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Guitarist

Issue 540

SUMMER 2026

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Name Of The Game

The late American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham is quoted as once saying, "No artist is ahead of his time. He *is* his time; it is just that others are behind the times." Nowhere is this more apparent than in guitar design. Les Paul agitated for Gibson to build a solidbody guitar for years before the comany finally granted him his wish in 1952 and – as it happened – created the most iconic guitar they would ever build and the most successful signature model in history. So if you're ever tempted to dismiss a signature model guitar as a mere cash-in, take a look through this issue's history (from page 74) of how artist-guided guitar designs have not merely given those musicians the tools they needed to perform at their best but, in the process, expanded the possibilities of guitar music.

Such an important process has always needed its chroniclers. But for writing about guitars to have any meaning, it must be undertaken with a sharp, impartial eye and rest upon a bed of knowledge as solid as a marble floor. And for all the rigorous objectivity that role requires, an abiding love and curiosity for guitar must underpin it all. Our dear friend and colleague Dave Burrluck had all of these qualities. When he died recently, after a short illness, we lost not only a friend you could trust in all weathers but a straight edge to measure by in an industry too often beguiled by trends and hype.

When we held editorial meetings (which Dave usually attended by telephone), you could often hear him working on guitars as he talked. Sometimes it seemed as if the rasp of sandpaper or the clink of tools was part of his voice, along with an acerbic quip about how guitars should properly be made. That Dave believed guitars could and should be surveyed with an engineer's precision was a mark of his deep diligence. That he also loved them like an unapologetic rock 'n' roller was a measure of the heart he put into his work, which was peerless. This issue is respectfully and lovingly dedicated to his memory.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Graham Coxon
The riff powerhouse behind Blur's biggest hits reflects on heartbreak, solo work and regrettable shirts as he brings a lost album back to light **p36**

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The French fingerstyle master takes us on a deeply philosophical journey into what it takes to let pure musicality shine out of your playing **p68**

COVER: GUITAR PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER; STEVE LUKATHER FENDER ESQUIRE PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS; VALIANT MERCURY PHOTO BY LUCY ROBINSON ABOVE: GRAHAM COXON PHOTO BY JAMES KELLY; DAVE BURRLUCK PHOTO BY FUTURE PLC; PIERRE BENSUSAN PHOTO BY LUCY ROBINSON

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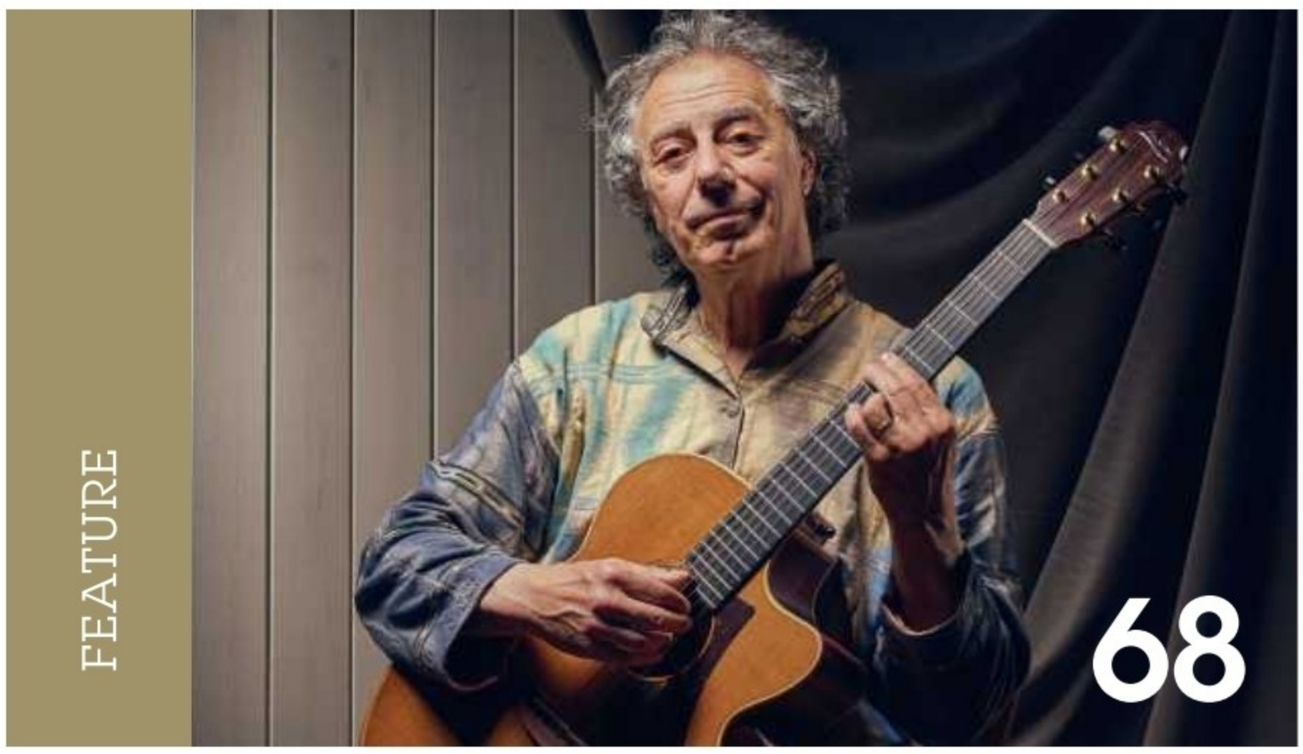

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The Pick
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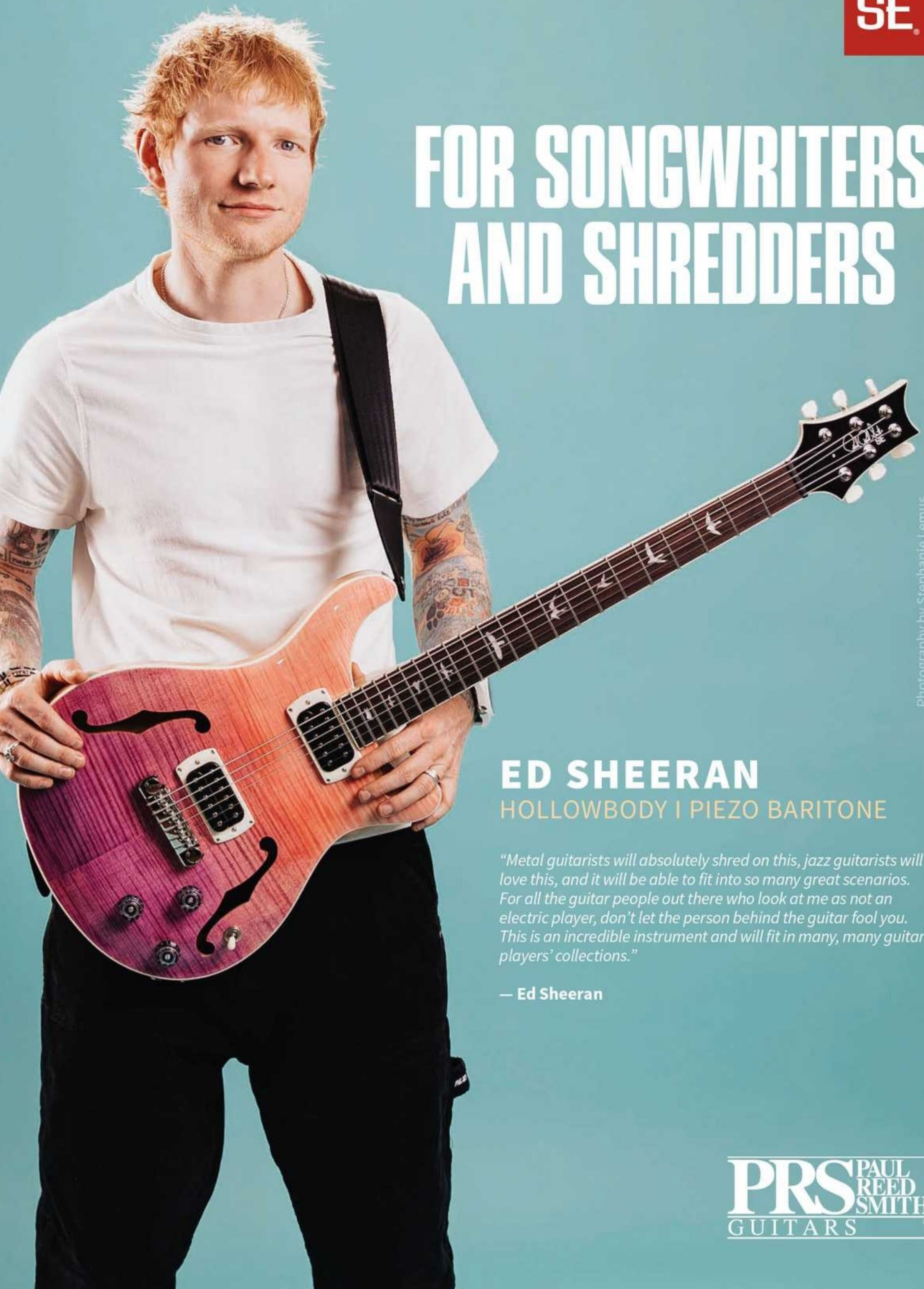

Photography by Stephanie Lemus

ED SHEERAN

HOLLOWBODY I PIEZO BARITONE

"Metal guitarists will absolutely shred on this, jazz guitarists will love this, and it will be able to fit into so many great scenarios. For all the guitar people out there who look at me as not an electric player, don't let the person behind the guitar fool you. This is an incredible instrument and will fit in many, many guitar players' collections."

— Ed Sheeran

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VALIANT MERCURY DISTRESSED
£2,950

WHAT IS IT? Double-cutaway offset with HSS layout, series/parallel switching and unusual adjustable nut

Planet Sweet!

A guitar built in Ukraine that nods to the familiar yet brims with ideas to set it apart from the mundane

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Lucy Robinson

We cannot begin this review without applauding the sheer tenacity of a family business that started just as Covid-19 ran rampant across the globe, only to be hit two years later by the horrors of war. That the company then managed to turn out individual designs such as our offset S-style Mercury is, quite frankly, astonishing.

Formed by older brother and head luthier Vadym Gavrylenko and sibling Dima in 2020, the company's small team operates from its purpose-built facility in Bila Tserkva, in the Kyiv region of Ukraine. The brothers used the pandemic's periods of enforced lockdown to create an exclusive range of guitars and basses. These tip their hats respectfully to the past while retaining a strong design ethic that you won't see anywhere else.

Vadym's training as an aerospace engineer brings to the table materials like duralumin, a strong and lightweight aluminium alloy that's used for the Mercury's two metal control plates, knurled knobs and dressed away neckplate. The material is polished rather than plated, so should age naturally with the guitar. Aerospace is also where the

1

company's many cosmic references have their origin – other models include Jupiter and Titan. But down to the nuts and bolts.

Using European alder for the body and a hard rock maple neck (reinforced with two rods of another space age material, titanium), the 304mm (12-inch) radius neck housing 22 nickel silver frets is glued on, not integral. The neck seems shallower than its stated 'C profile' might imply but measures a not outrageously slender 20.5mm at the 1st and 22mm at the 12th fret.

On the maple 'board you'll notice those attractive 'Trinity' inlays beginning at the 1st fret, and the easy truss rod adjustment nut that sits between the topmost two wires. You will have seen a similar approach on Music Man and Blade instruments, and it's such a good move if you're not bent on slavishly observing tradition. You may also spot a somewhat unusual fingerboard nut. It's micro-adjustable: every string sits in its own separate bell bronze screw head, and each 'mini nut' has two slots arranged in a cross pattern. Lift the string and a quarter turn of the screw either way raises or lowers the height minutely. Is it a sledgehammer to crack a walnut? Of course – but we love it!

Those control plates, too. While this idea first appeared on other more famous offsets, these are no direct lift. Instead, the duralumin is thicker and more chamfered, and reminds us of the tailfins of old American cars like the 50s Ford Fairlane and Fleetwood Cadillac (or again, perhaps something more aeronautical). Whatever their inspiration, the whole assembly is really rather cool.

> A studio guitar par excellence [and] live you can select whatever tones your music requires

Housed within a 3mm mint green acrylic pickguard sits a trio of pickups (well, four actually, but we'll get to that) in HSS format. This is Valiant's M80 set and comprises neck and middle single coils with oversized magnets, said to offer smoother tone and better balance across the strings, plus the bridge pickup – which looks like a standard-footprint open-topped humbucker but is, in fact, a pair of singles placed side by side.

Now, a word about the finish. Obviously without the decades-old heritage of certain other guitar companies, Valiant's distressed Mercury is not pretending to have got this way through years of wear. Instead, it's as though Vadym and Dima simply wanted to evoke a worn-in vibe, and in beaten-up Sonic Blue with matching headstock (cool shape, too), it certainly does the trick. Non-distressed instruments are, of course, also available.

Hardware and electrics-wise, everything is super quality. Locking tuners and floating vibrato bridge are both from Gotoh's superlative 510 range, while volume and no-load tone pots are CTS 500k, the three-way toggle and two slider switches come from the legendary Switchcraft stable, while the jack socket is Pure Tone. It's a great line-up across the board, but how will it fare in action?

Feel & Sounds

As mentioned, the neck is indeed a C shape, but that slightly slimmer profile, with satin finish and bare wood here and there, gives it a lovely feel in the hand. It also seems wider than its standard 42mm (1.65-inch) nut width might suggest. The fret ends are beautifully dressed, and the fretboard edges perfectly rolled so there's no sharp or 'hard' feel. Overall, it's a very comfortable and ergonomic play.

There are a few buzzes and rattles around the lower to middle frets. However, Valiant informed us that, in order to get the Mercury to us quickly, there wasn't time

2

3

for a full setup. It's also fair to state that our review is being written on the UK's hottest June days on record. And we all know what havoc temperature and humidity – either way – can wreak on our guitars' necks. The good news is that the simplicity of the truss rod and bridge adjustment (that Gotoh 510 vibrato is extremely responsive and tuneful, too) meant that we had the strings singing clear and clean in about five minutes. Doubtless Valiant will do the final fettling on the Mercury's return. But this *is* a really great neck.

Sounds-wise, it takes a while to get one's head around what's going on here, so strap yourself in. But persevere, as your intrepid reviewer did, and you are treated to a wondrous array of tones, from dreamy ambient vibes at one end to out-and-out filth at the other.

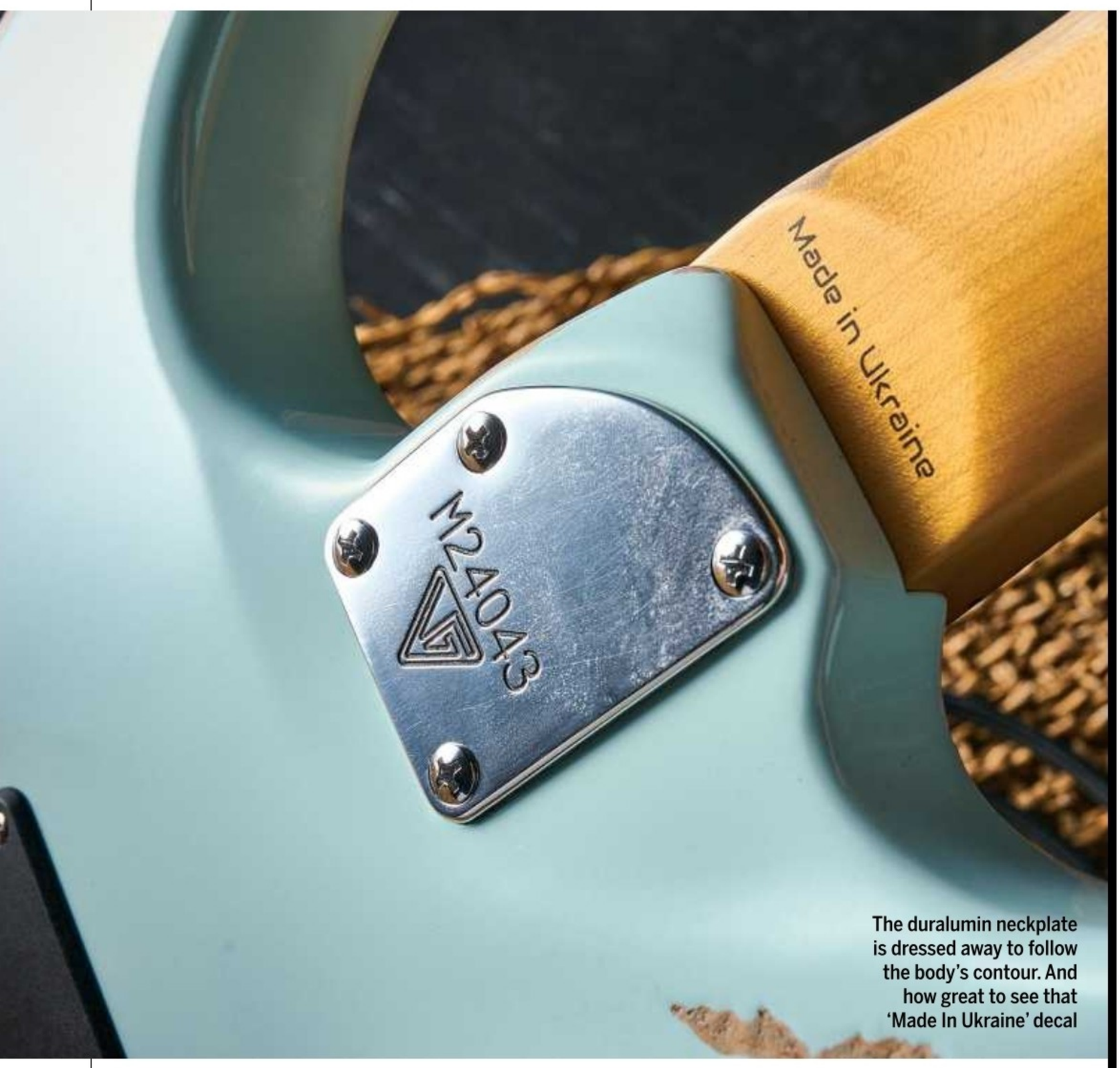
Looking at the pickup array, you can think of it in two different ways: as four separate single coils, or as two humbuckers, with the neck and middle coils some distance apart. Therefore, the bridge 'humbucker' is actually two independent single coils, and the neck and middle 'single coils' are also configurable together as humbucking.

The Switchcraft three-way toggle selects neck (neck and middle together as a humbucker, or neck single coil only), the

1. The Mercury's pickup array: think of it either as two humbuckers with the neck and middle coils separated, or as a pure four single-coil guitar that's configurable as humbucking

2. The series, parallel or single-coil switching provides a massive range of tones and put us in mind of Brian May's legendary Red Special. Note the thick duralumin plates, too

3. We like the Valiant's headstock shape, and the matching Sonic Blue finish is cool, too. But check out that nut: each string sits in a sort of cross-head screw that's micro-adjustable for the perfect action setup



The duralumin neckplate is dressed away to follow the body's contour. And how great to see that 'Made In Ukraine' decal

VALIANT MERCURY DISTRESSED

PRICE: £2,950 with hard case
ORIGIN: Ukraine
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Solid European alder
NECK: 1-piece distressed, tinted maple with painted headstock, medium C profile with easy pickup-end adjustment
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bell bronze, adjustable/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Hard rock maple with titanium reinforcement; 241.3mm (12") radius; 'Trinity' inlays in black
FRETS: 22 extra-hard nickel silver, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Gotoh 2-point 510 vibrato (chrome); angled 4-bolt neckplate, butterfly string retainers, thick cream acrylic pickguard, chrome control plates, duralumin knobs w/ wooden inserts
TUNERS: Gotoh 510 locking
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: Valiant Guitars M80 HSS set; single CTS 500k volume and CTS 500k 'no load' tone pots; 3-way Switchcraft selector switch plus parallel/series/single-coil slider for each pickup set
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5
OPTIONS: Multiple options, including pickups, colours, pickguard styles/material, fixed or vibrato bridge, stainless steel or nickel silver frets, etc
RANGE OPTIONS: Mercury Primal (£2,750) is more or less our guitar but without distressing. Mercury Distressed M (£3,595) is again much like ours but with Jazzmaster style vibrato bridge). Mercury Maximus (£3,395) features no distressing but a fine-quality figured top.
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost (see dealer)
FINISH: Distressed Sonic Blue (as reviewed); range of colours is vast – see valiantguitars.com

Valiant Guitars
https://valiantguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Really great piece of design, perfectly bridging the old and new; superbly dressed and finished neck; most versatile set of awesome tones we've heard in ages

CONS Suffered buzz and rattle on the lower frets – but very easily fixed with its exposed truss rod nut and bridge hex key

middle position is all pickups on (as four singles or two doubles), and the bridge setting offers full humbucker or just the single coil closest to the bridge.

And that's before you get to the two 'ser' (series), 'par' (parallel) and 'sc' (single coil) sliders. The one nearest the neck operates on the two large-pole single coils, while the other focuses on the bridge unit(s). Boiling it down to the essence, pretty much any combination of pickups, both single coil and humbucker – including all four on at once – is available.

That's a lot to take in, but switching and finding some simply stunning sounds only takes a few minutes. In practice, this means you have a studio guitar par excellence – perhaps like Brian May's Red Special – but playing live you can choose to select whatever tones your music requires.

This Ukrainian build is one of the most impressive designs we've encountered in quite a while

The Mercury must surely be the most versatile guitar this reviewer has played in a very long time. And if he can work it out, anyone can.

Verdict

Blending traditional design with the new is a far more hazardous journey than many might suspect. Some guitar designers have attempted to imbue the familiar with their own styling touches but failed miserably. The Gavrylenko brothers on the other hand, perhaps due to their Ukrainian heritage or simply because they understand guitars so well, have done the opposite. While there are enough visual cues to evoke instruments we know and love, there's no rip-off here but bags of personality and, dare we say, both passion and fun put into the process.

Sure, our Mercury benefitted from a tweak or two using the simple tools provided, but we eliminated the issue easily. Anyway, a rattle or two doesn't detract from the fact that this is one of the most impressive designs we've encountered in quite a while. Indeed, we take our hats off to this brave young team. Long live the blue and the yellow! G

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GUITARS

GL-10

Amber Stained Maple

lowdenguitars.com

VHT D-20 TUBE AMPLIFIER HEAD
£779

WHAT IS IT? All-valve, single-channel Dumble-inspired 20-watt head with footswitchable overdrive section

Howard's Way

VHT attempts to emulate the much-vaunted Dumble sound with this moderately priced all-valve amp

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

VHT Amplification was originally founded by esteemed American designer Steve Fryette in the late 80s and its eye-catching stereo power amps quickly became a regular sight on US stages. However, in 2009 Fryette sold the VHT trademark to the AXL company who set about designing and manufacturing a fleet of affordable amplifiers from its factory in China, while Steve continued to make amps under the new banner of Fryette Amplification, which is still going strong today.

Back to the VHT brand here and the D range, from which our review model comes, aims to summon up the sonic magic of the Alexander – or Howard, depending on who you ask – Dumble custom-built amplifiers. These incredibly rare and highly prized amps, including Stevie Ray Vaughan's 'Steel String Singer', were made strictly to order in what Dumble himself referred to as a "one-at-a-time" process. Along with a frequently lengthy wait for delivery, customers would also receive an eyebrow-raising list of

The D-20's square-shouldered boxy look borrows both from the design aesthetic of previous VHT owner Steven Fryette and Dumble's classic front-facing top-mounted control plate. Constructed from finger-jointed ply and weighing a smidge over 8kg (18lb), it's a convenient unit to travel with

PREAMP
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TREBLE
MIDDLE
BASS
OVER DRIVE
DRIVE
LEVEL
POWER AMP
MASTER
PRESENCE
D-Twenty
INPUT

1. The supplied footswitch engages the overdrive section. This boosted gain stage shares the same input gain and tone control settings as the clean setting, à la Dumble's original circuits, which may require some accommodations to find your desired sounds

2. Dumble's gain structure cascaded the clean channel into the overdrive section together with a shared tone network. This allows the overdrive to bond to the clean channel in a way that completely separate channels often don't

3. The original effects loop system for Dumble amps was a rack-unit interface called 'The Dumbleator'. This unit sat between the preamp and power amp sections, providing the correct level and impedance necessary for pedals and other effect output levels

1

2

contractual obligations, ranging from a ban on photographing the internals to not even being able to take it to another amp technician. Luckily, VHT makes no such demands of its customers and, in a further break from Dumble ethos, you're much more likely to find the amps on the floor of your local music shop, rather than delivered at some unspecified point in the future.

Regardless of cost or availability, Dumble amps are still incredibly desirable due to sublime sonic hallmarks including their huge headroom, a bold 'more Fender than Fender' clean sound, and a smooth creamy overdrive with excellent note clarity. Circuit-wise, the overdrive section operates as a boost within the clean channel, sharing the same tone controls and input gain equating to an interdependence between the gain stages that requires factoring in somewhat when making settings. This amp also has a traditional-style effects loop, which is a great deal more convenient than the convoluted Dumble setup where an expansion device called 'The Dumblelator' would provide buffering and level integration for effects pedals and processors.

A Dumble-inspired aesthetic has been incorporated into the control panel layout combined with an overall build style reminiscent of the original VHT amps, though obviously with materials and construction scaled to meet lower price points. In this era of modern global manufacturing, valve amps are being produced at lower and lower prices as shown here by VHT, but even with this affordability drive, it's important to make sure everything is bolted down tightly.

When plugging in the IEC mains cable, some concerning chassis-shifting took place, indicating looseness in the assembly. Further inspection found many of the nuts securing the chassis and some pots and jacks were less than fully tight. Perhaps this review model had seen a lot of transit-related wear and tear, but firmly secured bolts and screws are essential to hold up to the rigours of gigging. We likely all have memories of losing a pesky knob, nut or bolt to a dimly lit stage.

3

Sounds

Beginning our listening with the clean channel, we're greeted with a glassy top-end and an extended bottom: exactly the tonal profile we'd hoped to hear from this D-style amp. The sparkle can be further encouraged by way of the treble switch, with its presence or high-boost settings. In this clean context the mid switch brought us a little closer to Vox-style thickness and edge-of-break-up. The available gain ranges from pristine clean through to moderate levels of break-up.

The 20 watts of output power produced by the pair of 6V6 valves is perhaps a different prospect to the higher output power of the original Dumbles and so cannot summon up quite the same amount

The three tonal voicing switches each focus their effect on the top, middle and bottom-end of the amp respectively. The treble switch has an up setting for a sweeter effect and down for a larger high-frequency boost

of clean headroom, but 6V6 valves do have their own charm. Also pedal-pushers be aware, this amp takes pedals like a champ you'll be happy to know.

The D-20's touch-sensitive characteristics open up a large dynamic range that jazz and blues players will particularly enjoy. For the heavier-handed among us, a softer touch seems to bring the best out of this design, and engaging a compressor pedal could potentially help to further smooth out the response. Using either the included footswitch or the front-panel control we can engage the overdrive circuit for some harmonic saturation of the Dumble kind. Voiced in a way that lends itself well to deeper tones of the type used in jazz and fusion, blues and country, the three tone switches are helpful in sculpting the type of response you desire from the amp. The mid switch in particular had a distinct effect on the overdrive, pushing the sound further into focused gain. Similarly, the treble switch in its wide high-boost position had the most pronounced effect on the driven sound, allowing for more attacking tones.

A common feature of Dumble's amps was the FET input channel boost, positioned before the signal hit the valves. Its effect was to add brightness, definition and clarity, especially with overdrive. Unlike its big brother, the D-50, this D-20 does not include this FET input stage.

For players looking for rock sounds, the fulsome bottom-end can be a little portly at higher-gain settings, but happily the

The D-20's touch-sensitive characteristics open up a large dynamic range that jazz and blues players will enjoy

amp still sounds full even with the bass control reduced to its minimum. The Bright switch with its two active positions – up for sparkle and down for larger-range treble boost – adds top in either setting that's conservatively judged and certainly not excessive. Placing a delay pedal in the effects loop is certainly a good deal easier than the palaver of the original Dumbleator and results in a clean signal without hum or interference.

Verdict

While the construction standards could (literally) be tightened up a little, it's notable that VHT is providing a Dumble-style sonic palette for a comparatively low entry fee. If Dumble tones are an itch you've wished to scratch without a rockstar's budget (that's if you could even find one available), this amp will give you the essence without that huge outlay. Perhaps the larger D-50 with its increased headroom and FET input circuit may be worthy of inspection, too, subject to your volume needs, but VHT's D range of Dumble-voiced, all-valve amplifiers is a commendable offering worthy of your own test-drive. G

VHT D-20

PRICE: £779
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: All valve
VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 2x 6V6GT
OUTPUT: 20W
DIMENSIONS: 418 (w) x 235 (d) x 233mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 8.25/18
CABINET: VT-112 cabinets coming soon (from £349)
LOUDSPEAKER: (N/A)
CHANNELS: 1 with switchable overdrive
CONTROLS: Volume, Bright, Mid Boost Deep Switches, Treble, Middle, Bass, Overdrive, Level, Master, Presence
FOOTSWITCH: 1-button (overdrive)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Effects loop
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The larger 50W D-50 with FET gain stage and jazz/rock switch lists for £1,399. Various speaker cabs available (£POA)

Vader Sound
+44 (0) 7775 592576
www.vadersound.com

8/10

PROS Dumble-flavoured rich bottom-end and chimey top-end; gutsy overdriven tone with a fusion-ish accent

CONS Final assembly quality control could be higher to ensure longevity; we'd have liked the FET stage included on this model

VEELAH V4 GAC
£329

WHAT IS IT? A grand auditorium acoustic with plenty of frills for a no-frills price

VEELAH V5 OMCE
£549

WHAT IS IT? OM-sized electro-acoustic cutaway with features well above its price point

Rebel Alliance

From a new name in the guitar domain, these acoustics are set to offer high-end performance at an entry level price

Words David Mead **Photography** Lucy Robinson

If you're at all unfamiliar with the Veelah brand, then don't worry because so were we to begin with. A little probing and it was revealed that it is administered to by father and son team, Paul and Billy Smith, trading under the company name Vader Sound. And if you find yourself thinking that there's possibly a *Star Wars* connection at play in the background here, you'd be dead right. It seems that when Paul and Billy were trying to come up with a company name they were distracted by an off-the-subject discussion about the most famous science fiction film of the past 50 years. They then mutually agreed that Vader would be a standout name, it having a couple of different connotations. The first is an obvious one with Darth's "I am

your father...” reveal from *The Empire Strikes Back*, but the second is less evident in that the word *vader* is Dutch for father. Considering this a perfect fit for a company run by father and son, the name stuck.

Paul has previously had a 25-year stint in the music business, gaining experience with manufacturing as well as musicians' needs, and Vader Sound's aim, according to its website, is to “develop standout products, promote and grow [a] brand presence in the UK and across Europe”.

Veelah acoustics are available at a spread of different price points, starting out with the Veelah Vero at around £149 up to Series Five, including the V5 OMCE we're looking at today, which comes in at £549. There are also Mini Camper guitars around the £250 mark and the even more affordable Veelah Togo travel guitars at £159. As you can see, we're talking about entry level instruments, but the spec list on the pair in front of us would seem to contradict that designation. An arm bevel, a solid spruce top, mahogany neck and a padded gigbag for just over £300? Sounds like a bargain to us. But we'll curb our enthusiasm until the play test a bit later on. Meanwhile, let's look at the Veelahs one at a time.

Both guitars surprised and delighted us with their sheer bang for the buck playability

Veelah V4 GAC

If you've studied guitar model acronyms then you've probably guessed that 'GAC' stands for Grand Auditorium Cutaway, and that's exactly what we have here. Casting a somewhat critical eye over the general build quality, we have to say that everything looks very neat and tidy as has virtually every instrument we've seen hailing from Chinese guitar factories recently. The satin finish has been applied very nicely and the mahogany binding around the top expands on the lower bout to form an arm bevel. Speaking of the top itself, the spec says that it's spruce, with no particular type specified. To our eyes it looks like it's probably Sitka, but it's very hard to tell the different types of spruce apart. In any case, it looks like a nice piece of timber that has been expertly bookmatched and is graced with a real mother-of-pearl rosette.

1. Both of these Veelah guitars have fixtures and fittings you'd expect find on instruments way above the price point we're seeing here

2. The V5 has a solid spruce top with this very attractive rosette made from koa and rosewood

3. The V4 GAC has a spruce top with a rosewood bridge and a compensated Graph Tech Tusq saddle. Those string pins add a touch of class, too!

4. On both guitars the back and sides are made from laminated rosewood. Build quality overall really is tip-top

2

Back and sides are listed as rosewood, but this would be a laminate and it would be prudent to shelve any prejudice against laminated back and sides on acoustic guitars as some luthiers proclaim them to be just the job for stability and durability.

The neck is mahogany with a rosewood 'board, with 20 very nicely finished frets and some vintage-looking open-back tuners on the very trim headstock. The spec says that bone is the choice for both the 43mm nut and saddle, but Paul tells us that on this particular model they have gone for Graph Tech Tusq, the former very nicely cut, the latter compensated for more accurate intonation.

Overall, this looks like a guitar with a much higher price tag, but we'll have to wait and see what it sounds like until we have explored its slightly more costly sibling.

Veelah V5 OMCE

Our V5 ups the ante in that this Orchestra Model Cutaway Electric is pretty much top of Veelah's range and includes a Fishman Presys Blend piezo/mic combo pickup and side-mounted preamp. It looks like it clocks in at a higher range, too, with its full gloss finish and bound fingerboard. Kerb appeal aside, once again, it appears like it should be wearing a higher price ticket than it does.

3

4

5. A Fishman Presys Blend pickup and internal mic combo comes with a handy tuner and enough preamp controls to ensure the V5's live voice delivers on stage

6. This little carved crest on the heel of the V5 is another feature you wouldn't expect to find on an acoustic guitar that retails at such a modest price point

So what does the upgrade give us here exactly? The spruce top looks to be of a slightly higher quality with a tighter grain pattern and that signature hazy shimmer that sometimes walks hand in hand with higher spec spruce. The rosette is a very nicely appointed rosewood/koa combo and the rosewood back and sides laminate here is nicely figured, too, all offering a more deluxe appearance from the start. The neck is mahogany once again, but this time with an ebony 'board with Graph Tech Tusq for both saddle and a nicely cut 43mm nut.

Everything about this guitar shrieks quality, but the thing that impressed us the most was the little emblem embossed on the heel cover. As they say, the devil's in the details...

Feel & Sounds

Returning to the V4, we didn't know quite what to expect, but the feel of the neck tipped us off to what was to come. It's a very comfortable C profile, not too dissimilar to that classic early 60s Fender feel, and we felt immediately at home. Probing chords revealed a light, airy sound with plenty of balance between trebles and bass, and fingerstyle playing produced very good results, too. We found none of the usual suspects that shout 'cheap guitar' at you – no high action, badly polished frets or sharp fret ends, for instance – and the ride was generally a good one. Factor in the price point and we would elevate the V4 into the very good value for money category straight away.

Turning now to the V5 there was an immediate upturn in terms of feel. Don't get us wrong, the V4 feels very good in the hands, but the V5 certainly pushes things up a notch or two. Despite the two guitars being of similar size – the V5 measured in around 397mm (15.6 inches) and the V4 393mm (15.4 inches) at the widest point – the V5 carries a little more weight at

Turning to the V5 there was an immediate upturn in terms of feel

7

around half a kilogram (under 1lb) heavier than the V4. This might be down to the onboard electronics or the thickness of the back and sides, it's very difficult to tell. But it wasn't by any means a dealbreaker.

It has the same feel-good neck profile with excellent workmanship to the frets and fingerboard, allowing the fingers to glide where cheaper acoustics we've played in the past have felt gritty and, well, cheap.

Then there's the sound. There's an upturn here, too, with richer, sonorous basses and sweeter trebles, and through our dedicated acoustic amp the Fishman pickup proved its worth, the preamp allowing for great control over the amplified sound with treble, middle and bass, plus mic blend, notch filter and phase switch thrown into the mix. There's a handy tuner aboard, too.

7. A set of Veelah Satin Gold tuners with a 14:1 ratio grace the V5's very neat-looking headstock

Verdict

What can we say? It's obvious that Veelah is following through on its promise to supply standout products because both of these guitars surprised – and delighted – us with their sheer bang for the buck playability for an incredibly low spend. Of course, there are better sounding acoustics out there, but you'd need to spend at least twice the ticket prices we have in front of us to find one. Go and try a Veelah; we think you'll be surprised. G

VEELAH V4 GAC

PRICE: £329 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Grand auditorium cutaway
TOP: Spruce
BACK/SIDES: Rosewood laminate
MAX RIM DEPTH: 116mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 397mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Veelah Satin Black Chrome 17:1
NUT/WIDTH: Black Graph Tech Tusq/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood w/ Graph Tech Tusq saddle/55mm
ELECTRICS: N/A
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.6/3.5
OPTIONS: Finish only (see below)
RANGE OPTIONS: The V4 Series has three other models: the V4-GAC-BK (£329) and two non-cutaway OMs, the V4-OM-BK (£329) and the V4-OM-NAT (£329)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet
FINISH: Open pore – Natural

Vader Group
info@vadersound.com
www.vadersound.com

8/10

PROS Very good value; well-built and good-sounding instrument

CONS While the V5 leads for tone and playability, a little more finessing could see the V4 join it

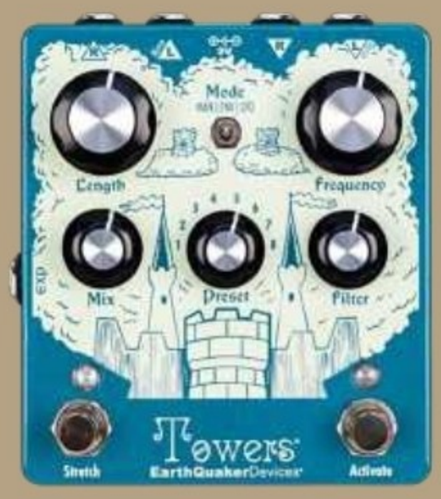
VEELAH V5 OMCE

PRICE: £549 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: OM cutaway
TOP: Spruce
BACK/SIDES: Rosewood laminate
MAX RIM DEPTH: 116mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 393mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Veelah Satin Gold 14:1
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony with mahogany binding
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood w/ Graph Tech Tusq saddle/55mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman Presys Blend
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.04/4.5
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The V5 OMCE currently stands alone in Veelah's V5 Series, but the V1, V2, V3 and V4 (see left) series offer acoustic guitars starting at £239 for V1 models
LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet (coming later in 2026)
FINISH: Gloss body with satin neck

Guitarist CHOICE **9**/10

PROS A gig-ready electro-acoustic for around £500 that really does sound and feel like a far more costly instrument

CONS We can't really fault a guitar that sounds this good for the price



EARTHQUAKER DEVICES TOWERS
£329

WHAT IS IT? Ambient soundscape generator using an inspired mix of delay, reverb and filtering

High Flyer

EarthQuaker Devices' latest pedal offers three filter modes to turn stereo reverb into meandering, hazy soundscapes

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln

PHOTO: EARTHQUAKERDEVICES.COM

1. The Mode switch determines the method by which the filter frequency is changed – manually with the frequency knob, by picking dynamics or by an LFO

2. With Tap or Hold action, the Stretch footswitch slows down the entire digital system of Towers, doubling reverb length and altering the spectrum of frequencies – a pitch-bending effect can be heard throughout the morphing process

3. You can save eight presets to be recalled by this rotary knob. Preset mode is indicated by a yellow Activate LED

The premise of the Towers Stereo Reverberant Filter pedal is to feed your guitar signal through what EarthQuaker describes as "an array of infinitely repeating micro-echoes" into a large cathedral-style reverb. The whole lot then interacts with a resonant low-pass filter that's woven into the signal path for an extra layer of harmonic complexity.

While you get a standard Mix knob to add effected sound to the dry, and a Length knob that determines how long your reverb tail is, the filtering is the key to the Towers' unique sonic aspects, adding a ringing richness and movement. A Filter knob controls how much the filter is mixed into the reverb pathways, determining the depth of harmonic resonance, with the filter Frequency dialling in variations of the effect via three toggle-switched modes that determine how it is applied.

Manual mode is used for setting the Frequency knob where you want it for tonal shading. In Envelope mode you can control the filter frequency with picking dynamics, the Frequency knob adjusting the sensitivity of the envelope and determining how you can emphasise that 'opening filter' movement in the sound. In LFO mode the filter frequency is controlled by a slow moving LFO, with the Frequency knob adjusting the sweep rate. It's here that you'll find the most dramatic stereo effects as the signal pans across the field. With left and right channels working independently, the pedal is at its optimum in stereo, but its richly textured reverb still works perfectly well in mono.

There's plenty to explore, with subtle sonic changes engendered by small knob adjustments, so it's great that there are eight preset slots for you to save and recall any favourite sounds you might discover. For performance, a second footswitch initiates the Stretch function, which slows the processor speed, doubling the length of reverb effect and generating a lo-fi effect that pulls apart the delay lines while smearing the filter and lowering the frequency responses – it's not unlike a tape slowing-down/speeding-up effect. There's also provision to plug in an expression pedal for control of any one of the parameter knobs.

Verdict

Just when you think you've seen enough fancy reverbs and ambience pedals, along comes another. However, EarthQuaker Devices has proven past history within this area and it all comes together in this excellent example of the genre's shifting atmospheric soundscapes. G

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES TOWERS STEREO REVERBERANT FILTER

PRICE: £329
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Stereo Reverberant Filter pedal
FEATURES: Tails or Full bypass, 8x assignable presets
CONTROLS: Length, Frequency, Mix, Filter, Preset selector, Mode switch (Man/Env/LFO), Stretch footswitch, Activate footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard inputs (L/Mono, R), standard outputs (L/Mono, R), EXP
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 85mA
DIMENSIONS: 108 (w) x 121 (d) x 64mm (h)

440 Distribution
0113 2842342
www.earthquakerdevices.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Lovely range of rich dimensional sounds; stereo operation; onboard presets

CONS Stretch function may have limited appeal

THE RIVALS

Walrus Audio's Slöer Stereo Ambient Reverb (£339) reliably does what it says on the tin, while the Lore Reverse Soundscape Generator (£299) is built around reverse delay and reverbs, and the Fable Reverb/Granular Soundscape Generator (£299) combines delay programs in series with sampling algorithms. Strymon's Cloudburst Ambient Reverb (£279, right) will add something otherworldly to ambient soundscapes, and the Old Blood Noise Endeavors Dark Star Stereo Soundscape Reverb (£349) includes dual pitch shifting, bit-crushing and filtering capabilities.

