

INSIDE

Dr. Z
Maz 18 Junior

Dr. Z
Interview

5
Dr. Z
Maz 38

6
The New
Dr. Z DB4

7
The Johnny A
Signature Guitar

8
An interview with
Johnny A

11
Chris Kroenlein
Custom Guitars

14
The Jimi Hendrix
Signature guitar

15
The Nachocaster –
As good as it gets

16
Larry Pogreba
on guitars and amps

the **ToneQuest** *The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone* **Report™**

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Dr. Z Maz 18 Junior NR

It's been awhile since we dipped into a Dr. Z but as always it was time well spent. This time Z sent us a non-reverb Maz 18 Junior and we had a blast with it. Consisting of Master, Cut, Bass, Middle, Treble and Volume, the Maz dual EL84 18 is a powerful amp for its size and gracefully toneful all the way to 10. This amp will stay clean by leaving the Volume cut, or you can cut the Z loose by increasing Volume and Master Volume.



Like all Dr. Zs this amp is built with an effective tone stack that delivers a wide range of tones and a very musical sound. Clarity is outstanding, and the cut control works well to round out the tone. We were particularly impressed with the interaction of the Master and Volume controls. This amp will stay clean with the Volume backed down, and increasing Volume delivers a nicely overdriven tone. The Maz 18 is dead quiet at idle and loud and crunchy with the volume cranked, although it maintains a certain cleanliness at high volume levels.

The EL84s do a lot for this amp, making it sound big, but never sloppy or pushed too hard. For a small amp you get a very big tone and excellent volume at approximately 20 watts. We really do love the clean and overdriven tones produced by the MAZ 18 – nearly perfect in all respects. This amp is loud enough for live work with a band, and it's also a great practice amp. Those of you who play at home will find the Maz 18 to be perfectly voiced for your needs, and you'll enjoy the



unique voice of this amp, which bridges Fender and Marshall territory quite nicely like no other production amplifier we have played. The build quality is excellent like all Dr. Z amps and we very highly recommend the Maz 18 with or without reverb.

We enjoyed a long talk with Dr. Z about the origin of the Maz 18 and Maz 38.

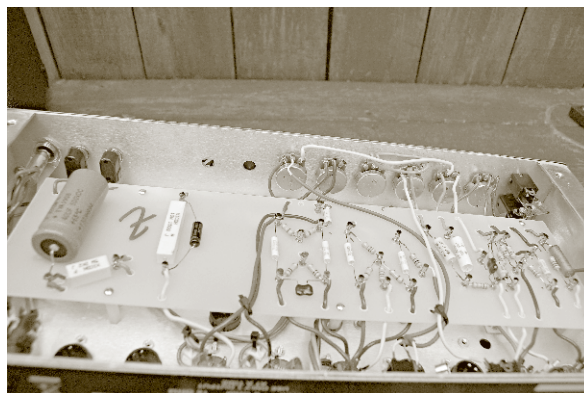
TQR: Tell us about the development of the MAZ 18.

The Maz 18 was a spin-off in 1999 requested by a customer who said that a Maz Junior would be wonderful. It had a lot of warts, but it was the right power, it had the right sound and it sold like crazy even though it wasn't quite as refined as I would want it to be. Perry Roper originally suggested it to me. The reverb was a little weak and there were some other issues I eventually addressed. Now it's a wonderful sounding amp and all of those things got addressed, but even when it had those blemishes it had the right power and the right sound and it sold like crazy. It just wasn't as refined as I would want it to be. That made me realize that people were looking for a full featured amp at low wattage. Where people were playing they didn't want to be told all night to turn down.

TQR: Is the MAZ 18 18 watts? Is that where that came from?



