Guitarist PRESENTS

HEROES of GUITAR

THE MUSIC & GUITARS OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST PLAYERS

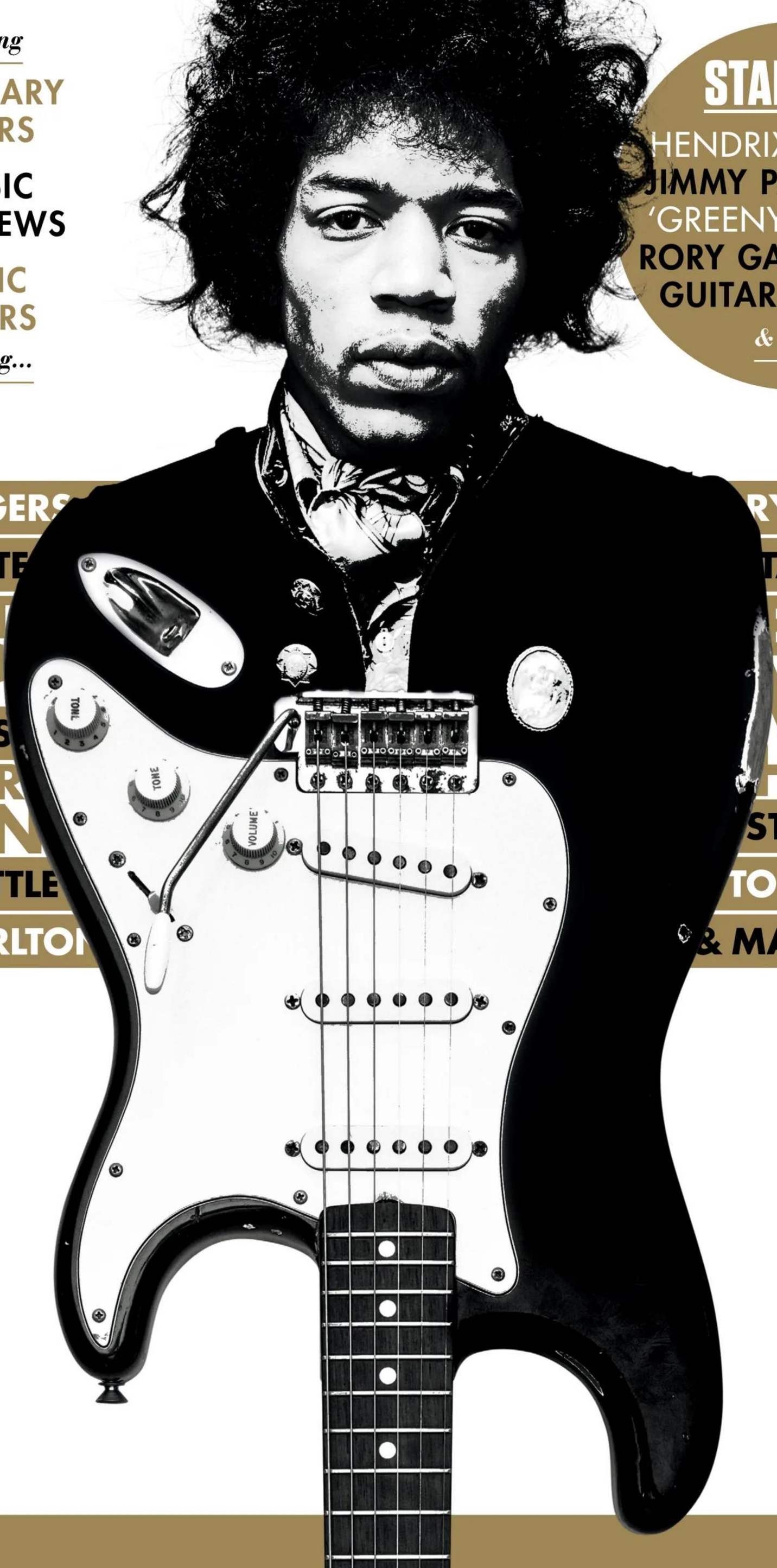
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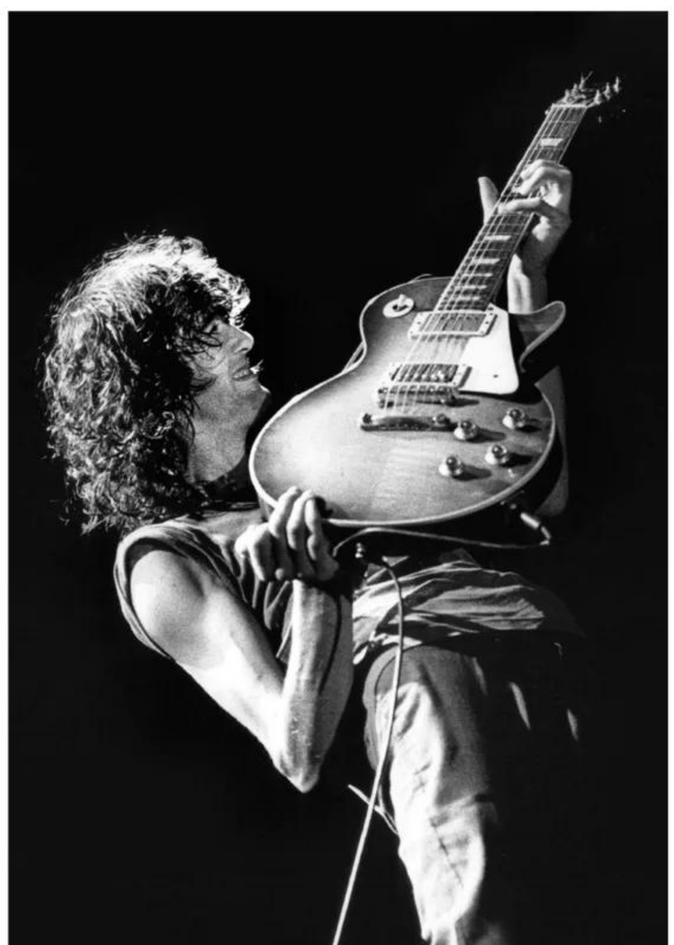
Welcome to

HEROES *of* GUITAR

THE MUSIC & GUITARS OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST PLAYERS

The term 'guitar hero' is part of the furniture of modern music, but the classic albums and spine-tingling live performances from which legends are carved were made by real musicians inspired by their own guitar heroes in their turn. Here, we explore the insights, influences and hard-won playing experience of some of the world's greatest guitarists in a series of classic interviews. We also take a close look at the instruments with which they made history, including Jimi's Strats, Peter Green's legendary '59 Les Paul, Rory Gallagher's eclectic collection of electric and folk instruments, and much more. We also look back to the true pioneers: the early 20th century guitar innovators who showed the way for all who followed, from Django Reinhardt to Sister Rosetta Tharpe. We hope this in-depth study of the roots of guitar greatness enriches and enlarges your own appreciation of guitar, as these masters of the instrument would surely wish.

ST VINCENT PHOTO COURTESY OF ERNIE BALL MUSIC MAN JIMMY PAGE PHOTO BY ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY



HEROES *of* GUITAR

THE MUSIC & GUITARS OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST PLAYERS

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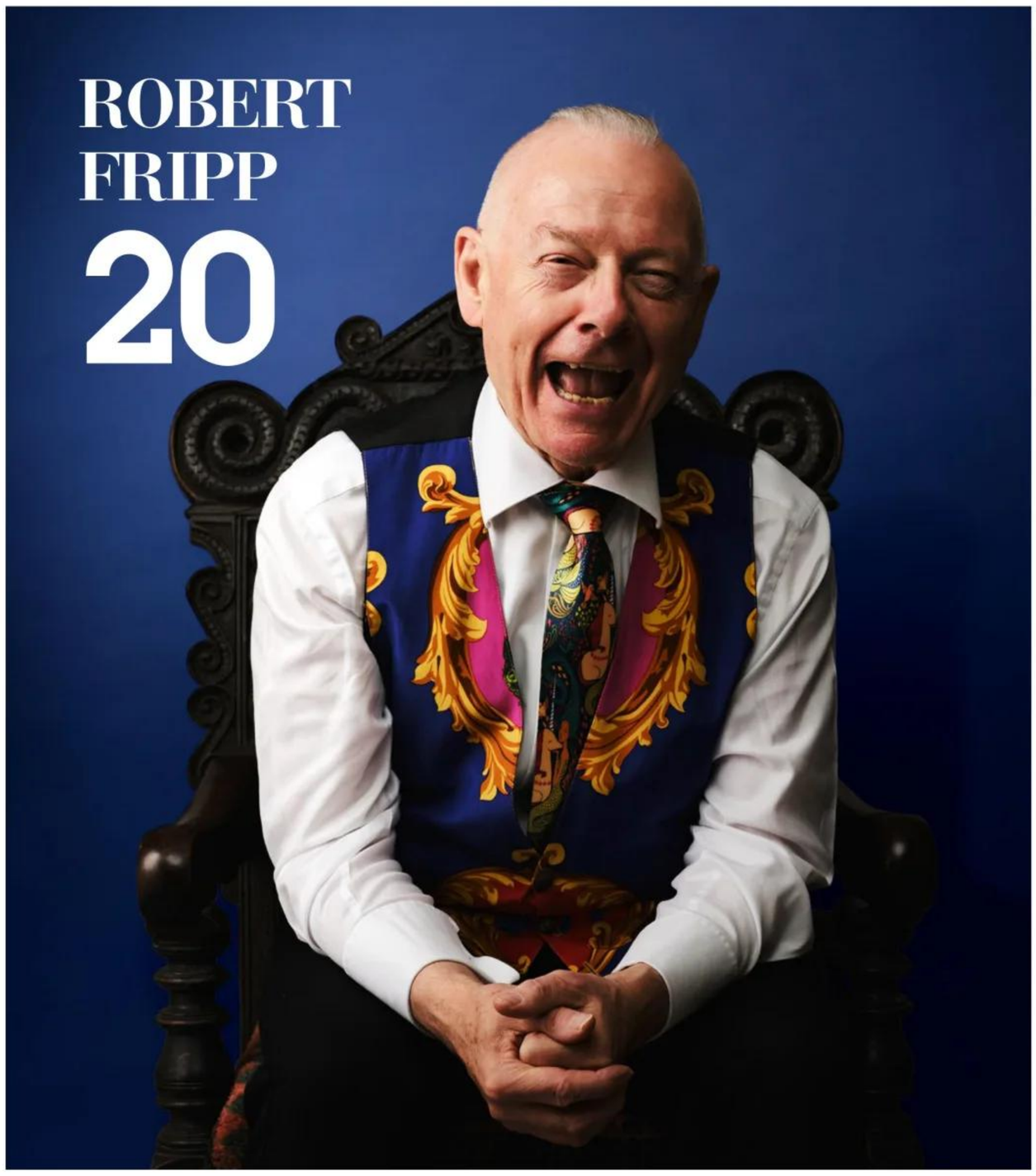
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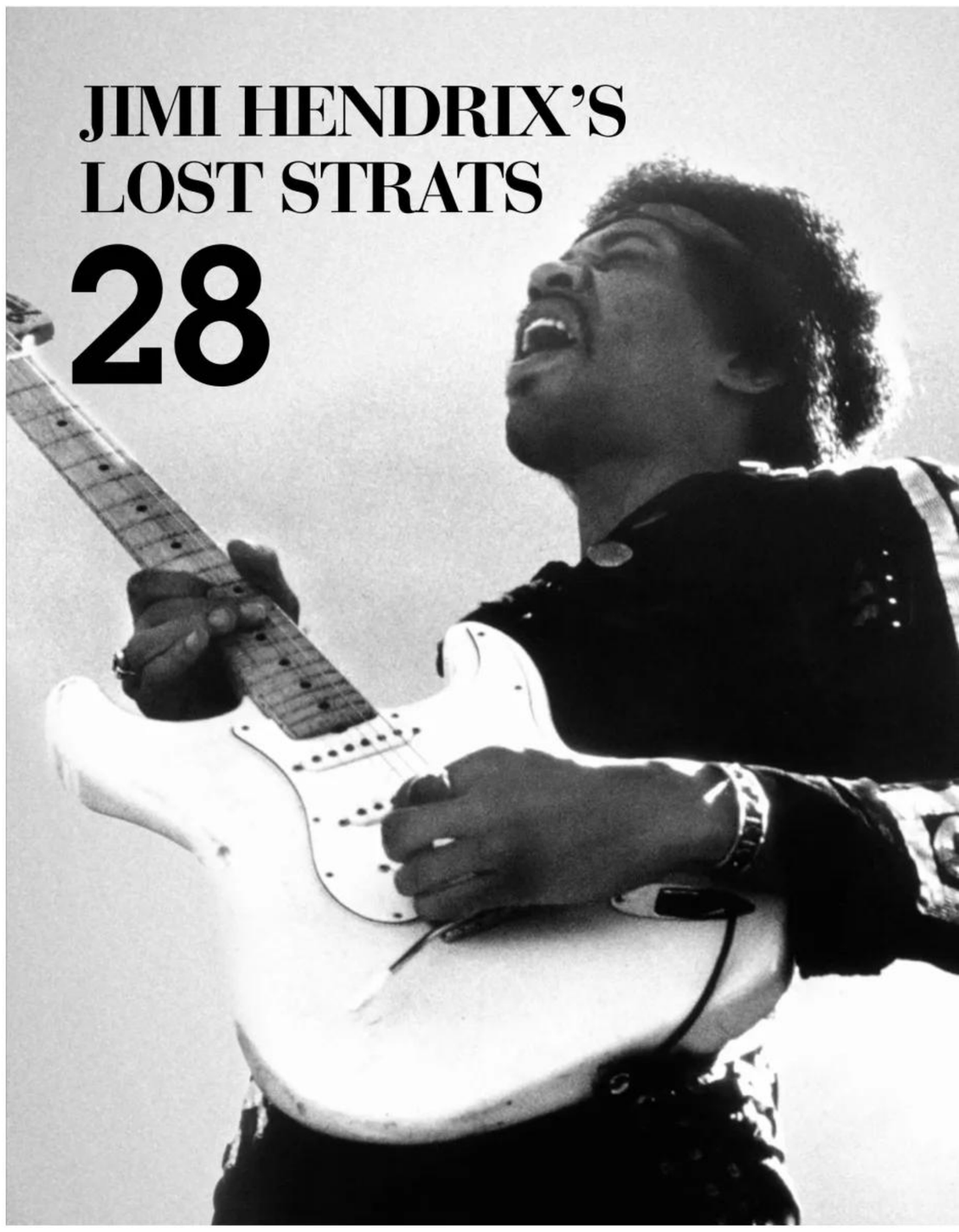


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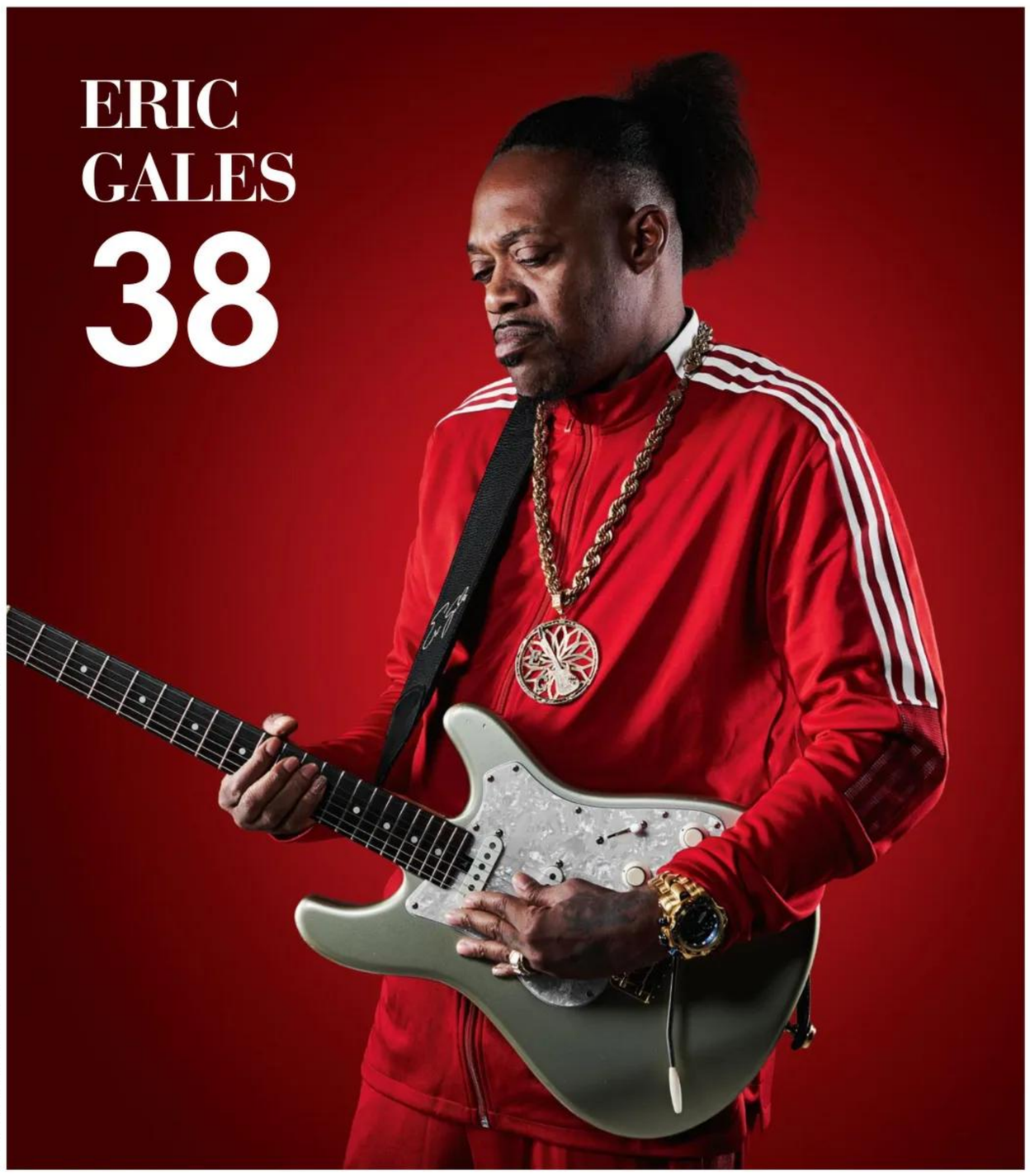


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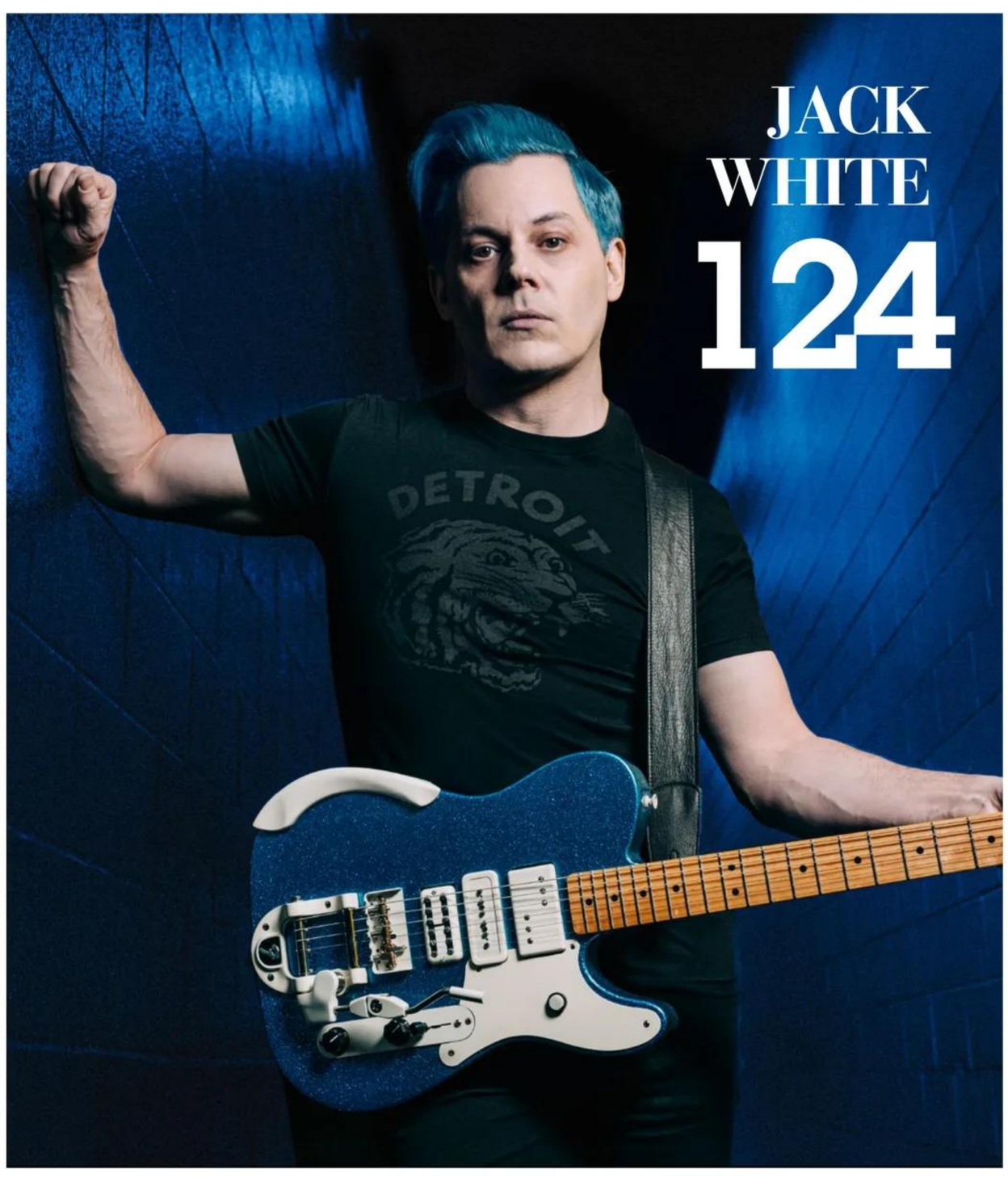


PHOTO BY JAMES KRIEGSMANN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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JENNIFER BATTEN

After 30 years on the road and still very much in demand as one of the world's busiest performers, Jennifer found some time away from her deliriously busy touring schedule to talk about life in music's fast lane – and how her flight-friendly 'lite' rig enables easy travelling and reliable tone

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis **Originally Published** January 2020

At least the air miles are stacking up. Jennifer Batten's continent-hopping career means her diary is always full: a clinic tour here, her renowned solo show there and, recently, she's even found herself in demand from Michael Jackson tribute acts, having toured with the man himself for 10 years back in the 80s and 90s.

"Yes, I've done so many different things," she tells us as we settle down in the *Guitarist* studio. "It's almost like you never know – when you wake up, there can be an email that just shows up and I go, 'Okay. Well, that's what I'm doing in March.'"

Spending so much time travelling has meant that she has refined her gear to be flight-friendly – we were impressed by the fact she knows the weight of everything she takes with her on tour. As an example she points to her Boss FV-50 volume pedal and says, "It weighs 1lb. It's plastic and if it breaks I'll just buy another one. Weight is everything when you travel."

In clinics she'll spend a while detailing to guitar hopefuls all the unexpected trauma of touring, such as "broken guitars and missing luggage, and the *not* joys of travel". All the stresses and strains of the modern-day itinerant minstrel aside, the clinics bring together Jennifer's vast and impressive experience.

"Three years ago I put together a seminar called Self-Empowerment For The Modern Musician. I wanted to base it on TED Talks, where it's 20 minutes and then move on, and that was inspired from having students that just shocked me from what they didn't know. I just wanted to hip everybody and take the tour out. I went out with a buddy of mine for six weeks in my motorhome and we just stopped in every city, did a clinic for Fishman TriplePlay one day and then did this other seminar the next day. I put a lot of effort into doing that: it's four hours and it's hard to get through everything. There's so much ridiculous content. It's crazy."

What sort of subjects do you cover in your clinics?

"One of the things that I had in there was an instructional on the app called 'Transcribe!' [by Seventh String Software]. I could start a church with that app because I'll fly over to Europe, or wherever, and play with a band I haven't played with before and, obviously, the songs are talked about in advance and files are transferred, and, invariably, we'll start running it through and I'll go, 'Uh-huh. That's not how it goes. I just wish you had this app where you could loop things and slow it down and do karaoke mode, get rid of the lead instrument and do an automatic bass drop-out so you could really hear what's going on there...' because it just drives me nutty. So I turn everybody on to the app that I can.

"Last year was the first time I did a multi-day workshop – the Schorndorf annual German workshop. Super intense. I think it's five days, you have the same





When Jennifer was on stage with Michael Jackson, she recreated Eddie Van Halen's famous *Beat It* solo, note for note

PHOTO BY PHIL DENT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

class the whole time, and you just carve and carve and carve, and answer questions, and have breaks from time to time, but it's all day long. You're exhausted by the end. And then two teachers play at night. So it's a very long day and night – and then you wake up the next day and do it again."

Do you take the clinics to guitar schools, festivals and so on?
"I've done it at schools. I do it mostly for guitar players, but sometimes it's all musicians and vocalists as well. I really have to put some thought into that, because I'm so guitar nerdy, I tend to want to talk about the guitar, so I don't want to leave other people out. I get a bird's eye view and philosophise more about music in general, and people always want to ask questions about touring, because I've been on the road forever. That was part of the four-hour seminar, travel was one of the modules that I talked about: things to expect, things to prepare for and things you can never prepare for.

"I get asked to do guitar festivals around the planet, too. This past year I was in Norway for a beautiful festival on the coast [Larvik Gitar Festival]. It was just gorgeous. Paul Gilbert was there. One thing that's so cool about the festivals is I get to turn on to the players that I'm not familiar with. I met Clive Carroll. I didn't know who he was before and I just became an instant fan."

"People say, 'Where in the world would you like to go that you haven't been?' and I just say, 'Home.' Home is a holiday for me"

What sort of questions do your students typically ask?
"I get a lot of the same questions, like, 'What was it like playing with Michael Jackson?' People always want to know about the audition. I get more questions about that than playing with Jeff Beck, which you would think, at a guitar clinic, they would be way more interested in him and details like songwriting and the nuts and bolts of it. But it tends to be pretty surface questions that I've answered a million times."

Do you miss doing massive tours with Michael Jackson and Jeff Beck?
"I do in the sense that on the Michael Jackson tour we were so spoilt. As long as our luggage was packed and outside the door, we never saw it again until the next hotel, you know? That was one of the biggest money tours in history. I didn't change my own strings for one and a half years. It was like a paid vacation, really. But after 30 years of doing it, I just want to be home. People say, 'Where in the world would you like to go that you haven't been?' and I just say, 'Home.' Home is a holiday for me.

"I'm not that excited about seeing new places in the world, because I've seen so much and I've been lucky to do that. Especially on the Jackson tour. Most tours it's so expensive to keep people out that you don't have days off. If there are any you're travelling to get to the next city. But with Michael, we only played two or three days a week, so we did have plenty of time to see every city we were in, all around the world. I mean, the first time to Europe, it was just a mind-blower. I remember we just jumped on a bus from the airport to go to the hotel and nobody told us what we would see and all of a sudden you look out of the window and see the Colosseum. I was like, 'Holy crap.' I mean, it's so mind-boggling, because, sure, we saw it in a two-inch-high photo in a history book, but it does not have the impact of being there and being able to just spend a couple of hours walking around it and thinking about the history behind it."

With all the touring that you do, how have you managed to refine your rig so that it's compact and flight-friendly?
"I will say, I've never been happier with my sound. I've been with DigiTech for 25 to 30 years, and I did a lot of clinics for them, so I ended up using their processors and their models when I was on tour because it fits in the suitcase – and I know it. I just got used to the digital sound. When I discovered the [BluGuitar] Amp1, it was such a game changer. All of a sudden I could roll off the volume when I had a distorted channel and it would clean up, and that's something I just could never do with the digital; it just sounded terrible if I rolled off the volume. So that's a whole new fun thing of discovery – and the clarity of the guitar has been magnified with that amp to where I tend to use more pickups now, just because you can hear the difference way better. The power amp is driven by the subminiature [Nanotube], too, and I can really hear that, and I just love that lush sound."

So all you have to ask for, gear wise, on a fly-gig is a cab?
"Pretty much anywhere in the world that you go you can find a Marshall 4x12, but I typically ask for a 1x12 or a 2x12, especially if I'm doing solo shows. [A 4x12 is] really not necessary and I always feel sorry for people that have to lift it. It doesn't fit in a car, you know, especially if you're with the band with other equipment. I do have two different BluGuitar speakers: one is called the Nanocab, which is super, super lightweight [10kg/22lb]. That's a 1x12 then there's a heavier cab called the Fatcab that's just ported differently and it's got more bottom-end. It depends how lazy I am when I'm home, which one I take. Rehearsals, it's going to be the Nanocab every time."

You mentioned earlier that you've been involved with a few Michael Jackson tribute bands...
"Yes. All of a sudden, in the last few years, there's been quite a few tributes that have contacted me. I think it's my third year of playing with a show called *King Of Pop* [*The Legend Continues*], which always has badass bands, really great funky drummers, and that makes all the difference because I have played one-offs with tributes that are not funky and it's just torture. It's just awful.

"It's kind of fun. I mean, I still like the music and I know it, so I don't have to spend two weeks learning it. They tend to go for the No 1 hits, like *Beat It* is always going to be in the show. *Billie Jean* will always be in everybody's show. Beyond that, some of them have personal favourites that they'll do."

Are you planning any more solo albums?
"My last CD I produced myself and even though I recorded everything at home, I still spent $10,000 on pro-mixing and mastering – and people aren't putting up the money anymore, so I'll never see that money back. So I'm just not motivated to do [solo albums].

"I do plenty of recordings for other people. They'll send me mp3s or aiffs or wavs to work on and I really enjoy doing that at home. If I'm not feeling it one day, I'll go off to the movies and come back and do them another day until I am happy with how it sounds and then send it off." G

For the latest news and info, check out
www.jenniferbatten.com

A seasoned globetrotter, Jennifer has mastered the art of travelling light

LARRY CARLTON

Larry Carlton's fretwork has been the magic ingredient of so many great albums, it's ridiculous. From his graceful, jazzy playing on Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* to the ecstatic solos on Steely Dan's *The Royal Scam*, he is the heavyweight champ of ES-335 artistry

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis **First Published** Summer 2015

The weathered '69 ES-335 sitting on its stand on an empty stage this afternoon has certainly earned its keep over the years. Its owner, Larry Carlton, has played this guitar to such dazzling effect, on so many albums, that every hairline check in the lacquer of its headstock might stand for a hit. From Michael Jackson to Joni Mitchell, Larry Carlton's playing has added grace and sophistication to career-apex albums by some of rock's greatest artists. Today, however, he's touring his own material. Carlton has recorded over 30 solo albums, which gives him the luxury of wandering at leisure through his sizeable back catalogue, changing gears between stately blues and energetic fusion as the mood takes him.

"I'm playing songs that I have been doing for the last five or six years, kind of a broad cross-section of material," he says. "Some of it is very jazz, some of it is very blues and some of it is fusion. This is my third or fourth tour with these particular musicians: Klaus Fischer on bass, Jesse Milliner on keyboards and Hardy Fischötter on drums."

During soundcheck, we get a taste of what the quartet is capable of. Together, the band combines finesse with heavyweight chops and Larry's playing against their backing is characteristically unhurried and tasteful, with easy flourishes of invention that seem to just flow out of the amp. Interesting to notice, too, that the lower fingers of his right hand are in play almost as often as the pick. "As a jazz-influenced player, my comping is done commonly with the pick and two fingers," Carlton says. "And then, for just a different tone and a different attitude, sometimes I'll just not use the pick when I'm playing my blues lines, so I can snap the string a little harder. Just gives me a different attack."

A big part of great playing, he continues, is in treating the space between licks as an opportunity, not a chasm that might swallow you up if you don't fill it with notes.

"I learned over the years that you play something and you leave a space," he says. "Well, a number of things can happen in the space. One, you can get another idea. Two, somebody else in the band might play something in that space that inspires you. Or somebody in the band plays something that is so appropriate for what you just played. Or you are going to play what you just played again except barely vary it. The space is an opportunity for something to happen."

Harmony Lessons

A particular hallmark of Carlton's playing is the easy way he marries a jazz guitarist's ear for harmony with the gutsy phrasing of blues and rock, a style he developed – perhaps surprisingly – without formal lessons.

"For me, it started by learning standards," he recalls. "I remember that when I would learn a four-bar phrase from a Joe Pass record, I'd then go back and learn the chords that were happening underneath it, not just the solo. Then I had the opportunity to analyse it in my head: why could he play those notes against that chord? I think it's important that once you learn the solo, learn the chords, then think about why that could happen."

In the past, Larry has spoken about building solos not around scales but simple clusters of notes that can be played, then re-stated and mutated up and down the fretboard. Does he still approach improvisation in that way?

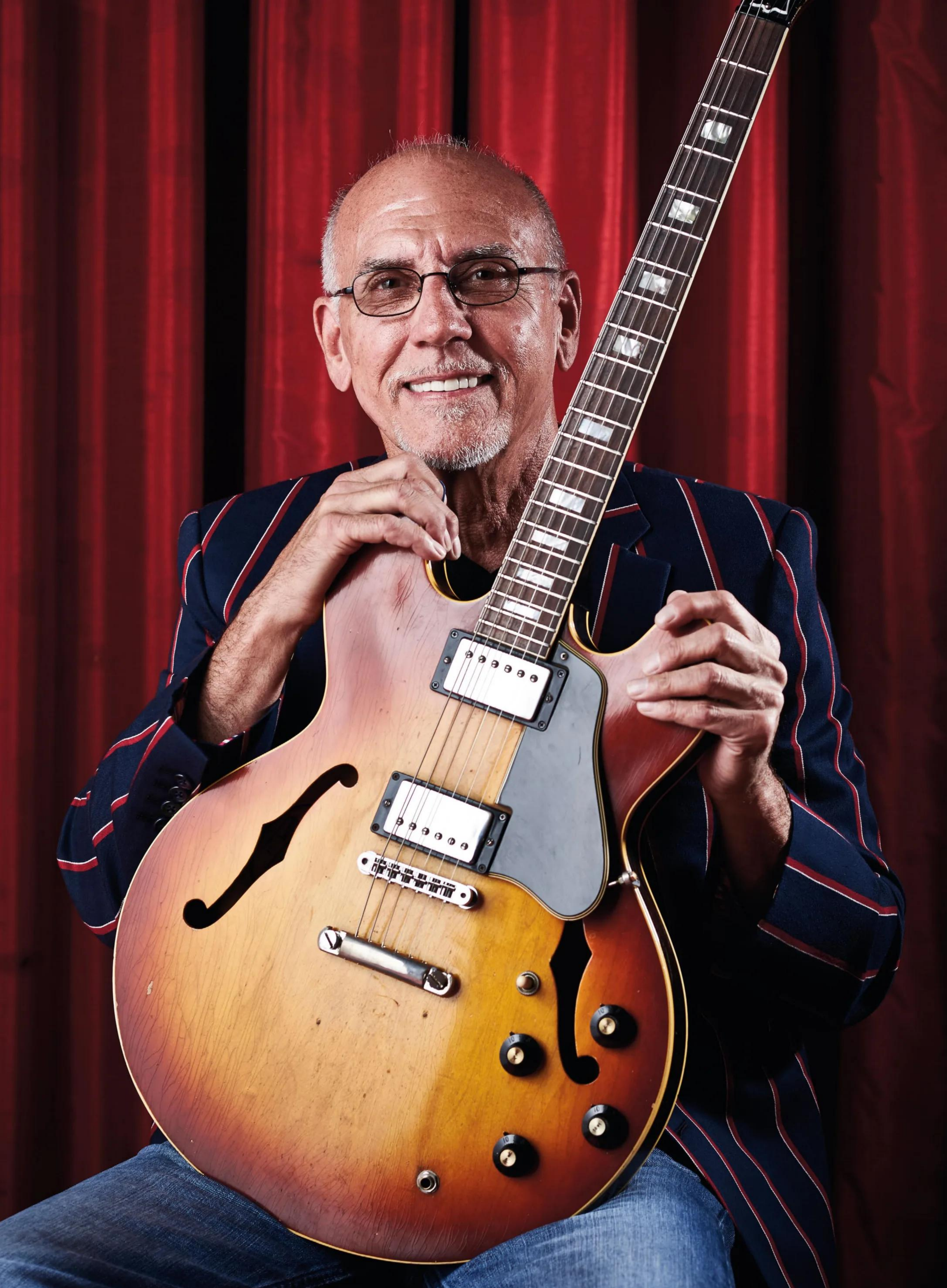
"That's the motif approach of making a small statement and then developing that statement," he says. "It always shows up in my solos. I haven't abandoned it but I am not really aware of it. To me, that is just the musicality that comes out of me. Play something and wait a second. If nothing else comes, imitate what you just did. It is a patience thing."

Guitar players, we suggest, sometimes have trouble staying cool and pacing themselves in solos. Any tips?

"Well, it's really about being a musician, not being a 'guitar player'," he observes. "For example, sax players have to take a breath. They can't just run on, sentence after sentence, like we can on a guitar. So take a breath."

The patient approach also served him well as a session player, he adds.

"There are a lot of guitar players that play along on the first run-through of a track, because they want to make sure that they are going to find something, so they can be heard. But my approach was always: don't even play on the first run, through, just listen to the song. We have time."



One of Carlton's cardinal virtues as a player is that ability to size up a track and then produce improvised guitar parts that stand the test of decades of listening, most notably on sessions with Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell. His two ecstatic solos on the former's *Kid Charlemagne*, a kind of musical *Breaking Bad* that tells the story of illicit LSD factories in 60s San Francisco, is seen by some as the high-water mark of Carlton's soloing on any record.

"I had prepared the chord charts and we had already cut the track," Carlton recalls of the session. "I don't know if it was weeks before or months before," Carlton recalls. "I really don't remember but then it was time. They had the tracks in a place that they now wanted to put the lead guitar on. I am sure there was vocal and something. I can't remember why but I decided to take my little Tweed Deluxe with my 335 and that became my lead sound with Steely Dan.

"Once we found a tone that we all agreed on, Donald Fagen and Walter Becker would say, 'Yes, that's cool,' then really it was just a case of, 'You want to try one?' And they would hit the red button and it'd maybe be, 'How you doing?' and I'd say, 'Yes, let's try it again.' Then all of a sudden some magic starts happening. Very patient, there were no suggestions of licks or anything like that."

The song's first solo is a masterpiece of coolly poised improvisation. By contrast, the outro solo is almost recklessly exuberant, with the 335 singing all the way to the fade. Unsurprisingly, the solos were waxed on separate takes.

"I am pretty sure that I made the solo section in two parts," Carlton recalls. "It seemed like I was flying along pretty good and then something happened and we stop and he says, 'Pick it up right there,' I continued on and finished the solo and played through the ending maybe, but there are vocals that come in from there."

On other standout sessions from *The Royal Scam*, however, a little discussion with Donald Fagen and Walter Becker helped get round awkward spots, notably on *Don't Take Me Alive*, a hard-boiled siege thriller in the form of song, which starts with a searing solo from Larry Carlton. Launching into full flight right on the first beat wasn't working out right, Carlton remembers, and it was Donald Fagen who suggested the jagged, drawn-out chord that precedes the song.

"There was no chord in front of the beginning of the song, nothing. Just 'wham'. I don't know what else we tried, but Donald was the one who finally just said, 'Why don't we just put a big chord in front of it?' It was that simple. I went out into the room where my amp was and stood in front of it and tweaked until there was [the right tone] and then I did four or five or six of those chords to where everything rang. They adjusted the limiter and everything so it really sat like they wanted it to. But Donald was right."

Carlton's playing with Joni Mitchell, on mid-70s classics such as *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira*, took place against the more mysterious backdrop of Mitchell's enigmatic open tunings. He recalls that the same approach applied.

"For her to use those tunings... was like playing with a jazz player who's using different voicings. I still hear what the chord is – even though it sounds unique and beautiful the way she tuned her guitar. But, no, it was not a special challenge. She would just have me play. And I remember that on the album *Hejira* that had *Strange Boy* on it – that album with me and Jaco [Pastorius] – she already had her guitars recorded and at least a rough vocal. And I was in the studio by myself and she said 'Just play, Larry.' And so I would play three, four, five approaches and then she later would choose the goodies that she liked. So it was very free."



According to Larry, the Tanabe Zenkudo Overdrive on his touring 'board is a great match-up for a 335

> *"On 'Don't Take Me Alive', Donald was the one who finally just said, 'Why don't we just put a big chord in front of it?' It was that simple"*

Backing BB King

Larry Carlton on playing with the late, great King of the blues

"I met BB King in 1974 in Zaire, Africa [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo]. I was there with The Crusaders and BB had his band there," Larry recalls. "James Brown was there, Bill Withers. It was the Foreman/Ali fight. I believe that was the first time and I played rhythm guitar in his set, which was a thrill. He needed a rhythm guitar and I was there. Later, in '84, I was doing the album that ended up being *Friends*. I got a hold of BB and he came to my house and came downstairs to 'Room 335' and it was Joe Sample, Jeff Porcaro and Abraham Laboriel. We had a chance to spend the afternoon together and play the blues. I saw him a couple of more times after that... he was just so giving. He always had time to talk to a guitar player. He was a great example to all of us of how to be a gentleman and still be in the music business. He is going to be missed."





"There is going to be a season, I think, in every guitarist's progress where it is just fun to play fast because you can. But it shouldn't be, in my opinion, the end result"

Larry on his spare Blues Deluxe: "I played it on the first song that night and realised it wasn't going to have the tone that I wanted so I plugged back into my Bludotone [pictured]"

Tone On Tour

The tone of many of Carlton's classic 70s cuts may have leapt from the low-wattage, cathode-biased heart of a 50s Tweed Deluxe, but his stage rig for the current tour is a far more gutsy setup, built around a Bludotone Bludo-Drive 100/50 head and closed-back cab with a single EVM12L 12-inch speaker.

"I have a Bludotone that I leave in London and for European tours I also bring a small pedalboard with a reverb, a delay, a volume pedal and a wah-wah [see picture]. There are a few countries, though, where I can't take my amplifier because the airplanes are too small so I get stuck with a hired backline. I am not a fan of Twin Reverbs for my playing, but I can usually have a nice enjoyable evening with a Fender Blues Deluxe with reverb as backline, though. It lets me respond somewhat as I like to."

Larry Carlton is one of those players whose tone is always at a simmering half-crunch, right on the cusp of a full-throated wail. He says he dials in the preamp of the Bludo-Drive carefully to keep himself in the right zone to suit the 335.

"The front end is really important to me. I have found with both my Dumble and with the Bludotone – and by the way, my Bludotone is an exact clone of my Dumble – my preamp volume is usually about four, then my tone controls and midrange are down a little bit. That amp sounds best set at four going in and four coming out. But it is too loud for me now: I want Brandon Montgomery who makes the amps to get it so I am happy with it on [a master volume of] two. Because the amp wants to breathe at four but it doesn't want to breathe quite as much at two. But four is just getting too loud for me!"

Another key element of Carlton's tone is having the perceived level remain the same when switching between his clean and lead tones, and his amps are customised to make this easier to achieve. "I don't like the level to change. That was an adjustment with Dumble and then with Brandon for the Bludotone. They have a little green button that kicks in the preamp. Originally, when you kicked that in there was like a two or three dB boost. But I don't want to be louder, I like where I am at right now, but I want that different tone. So that has been adjusted for me. The volume is perceived to be the same but the tone has been slightly altered, a little more aggressive."

Also on hand for an additional layer of gain, or an alternative to the overdrive voicing of hired backline, is the Tanabe Zenkudo Overdrive pedal on his touring 'board. "It seems to work really good with a 335. I tried the Zen Drive but for my ear, it was totally inappropriate playing the 335 through it. I seem to always be looking for the same tone – that sweet, singing distortion that's not so driven that it's not musical," he concludes.

335, Alive And Well

One thing that hasn't changed a lot, of course, is the hard-toured '69 ES-335 that Larry has used on most of his recordings. As it hasn't broken, Larry hasn't fixed it – beyond a switch to a different bridge and Schaller machineheads.

"Obviously, over the last 35 years or something it's had a number of fret jobs or level and dress," Carlton says. "It came with normal Gibson frets and over the years, I've gone through the process of trying Dunlop frets that were very big and very high but now I've switched back to whatever the normal Gibson fretwire is for a 335. Other than that, it has that graphite nut that we put on back in the 80s and it originally came with the trapeze tailpiece. But I don't know that I've ever changed the pickups."

As showtime draws near, we wind things up talking about the high standard of technical ability among players coming up not through gig venues but on YouTube and elsewhere. What does Carlton – whose playing blends feel with technical elan beautifully – think about the outrageous displays of technique that even a casual browse of the internet can yield? "I think it should just be part of the process but not the end result," he reflects. "As a young musician, and you could be 35 years old and only playing the guitar 15 years... to me, you are still a young musician. There is going to be a season, I think, in every guitarist's progress where it is just fun to play fast because you can. But it shouldn't be, in my opinion, the end result."

Better to have it and not need it?

"It was fun," he concedes, with a grin. "To get to where you could play really fast. It was fun." G

For the latest information and news of upcoming tour dates, see Larry Carlton's website **www.larrycarlton.com**

Django Reinhardt

Few guitarists in the history of the instrument have inspired such devotion as the Belgian-born Gypsy genius Django Reinhardt. Nearly 70 years after his death, his infectious and, at times, outrageous guitar playing continues to delight, enthral and perplex generations of guitarists who fall under his spell

Words Denny Ilett

If you've figured out how Django Reinhardt played with such breathtaking dexterity and spirit then do let us know. Because exactly how he managed, with a badly injured left hand, to play such mind-boggling lead lines is still the subject of debate. More thrilling even than Django's technique, though, was his spirit of invention. This is the story of how he managed to face prejudice, injury, and even Nazi persecution to emerge as one of the most awe-inspiring guitarists of all time.

A Genius Is Born

Django was born into the Manouche tribe of Romanies on 23 January 1910 in the town of Liberchies in Belgium. Reinhardt's parents were jacks-of-all-trades who did whatever was necessary to bring a few *centimes* into the family home – a horse-drawn caravan. Providing entertainment was what they most prided themselves for, however. Jean-Eugene Weiss, Django's father, had the caravan converted so that it could serve as a makeshift theatre where he and Django's mother, Laurence 'Négros' Reinhardt, and various cousins and friends would stage performances for the locals.

Young Reinhardt grew up surrounded by music and was picking out melodies on guitar, banjo and violin from the age of four, studiously copying the technique of his elders. By the age of just 13 years old, he was living with his family (minus Jean-Eugene who had, by now, left them) in a notorious area of Paris called La Zone – which the Gypsies and other so-called 'outcasts' called home – and was already working professionally in the *bals musette*. These were rough nightclubs where the city's underworld characters met, danced, fought and courted. The musical backdrop was a mix of folk melodies, waltzes and light classical pieces arranged for guitar, banjo and violin. Django, playing a six-string banjo by this time, was already gaining a reputation as a formidable talent.

At 18, he made his first recordings with accordionist Jean Vaissade, which show his powerful rhythm chops were already in place. Django met and married a young Romany girl named Florine 'Bella' Mayer around this time and the two set up camp in La Zone in a small caravan. Everything was going well – until tragedy struck.

The Fire

One night in October 1928, Bella – who was several months pregnant with their first child, Lousson – was making cellophane flowers for the funeral of a Manouche boy. Django was out at his regular gig. Arriving home in the early hours, he woke his wife as he entered their caravan. She lit a candle for him but it slipped and landed among the flowers, which instantly caught fire. By the time he'd got Bella out of the caravan, it was blazing. To shield himself while he tried to fight the fire, Django grabbed a blanket.

Several neighbours were woken by Bella's screams and as Django stumbled from the caravan they whisked him off to hospital. The right side of his body was scorched and his left hand, which had held the blanket, was also terribly burned. Doctors advised that his leg should be amputated but his mother, distrustful of conventional medicine, had Django spirited back to the Gypsy encampment.

Back at the camp, Django made a slow recovery – but his leg was saved. His left hand, however, was permanently damaged and it eventually healed in such a way that his third and fourth fingers were twisted and immobile. Nonetheless, Django's musician brother Joseph, known as 'Nin Nin', brought a guitar to him in the hope it might provide a focus during his depressing convalescence.

Slowly, Django began to force his contorted hand into action. He still had the use of his first and second fingers and he began to use his thumb, hooked over the top of the neck, for chord movements. Painstakingly, he forged a new approach to scales, arpeggios and chords. It involved playing in a more linear fashion, often playing several notes on one string. His new chord style often involved triads on the bottom four strings, thumb fretting the

Django On Vogue

Career-spanning collection



If this has whetted your appetite to hear Django's electrifying guitar work, check out the eight-CD boxset from Sony covering his recordings on the Vogue label, from the mid-30s to 1951, with liner notes from the late jazz expert Henri Renaud. Reinhardt's most famous Hot Club work is well covered but the set takes in the whole extraordinary arc of his development.



Django's revolutionary technique was born out of necessity

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Django will be forever linked with violinist Stéphane Grappelli

'Nuages' was such a hit that it sold 100,000 copies in Paris alone. Django was a-bona-fide star

PHOTO BY JP JAZZ ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

low E, skipping the A string and playing largely 6ths and 3rds on the D and G strings. He also discovered he could use his near-paralysed third and fourth fingers to fret 4ths on the top two strings. It was a triumph of will and perseverance.

Le Jazz Hot

By 1930, Django was back on the music scene. He knew *musette* was no longer the music for him after discovering American jazz. He was besotted with this new music and upon hearing Louis Armstrong for the first time he broke down in tears, referring to Louis as 'my brother'.

Armstrong's music is the key to Django's swinging, melodic and soulful approach to jazz. He was the dominant figure in jazz in the 20s and 30s and Django was not alone in his obsession with this genius from New Orleans.

In the summer of 1934, Reinhardt met the man with whom he'll forever be associated: violinist Stéphane Grappelli. The two became instant 'brothers' in their mutual love of jazz. Before long, a new group was formed: the Quintette du Hot Club de France, named after a record club run by jazz enthusiasts Hugues Panassié and Charles Delaunay, among others.

The Quintette was originally a quartet of Django on lead guitar and Grappelli on violin backed by rhythm guitarist Roger Chaput and bassist Louis Vola. But according to Stéphane, Django was upset that Grappelli had two guitars behind him when he solo'd, compared to one when Django did. The situation was resolved to Reinhardt's satisfaction when his brother Joseph joined on second rhythm guitar.

From 1934 until 1939 and the outbreak of World War II, the Quintette made many records showcasing Django's phenomenal lead and rhythm playing. Equipped with the Selmer-Maccaferri acoustic that he relied on for the rest of his life, Reinhardt created the music now known as Gypsy jazz or Gypsy swing. He invented all the genre's vocabulary and techniques and played some extraordinary solos, which still are copied note-for-note to this day.

From the off, Django's huge technique is evident on these records. The intensely swinging single-string solos, near-impossible chromatic runs encompassing the entire range of the guitar neck, incredible arpeggio leaps across the fretboard and fearsome rhythmic drive had musicians' jaws on the floor. But there was something else besides the chops: Django had true creativity and eloquence on guitar. As his friend and guitar rival 'Baro' Ferret said: "It was not Django's technique that frightened me, but his ideas!" Django's gifts as a composer are also much in evidence in titles such as *Djangology*, *Tears* and *Minor Swing*.

The War Years

The outbreak of World War II and the subsequent Nazi occupation of France led to the break-up of the first Quintette. The group was on tour in England when war broke out and Django and the band – except Grappelli – felt, perhaps naively, they'd be better off back in Paris.



PHOTO BY JP JAZZ ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Super Selmer

Inside the guitar that gave Django his unique tone

Django's trademark guitar sound can only be accurately reproduced on a Selmer-Maccaferri style guitar. These were designed in the early 30s by Mario Maccaferri, an Italian luthier who sought to increase acoustic volume through innovation. The guitars were marketed by Selmer and original models came with an internal 'sound chamber' to enhance projection. There were two soundhole designs: the grand bouche or D-hole, and the petit bouche or oval hole (which is what Django favoured most). Very few of the original guitars have survived and today fetch astronomical sums. Django's own Selmer, serial number 503, is on display at the museum of music in Paris.

Stéphane stayed on, not returning to France until the end of the war.

Life in occupied France was not easy at the best of times and Django, as a Gypsy, was playing a dangerous game by leading a public life, as Romany people were routinely being arrested and sent to concentration camps across occupied Europe. Undaunted, he formed a new quintet in 1940, this time featuring drums and clarinet in place of violin and rhythm guitar. He promptly composed his most famous song, *Nuages* (meaning 'clouds'), a beautiful ballad with a descending melody line and, for the time, very modern chord changes. The song was an instant hit and seemed to simultaneously sum up the melancholy of the occupation but also point to a brighter and freer time.

Django would record the song many times over the remainder of his life, each

time finding something new in the melody and chord structure. It provides a fascinating insight into how great Reinhardt was to listen to these versions back to back. *Nuages* was such a hit that it sold 100,000 copies in Paris alone. Django was a bona-fide star.

Finally, Paris was liberated and among the Allied forces pouring into the city were many curious American soldiers who wanted to hear the mysterious Gypsy genius. Django had made do with just one of his trademark Selmer guitars for the whole of the war, and by 1945 it was as battered as the country was. Photos show Django playing his guitar with a matchbox wedged under the bridge to help raise the action and offset the buzz from frets worn down by five years of ferocious playing.

In 1946, Reinhardt got the call he'd been waiting for. The great Duke Ellington wanted him to travel to the United States and tour with his orchestra. Django was so convinced of his own celebrity that he travelled to the US without a guitar, believing that Gibson and other famous guitar makers would be queuing up at the airport as his plane flew in. Predictably, this didn't happen, but it did usher in the next evolution in Django's sound: he went electric. Charlie Christian was already a hero in the US thanks to his trailblazing amplified jazz guitar. So, armed with a brand new Gibson archtop and a small valve amp, Django hit the road with the Ellington band.

Later Work

In truth, Django never really got on with the Gibson and begged his friend Charles Delaunay to bring his Selmer to the States for him. Delaunay dutifully arrived with a brand-new guitar courtesy of Selmer, which Django embraced as one would a lover. He played the Selmer from that day on, amplifying it with a Stimer (R-46 and, later, an ST-48) pickup with a built-in volume control. Coupled with a six-watt Stimer M6 amp, Django's guitar now sang with a new voice. Gone were many of his early trademark Gypsy-flavoured jazz licks, now replaced by the bebop phrasing of Parker and Gillespie.

The sound of the Selmer with the Stimer screwed to the top is one of the most extraordinary guitar tones in history. Django made it sing, and his playing and composing from the late 40s brims with a newfound joy and inspiration. In 1948, reunited with Stéphane Grappelli, there was an attempt to resurrect the Hot Club sound, but it was clear that Django had moved on. His playing seems light years ahead of Grappelli's and the reunion was short-lived.

Later, in 1951, a sax player named Hubert Fol visited Django armed with the latest bebop records. They stirred something in Django, who had been taking a break from guitar, and he began playing with a band nearly half his age. Django composed many of his most modern tunes in this period. Songs such as *Impromptu* and *Vamp* show a new maturity in his style.

There were fewer displays of audacious technique and we hear a more thoughtful and introspective Django, who seemed more in control of the electric sound than before. It's still astonishing how he evolved musically; the Gypsy flair is still there, but the character of his improvisations has changed entirely, a feat only a handful of players have achieved.

Something else had changed, though. Django seemed less interested in music, and the fleeting moments of energy and inspiration didn't seem to last long. He moved his family (his second wife Naguine and son Babik) to the village of Samois-sur-Seine near Paris and took up painting and fishing. In early 1953 he made his last recordings, which show him as a total master of his instrument, and his final version of *Nuages* from these sessions is as poignant as it is beautiful.

On a tour of Switzerland in early May he started complaining of bad headaches. Naguine begged him to see a doctor but Django refused. On 16 May that year, he went fishing as usual, stopping at a local cafe by the Seine. Suddenly, Django collapsed and, shortly afterwards, fell into a coma. Naguine called for help but it was too late. Django never regained consciousness and he died that afternoon of a brain haemorrhage. He was only 43 years old.