FIRST PLAY

DUNLOP CRY BABY BB535 REISSUE
£229

WHAT IS IT? Reissue of the first commercially available modded wah

2

1

Wah For All

First seen in 1994, updated in 1999 and reissued in 2026, Dunlop's Cry Baby now comes with even more versatility

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln

1. The green LED indicates that the wah is engaged (switch under the treadle toe), while red indicates the boost is active

2. Engaging the boost selector switch will give you an increase in output as set by the adjacent volume knob. It's conveniently located for a nudge from the side of your foot

3. Use the six-position rotary switch to set the frequency range in which the wah operates. The two extremes are 444Hz to 2,117Hz and 173Hz to 847Hz

The Cry Baby has to be the most well-known wah pedal in existence, and a perusal of current manufacturer Jim Dunlop's website reveals no less than 37 different variations in the roster, including signature models for a whole host of players. Now, while there's nothing wrong with buying, say, the Jimi Hendrix edition if that provides exactly the sound you want, it's worth noting that it has one basic voice with a sweep that covers one specific frequency range – great if you want to bash out your version of *Voodoo Chile* but possibly not so great if you want to get wacka-wacka funky with *Theme From Shaft*.

If you like to play a wide variety of musical styles, a better fit for your rig might be the newly released Cry Baby BB535 Reissue, which is based on a long-discontinued model from 1994 known for its throaty growl and sports a choice of six frequency ranges for the sweep, plus a variable boost.

With the solid, weighty construction seen in all Cry Baby units, this model features controls on its right-hand side that can be adjusted by foot if needed. A rotary switch with a hard rubber covering selects the frequency range, while a tiny red mushroom-shaped switch can be pushed in to engage a boost of up to 12dB, set by an adjacent knob. The boost (which only works if the wah treadle is engaged) is based on the MXR micro amp and has plenty of poke to take things up a level as needed.

Treadle action is smooth but firm, with enough stiffness to leave it in a fixed position for cocked wah sounds. There's a reduction of top-end at the toe position as you work through the six frequencies, coupled with an increase of low-end at the heel, so each basically offers a different midrange sweep. Switch position 1 is the brightest and will let you 'wacka wacka' back to the 70s, while switch position 6 provides the darkest tone and a pronounced vocal 'wow'. In between those two you'll find equally valid variations on the expressive vocal quality in which the pedal excels – try them all and find which feels best for you underfoot.

Verdict

Six range options and a boost to lift things when needed makes the Cry Baby BB535 Reissue a very versatile wah pedal that has you covered for whatever style of music you play. G

DUNLOP CRY BABY BB535 REISSUE

PRICE: £229
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Wah pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, up to 12dB of boost, 6x freq ranges: 444-2,117Hz, 385-1,888Hz, 300-1,468Hz, 248-1,217Hz, 214-1,050Hz & 173-847Hz
CONTROLS: Boost switch, Boost volume, Wah Range selector, treadle, Activate footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 12mA
DIMENSIONS: 115 (w) x 251 (d) x 75mm (h)

Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.jimdunlop.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Solid construction; throaty sound; six selectable frequency ranges; switchable boost option

CONS There's no adjustment for the treadle tension

THE RIVALS

Another Cry Baby with six frequency ranges and a boost is the 535Q Multi-Wah (£179), but it has different frequency ranges and a different inductor (the BB535 is said to have a custom inductor tuned for a warm, vocal tone). The Cry Baby Mini 535Q (£189) offers a smaller option. A direct rival favoured by many players is the Jam Pedals Wahcko (£329), which also features six different frequency sweep ranges. If you'd like the simpler operation of a retro classic, look no further than the Dunlop CM95 Clyde McCoy (£199), the Vox V846-HW (£180, right) hand-wired wah, or the less expensive V847-A Original (£95).

the Wishlist

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

Blind Guitars B-24L £18,100

CONTACT **Blind Guitars** PHONE **+33 6 51 05 72 22** WEB **www.blindguitars.com** WORDS **David Mead & Jamie Dickson** PHOTOGRAPHY **Olly Curtis**

Blind Guitars hails from Anglet in France with luthier Virgile Pilon at the helm. Somewhat surprisingly, for such a modern-looking guitar, Virgile's mission is to try to recreate the sound of the acoustic blues players from the 1920s and 30s. But he will build each commission he receives in accordance with an individual musician's needs. "I make each guitar according to the playing, the affinities and the taste of each musician," he says, "with the goal of getting as close as possible to their desire while making them discover an instrument that pushes them towards new creative limits." As is often the case, Virgile began his path towards building by doing instrument repairs. "That was really important in my building process," he continues, "because you get to experience a lot of the different ways of making a guitar, and you explore what works and what doesn't work."

Despite his aim to recreate the tones of a hitherto bygone era, a lot of the techniques Virgile employs are cutting edge, including the use of parabolic tops and a compound radius on the bracing "for a lighter construction without sacrificing strength and stability, thus creating more powerful and responsive guitars". The B-24L resides in the upper echelon of models that Virgile offers and comprises a who's who of premium tonewoods with a top fashioned from Adirondack spruce and a set of old-growth Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides. Along with a flame maple neck, the fingerboard and bridge are Amara ebony, a wood native to Indonesia and as highly prized as its Macassan equivalent for its denseness and durability. The frets are phosphor bronze, which sit in between the toughness of nickel-silver and the more modern stainless steel.

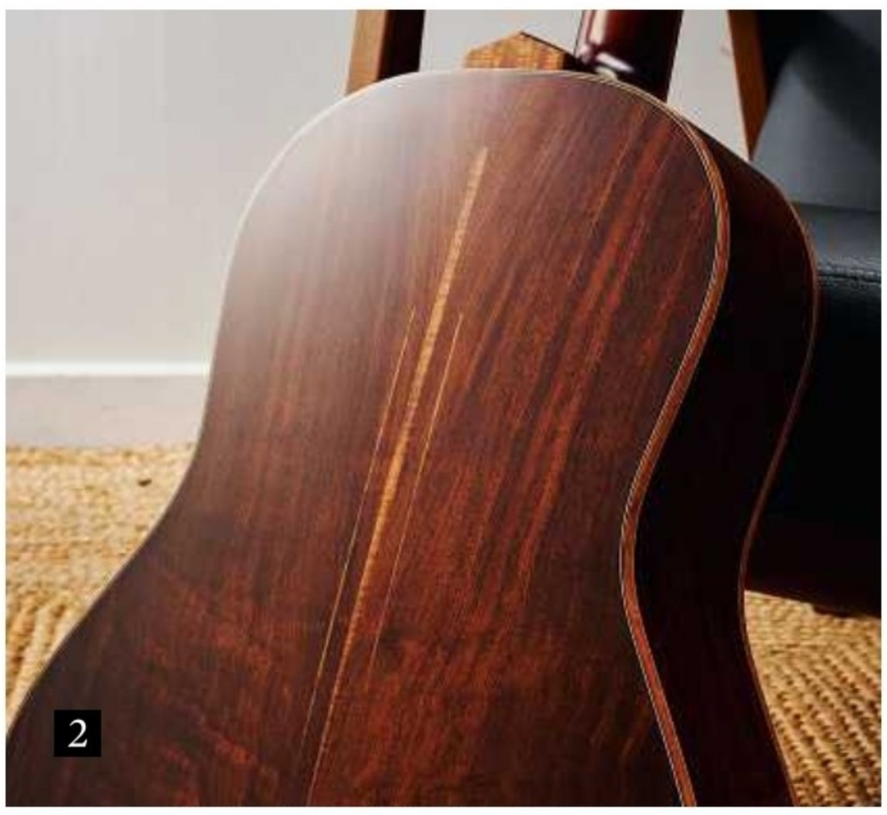
As far as finish and furnishings are concerned, the rosette is Brazilian rosewood, and bindings and headplate back are flamed koa. The face of the headplate is a cocktail of ebony with Amara ebony decoration, and if we look under the hood we find that the braces are Alpine spruce.

With a scale length of a familiar 648mm (25.5 inches) and a nut width of a fingerstyle-friendly 45mm, the Blind B-24L is certainly a stunning instrument with workmanship only found in the topmost realms of lutherie expertise. Smooth and refined – both sonically and aesthetically – but also deeply rooted in the workmanlike guitar designs that defined early blues, it is a vision of roots burnished to a golden glow that transcend their humble origins. G

1. The touches of luxury begin at the headstock end of the B-24L with a fascia decorated with rare Amara ebony, plus a set of Swiss-made Schertler tuners to guarantee the player harmonious bliss

2. Back and sides are fashioned from that absolute king of tonewoods, Brazilian rosewood, this richly coloured set being of the old-growth variety

3. Amara ebony turns up on the B-24L once again in the fretboard. It is prized for its striking black stripes against reddish-brown, pink or gold undertones and heralded for its durability. Note, too, the finely crafted inlay at the 12th fret and the 13th-fret neck joint



4. There's a lot going on underneath the B-24L's Adirondack top that contributes to the guitar's overall sound. Virgile Pilon believes in parabolic tops for superior tone, and employs X-bracing to both the guitar's top and back in order to "control the stiffness and tone of the top during the building process and to be able to be more precise when it comes to the sound requirements of each musician"

5. Old-growth Brazilian rosewood forms the back and sides, the X-braced back being thinned down, which "allows a real expression of the character of the wood"

6. Virgile says that the body shape of the B-24L is the "ideal shape for an acoustic guitar" and sits at the very top of the Blind range

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

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

Fender Limited Edition Player Fusion £1,049 to £1,099

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

JARGON CRUNCHING

'Spin-a-Split' circuit
Many guitars feature coil-splitting these days, most commonly via a push-pull or toggle switch to send one side of the humbucker to earth, effectively creating a single-coil pickup. Fender's 'Spin-a-Split' circuit employs a roller pot to dial down the signal from one side of the pickup, making it a partial coil-split.

Fender has been busy lately...

Well, when the biggest guitar brand on the planet drops a massive amount of new products at once, including updates to the American Vintage II range, Squier Paranormal Series, California Deluxe acoustics and Pro Classic Series, there's a good chance you're going to read about it in a guitar mag. We've chosen to focus on the Player Fusion range here, because... well, it's straight down the middle in terms of price.

Fusion? Will these new additions finally help me understand modes?

We can't promise that, but if you know your Aeolian from your EBow you'll likely find these interesting. Curiously, Fender is referencing the heavier end of the genre here, rather than the jazz-soaked trad-fusion you might associate with the word, claiming to be aimed at the "players who are redefining what heavy looks like". And according to Fender, heavy takes its form in this limited-edition series of models: Telecaster HH Floyd Rose (Black or Aura, £1,099), Stratocaster HSS (Black or Olympic Pearl, £1,049) and a Jaguar Baritone Special (Black or Silverburst, £1,099).

What makes them good for widdly-widdly chug music, then?

You know how the law of tradition states that vintage Fenders complete with a narrow neck radius, skinny

ELECTRONICS
The Strat is an HSS configuration with Noiseless single coils in the neck and middle positions, while the Telecaster is an HH layout with a three-way switch. The Jaguar Baritone Special is treated to two special Fender circuits: TBX tone control and 'Spin-a-Split' coil-splitting

FLOYD ROSE SPECIAL
It's a Tele in shape, including a bound body, but here it's equipped with a Floyd Rose Special. As with every model, it's available in Black, as well as the bold purple Aura finish shown here

PERFORMANCE NECKS
The Thin C-shape maple neck profiles meet ebony fingerboards with a 305mm (12-inch) radius and jumbo frets on these models. At the heel end, Fender has added a curvy contour to make the end of the runway more accessible and comfortable

HARDWARE
These guitars are designed for people who know the notes and aren't afraid to play all of them. As such, Fender has gone to town on the identity, kitting them out with black headstocks throughout, and black hardware on the Stratocaster and Telecaster models

frets, bashed-up paint jobs and lower-output pickups are the pinnacle of Leo's drawing board? These are not that. If you like your guitars how you like your TV – to only have three channels – best look away now.

Try me...

Okay, Fender says that it has "stripped away anything that doesn't serve the riff". All three of them feature an alder body, but in the case of the Strat and Tele it's described as 'slim'. Being aimed at performance, the fingerboards are all ebony and their radius is Fender's

> Fender is referencing the heavier end of the genre here, rather than jazz-soaked trad-fusion

go-to modern curve of 305mm (12 inches), giving plenty of space for choke-free string bends. Add 22 jumbo frets and you've got a playing surface that should serve the riff pretty nicely.

Okay, and have they gone mad with the pickup selection?

No, but these clearly aren't going to be your vintage-voiced slow blues babymakers. The pickups are Player II Modified Humbuckers across the board, which are designed to be high-output. For the Strat, Fender has opted for a pair of Player II Noiseless single coils in the neck and middle position, which should aid when piling on the gain but also keep your cleans crystalline, even when rolling back the volume.

What about the Jaguar Baritone?

Instead of being the shortest scale of the bunch, it's the longest at 686mm (27 inches). Naturally, it's optimised for B-to-B tuning and features some interesting wiring options. First is Fender's 'Spin-a-Split' control, occupying the Rhythm circuit controls, and the TBX (Treble Bass Expander) tone control. This acts as a regular tone control from 0 to 5, is effectively bypassed in its centre detent, and offers a high-pass filter from 5 to 10.

When can I get one?

These will be available in September, which leaves plenty of time to get that sweep picking sorted... **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

GUILD S-300 £734

You can count on Guild to bring fresh body shapes to the drawing board, and its S-300 certainly delivers on that front. Except this isn't a new design at all. Rather, the S-300 silhouette was launched in 1977 and failed to catch on before being dropped during the early 1980s. But now it's back, with a mahogany body, a mahogany set neck with a Soft U-shape profile, rosewood fingerboard (628.65mm/24.75-inch scale) and dual Guild HB-2+ humbuckers. Those are wired to a pair of volume and tone controls with a three-way selector, but Guild has also added a phase switch via a mini-toggle. It'll be landing here in September in Neptune Blue Metallic and Vintage Sterling Metallic finishes.
www.guildguitars.com

ELECTRO-HARMONIX PERCOLATOR HARMONIC SATURATOR £99

Old is the new new this month, and just when you thought the New York pedal maven had done everything, Electro-Harmonix has dug deep into the pedal cupboard for its take on a cult classic with the Percolator. Based on the Interfax Harmonic Percolator Harmonic (a pedal much-loved by late recording engineer Steve Albini), this version may look straightforward, but EHX has packed a lot in. First, it's capable of overdrive and fuzz, selectable via a toggle switch. In Drive mode it promises smooth enhancement of even-order harmonics, while in Fuzz mode, and in conjunction with the Bias control, you can go from vintage to ripping-Velcro aggression. There's a sub-octave, too, which can be adjusted via an internal trim pot. Finally, the dual-mode footswitch can be set to latch or momentary.
www.ehx.com

PHOTO: EHX.COM

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

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

Artist: Steve Louw

Album: Traces Of The Flood (BFD/The Orchard)

Steve recorded this 10-track album at the historic RCA Studio in Nashville, alongside producer Kevin Shirley
stevelouw.com

There's an honesty to South African singer-songwriter Steve Louw's music that hits listeners straight in the heart. On his latest album, *Traces Of The Flood*, he's mixing elements of folk, country and classic rock using tones that will have just about any fan of guitar music grinning from ear to ear. And with long-time collaborator Kevin Shirley (Joe Bonamassa, Aerosmith, Iron Maiden) once again sat behind the desk, these minimalistic songs sound bigger and bolder than the simple chords at their core.

Triple Threat

Ask Steve Louw what makes this record different from the others across his four-decade long career and he'll tell you a lot of it comes down to the addition of a third guitarist. "Adding Bob Britt into the band made a big difference," says Steve. "His friend Doug Lancio has been on my last three albums; they're great friends and have played together in Bob Dylan's touring band. I saw them in Memphis and loved the interaction between them. Their chemistry affected all of us in this band."

Unplugged Victory

It's not often you'll hear a song with three guitarists all playing acoustic, but that's exactly what happened on standout track *Echo Dream*. "We played it a couple of times on electric, but it wasn't working," admits Steve. "So I said to Kevin, 'Let's do it with three acoustic guitars.' He looked at me a bit strangely but gave it a go. The other musicians started adding extra touches. Then I asked Bob to do something electric in a Mick Taylor style and he played this beautiful line. You're hearing three acoustics and a 1956 Strat. It ended up being one of the best-sounding tracks on the album."

Vintage Mojo

As it happens, the 1956 Strat wasn't the only golden-era guitar used on the album. "Bob was playing a 1956 Les Paul Junior on the song *Angeline*, while Doug was playing mandolin," adds Steve. "Bob has an original 60s Princeton. A lot of the album was the Junior going into that. Doug has some interesting and quirky guitars like his Harmony Rocket and there was an Epiphone Casino in the mix, too. We also rented a beautiful 335 12-string from 1966, which you can hear on songs like *Time To Move*. I mainly played my Gibson J-45. It's a 2015 reissue with a darkish sound that really works for me."

Like A Rolling Stone

Bob Dylan's influence on Louw stretches far beyond the personnel heard on this latest release. "Bob's a genius," he says, "a brilliant musician and storyteller. He keeps reinventing himself in unique ways. He knows what sound he wants and always manages to find it. He's more than a writer; he's a leader who knows how to get the best out of people. Songs like *Tangled Up In Blue* are extra special. It has such a great story and rhythm to it. The story is quite long, but the structure is simple, taking you right into the lyrics. Translating the journey of the subject through music is so mystical to me."

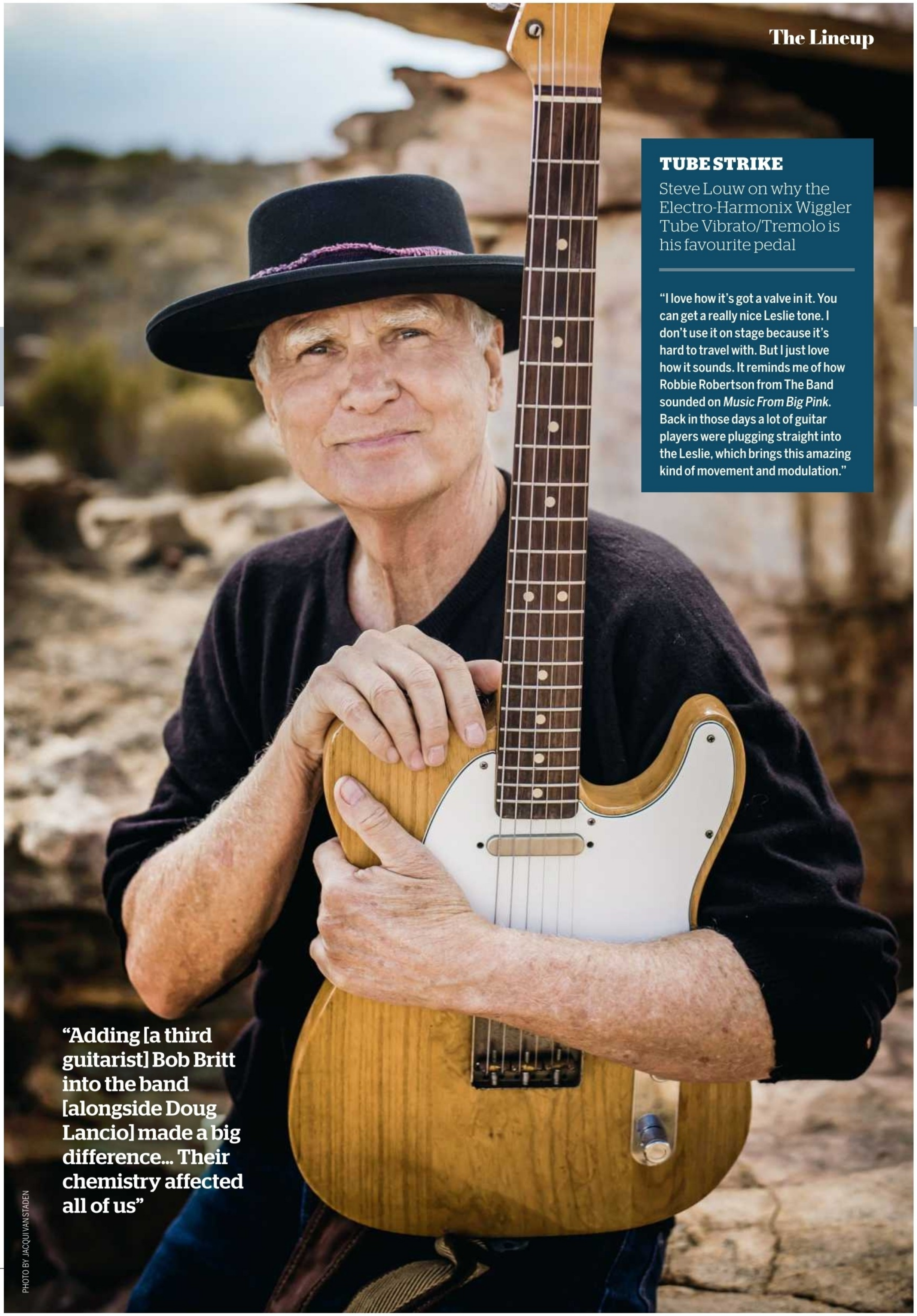
PHOTO BY JACQUI VAN STADEN

A special track on the album is *Echo Dream*, uncommonly comprising three acoustic guitars, plus a '56 Strat

Featuring JoBo

The Kevin Shirley connection led to Joe Bonamassa appearing on three of Steve's most recent albums. "Me and Kevin started working together early on," says Steve. "We both had bands in Cape Town and made our first record together in 1986. Much later on he introduced me to Joe, who played this beautiful solo on *Wind In Your Hair* from my 2021 album, *Headlight Dreams*. Then he played on the track *Mother, Don't Go* from my next album [*Thunder And Rain*, 2022], and *Cruel Hand Of Fate* from my last album [*Between Time*, 2024], using his Fender B-Bender Telecaster. It's been a privilege to have him elevating my songs because he's a musical genius." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Echo Dream*
For fans of: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen



TUBE STRIKE

Steve Louw on why the Electro-Harmonix Wiggler Tube Vibrato/Tremolo is his favourite pedal

"I love how it's got a valve in it. You can get a really nice Leslie tone. I don't use it on stage because it's hard to travel with. But I just love how it sounds. It reminds me of how Robbie Robertson from The Band sounded on *Music From Big Pink*. Back in those days a lot of guitar players were plugging straight into the Leslie, which brings this amazing kind of movement and modulation."

"Adding [a third guitarist] Bob Britt into the band [alongside Doug Lancio] made a big difference... Their chemistry affected all of us"

PHOTO BY JACQUI VAN STADEN

THE LINEUP

Albums

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

PHOTO BY ANNE-MARIE FORKER

Perfect pair: Hackett and Rothery are two of the most revered voices in prog guitar

Steve Hackett & Steve Rothery

The Roaring Waves

InsideOutMusic (available 28 August)

Two prog guitar masters collide in perfect harmony

To say that this album from prog guitarists Steve Hackett and Steve Rothery has been 'eagerly awaited' is a bit of an understatement as rumours of its creation were first heard a decade ago. Indeed, the two Steves first conceptualised working together even further back than that, but it took 10 years or more for the project to come to fruition in the form of *The Roaring Waves*.

Recorded in home studios and Marillion's Racket Club, the compositions began with a few loose jams and gradually formed into a series of seven cinematic instrumental tracks wrapped around the theme of the relentless power of the sea. "You're trying to create an atmosphere... like painting a picture," says Rothery. "Taking people on a journey."

Joined by Ricardo Romano (keyboards and bass) and Leon Parr (drums), there's a symphonic element throughout, with the use of strings and percussion. But it's the two proggers who naturally take centre stage at all times. If you're a fan of either Genesis or Marillion, you'll know what to expect from these two masters of atmospheric guitar. For Hackett, look no further than the soaring melody of the guitar solo on *Firth Of Fifth* from Genesis. And for Rothery, think of the solo to *The Last Of You* from Marillion's *Brave* album. Just a listen to *The Black Sea* here and you'll see what we mean.

The only track that falls outside prog territory is the final cut on the album, *Pacific Coast Highway*, which is an upbeat boogie with Hackett on harmonica, although even this finds its prog roots towards the fade-out. Progtastic! **[DM]**

Standout track: *The Black Sea*
For fans of: Genesis, Marillion, Pink Floyd

Guitarist CHOICE

Hannah Wicklund

War On Women; Calling All Good Men

Strawberry Moon Records (available 28 August)

Gutsy, emotive rock with hard-hitting guitar and a nuanced, feminist soul

We first encountered Hannah Wicklund's considerable talents back in 2018 when she was one of the acts aboard Joe Bonamassa's Blues Cruise in the Med. The eight years that have elapsed have seen her character and quality as a writer and guitarist grow ever stronger. Accordingly, her new long-player, while it has familiar touchstones in classic rock, also has spiritual depth and a nuanced feminist perspective on society, life and relationships that is the album's beating heart. Gutsy rock numbers such as *Cowards & Kings* have real heart and momentum – and Wicklund has the chops to deliver both with elan. But it's the ballads that really show off the insight and emotion of her writing, as on the yearning *Stockholm* or the wounded soul of *Total Truth*. Throughout, the album is painted on a big sonic canvas that suits the emotional dynamism of Wicklund's singing, writing and playing, adding up to a satisfying and surprisingly spiritually galvanised experience. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Cowards & Kings*
For fans of: Bonnie Raitt, Stevie Nicks, Led Zeppelin

Steve Cropper & The Midnight Hour

Watching The Tide

Provogue/Artone (available 28 August)

Final work from much-missed 'Mr Soul'

When Booker T & The MG's guitarist, co-writer of Otis Redding's 1967 hit *Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay* and guitar dynamo behind the hit *Green Onions* passed away in December 2025 at the age of 84, the guitar world mourned. Cropper may not have been the flashiest player around, but his rock-solid contribution to music as a Stax Label first-call sideman was held in very high regard by just about everyone. *Watching The Tide* represents Cropper's final work and features a guest list that includes Eric Clapton, Billy Gibbons, Ronnie Wood and Brian May. As you'd expect, it sits stylistically in that soulful Blues Brothers domain with a garnish of extra funk and boogie. As such, it's a great listen and worthy tribute to one of guitar playing's principal architects. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Stand Right Here*
For fans of: Booker T & The MG's, Stax Label soul

Rodrigo y Gabriela recorded their latest album in Japan

PHOTO BY ENRIQUE LEVYA

Rodrigo y Gabriela
OurHome
ATO Records (available 18 September)

Dreamlike soundscaping from acoustic duo

On Rodrigo y Gabriela's last album, 2023's *In Between Thoughts... A New World*, there was a distinct swerve towards electric guitar instead of the usual nylon-string acoustics that the Grammy-winning pair is known for. This time, they have returned to the flamenco-inspired rhythmic vignettes they have made their own. Well, almost. The presence of guest star Marty Friedman means that there is some occasional single-string soloing, but for the most part Rod and Gabs switch between beautiful, melodic passages and high-energy Spanish outings. They opted to record *OurHome* in Japan: "We've always felt drawn to Japan because of the art and aesthetics and attention to beauty," Gabriela tells us. And the visit has paid off as the album provides a mystical soundtrack to "an enchanted world of rogue monsters and ancient celestial birds, skeletons made of stardust and savage lands of endless rain..." Beautiful. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Akatsuki*
For fans of: Antonio Forcione, Opal Ocean

Cream
Wheels Of Fire (Super Deluxe Edition)
UMC/Polydor (available now)

Cream's 1968 double-album expanded

In '68 Cream was riding high in the popularity stakes. In fact, their third album, *Wheels Of Fire*, was the first double-album to be certified platinum, such were its sales in the UK and US. A mix of studio and live tracks, it found the trio experimenting with non-blues-based compositions – such as *As You Said* and *Passing The Time* – and the live version of Robert Johnson's *Crossroads* with its legendary solo was to become a talking point among guitarists worldwide for many years to come. Now, the album has been expanded, remastered and generally cleaned up and includes tracks from *Live Cream Volume I* and *II*, plus many singles versions, reference reels and alternative mixes. Oh, and it comes with a hardback book, too. A worthy re-release package of a classic album that collectors will enthusiastically applaud. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Crossroads*
For fans of: Blind Faith, Mountain

THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Blur legend **Graham Coxon** on his 'lost' solo album, co-writing with ghosts and what he really thinks of Damon Albarn's guitar playing

Artist: Graham Coxon

Album: Castle Park (Transgressive Records)

Castle Park was recorded in 2011 and has finally been released as Coxon's ninth solo studio album

Graham Coxon doesn't usually like to be reminded of his younger self ("I wore a dreadful shirt that day," he squirms when I tell him that Blur's seminal 1995 show at Mile End Stadium was this writer's first teenage gig. "I really regret that shirt"). But he'll make an exception for *Castle Park*. Recorded alongside the noisy, angular tracks that became 2012's *A+E* – but shelved as his post-Blur career as a musician, visual artist and TV soundtrack composer snowballed – the album is a lovely surprise gift, teeing up this year's reissue programme of the guitarist's entire solo catalogue.

All these years after you recorded it, are you pleased with *Castle Park*?

"Yeah, I'm glad it's out there. No more secrets. It's a little snapshot of me, 15 years ago. I wanted it to come out earlier, but it just never seemed like there was a right time to put out an album that sounded like 60s-influenced trad indie or something. It's a funny old thing. But, yeah, it's good to get it out of the way. I made it with Ben Hillier [producer], and he was always like, 'When's that fucking album coming out?'"

The songs came from the same sessions as *A+E*, right?

"Yeah, there were 20 songs and they fell quite neatly into two different piles. *A+E* was more aggressive and nuts and groovy, perhaps. And *Castle Park* was more loose. A lot of *A+E* came from improvisation, but *Castle Park* was a little more traditional songy-type stuff – verses and choruses. And even an attempt to create a sort of Spaghetti Western with *Dripping Soul*.

"It's not particularly about the actual Castle Park in Colchester, where I had to climb over a rather treacherous fence with friends a few times after it shut on a Friday night. I guess the title seemed to reflect a certain romance and innocence. Even though I was no spring chicken when I recorded it."

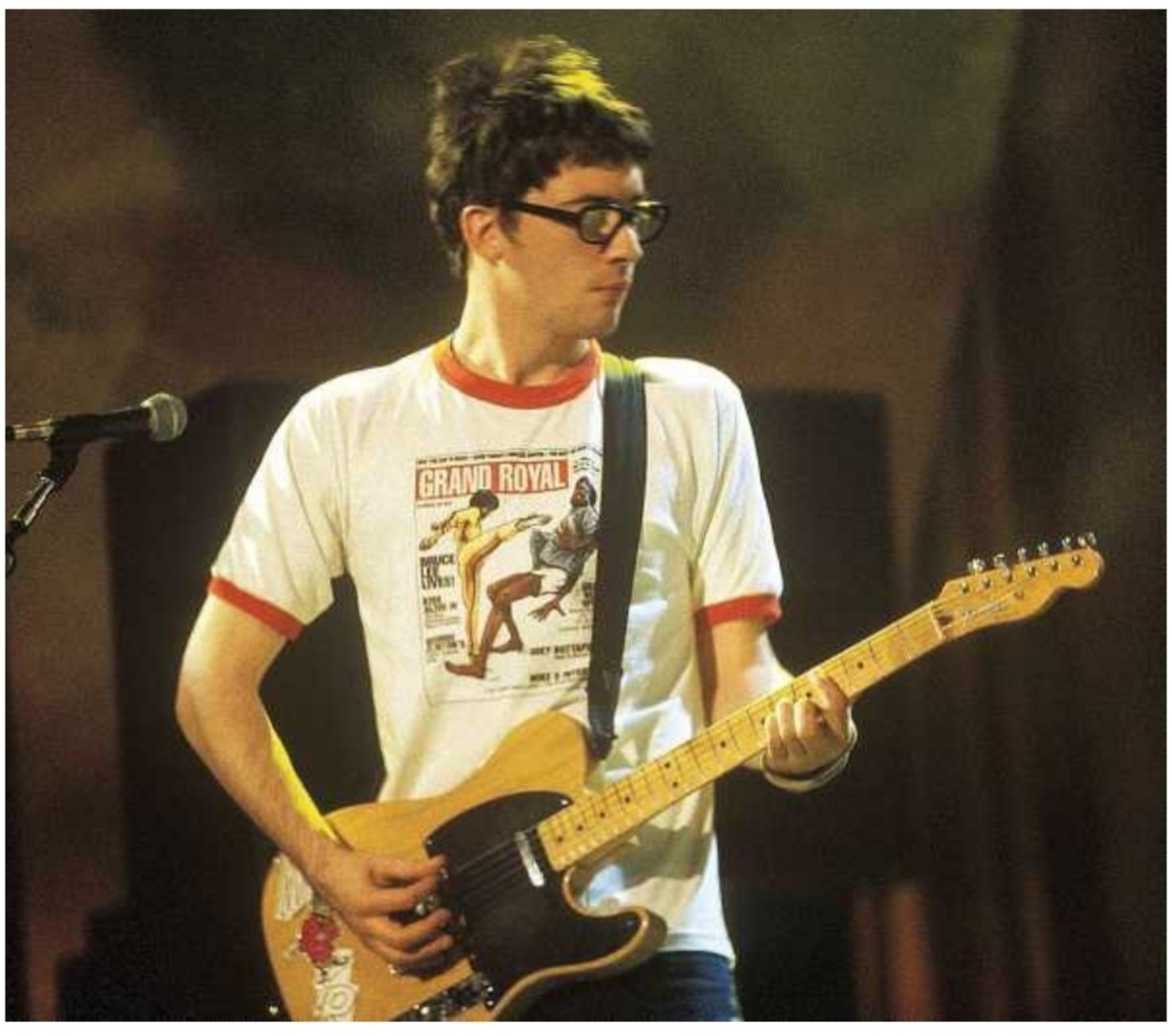
You've said you were heartbroken when you wrote these songs...

"Yeah. There's a quite light-hearted 'I've got dumped' song [*Alright*], but actually, at the time, it hurt. The album starts with a reasonably optimistic vibe. But when I've listened to it again recently, I go, 'Oh my God, this just goes downhill.' It gets more and more weird – there's New Orleans soul, and *Mélodie Pour Christine* is something I used to play on an old Spanish guitar – then gets about as depressing as you can get on the last song, *All The Rage*. But I think that's a really interesting chord sequence, and the way it goes to that middle eight when the French horns come in.

"There's a bit of a Jam influence on *Billy Says*, but it's not as good as The Jam. There's Kinks-iness in there, too, but I'm not as good as The Kinks. I don't think anyone is anywhere near Ray Davies as a songwriter, to be honest. He's our best songwriter we've ever had. Closely followed by Paul McCartney."

What kind of guitars were you reaching for?

"It was the same old thing, really: a Tele, a bit more of a Fender-y sound, that jangle kind of thing. I mean, my old Blur Tele, that butterscotch thing with the stickers – that weighs a ton. It's like playing a Les Paul, basically. And the neck is thick. It's an absolute beast, but I didn't know any different. Then I finally bought an old '68 Tele, which someone had dug a huge hole in and put in a [Patent Applied For pickup]. The neck on that was so beautiful, I had to buy it, and it was so different from that one I struggled with throughout the 90s. So it was quite possibly that '68 on *Castle Park*."



A fresh-faced Coxon on stage with Blur with his heavyweight butterscotch Tele at the height of Britpop in 1995

PHOTO BY MICK HUTSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"Melody, for me, is very important. Theoretically, I'm not terribly good, but I like the idea of having a conversation with the guitar. I don't want to dominate the thing"

Graham Coxon refers to this previously unreleased album as "a little snapshot of me". He says: "I'm glad it's out there. No more secrets"

PHOTO BY JAMES KELLY

“The guitar comes with a lot of baggage, and it can be quite a masculine energy, and so I’m always trying to be very careful how I use it”

Among Graham’s live arsenal is this Sustainiac-equipped Manson GC-01 MA custom single-cut

PHOTO BY HARRY HERD/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

How about your amps?

“A lot of the sounds on *A+E* were just through a tiny, cheap, nasty, solid-state amp. But for *Castle Park*, I might have used my ‘Plexis’. There’s not an awful lot of aggressive sounds on it, or really gainy tones. It’s kind of gentle. But even at the beginnings of Blur, my goals when it came to tone were based pretty much around *Abbey Road*, that warm bluesy thing on *I Want You (She’s So Heavy)*.”

There’s a couple of outings for acoustic guitars, too?

“I think the *Dripping Soul* acoustic was just a Spanish one that was knocking around, just to give it that Ennio Morricone Spaghetti Western thing. *Easy* may have been my old Harmony Sovereign. It was a pig to play, but I kinda wish I hadn’t sold it. Actually, part of the reason I did was to get that Marquis D-28 [points to wall behind him].

“*Dripping Soul* is a funny old song. It seems like each record I’ve made, there always seems to be this kind of strange presence, some sort of feminine spirit. Like, on *The Spinning Top* [2009 album], she was there, and with my work with Rose [Elinor Dougall] in The Waeve, she turns up quite a lot. Rose and I live in this house and we’re not alone here. You just have to keep them happy by writing songs about them.”

How does your solo approach to music differ from playing with Blur?

“Well, with Blur, I have to interpret somebody else and channel what I think they’re saying emotionally in a song, before they even do it. It’s like creating a runway for the aeroplane of their voice to land on nicely. So as not to overwhelm it. Y’know, the guitar comes with a lot of baggage, and it can be quite a masculine energy, and so I’m always trying to be very careful how I use it. I mean, sometimes I just Polyfilla a song with distortion, but normally I try to be considerate!”

How do you know if a song should go in the Blur pile or your solo pile?

“It’s not up to me. It’s up to Damon [Albarn], innit? We’ve all written a little bit for the Blur pile, but, really, that comes down to what Damon’s writing, and that’s a struggle I’ve had since I’ve known him. You know,

how dare I have the flippin' hard neck to write songs when I'm Damon's mate? But he's a bloody good songwriter and he has written some beautiful songs. So it's frightening but inspiring at the same time."

You're reissuing your solo catalogue this year.

"[Deadpan] There are so many overlooked works of genius, I had to get them back out there..."

What was it that made you embark on a solo career with 1998's *The Sky Is Too High*?

"A neighbour was a boxing trainer and he'd decided to write a script for a film about a Victorian bare-knuckle fighter. He came round and said [geezerish growl], 'You're in that music game. Write us a couple of songs.' So I thought, 'Well, this bloke's a boxer. I don't want him to start kicking me about the kitchen.' So I wrote *Me You, We Two* and *A Day Is Far Too Long*, purely for his film. Then I found I couldn't stop. I just thought, 'Cor, this is good. Just get some words and chords together.' It seemed to make me feel something. It was different from drawing and painting."

The Spinning Top was a showcase for your acoustic guitar skills and really surprised Blur fans. Was that an important album for you?

"Yeah. Because the acoustic guitar had always been such a bugger for me. In Blur, I'd just swing the songs along with a bit of strumming, but the guitars I had just seemed so horrible. I was influenced by Bert Jansch, John Martyn and Davy Graham, but I just got tired of sitting there, depressed, saying, 'Gosh, I wish I could play this kind of thing.'

"So one day, I went down Denmark Street, into Hank's, and thought, 'Ooh, look at all this.' I realised there were these small-bodied OM-type guitars with a string spacing that was really comfortable to fingerpick with. I just thought, 'Well, I'm going to buy one of these, then I'm going to go home and hide all my plectrums, and for eight hours a day I'm just going to practise.' I used to have a place in the countryside near Canterbury and I sat at the kitchen table for a week, messed around with tunings and got those songs together. And I got Danny Thompson on the album as well."

Graham says a "feminine spirit" often appears on acoustic tracks like *Castle Park*'s *Dripping Soul*, and on previous recordings such as *The Spinning Top* from 2009

"With Blur, I have to channel what I think someone else is saying emotionally... It's like creating a runway for the aeroplane of their voice to land on"

How do you rate Damon Albarn as a guitarist?

"[raises a suspicious eyebrow] This is a stitch-up..."

No, no, we think he's great...

"Well, he's got his own thing, like everyone has. You know, he rushes it a bit with his strumming. But he does that nice, simple kind of Elizabeth Cotten picking thing. But he always plays those little Taylors. I'm always like, 'Come on, play a proper guitar.'"

Some people say you play guitar like an incredibly talented teenager. The energy, the artiness, the messiness...

"Despite what people say about me – that I just want to be noisy – that's not always the case. I've also got an appreciation for people like Larry Carlton. I love his playing on *New Frontier*. It's like Donald Fagen has gone: 'All right man, you got one take – go!' And you can hear that he's feeling his way through the song.

"Melody, for me, is very important. And there's nothing better than playing the changes, y'know? I mean, I'm not great at it. Theoretically, I'm not terribly good, but I like the idea of having a conversation with the guitar. I don't want to dominate the thing. I don't know all my scales, but [if I did] then I wouldn't play so many naughty notes that do something emotionally interesting. But sometimes I play something and it's absolutely dreadful. It's just the luck of the draw, really!" **[HY]**

Castle Park and reissues of *The Sky Is Too High* and *The Golden D* are out now. Look out for further solo reissues plus UK dates in November ***www.grahamcoxon.co.uk***

PHOTO BY TOMMY JACKSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

The Irreplaceable Dave B

Neville Marten recalls his years of friendship, collaboration and early rivalry with our much-missed colleague and compatriot

I hope you'll indulge me if I turn this month's column over to memories of my dear friend, colleague and erstwhile rival, Dave Burrluck. What goes without saying was his dedication, doggedness, forensic attention to detail, a genuine love for music, and the instruments and industry that sprang up around it.

When I became editor of *Guitarist* in late 1986, Dave was six-string guru for the leading music industry publication of the day, *International Musician & Recording World*. This weighty tome offered in-depth artist interviews and stories, plus coverage of drums, keyboards, recording equipment – and guitars. I'd joined the publishing world directly from CBS/Fender where I'd worked as guitar technician for the UK's importer of Fender guitars. So, despite being on opposite sides of the fence and in many ways sworn enemies, Dave and I were kith and kin in every other respect. *The Guitar Magazine* began as a supplement in *IM&RW*, but soon span off to become *Guitarist*'s first serious rival.

The two of us would be thrown together on industry jollies both here and abroad, including the International Music Fair in London, Frankfurt's Musikmesse, and Winter and Summer NAMM in America. Inevitably, we became buddies: us against the keyboards, drums and woodwind but also each other. We'd never discuss our latest issues lest we leak the crown jewels, our *Cover Story*, to the opposition. But with his journalistic nous Dave tried every trick in the book to gazump us, and I'll confess he succeeded on occasion. *Guitarist* always featured an artist as its main cover shot, but one day I had the notion to feature thinline semis instead (it was Britpop era, after all), so I cadged a couple from the obvious manufacturers. I breathed not a word to Dave, but was recording in London when I received a call telling me the buggers had beaten us to it. Dave's close ties to the industry doubtless led to an insider tip-off.

