

Guitarist

SPRING 2021

• PRESENTS •

Acoustic

ACOUSTIC GUITAR PLAYER'S GUIDE

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INTERVIEWS

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JONAH
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**GWENIFER
RAYMOND**

**NILE
RODGERS**

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ON HER DRASTIC, FANTASTIC LIFE IN MUSIC

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Many Paths, One Goal



This issue contains perhaps the most stylistically diverse range of acoustic players we've featured to date. On page 30 we join funk legend Nile Rodgers, who tells us about his new-found love of the Acoustasonic Strat – Fender's unplugged take on its most famous electric. He also reveals how early study of Django Reinhardt underpins aspects of his playing style on electric, showing that understanding a broad range of styles on the guitar has the capacity to deepen our own playing, even if we don't play in that genre ourselves.

As if to further demonstrate this point, cover star KT Tunstall also cites Django as an influence on her appreciation of guitar. Join her on page 14 as she looks back on her major hit album *Drastic Fantastic* and gives us the lowdown on her approach to songcraft and technique.

This issue also features some of the most exciting players on the British scene, including the talented Gwenifer Raymond who balances the influence of great fingerstyle players such as John Fahey, with an independent streak a mile wide. Check out our interview with her on page 46.

Rounding up a superb lineup this month is Derbyshire folk magician Nick Jonah Davis, whose flowing, lyrical playing style is as hypnotic as it is beautiful. As different as all these artists are, they are all united by finding beauty in that most adaptable of instruments, the acoustic guitar.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights



Brighton Rock

Gwenifer Raymond is one of the most arresting talents we've heard in ages. We join the Brighton-based artist on **p46**



Gilmour's D-35s

The Pink Floyd legend has not one but two new signature Martins, and they're not nostalgic reissues either. See **p72**



Irish Charm

An alumnus of both Lowden and Atkin, Ciaran McNally is now in business making guitars under his own name **p92**

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Future Publishing Limited, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA
Telephone 01225 442244 Email guitarist@futurenet.com Online www.guitarist.co.uk

EDITORIAL

EDITOR

Jamie Dickson

jamie.dickson@futurenet.com

DEPUTY EDITOR

David Mead

rod.brakes@futurenet.com

CONTENT DIRECTOR, MUSIC

Scott Rowley

scott.rowley@futurenet.com

REVIEWS EDITOR

Dave Burrluck

dave@daveburrluck.com

SENIOR MUSIC EDITOR

Jason Sidwell

jason.sidwell@futurenet.com

ART EDITOR

Darren Phillips

darren.phillips@futurenet.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Lucy Rice

lucy.rice@futurenet.com

CONTRIBUTORS

RICHARD BARRETT, ALEX BISHOP, ROD BRAKES, RICHARD HOOD, GLENN KIMPTON,
NEVILLE MARTEN, ROGER NEWELL, DAVINA RUNGASAMY, HENRY YATES

IN-HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY

PHIL BARKER, OLLY CURTIS, NEIL GODWIN

ADVERTISING

CHIEF REVENUE DIRECTOR **Zack Sullivan** zack.sullivan@futurenet.com

UK COMMERCIAL SALES DIRECTOR **Clare Dove** clare.dove@futurenet.com

ADVERTISING SALES DIRECTOR **Lara Jaggon** lara.jaggon@futurenet.com

ACCOUNT SALES DIRECTOR **Alison Watson** alison.watson@futurenet.com

ACCOUNT SALES DIRECTOR **Guy Meredith** guy.meredith@futurenet.com

MARKETING

MAGAZINE MARKETING DIRECTOR **Sharon Todd** sharon.todd@futurenet.com

HEAD OF ACQUISITIONS **Helen Harding** helen.harding@futurenet.com

ACQUISITIONS CAMPAIGN MANAGER **Tom Cooper** tom.cooper@futurenet.com

ACQUISITIONS MARKETING EXECUTIVE **Jessica Weatherbed** jessica.weatherbed@futurenet.com

PRINT & PRODUCTION

HEAD OF PRODUCTION UK & US **Mark Constance** mark.constance@futurenet.com

PRODUCTION MANAGER **Frances Twentymann** frances.twentymann@futurenet.com

PRODUCTION PROJECT MANAGER **Clare Scott** clare.scott@futurenet.com

ADVERTISING PRODUCTION MANAGER **Jo Crosby** jo.crosby@futurenet.com

DIGITAL EDITIONS CONTROLLER **Jason Hudson** jason.hudson@futurenet.com

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

GUITARIST IS AVAILABLE FOR LICENSING. CONTACT THE LICENSING TEAM TO DISCUSS PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

HEAD OF PRINT LICENSING **Rachel Shaw** licensing@futurenet.com

CIRCULATION

HEAD OF NEWSTRADE **Tim Mathers**

FUTURE PLC

GROUP ART DIRECTOR **Graham Dalzell** graham.dalzell@futurenet.com

CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER **Aaron Asadi** aaron.asadi@futurenet.com

CHIEF EXECUTIVE **Zillah Byng-Thorne** zillah.byngthorne@futurenet.com

BRAND DIRECTOR **Stuart Williams** stuart.williams1@futurenet.com

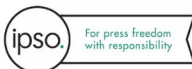
HEAD OF ART & DESIGN **Rodney Dive** rodney.dive@futurenet.com

COMMERCIAL FINANCE DIRECTOR **Dan Jotcham** dan.jotcham@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS, BACK ISSUES & CUSTOMER SERVICE

TELEPHONE 0844 848 2852 ONLINE www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk EMAIL contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

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Chief Executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Rachel Addison**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

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COVER FEATURE KT TUNSTALL

The singer reveals more about her 2004 fast route to fame and why tough is best when it comes to guitars

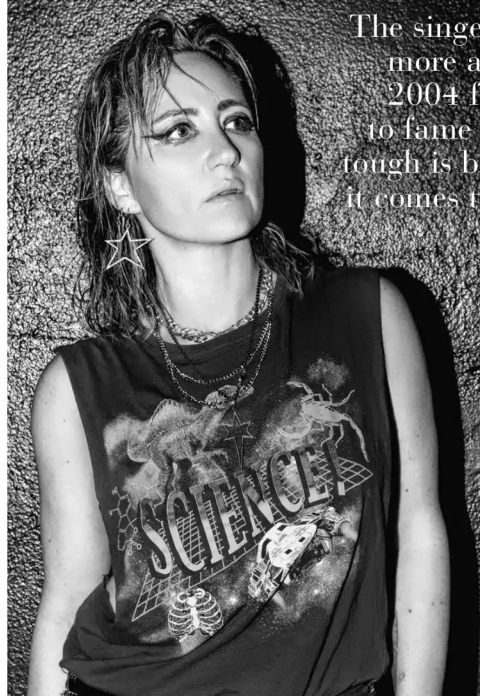


Photo by Courtney Armitage

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IN THE PICTURE

Bob Dylan surveys the highway ahead of him in '65

BOB DYLAN STANDS in the control room of Columbia's studio in the summer of 1965, during the recording of his seminal album *Highway 61 Revisited*. This record remains one of the jewels in the crown of a storied and prolific career that saw him hailed as perhaps the greatest American songwriter of all time. A few years ago it would have been hard to imagine the musician ceding the rights to his monumental back catalogue, but recently he took a step that many other major artists have taken in the past year by selling his entire publishing catalogue – in Dylan's case to Universal for \$300m (£225m). But with his most recent long player *Rough And Rowdy Ways* garnering critical praise, we probably needn't fear this is the end of Dylan's days as a musical force to be reckoned with.





Hole In One

Why are luthiers putting holes in all the 'wrong' places these days?
Alex Bishop examines the pros and cons of the side soundport

After finishing three years' studying guitar-making, in 2011 I moved into my first workshop in Deptford, London. With only a handful of guitar builds under my belt and a slew of more experienced luthiers already in business in the big city, I decided I would need to do something a little different to make an impact. So I had a go at figuring out some of the intriguing new ideas I'd seen coming from the workshops of my favourite acoustic luthiers, and top of the list was the side soundport.

Soundports are one or more holes cut into the sides of the guitar, typically on the bass side of the upper bout, facing the player. The front soundhole of a guitar

First, a little refresher on how a guitar functions. When we strike a guitar string it vibrates, and this energy is transferred into the rest of the instrument via the bridge. Much like a beater striking a drum skin, the soundboard will vibrate in a corresponding manner and its surface moves the air to produce the tone and volume we desire. If we imagine there was no soundhole and that the guitar was a perfectly sealed box, the movement of the soundboard would get restricted by what is in effect a vacuum within the box. As long as the box is ported in some way, the air can freely flow in and out, allowing the soundboard to flex fully and provide the best possible tone.

So, what happens to the tone when a second port is added? Well, initially I would argue not a lot. In effect, we can consider that we are simply making the soundhole bigger – and by how much depends on the size of the new soundport that's installed. Without plunging too deep into the technical stuff, this has an effect on the resonant frequency, essentially shunting particularly prominent frequencies in one direction or another. This might sound like it could have a big effect on the character of a guitar, but, in my experience, a modestly sized soundport doesn't translate to a huge difference in overall tone.

What's the big deal, then? Well, the side porting gives players a completely different perspective. Rather than hearing most of the guitar's tone as secondhand reflections from the walls of the room you're playing in, it's more like sitting in front of the guitar. I would actually describe the experience as hearing what's going on inside the instrument. There is more detail in the perceived tone and a pronounced natural reverb. It's akin to having a monitor in front of you on stage, instead of relying on hearing yourself and the band from what's coming out of the front-of-house PA system.

Some astute sceptics do make the point that the side soundport must be siphoning a certain amount of projection from the front of the instrument; after all, you can't have something for free. While I reluctantly agree this must be the case, I do think the effect is negligible. At any rate, I think an audience benefits more from a performance where the player can indulge in hearing themselves with added clarity.

You'll not likely find many of the big factories producing guitars with side soundports, so it does mean that these guitars tend to be luthier-built instruments with bigger price tags. However, the extra hole does at least also reveal the beauty of the craftsmanship on the inside. So, next time you are in an acoustic jam session and struggling to hear yourself over the shriek of an adjacent clarinetist, consider giving one a go. It's not often that us guitarists will admit this, but less is actually more, for a change. **G**

"Rather than hearing most of the tone as secondhand reflections from the walls, it's more like sitting in front of the guitar"

A side helping of soundport can help the player gauge their own tone a lot more

is so iconic and intrinsic that many people find the idea of another hole in the side unnecessary at first – or just plain odd. Some luthiers find the removal of precious tonewood to be a questionable practice. There is, however, a strong logical argument in favour of this ancillary opening.

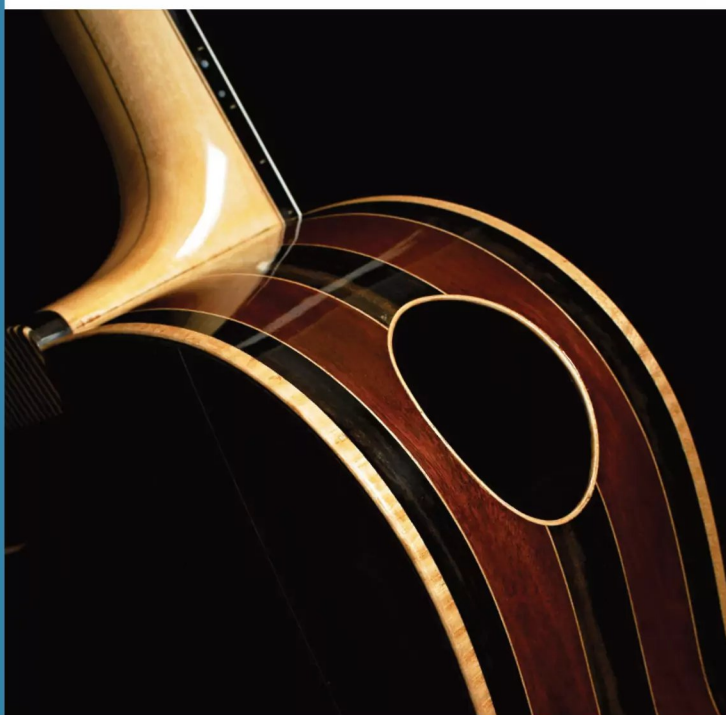


PHOTO BY RICK SMEE



Once Upon A Guitar...

Why do some guitars sound special? **Alex** considers whether there may be more to it than meets the ears

Recently the repair 'department' at Alex Bishop Guitars has seen the satisfying completion of a number of restoration jobs. As anyone who has dabbled in this field will know, guitar repair work is often riddled with unforeseen niggles. Manufacturers use a differing variety of designs, materials and methods to construct their instruments, so you can rarely predict with certainty how a job will unravel each time.

Included in my roster of recent repairs are a substantial rebuild of a 1970s Yamaha, an overhaul of a 1980s Japanese dreadnought, and the resetting of a neck from a 1960s Martin Coletti archtop. All the clients are unconnected to one another, though two common themes run through every one: each owner bought their instrument new, and all are fixing up their instruments on sentimental grounds.

You don't need me to tell you that a guitar is more than just a guitar. Whether it is battered and bruised from a hard life on the road, or a well-looking-after bedroom guitar, we all know well that bond between player and instrument. Playing guitar is about so much more than just hearing a sound. It's the feel of the neck, the lustre of the finish, perhaps the smell of the wood. It's also about the story.

When I moved into my first workshop in London, I used to visit Deptford market regularly. For a cash-strapped, aspiring luthier it was a great place to look for cheap tools, sometimes instruments, and always local paraphernalia. One week I picked up a 1984 copy of the *Jazz Express* for 20p because it featured UK Gypsy jazz legend Diz Disley on the cover, performing at Soho's 100 Club with a youthful-looking Biréli Lagrène. Diz is playing a beautiful Selmer-Maccaferri style guitar and – since these were my guitars of choice – I decided it had to go on the wall of my new place.

It was several years later, when I took one of these kinds of guitars in for a service, that I made an interesting realisation. The guitar in Diz Disley's hands in the photo bore many similarities to the one lying on the workbench in front of me. Despite the granular black and white photo, it was possible to make out a distinctive rosette and an unusual fretboard dot layout. I made a couple of enquiries and was able to complete the chain of five or so previous owners right back to that moment at the 100 Club, 30 years ago.

The guitar changed in an instant. Its sound seemed to resonate more fully, each note inspired the next more effortlessly. While I would love to take the credit for some extraordinary setup work, it seemed to me that it really took on this new lease of life because of its newly discovered heritage.

But it's not just old guitars that can have a story. I recently wrote about my enjoyment in building a

guitar entirely from reclaimed wood, each piece of timber having already lived a life as a dining table, roof beam or floorboard. I believe the unique sound of this guitar has to do with more than just the mere translation of vibrations through wood and air hitting the ear. The human brain adds to this sensation the entire context surrounding the player, too: the feel of a performance space, the reaction of an audience, the uniqueness of the instrument.

"I'd love to take the credit for some extraordinary setup work, but the guitar took on this new lease of life because of its newly discovered heritage"

Branching Out

It was dwelling on this important aspect of guitar building that I decided this month to commence a new life-long lutherie project. Not long ago I decided I would attempt to visit all of the 50 'Great British Trees' and I've visited four of them so far. Spread far and wide across the UK, these trees were selected by The Tree Council in 2002 for their noteworthy magnificence. Some are ancient, or especially enormous, and several are historically significant. So it only seems fitting that I should build a guitar to represent each of the trees that I meet on this dendrological pilgrimage. My hope for these guitars is that they, too, will develop their own unique history and inspire generations of players to come. Wish me luck! **G**

A 1984 copy of *Jazz Express* (pictured below) found at Deptford market would, several years later, allow Alex to join the dots between a guitar on his workbench and Gypsy jazz legend Diz Disley





Fan Club

With design, innovation and wonkiness in mind, **Alex** ponders the intriguing world of multi-scale guitars

The job of the small-scale luthier, as I see it, is not just to hand-build great-sounding guitars, but also to probe around at the very edges of guitar design. We are getting used to seeing side soundports, arm bevels and scoop-shaped cutaways, but, in my experience, nothing grabs the attention of a casual passerby like a fanned-fret guitar.

When confronted with such an instrument for the first time, most people (whether they be guitarists or not) tend to stare at the fingerboard for a moment with a look of uncertainty, trying to comprehend whether such an instrument could ever actually work. Eventually,

“When confronted with such an instrument for the first time, most people tend to stare at the fingerboard with a look of uncertainty”

bewilderment gives way to curiosity as I am asked why I – as a luthier – have undertaken the task of building such a heretical instrument...

For the uninitiated, fanned frets are best described as an arrangement of frets that appear to radiate from an imaginary centre point some distance away from the fingerboard. The nut is normally angled away from the player on the bass side, with the bridge slanted in the opposite direction. Sometimes the visual impact is subtle, and other times it is quite striking. It is regularly assumed that contorting the frets in this way has something to do with intonation or tuning, but this is not the case.

A wonderful sight to behold, fanned frets are equally wonderful to play, with surprising ergonomic qualities on offer



In order to understand the purpose behind such a design, we must first appreciate that fanned frets go back to the 16th century with the invention of the orpharion, a type of English lute. Back then, string technology was much more limited, and it was impossible to add enough mass to a string to make it resonate at the lowest desired pitches. If the note was detuned (in the same way that we might go into drop D tuning, for example) the string would become too slack. Instead, the scale length of the instrument had to become longer on the bass side. The result is a multi-scale instrument, capable of covering a broader range of notes than equivalent straight-fretted lutes could handle.

Given that today's guitarist is spoiled for choice with almost every kind of guitar string imaginable, one might ask: what is the point of fanned-fret guitars now? Well, first, we can say that for the same set of strings, we are experiencing different tensions. Most notably, the longer scale length on the bass strings will produce a more robust tone because they are more taut, but the trebles will retain a sweetness from staying slacker. Second is the ergonomic case: fanned frets are surprisingly comfortable to play on. While the degree of fanning varies between guitars, most players agree that slanted frets better suit the natural resting position of the left hand than the parallel frets of a 'normal' guitar.

Full Circle

For me, the repercussions of choosing fanned frets go a little deeper. By skewing the bridge, there is a change in the distribution of tensile stresses in the top, so bracing design has to be reassessed to counter this. My first fanned-fret guitar had slanted ladder bracing radiating away from the bridge, roughly in line with the frets on the fingerboard. The result was a soundboard that was excessively stiff in particular areas on the treble side, and more opened up on the bass side. The tone of this instrument was pleasingly distinct from its parallel-fretted siblings. I recall that it had a focused bottom-end, an extra-pronounced midrange, and a more delicate upper register.

I have since evolved my ideas of a ladder-braced fanned-fret guitar. I realised it would also be possible to avoid the problem of redesigning bracing patterns by skewing the grain of the soundboard so that it runs perpendicular to the angle of the bridge, rather than parallel with the centreline. This way, all horizontal braces can run pretty much parallel to one another. The result is (rather ironically) a fanned-fret guitar that sounds much closer to what I would expect from a guitar that doesn't have fanned frets. Sometimes, when you are trying hard to push the envelope, you have to tell yourself that there is no shame in going full circle, and simply ending up right back where you started. **G**



Tuning Up

Alex tackles the common misconceptions around intonation, and why trying to play the guitar 'in tune' is a fool's errand anyway...

Between the shifting tiers and local lockdowns of 2020, I was fortunate enough to have taught numerous guitar setup masterclasses. These sessions were designed to give my students the confidence to be able to make adjustments to their beloved six-strings, and it's been encouraging to see so many guitarists and amateur luthiers signing up to broaden their understanding of the mechanics of the guitar. Even though setting up a guitar is a relatively easy affair once you know how, there's always a bit of myth busting involved. At the top of my list of lutherie folklore is the matter of 'intonation' – or fixing a guitar that doesn't play in tune.

Consider firstly what happens when we play a note on the fingerboard. A certain amount of pressure is needed from the fretting hand to get the note to sound clearly: we have all felt, at some point, the agonising union of a high E string with an uncalloused fingertip. This pressure stretches the string over the top of the fret and increases the pitch of the note slightly causing it to sound out of tune, especially against any perfectly tuned open strings.

We can fix this problem by moving the saddles slightly further away on each string, a process known as 'compensation'. The distortion of the fretted notes tends to be more pronounced on the lower strings, often resulting in a familiar-looking slanted saddle.

In my experience, though, incorrect alignment of the saddle is rarely the main cause of a poorly performing guitar, and this is what I've been highlighting so often during my workshops. The first of the pitch-wobbling offenders is string gauge. We are spoilt for choice when choosing strings these days, and guitarists opting for nine or 10s should understand that – while easier to play – these thinner strings are far less likely to sound the desired pitch with any accuracy. Players with a lighter touch will have more luck, but heavy-handed players with a sensitive ear would be better off stringing their instrument up with spaghetti. Alternatively, the higher tension that comes from 12s or 13s will not only produce a robust tone but far improve your guitar's ability to resist the pressure from your fretting hand and sound the intended note with precision.

Tunings & Temperaments

You might have tossed your nines in the bin, but don't expect a higher string gauge to instantly solve all your problems; you'll need a good setup, too. Those 13s will put quite the bow in your guitar's neck, meaning that the height of the strings is being raised from the surface at the same time. A high action is not a friend of good intonation, so make sure the truss rod is adjusted accordingly to allow only a little neck relief, as well as keeping the saddle heights in check. Finally, don't forget

your nut slots, otherwise the consonance of those cowboy chords will suffer, too!

If you are keen to go down the rabbit hole of improving intonation further, it is worth exploring the world of tunings and temperaments, if only to ultimately absolve yourself of any responsibility towards ever playing (or making) a guitar that is perfectly in tune with itself. There is not enough space to discuss this topic in detail here, but essentially there is a beautiful

"It is worth exploring the world of tunings, if only to absolve yourself of any responsibility towards ever playing a perfectly in-tune guitar"

mismatch between the 'perfect' guitar (in intonation terms) and an instrument capable of playing equally well in all keys. You can blame mother nature or physics for this one, but achieving both on a fretted musical instrument is impossible.

This realisation always reminds me that it is all too easy to get lost in the minutiae of detail with setting up guitars, when really they are not instruments of mathematical perfection but rather tools for channelling emotion and expressing creativity. There is something beguiling about this notion that music can only ever just miss the mark – perfection always seems to be over the brow of the next hill. **G**

We may be inclined to blame the saddle for many an intonation woe, but often it's more helpful to take a closer look at your choice of string gauge

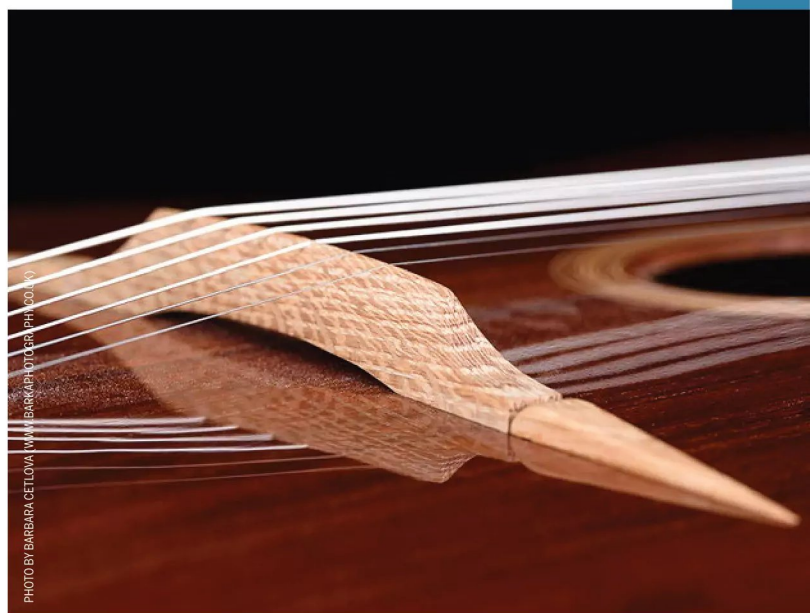


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Tones Behind The Tracks

The Philadelphia troubadour **Steve Gunn** shares more about his enigmatic alt-folk masterpiece *The Unseen In Between*

Artist: Steve Gunn

Album: *The Unseen In Between*



The Unseen In Between offers effortless yet deep introspection from Gunn

Steve Gunn is one of those artists who you happen upon one day and discover, with joy, that they have a long back-catalogue of great recordings – but his latest, *The Unseen In Between*, is one of the best. Combining the art-house cool of a latter-day Tom Verlaine with thoughtful, introspective songcraft, Gunn is a troubadour for our times. He's a great electric player, who was a member of fellow Philadelphian Kurt Vile's band, but the spiritual heart of his music is unplugged guitar. We joined him to talk about how he achieved the rich acoustic sounds of the album's standout tracks such as *Vagabond* and *Stonehurst Cowboy* and learn what his next studio project will be.

***Vagabond* is a really beautiful track that sets the tone of the album...**

"That was more or less one of the first songs I had written and usually, you know, a lot of the songs I come up with are based around simple licks and then connecting the chords, and that has the one simple lick that runs through the whole song. Also I'm really into filmmakers and watching films and Agnès Varda, who directed a film called *Vagabond*, is one of my favourite directors. I love that film, so the song is directly inspired by that film. Actually, I watched the film and then I wrote the song pretty much right there.

"And that song kind of formed the foundation of the album. It was the first thing I had written and the first thing I think we recorded for the record. When I think back on the session again, equipment-wise I was using a D-18 and a triple-O. I also had a Fender Princeton as we were doing some electric as well. I have a custom Stratocaster that a friend of mine made for me, and that has Lindy Fralin pickups and it's a really wonderful, funky guitar that I've also been playing for years. And so those were the instruments I had, playing along with Tony and the other guys in my group."

The recordings, especially the acoustic guitars, sound fantastic. What techniques and gear did you rely on?

"I was working in a studio that had really, really nice microphones. There was a Neumann U 87 that they were using on my acoustic – actually, there was a pair of those – vintage ones. For me, particularly if I was recording at home, I would buy more savvy kinds of things like copies of Neumanns. I have these Oktava microphones that I still use today and they're from Russia. They're pretty decent and I got them years ago. They're good and fairly well made, but when I went into the studio and he pulled out these U 87s from the 60s, I had never heard an acoustic sound so good before. So that was my dream scenario – I don't think I'm a purist in that respect, but they were magical microphones."

What were your go-to guitars when you recorded the latest album?

"For the song *Stonehurst Cowboy* I was using a Martin 000-18 and that was my main guitar for that session.



Photo by Clay Benjan



Photo by Jamie Atwick

There was another guitar that was definitely greatly used, which was a D-28 Martin and I also have this custom guitar that was made in Pittsburgh by a luthier called Plainview. And that's kind of like a Gibson L-00. The Plainview guitars are also kind of similar to the old Recording King guitars, but the bracing is a lot lighter. It's more of a hollow, bluesy sound.

"But I think particularly for that song, I used my Martin, my trusty sort of 'road' guitar, which I really fell in love with. I had been playing D-35s and all kinds of different models. I remember the exact moment when I was in Nashville and my friend had a vintage triple-O and came in and I just had one of those lightning-bolt moments about the style I play and fingerpicks... and I had this realisation it was the perfect model for me after playing all different kinds of things over the years. And so then I finally found one that wasn't like an old one, but a well-made one. And I played that for five years straight. But since then I've gotten the D-28.

"But that particular song, *Stonehurst Cowboy*, there was kind of a magical moment in that session because the bass player, Tony Garnier, had this upright bass from 1850 and which had also belonged to Charles Mingus. And he didn't tell us that until about day three. He just said, 'Ah, yeah, check this out,' and it had his name written on the side. Just the acoustic along with that bass created a really magical moment."

"There was a magical moment in that session because we had this upright bass from 1850 that had also belonged to Charles Mingus"

What recording project do you plan on tackling next?

"During lockdown I ended up buying a classical guitar. And it's funny because I'd never really had one or played nylon-string guitars much before. So I just kind of bought one quickly on a whim, a cheap one. I actually asked my friend, who works at Chicago Music Exchange, if he could recommend a cheap one, maybe a couple hundred bucks, just to have around the house. And he said, 'You gotta get one by Córdoba – just buy one of those.' He sold me one for a really good price and I've been playing that for five months straight.

"So I've been writing a new record that I was supposed to start recording in Los Angeles back in May and June 2020, but of course that got postponed. I've also been redoing demos, editing things and doing different versions of songs recently. So it's been kind of interesting to slowly work on songwriting. [The enforced break from recording has] allowed me to really take my time with it and try different things." [JD]

***The Unseen In Between* is out now on Matador**
www.matadorrecords.com

A man of many Martins (the D-35 in particular), Gunn used a 000-18 for *The Unseen In Between* as well as a D-28



KT TUNSTALL

Back in 2007, KT Tunstall's second album *Drastic Fantastic* found her struggling in the spotlight and battling industry expectations. Now, with the release of a deluxe reissue, the Scottish songwriter reflects on vintage Falcons, battered Doves, her hatred of barre chords and the fear of failing...

Words Henry Yates Photo Courtney Armitage

Autumn 2004, and as Jools Holland welcomes the nation to a stardusted episode of *Later...*, nobody expects much of the unknown ex-busker with the Gibson acoustic. KT Tunstall has only been drafted as a last-minute fill-in for absent rapper Nas – and seems hopelessly small-fry on a bill alongside The Cure and Jackson Browne. But in the four minutes it takes to perform *Black Horse And The Cherry Tree* – a loop-pedal symphony of hollers, handclaps and heavy-hit chords – the Scottish singer-songwriter lights the spark that will make four million people buy that year's debut album, *Eye To The Telescope*.

It was a dream break for Tunstall, who was by then pushing thirty and fearful of ending up screwed, because "I'd spent my whole twenties chasing something". But *Later...* was also a reminder to be careful what you wish for. With her career exploding on both sides of the Atlantic, and her record label clamouring for more, Tunstall began the recording process for 2007's *Drastic Fantastic*: a second album forged amid the bittersweet circus of sudden fame, that still holds mixed memories for her.

"I faced a difficult situation with the whole team around me: the producer, manager, label. At the start, I'd been a girl with a guitar in a pub"



Left: Indulging in the thrill of live performance at the Cornbury Festival, Oxford, 2019

Below: While KT very much has her own style, her influences include Nick Drake, Joni Mitchell and Django Reinhardt

How pleased are you with the new Ultimate Edition of *Drastic Fantastic*?

