Guitarist PRESENTS

LEGENDS OF TONE

GIBSON

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE
TO THE GUITARS THAT MADE GIBSON GREAT

ES-335s
FIREBIRDS
FLYING Vs & EXPLORERS
SGs & JUNIORS
LES PAUL 'BURSTS
RARE ARCHTOPS
GREAT TONES
DREAM RIGS

STAR GUITARS
PHIL MANZANERA
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Welcome to

LEGENDS

— OF TONE —

GIBSON

Legends of Tone: Gibson is a celebration of the contribution that Gibson's electric guitars have made to musicians and musical culture for almost a century. From the time of its earliest inventions in the 1920s, when the company introduced the world to the truss-rod, the height-adjustable bridge and the L-5 archtop, via the high-tech Robot guitars and automatic tuning models of 2015, all the way through to the company's 130th anniversary, Gibson's innovations have continued to shape the way the electric guitar has sounded. In the pages of this bookazine, we'll chart the evolution of Gibson's sound, meet iconic Gibson players and get up close and personal with some of the rarest and most desirable Gibson guitars. We hope you enjoy the trip.



LEGENDS *of* TONE | GIBSON

LEGENDS
— OF TONE —
GIBSON

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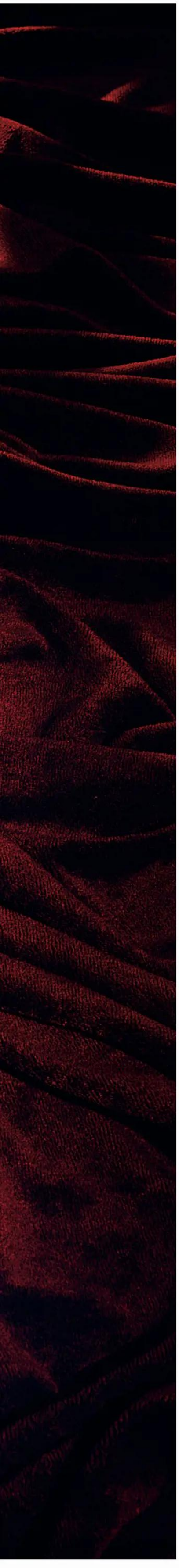
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GUITARIST PRESENTS...

LEGENDS *of* TONE | GIBSON

ARCHTOPS

8 ..... *Introduction*
10 ..... *Going Electric*
14 ..... *The F-hole Story*
15 ..... *Higher And Higher*
16 ..... *1951 Gibson ES-5*
17 ..... *Steve Howe's 1964 Gibson ES-175D*
18 ..... *Ten Great Archtop Tones*

THE GIBSON LES PAUL

20 ..... *Introduction*
22 ..... *The Birth Of The 'Burst*
26 ..... *Captain's Log*
28 ..... *Total Control*
30 ..... *A Tale Of Two Humbuckers*
31 ..... *Time Pieces*
32 ..... *'Burst In Arms*
34 ..... *Keef 'Burst*
38 ..... *Bernie's 'Burst*
42 ..... *From First To 'Burst*
44 ..... *Ten Great Les Paul Tones*

THE ES-335 FAMILY

46 ..... *Introduction*
48 ..... *An Icon For Everyone*
54 ..... *The Centre Block*
56 ..... *The Magic Switch*
58 ..... *King Of The Blues Machines*
60 ..... *Room Service*
65 ..... *1961 Gibson ES-335*
66 ..... *1964 ES-335 Cherry*
67 ..... *1965 ES-345 Sunburst*
68 ..... *1958 ES-335 Natural*
69 ..... *Bernard Butler's 1968 ES-335 12-String*
70 ..... *Ten Great ES-335 Tones*

SHAPES

72 ..... *Introduction*
74 ..... *The Birth Of The Shape*
78 ..... *The Guitar That Never Was: The Moderne*
80 ..... *1958 Flying V*
82 ..... *Intrepid Explorer*
84 ..... *Winging It*
90 ..... *Roxy Lady*
94 ..... *Skylarking*
96 ..... *1964 Firebird & 1974 Lead And Bass 20*
98 ..... *1967 Firebird V 12-String*
100 ..... *Ten Great 'Shape' Guitar Tones*

THE SG & JNR

102 ..... *Introduction*
104 ..... *Less Is More*
108 ..... *SG Slide Guitar*
112 ..... *Stick Your Neck Out*
113 ..... *Mellow Yellow*
114 ..... *Junior High*
118 ..... *Junior vs Junior*
124 ..... *Ten Great SG & JR Tones*

GIBSON TODAY

128 ..... *Introduction*
130 ..... *Mandolin Wind*
138 ..... *Old Glory*
142 ..... *Ten Great Modern Era Tones*

1959 ES-330

Gibson's ARCHTOP MODELS

The post-war era amplified the musical potential of the electric guitar across blues, jazz, country and other emerging genres – and Gibson led the charge, refining and transforming its archtop line to capitalise on the trends and creating some classic instruments in the process

Going Electric 10
The F-hole Story 14
Higher And Higher 15
16 ..... 1951 Gibson ES-5
17 ..... Steve Howe's 1964 Gibson ES-175D
18 ..... Ten Great Archtop Tones

1958 ES-225T

GOING ELECTRIC

Gibson's constant updating of its market-leading archtop lines saw the electric guitar evolve at a dizzying rate either side of the war years

WORDS TONY BACON

When Gibson electrified some of its f-hole acoustics in the mid-1930s, Chuck Berry was not quite 10 years old. Neither Gibson nor young Chuck could possibly have guessed the importance of the new pickups and controls that were beginning to appear on Gibson guitars.

In 1934, Gibson had increased the size of its four f-hole archtop acoustics, the L-5, L-7, L-10, and L-12, expanding the existing 16-inch body to its 17-inch Advanced body. Gibson figured a further inch was justified for a new 18-inch deluxe archtop – the luxurious Super 400, the biggest and flashiest archtop around. Five years later, Gibson introduced Premiere versions of the L-5 and the Super 400 with a new rounded body cutaway. "Quickly and easily, without the slightest extra effort, you can reach all 20 frets in this new body design," ran the catalogue blurb. "It gives you more notes, more chords, greater variety, and much greater playing comfort."

The move to electrics for Gibson came first in 1935 with an odd cast-metal Hawaiian model. But the following year saw the ES-150, Gibson's first proper hollowbody electric. 'ES' stood for Electric Spanish, where 'Spanish' means a guitar played in regular style, as opposed to a 'Hawaiian' played on the lap. Gibson added the budget ES-100 and high-end ES-300 electrics to the line just before America's entry into the war in 1942. Once Gibson got going again post-war, there was a new demand for electrics. Guitarists realised that a pickup or two and an amp meant they could compete in the fresh musical settings that were opening up in blues, jazz, country, and other popular styles.

Gibson pushed forward with new models aimed at players prepared to commit to instruments designed and built as electrics. Gibson pioneered electric guitars with cutaways, building on its earlier acoustic development. The ES-350 of 1947 was the first of the new-style cutaway electrics, and in its wake in 1949 came the ES-175. The small-body pointed-cutaway 175 added a distinctive tone colour to the electric line, its pressed, laminated body contributing to a bright and cutting sound. Gibson replaced the earlier rounded cutaway with the new pointed style on various other models, too, starting around 1960. But it seems they grew tired of the extra work (and costs) involved with the new design, and by the end of the 60s, the firm had reverted to the original rounded style.

The ES-5, also launched in 1949, was one of the first electric guitars with three pickups. Gibson's 1950 catalogue described the new model in glowing terms: "The supreme electronic version of the famed Gibson L-5, the ES-5 Electric Spanish Guitar combines the acclaimed features of the L-5 with the finest method of electronic guitar amplification. Three separately controlled, adjustable, magnetic pickups reproduce the full, rich tones and harmonics to make the ES-5 truly the instrument of a thousand voices."

In fact, the ES-5 was more like a three-pickup ES-350, and soon it became obvious that a three-pickup guitar without pickup switching didn't really cut it. In '56, Gibson redesigned the electronics and issued the new ES-5 Switchmaster, claiming "an

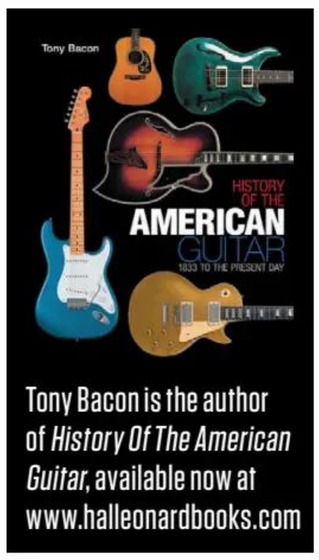


1957 BYRDLAND

increased range of performance, the latest electronic advances, and exciting playability." They added three individual tone knobs to the three volume controls, as well as a four-way pickup selector switch (which explains the Switchmaster name) near the cutaway. At a time when Fender had just launched its stylish three-pickup Stratocaster, and Epiphone was offering models with a six-button "color tone" switching system, Gibson must have felt the Switchmaster was a potential market leader. But it never caught on. And anyway, in 1951, Gibson had produced proper electric versions of both the L-5 and the Super 400.

This was where Gibson got properly engaged with the electric guitar, launching these two new models based on its most prestigious archtops, which in electric guise became the L-5CES (the initials standing for Cutaway, Electric, Spanish) and the Super 400CES. Gibson added two P-90 pickups and strengthened the body's internal bracing so the guitar was less prone to feedback. They were the company's first electrics to use a volume and tone for each pickup, a scheme adopted quickly for most electrics. By 1953, Gibson's electric line included nine electric hollowbody models: in descending price order, they were: the Super 400CES, L-5CES, ES-5, ES-350, ES-295, ES-175, ES-150, ES-140, and ES-125.

The company's standard pickup for archtops had been the single-coil P-90 (or sometimes the Alnico),



Tony Bacon is the author of *History Of The American Guitar*, available now at www.halleonardbooks.com

but 1957 saw the introduction of the Gibson humbucker. Soon, the new pickup was turning up on many of its electric hollowbody models. Until 1962, the company's humbuckers had small "Patent Applied For" labels fixed to the base, and these PAF versions are now considered by a lot of players and collectors to be the best tone machines that Gibson ever produced.

Another significant change to the electric hollowbody line came with the new Byrdland, ES-225T, and ES-350T in 1955 and '56. They had a new slimmer body style Gibson called "Thin", aimed to be more comfortable than the existing deep-body cutaway electrics. They combined the leanness of the new solidbody electrics with dependable hollowbody tradition. The Byrdland and 350T had slimmer necks, too, and that idea began to spread to a few other models, including Gibson's solidbody Les Paul Standard. The thin-body fast-neck combo made sense to Chuck Berry, fast becoming the most influential rock 'n' roll guitarist of the 50s, who chose a brand new natural-finish thinline ES-350T. Now, at last, he could play his guitar just like a-ringing a bell.

ARCHTOP TIMELINE

1934
17-inch Advanced body introduced on L-5, L-7, L-10 and L-12 models, upgrading from 16-inch bodies

1936
Gibson's first hollowbody electric, the ES-150, is launched

1939
The market-leading, 18-inch-bodied Super 400 and L-5 Premiere are launched, with rounded cutaway

1949
Three-pickup ES-5 launched and hailed as 'the instrument of a thousand voices'

1949
ES-175 model with pointed cutaway launched



1951
L-5 CES launched – the CES suffix standing for 'Cutaway Electric Spanish'

1952
ES-295 launched, later used by Scotty Moore on Elvis's legendary Sun Sessions

1955
Gibson's thinline body shape introduced

1956
ES-5 Switchmaster launched, with three individual tone and volume controls and a four-way selector switch

1957
Gibson's PAF humbucker enters production

the HOLE story

Gibson's early history of electric-guitar making is littered with innovations, and many of them survive – refined but largely unchanged – on models in the present day: including the f-holes that help define the look and tone of the classic archtop

Gibson's L-5, so-called because it was the company's fifth archtop design, was created in 1922 as part of a 'family' of instruments designed by Gibson employee, Lloyd Loar. As a result of his pioneering interest in sound engineering, the instruments he created (including the F-5 mandolin, mandola, mandocello and others) incorporated many innovations.

Among them was the use of violin-like f-holes instead of flat-top style round soundholes; part of Lloyd's design ethos was that each component part of an instrument affects the tuning of another part; and once the instrument had been assembled and the top, back, tone bars and air chamber were working sympathetically, the f-holes were adjusted in size to perfect the instrument's final 'tuning'.

F-holes also affect the character of an instrument's resonance, summarised here by luthier Fernando Alonso Jaén in an article on acousticfingerstyle.com: "Jazz guitars were designed to be heard in loud environments, with trumpets and saxes, when electric guitars didn't exist or were not affordable. It was desirable that the energy in the strings dissipated fast, in order to get the loudest volume. F-hole archtop guitars usually have a very poor sustain in exchange for increased volume. In the 1930s, Gibson mentioned the 'cutting power' of its L5; this expresses very precisely the consequences of the new design."

The L-5 was the first Gibson archtop to receive the f-hole treatment; it also had a 14th-fret neck join, a truss-rod and a Virzi Tone-Producer (a second soundboard), and was a true design innovation, especially when you consider almost a century later, f-holes still adorn the bodies of Gibson's archtops.

HIGHER & HIGHER

One invention quickly led to another in the electric guitar's early development



1953 ES-175

The post-war development of pickups for acoustic archtops – from attachable floating pickup 'guitar microphone' devices (as they were advertised) made by DeArmond and Gibson's own 'finger rest' pickup developed by Ted McCarty – led to fully incorporated, fitted pickups on true electric models such as Gibson's ES-350 in 1947 and 1949's ES-5 and ES-175. So, with the guitar now electrified and also, thanks to Charlie Christian and others who had redefined the guitar as a solo instrument, another design innovation became a standard feature – the body cutaway.

The upper fingerboard (what we now know as the 'dusty end') wasn't an option for early guitarists. Not only was it difficult to get to; lack of amplification meant even if players were determined enough to attempt it, even their best cramped and uncomfortable efforts at high-register soloing would go unheard. Premiere variants of Gibson's Super 400 and L-5 featured a shallow rounded lower bout cutaway in 1939, but with electromagnetic pickups in full effect, the musical possibilities of this virgin territory were ripe for exploration.

Gibson's first cutaway electric, the ES-350, featured a pointed, horn-like 'Florentine' cutaway design, rather than the alternative, the more rounded and smoother 'Venetian' style: neither name had any relevance to the craftsmen of Florence or Venice – they were likely just marketing terms that sounded good. But the extended fretboard access they offered made the jazz players that bought them sound good, too, and the popularity of these early electric models meant the cutaway became a mandatory element of almost all electric guitar designs from then on.

1951 GIBSON ES-5

The ES-5 archtop is a prime example of a more civilised weapon from a jazzier age, but its three-pickup configuration made it an innovative creation for the time

While the upstarts at Fender took a gamble on their futuristic new solidbody guitars, the Broadcaster and Esquire, Gibson's early 50s designs still evoked the golden age of jazz. Grand, glitzy and beautiful, the ES-5 is a perfect example of that design philosophy, with its 17-inch wide body and upmarket five-ply binding round the pointed-end rosewood 'board.

This example, shot while residing at Vintage & Rare Guitars in Bath, has a trio of P-90 pickups, each with its own volume control, while a single master tone knob is mounted on the cutaway bout. This unwieldy control layout was updated in the mid-50s to 'Switchmaster' spec, with the addition of dedicated tone controls for each pickup and a four-way switch. Plugged in, its old-school tone is glorious, with all that air inside adding a full but controllable bloom to each note. For such a grand-looking design, it's also surprisingly comfortable to sit and noodle with – the narrow-ish neck has a slender C-shape profile, and although the tiny frets don't encourage big bends, those Scotty Moore licks pop out like a charm. As hollowbodies from an earlier, grander era go, the ES-5 really is a beauty.



Steve Howe's
1964 GIBSON ES-175D

Prog-rock legend Steve Howe explains his long-standing love for his number-one guitar, his old faithful 1968 ES-175D

"This is my Number One. When I was 17 years old, I said to my mum and dad, I need a really good guitar now. And they said, Well, what's this guitar you want, the ES-175? So we went to Selmer's, the main Gibson dealer, and they didn't have one in stock – but they said they could order one and it would take about a month.

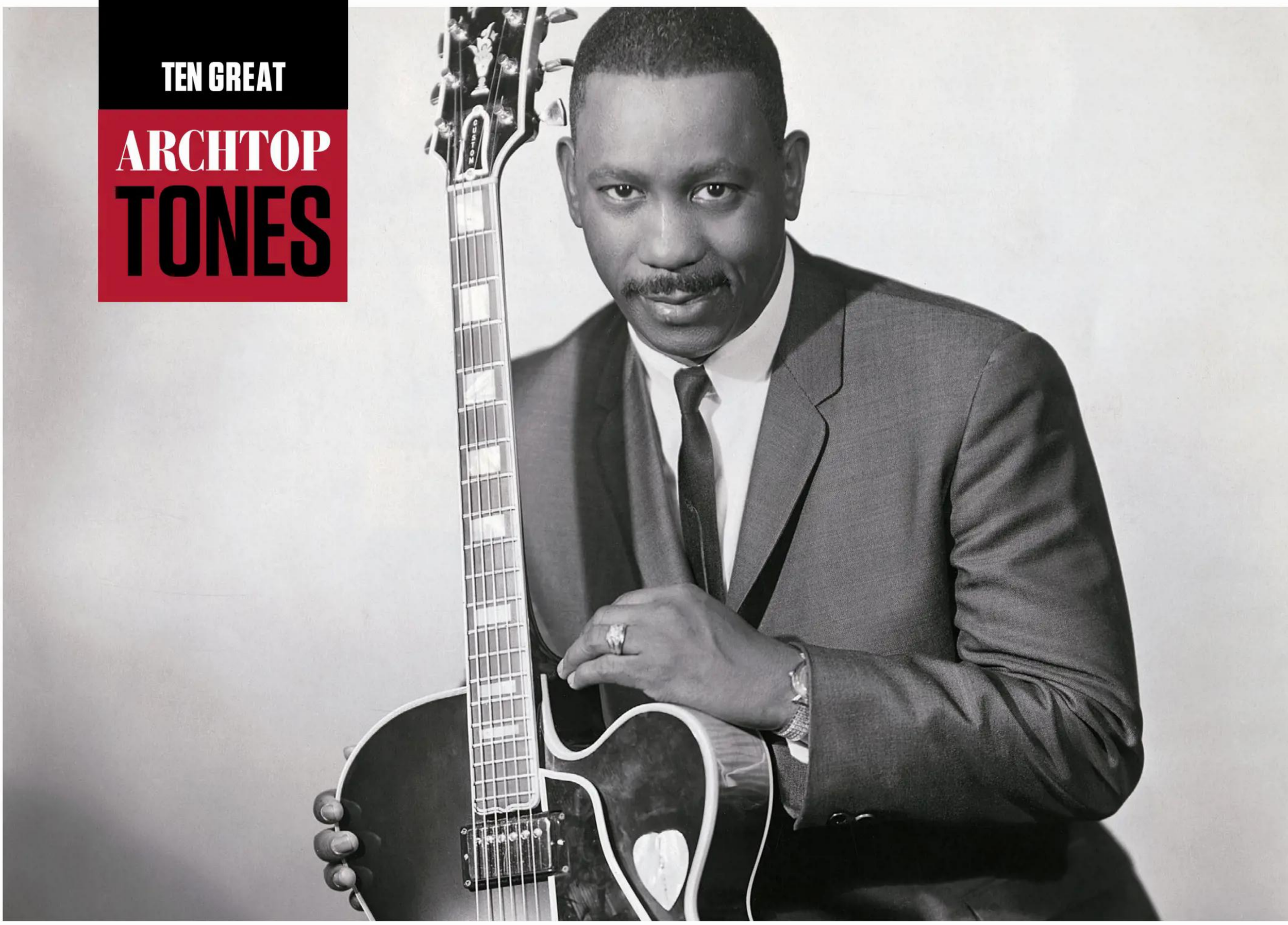
"When it arrived, I remember plugging it into my Fender Tremolux and thinking, It sounds exactly like Kenny Burrell! I'd sit and listen to records just looking at it – almost meditating on it – and I played it as much as I could.

"I first played this guitar in groups like the Syndicats, and Tomorrow. But when I did *The Yes Album* in 1971 it really came to the fore. Tony Kaye [keyboardist] let me rule the roost when it came to solos. The guitar worked great alongside sounds like the Hammond organ and electric piano and I was amazed by the tonal colours it gave me.

"I fitted a fancy inlaid bridge years ago, and these knobs are from a late-50s guitar. I also got a [Kluson] machine head and whittled the tuning button down and fitted it as the pickup-selector toggle.

"It's had one re-fret, a couple of years ago, by Tim Stark at Manson Guitars. It's amazing that I let anybody do it, but it had a couple of buzzes in predictable places that I was tired of working around... But Tim did a brilliant job."

TEN GREAT ARCHTOP TONES

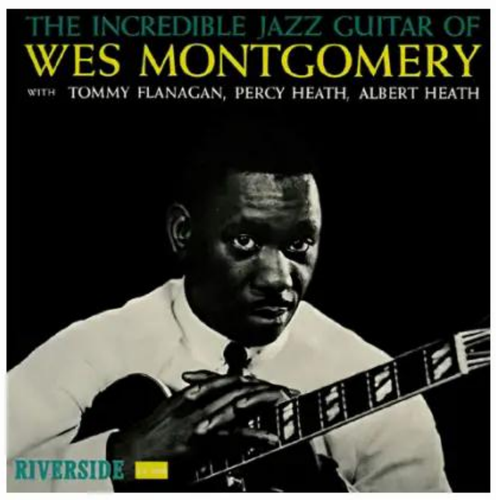


1 WES MONTGOMERY

D-NATURAL BLUES

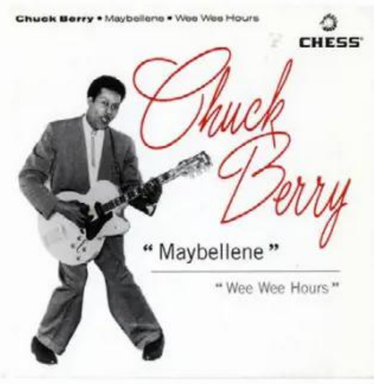
THE INCREDIBLE JAZZ GUITAR OF WES MONTGOMERY, 1960

GIBSON L-5CES



AN OCTAVE melody line with a tone as smooth as melted chocolate – Montgomery brushes the strings of his deep-bodied Gibson L-5CES archtop just behind the guitar's single forward humbucker with the fleshy part of his thumb here, to create a timeless guitar sound. Later in the solo, Montgomery uses the callus on his thumb to add grit to his tone. "He would get one sound from the soft parts and another by using the corn," mused George Benson. "That's why no one will ever match Wes."

© Bettmann/Getty Images



2 CHUCK BERRY

MAYBELLENE

1955, SINGLE

1955 GIBSON ES-350

THE POWERFUL P-90s on Chuck's Gibson ES-350 make the opening licks sound like they were recorded in a toilet. It's pure rock 'n' roll filth tone in 1955; setting a scintillating blueprint for the many, many players that would follow in Chuck's trailblazing, duck-walking footsteps.



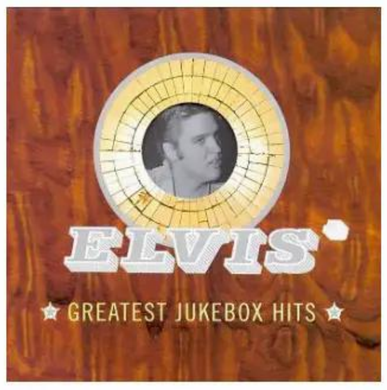
3 CHARLIE CHRISTIAN | BENNY GOODMAN SEXTET

FLYING HOME

1939, The Original Guitar Hero compilation

1939 GIBSON ES-150

The first-ever star of the electric guitar played a Gibson ES-150 that would come to define jazz tone as his playing would ultimately come to define jazz guitar: neck pickup, warm and clean. Coming as a package with an EH85 amplifier, the pair cost $150 – the fee Benny Goodman paid Christian to play in his sextet, per week, in 1939.



4 SCOTTY MOORE | ELVIS PRESLEY

HOUND DOG

Greatest Jukebox Hits, 1956

1954 GIBSON L-5 CES

Scotty's P-90-equipped Gibson L-5 and Ray Butts amp growl into life as the first solo starts down on the low notes of the fingerboard. The bridge pickup is almost distorting, just on the verge of breaking up, and when the lick climbs and hits the top strings, anyone with a spine can feel it tingle. Completely timeless, and the stuff legends are made of.



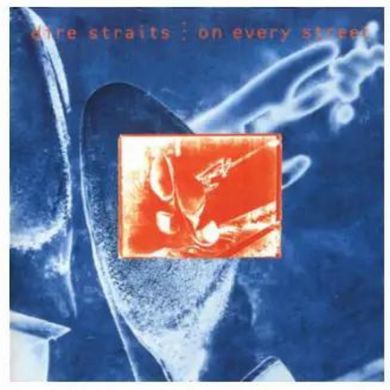
5 TED NUGENT

CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Cat Scratch Fever, 1977

GIBSON BYRDLAND

The Motor City Madman has spent decades proving that archtops aren't just for jazzers by somehow taming the feedback for his hard-rocking excursions. One of his omnipresent Byrdlands is singing a mean riff here, but it isn't through a Marshall. It's rumoured that Ted Nugent used a Fender 'Brown' Deluxe combo with Electro-Voice SRO speakers here.



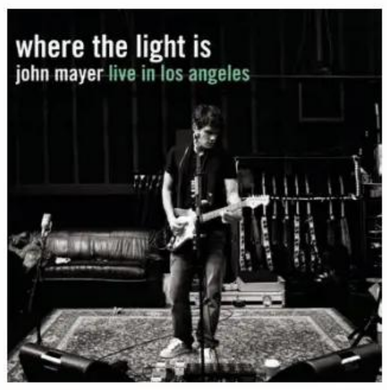
6 MARK KNOPFLER | DIRE STRAITS

FADE TO BLACK

On Every Street, 1991

1953 GIBSON SUPER 400 CES

A rare guitar with a value to match, the Alnico pickup-loaded guitar's studio outing came with a pick through a Fender Vibrolux for a short break in *On Every Street*'s title track, but was used more exclusively on the band's understated live take on the jazzy blues of *Fade To Black* – just one of the classic guitar tones Knopfler conjured up for this era-defining record.



7 JOHN MAYER

I'M GONNA FIND ANOTHER YOU (LIVE)

Where The Light Is CD/DVD, 2007

1977 GIBSON L-5

Always the purveyor of impeccable tone, Mayer's is the kind players lust after here; he shares three solos with his bandmates, but his blonde L-5 channels intimate, raw talent through the neck pickup... There's the small matter of his signature Two-Rock head and ultra-exclusive Dumble Steel-String Singer in the mix.



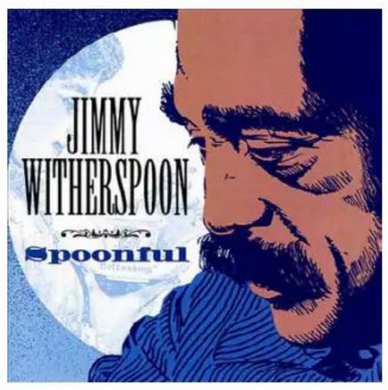
8 JOE PASS | ELLA FITZGERALD

STORMY WEATHER

Duets In Hannover, 1975

1960 GIBSON ES-175

A blissful duet between bona fide jazz legends. Joe's Epiphone Emperor II signature was only released just before his death in 1994, so here, he's playing his long-favoured ES-175 with PAFs (a gift from a fan in 1963). An advanced fingerstyle player, Joe clipped his nails short to enable just his tips to make contact with the string.



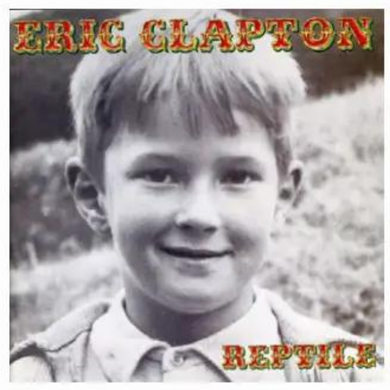
9 ROBBEN FORD | JIMMY WITHERSPOON

NOTHING'S CHANGED

Spoonful, 1975

GIBSON SUPER 400 CES

Way back when he was sideman to Jimmy Witherspoon, and before his Dumble days, a young Ford still had great tone to match his cultured rhythm and lead playing. He was blazing with a Super 400 through a Fender Twin here, adding bite to the sweetness for one of his most expressive solos ever in this slow blues.



10 ERIC CLAPTON

REPTILE

Reptile, 2001

1955 GIBSON L-5

God has spoken with an SG, a 335, a Les Paul and a Strat, but on this album, he used an L-5 because he wanted it to "personify" *Reptile*, opening with the unexpectedly samba-jam feel of the album's title track. The jazzy tone was inspired by a woolly sound BB King would have often employed, and the L-5 was played through a 1958 Tweed Fender Twin amp.

the LES PAUL

Les and McCarty's ingenuity and design savvy resulted in a versatile, attractive players' instrument that provided a benchmark for the tone of electric guitar for decades to become. What's more, its rarest examples have taken their place among the most valuable instruments that money can buy. What are the secrets behind the enduring appeal of Gibson's flagship?

The Birth Of The 'Burst 22
Captain's Log 26
Total Control 28
A Tale Of Two Humbuckers 30
Time Pieces 31
'Burst In Arms 32
Keef 'Burst 34
Bernie's 'Burst 38
From First To 'Burst 42
Ten Great Les Paul Tones 44




Marshall
The Beano
3d
EVERY THURSDAY
BIFFO THE BEAR
ABDUL THE FAKIR AND HIS BED OF NAILS

THE BIRTH OF THE ’BURST

Nowadays, talk of 1959 Les Paul Standards usually ensures there’s not a dry eye in the house. But it wasn’t always thus – here we consider the legend that so nearly never was, and how Gibson’s accidental hero managed to infiltrate the dreams of players and collectors alike

WORDS TONY BACON

Every guitarist and guitar-maker has the same general idea: to find a combination of features that will make it play and sound the best at a decent price. Simple? In theory, sure, but it’s the hardest thing in the world to get right. It was this same, timeless problem that faced Gibson towards the end of the 1950s, as the team wondered what they could do to the Les Paul model to make it more popular: at that time, Les Pauls weren’t exactly flying off the shelves.

So what to do? Simple: change the finish. Gibson merely dropped the unusual look of the Goldtop Les Paul during 1958 and changed it to a traditional Sunburst top: that was it, nothing more. It was such an apparently insignificant change that when, years later, we asked Ted McCarty, Gibson’s boss at the time, what he recalled of the new look, he didn’t know what we were talking about.

“I don’t remember changing from the gold to the Sunburst,” he said, but thought it may have been the other way around. “Some of our competitors did not know that the body was two pieces, maple and mahogany, because of the gold finish,” said Ted. “So to go to Sunburst would have displayed that. And as far as I remember we never did that.” Whatever McCarty’s memory, history has the answer: the ’Burst was born.

HERE COMES LES

Gibson had been making hollowbody electrics since the 1930s with varying success, but in the early 1950s they noticed that an upstart West Coast company, Fender, was making a noise with its odd solidbody electric Telecaster. Like every good business should, Gibson reacted to the competition, attaching the name of the most famous American guitarist of the day to its own new solidbody guitar. The Les Paul Model went on sale in summer 1952, complete with Goldtop finish and two P-90 single-coil pickups.

As well as being a great guitarist, Les was also a tinkerer. He took guitars to bits; he took recording machines to bits; he took amps to bits – all to make them work just that little bit better. He had an idea that an electric guitar with a solid section in the body would have better sustain and a clearer sound, and would not feed back like his Gibson ES-300 when he turned his amp up too loud. Fiddling away on odd weekends out at the Epiphone factory in New York, Les came up with his ‘log’, a guitar he’d patched together with a four-by-four solid block of pine between the sawn halves of a dismembered Epi body. He says he took it to Gibson and tried to persuade the company to market it, but, unsurprisingly, it declined. A little later, he hacked a second and third Epiphone, his semi-solid ‘clunkers’, which he and wife Mary Ford played regularly on stage and in the studio, until Gibson’s Les Paul appeared.



1952 LES PAUL STANDARD



1953 LES PAUL STANDARD



1955 LES PAUL STANDARD



1957 LES PAUL STANDARD

The new Gibson Les Paul Goldtop, like most new guitars, was improved along the way. A mistake in the neck pitch was fixed and the original 'trapeze' bridge/tailpiece unit was replaced with a new bar-shaped device in 1953. Gibson added further Les Paul models to the line with the black Custom and simpler Junior in '54. The Custom was the first Gibson with the new tune-o-matic bridge, used in conjunction with a separate bar-shaped tailpiece. Patented by McCarty, it offered for the first time to Gibson players the ability to individually adjust the length of each string, improving tuning accuracy. From 1955, it became a feature of the Goldtop, too.

TOP PRIORITY?

The Les Paul TV (a Junior with a beige finish) and Special (essentially a two-pickup Junior) came along in 1955. Then Gibson introduced a new type of pickup – the humbucker – designed to cut down the hum and electrical interference that plagued single-coil pickups, Gibson's ubiquitous P-90 included. Gibson began to use its new PAF humbuckers in the early months of 1957 and replaced the P-90s on the Les Paul Goldtop and Custom that year.

Sales of the Goldtop model in particular began to decline and the top bods at Gibson made that all-important decision to switch from gold to Sunburst. The first two Sunburst Les Pauls – known today as Standard models – were shipped from the factory on 28 May 1958, logged in Gibson's records simply as 'LP Spec finish'.

Gibson had not used this type of Sunburst before; its guitars were more commonly the brown-to-yellow affair, as on the Les Paul Junior. But with the new Cherry Sunburst for the Standard (which sometimes faded to a lovely 'washed-out' top), the maple body cap was now clearly visible through the finish, where it had previously been hidden, just as McCarty intended. Now that the Standard showed off its maple through the virtually transparent Sunburst finish, Gibson's woodworkers were a little more careful with its appearance.

LES PAUL TIMELINE

1952
The 1952 Les Paul had a trapeze tailpiece, P-90 pickups and the Goldtop finish

1954
By the year 1954, the tune-o-matic bridge and stop tailpiece had arrived

1957
1957 was a watershed year for rock: enter the Gibson PAF humbucking pickup

1958/9
The first Sunburst appeared in 1958, followed by the hallowed year for flamed maple: 1959

1961
Gibson discontinues production of the Les Paul Standard and significantly redesigns the model



1959 LES PAUL STANDARD

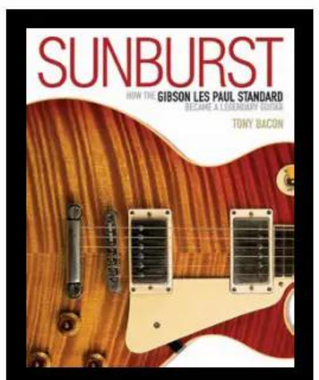
They regularly made the backs of archtop hollowbody guitars from carved bookmatched maple, often with spectacularly beautiful timber. Some of the Les Paul Standards made between 1958 and 1960 also displayed astonishingly patterned maple. The most attractive figured maple can look as if there are parallel rows of three-dimensional ‘hills and valleys’ in the wood. In extreme cases, it’s dramatic, and on a Les Paul Standard of 1958-60 it can add a lot to the value.

The new Sunburst Les Paul Standards continued to come off the line at Gibson. No one there ever advertised or promoted the quality of the maple used for these tops. In fact, no priority at all was given to the Standards – remember that Les Pauls had not been selling well. The new-look Standards were almost an afterthought. If a good-looking one happened to come along now and again, well, that was a bonus.

Gibson’s hunch about a different look paid off briefly. Sales of the Goldtop had tumbled between 1956 and 1958, the year of the new Standard. After the revised model appeared, sales climbed but then dipped again in 1960. Gibson decided that the change of finish had not been enough and the only way to attract new players was to completely redesign the entire Les Paul line. The result would be the new and, to put it politely, quite different SG.

A WONDERFUL NOISE

We know that Sunburst Standards have since become the most highly prized solidbody electric guitars ever. Those with especially outrageous figure visible through the top’s finish are rated most highly.



Tony Bacon is the author of *Sunburst*, published by Backbeat Books www.backbeatbooks.com

Gibson’s November 1959 price list offered the Sunburst Les Paul at $280. Translated to today’s buying power that’s the equivalent of about £1,000, but now they’re selling for tens, even hundreds of thousands: as a guitar player, you’d have to say that’s a pretty disgusting fate for such a great guitar! No ordinary musicians today can afford the originals, they are doomed to be unplayed ‘furniture guitars’, pieces of fancy timber admired from afar. Those fortunate to have played original Les Paul Standards rather than consign them to bank vaults as part of an investment portfolio have noted a number of minor changes over the three production years: smaller frets in 1958, bigger during 1959-60; a chunky, round-backed neck over the 1958-59 period compared to a slimmer, flatter profile in 1960. Gibson examined the old guitars closely too, and since the early 1980s, has offered increasingly accurate reproductions. Ultimately, of course, they’re not ’59s.