We had fun times, too. Yamaha laid on a music dealer (plus a couple of long-haired music journos) jaunt to its factory in Taiwan. A few days in Hong Kong were added as a bonus. Dave and I were both veggies at the time and were unable to eat a morsel until about course seven of the stunning banquet served in the factory canteen. That night we all trooped to a karaoke bar in Taipei. Despite us being horrified at the prospect of warbling in front of the assembled dignitaries, I suggested we get it over with and sing something corny together. We chose *There's A Kind Of Hush* by Herman's Hermits and got through the song like a couple of stars, only to realise that these two industry stalwarts, both gigging and recording musicians, had neglected to switch on their microphone.

> "Dave's encyclopaedic breadth of knowledge brought untold kudos to the gear side of the mag... You couldn't get a molecule of BS past him"

Rare Breed

Dave was an extremely private person. In 40 years of knowing him, although he played successfully in bands every week, as well as recording and I believe even engineering in studios, I never really heard him play. But he loved his guitars and owned a fair old hoard of electrics and acoustics. One of my favourites of all time remains his fabulous 50s Les Paul Junior. What a thing!

I tried at every turn to get Dave to defect from *The Guitar Magazine* to *Guitarist*. He resisted for years but finally relented. It didn't go down well in some quarters, though, since parts of the industry felt that *Guitarist* needed his powerful opposition. Others, including me, felt it needed Dave Burrluck more. Dave's encyclopaedic breadth of knowledge brought untold kudos to the gear side of the mag, and before long it was clear that he'd found his true home.

You couldn't get a molecule of bullshit past Mr B. He hated clichés, journalistic sloppiness, was a stickler for measurements (he could talk for hours about Gibson's *actual* scale length), and I was always overjoyed when a review that I'd written got through his ultra-fine editorial sieve unscathed.

Dave's passing leaves a gaping chasm in the guitar world. He will be missed by industry friends and admirers across the globe. As comfortable with corporation moguls as with one-person start-up builders, many of the latter owing their continued existence to his encouragement and tacit endorsement. Not to mention the readers – of *all* his magazines – that he's inspired to go out and spend money on a guitar brand they wouldn't have heard of without Dave. I'll simply rue the passing of a great pal, the likes of whom the music industry and magazine world will never see again. Safe travels, old friend. G

Dave Burrluck (right) pictured with the late Jeff Pumfrett, founder of World Guitars, during a late-90s trip to Hong Kong (with Neville behind the camera)

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEVILLE MARTEN

TIME FOR A CHANGE?

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CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHIER

Tree For Two

Five years on since announcing the project, **Alex Bishop** completes the second guitar in his series that celebrates 50 great British trees

Veteran readers of my column may recall that back in 2021 [in 'Home Grown', issue 475] I announced a series of passion projects: the construction of 50 instruments each celebrating a landmark tree in the United Kingdom (as designated by The Tree Council). This lifelong project has been somewhat of a slow burn, but I am pleased to say that the pressure of guitar show deadlines means the second guitar in the series was completed in May.

The 50 Trees project is a great excuse to experiment with woods that are not necessarily commonplace in lutherie, and my latest iteration pays homage to the redwood of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. This tree with ancient lineage was once widespread across the Northern hemisphere. Redwoods (or for the botanically inclined, *Sequoioideae*) have a totally different tap tone response to commonplace spruce or cedar, and my decision to use it for the soundboard on a Gypsy jazz guitar plunged me into a world of uncertainty. With gorgeous deep figuring in the grain it was far more exciting to look at than your usual plain spruce. But would it sound the part?

One of the key soundboard features of a Gypsy jazz guitar is the *pliage*, a fold in the lower part of the soundboard that raises the bridge to give a boost to the guitar's sonic power. Just like bending sides, it can be difficult to predict how much heat and/or moisture will be necessary for the timber to stay put. That said, this all helps a maker to understand the characteristics of a wood species they haven't used before.

PHOTO BY ALEX BISHOP

Alex's *Sequoioideae* six-string features stunning deep figuring and exceptional sound

> "The clarity of the bottom-end was striking, an E minor chord noticeably pulsing off the guitar back in a way I had never experienced before"

Making Magic

I used a curious-looking jig cobbled together from copper pipes, MDF and 100-watt light bulbs to clamp the soundboard into shape, and I was struck by the ease with which the redwood settled into position. With this in mind, I decided not to leave the heat on too long, in case my glued centre join came apart just as readily...

Keen to ensure that the top of the guitar drew the most attention, I opted for Indian rosewood back and sides in an effort to control my understanding of the role of redwood in the soundboard. Rosewood is probably one of the safest bets for back and sides when it comes to building any style of guitar. Commonly used in classical, folk and Gypsy jazz guitars of all shapes and sizes, it tends to deliver a tonal quality that is exceptionally clear: a robust bass response combined with sparkly top-end clarity. Tried and tested on previous builds, I knew that if anything were to go wrong with the sound of this instrument, the redwood top would be to blame.

With the instrument completed in the white and aiming for this year's 'String Break' guitar show in Harrogate at the end of May to unveil my latest creation, I began to panic as other exhibiting luthiers started to flood social media with titillating pictures of their finished builds. Haunted by glossy profile shots of seductive outlines, moody lighting and intimidating reports of "exceptional tonal response" – I would have to get a move on if this guitar had a chance of at least getting strings on it before the drive from Bristol to Yorkshire on the Friday morning.

A number of late nights and occasional weekends in the workshop soon followed, but late on Thursday evening I finally strung it up. I don't normally take too much from the initial sounds fresh from the workbench; most guitars require a bit of time to bed in properly, not least for the sound to begin to mature as it experiences the vibrational energy of steel strings for the first time. But there was no question that this guitar had something special. The clarity of the bottom-end was striking, an E minor chord noticeably pulsing off the guitar back in a way I had never experienced before.

With 48 trees still awaiting, there's plenty of room left for experimentation. There is a chestnut, elm, whitebeam and even a monkey puzzle tree. If this guitar has taught me anything, it's that some of the most rewarding discoveries lie hidden in materials that have been overlooked. The challenge is finding the courage – and the curiosity – to give them a chance. G

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RAISING THE TONE

The Shape of Things

Charlie Wilkins digs into the radical history of the Gibson Flying V, revealing how a misunderstood design conquered the guitar world

Few guitars command the attention quite like the Gibson Flying V. As a young, aspiring guitarist, I remember that I was totally mesmerised by how aggressive it looked, only to realise that playing one sitting down was a total mess; it kept sliding right off my lap. It's a weird design that you have to adjust to, but that fine line between a trainwreck and a stroke of genius is exactly what Ted McCarty tapped into during Gibson's 'modernist' push in 1957.

Crafted from African korina wood, featuring a split headstock and a body that cut away into a dramatic, sweeping arrowhead, the original Flying V was unlike anything else on the market. Released in 1958, the futuristic design was way too radical for the conservative jazz and country players of the era. Gibson had quietly pulled it by 1960 after only shipping about 100 units. It reemerged in 1967, when Gibson brought it back with some crucial changes, trading the original korina wood for a mahogany body, adding a larger pickguard, and updating it with a stopbar or Vibrola tailpiece. This forgotten failure somehow clawed its way back to define everything from raw Delta blues to thrash metal.

Blues guitarists played a significant role in popularising the Flying V. Lonnie Mack favoured a '58 model throughout his career. Albert King was famously a lefty who flipped a right-handed '58 korina V upside down: the way he grabbed those massive, string bends out of his V proved the design had plenty tone to back up its wild looks. In the late 60s, Jimi Hendrix dragged the V straight into the psychedelic stratosphere, hand-painting his '67 Flying V and completely blurring the lines of what a rock guitar was supposed to look like. By the time the 70s rolled around, Rudolf Schenker had turned the V into a visual trademark for the Scorpions, while his brother Michael took it into absolute guitar shred territory. Michael's legendary half-black/half-white Gibson Vs became the ultimate symbol for blistering, lightning-fast solos, proving that this crazy V shape was more than worthy. By the late 70s, Dean Guitars put its own stamp on the iconic shape with the Dean V. Boasting an oversized wing-shaped headstock and a massive string-through V-plate tailpiece, it was quickly adopted by heavyweight players such as ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons.

By the 1980s, music got harder and faster and the V shape evolved and underwent its wildest mutation yet. Virtuoso Randy Rhoads teamed with Grover Jackson to develop an offset V-shaped guitar named 'The Concorde'. The look was so radical that Grover Jackson slapped his own last name on the headstock instead of his established Charvel logo. He did it purely to protect the Charvel name and avoid alienating his traditional customers if the guitar flopped, accidentally launching one of the most renowned guitar brands on Earth in the process: Jackson Guitars. The sharp evolution of the Jackson models weaponised the V for the metal era, and the Concorde evolved into the iconic Randy Rhoads model that the metal community has fully embraced for the past four decades. Dave Mustaine of Megadeth made the Jackson King V his signature guitar for much of his career.

Even boutique brands are putting their own spin on the V like the radical, custom-built Dirty Boy 'Dirty V' that completely twists the traditional shape. And, today, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram is carrying the torch for modern Delta blues, tearing up stages with a killer, custom-built V-shape from Banker Guitars.

PHOTO BY GILLES PETARD/REDFERNS/GETTY

A famous lefty, Albert King makes a statement with one of his 'Lucy' Flying Vs in 1969

C'est La V

To fully grasp why the Flying V remains an iconic tone monster you have to look closely at how they're constructed. Luthier Matt Hughes of Banker Guitars highlights the tonality and build variations separating generations of the V.

"The 1958 original Flying Vs were carved from a beefier 1 ½-inch slab of korina, whereas the 1967 mahogany reissues were cut thinner at 1 ⅜ inches," he says. "The construction approach shifted completely. On the '67 models, Gibson routed a massive electronics cavity right through the centre to mount a giant pickguard,

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

fundamentally hollowing out the footprint compared with a solid string-through '58 korina body. Recreating those original specs requires rare, thick slabs of korina wood, but when it's done right, that solid construction generates a distinctly snappier midrange and a unique resonance that you simply cannot achieve with thin mahogany."

What fascinates me most as a player is how the V's shape changes the physics of how you play, requiring you to wear it differently. Blues-rock powerhouse Jared James Nichols describes how plugging into a Flying V shatters conventional playing habits.

This mint-condition 58 korina Flying V belongs to Joe Bonamassa and was once owned by a preacher. "I always thought it would be an odd sight going to church and seeing your pastor rocking a Flying V," Joe told us

"It feels less like a guitar and more like a sword... A Flying V demands a different kind of choreography" ***Jared James Nichols***

"When you first strap on a V, you realise it's completely unlike any traditional guitar shape," he tells us. "It feels less like a guitar and more like a sword. Standard instruments just rest on your leg or hug your hip, but a Flying V demands a different kind of choreography. If you try to position it traditionally, it simply doesn't feel right. You have to pull the body directly into your frame, almost like you're giving the instrument a physical hug. It forces you into a more personal, aggressive stance where you're actively shaping the guitar to the contours of your own body. It's deeply expressive and commands you to play it with authority."

The Gibson Flying V was never a failure; it was just waiting for the rest of us to catch up. Today, the value of those rare pristine 1958 original korina wood Flying Vs has skyrocketed. They aren't just vintage guitars any more, they're pieces of six-string fine art that easily command jaw-dropping price tags into the hundreds of thousands. Take Joe Bonamassa's 1958 korina Flying V, affectionately known as 'Donny J', which he bought for over $400,000 – going down in JoBo history as the most he'd ever paid for a guitar when he bought it in 2019. Decades after it originally crashed and burned, the Flying V stands as a masterclass in why we shouldn't judge a design by its first act.

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If you're ready to steal the spotlight, the Epiphone Futura Flying V Custom is begging to cause a scene. This modern machine pays homage to the classic Flying V soul with a solid mahogany body, compound-radius ebony fretboard, string-through-body bridge and stainless-steel frets. At a price that feels almost suspiciously good, it delivers boutique-grade performance without the boutique sticker shock.
www.epiphone.com

Dirty Boy 'Dirty V' $3,500

If you think traditional Vs are too polite, the custom Dirty Boy 'Dirty V' is here to pick a fight. This boutique monster gives the classic design a radical offset twist, matching its dangerous attitude with a mahogany body, heavily checked road-worn finish and premium gold hardware. Outfitted with dual humbuckers for maximum muscle, it's a high-end, modern-day evolution of the V shape with built-in attitude.
www.dirtyboy.co

Jackson RRT-5 Pro Series Rhoads £849

Pushing the boundaries of the original Flying V design, Grover Jackson and Randy Rhoads somehow made one of rock's craziest shapes even more outrageous. The Jackson Pro Series RRT-5 Rhoads sharpens the V's silhouette with offset wings, flat neck, high-output pickups and 24 jumbo frets. This iconic heavy metal shred machine remains one of the most extreme and instantly recognisable V variants ever created.
www.jacksonguitars.com

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‘No 5’ Chords

Follow **Richard Barrett**’s lead and remove the 5th from a chord to discover some jazz-friendly options for solo arrangements

While ‘no 5’ isn’t an official theoretical term, there are a couple of reasons why we might choose to omit the 5th interval of a chord. The first is that on the guitar we can often run out of fingers and/or strings to make up a complex chord voicing. Leaving out the 3rd takes away the harmonic information needed to differentiate between a major or minor chord – which is common in blues and rock but not so much in jazz. Omitting the root isn’t a problem if there’s a bass to cover for us, but in a solo guitar arrangement this may not work so well.

Taking out the 5th from a chord allows us to retain both the root and the major/minor 3rd, plus also provides the potential to add in an extension, such as the 7th or 9th. But the 5th isn’t always omitted from chords out of necessity; sometimes it’s removed to make the sonic space to hear the other notes in the chord. The root and 5th played together is called a powerchord for a reason! Have a go at the chords below and see how ‘no 5’ affects the feel and sound. G

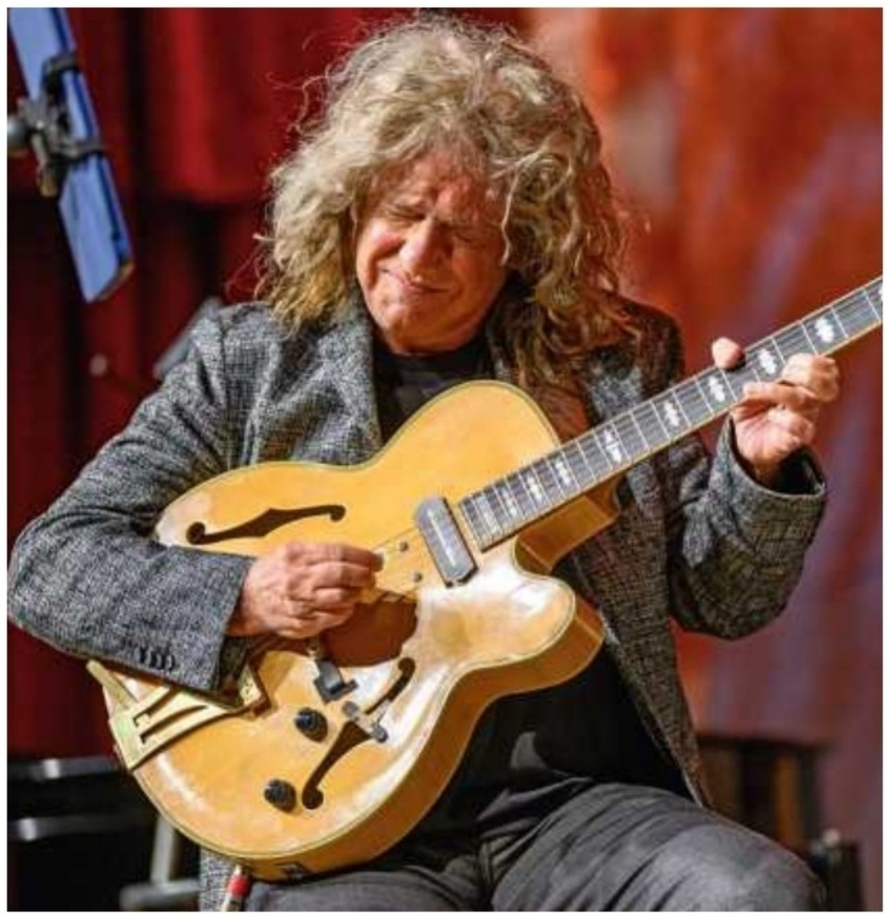
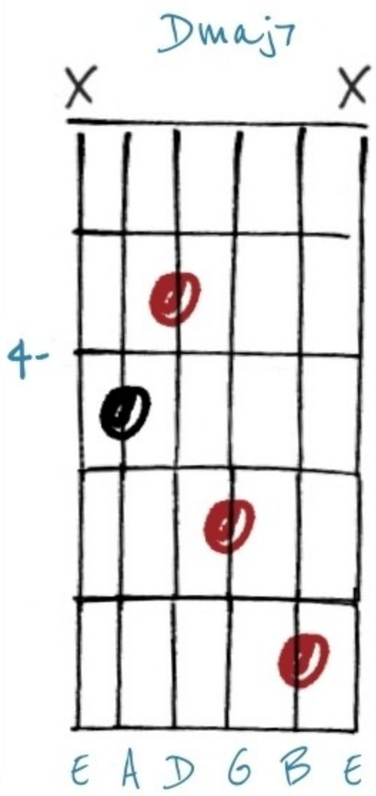


PHOTO BY ROY ROCHLIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR JAZZ FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

Pat Metheny is a master at using ethereal, atmospheric chord voicings that often omit the 5th. Check out the intro to *Sirabhorn* from the album *Bright Size Life*

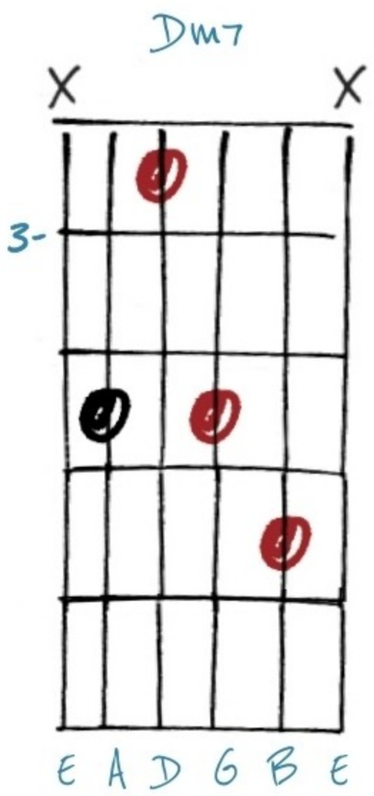
Example 1

This voicing of Dmaj7 has a very different feel from more conventional voicings that include the 5th (A). The 3rd (F#) and maj7th (C#) are allowed to breathe more, not so anchored by the ‘powerchord’ overtones of the root and 5th played together. As this shape uses no open strings, it’s also movable.



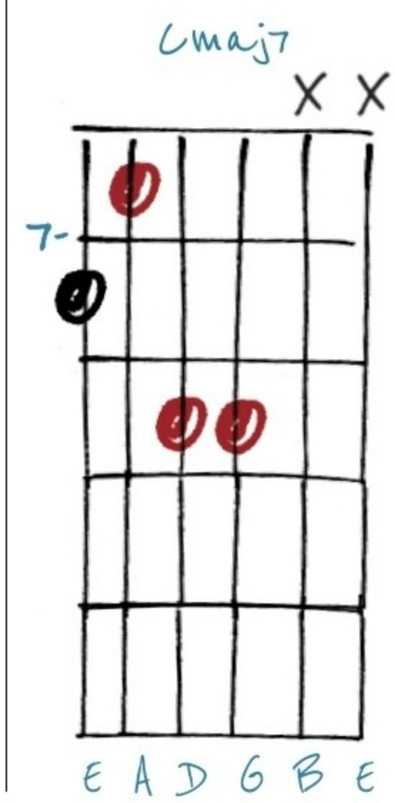
Example 2

By shifting everything but the root down a semitone, we get this Dm7. It seems much darker and more jazzy sounding without the 5th. Note, we have a double of the minor 3rd (F) on the second string. By lowering this a semitone to E, we can create a lovely Dm9 chord.



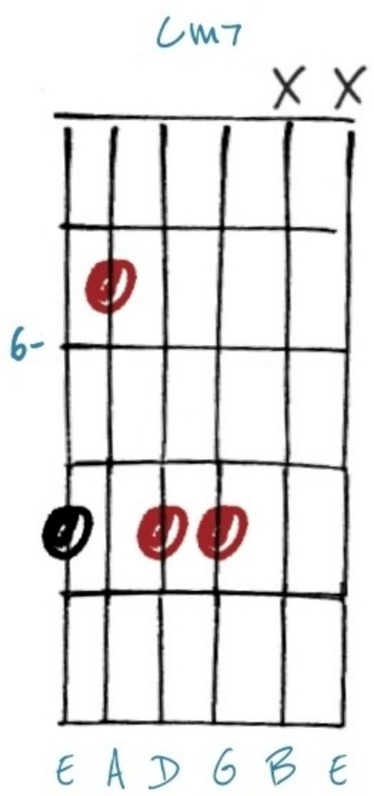
Example 3

This Cmaj7, like all the other examples, features no open strings. This gives it a much warmer sound than the open string voicings we might want to use on acoustic guitar. We skip straight from the root (C) to the major 3rd (E) then the maj7th (B) going across the strings. Note there is another E on the third string.



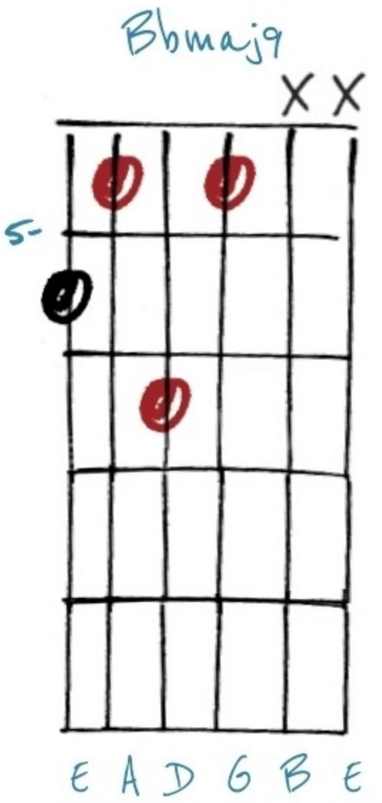
Example 4

Using the same principle as Example 2 – dropping everything but the root by a semitone – we get this Cm7 chord. It’s a notably different flavour from the regular ‘chordbook’ Cm7, conjuring images of a dimly lit jazz club, rather than the more rock ’n’ roll feel of the former.



Example 5

Moving beyond major and minor 7ths, this B♭maj9 hints at the further extensions that are available if we relieve our fretting hand fingers of the responsibility of playing the 5th – which, in this case, would be F. Again, there are no open strings and this voicing is movable to any position.



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THE BOYS...

Many, many thanks for the Brian Robertson interview in issue 539. As a huge Thin Lizzy fan, I just hope Robbo is aware how much he is truly appreciated and adored by us. With all due respect to Scott Gorham and the other guitarists that followed Brian, Thin Lizzy were never as great once Robbo had gone. Sure, there were isolated moments and some chart hits, but, on the whole, it wasn't the same.

Thin Lizzy will always be Phil Lynott's band. He was the main songwriter and vocalist of the group that he originally formed with Eric Bell and Brian Downey. But for many of us it was Brian Robertson that was the difference. From 1974 to 1978 he was the magic that took Lizzy from being a good band to a really great one. Cheers, Robbo, and thank you!

Rich Snowdon

Glad you enjoyed it, Rich – and yes there was something really special about that line-up of Lizzy. Robbo's time in the group spanned its first, exuberant period of real success and that excitement and edge can be heard all through those records to this day. The chemistry – and Robbo's artistry on the Les Paul – is absolutely undeniable.

HOG HEAVEN

Just a line to say that after Jamie Dickson's glowing review and some deliberation, I ordered a Martin Jason Isbell Retro O-10E from Peach Guitars, and to say I'm pleased with it is an understatement. The build quality, playability and intonation are all top-notch, sounds great now and will only improve with playing time, which it's getting plenty of. Unbelievable value for money, too, for an all-mahogany guitar.

Dave Kirkpatrick

Thanks, Dave (Jamie here). Wish you joy of your new acoustic and it's always nice, as a reviewer, to play something you have absolutely no reservations in recommending. For what it's worth, I'll say again that Martin's all-mahogany guitars have always punched above their weight. There's just something about their warm and characterful sound that doesn't disappoint and, as they tend to be among the more simply decorated models Martin makes, they're not vastly expensive, either. Enjoy.

FRAMUS STORY

Thank you for your article on German archtops in issue 537. Maybe I can add a personal story to the topic. In 1955 my late father bought a Framus Black Rose de Luxe here in Germany, which cost him 386 German Marks back then (including a hard case and a pickup), which was way more than he earned per month. So he made a downpayment and paid the rest off in the following months from the money he made from gigs in clubs and dance halls. Later in the 1970s he taught me my first chords on this very guitar, before I got my own first electric.

After my father passed, the guitar spent many years standing around in my office until I decided to have it restored by a local luthier. So now it is playable again and sounds really good. Since the neck does not have a truss rod it has a substantial bow and thus is not on the

STAR LETTER

LESS IS MORE?

I am currently listening to artists who, although playing fewer and more subtle notes on the guitar, do so with all their heart and soul to make things sound melodic. This makes the entire song open up and flourish, which touches the heart of the listener. BB King is a master who conveyed so much he had to say with fewer notes. He knew when to play a note so that it blended well with the song.

Mark Knopfler, on his solo albums, is doing wonders by blending his playing with the theme of the song, which makes the listener feel that he or she is a part of that story. His guitar playing takes me to the places he features in his songs. John Mayer is another master guitarist who makes the guitar sing in every solo.

There is nothing more beautiful than the sound of a guitar blending well with the theme of the song.

Abhinandan Ghosh

Thanks, Abhinandan, couldn't agree more – during discussions in the *Guitarist* office, we've sometimes floated the idea that if you want to be really *loved* as a guitarist – not just renowned for your technical prowess – you have to play slow enough and melodically enough that listeners can sing all the notes you play in a solo. Think of Don Felder and Joe Walsh's back-and-forth extended solo in *Hotel California*. Barring some little flurries, you can sing it all easily. Likewise, check out Knopfler's fine playing on solo album gems like *Drover's Road* from his 2018 album *Down The Road Wherever*, or his famous intro to *Brothers In Arms*. The notes move you because they have time to hit the target, each one deepening the emotional impact of the song. A good solo should launch off where words fail and carry you higher. A slow, perfectly phrased solo is the perfect vehicle for that.

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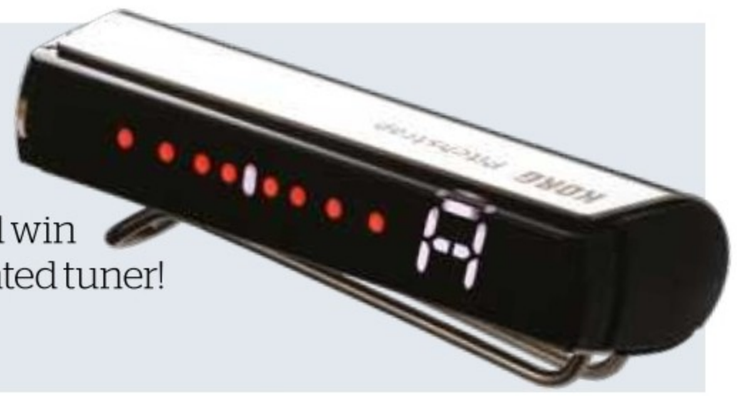


Has the US-made Pedulla Orsini EL already had its moment in the sun?

comfortable side to play. But I will never sell it because it reminds me of my dad and my own first steps into guitar playing.

Rupert Grübl

Thank you for sharing touching memories of your father and his guitar, Rupert. These things are, on one level, only wood and steel, but the memories and ties of emotion to guitars are powerful things, never more so than when a parent has introduced us to guitar and inspired a lifelong love of the instrument. And, no, some things just can't be sold because the money isn't worth it!

PEDULLA ORSINI

Somewhere around 1978 I was taking lessons in Massachusetts from a guy who played a very unusual, upscale LP-type, made locally just south of Cape Cod. All handmade, neck through body, solid-wood pickup surrounds, backplate and truss rod cover, Schaller tuners, Dimarzio Super Distortions with split and phase switching, and a hand-etched scrimshaw inlay in the headpiece. I put my '76 Les Paul Standard in the local music shop on consignment with my eye on acquiring one of these beauties – a Pedulla Orsini EL – and I wound up with the coveted EL, which I still have to this day. I've made a few mods, primarily sanding the body from its original sunburst to raw wood, and replacing the Dimarzios with Seymour Duncan P-Rails, which sound fantastic.

I know that Pedulla Orsini moved on to become the MV Pedulla company, which made high-end boutique basses such as The Buzz Bass, then eventually closed up shop. Yet there's very little written about their Pedulla Orsini six-string predecessors. Are these fine and certainly rare guitars considered collectibles in any way and how many of these are in existence?

Sam Hallenbeck

Hi Sam, full disclosure here – we honestly don't know! A quick search through the archives reveals that a double-cut Pedulla Orsini EL-10 came up in 2023 at Gardiner Houlgate guitar auctions. It fetched a hammer price of £360 from a pre-sale estimate of £300 to £500. So we're forced to conclude they are perhaps a little too obscure to be highly collectible, certainly in the UK. That said, it seems a ludicrously accessible way to own a bit of mid-70s American lutherie. This kind of through-neck guitar replete with micro-switches was very in vogue during that era and it is curious how that style of electric has yet to have a real second wind on the vintage market, with the possible exception of Ibanez's Artist electrics. But we rather like the Grateful Dead-ish vibe to it, and it's wonderful to hear yours is still giving you a lot of enjoyment. Maybe you'll spark a trend via your letter and enthusiasm for it...

DAVE BURRLUCK

1956 – 2026

Remembering *Guitarist*'s inimitable reviews editor, whose expertise and generosity will be greatly missed by the guitar community worldwide

Words David Mead

PHOTO: FUTURE PUBLISHING

DAVE BURRLUCK

December 1956 – June 2026

Of all the obituaries relating to industry figures that we have published in the magazine in past months, this one has been the hardest to write. When you lose a member of a tightly knit team suddenly and unexpectedly, it's akin to grieving a family member. And the sense of loss is definitely on that kind of level among the magazine staff. After all, Dave was entrenched in guitar journalism well before any of us had even thought of doing what we do today.

Despite being such a well-known music industry figure, Dave Burrluck was an intensely private individual who rarely, if ever, talked about himself – unless it was related to guitars, of course. His father was an instrument builder and this was a course Dave set himself on at one phase of his career. Building guitars was to set him up for his later role as a discriminating critic of guitar builds far and wide, as well as being an advisor and enthusiastic voice at the other end of the phone to many luthiers, eager to learn from the vast wealth of experience he had gained over the years.

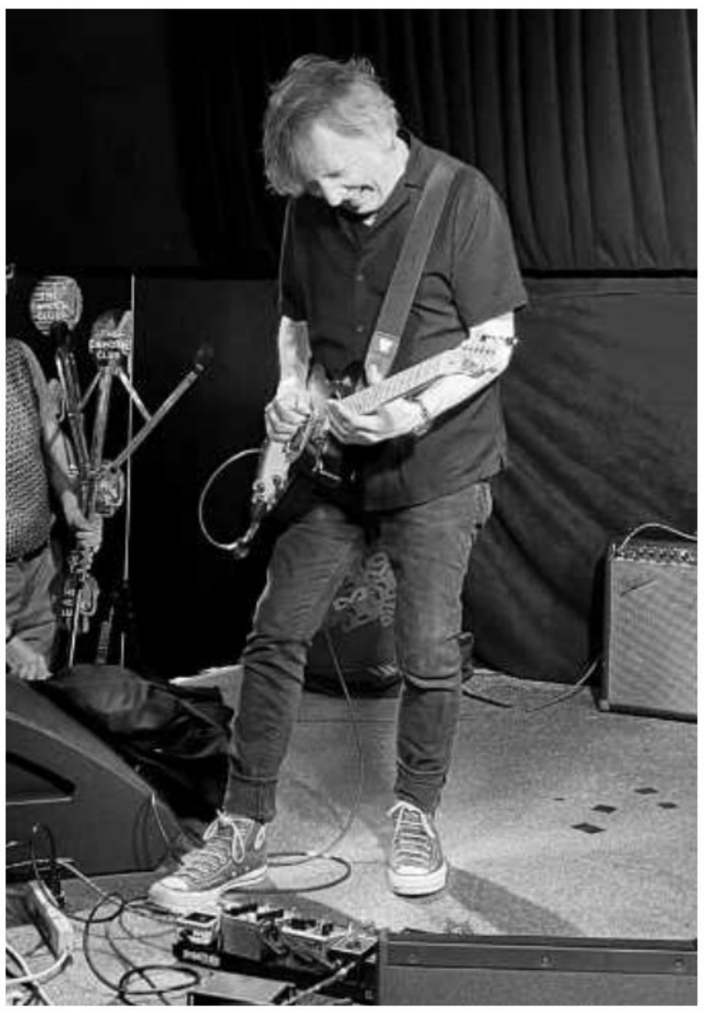


PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUREN DUNCAN & LUCY BURRLUCK

> *"Dave undoubtedly left the guitar world a better place than he found it, and we all owe him a debt of gratitude"* SETH BACCUS

Seth Baccus tells us: "I first met Dave nearly 30 years ago through Andy and Hugh Manson. Dave was always a passionate champion of British guitar makers, and both Andy and Hugh held him in the highest regard. When I began building guitars, Dave was incredibly supportive and encouraging. His kind words about my work over the years meant more to me than he probably ever knew. He was always generous with his time, knowledge and wisdom, all delivered with his wicked sense of humour. Dave undoubtedly left the guitar world a better place than he found it, and we all owe him a debt of gratitude."

Naturally, building, modding and generally tinkering with guitars wasn't everything within Dave's compass. He was also a fine guitarist, too, having played in bands from his teenage years right up until illness claimed him. We spoke to James Digings, who played drums in one of Dave's early music adventures. "I first met him in Colchester when we were both about 15," James tells *Guitarist*, "and we started playing in a local band called Firebird, which was a four-piece (guitar, bass, keyboards, drums) playing fairly heavy rock: Uriah Heep, Black Sabbath, et cetera. I was on drums, and Dave was the first guitarist I ever played with, using guitars he made himself under the guidance of his father, who made a variety of instruments in his home workshop. He was an impressive guitar player, but I don't think he was totally committed to the heavy rock genre, as I remember him playing me a Lindisfarne LP, saying they were his favourite band."

This early experience of the music business very nearly led to success – and could have set the teenage Dave on a very different course. "After I left Firebird," James continues, "they were mysteriously 'discovered' by 70s pop impresario Barry Blue, producer of early hits for the band Heatwave, such as *Boogie Nights* and *Always And Forever*. He changed the band's name to Patches, dressed them in patched outfits, and wrote a single for them called *Telltale*, which was a big hit in Colchester but sadly nowhere else."

Steve French, who played keyboards with Patches, remembers: "We did the national TV show *Rock On 45* but sadly failed to trouble the Top 40. After a couple more failed singles, Dave decided to go to college to study English or journalism."

Alas, with fame in the halls of rock 'n' roll eluding the young Dave, he soon found himself writing for *International Musician & Recording World* where his experience as both player and builder came into play. That magazine morphed into *The Guitar Magazine* in the early 1990s and was seen as a rival to *Guitarist*, but that rivalry was always friendly – after all, we all did the same job, it's just that we saluted different flags. While he was with *The Guitar Magazine* Dave wrote *The Player's Guide To Guitar Maintenance* (Balafon/Backbeat, 1998), which became something of a must-have among guitarists eager to tweak their instruments under his guidance.

Another book of Dave's that became an essential reference was *The PRS Guitar Book* (Outline Press, 1999). Since its initial release, the book has received several updated and revised editions, including a notable third edition released in 2007, and *The PRS Electric Guitar Book* followed in 2014.

It was around the turn of the century that Dave joined the ranks of *Guitarist* as reviews editor, serving under Neville Marten, Mick Taylor and Jamie Dickson, respectively, as editors. Here, Dave's reputation blossomed further and, judging from the outpouring of love and respect for him when we announced his passing on social media, he was to become known as one of the world's top authorities on guitars. His depth of knowledge really was that astounding.

His voice in reviews was always fair and precise, and his passion for instrument tinkering was embodied in 'The Mod Squad', which quickly became the flagship resource for DIY tweakers and amateur builders alike. But pro builders would often run ideas past him, too. We'll leave the final words to another great British builder, Patrick Eggle: "I never had a quick chat with Dave, this was virtually impossible. His enthusiasm was infectious. His knowledge of guitars and those who build and play them, massive. I will miss our conversations, his encouragement and sage advice. I've got a new model of guitar almost finished. I really, really wanted him to see it..." G

DAVE BURRLUCK

1956 – 2026

When the news of Dave's passing broke, the music industry responded with some touching tributes from guitar manufacturers, big and small

Compiled by David Mead

PHOTO BY FUTURE PUBLISHING

Paul Reed Smith PRS Guitars

"Dave Burrluck was a dear friend. Many of his articles became legend in the guitar community. He was very passionate about guitars, guitarists and guitar making, and was England's best electric guitar historian. Dave had a unique, character-filled style.

"He used to ask me the most aggressive questions to start his interviews with a goal of digging deep into what people would truly be interested in. Whatever the particular question was, I would react with, 'Are you *really* going to lead with that?' and then he would laugh. He wasn't being mean; he was trying to get me off centre and thinking in a new way. It helped him drive directly to the heart of the new topic he was reporting on. Although very supportive, he wanted to challenge people and get the real meat on the bone.

"He was big-hearted, intelligent and tough at the same time. It made his writing very honest and critical in a professional way that his readers respected. In addition to his humanity, he was special to us in part because he documented our history in *The PRS [Guitar] Book*. On a personal note, his world revolved around his daughters, Lauren and Lucy, and I just learned about his three beautiful granddaughters. When I heard he passed, it hit hard."

Jack Higginbotham PRS Guitars

"We lost one of the great ones. Dave was a master at his trade. His love for our industry and our company was beautiful. With Dave, it wasn't just a review or just an interview; it was a real conversation about guitars and guitar design. He was absolutely interested in the intention of the instrument and all the details. I told him once in a recorded interview about an upcoming release and hadn't meant to. He was so good at his craft that I always forgot there was an interview happening, and he always got more out of me than I intended. He will be missed."

Decades of playing and a deep appreciation of guitar craft gave Dave a rare level of expertise in the industry

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUREN DUNCAN & LUCY BURRLUCK

"He was big-hearted, intelligent and tough at the same time. It made his writing very honest and critical in a way that his readers respected" PAUL REED SMITH

Joel Richardson
Blackstar Amplification

"Dave was a great champion of Blackstar from the very beginning. I remember him visiting us in a hired studio on the outskirts of Northampton before the brand had even officially launched, and he remained a supporter right through to March of this year, which was the last time I heard from him. Throughout that journey, he was always generous with his support, honest in his opinions, and unwavering in his passion for great guitars and guitar products.

"One of my fondest memories of Dave was a night in Bath with him and Mick Taylor. Listening to the two of them talk about guitars was both fascinating and humbling. Their depth of knowledge, attention to detail and enthusiasm for the instrument left me feeling like a complete amateur. It was a reminder that Dave's understanding of guitars wasn't simply professional expertise; it was a lifelong passion.

"What makes that evening even more memorable is how it ended. Long after last orders had been called, Dave and I found ourselves sitting in the hotel garden, drinking and talking about life.

DAVE BURRLUCK

December 1956 – June 2026

"GUITARS… AND SO MUCH MORE"

A heartfelt tribute from Dave's daughters, Lauren and Lucy

Dave was a proud and playful grandfather to three granddaughters

"Our dad grew up in Colchester, where his father made violins. He spent much of his childhood in his dad's workshop, watching, learning and absorbing the patience and precision that goes into building an instrument by hand. That appreciation for craftsmanship stayed with him throughout his life.

"Anyone who read his writing will have noticed how much attention he gave to the guitar as a physical object – the craft as much as the sound. This thread carried through his whole life and career. He briefly tried his hand at teaching woodwork at a secondary school, though that was short-lived… they wouldn't let him wear his DMs to work.

"Dad loved playing the guitar as much as he loved writing about it, and he was an exceptional guitarist. While still living in Colchester, his first band, Nautyculture, appeared on *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in 1981. He later moved to London and was a key member of many bands over the years. If dad wasn't on the stage, he was behind one helping out. Music was never something he observed from a distance.

"We can't think about dad without thinking about guitars. They're woven into almost every memory we have of him – the sound of him playing, guitars propped up in every corner of the house, hours spent writing about them, travelling to review them, seeking out the people who made them, and even building guitars himself for friends over the years. He even took us on a trip to the PRS factory in the States in 2000, which felt entirely normal at the time and only gets cooler the older we get. When we were small, we danced around the living room to whatever he was playing. As we got older, we watched him perform with various bands and collaborators. We were always in awe of his talent, and always incredibly proud.

"We can't think about dad without thinking about guitars. They're woven into almost every memory we have of him"

"He had that rare gift of genuinely loving what he did. He was a perfectionist in both his playing and his writing. His reviews were always honest and fair, and he approached music with an open mind. A regular viewer of *Later… With Jools Holland*, he would listen carefully to every performance before reaching his own conclusion – which wasn't always glowing – but that never stopped him tuning in the following week. He believed everything deserved a proper hearing. As a father, he was much the same. He never offered praise he didn't genuinely believe. If dad told you something was good, you knew it really was. That honesty was exactly what made his opinion worth having. When dad spoke, people listened.

"Dad was also so much more than guitars. He loved photography, exhibitions, mooching around London with a cup of coffee in hand, losing himself in Foyles and camera shops, and cooking for friends and family. He loved to travel, too – from the English coast to his annual trips to Cádiz, where he would listen to flamenco guitar drifting through the streets. He was almost always behind the camera at family occasions, quietly capturing moments that might otherwise have been forgotten. He was funny, thoughtful and gentle, with a quiet kindness that drew people to him. His three granddaughters absolutely adored him; their faces lit up the moment he walked into the room. He was a doting, playful and wonderfully silly grandad.

"No one person knew every part of dad. Every conversation we've had since losing him has revealed another story, another memory, another side of the man we knew and loved. We were always proud to say, 'That's my dad.' We still are."

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUREN DUNCAN & LUCY BURRLUCK

The conversation moved far beyond guitars and gear, and I got to see the warmth, humour and humanity behind the industry figure that so many people knew and respected.

"In an age where the word 'influencer' is often overused, Dave was a true influencer in the purest sense of the word. His opinions mattered because they were earned through experience, integrity and an unrivalled knowledge of guitars and guitar gear. If Dave thought something was good, that carried genuine weight throughout the industry. His endorsement couldn't be bought; it had to be earned.

"Dave made an enormous contribution to the guitar world and helped shape the way countless players, manufacturers and retailers thought about instruments and equipment. More importantly, he was someone whose enthusiasm for guitars was infectious and whose knowledge was respected by everyone fortunate enough to know him.