"It's such a wicked bounce down memory lane. Life was definitely more drastic than fantastic. It was actually a really difficult time, making that record. *Eye To The Telescope* had just been so phenomenally successful, it was breaking in America... and I was absolutely exhausted. I cannot tell you. It was this schedule of five countries a week, incessant touring and promotion. It was definitely not conducive to making a record. And not only making a record, but a follow-up to this hugely successful debut, completely aware that the majority of people fall on their arse in that situation."

What was your approach to *Drastic Fantastic*?

"I faced a difficult situation with the whole team around me: the producer, manager, label. At the start, I'd been a girl with a guitar in a pub. But before I made *Drastic Fantastic*, I'd been playing these big venues of six thousand people with a full live band, and I was really excited by the power of that. All the live bands I love are really scrappy and rock 'n' roll. So I was desperate to make a live-sounding record. But I just could not get the support. So we ended up tracking *Drastic Fantastic*, laying each part down separately. In my opinion, we didn't capture what I wanted to. I love the songs, but it was a really hard record to make. But now, with the re-release, I'm able to appreciate what I made. It's like getting past being embarrassed by your childhood photos, and thinking, 'Oh, I was actually really cute.'"

What subjects did you write about?

"*White Bird* is one I'd written when I'd first moved to London. I was living in Tufnell Park, and I used to walk past this playground. I'm not a city girl. I'd grown up in nature, on the east coast of Scotland. And I would stop at this playground full of pigeons. And I'd look at these gnarly pigeons with feet missing, and I'd be, like, 'Ooh, nature...'. There was one dove with a completely black tail, and it was this brilliant snapshot of how I was feeling: half-city, half-country. So it's a very tender song about that conflict."

"I was excited about playing electric, but no matter what I make, you're always going to find acoustic at the essence of it"



PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/RED PEARNS/GETTY IMAGES

Tell us about the mirrorball Firebird on the sleeve...

"People are always like, 'What is that guitar?' Well, I'll tell you: it's MDF. It's completely fake. I wanted a Firebird, but the person building the prop guitar just took a Firebird, put it on a piece of wood and drew an outline. We ended up with this huge, completely fabricated guitar. But it was great. And the pose was this kind of Suzi Quatro moment of stepping into rock stardom, I guess. There was part of it that I was absolutely loving, and part of it was completely terrifying. Hence, *Drastic Fantastic*."

Some critics said *Drastic Fantastic* was less folky than *Eye To The Telescope* – but it sounds like acoustic was still a big part of the writing and sound?

"It was. I was definitely excited about playing electric at that point. But no matter what I make, you're always going to find acoustic at the essence of it. *Hold On* is a good example of a song that started on acoustic. That was a song I wrote with Ed Case: he got famous doing remixes for Gorillaz. The beat has a garage inspiration, but actually, it's almost got a Spanish guitar feel when I play it on acoustic. I think, regardless of what instrument you're playing, you hope that your style is your signature."

*“Because I was busking,
I was wanting to be the drums
and bass – as well as the
guitar – on my own”*

The Gibson Dove has always been your mainstay acoustic. But what other guitars featured on *Drastic Fantastic*?

“I was definitely using my ’64 Gretsch Silver Jet, and the ’75 White Falcon that was gifted to me after I played it at the BRITs [in 2006]. I’d asked my tech what the coolest white electric guitar of all time was, and then EMI had hired me that Falcon. Unbeknownst to me, the whole time, they intended to give it to me as a present. I was like, ‘Oh my God! I forgive you for all the horrible arguments we’ve had!’ I’m using Eastwood and Supro electrics now too [a Poppy Red Belmont Vibrato and white Dual Tone].”

When you listen back to *Drastic Fantastic*, how has your playing evolved?

“I still feel like a very scrappy guitarist. But y’know, *White Bird* is not an easy fingerpicking part, it’s quite technical. *Beauty Of Uncertainty*: I almost never play that live, because it’s so hard. It was one of those songs where you can hear what you want to play, and you actually have to teach yourself the part. *Someday Soon*, I wrote with Jimmy Hogarth and Sam Dixon. Sam had come up with that beautiful guitar part – and I still can’t play it. I’m looking at the tracklisting now and there’s loads of good, juicy guitar playing. *Paper Aeroplane*, as well, has that lovely slide-up.”



“50s and 60s players, like the Everly Brothers, Elvis and Eddie Cochran were playing acoustic with, like, Ramones energy”

Which techniques do you lean towards as an acoustic player?

“I think I err on the side of rhythm playing. Although age is a great factor in this. I feel like I might become more of a picker. I’m a huge Joni Mitchell and Nick Drake fan, and actually, I maybe listen to Django Reinhardt more than anything else. I was actually in the car yesterday thinking, ‘Maybe I should become a bebop guitarist...’”

You’ve never been gentle with your rhythm playing...

“Oh my God, no. I mean, I’m now on my third main Dove acoustic. I’m literally having to stop playing these guitars, because I batter them apart. We try and look into putting some extra bracing inside and just giving them a bit more of a chance. But they’re inevitably cracked within a month.”

How did busking help that right hand?

“It was the key factor in learning how to be a rhythm guitarist. Because as I got into rhythm guitar, I started to really appreciate those 50s and 60s players, like the Everly Brothers, Elvis and Eddie Cochran. They were really playing acoustic guitar with, like, Ramones energy. They were going at acoustic guitar like they were playing electric guitar – but electric guitar didn’t really exist yet. When you listen to *Wake Up Little Susie*, that is just a masterclass in hardcore, precise acoustic rhythm guitar. And because I was busking, I was wanting to be the drums and bass – as well as the guitar – on my own. So you’re really trying to create a rhythm track out of your acoustic playing, as well as delivering the chords. I started out as a picker. I’d taught myself on a Spanish guitar, and it was only when I started busking that I realised no one could hear me. So it was busking that made me basically transfer over to steel-string with a pick.”

You once said you hate barre chords...

“I have very skinny fingers and bony knuckles, so I basically can’t play them. But actually, I’ve found that I just have to find the right guitar. I need a really

high action on my acoustic, because I hit it so hard that it’s just going to be buzzing like mad otherwise. But electric definitely makes it easier, and if I find the right guitar then I can start playing around with barre chords. But actually, finding open chords and basically making up chords instead of barres, has become a really important signature for me. Barre chords just never sound very inspiring to me. It’s the ‘straightness’. I’m always looking for the hanging note or the suspended note.”

Your Doves have LR Baggs Element Active pickups. What else do you use?

“I use a Supro Statesman [1699R 50-watt combo] with a Boss LS-2 line selector, and basically my electric and acoustic both go through my amp. It’s hard to find an amp that suits both. Because an acoustic is just gonna go mental through an amp. So the Statesman is good. I find smaller amps work better, and the Statesman really handles the acoustic, and I can actually turn it up a bit. I was on a Fender Twin for years. But I can’t lift it up on my own, and I can literally only turn it up to ‘2’, and it was blowing me offstage. That’s just not the right amp for me. Because the thing with an amp is that you don’t really get the character until you’re turning it up, and all these richer elements come into play.”



PHOTO BY PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/RED PENS/GETTY IMAGES

Left: KT goes back to her roots for International Busking Day at Wembley Park July, 2019

Above: KT says it loud and clear on stage at the Shepherd's Bush Empire, London

"I started on an Ovation. It was awful, the ugliest. Thankfully, it got snapped in half on a flight..."



PHOTO BY DOMINIK BINDL / GETTY IMAGES

You were known as a looping pioneer – do you still enjoy that?

"I really do, yeah. Because I perform mostly solo, so it's important to keep myself on my toes. Working with Howe Gelb on *Invisible Empire Crescent Moon* [2013] also introduced me to really experimenting with effects. That is absolutely staple for me now, to be able to put overdrive, tremolo and reverb onto my acoustic." [Tunstall's board includes the Akai Head Rush II, Boss TU-3 Tuner, SY-300 Guitar Synthesizer, CE-2W Chorus and SD-1 Super Overdrive, Supro Drive and Tremolo, and Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail.]

You once said you don't rate yourself as an electric lead player...

"No. When I do my two-piece show, there's this moment where we do some clever triggering and I play the lead line on *The River*. I fuck it up every time. Total mess. But it's all about the attitude."

How important is a good acoustic?

"Really important. I'd love to say to everyone: 'Just get a crap £50 guitar from Argos'. But it does make a difference. The first nice guitar I got was a Seagull, and it was an amazing step up. I started on an Ovation. It was the ugliest. It was awful. Thankfully, it got snapped in half on a flight. Then I got my Seagull with the insurance."

Which acoustic guitars are most precious to you?

"I have a 60s Gibson parlour guitar, which is currently in the care of Maggie Rogers. You've just reminded me: I'd better get it back. It's a really beautiful storyteller of a guitar. I need to play big-body dreadnoughts live, because I need that spectrum, especially if I'm playing solo. I need the breadth and width and depth. But really, I love small-bodied guitars. I have this little Taylor GS Mini, which I love playing. It's so nice, having a little baby-sized guitar. It feels very intimate, like you're in a cocoon."

Aside from *Later...*, do any other performances stick in your memory?

"I [went] on Jay Leno's show. The lineup was Ann Coulter – who's like America's Katie Hopkins – and the comedian George Carlin. So you couldn't get two more opposite ends of the spectrum. My friends called me, saying, 'Don't shake Ann Coulter's hand, she's the devil!' And I was like, 'Well, I can't really do that'. But I knew the cameras always zoom in on me battering the bottom of my guitar with my fist. So I got a piece of paper and did the Woody Guthrie special – I wrote 'This Machine Kills Fascists' with a Sharpie and taped it to the guitar. It worked perfectly!" **G**



Drastic Fantastic: Ultimate Edition is out now on Universal.

www.kttunstall.com

Left: "I need to play big-body dreadnoughts – I need the breadth and width and depth"

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NICK JONAH DAVIS

Words Glenn Kimpton Photography Andy Joskowski

DERBYSHIRE GUITARIST NICK JONAH DAVIS' LATEST ALBUM *When The Sun Came*, COULD WELL BE HIS FINEST YET. RECORDED IN A CHURCH AND RELEASED JUST BEFORE LOCKDOWN, WE FOUND OUT ABOUT HOW THE RECORD CAME TO BE, WHILE DISCOVERING MORE ABOUT NICK'S INFLUENCES, INSECURITIES AND EXPLORATIONS INTO WEIRDNESS...





When fingerstyle guitar and lap-steel whiz Nick Jonah Davis isn't teaching guitar, playing on other artists' recordings or working as part of the District Musicians organisation, he makes albums that explore the art of solo acoustic instrumental music. *When The Sun Came* is his fourth album and his most refined and fully realised yet, leaning more heavily on his Weissenborn guitar to produce a set of beautifully played, intricately written pieces, self-recorded in his local Atlow church.

Because of the record's long gestation period, it's refreshingly free of current anxieties. "It's a strange time to release an album," Nick says, "But I'm glad the recording was finished by early 2020. I had it all in the can, as they say, before lockdown happened, which means the actual creative process wasn't informed in any way by the pandemic, which is really good, because it feels like part of a sequence that has been going on for a longer time. Some of the tunes on the record have been bubbling for eight years."

The patience surrounding the writing and release of *When The Sun Came* comes across in the music, and as well as significant complexity, there is also an openness and freshness to each of the ten tracks. "I think if you're going to make a solo guitar record, it's a saturated niche and you need to look yourself in the eye and say that it's a valid contribution to that field of endeavour," Nick says. "I need to be able to think this is worth someone's

guitars and just blowing my head wide open. I wanted to go and find this person and ask 'What the fuck were you just doing and how the hell did you do it?' I didn't do that... but *Kensington Blues* was the touchstone for that feeling of 'this is very peculiar because I can understand this, but it's also accepted in this field of outsider music that I love listening to.'"

Nick learned from that epiphany and, as self-critical as he often is, it's clear that *When The Sun Came* is a record that brought out something unique in him. "What I've tried to do with this one is make sure everything on there feels like it's mine," he explains. "I'm eleven years into solo guitar now and this [particular] album feels like the least derivative of its influences. I'm relentlessly critical of what I do – I listen back to stuff and always hear the problems, but I think that's the same for anyone doing creative work. There's a really interesting book called *The Natural Classical Guitar* that has this very 70s yoga-infused approach to playing and it says if you play a piece with 700 notes and you fluff three, then the 697 you nailed will mean nothing. Ah man, those fluffs! One of the hallmarks of someone who is bedded into their practice is what happens when they make a mistake live. What do you do now? Are the wheels wobbling for miles afterwards, or is it more like 'Okay, a mistake, now, on.' You're going to make mistakes and some will be appalling, but some will be beautiful."

"AS PART OF THE PROCESS OF MAKING SOLO GUITAR MUSIC I'VE TRIED TO UNDERSTAND IT A LOT – I'M ALWAYS LOOKING FOR SOME WEIRD LITTLE CORNER THAT I HAVEN'T SEEN ANYONE ELSE GO AROUND..."

time and if they like this kind of thing they will listen to it and there will be something worthwhile in it. I guess as part of the process of making solo guitar music I've really immersed myself in it and tried to understand it a lot, and I think that has meant I'm always looking for some weird little corner that I haven't seen anyone else go around. But that takes a long time..."

PRIMITIVE LISTENING

When asked about albums that have had an influence, Nick namechecks Jack Rose's *Kensington Blues*. "It's a very obvious choice for a contemporary American primitive guitar record," he says, "But what was compelling about that one was I was really interested in outsider and avant-garde music, and I was listening to a lot of strange stuff and somehow Jack Rose bubbled up in the middle of that weird realm of music that I was investigating. When I heard *Kensington Blues*, it was the first time within that context that I thought I could do something with it. It felt like it was beckoning me and saying 'You could do this as well.' I remember seeing Jack play in a church in Leeds opening for A Hawk And A Hacksaw – they were incredible, but there was this scruffy guy wandering out with a couple of acoustic

CHURCH SONGS

When The Sun Came was recorded in a peaceful church space. Nick explains how this environment impacted the experience of making the album and how it differed to previous sessions: "When I've recorded before, I've gone in with other people, which has been great, but I haven't had much budget and I've tried to do as much as I can in as short a time as possible," he says. "You end up asking a lot from the person recording you and you have to get it done quickly. When I listen to my earlier recordings, there's a sense that I'm rushing. I didn't want to rush this one, so I decided to put my budget into upgrading my own recording equipment. And then the village let me use the church for free, as long as I accepted that visitors would wander into my sessions if they wanted to. So instead of having two days to nail it, I had as long as I needed – I could just pack down and go back and forth from my house. If you're in a church with no internet or anything, just your mics and guitars in a lovely sounding space, you just work with it and it was refreshing to think 'Maybe today will be rubbish, but if it is, I won't use it,' rather than 'Today has to be amazing otherwise I've spent all this money for nothing.'"

There's a sure sense of patience that permeates through the record, but the album also has its share of maverick music, with side B sounding slightly more experimental in places. "Yeah, I think I backloaded a lot of the weirdness onto the second side," Nick says. "It's easy to just say 'I'm going to be weird' and then stick some things on the guitar and be weird, but the point for me is that I need the listener's trust before I get weird. I want them to think I can write

Nick's album was recorded at his local village church in Atlow, Derbyshire. He says: "If you're in a church with no internet, just mics and guitars in a lovely sounding space, you just work with it"



ALTERNATE REALITIES

When The Sun Came is a melting pot of alternate tunings and custom string sets, with some strange habits dotted about. Nick gives us some of the vitals.

"*When The Sun Came* is on Weissenborn in DGDGBD, with a floating capo on the fifth fret, which gives it a slightly muted tonal quality. *Ramsons* is Weissenborn again, in AEAF#AC#, which is really taking things below what makes sense. I had to use some funny slants to keep things relatively in tune with each other round the neck, because the strings flub about like rubber ropes. *All Them Symbols* is also Weissenborn, but in CGCGCD and with a large knitting needle threaded through the strings, played with a slide in the left hand and a dulcimer hammer in the right...

"*The Muckle Master* is played on my Strat in DGDGBD, through a lovely underrated Fender Super 60 amp and a really old cheap and nasty (in just the right way), analogue delay pedal. *The Peacock Dance* is on the Fylde in CFCFCC, which is one of Jack Rose's old slide tunings that I pinched. *Delta Suey* uses the Martin in DGDGBD with a chopstick under the seventh fret and the slide on my ring finger, so I could slide the chopstick up and down the fret at points and give it a little twang.

"All my guitars are strung with Newtone strings, which are made by Neil Silverman in a factory just down the road from me. It's really useful being able to work with them on weird string sets for the lap steel, or my Nashville strung electric; it's also just really fun watching someone wind strings."



“WHEN I GOT A FYLDE, IT WAS ALMOST INTIMIDATING – I HAD TO RISE TO IT. I’VE ALSO KNOCKED IT OVER A COUPLE OF TIMES, SO IT’S GOT SOME BASHES, WHICH HELPS, BECAUSE A GUITAR IS A TOOL OF WORK”


a compelling composition and perform it well, and then when I go down the rabbit hole, they’ll come with me. If I start by whacking chopsticks under the strings and spanking the whatever, they’re going to think ‘What’s this guy up to?’”

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Aside from the black Fender Stratocaster featured on lone electric piece *The Muckle Master*, there are three acoustic instruments on *When The Sun Came*. “The main guitar on this record is my Weissenborn copy,” Nick tells us. “It’s a relatively inexpensive handmade instrument from a builder in Italy called Ermanno Pasqualato. I had encountered lap-steel only through the John Fahey end of things, but then I remember sitting watching Jack Rose playing it and thinking maybe I can play slide, because, before then, I’d never gotten on with upright slide guitar. I never knew about lap-steel then and it made me see how some slide-playing could sound so amazing. So, I ordered this guitar and it’s one of [Pasqualato’s] earlier ones, so it’s not an exquisite instrument, but for me it’s just perfect. It’s got monster sustain and really good personality and

it’s very playable. I think because it’s such a modest instrument, it’s really satisfying to find something within it that’s so compelling. It’s a beautiful guitar.”

For his fretted six strings, Nick has two very different regulars. “Another one on there is a custom Fylde Falstaff, which *The Peacock Dance* is recorded on,” he says. “That’s the other end of the spectrum to the Weissenborn, it’s exquisitely made and of the highest quality. When I eventually got a Fylde, it was almost intimidating, to the point that it’s taken me a number of years to acclimatise to it being in my day-to-day life. I had to rise to it and I think I’m there now... I’ve also knocked it over a couple of times, so it’s got some bashes, which helps, because a guitar is a tool of work. It’s stunning and I love it and it’s the guitar I was playing for my dad when he was dying, because he loved it too. The one on *Delta Suey* is my 90s Martin SPD-16K, which was an amazing gift from my wife. It has koa back and sides and a spruce top and it really changed my life, because before I had it I really liked playing acoustic guitar, but then I was like, ‘oh right...’

“I think the key to a great guitar sound is a great-sounding guitar and that Martin was the first great-sounding guitar I owned; all my previous records were done mainly on that one. I also mostly continue to gig on the Martin, because it’s frightening taking the Fylde out into the world sometimes!” 

It’s important for Nick to gain the listener’s trust before experimenting musically. He says, “If I can write a compelling composition and perform it well, when I go down the rabbit hole, they’ll come with me”



When The Sun Came is out now on Thread Recordings

www.nickjonahdavis.com
www.districtmusicians.org

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BEST OF BRITISH

FROM CLASSIC ARTISTS TO NEW TALENT, WE HANDPICK TWELVE
ESSENTIAL INSTRUMENTAL GUITAR ALBUMS FROM UK SHORES

Words Glenn Kimpton

While it's not unusual for the bulk of instrumental acoustic guitar albums to be slotted into various American primitive sub-genres, there is also a wealth of British talent – new and established – that deserve as much attention. Here is our selection of just some of the finest sounds from the UK's acoustic instrumental canon, including many albums from decades ago that continue to influence today



PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

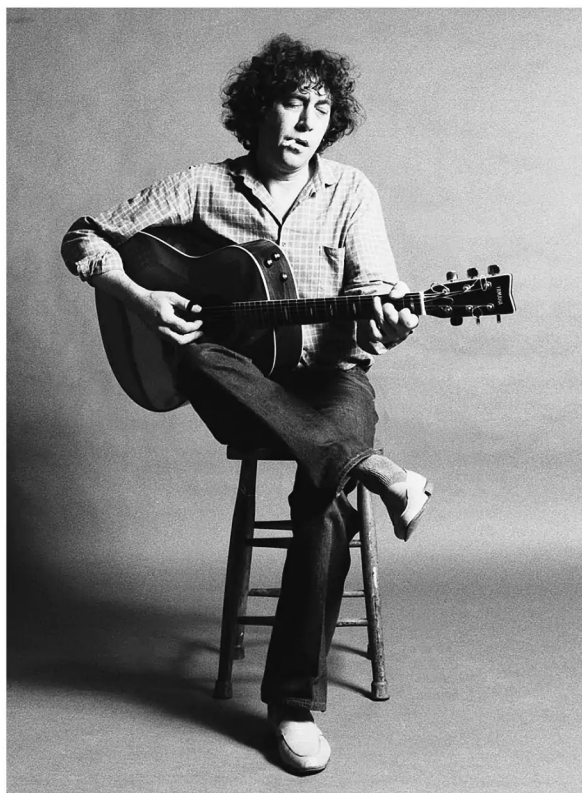


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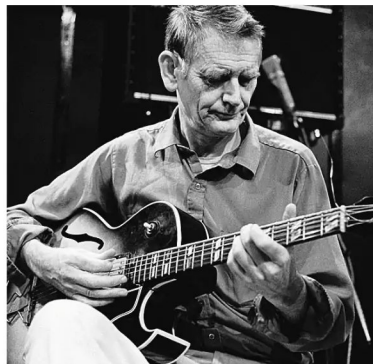


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NICK JONAH DAVIS

When the Sun Came

(Thread Recordings, 2020)



Nick's fourth solo guitar album distils all he has previously recorded into a set of compelling and endearing tunes, played with precision and care. The first half is Weissenborn-focused and showcases Nick's skill with the slide, but there's still plenty of variety across the ten tracks and it's all ace.

TRY: *Goodfellow Of The Riverside*

BERT JANSCH

Avocet

(Charisma Records, 1979)



This album from the Pentangle co-founder and Scotsman offers six pieces. *Avocet* saw the return of a more 'English' sound, after

the US-produced *L.A. Turnaround* and *Santa Barbara Honeymoon*. The title track is a side-long epic, while *Bittern* contains hints of psychedelia and *Kingfisher* is beautifully realised.

TRY: *Kingfisher*

C JOYNES

God Feeds the Ravens

(Leith Hill Recordings, 2006 / Bo'Veavil Recordings (reissue), 2008)



So rich in material and musicianship are C's solo records – not to mention beautifully packaged and informative – that any of

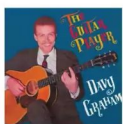
his albums could make this list. The ghost of Fahey permeates this set, particularly in C's double-thumbed picking style and the *Christmas Medley*, but the styles and influences reach far.

TRY: *And When The Sun Begins To Shine*

DAVY GRAHAM

The Guitar Player

(Pye Records, 1963)



DADGAD legend Davy Graham's first full-length record saw him bringing in blues, jazz and folk influences to create an

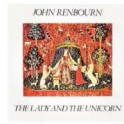
enduring set of instrumentals. Although lacking some of the diversity and creative depth of his later recordings (the reissue of this tellingly includes his hit song *Anji*), this is still a great introduction.

TRY: *Exodus*

JOHN RENBOURN

The Lady And The Unicorn

(Transatlantic Records, 1970)



Renbourn's 1970 album mined 13th- and 14th-century English, Italian and French songs in parts and set them to arrangements centring around guitar and sitar music, while bringing in strings, glockenspiel and flutes. This set is considered to be the one that kickstarted the 'Early Music' genre in the UK.

TRY: *The Lady And The Unicorn*

GWENIFER RAYMOND

Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain

(Tompkins Square Records, 2020)



Moving on from Gwen's 2018 debut *You Were Never Really Much Of A Dancer*, which often felt like a demonstration of her

musical influences, *Strange Lights* sees her creating some truly original music. The frenetic punky picking is still there in places, but there is a new maturity heard throughout.

TRY: *Marseilles Bunkhouse, 3am*

DBH

Mass

(Thread Recordings, 2017)



It's tricky to decide which of dbh's two solo albums – *Mass* and 2015's *Mood* – is best, so it's best to hear both. *Mass* contains more far-out effects-driven abstract music, but the acoustic tunes, such as *Funny*, clearly come from a player gifted with the ability to write some of the simplest and most effective pieces of music.

TRY: *Funny*

DAVE EVANS

Sad Pig Dance

(Kicking Mule Records, 1974)



Even though there's serious talent at play here, guitarist Dave Evans never really hit the recognised heights of players such as

John Renbourn and Bert Jansch. A fan of alternate tunings and technical flourishes, Evans is still a niche name, but his music has influenced players from folk genres to improvisation and noise music.

TRY: *Sun and Moon*

JIM GHEDI & TOBY HAY

The Hawksworth Grove Sessions

(Cambrian Records, 2018)



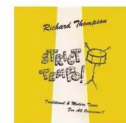
Toby and Jim are both accomplished solo artists, so this album of duets recorded in two days with no overdubs, was bound to be a success. The two Taylor guitars – Jim's six- and Toby's twelve-string – merge seamlessly throughout ten tracks of intricate picking for tracks inspired by the Welsh and Derbyshire landscapes.

TRY: *The Marcher Lords*

RICHARD THOMPSON

Strict Tempo!

(Elixir Records, 1981)



Thompson's second studio album was often overlooked in favour of the follow-up *Hand Of Kindness*, but this

reflective set of dance band jigs, airs, reels and waltzes is a love letter to Thompson's musical influences and has since become something of a classic in his catalogue.

TRY: *The Random Jig/The Grinder*

DEREK BAILEY

This Guitar

(Rectangle, 2011)



Derek Bailey's free improvised approach is important work. *This Guitar* features a 1951 Epiphone Emperor across six tracks in six different keys – it's disparate, fragmented and spiky, but also mesmerising and integral to any guitar player working with improvised playing and free jazz structures.

TRY: *G*

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

Trainsong

(Tompkins Square, 2011)



This fantastic compilation contains 25 tracks of recordings of tunes composed between 1967–2010. Five decades'

worth of material creates a fascinating insight into one of our most cherished players and the information on each piece, including tunings, makes this record indispensable.

TRY: *Slowcoach*

NILE RODGERS

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

Words Jamie Dickson

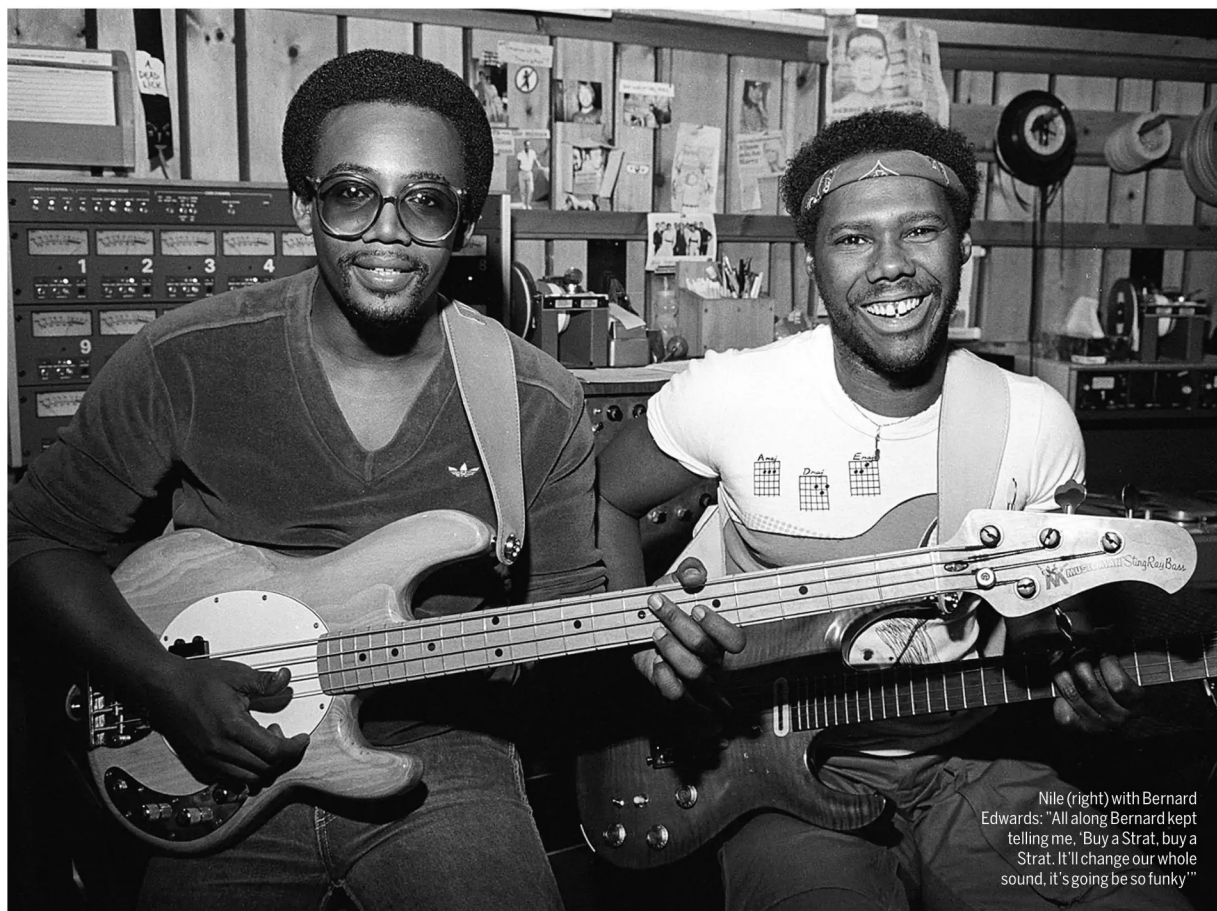
To call Nile Rodgers' guitar-playing career a success is a gross understatement. More than \$2 billion worth of music has been recorded with his 'Hitmaker' Strat, a guitar that cost him just \$149 and which, at the time, he wasn't even sure he should buy. He's not regretting that purchase anymore, to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

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

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

"When I'm sitting at home and I practise, I'm playing a D'Aquisto or a D'Angelico or





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

PHOTO BY ALLAN TANENBAUM/GETTY IMAGES

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

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

Which jazz guitarists influenced your own style the most?