The Legacy of Django

Countless guitarists of all styles have cited Django as an influence, from Joe Pass and Wes Montgomery to Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jeff Beck. But it's among the Gypsy communities of Europe that Django truly lives on: this vibrant culture has produced some extraordinary players, including Boulou and Elios Ferré, Biréli Lagrène, and hundreds of others who meet at festivals, such as the one held every June at the spot on the river Seine where Django spent his last days. Here, they celebrate this great man in the finest style: by playing his music the way he played it. G



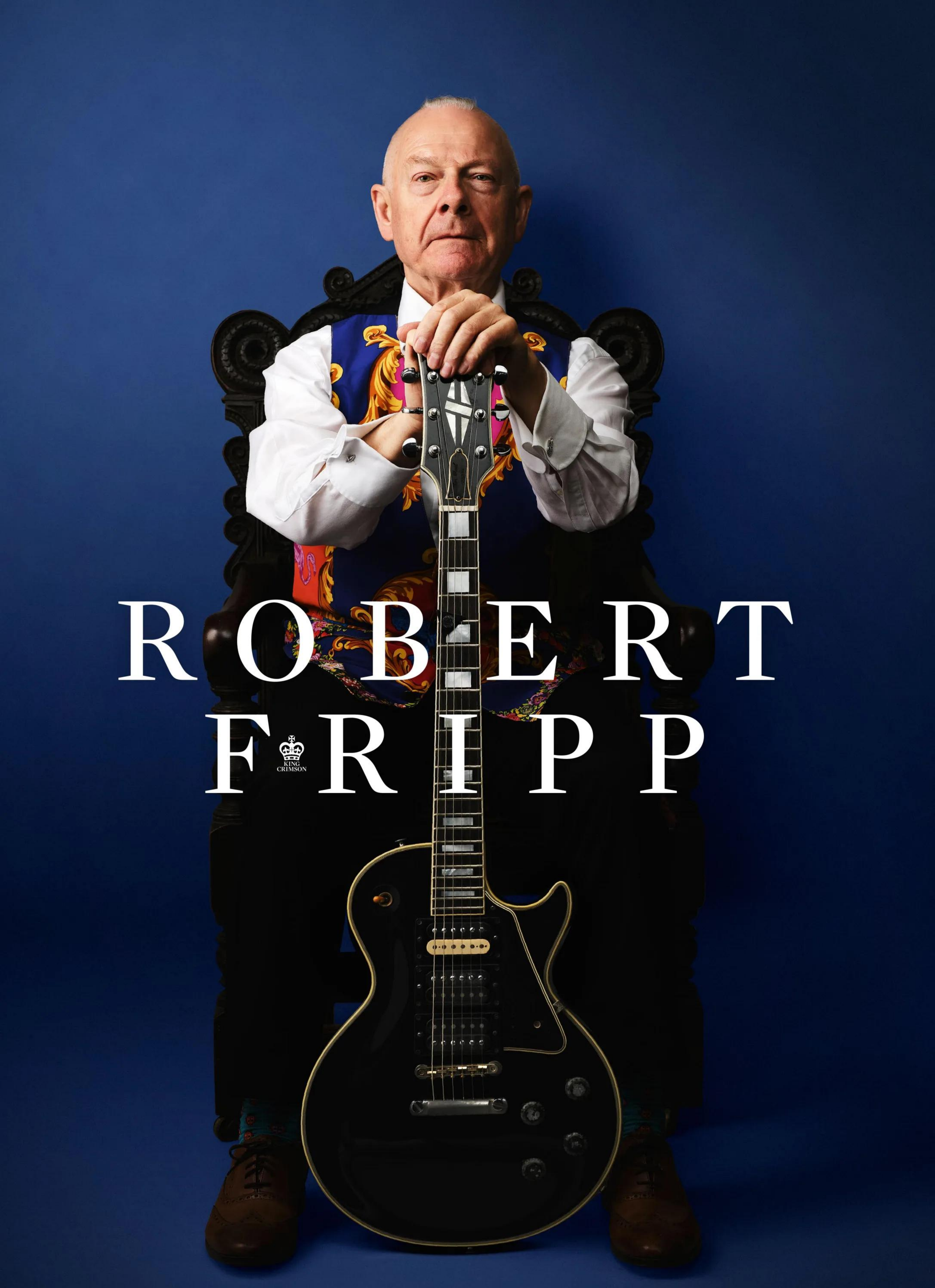
Django often used self-made tortoiseshell picks

PHOTO BY AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Thick Pick

How technique and gear intertwined to form Django's agile, percussive style

Django used the Selmer guitar almost exclusively. He would use light gauge 'silk 'n' steel' strings (0.010-0.046) made by Argentine. These strings are silver-plated and essential to the Gypsy jazz sound. He would often make his own picks, shaped from pieces of tortoiseshell at least 4mm thick. He would primarily use downstrokes when crossing strings and only employ upstrokes when playing more than one note on the same string.


ROBERT
FRIPP
KING
CRIMSON

KING CRIMSON

WITH A **32-DISC BOXSET** OF HIS SOLO WORK DURING THE LATE 1970s ALREADY RELEASED INTO THE WILD AND A **GUITAR BOOK** COMING OUT IN EARLY AUTUMN, ROBERT SITS DOWN WITH US AT **FRIPP HQ** IN THE MIDDLE ENGLAND COUNTRYSIDE TO TALK ALL THINGS **KING CRIMSON**, AS WE TAKE AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT THE **INSTRUMENTS** THAT HAVE GIVEN VOICE TO SOME OF **PROG-ROCK'S FINEST MOMENTS**

Words David Mead **Photography** Adam Gasson **First Published** Summer 2022

Interviews with 'That Awful Man', as Robert Fripp refers to himself these days, are rare, and until now he hasn't allowed his collection of guitars to be photographed, including the one pictured opposite that was used on so many classic Crimson albums. "I don't collect guitars," he tells us as we settle down to talk, "they are merely tools that I use in my work." However, we note that the famous '59 Les Paul Custom appears to be in almost pristine condition – in fact, it's still shiny even after years on the road. "One careful owner," he quips with a wry grin.

Anyone who wants to assess Fripp's skills as a guitarist need only check out *Fracture* from the King Crimson album *Starless And Bible Black*. The *Moto Perpetuo* from that piece is a legendary example of his crosspicking finesse. His guitar journey began with lessons that found him playing some challenging classical pieces with a plectrum, instead of the more conventional fingerstyle. This influence reached into the Crimson repertoire and is apparent in 1970's *Peace – A Theme* from *In The Wake Of Poseidon*. "Yes, Carcassi *Etude No 7*, the middle section," he tells us. "You probably wouldn't be able to see the connection, but *Peace – A Theme* wouldn't have quite ended up that way unless I practised the Carcassi *Etudes* for fingerstyle, but with a pick because crosspicking was my speciality."

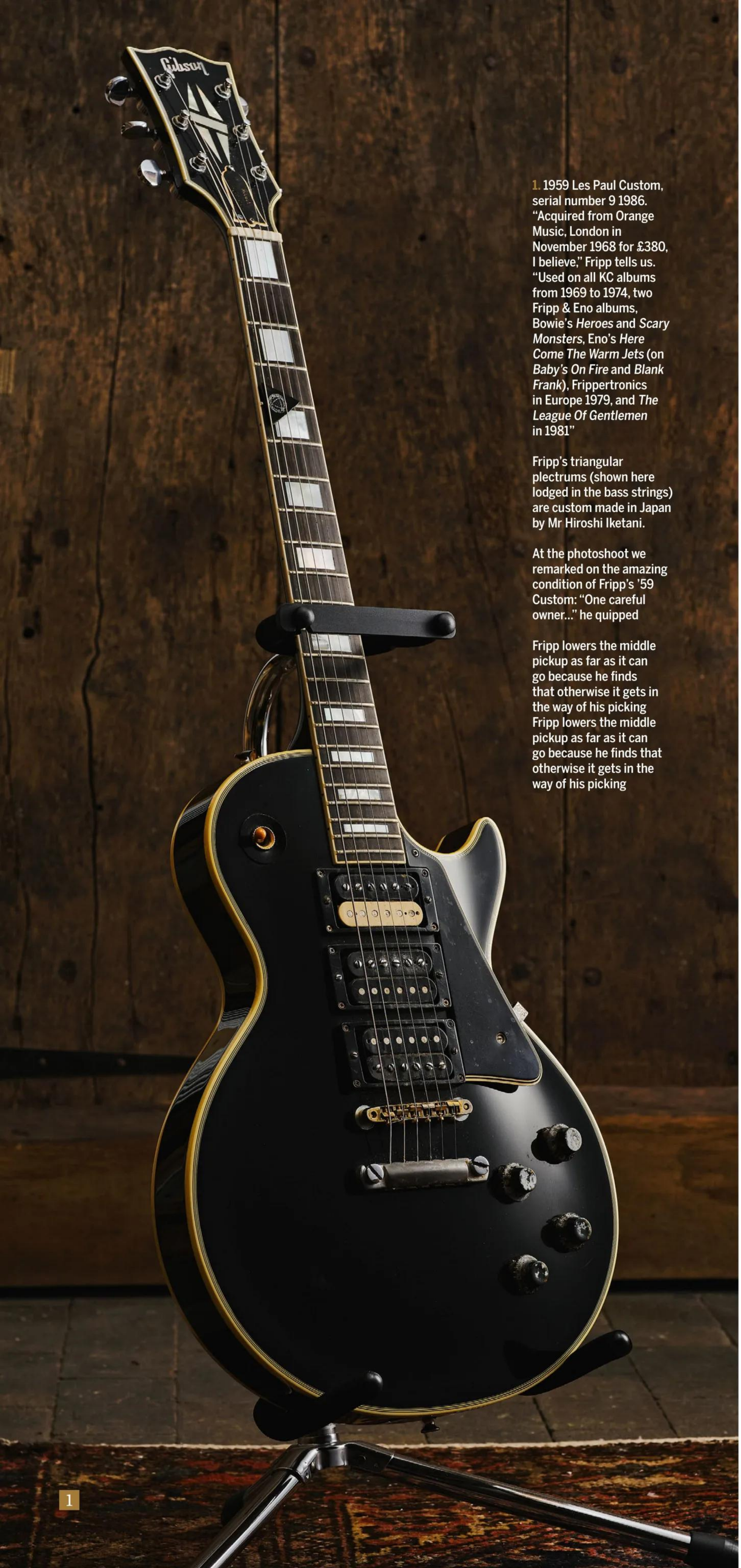
Now that Crimson has entered another hiatus, the rendition of *Starless* in Japan last December being regarded by all as the last we'll hear from the band, it's time to catch up with Crimson's only permanent member. And we start our conversation at the very beginning...

How did you become interested in music – and specifically the guitar – in the first place?

"My trajectory was at age 11 my sister and I bought two records, *Rock With The Caveman* by Tommy Steele and *Don't Be Cruel* by Elvis Presley. The guitarist on Tommy Steele I learnt later was Bert Weedon, on Elvis, Scotty Moore. There weren't any English rock musicians, they were all jazzers. Old men, basically. Old men who would come in and do the young character sessions. Mel Collins' [Crimson sax player] father would be doing the ripping tenor solos on [BBC music programme] *Six-Five Special* with Tubby Hayes and Ronnie Scott sitting next to him. They would be making derogatory comments on these young rock artists who really weren't in the same musical ballpark as they were. In America it was entirely different. There was nothing demeaning about playing rock music and moving out of blues. Scotty Moore, Chuck Berry, the sheer power of Jerry Lee Lewis... That was me around 11 to 12.

"At 13 trad jazz came along. I would go down to the Winter Gardens in Bournemouth and see all the characters: Chris Barber, Acker Bilk, Monty Sunshine and just about everyone else that was working at the time. Memphis Slim I saw there, too – I think he was supporting Chris Barber. Wow, wow. At 15, hearing Mingus, *Extrapolation*. Max Roach, *Town Hall New York City*. Then, at 17, the more challenging aspects of what we call classic music. It segued into The Beatles and 1960s English rock instrumentals. I saw The Outlaws at a show in Poole when I was 17 with Ritchie Blackmore, he was then 18. He was phenomenal. He had all the moves. He had the music, he had the playing, it was astonishing.

"The Bournemouth scene was very hot. Working in the first League Of Gentlemen we would do lots of specialty vocals: Four Seasons, Beatles. We would also do the instrumental specialities, *Entry Of*



1. 1959 Les Paul Custom, serial number 9 1986. "Acquired from Orange Music, London in November 1968 for £380, I believe," Fripp tells us. "Used on all KC albums from 1969 to 1974, two Fripp & Eno albums, Bowie's *Heroes* and *Scary Monsters*, Eno's *Here Come The Warm Jets* (on *Baby's On Fire* and *Blank Frank*), Frippertronics in Europe 1979, and *The League Of Gentlemen* in 1981"

Fripp's triangular plectrums (shown here lodged in the bass strings) are custom made in Japan by Mr Hiroshi Iketani.

At the photoshoot we remarked on the amazing condition of Fripp's '59 Custom: "One careful owner..." he quipped

Fripp lowers the middle pickup as far as it can go because he finds that otherwise it gets in the way of his picking
Fripp lowers the middle pickup as far as it can go because he finds that otherwise it gets in the way of his picking

The Gladiators, which I didn't realise until I met him years later was Mick Jones of Foreigner. Then I went off to college to take A-levels to go onto university and take a degree in estate management.

"My musical interest went slightly to the side, and I went to the Majestic Dance Orchestra to pay my way through college. When that came to an end, there was Hendrix, *Sgt Pepper* and things shot off in a different direction, to the extent I could no longer continue. Going on to London where I'd been accepted for a place for three years to take a degree in estate management at the College of Estate Management in South Kensington, I had my digs booked in Acton; how awful that was. I said to my father, 'I can't continue,' and I turned professional on my 21st birthday."

What was the first guitar you had when you began playing?

"It was an Egmond Freres, an appalling instrument. The action at the 7th fret, you needed pliers to depress it. It was appalling. It required me to develop such strong muscles that I remember in 1971 practising to put less pressure into my left hand. I moved onto a cheap Rosetti guitar, which was not good. Then a Höfner; I believe it was a President, it was the cutaway version. It wasn't great, but at least it was an instrument.

"My first good guitar was my Gibson ES-345 Stereo, which I bought from Eddie Moors music shop in Boscombe where on a Saturday afternoon I would give guitar lessons. Young characters would come in and say, 'I'm interested in buying a guitar.' They'd say, 'We have an in-store guitar teacher who can give you lessons on Saturday afternoon.' I'd go around the corner to something like a village hall in Boscombe and give guitar lessons. Then in the evening I'd go on to Chewton Glen Hotel, this was when I was 17, and play in the Douglas Ward Trio. This was my first good guitar, and it was expensive, something like £350. That was the guitar with The League Of Gentlemen. That took me to London with Giles, Giles And Fripp, that guitar, which I used until 1968 when I got my first Les Paul. I only used the 345 again with Crimson on *In The Wake Of Poseidon* on *Cat Food*, and *Bolero* [from *Lizard*]."

Was there an influence on you musically from listening to classical music?
"I began listening to the Bartók String Quartet and Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring*. The turning point in my musical, and I suppose personal, life was something like 'music is one'. I didn't hear separate categories, I heard music but as if it was one musician speaking in a variety of dialects. The crashing chords of *Rite Of Spring* or Bartók, where is that coming from? The opening bars of *Purple Haze* or *Day In The Life, I Am The Walrus*, it all had this incredible power as it reached over and pulled me towards it."

You're well known for your crosspicking ability on pieces such as *Fracture*. How did this skill begin to develop?
"It's what in Guitar Craft is called 'a point of seeing'. It's not the process of rational deduction of working out; you simply *see* something. I remember specifically the moment. I was at home in the first floor rear room where my sister and myself would do homework. I was practising *Study In 3/4* by Dick Sadleir. My guitar teacher, Don Strike, gave me a very good technical foundation. In terms of current music, it was a little old-fashioned. It was kind of corny for a young character who enjoyed Scotty Moore. Instead of doing *bom-bish-bish bom-bish-bish*, I began crosspicking. The same shapes, the same notes but crosspicking it. Seeing that that was so obviously the way to go I continued to develop that as a speciality, including [Francisco] Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, which was a very challenging piece for the pick."

There's not a great deal of blues influence in your playing...
"Why didn't I become a blues guitarist? Probably because I wasn't a very good blues guitarist. The thing is, a lot of young players and some established players have said to me, 'I only wanted to be like Clapton.' They didn't say it, but you knew it. That wasn't my aim. Stunning player, but... The question eventually became formulated for me as, 'What would Hendrix sound like playing the Bartók *String Quartets*?'

"In 1969 the major musical influences in Crimson were Ian McDonald and Michael Giles. I recognised they had a connection with music, which at the time I didn't have, but I could recognise in others. I'd known this probably since I was 17 or 18 working alongside and going to see the other young players in Bournemouth, stunning young players."

How did McDonald's and Giles' influence connect with you in Crimson's early days?
"In the studio recording *In The Court Of The Crimson King* they would make a comment, [and] I would adjust my response to sit in accord with theirs. Then when they left it was heartbreaking for me, because although Giles wasn't a writer his contributions to the arrangements and direction were stunning.

"My primary role for *In the Court*... in Crimson in 1969, as I saw it, was to come up with guitar parts that supported the writing. Although you could say that McDonald and [Peter] Sinfield were the main writers, you can't exclude Giles from that. You can't really exclude anyone from that, it was five people. *Moonchild* on that album, the music was 99 per cent Robert [Fripp, himself] with one suggestion from Ian McDonald to move a G to a G#, which we incorporated. This was Ian, he had a gift for the simple melodic phrase.

"That's what we went with. For the writing credit, which properly should have been Fripp/Sinfield, I decided to have all the names of the members because I felt that actually everyone was involved equally. How can you exclude anyone at that point? For me, Crimson has always been a co-operative, which it certainly was in 1969."

"The question eventually became formulated for me as, 'What would Hendrix sound like playing the Bartók String Quartets?'"

This led to some turbulence within the band, didn't it?
"My personal difficulties with any Crimson musician since have been if they favour themselves or see themselves as somehow coming ahead of the other players or the music. To put that positively within Crimson, the music comes first: principle one. Principle two: the band comes first. The interests of the band come ahead of the interests of the other players. Three: we share the money. Why do there seem to be personal difficulties? Look at those



2. The 1970s incarnation of King Crimson (left to right): Fripp, Bill Bruford, David Cross and the late John Wetton

"When Giles and McDonald left it was heartbreaking for me. Giles' contributions to the arrangements and direction were stunning"

three principles and really that's the clue to anything that follows.

"If the music does come first, then all the names are there at the top. We shared the record royalties; we shared the publishing royalties. There is a legitimate concern that if you have one person who writes all the music, shouldn't they get a disproportionate part of the publishing? The answer is yes, they should. This was a legitimate concern for Adrian Belew.

"From 1994 onwards, we would look at essentially who had made the greatest contribution to writing this piece. Between 1970 and 1974 when Robert was the primary writer, even if Bill Bruford didn't play a note he would receive an equal share of the publishing income. Why? Firstly, because it exemplified the view that where there is an equal commitment there is an equitable distribution. Secondly, if Robert made a value judgement or recommendation that we go this way, there was never any question that my recommendation for either a musical or business direction favoured me. There was never a conflict of interests with Robert. If I said, 'Look, lads. I think we should do this.' It was because I thought we should do this. Why? Primarily for the music, then primarily the interest of the band and so on."

3. Suited and booted, the 2018 Crimson line-up (left to right): the late Bill Rieflin, Jakko Jakszyk, Pat Mastelotto, Fripp, Gavin Harrison, Tony Levin, Mel Collins and Jeremy Stacey

The recent release of the *Exposures* boxset features Steven Wilson remixes of your solo material. As with the Crimson remixes Steven has done, they're remarkably faithful to the originals.

"When I go in to mix something, I don't go in with a historic overview to mind. Steven's aim was very faithfully to reproduce the original but with modern technology. There had been the odd discussions. For example, with *Lizard* there were one or two things we didn't quite put in and so on. My view on occasion has been we actually didn't get it right the first time, so now is an opportunity. Then you say, 'What's right and what's wrong?' If it has been adopted and accepted by decades of listeners, then maybe that's what it is. Steven aims to get it exactly as. Me, I'd be very happy to go a different way.

"In terms of *Exposure* I went down and worked with Steven, I was very up for complete reimagining. Steven: 'No, this is a classic.' His brief, this is Steven, is to present this as the original. How can I put it? That desk [pointing to an antique writing desk in the room in which we are sitting] is an 1830s desk. It's a classic of its kind. If I were designing a desk for today to use with modern things, such as having computers on the side, it wouldn't be designed like that. However, for me that is the classic and I'm not going to redesign it. That's Steven's point of view: this is the classic. The only innovation we had on *Exposure* was with [Dolby] Atmos mixing, which isn't, I suppose, entirely legitimate."

Revisiting *Exposure*, it is possible to see a stylistic link between the albums *Red* from the mid-70s and *Discipline* from the early 80s, with the two guitars playing offset then synchronous parts. Was this an idea forming in your mind during Crimson's hiatus in the late 70s?

"Was it Steve Reich? Was it Philip Glass? Was it Robert Fripp? Was it in the air? Was it world music? Anyway, all of this, my thinking, my academic interests and approach to music were in place in 1980, 1981, with the coming together of that form of King Crimson. I met Adrian [Belew] personally at The Bottom Line in New York when I went down to see Steve Reich. Bowie was there with Adrian. We went over and said hello and Adrian said, 'Let's get together for tea tomorrow,' so we did. That's how our personal connection began."

People might not be aware that you actually write these pieces out on manuscript paper.

"Yes, I do. I don't give the other players charts. I don't like the word 'bandleader' because I've never viewed myself as a bandleader. That's another endless wittering on. You have [Charles] Mingus. I understand that Mingus didn't give the other characters in the band charts. Why? Because it goes in through your eyes. You present the music you have and you say, 'If I'm playing this, what are you playing?' One of Bill's good quotes from the time was, 'It was as if Robert expected us to know what to play.' Of course. If I have to tell you what to play, why are we working together?



"What I would aim to do is construct situations or conditions within which the talent of each of these players is given an opportunity to develop. To the extent that when Robert composed for Crimson it was writing specifically for these people in this band to play. Not a generic piece that anyone could play, it was specifically for these people.

"There were two occasions when I presented *Larks' [Tongues in Aspic, Part] Two* to that formation of Crimson. We had short rehearsals in Covent Garden and then we went to Richmond Athletic Club. I presented the defining *Larks'* rhythm and chords at Covent Garden and it wasn't heard, it went nowhere. Then I played it at Richmond Athletic Club and Bill and John [Wetton] leapt straight in. They had it; clicked, it worked. Most really good rock drummers in London at the time wouldn't have heard it because it wasn't written for them.

"With Crimson it was an open form of engagement, which has always been complex, always problematic and always very demanding. If you would like a band to break up, have writing rehearsals. What you do when you hit that problem is you get on the road. Then you introduce an audience into the situation, music comes to life and you'll keep going. Not that Robert is a bandleader, but in terms of practical strategies for keeping the band together and working, you move from writing rehearsals as quickly as possible into live performance."

Can we talk a little about gear?

"You know I have no interest in that. I have no interest in gear at all. For example, whatever fuzzbox, whatever guitar, whatever amp I'm using I'll get my sound. Here's an example of this. I went to see Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea at Carnegie Hall: wow, breathtaking. Chick Corea is stage right, Herbie Hancock on the left. They changed places and played and their sounds went with them. I still don't understand that. How can that be? It cannot be that the sound of a piano changes. The sound of a piano is the sound of a piano, surely?

"With Crimson I use Axe-Fx, which is very good. For basic work that I can carry myself without a team of engineers I use a Helix. Why? Because Jakko [Jakszyk] uses a Helix



"How I experience and engage with music and other musicians is subtle. If I'm explaining it in bold terms, it falls under the heading of cosmic horse shit"

and if you're working in a band with another character you aim for compatibility. The other thing is, he can tell me how to work it."

The rig you use for soundscaping hasn't changed too dramatically over the years, has it?

"It changed. I'm trying to think when it changed from the 'Solar Voyager' to the 'Sirius Probe'. It changed when I stopped using the [TC Electronic] TC2290, which I used to use for sampling. It developed high-level digital frizz. I started using the Eventide 8000s, which are astonishing things. You have 90-second samples that will repeat. You can leave them 24 hours, come back, no decay, no degeneration whatsoever. For sampling, that's astonishing. There is something irreplaceable in those early versions of the Eventides. I've no idea what the algorithms are, but wow. They shape the sound.

"In terms of the 8000s where I have bona fide quadraphonic sound, what I do is I work to ratios in delay. If you have four outputs, if a short loop is needed, one stereo pair will have 12 seconds on one side and 18 seconds on the other. You have a 3:2 ratio. On the next one I tend to have an offset of maybe 20.5 to 21 seconds. It's just essentially the same delay, which over a period of maybe half an hour will change. If I'm going for longform soundscapes it might be something like 42:49 or 42:63. On the other stereo pair to complete the quadraphonic might be 21:35 or 63:72. In other words, there are ratios within the time delays generally in terms of six or seven seconds, which lots of experience – including being booed constantly – has suggested to me this has resonance.

"I'll then go in and I have my defining programmes within the Eventide 3000s, which sends it shooting off in different directions. In terms of soundscape performances, I bypass all of that and through an Eventide Eclipse I have a solo sound. It gives me my solo voice. In the quiet moments the solo voice will come up with all of this, all in real-time. I have had various suggestions, 'Bob, why don't you use Ableton Live?' The answer is, when I'm doing a live performance soundscape with the rig I have, the Sirius Probe, all of the parameters I can change in real-time by hand as I am playing. I don't have to go to a computer and fiddle about. I don't have to look up here and see what's going on, I can do it all with one hand."

"With Crimson it was an open form of engagement, which has always been complex, always problematic and always very demanding"

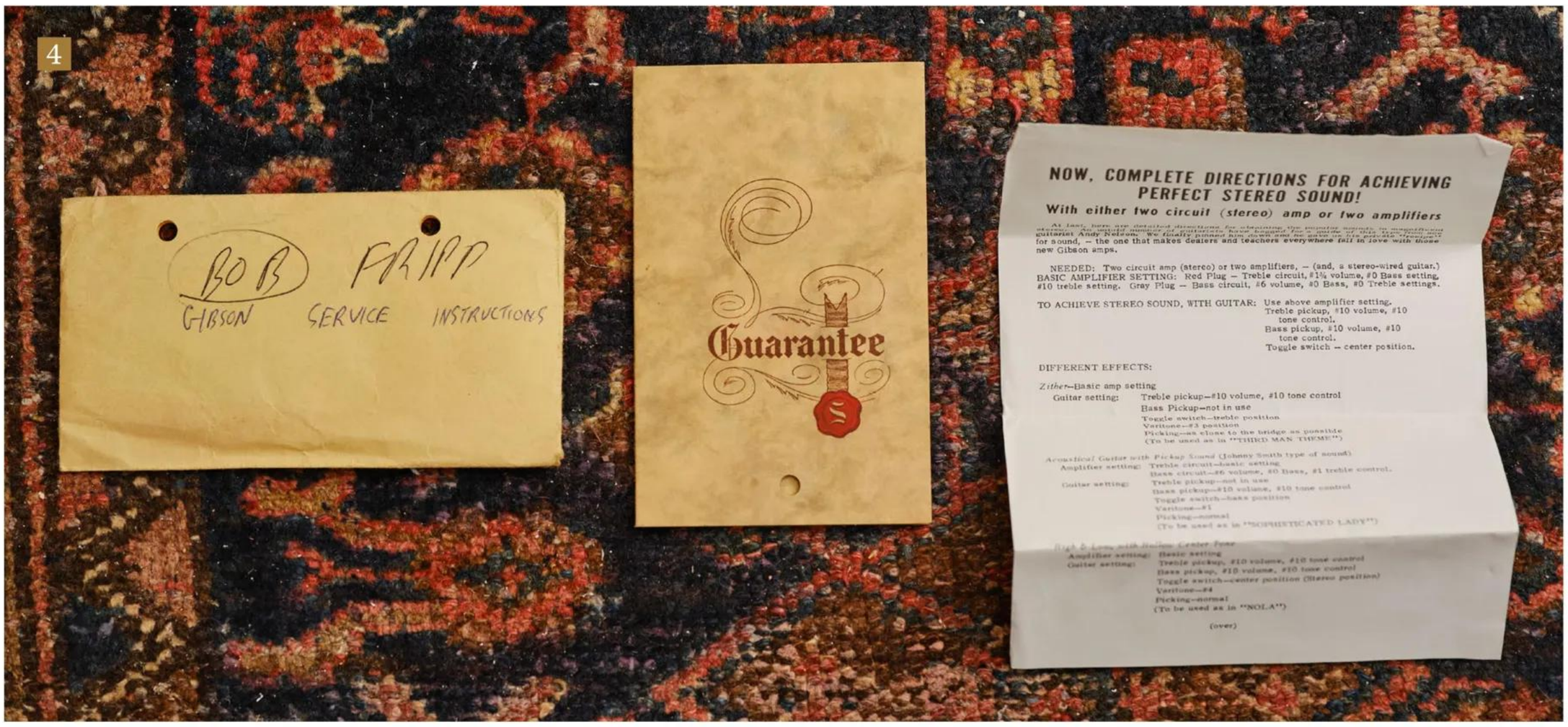
Are you still using the Roland GR-1?

"It's set up in my full Crimson rig. I haven't been using it recently, but I have used it certainly in 2015, probably using it for the first half of seven-, eight-piece Crimson. Why? Because it does two or three things that nothing else does. The same as the 3000s. The GR-1 has a fretless bass sound, that is breathtaking, which I would use to have fun with Tony Levin. Tony would be doing some upright slides, I might slip in some fretless. Tony would look up wondering where the bass sound was coming from.

"It's also stunning in terms of low-end for soundscapes. It also has bell sounds, which in combination with an Eventide 3000 programme called 'In Six' makes astonishing sounds. It also has a piano sound, which I haven't really used since 2003, but which was astonishing. I used it a lot in all the ProjeKcts."

Technology has come a long way since your early Frippertronics work.

"Yes, that's right. I've had these posts, 'Bring back the ReVox. Where is Frippertronics?' It's just not feasible. Why not? If you go back to when I used that technology you'd have to fly it. What would happen if there was a bounce? Here's another one: you have it set up on the table, what would happen if someone walked by and bumped the table? The answer is, there would be a fluttering on the tape. You'd then have to shape the entire Frippertronics piece around the flutter. If, as in Madrid in May 1979, what happens if the ReVox the record company has brought in begins to catch fire? What do you do? These are practical examples. It's not feasible."



4. The original paperwork that came with the ES-345 opposite, including the instructions for using the guitar in stereo

Would it be true to say that *The Guitar Circle* book you have coming out in September isn't what you might call a conventional guitar tutor?
"Correct. It's the attitude. It's less what you do, it's more how you do and why you do. We've now had guitar courses since March 1985 and the book is essentially a report on the history of Guitar Craft and the Guitar Circle to date. If you're looking for a book of guitar exercises, this is not the way to go.

"People who have a background in martial arts feel an immediate affinity with Guitar Craft in the Guitar Circle. One character said to a pal of mine it's like martial arts with a guitar. I've a little tai chi, some muay Thai. Here, your response is governed by the intentionality of the person with whom you're sparring. If you wait for them to make a move you're on the floor. What you respond to is their intention. How we respond to someone's intention before there's any movement at all is a subtle thing. How to explain that? That falls under the heading of 'cosmic horse shit'. The point is, it can very easily be experienced.

"Guitar Craft was basically developing a personal discipline with a guitar. The Guitar Circle is developing a personal discipline within others. We're learning to work with others and with ourself. In a sense it's a maturing and a development within a social context.

"One of the difficulties I've had doing interviews over a period of 53 years with guitar magazines is that just about everything that is real with me in terms of how I experience and engage with music and other musicians is subtle. If I'm explaining it in bold terms, it falls under the heading of cosmic horse shit. One of the important principles in this is 'accept nothing that someone is telling you, presenting you, judge by your own experience'. When someone comes into a Guitar Circle, don't take Robert's view of what might be happening for yourself, what is *your* experience?" G



Robert Fripp's 32-disc boxset, *Exposures*, is out now, via DGM/Panegyric. *The Guitar Circle* book is available via Panegyric Publishing in association with Discipline Global Mobile
www.dgmlive.com

5. Gibson ES-345, serial number 100510. "Acquired 1963, and so probably 1962 manufacture. Used in the original League Of Gentlemen (1964/'65) at The Majestic Hotel, [and with] Giles, Giles & Fripp. Not used much in KC other than on *Cat Food* and *Prince Rupert's Lament* (1970)"

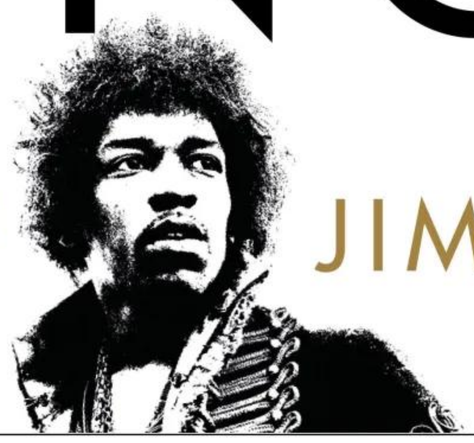
It's unclear as to whether Fripp used Gibson's infamous Varitone switch much, and that extra piece of wire looks like it was employed to cure an earthing problem on the Bigsby

Fripp tells us that he receives a lot of communications from guitarists telling him that his string ends look untidy, but he insists that his method of restringing is both functional and thoroughly effective

5

WILD THINGS

IN SEARCH OF JIMI'S STRATS



Over five decades since his untimely death, Jimi Hendrix remains synonymous with the Fender Stratocaster, a guitar that he would set alight – both figuratively and literally – on stages across the world throughout the 60s. But what became of those fated instruments? And will we ever find out since so many were reduced to splinters in his onstage histrionics? We set out to track down the Strats that accompanied the legendary musician on his musical journey

Words Tony Bacon **First Published** November 2021

Jimi Hendrix arrived in London from New York City in September 1966 with his new manager, Chas Chandler, the ex-bass player from The Animals. They soon put together Jimi's new band, the Experience, with Mitch Mitchell on drums and Noel Redding on bass, and by the middle of October that year they were playing their first proper gigs on a brief tour supporting Johnny Hallyday in France.

It's not clear if Jimi brought with him to London the guitar he was playing during those early months. It was an Olympic White finish Fender Stratocaster with a maple neck and rosewood fingerboard, made most likely between '63 and '65. Perhaps he bought it in London? It was unlikely that he or Chas had the cash to buy a new one – a brand new custom-colour Strat similar to this white one listed at £168 at the time. That's a lot of money for a musician still to prove himself. If he bought it secondhand in one of London's music shops in late '66, he'd have needed a more manageable sum, between about £60 and £90. The Selmer shop in Charing Cross Road, for example, advertised "Strats, all finishes, from £75" at the time.

Wherever it came from, Jimi's first white Strat served him well for a while, alongside a secondhand black one with rosewood 'board that he got around November. By February of the following year, things were looking up. The Experience had played the Marquee and the Saville Theatre in London and a number of other gigs in Britain, plus a few in Germany and France. Work on recording a follow-up single to *Hey Joe* had begun – and *Purple Haze* would go to No 3 in the UK. Reports suggest that, during February, Jimi had a black Strat stolen from a gig in Darlington and a white Strat from London's Roundhouse. He soon acquired at least one more white one and at least one sunburst model, all with rosewood 'boards.

Jimi was, of course, left-handed, and all his Strats were regular guitars that he would flip over and restring to accommodate that. It's a matter of debate how much difference this made to his sound – the reversed nut, the angled bridge pickup accentuating different strings than intended, the vibrato handled differently – but with the high volume levels at which he played, and his natural dexterity and playing skill, any differences were probably minimal. Less open to debate is that Jimi made more players aware of the Strat's tonal and musical possibilities than any musician before him.

At first, he would tune his Strats to regular concert pitch, but soon he favoured tuning them down a half step and sometimes a whole step. It meant less strain on his voice because he could sing in a slightly lower register, and also the newly lower-pitched strings were slightly slacker and therefore easier to bend. He liked the neck pickup's full tone, and occasionally he'd use the different tones from the two in-between positions of the three-way selector.

INSET PHOTOS OF JIMI HENDRIX BY AF ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



"WE USE THE SAME THING ANYONE ELSE WOULD, BUT WE USE IT WITH IMAGINATION AND COMMON SENSE"

JIMI HENDRIX

Jimi in mid-flight, photographed during a concert at Berkeley, California in 1970

PHOTO BY GRANGER HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO





PHOTO BY POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

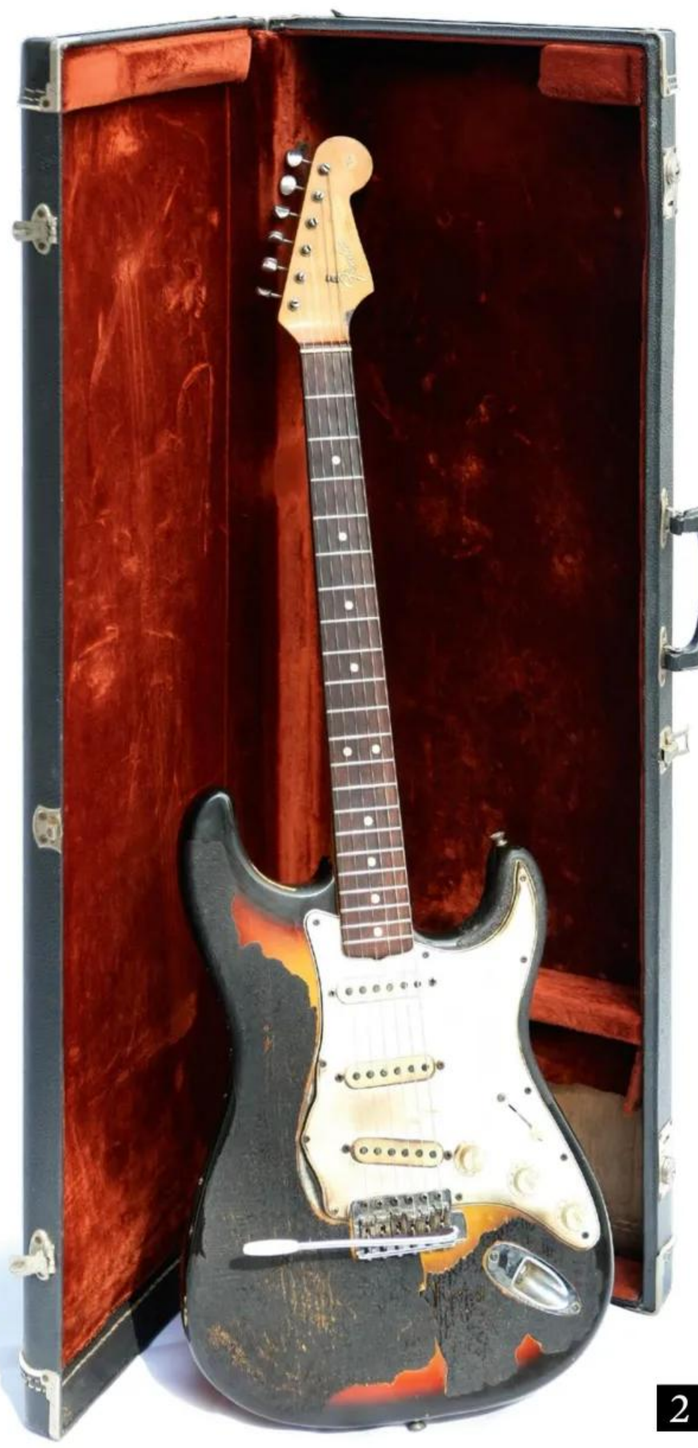


PHOTO BY ANDREW COWIE/PHOTOSHOT/GETTY IMAGES

1. Burning ambition? A tech helps Jimi attend to his guitars before a performance in Germany, circa 1967

2. This '65 Strat was set alight in March 1967 at the Finsbury Astoria before a bemused audience and a horrified fire officer

ALIGHT AT THE ASTORIA

At the end of March '67, Jimi started a British tour on a bill with what we might call a varied line-up, alongside The Walker Brothers, Cat Stevens and Engelbert Humperdinck. The opening night in north London at the Finsbury Park Astoria (better known later as the Rainbow) saw the music press in attendance, and Jimi, Chas, road manager Gerry Stickells, and Keith Altham from the *New Musical Express* got together in the dressing room to come up with a stunt to get some coverage. Keith suggested, as something of a joke, that Jimi might burn a guitar. Chas smiled and sent Gerry out for some lighter fluid.

"The guitar went up about halfway through *Wild Thing*," Keith recalled later in *Q* magazine, "with Jimi straddling his Fender and applying several matches before the instrument caught alight. There was a pathetic little pile of used matches on the stage afterwards. It was not exactly a towering inferno, but Jimi made the most of it by whirling the guitar around his head and throwing in a touch of the mad axeman for good measure."

Unsurprisingly, the fire officer at the theatre was unimpressed, but Jimi still got his headlines. Chris Welch's story on the blazing event was on the front page of the following week's *Melody Maker*. "Jimi sustained a burned hand when his guitar accidentally burst into flames at the climax of his act," Chris wrote. "Hendrix was lying on stage playing the guitar with his teeth when it suddenly burst into flames. Jimi leapt backwards and ran off stage followed by his group. The guitar was left burning dangerously near the closed curtains, and compere Nick Jones ran and tried to pick it up, burning his hand in the attempt. An attendant rushed on stage with a fire extinguisher and put out the flames, which were leaping 10ft in the air."



Electronics whizz Roger Mayer was Jimi's right-hand man for modifying pedals and guitars alike

STRAT CALCULATION

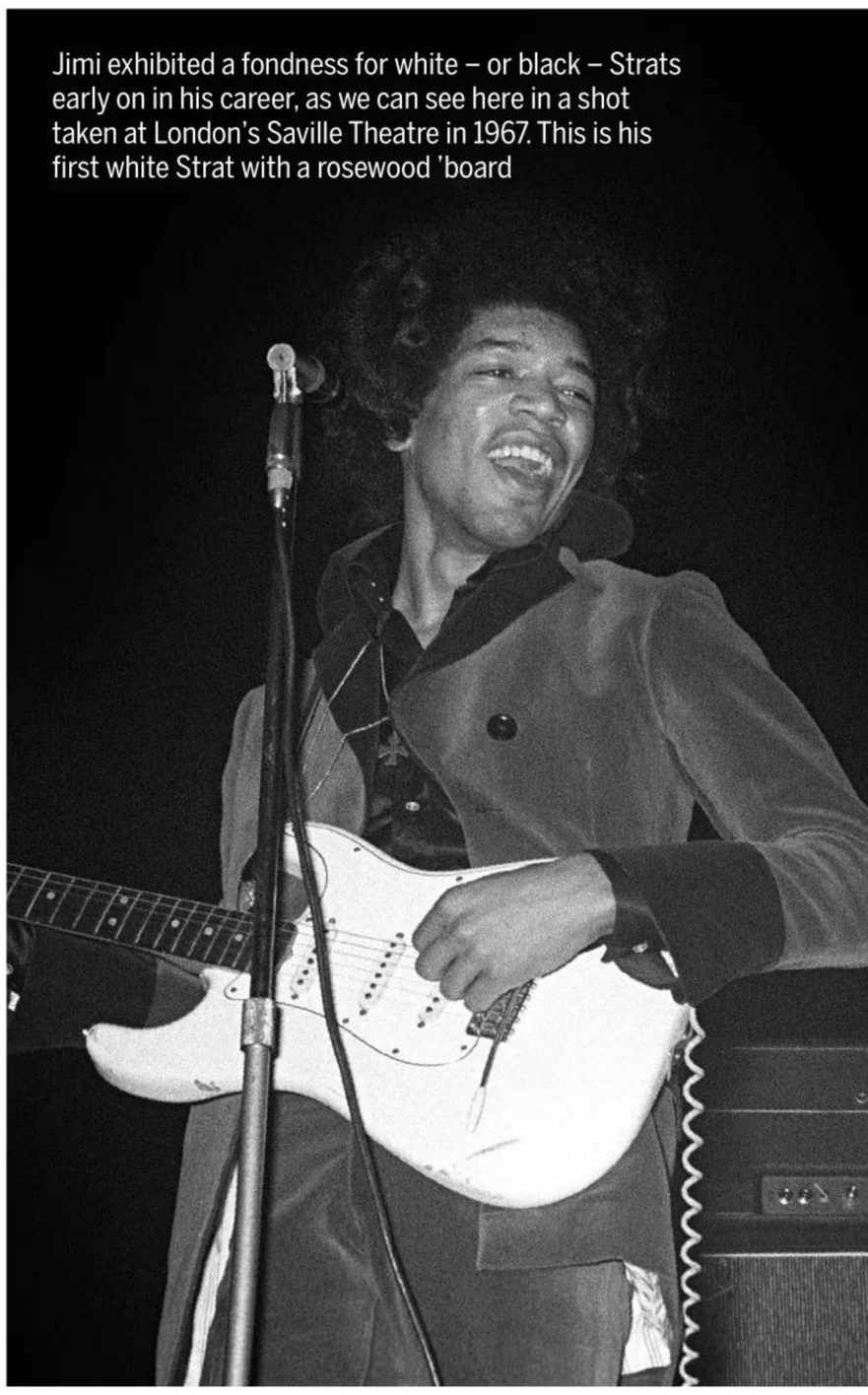
It took more than a fiery story in *Melody Maker*, but soon Jimi was making real ground. His first album, *Are You Experienced*, was released in Britain in May 1967 and streaked up the LP charts to No 2. He was playing more gigs than ever, and his wild onstage performances meant the Strats he used took a real beating – as did Jimi's teeth from his regular dental-picking routine.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Neville Marten remembers his brush with a possible Hendrix artefact... "In 1971 I saw Free on TV with Paul Kossoff playing a white Strat. Instant lust set in so I trawled the London shops but to no avail. Then, in the *Melody Maker* ads I spotted it: white Fender Stratocaster, rosewood neck, £115. I rang the number (Romford) and agreed to buy it. They would deliver it.

"On the day, two besuited gents turned up with the guitar. They'd said it was nearly new, but even then I knew a small headstock meant otherwise. Still, I bought it. It looked stunning. When I took it to bits I discovered the neck was a slab 'board, pre-'63, the neckplate was F-stamped with a 1966 serial number (which I still remember), and the pickups were different again; it had an extra strap button on the lower horn and the nut was loose in its slot, clear indications it had been used upside down.

"Who, at that time, could afford to make one Strat out of three and played a right-hander upside down? And who were those guys? I'll never know for sure, but odds on it was Jimi's. Sadly, it was a pretty poor guitar – probably the runt of the litter – and I sold it a year later. For £115. D'oh!"



Jimi exhibited a fondness for white – or black – Strats early on in his career, as we can see here in a shot taken at London's Saville Theatre in 1967. This is his first white Strat with a rosewood 'board

PHOTO BY CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

By May '67, he was playing at least one sunburst Strat with rosewood 'board, and for a *Top Of The Pops* TV performance of *Purple Haze* he mimed with what looked like a Fiesta Red finish Strat. Chas talked to Ray Jones at *Beat Instrumental* around this time and said that Jimi had already been through six Strats: two stolen (presumably the Aldershot black one and the Roundhouse white one), two others "fogged up on him" (surely a southerner's misquote of Chas's north-eastern accent), and two that Jimi "always carries on gigs".

Usually, Jimi reserved one of the two gigging guitars for his more extreme stage antics. Richard Green wrote in *Record Mirror*: "He kisses the guitar, sits on it and treads on it. Quite apart from belting it with his elbow and caressing the amplifier with it." The sequence where Jimi "caressed" the speaker cabinets with his Strat seemed to another observer more like aggressively "humping the amp". It did no favours to the poor instrument earmarked for such treatment, nor to those charged with keeping the guitars roadworthy.

The team would vary from time to time, but most often in mid-'67 there was Gerry Stickells (road manager) and Neville Chesters (roadie), and sometimes Roger Mayer (technical support). They were exploiting the Strat's screw-together construction and would strip and swap bodies, necks, pickguards, controls and more. This makes it especially difficult to determine, in hindsight, how many Strats Jimi used. We'll almost certainly never know for sure, but there were probably no more than 15 base instruments – regularly repurposed and chopped about, sometimes with the same neck appearing on several bodies – right up to the point in 1968 when, as we'll see, Jimi appeared to settle on two primary instruments.

"WE CALLED THEM THE SACRIFICIAL GUITAR... PUT TOGETHER FROM ALL THE SCRAPS WE HAD, JUST TO MAKE A GUITAR THAT WORKED FOR THE END OF THE SHOW"

ROGER MAYER

SMASHED AT THE SAVILLE

Roger Mayer recalls the changing nature of the Strats reserved for the rough treatment. "We called them the sacrificial guitar," he says with a smile. "It would be put together from all the scraps we had, just to make a guitar that worked for the end of the show, when Jimi was jumping on it and everything. Obviously, that wasn't one of the better ones. Maybe it would only have one working pickup, which we would wire directly – and there'd be no point for the volume control to work, because why would Jimi want to play on anything less than 10?"

One victim of the onstage frenzy was a Candy Apple Red model, with a rare sighting at this period for Jimi of a maple 'board. He used it through a European stint in May '67 when it was fitted with a procession of non-standard knobs and switch tips thanks to the hammering it took against the speakers and elsewhere.

Chas told *New Musical Express* later: "The smashing routine really began by accident. Jimi was pulled off stage by a few over-enthusiastic fans, and as he jumped back on the stage he threw his guitar on before him. When he picked it up he saw that it had cracked and several of the strings were broken – he just went barmy and smashed everything in sight. The German audience loved it, and we decided to keep it in as part of the act."

By the end of May the guitar was in a sorry state, the crack developing from the bridge right back across the rear of the body. Jimi decided it was time for this one to go, but rather than consign it to the parts bin, he chose to give it a special send-off. Another show at the Saville Theatre loomed in early June, the last British gig before the Experience went off for Jimi's homecoming US tour that would last until August of that year.

He planned for this gig and this guitar to mark a kind of farewell. Jimi took his battered and cracked red Strat and painted the front with black and white swirling foliage and hearts. On the back he painted a white ground and then added flowers and a big message about the "universal gypsie queen of true, free expressed music", adding the date and location of the gig alongside.

Jimi and his Experience played their final Saville set, opening with a cover of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*,





3. From the Saville gig with handwritten note: 'Died June 4 1967'. This model was originally Candy Apple Red with embellishments from Jimi himself, including a poem on the back (see final page of feature)



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF POP CULTURE, SEATTLE, WA

released a matter of days before, as a nod to Paul McCartney and George Harrison in the audience. He played a black/rosewood Strat throughout the gig, but as the band prepared to perform *Are You Experienced* for their finale, a roadie handed Jimi his painted Strat.

Hugh Nolan in *Disc And Music Echo* wrote that Jimi "proceeded to smash a beautifully-painted guitar and hurl the pieces into the clamouring crowd... a guitar he'd painted in glorious swirling colours and written a poem on the back dedicated to Britain and its audiences. Bathed in a flickering strobe light, he crashed the guitar about the stage and hurled what was left of it to eager souvenir-hunters in the audience."

IT HAPPENED IN MONTEREY

Later in June '67, Jimi and his Experience flew to the US for the long tour that saw him continue to play a black Strat, as well as a white/rosewood one, and also a white/rosewood Strat with a tortoiseshell pickguard. The first gig was at the Monterey Pop Festival, and again a plan was hatched to grab attention, not least because the event was being filmed by DA Pennebaker for a documentary movie. He would burn another guitar.

Jimi certainly wasn't going to ruin his black Strat, so upon arrival in San Francisco a sacrificial red Strat was acquired. As with the Saville guitar, Jimi sprayed it white and then decorated it, this time with vines and flowers and hearts. He went on stage later and played eight songs on the black Strat then changed to the prepared guitar. "I'm going to sacrifice something that I really love," he told the audience before the last song of the set. "Today I think it's the right thing, all right, so I'm not losing my mind. This is this, for everybody here, man. This is the only way I can do it. So we're going to do the English and American combined anthem together, okay?"

Jimi coaxed some feedback from the painted Strat for a while, toying with the vibrato arm, and then launched into *Wild Thing*. He ran through his stage tricks – playing on his knees, behind his back, up against the speaker cabs – and finally put the Strat down on the stage, squirted lighter fluid over it, kissed it goodbye, and struck a match to set it on fire. He watched the flames for a few seconds then snatched up the guitar and smashed it against the stage. He threw the pieces to the crowd then he walked off stage, knowing his black Strat was safe. The (red) Stratocaster was dead. Long live the (black) Stratocaster. And the (white) Stratocaster.

"I'M GOING TO SACRIFICE SOMETHING THAT I REALLY LOVE. TODAY I THINK IT'S THE RIGHT THING, ALL RIGHT, SO I'M NOT LOSING MY MIND"

JIMI HENDRIX AT MONTEREY

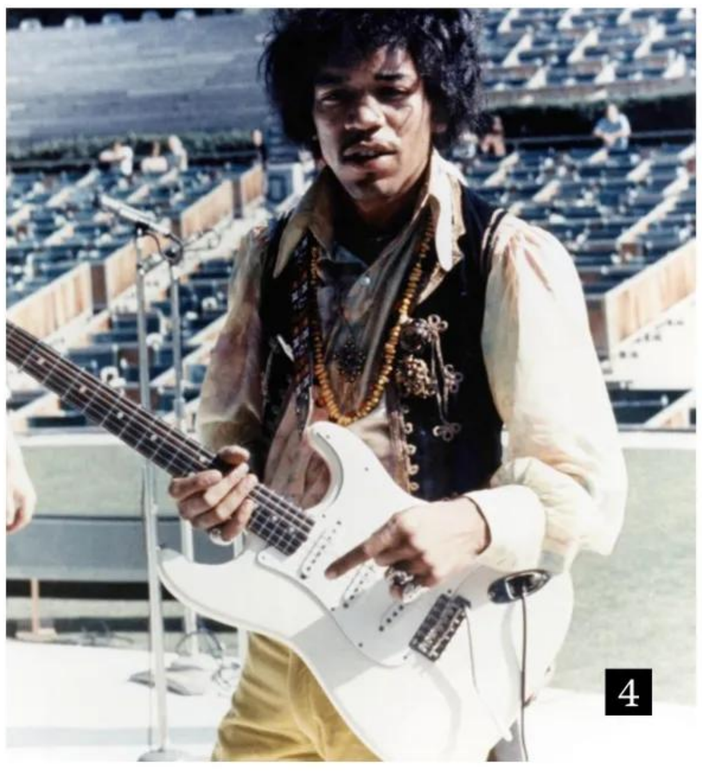


PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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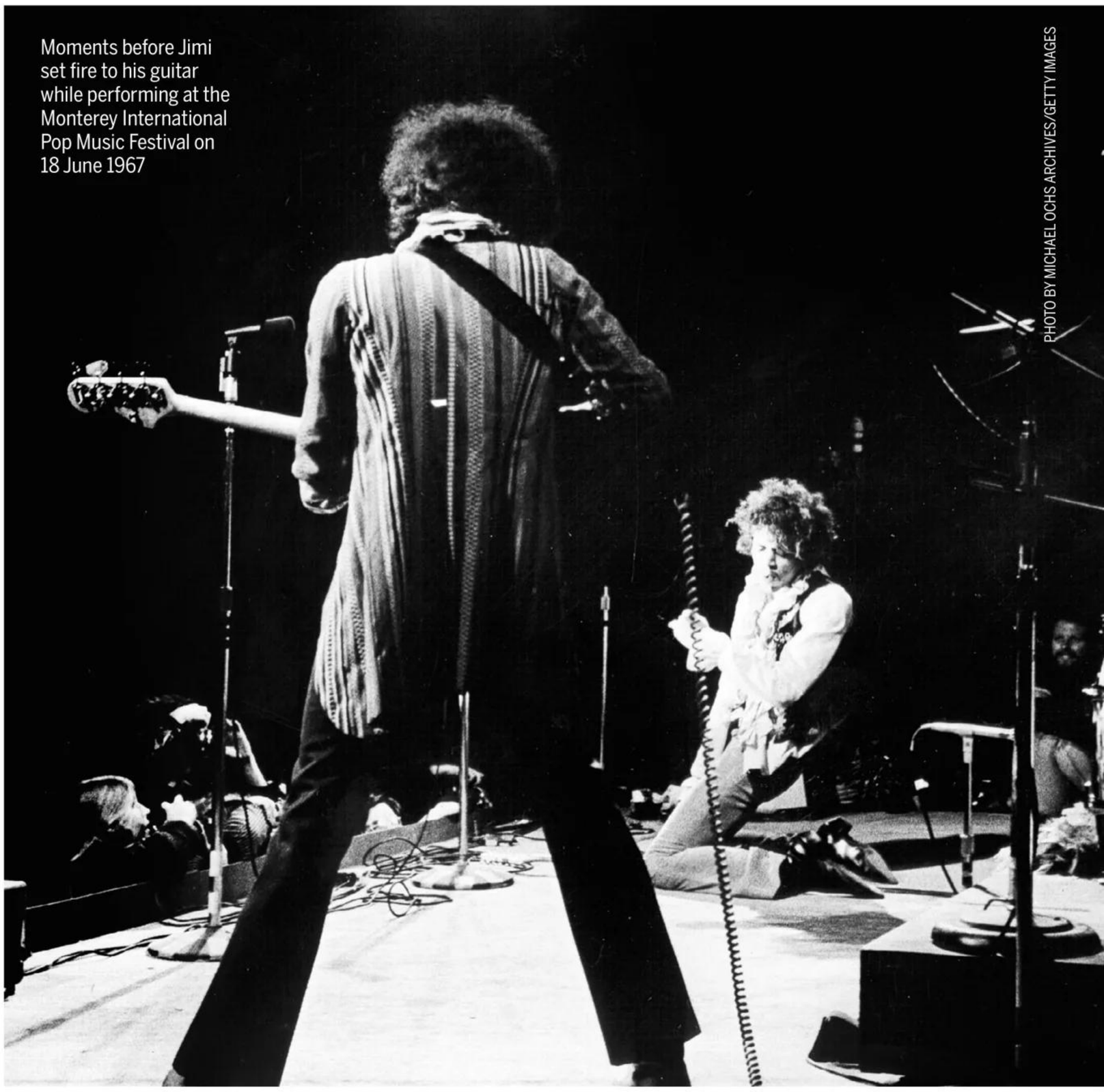


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PHOTO BY PAUL RYAN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

4. Jimi on stage during the soundcheck for his performance at the Hollywood Bowl on 18 August 1967 in Los Angeles, California, with most likely his fourth white/rosewood Strat

5. DA Pennebaker's film of the Monterey Pop Festival went on to introduce the world to Jimi's occasional fiery Strat sacrifices; note the vines, flowers and hearts motif



Moments before Jimi set fire to his guitar while performing at the Monterey International Pop Music Festival on 18 June 1967

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Jimi played a number of other guitars on stage aside from his Strats. Starting in summer '67, he would occasionally switch to a Gibson, mostly for blues numbers. First came a '67 Flying V that he painted with flamboyant decorations, then a '68 SG Custom, on next to another V, this time a sunburst '69, and finally a custom-ordered black left-handed '69 Flying V. And in March and April '68, he played a sunburst Fender Jazzmaster on stage at a few gigs.

