacquer



9/10

PROS Vintage appeal in spades with modern touches that enhance, rather than detract; good range of toothsome tones on hand

CONS Virtually nothing... perhaps the 12th-fret neck join might deter purists



GIBSON J-45 CENTURY 12-FRET

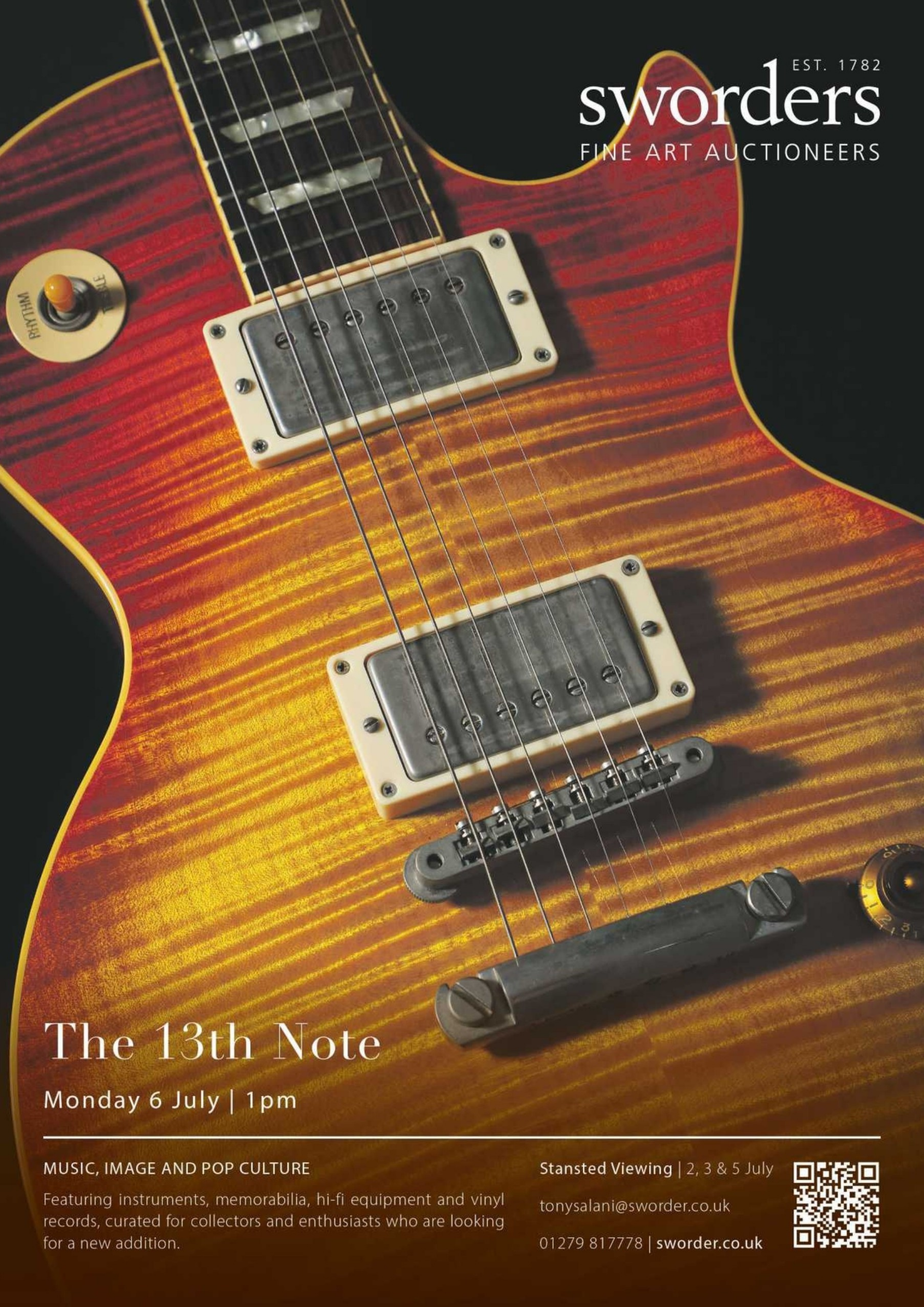
PRICE: £2,049 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Round-shoulder dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 123mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 407mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Three-on-a-plate with cream buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 19
BRIDGE/SPACING: Bone/56mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.57/3.48
OPTIONS: Finish only – Vintage Sunburst or Ebony
RANGE OPTIONS: See left
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price
FINISH: Vintage Amber satin nitrocellulose lacquer



9/10

PROS All the things we love about the J-45 in a slightly more compact package; toneful and brash (but in a good way)

CONS As with the J-185, the 12th-fret neck join is not for everyone



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**VIDEO
EXCLUSIVE!**

Samantha muses on life on the road and her new live album. Plus! See her run down her guitar and pedal rig <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>





SAMANTHA FISH

With a new live album hitting the streets soon, we sat down with the blues-rock fireball to hear about the gear and attitude that fuels her stage performances

Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker

When Samantha Fish's stately (and, quite frankly, enormous) tour bus stopped outside the *Guitarist* studios during her recent UK live dates, the first order of the day was to commiserate with her. Her latest studio album, *Paper Doll*, was up for Best Contemporary Blues Album at this year's Grammy Awards but sadly missed out. However, she was philosophical about the whole experience: "It was an honour," she says, "I was really excited and humbled because you got to go. Who knows if it'll ever happen again? So if you don't go, you might never get to go. So I went, I dressed up, had fun, had a couple cocktails and it was a great day. And we didn't end up winning, but being nominated is really the recognition of your art and a nice reassurance that I'm on the right path."

Samantha's new live album is called *Paper Doll (Live)* and it's something that has been in the pipeline for quite some time, as she explains...

What finally persuaded you to release a live album now?

"It's something my fans have been asking for a long time and I keep telling them, 'Yeah, we're going to do it,' and then five years later, they're like, 'She's still not doing it...'

"It's a timing thing with live records, but I felt like it was a good time because we recorded this last [studio] record, *Paper Doll*, with my touring band and so, I know it sounds stupid, but, to me, it felt live. A lot of studio albums have dynamics and everything,

but we had something on this last record. We didn't play with a click track, so we're changing tempos in the middle of the song, and there's just something about it that felt really open – it just lends itself to the stage and what we're doing. I felt like it was a good time to capture it."

Where was it recorded?

"We did it at the Bijou Theatre in Knoxville, Tennessee. It's an old theatre; the record label chose it because they know it sounds good and looks good. They brought in a camera crew and we had our lights, and we brought in the McCrary Sisters to sing backup vocals. It added an extra layer of dynamics and really beefed up the show and made it special."

Live recording can sometimes add nerves for the performer. How was your experience?

"Not only are we recording it, but we're filming it, too! So, 'Try to look natural,' right? I caught myself a couple times where I was thinking so hard about performing it perfectly that I thought, 'You haven't moved from this spot in, like, half a song. You need to just play your damn show!' You have to take it out of your mind a little bit."

"For me, it's about connecting with the audience. Anytime I'm feeling like, 'Oh God, oh God...' I try to find a person that looks like they're having a good time and [tell myself] 'Okay, this is what I'm here to do – entertain that person, so forget about all this other stuff.' It's just hard, you know, because you want it to be perfect and I was taking notes as I was



1

going and I really screwed up a song that night. At the end of the night I came out and said, 'Hey, we're gonna do it again, so just pretend to be as enthusiastic as you were the first time!' Everybody's understanding and there's a little freedom in that.

"When you tell people you're making a live record, they're a little more open to you repeating songs; it's hard to nail it in one shot. Things go wrong, guitars fall out of tune, singers don't sing in key. I'm the singer and I'm the guitar player. The band sounded great, I was the one with the most problems. It's hard to accept that when you're a perfectionist, but you have to."

1. Samantha describes her pedalboard as a "hot mess", but it's served her through the busy touring schedule for her latest studio release, *Paper Doll*

You've been using SGs live and in the studio for quite a lot of your career. What's the attraction?

"I find that the SG is the most versatile guitar in my whole arsenal. Some people might disagree and think, 'No, it can only sound a certain way.' But I feel like I can just apply it to a range of songs and I can shape the tone in a way. And, honestly, it's also my most comfortable guitar. The way the neck feels... I just feel the most comfortable playing it. When I stretch out on solos and everything, it fits my personality.

"When I first got it, it just felt like me, and I've had [the one I'm using live] since 2015. I've relic'd it myself,



2

"[When you're making a live record] it's hard to nail it in one. Things go wrong, guitars fall out of tune, singers don't sing in key"

you know, through the sweat and everything, just playing it – I didn't actually take any tools to it. I really love this guitar. It feels good in my hands. It's expressive when I need it to be. I can tame it when I need to. And it looks cool."

What drew you to the SG in the first place?

"I don't know how or why I landed on the SG. I guess sometimes you're just naturally called to things. But I kind of chalk it up to three things: Angus Young, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Derek Trucks. They can all make them sound good, so I was hoping I could, too."

What pedals are you using on your 'board for the current live show?

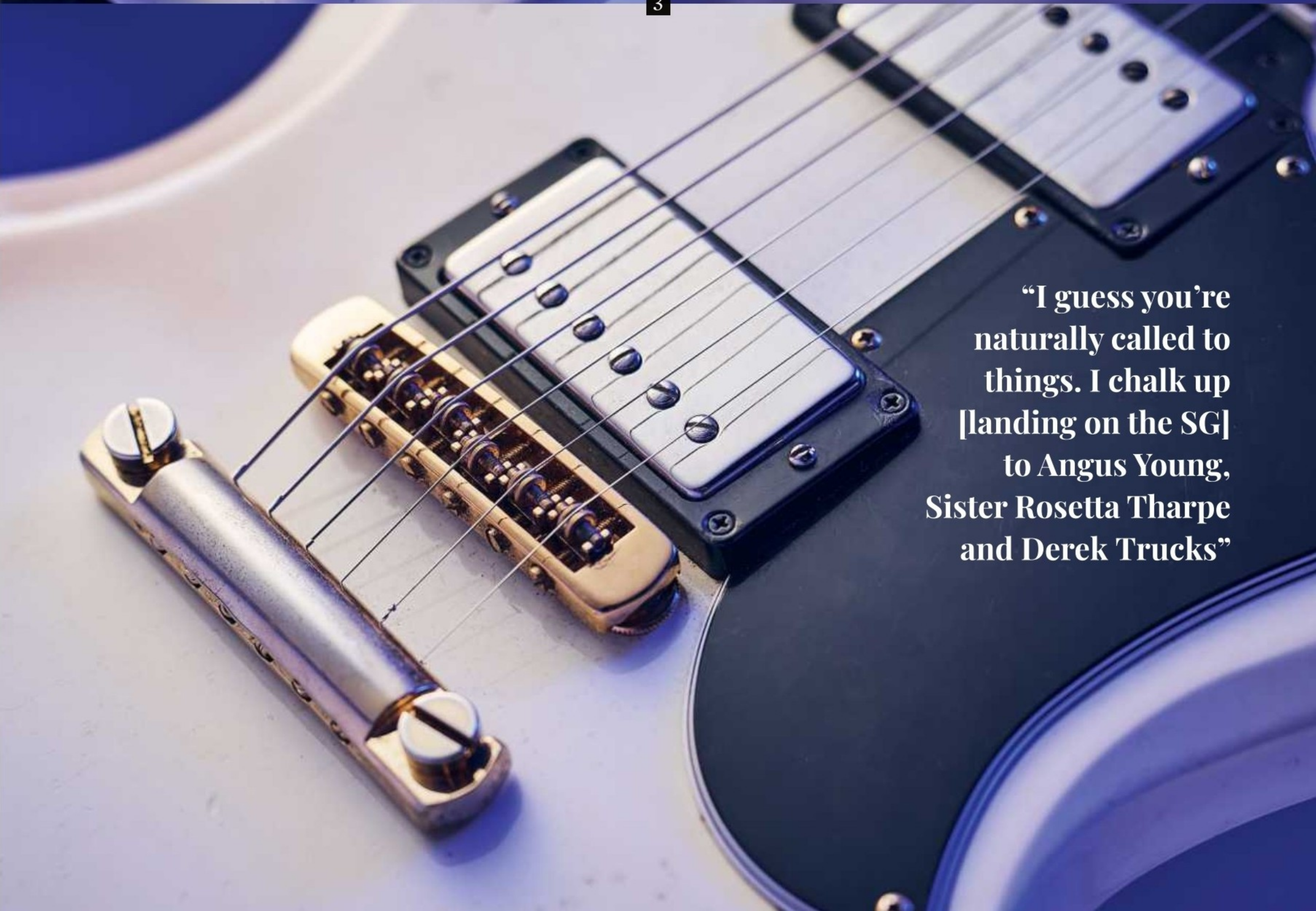
"I'm probably gonna get 150 guitarists telling me how I'm doing this wrong, but this is just what works for me. [My 'board is] a hot mess, but it's been working for a long time. I generally go into my volume pedal first and I use that [for] volume swells. I really love pedal

2. The new live album is accompanied by a DVD, which displays the electrifying intensity of Samantha's stage show

3. Samantha's faithful Gibson SG has been in her rig for over a decade and she proudly notes that she's relic'd it herself purely through use and the natural wear and tear of life on the road



3



“I guess you’re naturally called to things. I chalk up [landing on the SG] to Angus Young, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Derek Trucks”

4. A complete contrast in character to her SG, the Gibson Custom Shop ES-335 is a toneful beast that has to be tamed on stage

5. "It looks like a disco Ball," Samantha says of her latest six-string companion. First seen in a dealership in St Louis, the 335 was added to her collection because, as she says, "I just knew it would look great with my wardrobe and our lights"

steel [effects] and I'll do that in solos. I see a lot of guitar players do that with their volume control, but they're kind of far away from me on most guitars, you know? So I haven't found a comfortable way to do that and pull it off effortlessly. So that's a good way to cheat. Then I go into a tuner, a [TC Electronic] Polytune; you know, it works. Then I go into an Analog Man King Of Tone, which is probably my favourite, heaviest-relied-upon pedal. It sounds like a tube amp. The next one was a gift: it's called Jail Guitar Doors [MXR JGD1 Drive], and it's the MC5 drive pedal my tour manager gave me because we play *Kick Out The Jams*. I'm a big MC5 fan. It's a massive pedal with a single button, so you don't have many options.

"My next one would be the JHS Mini Foot Fuzz, this tiny little fuzz pedal that sounds crazy. I generally try to turn the volume up and I keep the fuzz around one o'clock so it doesn't get too muddy. I go into the MXR

Carbon Copy analogue delay, which is also a favourite. Then I've got my [Electro-Harmonix] Nano Pog, which is an octave [pedal]. Fun, weird stuff. I like to use it on *Black Wind Howlin'* and a couple other songs. Then we go into the [Boss TR-2] Tremolo, which is a new one for me. I got it for the song *Don't Say It*. Then a [Boss PS-5] Super Shifter, which I use very minimally, really only for divebombs, though I know it's got a million uses."

You have a new guitar on tour with you at present. Tell us about your sparkly ES-335.

"I've wanted a 335 for several years, but when it comes to picking out and purchasing a guitar, I wait until one comes along, then I'm like, 'That. I need that.' My friend Mike Zito had a sparkly Firebird and I was like, 'Oh, that's beautiful, where'd you get it?' [He said], 'You need to go check out this guitar shop in St Louis.' And they had all these Custom Shop sparkly 335s and pretty much every kind of Gibson. I saw this one and I had to have it. It looks like a disco ball and I just knew it would look great with my wardrobe and our lights.

"You know, you kind of see the whole picture like it's gonna fit right in. And I knew what they sound like, and you kind of hope that it's gonna feel and play great. But, I mean, you can't go wrong. I pulled it right out of the box and it played great. It's a Gibson Custom Shop. It's a beautiful guitar. I've been wanting one of these for a long time because I really like how dark they can get, how resonant they are when you're playing – and they just scream. I can get a lot of feedback with the amp, like really controlled feedback when I need it, and it just has great tone. I love it."

How does it differ from the SG?

"It's definitely got more body to it. The SG, as much as I like it, I beef it up with pedals and with amplifiers. This one, I almost have to tame it. You just have to approach things a little differently – like I can come out and throw on my crazy MC5 pedal, turn the amp all the way up with the SG and I've still got to work to keep the thickness of it. With this one, if I plugged it in with that same kind of effect, it'd be screaming – a lot of feedback and everything. So there's a little bit of a taming thing [going on]. But knowing where this threshold is it just gives you a lot of dynamics to play with. So one's not better than the other; you've just got to approach it a little differently."