"I started out really, really loving Wes Montgomery and then for a bit I started

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

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

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

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

"We were a group called New York City We had a hit record called *I'm Doin' Fine Now* – we toured on that record for about two or three years. One day we were doing a gig that we were headlining and we had an opening act; it was a young kid. We didn't want to have a stage changeover because we weren't that big, so we would just let the opening act use our gear. And so this young kid plugged into my amp, and at that time I was playing through an Acoustic [brand] amp with the horn in it, because we all wanted to look like Sly And The Family Stone. But it was stupid because I was playing a jazz guitar that would feedback and I'd have to put tape over the f-holes. But, still, you wanted to look like Sly! Anyway, this young kid plugged into my amp and he was playing a Fender Stratocaster and he was *smoking!* [laughs]



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

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

"He kept trying to talk me into it, but I was a hippy, so I was like, 'No, man, I just want to play like Wes...' But this kid, he was playing some of the songs that we were playing, because we were doing cover songs as well as a few originals, but he would do the cover and he would sound *exactly* like the dude on the record and I was like, 'Whoa!' So that day I went out and I traded my Gibson Barney Kessel for the cheapest Strat I could find because I was not convinced. So there was this really cheap guitar and I think it was going for about \$149. At that time, Strats with maple necks had become expensive because of Hendrix. So typically in those days if you bought a Strat, especially if

it had some age on it, it would be around \$300, which was a lot of money. But with this one I traded in my Barney Kessel and the dude gave me \$300 back! I was like, 'Oh, *man* – this really was a cheap guitar.' That guitar has now become the 'Hitmaker'. I play it on damn near every record and it was the runt of the litter. And it sounds amazing – it's the only Strat I know that sounds like that."

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

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

What musical uses do you think you will put the new Acoustasonic Strat to?

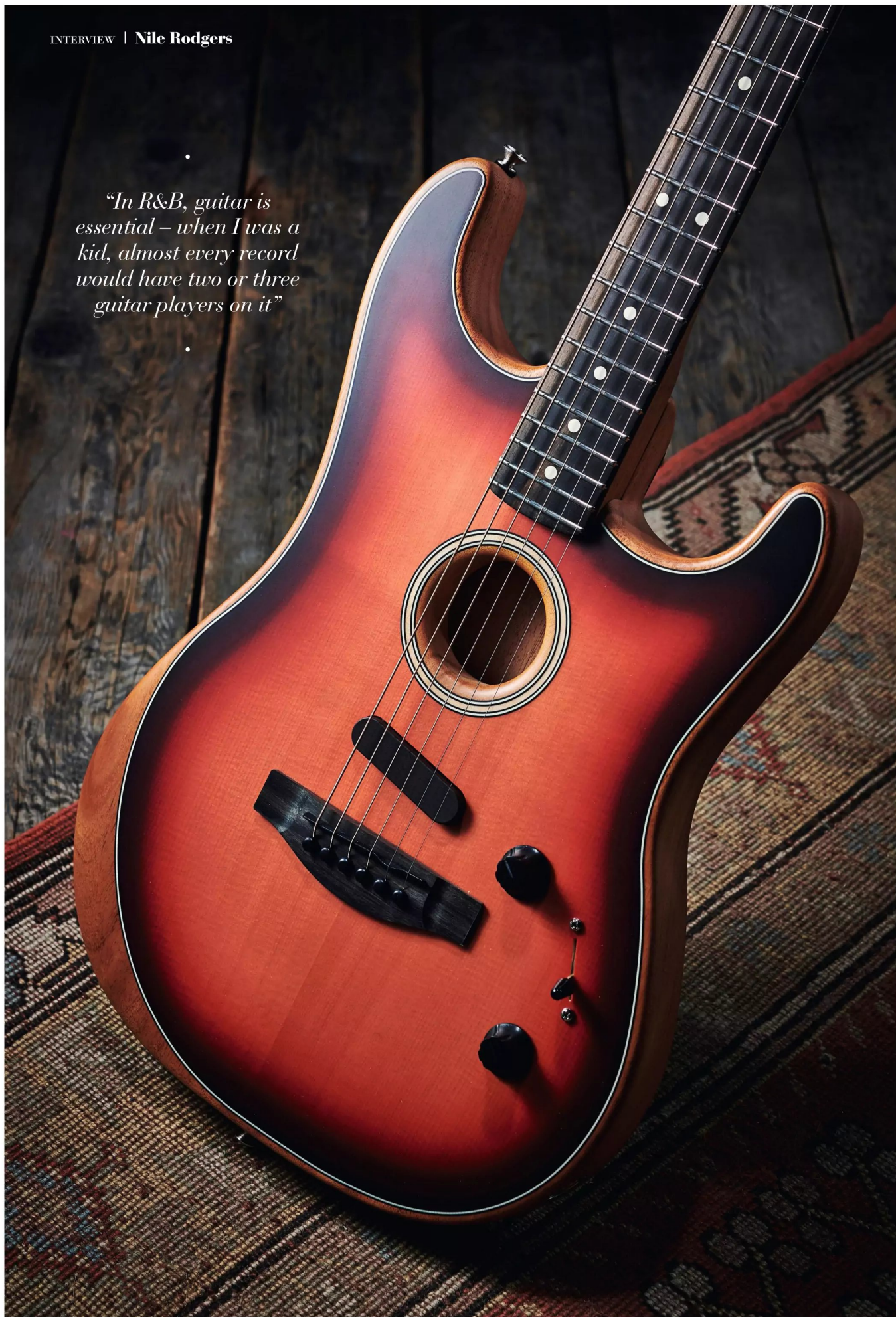
"I really think it's going to wind up being my jazz guitar. Because it's right next to my bed, it's in the bed with me at night, and I'll probably play jazz on it – it feels like a jazz guitar to me, it doesn't feel like a dreadnought or something to me. I think it's going to wind up being that for me."

What does the rest of your rig look like these days – have you got into modelling amps at all?

"I'm so old-fashioned, man. I just play a regular Fender Strat. One thing that's a big part of my sound is that I'm a 10-inch speaker guy and I've been that way forever. Even when I had like big stacks, I'd have the Sunn amplifier with like six 10-inch speakers [laughs] and then stack them up and have 12 10s or something like that. Because I think that it's the most flattering thing to a funky sound. For me, 12-inch speakers were just like not the thing. I can use them, but it's just not... it's just...[shudders]."

"So I really just use a Fender Strat, a Fender amp and I've just added a wah-wah pedal to my rig as well as a delay pedal.

“In R&B, guitar is essential – when I was a kid, almost every record would have two or three guitar players on it”





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

PHOTO BY GORDON STABBINS/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

But it's only for playing one song, which is *Let's Dance*. I have a chorus pedal, too, that's for one song that we play in the show – I think it's Sister Sledge's *He's The Greatest Dancer*. On the record it's tremolo, but in a live gig the tremolo won't be in the pocket, so I just put the chorus on heavy and I just play extra notes."

Developing a solid sense of time and groove is often overlooked by guitarists. What's your advice on using time more creatively in playing?

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

"So ghosting [partially muting passing chords] became so important to my style of playing. I'm mean, I ghost all the time and the reason why I ghost a lot is just because it sounds funky to me. To me, the less information I throw at you at once, the funkier something sounds. You rarely will ever hear me play a six-note chord... to me,

that's like, 'Agggghhh!' It's horrible to me. But every now and then I have to because it's the right thing to do. So typically when I'm playing 13th chords or something like that you will hear me do a [full] voicing, but it's very rare I'd rather go [plays partial chords with tighter sound]. That just sounds funkier to me. What I'll do is reduce the harmonic package to its smallest components to project that tonality or that information – and that's really where the fun comes in."

How did you prefer to write with Chic?

"I write the hooks first. The very first song I wrote for Chic was called *Everybody Dance*. And when I wrote it I started with [plays a sequence of open chords], but then I thought, 'Wait a minute, that's not cool enough,' so I went [plays linking melodic licks and adds two passing 11th chords] and

•

"I always want to have a lick. I wanna have a riff. Because I come from the school of rock 'n' roll where you had to have a riff"

•

then I had the hook that was on the record. I write everything like that, like when I wrote *We Are Family*. I always want to have a lick. I wanna have a riff. Because I come from the school of rock 'n' roll where you had to have a riff. You could just play the chords to *We Are Family*, but that doesn't work to me – it's actually a riff."

Is there a difference between funk and disco, in terms of guitar parts?

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



BROTHER ROBERT

Robert Johnson has been mythologised more than any other figure in modern music to the extent that it's become very difficult to separate what few facts we know from the fiction that surrounds his story. A new book sets out to put the record straight...

Words David Mead Photography Neil Godwin

BROTHER ROBERT

GROWING UP WITH ROBERT JOHNSON



ANNYE C. ANDERSON WITH PRESTON LAUTERBACH

BROTHER ROBERT

ANNYE C. ANDERSON

One of the problems we encounter around Robert Johnson's history is that so little is known about the man himself. We know he was born in 1911 and that he died at the age of 27 in 1938. A virtuoso guitarist and singer – someone who Eric Clapton refers to as “the most important blues singer who ever lived” – he was recorded only twice: once in San Antonio in 1936 and again in Dallas a year later. Both sessions resulted in a total of 29 songs that have gone on to influence generation upon generation of blues guitarists and singers ever since.

A new book released in the summer of last year aims to shade in some of Johnson's hitherto unknown background. Entitled *Brother Robert: Growing Up With Robert Johnson* (Hachette Books), it was authored by Johnson's stepsister, Annye C Anderson, and it paints an entirely different picture to that of the troubled 20-something who visited the crossroads at midnight to do a deal with the devil. On the contrary, it conjures up a picture of a warm-hearted, shy individual who was dedicated to his music and guitar playing – but also that the blues wasn't his only stylistic string. The book reveals that Johnson could turn his hand to practically any tune, from jazz

“On the bayou there was a platform that extended out onto the water. In front of our house, he would sit there and play his guitar”

ANNYE C ANDERSON

and popular songs of the day to spirituals. There's even an occasion mentioned in the book where he sits on a step and plays nursery rhymes for the local children to sing and dance to. That's a long way from the picture we might have formed about a man who sang about a hellhound on his trail.

The book's biggest revelation is its cover image, which shows a relaxed and smiling Johnson with his guitar in hand, looking directly into the lens. Up until now, only two pictures were known to exist, but the third was revealed by stepsister Annye, it having been stored in a bank safe deposit box since the 1930s.

Annye was born in 1926 to Johnson's stepfather and third wife, Mollie – nobody

knows who Johnson's real father was, but his mother's name was Julia, whom Annye refers to as ‘Mama Julia’ in the book. Other characters who make an appearance here are stepsisters, Carrie (who bought Johnson his first guitar) and Bessie, and a stepbrother nicknamed Son who Johnson would sometimes perform with in a duo. When Johnson's mother split up with her husband she couldn't take care of her son and so Johnson went to live with his stepfather, who taught him to play the guitar. Eventually, Johnson was reunited with his mother... (page 42)

BROTHER ROBERT

– 42 –

Despite what happened to his mother, and having to give him up, he loved his mother. And she loved her “boy.”

She usually called him Bob, my boy, or Robert, she would address him by those three. She would often say she made a mistake, but the Lord forgave her a long time ago. Mama Julia had him out of wedlock, but she was a devout Christian. She had great faith and was sincere. I never heard Mama Julia say who Robert's father was. Sister Carrie said she would see her mother sitting in the swing with a man. She didn't know him either.

During this time, Brother Robert began to branch out, lived on and off with Sister Carrie, with his mother, or Sister Bessie. He's been called lazy because he aspired to do something more than pick and chop cotton and say yessuh and nosuh to white folks.

He didn't like farm work, so he had to come to the city. But he was restless and didn't stay long. Sweet as he was, I've come to think that maybe bitterness drove him. You have to understand that about Brother Robert.

When Brother Robert came to town, he was king. Sister Carrie ordered his first guitar from Sears & Roebuck and paid for it. It's my understanding from her mouth. He didn't have any money, so he had to get it from somebody.

He never stayed in my mother's side of the house. On Sister Carrie's side, he could pick his guitar. You could pop your fingers all you want in her house. But my mother wouldn't have had it on her steps or in the house. On the bayou there was a platform that extended out onto the water. In front of our house, he would sit there and play his guitar. If they haven't torn it down, it's still there.

For a while he wore his patched overalls. Then he had the khakis, starched and creased. Son would do that for him. Son could press. I've never seen Brother Robert iron, everything was done for him. He played the guitar – he was the star of the show. I've never seen him cook, everything was cooked for him.

Brother Robert loved to eat and never gained a pound. He loved fried pumpkin. Making ends meet, that's a delicious dish. You use butter, if you could afford it, and we always had bacon grease, to mix in with the butter. You boil the pumpkin first. Your spices are on the sweet side. You mix all your spices together and the sugar, and you add it until the pumpkin thickens. We called that roping. You can drop it in the mixture until the pumpkin dries out. It was just delicious. That could be a dessert. He stayed slender, kept that boyish figure though he'd eat and eat and eat. My mother would feed him, but there wouldn't be any blues in her house.

Until stepsister Annye produced a previously unseen picture of Johnson from a bank deposit box, this was one of only two certified photos of him known to exist

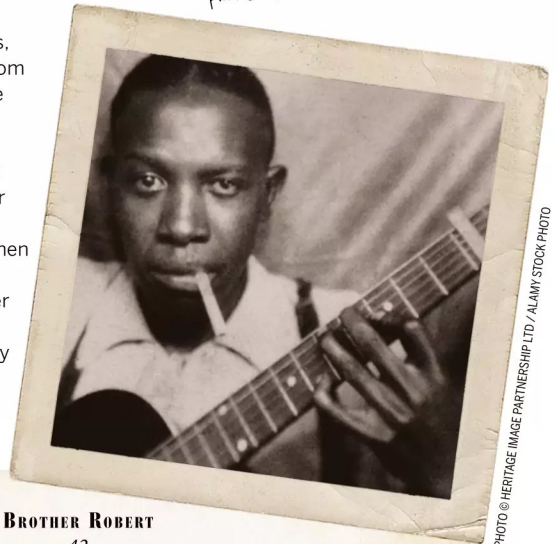


PHOTO © HERITAGE IMAGE PARTNERSHIP LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Johnson was soon to spread his wings, disappearing for days on end, hitching a ride on the trains that passed through the town, a local railroad worker commenting at the time that Johnson spent more time riding the rails than he did. Johnson's song *Walking Blues* details this part of his itinerant musical life. (page 47)

*"[In 'Walking Blues']
Brother Robert sings about
riding the blinds... hitching
a ride and catching on
wherever you can't see.
I never knew where he
was going when he left"*

ANNYE C ANDERSON

Later in the book, Annye offers some insight into her stepbrother's performances. Apart from playing songs for the local kids and passers by, Johnson would perform in juke joints, playing up-tempo songs for people to dance to. And, by any account, he knew a few moves himself. (page 61)

BROTHER ROBERT

- 47 -

In that same song, Brother Robert sings about riding the blinds. That too comes from his life. Brother Robert rode the blinds. That didn't have to mean a cattle car, I'm talking about anywhere a person can't see. Could be on the running board, and if the wind is blowin', he'd ride backwards. My mother picked cotton and chopped cotton, and they'd pick you up at dark in the morning to take you to Arkansas or Mississippi. If Brother Robert was available, he'd take that ride to Hernando, or that ride across the bridge to Arkansas, and he wasn't going to pick cotton. He wouldn't get a seat inside, under the canopy. Riding the blinds is hitching a ride and catching on wherever you can't see.

I never knew where he was going when he left.



PHOTO BY PRESTON LAUTERBACH, COURTESY OF HACHETTE BOOKS

BROTHER ROBERT

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Brother Robert could move, he didn't just sit and play. He could do the shimmy. He could snake hip. His foot would move, he had rhythm. Depending on the song, *Sweet Home Chicago*, he wouldn't do a lot of moving. *Terraplane*, he'd move a little more. He could rock on some of that stuff. He could shimmy on down. We'd do the Cake Walk, the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Break Down, and the Mess Around, plus something we called the Levee Camp Stomp.

Brother Robert picked up songs from spiritual sources and he played old-time folk music. From the latter background, he did *John Henry*, *Casey Jones*, and *John Brown's Body*, plus *Loch Lomond*, *St. James Infirmary*, and *Auld Lang Syne*. His spiritual repertoire included *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *Dry Bones*, *Mary Don't You Weep*, *When They Ring Them Golden Bells*, and *Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho*. Brother Robert knew modern gospel, too, like *Precious Lord (Take My Hand)*. He was conversant with WC Handy songs, *Memphis Blues*, *St. Louis Blues*, and *Beale Street Blues*.

He even got ideas from the men who sold watermelon and tamales, rolling their carts through town and singing things like, "One for a nickel, two for a dime, would give ya more, but they ain't none a mine."

Today some people want to put Brother Robert on the troubled side. I'm not getting in and saying what didn't happen, because I didn't have him in my pocket. I don't know what he did and didn't do. But I know I've never seen him drunk a day in my life. Sister Carrie took her toddy. Son took his. I know there was drinking, Brother Robert just didn't drink when he played.

Book contributors Elijah Wald (left) and Peter Guralnick (right) with Robert Johnson's Stepsister, Annye C. Anderson

*"Today some people want
to put Brother Robert on
the troubled side... I don't
know what he did and
didn't do. But I know
I've never seen him drunk
a day in my life"*

ANNYE C ANDERSON

"After he died, a few of his things came to us: his guitar... and a scrap of paper. We were told it was Brother Robert's deathbed confession. The family calls it his testimony"

ANNIE C ANDERSON

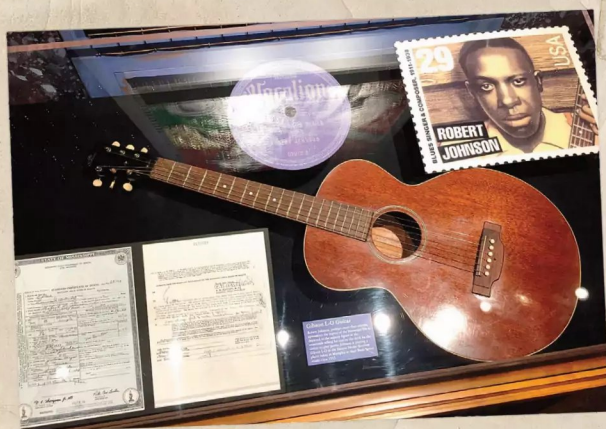
The final part of Annye's story about her celebrated stepbrother surrounds his death. Legend has it that he was poisoned by a jealous husband in a bar somewhere, but nobody knows the facts for sure. The family didn't hear about his passing until two weeks after it happened, by which time Johnson was already buried – they received a telegram bearing the news and tried to claim the body, but were too late. (Page 87)



Brother Robert: Growing Up With Robert Johnson by Annye C Anderson (Hachette Books, £20) is available now. Extracts from the book printed by kind permission of Hachette Books

Robert Johnson's guitar in the Gateway To The Blues Museum in Tunica, Mississippi

PHOTO © BOB COLLET / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



BROTHER ROBERT

– 87 –

After he died, a few of his things came to us: his guitar – which Son later got hold of and pawned – and a scrap of paper. We were told it was Brother Robert's deathbed confession. The family calls it his testimony. He wrote in beautiful cursive with green ink. The message says:

Jesus of Nazareth, king of Jerusalem, I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He Will call me from the Grave

I believe that came true. He's had a life after death longer than his life on earth.

He's been gone so long, over 80 years. I think of saying goodbye to him. Walking with him to Third Street, Highway 61, where he'd hitch a ride across the Harahan Bridge, going over the Mississippi River. I still think of how it felt to hug him. He put his skinny arms around me. His clothes felt starched and pressed. His face felt smooth. He smelled like cigarettes and Dixie Peach.

*Author Mrs Annye C Anderson
outside her family home,
Memphis, 2018*



PHOTO BY PRESTON LAUTERBACH, COURTESY OF HACHETTE BOOKS

"I still think of how it felt to hug him. He put his skinny arms around me. His clothes felt starched and pressed. His face felt smooth. He smelled like cigarettes and Dixie Peach"

ANNIE C ANDERSON



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HEAR ME WHEN I MOAN

A look at Gibson's L-1 & L-00 acoustics, which were contemporaries of the legendary Robert Johnson

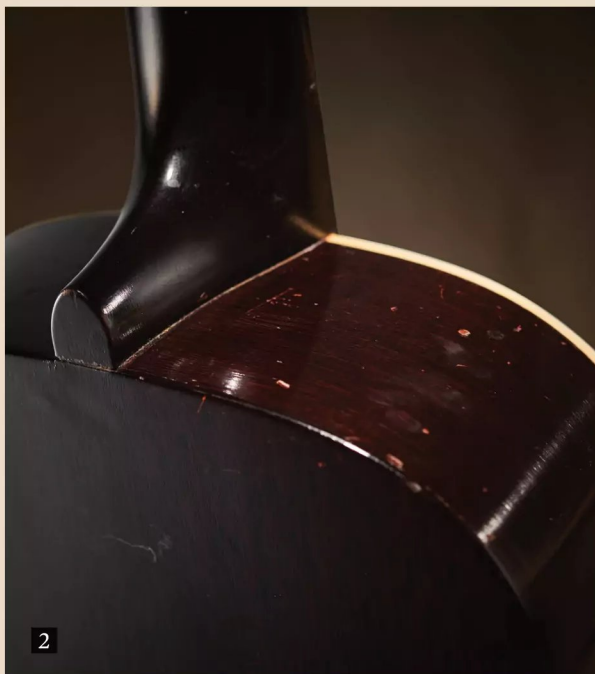
Words Rod Brakes Photography Neil Godwin



1. A large V-shaped mahogany neck featuring an unbound 19-fret rosewood fretboard joins the body at the 14th fret

2. Mahogany neck, mahogany back and sides, and a single-bound spruce top. By 1937, L-00s also featured binding on the back

3. "If you are among those who think it is impossible to get a genuine, full sized, guaranteed Gibson guitar at popular price, the L-00 model guitar is the answer to your question," reads Gibson's 1934 catalogue



Flat-tops were popular instruments in America throughout the 19th century, with market leaders Martin introducing its first

US-made guitar in 1834. However, the first Gibson flat-tops appeared as late as 1926, beginning with the small-bodied L-0 and L-1 models. Prior to this, Gibson's L-series guitars comprised of archtops – Orville Gibson's grand contribution to the guitar world – including the 1918 L-1 pictured overleaf. Robert Johnson is perhaps most famously associated with the L-1, having been photographed holding one, albeit a later flat-top version, a markedly different design to its earlier namesake, which was produced from 1902 to 1925.

The L-1 archtop was originally available in standard or concert sizes – 12½ and 13½ inches in width respectively – until 1908, when the smaller size was dropped from production. Inheriting the "concert size" width of 13½ inches, the 1926 flat-top

"Small-bodied Gibson acoustics have had a resurgence in recent years, with Gibson currently offering no less than six variants of the L-00"

L-1 was introduced with a 12-fret design and this is the more rounded version Robert Johnson was photographed with. In the late-1920s, the L-1's body was redesigned with a squarer lower bout measuring 14¾ inches across, and by 1932 14-fret necks were standard. By 1937, the L-1 was discontinued, although Gibson has since reissued the model due to popular demand.

Much like Martin's 0- and 00-size flat-tops, small-bodied Gibson acoustics have experienced a resurgence in recent years, with Gibson currently offering no less than six variants of the L-00 – namely, the Studio Walnut, Studio Rosewood,





4. The flat-top version of the Gibson L-1 is famously associated with Robert Johnson, but prior to 1926 the L-1 came in the form of an archtop, as per this model from 1918. "Always state whether gut or wire strings are wanted," reads the 1917 Gibson catalogue
5. As the headstock angles upwards when the guitar is played, the diagonal script logo becomes more legible on a horizontal plane
6. Introduced in 1902, the L-1 archtop features a carved spruce top, maple back and sides, and a mahogany neck with a bound ebony fretboard

Sustainable, Standard, Original and Deluxe models. Introduced in 1931, the L-00 commonly features a width of 14¾ inches and a 14-fret neck, much like the later L-1 models. Upon its release, it was finished in black, with sunburst becoming standard a few years later, followed by a natural option from 1941. Having survived production throughout World War II it was discontinued in 1945.

"During the Great Depression, Gibson and Martin were, as they are now, premium brands whose instruments were unobtainable for many"

During the formative blues years of the early 20th century – notably during the Great Depression – many guitarists enjoyed playing less expensive guitars from builders such as Stella and Washburn. Back then, Gibson and Martin were, as they are now, premium brands whose instruments were simply unobtainable for many. Nevertheless, both companies made efforts to provide more affordable flat-tops: Martin with its 17-series, and Gibson as part of its L-series. Skilfully crafted using the same quality materials as higher-end models, these vintage guitars are more revered by players today than ever. **G**

Guitarist would like to thank Delta blues ace Andrew Bazeley for the loan of these classic Gibsons







Gwenifer Raymond

Welsh-born guitarist Gwenifer Raymond recently released her second album *Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain*, recorded during lockdown.

With that challenge firmly out of the way, she speaks to us about her love of American primitive guitar, the magic of the blues and how she has evolved as a player in her own right

Words Glenn Kimpton

Gwenifer Raymond's rich, powerful solo acoustic instrumental music first took flight with her debut album *You Never Were Much Of A Dancer*. A thirteen-song flurry of acoustic guitar and banjo compositions – very much in the vein of the big hitters of American primitive, John Fahey and Jack Rose – the set was a riveting demonstration of her often-blistering playing. For Gwenifer's second release, *Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain*, she has composed music that feels more personal and confident. Longer pieces unfold in complex forms and worry less about typical structure. "The first album was the result of spending years playing in [American primitive] style and gathering songs," she says. "Some of the riffs went back to when I was learning. With the second album, I'd been playing this music

for a long time and playing lots of shows, so I think by that point my voice had begun to come out more naturally. Before, I felt like I was trying to do this American primitive music, but with this one I was more like 'I'm alright with whatever comes out.'"

Solo acoustic guitar music is solitary by nature, but the arrival of the pandemic put pay to Gwenifer's plans to record the second album in a studio and she had to opt for a more homemade approach. "I had the whole thing ready to record in the studio right as lockdown happened," she says. "So instead, I dropped a couple of bucks on some mics – it was money I would have spent on studio time – and I recorded it in my bedroom. Although I intended to take my time over it, I ended up doing a song or two an evening, in-between waiting for the upstairs neighbour's washing machine. I recorded it all over a week and mixed it the following week."



PHOTO BY JIN WOO

SOPHISTICATED SIMPLICITY

Although Gwenifer doesn't read music ("I'm a very impatient person...") and tends to remember her tunes instead of writing them down, *Strange Lights...* remains complex and finely nuanced, with more sophistication over her debut. "This one feels more compositional to me," she says. "It's a bit like classical music in that it's got these ideas of movements instead of a verse-chorus-verse-chorus structure. It has a section that has a certain vibe, which evolves into something else and then returns to it again. I've heard that more in classical and avant-garde stuff rather than folk music. It makes sense because I was listening to a lot of Erik Satie and Moondog and all that kind of jam, when I was writing some of the songs. I also think a lot of the style-change came from a live-scoring gig that I did for silent movies, where I was assigned *The Red Spectre*, a French film from around 1907. So I wrote a track for it, which then turned into a single called *The Three Deaths Of Red Spectre*, and because it was for a movie it has a narrative to it, where the mood changes and I really liked that, so I started doing that more. I still like a good riff though."

Rockier inspiration has been there from the start for Gwenifer. "I started out in punk and grunge bands when I was a teenager," she says. "I then got into blues music by

way of influences I'd discovered, the most famous one being Nirvana doing Lead Belly on *Unplugged*. But there was Dylan and The Velvet Underground too and I discovered that pre-war blues was an influence on those players, so I started getting these cheap blues CDs. They were about a fiver in HMV, so I bought loads of them and got into guys like Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and Blind Boy Fuller. I loved how they could make the guitar sound as if there was more than one playing. So I started teaching myself that and ended up finding a blues teacher in Cardiff who was a really good alternating thumb player. He taught me open tunings as well and because I'm the worst singer in the world, I started composing these more complex pieces without vocals."

•

"I started getting these cheap blues CDs and got into guys like Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and Blind Boy Fuller"

•

PAST INFLUENCES

Gwenifer's teacher went on to play her a record by John Fahey, which led to another turning point in her career, when she realised there were people making this music and that it was being heard. There is no denying Fahey's genius and his trail-blazing approach to solo acoustic guitar music, and the genre is now bursting with new emerging players, as well as stalwarts such as Glenn Jones in the US and our own crop of talent here in the UK, like Gwenifer, Nick Jonah Davis, C Joynes and Toby Hay (see page 28 for more recommendations).

"I think it's cool that people are so interested in it now, because the more people you have doing stuff, the more likely it is that something interesting will come out of it," Gwenifer says. "I'm not really into that whole pastoral guitar thing, though. I don't like 'pretty' guitar, but that has also been a thing in American primitive music, that whole 'sounds like a lovely green meadow with some cows in it' thing."

"There are some players coming through now though that are getting into this weird angular, quite uncomfortable sound. People going goth, basically, which I'm always on board with. What I don't like is self-indulgent guitar and I think that comes from my punk roots. It annoys me when it's all 'look what I can do' and the person that loves it the most is the person themselves."



TALES OF TUNINGS

Gwenifer explains how she gets her sound

When Gwenifer began lessons in alternating thumb fingerstyle with her specialist tutor, she also started to explore the riches of alternate tunings, with a few becoming integral to her sound. "My default tuning these days is probably C minor," she tells us. "CGCGCE. It's always the minor ones that I like, so I also go to G minor [DGDGB-D] and D minor [DADFAD]. Very occasionally I'll use a major tuning if I feel like it, but most of the time I'm in minor. They're spooky. They just have that sound, that sympathetic drone that comes with them and gives them a spooky vibe that I like. That with a bit of discord; can't beat it. I'm a big folk horror fan too. I watch way too many horror films!"

“I do like a bit of noise, but to me it’s also that ‘loud-quiet-loud’ thing, which is the easiest way to assert a mood change”

To me, most of the time, paring things down to their essentials is what turns it into a piece of art.”

