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Guitarist
Annual

A Year In Guitar



Something lost, something gained. This year has seen more guitar heroes take the decision to let their most prized guitars, with which they won their fame, pass on to new owners. On the face of it, it can seem baffling – why would you let go of something so meaningful to your life and your work? Yet that is perhaps a fan's perspective, rather than that of the musician themselves.

Art depends on a sense of personal renewal and, for players such as Johnny Marr, it can be a case – paradoxically – of letting go of the totems of past glories in order to go on and create something new (see page 36). Sometimes, of course, famous guitarists want to take on the burden of selling expensive collections before they pass away, so it doesn't fall to their loved ones. And other times it can simply be a case of clearing house and raising funds for other ventures. Whatever the motivation, such auctions provide a rare chance to get up close with guitars that have provided the soundtrack to peoples' lives and helped the artist redefine the landscape of music – and, when they are vintage pieces, those instruments are very often of interest as examples of Golden Era guitar making, too, as with Paul Kossoff's 1955 Les Paul Custom over on page 80, Eric Clapton's 'other' lost Les Paul on page 86, or Steve Lukather's 1951 Fender Esquire over on page 74.

Of course, this year has also been about present delights as well as past glories, and we've been lucky to welcome Samantha Fish (page 112), Al Di Meola and Julian Lage (page 8) and many other luminaries of guitar to sit down with us and talk about their fascinating perspectives on the endless art of playing guitar.

As a final note on a sadder subject, we also had to say goodbye to our dear friend and colleague, Dave Burrluck, who was Gear Reviews Editor for *Guitarist* for over 25 years, who died after a short illness in June. This edition is respectfully and affectionately dedicated to his memory.



Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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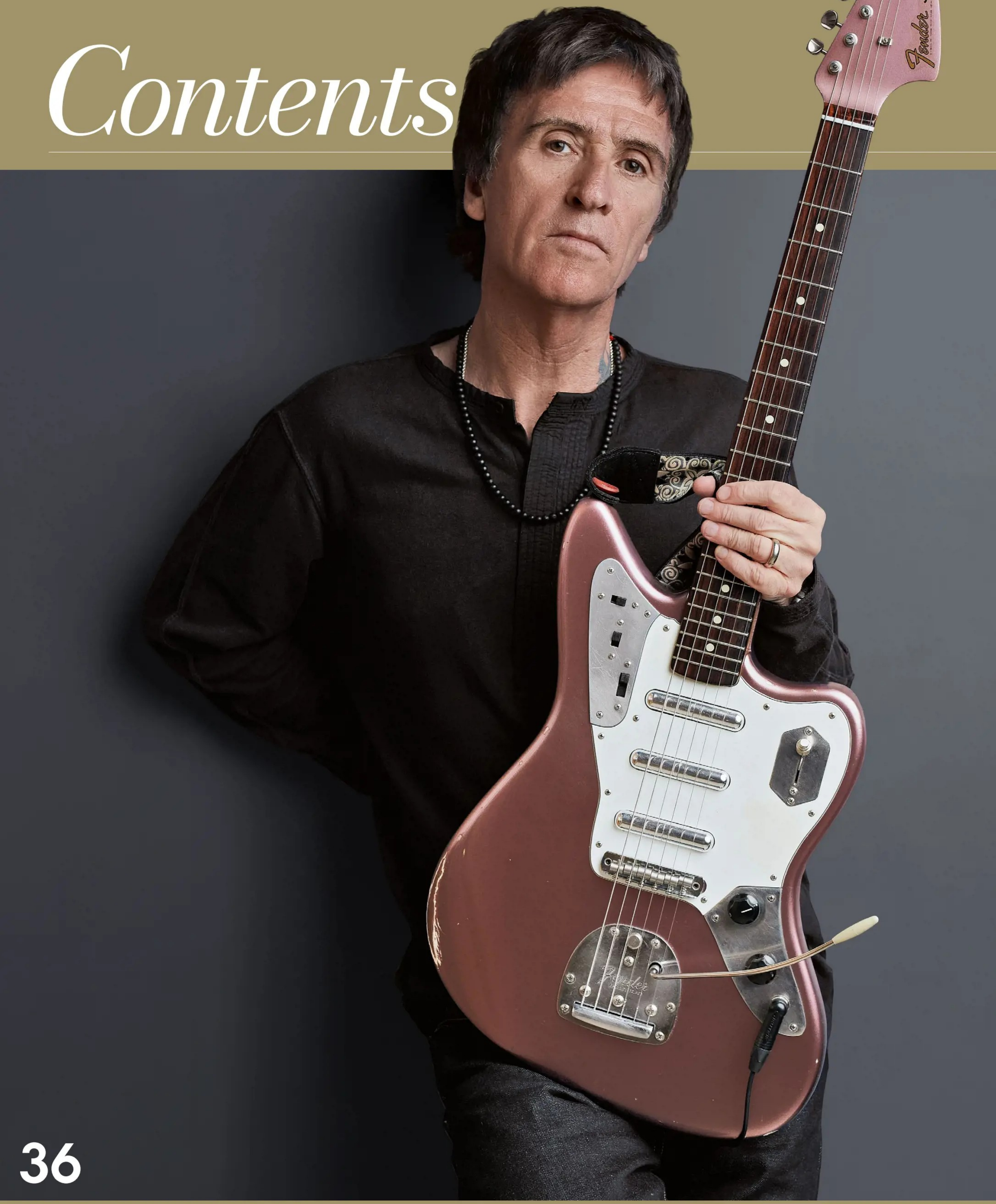


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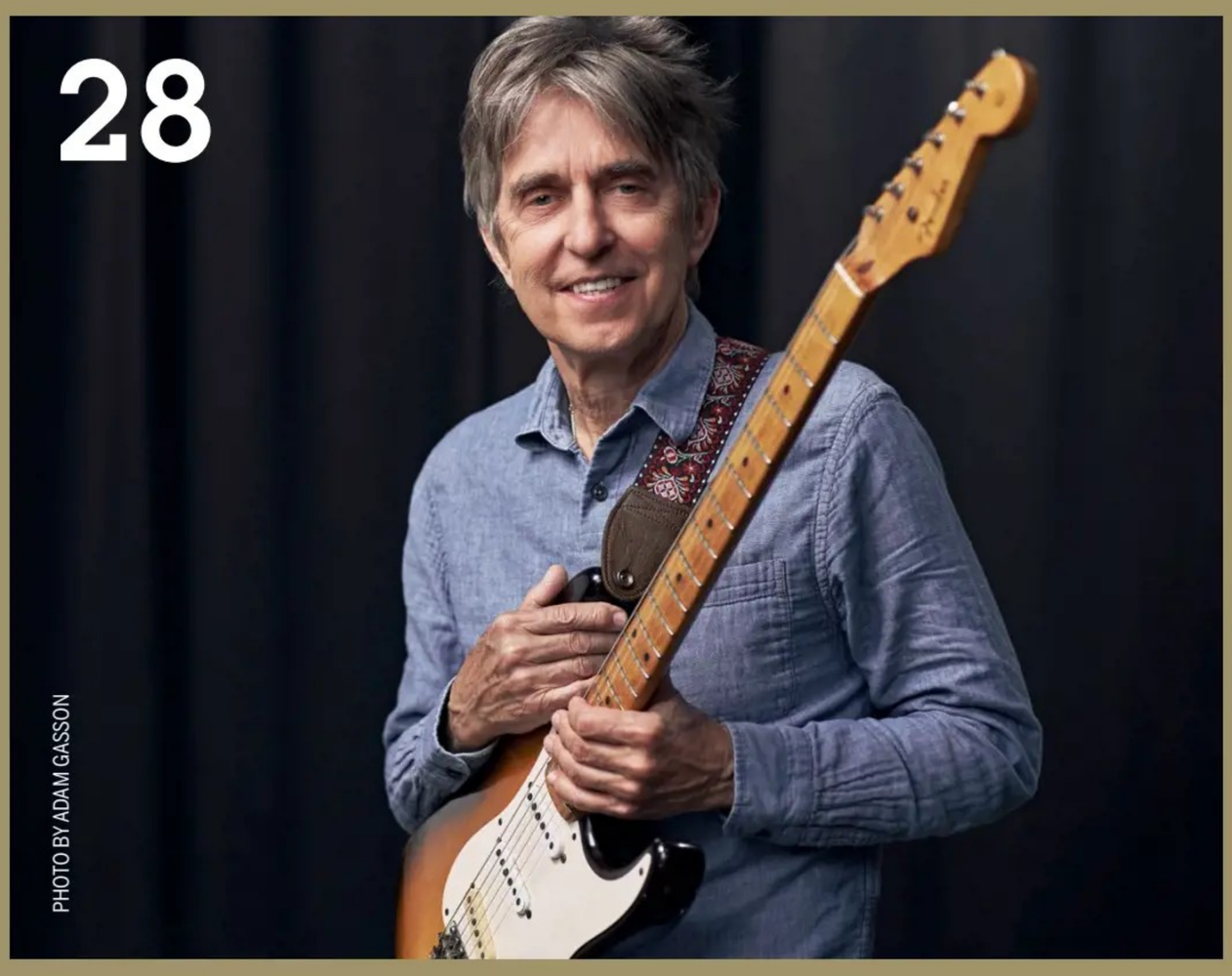








PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

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JAZZ HANDS



THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

YouTubers. Sloppy solos. Paco de Lucía's darkest tour secrets. When US jazz giants Al Di Meola and Julian Lage joined the same Zoom call for *Guitarist*, no topic was off the table

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates

Round-table interviews with rockstars always carry a risk. You can make the intros. Dim the lights. But if the chemistry doesn't fire, it can feel like forcing giant pandas to mate. Fortunately, as pan-generational giants of US jazz, Al Di Meola and Julian Lage have long admired each other's work, and while the 71-year-old Di Meola remains a New Jersey tough-guy with a palpable nostalgia for the old industry, offset by the 38-year-old Lage's more abstract take on the craft and business, we're soon off to the races. All that's left to do is run the dictaphone, tee up a hot topic – from YouTube shredders to the instrument's next quantum leap – and catch the flying sparks.

Let's start with the state of the art. There were once clearly defined new frontiers for guitar, from electric blues right through to shred and beyond. Do you still feel there's a new frontier for the instrument?

Al Di Meola: "Well, there seems to be a whole new generation of great players coming up. But as advanced as a lot of them are, I sometimes feel bad that they're not in the glory days of the record industry any more. And as great of a record as they make, most of us won't know about it. You almost feel like, 'Man, you missed out on the best ever,' y'know? The brilliance is unbelievable, but I can't associate them with an album or piece of music. Unlike when we came up in the mid-70s, when you'd think of Weather Report and then you'd think of *Heavy Weather*. There's more killers out there than ever before. I'm glad I'm not starting now! It's a good thing I have a little bit of an accumulation of what could be a legacy, like, 30-something albums, and I'm like, 'Okay, phew, I got that done.'"

PHOTO COMP BY ALEXANDER MERTSCH/HANNAH GRAY HALL

Julian Lage: "I think you're right. Granted, I don't know what the best days of the recording industry were, and I do think it's a different topography nowadays, [but] I think everything swings back and forth, y'know? I'm not expecting the record industry to go back to what it was, but the desire to take in music the way we all received it years ago – I think that's coming back."

What would you say are the big obstacles for guitar players these days?

Di Meola: "Here's the big issue that doesn't get talked about. Back then, before cellphones and computers, we practised way more. And it was way more focused on the songs. For instance, I made an album about 15 years ago at the Power Station in New York. And I noticed, as soon as we were done with the track, which was killer, everybody ran out in the hallway. Now, back in the day, everybody would run into the control room to hear their performance. But everybody was on their phone, like, networking, y'know? And I said, 'This is not right.' We went as far as to tell the receptionist to hold all calls.

"That phone is always right there, within arm's length. We got addicted to something that we can't break. But back in the time when we didn't need it because it didn't exist, our focus on our work was phenomenal. Like when I did *The Guitar Trio* with John McLaughlin and Paco de Lucía: the first tour, we were in our hotel rooms practising for the show that night because we knew we had to be up on our game. There was no 'let me check my phone'. And when I listen to those records, I cannot do what the hell I did back then now. Not that I want to, by the way. Velocity isn't my number one desire. I've been devoting more time to composing."

1. Julian Lage (pictured here with Peruvian bass player Jorge Roeder) is in good company alongside John Scofield in playing jazz on a Tele: "This instrument, it's gonna kick my butt, but I think it'll do what I want," he told us. You'll hear T-style tones from his Danocaster on 2016's *Arclight*

2. Julian's view of virtuosity has shifted over the years, he says, recognising that a certain "coyness" can exist in players of his generation around displaying their full playing abilities

"I come from a couple of different traditions of players that really celebrate the kind of kinaesthetic experience of playing the guitar" **JULIAN LAGE**

Is it more helpful to have constraints or freedom when you're creating music?

Di Meola: "My record company gave me, on my last record, as much time as I wanted. And I went, 'Boy, that's a good thing and a bad thing.' Because in the days when they had deadlines for shipments, you had to be done no matter what. In a way, it was good to have that pressure. Otherwise, you start experimenting, doing so many different things, and then you go, 'Wait, let me listen to those early takes' – and you already had it."

Lage: "I've never made a record in more than a few days, ever in my life. It's always been one or two days, or three days if you really have a big budget and everyone's available. But I have re-made records. I once made a two-day record, and a month later I realised I wasn't happy with it – I changed everything about it, and I did another two days. But my perception of what's a limiting or liberating factor isn't always accurate. I can see a situation presenting all these challenges, then



PHOTO BY DOUGLAS MASON/GETTY IMAGES

in retrospect I look back and realise I had complete freedom. And vice versa: there have been times when I thought, 'I have all this freedom, why am I not getting anything I like?' So I can't say I'm the most solid barometer of what's helping me and what's limiting me."

Di Meola: "The barometer, Julian, is when you record something, and you want to hear it over and over. I recorded a whole record called *The Infinite Desire* [1998] and at the end I just didn't feel like hearing it. So I wound up re-recording the whole record. It took a lot of guts, it took some extra money, whatever, but I gotta like what I do. Then again, I am talking about a different time with better budgets than what we see on our horizon, which is like, 'Holy shit.' It looks massively different now."

Guitar virtuosity can be a double-edged sword. What does it mean to you, in its most positive and negative sense?

Di Meola: "It's a balance, man. It's the variety. It's the ingredients you put in the soup. If it's all velocity, it's overkill. Not that I haven't been accused of that a few times. But it should be a story within a story. Velocity for velocity's sake is not the key. It's about the lines you play and how they meet one another. There was a big emphasis on velocity back in the 70s. It was insane, but luckily I was with Chick Corea and playing some meaty compositions in the context of displaying whatever youthful velocity I had at the time.

"You need a composition. There's no two ways about it. If a guy's only playing licks, they might be phenomenal licks, but what's it pertaining to? So I have, over the years, been paying less attention to technique and more to developing as a composer because that's what keeps the attention of the audience. Soloing is an aspect of it, but that's not going to hold many in the audience.

"The worst thing in the world is if you hear [an ambitious part] in your head and it comes out sloppy. So that's where the ability to play technically – at the moment you hear it in your head – is important. Because there's nothing worse than sloppy."

What's your take on the virtuosity debate, Julian?

Lage: "I feel the same way about that balance, y'know? My definition of virtuosity has definitely changed over the years. I think, especially in my generation, there's often a coyness about virtuosity. Like, you might have the ability to do it, but you don't because that would be too forward or something. And I've had some pitfalls, where I maybe had the ability to play something but didn't do it at a moment when it would actually have been good for the music. I've definitely shifted my perspective on that. Anybody who's in service of the music, with whatever skills they have at their disposal, I think they're using it responsibly and beautifully.

"And as Al said, it's as much about space as it is about velocity or density or harmonic complexity, or whatever it might be. You know, I hear Julian Bream, and I think that's the mastery level I dream of. Or I think Jim Hall is one of the great virtuosos. He was so self-effacing and maybe never thought of himself as 'that player', but his mastery over space and time, you can't tell me that's not the highest level of virtuosity. But I don't think there's anything offensive about a kind of rudderless virtuosity, either. I just don't think it does anything for you as a player."





How do you stay in touch with the spirit of music when you play, rather than just mechanically operating the guitar?

Lage: "I come from a couple of different traditions of players that really celebrate the kind of kinaesthetic experience of playing the guitar. You think of someone like Derek Bailey, or even Fripp, for that matter. Y'know, players who create sound with an instrument using their gestures, but in an unusual way, and there's something that feels good about it. I've just never been someone who's good at warm-ups or ratcheting things up to a certain level. I'm rather rough around the edges in those respects, to be honest. But I play a lot of guitar, and things show up. After an hour of playing, I feel different than after 10 minutes, and different again than after four hours of playing.

"If something's still not coming together, I'll take a moment and work on it. But not too much. When I was younger, I practised maniacally – and it was good, but I could hear in my own playing, especially on the bandstand, that I was someone who practised a lot, and that was a different thing than the players I was looking up to, who just kind of emanated this thing. So I made a decision to kind of chill out a little bit, so it didn't sound like I was preparing all day for something. If I played different music that required it, that would be different. But I'm involved in group improvisation music and songs that are more from the Americana tradition. It's a different swagger."

You both have a love and appreciation for the acoustic guitar. What do you get from that instrument that you don't get from the electric?

Di Meola: "Well, rhythm is one. The way I'd approach playing rhythm on acoustic guitar is different than with an electric. Electric is more of a voice; it's like a singer, there's more lyrical possibilities that you don't have with an acoustic. But the nature of my compositions signal the necessity of playing with my nylon Spanish guitar because there's a lot of arpeggiated, rhythmic, syncopated things. Plus, in some ways, I've exhausted the louder electric days. Even though I'm trying to keep it alive, my tendencies over the last 30 years have been going more and more for this acoustic ensemble. Whether it's a trio or quartet or quintet, it's just the way it's gone due to aging and maturity. And the music has gotten deeper as a result.

"I feel like I'm more and more into the acoustic camp overall. I got that bug back when I was playing with Paco. With my own band, we had 10 tons of equipment and we'd be rolling up these cases to the airport check-in counter, and they'd weigh it all and at the end they'd charge me $13,000 because it was so overweight. I'd be crying sometimes, like, 'Please, give us a break!' And then I'd watch Paco. Not even a spare guitar. He had his cigarettes in his suitcase, one shirt for a tour. One! I asked him: 'Paco, how do you have one shirt?' One day, I caught him in the bathroom, and he had his shirt off and he was taping paper towels under his armpits. I said, 'Why are you doing that?' And he said: 'One shirt!'"

What does the acoustic guitar mean to you, Julian?

Lage: "I think of myself as an acoustic player first and foremost. Anything I've ever done on electric is kind of an extension of that same sound. But they are different.



PHOTO BY SERGIONE INFUSO/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

The electric basically implies that I'm playing with an ensemble, so my role is more one of orchestration – how I contribute to the sound and how I fit between the bass and the drums. And acoustic is usually more something I would be doing if it was just me, and that is a bit more 'Technicolor', frankly. I hear such a wide range of frequencies because nothing's covering it up. No other sound is there.

"So, in my head, acoustic is the louder, more luscious sonic world, and the electric is a little more penned-in, but it kinda threads a needle through an ensemble. I always wanted to have that experience of an electric being this kind of unleashed voice. But it's just not my constitution. I don't like loud sounds. I don't want to play loud."

3. The electric's voice lends itself to "more lyrical possibilities", says Al Di Meola

Then I went back to New York to try to finish it. But I couldn't match it sonically, so I knew I had to go back. But before I went back, I rented a house in the Hamptons to really focus on arranging the rest of the pieces. And it just so happens that my next-door neighbour was Paul McCartney. We got to talking, you know, but I never told him who I was. I had this fear that maybe he wouldn't know me.

"Over the years, I've been paying less attention to technique and more to developing as a composer: that's what keeps the attention of the audience" **AL DI MEOLA**

Julian, you've just played in London at the Royal Festival Hall, and Al, you'll play the Barbican in June. What does the city and its music scene mean to you?

Di Meola: "I haven't been to London in a good five years. So there's a lot of anticipation for the show. I have a lot of reasons to love London. I once did a tribute record to The Beatles at Abbey Road, and that was one of the highlights of my career. I felt like a five-year-old at Disney World. It was so great to be in the same environment and tell the engineer: 'Pro Tools? No, no, no, I want to go 8-track analogue. Y'know, like the other group that recorded here?'

"I did three tracks and I was very happy with the sound. Like, 'Wow, that studio really is something.'

4. Di Meola's work in this latter half of his career has moved further towards the nylon-string acoustic: "The music has gotten deeper as a result," he says

"But the next year, I rented the house again and by then I had the finished product. And my wife said, 'Why don't you write him a little note about what The Beatles meant to you growing up?' So I stuck the note in the CD case, and when he pulled into the drive in his brown Rolls Royce, she said, 'Go down there, give him the CD.' I said, 'Oh no, I can't.' She goes, 'Give me that thing!' She runs down – and I was so impressed that she did that for me. It was just a beautiful memory that will live with me." G

For more information on the guitarists' latest projects and forthcoming tour dates, visit https://aldimeola.com and www.julianlage.com



PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Brian Robertson

Scott Gorham has long been the public face of Thin Lizzy. Now, Brian Robertson, the man behind Lizzy's trademark six-string harmonies, gives *Guitarist* his perspective on the band's classic era

Words Rich Davenport & Per Olsson



Some 40 years after the passing of charismatic frontman Phil Lynott, Thin Lizzy's enduring popularity transcends the hard rock genre. Lynott's timeless songwriting, and the contributions of a succession of stellar guitarists, resulted in a catalogue of classic material that's inspired bands as diverse as Metallica and Primal Scream. Lizzy's most celebrated and influential recordings were made between 1974 and 1978, by the line-up of Lynott, drummer Brian Downey and guitarists Scott Gorham and Brian 'Robbo' Robertson.

While Robertson's stint with Lizzy would be tempestuous, his input – both as a lead guitarist and in writing Lizzy's signature twin-guitar harmonies – helped define the band's sound, captured at a coruscating peak on 1978's *Live And Dangerous*.

> **"There was a bit of Hendrix about [Eric Bell's playing], and that Celtic lilt. That's what turned me on to *Vagabonds*..."**

After leaving Lizzy in July of that year, Robertson recorded two albums with Wild Horses (remixed for the recent *Standing Our Ground - Complete Recordings 1978-1981* boxset), followed by stints with Motörhead and fellow Glaswegian Frankie Miller. He spent the 90s and Noughties working predominantly as a session musician and producer, and in 2011 Robertson released his debut solo album, *Diamonds & Dirt*, reissued in May this year as *Diamonds & Dirt: Expanded Edition*, with a previously unreleased instrumental album.

Though happily retired since *Diamonds*' original release, the reissue has prompted Robertson to grant *Guitarist* a rare interview to look back on Lizzy's classic era.

You were a fan of Lizzy's *Vagabonds Of The Western World* and could play the songs before you auditioned. What did you like about Eric Bell's guitar playing?
"There was a bit of Hendrix about it, but there was that Celtic lilt to it as well. That's what turned me on to *Vagabonds*."

Peter Green is your main influence. What did you like about his playing?
"Fleetwood Mac's *Blues Jam At Chess* is my favourite album. [I tried Les Pauls] because of that album and that specific guitar [Peter Green's 'Greeny']. We did a lot of shows with Colosseum II in Europe. Gary [Moore] was using that Les Paul from the Lizzy days, so I got to play it. It was quite difficult, the action was horrendous. Gary had big, big hands."

When you joined Lizzy, you famously refused to replace the solo Gary had recorded on the demo of *Nightlife*'s *Still in Love With You* before he left. Was that played on Greeny?
"Yeah, it was. I remember hearing [that] with Gary, because he was using the Echoplex a lot, on short delay. When Gary wasn't widdling it just came – and that's the magic, to me. That's why I refused."



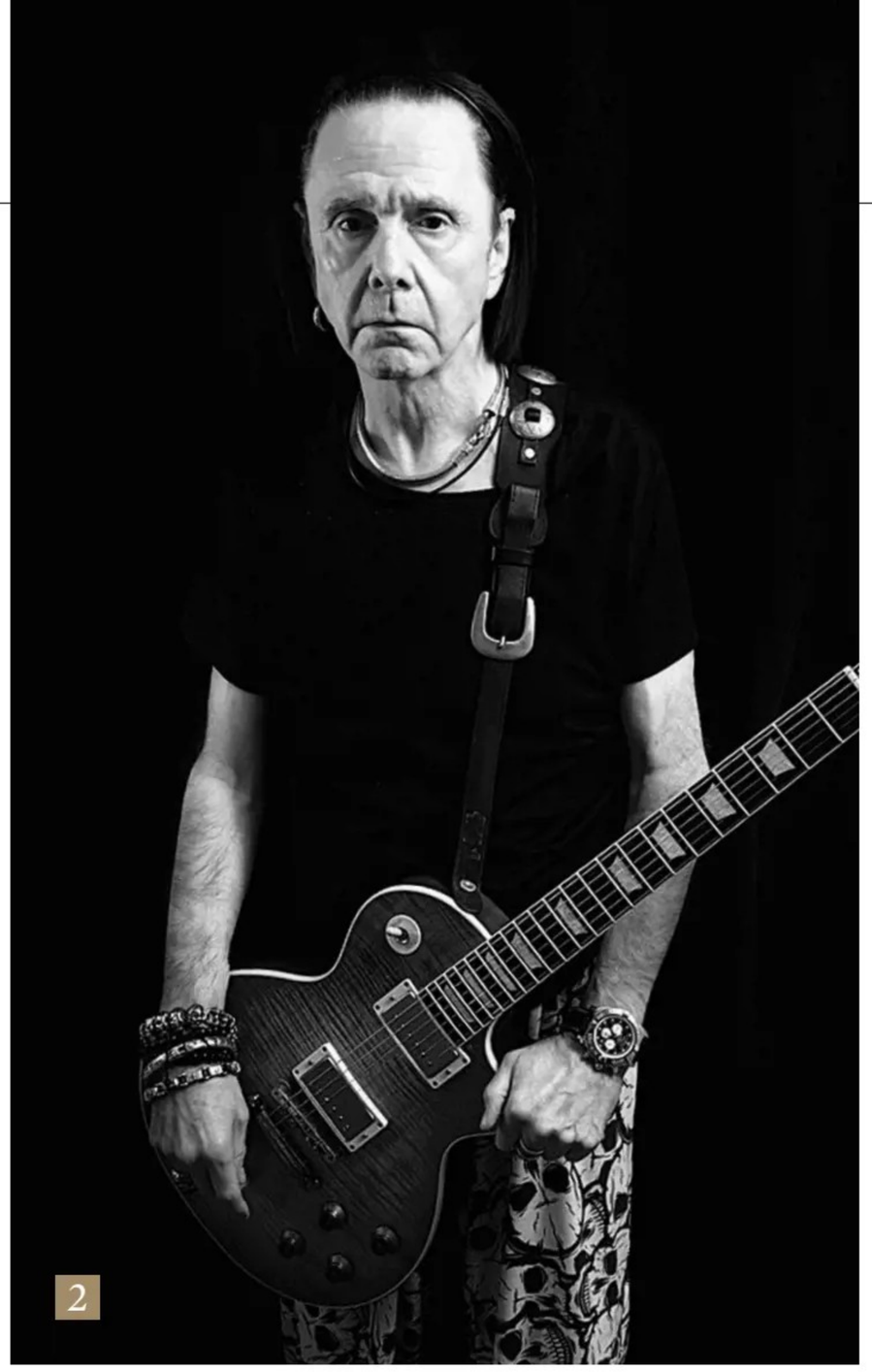


PHOTO BY JAN VENESS BLACK

You and Scott Gorham effectively replaced Gary when you joined Lizzy, after temporary recruits John Du Cann and Andy Gee didn't work out. Gary toured with Lizzy in 1977 after you'd sustained a hand injury while defending blues-rock singer Frankie Miller from an assailant with a broken bottle at London's Speakeasy Club. And when you left in 1978 Gary rejoined permanently. Despite all of that, there didn't seem to be any sense of rivalry between you.
"The press take great delight in creating umbrage where there isn't any. I always had the utmost respect for the man. There was one interview where he said something like, 'Robbo's never off that bloody wah-wah pedal,' [laughs] and that sparked this so-called feud in the press. It wasn't a feud – that was just Gary being funny."