"He will be greatly missed, but his influence on our industry will remain for many years to come."

Be it at family gatherings, gear shows or The Mod Squad workbench, Dave was often to be found behind a camera

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAUREN DUNCAN & LUCY BURRLUCK

"Dave's opinions mattered because they were earned through experience, integrity and an unrivalled knowledge of gear" **JOEL RICHARDSON, BLACKSTAR**

Tim Shaw Fender

"Dave was one of my favourite gear journalists; he understood guitars at a level that was seldom matched by his peers, and his love for them and his curiosity translated into writing that was as enjoyable as it was informative. He asked, he learned and he taught with enthusiasm, and I'll miss him."

Patrice Vigier

"I met Dave several decades ago, through his work as a journalist. It became clear to me that he was one of the two best technical journalists in our profession. Indeed, he did not simply take our claims at face value; he took the time to verify them, to explore them in greater depth and, often, to enrich them.

"Generally speaking, he was meticulous and rigorous in his testing because he always took the time to understand the products, analyse them and get to the heart of things. That is why I used to give him our latest models to test as a first exclusive: we always included one or two innovations that might spark his curiosity.

"I know he respected my work, and that naturally brought us closer. But what truly brought us together was that he placed his passion for the guitar above commercial considerations.

"Another reason I had such respect for him was that he was one of those highly competent people who never put themselves forward, preferring instead to stand back and serve their mission: to inform.

"He used to tease me kindly about my French accent, and I will miss that terribly, just as his passing will leave an important void in our profession. I am sad, and my thoughts are with his colleagues as well as his loved ones, whose pain must be immense."

Peter Wolf Knaggs Guitars

"I had the pleasure to become acquainted with Dave in the mid-80s. Throughout the years, trade shows, visits and working together across different brands, it turned into a friendship. Dave was one of the most prolific writers and an honest, knowledgeable, sincere and lovely bloke. His passing is a great loss for our industry as a whole. RIP, brother!"

Pepijn 't Hart Eastman Guitars

"We received the sad news that legendary guitar journalist Dave Burrluck, a true rock 'n' roller and guitar connoisseur, passed away unexpectedly. Dave has written many amazing reviews about our instruments, and inspired and drove us to think 'original' – in that sense he was a true inspiration. We contacted him to ask his advice because of his vast knowledge of electronics; he was the ultimate professional tinkerer.

"As a writer for *Guitarist* magazine, he was a legend on his own. We will miss him dearly and send our heartfelt condolences to everyone at *Guitarist* magazine but especially to Dave's family and loved ones. We are sure he is talking to Jimi Hendrix now, in guitar heaven – thank you, Dave."

Leigh Dovey PJD Guitars

"Dave was an incredible inspiration to me and so many others in the industry. His advice and passion helped shape so much of what I do today. I remember our first meeting like it was yesterday – we sat around his kitchen table talking about guitars for hours, laughing and joking as though we'd known each other for years. I'll miss him greatly, not only as a hugely respected figure in our industry but as a friend. Thank you, mate." G

BILLY DUFFY

The Cult's long-time guitarist on channelling Hendrix through a Gretsch, nailing his sound on *She Sells Sanctuary*, and keeping the spirit of rock alive

Words Andrew Daly
Photo Mick Peek

As a young player, the Manchester-born Billy Duffy dreamed relentlessly of being in a rock band. "It's always been about a love of music," he tells *Guitarist*, and early 70s rock was a clear catalyst, "where the guitar solo would be something you could whistle. I can admire 'technicians', but I like players who play from the heart, and not from the head." And The Cult answered his prayers.

With his long-time partner in crime, the band's charismatic vocalist Ian Astbury, mega-hits such as *She Sells Sanctuary* and *Fire Woman* were created. "I never wanted to sit in my bedroom doing scales on guitars," he says. "I wanted to get out and have a good time. In The Cult, we were living it 24 hours a day. I didn't differentiate between doing a gig, being in rehearsals and being at home because there wasn't time off. It was just kind of immersive, to use a very modern phrase. We were in it."

By the late 80s, The Cult were on top of the world. "We supported Metallica for 60 shows after *Sonic Temple* [1989]," Duffy says. "We learned how to win over crowds and Metallica loved us – and still do."

But like many rock acts who lived the high life in the 80s, grunge toppled The Cult from their perch, leading to a hiatus for the band, followed by a reunion and a period of unevenness into the 2000s. By 2006, however, the band made a more stable comeback, with four albums, the last being 2022's *Under The Midnight Sun*. "We're lifers, you know? For me and Ian, this is what we wanna do," Duffy says. "There's nothing else I wanna be. All my dreams have pretty much come true."

What initially got you going on guitar?

"The mid-70s were kind of my era. I was born in 1961, so I'd say in '74 or '75 I caught the next wave of bands after David Bowie, Alice Cooper and Roxy Music. All we were really into was music and football in grey old England [laughs]. When you're young and you start off playing guitar, your aspiration is to play the riffs your heroes wrote. So when I left high school in 1977, the punk thing happened in England and I'd literally go see any band that I could sneak out to see in Manchester – if they were a rock band. At first, that was Queen, Rush, Thin Lizzy and Uriah Heep, but when the punk thing happened, I'd go to see the Ramones, Patti Smith, you know, in clubs. And it was a gang of us, so we'd play football, go to clubs and go to music stores and see if we could borrow anything on a permanent basis [laughs]. And, actually, one of the main guys who was in this little gang was Johnny Marr, who ended up being in The Smiths; he would come to see shows with us."

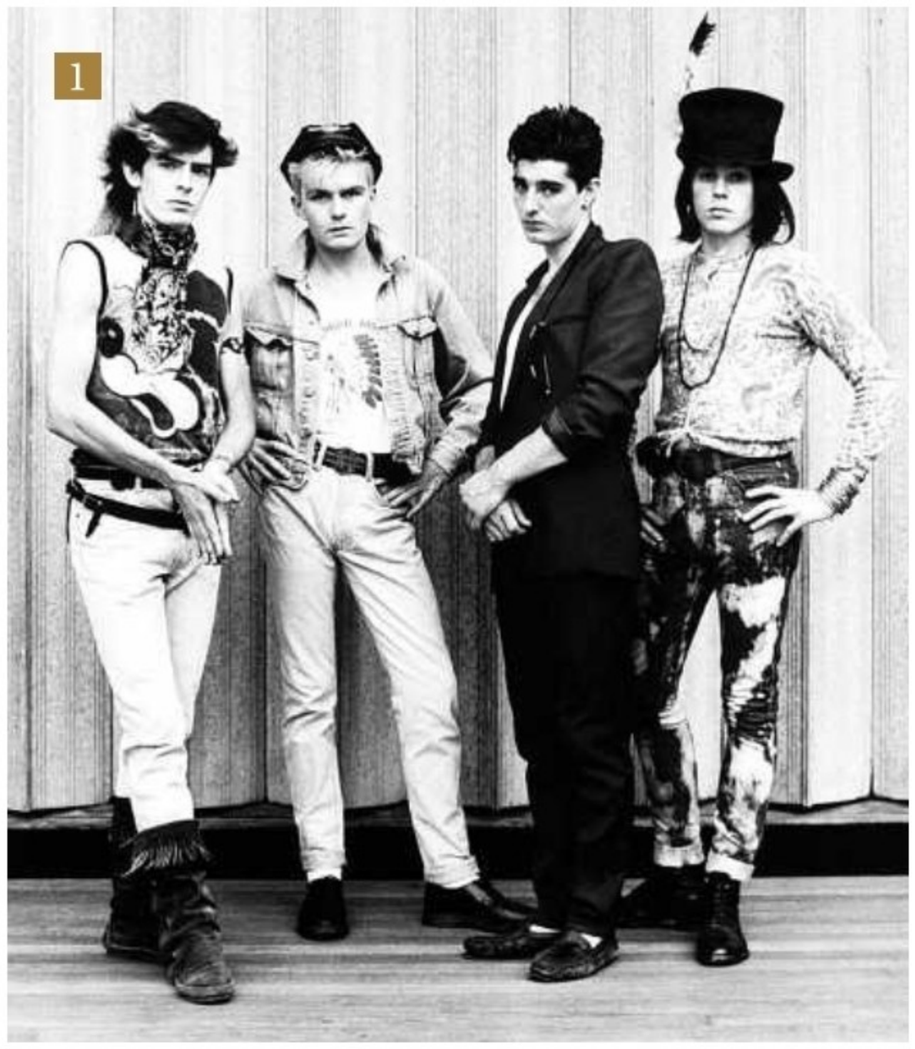


PHOTO BY ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. The Cult in London during the mid-80s (left to right): bassist Jamie Stewart, Billy Duffy, drummer Nigel Preston and frontman Ian Astbury

2. Duffy's 1975 'Sanctuary' White Falcon would become synonmous with his early sound: "Me taking a Gretsch and putting two overdrives and a wah there, it took Gretsches into another area," he says

What was in the water in Manchester that had so many of you picking up guitars and starting bands?
"Liverpool dominated the 60s, and Manchester wasn't known for a strong music scene until punk came and then [the city] was quick to embrace that. Again, it started in London and also New York, but something just resonated with a whole generation of Mancunians. And those are the people who created the Manchester music scene that was to become legendary."

How did you meet Ian Astbury?
"I'd been in a few different bands and I'd moved from Manchester to London. I was hustling, trying to make it in the music business, and ended up in a band called Theatre Of Hate, a band that Boy George actually recommended I join [laughs]. We had a hit single called *Do You Believe In The Westworld*, which got us on TV in England – this was a gargantuan step for me because everybody wanted to get on *Top Of The Pops*. When we toured, the support band was Southern Death Cult and the lead singer was Ian Astbury. I remember the first time I clapped eyes on him and heard him sing, it was quite extraordinary.

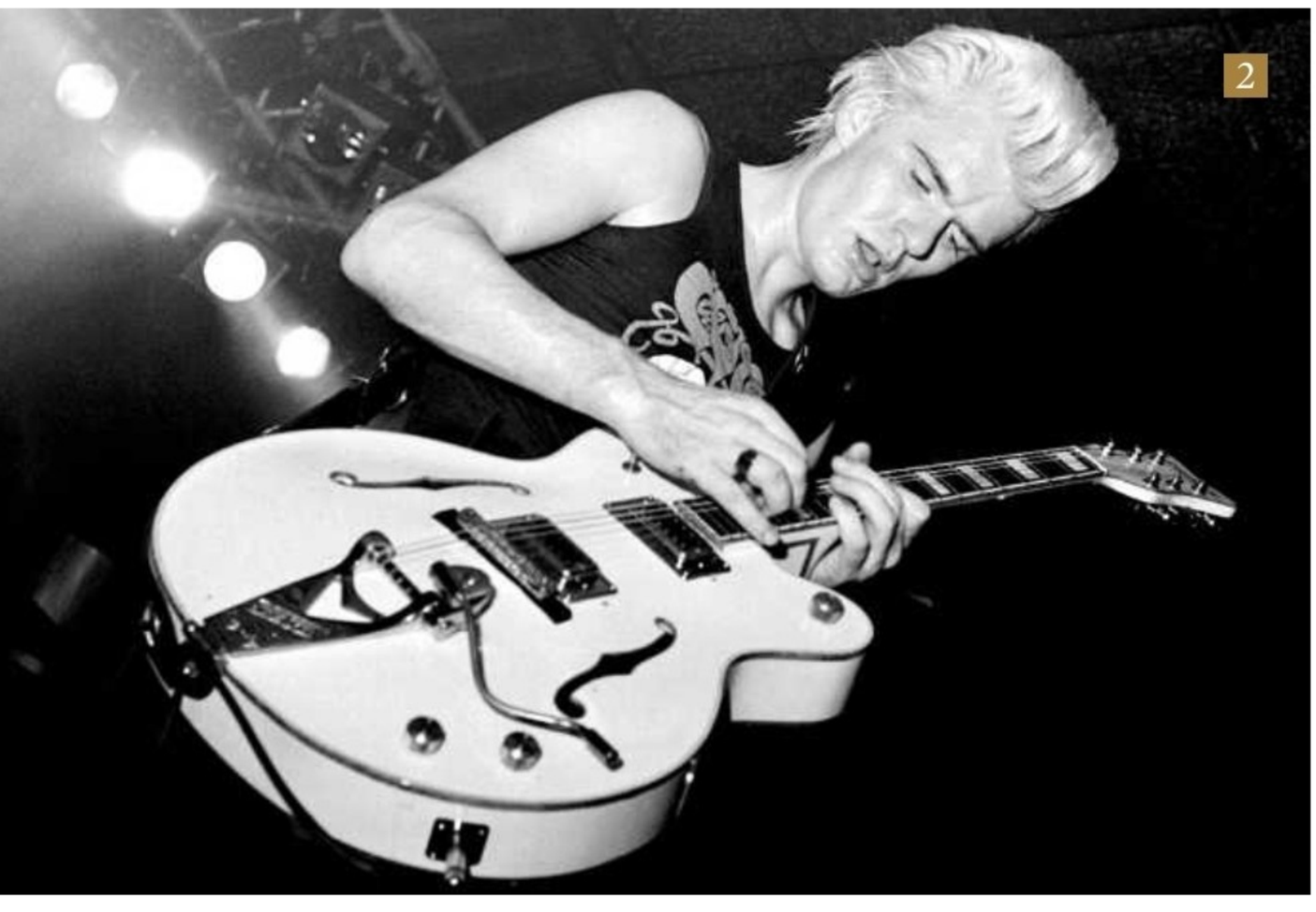
"THE CULT WERE KIND OF PLOUGHING OUR OWN FURROW, TRYING TO DO ROCK BUT MAKE IT INTERESTING"

"We became friends because we were both from the North West of England. Within a year, he was no longer the singer of Southern Death Cult and I was no longer in Theatre Of Hate, and he came and found me in London and said, 'I like the way you play guitar. I like the cut of your jib. Do you wanna form a band?' I was like, 'Absolutely.' He literally stayed in my apartment in London in Brixton and we spent the weekend writing songs. Then we went to the record company that signed Southern Death Cult and informed them that the band had split up and there was a new band called Death Cult, which later became just The Cult. That's honestly how it went down."

PHOTO BY JANE SIMON/GETTY IMAGES

How did The Cult's first record, *Dreamtime*, which featured *Spiritwalker*, come together?
"When we started, it was a very underground movement. It was kind of post-punk and people were calling us gothic, and then there was the New Romantic movement happening. But we were kind of ploughing our own furrow, trying to do rock but make it interesting.

"Theatre Of Hate were very much into a different arrangement of music, with guitar that was like Ennio Morricone. It wasn't powerchords but really Spaghetti Western sounds with reverb. Every song we did [in The Cult] was us trying to improve ourselves. I do remember feeling that we weren't completely satisfied, like we hadn't captured our sound yet. With *Spiritwalker*, we were almost there... there were hints. But there was a bit of a concern because we hadn't had a hit, while our contemporaries [had] – Killing Joke and Bauhaus, for example, were in the charts and so were The Psychedelic Furs and Billy Idol, who were doing pop stuff."



And then you released *She Sells Sanctuary* from 1985's *Love* record.
"Ian and I were literally into it over our heads for, probably, 12 years. From '83 until the end of the *Ceremony* tour in the 90s, we were in it. We didn't stop to take a breath. But with the song *She Sells Sanctuary*, what an incredible journey. And I stuck with my Gretsch because it made me write a certain way. Once *Sanctuary* became a big hit, it changed everything for us. We were in a whole different world then and on a whole different level of commerciality."

What led you to use a Gretsch White Falcon, a decidedly unfashionable guitar for the 1980s?
"It stems from that early 80s period of exploration. When you think of certain players, like Charlie Burchill, The Edge or Will Sergeant, we were all trying to find our voices. I wanted mine to be like, 'What if Jimi Hendrix plugged a Gretsch in?' or 'What if Neil Young had a fuzz and a wah-wah pedal when he was doing *Cinnamon Girl*?' I was trying to find a voice for the band and it just sort

of clicked with Ian. But that Gretsch kind of ran out of steam in 1987. When we did *Electric*, we'd [already] done one version of the album and it didn't seem right, so we went to New York and recorded with Rick [Rubin] – and Rick does what Rick does, which is minimalism. He put me on the spot and said, 'Hey, this is a Les Paul... And this is a Marshall.' So we spent hours cleaning the Marshalls up and they sounded big, vibrant and not oversaturated. We got rid of all that front-end buzz."

After *Electric* was released, The Cult toured with Guns N' Roses. Did this experience lead to the massive Les Paul-driven heavy rock sound on *Sonic Temple*?
"In '86, when we finally made some money, I went out and bought a whole wall of Marshalls that were brand-new. I flight-cased them all, and these were JCM800s that I used on the *Electric* tour. Before that, on the *Love* tour, I had a Marshall, but I also had a Roland JC-120. It was mostly Gretsch, with bits of Les Pauls in there. But getting into *Sonic Temple*, after the tour with Guns N' Roses supporting us, which was kind of crazy, we got a big, muscular American manager and stepped it up. We sorted our business affairs out, and said, 'All right, *Electric* has done really well, but we wanna do better.'"

What led you to hire Bob Rock, who was relatively unproven then?
"He had produced Kingdom Come['s self-titled debut], though he was Bruce Fairbairn's engineer with Bon Jovi and Aerosmith. I didn't feel *Electric* showcased all that we were capable of. I'd never heard of Bob Rock, but we hit it off. When we started looking for a producer to do *Sonic Temple*, something Bob said to me was in my mind. He said: 'I really liked *Electric* and *Love*. I think it would be so cool to take elements of both and make the ultimate Cult record that showcases both sides of you, not just one or the other.' That resonated with me. So I put his name forward. And to my everlasting surprise, everybody involved said, 'Oh, that's a good idea. Let's go for it.'

"WE WERE TRYING TO FIND OUR VOICES. I WANTED MINE TO BE LIKE, 'WHAT IF NEIL YOUNG HAD A FUZZ AND A WAH-WAH FOR *CINNAMON GIRL*?'"

The Les Paul Custom has been a mainstay in Billy's rig since the late 80s, including 70s wood-top models that pay homage to Mick Ronson

PHOTO © MICK PEEK

3

PHOTO BY LARRY MARANO/GETTY IMAGES

I thought they'd go, 'No, we've got to get Ron Nevison or Steve Lillywhite,' or whatever big name you want to mention. [Bob Rock] was cool, but he hadn't yet become 'the Buddha'; he hadn't levitated yet. He was still a mere mortal who ate pizza [laughs].

"Anyway, with Bob and *Sonic Temple*, Ian wanted to make a psychedelic album, like [Cream's] *Disraeli Gears*. I did really want to do a hybrid of the stuff on *Love* and *Electric*; I wanted to somehow find a way to fuse those elements together and make it cohesive. But it was 1988... In retrospect, we can all agree that it might have been a teeny-weeny bit overproduced."

You released *Ceremony* and *The Cult* in the early 90s, but then the band went on hiatus in '95.

"In retrospect, that was probably necessary. Ian wanted to go in a different direction. I was a bit more conservative and was like, 'We've just had a multi-platinum record. Why would we depart from that?' But he wanted to change it up and do something looser and more shambolic, like Keith Richards' band the X-Pensive Winos. I remember being resistant, so we kind of compromised. Bob Rock was gonna do *Ceremony*, but he said, 'Well, I've got Metallica. That's only gonna take a couple of months...' Well, 13 months later he finished the Metallica record and in the meantime we had to find another producer. And it was just never right. It was okay, but it didn't really capture what we wanted to do. It's sad because the guitar sounds [of that era] are probably the best I ever got."

What kept you and Ian coming back to the band?

"As you get older, you gain more tolerance for each other's perceived shortcomings. You just focus more on the positive and the love and the desire, which are the same things from when we got together in Brixton in 1983, when we spent that weekend together writing songs. We just want to write music, be in a band and get out and play to people who appreciate it. That's it. That's what it was then and [is] now. It wasn't – and isn't – a complicated manifesto."

"NEITHER [IAN'S NOR MY] EGOS GET IN THE WAY OF SERVING THE SONG. WE BOTH THINK THE SONG IS THE MASTER"

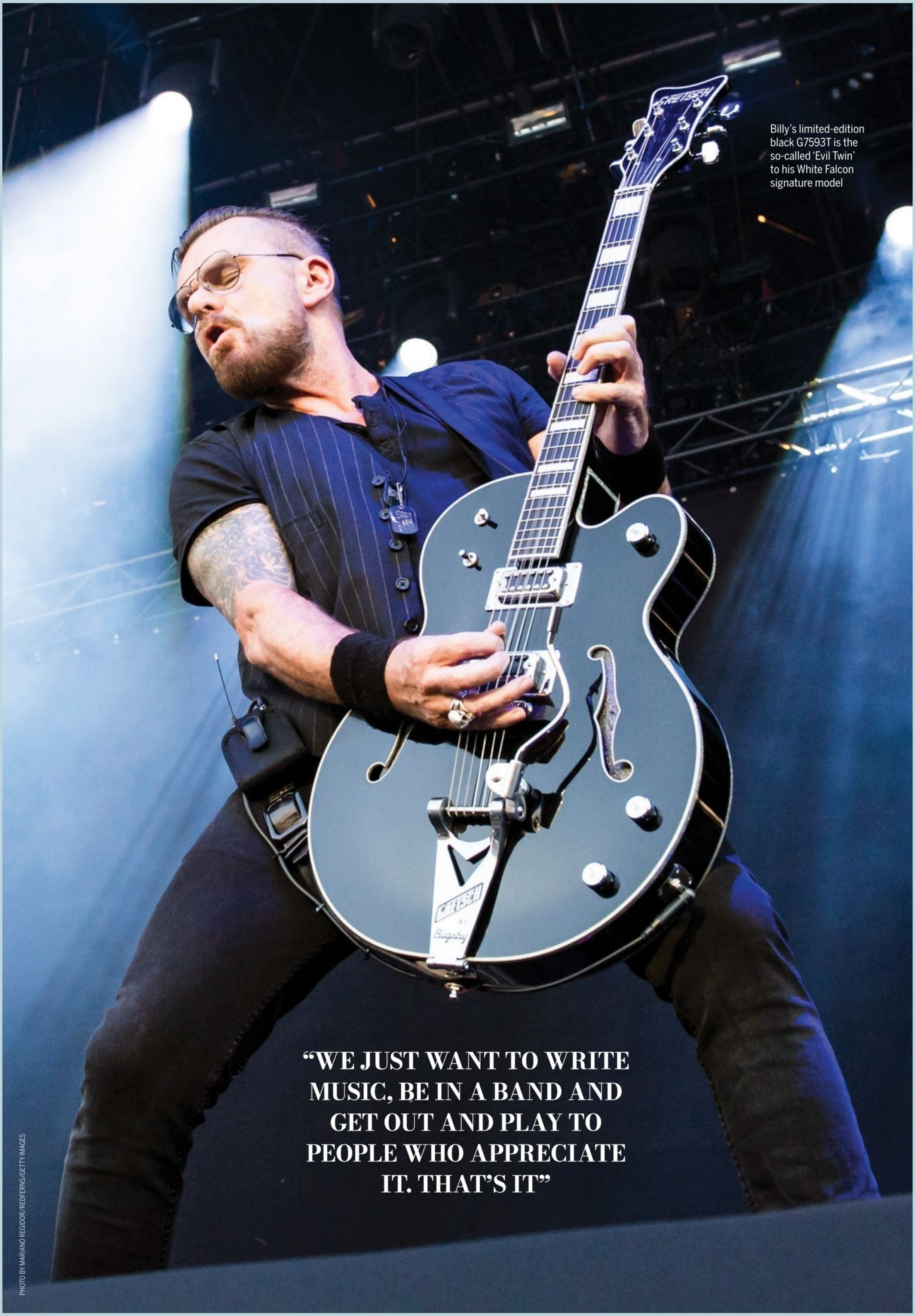
How do you hope to be remembered as a guitar player?

"I think what I did on *Electric*, *Love* and *Sonic Temple* was interesting. Me taking a Gretsch and putting two overdrives and a wah there, it took Gretsches into another area. I just thought it was kind of cool to try to make this acidy, psychedelic kind of post-punk music – but with a big, solid, chunky rock sound in its foundation. Somebody once said to me that the guitar player in a band should serve the song. I would imagine that's another reason why me and Ian get along – neither of our egos get in the way of serving the song. We both think the song is the master.

"But it's a very difficult question to answer. I just think I'd like to be remembered as a guy who kept the values of the 70s – you know, the good stuff – alive. I helped keep the spirit of Free, Bad Company, Mott The Hoople, Zeppelin, Iggy Pop, Sex Pistols, Sabbath and all that stuff alive. I just wanted to keep the essence of proper rock alive." G

www.billyduffy.com

3. *She Sells Sanctuary* shot the band into the big-time in 1985 and, while they parted ways on occasion, Billy Duffy and Ian Astbury (left) have always come back together for the love of the music



Billy's limited-edition black G7593T is the so-called 'Evil Twin' to his White Falcon signature model

"WE JUST WANT TO WRITE MUSIC, BE IN A BAND AND GET OUT AND PLAY TO PEOPLE WHO APPRECIATE IT. THAT'S IT"

PHOTO BY MARIANO REGIDOR/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

ROBYN HITCHCOCK

The psych-folk pioneer tells us about the "sprawling mess" of his songwriting, the hell of forgotten tunings, and the Telecaster that almost broke his back

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates
Photo Laura Partain

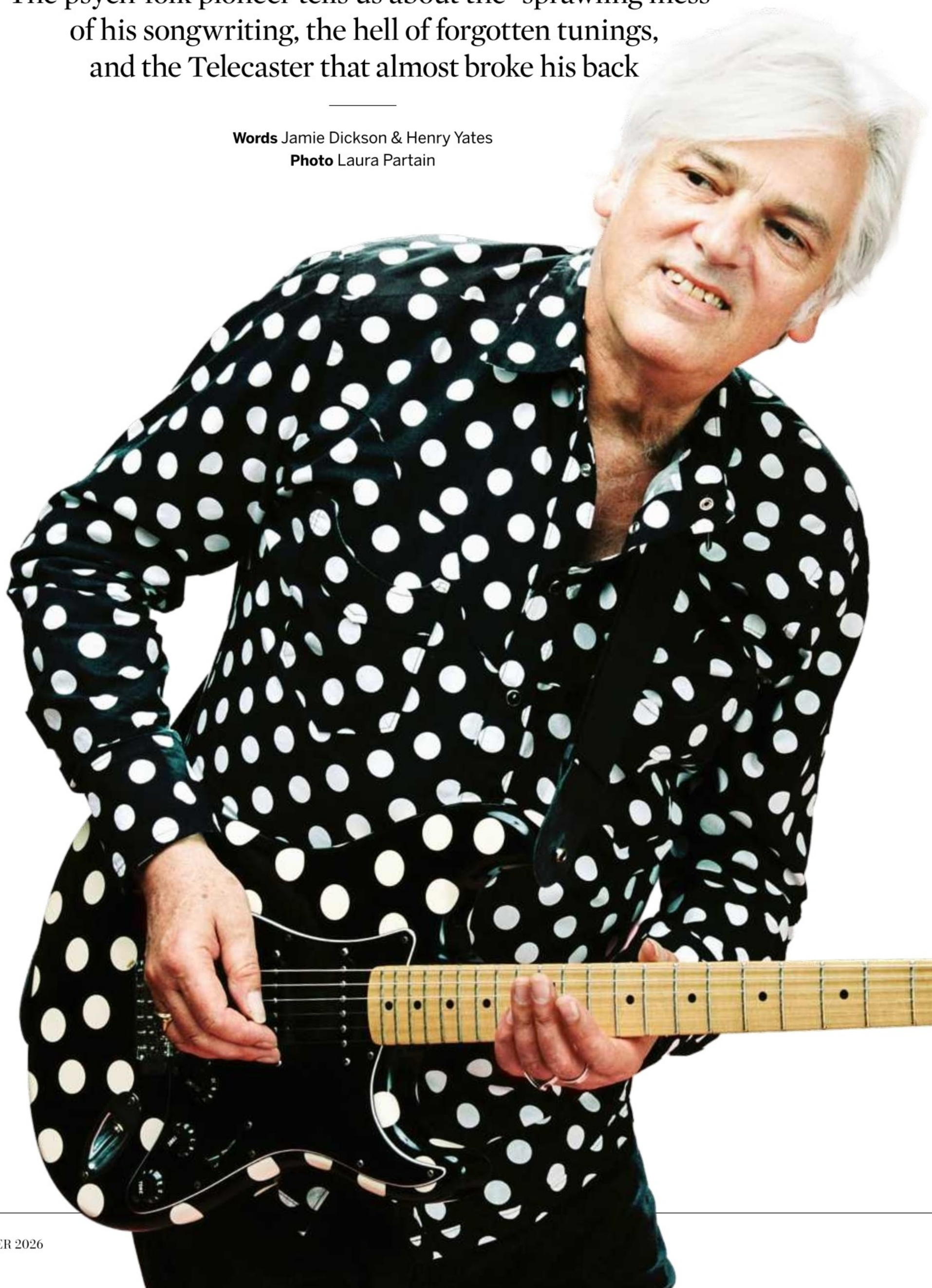


PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. Robyn Hitchcock can be seen with a Stratocaster in early shows with The Soft Boys – such as here in London, April 1978 – but he soon made the Telecaster his guitar of choice...

2. ...though the polka dot Buddy Guy Strat does come into play, showcasing Robyn's decades-long love of white-on-black spots!

Imagine a textbook Nashville gunslinger. Chances are, in your mind's eye, you're picturing a claw-handed Southern roots master, raised on hickory smoke and hybrid picking, firing off first-take flash at three recording sessions a day. By those metrics, Robyn Hitchcock might seem a square peg on the Music City scene where he planted his flag in 2015. Make no mistake: the 73-year-old Londoner is a serious player, especially when you hand him an acoustic guitar. But Hitchcock is also a mischievous, satirical, at times achingly British songwriter, whose breakthrough band of the late 70s – The Soft Boys – played mind-expanding psychedelic folk in the face of punk's raw clatter and gave direct influence to artsy outfits like REM.

Fiercely prolific since 1981's solo debut, *Black Snake Dîamond Röle*, Hitchcock's solo career still moves with the energy of his adopted music scene. And as he releases – by our calculation – his 25th album, *The Confuser*, he tells *Guitarist* he's never felt more at home as an artist.

There's a strand of your voice and writing that seems so English. So it's interesting to find you in Nashville. What does it mean to you to work there?

"Nashville calls itself Music City at the airport, and it's a fantastic place to find musicians, to hang out with musicians, to record. I've made four records here. It's also conveniently placed for touring the States. I mean, Tennessee is a red state and not necessarily the kind of place I would be, but the cities tend to be oases of liberal thought. You know, the baying hounds are all outside the perimeter. Nashville is the only place I know where people take musicians seriously, so you don't get into an Uber only for them to go, 'Do you make a living playing that thing?' I like being in that marketplace and I feel very honoured if a local muso says, 'Robyn, you're a Nashville cat.'"

2

Jeff Beck once said that, in Nashville, even the janitor played better guitar than him. What are the merits of being in a town where everyone's so good?

"I think I'm a very good acoustic player, and I'm an idiosyncratic electric player, but most electric players are much more technically adept. So I'm basically known as a songwriter and a performer, rather than an instrumentalist. People don't hire me to play sessions or anything, but the fact they're prepared to play with me, I feel very validated.

"There are great players and, of course, they're not necessarily from Nashville. There's a new guy that plays with my wife [Emma Swift] called Rick Lollar, originally from Tallahassee. He's one of these guys like Richard Thompson, who just came out of the egg and they could play – you know, the fretboard held no fear for them. Dave Rawlings and Gillian Welch: he's from Rhode Island and she's from California, but people just converge here. And I've never met Jack White, but the Third Man hive is here. Then there are homegrown guys. Will Kimbrough, who plays with Emmylou Harris, I think he's fairly local."

Lyrically, the new album holds a sense of unfolding disaster. What's your position on what we see going on in the world now?

"Well, you can wring your hands and go, 'This is terrible' and 'Isn't mankind a revolting beast?', and 'Why do the worst people always reach the top?' and all that. I'm not exactly saying, 'Bring it on,' but I refuse to fall to my knees in the face of horror. I just think you've got to get up and rock [laughs]. And rock 'n' roll is an old person's game now – there's still loads of people 10 years older than me who are doing it. I imagine they've got personal trainers and better health regimes than I do. I'm just an amplified folkie, really. I don't have the infrastructure that The Stones or McCartney or Dylan has."

PHOTO BY EMMA SWIFT

"The last song on *The Confuser, Wasted*, came to me right there on the spot… Others, like *Ghost In Sunlight*, I spent years trying to get that right"

This is your 25th solo album, so you must be a prolific writer. Do you reject more songs than you keep?
"A lot of them fall by the wayside. Songs select themselves. I never sit down to write a song, I just realise I'm making one up in my head. It's usually when I'm doing something else, so I have to quickly sit down and sing into the phone or scribble in my notebook. I sometimes work on it there and then. The last song on *The Confuser*, *Wasted*, came to me about 40 minutes before I had to check out of a hotel in San Francisco, so I pretty much wrote the whole thing there on the spot. Others, like *Ghost In Sunlight*, I spent years trying to get that right, wrote hundreds of lyrics. So some things are just cleaner and neater than others. It can be a sprawling mess."

Do you let the ideas flow when you're writing?
"Initially, I keep the taps wide open and unfiltered, and as the song goes on, as I hone it, I'm more rigorous. You've got to be open to suddenly going off at a tangent in the last 30 seconds. Some songs are just a series of tangents, then it's a matter of making them stick together. Like, Paul McCartney's *You Never Give Me Your Money* is about six different sections that don't really repeat, but it works. Or *Jugband Blues* by Syd Barrett. On the other end, you get Dylan songs like *Desolation Row*, where you have endless verses of exactly the same structure. That works if you're telling a story, I think."

How has your approach to songwriting evolved over the decades?
"I sometimes wonder if I've exhausted my bag of tricks, or whether I did that decades ago, and I've simply got three or four different paths I use and I've been up and down them many times. I'm not really aware of having a craft, but I do think of finishing songs as a kind of problem-solving. Once you've started one and you've captured the essential feel of it – which often only takes a couple of seconds – then you've got to make the rest of it work. I paint as a hobby. And rather like people doodle when they're thinking about stuff, if I'm doing a painting, often I'm playing a song over and over in my head.

"I mean, it's a mystery. I just know there's a point where you're like, 'Okay, great, this flows properly.' And if you don't feel like singing or playing what you've just written, then it's not working. But I absolutely have no idea where it comes from or how it starts. Nick Lowe used to refer to [songwriting inspiration] as 'the man'. He'd say something like, 'The man came round today.' Or, 'The man wasn't there this morning.'"

How did the guitar come into your life?
"My first experience with the guitar was drawing pictures of The Beatles playing it, or even – because I was a *Doctor Who* fan – drawing Daleks playing it. My parents gave me a beat-up old guitar for my 14th birthday, and I got a Les Paul copy called a Kimbara in 1975, but I wasn't really a Les Paul [player]. It took me a long time to figure out, but I realised I was a Fender person. I briefly had a Gretsch. But I couldn't get it in tune, and I wasn't sophisticated enough to figure out what to do with it.

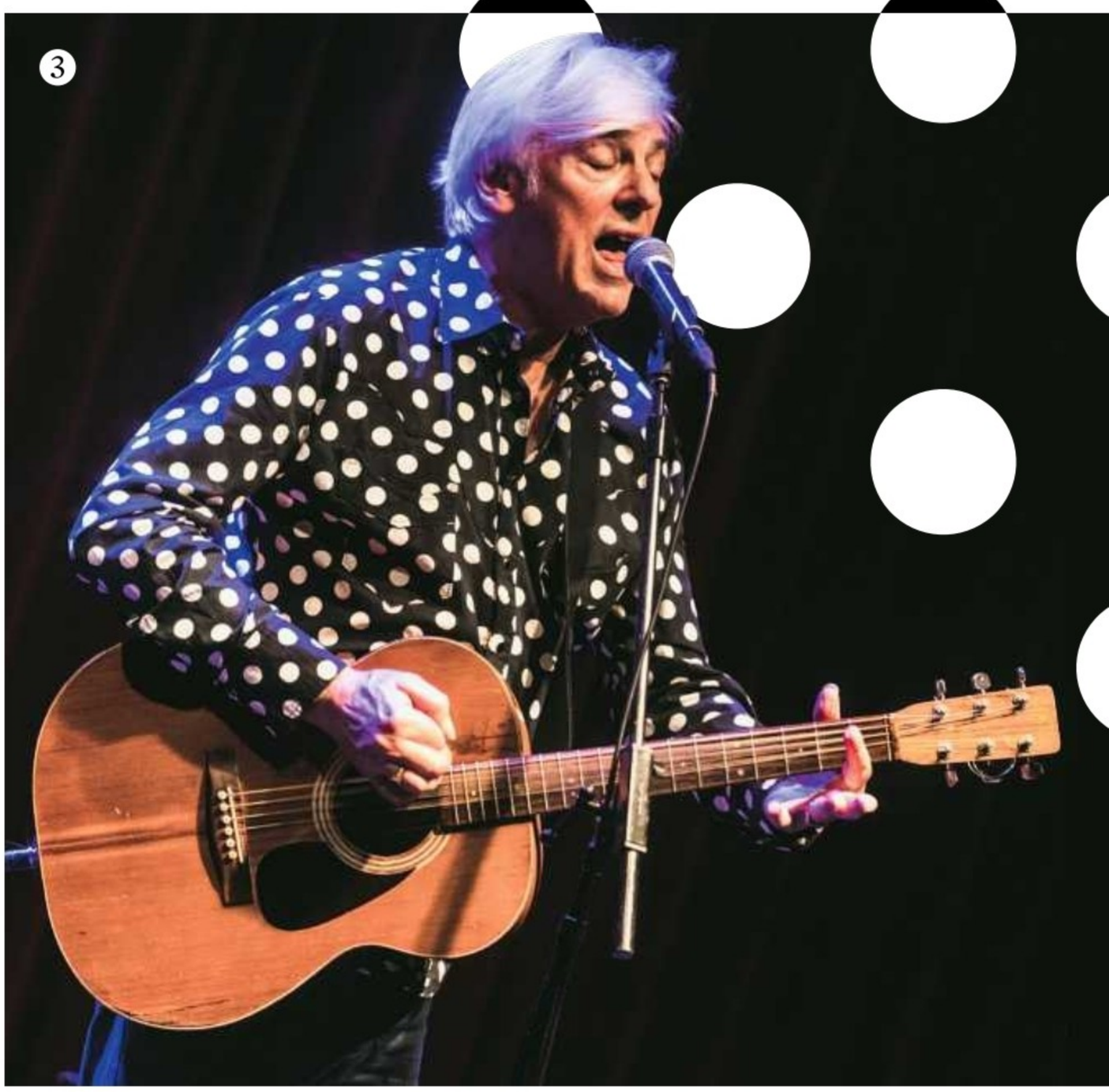
"In the early days of The Soft Boys, I bought a Stratocaster, which I actually swapped with another Cambridge musician for a Telecaster. Then I pretty much settled on Telecasters, and my big old archetypal '78 Tele – the one I used on *I Often Dream Of Trains* [1984], *Fegmania*! [1985] and *Element Of Light* [1986] – is appallingly heavy. I don't know if it's got gold bars inside it or something, but it has an enormous and specific gravity. I actually don't play it live any more. I'd haul it out and I realised it's just not for touring. But it's got a really good tone and I still use it for recording."

"Finishing songs [is] a kind of problem-solving. Once you've captured the essential feel, you've got to make the rest of it work"

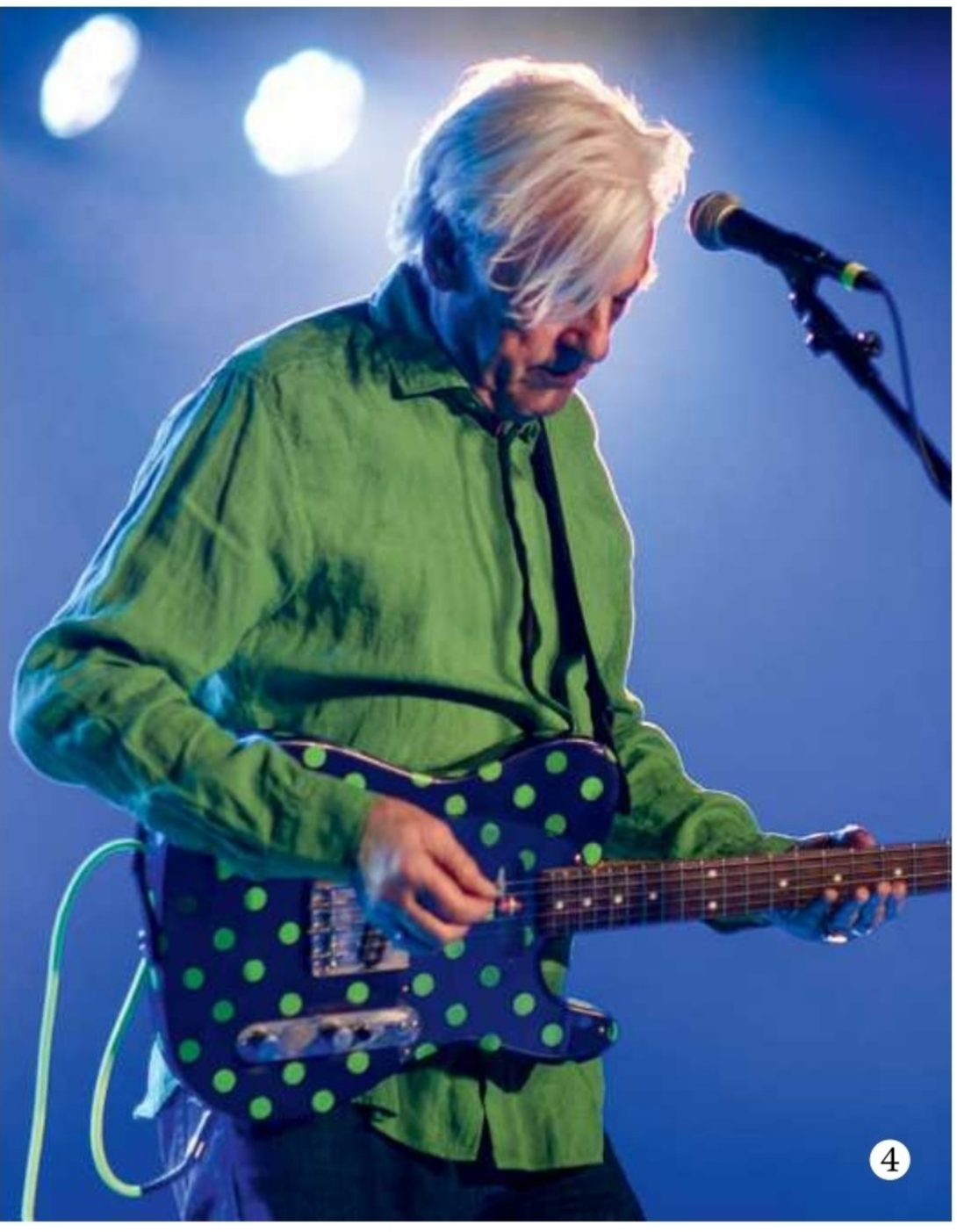
What guitars would you pick up if you were relaxing at home?
"Well, I've got one here called a Fender Malibu, which is a very strange-looking thing. It's got a head like a Stratocaster, but it's an acoustic. And then, this is my go-to guitar: it's a Fylde. It has a kind of wide fretboard. My really old Fylde, that's up at the menders at the moment. It's had so many accidents that my guitar doctor in London told me to retire it nearly 20 years ago. It's an Olivia, and I contacted Roger Bucknall and he made me this – it's an Olivia, too. They don't really make them any more.