The Sunburst Standard turned into one of Gibson’s sleeping giants. Almost ignored at the time, the instrument has become an ultra-collectable icon, both for its rarity – fewer than 1,700 were made between 1958 and 1960 – and its history-changing tones in the hands of Clapton, Green, Bloomfield et al. A modern classic that makes a wonderful noise: with or without a killer top.

1964
Keith Richards plays a Les Paul Standard at the height of Stones mania

1966
Eric Clapton plays a Les Paul Standard on the Bluesbreakers’ ‘Beano’ album

1966
Mike Bloomfield plays 1954 Goldtop on *East-West* by Paul Butterfield Blues Band

1969
Peter Green plays 1959 Les Paul Standard on Fleetwood Mac hits such as *Black Magic Woman* and *Albatross*

1969
Jimmy Page buys his ‘Number One’ 1959 Les Paul Standard from Joe Walsh

CAPTAIN'S LOG

Take a piece of 4x4, attach sides, strings, a bridge and a pickup. This is the future of rock 'n' roll – anyone interested?

WORDS MICK TAYLOR

Try to imagine, if you can, going to see the world's most respected telephone company, around 20 years ago. You hand them a crude piece of plastic with an aerial sticking out of the top and say, Hey, I've designed this thing called a mobile telephone, and everyone is going to come to rely on one before you know it. After they stop laughing under their breath, they thank you for your interest in their company and send you on your way. So it was for Les Paul and the solidbody guitar in the mid-1940s.

GOING ELECTRIC

Gibson wasn't averse to the electric guitar per se – the company introduced its first electric way back in 1935 with the metal-bodied E-150 Hawaiian guitar – but the solidbody was a totally different matter. In Gibson's view, guitar making was high craftsmanship where traditional principles reigned supreme. As it happened, Gibson employee Walt Fuller designed the pickup that began it all, after being told to emulate Rickenbacker's horseshoe design of 1932. The E-150 had a small, cast aluminium body and Gibson later



applied for a patent that, at its essence, negated the guitar's body, relying solely on the electric pickup for sound.

"Walt was the one they chose to be in charge of the electric guitar," Les told us in 2009. "He went over to the library and I went with him. He had always worked with wood and he didn't know anything about electronics, so that whole thing had to start from scratch: from the beginning. That was back in the early 30s."

Fitting Fuller's new pickup to a regular archtop, the 1936 ES-150 was born, the first commercially significant non-Hawaiian-style electric guitar. Given both the EH and ES models' success, quite how it took another decade-and-a-half for the electric solidbody to emerge is anyone's guess – not least Les, whose early experiments had convinced him a solid body was the way forward.

By 1939, the electric guitar was gaining popularity. Les was a noted player himself who, by that time, had met the electric instrument's leading exponent,



© Photo by Ron Burton/Keystone/Getty Images

Charlie Christian – guitarist with the Benny Goodman band – at a Gibson clinic, surely firing his belief in the electric guitar's future. As his career progressed and he had greater access to materials and equipment Les's experiments were many and varied. The most notorious and well documented was the Heath-Robinson-style contraption known affectionately as The Log, taken to Gibson as early as 1946, but rejected. It was a 4x4-inch piece of pine with the sides of an Epiphone archtop bolted on. To Les, the premise was simple, as he explained to us.

"I thought, I've got to go to something not heavy, but that's very dense, very sturdy, that's going to sustain the sound, and it's gotta be something you love when you hold it, and immediately thought of something like a woman! Instead of an ironing board or a stick of wood with string on it, it would say something cosmetically as well as musically."

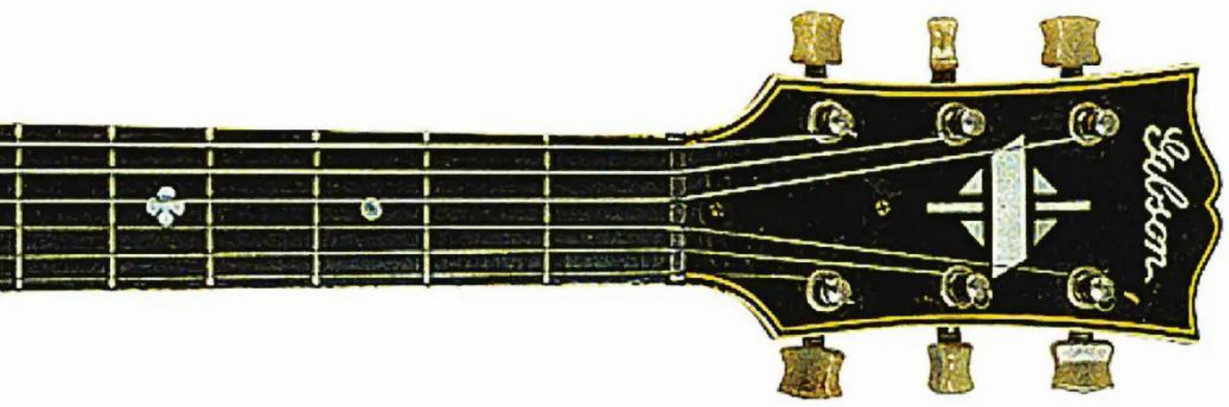
THE PLANK TAKES OFF

Les's latter-day memories were no doubt coloured by history and most likely extrapolated by legend, not least the differing account of who was actually responsible for the eventual Gibson Les Paul solidbody design. One account says it was all Les, the other suggests a stronger guiding hand from Gibson – notably 1950-1966 president Ted McCarty.

"I may have gone through at least 11 presidents and 10 years of trying to convince Gibson they should make this solidbody electric guitar," Les told us. "For 10 years, when I wasn't around, they would talk about the character with the broomstick with pickups on it... They made fun of it and didn't take it seriously. It wasn't until 1950 or '51, until I talked to Maurice Berlin and he was chairman of the board and he ran the whole Chicago Musical Instrument company, which included Gibson. He gave me full reign to do what I wished to do, and then came in the different presidents of Gibson and there were a lot of them. Some of them were not as good as others, some of them were just great."

Whatever the minutiae, the cold fact is that Gibson's reluctance to accept the solidbody electric guitar as a serious musical instrument let a certain Clarence Leo Fender in the door with his rudimentary Broadcaster in 1950. Gibson initially mocked it as the plank, but soon took notice as its popularity took hold. It was time to call that character with the broomstick.

Given both the EH and ES models' success, quite how it took another decade-and-a-half for the electric solidbody to emerge is anyone's guess





TOTAL CONTROL

Gibson's dual-pickup, four-control layout offers a surprising variety of contrasting tones. If you haven't experimented with yours much as yet, now is the time

WORDS NEVILLE MARTEN

Gibson's classic control layout, first introduced on the L-5CES and Super 400CES and standard on models such as the Les Paul, ES-335, ES-175, SG and others, presides over two pickups, usually humbuckers, with individual tone and volume controls for each and a three-way selector. In the middle position, both pickups are selected; a setting which enables you to balance their output with the individual volume controls and, together with creative manipulation of the tone controls for each pickup, there are all kinds of tones right there at your fingertips.

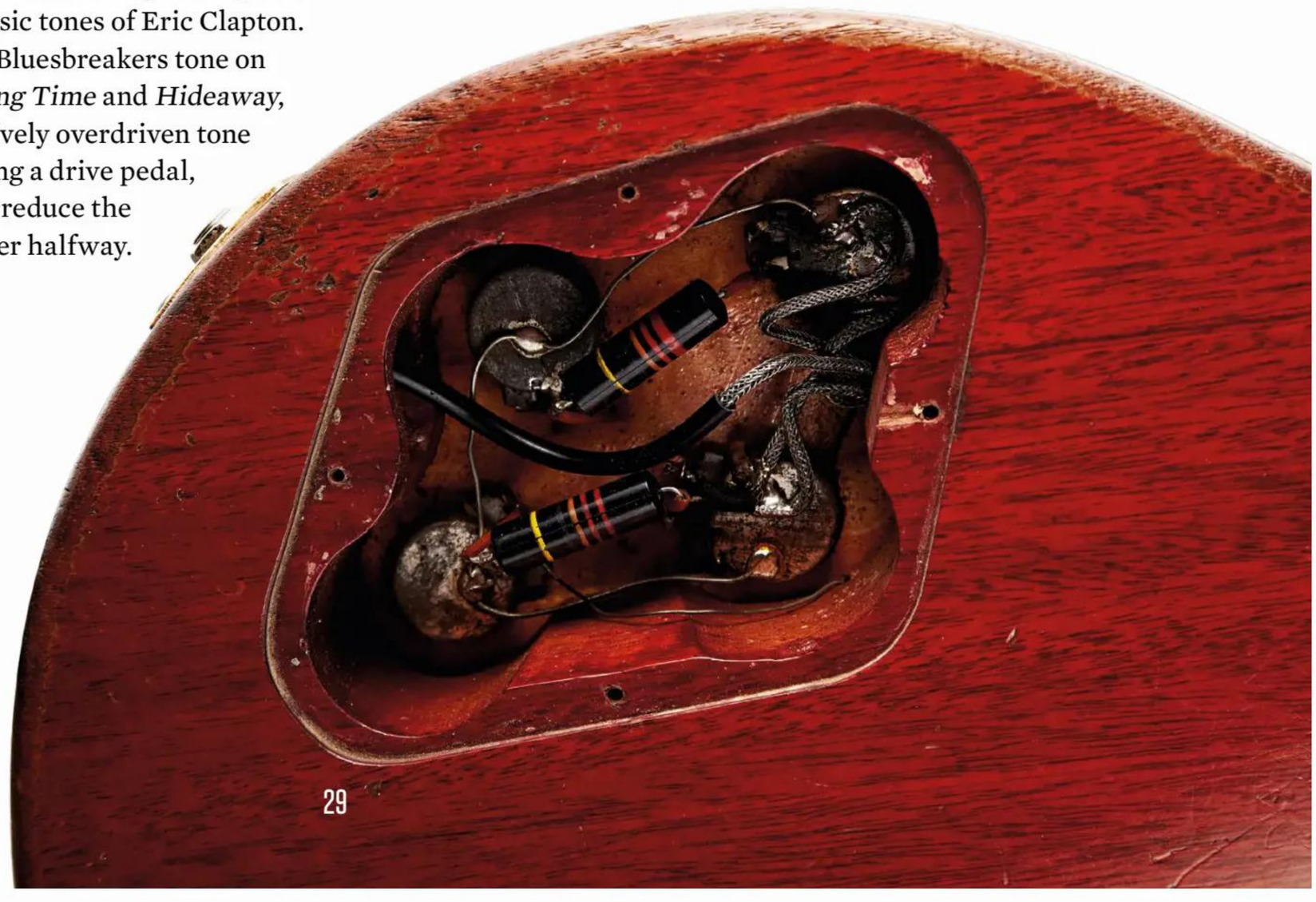
For an idea of the variety available from the standard Gibson layout, try the following settings for an approximation of the classic tones of Eric Clapton.

For Clapton's classic 60s Bluesbreakers tone on songs such as *Double Crossing Time* and *Hideaway*, set a crunchy but not excessively overdriven tone either on your amp or by using a drive pedal, select the bridge pickup and reduce the bridgetone control to just over halfway.

On the same pickup selection, roll the volume control down to around a quarter and the tone control on full, for a *Ramblin' On My Mind*-type of tone.

For the biting yet warm tone on *Crossroads* from Clapton's Cream era, select the middle position to combine both pickups, set the neck volume at around seven and the bridge on full, and roll off some of the tone on both pickups.

Finally, for Clapton's Cream-era 'woman' tone, select either pickup, take the tone control to both pickups down to zero and leave the volume on full... One player, one guitar, a huge range of tones!



A Tale Of Two HUMBUCKERS

A key ingredient in the tonal recipe that defines the Les Paul sound is the PAF humbucker. The pickup was designed by Seth Lover in 1955; but he wasn't the only one with the same idea…

You'll often hear vintage-model Les Paul humbuckers referred to as 'PAFs'. This is an acronym for 'Patent Applied For', and it refers to the pickups designed by Gibson electronics expert Seth Lover in 1955 but not awarded an official Patent until 1959, which were first fitted to Les Paul Goldtop and Custom models in 1957.

Gibson's rival, Gretsch, had also developed a similar invention, which it had christened the Filter'Tron. The unit had also appeared on the company's models in 1957. Its inventor, Ray Butts, had developed his unit separately and in parallel to Lover; but because Butts applied for his patent later than his opposite number at Gibson had done, he received it later, too.





PAF

The PAF consists of two coils of opposite polarity situated side-by-side. This reverse-phase arrangement cancels audible hum while preserving the AC signal, and the wider magnetic field of these pickups creates a characteristically fatter, warmer tonality than that of a single-coil pickup.

FILTER'TRON

Ray Butts' Filter'Tron has narrower coils than its Gibson equivalent, and is consequently less powerful. However, because there's more emphasis on higher frequencies, this leads to the twangier character we associate with classic Gretsch tone.

TIME PIECES

Here's our pick of five retro-fit, PAF-style 'buckers that could help you capture the spirit of '59...



WILKINSON WVCNCR (NECK) & WVCBCR (BRIDGE)

FROM £57.99 EACH

Trevor Wilkinson says he was given insights into the original PAF design by the creator of the humbucking pickup, Seth Lover himself. Accordingly, Mr Wilkinson reckons his take on classic, covered 'buckers are as authentic as it comes.

JHS 01132 865381
www.jhs.co.uk



DIMARZIO PAF 36TH ANNIVERSARY

FROM £65 EACH

DiMarzio's PAF 36th Anniversary is a modern version of the classic recipe."We re-engineered the PAF using our patented technology and Larry DiMarzio's own 1959 Cherry Sunburst Gibson Les Paul as the reference," it claims.

DiMarzio UK 0330 330246
www.dimarzio.com



GIBSON BURSTBUCKER 1

FROM APPROX £75

Available in 1, 2 and 3 formats, in rising outputs, as well as Pro (Alnico V), Gibson's Burstbucker has unbalanced coil windings for more original vintage 'edge'. The Burstbucker 1 "is slightly underwound, with medium 'vintage' output, and works well in both bridge and neck positions".

Gibson 0800 444 27661
www.gibson.com



SEYMOUR DUNCAN SH-1 '59

FROM £85.95 EACH

A popular PAF-style replacement used by numerous manufacturers, the '59, along with the SH-4 JB, put Seymour Duncan on the map. For an un-potted, more vintage version, try the SH-55 Seth Lover (from £124.95).

Rosetti 01376 550033
www.seymourduncan.com



LOLLAR IMPERIAL

FROM £230 A SET OR £115 EACH

Jason Lollar's Imperial "captures the airy top end, tight lows, balanced midrange, and complex overtones of the best original PAFs", says Lollar. There are low- and high-wind versions, plus balanced neck/bridge sets.

Charlie Chandler's Guitar Experience 0208 973 1441
www.lollarguitars.com



'BURST IN ARMS

Dire Strait's Brothers In Arms features one of the most beloved Les Paul tones of all time, played by Mark Knopfler on a 1970s model. Here's the beloved 1958 'Burst he eventually upgraded to…

WORDS JAMIE DICKSON/MICHAEL LEONARD PHOTOS JOBY SESSIONS



Live Aid, 1985. Sting and ropey keyboards be damned, when Knopfler fingerpicks that riff on *Money For Nothing*, it's timeless. Incidentally, for the record itself, Mark used a 1970s model that he acquired from luthier Rudy Pensa. However, Knopfler's preference for plainer 'Burst tops led him to purchase a '58 original – complete with the stock PAFs, no less – and it was employed as his main guitar on the 1996 tour for his debut solo album, *Golden Heart*, and he's returned to it ever since.

A devotee of the Les Paul since, like many others, he fell under the spell of a certain Slowhand when the 'Beano' album was released and never forgot it.

"My '58 is just a ridiculous-sounding thing," Mark told *Guitarist*. "I really wish I'd known about them before, but nobody told me. The thing is, I just couldn't afford one." He can now, of course, and Mark currently owns two golden-era Les Paul Standards, including the '58 pictured above. "I've got a beautiful '59 that I also like and I play that '58 a lot. I've also got a '59 Reissue that's a really great guitar – so they can get pretty close. But I don't know what it is about Les Pauls from that era but, on stage, I've never had to touch a single tuner on the '58. Ever. It's had plenty of time to settle."

Glenn Saggers, Mark's guitar tech, adds: "This Les Paul has a lot of output; the neck pickup has a lot of output as well. More so than any other Les Paul I've had to deal with. But this one is a bit of a beast." The 1958 has been refretted with 1959-spec larger frets. "The bigger frets didn't come in until 1959, so I had a lovely set of big frets [put on]," Knopfler told *The Guitar Show* website. "I like big frets, I like jumbo frets. I don't like little hard, 'mean' frets."


PATENT
NO.D-169,120

KEEF 'BURST

Some guitars can become more famous than their owners, but when the owner was once Keith Richards, that's a tall order. Guitarist discovers how his first 1959 Les Paul is still causing controversy some 45-plus years after he last strummed it

WORDS DAVE BURRLUCK PHOTOS JOBY SESSIONS



Keith Richards may not be renowned for the liquid blues improvisations that so many Les Paul players can boast, but he was – unquestionably – the first Brit rock star to embrace the then-discontinued Gibson solidbody. Richards-plus-'Burst was first seen on the second Stones USA tour in 1964, and more Les Pauls were added to Richards' arsenal during the decade only to be replaced with Telecasters during the 1970s.

Dave Brewis of Rock Stars Guitars, which specialises in the sale of artist-owned instruments, believes the pictured Les Paul (serial no 93182) to be very definitely Keith's original. In the early 2000s, vintage restorer Clive Brown had called Brewis when he had the guitar in for some work. "I'd been looking for it for a good few years," remembers Brewis. "I'd looked at so many shots of the Stones to know just from the grain that it was Keith's original Les Paul.

"It's been very difficult to get any info from the Stones themselves," continues Brewis, but through fans, enthusiasts and 'Les Paul people' he's managed to piece together at least some, if not all, of its story. "I understand – via a second-hand story from Andrew Loog Oldham – that they'd got the guitar on their first visit to the States (in 1964). There's a flurry of activity with the guitar being used by Keith from that point on – *The Ed Sullivan Show* and every American show on that small [second] USA tour, then *Ready Steady Go* in the UK, *Top Of The Pops* and so on. It runs for about 18 months to two years when the guitar is quite heavily used. There's also a picture in Andrew Loog Oldhams's book of the recording of *Satisfaction* in Los Angeles [May, 1965] and it looks like Keith is playing that guitar. It then gets rather more cloudy."

GUITAR LEADS

Brewis has other leads to go on: "There's a picture of Eric Clapton at the 1966 Richmond Jazz And Blues festival playing what looks like the exact same guitar. But from the enquiries I've made, I don't think Eric specifically remembers that guitar. It's obviously one with a Bigsby. Later, there's a picture of Mick Taylor playing what again seems to be that guitar. I'd heard a theory that maybe Keith traded it to Eric and then Eric traded back to Mick Taylor and the Stones. But I don't know."

Richards is clearly playing a 'Burst-with-Bigsby on the 1969 tour but, "I think by then there were more guitars in the Stones camp," says Brewis. "Is it the one on the cover of *Get Yer Ya Ya's Out*? It's definitely had a vibrato on it but I don't know. But 1964 to 1966, it's absolutely cast-iron definite that guitar was Keith's.



"I think it could well become the first million-dollar Les Paul because of its history. Actually, I think it could already be there" DAVE BREWIS

After that, I don't know for sure. I've seen photos of Jagger with what looks to be the same guitar recording *Beggars Banquet*... there are a couple of shots of Keith with it when the pickguard's gone but the Bigsby is still on it. But, as I say, after 1966, I wouldn't definitely say it was that guitar."

When Brewis stumbled across the guitar, it was owned by Mike Jopp who'd played in a band called Affinity, with Mo Foster, back in the 60s before he retired from music. He, apparently, bought the guitar in 1974. "Mike told me he'd bought it from Bernie Marsden and Bernie had bought it, just about a week before, from Cosmo Verrico. I'd spoken to Cosmo and he told me he'd got the guitar when he was in a band called the Heavy Metal Kids and was signed to Atlantic Records. His own Les Paul had gone missing in transit or had been stolen, I think, and he had no guitar. He told his guy at Atlantic that he needed a Les Paul and was presented with this guitar by someone called Phil Carson, who ran Rolling Stones Records out of Atlantic. It was a 'the band has no use for this guitar now, you can have it' sort of thing."

It's a plausible tale but, according to the current Heavy Metal Kids website, Cosmo didn't join the band until January 1975 just prior to the recording of their second album; he'd left by the time the third was recorded. It seems, that trying to be precise about this guitar's ownership or whereabouts from 1966 to 1974, is difficult. A reason perhaps the Stones' 'people' have asked for it to be returned to them?

Dave Brewis brokered the deal for the guitar to pass from Mike Jopp to "a collector/memorabilia company in New York. "But about a year later, in 2004, they decided to sell it. They put it in a Christie's auction, co-hosted by an auction company called Julien's. The founder, Darren Julien, called me asking about the guitar's history and did I know about any Stones' guitars being stolen? All I could say was that Mike had had it for 30 years, it had been in books and magazines and there had been no issues with it. The Stones wanted it back as soon as it hit the catalogue but it was allowed to go to auction, so obviously there was a stalemate, or whatever, reached there. The seller was happy with that, but the guitar didn't meet its reserve. In 2006, the same seller called me again to say he was still interested in selling it. I mentioned it to Music Ground in Leeds and they had someone in mind for what is the first 'rock star' Les Paul – eventually, a deal was done. I've never owned it, but I've seen it whiz past twice."

The Keithburst now resides in Switzerland, with a musician/collector. Its value? "I think it could well become the first million-dollar Les Paul because of its history," muses Brewis. "Actually, I think it could already be there."

BERNIE'S 'BURST

When Guitarist had an audience with blues-rock player Bernie Marsden, he happily passed round his 1959 Les Paul 'Burst, affectionately nicknamed 'The Beast'. We played, we drooled, we found out more…

WORDS MICK TAYLOR PHOTOS JOBY SESSIONS

Bernie Marsden is the renowned Brit blues-rocker who found fame with Whitesnake in the late 1970s, after stints with Wild Turkey, and Paice, Ashton & Lord. In 1974, he parted with £500 ("It may as well have been 50 grand at the time," he quips) for the 1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard you see on the page opposite. It's been with him ever since and is now worth a small fortune. It is, as Bernie affectionately calls it, The Beast, and when he pulls up outside our photo studios on a damp Tuesday morning with one very special hard case, we feel our hearts beat faster.

Mention of Marsden's '59 Les Paul is tantalising for any guitar enthusiast. It's an instrument he's known intimately for the majority of his playing life, so, having owned a fair few nice Les Pauls over the years, what is it that makes this one so special? "Every Whitesnake record I did has that guitar on it – I wrote all those songs on that guitar," he smiles. "I bought it in '74 and it was there with me literally until I retired it 10 or 15 years ago.

"To me, it's such a great guitar. But it's no better than David Gilmour's favourite guitar, or Mick Ralphs' favourite guitar, because it's all down to us; it's a personal thing."

What do other people say when they play it? "When I put that guitar in other peoples' hands – Joe Bonamassa just recently for example – something just happens. He said he could feel that there was something going on when he started to play it, and of course I know what he means."

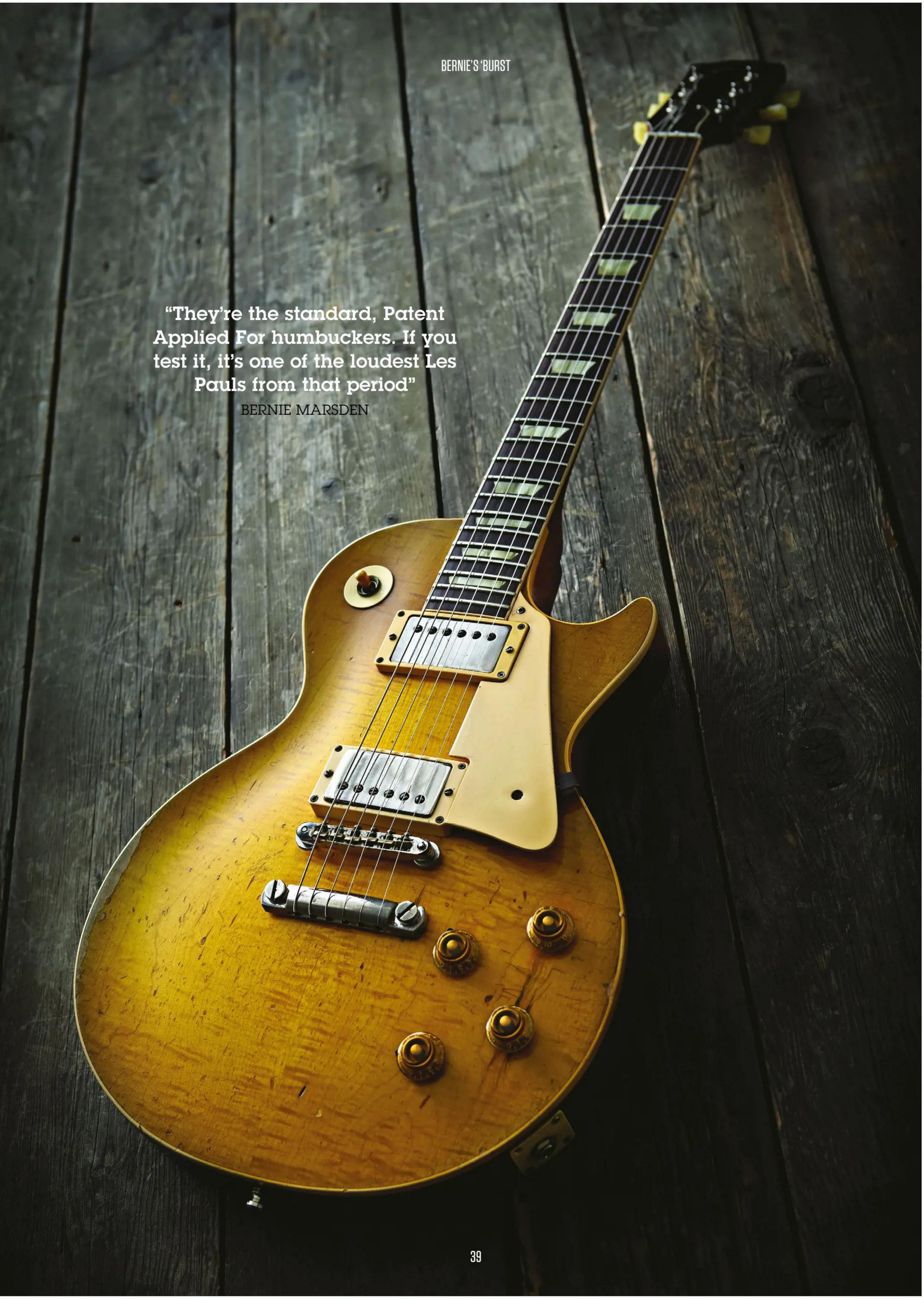
Is it a strange experience to hear your own guitar played by somebody else? "Ha! When Joe played it at Hammersmith, that was the first time I'd ever heard it in the audience, so to speak. Somehow after the best part of 40 years, I realised what people had been telling me about it. As they say in America, Man, that guitar is sick!

"Even the late, great Gary [Moore]. He liked it too – I'd loaned him a guitar when his '59 Les Paul got broken; I loaned him an SG. He said, There's no chance of borrowing the other one is there? Nope, I said to him, but I do love a trier!"

"Yeah, it has that early Cream sound to it and the contrast between the neck pickup and the treble pickup when you switch across is devastating. I switch pickups like crazy anyway, but I'm one of the few people who likes the middle position – not a lot of people use it still to this day…"

Well, Peter Green was rather fond of it… "Yeah, but we know why he did that, don't we? I was listening to him last night, in fact. I think he was 19 and playing with The Bluesbreakers. Don't start me off on that or we'll be here all day."

But moving swiftly back to the pickups… "Oh yeah, well on my old guitar they're the standard, Patent



"They're the standard, Patent Applied For humbuckers. If you test it, it's one of the loudest Les Pauls from that period"

BERNIE MARSDEN


Gibson

Applied For humbuckers. If you test it, it's one of the loudest Les Pauls from that period."

It is a magnificent instrument on every level. We're aware, of course, that it's all but impossible to detach heart and head when a playing vintage guitar like this, but frankly, why would you want to? The connection with the past gives the thing a soul; a life that can translate directly to inspiration for the person playing it. Could you measure it in a lab? Unlikely. But you can sure as hell hear it in a performance.

"When I put that guitar in other peoples' hands – Joe Bonamassa just recently for example – something just happens. He said he could feel that there was something going on when he started to play it, and of course I know what he means"

BERNIE MARSDEN



FROM *first* TO *'Burst*

The Les Paul took six years and a series of significant design revisions before Gibson hit on what many regard as the high-water mark of the electric solidbody guitar. Let's wind the clock back to 1952 and take a look...

1 LES PAUL MODEL

1952-1953

Gibson got some things right at the first attempt: the shape, scale length and control lay-out were bang-on. P-90 pickups and the Goldtop finish came as standard, with some examples featuring gold backs and sides. More problematic was the bridge/tailpiece, which the patent document shows was intended to be strung over the top. However, this was impossible due to the shallow neck pitch. Palm muting was out of the question, and Les wasn't happy...

2 LES PAUL MODEL

1953-1955

Late 1953 saw the Ted McCarty-designed 'wrapover' stud bridge/tailpiece correct most of the ills of the previous trapeze arrangement, and when neck-pitch problems were addressed in early '54, the result was one of the coolest Les Pauls of all. Intonation is, of course, something of a compromise with a wraparound bridge, but devotees swear something in the tone and sustain offered by this arrangement makes the struggle worthwhile.

3 LES PAUL MODEL

1955-1957

If intonation had previously been an issue, Mr McCarty once again had the answer in the form of the Tune-O-Matic bridge, a design that made its debut on the Les Paul Custom in 1954. The previous stud wrapover became the string anchor – it had originally been intended for the strings to pass over the top, and some players, such as Joe Bonamassa, 'top-wrap' their guitars as such for a slinkier feel – and the new bridge offered precise intonation adjustment.

4 LES PAUL MODEL

1957-1958

Although, 60 years later, a soapbar-loaded Les Paul still delivers many players' idea of tonal heaven, when engineer Seth Lover found a way to buck single-coil hum in 1955, it wasn't long before Gibson replaced the P-90 pickups on its Les Pauls with new PAF humbuckers. Although this enforced 'upgrade' wasn't unanimously popular with players at the time, it's hard to argue with the place that PAF-loaded Les Pauls have carved in rock history.

5 LES PAUL STANDARD

1958-1960

In mid-'58, the Goldtop finish and lightly-toned back, sides and neck made way for Cherry Sunburst tops and red stain elsewhere. Previously, tops were made from three pieces of unmatched maple, hidden by gold paint, but the visible grain saw Gibson switch to book-matched, two-piece tops. Until early 1960, the highly UV-sensitive red dye used was prone to fading. Jumbo fretwire arrived midway through '59 and the neck shape slimmed down by mid-1960.

6 LES PAUL STANDARD

1960-1963

Despite its Holy Grail status amongst collectors, the '58 to '60 'Burst wasn't a roaring commercial success for Gibson, and late in 1960, there followed a radical switch to a design that'd later come to be known as the SG, with its thinner, all-mahogany body, pointed horns and easy upper-fret access. The model was renamed the SG Standard in late '63, and though it seems unthinkable, for a period of time the Gibson Les Paul went out of production entirely.

7 LES PAUL STANDARD

1968-1969

Somewhat bafflingly, Gibson responded to the demand for Les Pauls triggered by the likes of Clapton and Bloomfield with a new Standard that resembled a '56 Goldtop rather than a 'Burst. Despite wider cutaway binding and other departures from 50s spec, these guitars still became desirable, though the arrival of 'pancake' body construction in early '69 took them even further from the source. The model was soon re-christened the Les Paul Deluxe...

8 LES PAUL STANDARD 2015

2014-2015

The Les Paul Standard has remained in production since the mid-1970s and undergone numerous reinventions over the years, some in the name of authenticity, and others in the name of innovation. At the end of 2014, Gibson announced that the 2015 Standard would feature G Force automatic tuning, a zero-fret adjustable nut and wider fingerboard dimensions, just to name but a few of the sweeping changes that set all of the internet forums alight.

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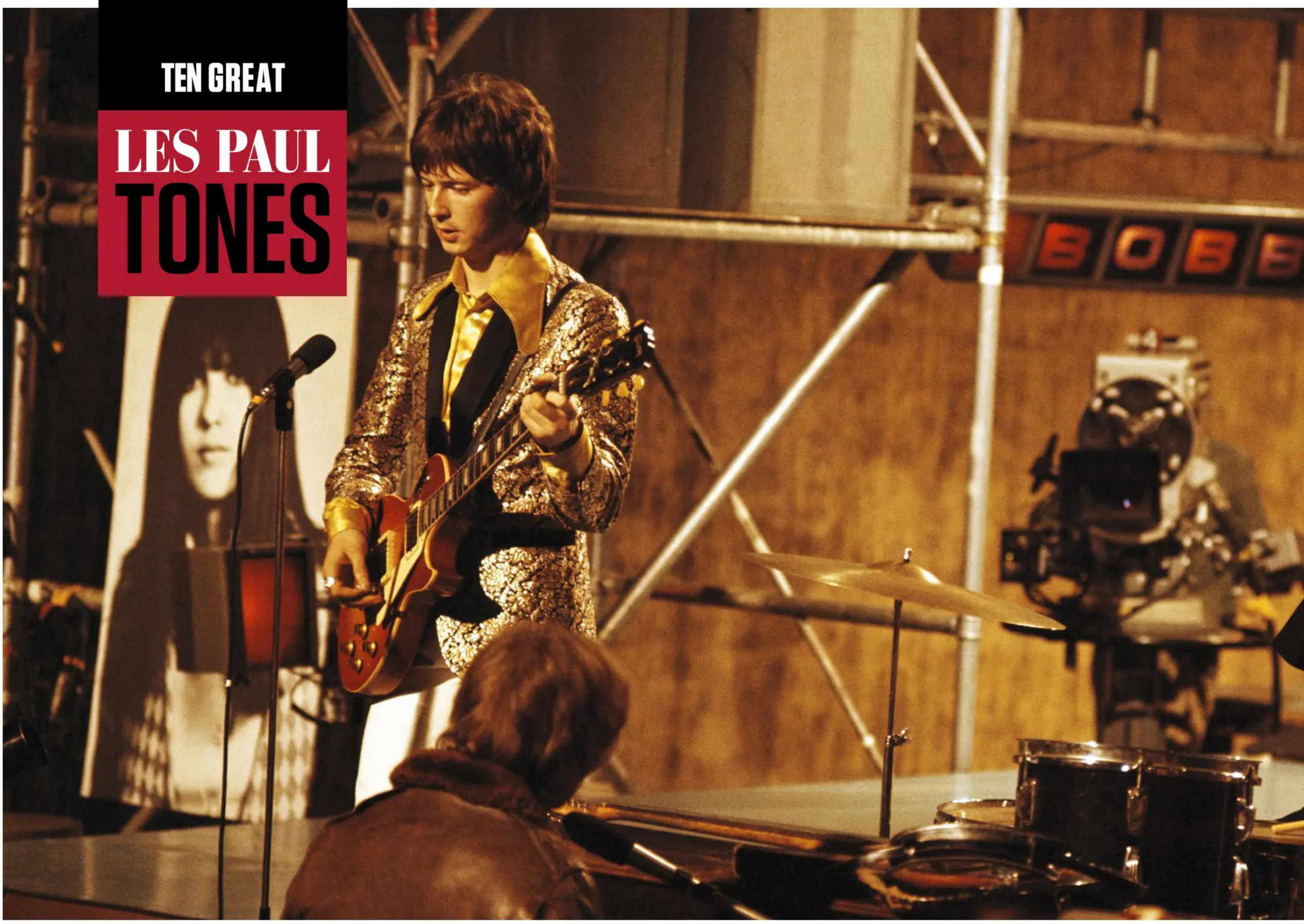


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TEN GREAT

LES PAUL TONES

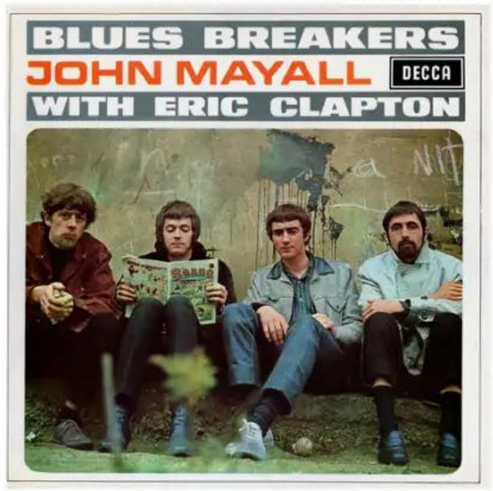


1 ERIC CLAPTON

HIDEAWAY

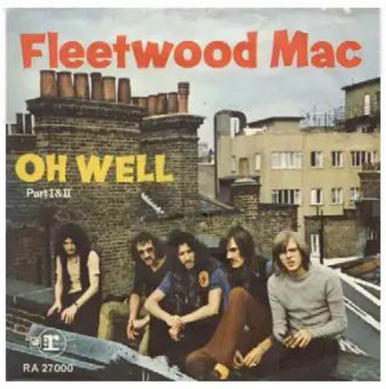
John Mayall's Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton, 1966

1960 LES PAUL STANDARD



© Mark and Colleen Hayward/Redferns/Getty Images

A WATERSHED moment for blues-rock, Clapton's playing on his first post-Yardbirds record (aka the 'Beano album') is a landmark for tone, too. The guitarist bought what's generally believed to be a 1960 Les Paul Standard from a shop in London; later stolen during his early Cream days. Clapton's quest for sustain also led him to a Series II 1962 Marshall JTM 45 'Bluesbreaker' combo, rolling back the guitar's volume to effectively control the overdrive on this stunning version of the Freddie King classic.



