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Every month in *The Guitar Magazine* we take a deep dive into a fascinating guitar collection and find out what makes its owner and curator tick. Sometimes the array of instruments on display represents the spoils of a long career in rock, but often we'll put the spotlight on the well-worn tools of a weekend warrior, or even showcase the wares of a leading vintage dealer.

What all these people have in common is their irrepressible passion for the guitar and the music that the instrument has helped to create. We share that passion, and it's a pretty safe bet that you're reading this because you do, too. Don't worry – you are among friends. This is a safe space where nobody minds if you care irrationally about the number of screws on a Stratocaster pickguard, or the dot spacing at

the 12th fret. In fact, that level of obsession is positively encouraged.

Across the following pages you'll see over 150 jaw-dropping guitars (and some very nice amplifiers and effects, too) that are symptomatic of terminal cases of six-string addiction. For the high-rollers, it's Bursts and pre-CBS Fenders, but you'll also find plenty of more affordable vintage prizes that aren't beyond the reach of us mere mortals. Be warned, what follows is dangerously beautiful, and it will not help to suppress your gear lust one bit...

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ULTIMATE GUITAR COLLECTIONS

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SOUTHERN FRIED

Mississippi native Kris Blakely has one of the most breathtaking guitar collections we've ever encountered, ranging from instruments that saw action in World War II, to Paul Kossoff's 1959 Les Paul Standard. Chris Vinnicombe pays him a visit...

Photography ANA BLAKELY DAVIS

If you've ever whiled away the hours gazing at fine guitars on the internet – and if you haven't, it's entirely possible that you are reading the wrong magazine – you may well be familiar with Kris Blakely, especially if your lust for gear has led you to The Les Paul Forum or Instagram, where Blakely goes by the name 'Fried Okra'.

A popular Southern dish made by frying battered okra in a cast-iron skillet until it's crispy, Fried Okra became Kris's nickname over 30 years ago. As a somewhat worse-for-wear 17-year-old at a house party, he caused a small fire while trying to satiate a case of the munchies by throwing a frozen box of breaded okra into a very hot pan... and promptly falling asleep. Happily, there were no injuries, but the nickname stuck.

Like so many Southern families, music went way back in the Blakely house: "It all started with my father, as well as his family," Kris recalls. "They played various stringed instruments, guitars, mandolins, banjos, et cetera. Every year we have a family reunion back in the hills, near the old stomping grounds as the old folks say. Though it's becoming less every year, it's still a lot of bluegrass and gospel music played whenever the old timers get together. It really is something special.

"My dad, a brother of nine, grew up with his father 'Pawpaw' cutting and hauling pulp wood. Pawpaw was known for making moonshine for a meagre living. After spending time in Parchman [Mississippi State Penitentiary] he decided to get out of that business. My father, not wanting to struggle like his father, started a commercial roofing company in 1966 and became quite successful.

"I remember he would come in from work late in the evenings and play some blues shuffles or some Elvis chords, it was a wonderful time. When I was about nine years old in the late 70s, my dad gave me my first guitar for Christmas. It was a small Harmony parlour-style guitar, which I still have to this day. I guess I really did start collecting early!"

We wonder exactly when he felt the collecting bug bite. "It was thanks to my best friend Trip's brother-in-law Mike," Kris replies. "He was an attorney in Memphis and one hell of a guitar slinger. One summer break

around 1990, Trip and I went to Memphis to visit his sister. While visiting Trip said, 'Okra, let me show you Mike's killer old Les Paul.' It was a 1959 Sunburst Les Paul, and when Mike plugged it into that old Marshall, well, I was blown away. Not knowing much about vintage guitars, Mike showed me what they sold for in a *Vintage Guitar* magazine. Good lord! I had no idea. So my pursuit of vintage guitar collecting began."

THROUGH THE ROOF

After college, Blakely married his high school sweetheart and went to work for his father's roofing business. Travelling around the state with work proved fruitful when it came to guitars, too: "We covered most of





Mississippi, so I was all over the state daily. Back then you could walk into a smalltown pawn shop in Mississippi – we had a lot – and still find vintage Fenders, Gibsons, Rickenbackers, Martins...”

During his daily routes, Kris would stop at pawn shops, old music shops and call in on musicians. Buying and getting leads on guitars and amps – always picking up his weekly copy of *TradeWinds* magazine for the local yard-sale listings – like most collectors, Kris would keep some of his treasures but also (despite sometimes regretting it later) sell them on, “to make a few dollars to keep my guitar-collecting addiction going.”

“When the internet and eBay came along, the pawn shop deals slowly began to diminish,” he remembers. “It was the end of an era. Back in the late 1990s I was checking out a roof leak in a customer’s attic and found a pre-Civil War Martin parlour guitar. Regretfully, I sold it on eBay to a gentleman in Australia. And I guess my last real pawn shop prize was a 1966 Candy Apple Red Strat I found back in 2000, which ironically I also sold on eBay to a guy in California.

“In late 2004 I went through a pretty dark time in my life and just stopped playing and collecting for about five years. As BB said, ‘The thrill is gone’. I mean they just

Previous page **Kris with the 1959 Les Paul** previously owned by Paul Kossoff, and ‘The Bishop’, a 1957 Goldtop sent back to Gibson factory in 1959 for a Sunburst finish

Above left **1957 Fender Esquire**

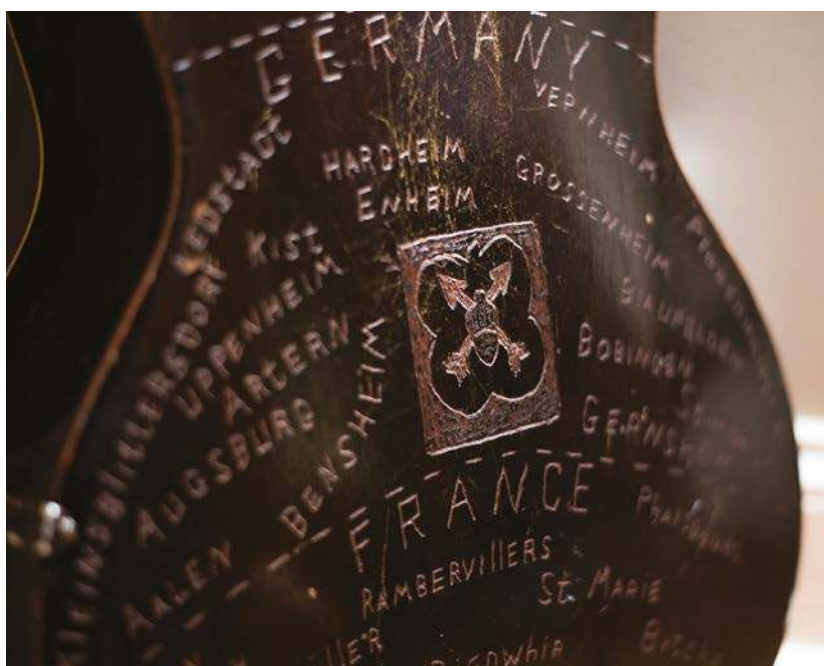
Above right **1955 Tele headstock**

Right **1957 Esquire headstock**

Above **1954 Esquire, ’52 Telecaster, ’56 Fender 5E3 Deluxe and 1960 Fender Champ** with its original box

Opposite **1963 Fender Jaguar in Fiesta Red**





sat in my music room and collected dust, I didn't even open the door to that room anymore. In 2010 I heard that Gibson was releasing a recreation of Paul Kossoff's famous Les Paul, and being a fan of Paul Kossoff, I had to have it. Since then I have found contentment and enjoyment in collecting again. Fried Okra was back!"

ALL RIGHT NOW

Kris didn't stop with Gibson Custom's recreation of Paul Kossoff's Les Paul, however. In 2016 he had an opportunity to acquire the real thing. "Since the day I played Mike's 1959 Les Paul, 28 years ago, I had the fever for a Burst," he admits. "Over the years I had collected quite an arsenal of guitars, but not a real Burst. One day as I looked over my horde, I thought to myself, if I would thin the herd, I could buy a Burst. Okay, that's settled. What Burst would I buy? And with so many fakes and questionable Bursts out there, I'm not taking any chances."

Although in some respects the internet has made it tougher for the guitar collector to get what they want for the price they want to pay, this time the web came to the rescue: "Thanks to The Les Paul Forum and

This page 1934 Gibson L-75 and Gibson-built 1937 Reznick that travelled with their former owners through the Pacific and Europe respectively during WWII

Opposite The Bishop, in addition to its factory sunburst refinish, also features pre-sticker PAF pickups

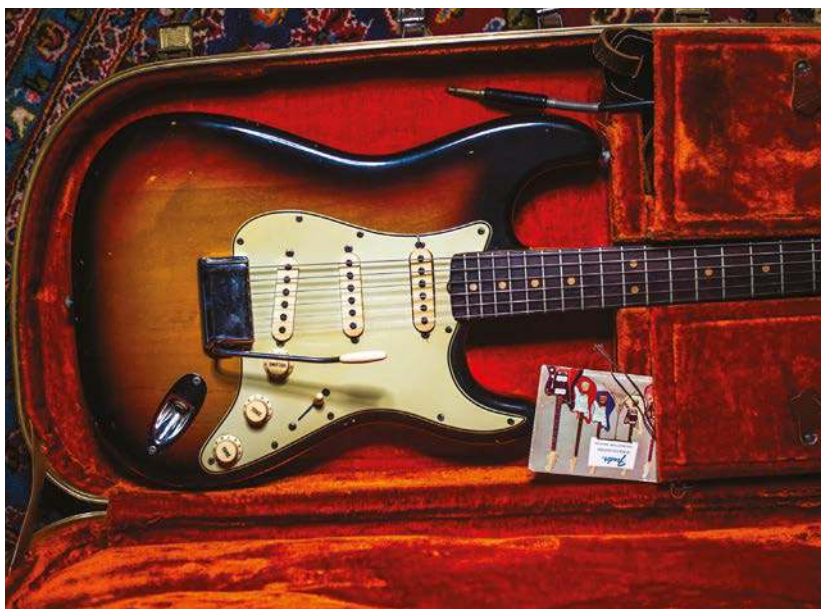
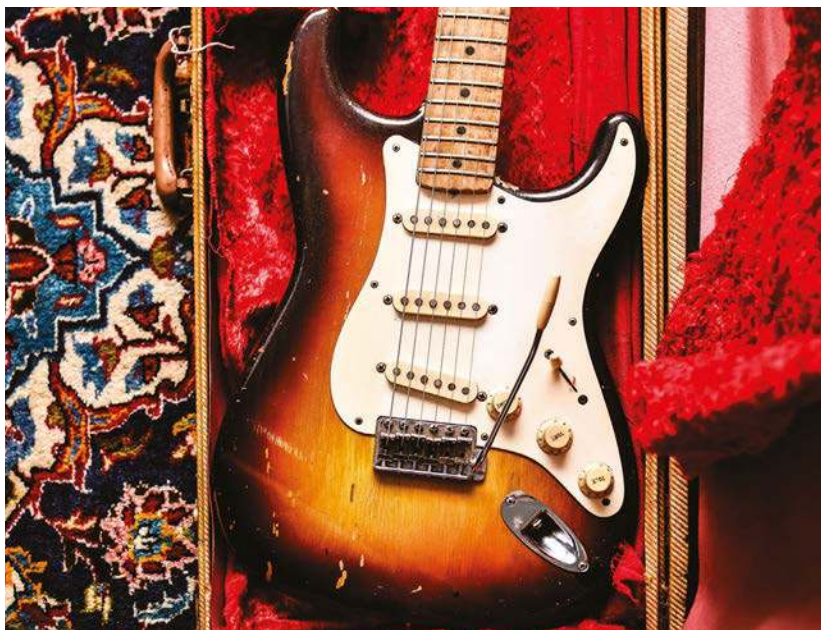




Opposite **1969 Stratocaster** formerly owned by Chris Traynor of Bush

Above left **1963 Stratocaster** with Fender Custom Shop Tobacco Barn amplifier

Above right **1958 Stratocaster** rescued from the great Nashville flood of 2010 and **1964 Stratocaster** in Bulwin 'sunglasses' case



friends, David Plues, Vic DaPra, Charlie Daughtry, Mike Slubowski, Tom Wittrock, Joe Bonamassa, Scott Softy, Drew Winn et cetera... I was able to come to a decision that made sense.

"In 2016 David Plues emailed me and asked if I was interested in the Kossoff Burst. I first thought, yeah right. Me? I'm not worthy of Kossoff's Burst. Besides, I would catch flack from the Kossoff fans for owning it and it not going to a professional player.

My pal Vic DaPra said, 'If you want that Burst, get it. And don't worry about what anyone says.' Good enough for me. So, negotiating began, contracts were drawn up, pay schedules agreed on. David Plues was very instrumental in mediating the whole thing, a genuine Scotsman and a great friend.

"The hard part of thinning the herd began, so I called up my good friend Drew Winn to come and load up his van and get to selling. My wife Tonya and

daughter Ana were both very excited about the Kossoff acquisition. I think as a collector, your family can get a little complacent about guitars, and they don't ever get as excited as we do. So to have them be so enthusiastic about this was awesome. At first I was going to just hop

on a plane, go get it and come home. But I thought, why not make this a family vacation?"

The ultimate guitar-buying trip ended up being combined with a sightseeing holiday, as

Kris and his family explored Edinburgh and its beautiful surroundings. But it was soon time for the main event: "As we travelled via train from Edinburgh to Newcastle along the North Sea, I was able to reflect on the fact that in a couple of hours I was going to be the new caretaker of one of the most iconic guitars of all time. And that's when it hit me, it hit me like a brick thunderstorm. I am going to own Paul Kossoff's legendary broke-neck Les Paul.

"I FIRST THOUGHT, YEAH RIGHT. ME? I'M NOT WORTHY OF PAUL KOSSOFF'S BURST"







"Upon arrival at the station we met David Plues and [the Kossoff Burst's then-owner] Arthur Ramm, from where they drove us to Arthur's home. Arthur said, 'Well, let's see what you travelled all this way for.' Those are the words I will remember for the rest of my life. And there in his music room was Paul Kossoff's infamous Burst. I was so excited that I was trembling, I completely forgot how to play. I couldn't even play a simple blues shuffle that my father taught me when I was a kid. I think for Arthur it was a very emotional time, as he had been the amazing caretaker of it for 40 years since Koss's passing."

MUSEUM PIECES

The Kossoff Les Paul is far from the only guitar in the Blakely collection with history. His treasure trove also contains a 1934 Gibson L-75 and Gibson-built 1937 Reznick that travelled with their former owners through the Pacific and Europe respectively during the Second World War. "I love World War II history and have collected many items from the European theatre and the Pacific theatre of WWII," says Kris. "Since I have a passion for guitars, I have always wanted a stringed instrument from that period. One day I received a

Opposite **1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard** previously owned by **Free legend Paul Kossoff**

Above **Early 1957 Les Paul Goldtop** (pre PAF sticker) and **1967 Marshall 18-watt 2x10 combo**. **1952 Les Paul** with **1950s Gibson dealer sign**



Opposite 1959 Les Paul Junior formerly owned by Martin Barre of Jethro Tull

Above right Various vintage Gibson ephemera, including picks, strings and more

Above left 1965 Firebird III

Right 1963 SG Special with factory-fitted Lyre tailpiece, and 1965 Pelham Blue SG Standard

Above 1982 Epiphone 'open book' headstock made-in-Kalamazoo SGs

message from a friend and fellow collector Arthur Forni, that he had found a 1937 Reznick and said he knew I would be interested in it. Of course I had to have it.

"It belonged to Norman Byerly, who had carved on the back his tour as he travelled through the European theatre of World War II. It is a Gibson-made model KG-11 [usually seen badged as Kalamazoo – Ed] built for the Reznick music shop out of Greensboro, North Carolina. Shortly after, Arthur messaged me about a 1934 Gibson L-75. Again, I had to have it. Belonging to Emmett H Atkinson, this one was taken to the Pacific theatre of WWII. It was hand-painted in true early American art form, a long-gone skill. Finding two guitars, one from each theatre of World War II, is definitely one of the highlights in my collecting career."

Although Kris already has a pretty comprehensive collection, we suspect that he isn't finished just yet. "Most definitely" is his response when we ask if there's anything he'd still like to add. "I would love to add a Fender Broadcaster and Nocaster to, as Joe B calls it, the 'Okra-seum'." 🎸

To see even more from Kris Blakely's collection, follow him on Instagram: www.instagram.com/fried_okra





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AT HOME WITH BONAMASSA

We visit the hardest working guitar player in showbusiness at his California home to see the guitars that made Joe Bonamassa's 12th studio album, *Blues Of Desperation* album take flight...

Story Chris Vinnicombe | Photography Eleanor Jane

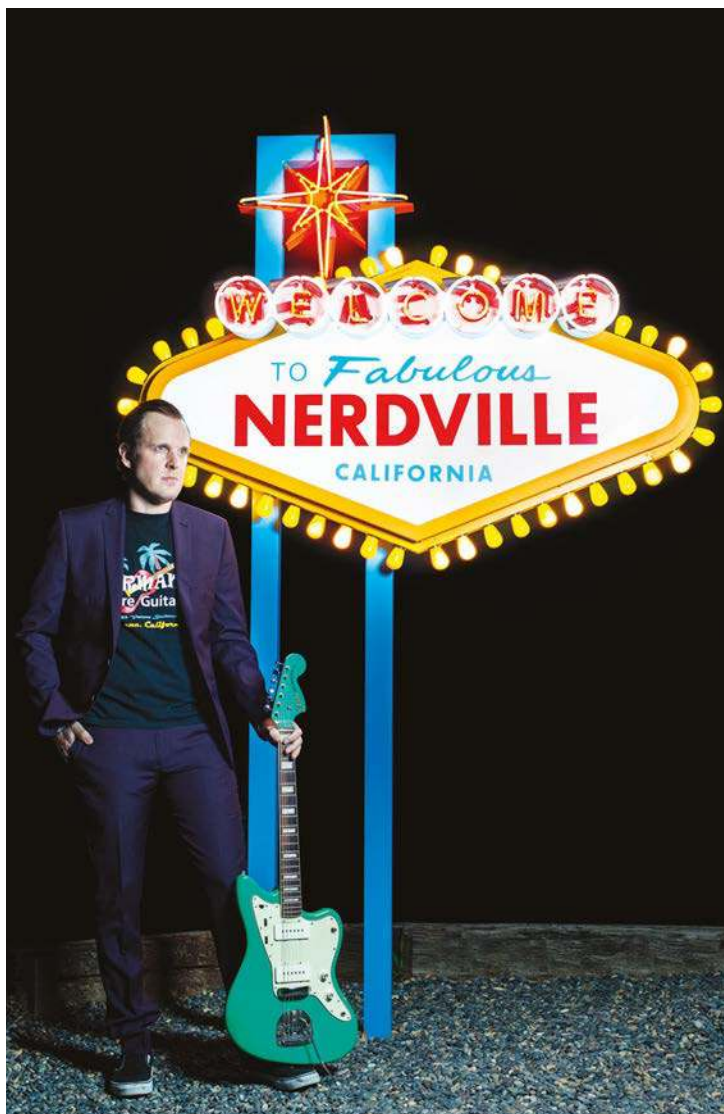
Practice, practice, practice. That, so the old joke goes, is the way you get to Carnegie Hall. Yet after a pair of sold-out acoustic performances at the legendary Midtown Manhattan concert venue in January, the biggest challenge for Joe Bonamassa was getting back. 22-24 January 2016 saw a huge storm dump record-breaking levels of snow on the eastern US. With a New York City travel ban in place and tens of thousands of flight

cancellations, in order to return to the West Coast, Bonamassa had to apply some creative thinking and drive to Boston before flying home from there.

48 hours later, in considerably sunnier conditions, it's with more than a little relief that we wind our way up his driveway in the Hollywood Hills – complete with neon, Vegas-style 'Welcome To Fabulous Nerdville' sign – safe in the knowledge that the guitarist is behind the front door. Described by







Bonamassa as “more of a house now than it ever was,” the property was formerly owned by both songwriter/producer Oliver Leiber and Buckcherry’s Keith Nelson and was the scene of Rod Stewart album sessions during Leiber’s tenure.

These days, it’s home to one of the finest guitar collections on the face of the earth. As we lose ourselves in a view that stretches all the way to Downtown Los Angeles and the ocean beyond, our host is on the telephone closing yet another deal for a rare vintage piece. Today, it’s a 1959 DeArmond R5T amplifier.

Of course, this isn’t just a social visit, and the business at hand is to discuss and photograph the instruments that Bonamassa used on his latest studio long-player, *Blues Of Desperation*. Recorded with two drummers at Grand Victor Sound (the former RCA Studio A) in Nashville – a decision designed by producer and long-time collaborator Kevin Shirley to “put the cat amongst the pigeons” and push Joe out of his comfort zone – the album also represents another first for the star: there are no Marshalls on it.

“It’s weird because I’ve been a Marshall guy for most of my career,” Joe acknowledges, “but there wasn’t the right song.” Instead, most of *Blues Of Desperation*

features his much-talked-about, all-vintage tweed Fender stage rig, which comprises a pair of high-power ’59 Twins and a pair of Bassmans. “It’s the loudest rig I’ve ever used,” he enthuses. “It’s even louder than the Marshalls and the Dumbles. It will shake the ground.

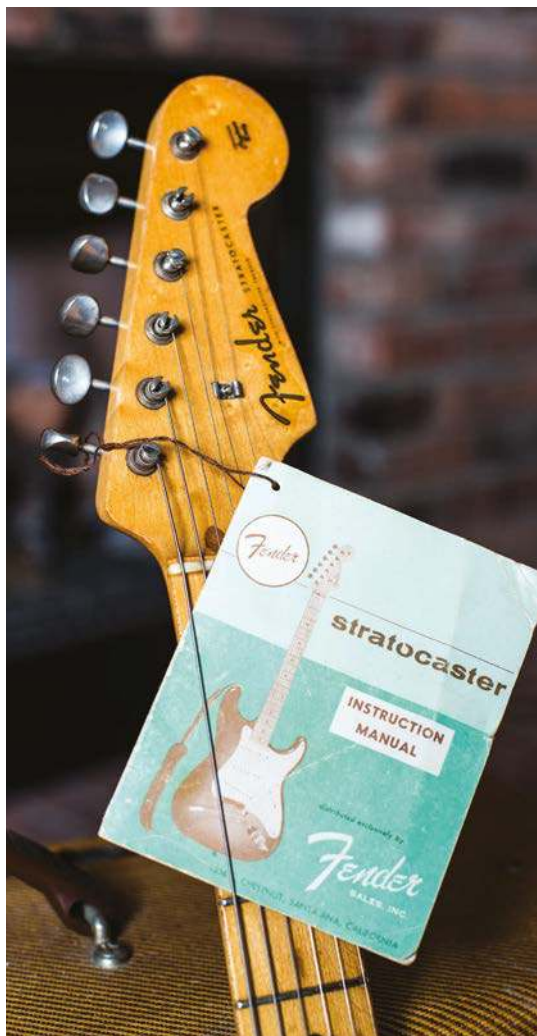
So much so, there was plaster coming off in the studio; every day, there’d be like a layer of dust on top of the amps. One Twin is really the only thing mic’d, but having it all in the room and a couple of room mics just created this cacophony.”