Gwenifer’s picking style can be almost aggressively frenetic at times, her fingers blurring as she whips through her instrumental narratives. We talk about a Michael Chapman support slot at a venue in Bristol a few years back, where her finger-picks kept flying from her hand. “That was a rough gig – it was the hottest place on Earth!” she laughs.

“I do like a bit of noise,” she continues, “But to me it’s also that ‘loud-quiet-loud’ thing, which is the easiest way to assert a mood change. On record it’s different, but playing live it’s almost like theatrics and it’s exciting. I can’t help it, I just get taken away with it and it can be hard to rein it in sometimes. There might also be some pent-up aggression there though, which is probably why I played in punk bands when I was a kid.”

GO-TO GUITARS

When it comes to favoured acoustic guitars, one instrument sits at the top of the pile for Gwenifer. “My go-to is my Waterloo WL-14L; I recorded the whole album on this and it’s my live guitar as well. I got it because I was travelling around and touring and playing vintage guitars and just being terrified they were going to be smashed into a thousand pieces. Someone recommended Waterloo to me for that vintage sound that they have, without actually being vintage.”

Waterloo was a concept of the late Bill Collings, who envisaged a guitar with all the charm of an old Kalamazoo, but built at the Collings factory in Texas to the same high standard as Collings guitars, albeit with a simpler spec and a lower price. “It has such a solid build,” Gwenifer says. “My old Houn-

Dog [a Bradley Kincaid parlour model, built by Silvertone in the 1930s], which I recorded the first album on, its neck is so fucked that it’s unplayable above the fifth fret. I knew it was time for a modern guitar and I had a Gibson for a while, which was okay, but didn’t quite fill the hole, so then I managed to find this Waterloo for a great price and it’s spot on. I was really lucky, because I bought it blind, having only heard it and not played it.”

Another gem in Gwenifer’s collection is a guitar gifted to her at 2018’s The Thousand Incarnations Of The Rose Festival in Takoma Park, Maryland. “Henry Kaiser got in contact with Tompkins Square [Gwenifer’s record label] and said he had a guitar he wanted to give to me. I’d never spoken to him before, so I was quite

surprised, but of course I said ‘alright, I will accept a guitar’. So when I got to the festival, it was there waiting for me.”

The guitar is an 1890 Joseph Bohmann model, beautifully diminutive. “It’s amazing sounding,” Gwenifer says. “I was gigging it for a while, but I’ve stopped now because I’m scared of it. It’s got this crazy sick bass sound to it. I recorded *The Three Deaths Of Red Spectre* on that guitar. It’s got this big wide arse and a slightly rounded back too, which makes it sound amazing. So yeah,” she laughs, “Henry Kaiser is a pretty stand-up guy!”



Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain is out now on Tompkins Square

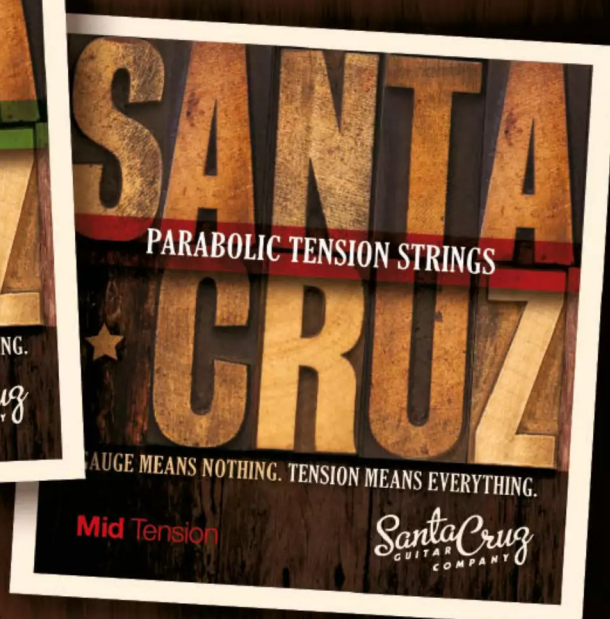
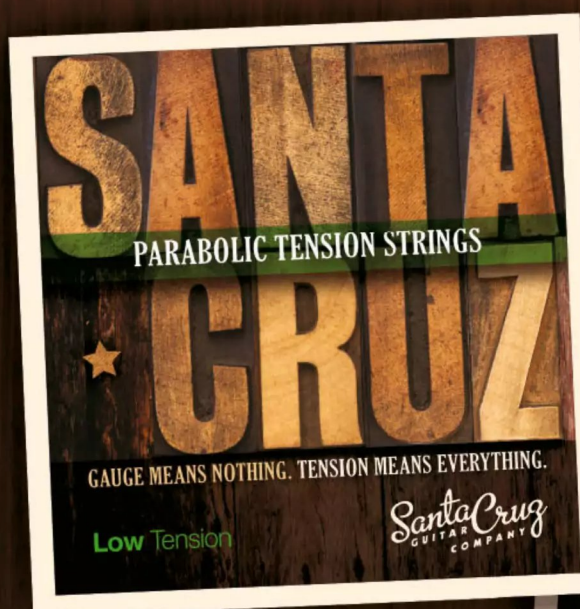
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the Wishlist

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

Joe Doe 'Tumblin' Cowboys' Acoustic £2,599

CONTACT **Ben Court** PHONE **07970 323855** WEB www.joedoe guitars.com Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker

"Duke 'Nine Lives' Jones was a Hollywood stuntman who worked during the 1950s golden era of Hollywood Westerns. If he wasn't jumping from a speeding stagecoach to a galloping horse, he was being shotgunned in the chest and flung through saloon doors. However, while performing a simple horse fall for the 1957 MGM film *Shotgun Sheriff*, Jones was crushed underneath the animal and suffered numerous broken ribs and a shattered femur. It was during his recovery that he started playing guitar..." So begins the entirely fictitious backstory of how this unique creation from Joe Doe (alias luthier Ben Court) came about.

Remember the Joe Doe by Vintage electrics we reviewed back in issue 463? They had an equally tongue-in-cheek story attached to them that was all part of the fun. The same is true here, but, at £2.5k, the 'Tumblin' Cowboys' has a second string as a serious instrument.

So, where does Ben draw his inspiration from to create these instruments? "Every guitar I build has a unique story built into it," he tells us. "Inspiration can come from real events – say, the Apollo 11 mission to the moon, or people, like Lucky Lucy, a stuntwoman from the 1950s. That's normally the spark I need to start creating a fictional character who would have

owned and played the guitar." And to complete the picture, Ben adds: "My aim is to create a musical artefact that can be admired while hanging on a wall as well as played and beaten at a gig."

The 'Tumblin' Cowboys' acoustic has a Sitka spruce top with mahogany back and sides, plus a bolt-on mahogany neck with a rosewood fingerboard. The finish is, somewhat appropriately, Oscar Gold nitrocellulose on the sides and back of the neck, and overall the guitar has received a very light relining. "I wanted it to look like it's taken a sucker punch or two, but nothing too bone-breaking," says Ben.

You will have noticed the 'Twist-O-Coil' pickup arrangement, which was inspired by Ben seeing a video featuring a 1959 Martin D-18E. It features a Bare Knuckle Apache neck-position single coil, so you can enjoy the "thrilling electric rodeo experience of amplified performance... if you're brave enough to try it".

The lucky owner of the guitar will also find candy inside its Kinsman case, with a branded 'Tumblin' Cowboys' guitar strap. And there are more surprises waiting inside the guitar's soundhole. "If you peek inside, you'll see an aged and signed photo from a long forgotten cowgirl sweetheart. Touch it for luck." **G**

1. The finish is nitrocellulose throughout with 'nicotine yellow' for the top and back and 'Oscar Gold' for the sides and back of the neck. Both received light relining

2. The inlay uses flamed sycamore. "It's the origin stories that make them more than just wood, wire and magnets, so that's the magic I try to conjure up with each of my Joe Doe original builds," says Ben

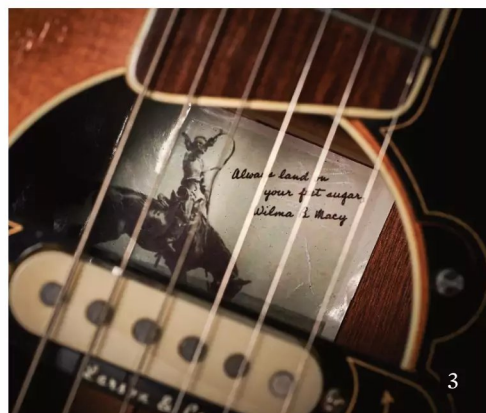
3. Inside the guitar's soundhole is more hidden evidence of the fictitious Duke 'Nine Lives' Jones's past adventures with a signed photograph from an old flame, bearing the words, 'Always land on your feet, sugar'



1



2



3

4. With electronics inspired by a 1959 Martin D-18E, with perhaps a nod towards the Gibson J-160E for the surface mounting of the volume and tone controls, the 'Tumblin' Cowboys' acoustic features a Sitka spruce top with mahogany back and sides
5. Ben tells us he also drew inspiration from the real-life Hollywood stuntman Yakima Canutt who defied death several times. Spielberg paid tribute to Canutt in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* where Indy, played by Harrison Ford, is dragged along behind a horse
6. Ben's invention, the Twist-O-Coil system, finds a Bare Knuckle Apache pickup (which "tries its best to handle the inevitable feedback") mounted on a swivel device that gives the user a choice between a rhythm or lead configuration. Ben tells us this probably won't "win any tone awards..."





Small World

Two bouncing baby electro-acoustics reveal their tonal wares at vastly different points on the price spectrum – and small really is beautiful, it seems...

Words David Mead Photography Neil Godwin





PRS SE P20E & TAYLOR GTE URBAN ASH

£499 & £1,835

CONTACT PRS Guitars PHONE 01223 874301 WEB www.prguitars.com

CONTACT Taylor Guitars PHONE 00800 2375 0011 WEB www.taylorguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1 The price differential here means that this isn't a fair fight, surely?

Absolutely correct, and that's why we're not pitting this pair against one another, we're merely taking two smaller-bodied acoustics at two very different price points to illustrate that there's something to suit everyone's pocket in the compact acoustic range.

2 So, parlour is the new dreadnought?

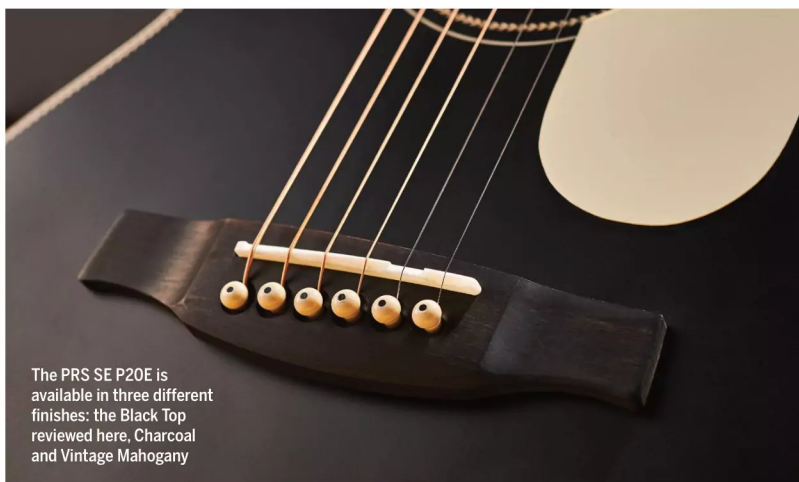
It would appear that smaller acoustics are enjoying something of a heyday, yes. But while a more diminutive guitar might pack quite a surprisingly hefty punch, if you're after the majesty of the sound of a dreadnought then you know where you can start looking.

3 Home-use only or are these guitars crowd-pleasingly performance fit?

We're going to stick our necks out and generalise a bit. If you put a good pickup on any well-built acoustic, irrespective of body size, and feed it into a good acoustic amp or capable PA, you're entering a whole new sonic dimension. In our experience, even the tiniest mite can be made to roar, given the right setup – and a good pair of ears behind the mixing desk.

One of the more inspiring offshoots of 2020's lockdown (to counteract the isolation, working from home and no live gigs) was the increased sales of acoustic guitars across the land. And, not only that, we hear that it was the smaller, boudoir-friendly instruments that were receiving a disproportionate amount of interest. It seemed that everyone was after a sofa-buddy six-string to soundtrack their solitary social hours in those dark days, and, of course, the industry responded accordingly.

We've selected two models to take a look at, but we'd like to point out that this is no slugging match between grossly mismatched opponents. On the contrary, we've been careful to pick this pair as being representative of what's available on the market at very different price points. Both PRS and Taylor are well known for their high-quality instruments that come with hefty price tags to match. But we're focusing in on the somewhat specialist area of smaller-bodied instruments in order to find out how both these heavyweights have addressed the quandary of achieving



The PRS SE P20E is available in three different finishes: the Black Top reviewed here, Charcoal and Vintage Mahogany



1

1. PRS's SE P20E comes loaded with a Fishman GT1 pickup for live use. But if you can do without, the P20 model is available at £100 less

2. The distinctive PRS headstock is adorned with Kluson-style tuners and white buttons, adding a dash of vintage chic to the instrument



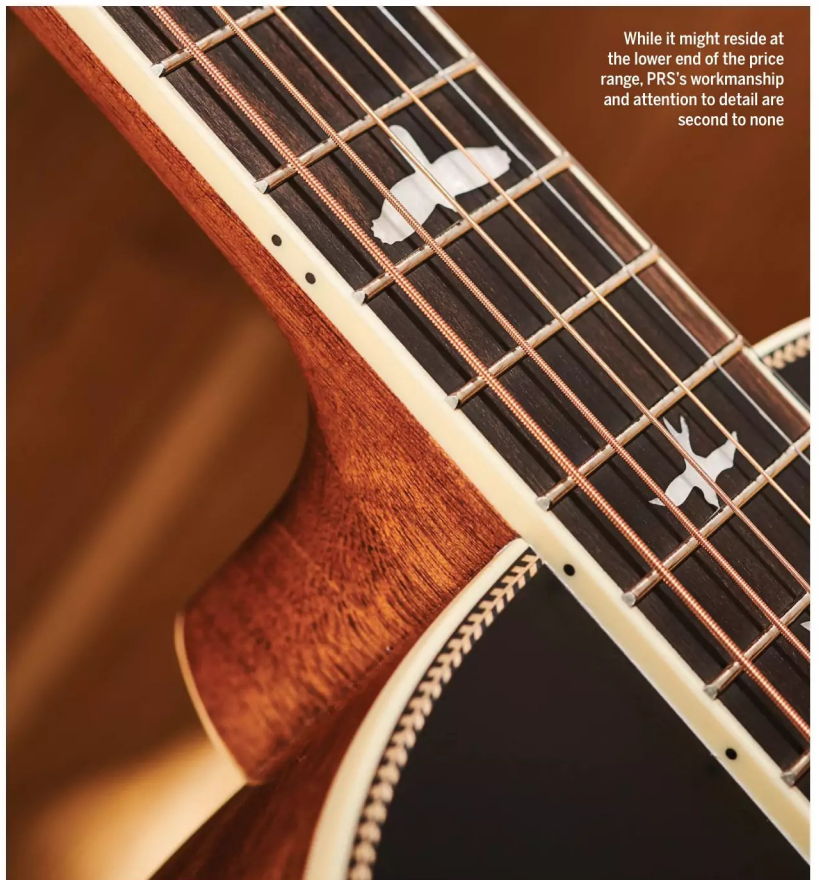
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With an ebony 'board, 20 frets and a Wide Fat neck shape, PRS's P20E is open for serious business

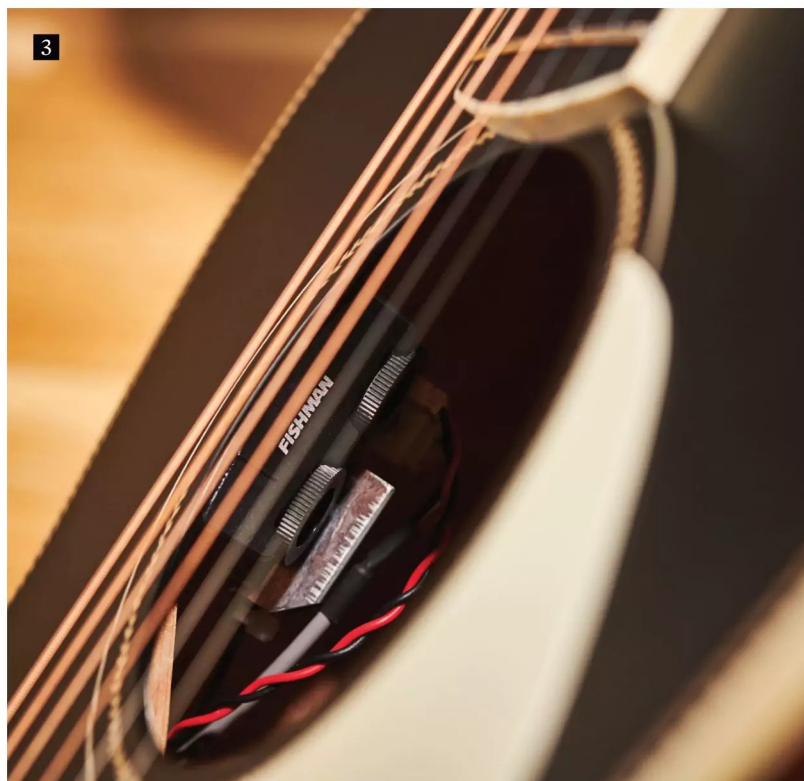
concert-hall performance from parlour-sized – or thereabouts – instruments. So, let's start opening cases, and in the interest of being scrupulously fair, we'll look at each guitar individually.

PRS SE P20E

PRS's parlour acoustic – or Tonare, to give it its catalogue name – is available in three different liveries: the Black Top we have here, Vintage Mahogany, and the all-black Charcoal, with the all-mahogany cocktail of body woods remaining static throughout. If you're not particularly fussed about having a pickup installed, then your wishes are accommodated with the SE P20, which comes in at around at £100 less. Kerb appeal is very high; this is a very attractive guitar, from its signature PRS headstock and bird inlaid fingerboard to the herringbone bound black-topped body. It's cute and it makes us want to pick it up and start playing immediately, but first we have to run our eyes down the spec sheet and look at what's going on behind the scenes.



While it might reside at the lower end of the price range, PRS's workmanship and attention to detail are second to none



3. Controls for the PRS SE P20E reside just inside the bass edge of the guitar's soundhole, within easy reach during live performance



4. The jack output is situated on the lower reaches of the body below the strap button, with an easy-change battery compartment

Taylor's GTe is a fun instrument with serious ambitions, standing tall among acoustic big hitters

The top is solid mahogany, whereas the back and sides are, we suspect, a hog-topped laminate. Nevertheless, we know roughly what to expect from all-mahogany instruments – mellowness and warmth but with a definite bite when played hard. Traditionally good for playing a bit of Delta blues if you're so inclined, but it's capable of addressing most musical styles you care to throw at it.

As we've found many times in the past when reviewing instruments hailing from China, build quality really is excellent. Considering the price, you're getting something seriously attractive on a sub-£500 ticket. The combo of herringbone and white binding has been expertly done, as have the other decorative refinements onboard. With an ebony fingerboard, 20 frets and PRS's Wide Fat neck shape, the P20E is open for serious business – and a Fishman GT1 pickup means that it's not shy of performing on stage either. Controls for the aforementioned are hidden away unobtrusively inside the bass side of the soundhole where they're under the fingers but otherwise anonymous, as far as the overall appearance of the guitar is concerned.

Vintage-style butterbean tuners adorn the headstock and tuning seems absolutely stable. We only had to tune once and didn't have to touch that side of things again for all of the time it took to write this review.

THE RIVALS

If the smaller-bodied acoustic is your idea of a strummer's bliss, the marketplace is positively awash with models that will suit your needs. For starters, how about checking out Vintage's Viator range? Although designated as travel guitars, they fit the brief of smaller body with a lively sound. The VTR800PB-USB (£349) has antiqued good looks plus a Fishman Sonitone preamp for those plugged-in moments, and even a USB output to help out with all those recording projects you've been putting off for ages.

Then there's the Baby Taylor (circa £350 depending on model), which is available in various guises and body wood combos, and you should check out Martin's Dreadnought Junior, for example, the DJR-10E (£637) – loads of toneful heft for a little 'un.

Moving upscale, Lowden's Wee range delivers the goods, with the cedar-topped WL-25 (£2,890) and its stablemates packed with performance power. Martin's mahogany-topped 0-15M (£1,499) should be included here, too, and a quick Google search will reveal that companies such as Faith, Washburn, Guild and Seagull all have entries in the compact acoustic race and so exploration is well advised.



First impressions of the sound are as good as our reaction to the design. There's plenty of volume – more than you'd expect, in fact – with the basses and trebles evenly represented. Both fingerstyle and chord work are effortless, thanks to the low action, generous nut width and the palm-friendly feel of the neck. Fretting and neck binding are, again, exemplary – everything we'd expect from PRS's SE instruments.

When amplified via our trusty AER Compact 60, the Fishman GT1 does its thing as you'd expect and reproduces the acoustic vibe of the P20E faithfully while allowing you to EQ things to taste. Want a bit of gritty blues? Then walk this way. If it's sensitive fingerstyle ballads you had in mind, no problem. We're seriously impressed.

Taylor GTe Urban Ash

Taylor's entry into pint-size pluckery moves us away from the parlour-sized end of the spectrum and up to what Taylor refers to as Grand Theater territory. Technically speaking, the GTe is, in Taylor's own words, a "scaled-down body that echoes the jumbo curves of our Grand Orchestra shape, with its dimensions reduced to create a remarkably approachable feel". Couldn't have put it better ourselves. It's another good looker and it has some serious ecological credentials, too.

We've looked at Taylor's use of Urban Ash before in these pages when we reviewed the

Builder's Edition 324ce, but if you missed it, a brief sketch of events goes something like this. On the lookout for alternative timbers for use in its guitars, Taylor's Andy Powers wondered what happened to the trees that line the highways and byways of California after they reach the end of their time, that is, when West Coast Arborists – the local tree-minders and carers of the state – are forced to

5. Taylor's GTe has a fingerboard made from eucalyptus, in line with the company's ongoing 'green' philosophy

6. A more traditional Sitka spruce soundboard sits atop the GTe's Urban Ash back and sides





7. Taylor's renowned Expression System 2, with its trio of subtle side-mounted controls, offers the prospect of great live sound

Not only is this guitar a new venture in terms of body size for Taylor, its 'green' credentials are fully intact, too

remove trees from the streets due to age or safety concerns. Luckily, the wood is being archived with the expectation that it might enjoy a second life at the hands of furniture makers or, as it turns out, luthiers. Andy found that the wood produced a similar sonic quality to that of Honduran mahogany – one of the royal family of instrument timbers – and so a plentiful supply of ethically resourced, good-sounding wood suddenly became available. And it's Urban Ash that we find on the GTe's back and sides here.

The guitar's top wood is the more familiar Sitka spruce, but the fingerboard features eucalyptus on a mahogany neck. So, not only is this guitar a new venture in terms of body size for Taylor, its 'green' credentials are fully intact, too.

There's a new form of bracing under the top of the soundboard, as well. A relative of Taylor's groundbreaking

V-Class bracing, the GTe boasts asymmetric C-Class, aimed at producing "more volume and longer sustain, while also bolstering the GT's bass response to surprising levels of low-end power from a smaller guitar".

It's another very playable instrument and we would agree about the sustain and full bottom-end. The trebles are sweet, with very good separation, the basses rich without being in any way overpowering. Both fingerstyle and strumming are well catered for, meaning that this is another all-rounder that will be a happy companion for virtually any stylistic persuasion you could name.

The GTe's acoustic voice is aided and abetted for the live stage by Taylor's renowned Expression System 2. Suddenly size doesn't matter and the sound from the guitar can get as big and boisterous as you want, while retaining its sonic integrity to the full. It's a serious instrument, to be sure.



8

Verdict

Two very different instruments, each with a well-considered set of features and a sonic portfolio to match. The PRS parlour is amazingly priced, considering the build quality and general sound capabilities – and you have to consider the fact that the non-pickup version is even cheaper still. It represents very good value that would be equally at home as an erstwhile songwriting companion or performance ally.

Onto the Taylor and it is in line with the company's reputation for acoustic luxury, with a great build-quality and a seductive and sophisticated sound palette. It's a fun instrument with serious ambitions, as it could stand tall among the big hitters in the acoustic world, despite its diminutive appearance. And let's not forget those green credentials, as well.

Overall, a dynamic duo that were both very difficult for us to put down. **G**

8. The rustic look of the wood grain on the fingerboard and headstock veneer suit the guitar's ecologically minded aesthetic down to the ground



PRS SE P20E

PRICE: £499 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Tonare parlour-sized electro-acoustic
TOP: Mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 98.4mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 355mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Vintage-style with butterbean buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony/51mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman GT1
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.76/3.9
OPTIONS: The SE P20 without pickup costs £399 and both models are available in three colours: Black Top (as reviewed), Charcoal and Vintage Mahogany
RANGE OPTIONS: PRS SE acoustic models have 3 basic body shapes: the Tonare Parlour (2 models), Tonare Grand (4 models) and Angelus Cutaway (5 models). See website for details
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Black Top (as reviewed), Charcoal, Vintage Mahogany – satin



TAYLOR GTE URBAN ASH

PRICE: £1,835 (inc AeroCase)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Theater sized electro-acoustic
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Urban Ash
MAX RIM DEPTH: 108mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 380mm
NECK: Tropical mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 638mm (25.1")
TUNERS: Taylor nickel mini
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Eucalyptus
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Eucalyptus/51mm
ELECTRICS: Expression System 2
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.71/3.7
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The GT model without pickup costs £1,619
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Natural Matte



PROS A well-made, good-looking and great-sounding guitar at a bargain basement price

CONS Practically nothing for this very modest price



PROS Sophisticated sounds from an ecological thoroughbred

CONS The price might put off those who want a smaller-bodied guitar for home-use only

FIRST PLAY



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A New Breed

A hand-built parlour-on-steroids from Breedlove's Bend, Oregon, facility – and it's full of surprises!

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

If the name is unfamiliar to you then it might come as something of a surprise that Breedlove has been making guitars for more than 30 years. It may not be at the forefront of an acoustic player's mind or a name ready to trip off the tongue when the subject of hand-crafted acoustics enters the conversation, but its reputation as a builder of a broad range of fine instruments has been long established.

The company was founded in Oregon by Larry Breedlove and Steve Henderson, both having worked previously for Taylor Guitars. In 2010 Two Old Hippies – in the form of Tom Bedell – bought the company, now established in Bend, Oregon, where the workshops remain until this day. "Breedlove has continued, really, from the dreams of Larry and Steve," Tom tells us. "Everything we're doing today is still based on innovation and customisation. Those are the themes that inspire us. We're constantly learning. It's just this real passion to create the best-sounding instruments possible."

The company's USA facility now has a team of around 30 builders, turning out







1. The folk at Breedlove strive to establish a personal relationship with the suppliers of their timber, stating that "sustainable sourcing is the right thing to do"

2. The Concertina's neck is made from a single piece of Honduran mahogany with East Indian rosewood for the back and sides

3. Adirondack spruce has a reputation for providing a powerful performance

4. Breedlove has established a range of body shapes that are all its own

With some gentle strumming and fingerstyle, you can hear the Adirondack earning its crust

approximately 2,000 guitars per year, and its dedication to sustainability is still high on its list of priorities, with the company manifesto declaring: "Travelling throughout the world we go to the forests and work with local families and mills whenever possible. Sustainable sourcing is the right thing to do..." Furthermore, the company wasn't happy to base its instruments on the established designs of yore, either, choosing instead to innovate with body shapes of its own. The Concertina is joined by its larger-bodied siblings the Concert and Concerto models, each sleek and elegant in its own right. We have the baby of the family on test, so let's open the case and take it out for a whirl.

The Premier Concertina CE mixes traditional good looks with some endearing flourishes – the distinctive asymmetrical headstock shape and that deep cutaway catch the eye immediately. To give you a set of proportions to consider, the Concertina's lower bout measures in at 375mm (14.75 inches), which means that it sits in between the size of a Martin 00 and 000. And, at 107mm (four inches) deep,

it shaves a tad from both those models in terms of depth, too. When you add in the tight waist at 219mm (8.6 inches) and the upper bout's sleek 274mm (10.8-inch) dimension, you can see that we're dealing with an instrument that orbits around the parlour area. But while the 12-frets-to-the-body also aids the guitar's diminutive appearance, Breedlove is quick to point out that the presence of an Adirondack top means that we're dealing with a little powerhouse and there's a surprise in store for the idle strummer when the strings are summoned into action. To be sure, Adirondack has a reputation for dishing out volume and its presence here might be seen as akin to putting a powerful engine into a smaller car. We'll have to wait and see.

Supporting the spruce top there is East Indian rosewood at work in the guitar's back and sides, and here its dark chocolate appearance acts as contrast to the pale spruce and the Concertina's general good looks. We would imagine that if we were to see this instrument in a few years when the spruce has become a mellow yellow, it will be an absolute stunner.



The neck is one-piece Honduran mahogany, the familiar grain of this prince among timbers evident along its length. African ebony is the choice for the fingerboard, with a Graph Tech Tusq nut and string saddle at either end of the Concertina's 635mm (25-inch) scale length.

There's an LR Baggs EAS VTC under-saddle pickup installed, with volume and tone controls concealed within the soundhole for amplified fine-tuning.

In much the same way as a good dish is the result of its ingredients, the recipe above leads us to believe that we're in for a treat. But before we adjudicate its performance, we must just mention Breedlove's Sound Optimization Process. No two pieces of timber are the same – even those from the same tree – and so all the woods used in Breedlove's instruments are subject to rigorous testing and analysis to make sure that every component part of the guitar is acting together to produce the best possible sound. Every guitar has a top that is thinned to suit its capabilities, and braces are shaved accordingly to form a compatible supporting cast.





Strings are loaded via the back of the Concertina's bridge – no pegs in this vicinity!