2 PETER GREEN | FLEETWOOD MAC

OH WELL

SINGLE, 1969

1959 GIBSON LES PAUL

THERE'S A lot of confusion about the Green's '59 'Greeny' (now owned by Metallica's Kirk Hammett) and its upside-down neck pickup. Being upside-down wouldn't have affected tone, but it's said Green reassembled the guitar incorrectly, reversing the magnet, which resulted in the characteristically nasal, out-of-phase sound.



3 STEVE JONES | SEX PISTOLS

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN

NEVER MIND THE BOLLOCKS... 1977

1974 LES PAUL CUSTOM

JONES' RECOLLECTION is that the Sex Pistols' classic punk record was recorded through a Fender Twin with Gauss speakers (allegedly stolen from Bob Marley's band) that enhanced mids over the trebles, with two Les Pauls; a black 1954 Les Paul Custom and his more famous white 1974 model.



4 PAUL KOSSOFF | FREE

ALL RIGHT NOW

FIRE AND WATER, 1970

1959 GIBSON LES PAUL

KOSSOFF'S CLASSIC tone was fuelled by his love of 1950s and early 60s Gibson 'Bursts, with high action and heavy strings. But the iconic riff and solo on Free's best-known song may not actually have been played through his usual Marshall; in fact, it's rumoured that Kossoff actually used a 50-watt Selmer Treble 'N' Bass amp on the track instead.



5 JIMMY PAGE | LED ZEPPELIN

WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

LED ZEPPELIN II 1969

1959 LES PAUL STANDARD

PAGE RECORDED Zeppelin's debut with a Telecaster, but for the follow-up, he'd bought Joe Walsh's '59 'Burst. The metallic descending riff tone here is the result of distant mic'ing of a Marshall Plexi from the innovative Page to fatten the sound of a cranked amp, while a depressed wah is used on the solo for that raucous tone.



6 GARY MOORE | THIN LIZZY

STILL IN LOVE WITH YOU

NIGHTLIFE, 1974

1959 LES PAUL STANDARD

THIS IS the second appearance in this list for Greeny, after Peter Green sold it to his young protégée Gary Moore. This classy Lynott slow blues saw him run it through an original UniVibe and 100-watt H&H amplifier singing sweetly, the neck pickup just pushing the amp's front end into natural overdrive. Simple and fabulous!



7 GEORGE HARRISON | THE BEATLES

SOMETHING

ABBEY ROAD, 1969

1957 LES PAUL STANDARD

GEORGE ACTUALLY ended up re-recording his finest break on his greatest song, just to change the tone. He replaced his earlier solo using 'Lucy', a Goldtop refinished in Cherry and previously owned by friend Clapton, and then John Sebastian and Rick Derringer before him. Harrison played the famous solo through an unspecified Fender amp.



8 BERNARD BUTLER | SUEDE

ANIMAL NITRATE

SUEDE, 1993

1980 HERITAGE LES PAUL

BUTLER WAS inspired by hearing Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* to write Suede's enduring, guitar-riff-led anthem, but the marriage on this song is a surprisingly jangly overdrive tone for a Les Paul, but layering with a Rickenbacker 12-string and an ES-355 through the amp choice of a Vox AC30 with a flanger certainly aided that.



9 TOM SCHOLZ | BOSTON

MORE THAN A FEELING

BOSTON, 1976

1968 LES PAUL GOLDTOP

SCHOLZ HAS always been loyal to his two '68 Goldtops with the P-90s swapped for humbuckers, but his perfectionist approach to technology and wall of sound on Boston's debut was forward thinking. He used a cranked V Marshall Plexi 1 head fed into a prototype of his own design Power Soak attenuator and stacked layering.



10 KEITH RICHARDS

(I CAN'T GET NO) SATISFACTION

OUT OF OUR HEADS, 1965

1959 LES PAUL STANDARD

AFTER BUYING it at London's Selmer's music store in 1964, Richards wasn't sure about putting his Bigbsy-fitted LP through a Gibson Maestro Fuzz-Tone pedal for the opening riff of the final *Satisfaction* recording, and wanted horns. But his bandmates convinced him and the sound became a milestone in early fuzz use.

the ES-335 FAMILY

In the late-1950s, Gibson produced a technological marvel that answered guitarist's prayers for hollowbody-like tone with reduced feedback. The resulting semi-hollow thinline ES-335, 345 and 355 models were the perfect marriage of Gibson's illustrious past with its forward-thinking, contemporary design – and nearly six decades on, they remain the last word in tonal versatility

An Icon For Everyone 48
The Centre-Block 54
The Magic Switch 56
King Of The Blues Machines 58
Room Service 60
1961 Gibson ES-335 65
66 ..... 1964 ES-335 Cherry
67 ..... 1965 ES-345 Sunburst
68 ..... 1958 ES-335 Natural
69 ..... Bernard Butler's ES-335 12-String
70 ..... Ten Great ES-335 Tones



AN ICON FOR everyone

Often overlooked in favour of solidbodies such as the Les Paul and Stratocaster, Gibson's versatile semi-solid ES-335 actually heralded a new electric guitar design that's thriving nearly 60 years on

WORDS DAVE BURRLUCK

Things were changing fast in the United States by the mid-50s, and as a traditional guitar company Gibson was having a problem keeping up. It had embraced the electric guitar, but hadn't yet got its head around rock 'n' roll or, indeed, the solidbody electric. The still-evolving Les Paul continued to flounder and by 1955, it was overshadowed by 1954's cheaper Les Paul Junior. The solidbody Junior was the number-one Gibson electric in 1955 and only the non-cutaway, full-body ES-125 (in 1953) had ever shipped more units. These two models illustrated Gibson's electric dilemma: the clash of old and new style and culture that popular music was experiencing, the clash of the jazz archtop of the pre-war years with this darned new-fangled solidbody 'plank' and the new rock 'n' roll music.

Unlike Fender, which had a clean sheet, having only gone into business post-war, Gibson came from a fast-disappearing age and as the 50s progressed, it was clearly unsure of what was around the corner.

In hindsight, a young guitar player had seen the future, and become a big star with his virtuoso, multi-tracked hits: Les Paul. In creating his famous 'Log' in 1941 – with its solid centre block and hollow wings to assimilate the look of a conventional archtop – he'd laid the foundation not only for the fully solid now-classic that Gibson eventually put into faltering production, but also for one of the most fabulously successful designs ever: the ES-335.

A QUESTION OF VOLUME

Amplifying a large hollowbody archtop was problematic. The very thing you needed for acoustic projection, that large soundbox, was exactly the thing you didn't need with a pickup and an amplifier. The majority of Gibson's post-war electrics were made from laminated maple "so that you didn't get a great deal of body tone," says Gibson's president, Ted McCarty, in AR Duchossoir's *Gibson Electrics: The Classic Years*. "We didn't need all that big body, so we reduced the size of the rim and made it a stronger instrument as far as the structure was concerned. I can't recall where the thinking came from... whether some custom maker had made one and we saw it or it came from the sales department." Either way, the 'thinline' was born.

The first thinline to be produced in any numbers was the single-cutaway ES-225T, introduced in 1955 (the dual-pickup version followed a year later), the same year as the more expensive and fewer in number Byrdland. With its 1.75-inch rim depth, just about the same as the Les Paul Junior, it was dramatically slimmer than the more usual 3.375-inch rim depth of Gibson's standard hollowbody guitars.

The following year saw more thinline electrics: the ES-225TD, ES-125T/125TD, the ES-350T and the ES-140T. While the Byrdland retained the classic solid-wood spruce top and maple back and sides, the others used pressed maple-laminate construction that (along with the thinner body) helped reduce feedback. The thinlines were still hollow, very different from



1936 ES-150



1956 ES-350T



1958 ES-335



1959 ES-345TDN

the more sustaining sound of the solidbody – enter the ES-335.

Ted McCarty is quoted by Duchossoir as saying: "The solidbody guitar had become so popular and proved there was a sustaining tone that you couldn't get with other types of guitars, but it was never a real comfortable guitar. It was heavy or it was too small, and the thought was to make a guitar with hollow wings but a solid centre. So what we did was to take a solid block of maple and run it all the way through the body. So you got all the sustain of a solidbody guitar with the appearance of a standard guitar, with less weight than a similar guitar if you had made it out of a solid plank."

In Tom Wheeler's *American Guitars*, McCarty adds: "It was my idea to put the solid maple bar down the middle but the design for the series – the 335, 345, and 355 – was a cooperative effort." It was a genuinely innovative design – with the neck, pickups, bridge and stud tailpiece fixed onto that solid maple centre, just like a solidbody. The relatively large body (16 inches across) gave an older-style image and a little of the resonance and acoustic volume of a hollowbody. Played seated or standing, it had none of the 'too small' feel of the Les Paul or Fender's solidbodies.

The new double-cutaway body also gave unprecedented access for an archtop to the whole of the neck and its 22 frets, just like the Flying V and Explorer that were released a short time before. Up until the ES-335 the bass-side body edge was usually flush with the 14th fret (hollowbodies and thinlines) or the 16th fret (the Les Paul). The ES-335's neck joined the body at the 19th fret, enabling easy access to the whole fingerboard or, as Gibson originally promoted, "it'll let you reach many chords easily you've never played before." Technically, it wasn't the first thinline electric with 22-frets – the Byrdland had already copped that accolade – but its scale length

ES-335 FAMILY TIMELINE

1958
ES-335. Semi-solid body, bound rosewood 'board, dot position markers, stop-bar tailpiece, long pickguard

1958
ES-355. Semi-solid body, bound ebony 'board, block position markers, vibrato tailpiece, gold hardware

1959
ES-345. As 335, with split parallelogram markers, stereo circuitry, Vari-Tone switch, gold hardware

1959
Stereo circuitry and Vari-Tone switch optional on ES-355

1962
Small block position markers replace dots on ES-335 and ES-330



1958 ES-355

"It was my idea to put the solid maple bar down the middle but the design for the series – the 335, 345 and 355 – was a cooperative effort" TED MCCARTY

was shorter and as the neck joined the body at the 14th fret, the design hardly made easy use of those extra frets.

We can say the ES-335 was the first Gibson thinline with 22 frets and their full-length scale, and along with the Modernistic guitars released earlier in 1958, this easy access would be a major part of Gibson's subsequent and important electrics: the redesigned Les Paul Junior, Special and TV, the Les Paul/SG and the Firebird.

Aside from these innovations, Gibson had already amassed some serious ammunition that undoubtedly aided the success of the ES-335. The tune-o-matic bridge design was already being used and the legendary PAF humbucker had appeared on various models the year before. But it meant that, unlike the slowly evolving Les Paul model, which took some six years to get 'right', the ES-335 appeared perfectly formed (aside from its wide, rounded 'Mickey Mouse' horns, with a distinct arch, that were slimmed and flattened from 1962). And while the Les Paul staggered on until the start of the new decade before being deleted from the line, the ES-335, with its perfect mix of old and new, archtop and solidbody, has remained in production for the past 50 years.

COPY ME

If imitation really is the sincerest form of flattery, then McCarty and his team must have felt very flattered indeed. Like any design classic, the ES-335 has inspired many variants, both from Gibson itself and from many other companies. Along with the EB-2 bass, which featured the same double-cut outline and centre-blocked construction and was announced simultaneously with the new ES-335, Gibson applied the same recipe to the ES-355: the deluxe version of the 335, which appeared later in 1958 and came standard with a Bigsby vibrato and block inlays. The ES-345 appeared in 1959 with its double parallelogram inlays (upgrading the 335's simple-is-best dots), stereo wiring and six-position Vari-Tone switching (also offered from that year on the ES-335). In 1959, Gibson also issued the ES-330 that utilised the same outline but without the centre block and a neck that was moved further into the body. The EB-6 bass/baritone appeared in 1960, and used the same

1963
Body shaping changes on all ES twin-cutaway semis, losing originals' more rounded ('Mickey Mouse Ear') horns

1965
Trapeze tailpiece on ES-335 and ES-345

1965
ES-335-12. 12-string with modified tune-o-matic bridge, trapeze tailpiece

1965
Trini Lopez Standard, with Firebird-style headstock, split-diamond markers, diamond soundholes

1965
Nut width narrows to 1 9/16 inches from 1 11/16. Chrome hardware replaces nickel

The ES-335 covers so many bases that, although at one time it may have been seen as just a blues or 'serious player's' guitar, today, it's genuinely a guitar that appeals to almost everyone

format as the EB-2 but with six strings. Epiphone, which was acquired by Gibson in 1957, used the ES-335 outline for its centre-blocked Sheraton and Riviera and hollow-bodied Casino. Gretsch's switch, in the early 60s, from a single-cutaway outline to a symmetrical double-cut design was clearly modelled after the ES-335. Guild's Starfire IV, Hofner's Verithin? The list, which grew steadily as the 60s progressed, seems endless.

But the ES-335 was not just another guitar – it defined a new semi-solid genre of electric guitar that defies stylistic pigeon-holing. Even Fender got in on the act with the Coronado in 1966, before revisiting the concept in 1976 with the Starcaster – neither can be called classics. By the 70s, numerous Far Eastern brands such as Yamaha and Ibanez had joined the thinline semi crowd and there are few mainstream companies that exist today that don't reference (or copy) the design somewhere in their catalogues.

WHO INSPIRED WHO?

While the ES-335 – viewed as a package of varying design features – was certainly unique and innovative, it certainly wasn't the first semi-solid guitar. Rickenbacker, in the mid-50s, began hollowing out its solidbody guitars from the back, leaving a solid centre section before capping the back to create a sealed structure. Intended to reduce weight, Rickenbacker first employed this construction method on the Combo models, but it proved most effective on the Capri models, launched in 1958 (that year again!), that evolved into the now-classic 330 and 360. Danelectro used a pine frame with a pretty much solid centre section from the mid-50s; even Gretsch's Duo Jet looked like a solidbody but was in fact a semi-solid design – there are, no doubt, plenty more.

Yet, as we'll all probably admit to ourselves, if a guitar's shape doesn't capture us, it's doomed – and precisely who drew the design has never, to our knowledge, been recorded. McCarty's statement that the design was a cooperative effort is probably true. The lower rounded bouts are clearly inspired by Gibson's prior hollowbodies and the double-cutaways cleverly adapted from the treble side-only Venetian (rounded) cutaway of models such as the ES-350TD.

The ES-335 has also suffered by the degree of interest in, for example, the Les Paul. Even today the ES-335 remains overshadowed despite its commercial success, artist acceptance and stylistic malleability. There are very few gigs that if you turned up with an ES-335 – or any guitar that looks pretty similar – you'd be shown the door. It's not associated with a style or level of playing. It might be the choice of legends such as BB King (and many other blues players) or Eric Clapton during his Cream peak, not to mention players like Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour, Robben Ford and John McLaughlin. Yet in the hands of Noel Gallagher – hardly, then, an 'accomplished' guitarist – that symmetrical, large-bodied double-cut design (in its Epiphone incarnation, as used by The Beatles) also became the *de rigueur* Britpop axe. The slit soundholes and Fender-like headstock of the Gibson Trini Lopez Standard, as used by Dave Grohl, didn't ruin the elegance of the obvious ES-335 body shape and no one can call the Foo Fighters a jazz act. Yamaha added some Art Deco soundholes and three soapbar single-coils, but its Troy Van Leeuwen signature model was, in reality, just another ES-335.

Perhaps that is the secret to the design. The ES-335 covers so many bases, so many styles, that although at one time it may have been seen as just a blues or 'serious player's' guitar, today, it's genuinely a guitar that appeals to almost everyone from any genre. So let's raise a glass to, perhaps, what has come to be Gibson's most versatile electric guitar.

EXPLAINING GIBSON'S SUFFIXES

What do all those letters mean?

So, ES means 'electric Spanish' – a guitar that's played Spanish style, not Hawaiian (ie across your lap). Originally, after the guitar's model number, Gibson added a letter suffix to indicate a thinline model: the ES-225T. A single T denotes thinline, single pickup. The ES-225TD means thinline, double pickup. Confusingly, some models had the same model number but were available as full-depth hollowbodies and thinlines.

The ES-125 is a full-depth non-cutaway hollowbody. The ES-125C is the single-cutaway version – both are single pickup models; the dual pickup version, with cutaway, is the ES-125CD. Thinline options include the ES-125T (non-cutaway, thinline, single pickup), the ES-125TD is the dual-pickup variant while single cutaways were the ES-125TC (single pickup) and ES-125TCD (dual pickup)! When first announced in Feb 1958's issue of the Gibson Gazette the ES-335, despite being dual pickup, was designated a single T suffix; the TD came later that year. Colour suffixes were also used: N for natural, C for cherry – sunburst was the standard colour so didn't get a suffix: a late-50s ES-335TDN refers to the rare natural finish.

Thankfully, Gibson's new management team that took over the company in 1986 dropped these archaic suffixes but they're still used in vintage circles. Phew!

THE CENTRE BLOCK

The ES-335 and its close relatives employ an ingenious laminated centre block that equips hollow-body tone with feedback-busting superpowers. We dissect an ES-335 to show you how it works

WORDS DAVE BURRLUCK

Ted McCarty came up with the idea for the centre-block design that has become a staple of so many guitar models since. In Tom Wheeler's *American Guitars* book, he described the design: "In order to glue that centre chunk of maple, we put spruce pieces on the inside of the arched top and back to flatten out the arch for the solid maple bar. I had never seen a semi-solid guitar before we built ours. We were after the sustain of the solidbody, but with a little less weight. Those guitars were very successful right from the start."

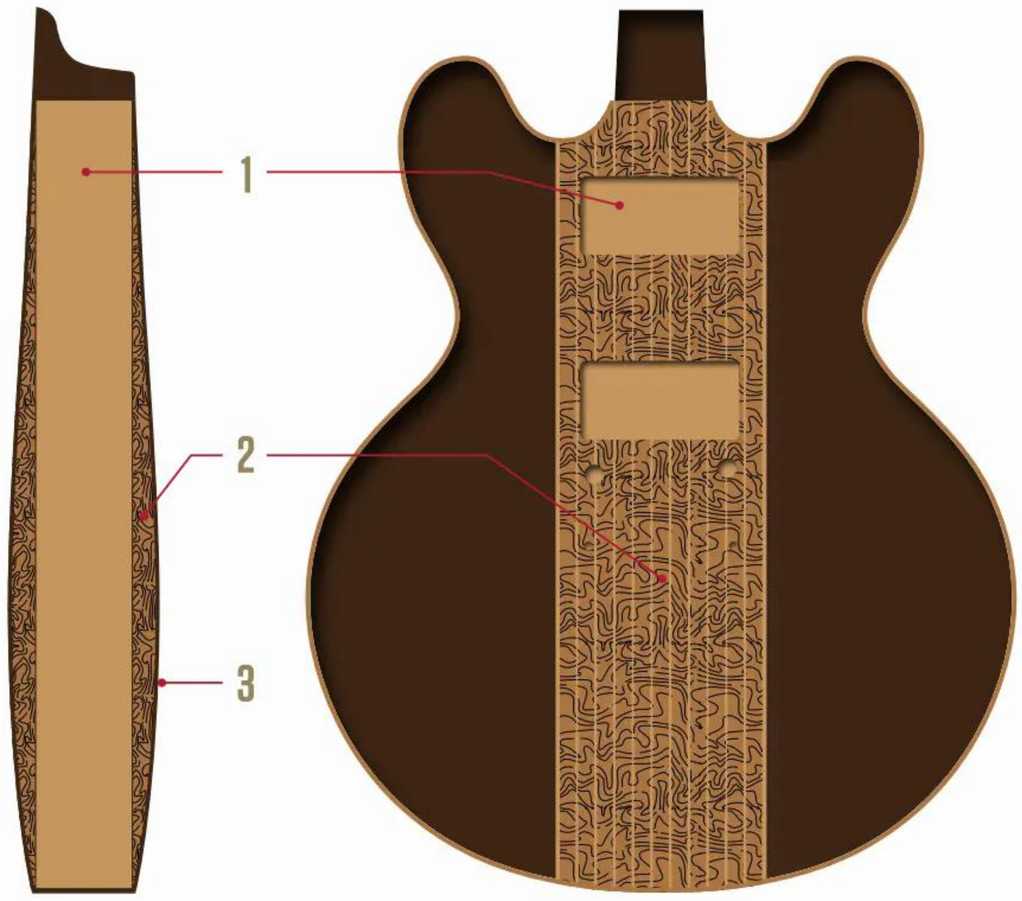
Although this centre-block concept is certainly very similar to Les Paul's 'Log', the design of the ES-335 is a lot more refined, with its symmetrical, double-cutaway arched top and back design. McCarty mentioned those spruce fillets, which filled the gap between the top and bottom of the centre block and the curves of the top and back – an important design feature that isolates the two acoustic chambers either side of the centre block and, of course, secures the top and back to the centre block to prevent feedback.

THE 335 DISSECTED

1 MAPLE BLOCK
The solid maple centre block runs from the neck to the endpin

2 SPRUCE FILLETS
Thin strips of spruce are shaped to fill the gaps between the flat block and arched-top

3 ARCHED TOP
The top and back are arched maple laminates. The dark-brown area is the hollow part of the guitar





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THE MAGIC SWITCH

The ES-335's swankier siblings, the ES-345 and ES-355, both sport a curious tone-shaping dial named the VariTone, which BB King called "the magic switch"…

As well as stereo wiring, the ES-345 and 355 sported the six-position Vari-Tone passive tone filter, which removed frequencies from the guitar's output. It was invented by Walt Fuller.

The Vari-Tone concept led to the production of a Vari-Tone amplifier, the GA-80, between 1959 and '61, which added an additional six tones. Vari-Tone circuits could also be ordered on a range of Gibson's other hollow-body electrics.

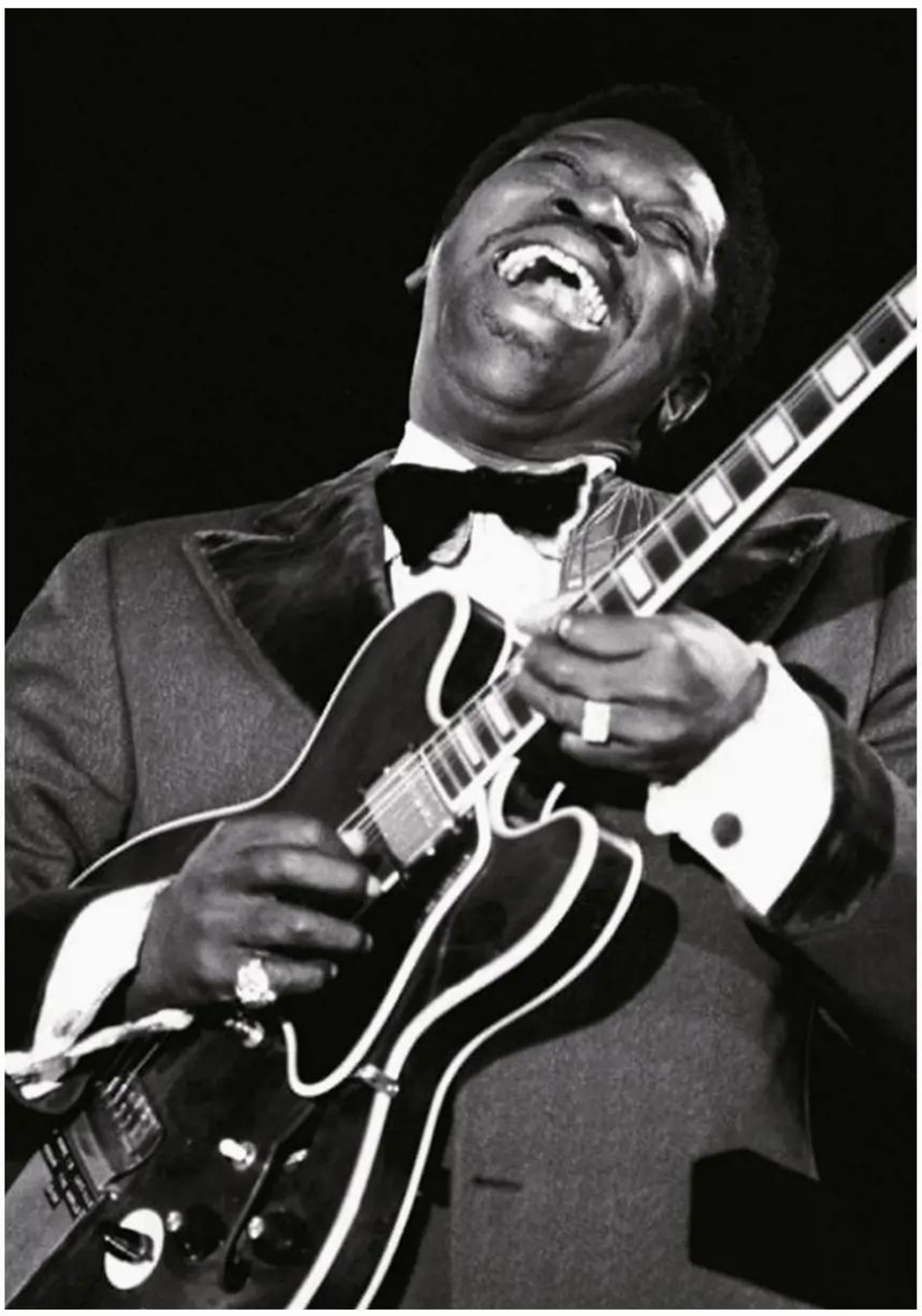
Six tones and three different pickup selections made for 18 distinct tones; a fact Gibson was quick to promote in its sales literature, saying: "This new Gibson guitar can produce any sound you've ever heard from any guitar".

The Vari-Tone's six selections use five capacitors to reduce frequencies around a selected point in the spectrum, ranging from 1 (no effect) to 6 (20db at 130Hz): the effect is a set of sometimes out-of-phase-seeming timbres or voices.

KING OF THE BLUES MACHINES

The late BB King was undoubtedly the most emotionally expressive and lyrical guitar player ever to bend a string. His instrument of choice? A custom Gibson ES-355





© Dan Farrell/NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images

BB King has christened many Gibsons with the name 'Lucille', including an L-30, an ES-5, an ES-125, an ES-175, and a Byrdland. But it's the ES-355, complete with Vari-Tone switch, feedback-reducing centre-block and improved upper-fret access, thanks to the 19th-fret neck join, that remains indelibly linked with him. When Gibson honoured him with the first of his signature models in 1980, BB asked that, along with the vibrato unit, the f-holes were removed from the body (he used to stuff his own 355's f-holes with rags to reduce feedback). BB once said: "The minute I stop singing orally, I start to sing by playing Lucille."

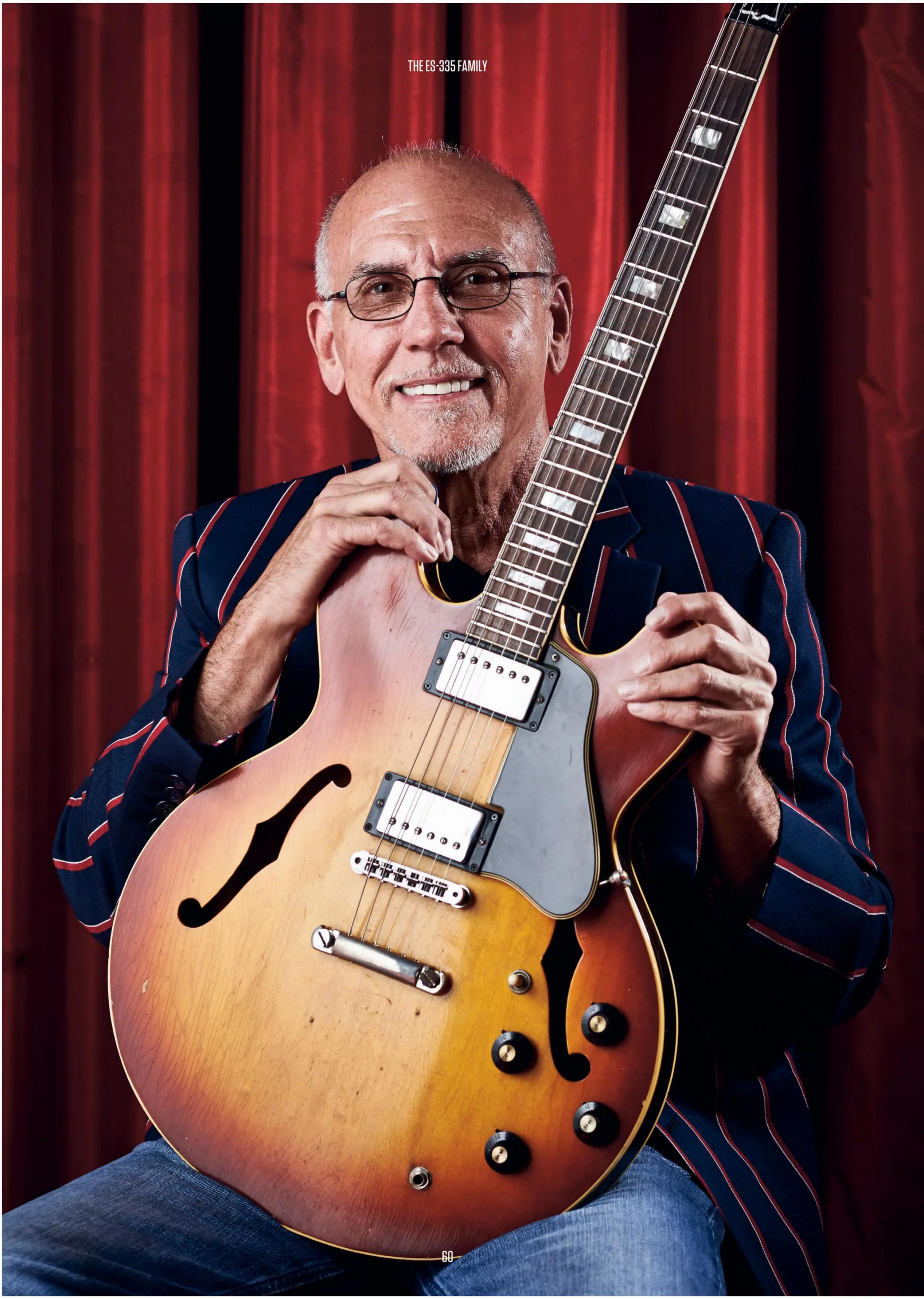
Hear It Here: *The Thrill Is Gone* (from *Completely Well*, 1969)

GIBSON MEMPHIS BB KING LUCILLE 2015 £2,949/$4,199

Gibson's Memphis Custom Shop has released the latest iteration of the Lucille, with a maple neck, slightly overwound humbuckers, a TP-6 fine-tuning tailpiece and a gold truss-rod cover with 'BB King' engraving.

www.gibson.com





ROOM SERVICE

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

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, 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 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. "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, 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 have 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 may have just played. Or that 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 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."

Larry has spoken about building solos around 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 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."

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."



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 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 thriller in the form of song, which starts with a solo from Larry Carlton. Launching into full flight right on the first beat wasn't working out, Carlton remembers, and it was Donald Fagen who suggested the drawn-out chord that precedes the song.

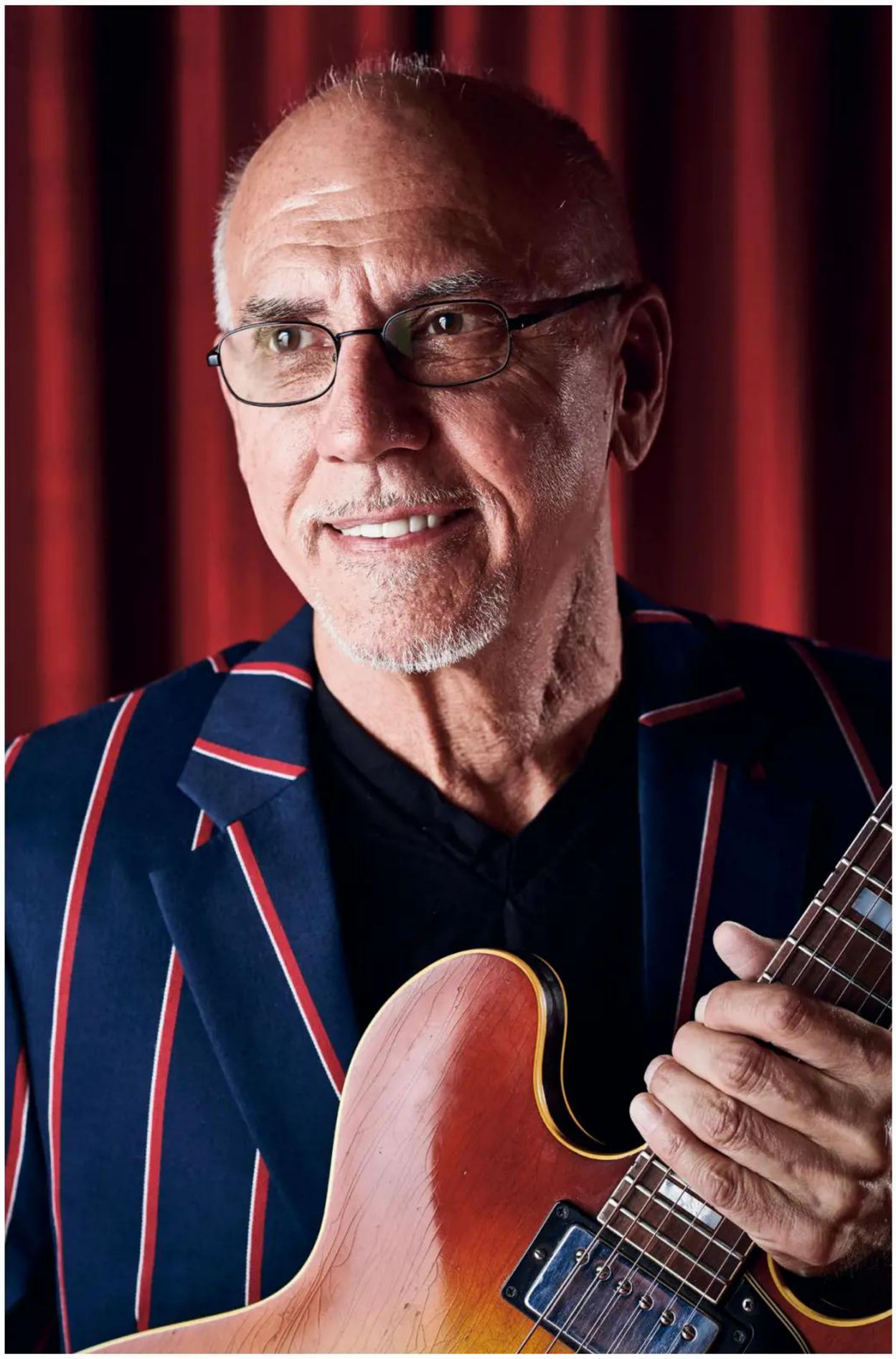
"There was no chord in front of the beginning of the song, nothing. Just 'wham'. I don't know what else we tried, but Donald was the one who finally just said, 'Why don't we just put a big chord in front of it?' It was that simple. I went out into the room where my amp was and stood in front of it and 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 took place against the more mysterious backdrop of Mitchell's enigmatic open tunings.

"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."

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 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."

On hand for an additional layer of gain is the Tanabe Zenkudo Overdrive pedal. "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 is the hard-toured '69 ES-335 that Larry has used on most of his recordings. Larry hasn't fixed it – beyond a switch to a different bridge and Schaller machineheads.

"Obviously, over the last 35 years or something it has 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 different 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."

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 in today's society? "I think that 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."

You can find him at: **www.larrycarlton.com**.

1961 GIBSON ES-335

By the 60s, the 335 was into a swagger. Here's a mint original that flew off the shelves...

There's always something old and beautiful to see at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, but this '61 Cherry ES-335 takes some beating. "The necks on the '61s are the wide, flat type – after the chunky 50s-era-type – sometimes referred to as 'blade' necks," says Rod Brakes, who owned the shop when this example was sold. "Some people really have an aversion to the chunky 50s stuff, as they like the slinkier, quicker feel of the shallow necks.

"It's the classic PAF with stop tailpiece and 'dot-neck' – before the blocks came in in '62," he continues. "And the new, shorter pickguard. Also, the 'Mickey Mouse Ears', which refers to the rounded symmetry of the double cutaway – some people love that look.

"It's just a really classic guitar, especially in Cherry," adds Brakes. "The PAF pickups sounded sparkly and open, with nice upper harmonic distortion and bite. Plenty of body, too, a great deal of character and very expressive, responsive and dynamic. These go for more than the ES-345s and ES-355s, which were obviously a bit more pricey back in the day. I think that people really like the comparative simplicity of the ES-335 – aside from the player association thing!"