MAKE DO & MEND

Back to London briefly for a few UK shows and TV appearances, the band was soon off again for a romp through Europe in September '67, with Jimi playing almost exclusively a white/rosewood Strat. Upon his return, he played another gig at the Saville and used a white Strat that on closer inspection had received some unusual mods. Roger Mayer did the work. He says the Strat in question had been "biffed up", another victim of Jimi's energetic stagecraft.

"It was broken pretty much along the glue joints," Roger recalls, "so we re-glued it and used long screws to hold it all together. I resurfaced the neck, with a lot of attention to the neck-body joint, to be sure we maintained the sustain." The controls had been ripped apart, and with Fender spares unavailable back then, Roger put on three black knobs and replaced the three-way switch with three mini-toggles.

"The three toggles turned each pickup off or on, which gives you seven combinations," he explains, "which was useful if you wanted to have bridge and neck, bridge and middle, all three –

6



6. Smash hits: a fragment of the Monterey Strat still exists at the Museum Of Pop Culture in Seattle, Washington

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF POP CULTURE, SEATTLE, WA



7



7. Another exhibit at the MoPOP museum – part of the sunburst Strat smashed at the Royal Albert Hall on 24 February 1969

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF POP CULTURE, SEATTLE, WA

whatever. And those type of switches were pretty stage-proof. Jimi-proof! I mean, sometimes when he raked the amplifier with the neck of his guitar the violence was such that the wire-wound strings would be cut right through on each fret. Anyway, repairs done, we had the guitar repainted at my dad's firm, which did product finishing for the electronics industry. It was painted Old English White, a British Motor Corporation colour."

By the end of November, Jimi had three white/rosewood Strats on hand for at least one gig (in Blackpool), and he was by now in the habit of throwing one toward the back of the stage and past the amps as a performance flourish. Tough though Strats may be, this is not the kind of treatment they were designed for, and yet more lash-ups and running repairs were necessarily made.

GOOD MORNING WOODSTOCK

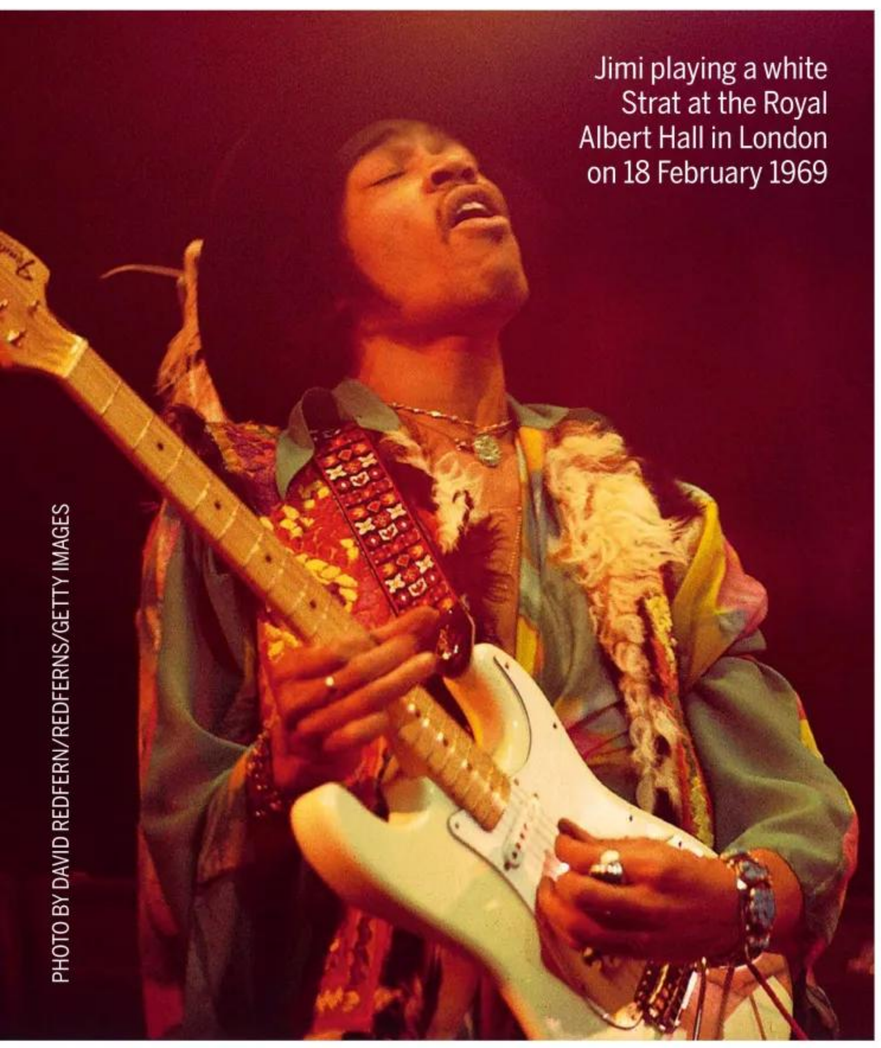
From the start of February '68, the Experience shifted their attention from the UK and Europe and concentrated on playing across the pond in America. At first, Jimi continued to play white/rosewood Strats, although roadie Neville Chester bought what he called in his diary "another secondhand Strat" at Manny's music store in New York City early in March. A few days later Jimi was playing this sunburst/rosewood Strat alongside a white one. A blue Strat turned up at gigs around this time, too, apparently in Fender's Lake Placid Blue finish, but its headstock was split apart thanks to one of those flights to the back of the stage, and it limped on until retired in September.

From October, still gigging incessantly in the States, Jimi began using two new Strats, both with maple fingerboards, one in Olympic White (Mitch Mitchell said it was another Manny's purchase) and one in Black. They appear to have lasted Jimi until his death, just under two years later. For a European tour in January '69, he used a black/maple Strat exclusively, and at the Albert Hall in February he smashed a sacrificial sunburst/rosewood model.

From that time on, almost without exception, he would play a black and a white maple-'board Strat interchangeably. In May, a white one suffered some damage at the neck-headstock join, possibly a break, leading to a gig in June where he played a white Strat with a Telecaster neck temporarily attached. The most celebrated of Hendrix performances came early one morning at the Woodstock festival in August '69, with a new band he'd assembled after the Experience split, and he played a white/maple Strat.

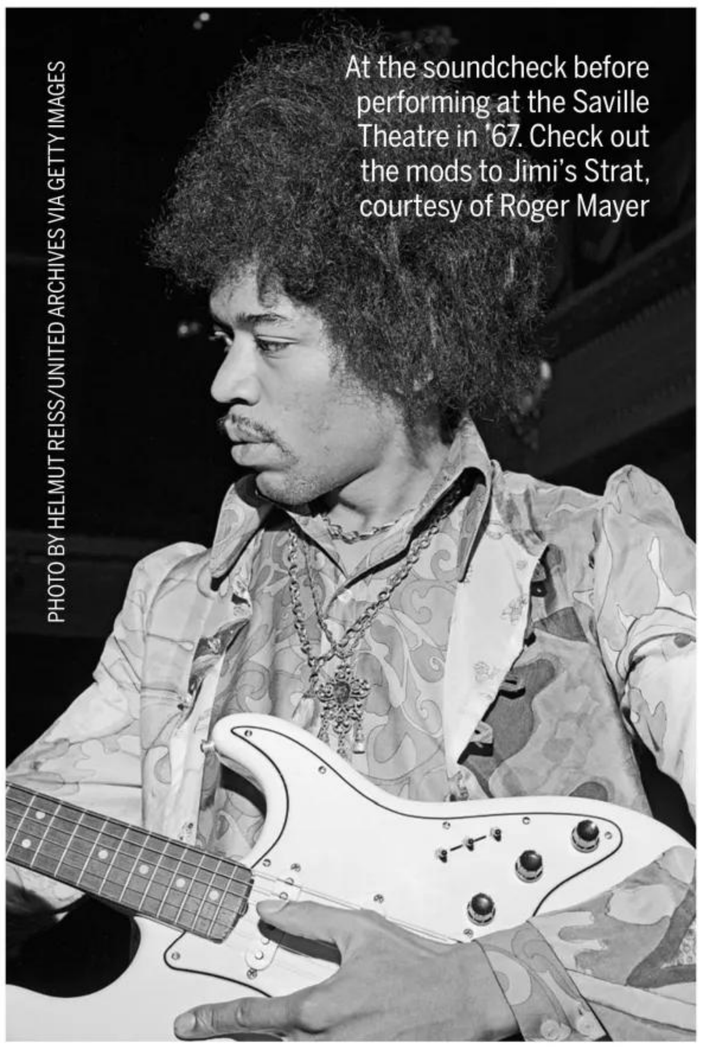
Following a brief time fronting the Band Of Gypsys with Buddy Miles on drums and Billy Cox on bass, he put together an Experience with Mitch on drums and Billy on bass. For his final gig – in September 1970 at a festival on Fehmarn island in Germany, and just 12 days before his untimely death – he played both a black and a white maple-'board Strat.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



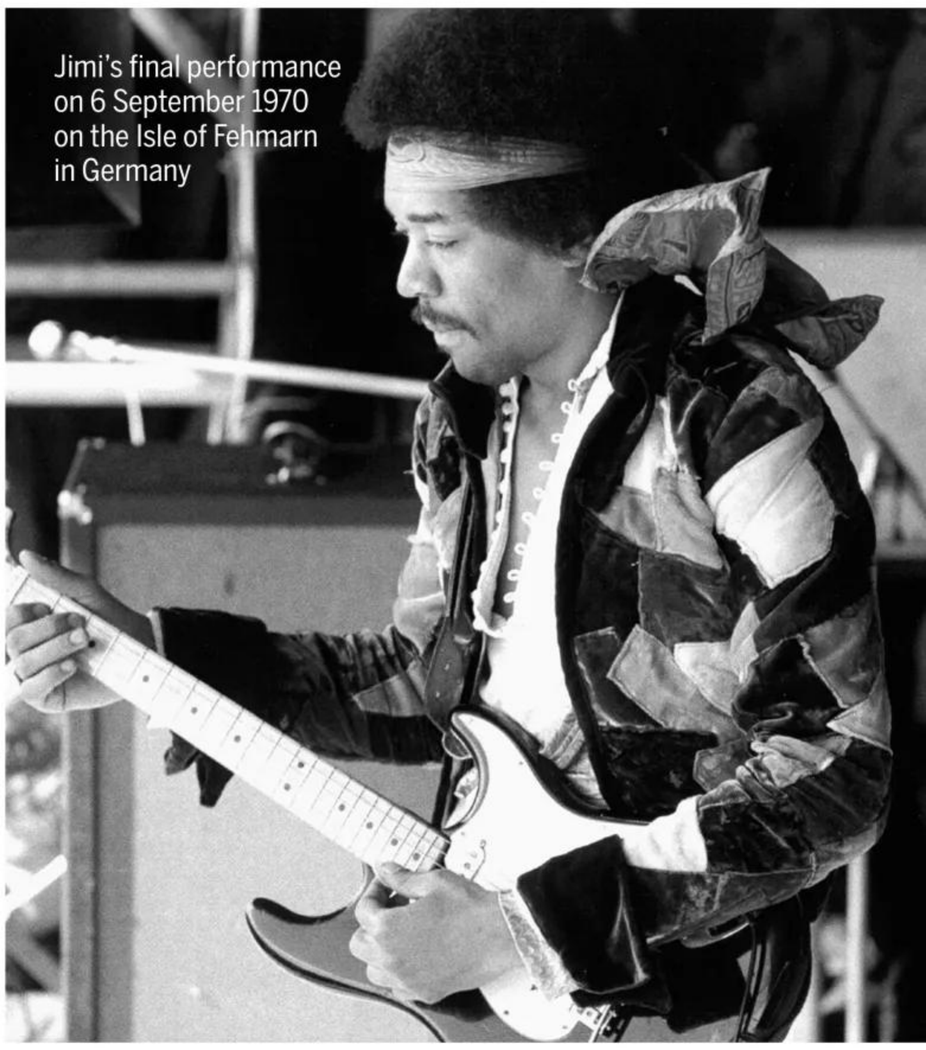
Jimi playing a white Strat at the Royal Albert Hall in London on 18 February 1969

PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



At the soundcheck before performing at the Saville Theatre in '67. Check out the mods to Jimi's Strat, courtesy of Roger Mayer

PHOTO BY HELMUT REISS/UNITED ARCHIVES VIA GETTY IMAGES



Jimi's final performance on 6 September 1970 on the Isle of Fehmarn in Germany



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF POP CULTURE, SEATTLE, WA

8. Undoubtedly one of the most iconic instruments in rock history: the white Strat that Jimi played at the Woodstock Festival in 1969, sold at Sotheby's for £198k

8

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Today, there are a few well-documented Stratocasters known to be instruments that Jimi played. There have also been a number of guitars offered for sale through the years that were less convincing, some laughably so. Talk to any professional involved in Hendrix-related auctions or museums or collections and the subject inevitably comes up. They will tell you that many of the "Hendrix Strats" put up for sale have questionable provenance. They will add – with raised eyebrows – that some of those have still managed to sell, and for big money. And they will conclude that some purported ex-Jimi Strats might actually be right, but that they lack enough supporting material to prove their authenticity.

Let's take a brief look at two of the best surviving Hendrix Stratocasters, both owned by MoPOP, the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, Washington. The museum was established by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, who bought the white '68 Strat that Jimi played at Woodstock and other later-period gigs. Paul acquired it for around a million and a half dollars from Gabriele Ansaloni, aka Red Ronnie, an Italian radio and TV host, who had bid successfully for the instrument in London back in 1990 at a Sotheby's auction, where it was sold for its owner, Mitch Mitchell.

Gabriele paid £198,000, at the time a record price for a guitar, and he says he bought the Woodstock Strat because he's a Hendrix fan. "In a way," he recalls, "Jimi contacted me – that's a long, long story – and I had to buy that guitar. I had it for two years, and one day Mick Hucknall of Simply Red was staying at my house. I showed him the guitar, and he said no-one is to play that guitar – it's like Van Gogh's brushes, no-one has to touch them. I had the idea to do a benefit show and ask Eric Clapton to play it, but after Mick said those things to me, I didn't do anything with that guitar."

He adds: "I knew I wasn't *the owner* of that guitar. In fact, Mitch Mitchell said I am not the owner – it's in my hands, but I am not the owner. So, one night in 1992 I asked Jimi Hendrix: 'I have no money, the bank wants money back, what do I have to do with that guitar?' And the day after, I had a phone call from Paul Allen's secretary telling me that he wanted to do a museum, asking me if I wanted to sell that guitar. And I said yes."

Peter Blecha was a full-time curator with Paul Allen from 1993 to 2001, helping to steer what began as a private collection to become a museum, which opened in 2000 as the Experience Music Project. He remembers, soon after the white Strat's acquisition, that rumours circulated questioning its authenticity. So he set about proving its use at Woodstock.

"I arranged for digital close-ups of the neck, so we could look at the grain on the fretboard or on the back of the neck or on the headstock," Peter says. "We got the highest quality Woodstock video footage we could and took stills of certain frames. Then we got the guitar out, lined them up, and they matched. We never had any doubt the guitar was real, but at that point we proved it, based on the wood-grain fingerprints."

Jacob McMurray, who is the current director of curatorial, collections & exhibits at MoPOP, says the Woodstock Strat sits at the very top of the Hendrix hierarchy among the museum's 6,000 Jimi-related artefacts. "And one of my favourites in the whole collection is the fragment of the guitar he smashed at

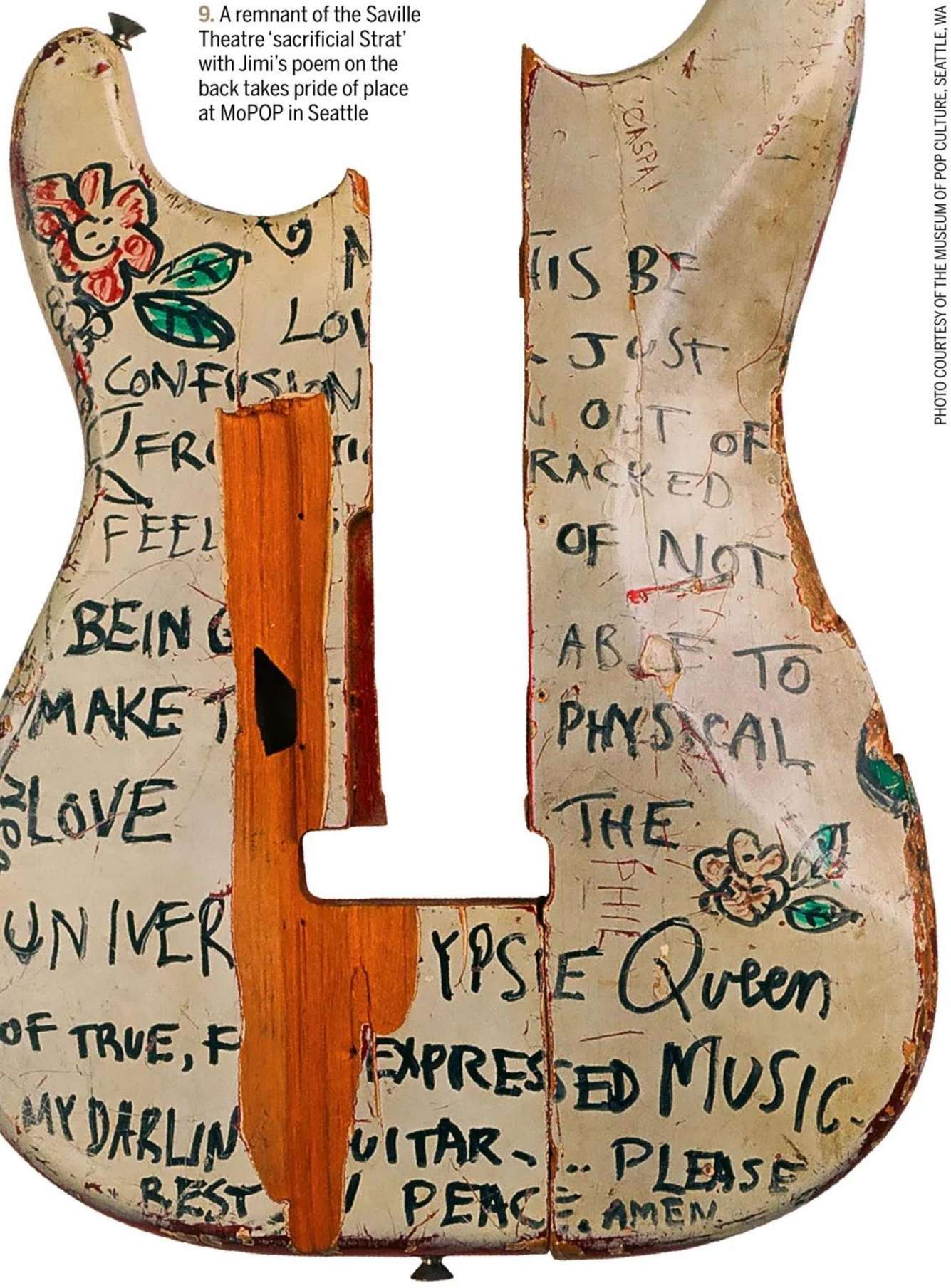


Italian radio and TV host Gabriele Ansaloni paid £198,000 for the Woodstock guitar in 1990 at a Sotheby's auction in London. He's pictured here (left) with Mitch Mitchell, who sold the guitar

PHOTO BY GABRIELE ANSALONI



9



9. A remnant of the Saville Theatre 'sacrificial Strat' with Jimi's poem on the back takes pride of place at MoPOP in Seattle

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF POP CULTURE, SEATTLE, WA

the Saville Theatre," Jacob reports. The museum acquired these two broken body halves at another Sotheby's auction in London, in 1991, paying £29,700.

"I love the fact that when Jimi landed in London in late September '66 he was totally unknown, but nine months later he's on top of the British pop charts, and he plays this last show before he goes to appear at Monterey," Jacob says. "It's a few days after the release of *Sgt Pepper's*, and he comes out playing a cover of the title track almost as an homage to the scene that's allowed him prominence.

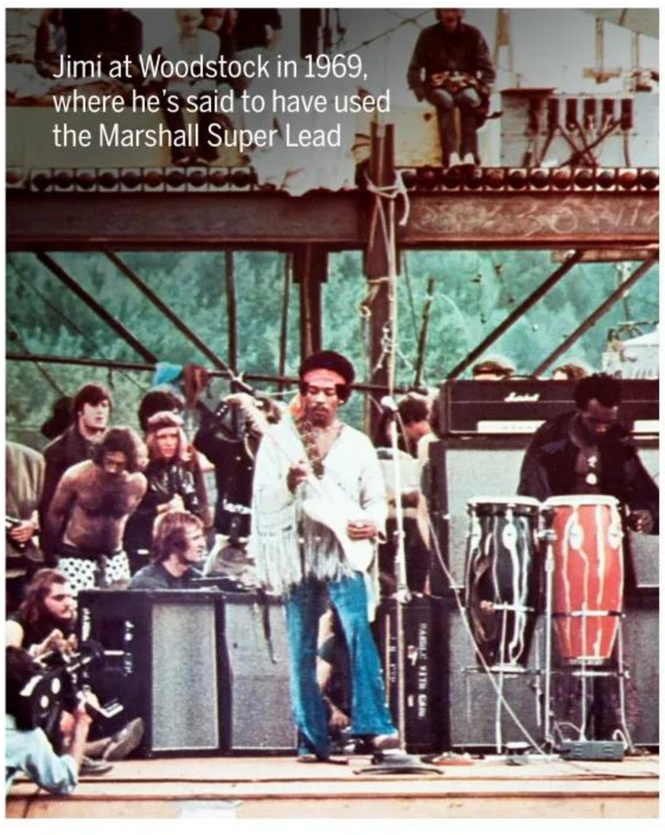
"And the guitar he smashes is so Jimi, with those psychedelic swirls and the *Love Or Confusion*-esque poem on the back. I did a Nirvana exhibit here at the museum, and while Kurt Cobain smashed a lot of guitars, he did so for very different reasons. For Kurt, it was a kind of punk-rock nihilism. Jimi, though, wrote on the back of that Strat, 'My darling guitar, rest in peace, amen.' For him," Jacob concludes, "it was a loving sacrifice to the musical gods."

> "JIMI WROTE ON THE BACK OF THAT [SAVILLE] STRAT, 'MY DARLING GUITAR, REST IN PEACE, AMEN.' FOR HIM, IT WAS A LOVING SACRIFICE TO THE MUSICAL GODS"
>
> ***JACOB McMURRAY, MoPOP***

An imposing monument stands in honour of Jimi at his gravesite at Greenwood Memorial Park in Renton, Washington. In the centre, on a plinth under a granite dome, stands a sculpted electric guitar. It is unmistakably a Fender Stratocaster. That mesmerising combination – Jimi Hendrix and his Fender Stratocaster – still haunts guitarists to this day. "We use the same thing anyone else would," he told *Guitar Player* in 1968, "but we use it with imagination and common sense." G

Tony Bacon would like to thank: Gabriele Ansaloni (Red Ronnie), Sid Bishop, Pete Blecha, Craig Bradley, Dave Brewis, Chas McCue, Jörg Düsedau, Mike Eldred, Craig Inciardi, Tony Magee, Perry Margouleff, Nev Marten, Stephen Maycock, Roger Mayer, and Jacob McMurray.

PIECES OF HISTORY



Jimi at Woodstock in 1969, where he's said to have used the Marshall Super Lead

PHOTO BY UNITED ARCHIVES GMBH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

In April of this year, two historic pieces of gear owned and played by Jimi Hendrix went up for sale at online retailer Reverb.com: a 1962 Fender Jazzmaster that Hendrix played with the Isley Brothers and Little Richard, and a heavily used Marshall Super Lead 100 that featured on stage throughout 1969. Both items were being sold by the LA-based Neil's Gear Bazaar.

The sunburst 1962-dated Jazzmaster was played throughout 1964 and carried an eye-watering price tag of $750,000. Elsewhere was a Marshall Super Lead 100 built in March 1969. Embossed with "J.H. EXP." spray paint, it was used at a number of high-profile Hendrix performances that year, including the Rainbow Bridge Vibratory Color Sound Experiment in July, Woodstock Music and Art Fair in August, plus Isle of Wight Festival in August 1970, and the Germany-based Open Air Love & Peace Festival in September 1970. The ultra-rare amp was listed at $350,000. [MO]

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ERIC GALES

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis **First Published** July 2022

ERIC GALES' NEW ALBUM 'CROWN' IS THE WORK OF AN ARTIST AT HIS APEX. THE CHOPS ARE STAGGERING, BUT IT'S THE SONGWRITING – WHICH DELVES DEEP INTO HIS PAINFUL EXPERIENCES OF PREJUDICE, DEMONS OF SELF-DOUBT AND ADDICTION – THAT HITS YOU IN THE GUT. IS THERE ANYONE TO BETTER HIM RIGHT NOW? WE JOINED HIM TO FIND OUT...

Anyone who has witnessed Eric Gales live will agree that he fully deserves his newfound status as blues-rock royalty. But his guitar vocabulary extends way beyond just those domains as it incorporates elements of jazz, funk, soul and gospel within its compass, all channelled into what he describes as his "upside-down and backwards" playing style. Touring to promote his new album, *Crown*, he recently wowed audiences across the UK with the unstoppable force of his live performance, a canny blend of showmanship and unbelievable chops. "Everybody is actually blown away, man," he tells us as we settle down for a cuppa in the *Guitarist* studio. "And the response and the emotion that has been displayed by the audience receiving the material live has been awesome. Everybody's been really enjoying it."

Lyrically, the album explores areas that are at once both old and familiar and shockingly contemporary. "It's inspirational to watch actually, to see the tears come in people's eyes when I'm playing and singing these lyrics," he continues. "Predominantly, a lot of people come to the shows to see the guitar playing, but at the end of it they are moved by the things that I have to say. It's a one-two punch, doing everything that I can to try to help change the world."

To say that *Crown*'s release was eagerly awaited would be an understatement. As with many recent projects it was stalled by the onset of the pandemic. "We made wise use of our time and we even delayed the record coming out for a year because I didn't want it to be released and not being able to fully promote it and tour and everything," Eric remembers. "So we held off until this year. It's been anticipated for quite some time and I hope it was worth the wait."

Unleashed to the world at the beginning of the year, the album has proven to be not only worth the wait but something of a game-changer for Gales with the prize finally in sight and a coronation imminent...

Would you say that *Crown* is very autobiographical in a lot of ways?

"It's very autobiographical. The writing was taken from the state the world is in and it's been in for quite some time as it relates to race and equality and things like that. We felt like it was important to get that message across on this record."

What is the central message of the new album?

"That we're all here for a purpose. No-one is less than nobody – we're all equal, we've all got parts to contribute. When the whole world can view it like that, then you can begin to be a better place."

What got you into playing guitar in the first place?

"Man, music was inevitable. My brothers were already playing and I got to be turned on to Albert King and Muddy Waters and Hendrix and Stevie Ray and just a whole cast of different players. I was going to church every week because my mum and dad were heavily religious, and so I was in the church and I began to play in the church. I was listening to blues and rock and everything. So that was basically what my household was like coming up: traditional gospel, blues, rock, funk... everything."

Are you actually left-handed?
"I play left-handed, but I write right-handed. I just picked [the guitar] up and that was what was comfortable. I picked the guitar up when I was about four years old, so [I wasn't even thinking] which way to play it. That's what felt comfortable to me and, ironically, my brothers play the same way."

Did you inherit a guitar from your brothers?
"Yeah, it was passed down. I'm the youngest of five brothers and it was passed down from my uncles to them. Cousins and aunts and uncles and everybody was playing, you know, my mom and dad and all of them. They had a gospel group, so it was like everywhere, it was all over me. That's why I say music was inevitable, seeping into all of us in some kind of way. First thing I learnt to play was some Albert King stuff, you know, topped with gospel music, just basic church, praise and worship type of music and things like that. That was where the egg was hatched."

When was the first Eric Gales Band formed?
"Oh my, the first Eric Gales Band happened when I was 14 years old. But I did a battle of the bands around the town when I was like 11 in my brother's band. So it started there. And then, when I was 14, my brother said, 'Let's turn this into The Eric Gales Band... and you're going to be the frontman.'"

What sort of material were you playing back then?
"It was all original. The first two Eric Gales Band CDs were all originals, except we did a rendition of *I Want You (She's So Heavy)* on the *Picture Of A Thousand Faces* record in '93."



PHOTO BY CATHERINE MCGANN/GETTY IMAGES

"Cousins, aunts, uncles and everybody was playing – my mom and dad, all of them. It was everywhere, it was all over me"

When did you first come across Hendrix?
"Day one. I mean, my brother was hugely influenced by Hendrix, so he was definitely one of the ones I was introduced to. But I began to be more influenced by people that were influenced by Hendrix more than him. You know, you can't get around him being the top of the tree, but there's people ahead of him, such as Buddy Guy, Curtis Mayfield, Albert King, Lightnin' Hopkins and Robert Johnson. It's who you are influenced by that automatically makes you acquire who *they* were influenced by. It's just evolution. So, Hendrix, you know, there'll never be another him. I just do my best not to be the next him, and I just do my best to be the first me. And that is honouring him, by showing how his legacy made me be who I am.

"Hendrix is a huge part of everybody's style and they're lying if they say that he ain't, but the object is – how does it help mould you into being the best in you? Because, at the end of the day, what's going to stay and stick is your DNA. No-one has a DNA like yours. So what type of imprint are you leaving? Is it an imitation of an imprint of somebody you like, or is it your own? And that's what matters."

1. The guitarist grew up surrounded by music, playing guitar as a child in church alongside his family and older brothers. By the age of 14 (as pictured above in New York City), he'd formed his first group, The Eric Gales Band

As you progressed, these other influences started to come through. There's a lot of jazz in your playing, particularly in your chord voicings. Who were you listening to at the time?
"Wes Montgomery, George Benson, Herb Ellis, Kenny Burrell, Grant Green, Jonathan Butler... All of those guys, man, were people that my brother was hipping me on to. And I just took it in, it was amazing. There are plenty that I'm probably leaving out that contributed as well. But there are a lot of known and unknown musicians out there who contributed to the whole pot of inspiration. I was basically just at home and listening to their records. YouTube wasn't even around back then, so it was just dropping the needle on the record and trying to pick it out."

So all of these different guitar styles poured into your guitar playing, but blues was basically the core?
"Yeah, it's the main ingredient that is common in all of it. Everything else is just spices that's thrown in sporadically with no rhyme or reason, no motive, no process. That's totally a feeling thing. It's very hard to dictate that."

You once said that there are a lot of similarities between gospel and the blues.
"Absolutely, yeah. Music-wise, it's the same sensation, the same emotion that you get. Just two different types of words, you know, blues and gospel, but musically, the effect emotionally, it's exactly the same. Gospel is



SOUND ADVICE

Stuck in the woodshed and in need of a little encouragement? Heed the wise words of a master guitarist…

"Don't stop what you're doing. No matter the amount of frustration that comes to you, no matter how many days you end up frustrated, the days that you aren't frustrated are gonna outweigh them. Keep yourself surrounded by the right people, don't let the woes of this world suck you in, and try to stay inspired. With those things, I think you've got a winning chance. Keep doing what you're doing and, if all else fails, listen to *Crown*!"

"Blues is the world man's [music] and gospel is a religious person's blues… But musically, the effect emotionally, it's exactly the same"

the religious man's blues. That's what it is. I've never thought about that before, but that's exactly what it is. Gospel is a religious person's blues because it's pain, it's suffering, it's all kinds of things they spoke about in gospel, but it's the same. Because pain, suffering and all kinds of things are talked about in blues. So blues is the world man's [music] and gospel is a religious person's blues."

What gear did you use when you were recording *Crown*?
"In the studio I used my signature DV Mark Raw Dawg [amp] blended with a little bit of Dumble that was provided by Joe Bonamassa. I used the RawDawg Magneto [guitar] predominantly for the record and I used my pedalboard that has a Cry Baby wah , a DigiTech Whammy pedal, a Colossus fuzz made by Mojo Hand, a [EWS] Brute Drive made by Xotic Pedals, a Tech 21 [Boost] DLA, the Raw Dawg Boost Drive made by MXR and an Octavio MXR fuzz."

When did you first discover Magneto guitars?
"I would say it was about 13 or 14 years ago, and I've been liking them ever since. They kind of discovered me, man. I had a conversation with Chris [Hatstatt], president of Magneto Guitars, and he said, 'Man, I got something I think you'll like,' and I tried it out. At that time, I was going through some things and other companies really didn't want to deal with me – but he did and I never forgot that. We just continued to build our relationship, and I never will forget the fact that he was always in my corner."

What sort of features were you looking for on your signature model?
"Oh, there's the bells and whistles, being draped in gold and all this, but nothing different to the original one that I was playing: 'Give me that, but let's engrave my name in the neck…' and stuff like that and putting my nickname, Raw Dawg, on the back of it. But I like the tone of the Jason Lollar pickups that were in them, they sounded great and we just dressed it up a little bit more to look flashy, like I like to be. I would have played it like it was, but he was like, 'Let's do a signature. What would you want to see?' I told him and boom, boom, boom. Basically, we doctored up the Eric Gales model."

Just two controls – master volume and tone?
"Yeah, a master tone with one tone knob that works on all three pickups in all positions. It's just a little more convenient, to be honest with you. I mean, one tone knob working all three pickups is a little more convenient than mixing and blending two tone knobs on the traditional Strat. I'm not unaccustomed to working with that, it's what I worked with for years."



2

PHOTO BY JIM ARBOGAST

2. Trimming the tone during the recording sessions for *Crown*

Were you playing Strat-style guitars from the outset?
"Oh yeah, I've always been more connected to a Strat style. I mean, I've had Les Pauls and I even have a Flying V and SGs, Paul Reed Smiths. But my particular preference is more of a Strat style."

How did you go about developing your signature DV Mark Raw Dawg amp?
"Just basically had a conversation with Marco [De Virgiliis, DV Mark owner and amp designer] and told him I wanted something crystal clean and loud. I wanted it to be not too heavy and he made it all happen with the signature model. Treble, bass, midrange, volume and reverb, which I rarely use, but it's there. As to the cabinet, I chose a cabinet with two neo [neodymium] 12-inch speakers in, I think they're 60 watts. I used two generally, but I often like to run four cabinets as well. It's not about the volume, it's just about the dirt that it gives, you know? That's a pretty well oiled machine for me with that combination of the pedalboard and the guitar, and I can take that anywhere and take care of business."

What does the immediate future hold for you?
"A whole lot more touring, supporting this record, getting this message of *I Want My Crown* out to everybody. Meanwhile, riding forward is getting some material together and just keep going forward, man, and trying to shape the world [with] every gig, every note that I can." G



HEAR IT HERE

Eric Gales *Crown*

Eric manages to coax so many shades of tone from his guitar on tracks such as *The Storm, Stand Up* and *Rattlin' Change*, with particularly fine soloing throughout. Solo highlights include *The Storm, Survivor* (which channels both Eric Johnson and SRV), plus *Too Close To The Fire* and *My Own Best Friend*, with their *Little Wing/Lenny* influenced chordwork. Special mention should go to Eric's wife and collaborator, LaDonna, for her outstanding vocals on *Take Me Just As I Am*.

Eric Gales' new album, *Crown*, is out now via Provogue

www.ericgales.com

Les Paul

For many, the name Les Paul brings to mind only the iconic guitar played by blues and rock giants such as Clapton, Page, Green and Kossoff. Too few, these days, recall that Les Paul himself was a truly extraordinary guitarist, recording pioneer, inventor, luthier and songwriter. Time, then, to rediscover the man behind the machine

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Words Denny Ilett

Les was born Lester William Polsfuss in Waukesha, Wisconsin on 9 June, 1915. His parents, George and Evelyn, were of German extraction and, in an effort to 'anglicise' their name – common practice in the US at that time – dropped the 's', altering the spelling to Polfuss, then, later, Polfus. By the age of eight, Lester was already showing an interest in music, taking up piano and harmonica before moving on to the guitar. By his early teens, he was proficient enough to be picking up local gigs around town. To allow him to play guitar and harmonica at the same time, he invented and patented a neck-worn harmonica holder that remains the industry standard to this day.

Lester, now calling himself Rhubarb Red, became quite a name on the local scene, playing country music at burger joints, roadhouses and drive-ins playing on guitar and harmonica. He soon applied his audacious mind to the problem of making acoustic guitar loud enough to overcome crowd noise by devising a contraption that involved wiring his guitar to a gramophone stylus connected to a radio speaker, thus enabling him to amplify his acoustic and making him an early experimenter in the field of guitar amplification.

His next move, a few years later, was to devise a primitive solid-bodied electric guitar that he built using a piece of rail track. This was inspired by the fact that the early 'electric' guitars were, in fact, acoustic archtops with pickups fitted. These were prone to feedback and other unwanted noise that Lester set about addressing through further practical experiments throughout the late 1930s and into the 40s.

Sweet Home Chicago

Polfus made the move to Chicago in 1934 in a bid to make a bigger name for himself. Once there, he met jazz piano genius Art Tatum, which inspired him to take his guitar playing to the next level as jazz became his latest obsession. Despite this, he made his first records under his pseudonym Rhubarb Red in 1936 and also accompanied blues singer Georgia White on some sides for Decca. Shortly after, he adopted the name Les Paul.

When the first records by Django Reinhardt started to appear in the US in the mid-30s, Les was an instant convert. Up until that moment, the jazz-guitar stars in the US were Eddie Lang, Carl Kress and Dick McDonough. All three were virtuoso players who had the guitar scene virtually to themselves for many years from the mid-20s to mid-30s. To Les Paul, however, Reinhardt was on another level and famously commented that "I may as well be selling shoes" upon first hearing the Gypsy genius. Django became a huge influence on Paul's burgeoning jazz playing, which he seamlessly blended with his established country style.

Like all guitarists then, Les also experimented with horn-like phrasing on guitar, having listened to the great jazz brass and reed players that dominated the genre until the appearance of Charlie Christian. With his Gibson ES-150 guitar and EH-150 amp, Christian carved a new path into the 40s with his fluid legato phrases and all at a volume that could compete with the horn players. As it developed, Les Paul's guitar playing became a distinctive mix of Django, Christian and country picking that made him instantly recognisable.

'The Log'

With a trio featuring bassist Ernie Newton and Chet Atkins' half-brother Jim, Les made the move to New York in 1937, setting himself up in an apartment in Queens that quickly began to resemble a mad scientist's laboratory. Les's growing dissatisfaction with the amplified archtops that were being produced in the late-30s prompted him to design and build several prototype solid guitars that he dubbed 'The Log'. These, for the day, bizarre inventions were built using solid slabs of wood to which Les fitted pickups, a bridge, a neck and tuners. To this, he attached the side bouts of an Epiphone archtop to give it a more aesthetically pleasing appearance.

In 1941, Les took his prototype to Gibson but the company showed no interest, calling it "a broomstick with pickups". Gibson's 'problem' with the design was that they



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thought guitarists would have to take two guitars out on gigs: acoustic and the new-fangled solid electric! This allowed Leo Fender, with his Esquire guitar (soon, with a few alterations, to become the Telecaster) to go down in history as the maker of the first commercially available solid electric guitar in 1950. Paul's experiments with electricity almost killed him in 1941 when, in his apartment workshop, he electrocuted himself so badly that it took him two years to recover, which he spent in Hollywood working as a radio producer along with observing work and picking up ideas at the busy Rickenbacker plant.

In 1943, Les was drafted into the army where he worked for the Armed Forces Network with his trio, along with performing with such stars as Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters. A fascinating record of Les Paul's prowess as a jazz guitarist exists in the form of a Jazz At The Philharmonic concert from July 1944. JATP was an organisation run by impresario Norman Granz who felt that jazz musicians of the stature of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and many others belonged in the concert hall. Granz tolerated no segregation at his concerts and always presented black and white musicians performing together. Paul was drafted in at the last minute to 'dep' for Nat 'King' Cole's guitarist Oscar Moore. Over several tracks, Les gives us an insight into what a fluid and exciting jazz soloist he'd become. His solos on tracks such as *Body And Soul*, for example, are full of his unique country-tinged swing jazz playing infused with Django and Christian-inspired licks and flurries. Throughout the concert, Les also demonstrates a total command of the Freddie Green style of four-in-the-bar rhythm playing.

> "[Playing with multiple tracks] was a brand-new sound in the 1940s and, along with Mary Ford, gave Les Paul the biggest hit records of his career"

Multi-Tracking With Mary

In 1945, Les met country singer Mary Ford and began a new phase in his musical, personal and pioneering life. Paul had become interested in refining recording techniques and – with support from his friend Bing Crosby – built his own studio, where he experimented with overdubbing and mic placement. Les found a way to add a second playback head to his tape machine, which allowed him to play along with – and record – multiple tracks until he'd built up an 'orchestra' of harmonised guitar parts. This innovation paved the way for multi-track recording that became the standard in all recording studios by the 1960s.

This, however, was a brand-new sound in the 1940s and, along with Mary Ford, gave Les Paul the biggest hit records of his career. The pair were soon married and produced a string of huge-selling records including *Vaya Con Dios, Bye Bye Blues, The World Is Waiting For The Sunrise* and the classic *How High The Moon*. Les also overdubbed Mary Ford's vocals, which could be reminiscent of the Andrews Sisters that Les so admired.

Paul also experimented recording some guitar tracks at half speed, which, when played back, had the guitar playing an octave higher than pitch. He was also pioneering the use of delay and phasing techniques, making these records milestones in recording history.

In 1948, Les and Mary were involved in a car accident on Route 66 that left Les severely injured. Doctors were concerned that they wouldn't be able to save his shattered right elbow and were contemplating amputation. Les requested that they 'set' his arm at a near 90 degree angle so that he would be able to play guitar again. It took Les 18 months to recover. Fortunately, his fame with Mary gave him much encouragement and he was soon back on top.

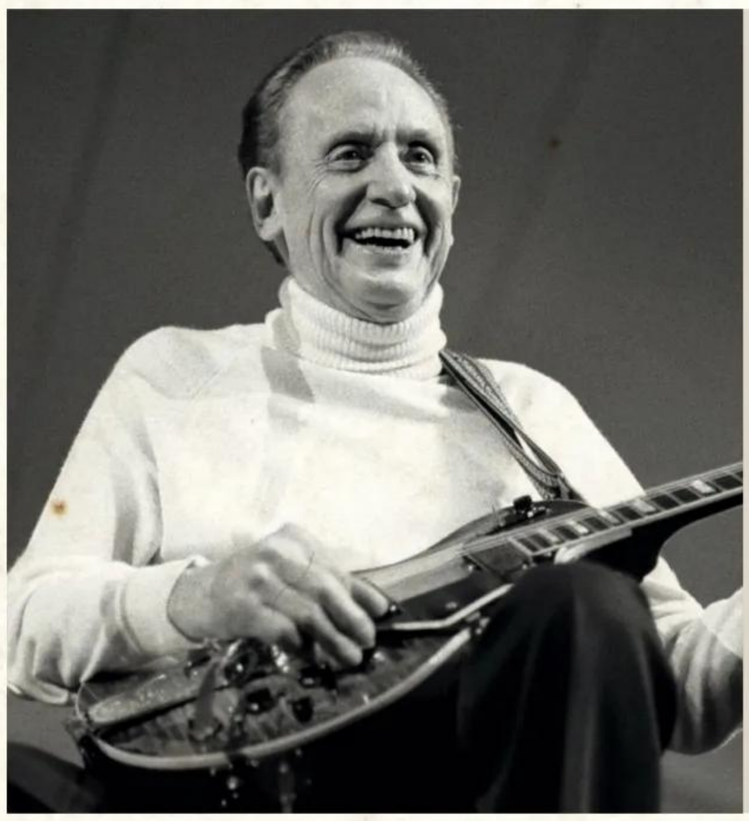


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The couple became so big that they had their own radio show, and, later, their own TV show, *The Les Paul And Mary Ford Show*. The show was aired five times a day, five days a week for five minutes at a time – during which Les and Mary would perform one or two songs along with some short skits. The show ran from 1954 until 1960 with Les creating the entire show – both audio and video – himself. Sadly, the relentless work schedule took its toll on Les and Mary's personal life and the couple eventually divorced in 1964.

Solid Success

Les's advocacy of solidbody guitars had borne fruit long before the 60s, however. In 1952, Gibson decided to produce the 'Les Paul' after all, having seen the success that Fender was enjoying with its solidbody guitars. For the next decade, a variety of tweaks were made to the basic design including different pickup configurations (from P-90s to humbuckers and even Alnico V pickups with 'staple' poles) and alterations to the bridge and tailpiece. Essentially, though, if one buys a Les Paul today, one is holding something that has not changed much in over 60 years, a testament to the soundness of the basic design that Les created. Despite this, Les never stopped experimenting, and there are photos and video of him sporting ever-more strange new combinations of buttons, switches and LEDs set onto his Gibsons. He was forever looking for novel ways to improve sustain and pickup switching on his guitars along with his legendary 'little black box', the Les Paulverizer, which allowed him to replicate



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Les Paul's Les Paul?

Les's personal favourite Gibson bearing his name was the Recording model. Something of an oddity in the annals of Gibson history, the Recording boasted a dizzying array of switches/controls along with a pair of special low impedance pickups. Alongside the standard volume and treble were bass, microphone volume, pickup selector, switches for tone and phase, and the strangely named 'decade' switch, which was designed to manipulate treble harmonics. With humorous foresight, the decade switch went up to 11!

Father Of Fusion

Les should certainly be considered a pioneer of 'fusion' music. His guitar style was a revelation in the late 1940s: a blend of country blues, Western Swing, the Gypsy jazz of his hero Django Reinhardt and the proto-bebop of Charlie Christian. Put together, Les Paul created a style all his own with his blistering chromatic runs and pre-rock 'n' roll chord stabs melded together with his thorough understanding of the guitar 'tradition'. His guitar playing really was as original as the guitars that bear his name.



his patent multitrack sound on stage. He also installed his own self-wound pickups into his guitars.

In 1961 Gibson, aware of declining sales of the Les Paul, decided to change the design – prompting Les himself to request they remove his name from it. This is the instrument that was renamed the SG (meaning Solid Guitar) in 1963, thus beginning a period during which Les didn't endorse guitars for the company. It took a certain Mr Clapton, who bought a cherry-burst 1960 Les Paul in 1965, to not only re-establish interest in the instrument, but also to change the sound of the electric guitar forever. Almost overnight, everybody wanted a Les Paul and the company decided to reintroduce the model, along with Les's renewed endorsement, in 1968. This iconic guitar has remained in production, in various forms, ever since.

Later Life

By the mid-1960s, Les was enjoying semi-retirement, playing and recording only when he felt like it. Two valuable recordings exist in the form of *Les Paul Now!* from 1968 where he revisited many of his earlier hits and, *Chester & Lester*, recorded in the mid-70s with his old friend Chet Atkins, which finds the two guitar giants playing a beautiful mix of country and jazz standards.

As he aged, Les began to suffer from arthritis. He also suffered from hearing loss but began designing his own hearing aid – a move typical of this irrepressible inventor. None of this stopped him playing, however, and he undertook a long residency at Fat Tuesdays in New York before moving over to the Iridium Club where he played two sets every Monday night up until the time of his passing. Stars from the rock and jazz world would regularly drop by, sit in and pay their respects to the great man. In 2006, at the age of 90, he won two Grammys for his album *Les Paul And Friends*. Two of his records with Mary Ford, *How High The Moon* and *Vaya Con Dios*, were inducted into the Grammy Hall Of Fame in 1979 and 2005 respectively.

Les spent the last years of his life living in Mahwah, New Jersey, an hour from New York City where, true to form, he spent many hours in his basement workshop tweaking old inventions while coming up with new ones. On 12 August 2009, Les passed away, surrounded by family and friends, after contracting pneumonia. After a private funeral in New York on 19 August, Les was flown home to be buried next to his mother, in his birthplace in Waukesha.

Les's Legacy

Les Paul's name is synonymous with not only one of the greatest electric guitars but an extraordinary body of music. Fitting, therefore, that the last word should go to a personal friend and colleague, bassist Nicki Parrott, who played with the Les Paul trio at his legendary Monday night residency at the Iridium Club in New York City for 10 years until his death in 2009: "It was customary for any musician passing through New York City to drop by the club and see Les play," Nicki recalled. "I went there one night in 1999 hoping he'd ask me to sit in. He did and after three tunes, he asked the other two guitarists to 'have a seat but leave the girl up here'. After that, he asked me to join him every Monday, which I was honoured to do. Les would stay on after the gig until 2am signing autographs and hanging out with everyone from Keith Richards to Tony Bennett, from Paul McCartney to Jose Feliciano. Everyone had the greatest respect for him. He had a great sense of humour. If he didn't like someone's playing he'd say, 'There's a phone call for you!' to get them to leave the stage. He had a spare guitar in case anyone didn't bring their own. The thing is, it was never in tune! Les taught me what it meant to be a professional and how to create my own sound. He said that was the most important thing of all. For that, I say: thank you, Les Paul." G

TONY IOMMI

Tony Iommi truly is the iron man of rock. After a hand injury that would have halted most guitarists in their tracks he battled a constant "you can't do that" from parents, record companies and guitar builders, survived a revolving door of bandmates (since 1968 he's been *Black Sabbath*'s only constant member), and even beat cancer. To honour his astounding career, Gibson has recreated his heavily modified SG special, the 'monkey' guitar. Here, Tony weaves the tale of this instrument into the story of a career that, without such dogged determination, might never have happened...

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Olly Curtis **First Published** March 2020

First of all, tell us about the monkey sticker. Does it have a particular significance?

"Well, I had this jacket that I bought from Take 6 in London. I just barely afforded it and I wore it all the time. I wanted to make it a bit different for on stage, so I started putting metal stars and things on it. Then I found these monkeys and I thought, 'I'll put a couple of them on, and I'll put one on the guitar as well.' So I put one on the guitar and it became known as the 'Monkey' guitar."

And how did the idea come about to recreate the Monkey SG with Gibson?

"It's been talked about for quite a while. When the new owners came in they said, 'Let's do it' – because that is my original guitar that was on all the early albums. I had a right-handed SG, upside-down, which I strung left-handed. But I heard of this guy who'd got a left-handed SG; he was right-handed and he played his upside-down. I didn't know him from Adam, but we arranged to meet in a carpark. It looked a bit dodgy, but I finally got a left-handed SG.

"I had a Strat, which I played mainly, and I wanted another guitar as a spare. But when we came to record the first album [*Black Sabbath*], I played the very first song, *Wicked World*, with the Strat, and the pickup went, which is weird. In those days you couldn't just go to the shop and get a pickup, and we only had two days in the studio. So I thought, 'I've got to use this SG,' and I ended up playing several albums on it.

"The band's sound developed over a period. We'd be getting louder and heavier, and we decided this was the way we wanted to go – and I came up with that *Wicked World* riff. It was the first song we ever wrote and we really liked the way it was going. *Black Sabbath* was the next one. We played these in a blues club and people in the crowd came up afterwards: 'What was that? We really liked it.' 'Oh, that's one of our own songs.' That sparked it all off, really. *Black Sabbath* was the benchmark of where we were going to go, and off we went.

"I think where we come from was also a great influence on the music, because it was a bit dismal where we lived. There were always gang fights and God knows what else. We worked in factories. I did and Ozzy did. Geezer was in the office; he was going to be an accountant. But there was a desire to escape, without a doubt. I'd always have these dreams of being on stage. But I never thought it would be musical, because I used to do contact sports. I thought it would be doing something like that. It was so weird when music took over. I remember playing one night and thinking, 'Blimey, this is that image I used to see, of being on stage.'"

When metal happened, which you and your SG were fundamental to, was it a natural evolution from, say, Cream and Led Zeppelin, or was it the chemistry between the four of you?

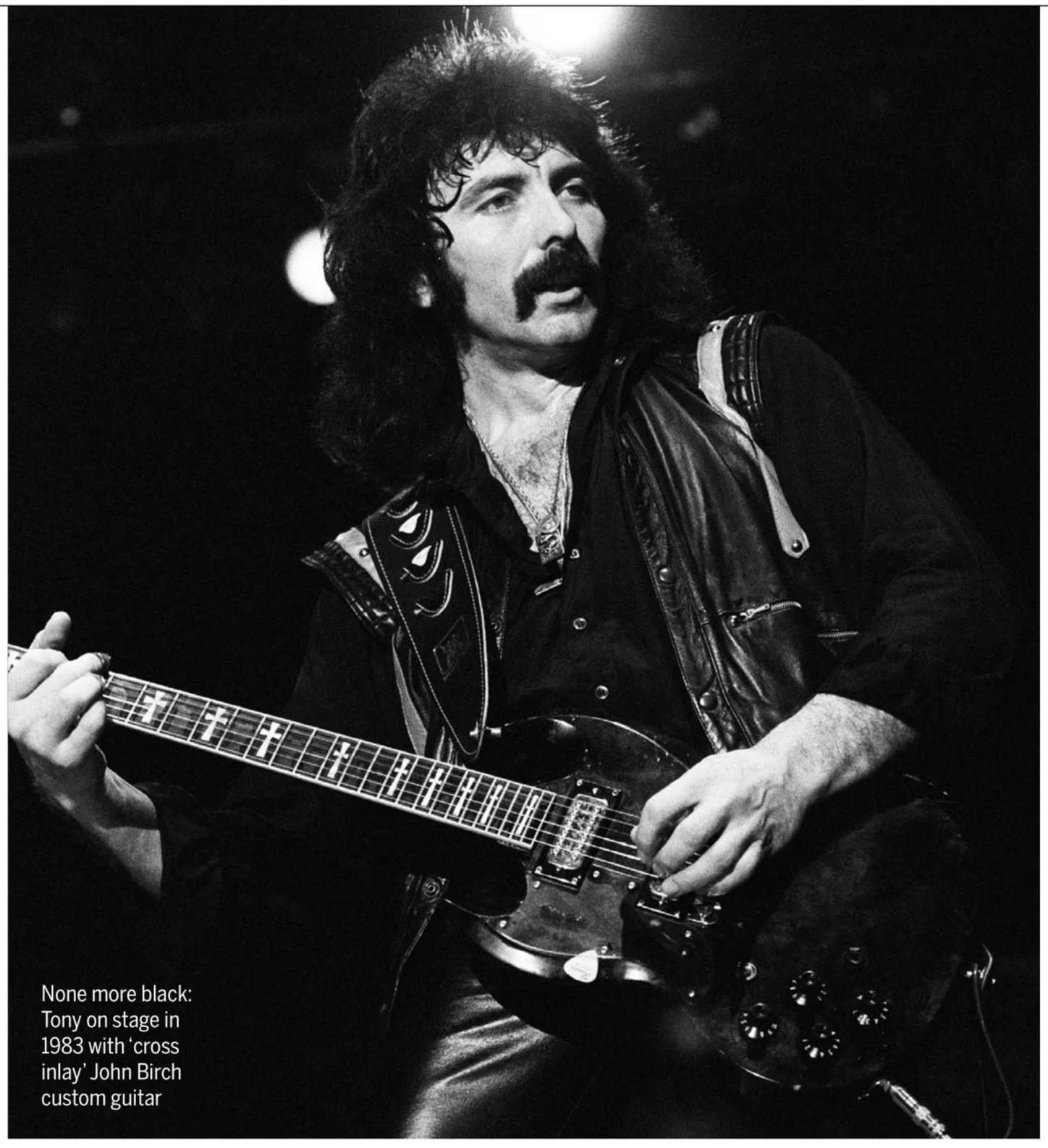
"Yes, absolutely [the chemistry]. I'd played in a band with Bill Ward before. We'd joined this blues band up in Carlisle. Then when Bill and myself got together with Oz and Geez, it was a weird combination. Geez had played guitar before but never bass. Bill and I used to play in this place in Birmingham. They'd do an all-nighter with four or five bands. Geez was in this other band, and he'd be doing acid and climbing up walls. You'd go, 'Blimey, he's nutty that guy.' We never knew for a minute we'd end up playing with him. With Ozzy, I went to school with Ozzy and I never knew he was a singer.