Well, it basically started that way but you can get 22 watts out of it's peak. And I also used the Marshall 18 moniker I suppose. There was a book out called 18 Watts about the Watkins Dominator and that's really where the two EL34 amp got its wings. The Marshall was just a copy of the Watkins, and the Dominator was the original one. That's how it all evolved. The MAZ 18 has eclipsed every other amp I make. I've sold over 5,000 MAZ 18's – 3,000 NR's and 2,000 reverb models. I don't want to pat myself on the back too much but it kind of took the place of the Deluxe Reverb. It's kind of a modern Deluxe reverb. It has the British edge to it but fits that niche for a 20 watt combo. After some time, my good friend Stu Carter from Fatsound kept saying. "Stu don't surf. I want a non-reverb." So I built a non-reverb version of the 18 and it's a little gainier and tweaked. People liked it. It had plenty enough clean headroom for what you needed for rock & roll, but where it excelled was its nice break up and ability to take pedals. You can either drive the front end and get that kind of distortion, or the opposite and drive the output into a mic'd distortion. The master volume enables you to control the front end or back end. EL84s really warrant that kind of response. You get a lot of output tube distortion, odd order harmonics and a strong midrange bulge. Output tube distortion is a little different. It's a fuller, broader bandwidth with crossover distortion and odd order harmonics. That's that rich, output distortion. But if you are using EL34s or 6L6s you are at a pretty high volume level, and unless you are on a big stage you can't do that. That's why single ended amps are in vogue today. What does a 12AX7 sound like? It's a mixture of an asymmetric midrange distortion where the top clips and the bottom stays clean. A lot of odd order harmonics are generated as well as a pretty strong midrange bump.



One thing that we don't put into the calculation and we should is the speaker. If you don't push your speaker hard enough its not going to add any coloration, fullness or warmth to the sound. You have to push your speaker a little bit. It's OK when you record that, but when you are in a room with an amp that's what you feel. Amp distortion is all wonderful, but the speaker in the final transducer. You have to push the speaker a bit. You are always better with a lower wattage high

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efficiency speaker with a less powerful amp. That's where a lot of people have problems with attenuators. It sounds different because you are putting 1 watt into your speaker. It's all perception but there is some science behind it. It's all of the parts working in synergy – the front end, the back end, the speaker, the guitar, the guitar pickup, your pick attack. All of this contributes to the tone, and when you're on the tone quest everything matters.

TQR: Now what inspired the Maz 38 for you?



The Carmen Ghia was really the first amp I ever sold, and then I developed the SRZ65 that Joe Walsh took out on tour in 1995. That gave me some instant credibility. From that, I've always had an affection for Vox. When I was a kid I can remember getting on a bus and going downtown to Howies, which was a big department store and the only place in Cleveland that sold Vox amps. I can remember just standing there looking at the Super Beatle and Royal Guardsman amps. I was mesmerized by them. It's 1964 and I'm 13-14 years old. I guess my affection for amplifiers brought me to what I'm doing now. I always wanted to make some kind of AC30 amp. My life in this business has been so lucky, I have fallen into all these people that have come into my life and affected my business. There was a guy who played in the Beatles tribute band in 1964 and he lived in Akron. They were pretty big and they did it to the nth degree. The hair, the amps, the guitars... everything had to be perfect. The one guy in the band learned to play bass left handed and he would put a little knot in his guitar strap just like McCartney. So I became friends with Mark and he brought his AC30 down and he would point out things that he liked. And finally I started developing the Maz 38. Now, I have never been the kind of builder who would Betty Crocker an amp together. There are a lot of guys who basically copy an amp design and have been successful and that's a wonderful thing. If you can't have an original, a good copy is a good thing. People want those amps. But



I always wanted to put my own spin on things, and I never wanted the ghost of Leo Fender looking over my shoulder. With the MAZ 38 I wanted to put reverb on it, which a Vox doesn't have. And I wanted to give it kind of a Fendery sound, I still want the Vox cathode biased four EL34 so it has the clang of an AC30, but I also wanted a nice preamp section like a Blackface Fender with that rich, slightly scooped sound, and I wanted to put a little drive in it so I used a cathode follower for the tone stack driver which gave it kind of a Marshall or early Fender voice. So I made a jambalaya of all three amps and it really did become very popular. You know, it's the Buddy Whittington sound on eight or nine John Mayall albums. Buddy plugged into that amp and that was it. He didn't need pedals and the amp just responded to what he was doing. The only pedal he used was a tuner.

It was funny – it was at Easter and we had just come back from my in-laws and I got a phone call from a club called Wilberts. Everyone has played there. And the sound guy



called me and said this guitar player was playing through my amp. I had left it there for the owner and Buddy was using it. We went down there and the place was packed. It was an incredible night, and I get to meet Buddy for the first time and we kind of hit it off. Such a warm, genuine Texas guy. Once again paths cross and I get lucky. More and more people heard the amp and it began to grow.