Do you think that touring and playing live is getting easier for you?

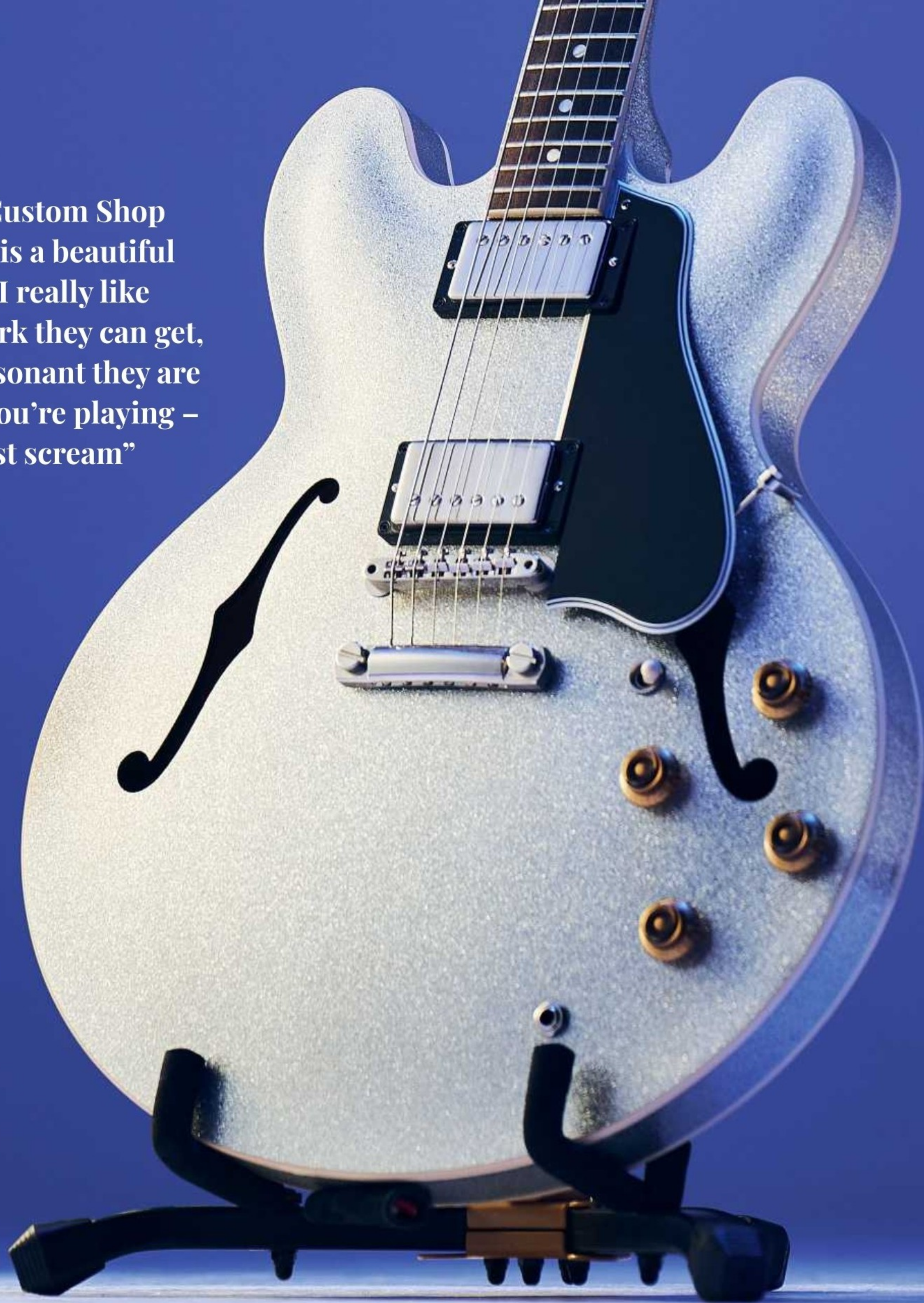
"Certain things get easier. You know, the way that we started travelling in a [tour] bus. So that's easier in some ways. But then a new challenge will arise: so this is easier in this way, but this thing is a little more complicated, you know? That's just life, right? But I'm still in it. I try not to do things the hardest way possible, but sometimes you've got to get to the gig, you've got to make it happen. The travel sometimes can be a little bit daunting and exhausting, but I'm still down for it." 



Samantha Fish's new album, *Paper Doll (Live)*, is released by Rounder Records on 12 June

www.samanthafish.com

“This Custom Shop ES-335 is a beautiful guitar. I really like how dark they can get, how resonant they are when you’re playing – they just scream”



5





1963 GIBSON SG

The Les Paul Standard may be the most iconic and the ES-335 the most versatile, but the SG remains Gibson's greatest commercial success

Words Huw Price Photography Matt Lincoln

Although not as outlandish as the Explorer and Flying V, the SG's pointy horns and sharp body contours were nevertheless radical for the era and it continues to divide opinions decades after its debut at the July 1961 NAMM Show in Chicago. When analysing many of Gibson's late 1950s and early 60s designs, it's often helpful to consider them in the context of the competition the company faced from Fender.

Flagship models such as the Stratocaster, Jazzmaster and Jaguar had popularised smaller lightweight bodies, double-cutaways for easier upper-fret access, and increasingly slim and fast-feeling necks. In contrast, the Les Paul Standard and Custom were essentially heavy scaled-down jazz guitars, and while the semi-solids were easier to play higher up the neck, they were also bulky and feedback prone.

Slimline Tonic

The Les Paul Junior and Special models indicated where Gibson's approach to guitar design and construction was heading when the double-cutaway body shape was introduced in 1958. In a sense, the SG can be seen as an evolution of the Special, with a solid mahogany body that was slimmed down from a nominal 1.5 inches to 1.375 inches and given pronounced contours to sharpen up the plank-like appearance.

Many players welcomed the enhanced playability these new features offered, but there were some drawbacks. The lighter bodies resulted in the SG's notorious tendency towards neck heaviness and, for some, the long skinny necks made SGs feel more like longbows with guitar strings. There were structural issues, too, that made the challenge of keeping them in tune second only to the challenge of keeping them in one piece.

SGs are just as vulnerable to headstock breaks as any other vintage-era Gibson model, but slimming down the body also meant that there was less wood and reduced glueing surface area where the neck joined the body. As a consequence, many SGs have suffered breaks where the neck joins the body and extensive repairs are not uncommon.

Less Les

To his credit, Les Paul identified the SG's structural issues from the get go, and by the third year of production the embossed Les Paul logo was quietly removed from the truss rod cover. The model name was also changed from the Les Paul SG Standard to the SG Standard. Les later suggested: "The problem that the SG had was the fact that you could pull back on the neck and it wasn't strong enough. I don't want no vibrato by bending on the neck. I want a good solid instrument, and it didn't sustain as good. Otherwise, it's a good instrument."

It must be said that there's no evidence the likes of Frank Zappa, Angus Young and Derek Trucks ever struggled with a lack of sustain. As for the whippy necks, Pete Townshend used them to create vibrato effects and control feedback, as you can hear on *Live At Leeds*. He was eventually forced to stop playing SGs, however, because replacements couldn't be found in sufficient numbers to replace those rendered unusable by his ferociously physical playing style and tendency to clout self-righteous hippies at music festivals.

Les Paul models of the 1950s ranged from entry-level Juniors and Specials to the flagship Standard and Custom models. SGs followed suit, with the same P-90/humbucker split but far greater consistency in the way they were constructed. And just like before, the two-pickup Standard model was far more popular than the glitzy gold-plated three-pickup Custom.

For some collectors, the golden era of the SG Standard lasted from 1961 to '63. Besides the kudos of retaining the Les Paul branding, SGs from that era stand a good chance of having those fabled 'Patent Applied For' humbucking pickups. Although Gibson was granted its patent in 1959, it continued using up stocks of these pickups and Patent Applied For decals for years afterwards, and there are documented examples of gold-plated units still being installed as late as 1965.

Golden-era SG Standards from 1961 to '63 stand a good chance of having those fabled 'Patent Applied For' pickups

Despite being regularly gigged throughout the 60s and 70s, this SG is almost entirely original and has never needed repairs



Although far simpler in design, the Maestro Vibrola works much better than the sideways vibrato unit that preceded it

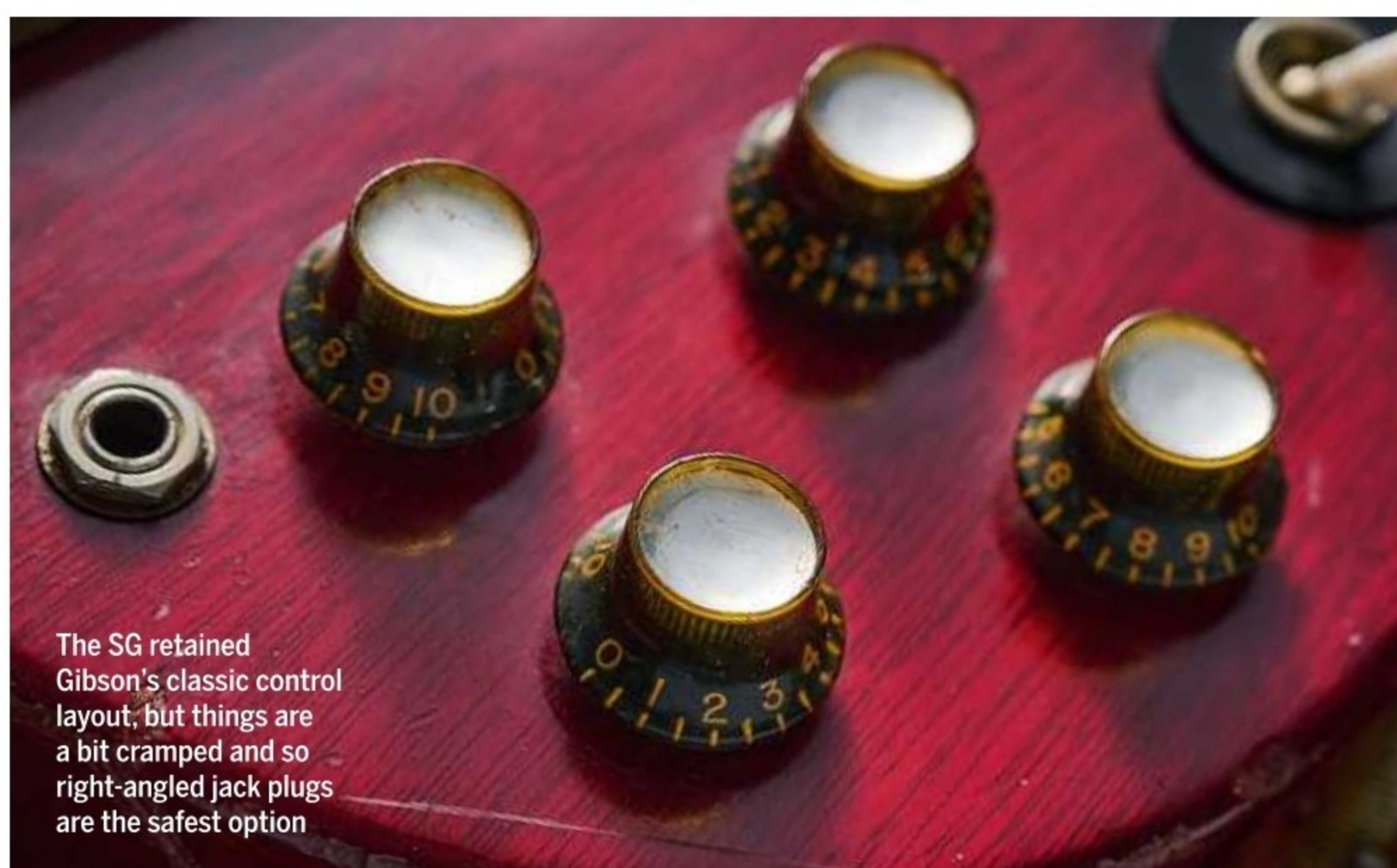
This is where things become murky because not all Patent Applied For pickups were created equal. The version that Gibson was making after mid-'61 had shorter Alnico V magnets, which generate a fatter and more midrange focused tone. Also, some examples have Patent Number decals, despite conforming in all other respects to the Patent Applied For formula. With so much money riding on them, the devil really is in the decals.

Cherry On Top

According to some SG aficionados, the ultimate year for the model was 1963, so we're pleased to be featuring a '63 SG this issue. Better still, it's one of those ever so rare examples that retains its full history. This guitar can be traced back to Hessy's Music in Liverpool where its original owner purchased it. That same owner consigned it to Gardiner Houlgate in Wiltshire to be auctioned, where it achieved a hammer price of £10,000 in December 2025.

It is clear that this SG saw a lot of action on the Liverpool circuit and the owner is known to have played for The Squares, The Renicks and The Twig. He also regularly performed at the iconic Cavern Club and even shared the stage with The Beatles prior to acquiring the guitar. One of the most charming features is a 'Frank Hessy LTD' sticker that the shop applied to the rear of the headstock.

Thankfully, this SG was spared the modifications that were so often done to guitars during the 60s and 70s. There is



The SG retained Gibson's classic control layout, but things are a bit cramped and so right-angled jack plugs are the safest option

quite a bit of playwear on the back of the neck, along with finish rub-throughs on the edges, and the dings and dents that are typically acquired by gigging guitars. But the finish retains a vibrant cherry colour and there is no evidence of repairs or overspray.

The electronics are also all original, with a full set of 1963 potentiometers and two original pickups. Since 1963 was a crossover year for such things, it's hardly a surprise to see a Patent Number pickup in the bridge position and a Patent Applied For in the neck. Guitars & Musical Instruments auctioneer Luke Hobbs suggested that the decal is the only significant difference and that both pickups sound exactly the same.

Other than one replaced tuner screw and a new switch tip, this SG is completely original. The owner's son brought it to Gardiner Houlgate in a Frank Hessy supplied hard case, which also contained the original Gibson strap.

Sideways Glance

Another reason '63 SGs are so popular is that they retain most of the desirable early features, but most are unencumbered by Gibson's notorious sideways vibrato. No doubt this device has its fans, but in most cases any attempt to use it in earnest is just a prelude to tuning mayhem. Since owners generally fold up the arm and tuck it out of the way, it makes one wonder why Gibson went to the bother of making these.