So much for the whole theory about small amps being better for recording, then? “Most of my albums have been recorded with high-powered amps,” Bonamassa replies. “There’s one exception this time: a fuzzy bit on a song called *Mountain Climbing*. The main sound is basically the Firebird and the Twins and the Bassmans, but I also used a ’55 Champ, and the weird thing about a ’55 Champ versus a ’56 or ’57? It’s smaller. They were smaller in ’55, so it’s the same power as a normal Champ and it has this very condensed and punchy sound. I used a brown Deluxe for something, but generally what was happening was that, because the big room in RCA is so big, the low-power amps were sounding too compressed in the track.

“IT’S THE LOUDEST RIG I’VE EVER USED. IT WILL SHAKE THE GROUND. THERE WAS PLASTER COMING OFF IN THE STUDIO”

Above left *Viva GAS Vegas* – the light show *Chez Joe* begins at 5:30 every evening

Opposite and above right This 1951 Nocaster features heavily on the new album and is “all stock except for the PAF that somebody put in the front. If you’re a Keith Richards fan you’re in love! Because of the humbucker in the front it’s out of phase in the middle, so it does the Jimmy Page thing really well. And the flat pole pickup is wound super-hot. I love guitars that are either mint or like this. The sins have already been committed before I purchased it! It’s one of the coolest ones I’ve ever seen. I’ve had it for over a year and I’ve used it a lot. Somebody had it since the 70s and it walked into Guitar Center in Hollywood!”



Above This 1964 Gibson Firebird III has a prominent role on *Mountain Climbing* and the album's title track. "Some people just totally disregard the tailpiece and wrap over the top," says Joe. "I don't do that 'cause it changes the scale and I don't like the tension. With the single-pickup Firebird, you always have to be on the tone control 'cause the lead pickups on these are so bright. The magic of the Firebird III and V is the middle position. To me, VIs are not worth the extra money at all."

Opposite page Joe purchased this '57 Stratocaster with the proceeds from a garage sale that he held last year in Burbank: "I sold a bunch of stuff that I wasn't using – 4x12 cabinets and pedals – and immediately took all the money and bought this. I was like, save me from myself! But trading a bunch of stuff I wasn't using for a '57 blonde Strat seems like a good deal to me."

"A couple of Rod Stewart records were recorded in this house and there's still PVC pipe running into the bedroom. They recorded drums in the living room. If you were recording an amp in this kitchen, it's a very small space. You can get away with a 20- or 30-watt amp and it would sound big, larger than life. If you go into RCA with a little tweed Deluxe and you put a mic in front of it? [shakes head] It's all about how big the space is that you're recording in. Some people swear by small amps. I use a few, and I arguably own more small amps than big amps, but I generally like a big-headroom sound."

All that being said, the aforementioned 20-watt 6G3 brownface Deluxe is part of the "very specific toolkit" that Bonamassa always takes into the recording studio: "Brown Deluxes are fantastically underrated amps. You get the right speaker, and if the amp is co-operating, it just sounds like the best, hardest-sounding Marshall. And it's just this big sound. They are almost like tweed

amps, they are very distorted, very midrange-y. The mics love 'em. Put a 57 or whatever in front of one and you're really loving life."

"BROWN DELUXES ARE
FANTASTICALLY UNDERRATED.
PUT A 57 IN FRONT OF ONE AND
YOU'RE REALLY LOVING LIFE"

Bonomassa continues: "There's always a reverb tank. I use one of the brown Fender spring reverbs, but you can use a brown or a blackface one. A reissue is fine, they all sound the same. I use a reverb tank because I like the chime that it gives, and the

microphone in the studio doesn't hear the reverb as much as live. Live, you're swimming! I always leave the reverb on a little bit and it just gives it a nice sheen."

When it came to choosing the guitars for the album sessions, Bonamassa had to send a selection to Nashville before the bulk of the writing was finished. "I was sending weird stuff that I thought I'd use, maybe, I didn't send a lot. And I purchased a few guitars in Nashville, one from George Gruhn, one from Walter and Christie at Carter Vintage. I got a '23 Gibson Style O that's actually on its way back from Carnegie Hall on a truck somewhere in the Midwest,









hopefully not freezing and cracking.

"And I bought a '51 ES-5 in natural. I'm a sucker for the T-Bone Walker thing. I've got four of 'em, but this is a particularly good one. ES-5s are great to look at until you play them and you go, 'This is a piece of shit! How did T-Bone even get a sound out of this?' So I had that and I had a Grammer Johnny Cash guitar – I have two of them, one is on its way back from Carnegie Hall and the other one is here. That was kind of the acoustic section."

"I TRY TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW ABOUT A GUITAR EVERY DAY. BY PLAYING THEM YOU REALLY GET TO KNOW WHAT'S UP"

saw a lot of action – "a particularly beautiful playing and sounding instrument. It wouldn't matter if it was a '71, it's just a killer guitar" – as did the 1959 Les Paul nicknamed The Snakebite on account of its tell-tale Bigsby holes. "It's the one that cured me of that nasty habit," he says of his favourite Burst. "I've played that

The bulk of the album's electric parts were recorded with a small but discerning collection of toneful vintage instruments. The 1951 Nocaster with a PAF in the neck position that graces the cover of this very issue

Opposite page **Used on Drive**, this 1958 Gretsch Country Club was strung with flatwounds: "It's the same thing with Jaguars and Jazzmasters. As soon as you use flatwound strings, the whole guitar, the scale, everything makes sense."

Above **With the Epiphone Cortez** plugged in, the main acoustic on the album was a 1969 Grammer Johnny Cash. As Joe's suburst model was in transit from NYC, we shot its twin: "As a rhythm guitar, they're really awesome. They're just special guitars."

Opposite page Though it doesn't feature on *Blues Of Desperation*, we couldn't miss the opportunity to photograph the 1959 Les Paul Standard known as Skinnerburst (right) next to Joe's current favourite squeeze, The Snakebite. Just three serial numbers apart, The Snakebite is 9-1948 and Skinnerburst is 9-1951. Joe also owns serial number 9-1953, aka Carmelita

This page Used on album closer *What I've Known For A Very Long Time*, this 1951 Gibson ES-5 is in remarkable condition: "Sometimes you want that quacky out-of-phase thing, sometimes you want to use the front pickup. If the neck angle is right and the lead pickup is up high enough you can get a really cool barking thing out of it. I have another one identical, just the same deal. I also have two sunbursts."





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guitar almost exclusively for a year, it's basically the only one I play now. I love it. I play it every day. When you find the one, you find the one."

Joe also used his 1964 Firebird III "a surprising amount": "The cool thing about a Firebird? In a studio setting – and I always trust Kevin's judgement – I'm never moving mics unless I hear something and hate it after a first take. I always default to the Les Paul and he'll say, 'that needs to be brighter, maybe like a Tele'. And if the Les Paul is too dark and the Tele is too bright, the best option is the Firebird. It drives right up the middle, where it's almost like instant Jimmy Page. It's got that quirky middle position thing going on. I used the Firebird a lot."

A 1958 Gretsch and a blonde '57 Stratocaster also made appearances, but by far the most leftfield choice was an Epiphone FT-45 Cortez acoustic fitted with a sixties DeArmond pickup. "It was a gift from a fan of mine in Fort Myers," Joe explains. "It was his brother's, he didn't play so he gave it to me. I tried to give him some money and he wouldn't take any, so I said that I would use it on the record. I just brought it because it's actually a really nice instrument."

"It's not a valuable guitar whatsoever, but we have this song called This Train that opens the record and none of it sounded right; the Firebird didn't sound right, the Les Paul and Strat didn't sound right, and I plugged the Epiphone into my live rig, and because the amps were isolated it didn't feed back and I could just wail on it! It produced a very interesting sound, a very Elmore James kind of thing. You can hear me try to bend with acoustic strings – I think the solo was done on the acoustic as well. It was just one of those things

that just worked. You'd never call that in a million years. If I heard it I'd think it sounded like the front pickup on some Kay or something like that, but it's this cool, crazy Epiphone that seemed to work. But if I plugged in the Epiphone anywhere in the vicinity of the rig and turned the pickup all the way up like I did, I think the top would just explode off of it."

As an avid collector of vintage guitars, amplifiers and even point-of-sale memorabilia such as illuminated

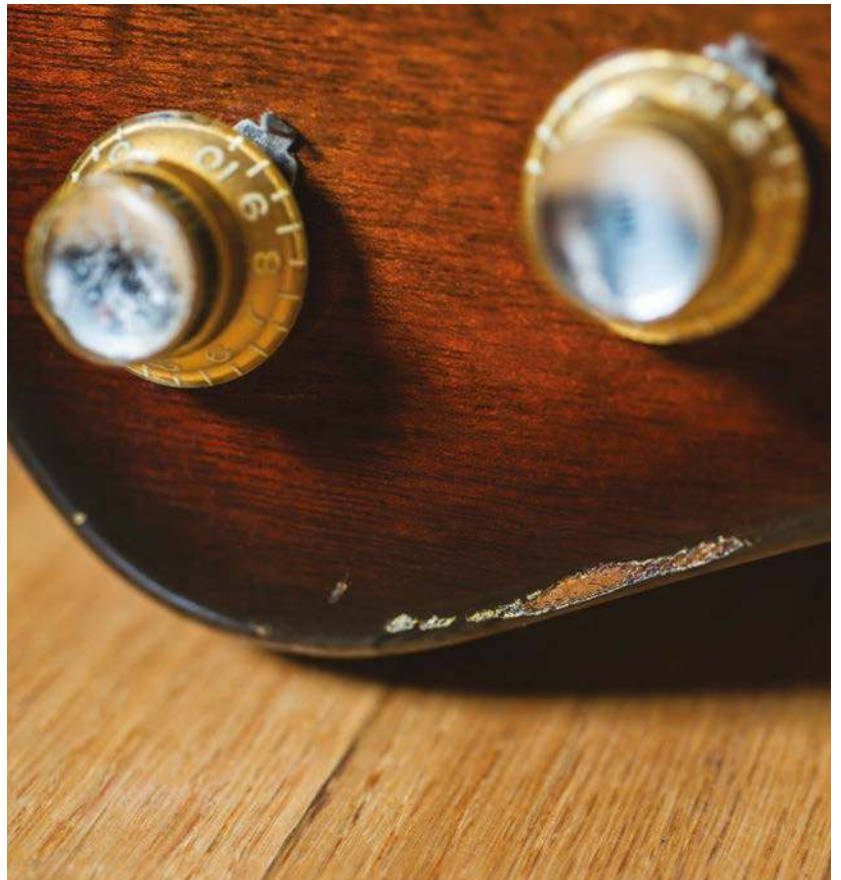
signage and branded clocks, Bonamassa is only half joking when he claims that "most of my life is spent on the phone with some dude with a credit card!" That said, he still believes that using these musical instruments for their intended purpose and taking the time

to establish a relationship with them is the most important thing.

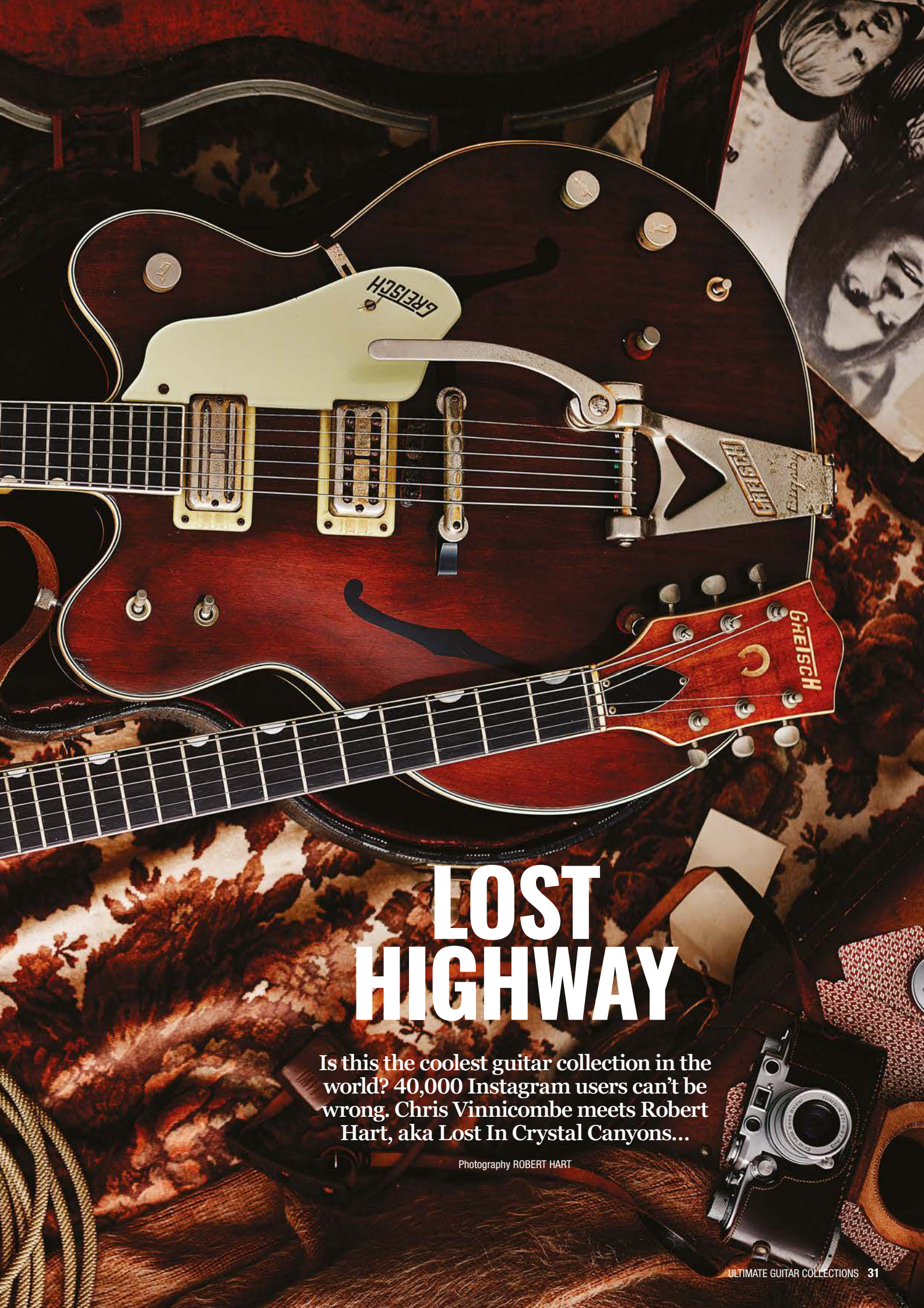
"I try to learn something new about a guitar every day," he says. "You've gotta play 'em. You've gotta understand that by playing them, that's when you really get to know what's up. I hate it when people buy an R9 or anything from the Custom Shop and immediately go out and spend \$3,000 on aftermarket parts – why don't you just play it for a couple of gigs? Or even if you don't have any gigs, why don't you just sit there for three or four hours, zone out, beat the thing into oblivion and all of a sudden the guitar looks real; the more you play it, the guitar looks real! It's almost like a Hollywood agent: 'We love you, now just change everything about you!' And then there's a cat that can pull out a sandwich-bodied '78 Les Paul Pro that weighs 12 pounds, plug it into a Lab Series L5 – retail value of guitar and amp \$1,000 – and kick ass..." 🐱

"I'VE PLAYED THAT GUITAR
ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY FOR A
YEAR, IT'S BASICALLY THE ONLY
ONE I PLAY NOW. I LOVE IT"

Above Joe's beautifully-worn #1 Burst is known as The Snakebite on account of its still-visible Bigsby vibrato tailpiece holes. "I've had it about a year. It was purchased at a pawnshop in North Carolina for \$700 back in 1987, ironically by a fellow whose wife works for my production company in South Carolina. He sold it to a friend of mine and then I got it. He made a tiny profit! The neck is very small for a '59. It had a Bigsby on it and nobody plugged the holes, which I like. It's honest."





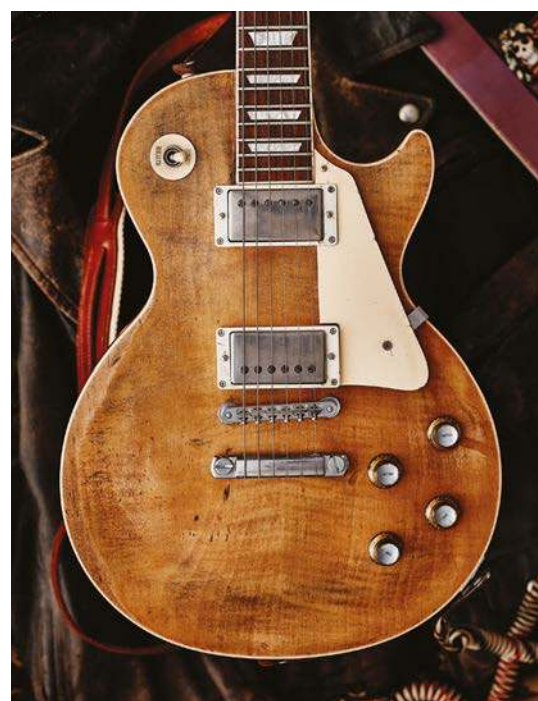


LOST HIGHWAY

Is this the coolest guitar collection in the world? 40,000 Instagram users can't be wrong. Chris Vinnicombe meets Robert Hart, aka Lost In Crystal Canyons...

Photography ROBERT HART





Scrolling through the relentless parade of pictures on your Instagram feed has become one of the easiest ways to kill time, especially if you're a guitarist. The supply of interesting gear to gawk at and lust after is seemingly endless, and for some gear companies it has become the most important place to market their wares. It's also a fantastic place to discover new musicians.

Amidst the all of the noise, however, some accounts stand out because they bring a high-end artistic sensibility to the table that goes way beyond a quick mobile phone snap with a grainy vintage filter applied to it – Lost In Crystal Canyons is undoubtedly one of those. Named after a lyric from the song Thrasher – one of

Neil Young's most vivid slices of acoustic balladry – the account is run by the affable Robert Hart: a unabashed guitar fanatic from New Zealand whose Shadowlands (www.shadowlands.co) photography studio is situated

"JANSEN, COMMODORE AND MATON WERE PIONEERING THEIR OWN TECHNIQUES FOR INTERESTING RESULTS"

in the historic Auckland suburb of Eden Terrace.

Hart's guitar collection is a mixture of classic designs, modern boutique instruments and pawn shop curios, with a common thread: everything is cool as hell. Robert was kind enough to shoot some choice guitars from his envious

treasure trove especially for The Guitar Magazine and – as is often the case on his Instagram account – they are surrounded by an artful selection of gear, clothing and vintage ephemera.

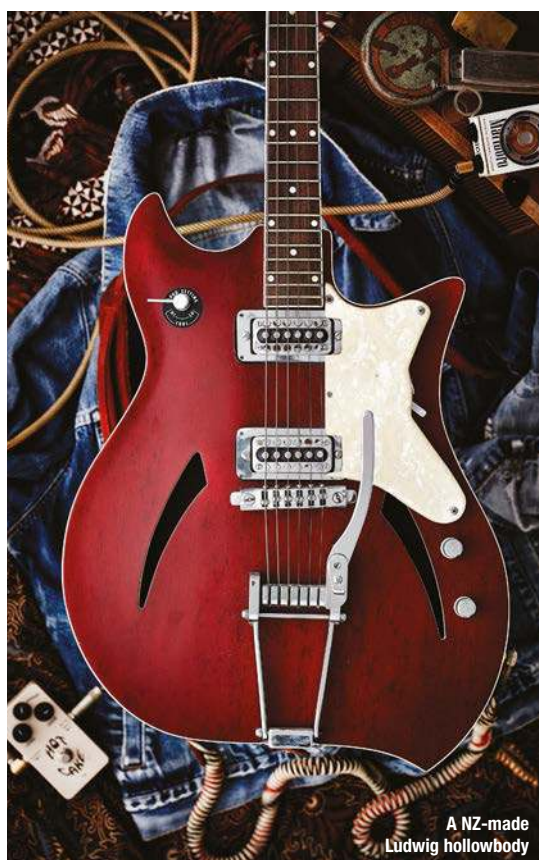
Previous pages **Mid-60s Gretsch 6120 and 6122**

Opposite page **"These are mid-60s Maton Fyrbyrds. The one without the shark-bite was an export model made for New Zealand, featuring the NZ-made Milton vibrato"**

Above left **"Two Hummingbirds made by Tokai in the 60s – the brown one has a built-in fuzz"**

Above top right **A Gretsch Custom Shop Penguin, Master Built by Stephen Stern**

Above bottom right **A 2005 Les Paul Faded that came to Robert "destroyed" so he brought it back from the grave**







VIEW FINDER

As you can see from the photographs used in this feature, the man certainly knows how to dress a scene, but how did his love affair with guitars catch fire?

"My first guitar was a black Epiphone S-type I bought when I was 14 years old," Robert recalls. "But my true love for guitars developed in 1996 with a Fender Jag-Stang in a world of fuzz-infused grunge. Collecting is in my blood; my father is an avid collector of all things nautical. Whatever it is you choose to collect, it's the thrill of the hunt that can get addictive."

The spoils of that hunt very often find their way onto Instagram and perhaps inevitably, there's a common

thread running through Hart's day job and the way he chooses to display his wonderful trophies. "Each shoot at my photography studio, Shadowlands, is an exercise in styling," he says. "Which I guess develops

a refined eye and strong understanding of light, which has flowed over into my personal work.

"By day I shoot everything from fashion to jewellery to beer bottles, so when I come home to unwind, the work takes on my personal aesthetic naturally. The continuity of Lost In Crystal

Canyons is a result of the things I have collected over the years and surround myself with. I'm a hunter-gatherer, and the things that I connect with always have a history, which is why there is a sense of nostalgia in my photos."