Feel & Sounds

We're told that the Concertina suits a lighter touch and so our natural inclination to belt out a bit of Delta blues is shelved in favour of some gentle strumming and polite fingerstyle. Immediately, it's possible to hear the Adirondack earning its crust. The sound is surprisingly full and rich – more power than we suspected, despite being aware of this timber's reputation. There's a full range of dynamics available, too, as everything from a whisper to a yell – a restrained yell, you understand – is rewarded by a sweet sensitivity. We were unable to find any boxiness or nasal midrange that sometimes darkens the sound picture of smaller-bodied instruments, either. The slim neck and generous nut width mean that nothing is out of reach, stylistically speaking.

Through an amp, the LR Baggs Element VTC (that's Volume, Tone and an analogue Compression circuit that kicks in below 400Hz) pickup swings into action and

The Concertina was a refreshing surprise. It's a breeze to play and it really does sound beautiful

does an excellent job of delivering the Concertina's aural charms into the electronic domain with deft transparency. Overall, this guitar sounds rather lovely...

Verdict

At a price point that sits north of £3k, the Concertina is set against the big league players such as Martin and Taylor. But it's also in competition with bespoke makers, too; the advantage there is that you can sculpt a guitar to your precise requirements, rather than settling for something that's 'off the peg', so to speak. The downside, though, is that many builders have long waiting lists to endure before the instrument arrives at your door.

But the Breedlove plays the part of a supremely able everyman – and if body size is an issue then you can look at the Concerto or Concert models. If you're not particularly a fan of spruce tops, Breedlove introduced redwood tops into the range last year, and so there really is something for everyone within the range.

We found the Concertina to be a refreshing surprise. It's a breeze to play and it really does sound beautiful, with a pickup that will guarantee a great sound at gigs. We loved what we found here and, if the name is unfamiliar, we can assure you that Breedlove is worth adding to your potential shopping list. **G**



BREEDLOVE PREMIER CONCERTINA CE

PRICE: £3,299 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Concertina acoustic

TOP: Adirondack spruce

BACK/SIDES: East Indian rosewood

MAX RIM DEPTH: 102mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 375mm

NECK: Honduran mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

TUNERS: Breedlove branded, chrome-plated

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/44.4mm

FINGERBOARD: African ebony

FRETS: 18

BRIDGE/SPACING: African ebony w/ compensated Tusq saddle/57mm

ELECTRICS: LR Baggs EAS VTC

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.86/4.1

OPTIONS: Breedlove's Premier Concertina redwood/East Indian rosewood is priced at £3,175. Larger-bodied versions with Adirondack spruce/East Indian rosewood body woods include the Premier Concert CE (£3,299) and Premier Concerto CE (£3,439)

RANGE OPTIONS: The extensive Concertina range starts at the Discovery (£389) and moves up to the Legacy Concertina Natural Shadow (£4,629). See website for details

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Natural gloss poly

Rosetti

01376 550033

www.rosetti.co.uk



9/10

PROS A beautifully wrought petite guitar with a voice that belies its size

CONS It's up against the big boys and there's plenty of competition from bespoke makers

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Introducing THE NEW BREED

Although 2021 will likely see a slow return to gigging for most players, at least guitar makers have furnished us with some superb new acoustics to try...

Words Dave Burrluck

1 AUDEN YORK

If you're a steel-string player but fancy trying out the smooth sound of nylon-strings then the York is aimed at you. Crossover guitars such as this are far from new, but the 12-fret non-cutaway York is a typical Auden high-spec all-solid-wood build, cedar-topped with a choice of African mahogany (£1,099) or Indian rosewood (£1,199) back and sides. To make it a little more 'steel-string' friendly, the nut width is 45mm and the ebony fingerboard is cambered (406mm). Powering comes from the Brad Clark Supernatural preamp, specifically voiced for this guitar, and the price includes a hard case.

If the idea of the York interests you but you don't have the budget, Cordoba's new entry-level cutaway Fusion 5 (approx. £450) is similarly aimed with a 48mm nut width, 406mm (16-inch) radius 'board and solid spruce top. It's powered by Fishman's Sonitone pickup system and comes in a choice of Gloss Natural, Jet Black (both with laminate mahogany back and sides) and Gloss Sonata Burst (flamed mahogany back and sides).

Price: From £1,099 Web: www.audenguitars.com/
www.cordobaguitars.com



2 GIBSON ADDITIONS

New for 2021 from the Gibson Acoustic Custom Shop is the SJ-200 Western Classic, which features as the basis for new signature models from diverse artists.

First up, there's the new Gibson Orianthi SJ-200 Custom in Cherry (pictured): "It's the same full SJ-200 sound, but it plays much faster with a [ES-335] neck on it, and with the modified unique LR Baggs custom pickup it's a balanced guitar and cuts through. I can't wait for you all to be able to pick it up and shred away on it in May," says Orianthi.

To our knowledge, Tom Petty never shredded on any of his guitars, but you can look forward to the Gibson Custom SJ-200 Wildflower. Here's hoping some of the late, great man's songwriting skills rub off. Speaking of colossal selling songwriters, Noel Gallagher apparently has a signature J-150 on its way, too. When, where and how much? No idea.

Price: £TBA Web: www.gibson.com

3 GUILD BT-258E DELUXE 8-STRING BARITONE

Part of Guild's Chinese-made 'pressed back' 200

series, this is something a little different: an eight-string jumbo baritone! It features a solid spruce top with laminated rosewood back and sides, but Guild couldn't confirm the scale length at the time of writing. The baritone is tuned five steps down with octave middle strings – so we get (bass to treble) B-E-a-A-d-D-F#-B – and it comes with a Fishman pickup/preamp system.

If eight strings sounds like two too many for you then look instead to the BT-240E (approx. £499), a six-string pressed-back baritone electro with mahogany laminate pressed back and sides, and the F-240E (approx. £399) is pretty much the same but in standard tuning.

Price: Approx. £599 Web: www.guildguitars.com

4 IBANEZ JGM10 JON GOMM

Jon Gomm is known for his explosive percussive style and his new JGM10 asymmetric jumbo signature has workhorse written all over it. It has a long 655mm (25.75-inch) scale to accommodate his various drop tunings and comes in just one colour, black (with satin top, natural high-gloss back and sides). That opaque top colour hides an impressive spec, which

includes Thermo-Aged solid Sitka spruce top and bracing, solid pau ferro back and sides, and Macassar ebony top-loading bridge. The nut and compensated saddle are bone.

To amplify Jon's percussive style, it's loaded with Fishman's Rare Earth Mic Blend Active soundhole and top Tap pickups with dual outputs. John recorded most of his latest album, *The Faintest Idea* (which he talked with us about in issue 469), with the prototype, which he concedes is "now pretty battered".

Price: £2,779 Web: www.ibanez.com/au

5 TAYLOR GT 811E & K21E

Taylor introduced its new smaller-body GT size with the GTe Urban Ash at the tail end of 2020. The design also debuted designer-in-chief Andy Powers' specially developed C-Class bracing system (see interview on page 80) which seeks to increase bass response from a small body. The GT 811e and K21e both embrace the new body size and bracing system – but with a Sitka spruce/Indian rosewood combo for the former and an all-koa complement for the latter.

Price: £3,335 & £5,159 Web: www.taylorguitars.com

1. AUDEN YORK

A perfect fit for the steel-string player making the transition to nylon, the York features a scaled-down 45mm nut width

5. TAYLOR GT 811E

A giant-size sound from a smaller body is one of the hallmarks of Taylor's new GT acoustic (see full review, p92)

1

5





6 LOWDEN 12-FRET ORIGINAL

The popularity of the 12-fret acoustic seems to be increasing at quite a rate. Lowden's 12-fret models were previously only available in its upper 35 and 50 Series, but for 2021 you'll be able to buy a 12-fret in the most cost-effective Original Series in F, S and WL body shapes. They will be available in the usual four body wood pairings: cedar/mahogany (22), cedar/walnut (23), cedar/Indian rosewood (25) and Sitka spruce/rosewood (32). Also new within the Original Series this year is a fifth wood combination: Sitka spruce top with koa back and sides (34). "It's not a highly figured koa like we use in the 35 or 50 Series," explains Lowden's Steve Harvey, "but you're still getting the sound without the expense." So, while the Original Series starts around £3,100, the 34-spec koa models sit at the top of the price range starting around £3,700.

Price: From approx. £3,100 Web: www.lowdenguitars.com



7 MARTIN D-35 DAVID GILMOUR 6/12 & 00L EARTH

As Martin's Fred Greene ably explains on page 72, the new D-35 David Gilmour Custom Signature models (£5,750) announced recently, six- and 12-string variants, are progressive designs to suit the Floyd legend's current musical needs, not slavish replications of D-35s David has used in the past. As such, the new models are built with sinker mahogany for the back and sides, rather than rosewood. The six-string has an Adirondack top for punch and clarity, while the 12 sports Carpathian spruce. Production is limited to just 250 pieces in total and Gilmour has hand-signed each guitar.

Also new is the 00L Earth (\$2,249) with eco-credentials including 100 per cent FSC-certified and 100 per cent plastic-free build materials, a natural-fibre hemp gigbag, plus unique artwork on the guitar's top by Robert Goetzl.

Price: £5,750 & \$2,249 Web: www.martinguitar.com



8 MARTIN DJR-10E STREETMASTER

Martin's Dreadnought Jr gets the StreetMaster 'relic' treatment and is the lowest-priced guitar addition so far this year. The 610mm (24-inch) scale, all-sapele DJR-10E features the Fishman Sonitone preamp with its handy USB output.

If you're tempted by the Gilmour 12-string then check out the Grand J-16E 12-string (approx. £2,150). With a 000-depth body, it has East Indian rosewood back and sides, a 645mm (25.4-inch) scale, and Fishman's Matrix Enhance NT2.

The new D-13E (approx. £1,295 with an option of siris) and GPC-13E (approx. £1,395, with an option of muteny) feature back and sides made of layered ziricote, known for its Brazilian rosewood-like appearance, big bass and sparkling highs – layered here with African khaya mahogany. Good looking and affordable!

Price: Approx. £715 Web: www.martinguitar.com

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SheeranGuitars.com

WISH, YOU ARE HERE

Words Jamie Dickson

A new duo of David Gilmour acoustics is one of the most exciting launches to come out of NAMM. Martin's Fred Greene explains how a fresh take on the classic D-35 made the final cut



Photo by Polly Samson



David Gilmour (left), requested a surprisingly progressive spec for his new D-35s. What remained the same was Martin's high level of traditional hand-craft (above)

It's not every day you get asked if you'd be interested in designing a new David Gilmour signature model. "I nearly jumped out of my seat,"

Fred Greene, Martin's vice president of product management, admits. The call came from Mark De Neys at Westside, Martin's UK distributor, and, unsurprisingly, Fred didn't need much convincing to get behind the project.

"There's a handful of iconic artists that have always played Martins but we haven't had the opportunity to work with," Fred reflects, "and David was at the top of that list, along with Neil Young and maybe one or two others. So I said, 'Just tell me how I can help out and make this project work.'"

With a green light to get going on both a six-string D-35 and a 12-string variant designed to Gilmour's preferred spec, Fred began piecing together exactly what the Pink Floyd legend wanted from the instruments.

"Mark De Neys was working with David's guitar tech, Phil Taylor, so Mark would speak to Phil and Phil would speak to David and sort of

translate it back – and then it would come to myself and Skip Beltz, who's our guitar product manager here. We would all get together and develop a picture of what David was asking for and what he wanted to do. And that's sort of how it happened," Fred explains.

The fruits of their labour have now emerged as two D-35 David Gilmour Custom Signature Edition models, limited to 250 pieces in total, hand-signed by David. We quizzed Fred about what the dark side of the D-35 looks like...

Are the two new models intended to be replicas of vintage Martins used by David – or were they designed in a more progressive spirit?

"That's a really good question, because that's the question we had; we weren't sure when we were first asked about the project. My thought was that he was probably just going to want to do a replica of his 1969 D-35. But actually, I was thrilled that that was *not* what he wanted to do. He wanted to stay within the realm of a 35 Style, three-piece-back instrument, but he was open to

new combinations of woods and specifications and it became clear that he was looking forward, not backward, with this project. You know, he's still very creative and not wanting to repeat himself, and I thought that was really cool.

"So we started to put together some basic specifications. He had a lot of ideas of what he wanted to do. But he left some specs open-ended for us to make suggestions and send him prototypes. So we sent him a rosewood version of this guitar, a mahogany version and then, of course, the sinker mahogany version. And he had all three of them at one time – he wanted to sort of live with them a little while and see which one

"David was open to new specifications... It became clear that he was looking forward, not backward, with this project"

he preferred – but they quickly got back to us and said that the sinker mahogany version was the one he loved the most. Apparently, it 'wasn't even close': that was their quote. So the sinker mahogany became the bones of the design that we were going to work around."

What are the qualities of so-called 'sinker' mahogany as a material for back and sides?

"To me, it's a little bit denser than some of the newer-growth mahoganies we use. Sinker mahogany is old-growth forest [timber] because it's wood that was cut in Central America over a century ago. At that time, they would float lumber down the river to port and in the process some of the heavier logs would sink to the bottom. And so they were at the bottom of the river for over 100 years before salvage companies went in and dredged those logs up [for use in high-end woodworking] in recent times. Now, those logs sank for a reason because they were a little bit more dense than the other

"The D-35 has become a classic. It's always been a very steady seller... there's no reason to fix something that's not broken"

logs. So used in the back and sides of guitars, the sinker mahogany just adds a little more immediacy to the tone, if that makes sense? It's a little quicker to react, whereas what I call younger mahogany can feel very light and airy and softer by comparison. So I think the sinker stuff has a little more snap. Physically, it's still very light – it's not heavy like rosewood – but it just has a quicker response."

The 12-string Gilmour model features a Carpathian spruce top instead of the Adirondack used on the six-string. Carpathian is a bit of a new one on us...

"Carpathian spruce has properties that are probably closer to Adirondack than they are to Sitka. Now, the thing with the Carpathian spruce is that the logs are bigger than with Adirondack spruce, so it tends to look a little bit cleaner: the lines are tighter. I don't think it's quite as stiff as Adirondack. I would say it lies in between the Sitka and Adirondack in terms of stiffness, but it's definitely stiffer than the Sitka. But it's



MARTIN D-35 DAVID GILMOUR

This Custom Signature Edition features sinker mahogany neck, back and sides with an Adirondack spruce Vintage Tone System top, antique white binding, and Waverly Relic Nickel tuners. David also spec'd a new neck shape and fingerboard pattern for these limited-edition models

The classic three-piece back of the original D-35 design has been retained here but with sinker mahogany. Below, Martin luthiers prepare two of the 250 guitars



Photos courtesy of Martin Guitar

usually beautiful-looking wood: it's super white and clean, which I think looks really good.

"In this case, we paired it with the Sitka braces to sort of soften it up. Sometimes if you make a 12-string too stiff it can be just a little bit too ring-y or overwhelming, and the overtones can get a little weird in there. So you want to let it breathe a little bit more, let it move a little more. So that's the case here with this guitar. And, of course, on both these guitars we're using protein glue to put them together and that changes of sound quite a bit also. Once again, we're trying to get that vintage-y vibe out of these particular guitars."

What place does the D-35 occupy in the pantheon of Martin designs, today? The three-piece back sets it apart, but it was originally intended to make more efficient use of rosewood...

"I think it's one of those pieces that, as you point out, was born out of necessity and wanting to be a good steward of natural resources. So

we wanted to use every piece of wood back in the late 60s, early 70s and we sort of stumbled across a formula that it created a relatively bass-y sounding guitar. D-35s are known to be relatively bass-y sounding instrument. I don't want to be too broad, but the 35 tends to be a favourite amongst people who prefer strumming as opposed to bluegrass flatpickers who will gravitate more towards that than a D-28 or -18 style. So there's a smoothness to it.

"And, of course, there were bound fingerboards on the traditional 35s – David's does *not* have a bound fingerboard, by the way – so there was just a little bit more ornamentation to a D-35, and I think it feels like a bit of an upgrade for some people over the D-28, just from the ornamentation standpoint. So, yeah, it's sort of become a classic that's stood the test of time and has always sold well.

"It's always been a very steady seller, it's got its fans, so there's no reason to fix something that's not broken."

www.martinguitar.com





From The Wood

Taylor continues the rollout of its brand-new smaller-body Grand Theater acoustics with the latest C-Class bracing system onboard

Words David Mead Photography Oily Curtis



TAYLOR GT 811E £3,335

CONTACT **Taylor Guitars** PHONE **0800 23750011** WEB **www.taylorguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1

What's the score with the GT?

When Taylor's new GT body size was introduced in October 2020 with the GTe Urban Ash, we soon became charmed by its demure playability and sofa-buddy cuddliness, not to mention its ecological credentials. The 811e shares its body dimensions, scale length, and so on, but this time we have more 'old-school' body woods – rosewood, spruce and mahogany – and more upmarket body furnishings.

2

Small is still beautiful, then?

Indeed. We're certainly seeing a rise in smaller-bodied acoustics these days as the mystic art of lutherie has evolved to the extent that less is more in this respect. We've heard instruments that can dish out surprising levels of volume and rich tone from a comparatively minute soundbox. One theory is that all the engineering that was brought to bear in the popular 'mini' ranges from both Taylor and Martin has been used to give smaller guitars a bigger voice.

3

Do Taylor's new-fangled bracing systems really make a difference?

From what we're hearing, yes. We were as sceptical as anyone when Taylor introduced its V-Class bracing, but had to admit that there was a very real difference. Now, with the C-Class, it becomes immediately apparent that volume and tonal evenness across the audio spectrum has been turbocharged.

Turn back to page 54 and you'll find our review of Taylor's GTe Urban Ash guitar, an instrument that heralded in the company's slightly smaller body sized acoustic. In that review it shares the stage with the parlour-sized PRS SE P20e, but here the spotlight falls solely upon the GTe's brother-in-arms, the GT 811e. This guitar sits within Taylor's established 800 acoustic range, the numeral 1 at the end of the model designation meaning it features the new body size.

The Urban Ash variation offers a palette of eco-friendly body woods, Urban Ash being reclaimed from the roadside arboreal greenery found in California's cityscape. It also featured properly managed tropical mahogany and a eucalyptus fingerboard, as well as a Sitka spruce top, and came in at £1,835. If the GTe added up to an

ecologically worthy sign of the times, the 811e takes a more traditional body-wood path – and comes in at just under twice the price. That's not to say Taylor has abandoned its quest to use eco-appropriate woods here (quite the opposite), it's just that maybe not everyone is ready to abandon their expectations, tonally speaking, from an upmarket acoustic. If things follow the traditional human curve here then adjusting the acoustic world's mindset to the different tonalities found with alternative timbers will take a generation or so in any case.

We liked what we heard from the GTe Urban Ash and, from the look of things, we're going to be smiling our way through this review, too. "You'll hear that familiar spruce and rosewood flat-top guitar sound, but with the GT's fresh form and structure,



The compensated Micarta saddle helps to keep intonation on track



The 811e's rosewood scratchplate adds a dash of luxury to the guitar's top

the listening and playing experiences deliver a distinctly new dimension," Taylor's master luthier Andy Powers tells us. "This model retains the slinky, ultra-easy handling and string feel, but the voice has been shaped into a denser, harmonically saturated sound. The top responds quickly to even the most delicate articulation, and it's buoyed by the deep and supportive sound rosewood is known for."

As we've seen, the main difference between the 811e and GTe is that Indian

rosewood replaces the latter model's Urban Ash back and sides, and ebony steps in for fingerboard duties instead of the GTe's eucalyptus. The formula here – Sitka spruce top, rosewood back and sides, mahogany neck and ebony 'board – will be familiar to everyone who spends any time reading the spec of acoustic guitars as it's probably the most tried-and-trusted combination available. Just about every manufacturer uses it and just about every player knows exactly what to expect from this particular fusion of timbers.

Then there's the new and slightly smaller body shape. Just how do you manage to get a big sound from a smaller body? After all, we can predict what we'd expect from a dreadnought made from these materials: big and boomy, with plenty of midrange clout and sweet trebles. We'd also be able to put together

"The listening and playing experiences deliver a distinctly new dimension"

Andy Powers

THE RIVALS

If you're going shopping with a four-figure acoustic guitar budget in mind, it's pretty much an open playing field. We would suggest browsing a few bespoke makers' price lists as there are some remarkable instruments available in the UK. Roger Bucknall's Fylde range includes the smaller-bodied Goodfellow (£2,300) and Ariel (£2,500) and custom variations in terms of body woods, etc, are available on both. Alister Atkin is another maker to check out with the 037s (around £2,799) and Essential 0 (£2,699) both meeting smaller-body requirements. Off the peg, so to speak, it would be foolish to ignore Martin's 00-18 (£2,375) or 0-18 (£2,299), and Lowden's S range is worth a look with the S-32 coming in around £3,179.

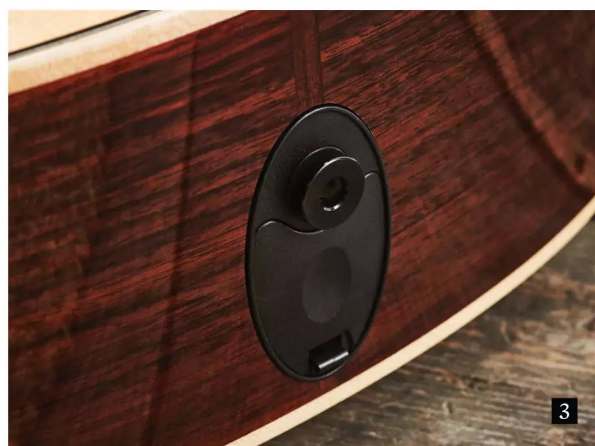


1. A set of Taylor-branded tuners sit atop the 811e's mahogany neck

2. West African ebony and Element inlays make up the 811e's fretboard



2



3

3. The guitar's battery compartment is located under the rear strap peg/output jack. No more fishing inside the soundhole when it's battery-changing time!

We weren't prepared for was how much fun it is to play and how adaptable it is to various styles of music

an identikit sound picture from a 000 or 00. But where does the Grand Theater fit into the body-shape soundscape?

Enter Taylor's secret weapon: C-Class bracing. We've said before in these pages that there's a definite shift towards smaller bodies among acoustic players, but in the past this has always been at the sacrifice of output. Smaller body equals less air movement equals less volume and a weaker bass response, right? Not necessarily, it would appear. We go into more detail about what's happening down in the GT's engine room in our interview with Andy Powers that follows this review, but the short version is that by rethinking the bracing underneath the guitar's top and paying particular attention to scale length, you can recalibrate tonal output and balance basses, mids and trebles accordingly. Throw in a road-tested and proven pickup such as Taylor's Expression System 2 and you have a guitar that's a comfortable fit everywhere from the sofa to the stage. That's the theory, anyway.

Feel & Sounds

In practice, the GT 811e is a revelation. We were already sold on the body shape when we looked at the GTe and we enjoyed the sounds we heard there immensely. Here, it's almost like we've found an extra gear or two.

The bass response, a yardstick that a lot of players put into play during their first encounter with a new model, is very sprightly and rich and a perfect foil for the trebles, which are loud and proud with an appropriate amount of rounded sweetness thrown in. It's a very well-balanced instrument, but the thing we weren't necessarily prepared for was how much fun it is to play and how adaptable it is to various styles of music. We tried some fingerpicked blues, strummed chords, fingerstyle acoustic and the 811e batted everything back to us with multilingual dexterity. You can play just about anything you want to and the result is, pleasingly, the same.

The reduced scale length of 612.7mm (24.12 inches) sits in between Taylor's Mini at 597mm (23.5 inches) and, say, an 800



Rosewood back and sides with a Sitka top and mahogany neck is a tried-and-trusted combination

Series 814ce's 648mm (25.5 inches) and produces the slinkier feel of a drop-tuned instrument while enhancing the playing experience overall. At no point did we feel that we were 'fighting' with the guitar; it was smooth sailing all the way.

The body size means you can sit in the accustomed 'slumped in front of the TV' position comfortably and the GT fits on your lap like a faithful hound. Meanwhile, the twin strap pegs mean it's all set to be strapped up and let loose in front of a socially distanced crowd, too. Which brings the Expression System 2 nicely into focus. We've encountered the ES2 plenty of times in the past and it never fails to impress. After all, this is a system that has been developed in-house and, as such, is a perfect fit for Taylor's range. Bright, airy and sufficiently hi-fi, it delivers everything you put into the guitar with the absolute minimum of fuss.

We literally spent moments adjusting the EQ on the guitar – with the AER Compact 60's controls set absolutely flat – and we

were up and running. An all-rounder? It's beginning to look that way.

Verdict

If you were able to herd a number of acoustic guitarists into a room and ask them what they wanted from an instrument, you can bet the consensus would be reliability, great sound and an easy transition into the amplified realm for performance duties. The group might also add that a guitar has to feel like it belongs in your hands and is, generally speaking, fun and easy to play. The Taylor GT 811e ticks all those boxes and its body size – plus tough Aero case – means that travelling with it wouldn't be a problem, either.

At over £3k, it would be true to say it's a pro-grade instrument and might fall out of reach for players who are looking for an acoustic guitar merely to supplement their electric playing. But if you're in the market for a guitar that will stand by you in the practice room, studio and stage, the 811e ought to be at the top of your list. **G**



TAYLOR GT 811E

- PRICE:** £3,335 (inc Aero case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Theater electro-acoustic
TOP: Sitka spruce w/ C-class bracing
BACK/SIDES: Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 375mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 612.7mm (24.12")
TUNERS: Taylor nickel mini
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech
 Tusq/43.6mm
FINGERBOARD: West African ebony, Element inlays
FRETS: 20, small
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with compensated Micarta saddle/56mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor Expression System 2
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2/4.4
OPTIONS: The 811 is available without the Expression System 2 pickup at £3,155
RANGE OPTIONS: Taylor's 800 series currently features 10 models; the GT body size within that range extends to the GT urban ash/spruce (£1,619), GTe Urban ash/spruce (£1,835) and, also new, all-koa GT K21e (£5,159). See website for details.
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Natural Gloss with satin neck back



9/10

PROS Great instrument with a surprisingly capable range of tones and a fun playing experience

CONS The price may limit appeal to the pro league only

Fun Size

Taylor's new body shape is a bold step in a notoriously traditional genre. We talk to designer-in-chief Andy Powers to get the full story behind the Grand Theater acoustic

Words David Mead

As you can probably tell from the review on the preceding pages, we rather liked Taylor's new GT 811E. It's a bantamweight instrument that packs a surprisingly potent punch, but, maybe more importantly, it's loads of fun to play. Smaller-bodied instruments notoriously lack an even frequency response and often have a hole where the bass should be, but that's far from the case here. The fact that it plays and responds so well is down to the craft of its designer, Andy Powers – who joins us to talk us through the process.

Where exactly did you start with the new Grand Theater body size?

"It was string length, actually. A lot of time in the world of guitars we think of designing the body size or body shape first and we think of the string length as a secondary consideration. In this case, I wanted to start with a scale length that falls in between your more typical 25-something inch scale length and what you'd think of

"The physics of the guitar matters a lot... because it determines those first brushstrokes on a design"

as a more travel guitar scale length that's 23.5 inches and smaller.

"If you take a typical 25.5-inch scale length that's common for, say, a Fender and were to drop-tune that to E₁, you kinda get this appealing slinky, easy-feeling guitar, right? A lot of electric guitar players do that. I don't always do it, but I enjoy the feel of it. But I don't necessarily want to play drop-tuned. So, to get that same feeling you could capo up one fret and then you're back at concert pitch, but you still have this really nice slinky feeling.

"The other benefit that I get when I do that is that I have a little smaller space between each fret; it's a little easier to get around, easier to make those chord stretches. So I took that resulting scale length, if you will, and designed the whole



Andy Powers' first step in the GT design process was to focus on the scale length

guitar around that setup. Because we're using a typical size set of strings and have voiced the guitar appropriately for that slightly lower string tension, the thing ends up working really well – that easygoing feel that we like so much."

That's a really interesting approach to designing a body size...

"Sometimes we want to go to the more esoteric details of the guitar and talk about the nuances and the subtleties of this and that, but the mere physics of the guitar matters a lot. The string length, the physical size of the body, the proportions of the body... Because it determines those first big, broad brushstrokes on a design. They determine the way it's going to go, the way it'll work out for the musician – the way they'll hold it, approach it.

"So with the GT design, that Grand Theater body shape with its different proportions, its scale length and whatnot, I find that musicians approach that instrument differently than all the other guitars that they have. Even if you compare it to something like the GS Mini, which is smaller still, your approach is different."

How about the C-Class bracing?

"In real simple terms, it's an asymmetrical bracing pattern in order to make an asymmetrical voicing. If you're familiar with the V-Class idea that we introduced a few years ago and the development that went into that, you can generate a good bit of sustain by using a top that's fairly rigid parallel to the strings. When you go to build volume you need some flexibility, just like a speaker cone; the thing actually has to displace air in order to produce sound pressure. So what I'm always trying to do is balance those two to see how you can get the best result.

"Typically, with a very small-body guitar that's really challenging for a designer because there physically isn't enough room to allow the top to flex enough to produce what we think of as being a pleasing bass response. It's hard to make a big fire in a small fireplace. So with some designs, especially with a symmetrical design, you can make a very pleasing voice, but the low-end response is less satisfying.

"That's why we think of a parlour guitar as having this delicate low-end response. It can have great volume and it can have

BRACE YOURSELF

Taylor's simplified guide to bracing options



V-CLASS BRACING

Taylor's V-Class bracing is a revolutionary new pattern that marks a major shift away from traditional steel-string bracing patterns. By allowing the soundboard to flex naturally while maintaining rigidity along the centre (in the direction of the strings), it enhances both volume and sustain. Up and down the fretboard, notes are full, true and consistent, with more harmonic agreement. It represents an entirely new design platform that can be adapted to different body styles in different ways to infuse each with a unique sonic personality.



C-CLASS BRACING

Developed for the smaller Taylor GT body shape, Taylor's proprietary C-Class bracing leverages some of the tone-enhancing ideas behind the V-Class design to boost the volume and sustain. Featuring an asymmetrical, cantilevered design (thus the 'C' in C-Class), this unique architecture emphasises the lower frequencies to produce a surprisingly powerful bass response from a smaller-bodied guitar. The overall sound is sweet, focused and responsive, with a tonal output that sonically punches above its weight class.