One of the screws is non-original, but the original single-line Kluson tuners with double ring buttons have never been replaced

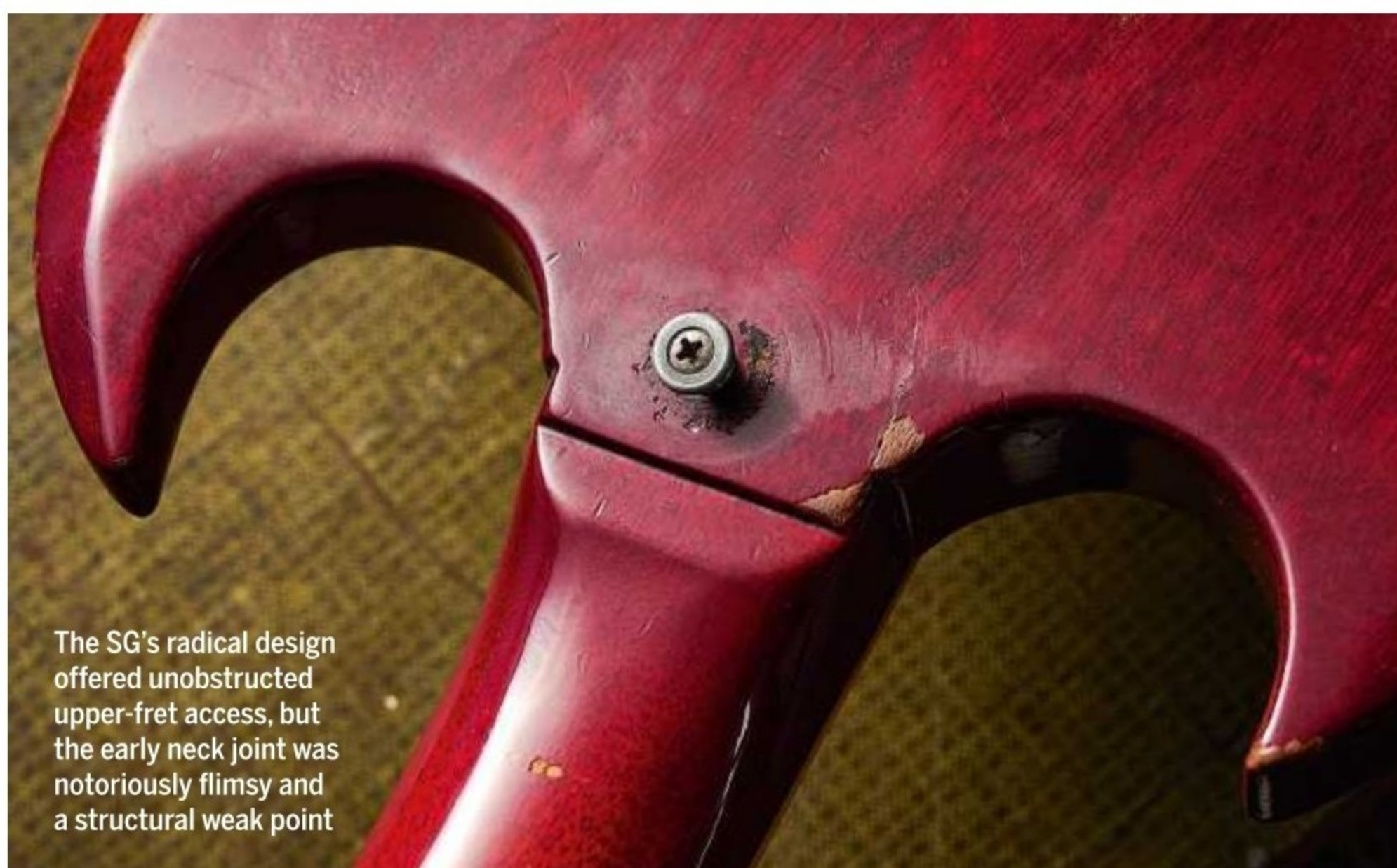
Purchased from Hessy's Music in Liverpool, this SG saw a lot of action on the local circuit



One of this SG's most desirable features is the Patent Applied For pickup in the neck position

Gibson would have been aware of the popularity of Fender vibratos and maybe considered Bigsby's to be too expensive or too closely associated with Gretsch to be used on its guitars. Either way, the company devised its own vibrato, with a bar that moved side to side, rather than up and down. As someone who has

Thankfully, this SG was spared the modifications that were so often done to guitars during the 60s and 70s



The SG's radical design offered unobstructed upper-fret access, but the early neck joint was notoriously flimsy and a structural weak point

removed a few of these, this writer can also report that they are extremely heavy. And that's possibly their best attribute because sideways vibratos do a fine job of counteracting neck dive, and some credit them with enhancing sustain.

Given the aforementioned tendency of SG necks to induce vibrato (whether you want it or not), vibratos on SGs may seem as superfluous as go-faster stripes on a Ferrari. But the Maestro Vibrola unit that features in this guitar is actually very effective, despite being as under-engineered as the sideways vibrato was over-engineered.

The Maestro, which replaced the sideways vibrato, is little more than a springy piece of metal that is screwed

onto the body. So long as you respect its limitations, you can use it to apply gentle Bigsby-like vibrato with confidence that your strings will stay in tune. The trickiest part is finding the sweet spot where the screw-on arm stays tight enough to provide good feel but can swing out of the way when it's not needed. As for the sizable 'lyre' faceplate, it attaches to a metal frame that is also screwed onto the body. They serve no practical purpose, but they do look good.

Between 1963 and the end of the decade, the SG continued evolving. By 1965, Gibson had transitioned from nickel-plated to chrome-plated hardware, and soon after the neck joint was revised. Known as the 'Stair Step', the rejigged

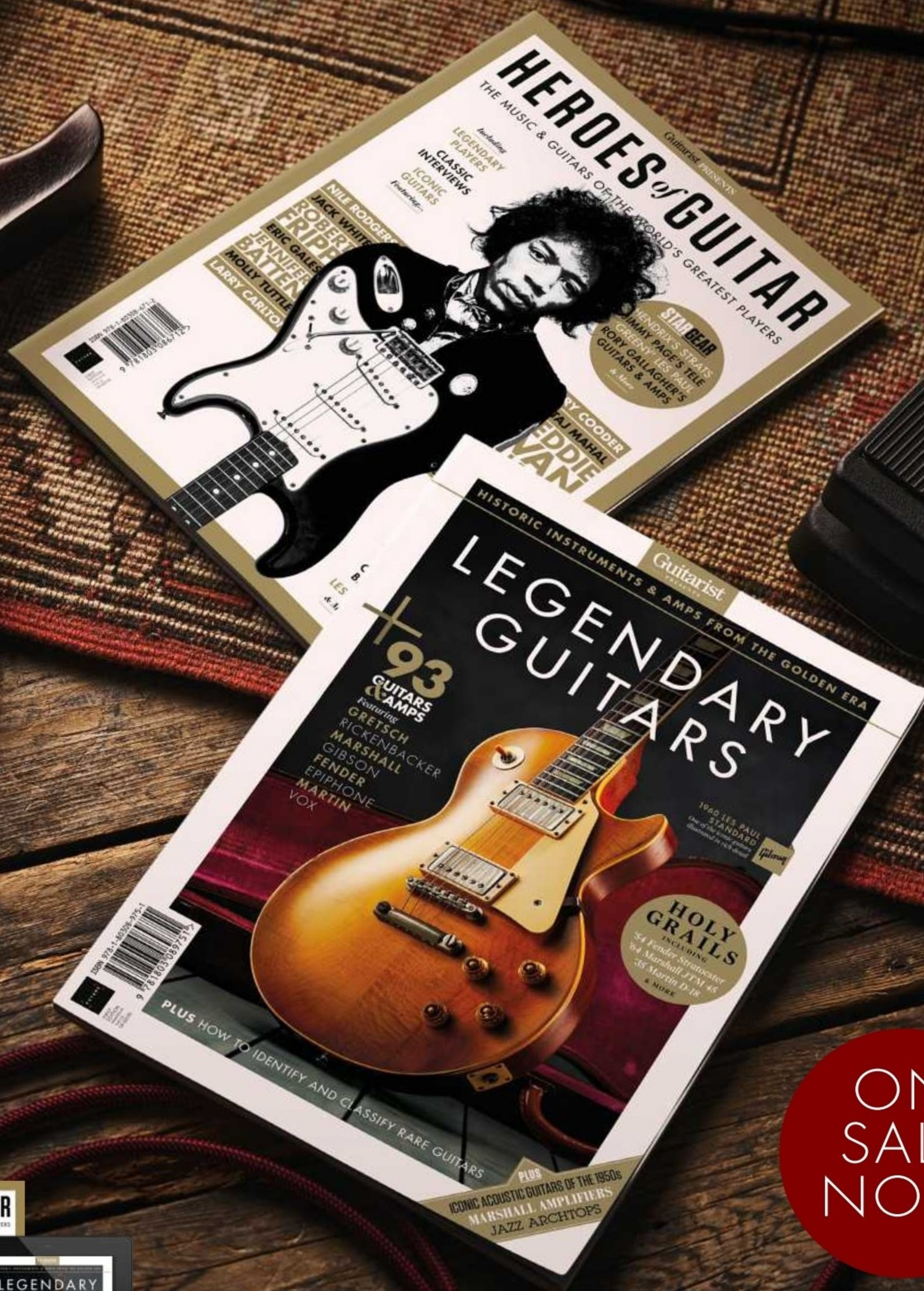
join was moved closer to the 19th fret and the heel was elongated for additional strength and stability.

The fretboard width at the nut gradually reduced from 1 11/16 inches to 1 9/16 inches, and ended up at 1 5/8 inches. Gibson also changed the headstock angle from 17 to 14 degrees, and the pickguard was enlarged to extend beyond the bass strings and eliminate the need for pickup rings. These days, you can choose whichever style or feature set you prefer from the current range of Epiphone and Gibson models. 

With thanks for Gardiner Houlgate for allowing us to photograph this guitar
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Time Flies

After redesigning the 'new' Revstar back in 2022, Yamaha has added two models to the line-up: a 60th Anniversary knees-up and possibly the best Revstar yet for Chris Buck

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Matt Lincoln





YAMAHA 60TH ANNIVERSARY RSP20B & RS02CB CHRIS BUCK £2,403 & £1,254

CONTACT **Yamaha** PHONE **01908 366700** WEB **uk.yamaha.com**

What You Need To Know

- 1 Why a 60th Anniversary Revstar? They weren't around in 1966!**
 Bang on. Yamaha launched the original range in 2015. In 2022 there was a refresh/redesign and it's that style that informs our review models. But 60th? Yamaha entered the global guitar market in 1966 with the acoustic FG180 'folk guitar' and the electric solidbody SG-3 and SG-2. The latest Revstar celebrates the craft and innovation that's gone into Yamaha instruments since then.
- 2 Like what?**
 The second-gen Revstar is a good example of how Yamaha approaches its design differently to most. It uses the proprietary Acoustic Design process to tailor the frequency response achieved with chambering to the body, plus graphite reinforcement (on the Japanese-made models). There's plenty more...
- 3 Is Chris Buck the only Yamaha electric guitar signature artist?**
 Of recent times, yes. The only other signature artist today is Mike Stern with his Pacifica (now the PAC1611MS) introduced back in '96.

What once seemed like a radical new thing, now 11 years on Revstar – Yamaha's first new guitar line-up in more than a decade – has stayed the course. No mean feat in today's very fickle guitar market. Okay, the range was completely overhauled four years ago, but the original Café Racer inspiration was retained, and while plenty of us enjoyed the earlier models, it seems that the Mk IIs are, well, just a bit more grown up.

These new guitar designs brought in fresh technology in terms of a passive

transformer-based Focus Switch midrange boost, and a slightly larger body created with Yamaha's Acoustic Design process, which results in a mildly chambered structure designed to attenuate and/or amplify specific frequencies. Graphite strengthening plays its part in the chambered bodies (Japanese models only), while dual graphite rods are slipped into the neck of both Japanese and Indonesian levels with the exception of the start-up Element models.



Subtly stylised versions of the Gibson-style split parallelogram position markers adorn the 22-fret neck with 304mm (12-inch) radius



The Göldo G5 vibrato offers an evolved version of what the Bigsby has traditionally offered: evocative shimmer

Then there are the processes we seem to have been writing about for some years. The Japanese guitars, once assembled, go through Yamaha's IRA (Initial Response Acceleration) procedure, which Yamaha says is "a process in which the instrument matures and opens up as the stresses between the wood and finish, neck and fingerboard, and body and hardware are released, resulting in better sound and playability". This, in our experience, ekes out a few extra per cent in terms of sound and performance.

If you need proof that Yamaha makes exceedingly good guitars, then take this 60th for a spin

But close on the heels of the new generation Revstars we saw the return of the good ol' Pacifica, which hadn't really gone away but was lacking a little up-to-the-minute design. The resulting Pacificas from 2024 and their SC (T-style) models, which were launched at the start of the year (and featured in our last issue) are certainly making waves for their intelligent, modern and very player-centric design.

But what's next? Well, also at this year's NAMM Show, apart from delivering that killer Pacifica SC punch (to which we awarded *Guitarist* Gold, no less), Yamaha took the wraps off the stylish Yamaha 60th Anniversary Revstar, the RSP20B 60th and the Chris Buck RS02CB. Two new Revstars with rather different aims and prices. Let's take a look.

In Build

If you need proof that Yamaha makes exceedingly good guitars, then take this 60th for a spin. There's an angular elegance to the Revstar design, not least in this tuxedo celebration style. The Nobel Black finish is solid gloss all over the body with the exception of the bass side where it fades to a light grey and – rare on a Revstar – you can see the thin and only lightly figured maple top. The cleanly single-bound top edge of the body really defines the outline; there is a light forearm chamfer to the otherwise flat top, and on the back, where the edge radius is larger, we also get a sizeable chamfer reducing the bulk of the 42mm-thick body.

What we can't see is the complex chambering to the mahogany back under that maple top, or the dual graphite rods. And while any chambering will reduce weight, that's not Yamaha's primary aim: it's all about tuning the frequency response and that includes the dual carbon

graphite rods in the maple neck. "Both the carbon rods in the neck and body help eliminate unwanted boomy bass frequencies," said Yamaha's manager of Guitar Development, Takashi Yamashiro, when we evaluated the redesign in 2022. "Even with the chambering, we'd like the body to vibrate not as a typical semi-hollowbody but more likely as a solidbody. With the carbon rods around the bridge, it stabilises the body vibration, eliminates unwanted bass and elevates the midrange. The neck rods increase the stability for sure, but with the well-calculated design of the neck and body, the guitar could get a well-coupled vibration between them."

There's no chance of seeing the three-piece mahogany of the neck, either, as it's black-painted, a contrasting satin to the body's gloss. There's a light point to the body heel and a slight volute behind the nut on the classy back-angled three-a-side headstock. Like the body and headstock, the rosewood fingerboard is single cream bound, with split bar inlays – and, to be honest, our only concern is the chunky stainless-steel frets. Why? The ends have been left fairly angular, as if there's still another process to go to round them.

There are no complaints about the hardware here, though. Gotoh's rear-lock tuners have a very positive feel and look pretty classy, too, while the Göldo G5 vibrato is a typically improved Bigsby-



1

1. The anniversary model's lightly potted humbuckers yield a surprisingly vintage-informed voice

2. Low-key as always, Yamaha keeps the Anniversary legend discreet on the slickly appointed 60th model

3. Elegant Gotoh SG301 MG-T tuners elevate the form and function of this commemorative model and, together with the Göldo vibrato, keep tuning stable

style piece, with easier stringing, a super-smooth feel and the 360-degree rotatable arm that can be set exactly how you want. The tune-o-matic bridge lightly rocks as the vibrato is moved and once the new strings settled tuning stability is solid, they feel liquid. Superb.

At pretty much bang-on half the cost of the 60th model, the long-awaited Chris Buck drops the celebratory style and gets right to the point. It's based on

the Indonesian-made Standard RSS02T with quite a few changes. The maple-topped, chambered mahogany body (without graphite rods) and the three-piece mahogany neck with its carbon reinforcement are retained, but the first change is the tune-o-matic bridge and vibe-y 'racing tailpiece' are ditched in favour of a Tone Pros AVT2 wraparound.

The VP5 soapbars get a magnet swap from Alnico V to III, while the chromed metal knobs are switched to old-school amber top hats. There's no truck with Yamaha's high-pass Dry Switch or Focus Switch passive boost extras, and the pickups are simply selected on a three-way lever. Oh, and aside from the split-bar inlays that actually look like a pearl, rather than the duller pearloid of the standard models, that's it.

Now let's get the difficult bit over, shall we? These changes basically double the price of the Chris Buck model over the standard Standard RSS02T.