1964 ES-335 CHERRY

1964 ES-335 CHERRY

This beautiful ES-335 is one of the stars of the *Seven Decades* show – a fiery, fun multimedia celebration of the classic guitars behind the hits of the past 70 years

The *Seven Decades* show is a two-hour live spectacle that is that rarest of things – a show entirely focused on the instruments that built rock 'n' roll as we know and love it. The brainchild of guitar-adoring best friends Phil Hylander and Michael Ross, *Seven Decades* sees talented player Mike and a live band play a selection of genre-spanning hits from the titular seven decades of music, on a collection of vintage guitars that, to put it simply, mind-blowingly desirable.

The show packs in multi-media spectacle and a voiceover from Fun Lovin' Criminal Huey Morgan, but the real stars are, of course, the near-as-possibly period-correct vintage instruments – many of which belong to Phil and Michael. Phil likens the concept behind the show to that of vintage-car collectors: "There's a real culture with classic cars of collectors having professional drivers to race them. That similar approach hasn't really ever existed with guitar collections." Until now...

This '64 ES-335 is one of two used in the show, and is called upon to play Eric Johnson's *Cliffs Of Dover*, among several others. "This is my favourite 335. I love it!" Michael enthuses. "It's had a refret and there are a couple of things that aren't quite original on it, but it's a player's guitar – the real deal! You pick up and, bang, you're in!" For more on *Seven Decades*, see **www.sevendecades.com**.



1965 ES-345 SUNBURST

Photograph by Neil Godwin

Launched in 1959, the ES-345 was aimed to sit in between the 335 and the slightly more luxuriously appointed 355 models in the Gibson catalogue. Like its stablemates, the 345 was originally designed to summon up the mellowness of an f-hole jazzer and combine it with the raunch of a solidbody. In order to achieve this, the 335-style instruments had a maple block running the length of the body to add warmth and sustain as well as eliminate troublesome feedback in one fell swoop. One thing that set the 345 apart was its Vari-Tone switching and stereo wiring, the former having achieved some notoriety in guitar circles, with many players insisting that it did more harm than good!

The model has seen some variations in its livery since introduction – for instance, on early models, the ring around the Vari-Tone switch was black, with the upgrade to gold being introduced during the second year of production. The pickguard was also shortened in 1961 so that it no longer extended beyond the bridge and Gibson dropped the 'jazz style' tailpiece in 1982 in favour of the Les Paul-type 'stop' variety.

This gorgeous '65 Sunburst model features a single-bound rosewood 'board with double parallelogram inlays, a trapeze tailpiece with raised diamond motif, gold hardware, PAF pickups and the longer, non-rounded horns prevalent on the 60s 335 series. Notable ES-345 players include guitar connoisseur Steve Howe, who played his Sunburst model on the Yes prog masterpiece, *Close To The Edge*.

1958 ES-335 NATURAL

A stunning example of a rare Natural-finish ES-335 from the model's debut year

"This used to belong to Larry DiMarzio. Extremely rare," says Guitars: The Museum's Samuel Åhdén of an instrument fit to make any self-respecting guitar addict weep with desire. Though the long pickguard extending past the bridge pickup was retained until late 1960, it's the lack of fingerboard binding that marks this particular guitar out as a dead-cert early '58 example.

The company shipped only 50 Natural models that year, with or without binding, so you'd likely have more luck adding a bantam hen with a full set of gleaming gnashers to your collection than one of these beauties.



Bernard Butler's
1968 ES-335 12-STRING

12-string electrics have cropped up time and again in the Gibson catalogue. Here's a special guitar with a star-studded history

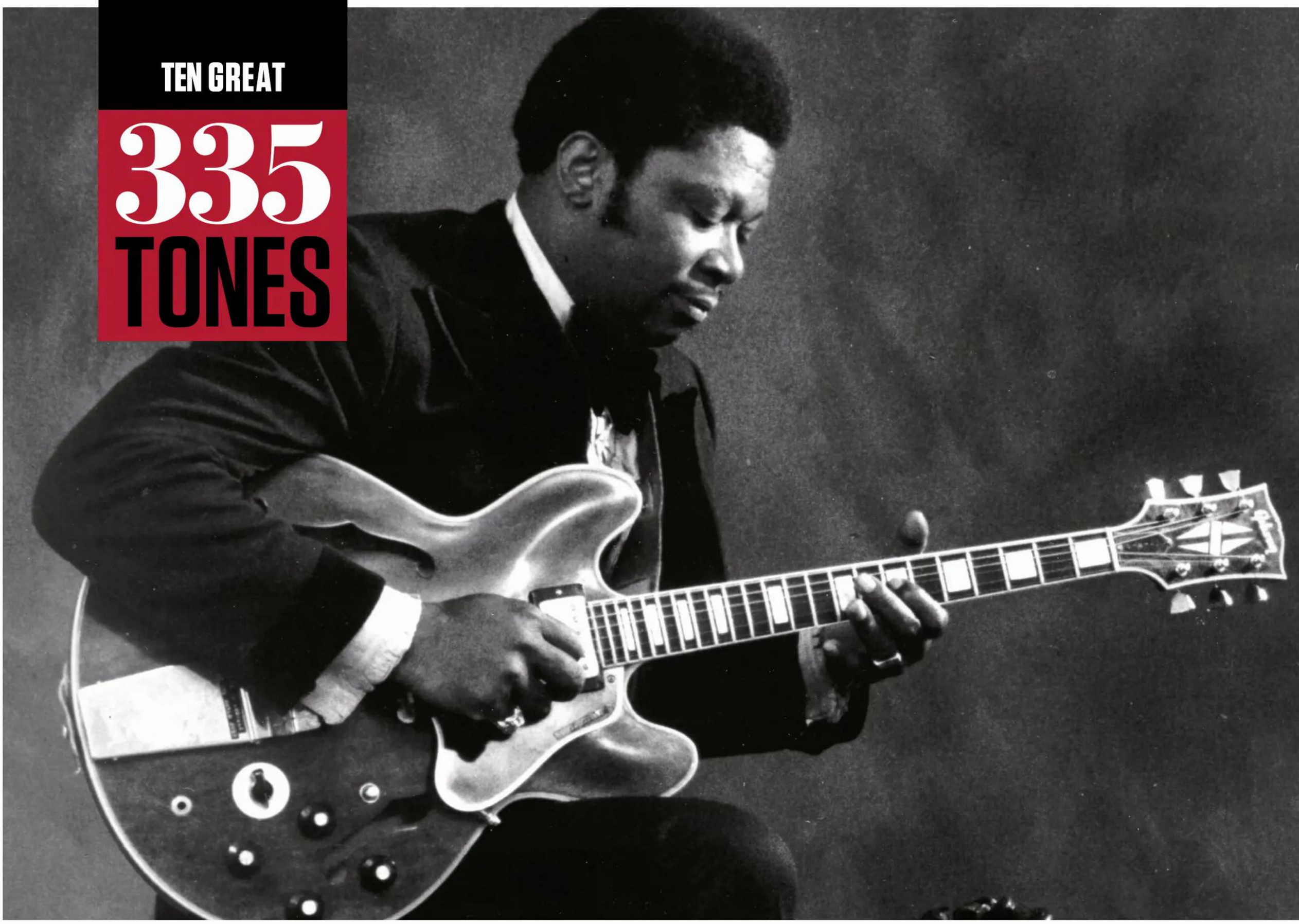
Gibson's most-famous electric 12-string by far is the EDS-1275 – the six- and 12-string extended SG-bodied model that debuted in 1958 and has fascinated guitarists ever since Jimmy Page used his 1968 specimen to recreate *Stairway To Heaven* live. However, many of the company's other models have had a 12-string variant, including the Les Paul, the ES-335 and even the Firebird... and many of these have become rare collector's models.

One starstruck specimen is the 1968 ES-335 you see here, owned by Bernard Butler, ex-Suede guitarist and producer. "Usually tried by every guitarist I produce, as 12-string 335s are quite unusual. I don't initially tell people it came from Johnny Marr. I was a huge fan of Johnny, obviously, but we later became good friends," Butler told *Guitarist*.

"I went up to visit Johnny in 1995, and we played guitar together and watched Neil Young videos all night. Just before I left, Johnny said, 'I want to show you this,' and got out this 12-string. I told him I recognised it from The Smiths on *Top Of The Pops* and *Sheila Take A Bow* and *Shoplifters Of The World Unite* on *The Tube* in 1986; specific songs. He just said, 'I knew you'd know all that... so you take it'. Amazing, but Johnny's always so generous to me. We play very differently, which believe me, wasn't my intention when I started. This is the main guitar on The Smiths' *Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before*, and I wrote [debut solo single] *Stay* on it. A special guitar."

TEN GREAT

335 TONES

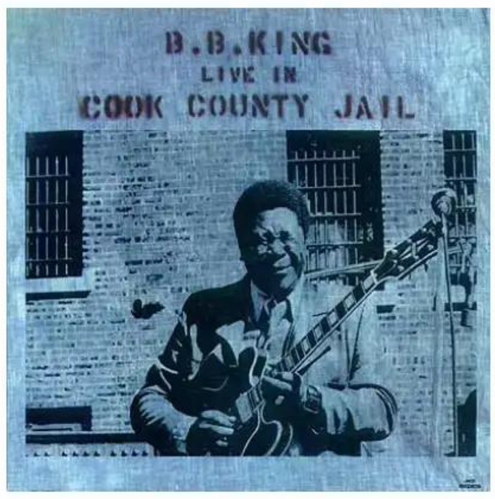


1 BB KING

THE THRILL IS GONE

LIVE IN COOK COUNTY JAIL, 1971

LUCILLE



© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

HOW BLUE can you get? The King claimed his guitar has saved his life two or three times, and while there have been many Lucilles along the way, the iconic look and sound of a Gibson ES-355 in the hands of blues' most lyrical player is one of music's most enduring sights. 1964's *Live At The Regal* gets a lot of love, but on this lesser known recording with a Fender Twin, in front of the Cook County inmates who knew what the blues meant, there's a brighter spotlight on King's searing tonal personality.



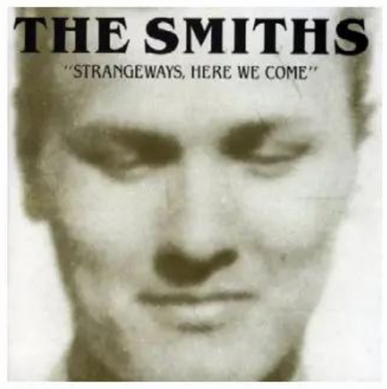
2 LARRY CARLTON | STEELY DAN

KID CHARLEMAGNE

THE ROYAL SCAM, 1976

1968 GIBSON ES-355

THIS JAZZ-blues maestro is literally Mr 335, thanks to his 1968 beauty – his "go-to guitar for the last 35 years", as he told *Guitarist* in 2007. Larry played it on hundreds of big sessions in the 70s and 80s, not least the incredible solo here with a Fender Tweed Deluxe amplifier, bridge pickup and with the tone control turned down to about three.



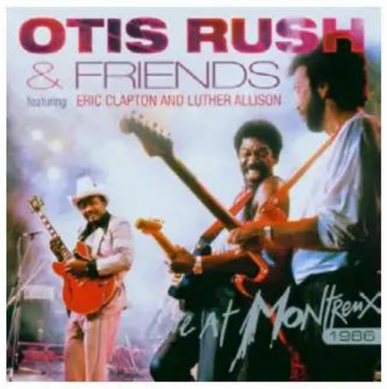
3 JOHNNY MARR | THE SMITHS

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE

Strangeways Here We Come, 1987

1968 ES-335

Despite his association with the Rickenbacker and Jazzmaster, the ex-Smiths guitarist used an unusual 12-string Gibson 335 on most of his favourite Smiths album, *Strangeways Here We Come*. As Marr moved away from layering on the album, he wanted a guitar to add weight. This was one of the songs he wrote and recorded on the 335.



4 OTIS RUSH

ALL YOUR LOVE (I MISS LOVING)

Live At Montreux, 1986

GIBSON ES-335

Another southpaw legend (whose playing style saw him use his 335 left-handed with the strings unaltered and therefore upside down), West Side Chicago innovator Rush influenced many a blues player with his stinging attack and vibrato chord work. Among them was Eric Clapton, who duets with both his Strat and vocal here on a fantastic live guest appearance.



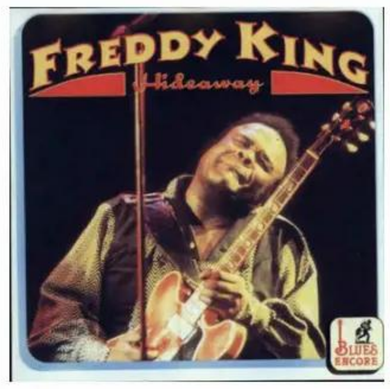
5 ERIC CLAPTON | CREAM

BADGE

Goodbye, 1969

1964 ES-355 TDC

Clapton first bought his 335 in 1964, and it's very likely that it was the guitar he used on *Badge*, his collaboration with George Harrison. The Beatle was of course repaying the debt owed for Clapton's uncredited solo on *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*; George plays the rhythm until Clapton takes over for the Leslie speaker-effected arpeggiated bridge and wonderfully concise solo.



6 FREDDIE KING

HIDEAWAY

single, 1960

1960 GIBSON ES-345

Originally playing a Goldtop Les Paul but switching to a 1960 ES-345TD that would become his signature guitar, Texas Cannonball Freddie used a plastic thumbpick and metal fingerpick to create some of the greatest blues instrumentals of all time. Still underrated to this day, his inimitable, highly melodic style influenced a whole generation of players, both at home and across the Atlantic.



7 RITCHIE BLACKMORE | DEEP PURPLE

CHILD IN TIME

In Rock, 1970

1961 ES-335

Blackmore used his 335 throughout Purple's first three albums, but this is its last studio appearance before he heard Jimi Hendrix, and the Stratocaster became his main squeeze. He makes it count, though, on a stunning virtuoso solo that builds in speed, moving from neck to bridge pickup. It's likely the guitar on this track was amplified through a Vox AC30.



8 ALEX LIFESON

ANTHEM

Fly By Night, 1975

1976 GIBSON ES-335 CUSTOM

A guitar that symbolises an entire era for Rush fans, Lifeson got his custom-built Alpine White 335 in 1976 and it was his main guitar until the late-70s; covering a truly classic period of the band, especially this side-long title track. Backline in the studio included a 50-watt Marshall, a Fender Twin with a Maestro phase shifter and Lifeson's trusty Echoplex.



9 ALVIN LEE

I'M GOING HOME

Live At Woodstock, 1969

1959 GIBSON ES-335

The late, great Alvin Lee could do truly impressive things with the used and abused, sticker-covered 335 he named Big Red, and the solo here is one of them – its adrenaline blues bristles with energy. Alvin's model sported a fast 60s-profile neck with block inlays (after the dot original's headstock snapped off) and an added single-coil pickup in the centre position.



10 DAVE GROHL | FOO FIGHTERS

NEXT YEAR

There Is Nothing Left To Lose, 1999

1967 GIBSON TRINI LOPEZ

Grohl has proved just how versatile Gibson's semis can be, using his Trini Lopez model's spin on the 335 frequently for sparkling cleans and dirty breakup through a AC30. Here, he manages to get the former by boosting the treble on the amp and keeping the volume down to avoid too much breakup on the amp, but still adding a touch of distortion.

Gibson's 'SHAPE' GUITARS



Gibson's late-50s Modernist Series guitars, and the futuristic Firebird that followed, were outlandish, avant-garde designs created against the backdrop of the Space Age. They were initially met with confusion and poor sales, but their subsequent rarity and their slow-burning appeal for players has secured them a place in the pantheon of classic guitar designs. Read on for the (ultimately triumphant) story of how Gibson dared to be different…

The Birth Of The Shape 74
The Guitar That Never Was: The Moderne 78
1958 Flying V 80
Intrepid Explorer 82
84 ..... Winging It
90 ..... Roxy Lady
94 ..... Skylarking
96 ..... 1964 Firebird & 1974 Lead And Bass 20
98 ..... 1967 Firebird V 12-String
100 ..... Ten Great 'Shape' Tones

1964 FIREBIRD I

1958 FLYING V

THE BIRTH OF THE SHAPE

57 years ago, a very conservative guitar company created two radical designs that flopped big-time, yet changed the guitar world forever

WORDS DAVE BURRLUCK

At the tail-end of the 1950s in Kalamazoo, USA, Gibson president Ted McCarty was probably having a sleepless night thinking about a trio of guitar designs he and his team had come up with that he would file at the patent office in June 1957, to be launched the following year in 1958. Two of the three designs made it to production: the Flying V and the Explorer. Yet these angular 'modernistic' guitars made Gibson a laughing stock and within two years, with approximately 120 made – according to guitar historian AR Duchossoir, official Gibson records show that just 98 Flying Vs and 22 Explorers were shipped during 1958-59 – the guitars were shelved. Little did McCarty know that this decision would, 50 years on, be the very thing that gives these late-50s modernistic guitars such 'Holy Grail' status. Little did he know that players would, after the lead of the likes of Albert King and Jimi Hendrix, 'get it' and this pair would eventually grace stages the world over. Little did he know that many other manufacturers would copy these designs, paint them funny colours and add fancy vibratos and players with daft haircuts and even dafter trousers would prance around posing and gurning with their 'shape' guitars. Frankly, the man has a lot to answer for.

THROWING SHAPES

In the mid-50s, Gibson was trailing in the solidbody electric guitar stakes and seen as a 'fuddy duddy' company compared to Fender who already had its Telecaster and Stratocaster. Sales of Gibson's carved-top Les Paul had peaked in 1953 and were in decline – the cheaper Les Paul Jr was by far Gibson's best selling electric during the decade. "The dealers thought we were too stodgy, too traditional, so we decided to knock them off their feet," says Ted McCarty in Tom Wheeler's *American Guitars – An Illustrated History*. Work probably started in 1956. "I designed those three guitars with the help of a local artist," continues McCarty's quote. "There must have been a hundred sketches around the shop, all sorts of weird shapes. We were working on this one guitar – since it was solidbody, you could do just about anything with the shape – and it was sort of triangular. It was too heavy and we had to remove some weight from somewhere and we discovered that we didn't need the back end at all, so we just cut out some material in the middle. We wanted it to look like an arrow. Someone in the shop made a wisecrack and said, The thing looks like a Flying V, and we thought about the name and eventually used it. That's how we came up with the Moderne and Explorer too, just experimenting with shapes – we must have made dozens of variations." Interestingly, in Gil Hembree's *Gibson Guitars – Ted McCarty's Golden Era,* McCarty is quoted as saying that the 'someone' who named the Flying V was none other than Seth Lover, the inventor of the humbucking pickup.

The Moderne that McCarty refers to was one of the three patent applications filed in 1957 (and granted in January 1958) but it never went into



2014 EXPLORER 120

2000s '67 REISSUE FLYING V

production. It is not even known if a prototype was made. What became the Explorer didn't follow the skinnier (but still Explorer-like) patent drawing – in fact, that guitar, referred to as the Futura, was prototyped (and a photo proves it was shown to the musical trade, presumably with other modernistic prototypes, in July 1957). Duchossoir, in *Gibson Electrics – The Classic Years*, suggests the new name came from the start of the space-race in 1957 with Russia's Sputnik 1 satellite. The USA followed with its own satellite launched on 31 January 1958. It was called Explorer 1 – too good a name "not to be used by a company wanting to foster its sense of modernity," muses Duchossoir.

The Futura's patent drawing also features a 'split' headstock – an inverted V – which featured on at least one early Explorer before the 'banana' headstock was added.

If the guitars looked modern – oh boy they did! – there was very little new in terms of construction or parts. The hardware, for example, had all been previously used, yet the Flying V is the first Gibson electric to use through-the-body stringing, previously seen on Fender's Broadcaster. The Flying V is also the first Gibson electric to boast 22 frets clear of its body – in quick succession many Gibsons would follow with all, or virtually all, frets clear of the body: the ES-335, the double cut Junior and Specials, and the SG.

SHAPES TIMELINE

1957
Three patents filed for Modernistic range of guitars, granted in January 1958

1958
The Explorer and Flying V launched

1958
Split-headstock Explorer prototype created

1958/9
98 Flying Vs and 22 Explorers shipped during this period

1959/60
Gibson discontinues production of Flying V

"We wanted it to look like an arrow. Someone in the shop made a wisecrack and said, The thing looks like a Flying V..." TED MCCARTY

It was also the first time Gibson had used Korina on an electric (it had been used on the Consolette and Skylark lap steels earlier in the 1950s). Korina is a trade name given to the West African limba wood. "The Flying V was clear limba wood," states McCarty in Gil Hembree's *Gibson Guitars – Ted McCarty's Golden Era*. "The Flying V had to be something nobody ever saw before. And we wanted a wood that we wouldn't have to finish to a colour. Limba wasn't used in the guitars at the time," McCarty says and later adds, "in those days there was quite a demand for natural finishes."

Gibson originally referred to the finish of the V and Explorer as a "natural limed Korina", as opposed to the "limed mahogany" of the Les Paul TV, released earlier in 1954. The pale yellow of the TV finish isn't a million miles away from the V's 'natural' finish, although the latter, in terms of production, would have been easier. But you can't help thinking Gibson was looking to Fender, with its 'blonde' slab-bodied Telecaster – not that different from either the yellow TV finish or the V's Korina. (Many suspect 'TV' might just have stood for 'Telecaster Version'. But hey...)

Today, the 50s Flying V and Explorer (plus the few instruments assembled in the 60s from 50s wood parts) fetch unimaginable prices. Even McCarty said (Tom Wheeler), "I wish I had kept one each of those original models. I hear they are really very highly prized these days," and that was in the early 80s! But perhaps of all the words written on these guitars, Paul Trynka, in *The Electric Guitar*, sums up the legacy, specifically of the Flying V, best: "It's obvious that the instrument which provoked more derision than any other Gibson design, changed the imagery of the electric guitar forever."



1963
Gibson discontinues production of the Explorer

1963
Ray Dietrich-designed Firebird range launched – models I, III, V and VII

1963
Thunderbird II and IV basses launched

1965
Firebird redesigned and launched; 'non-reverse' body outline

1966
Firebird V 12-string model launched

The Guitar That Never Was: THE MODERNE

Gibson originally designed a third guitar in its 'Modernistic' series, alongside the Flying V and Explorer – but did it ever leave the drawing board?

Back in 1957, Gibson was a successful company, but unlike upstart rival Fender, was in danger of earning a reputation as old-fashioned and devoid of ideas. Next to the futuristic Stratocaster, released a few years earlier, Gibson's hollowbody guitars seemed anachronistic and staid. So the company's design team conjured up a trio of outlandish models to beat Fender at its own game, and filed for patents for them, to stave off would-be imitators.

The first became known as the Explorer; the third, the Flying V. But the second of these patents described an oddly proportioned instrument with a backwards-angled upper bout describing half a V, and a stunted lower bout that was neither aesthetically pleasing nor ergonomic... This curio was the Moderne, and remains shrouded in mystery. Was it ever even made?

Gibson's literature said of the Modernistic range: "[The company] investigated every conceivable idea – and a few inconceivable ones, too – used some, abandoned others, tried a few over again," and in reference to this, esteemed guitar historian Tony Bacon stated categorically in *Guitarist*: "I'm convinced Gibson never made a single Moderne in the 1950s, not even a prototype. Or, as Gibson put it at the time, they abandoned an inconceivable idea." Other guitar experts concur. Vintage expert George Gruhn told *Premier Guitar*: "I have never encountered any original Moderne guitar made prior to their so-called reissue in the early 1980s, nor have I ever had a conversation with anyone who claimed [to me] to have seen one. I have significant doubts that they were ever made." The Moderne has been called the 'Sasquatch of the guitar world', and the 'unicorn of collectibles'.

And yet... guitarist and author Ronald Lynn Wood, in his 2008 book *Moderne – Holy Grail Of Vintage Guitars*, says eyewitnesses claim to have seen one at a trade show in 1958, and quotes John Huis, Gibson's Production Manager at the time, as saying 30 to 35 Modernes were made, but most of them just hung around in a rack. Wood also states Gibson historian Julius Bellson and Ted McCarty (quoted in *The Gibson*) confirmed that Moderne prototypes were displayed at various trade shows, clinics and conventions. Sadly, for guitar enthusiasts in possession of Moderne-shaped objects (among them ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons), the Moderne's Holy Grail status would make a verifiable original worth a huge amount of money; therefore, fakes and forgeries are rife. Of course, Gibson's two 'reissues' of the Moderne, in 1982 and 2012, mean that anyone who fancies owning one to see how it would sound if it did in fact exist can do so. But given the likelihood that no one will now ever be able to authenticate an original, perhaps we should begin peddling the alternative myth that this phantom of the Space Age was indeed put together in the 50s – only not in Kalamazoo, but by little green men in Area 51 in Roswell, from surplus saucer parts.



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1958 FLYING V



1958 FLYING V

This icon of the space age has held rock and blues players in its thrall for generations

On its launch in 1958 as part of Gibson's Modernist Series, the Flying V shared a $247.50 price tag with the Les Paul Standard. Gibson's design chief and president Ted McCarty had begun developing prototypes the previous year, likely inspired by Cadillac tailfins and the Atomic Age optimism that fuelled a general enthusiasm for all things futuristic that even saw the Ford Motor Company design the Nucleon, a nuclear-powered concept car.

Though the originals didn't sell in sufficient numbers to sustain initial production beyond 1959, artist association – Lonnie Mack, Albert King, Jimi Hendrix – and sheer cool would eventually help the V attain legendary status. With just 81 Flying Vs leaving the factory in 1958, this beautiful original model on display at Guitars: The Museum in Umeå, Sweden is comfortably in the 'Burst bracket when it comes to monetary value.

INTREPID EXPLORER

The futuristic Explorer has enjoyed more regenerations than Doctor Who, and is still going strong in the Gibson catalogue almost 60 years on

For a supposed commercial flop, the Explorer has seen its fair share of reincarnations since its debut in 1958. A mahogany reissue appeared in 1975, with a limited-edition korina version the year after and a short-lived, radically different take called the V2 in 1979. Fulfilling the duties of the 80s rock era and responding to the slew of me-too pointy axes and Explor-alikes that flooded MTV, that decade saw a variety of different components, trems and colour schemes applied to the Explorer's once-more Zeitgeisty outline.

Alongside all the experimentation with the formula, Gibson hadn't completely forgotten about the magical lure of the 50s originals, and released a series of revivals of these in the shape of the Explorer Korina and The Explorer/CMT, with luxurious curly maple top. Then followed reincarnations of the 60s and 70s designs, too, including the successful X-Plorer (or Explorer '76 pictured here). Yet other special editions have filtered into Gibson's catalogues, including the X-Plorer Studio Swamp Ash, while other oddities have included the red and black Voodoo series, the metal-inspired Gothic versions, the mirror-fronted New Century guitars, the Holy Explorer, the Kahler-fitted Tribal Explorer and the Robot Explorer, among many others.

Still it isn't over, either: Bill Kelliher of Mastodon and Lzzy Hale of Halestorm are both recent Explorer signatories, rocking the 'shape' guitar that seems destined to be with us forever.



2000s EXPLORER '76

Few guitars have seen so many changes as Gibson's Firebird. From the classic 60s 'reverse' models to today's 'love-it-or-loathe it' Firebird X, it's a guitar that inspires emotion with its unique looks, biting tone and underdog cool. Here, Tony Bacon talks us through the Firebird's fascinating evolution, and reveals how to identify the key models in this famous flock…

WINGING IT

WORDS TONY BACON

At Gibson in the early 60s, coming down from the high of 1958 must have been a difficult proposition. After all, that was the year Gibson released the futuristic Explorer and Flying V, as well as the innovative ES-335 and 355, slapped some Sunburst on the Les Paul, made a double-cutaway out of the Les Paul Junior and Special, and offered its first doubleneck electrics. All in one year. The company wasn't going to top that in a hurry. So, what next?

Gibson began a big expansion of its Kalamazoo factory during 1960, more than doubling its size upon completion the following year. Among the firstborn within the new walls was a revised line of Les Pauls, with Gibson completely redesigning the Junior, Standard and Custom with a modern, sculpted double-cutaway body. At first it called them Les Pauls, but during 1963 renamed them the SG Junior, the SG Standard, and the SG Custom. Despite all this invention, something was bothering the bosses



1964 FIREBIRD I

upstairs: Fender was selling more and more guitars as every month passed. The first Fender solidbody electric had come out in 1950, but now, a dozen or so years later, the Californian company had a line of four great electrics – Telecaster, Stratocaster, Jazzmaster and Jaguar – as well as budget models. Fenders looked and sounded fresh, new and different. Gibson's managers must have felt their guitars seemed old and fusty by comparison.

The company had been around a long time, and its reputation was based on long-founded production methods and traditional values. Gibson's first reaction to Fender's solidbody revolution was the original Les Paul model of 1952. Next, it decided to try to upstage what it saw as Fender's edgy, modern style with the angular Explorer and Flying V. But by the early 60s, however, it was clear Gibson needed something else to weather the storm blowing in from the West Coast.

EARLY 'BIRDS

So, it was that in 1963, Gibson introduced its new Fender-rivalling solidbody, the Firebird. The design had strong links with the failed Explorer, which had already been discontinued. Nonetheless, Gibson hoped that a new spirit of innovation would win the day. The company hired an outside designer to create the Firebird, someone who would not be limited by traditional approaches to guitar design and who would reconsider the way an electric could look and work.

Gibson hired an outside designer to create the Firebird, someone who would not be limited by traditional approaches to guitar design and who would reconsider the way an electric could look and work

Ray Dietrich had been a legendary car designer for 50 years. He started in the drawing office of a small company in 1913, and over the next few decades established the idea of the custom car-body designer. Based in New York City and then Detroit, Dietrich headed a number of firms, including his own, LeBaron Carrossiers, designing and building luxury car bodies and working for brands such as Lincoln, Packard, Duesenberg and Ford. Some of his best work was done in the 30s, when he designed the striking Chrysler Airstream. He founded Raymond Dietrich Inc in 1949 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Four years later, he returned to consulting work, and in 1960, at the age of 66, he retired to Kalamazoo.

One of the ways Dietrich whiled away his retirement was to give talks on his life in car design. Gibson boss Ted McCarty happened to go along to one, and afterwards, he introduced himself and asked if Dietrich would be interested in designing a guitar. Dietrich agreed, and Gibson hired him to devise a new solidbody electric line. He eventually came up with the design we know as the Firebird, but at first it didn't have a name.

"I was sitting in my office one day with Ray and a couple of the other fellas," McCarty later recalled, "and we were trying to come up with a name for this thing. He said, 'Why don't you call it Phoenix?' I said, 'Phoenix, that's the firebird, the old story of rising from the ashes.' So, that's where the name Firebird came from. And Ray also designed the firebird logo that's on the pickguard."

The new models appeared in Gibson's 1963 catalogue, with the blurb insisting that the Firebirds were a "revolutionary new series of solidbody guitars. Exciting in



'65–'69 FIREBIRD V



1964 FIREBIRD VII

concept, exciting to play. You'll find a whole new world of sound and performance potential... plus that sharpness in the treble and deep, biting bass... A completely new and exciting instrument that offers all the sound, response, fast action, and wide range that could be desired."

There were four Firebirds for the 1963 launch – I, III, V and VII – each with different appointments but following the same overall design and build. The missing numbers II and IV went to two complementary Thunderbird basses, but there was no VI. Gibson announced the new line just before the July 1963 NAMM show in Chicago, and they first appeared on a July price list, with production starting about three months later.

WINGED WONDER

The Firebirds were the first Gibson solidbodies with through-neck construction. All Gibsons until now had a glued-in set neck, and Fender used a screwed-on neck joint. Some guitar makers felt that designs with through-necks gave better sustain and tone.

For the Firebirds, Dietrich had a central multi-laminate mahogany-and-walnut section running the length of the guitar, providing the 22-fret neck and the mid portion of the body in a single unit. Two slightly thinner mahogany 'wings' were glued on, completing the body, so the mid portion of the body was stepped a touch higher than the wings, forming a sort of central shelf, four inches wide, on which sat the pickups, bridge and tailpiece. The back of the body had a gentle contour at the top, a feature better known on Fenders and designed for player comfort.

The elongated body – something like an Explorer with curves – had a horn-less upper section that made the lower horn appear to stick out further than it really did. It made for an almost unbalanced but quite pleasing look, which is why we call these original models the 'reverse body' or simply 'reverse' Firebirds. A thoughtful touch was the inclusion of three strap buttons, providing a choice between neck heel or top horn.

There were rosewood fingerboards for the I (1963 list price $189.50), III ($249.50) and V ($325), while





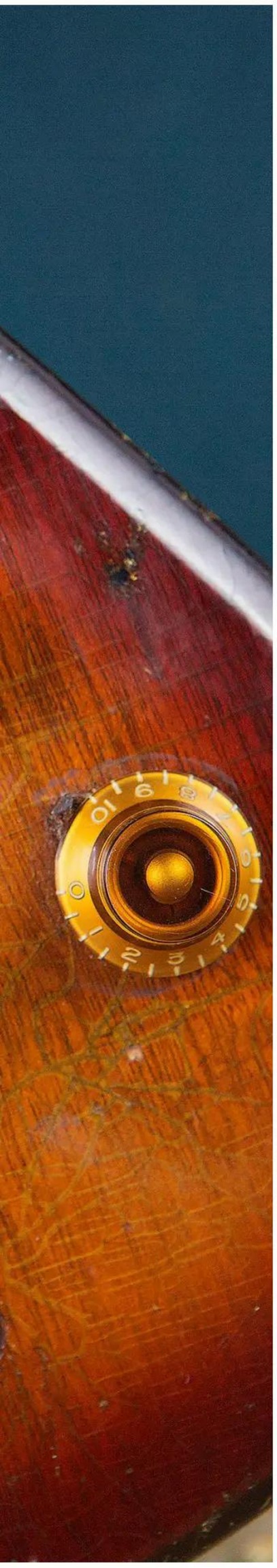




the VII ($445) had ebony, with binding on the III, V and VII, and dot markers (I, III), trapezoid (V) or blocks (VII). There was a single mini-humbucker at the bridge on the I, two on the III and V, and three on the VII. The I had a wraparound bridge-tailpiece; the III had a stud-style bridge and Gibson/Maestro Vibrola unit; and the V and VII came with a Tune-O-Matic bridge and a Deluxe Gibson/Maestro Vibrola, with a decorated cover. Metalwork was nickel-plated on the I, III and V, and gold-plated on the VII; this was Gibson's most expensive single-neck solidbody, $20 more than a Les Paul Custom. The least expensive Firebird I was a touch below the $210 SG Special.

It got weird at the headstock, a kind of flipped-Fender shape. The sixth (low-E) string fed the furthest tuner, the opposite of how a Fender head worked. The six Klusons were banjo-style tuners, with string-anchors on the treble side of the head and buttons protruding from the rear, hidden from a front view. You had to reach around in an unfamiliar way to tune the thing.

Fender was having some success with its optional Custom Colors; Gibson followed suit. Standard finish was Sunburst, but Dietrich and Gibson borrowed the Fender idea, even issuing a special colour chart, just like Fender. "The showmanship of custom color is that finished, professional touch," said the chart, "the extra drama and flair that sells a combo! There are 10 beautiful Gibson custom colours – one that suits you and your personality perfectly." The colours (Poly



By the start of 1965, Gibson's managers knew that they had a problem: the Firebird was a difficult and expensive guitar to make

denoted a metallic finish) were Cardinal Red, Ember Red, Frost Blue, Golden Mist Poly, Heather Poly, Inverness Green Poly, Kerry Green, Pelham Blue Poly, Polaris White and Silver Mist Poly.

Gibson's colours were similar (at least) to existing Fender colours, with Golden Mist Poly being identical to Fender's Shoreline Gold Metallic. Pelham Blue and Cardinal Red were the two most requested Firebird colours, some way behind the much more popular regular Sunburst. A custom colour added just $15 on top of a regular Sunburst list price in 1963.

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

By the start of 1965, Gibson's managers knew they had a problem. The Firebird was a difficult and expensive guitar to make, and the disadvantages of employing an outside designer who did not understand guitar production were becoming clear.

In the factory, if a neck were to develop a fault, then the through-neck design meant that a good portion of the body, too, was lost. The intricacies of the laminate through-neck, the carving, the tricky wiring – all added to production time and costs. Out in the real world, Firebirds were prone to breakages at the fragile head/neck junction. Some of the breaks even happened while the guitar was still in its case, where the crucial intersection was unsupported.

Gibson wound down production of the original Firebirds and devised new versions with simpler construction and a different design. It's been said that Fender threatened to sue Gibson over the design of the original reverse Firebird, because of Fender's existing offset-waist body on its Jazzmaster and Jaguar, and that this was the reason Gibson was forced to change the first Firebird design. But this seems unlikely. Fender was certainly annoyed, publishing an ad showing the Jazzmaster and Jaguar below a headline that read: "The Most Imitated Guitars In The World." But Fender had little scope for legal action. It had only a simple design patent for the Jazzmaster, which was granted in December 1959; Fender described the Jazz and Jag's Offset Contour Body as 'patent pending'.

The most obvious change to the line of brand-new Firebirds that appeared in 1965 was a slightly more conventional body shape, looking as if the original had been flipped upwards and over. As a result, we call these the 'non-reverse' Firebirds, in contrast to the earlier 'reverse' body. Gone was the through-neck and the body 'shelf', replaced with a conventional glued-in neck. The pickups on the two cheaper models were P-90 single coils, and the headstock was more Fender-like and came with regular tuners.