Many fans know the name of the Les Paul Deluxe you played with Lizzy, with the finish scratched away by the bracelets you wore.
"Yeah, the 'Auld Bitch', which I've still got. It was my first Les Paul, given to me the minute I joined Lizzy. I think it was still on hire purchase [laughs]."

It was stolen around 2010, when a cab driver in Stockholm drove off before you could retrieve it from the boot of his car. 10 years later it appeared on Facebook Marketplace. Fans recognised it and alerted your friend Per Olsson, who arranged for you to buy it back. It had ended up with a 16 year old who'd never heard of Lizzy. Is it true that you spoke to him on Skype to prove the guitar was yours?
"Yeah, it's quite recognisable. I was over the moon. That sort of thing never happens to me [laughs]."

You also have a rare hollow-bodied 1953 Les Paul, purchased when you joined Lizzy in 1974. It was customised by Les Paul himself for his wife, Mary Ford, who found standard models too heavy. How did you trace its provenance?
"It was on consignment from Mick Ralphs [Mott The Hoople, Bad Company]. Mick's roadies told me it came from Mary Ford and Les Paul. They'd tracked the history down. I used it on two gigs; it was dreadful because it fed back. But it looked great, Burgundy red-ish. I had to have it, even though it had a Bigsby. My contention was that we needed a spare [laughs], which is bollocks because you couldn't use it live. Plus, with the Bigsby, if you broke a string, it'd take you an hour and a half to change it. [I played it in the studio] on *Jailbreak*. Anything with slide, and anything clean-ish, is that one.

"Jeff Beck had it for a little while. We were rehearsing together in Nomis Studios [London rehearsal/recording studio, founded by Wham! manager Simon Napier-Bell]. I was rehearsing with Motörhead. I wanted to know how he got that top note on *Cause We've Ended As Lovers*, and he said, 'It's a guitar synth.' I started joking, 'You can have that if you give me your Roland guitar synth.' He let me use the guitar synth while he had the Les Paul. That's how I got into using the guitar synths with Motörhead [see 1983's classic *Another Perfect Day*]."

1. Brian Robertson and Phil Lynott on stage at the Hammersmith Odeon in December 1977, six months before Thin Lizzy's legendary *Live And Dangerous* album would be released

2. Brian stepped away from the spotlight after recording his solo album, *Diamonds & Dirt*, in 2011

3. Robbo on stage with Lizzy during the Great British Music Festival at London's Olympia, New Year's Eve 1975

PHOTOS BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"Jeff Beck and I were rehearsing together and he let me use [his] guitar synth. That's how I got into using the synths with Motörhead"

You were introduced to Lizzy by your friend Charlie McLennan, their roadie, in Glasgow in February 1974. You had your guitar with you and impressed Brian Downey by playing some of their songs. Shortly thereafter, you moved to London and successfully auditioned at Club Iroko, after Charlie tipped you off that they were looking for new guitarists. What do you remember about your audition?
"They were rehearsing every day and auditioning every day. Andy Gee [ex-Pete Bardens, Ellis] was still there, playing the Auld Bitch. That was his guitar. And [there was] another guy. I can't remember his name. A very straight-looking geezer. I think he was a session guy. I remember watching the two of them play, thinking, 'This is bollocks.'"

“Fleetwood Mac’s *Blues Jam At Chess* is my favourite album. [I tried Les Pauls] because of that album and that specific guitar [‘Greeny’]”

PHOTO BY ANDREW PUTLER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

“We built ourselves as a live act. [Brian, Phil and I] would work off each other, while Scott was playing a solo”

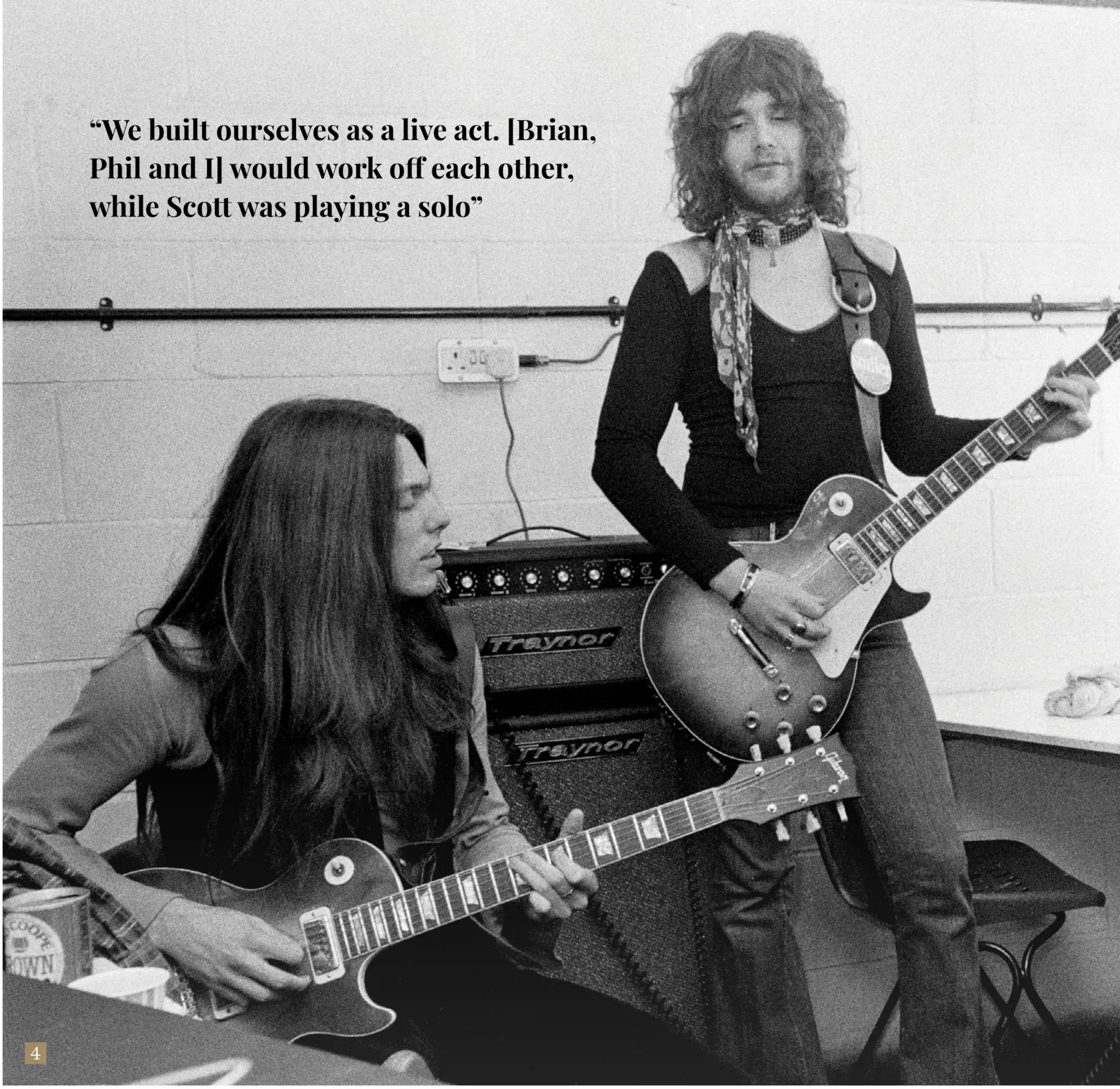


PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/ HULTON ARCHIVE

4

When you, Phil and Brian started playing, was there an immediate chemistry?
“Certainly with Downey. It didn’t matter what song they said, I already knew [them] all. I threw *Gonna Creep Up On You* back at them because it had the wah-wah on it.”

You got the gig slightly before Scott. What made him the right choice?
“It was Phil’s decision because he liked his look, and he was American. Brian and I didn’t think he was up to it, to be honest. He was perfectly capable of playing the major and minor chords in the right place, but not the lead. You’re playing a minor blues and you’d say, ‘Take a solo,’ but he played it [in] major. That’s what jarred with Brian and I.”

Scott has said you were the more advanced lead guitarist at that stage.
“He was more of a rhythm player in the beginning. The solos he *did* take were meticulously worked out. They weren’t solos, as I understand solos. Even from the early days, I would just say, ‘Run the track and I’ll just jam.’ We’d do it three or four times, and then edit them, so there’s some spontaneity.

“I’d write a riff or a melody line [of the guitar harmonies]. I started off by just banging on the tape echo. I’d show Scott the easiest part, or the part that suited him best, then I’d put the other part on top. I was playing by ear.”

Were you influenced by Fleetwood Mac’s harmonies on songs like *Albatross*?
“No, I was listening to the lead playing more than the harmonies. I was into Wishbone Ash, that probably had some effect. Definitely the Allman Brothers’ *At Fillmore East*.”

Lizzy released the classic *Jailbreak* and *Johnny The Fox* albums in 1976. Scott has said that your management and label said the band was in danger of losing its record deal if you didn’t get a hit.
“I don’t think we knew we were on the chopping block. We were aware that the contract was coming

4. Scott Gorham, Brian Robertson and Phil Lynott rehearse in a dressing room at the Roundhouse, London, November 1974

5. Away from the stage and studio, Brian likes to customise his Les Pauls in his workshop



A new six-CD boxset *Standing Our Ground: Complete Recordings 1978-1981* is out now via Cherry Red and includes remixes and rarities from Robertson’s post-Lizzy band, Wild Horses





PHOTO BY JAN VENESS BLACK

up, so we knew that it had to be a good album. But when you're that young, you think, 'Nah, it'll be cool.' I've got a soft spot for [*Johnny The Fox*]. There was tension because it was so quick after *Jailbreak*. Rather than just doing what Phil had got on his acoustic, there was more involvement from the band. That led to stress [laughs]."

You assumed you'd been fired after the hand injury at the Speakeasy and began forming Wild Horses with former Rainbow bassist Jimmy Bain. Scott has said that he wanted you back for the *Bad Reputation* album. Despite not being pictured on the cover, your input was far greater than anyone realised.

"When they asked me to do it, I'd already started Wild Horses. I went out there as a session [player]. When I got there, it was skeletons. There were no harmonies on the riffs, just Scott's guitar, so what you were hearing was very small. I doubled everything. On *Dancing In The Moonlight*, you can hear the same augmented chords I put on *The Boys Are Back In Town*. I was pretty focused on that one and a bit pissed off about the way it was handled – the album cover and all that nonsense."

You stayed for the *Bad Reputation* tour and subsequent *Live And Dangerous* dates, then left in July 1978. To set the record straight, as far as you're concerned, you were never back in the band as a permanent member?

"Yeah. There was no big blow-up. It might have been a build up of little things [laughs]. It fizzled out. It was time to go back to Wild Horses."

You maintained a close friendship with Phil until the end of his life. Phil and Gary guested with Wild Horses, and Phil and Scott had writing credits on the band's first album, so things must have remained amicable?

"Yeah, exactly."

Gary Moore replaced you for the *Black Rose* album. However, you'd played *Waiting For An Alibi* and *S & M* live, and the title song during a soundcheck. What did you think of *Black Rose*?

"I didn't like the sound: very compressed, no definition on the guitars. The identity had gone a little bit. Gary's sound was different to mine. My sound was a substantial, clean sound. When I left, the sound was smaller."

Gary later said that the line-up with you and Scott was his favourite. Most fans consider *Live And Dangerous* to be Lizzy's definitive album because the band was at its best on stage. Do you agree?

"Yeah, we built ourselves as a live act. If we were having a good night, I would pick up on accents that Downey was playing, Phil would latch on to it, and we'd work off each other, while Scott was playing a solo. We enjoyed playing live. We had to – we were doing two world tours a year [laughs]." G



Diamonds & Dirt: Expanded Edition is out now via HNE; 3-CD/1-Blu-ray release, *Thin Lizzy (Deluxe Edition)*, is available on 10 July on UMC/Decca
www.facebook.com/Brian.Robbo.Robertson

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

ERIC JOHNSON

Amid the pre-gig chaos of the second UK date of EJ's Texaphonic tour, we managed to find a quiet-ish space to talk guitars, gear and how learning piano helped Eric develop his signature sound

Words David Mead **Photography** Adam Gasson

It's been 13 years since *Guitarist* stood on stage with Eric Johnson for a tour of his rig. And we muse that it had probably seen some changes since that time: "Not as many as you'd think," he says with a laugh, explaining that he actually ships his USA rig across to Europe, rather than hiring backline on this side of the Atlantic. "Yeah, it's pretty extravagant," he continues. "I'm going to go home broke because I shipped everything over here, so I'll be eating bread and cheese for the next year or two, but that's okay, at least I'll have my sound, I guess."

Known for his connoisseur-level guitar tone, we were surprised to find that the actual sum of parts doesn't comprise anything that might be described as 'exotica'. We were even more surprised to find that Eric has been experimenting with digital amps. But the 21st century hasn't quite found its way on stage with the Tonemeister General quite yet...

We caught up with Eric at the Cheese & Grain in Frome, Somerset – the second date of his UK Texaphonic tour

"[Shipping my US rig over means] I'm going home broke, but at least I'll have my sound"

Could you give us a guided tour of your live rig?

"I use three different sounds: the guitar goes into two A/B boxes, the first A/B selects whether it's going to be lead or it's going to be a choice of rhythms. So it comes out for the lead, goes into a wah-wah, and then it goes over to an Echoplex and a Tube Driver, and it comes out of that and goes into a Marshall [JMP] head connected to the bottom [Marshall] cabinet. I can then switch to a second A/B box, which will give me a choice of rhythm.

"The first is a clean rhythm, which goes into a loop box for the Deluxe Memory Man, which goes into another Echoplex and a TC Stereo Chorus. That goes into two [Fender] Deluxe Reverbs. If I choose the other type of rhythm, I can switch this second A/B box and get a dirtier rhythm, which goes into an [Ibanez TS-808] Tube Screamer, an [Arbiter] Fuzz Face, and an MXR Digital Delay. That goes into a Two-Rock Classic Reverb amplifier, which goes into the top Marshall cabinet. So it's really just a matter of having three different sounds: one clean stereo rhythm, one dirty rhythm with fuzz, or a lead with

VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!

Watch Eric talk about his gear setup, his '54 Strat and guitar technique on video...

http://bit.ly/gitannual2027

the tube overdrive. Pretty much the same as it's been for years, although the particular amps might change, but the general structure and architecture stays the same."

A lot of players have a single amp set-up and use pedals for a clean boost, crunch and a lead sound. When did you discover the three-amp system worked for you?
"Well, one thing is the gain structure of the amps. I was able to get a better lead tone out of a high gain or a higher gain amp like a Marshall. And I was able to get a better rhythm tone out of a lower gain amp like a Fender. Also it's the way the tone controls work on the amp. The tone controls are in a different place in the schematic on a Marshall than they are on a [Fender] black-panel, so it affects the sound. So to try to get that clean country tone, or *Wind Cries Mary* kind of tone, the black-panel Fender works for that. But the Marshall works better for that blues rock thing, so I just had to part it out because I could never figure out a way to make it work just using one amp and getting all those sounds. I wish I could do that. I think they actually call that the Neural DSP [Quad Cortex], don't they?"

Have you experimented with digital amps?
"A little bit, yeah. The Tone Master by Fender and the Neural [Quad Cortex]. Still messing with it. I'm trying to decide whether to try to replicate my sound or to just go with it in a different sonic direction. I think at this juncture it seems that its strength is to use it as its own tool instead of trying to make it sound exactly like a vintage amplifier, you know?"



PHOTOS BY RICH WARD

"Its strength is using [a digital amp] as its own tool instead of making it sound vintage"

What about guitars?
"I just use my '54 Strat, and I have one of my EJ rosewood [fingerboard] Stratocasters with me. But the Strat is the main thing I use for most of the show. I also brought a Custom Shop Les Paul along for a few songs."

1. Eric told us that his current stage favourite '54 Strat has only been a part of his live setup for around four months

2. Despite driving a very complex live rig, Eric's pedalboard is surprisingly old-school and much more sparse than many gearheads would think

Do you have very specific set-up requirements for your Strats?
"I like the fretboard a little flatter with bigger frets, and I hook [the lower] tone control up to the bridge pickup. The neck and middle are the old pickups, but I replaced the bridge pickup with a HS-2 DiMarzio. But I don't hook up the bottom coil, I just leave it single coil, so it has a little bit more gain than a regular Fender pickup. The action is not too low, but kind of low; so that it doesn't fret out, you know?

"It's been refinished and [the neck] was already flattened before I got it, which is perfect because nowadays you don't want to touch it anymore. But in the old days it didn't matter. I mean, I used to find [50s





The setup on the '54 Strat features a lowish action, the bridge pickup (a DiMarzio HS-2) wired to the lower tone control, a flatter fingerboard profile and larger frets



3



4

Strats] for 400 bucks and you could do whatever you wanted. But it's kind of become a stigma now. This is the only '54 I have and it's a good guitar, although it's not particularly original, but it does the job."

What about the profile of the neck? Is it a soft V?

"It's not too sharp, which I like. It's kind of rounded, that's really my favourite neck. They're smaller than they were in the later 50s, but they're thicker and rounded, which I find to be kind of nice because with the smaller neck you can do different [chord] voicings and stuff like that."

What gauge of strings do you use on your Strat?

"I just use a stock 10 through 46: 0.010, 0.013, 0.017, 0.026, 0.036, 0.046. I was using a little bit thicker [gauge] but it kind of got to where I thought these were more balanced."

You actually started on piano. How do you think that influenced your guitar playing?

"It was in a pretty major way because I kind of assimilated all the nuances and technique of piano and so when I started guitar, I wanted to get those chord voicings. So it's almost like your principal language in a way, whether you got real good at it or not, you think that way, and so I transferred that to guitar, and it helped me not be too myopic about how I looked at chord voicings or tone.

"I like the sound of the piano because it's a lot of note and not a lot of attack. Usually on a nice piano, and similarly with some of my favourite guitar players, there wasn't a lot of noise or attack. It was just the blooming of the note, like Wes Montgomery, or in particular steel-guitar players. They get this sound where it just jumps out because of their picking."

"I assimilated the technique of piano and when I started guitar, I wanted those chord voicings"

3. Hidden away behind Eric's main stage rig sits the Two-Rock Classic Reverb, an MXR Time Delay, a TC Electronic Chorus/Flanger, a Tube Driver and an Echoplex

4. Eric uses a Variac to keep his US rig's voltage at around 119 volts. He says he auditioned a load of different Variac units before he came across this vintage model. Why 119 volts? "Trial and error," he says

Do you think it's true that guitar players learn chords and scales using patterns or diagrams, whereas a keyboard player would learn the same information from a more musical perspective – note names, key signatures and so on?

"That's true, and I think most guitar players are still somewhat trapped in patterns. But I think the less you are, the better, obviously. We're all trying to get out of that and become more liquid and just be able to play melodically. When I started playing guitar and didn't know how to play, one of the first things I did was teach myself by



This Custom Shop Les Paul is used for a couple of songs in Eric's current live set



5

6

sitting at the piano with the guitar in my hand and taking the notes and moving them over [to the guitar]. So what I had to do with this strange way of learning guitar was learn all the notes on all the frets; that's one of the first things I did. And I think it helps if you look at a string on a fret, and you immediately know what note it is. So that you're not so bound by those patterns."

5. During the acoustic set in the Texaphonic tour, Eric features songs like *Resolution*, *Abelia* and *Chester* on his Maton Custom Shop guitar

"[I like to] keep the door open and stay a student of the guitar and learn from everybody"

Guitarists can find it very difficult to break away from shapes and patterns...

"One of the first things [to do] is just sit down and learn – to where you [can do it] without thinking – to look at any fret on any string and know what note it is. It is a daunting task, but it's totally doable. And then, once you get it, it's like breathing. We don't think about breathing, we just do it, and it really helps free you up and not be so stuck on the pattern thing."

6. The set's closer, the Grammy-winning *Cliffs Of Dover*, features an extended intro from Eric, sometimes stretching the song to a marathon 12 minutes!

In the past you've said that your style is a mixture of diverse influences, from Eric Clapton's period with John Mayall to jazz players such as Wes Montgomery. How did that come about?

"You know, when I was really young, my dad loved music so much he just played all these records of all these different styles. And I saw how much it made him happy. [I thought] 'Oh, there must be something to this music thing'. Then you start listening to different music, which continues to this day. I mean, you can find stuff in any style of music. It's just incredible, and I think it kind of broke the conceptual mould for me. I realised I just like the sound of the guitar, whether it's Chet Atkins or Jimi Hendrix or Django Reinhardt or Wes Montgomery or Jerry Reed. With all these musicians there's something there, so I think that's what prompted me to keep the door open and stay a student of the guitar and learn from everybody. And you never really arrive on your journey because you go back to the 30s and 40s and listen to all the sax players or keyboards, all different instruments, and you go, 'Oh well, I'm not doing anything new!' I should have started when I was two years old if I wanted to catch up with these people, you know?" G

To keep up to date with Eric Johnson's tour dates, clinics and album releases, visit his website at www.ericjohnson.com



This rosewood 'board EJ signature Strat is another guitar on the tour. Of Eric's maple-necked 'Victoria' model, Eric confesses that he's still trying to "find the right one"

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

JOHNNY MARR

As the indie-rock legend clears his vault at next month's Christie's auction, he tells us about a life in guitars, hungover shopping trips with Noel Gallagher, why some electrics feel like 'living things' (that it would be a crime to keep cased under a bed), and what he'll do if a tech bro starts the bidding...

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates **Photography** Jesse Wild

Johnny Marr woke up last night in a cold sweat. "I had a bit of a 3am attack of the 'oh-my-Gods'," he tells *Guitarist*. But there's no need to ask the 62-year-old the cause of his palpitations. On 17 September, the indie-rock legend will follow the biggest names in blue-chip rock 'n' roll – David Gilmour, Mark Knopfler, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton – and auction off his four-decade guitar collection at Christie's of London.

For a player whose instruments have so often seemed like an extension of his arm, it's practically an amputation. "This auction is a bit of a wrench," admits Marr. "But for me it's boom or bust. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to go for it. And once I made up my mind that I was going to go through the rest of my life without these guitars, I've tried to hold that position and not get too sentimental."

That's Johnny. As well as being a shining example of a human being (a proportion of auction proceeds will go to charity), the guitarist has never been one for nostalgia. It's the reason he quit the greatest indie-rock band of them all – The Smiths – at their '87 peak for a kaleidoscopic solo career taking in everything from teaming up with Bert Jansch to the *Inception* soundtrack. Likewise, it's why he chose to jettison these fabled guitars to record new solo album, *The Age Of Everything*, with a box-fresh signature Jaguar.

"With this guitar collection that I've had for 40-odd years being suddenly absent, it's definitely going to feel like my life is different," says Marr. "And I'm quite excited about that, y'know?"

What was the motivation behind your auction?

"While I was documenting these instruments for the *Marr's Guitars* book, there was a kind of catharsis. I'd go home from a day's shoot and really be able to remember who I was and how I felt when I was using those guitars in the 80s, 90s and onwards. Then we did the events in New York, Manchester, London and Dublin, and when they were being put back in cases, it felt like putting them in a cage at the zoo. It seemed really weird because they had become these living things to me again. So that was the overriding emotion – that they should be cherished on a daily basis by somebody."

How have you found working with Christie's?

"It's been fascinating. From the transportation to the climate-controlled rooms to the forensic analysis. Y'know: 'Why is this decal different? You must have changed it.' It's mind-boggling, the expertise. I did enjoy nerding out with guitar nerds And with all due respect, everyone I've worked with at Christie's are real guitar nerds!"

Let's start by talking about the '82 Rickenbacker 330 Jetglo.

"Anyone who's been in a successful group will tell you the early days are unmatched. So all of that is synonymous with that Rickenbacker: the excitement of the early songs, but also The Smiths taking off at the age of 19, which is how old I was when I got that guitar. I bought that with the first bit of money I made, and I immediately started writing things like *Still Ill* and *Accept Yourself*. And because that guitar had such a vibe, it stayed with me all the way through, even to the solo records."

Ever the forward-looking musician, Johnny Marr is pictured here holding the latest version of his popular signature Fender, the Limited Edition Johnny Marr Signature Special Jaguar RW with lipstick tube Kent Armstrong pickups



1. Johnny and Morrissey during the 1985 US *Meat Is Murder* tour at the Royal Oak Music Theatre in Michigan

PHOTO BY ROSS MARINO/GETTY IMAGES

You loaned it to Noel Gallagher. Weren't you worried that he'd damage it?