"But the more guitars you have, the less you can play each one, so I'm not drawn to having a loft full of them. I'd rather just have a few and get intimate with them, but I wouldn't say no to another Fylde sometime. My original Olivia was built in '77 or '78, so it's getting on for 50. It belonged to a friend who never played it. I'd go around and I kept playing it, so in the end he just said,

PHOTO BY CHRIS SIKICH



3. Robyn with his "go-to" Fylde Olivia. His late-70s model "still sounds beautiful", he says. "It's too fragile to tour with, but I would record with it again"



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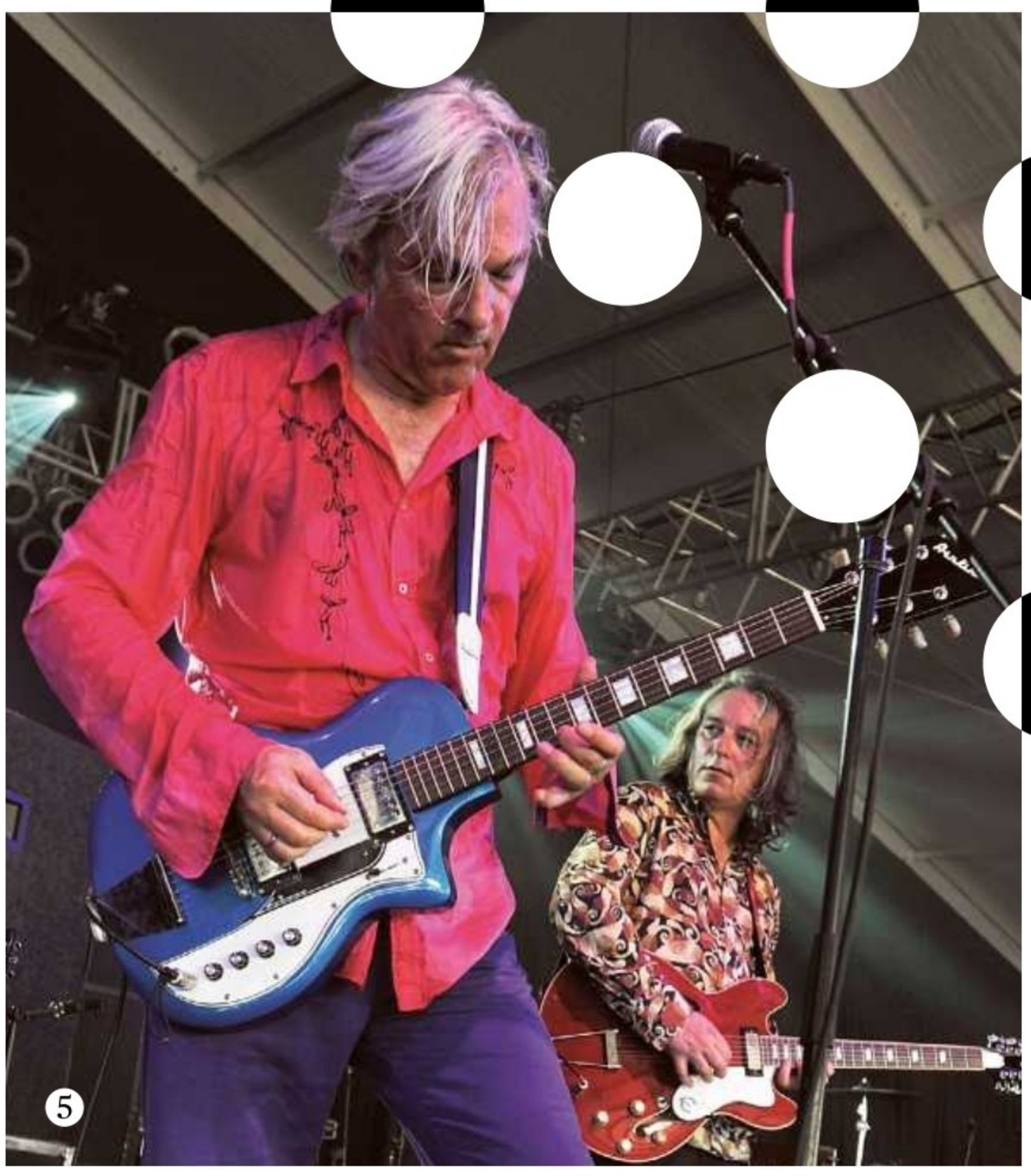

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PHOTO BY C. TAYLOR CROTHERS/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

'Do you want to buy it?' Best 200 quid I ever spent. It still sounds beautiful. It's too fragile to tour with, but I would record with it again."

Are there any curios in your collection?
"I've got a funny-looking Fender called a Meteora. And another hollow-bodied guitar made by a Finnish builder in Australia, which looks kind of twangy. I've also got my TubbyCaster, which is a Telecaster [style] made for me by a man named Kelley Stoltz. He's from California, but he was in Echo & The Bunnymen. He's an Anglophile. He made me this rather nice polka dot 'Tele'. It's really light, so it's kinder to my mature spine than the old Tele. I will be deploying these at my upcoming gigs."

Do you have a theory on what makes a songwriter?
"Why some of us pick up on it, or have the ability, I don't know, but it may be to do with listening to a lot of music when you're a kid or a teenager. My molecular structure was changed by listening to Bob Dylan, and then all the other people that came out around that time: Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Traffic, Donovan and The Incredible String Band – talking of fingerpicking – and later on, Martin Carthy. He's my favourite acoustic guitarist, I think, along with Bert Jansch."

What's your relationship with that golden generation of folk players?
"Actually, I rang Martin up yesterday. He just turned 85. He's got some memory problems now [Martin was recently diagnosed with late-onset Alzheimer's Disease]. He can't really talk. I think he knew who I was. I don't know. He was very friendly; he may have had no idea. Martin's an understated genius of guitar. He kind of appeared fully formed, Jesus, about 65 years ago. He just had these odd tunings that he puts guitars in, and he does what I would never dare to do live, which is change tunings between songs. But I do mess around with tunings at home and that is often inspiring, and I should do it more."

4. Robyn's custom TubbyCaster T-style was made by songwriter and musician Kelley Stoltz, who toured with Echo & The Bunnymen

"Rock 'n' roll is an old person's game now – there's still loads of people 10 years older than me who are doing it"

5. On stage with REM's Peter Buck as part of The Venus 3, Robyn plays an Eastman Airline

PHOTO BY JON WALDER POST 92 PHOTOGRAPHY

What's been your experience of working with tunings?
"I made up a song and we recorded it – it's called *The Green Boy* – and I was very pleased with it. But I can't for the life of me remember now what the tuning was. I should have written it down. People have written in and requested it and suggested what the tuning might be, but I just can't get it. There's another one called *Heliotrope*, and I do remember the tuning for that, but I'd never play it live because I couldn't get [the guitar back in tune]. I think that's always a good excursion, though, to mess around with the tuning a bit. You'll probably get a new song, if that's what you want."

And, of course, there are no rules...
"[nods] People may not understand what you're doing. But it's your guitar to tune." G

Robyn Hitchcock's new album, *The Confuser*, is released on 24 July via Tiny Ghost Records

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THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

JOURNEY MAN

Pierre Bensusan is the quintessential French guitarist – a thoughtful, meditative musician whose playful yet elegant mastery of his Lowden has long put him in the front rank of fingerstyle masters. We caught up with Pierre on the British leg of his current tour to discuss how to play guitar with freedom, heart and soul – without letting nerves or ego trip you up

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Lucy Robinson

Fingerstyle acoustic guitar is a hard game. It's possibly the most exposed, intricate form of guitar to perform in front of an audience. There's no safety net, no band to carry some of the weight of expectation or mask mistakes. So it's unsurprising that Pierre Bensusan has spent a fair bit of time thinking about the deep questions of what connects a guitarist to an audience and what conjures magic from the thin air of solo performance.

Half a century on from the start of his career with the brilliant folk album *Pres De Paris*, Pierre believes that summoning perfect poise and concentration when playing guitar are hard disciplines to master – but that it is the duty of every guitarist to try to let nerves and ego fall by the wayside when you play, so the music can truly and fully come to life.

As he sits down to a cup of coffee in the *Guitarist* studio – he didn't sleep well the night before – Pierre says that the mundane cares of daily life are a recurrent enemy to what a touring musician can achieve on stage, if you let them be.

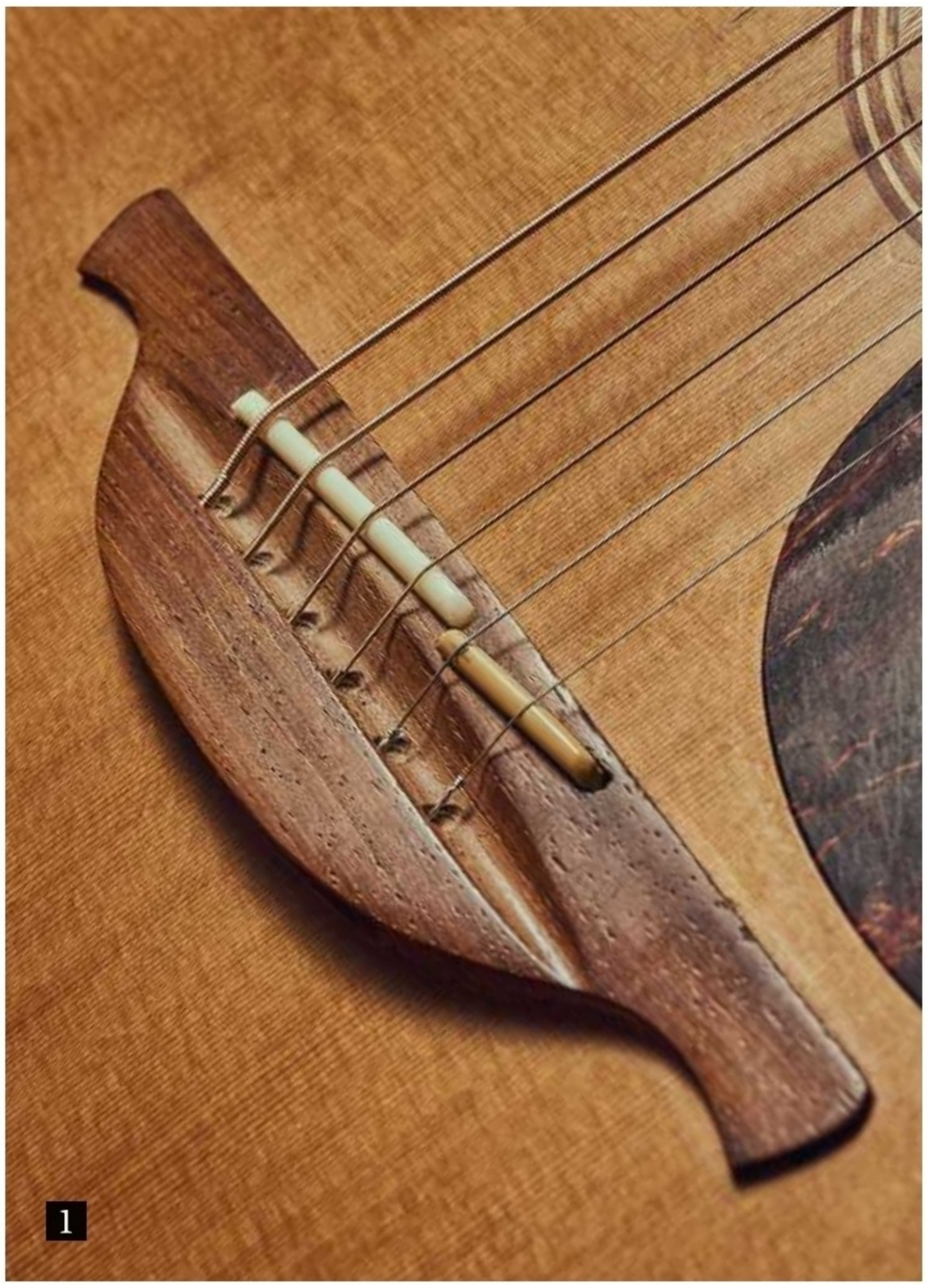
"I guess this is the work," he reflects. "To travel, to have to deal with all the aggravation of being away from home. Having to go through all kinds of little things, such as driving long distances, parking, dealing with aggravations and stuff, in order to be in a venue and play music for people. And when people come, of course, you give your best – you have to be at your top every time, and so you cannot let any grain of sand come and destabilise this," he says. "So, for me, everything else is just building momentum for that to happen. Whatever happens, it has to be recycled and transformed into pure energy.... touring life is full of so many little details, which are absolutely nothing to do with a pure rendition of the music when it happens. And yet it feels like if you succeed well to go through all of those, the music is going to be better."

As a solo fingerstyle guitarist, do you think you have to be uniquely present and focused on your performance in a way that might not be necessary in a band?

"I don't know. I think you have to be present. You play one note, whatever you do... even if you play in a band, you have to be present. You have to be present listening to what other people play, how they interact with the music, how they expect you to interact with it... So I think presence is the key. If you are not present, you lean towards chaos as soon as you start thinking about something – that's it, you're no longer in the moment.

"But when you are a solo performer, whatever the instrument, it is even more crucial [for you to be present in the moment]. Because it's only you who is making this music. This music needs 200 per cent of you. But the balance is extremely subtle between being

“For me, a musician serves an intention, a continuum, a storytelling through music… You need to be listening carefully to what you play”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present but not being overwhelmingly present. If you are too present and you make yourself too important, you hide the music. So, for me, a musician serves an intention, serves a continuum, serves a storytelling through music. And, of course, you need to be listening carefully to what you play.

"In fact, you need to be a listener – a big-time listener. There is not much difference between you listening and the person in front [in the audience] listening. We are two listeners – and the person listening is also very creative. Because, in fact, when I play for myself, I play for myself; there is only me and the music. But when we are together [as performer and audience] we share this intimacy, I hear the music and I understand that it's far more, it's going much further than just my moves to make that music happen. You should never play without listening to what you play – there is no reason why you should play if you don't listen. What's the point?

"But all my moves, I look at them with a microscope before each sequence, the geography of where my fingers and hands are on my fretboard. The geography of my right hand touching the strings, where they are, how they touch... All those little things can be slightly nuanced to make a sound richer by just where you touch, how you work on the sustain of a note, how you express that note. Do you use vibrato? Or do you have the note just stand straight? Because no vibrato is also an effect – too much vibrato is a way to hide something, and it's too much sometimes. So the effects need to remain effects, but something neutral with no vibrato is also very beautiful.

"I do compose a lot by just imagining music and where it could go... this is the beginning of the creative process"

1. The elegant bridge on the Lowden guitar Pierre brought in has compensated split saddles for better intonation

2. The Lowden name and Bensusan's music have been synonymous with one another for many years, and Lowden's guitars have, in part, helped to define Bensusan's voice on the instrument

3. Lowden currently makes two distinct Pierre Bensusan signature models – this variant, dubbed the 'Old Lady', features AAAA-grade 'Ancient Cuban Mahogany' back and sides paired with a Californian red cedar top

"So this is a thing, you know. How do you make the music stay and then be shared by people without intruding as an ego? And so I think when you play for people, this is when you understand a lot of those things; you understand them better than when you play for yourself. For me, music needs the experience of being shared to understand what it takes to go from you to another person – to create that bond without intruding. And so that's why playing for people is part of my progression and evolution. I've learned so much.

"And also, when you play for yourself, you can stop any time. When you're recording in the studio, you can stop any time. And to know that you can stop already dictates something in the dynamic. But when you're on stage, the only reason that I will stop will be because my guitar is so out of tune that I have to stop and tune. But now I stop between each song and I tune my guitar again, and I take the time to tune before each song."

In this era of on-demand digital entertainment, it's easy to forget that an audience contributes directly to a live performance, through their engagement and emotional response; it's not just a passive thing.

"People are part of the music. In fact, they make the music. They let this music enter and they start to process what they hear, so they take advantage of

“All my moves, I look at them with a microscope before each sequence, the geography of where my fingers and hands are on my fretboard”

the person playing to start creating something, and so the music becomes a pretext to get to a state of being that is going to allow this person to open up completely. So, you know, the beginning of a concert is very important. People come and they are not aligned [with the performance] at first. They come from their reality, from work or whatever, they talk with friends, and then the music starts. They need time to be receptive.

"All of that is important, especially nowadays with artificial intelligence. What's the point to do something perfect if it's made by a machine, right? Why should I feel anything? But this is a live performance, it is still one of the very last things where people are people – people come to see and they get what they see, it's all there. There are no secrets, nothing hidden. What you hear is what you see, and it's made for you. It's like a cooking recipe by a chef who is working very hard for all the taste to be there for the people who are going to appreciate the meal, to really have the best possible [experience] – and that's why I didn't feel those 51 years go by. Each concert is very different for me and I do play notes that... try to capture what I hear at the moment, and I really try to play what I hear. It's not always the case. Sometimes I go back to what I know for security, and I try to enhance that in the most beautiful way possible. But when I can incarnate what I hear, this is when I really am the happiest man."

4. The reverse of the headstock shows attractive detail of the five-piece mahogany neck with maple splices

5. Pierre's love of the DADGAD tuning is well known – but he says it's important to explore beyond the obvious Celtic palette of DADGAD if you are serious about adopting it as your main tuning

When playing solo fingerstyle guitar, it's really hard not to let conscious thoughts intrude as you play – the part of your brain that vocalises self-criticism if you scuff a note or play something slightly wrong can really upset the flow.

"That thought could lead to losing it. To shut the mind from thinking... this is something that every one of us is trying to [achieve]. How do we stop thinking, even when we go to bed? How do we stop thinking and let sleep come? The mind is always late... the attention, the reaction are, in fact, the instant thing. So when we play there is no time for thinking. The thinking comes before, maybe like when you are away from your instrument and you start imagining the music. I don't even know if it's a thought or if it is a very active mental vision, not even mental, but something you hear inside of you. It's not mute, it's very rich, you know? I do compose a lot by just imagining music and by imagining where that music could go... and this is the beginning, for me, of the creative and compositional process: that I identify a journey and then when I take my guitar, I go back to that journey and try to make it on the guitar – to make it playable.

"And so if I have an idea I will record it or I will write it down in [such] a way that it can be played. But all my ideas have to be there as well – and it also has to be doable physically. It has to be playable. Very often I end up writing music that I have no idea how to play. But I think that technique [when used properly] becomes

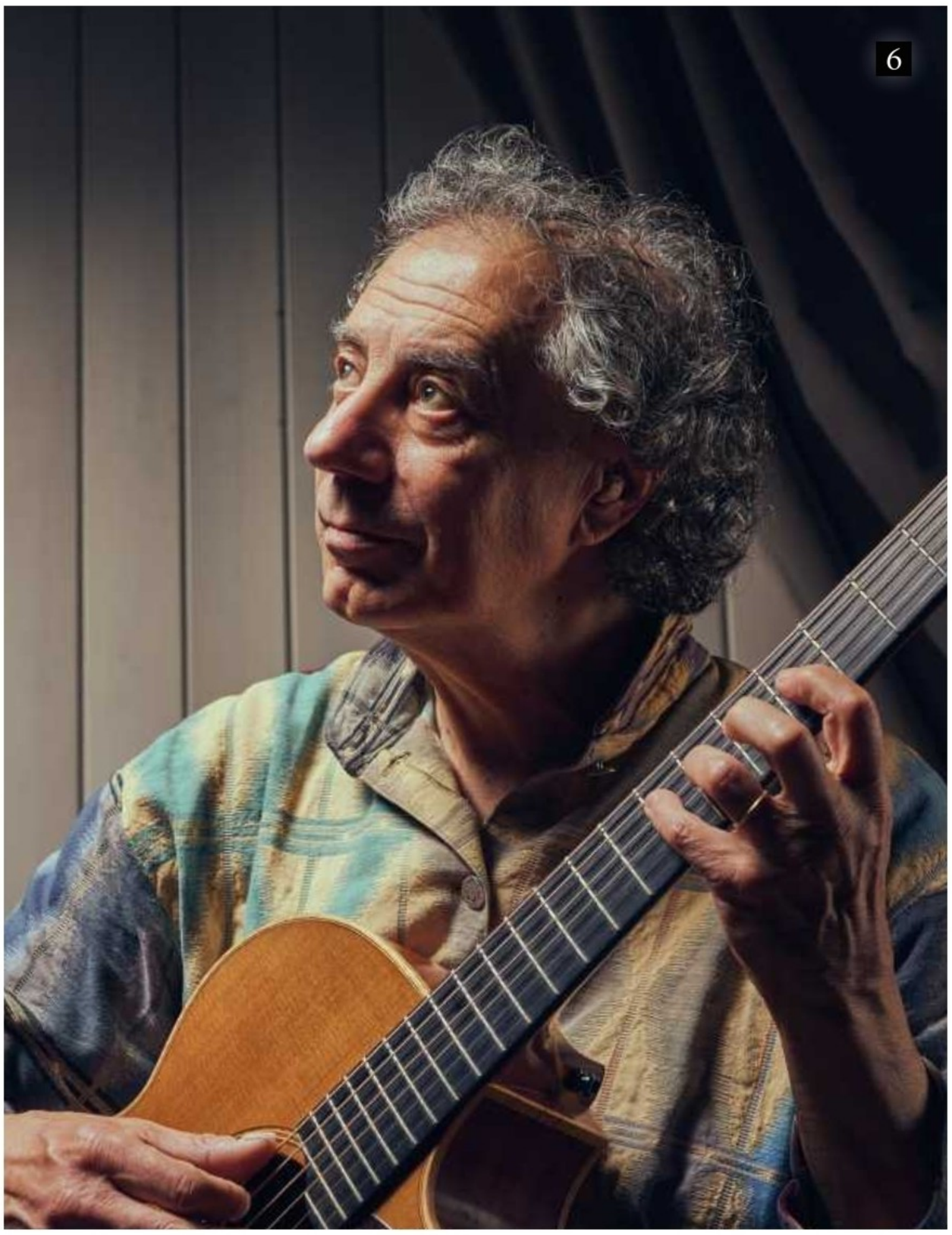
completely invisible. The technique is a tool, so you need a lot of technique, you need a lot of expertise, you need a lot of ability to make that technique become invisible, in order to just let the music *be*...

"And I'm sometimes thinking, 'Is there an artificial intelligence that could just listen to my thoughts and put them on paper, so I can hear them?' In fact, no. It's going to be my work – that's what is going to make it happen, all my short lifetime. So there is no time to lose, really. Especially now, 51 years on, I need to see what is essential. I cannot lose time."

You're known for pushing the boundaries of what is possible with the DADGAD tuning. How did you first discover it?

"Well, I mean, I found it on my own when I was 13 or 14 – I played guitar before in standard tuning and sang and even wrote lyrics and songs. When I found DADGAD, it was a time when I started to listen to Alan Stivell playing the harp and then from him I went to listen to Irish music but also British folk music, Steeleye Span, Fairport, Martin Carthy, Dick Gaughan, Nic Jones. Some of my friends were into Merle Travis and Chet Atkins, but I also played bluegrass – and I loved Doc Watson and Joan Baez and Dylan and Cat Stevens and Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell.

"I'm self-taught, so I was free. And I like that freedom; I don't like people to tell me what I should do. But I learned [the value of taking] advice later in my life. Can you help me? Can you inspire me? What is the next move? And so, of course, that's different... but then I came from piano and I already had a lot of information that helped me to really love music. I knew from a very early age that my life was going to be in music, since I was 12 years old. I knew that



"[DADGAD] taught me especially to work on melodies or phrasing without having to worry about chords"

I would be playing full-time, so I didn't deviate. And today I'm just on the same road that I [embarked on] when I was six, when I started to play piano.

"No-one told me, 'Oh no, you should not play in different tunings,' you know? Some self-taught guys did it and they were playing beautiful stuff that was very interesting. For me, it was always obvious that I should try different tunings. There was a Martin Carthy tuning, which I tried, and I even played a couple things with that tuning, but after a while I found DADGAD and it spoke to my North African roots, my Jewish roots... you know, it opens things. And that taught me especially to work on melodies or phrasing without having to worry about chords because of the three Ds – the drone and everything – so that really spoke to me.

"It's like a relationship. You meet someone and at the very beginning you see what is obvious. But what is less obvious, you will have to work hard [to reveal]. You will have to really want to deepen that relationship. Some people like to stay at the surface, but they are afraid to deepen things because deepening means to put yourself in danger. And I think some people like to play because they are creating a zone of comfort, and it's great. We need to reach that zone – but that zone of comfort is very short, it is a very short pleasure, in fact.

6. For Pierre, playing with utmost musicality is a delicate balance between ego and humility that is always guided by receptivity to what you're hearing as you play

"It doesn't last long and so you always go from one zone to another zone to another zone, and in order to go from one zone to next, you have to study. I think studying is beautiful, you know? Studying means deepening, to go into the core of things, into the heart of the things. I cannot explain where music comes from. I don't explain where my inspiration comes from. I have no idea. I haven't learned it. I'm listening, and I'm very grateful and I'm lucky – but that means a lot of responsibility and a lot of work.

"To go back to your question about guitar technique, I never try to impress people. I try to tell a story with sound and that story requires dynamics, and so I can look at music with a microscope to see how those dynamics work, and it requires a lot of introspection on the technique – that I need to do this, or I need to touch the guitar like that – and then I expand my technique and my vocabulary every time I'm confronted with a technicality that I do not master, and there are a lot of those. I try to understand what it takes and I confront myself, and I win because there is no choice." G

Azwan by Pierre Bensusan is available on MVD Audio

www.pierrebensusan.com

THE WORLD'S GREATEST

SIGNATURE GUITARS

They should be an irrelevancy – guitars built to suit a celebrated player's specific needs. And yet signature guitars have not only brought fans as close as they'll ever get to their heroes, but in some cases they've opened up new horizons in guitar design and music itself. Here, we explore the power of a name to transform guitar forever

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

SIGNING UP

The lure of celebrity endorsement has long been present in the world of guitars, with early examples dating back as far as the late 19th century

Words Tony Bacon

PHOTO BY EAGEN ARCHIVE/ALAMY

Finding the first one of anything can be a tricky business. It can make your head hurt. Try this, for example: Who made the first guitar? Impossible to know, especially as you can tie yourself in knots defining 'guitar' before you even get to brands and time periods and... well, you get the picture. But let's try something that ought to be simpler. What was the first signature guitar?

You know what a signature guitar is, of course. One that bears the name of a well-known musician, usually alongside a popular brand name, offering some kind of connection to a guitar that this particular guitarist is or was known to play, and is manufactured as a production item and offered for sale to us mere mortals.

Replace that phrase "well-known musician" with "your guitar teacher", however, and some early examples come into view. The Bambina, which dated from about 1870, was a tiny classical-like instrument with a 13-inch scale, designed by Catharina Josepha Pratten. She was a well-known guitar teacher in London at the time and had a brilliant scheme: she signed labels and sent them to her French guitar maker, who stuck them inside the guitars that she would then sell on to pupils eager to have an affordable instrument with a hint of teacher's magic. Maybe the Bambinas qualify as the first signature guitars?

This kind of idea continued, for example with Martin's special Style 44 for Vahdah Olcott-Bickford, a Hollywood-based teacher – only a touch over 30 were made, starting in 1913, the majority in Martin's size 0. Other signatures in this category followed, always with the aim of the teacher having an answer ready for when the student asks the inevitable question: "What guitar should I buy?" Ah! Here's one specially for you!

There were more early acoustic instruments that qualify as signature trailblazers, and the first Gibson signature guitar, if a vanishingly rare one, was probably the Walter Boehm harp guitar of 1923. Walter, a successful musician and businessman based in Buffalo, New York, was an early adopter of Gibson's mighty harp guitars and helped the company's development of the instrument, popularising its role in mandolin orchestras and standardising tuning. The idea was to play the instrument's regular six strings as normal, while the extensive set of sub-bass strings – in Gibson's design supported by an extension connected to the body and the headstock – added sustained bass accompaniment and drones.

A few years later, and still at Gibson in Kalamazoo, we're greeted by the man who seems the most likely contender for the title of First Famous Guitarist To Get His Own Signature Model. Nick Lucas was known as America's Singing Troubadour, and he became a big star with catchy hits, including his 1929 smash *Tip-Toe Thru The Tulips With Me* – almost as off-the-rails as the much later cover version by Tiny Tim. Some of Nick's more sensible cuts, such as *Teasing The Frets*, show off his assured guitar playing, too.

Gibson's extravagant '29 catalogue blurb for its Nick Lucas guitar looks very much like the model for every piece of signature-guitar hype that followed. "The wizardry of Nick Lucas and his guitar is known to all music lovers," it says. "Combining his ideas and knowledge with the skill of Gibson Artist-Craftsmen has given birth to a truly magnificent guitar. To play it is to know a measure of the same inspiration that has carried Nick Lucas to great heights. You love the feel as it comes to life with the touch of your fingers. Your regard grows like a rare flower watered by the crystal drops of purest melody. It is indeed an instrument *by an artist, for the artist*."

There were other signature acoustics from this era, including a Harmony guitar named for Roy 'Wizard Of The Strings' Smeck, the lute-shape Vita-Guitar launched in 1928. Roy was a widely popular star from the vaudeville days who played ukulele and banjo as well as steel and Spanish guitar. Gibson, too, made a deal with Smeck a few years later for the Roy Smeck Radio Grande and Stage Deluxe Hawaiian flat-tops, first seen in 1934.

A few signature models turned up in Gibson's contract brands around this time. The company repurposed a flat-top from its budget Kalamazoo line for a Recording King model, the Carson J Robison, introduced in 1933 for the New York-based country singer-songwriter. Recording King was a house brand of the hugely successful Montgomery Ward mail-order operation. At the end of the 30s, Gibson produced a pair of short-lived Recording King signature models for the singing cowboy Ray Whitley, who helped Gibson with the introduction of its SJ/J-200 jumbo flat-top.

During the early years of electric development, there was an obscure Harmony-made Rickenbacker electric flat-top, the Ken Roberts of 1935. More or less

1. An early star of guitar, Nick Lucas is seen in this 1929 Gibson catalogue with the flat-top he would become synonymous with in the movie *Show Of Shows* (pictured opposite) from the same year

Gibson's extravagant blurb for its Nick Lucas guitar looks like the model for every piece of signature hype that followed

PHOTO COURTESY OF TONY BACON

all we know about Mr Roberts is that his first name was Ken and that he wasn't Alvino Rey. A year later, Epiphone launched the fabulous if hefty Electar Rocco double-neck electric lap-steel, although history insists we remember Anthony Rocco as an effects pioneer thanks to his Tonexpressor volume/tone pedal. Toward the end of the 30s, the tireless Roy Smeck signed off on a couple more Recording King guitars, his Professional and A104 electric steels.

2. Roy Smeck was dubbed the 'Wizard Of The Strings' and laid claim to several signature models across the span of his career

PHOTO COURTESY OF TONY BACON

BIG IN AMERICA

As the memories of World War II began to fade and the 1950s arrived, Gibson noticed that the novel solidbody electrics Leo Fender and his team were making over in California were becoming popular. The firm's bosses decided to compete by developing Gibson's own electric solidbody, and then made a signature deal with Les Paul, the best-known guitarist in America. Les had chopped up several guitars in an effort to get nearer the kind of electric instrument he wanted and the sounds he had in mind. But of prime importance for Gibson was his fame. He'd bagged a No 1 hit with Mary Ford, the 1951 multi-vocal multi-guitar *How High The Moon*.

At Gibson, the design team came up with the new Les Paul Model (apart from Les's own trapeze tailpiece, which was soon replaced). This typifies the approach of many guitar makers before and since: slapping a famous name on an instrument that the company either already made or devised itself. It was a step beyond the ads and catalogues of the 50s featuring this well-known player with that particular guitar: Laurindo Almeida and a Vega E-300, say; perhaps Jimmy Bryant and a Broadcaster; or maybe Mary Osborne and a White Falcon.

Other brands sought their own Les Paul and associated model as the decade progressed. An early one was the Framus 5/120 Billy Lorento (aka Bill Lawrence) archtop, introduced in 1953. Also in '53, Hofner's UK agent Selmer unusually opted for a combined effort, introducing the aptly named Committee, designed with six leading British guitarists: Frank Deniz, Ike Isaacs, Jack Llewellyn, Freddie Phillips, Roy Plummer and Bert Weedon.

In '57, Kay introduced a trio of Barney Kessel models, complete with the brand's wonderful Kelvinator headstocks. A little later, when Barney shifted his allegiance to Gibson, Kay simply omitted the 'Barney Kessel' pickguards and kept the Kessel-less model names.

Gibson competed [with Fender] with its own electric solidbody, and then made a deal with the best-known guitarist in America

3. Les Paul serenades his wife and singing partner Mary Ford brandishing his brand-new signature model guitar – which would ironically become universally popular in the brash rock era

4. The actual, original 'Number 1' goldtop Les Paul prototype signed off for production by Les himself – though he went on to mod this guitar extensively

PHOTO BY EXPRESS/EXPRESS/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY JUSTIN BUROCKI

The devilish twin-horn styling of Gibson's Barney Kessel model looked more suited for rock than mellow jazz, and the guitar was famously used by bluesman T-Bone Walker, too

This 1959 6120 Chet Atkins model, replete with the relatively new humbucking Filter'Tron pickups, represents a signature model that, like the Les Paul, transcended its original artist connection to become a staple of rock and pop guitar

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

The idiosyncratic guitars of the Mosrite company got a big boost from their association with the hugely successful 60s surf guitar group The Ventures – their '65 signature model is shown here

Naturally, it was exciting to be honoured with a signature model – a promo boost rarely does a musician any harm. Gretsch launched its Chet Atkins 6120 and solid 6121 in 1955 and the Chet Atkins Country Gentleman and Tennessean three years later. Chet recalled some 40 years later how much it meant to have a signature model. "I was thrilled to have my name on a guitar," he told this writer, "like Les Paul had his name on the Gibson. I was *so* thrilled by that – and now I don't know why. Now, it wouldn't mean that much to me. At the time, I was fired up with ambition and I was so anxious to be known all over the world, to be known as a great guitarist. And that deal with Gretsch was one brick in the edifice that would help that happen."

5. Gretsch produced a variety of guitars bearing Chet Atkins' name, though the artist felt some of the cowboy stylings used on the instruments were over the top

Into the 60s, more artist models tempted players who wondered if some of their hero's fairy dust might be lurking under the frets

BAND AID

The modern idea of the signature guitar was taking shape as the 1950s rolled into the 60s. More artist models hit the shops, tempting players who wondered if some of their hero's fairy dust might be lurking under the frets or inside the pickups of the instrument bearing the big star's name. In the 60s, as rock and pop exploded, a slew of new signature models appeared, and one new trend underlined the popularity of the band over the individual musician: Mosrite gave us its Ventures model in 1963, Gretsch introduced a Monkees guitar in '66, and Guyatone hooked up with Japanese heroes Sharp 5 a year later.

Is it the player, or is it the guitar? That debate around the value of a signature model will run and run. In the meantime, it wouldn't be a bad idea to start practising your signature. There's a knack to make it fit snugly on the headstock of your choice without grazing the brand logo or the tuners. Why not do some advance planning? Then when the call comes you'll be ready. G

6. Japanese Beat group Sharp 5 received their own Guyatone signature model guitars – the lucrative influence of star appeal was just as effective for selling guitars in Japan as it was in the States

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWYN

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TONY BACON

MAKING A NAME

Some signature models are little more than a cash-in, but surprising amounts of R&D are invested in the best ones –making them truly advanced guitars

Words Charlie Wilkins

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

Mention the words 'signature guitar' and you will usually provoke one of two distinct reactions. Some see the ultimate expression of an artist's vision, an instrument shaped by years of touring and real-world experience. Others see little more than a standard production guitar with an inflated price tag and a famous name slapped on the headstock. The truth lies somewhere in the middle, split between two design philosophies: instruments built as faithful replicas, and instruments engineered to refine and innovate.

The first approach treats the guitar as a historical artefact. Faithfully replicated models such as Gibson's recent 'Greeny' Les Paul, cloned from the iconic 1959 'Burst shared by Peter Green, Gary Moore and Kirk Hammett, aren't trying to improve the original template. Their purpose is to preserve a frozen moment of rock history for a new generation. Conversely, the second philosophy looks forward, asking a practical engineering question: how can we make this guitar better? These instruments use an artist's experience to refine ergonomics, hardware and electronics. Steve Vai's groundbreaking Ibanez JEM is the ultimate example. Its structural innovations solved real performance roadblocks, eventually trickling down into the mass-market RG series and permanently changing how modern guitars are built.

PROBLEM SOLVERS

The best signature guitars rarely begin as marketing ideas; they start with a player trying to solve a persistent problem. Fender chief product officer, Justin Norvell, explains that this collaborative spirit is part of the company's original DNA.

"It's an ongoing conversation we have with everybody," Norvell notes. "Leo wasn't a guitar player. It was Bill Carson, Freddie Tavares... all of these players that would just say, 'I like this. I don't like this. Can you put an extra pickup on there? Can you do this?'"

Artist-driven R&D existed long before formalised signature models did. Michael Schulz, Fender's head of Signature Artists, says that same spirit drives modern projects, though artists now arrive with highly specific insights from heavy touring and recording.

Opposite: The appeal of a signature guitar made for a specific artist often goes well beyond that player's original fanbase. This reissue Gibson Trini Lopez is a go-to instrument for Mirador guitarist Chris Turpin and was played on tour by Greta Van Fleet guitarist and Mirador bandmate, Jake Kiszka

1. The PRS McCarty Korina model (left) sits alongside the David Grissom Trem (DGT) model in 2008, a year after the model's NAMM launch

"We're getting more information from artists saying, 'Hey, I've been doing this thing. I've been hearing this thing... let's R&D it.' So then, we'll try to figure out how to make it work."

In much the same way, the PRS DGT grew organically from a friendship starting in the mid-1980s between David Grissom and Paul Reed Smith. As they exchanged ideas, Grissom's road and studio experiences led to requests for a thicker mahogany body, revised pickups and player-focused changes. Those ideas first evolved into the PRS McCarty model, which Grissom initially declined to put his name on out of respect for Ted McCarty's legacy.

Grissom explains: "I was really at the point where... nobody knows who I am and I don't want my name on the guitar. A lot of the ideas that I was trying to translate into the PRS were really ideas that Ted McCarty had pioneered at Gibson, and I thought it was extremely fitting and appropriate to recognise Ted for all his contributions."

"Everything about that [PRS signature] guitar is spec'd out. It's not an accident. It's not left to chance" ***DAVID GRISSOM***

PHOTO BY PHILIP SOWELS / PAUL REED SMITH PHOTO COURTESY OF PRS

Only after years of continued refinement did that platform become the DGT. As Grissom recalled: "We bounced ideas off each other for years and we would always come up with different stuff." As Grissom's session work increased, the guitar had to cover more ground. "We changed the control layout so the bridge pickup volume knob was closer to my little finger because I worked that constantly," he explains. "We worked on the neck profile quite a bit over several years with quite a few prototypes."

Norvell witnessed a similar level of microscopic detail when collaborating with Radiohead's Ed O'Brien, where tiny shifts in wood dimensions mattered. "I remember we were messing with different necks," Norvell recalled, "and Ed was feeling 10 thousandths of an inch on the back shape of neck. 'Well, this

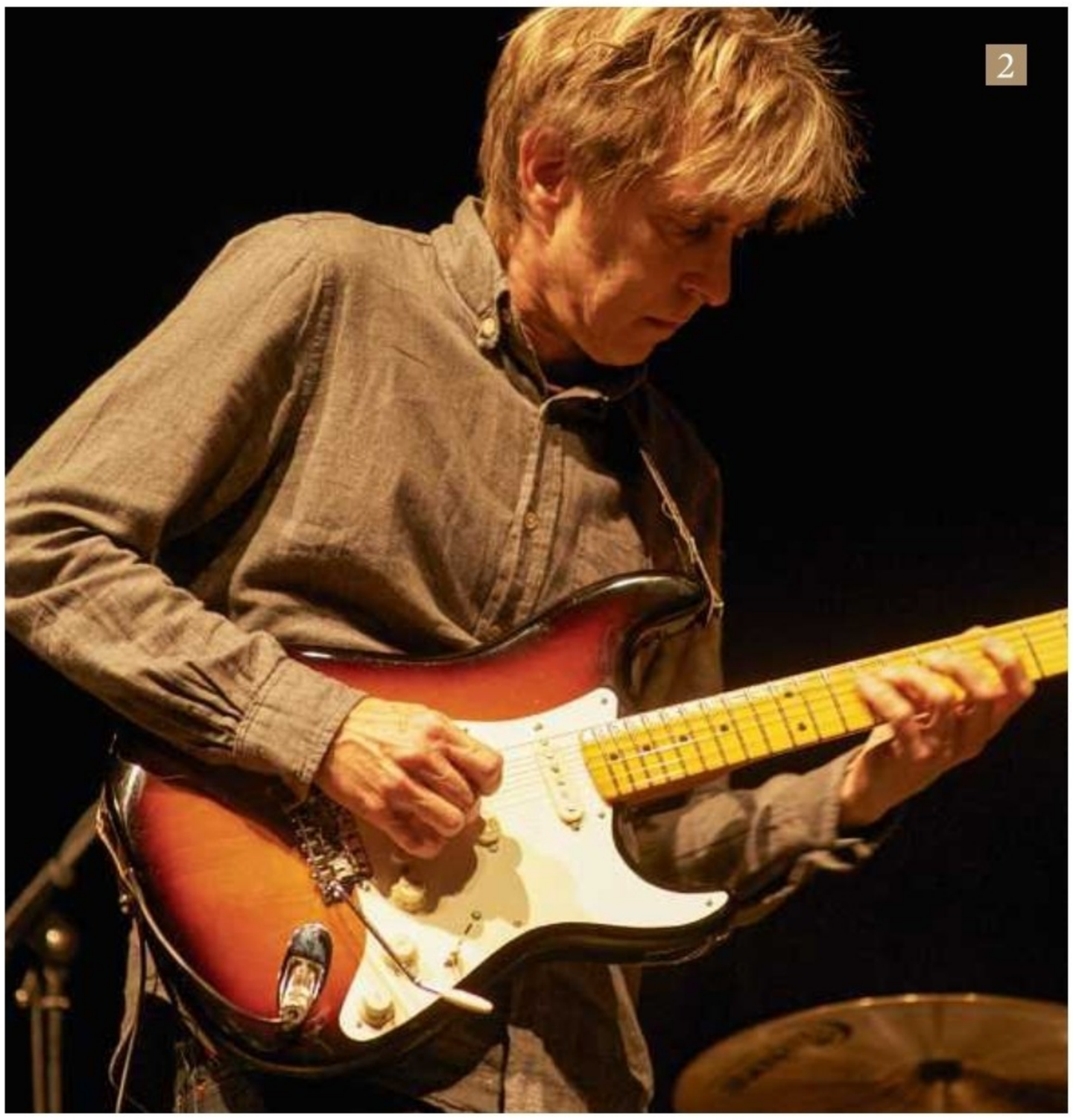


PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

one's a little bigger.' We'd get out the digital calipers and, sure enough, the neck was bigger."