X BRACING

The 'X' pattern provides a continuous flow of strength from the upper bout to the lower bout, which provides rigidity despite the soundhole's location in the middle of the soundboard. Taylor's refined interpretations of this traditional bracing style have been adapted to produce pleasing volume, sustain and responsiveness, with signature clarity and balance across the tonal spectrum that has long been associated with the company's guitars. X bracing is used on the Baby Taylor, GS Mini, Academy, and 100 and 200 Series.



NYLON-STRING FAN BRACING

Fan bracing is a completely different bracing style used on Taylor's nylon-string models, inspired by patterns used by classical guitar builders. Nylon strings generate less tension and so a nylon-string guitar typically has a thinner top and lighter bracing. Fan bar styles come in different arrangements, and they use both five-bar and three-bar patterns. The three-bar pattern shown here is a unique Taylor design that Andy Powers adapted from his ukulele designs. It produces a signature clear, open sound with a long sustain and is responsive to a light touch.

great clarity, but it's difficult to get the sort of broad, uniform response out of a mainstream guitar that I could strum chords on, play leads on and accompany things with.


"So the C-Class idea was a way to deliberately over-exaggerate the low-end response from a small box so that it ends up well balanced despite its size. The low-end response certainly isn't the same as a big dreadnought or something, but when you listen to it and play over the whole usable register of that guitar it ends up relatively well balanced.

"If I were to draw the frequency response like a graphic equaliser, a small-bodied guitar would dip out in the low-end dramatically on the E, F and F# on the low E string. It just falls away. That overall low-end response is missing from the guitar's register. You can always feel that little bit of body behind every one of the notes you play even though the frequency of the note you're playing is much higher than you would think of as being articulated by that resonant frequency. That's missing from a small body because you just physically can't make it that easily. In this

case, with the asymmetrical C-Class design, we're making up for that missing spot by over-exaggerating it."

What's the physical make-up of the C-Class bracing pattern?

"If you were to disassemble the guitar and look at it from the inside you'd see very clearly that it's closely related to the V-Class idea. You'd see where the rest of the V would be, but in this case it's been modified so that it's kind of only halfway there. So if you look at the footprint of where the braces go it's pretty clear as to what's going on. For me, at least, the interesting magic behind the design is in looking at which parts of the guitar you can make strong and which parts you make flexible in order to make that kind of response that we're looking for.

"The entire philosophy behind this GT guitar was that I want it to be fun to play – make it appealing, make it sound good, but it can't be a guitar that takes itself too seriously. For me, the measure of merit in an instrument is how much I enjoy playing it. It should be gratifying to play, you know – you should enjoy it and it should make you want to play." 

"The entire philosophy behind this guitar was that I want it to be fun to play – it can't take itself too seriously"

Longtermers

A few months' playing, recording and everything that goes with it – welcome to *Guitarist's* longterm test report



Emerald X10
Artisan Woody
with David Mead

Writer

DAVID MEAD,
Guitarist, Deputy Editor



David sums up his time with the fibreglass-bodied X10 and its myriad sonic possibilities, despite plans to use all of them simultaneously being dashed by the ongoing pandemic...



For this look at Emerald's X10 Artisan Woody I was ready to try to use all its available outputs – piezo, humbucker and MIDI – simultaneously in a mighty fusion of acoustic/electric accord. But once again my efforts were thwarted by the prevailing situation with regards to Covid-19. Alas, access to the *Guitarist* studios was still restricted at the time of writing and I felt I couldn't delay any longer before adding the final full stop to my time spent with the guitar.

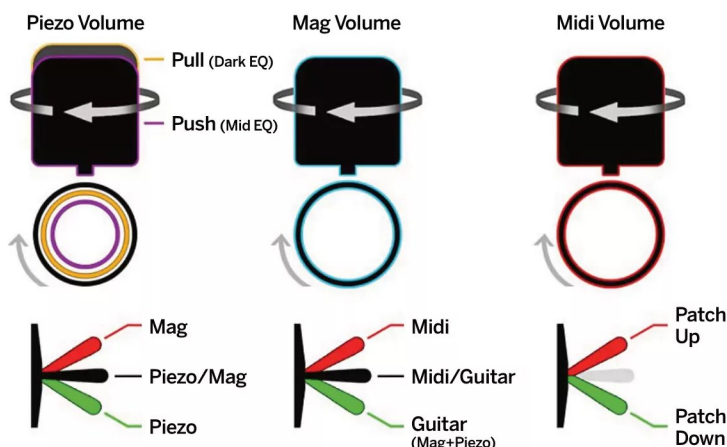
So I had to cancel 'Operation Three Ring Circus' in favour of a final glance at its sound opportunities individually. Previously, I managed to have both piezo and humbucker reporting for duty, albeit not at the same time, and so I formed what I think is a fairly accurate picture of what this guitar's capabilities are. I've also spent time with it as a straight acoustic and picked up on thoughts of other players who have had a chance to have a quick strum while it was with me.

To briefly recap, the Emerald X10 Artisan Woody is an all-fibreglass acoustic with a surprisingly 'woody' acoustic tone. The facilities to amplify it come via a Graph Tech Ghost Acousti-phonic piezo, a wafer-thin Krivo humbucker at the neck and, taking advantage of the six individual saddles from the Ghost piezo, a MIDI facility. Outputs are either via

"All fears of it feeling plasticky are allayed by its slim neck with unfettered access to the upper register"

a stereo Y cable to connect to two separate amps, or an amp and PA, a mono cable to sum the piezo and humbucker together and a 13-pin cable for the MIDI.

Dealing with the pure acoustic tone first, I'll be forever in awe of this instrument's ability to hold its tuning. Its fibreglass construction means it's virtually invulnerable as far as changing humidity levels are concerned and this alone has made the Emerald range very popular with players living in areas where this would otherwise be a problem with wooden-bodied instruments.



I would imagine you could gig this guitar in Alaska one night and Texas the next without any of the roadside tweaking I've heard about from the many travelling minstrels of my acquaintance.

Apart from that plus point, and the thought that an Emerald guitar might just be the instrument that all-weather buskers everywhere have been dreaming about, the guitar is a real joy to play. All fears of it feeling plasticky are quickly allayed by its slim, friendly neck with unfettered access to the upper register by virtue of its clever neck join – which isn't really a join at all because neck and body are moulded together, but you see what I mean.

On to the Krivo humbucker and another surprise as this super-thin pickup delivers a wonderfully warm and responsive sound. If an occasional bout of jazz is your type of thing, then archtop tonality is all there, but, if your mood takes you, then some gutbucket blues through a distorted amp is well within the Krivo's repertoire, too. Mixing the two together isn't a problem, either, thanks to the X10's comprehensive switching system. It might seem a little daunting at first (see the diagram above), but, like everything, you soon fall into step with it. Put it this way, if you can operate a smartphone, you're home free.

MIDI and I are old adversaries and I've since come across the term 'MIDIOT', which probably sums up my abilities in this direction admirably. Previously, I was able to access my ancient (aka 'classic'

or 'vintage') Roland GR-50 without any problem at all and was soon walking through the guitar synth's presets from the guitar like a pro. Unfortunately, my capabilities as far as MIDI is concerned don't extend to exploring the whole universe of possibilities its presence here might suggest – switching through presets on a pedalboard or accessing the inner workings of some of the acoustic-friendly pedals out there, for instance. The possibilities are quite probably endless, it's only my resources and status as a long-serving technophobe that provide a limiting factor.

To be honest, I can't think of too many situations where I personally would use all three voices of the X10 together during a performance, but I know a few players who have had a piezo, soundhole humbucker and MIDI pickup installed on their wooden-bodied acoustics and have used them to great effect. The late great Eric Roche was one and I could never fathom what he was using the MIDI side of his gear for until I went in really close and listened to his live sound. It was subtle but present, and I think that would be the key to its successful operation here. Of course, as far as the Emerald range is concerned, MIDI is an option and so you don't need to have it if you don't think you'd use it.

To sum up, I've enjoyed the time I've spent with the X10. It really is a fantastically capable instrument with a mind-stretching range of sonic possibilities and a tuning stability that's off the scale. **G**



Little Mix

It's the age of the smaller-bodied acoustic – but being petite doesn't mean you won't stand out in a crowd, as these two new 12-fretters from the Lowden workshops set out to prove

Words David Mead
Photography Olly Curtis



LOWDEN WL-25 & S-23 12-FRETS **BOTH £3,475**

CONTACT **Lowden Guitars** PHONE **02844 619161** WEB www.lowdenguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1

So, 14 and 12 frets to the body. Not much of a difference, surely?

On the contrary. The principal difference is that the bridge is in a different position on a 12-fretter in that it's situated at the widest point of the soundboard. George Lowden explains more in the review, but in a nutshell it results in a subtle shift in tonal response, making a 12-fretter a slightly different animal altogether.

2

Isn't access to the upper fretboard going to feel a little limited?

Well, classical and flamenco guitars traditionally have a 12th-fret neck join and that doesn't seem to have placed much of a restriction on the vast repertoire of music in that genre. If you spend a great deal of time above the 12th fret, try before you buy or go for a guitar with a 14th-fret join.

3

Are the guitars here available in different wood combos?

Indeed. Lowden guitars are, in the main, built to customer orders, so you have a vast amount of choice when you begin to map out your ideal instrument. We've given a few examples of different wood combos in the spec at the end of the review.

You're probably tired of us telling you that small is the new large as far as acoustic guitars are concerned. In recent months we've seen a few tiny tots pass through these pages and have been consistently in awe of how much sound it's possible to get from a smaller frame. And if you add a 12-frets-to-the-body configuration into the equation, things can become even more compact. Where's it all going to end, we wonder?

These two models from Lowden are the latest to receive the 12-fret treatment, a WL – that is, 'Wee Lowden' – and an S

model, the next range up from the Wee in terms of body size. Whereas the difference between these models and the more regular 14-fretters is immediately apparent to the eye, things actually go a lot deeper than that when it comes to construction. It's not just a case of moving everything along a bit so that the neck joins the body a little earlier. If only things were that simple.

When we spoke to George Lowden last year and drifted onto the subject of 12-fret guitar construction, he told us this: "When you join the neck at the 12th fret, it moves the bridge more or less into the centre of





the bottom bout. Of course, acoustically, that's a good thing." He went on to explain that on a 12-fret design the bridge sits at the widest part of the guitar's soundboard so that the top is responding far more to vibration transmitted through the bridge from the strings. But, talking about what has to change inside the guitar, he added, "there are a lot of changes that have to take place there. The bridge position has changed in relation to the soundbox so you have to change the bracing and then we have to experiment with the position of the braces,

Think of a very well behaved parlour guitar and you're in the right aural space with the WL-25

as well as the way they're carved. The first one of those that I designed about three years ago, I actually designed two different bracing systems for the same guitar and we made prototypes up using both systems and then made a judgement call on which we considered to be the best. That process is incredibly interesting to me, because when you play the new guitar – whether it be with a new wood or a new position for the bridge or new voicing or the bracing being

changed – you will get a difference in tone and it's often very subtle. For me, as a guitar maker, I'm not only relying on my own ears but I'm relying on the players' ears as well and asking them for their viewpoints."

We're told that the bracing configuration that resides within our two review models here has been dubbed 'Dolphin Bracing', but you can see what we mean when we say that converting a 14-fretter to a 12 is a job that has to be thoroughly thought through.

Feel & Sounds

Looking at the WL-25 to begin with, we have to declare a soft spot for the Lowden Wee range. Size-wise, it has the appearance of a classical guitar but comes in a tad more slender when compared to our Admira Elena nylon-string. The WL measures 335mm at its widest point, whereas the

1. Red cedar is the choice for the top wood on both of our review models, but there are plenty of other options available

2. Necks are mahogany spliced with rosewood strips, crowned by a set of Gotoh 381 tuners

3. The WL-25's back and sides are made from East Indian rosewood with contrasting mahogany bindings top and bottom

4. As we've found in the past with Lowden acoustics, craftsmanship and quality are supreme



5

5. Both models have headstocks decorated with rosewood faceplates

6. A close-up look at the S-23's mahogany neck with rosewood splices

Admira sits at 375mm at the same spot. It's very cute-looking; let's leave it at that.

From a construction point of view, the WL has a cedar top with rosewood back and sides and mahogany bindings, but if this particular wood combo doesn't float your boat, Lowden will accommodate practically anything you can imagine on demand. The neck is mahogany with rosewood strips and the fingerboard is ebony, and, as we've seen so many times in the past when confronted with an instrument from Lowden, the workmanship is second to none.

The overall matt finish gives the guitar a sort of 'worn in' feel under the fingers and we found ourselves settling in with it from the offset. The body might be wee but the neck is fully grown with a satisfying full C profile, and its 45mm nut width acts as an open invitation for some deft fingerstyle activity. It's true to say that a diminutive body size matched with a fully realised neck means a little neck heaviness, but this is inevitable and almost completely unnoticeable after a very short period of playing. Standing up on a strap you wouldn't even think about it.

How does it sound? Well, the trebles are loud and proud, with a level of volume and sustain that completely contradicts the size of the body. Basses are understandably not quite as full and rich – you can't argue with science, after all – but what's there is packed with a surprising amount of tone. And, once again, single notes and chords ring on for days. Playing the WL-25 is a great experience and we found ourselves opting for quasi Renaissance fingerstyle before we even noticed. Think of a very well behaved parlour guitar and you're in the right aural space.

Moving over to the WL's companion and the S-23 shares many of the WL's construction details, save that its back and sides are walnut, which – legend has it – has a tonal fingerprint that sits between the dark complexity of rosewood and the



6



7. Bindings on the S-23 are made from sycamore

8. Walnut is the choice of timber for the S-23's back and sides, offering a tone that sits between the complexity of rosewood and the treble zing of maple

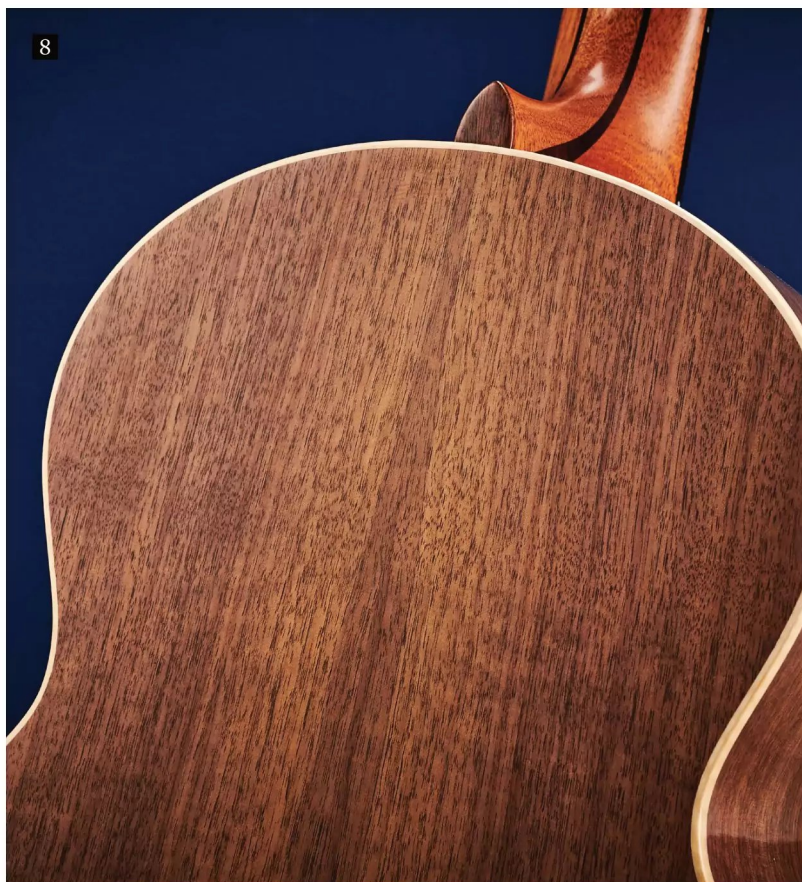
bright zing of maple. Instruments featuring walnut have inspired us in the past in these pages and so it came as no surprise to find that the S-23 sings with a beautifully bright, airy voice. Sustain is practically infinite, too, with bass notes ringing on underneath our melodic noodlings, and drop tuning the bass string to D took us to a modal wonderland.

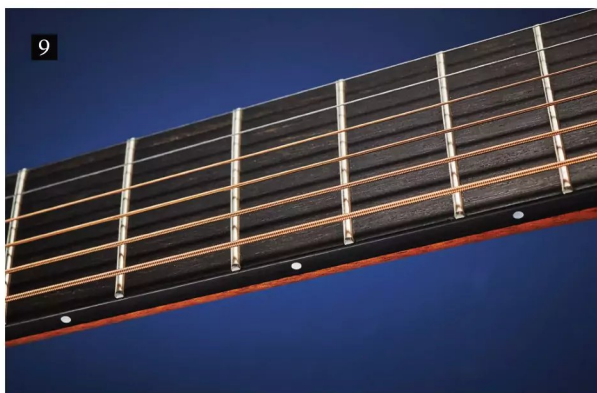
Maybe it's the combination of walnut with the red cedar working their magic together, or that extra few mill on the width of the soundbox, but this guitar has really

The S-23 sings with a beautifully bright, airy voice.... this guitar has really hit the sweet spot in our vicinity

hit the sweet spot in our vicinity. So much so, we didn't want to put it down.

There are no pickups installed on either of our review models, but Lowden will happily fit one when you order your instrument. We can only imagine what both these littl'uns would sound like through a good acoustic amp or a PA. As we've been finding recently, body size is definitely not a determining factor once you enter the domain of amplification.





Verdict

You want us to name a champion, don't you? Well, this sort of thing is very subjective and if we can allow ourselves the luxury of favouring one instrument over the other for just a moment then the S-23 would take the laurels. But remember that it's only because it holds the tonal key that unlocks our own specific desires in terms of what we want from an acoustic. Others may prefer the more parlour-like tonal range of the WL. It's horses for courses, and the advantage of being able to order exactly what you want from Lowden's stable of body sizes and wood combos really hits the mark.

Now that body size isn't necessarily proportionate to volume and tonal output, the world really is your oyster in terms of what your particular needs are. If you feel that a dreadnought has all the road handling capabilities of a monster truck and need something more manageable then there's never been a better time to state your case with a custom order – and the team at Lowden should be one of the first places to direct your gaze. **G**

9. Frets are seated in ebony fretboards on both guitars

10. The split bone saddle and top-loading rosewood bridge are well known characteristics of Lowden's acoustic range



LOWDEN WL-25 12-FRET

PRICE: £3,475 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Northern Ireland
TYPE: Small body 'Wee Lowden'
TOP: Red cedar
BACK/SIDES: East Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 100mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 335mm
NECK: Mahogany with rosewood splices
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
TUNERS: Gotoh 381
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 18
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood w/ bone saddle/56mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.6/3.5
OPTIONS: Various pickups/minor build variations are available when ordering. See website for details
RANGE OPTIONS: The 12-fret WL body size comes in a variety of body wood combos across the Lowden range from the WL-22 red cedar/mahogany (£3,365) and red cedar/walnut (£3,475) up to the WL-35 Adirondack/Cocobolo (£5,975)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Matte Natural

8/10

PROS Small-bodied, tonally satisfying instrument with bags of charm and sophistication

CONS After more boom in your bass? Look further up the range



LOWDEN S-23 12-FRET

PRICE: £3,475 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Northern Ireland
TYPE: S-type acoustic
TOP: Red cedar
BACK/SIDES: Walnut with sycamore bindings
MAX RIM DEPTH: 105mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 374mm
NECK: Mahogany with rosewood splices
SCALE LENGTH: 630mm (24.8")
TUNERS: Gotoh 381
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 18
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood w/ bone saddles/55.6mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.7/3.74
OPTIONS: Various pickups/minor build variations are available when ordering. See website for details
RANGE OPTIONS: The 12-fret S body size comes in a variety of body wood combos across the Lowden S range from the S-22 red cedar/mahogany (£3,365) and S-25 red cedar/Indian rosewood (£3,475) up to the S-35 Adirondack/Cocobolo (£5,975)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Matt Natural



9/10

PROS Petite good looks combined with an excellent airy voice and tone in spades

CONS We've really nothing much to say here...

Small Wonders

A round-up of acoustic 12-fretters to suit every budget



CORT AP550-M £129

With an all-mahogany body and neck, this parlour-sized acoustic features a laurel or merbau fretboard, X-bracing and an open pore finish. Fancy touches include the slotted headstock, vintage-classic machineheads and a "surprisingly loud volume for a guitar of its compact size". With a cool vibe hailing from guitar's golden age, you have to admit, it's a bit of a looker, too! www.cortguitars.com



FENDER PM-2 £619

When we reviewed Fender's PM-2 all-mahogany parlour acoustic back in issue 422 we found "a bigger and bolder voice than you might expect from a parlour-style guitar". As part of Fender's celebrated Paramount Series, it's inspired by the company's '60s acoustics, with a narrower headstock and distinctive chequerboard purfling. www.fender.com



FAITH FECM-BNC £925

Faith acoustics have always received encouraging reviews in these pages and its FECM-BNC – Eclipse Mercury Electro Scoop enters the short-scale parlour-style race with style. A solid Engelmann spruce top is partnered with solid mahogany back and sides, a mahogany neck, and a Fishman INK3 pickup. You gotta have Faith. www.faithguitars.com



AUDEN ARTIST ROSEWOOD EMILY ROSE £1,499

Auden says of its parlour model: "The slightly deeper body allows the guitar to resonate with a volume and presence not usually heard in guitars of this size." With a AAA grade cedar top, rosewood back and sides and an ebony fingerboard, coupled with the revolutionary Brad Clark Supernatural pickup system, you're good to go. www.audenguitars.com



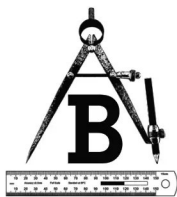
TAYLOR 322CE 12-FRET £2,300

According to Taylor, you can expect "a strong voice with a pleasing midrange focus and a splash of top-end shimmer" from its V-Class-braced smaller body acoustic. At only 381mm (15 inches) wide, this Grand Concert cutaway acoustic has a mahogany top with Tasmanian blackwood for the back and sides, and comes fitted with an ES2 pickup. www.taylorguitars.com



MARTIN 00-17 AUTHENTIC 1931 APPROX. \$4,799

If your tastes and purse extend to the exotic then Martin is bound to satisfy your every 12-fret whim. This all-mahogany model comes with a VTS (Vintage Tone System) top, plus a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard in a smaller-body 000 instrument that pays tribute to the company's celebrated pre-war designs with bags of mojo to spare. www.martinguitar.com



« BLUEPRINT »

THE NEXT STAGE

Ciaran McNally learned his craft at Lowden and helped take Atkin to greater heights. Now building guitars under his own name, he explains how he used lockdown to design a touring acoustic for Irish virtuoso Shane Hennessy

Words Jamie Dickson

There are many fine acoustic luthiers out there – but you’d be hard-pressed to find many who have the breadth of contrasting experience that Armagh-based guitar maker Ciaran McNally possesses. A protégé of George Lowden and then a key member of the Atkin Guitars team, Ciaran has worked on, by his estimate, several thousand guitars over the years, most of which were finely crafted, high-end instruments. But it all started out much more simply, he recalls: “I started making kits when I was 15/16 years old, and that was just on the kitchen table at home...”

“The story goes that I wrecked the kitchen table so much that my mum had to refinish it,” he continues. “She was better at finishing than I was back then [laughs]. So they were just partcasters that you put together, but that naturally progressed to where I thought, ‘Well, I’m not sure I really want to buy the parts any more, I really want to make them.’”

“So I went to a college in Belfast that did an evening course in instrument-making run by an ex-Avalon luthier. People did make various instruments there, though the vast majority of them were acoustic steel-strings. But I went with the intention of making a Les Paul copy. The tutor, Sam, told me, ‘Most people



Luthier Ciaran McNally in his Armagh workshop. His designs combine the best of both American and Irish guitar-making traditions and are built beautifully

make acoustics and, if you want, you could do an acoustic and you’d probably find a lot of the skills are transferable. You could probably even make an electric at the same time or in your own time.”

“So I started on an acoustic. I was quite into Eric Clapton at the time, so I did a copy of a triple-0 Martin. And I’ve never made an electric guitar since! I really just got totally hooked.”

Having been bitten by the bug, Ciaran’s first big break was getting hired by revered luthier George Lowden, a connection that came about in such a fortuitous way it almost seemed like an act of fate.

“I went travelling in the East Coast of the US with one of my friends and on a flight back from New York George Lowden was on the same plane. I hadn’t met him before and he didn’t know me, and I was so jetlagged that I could barely keep my eyes open. But I said to myself, ‘Well, if he sits near me, I’ll have to say hello,’ you know?”

“The flight was empty so there were loads of unused seats, but he still ended up being in the same row as me – which was odd. So I said hello and made the connection and then a few months later, I heard there were openings at Lowden. So I emailed them on a Wednesday, he emailed me back on the Thursday, I went to visit them on Friday and I started working for them on the Monday.”

Ciaran says his prior experience in making guitars meant he was soon employed on a variety of tasks, from binding to machining, working wherever he was needed. But he admits that, three years later, the intense yet painstaking workload left him feeling a little jaded.

“I needed to get out because I’d started to lose the love of it a little bit,” he admits.



»
"My beliefs about how
to create a good guitar are
totally grounded in reality
with proven methods
of working"
»

Shane Hennessy's
signature Celtic harp
motif adorns the beautiful
walnut soundhole cover



Ciaran then left and joined a high-end coffee-making firm – another passion of his – where his pragmatism and eye for detail saw him become production manager as the company expanded. He kept on making his own guitars, however, as he had done even during his time at Lowden. Ciaran exhibited this private work at 2016's Holy Grail Guitar Show, where he met Alister Atkin.

The two clicked and, catching up via email afterwards, Ciaran was able to make suggestions as to how Atkin could improve workflow and scale up his expanding manufacturing operation. To his surprise, he promptly received an offer to come over and work for Atkin. He spent a fruitful couple of years there as Atkin's success grew, but at the end of 2019 Ciaran decided it was finally time to start his own guitar-making firm in Armagh.

Celtic Crossover

Given his time with two exceptional makers, one building acoustics in the Celtic tradition and the other in the American tradition, it's unsurprising that a hallmark of Ciaran's own designs is a graceful blend of those two worlds.

"A Celtic guitar is very much a certain thing that works for certain styles very, very well," Ciaran says. "And an American guitar is almost the polar opposite. But I've always liked really traditional American guitars. The first guitar I made was that copy of a triple-O and I've always just liked that vibe. So injecting a bit of that into the Irish-style guitar was a way to create something that actually is a bit unique as well. Being somewhere in between always seemed really beneficial because, personally, I like a really versatile guitar."

The third element in his designs is a strong desire not to work in a vacuum and always focus his designs on the music-making needs of working guitarists. Irish acoustic virtuoso Shane Hennessy caught his ear and Ciaran soon realised that designing a guitar for a player who toured relentlessly, in different climates and stage conditions, could be a fascinating challenge.

"Shane is a kind of Tommy Emmanuel-style virtuoso player – he's an incredible

»

"A Celtic guitar works for certain styles very well. And an American guitar is almost the polar opposite"

»



1. Bracing was optimised for strength, stability and amplified tone rather than out-and-out unplugged performance



2. An elegantly pointed cutaway permits Shane all the access he needs to the upper frets



3. Here, the signature model's neck is being fitted in Ciaran's Armagh workshop. This is very much a craft-led process, backed by years of experience

guitarist," Ciaran says. "He was using a Maton instrument, as a lot of players working in that style do, mostly because of the pickup system. But a few years ago, I approached him and asked him if he wanted to do something.

"He was hesitant at first because he's very much about [getting a great] live sound and Maton does that so well. His point was that [stage-focused guitars] weren't something that luthiers covered very well. I thought this was brilliant because it was actually something I really wanted to get into. So I said, 'Well, let's work on it. Let's actually make an Irish-made guitar that is designed for the stage.'"

At this point, Shane himself joins the conversation to pick up the rest of the story: "Ciaran was over in Margate in England at the time and I said, 'Look, if it's possible at some point next year and you have some guitars ready, you might let me know when a good time would be to come over and try them. The more we spoke online, the more our opinions of what a guitar should – and shouldn't – be lined up.

"Then in March 2019, I had a couple of concerts in Germany... and on the way

back, I stopped off at Stanstead [airport] and Ciaran picked me up and brought me to his house. He had four guitars ready. I think they were going off to different parts of the world. But it was the first time I had a chance to sit down and spend a lot of time with his guitars. And I was just blown away by how good they were."

Shane continues: "The first thing I think most people would think of if you mentioned guitars from Northern Ireland is going to be a Lowden and that's what I was expecting when I picked them up. But, in fact, they were totally, completely the opposite. Ciaran told me that he was trying to get what he thought of as an American or a Western sound in the guitar, but combine it with that sort of lovely, lush European or Lowden style of guitar. And from the second I played the first one he gave me, I thought, 'Yeah, he's nailed this idea completely.'"

"So we talked about what I would look for in a guitar and Ciaran brought up the idea of having one model for the stage and then a studio model as well – essentially an unplugged model – because we both agreed that a stage guitar is a completely



4. Acoustic amplification expert Udo Roesner contributed the groundbreaking prototype pickup

5. Walnut back and sides were chosen for the guitar for light weight and CITES-safe travel

6. Santos rosewood was selected for the fingerboard and bridge, again to avoid any CITES-related travel complications

7. Integral to the guitar's stage performance are these walnut soundhole covers



different beast to a nice unplugged acoustic guitar. I mean, that's the reason I've been using Maton for so long – the pickup system is phenomenal. It seems to be able to handle anything.”

Shane had been touring relentlessly for two and a half years and needed something that sounded great plugged in and that was stable and strong enough to cope with continual trips through airports. Building a robust guitar was easy enough for someone of Ciaran's experience – but Shane reckoned the crucial matter of getting its amplified sound just right would prove harder. Fortunately, he knew just the man to help.

He tells us: “I said to Ciaran, ‘You know, I reckon it'll be easy to build a guitar that is a stage performer. What's going to be hard is getting the pickup right.’ At the same time, kind of serendipitously, I had been back in touch with a man named Udo Roesner in Germany who had started AER Amps a few years before. I'd played at his booth at the Frankfurt Musikmesse so I got back in touch and he was telling me he had a new amplifier and he'd just given the first one to Tommy Emmanuel.