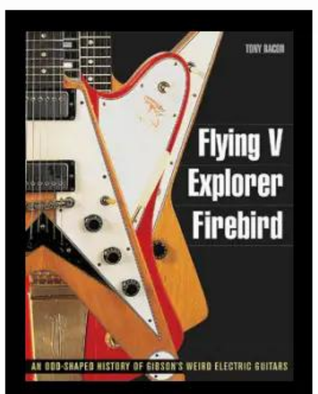
The new Firebirds first appeared on the June 1965 pricelist, with a sizeable price cut. The final reverse Firebirds had listed at $215 (I), $280 (III), $360 (V), and $500 (VII). The non-reverse line was notably cheaper: $189.50 (I), $239.50 (III), $289.50 (V), and $379.50 (VII). Gibson briefly made a 12-string Firebird V, too, introduced in 1966. But the changes were not enough to stop a decline in sales of the non-reverse Firebird models during the 60s. At the end of the decade, the Firebirds were finally dropped.

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Two short-lived reappearances were the limited-edition 'Medallion' model in 1972, and the Firebird 76, a sort of Firebird III with an unbound fingerboard and gold-plated metalwork. It was hard to ignore the influence of the Firebird shape on Gibson's RD guitars from the late 70s – a largely unsuccessful attempt to popularise onboard electronics. Gibson stayed quiet with the Firebird through the 80s, probably not encouraged when a further attempt at Fender-like styling, the Victory, failed.

There was some dabbling with 'bird reissues in the early 90s and some full-tilt remakes in 2000. The III, V and VII survive in the current line, where you'll also find a Studio '70s Tribute model. Gibson usually loves signature guitars, but only one artist-model Firebird has appeared, the limited-edition Johnny Winter model of 2008/2009. The peculiar Firebird X heaved into view in 2010, a heavily adapted take on a non-reverse Firebird with Robot tuning and onboard digital paraphernalia.

But the originals still undoubtedly have a certain something, and in the midst of all those Roman numerals, it can be tricky to remember which model is which. So, to finish, here's a one-stop guide to 'bird spotting... One pickup is always a reverse I. With two pickups, a reverse is either a III (dot markers) or a V (trapezoids), while a dual-pickup non-reverse model is a I (P-90s) or a V (mini-humbuckers). With three pickups, a reverse is always a VII, and a non is a III (P-90s) or a VII (minis). So, now you're fully armed to grab a YouTube clip and say: "Ah, that's Dave Mason with a reverse V" or "Here's Brian Jones with a non-reverse III." Or, more simply: "Now, there's a nice, underrated guitar."



Tony Bacon's book *Flying V, Explorer, Firebird* is an 'odd-shaped history of Gibson's weird electric guitars'. Published by Backbeat, find out more at www.halleonardbooks.com


VOLUME
VOLUME
TONE
TONE
Gibson

ROXY LADY

Resplendent in its Cardinal Red finish, Phil Manzanera's 1964 reverse Firebird VII is a genuine stunner. In Phil's hands, it gave Roxy Music's art-rock sound its sneer and snarl – check out his wailing solo on Do The Strand – and he still uses it today. Here, Phil tells us about breaking the rules and pushing sonic boundaries with his 'bird in Roxy Music, including running it through Brian Eno's synth

WORDS JAMIE DICKSON

"When I first got the gig with Roxy Music, I had a Gibson 335," Phil Manzanera recalls. "They said, 'We really think you should have a white Fender Strat,' for the image, you know? The 335 looked a bit jazzy, so I went with my mum and got a bank loan to buy a white Strat.

"But by the middle of 1972, Roxy were quite successful – we'd had a hit single and we're all looking round for interesting clothes and things. So, I looked in the back of *Melody Maker* and there was this small ad saying 'Red Firebird for sale'. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but when I was about nine or 10 I'd managed to get my hands on a red Hofner Galaxie guitar, so I had previous with red guitars.

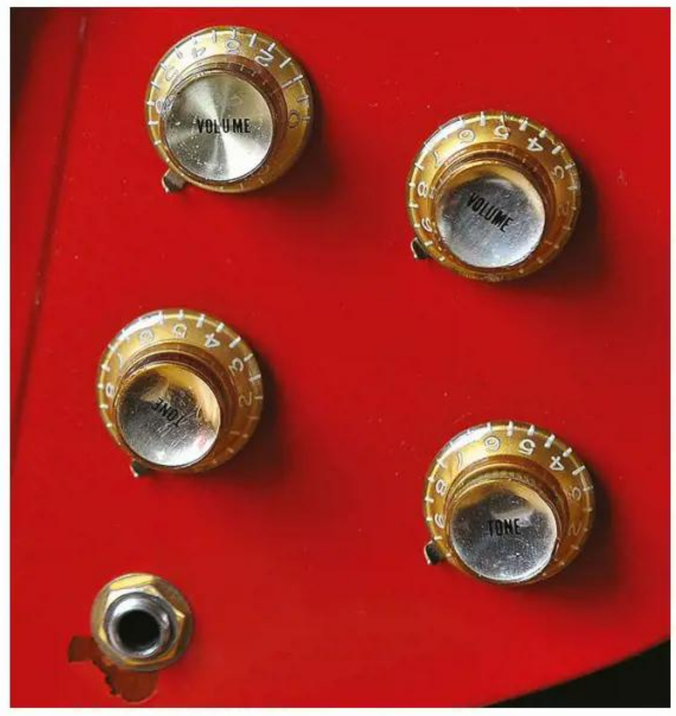
"So, I turned up to see this guy, and it turned out he was the son of some rich Americans who lived in Regent's Park. This 18 year old appeared at the door, holding the red Firebird. And I sort of went, 'Oh my God! What the...?' His parents had bought the guitar for him in the custom red colour. So, I said, 'Here's your £165 – thank you very much.' I came away and thought, 'Yes!' I didn't even plug it in and listen to it or anything [laughs]. I didn't really care! I just thought, 'This looks amazing.'

"Then we went to record the second Roxy album, *For Your Pleasure*, and discovered it was a fantastic recording guitar. Those pickups are different from standard humbuckers or P-90s; they have a very contained sound, which doesn't spread a lot around the edges into other frequencies, so if you have distortion it sits very nicely within the whole spectrum. And then your clean sound is unique, too. It also has an amazing tremolo unit – certain guitars are just magic. You just play notes and it sounds great. It's so special, that guitar – it's a different kind of heavy sound when you use it with distortion: it just sits nicely within songs.

"In the early days, I was using Hiwatt amps and I had Pete Cornish pedalboards. And he would stick in it a Fuzz Face, a Cry Baby wah, and an MXR phaser. I had a setup where it would go to the Hiwatt – I don't think that it had a Hiwatt cabinet, actually; I think it was a special 4x12 cabinet. And I also had a Fender Twin with Electro-Voice speakers, which was ridiculously heavy.

"I also used it in conjunction with Eno. We both had these Revox tape recorders, which we had adapted for vari-pitch so we could control the speed of the motors with the DeArmond pedal. So, apart from using direct signal with fuzz and wah and things like that, my signal also went into Eno's [EMS] VCS3 synthesiser, which he then processed with filters and oscillators. It was quite a complex setup for those days and very Heath Robinson in a British way. But the combination of having a unique guitar with this kind of custom-made setup created a unique musical context for Roxy – and then you've just got a singer with a weird voice who's quite good-looking, and Bob's your uncle!"









HEAR IT HERE

FIREBIRD VII (2008)

Hear Phil Manzanera take flight with this solo album dedicated to his beloved 'bird

This inventive instrumental solo record released in 2008 is in fact the second album cover that Phil's Firebird VII has graced – it's also on the cover of Roxy Music's *For Your Pleasure*. The solo record features drummer Chris Hayward (an old school friend and musician who Manzanera was reunited with after a break of 20 years), bassist Yaaron Stavi and celebrated pianist Leszek Mozdzer, and is a joyously experimental listen, veering from melodic pop-rock into jazzier and stranger atmospheric excursions. See www.firebirdv11.com to listen to a taster.



SKYLARKING

Dave Gregory, formerly of XTC, on his bevy of Sunburst 'birds



If you've enjoyed feasting your eyes on the '64 Firebird I here, then envy Dave Gregory, who is its devoted owner. He used a variety of Firebirds to record classic tracks with New Wave pioneers XTC, and is a card-carrying Firebird aficionado who uses his workhorse '65 non-reverse Firebird V in current band, Tin Spirits.

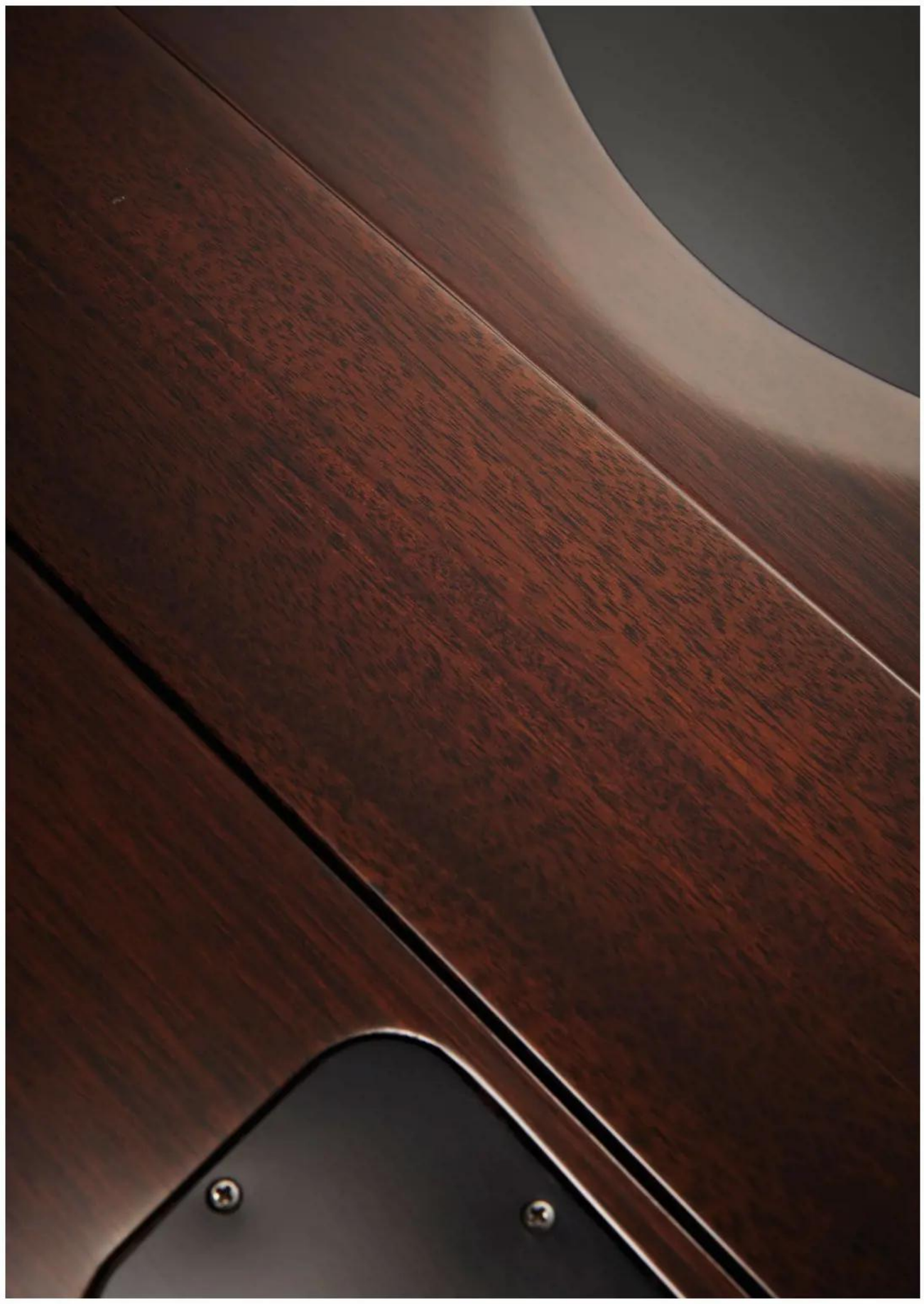
"The first one I bought was the Firebird III, which is a '65 non-reverse," Dave recalls. "I got it on the first American tour I did with XTC in January 1980, at a time when it still made sense to buy guitars in the States and bring them back. I was window shopping one day – I was actually looking for a Rickenbacker 12-string – and I went into a shop in Detroit.

"There was this mint Firebird III hanging on the wall – I think they were asking $500 – so I decided to buy it because it was so clean. But later, I discovered it didn't play very well: it hadn't been set up, didn't stay in tune. But I just liked looking at it!"

Since buying his first Firebird, Dave has also acquired a '65 non-reverse Firebird V; plus a non-reverse Firebird I, with its duo of P-90s. He says that poor factory setups and fret dress are common on many vintage Firebirds, so his have since been fettled by Kinkade Guitars in Bristol. Dave also suggests vintage 'bird owners slacken or remove scratchplate screws in storage, because the 'plates tend to shrink over time and break around the screws otherwise. *Guitarist* would like to thank Dave for kindly bringing his beautiful Firebirds in for us to take a gander at...







1964 FIREBIRD & 1974 LEAD AND BASS 20

Gary Moore was an eclectic collector of guitars and amps, but each piece in his collection was expected to play its part in creating music. Gary's tech, Graham Lilley, gives us a tour of this Dream Rig

Although perhaps best known for playing Les Pauls and Strats, Gary Moore had wide-ranging tastes in instruments and the Dream Rig setup here is a case in point. It is currently in the keeping of Gary's tech, Graham Lilley, who remains custodian of the Irish bluesman's guitars on behalf of his estate, including this stunning '64 'reverse' body Firebird I. The model was introduced in '63, making this Ray Dietrich-designed electric an early example of the breed. The neck-through-body construction and banjo-style tuners on the treble side of the headstock made it an unorthodox addition to the Gibson stable, but the acerbic tone of its single mini-humbucker found favour with artists such as Eric Clapton. Lilley says of Gary's example: "Although this was bought in 1994 for the BBM [Bruce, Baker, Moore] project, it wasn't featured on the album or live shows in that year.

Currently, it has a Seymour Duncan mini-humbucker fitted, but the original pickup and replaced volume pot are included in the case. I should get round to putting it back as it was, and dropping the action to make it more playable," he says, referring to the high action. The amp is paired here with Gary's potent little twin-channel, 20-watt Lead And Bass head, which is built around a duo of EL84s in the power stage.

1 "Gary mostly acquired equipment items to use on recording sessions or live shows," Graham Lilley recalls of the Marshall '74 Lead And Bass 20 head. "His reasoning was that if an amp, pedal or secondhand guitar triggered a riff, or different tone that could be developed into a song, then it was worth getting for that initial inspiration."

2 "Shame I didn't have a bottleneck with me for this, as it still has the action jacked up for when Gary used it for slide," veteran Guitarist contributor Neville Marten said of Gary's Firebird, when he played it. "This is just like the guitar Clapton used in the last days of Cream and on the Blind Faith album, and clearly why Gary bought it for the BBM project. It's a meaty old thing and if you know 'Sitting On Top Of The World' from Cream's 'Goodbye' album, then that's the tone."

The neck-through-body construction and banjo-style tuners made it an unorthodox addition to the Gibson stable


Marshall
OFF
INDICATOR
JMP
ON
TONE
VOLUME
INPUTS
TONE
VOLUME
INPUTS
Marshall

1

2

1967 FIREBIRD V 12-STRING

A very unusual Firebird in an even more unusual finish…

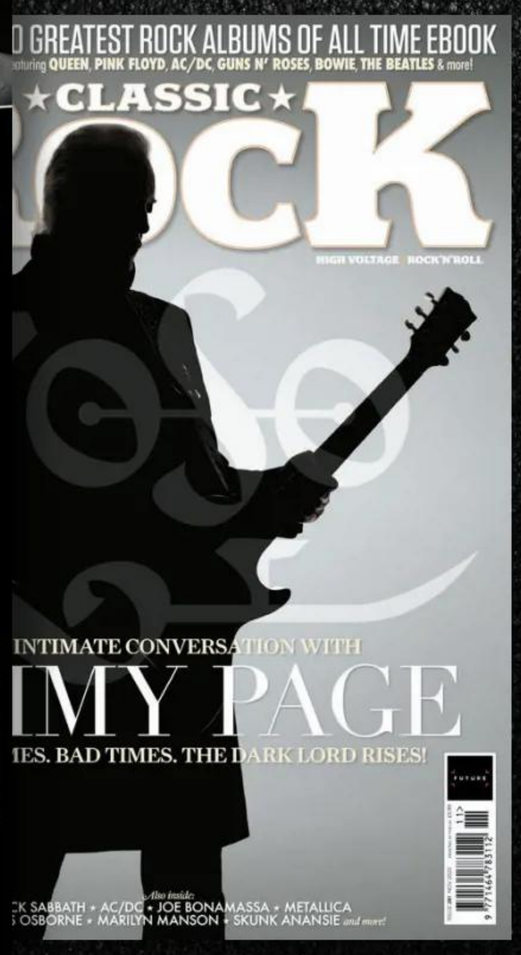
Gibson's Firebird was launched in 1963 as a counter to Fender's success with the Stratocaster and Telecaster. Gibson was in the midst of a decline in its solidbody range, as the later success of the Les Paul was still a few years in the future. Company president Ted McCarty tasked car designer Ray Dietrich to come up with a revolutionary, modern-looking guitar and, no doubt inspired by the earlier Explorer and perhaps a cheeky nod to Fender's Jaguar and Jazzmaster, he came up with this distinctive body shape. Known initially as the 'reverse' model because of its extended treble-side horn and 'upside down' tuners, the Firebird enjoyed various specification and pickup configurations over the next few years, with the Firebird I bearing a single pickup, the III loaded with two, and the V including a vibrato and more deluxe appointments.

The Firebird was Gibson's first solidbody with a through-neck. This featured a composite of mahogany and walnut running down the centre, with two mahogany 'wings' making up the body shape. In 1965, Gibson introduced the simpler set-neck, non-reverse revision of the Firebird, which saw the extended horn swapped to the treble side and this is the shape of the Firebird V 12-String we see here. To say that these 12s are rare would be an understatement – Gibson tells us that fewer than 300 were made during their '66/'67 period of manufacture. This model is finished in the extremely unusual Inverness Green custom colour, making it practically unique. Truly a rare 'Bird! (Guitar courtesy of the New Kings Road Vintage Guitar Emporium.)







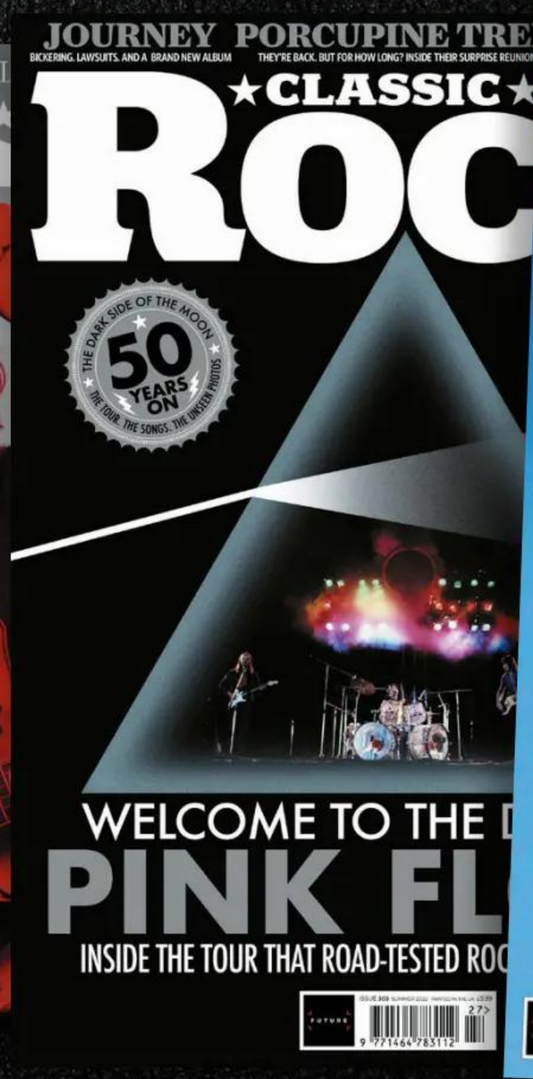


CLASSIC ROCK

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TEN GREAT

SHAPES TONES



1 ALBERT KING

BORN UNDER A BAD SIGN

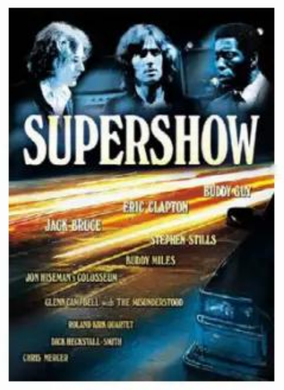
Born Under A Bad Sign, 1967

1966 GIBSON FLYING V



A MAN whose persona was so intertwined with the Flying V that his gravestone in Arkansas has one emblazoned on it, in many ways Albert King had the first and last word on the instrument. A true original, his trailblazing Southpaw blues, with wide-interval bends and expert use of vibrato within them, was powered by a 1958 Korina V he named 'Lucy', flipped upside down. But he was using a '66 model here given to him by Gibson after Lucy was stolen (and later recovered).

© David Redfern/Redferns/Getty Images



2 ERIC CLAPTON | CREAM

SUPERSHOW

1963 GIBSON FIREBIRD I

CLAPTON FAMOUSLY used his single-pickup 'bird during Cream's final American tour in 1968 and at their feted 'Farewell' concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, as well as on the March '68 *Supershow*: an all-star documentary filmed in an abandoned factory in Staines, which saw Eric plugging into a Marshall and trading licks with Buddy Guy.



3 ALLEN COLLINS | LYNYRD SKYNYRD

FREEBIRD

Pronounced 'Leh-'nérd 'Skin-'nérd, 1973

1964 GIBSON FIREBIRD I

Collins is virtually synonymous with the Firebird I, specifically a customised example from 1964, with a dog-ear P-90 in the bridge position plus the original mini-humbucker, relocated to the neck position. He used his #1 extensively in Skynyrd's early work, including the climatic solo section of their debut album's closer.



4 THE EDGE | U2

I WILL FOLLOW

Boy, 1980

1976 GIBSON EXPLORER

When a teenage Edge wandered into a New York guitar shop, he was originally after a Rickenbacker. Yet it was a natural 1976 Explorer that he left with. It has since appeared on almost every U2 album, including this live favourite and the opening song from their debut. The Edge's post-punk riff uses 200ms delay to add presence to the mantric riff.



5 DAVE GROHL | FOO FIGHTERS

HEADWIRES

There Is Nothing Left To Lose, 1999

GIBSON EXPLORER

Grohl recorded all the guitar parts for the Foos' 1999's *There Is Nothing Left To Lose* himself. And to capture many of this album's most memorable licks, he used a white Explorer (it makes an appearance in the space-shuttle scenes of the video for *Next Year*) through a Vox AC30, and a Memory Man, too, for this song.



6 MICHAEL SCHENKER | UFO

ROCK BOTTOM

Strangers In The Night, 1979

GIBSON FLYING V

He's now playing Dean Guitars, but back in his UFO prime, Schenker was a Gibson V man, loaded with PAFs and customised in black and white, through a Marshall 50-watt plexi and a Cry Baby wah cocked into a 'sweet spot' to aid sustain and articulation. Schenker raised the bar for hard rock in the 1970s and is captured here in live glory.



7 JOHNNY WINTER

HIGHWAY '61 REVISITED

Second Winter, 1969

1963 GIBSON FIREBIRD V

Texan bluesman Johnny Winter used many different Firebirds over the years, but the most iconic of them all is a Firebird V from late 1963. Gibson records show that just over 920 Vs were made between 1963 and '65. Winter employed his almost exclusively for slide playing, as he did here on this blazing Dylan cover – favouring open-D tuning.



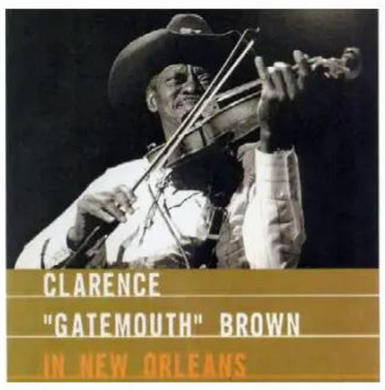
8 BILLY GIBBONS | ZZ TOP

THUNDERBIRD

Fandango! 1975

1958 GIBSON KORINA V

Not content with owning just one Holy Grail of the guitar world (in Pearly Gates, his legendary '59 Les Paul), the Reverend also has this original V in his huge collection. It saw action on the opener to fourth album *Fandango*'s live side A through dual amps; a cranked Marshall Plexi-esque (the mysterious Rio Grande amp?), the other more Tweedish.



9 CLARENCE 'GATEMOUTH' BROWN

PRESSURE COOKER

Live In New Orleans, 1984

1966 GIBSON FIREBIRD V

Clarence's self-taught fingerstyle (using all five fingers) with up-tempo jazzy runs, is laid bare in this live clip. And the late Louisiana-born blues player's non-reverse Firebird V was as unique as his playing; adorned with a leather scratchplate emblazoned with his nickname. He used Music Man amps for decades, with a little reverb.



10 JAMES HETFIELD | METALLICA

CREEPING DEATH

Ride The Lightning, 1984

1984 GIBSON EXPLORER

The rhythm king's white 'So What' 1984 Explorer (named after the permanent-marker scrawl on its body) became a veteran of every single Metallica session from 1984 until 1991's *Black Album*. The So What still had stock humbuckers for this song and album, through a 1984 Marshall JCM800 and Ibanez TS-9 Tube Screamer.

SG & JR

Very little that Gibson created in the past became an irrelevant footnote. Even the company's stripped-down student guitars and the model that its own endorsee disowned just shrugged their shoulders and went on to become beloved icons of rock and blues music, toted by generations of groundbreaking players. Read on for the triumphant, intertwined tales of the demonic SG and the child prodigy Les Paul Junior

Less Is More 104
SG Slide Guitar 108
Stick Your Neck Out 112
Mellow Yellow 113
114 ..... Junior High
118 ..... Junior vs Junior
124 ..... Ten Great SG & JR Tones


VOLUME
TREBLE
VOLUME
TONE

LESS IS MORE

In 1965, Eric Clapton and Michael Bloomfield unwittingly saved the archetypal Les Paul Standard from total extinction. The market was the would-be killer, but the murder weapon was the guitar you see before you. From enfant terrible to blues and rock royalty, we chart the rise and rise of the Gibson SG

WORDS MICK TAYLOR

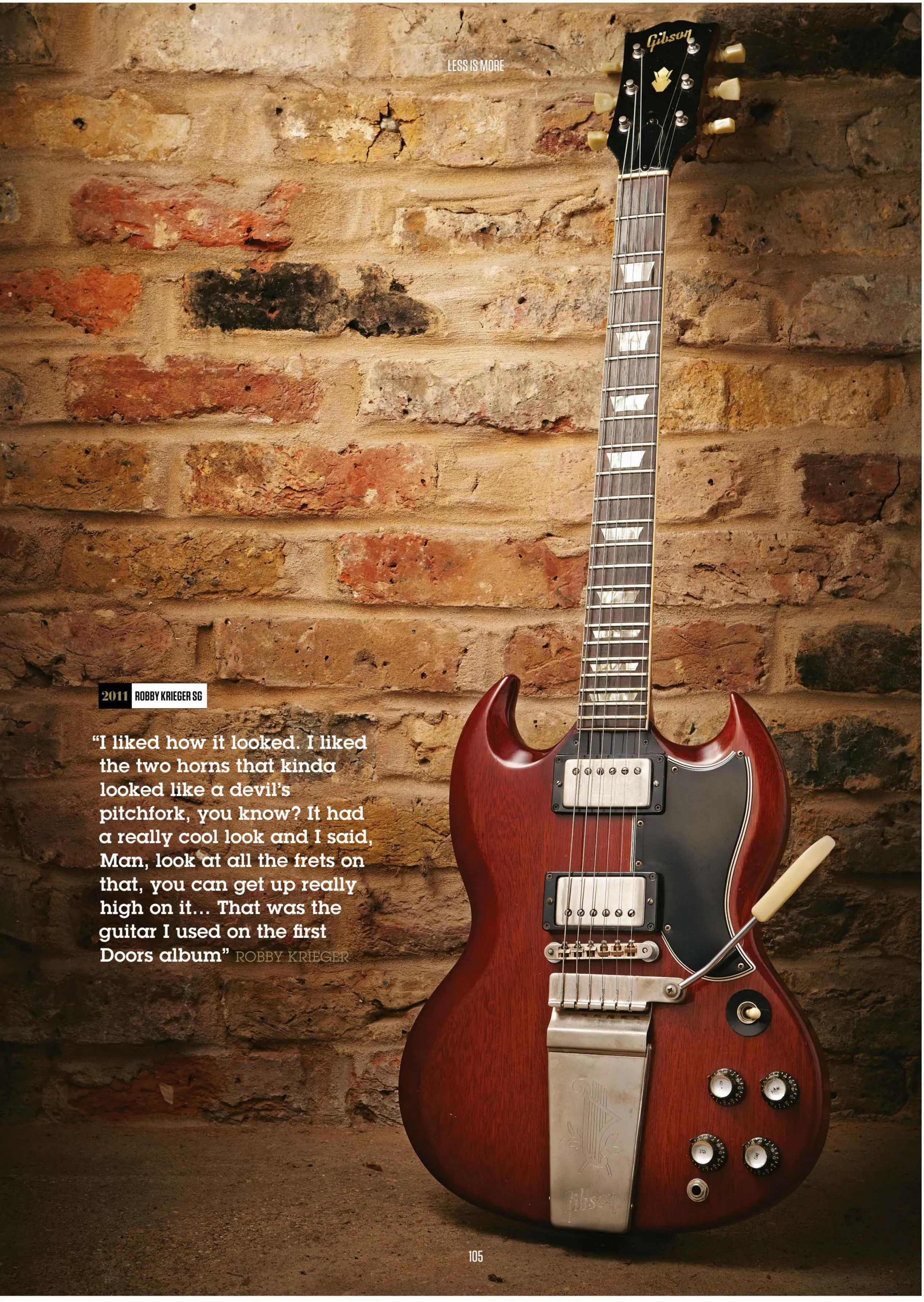
You couldn't make it up. Take a trip to 1960, and sit at a table in Kalamazoo, Michigan. You work for Gibson and you're looking at – or at least talking about – what will turn out to be the Holy Grail of electric guitars, the 1958 to 1960 sunburst Les Paul Standard. Honduras mahogany, big leaf maple, Brazilian rosewood, PAF pickups – timeless, aching beauty.

But the financial picture for this guitar isn't so pretty. You revived it in 1957 with humbucking pickups, again in '58 with the sunburst finish. Sales peaked in 1959, but you've shipped less than 1,800 'Bursts in total. Your biggest-selling guitars are the lower-priced, slab-bodied Les Paul Junior and Melody Maker. What's more, you're doubling the size of your factory and you need to get it working to capacity. The next decision taken by your boss, Ted McCarty – with some help from Bloomfield and Clapton – ensures firstly that those original 'Bursts will sell for a million dollars one day, and more importantly, it creates yet another legendary Gibson solidbody.

SG ORIGINS

Ted McCarty was Gibson president between 1950 and 1966, and was ultimately responsible for the most important electric guitar designs in the company's history. The SG's development was part of a wider restructure in the electric-guitar line through the late 1950s and early 1960s. With hindsight, the decision to radically morph the Les Paul Standard into what we now know as the SG may look like madness. At the time, and in the context of what was happening in the market, however, it was the obvious move. Gibson's legacy of high-craft archtop instruments was enjoying new electric life via the hollowbody ES-175 and revolutionary ES-335 thinline semi of 1958. Meanwhile, the trend for more modern-minded, feedback-busting solidbody electrics for younger rock 'n' roll players received a shot in the arm with the Flying V and Explorer of the same year – well ahead of their time and selling poorly as a result. Less radical but just as important, in 1958 came Gibson's first double-cutaway solidbody, the Les Paul Junior, which would prove pivotal in the SG's genesis.

For 1961 then, McCarty took the single-cutaway Les Paul Standard's 60mm thick body and slimmed it considerably, did away with the carved maple top and left a simple slab mahogany body already popularised by the Junior and Melody Maker. The shape was resculpted to a more aggressive, modernist outline, offering twin cutaways and unrestricted access to the very last of its 22 frets. With the chunk of wood gone between the 16th and 21st/22nd frets on the bass side, the neck would also prove more unstable; 'flappy' or



2011 ROBBY KRIEGER SG

"I liked how it looked. I liked the two horns that kinda looked like a devil's pitchfork, you know? It had a really cool look and I said, Man, look at all the frets on that, you can get up really high on it... That was the guitar I used on the first Doors album" ROBBY KRIEGER



1961 LES PAUL JUNIOR

'whippy' and very easy to bend in and out of tune, perhaps the SG's most notable idiosyncrasy, loved and loathed equally. Indeed, the neck itself was slimmer than the 1960 Les Paul model.

Retained from the previous models was most of the hardware and electronics complement – the first models shipped with the distinctly odd, sideways action 'Gibson Deluxe Vibrato' – and the overall effect on tone was a brighter, harder-edged sound with less apparent low-end response. It was certainly different – evidence, were more needed, that McCarty was moving forward fearlessly.

LOSING LES

Les Paul, by all accounts, wasn't enamoured with his new signature guitar. As Tony Bacon explains in his book *50 Years Of The Gibson Les Paul*, and indeed Walter Carter in *The Gibson Electric Guitar Book* (both Backbeat Books), the superstar's contract with Gibson was up for renewal in 1962 or 1963, depending on who's telling the story. Waning popularity in the charts, Les's impending divorce with Mary Ford and his general dissatisfaction with the new design meant that by 1963, the contract hadn't been renewed and



1961 PETE TOWNSHEND LES PAUL/SG VOS REISSUE

Paul, almost unthinkably in hindsight, was no longer officially associated with the Gibson company. As it turned out, he wouldn't be again until 1968 when Gibson reintroduced the original Les Paul shape, having realised that a handful of world-changing players were lusting after those old 'Bursts. The new guitar, meanwhile, became the SG – Solid Guitar – and so it would remain for ever more.

Over the years, the SG has been subject to plenty of revisions, changes and tweaks. Like Fender's celebrated Stratocaster, Telecaster and indeed the very guitar from which it was spawned, it has survived mid-60s stylistic tinkering, 1970s corporate meltdown and 1980s metal-driven excesses. What prevails in the hearts of most guitar enthusiasts is that '61-'63 classic spec; the Cherry Standard, Juniors and Specials and the white three-pickup Custom that we'll forever associate with a man named Hendrix.

HAPPY MISTAKE

Now, 54 years on, who could have guessed that such a potentially colossal mistake – evolving the super-plush single-cut Les Paul Standard into a stripped-down, twin-horn rocker – would net the most desirable electric guitar in history for Gibson, right alongside its rebellious, outlandish sibling? Exciting, visceral and thoroughly modern, players who saw it first couldn't help but be seduced by its sharp lines and unbridled playing potential. In the hands of Angus Young through Tony Iommi to Frank Zappa and beyond, the SG has come to hold a unique place, both tonally and visually, in rock 'n' roll history. Long live the Solid Guitar – may you never grow up.

THE FIRST SGS

THE STANDARD, CUSTOM & JUNIOR MODELS

When the SG/Les Paul first appeared in 1961, there were two models. The Standard ($265) had a pair of humbuckers, two controls per pickup, crown inlays in a bound rosewood fingerboard and sideways-action vibrato. The Custom ($395) was the top of the line model, with gold hardware, three humbuckers, a bound ebony fingerboard and a bound headstock.

Later that year, the Junior ($147.50, single-pickup) and Special ($210, dual-pickup) were added, featuring a one-piece wraparound bridge/tailpiece and P-90 pickups. They had unbound rosewood fingerboards with dot inlays. Gibson tweaked the design over the coming years, most notably adding the enlarged pickguard on the Custom and Standard in 1966, which held the pickups, rather than them being mounted directly to the body.

SG SLIDE GUITAR

Since he broke through on to the international stage as a child prodigy, Derek Trucks has pushed the boundaries of electric slide playing, and never strays far from his beloved SG. Guitarist found out why he feels the SG is the perfect foil for his style

WORDS HENRY YATES & ADRIAN CLARK

What made you choose an SG for slide?

"The SG has always served me well. I mean, my first few guitars were just garage-sale and pawn-shop beaters, but my first real guitar that I was excited about was an off-the-rack SG in the early 90s. I played that forever. I tried other guitars, but I would always come back to the SGs. It just felt like there was something about the weight, and the sound for slide, and the access that you have way up on the neck. It just felt right. It's always been my go-to. So I guess in the last five years, I've been fighting the urge to try other things."

Do you have a particular setup?

"Y'know, I mainly play in open E, and I think because of that, I don't have to keep the action as high. My SG has got a relatively low action, but the tension of having it tuned up, I think, makes that possible. It's nothing too unique. I always feel like the bulk of it is really in your hands. It's less about the gear, and more about the approach and the attack."

SG SLIDE GUITAR



What material do you prefer your slides to be made from?
"When I started, it was always a metal slide. Then somebody hit me to the fact that sometimes with electric, glass is a little sweeter, not as sharp and grating on the ear. Have I tried a knife or bottle? Oh yeah. All of that. Wine bottles. Steak bones. I remember reading Robert Palmer's book, *Deep Blues*, about the Deep South backwoods Delta players, and how they would use anything. Butter knives. Lighters. Bones from meat. Whatever they had layin' around. Over the years, you try all of it, just to get a different sound."