"I'VE ALWAYS APPRECIATED
BOUTIQUE BUILDERS. THE
FRANK BROTHERS SHAPE IS
MODERN, YET CLASSIC"

Above top left "The toilet-shaped thing has a faux-wood top. Based on the inlays I think it was made in Japan in the 60s by Norma Guitars"

Above bottom left A stock Gibson SG from around 1968

Above right "The Frank Brothers Arcade has a MojoAxe tailpiece, Seymour Duncan Joe Bonamassa Amos PAFs, aged Grovers and a Bumble Bee harness from 59 Parts. Amazing!"



Three of Robert's Les Pauls (bottom to top): another 2005 Faded, a mid-2000s Goldtop with Mojo P-90 Gold Foil in the bridge, and mid-90s Plaintop with Tru-Clone PAFs and harness





"These two are custom builds by Kauer in Shoreline Gold – left is a Banshee with TV Jones pickups and the other is a Super Chief with two Mojo Dual Foils"



Opposite **Robert Hart at home with his custom Frank Brothers Arcade model**

Right **Two vintage Supros, and an early 1960s stock Harmony H75**

SOUTHERN ROCK

While many of the guitars pictured across these pages are classic designs with which we are all familiar, some of the most rare and unusual instruments in Hart's collection originate from the Southern Hemisphere, and it's a topic that he is clearly very passionate about.

"During the late 50s boom of rock 'n' roll, New Zealand had stringent import laws," he reveals. "This created an isolated industry of our own down here. Brands such as Jansen, Commodore and Maton were

"COLLECTING IS IN MY
BLOOD: IT'S THE THRILL
OF THE HUNT THAT CAN
GET ADDICTIVE"

pioneering their own techniques, which produced some very interesting takes on the classics. I have a number of beautiful Australasian pieces in the collection, which I will be featuring in my upcoming book, through which I hope to capture a piece of history before it's lost."

Another model that catches our eye is from much further afield, however – and it also happens to be Hart's latest addition to the fold. His Frank Brothers Arcade would be handsome enough in its own right, but Hart's model has been furnished with some custom features by the boutique Toronto firm.

"I've always been a fan of boutique builders," says Hart. "And I thought it would be amazing to get Frank Brothers to do a custom build. Their shape is incredibly modern yet intrinsically classic – pairing that with a 50s trapezoidal tail, plus the epic tortoiseshell accents and off-white colour, ticks all my boxes. Their attention to detail is impeccable and that's something I really appreciate in this day of mass production."

PLUGGING IN

When it's time to amplify his enviable collection, Hart turns to a Marshall Bluesbreaker and a Swart with one of the North Carolina amp company's Night Light attenuators built in. "I tend to use [the Swart] more often due to living in a loft," he remarks. "My favourite pedal at the moment is an early 70s New Zealand-made Hot Cake; it sounds amazing."

Though Hart says the Swart and his ES-330 would be his desert island rig, we wonder if there's anything that even someone with a collection as varied as this can still be lusting after? "I have a long list," he admits. "With a TK Smith Special at the top. And another Frank Brothers Malcolm Young-inspired creation. That, and I'm always on the hunt for New Zealand-made oddities." 🎸

To see more of Robert's guitars and photography visit www.instagram.com/lostincrystalcanyons or www.shadowlands.co





DAY IN DAY OUT

For a quarter of a century, Feeder have endured as one of the UK's most consistent rock bands, outlasting many of their peers and still going strong with a new best-of and mini-album released at the end of 2017. Josh Gardner sits down with frontman Grant Nicholas and bassist Taka Hirose to talk through the instruments that have shaped their musical journey. Prepare for offsets...

Photography **ELEANOR JANE**

It's been 21 years since Feeder released their first album, *Swim*, and over 25 since Newport friends Grant Nicholas and Jon Lee met Japanese bassist Taka Hirose in London, and set themselves on a path that would lead to top five hit singles, platinum-selling albums and major festival headline slots. "It's a long time isn't it? I never expected us to last this long!" jokes Taka. "Probably not!" adds Grant. "It seems like a long time. But from the start, Jon and myself were very driven, and we were into it for a career – we didn't want to just make one album and then disappear. We've always been more about the songs – that's always been our goal. To be a band where it doesn't really matter what people think at the time, it's about having songs that are timeless, and maybe 10, 20 years after they were recorded they still stand up. That was always the plan and we've stuck to that – and that's probably why we're still here, I suppose!"

Despite the highs, however, the pair have also had to deal with great tragedy. Lee's suicide in 2002 is the kind of devastating moment that many of us would struggle to get past, but Grant and Taka have been galvanised by their shared loss, "It being two of us has made us stronger, and feel more strongly about what we do," Taka affirms. "Grant is always the driving force. If he's not talking about a guitar, he's talking about a song – and that hasn't changed!"

COMFORT IN SOUND

Talking guitar is what we're here for, of course, and it's a subject that the pair both know very well indeed. Grant has a love affair with Jazzmasters that borders on the obsessive – and he came to Fender's quirky offset at a

time when not a lot of people in the UK music scene were playing them.

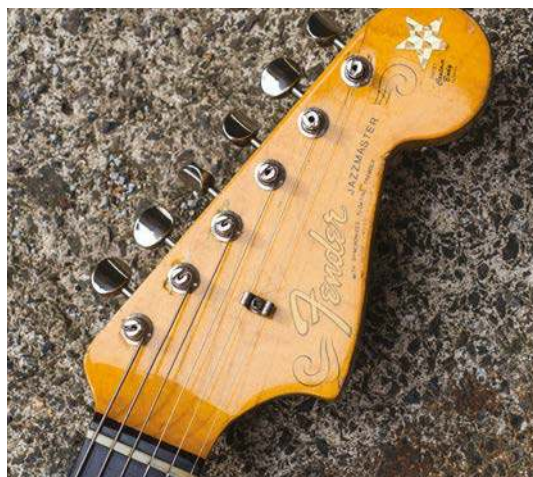
"No there weren't really," Grant confirms. "I just liked the shape. I was playing Telecasters, I had an SG... but the Jazzmaster appealed to me because they weren't so popular then. My first Jazzmaster, I swapped it for like £200 and a Whammy pedal, and I just fell in love with the shape of it. I liked the fact that even though I'm not a big-framed person, I like guitars that have a little bit of weight to them, and also it being the longer scale. I love the Jag and the Mustangs, but the Jazzmaster just suited my playing more and suited my style. I mess around with them quite a bit – I change pickups and bridges and that stuff."

On the flipside, Taka's bass collection is a fascinating mix of classic designs, boutique curios from his homeland, and most interestingly of all, instruments that he's built himself under the brand ReBirth. It seems like an unusual thing for a rock star to do, but it makes sense when Taka shares the details of his pre-band career.

"After high school I worked at the ESP factory in the mountains for just over two years," he explains. "I've loved making stuff since I was a kid, and I love guitars and bass... it was good fun! But I was young – 18, 19... living in the mountains when you're that age it's like, 'How has my life ended up here?! I want to see the world!'"

PICTURE PERFECT YOUTH

Grant's collection of guitars extends far beyond the instruments that he's brought along to share with us today, but they're the ones that mean the most to him,



and there's no more special guitar in his collection his 1966 Jazzmaster affectionately known, to fans at least, as 'Old Brown'.

"Or Old Jesus as I call it!" Grant chuckles, in relation to the sticker between the pickups. "That's my first one – the one that I did the swap for. It's my most sentimental one – my '59 is the one that I use for recording, but this is the one that people know me for, because that's the one I've most used, and the one I used on the main stage of Reading back at the 90s.

"Old Brown is a '66, but it's a bit of Frankenstein, yet it's got a great vibe. It was worn when I bought it, but I've certainly added a fair bit of wear to it over the years – it's been thrown around a bit. It's got a really lovely neck, it's got a great sound and I really love the square

inlays and the binding on the neck – that's my personal favourite era of Jazzmaster, with the big headstock. It's got a lot of character, it plays really well.

"The pickups I use live in all my Jazzmasters are Seymour Duncan Quarter Pounders, because they give me that really fat sound. I've used other pickups, but the Quarter Pounder for me just covers a lot of ground in Feeder – I had humbuckers in there for a while, I had a JB in the bridge for a while when I was using my amps in a different way, but now I'm mainly on single coils it's difficult to switch to a humbucker guitar when the amp is set a certain way. You can get away with it on certain things, but the Quarter Pounder in the Old Jesus is pretty much my signature sound. It's got a lot of tones in it, and I'd be absolutely devastated if it ever got nicked

or anything – it's an old faithful.

Everyone has that guitar, don't they? Most of the guitar players of my era had that one guitar that's the one, with Neil Young and

his Les Paul, and that's my signature guitar."

"MY FIRST JAZZMASTER, I SWAPPED IT FOR £200 AND A WHAMMY PEDAL, AND I JUST FELL IN LOVE. I LIKE GUITARS THAT HAVE A LITTLE BIT OF WEIGHT TO THEM"

TINSEL TOWN

Another of Grant's signature guitars is a 1964 model that's been finished in eye-catching silver sparkle finish. "It's another iconic guitar for me," he enthuses. "That's on a close par with Old Brown because I've had it almost as long. It was originally like a dirty white colour. It's a

This page Grant's got his 1964 Jazzmaster refinished in silver sparkle and modded with a Seymour Duncan Antiquity humbucker in the neck position

Opposite Grant with his most iconic Jazzmaster – his sunburst 1966 model that's nicknamed 'Old Brown' by fans, or 'Old Jesus' by him



'64, but again that's got a Seymour Duncan Antiquity in the front and a Quarter Pounder in the bridge. I think it had two humbuckers in it at one point. Then when I moved back to single-coils I swapped the bridge out but I kept the neck pickup, because it really has that really fat, really creamy sound that I need for some of the solos and guitar lines in Feeder, so it's just nice to have one that does that.

"For example, there's a song called Turn that has this really filthy guitar sound on the solo, so to compensate for that I hit the front pickup and it gives that fat, saturated sound. So yeah that one's called Wales, and I've had it for a long time – I actually had it refinished in that silver sparkle, and that's kind of become another trademark for us. I've actually got two matching '64s in silver sparkle, but this is the one with the most history.

"That one's got a Mastery Bridge in it – Old Brown has got a Staytrem. They're really good – I was just buying the Mustang, but when I tried the Staytrem I was really impressed. It's probably my favourite bridge to use as a replacement. I've always changed my bridges to the Mustang-style unit, because it's better for live use, and also I tend to fix all my bridges so they don't really move. It's just better for tuning.

"Staytrem do one that has a thicker post that's more of a fixed one... but I only found that out afterwards! So I wrap copper tape around the posts so it's really wedged in there. It's the sort of thing I've done since I started playing them in the early 90s. It's quite hard to find, you buy it in art shops.

"The '64 and the Old Brown were my two first Jazzmasters. It's been used on everything as well! It's





a beautiful guitar to play, it's got a lovely feel. It's got a little bit more weight in the body than old brown, but it's an absolute corker guitar, it's got a beautiful neck. You know you get some Jazzmasters that just feel better than others – even if you buy a vintage one they don't always feel as good, but they all get better with a bit of wear, y'know, because it's been played.

Any guitar just gets better wear I think.”

QUICK FADE

Grant clearly has a thing for sunburst Jazzmasters, but his late-80s Japan-made example has seen a bit more abuse than it might initially appear. “That's got a real history to it,” Grant remembers. “God, we're going back a long time ago... I bought it in Japan, and it was cheap.

It was a nice guitar to play, and I think I used that guitar at Reading at one of our big main stage appearances. If you look at any of the early Feeder footage, it used to have an oval Feeder sticker on the top of it.

“Basically what happened was that it's been completely trashed over the years! I took the neck off it, and put the neck on another Jazzmaster, I don't know why I did it, but it was just this body that's been living there for a while – this body with a broken scratchplate. I think I might have smashed it and thrown it against the wall a few times to make it look a bit more messed up for the *Renegades* video. But yeah, to cut a long story short, Taka started doing this thing called ReBirth Guitars, and that was one of his first experiments.

“So I gave him a body, some pickups and a

scratchplate.

And then for the neck... when Feeder headlined Download Festival it was a pretty big gig for us, but it was a tough gig, and I

“WHEN FEEDER HEADLINED DOWNLOAD, I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME, BUT I TRASHED TWO AND A HALF GRAND'S WORTH OF JAZZMASTER ON STAGE”

remember getting really frustrated. I don't know what came over me, but I basically trashed over two and a half grand's worth of Jazzmaster on stage. I don't know what happened to the body, but I was left with two bits and a neck, which had a big crack in the headstock, which you can still see. So Taka put some screws in it, glued it, aged the neck, and put it all together for me – so that's the story! It plays really well, and it looks really cool.”

This page Grant's custom-made Combat model was designed to be a hybrid between a Jazzmaster and a Firebird

Opposite The '59 Jazzmaster is Grant's number one recording guitar, and his favourite guitar

Trashing his lovely new Jazzmaster on stage did have an upside, however, and it can be found in the blue Jazzmaster he's brought along with him. "This is basically a standard US Jazzmaster," he explains. "Neil Whitcher at Fender and the guys... they heard about me trashing my Jazzmaster, and because I was endorsed by Fender, I thought I'd be in big trouble! But they came when we were supporting REM in Hyde Park, and turned up with that in the case and were like, 'This is yours, you can keep it'. And I was like, 'Oh my god how lucky am I?! I trash a guitar and they just give me another one – I don't deserve it!'"

YOU'RE MY EVERGREEN

While some of his Jazzmasters have more sentimental value, there's one guitar that is without question his favourite instrument, and one that is always his first call in the studio – his Sunburst '59.

"That's my holy grail – it's an all-original '59," he enthuses. "I got that after *Comfort In Sound* – me and Taka went down to Vintage & Rare and he bought an old Jazz Bass. It was outrageous, I think I bought like three guitars in one go! The ridiculous thing is that it wasn't even that expensive – it was a bargain. It's got the original case and everything. It's just a beautiful guitar. I haven't changed the strings on it since *Generation Freakshow*, because I just love the sound of those dead strings. That's the guitar I use most for Feeder recording – even for the heavy stuff, it's on virtually everything.

"That guitar has got so much character. The trem is working on that one, in case I want to do any crazy rockabilly stuff. It needs a refret really, but I'm scared to mess with it because it sounds and plays so good. I've used it in videos, or if we did like, Jools Holland or something – but otherwise it just lives at home! Since *Comfort In Sound* that's been the most used guitar for all the Feeder stuff, and my solo stuff as well."

It's not all Jazzmasters in Grant's collection, however – he's got a variety of classic and esoteric instruments to call on, including his battered early 70s Sunburst Tele.

"That was one of the guitars that I got at the same time as the '59," he recalls. "I've always loved Teles. They're solid, they sound great and I love that beaten up Sunburst. I always loved Andy Summers, so when I saw that and I played it I thought, 'Well this is just brilliant'. When you see the right one that's the right weight and all that, you've just got to snap it up because they're getting hard to find these days. They just get better with age. Teles are just great guitars, solid, reliable – I love anything that's sunburst and has a bit of character – I've always been a bit of a sucker for it."

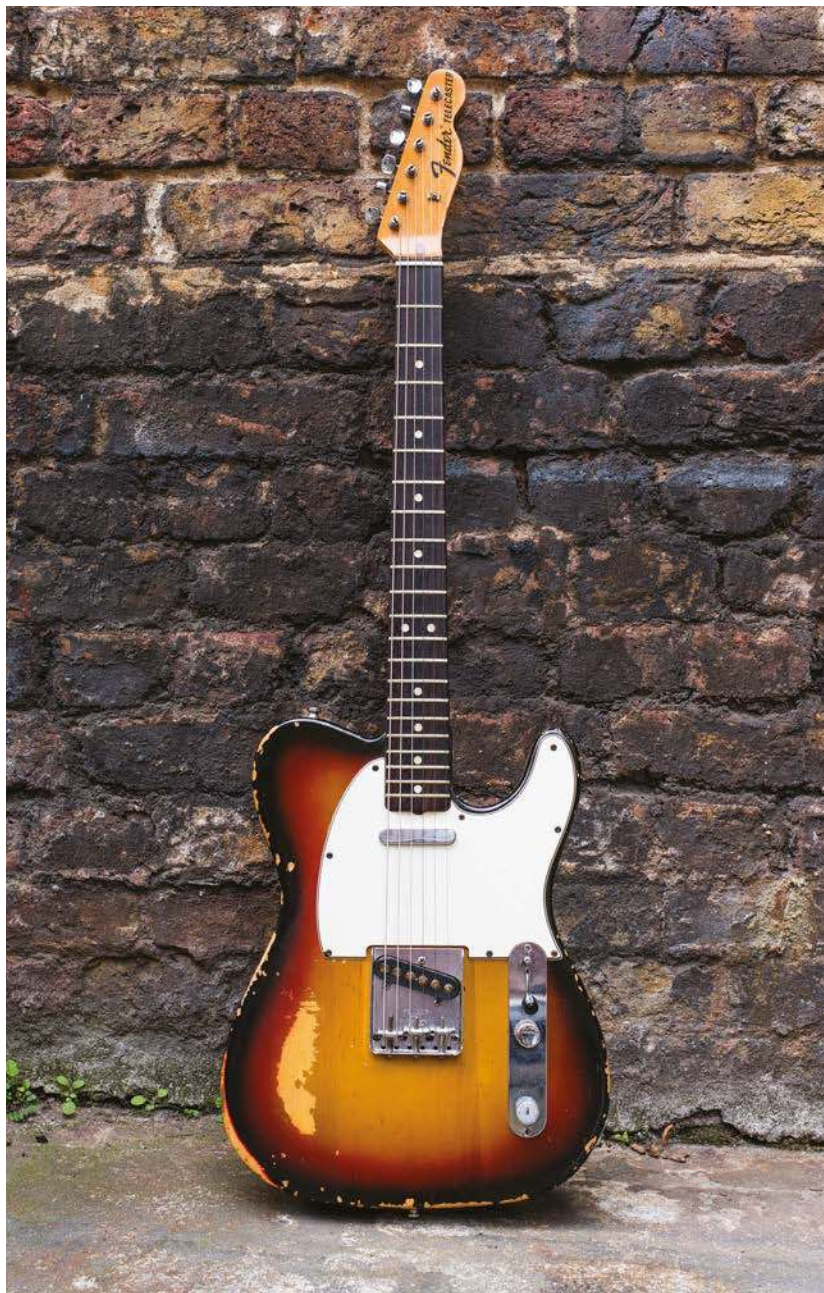
JUST THE WAY I'M FEELING

Grant clearly likes his classic old Fender designs, and with that in mind, the presence of a Gibson Explorer might be surprising, but again it comes from Grant's affinity for playing things that are a little bit different...

"When I bought that guitar I was with Taka, we used to go to this guitar shop in Richmond quite a lot, and this guitar was just there for sale. And at the time no-one was really playing Explorers unless they were in a metal band, but I quite liked that, and it was a cherry one as well, so it didn't look quite as metal.

"It originally belonged to Mick Ralphs from Bad Company apparently. Well it had his name on the case, and that's what they told me! I haven't touched anything





Above left **Grant's Telecaster** was picked up at the same time as he bought his '59 Jazzmaster

Above right **Taka built Grant this ReBirth TeleMaster**, which has a Mojo gold foil in the neck and a Tele bridge pickup

Opposite top **Grant's Gibson Explorer** used to be owned by Mick Ralphs, and has been a studio mainstay since Feeder's early period

Opposite bottom **Fender gave Grant this stock USA Jazzmaster** after he trashed his previous USA model on stage at Download



with it – the pickups are Seymour Duncan Antiquity humbuckers in there – they're my favourite humbuckers actually. It's been used since the *Polythene* period really – it's been used on practically every Feeder song since. It just plug it straight into a Marshall and track it, it just does that one thing – it just rocks."

Perhaps the most interesting Jazzmaster-style instrument in Grant's collection, however, is another of the fruits of Taka's ReBirth project – a full custom build that he calls the TeleMaster. "He's got a bit of a taste for it now!" Grant jokes. "He made this one for me that's basically a Tele-Jazz idea, similar to what the Custom Shop was doing with the Offset Tele, but I asked him if he could make me one that is more faithful to the Jazzmaster look.

"TELES JUST GET BETTER WITH AGE. I LOVE ANYTHING THAT'S SUNBURST AND HAS A BIT OF CHARACTER – I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A SUCKER FOR IT"

"He's put the Mojo Pickups Gold Foil in there, but I haven't got my head around it yet. It suits my sound, because I love Jazzmasters but that Tele sound is a really

important one for me – so it's good to have something with a bit more character than just a standard Tele. I am going to start using them more. He's done

another one that's a sort of Firebird/Telecaster which is really nice – it's got a mini-humbucker on the front and a Telecaster pickup on the bridge, so I'm going to start using that as well. I think he's taken on board all the stuff that I've liked over the years!"

SPACE AGE HERO

The final electric in Grant's collection is another esoteric instrument – a Firebird-meets-Jazzmaster hybrid made



by Combat Guitars in Japan. “This was made for me by a friend of Taka’s that used to work at Combat – they were a small company in Japan,” Grant explains.

“I wanted something that was a cross between a Firebird and a Jazzmaster, so I named it the Jazzbird, and it’s kind of a one off. I wanted the Jazzmaster trem, the big headstock, the square inlays in the neck, and I wanted the body to be thicker than a standard Firebird because I wanted a bit more weight and a bit more balance as well. That’s the problem with Firebirds, unless you move the strap button they tend to lean forwards – they look cool but they’re not the most comfortable things to play.

“The original had two Tom Holmes humbuckers that sound fantastic, but I recently changed the bridge humbucker to a Seymour Duncan P-90, but in a humbucker casing. I haven’t really had time to get to grips with it yet and I’m not sure it’s the right one, but I do want to get it back out in time for the hits tour, because that’s what I’m using on our singles album sleeve and in the Come Back Around video, so it feels wrong to not to use it for something!





Above left **This Gibson J-200** was a bargain that Grant picked up in the USA on tour with Everclear

Above right **The Guild M-20** is one of Grant's favourite acoustic guitars. He owns a 1964 model, and this '65

Opposite **Grant trashed this Fender USA Jazzmaster** on stage, but Taka rebuilt it, relic'd it, and gave it a new lease of life



"I think this was also one of the guitars where Taka got the idea for his ReBirth stuff from. He said to me, 'Do something different!' because I always basically say, 'Yeah, can you make me a Jazzmaster?' – because that's basically all I really want! But he was adamant that I should do something different. 'Oh okay, I like Firebirds... so can we make it maybe half Firebird, half Jazzmaster?' [laughs] I've had a few lovely custom guitars I've had made for me – I've got this beautiful ESP that's half SG, half Mustang, but I could only bring so many guitars with me today! It's a great guitar that, and it looks cool!"