“Udo said, ‘I'd like to send you one as well before I go public with them,’ essentially. So I tried out his amplifier, and it was fantastic. I liked it more than my old AER and I also remembered he'd been doing some pickups before. So I said to him, ‘You know, do you have any plans to do pickups?’ And he said, ‘Oh, yeah, I've got a couple of prototypes that I'm working on.’ So while Ciaran was building the guitars, Udo sent over a prototype of an under-saddle pickup that had a microphone installed in it. And then he also sent over a prototype sidemount pickup to try as well. So I kind of said, ‘Ciaran, the only person I would have faith

“The design was made through Zoom with Udo in Germany and Shane in the South [of Ireland] and me in the North”

in to do as good a job as the Maton pickup, or possibly better, would be Udo.”

Ready For The Road

With a master of plugged-in acoustic tone adding to his expertise, Ciaran was able to forge ahead with his all-new design for a stage-focused signature model for Shane. Ciaran says the work was a refreshing change from the more typical acoustic guitar designs he's made to date.

“It's been really interesting and it's kind of been developed during lockdown as well,” Ciaran reflects. “The design was made through Zoom calls with Udo in Germany and Shane in the South [of Ireland] and me in the North. We'd be sending each other drawings of designs and stuff. One of the things I'm really focused on with my brand is sometimes I feel like the luthier world is quite music-less. It's often about lots of photographs of nicely polished guitars – and I want to connect more with music.

“Shane saying that luthiers don't necessarily approach this problem in the right way was very interesting to me because I like to think of myself very



The finished guitar looks stunning and is poised for professional gigs

much as a pragmatic luthier. I don't over-romanticise what I do. My way of building guitars and my beliefs about how to create a good guitar are just totally grounded in reality with proven methods of working and the knowledge of having worked on probably around four or five thousand guitars in my life."

Describing the fruit of their joint labours, Ciaran explains that the Shane Hennessy stage model has several unusual features that are tailored for its road-ready role: "It's quite a unique guitar from me," he says. "It'll be a totally matt finish and it'll have a Sitka top with walnut back and sides, which makes it very lightweight. It'll be lacquered inside so that it's stable

for travel [in different climate conditions]. Shane always plays with a soundhole cover, made from the same wood as the back – so when you look at the soundhole it kind of looks like the back."

Ease of transport across continents also dictated wood choices that would raise no eyebrows at border control.

"It's got a Santos rosewood bridge, fingerboard and bindings – again, when we were designing it as a guitar for touring we thought we'd cover ourselves CITES-wise. It's also a lighter weight wood as well – the idea was that it was going to be around Shane's neck for two hours a night so let's keep it as light as possible."

The result is an elegant instrument that's unquestionably a thoroughbred acoustic – but one that is purpose-built to bring music to auditoriums across the globe. As the world looks forward to a hopefully brighter 2021 and a return to being able to gig again, it's an instrument that will hopefully soon be completely in its element. Look out for a full review in *Guitarist* next month. **G**

mcnallyguitars.com



NO NONSENSE

Forget everything you think you know about tonewoods, Ciaran McNally advises...



"I do not believe people should buy [based only on] wood choice," Ciaran McNally explains, reflecting on his pragmatic approach to guitar design. "I think they should decide the guitar maker they want to work with or the guitar brand they want to work with, because that is by far and away a bigger deciding factor. What two guitar makers do with one wood combination will be vastly different compared with what one guitar maker would do with two wood combinations. So I think you've got to find the guitar first and then the wood is the secondary last 10 per cent of the choice."

"That said, I unfortunately do love all the classic combinations," Ciaran laughs. "Sitka, rosewood and mahogany... I love Adirondack as well – but I love Adirondack with a heavy back and sides, like a more dense rosewood, like Honduras rosewood or cocobolo. Because you get this dynamic thing that goes on with Adirondack: it's so stiff you can hit it lightly and get a good response or you can absolutely dig in and it just shouts back at you and doesn't break up or anything. And when you add that to a dense back and sides it gives the kind of brightness and projection that just forces the sound out of the guitar quite quickly."

"So I don't necessarily believe that a certain species of wood gives a certain tone. To me, it comes more down to density and texture. So, to give an example, if I find a piece of mahogany and a piece of rosewood and they have the same density and texture, to me, I think they'll sound the same. But it just so happens that within the species, you have a typical range of density and texture that creates these generalisations. It's not a romantic ethereal, magical thing – it's just that mahogany tends to be lighter in weight and softer than rosewood. There are exceptions: things like Cuban mahogany can be quite dense and people do say you get a kind of rosewood tone off that. So, again, I take maybe a more pragmatic approach to the woods."

“I don't necessarily believe that a certain species of wood gives a certain tone”

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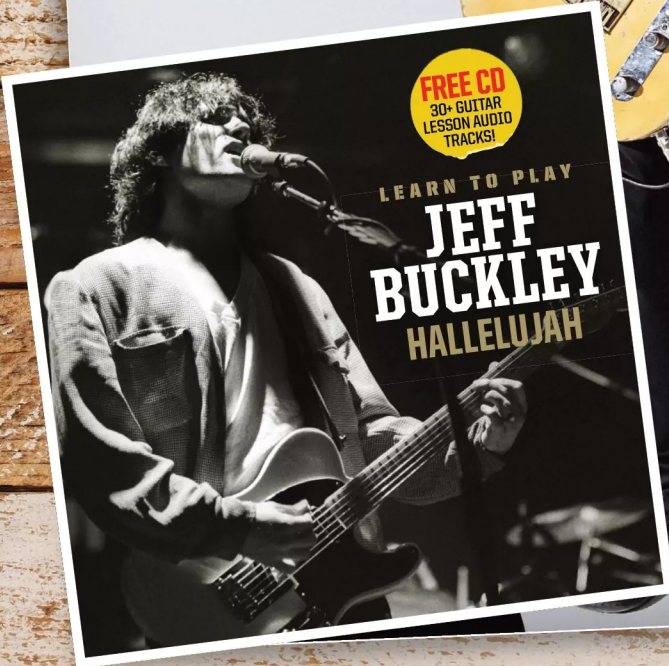
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THE ACOUSTIC BUYER'S GUIDE

So you want to buy an acoustic? Here are our 84 top guitars from the Guitarist review instrument archive. Get your wallets at the ready...

INFORMATION IN THIS GUIDE

How we chose these guitars

Every guitar in this guide has been reviewed in *Guitarist* and has gained a 9/10 rating (or equivalent) or 10/10 rating, achieving either a *Guitarist Choice* or *Guitarist Gold Award*, or has otherwise been highly commended. That means we feel their build quality, sound, playability and value for money are not in question at their relative price points.



Scale length

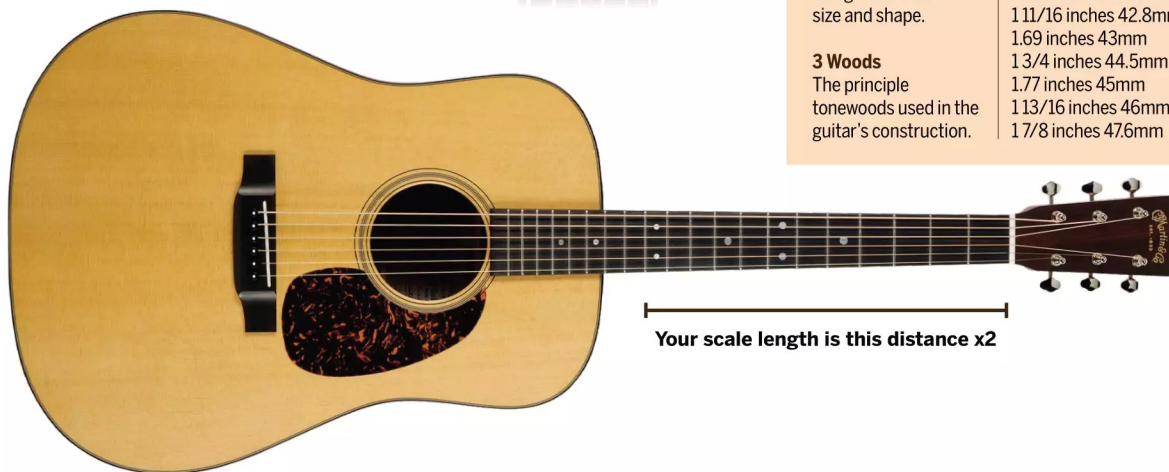
Scale length is important because it has a direct effect on the tension of the strings and therefore how the instrument feels to play: the longer the scale length, the higher the tension of the strings for a given pitch. There can be a tonal effect, too.

Common 'longer' scale lengths are around 645 to 650mm (25.4 to 25.6 inches): most dreadnoughts and jumbos, for example.

Common 'shorter' scale lengths tend to be 628 to 632mm (24.75 to 24.9 inches): many Gibsons and 000 Martins. Parlours and travel guitars can be shorter still: play some and compare their feel and sound differences.



Nut width



Your scale length is this distance x2

Yamaha NCX700C 1 £645



- 2** Reviewed: Issue 383
- Type:** Cutaway nylon-string electro-acoustic
- 3** **Top:** Solid cedar
- Back/sides:** Laminated nato
- 4** **Nut/scale:** 2/650

Guitarist says:
This guitar will appeal to any classically trained guitar players who want to go electric

1 A note on prices

The prices we've quoted are the manufacturers' suggested retail prices, correct at the time of going to press. Some official SRPs will have gone up slightly, while many advertised/web prices from retailers will be lower.

2 Type

The guitar's basic size and shape.

3 Woods

The principle tonewoods used in the guitar's construction.

4 Nut widths

We've quoted nut width as it's a significant factor in playability; below are some common widths. You'll be amazed how different a millimetre or two across the nut can feel!

Common nut widths

1 5/8 inches 41.2mm
1.65 inches 42mm
1 11/16 inches 42.8mm
1.69 inches 43mm
1 3/4 inches 44.5mm
1.77 inches 45mm
1 13/16 inches 46mm
1 7/8 inches 47.6mm

A WORD ON SPRUCE Most acoustic guitar tops are made of spruce. But what kind?



SITKA SPRUCE

Picea sitchensis
Found in North America and Canada,

this is the most common wood for tops. It offers a good mix of strength, clarity and dynamic range over a variety of styles and looks. Find it on everything from budget boxes to high-end Martins.



GERMAN SPRUCE

Picea abies
Not to be confused with Engelmann

(right), it's also often called European spruce (as are other European spruces!), and is popular for classical guitars, violins and, increasingly, flat-top steel-strings. Similar to Adirondack, many believe,



ENGELMANN SPRUCE

Picea engelmannii
Native to western

America and Canada, this is usually an upgrade from Sitka, albeit 'different' rather than 'better'. It's lighter and less stiff; it can give a subtly richer sound than Sitka, depending on guitar.



ADIRONDACK SPRUCE

Picea rubens
The King Of Top

Woods (also called 'red' spruce) hails from eastern North America and Canada. It can be driven hard, but remains dynamic and toneful right across the spectrum. It's often the most expensive option to boot.

Vintage Victor Paul Brett 12-string £419



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Small body 12-fret electro-acoustic 12-string
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Laminated sapele
Nut/scale: 47.8/546

Guitarist says:
A 'honey I shrunk the kids' 12-string electro par excellence

Alvarez Artist Series ABT60E Baritone £479



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Jumbo-size baritone electro
Top: Solid A+ Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Laminate mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.45/704

Guitarist says:
A powerful performer with plenty of usable low-end depth

Vintage Gemini Paul Brett Baritone £499



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Small body baritone/standard electro
Top: Solid spruce
Back/sides: Laminated rosewood
Nut/scale: 46.5/628

Guitarist says:
An original voice and a more flexible approach to the baritone guitar

Martin LX1E Little Martin £499



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2016
Type: 'Modified 0-14 Fret' electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Mahogany high pressure-laminate
Nut/scale: 42.86/584.2

Guitarist says:
Business class by design – simple, but everything you need

Eastman E20M £529



Reviewed: Issue 452
Type: OM-size acoustic
Top: Cedar
Back/sides: Sapele
Nut/scale: 45.5/632.5

Guitarist says:
An OM model with everything you need onboard – simple

Seagull Entourage Folk Burnt Umber Q.1Tt £579



Reviewed: GPA Spring 2016
Type: Folk electro-acoustic
Top: Solid cedar
Back/sides: Laminate wild cherry
Nut/scale: 43.62/630

Guitarist says:
An all-round strummer, picker... or a fine bottleneck blues machine

Takamine GN75CE-TBK £585



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2017
Type: NEX (scaled-down jumbo) electro-acoustic
Top: Solid spruce
Back/sides: Quilted laminated maple
Nut/scale: 2.5/644

Guitarist says:
Great playability; a lively performance both unplugged and amplified

Art & Lutherie Americana CWQ.1T £599



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Dreadnought cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Solid spruce
Back/sides: Wild cherry three-layer laminate
Nut/scale: 43.68/631

Guitarist says:
A distinct take on a dread with a strong plugged-in sound

Fender Paramount PM-3 Standard £609



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2015
Type: 'Triple O'-size electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.4mm/643mm

Guitarist says:
With excellent build quality, this is a great all-rounder suitable for almost any style

TRAVEL LIGHT Three small but serious guitars for players on the move



TAYLOR GS MINI from around £550

This serious small-bodied/travel guitar has a big voice and a tidy build with solid top/laminated back and sides construction, 597mm (23.5-inch) scale length, and 42.8mm (1.685-inch) nut width. It comes with a gigbag and optional pickup.



YAMAHA SLG200N SILENT GUITAR from £588

This design breaks down into an easy-carry rifle-shaped gigbag and is a perfect practice/travel guitar with a set of headphones. The nylon-string versions have two nut widths (50mm and 52mm) and a 650mm (25.6-inch) scale length.



FURCH LJ-10 from £1,000

This all-solid wood (cedar/mahogany) foldable guitar takes the travel concept up a level. It stays in tune after reassembly and comes with a backpack-sized carry bag. Scale length is 614mm (24.2 inches) and nut width is 44.45mm (1.75 inches).

Faith Venus Naked Mahogany £619



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2016
Type: Cutaway electro
Top: Solid Indonesian mahogany
Back/sides: Solid Indonesian mahogany
Nut/scale: 42.3/645

Guitarist says:
Crisply built, all-solid construction with a 'blue collar' vibe and price

Eastman AC 122-2CE £619



Reviewed: Issue 452
Type: Grand Auditorium cutaway electro
Top: Cedar
Back/sides: Sapele
Nut/scale: 4.5/645

Guitarist says:
Sweet, soulful grand auditorium, with loads of power and finesse

Yamaha CSF3M £670



Reviewed: Issue 435
Type: CSF compact folk electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 43/600

Guitarist says:
Rich, surprisingly full-bodied sound from compact proportions

Martin D-X2E £695



Reviewed: Issue 458
Type: Dreadnought electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Koa pattern High Pressure Laminate (HPL)
Nut/scale: 44.4/645

Guitarist says:
Open-toned, with great string separation and clarity

Yamaha FSX830C £696



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Folk-sized cutaway electro
Top: Solid spruce
Back/sides: Laminated rosewood
Nut/scale: 43.48/635

Guitarist says:
Potentially superb guitar: narrow bridge spacing and nut suit smaller hands

Yamaha LJ6 ARE £696



Reviewed: Issue 381
Type: Jumbo
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Laminated rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.5/650

Guitarist says:
Unbelievable value for money for such a superbly capable quality electro in sunburst!



TO CUT OR NOT TO CUT?

The difference between cutaway and non-cutaway acoustic guitars

For fans of the classics of yesteryear, acoustic guitars should simply not have cutaways. Conversely, it's almost odd when you see a 'modern' acoustic, like a Taylor, without one. Sonically, the jury's out on whether non-cut or cut is better, and when you consider the top itself is doing very little at the point of the cutaway you begin to understand why. So, aside from aesthetics and possibly sound, the obvious reason to go with a cutaway is simply down to how you play. If you're spending your time below the 10th fret you don't need it. However, jazzier or more virtuoso and electric-like styles can easily take you up the dusty end and a 14-fret-to-the-body non-cutaway, let alone a 12-fret, might simply be too uncomfortable. Take Martin's brand-new SC-13E cutaway, for example. This more electric guitar-like aim suits the model's modern design and with it comes a completely new and unique heel-less patent-pending Sure Align neck system.



ALL IN ONE A foot-friendly solution for singing players

Going straight through the PA live is all very well, but taking back some control of your sound and expanding your horizons is better. Boss may well have solved problems you didn't even know you had with its VE-8 Acoustic Singer (£334) unit by putting a lot of features at your feet.

For guitar, it offers reverb and chorus effects, plus a useful feature Boss calls Acoustic Resonance – an effect that you dial in for more of a natural 'acoustic' sound for your piezo. There's also a looper with 80 seconds of recording time for you to try out ideas

when songwriting or add extra layers live (you can loop guitar and vocals independently).

There's a whole array of vocal features, too: an Enhance effect improves clarity with compression and EQ and you can even use pitch correction. If you're feeling particularly adventurous there's robot and radio-voice, AutoTune-style and doubling effects with five different harmony types on offer. With all this at your disposal, Boss has upheld its reputation for intuitive and accessible controls, encouraging players to get hands-on with the VE-8.

Alvarez Masterworks MF60CEOM £699



Reviewed: Issue 453
Type: Folk/OM-size electro-acoustic
Top: Solid AA Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid African mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.45/630

Guitarist says:
All-solid woods, superb pickup system and a neck sent from the heavens

Taylor Academy Series 10E £719



Reviewed: GPA Spring 2017
Type: Dreadnought electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Layered sapele
Nut/scale: 42.86/632

Guitarist says:
Great playability; very well balanced and the armrest enhances comfort

Taylor Academy Series 12E £719



Reviewed: GPA Spring 2017
Type: Grand concert electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Layered sapele
Nut/scale: 42.9/632

Guitarist says:
Inspiring high mids and trebles with a responsive playing experience; great plugged-in sound

Cort Gold-OC6 £749



Reviewed: Issue 463
Type: OM cutaway
Top: Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Okoume
Nut/scale: 43/643

Guitarist says:
Good level of kerf appeal, along with alternative body woods

PRS SE T50E £749



Reviewed: Issue 442
Type: Tonare Grand electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Figured maple laminate
Nut/scale: 43/643

Guitarist says:
We're sold on the playability – this guitar feels alive in our hands

Gretsch G9241 Alligator £759



Reviewed: GPA Autumn 2016
Type: Hollow body resonator w/ pickup
Top/back/sides: Laminated mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.5/635

Guitarist says:
You'll be hard pressed to find a better-looking, as authentic-sounding, and more playable resonator at this price

PICKUPS & SOURCES Let's transduce, baby

When considering which electro-acoustic to go with, you need to think about how it's generating your plugged-in sound...



UNDER-SADDLE PIEZO PICKUP

This is a thin strip of transducing material that's sandwiched between the bottom of your string saddle and the wood of the bridge, in the saddle slot.

Where can I hear one?

Pretty much any mid-price electro-acoustic guitar.

SOUNDBOARD TRANSDUCERS

These are small transducers, usually attached to the underside of the top or bridge. They're often mixed with another source, piezo or soundhole.

Where can I hear one?

K&K Pure Mini and Yamaha ART-equipped guitars.

SOUNDHOLE PICKUPS

These sit across your soundhole and, in many people's opinion, sound more 'natural' than under-saddle piezos or soundboard transducers.

Where can I hear one?

Any guitar fitted with one – they're very easy to spot!

BAG IT UP Three gigbags to help keep your pride and joy safe



FENDER FA-405 £21
Give your dread a fighting chance with this budget gigbag. The rugged 400-denier polyester outer layer takes moderate abuse on the chin, while the 5mm inner padding keeps your guitar scratch-free.



TAYLOR WARE 61030 £80
It's not just Taylor owners who can enjoy its gigbags. This distinctive tan case is made from water resistant 600-denier nylon and it offers reassuring protection inside with high-density closed-cell foam and an inner sponge absorber.



MONO M80-AD £168
This brand's reputation for quality is well earned, and this surprisingly light hybrid shell case is a significant but worthy investment with patented Headlock to stabilise the headstock in the case during transit.

Taylor Academy 12E-N £779



Reviewed: Issue 426
Type: Grand Concert nylon-string
Top: Solid Lutz spruce
Back/sides: Layered sapele
Nut/scale: 47.8/648

Guitarist says:
Typically precise Taylor design and build; crisp classical-style voicing, excellent plugged in

Yamaha SLG200S £806



Reviewed: Issue 396
Type: Full-size, 'solidbody', steel-string
Body: Mahogany centre core with rosewood/maple laminate frame
Nut/scale: 43/634

Guitarist says:
The ultimate practice tool? The Silent Guitar is really quite amazing!

Martin Road Series 000-10E £839



Reviewed: Issue 451
Type: 000-size electro-acoustic
Top: Solid sapele
Back/sides: Solid sapele
Nut/scale: 44.45/632

Guitarist says:
Less than a grand for a well-sorted 000 with enhanced playability and solid woods

Gibson G-45 Studio £869



Reviewed: Issue 453
Type: Round shoulder dreadnought
Top: Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Walnut
Nut/scale: 43.82/629

Guitarist says:
A solidly built dread with an almost irresistible price tag

PRS SE A60E £879



Reviewed: Issue 442
Type: Angelus Cutaway electro
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Zircote laminate
Nut/scale: 43/643

Guitarist says:
Playability, tone, build quality, pickup performance – this thing just keeps on ticking boxes

Vintage VE2000DLX Gordon Giltrap £899



Reviewed: Issue 372
Type: Folk/OM-sized electro-acoustic
Top: Solid cedar
Back/sides: Rosewood, solid back, laminate sides
Nut/scale: 46.5/642

Guitarist says:
A good guitar just got even better with rosewood and Fishman additions

Faith Venus Blood Moon £929



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2016
Type: Cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Indonesian Trembesi
Back/sides: Solid Indonesian Trembesi
Nut/scale: 43.5/645

Guitarist says:
Classy build from unusual hardwood with a powerhouse 'tone engine'

Tanglewood Sundance Performance Pro Series X70TE £949



Reviewed: GPA Spring 2017
Type: Orchestra / 000-style electro-acoustic
Top: Solid AAA Torrefied spruce
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 43.3/650

Guitarist says:
Excellent build, trendy old-school vibe

Faith Neptune Blue Moon £979



Reviewed: Issue 456
Type: Baby jumbo cutaway electro
Top: Figured Java mango
Back/sides: Figured Java mango
Nut/scale: 43/650

Guitarist says:
An interesting voyage into the aural charms of a little known tonewood

ON YOUR MARKS Three great acoustics for beginners



PRS SE P20E £499 (acoustic version £399)

This new Chinese-made parlour-size completely wrong-footed PRS Europe who simply can't keep up with demand. PRS's 'X'/Classical bracing and superb attention to detail are more than evident here.



YAMAHA FG-TA TRANSACOUSTIC GUITAR £633

A classic of many a new guitarist over the years, the 'red-label' FG (Folk Guitar) is a thing of legend. While FGs start at £199, this one – with its other worldly built-in reverb/chorus – is state of the art.



TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM from £1,619

This new entry point into Taylor USA is a fine choice from a premium maker. All solid woods, thin satin finish and choice of top wood/colour, all based on the non-cut Grand Pacific outline.

ACOUSTIC STRING BASICS

Helping you choose your wires...

GAUGE & CORE

Acoustic strings are usually thicker than electric strings, which means stiffer string tension. Broadly speaking, 'standard' acoustic sets are 0.011 to 0.052 (extra light) 0.012 to 0.054 (light) and 0.013 to 0.056 (medium). There are many other variants and hybrid gauge mixes to suit different tastes. The wound strings' steel core thickness has an effect, too: thicker core/thinner wrap gives you more volume and string tension; a thinner core/thicker wrap the opposite.

MATERIALS

There are two main types for acoustic wound strings: Phosphor bronze (typically 92 per cent copper, eight per cent tin) is the modern 'standard'; a good all-round choice that sounds less bright than bronze when new, and maintains a more consistent tone over the strings' lifespan than... Bronze (also called 'brass', 80 per cent copper, 20 per cent tin). Brighter and more 'rich' than phosphor bronze when new, although loses brightness and articulation more quickly. It's also worth looking out for different alloys that have a tonal effect, for example the new aluminium bronze from Ernie Ball and Retro 'Monel' (nickel) from Martin.

COATED/UNCOATED

Most modern string brands offer a range of 'coated' strings these days, where either the whole string, or just the wrap wire, is treated to a coating of material that protects the metals and therefore extends string life: three or four times in our experience. The 'downside' (that may be an advantage, depending on your opinion) is that they generally feel and sound slightly smoother to a lesser or greater degree. They're more expensive, too.

Yamaha A3R ARE £1,057



Reviewed: Issue 423
Type: Western-shape electro acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 43/650

Guitarist says:
Characterful mids; one of the best pickup systems around is now more intuitive for players

Takamine P3NY £1,095



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2015
Type: Parlour-size electro
Top: Solid cedar
Back/sides: Solid sapele back; laminate sapele sides
Nut/scale: 42.9/629

Guitarist says:
A smart build combined with a very stripped-down look

Furch MC Blue GC-CM £1,100



Reviewed: Issue 451
Type: Grand Auditorium cutaway electro
Top: AA-grade western red cedar
Back/sides: AA-grade African mahogany
Nut/scale: 45/650

Guitarist says:
Nice all-rounder with few frills – but an excellent playing experience

Yamaha LL16D ARE £1,159



Reviewed: Issue 381
Type: Dreadnought electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.5/650

Guitarist says:
Pushed-up version of the LL16 offering stunning spec for very sensible money

Martin Road Series D-12E £1,179



Reviewed: Issue 451
Type: Dreadnought electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid sapele
Nut/scale: 44.45/645

Guitarist says:
It'll accommodate any style from singer-songwriter and modern country to flatpicking bluegrass

Yamaha LS-TA Transacoustic £1,182



Reviewed: GPA Autumn 2016
Type: Jumbo acoustic with built-in effects
Top: ARE-treated Engelmann spruce
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 44/650

Guitarist says:
An enhanced playing experience, without the fuss of outboard effects

THREE FOR PRE Preamp pedals to go live with



LR BAGGS ALIGN SERIES SESSION £192
A studio-quality live sound is a footswitch away with the Session pedal, with frequency-specific compression EQ and tone-shaping saturation control to serve up warmth and harmonics.



ORANGE ACOUSTIC PRE £649
This stereo preamp/active DI gives two flexible tone-packed channels. Choose between Channel A's warm valve circuitry and the softer analogue solid state of Channel B; or blend together.



PALMER ACOUSTIC POCKET AMP £121
This scores high for flexibility, offering input options for both piezo and mag pickups, 3-band EQ tuned for acoustic instruments and a mode selector that flips your tone from vintage to modern.

Takamine TSP138C TBS £1,199



Reviewed: Issue 457
Type: Thinline electro
Top: Spruce
Back/sides: Sapele
Nut/scale: 42/630

Guitarist says:
Instant familiarity for electric players and flexibility of amped-up sound

Faith PJE Legacy Mars £1,229



Reviewed: Issue 428
Type: Non-cutaway Drop Shoulder dreadnought electro
Top: Solid kiln-aged Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid African khaya mahogany
Nut/scale: 45/650

Guitarist says:
An all-rounder with a big voice and impressive depth

Faith PJE Legacy Earth £1,259



Reviewed: Issue 428
Type: Cutaway OM/Auditorium electro
Top: Solid kiln-aged Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid African khaya mahogany
Nut/scale: 45/650

Guitarist says:
It looks great, sounds amazing and really sells this torrefied wood thing!

Auden Austin £1,299



Reviewed: Issue 438
Type: Grand Auditorium 12-string electro
Top: AAA Sitka spruce
Back/sides: African mahogany
Nut/scale: 48/655

Guitarist says:
The tone is airy but powerful and the playability is addictive. A fine acoustic

Auden Artist Mahogany Austin Spruce £1,299



Reviewed: Issue 450
Type: 14-fret OM-style acoustic
Top: Spruce
Back/sides: African mahogany
Nut/scale: 43/655

Guitarist says:
Sweet, balanced tone makes it a great all-rounder that's still a bit different

Guild M-20 £1,365



Reviewed: GPA Autumn 2016
Type: Concert-sized acoustic
Top: Solid mahogany
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 45/629

Guitarist says:
Clean, no-nonsense build with engaging, fingerstyle-friendly voice and feel

Martin D-15M £1,389



Reviewed: Issue 328
Type: Dreadnought acoustic
Top: Solid mahogany
Back/sides: Layered sapele
Nut/scale: 43/645

Guitarist says:
Looks brilliant, plays and sounds amazing. The Guitarist Gold Award is the no brainer of the century

Finlayson 000-100RS £1,399



Reviewed: Issue 447
Type: 000-size electro
Top: Pressure-tested solid spruce
Back/sides: Solid Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 43.6/648

Guitarist says:
Jaw-dropping looks, all-solid woods – it excels on every level

Yamaha A5 £1,444



Reviewed: Issue 423
Type: Western-shape electro acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce with ARE
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 43/650

Guitarist says:
A great-looking cutaway dread; unplugged experience is reflected plugged in

NEW AGE Torrefaction: the science of making new wood sound older

Torrefied guitar tops might be something you've read about already, and they're a feature we could be hearing a lot more about in the coming years. Torrefaction is a process used by brands including Gibson, Martin, Takamine and Taylor, among others, and involves heating acoustic guitar tops at high temperatures, then super-drying them (some also bake the bracing) in controlled conditions to accelerate the ageing process.

Torrefaction is the latest method designed to make instruments sound older, more mature... more vintage. The process essentially cooks the wood in a controlled way to remove the oils and resins on 'new' wood that would gradually disappear over years. Young tonewood tends to have more of a harder edge to its sound, but after years it can be enhanced with warmer vintage character (often torrefied tops look darker, too)

and increased resonance. The advantages of this ageing process is what manufacturers are seeking to offer players without them having to put the years of playing time in. We've played both treated and untreated tops and the jury is still out as to whether it's best to have a guitar that has been heat-treated or not. Some luthiers claim that wood ages differently and 'opens up' more naturally left to its own devices.