"It never occurred to me that my guitars would be damaged. I've always been very loose like that. I cherish them, but I also leave them leaning up against amps, lying on the floor. I'm a bit of a liability where guitar stands are concerned, so my guitars are actually safer leaning up against amps. It's an aesthete thing as well. I always thought guitar stands looked clumsy. Maybe it's to do with being the oldest in an Irish family and being let loose to do whatever the hell I wanted when I was about 11. But I have the same attitude with my guitars. Like, 'They'll be all right.'

"I suppose I'm a bit cavalier, but I've been pretty lucky. I've only had significant damage to two guitars, caused by myself. One was my '73 Custom. My tech had come down with food poisoning so I had to use New Order's tech, who had no idea about tunings, he only knew about synthesisers. So the gig was a disaster and, in frustration, I threw the guitar up in the air. Miraculously, it only damaged one of the machineheads. Another time, it was a Flying V. But they're notorious for breaking their headstocks."

Didn't Noel once break a Les Paul of yours?

"Yeah, in a fracas on stage in Newcastle. There's probably some Geordie guy who's still got the bruises to show for it."

We have to talk about the '60 Cherry Red ES-355...

"Seymour Stein of Sire Records came to wine and dine The Smiths one night in 1984. It was a done deal we were going to sign to Sire. We'd have happily paid him: it was our dream label. But I was asking about The Stones in the 60s, and he made the mistake of telling me he'd always take Brian Jones to get a guitar. So I saw my opportunity. I told him if he bought me a guitar, The Smiths would sign to Sire.

"On a snowy day in New York, I hung around the Sire offices all day, so Seymour wasn't going to escape. We walked to We Buy Guitars on 48th Street and, as is often the way – and it's a bit like this with pets – it already felt like I owned it when I saw it.

"There's this romantic notion many musicians have – myself included – that instruments have music in them. As soon as I got that 355 back to the hotel, I wrote *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*. Which took about 10 minutes. Then I immediately wrote *Girl Afraid*. There's a few guitars like that in the auction. If they end up in the hands of songwriters, they'll definitely deliver songs."

Did your '84 Roger Giffin 'Telecaster' have songs in it, too?

"It did. Although it might be a trick of the mind because it was a very prolific time. That was a gift from my girlfriend [now Marr's wife], Angie. It was probably the second time we felt like we were suddenly wealthy. It probably cost £400. It was just such a beautiful surprise, that my girlfriend put in the thought and research.

"How she lugged it over from Tower Bridge to the West End, where we were recording that day, is beyond me. It's the heaviest guitar you'll ever come across because it's got loads of brass. But that means it's got an amazing sound. It's so loud. I was such a little guy back then, probably only seven-and-a-half stone. I'm not such a big guy now. But I would only be able to play three songs on it during a concert, and then I had to swap over to an acoustic to recover.

"Because it's such a stable machine, it held tunings really well. I wrote songs on it like *Meat Is Murder*, which is open G, and then *The Headmaster Ritual*, which was open D. I played overdubs, too, things like *Nowhere Fast*. It's funny with guitars. There's this associative thing. For instance, in the 90s, if a guitar player came across his mate's Epiphone, he'd probably start playing like Noel Gallagher. So because it was a Telecaster, *Nowhere Fast* was somewhat of a rockabilly song."

Did you hold any guitars back from the auction?

"There's a few. Bryan Ferry gave me a Hagstrom: it's [in the gatefold] of the Roxy Music album *For Your Pleasure*. I have one of Nile Rodgers' first signature Strats. There's the Telecaster that Chrissie Hynde gave me. It's been a selection process. Like, there's a signature Strat that Edge gave me that I did put in the auction because it's for charity, and I think because it was previously owned by a name player, it'll raise a bit of money.

"I've kept a couple of '73 Strats. My son owns a few of my Modest Mouse Jazzmasters, so I'll be borrowing those off him. Another workhorse I've kept is a '63 SG. In theory, I could get another, but I thought, 'Well, this one's perfect, so why bother?'"

"There's this romantic notion that instruments have music in them – if they end up in the hands of songwriters, they'll deliver"

How have you adapted your gear choices to record your latest studio material?

"My workhorses have been easy to decide on. There's a '63 335, just an amazing instrument that delivers – I used that on my new album, *The Age Of Everything*."

This new album has so many different tones, from *Spin*'s edge-of-distortion chime to the glassy funk of *Ophelia*. How did you dig them all out?

"Rather fortuitously, the most recent version of my signature

2. Johnny has been an eclectic player in terms of guitar choices over the years but has now settled on the Jaguar as his main tool for music making

Jaguar has even more tone options. My Jags have 11 sounds, without any of them crossing over. But the Signature Special with lipstick pickups, it also has a position where it does all of that but with the added middle pickup. There's one other option, too, which is just the middle pickup but with high-pass filter. I've lost count of how many sounds I can do, but I used that guitar really extensively on the new album and it works a treat."

Isn't there a danger of you inadvertently building up yet another collection?
"Yes, there is. And who would blame me? That's quite a nice prospect. But the remaining guitars that I have now – and there's not loads of them – I really appreciate them."

The '84 Standard is another icon.
"I put the Bigsby on that in late '85, I think. I always wanted a Bigsby, but I wanted a short one and back then they weren't easy to find. Again, I've got Angie to thank. On tour, she went to some guitar store and came back to the soundcheck: 'There you go, darling.' She's quite a woman. That's why I'm still with her. It's all because of the guitar gifts.

"That Bigsby changed the way it felt significantly. Then I swapped the pickups to Seymour Duncans and put on partial-taps. I'm aware that, in theory, keeping a guitar stock, particularly where wiring's concerned, usually means a better tone electronically. However, in the case of that Les Paul, everything came together brilliantly.

"I investigated that guitar more fully – forensically, in fact – last year when Gibson made some copies for the Teenage Cancer Trust. We looked into the pitch angle, which is somewhat of an anomaly because it's 14 degrees. So the combination of the Bigsby, pitch angle, pickups and the partial-tap – which applies to the inside coil of the humbucker – makes it not behave like a regular Les Paul. Which I think is why I ended up playing it almost exclusively clean, like on the top line for *The Headmaster Ritual*. But you really hear it on *Regret* by New Order."

"I hadn't played the '63 Casino for a long time – when we came to photograph it, it brought me back in the time machine..."

Smiths fans will definitely recognise the '63 Casino.
"Yeah, that's the tremolo sound on *How Soon Is Now?*. A lot of players of my generation in the 80s and 90s – I'm thinking of Noel, Paul Weller, Gem Archer – we liked the idea of those guitars. They were played by The Beatles, The Stones, The Kinks, and if it's good enough for those guys, it's good enough for me. But sound-wise, that Casino didn't suit the existing Smiths material. It was too distinctive.

"But that really paid off with *How Soon Is Now?*. I hadn't played that guitar for a long time, and when we came to photograph it for the book, I held it and it brought me back in the time machine. All you've got to do is stick it through a Twin, put the trem on and it sounds exactly like *How Soon Is Now?*."

That nine-pickup Strat looks more like something Steve Vai would own.
"I have no idea what happened there. I can't imagine anyone [building that] other than if there

was a guitar player who joined Kraftwerk in 1984. I bought that the first time Noel Gallagher and I went to a guitar shop together [in 1992]. I wasn't actually drunk, but I'd definitely have been hungover. I was also very into Kraftwerk and just thought it looked amazing. It only came good in 2001, when I used it for *Spirit Power And Soul*. So it got there in the end."

There's a Lake Placid Blue Jaguar in the auction. How did you fall for that model?
"The first night I got together with Isaac Brock from Modest Mouse, he had a Jag and my Telecaster just would not compete with his sound. That's partly because he was playing through a Super Six. I had to abandon my Telecaster and Deluxe, and the only guitar at hand was a Jaguar. I thought I didn't get on with them, but I played this black '63 of Isaac's and came up with the riff that became *Dashboard*.

"After that, I went through a period where [people kept] offering me Jaguars. Angie told me, 'You're like one of those weird [people] who takes in every cat in the neighbourhood. Do you have to own every old Jag in the world?' And I said, 'Yes, I do.' But to be fair, they were much cheaper than they are now."

"It's not just someone who wants to buy the 'How Soon Is Now?' guitar and stick it in a glass case. I want a fan to buy these guitars"

Was that how your signature model came about?
"Yeah. When I joined Modest Mouse, that was 2005, and in Portland, Oregon, at the time, everybody was making knock-ups, y'know, custom guitars. That led me to the idea of making my own Jag. I was experimenting with necks and pickups, and doing it all in what I call 'absolute conditions'. In other words, because we were playing arenas, the stages and the distance from your amps were the same every night. So if you change your guitar mid-set, you immediately hear it: 'Oh, that pickup is brighter.' We were playing so much that any change in my routine, I was able to evaluate straightaway.

"I was absolutely obsessive for about two years. At that time, Fender contacted me and said, 'Why don't we do a signature?' I said to them, 'Look, leave me to it and I'll make myself my perfect Jag – with Bill Puplett – then you can just copy it.'"



3. Marr now has his own signature model M-6 and M-7 Martins. The latter is pictured above, with its seventh string adding a surprisingly strong suggestion of that 12-string jangle

How do you feel about the estimates at your auction?
"Well, compared with other auctions, the prices don't look too horrible. The people who follow me might not necessarily be the same people who follow Mark Knopfler or David Gilmour. Two people I've got the utmost respect for. But my appeal as a guitar player is coming from a different place and a different time. That's the main reason I put a lot of my Jags in there, precisely because they're not heritage antiques.

"My hope is that someone who's got a regular job in Glasgow, who fancies a good guitar but wants one of mine, will be able to afford it. They're not all tens of thousands. In the past, I've never regretted selling, like, one of the *Playland* guitars or something I used on *The Messenger*. Because I know it's someone who really cares about [what I've done in] my career overall. It's not just someone who wants to buy the *How Soon Is Now?* guitar and stick it in a glass case. I want a fan to buy these guitars."

4. Even Johnny Marr isn't immune to the appeal of a guitar owned by a revered guitarist, naming Jeff Beck's 'Oxblood' as the one he would most liked to have bought at auction for himself

How do you feel about the notion of a tech bro bidding on the Rickenbacker?
"It's not really for me to control if someone wants to hang it up in a collection, but something tells me that isn't going to be the case. Precisely because I come from a different culture from Jeff Beck and David Gilmour. And not to say that their fans aren't [guitar fanatics]. But y'know, I'm an indie-rock musician and I've got a feeling it's going to be an indie-rock fan who buys my guitars."

When you take a bird's eye view of your collection, are there any themes? You seem to prefer classic stuff.
"Yeah, because when I first got known in The Smiths, playing what we know as 'classic' or 'vintage' guitars was quite unusual. There were other players doing it, like Edwyn Collins in Orange Juice, or Geordie [Walker] from Killing Joke played a 295, Will Sergeant played Jaguars. But there weren't really many people playing semi-acoustics and certainly not Rickenbackers – although Paul Weller had done it before me.

"Even for someone of my age to play a Tele in '83 was unusual. But I was somewhat of a classicist, really. I remember, it being the 80s, Ovation gave me a loaner because I'd started using acoustics on songs like *Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want*. But whereas people in more mainstream bands would've just been happy to play the Ovation, it was important to me that as soon as I could afford it, I got a Martin D-28. I had enough about me to know about quality, from a recording point of view."

What was your first 'proper' guitar? Not a schoolboy knockabout, the real deal.
"It was a black [Les Paul] Standard. I think it was a 1980. I had that in a couple of bands before The Smiths. I couldn't afford a Gretsch Country Club, a 6120 or a Chet Atkins, but just before I formed The Smiths I felt I had to have the right guitar and that had to be a Gretsch. So I [traded the Les Paul and] got the Super Axe and that's what I did *Hand In Glove* – and wrote all the first album – on."



"The [guitar] I really wanted was Jeff Beck's Oxblood Les Paul. You have to be a Beck freak or a guitar freak to understand the appeal"

Do you remember the first time you ever saw a guitar?
"I was about five. At a party, my uncle put his Chelsea boot up on a chair and played a few chords. That blew my mind. But the most significant thing was at my cousin's christening. I'm from an Irish family and at weddings and christenings there was always the same show band. Before they played, my dad approached the guitarist and said, 'My boy's guitar mad. Can he see your Strat?'

"So this guy dutifully opened the case. I can still smell it. It was this otherworldly object, like something out of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. It was all the things that people from the generations before me say about Strats, y'know, that the design was space age. And I was obsessed. I was really into football and my bike. But not like I was into guitar."

Would you ever consider bidding on a guitar yourself?
"The one I really wanted was Jeff Beck's Oxblood Les Paul. I think you have to be either a Jeff Beck freak or a guitar freak to understand the appeal. Because I've got a couple of mates who love rock music and it's just a brown guitar to them. The other would be Rory Gallagher's '61 beat-up Strat, which I've had the good fortune to have played."

Do you remember how it felt to scrap for your next guitar? To sell one to afford another?
"Oh, Jesus, yeah. Or swapping a guitar with somebody and hoping that it was better than yours, and that they didn't realise that. It doesn't seem that long ago when I was hustling – putting myself in some pretty precarious situations – to get my first proper Les Paul. So it's not beyond me how amazing this whole thing is..." G

Marr's Guitars: The Johnny Marr Collection is held at Christie's London on 17 September. To find out more, visit the website at www.christies.com. Johnny's latest album, *The Age Of Everything*, is released 2 October on BMG
https://johnnymarr.com

EVERYTHING MUST GO

In a cathartic echo of the title of Johnny Marr's new album, the former Smiths guitarist is selling 100 of his most treasured instruments, including the guitars with which he first won fame in The Smiths. We join Amelia Walker, Christie's Head of Iconic and Private Collections, to walk through Marr's groundbreaking recordings, guitar by guitar

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

The sale of a great player's guitar collection is sometimes lamented by fans, however, it's something we are seeing more often as celebrated musicians reflect on the road travelled and the road yet to come. As a player always ready to embrace the future, Marr is clearly no servant to his own backstory. But why is he choosing to sell some of the most important guitars, amps and even the gold and platinum discs that he's picked up over the years?

"He found the process of writing and publishing the book *Marr's Guitars* in 2023 quite a cathartic experience," says Amelia Walker, Christie's Head of Private and Iconic Collections, who is overseeing the sale. "In the process of writing the book about the guitars, he was getting them all out, holding them... finding the muscle memory of all these amazing songs that he'd written on them – particularly some of the earliest guitars – and then going out after the book was published and speaking about them... And then when that whole tour wrapped up, and it was time to put them away, the impression I got was that he didn't want them just to get put away in cases again.

"With his [signature] Jag, he's basically created an instrument that does everything he needs – so he doesn't see as many opportunities to use a lot of these instruments in the future. And yet he wants them to be played, he wants them to find new owners and I think he really loves the idea of people coming up to him in years to come and saying, 'I've just written a song on your D-28', or 'I've just played your Rickenbacker on stage,' or whatever it might be. Or even if it's not someone who performs, just 'I love your guitar,'" Amelia says.

"The final lot count is 111," she continues. "There are about 90 guitars and we've got about 10 gold records... actually gold, silver and platinum. Mainly Smiths, but also one for Electronic's [eponymous debut] 1991 album and a recording he made with Bryan Ferry, which are all being sold for charity. And then there's a collection of concert posters and promo posters, which again are all being sold for charity. There are about 10 amps as well – no pedals – and I think most of them are amps that he's had for his whole career."

"I think he really loves the idea of people coming up to him in years to come, saying, 'I've just written a song on your D-28'"

It's an impressive collection even when viewed simply as vintage instruments – but when you consider the music made with them, it adds real depth to Marr's decision to let them go, and pass the proceeds of around 20 lots on to his chosen charities (The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and the National Autistic Society). Before they go under the hammer, we took the opportunity to take a close look at the most important (and distinctive) of his guitars, with Amelia as our guide.



Amelia Walker is the specialist Head Of Private & Iconic Collections at Christie's in London and has overseen auctions of some of the most important guitar collections in the world

PHOTO BY VALERIE MACON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

1963 EPIPHONE CASINO

"Compositionally, a lot of his songs start on acoustics, but *How Soon Is Now?* was written on the Casino, over what sounds like the most prolific songwriting weekend of all time, when he wrote *William, It Was Really Nothing* and *Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want* and then *How Soon Is Now?* as the third, just to top it off [laughs]. The fact he wrote the song on the Casino and then also used it to record that riff makes it very, very special.

"He used the Casino at Glastonbury in 1984 which, by all accounts, was the moment that the festival kind of shed its hippie roots and went into pop because [The Smiths] were in the pop sphere by that year. Then everyone rushed the stage and there were these guys who were trying to climb up the sheet metal in front of the stage, while he's playing that guitar. Casinos have such a strong association with the music that he loved from the 60s that he was listening to. So yeah, it's a really cool thing, and everyone loves that song."

The juddering tremolo riff of The Smiths' classic track *How Soon Is Now?* was written and recorded with this 1963 Casino, which also reflects the influence of The Beatles on Marr







PHOTO BY PETE CRONIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1959 GIBSON ES-355

"So this guitar is probably the one guitar – other than the Rickenbacker – that is most associated with The Smiths. I think it was probably the third guitar he owned in that band: he had a Gretsch [Atkins Super Axe, see page 72], the Rickenbacker and then this. He got it because The Smiths went to New York between Christmas and New Year in 1983, and they were due to play their first show and to sign to Sire Records with Seymour Stein – they were already signed to Rough Trade in the UK but they were going to do their US deal [with Sire]. And I think Johnny had heard about Sire doing a similar deal with Brian Jones, so he cheekily said, 'We'll sign to Sire if you buy me a guitar'.

"So they played their show on New Year's Eve at Danceteria, and then on 2 January, Johnny marched Seymour to 48th Street and bought this guitar, which is a thing of beauty. He got back to the hotel and I think before even sitting down he wrote *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*. Johnny talks about songs 'falling out of him' and sort of just coming to him, as well as guitars giving him songs – and it seems that this guitar inspired him to do that. He then used it to record a lot of The Smiths' second album [*Meat Is Murder*] and it's seen on stage throughout 1984 and 1985.

"He made a few modifications to it. It was, obviously, originally a stereo [output] guitar but he didn't want it to be stereo so he switched it to mono. And then I think at some point in the late 80s, Bill Puplett replaced the wiring harness but unfortunately we can't date that because everything's shielded and it's really hard to see. But we still have the original [wiring harness]

1. The Smiths perform live on the music show, *The Tube*, 1984. Left to right: Andy Rourke, Mike Joyce, Morrissey and Johnny Marr

2. The yellowed binding and split-diamond inlays tell a story of miles travelled and years past on this grand old 300 Series Gibson semi

"Johnny talks about songs 'falling out of him', as well as guitars giving him songs – and this one inspired him to do that"

The late, highly respected luthier Bill Puplett, who was also involved in the development of Marr's signature Jaguar, changed out the original wiring loom in this 1959 ES-355 at some point in the late 1980s

that he took out and from that we can tell the original pots must have been taken out before he bought the guitar as the harness that was in there dates to '83 – all the pots are '83. But it's still got these lovely [original] Patent Applied For pickups. The Varitone must have been switched out as well because that dates from a bit later than 1959. The guitar's factory order number dates it to late '59, but then it was shipped on 2 February 1960. So it's a bit of a hybrid, crossing over '59 and '60."

1992/93 RICKENBACKER 330

"When you think Johnny Marr, really you think Rickenbacker. This particular guitar also appears on the front cover of *Supersonic* by Oasis – just lying on the floor. That says a lot about Johnny's generosity in lending instruments to other musicians and further underlines that he wants his guitars to be played. He wants them to give songs to other people. The Rickenbacker is [the sound of] *This Charming Man* and so many other songs. It's his jangly sound and I think it was a deliberate choice at the time – he wanted his playing to go in a certain direction and that's what the Rickenbacker did for him. His melodic arpeggio playing and picking out the individual strings of the chord, rather than just strumming, is so intertwined with the Rickenbacker.

"Marr's arpeggio playing and picking out the individual strings of the chord is so intertwined with the Rickenbacker"

"He got it in '83 and he used it to record the single *This Charming Man*, which was tracked along with a Telecaster that belonged to producer John Porter. I think Johnny only had two guitars at the time [this and the Gretsch Super Axe], and John thought he needed another one on that track. He then used it on most of The Smiths' first record as well. I think a lot of that record was written on the



3. The so-called Hi-Gain single-coil pickups, blend control knob mounted beside volume and tone controls for each pickup, and the paddle headstock, are all part of the Rickenbacker's classic pedigree

The bouncing, chiming riff of *This Charming Man* sprang from this guitar, although a Tele was used in the recording, too, to thicken things up





4



Gretsch because he didn't have the Rickenbacker at the time, but the recording itself is a lot of Rickenbacker with the Tele added in. It's really so connected with The Smiths emerging and their whole story."

CUSTOM ROGER GIFFIN T-STYLE

"So that guitar was custom-made by Roger Giffin. I think having played John Porter's Tele, Johnny really wanted one. So Alan Rogan, who worked with The Who, Keith Richards and George Harrison, put [Marr's then girlfriend, now wife] Angie in touch with Roger Giffin and she bought the guitar for him. It's heavy – it weighs around the same as Tiger [Jerry Garcia's custom electric built with exotic woods by Doug Irwin], around 10lb. But the Roger Giffin guitar is iconic because of its unique look, and so many fans will remember it as the guitar he played on *Top Of The Pops* with The Smiths. Johnny switched out the neck humbucker after a while because originally it had a Mighty Mite zebra-coil pickup fitted. But now it's got a different humbucker with these very distinctive hexagonal pole pieces – a Bare Knuckle 'Juggernaut'. We don't know when that mod was done but again the work was completed by Bill Puplett.

"The Roger Giffin guitar is iconic because of its unique look – many will remember [Marr playing it] on 'Top Of The Pops' with The Smiths"

4. This spectacular T-Style electric built by luthier Roger Giffin was originally constructed for another of his clients but ended up in Johnny's hands

1963 LAKE PLACID BLUE FENDER STRATOCASTER

"That was a John Entwistle guitar, so that came from him, via Alan Rogan. There were about seven or eight guitars that came from John, who seemed to have the most amazing, huge collection of guitars... there's a fantastic photograph taken around 1977 of him in his living

This 1963 (body) Fender Strat has seen one or two neck switches over its time with Johnny, including – for a long period – a well-worn maple neck from a sunburst Strat

room, literally surrounded by guitars – and we managed to spot one of Johnny's in the photo, which is pretty cool [a Gretsch 6120].

"It's actually composite – it's got a '65 neck, and the body is '63, which is why he would have wanted it. He used it on *Strangeways Here We Come*, for the solo in *Paint a Vulgar Picture* – which is notable because it's his first proper solo on a Smiths record.

"We don't know what neck it had on it originally, but at some point in the late 1980s he took the neck off his sunburst Strat – which had this really beautiful bird's-eye maple neck, and is really distinct because it has particular wear on the first and third fret, and switched it onto this Lake Placid Blue guitar. In late 1989 he was photographed with it for the cover of the January 1990 issue of *Guitar Player* magazine, with the maple neck. I don't know when he put this [current] 1965 rosewood neck on it – we're still verifying that."

1977 GRETSCH ATKINS SUPER AXE

"This was Johnny's only guitar for I don't know exactly how long. It's pre-Morrissey, pre-Smiths and I think – until he got the Rickenbacker– it was the only guitar he had. I think it was some sort of part-exchange when he sold his [prior] Les Paul. And it's interesting that he chose this model. I don't know if it was literally what was available in the shop, or if he was on the lookout for a Gretsch... but he was clearly looking to move away from the Les Paul when he swapped it for this. He wrote the whole of the first album on this, and recorded *Hand In Glove* on it."

"Marr wrote the whole of The Smiths' first album on [his 1977 Gretsch Atkins Super Axe], and recorded 'Hand In Glove' on it"



5. The Gretsch Atkins Super Axe was one of the guitar industry's sporadic attempts to put effects, including a phaser and compressor, onboard an instrument

Marr's 1984 Les Paul Standard is the perennial workhorse of his collection, used in The Smiths, The The and solo work, and modded with a Bigsby and Seymour Duncans



6. The bizarre nine-pickup modification of this 1978 Strat was the brainchild of brothers Stephen and Richard Liddard. The pickups are by Kent Armstrong

1984 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD

"He got this new in 1984. Again, I'm not sure of the exact date, but it was probably around September. When he bought it, it didn't have a Bigsby – he put that on himself in about the summer of '85, because we have photos of him with the Les Paul without a Bigsby on in December '84 and March '85. But then by the time The Smiths were on *Top Of The Pops* in October '85, it had the Bigsby on. He's said that if the building was on fire, this would be the guitar he'd grab.

"Because I think he's done more on that guitar than any other in terms of consistent use throughout his career, even up until his current record that's about to come out [*The Age Of Everything*], there are parts on that record that have been played with this particular Les Paul.

"It's got Seymour Duncans in now and I think they were double blacks originally, but they always had covers on them during his time in The Smiths, and then at some point they got swapped out again by Bill Puplett. We're still investigating when the Seymour Duncans were fitted but, again, I think it would have been late 80s, because he used the Les Paul in the music video for The The's track *Dogs Of Lust* and you can very clearly see there's a zebra in both positions – and that was in 1993."

"Marr has said that if the building was on fire, the 1984 Gibson Les Paul Standard would be the guitar he'd grab"

1978 9-PICKUP MODIFIED FENDER STRATOCASTER

"We initially had no idea who created this, but we had another look at the instrument when we took some of the guitars to New York for an exhibition in late June. And we found a label indicating who [had carried out the major modifications]. It seems as though the idea was the concept of one

The wiring for the pickups and switching that lies beneath the scratchplate is complex but scrupulously tidy – impressive work from the otherwise obscure Liddard brothers

brother, Stephen Liddard, with the work itself done by a Richard Liddard in 1991. So that would have been just before Johnny bought it from Music Ground in Doncaster. He bought it on a trip there with Noel Gallagher, just a day or two after they first met... Noel remembers Johnny saying, 'Let's go for a sandwich. Never buy guitars on an empty stomach.' But anyway he bought the 9-pickup Strat and, much later on, it was used in the video for his solo record *Spirit Power And Soul*. It's amazing, just about the maddest thing you'll ever see, and it was the concept of the Liddard brothers in, I presume, somewhere near Doncaster."

"Noel [Gallagher] remembers Johnny saying, 'Let's go for a sandwich. Never buy guitars on an empty stomach...'"