"When we first got together we'd just learn 12-bar songs, and on the first gig we did, I didn't even know what they were going to wear. Geezer came in in this long hippie dress. I've got my leather jacket on. Ozzy came with a shirt and a tap round his neck. I thought, 'Bloody hell!' We were a right odd bunch. But it brought us together and it just worked."

Was there a decision to go that dark route? Was it that you wanted to be scary?

"Well, I was always interested, and so was Geezer, in horror movies and stuff


Gibson



None more black: Tony on stage in 1983 with 'cross inlay' John Birch custom guitar

PHOTO BY BILL ROWNTREE/MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

like that. So we had this interest in the supernatural. We said, 'Imagine how people get frightened, get that excitement from a horror movie, that fear. It would be nice to do that in music.' And that's how it took hold. Trying to make something in music that would give it the light and shade. Something a bit frightening. Which Black Sabbath, according to a lot of people, was. For a while we couldn't get anybody to talk to us, because they thought we were going to turn them into a fish or something. The reputation built up and up and up."

Of course, the guitar builder John Birch was also Birmingham based, and he was important in customising your SG and getting it sounding and playing how you wanted, and needed, due to your injury...

"Well, like I did with my Strat, I always used to have the SG in pieces. Do this to it, do that to it. Try and stop anything from feeding back, put tinfoil inside to shield all the bits, then dip the pickups and work on the frets, because they were too high for me. So I was constantly trying to improve it. Then the Badass bridge came out so you could adjust the intonation, which you couldn't on the original Gibson SG Special bridge. That made a world of difference to me because I used such light gauge strings.

"Somebody recommended John Birch. I had these ideas that I wanted to try, because I'd approached some guitar companies and nobody was interested. I wanted a 24-fret guitar and I was told, 'We can't do it.' So then when I said to John, 'Can you build me a 24-fret guitar?' he said, 'Yes, let's have a go.' Then we began experimenting with pickups. I'd try them on the gigs – he had to make them by hand, so I'd go out and come back, 'No, it's not right.' And he'd do another one and another one until we got one that we felt comfortable with. Then I used the John Birch neck pickup on the SG, and I got John to encase the other one in epoxy, the P-90, in one of his covers, to try and stop the feedback – it was always a constant battle because we played loud."

"I've always had determination. I had to go against all these people who said, 'You can't do it.' I wouldn't accept that"

So you shaved the frets down and then had the fretboard lacquered as well?

"Yes, John Birch did that as well. I tried everything I could to make it easier for me, because of my fingers. Having high frets was disastrous because I've got thimbles on: they're hard, not like the skin where you just glide over. So I had the lacquer put on to build up the fretboard so I could sort of roll over the frets. All these things were experiments to make things work for me. Like the first fret. Because I was using light strings, everything had to be worked differently. It had to be right from the off, because I was already struggling."

So the fact that you had to do all these modifications because of the injury to your fingers, created a sound that might otherwise never have happened...

"I think so. And I experimented all the time. I'd always hear, 'You can't do that.' Constantly. 'Oh no, you can't do that. 24-fret guitar, you can't do that. It wouldn't be harmonically right.' 'I'm using light-gauge strings.' 'You can't do that.' I can, I've done it. I've made my own set up, out of banjo strings first and dropped the gauge down. I eventually got Picato to make them, and then all the other companies caught on.

"But I constantly had to struggle with people saying, 'You can't do that.' So I would find people to do it. It's like with the amp. I had this treble booster – a Rangemaster – and I wanted it modified. This guy I met when I lived up in Carlisle with Bill Ward, this guitarist from a band that became Spooky Tooth, said, 'I can make that sound better. I'll take it and bring it back tomorrow.' He could have really cocked it up, but he took it away, put different components in it, brought it back and I loved it. It had got a great sound with the amps I was using at that time, which were Marshall 50s. He'd given it sustain and everything. So I went to a company saying, 'Could you build this booster into the amp?' 'We can't do that.'

"But I've always had determination. I have to try and make something work and go against all these people who say, 'You can't do it.' The same with my accident: they said, 'You won't be able to play any more.' And I just wouldn't accept that. I thought, 'There's got to be a way.' It just made me try and figure out a way I could play. And the same with the music. 'You can't be playing that sort of stuff, it's never going to sell and never going to do any good,' but it's a belief that you have to carry on.

"Before the accident, I could play regular chords like everybody else. But after the accident I had to think of different ways to approach the thing, because I couldn't play a full chord the way they could. I used to work on a way to make the sound bigger and get as much out of the guitar as I could, hence all the fiddling about and making the

thimbles. It was really a struggle. You had to be dedicated. I'm listening to all these people going, 'You're never going to be able to do that.' So it was an upwards struggle from day one. Even my parents: 'You're not going to be able to play. Get a proper job.'"

You've told how your struggles to get the guitar right included John Birch building and modifying pickups. There's a Birch one on the new SG, too. It's obviously not made by him as John passed away years ago...
"Gibson got in touch with the people who worked with John. John had another guy working with him called John Diggins, who came on the road with me. JD got to know what sort of thing I'd like and what I'd use, and, of course, later on he started his company, Jaydee. But JD has sort of pulled back a bit now. His sons have worked for him for quite a while, so they build guitars as well. So it was somebody, I assume, there that they contacted. But the idea with this guitar was to reproduce everything about it, and they really have reproduced it exactly – every little bump and knock. When I saw it I said, 'Bloody hell!' It's scary."

Where's the original?
"That's in the Hard Rock Cafe now. It's been in New York for a while, but they pulled it out of there to do this guitar. I'd stopped touring with it, because it was too fragile. I was worried about anything happening to it or it getting stolen. It used to travel with me all the time, but as you get more successful, it goes with the crew. So then it was out of my hands and I was a bit worried about that. I thought, 'I'm going to stop touring with it.'

"So I kept the SG at home. Then it went into storage and I thought, 'It's a shame, really.' Then the Hard Rock got in touch about selling it. The deal was they could have it, they'd pay me for it, and if I ever wanted it back, pay them the money back. The guy is dead now who I'd done the deal with, but I thought it would be better for people to be able to see it than me having it in a case with all the others."

And you tuned the SG down to Eb with very light strings, again to help with your struggle to play, let alone to come up with some of the greatest rock riffs of all time!
"I had different gauges on stage for different songs. Because one album we did, *Master Of Reality*, we tuned down three semitones. So if we do any songs off that album, I need a guitar with a thicker string. But generally on stage, from the early days it was eights. It was .008, .011, .016, down to .032. Actually, the first album was in regular tuning, but then we tuned down on stage, both for Ozzy and for me with my fingers.

"I played a Strat, but its pickup went so I had to use the spare SG. I ended up playing several albums on it"

The Gibson Tony Iommi 'Monkey' 1964 SG Special Replica sits regally on its throne, photographed in an ancient Cotswold inn



"I had Schaller tuners put on; you'd turn the old plastic keys and nothing would happen, after years of use"


"John Birch made me the neck pickup. We tried various ones and came up with this, the P-90 he set in epoxy"

"But, yes, they relied on me to come up with the riffs. Geezer came up with some as well, but it was mainly me. Hence if I didn't come up with anything we'd be stumped – and that did happen later when we went to do what turned out to be *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*. We'd had a great time doing *Vol 4* in the Record Plant [in Los Angeles], so we went back to America, to the same house and everything. But Stevie Wonder had built a bloody Moog in the studio so [the space] was too small. That was the first disaster. The next one was I couldn't come up with any ideas; it was just horrible. So we came back to England and we had a few weeks off. Then we hired Clearwell Castle in Wales and we set the gear up in the dungeons to give us some inspiration. The first thing I came up with was *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*. The first riff I did! I thought, 'That's it, we're off.' So that led the way and we were going again.

"Usually, the riffs would come first. Ozzy would sing anything on it, then that would go to Geezer who would do the lyrical side. So Geezer was generally the one who came up with the lyrics, and Ozzy would do the melody lines. We'd use some of the words from the original thing he'd just made up, so it was a combination of everybody, really.

"But we weren't bothered about money. We really weren't, because we didn't have anything anyway. We just wanted to play. Our highlight when we first started was to get out of Birmingham and play in London. And, of course, when we did that they hated us. It was a bit of a disaster, really.

"We played at the Speakeasy, and we'd just started out. It was Alvin Lee, actually, who got us that gig. I used to go round to his house and I brought the lads round a couple of times. We'd sit there talking about what we were going to do. We said to him one day, 'We're going to change the name,' because we were called Earth, and we said, 'We're going to change it to Black Sabbath.' 'Oh, that will never do any good.' We plagued him for years about that."

You're known as the Dark Lord Of Riffs, but you could have played in many different bands, because your playing is broad enough and you're musical enough...

"Thanks. It's hard for me to see. I tend to set myself in that vein with what we do. I've always been a bit, not scared, to jump out of my field. I do on my own, but if you shoved me in the Eagles I'd go, 'Oh Christ, what do I do here?' Much like when I was with Jethro Tull. I did that short thing with them, after Mick Abrahams and before Martin Barre.

"We'd supported them on one of their gigs, and they asked me and I was like, 'Oh God, I don't know.' On the way back, I was driving the van and I said, 'They've asked me if I'll join them.' And they're going, 'You should go for it, it's a great opportunity.' I felt really bad. When I had a call from their office to come down and play, I went to London. I got there and there's like 50 guitar players. I went, 'Oh God, what's going on?' because I thought it was just me. I got really nervous and walked out and a guy came running after me. He said, 'Don't go, don't go.' I said, 'I can't do it, there's all these other guitar players.' He said, 'Sit in the cafe and when they're all gone I'll come and get you.' So that's what we did. And then they offered me the job.

"It was good and bad, because I felt really sad for the others. When I went down to play with them I took Geezer with me. I kept saying to him, 'I don't feel comfortable about it.' When I told them, 'It's not for me,' they said, 'We've got this movie [*The Rolling Stones Rock And Roll Circus*] and we can't get anybody else quickly enough. Could you do it?' I said, 'Yes, I'd do that.' Then I started doing that and meeting John Lennon and everybody, and I thought to myself, 'Have I done the right thing, going back to playing at this blues club up the road?' But that's how it happened."

What about your influences? Given the era in which you grew up, where there was so much new music happening, presumably Hank Marvin was high on the list as you're a melodic player yourself?

"Absolutely. Me and Brian May both loved Hank. We're not widdly diddlies. Brian and I have done a few things, played together on albums. We were in the studio together once and we started playing Shadows stuff. So it was mainly Hank, then Chuck Berry and a bit of Buddy Holly. I liked Clapton. I liked John Mayall. That line-up was really appealing. When he went with Cream I wasn't so enthusiastic, but then I got used to Cream. I loved his style and his sound.



Black Sabbath in 1970: Bill Ward, Tony Iommi, Ozzy Osbourne and Geezer Butler

PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

"But, yes, you had bands like The Moody Blues, Fleetwood Mac, John Mayall, Cream. Then you had Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, and us. We knew Planty and Bonham. Bonham was best man at my first wedding. I used to knock about with him a lot. We used to play the same gigs. We'd be playing at this club and he'd be with another band. 'They fired me.' 'What happened?' 'I'm too loud.' And then he'd go with another band and get fired from them because he was too loud. He was constantly in and out of bands."

Did anybody else turn you on later? People like Yngwie Malmsteen or Van Halen?
"Van Halen, yes. We took Van Halen on their first big tour. They were with us for eight months. Eddie was playing things I'd never seen before. We're still friends and we became friends then. Of course, he set off a whole new load of players playing like that, and now I can't believe some of them. I can't follow it. I certainly couldn't do it."

So, any plans to make new music with your new SG? More solo stuff? Collaborations?
"Well, that's the million-dollar question. I've got loads of stuff. I keep saying to Ralph [Baker], my manager, 'I want to put it down properly,' but the engineer I've used for years, Mike Exeter, has gone on to do other things... I'd like to put some stuff down, but it won't be a touring band. Actually, Brian May came over and I gave him four or five CDs of riffs, and he's going, 'You've got to do an album with these, just put them out like that.' I said, 'No, I don't want to do that. I'm going to do them properly.'"

It would be great to get people you really admired to participate. They'd jump at it!
"Yes, I'd like that. I sort of did it with the *Iommi* album in 2000. I had Dave Grohl, Billy Corgan and all sorts of people on it. Another two embarrassing things that I didn't go for was one where they said, 'This chap wants to do something. Eminem.' 'Who the bloody hell is Eminem?' I didn't know, and I went, 'Oh, no.' And Kid Rock. So I turned a few people down that became quite big later, but I hadn't the faintest idea. I'd tried to do it before with Planty and a few others, but it was so hard because of management and all that. But the last one, they really wanted to do it, and I enjoyed playing with different people."

When you were struggling to play again, possibly wondering if you ever really would, could you have imagined that a company would build you a guitar, let alone Gibson?
"No, never – when I think back, how difficult it was. Now you could say, 'Send me a couple of guitars,' whichever company it is, and they'd do it. But I believe in having guitars I like; I don't just want loads of guitars. There's always been companies saying, 'Can we give you a couple of guitars?' 'But I'm using these – I like these.' Not to be funny, I knew people years ago who would have anything they could and then sell it!

"But getting back to this guitar, they said they'd do it and straight away they did it. And it's exactly the same. *Exactly* the same. It was my guitar and *I* can't bloody tell. I've got it at home in my bedroom. I regard that as my original now!" G

Heaven And Hell

Tony on the highs (and infernal lows) of Sabbath's ride to fame

"There's been so many highs that we've had over the years. Every stage we've gone through. For us, when we first played Madison Square Gardens, that was like, 'Oh,' you know. And then we actually did it again and again and again, and then we got this plaque from Madison Square Gardens for selling the most seats at one point. So those were high times. And then different events we've done have become another high point. There's so many of them. But it was definitely a high.

"The low points of it were all the other things that happened. The management thing we went through at one point, which was awful – getting law suits while we were in a bloody recording session, you know. Going to court in the morning, having to wear a suit and tie, which none of us ever had, and then coming [back] in the night to come and record the *Sabotage* album. Things like that. And of course other things would come up, within the period of the success comes the gloom as well."

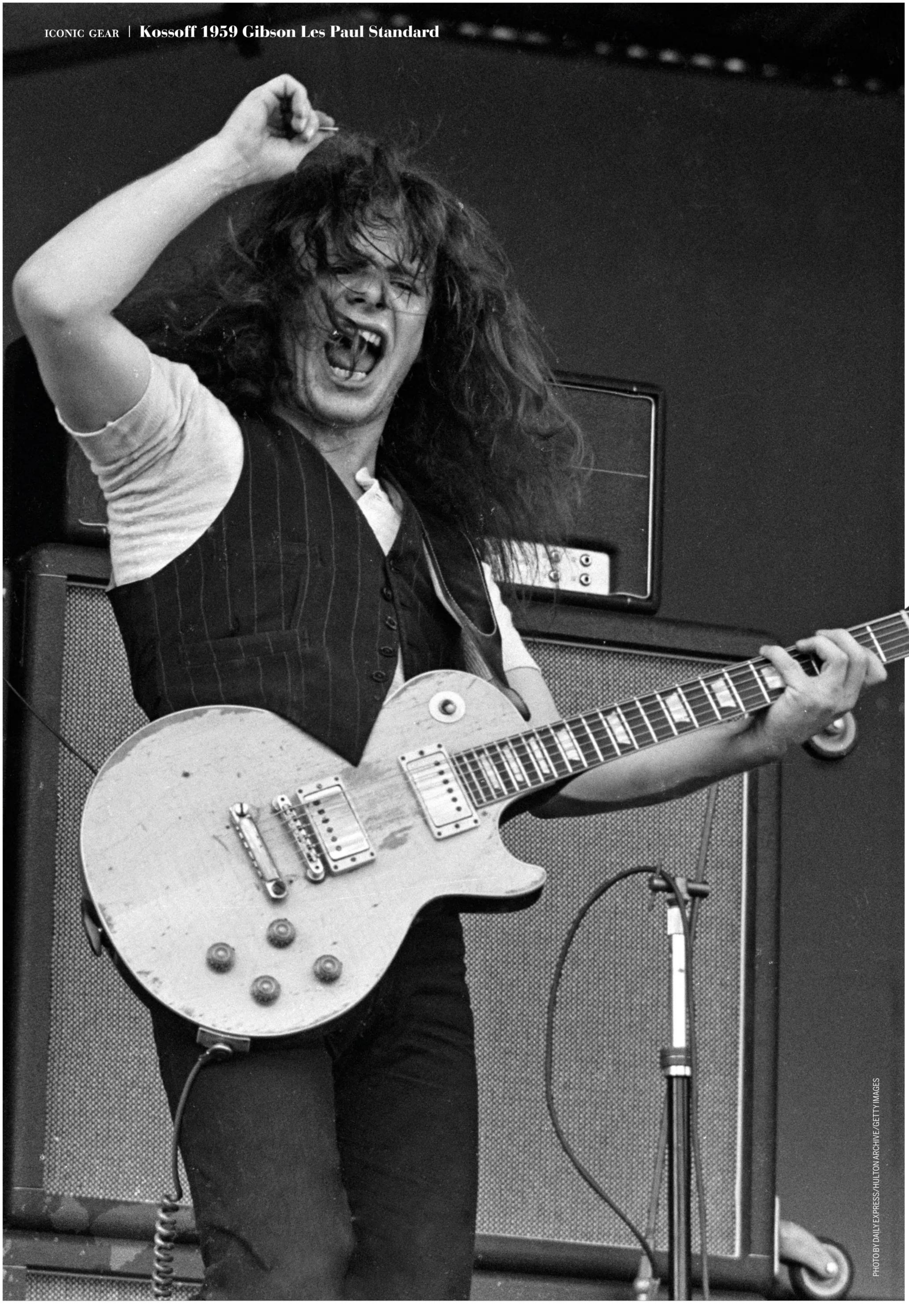
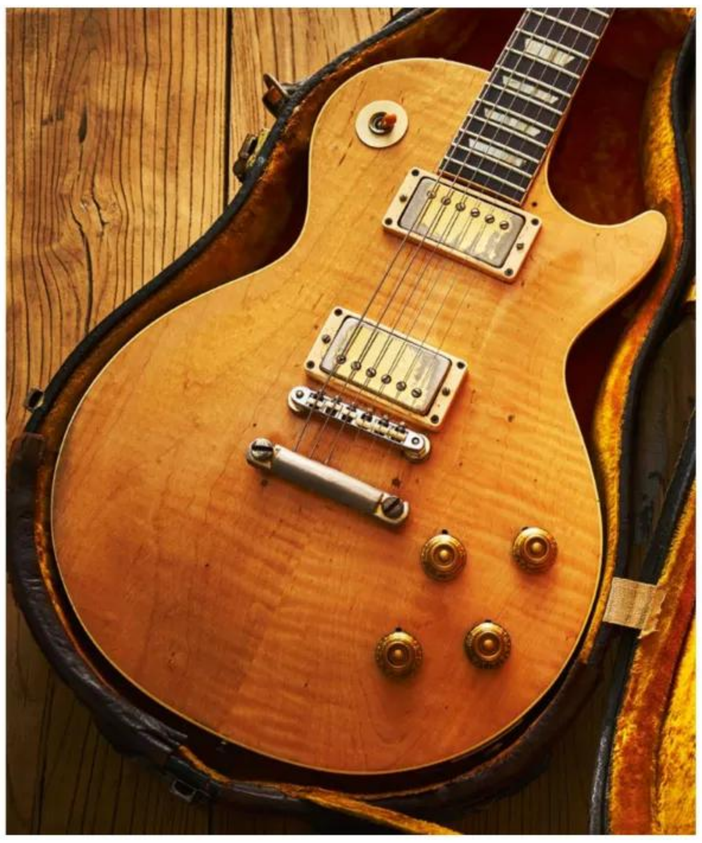
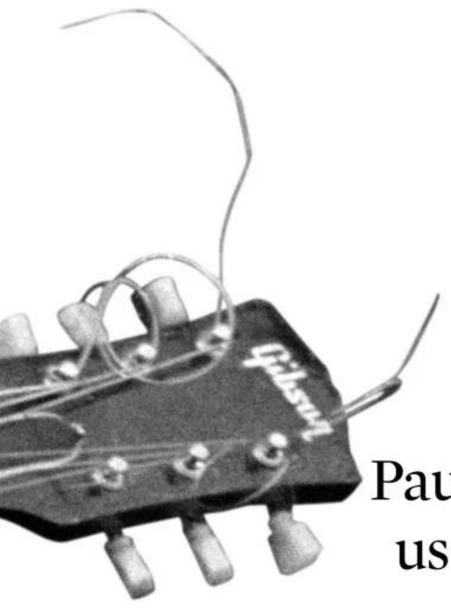


PHOTO BY DAILY EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES





FREE SPIRIT

Paul Kossoff's 'Stripped Top' 1959 Les Paul was almost certainly the guitar he used to wax *All Right Now*. Here, Steve Clarke walks us through the original features and numerous changes that this historic Les Paul has seen

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Adam Gasson
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As well as being an author, authenticator of vintage guitars for Bonham's auction house and a highly experienced repair and restoration specialist, Steve Clarke is also the man entrusted with the maintenance of Paul Kossoff's iconic 'Stripped Top' 1959 Les Paul Standard, the instrument Koss used to play the Isle of Wight Festival and that he almost certainly used to cut Free's enduring classic, *All Right Now*.

"I'm grateful that the guy who owns it today trusts me to be the only guy that will service it and keep it in good order," Steve says. "So I've been lucky enough to be able to take the guitar apart and check it over in detail."

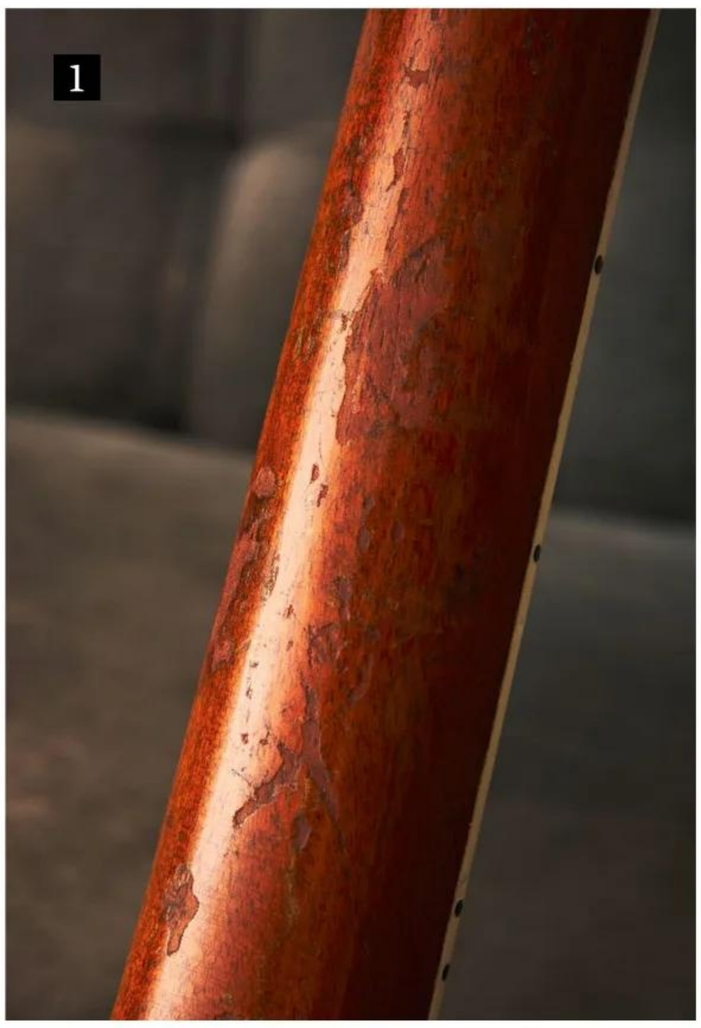
As such, Steve was uniquely well placed to cut through the fog of myth that often swirls around such iconic guitars, driven by plausible – yet inaccurate – theories based on hearsay and speculation.

"The guitar was known to have a very, very slim neck so people on forums would say that Paul Kossoff had shaved the neck down," Steve recalls. "And you'd think, 'Wow, that's interesting.' You'd also see it argued that it had to have been converted from a Goldtop because the back of the guitar is very dark. As you know, a lot of '57 Goldtop Standards tended to have a darker brown stain on the back. So, at the time, you'd think, 'Well, that ticks a box, so it must be.' But when I actually examined the guitar I found out that neither thing was true."

Even hardcore 'Burst aficionados weren't sure what the reality behind the myth was, Steve recalls.

"Somebody from Joe Bonamassa's management heard I was working on the guitar and passed on a message from Joe: "Could you please ask Steve Clarke whether that Paul Kossoff guitar was once a Goldtop?" And I wrote back with some of the details that indicated it wasn't a Goldtop at any stage. To give just a couple of examples, the toggle-switch area still had some red stain [underneath] and it had a double-white humbucker in the neck position. You only started to see those white bobbin colours appear in late 1959, so that also argued against an earlier build. The story goes that the company making the bobbins for Gibson ran out of the black pigment, so you started to see a lot of zebra coils and double whites appearing around at that point."

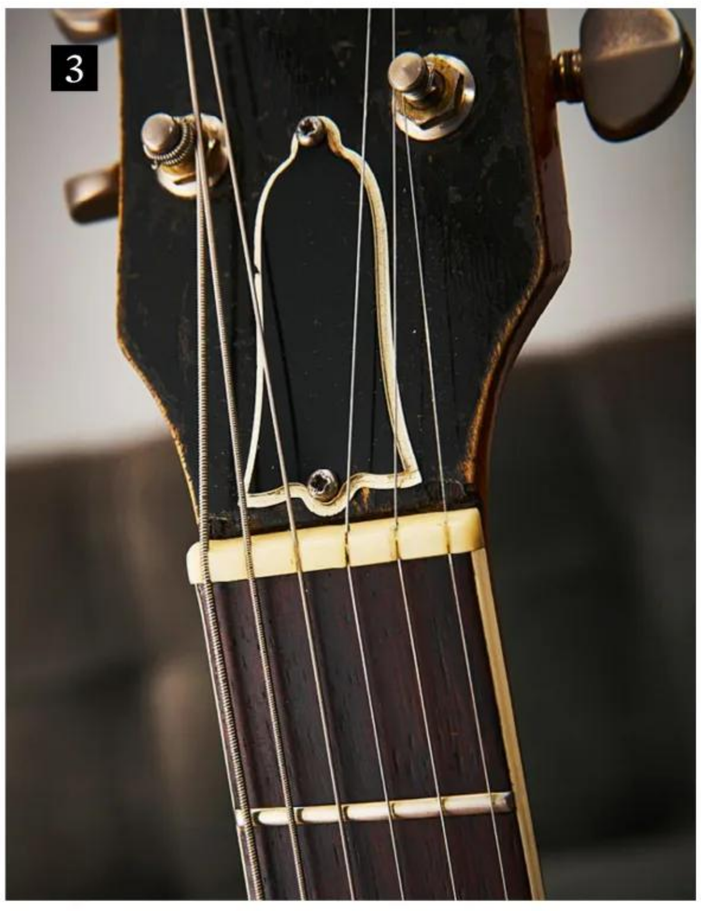
These and numerous other details of the guitar meant Steve was able to build conclusive evidence that it was made in 1959 – and he was also able to piece together the numerous mods and changes made to the guitar while it was in Kossoff's keeping and during the years after it passed into Mike Gooch's hands. Here, Steve strips away the myths behind this storied instrument, part by part.





Neck

"The first thing off when I examined this guitar in detail, I found no evidence whatsoever that Paul Kossoff or even a professional repairer had done any work on that neck, sanded it down or otherwise slimmed it, contrary to myth. I've fixed a few old ones with neck breaks and if you look very carefully and use a blacklight and what have you there are always telltale signs [of neck and refinish work]. There's none on the Kossoff guitar. Just because this guitar has a slim neck doesn't mean it's not an original 1959 neck, though. George Gruhn, who has bought and sold many '59 Les Pauls over the years, said to me, 'Steve, we get this all the time. It's not a surprise to find a slim-neck '59 – they start to get slimmer in 1960 but it's not unusual to find earlier examples.' These were guitars that were made following feedback from guitarists, saying, 'Could you make it a little bit slimmer? Could you make it this or that?' So he said it's not unusual to find one with a slim neck. So it was great to get that confirmation."



Body, Top & Weight

"The guitar weighs 8.74lb [3.96kg]. They were selecting lightweight woods. Good Les Pauls from that period are around about 8.5lb and they were fairly consistent. You'll maybe get the odd one just peaking closer to 9lb but I've probably picked up about 15 or 16 original [1958 to 1960] Les Pauls and I've found them to be fairly consistently in the 8lb range. That's where Gibson wanted them to be because they were aware of the weight being a selling point. By comparison, the 70s ones started to get backbreaking: they were way over 9lb, some of those things. That was because the mahogany that Gibson was getting at that time, under Norlin ownership, was getting quite dense. They couldn't get the really lightweight mahogany they'd previously used any more.

"The guitar originally had a sunburst finish, as you'd expect. The inside of the guitar still has clearly visible traces of red in the control and switch cavities. At some point before Kossoff bought the guitar the top was stripped. Mike Gooch bought the guitar in 1974 and he had the top sanded back again and refinished by [renowned repairer and luthier] Dick Knight in 1975, though it was left natural. This guitar has got a particularly good flame on its top and that, along with the other features, helps date it to around 1959. Some people have suggested that it's a '58 or a Goldtop. But pretty much all the '58s that I've looked at are quite plain Janes in terms of the tops. There's a certain colour about those '58 guitars – a very different red in the lacquer – and they tend to be slightly plainer in terms of the tops.

"I particularly like the top on this guitar. It looks so different from different angles. You can look at it from a few feet away and only pick up a bit of the flame. But turn it just slightly to the left or right and it really does go three dimensional."

1. The neck carries the wear marks of decades of use. It's possible that parts of the neck had light spray-over to blend the top's refinish with the rest of the guitar, but there is no evidence that Kossoff modified the neck to slim it down from its original dimensions

2. The neck is slim, as compared with those found on many 1959 Les Pauls, but such outliers are not without precedent and do turn up from time to time, as George Gruhn explained to Steve Clarke

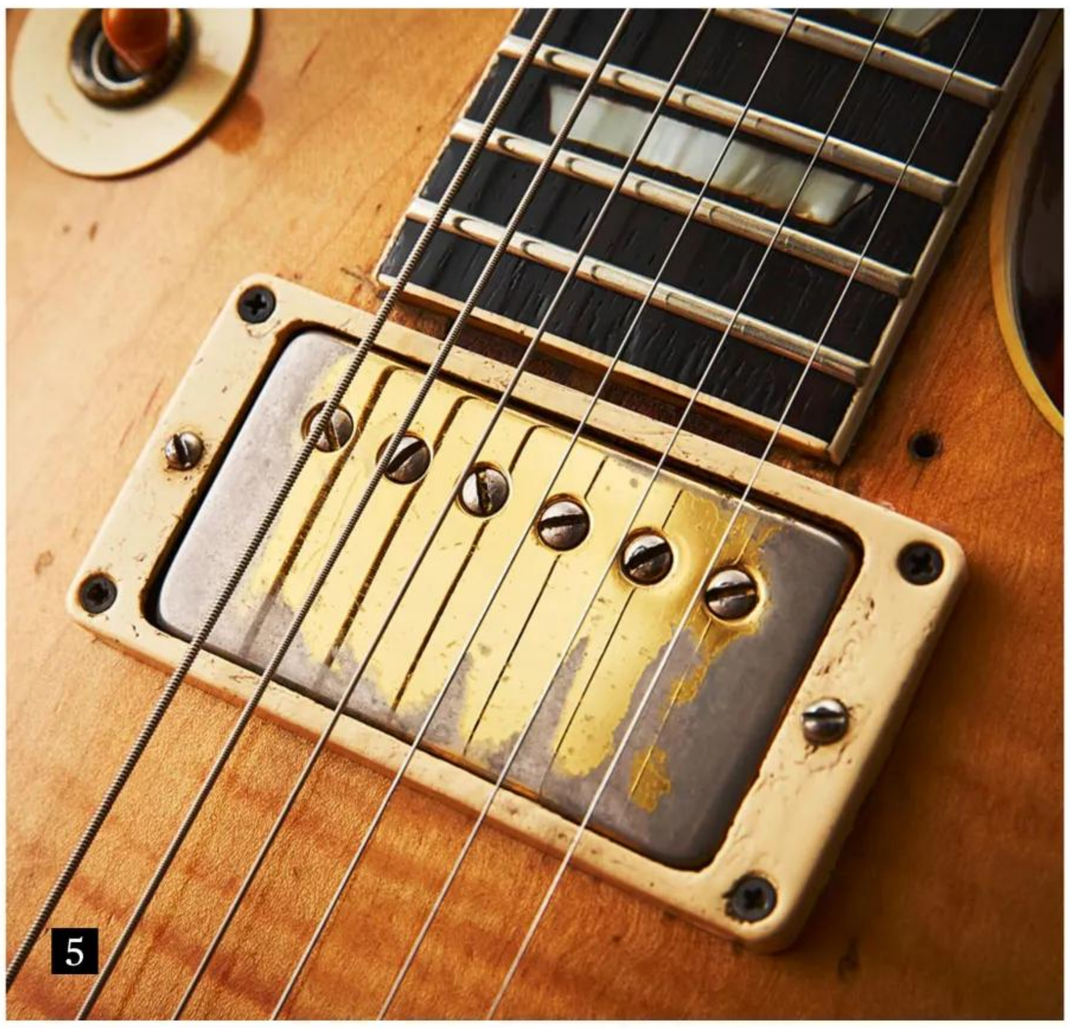
3. The dark Brazilian rosewood fretboard is typical of late-50s Gibson tonewoods

Tech Spec

BODY: Mahogany back, maple bookmatched top
NECK: Mahogany
HEADSTOCK: Low E side 16.26mm; top 14.55mm; width at top edge 78.54mm; thickness at 1st fret 20mm and 12th fret 22.25mm; 16th fret measurement 54.68mm
NUT: 42.56mm
FINGERBOARD: Brazilian rosewood
FRETS: 2.61mm
HARDWARE: Grover Rotomatic machineheads; Gibson Tune-o-Matic ABR-1 bridge – 83.9mm long and 10.76mm wide (post-to-post 75mm)
ELECTRICS: PAF pickups (bridge 7.99kohms, neck 8.38kohms); Gold bonnet type control knobs –18.72mm at waist, 27.27 on numbered edge
CONTROL CAVITY: Centralab volume and tone potentiometers, Sprague Bumblebee capacitors (paper-in-oil type)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.96/8.74
TOGGLE SURROUND: 33.34mm
PICKUP SURROUND: 89.31mm long, 45.2mm wide
BODY THICKNESS: 49.41mm at toggle area and 47.09mm at back of tailpiece (above strap button)
TAILPIECE: 101.72mm long



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4. Gold Grover Rotomatics are found on the reverse of the headstock, with evidence that at least one other set of tuners was fitted after the original Klusons were removed. The serial was probably lost during refinishing work in '75

5. Worn gold covers contain the guitar's original double-white PAF in the neck position. White double-coil PAFs started to appear on numbers 9-0600 and by 9-2021 you might find double whites *or* zebras. By 1960, the use of white bobbins stopped and double black pickups returned to production

6. Battle scars on the side of the body bear witness to hundreds of gigs and sessions

Finish & Serial Number

Mike Gooch had the guitar refinished by Dick Knight after he bought it because his father didn't like the idea that he'd spent so much money on a guitar that was scruffy and beaten up, would you believe! It was in a poor state by then – the whole top was blackened in places where the sweat had soaked into the wood. Dick Knight did the refinish, but it was really only the top that I could see had been sanded down so that black perspiration marks could be removed.

"In comparison with the top, the back of the guitar just looks like it's been dragged down a motorway. It's really quite tatty, so it never had a proper refinish on the back. The back and the reverse of the neck may have had a very light sanding and a light blow-over with clearcoat to match it more closely with the refinished top, and that's probably when the guitar lost its serial number. But only the top was fully refinished and even that's beginning to wear through today.

"As a side note, Kossoff didn't seem to like having scratchplates on his Les Pauls. The only one he kept the 'plate on was the black three-pickup Les Paul Custom, which was the one that he exchanged with Clapton for the Darkburst '58 Les Paul. But other than that he'd take the 'plates off his Standards."


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Back

"The back looks like a truck has run over it, in terms of wear, and is very dark in colour. But that's not as unusual for the year as you might think. The backs of some of these Les Pauls do vary in colour and there's lots of reasons for that. Different blocks of mahogany will vary – some are quite light, some are quite dark. And when you put a stain on them, if it's a dark piece of mahogany it'll go darker still, obviously. Then when it oxidises over the years, it takes on this chocolatey brown look that almost looks like the '57s where they deliberately did the backs dark."

Pickups

"The pickups are fairly typical in output for the model and year. The neck, which is a double-white bobbin PAF, reads at 8.38kohms DC resistance whereas the bridge, which is either a double black or a zebra under the cover, comes in at 7.99k. Among the 'Bursts I've examined I've tended to find double whites are slightly hotter in output than other PAFs and I don't know why that is. And I don't believe Gibson would have done that deliberately; maybe it's just pure coincidence that the ones I've seen have always been slightly on the hotter side. We're not talking massively so, though – and really these pickups are just about where they should be for the model and year. The pickup covers were changed from the nickel-plated originals to gold covers when Mike Gooch bought the guitar and had the top refinished."

Hardware

"Gold hardware was fitted at the time of the Dick Knight refinish. But the original parts were left in the case from when Koss had it. The nylon saddles, the original toggle switch were all there... case candy doesn't come much better than that! The original bridge was replaced with a gold one, and that's very, very worn now but you can still just about make out the remnants of the gold if you look closely. Some people have suggested that when he played on *Top Of The Pops* he was using the nylon saddles. But personally I don't see it – in fact, you can see on the footage that not only are the saddles metal but a couple were turned round: the low E and the top E are reversed and you can clearly see they're metal. Today, however, as you'll see in the pictures, the nylon saddles are back on the guitar.

Worlds Apart

Steve Clarke on the sonic contrasts between 50s Les Pauls and later versions

"I did an A/B test on the Koss guitar when I inspected it," Steve recalls. "I had a 1971 conversion Les Paul that was originally a Deluxe. It had humbuckers put in it but the great thing about it was it had the same caps in it as the Koss one and it had been converted so it was fitted with T-buckers.

"So there were some contrasts to begin with but when I plugged them both in, you wouldn't believe how different the two guitars were. The 1971 conversion was brittle in comparison to the 'Stripped Top' 'Burst. As soon as you plugged the Kossoff in and you hit the first chords of *All Right Now*, I can only say you felt like you'd just gone back to 1970. It's got the harmonics, it's got the character... Everything is in there – but without needing to dial it in to get there."



The guitar's current owner has refitted the nylon saddle-equipped bridge to the guitar that was in the case when he acquired it. Koss was said to prefer the sound of nylon saddles

The owner has changed the saddles back to nylon because he currently likes the sound they make. It has been said that Kossoff actually preferred the sound of these and, as I mentioned, they were in the case.

"Up at the headstock, the machineheads appear to have been changed twice from the original Klusons. The Grover Rotomatics now on the guitar were fitted around the time Mike Gooch took ownership of the guitar but additional offset screwholes suggest a third set was fitted between the Klusons and the current machineheads."

Electronics

"The toggle switch cap has been replaced but it's got the original poker chip and toggle switch surround. Again, details of the size and spacing of the lettering, which features a slightly wider 'R', plus the reduced thickness of the plastic as compared with 1958, both date it to 1959. The Centralab pots, stamped with the code 134839, date to September '58, which is normal for a '59 guitar as parts would often be bought in bulk and held in stock for a period before being used in production." G

Black & White

Steve Clarke has a theory about why black bobbins appear where they do on old zebra PAFs...

"If you look at any of the old '59 Les Pauls that have zebra-coil humbuckers on, you'll find that the black bobbins are almost always positioned on the height-adjustable [screw] side. As I mention in my book, I believe it was probably a cosmetic touch that was built into the production process. Because if you had a black Les Paul Custom, for instance, and you had the screw-poles adjusted so they stood proud of the cover, you would have been able to clearly see a white bobbin underneath, which wouldn't have looked good cosmetically."

Interestingly, there's some circumstantial support for Steve's theory from Gibson's setup expert Jim DeCola, who we spoke to for issue 461. He told us that, back in the 50s, the adjustable screw-poles on humbuckers were routinely set up with some poles higher than the others to boost their presence in the mix.

"In the old days when you had heavier strings and wound G strings, adjusting the polepieces came into play a little bit more because of the disparity in output between the wound G string and the B string," he told us. "The core of the G was a lot thinner than that of the D string. So with those old string sets with a wound G, your G was a lot weaker sounding than the B string and then the B string being thicker than E would overpower that. Today, it's not quite that critical..."



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7. Alongside the pot code there is a Gibson part number 'BA8 11-1053' plus the legend '500k .C2' . The C2 denotes the percentage of audio taper as per Centralab's in-house 'percent chart'

8. As evidenced by the heavy original wear on the reverse of the guitar, the back was never refinished

Recreating Ramm

Gibson's homage to Kossoff's 'other' 1959 Les Paul Standard.

At the 2012 Winter NAMM Show, Gibson unveiled its tribute to Paul Kossoff with a replica model of the faded, battle-scarred Les Paul Standard that was acquired by Paul's old friend, guitarist Arthur Ramm, following Kossoff's untimely death in 1976. Although the serial number was lost to a neck break repair, this guitar is believed to be a '59 and is one of three 'Bursts used extensively by the late, great man himself.

Made in limited numbers, including 100 Murphy-aged and 250 VOS instruments, the Gibson Paul Kossoff 1959 Les Paul Standards are now highly sought-after collector's items. As both versions recently surfaced at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, vintage expert and co-owner Steve Hove walks us through a Murphy-aged replica for a taste of the real thing...

LOOK: "[Gibson] scanned the original guitar and measured it and tested it, so it's got more of a period-correct neck profile and dish carve in the top. The ageing looks really cool. Tom Murphy did the first aged stuff for Gibson and became their go-to guy. The top has a slight chevron and is very well matched in terms of flame on either side. If you get it in the right light it will pop but it's not too blingy in terms of flame; it's nicely understated and it ties in with the finish. There's an ever so slight gradient in the finish where it's darker around the edges. Gibson called it Green Lemon 'Burst."

SOUND: "One of the first things I noticed was that the pickups are really dynamic and responsive. [Gibson] have tried to recreate the sound of the original guitar using Alnico 3 magnets and plain enamel 42 [AWG] wire. That treble pickup has got loads of bite to it: if you dig in, it will really push the front-end of the amp. The neck pickup has a creamy, sumptuous, bluesy tone. It's very cool. It nails the sound of the solo in *All Right Now*. That's the first thing you need to do when you pick this guitar up, surely!"

FEEL: "Generally speaking, '58 necks are the bigger of the three ['Burst years], '60s are slimmer and '59s sit somewhere in the middle. Based on my experience, I would place the feel of this one around early '59. It feels really good. With the ageing on the neck I think they get pretty close to the feel of an old 'Burst. It feels like an old instrument even though it's not been played much since it left the factory." **[RB]**

www.vintageandrareguitars.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLLY CURTIS











9. The Gibson Custom Shop produced a total of 350 Paul Kossoff 1959 Les Paul Standards in Green Lemon finish, including 250 lightly aged VOS instruments (right) and 100 hand-aged replica guitars (left)

10. The gold-plated kidney button Grover tuners have been accurately distressed in order to match the tuners Paul modified his original 'Burst with. The logo on Paul's guitar features the same masking tape impressions picked up from a neck repair

11. Paul's guitar suffered a particularly bad neck break that was expertly repaired by legendary luthier Sam Li. Although these replicas look similar, no guitar necks were harmed during the course of building!

12. Gibson was able to recreate an accurate dish carve by scanning and measuring Paul's 'Burst, while the two-piece maple top was specially selected to match the grain of the original guitar as closely as possible

13. Here is Paul's original 'Arthur Ramm' guitar. It's had a hard knock life, but it now resides in America where its new owner gives it plenty of love

Sister Rosetta Tharpe

The evolutionary timeline of rock history includes iconic names such as T-Bone Walker, Chuck Berry, Elvis, Little Richard and many others – and yet it's only in recent years that another name has started to get its due. The extraordinary Sister Rosetta Tharpe not only paved the way for rock 'n' roll but also stands tall as an electric guitar pioneer

Words Denny Ilett

Rosetta Nubin was born on 20 March 1915 in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, a small town sandwiched between the Midwestern and Southern states. Both parents were cotton workers, although Rosetta didn't know much of her father except that he sang in his spare time. Her mother, Katie, was deeply ensconced in the local church as both deaconess, vocalist and mandolinist.

Clearly a child prodigy, by the age of six Rosetta was performing with her mother, singing and playing guitar under the name Little Rosetta Nubin as part of a travelling evangelical group. Even at this early stage Rosetta was spoken of as a formidable talent on the guitar. Throughout the 1920s, she further honed her skills after relocating with her mother to Chicago, performing in gospel music ensembles locally alongside the occasional nationwide tour.

It was around this time that Rosetta started to hear the first recordings of such blues queens as Ma Rainey and the trio of Smiths – Bessie, Trixie and Mamie. This was the era when blues was dominated by female artists shortly before the first Delta, or country blues, recordings were made. Rosetta was right in the thick of it, absorbing the music of her church roots and mixing in a dose of the blues – a controversial pursuit at the time.

In 1934, aged just 19, Rosetta married for the first time. His name was Thomas Thorpe, a preacher who was part of the touring troupe that Rosetta and Katie were involved with. The marriage lasted just four years, but in that time Rosetta Nubin became Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a slight deviation from her husband's name.

Decca Daze

Big Band leader Lucky Millinder led an orchestra from the mid-1920s to the mid-50s that served as a breeding ground for many future stars of jazz and blues. Bull Moose Jackson, Wynonie Harris and Ruth Brown were among those who later found fame as R&B took hold into the 1940s.

Tharpe joined Millinder's orchestra for her first recordings at the end of October 1938 waxing four sides for Decca. *That's All* and *My Man And I* feature just Tharpe's voice and Delta-infused National guitar (like the guitar pictured, right). Sounding for all the world like a female Robert Johnson, Rosetta's sparkling voice soared over her accompaniment, demonstrating her mastery of the country blues style perfectly. *The Lonesome Road* – an evergreen jazz standard with a gospel-leaning lyric later recorded by the likes of Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole – sees Rosetta performing solely as vocalist, her church-influenced yet blues-drenched voice perfect for this material.

It's with *Rock Me*, however, that we hear Tharpe's electric guitar for the first time and, significantly, this is the very record that had such a profound influence on future rock 'n' rollers such as Elvis, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. It's a typical 16-bar blues sequence, for the time, where Rosetta's now patent bluesy-gospel vocal blends effortlessly with Millinder's standard swing-era big band arrangement. But it's the opening 16-bar guitar solo that caused such a stir and is nothing short of revolutionary.

Big Bill Broonzy's *It's A Low Down Dirty Shame* featured the first electric guitar sounds on a blues recording courtesy of the legendary George Barnes and was recorded

During the 20s, Rosetta was right in the thick of it, absorbing the music of her church roots and mixing in a dose of the blues – a controversial pursuit

PHOTO BY JAMES KRIEGSMANN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Sister Rosetta Tharpe posing for a portrait with a National guitar in New York City, circa 1940

a mere seven months before Tharpe's *Rock Me* solo. In turn, both recordings are almost a year before the first records by Charlie Christian were issued.

Sister Rosetta truly was a force and highly influential in the electric guitar's early days, a fact so often overlooked. It's a beautifully melodic solo full of subtle slides and string bends, and sounds as though it's taken as much from country music as it has blues. The song was a huge hit and made Rosetta a star despite the controversy surrounding the recording, which, effectively, is a gospel song performed in a secular style. It was a full 16 years before Ray Charles got the credit for mixing sacred with secular with his seminal *I Got A Woman* record from 1955. But it was Rosetta who was the true pioneer.

Breaking Ground

A stream of historically important recordings followed. *This Train, Trouble In Mind, Shout Sister Shout, Nobody's Fault But Mine* and *Strange Things Happening Every Day*, her biggest hit, are just some of her recordings that are now acknowledged as groundbreaking and influential in those proto-rock 'n' roll days. On these, and many other finely crafted records throughout the 1940s, Tharpe plays acoustically in a classic Delta style – each track allowing her guitar and voice to soar.

Rosetta also made several traditional gospel records in tandem with her more R&B-flavoured output, a clear sign that she felt some degree of guilt over becoming so well known as a secular pop star. After all, gospel was where her heart and musical roots lay. Regardless, she maintained this musical balancing act for the remainder of her career by which time it had become perfectly acceptable to combine the two.

As the 50s dawned, Tharpe, like so many of her trailblazing contemporaries, found her career on somewhat of a downturn as a new generation appeared and proceeded to convert her innovations into rock 'n' roll. Similarly, on the gospel scene, the rise of Mahalia Jackson had a similar effect in making Rosetta sound old-fashioned, almost overnight. Tharpe continued to perform in nightclubs and on tour, but the hit records had dried up.

> Sister Rosetta Tharpe's 1940s recordings are now acknowledged as groundbreaking and influential in those proto-rock 'n' roll days



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Rosetta controversially bridged the gap between gospel and secular music with *Rock Me* in the late 1930s



PHOTO BY CHRIS WARE/KEYSTONE FEATURES/GETTY IMAGES

Crossing The Pond

By 1957, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Elvis Presley and a host of others had firmly established rock 'n' roll as the music of choice for 'the kids'. In the UK, however, something else was going on in parallel with the new music emanating from across the pond: a vibrant and healthy scene for traditional jazz. One of its leading lights was trombonist Chris Barber who had led a band that included Lonnie Donegan since the late 40s. During Barber's concerts, Donegan would play what became known as a 'skiffle break' where he'd perform songs by the likes of Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly. These interval sets kicked off a whole movement in British music that directly led to the 'blues boom' of the 1960s.

Aside from this, Barber took it upon himself to bring over many blues and jazz musicians from the States to perform with his band, therefore introducing UK and European audiences to heroes that had only been heard on record before. It was tours featuring the likes of Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters and, in 1957, Sister Rosetta Tharpe that has such a profound impact on young British musicians that are now household names such as Peter Green, Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck. The list is endless – and the rest is history!

The 1957 tour was a huge success and put Rosetta firmly back on top. She came to the UK again in 1958 and in 1964 she toured as part of the Blues & Gospel Caravan, which also featured Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Rev Gary Davis and Mississippi John Hurt.

Going Electric

It's from the late 50s through the 60s that we are blessed with some incredible live footage of Rosetta singing and playing. By this time, she'd gone fully electric and was playing the guitar with a ferocity that foreshadows Townshend, Clapton, Beck, Page and Hendrix. Her signature licks are full of clever use of chromatics, doublestops and triplets, all delivered with such ease. They're fluid and melodic with a rhythmic drive that can only be described as being 'in the pocket'. Her sound and approach was quite unlike the bulk of blues guitarists at the time and actually allow one to see the beginnings of the path the music was to take as it strived to see itself beyond the pentatonic box.

Tharpe favoured a thumbpick for single lines and rhythm, freeing up her other fingers to pick out those Delta licks at which she was also a master. She played through Gibson amps in her early electric days, simply because they were the only ones available, and had no problem turning



Performing with a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop with trapeze tailpiece in 1957



Sister Rosetta Tharpe with her iconic white Gibson SG while filming at Wilbraham Road station in Manchester, May 1964

PHOTO BY TV TIMES/TV TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

them up full! In fact, Rosetta is often cited as one of the first guitarists to fully embrace valve overdrive. In later footage, Tharpe is plugged into either a 15-watt Gibson Falcon or a Vox AC30. She used 'Vestapol' tuning in D; imagine the notes of an open E chord tuned down a whole step to D A D F# A D.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe's guitar collection is enough to make any vintage enthusiast salivate. In the early days she played a National Triolian Resonator, a wooden-bodied (as opposed to the later steel) guitar produced between 1938 and 1941, with it

> By the late 50s Rosetta had gone fully electric and was playing the guitar with a ferocity that foreshadows Townshend, Clapton, Beck and Page

featuring on most of Tharpe's Delta styled recordings. By 1941, Rosetta is seen with a blonde Gibson L5 archtop that is likely the guitar she experimented attaching a pickup to later in the 40s. For her 1957 tour with Chris Barber, Tharpe literally rocked up with a P-90-equipped Gibson Les Paul Goldtop with a trapeze tailpiece. You can imagine those young future rock stars gazing in awe at this imposing black woman tearing off a barrage of distorted licks. It would have been truly mindblowing at the time. In 1960, Tharpe was filmed at the Antibes Jazz festival backed by the Ian Wheeler & Ken Sims Sims Jazz Band. For this trip, her travel companion was a Gretsch G6117 Double Anniversary, a non-Bigsby version. Later in the 60s, Rosetta is seen with a sunburst Gibson ES-330 and, in 1970, the year of her forced retirement, she was still purveying those piercing licks via a Gibson Barney Kessel signature model.

Making Tracks

The one guitar Tharpe will forever be associated with, though, is her white 1961 Gibson SG Custom. This is the guitar that features on the majority of existing film, most notably the iconic footage of her playing at the disused Wilbraham Road train station in South Manchester on 7 May 1964. Recorded for Granada TV while the aforementioned Gospel And Blues Caravan show was touring, the footage shows Sister Rosetta and the other members of the troupe performing on one platform while the audience sat across the tracks on the other. The impact this show had cannot be underestimated as, for so many, it would have been their first exposure to authentic Black American music – music that was known well to the young musicians frequenting the blues clubs that had cropped up around the country but almost alien to the majority of the public. From this moment, the British take on the blues left the underground, exploded into the mainstream and things were never the same again.