Feel & Sounds

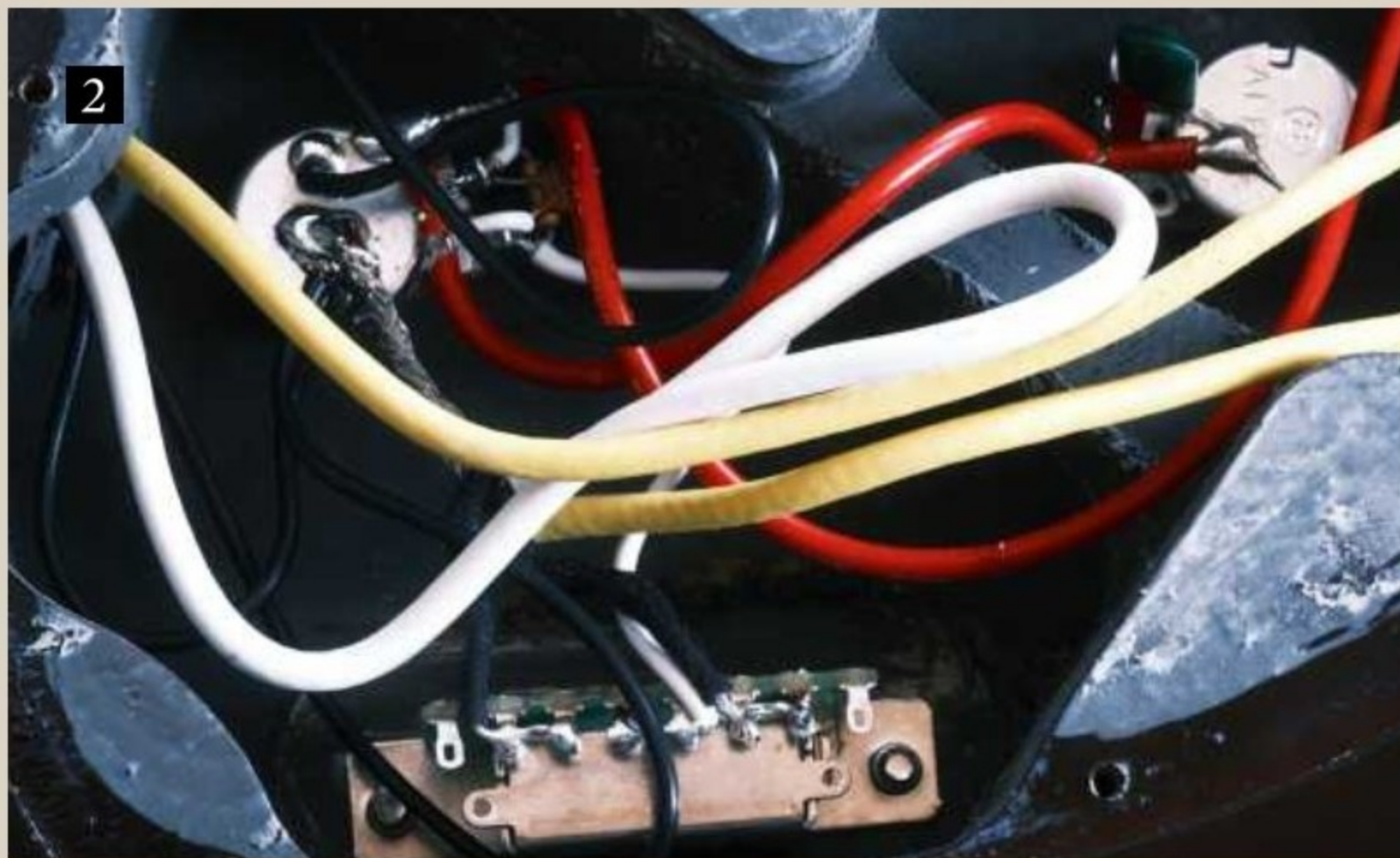
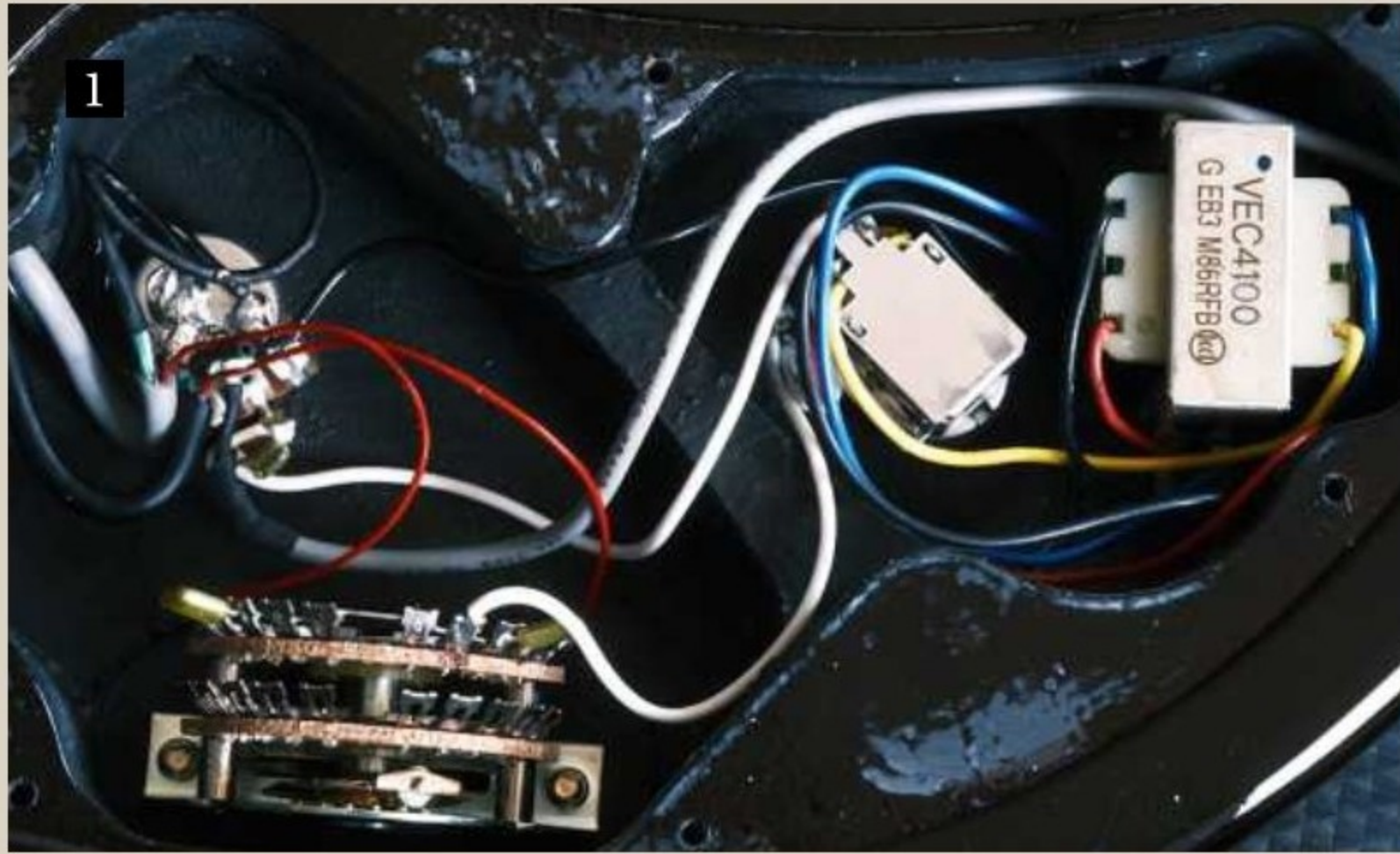
Revstar has quite a specific feel, not least these Mk II versions with their slightly wider, flat-front bodies almost summoning a less chamfered Gibson SG or a lightly offset version of Yamaha's own SG classic. The scale length and playing feel



2



3



UNDER THE HOOD

What lies inside a Revstar?
Let's take a look...

Both Revstars have a partially recessed backplate to cover the electronics cavities: the 60th's is black brushed-aluminium, the Chris Buck's is plastic just like the Indonesian Standard on which it's modelled. Both cavities are quite large, too, the 60th's for obvious reason as it has to fit in the small (VEC4100) transformer for the Focus Switch next to its pull-switch Alpha tone control. In the forward cavity there's a mini-pot (which, like the pull-switch tone pot, is A500k) for the master volume, which also has a small treble-bleed cap (560pF) across the unusual input and output lugs.

The five-way pickup selector gives us standard voicings for the humbuckers in position 1, 3 and 5 (bridge, both, neck). The position 2 and 4 sounds are achieved in a very simple fashion. In position 2 we have the full bridge humbucker combined with the neck humbucker, which passes through a .0033µF cap that acts as a high-pass filter and thins the sound of that pickup. In position 4, again we have both humbuckers, but this time it's the bridge humbucker that gets the bass-cut treatment via a second .0033µF cap.

The Chris Buck, obviously, is a much simpler circuit – master volume, tone and three-way lever pickup selector switch. Again, we have the A500k Alpha mini pots, the volume with a similar value treble-bleed capacitor (560pF) augmented by a small resistor, with a 330k

The Chris Buck is a much simpler circuit – volume, tone and three-way lever pickup selector switch

value, placed in parallel. The tone caps on both guitars are simple green Mylar types valued at .022µF.

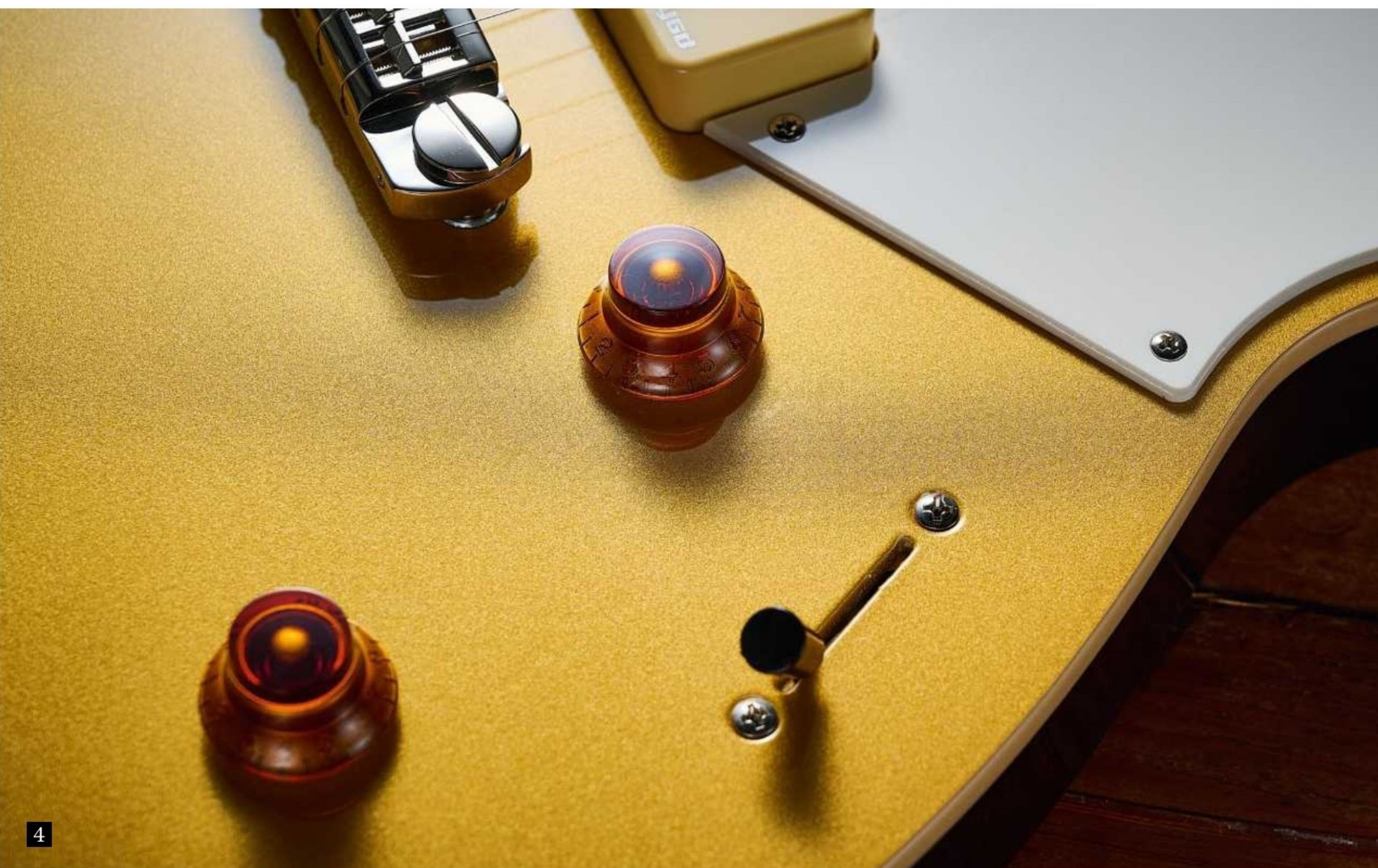
Typically, Yamaha remains pretty tight-lipped about the pickups used on Revstar. Yes, they are made by G&B Pickup in South Korea and the 60th's humbuckers have the same model name, VH5, as those on the Revstar Standard and Professional models and use Alnico V magnets. These have DCRs of 8.56k (bridge) and 8.27k (neck). The Chris Buck pickups aren't the same as the standard soapbars (which remain unchanged from the first generation Revstars to the current Mk II versions). The magnets swap to Alnico III (from Alnico V) and DCRs are on the lower side at 6.32k – both neck and bridge are wound the same.

1. The 60th Revstar's wiring is typically tidy here. Note the transformer on the upper right-hand side, next to the pull-switch tone control

2. The Chris Buck wiring is more simple, although you have to look for the treble-bleed circuit on the volume control

3. The underside of the 60th Revstar humbuckers clearly shows the manufacturer's name, although there's no position indicator

4. The Chris Buck soapbar has two foam cushions plus a position sticker that clearly shows the manufacturer



4

THE RIVALS

Obviously a P-90-loaded Les Paul, although quite a bit different to the Chris Buck guitar, will get you into the same sonic area. Epiphone doesn't have a Goldtop with P-90s at the moment but you might still find the Joe Bonamassa 1955 Les Paul Standard in Copper Iridescent (£799) that does. It's worth tracking down.

PRS's SE Custom 24 Semi-Hollow Piezo (£999) is another Indonesian build with mahogany set-neck, maple-capped mahogany body with a little chambering. It's powered by dual 85/15 'S' humbuckers with the piezo system loaded into the PRS vibrato. A lot of guitar for the money.

Another brand to use a similar Göldo vibrato is of course Duesenberg. Their Starplayer TV (approximately £2,200) is a lot more hollow than the Revstar but is good-sounding with expansive switching for the Grand Vintage/DP90 Domino pickup combo and large colour choice.

are more Gibson-like, of course, and with pretty trim weights, good strapped-on or seated balance, these are easy guitars to get accustomed to.

From the instruments we've tested, the neck shapes have been pretty consistent, and these two are a little different. There's a slightly more Fender nut width of 42.4mm here with a depth that averages 21mm at the 1st fret, 23.5mm by the 12th. The profile is quite distinct, though – a slightly flat-backed shape with noticeable shoulder – and both these 2026 guitars feel identical to our earlier 2022 Standard reference. We mentioned the slightly sharp-feeling fret ends, and our earlier model is noticeable in that its fret ends are really nicely domed by comparison. They feel great, though, with good height and are really bend-friendly.

There is some difference playing these unplugged. While both have a strikingly similar evenness and smoothness to their character, the 60th does sound a little fuller. But both are working in a similarly lively manner: vibrant and quite alive.

The 60th isn't shooting for anything particularly contemporary when it comes to the sounds we hear plugged in. In fact,

While both have similar evenness and smoothness to their character, the 60th sounds a little fuller

the only lightly potted humbuckers seem to nod back to the late 50s and give the guitar a pretty classic voice. No complaints there, certainly in positions 1, 3 and 5 on the five-way lever (bridge, both and neck).

Overall, the 60th is a little fuller and thicker than our RSS20, for example, which is spec'd with the same VH5 humbuckers (with similar DCRs), but the Professional Japanese level of the 60th clearly sounds, well, bigger. Still, there's plenty more here: those position 2 and 4 sounds certainly capture some of the classic 'in-between' single-coil sounds, useful played clean and funky or to add another gained texture for lead lines.

Meanwhile, the pull-switch Focus Switch adds thickness and level boost, which isn't overdone in terms of level. The vibrato obviously adds to what we

5



6



4. Classic amber top-hat control knobs and an adjustable TonePros AVT2 wraparound bridge lend the Chris Buck a certain 1954-like vibe and keep things simple and direct

5. Chris Buck specified Alnico III magnets for the VP5 soapbar pickups, emphasising the subtle vintage feel on offer here

6. Chunky jumbo stainless-steel frets and a flattish 304mm (12-inch) radius make big bends at the top of the neck easy

hear and create, not least with a big clean sound that the 60th actually excels at. Add big 'verbs to taste.

While our second Revstar did need some attention in the setup and intonation, sounds-wise the Chris Buck is rather special. Neither soapbar is overwound – in fact, our pair has the same amount of wire. And this is less the aggressive midrange of a hotter Gibson Junior or Special; it's a little more refined, more jangly, more traditional single coil. But that's not to say it doesn't have some poke and nose. A little level boost and pull the tone back slightly and you're there. The neck sounds quite Patent Applied For-like, that lovely fatter single-coil voice, and the mix position is standout with beautiful sparkle, hollowed depth and all the bounce you'll need.