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I took a Leo Fender design approach by taking different speaker configurations and giving each one a different name. It was nice because I had one good transformer set and one chassis and minimize my inventory but have several different amps. The model Buddy used was called the Studio Deluxe. That was a 1x12 angled combo. The 2x12 version was called the Invasion. I had a head version called the Studio Lead.

TQR: So how many different speakers did you try with that amp?



That's a good question. I don't think I tried a whole lot. You gotta remember that in 1988-89 there wasn't quite the variety there is now. I wound up using the 70th Anniversary H30 and I love that speaker. It was just amazing. But you know what happened – they only made that speaker for one year, and I said you gotta keep building that speaker. A couple of years later they did reproduce it, and it sounded really good. It's got a big magnet because it's an H, and it responds to you and it's very dynamic. I like the Vintage 30s and they are a great speaker on stage, but they can be very fatiguing when you are playing alone at home. Because of their transient spikes it can be kind of harsh.

TQR: Where does the Maz 38 rank among all of your amps?

It's behind the Maz 18 but it's up there. I probably sell more Maz 38 NRs – the non-reverb version. They are kind of loud, but they have that cool response. Anson Funderburgh... his playing is just so rich. I could listen to Anson all day long. He doesn't overplay or underplay. He knows just what to play, and with a Stratocaster and a Maz 38 it's unbelievable. But to be honest that's not really the sound that a lot of players want. I'm sure there are in Texas...

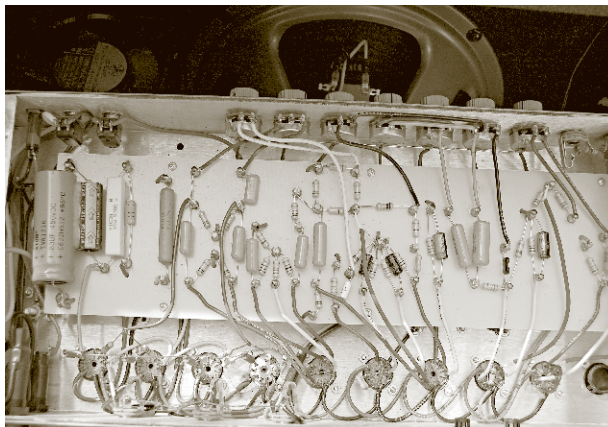
TQR: How many different versions did you build?

Like I said, in the beginning I gave them different names but



they were basically the same amp. Then I went to the Maz Senior and they were all called that. I did change the amp a little bit and made it a little dirtier. I changed the long-tailed phase inverter and there was no negative feedback, I removed the Presence control because the Presence is a function of the negative feedback. I put in a Vox cut control that works on the back end of the phase inverter to work as a tone control for your output tubes. I beefed up the Maz 38 Senior and made it a little dirtier and that's just like the one you just bought. That's why we put that sticker on it and those amps sound really, really good.

Then I went to version 3 when I had them UL approved. I started doing a whole lot of exporting in 2009-2010 and



every country has their own approval requirements. One of my big ones was Canada, and I still have Long & McQuade. They have 50-60 stores in Canada but without the CSA approval they could not import my amps. So I went through the testing procedure and I didn't have a problem but there are certain things you have to do. Your amps are tested and it's a pretty extensive and costly ordeal. I had to redesign the chassis and move caps around a little bit to make servicing easier. Those are the UL versions, and I'm proud of the fact that I'm the only boutique manufacturer who has done this. I'm inspected four times a year, and they make sure we haven't changed anything. **to**

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Dr. Z 38 "Senior"



The Dr. Z 38 has been one of our favorite amps for a long time. More powerful than the MAZ 18, the Z 38 falls in the range of a Super Reverb, with plenty of clean headroom and a beautiful overdriven tone. This is guitarist Buddy Whittington's favorite amp and you can hear it on many Mayall albums.



Controls are: Volume, Treble, Midrange, Bass, Master Volume, Cut and Reverb, and all are very effective in shaping the tone of the amp. Sustain and distortion are dialed in with the level of the Master Volume. The Z is an exceedingly expressive amp, with an exceptionally smooth overdriven tone. The four EL84s and the Celestion speaker create a lush and rich tone that is unmistakable – a classic tone that simply can't be beat for rock and blues.