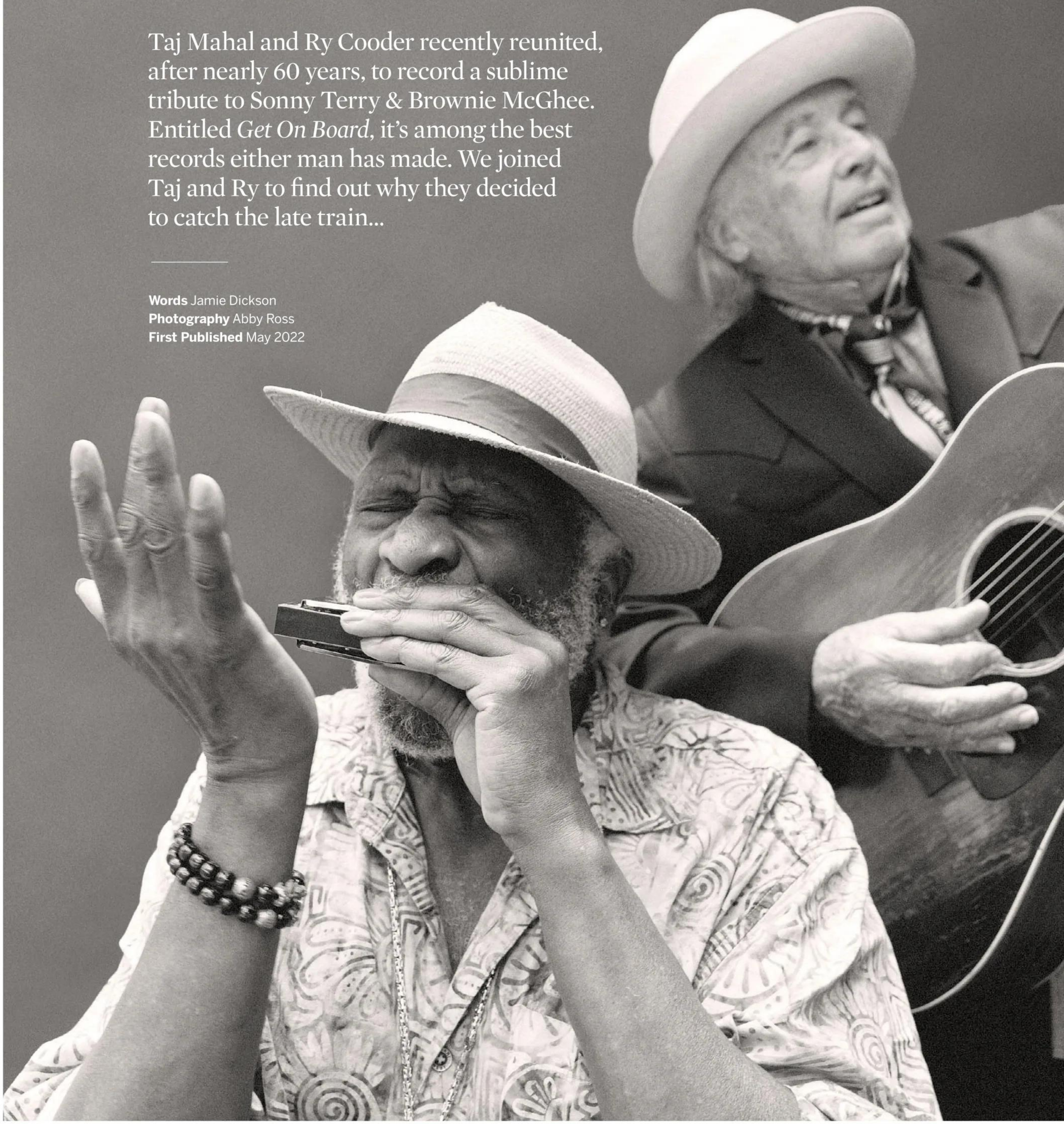
Some 50 years of performing and touring finally caught up with Tharpe when, in 1970, she suffered a stroke that put an end to her touring life. She had lived with diabetes for several years, which, after the stroke, forced her to have a leg amputated. After recovering, Rosetta was booked for a recording session in October 1973. The evening before the session she suffered another – this time fatal – stroke at her home in Philadelphia.

Sadly, it wasn't until 2008 that Tharpe finally had a gravestone to mark her resting place, but, by this time at least, interest in her life and work was renewed and in the years that followed Rosetta received several 'hall of fame' nominations. Tharpe also appears in the 2022 Elvis Presley biopic. In the scene, a young Presley is in a late night club on Beale Street, Memphis, where he marvels at the voice of Sister Rosetta Tharpe (played by Yola) blending gospel and blues into an intoxicating cocktail of sound that Elvis himself – along with millions of others – was utterly captivated by. G

TAJ MAHAL & RY COODER

Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder recently reunited, after nearly 60 years, to record a sublime tribute to Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. Entitled *Get On Board*, it's among the best records either man has made. We joined Taj and Ry to find out why they decided to catch the late train...

Words Jamie Dickson
Photography Abby Ross
First Published May 2022





Talk to any dyed-in-the-wool fan of blues music and it won't be long before they mention Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. Hailing from Tennessee, guitarist Brownie McGhee learned his craft from Blind Boy Fuller. But it was when he paired up with blues-harp wizard Sonny Terry that he found his perfect foil – and the duo were lionised by the folk scene of 60s America.

Around that time, a young Santa Monica guitarist, Ry Cooder, stumbled across their records in a secondhand record store. After that, he sought out live performances by Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, learning licks directly from McGhee after the shows. Meanwhile, another aspiring blues-folk artist, Taj Mahal, was piecing together where he might witness the music of a duo he had heard fragments of over the late-night airwaves. Like Ry, he couldn't believe Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry weren't major stars. And, like Ry, he found that their live performances were a wellspring of pure musical joy. Weaving together strands of blues and folk, their music defied easy categorisation – which is, in itself, reflective of the underlying reality of the music of America's South. Eclectic, entertaining and wide-ranging, it was a huge influence on Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal.

The latter moved to Santa Monica in the 1960s and met Ry – and Ry played on Taj Mahal's eponymous debut album in 1968. Now, nearly six decades later, they have reunited to record *Get On Board*, a captivating tribute to the music of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. We joined these two past-masters of American music to discover why returning to their roots yielded one of the best recordings of their career, and we learn why a guitar so large that Ry could barely get his arm around it was the star of the show...

When did you first encounter the music of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee?

Taj Mahal: "Well, I started hearing them probably when I was 15 or 16 years old. You'd hear little bits and snatches of them on the radio and whatnot. Not on regular radio – but some late-night blues programme would be on and you'd hear it and be struck by how good it was and how come you didn't hear it all the time? And then I just wondered where these people



1. Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder (pictured far right) played together during the mid-1960s with Rising Sons, alongside (L-R) Gary Marker, Kevin Kelley and Jesse Lee Kincaid

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



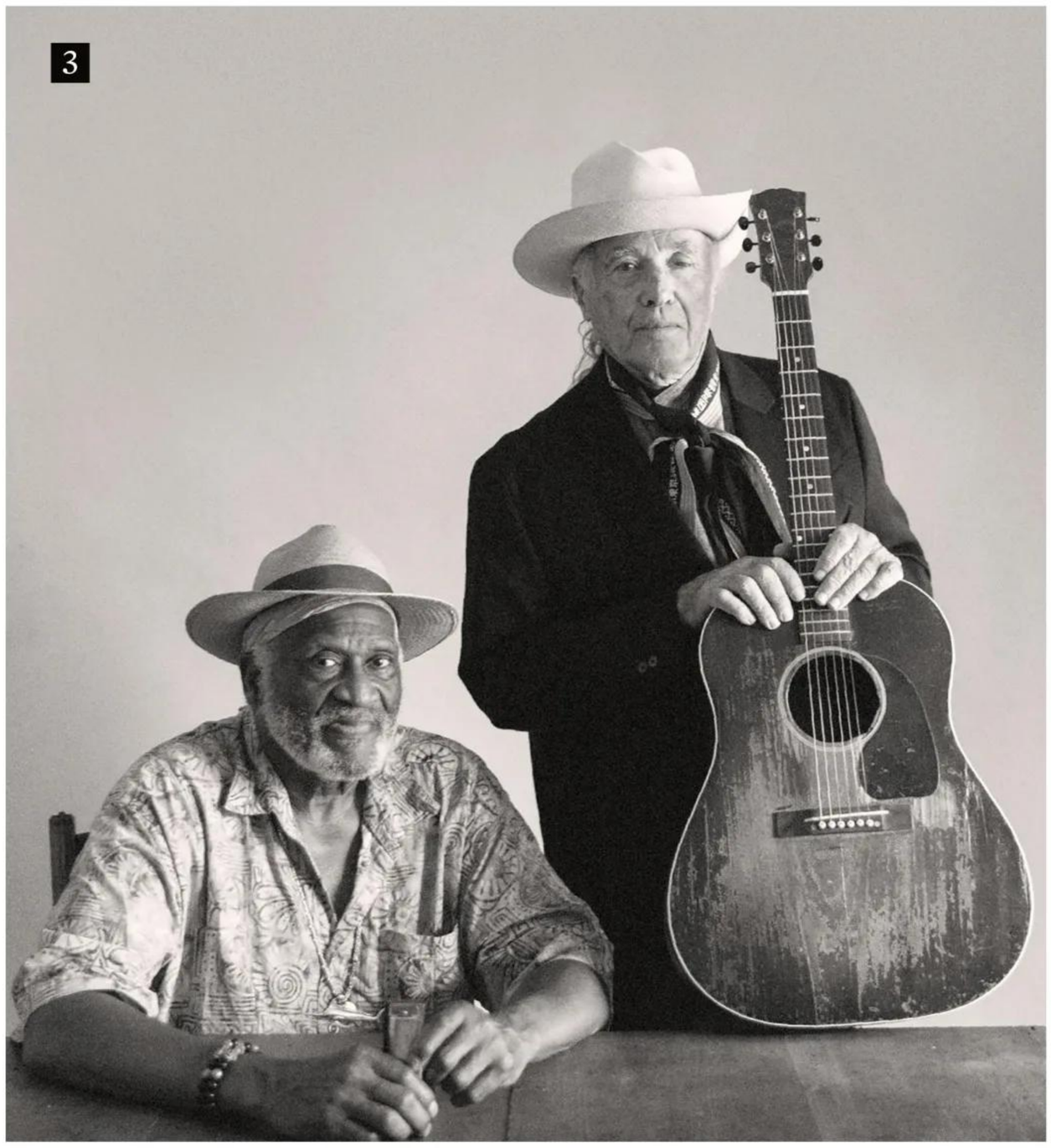
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2. The Spanish-style Californian home of Ry Cooder's son Joachim played host to the recording sessions, with its "acoustically perfect" shape and high ceilngs

were. But later I came to university, during the 60s, when the whole folk-craze came through. And many of these musicians, people like Brownie and Sonny and Bukka White, Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes and others, were being brought around to coffeehouses and played at folk festivals. So I began to realise that there was a place you could go and see them play, you know?

"I got to see them and I thought they were just incredible. And I hoped that I would be able to be that good someday. I mean, I could play a little bit and I could sing quite well, but I was just learning to get my guitar chops together. But Brownie was really good and Sonny was just a wizard on the harmonica. Those guys, they'd play with Lead Belly, they'd play with Pete Seeger, they'd play with Blind Boy Fuller or the Reverend Gary Davis... they had some versatility, to be honest. They were involved in different plays on Broadway like *Finian's Rainbow* and came up with some great stuff. I mean, that whole *Fox Chase* blues stuff that Sonny Terry came up with – that's a Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina style. Goes over to Arkansas, too – but it was always a great show. I never saw them put on a bad show. Ever."

3. Taj Mahal was on the cusp of his 20s when a Robert Johnson album opened his ears to a sound that was surprisingly little-known



3

Why do you think history has remembered Robert Johnson and BB King, for example, but only hardcore blues fans tend to know about Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry?

Taj: "Well, I don't even think that everybody knows the aforementioned people you're talking about. In fact, I'd never heard *Dust My Broom* [by Elmore James], none of that, until I came to the university and I was about 19 years old and they put out that record *Robert Johnson King Of The Delta Blues Singers*. I was like, 'Who *is* this guy I've never heard of before?' Why, all of a sudden, was this whole group of folkies going, 'Wow, wow, wow – listen to this guy *play*...'? I had absolutely no idea! So I put the record on and at first it sounded [quick]. And the reason was they had printed the record at too fast an rpm. But when they finally got it at the right speed, it really made more sense.

"But still, never heard of Robert Johnson before that. Now, John Lee Hooker I'd heard of. BB King I'd heard about. And maybe now and then I would hear that sound when I'd be at a neighbour's house... their moms and pops were in the kitchen and maybe BB King would be on in the background. But I'd never heard Elmore James or even understood the sound of slide guitar, except that it was on a couple of Jimmy Reed records I knew. But a lot of that comes from the record-selling industry – they were always trying to put music in boxes. You know, like, 'This is *this* kind of blues, *this* kind of country & western, *this* kind of pop,' separating things like that. Oftentimes, the listener didn't get a chance to realise that [music] was just one big river full of lots of different fish."

How did the idea of working together again start?

Taj: "Well, we literally hadn't played together for over 50 years and I was getting a lifetime achievement

award in Nashville at the Ryman Auditorium, which is the Mother Church of Country Music. Ry and his son were involved in the band, as well as Buddy Miller and Don Was, and so Ry reached out to me and said, 'What material do you think you'd like to do?' I suggested maybe something that was a little more country. He said, 'Oh, well, I mean, that's all right, but I think we should pump it.' And I was like, 'Okay, I do, too – but I was trying to be a little diplomatic.' So I said, 'Well, that only means only one thing, Ry – *Statesboro Blues*.' He says, 'You're on,' and so we did a version, which is now on YouTube.

"Little by little, we started communicating with one another again and his birthday came and I called him up. Then we started sending music back and forth and, at one point, he came and he said, 'Well, what do you think about this? I've got an idea. Why don't we do a tribute to Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry?' Well, I was ready right there [laughs]. So I came down to Los Angeles and we played together again and it was just great. We had lots of rapport, lots of communication and it took off from there. The way we recorded, it was kind of a back porch-y, living room style, you know? Real music, live music... the way it is. Ry set the music up and then we got to playing and we're talking to one another. That's what you really want to happen is that, ultimately, you're speaking to one another through the instruments."

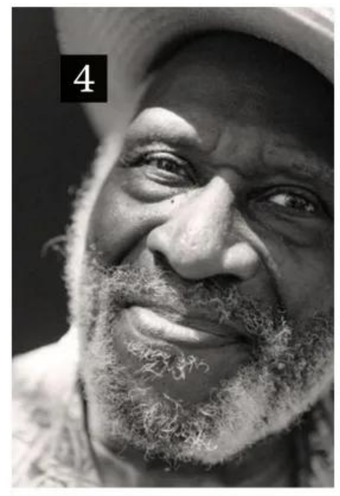
How did the sessions for *Get On Board* go down?

Ry Cooder: "Well, [my son] Joachim's got this nice old Spanish-style California house down the street from us here. We're in an old neighbourhood – we're not in LA any more. We're all out in this other area. But I mean, it's an older neighbourhood, it's an older area. His living room is about the shape of what you might expect in an early recording studio with a very high ceiling, wood floor and some plaster as well. The architect that designed the house was a very good architect. I happen to know who it was – and at the time, in 1927, he came upon this shape of this room somehow, and he thought it would be pleasing. But maybe he didn't know that it's also acoustically perfect, as long as you don't play too loud. You can't hit a loud snare drum in there and you can't play electric bass in there. But you can do all kinds of things acoustically.

"Then [there was] our engineer friend Martin Pradler – to say he's a genius is like saying Beethoven was a pretty good orchestrator. I mean, he's a tremendous interpreter of how the music should be recorded and we've worked with him for a lot of years now. So I said to him, 'Martin, I'm going to play acoustic guitar, which I hardly ever do in recording, and Taj is going to play harmonica. We're going to sing. It's all live and Joachim bangs on these strange oddball drums. And we're going to sort of be in a triangle. The drums a little further away from the vocal mic, but it's a good-sized room and we want to mic the room... don't mic us too close. We want it so it sounds like you walked into a place like a little juke joint or a little bar or somewhere where you hear the thing [as a whole], not as isolated individuals...'

"So he set the mics up. Tube mics, naturally. We've got all this old equipment – me and Martin between the two of us – that's really good. But, the point is, it's period equipment. It's vintage but good. We record through an old AM radio tube-powered board [desk] and he moves mics around until you hear in the earphones, 'Ah, that's the spot for that mic.' You know, that's capturing something that's well defined, but it's ambient – like being in the room. That's what I want. When I hear it, I'll like it. And when we like what we hear through the earphones, then we can go ahead and play and we don't have to work too hard and it's very natural. If you like the sound, you can record anything, you can play anything. If you don't like the sound, you might as well go home.

"I overdubbed stuff here and there, but the basic tracks with the live singing is what you're hearing. Yes, I added bottleneck here and there and whatnot, and maybe another harmony sometimes because it's nice to hear three voices just for fun. Nothing fancy but just to get the feel. Get the groove going right. If the groove is right, you're in business with that music. That's really what it is. Who cares what the lyrics say so much? They're fun lyrics, but the point is the groove, you know?"



4. When Taj was awarded a Lifetime Achievement award from the Americana Music Association a few years back, Ry Cooder was part of the band at the Ryman. And so the seed was sown for their latest collaboration...

5. Taj has released numerous solo and collaborative records since his debut album landed in the late 60s

"We had lots of rapport. We recorded [in] a back porch-y, living room style. Real music..."

TAJ MAHAL

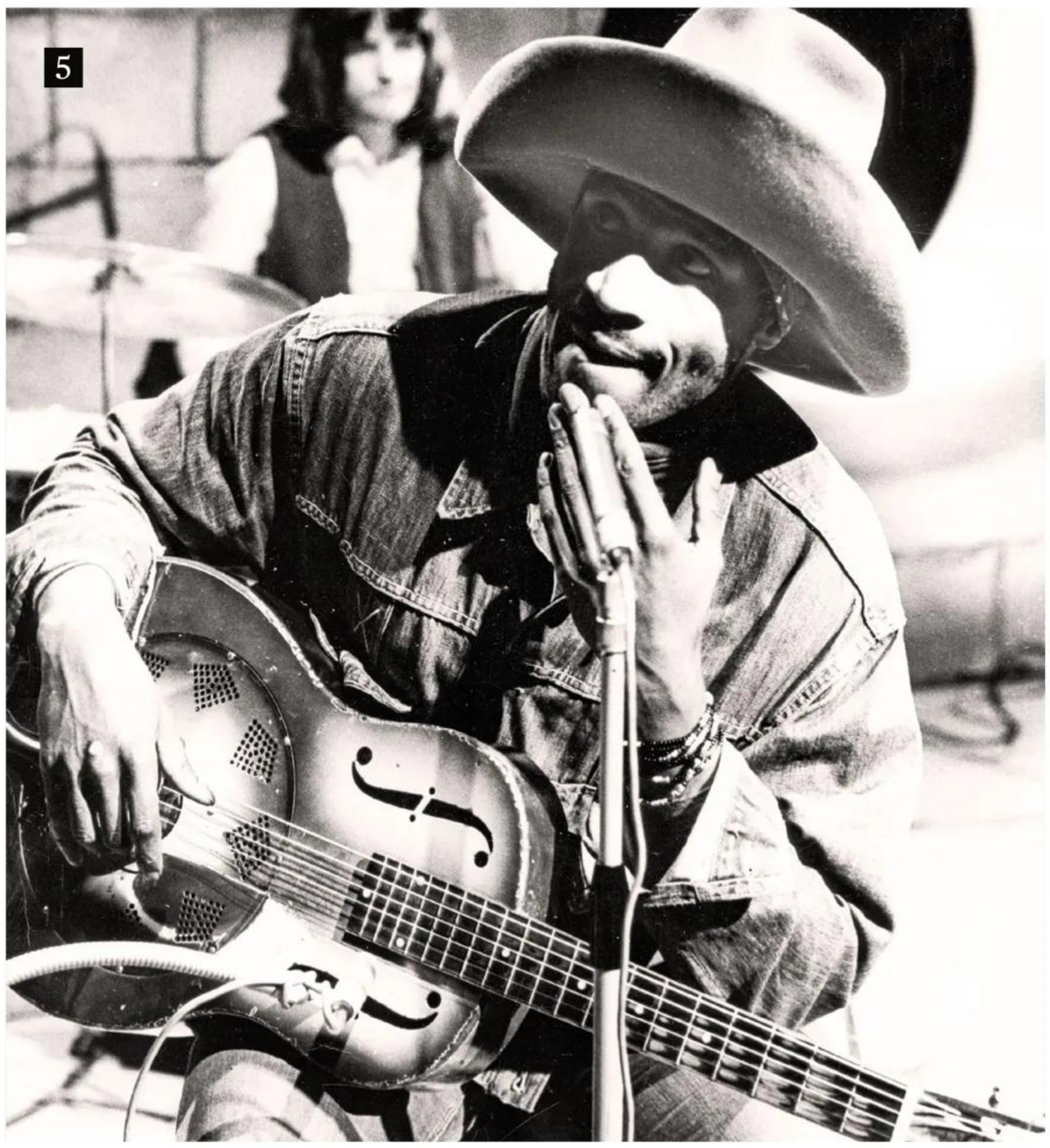


PHOTO BY MARKA/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

6. Pictured here in the 70s, Ry Cooder says his proficiency on guitar has improved as time has passed: "I'm a slow learner. So now I'm playing the way I wanted to play when I was young... I can say to myself, 'This is exactly what I aspired to do all those years ago'"

The acoustic sounds on *Pawn Shop Blues* are incredible. What guitar did you use for that?

Ry: "Oh yeah, that's a nice guitar. That one there is one of these Banner [logo] Gibsons J-45s. I think it's from 1943. But I like to vary things. The real oddball guitar, the crazy guitar, was on the track [*What A*] *Beautiful City*. It's the most goddamnedest thing you've ever seen. It's an Adams Brothers guitar that's so big. It's as big as a guitarrón, and I can barely hold it and wrap my arm around it. It's enormous and it has a short neck, so it can only be played in one key, E. But it has this incredible sound, it's a big goddamn guitar, real thin. 1905 it was made, and how it survived all these years, who the hell knows. That's a wonderful guitar.

"But that J-45 on *Pawn Shop* is nice, yeah. It's not as resonant as the D-18. I used the D-18 for most of the tunes because that's what Brownie played and it's a good one, 1946. Very, very good guitar. For that music it's perfect: very big, twangy sound. But for *Pawn Shop* I needed something a little quieter and played a little softer, so that Banner J-45 is nice – it was in a fire, I think, so it's real damaged [laughs]. It looks like somebody in Pompeii had it when the volcano erupted, but it's good."

Taj: "Ry also had a cello banjo. The [pre-war] instrument makers made violins, viola, cello. And they made banjos like that, too – bass banjos, mandolas, mandocellos or banjolins. That was the imprint from the European instruments when they came over here and started to make them. Ry had some extraordinary ones... I had a steel guitar and a wooden guitar and a plethora of harmonicas."



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

6

> *"If you like the sound, you can record anything. If you don't like it, you might as well go home"*
>
> **RY COODER**

***Pawn Shop Blues* has a really slow, meditative tempo that gives it huge emotional weight. You don't hear that so much any more in blues. Why?**

Ry: "First of all, everybody's moving too fast. If you don't think so, just go on to LA freeway sometime. People move too fast or they're in a hurry all the time, like, 'I get my brown shoes – no socks – I get my tattoos, I get my beard and my hat and my little box-back coat. And then I'll get my guitar and then I'll make my record and then I'll be famous.' [Laughs] And that's the order of battle, that's how it's going to play out. Well, that's ridiculous. There's no way that can work. I mean, we older people know that – but it's basic. So it does take some time.

"The other thing is, if you're going to play real slow, then you have to go into that song as a meditation. I mean, shall I use that word? You have to immerse yourself in it. You have to have the ability... the desire is very important, but stop thinking about 'brown shoes, no socks, beards and tattoos' and think about nothing and just play the goddamn song. Can you evoke something? Can you make it felt? If you feel it, your audience will feel it. And yet at the same time, you have to have enough ability.

"By the way, it's taken me a lifetime since I started guitar when I was four or so. It's not something you learn overnight, and I certainly didn't learn it overnight. I'm well aware records exist that show us there were people who were very young, such as Louis Armstrong, who had an epiphany and they became who they became suddenly. So that can happen – but not me. I'm a slow learner. So now I'm playing the way I wanted to play when I was young. I actually can hear that I'm doing it, and I can say to myself, 'This is exactly what I aspired to do all those years ago.'

"I remember one time, Terry Melcher, the record producer, said to me – and I was in my 20s at the time or even younger – he said, 'The rate you're going, it's going to take you 20 years to get anywhere.' And I thought, 'Jeez, that's harsh.' But it wasn't. He was actually way off the mark: 20, hell! 40, 50 years maybe. You have to realise I'm not from some little podunk town in the South with uncles to teach me. I didn't have uncles to teach me. In Santa Monica, there's no uncles! You're just on your own. I mean, if you can get anywhere and not have to become an insurance underwriter or an auto mechanic... I mean, they should have taught me auto mechanics when I was in high school, but they didn't. So I went on and learned guitar [laughs]." G



Get On Board by Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder is out now on Warner Music Group

www.tajblues.com

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RORY'S GLORIES

A supremely soulful guitarist who played with headlong, ecstatic energy, it's little wonder Irish blues-rock hero Rory Gallagher is remembered with such enduring affection. To mark the 40th anniversary of his solo career, *Guitarist* was granted unique access to the iconic guitar rigs that gave his tone wings...

Words Jamie Dickson **First Published** May 2012

Time machines don't look like this in the movies. Here we are, stood gazing at stacks of battered flightcases covered in faded stencilled letters that have just been wheeled in by Tom O'Driscoll, who roadied for Irish blues-rock legend Rory Gallagher during his too-brief life.

Tom is now custodian of the battered but very special instruments with which Rory made his name. Somewhere among these cases is Rory's famous '61 Strat, the one he played so hard that only a few jagged islands of lacquer remain on its body, while its reverse still bears a faint blue sheen from his jeans.

Also hidden inside these dusty boxes are treasures such as his early-number tweed Fender Twin, and the white '66 Tele that gave voice to Rory's blazing slide solos. We can't wait to take a look.

But this collection evokes something more important than simple gear envy; something you can feel even before the cases are opened. And that's a faint echo of what this private but brilliant musician was like in life, as a player and a personality.

It's a timely moment to revisit Rory's musical legacy. His nephew, Daniel Gallagher, recently re-mastered six classic albums from Rory's solo career to celebrate its 40th anniversary. These range from his eponymous debut, with its taut blues riffs and gentle, folky interludes to the full-on string-shredding majesty of his *Irish Tour '74* album.

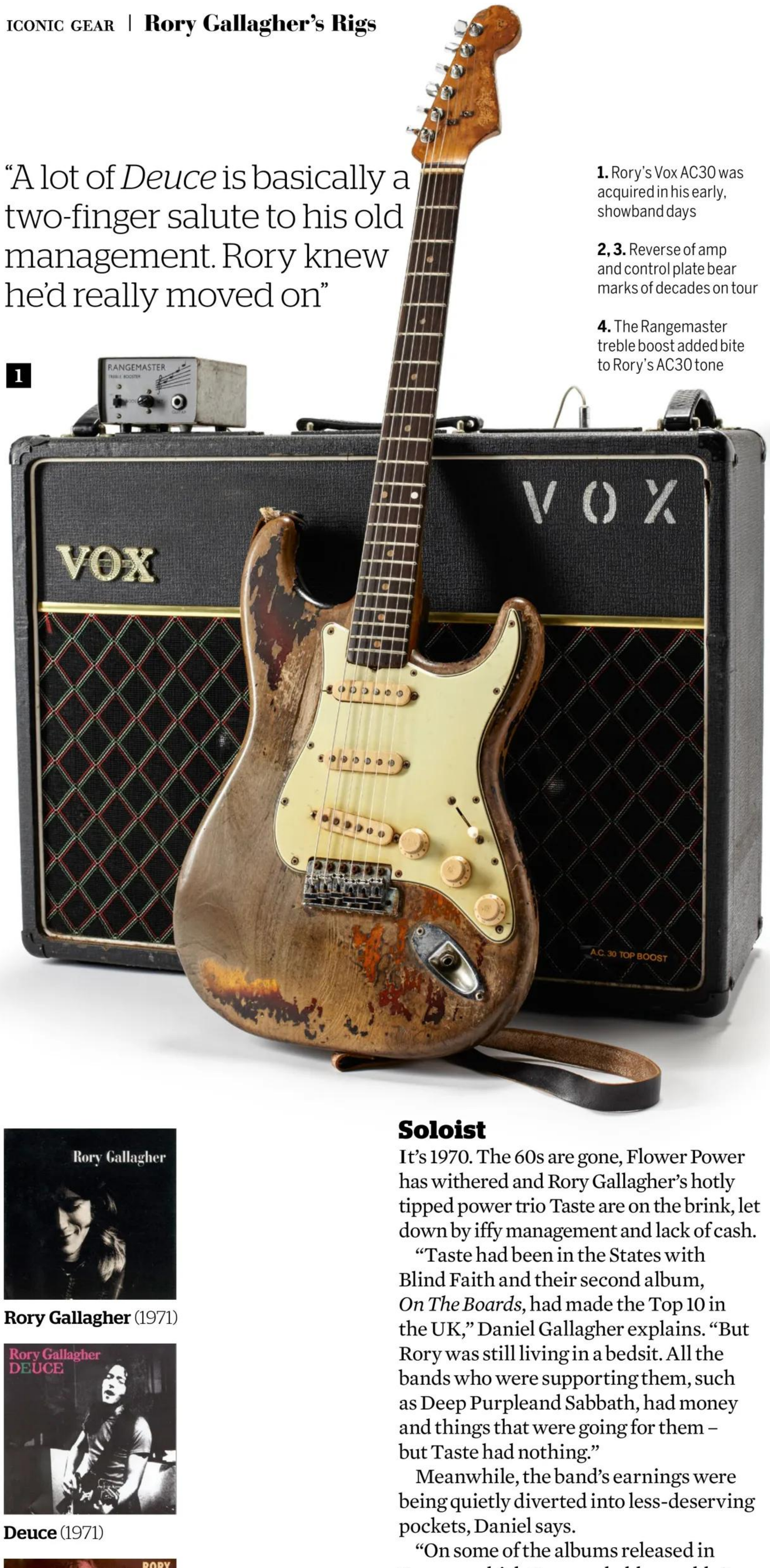
The aim of the project, Daniel explains, was to shed fresh light on the original recordings, restoring the fine details of Rory's sound – but without burying the spontaneity of his playing under layers of sonic varnish.

Back in *Guitarist*'s London photo studio, Daniel leads us to one of the larger flightcases, flips the latches and opens the lid to reveal a row of historic instruments nestled inside. But it's the scent that rises from the box that stops you in your tracks: a musty essence of well-gigged vintage gear that makes you feel as if the cheering has only just faded; as if the fierce glow of valves has only just dimmed in the back of these battered amps.

We can't replicate that essence of '74 here, but the rest we can share. Join us for an album-by-album tour through Rory Gallagher's favourite guitar rigs, as Daniel Gallagher tells the story of how Rory's sound evolved after his power trio Taste folded and he embarked on a storming solo career that inspired everyone from Peter Frampton to Johnny Marr.

But we'll leave it to no less a guitar icon than Slash to sum up the magic of Rory's playing from a guitarist's perspective. As he recently told us: "Rory is right up my alley because he was one of those spontaneous, do-it-in-the-moment-and-leave-it kinda guys. There's not much messing around with getting everything perfect. He had great natural feel and played so many different styles."

"A lot of *Deuce* is basically a two-finger salute to his old management. Rory knew he'd really moved on"

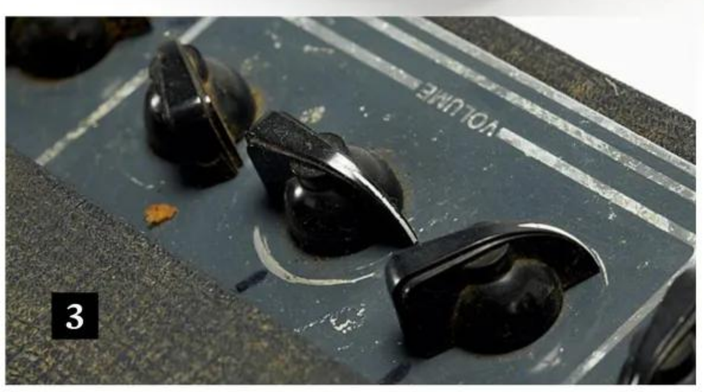


1. Rory's Vox AC30 was acquired in his early, showband days

2, 3. Reverse of amp and control plate bear marks of decades on tour

4. The Rangemaster treble boost added bite to Rory's AC30 tone



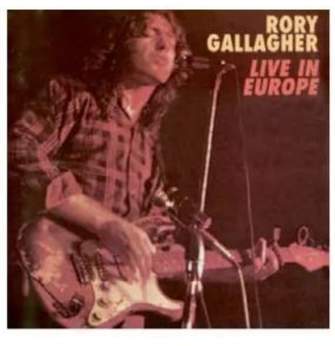




PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

Rory Gallagher (1971)

Deuce (1971)



Live in Europe (1972)

Soloist

It's 1970. The 60s are gone, Flower Power has withered and Rory Gallagher's hotly tipped power trio Taste are on the brink, let down by iffy management and lack of cash.

"Taste had been in the States with Blind Faith and their second album, *On The Boards*, had made the Top 10 in the UK," Daniel Gallagher explains. "But Rory was still living in a bedsit. All the bands who were supporting them, such as Deep Purpleand Sabbath, had money and things that were going for them – but Taste had nothing."

Meanwhile, the band's earnings were being quietly diverted into less-deserving pockets, Daniel says.

"On some of the albums released in Europe, which Rory probably wouldn't have seen, Taste's manager had managed to give himself writing credits! Rory tried to change things but the manager told the other two guys in the band that the reason they were poor was because Rory was demanding all the money, which wasn't true."

Disillusioned and at loggerheads with his own manager, Rory wanted out.

"There were no heated words, because Rory wasn't that kind of guy, but he made it clear it was over. It wasn't just the money: *On The Boards* had a lot of jazz influences and [drummer] John Wilson wanted to go further into that. But Rory wanted to stick to his blues roots, so there were musical differences as well," Daniel says.

Taste finally split at the end of 1970, after an Isle Of Wight Festival performance marred by gear theft and financial strife. Wilson and bassist Richard McCracken formed a new band by themselves, but Rory was left mired in contractual red tape that prevented him working. Zep's manager Peter Grant helped him break free, but it took time.

"He wrote two albums, *Rory Gallagher* and *Deuce*, while he was waiting," Daniel says.

Close to broke, Rory still had a rig to reckon with, which included the '61 Strat (see box, right) that he bought on

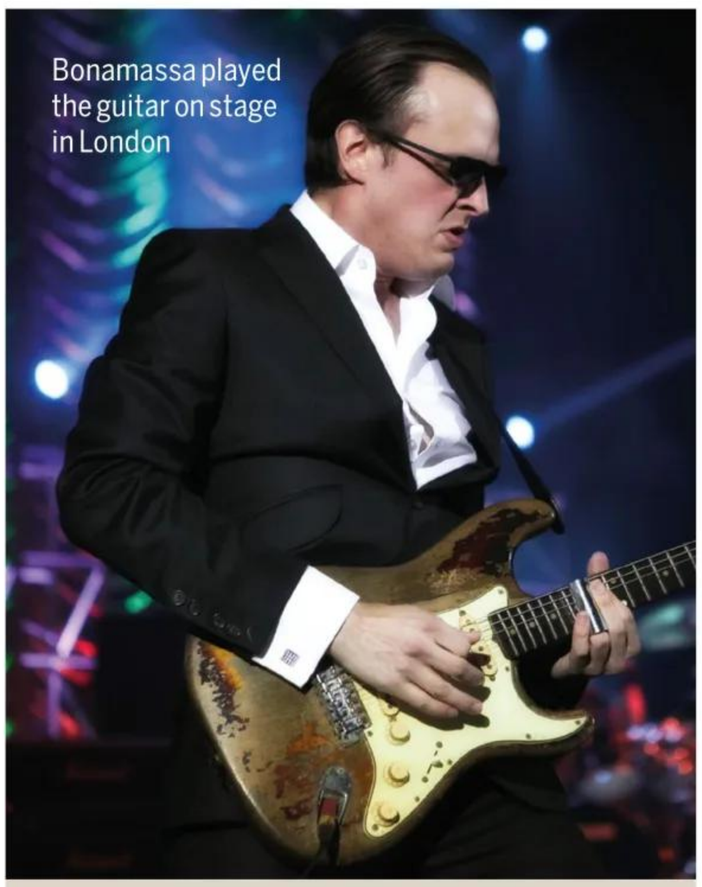


PHOTO BY CHRISTIE GOODWIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Bonamassa played the guitar on stage in London

Joe Bonamassa

On playing Rory Gallagher's '61 Strat

"Growing up, I'd read about it, I'd seen it on the covers of *Irish Tour '74*... y'know, it was Rory Gallagher's iconic battered Strat. Before the Hammersmith gigs, my girlfriend says, I got you your Christmas present. That night, in walks Dónal Gallagher [Rory's brother] with a gigbag, then out comes the '61 Strat: when that comes into the room, everybody knows what it is. So that was a pretty heavy scene for me. They left it in the dressing room, and I didn't want to leave because it was like, I'm responsible for this thing.

"It's a great Strat, just at face value. It's loud, it's punchy, it's articulate, when you roll the volume down it cleans up nice, but then it roars like a Gibson. We happened to have *Cradle Rock* in the set, then I used it for *When The Fire Hits The Sea*, and I kept it on for Gary Moore's *Midnight Blues*, y'know, because it's two Irish guitarists and here's this American kid who was really influenced by them. I've played my share of vintage guitars and I'll say this: he's played that guitar so much there's a little divot on the body where his right arm started working into the wood, and divots on the neck where I could tell what position he'd play in. He's definitely played it to its maximum potential.

"I never thought I'd play a special guitar such as that. But it wasn't hard to give it back. When you have an iconic guitar – an irreplaceable item – you feel the weight and responsibility of it. That's the family's guitar. It shouldn't be anyone's but Rory's. I can't thank Dónal enough for that moment. It was really super special."



PHOTO BY ANDREW PUTLER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Rory performing at the Montreux Jazz Festival in July 1975

"Rory developed his style of really ramping the Vox up, using the tone and volume on the guitar to control everything... Everything was full blast"

credit from Crowley's Music Store in Cork, a Top-Boost AC30, a sweet-voiced Martin D-35 acoustic and a white '66 Tele. These would provide the bedrock of the electric and acoustic tone on his first two studio albums, both recorded in 1971 with bassist Gerry McAvoy and drummer Wilgar Campbell.

"Around that time, Rory developed his style of really ramping the Vox up, using the tone and volume on the guitar to control everything," Daniel says. "The Dallas Rangemaster gave his tone that step beyond when he wanted to pierce people's ears. Everything was full blast.

"The Tele was in there for slide. He used a half-finger brass slide, which you can see on the clips from the Isle Of Wight Taste gig. He did all his acoustic stuff on the Martin – and that was pretty much it. It was all the kit he could afford at that time."

The Albums

"*Rory Gallagher* and *Deuce* are two really quite different albums," says Daniel. "With Rory Gallagher, there's a slightly softer, acoustic side to some of it, plus a touch of the jazz feel from Taste. *Deuce* is my favourite, though. A lot of it was basically a two-finger salute to his old management. Rory was confident in himself and knew that he'd really moved on from Taste."

That newfound assurance is clearly audible on what many consider to be Rory's finest hour on slide – the solo from *Crest Of A Wave* that closes the album *Deuce*.

"He recorded *Crest Of A Wave* in one take while he was doing the vocals at the same time. There's two guitar solos on the track and in the second one he just really goes for it," Daniel explains.

"Rory's tone on *Live In Europe* is so good. There was no producer – he did it all himself, recording direct from the mixing desk"

"There's a great moment right at the end of the tape where Robin Sylvester, who was the engineer on the album, says, 'Flawless,' and Rory says, 'I hope that's the lucky word you always use.' But it's the right word: that level of slide playing is not often paralleled."

When Rory journeyed to Europe to tour *Deuce* in '72, the white '66 Tele was still his go-to guitar for down-and-dirty slide tracks such as *Bullfrog Blues*. But he went on to use guitars with progressively hotter pickups for slide, ranging from his heavily modded '59 Esquire to a Gretsch PX6134 Corvette, fitted with a single P-90 pickup, which he used in the latter years of his career (see box, right).

"*Live In Europe* is a really cool but basic record," Daniel says, "but Rory's tone on it is so good. There was no producer – he did it all himself, recording direct from the mixing desk. But again, he liked that idea of controlling his sound from the stage, with the guitar being the controlling point."

5. Rory's '68 Martin D-35 was used on tracks such as *Just The Smile* from his first solo album, and shows signs of age

6. Rory's sharp-toned white Telecaster has a '66 marking on the neck, but some sources have it as a '67 model

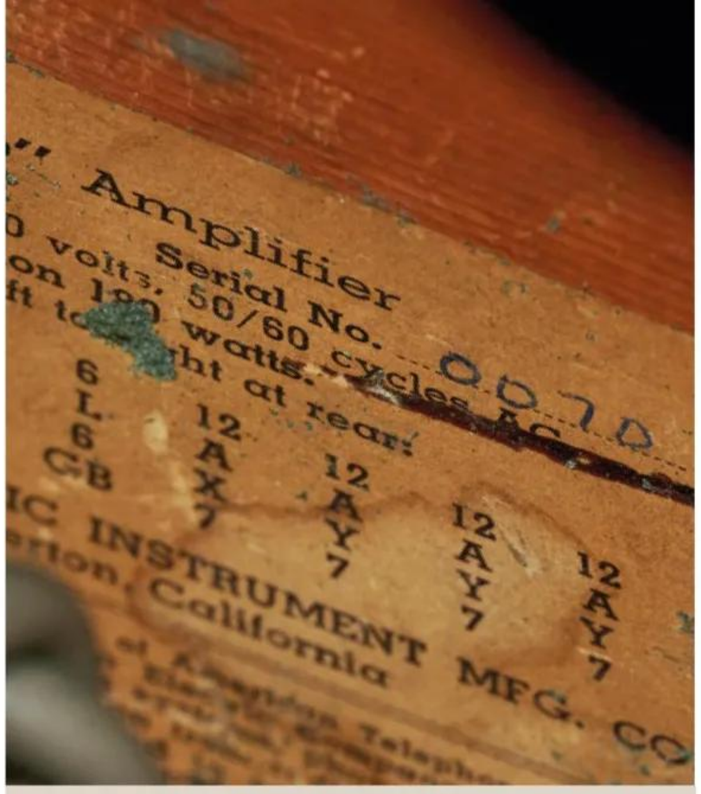


Lil' Red Corvette

The pawn-shop prize that became a slide favourite

Rory's quest for increasingly hot slide tone eventually led him to a gorgeous '63 Gretsch Corvette bought by brother Dónal in an LA pawn shop for $50. While not used on his early solo albums, Daniel says Rory came to love the Corvette for slide work, which he saw as an integral part of his style.

"Playing live in a standard tuning, he might just decide that on one of the solos he would play slide," Daniel says. "I don't think there was a big divide in his mind between slide and fretted playing."



Blues Explosion

How a calamitous gig with ZZ Top made Rory cautious about cranking up his early Fender Twin

"Rory had a few issues over the years with different amps catching fire on stage. His tweed Twin has got a very early serial number – I think it's 0070 – so he used it in the studio and didn't like to ramp the volume up on it too much, unlike the Voxes or the Bassman. Although he actually had a Bassman blow up when he was supporting ZZ Top in the US in the mid-70s. Halfway through the show, it basically caught fire. It was still going and the fan was pushing the flames out . Rory was horrified – but everyone else was enjoying it, because it looked amazing. The local amp repair man that Rory went to the next day had actually been in the crowd during the gig and had seen the whole thing. When Rory arrived with the burnt-out amp to fix, he said he'd been expecting him!"

Songwriter

With Rory's solo career off to a flying start, he upped the ante in 1973 after drummer Wilgar Campbell left the band, fatigued by the touring that followed *Deuce*. Rod de'Ath was hired in Campbell's place and Lou Martin came in on keys. Crucially, the addition of keys filled out the sound and granted Rory extra freedom to go where he wanted on guitar.

"He knew that it meant he didn't have to do as much rhythm playing," Daniel says. "The change in drummer had an influence as well. Rod was a much busier player than Wilgar and added a fill at the end of every bar. Along with the keys, there wasn't the space for that earlier, blistering guitar sound that covered everything. He had to make room for everyone."

This powerhouse line-up carried Gallagher into his next two studio albums, and they would stay together all the way through the celebrated Irish Tour until late 1977.

Rory's backline was also in transition during this period. The Vox AC30 wasn't gelling with the sound of the new line-up, so he began to use a variety of Fender amps alongside the Vox, phasing out the Rangemaster from his rig around the same time, although he did go on to use a Hawk treble boost in its place.

"By 1973 to 1974 Rory got into Fender amps," Daniel explains. "Part of it was that he'd added keyboards and maybe he felt the Vox and Rangemaster setup was conflicting with that. The Bassman, Concert and Twin became his staples for the rest of the 1970s with the Vox linked in."

Blueprint (1973)

Tattoo (1973)

The Albums

"*Blueprint* is kind of different from the first two albums. Rory seems to have left the angst about Taste's break-up behind," Daniel says. "It opens so well with *Walk On Hot Coals*, which became a favourite live track on *Irish Tour*. He was also beginning to write songs that were very much his own, such as *Daughter Of The Everglades*."

> "He would always go back to Ireland before doing an album and spend two weeks coming up with songs..."

Rory was in full flow and a further album, *Tattoo*, followed in the same year. It was to become one of his best-loved recordings, introducing staples of his *Irish Tour '74* set, such as *Tattoo'd Lady* and *A Million Miles Away*. The latter, a lyrical, Danelectro-powered ballad, gave an insight into Rory's introspective side, Daniel says.

"He would always go back to Ireland before doing an album and spend two weeks coming up with songs. He'd go to Cork where his mother lived, on the coast, and *A Million Miles Away* is all about that – going to the pub and sitting there on your own. It's got quite a lonely feel, and that would have been him in Cork."

"He used the 3021 shorthorn Danelectro on *A Million Miles Away* because it features both standard and fingerpicking, with a lot of embellishment around the chords. He maybe felt that with Dano, he was getting a better response than he could with the Strat. I've never seen an image of him touring with it, so it was clearly just a studio idea."





7. Rory's battered Fender Bassman was his go-to amp in the mid-70s



8. Brackets supported weighty transformers on tour



9. National resonator, Martin mandolin and modded '59 Esquire were all used on the Irish Tour





Irish Tour '74 (1974)



Hero

For many fans, one album above all others encapsulated everything for which Rory Gallagher was/is loved: *Irish Tour '74*. The record captures a spectacular run of shows, in which he brought together all the guitar disciplines he had honed to date, in one burning live act.

Unsurprisingly, the tour recordings include many high-powered renditions of studio tracks from 1973, such as *Tattoo'd Lady* – but also energetic covers such as *As The Crow Flies* by Tony Joe White, played on a '32 National Triolian resonator for some thrilling slide work.

The Irish Tour's legend has even spawned a set of Strat pickups named in its honour, made by UK company Bare Knuckle Pickups. But it wasn't a walk in the park at the time – taking place against a backdrop of intense sectarian violence centred on Belfast.

"He'd lived in Belfast when he was with Taste and called it his second home. He'd play every Christmas and on New Year's he'd do four nights at Ulster Hall. There was no divide in the crowd and it was clear everyone was welcome and there was no trouble.

"But at the time of *Irish Tour*, in the mid-70s, everything went crazy. There was a band called the Miami Showband and they were murdered at a roadblock. That's when no bands were coming to Belfast. But Rory just thought, 'Every year I go, so I should keep doing it.'"

Despite the times, the opposing sides in the Troubles left Rory's gigs alone – and he treated fans from all walks of life to his finest playing yet. The Strat was still Rory's main squeeze, but now he largely split his sound between a Fender Bassman and his faithful AC30.

"The Vox went all the way through but the Bassman was his main mid-70s amp," Rory says, adding that although

> "The *Irish Tour '74* album encapsulated everything for which Rory was loved and brought together all the guitar disciplines he had honed to date"

Tattoo, the album from which many of the *Tour*'s songs were drawn, saw Rory use a smattering of effects, including wah and a Leslie speaker cabinet, he didn't rely on them for the Irish Tour.

Though acquired in the Taste era, Rory's heavily modded '59 Esquire was gaining favour at this time, as it produced a hotter tone than the white '66 – which nonetheless saw action on the Irish Tour thanks to its uniquely cutting sound.

"A good example of that is *Who's That Coming?* on the Irish Tour," Daniel says. "He got a very, very sharp lead tone with the Tele. He liked hearing the note hitting the back wall and coming back to him. Eventually, the Esquire took over though," Daniel adds. "The tone he got with it was just a touch rockier and more distorted."

Rory, Remastered

As Rory's nephew and a seasoned musician, Daniel was perfectly placed to revisit Rory's early solo work and restore it for the new issue of six remastered albums, which are available on vinyl as well as CD and as downloads.

"Sony came to us and said they'd like to do something with the catalogue albums," Daniel says. "I felt that if they did it, the first six solo albums were the place to start.

"They'd been released on CD in the late 90s and had been remixed and remastered – but they didn't sound like Rory's original mixes. So I felt that we should go back to those and celebrate the fact that 40 years have passed since his solo career began."

Daniel says the aim was to offer fans something that was more authentic than the 90s remixes.

"We tried to make the mastering very sympathetic to how it would have been back then. The CDs from the 90s were quite harshly driven, I think. This time, we tried to make it about the dynamics Rory got in the studio, rather than compression to the max. It's kind of what the fans wanted – to hear Rory's version."

Revisiting his uncle's original masters also gave Daniel fresh insights into how this instinctive player transferred his sound to tape.

"Even in the studio, he didn't rely on a fader to bring the guitar up and down – he changed the volume control on the guitar. It goes back to that thing of being in control of the sound from where he stood rather than doing it after."

Daniel adds that what some engineers would consider 'mistakes' were actually part of the spontaneous vibe Rory wanted to capture, and which was characteristic of his whole approach to music.

"It's that 'playing live' thing. His band would have been watching Rory for every move, even in the studio," Daniel says. "I think you hear that on *I'm Not Awake Yet* from *Deuce*. You can hear the band make a mistake: they're following Rory on a solo and they don't know where he's going. They think they're about to go to a chorus and have to jump back.

"Rory put it out like that, but the 90s remixes smoothed that bit out and 'corrected' it. But Rory would have said, 'No – that's how it happened in the studio.' It's those little things that add a touch of magic." G

The 40th anniversary reissues of Rory Gallagher's early solo albums are now available on CD and vinyl and to download from Sony Music



Rory's 'Other' Strat

"The '58 Strat went on the first couple of American tours from '72 onwards. He got it from a guitar dealer in Texas called Robert Johnson, who Rory took a shine to straight away because of his name. It was meant to have been bought as a backup to the '61 Strat to use if it ever started conking out. But as you can tell from the look of it, it hasn't had as much road wear. The guitar dealer at the time was intimating that it was a guitar that had once belonged to Buddy Holly. I don't know if that was really true, but it was a big selling point."

"The 'mistakes' were actually part of the spontaneous vibe Rory wanted to capture"

10. Rory's '58 Strat has a three-tone sunburst finish which was unusual but not unheard of. The pickguard, however, looks like it's from a post-'63 guitar, quite possibly later

Wes Montgomery

When we think of the electric guitar 'explosion' of the 60s, players such as Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page come to mind. While these names deserve their place in history, one giant of the fretboard tends to get forgotten: Wes Montgomery. Here, we examine how a jazz guitarist inspired a generation of rock and blues players with his fat, Gibson-driven sound

Words Denny Ilett

Some of the world's greatest guitarists, from Carlos Santana and Stevie Ray Vaughan to Steve Howe and many others, have taken direct inspiration from Wes Montgomery. Although this unassuming gentleman plucked an old-school Gibson L-5 with his right-hand thumb, he played some of the most blistering jazz and blues lines ever heard.

He didn't invent fluid bebop jazz on the guitar, nor was he the first to use octaves and block-chords as solo devices. He did, however, take all three of these techniques and create some of the most beautiful, melodic and swinging music of all time – and it was this sheer musicality that has inspired so many other musicians, regardless of genre.

Brotherly Love

Wes was born John Leslie Montgomery into a poor but large family on 6 March 1923 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Very little is known about his infancy, but he did move to Columbus, Ohio with his father after he separated from Wes's mother.

Wes had an older brother, William Howard Montgomery – better known as 'Monk'. In 1935, at just 14 years of age, he left school and went to work to help support the family. It was Monk who noticed that young Wes was interested in music and he took it upon himself to save up the $13 that bought Wes his first instrument: a four-string tenor guitar.

It's worth taking a moment to consider what a selfless act this was. Although $13 seems a paltry amount today, the average annual salary for a family in 1935 was barely $1,500. To show his gratitude, Wes spent every waking hour learning to play his new possession.

Monk, meanwhile, became a fine bassist and in the late fifties worked with Wes and their vibraphone-playing sibling Charles (nicknamed Buddy) in their group, The Mastersounds. He was also one of the early pioneers of electric bass, recording with a Fender Precision as early as 1951 – the first year it was in production.

At age 17, Wes and his brothers were all back together in Indianapolis and by 19 he'd switched from the four strings of the tenor guitar to six, having progressed to the first of many Gibson archtops. By this time the Montgomery brothers were a close-knit team, gigging regularly in the jazz clubs of Indianapolis. Wes gained valuable experience and improved at an astonishing rate.

Learning By Ear

The year 1943 was a big one for Wes. He met a girl called Serene at a local dance and they were soon married and raising the first of their seven children. It was at one of these dances that Wes first heard Charlie Christian, who'd recently turned the guitar world – and the jazz scene in general – upside down with his explosive single-line improvisations in clarinettist Benny Goodman's sextet. Wes was blown away by what he heard and he wasn't the only one: Christian's work revealed a new path for jazz music and, almost overnight, guitar was propelled to the front of the stage – where it has stayed ever since.

Montgomery was now obsessed. He went to the local music store and made a down payment on a new Gibson and an amplifier, committing himself and his young family to $350 worth of debt they could ill afford. Over the course of the next year or so, Wes set about learning all of Christian's recorded solos by ear. This was a long and arduous process but, having had no musical training, it was his only option because he couldn't read music notation or chord symbols.

Remember, this was a pre-tablaturate world and even records were hard to come by. Musicians learned through a strong ear and a lot of trial and error. Fortunately, Wes had great ears. As he worked through Christian's solos, he developed the ability to learn a tune, riff or chord sequence after just one hearing – a talent that would later astonish his fellow musicians.

As Wes improved, so attention from other players and bands came his way. His Charlie Christian-inspired solos were heard at clubs all over town at places such as the 440 Club, the Keys Supper Club, The 19th Hole, The Ritz, The Cactus and the 500 Club. Wes's growing family meant they had to move to a bigger house and he started supplementing his income with

Montgomery's style and tone influenced guitarists of all stripes



PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Starting with blues-drenched bebop lines, he'd play a few choruses entirely in octaves and follow this up with a few more in a 'block chord' style

daytime work at a milk factory. Early experiences on the road with various bands were not to his liking. Wes was, at heart, a family man and throughout his life he always considered his music to be second to them in order of priority. The day job meant he could always be in town and get home every night – for a while.

Road Worn

Montgomery's first serious break came in 1948 when a big band led by Lionel Hampton came through town. Hamp, as he was known, was a big star on the jazz and pop scene and had already worked with Louis Armstrong. Aside from being a great player on vibraphone and drums, Hampton was a master showman and drew big crowds wherever he went.

In those days, it was a common occurrence for members of bands on the road to jump ship in the middle of tours that were often long, gruelling and badly paid. Bands such as Hampton's would be constantly touring, playing up to 300 one-nighters per year with journeys of 500 miles between gigs not uncommon. So it was that Hamp's guitarist left the band in Indianapolis and, having put the word out that he needed a replacement, he wasted no time in hiring Wes. It says a lot for Wes's ability and Hampton's keen ear for talent that he was hired to play in a top-flight big band, playing organised arrangements despite his lack of music-reading skills. It says even more for the strength of his relationship with Serene that he got the call to join the band and left to go out on the road the same day!

Wes managed to stay with the band for two years until his distaste for being away from his loved ones got the better of him and he quit and went home. He soon fell back into his old routine of day jobs supplemented by gigs. Until 1957, his daily schedule was factory work (he worked a variety of these jobs) from 7am until 3pm followed by a night-time gig in a local club such as the Turf Bar or the Missile Room from 9pm until 2am, finishing up at an after-hours joint playing until 5am!

It was in 1957 that his brothers Monk and Buddy took a band out to the West Coast to try their luck in California. Wes turned down their invitation to accompany them as he wanted to stay with his family but they did make valuable connections out there and Wes would sometimes join them for short tours. Calling themselves The Mastersounds, the brothers landed a record deal with Pacific Jazz and, encouraged by producer Dick Bock, promptly asked Wes to record with them. Although these early recordings were not successful, they did allow a generation of jazz players an early glimpse of a new and rare talent and Montgomery's name began to spread along the musical grapevine until it reached the ear of alto saxophonist Julian 'Cannonball' Adderley.

Cannonball's Impact

The biggest name in jazz in the late 1950s was Miles Davis. Adderley was a member of Miles' group, which had just recorded the masterpiece Kind Of Blue. This exposure meant that when Cannonball called his label, Riverside Records, and raved about an incredible new jazz guitarist, A&R staff listened – and then invited Wes to come in and make an LP.