SILENT IN SPACE

It's not all electric guitars in Grant's collection, however, and when it comes to acoustic, Grant has a few key instruments he uses for live work and songwriting.

"I write pretty much all of Feeder's stuff either with the '59 or with one of my acoustics," he confirms "That's what I've always chosen to write on. My Guild is an

M-20, I've got two – a '64 and a '65 – that one is the 1965. I absolutely love those guitars, they're so good for fingerpicking. Again I hardly ever change the strings because I like that organic, dead sound for fingerpicking.

"If you ever find an old Guild M-20 for a great price, buy it immediately because they're great guitars and a good investment, but they're getting harder to find. When I got it, it blew away any other acoustic I'd tried. It was great for my solo stuff [Grant's 2014 *Yorktown Heights* album]

because it's great for fingerpicking and rhythm stuff, too. It's also probably the best sounding recorded guitar I've got, even though it's got the smallest body. It's an amazing guitar, it's all mahogany so it's got a real dark tone to it – I'm not into sparkly sounds, I'm into organic, earthy, been playing it for 50 years and haven't changed the strings kinda vibe."

Grant's most famous and commonly seen acoustic is his old Gibson J-200, but it's an instrument that came to him by a stroke of luck and some trust in a dodgy hotel...

"I LOVE THAT JOHNNY CASH/
ELVIS THING THAT THE J-200
HAS GOT. THEY JUST LOOK
ROCK 'N' ROLL"



"I was on tour in the US with Everclear and we did a gig in Idaho," Grant remembers. "We went to a vintage guitar shop and I saw it there, and I fell in love with it. I didn't have enough money at the time but it was really cheap... crazy cheap. It was like 500 dollars or something. And it had the original case with a handle that looked like somebody's belt, loads of stickers on it and the bottom falling out. It just had so much character to it. I remember thinking, 'Oh I really want to get it but we're a bit tight for cash'."

"Then, about three gigs later, I think we were in Texas, I called them up and said 'Have you still got that J-200?' 'Yeah man!' 'Well then I've got to buy it!' I think I put it on my credit card, and I said, 'Well we're going to be arriving at this shitty hotel in a week's time – can you post it to me there?' And they're like, 'Sure man we'll send it through'. And I'm thinking, 'Christ is it ever going to turn up?' But then we got to the hotel and there's this massive cardboard box and it was there, and I've had it ever since. It's a great guitar – as much as I love a small-bodied guitar, I also love that Elvis/Johnny Cash thing that the J-200's got, they just look rock 'n' roll don't they?"

WE ARE THE PEOPLE

When it comes to discussing Taka's collection of bass guitars, there are three distinct categories that he favours – vintage classics, boutique one-offs and the guitars he's built himself. But the common theme running through all of them is a reverence and love for classic designs, and it's something that Taka learned when he was a teenager working at the ESP factory: "Some people there wanted to make things that were almost like furniture, very ornate," he recalls. "But for me I always ended up back with the classic Fender and Gibson stuff."

It's hard to improve on the classics, and that's exactly what Taka has in his 1968 Jazz Bass. "Before a gig one day I was in second-hand music shop, and tried this Jazz Bass," he tells us. "It was so nice and so good – but I didn't have time to buy it because I had to go back to the venue to do a soundcheck, and I never got it!"

"So from then on I'm thinking, 'I wish I'd bought that'. Then when me and Grant went down to Denmark Street after *Comfort In Sound* was a success, I was determined that I was going to find a Jazz Bass! So





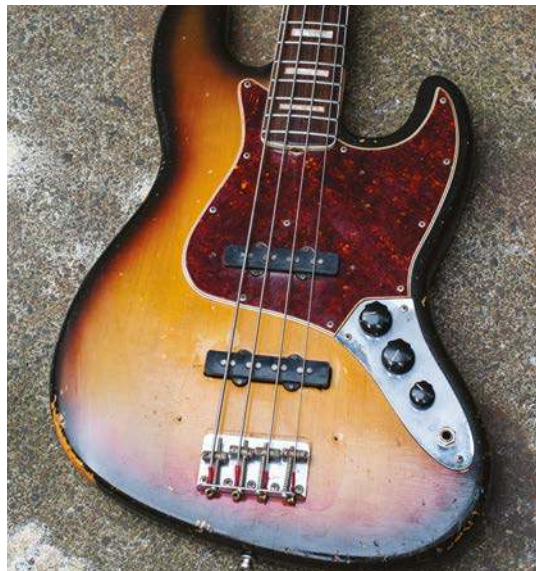
Above left **Taka's Kazu Guitar Village Ricky-style bass** has both P-bass and humbucker pickups installed

Above top right **Taka's 1968 Jazz bass** is one of his most treasured instruments

Above bottom right **ReBirth isn't just guitars** – Taka unsurprisingly also makes basses, including this '51 P-Bass style relic

Opposite top **Taka with his trademark Combat bass**, which is a solidbody take on an old Gretsch semi design

Opposite top **This aged P-style bass** was actually made for Taka by his friend at the ESP Custom Shop in Japan



I found this 1968 model that was in great condition. I love everything about it! It was the same day as Grant bought his '59 Jazzmaster – he wasn't sure about that it, because it was a bit old-school for him, but I was like, 'You've got to buy this – it's a '59!' [laughs] We got a discount because we bought them together!"

There's another Jazz-style in Taka's armoury, but it's not as vintage as it might look...

"One of my mates was still working for ESP at the time and he emailed me, 'Taka I've just done a nice old Jazz Bass body and neck...' he remembers. "I was like, 'Ooh that would be nice!' But I asked him to make me a Jazz with precision pickups, which is why it's got the big pickup cover on it – it's actually a Precision pickup on the front and a Jazz at the back. So that's my main recording bass. As soon as I had it, it had that feel of a vintage instrument.

"That one has active pickups and it has kind of like a parametric EQ on it. I like to be able to tweak in the studio, so it's perfect for me, and very powerful as a recording tool."

"I'VE GOT LOADS OF RESPECT FOR FENDER AND GIBSON, BUT I JUST WISH THEY'D DO SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT... SO THAT'S WHAT I DO!"

Two of Taka's most famous and familiar basses are a good deal more unique, and have also come to him through the friendships he made in his time at ESP, and the most famous

one of all is his gold sparkle Combat bass, which he used at the height of Feeder's chart-troubling success.

"Unfortunately the C on the headstock logo has gone, so now it's Ombat," he chuckles. "Another friend of mine started to work for Combat, and I asked him to make a bass for me. I had a semi-acoustic Gretsch bass that I always loved, and I used it for videos a lot, but I can't use it live because it's fragile and has no bottom end.

“So I asked him to make me the same body, but solid! [laughs] It’s an ash body, but yeah – it is quite big when it’s a solidbody! The controls are the same as on the ESP bass – it has the same active circuitry. It’s also got a Jack Nicholson sticker on there – I think when we were playing on *Top Of The Pops*, the director was like, ‘Oh you have to hide your sticker, you can’t show it.’ I was like, ‘Really!?’ So I borrowed some tape and put the tape over his eyes... ‘How about that?’ And he was like, ‘Yeah... that’s actually okay.’ So it’s been there ever since!”

Another of Taka’s customs is a Ricky-style bass made by Kazu Guitar Village. “Kaz is my guy who used to work for ESP, he made loads of basses for me when he was working there,” he explains. “But then he left and set up his own workshop. When he was at ESP, I always used to ask him, ‘Please make me a Rickenbacker-style with my spec!’ And he was like, ‘...No.’ Because he was working at ESP and he would get in trouble! So straight away when he started I was on to him and said – ‘Now you can make it!’ And in fairness he was like, ‘Okay... but only one though!’”

“I love Rickenbacker’s design, and it’s got such a characterful sound, but it hasn’t got that fat bottom end that I need for gigs. So that’s why I put the Precision pickup and the humbucker in there – it’s a bit more powerful. My favourite pickup is the Precision pickup – it’s just great for rock, well, it’s great for anything, but for Feeder the Precision pickup is perfect.”

PIECE BY PIECE

As you’d expect for a four-string stalwart, ReBirth isn’t just about guitars, and the black relic’d P-bass style bass is his self-made weapon of choice. Clearly he’s hit onto a cool recipe that smashes together classic designs with top-end parts and cool paint jobs – but we have to wonder how he got into building guitars again?

“Well, one by one my friends left ESP or the guitar business or whatever,” he says, “And then Kaz, because he’s independent, he can’t give me a freebie any more! When he used to work for ESP it was all, ‘Oh Taka I made this – take it!’ But now he’s independent he can’t, so I thought that I should maybe just do it myself!”

“I started out just customising because I didn’t want to do too much. I found this company called Mojo Pickups, who are also in Yorkshire, and I was like, ‘I’ll support local business!’ But when I did some more research I found out that Mojo Pickups are actually really interesting. I really love the looks and the sound as well – I’ve never actually met him but we’ve become good friends because I always buy pickups off him! He made some Thunderbird pickups, which I use on my ’51 P-bass type.

“So at first I was just customising cheaper Fenders, Squiers and Epiphones I found on eBay, but then I was like, ‘Hmm, these are actually quite expensive... maybe I should start to build myself!’ So that’s how it extended from customising to actually building. Now I’ve got my man cave – I used to do it in the kitchen but my girlfriend kicked me out! So I asked my neighbour, who’s got this really nice brick shed that they’re not using, if I could go in there, so now I do all my work in there!”

“I’ve got loads of respect for Fender and Gibson, but sometimes I just wish they’d do something that’s a bit different... so that’s what I do. And it’s quite fun as well! 🎸







TONE MOUNTAIN

Paul Connop's taste for designs from the electric guitar's golden era has seen him assemble a highly desirable array of six-strings that have seen plenty of use in the studio and on the road.
Chris Vinnicombe gets the skinny

Photography RICHARD SHAKESPEARE

Growing up in Herefordshire with a Wurlitzer jukebox in his living room meant that Neil Ivison's relationship with music was cemented at an early age. Although he distinctly remembers Little Richard's scream kickstarting an obsession with the crackle of old vinyl records, his "lightning bolt" moment came on 16 December 1991 – "I still remember the date!" he admits – when his mother and DJ father took him to see the mighty Status Quo at Birmingham NEC.

"I went to school for the next 18 months, wearing the Status Quo t-shirt my dad had bought me from the gig, it was my prized possession," Neil remembers. "Coincidentally, at the same time, the music teacher started a guitar club, teaching guitar after school. I was straight there, first in line, with a list of Quo songs, 'I just need three chords to play these, don't worry about the rest!'"

Then at high school, members of staff that had their own band helped Neil and some fellow students put a group together, mentored the fledgling act for a summer and organised an end-of-term concert. Playing in front of 300 screaming kids was mind blowing," he recalls. "At that moment, any chance of academic qualifications went straight out of the window, I was obsessed!"

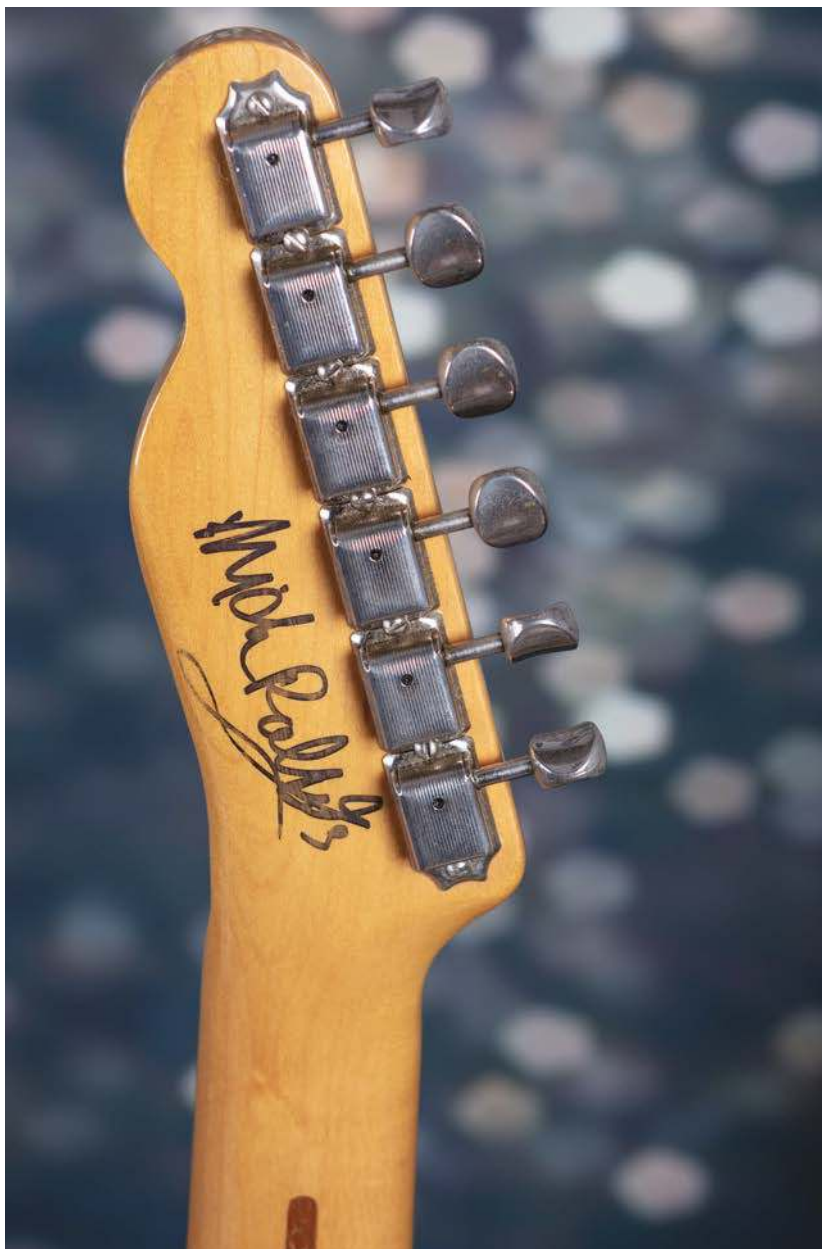
TECH SUPPORT

By the time Neil left school, he'd already been playing in function bands for about three years. "I'd already got a 'job', so to speak. I did go to college and get a diploma in sound engineering but, in rural Herefordshire, I didn't really have many options available to me so I ended up selling parts for tractors for three years while doing three or four gigs a week in the evenings. Then, by chance, I got a call from a guy I knew who needed a guitar tech urgently for a gig at Download Festival. So I jumped at it.

"It was on the main stage on a Sunday morning and the lead singer sang the whole set suspended above the stage with four meat hooks in his back! Then the guitarist smashed his guitar and set it on fire... that was my introduction to guitar tech'ing! Another tour followed and I realised I absolutely loved being on the road, regardless of if I was playing or as crew, so for the next 15 years, I juggled both.

"I love the travel, the camaraderie, the panic when things go wrong, the thinking on your feet or the elation of a great gig that we made happen against the odds. And with this came the need to learn how to set up, repair and maintain instruments for a variety of different players. Through playing music and touring, I have met some amazing people and have been to some amazing places over the years. In fact, I would say, bar school friends and people I grew up with, most of my friends I have met directly or indirectly through playing guitar, including my wife! So I really do credit the guitar with forming my adult life."





STRIPPED DOWN

Given that his collection betrays a love for no-nonsense, workhorse instruments such as Telecasters, Juniors and Specials, we wonder how far Neil's personal gear choices have been informed by his experiences as a guitar tech. "It just came from my need for a functional guitar when playing myself," he says. "I've never been one for lots

of switching because, nine times out of 10, I'm the frontman/singer, too, so the less to confuse me the better – I'm easily confused!"

Although primarily a fan of single-pickup electrics, Neil is "learning to love" the neck pickup on his '65 Telecaster: "I was watching That Pedal Show when they did a vintage guitar episode and Dan [Steinhardt] was playing a '64 which sounded great, so I decided I needed to find one and this one came up at the right time. It just sounds spectacular through any amp you put it through. It's pretty raunchy – almost like an SG if you dig in with some dirt. I love it! The week I got that, four songs seemingly just fell out of it so I've nicknamed it 'Magic'! My pal Charlie Starr from

Blackberry Smoke loves that guitar too, I took it up to a show in Birmingham for him to use and he fell for it big time, so he has first dibs!"

When it comes to influences, Mick Ralphs was a major one for Neil: "I've always been a massive fan and he used a Les Paul Junior for most of the Mott The Hoople and the early Bad Company albums so a

Junior was a no-brainer, really. I've had a good few now, both single-and double-cuts but the single-cut Les Paul Junior, for me, is the perfect marriage of style and functionality. It literally only has the bare essentials

to function, needs nothing

else and just sounds otherworldly!

"A great, microphonic P-90 can really scream but just wind the volume back and it'll clean up to a whisper and sound almost like an acoustic. Even where the volume and tone controls are placed is perfect for me. That big 50s carve mahogany neck fits my spade hands perfectly and a good Junior will just vibrate in your hands... I've had a couple that you'd be in danger of getting RSI from!

"THE SINGLE-CUT LES PAUL JUNIOR, FOR ME, IS THE PERFECT MARRIAGE OF STYLE AND FUNCTIONALITY"

Opposite This 1986 Fender Esquire was previously owned by Mick Ralphs – the guitarist hand-painted the scratchplate black so it matched his '57

Above Eagle-eyed readers will have spotted this 1965 Telecaster in *The Guitar Magazine's* Vintage Bench Test back in March 2017



Above left This 1957 Les Paul Special had been refinished in a poly gold/silver before Neil bought it and returned it to the original TV Yellow

Above right Neil has started building Les Paul Junior-style guitars under the Ivison Guitars marque. Visit facebook.com/ivisonguitars to see more

Opposite Neil's Gretsch resonator and 2002 Gibson Historic Collection J-45 acoustic, complete with headstock repair



Plus, that 50s two-tone sunburst just stirs my loins! As does TV Yellow... and Cherry Red!"

BUILDING BLOCKS

All that said, Neil doesn't own a 1950s Junior at the moment. "I sold my last one to fund something else," he admits, "but I do have a '57 Special that came to me with a bizarre silver/gold poly finish so I restored that back to its original TV Yellow. That guitar has the quintessential late 50s neck carve which just feels like home and the P-90s are some of the most expressive I've ever heard, they have this top end, almost three-dimensional sparkle to them."

Vintage Juniors are rising in price, and this was in part the motivation for Neil to build his own tributes, under the Ivison Guitars banner. "The other part being that I'm totally obsessed with Juniors and Specials!" He laughs. "So I've started hand building vintage-accurate guitars from the measurements taken from 50s Juniors and Specials that I have owned in the past.

"I've had a '55, '56, '57 and a couple of '59 double-cuts and I meticulously measured each one so I could get as

close to a vintage-feeling guitar as possible. The idea being that a gigging player can take these out and gig them without worrying too much about having a £5,000 guitar in tow that may get damaged, or worse. It's taken a long time to get them sounding how I want but I'm confident they are as close, in feel and tone, to an old Junior as you can get with modern materials."

GLORY DAYS

The 1989 Gibson ES-335 in Neil's collection has a storied history linked to Rockfield Studios in Wales, where Neil has recently been recording with his current band, Americana outfit Stone Mountain Sinners. "There's a shop in Hereford called Head, Hands & Feet that was literally a porthole into the music world for us young guitar players from the outlying villages. Pete Overend Watts from Mott The Hoople would often be in there with some weird and wonderful vintage guitar he'd found at a boot sale or flea market getting it repaired.

"One day I was there, I was 16, and a chap who happened to be Noel Gallagher's guitar tech came in to drop off a guitar. The shop used to hire guitars and amps





to Rockfield Studios and this 335 was a regular down there in the early 90s. The Charlatans, The Bluetones, Teenage Fanclub and Bryan Adams had all used it previously and then Noel Gallagher had hired it for the *Morning Glory* sessions. He needed a guitar with a Bigsby and loved it so had asked for it again to use for some of the *Be Here Now* sessions, too, which was when I first saw it.

"I wasn't into Oasis at the time at all, I was actually into punk bands especially the Backyard Babies and The Yo-Yos. Those guys all used 335's but when I asked to have a look and opened the case, my immediate thought was 'Chuck Berry'! I have to have it! Alas, Colin the owner said it wasn't for sale. So I just spent the next two months badgering him until he relented and begrudgingly sold it to me! And I've had it ever since.

"I just wish I had some written provenance of all the records it's been on! The thing I find with a 335 is that

it is incredibly versatile. It'll do jazz and blues... even country. But if you wind it up through a Marshall or what have you, it'll out-rock a Les Paul... in my humble opinion, of course!"