The Eric Johnson Signature Stratocaster illustrated how demanding an artist can be when every detail affects performance. Norvell recalls that "Eric wasn't interested in changing a guitar simply for the sake of change; he was searching for a very specific feel and response. The project ultimately involved testing more than 60 pickup sets and developing Fender's first compound back-shape neck."

But the real takeaway was much bigger than any single component. It was about getting every element to vibe together perfectly. "We always reduce it to the components," Norvell says. "But, really, it was about designing a guitar that's optimised to be the best version of itself where all the components work together in harmony."

This same holistic approach defined the development of the PRS DGT, where Grissom focused heavily on achieving a seamless dynamic response across the entire fretboard. The pickups became a major focal point of the R&D process. Instead of settling for high-gain performance or sterile vintage replication, he pushed for a balanced pickup voiced to deliver rich output and musical warmth without losing an ounce of single-coil-like openness and clarity. "I still felt like there was too much midrange, too much gain," he says, "but I didn't want it to be sterile. I'm trying to get that sweet spot, where you do have mids, but you don't sacrifice the sweet top-end and the harmonic complexity."

2. Exacting artists such as Eric Johnson can really push companies building their signature model into deeper R&D. Over 60 pickup sets were trialled for his signature Strats

"Eric wasn't interested in change for the sake of change; he was searching for a very specific feel and response" ***JUSTIN NORVELL***

Factory manufacturing methods, like pickup potting, became part of the discussion. Grissom questioned whether soaking them too long in wax killed the sound. "If you're letting them soak in a tub of wax for 10 minutes," he says, "you're killing all that air around them." The solution was subtle: "To this day, they just go in for a little bit, and we don't do the vacuum where it pulls the wax through."

That level of detail carried through the entire instrument, down to the fret bevels, spec'd for "maximum real estate, but with no sharp edges". He sums up the philosophy simply: "Everything about that guitar is spec'd out. It's not an accident. It's not left to chance."

3. Mike McCready of Pearl Jam took his Road Worn Strats out on tour with the band and the feedback on the prototype's performance came direct from the stage

TRIED & TESTED

Real-world testing is equally vital. Fender's Michael Schulz recalls sending Mike McCready an early Road Worn Strat prototype to play on stage with Pearl Jam. McCready came back with direct operational notes: "Hey, this sounds great, but I need this changed a little bit – I need this neck thing fixed right here a little bit." For Schulz, that was definitive proofing: "How much more R&D truth can you get than having this be played during *Yellow Ledbetter* and *Alive* and *Even Flow* live with Pearl Jam?"

Grissom describes the exact same idea from the player's side. His suggestions were "born out of thousands of gigs and hundreds of sessions", but success required "the ability to take those suggestions, put them into a guitar, and then hit the road, or go make a couple of records to see if they worked".

The Mark Knopfler 1958 Les Paul directly replicates Mark's much-loved '58 'Burst. The model was launched in 2016 in a much sought-after (and pricey) Aged And Signed version and a more attainable VOS (Vintage Original Spec) variant. This example currently resides at Gas Station Guitars in Taunton

The US-built Mark Knopfler Stratocaster, made between 2003 and 2013, was not a direct replica of his famous '61 Strat but a blend of features chosen by Mark, including a 50s-style ash body and Texas Special pickups. Plus plenty of case candy, of course

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

Jared James Nichols' signature model evolved even more organically. Nichols took his own Les Paul, removed the neck pickup, stripped the controls and rewired it with a single bridge P-90 and one volume knob. The guitar became his main instrument long before a brand got involved. When Gibson approached him, Nichols says the development was remarkably collaborative. "They let me pick whatever components I wanted," he recalls. Crucially, Nichols chose to build the guitar as an Epiphone, rather than a Gibson Custom Shop model, wanting something working musicians could realistically afford.

Perhaps no model better illustrates the power of artist-driven R&D than Steve Vai's collaboration with Ibanez. Rather than modifying an existing production model, Vai worked with engineers to build a guitar from scratch. The resulting JEM introduced innovations such as the Monkey Grip, enhanced upper-fret access, advanced switching and the 'Bear Claw' tremolo rout – all practical solutions to Vai's real playing challenges.

Meanwhile, Paul Reed Smith rejects the idea of a standard blueprint for signature guitars, noting every collaboration follows its own path. "It's all different," Smith explains. "What I did with Herman Li, what I did with David Grissom, what I did with Carlos Santana – all completely different stories." In fact, Herman Li's model took nearly a decade because "he didn't just want a guitar. He initially wanted a synthesizer controller that would do things that most guitars won't do." By contrast, "David wanted a McCarty guitar with a tremolo, he wanted everything right". Ultimately, Smith says, "it's not a label-slapping moment where you just throw an artist's name on the back of a headstock. It's getting these people what they want and having their legacy and their pride involved."

Perhaps no model better illustrates the power of artist-driven R&D than Steve Vai's collaboration with Ibanez

Together, these stories show that signature guitar R&D is multifaceted. Whether it is a long factory development cycle, a prototype tested on stage, or a guitarist stripping a Les Paul down to the essentials, the best examples all share one core idea: the artist brings the problem, the builder helps find the solution, and the guitar becomes stronger because both sides listen.

BACK TO BUSINESS

Behind every successful signature guitar is a massive investment of time, money and trust. Long before reaching a dealer's wall, manufacturers spend years refining prototypes alongside an artist. It is a major risk, with no upfront guarantee that the instrument will appeal beyond a core fanbase.

For some players, royalties from a successful signature guitar can provide long-term financial stability while cementing an artist's legacy. While David Grissom and Steve Vai both acknowledge the economic benefits, they insist that a guitar must ultimately stand on its own merits. Players buy an instrument because it performs, regardless of whose signature is on the headstock.

4. Not all artist models are designed as high-end exotica. Jared James Nichols chose a workmanlike spec for his single-pickup Epiphone signature models and uses them on tour extensively

5. Steve Vai's input on the original Ibanez JEM – launched in 1987 and seen here in its early-model Loch Ness Green livery – stands as an example of how the needs of pioneering guitarists literally changed the shape, sound and boundaries of mainstream electric guitar design

PHOTO: GIBSON

PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

At the ultra-premium end, limited Custom Shop micro-runs function less like tools and more like fine art or financial assets

While the Ibanez JEM represents the uniquely original end of the signature model spectrum, high-end replicas such as this Gibson Paul Kossoff Les Paul Standard 2012 Lemon Burst from ATB Guitars are about painstaking homage

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

Fender's H.E.R. Strat, originally released in 2020, shows how the signature model continues to breathe fresh relevance into decades-old designs and engages new players with them

To make it all work, the guitar market has split into very distinct price points and tiers. At the ultra-premium end, limited Custom Shop micro-runs function less like tools and more like fine art or financial assets. The benchmark remains Gibson's 2004 Jimmy Page Les Paul. The 25 'Played and Signed' models originally retailed for $25,000 and now routinely command over $80,000 at auctions. Fender's 2006 clone of Eric Clapton's 'Blackie' retailed for $24,000 and sold out in hours. These instruments generate immediate, high-margin cash flow and can elevate a brand's entire catalogue.

Modern artist collaborations are explicitly engineered to introduce the guitar to younger, more diverse demographics

This split highlights a brand-new approach to signature collaborations. As Fender's Justin Norvell and Michael Schulz reveal, modern collaborations look far beyond traditional rock heroes. High-profile releases like the Bruno Mars and H.E.R. Stratocasters are explicitly engineered to introduce the guitar to younger, more diverse demographics. When a partnership really clicks, it doesn't just sell gear, it builds a lasting legacy for the company and creates a classic instrument that keeps inspiring players long after the artist is gone.

MORE THAN A NAME

The ultimate compliment a signature guitar can receive is when players forget it's a signature model at all. The Gibson Les Paul is the absolute benchmark. While it carries the name of a true pioneer, most guitarists don't buy a Les Paul to sound like Les Paul; they buy it because it is one of the greatest electric instruments ever built. Somewhere along the way, the design simply became bigger than the signature.

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

A signature opens the door in a showroom, but the guitar has to do the rest. That's what separates truly great signature models

This Limited Edition John Lennon Epiphone Casino 1965 reissue currently resides at Gas Station Guitars. It comes with its original metal-backed silkscreen print portrait of the Beatles legend

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

PHOTO BY J ESSE WILD

The same has happened with many of today's most successful artist models. The PRS DGT has earned a loyal following among players who appreciate its feel and versatility, regardless of whether they're familiar with David Grissom's music. Martin's 000-28EC followed a remarkably similar path. The guitar's initial spark came during Eric Clapton's legendary 1992 MTV *Unplugged* performance, where his stripped-down acoustic set gripped a global audience and put the short-scale Martin 000 back on the modern map. But while that landmark broadcast served as the ultimate launchpad for his 1996 signature model, 30 years later, it remains a cornerstone of Martin's line-up because players discovered it is simply an outstanding, highly responsive acoustic instrument in its own right.

6. Successful associations between artists and brand, such as that which exists between Brian Setzer and Gretsch, can literally bring companies back from the brink

7. Les Paul ushered the world's most famous single-cut into the world, but Slash gave it a vital second wind when Guns N' Roses shot to fame

Every once in a while, a signature guitar does something much bigger. It changes the entire direction of the company

Even the Ibanez JEM tells a similar story. Steve Vai's ideas helped reshape the instrument, but many of the innovations developed during the project eventually found their way into Ibanez's hugely successful RG series, extending far beyondthe people who originally set out to buy a Steve Vai model.

A signature opens the door in a showroom, but the guitar has to do the rest. That's what separates the truly great signature models from the forgettable ones. The best ones endure because they became exceptional instruments in their own right.

THE GAME-CHANGERS

Most signature guitars are designed to solve problems, introduce new ideas or celebrate an artist's contribution. Every once in a while, a guitar does something much bigger. It changes the entire direction of the company.

Gretsch is one of the best examples. By the early 1980s, the company had all but disappeared from the conversation. Production had stopped, quality had suffered, and the brand had lost relevance. Then Brian Setzer stepped into the spotlight with the Stray Cats, proudly playing his well-worn Gretsch 6120. Suddenly, a new generation of players rediscovered the brand, sparking renewed interest that eventually led to a successful line of signature models and playing a significant role in the company's resurgence.

Gibson experienced a similar revival in the late 1980s. At a time when pointy 'SuperStrats' dominated the hard-rock market, Slash walked on stage with a late-50s-style Les Paul and reminded an entire generation why the design had become a classic. Demand for Les Pauls surged, helping re-establish the model as Gibson's flagship guitar and laying the foundation for one of the company's most successful signature relationships.

Stories like these are rare, but they illustrate the extraordinary influence the right artist and the right guitar can have. The best signature models don't just sell well; occasionally, they revive forgotten designs, reshape public perception and help rewrite a company's future. G

With thanks to ATB Guitars in Melksham (www.atbguitars.com) and Gas Station Guitars in Taunton (www.gasstationguitars.com) for providing the stunning vintage guitars photographed for this issue's cover feature

The ultimate compliment a signature guitar can receive is when players forget it's a signature model at all

The best signature guitars arguably blend time-proven platforms with artist-spec'd tweaks such as the Filter'Tron-style Lollar'Tron pickups on this Chris Cornell ES-335 from Gas Station Guitars

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

AZIZ IBRAHIM

From poverty to ’59 Les Pauls, the Manchester-born guitarist and composer landed his dream gig with The Stone Roses in 1996, which forever shifted his technical playing mindset towards “individuality, tonality and the sense of the song”

Words Andrew Daly **Photography** Jesse Wild

When it comes to merging the worlds of composition, technique and feel, Aziz Ibrahim is up there with the best of them. But despite playing with Simply Red, Asia, The Stone Roses, Ian Brown, Paul Weller and Steven Wilson, a hint of 'what could have been' remains in his career: "I was prevented from reaching the US," he tells *Guitarist*. "Life and politics always got in the way. But after I stopped touring with Ian Brown, people would ask him, 'Hey, man, where's that Asian Jimi Hendrix that plays with you? Why haven't you brought him with you?' So I missed out on the US, but putting current politics aside, the US was – and is – one of the places I always wanted to tour."

Now 62, Aziz says that people probably "wonder where that great body of work is" when looking back on his career. But the evidence is clear: his playing and songwriting are all over albums such as Asia's *Arena*, Ian Brown's *Unfinished Monkey Business*, and Paul Weller's *Illumination*, not to mention his 2001 solo record, *Lahore To Longsight*, its title highlighting his Pakistani heritage and the area of Manchester in which he was born.

"I just love the guitar," Ibrahim says with a shrug. "It doesn't matter what I'm doing, it's just great to be playing guitar and playing well. And with each era, there are new styles of playing and new things to discover."

As for why, in his eyes, he never made it big, Ibraham says: "I wasn't cut out for being a session musician. I'm too used to the freedom of being in a band and playing within that dynamic. I don't like to be told what to play, what to wear, or having my sound kept in a box. There's a science and skill set to that – I'm not one of those players."

Simply Red and Asia had their moments of that coveted band dynamic, but they couldn't hold a candle to Ibrahim's 90s tenure in The Stone Roses as a replacement for John Squire. "There were hardships of being accepted," Ibrahim recalls. "But the sweet part was the education, which was invaluable. I learned so many things. I backed away from the technicalities of playing and concentrated on creating my own sound and my own style of playing."

And that career-defining gig with the Roses springboarded all that came after. "I'd never seen anything like it before," Aziz tells us. "The esteem and how the band was treated... people would go quiet when the band entered. That was a world I didn't know. Before The Stone Roses, it's not like I was in Guns N' Roses [laughs]. I didn't know about the status of a band like the Roses or how people reacted to that. I felt like a sober observer, looking out from the inside. I guess I could be a journalist writing a story of what it's like to be in the coolest band in the world... with a '59 Les Paul in my hands [laughs]."

1. Originally finished in Champagne Gold, this 2021 Harmony Silhouette is now Fender Shell Pink thanks to Lewis Guitar Works. Aziz says: "It's a combination of Firebird-type pickups, Telecaster bridge and Jazzmaster looks rolled into one"

2. This 2012 Yamaha Guitalele GL1 harks back to Aziz's first forays into guitar as a child, and appears at all his acoustic shows. It's the perfect sofa noodler and great for aspiring players, too

3. Aziz's 2022 Squier Classic Vibe 60s Bass VI is a CME Factory Special Run with a Staytrem Mustang-style bridge. Its sole use is with all-female Manchester post-punk band Tuareg; Aziz is the "token male bassist"

4. Aziz has made his mark in a number of bands, but he's no session musician: "I'm too used to the freedom of being in a band and playing within that dynamic. I don't like to be told what to play, what to wear, or having my sound kept in a box"

5. Source Audio's Soundblox2 MultiWave Distortion is a must-have for Aziz: "Such an unusual pedal – polyphonic in nature and touch-sensitive beyond belief," he says

What initially got you going on guitar?
"Ever since I was eight years old, I was mesmerised by the guitar. It was like a silver-stringed angel. And then, for my birthday, there was a guitar in the window of a hardware store, which was, like, £5, quite a lot of money in those days... that was my first. It was small, like a ukulele, but I've never looked back."

How did the Manchester scene you grew up in affect you as a player?
"Firstly, I'm self-taught. I can't read or write music, but I can compose for an orchestra or any artist. But the strange thing about Manchester is that it has a very diverse music scene – people think it's mostly indie and alternative, but there's a lot there culturally. I don't have a preference and I enjoyed all of it; I just wanted to play music and join a band. I grew up with street culture and was very into dance, but I was hungry to play the guitar, so I got into Santana, Van Halen, Metallica and then Bob Marley and session players like Larry Carlton."

"I went from poverty and playing what I could afford, and then the next minute I had the world's ultimate guitars in my care"

6. The original Line 6 DL4 from '99 (later versions are no substitute, according to Aziz!) are 'can't live without' inclusions on both pedalboards

You joined Simply Red in 1987. What was that like?
"That was the money period, where it began [laughs]. I had a bigger budget than I'd ever had, but when I joined I had a Marshall stack and an Ibanez Pro Line in Cherry Ice. It had covered pickups, an HSS setup, and it had the new Ibanez headstock that was pointier. It was a beautiful guitar... but when I joined, I was asked, 'Do you like The Rolling Stones and do you like reggae?" [laughs] I knew the disciplines... but they didn't like the guitar. I said to them, 'Look, I haven't got the money,' so they bought me a PRS in Emerald Green. And the cabinets I used were 4x12 Marshall Jubilees with Greenbacks. But they didn't like the Marshall [heads], so they got me a Rivera TBR-1 head, which went into the Jubilee cabinets."

After that, you joined Asia. What gear did you use?
"I recorded one album with Asia, *Arena*. That was different because when I came into the band I was using borrowed equipment. There were 100-watt Peavey heads, which were too heavy for the sounds I wanted to make. I wanted to add the dirt myself and go for a really ballsy, clean sound."

What was it like joining The Stone Roses in 1996, and how did your rig change?
"It came as a surprise to me when The Stone Roses asked me to play for them because that was the ultimate rock 'n' roll gig. And by that, I mean that somebody literally just handed me a 1959 Gibson Les Paul and said, 'Yeah, mate, that's yours to play.' Then they said, 'Oh, and so are these...' I looked at the rest of the collection and it was a 1959 Gibson ES-345, a 1959 Fender Strat, plus a '62 and a '64 Strat, a Gibson Hummingbird, and a plethora of beautiful amps. And some vintage pedals... I went from poverty and playing what I could afford one minute, and then the next minute I had the world's ultimate guitars in my care."

Were you given these guitars, or was this band gear, so to speak?
"I didn't own them, but they were in my care because I was the guitarist in the band. As you can imagine, that blew my mind! But it was also an education because you don't often get the opportunity to live with those sorts of instruments and appreciate what's special about them."

The 1998 Jerry Jones Master Sitar (left) was used to record Ian Brown's *Return Of The Fisherman* from 2005's *The Greatest* and is always tuned to CGCGCD. The 2025 Danelectro Big Sitar alongside it, meanwhile, is in standard tuning

7. This 2023 Gretsch Paisley Penguin is Aziz's main guitar and features on all his new material and live shows. You'll also hear it on the *Ogun* and *Amor e Morfina* singles from Brazilian post-punk star Nasi

8. A writing and jam-night staple, this 2014 Airline Tuxedo offers a unique sound. It's customised with a shorter tailpiece and has white cupcake pots

How did that change you as a player?
"The [guitars] are all beautiful and they're not all the same. You grow with them... I grew up, shall we say. I grew up in the moment because I was spoiled, but I had the time to actually invest in learning what the qualities of those instruments were."

What were the band's expectations of you?
"It was a dream come true. They didn't tell me how to be; they just wanted me to be an entity, a unique individual, and to let my personality shine. They wanted that to come out in the music, so it was about identity. I started to understand what being in a band was about, which is about what you have to say, not what you're told to do."

"The education was invaluable. I backed away from the technicalities of playing and concentrated on creating my own sound"

9. This 1987 Desert Yellow Ibanez JEM 777DY, with Tree of Life inlays, is from the first year of FujiGen-factory production. Aziz used it live with both Asia and Steve Hogarth's h Band, but it was a hard no for onstage use from the Simply Red camp!

Was that difficult to do, coming in as a replacement for John Squire?
"That was bittersweet. The downside was that I knew you couldn't replace somebody as loved as John. It was difficult in terms of being accepted, but also with the racism I faced during that period. In those days, people could get your phone number easily and I used to get death threats and all manner of calls. For that to be related to music was mindblowing. It was difficult psychologically, but, musically, it didn't take me long to learn. The hardest thing was that John is such a unique individual, so that was an education. That was the beginning of my reverse-engineering the damage in my playing. And when I say 'damage', what I'm referring to is the technical playing. I was geared up to play Steve Vai solos, which needed dexterity, and I was [particular] about pickups, fretboards and fret height. But being in The Stone Roses sent me in a completely different direction. It was now about individuality, tonality and the sense of the song."

So what sort of player were you coming out of The Stone Roses, and how was that reflected in the work you did with Ian Brown on his solo records?
"The demise of The Stone Roses was in April '97. It was kind of a blessing, to tell the truth. I was playing Stone Roses legacy songs, but didn't have any writing credits. The band was writing and making moves for a third album, and I didn't really have a say in that, but I played on the tracks they were demoing. But that demise was where I got to shine because Ian Brown was letting me write music, and if he liked something, he'd pull out a cigarette packet and write some lyrics on it [laughs]. So it was initially a solo album, but eventually became an all-valve-amp, all-analogue solo record for Ian."

What sort of gear and approach did you use once it became an Ian Brown solo record?
"I'd gotten really into hip-hop and sampling. I was putting beats together, literally creating break beats, and then I'd loop... Like the first single off Ian's album [*Unfinished Monkey Business*] was *My Star*, where I used a Rickenbacker 12-string, and I wrote the riff and then looped it and stuck it on a virtual track. Then Ian would transfer it to quarter-inch tape. It was a great process and I really came into my own as a songwriter."

You kept working with Ian, but also worked with Paul Weller on his album, *Illumination*.
"Through my work with Ian, Paul took an interest. I bumped into him at a clothing store in Covent Garden

Aziz's early 80s Gibson Flying V '67 Reissue has bags of bling courtesy of gold fret-marker LEDs, mirror scratchplate and truss rod cover from Martin Sims at Sims Custom Shop in Kent, and gold sparkle finish by New Kings Road Vintage Guitar Emporium. It's his go-to showpiece stage guitar and also makes appearances for Stone Roses' *Love Spreads*

Lahore To Longsight, Aziz's debut album from 2001, was recorded with members of The Smiths, The Stone Roses, Primal Scream and Paul Weller's band. Its recent vinyl re-release features tributes to the artists who have since passed away, and he'll tour the album around the UK this autumn

and he said to me, "You wrote *My Star*...' and I was thinking, 'Wow, this guy knows what I wrote and played.' But a friendship was built from that point and he invited me to play on his album."

All of this led to you recording your solo record, *Lahore To Longsight*, in 2001, which featured Paul and members of The Stone Roses and The Smiths.
"I'd written the first album with Ian and was co-writing with Paul, and I thought, 'I could actually do my own album.' So I wrote that album and all the friends I'd made from being in the Roses onward, and then with Ian, I managed to pull them together. I had the rhythm section from The Smiths, Mike Joyce and Andy Rourke, and Reni [Alan Wren] and Mani from The Stone Roses, the fantastic vocalist from Primal Scream, Denise Johnson, and then Paul Weller and Steve White, Paul's drummer. I basically called in all these favours because I didn't have a band, and we put together this incredible album that encapsulated all these players."

10

10. This unusual 11-stringed fretless nylon-string instrument is a 1999 Godin A11 Glissentar and can be heard on *Middle Road* from Aziz's 2012 album, *Rusholme Rock*. He also uses it when experimenting with tumbi and oud emulation

In support of *Lahore To Longsight*, you put together a proper band with Mike and Andy and were set to tour the US, but it didn't come to pass. What happened?
"I financed the album myself along with my manager at the time. I finished it and was getting ready to tour the US with Andy Rourke and Mike Joyce. I felt like I'd arrived. I had this incredible rhythm section, but what happened was 9/11 hit, the US tour got cancelled and everything fell apart. I put it down to the fact that I've got a Muslim, you know, Arabic name, and the reaction globally and in the US... there was just a lot of stuff going down. There was no way that anyone was interested in releasing an album by Aziz Ibrahim, so I shelved it. I tried releasing it on CD, but I couldn't do it while working with Ian and Paul."

"I'm probably an artist where you wonder where that great body of work is. Global events always seemed to scupper my plans"

The good news is that you reissued *Lahore To Longsight* on vinyl for Record Store Day this year.
"Yes! It's on limited double vinyl, with all the photographs and information as a tribute to Mani, Denise Johnson and Andy Rourke, who have all passed away. This version is limited, but if there's demand, I'll take steps to do a deluxe version and find distribution in the US and Japan."

When you look back, you've got an incredible body of work...
"Well, I'll stop you there. I can tell you that it wasn't a great body of work. I'm probably an artist where you wonder where that great body of work is. Global events always seemed to scupper my plans, and I didn't want to be in the role of being somebody's player or someone you hire to do tours and play other people's parts. I always wanted to collaborate."

Why have you always coveted the band dynamic?
"When you play for someone else, they don't have the same backbone as a band does. There's camaraderie within a band and they stick up for each other. But I'm not naïve... what's kept happening in my life is that [bad] luck kept putting a stop to progress, shall we say."

That said, do you have any regrets?
"No. We all say to ourselves, 'If I'd done this, then I wouldn't have been sacked,' or whatever. What is meant to be has happened. It's all the lessons that you learn from, you go on making the same mistakes and having the same experience. So I don't always think they're mistakes; I think they're experiences that you need to move forward and move on [from]. Those experiences taught me a lot and that's the legacy. If it helps others when you share them... music shouldn't be a selfish thing. So with music and with experiences, I am always about sharing." G

Aziz Ibrahim will tour *Lahore To Longsight 2026* in October and November. See SeeTickets.com and Skiddle.com for details
www.aziz.co.uk

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STEVE LUKATHER'S 1951 FENDER ESQUIRE

This single-pickup instrument from the early 50s has made musical history in the hands of the Toto icon and is a rare unconverted example

Words Huw Price **Photography** Olly Curtis

If you mention the words Fender and Esquire, most guitarists these days will picture a Telecaster-style guitar with no neck pickup. Fender's Esquire model actually predated the Telecaster, and indeed the Broadcaster, having first been produced in the spring of 1950. Although a single bridge pickup was standard, Fender soon began offering a two-pickup 'double Esquire' version for a modest upcharge.

Some Esquires were also returned to the factory to have neck pickups installed, and others were converted by owners themselves – often years later. Fender paused Esquire production between late summer 1950 and January 1951, offering only a two-pickup model newly dubbed the Broadcaster. When Esquire production eventually resumed, it became Fender's official single-pickup single-cutaway option – and things have remained that way ever since.

Single-pickup guitars were nothing new when the Esquire was released, but most were lap steel or jazzbox-style instruments with the pickup in the neck position. Paul Bigsby was clearly an influence on Leo Fender and during the 1940s he made a single-bridge-pickup guitar for Merle Travis. Merle's guitar had what appears to be a three-way selector switch that operated in line with the strings and three control knobs. Leo Fender's approach was similar and was a laudable attempt to provide Esquire players with instant access to three distinctive preset tones. We'll discuss those settings later on.

It's hard to identify any big-name players who have used a single-pickup Esquire throughout their careers. The likes of Steve Cropper, Jeff Beck and Billy Gibbons have all played them at some point, but they graduated to Telecasters and other models. Bruce Springsteen's Esquire already had a neck pickup fitted when he bought it, and there's no evidence to suggest he ever changed it back.

Toto Gesture

Although better known for playing his *Rosanna* 'Burst and his more recent affiliation with Music Man, session ace and Toto founding member Steve Lukather also owned and played a 1951 Esquire for decades. In an interview with *Vintage Guitar* magazine, Steve revealed how he acquired the guitar in the late 70s: "I already had the Goldtop and 'Burst, and I began to look into other vintage guitars. The Esquire just fell into my lap; I paid 600 bucks for it."

Steve was acting on the advice of his friend Paul 'Jamo' Jameson who persuaded him that collecting vintage guitars would be a sound long-term investment. "He actually hipped me to a lot of stuff," he said. "Had I listened more than I did – because I thought paying a couple of grand for a guitar was insane back then – I would've bought everything."

The Esquire became a studio staple for Steve and he recalled using it extensively on *Toto IV*. "Anything that sounds remotely like a Tele is that Esquire. It's me doing my impression of Keith Richards." He also used the Esquire on sessions with Joni Mitchell and Dolly Parton, and played it on Ringo Starr's single *Let's Change The World*.

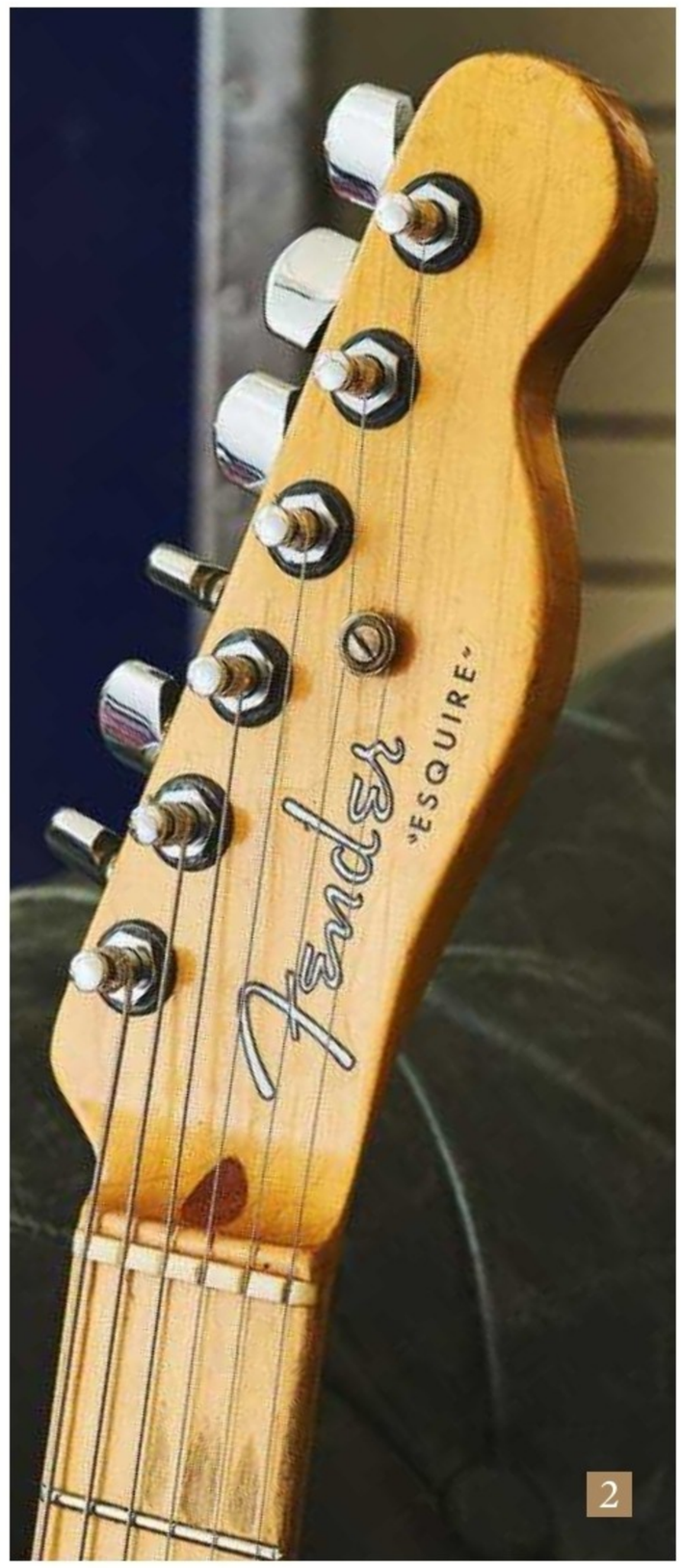
When we contacted Steve, he seemed to have few regrets about selling it. "It was clean and sounded and played great," he says, "but I was cleaning house and some guy offered me a shit ton of dollars for it and I said yes. Vintage gear is getting to the point where it's so expensive, the crash will occur and values will drop so..."

"I already had the Goldtop and 'Burst, and I began to look into other vintage guitars. The Esquire just fell into my lap"

STEVE LUKATHER

Besides a few battle scars and copious lacquer checking, the finish remains in excellent condition for a 75-year-old guitar

1



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1. Fender transitioned from flat-head to cross-head screws in 1951, and this Esquire model has a mixture of both

2. A set of Schaller tuners has replaced the original Klusons, but the round string tree remains

3. Fender still hadn't figured out how to get the string ferrules lined up and evenly spaced when this guitar was made

4. Plugged screw holes (under the scratchplate) reveal that a neck pickup was once fitted, but the wiring has been returned to Esquire spec

French Connection

The Esquire now resides in Paris and is owned by Matthieu Lucas of Matt's Guitar Shop. It's in fairly remarkable condition for its age with the dirty yellow butterscotch lacquer that is so typical of Blackguards from this timeframe. The finish itself is semi-opaque and the ash body's grain pattern is clear to see.

There are a few scratches and nicks on the surface, along with a small patch of buckle rash adjacent to the string ferrules, but the guitar certainly hasn't endured decades of hard gigging in the honkytonks. While there is some finger wear on the fretboard, the lacquer on the back of the neck remains largely intact.

Fender began transitioning from flat-head to cross-head screws in 1951, and this Esquire has a mixture of both. The neck, bridge and control screws are all cross-heads, but the pickup, pickguard and switch screws are flat-heads.

David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars in New York had the opportunity to examine the guitar and told us that there was a 1mega-ohm potentiometer in the volume position and he believed the 7.24k pickup had been rewound. The neck was

initialled 'TG' with December '51 pencil dates on the neck and body. Dowel plugs in the neck pickup cavity indicated that a second pickup was installed at some point and, in addition to a refret, a set of Schaller tuners has been fitted.

The Esquire is housed in a 1970s Fender case with a 'Steve Lukather' stencil and case candy that includes a note from Steve along with a photo of him playing the guitar and other documentation.

Is Less More?

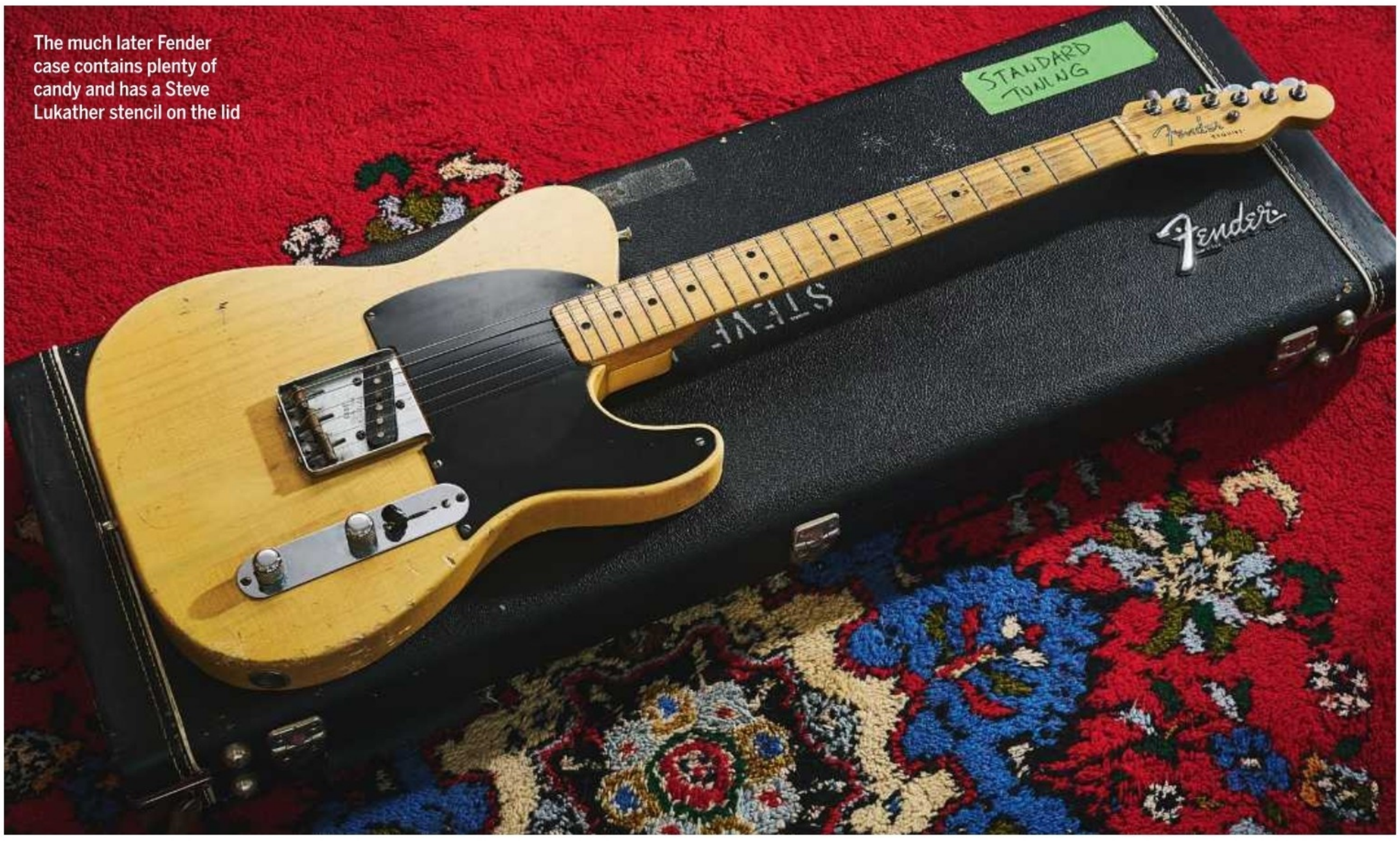
Some guitarists hold the view that single-pickup electric guitars are tonally superior, and the most commonly cited examples are Les Paul Juniors versus Les Paul Specials, and Fender Esquires versus Telecasters. In short, it's the 'all I need is one pickup and a cranked up valve amp and I can get every tone I need' school of thought – and if that works for a player, it's hard to dispute.

Regarding Juniors, there's also the simplified controls argument, but if the complexities of a three-way pickup selector flummox you, there could be other issues at play. The touted sonic benefits include greater brightness and clarity, enhanced resonance and improved sustain. Focusing solely on Fenders, it might be interesting to analyse why that may be the case.

The fundamental differences between an Esquire and a Telecaster are one pickup, rather than two (obviously), and different control wiring. Addressing the pickup disparity first, the two factors to consider are lower weight and less magnetic pull on the strings to inhibit vibration. Popping a Telecaster neck pickup on some digital scales we get a reading of 62.4g (2.2oz). Telecaster guitars vary considerably in weight, but let's assume they range from 2.7kg to 4.5kg (roughly 6lb to 10lb). Running the numbers, the weight of a neck pickup equates to between 1/43 and 1/72 of the overall weight of the guitar. To put that in context, a set of vintage-style Kluson tuners weighs 135g and a set of die-cast tuners is around 175g, which makes the weight argument seem a bit moot.

The decreased magnetic pull factor may have more to it. As someone who has spent more time than is healthy swapping magnets in humbuckers and P-90s, this writer can report there are audible differences in sustain characteristics. In short, the same pickups hang onto notes noticeably longer with weaker Alnico III than strong Alnico V magnets. This is only discernible, however, with clean or mildly overdriven tones. If you crank up the gain or use a compressor or overdrive pedal, everything evens out. What's more, a lack of sustain in Les Pauls with Alnico V-powered Patent Applied For pickups is not a noted characteristic. It's also worth remembering that Telecaster neck pickups have traditionally been made with relatively weak Alnico III slugs. On balance, the improved sustain argument does seem to have merit, but it's fairly marginal.

> *"Anything that sounds like a Tele [on 'Toto IV'] is that Esquire. It's me doing my impression of [Keef]"*
>
> **STEVE LUKATHER**



The much later Fender case contains plenty of candy and has a Steve Lukather stencil on the lid

Some guitarists hold the view that single-pickup electric guitars are tonally superior

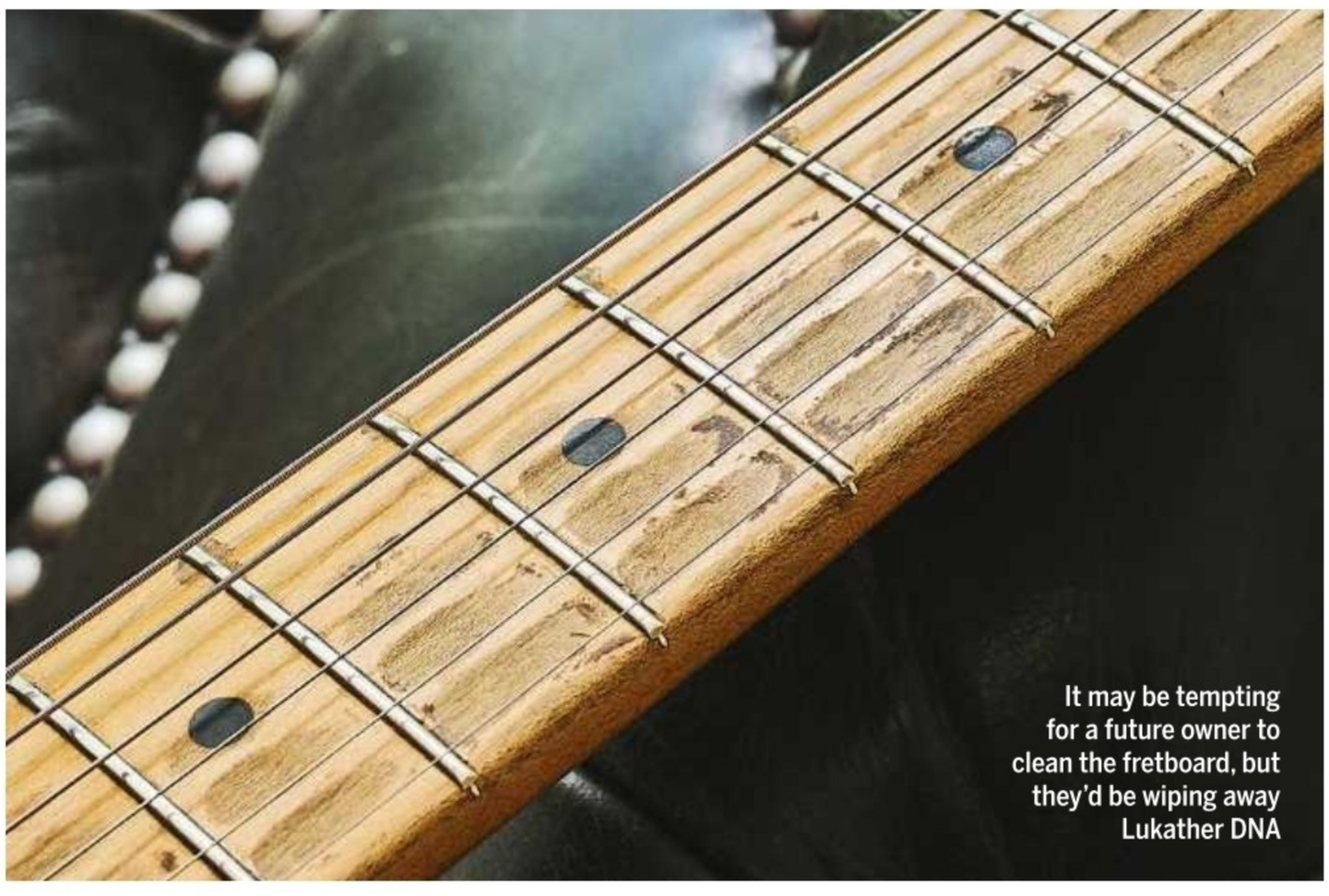
Switching Stuff

Turning to the electronics, Esquires and pre-1968 Teles both had one setting with a preset treble roll-off. Whether it's applied to a neck or bridge pickup doesn't make much difference because they're both dull to the point of impracticality. So let's keep things simple and assume we're comparing Esquires with Telecasters with neck/both/bridge switching options.