It's not just the pickups, of course, these Revstars are good-sounding guitars – there's that smoothness that underpins the sounds we hear, plus the pickups, again, aren't over-potted and have some attractive and lively 'clonk' to them as you wind up the wick. Shame about the supplied setup, but with that sorted, this is a very valid, almost stripped-down Revstar with a classic-aimed voice. **G**



YAMAHA 60TH ANNIVERSARY RSP20B

PRICE: £2,403 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Japan

TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Chambered 2-piece mahogany with thin flamed-maple cap and graphite reinforcement

NECK: 3-piece mahogany with carbon graphite reinforcement, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.5mm

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood with pearloid bar inlays, 304mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, jumbo stainless-steel

HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge with Göldo G5 vibrato tailpiece, Gotoh SG301 MG-T tuners – gold-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Yamaha VH5B (bridge) and VH5N (neck) Alnico V loaded humbuckers, 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.86/8.49

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The other MIJ Professional models (all at £1,599) are the twin-humbucking RSP20 and the RSP20X in Rusty Brass Charcoal, and the RSP02T

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model

FINISHES: Noble Black Burst (as reviewed) – gloss polyurethane body with satin polyurethane neck back



PROS Great twist on the Revstar design with excellent vibrato; overall build is typically sharp; good classic sounds; plus the Focus Switch boost

CONS Expensive compared with the existing Japanese Professional model on which it's based



YAMAHA RS02CB CHRIS BUCK

PRICE: £1,254 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Chambered, thin maple cap

NECK: 3-piece mahogany with carbon graphite reinforcement, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: PPS/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood with pearloid bar inlays, 304mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, jumbo stainless-steel

HARDWARE: TonePros AVT2 wraparound bridge, die-cast tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Yamaha VP5b (bridge) and VP5n (neck) Alnico III loaded soapbar single coils, 3-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.52/7.74

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The Revstar range kicks off with the Element models (£439). The Standards (£659) come with dual humbuckers or soapbar single coils, graphite neck reinforcement and wide colour choice

LEFT-HANDERS: Element RSE20L (£439) and Standard RSS20L (£659) with humbuckers

FINISHES: Honey Gold (as reviewed) – gloss polyurethane body with satin polyurethane neck back



PROS Subtly stripped-down Revstar style; low-wind soapbar single coils; simplified controls and switching; TonePros wrapover bridge

CONS It seems expensive compared with the Standard RSS02T on which it's based; oh, and if you don't like gold paint...



Hold The Floor

Blackstar takes the sounds from its ID:X amp series and puts them into an easy-to-use floor pedal

Words Trevor Curwen Photography Phil Barker



BLACKSTAR ID:X FLOOR THREE £279

CONTACT **Blackstar** WEB www.blackstaramps.com

What You Need To Know

- 1 Is that a Blackstar floor processor?**
Yes, the brand has released three ID:X Floor models so far that put the modelled sounds found in its ID:X combos into a pedal format.
- 2 What are the differences between the iterations, then?**
Well, they all have the same DSP and so they sound the same, but moving up the range you get an increase in facilities. The ID:X Floor Three we have here on review is the fully-loaded flagship model.
- 3 So, are we looking at a full amp and effects chain?**
Yes, it's a patch-based system with each patch featuring a component-level amp model complete with cabinet simulation and four effects – one effect in front of the amp, followed by modulation, delay and reverb.

Following on from its ID:X series of modelling amps, Blackstar has expanded the ID:X range with a release of three floor processors, the ID:X Floor One, Two and Three. All of these have the same onboard DSP so are capable of the same sounds, but each delivers it in a different way. The small One unit features three footswitches as does the Two, which adds a treadle for control of wah, volume or effect parameters. But our focus is the Three here, which ups the flexibility quota by having eight footswitches and adding an effects loop among other features.

The ID:X Floor Three gives you amp and effects modelling with 99 onboard patches to store your sounds. It features 12 guitar-amp models, three bass amps, two acoustic voices and an acoustic simulator. In addition, there are 35 onboard effects in various categories. While the (very) affordable price is a major factor of its appeal, another is that it is gloriously easy to use with a proper hands-on aesthetic: there are some screen parameters to navigate, but there's no deep diving into the menu, and operation is really intuitive.

In Use

Although the treadle is plastic, the ID:X Floor's bent sheet-steel chassis offers confidence that it's rugged enough for use underfoot, and has the connectivity to take care of all the common onstage, studio and home tasks. There's a single guitar input with a pair of main XLR outputs for connection to a front-of-house mixing desk or PA, plus a single output to connect to an amp or FRFR speaker. You also get a stereo line output that'll take headphones for silent practice and, tied in with that, there's a stereo line input for an external audio source – Bluetooth streaming is not supported.

Send and Return sockets allow you to connect external pedals into the system

The Floor Three can be used as your sole onstage item if required and fulfil at-home roles, too



The Voice button selects which bank of six amps (Amps 1, Amps 2, AC/Bass) will be accessible from the rotary Voice knob. The banks feature six original Blackstar designs, six Amptone amps (based on classics), plus bass amps and acoustic processing

(with the option of having them pre- or post- the amp modelling), and there's a pair of MIDI sockets for implementing MIDI control. A USB-C socket enables connection to a computer to take advantage of the unit's audio interface capability for recording, along with Blackstar's Architect software editor and librarian, which offers a quick way to set up sounds with a few mouse clicks, and also gives you access to any firmware updates.

The onboard patches are arranged three to a bank and are instantly recalled with the first three footswitches on the lower row, which are also used for scrolling through the banks by pressing



1. You can adjust the effects for each patch within this section of the pedal. Press the associated button for the effect you want to edit. Press then turn the Type encoder to select from the available models. Both encoders then adjust its parameters

two simultaneously – something that requires a slight angling of the foot. The fourth lower row footswitch offers tap tempo or calls up the tuner. The footswitches in the upper row turn the effects in a patch on and off. These are arranged in a fixed but logical order with one effect before the amp block, and modulation, delay and reverb effects coming after the amp. There is a choice of two compressors, auto wah and envelope filter to select before the amp, as well as a comprehensive range of dirt options that includes models of Tube Screamer, Klon, Rat and Big Muff, among others. The modulation slot offers chorus, flangers,

phasers, tremolos, UniVibe and vibrato, while there are five different types each of delay and reverb.

The amps are chosen by a six-way rotary Voice switch allied to a button that selects one of three banks of six. The first bank has signature Blackstar amp sounds including various St James models, and the second bank features the company's Ampton models, which cover classic tone builders: a Fender Twin, Vox AC30, Marshall 'Plexi' and JCM800, Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier, and Peavey 5150.

The usual array of controls (Gain, Volume, Bass, Middle, Treble) are available as easily grabbable knobs for

2. Blackstar's Architect software is the interface for controlling and customising many of the advanced features of compatible Blackstar products. In the case of this pedal, one page shows the amp and effects settings with a separate page for the cabinet-simulation options

THE RIVALS

Looking at units around the same price point as the ID:X Floor Three, the Valeton GP-200 (£249) is similar in its 'eight-footswitches-with-treadle' layout; it has 256 patches and an extensive selection of amps/cabs and effects. The Mooer GE150 (£249) has a similar layout. Other contenders have less in the way of footswitches. The Boss GX-1 (£219) and GX-10 (£339) both have three footswitches and a treadle, with the GX-10 having a larger feature set that includes 32 amp types and 170 effects. There's also the IK Multimedia Tonex Pedal (£329), which has no treadle, but you can add an expression pedal.



3. A toe-down footswitch makes the pedal active. The Exp Mode button above it scrolls through the treadle's three assignment options: Volume, Wah or a custom effect (continuous effect or amp parameters only like Reverb Mix, Delay Time or Amp Treble)

4. Press the Manual button for 'what you see is what you get' operation. The sound will reflect the current physical position of the controls. Any effects that are active when switching to Manual Mode will initially be turned off and reset



the amps, but you also get some extra tonal variation from the ISF knob, which is designed to morph from British to US sound. On top of that you have a selectable choice of modelled output valves – EL84, EL34 and 6L6 for Vox, Marshall and Fender flavour respectively. Each amp has the CabRig IR-based speaker simulation that offers a selection of cabs with adjustable mic'ing and room options, or ITR (In The Room), which gives you more of a feeling of playing through a real amp in a real space, rather than listening to a mic'd cabinet.

Plenty of options, then, to dial in a range of tones. But it's worth starting with the factory-programmed patches that have been carefully curated to be usable for common guitar tasks straight out of the box. Alternatively, you could switch to Manual mode where the sounds are purely down to the position of the physical knobs and switches.

What you get is an effortlessly usable unit that delivers dynamically playable amp sounds. The complementary effects are suitable for a wide range of styles, and also give you a passable simulation of acoustic guitar that will fit in nicely with a band mix, as well as alternative acoustic voices if you use an electro-acoustic.

An effortlessly usable unit that delivers dynamically playable amp sounds and complementary effects

Verdict

The ID:X Floor Three costs just £279.

Just think about that – there are plenty of boutique dirt pedals that do one simple task and cost around the same. With the Floor Three you get a full amp/cab and effects chain, fully footswitchable. It can be used as your sole onstage item if required or fulfil the at-home roles of being a practice tool and the source of all your recorded guitar sounds when connected to a computer.

Where's the catch, then? Well, there isn't one. Okay, you can't experiment with the effects order and the sounds aren't quite in the same class as the (much more expensive) Neural and Fractal units, but they are good, eminently playable sounds from clean right through to high-gain.

All three ID:X Floor units should attract the attention of anyone who wants to get into the world of modelling processors, but this model is the one that is most capable of making the graduation from bedroom to stage. **G**



BLACKSTAR ID:X FLOOR THREE

PRICE: £279

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Amp and effects modelling floor pedal

FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 99 presets, tuner, tap tempo, noise gate, hardware FX loop, 2 in/4 out audio interface

CONTROLS: Voice switch, Gain, Volume, Bass, Middle, Treble, ISF, Master, 10x buttons, 2x turn/push encoders, footswitches (Channels 1, 2, 3, Tap, Pre FX, Modulation, Delay, Reverb), treadle

CONNECTIONS: Standard instrument input, Standard Send, Standard Return, Standard 'To Amp', XLR Outs (L/Mono, R), TRS stereo line out/phones, 1/8" stereo line in/streaming, MIDI In, MIDI Thru, USB

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 500 mA

DIMENSIONS: 397 (w) x 195 (d) x 68mm (h)

RANGE OPTIONS: ID:X Floor One (£169), ID:X Floor Two (£219)



PROS Affordability; rugged build; good range of sonic capability; ease of use; integral treadle; practical footswitching

CONS The onboard tuner isn't the best we've used

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BILLY DUFFY

The Cult six-stringer looks back on Les Pauls loved and lost, plus the latest and greatest from his mostly back-to-basics rig

Billy stays old-school when it comes to amplification: "I haven't done the Kempers, I've still got monitors on the floor, man. I'm very picky about my wedges at the front. I don't use in-ears, so I get in this pocket, which a lot of guys respect and like"

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

"It was an Ibanez Les Paul copy from back when they were making copies in the 70s. I got a complete deal on it... it might have fallen off the back of a lorry, if you know what I mean [laughs]. But it was Wine Red and like a Les Paul Standard. What I really wanted was a Les Paul Custom, but beggars can't be choosers."

What was the last guitar you bought, and why?

"I'm sitting right next to it: I just bought that Mick Ronson [1968 Les Paul Custom Collector's Edition] tribute guitar from Gibson – and I *did* buy it with my own money!

The fact that it happens to be wood-fronted and a Les Paul Custom with no pickguard or pickup covers might be something that sounds familiar to me over the last 30 years [laughs]. I couldn't *not* buy it. How could you not buy a Ronno?"

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

"Rapid City, South Dakota: Les Paul Custom with a wood front. Pawn shop: \$400. We [The Cult] were supporting Metallica, so this would have been spring or early summer of '89, I believe. I remember this because I never found anything in pawn shops, apart from that guitar, which I had sprayed black. I think it's a '75, or a '76. That was my best score."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've had while buying gear?

"I remember going through a phase of buying, wanting and looking for the ultimate overdrive pedal. I kept buying pedals and trying them out, but they were basically all shite [laughs]. I wanted the 'ultimate', but nothing beats what I've got – a Klon – so that's buyer's remorse. And okay, I did buy a Gibson twin-neck, which is on *Sonic Temple* somewhere, so I should

"I've never really gotten over walking on stage with a Les Paul and Marshall and letting rip"

probably get a demerit for that. I used the 12-string part, but I mean... what was I thinking? It was cream-coloured and I guess it was beautiful."

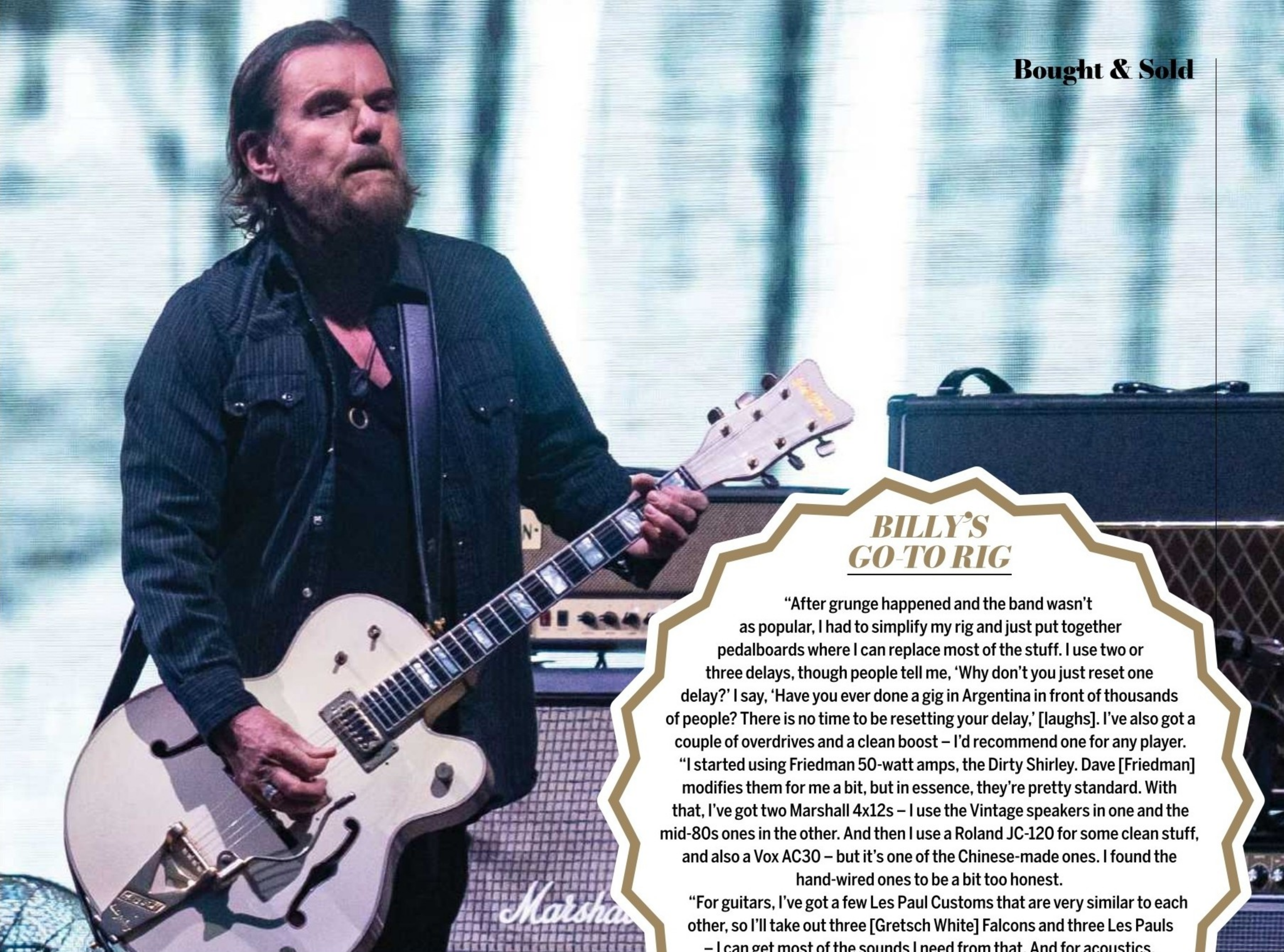
Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go of?

"Oh, yeah. I bought a refinished but otherwise all-original '59 Les Paul for about \$10,000. You can see it on YouTube because I used it on a few TV shows around the *Electric* album. I would use it on stage occasionally, like at the live concert we did for the BBC in London. But I didn't use it all the time, just for maybe encores, because I never really got along with it. I knew the guitar was valuable, but remember: this was before Slash blew up, so nobody really wanted Les Pauls. They all wanted fucking Charvels, not flame-fronted Les Paul Standards. Then, all of a sudden, Slash came along.