"THE THING I FIND WITH A 335 IS THAT IT IS INCREDIBLY VERSATILE. IT'LL DO JAZZ AND BLUES... EVEN COUNTRY"

HOT GLASS

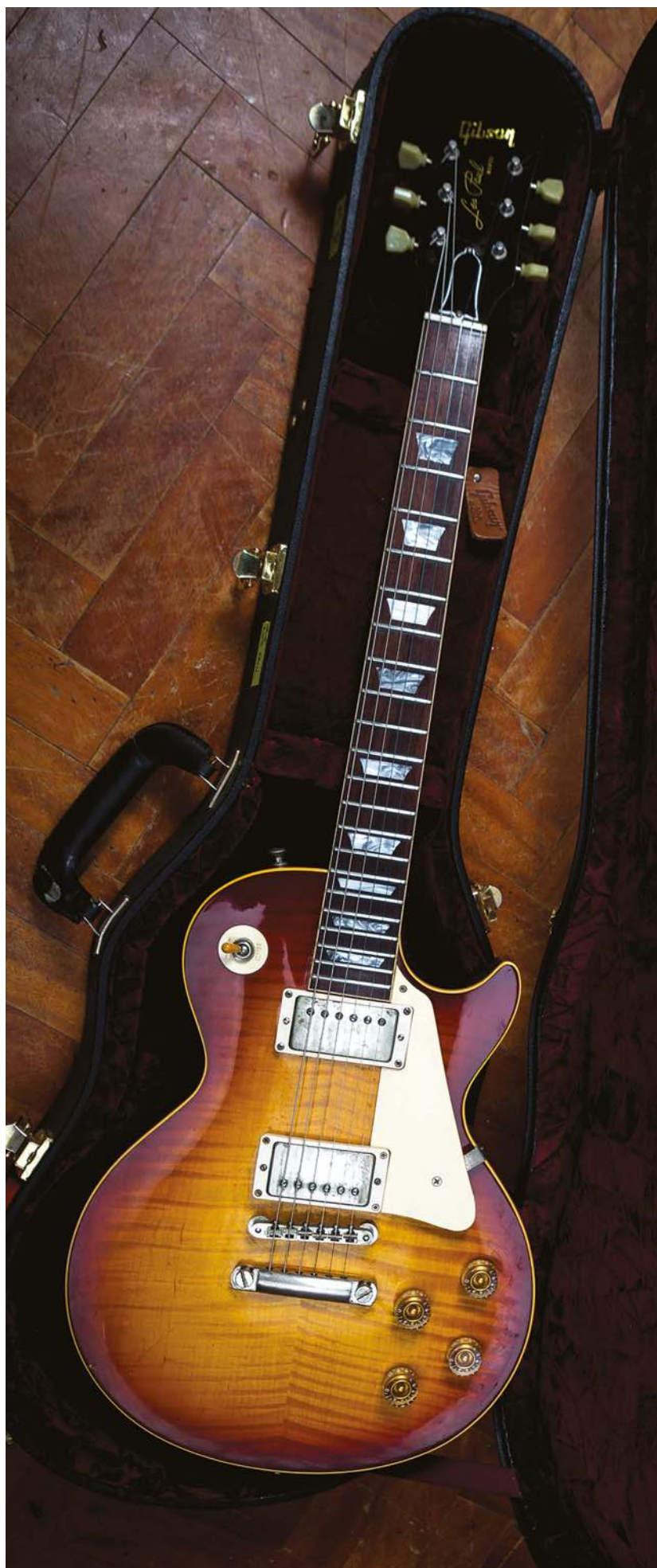
When it comes to amplifiers, Neil's tastes are similarly fuss-free, prioritising simplicity, build quality and reliability. Despite "slipping down the pedal rabbit hole for a while and coming out unscathed," he doesn't

use many stompboxes these days. "I like to get one great, edge-of-breakup sound from the amp and then use the guitar volume knob to clean up," he explains. "Personally, I think the more parts an amp has in it – the more switching, gain boosts, mid cut, deep switches, whatever – it just robs them of tone.

"As with guitars, I like an amp that has just enough parts to function and function well – this might be

This page & opposite Neil at Rockfield Studios in Wales with the ES-335 that featured on many hit records in the 1990s





a throwback to my time as a tech, the ‘there’s less to go wrong’ mentality, but I just find that a simple amp sounds better to me. The boutique amp builders seem to follow this trend, too, so it just confirms it to me. I like the fact that you can contact the builder directly if there’s a problem, you don’t have to email ‘customer services’, you go direct to the organ grinder.

“I remember when my pal Graham got a Matchless DC30 and it was just the most beautiful looking amp we’d ever seen, it was built like a tank and just sounded incredible! And there was barely anything on it in terms of controls compared to a multi-channel combo. It just had what you needed and nothing else. I took me 10 years to be able to afford my own, but I did!”

Neil’s number one amp for the last decade has been a Bad Cat Black Cat, “which is essentially a DC30 that Mark Sampson built after leaving Matchless,” he says. “In fact mine is one of the very first and it is full of Matchless-branded parts! That’s the number one ‘go to’ amp. I’ve just picked up a Matchless Lightning Reverb that is outstanding too.

“I’m also a big fan of Top Hat amps. I have a love/hate thing going on with the tweed sound currently, the Lazy J 20 is exceptional – I’ve had four J 20s and two J 40s over



the years! – but I find it's not suiting what I'm doing at the minute so I'm heading back to EL84s again. Another amp that I've probably had the longest of all is one of the first runs of the Orange Tiny Terror. Again, it's so simple and reliable and just sounds great! And it cost me less than the flightcase for the Bad Cat! We're a funny bunch, us guitar addicts!"

NEW ADDITION

The aforementioned Mick Ralphs influence is a big one for Neil, to the extent that he now owns a pair of the star's guitars. "I have a 2002 R8 Les Paul that was his main guitar for about 10 years – the guitar he was playing the first time I saw him live actually – and a pal from The Fretboard forum alerted me to an '86 Esquire that was for sale in London so I bought that unseen.

"I was on holiday at the time and had to wait two weeks before I could get it! Mick is a notorious tinkerer when it comes to guitars – he loves to try out different pickups, wiring et cetera like we all do – it has upgraded pots and a killer bridge pickup, I'm not sure what it is but it sounds great! Anyway, when I got it I took the scratchplate off – Mick had hand-painted it black to match his original '57 Esquire – and underneath he'd

written 'Property of Mick Ralphs, Bad Company. Kiss Off!' I don't think there's more authentic provenance of ownership than that!"

As our conversation draws to a close we ask the inevitable question: what are you looking to add to your collection next? "Well, it's not so much a 'collection' in the truest sense, more a collection of instruments that all get used regularly and gigged," says Neil. "It's just unfortunate for my bank balance that I generally prefer vintage guitars! There's nothing I dislike more than having a guitar on a stand, covered in dust and not getting used.

"I'm on the look out for another 50s single-cut Junior if anyone has one... but the holy grail would be Mick Ralphs' '57 Esquire. It was used on my two favourite albums and on the song we had as the first dance at our wedding... but I don't think that'll happen any time soon! You know, at the minute, I'm actually pretty content with what I have. Ask me again next week, though..." 🎸

Tones Of Home by Neil's band, **Stone Mountain Sinners**, is available now. Visit www.stonemountainsinners.co.uk to find out more

Opposite left This 2002 Gibson Custom R8 was Mick Ralphs' primary guitar for a decade

Opposite right 1977 Fender Telecaster Custom

Above Neil's current amps of choice are his long-serving Bad Cat Black Cat, and a Top Hat Emplexador, "the best sounding vintage Marshall you've heard!"





NORMAN'S WISDOM

With 50 years in the business and one of the world's leading guitar collections, Norman Harris is the proprietor of Norman's Rare Guitars – a destination guitar store in Tarzana, California, which is frequented by A-list musicians and vintage obsessives alike. Here, the man who supplied the guitars for Spinal Tap holds court and introduces us to some choice pieces...

Story Chris Vinnicombe | Photography Eleanor Jane

2008 Gibson Custom
Joe Bonamassa Les
Paul prototype

"Joe, in my opinion, is the greatest blues guitar player alive today. I think he is the Clapton of this era. I've known Joe since he was 12 years old and he's like family to me. This we had for all of about five minutes! It sold instantaneously. This was the guitar that got his whole relationship with Gibson started. This was the prototype and they gave this guitar to Joe, going 'maybe we'll build a few instruments, we'll see how it goes.' I think they've sold about 10,000 so far! This one started it all and it's the prototype"





It might be a world-famous institution, but you won't find Norman's Rare Guitars jostling for position with the souvenir shops that line the star-embedded sidewalks of Hollywood. Join Highway 101 and travel about 15 miles north west you'll find yourself in Tarzana, a neighbourhood in the San Fernando Valley established on the site of a ranch formerly owned by novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs and named after his most famous creation, the jungle hero Tarzan. Only in America.

Norman Harris' store resides in the corner of a nondescript strip mall sandwiched between Ventura Boulevard and the freeway.

When we arrive, the sky is still bruised from a weekend storm that saw years of drought conditions in Southern Californian alleviated in a matter of hours. Inside the store, we find shelter and guitars. New guitars, used guitars and vintage guitars. Hundreds of them. And that doesn't even include the really good stuff in the back. We ask the boss how this whole thing got started in the first place and he winds the clock back to late 1960s Miami...

"WE CAME OUT LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE WITH HOPES OF MAKING IT BIG. MY PLAN B BECAME PLAN A"

"Originally I was a Hammond organ player," Norman recalls. "My band had two guys that doubled on guitar and bass, and neither one had a bass, so I volunteered to go buy one 'cause I figured maybe I could learn to play. I bought a very early Jazz Bass, and everybody in town wanted to buy it from me. The light went on and I just said, this is something that I can do. We weren't making

a lot of money playing and I figured I could subsidise my income by buying and selling instruments. I came out [to Los Angeles] in 1970. I had a band with this guy Bobby Caldwell. Little Richard's brother managed our band; we came out like everybody else with the hopes of trying to make it

big. In the meantime, my plan B became my plan A."

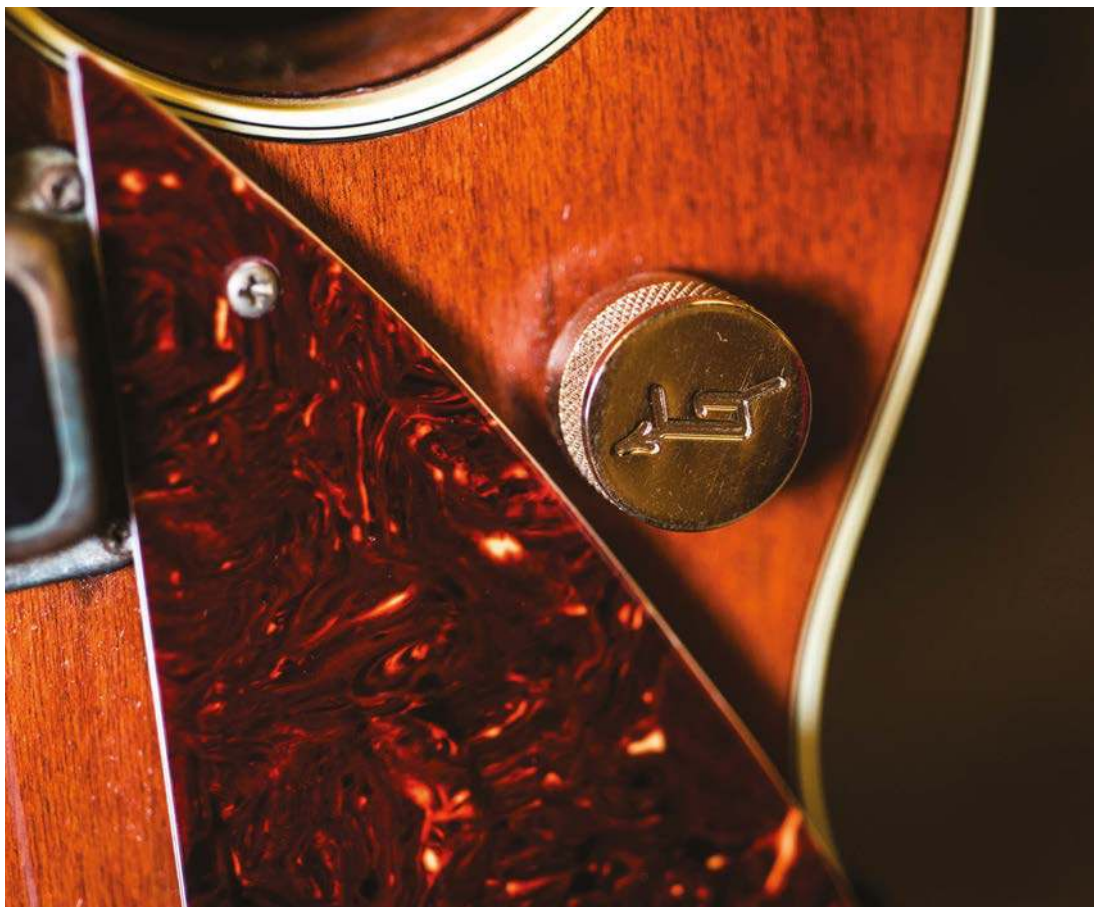
ONLY IN THEATRES

After a period spent trading guitars out of his home, by early 1975, the first incarnation of Norman's Rare Guitars was open in nearby Reseda. The following year, when actor and customer David Carradine approached Norman to rent period-correct instruments for his Woody Guthrie biopic, *Bound For Glory*, it kick-started

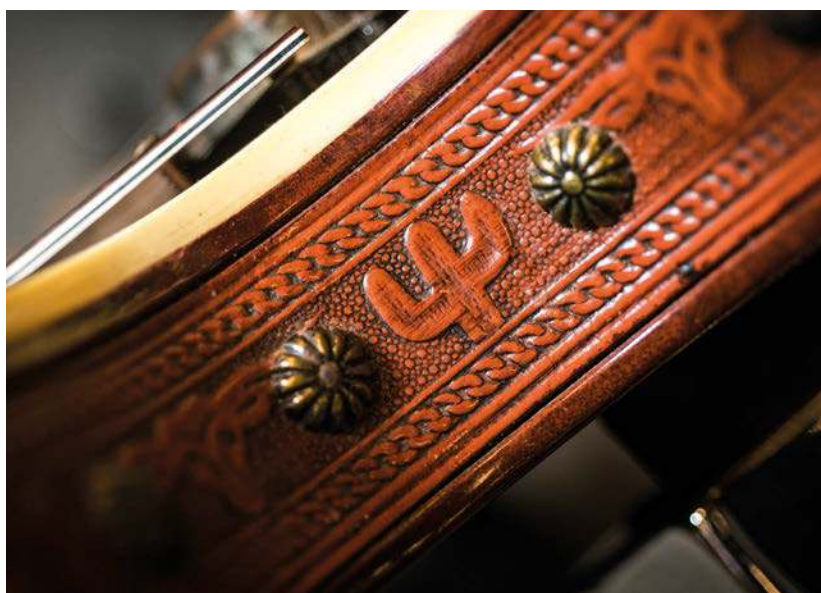
Above: 1951 Stromberg Master 400

"Probably the two prime boutique builders back in the day were Stromberg and D'Angelico. Stromberg probably had even less of an output than D'Angelico and he's a little less known. This guitar is 19 inches, blonde. Both of those makers made custom guitars for the top players of the day from Oscar Moore to whoever. There was so much more workmanship in an archtop guitar. It really is an amazing piece of art."





Opposite: 1954 Gretsch
6130 Round Up
"It's a very cool
guitar. One of the very
first of its kind. Some
of the parts are
cleaner, reissue parts
as the originals are
very oxidised, but we
have the originals."



a relationship with the movie industry that saw Harris supply guitars that would be immortalised in celluloid in the likes of *The Last Waltz*, *Back To The Future* and *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Given that any guitar journalist worth his or her salt has a borderline religious devotion to *Spinal Tap*, we have to ask how Norman's contribution to the movie came about. "Chris Guest was a customer of mine for a number of years," Harris reveals. "He was kind of a folkie – actually *A Mighty Wind* is closer to what Chris Guest is than *This Is Spinal Tap!* – but he said, 'We're gonna do this movie, it's a mockumentary spoof on this rock band, and we'd really like to have a lot of cool vintage instruments as part of the movie'.

"He gave one magazine interview that had the greatest line ever in it, he said, 'Spinal Tap is great because we play loud. These jazz groups, they play so low that you have to take their word for it that they are good.' I love that line. Chris was more into the acoustic instruments, but he knew that I had a lot of really cool electric stuff. He kind of wanted to set it up that Nigel Tufnel was a real guitar collector. The band had done really well and peaked at some point, and the next thing you know they are opening for a puppet show at a Holiday Inn."

"CHRIS GUEST KNEW I HAD COOL STUFF. HE WANTED TO SET IT UP THAT NIGEL TUFNEL WAS A GUITAR COLLECTOR"

WHILE THE GUITAR DEALER GENTLY WEEPS

If you have spent years buying and selling guitars, along the way a gem or two will inevitably have slipped through your fingers. Norman's 'one that got away' just happens to be an instrument that was used to change the course of popular culture.

"There are a lot of dumb things that I've done over the years, but this is probably the dumbest," Norman grimaces. "When I first met George Harrison, he'd gone from playing Gretsch guitars to Gibsons and

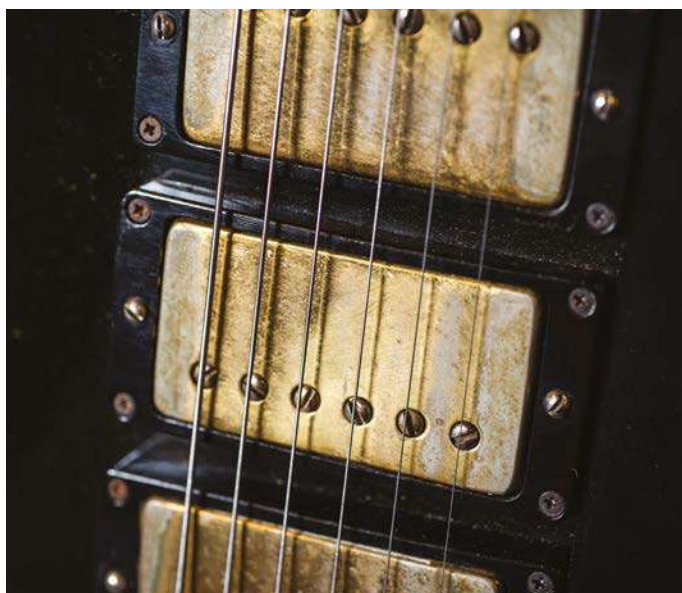
Fenders and stuff like that. There was a time when he wasn't using his Country Gentleman anymore and he offered to possibly trade it against this sunburst Les Paul that I had.

"Firstly, he was the first really big star I'd ever

dealt with, and I didn't figure anybody was ever going to believe I was sitting next to George Harrison. I had trouble believing I was sitting next to him. I figured people were just going to call me a liar. And I could have had that guitar, which was probably the guitar he was associated with most. He used that guitar a lot. This was before the days that techs were bringing people different guitars for every tune. It was my bad that I didn't take it in trade. That was probably the biggest one that ever got away. But there's been a lot of them. When it comes to

Above and opposite:
1965 Fender Stratocaster
"This is an early '65 in Lake Placid Blue with a green guard, it's got the pearl dots. It's a really nice example. It's not mint but I'd call it an 8.75 out of 10. Very clean, straight, 100 percent, just a very nice example and it happens to be a great instrument as well."





Above:
1957 Gibson Les Paul Custom
"This is one of the cleanest ones on the face of the earth. It still has the hang-tag that says 'Fretless Wonder' because of the very small frets. Three PAFs... a fantastic guitar. A piece of time notated in an instrument. People were using flatwound strings back in the day and it allowed people to have a very low action. Now people are bending a lot more and they want to have a little more fret."

Opposite: 1966 Fender Jazz Bass
"That's Firemist gold. It's a very unusual guitar that has a bound neck with dots. They only did that for a very brief time. There were several golds: Aztec, Shoreline, Harvest and Firemist. It's sort of a subjective call as to which one it is, 'cause Firemist was a little more bright and bold where Harvest was a little more subdued. We're calling this Firemist. This is in the vicinity of \$30,000, but it's a stunning example and it's something you probably won't see again."

doing stupid things, I'm right up there with some of the stupidest people I've ever met!"

Fast-forward five decades or so and, like many vintage guitar dealers, Norman is grappling with the challenges presented by CITES and is hopeful that there can be a pragmatic solution. "It's definitely hampering business and it's really unfortunate," he admits. "I'm kind of with them when it comes down to not wanting to cut down new trees, in order to give the forests chance to recoup and recover. But instruments that were made 50 years ago? I really see no point in trying to hamper business."

"What are they going to do, come into people's houses and destroy instruments? Are they going to chop up someone's Steinway piano? I'm not for killing elephants, I'm not for any of that kind of stuff. But if it happened 50 or 100 years ago then an instrument shouldn't be destroyed because of it. To just destroy it makes no sense to me at all. People should be allowed to do business and you shouldn't destroy antiques because they contain certain products. I'm hoping that common sense will come into play and they'll get this all worked out so it's not just crippling people's business."

**"DON'T BUY A GUITAR
BECAUSE I LIKE IT. IF YOU ARE
GOING TO PLAY IT, YOU HAVE
GOTTA LOVE IT"**

COLLECTOR'S CHOICE

Norman recently turned 68 years old and he says that this has put him in "a different mindset". As a result he's now prepared to part with certain instruments he's been holding onto for years, although there are still new guitars coming into his possession all the time. This is evidenced by dozens of battered cases that arrived that very morning – the spoils of a buying spree at the SoCal World Guitar Show in Orange County just a couple of days before our visit.

Harris has sage words of advice for others who have been bitten by the vintage guitar bug: "This is what I tell everybody who is buying guitars: don't buy a guitar because I like it, or somebody on a forum tells you it's great. If you are going to play it, you have gotta love it. You can buy something that's really cool that's gonna be collectible, but if you love it you'll get use out of it and it's functional art. If it's something you are gonna buy because some guy on a forum told you to... that's a bad reason to buy a guitar."

He also argues that vintage guitars are not overpriced in comparison to other major collectible items. "When you think about coins, baseball cards, whatever... guitars

are still not really overpriced,” he states. “You might get a really nice violin for seven figures but it might not even be the best of the best. Here, you can buy the best of the best for way less money. There’s more people that play guitar than play violin. A lot of these things, they’re not making any more of them. More than likely the great examples will keep increasing in value. I think it’s still a very valid investment – the only thing is you have to know what you are buying, do your homework, get a great example, something that plays great and sounds great. The bonus to everything is that you get to play it!”

As he’s already hinted, Norman doesn’t have much time for received wisdom and always encourages people to make up their own minds: “People might not like me for saying this but on those guitar forums... you have a lot of people that are self-proclaimed experts on things. They’ve probably not seen very many guitars. But they’ve read this and they’ve read that and they say, ‘You don’t need a Stratocaster unless you’ve got one with nine screws in the pickguard.’ It’s just nonsense that has no meaning.”

“The truth of the matter is that one guitar may work really well for somebody and the next person who picks it up, based on the way they play, whether they hit the strings harder or lighter, it may have a whole different thing. I’ve heard acoustic guitars sound fantastic with somebody and the next guy picks it up and it’s not so great.

“It’s a personalised thing. Don’t take the advice of all these knuckleheads on the forums that they basically spew because they’ve got nothing better to do. Use your own judgement, your own ear and your own hands. Don’t listen to what somebody tells you that you need. You need what you feel good on, and what sounds good to your ear.” 

Confessions Of A Vintage Guitar Dealer: The Memoirs Of Norman Harris is available now via Hal Leonard and includes a foreword by Richie Sambora and a preface by Joe Bonamassa





THE BEAT GOES ON

A contemporary curator of budget beat tools, Matt Armstrong has an array of classic amps and period guitars. We talk Mersey beats and authentic tones with The Kaisers' former rhythm guitarist and the band's long-standing frontman...