1963 GIBSON J-160E

I think [he acquired this guitar] at the same time he bought the Casino when he was very Beatles-focused, and wanted that Beatles sensibility in his playing. This was around the time The Smiths moved to London just after they released their first record, and that was when he met Alan Rogan. This was when he started to have a bit of money to buy guitars and when his guitar-purchasing really sort of started taking off. He went from only having two to suddenly having three... five... seven guitars, and wanted them so he could do different things for specific reasons and sounds. He used it, as I mentioned before, when he wrote three of the most epic Smiths songs on a quiet weekend when the band had nothing on – *William, It Was Really Nothing* and *Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want* were both written on that guitar." G

Marr's Guitars: The Johnny Marr Collection will go on sale at Christie's in London on 17 September. For more info, see www.christies.com



7. Marr's 1963 J-160E is another expression of his Beatles influence and another one of the guitars in the collection from the year of his birth



Gibson launched the J-160E in 1954 and, unusually, it featured a laminated spruce top as a means to suppress feedback from its uncovered P-90 pickup

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

PHOTO BY EXPRESS/EXPRESS/GETTY IMAGES



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 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

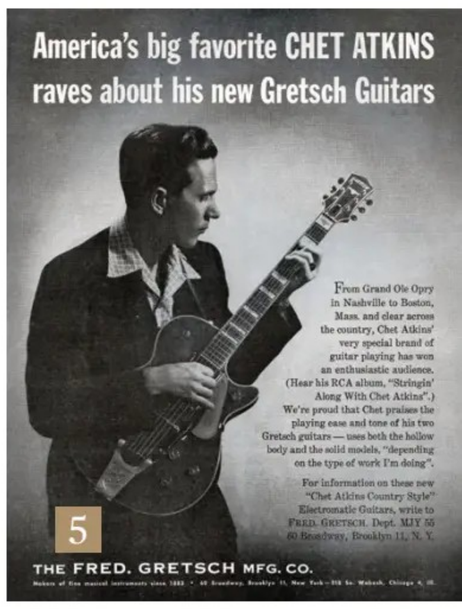
This 1959 6120 Chet Atkins model, replete with the relatively new humbucking Filter'Tron pickups, represents a signature model that, like the Les Paul, transcended its original artist connection to become a staple of rock and pop guitar

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

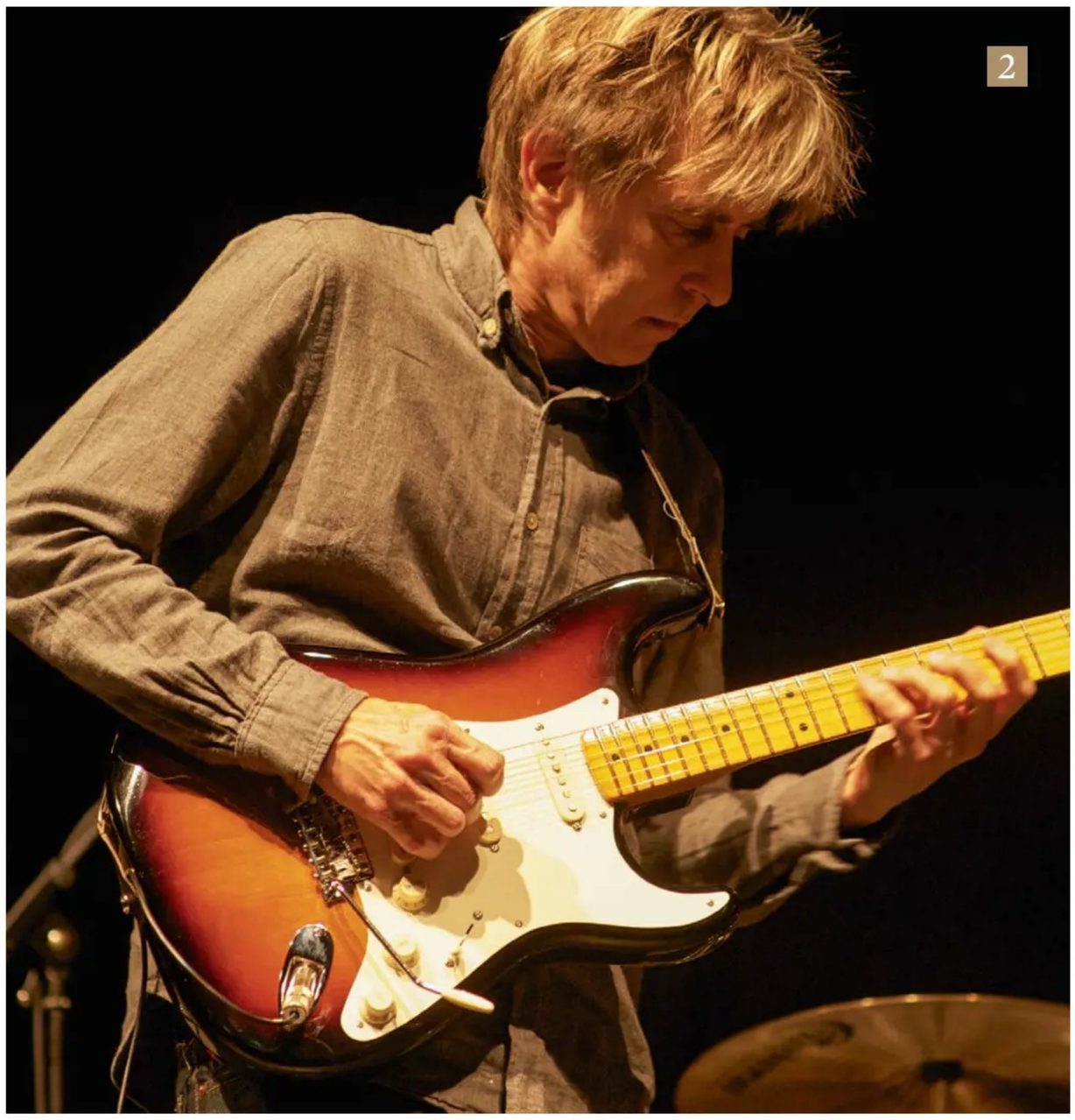


PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS



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

PHOTO: GIBSON



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 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.

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.

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

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

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

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

3. 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?

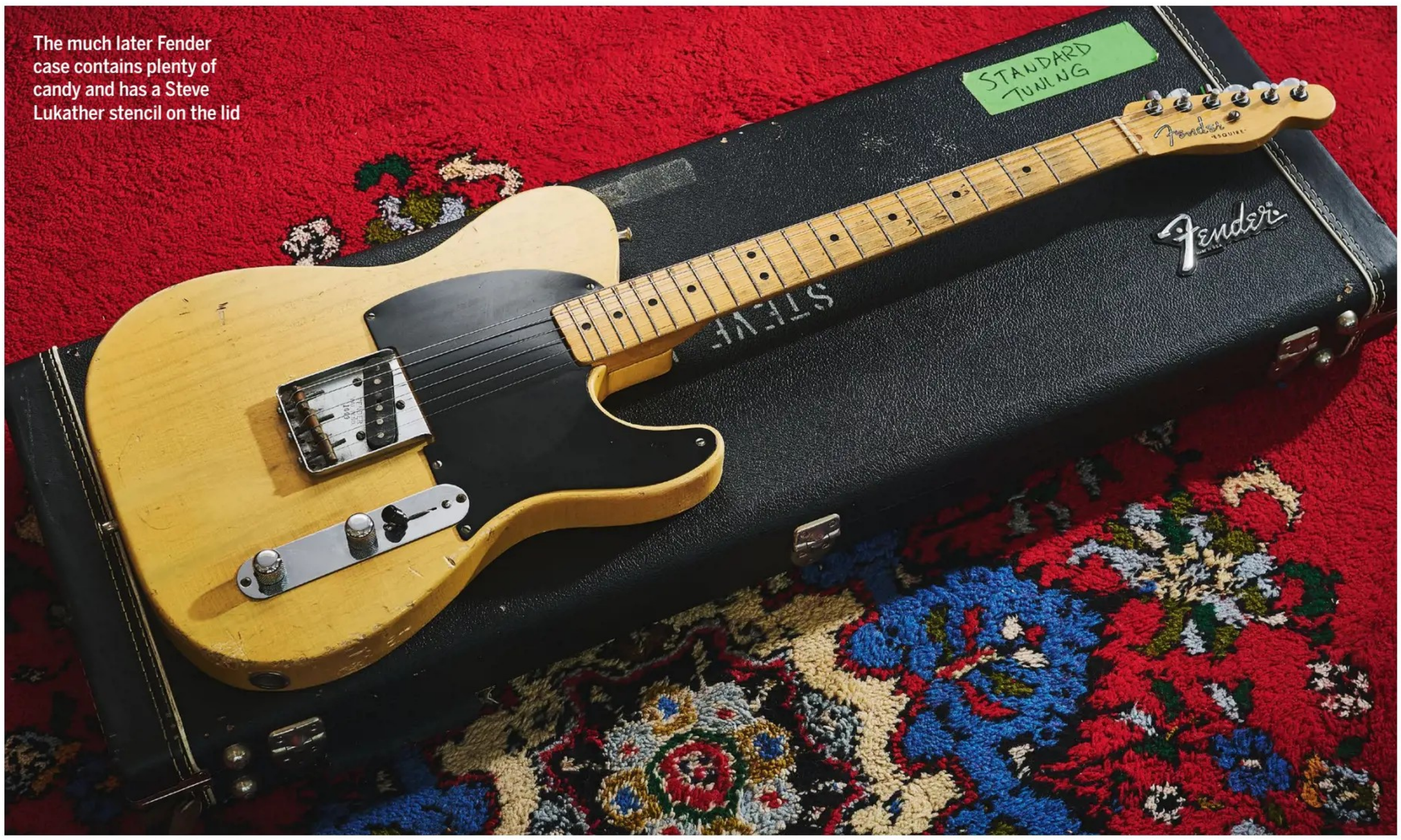
Some guitarists hold the view that single-pickup electric guitars are tonally superior, and the most commonly cited examples are Les Paul Juniors versus Les Paul Specials, and Fender Esquires versus Telecasters. In short, it’s the ‘all I need is one pickup and a cranked up valve amp and I can get every 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

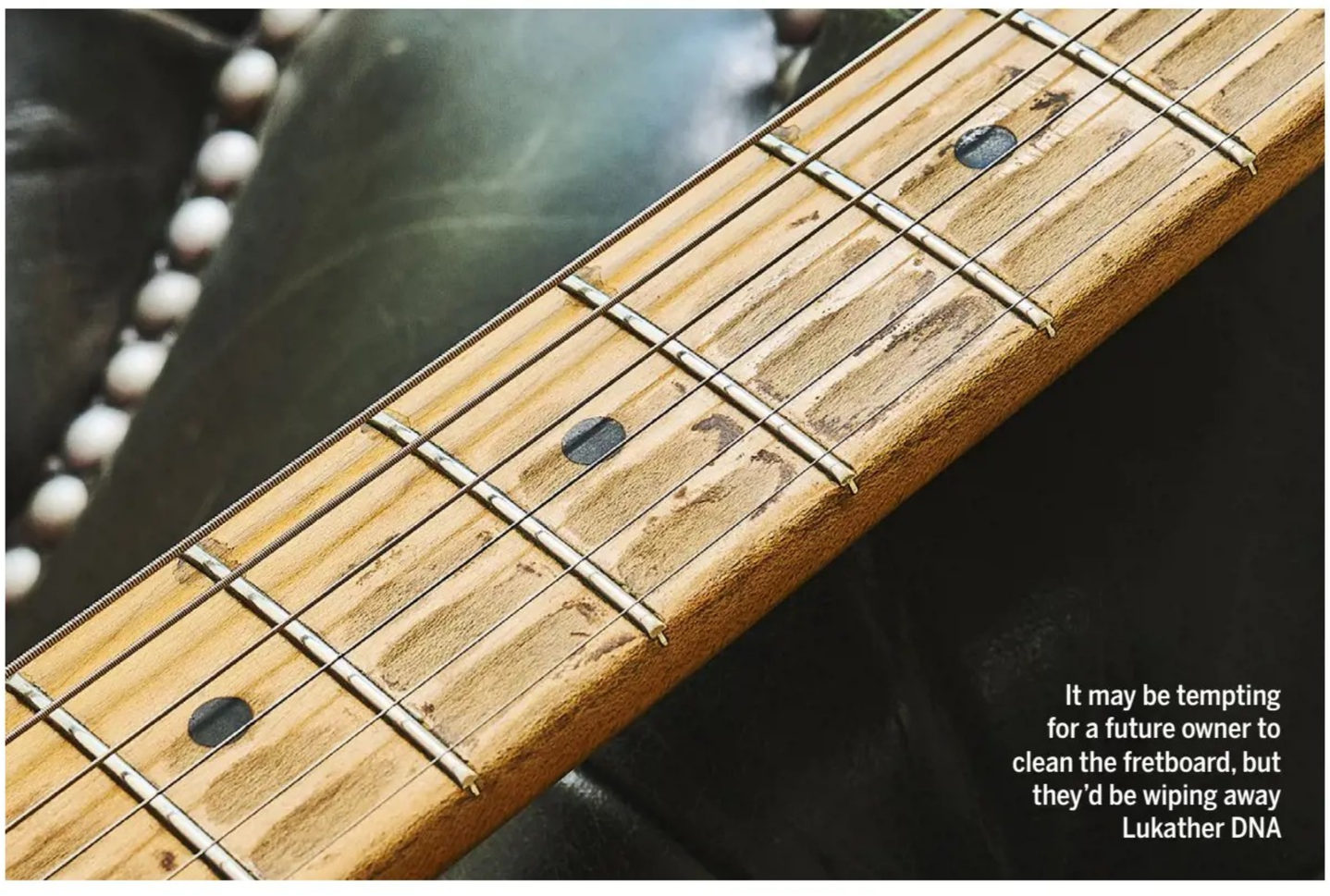
Switching Stuff

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

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

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

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PAUL KOSSOFF 1955 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM

Dubbed the 'Fretless Wonder', the Les Paul Custom waltzed onto the scene in 1954, resplendent in its tuxedo finish with gold-plated hardware. This particular mid-50s model found its way into the hands of both Paul Kossoff and Eric Clapton...

Words Huw Price **Photography** Olly Curtis

Les Paul was a man of many fine qualities, but understatement probably wasn't one of them. Rather than ease loyal Gibson customers into the concept of a solidbody electric guitar, Les came out swinging when he specified a metallic gold finish for his official signature model. Back in 1952, it would have shone like a supernova in an era of muted sunbursts.

With the metaphorical dial already turned to 10, Gibson had its work cut out when devising an even more upmarket version of Les Paul's signature guitar, but it still had a few more cards to play. It's almost as if someone on the design team pondered about the world's classiest musical instrument and decided it was probably a concert grand piano.

With its lustrous gloss black lacquer finish, gold-plated hardware and multi-ply body binding, the Les Paul Custom must have seemed like a lap Steinway when Gibson introduced it at the 1954 NAMM Show. But it wasn't simply a glitzed up version of the Goldtop because there were several differences.

Peculiar Customs

Of greatest significance was a change in the way the body was made. The Goldtops that preceded the Custom, and the sunburst Standards that followed it, are all known for their maple tops. In contrast, Custom bodies were carved from a single slab of mahogany, so they didn't have the dampening effect of a maple cap.

There were significant changes to the neck, too. While most (but not all) 1952 and 1953 Goldtops had fairly substantial neck profiles, the Custom necks often feel a bit slimmer and faster. Upmarket ebony was favoured over Brazilian rosewood for the fretboard and, rather than use celluloid nitrate inlays, Gibson 'upgraded' to mother-of-pearl blocks with wider fretboard binding.

Perhaps the most contentious change, from a contemporary player's perspective, was made to the fretwire. Les Paul would whizz around the fretboard interspersing lightning-fast runs with jazz chord voicings. To facilitate his style, Les specified fretwire that was wider and even lower than the relatively small wire used on the earlier Goldtops.

In its promotional literature, Gibson said: "Players [who] rave about its extremely low smooth frets and playing action call it the 'Fretless Wonder'." Les wanted the frets to be as close to imperceptible as possible, but for players who like to bend strings more than a semitone, Customs can feel like hard work. This may be one reason why most big-name players of the 60s and 70s chose other models and Customs have always been less popular, collectible and valuable than Goldtops and 'Bursts.

Few liked the wrap-under iteration of the trapeze tailpiece that Les Paul designed. It worked well and sounded fantastic in wrap-over form on the ES-225 and ES-295, but most players would have welcomed the stability of the fixed wraptail bridge that superseded it on Goldtops in 1953. Here's where things get contentious because some consider the wraptail to be the best-sounding bridge that Gibson ever fitted to Les Pauls, but the counter argument is that intonation can never be perfect.

Leaving aside the fact that Gibson somewhat undermined its own efforts by

“Every artist that’s played it goes crazy... it has been owned by two legends for a reason”

MATTHIEU LUCAS

The first version of the Les Paul Custom featured two pickups and a mahogany body with no maple cap



1. The new 'Staple P-90' pickup that Seth Lover designed for Les Paul was visually and sonically similar to a DeArmond Dynasonic

2. Upmarket appointments on the Custom included multi-ply headstock binding, gold-plated hardware and a split diamond inlay

3. 'Speed' knobs appeared on Les Paul Custom models in 1954 and were later replaced by smaller 'top hat' knobs in 1956



positioning it sub-optimally, the Tune-o-matic bridge and stoptail combo allowed strings to be individually adjusted for intonation. Although the first Gibson with a Tune-o-matic was the 1953 Super 400, the Les Paul Custom was the first solidbody to have one. The two models also shared the same inlay on the front of the headstock.

Staple Diet

Another feature unique to Les Paul Customs made before 1957 was mismatched pickups, and this was almost certainly done at the behest of Les Paul himself. If you closely examine footage of Les playing very early Goldtops, you will notice that whatever pickup he had in the neck position wasn't a P-90. The giveaway is wide and off-centre round polepieces with a series of smaller holes that seem to indicate he was using a DeArmond Dynasonic under a cream plastic cover.

Whether he was actually using stock DeArmonds in disguise or, as suggested by his tech Tom Doyle, pickups that Les wound himself using DeArmond parts is open to debate. But one thing we can say for sure is that Les wasn't using P-90 neck pickups. Given that he was Gibson's number one endorser and something of a superstar at the time, this must have been seen as problematic.

> *"[The neck is] fuller and really not comparable to any other mid-50s Customs that I've played"*
>
> **MATTHIEU LUCAS**

Rather than ape Gretsch and simply buy Dynasonics from DeArmond, Gibson tasked Seth Lover with creating a Gibson version of the Dynasonic. The resulting pickup is often called the 'Staple P-90', but besides the shape and size it's a very different pickup from a regular P-90 and has a clearer and a more 'hi-fi' sonic characteristic that is oddly reminiscent of – you guessed it – the DeArmond Dynasonic.

Early Customs provide the best of both worlds because you still get the snarlier joys of a regular P-90. The Staple's power means the P-90 has to be set quite high to balance out, but with such differently voiced pickups it's a mismatch made in heaven. In that sense it's a bit like a Telecaster and yet far more versatile because the pickups have individual controls.

There was something about the way Gibson wired controls and wound pickups in that era that allowed volume adjustments without losing clarity and tone finessing without losing definition. Watch any footage of Paul Kossoff and you'll see him continuously switching pickups and using the controls. It's entirely possible that he learned to do so on this actual guitar.

Prior to the introduction of the humbucker in 1957, the Staple P-90 was Gibson's most prestigious pickup and featured in various high-end jazz guitars as well as the Les Paul Custom. The 'Staple' nickname was probably inspired by the thin rectangular polepieces, all of which had height-adjustment screws. It's interesting to note that for the Staple P-90 Gibson reverted to the pickup mounting method used for a brief period on the bridge pickup of the earliest Goldtops, with screws going through diagonal corners.

Blues Boomers

Maybe it's because of the frets, the non-robust gold plating or a long-standing preference for Patent Applied For pickups over P-90s, but very few big-name players are associated with pre-1957 Les Paul Customs. The guitar we're featuring here is an exception because it belonged to two British blues legends – Paul Kossoff and Eric Clapton. We caught up with its current owner, Matthieu Lucas of Matt's Guitar Shop in Paris, to learn more about its history.

[‘Staple’ pickups on] early Customs provide the best of both worlds – you still get the snarlier joys of a regular P-90

“My understanding is that the guitar was brought back to England in late 1965 or very early 1966 by Paul’s father, David Kossoff,” Matt recalls. “He was an actor who travelled back and forth to the US and he bought it from Manny’s in New York. Paul was playing an SG Junior at the time, so the Custom was basically the first serious two-pickup Les Paul he ever owned.”

Paul auditioned for a North London blues combo called Black Cat Bones in 1966. The band’s drummer Frank Perry joined the band in the summer of 1966, shortly after Paul, and he recalls Paul having a black Les Paul at the time, but [remembers Paul] quickly acquiring a sunburst Les Paul. Since Paul was only on the cusp of turning 16, he probably wouldn’t have been acquainted with a rockstar like Eric Clapton. It’s most likely he traded the black Custom for the ’Burst at Selmer’s and, since Eric was a regular visitor, that’s probably where he bought Paul’s guitar.

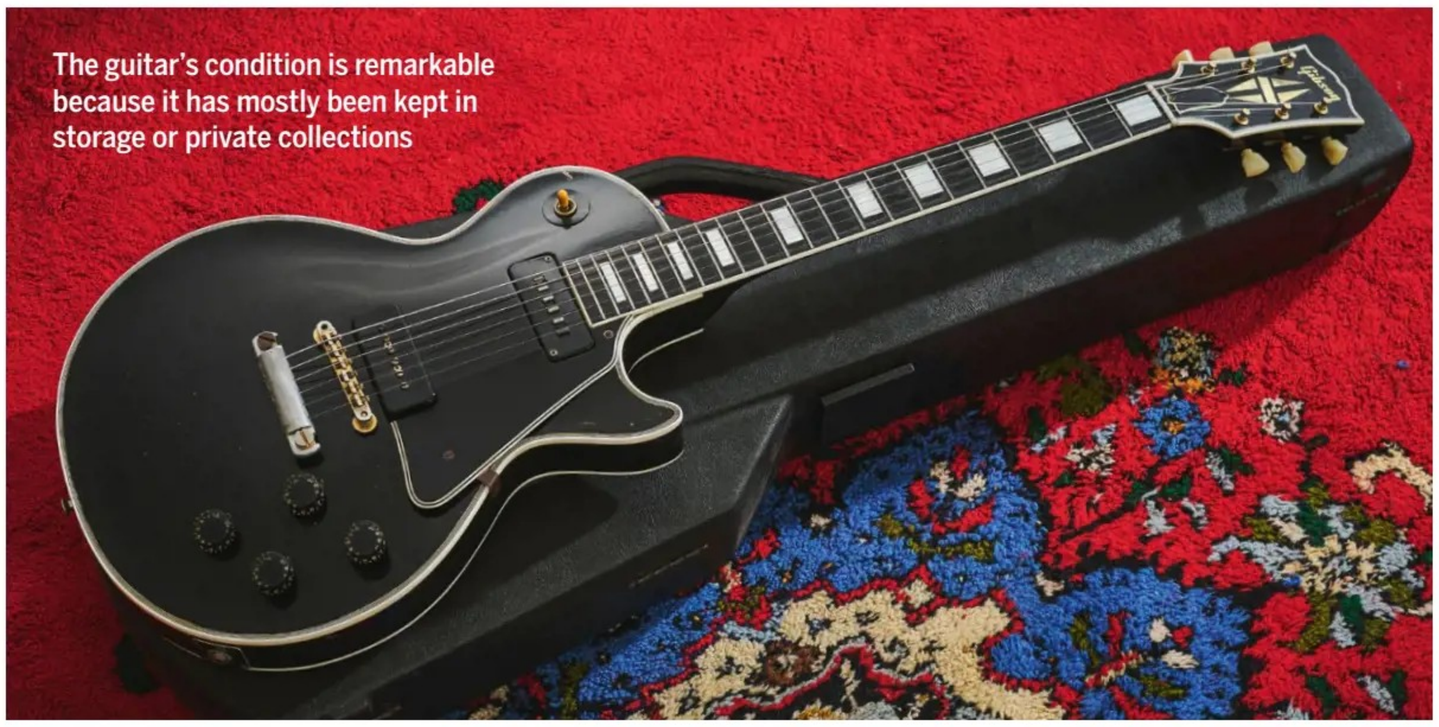
“Clapton was certainly playing a 1950s Custom around that time,” Matt insists. “There are quite a few pictures of Clapton playing a Staple P-90 Custom with Cream at the Marquee Club, and we don’t know of any other pre-1957 Custom that was played by Clapton, except this one.”

It was very rare to see Clapton playing P-90 Gibsons during the Cream era, so it’s tempting to imagine him experimenting with different guitars before he moved onto the Firebird, ES-335 and SG that he’s most closely associated with during the mid-to-late 1960s. He did play another black Les Paul Custom, notably with Blind Faith and Delaney & Bonnie, but that was a three-pickup 1958 model that he later gifted to Abert Lee.