In this instance, the Esquire's middle setting corresponds to the Telecaster's bridge setting because the tone control is out of circuit on the Esquire's back setting. Whenever a tone control is connected to a pickup there's some degree of treble roll-off – even when the control itself is turned fully up – and this may be why the Esquire is noted for having a brighter and more cutting tone.

The trade-off is that, for obvious reasons, an Esquire can't give you neck pickup or neck and bridge in combination tones. A Telecaster can, however, do the wide open Esquire thing if you disconnect the bridge pickup from the tone control or fit a no-load tone potentiometer. In recent years, the 'Eldred' mod has become popular among Esquire players. The 'neck' setting is slightly revoiced to produce a mid-heavy cocked-wah tone with ample clarity and more than a hint of P-90 heft.

The question ultimately boils down to whether Esquires justify their 'too cool for school' reputation or if they're guitars that are precisely one third as good as they could be. Esquires have a unique vibe that some players genuinely prefer, but when this writer performs Esquire conversions for clients he invariably finds himself converting them back to Tele specs within weeks. If you're a T-type enthusiast, you'll probably want to own an Esquire as well as a Telecaster, but if it has to be one or the other, then a Telecaster may be the better option. G



It may be tempting for a future owner to clean the fretboard, but they'd be wiping away Lukather DNA

With thanks to Matt's Guitar Shop in Paris for allowing us to photograph this guitar www.mattsguitar.shop

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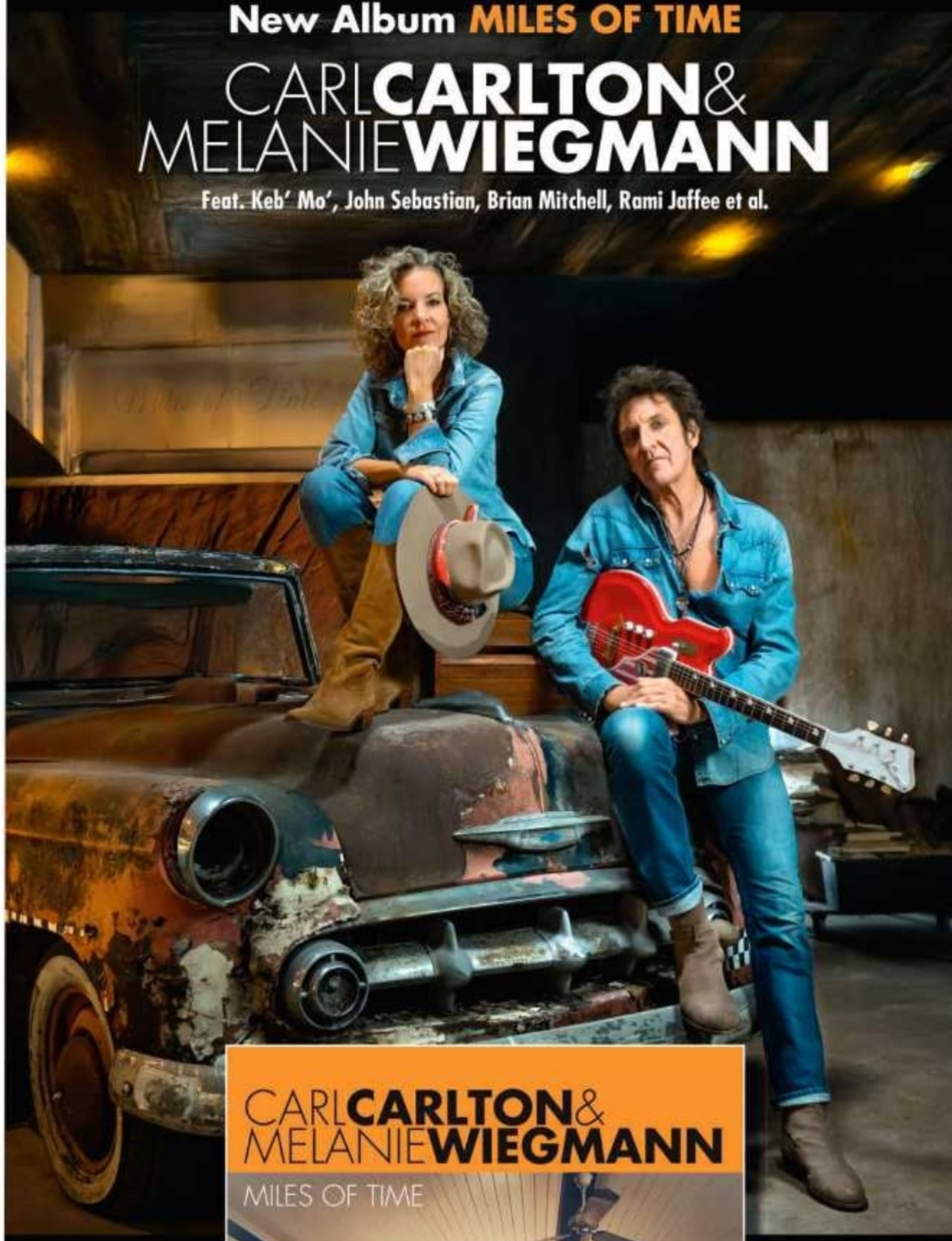

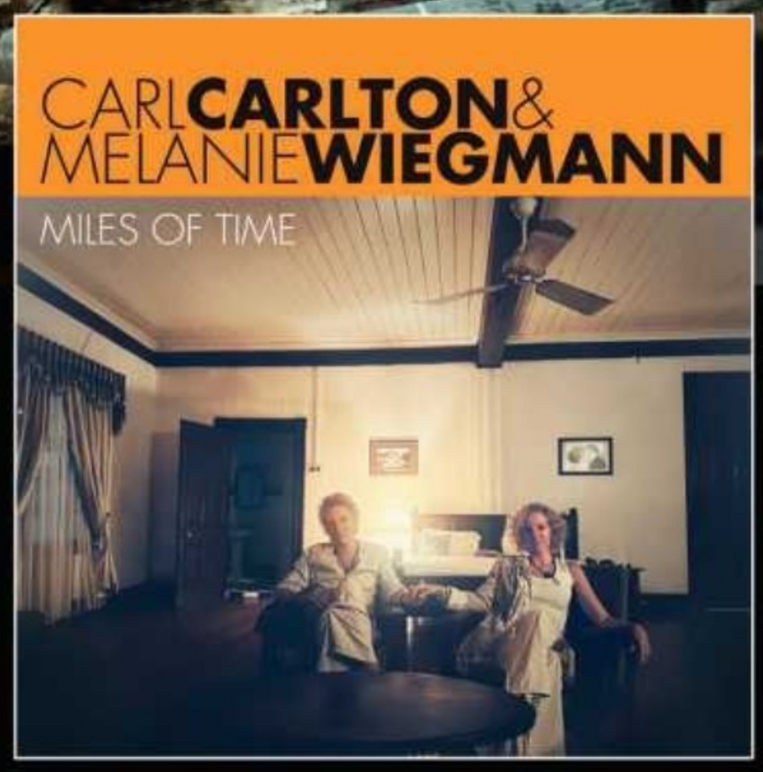

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Flex Machines

This new range of pedals straight out of Music City, USA, is designed for flexibility

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Lucy Robinson

THORN SOUNDLABS BAD CASH, SILVER SPURS, BLACK SWAMP, THE FREAQ, STEAM & TREMONATOR £121 TO £199

CONTACT **High Tech Distribution** WEB **www.thorn-soundlabs.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Thorn Soundlabs? Never heard of them...
The brand was launched in Nashville in 2021 but has only recently got UK distribution. These pedals form part of the Flex range, which comprises nine pedals to date, two of which, including the cutely named Basstard, are aimed at bass players.

2 Lots of knobs!
Yes, there is plenty of tweaking to be had. The Flex name stands for flexible and Thorn Soundlabs says that the pedals "empower you to sculpt your tone with finesse".

3 They look quite big.
They are wider than a Boss Compact but would probably take up the same amount of space on a pedalboard as the sockets are not on the sides.

Thorn Soundlabs is a relatively new pedal company formed in Nashville, USA. Its mission, it says, is to "redefine effects pedals with tools that inspire sonic exploration, not just sonic replication". We have six of the current Flex range of nine pedals here for review, the Flex in the name standing for flexible with the understanding that each pedal offers a wide range of variation within and maybe beyond its allotted task.

Drive, distortion and fuzz are respectively taken care of by the Bad Cash, Silver Spurs and Black Swamp, while The FreaQ provides boost with EQ functionality, and Steam is a compressor. The Tremonator is the sole modulation pedal in the bunch, offering tremolo with tap tempo.

Construction is reassuringly solid, and the pedals all run from a standard nine-volt adapter (no batteries), with four of them also taking an 18-volt supply for extra headroom.

A quick glance and one thing that's apparent is that some of the pedals have controls with names that are not standard – most notably Damping and Headroom. The Damping knob, found on the three dirt pedals and the boost, adjusts a variable filter that reduces the low-frequency content before the signal enters the overdrive circuit, working brilliantly for getting rid of any flub and tightening up your sound. The Headroom knob is designed to adjust the clipping threshold of the output stage on the drive and distortion pedals, working in conjunction with the drive/gain knob to turn up the wick.

Sounds

Bad Cash is an overdrive with a wide range of tone shaping available from its amp-like tone stack array of Bass, Mid, Treble and Presence knobs, as well as the aforementioned Damping and Headroom controls. There are two clipping options available; symmetrical is the smoothest option, with asymmetrical delivering an edgier sound. There's also a similar choice of output distortion characteristics with

A lesser-seen Damping control reduces the low-frequency content before the signal enters the overdrive/distortion circuit, keeping the bottom-end tight and responsive. Allowing all low-frequency content to be processed can make the bottom-end sound loose and flabby

Each pedal offers a wide range of variation within and maybe beyond its allotted task

Class A or AB on offer, so a total of four nuanced voice combinations. With a wide clean to dirty range, this is one flexible drive pedal that should pair with any amp.

Silver Spurs has a similar set of controls to the Bad Cash but operates in a higher gain range. The aim here is classic British amp sound, which the pedal does with aplomb, spitting out aggressive raunch and

heavier saturation. Incidentally, there's one more drive pedal that we couldn't fit into this review and that's the Magma, which is described as a Metal Distortion. The last of the dirt pedals is the Black Swamp fuzz, although we'd say it's as much a distortion as a fuzz in the same way that a Big Muff can be. With a choice of Smooth, Normal or Hot for the fuzz character, as well as the options of soft or hard clipping, all shaped by the usual Damping, Bass and Treble knobs, there's no mistaking the versatility available. But the kicker here is the extra layer of detailed tone sculpture provided by the semi-parametric midrange EQ, which offers boost or cut anywhere between 310Hz and 2kHz.

The FreaQ, described as a Double Stage Booster, has a Boost footswitch that activates the first boost stage where the sound is only affected by the Damping and Boost knobs. It starts from unity gain, so has plenty on tap, yet it also adds a subtle but sweet amount of top-end that can combine with the reduced lows from the Damping knob for added tonal enhancement. The second Freq footswitch only works if the Boost footswitch is already engaged and adds the Gain and Freq controls into the mix to give you a targeted boost where a frequency between 200Hz and 3.4kHz can be cut or boosted by the Gain knobs. This is a really functional pedal that works equally well as an always-on tone conditioner or something to be kicked in as needed.

First port of call on the Steam compressor has to be the Auto/Manual switch to choose between automatic attack and release timing (which is really well dialled in), or use of the Attack and Release knobs for your preferred settings, especially in sculpting the transients. A Threshold knob sets the level at which compression starts and an Amount knob sets the intensity of compression.

But the secret weapon here is the Detail knob, ostensibly designed to restore the brightness perceived to have been lost due to compression and in reality a great tone enhancer to focus your top-end with up to +15dB of gain in the upper mid/treble frequency bands. Steam provides a practical compression toolbox with plenty of output for a boost, too.

Finally, the Tremonator provides a choice of decent-sounding sine or square-wave tremolo that can be further shaped by the Symmetry knob, which will dial in lopsided waveforms in either direction. The tremolo is added to the dry sound by a Mix knob that runs from 100 per cent dry to 100 per cent wet – think of this as your depth control – while speed is set by the Rate knob. Alternatively, you can set the speed via the Tap Tempo footswitch, which means you can sync to a drummer on the fly. A Multiplier knob multiplies any tempo inputted by either method.

Verdict

Some US pedals can get a bit pricey, but the 'Designed in the USA/Made in China' concept here keeps these units more reasonable. They're neither budget pedals nor overly expensive.

The Bad Cash and Silver Spurs have a solid flexibility with tonal shaping options that set them apart from many other dirt pedals. Likewise, the Black Swamp benefits from the tonal focusing of its semi-parametric midrange.

Flexibility is again the name of the game with the FreaQ, offering plenty of gain on tap and tonally targeted, too, while Steam pretty much does everything you'd want from a guitar compressor (apart from the parallel compression that a dry mix knob would add).

Considering its higher price, the Tremonator isn't such a bargain as the rest, but overall this is a range of pedals endowed with thoughtfully considered features that would make them practical additions to a signal chain. G

THE RIVALS

Flexible drive pedals? Perhaps the Wampler Triumph (£99) or, for Marshall flavour, its Plexi Drive Mini (£150) or Deluxe (£249). Fuzz options to check out are the Walrus Audio Eons Five-State fuzz (£211) or DOD Carcosa (£99).

The Freaq is its own thing, but another boost pedal with twin footswitches is the Xotic RC Booster V2 (£170) while, for both boost with EQ on a tighter budget, there's the Electro-Harmonix LPB-3 (£79).

For a compressor, the Wampler Ego (£175) has pretty much everything you'd want including a dry blend knob. The Walrus Audio Monumental (£279) is a flexible tremolo pedal with tap tempo and assorted waveforms, as is the JHS Pedals Kodiak (£160).

1. Low-frequency content tends to become more dominant when compression is used aggressively, resulting in a darker overall sound. The Steam pedal's Detail control is used to counteract this effect and restore and rebalance the high-frequency content of the signal

2. On the Black Swamp, the Character switch (Smooth/Normal/Hot) lets you choose between different fuzz character settings, while the Hard Clip O/I switch toggles between soft and hard clipping for varying degrees of distortion before the signal hits the tone stack

3

4

3. The Tremonator's waveform switch selects a sine-wave or square-wave tremolo. The Symmetry knob adjusts, so at 12 o'clock the volume rises and falls at the same rate. Clockwise, it rises slowly but drops fast. Anti-clockwise, it rises fast and drops slowly

4. The FreaQ's Boost footswitch engages the boost, while the Freq footswitch activates a second tonally shifted boost stage that only works as a complement to the first stage. Set to active so the Boost footswitch brings in both together

THORN SOUNDLABS BAD CASH

PRICE: £147
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Drive pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Drive, Damping, Headroom, Volume, Bass, Mid, Treble, Presence, Symmetry O/I switch, Class A/AB switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor 18mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Damping bass roll-off; powerful EQ; nine- to 18-volt operation

CONS Nothing

THORN SOUNDLABS SILVER SPURS

PRICE: £156
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Distortion pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Gain, Damping, Headroom, Volume, Bass, Mid, Treble, Presence, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor 18mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Damping bass roll-off; powerful EQ; nine- to 18-volt operation

CONS Nothing

THORN SOUNDLABS BLACK SWAMP

PRICE: £164
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Gain, Damping, Mid Freq, Volume, Bass, Mid, Treble, Character S/N/H switch, Hard Clip O/I switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor 24mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Semi-parametric EQ; wide range of fuzz/distortion tones; nine- to 18-volt operation

CONS Nothing

THORN SOUNDLABS THE FREAQ

PRICE: £121
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double Stage Booster pedal
FEATURES: True bypass, Freq and Boost switching
CONTROLS: Damping, Gain, Boost, Freq, Freq footswitch, Boost/Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-18V DC adaptor 18mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Two boosts; flexible range of frequency shaping for second boost; nine- to 18-volt operation

CONS Fully independent boost stages would be good

THORN SOUNDLABS STEAM

PRICE: £164
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Compressor pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Threshold, Amount, Attack, Release, Detail, Output, Auto/Manual switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 29mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Auto and manual envelope settings; Detail EQ function

CONS No dry mix function

THORN SOUNDLABS TREMONATOR

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Tremolo pedal
FEATURES: True bypass, Tap Tempo
CONTROLS: Symmetry, Mix, Volume, Rate, Multiplier, Sine/Square Wave switch, Tap Tempo footswitch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, external tap tempo (3.5mm jack)
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 28mA
DIMENSIONS: 94 (w) x 120 (d) x 51mm (h)

8/10

PROS Tap tempo; waveform shaping

CONS We'd like it more if it cost less

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« BLUEPRINT »

STICKING YOUR NECK OUT

Czech guitar maker Furch celebrates its 45th birthday this year – but it's what acoustic guitars will look like in the future that spurs the company on, CEO Petr Furch tells us

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Just outside the Czech city of Brno, known for its motor racing circuit, there are rolling fields and orchards dotted with hamlets and canals. Pulling up to the white stone frontage of an old mill in the village of Velké Němčice, you might think we were about to enter some artisanal throwback to a hand-crafted past. But a quick look around inside tells another story. Five-axis robots cut precision neck joints, while humidity is micro-controlled in different areas of Furch's factory to optimise the various processes taking place – from glueing bracing to soundboards, to fitting hi-tech climate-compensating truss rods to the guitars being built.

There is a certain boyish delight on CEO Petr Furch's face as he explains how Furch engineers guitars as much as it crafts them. He's a big believer in human hands doing the jobs that require lots of careful micro-decisions and judicious tweaks – like glueing binding to a guitar body. But when it comes to the things that are at their best when they are simply deadly accurate, every time, like cutting a neck joint, he says without a shred of doubt that he prefers hi-tech robotics to do the job.

Like a football manager picking the best squad, he simply assigns people and machines to different stages in the construction of a guitar according to which choice will yield the best finished instrument, as he sees it. It's refreshing to hear after all the (admittedly compelling) emphasis on craft and legacy that established acoustic makers such as Gibson and Martin often employ. To be fair to them, they know that not only can they lean quite hard into history to sell their guitars but that people actually expect it of them – which can be its own form of gilded cage sometimes, if you want to branch out and try something new.

CEO Petr Furch values technology and traditional hand-craft in equal measure when it comes to acoustic design

As a relatively young company that's still building its profile around the world, Furch doesn't have that problem. Instead, it has plenty of things to talk about concerning the future of acoustic guitar design, which is being defined in its workshops every day, according to the company.

Its guitars are now offered in one of two formats: Performance or Deluxe variants. The former comes with a high-quality LR Baggs pickup system, whereas the Deluxes are designed for an immersive unplugged experience and feature the elegant Booster Soundport system – a series of slots in the upper side of the guitar that spills some of the sound of the instrument back towards the player for a more immersive playing experience. The company's colour-coded system for indicating where each model sits in the overall range, from entry level to the highest spec the company offers, is perhaps the only unintuitive thing about their instruments (the cheapest guitars belong to the Violet range and the quality and features increase incrementally through the Blue, Green and Yellow ranges all the way up to the flagship, high-end Red range).

But what is common to all Furch guitars is perhaps more surprising than what differentiates them. All have soundboards that have been individually analysed and tuned for the best resonance and performance, a high-end feature normally reserved for Custom instruments, and most of them feature some variation of the Bevel Duo system of a comfort armrest on the top edge of the guitar and a bellycut behind, again a feature normally only seen on high-end or custom acoustics but, at Furch, a pretty standard perk on its guitars.

"These days, bigger-budget technology is available, and our knowledge of how to utilise that [tech] is opening new doors"

Furch's Eclipse Anniversary models – two were released to celebrate 45 years in business – feature beautiful detailing in padauk and koa respectively and a specially formulated thin black finish

1

1. The Booster Soundport, which aims to immerse the player in the soundfield of the guitar, is elegant and inobtrusive on the guitar body's top edge

2. The Eclipse Anniversary has 45 'F' inlays on the headstock, only one of which is of contrasting wood not pearl

3. This 12-fret Vintage 3 OOMs-AV features an Adirondack spruce top over Mexican Grenadillo and sounded sensational on our visit

4. Furch is now using a traditional script logo on its Vintage Series

2

With all this percolating in our minds, we managed to grab CEO Petr Furch – son of company founder, Frantisek Furch – for a chat amid various 45th Anniversary celebrations taking place at the factory during our visit, to talk about what it takes to be different and to genuinely move the state of the art forward in that most traditional area of lutherie: acoustic guitar design.

Furch has been around for 45 years now – what core values that were a feature of the company when it started are still true of it today?

"I think even from the beginning, even in my father's times, it was not really about making a copy of somebody else's guitar. It was about improving the guitar in general. In the 90s, we didn't have so many possibilities. We didn't have the budgets and the revenue we have right now, so we didn't have so much possibility to invest in such great things [as we can do] today. But still, I think the core [of our ethos] was: let's improve the guitar somehow [with] things that customers need – or maybe they don't know they need it, but it would be helpful for them – in terms of the ergonomics, durability or longevity of the guitar. Or, of course, the main thing: the sound.

> "After a year of mixing and testing, spraying, curing, sanding and so on, we got to the [right finish] formula"

"I think these are our core values, which have been there basically since the first guitar. And these days, bigger-budget technology is available, and let's say our internal knowledge – how to utilise that technology – these are new things and they're opening new doors for us.

"You have to consider that the guitar world and the world in general is a very dynamic place. Therefore, new ideas are coming, new technologies and new ways of how you can produce something. So if you mix it all together, you can always find some new way to improve [things], though that doesn't mean that the older stuff was bad. It's just that you have new possibilities, new knowledge, and so new opportunities. So that's how I see guitar as well."

What's interesting about Furch is that it isn't just interested in the usual showpiece upgrades to a guitar's tone such as a nice soundboard. You've spent just as much time coming up with a so-called Resonance-Enhancing Finish. What does that contribute to the sound of your guitars and why make it such a priority to get right?

"The acoustic guitar generates its sound by vibrating the body of the guitar. Therefore, the physical properties of that 'box' are important and, of course, it has to somehow resonate the weight of the soundboard – and the flexibility of the soundboard is important. So if you want to go deeper into the detail of the guitar construction, at some point you have to say to yourself, 'Okay, how do I cover and protect this 'box'? And, at the same time, 'How can I avoid compromising the sound?'

"You're trying to figure out, 'What kind of protective cover should I put on it? What should be the material? Should it be soft or hard or thick or thin?' Years ago, that [question had] already prompted me to think about exactly what finish I'm going to use. So we consulted with many companies that specialised in producing lacquers and finishes, and we came up with a formula for a material that is

3

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specific for us and specifically designed for a guitar body and guitar shapes. We had to really play with properties of the finish so it's applicable, especially on round edges and sharp edges of the guitar. Basically, we needed a lacquer that was as thin as possible and as hard as possible. But at the same time it must also be flexible somehow, though not soft, because the guitar body is always moving with humidity: the top is either lifting or dropping down, even the sides.

"It took me more than a year in our spraying department, mixing different additives supplied by the manufacturer of the lacquer. And I was mixing and testing, spraying, curing, sanding and so on. After a year, we got to the [right] formula – I think it was in 2017 – where we started to apply this finish to all our guitars. And actually these days we call it a Resonance-Enhancing Finish and we apply at least a little bit of that lacquer to all our guitars. Even if you have a [more basic] open-pore finish, we put a little bit of that lacquer on it because we found out that it really improves the sound."

What tonal qualities does that Resonance-Enhancing Finish enhance, in your view?
"Extra volume is the main thing that you

5. Furch's CNR Active System uses the natural propensity of wood to expand and contract in changing climate conditions to make micro-adjustments to the guitar's neck angle for a stable setup

6. Furch makes extensive use of robotics where consistent, high-precision work is needed

7. Even preliminary sanding jobs can be undertaken by robots when programmed with finesse

8. A Furch employee in the final finish area inspects a Little Jane travel guitar before shipping

can notice – but it's improved balance as well, and enhanced high frequency a little bit, too. But the volume [boost] is really noticeable."

One of the most eye-catching innovations Furch has recently introduced is the CNR System Active neck joint and truss rod mechanism. It's designed to automatically counteract changes to your setup that might happen when you take the guitar into different climate conditions, either drier or more humid. How does that work?

"CNR Active System is a special neck-to-body joint. We made sure that it's not visible from the outside, but inside there is this piece of wood that we call the Expansion Element. So the direction of the grain of this block of wood is set so it can absorb the humidity and expand and shrink with ambient humidity. Basically, the expansion or shrinkage of that piece of wood [which is mechanically connected to the neck joint] is making the neck tilt backwards or forwards a little bit relative to the body... If your top is exposed to high humidity and is lifting, the Expansion Element basically compensates for a change. And the other way around, if you have a guitar exposed to low humidity

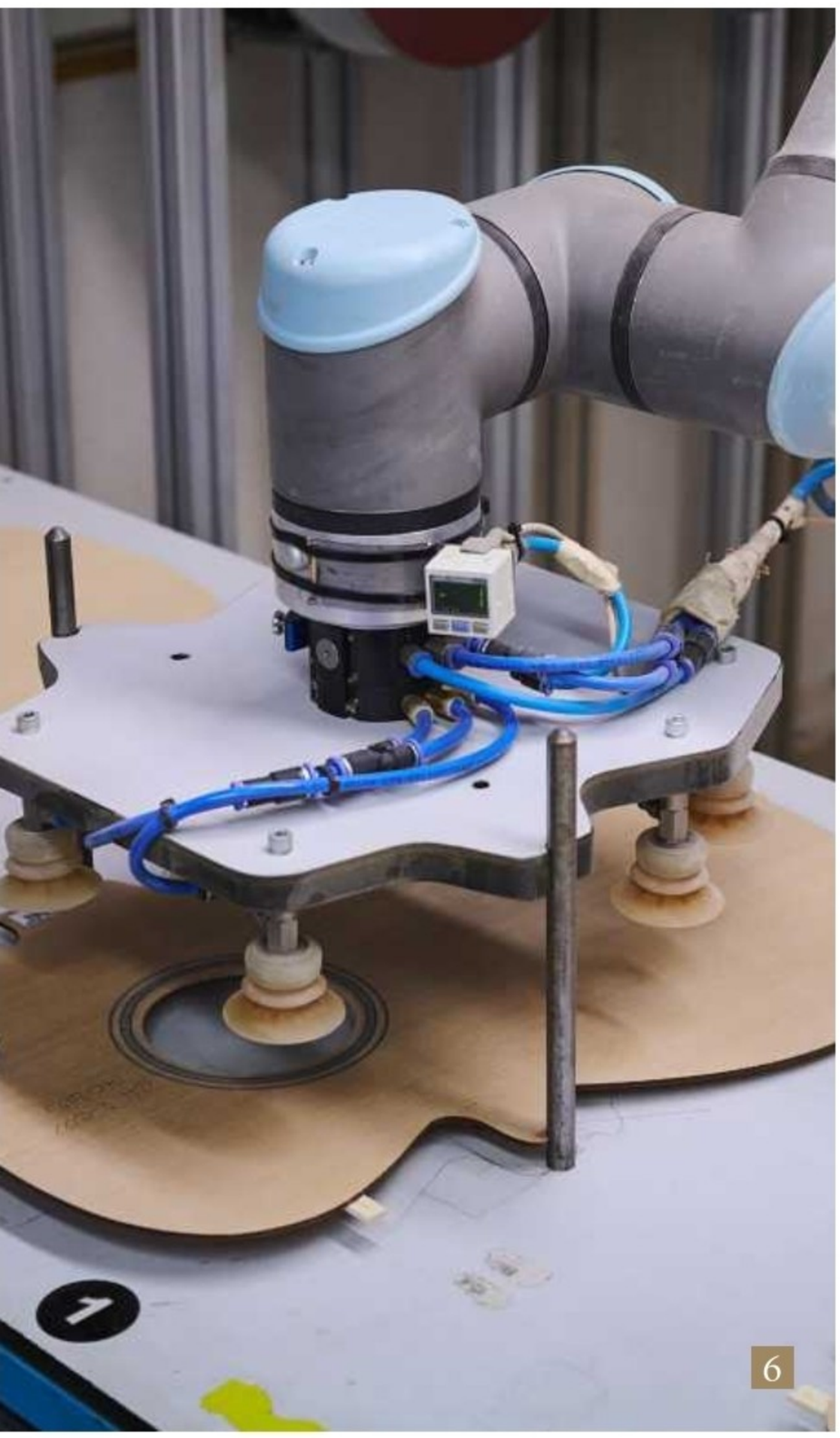
> "If your top is exposed to high humidity and is lifting, the Expansion Element compensates"

and the top is dropping [CNR Active will adjust the neck angle slightly to compensate], so the string action stays pretty much the same.

"Also the added value to that concept is that you can use a special Allen key to perform what for years was termed a 'neck reset' in seconds. You very quickly adjust your neck angle and therefore your string action and playability in a couple of seconds, and this is very powerful."

It's pleasing that amid all the hi-tech solutions Furch uses, a block of wood – albeit mounted in a precision-engineered mechanism – turned out to be the best material for automatically adjusting for changes in climate...

"It makes sense. I mean, your top is also made of wood, and wood is reacting with



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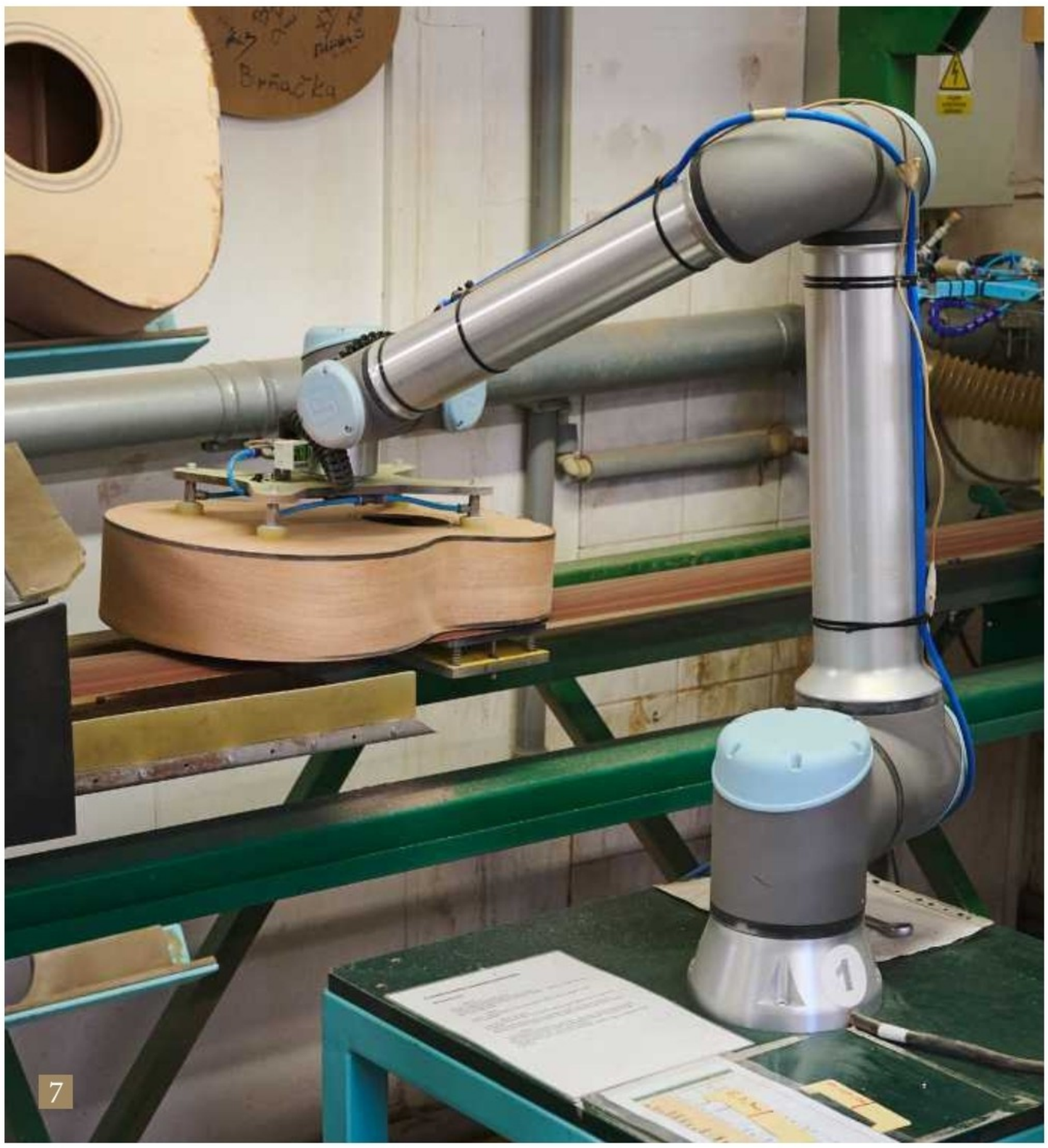

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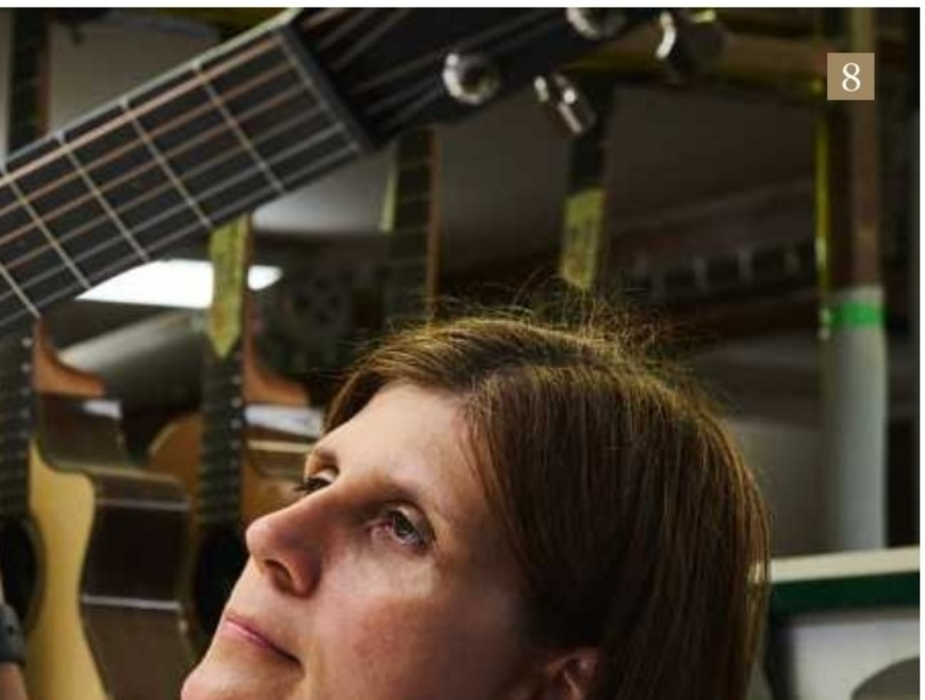

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certain dynamics and a certain speed to the humidity. We were initially thinking about some artificial material [for the Expansion Element], for example, that probably could be more predictable than wood. But after all this, [wood] was the best solution. Because once you do a couple of tests, find the right length of that expansion element – basically, how big the expansion is going to be – then it really does the best job here."

Do you think of making acoustic guitars as a craft or a science?

"I think it's a little bit of both. I'm an analytical person, so I tend to work with data and I tend to [take steps to] obtain the data if I don't have them. But, of course, there are many things that I still don't know about guitars and don't understand about the guitar, so those are the blind spots for me, which still need to be explored. Those, for now, I just have to sort of intuitively decide – so in that way I would say it's more like a craft."

What are the most interesting challenges that still lie ahead of you, in terms of crafting ever-better guitars?

"Materials, for sure. Every year some materials become less and less available. That doesn't mean that we will go away – or anybody should go away – from making wooden guitars because wood is still the best acoustically performing material out there and not every species is endangered. But working with materials, that would be one topic not only for us [to expand our horizons on] but for all guitar manufacturers. Because when we are getting deeper and deeper in understanding the guitar and basically improving for guitar sound specifically, it's getting tougher and tougher to make another step forward.

"We have a couple of main [areas for evolving the art of making guitars] that we are still researching... there are always ideas. And there are also dead ends that we encounter, where we have to say, 'Okay, we shouldn't go this way because if the guitar would maybe end up being too expensive, the resulting sound improvement will be too small.' So the [process of raising the game] gets more difficult with every new generation of our guitars. But I'm not complaining – this is the game and we're gonna play it well. I like challenges and they give us the potential to improve ourselves." G

For more information, see https://shop.furchguitars.com

HANNAH WICKLUND

South Carolina's rising blues-rocker on her expensive tastes, the "turn-off" of gold hardware, and the weapon she picked out to take on Deep Purple

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

"My dad is a painting contractor, but his friend was one of those attorney gear collectors – he literally had a room full of amps and guitars. So we went in halfsies when I was nine years old. I paid $800, my dad paid $800, and I went from playing a Daisy Rock to my very first Anderson Drop Top Classic. I think the price was down to the 'cute' factor of being a little nine year old who was paying for half of it myself. I think the poor attorney took pity on me. But my first full-on, by-myself guitar purchase was this amazing sparkle Cherry Red Custom Shop Tele. They only made 13 of them and it was my introduction to Abby [Ybarra]-wound pickups, learning the lore behind that amazing woman."

"I'm a quality-over-quantity girl. I mean, $2,000 for a guitar is the minimum I would spend"

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"I bought this incredible Custom Shop Gibson 339 – it's white with cream binding. I'm a sucker for binding. Y'know, the devil's in the detail. I'd gone a long time of playing more Strat/Tele-dominant guitars, but I was going on tour solo with Yes and Deep Purple, and I wanted a hollowbody to ratchet things up with an instrument that really fit the stage."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"It's really just to follow your intuition and your gut. Before I even pick up a guitar, there's a special moment, there's a spark. It's like love at first sight. I'm not into forcing anything. I love the universe and divine intervention, so I just wait for the perfect guitar to fall into my lap – and it usually does."

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

"I mean, I'm a lady with expensive taste. I went into Fanny's [House Of Music] when I was still living in Nashville, and there was this stunning parlour with checkerboard binding. It also had these weird symbols carved into it, almost like little cats or something. It was obviously very old, you could tell, and the name on the headstock was Herwin. Like, 'Her Win', I loved that. Turned out it was an 1800s parlour, so I was expecting to look at the tag and see a super-duper high price, but it was only two grand."

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

"Honestly, I haven't. I'm a quality-over-quantity girl. I mean, $2,000 for a guitar is the minimum I would spend. I've been really fortunate: I started making good money playing music as a literal child, so I've taken my time with my purchases. I will say that I've been gifted a few things I didn't end up enjoying... but I'm not going to tell you who gave me what!"

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

"Definitely. That would be my first two guitars, which were a Baby Taylor and my Daisy Rock. It's so weird because I'm the most sentimental gal in the world. I have, like, an altar of all of these knickknacks and tokens from my life surrounding me, even on tour."

Below left: Rocking from an early age, Hannah was just nine years old when she got her first Anderson Drop Top Classic, a model she still leans on today

Below centre: This Custom Shop ES-339 joined Hannah's collection for her support slot with Yes and Deep Purple

Below right: Hannah bought this 19th century parlour guitar from Fanny's House Of Music in Nashville

HANNAH'S GO-TO RIG

"My Anderson guitars are an extension of me at this point. The Drop Top Classic is my go-to, but last year they sent me a Wolfhound, which has some fantastic humbucker energy. I also have a Cobra with these custom-painted flames. It's funny... flames can be kinda corny, but these are beautiful. I've had plenty of dudes make fun of me and that guitar, but I'm ready to embrace my fuck-you energy and break it out for this next run.

"I'm playing through an Orange Rocker 30, but I'm gonna test the waters by adding a Supro Amulet. I love a tiny amp with a bit of break-up. On my 'board, there's my Keeley-modified Blues Driver, my old T-Rex Room-Mate, the [MXR] Carbon Copy, the J Rockett Archer and my MXR Talk Box. I'm also playing the shit out of this incredible guitar called a Myooz guitar. The builder, Tudor Maier, reached out and asked if he could send me a guitar, and I'm not a crazy person, so I said, 'Sure.' It's the most beautiful custom guitar. Anybody who sees it, their jaw drops, especially guitar nerds."

Are there any common design features on electric guitars that are an instant turn-off for you when you're auditioning potential new guitars?

"I prefer a natural shape. I'm not a huge pointy guitar fan. And I'm not a fan of gold hardware. I don't know... there's something about it that really turns me off, other than on a really high-end Black Beauty Les Paul. Now that is beautiful. But other than that, I just don't trust gold on a guitar."

When was the last time you stopped to stare in a guitar shop window and what were you looking at?

"It was literally the other night in Soho. I stopped and stared at this gorgeous natural-finish Gibson 335. It was very clearly quite old and had been worn in. But then I looked up and I was like, 'What the fuck are they doing?' Because they had it hanging on a string from the headstock, and I was like, 'That can't be good for this beautiful old guitar.'"

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?

"Well, I really don't like this question. It's slightly torturous. But I will answer it: I would much rather have a shitty guitar through a fantastic amp. I do believe there's a lot that lies in your hands, so I think for somebody who knows how to work with an instrument, there's always a lot you can do to make a guitar sound better. But there's not a lot you can do when there's a solid-state amp just killing your tone."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your life, which one would you choose and why?