"Anyway, I sold the guitar to Bob Rock like an idiot for \$10,000... then Slash blew up, and I immediately missed out on about \$150,000 worth of profit right there [laughs]. But that was the marketplace for the guitar at the time – and we knew it had been refinished,



PHOTO BY SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES



BILLY'S GO-TO RIG

"After grunge happened and the band wasn't as popular, I had to simplify my rig and just put together pedalboards where I can replace most of the stuff. I use two or three delays, though people tell me, 'Why don't you just reset one delay?' I say, 'Have you ever done a gig in Argentina in front of thousands of people? There is no time to be resetting your delay,' [laughs]. I've also got a couple of overdrives and a clean boost – I'd recommend one for any player. "I started using Friedman 50-watt amps, the Dirty Shirley. Dave [Friedman] modifies them for me a bit, but in essence, they're pretty standard. With that, I've got two Marshall 4x12s – I use the Vintage speakers in one and the mid-80s ones in the other. And then I use a Roland JC-120 for some clean stuff, and also a Vox AC30 – but it's one of the Chinese-made ones. I found the hand-wired ones to be a bit too honest.

"For guitars, I've got a few Les Paul Customs that are very similar to each other, so I'll take out three [Gretsch White] Falcons and three Les Pauls – I can get most of the sounds I need from that. And for acoustics, Johnny Marr gave me his [Martin M-7] signature acoustic.

That's a really cool seven-string with the cheeky extra G string. It gives me a little bit of instant access to what was originally Roger McGuinn's kind of trick, you know?"

but it was only re-lacquered on top, otherwise it was all-original. It had all the right electrics, but it was purchased knowing it had a refin. So I let Bob have it for what I paid for it in a moment of largesse that I regret... and he still reminds me about it today! I also sold him a 1961 P-Bass that I bought and that we used quite a lot on the road. We used it on *Sonic Temple*, too. It was a cheap white P-Bass, but it was great-sounding."

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

"Sit with the guitar in your hands and if it doesn't feel right, if it doesn't immediately feel good, it ain't for you. Go with your gut. Trust your instincts. I've tried to make guitars work for me and, in the end, I've gotten rid of them. If you feel immediately at home with a guitar, that's a beautiful thing. And it doesn't matter what type of guitar, you know? I've never been much of a Fender person, but there are certain Fenders that I've picked up, and I'm like, 'Oh, this is epic.' It's not a branding thing, it's just the individual instrument – and you have to bond with it."

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?

"It's interesting because a good amp is a very useful thing to have because there are a lot of bad amps out there. So I'd be more inclined to keep the amp, but that sort of contradicts what I just said about buying a guitar...! If you buy a good guitar and a bad

amp, you're gonna have to get a good amp or else you're always going to sound shitty. If you do it the other way around, you might actually sound better with a bad guitar because if the guitar is badly put together, you could change the pickups. It's much easier to throw a good pickup in the shitty guitar and transform it, right? Unless it's a bad acoustic... You'll have to find somebody to take it off your hands because there's no fixing a bad acoustic."

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

"You can answer that one. With me, you really can [laughs]. With humbuckers, I just love the thickness of the sound. Personally, I have never really gotten over walking on stage with a really good Les Paul and a really good Marshall – or equivalent – amp, and just letting rip with the visceral nature of what that can do, you know? I've used single-coil guitars on albums for bits and pieces here and there, and for layering guitars. But, for me, they're a bit too... they're just kind of delicate, I guess. I'm a bit of an old-school player who likes to feel the air move and the raw power of the thing. And that's a humbucker for me." [AD]

www.billyduffy.com

Billy bought his first Gretsch White Falcon in the 80s, inspired by seeing Matthew Ashman play with Bow Wow Wow – years later, Billy was granted his own signature version, based on his original 1970s model

PHOTO BY LORNE THOMSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Huw Price's *Nitty*Gritty

Upgrading pickups and controls on a Gibson thinline may be easier than you think

Making & Installing An ES-335 Wiring Harness

It's probably fair to say that very few guitar techs enjoy doing wiring work on Gibson semis. I attempted a repair on my old ES-330 for the first time a few decades ago. It took me about an hour to get the loom out and a fortnight to put it back in... Some compare the task to putting a ship in a bottle, but once you know a few tricks and techniques, it can make wiring a little easier than you think.

This month's subject is a late-Noughties Gibson ES-335 with scratchy potentiometers and tone controls with no audible effect unless they're almost completely backed off. James, the guitar's owner, decided it would benefit from a new wiring harness with Armstrong Music's Premium 450 Series 550k potentiometers and a pair of Sprague Black Beauty replica capacitors from Luxe Radio.

Pulling Rank

Taking out a harness from any guitar of this sort begins with removing the strings, tailpiece, bridge and pickguard. If you aren't able to measure and make a note of the action prior to disassembly (or you forget to do it), place some

masking tape over the bridge-post thumbwheels to hold them in place.

Removing control knobs can be tricky, especially when they're pressed tightly onto the pot shafts or there's insufficient space to get the tips of your fingers underneath them. There are tools designed for the job, but I lever them up using a pair of teaspoons. If you try this, just remember to place some thick cardboard or, better still, cork tile between the spoons and the guitar body or you'll probably end up with some nasty dents.

Undo the nuts holding the potentiometers and output jack, along with the ring nut securing the switch, and the harness should drop down inside the body. But before you can remove it, the ground wire will need to be disconnected. It's usually soldered to the braiding of the bridge pickup's leadout wire, so remove the four pickup ring screws, lift out the pickup and you should find the joint.

The wire is sometimes quite stiff and wrapped around the pickup wire, so you'll need to unwrap it very carefully as you melt the solder. You might also want to place something over the guitar while

you're working to protect the finish from blobs of molten solder.

By looking inside the bridge pickup cavity, you'll discover if it's possible to pull the harness out through the pickup hole. On this guitar there was a wide gap through the centre block into the body, but some semi-solids will only have a narrow hole for the pickup wire. If that's the case, the harness will have to be taken out through the treble-side f-hole.

Using my fingers and a wooden dowel, I coaxed the switch towards the pickup cavity. This pulled the neck-pickup control pots out, too, followed by the jack socket and, finally, the bridge-pickup pots. If things get tangled with the pickup wires, back up and move the wires out of the way. If things get snagged, stay calm, back up and think it through, rather than try to force anything.

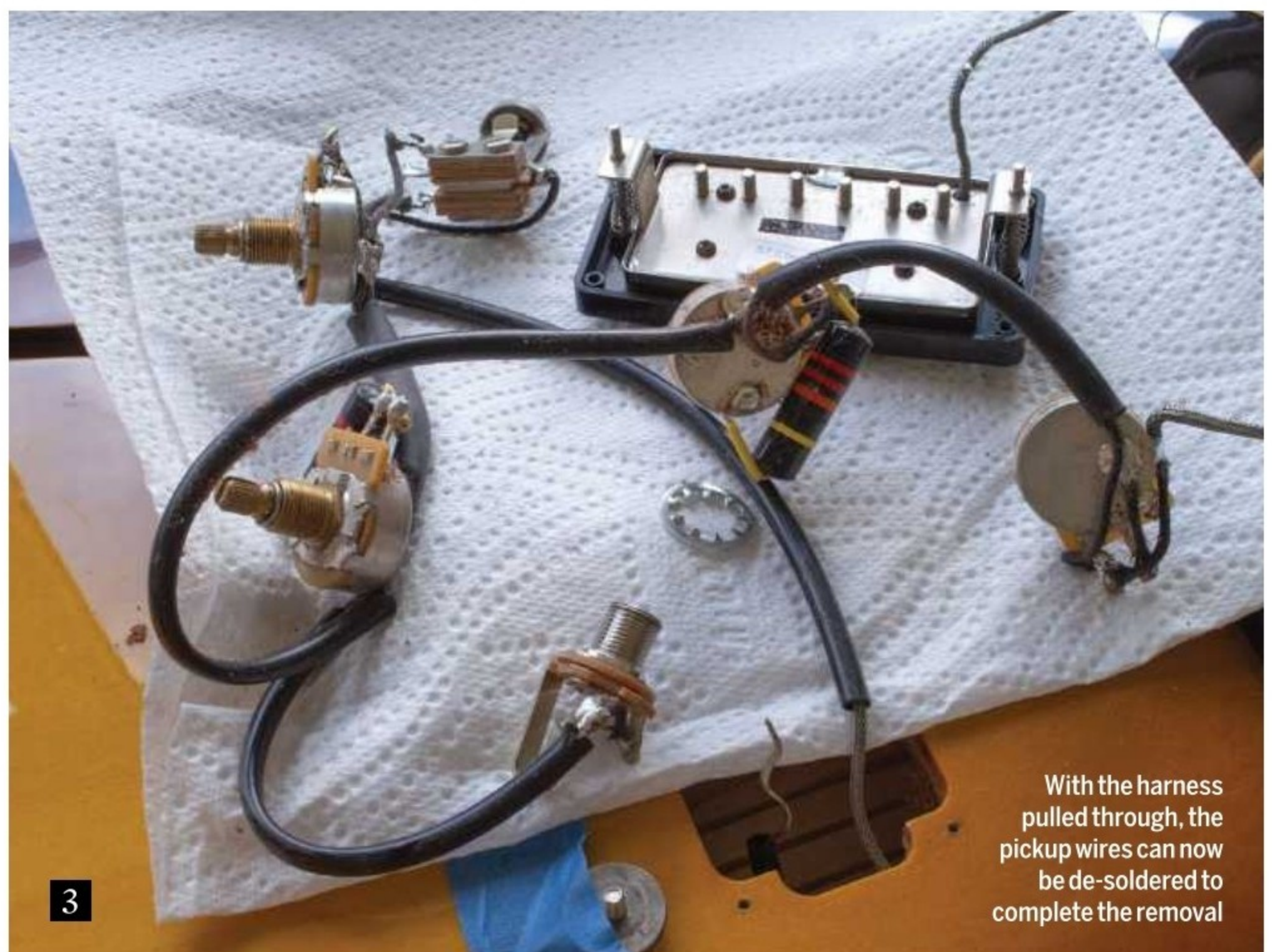
With the full harness resting on top of the guitar, I de-soldered the pickup wires from the volume potentiometers and lifted it clear. Had we been keeping the original pickups, I would have left the neck pickup in place, but James was also upgrading the pickups so I removed them both.



1. Before removing the harness, you will need to de-solder the ground connection from the bridge pickup wire



2. This gap in the centre block made it easy to remove the harness, but it could also be extracted through the f-hole



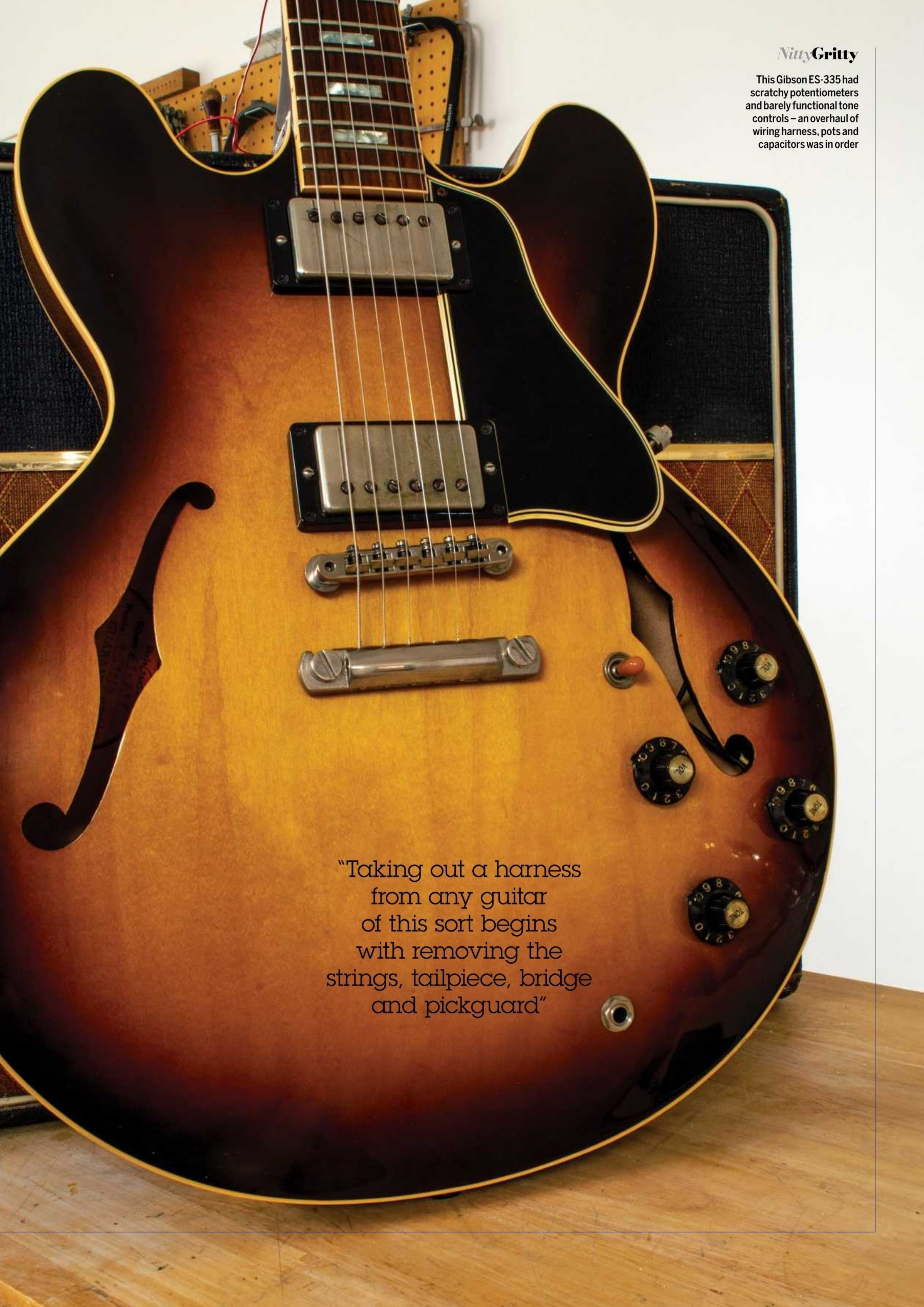
With the harness pulled through, the pickup wires can now be de-soldered to complete the removal

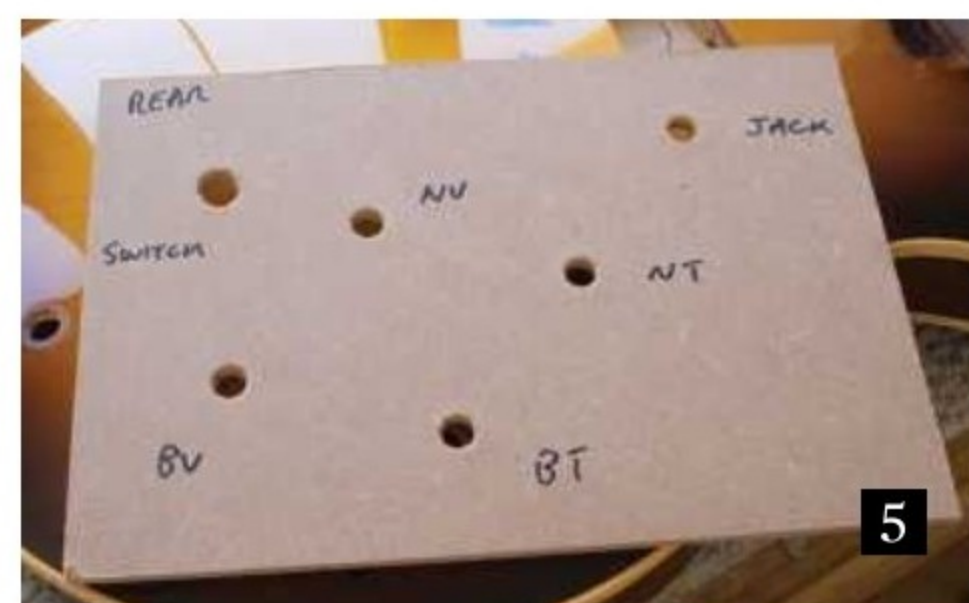
PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

NittyGritty

This Gibson ES-335 had scratchy potentiometers and barely functional tone controls – an overhaul of wiring harness, pots and capacitors was in order

“Taking out a harness from any guitar of this sort begins with removing the strings, tailpiece, bridge and pickguard”





Soldering On

Wiring up Teles, Strats, SGs and Les Pauls and so forth is relatively easy because you can attach the switches and pots to the body, plate or pickguard before soldering everything up. You can't do that with Gibson thinlines or most other hollowbody guitars, but getting the component spacing correct is crucial for easy harness installation.