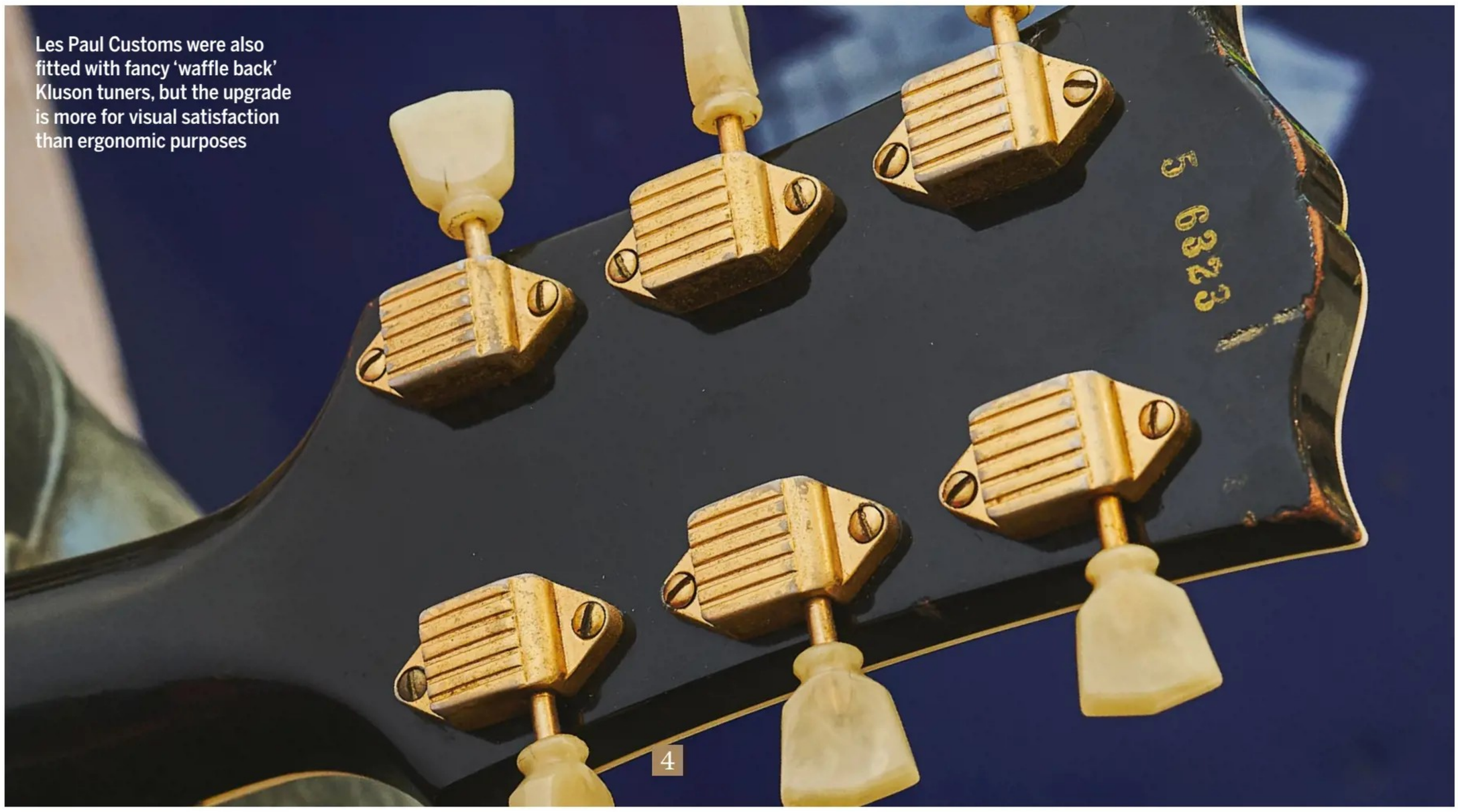
Matt offers another clue that Kossoff and Clapton owned the same Custom: “Paul didn’t like the way the binding was turning yellow, so he stripped the lacquer off the binding to make it white again. You can see in the Clapton pictures that the binding is very bright white and it remains that way today.”

Accounts suggest that Clapton left the guitar at the offices of Cream’s agent, the NEMS Organisation, in April 1967 because it was surplus to requirements for a forthcoming US tour. This is where the name Howard ‘H’ Parker enters the story because it’s thought the guitar was passed to him in lieu of payment.

Parker was a well-known face on the late-60s music scene in London who worked as a roadie and road manager for Hendrix, Pink Floyd and Cream. He kept the Custom under his bed, and when he died in 1974 the guitar passed to his friend



The guitar’s condition is remarkable because it has mostly been kept in storage or private collections



Les Paul Customs were also fitted with fancy 'waffle back' Kluson tuners, but the upgrade is more for visual satisfaction than ergonomic purposes

4

and fellow road manager John Wilson who kept it under his bed for the next 32 years. Although aware of the Clapton connection, Wilson had no idea the guitar had belonged to Paul Kossoff. This was discovered when he took the Custom to auctioneers Cooper Owen in 2006. "They only found out about Paul's ownership when they removed the switch and control covers," Matt reports. "Paul used to put paper stickers under the covers and write his name on them. He sometimes wrote the serial numbers of guitars and his address on there, too.

"At some point it supposedly belonged to Duff McKagan," Matt adds, "but I actually have no proof of that and I haven't asked



6

Paul Kossoff often applied his name and sometimes his address to the underside of his guitar's control plates – something discovered on this model at auction

"They only found out about Paul's ownership when they removed the switch and control covers"

MATTHIEU LUCAS

Duff personally if he ever owned it. I just know that after Howard Parker it went through several hands and apparently went to Japan at some point. It definitely ended up in Florida when Melvyn Franks was building his guitar collection. I bought it from him about 10 years ago."

We're obviously curious to know how the guitar feels to play and whether the neck profile is thinner than the ones generally found on 1958 or 1959 'Bursts?

"Actually no, I would say it feels quite a beefy neck to my hands," Matt insists. "It's actually quite fun with this guitar because it has a very unique profile. It's fuller and really not comparable to any other mid-50s Customs that I've played before now. If I had to define it, I'd say it's the type of chunky C profile I would expect to find on a '58 Standard.

"What's really nice is that the original frets are almost unplayable... but still very playable at the same time. It's very weird because when you get to the high notes, there are basically no frets left. It's like the definition of a Fretless Wonder, but at the same time it's very easy to play. It's also super light for a Les Paul Custom and weighs just 3.84kg, which is just under 8.5lb.

"The hardware, frets, pickups, potentiometers and the caps are all original to the guitar, along with the finish. It remains exactly as Kossoff and Clapton left the guitar. Although I do have some photos of Clapton playing it with a white or cream pickguard. But, for sure, this guitar has either been stored under a bed or owned by collectors from that point onwards.

"That's probably why it has survived the way it has," Matt concludes. "It's an exceptional-sounding guitar. Every artist that has played it goes crazy about it, and it has been owned by two legends for a reason. It's really a special instrument." G

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

The body binding looks unusually white because Kossoff scraped off the yellowed lacquer – current owner, Matthieu Lucas, tells us that Paul disliked the yellowing

ICED CREAM

When Eric Clapton's fabled 'Beano' 'Burst was stolen at the height of his mid-60s Bluesbreakers fame, he turned to Andy Summers for a replacement. That guitar, a 1960 Les Paul Standard, was the one Eric used for his next project, an all-new power trio named Cream. Hidden away from public view for nearly 60 years, the guitar – as influential in its way as 'Beano' – has now resurfaced in Paris, and we were able to get up close with it and tell its remarkable story in the following pages

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Back in the mid-1960s, Gibson's cherry sunburst Les Paul Standard had been discontinued five years previously. But some devotees of blues guitar, such as a young Eric Clapton, knew that, if you could find one, the pre-SG Les Paul was an instrument to be reckoned with. The problem was finding one. A post-war embargo on American luxury goods and musical instruments had ended only a few years previously, in June of 1959, and US guitars, such as Strats and Les Pauls, were rare birds and genuine examples coming up for sale were hunted down diligently by London's leading guitarists.

So when Eric's 1959 Les Paul Standard he used on John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton – aka 'Beano' – was stolen from a church hall in Brondesbury, London, where he was beginning rehearsals with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker for their nascent supergroup Cream, Eric needed to get his hands on a replacement in a hurry and there were very few to be had. In the end, Eric turned to another young pro on the London scene, Andy Summers, and implored him to sell his 1960 Standard.

Despite Summers' initial reluctance, money – to the princely tune of £300 – soon changed hands and Clapton had the guitar he needed to press on with recording *Fresh Cream*, the debut album for a group that would become every bit as influential as Clapton's era-defining work with John Mayall. Beano's replacement wasn't perfect, however. Not that it mattered much at the time, but it featured a newer style of sunburst that Gibson had debuted in 1960 to avoid fading red tints in the finish – a process that customers didn't like at the time, but which has since passed into 'Burst lore – and this newer finish had a gaudier 'tomato soup' tone to it.

Eric's new Lester also had a malfunctioning bridge pickup that would need sorting out, too. But in the cut and thrust of the 1966 music scene none of that mattered much – it could all be fixed or overlooked – because the sound that guitar made was tarnishless gold.

By turns biting and mellifluous, the voice of that guitar is all over Cream's debut album, recorded at London's Rayrik and Ryemuse studios and released in the UK on 9 December 1966, which featured tracks that shaped what blues could be in a new, free-thinking era of psychedelic rock. Tracks such as *Spoonful*, *I'm So Glad* and the single *I Feel Free*, which

The vivid cherry of the finish is the so-called 'tomato soup' or 'tangerineburst' of the later 1960 Standards, which utilised a non-dye-based colourant that withstood fading better than previous sunburst finishes but was bolder in hue



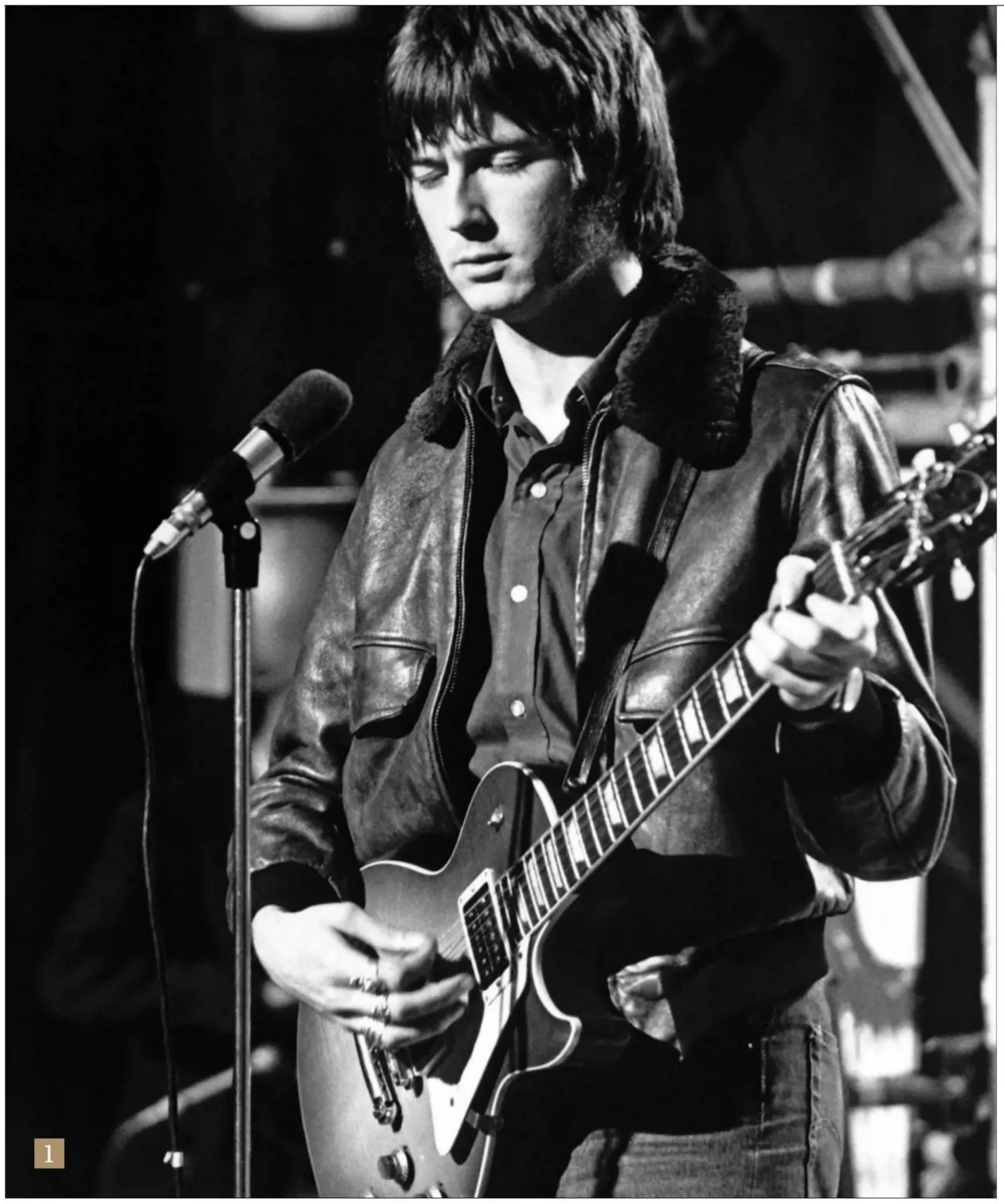


PHOTO BY TONY GALE / PICTORIAL PRESS / ALAMY

1

appeared on Atco's 1967 US release of the album.

But though the guitar's story as a famous instrument began in London, it ended – or rather went dark – across the Atlantic in New York, where Clapton and Cream soon ended up, initially playing dates at the RKO Theater in March of 1967, before returning to record their follow-up album, *Disraeli Gears*, in May of that year. Somewhere in among these New York trips, Clapton's Les Paul suffered what is now believed to be the second of two serious neck breaks and he took it to Dan Armstrong's repair shop, where it was given a 'creative' headstock replacement that was crafted to please the young guitarist but prompted him to dump the guitar at the shop after refusing to pay the bill.

And there, after changing hands a few times, the guitar came to rest – in New York, in a private collection, kept out of sight through all the years that saw original sunburst Les Pauls change from being somewhat obscure, niche collector's items to icons of mid-20th century guitar making. There it stayed, widely speculated about but seen only in scarce photographs. Until today. Now, Matthieu Lucas of Matt's Guitar Shop in Paris has acquired the guitar, which has sometimes been dubbed the 'Summersburst', and wants to share it with the world while it remains in his keeping. We join Matt to pick up the story...

How did this guitar come into Clapton's hands originally? And what was Andy Summers' connection to it?

"So this guitar was bought by Andy Summers originally, way before he went into The Police, in 1964, to the best of my knowledge, at Rose Morris in London. At the time, there were only about two Les Pauls available in London – or very few. We all know that Keith Richards was already playing one [in The Rolling Stones], and I think his was the very first sunburst Les Paul to appear on [British] TV, so he was playing his. But in '64, it was not easy to get one in London.

"During my research, I've seen Andy talking about how he got the guitar at Rose Morris and Clapton was playing with John Mayall already at the time, and then Clapton saw this beautiful Les Paul that Andy had in the case, and he said, 'Wow. Where did you get that?' Andy told him that he bought the guitar at Rose Morris's shop, and so Clapton went right away and bought the guitar we all know as 'Beano'."

"Then Andy was not really using the guitar that much and, in the meantime, as we all know Eric's 'Beano' 'Burst got stolen – and we are still wondering where that guitar is. So Clapton kept calling Andy Summers and reportedly he said something along the lines of, 'You need to sell me your guitar. I'm going to record *Fresh Cream*, I need a Les Paul, that's the sound I want.' Andy initially said no because he wanted to keep the guitar for himself, but, apparently, Clapton [persevered] and pressed him to sell him the guitar and, in the end, Andy accepted. I think he charged him £300.

"An interesting point to draw attention to is that when Andy sold the guitar to Eric, the bridge pickup didn't work properly and Andy was already using a Tele at the time, which he still has today. So he sold him the guitar, and after that Cream were rehearsing in London and recorded *Fresh Cream*."

"I decided to make it public because this guitar is a major piece of the 60s and British music history" **MATTHIEU LUCAS**

1. The 'Summersburst' makes a TV appearance on *Ready Steady Go!* in November 1966

2. The neck pickup is the original Patent Applied For humbucker that the guitar received in the Gibson factory in 1960 and has a thick "creamy" tone, says Matthieu Lucas. The 'Patent Number' bridge pickup is thought to be an in-period replacement for the original Patent Applied For humbucker that was malfunctioning when Eric bought the guitar from Andy Summers

The headstock on the guitar today is very clearly non-original – what's the backstory of the neck on this guitar and how did it end up with this mandolin-style headstock?

"In my opinion, Clapton broke the headstock of the guitar twice.

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The first time was very early on after he bought the guitar from Andy Summers. I can't tell where and when, but when you really search the archives, in the very early pictures of Clapton with that almost 'bowl' haircut, you can already see that the headstock has been badly repaired and it has already been broken off, in a major way, a first time.

"Apparently, what happened – although of this we can't be sure – is that the repair [of the first break] was so bad that when the guitar was dropped a second time Clapton went to Dan Armstrong's shop in New York City to have the guitar fixed properly. Dan Armstrong was there and a then-young luthier called Matt Umanov, who checked the guitar, said, 'Well, it's not possible to fix the [original] headstock on that guitar because that's a really, really bad break that the guitar just had,' so they offered to replace the headstock for Clapton.

"And that's where Matt Umanov got very innovative with the way he replaced the headstock of the guitar. He removed the original headstock and we don't know where it went. But then he grafted a new headstock on, keeping the original binding and fingerboard intact, and what he did was create the [new-built] replacement in the shape of the headstock from an F-5 mandolin, which made the guitar unique because nobody ever did that again on a Les Paul, to my knowledge. [He] put Eric Clapton's name, with a mother-of-pearl inlay on the headstock, too, plus a [representation of someone's] face. It's unclear if it's a woman or if it's Eric Clapton's face that Matt Umanov put on that guitar with mother-of-pearl inlay."

"Matt Umanov got very innovative with the way he replaced the headstock"

MATTHIEU LUCAS

What happened next?

"From what I can tell, Eric Clapton was very unhappy with the repair, and that way he didn't pay for the repair, but he just said words to the effect that, 'No, no, I don't need the guitar any more anyway, I'm starting to use the ES and the SG,' because he was already searching for another kind of sound. So the guitar just stayed in [Greenwich] Village of New York City, at Dan Armstrong's shop.



The headstock that Clapton infamously objected to certainly departs from the 'open book' shape of the Gibson original and is loosely styled after that of a vintage Gibson F-5 mandolin. Close examination reveals the inlaid silhouette of a head, in profile – possibly intended to be EC himself. Meanwhile, chunky frets, fitted later than the period when Clapton had the guitar, stand out as another mod to this unconventional 'Burst



PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

3. Cream perform at the Starlite Ballroom, London in February 1967 – with the 'Summersburst' still in one piece

"Then the guitar went to a guy called Adrian Barber, who was the guitar player for a Liverpool band called the Big Three at the time. After he quit the band, he stayed in Germany and he became a sound engineer. When he passed away, the guitar went [back] to New York with his son, who was living there. He didn't really want the guitar, so he called somebody named Chris Such, who had a small guitar shop in the [East] Village called Mojo Guitar. Chris's place was a little neighbourhood guitar shop, so he didn't have the money to buy a sunburst Les Paul at the time, so that's how he called [collector] Perry Margouleff to offer him the guitar, and Perry met the guy and just gave him money, and then owned the guitar since 1986.

"Nobody saw that guitar for many years because, first of all, Perry was a curator for the largest guitar collection ever – and this was part of his private stash – but mainly because Perry was very attached to 100 per cent original 'Bursts, at the time, and he didn't care so much about the fact it had been Clapton's guitar. And, in any case, the market for star-owned guitars didn't really exist back then.

"It was kept in the collection for years and, eventually, when I first met Perry 13 years ago, he showed me a lot of those guitars, and I was very blessed that he kind of put me under his wing – he was always showing me and teaching me about [vintage] guitars, especially this one. Back then, you know, I was never in a position even to imagine that I was eventually getting this guitar 12 years later, but that's what happened. And we started talking, I would say, around October last year. It took a bit of time, but we arranged a deal a few weeks ago and then I went to New York City and picked up the guitar myself."

"I think Clapton really loved a very thin neck... [This guitar] has one of the thinnest necks on a '60 I've ever played" **MATTHIEU LUCAS**



Top-hat reflector knobs are an obvious visual clue to the 1960 date of manufacture. Note also some light figuring to the top, which shouldn't be surprising as less than a quarter of all original 'Bursts had any strongly visible flame or stripes

Tell us about the pickups. The bridge humbucker isn't the Patent Applied For humbucker it left the factory with. So what's the story behind that?

"Well, what's interesting is that when you look at the picture of [this guitar] in *The Beauty Of The 'Burst* book [Yasuhiko Iwanade]... We all know that picture of Perry with the 'Burst wall behind him – there's [famous 'named' 'Bursts]



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PHOTO BY MARK HAYWARD ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Red Eye, there's the Stanley 'Burst, the red cherry [finish] '59 Les Paul, all of those, and there is also Eric Clapton's guitar on there and you can recognise the guitar immediately from the mandolin headstock, of course. But what's interesting is that this guitar – on that picture – has a zebra bridge pickup, which, of course, it doesn't have today. That pickup is long gone and Perry doesn't have any idea where it went.

"But what Perry is sure about is the Patent Number pickup – because the pickup now in the bridge is one of those, a mid-60s Gibson pickup, which is good news for the guitar because Perry remembers that this pickup was in the case of the guitar, in the case pocket. And that matches Clapton playing this guitar with the double-black pickup in the bridge. So Perry said, 'Okay, well, we have this pickup in the case and I think that's the pickup that belongs to the guitar, I'm going to put it back, so it matches really what Clapton was playing at the time.'

"Because if Perry had restored the guitar [to a generic period-correct spec] back then, based on his meticulous restoration work, he would just have put an original Patent Applied For [pickup in the bridge] that he had back then from his stash – he would never have put the Patent Number pickup in the bridge position [but for the Clapton connection]. The [otherwise anomalous] Patent Number pickup makes total sense because when you read Andy Summers' biography, and the interviews that Andy gave on that guitar, that's one of the reasons why he sold the guitar to Eric in '65 or early '66 – because the bridge pickup didn't work on that guitar.

"My guess is that Clapton obtained a pickup on Denmark Street – a Gibson pickup – from 1965 or early '66, which was a Patent Number humbucker, and he put the pickup in the bridge position of the guitar and then went to record *Fresh Cream* with that pickup configuration because the neck pickup on that guitar is the original Patent Applied For pickup. We checked the solder joints on the parts, and that guitar for sure has all-original solder, except for the volume pot in the bridge position – and that's the only major electronic change that's on the guitar. Back then, nobody cared about original [Patent Applied For pickups] – they were all players [not collectors], and so my guess is that he just put a working pickup in the bridge position and that was it, you know?"

"So that's the journey of this guitar, and that's interesting because I knew about it for years; I couldn't tell anyone about it because that's not how Perry is working – he wants his guitars to be top secret, if I can say. But then I decided to make it public for several reasons because my theory is that guitars like this should be played, should be shared with people, and I think it's not even belonging to me, or whoever is going to buy the guitar – it's belonging to, I would almost say, humanity because that guitar is a major piece of the 60s and the British music and a major piece of guitar history, so my feeling is that all those guitars need to be shared and played. So that's why at some point, I said to Perry, 'I want to buy this piece, but in my opinion it's just a shame that it stays off the internet because I think it's a different time now and everybody should know what happened to this guitar,' because nobody knew where it was, basically."

4. Another shot from Cream's *Ready Steady Go!* TV appearance finds Eric sporting the Les Paul – and a gold lamé jacket!

5. A set of Grover tuners has replaced the Les Paul's original Klusons. This was a common 'upgrade' for LPs back in the day

"The neck pickup is one of the creamiest neck pickups I've tried. It's not a woody sound, it's very dense" **MATTHIEU LUCAS**



5

Speaking of the guitar just as an instrument in its own right, what's it like from a player's perspective?

"I have had the chance to play 'The Fool' SG, I've played Eric's

335 and – with the exception of the Firebird – I've played a lot of instruments that he played in the Cream era. And it's funny because all of them [have notably slim necks], except the 335, which has more like a '64 neck but still a very thin neck. So I think Clapton really loved a very thin neck on guitars, you know? This guitar is quite the same: it has one of the thinnest necks on a '60 I've ever played.

"I would say it's a very late '60, too, probably one of the last 1960 [Les Paul Standards] ever made because of that 'tomato soup' finish and other details. It's not a lightweight guitar, but the neck is, as I say, super thin and, surprisingly, somebody did refret it at some point with huge frets – it would make sense if that was in the 80s as they were all refretted with big frets back then... But yeah, the neck is super thin. I think maybe they shaved the neck a bit when they put that new mandolin headstock on [during the repair process by Matt Umanov] and a new finish on the neck – and I would say there is a very old overspray on the guitar, too.

"Structurally speaking, it's super easy to play and super fast because of that thin neck. I would say the neck pickup is one of the creamiest neck pickups that I've tried. It's not like a woody sound, it's very creamy, very dense. It makes total sense when you put the guitar into a Marshall and you put the tone at zero – you get exactly the *Spoonful* sound.

"Also, the fact that on the bridge position you have a Patent Number makes total sense because it's really brighter in those mid-60s Gibson pickups. When you play the guitar, you really hear the *Fresh Cream* sound, which is very particular. I would say this pickup had [originally come] from an SG – it's so bright and it's such a rock 'n' roll-sounding guitar. And in the middle position, surprisingly, the tone is almost out of phase as well. Or rather, not out of phase but it's almost there – it's really close to that sound. When you play the guitar, it's incredible because that's the record, you know? It already sounds like the record." G

For more info, see www.mattsguitar.shop

The rear of the guitar's body features some light belt-buckling wear marks, and a basic form of locking strap buttons have been fitted to the guitar at some point



"When you play the guitar, it's incredible because it already sounds like the ['Fresh Cream'] record" *MATTHIEU LUCAS*

TALES OF CREAM ELECTRICS

Beyond the stories of Clapton's lost 'Bursts, the guitarist reached for a variety of instruments during his tenure in Cream, from the iconic 'Fool' SG to a mid-60s ES-335

Words Tony Bacon

When Ginger Baker, Jack Bruce and Eric Clapton were putting together Cream in summer 1966, Eric had with him his Les Paul. This was the guitar that we now know as the 'Beano' 'Burst. He'd bought it the previous year when he was a member of John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, but now he plugged it in for Cream's early rehearsals at a church hall in north-west London. However, before he'd had a chance to play it in public or in the studio with his new band, it was stolen from the hall. Infamously, the 'Beano' 'Burst's whereabouts remain a mystery to this day.

Eric began to seek a replacement, at first borrowing a few guitars. He used Keith Richards' Bigsby-loaded 'Burst in July for Cream's debut at a festival in Windsor (and a try-out in Manchester the night before). In a London club in August he played a cherry double-cut Les Paul Special borrowed from support group The Clayton Squares.

Eventually, probably in August '66, he bought a 'Burst from Andy Summers, the subject of the main feature in this issue. In the early months of the following year, Eric dismissed that guitar when it was the victim of an unsympathetic repair.



1. The guitar most associated with Clapton's Cream era is undoubtedly this 1964 SG Standard, known as 'The Fool'

A NEW PSYCHEDELIC FOOL

Perhaps he started to wonder if Les Pauls were jinxed for him, and he settled on a circa-1964 cherry-finish SG Standard – a different style, for sure, but with familiar humbuckers and control layout. Within a short time he took it to a pair of Dutch pop artists newly arrived in London, Marijke Koger and Simon Posthuma, who later started an art collective – and, briefly, a band – that they named The Fool.