This first album, recorded in October 1959, was titled The Wes Montgomery Trio. It featured the new, and very hip, sound of guitar, Hammond organ and drums. It displays Montgomery's already mature solo style to great effect. He plays with superb musicality and taste without wasting a single note or phrase. His pioneering and widely imitated solo-building formula is also fully in place. Starting with beautifully soulful, blues-drenched bebop lines, he'd play a few choruses entirely in octaves and follow this up with a few more played in a 'block chord' style in which the solo or melody line is harmonised with three-, four- or five-note chords.

All of these techniques had been used before, but nobody had managed to put it across with the warmth and personality Wes had. This first LP was a sensation and between 1959 and 1963 he recorded nine further albums and also a few as a 'sideman' too. Each one confirmed his place at the top of the jazz-guitar league. Examples of Wes's genius are legion, but tracks such as West Coast Blues with its extraordinary sequence of solo choruses, Four On Six with its angular chord changes, and Twisted Blues with its complicated but entirely logical re-harmonisation of the standard blues

Gimme Five

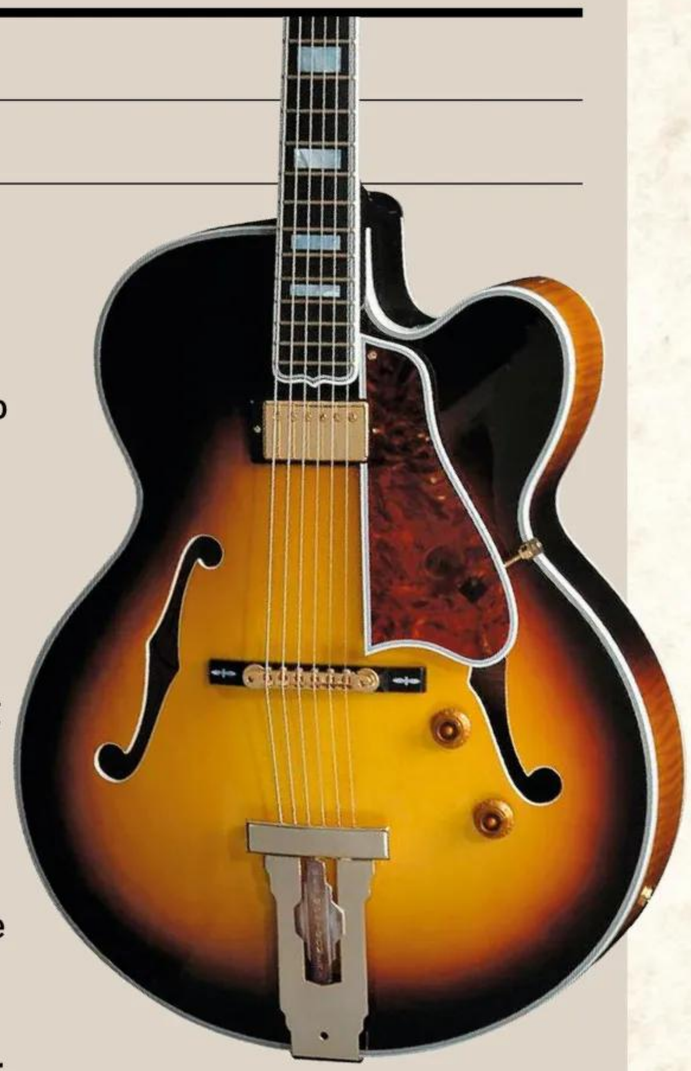
Why the Gibson L-5 was Montgomery's favourite guitar

Wes Montgomery's primary guitar was the Gibson L-5 – he owned and played several over the years. The L-5 is a full-sized archtop, which has, with a few modifications, been in production since 1922. It was popular in the 1920s and 1930s as the first-choice instrument for jazz and big band players due to its broad tone and ability to generate acoustic volume.

As amplification became commonplace and the guitar came into its own as a solo instrument, the L-5 was upgraded to feature two humbuckers or P-90 single-coils, plus a cutaway for upper fret access. Photos show Wes using varying pickup configurations: he used a model fitted with two P-90s, and one with a single floating DeArmond pickup. There are a few others with the standard twin-humbucker arrangement.

In the mid 1960s Wes and Gibson designed a custom model that he used until the end of his life. This version featured a single, neck-position humbucker, dispensing with the bridge pickup altogether. Standard L-5s were equipped with a wooden bridge but Wes had a metal tune-o-matic bridge fitted to his custom model to improve its intonation and possibly to promote a brighter tone to balance out the warm, blunt sound that playing with his thumb created. It's still produced by the Gibson Custom Shop and sold as the Wes Montgomery.

Some photos show Montgomery's guitars with the neck pickup turned backwards, Peter Green-style, which hints either at a desire to experiment with tone... or indeed the pickup simply put back in wrong after maintenance! Wes never found an amplifier he was truly happy with and tried out a variety of Fenders in the 1950s before settling on a solid-state Standel Super Custom: a 70-watt combo with a 15-inch speaker. He was also pictured throughout the 1960s plugged in to a Fender Twin Reverb. He used heavy-gauge flat-wound strings (0.014-0.058) on all his guitars, which were set up with a fairly low action.



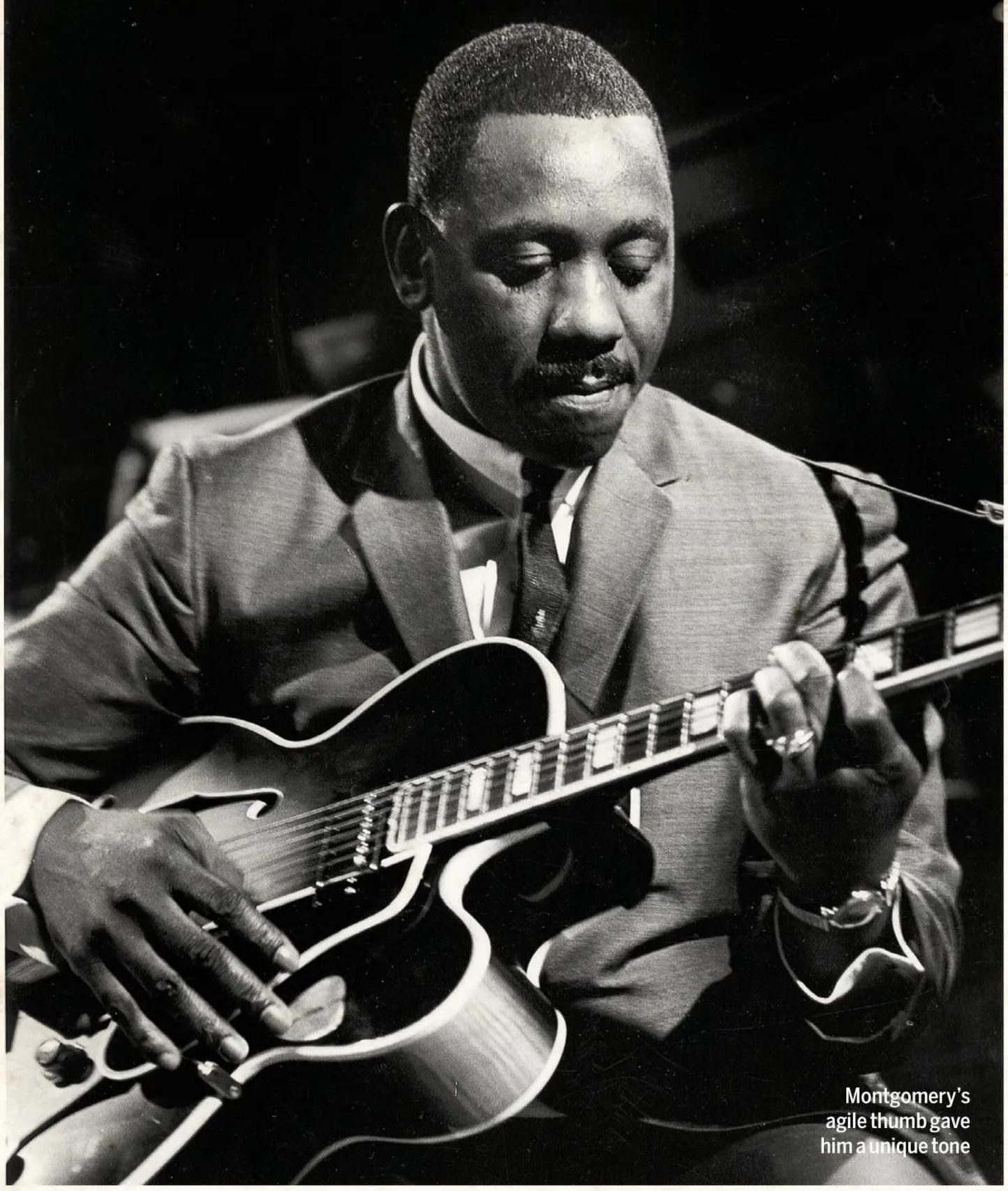


PHOTO BY VAL WILMER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Montgomery's agile thumb gave him a unique tone

He'd flash the audience a broad, cheeky grin as he rejoiced in making music, while displaying the utmost musical taste through his fantastic chops

sequence are just a few examples of his boundless imagination and inspiration. Many fans and scholars now regard the Riverside period as the guitarist's creative peak – and with such great albums as Incredible Jazz Guitar, Full House, Boss Guitar and Movin' Along (on which Wes plays a few tunes on baritone guitar) it's difficult to argue. More was in store, however, as the octave style he used as part of his solo-building formula was soon to catapult him to pop stardom.

Smoother Sound

In late 1963, Riverside, co-founder Bill Grauer died of a heart attack and the label went bankrupt soon after. Wes's contract was picked up by Verve records and with producer Creed Taylor, he crafted a new sound. The intimate, small group, 'jamming' atmosphere of the Riverside albums was replaced with slick big-band arrangements and lush string sections under Taylor's guidance.

His blistering and highly inventive solos were replaced with what jazz critics saw as a neutered Wes, who played octaves almost exclusively. Wes effectively lost one audience but gained another as the Creed Taylor-produced Goin' Out Of My Head won a Grammy for Best Instrumental Jazz Album as well as reaching number nine on the Billboard R&B chart. This and subsequent albums turned him into a household name: Wes himself was always very upfront when speaking of his decision to commercialise his music.

He was now reaching millions, not thousands of people and the financial security that gave his family was an honourable motivation. He still played set after set of swinging small-band jazz in clubs and his visit to Europe in 1965, where the bulk of the available film footage of him comes from, is a case in point.

Despite the fact that he sits down while playing, one is left utterly compelled by what an engaging performer he was. He'd flash the audience a broad, cheeky grin as he rejoiced in making music, while displaying the utmost musical taste through his fantastic chops. If any one person could epitomise 'cool', it was Wes Montgomery.

Final Curtain

The last few Wes Montgomery albums were, by the standards of the jazz press, disappointing affairs. Some argued his genius was being swamped under a barrage of schmaltz. However, if you listen with unprejudiced ears, you'll find music of great beauty and impeccable taste. Although these later recordings show a more sedate Wes, they still showcase his perfect sense of melody, his awesome sense of rhythm and groove and the beautiful tone he got from his Gibson L-5.

Montgomery was at the peak of his success when on the morning of 15 June 1968 he told his wife he wasn't feeling very well. As he sat on a dining room chair he suffered a massive heart attack and died in her arms. Many have speculated that the years of stress and hard work that preceded his mainstream success contributed to a weakened heart and it's true that Wes had been taking medication for a heart condition for some time. Close colleagues had noticed that his energy was waning and although he drank very little, he was a chain smoker. The music world was stunned by the death, at just 45 years of age, of this gentle and humble genius who never thought he was particularly gifted and always considered music to be his 'hobby'.

And yet every significant jazz guitarist of the last 40 years owes a great debt to Wes Montgomery, and his influence can be heard in countless other players, from Jimi Hendrix to Stevie Ray. Wes created such a strong and unique voice on the guitar that his playing inspires as much awe today as it ever did, in the same way that Jimi's does, or Django's – or any of guitar music's true originals. G

Thumbs Up

Putting your finger on Montgomery's amazing playing technique

Possibly the most significant aspect of Wes's unorthodox playing style was his preference for using his right thumb instead of a plectrum.

The tone generated by the thumb is far thicker and warmer that any plectrum can produce though it does involve sacrificing speed for tone as it's impossible to play as fast as you can with a pick. He explained it by saying it was quieter when practising at night; that he kept dropping picks, and felt that he was more 'in touch' with the guitar without one.

Regardless, it's amazing how agile Wes could be with the thumb. Although he played mainly with a legato style – with lots of slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs – he was able to play upstrokes with it for fast, single-note lines and could play very fast tremolo passages on octave and chord runs. He was also able to execute some arpeggio runs in a 'sweeping' style. Some of this can be explained by the fact that he was double-jointed. Even so, it remains impressive that he was able to create a totally classic, distinctive tone with just a guitar, a lead, and an amp!



PHOTO BY HELEN BOAST/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

NILE RODGERS



A Wes Montgomery die-hard in his formative years, Nile Rodgers reveals that being upstaged by a 'kid' was the reason he first picked up a Strat...

Words Jamie Dickson **First Published** January 2021

To call Nile Rodgers' guitar-playing career a success is a gross understatement. More than $2 billion worth of music has been recorded with his 'Hitmaker' Strat, a guitar that cost him just $149 and which, at the time, he wasn't even sure he should buy. He's not regretting that purchase anymore, to say the least. We caught up with the Hitmaker himself while he was in town testing out the new Acoustasonic version of Fender's ever-adaptable Strat at Abbey Road. Here, he opens up about the secrets behind his hyper-effective rhythm playing, his enduring love of jazz guitar and why being upstaged back in the 70s led to him picking up a Strat for the first time.

You've just filmed a video for Fender in which you're playing the new Acoustasonic Stratocaster. It's quite a departure from the 'Hitmaker' Strat you're known for using. What attracted you to it?

"They gave it to me over at Abbey Road and I was just putting the guitar through its paces. And the next thing you know I wound up doing session after session after session – just over and over and over again, trying to figure out what the guitar did. And as I did it I wound up having so much fun playing it that I just didn't stop playing it – it was a weird thing. It sort of grew on me almost right away... I really love jazz guitars, I just can't help it.

"When I'm sitting at home and I practise, I'm playing a D'Aquisto or a D'Angelico or an L-5, and typically I have the L-5 in my bedroom, because it's just right there and the other ones have to go to my locker. But by having this guitar and starting to play jazz on it, I was like, 'Oh wow, it's doing what I like jazz guitars to do.' I can hear it in the room, but when I amplify it, it's got the same kind of vibe – I can manipulate it and I can do what I can do with an L-5.

"And, just think, I haven't had to put flat-wound strings on it: I'm still using the acoustic strings that came on the guitar. I haven't changed them since I got it. Some people laugh, but old-school guitarists keep their strings on their guitars for a *really* long time. It's just a thing. I don't know if it's an R&B thing or a blues thing or a black thing or whatever, but it's just something that we do. My guitar techs know that I'm gonna have an attitude if I say, 'Did you change my strings last night?' and they say 'Err, yeah, man, we changed them before the last show...' It's just a thing, man, and I can't explain it, but I like old guitar strings."

Which jazz guitarists influenced your own style the most?

"I started out really, really loving Wes Montgomery and then for a bit I started to go into the Django Reinhardt school – I really got into the Gypsy jazz thing. But then practical life tends to take over and I realised that my life was going to be, for a certain amount of time, playing other people's music. That was going to be my job: I was not going to play my own music, I was going to play other people's music. I needed to have a guitar that satisfied composers and producers and artists, so I started playing different styles of hollowbody guitar. Eventually, I worked my way to a 335 and then that just didn't quite feel right to me, and so I went back to the other big box guitars."

Why did you make the switch to becoming a Strat player?

"We were opening for The Jackson 5 on the first leg of their first world tour in 1973 and we were substituting for a really great R&B band called the O'Jays. Whenever they had a headlining gig, they didn't want to open for the Jacksons, so they would turn it over to my band.

"We were a group called New York City We had a hit record called *I'm Doin' Fine Now* – we toured on that record for about two or three years. One day we were doing a gig that we were headlining and we had an opening act; it was a young kid. We didn't want to have a stage changeover because we weren't that big, so we would just let the opening act use our gear. And so this young kid plugged into my amp, and at that time I was playing through an Acoustic [brand] amp with the horn in it, because



Nile with his Fender Acoustasonic Strat: "It feels like a jazz guitar to me"

© FENDER

"I needed a guitar that satisfied composers and producers and artists, so I played different styles of hollowbody guitar"

we all wanted to look like Sly And The Family Stone. But it was stupid because I was playing a jazz guitar that would feedback and I'd have to put tape over the f-holes. But, still, you wanted to look like Sly! Anyway, this young kid plugged into my amp and he was playing a Fender Stratocaster and he was *smoking*! [laughs]

"It sounded unbelievable to me. I'll never forget this. Man, my partner at the time, Bernard Edwards, he gave me the dirtiest look... if looks could kill, I would be dead years ago and I would not be talking to you. Because all along Bernard kept telling me, 'Buy a Strat, buy a Strat. It'll change our whole sound, it's going be so funky. The way you play jazz, if you do that on a Strat, man, you're going to be killing, you're going to be known for something.'

"He kept trying to talk me into it, but I was a hippy, so I was like, 'No, man, I just want to play like Wes...' But this kid, he was playing some of the songs that we were playing, because we were doing cover songs as well as a few originals, but he would do the cover and he would sound *exactly* like the dude on the record and I was like, 'Whoa!' So that day I went out and I traded my Gibson Barney Kessel for the cheapest Strat I could find because I was not convinced. So there was this really cheap guitar and I think it was going for about $149. At that time, Strats with maple necks had become expensive because of Hendrix. So typically in those days if you bought a Strat, especially if it had some age on it, it would be around $300, which was a lot of money. But with this one I traded in my Barney Kessel and the dude gave *me* $300 back! I was like, 'Oh, *man* – this really was a cheap guitar.' That guitar has now become the 'Hitmaker'. I play it on damn near every record and it was the runt of the litter. And it sounds amazing – it's the only Strat I know that sounds like that."

[Ed's note: given that the Hitmaker is estimated to have been used to make $2 billion worth of music, Nile received a 1,342,281,779 per cent return on his modest $149 investment...]



PHOTO BY GORDON STABBINS/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Nile Rodgers & Chic on stage at Lowlands Festival, Netherlands, 2018

What musical uses do you think you will put the new Acoustasonic Strat to?
"I really think it's going to wind up being my jazz guitar. Because it's right next to my bed, it's in the bed with me at night, and I'll probably play jazz on it – it feels like a jazz guitar to me, it doesn't feel like a dreadnought or something to me. I think it's going to wind up being that for me."

What does the rest of your rig look like these days – have you got into modelling amps at all?
"I'm so old-fashioned, man. I just play a regular Fender Strat. One thing that's a big part of my sound is that I'm a 10-inch speaker guy and I've been that way for-*ever*. Even when I had like big stacks, I'd have the Sunn amplifier with like six 10-inch speakers [laughs] and then stack them up and have 12 10s or something like that. Because I think that it's the most flattering thing to a funky sound. For me, 12-inch speakers were just like not the thing. I can use them, but it's just not... it's just...[shudders].

"So I really just use a Fender Strat, a Fender amp and I've just added a wah-wah pedal to my rig as well as a delay pedal. But it's only for playing one song, which is *Let's Dance*. I have a chorus pedal, too, that's for one song that we play in the show – I think it's Sister Sledge's *He's The Greatest Dancer*. On the record it's tremolo, but in a live gig the tremolo won't be in the pocket, so I just put the chorus on heavy and I just play extra notes."

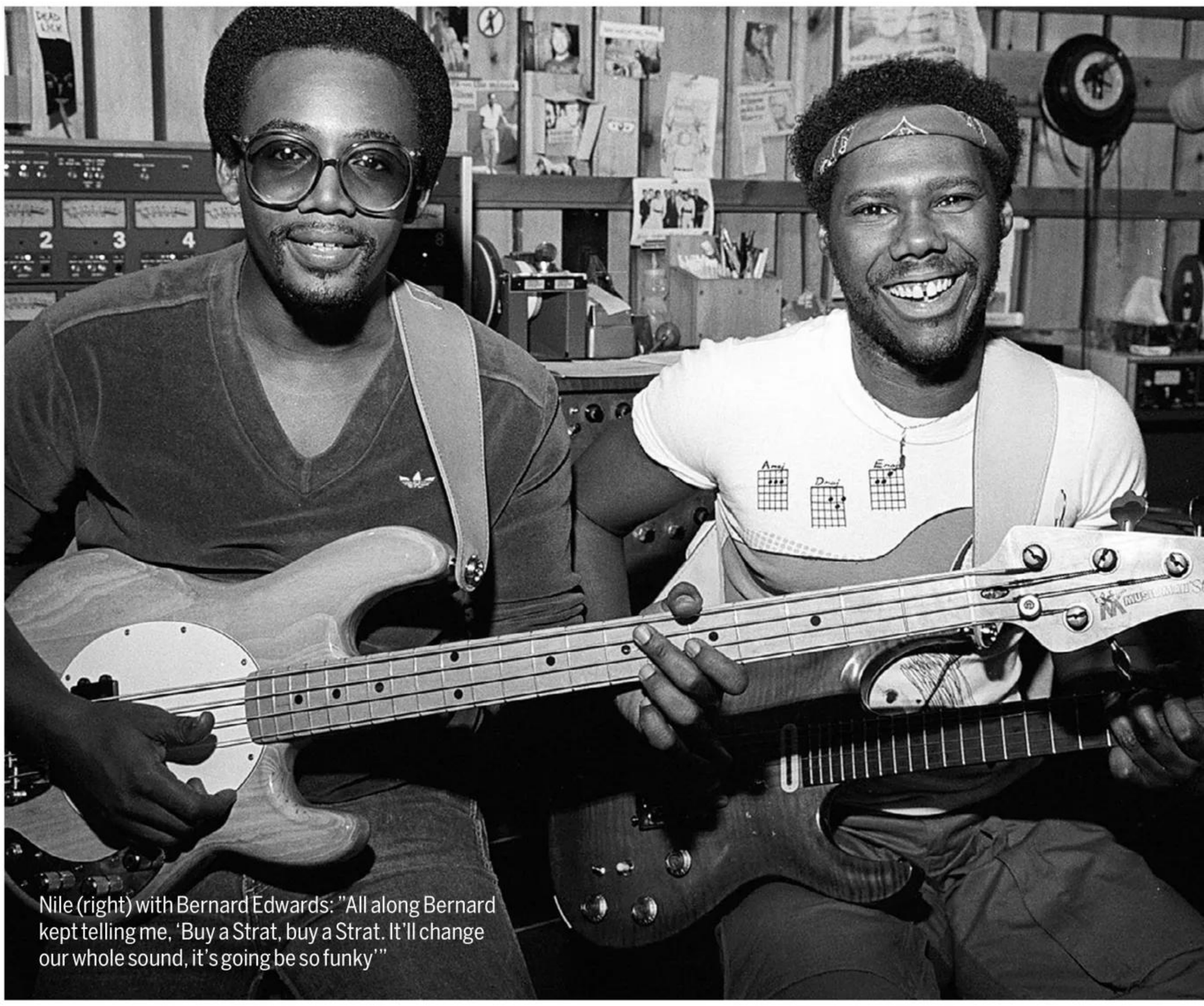
"One thing that's a big part of my sound is that I'm a 10-inch speaker guy and I've been that way forever"

Developing a solid sense of time and groove is often overlooked by guitarists. What's your advice on using time more creatively in playing?
"Yeah, man, you just touched upon the real essence of my life and my world. When I was younger I was fortunate enough to be around great jazz musicians and hear them say things that may or may not have been true – and may have just been bullshit for a magazine – but when you're a kid, you're very impressionable and you hear this stuff and it becomes the gospel to you. So when I was younger, and I had encountered Miles [Davis] or had read articles and heard him say things like, 'It ain't the notes you play, it's the notes you *don't* play...' I would think, 'Oh, wow.'

"So ghosting [partially muting passing chords] became so important to my style of playing. I'm mean, I ghost all the time and the reason why I ghost a lot is just because it sounds funky to me. To me, the less information I throw at you at once, the funkier something sounds. You rarely will ever hear me play a six-note chord... to me, that's like, 'Aggghhh!' It's horrible to me. But every now and then I have to because it's the right thing to do. So typically when I'm playing 13th chords or something like that you will hear me do a [full] voicing, but it's very rare I'd rather go [plays partial chords with tighter sound]. That just sounds funkier to me. What I'll do is reduce the harmonic package to its smallest components to project that tonality or that information – and that's really where the fun comes in."

How did you prefer to write with Chic?
"I write the hooks first. The very first song I wrote for Chic was called *Everybody Dance*. And when I wrote it I started with [plays a sequence of open chords], but then I thought, 'Wait a minute, that's not cool enough,' so I went [plays linking melodic licks and adds two passing 11th chords] and then I had the hook that was on the record. I write everything like that, like when I wrote *We Are Family*. I always want to have a lick. I wanna have a riff. Because I come from the school of rock 'n' roll where you had to have a riff. You could just play the chords to *We Are Family,* but that doesn't work to me – it's actually a riff."

Is there a difference between funk and disco, in terms of guitar parts?
"Not to me. But then, to me, there isn't really a distinction between funk or jazz – it's all the same. When I was lucky enough to play with jazz big bands, after I learned to play funk, man, people used to like hiring me because instead of just playing traditional jazz rhythm I could play [plays Chic-style jazz rhythm pattern with punchy inversions]. People like to hear that extra [syncopation and embellishment]. They started getting into it – they were having fun. And they'd say, 'Get that kid... get that funky kid.' I remember when I was a kid, jazz started to become like pop music. Some jazz musicians started having hit records. Of course, in R&B, guitar is essential, certainly when I was a kid, and almost every record would have two or three guitar players on it. So I was able to fill the spot sometimes that would normally be filled by two guitar players when I was playing with a jazz orchestra or a big band or something. I'm a lucky guy [laughs]." G



Nile (right) with Bernard Edwards: "All along Bernard kept telling me, 'Buy a Strat, buy a Strat. It'll change our whole sound, it's going be so funky'"

PHOTO BY ALLAN TANNENBAUM/GETTY IMAGES

Here Be Dragons

From magical mirrors to mythical dragons, it was a very special Fender Telecaster that dominated Jimmy Page's sound in both The Yardbirds and early Led Zeppelin...

Words Jeff Slate **First Published** July 2019

Jimmy Page is as busy as ever. When *Guitarist* catches up with him, he's bright-eyed and practically bouncing with excitement. He's just loaned some of his most prized guitars to an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum Of Art in New York City (including his full stage rig from Led Zeppelin's 1977 tour), he's contributed new interviews to a forthcoming documentary about the band helmed by *American Epic* director Bernard MacMahon, and, he says, he's been working on new music.

But his latest project – which the guitar legend says has been all-consuming over the past several years – is a unique collaboration with US guitar manufacturer Fender: a soup-to-nuts recreation of his fabled 1959 'Dragon' Telecaster, gifted to him by his longtime friend Jeff Beck upon joining The Yardbirds in 1966 and used almost exclusively in crafting the genre-defining sounds captured on Led Zeppelin's debut album, now more than 50 years ago.

"I wanted a Tele because of James Burton," Beck recalled of the guitar. "They had such a tight sound but very warm, too. I got that guitar from John Owen for a purple Strat and somehow it became Jimmy's. When I left The Yardbirds – in a huff, mind you – I left the guitar behind. Jimmy became the lead guitarist and had to play all my parts, so he started using it, and I guess that's how it became his. Then he plastered it with psychedelic paint and that was that."

Page, too, mentions Burton – and the rockabilly explosion that was happening all around him during his formative years – as a key to the draw of the Telecaster.

"The first Fender that I saw was on an album in the 50s, *The 'Chirping' Crickets*," Page recalls, citing Buddy Holly's 1957 album as a formative influence. "I said, 'My God, what is that?' Then I saw one in a guitar showroom – one of the smaller ones – in Charing Cross Road. They had one in the window. But I don't even know just whether I could even dream at that point that I'd ever be able to play in the region of Scotty Moore or James Burton. I was part of a whole generation of people who were seduced by the sounds of rock 'n' roll through their radios. We heard this wild music – whether it was Little Richard or Elvis Presley, or even big band stuff, but certainly [a] more rockabilly side of it.

"It gets to the point where I hear the Presley stuff – the Sun singles where he's playing incredible rhythm guitar – and I could appreciate that there was acoustic guitar going on," Page continues, describing his early influences. "And I heard this guy called Lonnie Donegan, who was doing Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie type music, but he had a sort of beat to it – and that was skiffle. He would be on a Saturday evening programme for young people, and was the only one really worth watching. He really captured the imagination of the youth. Everybody seemed to really be enamoured by his performances because he was so passionate with the songs that he was doing like *Rock Island Line* and *Cumberland Gap*. The next day at school, people would say, 'You see this guy Lonnie Donegan on the television?' The whole classroom would be buzzing and the whole school would be buzzing about this guy Lonnie Donegan, who was considerably older than us, but not as old as our parents. I can say quite safely that he was the portal. It was a door that gave many of the bands that started in the 60s access to the guitar."

PHOTO BY BOB KING/REDFERNS/GETTY

Jimmy's first attempt at customising his Tele was with circular stick-on mirrors intended to reflect the stage lights back into the audience

The Yardbird Years

Hardly thrilled with his new-found obsession for guitar music, Page's parents at least tolerated it, he tells us.

"I had to sort of deal with my dad as things went on with the guitar playing," Page says with a laugh. "He said, 'I won't get in the way of that, you know, just as long as you keep up your academic studies.'"

Soon Page met Beck – whose sister knew Page as another "weird kid with a guitar" – and the rest, as they say, is history.

"When I left school, I left school to join a group. But I started to get a bit disillusioned with it all and I went to art college. The curious thing is that while I'm in art college, I'm still playing in a rhythm and blues club – which was basically a blues club, called the Marquee Club, in London – in the interval band. So I didn't stop playing and I got headhunted from there to play on a record. And I played on a No 1!"

As for how he acquired the infamous Telecaster, Page recalls it a bit differently than his friend Beck.

"LONNIE DONEGAN WAS THE PORTAL... THE DOOR THAT GAVE MANY 60S BANDS ACCESS TO THE GUITAR"



Early versions of *Dazed And Confused* were performed with The Yardbirds with the violin bow section already in place

PHOTO BY JORGEN ANGEL, FROM THE NEW BOOK LED ZEPPELIN: DENMARK 1968-1970

"The manager of The Yardbirds had actually asked me to join when Eric [Clapton] left," Page remembers. "I said, 'Well, I know somebody who'd be really good for this and it's Jeff Beck.' So, he went in there. I gave him the fuzzbox I was using in the studio when he joined, and, of course, he went in there and did some amazing work. I'm still living with my parents at the time in Epsom. And I hear this sort of car roar up and I thought, 'What's that?' I didn't know it was a car, I just heard this thing roaring up. I looked out the window and I saw that it was a blue Corvette Stingray outside. It's Jeff. And Jeff's coming out and he's holding this guitar. He knocks on the door and he said, 'Here, this is yours,' and he gave me the Telecaster that he'd been using, and said, 'This is yours for getting me in The Yardbirds.' Obviously, I was really moved with that."

In many ways, the guitar Jeff gifted him was unremarkable. Like so many Teles of the era, it featured an ash body, as well as two stock single-coil pickups, a three-way selector switch, volume and tone controls, and chrome bridge, control panel and knobs, plus a maple bolt-on neck and a 'spaghetti' Fender logo decal on the headstock, with nickel machineheads and a rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays across a 25.5-inch scale.

Not long after this – in the dressing room following a university May ball performance by The Yardbirds that Page says was nothing short of "punk" – bassist Paul Samwell-Smith quit the band. Page, who says he was simply there to congratulate his friends on a red-hot performance, was deputised, using the bass Samwell-Smith had left behind at a Marquee Club gig just a few days later. The mercurial Beck left soon after, leaving Page as the band's lead guitarist.

"I started playing the Telecaster in that role," Page recalls of the infamous guitar, which was, at the time, undecorated in its factory White Blonde finish. "I used the Telecaster that he'd given me, because, the way I saw it, all of the work that Jeff had done during the time that he was with The Yardbirds was on the Telecaster."

In February 1967, Page says he added eight circular mirrors to the body.

"Bit by bit I tried various ideas on it to make it feel like my own instrument," Page tell us. "I started putting mirrors on it, so that it would be quite interesting in the light when I was playing it during concerts, and I could use it in an optical way with the lights to shine the mirrors on people while I was playing. In the 60s, mirrors were making their way into that whole 60s style. I don't want to call it 'Swinging 60s', because some of that was quite pedantic and ploddy, but you'd see mirrors appearing in fashion, applied especially in women's clothes, on jackets and skirts. And you'd also see mirrors appearing in artwork and in displays and things.

"But, of course, the thing about a mirror is that it's a reflective surface and I could buy mirrors that were adhesive and put them onto the guitar. So even though Jeff had given me the guitar, I still felt that I'd like to make some additions to it and

customise it, even something that I could take off if I wasn't that keen on it. So I got, in all, about seven or eight mirrors that I put on the guitar, just in some sort of order, and they didn't get removed until such point as I decided to strip it down and then paint it. That was the theory behind putting them on. But it was this whole thing of the reflective surfaces, that I could actually reflect the light over, onto other things, and onto good-looking young women and things like that. No, but quite seriously, it was something that then became quite kinetic as well."

Enter The Dragon

The guitar became Page's main axe during his late-period Yardbirds days – the first time the legend experimented with playing it with a violin bow on early live workouts of *Dazed And Confused* – and he took it with him when he, like Beck, left to find his way as an artist in his own right.

"The year 1968 is when The Yardbirds decide that they want to fold," says Page.

"MIRRORS WERE MAKING THEIR WAY INTO 60S STYLE... THE WHOLE THING BECAME QUITE KINETIC"

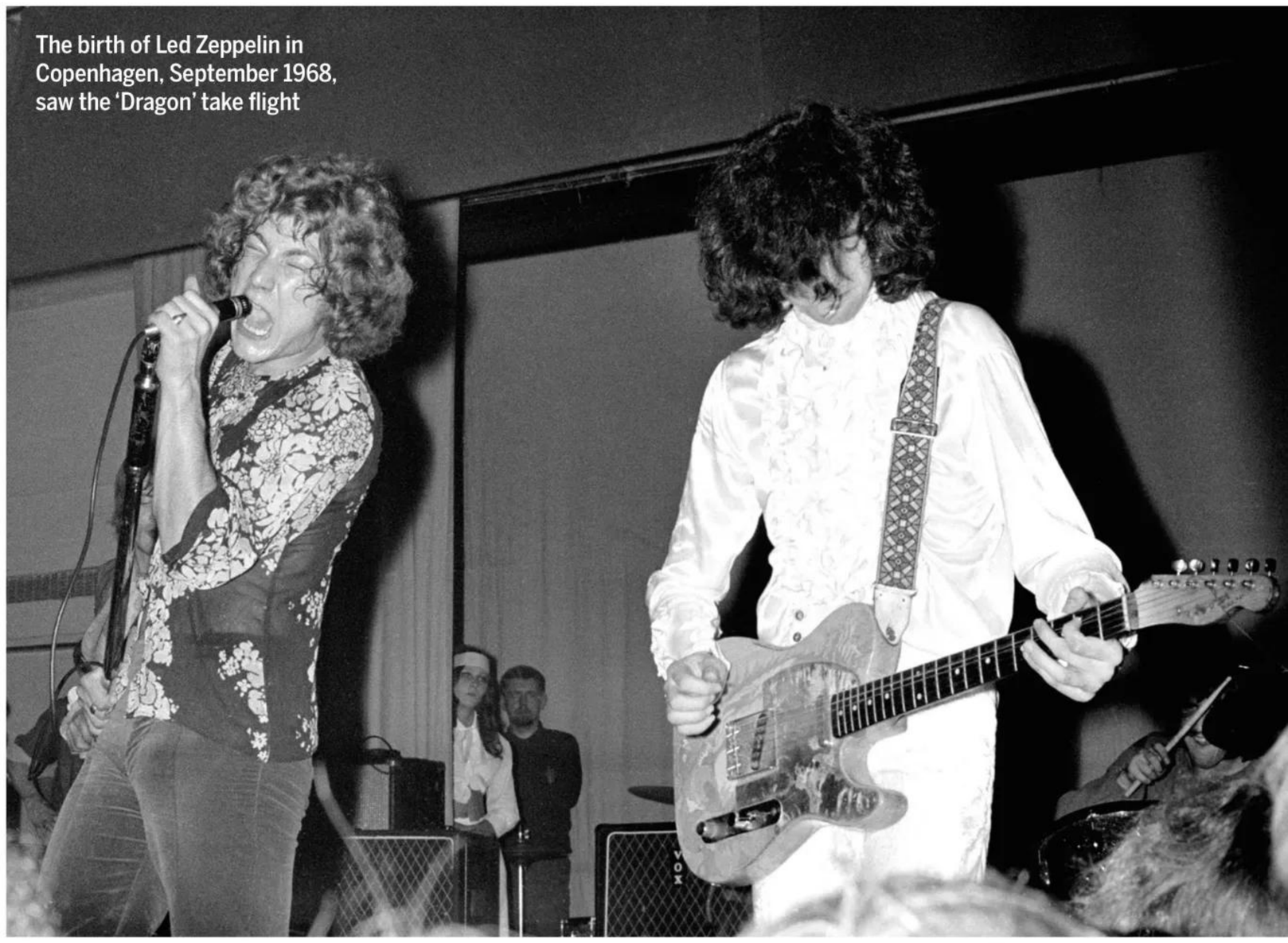
"Curiously enough, I was still trying to keep them together, because I had ideas of what I thought would be good for us to do, to come away from the pop singles that we were being asked to make and just really do something that was a bit more cerebral and more reflective of how we were actually playing live. But they decide they wanted to change the name and everything and go off. So it got to the point where I made a decision that I'm going to start my own band, because I'd done all the underground circuit over in the States, and I'd seen the advent and the birth of FM underground radio, which was stereo, and I could see what way it ought to go at that point. I knew what way I was going to take it."

As Beck noted, Page then truly made the guitar his own. It was in mid-1967 that he removed the adhesive mirrors and completely stripped and repainted the instrument himself, this time hand-painting a mystical dragon on the guitar. He also replaced the stock white pickguard with a transparent acrylic version, adding light-diffracting foil underneath.



Fender's new production Dragon Telecaster will be made in Mexico

PHOTO BY DANIEL KNIGHTON/GETTY IMAGES



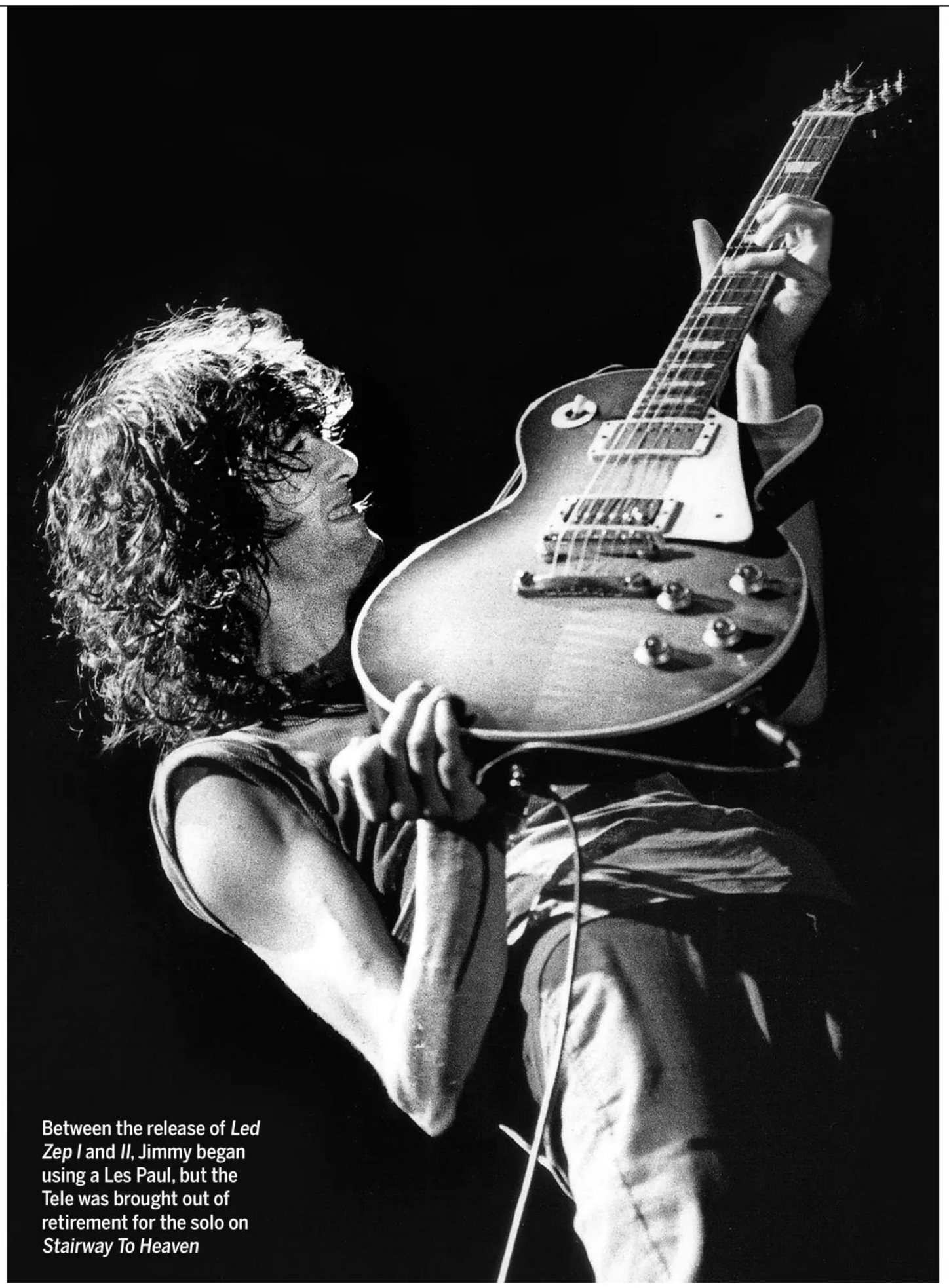
The birth of Led Zeppelin in Copenhagen, September 1968, saw the 'Dragon' take flight

PHOTO BY JORGEN ANGEL. FROM NEW BOOK LED ZEPPELIN: DENMARK 1968-70

"I got to the point where I wanted to consecrate this guitar and really make it my own," Page remembers of the evening he customised his Telecaster. "I had the idea that I'd wanted to actually have a complete consecration of it and strip it and paint it. So I had it stripped. Do I want to actually say it's defracturing and grating, so everyone runs off and uses it? Anyway, then I painted it. I wanted to use something that was going to make psychedelic patterns in it. And it all came together, and it was done in an evening.

"But when I started to go about painting the guitar, I wanted to paint it in colour opposites to begin with. When you do colour opposites, they'll flash when they're close to each other. That was the overall idea of approaching it, and I wanted to use poster paint, which was used in the production of those psychedelic posters. So the whole of the dragon artwork, I don't do a pre-run of it. I've got the paints and they're exactly what sort of paints I wanted to use, because I've already bought

"I WANTED TO CONSECRATE THIS GUITAR AND REALLY MAKE IT MY OWN... IT WAS DONE IN AN EVENING"



Between the release of *Led Zep I* and *II*, Jimmy began using a Les Paul, but the Tele was brought out of retirement for the solo on *Stairway To Heaven*

PHOTO BY ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY

them, and I just sort of do it. As I'm doing it, I get more ambitious with it. I've got pretty good control over my hand, so I tried something which is a bit more ambitious here, a bit more ambitious there. Because the whole idea of it was to bring a new life into it – to mix my identity into it, into the actual guitar, which was the reflection of how I felt about where I was at that point in time. I wanted to consecrate it almost like a magical implement. And that's exactly how it was.

"So it becomes quite a psychedelic guitar – and that is just absolutely what the idea of it was. It's absolutely freehand. I looked at the guitar and then started to work on it. I didn't draw it out and paint it. It was just an inspired evening. I already had the Perspex, for the scratchplate, and the material I was going to put underneath that, so I was thinking ahead on it. I'd gotten paints and I had my brushes, because I'd been to art college. That night the whole thing was assembled and I went, 'Yes. This is it.' It becomes like an Excalibur guitar."

Take A Bow

Remarkably, Page says the guitarists he came across when he first began using the guitar live barely made mention of its remarkable transformation.

"I think they thought it was cool, but I didn't really need any feedback on it," he says with a laugh. "The thing about the guitar, though, is that it has peculiarities about it. The neck – the depth of the neck – is very unusual. I haven't necessarily got very large hands, and it felt very comfortable to me."

When Led Zeppelin was formed in October 1968, the 'Dragon' Telecaster became Page's go-to instrument and he played it on Led Zeppelin's debut album and on stage after the album's release. By that time, Page had perfected using a violin bow to create an eerie piercing effect. But the origin of that unique technique is still fresh in his mind.

"When I was a studio musician, people in the rhythm section were looked down on by the ones who played the violins, who'd done years of training on their bow technique, and who saw us as people who just came in and made a bit of a noise," Page remembers. "But there was a really cool guy who came up to me one day – and normally those guys didn't really speak to us – and said, 'Have you ever tried to play the guitar with a bow?' And I said, 'No, it probably won't work.' And he said, 'Give it a go.' So he gives me his bow and I started playing chords with it. He said, 'Well, look, you can do it.'

"I went and bought some bows, you know, and I was working on it. I didn't really do too much of it as a studio musician, because I didn't want to be suddenly trying to do that. It was too much for them to take onboard! It was hard enough them taking on a distortion box that gave you the ultimate sustain and all of that. But it was something that I'd worked on at home. And by the time I got into The Yardbirds, and it was Jeff and myself, I remember I'd be doing a bow section, because they were a very avant garde band, so I didn't think that was out of character at all. Later, the way that I saw *Dazed And Confused* was very much like a classical piece that would

be in movements. Consequently, you've got the initial opening of it and then there's the verse, and then it sort of moves into another gear, and you've got the whole bow section. I'd heard some music by a composer called [Krzysztof] Penderecki, an ode to the victims of Hiroshima. So this was something that I wanted to employ in *Dazed And Confused*, and I put that together with my attempt at playing the bow on the guitar and I tried to emulate that sort of texture, which is, along with the melodic aspect, really, really scary."

From Magic To Mishap

Page recalls Led Zeppelin's first album as a lightning flash experience – "the whole album was done in 30 hours, so that's pretty mind-boggling" – and his trusty Telecaster was the star of the show.

"The Telecaster was employed all the way through that album," Page said. "It's just a small little amp that I'm using, with a 12-inch speaker, and an overdrive box, and a wah-wah pedal at times. But it just goes

"ON 'LED ZEPPELIN I', I WANTED TO HAVE THE FULL BREADTH AND DEPTH OF ORCHESTRAS WITH THAT MAGICAL TELE"

to show the versatility of the Telecaster and what could be achieved with the minimal amount of equipment. By the time I'm doing *Led Zeppelin I*, there's a whole landscape of guitarists that I've listened to, whether it was sort of blues or rockabilly, or a little bit of jazz or flamenco or classical, or whether it's orchestras – I wanted to have something that had the full breadth and depth of orchestras, through guitar music. I wanted all of it on that first album. I wanted to do everything. I was going to throw everything I could do at that, because there was a great focus on guitar albums around that point, but I wanted to show [the guitar's] total versatility on that [album] with that magical Telecaster."

Page says he left the guitar behind when Zeppelin hit the road in 1969. In his absence, the guitar was stripped and repainted by a well-meaning friend, all but ruining it.

"In 1969, I go on tour and I leave my Telecaster behind with somebody who made ceramics and was also a bit of an artist," Page begins, clearly pained by the memory. "He was going to look after my house, because I'd had a break-in there and I'd had a guitar stolen, a Coral sitar, during one of the tours. So I was really nervous about leaving the house where we did all the rehearsals with Led Zeppelin and everything, and word had got around, so I thought, 'I can't leave the house empty. I'll leave somebody to look after the house.'

"So I went off and did the tour, and the tour was absolutely amazing, as you can imagine. All of the Led Zeppelin tours were just getting more and more and more immense. The popularity of the band was just at such incredible levels. Each year that we went back, it just got bigger and bigger and bigger. So I came back and thought, 'Oh, I'm so glad to be home,' because I really enjoyed my home. My friend said, 'I've got a present for you.' I said, 'Oh, what's that?' I figured it was going to be a bit of ceramics. He said, 'A guitar!' I looked at the guitar and I didn't for one moment think it was mine. It was a Telecaster, but it had been painted with all these modulating lines, with very earthy colours, all over it. I said, 'Yeah, where's my guitar?' He said, 'Oh, no – that's it. That's my present. I repainted your guitar for you.' I didn't open the case. I didn't wanna see it. Now, I would probably smash the guitar over his head, but as it was I was still so vibed out from the tour that the whole thing didn't really fully connect. And, anyway, I was using a Les Paul at the time."

Page stripped the guitar down again, but ended up abandoning it, using the neck on a B-Bender Tele during his years with The Firm. And so the Dragon laid dormant. Until 2018, that is.

"I came to the point where I thought the artwork should be recreated," Page recalls, smiling. "I just wanted to put the guitar back as it was, to give it some TLC and bring it back to life and use it again. So I went through the process of going through various photographs, because I had done a book and there were lots of black-and-white photographs of the guitar where you could see the grain of it, but I was very keen to make a point of the fact that this guitar was painted. A graphic artist had done some overlay painting, or colouring, on the black-and-white photographs, because I wanted the continuity in the book to show the fact that this was what it was, so I got in touch with him and said that I really wanted to recreate the guitar and asked if could he help do that, because he'd already done the colouring in the book.

"Then we started researching it, getting all the colour photographs, and it was really interesting, because the guitar started playing tricks on me. In all of the colour illustrations that we managed to acquire, the colours changed in each photo, because there were lights going on and all the rest. It was really interesting. But, of course, I remembered the way it was originally approached, with the colour opposites, and what the colours were, so I could really get it right. We agreed on the outline of what the thing was going to be and then it comes down to a situation of painting by numbers, so that you can get the thing exactly right.

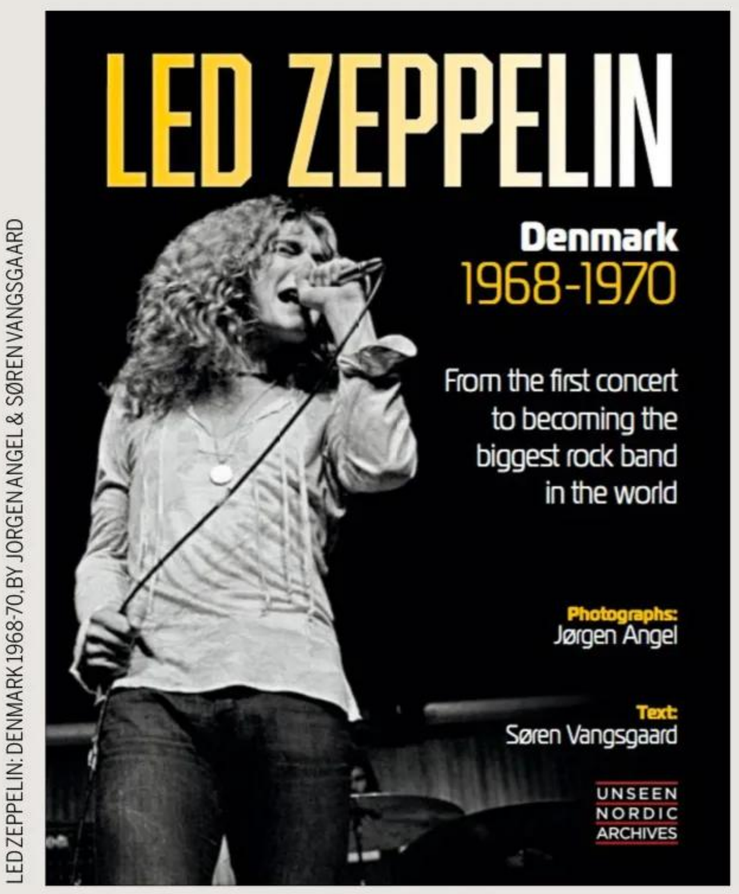
"Because I wanted to recreate the original guitar, I thought it would be really interesting to see if Fender would be

IN PICTURES

EARLY ZEP YEARS IMMORTALISED IN NEW BOOK

A new book, *Led Zeppelin: Denmark 1968-1970*, documents Led Zep's early years, including their first ever gig as The New Yardbirds in Copenhagen in 1968. Teenage photographer Jørgen Angel was there at the very beginning of the band's live journey and ended up befriending them, capturing them on and off stage whenever they passed through his home city in Denmark. There's plenty of unseen photography of their landmark first two years here, with an accompanying narrative from music historian Søren Vangsgaard.

***Led Zeppelin: Denmark 1968-70*, by Jorgen Angel & Søren Vangsgaard, is out now, £20, published by Flying V Books**



LED ZEPPELIN: DENMARK 1968-70, BY JORGEN ANGEL & SØREN VANGSGAARD



The neck from the 'Dragon' guitar ended up on one of Jimmy's B-Bender Telecasters, like the one here in use on stage with Joe Cocker

PHOTO BY PHOTO BY THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

interested to do it, because of the heritage of this guitar. Somebody had suggested to me doing an edition of it, and said I could just do it without them. But I said, 'I can't do it without Fender. It's a Fender guitar!' So we had our prototype in London and we sent the prototype over to the Custom Shop in California. I asked them to send back the version they had done. It arrived, and I opened up the thing, and I thought, 'Oh my goodness gracious, they've really got it 110 per cent right. Or 150 per cent right. It's so absolutely as it is, as it should be, and as it was.' I thought, 'Well, I've got our prototype here.' Because that prototype was actually the body of the original guitar. So that was great. And, of course, now we're here."

The results are the Limited Edition Jimmy Page Telecaster Set, produced by Fender's Custom Shop and veteran Master Builder Paul Waller. The 50 sets produced are exact recreations of Page's original 'Mirror' model and later 'Dragon' version and are now available to purchase from local dealers who are selling them to customers – together as a set, or separately for £23,259 each. They will include personal touches from Page's own hand, such as a handwritten signature on the headstock of the 'Mirror' model and hand-painted flourishes on the 'Dragon' guitar body's artwork, plus personally signed Certificates Of Authenticity for both models.

In addition to personal touches from Page, the Fender Custom Shop models feature an off-centre seam, two-piece ash body, a pair of Fender Custom Shop Hand-Wound '58 single-coil pickups, a tinted maple 'Oval C' neck matching the profile of Page's original instrument, clear and white vinyl pickguards on the 'Dragon' and 'Mirror' models respectively, a '59 top-load Tele bridge, and a 7.25-inch radius rosewood fingerboard matching the specs of the era, right down to the 21 vintage-

"I WANTED TO RECREATE THE ORIGINAL 'DRAGON' GUITAR... AND FENDER GOT IT 150 PER CENT RIGHT"

sized frets. The 'Dragon' Telecaster also includes a custom hardshell flight case, white seatbelt-style strap, super-long white leather strap, red coiled cable, violin bow, rosin and the Herco guitar picks favoured by Page. Meanwhile, the 'Mirror' model includes a vintage-style tweed hardshell case, black coiled cable, Ace 'Stained Glass' fabric strap and Herco picks.

"I'm really excited, knowing that the body has been absolutely cloned and the neck has been absolutely cloned, because it's a very unusual guitar," Page says. "I just really appreciate the time and dedication the people at Fender have put into doing it and getting it right, because it is a great project. Everyone's really pulled up and pulled into it. It's great."

A New Page

Two additional models have been made on Fender's production lines. Priced at £1,259 for the 'Dragon' model and £2,349 for the 'Mirror' version (which is reviewed in full over the page), the production-line models are not hand-signed or hand-painted by Page. But he says he did advise Fender first-hand on the design of the guitars to ensure they were true to the original. They feature custom 'Oval C'-shaped maple necks, '50s Tele two-piece bodies, top-loader bridges (for through-body or top-load stringing), custom single-coil pickups, lacquer finish and vintage tweed cases, plus case candy.

"That was what my idea was," Page concludes. "To be able to have this guitar so that it would travel beyond what it originally was – as part of my ownership, if you like – so that it could then travel and other people could have it, in an edition that would be more available as well for [more] people. Because the guitar's more important than I am at this point. Certainly, you won't see me cloned. But you'll see the guitar cloned, right now!" G

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ST VINCENT

Art-rocker and designer of a stunning Music Man signature model, St Vincent – aka Annie Clark – is notching up accolades across the entire breadth of the music world. We find out more...