Is open E (EBEG#BE) the only tuning that you use?
"Yeah. On *Down In The Flood* I'm tuned to open D and I used a capo, but that's just because I was using a guitar that Doyle Bramhall had retuned and left laying around. I know standard tuning from when I was nine years old, but now I only really know open E."

Did you ever experiment with playing slide guitar in standard tuning?

DEREK TRUCKS' SIGNATURE SG

Derek on his signature model SG, complete with the mods found on Derek's stage guitars

"The new signature model has all the little tweaks we've made to my own SGs over the years. It has different volume pots, so the swell is cleaner, and different capacitors. Y'know, my SG [a '61 SG-shape Les Paul with a Lyre vibrato] had a vibrato on it, and we just took a hacksaw and yanked it off and put a stoptail in. The guitar they finally ended up building for me is great. On the rack, it's a normal setup: it's not set up for slide. But even the way I play my own SG, in open tuning, the action is not unreasonably high, so it's not far off that anyway."

"For a little while, yeah, the first year or two. But then I heard someone in Jacksonville playing in open E and I got a lesson from him and it all became crystal clear. All those things I'd been hearing Elmore James and Duane Allman do, I was like, Oh, there it is!"

With open E, it all seems to be in that crucial crossover from the G# to B string, where all the classic blues licks live...
"Yean, that's where it is! There's hundreds of them right there."

Because they don't have to worry about bending, a lot of slide players use heavier strings on an electric. What string gauges do you use?
"It's 0.011s on the top, 0.010s on the bottom, so it goes 0.011, 0.014, 0.017, 0.026, 0.036, 0.046. I've been using them since I was 12 or 13, so it might have been a mistake in the beginning. I do like the heavier strings on top, because I'm playing both slide and straight on the same guitar, so the heavier high strings give the extra tension."

You often switch from slide to straight playing on stage. Do you keep the slide on your finger?
"It's usually in the pocket. I try to be Wild West... y'know, quick draw! A lot of times you'll be soloing and have to find a place to put the slide, so you'll be bending a note with one hand and removing the slide with the other."

Does using your third finger help with damping?
"I saw pictures of Duane and other people using their ring fingers, so that's just how I assumed you did it. I think most of the damping technique for me is right hand. There's probably stuff going on in the left hand, too, but it's mostly about playing and finding what's natural for you. A lot of times, when you start over-thinking it with ideas about how other people play, it becomes a stumbling block. If your technique's 'wrong', but it sounds good, so be it!"

How would you recommend a novice player should get started with slide guitar playing?
"You really have to find something that moves you. For me it was The Allman Brothers – *Live At The Fillmore East* and *Eat A Peach* – and Elmore James. Those sounds have haunted me since I was a kid, so somebody showed me a few licks and when you first play something that you've heard a thousand times, it's such a revelation."

Did you find the intonation hard to start off with?
"It came pretty quick. I mean, when I hear tapes of me at nine or 10 years old, it's pretty embarrassing, but it sounded good then!"



STICK YOUR NECK OUT

The SG's neck is a defining feature of its playability, but was one of the main reasons Les Paul rejected Gibson's redesign of his signature model. We look at the pros and cons



1 "I didn't like the shape. A guy could kill himself on those sharp horns. It was too thin, and they had moved the front pickup away from the fingerboard so they could fit my name there. The neck was too skinny... So I called Gibson and asked them to take my name off the thing. It wasn't my design" Les Paul, in *American Guitars: An Illustrated History*

2 The SG's neck joins its body at the 22nd fret, which offered unrivaled upper-fret access for guitarists who gravitate to the dusty end

3 The removal of the wood from the Les Paul's body in this area led to tuning instability and a neck joint prone to movement under pressure

4 Pete Townshend and others exploited the weakness and tuning instability to forcefully bend the SG's neck backwards and forward for a modulating vibrato-like effect... Please don't try it at home. The neck heel was strengthened in the latter half of the 60s

5 Earlier (and indeed later) SGs were prone to headstock breaks, and Gibson added volutes on the headstock/neck joint to improve strength in that spot. The extremely thin and wide neck profile was narrowed in 1963

MELLOW YELLOW

A guitar's finish doesn't influence the tone of a guitar, but it's a deciding factor in which guitar you buy – and Gibson's curiously named TV Yellow has always been a standout example

WORDS TONY BACON

1959 LES PAUL SPECIAL

The TV model was really just a Junior in a different finish, a colour the company referred to as "natural", "limed oak", and (most often) "limed mahogany". In fact, you'll see TV models from the 50s with varying colours. The earlier ones are a dull beige, while later ones are often distinctly yellow.

It's possible 'TV' was an unsubtle hint at Fender's competing blond-coloured guitar: the Telecaster. Or perhaps it was coined to cash in on guitarist Les Paul's television appearances on *The Les Paul & Mary Ford Show*, a sponsored daily ad for a toothpaste company, for which the couple signed a $2 million three-year contract in 1953. Gibson probably thought since you'd seen the man on TV, now you might buy his TV guitar.

Later, in the 70s, a Gibson spokesman seemed to confirm this when he replied to a reader's enquiry in a guitar magazine that: "The Les Paul TV model was so named after Les Paul's personal Listerine show was televised in the 50s". Much better than admitting a crack at a competitor...

JUNIOR HIGH

The Les Paul Junior was marketed as a stripped-down, deliberately simplified student-model guitar – but it soon played truant in the hands of some of guitar's fieriest and most iconoclastic players. Here's the story of this rock rebel's formative years…

WORDS TONY BACON

A year or so after Gibson introduced its first solidbody electric, the Les Paul Goldtop, the top brass had a meeting. Company historian, Julius Bellson, rummaged in the archives and found that back in 1938, electric guitars made up no more than 10 per cent of Gibson guitar sales – the rest were all acoustics. He told the meeting that the proportion had risen to 15 per cent by 1940, to 50 per cent by 1951, and that now – in 1953 – electric guitars made up a whopping 65 per cent of the company's total guitar sales. The buoyant Goldtop must have helped considerably in this. Naturally, it didn't take long for the meeting to agree that Gibson would be foolish not to create some more Les Paul models.

This was a standard way of working: to create a market and, if it took off, diversify with similar products at different price-points. Gibson had been doing similar things since at least 1920, when it had launched the Style L Junior, a budget version of the L-1 acoustic archtop. A Gibson catalogue from 1925 said it offered "to discriminating guitar players the lowest-priced guitar in the world to combine the truly essential features of a good guitar," adding that the Junior "will give you practically all that is desirable in a Gibson, lacking only some of those refinements which at present you may feel you cannot afford".

Now, in 1950s America, cheap electrics for starting-out players had begun to appear from brands such as Kay, Danelectro, National and Harmony. Those same companies also supplied cheapies to mail-order companies, who used their own brands such as Silvertone (Sears, Roebuck) and Airline (Montgomery Ward). Gibson had done it with hollowbody electrics, too, but now it was time to try the same idea, making several tiers of price-pointed models, for the new and popular solidbody guitars. Gibson boss Ted McCarty once explained it: "You have all kinds of players who like this and like that. Chevrolet had a whole bunch of models; Ford had a whole bunch of models. So did we."

The first wave of the new Les Pauls came in 1954, with the arrival of the Custom and year or so after Gibson introduced its first solidbody electric, the Les Paul Goldtop, the top Junior. The Custom was the upmarket one, looking suitably classy with its all-black finish and gold-plated hardware. But the one that we are most interested in was the budget Junior, which did not pretend to be anything other than a cheaper guitar. It was obvious that Gibson was building it to a price: a pricelist dated September 1954 showed the Custom at $325, the Goldtop at $225, and the Junior at $99.50.

The spec told a similar story: the Junior's shape made it clearly a Les Paul, but its simple, solid mahogany body had a flat top, where the Goldtop had a refined carved maple cap on a mahogany base. The Junior had one P-90 pickup, at the bridge, and single volume and tone knobs. It had a black pickguard and



simple dot-shaped position markers on an unbound rosewood fingerboard. The new Les Paul Junior was finished in Gibson's traditional two-colour brown-to-yellow Sunburst and had a wrapover stopbar bridge/tailpiece like the one on the latest Goldtop. All the metalwork was nickel-plated.

The straightforward simplicity of the budget Les Pauls later turned them into ideal rock 'n' roll workhorses. For now, Gibson watched the sales multiply. In 1955, the company shipped 2,839 Juniors, which was more than double the Goldtop and Custom combined and the biggest sale of any electric that year, even beating the budget hollowbody ES-125. That would explain the next move – Gibson quickly decided it wanted yet more of this, and in 1955 it launched the Les Paul TV and the Les Paul Special.

STUDENT SPECIAL

The Special was, in effect, a two-pickup version of the Junior, finished in a beige colour (but not called a TV model – a cause of some confusion since). Naturally enough, the Special required four controls and a pickup selector, but other than that and the colour, it really was the same as a two-pickup Junior. The TV and Special both appeared on a June 1956 pricelist, at $122.50 and $169.50 respectively. By now, the Junior had gone up to $110 (a Goldtop would set you back $235, a Custom $360). Also in 1956, Gibson added a Junior Three-Quarter model, available at the same list price as the regular one. It had a shorter neck, giving the guitar a scale length some two inches shorter than the Junior. Gibson explained in a catalogue that it was designed to appeal to "youngsters, or adults with small hands and fingers".

Nobody famous played the Juniors or TVs or Specials. It seems that, quite simply, they were aimed at beginners... and were dutifully bought by beginners. No doubt there were a few budding rock 'n' rollers scattered around here and there who made a great deal of enjoyable noise with them. But for the most part, American youth seems to have followed the Kalamazoo marketing plan, stumbling through three chords on a budget Les Paul, and then either forgetting about guitars altogether or moving up the tree to a 'better guitar' (for which read 'more expensive guitar'). It was, after all, the American way.

BODY DOUBLE

More change was coming. Sales of the original Les Pauls reached a peak in 1956 and 1957, with the Junior hitting a then-record 3,129 units in 1956. In 1958, Gibson made a big design change to three Les Pauls: the Junior, Junior Three-Quarter, and TV were revamped with a completely new double-cutaway body shape, otherwise keeping the P-90s and the generally simple vibe. Ted McCarty told this author that the redesign was a reaction to players' requests. "They wanted to be able to thumb the sixth string," he said, "but they couldn't do it if the only cutaway was over on the treble side. So we made those Les Pauls



"Chevrolet had a whole bunch of models; Ford had a whole bunch of models. So did we"

TED McCARTY

with another cutaway, so they could get up there. We did things that the players wanted, as much as anything." The Junior's fresh look was enhanced with a new Cherry Red finish. The TV adopted the new double-cut design as well, now with that rather more yellow-ish finish (Gibson called it "Cream").

When the double-cut design was applied to the Special in 1959, the result was not an immediate success because of a design mistake, a rarity for Gibson at the time. The company's boffins overlooked the fact that the rout for the neck pickup in the Special's new body weakened the neck-to-body joint, and many a neck was snapped right off at this point. The error was soon corrected by moving the neck pickup further down into the body, resulting in a stronger joint. The new double-cut Special was offered in Cherry or the new TV Yellow. However, and still causing much confusion today, the yellow Special was never actually called a TV model. Proper TV guitar models only ever have one pickup, just like a Junior.

Gibson's November 1959 pricelist showed the double-cut models as follows: Junior or Junior Three-Quarter (Cherry) at $132.50; TV ("Cream") $132.50; Special (Cherry or "Cream") $195; Special Three-Quarter (Cherry) $195. The Goldtop had morphed into the Sunburst Standard, at $265, while the black Custom retained its top-of-the- line position, at $395. The double-cuts survived until 1960 and 1961, when Gibson completely redesigned the line with the new SG shape.

Considering all Gibson's various Les Paul models as a whole, sales declined in 1960 after a peak the previous year. By 1961, Gibson had decided on a complete redesign of the line with a new sculpted body shape, in an effort to revive interest in its solidbody electrics. At first, Gibson kept the Les Paul name on the new models, but later called them SGs. That means that the early SGs made between 1961 and 1963 are mostly known today as SG/Les Paul models: they have the new SG design, but still sport a 'Les Paul' name on them somewhere.

The story of the new model names and the new design is a bit headache-inducing... The original design of the double-cut TV continued, but late in 1959, it was issued without the 'Les Paul TV' headstock logo and was called the SG TV model. The same thing happened to the Special and Special Three-Quarter models, which in late 1959 – also still with the old-style double-cut body – were renamed the SG Special and the SG Special Three-Quarter. The Junior Three-Quarter was discontinued in 1961.

In 1961, Gibson applied the new SG-body design to the Les Paul Junior (it was still called that), to the SG TV, to the SG Special, and to the SG Special Three-Quarter.

During 1963, Gibson then proceeded to drop the Les Paul name from the redesigned Junior, and in its catalogues and other promotional material, Gibson gradually renamed it the SG Junior. The SG Special Three-Quarter was discontinued later in 1961. What jolly meetings they must have had at Kalamazoo!



For more info on Gibson's Les Paul model range, check out Tony Bacon's *The Les Paul Guitar Book*, published by Backbeat www.halleonardbooks.com

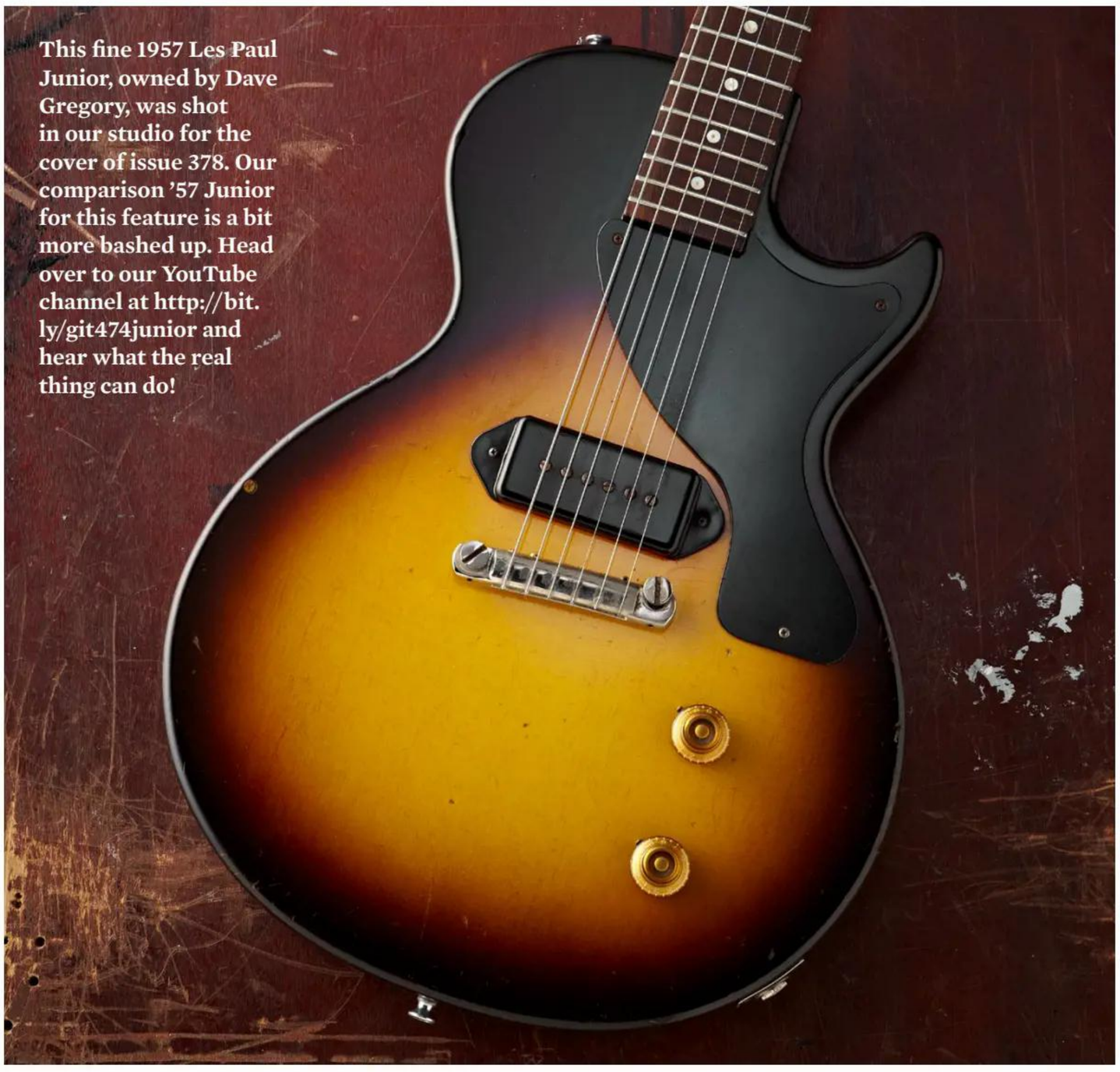
JUNIOR Vs JUNIOR

Just how does this made-to-look-old new Murphy Lab Junior compare with a real 1957? We take a close look

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY **DAVE BURRLUCK**

Most of us have limited access to real vintage pieces, especially models that haven't been molested. It can be the same for many guitar makers who may base their '59-alike builds on far-from-vintage instruments, or even use books such as *The Beauty Of The 'Burst* (Yasuhiko Iwanade) as their guide. When it comes to ageing and relicing, it can be just as difficult: not every artisan working in this area has a real piece to study before they create their ageing. Evaluating authentic ageing, then, can be just as difficult.

The TV Yellow finish of our Murphy Aged '57 Junior illustrates another typical problem: there's not one definitive colour. Some are more sand-like, mustard or a brighter, deeper yellow – and even if there were a precise colour, is Gibson (or any ageing artisan) basing the colour on how it would have looked in 1957 or how it would look some 60-odd years on? A carefully cased guitar is going to look very different from one that's been used and abused, even if they had consecutive serial numbers. And then, of course, whether it's a finish, a pickup or a neck shape, there's the "Oh, they were all different back in the day" caveat that can be a great get-out-of-jail-free card for any relicer, or indeed faker.



This fine 1957 Les Paul Junior, owned by Dave Gregory, was shot in our studio for the cover of issue 378. Our comparison '57 Junior for this feature is a bit more bashed up. Head over to our YouTube channel at http://bit.ly/git474junior and hear what the real thing can do!

The finish of our Murphy Aged '57 Junior illustrates a problem: there's not one definitive colour

There's plenty of truth in that caveat, of course, especially since Gibson, and other makers back in the 50s and 60s, didn't use the precise computer-assisted machining tools that most use today. Necks, in particular, were hand-finished from more rudimentary machining, and the sort of variances that are out of spec today were commonplace back then.

As Cesar Gueikian explains in our next feature, today Gibson has a large resource of scanned and photographed vintage guitars to draw on – not to mention access to quite a few vintage guitar collections and artist-owned instruments – and has even reverse-engineered the nitrocellulose recipe that the company used back in the day, which is a subject that could, and often does, fill many pages of debate and discussion. But surely Gibson's new '57 Murphy Lab Junior should be pretty darn similar to our original reference, shouldn't it? Let's see.

WOOD

The fundamental aspect of any solidbody electric guitar is the wood it's made from, and here we start our comparison with an aspect that's impossible to evaluate. In 1957, we're told by numerous sources that the mahogany [2] was pattern-grade Honduran and the fingerboard Brazilian rosewood. Today the former is rare, expensive and endangered; the latter effectively out of trade. Gibson tells us nothing about the mahogany in its spec sheets, although we understand the timber used by the Custom Shop [1] is plantation-grown genuine mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) grown sustainably in Fiji. What we will say is that our new Junior weighs exactly the same as our old one: 3.42kg (7.5lbs). It's a very encouraging start to our evaluation.

HEADSTOCKS

The new Junior [3] is nothing if not well observed. The lacquer cracks across the headstock face of the new guitar are certainly similar to our real '57, although they appear enhanced. The original's cracks [4] are more subtle, while the black face paint has sunk into the mahogany (there's no holly veneer to face the headstock). Along with the marks and grime of 60 years of use, this creates a much more complex façade. The Gibson













logo on the original looks slightly raised and is a brighter, more vibrant gold colour. And is it just us or does the new guitar's logo look slightly off in terms of positioning? You'll notice, too, on both old and new how the headstock thickness tapers, going from approximately 15mm at the lower edges by the E string tuners to 14mm at the tip. The new Gibson is a very similar thickness at its base, but it is very slightly thinner, 13mm, at the tip. And despite the new Junior having more simulated wear to its body and neck back, there's less to the headstock than our original.

NECK ANGLE

A noticeable and potentially important difference between our two Juniors is the neck angle. Our original Junior [6] has next to zero rake-back and results in a height in front of the wrapover bridge at the G string of bang on 15mm – with pretty much the same setup. The new Junior's neck is very slightly raked back, resulting in the wrapover sitting higher [5], approximately 17.3mm at the G string. Both dog-ear covers have the same height of 11mm above the guitars' faces, and as there's no height adjustment, aside from the polepieces, the new Junior's pickup sits noticeably further away from the strings. Bearing in mind the measured DCRs (at output) are only very slightly different – our old Junior is 8.09kohms, the new one is 7.89k – the actual difference in power we hear plugged in is possibly due to the fact it's simply further away from the strings than the original. Adding a simple 2mm shim might well even the playing field.

The exact positioning of the wrapover bridge relative to the neck back in the day would have relied on some basic positioning

1. The new Murphy Lab Junior's fingerboard is Indian rosewood

2. Meanwhile, the old Junior's fingerboard is Brazilian with a noticeable orange hue

3. There is much less crazing on the new headstock, although the model logo is typically worn because it's applied after the lacquer

4. 60 years of use means the old headstock's face has more complex ageing

5. You can see here that the new Junior's bridge sits higher from the body face

6. The old Junior's bridge sits lower and therefore the strings are closer to the pickup

As evocative as the new Murphy Lab Junior is, there's a lack of simulation of 60 years of grime

jigs. So, at the 22nd fret, the top E sits some 7mm in from the fingerboard edge; the low E is closer, at 4mm. On our new Junior, the same dimensions are reversed with 4mm on the treble side and 6mm on the bass. This also affects the alignment of the dot inlays: our original's dots hug the G string; the new Junior's sit closer to the D.

Fingerboard edge rounding, or 'rolling', has become commonplace even on non-aged/unreliced guitars. It certainly feels better to many than a sharp edge, particularly if you wrap your thumb around the bass side of the fingerboard. In the real world, this rounding wouldn't be regular and could possibly be more noticeable on the treble side where a player's rings might have knocked that edge off over the years. You'd imagine there would be more rounding wear in the middle area of the neck than by the nut. That is replicated on the new Gibson: for example, the fingerboard edges by the nut are left sharp. Our original? Well, it's hard to tell whether Bill Puplett rolled the edges slightly when he refretted it. Either way, it feels broken in and worn but far from overdone, and a little classier than the more original-style simulated wear on the new guitar.

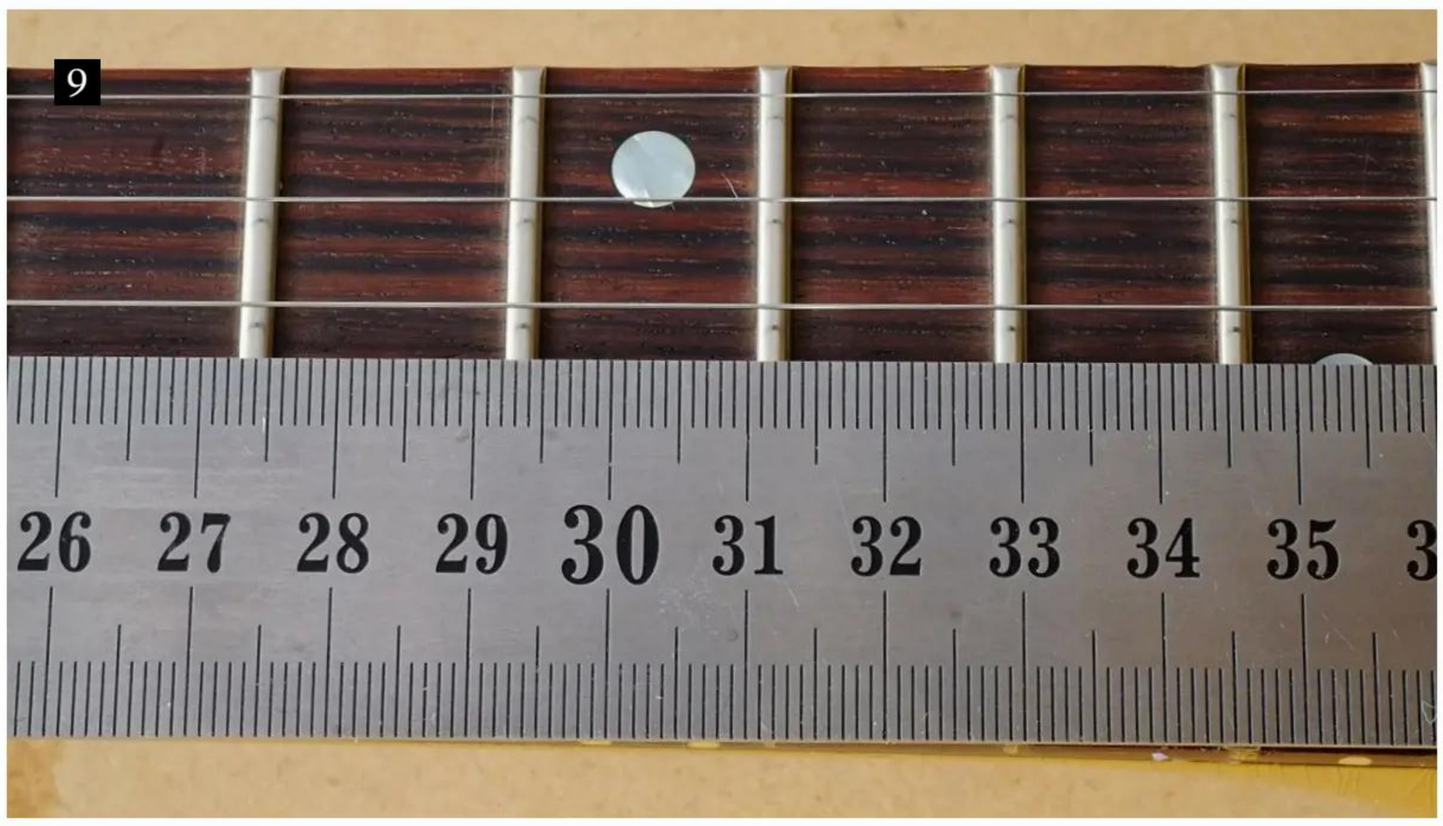
7. The tip of the lip in the cutaway is left squared-edged on the new Junior

8. On the old Junior, you can see that the tip is rounded

9. Measuring the scale length on the new Junior confirms it is virtually bang on 312mm, which, times two, gives us the actual length of 624mm


7


8



9

NECK SHAPE

If that alignment is a noticeable if subtle difference, the actual neck size and shape is much more profound. In terms of width, both necks are very similar: our original '57 measures 42.96mm just in front of the nut compared with the 42.85mm of the new guitar. At the 12th fret, the old-versus-new dimensions are 57.24mm versus 56.47mm. In terms of depth, our old Junior measures 22.4mm at the 1st fret and 25mm at the 12th; the new neck measures 23mm and 26mm at the same points.

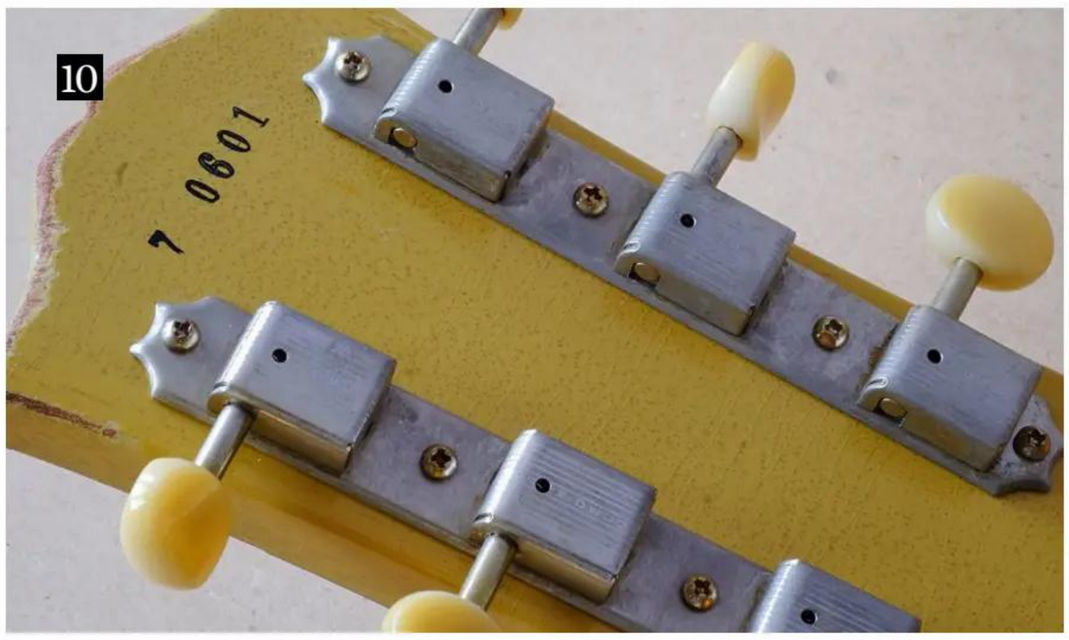
It's the shaping that's *very* different. The old Junior has quite trim shoulders and almost feels slightly V'd in the lower positions – it really is quite like PRS's original Wide Fat profile. The shoulders are much fuller on the new Junior's 'Chunky C', more baseball bat, if you like. That's not to say one is better than the other, but they certainly differ. Less noticeable is that lip of the body in the treble cutaway. The old Gibson [8] has a chamfer to the tip; the new Junior is left square [7].

A point about scale length [9]. It would be nice after all these years if Gibson itself came clean with its *actual* scale length rather than the nominal 24.75 inches (628.65mm). Anyone who has measured the scale lengths on old Gibsons will agree it's actually a few millimetres shorter. PRS has concluded that it is 24.594 inches (624.6876mm), which is where its 594 model gets its name. Many makers use this or a similar slight reduction; in *The Early Years Of The Les Paul Legacy*, Robb Lawrence states that the scale is closer to 24 9/16ths of an inch (623.8875mm).

Now, we can only measure by eye, and from the front face of the nut to the centre of the 12th fret, times two, gives us 24 5/8ths of an inch (625.475mm) on our old Junior; the new guitar measured in the same fashion is 24 9/16ths of an inch (bang on 624mm). Obviously, the position of the nut may account for these subtle differences. How accurate was that part of the build back in the day? In theory, the nut could be further away or closer to the 1st fret, which would affect the measurement of a scale length in this manner. The position of the nut plus the height of the string grooves can also affect lower-position intonation. Our Bill Puplett-fettled original Junior is very in tune in its lower positions. With its slightly higher nut grooves, the new Junior is just a few cents sharp.

HARDWARE

You need to be careful to compare like with like – and many real vintage pieces will have had parts removed and replaced. Our original Junior's tuners [11], for example, are close repros fitted over two decades ago. Gibson's new aged versions [10] look older,













their 'white' buttons noticeably yellowed. Our top nut was replaced by Bill Puplett with the correct nylon material when the guitar was refretted about the same amount of time ago. In fact, the frets on the new Junior seem bigger (wider and taller) than the ones we remember being replaced. A sensible decision.

Nickel plating ages naturally remarkably quickly, but will only rust once that plating has worn away or been scraped, bashed or nicked. The bass-side bridge stud on our new Junior [12] is heavily rusted and looks rather overdone, not least that the treble-side stud is shiny and pristine. A sweaty player who keeps their palm over the bridge all the way through the set? Well, perhaps...

As we mentioned in our review, the plastic parts on our new Junior are all unaged and sharp-edged, including the truss rod cover. Note, too, how the original's screws [13] are blackened with rust and oxidisation in virtually every position. The new guitar's screws, including those polepieces of the P-90, all look too new.

Overall, as nice and evocative as the new Murphy Lab Junior is, there's just a total lack of simulation of the proposed 60 years worth of grime and dust.

CONTROLS & CIRCUIT

The black 'top hat' knobs on our new Junior [14] also look brand-new. The same goes for their pointed position markers, whereas there are noticeable rust flecks on our original [15] and its gold knobs – certainly the tone control knob – has some green (copper?) oxidation around the skirt. Rather oddly, there's a slight groove around the base of the new Junior's volume knob as if it's been worn by constant use. There's nothing like that on our real '57.

10. All the hardware is aged on the new Junior, including these strip tuners

11. The tuners on our old Junior look less aged despite the fact they were changed some 20 years ago

12. Aside from the heavily worn bass-side bridge post, the bridge looks quite new, as do the pickup and its cover

13. There's less age to our original '57's bridge and studs, and considerably more to the pickup cover and exposed polepieces

14. Note the wear on the new Junior behind the volume control, although the knobs themselves look brand-new

15. The knobs on our old guitar have plenty of marks from use, while the tone control has noticeable green oxidation


16


17

16. The new Junior's circuit appears very similar to the original, without the dust!

17. There's plenty of that in the old Junior's control cavity. Both are wired 50s or vintage style

18. This close-up, taken by the output jack, shows the more simplistic lacquer cracks on the new guitar

19. On the old guitar, you can see the crazing is a lot more complex

20. Again, note the quite mild lacquer crazing by the bridge of the new guitar

21. The primary crazing on the old finish seems caked in grime and there's more complexity here

In isolation, the new Junior certainly looks like a used piece and should continue to age over time

Irrespective of what's underneath, the new Junior pickup is completely unaged [12] and it looks brand-new. Compare that with the real '57 [13]: its screw polepieces are near-black and its cover is noticeably distorted by its mounting screws and dappled with age and use. Like the face of that scratchplate, the cover just looks too new on the contemporary pretender.

Glance inside the two cavities and it's easy to spot the real one. Now, we're not suggesting Gibson ages the inside of the guitar – that might be taking this lark too far. However, component values are different: the tone control on our real Junior [17] measures 276k, not the 534k of the new guitar [16]. Obviously, you can't measure the volume pot without desoldering the pickup, and we're not doing that on our original, although the new Junior volume pot is under spec at 413kohms. Our original volume control is a little noisy at the top of its travel, despite cleaning over the years. I can't bring myself to change it.

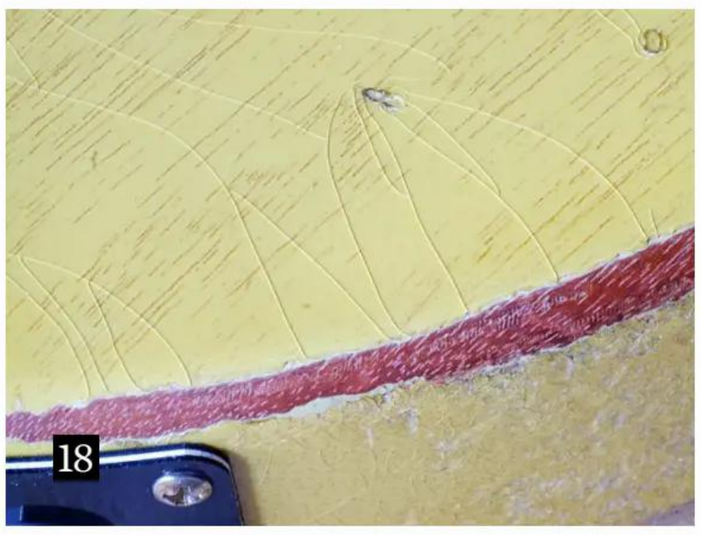
The large tone caps look pretty similar, but without knowing how they're made or indeed the precise (as opposed to nominal) value, that's about all we can say.

FINISH

As we've often pointed out, too many relics have a dull matt finish, and our real Junior [19/21], which has never been polished on my watch, has a deep gloss sheen. The large lacquer cracks across the amber centre of the sunburst stand out and are surrounded by small, finer cracks. Looking under a magnifying loupe, you see how complex the real ageing is.

The similarly glossed Murphy Lab [18/20] is less multi-dimensional, almost cursory in comparison; there's no 3D depth to the cracks, nor the dirt and grime that has worked its way into those of the real thing. And the dings? They look a little casual and almost uniform in places, but this reasonably believable wear is contrasted by the areas where the finish is completely removed – on the edges, considerably in the belt buckle area, and the neck back. But this bare wood on the body looks too new as there's no grime in the wood grain, and there's a noticeable edge where the bare wood meets the finish, as though it's been scraped, not worn or burnished away. The considerable neck wear exposes rather rough feeling wood, although there's less edge to the remaining paint.