Marijke and Simon painted colourful scenes and swirls all over the guitar, which Cream fans know as 'The Fool' guitar. Eric later called it a "psychedelic fantasy" and he played it as his main stage guitar throughout 1967 and into the summer of '68, recording with it extensively, too, notably on much of *Disraeli Gears*.

On tour in America in spring '67, Eric scooped up a few more guitars: a three-pickup 1958 Les Paul Custom, a Fender XII and a Danelectro Standard 3021. Again, he'd record some of *Disraeli Gears* with the Custom, and played the XII on *Dance The Night Away*. On a few occasions he played the Custom and the Dano on stage, but none of the three would count among his most favoured instruments.

A significant purchase came along in May '67 when he went to Sound City in London and bought a secondhand 1956 Stratocaster, the one that later became known as 'Brownie'. He got it just days before Cream travelled to New York City to record *Disraeli Gears*, heard at least on *Tales Of Brave Ulysses*, with its Strat-like tones and aggressive wah-wah sounding like an homage to the

Eric called 'The Fool' a "psychedelic fantasy" and he played it as his main stage guitar throughout 1967 and into the summer of '68

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Eric quite literally playing 'The Fool' in New York in 1967. This is the guitar that was played on Cream's live version of *Crossroads*, which appeared on the album *Wheels Of Fire*



2

current king of the Strat, one James Marshall Hendrix.

Aside from sporadic uses in Cream, this Fender would later feature on stage regularly with Eric when he began touring with Delaney & Bonnie toward the end of 1969, and it was also prevalent in the studio during 1970 for his first solo album and the *Layla* sessions. In his autobiography, he recalled how at age 12 he'd first seen a Strat, in the hands of Buddy Holly on a TV show. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," he wrote. "It was like seeing an instrument from outer space, and I said to myself: 'That's the future – that's what I want.' Suddenly, I realised I was in a village that was never going to change, yet there on TV was something out of the future. And I wanted to go there."

Meanwhile, Eric hadn't given up entirely on Telecasters: in 1968 he botched together a bound Custom Tele body and a contemporary rosewood-'board Strat neck. During a brief visit to Denmark in February, Cream were filmed for an of-its-time movie, *Det Var En Lørdag Aften (It Was A Saturday Night)*. In one of two scenes in which they appeared, performing *We're Going Wrong*, Eric is seen with the unusual Tele/Strat hybrid. This oddity's most visible appearance would come in June '69 when, now with a maple neck, it was his main guitar throughout Blind Faith's debut concert in London's Hyde Park.

A further acquisition on a US Cream tour arrived in April '68 in the reverse-body shape of a 1964 Gibson Firebird I. At the time, Firebirds were not considered to rank among the front-running Strats and Lesters and Teles that many prominent guitarists of the day treasured. But the Firebird was nonetheless a useful instrument, and his single-pickup model turned up on stage during the band's farewell dates later in the year.

"It was like seeing an instrument from outer space, and I said to myself: 'That's the future – that's what I want'" ERIC CLAPTON

MORE LES PAULS & A 335

Eric could be generous with guitars to his friends, and the most famous example concerns a Les Paul he gave to George Harrison. It was a '57 Goldtop refinished in cherry that George would name 'Lucy' and use on several 'White Album' and *Abbey Road* cuts. In September '68, he asked Eric to play the recent gift once more, on *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*,

2. Ginger, Jack and Eric perform at the Cafe Au Go Go in October 1967 in New York City

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



3

PHOTO BY SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

an event that saw Eric become the only non-Beatle to play a guitar solo on a Beatles record.

The cherry-refin Goldtop had been owned by Rick Derringer, guitarist in The McCoys, and before that by John Sebastian of The Lovin' Spoonful. Derringer decided the guitar was so beat up it could do with a fresh new finish and, living not far from the Gibson factory, he delivered it there in the mid-60s with instructions to paint it with an SG-like cherry finish. When he got it back he felt its quality had suffered in the process, so he traded it for another guitar at a New York City store – which is where Clapton acquired it, and Clapton in turn gave it to his Beatle chum.

Toward the end of '68, Eric acquired his third Les Paul 'Burst, which he used occasionally on stage during Cream's farewell tour. This one, too, did not last long, going to Paul Kossoff in a trade when Free supported Eric's new band, Blind Faith, the following summer.

Another key purchase that most likely took place in late '68 concerned Eric and his 1964 ES-335. Why "most likely"? There's been speculation about when he got the 335 thanks to conflicting claims and a tangled history. Eric was seen with this guitar on Cream's final farewell dates at the Albert Hall in London, and he kept it until selling it in 2004 at one of his Crossroads-benefitting auctions. Eric recalled then that he'd bought it when he was still with The Yardbirds. While there were certainly a couple of 335s around in that band – mostly played by Chris Dreja – specs and serial numbers and shipping dates prove that neither was the one Eric played in '68.

3. In 1968, the year that Cream announced their split, Clapton purchased a reverse 1964 Gibson Firebird I that would feature in the band's final tours both in the USA and in Britain

Firebirds were not considered to rank among the Strats, Lesters and Teles that many prominent guitarists of the day treasured

Photographer John Peden snapped Eric at a San Francisco Fillmore gig in summer '67 where, as one might expect, he played the psychedelic SG... but also apparently a red ES model, possibly a 335.

More recently, Jerry Donahue has said he sold the Albert Hall 335 to Eric a few weeks before the London shows of the farewell tour. At the time, Jerry was still an up-and-coming guitarist – this was before he'd played with Fairport Convention, Joan Armatrading, The Hellecasters and others – and he had a day job working at the Selmer music shop in London.

That leaves three possible scenarios. The first is that Eric

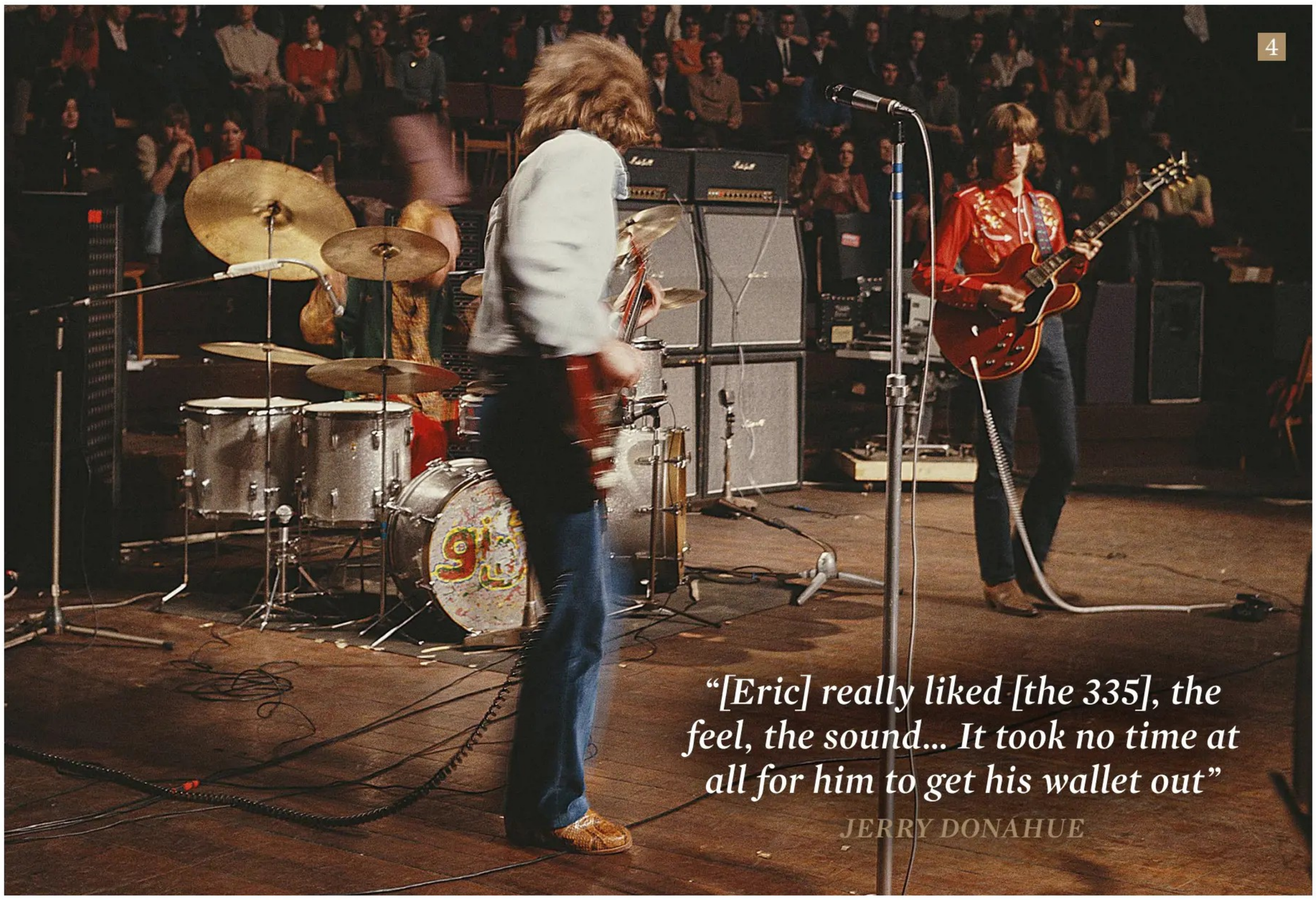


PHOTO BY MARK HAYWARD ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"[Eric] really liked [the 335], the feel, the sound... It took no time at all for him to get his wallet out"

JERRY DONAHUE

bought the Albert Hall 335 in 1964 while in The Yardbirds, never played it at the time but instead kept it hidden away for years, only pulling it out for a gig at the Fillmore in '67. Then he put it away again until the London gigs. But why would he go so long without using what is clearly a great guitar?

4. Eric brandishes his ES-335 at the Albert Hall in November 1968 as Cream take their final bow

5. A post-Cream outing with Delaney & Bonnie saw Eric break out his three-pickup LP Custom

The second is that he bought the Albert Hall 335 in San Francisco in 1967, played it on one gig, and then squirrelled it away until the London shows. Same question: why would he ignore such a great guitar for so long?

The third scenario seems most likely, that Eric bought the '64 Albert Hall 335 from Jerry at Selmer in 1968, a few weeks before the London shows. But a four-year-old guitar? Well, we know that Eric had a taste for used guitars. Of the dozen Cream-era electrics itemised in this feature only one, the Electric XII, might have been new – but even that could well have been secondhand. He was so taken with the benefits of budget-friendly used guitars that when he sat down with a 60s interviewer who wanted to hear some tips for guitar buyers, Eric said that he'd recommend seeking secondhand instruments.

He gave his reasons: such instruments are "broken in and easier to play", he insisted, and "the older the guitar the better it seems to have been made". Jerry Donahue recalled a happy Eric as the deal was sealed at the Selmer shop for that lovely ES-335. "He really liked it," Jerry said, "the feel, the sound – it was perfect. Certainly, it took no time at all for him to get his wallet out." Even when you're God, sometimes it's impossible to resist the lure of a potentially great guitar. G



PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

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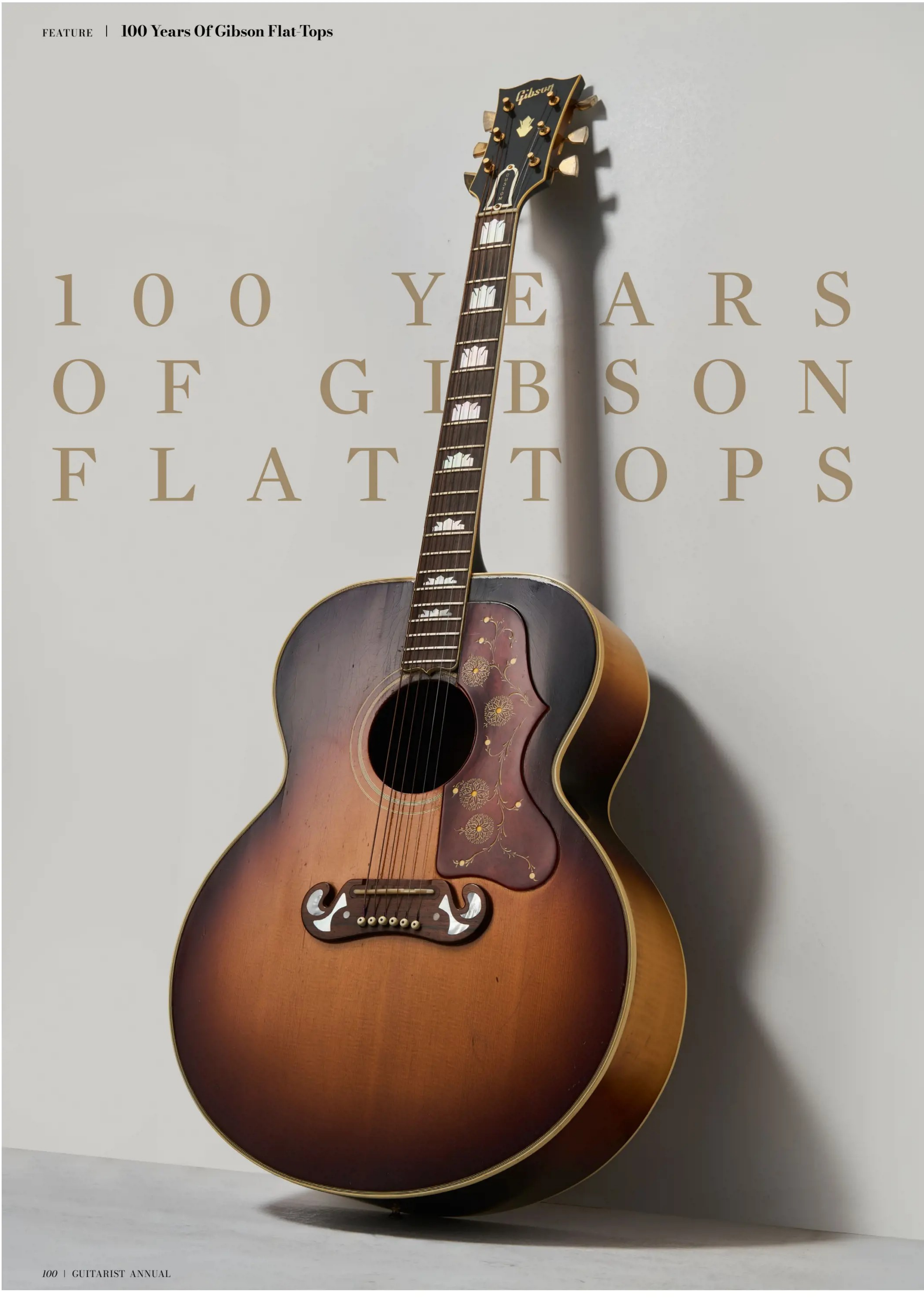
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100 YEARS OF GIBSON FLAT TOPS



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FLAT OUT

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

Photography
Matt Lincoln, Olly Curtis & Adam Gasson
Words
Jamie Dickson

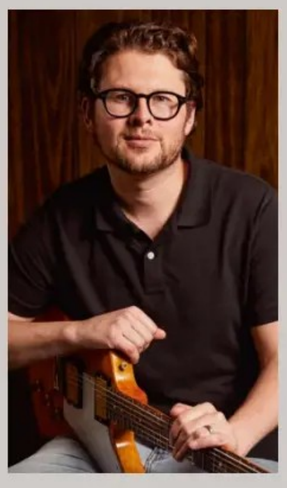
Flat-top acoustic guitars weren't really part of the plan for Gibson back in the pre-war years of the 20th century. The Kalamazoo-based company was known for its archtops, and Martin, over in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, had a big head start on them by the time flat-top guitars were becoming really popular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

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

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

"But I think how the experimentation started involved the same principles that [archtop pioneer] Lloyd Loar employed: it was trying different things, like messing around with mandolins. You've probably seen the early 'Army-Navy Special' guitars [designed for WWI servicemen to buy affordably] that have those interesting cat-eye f-holes – but that was a flat-top guitar. So there were lots of different types of flat-top guitars that they were experimenting with – and also flat backs, where they were putting flat backs on archtops. So they didn't dive right into it straight away.

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



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

PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

Guitarist would like to thank ATB Guitars in Melksham (www.atbguitars.com) and Matt's Guitars in Paris (www.mattsguitar.shop) for providing the stunning vintage Gibson acoustic guitars photographed for this feature

Gibson
FLAT-TOPS

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



1



2

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN

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

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

"There's a common misconception that [the price-based naming convention] continued into the 1950s, but it was pretty unique to the 20s and 30s – and actually maybe just the 30s and possibly during wartime. I honestly don't know! But I know that it wasn't around in the 50s. So it was a short period."

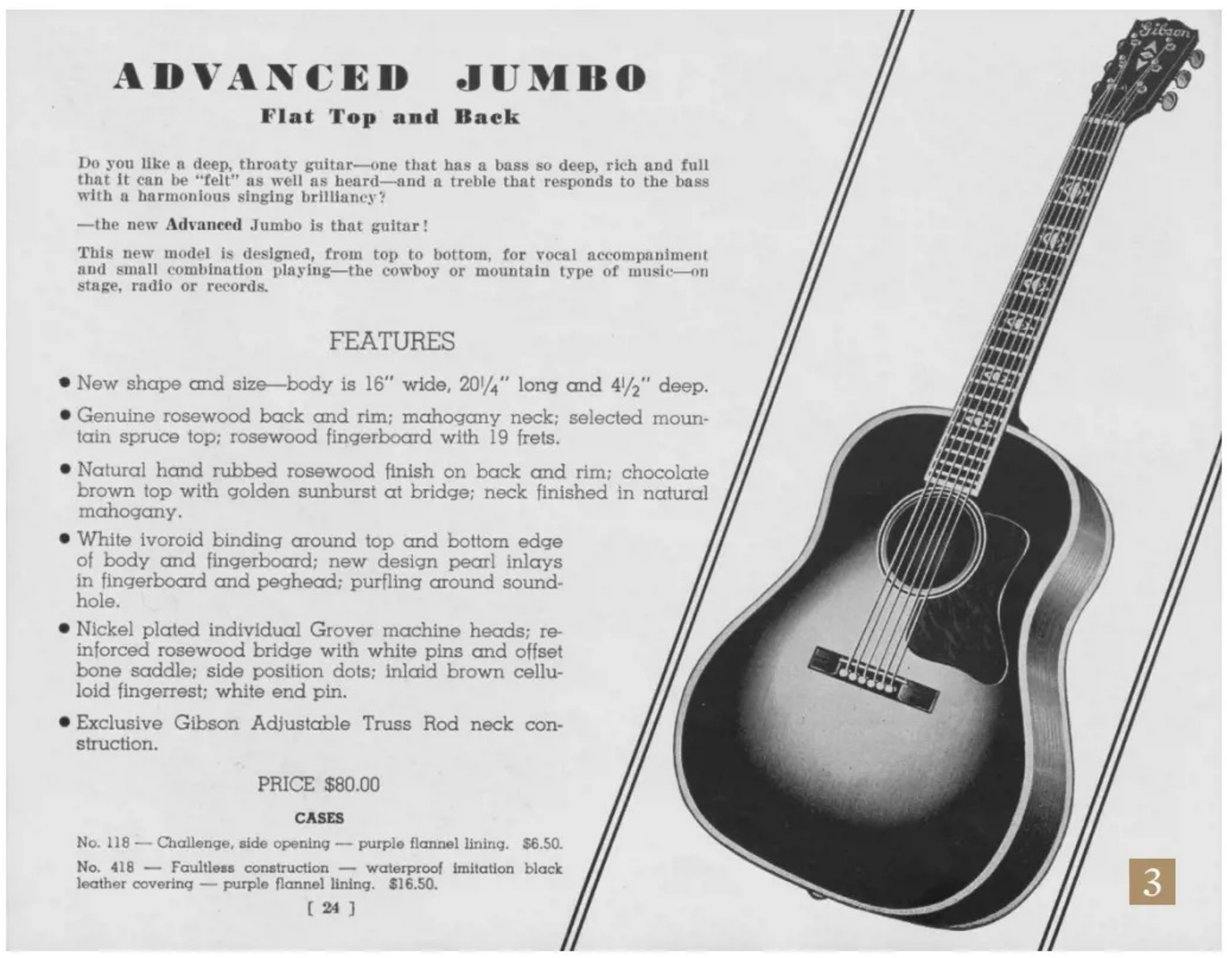
Tell us about the invention of the L-00. Its quaint parlour-style looks and sound strongly evoke pre-war musical styles and yet it's still a pillar of Gibson's acoustic line-up today.

"Yeah, to me, that is the perfection of those very first flat-tops: the L-0 and the L-1. Those were a little bit more crude and less refined because they had deeper bodies. And so the proportions – like the scale length and the bridge location – were great, but the body depth was the place to improve. So, basically, an L-00 is an improved L-1 with a shallower body depth.

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

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

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



3

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

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

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

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

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

Gibson
FLAT-TOPS

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



4



5

PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN

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

"Honestly, I think anniversary celebrations by guitar companies can be a little contrived, when it's like the 65th anniversary or something – it's like, 'Okay, yeah, but it's not the 75th anniversary or the 100th.' So we're always looking for those opportunities to celebrate the 50th, 75th and 100th because those are real milestones, in my opinion, that are really worth celebrating – these quarter-century increments.

"So 100 years [of Gibson flat-tops] is definitely an occasion we're celebrating. And we also wanted to reassert ourselves and remind people that we're the second-oldest acoustic company that exists and we have more shapes, more styles, more diversity of acoustic platforms than anybody else. We literally have something for everybody in our range. And 100 years ago, those very first guitars seemed to get it right and resonate with artists on the first try."

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't have the 'why' very well sorted out, other than I know that at least one maple-bodied J-200 was made pre-war. I think, again, there were lots of experiments happening. I also think World War II definitely played a part in that evolution – that's why we have the pre-war style in our line-up, which is rosewood-bodied, but also the post-war model, which is maple.

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

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



6

Gibson
FLAT-TOPS

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



7



8

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

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

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

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

"We have the original blueprints for the moustache bridge – there were a few different designs – but [country singer] Ray Whitley personally influenced that bridge. So there was definitely an artist element there where he had custom-ordered a smaller-body guitar that actually we own now. You may have seen it at Carter Vintage years ago, it's a really cool guitar. Then the next one that he ordered was on that big, giant [J-200 size] platform. He got that first customer-order, small-body guitar, and then for a second guitar, he was like, 'Can you do it with this [bridge]?' And so that wasn't the very first SJ-200, but it was among the first three and that was really the one that set the stage – plus, Ray Whitley was the biggest singing cowboy of the day."

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

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

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

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



Gibson staff examine what looks to be a beautifully applied two-tone sunburst at Gibson in the dawn of the rock 'n' roll era

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

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

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

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

Gibson
FLAT-TOPS

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



PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



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

People often assume that the mid-60s shift away from the more labour-intensive aspects of production – which occurred at Fender, Gibson and other major makers – was about maximising profit. But they forget that demand went wild for guitars in the 60s and firms couldn't make guitars fast enough to keep up.
"Nobody wants back-orders. If you build up a year of back-orders... you're hearing about it from all of your dealers and customers constantly. We've been there, in modern history, and you definitely want to find a way to fulfill those orders. But cutting corners was not really the mentality – it was more like, 'Let's find processes that are maybe needless and just aesthetic-based.' I would say that was probably one consideration. There's probably also someone there like [Gibson president from 1968] Stan Rendell who'd argue there was more surface area to glue the bridge on [with the later, solid J-200 bridges]."

The round-shouldered dreadnought shape is indelibly associated with the J-45. How did it evolve?
"Again, it was directly influenced by archtop shapes. Certainly the Sears catalogue archtops [made for the giant US mail order goods company and its compendious catalogue] were a little bit different to other Gibson shapes on purpose, but those shapes lent themselves perfectly to flat-top guitars. At the same time, historically, Ditson was ordering similar shapes through Martin, so there was something about the slope-shoulder shape that was considered intriguing and interesting at that point in time. But, fortunately for Gibson, it was the brand that made it famous."

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

Gibson's Dove and Hummingbird acoustics, with their ornately decorated pickguards, are among its best-loved acoustic designs. How did they come about?
"There was a gentleman called Hartford Snider who was a pattern-maker at Gibson but also a keen birdwatcher, and eventually his [interest in sketching birds] came to the attention of Ted McCarty and John Huis, who was Ted McCarty's right-hand man, and they said, 'Well, hey, you know you're making these patterns, but we can see you're sketching all these birds and stuff. Why don't you make a pickguard design?' So the very first one was the Hummingbird, and the next one was the Dove, and then came the Excellente, in the same year as the Dove, which had an eagle on a pickguard.

"He created all those pickguard designs, and I think the success of the Hummingbird in 1960 allowed Gibson to go back to the well and introduce a couple of more bird pickguards. Which was kind of a wild idea in 1960 – to call a guitar a Hummingbird. Back then, it was as wild as calling your band The Beatles, because in that era band names were usually something very conventional like 'Marty and the something-or-others'. And in the same way, guitar names were not typically

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

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

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



PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

Until its first flat-tops (the L-0 and L-1) arrived in 1926, Gibson's L-series guitars were exclusively archtops, such as the 1918 L-1 on the right. The L-00 flat-tops followed in the early 30s – and the example on the left here is from 1934

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

words like 'Hummingbird', you know? So it was just such a cool move. And, again, it was testament to Ted McCarty and his team to empower the workforce and empower the talented folks within it, and they struck gold."