The solution is to make a template. I started by placing a sheet of A4 over the holes in the body and pressing down with my finger to make indentations in the paper. Although basic, it's a quick and accurate way to register the control layout positions, and I marked the centre of each indentation with a pencil.

Placing the paper over a piece of MDF, I pressed a spike through all the pencil dots to transfer the layout. I then drilled holes through the MDF so I could mount and secure the socket, potentiometers and switch onto it before assembling the new wiring harness. For the jack socket and pots you'll need a 9.5mm or 10mm bit, and a 14mm bit or step cutter for the switch. I used MDF, which isn't ideal as it's too soft and powdery, so next time I'll use Perspex instead. Since the harness has to be assembled from the 'underside', it makes sense to mark each template hole both front and back to avoid confusion.

Harnessing Up

Although the potentiometers James had provided were all nominally 550k, the stated value and the actual value rarely coincide. You can measure the true value of any potentiometer by taking a resistance reading across the outer solder tags. In my experience, vintage 500k pots tend to read way higher than 500k, and are sometimes closer to 600k.

If you want a little less mud from a neck pickup, use the pot with the highest actual value in the neck volume position. Conversely, you can use the pot with the lowest value for the bridge volume if it sounds a bit bright. Three of these pots read between 515k and 519k, and one was 529k.

With the switch, jack socket and all the pots mounted onto the template, it was time to start assembling the harness. While it might have been possible to install the harness through the bridge-pickup cavity, I prefer to go through the f-hole, and over the years I have learned a couple of things that make it easier.

Inside Track

The first trick is to solder the braided wires to the sides of the pot casings, rather than the backs. It's hard to pinpoint when Gibson started doing this, but I discovered it when reassembling a chopped-up

4. Placing a sheet of A4 paper over the holes in the body and pressing with your finger will help transfer the layout

5. After marking the positions on MDF, the holes are drilled out to create a template

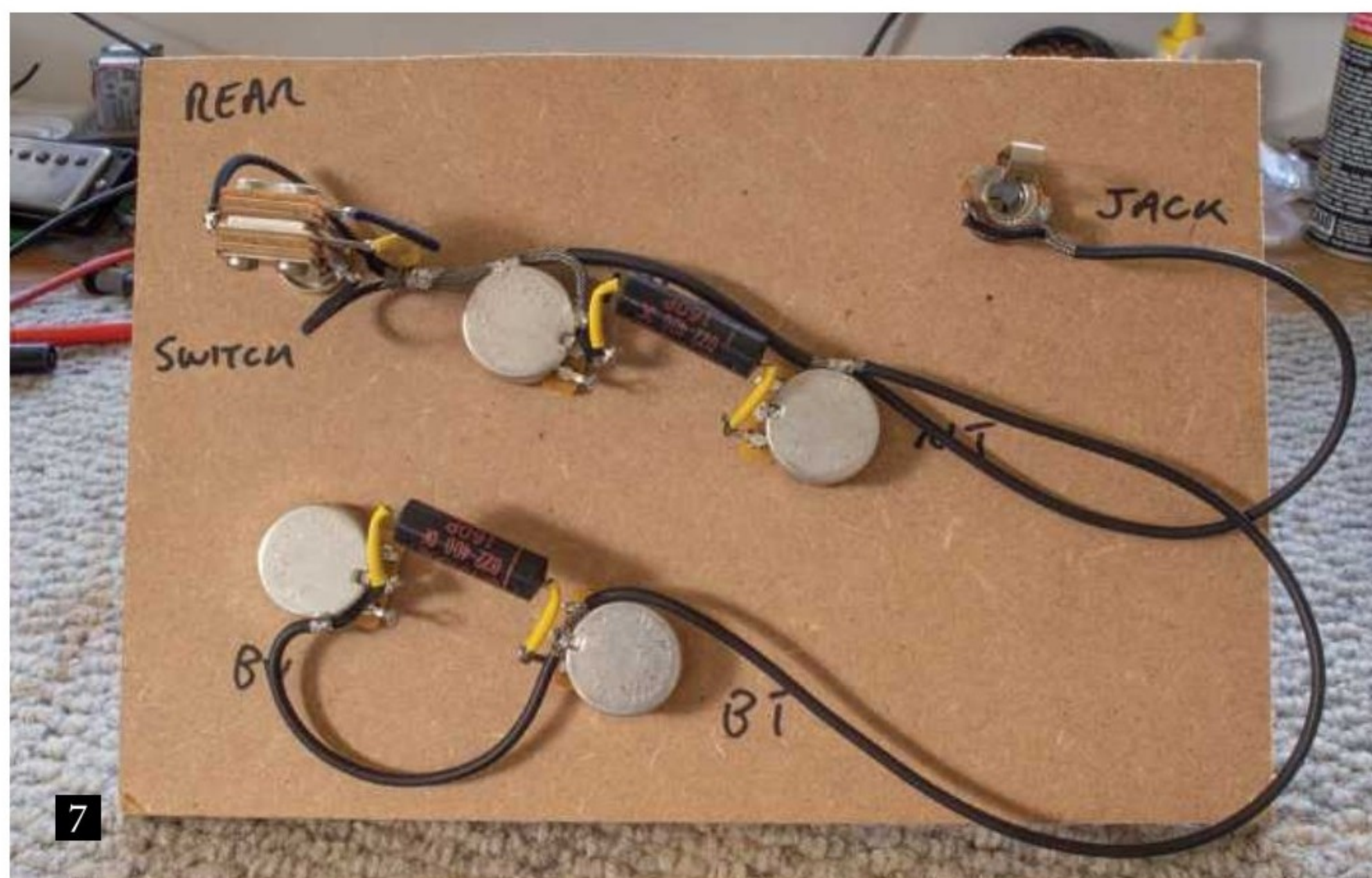
6. Labelling the template on both sides ensures all parts are mounted in their correct positions

7. Heatshrink tubing prevents shorting out, and the loops between the tone controls and the socket are elongated

8. The socket goes in first and wire is used to pull it through the f-hole, along with a star washer

9. Masking tape is used to protect the finish around the f-hole, and the bridge pickup controls are almost ready to go in

10. The bridge pickup and ground wire are the final connections made before the bridge pickup controls are installed



harness from a 1964 ES-335. Getting potentiometers through an f-hole requires a twisting motion and there is relatively little wiggle room. When the braided wires are soldered to the rear of the pot casings it can be an even tighter fit, but when they're attached to the sides, it's almost as if they aren't there.

The second trick is to increase the length of the wires running from the neck tone control to the jack socket, and between the neck pickup controls and the bridge pickup controls. Just look at the photo of the assembled harness to see what I mean.

I do this because I prefer to install the harness in stages, rather than try to get it in all at once. Some guitar techs thread twine or string through the holes, tie it onto the parts and then pull them into position. The same can be done using surgical tubing,

"Getting pots through an f-hole requires a twisting motion and there is relatively little wiggle room"

but I've ended up with a tangled mess whenever I've attempted this.

Instead, I started by getting the jack socket fixed in position while the rest of the components remained outside the body. To do this, I threaded some braided cable through the socket hole and pulled it out through the f-hole. I popped a star washer over the wire, pushed the wire through the socket and then tied a knot.

The star washer and socket went through the f-hole into the body, and I tugged the braided wire to pull them both into position. Maintaining tension, I ran



a washer and nut down the wire before tightening everything up. So long as you've used enough wire for it still to be accessible at the f-hole, you can pull it out and phase one is complete.

Before installing the neck pickup controls, the pickup itself must be connected to the volume pot. I threaded the pickup wire through the f-hole and ensured there was plenty of protection between the pot and the paintwork while I made the solder joints. With that done, the switch and the neck pickup controls went in through the f-hole, too.

Once they were inside, I popped on star washers to prevent things from twisting around – you can use your fingers to manoeuvre the switch into position before securing it with its ring nut. You can do the same with the volume pot, but the tone pot is always just out of reach and out of sight.

When a harness is assembled on a template, you can be confident that the pot shaft will be within the vicinity of the hole. I manoeuvred the pot using a piece of dowel until the shaft was visible through the hole and I grabbed it using long tweezers to pull it through.

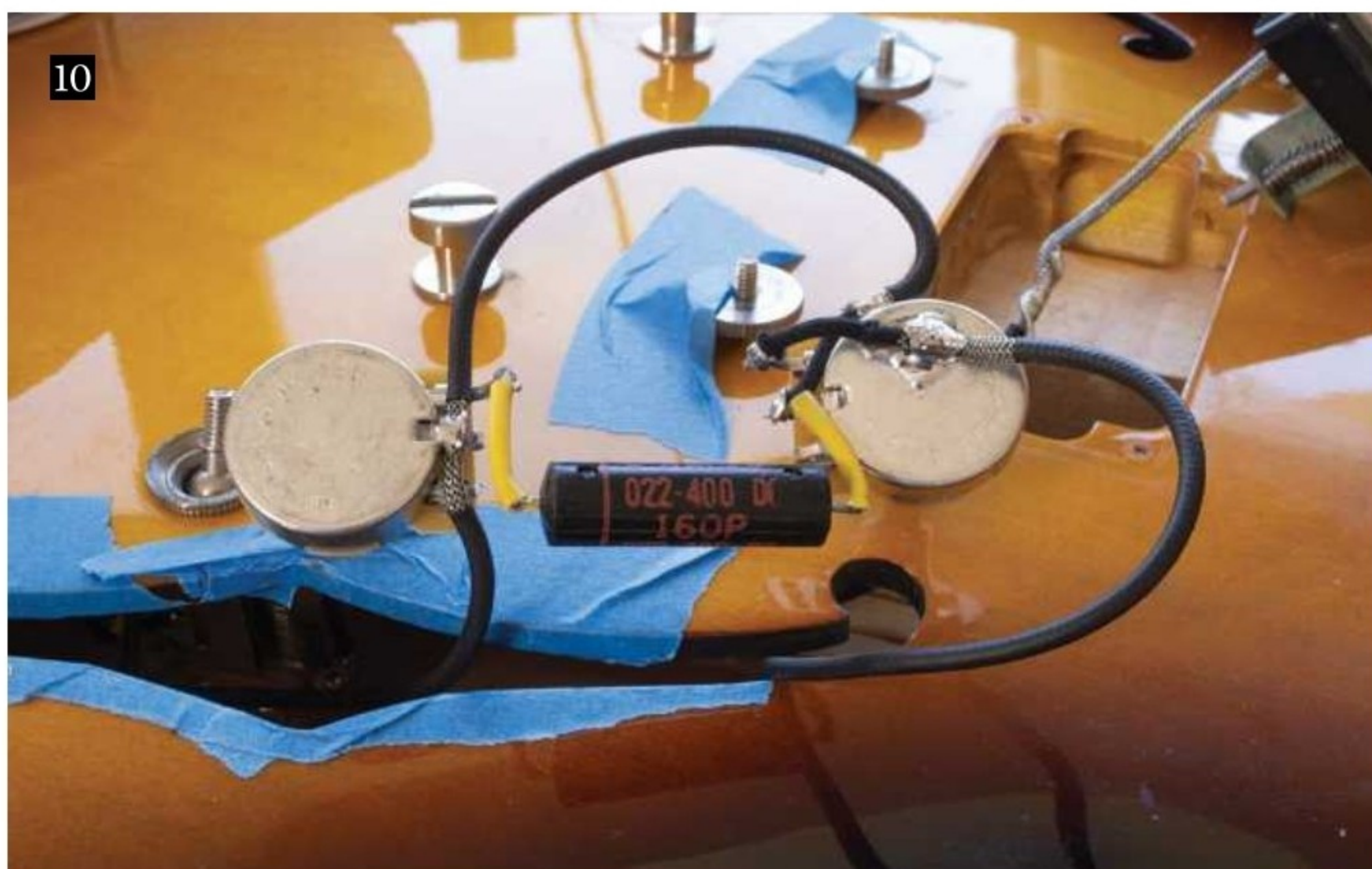
From here it's straightforward – just solder the bridge pickup to the volume pot and push the pots through the f-hole. Both pots will remain within easy reach and you can lever them up through the holes using your finger to complete the installation.

Back In Control

The extra wire length on the harness is probably equivalent to a couple of pedalboard patch cables, so that doesn't concern me. In addition to making the harness installation far easier, the volume pots can be taken out individually for cleaning or pickup swaps without having to remove the entire harness. Despite only doing this job maybe once a year, I'm no longer daunted by it and these days it takes me closer to 45 minutes than a fortnight.

Give it a go! 📺

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David Davidson's *Vintage Icons*

Merle Travis was a highly influential player with a unique taste in guitars

Merle Travis 1968 Gibson Super 400



Custom-made for Merle Travis in 1968, this Super 400 has a thinner than standard body and an added standby switch below the one-off pickguard

This is a custom-made Super 400 that Gibson made for Merle Travis. I bought it at Christie's in New York when his stuff went up for sale, along with several other guitars that belonged to him. It intrigued me because it has some features that were rarely seen in 1968.

"By the late 1960s humbuckers were standard pickups for the Super 400 and this body has humbucker cut-outs. But Merle must have specified P-90s, and Gibson placed a very thin plastic cheat ring under the neck P-90 cover to hide the humbucker rout. The bridge pickup has a standard spacer that also conceals the hole.

"The really cool pickguard is obviously custom made, and the Bigsby has the burnished brown colour that you sometimes see on archtops. It's actually an enamel finish that has chipped off in certain places. It has a palm bar, which is more like a long wire with a hook on the end. When he played, Merle would operate the Bigsby with his pinky finger as he picked with his thumb and index finger. The bar is fixed so it doesn't swing out of the way; he had about a hundred guitars with this setup. That was Merle's thing and I've bought several instruments that belonged to him, including a 1952 Fender Esquire. He mounted a big old Bigsby right on the end of that with the same long bar.

"The pickup selector is a standard three-way switch, but it's in a completely different position from a standard Super 400 switch. It's maybe an inch lower and almost directly in line with the pickup. A second switch, next to the pickguard, was used to put the guitar in standby. The witch-hat knobs are pretty standard for

"Most people don't get to see guitars like these and it isn't one that we have publicised"

late-1960s Gibsons, and there's a big plastic plate where the jack socket is mounted. I'm sure somebody broke the jack at one point and just stuck that sucker on to cover it.

"There's also a homemade wire hook for his strap that is screwed into the tail block. It's not the first time I've seen one and it's the kind of thing techs did back in those days. I don't really care because, to me, this is an artist guitar.

"The guitar has such a thin neck, I'm sure it was carved that way especially for Merle. It's a very comfortable instrument to play and it's made from three pieces of maple with a fair bit of flame. In contrast, the back of the body, which appears to be carved from a single piece of maple, has no figuring at all. The sides are maple, too, but the really interesting thing about the body is that it has less depth than a regular Super 400.

"The scary part is that this represented Gibson's best in 1968 and, to be honest, the materials are just not that great. I sometimes look at guitars from this era and wonder where they found such unremarkable wood. I can't believe they used maple like this for their flagship model guitar, particularly one made for an artist like Merle. But I guess they didn't really care that much.

"The truss rod cover says 'custom' and the front of the headstock has a Les Paul Custom-style split diamond inlay that is echoed on the back of the headstock, in regular Super 400 style. The fingerboard is ebony, with typical Super 400 inlays, and it has been refretted with wire that's a little flatter and wider. The Kluson Sealfast tuners are also original and have never been replaced.