In isolation, and bearing in mind this is a brand-new production process, not the real ageing of 60-plus years of being on the planet, the new Junior certainly looks like a used piece. And if the lacquer on the new guitar is as accurate to the old stuff as Gibson believes then it's an ageing process that will continue over time and use. G


18

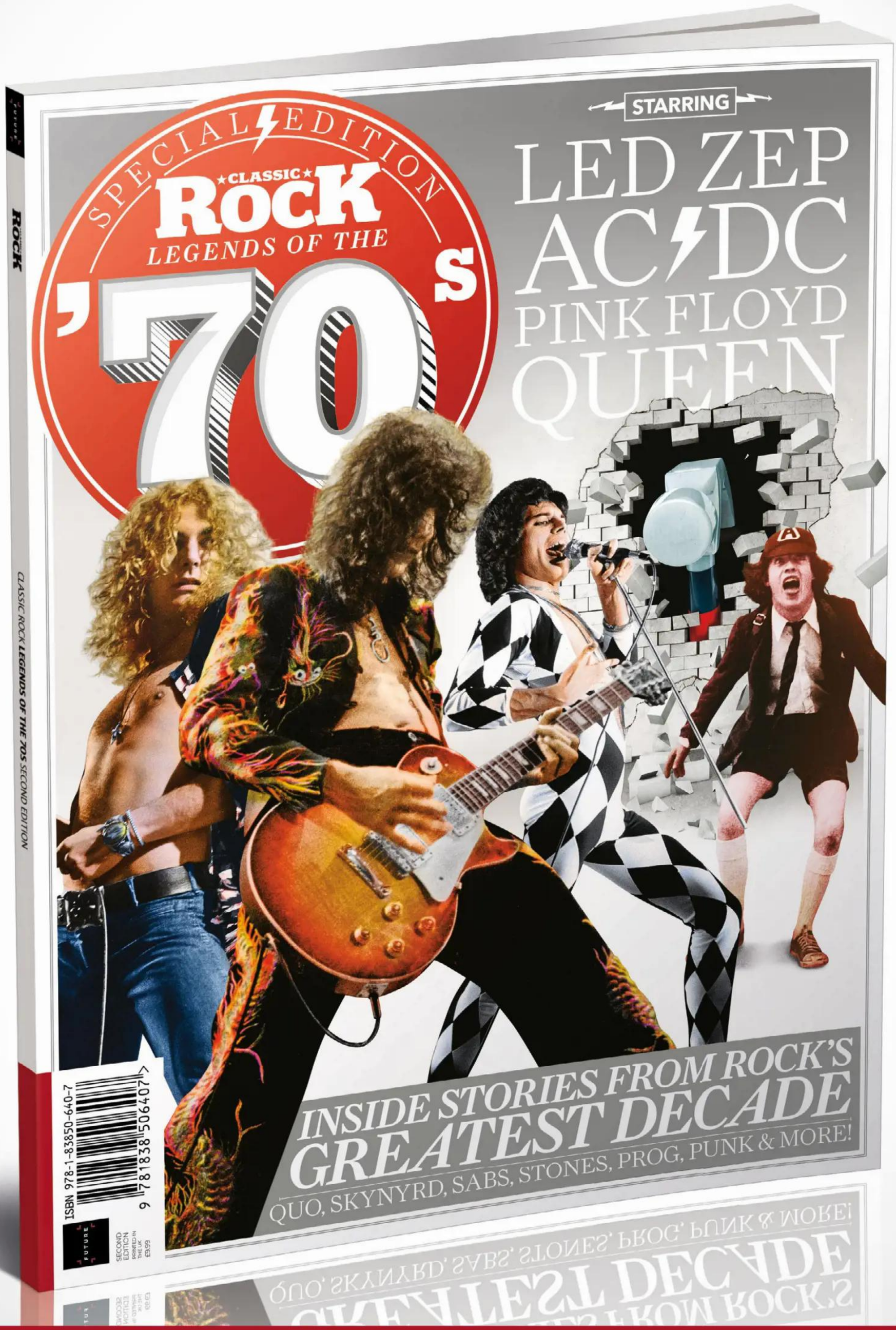

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TEN GREAT

SG & Jr TONES

1 SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

UP ABOVE MY HEAD

TV Gospel Time performance (1962)

1961 LES PAUL CUSTOM



A conduit for jazz, blues and all the music she was exposed to during her showbiz upbringing, Sister Tharpe became a huge star in the late 1930s. Her style was an influence on many of the pioneers of rock 'n' roll, and footage of her on Chicago's 1962 *TV Gospel Time* show proves why. Clutching an immaculate-looking Polar white Les Paul/SG Custom and peeling off dextrous picked bends and doublestops through a cranked Gibson GA-8 Discoverer amp, her performance is testament to an unearthly talent.

© Photo by Tony Evans/Getty Images



2 TONY IOMMI | BLACK SABBATH

BLACK SABBATH

Black Sabbath, 1970

1965 SG SPECIAL

Tony Iommi's red 1965 SG Special with P-90s, named 'Monkey', was drafted in as a replacement for his Strat, which developed a faulty neck pickup during sessions for Sabbath's debut. He added lower-powered pickups, filed the frets down, raised the action, down-tuned, cranked his Laneys and voilà; heavy metal was summoned forth.



3 DEREK TRUCKS

DOWN DON'T BOTHER ME

The Derek Trucks Band, Already Free, 2009

2000 GIBSON '61 REISSUE SG

The slide supremo is synonymous with his 1961 Reissue SG with '57 Classic humbuckers, built in 2000. He first chose the SG model because when he was gigging at the tender age of nine, he found a Les Paul to be too heavy. For this song, recorded live in the studio with the band, he used a powerful combination of Fender Deluxe and Princeton amps.



4 GEORGE HARRISON | THE BEATLES

HEY BULLDOG

Yellow Submarine, 1969

1964 GIBSON SG STANDARD

In 1966, around the same time Lennon and Harrison were following McCartney's lead and adopting the Epiphone Casino, George also took delivery of a 1964 SG Standard. It was his main guitar on the *Revolver* album, and on some later recordings, too, plus he used it sporadically for live work in 1966, before he gave it to Pete Ham of Badfinger around 1969.



5 ROBBY KRIEGER | THE DOORS

LIGHT MY FIRE

The Doors, 1967

1964 SG SPECIAL

If you haven't heard them for a while, listen again to The Doors and pay attention to Robby Krieger's sinuous blending of diverse blues, jazz, rock, exotic flamenco and Indian styles. Also notice his unusual fingerpicking-only technique; and, of course, the fluid, varied tones he wrangled from his 1964 SG Special with P-90s, mostly through Fender Twin amps.



6 ERIC CLAPTON | CREAM

SUNSHINE OF YOUR LOVE

Disraeli Gears, 1967

1964 SG STANDARD

During the triumphant Cream era, between 1967 and the band's demise in 1968, Clapton recorded with a 1964 SG Standard that was to become an iconic guitar. Inspired by the work they'd done for The Beatles, EC commissioned Simon Posthuma and Marijke Koger, known as Dutch artist collective and band The Fool, to 'psychedelicise' the SG.



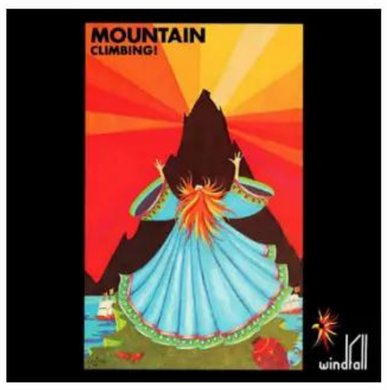
7 CARLOS SANTANA | SANTANA

BLACK MAGIC WOMAN / GYPSY QUEEN

Abraxas, 1970

LES PAUL SPECIAL

Before PRS, Carlos Santana was a Gibson man, and for his take on this Fleetwood Mac song he makes his circa 1961-63 SG-shape P-90 Special sing through an opened-up Fender Twin. For this solo, listen how he rides the volume knob throughout the track to add both sustain and distortion as required.



8 LESLIE WEST | MOUNTAIN

MISSISSIPPI QUEEN

Climbing!, 1970

1956 GIBSON LES PAUL JUNIOR

A gift from Mountain's bassist, Felix Pappalardi, Leslie would define the essence of the single-cutaway Junior's P-90 tone, calling their stripped-down vibe 'a tree with a microphone'. Here the tone's fully dialled with an unorthodox amp; a Sunn Coliseum PA head with KT88 tubes and Eminence cabs that can handle high treble.



9 BILLY JOE ARMSTRONG | GREEN DAY

AMERICAN IDIOT

American Idiot, 2004

1956 LES PAUL JUNIOR

Armstrong's sunburst Les Paul Junior 'Floyd' played such a key role on Green Day's renaissance with the *American Idiot* album, it went on to become the basis for the signature model that followed. "I plugged it in and the sound that was in my head for so many years, it exactly fit that, and even more," he told Gibson.com.



10 ANGUS YOUNG | AC/DC

HIGHWAY TO HELL

Highway To Hell, 1979

1968 GIBSON SG STANDARD

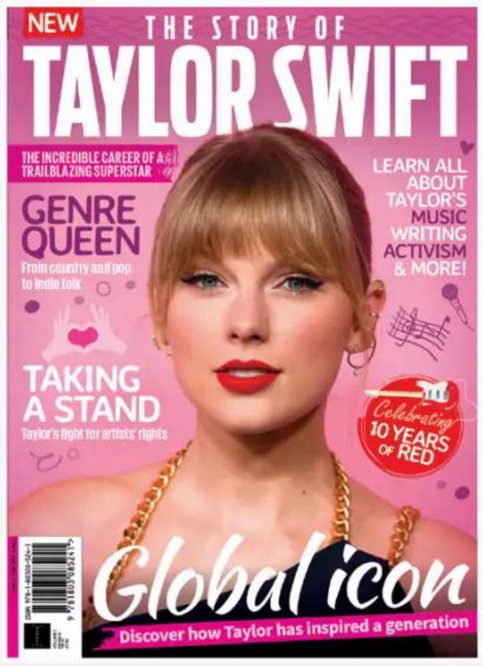
Angus Young favours the SG for its light weight and also because his 1968 Standard (Lyre vibrato removed) has an uncommonly thin neck. His timeless tone is the archetypal roar of vintage pickups through Marshall stacks, with hardly a single effects pedal in sight. In his hands, it remains one of the definitive sounds of classic rock.

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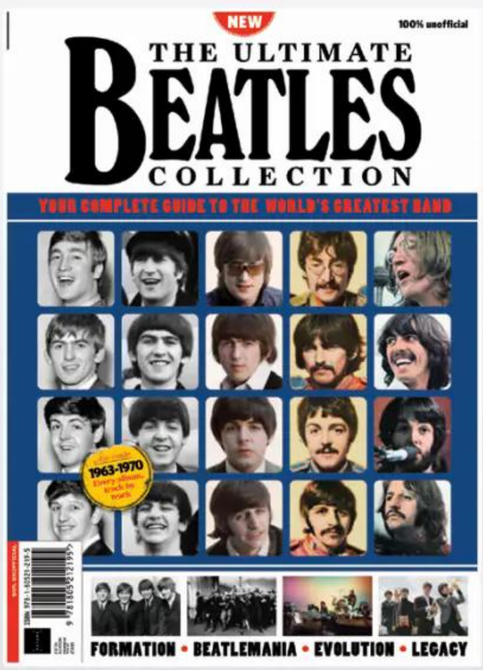
















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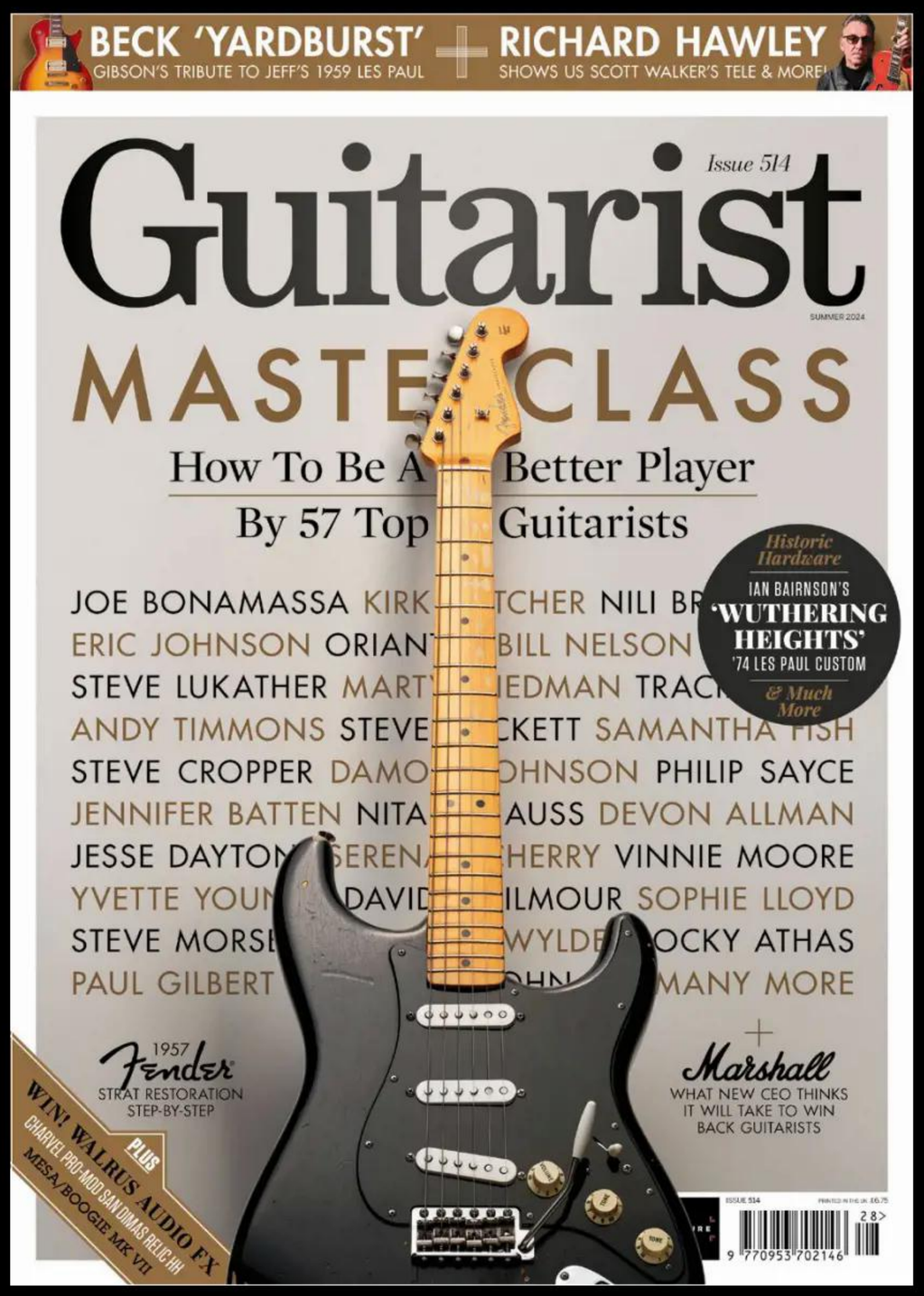


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GIBSON TODAY

This year Gibson celebrates its 130th anniversary – all the more remarkable because many of the core features that made the company's guitars popular a century ago can still be found on gleaming new Les Pauls, 335s and the like today. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Orville Gibson's chisel, patiently chipping curls of wood shavings from a slab of walnut, was shaping the future. And that shape was an elegant arch that itself drew upon violin-making traditions stretching back centuries.

Join us, then, as we celebrate the curious mixture of innovation and continuity that defines the company's iconic guitars to this day.

130 .... Mandolin Wind
138 .... Old Glory
142 .... Ten Great Modern Era Tones

MANDOLIN WIND

Gibson, perhaps more than any other guitar maker, has a history full of interesting nooks and corners – and unanswered questions. We join two of Gibson's top experts on the company's history to try to shine a light on some of the more interesting 'what ifs?' and behind-the-scenes moves that gave us the Gibson we know today

WORDS **JAMIE DICKSON**



There are guitar companies as old as Gibson but few who have made such a breadth of classic instruments – from mandolins and archtops to iconic solidbody electrics, debonair jazz guitars and sweet-strumming acoustics. So if you've ever struggled to get a handle on exactly how key events unfolded in over a century of guitar making by the company, you're not alone. Indeed, the guitar-playing public would never have been privy to many of the factors that shaped the company's evolution.

But decisions that got made in the boardrooms of the 50s and 60s and on the factory floor at Kalamazoo, and the personalities who shaped the company's fortunes, gave us the iconic guitars we know and love today just as much as famous musicians did. That's why we invited two of Gibson's most knowledgeable experts on its history – vice president of product, Mat Koehler, and director of product development and Gibson archives curator, Jason Davidson – to sit down with us so we could find out everything you wanted to know about Gibson but were afraid to ask...

Gibson began life as a mandolin company, essentially. In what ways did mandolin making influence how the company went on to make guitars in your view?

Mat Koehler: "Orville Gibson came up in a time where mandolins were probably the most popular stringed instrument. So, for me, the mandolins are just fundamental to the history of Gibson of being there [to serve] every major genre that developed, especially in America. Orville Gibson was an actor, too, so this theme of adapting, improvising, was part of who he was and his identity."

Jason Davidson: "Yeah, and I think Orville was open not to just mandolins. I think Orville would have built any instrument that either came to his imagination or that was requested of him because, you know, there's mandolins and there's the lute that was famous on his early labels... there's the harp guitars, there's the traditional six-string guitars that he built – all using the same principles."

Mat: "Yeah, supposedly the lute was actually a mandolin, but it was just shaped like a lute."

Gibson's trailblazing work with f-hole archtops in the 1920s was a hugely important step for the company. To what degree was Lloyd Loar responsible for that leap forward?

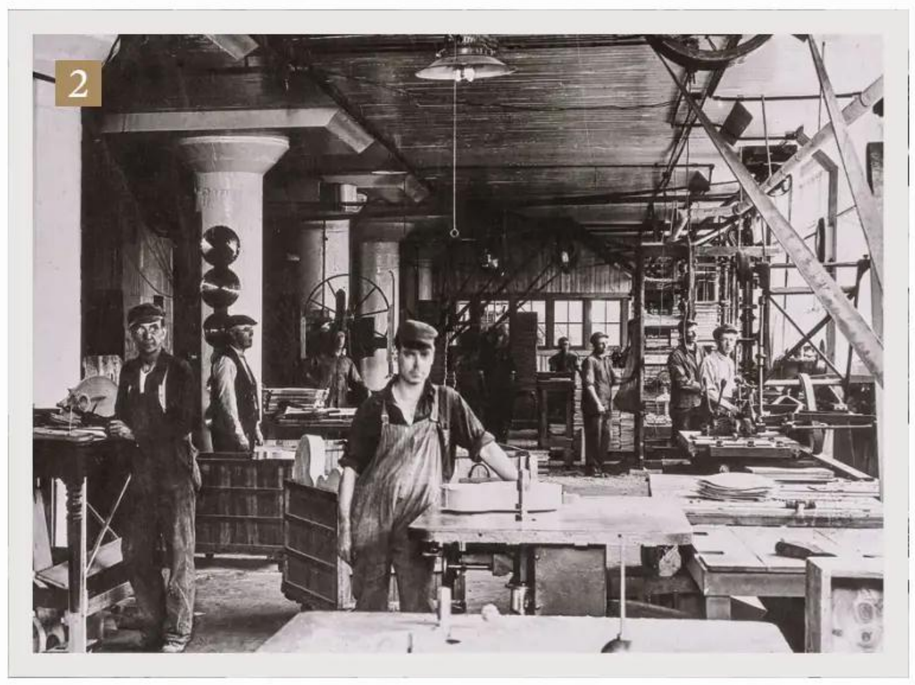
Mat: "I think Loar gets a lot of credit for what, ultimately, was putting f-holes on the guitar. I mean, that's definitely his legacy; he's 'Mr F-Hole' [laughs]. Which is not something that sounds that glamorous, but that lineage continues to this day, obviously, especially on our ES models, the 335s, and so on. So it all kind of began with Lloyd Loar there and that fusion of violin-making mentality with what Orville created, which was this [concept of a] carved-top guitar, a lot of the time made from a single piece of wood.

"So, to me, that was Orville's greatest contribution: the carved approach to creating guitars. A lot of time he was using huge pieces of American walnut for that. He was all about trying to find the most resonant properties of a stringed instrument. Loar was definitely a scientist in his approach as well, and it just happened to be that the fusion of violin-making techniques and Orville's archtop design worked out beautifully."

Fender relied on country artists to help develop its sound – would it be fair to say that jazz guitarists played an equivalent role in the evolution of Gibson as a guitar maker?

Mat: "Yeah, broadly speaking, the most popular guitarists of the day were jazz guitarists, which is incredible to think about when we look at how small the audience size is for jazz music today. But, again, it goes along with innovation – these are hard bop, bebop guitarists like Tal Farlow or the Western Swing guitarists like Billy Byrd and Hank Garland – guitarists who really took the music to the next level with some virtuosity and new thinking.





"Gibson was working with musicians in the hub (cities) of jazz, so it got them a broader reach" ***MAT KOEHLER***

1. Jason Davidson of Gibson says that the company's origins in mandolin-making were simply reflective of what musicians most wanted at the time

2. The Gibson shop floor in 1917. The carved-top guitar became key to growth

3. A 1929 banjo advert reminds us that guitar often took second place to other stringed instruments back then



HISTORICAL IMAGES COURTESY OF GIBSON

Whereas I think Leo was doing something a little bit more local to that area [Fullerton], while Gibson was working with musicians in New York and Chicago and New Orleans and other hubs of jazz, so it kind of got them a little bit broader reach."

We've spoken about Fender having its roots in West Coast country music and Gibson in the jazz scene – do you think that, during the 1950s, the customers for Fender and Gibson were different people as well? Or were they both competing for the same market?

Mat: "I think eventually they were [competing]. But, you know, with Gibson making guitars in Kalamazoo, [its development as a maker] was steeped in the techniques of immigrant furniture makers in the area. And it was a similar kind of thing with Gretsch in New York, where classic, old-school construction techniques met changes in popular music. And I think even Leo was emulating Paul Bigsby in a lot of what he did. So, again, he was just trying to take what was popular near him and make something of it – and not really knowing what would happen.

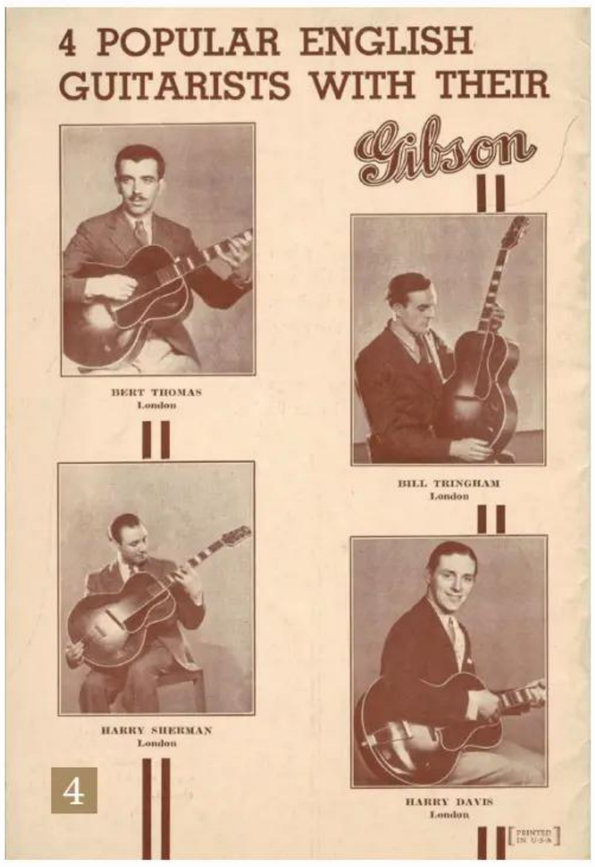
"But it just so happened that solidbody guitars became all the rage, firstly, because of the volume levels involved in the rock 'n' roll movement: early rock depended on that, and you can't really use a big old archtop with a monkey-on-a-stick pickup to blast some rock 'n' roll! So it had to evolve and, fortunately, I think Gibson was right there, and clearly the deal with Les Paul in 1951... I mean, there was no bigger guitarist at the time. They really keyed into what was popular."

When do you think Gibson reached full maturity as an electric guitar maker?

Jason: "Maturity? I would think the late 50s – 1957 to '58 – with all the new solidbody designs and the release of the humbucking pickup. That, I think, is the full maturity. There was still more to go, with the Firebird several years later and other solidbodies down the line, but that is where we reached the top of the mountain."

"The fusion of (Lloyd Loar's) violin-making techniques and Orville Gibon's archtop design worked out beautifully"
MAT KOEHLER

Centuries-old violin-making skills inspired the design of this 1936 Gibson L-5, shot at ATB Guitars in Cheltenham. Yet the f-hole archtops of the 30s gave the company's 50s-era semis such as the 335 their sonic DNA and styling cues



4. Gibson's reputation as a go-to maker for jazz guitarists wasn't restricted to the USA, as this pre-war ad shows – the British players mentioned may have largely sunk into history, but the archtop guitars they hold (or their descendents) are still widely used today

Mat: "Yeah. We had more of a model-year mentality in those days because we were trying to find a good footing [in the solidbody market]. And at various stages of Gibson's more recent history, we've done the same. It's just, like, 'Let's try to develop more different styles and takes and variations, try to home in on what works and what's going to be the most relevant tool for artists.'"

Plenty's been said elsewhere, including previous issues of this magazine, about the development of the original single-cut Les Paul model in 1952. Les Paul himself helped guide the design process for that guitar, but less has been written about the inception of the SG, which was much more of a purely in-house effort from Gibson. What drove Gibson to make such a bold departure from the single-cut Les Paul, do you think?

Mat: "I was going to say it's part of that model-year mentality that I mentioned earlier where [it was seen as critically important to regularly] revise the portfolio. What else happened in 1960? All slim necks, so that was definitely sales feedback. That's the CMI team in Chicago and the sales network giving feedback of, 'We want faster-playing necks,' and so that clearly happened – and the SG style, I think, happened as a result of that.

"But it was also about showing off new capabilities – because, by that time, they had expanded the factory twice, there were three buildings now in 1960, and I know that there were new – what we would call CNC today – but just new carving capabilities that they wanted to show off with the SG. Also, if you think about it logically, it's definitely a departure in terms of looks, but also the body wasn't bound like a Les Paul, in that sharp cutaways are hard to bind, so maybe [binding] was presenting challenges in production [that Gibson wanted to dispense with].

> "Gibson reached maturity in '57/'58 with its solidbody designs and the humbucking pickup" ***JASON DAVIDSON***

5. It's not every day you see a line-up like this – three 1959 Les Paul Standards alongside a 1954 Goldtop. Yet despite the present-day supremacy of the 'Burst, it was Goldtops and Customs that Gibson brought back in 1968, possibly because of dealer requests for them

"So that's how I think about it today: what else was going on that maybe prompted this design? As we know, the best designs come about by necessity, and that's why the SG has had such a long run that continues today – they got it right the first time. Even the side-pull trem did a great job of balancing that body, and then later the Maestro tailpiece. I really think the in-house team spent some time on the SG; I don't think it was just a rough concept that made it into production. It was clearly a very, very refined concept, and we attribute a lot of that to Larry Allers, who was one of the woodworking engineers at Gibson."

Do you think that the short production life of more radical designs such as 1958's Explorer and Flying V meant Gibson got cold feet about innovating at that time?

Jason: "No, I don't think it was getting cold feet. I think [those guitars] were viewed as experimental at the time. They may have sold even more guitars than they thought they would have initially. So I think it was a success in their mind. I don't think it was viewed as a flop. I think it was just showing what we could do."

By the middle of the 60s, you had Clapton and Bloomfield playing 'Bursts and literally kickstarting an interest in 'Bursts that continues to this day. So when Gibson relaunched production of single-cut Les Pauls in 1968, why did it go with black Les Paul Customs and Goldtops, rather than 'Burst reissues?

Mat: "I think it's because they were working with Les Paul, and he was like, 'I've never played a sunburst one' [laughs]. I think



"The SG has had such a long run that continues today because they got it right the first time"

MAT KOEHLER

A 1965 SG Junior in Polaris White sits alongside an equally stunning 1962 SG-shape Les Paul Custom at ATB Guitars. The crisp, shapely lines of the design were intended to show off Gibson's advances in wood shaping capabilities



PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

6. The SG began life as a Les Paul signature model. According to his former tech Tom Doyle, Les accepted that the market wanted a lighter guitar and liked the SG shape's upper-fret access. He had doubts about its tuning stability, however

that's what it was. It was probably that simple. Jason, do you have any thoughts on that?"

Jason: "I don't really have a theory on it. I'd hope it wasn't because someone in R&D was tone-deaf to the music and the players at the time. It could simply have been that the dealers were asking for Les Paul Customs. Because I think that if dealers were asking for and ordering sunburst Les Paul Standards, Gibson probably would have responded, you know? Which they eventually did. But maybe they were scrambling at first and trying to get a sense of what they needed to build, and maybe the dealers that they initially talked to or the salespeople they were hearing back from were saying, 'Goldtops and Les Paul Customs'. So it could have been a result of that because it wasn't much longer after that that they started making sunburst models again. Albeit not to the specs of the 1959 Standards – but they were at least bringing something back."

What were Gibson's best-selling guitars through the 50s and 60s? Do you have a sense of that?

Mat: "By volume, it's going to be the more entry-level guitars. In the 50s, maybe the ES-125 – pretty humble guitars that are not the most identifiable today or the most famous today. Certainly, on the solidbody side, it'd be the Les Paul Junior. So if you're going to go by volume [number of units sold], the lower-priced models are often the ones that are the most popular – and that's true today, too.

"But I would say in terms of the most hallowed and revered models – in the 50s and 60s anyway – were definitely archtops, and by the time you get to the 70s, it's the Les Paul Custom that's the most revered, because of, again, where music was going in the late 50s versus where it was going into the 70s. Very different mindsets, and young guitarists practising at home wanted very different things."

> "By volume (sold), the lower-priced models were often the most popular – and that's true today, too" ***MAT KOEHLER***

We've become used to Custom Colours on Gibsons, thanks to the present-day Custom Shop's work in popularising these originally rare instruments. How integral were custom finishes and other unique or limited-run orders to Gibson's guitar-making business back in the day?

Jason: "Well, I think Gibson's history of custom guitars goes all the way back to the beginning – it was a special-order instrument maker. And we've seen examples of special-order instruments dating all through Gibson's history."

Mat: "Yeah, I think there's a misconception that the Custom Shop as we know it was something that began in the 90s... To an extent, it *was* definitely formalised in '93 and '94, and became its own business unit within the company. But, like Jason said, not only was customisation possible from the very beginning, there was a dedicated space in Kalamazoo – I think it was the third floor – put aside for the special-order department. There would be a written correspondence with Gibson and you could request anything you wanted. If you wanted a Les Paul Special with the tenor neck, or you wanted your Les Paul black like the Les Paul Custom – but you couldn't afford a Les Paul Custom – you'd just get a quote back saying, 'Oh, that'll be $5 more.'"

What are the most unusual 50s and 60s factory-built customs you've encountered over the years?

Jason: "I like... what was it, Mat? Torpedo Joe! That was an interesting one."

Mat: "Yeah, that was, what, '66?"

Jason: "Yeah, '66."

Mat: "This was a guitar in that dark period between when the [single-cut] Les Paul was discontinued and

7. While 'Bursts and the like may dominate the history books, it was the humbler, less expensive models that did the big numbers in terms of sales, such as the various versions of the Les Paul Junior



when we started making it again in ‘68. So there was this... somewhat Les Paul-shaped solidbody guitar that they made for this musician, Torpedo Joe [laughs]. And then there’s the guitar that Kent Westberry ordered. He was one of a few guys in ’58/’59 who ordered a J-200 with a Bigsby-style, six-in-line headstock. So they just received the order and used an Explorer-style headstock in that instance. There were actually a few of those that went out in 1958 and 1959, and we used a different headstock style on pretty much every one of them [laughs]. There was not a lot of consistency. It was just whoever received the order: ‘Okay, let’s go down to the floor and see what we can make happen.’ Those are obviously very unusual, but you’d see a lot of customer-name inlays in them.”

We’ve spoken in the past how behind-the-scenes considerations shape the guitars that players eventually have in their hands – using up surplus stock of Epiphone mini-humbuckers in the Les Paul Deluxe of the early 70s is a good example. What other production-centric things have shaped iconic Gibson guitars over the years?

Mat: “To me, the first thing that comes to mind is just the fact that at Gibson we believe in set-neck construction. A lot of guitarists will look at a bolt-on neck guitar, like a Fender, the same way as a Gibson in terms of their capacity to be used to create music. And absolutely they’re on par [in that respect]; it’s just that the set-neck construction is so much a part of our identity. But it takes so much longer to do and to set, and the neck-setting process is a whole stage of the build process within the factory environment. So, to me, that’s something that I think a lot of guitarists maybe take for granted – they forget all of the work that goes into making a set-neck guitar, especially in Gibsons. They’re definitely crafted longer than any other major brand that I can think of.”

Jason: “I would add the carved top on a Les Paul as well. A carved top is not necessary, but Gibson did it because Gibson was known for carved archtops and we could do it, and that was a differentiator back then.”

“Gibson’s history of custom guitars goes all the way back to the beginning – it was a special-order instrument maker”

JASON DAVIDSON

This elegant 1955 ES-350, shot at ATB Guitars, straddles the two epochs – the pre-war archtop days and the post-war rock ’n’ roll era that followed. The use of a set-neck design unites nearly all Gibson’s designs, however, to this day

Name a major 'crossroads' moment in Gibson's history when the company could have taken a very different turn to what we know today.

Mat: "I was going to say Slash..."

Jason: "That's a good one, yeah. If Slash had picked up a Strat or something, or stuck with his BC Rich..."

Mat: "Right, yeah. Him playing a Les Paul really changed the course of the company in the late 1980s."

Jason: "It did. I was going to say, even just a few years earlier than that, I've heard stories that if Gibson wasn't bought by the previous owners in the mid-80s, it could have just been broken apart and turned into an import brand. It looked pretty bad around '84/'85. Times were tough. I mean, even post-bankruptcy Gibson from 2018 – I've been here a long time and Mat has, too – I'm thankful that KKR and the group that did buy Gibson came in and did that because it brought in the right leadership and the right change of direction for the company, product wise, structure-wise. It could have went another way, for sure. There were a lot of other interested parties."



PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

8. Slash almost single-handedly repopularised the Les Paul in the 1990s, providing a huge boost for the company

> "We're making not only tools for artists – but the best tools that someone can possibly choose" ***MAT KOEHLER***

Are there any unsung heroes in Gibson's history that you think should be better acknowledged?

Jason: "Ward Arbanas. He was a great one. One of the things he did was he ran Epiphone when Gibson purchased it, but he was still with the company up through, roughly, 1990. He was with Gibson through the classic years, all the way up to the modern era pretty much, and was very active throughout – you see him throughout Gibson history in documentation, in photos. I think his last role was running the customer service department, which I ran at Gibson from the early 2000s through to just a few years ago. So I feel a connection with him."

Mat: "Ward's a great one. But I'm going to go with a modern-day hero. This individual started with the company in the Norlin days in the early 1980s. Her name is Lynn Matthews and she was the first female engineer at Gibson, probably the first female engineer in the industry, as far as she knows. That's an accomplishment on its own, but she still works for the company today. An incredible legacy and she was the right-hand person to Rick Gember at the Custom Shop.

"So, all of those engineering projects, all of the historic reissue projects and whatnot, all of that was Lynn. And she's still doing all the behind-the-scenes build and materials stuff for the Custom Shop today. She's also one of the two people responsible for saving a lot of the archival materials by recognising, 'This is important and we need to save this.' She and Keith Medley really did a good job of safeguarding all of our historic materials when no-one else did. So she's who I think of."

Tell us something we probably don't know about Gibson...

Jason: "I would say one misconception you may have heard, at least under the previous ownership, is about high turnover rates – that 'nobody lasts very long at Gibson'. Well, I've been with Gibson for 26 years. We have employees that have been here close to 50 years, since the Nashville plant opened. And it's not just one single person, either, but a number of people."

Mat: "I would also say that another misconception is that we're this [faceless] corporation. But I can tell you, on the inside, it does not feel that way. We are a family. We're a family of people who are extremely passionate about guitars and music and making instruments. We just want to be the preferred choice of artists, you know? And we recognise that we're making not only tools for artists – but the best tools that someone can possibly choose. So we feel a huge sense of responsibility to be providing that experience, and it's palpable throughout the organisation, wherever you go." G

www.gibson.com

OLD GLORY

Tom Murphy has been the driving force behind Gibson's ever-more accurate reissues of vintage Les Pauls, culminating in the creation of the 'Murphy Lab', which crafts the company's hand-aged guitars. We join him to discuss what the Les Paul was designed to be, what it became – and what it takes to make a great one today

WORDS **TONY BACON** PHOTOGRAPHY **ADAM GASSON**

When did you first start working on Les Pauls?

"It goes way back to around 1970, with just an interest in the guitars. I had already started having a knowledge and appreciation for older guitars, like so many other people. I moved to Houston, Texas, in 1969, and there happened to be a culture of old-guitar guys there. My first Les Paul was a 1968 Goldtop, and I guess I'd say my first experience there was I stripped all the gold off of it. I've told people [since then] I am definitely paying for several sins I committed back in the day!

"I actually never planned to be a guitar technician, luthier or repairman, but it finally caught up with me that that's what I was supposed to do – helping other people with their guitars and just letting my passion guide me."

1. Details as small as the exact font shape of the Gibson logo inlay are revised and improved as new info comes to light on how the originals were crafted in the 50s

The flamed maple top has become an emblem of the Les Paul, but less than a third of 1958 to 1960 Les Paul Standards are estimated to have had any figuring in at all. Have we misunderstood the model's past?