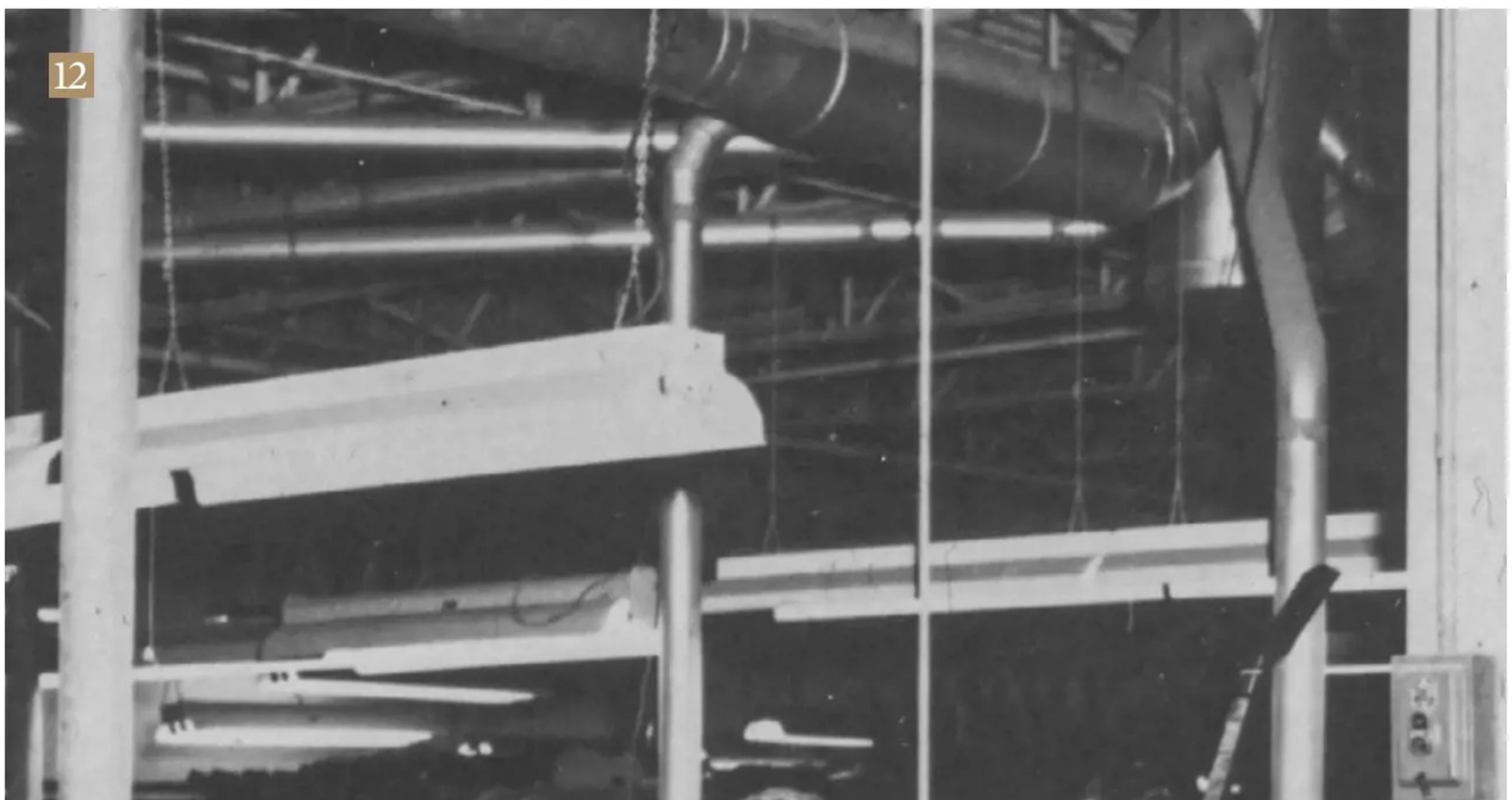
After 1957, Gibson also owned the Epiphone brand – and some great Epi flat-tops were produced, too. How did the Epiphone and Gibson flat-top ranges compare?

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

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

"One unique instrument to come about was, again, a dreadnought – a square-shoulder dreadnought – so that debuted with Epiphone as the Frontier, a continuation of the FT-110... The 1958 Frontier comes about immediately. Ernest Tubb then popularised it and a lot of those Nashville and Bakersfield country artists were playing Epiphones, which is really a testament to a guy named Ward Arbanas really pushing the line at the time and helping to sell it. Those acoustic guitars – those Epiphone flat-top guitars – were managed like a unique product line because they were in different stores from Gibson. That was the whole strategy. It's like, if you put Gibson in the mom and pop store across the street from the other brand, then you're not going to be competing for the same hook share in the store. So that was the thinking.

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



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

PHOTO COURTESY OF GIBSON

"Other really cool models then developed. Another awesome square-shoulder dread was the Excellente, one of my absolute favourites. Again, that was kind of a collaboration between Andy Nelson, who was a salesman for Gibson and some artists. It was adopted by many artists, including Ernest Tubb. It was cool to see that Epiphone had its moment in the sun, especially in the 60s, with really influential folk and country players."

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

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

VIDEO EXCLUSIVE!

Samantha muses on life on the road and her new live album. Plus! See her run down her guitar and pedal rig **http://bit.ly/gitannual2027**





SAMANTHA FISH

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

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

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

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

What finally persuaded you to release a live album now?

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

"It's a timing thing with live records, but I felt like it was a good time because we recorded this last [studio] record, *Paper Doll*, with my touring band and so, I know it sounds stupid, but, to me, it felt live. A lot of studio albums have dynamics and everything, but we had something on this last record. We didn't play with a click track, so we're changing tempos in the middle of the song, and there's just something about it that felt really open – it just lends itself to the stage and what we're doing. I felt like it was a good time to capture it."

Where was it recorded?

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



PHOTO BY DOUG HARDESTY

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

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

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

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

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

"When I first got it, it just felt like me, and I've had [the one I'm using live] since 2015. I've relic'd it myself, you know, through the sweat and everything, just playing it – I didn't actually take any tools to it. I really love this guitar. It feels good in my hands. It's expressive when I need it to be. I can tame it when I need to. And it looks cool."

What drew you to the SG in the first place?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My next one would be the JHS Mini Foot Fuzz, this tiny little fuzz pedal that sounds crazy. I generally try to turn the volume up and I keep the fuzz around one o'clock so it doesn't get too muddy. I go into the MXR Carbon Copy analogue delay, which is also a favourite. Then I've got my [Electro-Harmonix] Nano Pog, which is an octave [pedal]. Fun, weird stuff. I like to use it on *Black Wind Howlin'* and a couple other songs. Then we go into the [Boss TR-2] Tremolo, which is a new one for me. I got it for the song *Don't Say It*. Then a [Boss PS-5] Super Shifter, which I use very minimally, really only for divebombs, though I know it's got a million uses."



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

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

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

How does it differ from the SG?

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

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

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



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

www.samanthafish.com

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





GLENN TILBROOK

The Squeeze frontman, songwriter and guitarist shares the story behind *Trixies*, the band's latest release that unearths demos from decades ago, recording them afresh

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Adam Gasson



PHOTO BY PETER NOBLE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. An early incarnation of Squeeze with Jools Holland (keyboards), Chris Difford (vocals/guitar), Gilson Lavis (drums) and Glenn Tilbrook (vocals/guitar) on the right

Anyone who witnessed the emergence of Squeeze in 1978, with their galloping, octave-laden single *Take Me I'm Yours*, will recall a band whose intricate music and witty lyrics set them apart. Similarly great tracks followed, including *Cool For Cats*, *Up The Junction*, *Pulling Mussels*, *Tempted*, *Another Nail In My Heart* and *Labelled With Love*. Guitarists will have noticed Glenn Tilbrook's canny solos that wove through his chords with melodies sounding like no-one else.

Tilbrook and Squeeze lyricist Chris Difford recently discovered an *entire* album that they wrote prior to the hits but about which they confess "we weren't good enough to play yet".

"Obviously, we brought all the knowledge we have now to the table," Glenn tells us, "but these are very much the songs that we wrote then. The only difference is I can teach them to the rest of the band. Back then, I didn't even know the names of the chords."

Chris adds: "Before I met Glenn I was reading Damon Runyon books, which had these funny, poignant short stories set in the 30s and 40s in New York. There was one about a nightclub and the characters that inhabited it. That inspired me to write a load of lyrics about what I imagined a nightclub to be – but in Soho in the 1960s."

"I was just absorbing everything that was around me, and almost every song on Trixies I can trace back to something"

The band convened at Glenn's South East London studio, along with original Squeeze pianist Jools Holland playing an identical piano to the one on which Tilbrook composed the tracks. *Guitarist* met there with Glenn to discuss the new album, take a look at his guitars, and delve a little into Squeeze's fascinating five-decade history.

Trixies feels like the next in the Squeeze lineage, rather than a 50-year-old throwback.

"I'm astounded at how mature it was. And I think that when Squeeze were first successful, we essentially had to dumb down to fit in with what was going on. I was just absorbing everything that was around me, and almost every song on *Trixies* I can trace back to something."

1979/80 Black Strat
Tilbrook: "I would have got it in Manny's in New York, I'm gonna say '79 or something like that. I think I was using it on *East Side Story*"

"Chord-wise, I got such a lot from Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder. Stevie Wonder had a massive impact on my writing"

The ingenuity of the songs compared with what else was around reminds us of what groups like 10cc or XTC were doing.

"I remember [at school] there was a programme with 10cc talking about how to make a record. It was when they were cutting *The Dean And I*. I knew about studios, but not quite how it worked. They were doing guitar overdubs and then he did a harmony [Eric Stewart and Lol Creme harmonised the guitar fills] . It's like, 'Oh, that's amazing!' So yeah, all that stuff was sinking in. But chord-wise, I got such a lot from Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder. Stevie Wonder had a massive impact on my writing. You can hear that in *What More Can I Say*. It doesn't sound like Stevie, but that's what it is."

When your single *Take Me I'm Yours* came out, it sounded like nothing else at the time.

"Well, what came a bit later was listening to Kraftwerk. I had a fascination with that, and that's how *Take Me* was written. That was the last in a series of songs that I wrote, the first of which was *Why Don't You*, which is on *Trixies*. I had a few songs that went like that. I was such a sponge."

Listening to *Trixies* next to the hits, the connection is obvious. It's like you've recorded these old songs just as you would have done.

"That was such an important thing. That first time we heard Jools [Holland] play, when he was in the band, was when we got the RMI piano [Rocky Mountain Instruments Electra-Piano]. So I found one in America and brought it back. And I thought on *Trixies* we'd use it again. Back then we couldn't afford more keyboards, but the noise the RMI made was charming."



Gibson ES-125
Tilbrook: "I used the ES-125 on *Good Riddance*. That's also in the photo on the back of the *Tempted* single. It was made in the late 1940s and was first featured in *Messed Around* on the *East Side Story* album. It's also on the cover of a single release of *Labelled With Love*

1966 Gibson ES-345
"I use it on *The Place We Call Mars* and *Why Don't You*. A good friend got it for me as a present about three years ago. The tone on it and the sustain, it's just brought me into another world; I don't normally play with that sort of sound"









PHOTO BY MIKE PRIOR/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

2. Glenn Tilbrook, circa 1979, live with Squeeze at the Hammersmith Odeon

Does one dare describe *Trixies* as a rock opera of sorts? After *Tommy*, *The Village Green Preservation Society* and so on, many would have stayed shy of doing that.

"Chris was into The Kinks and I absolutely got that it was stuff I hadn't heard. I think there's also an element of *Cabaret*, the film about the German nightclubs of the 1920s, and that all fed into the idea of what *Trixies* was. Plus you have authors like Damon Runyon and Raymond Chandler influencing what it might be. Musically, of course, it had nothing to do with that. It was about processing 1974 music into what we could do."

Have people suggested the next move is to turn it into a musical?

"That's definitely a thing we could do. It would play very well there. The songs will stand up with or without us. One of the good things about *Trixies* is that there are enough characters. It's not a definite story. It doesn't have a beginning or an end. So all of that is open for interpretation."

Your guitar solos are intricate and clever, weaving around the chords.

"At heart, I'm a blues guitarist, but I'm also not interesting enough to do that very much. Early on, I was really influenced by the solo in The Carpenters' *Goodbye To Love* [played by Tony Peluso]. And also Maria Muldaur's guitarist Amos Garrett. When I worked with John Wood [producer: Cat Stevens, Nick Drake, Fairport Convention], I mentioned how I wanted to construct solos, specifically talking about Amos Garrett. He said, 'Well, I worked with Amos and he'd drop in every three seconds if he knew what he wanted to get.' And I was like, 'Oh, I can do that?' So one afternoon I did the solo in *Another Nail In My Heart*. I knew it had a journey in a certain direction, so I was just finding each bit and then learning it. And now that's part of the song and I will always play that same part."

"I came to Wes Montgomery through Hendrix – I play octave stuff because it's a beautiful and expressive way of playing"

But in solos like that you turn that bluesiness into a pop style.

"Well, my dad took me to see Joe Pass play at Ronnie Scott's. It was great – and also really embarrassing because he insisted on dragging me up to meet him. But Joe was very gracious. I was, like, 15 or something, but I learned a Joe Pass solo by slowing the record down and literally figuring out how it went. That taught me so much about positioning. It seemed to me there was only one way you could do it, and that was the way he'd done it. If I tried it another way I'd just get stuck. I came to Wes Montgomery through Jimi Hendrix, and I play quite a lot of octave stuff because it's a beautiful and expressive way of playing.

"So it was just what I listened to growing up. Before I met Chris, and even after that, Jools and I would get pub gigs, like the Morden Arms in Greenwich. So that gave me some fluency

1966 Fender B-Bender Telecaster
Tilbrook: "I got this from a guitarist called Ross McGeeney in 1986. I don't tend to use the bender that much though"

"The blonde Tele was very generously given to me by Elvis Costello in 1981, in return for my singing on *From A Whisper To A Scream* on his album *Trust*. It's an early 50s one. The first time I recorded with it was on *Sweets From A Stranger* on the song *His House Her Home*"



PHOTO BY NICKY J. SIMS/GETTY IMAGES

3. Squeeze on stage during the *Trixies* 2026 album launch at Koko in Camden – the venue was transformed into 'Trixies Nightclub' for one night only

because we were playing a lot of rock 'n' roll and blues songs. So I learned that I could work my way around a song and create tunes for it."

When Squeeze emerged, artists such as Elvis Costello, The Police and The Stranglers all hung to some degree on the coat-tails of punk. Squeeze had a bit of that, too – a little of the attitude but also a ton of musicality.
"Our first album [self-titled, 1978], which John Cale [The Velvet Underground] produced, doesn't sound much like us to me. The *Cool For Cats* album [1979] is our first one that really was how we were as a band. It was exciting and it was adventurous as well. I remember we played at the Nashville Rooms, us and XTC, one night. They were so good and the first other band that I thought were really doing something different. We also played with Joe Strummer, but The Clash came more from a rock 'n' roll side than we did. We came from a melodic rock 'n' roll thing."

"I prefer Chris giving me lyrics – it's the way we've worked since I was 15. I'd written songs before but suddenly had lyric after lyric"

Compositionally, does Chris give you the lyrics and you write the music?
"Very much so. I think I've written maybe two songs that started out as tunes. But I prefer it with Chris giving me the lyrics because it's the way we've worked since I was 15. I think I'd written about eight songs before I met Chris, then suddenly I had lyric after lyric. I'd grown up getting record songbooks, and I'd learn songs from those. The ones I didn't know, I'd just make up tunes for. So I was unwittingly practising for what I would later do."

There is a lot of guitar playing on *Trixies*. Is it all you?
"It's all me, except that Melvin [Duffy, Squeeze's second guitarist] played nylon-string on *You Get The Feeling*, slide guitar on *The Jaguars*, and various others throughout the album."

Do you come up with your guitar parts first, or get the basic track down and then find something to fit?
"Well, last January I had a few weeks in the studio by myself, trying to figure out if anything else needed to be done. I remember working on the solo for *The Place We Call Mars*. I knew it was something like it ended up being, but I didn't know what that was until I hit on it. And then, for the actual solo, I'm inverting the wartime song *We'll Meet Again*. It's not that tune, but I thought it was appropriate for the song's scenario of destruction and science fiction. It's parody, and I think it's serious, but it also makes me laugh that I could get that in. Actually, I did the same joke twice, once vocally and once on the solo in *Good Riddance*: that was the Jackson Five's *I Want You Back*."

Martin 000C Classical Tilbrook: "The first guitar I learned on was a nylon-string. But as soon as I could afford guitars I switched to steel strings and never really went back, until this one. And what a wonderful guitar this is. It features on *You Get The Feeling* from the *Trixies* album"



4

What gear did you use in the old days? A wooden Mesa/Boogie combo atop a Marshall 4x12 springs to mind.
"Yeah, I used that for years. It was a great amp and I've still got it. I eventually went back to Voxes at some point. I also had a 1959 Strat that I bought off the guitarist in Steeleye Span. It was my first proper guitar and it was a beauty. I used just that on at least the first two records. But it got nicked out of the back of the car in Liverpool. I've never had a Strat like that since; it was just one of the things that plays perfectly. I played Strats all the way through the first iteration of Squeeze and into Difford & Tilbrook. When I got the B-Bender Tele in 1986 that's when I swapped – it's been a big part of my playing ever since."

What can you tell us about the guitars on *Trixies*?
"That 1966 B-Bender Tele is the go-to for tracking and overdubbing. Do you know of a guitarist called Ross McGeeney [guitarist in a Byrds-influenced band called Starry Eyed And Laughing – see 'Neville's Advocate', issue 535) Well, when I met Ross he had the black B-Bender Tele. Ross and I did a few casual gigs together, like at the Albany in Deptford. It was great hearing him play. But also

"I'm all over nylon-string guitars at the moment. There's nothing old about it, but I love the way it sounds"

I'd seen a guy in Las Vegas, just playing in the casino in a corner, and he had a two-way bender – one going that way and one the other way. He also had two palm benders, and he could play it like a pedal steel. I've never seen anything like it, so I was really intrigued by that. I don't use the bender a lot, but it's a great tool to be able to bend the string up and down like that."

And the black Strat?
"That's early 80s or late 70s. I bought a few guitars when we were first out in America. I tried to get guitars as soon as I could afford them, so whenever I was in America I'd have a look and see what was around."

The cutaway Martin nylon-string looks interesting.
"What a wonderful guitar. I'm really all over nylon-string guitars at the moment and now I just want to use that all the time. It's completely new. There's nothing old about it, but I love the way it sounds."

Is it like a cutaway version of Willie Nelson's?
"Yeah. I saw Willie Nelson when we were touring with Elvis Costello in America in 1981. I went with Elvis and our bass player and we saw Willie Nelson at Caesar's Palace. And because it was Elvis, we had a table right by the stage. And oh, what a player. I mean, Willie Nelson is another massive influence. You can't replace that."

So how do you feel about Squeeze today, from creating *Trixies* all those years ago up until the band it is now?
"We're in such a good place now. It's definitely the best it's ever been. I know in my heart and soul we are at a different level now. We've got eight members, we can do proper backing vocals and do it live. And there's so much I didn't know about arrangements and stuff. It took me a while, but I'm there now." G

4. Tilbrook reflects on Squeeze from his East London studio: "We're in a good place. It's definitely the best it's ever been. It took me a while, but I'm there now"



Squeeze's new album, *Trixies*, is available now via Love Records/BMG
www.squeezeofficial.com

BUY & SELL GUITARS

Ever consigned a random assortment of unused gear to a traditional auction – the kind where the auctioneer slams down the gavel to close the deal? If you have, you'll know that an assortment of effects pedals, a couple of mediocre guitars and some cables and other oddments can bring in a surprisingly handy sum when the auction results come in. Most of us have no aspiration to trade guitars professionally – a whole different game that is beyond the scope of this article. But shrewd guitarists who know a little about getting the best price for what they sell and the best deal on the guitar they *really* want can build surprisingly impressive collections – guitars that, in turn, inspire new avenues of music. In the following pages, we consulted seasoned pros to get their insider view on how you can trade guitars more effectively and get on the path to owning and enjoying the guitar you've always promised yourself...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Matt Lincoln


Gibson
SOLD

TRADING TIPS

Want to trade up to your dream guitar? Or simply buy a keeper for a great price? From traditional guitar shops to online auctions, having some key principles in mind can save (or even make) you money and, most importantly, get you a guitar that lights a fire under your playing. We join the experts to find out how...

1 YOU REALLY SHOULD TRY IT

Guitarist writer and veteran guitar restorer Huw Price says, "If possible, try a guitar in person and test it out. Compare it with other guitars, because as tempting as the online prices often are, and even if the specs are the same, two guitars that come off production lines next to each other can sound very, very different. So if possible, try the guitar out in person. And if you can't, if you're buying online, make sure you've got a right of return."

2 LOSE IT IF YOU DON'T USE IT

Chris Turpin, guitarist and frontman with Ida Mae and Mirador is also a producer with an enviable working collection of guitars, which he has painstakingly traded for over years. He says it pays to be brutally honest and get rid of gear that doesn't see regular use. "If you haven't used it in a year-and-a-half to two years, trade it with something else, because you'll make someone else much happier [if they can have that] piece of gear they've been looking for," he says, "and it's going to better serve you as something else. I know it's a lot of faff to sell little bits and pieces, but just do it – turn it into something."



PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

4. Refretted vintage guitars are becoming increasingly more accepted and if the refret is done well it is unlikely to knock a huge percentage off the guitar's value

3 BEWARE FRETWEAR

"There's no getting away from fret wear," says Julian White, veteran guitar trader and owner of high-end guitar store World Guitars. "And these days it's very expensive having something refretted – to find someone to do it properly, that is." This is especially true of maple-fretboard guitars, which also need a clear topcoat sprayed on again once the fretwork is done to make good any cracks caused by removing worn frets. "A refret like that can add 500 quid to the price of your secondhand purchase," Julian says.

4 ...BUT DON'T BE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT REFRETS AND RESETS

"When I first got involved in vintage-guitar dealing about 15 years ago," says long-time *Guitarist* contributor Rod Brakes, "it seemed that popular opinion was changing regarding vintage acoustics with reset necks. Whereas some people would turn their noses up at the very notion that a guitar had been made more playable by a skilled luthier, others wouldn't pull the trigger if it *hadn't* been worked on.

"It was quite polarised, though I would say opinion has now swung more towards the latter. After all, most people want to enjoy the guitars they buy. Refretted vintage guitars, too, are increasingly becoming more accepted, and as long as the job's been done well, a refret isn't likely to knock a big percentage off an instrument's value. It makes all the difference to playability."

Using a reputable guitar auctioneer is a safe way to buy and can make the whole process of selling a guitar much easier

5 TRADITIONAL AUCTIONS CAN OFFER SECURITY

"Obviously we are a specialist in the area," says Luke Hobbs of bricks-and-mortar guitar auctioneers Gardiner Houlgate. "The advantage of coming to us to buy guitars is that we're acting as a middleman, which makes the mechanics of selling guitars easier, but we are also vetting [authenticating] things, so it's quite a safe way to buy. If you're buying from a private seller, you might not always have 100 per cent confidence in the person you're buying from and even many online marketplaces can suffer from fraudulent listings."

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



6

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

6 DON'T BE TOO SENTIMENTAL

Mirador's Chris Turpin says that while some guitars are genuine lifelong keepers, it's healthy to let stuff go. "You can't put a value on early guitars that have really done a lot with you, that you used on shows that were milestones in your own career, or creative explorations, or family life... those are a big deal.

"Don't get rid of those ones. But don't be overly attached to every single thing that you've bought just because it was a necessary stepping stone – be mercenary in getting rid of three guitars, five guitars, to get one incredible piece. Do it, and I promise you, by the time you sell each of those guitars, if it sat in a dusty corner not being used, you'll probably be quite happy that it's gone."

7 HAGGLING IS RARE THESE DAYS

Julian White of high-end guitar retailer World Guitars, says, "I get offered a lot of part-exchange. Some people are sensible and realistic and realise I've got to resell [the part-exchanged guitar] and pay card charges and make a couple of quid on it. But some people don't realise that at all, and they'll say 'Well I paid two-and-a-half grand for it, so I want to get close to that back', which you have to say 'no' to. Likewise, with haggling it's fine to ask but I wouldn't automatically expect it. After all, you don't go to the supermarket, put all your shopping through the till and then say to the cashier, 'Oh £200, that's quite a lot. How would you feel about £150?'"

8 CONSIDER BAD REFINS CAREFULLY...

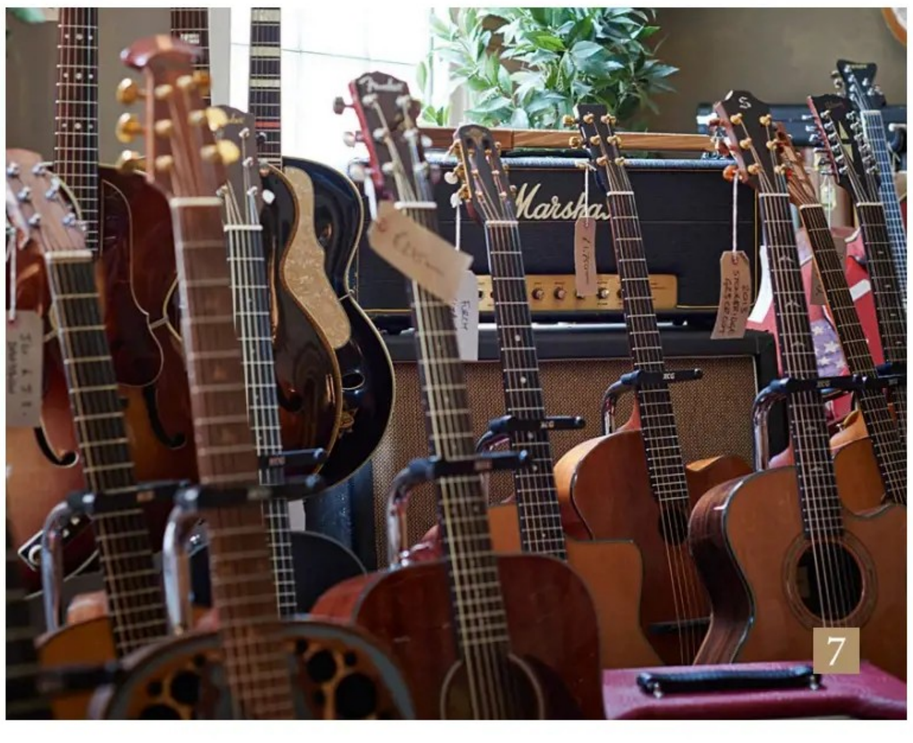
"I think bad refins can be hard to deal with," says guitarist and producer Chris Turpin of Mirador. "I know a lot of people will buy bad refins [on otherwise decent guitars] to get them refinished, but it's a lot of investment in time and effort to decide how much you're gonna like the guitar at the end. So one thing I always look out for is how a refin *feels*, because there's something in the finish of those old guitars, with them being so thin that can be quite dramatic in how it affects the tone."