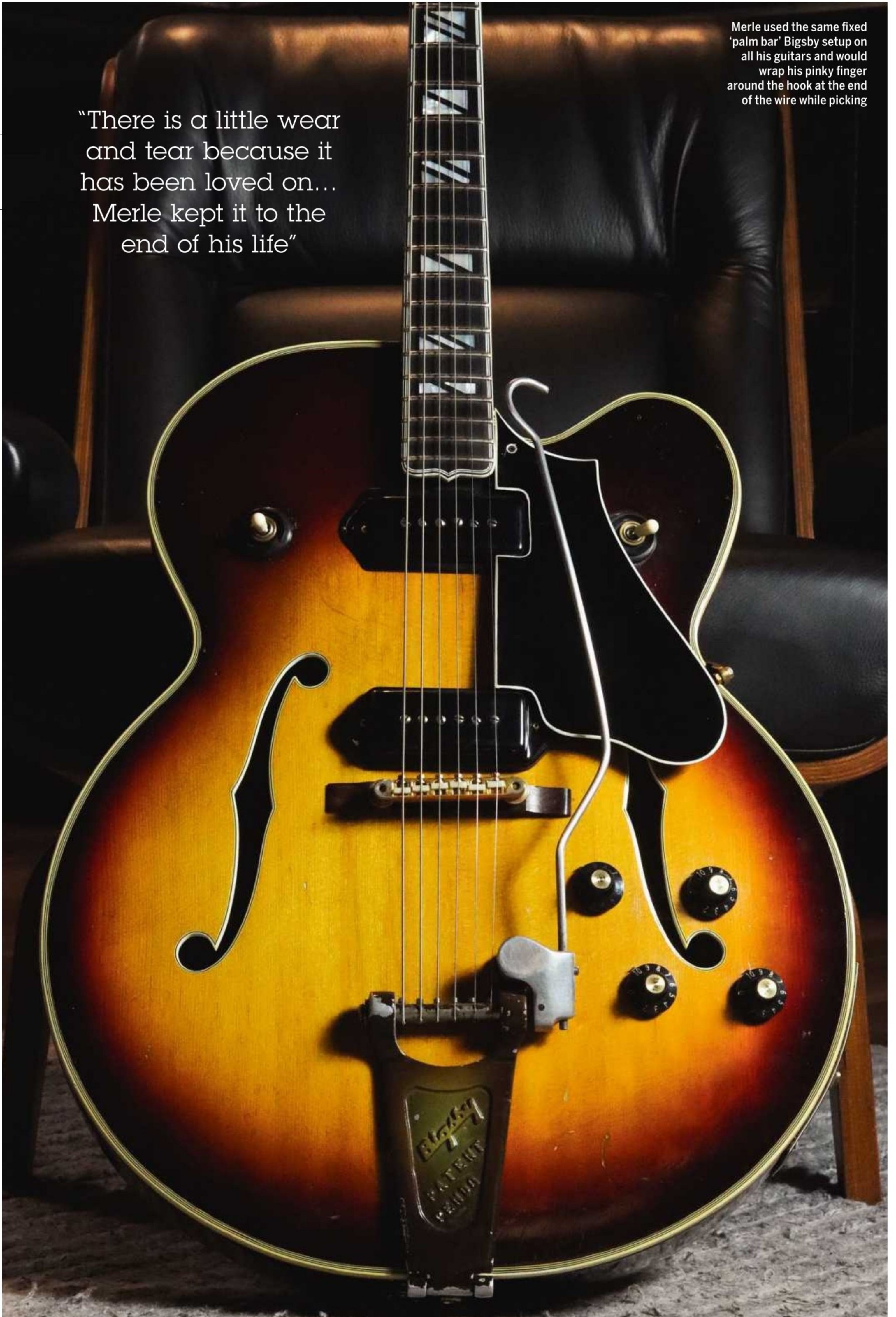
"The biggest differences between this custom-made guitar and a regular Super 400 that you could buy off the shelf are the thinner body, the pickups, the pickguard and the switching arrangement. It's wonderful to be able to feature it here because most people don't get to see guitars like these and it isn't one that we have publicised.

"There is a little wear and tear because this guitar has been played and loved on, and Merle did keep it to the end of his life. I have a cute little thank you note from Christie's and the original poster board that they made to display the guitar. There is also a CD that was in the case when I bought it with session outtakes and noodling on this actual instrument. On it, you can really hear how Merle used the vibrato and he was an absolute master of it. I had a conversation about this with Brian Setzer a couple of weeks ago and he was commenting on Merle's command over the instrument. He was such an exceptional guitarist." [HP]

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
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"There is a little wear
and tear because it
has been loved on...
Merle kept it to the
end of his life"

Merle used the same fixed
'palm bar' Bigsby setup on
all his guitars and would
wrap his pinky finger
around the hook at the end
of the wire while picking



Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks



Four-Note Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank & Vox AC15 Hand-Wired

Difficulty ★★★★★ | 10 mins per example

BEFORE WE START, let me qualify that the 'four notes' part of this month's title refers to four fretted notes (E, F#, A, B), plus whatever string bends I can use to squeeze more out of them! This is an exercise in getting a lot out of a little, inspired by the likes of Albert and BB King and Peter Green. If you've never tried this before, it's really surprising to discover how much we rely on patterns and shapes when we're playing – and this can potentially be at the expense of thinking melodically or rhythmically.

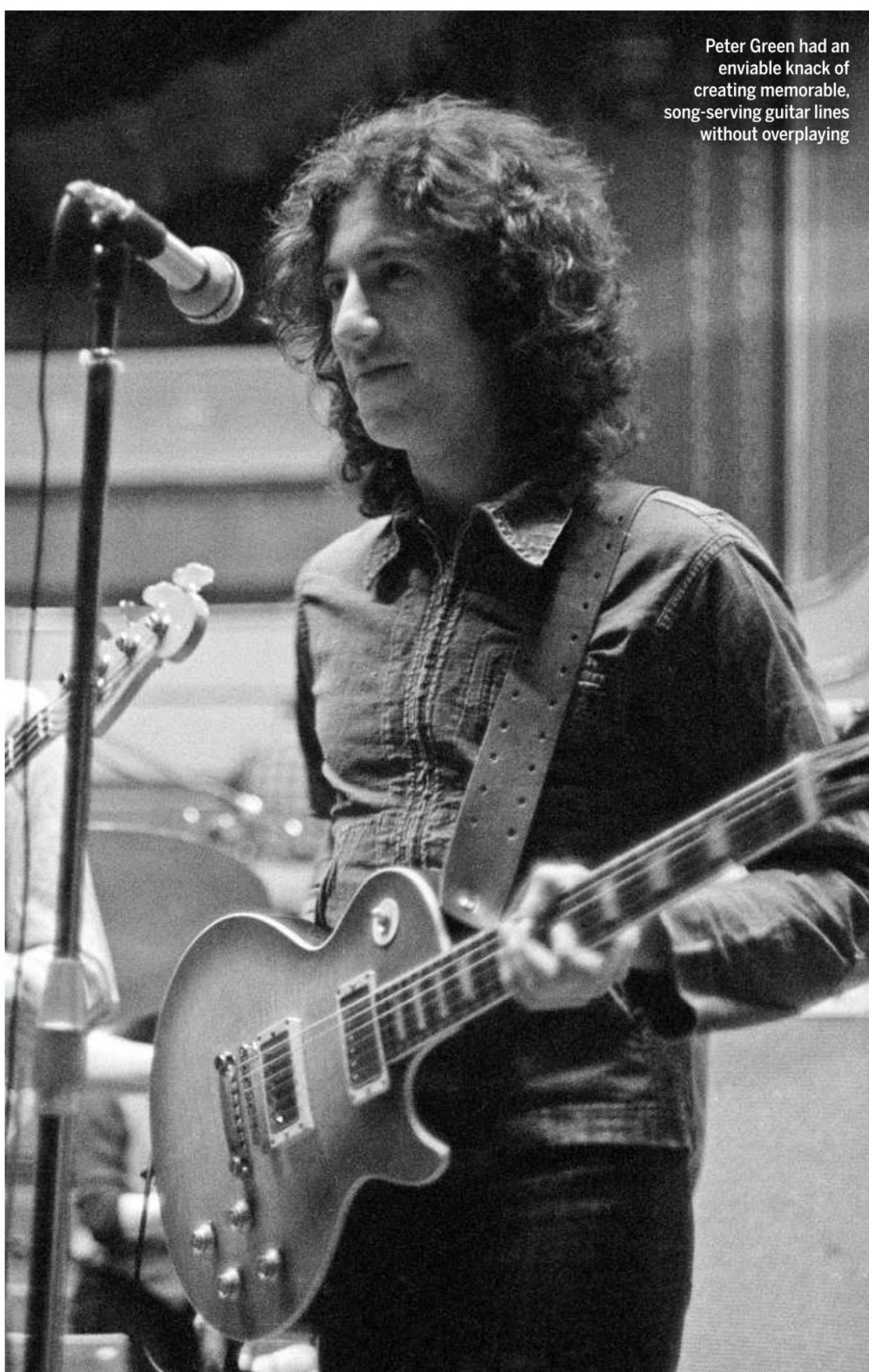
A slow blues like this issue's example is the ideal way to experiment with such minimalism, not because it's easy, but because it's so challenging! We're really exposed here... One thing that isn't particularly emphasised here is the use of space. But just as Albert King advised Gary Moore to play "every other lick", we should consider each phrase and try to put ourselves in the place of the listener. We encourage you to ask yourself questions such as: am I using enough rhythmic variation? Am I always starting or finishing on the Root note? and so on. The idea isn't to completely disregard the vocabulary and chops you've already developed, but rather to, ultimately, put you more in control of them.

The nature of the guitar does make it tempting to rely completely on the patterns and shapes we've discovered over the years and not venture outside of them. This can lead to us becoming a little jaded about our own playing. But a four-note blues such as this one is a great way to break out of that cycle.

As you play through the examples here, consider other details such as bends, vibrato and slides. Recording our playing and listening back later with an objective ear is also enlightening. I hope this approach is useful and see you next time! 🎸



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now to stream or buy from Amazon Music



Peter Green had an enviable knack of creating memorable, song-serving guitar lines without overplaying

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

THIS FIRST EXAMPLE MAKES USE OF SHORT STACCATO notes and contrasting longer held ones. Though all these examples are transcribed as faithfully as possible, there is a little bit of 'push and pull' in the timing, which is to be encouraged. One of the things great players such as Albert King, Jimmy Page and BB King have in common is that they don't always play squarely across the beat. It's also a good idea to check out the rhythmic phrasing of other instruments, or even vocals, to see if there are any ideas worth stealing.

Example 2

MAKING USE OF THE NOTE GROUPINGS ON THE FRETBOARD, this second example begins with a few doublestop-type ideas. There is potential to space these out more or play with the rhythms, but that didn't seem the best use of the space available here. In the following bar, there's a tone and a half bend from B up to D, the only way we can get this note without breaking our self-imposed 'four-note' rule... The pre-bend to C immediately afterwards follows the same rationale.

Example 3

ANOTHER TONE AND A HALF BEND HERE – it was really tempting to just play a G at the 12th fret, but that's not in the spirit of this idea! Also, Albert King and David Gilmour are no strangers to this type of bend, and it does force us to concentrate on the pitching, which can't be a bad thing. As mentioned earlier, do experiment with pushing and pulling against the beat. None of this is written in stone.

Example 4

HAVING HELD A NOTE OVER from the end of Example 3, we're rejoining the action here with this Albert (or perhaps BB) King-style lick. Another wide bend up to D leads to a quick shift in hand position. This allows for changing the fretting hand fingers around, giving the strength to bend the E at the 9th fret of the third string up rhythmically up to F#. This finally lands back on the E to finish.

♩. = 48 A

BU BD

9 11 10 12 12 (13) (12) 10 11

1

D G D A

BU BU PB 11 BU BD BU BD BU BD BU BD

11 12 (15) 12 (13) 12 10 11 (12) 11 9 11 9 (11) (9) (11) (9) (11) (9) (11) (9)

2

Hear It Here

ALBERT KING

VARIOUS



Albert's solos are a masterclass of economy and wild string bends. This is partly facilitated by his unusual tunings and 'upside down' playing orientation, but there's no reason why we can't take lessons from this to use in our own playing. Check out *Born Under Bad Sign*, the version of *Oh Pretty Woman* where he duets with Gary Moore, and *Laundromat Blues* to get a taste of how he creates excitement and dynamics without moving far around the fretboard.

BB KING

VARIOUS



Another player who wasn't afraid to leave space and didn't feel compelled to play long complicated runs was BB King, who maintained that his objective was to play simply and honestly – in his words, "like never lying". Check out his sparse phrasing on *The Thrill Is Gone*, *Don't Answer The Door* and *Why I Sing The Blues*. It's also worth pointing out that BB felt it was important to improvise and play from the heart, rather than rehearse his licks.

PETER GREEN

VARIOUS



Revered by players as diverse as BB King and Gary Moore, Peter brought a finesse to simple lines that reached players and non-players alike. The tracks most people know are *Need Your Love So Bad* and *Albatross*, but it's worth investigating a little more deeply to find gems like *Long Grey Mare*, *A Fool No More* and *Apostle*. It's often said that the primary objective of solo guitar playing should be to benefit the song; Peter certainly seemed to agree with this.

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Guitarist

Nextmonth



◀ **BRIAN ROBERTSON**

The boy is back in town. A rare interview with one of Thin Lizzy's frontline axemen

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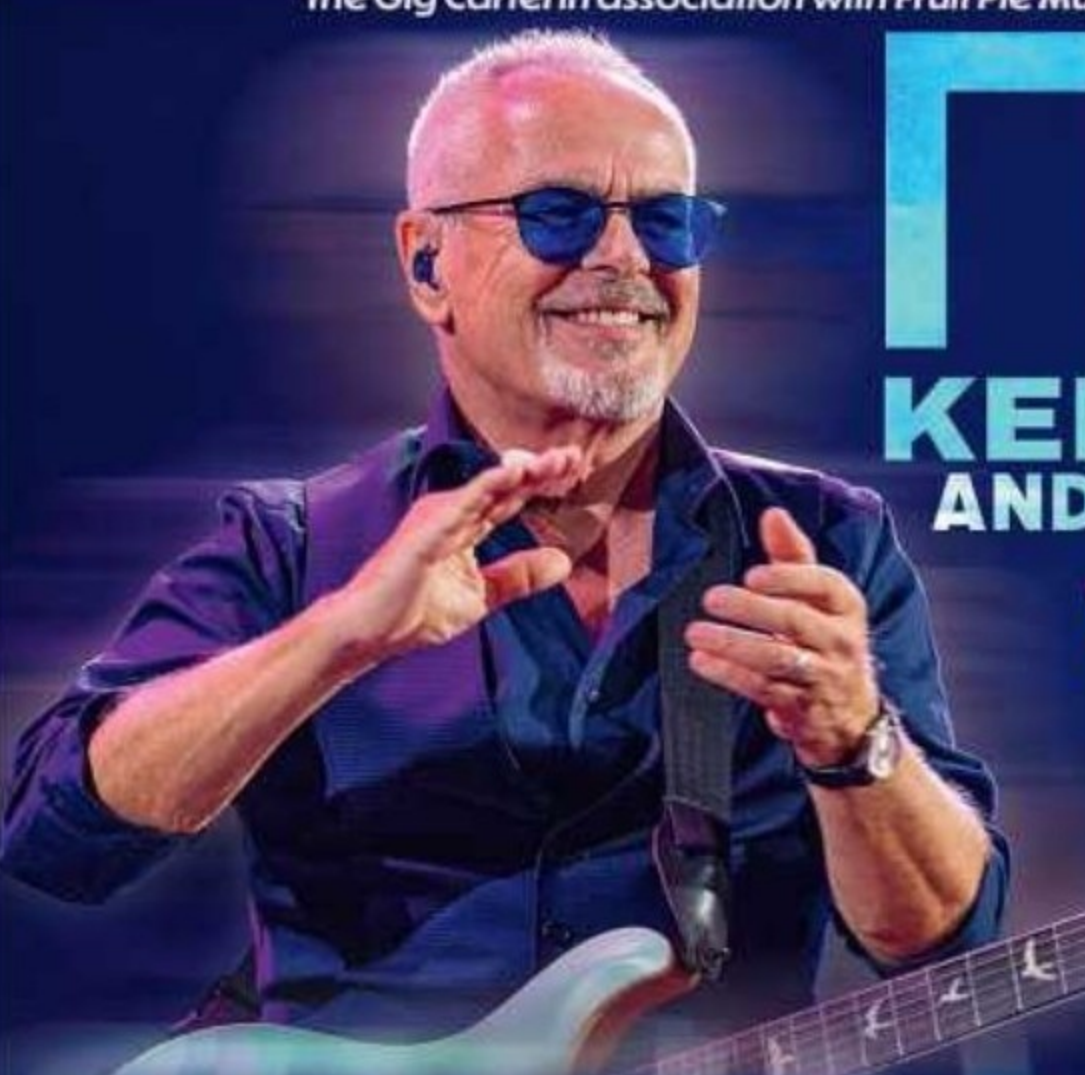
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