The beauty of the Maz 38 is in its expressiveness. You simply won't find a more expressive amp, and the Z has enough power to lay down a beautiful clean tone, too. The tone controls



beautifully shape the tone of the amp, and the reverb is excellent. The Maz 38 is one of the all time classic rock amps ever created, and there simply isn't a bad tone in it. If you need more than 20 watts the MAZ 38 is perfect, voiced for both clean and brilliant overdriven tones. Dr. Z got it right with this amp years ago and it remains true today. Quest forth...

TQR: Let's talk about your new projects... You have a new amp in the works, correct? What inspired it, and basically how is it unique compared to your other models?

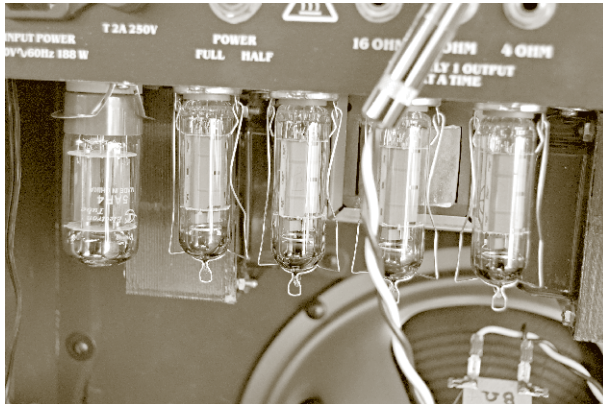


The DB 4 came to life as a request from Brad Paisley. Brad reached out and requested a warm, thick almost dark sounding amp for his Tele's. I worked on a simple two tube pre-amp and reached Brads request with the first prototype, Brad reported it is perfect DO NOT CHANGE A THING. And oh, by the way, build me more.

TQR: What kind of tubes does it use and how does it sound?

The amp is based on the 5879 Pentode pre-amp tube. This is the tube selected by Les Paul to be used in his Gibson

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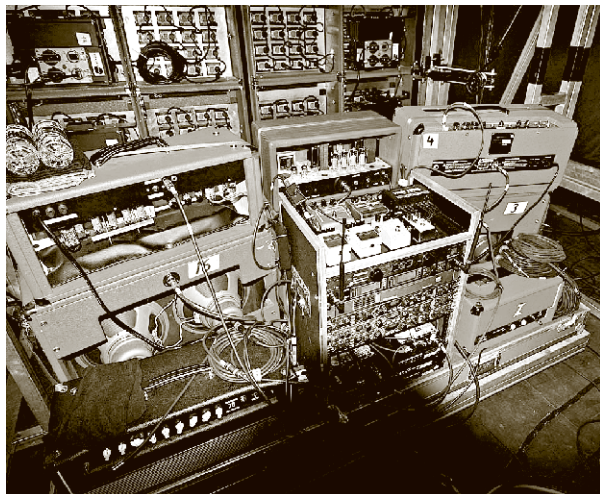
GA-40 Les Paul amp. It is full frequency, with a nice gain structure and is sonically biased at lower mid and rich bass response. The 5879 drives a rotary switch tone select control. It is loosely based on the Selmer Zodiac design, an extremely underrated vintage amp with had it's own unique voice. The output is a quartet of EL84s , but I must say most players comment on how it doesn't sound like a typical EL84 based amp. Sounds perfect with a Les Paul plugged in, and gives a Tele a total thick rich full bodied tone.

TQR: How many different versions will you build?

Three, a head, a 1x12 Ultra Lite combo loaded with a Celestion Gold, and the full monty 2x12 Bluesbreaker/Zagato model loads with two Celestion Blues. The 2x12 BTW comes with a special treat specified by Brad, a cool English style umbrella, and a tin of Special Earl Grey Tea. If you look to the "Beatles 65" album cover you will see the reference to the swag.

TQR: You mentioned that this was the third or fourth collaboration with Brad... Is this your favorite?

It is the fourth amp collaboration with Brad and DR. Z, hence the name DB 4, Doc & Brads 4th amp. Well it is the newest



face in the line up, but like asking a father which is his favorite child, tough to pick between the RX Extra Strength, Stang Ray, Z Wreck, and now the DB 4.

All four are great amps in their own right.