6. Chris Turpin advises against becoming too attached to every single guitar you have acquired. You may need to sell some, he says, to get one incredible piece that you really desire

7. Haggling over the price may well get you nowhere but don't be afraid to ask. Just remember that guitar retailers have to build in a profit margin for each sale

9 ...BUT DON'T DISMISS GOOD ONES

"It used to be that refinished vintage guitars were worth half as much as their original-finish counterparts," says former vintage guitar trader Rod Brakes, "though that's changed in recent years. What's more, they've tended to increase in value over time. Players also love refins for anxiety-free playing, as regular wear doesn't significantly affect value. If you buy such a guitar, you then have the option to refinish it again in the exact colour of your choosing – complete with ageing, if that's your preference. The same can't be said of an original vintage guitar, and professionals would likely raise their concerns about devaluing it. You might even love the refinish and decide to keep it that way."



7

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

Artist-associated instruments such as signature models can make good investments

10 DON'T OVERLOOK SIGNATURE MODELS

"One thing that's good for investment – and always has been – is artist-associated instruments," says Luke Hobbs of Gardiner Houlgate. "Not necessarily owned or autographed by artists, but things like signature models, because quite often they get discontinued or they get released in very limited runs. I was asked to do a valuation on one of the Mark Knopfler Les Pauls [the 2016 '58 replicas]. The first 50 were aged and signed, another 75 were aged but not signed and then the last 75 they made were VOS – something like that. Anyway, someone contacted us with one of the first aged-and-signed run and that was a guitar that originally sold for around £10k. But they're changing hands for between £30,000 and £40,000 now."

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

11 QUALITY NEVER GOES OUT OF STYLE

As many seasoned traders have observed in the past, the secret to selling is buying. Which is to say a secondhand high-spec instrument by a major maker, when in good condition, is one of life's more solid bets – both as an instrument to enjoy and as something that will hold value and be straightforward to resell.

"A secondhand Core-line PRS, for £2,500, is a lot of guitar for the money," says Julian White of high-end retailer World Guitars. "You could buy one of those £2,500 things [quasi-boutique new guitars by less-established makers] that's only ever going to be worth £1,500 secondhand. But I think your money's much better off buying a secondhand, better-quality guitar in the first place."

12 WHAT A GOOD GUITAR SHOP SHOULD DO FOR YOU

Julian White of World Guitars, says: "Almost every new guitar needs a setup because they are set up [to compromise settings] to ship to a range of different countries in different climates and need to be playable out of the box – if it goes to a cold country, the action will drop, if it goes to a hot country, the action will get higher. A good shop looks at every guitar they have in stock, sets them up, restrings them and makes sure they work as they should. A good shop should restring the guitars they put on sale, whether new or used, setting them up for you to perfection."

13 TRY SELLING ON CONSIGNMENT

Rod Brakes, former owner of Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, says selling guitars on consignment – where a guitar shop presents your guitar for sale and takes a reasonable cut of the proceeds – can be a 'goldilocks' solution for sellers. "The benefits of buying and selling vintage guitars on consignment via reputable dealers are often underappreciated," says Rod. "Buyers invest in instruments from trustworthy experts because they've been accurately assessed, which means confidence and peace of mind. You needn't worry about conducting an appraisal, researching specs, establishing value, taking photographs, writing descriptions, creating listings, handling inquiries, wrestling with packaging, paying shipping and insurance, dealing with after-sales, or any other time-consuming responsibilities. Dealers typically charge around 10–20% for consignment, but then they regularly achieve prices 10–20% higher than private sales. All you need to do is deliver the instrument, sign the agreement, and wait for a phone call."



PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

11. If you are planning to buy a secondhand guitar then it makes sense to aim for one of the better-quality models such as a Core-line PRS that will hold its value

14 TRY THE JERRY DONAHUE TAP TEST

Many different methods have been proposed to test how resonant a guitar you intend to buy is, but this one from Jerry Donahue – as told by *Guitarist* restoration expert Huw Price – brings a little musicality to proceedings, especially if you have an ear for intervals. "Jerry used to suggest tapping the body – specifically on Telecasters and Stratocasters – and try to establish what the note is [even a knock on wood has a pitch]. And then tap the neck and try to establish what the note of that is, then see if they're in unison or in harmony. If they're a third apart or a fifth apart, you're probably going to have a guitar that will resonate nicely in music in a way that's pleasing," says Huw.



PHOTO BY JEOBY SESSIONS

12. A good retailer looks carefully at every guitar they have in stock and will set them up, restring them and ensure they perform as well as they possibly can

15 DON'T FORGET THE BUYER'S PREMIUM

At live auctions nearly all auction houses charge a 'buyer's premium' – a percentage of the hammer price added to the final price paid by the buyer. "Experienced auction buyers come with a spreadsheet of what a hammer price will add up to with the buyer's premium added on top," says Luke Hobbs of auction house Gardiner Houlgate. "So they'll know that a £100 winning bid with the premium added will total £126.40, including VAT. And that [sliding scale of buyer's premium additions] carries on through the entire range of increments, right up to tens of thousands of pounds. Having a spreadsheet with it all set out means they don't get carried away. The buyer's premium can catch people out – for example, if you buy a guitar for £5,000 you're looking at at least another grand on top."

Anyone buying from live auctions should remember to take into account the buyer's premium and VAT

PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

1957 LES PAUL SPECIAL

This gorgeous and striking late-50s Special turned out to have freakishly good pickups in it, says Stu Robson

Stu Robson, a lifelong devotee of trading up to ever-better guitars and the founder of Sunbear Pickups, recently acquired – with the financial blessing of his nearest and dearest and some judicious trades – a genuine Golden Era Gibson. So what does it feel like to reach such a milestone as a player/owner and how did he get there?

"I've spent my whole life buying and selling guitars and selling stuff for a little bit extra and being able to, therefore use that to get something else," Stu reflects. "And I did that loads as a teenager and into my very early 20s, before Jeff Pumfrett [the late owner of World Guitars] left Machinehead in Hitchin. I used to go between Hitchin and Coda Music, and I would buy things from one place, do things up, then trade them in elsewhere. And they all knew about it [laughs].

The first things I used to buy and sell were Parker Flys and Ibanez JEMs. At the time, they were fantastic guitars but the real drive towards them had passed and was in a lull. So I could get a beaten-up late-80s, early-90s JEM the previous owner had set up badly because they didn't know what they were doing with a Floyd Rose.

Or there'd be a Parker Fly with a fret that'd fallen off of it. I was buying guitars like that for £400 to £600 and I would tart them up a bit and sell them online, and they would go to different countries. Japan in particular, loved buying JEMs at the time.

1. Years of judicious trading with guitars whose glory had faded a little – and were in need of a little love and attention – allowed Stu to strike vintage gold with this '57 Special

2. It may bear a few battle scars, but the guitar is in remarkable condition for its age

"The P-90s in it are ridiculously good. Yeah, I'm still trying to work out quite why they're as good as they are, if I'm honest"

3. A set of other-worldly P-90s, which Stu puts down to just the luck of the draw, puts this guitar on a whole different level

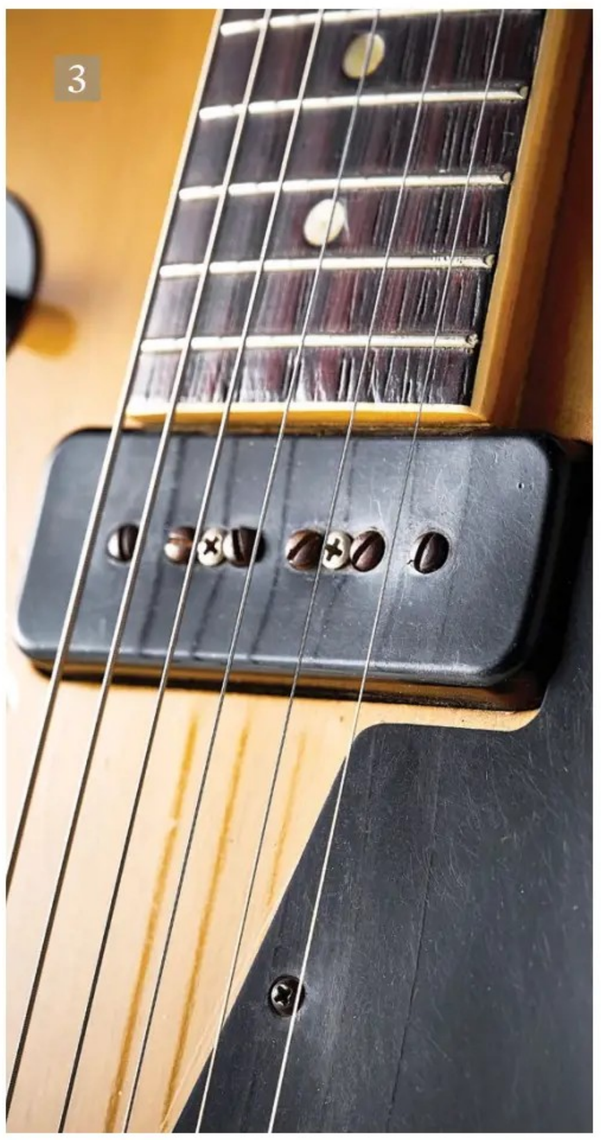
"So I used to trade myself up [in terms of quality of guitars] bit by bit over time. But with this particular one, obviously going up to a guitar of this sort of value, has involved years of trading up. I have a Masterbuilt Fender Duo Sonic, which is going towards paying for this plus a Masterbuilt Strat as well as some other smaller bits and that kind of stuff. So I think it's worth getting some nice guitars and then using those nice guitars to buy a more rarefied vintage guitar.

"This guitar is a 1957 Gibson Les Paul Special. It's all original. It's previously had a Bigsby and a set of Grovers on it. They're the only value-detractors on the guitar. Otherwise, it's all stock – the only thing on it that's an upgrade is a St Helens-compensated, replica wraparound bridge, so that's a modern quality-of-life improvement.

Apart from that, as I say, it kind of is what it is. I'd have bought it even if it had had an averagely good set of pickups in it. But, as it happens, its particular set of P-90s in it are ridiculously good. Yeah, I'm still trying to work out quite why they're as good as they are, if I'm honest with you. They're just ridiculous, which is just luck. You know, I've got a set of 1956 P-90s from an old Goldtop in another guitar here, which are also a great set. But you go backwards and forwards between the two and this '57 just slays it instantly." G







This ‘57 Les Paul Special is very nearly all original, apart from a retro-fitted compensated wraparound bridge. It had also been fitted with a Bigsby at one point in its life, and once bore a set of Grover tuners





PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

16. It's worth remembering that the scarcer your chosen guitar is then the less likely your chances will be of getting your hands on one

16 SCARCITY CHANGES YOUR OPTIONS

"If you're shopping for a brand-new PRS Custom 24 that's available in 10 different shops, you might go and find the shop where it's the cheapest," says Julian White of high-end retailer World Guitars. "But it's no good coming and looking at a Luxxtone, for example, where there's only two in the country, and be like, 'Oh, well, this is the one I want', but then walk away because you can't get anything knocked off the asking price. Are you really going to pass it up for the sake of a £150 haggle? Because you're not going to find one anywhere else, you know?"

17 BOUTIQUE QUALITY VERSUS BIG BRANDS

"Big brand names can be safer [in terms of holding their value] for obvious reasons," says Luke Hobbs of Gardiner Houlgate. "Gibson, Fender and Martin would be the main three. But then, on the other hand, if you want a fantastic guitar with the potential of buying it at a very good price point, you could go down the boutique builder route.

"We get lots of boutique builder guitars in the auction that may ask four or five thousand pounds on a commission basis, if you're getting one made by them. But then in the auction, you could be looking at somewhere between £2,000 and £3,000 for [that type of] instrument, so you're getting a lot of guitar for the money."

'BURST CASE SCENARIO

Gibson Les Paul Standard sunburst reissues are perennial favourites for players and collectors alike. But how do you find a good one for a great price? We ask Julian White of high-end guitar shop World Guitars for his insider tips

18 If you're looking to buy a used 'Burst reissue, is there a 'sweet spot' year in terms of features, price and tone, based on what you've had in over the years?

"Look for ones built from 2013 onwards," says Julian. "That was the big changing point for R8s and R9s. Gibson changed a lot of things and they became much, much better guitars, with new pickups – it was the start of the Custombuckers.

"They completely rejigged everything, really, and started doing rolled edges on the fingerboards. It was a big change from the previous years. And that's when all the excitement started – we sold a lot of those guitars in those first couple of years, 2013 and 2014."

19 Did that hot streak continue past 2014?

"Come 2015 they stopped doing normal R8s and R9s because that was the year that True Historic came out. So they downgraded the normal ones with a short-tenon [neck joint] but these only lasted a year because they were essentially downgraded. But after 2015, when they finished doing the True Historics, they went back to normal R9s, so that's just something to be aware of if you want a long-tenon neck joint example."

20 And what about 'Burst reissues from just before the sweet-spot year of 2013?

"So people were a bit funny about the 2012 model, because they used two-ply finger boards – it didn't make any [functional] difference at all but sometimes you do see a two-ply fingerboards on the 'Burst reissues from that year. The rosewood is two pieces laminated together."

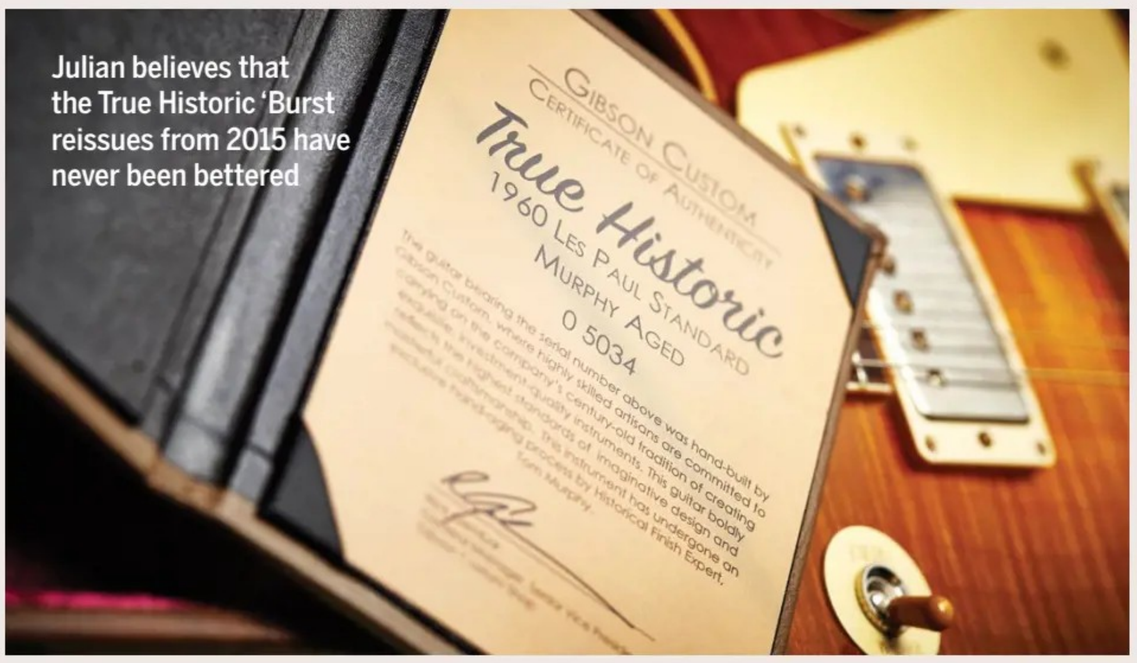
21 What about the True Historic models that were the flagship reissues in 2015?

"The True Historic models are the most accurate and the best [that Gibson have made], in my opinion. We sold a lot of them, and we saw a lot of them, and they were all brilliant. And, still to this day they haven't topped that. Double-carved necks, double-carved tops, thinner, hand-sanded finish, thinner headstock veneer... they had slightly different fret wire, which was vintage-correct. To my mind, they've never been bettered."

22 Are there any other year-specific features to look out for on 'Burst reissues?

"In 2017 they started using all the True Historic [vintage-correct] plastics on everything, which was nice, but they didn't do all of the other True Historic things. The rolled fingerboard edges on the 2017 guitars were nice – we sold a lot of those instruments.

"Going back to 2016 specs, 'R' serial numbers were still being produced then. So it would say R9 [if it was a '59 reissue] but the second number after the 9 would denote the year of manufacture. So R9 (or 8 if it was an R8) and then the second number, which followed that, was the year in that decade the guitar was built in."



Julian believes that the True Historic 'Burst reissues from 2015 have never been bettered

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

23 LOSING YOUR HEAD WILL COST YOU

"You really need to do your research, know exactly what you're buying and set your limit accordingly," says Luke Hobbs of Gardiner Houlgate. "Do market research [on what a guitar is likely to be worth] before you go for it. When we had our first few auctions during lockdown, people were getting really carried away – probably because they were bored – and in some cases were paying more in the auction for guitars than they could buy them at retail and then paying postage on top. And it was just crazy. So it's about preparation really."

24 WIDER EVENTS CAN AFFECT VALUE

"The Black Strat is a prime example," says guitar auctioneer Luke Hobbs."You've got the [Custom Shop] Relic and the NOS version. And when Gilmour's original Black Strat sold the first time for $3.9m in 2019 it coincided with when Fender stopped making the replica model and prices rocketed. We actually have a David Gilmour Signature Stratocaster Relic coming up in the next auction, so I was price-checking it and again, the market has shifted upwards, because suddenly the original is the most valuable guitar that has ever sold at auction [following the recent Jim Irsay sale, where the Black Strat sold again for a record $14.5m]. And that does have an effect on the market."

25 CONDITION COUNTS FOR A LOT

"From a good investment point of view," says guitar auctioneer Luke Hobbs, "condition is everything. The best condition pieces – whether it's a vintage or a rare modern piece by one of the big names – the better the condition, the easier it is to sell on. And then what you class as collector's grade or museum-grade pieces will always fetch a premium. The best always does."

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

25. Condition is absolutely key for both vintage and modern instruments when it comes to fetching a premium and selling them on

1961 GIBSON LES PAUL / SG

Chris Turpin of Mirador says friendly rivalry with Jake Kiszka secured him this stunning double-cut...

"So we call this 'The One That Got Away'. And when me and Jake [Kiszka of Greta Van Fleet] were working on the Mirador album, we spent a day hitting up a few guitar shops, including Vintage 'n' Rare in the morning and ATB later, where they had a killer little 1x12 Park combo. It was like a 50-watt, with reverb, and it was sitting in some dusty corner and I was like, 'We should plug that in'. And so we did and it sounded incredible.

"So I was talking to [the ATB staff] and said, 'Okay, I think I'm gonna do this. I just need to have a think about what will have to be sold to justify it'. But Jake just said, 'Ah, no, it's okay. I'll bring it into the family fold – I'll buy it right on the spot'. After that, we went to Vintage 'n' Rare, and it was right at the end of the day and we're hanging out upstairs, and they had this '61 Les Paul / SG. Jake's played countless numbers of them, and owns quite a few. So every time he sees one, he'll play it. And he plugged this one [in] and we both kind of just shut up and went, 'This is an amazing guitar.' Just sounded extraordinary, right off the bat. Jake was lost in it for 10 minutes.

"So I picked it up and realised this thing's really alive. You can tell it had been owned by a player – it'd been worn down and it had a stock tailpiece at some point... someone had been playing this thing. No idea who it was or where it came from, if anyone out there knows... So we left buzzing about it and Jack was like, 'I'm gonna put an offer in. I could give it a month [to consider it] then come in and make an offer. So the next day, it was in the back of my mind. It's player grade, so I thought, 'If I trade this, this, this and this, I could probably get close.'

So I spoke to Steve Hove [then manager of Vintage 'n' Rare], who's now at ATB, he said he would be willing to do it. So I went in and got it from underneath Jake and he was genuinely quite pissed off [laughs].

"So yes, we now joke that it's 'The One That Got Away'. It's got real Patent Applied For pickups and it's a little earlier than Jake's. We have put them side by side. Jake thinks it sounds like his before he trashed it..." G

1. This model was initially branded as 'Les Paul' on the truss rod cover before the name was dropped in late 1963

2. Chris's deal was sweetened by the fact that this player grade SG/Les Paul has original Patent Applied For pickups

3. A side by side comparison with bandmate Jake Kiszka's own SG revealed it to be an absolute stunner

"He plugged this one in and we both kind of just shut up and went, 'This is an amazing guitar'. [It] just sounded extraordinary"







The 1961 Gibson Les Paul / SG marked a radical design shift, with a sleek, double-cutaway mahogany body, bevelled edges, and a thin and fast-playing neck profile





PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

26 DOER-UPPERS HAVE THEIR LIMITS

"Be realistic about what you can upgrade and how much better you can actually make a guitar," says guitar restorer Huw Price. "I think that's key, because a lot of people waste money on upgrades that aren't really ever going to transform a guitar. If it's not good enough to start with, then it's not good enough.

"Take pickups, for example. They're like microphones. You can have the most fabulous vintage valve Neumann or AKG mic but if you stick it in front of a [terrible] acoustic, all you'll end up with is a really great, pristine recording of a really bad-sounding guitar! Pickups are the same – they work with the information they're able to pick up. If it's not inherent to the guitar, even the greatest set of pickups isn't going to magic it out of nothing."

27 KEEP ORIGINAL PARTS

Modding guitars is popular but be sure to keep any original parts, says Cyril Nigg of online marketplace Reverb.com. "If you're modifying or your guitar is getting into more of that 'player grade' territory – if you swap out pickups or a bridge or tuners – throw the originals in the case, if you think you might want to sell the guitar in the future. I think when potential buyers are making that purchase decision, having the original parts is always helpful."

28 BEWARE THE 'SUNK COST' TRAP

Guitarist and producer Chris Turpin says occasionally it makes sense to cut your losses. "People hold on to things, because perhaps they overpaid for it or they bought it because they got a good deal, but it wasn't the thing they really wanted. So then it kind of hangs around because it's a sunk cost, so it has to stay. That can be crippling! Get rid of those [instruments], I would say, even if you make a loss on certain things – if you're not using it and it's taking up psychological or playing space, get rid of it. If selling it is a means to getting that dream guitar or closer to that piece of equipment but you have to take a slight hit on a trade, take a hit on a trade."

27. If you swap out pickups or do any kind of modifications always ensure that you keep the original parts. It will boost your chances of selling a guitar on

28. Chris Turpin suggests getting rid of any instrument you're not playing that is taking up "psychological or playing space"



PHOTO BY SIMON LEES

Introduced in 1962, the Gibson B-25 12-String was an affordable instrument. Glen Campbell used one and it appeared on the cover of his 1964 Capitol Records album *The Astounding 12-String Guitar Of Glen Campbell*



1960s GIBSON B-25 12-STRING

Mirador guitarist Chris Turpin on the 'sleeper' of his vintage collection

Guitarist and producer Chris Turpin of Ida Mae and Mirador has an enviable selection of vintage guitars to work with but one of his most frequently-used instruments proves that buying vintage can be quite affordable. "I really like Fanny's House of Music In Nashville," Chris says. "They have great stuff to play and they're very friendly – good, honest folks. I went in and they had this particular 12-string, which had clearly lived a life. It's had the back panel smashed in, and I felt it just had the energy, like it had been to a bunch of political protests or something in the 60s and someone had played Simon & Garfunkel covers on it. I got it for not very much at all, 800 bucks or something, and it became quite an important guitar. I took it over to Jake [Kiszka's] house, and he whipped out a case and he had the same one. I was like, 'Oh my god, aren't these the coolest 12-strings, or the best recording 12-strings?' and it's been on records ever since." G

29. The admin and effort of packing up and shipping a guitar can seem a daunting task for some but a willingness to ship can bolster your chances of selling gear for the optimum price

30. While navigating all the do's and don'ts of buying and selling guitars, don't forget that the most important thing is to buy something that you love and cherish

29 BE WILLING TO SHIP

"I always tell sellers not to be afraid to pack and ship a guitar," says Reverb.com's Cyril Nigg. "It's often easier than people think. And it really opens up the potential buyers that you have to make a sale. You can usually sell things faster and sell for a better price than if you're just listing something locally on, say, Gumtree or Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist to name just three.

"While highly fragile, rare or valuable guitars can be a prudent exception to this rule, on the whole, readiness to ship helps you sell gear for the best price."



PHOTO BY SIMON LEES

30 BUY SOMETHING YOU LOVE

Amid all the advice for getting bargains or investing well, never forget the most important reason for buying a particular guitar – you ought to love it, says long-time *Guitarist* contributor Rod Brakes.

"I've met collectors who admit they rarely touch certain instruments, lest they put a mark on them. And I know players whose main concern is using a vintage guitar as Leo Fender, Christian Frederick Martin, or whoever else originally intended. However, I've yet to come across a collector with a complete aversion to playing. Nor have I met a player with zero appreciation of collectibility. And therein lies the point – you can have the best of both worlds. Regardless of budget or skill, if you want to get the most out of a vintage guitar, buy something you love. On the hypothetical desert island, there are no collectors or players – just guitarists."



PHOTO BY MATT LINCOLN



Rod says he is very cautious about buying guitars before playing them but says he took a punt on the '65 Duo-Sonic II because the seller's photographs were so detailed

1965 FENDER DUO-SONIC II & 1967 FENDER MUSTANG BASS

Rod Brakes reveals how he became fixated on finding this matching vintage duo

"This pair was separated at birth," says long-time *Guitarist* contributor Rod Brakes. "I first discovered the joys of the Fender Mustang Bass – strung with flatwounds, of course – several years ago while recording a Blue Violet album. I'd been using a Japanese Precision Bass, but Middle Farm Studios' Pete Miles handed me a 1970s maple-neck, Walnut-finish Mustang Bass loaded with flats. I was instantly hooked.

"I kept an eye out for Mustang Basses and spotted one at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath: a '67 model in White. That finish is actually the same acrylic paint Fender marketed as Olympic White. An early example, I snapped it up for £3,000 about five years ago. Today, similar models fetch around £4,000, proving you don't need top-tier instruments to get on the vintage guitar investment ladder.

"The Duo-Sonic II was offered in the same White, Red, and Blue (Daphne Blue) finishes as Mustangs and Mustang Basses, and I became fixated on finding one to match my bass (why not?). I'm very cautious about buying guitars before playing them, but about 18 months ago, I stumbled across a '65 Duo-Sonic II on Reverb and took a punt because the seller's photography was so detailed. Priced reasonably at £2,400, I pulled the trigger, and it joined the family a few days later." G



Guitarist

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