Words David Mead & Jamie Dickson **First Published** March 2017

You know that feeling when you've witnessed a performance so electrifying it sticks with you for months afterwards? This was our experience when we caught St Vincent's act at The Green Man Festival a while ago. Her music is a beautiful collision of adept, otherworldly guitar parts and propulsive electronica – though falling short, comparisons with artists such as Bowie, 70s Roxy Music and Talking Heads are a starting point, should anyone be unfamiliar with her music. In fact, she has recorded and toured with Talking Heads' David Byrne – a fruitful meeting of kindred spirits on the wilder shores of art-rock.

She's also responsible for one of the boldest guitar designs of recent years: the Music Man St Vincent guitar, pictured here, looks like no other – its clash of modern and retro styles making it almost unique in terms of contemporary design. "I was really inspired by Klaus Nomi's triangular tuxedo," she tells us – and, if you look it up on Google, you can see exactly what she means. With a "deep, bold," new album in the offing *Guitarist* grabbed the opportunity to speak with Annie across the Atlantic and we began by backtracking just a little...

How did the process of designing your signature guitar begin?

"In the spring of 2015, the Ball family invited me to see the Ernie Ball factory and so I went up there for a day and saw how they built guitars, all the care they put into them... I spoke to a lot of the employees, lots of whom had been there for years. It's truly a handcrafted guitar and, for me, as a guitar player going into a guitar workshop, it was like going into Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory! I just got the sense that they not only made a high-quality product for players, they also seem to run a very respectful and respectable business. It means a lot to me, in this day and age, when a lot of things get outsourced and quality control can go down the tubes and things get too, too, too big.

"So after going to the factory, I sat down with Sterling and he said, 'Why don't you design a guitar?' Really, the guitar that I drew up on that first day is very similar to what ended up making the final cut. There were definitely tweaks back and forth to make sure the ergonomics were correct – the balance was correct, to whittle down as much of the weight as possible without sacrificing the tone. I couldn't believe that it was that easy; I thought that there would be red tape or there would be a bureaucracy or it would have to go through layers of investors approving it... But they're a small, tight, well-run family-owned company that give you the freedom. And with my vision and their skills combined, I think we made a really great guitar. I think the test of a guitar is whether you reach for it time and time again. I've been writing for months now and I haven't reached for another guitar. I've not wanted the feel of anything else. Some guitars can be like wearing a really well-tailored outfit – some just make you look good, make you sound good and that's been my experience with this new guitar."

Your music is diverse – how often are guitar parts the starting point for compositions?

"Quite a lot of times. Melody, to me, is everything and there are a lot of melodies that I dream up that end up transposed onto guitar and end up being riffs. At the moment, I can only really speak of my current writing process, but it's very guitar-heavy. My emotional spectrum on the instrument has gotten broader."

You play with quite a lot of dynamism – you're up and down the fretboard with quite a percussive approach. Did you make a conscious effort not to play guitaristic clichés or is it just your voice on guitar... How did your style crystallise?

"I did try to shy away from the pitfalls of the poorly played blues guitar. I think, too, approaching the guitar from a melodic standpoint as a jumping-off point instead of relying solely on muscle memory – this might feel fun to play, but how does it sound? The ear and the heart are king. It's fun to riff on the classic stuff that every guitar player knows, but I get away from

PHOTO COURTESY OF ERNIE BALL MUSICMAN

"Some guitars can be like wearing a really well-tailored outfit – some make you look good, make you sound good – and that's been my experience with this guitar"





St Vincent is pictured here with the original design of her signature model, which has this year been updated with new finish options

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES PAWLISH

that in particular because there *is* John Lee Hooker and there *is* Howlin' Wolf and I don't think that that's where I need to add to the conversation."

The revered guitarist Tuck Andress is a relative of yours. Was he an early influence and, if so, what's so interesting about him as a player that you admire?

"Tuck's my uncle and his influence on me is immense. I flatter myself to think that there is an actual genetic through-line to our playing – I mean, we're obviously related and there are all manner of micro-movements that we might share. Tuck's a total genius and he can make an instrument sound like 10 people playing. The level of skill and discipline it took for him to become a one-man guitar symphony is staggering. I've never seen anybody play like he can play – he's the eighth wonder of the world.

"Tuck and Patti [his wife] took me out on tour with them when I was 15 years old to Japan, and to be a 15-year-old kid from Tulsa growing up in Dallas, all of a sudden being in Japan being their tour manager-slash-roadie, I got to see what it really meant to be a touring musician. And I got to see how much their show moved the audience, myself included, and it encouraged me to fall so deeply in love with music. I did and it's never, ever let me down. It's just the best thing."

Your live show has huge power. What's the key to engaging a big crowd?

"We're getting into the premise of David Byrne's book *How Music Works*. Music is so much about context, and certain kinds of music like to translate in big outdoor spaces better than other kinds of music. So there's that side of it. My personal relationship is that once you start playing to a certain level of crowd, the audience hears with their eyes, so I introduced choreography to the show that I thought would help shape the narrative [of the music].

"My personal relationship to the music just deepened: songs are meditations and the more you sing them, the deeper you go into them, in my experience. And you find new ways to get out the same thing and every night, even with a show that is structural, you want to find that moment where it's not like any other night. You have to be here now, and for a musician who tours a lot you have to make sure that you keep the stakes for yourself really high, because those high stakes for yourself mean high stakes for the audience and the emotional payoff is better and better."

What sort of gear do you use alongside the Music Man in your rig?

"The touring rig has to fulfil the sonic need, but also the space need. So for touring I've been using two Eventide H9s and a Z.Vex Mastotron Fuzz and a [Bixonic] Expandora going into a Kemper modelling amplifier. Ideally, I would like to have air moving through a speaker into a microphone, and I've had various small amplifiers – an old Kalamazoo and a custom TRVR that was like a 50s Tweed, and I loved playing through a '73 Princeton. My guitar tech had also worked with Nine Inch Nails and pitched me to the Kempers and I ended up buying a couple of them from the Nails. It's a techy show and all my guitar sounds are programmed – there are complicated changes and all of that stuff – so, for me, consistency outweighed the alternatives."

You have a very controlled, passive persona on stage – what was the root of that look?

"The *Digital Witness* tour [which took place from 2014 to 2015] was a bit of a commentary on the zeitgeist of the time, and part of the narrative of the show was seeing the robot break down as it goes along. That was part of it. Also, I feel it's interesting, the dichotomy of having really wild sounds delivered in a controlled way – playing with persona but not removing the emotional core – was interesting and that was kinda the first time I'd really dug into persona, and it's just something that's going to continue to evolve. You have to serve the art in ways that fit the themes of future records and projects..." G

PHOTO COURTESY OF ERNIE BALL MUSICMAN

"My current writing process is very guitar-heavy. My emotional spectrum on the instrument has gotten broader"

Chuck Berry

The late 40s and early 50s were a seminal time. Jazz, blues, country, R&B and rock 'n' roll were being born or undergoing significant changes. Also emerging were the first great wave of pop singer-songwriters. From this group of young pioneers came a genius, writing lyrics, melodies and riffs that provided the bedrock for almost everything to happen since...

Words Denny Ilett

Charles Edward Anderson Berry was born into a large, middle-class family in St Louis, Missouri on 18 October 1926, the fourth of six children to Martha and Henry Berry. Henry was deacon of the Baptist church in the area of St Louis called The Ville, where the family lived. Martha was a school headmistress, which meant that Chuck and his siblings enjoyed a relatively prosperous upbringing contrary to that of so many black (and white) families in the 1920s and 30s.

Chuck displayed an interest in music and poetry from a very young age and, encouraged by his parents, progressed quickly, making his first public appearance in 1941 at the age of 15, while still at high school. The song he chose, *Confessin' The Blues*, by Jay McShann, was a big band hit at the time and boasted in its ranks another fledgling genius in the form of alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, one of the inventors of be-bop jazz.

Chuck's first of many brushes with the law occurred three years later when he was arrested, and convicted, of armed robbery. He was sentenced to three years at the Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men in Algoa, Missouri, where he took up boxing along with forming a vocal quartet.

On the day of his 21st birthday in 1947, Berry was released from custody, and shortly after met Themetta Suggs. They were married in October 1948 and had a daughter Darlin Ingrid, born 3 October 1950. Berry worked in a variety of jobs in order to support his young family, including – significantly – two stints at car assembly plants in St Louis. Knowing, as we do, the abundance of motor-related metaphors in his later songs it's intriguing to picture a young man, bursting with ideas, working in a mundane job but composing riffs, rhythms and lyrics in his head to the beat of the factory machinery.

T-Bone's Stake

By the early 50s, Berry was also 'moonlighting' with local bands at clubs in and around St Louis; graduating to a regular group in 1953 – the Johnnie Johnson Trio – which held a residency at the Cosmopolitan Club. Playing mostly blues and ballads at gigs, Berry began to take an interest in presenting some country-flavoured tunes to the club's black audience, and later wrote: "Curiosity provoked me to lay a lot of country stuff on our black audience. After they laughed at me a few times they began requesting the hillbilly stuff and enjoyed dancing to it."

With an idea formulating in his head that a fusion of blues and country might make for a new sound, another major influence came along in the form of R&B maestro T-Bone Walker. T-Bone, along with his jazz-playing contemporary Charlie Christian, was instrumental in elevating the guitar from its former position as a rhythm tool to that of a front-line solo voice. Walker was also a consummate showman, playing the guitar behind his back whilst doing the splits and delivering solos that, at times, would make an audience think his guitar was speaking to them. Chuck Berry was so taken with Walker that he lifted many of T-Bone's trademark licks, doublestops and unison bends, incorporating them into his own emerging style.

Johnnie Johnson left the trio in 1954, with Chuck renaming it the Chuck Berry Trio. Having taken charge, Berry's mix of blues, country, Nat 'King' Cole ballads and T-Bone Walker showmanship propelled the trio to new heights. They quickly became the most popular band on the St Louis club scene.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this is how Berry's 'new' music almost exactly mirrored that of his nearest rival in the 50s, Elvis Presley. Where Berry took blues and added country to create a potent formula, Presley did the opposite by adding blues to country (one of Presley's major influences was Chuck Berry!). The huge success of both Berry and Presley serves as proof that the best music always comes from a mixture of cultural influences, and also that it could only ever have happened in the USA.

Maybellene

As Chuck's popularity grew, so his ambitions gathered pace. Feeling that he was ready to record his music, he travelled to Chicago and, through a meeting with Muddy Waters, was encouraged to approach the iconic Chess label with a view to scoring a recording session. Label boss Leonard Chess was particularly taken with

A sharply dressed Chuck Berry posing for a portrait in the late-50s, Chicago

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

a song Chuck brought in called *Ida Red*, a traditional 'hillbilly' tune made popular by Bob Wills And His Texas Playboys back in 1938. Lyrics were changed and the song retitled as *Maybellene*, with Berry taking the songwriting credit. The 21 May 1955 recording date features, among others, Berry's old boss Johnnie Johnson on piano and blues giant Willie Dixon on bass.

From the first bar, this was something new. Berry's guitar, despite betraying the T-Bone Walker influence, is raw, energetic and infectious; relentlessly rhythmic and driving behind the vocal, then piercing through with classic Berry attitude in the solo. The combination of blues and country flavours allowed *Maybellene* to become a huge hit with record buyers of all races, selling more than one million copies and going to number one and number five on the R&B and Billboard Best Sellers charts respectively.

The combination of blues and country flavours allowed *Maybellene* to become a huge hit with record buyers of all races

This mix, coupled with Berry's dynamic stage act, propelled him to overnight superstardom, and from then the hits came thick and fast, all classics, including *Roll Over Beethoven*, *Too Much Monkey Business*, *Rock And Roll Music*, *Sweet Little Sixteen*, *Memphis Tennessee* and the iconic *Johnny B Goode*; all recorded between 1956 and 1959. In all, Berry scored over a dozen hit singles during this period.

Berry went from earning $15 a night to more than $1,500 – a fortune in the 1950s. He invested heavily in St Louis real estate and even opened up a racially mixed nightclub – pioneering for its time – in 1958.

By December 1959, and seemingly with the music and business worlds at his feet, Chuck Berry again found himself on the wrong side of the law when he was arrested following allegations that he had sex with 14-year-old waitress, Janice Escalante, whom he had transported over state lines to work at his club as a hatcheck girl. Berry's appeal at the 1960 trial, where he accused the judge of racial prejudice, was upheld and a new trial set for May 1961. Chuck was eventually convicted and served 18 months of a three-year sentence, being released in October 1963.



Chuck Berry in the studio in Chicago, recording for Chess, in 1960

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Over the four-year period between his initial arrest and release from prison, his popularity had waned and his output slowed, despite Chess continuing to release material already 'in the can'. By 1963, however, the music scene on both sides of the Atlantic had changed drastically which, with a little help from some young lads from England, proved to be just what Berry needed to get back on top.

Resurgence

Rock 'n' roll, blues and R&B records had been making their way across the Atlantic for several years and were causing a huge stir among British youth. This movement was instrumental in bringing the music of Chuck Berry and his contemporaries to a new audience, with bands such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones recording versions of Berry's songs on their early albums. John Lennon famously said "If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry." For Keith Richards, "There was a time in my life when Chuck Berry was more important than anything else."

Chuck was able to secure a new record contract with Mercury Records and released several singles and albums between 1963 and 1969, including the classic *No Particular Place To Go*, yet another automobile-related song. Despite not achieving his previous success on record, Berry became a fixture on the touring circuit, and came to the UK in 1964 and '65. His stint in prison had, however, turned him into a moody and bitter man. This, coupled with his reluctance to

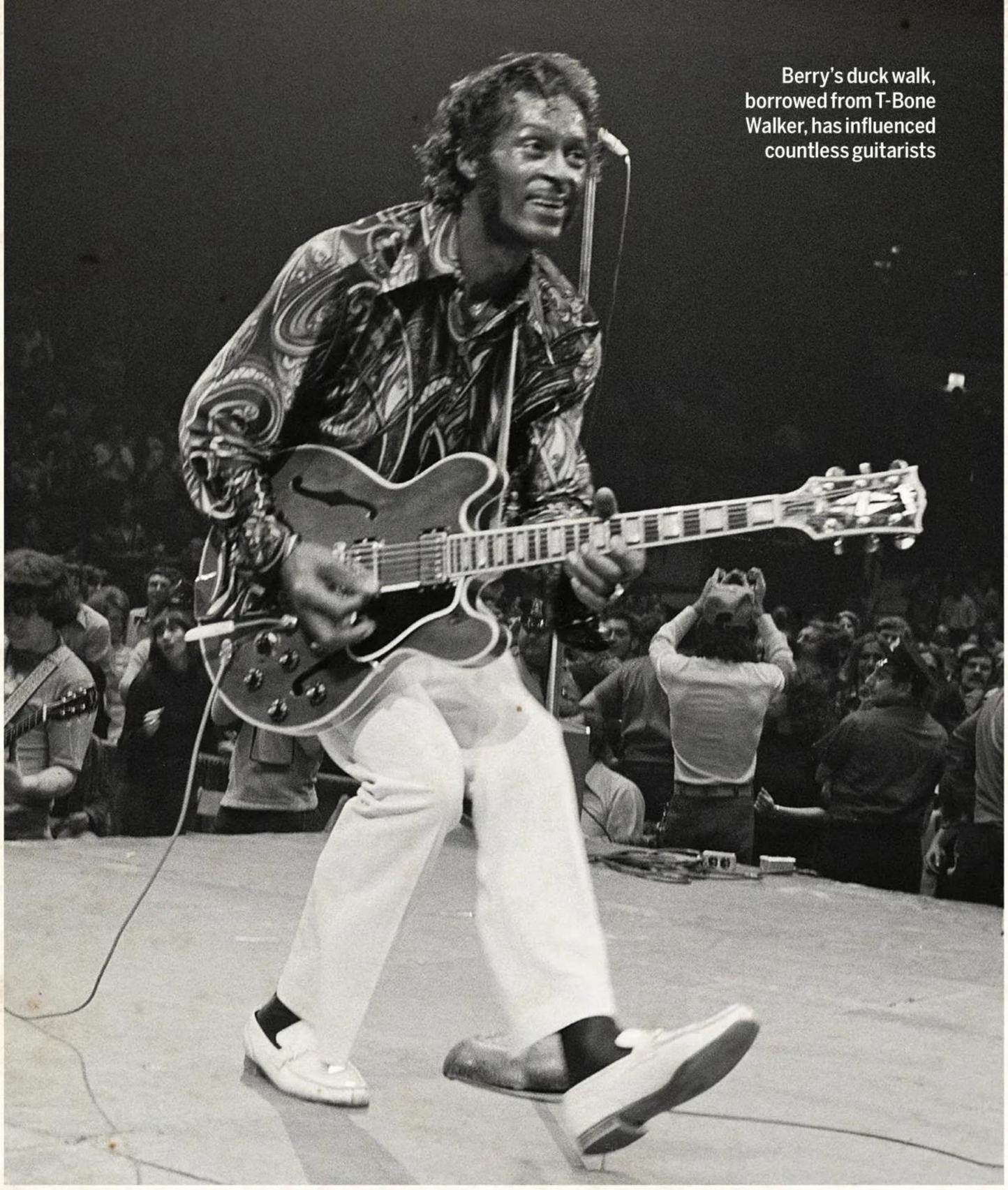


PHOTO BY ADAM GASSON

Chuck's Guitars

Gibson archtops and semis were Chuck's go-tos

Berry's warm, fat, just-on-the-edge-of-dirty guitar sound comes from a selection of Gibson archtops and semis. The early recordings were made with a P-90-loaded Gibson ES-350, which he later traded in for the PAF-equipped version. Into the 60s and beyond, Chuck worked his way through a series of ES-335s, 345s and 355s. These were plugged straight in to a variety of Fender tube amps, his favourite being the 85-watt Dual Showman, which came with a 2x15 speaker cab.



Berry's duck walk, borrowed from T-Bone Walker, has influenced countless guitarists

PHOTO BY DON PAULSEN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Duck Walk

The trademark stage move that lives on today

Chuck's dynamic stage act was inspired by his hero T-Bone Walker and has provided the performance blueprint for many rock and blues players since the early 60s. His trademark move, the famous duck walk, has been borrowed by everyone from Angus Young to Jimmy Page. It became such a signature for Berry that even in his mid-80s, he still delighted audiences when he breaks into the duck walk.

rehearse with the pick-up bands he played with, earned him a reputation as a difficult person to work for. He insisted on being paid in full, and in cash, before he would walk on stage – which eventually got him into trouble with the taxman – and, as time went on, his performances became ever more erratic, serving to alienate his loyal fans.

By the end of the 60s, disillusioned with Mercury, Berry returned to Chess, scoring an unlikely hit with an innuendo-laden ditty called *My Ding-A-Ling* in 1971, a song that earned him his first official gold record. Through the 1970s, and buoyed by the success of *My Ding-A-Ling*, Berry once again became a headline attraction at clubs, concert halls and festivals, culminating with a performance, at President Carter's request, at the White House. In 1979, the IRS finally caught up with him and, pleading guilty to tax evasion charges, Berry was sentenced to a combination of a short prison stint and community service. Throughout the 1980s, Berry continued to play up to 100 concerts per year, picking up local musicians along the way, sometimes good, sometimes awful, but always willing to put themselves through anything for a moment on stage with a legend.

Berry's reputation was again tarnished in 1990 when several woman sued him, claiming he'd installed video cameras in the ladies' lavatory at his restaurant, The Southern Air. The police raided his home and found video tapes, one involving a minor, along with a large amount of marijuana. This time, Berry got off relatively lightly with a suspended jail sentence and community service. Berry was also sued by former bandleader Johnnie Johnson, who claimed he'd co-written many of Chuck's hits. This time, the case was dismissed.

Despite his obvious dark side, what remains clear is what a pioneer and innovator Chuck Berry was in the 1950s; he crossed racial lines with his fusion of country and blues, and his groundbreaking songwriting inspired so many up-and-coming musicians on both sides of the Atlantic. He also was rock 'n' roll's first guitar hero frontman, and for that alone, he will always be revered and remembered.

Legacy

Chuck Berry features in almost every 'Greatest Ever' list one can name – a testament to his lasting influence and timeless music. His songs have been covered by everyone from Elvis Presley to Ted Nugent and his dynamite stage act, including the famous 'duck walk', has become the blueprint for the presentation of rock music from the 1960s to today.

His guitar style, although not 'technical', was so influential that the intro to *Johnny B Goode*, for example, is still taught to young and aspiring guitarists well into the 21st century. Perhaps that is what will serve as the ultimate tribute to this undisputed, but troubled, genius. G



Chuck performs live at a New York club in 1980

PHOTO BY RICHARD E. AARON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

MOLLY TUTTLE

Still only in her mid-20s, Molly Tuttle is already festooned with awards for her songwriting and incredible guitar playing. *Guitarist* caught up with her to talk about her new album and her extraordinary picking technique

Words David Mead **Photography** Adam Gasson **First Published** Summer 2019

When Molly's new album, *When You're Ready*, landed in the *Guitarist* office a few months ago, it brought our working day to an immediate standstill. We were amazed at the guitar playing from the first track onward and, still not quite believing what we'd just heard, jumped onto YouTube to see her in action. Her right-hand technique alone is enough to make players twice her age hang up their acoustics in shame – and that's before you consider the purity of her voice and the power of her songwriting.

After a brief dalliance with the piano and violin as a young child, things shifted gear for Molly dramatically when her father presented her with a Baby Taylor when she was eight years old. He showed her some chords and melodies, not really expecting the guitar to prove different from her previous attempts at playing music.

"But with the guitar, I was kind of interested in it," she says. "After about a year I got really, really into practising and learning new tunes, and it became really fun. Then I started singing a couple of years after that, and playing banjo, but guitar was my first musical thing that I learned."

Since then, she has taken home trophies at the International Bluegrass Music Association for Guitar Player Of The Year in both 2017 and 2018, and won the 2018 Instrumentalist Of The Year at the Americana Music Honors & Awards.

Do you come from a musical family?

"Yes, my dad plays music. My mum didn't play much music, but my dad's a music teacher for a living. After I started playing, my two younger brothers wanted to start playing instruments, too. So eventually we all played and then we played together."

What were the first tunes that you learned as a child?

"I learned tunes like *Old Joe Clark* and *Cripple Creek*, which are really standard fiddle tunes. When I started, I was mostly just listening. I didn't really have music that I would seek out on my own, so I just listened to bluegrass, which is what my dad played around the house. He had a bunch of bluegrass records and there would always be music on in the house. My mum would listen to folk music or bluegrass, too, so I heard that a lot growing up. But when I became a teenager, that's when I started to seek out other types of music, like rock music and pop, and all sorts of stuff."

"I first learned tunes like 'Old Joe Clark' and 'Cripple Creek', standard fiddle tunes. When I started, I was mostly just listening"

When did you begin playing live?

"I started playing in public when I was 11. It was just little shows. There was a local pizza parlour and sometimes bands would come through and I'd open for them. I played with some of my dad's other students, who were around the same age as me, and eventually my brothers started performing, too, and so we played together. But there were usually some other kids around the same age as me in the bluegrass scene that I would play with.

"Then, after a couple of years of that, we started playing with my brothers and my dad, and this girl, AJ Lee, who was our friend. That kind of naturally progressed from playing with other kids, and then some of them became less interested in bluegrass over time. Eventually, it was just AJ and us playing and then my dad would play bass."

When did you first think about going pro?

"I guess, gradually. When I was 15 or 16, I started writing songs and music was all I really wanted to do. In my spare time I was always playing music, so I began to entertain the possibility that I could be a professional musician, and then started thinking about colleges. I really wanted to

“Playing banjo helps me get an ear for filling out the chords around the melody – rolling and playing different chord tones”

Molly brought along her Pre-War Guitars Co dreadnought for our shoot: “It sounds like an old guitar and it looks really cool”



Photo by Scott Dudelson/Getty Images

Molly honed her spectacular picking skills from a young age, playing bluegrass with her family band and with endless dedicated practice

go to Berklee College Of Music to study. I think I became more and more obsessed and in love with playing. It became my dream to be a professional musician and I decided to go to music school and pursue that. And with my dad being a music teacher, I always had in the back of my mind, 'Well, if it doesn't work out to perform, I can always do that.' So I had his example set for me that I could always teach music as well."

Did playing live supercharge your overall love for music?
"Yes, yes. I think that really made me practise more and take it more seriously. But other kids I was playing with were more advanced than I was and they could improvise. I really wanted to be able to jam and improvise solos like they could. So that all turbo-charged what I was doing."

Did you begin playing with a pick?
"Yes, straight from the beginning I was playing with a pick, that being what my dad did with his right hand. And, eventually, I guess I developed my own thing. I practised a lot. I learned some songs that I liked to cross-pick with, *White Freight Liner [Blues]* in particular. I learned that one, and then wanted to play it really fast, so working up the solos and the rhythm part on that one really pushed my cross-picking. I remember transcribing some David Grier solos, and there's a lot of cross-picking there as well, so that helped me get more comfortable with skipping strings because he'll play a low note on the sixth string and then cross-pick on some high strings. It's really all over the place. So [my picking technique] was a combination of things: I didn't really do many exercises and drills, it was just learning songs and tunes."

Do you play fingerstyle as well?
"Yes, a little bit. Not as much – and definitely not very advanced. But there's one song on my new record, *High Road*, where I'm playing fingerstyle."

Has playing the banjo influenced your guitar picking?
"Yes, I would say so. I think the banjo influenced my guitar playing and probably vice versa. Sometimes I'll play something and people say it sounds like a banjo roll, and I don't even think about it. I'm like, 'Yes, I guess that does sound like something I'd play on banjo.' I think playing the banjo helps me get an ear for filling out the chords around the melody, because you're always rolling and playing different chord tones around it."

How did *When You're Ready* come about?
"I was writing a bunch of songs – I think I probably had 30 songs and then I narrowed it down to 20 – and showed them to the producer, Ryan Hewitt. We worked on them and really whittled that down to the 11 songs that we recorded. We recorded it in the studio with some Nashville session players and some friends of mine that I brought in like Sierra Hall, Matt Smith, Brittany Haas, Jason Isbell and Billy Strings. It was fun bringing in all these people I'd become friends with since I moved to Nashville."

Who are your songwriting influences?
"Aimee Mann was someone I was listening to a lot when we were going into the studio – she's definitely an influence. And Gillian Welch. Even bands like The National and The Smiths, so more indie bands – I think there's some influence from them on this record. I like to keep an ear to the ground for what new music is coming out. I've been listening to the new Big Thief singles a lot, and... what else am I listening to? I don't know, it's usually a mix of indie and some folk, and then I'll get on a pop music kick, where I want to know what the most popular music sounds like."

What acoustic guitars are you playing at the moment?
"I'm using a Pre-War Guitars Co guitar, which is their '18' model – it's similar to a D-18. I love that guitar. It sounds like an old guitar and it looks really cool. They kind of age it to look older.

"I'm also playing a Preston Thompson guitar, and that's a Brazilian rosewood guitar that they gave me a year ago. It's just awesome – it's a beautiful sunburst and [has a] beautiful inlay. Preston Thompson actually passed away a few weeks ago



"From the beginning I was playing with a pick… Working up the solos and the rhythm part on 'White Freight Liner Blues' really pushed my cross-picking"

[in April 2019], which was really tragic. But my guitar is really special and I'm really grateful to have it."

What pickup do you use in the guitar?
"I use a K&K pickup with a ToneDexter preamp. That's it – I don't use anything else. Right now I don't feel like I need effects, but maybe eventually I will. If I got something, I might get a reverb."

When you were over in the UK last time you were playing with a fiddle player. Is this something that you do all the time, or do you play in various formats?
"That setup was kind of a one-time thing. We were doing a co-bill tour together, so we played a set of her stuff and then a set of my stuff. I generally have a four-piece band out with me – drums, bass and electric guitar/piano. And then, when we can, we're going to bring the fiddle with us, too. So it'll be a five-piece, but the core will be a four-piece band."

You've also toured with Jerry Douglas on the Transatlantic Sessions UK tour. What was that like?
"That was really fun. Everyone in the band was so amazing, and it was great to meet all those people. It was really fun hanging out with Jerry Douglas; he's been a hero of mine for a while. But I just really liked to get to know him better. Cara Dillon and Gretchen Peters were both so sweet; we all shared a dressing room each night and it was really fun getting to know them."

What does the immediate future have in store for you?
"I'm doing a lot of touring for the new album. I get back home in a couple of days, and then go out again to North Carolina, then I got to the East Coast and the West Coast. We have a lot of exciting festivals and shows coming up. We're doing Telluride Bluegrass [in Colorado] and opening for Old Crow Medicine Show at the Ryman [in Nashville], and we're going to do Winnipeg Folk Festival, which I've never done. Then in the fall we're doing Pilgrimage [in Tennessee] and Newport Folk Festival [Rhode Island]. There's a lot of great stuff coming up.

"I'm going to be at Bush Hall in London on 29 October, and hopefully some other stuff around then, but nothing else is announced yet. People should keep an eye on my tour schedule around that time." G



Molly Tuttle's debut album, *When You're Ready*, is available now via Compass Records

www.mollytuttlemusic.com

BB King

From farm to stage, the story of Riley B King's rise to that of musical legend is an incredible one, at times both uplifting and heartbreaking. As a boy, King found himself at epicentre of a new musical form that would influence everything that followed. We explore the story of his blues…

Words Neville Marten & Mick Taylor

When *Guitarist* last sat down with BB King, backstage the Royal Albert Hall in 2011, the impression was of a man with incredible warmth and compassion. He seemed truly thankful for all he was been able to see, achieve and enjoy in his career, and you couldn't detect so much as an ounce of cynicism or negativity in his outlook or demeanour. Perhaps it's the preserve of an octogenarian to be worldly and wise; perhaps the passing of time grants a person an increasingly sagacious perspective. As the man himself admitted, however, what was on the outside is only part of the story. Riley B King's childhood, upbringing and teenage years brought him more than their fair share of tragedy and uncertainty that, while not twisting him into adulthood bitterness, nevertheless had a profound effect on his life that followed. There are differing accounts of the chronology of events, but the story remains.

Bena Born

Riley B King took his first breath on 16 September 1925 near the village of Itta Bena, around 20 miles from Indianola, born to Nora Ella and Albert Lee King (not to be confused with famous bluesman Albert King). His parents separated when he was around four or five years old, so Nora Ella headed back some 50 miles east to the Kilmichael hills to her family with Riley B, taking up work on a hill farm owned by one Flake Cartledge.

While black families were subjected to what would be considered extreme racism today, Cartledge was a fair man by all accounts, including King's – a world away from the slavery endured by the boy's great grandparents. As a child of six and seven years old, Riley worked the corn and cotton fields, and also milked cows in between the long walks to his school, opposite the Elkhorn Baptist Church.

It was through the church and preaching that he had his first up-close encounter with the instrument that would come to define his life. His uncle William's wife had a brother named Archie Fair – Reverend Fair in fact – who played the guitar. Nearly 80 years later, King remembered the days where Fair and his wife would visit. "Before they would go into the kitchen to eat," he recalled, "he'd lay his guitar upon the bed." Unable to resist a small boy's temptations with this fascinating new object, the young Riley would gingerly touch the guitar, just to see how it felt.

Noticed by the Reverend, Fair didn't scold or beat the boy as he might have expected, instead encouraging him to pick it up – he even helped him through his first few chords. Riley's mind was made up: he'd be a singing preacher, just like the Reverend. You could say he eventually achieved his dream, albeit as a slightly different kind of preacher.

Aside from the blues singing that he'd heard coming from the fields as a child (King later opined that they were often songs of specific communication and warning between workers), his other early musical influence was from Aunt Mima's wind-up gramophone player. It was here that he heard the sounds of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson; one the booming blues belter, the other altogether more refined. It's no small coincidence, then, that BB King's own later style of playing would sit squarely between the two – perhaps less in direct sound and technique, more in note choice, song structure and variety. The third piece of that early musical jigsaw was Booker T White – Bukka White – a cousin of his mother's, who greatly impressed Riley with his sharp dress sense and mesmerising slide guitar playing.

Alone In The Woods

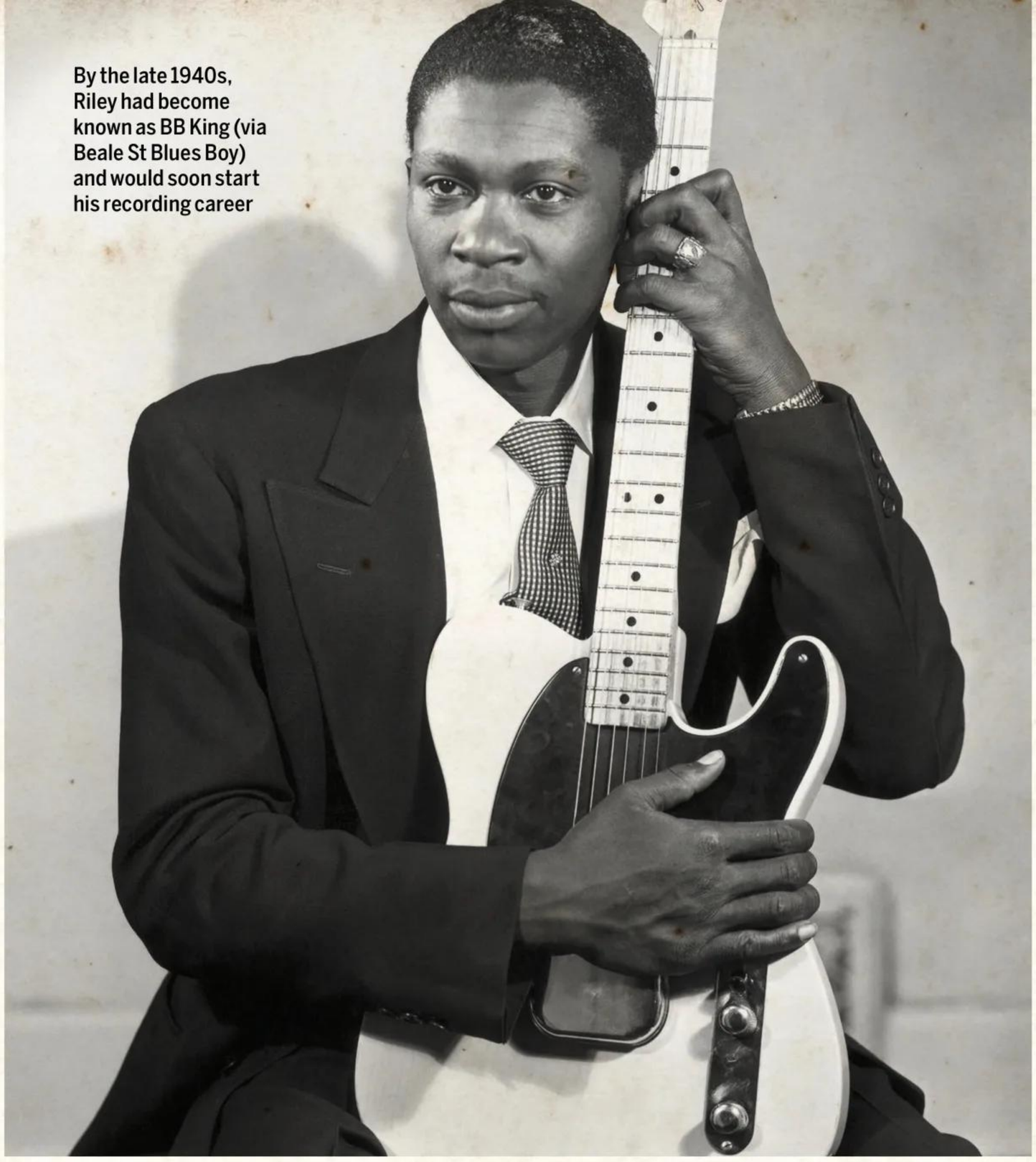
Riley soon found himself seeking solace in music for intensely personal reasons. Two tragedies struck within relatively short succession and, while the exact dates aren't certain, it seems he had lost his mother and then his grandmother before he'd reached his 10th birthday (some historians say his grandmother died later). Nevertheless, he was basically alone. Riley had experienced death close in the family once already – his younger brother had died aged around two, reportedly by eating glass.

Moving to Aunt Mima's was an option, but in an age long before social services (black families barely had access to basic medical care at this point) this boy instead took himself off and essentially self-subsisted in a cabin in the woods, working and paying his way. Exactly how long he was living on his own like this is not known, but in that cabin Riley was able to draw



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

A young Riley B King pictured around 1948 when DJ'ing for WDIA radio station, poses for a portrait in Memphis, Tennessee



By the late 1940s, Riley had become known as BB King (via Beale St Blues Boy) and would soon start his recording career

949: BLUES MUSICIAN BB KING POSES FOR A PORTRAIT HOLDING A FENDER ESQUIRE GUITAR IN 1949 IN

back from the world, put his head down and work through his grief. He was not a natural communicator, often stuttering his words and feeling uncomfortable. This suited him, and he even went so far as to say that he preferred the company of animals to humans at that point, referring to them as his friends to whom he'd talk and confide in.

Mercifully, Cartledge had agreed to advance him some money, deducted from his upcoming wages on the farm, so he could buy his first guitar, a red Stella acoustic. BB later recalled being around 12 years old or thereabouts when he first got it, and he was overjoyed. But just when he really didn't need another heartbreak, this first guitar was stolen from the cabin

By day he'd work the farm and at the weekends travel to Indianola to hear the fabulous music that was being played there

sometime in the following year.

Meanwhile, in Lexington, around 50 miles away, Albert Lee King had heard that his son was for all intents and purposes living alone. He drove to the farm and brought Riley 'home' to live with his new family. BB King always spoke respectfully of his father – a hard-working man of very few words – but he was nevertheless unhappy in that environment. So, remarkably, one day he simply got on his bicycle and rode back to what he regarded as his true home: firstly Cartledge's farm, then sometime later he moved on back to the Delta. There he settled with an aunt and uncle, and worked picking cotton, baling hay and ploughing fields with a mule.

When he first moved back to the Delta, there was a guitar in his heart, but not in his hands. But the regular farm work enabled Riley to save for another six-string, which he put to use in a group he had joined, The Famous St John Gospel Singers. It's worth noting that, depending on who you talk to, there was considered to be a strict line between gospel and blues music: the former was God's music, reverent and good, something sung in polite company; the latter, however, was the devil's music, sung in the fields, away from wives and grandmothers. BB King's later memories don't make the distinction so heavily – to him it was all music, and it was all good.

Running The Tractor

What came next was another big move. Riley had copped a break as a tractor driver working on the farm, which brought him in a much better pay packet. By day he'd work the farm and at the weekends travel to Indianola to see and hear the fabulous music that was being played there. He also did what any aspirant musician would do and went busking, singing gospel and blues songs and getting a pocket full of change for his trouble.

It's a stark juxtaposition to think that World War II was raging in Europe at this point, and as the USA waded in, Riley B enlisted for service as soon as he was eligible in 1943. He went through the basic training, but, though he was ready to serve, key agricultural workers were ordered to stay at home and produce food. By the end of the war in 1945, he'd been married for a couple of years and was feeling the pressures of that, alongside a welling dissatisfaction with his life as a sharecropper and tractor driver. That tractor, however, would prove to be more significant than he ever thought.

Returning from the field one day, he pulled the tractor up as he'd done countless times before. Switching off the engine, he jumped off and to his horror the tractor leapt backwards as the engine clunked to a stop. The exhaust struck the top of the barn door opening and broke. Fearing what would happen next – and panicking – Riley B gathered up what he had and ran.

He ran to Memphis, a city he'd dreamt about, complete with its famous Beale Street. Hooking up with his cousin Bukka White, Riley was able to find work by day and continue his music into the evenings and weekends. It was an eye-opener for sure, but wracked with guilt at his leaving, he soon returned to the farm, approached the owner, Johnson Barrett, apologised for his actions and started work again.

Having already been mesmerised by the electric guitar sound of Charlie Christian, it was about this time that Riley picked up on Django Reinhardt and T-Bone Walker: together these three are giants of guitar who would shape so much music that was to follow. The burning for six strings simply wouldn't abate, so weighing up his options – and this time with nothing to run away from – Riley said goodbye to Mr Johnson and headed back towards Memphis. It was there that he would seek out one Sonny Boy Williamson who, as the now 23-year-old King knew only too well, had a spot on the radio.

Riley managed to get in front of Sonny Boy and play for him. He was suitably impressed enough to give him a slot and also recommend him for a regular gig at the 16th Street Grill in West Memphis. The only conditions from the owner were that Riley himself needed to get some radio exposure and mention the Grill when he did. The challenge was big but the reward bigger – he'd earn $72 per week with one night off, which was a significant step up from the $22.50 he pocketed as a tractor driver. So, how to get on the radio?

Radio Bee Bee

WDIA radio started broadcasting in 1947 from Memphis, owned by John Pepper and Dick Ferguson. In 1948 the station broke new ground in airing the first program that was targeted at black people, called Tan Town Jubilee. In the world of 1940s America, the inherent racism in the name was the norm, yet there was perhaps some progress in that blacks and whites at least worked together. In any case, the uptake

was significant to the point where WDIA eventually became an all-black station in terms of programming, elevating it to the biggest station in Memphis. 'Bee Bee King', as the name on his amplifier proudly stated, was part of that success.

Following his meeting at the 16th Street Grill, Riley made his way over to WDIA to meet whoever was in charge. As things turned out, he ended up with a 15-minute spot every day including a commercial jingle for Pepticon, a health tonic – so healthy it contained a goodly slug of booze! Still, tonic or not, things were looking up, even if Riley still had to pick cotton in the mornings to supplement his income.

It was at this point that Riley B King started to become BB. Each of the radio DJs had nicknames for themselves, and the first of Riley's was Beale St Blues Boy. It ended up being shortened to Blues Boy, then Bee Bee, and finally BB. Promoted to full-time DJ, it was finally time to say goodbye to the farm work on a regular basis. Now surrounded by music, and fast developing as a guitarist and singer, he was out playing regularly. Then, in 1949, he called a guitar Lucille for the first time – a Gibson L-30 archtop by all accounts.

As BB recalled to us in 2011: "The first one named Lucille was because of a fight in a nightclub in a place called Twist, Arkansas. And in that little nightclub, it got pretty cold in winter, and it used to have something like a big garbage can, and they would half fill it with kerosene, light that fuel and that's what we had for heat.

"But this particular night two guys started to fight and one knocked the other one on that container. And when they did, it fell over and spilled on the floor. And everybody in the little club who was dancing started to run outside – including me. When I got outside, I found out that these two guys was fighting about a lady that worked in the nightclub. I learned that her name was Lucille and they was fighting over her because one of them had said something...

"But then I realised that I'd left my guitar inside," he continued. "So I went back in for it – a lot of people tell me that I was fighting because of a lady... I was not [laughs]. I didn't even know who the lady was! But then after that I found out her name was Lucille, so I named my guitar Lucille to remind me not to do a thing like that again. And I haven't!"

About Time, Too

Through his contacts at WDIA, BB King began his recording career in 1950, managing to cut a few sides at the studio. Nothing was very successful – a less than auspicious start – but now at least he was fully immersed in music. Sun Studios was in the offing. BB would meet and work with the legendary Sam Phillips, a meeting made possible by perhaps the most influential person in King's career: Jules Bihari of Modern Records in LA, and Meteor in Memphis. That friendship gave BB King his first recording success, his seventh release. Among a number of cuts was *Three O'Clock Blues*, a song made popular by Lowell Fulson four years previously. Joe Bihari (Jules' brother) later explained they recorded the song at the Black YMCA in Memphis in 1951, using some portable recording equipment, with blankets at the windows to deaden the noise of the traffic.

The track scored the 26-year-old his first number one hit on the Billboard Rhythm & Blues chart in the February of 1952 and it became a massive stepping stone for him, affording him the profile to move up the ladder of his career. BB was now in a position to book bigger venues and was soon out on the road. While America was still largely divided along race lines – King was playing to black audiences only at this point – his shows now took in the East Coast cities to which he'd never been before.

The first big step was signing to a booking agent in New York, Universal Attractions, via his new manager, Robert Henry. BB had his own small band by this point, but due to UA's existing roster of musicians they wanted BB alone, and that's what they got. What followed was a demanding schedule, compounded by the pressure of playing with musicians he didn't know, night after night. There were other musicians, however, all carving out their own careers, too: he'd rub shoulders with trumpet-legend-to-be Dizzy Gillespie, and sax virtuoso Charlie Parker, not mention Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughan with whom he was performing for various shows. Musicians today might be used to playing a few nights on the hoof, others sporadic dates in the month, but these travelling shows were over two months or more back to back: play, travel, play, travel, repeat ad nauseam. Not only that, but you'd often be looking at multiple shows in a single day.

Eventually, however, the gigs became less frequent, and the money was scaling back, so the following year BB headed back to Memphis to reconsider his plans.

Better Band

One of Memphis's influential musicians was Bill Harvey. The saxophonist and band leader had a strong reputation in the city, respected for his music as much as his connections. He helped BB hook up with new management and a booking agent in

As a DJ, Riley's first nickname was Beale St Blues Boy. It ended up being shortened to Blues Boy, then Bee Bee, and finally BB



BB developed a relentless touring ethic: he's pictured here with back-up dancers at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York, 1963

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Texas, while Harvey himself supplied the new band, a regular group of musicians who would travel and play from East Coast to West, and back again. Again, the culture of the day is barely believable compared with 2012. Steps forward with race issues were significant in the late 1940s, albeit far from ubiquitous. President Truman had officially ended segregation in the US Army three years after the end of WWII in 1948, for example, yet by the following year less than half of the US States had dispensed with segregation in public accommodations. What that meant for BB King on the road, was that neither he nor his band were allowed to stay in motels. According to King, they stayed with friends, often in the cars themselves – by this time, BB had his first Cadillac. However good that may have felt, it could never have made up for the fact that even basic, everyday tasks such as getting food could be a problem if you were black. As a child, finding something to eat wasn't always easy. Now they could find all the food they wanted, but they often weren't allowed to buy it.

Live At The Regal remains a landmark recording, with its star in commanding form. Put it-on, play it loud and-soak in the energy

That was one factor of many that were making the road hard for BB and his band. The money that was coming in was coming from shows, not from hit records, and it wasn't enough. So he decided to point his Cadillac back to Memphis once again, followed by the two other cars that carried the band. BB wanted his own band for real – not Harvey's – and to take this thing on again to the next level.

One Year, 342 Nights

After a deal with the Texas booking agent Evelyn Johnson to continue getting the shows, BB had also put the funding together to buy his first bus in 1955. Right from his early yearnings to drive the tractor on the farm, it was as much about status as it was a practical solution for being on the road. It's impossible to imagine fully just how BB must have felt, having come from literally nothing to owning his very own bus with his name down the side. New band assembled – many of whom remained lifelong friends and colleagues – that bus carried the show coast to coast and up and down the country once more. The staggering figure comes from 1956 with BB working the network of black clubs and venues known as the chitlin' circuit: 342 'one-night stands' as they were referred to, in one single year. That number is impressive enough, but then consider that he then went on to average well over 300 dates a year for the next four decades. Those must've been some pretty serious calluses on BB's fingertips.

Back in 1956, however, and despite the efforts of his management and booking team to get his music heard in the areas he was playing – by paying DJs to play his records – big success on the road was hard to come by. It was even alleged by Evelyn Johnson, BB's booking agent (in *BB King: Treasures by BB King* with Dick Waterman) that rival record companies were paying DJs to not play the records to protect their own artists. Popular music and culture were changing fast in the US as well. The arrival of rock 'n' roll doubtless made rhythm and blues seem like yesterday's news in certain situations. Elvis had released *That's All Right Mama* in 1954, the same year eager ears first heard Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock*. By the time 1956 rolled around – bringing Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins to prominence – popular white music had changed radically. The following year Buddy Holly also shot to stardom. Black music was changing, too; venues and scenes were still largely divided along race lines, although Ray Charles, Bo Diddley, Little Richard and Chuck Berry started to attract the attention of white teenagers. They were taking rhythm and blues in a distinctly rock 'n' roll direction, and creating a popular musical revolution in the process. The physical barriers remained, but nobody could stop anyone listening to whatever they wanted on the radio – if you were young, chances are you were more excited by this new music than the rhythm and blues of the early 50s.

As it turned out, by one Saturday in 1958 a changing music scene was the least of King's worries. On a road near Dallas, Big Red – the bus of which he'd been so proud – was involved in an accident with a butane truck, leading to a huge firey wreck. Two people in the truck were killed, and while all of BB's band survived (BB himself was not on the bus), it transpired that the insurance was invalid because the company that had provided it was stopped from trading by the government only the day before. King had been informed, but had not yet bought new insurance, assuming he'd wait until Monday. The subsequent lawsuit was a huge sum for which King was personally liable. According to his account of the ordeal in his autobiography, it left him in debt for years to come. He also needed a new bus, using up all of the money he'd had earmarked for taxes. Now not only were the lawyers after him, but so was the IRS (Internal Revenue Service, America's tax collection department). Agents would reportedly show up at gigs and demand money – BB himself has said he was down to paying himself just $75 a week for the best part of a year.



BB King performs on stage with one of his 'Lucille' guitars in the late 1960s

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Regal For Real

As the 1960s got under way BB King was – and always would be – working relentlessly on the road. His ambitions were growing and his business relationship with the Bihari brothers came to an end, switching instead to ABC Records in 1962. Bigger, more successful and with greater influence, he hoped they would be able to take him to the next stage. The black blues audiences were starting to tail off, however, as rock 'n' roll's net was cast wider than white-only audiences. Folk music was also in a period of revival and, while blues was arguably at the heart of it all, blues music itself wasn't winning young audiences.

There was nothing wrong with the audience on the afternoon of 21 November 1964 at the Regal Theatre in Chicago, though. King remembers it as much the same as any other show, and later commented that there was nothing particularly special about the performance. What was special was that it was being recorded for a live release – his first – that would sound and feel very different from King's studio recordings to date. The 1965 release, *Live At The Regal*, won significant critical acclaim and is considered among the best live albums of all time. Pervis Spann, a veteran of black radio and friend of BB's, introduced him that day. Just before the band kicks into BB's opening song – *Every Day I Have The Blues* – Spann says, "...How about a nice warm round of



The 1969 release of *Completely Well* put BB on the mainstream map

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

A blues song at heart, *The Thrill Is Gone* was nevertheless a long way from the I-IV-V chord structures of many R&B standards

applause to welcome the world's greatest blues singer, the King of the blues, BB King!" It was a term Spann had started using around this time, even going as far as to officially crown King at his nightclub in the city. The term stuck: he remains the king of the blues to this very day.

Live At The Regal remains a landmark recording with its star in commanding vocal and guitar form and the band as tight as you'd expect given how long they'd been on the road. Put it on, play it loud and soak in the sheer energy of the performance.

More significant for BB personally, however, was the 1967 show at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco. King had played the Regal in Chicago countless times before the live album recording – it was a familiar venue for him and one for which he had great affection. He'd also played the Fillmore on plenty of occasions too, but in February of 1967, it was promoted by rock music legend Bill Graham, and the audience profile on the night was very different to that BB had experienced to date: they were white. A standing ovation before he'd even played had King in tears – white hippie kids appreciating the rhythm and blues of a black man was entirely new territory.

King's exposure to this new audience received a helping hand via a new generation of electric blues guitarists. Eric Clapton had re-energised the blues with his own interpretation in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, likewise Michael Bloomfield in the USA with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Both hip young players – and quite a few others to boot – were giving credit to this man called BB King who had influenced them both so much. It did no harm at all for BB's profile in a whole new audience group. Coupled with new management in the form of Sid Seidenberg – "the smartest career move I ever made", according to King – the hard work and financial hardship of the late 50s and 60s showed signs of turning around.

What A Thrill!

The pay-off came in 1970. In mid-1969, King had gone into the studio with producer Bill Szymczyk to record *Completely Well*, released that year. One of the tracks was written way back in 1951 by Rick Darnell and Roy Hawkins, *The Thrill Is Gone*. A blues song at heart, it was nevertheless a long way from the I-IV-V chord structures of many R&B standards. Szymczyk was also keen to add strings, which was a significant departure in King's sound and gave it true mainstream appeal. The result was his highest ever position in the Billboard pop charts, giving King true crossover appeal. He also received a Grammy Award for the song in 1970: Best Male R&B Vocal Performance. 20 years into his career, BB had finally reached the top. Things would never be the same again. G

Szymczyk Speaks

The producer recalls working with BB in '69

Bill Szymczyk is a renowned record producer and engineer who moved from Jerry Ragovoy's Hit Factory studio in New York to ABC, where he first worked with BB King. It's also worth mentioning that he produced *Hotel California* by the Eagles among his many successes. But let's rewind to 1969...

"I had been there about eight months and I'd looked at the artist roster that was there," remembers the producer. "I'd been a BB King fan since I was a kid and I just kept bugging them – 'I want to produce BB King!' 'You can't do that' was the answer. 'Well, why not?' 'Because you're white and you're too young!'

But I figured that if I could take some different players and put them around BB, that something good would happen. So I pitched him on the idea and he didn't want to commit. So I said, 'Well, how about we do half of it live with your band, and we do the other half in the studio with my band.' That was *Live & Well*. The next time we recorded, we did it all my way, and the big success that resulted out of the second album was *The Thrill Is Gone*.

"We recorded that around 10 or 11 o'clock at night, and I'm listening back to it at two in the morning going though everything we recorded that day, and we have the idea to put strings on it. I think that's probably the best idea I've ever had in my career! I think that's what took it to the pop charts. I'm forever in his debt for allowing me to produce him, and bringing a new idea to him that really did establish my career as a producer."

EDDIE VAN HALEN

It's been 21 years since we last caught up with Eddie Van Halen. So, after an exclusive invitation to visit the man himself at his 5150 Studios, we pull up a chair to speak to one of the electric guitar's greatest legends

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Kevin Baldes
First Published Total Guitar Summer 2016

Every instrument has its pioneers – game-changing mavericks who push things forward – and if Jimi Hendrix kicked the electric guitar door down, Eddie Van Halen ran through it, picked up what was left, covered it in tape and built a stairway to the next level.

Just like Hendrix, Clapton, Page et al, the idea of Eddie Van Halen doesn't seem real. These people are heroes, otherworldly beings who exist solely on posters, album covers, stages and the imaginations of thousands of guitar players across the globe. Except Eddie Van Halen is real. We know this, because he's sat next to us in 5150 Studios, playing the tapped part from *Eruption*. Eddie built the facility adjacent to his house in the early 80s and it has become the creative headquarters for every Van Halen album since, and the walls are lined with the guitars that bear his name.

"I SAVED THE MONEY FROM DELIVERING PAPERS FOR TWO AND A HALF TO THREE YEARS, AND BOUGHT MY FIRST REAL GUITAR, WHICH WAS A '68 GOLDTOP LES PAUL WITH SINGLE-COIL P-90 PICKUPS"

It's lunchtime on a hot California day, the door is wide open and TG has just been introduced to Matt Bruck, Eddie's right-hand man for all things EVH brand. Eddie and his wife (and publicist) Janie enter the room accompanied by an excited Kody, the Van Halens' famous-in-his-own-right pet Pomeranian. "[Kody's] going to be on the cover of *Esquire* with George Clooney!" Janie proudly announces. "Yeah, me and him go way back," Eddie adds.

We're nervous. What do you ask Eddie Van Halen when you have a once-in-a-lifetime hour with him? You ask everything. From the story of that guitar and that amp and how they led to the creation of his gear company, to how he single-handedly became the greatest guitarist of his and, many would fairly argue, every generation since. What you find is that not only is he real, but Eddie Van Halen is one of the most humble, friendly and funny rock stars you'll meet. And he loves talking about guitars...

It's been nine years since you started the EVH brand – how did it first come about?

"It doesn't seem that long! Well, I first started off with Music Man, and then I went to Peavey, and when they stopped, kind of... doing what I asked [laughs], we moved to Fender. Which is a great home, it's a great team."

It seems like you're involved every step of the way with every piece of gear that goes out with your name on it.

"Well, I have to be. If I'm going to use it then it has to be my way, you know what I mean? I'll approach Matt, and Matt and I will approach the engineers, 'How about this?' – and everyone gets excited! Generally, depending on the intricacy or difficulty of the build, it can take anywhere between a year to three years to come to fruition."

It also seems that your level of involvement is there regardless of the price, too?