Story & Photography MARK ALEXANDER





Above **Matt Armstrong** poses with his **Zenith Josh White** acoustic

A hip coffee bar in the Scottish seaside town of North Berwick may be a million miles away from Liverpool's legendary Cavern Club – or indeed the Indra Club in Hamburg where the Beatles truly cut their teeth – but it's the ideal place to meet up with the unpretentiously dapper Matt Armstrong. The industrial vibe of the Steampunk Café is a happy hunting ground for the 49-year-old, who has been known to spin the house decks on a Sunday afternoon – providing a retrospective soundtrack for the weekend loungers.

But Armstrong's record collection isn't why we've agreed to meet up in this converted warehouse on a sunny afternoon in East Lothian, of course. As the coffee bean roaster whirs and splutters, we make our way up a flight of steps flanked with vintage memorabilia. On the mezzanine floor, we find Armstrong accompanied by his charismatic friend and bandmate George Miller, both of whom are quietly supping hot beverages while surrounded by battered guitar cases and vintage amps from the golden era. The bare floorboards and wood-burning stoves provide the perfect backdrop for the impressive assembly, which is drawing admiring glances from the intrigued patrons.



If only they knew. "Cheap, cheerful and old is where it's at," says Armstrong, smiling. He's been carefully amassing his collection of vintage guitars and basses ever since he discovered the buzz of Merseybeat during his teenage years.

Armstrong became infatuated with the origins of the music that would define the decade of his birth and mould his guitar collection. "Blondie's *Heart Of Glass* came out in 1978 and was the first single I bought," he says. "The second was *A Hard Day's Night* after I watched the Beatles cartoons. I remember being in



bed with glandular fever and listening to The Beatles' BBC sessions, which were being played for the first time on radio. I wanted to sound like that."

Armstrong would eventually fulfil his dream when he and Miller formed The Kaisers in 1992, predating their better-known namesakes Kaiser Chiefs by eight years. Far from the swagger of indie, Armstrong's beat band faithfully embodied an era of Brylcreem quiffs and black-polished winkle pickers. The stylised look was more rock than pop and more edgy than polished, but Armstrong had found his sound.

"I couldn't get enough of the early Beatles," he continues. "By 1967, it had gone too weird for me. I didn't have any pals who were into that – there was the mod thing, the two-tone thing and the new romantic thing at school, but I was wearing my little round, crew-neck jumper. I was an island by myself and I existed like that for a long time. But then I bumped into George at a party and that was it – I had found somebody else who knew what was going on!"

By this time, Miller had been in various bands, but had yet to find a genre with which he could truly

Above **The six-in-line headstock of a 1961 Höfner Colorama 161**



Top **The Harmony 12-string H79** features DeArmond Gold Foils

Bottom left **The headstock of Matt's Klira Triumphator**

Bottom right **An RSA/Selmer Truvoice Model TV8 amplifier**

Opposite page **A closer look at the eye-catching finish of the Klira Triumphator**

connect. "I had been in a rockabilly band, but got fed up of it because it didn't feel authentic – I didn't feel qualified to be in a rockabilly band," he admits. "When we started The Kaisers, we felt that we kind of had a right to do that because we came from the same place where beat music came from. Beat music was, after all, British people playing American music wrong."

With Armstrong's passion for the genre and Miller's connection with beat music, the pair set about capturing the energy and sound of an era. It was a potent mix that resulted in the band releasing a string of studio albums, including *Squarehead Stomp!*, *Beat It Up!* and *Twist With The Kaisers*.

"IT ALL STARTED FROM MY DAD'S ACOUSTIC. I BUSKED WITH IT ALL THE WAY THROUGH COLLEGE"

They went on to tour in the US three times and recorded radio sessions with the likes of John Peel and Mark Radcliffe. "The John Peel sessions made it feel like we were in a real band," Miller quips.

But simply playing early 1960s music wasn't going to cut it. The Kaisers needed the appropriate tools to achieve that unmistakable raw sound. "Because we wanted to set up a beat group," he continues, "it was natural we wanted to have the right type of guitars and the right amps."

TRUE COLOURS

Armstrong had already gladly taken on responsibility for curating the instruments used to create the tones of the early 60s. His first purchase, for example, was







a 1963 Höfner President bass, which would be used on The Kaisers' first record. "When I was 16, I saved up my paper round money to buy it from Reno's on Manchester's Oxford Street," recalls Armstrong, who was brought up in the north west and moved to Edinburgh in the 1980s. "It was £60 or £80. I played it in my first live shows with a covers group. It was inspired by Stu Sutcliffe. Even if it wasn't the right model, that's what I was thinking of."

Armstrong quickly moved on to six-strings, with his main studio and stage guitar with The Kaisers being a Höfner Colorama 162 in an understated red and gold colour scheme. With the pots dating back to 1959, it had all the hallmarks of a period classic, although Armstrong very nearly let it slip through his fingers.

"It was the early days of The Kaisers, and George and I went to Glasgow one Saturday afternoon to specifically look round guitar shops," he recalls. "I saw the guitar, played it, thought it was marvellous,

and then walked away. I loved it because it was so simple and robust, so I took the day off work on Monday to go back to buy it. At the time, I didn't think it would become the guitar I would use all the time, but it just played so great and made the right noise."

The guitar was duly snapped up for £150, but he didn't stop there. From the cascade of guitar cases

"I LOVE THE KLIRA TRIUMPHATOR. IT'S KIND OF CHEAP-FEELING, BUT FUN TO PLAY. IT'S GREAT FOR RHYTHM"

Armstrong has brought along with him, he pulls out another Colorama – this time in silver and blue.

He explains this 160, which also dates back to 1959, has just undergone a heat treatment to straighten

out a bow on the neck, a fret dress and a set-up. He bemoans the paint job, which was applied by the previous owner, but commends the sound.

"It has been repainted really badly at some point, but looks okay from a distance and plays and sounds spot on," he says. "The action could be lower, but that's the way I like it because I play quite hard – it's not going to break. They're very robust."

Above **The charismatic and ever-reliable Selmer Zodiac 30**

Opposite **Matt's current set-up is a 60s Vox VG6 modelled on a Gretsch Country Gent and a 1959 Watkins Dominator**



He continues: “Blindfolded, I couldn’t tell them apart – they’re both the same spec and the same year, so they should sound similar. I am delighted to have a spare.”

In fact, Armstrong has three spares, including a semi-hollow red Höfner Colorama 161 with a single pickup and a six-in-line headstock from 1961. It also needs heat treatment, so will soon be clamped and straightened, but boasts a more refined look. Pragmatic as ever, Armstrong says the upgrades are just for show. “They were trying to make it look more expensive than it actually was,” he says.

His fascination with the Höfner Colorama goes deeper than simply a need for authenticity. The guitar also encapsulated what The Kaisers were, and what they weren’t. “There isn’t a famous player associated with the Colorama, so I could go out on stage and nobody would think I was trying to be George Harrison. It was great to reinforce the fact that we weren’t trying to be The Beatles.”

HIPPY-HIPPY SHAKE

In sharp contrast to the modesty of the Colorama, the Klira Triumphator, from 1965, is all about making an impression. The red rhino skin-style textured vinyl on the body gives it a glamorous, exotic appeal that prompts a sharp intake of breath when it emerges from its case. If the glitz and the glamour of Las Vegas were ever embodied in a guitar, this would be the result.

It was played on stage by Miller – also known as Kaiser George – who admits to selling it to a pawn shop to keep up payments on a saxophone. As custodian of all things 60s, Armstrong rushed in to save the guitar, which he bought for £90.



“I love it,” says Miller. “It’s kind of cheap-feeling, but fun to play. And it is great for rhythm. Some guitars, you can’t really play that choppy style on, but this one has a bounce. A lot of guitars that Matt and I like have a banjo element – that rhythmic quality, and percussive sounds. We’re not interested in Jimi Hendrix-style guitars with loads of sustain.”

As if to prove it, Miller brandishes his custom ‘Kaiserette Guitar II’, which became a staple of The Kaisers’ set-up. Its 21-fret maple neck and sparkly pickguard disguise an instrument that’s been meticulously tailored to Kaiser George’s exacting and atypical standards. “If the guitar is too easy to play, you’re not going to sound like a teenager playing it. It’s important that you don’t sound too fluent,” he says. “When beat music becomes too expertly played, it loses everything that it is about.”



AUTHENTIC AMPS

Armstrong's dedication to sourcing authentic instruments for his band to use also extended to amplification, and his beloved Selmer Zodiac 30, which sports a worn-in silver and black finish with a mock-crocodile-skin cover and a central light that flashes in time with the amp's onboard tube tremolo. Pushing out 30 watts through a pair of Celestion G12 alnico speakers, there's not a lot to dislike there...

"It sounds as amazing as it looks," he says, "and blew a Vox AC30 right out of the shop when I tried them side by side. Both were £99. I was 17 at the time and negotiated a lift home in the back of a van as part of the purchase from Second Gear in Macclesfield. It

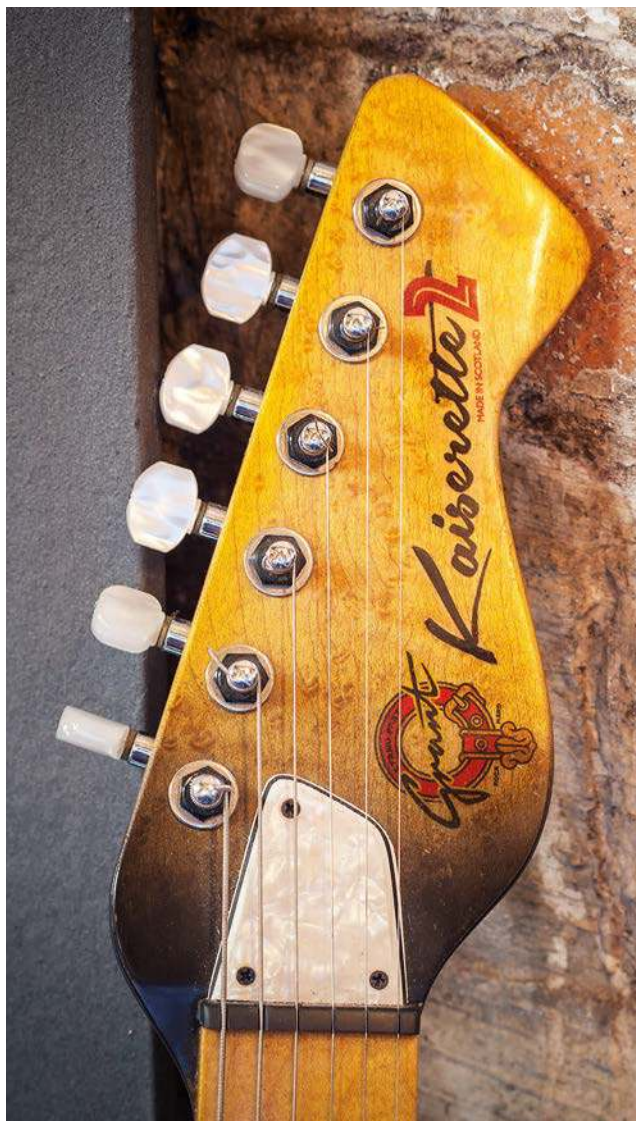
was one of my best purchases ever. And certainly one of the heaviest!"

As if one vintage Selmer wasn't enough, he's also the proud owner of a 1947 RSA/Selmer-Truvoice TV8. "It smells great, probably my best smelling amplifier – and sounds lovely, but doesn't have a very safe circuit in the earthing department," he concedes. "Electric John [John Phillips – The Kaisers' guitar and amp fixer, from Rosslyn] suggested it was never to be used in conjunction with any other electrical equipment! I think I bought it from Live Music, but had to promise not to hold them responsible if I ever plugged it in!"

During their heyday, The Kaisers had a complete and seemingly unshakable Selmer backline that toured

Opposite **Armstrong's Kaisers** bandmate George Miller with his custom-built Kaiserette II guitar

Above **Matt's collection** features some of the coolest oddball vintage guitars out there



unfailingly. Armstrong says he experienced only one valve failure in about 200 shows. Considering the £99 price tag of his Selmer Zodiac, that represents quite a return on his investment.

"It is a different world now, where you can research a particular model online," he says. "Back in the 1980s and 90s, it was possible to bump into a guitar or amp in a junk shop that you didn't even know existed. You could take it home for a reasonable sum and thump it on stage the next night.."

"MY GUITARS HAVE A HISTORY AND THEY HAVE A STORY. MOST IMPORTANTLY, THEY MAKE THE SOUND I WANT TO HEAR"

MODERN-DAY BEAT

Today, Armstrong performs as a singer-songwriter adopting the onstage persona of 'Troy Fridge' and using a Japanese-made Vox VG6 modelled on a Gretsch Country Gent. His instrument was actually unbranded and carries only a Marconi badge because removed from a radiogram and added to the headstock. He dates the guitar to 1969/1970 and pairs it with a 17-watt 1959 Watkins Dominator, which features two elliptical speakers in a v-shaped cabinet, and he admits "It has been severely meddled with".

Armstrong also confesses to owning a couple of "newish" guitars, as well as some "posh" marques,

but none compare to his Zenith 'Josh White' acoustic, which was bought by his father in 1961. The German-made guitar was the catalyst for Armstrong's love affair with music. "It was left in the family home when my parents divorced, so I picked it up and it all started from there! I busked with this guitar all the way through college.

"My dad was a skiffler – but my brother played it with a metal plectrum and scratched up the finish. So in the wisdom of my youth, I painted it white."

Armstrong owns six acoustics and upwards of 30 electrics. Many more

have been stolen, discarded, borrowed or donated. He describes his current collection as an "embarrassment of riches" stocked with examples from an era that changed music forever. Many of the guitars in Armstrong's collection were inexpensive to buy; chanced upon in a second-hand shop or in the darker recesses before the advent of the internet and eBay. All are charming, characterful and distinctively authentic.

"They sound right," Armstrong concludes. "They survived because they work. If they didn't, they would have been binned. They have a history, they look attractive and they all have a story. Most importantly, they make the sound I want to hear." 🎸

Above left The peghead of George's custom made 'Kaiserette II' guitar

Top right A close up on the single neck pickup of Matt's Höfner Colorama 161

Bottom right Matt's collection features many obscure electrics from the Beat Group era



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AT HOME WITH BONAMASSA

PART 2

If there's one man whose guitar collection deserves more than one feature, it's Joe Bonamassa. Besides from his Blues Of Desperation guitars, Joe also showed us a few very special extras from one of the greatest collections on Earth...

Story **Chris Vinnicombe** | Photography **Eleanor Jane**



Diving away from Joe Bonamassa's home in the Hollywood Hills down towards the flickering lights of Los Angeles, we wonder if we've ever seen

so many incredible vintage guitars in a single location. Given that what was supposed to be a 90-minute interview slot ended up lasting over four and a half hours, it's clear that Joe enjoys showing people the highlights of his collection.

And even though we were supposed to be sticking to the instruments that were used on his new album, the blues star couldn't resist letting us take a look at a few very special guitars with considerable history.

"I bought Terry's guitar last August," Bonamassa says of the heavily road-worn 1952 Telecaster owned previously by Terry Reid, the under-appreciated British rock singer and guitarist who turned down offers to front both Jimmy Page's New Yardbirds and, later, Deep

"OF THE GIBSONS I OWN, THE V AND THE BLACK BURST ARE PROBABLY THE MOST VALUABLE"

Purple. "He bought it in 1968 when he was on tour with Cream, and the front pickup died. When they played Madison Square Garden with Cream, he brought

it to [legendary New York City musical instrument store] Manny's and they put a new Gibson Patent Number humbucker in it.

"I'm a big Terry fan. There's some great footage of the guitar at Glastonbury in 1971 on YouTube. When you see the footage of it, this

thing was trashed in '71. Terry had the neck refinished in the 80s, but I had it refretted."

MARKET TRADER

We wonder whether Joe can remember when he was first bitten by the guitar collector's bug in a serious way? "I've always been serious about it," he admits. "I was dormant for a while, though, and actually sold a bunch of stuff that I was holding from the 1990s in

The black 1955 'Howard Reed' Stratocaster and '58 Flying V known as 'Amos' in Joe's lounge





2006. I saw a '64 ES-335 priced at \$28,000 and dealers willing to pay \$22-23,000 for it, and I'm like, sure! A dealer friend of mine paid me \$18,500 for a '65 Strat in sunburst! So I sold a bunch of it and was very dormant through the height [of the economic crisis]. When the crash hit, ultimately my fortunes went up and I started to buy again."

One of the rarest – and coolest – Fenders in Bonamassa's collection is the black 1955 Stratocaster formerly owned by Howard Reed, the guitarist who replaced Cliff Gallup in Gene Vincent & His Blue Caps.

Back in 1988, an 11-year-old Joe had a poster of this very guitar on his bedroom wall, and now he owns it.

Proof that patience and hard work pays off, but was it the first ever black Stratocaster? "Well there's the Jimmy Bryant one, which nobody has seen for a while and that's supposedly a '54, but it's either the first or the second. My guess is probably the second. There's photos of Howard playing this guitar in '56 or '57. Fender is doing a run of these, they're doing 100 of these.

Replicating the mailbox letters has been the biggest problem."

The most surprising fact about the Howard Reed Strat is its weight, as Joe confirms: "8lb 11oz – super-heavy! [The idea that all vintage Fenders are light] is a myth. Ash is ash!"

"THERE'S SOME GREAT FOOTAGE OF THE GUITAR AT GLASTONBURY – IT WAS TRASHED IN 1971!"

Last but by no means least in this trio of legendary instruments is Amos, the korina 1958 Flying V. Given that only 98 of these instruments are documented to have left Gibson's Kalamazoo factory in 1958, we're already right at the top of the tree when it comes to collectible guitars, but there's a

twist – only 10 are thought to have been manufactured with a black pickguard.

First sold in 1959 by Amos Arthur of famous family-owned music store Arthur's Music in Indianapolis, Indiana, the guitar dropped off the map for 17 or so years and was then purchased in the mid-70s by Joe's friend Norman Harris of Norman's Rare Guitars. Harris held onto it for four decades, during which the guitar was photographed for numerous books – and in 1984

This page, opposite and overleaf
The '52 Tele on the right was previously owned by British rock singer Terry Reid, and was used at Glastonbury in 1971 – looked nearly as weathered in the early 70s as it does today





even featured in *This Is Spinal Tap*. “They probably made five in that configuration,” says Joe of Amos’s black guard/white poker chip plastics. “The Pete Townshend one is in that configuration. Blackguard Vs were probably within the first 10. Of the Gibsons that I own, the V and the black Burst – the black ’60 Standard – are probably the most valuable.”

But how, we ask, does such a cool and iconic instrument sound when you plug it in? “Awesome, especially with real frets,” Joe replies.

VINTAGE TWEED

With the Reed Strat and Flying V leaning up against a ’54 Twin for photography purposes – and one famous blues guitarist and a magazine editor hovering just out of shot wearing expressions of grave concern – we return to the subject of Bonamassa’s current live rig, which consists of a pair of tweed Twins and a pair of tweed Bassmans.

“All the stage amps have Celestion speakers,” says Joe. “There are 80-watt Celestions in the Twins. I get about 40 shows a year out of them and we have to switch them. In the Bassmans, we use 60-watt Celestions and then there’s a Jensen in the upper-right on both of them because the Celestions won’t clear the transformer. Even live, only the Twins are mic’d, but the Bassmans give you this sympathetic distortion. The Twins would be too clean on their own. The Bassmans grind a little bit more and make the whole soup a little squishy.

“We put the rig together on a Sunday and Tour Supply wasn’t open, so we ran out of splitter boxes. For the final split point, I said, ‘well I’ve got this TC Electronic thing’ [a Stereo Chorus – Ed], and we put it on and it was the happiest accident. When you put it on subtly it tightens up the bottom a little bit, it shears some of the bass off, and it’s the secret weapon, but it’s so painfully simple...”







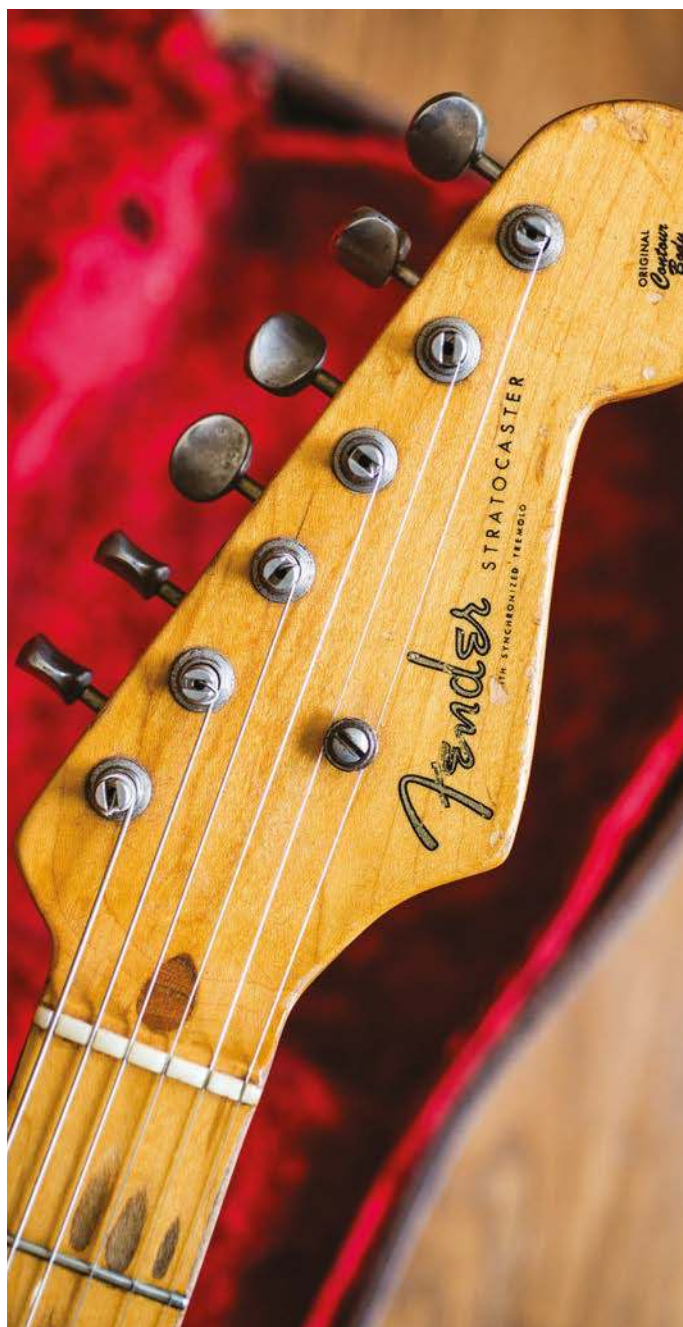
20TH CENTURY TOYS

An encounter with Rick Nielsen helped fuel Mike Long's passion for the classics. The owner of Cheltenham's ATB Guitars since 1998, he's bought and sold over 1,500 vintage pieces...