"We all have a love of the organic nature of a really beautiful figured top. I have a silly saying that when we see a great top and the guys are marvelling at it, I say, 'This stuff doesn't grow on trees, you know?' And why it's beautiful is it doesn't exist until it's found on a processed tree and so no two are alike, though some are similar. The difference today, and it has been since the 90s, is that we can calculate [production] and produce beautiful, awesome instruments every day through our source of wood, so it's really not a rarity today to find a beautiful top. But think back to the time before that was engineered into the guitars...

"My first experience of a '68 Les Paul was stripping the gold off of it. I'm paying for sins I committed back in the day!" TOM MURPHY



1

"We now have seen what was reported to be the first sunburst Les Paul – it surfaced and actually turned out to have a three-piece top. It looked like they might have tried to make it somewhat symmetrical, where the seams [in the three-piece maple top] were placed on each side of the bridge as opposed to on a Goldtop where you'll see really off-centre seams. But they hadn't yet engineered the centre seam or said, 'Let's make it look all bookmatched' like it is on the back of the jazz guitars. I mean, if you think about it, when it came into being, the top of Les Paul looks like the *back* of a jazz guitar – maple had never been on the front before. So then here comes the Les Paul and then they said, 'Oh, let's showcase the top.'

"But you don't see many '58s with fabulous tops [namely, at the start of the 'Burst's original production run]. I will say that it is *possible* that marketing or engineering then decided, 'Hey, we want to put the seam in the middle and we want really sophisticated-looking wood on the top.' All the same, a totally plain 1959 sunburst Les Paul and a really flamed one were the same price. Exactly the same price. But they are not now."

Did the top-carve change much over time?

"You tend to see it a little bit more pronounced on the '52s and '53s, which was very, very early. I'll tell you this, in the first year that we made the Historics, Matthew Klein – who's one of our engineers – and I did quite a bit of the engineering on the guitars. We wanted to capture a more accurate carving. We did have a couple of originals we were able to look at and take some measurements from, but we didn't have the digital scanning [technology] that we have now.

"Matthew hand-carved a big butcher-block piece of maple to the shape that he gathered from making accurate measurements. We had a measuring gauge on the top centre seam and we progressed

it up through the centre of the guitar, and that gave him some numbers to make a grid from and he then copied that [mapped profile] and hand-carved [a new carving template or 'pattern']. So we had this old carver where the wheel would travel over that pattern and it would reproduce it over on the top of a Les Paul. And that gave us an updated version of the carving. I was satisfied with it, but it didn't take me long before noticing it started to be sort of compromised because guitars had to go through a really heavy-duty belt sander to get the carving ripples out of the top. And so you lost some of that fine detail.

"I'm gonna jump ahead and say the carving today, that you see on our vintage-style Les Pauls, either gold or sunburst, is the most accurate that I've ever seen because it's taken off of a real guitar and transferred to digital machines. I love it. It showcases the look of a Les Paul, with the figured maple."

What's the secret to imparting that subtly 'just right' look to a reissue guitar's top?

"I won't get too technical, but I figured it out because I was around so many guitars. The top of the Les Paul has a plateau in the belly, as we call it, and it's not flat, exactly, but it's not all rounded, either. Through the 80s you'll see really arched tops, focusing on the centre. Well, that's almost flat on a vintage Les Paul to accommodate the pickup rings, the bridge. I discovered that there was a sort of flatness to the whole look of an old Les Paul: the screws are flat-headed, the pickup rings and the covers are for most part level with each other, the bridge is pretty close to the top of the guitar, and then the tailpiece...

"They're all sat on this cool plateaued belly, which, when it gets out toward the edge, drops off pretty quick. [The downward contour radiating outwards from the belly] doesn't go below the binding – though people think it



2. The exact contours of a Les Paul's top are key to its visual appeal, says Tom Murphy, as evidenced in this Murphy Lab 'Burst reissue. He adds that the peak of the arched top is flatter than many would think

does. But as it fans out sideways, the drop from the top of the carving to the bottom is radical and pretty fast, and so it catches light. So when we saw Jimmy Page on stage, there was a crescent-shaped light where we're seeing the carving in the top, and without that definition, you don't see that.

"Today, the carving is a showcase of the top of a Les Paul and I love seeing it. It was really good [in the 50s and 60s] and then it drifted – and in the 70s, they almost lost the carving. There are some guitars from that period where it's totally flat from the bridge to the binding. And a lot of us knew that. So the [accuracy-restoring] things that we're able to do today are like that – the shape of the carving is very, very important."

Tell us something surprising about the Les Paul...

"You know, the first one I ever encountered belonged to a friend. He had bought it and it was like $4,000, which was a lot of money at that period in time. I can't even say what year it was. But he gave me that guitar because I was playing music professionally. Well, that guitar did not weigh 8lb – and that guitar did not sound good. So I never planned to be a technician, like I said, but now I am. But I will tell you that if you can't handle 9lb, you don't need to be playing a Les Paul! I don't know what it is, but there is probably a formula [to define] the ideal weight and density of the body and the neck *and* the top all together.

"We have a lot of engineers here and ways to measure stuff. I had two tops – just the tops – in my hands one time when I was picking tops. And that's just a slab, the two pieces glued together. It's like an inch thick [before carving]. So I had one in one hand and one in the other and I realised these are not even close to the same weight – yet no-one talks about the weight of the top. We measure, we weigh the backs – starting in '93 – and if it didn't weigh 9.5lb or less, we would not use it for the back of a Historic. But that's all we can control. Because once we got it started, we can't adjust it. You're not gonna throw a guitar away if it happens to weigh 10.5lb. But we figured it would control the overall weight if we caught it at the beginning of the back.

"Anyway, I went and weighed these tops: one weighed 3lb and one weighed 6lb. Wow! That's gonna be two entirely different guitars. And they're probably not gonna sound the same because the top that weighs 6lb is the exact same size as the 3lb top, but obviously it's much denser. Well, your bridge is screwed into the top, not the back. So what's gonna sound better: the 3lb top or the 6lb top? So ideally, if you put a really dense, tight, heavier top on a light back, it'll balance out."

How has the process of making accurate reissues of vintage Les Pauls evolved?

"When you look at a vintage Les Paul, it's completely beautiful to me – always was. I would just stare at them and think, 'How did they come up with this cool design?' Les Paul himself was an innovator, he broke a lot of [pre-existing] rules with that design and, like I said, the music eventually caught up with the guitar.

"When I saw my first '68 reissued Goldtop in about 1970 I was disappointed to see the wider binding in the cutaway, which I knew didn't exist in the 50s. That's a technical thing because the routing for the binding follows the top, and it's a quarter of an inch tall at the binding. If you rout it from the back, it's much easier, but when you get to the cutaway, since the top arches up, you'd have to cover all of that with binding. So those guitars are wonderful and very valuable today, but it looked like a compromise. They're really good guitars, but it showed that they weren't trying to replicate 50s guitars; they just had some similar features. The body shape looked like a Les Paul, but if you get right down to it, there were lots of differences. So over the years, aficionados really wanted Gibson to figure it out and nail it.
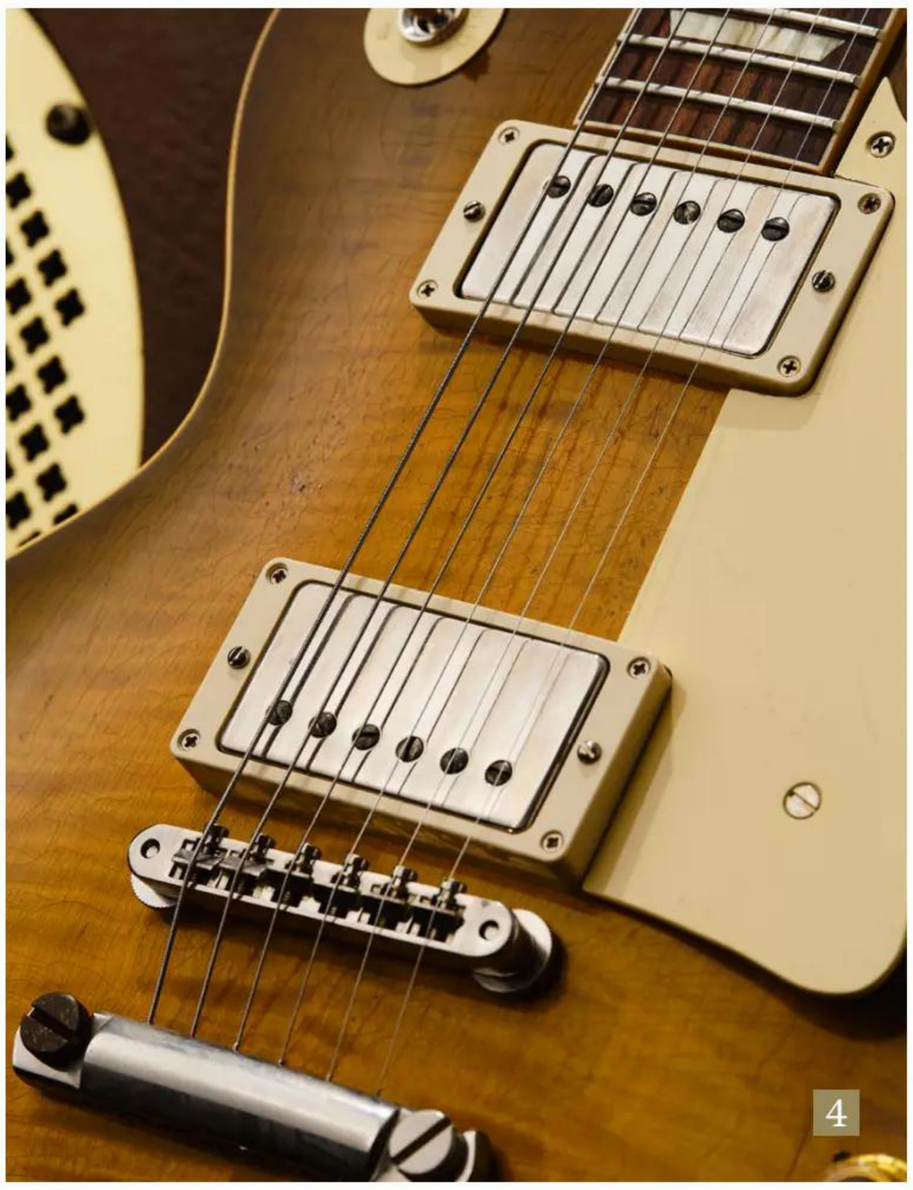
"So you had various attempts by outside consumers – most of them were guitar dealers – to try to get Gibson to [highly accurately] replicate a 50s Les Paul. Because the project was done from the inside to the outside, when we took on Historic that meant Gibson's gonna figure out how to make the guitar right. We don't need anybody else's advice. We'll take real guitars and

3. Subtle ageing – or heavy, as desired – is now the preserve of guitars made in the so-called Murphy Lab, as displayed on the rear of this headstock

4. Everything from pickup covers to plastics and hardware is designed to be as accurate as possible – and today's aged reissues have come quite a long way from the replica 'Bursts of the 80s and 90s

"The carving you see today on our vintage-style Les Pauls is taken off of a real guitar and transferred to digital machines" TOM MURPHY





"Les Paul was an innovator, he broke a lot of rules with the design and the music eventually caught up with the guitar" TOM MURPHY

5. Artist models are also produced in the Murphy Lab, such as this Sergio Vallin 1955 Les Paul Goldtop with Bigsby B7 vibrato and Custombucker at the bridge – a blend of reissue and modded hot-rod Lester

try to copy them. And that's what is done in this building today, all day – replicas of 50s guitars.

"I will tell you that if you look at a current Historic Les Paul and you look at the Gibson logo and peghead face, if you look at the top of the capital 'G' in the logo, it's now rounded, exactly like the 50s. Whereas if you look up to 2019, that had a flat sort of look. I wasn't concerned about it, but I was told we were gonna change it. And it has been changed – and now I can't unsee it. That's how committed the company is to detail on all the guitars. It's like a dream come true for me. When I was involved in '92 and '93 with the Historic coming on, I had no idea we'd be making the guitars so accurate today. It's really great." G

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TEN GREAT MODERN ERA TONES



1 DAN HAWKINS | THE DARKNESS

I BELIEVE IN A THING CALLED LOVE

Permission To Land, 2003

2000 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD



Justin Hawkins kindly bought this for his brother in the early days of the Darkness and it's since become a mainstay live, too. "It has the highest output pickups that they ever made," Dan told *Total Guitar*. "You just knock the volume back a little bit and it sort of jangles, but you can always make it really saturated if you want to. A lot of the time, if I'm doing old-school riff, open-chord AC/DC stuff, I'll knock it to about nine. Then when I need to chug, it's on ten."



2 BILL KELLIHER | MASTODON

BLACK TONGUE

Live At Brixton

1987 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM

Les Paul aficionado Bill bought this from a friend and it soon became a favourite onstage for the progressive Atlantans. The pewter finish with Lace's Nitro Hemi pickups make it a perfect workhorse for the 'Don's heavy riffing and lead intricacies. "It's just a great tuning guitar, Bill told *Total Guitar* in 2012. "The action's perfect."



3 JASON HOOK | FIVE FINGER DEATH PUNCH

LIFT ME UP

The Wrong Side of Heaven and the Righteous Side of Hell, Volume 1, 2013

2013 GIBSON M-4 SHERMAN EXPLORER

The final stretches on the solo here might be tricky on a Les Paul, but Hook's signature model has improved access to the upper frets due to an extended cutaway. The bridge pickup is based on the Seymour Duncan JB, "A good, chunky, medium-high output, well-balanced pickup," he says.



4 SLASH

ROCKET QUEEN

Live From the Roxy, 2014

2010 GIBSON CUSTOM LES PAUL APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

Slash's original *Appetite For Destruction* guitar was a Gibson copy, but the official signature model based on his studio favourite is the real deal. Here, on this recent live album, he's giving it the most thorough workout we can imagine over the 17-plus minutes of classic Slashisms; bluesy bends, doublestops, legato and feel galore.



5 BUCKETHEAD

SOOTHSAYER

live, Gothic Theater, Colorado, 2012

2009 GIBSON BUCKETHEAD LES PAUL SIGNATURE

One of the masked enigma's finest compositions builds with slow arpeggios into an astonishing technical display of speed and control with not just his fretting hand, but his right hand's muting technique as well. Listen out for the killswitch (one of two on the guitar) of his chambered, Alpine White Les Paul signature coming into play, too.



6 MARK TROTTER | LONELY THE BRAVE

BACKROADS

The Day's War, 2014

1990 GIBSON SG CUSTOM

This SG is the most treasured instrument owned by the creative force behind one the finest rock bands to emerge from the UK in recent years. Putting an inheritance from his grandfather to fitting use, the band's original guitarist Mark bought his 'dream guitar'. It's since been retired from touring duties after Gibson supplied him with a replacement model.



7 LZZY HALE | HALESTORM

APOCALYPTIC

Into The Wild Life, 2015

2013 GIBSON LZZY HALE EXPLORER

Lzzy and the band decided to push themselves and record in more of a live setup for their third album, helping to capture the energy of this modern spin on Mississippi Queen-esque blues grind. Lzzy kept things simple but highly effective with her white-with-gold hardware Explorer going through a JCM800 2203.



8 MIKE SULLIVAN | RUSSIAN CIRCLES

1777

Memorial, 2013

EARLY 2000s LES PAUL '57 CUSTOM REISSUE

The guitarist from the instrumental three-piece settled on a Cherry reissue custom for much of the band's fifth album. The inherent sustain, and retrofitting a Dirty Fingers pickup in the bridge for midrange punch and a 498T in the neck, helped deliver the dark heaviness and ethereal ambience.



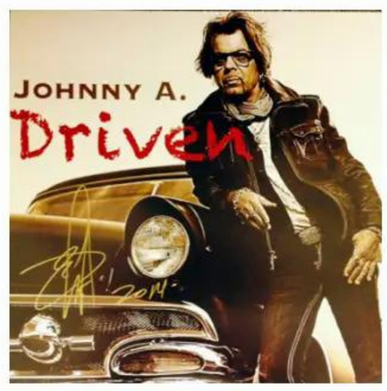
9 ZAKK WYLDE | BLACK LABEL SOCIETY

STILLBORN

The Blessed Hellride, 2003

1999 GIBSON ZAKK WYLDE LES PAUL BULLSEYE

Styled on the bullseye-patterned 1981 Custom known as 'The Grail' that Wylde used in Ozzy's band, Gibson's replica replaces the ebony fretboard with Richlite; a material that doesn't absorb moisture, while aiding Wylde's fast pentatonic runs. Active EMG pickups are also pinch harmonic and sustain-friendly.



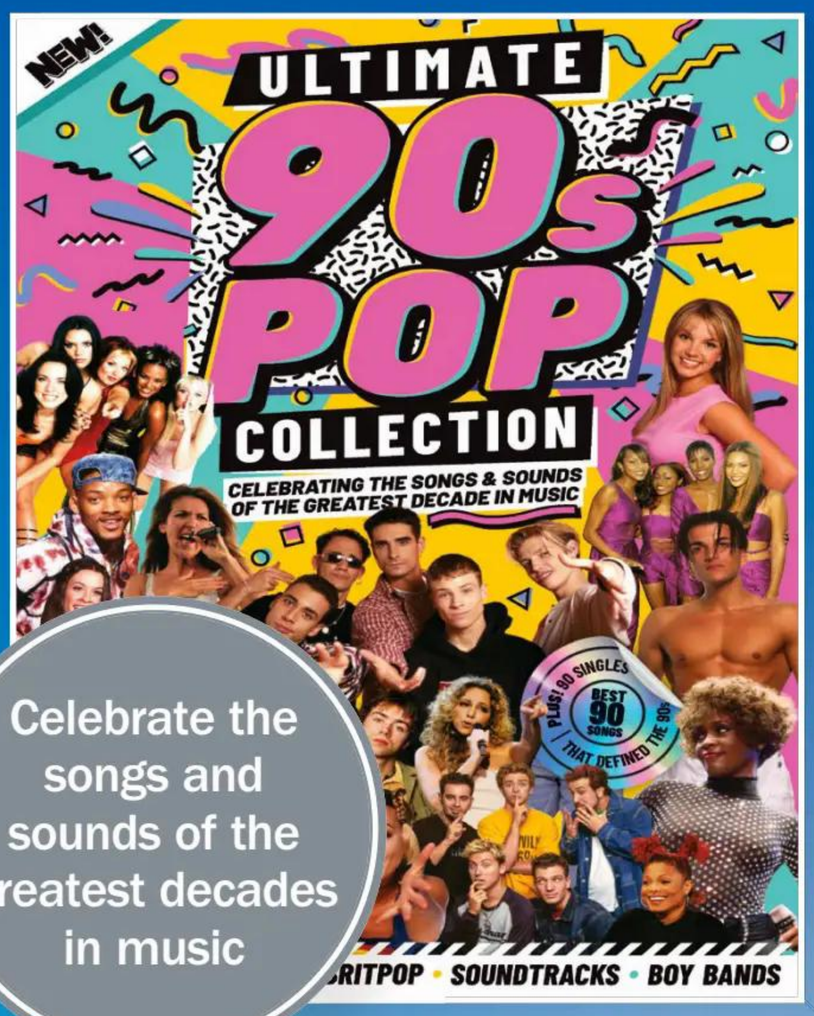
10 JOHNNY A

GONE (LIKE A SUNSET)

Driven, 2014

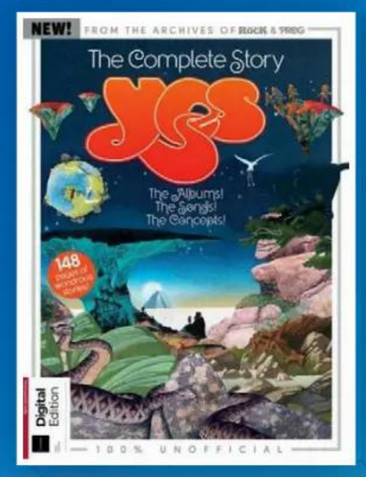
2004 GIBSON JOHNNY A SIGNATURE

After US instrumentalist Johnny Antonopoulos persuaded the Custom Shop to develop a semi-hollow prototype he saw hanging on its wall, he was honoured with not only a signature model, but a whole new design. The '57 'buckers cover classic bases, while the Bigsby gives Johnny added expression to his twang.

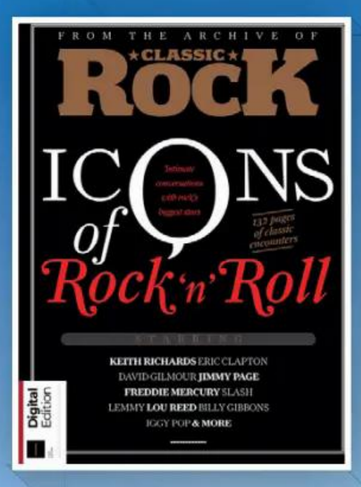


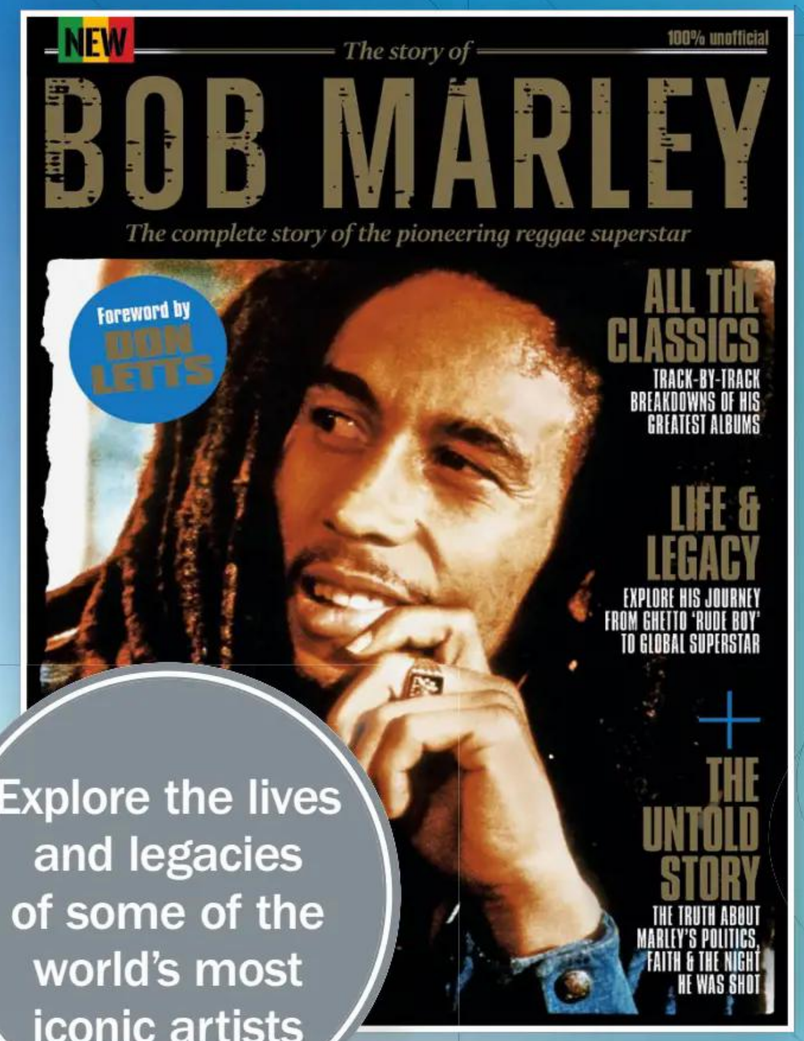
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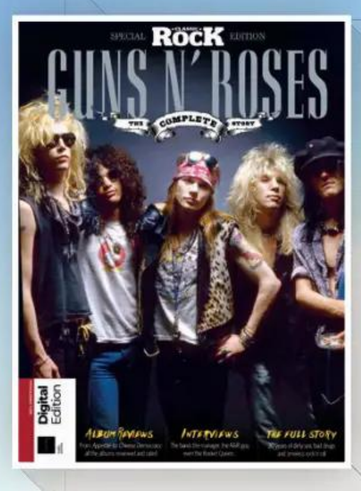




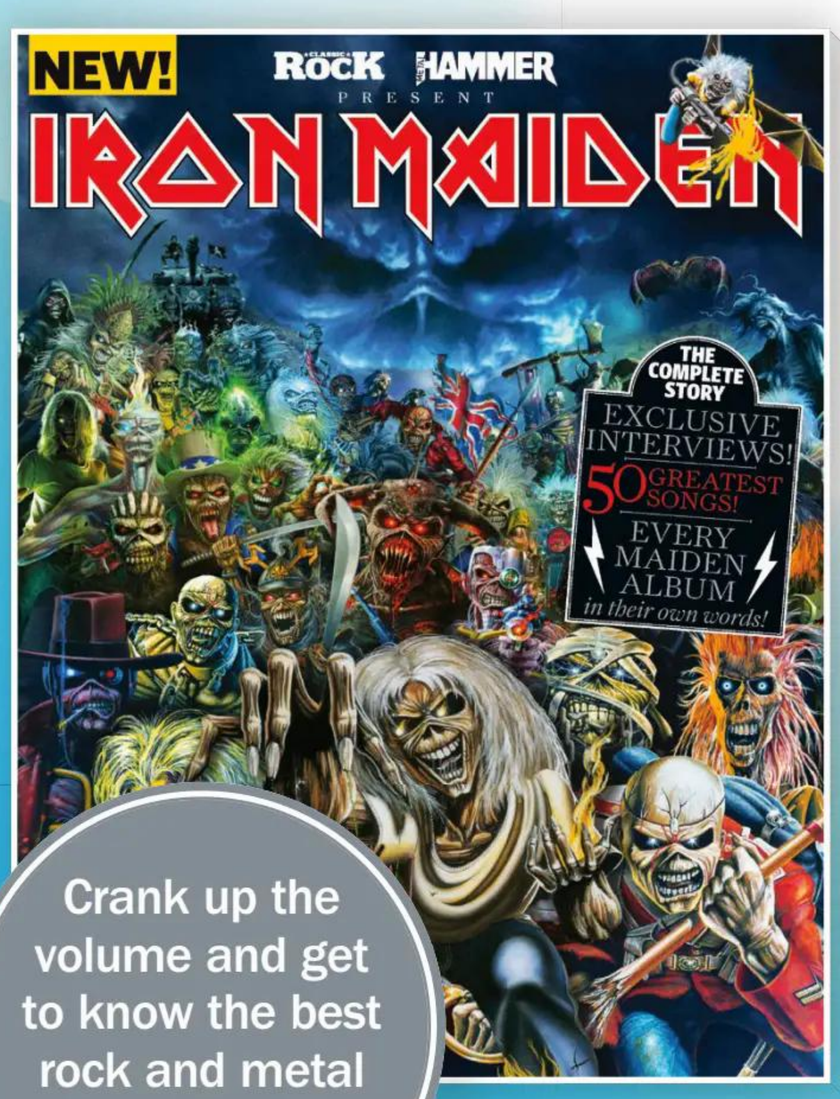
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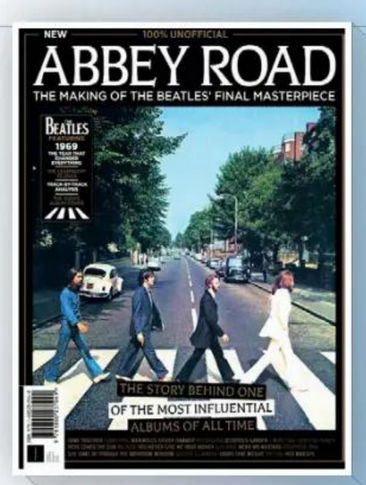


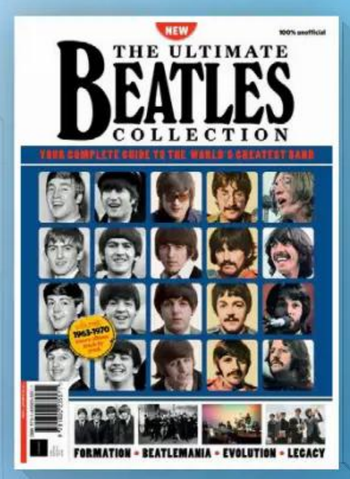






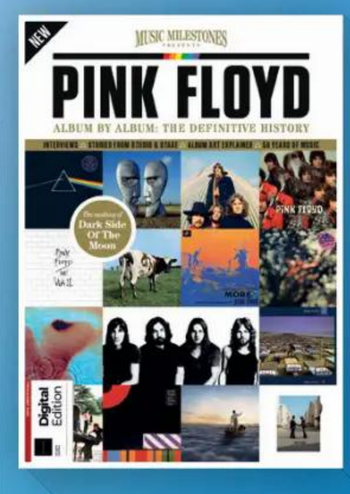
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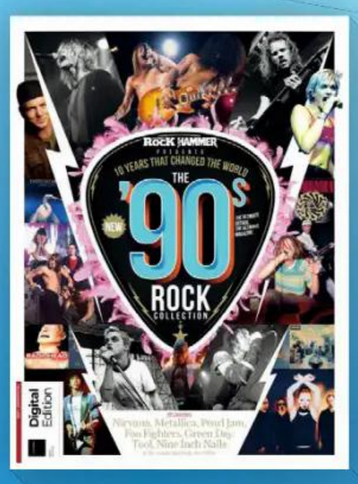






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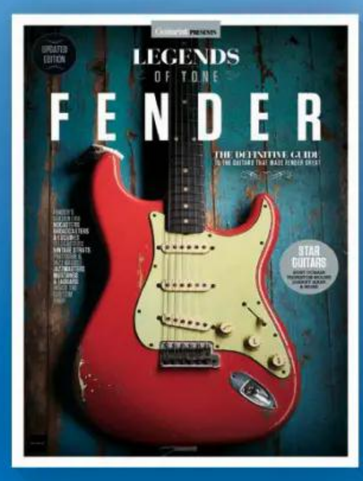




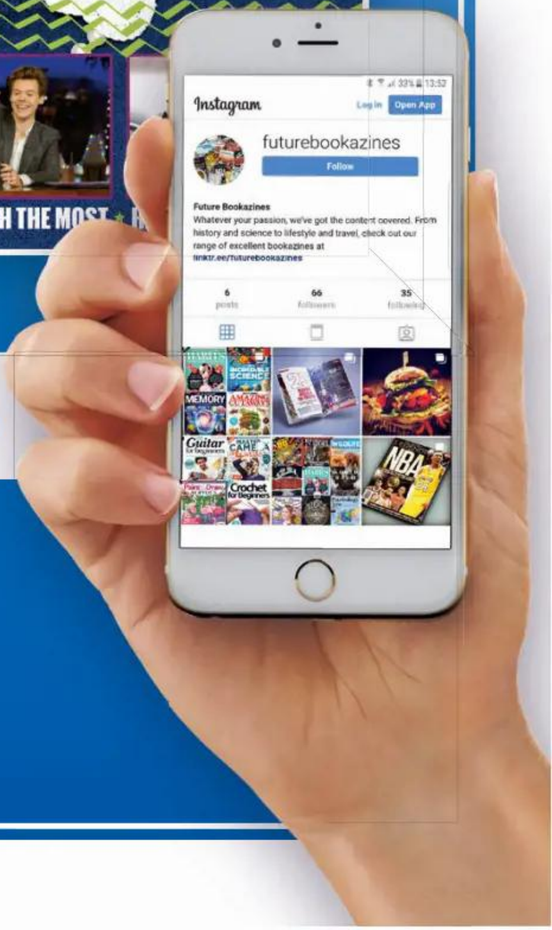








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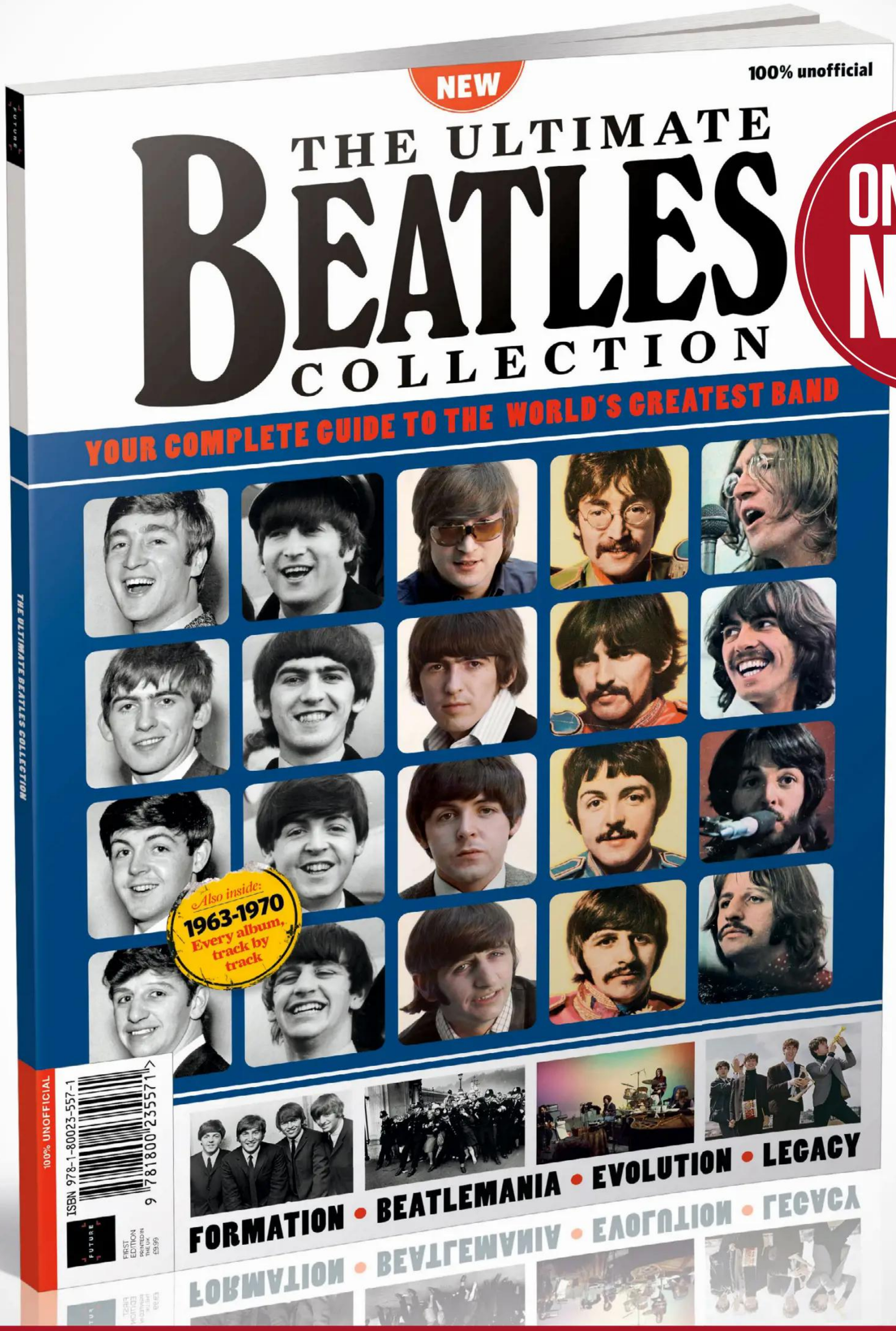
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GIBSON



1958 FLYING V

This icon of the space age has held rock and blues players in its thrall for generations

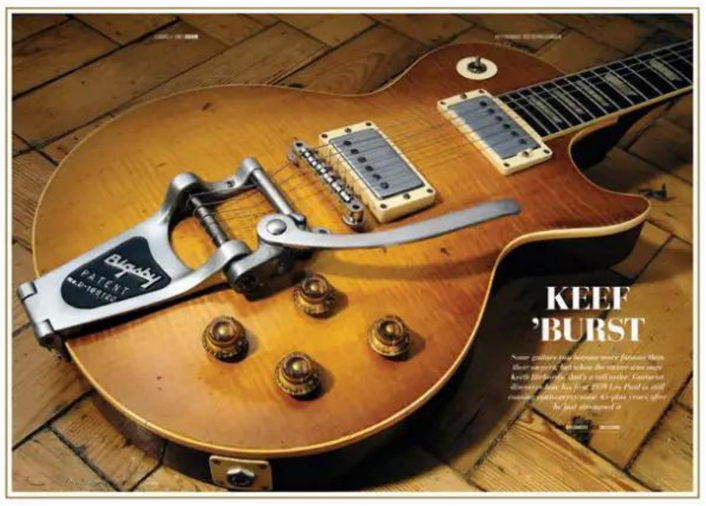
On its launch in 1958 as part of Gibson's Modernist Series, the Flying V shared a $247.50 price tag with the Les Paul Standard. Gibson's design chief and president Ted McCarty had begun developing prototypes the previous year, likely inspired by Cadillac tailfins and the Atomic Age optimism that fuelled a general enthusiasm for all things futuristic that even saw the Ford Motor Company design the Nucleon, a nuclear-powered concept car.

Though the originals didn't sell in sufficient numbers to sustain initial production beyond 1959, artist association – Lonnie Mack, Albert King, Jimi Hendrix – and sheer cool would eventually help the V attain legendary status. With just 81 Flying Vs leaving the factory in 1958, this beautiful original model on display at Guitars: The Museum in Umeå, Sweden is comfortably in the 'Burst bracket when it comes to monetary value.

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