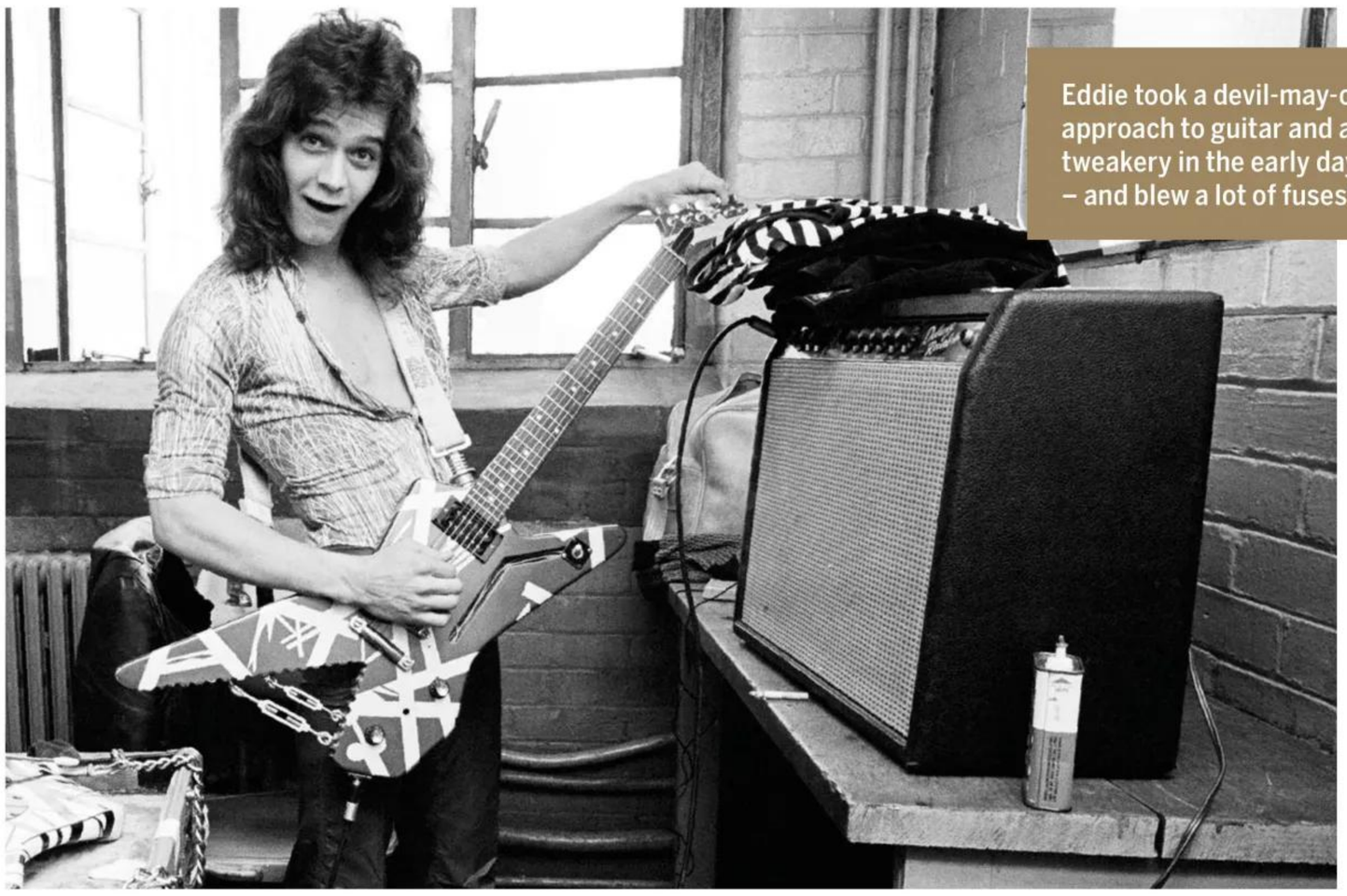
"Well, the first thing we started out with was obviously the flagship/benchmark models. I very much wanted a versatile three-channel amp. That's what I need to do my gig. As the brand evolved we expanded our line with some more affordable models, like the Lunchbox amp and the Wolfgang Standard, for example. I just heard yesterday that a lot of players are buying the 1x12 cabinet because it's the perfect match, and a reasonable price. When I use it, I use it with a 4x12 cabinet – for a 15-watt amp, it will still power a 4x12 cabinet and get a great sound – but I'll have to try it through a 1x12 and see how it sounds, since everybody else seems to dig it that way!"

What was it like building the Frankenstein, and doing that out of necessity?

"Let me start at the beginning. When I first started playing guitar, I was at the local music store, which wasn't even a music store, it was kind of like a Radio Shack that also sold musical instruments, it was called Lafayette Music. I fell in love with this hollowbody 12-string because of the neck, and the first thing I did was I took six strings off, because it was a 12-string and I didn't want 12! They didn't have what I wanted in the store, so it had already started there!

"Then, I got a paper route. We didn't have any money and my parents couldn't afford to buy us equipment, so I saved the money from delivering papers for two and a half to three years, and bought my first real guitar, which was a '68 Goldtop Les Paul with single-coil P-90 pickups. So what do I do? I take the chisel to it right away! Because I wanted a humbucking pickup! But in Pasadena, there were no Les Pauls with a humbucker in them. There was one store in northern Pasadena – a Les Paul came in and they called me right away, 'Hey, we've got a Les Paul!' I walk in and I go, 'Ah, shit! It ain't the kind Clapton plays!' It didn't have humbuckers.

"So, of course, I hunted down a humbucker, took a chisel and made the hole bigger and crammed it in there. I was lucky enough to solder it back properly, then I painted it black and



Eddie took a devil-may-care approach to guitar and amp tweakery in the early days – and blew a lot of fuses!

PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Cars, guitars or attitude, Eddie's approach is to constantly adapt, tinker and occasionally blow stuff up...

added binding. I did all kinds of crazy shit to it. The funny thing is, I only changed the bridge pickup and left the P-90 neck pickup. Since my right hand was covering the bridge pickup, when I played people were going, 'How the fuck's he getting that sound out of a P-90?!' Because that's all they could see. Little did they know that I'd stuck a humbucker in there!

"From there, I bought a Strat, and the rest of the guys in the band hated the way it sounded! And I couldn't really handle the hum, so it was just a logical marriage to – with the humbucker – cross a Gibson with a Fender. Because I loved the vibrato bar and that was probably the most difficult thing, trying to figure out how to keep that thing in tune. This might take a while, but I'll try to explain...

"Everything from the bridge to the tuning peg had to be perfectly straight. The only reason a tremolo goes out of tune is because of friction. When you bring the vibrato bar down and if the string angle is wrong then it's not gonna slide back to its original position. So I would do things like take the string and put it through the tuning peg hole and wind it up instead of down, so there would be no tension on the nut to the tuning peg. I had a brass nut that I cut larger grooves into, and I put oil in it all to eliminate any friction that could cause the string to hang up.

"Another problem is Fender Strats always have the string retainers. I removed them, again to eliminate any other factor that would cause the string to not slide back and forth smoothly. As a result, if I hit an open string too hard it would pop out of the nut. So I'd have to keep my index finger on the other side of the nut to keep it from popping out! I got away with that – in the club days, through the whole first record and live on tour. That's how I used the stock Fender tremolo until the locking tremolo was introduced."

So a lot of it came out of solving problems, then?

"Yeah, a lot of it was through necessity and just mistakes. A lot of accidents. Like the one-pickup thing wasn't intentional. I just didn't know how to wire it back up to the five-position toggle switch, it was just too complicated! Even with what we call the Shark guitar – the Ibanez Destroyer that I cut a chunk of wood out of – it's got two pickups in it, but I couldn't figure out how to wire it to the toggle switch, so I just went straight to the pot and boom! I'm happy."

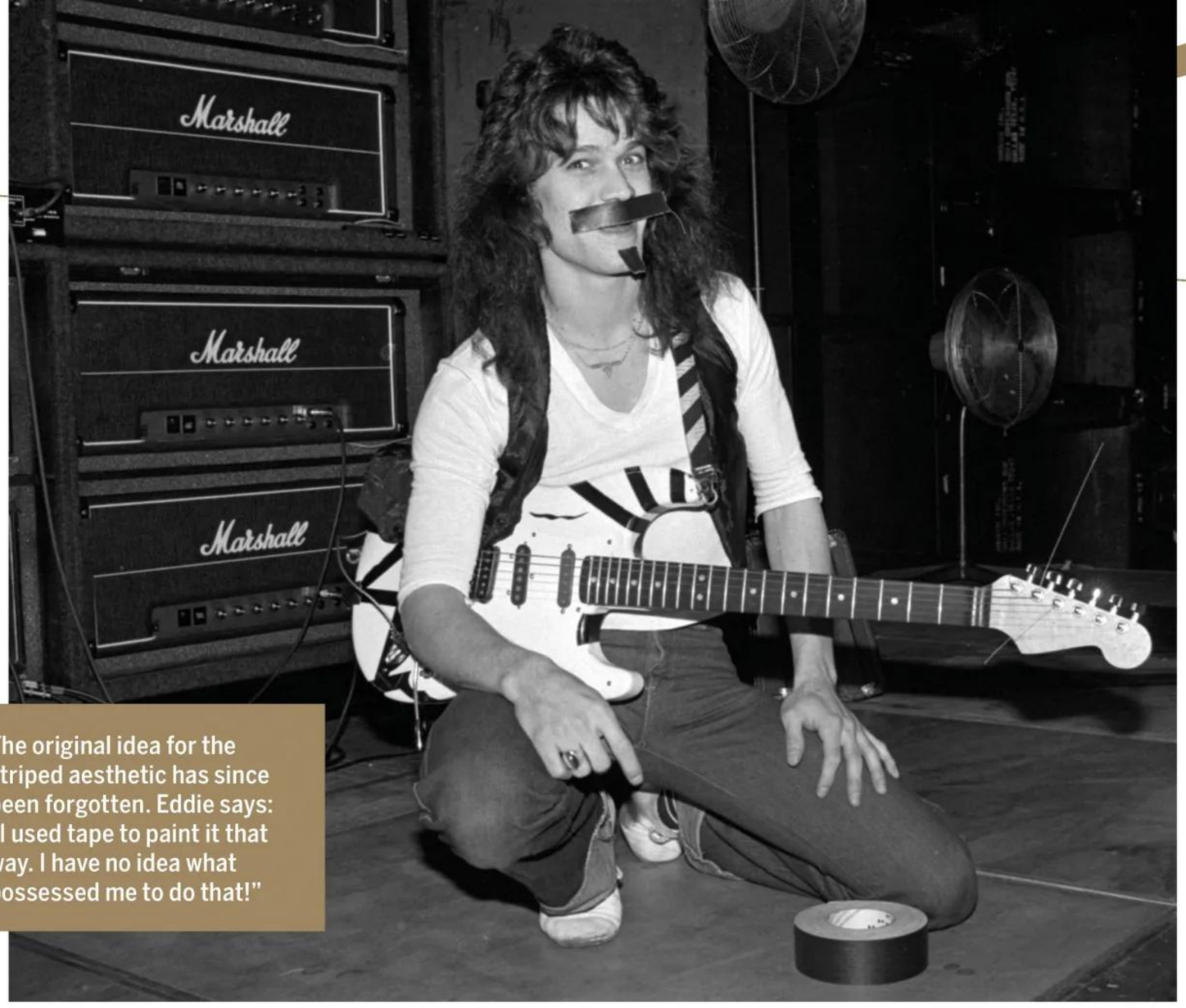


PHOTO BY LYNN GOLDSMITH/CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

The original idea for the striped aesthetic has since been forgotten. Eddie says: "I used tape to paint it that way. I have no idea what possessed me to do that!"

"THERE WAS NO HUMBUCKER STRAT UNTIL I BUILT ONE. EVEN BEFORE I DID WHAT I DID, I DIDN'T KNOW ANYBODY WHO FUCKED AROUND WITH GUITARS AND AMPS AS MUCH AS I DID"

Were you always the kind of person who was taking things apart?
"Well, yeah, like I said, the very first thing that I did [to a guitar] was take six strings off a 12-string because I didn't want 12 strings. Anything just to make it do what I wanted."

Do you think people are less inclined to tinker with their gear these days?
"It's totally up to them. If you're happy with what you have then fine, but if not then do something about it. I apply it to everything. Even if there's something about my car I don't like, or anything for that matter I'll change it, until I like it."

Do you think the advancement in technology and gear killed some of the need for players to be imaginative with their gear?
"Yeah, I mean, really there was no humbucker Strat available until I built one. Now it's just common, everyone uses them now. But even before I did what I did, I didn't know anybody who fucked around with guitars and amps as much as I did. It wasn't until the first interview I ever did that I tried to explain how I got the sound out of my Marshall with the Variac [a variable voltage transformer], except our singer said, 'Don't tell 'em the truth. Lie!' So I told them that I cranked the thing up to 140 volts, instead of lowering it. And, god! The editor's note in the next magazine was, 'Don't do what Eddie said!' – because everyone was frying their amps!

"The real reason I did it was I had my main baby Marshall, except it was too loud, and it would blow up on full voltage. So not only did lowering the voltage take care of the amp not blowing, it also enabled me to contain it and play anywhere between 60 to 90 volts depending on the size of the room. Everything was all the way up on the amp, and the Variac was my volume knob.

"What made me think of lowering the voltage was I bought another Marshall head not realising it was a European model. So I plug it in and there's a really dim pilot light. I'm waiting and waiting and there's no fucking sound coming out! 'Goddammit, I got ripped off!' So I just let it sit and I come back to it an hour or two later.

"I pick up my guitar and it's really, really quiet, but it sounded like it was all the way up. Then I realise 'Shit! The damn thing's set on 220 volts!' Then I went 'Ding! I wonder what'll happen if I hook my main amp up to the light dimmer in the house?!'

"Of course, I blew out all the fuses in the house because I wired it backwards... but once I figured it out, I went down to an electronics store and asked, 'Do you guys sell an industrial type of variable voltage regulator?' and they go 'Yeah, here you go!' It was called a Variac.

"So I plug my amp into it and *voilà*. I was going, 'Holy shit, this is great!' But you know, so many people like Tom Scholz came out with the power soak or whatever. They all thought I had something in between the head and the cabinet, but I didn't... it was a very happy accident that I bought that 220-volt Marshall!"

Your personal involvement in the development of EVH gear extends down to the very smallest detail, too...
"Well, we scrutinise every little piece of the guitar to what I need. The pots that we have are guaranteed for a million turns or something like that. They're really low friction on the volume knob, because when I'm doing *Cathedral* live, the normal pots would freeze up on me because I'm turning it so fast. After two weeks they'd start making noise, so we had a bunch of different companies make us samples, and finally we've landed on one that makes a custom one, just for us. But at the same time, the tone knob is really stiff. You won't accidentally bump it. Since I never use it, I like it stiff."

These guitars have your name on them, but they seem like they're designed to be versatile, not just for your fans.
"No, no. It's designed for anybody to use. There are a lot of country guys that love EVH amps and guitars. EVH guitars do everything I want and more. They're very versatile, all-round guitars, as are the amps.

"It's just a really well-built, a lot-of-attention-to-detail instrument, that makes it easy for anyone to play. I mean, how many beginner guitarists do you know who stopped playing because their fingers hurt? Well, get lighter strings and set it up right! I have a Harmony guitar – a really cheap beginner guitar, and what I always do is just lower the action until it buzzes, then I back it off a little bit. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that out!

"Which brings me to something really funny that I read years ago. Even though I love his playing, and I'm sure he's a wonderful guy even though I've never met him, I read something where Ritchie Blackmore said 'I play a Stratocaster because it's harder to play than a Gibson.' And I'm going, 'Wow, why would you want to make it hard on yourself?' Not that it's really true, I mean, you can set up a Strat to play easy, too. But I always thought it was a strange comment, because I was always the opposite. For me, it was like, the easier the better! That's why our entry model [the Wolfgang Standard] guitar plays as well as the top of the line Wolfgang."

"THERE ARE A LOT OF COUNTRY GUYS THAT LOVE EVH AMPS AND GUITARS. THE GUITARS DO EVERYTHING I WANT AND MORE. THEY'RE VERY VERSATILE"



Eddie with an EVH Striped Series Frankie. He says of his guitars: "You know, when I say in an ad, 'This is what I use', I mean it"

So do you have a benchmark setup for the EVH guitars?
"Oh yeah! The guys on the assembly line do the final checks, and before it goes in the box, it'd better be set up right. And we do spot checks, and if it ain't right, we get pissed!"

Is the idea basically that you should be able to walk into a guitar store, buy one and use it that night?
"Yeah, exactly. And you know, when I say in an ad, 'This is what I use', I mean it. There's nothing custom about my stuff – or, actually, it's all custom for you and for me!"

There have been conflicting reports about the humbucker in the original Frankenstrat. Could you clarify what guitar it came from?
"Yeah, it's from a [Gibson ES-]335. Actually, if I had my phone here, I'd show you a picture of me playing that guitar. Somebody just sent me it, it's the only picture that I have of myself playing it. I painted it white because, of course, I fucked with that, too! But yeah, I yanked it out of there. I took the rear pickup out and it was really hard. I mean... I pretty much destroyed that guitar because you had the f-holes to get to the electronics. Man! Talk about a pain in the ass! I just yanked the stuff out and once I got the pickup out I said, 'Fuck this guitar!'"

It was never going back in anyway...
"Nah!"

And when you made the tape finish, was that in fact just another solution to a problem?
"It wasn't a tape finish, I used tape to paint it that way. I have no idea what possessed me to do that! I wish I did, but it's just one of those things. I have no fucking idea! And now I have a registered trademark on it. But at the same time it's just like potting the pickup, dipping it in wax to hopefully stop feedback. I have no idea, nobody told me about it, it's just straight from wherever ideas come from. I just had this crazy idea that maybe the coil windings vibrating caused that high-end squeal. Not controlled feedback, the high-end squeal, the real nasty shit. The paint job and the potting of the pickup, I don't have a fucking clue where these ideas came from! Everything I did back then was either intentional, or the outcome of a happy mistake."

PHOTOGRAPHY KEVIN BALDES



PHOTO BY MARC SEROTA/GETTY IMAGES

"It's just a really well-built, a-lot-of-attention-to-detail instrument, that makes it easy for anyone to play"

Are you quite technically minded with other stuff outside of guitars?
"Not really. Computers? Nah! We have a Pro Tools system in the studio, but I still use the tape machines. Even the tape machines are too difficult for me! The console's too big. Too many knobs, you know? The only thing I really use on the console are the faders. I leave everything flat, because if you're not getting the sound from your instrument then what's the point? If you start EQ-ing to tape then you start getting in trouble."

Does that extend to microphone placement? You get it right at the amp first?
"Yeah, mainly, your amp better sound good, or your drum better sound good!"

You were one of the first players to get on board with the Floyd Rose vibrato. What was it like when you were first presented with it?
"Okay, this is a funny story – very true. Three tours in a row, every time we'd play Seattle – I can't remember if it was '79, '80 and '81 – it had to be '79 because I never put it in the black and white guitar. So, in '79, somebody goes, 'Hey, there's a guy here named Floyd Rose and he wants to show you something.' He comes in and goes [with cupped hands], 'You wanna try this?' and I say, 'Sure, what the fuck, why not!?' So I gave him one of my guitars and asked him to put it in because I didn't know how to do it. It was different to the Fender tailpiece and it wasn't a direct swap.

"So I tried it, once it was ready to go and... it was a pain in the ass! For one, the Allen screws on the neck were very small, and in order to torque it down you'd either strip the Allen key or the screw would strip. But more importantly, when you're playing the guitar, things bend and they move and the neck shifts a little bit. Depending on the temperature of the gig from the beginning to the end, the temperature fluctuates. So between every, fucking, song I had to unclamp and tune! And then Dave and the rest of the guys would be going, 'Is he ready yet?!' It was just a pain in the ass. So first I told him, 'Beef the thing up!' because I kept snapping shit.

"So he comes back the next year with a beefed-up model. But there was still the problem of having to tune between every song, so I told him, 'Put some fine-tuners on it. I played a little cello and violin when I was in elementary school and those instruments have finger adjustable fine-tuners. Okay?' So that's what I meant.

"Then the third year he comes along and goes, [cupped hands] 'I did it!' and I go, 'No! You fucking numbnut!' Because now you needed a wrench to fine-tune it! So now instead of three, you've got nine, you know? I'm going 'No, you idiot, I meant fucking finger tuners! You've seen 'em before!' Then he patents the fucking thing behind my back. Pissed me off... whatever!"

"WE HAVE A PRO TOOLS SYSTEM IN THE STUDIO, BUT I STILL USE THE TAPE MACHINES. EVEN THOSE ARE TOO DIFFICULT FOR ME! THE CONSOLE'S TOO BIG. TOO MANY KNOBS, YOU KNOW?"

You've always had your Floyds set without a rout underneath?
"All flush to the body. Everything needs to be connected. I even like my cabinets on wood, not on wheels. Everything needs to be solidly connected. The more connection, the more sustain and resonance."

Could you explain why the pickup switching on a Wolfgang is backwards to the usual three-position?
"I have to have it that way! When I use my right hand on the fingerboard, if it's wired the other way I always bump it up. So it's just out of necessity, the USAs are like mine, but the Specials are like a Les Paul. But you can turn them around – that's what I did, just turned it around because I kept bumping it."

You seem to be favouring the Wolfgang in recent years. Could you take us through a few of your favourite features on it?
"Well, it's the ultimate guitar for me. Everything from that 12-string I took the six strings off, to the Frankenstein, to everything else I've broken or rebuilt – this is the ultimate guitar, which we still continue to improve on. Like that low-friction pot, we just added it a year ago. We've upgraded it to stainless steel frets so they don't wear out. We're always just doing something. As Matt would say, 'Building a better mousetrap.'

"I played a Special during *I'll Wait* during the last tour. I traded off between that and the Star guitar. I actually preferred it to the Star because it has the neck pickup. It just so happens that on the record I used the neck pickup, so for that I preferred the Special. And we're still tinkering. Just last week we were tinkering with different magnet types to make the guitar sound even better."

Does that come from a place where you live with something for a while and then your tastes change?
"It's a natural evolution. I hate to put it this way, because it doesn't apply to everything – like my wife or anything – but... everything guitar-based! [laughs] It's not necessarily that I get tired of it, but after a while you go, 'Hey, this could be a little better. I'd like a little more of this.'

"Like the difference between the 5150 III and the IIIS. I didn't like the fact – even though a lot of people do like it – that on the 5150 III the second channel has a different tonal quality to the third channel. I want them to be identical in tonal response and quality. The same sound. So that when you're facing the

Eddie had no idea the 5150 would become a benchmark for heavy tone. He says: "I just wanted a high-gain amp that wouldn't blow up..."

"I TURN EVERYTHING UP TO 15. TO THE POINT WHERE IT GETS SO UGLY, AND THEN I BACK IT OFF TO THE POINT WHERE THE UGLINESS GOES AWAY"



PHOTOGRAPHY KEVIN BALDES

other way and not looking at which channel you're on, you can't tell, except one is just fucking over the top overdrive for soloing and the other is rhythm so you can have your guitar full up and it won't drive you crazy feeding back. But yeah, we just continue to – in my mind – evolve and change and improve, and in turn give players a better product. It's an ongoing thing."

When you first designed the 5150, were you conscious of the fact that you were creating something that would become a benchmark in heavy guitar tones?
"I had no clue. I just wanted something that I liked. I just wanted a high-gain amp that wouldn't blow up!"

How does it feel? You're obviously used to being emulated, but still!
"Yeah, I guess it's a wonderful feeling that people like the stuff we design. But even if they didn't, I would still use it! Because really, that's the bottom line. I have to like it otherwise it doesn't go out."

We heard an interesting story about you benchtesting the 5150 III with feedback...
"Oh yeah! I left it feeding back for a month! And then I put a bass through it and left it for another month, because I wanted a really low frequency to see how the amp and the cabinet would hold up. [I'd try] different feedback frequencies, really high, then I'd muffle the other strings once I got the note that I wanted it to feedback at, and I'd just leave it.

"I'll never forget, we had a Fender meeting with the powers that be to talk about something, and we're walking up the hill to the studio here and they hear this, 'Ooooh.' Then we open the door and it's 'OOOOOH', then we open another door and it's just fucking screaming! And they all went 'What the fuck are you doing?' and I'm like 'I'm crash-testing the amp!' I don't like stuff to blow up. So then I take it out on tour for a whole cycle before it was released to the public. Nothing goes out until I've totally fucking crash-tested it."

So did it break down?
"No, it held up!"

Were you secretly hoping that you'd be able to destroy it?
"No, no! I mean, even when I was with Peavey, guitars would show up in stores or even to me with loose necks or this and that. So I went to Peavey and said, 'Give me a Wolfgang' and I took the



"Our mission is to build a better... everything. Whatever it is that we approach, it had better be better than our competition"

whole fucking guitar apart, right there, in the board meeting with Hartley Peavey sitting there, the owner of the company. I took the neck off, took the pickups out, took it all apart, then put it back together. The way I would. Then I grab the guitar, and I threw it across the fucking room and it hit the ground. I go, 'Go pick it up.' The guy picked it up, and it was perfectly in tune, because the strings were stretched properly, the neck was tight, everything was the way it was supposed to be.

"I just looked at them and said, 'Now tell me it's [because of] shipping! It ain't fucking shipping, you guys just aren't setting them up right!' Attention to detail. It blew their fucking minds."

You seem very conscious of the fact that it's your name on the gear.
"Yeah, well I'm not endorsing a product; it's *my* product, y'know? It's definitely a team effort, I couldn't do it on my own. But it's a brand, it's our company, so to speak. The only variable or possible thing that we have no control over is tubes. Like last tour I blew a head once because I had a bad tube. But you know, you get a bad tyre on a car or whatever. We don't make tubes. If we made EVH tubes, they wouldn't blow! [Laughs]"

You mentioned the Lunchbox earlier. It's a small amp, but it has your sound.
"Yeah, and that's the whole point. It's a 15-watt amp, and it just screams. I mean, you could play The LA Forum with that amp. It's got a quarter-power switch that brings it down. We used EL84s in it, they're great tubes. It sounds like a 5150."

Was it a challenge to scale that sound down?
"Everything's a challenge, basically. When we come up with the idea, they build it and send it over and then I'll suggest changes, and it's just back and forth until it's right. The pickups on a Wolfgang – we had two companies each build us 40 pairs of pickups. So we had 80 pickups, and I didn't like any of them! So I ask Fender, 'Who makes your Strat pickups?' They go, 'Well, we do them in-house.' So I say, 'Well, let's build my pickup in-house.' First time around, first attempt, boom! That's what I want! Because they listened. The other guys, I don't know, I guess they just threw me something that they already had so they could say, 'Hey, Eddie Van Halen uses this model pickup.' I mean, it wasn't the point. I would have used anything if it sounded the way I wanted, but it didn't."

"I WENT TO PEAVEY AND SAID, 'GIVE ME A WOLFGANG' AND I TOOK THE GUITAR APART, RIGHT THERE IN THE MEETING WITH HARTLEY PEAVEY SITTING THERE, THE OWNER OF THE COMPANY"

The power-switching thing is kind of a continuation of the whole Variac idea.
"Yeah! And on the combo version of the 5150 III it has a knob that does the same thing. It's a different circuit, but it's the same premise, so that's actually more like a Variac."

Could you imagine what it would have been like to have had that in your early days?
"Oh man! But these things happen for a reason, I guess..."

The Lunchbox also has a lot of features on it compared with a lot of low-wattage amps. Was it important to keep features like full EQ, the effects loop, and so on?
"Oh definitely. Our mission is to build a better... everything. Whatever it is that we approach, it had better be better than our competition."

And you've included Resonance and Presence controls on there. Do you think these are often misunderstood, sometimes forgotten by players?
"Well, you shouldn't be afraid to fucking turn anything, you know! That's my philosophy. I know it's a Spinal Tap line, but I turn everything up to 15. To the point where it gets so ugly, and then I back it off to the point where the ugliness goes away. That normally ends up around 14, not 11!"

More than 11...
"Yeah! And then we continue to push. Just like the Burn channel on the 5150 IIIS is hotter than the 5150 III. It's like a race car, every year you've gotta be faster. It's never-ending."

It sounds like you're never going to stop looking for improvements in tone...
"It's just innately part of my DNA you know? It's who I am. I like people to be able to pick up a Wolfgang and a 5150 and not have to struggle to get a sound. I mean, I see so many people who plug into an amp and they don't have a clue how to even set it. And with a 5150 III, it almost doesn't matter where you set it, it's going to sound good. Just turn the volume up, and it's not difficult. To get a bad sound out of a 5150 is really difficult. I know so many engineers who have a 5150 III in their studio, because they reamp. When the guitarist leaves they plug it all back through a 5150 III and the guy comes back the next day and goes, 'What did you do, man? It sounds fucking great!'"

Finally, do you have any advice for aspiring guitar players?
"Obviously, enjoy doing what you're doing. Bottom line is, you've gotta love what you're doing. There are no rules. I think it's funny when people take all these music theory classes, it's exactly that. It's theory. You know? You have 12 fucking notes, the 13th one is the octave, do whatever you want with them. It's really that simple. There are no mistakes: I call those passing notes! [laughs]"

BURST OF INSPIRATION

We caught up with Greeny's current owner, Metallica guitarist Kirk Hammett, for an in-depth chat about this legendary 'Burst following his recent performance at the London Palladium's all-star Peter Green tribute concert

Words Rod Brakes **First Published** May 2020

How did you manage to acquire Greeny?
"[Guitarist specialist] Richard Henry and I have had a long-standing relationship with me buying guitars from him. About five or six years ago, I rolled into London and I called him up and said, 'Hey, Rich. What have you got for me? Anything interesting?' He goes, 'I have a guitar you might want to see.' I asked him, 'What would that guitar be?' He said, 'Well, I have the Gary Moore/Peter Green Les Paul.' I said, 'Whoa! Wait a second. I'm not going to pay $2 million,' because that was the rumour going around at the time – that it was on sale for $2 million. He said, 'Don't worry, Kirk. It's all poppycock. It's very reasonably priced. Let me bring it over.' I thought, 'This might be a nice opportunity to spend an afternoon playing a cool 1959 Les Paul Standard...' I can think of worse things to do!

"Riffs just fall out of this guitar…all of a sudden, a beautiful chord progression will come out of it. It leads me to other new things and pieces of music"

"So he brought it over about 45 minutes later. I plugged it in and I checked the bridge pickup. It sounded nice, bright, full. Great tone. The tonal spectrum was very, very smooth from low to high. I checked the neck pickup. I thought, 'Oh my God. This is so nice.' It has that full-on *Still Got The Blues* sound; I recognised it instantly. Then, you know, I put it in the middle position and started playing and all of a sudden, I was like, 'Holy... Lord!' I looked up at Richard and I said, 'I'm not giving this guitar back to you guys."

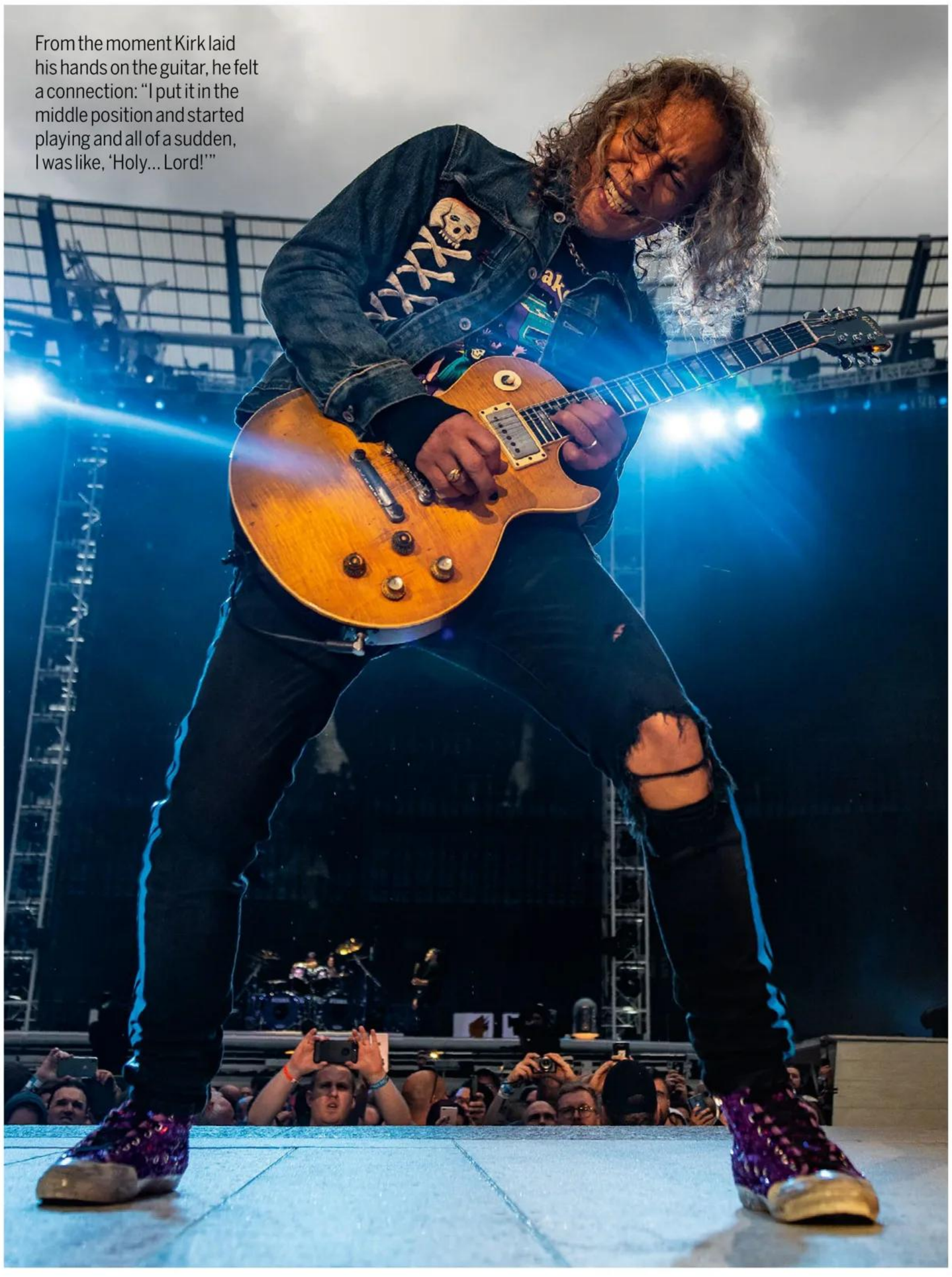
What were your first impressions of the middle-position sound?
"I instantly thought, 'This is like a Strat through a 100-watt Marshall.' I thought to myself, 'Les Pauls aren't supposed to sound like that, especially 1959 Les Pauls.' I was so blown away by that aspect. I mean, it didn't even sound like a traditional sort of out-of-phase sound, like the typical middle toggle position Jimmy Page has been known to use a lot. It sounded completely different – its own characteristic, its own tone."

Sometimes people have an immediate gut feeling about guitars...
"I felt it in my gut, but I also felt it in my heart and I felt it in my brain. I felt it in my hands. I'd go so far as to say it had an aura about it. It was just unmistakable and undeniable. I had never experienced a guitar with that much mojo, so to speak."

Do you feel inspired creatively when you pick it up?
"Riffs just fall out of this guitar. When I'm playing at a low volume with a slightly distorted sound or high volume through a Fender amp, all of a sudden, a beautiful chord progression will come out of it. It doesn't matter really what the situation is, sonically, it leads me to other new things and pieces of music. It has so much tone. I can make the slightest tweak and it will sing in a different way."

What amps and pedals does Greeny pair well with?
"Greeny likes Tube Screamers. And Marshall amps. Just recently, I was recording at Abbey Road using an old Marshall Bluesbreaker – the same model [1962] Eric Clapton used on the 'Beano' album. The Bluesbreaker, Greeny, a Pete Cornish Treble Boost and a cord was all the tone I needed for that particular song. I was in heaven. There are some guitars that you can plug into any amp and they will make it sound great. And Greeny is that kind of guitar."

Are the pickup DCR readings unique in any way?
"They're really not that high compared with other Les Pauls that I've got a reading out of. With most Les Pauls, the neck pickup seems to be slightly louder than the bridge pickup, but with Greeny, the neck pickup



From the moment Kirk laid his hands on the guitar, he felt a connection: "I put it in the middle position and started playing and all of a sudden, I was like, 'Holy... Lord!'"

PHOTO BY GEORGE WILKES/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY BRETT MURRAY

is significantly louder than the bridge. I think that has a lot to do with why the middle pickup position sounds like it does. That middle pickup sound is so unique. I call it my 'Dragon Tone'."

How heavy does Greeny feel?
"For a Les Paul, it's about average. It's not too heavy, but it's definitely not light, either. I would say it's somewhere in between."

What does Greeny feel like to play?
"It's definitely a player type of guitar. The neck has been broken twice, but there's something about the way it's been worn in. There is something about its components. There is something about the wood. It's magical. Over the years, it's become astonishingly unique. It's been touched so much. I'm looking at it now and I can see the wear marks that Gary Moore's fingers put in it. Just looking at the wear is inspiring to me, because I'm such a big Gary Moore fan."

How much of an inspiration was Gary Moore to you as a guitarist?
"He was such a big influence on me, in so many different ways. When I was 16 years old, I remember going to the record store and seeing Gary Moore's

"I want to share the magic of this guitar because it gives so much. It gives more than any other guitar I've ever played in my life. It seems to get better, too"

very first solo album that came out in '78 [*Back On The Streets*]. I remember seeing this really cool live shot of Gary and thinking, 'Oh, man. What a cool-looking Les Paul. Wow! That's what I want to do.' I was aspiring to be a musician, and now I have the very same guitar. It's one of those full circle things."

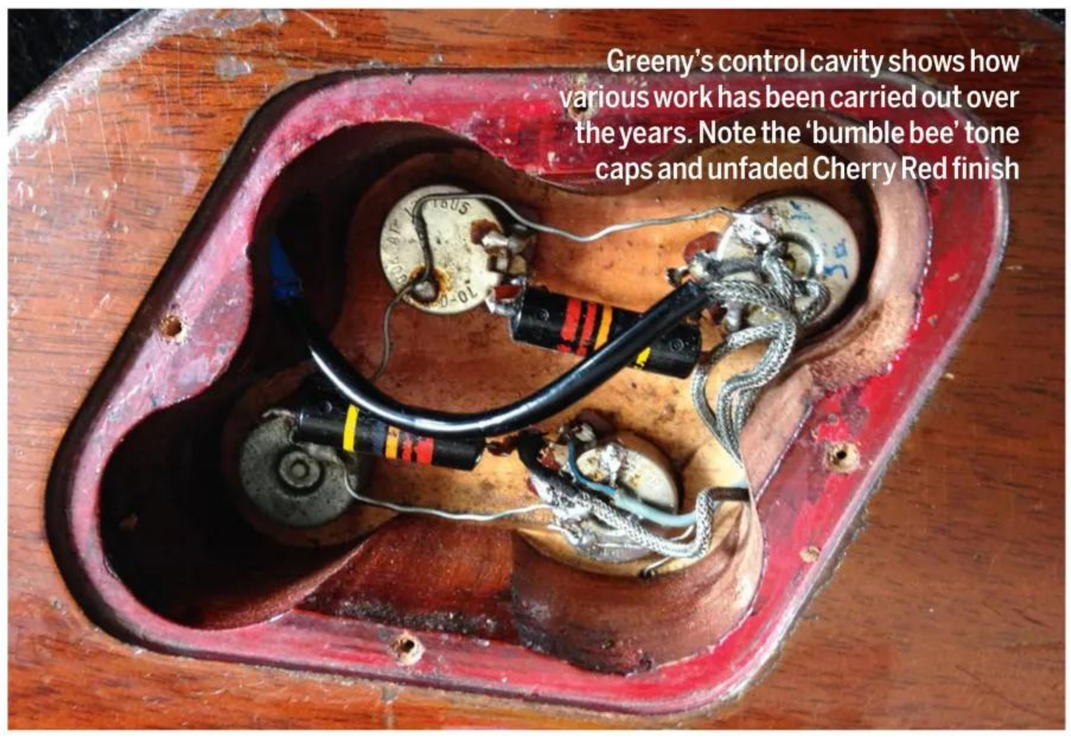
You recently performed at the Mick Fleetwood & Friends Peter Green tribute concert. Tell us about it...
"It was amazing. Again, it was a full circle thing for me having Peter Green's guitar and playing *The Green Manalishi*. That song has been with me for a very, very long time. And to be able to play it with Mick Fleetwood and a bunch of other players who just understand that era of Fleetwood Mac was an amazing thing. Greeny was so at home with that song, and all the tones were just sitting there waiting to be used inside of her. It was a transcendental experience. When it came time to do the solo, I dug deep. I didn't know what I was going to play, but having Greeny in my hands and with that Marshall Bluesbreaker and with that band, I knew I was going to be okay."

And how was it meeting Peter Green when you visited him at home?
"It was a real honour. He was very, very cool. He was a gentleman. I found him just to be really, really nice. He was very attentive. Once we broke the ice we started talking about fishing and we talked a little bit about guitars. He still likes to collect guitars. He still plays guitar.

"Yet again, it was one of those full circle things, because he had not seen that guitar since the early 70s when Gary Moore acquired it, so it was a homecoming for Greeny of some sort. He said, 'That's not my guitar. My guitar had more red in it.' But afterwards he held it and he kind of acknowledged it in his own way."



Greeny's infamous neck PAF pickup with non-original grey lead wire


Greeny's control cavity shows how various work has been carried out over the years. Note the 'bumble bee' tone caps and unfaded Cherry Red finish


This image shows the bridge PAF pickup with typical silver braided lead wire and 'Patent Applied For' sticker


Here, on the rear of Greeny's headstock, you can see replacement tuners along with some serious headstock fracture repair work

PHOTOS BY RICHARD HENRY

"I felt it in my gut, my heart, my brain, my hands… it had an aura about it. unmistakable, undeniable. I'd never experienced a guitar with that much mojo"

Do you feel like Greeny's owner or more of a custodian for the guitar?
"I am definitely the custodian. I tend to see it as the people's guitar, only because, obviously, this guitar's professional life just refuses to end. This guitar wants to be heard. I'm doing all I can to make sure it's still being heard by playing it live, recording with it, and having people see it and hear it in real-time. I am not particularly precious with this guitar. I mean, if people come up to me and say, 'Hey, can I play it?' I'm like, 'Sure. Plug it in. Get a feel for it.' I want to share the magic of this guitar, because it gives so much. It gives more than any other guitar I've ever played in my life. It seems to get better, too."

What would you like to see happen to Greeny in future?
"All great instruments tend to outlast their owners, or their custodians, or their players. Whoever ends up with it after I do – and I've got no fucking idea who will at this point – I'd hope that it continues to be played, because I think that people will always want to see and hear this guitar." G

***Guitarist* would like to thank Richard Henry**

PHOTO BY STEVE CATLIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The red pigment in Greeny's original Cherry Sunburst finish has faded to reveal a predominantly yellow 'Lemon 'Burst'


DETROIT

JACK WHITE

Jack White is one of guitar's most mercurial figures, whose core influences span decades and embrace both Son House and Van Halen without apparent contradiction. With a new album, *Fear Of The Dawn*, out, we join him to explore his equally eclectic guitars

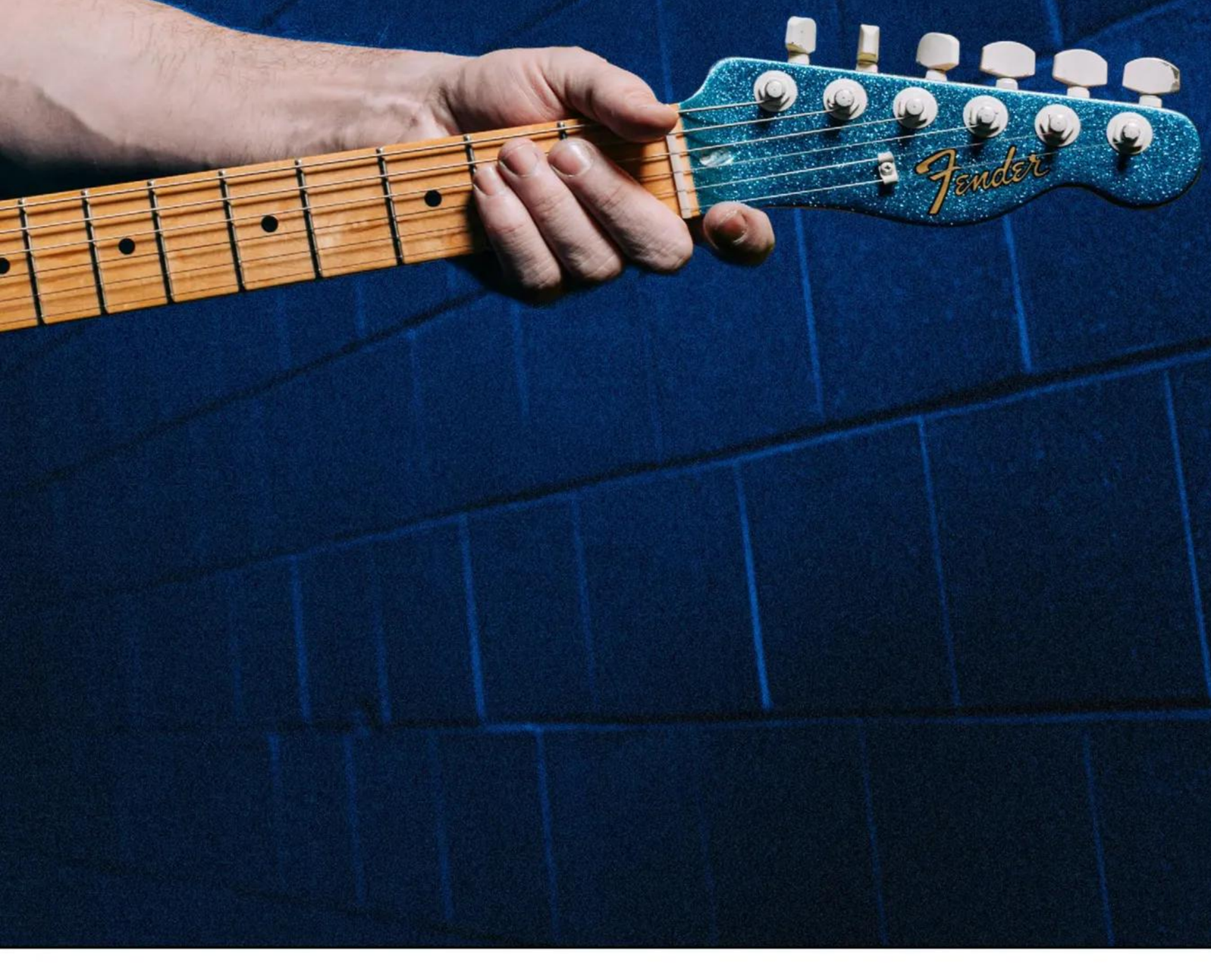
Words James Volpe Rotondi & Jamie Dickson* **Photography** Eleanor Jane **First Published** July 2022

It says something about the way we unconsciously pigeonhole artists that it was a little shocking to see Jack White use a customised EVH Wolfgang guitar to perform the track *Lazaretto* on the US TV show *Saturday Night Live* in October 2020. Just like the movies, the world of guitar has its tropes and clichés, and one of these is that alt-rock guitarists should play painfully hip pawn-shop relics and turn their nose up at anything with the mark of shred upon it. White played the EVH partly as a gesture of tribute to the late master. "I won't even insult the man's talent by trying to play one of his songs tonight," he said prior to the show. "[But] Eddie was very kind to me and saw to it that this guitar was made for me to my specs..."

And while some might be surprised to learn that indie-rock's champion of primal blues lines and the late, lamented heavy rock virtuoso were so sympatico, it makes terrific sense on many levels. In addition to decades of knocking out album after album of wicked riffs and potent solos, both players have displayed an almost obsessive pursuit of individualism and specialised design in the instruments they've played throughout their careers – never content with stock features and aesthetics, always pushing the envelope to make their own guitars more idiosyncratic, versatile and allied with their own approaches to both technique and tone.

As White and his band prepare for his first full tour in more than two years, James Rotondi of our sister magazine *Guitar Player* sat down with Jack to discuss the methods to the madness behind his creative and fluid approach to recording, writing and modifying both guitars and pedals – including his own Third Man line of effects, which includes the cool Bumble Buzz, Triplegraph and Mantic Flex – and how his tone has evolved from his early days with The White Stripes through his Raconteurs years (with co-frontman Brendan Benson), The Dead Weather, and his own unique and often-challenging solo albums.

**This feature has been adapted from the July 2022 edition of Guitar Player*



1. Jack was an early adopter of Fender's innovative Acoustasonic series of instruments but asked for his to have a deliberately restricted range of tones to include his favourite acoustic sound, an electric tone and finally a blend of both

2. As well as an Acoustasonic Jazzmaster, Jack has a Telecaster from the hybrid acoustic-electric range. Its striking, high-contrast blue sunburst finish was inspired by Fender's love-or-hate-them Antigua finishes of the 1970s

3. A delectable Fender Jazz bass in full chromed-up trim is also found among Jack's collection

Let's start with the very unique blue-and-white Telecaster you're holding in the opening shot for this feature. It resembles the more copper/orange sparkle Tele you played with The Raconteurs, right?

"This is sort of the next step on from that guitar, which Chip Ellis and I had started working on around The Raconteurs' last album, before the pandemic. We called it the Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster. We started with a B-Bender-equipped Telecaster that I received as a Christmas present a few years back, and we just started adding cool elements and features that I've been wanting to add based on my experience playing live over the past couple of solo tours I've been doing.

"The B-Bender Tele was a great present to get. I'd always wanted one, and we changed the colour of it to something more suitable for the colour scheme of The Raconteurs, with that orange sparkle finish. Then the thought was, 'Okay, as long as we're repainting it, let's put some new pickups in it.' At that moment in time, I was really into the Fender Lace Sensors for the bridge and then a P-90 in the middle position. And then we added a neck pickup that was on my brother's 1972 Fender Telecaster Thinline when I was a kid. I always thought that the bassy-sounding neck pickup on that was really creamy, so I wanted to have that in there. And then eventually the bridge pickup changed from the Lace Sensor, as well.

"My wife, [Third Man singer/songwriter/guitarist and session player] Olivia Jean, had gotten a custom guitar from Fender and [pickup guru] Tim Shaw had made these outstanding Filter'Tron-style pickups for that. I love Filter'Trons and I've played Gretsch guitars quite a bit, so I really wanted those same types of pickups in my Telecaster. Sure, if you A/B most Filter'Trons against a lot of the higher-output pickups out there, they don't compete for gain, but whatever Tim did to make these balance with the output of my other pickups, they're just really furious Filter'Trons. Tons of bite. And we're even considering adding a coil-tap to it next. We did that with the humbucking Lace Sensors I used on the last tour, and that was really interesting at times for adding a bit of extra treble when you need it."

You've been exploiting interrupter or kill switches for a while now, and most of your guitars have them. What inspired that?

"My interrupters do a complete cut of the signal, but, I mean, Tom Morello was doing a similar thing back in the 90s by just turning on and off between two pickups.



And, of course, people would do similar things with Les Pauls back in the day, where they'd have one of the pickup's volumes down, so the pickup selector would act as a kind of kill switch. So it's nothing new. All my White Stripes guitars had those sorts of on/off switches on them back in the day, and I enjoyed playing with them, but eventually I thought it would be much easier if we installed them as buttons. The inspiration for that way of doing it probably comes from when I was using the Fender EVH Wolfgang USA Eddie Van Halen Signature guitars, which have these momentary push-button switches. I'm tempted to put them on all my guitars now. And it's not an issue for me with blending

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"I got to road-test the Acoustasonic heavily. And the first thing I asked was, 'Is there any way we can have fewer choices for sounds?'"

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two pickups because I've never blended pickups on any guitar I've used, not ever. Even my Tele is just three positions, not five.

"I've also got a V-neck on this Tele, made from the whitest maple we could find because I don't like that sort of yellowy maple; I like it to be really white. I like the V-neck a lot. All the old Gibson acoustics I play, like my 1915 Gibson L-1 [aka the Robert Johnson model], are V-necks. I understand why people wouldn't like it; it's hard to play. But I think I like making things a little bit harder on myself, too. So there's that..."

Tell us about these customised Fender Tele- and Jazzmaster-style Acoustasonics you're playing. They look rad with those cool blue finishes. But there's more to your specs on these than just the finish, right?

"Yeah, I made some recommendations regarding the range of sounds in them as well. Y'know, I first started using an Acoustasonic for the last Raconteurs tour. Since we were going with an orange colour scheme for that tour, we borrowed the design idea from one of my Gretsch Rancher Falcon acoustics, the one I named after the actress Claudette Colbert, which has her face engraved on the back by a great tattoo artist in Cincinnati named Kore Flatmo. Along with the tribute to Claudette, my thought was to try to mix some of the design vibe from those interesting old Fender Antigua finishes from the 1970s but with the modern Acoustasonic guitars.

"As for the sounds, I was lucky enough to be one of the first people to get an Acoustasonic when they first came out, and I brought it straight out on tour with The Raconteurs, so I got to road-test it pretty heavily. And the first thing I asked them was, 'Is there any way we can have fewer choices for sounds?' I felt I only needed three sounds – one great electric, one great acoustic and then a sound with both together – because that solved a basic issue with how to play songs of mine that had acoustics and electrics, either



Jack White's 1964 'JB Hutto' Res-O-Glass Airline electric is the guitar most people think of when his name is mentioned, to this day. Its Valco pickups are humbucker-sized but are in fact single coil units, while the body is made of hollow fibreglass

in different sections of the same track or sometimes doubling the same parts. That came in real handy with The Raconteurs. Before that, I'd have to write acoustic sections with a long enough space at the end so I could switch back to electric."

This custom Jazzmaster electric you've got in process here looks cool. Any interesting mods on that one?
"Oh, yeah. So, Dan Mancini, my brilliant guitar tech and mission man, has been working a lot on this one. A while back, I showed Dan a clip of a guy who had incorporated some sort of synth device into his guitar, and I thought, 'That's what I've been trying to do for years that I wish we could figure out!' I remember speaking to Matt Bellamy of Muse about how he incorporated a Korg Kaoss Pad into his [custom Manson] guitar, and I always thought that was a great idea. So Dan and I began talking, and right now he's in the process of installing the guts of an Electro-Harmonix Pitchfork pedal into the back of this Jazzmaster. The intermittent switch can turn on the harmonies, but I can also use one of the pots to bend the pitch as well, just like with a Whammy Pedal. I think Tom Morello may end up getting jealous of this and have to put it on his guitar, too... I'll have to send him a clip of it and see what he thinks."

"The Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster started [out as] a B-Bender-equipped Tele and we added cool elements"

Will that have a similar mix of Filter'Trons and P-90s like the Telecaster?
"It will have some of the same features as the Tele, but the pickups will be different. I own this incredible Gibson Fort Knox 'Skunk Baxter' Firebird that I played with The Raconteurs, and the mini-humbucker pickups on that, which Jim DeCola designed, are just so impressive. Honestly, it's almost a shock every time I play it. So Tim Shaw at Fender is working on his own version of that type of mini-humbucker to put into this Jazzmaster."









4. Jack's eclectic effects include the Coppersound Triplegraph octaver built with his design input

5. Jack's Fender Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster is a creation of the Custom Shop and is converted from a Nashville Tele fitted with a B-Bender. Its trio of pickups includes a Lace Sensor single coil in the bridge position, a P-90 in the middle and, at the neck, a Wide Range humbucker

6. An apparent variation on the Three-Wheel-Motion Low Rider Telecaster, this metallic blue Custom Shop creation features a "furious" take on Gretsch's Filter'Tron humbucker at the bridge, which was designed by Tim Shaw

7. Given its rarity, you might assume this was a Gretsch Custom Shop creation, but it's an original 1957 G6199 Jupiter Thunderbird

From your well-documented 1964 JB Hutto Montgomery Ward Airline to your gorgeous Gretsch 'Triple Green Machine' to your 1950s Kay Hollowbody to your EVH Wolfgang guitars, you constantly seem to be exploring unusual choices in pursuit of both new sounds and new/old aesthetics. What do you think drives that for you?

"I just think it's cool that there are these moments in your life where you might play through a certain pickup or type of guitar, but maybe it's at the wrong moment in your life, and somehow you decide, 'Nah, that's not for me.' And then you revisit it 10 years later, and you're like, 'Oh my God, actually this is great. It just has its own kind of appeal.' Now, obviously this kind of experience only happens when you're really deep into the tone thing. Plenty of people wouldn't know the difference if you played them five different pickups in a row. They'd probably sound exactly the same to them. But when you're a guitar player, you can really hear how the differences matter and how they influence your playing and tone." G



Fear Of The Dawn by Jack White is out now on Third Man Records. For more information on tours and releases, visit Jack's website ***https://jackwhiteiii.com***



"When you're a guitar player, you can really hear how pickup differences matter and how they influence your playing and tone"

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