TQR: What else is in the works? Any other new amps?

Well nice to take a break after a birthing of a new original product, but I can't stop. I have the new Pedal Steel amp, the Surgical Steel, which is making waves in the select pedal steel market. Very cool KT 88 based amp voiced for Pedal Steel players sonic needs. Also I see EL34 based amp on the horizon, still working out the details on that one.

Review



The DB4 with its' 5879 preamp tube delivers a classic tone that is full and rich in both full and half power settings. Equipped with a Celestion gold 50 watt speaker, this amp produces the classic tones of the Celestion blue with more power and headroom.

The DB4 generates great low end response, solid mids and a sweet top end. The 5879 Preamp tube also adds clarity, detail and textures that work beautifully in this amp, and we agree – it does not sound like a typical amp running on a quartet of EL84s. It does have a thick, rich, full bodied tone as Z described it. It also sounds equally good in full and half power modes – a very useful feature that is likely to get a lot of use in your music room.

We wouldn't describe the sound of this amp as dark in the least, but it does have a thick, rich tone in all the settings for

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our Nacho Stratocaster. This amp also sounds exceptionally fine with our signature Johnny A guitar, and it kills with a



Robert Cray Strat. The tones are thick and suitably rich in all positions, bright on the top but full and rich, too.

The Cut control also offers a nice touch – thick set low and gradually brighter with more harmonic textures turned up.



There is absolutely nothing not to admire in the DB4 – a truly great amp rich in tone with a very lively feel. As described, Fender players will absolutely get off on the vibe of the DB4, and it sounds equally good with Gibson guitars. It's pretty clear that Dr. Z knows how to voice an amp, and he has outdone himself with the DB4. Quest forth...to

Johnny A Signature Guitar



If you aren't familiar with Johnny A you need to be, because he is one of the most accomplished and unique guitarists working today. Having played with Peter Wolf, Johnny launched his solo album "Sometime Tuesday Morning" to great acclaim and he has been pursuing his solo career ever since. He also teamed with Gibson to create his signature guitar, a unique hollow body with '57 classic pickups

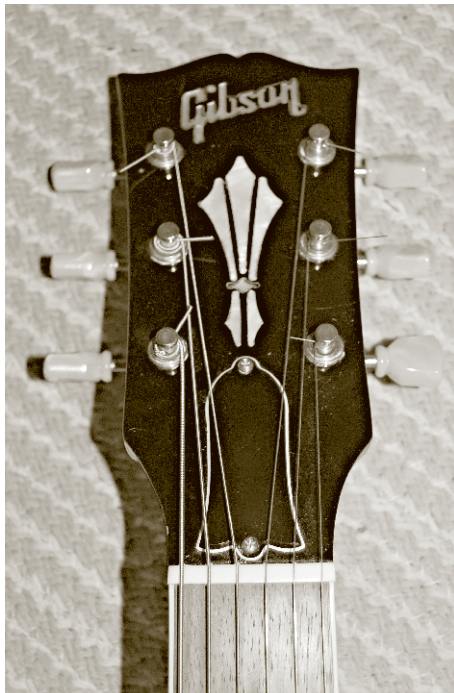
and many unique appointments. We acquired our own Johnny A signature for this issue – an early standard model featuring a comparatively rare mahogany top and replacement Lollar humbucking pickups. We spoke with Jason Lollar about the inspiration for his pickups and his comments follow. Enjoy...

I played Gibson's with humbuckers since I was a teenager so it's really a pickup I have the most experience using. One thing I have felt with vintage Gibson humbuckers particularly with Les Pauls is the neck pickup will sound really fat and smooth, almost saxophone like but then when you switch to the bridge it's like someone pulled the rug out from under you. Too thin in comparison to the neck and it seems like the volume just doesn't quite keep up. Gibson used identical pickups for the neck and bridge - well, identical meaning they didn't seem to specify that the bridge was intentionally made differently than the neck. It appears they made batches of pickups and then randomly paired two together without doing any matching so often you'll find a guitar that has a neck

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pickup that reads higher than the bridge. By the early '70s the pickups were more consistent than earlier on so having one pickup with higher ohms than another could just be variance in the coil wire diameter.