"Oh, that's very easy – humbuckers all the way. I love digging in. I love being loud. I love having a ferocious guitar tone. I love sustain. And I play most of my set on humbuckers anyways. Y'know, if I need to, I'll just roll the tone back and figure something else out. You can always go less, but it's harder to go more."

What's your favourite guitar shop and why?

"Honestly, I love Gruhn Guitars [in Nashville]. There is something quite spectacular about being in a place that has so much history and love and attention put into it. It's like an art gallery of guitars. Passion is very palpable, and George Gruhn is the heartbeat of that place. I love being anywhere where the person in charge has as much love for it as I do for what I do in my life. But I also really do love Fanny's. I usually have a lot of shit to talk about Nashville, I'm not gonna lie, but the guitar shops in that town are quite spectacular." **[HY]**

War On Women; Calling All Good Men is released 28 August through Strawberry Moon Records
https://hannahwicklund.com

Hannah's Myooz guitar was handcrafted by Tudor Maier in Westport, Connecticut, and features a mahogany, walnut and maple body, with a carbon fibre-reinforced mahogany neck and pau ferro 'board

NittyGritty

This month we look beyond hardware to tell you everything you need to know about Fender's legal battle over the Strat body shape

Bent Out Of Shape

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM JAMIE DICKSON, JONATHAN HORSLEY, MICHAEL ASTLEY-BROWN, MATT OWEN & MATT PARKER

If you ask a child to draw a picture of an electric guitar, chances are they'll draw the outline of a Strat. It's at once the most iconic guitar in the world and the most common – and copied. But while Strat clones and copies may have been part of the landscape for decades, Fender wasn't always philosophical about accepting them. Over the years, the company spent a lot of money and time trying to win legal protections for its most iconic designs. The most significant of these rulings arrived in 2009, bringing an end to five long years of litigation in an attempt to trademark the body shapes of the Telecaster, Stratocaster and Precision Bass – and it brought bad news for Fender.

The Trademark Trial and Appeal Board (TTAB) of the United States Patent and Trademark Office ultimately ruled on two grounds: first, that those shapes were now "generic" instrument designs. Second, and in the alternative, that even if they were not generic, Fender had in any event failed – despite more than 20,000 pages of evidence being considered – to establish "acquired distinctiveness" over the two-dimensional outlines of the body shapes.

Fender had argued that the shapes were famous as Fender designs, that consumers associated them with the brand. It presented survey evidence. Press cuttings were submitted, such as *Rolling Stone*'s 'American Icons' feature in its 35th Anniversary Special issue, which described the Stratocaster as "rock 'n' roll's ultimate guitar" that "looks and sounds like America".

The TTAB didn't agree. It rebutted this evidence, citing Fender's own advertising materials in the mid- and late 80s, notably one advert in the August 1986 issue of *Guitar Player* – "There's only one Eric Clapton. And only one Fender" – and a 1988 ad in *Guitar World* that read, "You're not taken in by look-alikes or by wild claims." That Fender was addressing the fact that countless manufacturers were making Strat-style copies, and that its strategy to counter these rivals was through marketing and not the courts, suggested that it recognised that guitar players understood the market for these guitars and could already distinguish a generic S-style from a real Strat.

"It is clear from this record that guitar consumers in the United States have been exposed to a multitude of the Strat, Precision Bass and Telecaster body shapes, either as complete guitars or as guitar parts, coming from and being associated with third parties," said the TTAB. "The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that these configurations are so common in the industry that they cannot identify source."

History Repeating

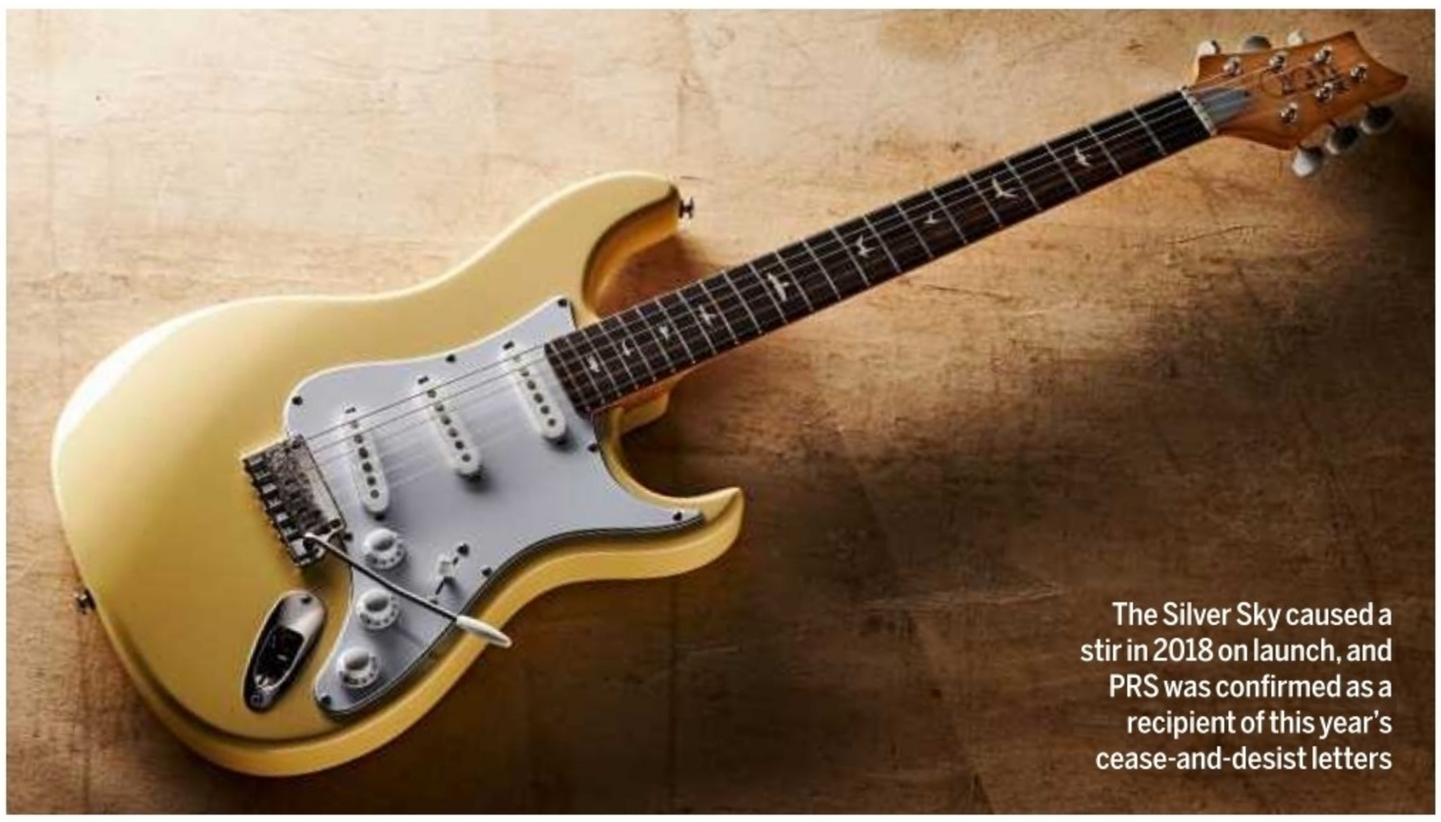
There the matter might have rested, with Fender's ambition to reassert sole rights to that famous body shape swept away on a bland tide of copies and unfavourable rulings. However, this year, a legal ruling in Germany brought the issue back to life like a dormant volcano.

In a press release dated 9 March 2026, Fender announced that it had won a court case decided by default judgment the previous December in the Regional Court of Dusseldorf, which it said created "enforceable rights against any guitars using the Stratocaster body shape that are manufactured, sold or distributed into Germany or other countries of the European Union – regardless of where those guitars are produced". In essence, Fender said, this created a legal precedent that "reinforc[es its] ability to protect its designs in global commerce".

The Dusseldorf court proceedings were, however, a default judgment: Yiwu Philharmonic Musical Instruments Co did not appear or defend the case, meaning the court did not test Fender's copyright claim against any opposing argument. Although the case was undefended, the court nonetheless set out reasons for its decision, applying recent European Court of Justice guidance and finding that the Stratocaster body-shape reflected genuine, free creative choices sufficient to qualify as a copyrighted work of applied art under German and EU law, thus prohibiting Yiwu Philharmonic Musical Instruments Co. from manufacturing, offering or distributing guitars featuring the Stratocaster body shape in Germany and the EU. Any future violations, the court ruled, could result in fines of up to €250,000 per infringement, or up to six months' imprisonment if those fines could not be enforced, subject to statutory limits.

> This year, a German court deemed the Strat design qualified as a copyrighted work of applied art

Fender went on to comment, of the ruling, that it did not hope to "restrict innovation or healthy competition within the guitar industry" but rather the case "represents targeted enforcement against clear cases of infringement".



The Silver Sky caused a stir in 2018 on launch, and PRS was confirmed as a recipient of this year's cease-and-desist letters

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

The Fender Stratocaster is at once the most iconic guitar in the world and the most common – and copied

An original '54 launch-year Stratocaster: the iconic body shape has been the subject of Fender's recent legal campaign

"The Stratocaster guitar is one of the most recognisable instrument designs in the history of music," commented Edward 'Bud' Cole, CEO of Fender Musical Instruments Corporation. "Protecting the integrity of Fender's iconic designs is essential to preserving the legacy of the artists and builders who shaped them," he continued. "This decision reinforces the value of originality and ensures that the authenticity players associate with Fender continues for generations to come."

It should be noted, however, that the judgment of the German court was entered on an uncontested basis, with the defendant not appearing to challenge the claim. While the ruling recorded the Stratocaster as a "copyrighted work of art... rather than purely functional design", this characterisation was not tested against any opposing argument, and the question of whether the design constitutes "original creative expression" remains untested in adversarial proceedings.

The legal landscape around the Strat did indeed seem to shift with that ruling. But had the matter rested there, with no immediate new targets for Fender's ire entering the picture, perhaps we wouldn't still be talking about it. But what happened next was an abrupt escalation.

In May, it emerged that Fender had thrown down the gauntlet in its protection of the Stratocaster body shape by sending a cease-and-desist letter to a US firm, ordering it to stop production of its S-style electric guitars. As per documents obtained by YouTubers Phillip McKnight and Tone Nerd, Fender sent the cease-and-desist letter via its lawyers, Bird & Bird, to a small family-run guitar company based in the US, LsL Instruments.

The letter was allegedly part of a number of cease-and-desists sent to a range of US-based builders of Strat-style guitars ordering them to halt production. McKnight further claimed to have heard from at least half-a-dozen firms who had received such correspondence.

While Fender clearly believed it had a green light to protect the Strat body shape more aggressively following German ruling, the optics – from a purely PR perspective – were undeniably

German giant Thomann, whose Harley Benton models are produced in-house, is taking its own legal stand against Fender

bad. It didn't help that LsL was a small family firm being threatened with legal action by one of the biggest brands in guitar. Regardless of any underlying legal justification, the move smacked of bullying to outside observers, especially after so many years of Strat copies being reluctantly tolerated by Fender or treated as a marketing gadfly, rather than a legal infringement – and, of course, that 2009 ruling of the TTAB had seemed to have put paid to the matter in law.

It is important to note that the German ruling turned on an entirely different legal question in a different jurisdiction: whether the Stratocaster body shape

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

From May 2026, cease-and-desist letters began landing at larger rivals, not just small firms

qualifies as an original artistic work protected by copyright under German and EU law. This is a distinct legal right from the US trade mark protection that Fender had sought and failed to obtain before the TTAB in 2009. The German copyright decision therefore does not overturn or alter the US trade mark position, where the TTAB's 2009 ruling that the Stratocaster body shape is generic remains good law.

In a press statement, Fender had warned that "offering infringing products for sale into Germany or other countries of the EU is sufficient to establish liability, regardless of where a manufacturer or seller is based".

Serious Consequences

With the delivery of cease-and-desist letters, it seemed Fender was now ready to embark upon an active and wide-ranging legal campaign both in the EU and potentially beyond.

"Subject of this letter is your offer of products which infringe the copyright of our client's Fender Stratocaster guitar," an example of the Bird & Bird cease-and-desist letter, as shown by McKnight, read. "We insist that you immediately stop manufacturing, selling, marketing, or producing such infringing products."

According to McKnight, who was given copies from different sources, the letter also demanded that the recipient recall all the guitars it had sold in the EU and destroy them, a 'nuclear option' Fender now seemed ready to push the button on.

If Fender was worried about the optics of its legal campaign, this striking escalation did little to help. Rather it added fuel to the flames, among those who felt Fender was using disproportionate force to protect the Strat body shape. High-profile influencers such as Rick Beato posted videos criticising not just Fender's legal campaign but also questioning its quality control standards and comparing them unfavourably with those of other major brands making Strat-style guitars, while others publicly cut ties with the maker.

Meanwhile, the cease-and-desist letters began landing at larger rivals, not just small firms. Later in May PRS was confirmed as one of the firms that had received a cease-and-desist letter from Fender. Until that point, LsL Instruments had been the first and only company to go on record to confirm it had received such a letter, which called for the company to halt production of its S-style electric guitar, the Saticoy.

Now, in late May, it was confirmed via the *Wall Street Journal* that PRS had also received a letter from Fender. The *WSJ* wrote, "PRS Guitars, a company endorsed by the likes of John Mayer and Carlos Santana, confirmed that it is among the companies that received a letter. The company said it disagrees with Fender's assessment and declined to comment further."

With Fender now seeming increasingly ready to take on big players, there were further developments in mid-June. After the second deadline for responding to its cease-and-desist letters passed on 8 June, a leaked video emerged of Fender CEO Edward 'Bud' Cole addressing an audience of dealers about the developing controversy, which shed a somewhat softer light on Fender's intentions.

"First and foremost, Fender is not suing anybody," Cole began. "What we've done is reach out thoughtfully and respectfully to a handful of companies whose guitars come extremely close to replicating the iconic Fender Stratocaster design.

"Let's also be very specific," he continued. "We're talking specifically about the Stratocaster because that's what this is really about. Calling it simply the S-style or the S-shape is an attempt to

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

In a leaked video that surfaced in June, Fender's CEO, Edward 'Bud' Cole, said the company's intention was to protect Fender players and collectors

diminish and whitewash the immeasurable game-changing contribution that Leo and his team made to the entire industry that all of us have built so much of our success and careers around."

Crucially, however, he appeared to climb down on the possibility of inventory destruction – the most draconian penalty Fender had appeared to threaten in its letters.

"No inventory destruction," Cole said. "Those comments were unfortunate. We are not asking anyone to destroy inventory. No immediate financial demands. This is a work in progress. We want to work together with everyone because we believe that innovation is strongest when brands create their own distinctive voices, rather than closely copied icons that have defined our industry for generations."

Cole's attempt to downplay any punitive measures from Fender echoed an earlier statement shared by GuitarWorld.com, in which the company stated: "Outcomes such as inventory destruction are not something we are seeking." Cole also touched on the scope of Fender's legal campaign in the video, saying: "It's important to understand that this effort stems directly from the recent European Union's court rule. So our current conversations are centered on products being made, marketed or sold in the European Union, not here in America.

"Fender has no intention of going after artists, players, collectors, or anyone who simply loves to make music," Cole continued. "To the contrary, we are protecting those players who play Fender, who buy Fender, who love Fender, who collect Fender, and who continue to invest in Fender."

So, following an apparently aggressive start to its legal campaign, Fender now seemed to be offering an olive branch of sorts to an alarmed and, in some quarters, outraged industry.

Heavyweight Challenge

However, any sense that the applecart was sitting steadier on its wheels was then overturned in late June by the giant German musical instrument retailer Thomann – a company comparable in size to, if not larger than, Fender by revenue. Thomann, whose in-house guitar brand Harley Benton had, by now, also been hit by a cease-and-desist of its own, became the first firm to take Fender to court in the ongoing Stratocaster copyright dispute.

"After careful consideration, we have decided to take legal action," a statement on the Thomann blog read. "We have done so because we are convinced that the questions raised here go far beyond a mere legal dispute and affect the future of diversity, innovation and competition in our industry."

Thomann further claimed that it was acting on behalf of other prominent brands and smaller manufacturers, and specifically named "custom shop brands and innovators", including Tyler, Tom Anderson, Suhr, LsL, Maybach, Pensa, FGN, and PRS as firms that it believed were now at risk due to the current legal action.

Ironically, Thomann was founded in 1954, the same year as Fender launched the Stratocaster, and carried the Fender brand in its retail outlets for over 70 years. Thomann added that Fender's action against longstanding business partners had "surprised and disappointed us".

"Diversity, fairness and respectfully dealing with each other have always been part of our philosophy. Many of those affected do not have the financial and legal means to conduct such a legal dispute. We therefore see it as our responsibility to have this matter clarified in court not only for our own company, but for all parties involved."

In its legal action, Thomann will be pursuing similar arguments to those made by commentators including industry lawyer Ronald Bienstock: namely, that the Stratocaster is not a copyrightable "work of art" as the court of Dusseldorf had so ruled. Rather, its design and subsequent success is down to ergonomics, which, it is argued, is what led to the proliferation of similar double-cut platforms.

At time of writing, the matter rests there – with some of the largest names in guitar manufacturing and retailing ranged against Fender and much of the court of public opinion, for whatever that may matter, siding with the firms who have been sent cease-and-desist letters. It will certainly be interesting to see if the dignified de-escalation Fender seemed to be attempting in Bud Cole's speech to dealers will continue further into an outright climbdown – or if Fender will try conclusions with Thomann and potentially≈others in court. G

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

During the mid-1950s a man called Gillie ordered a matched pair of custom colour Teles…

1956 Fender Telecasters

Someone by the name of Gillie ordered these Telecasters in 1956: one shows substantial playwear, while the other remained completely unplayed

"One of a kind would be overstating it because I actually have two of these 1950s Telecasters with this custom walnut finish, but I've never seen any others. These guitars were purchased brand-new as a set in 1956 and, besides the condition, they are like clones. The one with all the wear and tear has lettering spelling the name 'Gillie' on the pickguard. The obvious question is, who the heck was Gillie? Unfortunately, we don't know, but the photographs that came with these guitars show us he was a singing cowboy who played in a band with other singing cowboys.

"Having bought these guitars, he must have decided which was the one for him and he never used the other one and it remains in new old stock condition. It's wrapped in the tissue paper it was shipped in and it still has the factory strings on it. Although we haven't been able to identify Gillie, it's likely that Fender did know who he was because they agreed to build him a matching pair of guitars with a unique finish and custom-feeling necks.

"I think that Gillie may have been someone locally famous in the Southern California area judging by the look of his band photos and the way they were dressed. Or perhaps he knew somebody who worked at the factory. Either way, he must have had an in somewhere with Fender for them to make him two special guitars.

"The necks are basically identical and they feel fabulous with a really thick V profile. Although the neck and nut widths are standard, they are quite bulky – almost like Fender turned U-shaped '52 Tele necks into soft Vs. Gillie must have had giant mitts on him, but they do feel comfortable. The one he played weighs around 7lb 4oz and, besides the pickguard lettering, it has never been altered and it still has its battered original case. The really clean guitar's case is in mint condition and still contains all the paperwork from Fender.

"I must say that for my taste, this is not the prettiest colour and it's the kind of brown that's reminiscent of something else. You'd be the only kid on your block to have one if you owned these guitars because I've never seen this finish on any other 1950s Fender guitar and that means it was specially ordered. I have no idea why Gillie wanted his guitars to look like 1950s kitchen cabinets. Maybe it matched his personality or the band's stage outfits, but

Semi-opaque brown may not be the most exciting of custom colours, but it could be Fender's rarest

for whatever strange reason, he thought this was cool. It is somewhat translucent so you can see grain through it. The lacquer is just opaque enough that it's almost a transparent walnut colour. If it was just the one guitar, I might be less certain that it's a factory finish. But because the clean one is in mint and completely unmolested condition, it confirms that it is original. Neither guitar has been altered in any way and even the solder joints are pristine so this is Fender paint.

"The one Gillie played has got checking and a few dings and dents. The edges are bumped and bruised and there's a big wear spot from a giant buckle. You can tell from the buckle rash that he played the guitar high up, which means he was playing it early on. It's been loved on and Gillie had a career with it.

"Neither guitar has been altered in any way and even the solder joints are pristine"

"As you'd expect for '56 Telecasters, they have smooth steel saddles and bridge pickups with staggered slugs. On Gillie's playing guitar the pickups read 7.5k and 6.6k at the neck and bridge respectively. The played one sounds particularly good, but since the other one has original strings, we can't really compare them at this point.

"The bodies aren't dated, but the neck dates are September 1956 and the pots are from the 20th week of 1956. The wiring is unchanged, so the guitars still have their 'mud' settings, and although the played one doesn't have a bridge cover, the mint one does.

"The guitars come with two really cool old photos. In one picture you can see a Fender doubleneck pedal steel and the other guitarist in the band looks a bit horrified. Maybe he's kicking himself because he could have had a Fender, but he ended up buying a Gretsch. We would love to hear from Gillie or maybe his kids or grandkids. If you know who he is, please step forward." **[HP]**

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

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Standard Tuned Slide

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Lewis Pequeño Bastardo & Vox AC15 Hand-Wired
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 15 mins per example

Muddy Waters favoured standard tuning to play slide guitar

PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

WHEN PEOPLE DISCUSS slide guitar, they often presume the guitar will be open-tuned to a chord. This is fair enough as it's a time-honoured method that allows a lot of flexibility. However, unless you're going to play the whole gig in an open tuning, it might feel a bit excessive to keep retuning or to carry an extra guitar for a couple of songs. If you're just looking to play solos, or even just getting into slide, it isn't necessary to go to such lengths.

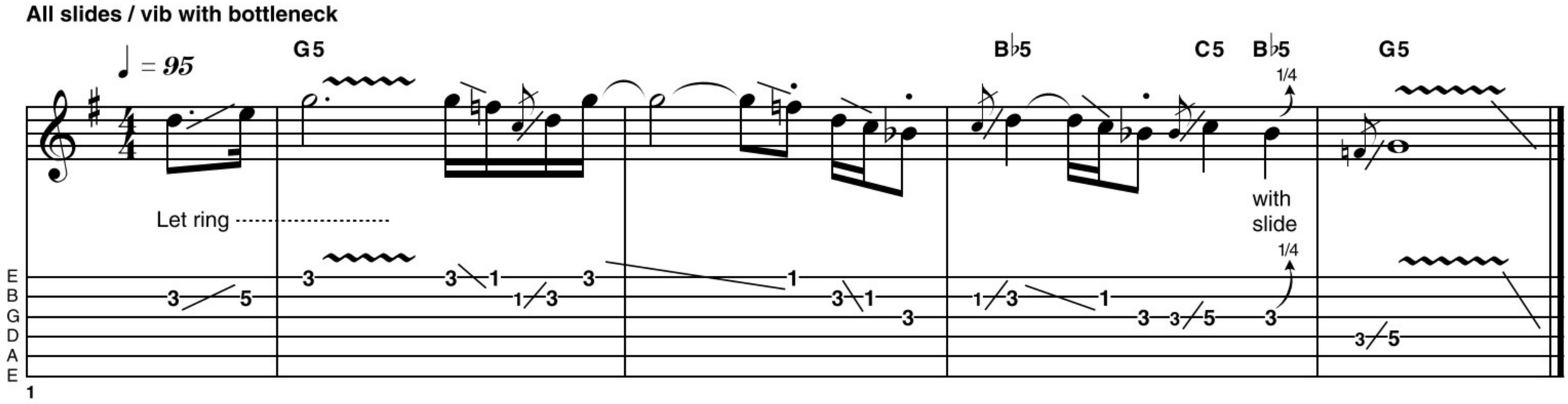
Bear in mind that in standard tuning the second, third and fourth strings give us a G major triad, with a 4th interval available by playing the first and second strings together, and a 5th available on the fourth and fifth strings, so there are more than a few authentic-sounding licks available. If we add in the convenience of the pentatonic shapes also being available on the fretboard as usual, then I think we have a pretty compelling case for staying with standard tuning – at least for now.

We'd be in pretty good company. Muddy Waters, Ariel Posen and Blackberry Smoke's Charlie Starr all favour standard tuning for slide playing. However, we need not limit ourselves here – there are lots of Duane Allman, Lowell George and even George Harrison licks you can emulate once you've developed enough technique. On that subject, a light touch with a medium/lightweight slide should work with the average action and string gauge. You can experiment with wearing the slide on the second, third or fourth finger of your fretting hand. We'd suggest trying the first finger, too, but this is best used to mute behind the slide and control unwanted ringing. Be prepared to put some practice time in, but you will be rewarded! Hope you enjoy and see you next time.

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now to stream or buy from Amazon Music

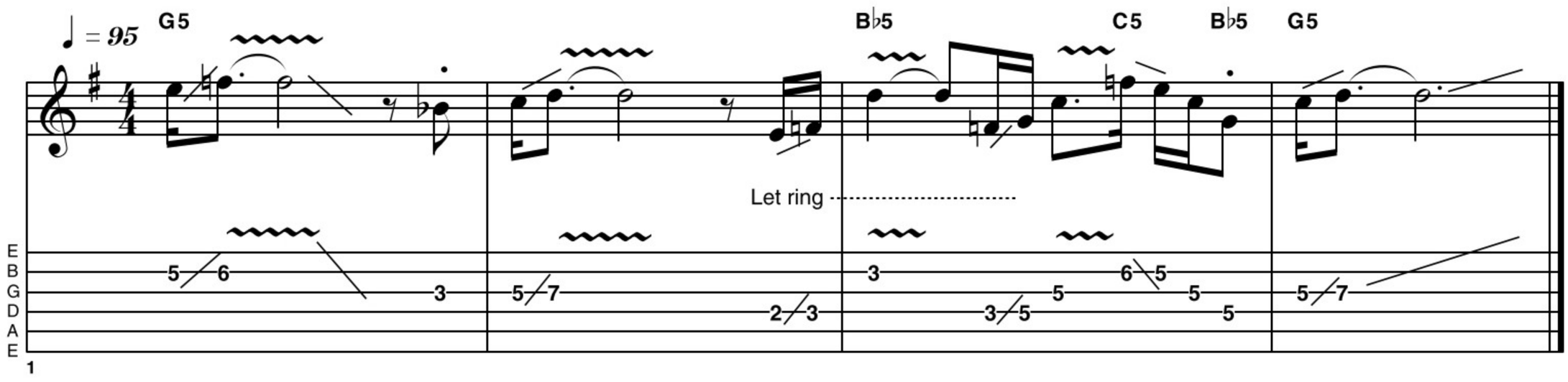
Example 1

USING THE 4TH INTERVAL AVAILABLE on the first and second strings, this first example stays very much 'in the box' between the 1st and 3rd frets until the end of the phrase. Note there isn't automatically vibrato on every sustained note, plus there are a few staccato notes, facilitated mainly by muting with the picking hand. You'll also see there's what we would normally call a quarter-tone bend. This is executed by moving the slide slightly sharp instead.



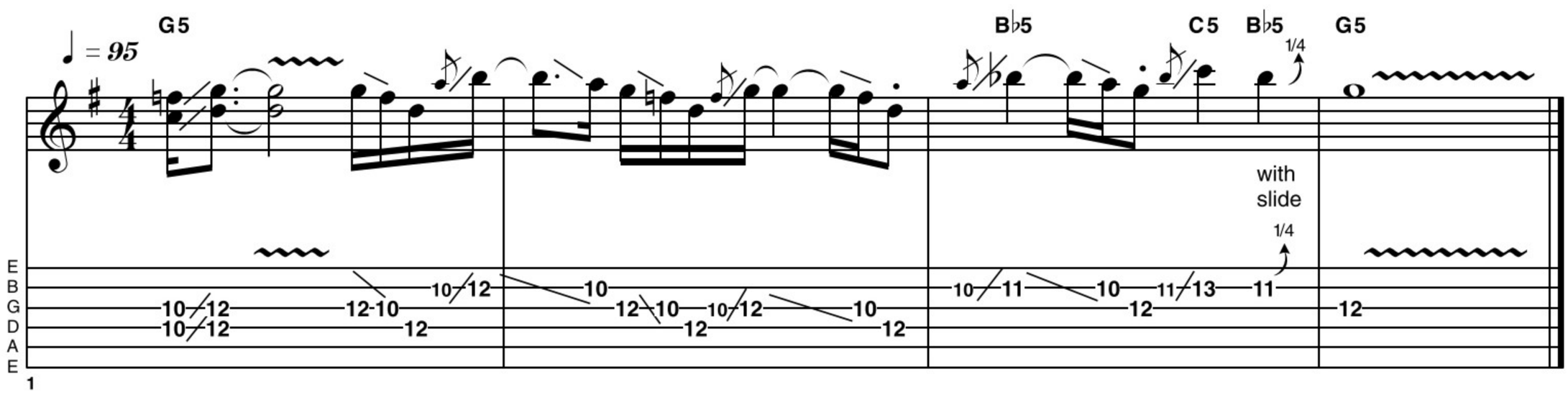
Example 2

SHIFTING UP THE FRETBOARD SLIGHTLY, this example kicks in with a sustained dominant 7th (F), before making use of the triads available when playing the second, third and fourth strings together. We move through a B♭, then a C triad, with a cheeky sus4 in the shape of that F, before holding a sustained D, which slides slowly upwards in anticipation of the next phrase. Keep an eye on details such as staccato and 'let ring' instructions.



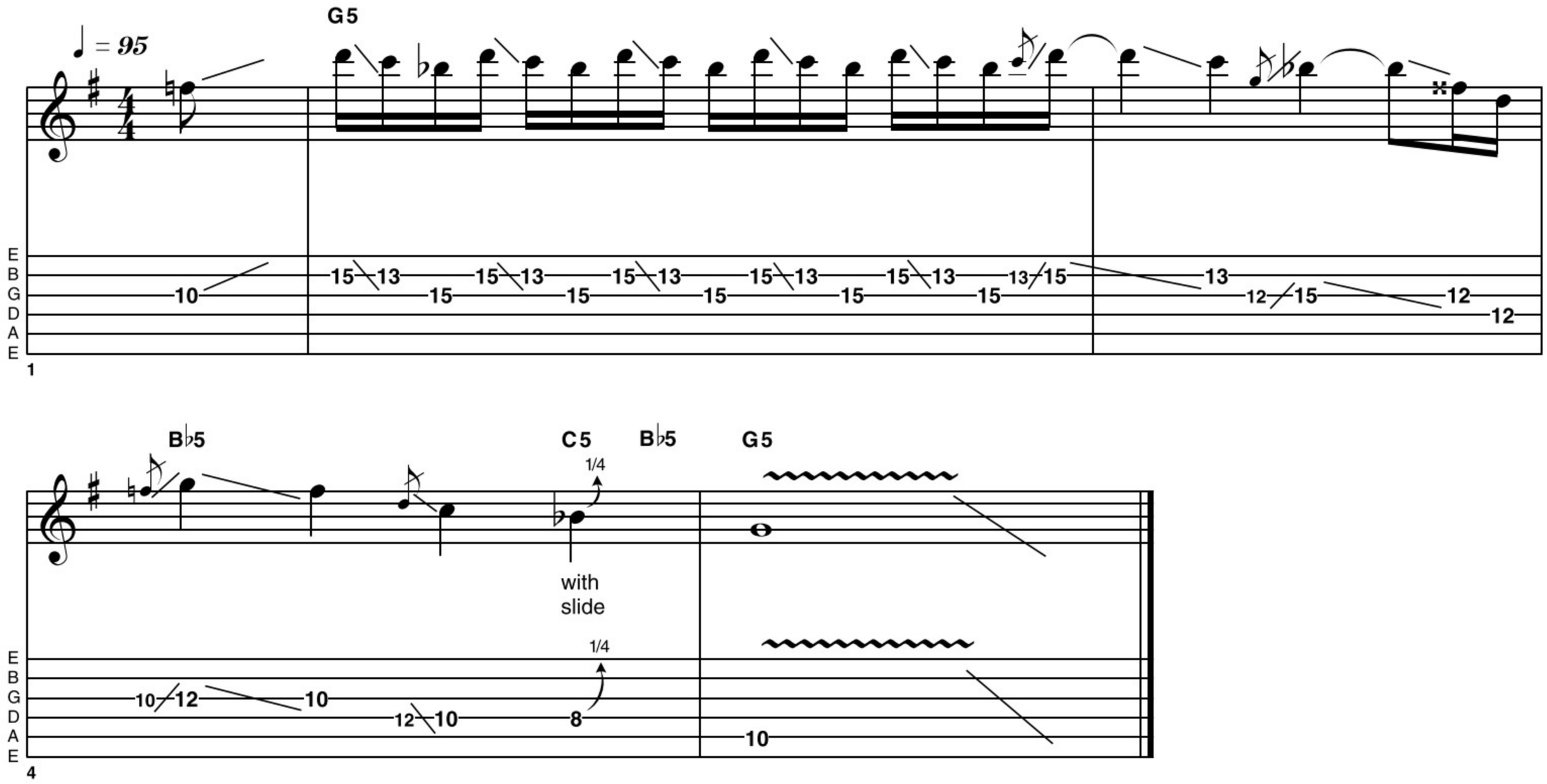
Example 3

STARTING WITH SOME DOUBLESTOPPED 4ths on the third and fourth strings played together, this example stays exclusively between the 10th and 13th frets. Look out for details such as vibrato (or not!), staccato hits, a G major triad linking bars 1 and 2, plus a quarter-tone 'bend' near the end of the phrase. This one is a little trickier, especially where it moves to B♭, but it demonstrates the available vocabulary in this zone of the fretboard, plus being aware of the backing chords.



Example 4

STARTING WITH SOME REPEATED SLIDES between the 13th and 15th frets, this example ramps things up with those insistent semiquavers before relaxing into a more pentatonic descending line. This part demonstrates how we can make use of those pentatonic shapes by virtue of being in regular tuning. Wider position shifts such as this carry more risk of tuning errors, but don't overthink it – just make sure to keep any unwanted strings muted and don't use more drive than you actually need.



Hear It Here

LITTLE FEAT
THE LAST RECORD ALBUM

Lowell George mainly used an open A tuning, but this gave a major triad on the fourth, third and second strings just like regular tuning. It's perfectly possible to steal a few ideas from here without having to retune. Check out *Romance Dance* and you'll hear that you don't need to be all over the fretboard, just adding some touches and sustained notes here and there to make your presence felt. Elsewhere, check out *Long Distance Love* and *Mercenary Territory*.

ARIEL POSEN
BANNATYNE

The slide player of 2026 would be well advised to check out this guitarist's work. There are some great ideas to be taken from *Future Present Tense*, *Dead To Me* (with its cool vibrato/detune effect) and *Shed Your Skin*. This is something to aspire to, rather than expect to emulate straight away, but with the right attitude and some vintage-style fuzz effects, you may be surprised how quickly you can get into the ballpark. Give it a go.

GEORGE HARRISON
ALL THINGS MUST PASS

Known for his nimble and melodic playing generally, it's no surprise that George was just as meticulous with a slide. Check out *My Sweet Lord* (with its lovely multi-tracked acoustics), *Isn't It a Pity* and *I Dig Love*, which sees him cut loose with some deft phrasing. The message from George's playing is to add to the song without feeling the need to display technique for technique's sake. As the old saying goes, if you don't have the songs, you don't have anything!

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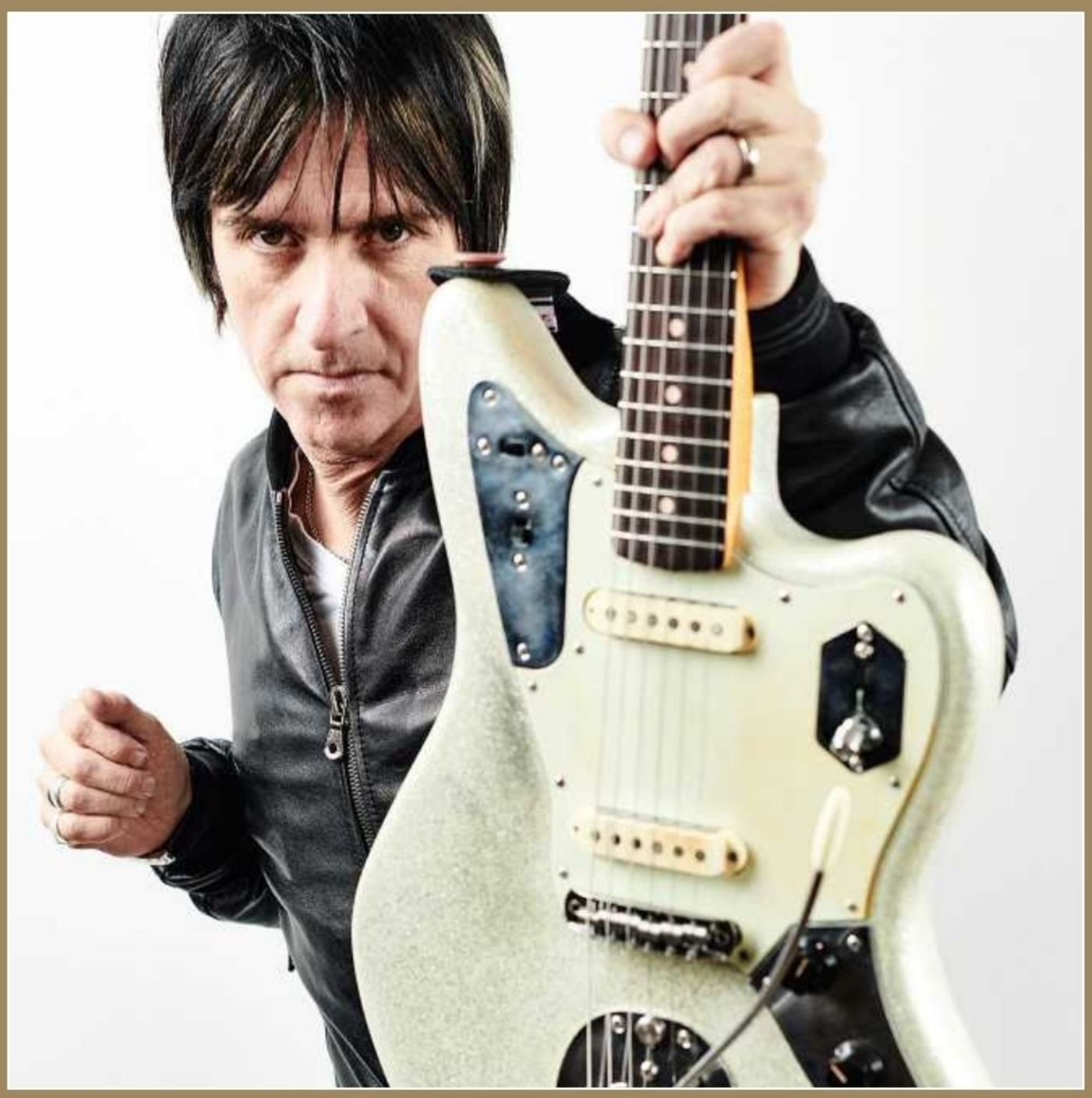

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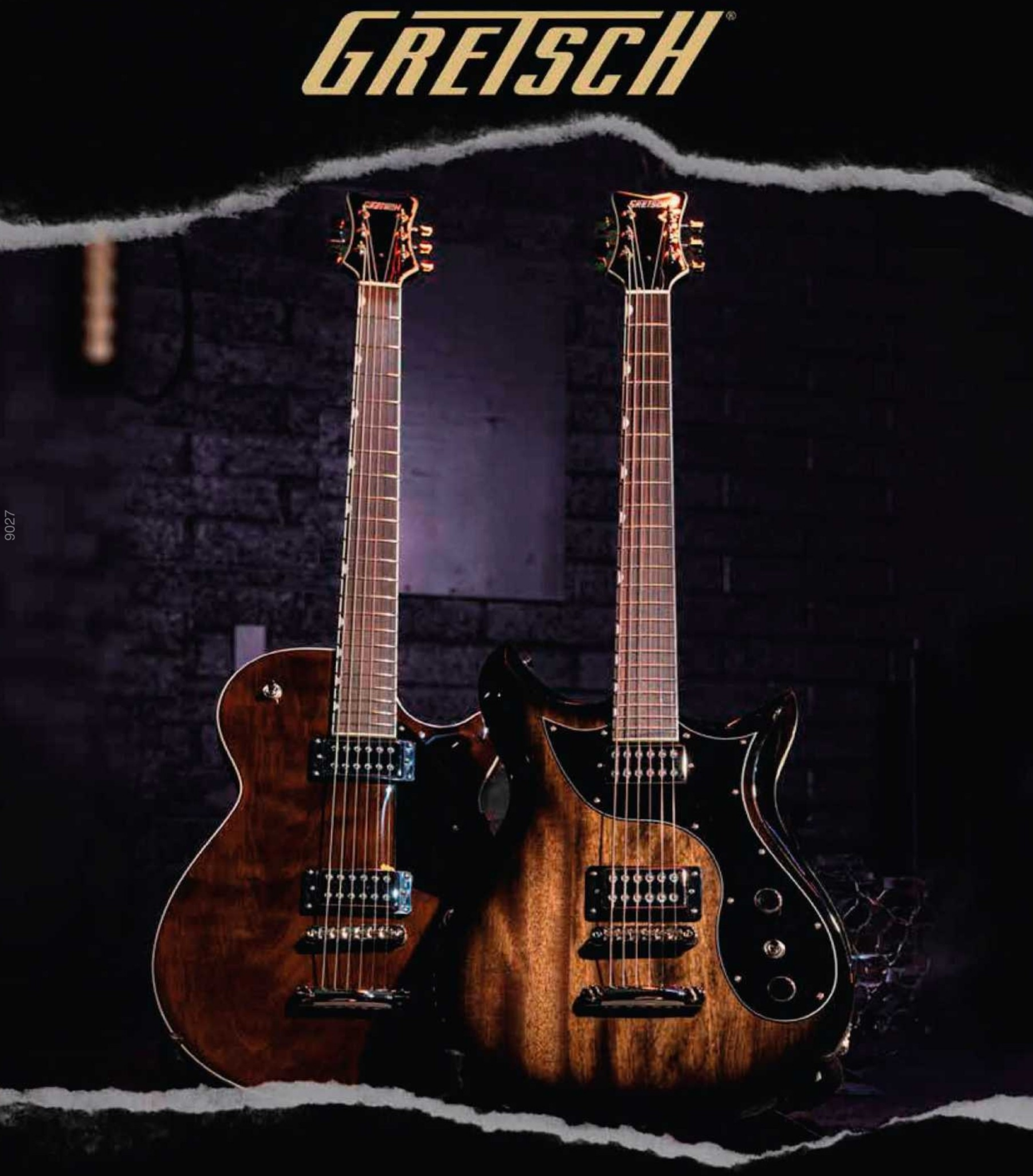

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