Story Chris Vinnicombe | Photography Eleanor Jane

Opposite **ATB Guitars** head honcho Mike Long, holding a super-clean 1957 Les Paul TV Junior

Above This transitional 1959 Strat sports a single-ply pickguard and has a mid-1959 body date, making it an early slab rosewood 'board model



1954 Fender Stratocaster This very early Strat has a serial number below 0050 and a neck date of 6-54, initialled by Tadeo Gomez. The body has a pencil date mark of 5/54 and the tape in the control cavity is signed 'Gloria' and dated 8 June 1954. It sports the distinctive early features that were gradually phased out throughout the second half of 1954, such as the rounded pickup covers, and is all-original with the exception of later knobs, switch tip and back plate

I was a guitarist from quite a young age. At school, really," remembers ATB Guitars main man Mike Long as we sit among a frankly outrageous selection of electric guitars

from Fender and Gibson's golden era, many of which are in their original cases.

"I started playing in various bands in the North Devon area," he continues. "I was always into guitars and I always wanted to strive to get the best guitar I could. But the interest in older guitars quickly became an obsession of mine. When I went to university in Leicester, I was still buying and selling guitars while trying to do my coursework.

"Also, while I was at university, I was on the entertainment committee, which basically meant that you had to help with the load-in and set-up of the bands. And one of the bands was Cheap Trick.

Rick Nielsen came along with probably 150 vintage guitars... Korina Vs, Strats, Blackguard Teles, probably about half a dozen Bursts. Just for a university show in Leicester! I met him backstage and we got on really

well and he sort of turned me on to various vintage guitars that were out there and he let me play them. Unbelievable! So by that time I'd really caught the bug."

WIRED FOR SOUND

As introductions to the vintage guitar market go, that's pretty impressive. But before collector-grade six-strings became his bread and butter, after leaving university, Mike worked in the music industry for 12 years as a live and studio sound engineer with artists such as Blur, Manic Street Preachers, PJ Harvey and Spiritualized. This was followed by a venture into pro-audio that evolved into one of Europe's biggest vintage studio gear

**"I USED TO GO TO MOSCOW
AND COME BACK WITH A
SUITCASE FULL OF NEUMANN
VALVE MICROPHONES"**







businesses: “I used to go to Moscow two or three times a year and come back with a suitcase full of Neumann valve microphones,” he recalls.

However, during this period Mike was still buying and selling vintage guitars on the side. And when his pro-audio company eventually folded, he started taking his guitar sales a lot more seriously, eventually leading to what’s become ATB Guitars today. “Since 1999, that’s basically all I’ve been doing,” Mike reveals. “I started off on eBay and quickly gained a good reputation for honesty in descriptions. All our auctions started off at 1p with no reserve! Sometimes people got bargains but at that time eBay’s fees were very small so even if your profit was only 10 per cent you’d still make something. When eBay raised their fees I made my own website and basically got to where I am now.”

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Remarkably, Mike resists the considerable temptation to keep hold of individual guitars, no matter how much he likes them, and every instrument that he owns is

for sale: “If I do want a guitar for my own personal use I usually have plenty to choose from. And I hand-pick these, so they’re generally ones that I like anyway.”

The search for vintage treasures often sees Mike racking up the air miles

“all over the world,” even if the weakness of the pound since last year’s Brexit vote has made Stateside guitar trading less lucrative. “The States isn’t as good as it used to be,” he admits, “but I’m finding quite a lot of stuff in Europe. I’m often jumping on a plane and going on a hunt, or as Joe Bonamassa calls it, a guitar safari!”

The trophies that Mike brings home from safari are often all-original examples. “Originality tends to

“PEOPLE ARE REALISING HOW RIGHT THEY GOT THINGS BACK IN THE 50S. YOU DON’T HAVE TO MESS AROUND WITH THEM”

1955 Gibson ES-295
This is one of only a handful of factory red Gibson ES-295 models that are known to have left Kalamazoo, and is in near-mint condition with its original case. Rarity aside, it’s a simply wonderful instrument that is very difficult to put down



be what my customers want,” he remarks, “Whether they are players or collectors. It’s always been the case with collectors but I’m finding that the newer, younger breed of players who are starting to realise the niceties of guitar are also looking for originality as well.

“It does show how right they got things back in the 50s. People are realising that, and that you don’t have to mess around with them too much. There’s obviously a market for guitars where people can swap pickups out of them, and the hardware, but at the end of the day the vintage market is geared towards originality. But modded instruments do offer a good opportunity to get into the vintage market. And some mods are reversible – sometimes it’s just a question of finding the right hardware and putting it back on.”

Having traded so many instruments over the years, Mike is no stranger to some of the rarest guitars that the vintage market has to offer.. When we ask what his most prized catch has been so far, he reels off a list: “There’s been a few... a 1967 Flying V, a ’63 Stratocaster in Olympic White with gold hardware, in mint condition. A black ’63 Strat in mint condition. There have been loads of mint condition Les Paul Goldtops from various years. Some of the ones I’ve had have been in time-capsule condition. It’s unreal.

Left This rare Sunburst 1967 Custom Telecaster features a maple 'board and is a super-light and resonant example. Its neck is dated October 1967, while the pots date to 1966

Below right This original stop tailpiece, 1959 ES-345 is a monster player with original PAFs that has been well used, but not abused

Below left and opposite Fender changed the colour of the Candy Apple Red undercoat from silver to gold in the mid-60s. Candy Apple Red guitars with a gold undercoat tend to turn a darker bronze colour than those with silver – in the flesh there’s a noticeable contrast between the finishes on the ’63 Jazzmaster and ’69 Strat pictured overleaf







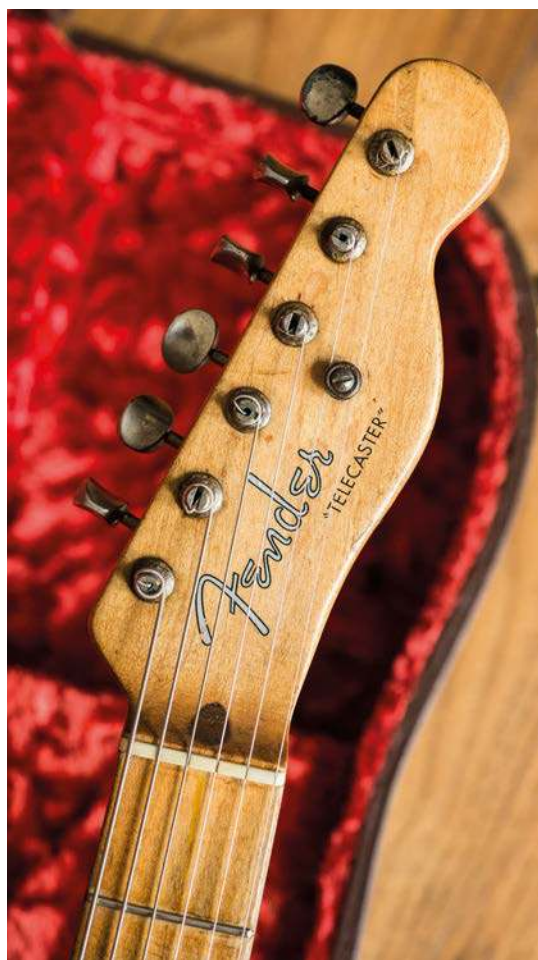
There was a '52 Les Paul like that. And recently a '61 Les Paul SG."

A couple of his favourites are here today in the shape of a very early Stratocaster and one of only a handful of cherry-finished Gibson ES-295s that are known to exist: "The '55 ES-295 in Cherry Red is pretty special one, I think. That '54 Strat has a very low serial number, it's below 0050 and was made in June 1954."

GLOBAL GAS

Mike's customers are often as far-flung as the guitars that he sources, and it's not unheard of for celebrity players to buy instruments from him. "I also had a Pelham Blue 1966 Gibson ES-335," he remembers. "I think there's only one other in existence. That was probably the fastest selling guitar I've ever had. I posted it on my Instagram and it had tonnes and tonnes of likes. It was on the website for about an hour and a half and it sold at full price to one of the guitarists from Pearl Jam. Hardly any guitars sell locally – they're shipped all over the world. All sorts of different people buy them, including rock stars!"





Returning to the subject of originality, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the phenomenon of the clean, 'kept under the bed' vintage guitar is now pure fantasy. Not necessarily, says Mike: "People are still coming out of the woodwork with various things that have been passed through generations. That ES-295 was a case in point. It was bought from a Californian dude whose daddy used to own a music store back in the day that sold Gibsons. I get the feeling that's been handed down... then finally I bought it!"

With all this talk of the super-rare, are there any bargains out there for vintage fans on a budget? "Jazzmasters are starting to creep up but they are still under-valued in today's market," Mike opines. "Jaguars as well, although they are a poor man's Jazzmaster in some ways, I think mainly because the pickups aren't quite as meaty. SG Juniors are brilliant guitars that are underpriced as well. Les Paul Juniors have crept up quite a bit over the last couple of years – they've really found a market place, again with emerging players. When they get into Juniors they tend to find with the old P-90 guitars you just need a volume control and you've got all the tones you need, basically."

As we give that gorgeous ES-295 a final strum and prepare to leave, we wonder if there's anything that has so far evaded the grasp of this veteran guitar trader. "Although I've handled and played original 1950s Korinas, I haven't actually sold one, it would be nice to do that," says Mike. "They are great guitars." Now that would be some safari. 🐾

To find out more about ATB and to see what Mike has for sale currently, visit www.atbguitars.com



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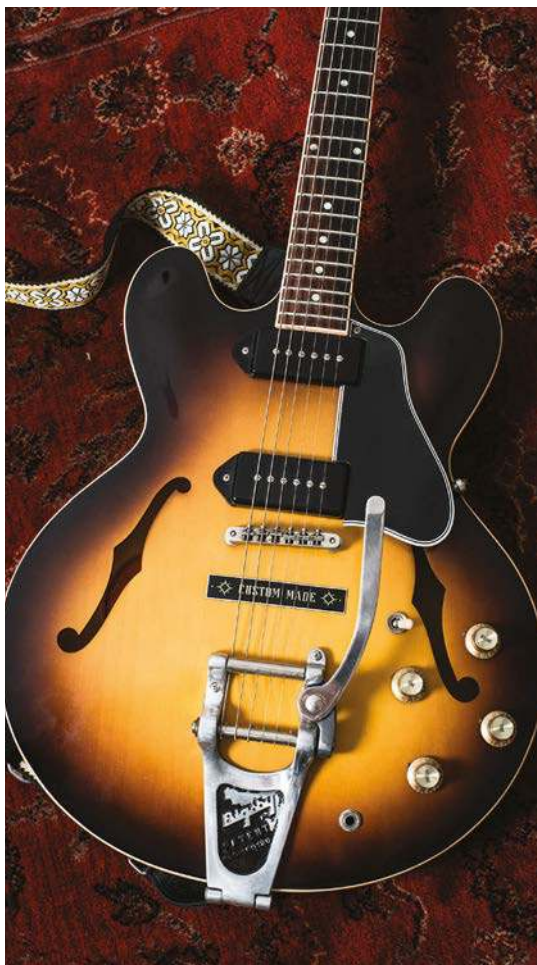
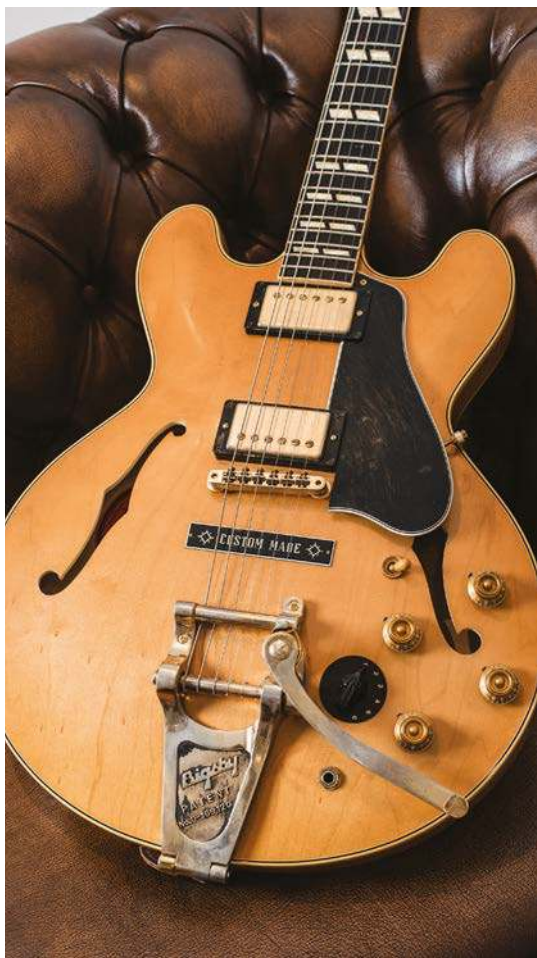
MODERN CLASSICS

Paul Connop's taste for designs from the electric guitar's golden era has seen him assemble a highly desirable array of six-strings that have seen plenty of use in the studio and on the road. Chris Vinnicombe gets the lowdown

Photography ELEANOR JANE







Based in a picturesque corner of Shropshire, guitarist Paul Connop is responsible for toneful, ethereal electric guitar atmospherics as part the live backing band for Ivor Novello Award-winning Black Country singer-songwriter Scott Matthews. Paul's collection – Telecasters, Gibson semis, Juniors – was recently given an airing on a string of UK and European tour dates with Matthews and it betrays a love of classic gear that's as tasteful as his playing, while a pedalboard bristling with Strymon units is a nod to convenience and modernity.

Like so many of us – this writer included – Paul's pathway into the wonderland of the six-string guitar began with classical lessons and a nylon-string before the siren song of rock 'n' roll came calling. "I was probably eight, nine, something like that," he remembers. "I was into bands like Quo and stuff like that, I guess I'd seen people playing guitar and

Opposite Paul's Gibson Memphis 1964 ES-345 features an aged Bigsby B7 from Electric Mojo Guitars. "I always wanted a Cherry 335, 345 or 355," he says. "I'm a massive Noel fan. I had one of those Höfner Verithins which was great, but when I could afford it I got a Gibson."

Above left Paul's Gibson Memphis 1959 ES-345

Left Gibson Custom 1963 ES-335 with P-90s

Above Gibson Custom '61 VOS SG Maestro circa 2000 with Martin Six String Customs loom and double-ring tuners



Top left **Fender 2007 '50s Road Worn Telecaster**

Top right **Fender American Vintage 1952 Hot Rod Tele**

Bottom left **Custom Shop 1960 Strat: "It felt like I'd been playing it for 20 years"**

Bottom right **Fender Japan 1962 Custom Telecaster**

thought, that could be for me! But my parents were keen for me to do it properly and get some lessons."

CLASSICAL GAS

"There was a lady who lived not far from where I lived who was a piano and guitar teacher, so I went to her for a few years and did the whole classical thing and the grades. Then Angus Young came along and everything changed! Then it was like, I don't really want this guitar anymore, but I really want one that looks like

Angus's. So I got a Kay SG replica with single-coils, a trem and a batwing 'guard.

"It was probably from that point that the lessons started to fade away," he laughs. "I got a small practice amp and learnt from records but I'm eternally grateful to my parents for making me do the lesson thing. For what I do now with Scott, the fingerpicking – having that early tuition, I'm grateful for it now. When I'm at home I never play with a pick. Maybe that comes from starting that way."







Once he'd been bitten by the electric guitar bug, Paul was hooked:

"Then begins a lifelong obsession and always thinking about the next guitar!" he chuckles. "I grew up on AC/DC and Sabbath and Purple, Rainbow and Whitesnake and all those bands. So it was about saving what you could to get to that next, best guitar. And I went through the whole pointy phase with the Charvels and the Jacksons. From early teens I was in bands, just mates at school, as soon as there was enough of us to put a band together and get in a room or somebody's shed or a classroom after school."

WORTH THEIR SALT

When he's not thinking about that next guitar purchase or backing up Scott Matthews and doing session recording work, Paul also plays with Neal Cook – once the frontman of Wolverhampton post-punks The Wild Flowers – in Americana outfit Saltflat. It's his second stint with the band.

"Saltflat are a band I met about 10 years ago and started playing with them," he recalls. "It's Americana with that Petty, Wilco vibe. I played with them for a few years and for whatever reason went on to do something else and play with other bands."

Above Paul's 1960 Kent Guyatone Polaris, "A quirky little thing, but the neck is awesome."

Opposite Fender Custom Shop 1963 Double TV Jones Tele with Bigsby vibrato and Mustang bridge saddles. Paul's guitar straps are hand-made by Souldier in Chicago





A TALE OF TWO JUNIORS

Five decades separate this pair of stripped-down tone machines

Paul owns two sunburst Les Paul Juniors: a 2007 Gibson Custom '57 VOS and an original 1950s model. "My friend Neil had a Junior and I really liked everything about it," he remembers. "The neck, the weight, everything. Then this VOS model came up. I fell in love with the massive neck; in fact the Custom Shop one is even bigger than the vintage one, they've kind of over-egged it. I've put MojoAxe compensated tailpieces on both of them, they are just great. It's not the easiest thing in the world to intonate and I find it really helps. But you've got so little to work with it makes you work a bit harder. I really fell in love with it."

The love affair soon blossomed and when an affordable vintage Junior became available, he jumped at the chance: "The old one was sold to me as a '57. It has had a neck break, which meant I was able to afford it! I did a part trade for a '98 Firebird, which was great but a bit of an unwieldy beast. When you buy one of these, the more you read into it, you start looking at other '57s... I'm not sure it's a '57 because the tailpiece is so close to the P-90. It may be a '56. I'm not 100 per cent sure but in all honesty I don't really care!"

"As far as I'm aware it's all stock apart from the tailpiece that I've changed, and when the neck was broken I'm pretty sure the headstock was resprayed. It hasn't got original decals. It doesn't bother me that much. It doesn't change the way it plays or sounds. It's got a lot of charm. It did have repro tuners on but I've changed them for a set for Fake 58s. They are good, it feels pretty solid and holds its tune. When you play both guitars side by side they have got their own characteristics. In some ways I think the VOS one is a little brighter, maybe. Feel-wise, they are pretty close but the reissue's neck is bigger. It's lovely just to sit and noodle on, it's a super-comfy guitar."



Above Although Paul's vintage Junior is a favourite for home noodling, his Bigsby-loaded Fender Japan Tele has become a go-to guitar for live work

"We stayed friends and we just got chatting and now we've almost drawn a line under it and said, let's not do anything we did 10 years ago, so we started writing some stuff again so we've been doing that on and off recently. We were supposed to be playing the Y Not festival last weekend but it was a wash-out, it was like a warzone out there. The whole site was like gravy!"

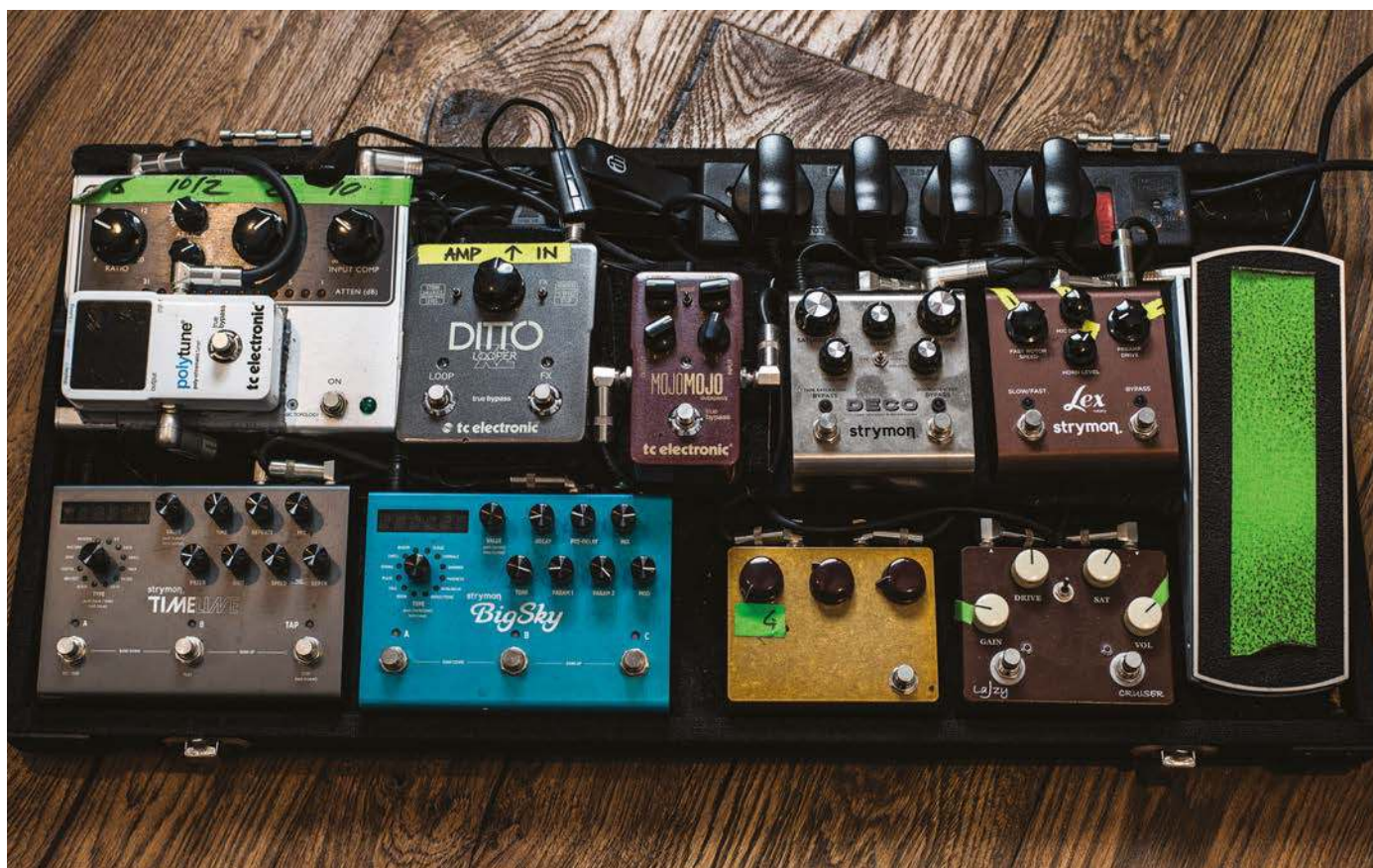
STILL SEARCHING

Although his collection contains some lovely Custom Shop instruments and ticks most of the classic tonal

boxes, he's not done collecting just yet. "I feel very lucky that I've got what I've got," he says. "There's not a lot of vintage stuff. Like all of us I guess I'd love to own lots of nice vintage pieces. As a collector it would be lovely to have a room full of that, no doubt, but I still feel very lucky to have found the ones I've found along the way. Custom Shop guitars are great guitars."