Martin DCRSG £1,450



Reviewed: Issue 429
Type: Dreadnought cutaway electro
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid mutenye
Nut/scale: 44.45/645

Guitarist says:
An attractively mellower take on Martin warmth; great playability and build quality

Auden Artist Rosewood Emily Rose Cedar £1,499



Reviewed: Issue 450
Type: 12-fret parlour acoustic
Top: AAA-grade cedar
Back/sides: Rosewood
Nut/scale: 44/635

Guitarist says:
Great amplified voice and a surprisingly expansive unplugged tone for a parlour-size guitar

Guild D-20E £1,545



Reviewed: GPA Autumn 2016
Type: Dreadnought-size electro-acoustic
Top: Solid mahogany
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 43.29/651

Guitarist says:
Dark-toned big sound and excellent electro performance; a road-hog!

Taylor 214CE-CF DLX £1,559



Reviewed: Issue 429
Type: Grand Auditorium cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Layered copafera
Nut/scale: 43/647.7

Guitarist says:
An all-rounder with good projection and balance, great playability and build

Martin SC-13E £1,599



Reviewed: Issue 460
Type: 13-fret cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Koa fine veneer
Nut/scale: 44.23/645

Guitarist says:
A guitar you just want to play, and with zero adjustment from your favourite electric

Martin 00-15E Retro £1,649



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2015
Type: 00-size electro-acoustic
Top: Solid mahogany
Back/sides: Select hardwood
Nut/scale: 44.8/632.5

Guitarist says:
Excellent build, sound, old-school aesthetic and price

Takamine EF740FS-TT £1,669



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2017
Type: Medium-bodied cutaway, nylon-string electro-acoustic
Top: Solid thermal treated (torrefied) spruce
Back/sides: Solid sapele
Nut/scale: 47.5/644

Guitarist says:
An intriguing vintage, lower-end voice

Martin 000-17 £1,695



Reviewed: GPA Summer 2016
Type: 000-size 14-fret
Top: Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.45/632.4

Guitarist says:
Great sounds, good looks – all wrapped up in a lap-friendly instrument that won't break the bank

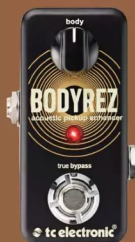
Martin OMC-15ME £1,695



Reviewed: GPA Autumn 2016
Type: OM cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Solid mahogany
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.45/646

Guitarist says:
Easy to play; warm, punchy acoustic tones and great amplified sounds

ELECTRO ENHANCEMENT Three pedals that could give your onstage sound new life



TC ELECTRONIC BODYREZ £78

This mini pedal-sized 'acoustic pickup enhancer' for under-saddle pickups helps to deal with plasticky piezo 'quack' with one control for Body; the more you dial in, the more low-end compression you get so it's a matter of balancing that for your needs.



XVIVE MIKE £69

The Mike takes a different approach to enhancement with nine presets that seek to reproduce the room sound of a number of different acoustic model/mic combinations. So it's a matter of finding the one best suited to your guitar with a bit of careful tweaking.



BOSS AD-2 £114

Boss might call this a preamp but there's no traditional EQ settings in sight: instead you have the Resonance feature found on its VE-8 unit and Acoustic Stage amp with an ambience (reverb) control and notch control for tackling feedback. A great idea for guitars with no onboard preamp controls.

Fender American Acoustasonic Telecaster £1,749



Reviewed: Issue 445
Type: Single-cutaway, solidbody-sized electro
Top: Inset Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Mahogany
Nut/scale: 42.7/648

Guitarist says:
Smart design, build and execution – very credible plugged-in acoustic voices

Fender American Acoustasonic Stratocaster £1,749



Reviewed: Issue 458
Type: Double-cutaway, solidbody-sized electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Mahogany
Nut/scale: 42.8/648

Guitarist says:
Innovative design with sharp, lightweight build and very credible plugged-in acoustic voices

National Reso-Phonic Dave Arcari Signature From £2,310



Reviewed: Issue 455
Type: Resonator
Top: Steel
Back/sides: Steel
Nut/scale: 45.72/635

Guitarist says:
The point of the signature project was to create a versatile and robust guitar that would handle anything Dave could throw at it

Martin D-18 £2,375



Reviewed: Issue 356
Type: Dreadnought acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid mahogany
Nut/scale: 44.5/645

Guitarist says:
Martin has managed to improve and refine what was an already great guitar. This new D-18 is truly fantastic

Eastman DT30 GACE £2,650



Reviewed: Issue 445
Type: Grand Auditorium electro-acoustic
Top: Sitka spruce/ Normex double top
Back/sides: Rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.5/650

Guitarist says:
An innovative instrument from a company destined to become a giant killer

Martin D-28 Reimagined £2,650



Reviewed: Issue 428
Type: Dreadnought acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid East Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.45/645

Guitarist says:
Clarity and balance... this is still a benchmark dreadnought, now enhanced in look and feel

Larivière C-03R TE Custom £2,699



Reviewed: Issue 462
Type: 0000 12-fret cutaway acoustic
Top: Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.45/648

Guitarist says:
A wonderfully realised no-nonsense 12-fretter with a foot in many stylistic camps

Emerald X10 Lvl 3 Koa £3,300 (c. £2,870)



Reviewed: Issue 456
Type: 0-size-style
Top: Woven carbon-fibre; koa veneer
Back/sides: Woven carbon-fibre
Nut/scale: 43/650

Guitarist says:
If there is such a thing as an acoustic guitar without frontiers, the Emerald X10 is it. Exceptional

Atkin The Forty Three £2,899



Reviewed: Issue 460
Type: Round-shoulder dreadnought acoustic
Top: Solid baked Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid African mahogany
Nut/scale: 42/630

Guitarist says:
The Atkin's simplicity makes it so compelling. It seems warm and welcoming



SUSTAINABILITY & BEYOND What's next for woods?

Sustainable woods and eco-friendly practice are rightfully informing our choices, with brands increasingly seeking out sustainable timber sources. Bob Taylor's work with ebony and koa is just one example but Martin, Yamaha, Fender, Gibson and PRS have nodded towards more sustainable wood supplies. Plenty of smaller makers are choosing less threatened and more unusual woods: Surrey-based Turnstone

Guitars is a shining contemporary example, promoting English-grown woods in its 'E' series. Other makers are following similar paths but do your homework: 'alternative' doesn't always mean sustainable. Planet-friendly guitar-making is more than wood choice. Some say buying used is the best choice; others encourage us to support local makers. A complex topic that we'll continue to focus on.

Martin OM-28 Reimagined £2,950



Reviewed: Issue 438
Type: Orchestra model six-string acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid East Indian Rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.45/645

Guitarist says:
Martin has brought the OM bang up to date with intelligently thought-out upgrades

Anderwood Authentic Series c1927 Style 4 £2,950



Reviewed: GPA Spring 2016
Type: Acoustic lap-steel guitar
Top: Solid figured koa
Back/sides: Solid figured koa
Nut/scale: 52.65/629

Guitarist says:
This Anderwood Weissenborn recreation is absolutely gorgeous and hugely aspirational

Taylor Builder's Edition 324ce £3,239



Reviewed: Issue 461
Type: 14-fret Grand Auditorium electro cutaway
Top: Mahogany
Back/sides: Urban ash
Nut/scale: 44.8/648

Guitarist says:
A well-built and tonally satisfying instrument with its environmental credentials in place

Martin Retro Series HD-28E £3,299



Reviewed: Issue 363
Type: Dreadnought electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid East Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 45/645

Guitarist says:
One of the most exciting and rewarding electros Martin has produced

Taylor 562CE-TF 12-string £3,299



Reviewed: Issue 404
Type: Grand Concert 12-string cutaway electro-acoustic
Top: Tropical mahogany
Back/sides: Tropical mahogany
Nut/scale: 47.6/631.8

Guitarist says:
Small, full-bodied and compact, with a shimmering warmth that needs to be heard

Taylor 712CE 12-fret £3,359



Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016
Type: Grand concert 12-fret electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Lutz spruce
Back/sides: Solid Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 44.75/632

Guitarist says:
Updated spec creates a bigger, more powerful voice. A small-body plus!

Guild D-55 £3,360



Reviewed: Issue 378
Type: Dreadnought acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 42.9/648

Guitarist says:
A loud, proud and classy dread offering serious credibility quality and tone

Guild F-512 £3,545



Reviewed: Issue 378
Type: 12-string jumbo acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: Solid rosewood
Nut/scale: 46/650.8

Guitarist says:
The poster-boy 12-string: a dream realised or a serious, pro-grade guitar







Lowden 32SE £3,699



Reviewed: Issue 370
Type: Shallow-body electro-acoustic
Top: Solid Sitka spruce
Back/sides: East Indian rosewood
Nut/scale: 43.5/650

Guitarist says:
Stunning build quality, effortless playability and a voice that's all Lowden's own: a veritable original

Buyer's Guide

 <p>Taylor T5z Custom £4,019</p> <p>Reviewed: Issue 381 Type: Thinline hollowbody hybrid Top: Koa Back/sides: Sapele Nut/scale: 43/632</p> <p>Guitarist says: A visionary design for creative players wanting to merge electric and acoustic sounds</p>	 <p>Martin 000-28 Modern Deluxe £4,295</p> <p>Reviewed: Issue 447 Type: 000-14 fret acoustic Top: Sitka spruce with VTS Back/sides: Indian rosewood Nut/scale: 44.5/632.5</p> <p>Guitarist says: Fabulous good looks and a distinct tonal upgrade</p>	 <p>Lowden FMC £5,635</p> <p>Reviewed: Issue 455 Type: OM/Grand Performance acoustic Top: Alpine spruce Back/sides: Cocobolo Nut/scale: 43.5/650</p> <p>Guitarist says: An excellently built acoustic with a lot of personality and player appeal</p>
 <p>Collings CJ35 £5,725</p> <p>Reviewed: GPA Winter 2013 Type: Dreadnought acoustic Top: Solid Sitka spruce Back/sides: Solid mahogany Nut/scale: 44/632</p> <p>Guitarist says: Jaw-dropping build quality and awe-inspiring modern-vintage tone</p>	 <p>Taylor Builder's Edition V-Class K14CE £5,759</p> <p>Reviewed: Issue 430 Type: 14-fret Grand Auditorium electro Top: Solid torrefied Sitka spruce Back/sides: Solid Hawaiian koa Nut/scale: 44.6/648</p> <p>Guitarist says: Radically enhanced intonation and voice that has to be heard to be believed</p>	 <p>Collings D2H T £6,095</p> <p>Reviewed: GPA Winter 2016 Type: Dreadnought 14-fret Top: Solid Sitka spruce Back/sides: Solid East Indian rosewood Nut/scale: 648/44.53</p> <p>Guitarist says: Faultless vintage informed build, exceptional volume and tonal balance</p>

AMP IT! Seven great acoustic amps



FENDER ACOUSTASONIC 40 £209

Fender markets the 40 as a simple 'grab and go' solution, but the spec sheet belies the competitive price tag. From the onboard reverb to the whizzer cone that works alongside the six-inch speaker for better high-frequency response, this combo is punching above its weight.



LANEY A-DUO £299

Laney's latest value-packed combo is a 60-watter designed to be sat on, and its main controls are arranged at the side with this in mind. As well as a host of input and output features, the four EQ preset switches are useful.



AER COMPACT 60 4 £890

Don't be fooled by the squat appearance: this German-engineered twin-channel slugger has the tools to satisfy any road warrior. There's a useful multi-band EQ on each channel for dedicated tone-shaping, plus delay, chorus and your choice of two reverb types to sugarcoat unplugged sessions. All that – plus a punchy 60-watt output.



MARSHALL AS50D £249

An absolute stalwart of the acoustic amplification world, what the AS50D lacks in sophistication, it more than makes up for in functionality, reliability and sheer value for money. Often used as a PA-in-a-box, you can sing through it, play through it and use it for backing tracks/mp3s, too.



FISHMAN LOUDBOX MINI £289

The world leader in acoustic guitar pickups also makes its own acoustic amps. This no-nonsense 60-watter offers two versatile channels, in-built effects, anti-feedback and all the output options you need. Excellent value for money as a workhorse acoustic amp.



BOSS ACOUSTIC SINGER LIVE £510

The acoustic amp series from Boss packs a lot in for both guitarists and singers. The vocal channel on this 60-watt combo has phantom power to run condenser mics with echo, delay and reverb effects for vocalists or guitar. There's even a vocal harmony mode that creates live harmonies as you play and sing. For guitarists, the Acoustic Resonance Button offers three modes to restore some natural resonance to piezo guitars and a Tweeter Attenuator button that can be applied as a filter to high frequencies to mellow out your sound.



HUGHES & KETTNER ERA 2 £1,219

A serious price tag – but it's justified by the Era 2's heavyweight performance. More compact than its whopping 400 watts of headroom would suggest, this German-engineered beauty has twin channels – each with dedicated voicing controls and FX engine – and delivers a natural and detailed tone.

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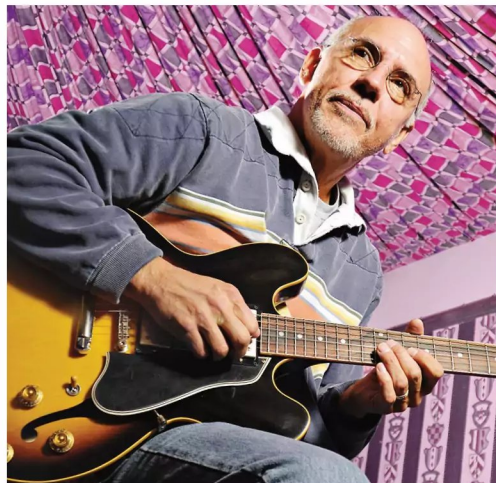


Extended Chords: Major (PT1)

Richard Barrett explains how adding notes to major triads can make for interesting harmonies – a skill to add to your improv toolkit

Taking the root, 3rd and 5th from a major scale and playing them together gives us a major triad, or chord. The other extreme might be to play every note in the scale at the same time, but that would not be harmonious! However, by adding to or extending chords with further notes from the scale, we can create complex and detailed harmony.

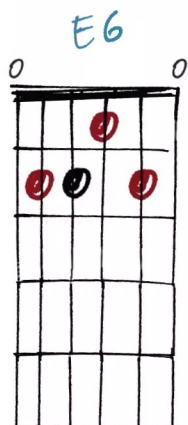
Understanding this doesn't mean every chord has to be an unwieldy fistful of notes – it can also feed into melodic composition and note choice when improvising. As we'll see, extending the chord leads to numbers being added to the name, but not 1, 3 or 5 generally, as these are presumed to be present already. An E chord with the 6th note of the scale (C#) added makes an E6 chord. However, our main focus in this article is what happens when we add notes from the 7th on up, making 9th or 13th chords. I'll fill in a few of the gaps here such as 'add' and 11th chords next time! **G**



Larry Carlton is no stranger to the concept of extended chords

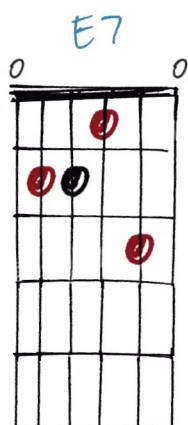
Example 1

Theoretically speaking, this E6 chord is one of the simplest to understand. It really is just a standard E chord with a 6th (in this case, C#) added. Here, the 6th is on top, but you might find it works well nested inside the chord in other registers of the fretboard, so give this a try.



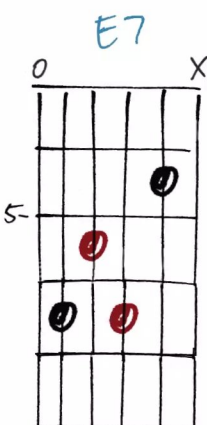
Example 2

E7 is actually an E with a b7 (D), but calling it E \flat 7 would obviously be misleading. The solution? Sometimes this is called E dominant 7th, but mostly the issue is avoided completely. If the 7th is taken directly from the scale and not flattened (D#), you would have E major 7th – 'major' referring to the 7th, not the chord...



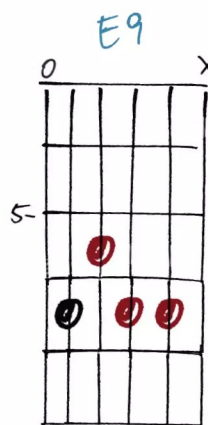
Example 3

An alternative voicing of E7, this shape links nicely with the subsequent chords we'll look at here. The use of mostly fretted notes gives this a warmer sound great for jazz. It also makes this shape movable to any key if you omit the open 6th string.



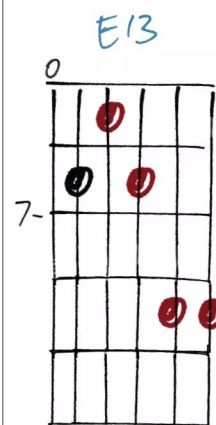
Example 4

E9 moves beyond the first octave of the major scale and begins to use notes from the octave above. Why do this? If we have used 1, 3, 5 and (b)7, it makes sense to visualise this as extending higher. Count through a two-octave E major scale and the 9th note will be F#. 9th chords are based on the presumption that the 7th is also present somewhere, or you simply have an Add 9.



Example 5

E13 adds a C#, like the 6th but this is added to a 7th chord. It is this that distinguishes it from a regular 6th chord, rather than the octave the 6th is taken from. However, the system of extending or stacking notes on top of an existing chord can make things easier to visualise.





Extended Chords: Minor (PT2)

Continuing with the topic of extended major chords, **Richard** explains the construction of darker, more complex minor chords

The conventions for creating and naming a minor chord are similar to those for major chords – but not the same, as we shall see. Nevertheless, the origin and point of reference remains the major scale, however counter-intuitive that may seem!

Minor chords are commonly described as having a 'b3rd'; this means the 3rd is lowered by a semitone, rather than necessarily being a 'flat' note. For example, in E minor, the 3rd is G \flat rather than G#. Extending the chords, adding further notes than the root, (b)3rd and 5th, follows the same numerical system as major chords – though gives a darker, more complex sound.

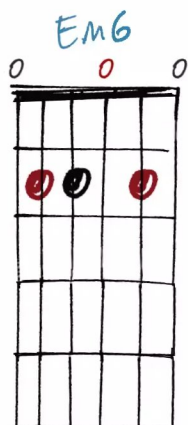
7ths are also dealt with in the same way. Simply adding the 7th from the scale gives us a major 7th chord (which would result in a minor/major 7th as featured later), or a 'b7th' to give the more commonly heard 'dominant' 7th. Always remember, we are simply dealing with names for sounds here. Check out the examples, which will help explain further. **G**



Right: Robben Ford is an expert in adding colour to chord voicings to keep things interesting

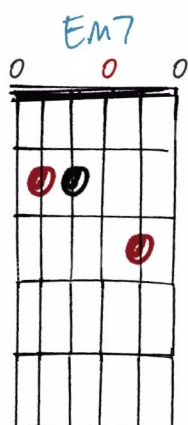
Example 1

This Emin6 chord features the root (E), b3rd (G) and the 5th (B), though they appear out of scale sequence due to the guitar's non-linear nature. The '6' part of the name refers to the C# happening on the second string – the sixth note of the E major scale (not minor!) added to the existing chord. From low to high, we now have: E, B, E, G, C#, E.



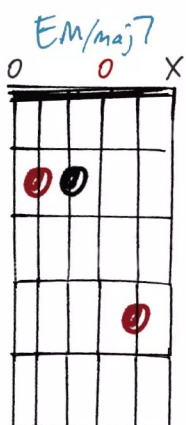
Example 2

By raising the 6th a semitone/fret, we create an Emin7 chord. This is actually quite a simplistic name for what could be described as Emin/b7, which actually counts as an altered chord due to the b7th not being lifted straight from the major scale. Thankfully, b7ths (also called dominant) are usually referred to by default simply as '7th'.



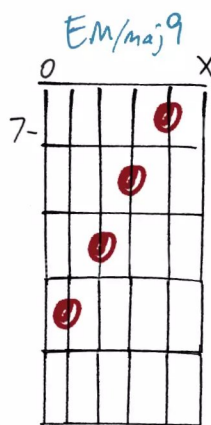
Example 3

If we take a minor chord and add the major 7th (D#), it is no longer an altered chord, as this note has been taken straight from the major scale. But the name needs to specify that this is a major rather than b7/dominant 7th, hence this initially contradictory sounding name, in which the term minor describes the chord and major describes the extension/added note!



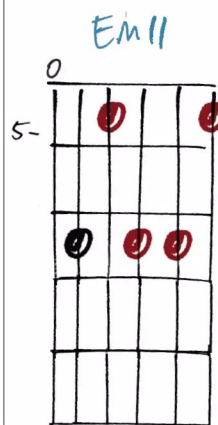
Example 4

Here is a take on the previous Emin/maj7, extending it further to add a 9th (F#). For this reason, we call it Emin/maj9. We're not ignoring the 7th – that is what the 'maj' is referring to – but we always name after the highest extension. Sometimes a 9th is added without the 7th, but this would be called 'add9'.



Example 5

Extending beyond the 9th, we add the 11th (A), for an Emin11. You will find the root (E), b3rd (G), b7th (D) 9th (F#) and 11th (A). Where is the 5th, you may ask? It's not very practical to reach on the guitar, but you will also find it's pretty common to drop the 5th in extended chords like this. Why? Because it sounds prettier and less harmonically 'dense'.






Stretches

This selection from **Richard** presents a workout for your fingers with a physical examination of extended chords

Now that we've looked at extended chords, we're also going to approach it in a physical – rather than theoretical – way, though the two approaches coincide, as we'll see. One of the challenges presented by the guitar is creating piano-style wide-interval chord voicings. Players such as Barney Kessel and Jimi Hendrix used the thumb of their fretting hands to expand the possibilities and reach notes or embellishments that were otherwise impossible.

Elsewhere, Allan Holdsworth and Tal Farlow were fortunate enough to have large hands and long fingers, though it's amazing what can be achieved with small to average hands by simply shifting to a more 'classical' grip with the fretting hand thumb more centred on the back of the neck for wider stretches. Tal Farlow would also add extended notes at the top of chords with his picking hand, so check out the examples for more on this. Finally, be sure to build up to bigger stretches gradually – and patiently! 

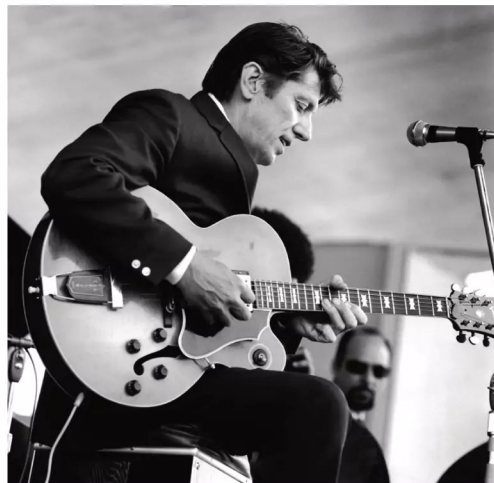
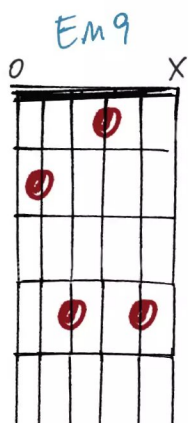


PHOTO BY DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

American jazz guitarist Tal Farlow was nicknamed 'the Octopus' on account of his large hands that allowed him to traverse the fretboard with ease and speed

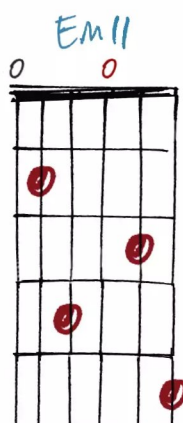
Example 1

This Emaj9 chord requires careful fretting hand positioning – not only to reach the notes but to let all the notes ring. I've omitted the top E string here. Even though it fits from a theoretical standpoint, it isn't really needed and the focus really belongs on the D# (the major 7th) here.



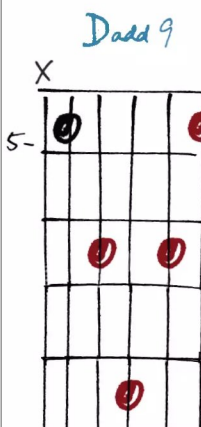
Example 2

Stretching out a bit further, this Emin11 includes the open third string. Letting this ring clearly while stretching to the other notes is probably the most challenging aspect of playing this chord. Remember to move your fretting hand thumb downwards on the back of the neck like a classical player; this will help with the stretch required.



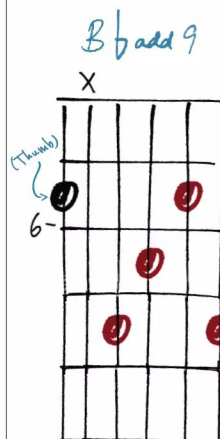
Example 3

This Dadd9 can be a challenge to make sound perfectly in tune, because it's hard to stretch to the 9th (E) on the third string without adding downward pressure, too. This may seem unreasonably difficult at first, but it becomes easier over time. Not one for vamping through a whole song, though...



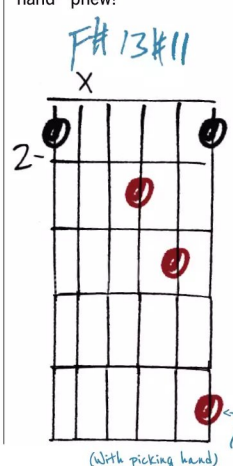
Example 4

Not such a stretch, but this Bb add9 requires you to use your fretting hand thumb over the top of the neck to press that root note at the 6th fret of the low E, allowing the four-finger chord on top. The fifth string is also muted. I find fretting slightly off-centre on the fourth string to let your third finger rest against it is the easiest way.



Example 5

Perhaps the ultimate way to extend a chord, Tal Farlow-style. This F#13#11 could not be played using conventional technique: the top note is fretted with the picking hand, while the thumb of that same hand rakes across the chord over the fretboard, which gives a harp-like sound. The fifth string is muted with the third finger of the fretting hand – phew!





Open D Tuning

Richard encourages you to explore alternative tunings and the challenges and surprises they present to your playing habits

Right: Try experimenting with voicings that are made available to you via altered and open tunings as the greats such as Joni Mitchell have done in their music

Sometimes it's good to change things up and try a different guitar, or even a different instrument entirely. This frees you from habits that may have become traps, and forces you to think consciously about the simplest things. The approach we'll take to this idea here is alternative/open tunings, in this case open D (low to high: D A D F# A D).

Raking across the open strings will give you a ringing D major chord, with exactly the same 'stacking' of intervals found when playing an E chord in standard tuning. However, regular chord shapes may or may not work in this new tuning. Part of the fun is trying them out for yourself and discovering some nice (and not so nice!) surprises, though the chords below will give you some good options for voicings that are unavailable or difficult to achieve in standard tuning.

Open tunings are also great for Ry Cooder-style bottleneck or moving single-note melodies around using the open strings as a 'drone' like Jimmy Page. **G**

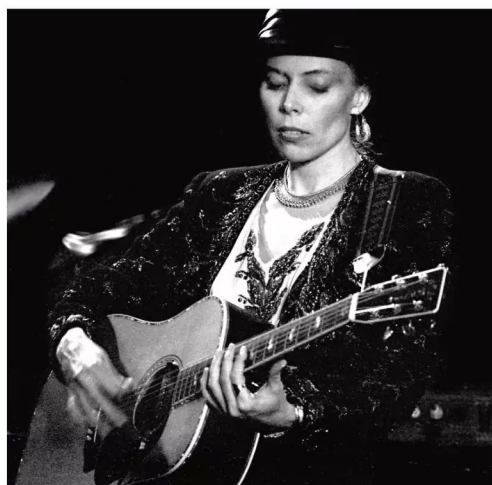
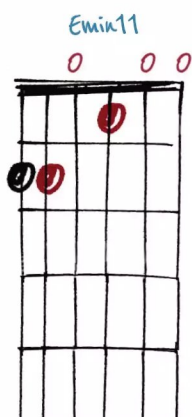


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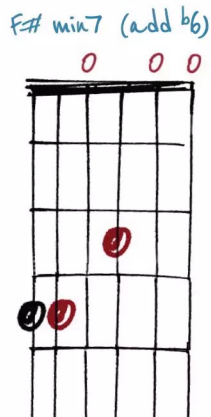
Example 1

This three-finger shape gives a surprisingly complex (and lovely) Emin11 chord, but there is also the option to keep the sixth string open, giving you a Gsus2/D chord, which fits nicely with the Emin11. Between these two and the open D chord, there are already lots of options.



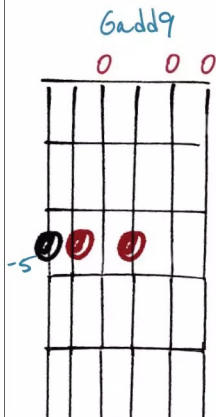
Example 2

What to call this one?! By sliding the Emin11 shape up two frets, we create a dissonant but interesting chord. Let's start at the bottom: F# on the root, then the 5th (C#), then the open D string. Hmm, we'll call it a ♭6 as there's already a 5th present in the chord. Third and second strings give A in unison, which is the ♭3rd, and the open first gives us D – another ♭6. How about F#min7 (add ♭6)?



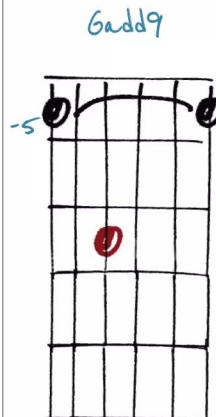
Example 3

Sliding up and altering the shape slightly gives this ringing Gadd9. You could easily change to a minor version by shifting the B at the 5th fret of the G string down a fret/semitone. Note the slightly chorused effect given by the unison D on the fifth and fourth strings, too.



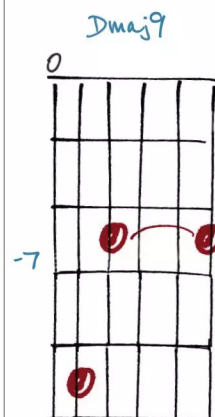
Example 4

Another way of creating Gadd9 but with different possibilities: try removing the 9th, meaning the A played at the 7th fret of the D string, then adding it again. This hints at some of the possibilities explored by players such as Nick Drake and Joni Mitchell.



Example 5

This Dmaj9 requires only two fingers and is a much clearer, wider version than we can achieve in standard tuning. We are now in the territory of Jimmy Page in *The Rain Song*, or Nick Drake with *Bryter Lyster*. Don't forget to try moving this around, both with and without the open sixth string.





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