We sense a 'but' on the horizon. What's next on the list? "I don't know why I've never bought one but I'd really love a Ricky. They're an acquired taste and I've played different ones over the years... some feel great





ROAD WARRIORS

Hot glass and boutique stompboxes are central to Paul's rig

Paul's main live and studio amplifiers offer Blackface and tweed flavours. His limited edition Fender '65 Princeton Reverb 'Fudge Brownie' is loaded with a Jensen P10Q alnico speaker, while his Lazy J 20 combo and extension cabinet feature Celestion Alnico Blue 12-inch speakers. The Lazy J 20 is fully loaded with a Variable Attenuation Control, valve tremolo and reverb.

For shows with Scott Matthews, the Princeton tends to be Paul's main stage amp along with the Lazy J extension cab, "Because of the delicacy of Scott's music. The Lazy J 20 can be a little feisty and the Princeton is less likely to roar! There's lots of textural, reverb-drenched stuff with Ebows and slides going on. For me there always seems to be a bit more clarity with the Princeton. But if I'm just plugging into an amp on its own I just love the Lazy J. From the first time I played one, nothing else ever sounded the same. Jesse [Hoff, Lazy J head honcho] is such a lovely guy."

The aforementioned widescreen textures are created using an enviably well-stocked pedalboard. Paul describes the Strymon BigSky and TimeLine as "a world of fun", while the Origin Cali76, Strymon Deco and RYRA Klone tend to remain switched on. They add an appealing sheen and it "feels like there's something missing" when they are disengaged.





and some feel very odd. A friend of mine has a 625 – the Damn The Torpedoes, classic Tom Petty Fireglo model – and it's great. The neck's quite chunky and it sounds great. Put it into a Fender amp and it sounds gorgeous. I would love a Ricky, and if I was going to buy one I'd buy a 12-string because I haven't got one. It would be nice to have it as a different colour and texture."

And like every guitar player out there, Paul's wishlist doesn't end there, of course: "At some point I'd love an old non-reverse Firebird but they are so much money. A real '54 Goldtop would be the dream, but that's a real lottery win guitar, I'm afraid..." Ain't that the truth. 🎸

Check out Paul's new website at www.paulconnop.com

Clockwise from top left
Kimbara nylon-string
(Paul's first guitar), Gibson
J-45 True Vintage, Fender
Thinline nylon-string,
1957 Melodija archtop

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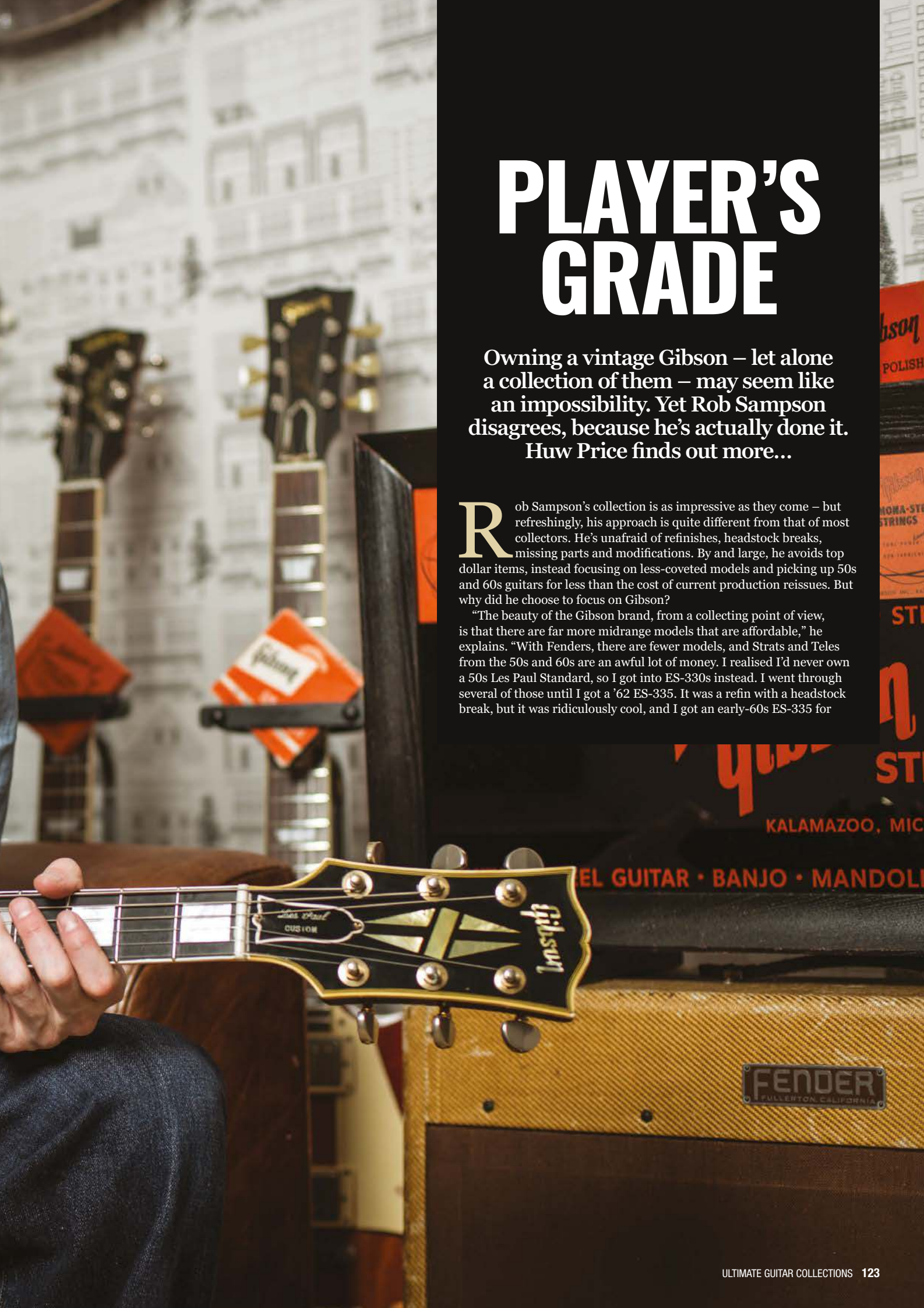
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A person is playing a Gibson Les Paul guitar. The background shows a music store with other guitars hanging on the wall and a Fender guitar case in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

PLAYER'S GRADE

Owning a vintage Gibson – let alone a collection of them – may seem like an impossibility. Yet Rob Sampson disagrees, because he's actually done it. Huw Price finds out more...

Rob Sampson's collection is as impressive as they come – but refreshingly, his approach is quite different from that of most collectors. He's unafraid of refinishes, headstock breaks, missing parts and modifications. By and large, he avoids top dollar items, instead focusing on less-coveted models and picking up 50s and 60s guitars for less than the cost of current production reissues. But why did he choose to focus on Gibson?

"The beauty of the Gibson brand, from a collecting point of view, is that there are far more midrange models that are affordable," he explains. "With Fenders, there are fewer models, and Strats and Teles from the 50s and 60s are an awful lot of money. I realised I'd never own a 50s Les Paul Standard, so I got into ES-330s instead. I went through several of those until I got a '62 ES-335. It was a refin with a headstock break, but it was ridiculously cool, and I got an early-60s ES-335 for





£2,000! Later, I got a '66 ES-345 that was also cheap, because the 'board had been replaced. As a result, I slowly realised that player-grade stuff with repairs and some changes can be relatively affordable. If there are hardware issues, you can just find replacements online and put things back to original."

Chasing down vintage parts and guitar-related ephemera has added to Rob's enjoyment, so how does he do it? "Basically, I just scour the internet", he admits. "Etsy has lots of interesting stuff on it, which you would never think; eBay of course, but I haven't figured out yet whether Reverb is a really good or bad thing for me! My Reverb Watch List is ridiculous: tuners, pickups, hardware and even stuff like original keys for Lifton cases."

Rob's love of rock music began when a schoolmate brought a cassette tape of *Appetite For Destruction* to class. Pictures of Slash and various other rockstars of

the era often featured Les Pauls and, when Rob decided to learn guitar, that's the model he wanted to play. A succession of copies followed, before Rob started buying vintage Japanese guitars because they were that bit closer to the vintage Les Pauls he saw in guitar

books. But his tastes were broadening, too. "I went to art school in Lancaster and there was a shop called Hobbs Music," he recalls. "The guy had modern Gibsons, but in the back of the shop, there were a load of jazz guitars up on the wall. There were

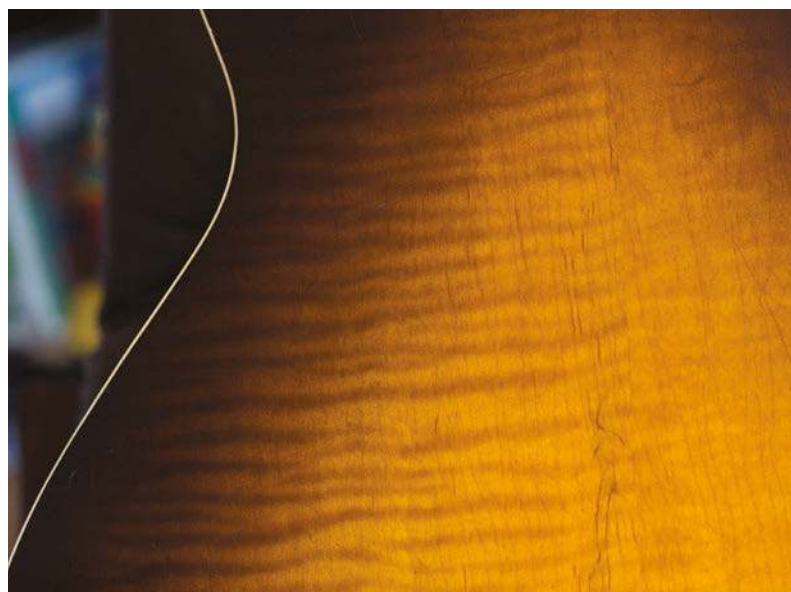
L-5s, L-7s, really top-of-the-line stuff, and none of them were for sale. Even though I don't play jazz, I fell in love with those because they are so beautiful and the craftsmanship is incredible."

Rob's first vintage Gibson was acquired soon he graduated and moved to London. "I'd saved up about £1,500, so I managed to pay six weeks' rent in advance. My dad drove me down on the Sunday, and on the

"I REALISED THAT PLAYER-GRADE STUFF WITH REPAIRS AND SOME CHANGES CAN BE RELATIVELY AFFORDABLE"

Opposite and top right Rob's 1949 ES-300N features an outrageously flamé maple top

Above Rob's 1953 Fender Bassman. The 'PM' on the 15-inch Jensen speaker stands for 'permanent magnet'



Above **Rob's 1936 Gibson L-Century 'Century Of Progress'** is one of only 33 made. Rob mainly uses this striking mother-of-pearl-heavy acoustic for slide

Opposite top right **Rob has heavily restored his 1934 Gibson L-00**, including crack repairs and finish touch-ups

Opposite bottom left **A banner headstock Gibson LG2 from 1946 cosies up with a 1930 Gibson L2 in Argentine Grey**

Opposite bottom right **This Gibson EH125 lap steel features a P13 pickup, which was the forerunner of the P-90**

Monday, I went to Denmark Street and spent £500 on a '62 Melody Maker. It had been Grovered, so it was £150 cheaper, but I had no job and I'd just blown half of my remaining money. I still do that sort of thing. If there's a guitar that I can't let get away, but I haven't really got the money, I'll buy it anyway and then figure something out."

GUARDIAN ANGEL

The Melody Maker is long gone, but Rob managed to replace it with some fantastic solidbody Gibsons, including a TV Model. "I've had it for about four years. It came from Angel Music. Somebody in the past moved one of the studs, presumably to improve intonation, and it has a DMC repro tailpiece. It's had a headstock break, too, and the new frets are too big, so I might get it refretted." We ask if the 'board will get refurbished in the process, but Rob has strong views about that. "I'm quite particular about fingerboards, because I think that's where a lot of the feeling and soul of

a vintage guitar comes from. That played-in waxiness you get from Brazilian rosewood."

Despite putting his 1950s Les Paul dream on hold, Rob stumbled upon a Les Paul Custom. "I've known Steve from Lucky Fret Music for a while, so I popped in for a chat and saw it downstairs," Rob recalls.

"You can't miss a chance to play a 1950s Les Paul, so Steve took it off the wall, plugged it into a Tweed Deluxe and after playing one chord, I said: 'I don't care what it takes, I've got to have this'.

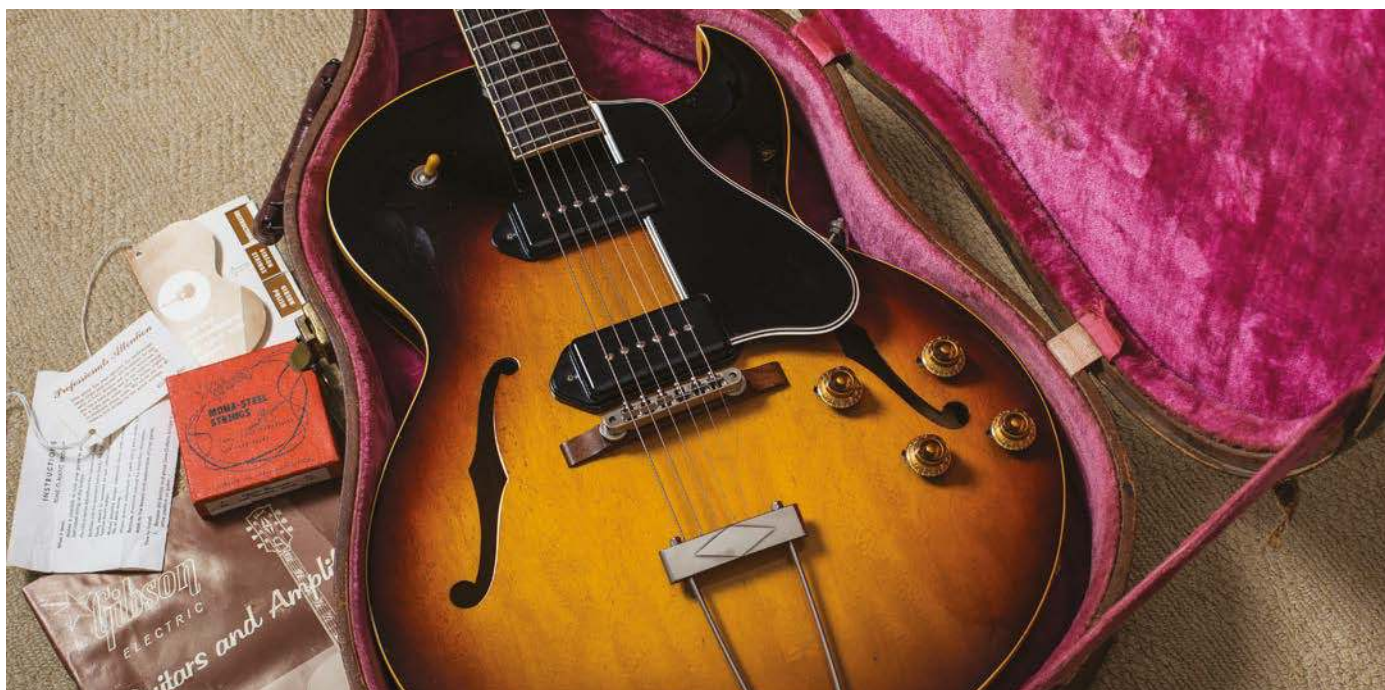
I ended up trading a few guitars for it, but hey, I have

a real 1950s Les Paul and I never thought I'd own one. I'm not entirely sure of the year, because the back of the neck was refinished, but I think it's a '55 or '56."

The Les Paul Custom's original staple and P-90 pickups had been changed to a short-spaced, long-magnet PAF in the neck position and a PAF-spec Patent Number humbucker in the bridge. The pots and Bumblebee caps

"THE FINGERBOARD IS WHERE A LOT OF THE FEELING AND SOUL OF A VINTAGE GUITAR COMES FROM"





Opposite This TV model has a well repaired headstock break, a DMC repro bridge and an added post holes, but when it looks and sounds this good, who cares?

Top Rob's 1959 ES-225, complete with an original Cali Girl case and candy

Bottom left This natural-finish '58 ES-225 is still relatively affordable, but they're becoming more sought after

Bottom middle Rob's '64 ES-330 has been refinished, but all of its parts are otherwise original

Bottom right Rob's 1980s dot-neck 335 has been modded with vintage parts and pickups to make it look and sound like the real thing

have never been changed, and it's an all-mahogany body with the drilled wire channel straight from the output jack socket to the switch. The neck sounds really woody and flutey and beautiful, and then the bridge pickup is really spiky and Tele-like. Think of the *Sympathy For The Devil* solo and it does that. It's a phenomenal guitar. You can play anything on vintage Les Pauls, but you can't on modern ones."

Having gone through a variety of Les Pauls, ES and jazz models, Rob became stricken with "a bad case of flattop sickness" and quickly acquired six vintage acoustics. The highlight is probably a 1930 Gibson L-2 in Argentine Grey with gold-sparkle binding.

"It was second-in-line to the Nick Lucas model," Rob says. "Nobody knows how many they made, but probably

about 200, so it's really rare and unique in terms of its finish.

"It had been on the wall in No. Tom Vintage & Classic Guitars in Denmark Street for quite a while. I'd noticed it and knew what it was, but I didn't know much about

it. I always like to research something before I buy it and delving in, I discovered the regard this model is held in.

"It was one of the most expensive guitars Gibson made during the Great Depression, and it's probably the most Martin-sounding, because it doesn't have that

'dry' sound. It's a lot more articulate than that and it even has a Martin look, with 12 frets and the bridge sitting lower on the body. My '46 L-00 was on Denmark Street labelled as a '49, but it had the script logo, which they only did from 1946 to mid-1947.

"I PLAYED ONE CHORD ON
THE CUSTOM AND SAID:
I DON'T CARE WHAT IT TAKES,
I'VE GOT TO HAVE THIS"



So it was priced lower than it should have been. I'm into the history of these things, and this would have been one of the first guitars built by the Gibson guys when they got back from the war. That feels special to me.

"All my acoustics have mahogany backs and sides except my 1936 Gibson L-Century 'Century Of Progress', which has flamed maple. That thing's a cannon, it's incredibly loud. It started out as the Hawaiian Model with a whopping V neck and the action is fairly chunky. I bought it with the tall nut for slide playing and I didn't want to convert it fully for regular playing. It's a bit odd, because it has the pearloid fretboard, but it's Brazilian rosewood underneath. I find the character so compelling and although it's indulgent, I bought it for playing slide. Although I'm no expert, I like to use guitars for what their original intention was and be as rounded as possible in terms of what I play. I keep it in open D and sometimes take it up to open E, but those old Grover tuners don't really like going above standard tuning."

ACCEPTABLE IN THE 80S

Despite his love of vintage Gibsons, Rob is a man after our own hearts when it comes to reissues. "A lot of people who follow me on Instagram assume my blonde ES-335 is vintage, but it's an 80s one," he admits. "Owning a vintage blonde dot neck is an impossibility for most of us, so I wondered how close could I get. Vintage parts and pickups do make a massive difference, so I installed Patent Number pickups, real M69 rings and an ABR-1 bridge. The Bigsby and 'Custom Made' plaque are 1960s and the knobs, pickguard and switch tip are vintage, too.

"It's the same story with my Les Paul Standard and, to an extent, both guitars are just borrowing these parts. If I find a vintage husk that's missing parts, everything can be transferred across. I see it as having two full sets of parts ready for a Les Paul conversion, or a stripped ES-335 if something comes up. That's another great thing about Gibsons. The parts tended to span most of those models. With Fenders, you can't put a Strat pickup into a Tele or vice versa. A Dog Ear P-90 is a Dog Ear P-90 and you can put one in an ES-300 or a Junior and all models in between. There's something inherently different about the old ones, and while I don't buy into the 'vintage is always best' thing, I think that it's true of all the Les Paul models. If I had six grand to spend, I'd rather a beaten-up old Special than a modern True Historic Standard.

"For the price of some Collector's Choice Les Pauls, you could get a vintage ES-330 and a 50s ES-225, and still have change. I don't think people realise that it doesn't matter if a guitar has had a headstock break, so long as it has been repaired well. Even if the guitar has been refinished, you still have Brazilian rosewood, Honduras mahogany and original parts and pickups, and they do sound different."

Before we leave, Rob imparts some more sage advice. "People think that collecting vintage guitars is a rich-man's game, and to an extent that's true. But there were so many midrange Gibson models, you can buy cheaper guitars that are every bit as good as the really valuable ones. The only way I can buy a lot of this stuff is by getting player's-grade guitars. If I'd bought all these things in original condition, the collection would have cost me three times what I've actually spent. Sometimes, the value of a guitar with replaced vintage parts exceeds what I spent on it, but even if the increase in value just means I'll just get my investment back, it makes the guitar far easier to sell.

"In the meantime, the guitars will get used because I play them at home and I'm happy to lend them out to friends for recording. That's really important to me. They're always good-to-go, in tune with fresh strings and they are all played regularly." 🎸



Rob with his pride and joy, a '56 Les Paul Custom modded with humbuckers

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1953 Fender Esquire
1956 Fender Telecaster
1956 Fender Telecaster body refin
1965 Fender Telecaster Blonde
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1967 Gibson ES-335 TD Pelham Blue



1957 Gibson ES-5 Switchmaster



1952 Fender Telecaster Blackguard



1956 Gibson Les Paul Standard MINT



1969 Gibson Flying V



1964 Fender Stratocaster Olympic White

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