What I do is make sets where the bridge pickup is wound hotter than the neck pickup so when you are soloing you can change pickup settings to get variation in tone and with the hotter bridge. It's like you take it to another level rather than being let down. A hotter bridge pickup

also gives you a more spanky sounding middle position to get that Albert King kind of thing going. If you want that more vintage pickup balance you can use two neck pickups but I have never had anyone ask for that or claim they prefer it.

Another difference from vintage Gibsons is I will select different magnets for different sets and even use different magnets in the neck and bridge so we have some sets that have both alnico 2 and alnico 5 and also use alnico 8 in one design. On most of the designs I make the magnets are individually degaussed to specific levels. Most makers either fully charge the magnets or if they degauss, they don't measure the gauss level and they don't have a specific number range they shoot for—we do.

Unlike vintage Gibsons we pot most of our pickups but we only immerse them in wax for 10 seconds. What this does is the wax will penetrate the outer layers of the coil but it leaves most of the microphonics intact. What happens a lot with un-potted pickups is over years of vibration and bumping the guitar against obnoxious audience members heads the coil can eventually shift and become overly loose which increases the level of microphonics to an unusable level. A real shame when it happens to an old PAF!

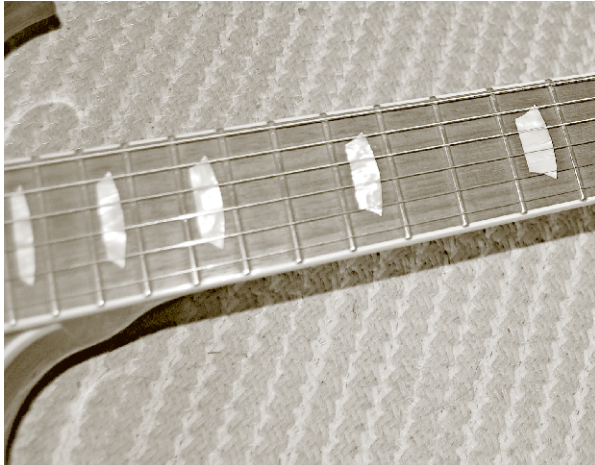
With any company's vintage designs I always look at what the weak points are from how it sounds and feels to what tends to break after 20 or 50 years and I will make improvements to push the design farther. That said; it's a lot easier to improve something than it is to make a completely new design with no failings.

Interview

TQR: Where did the concept for your guitar originate?



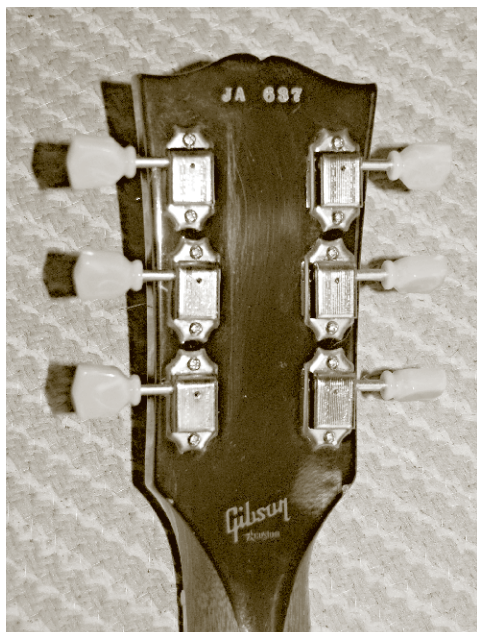
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I ran across this mongrel guitar at a summer NAMM show that was never going to see the light of day at Gibson but it showed some promise. It was kinda what I was looking for. A lot of the “Sometime Tuesday Morning” songs were recorded with a vintage ES295 which is a hollow body guitar that has a nice snappy attack but it was a very hard guitar to deal with live because of the feedback issues. So it was in pursuit of trying to find a guitar that would retain a hollow tone but could scream like a Les Paul. I worked with Mathew Cline, Mike McGuire and Rick Gembar in trying to get a full hollow body guitar in a small package and use humbuckers rather than P90s. The way we approached it was to add ebony to the fingerboard and use a 25.5” scale to make it more percussive and give it a tighter feel.

TQR: Did you approach Gibson or did they come to you?

It was kind of a mutual thing honestly. It was after my first album had started to get some press and I had been endorsed



by Gibson since 1994 when I was with Peter Wolf. I was down there a lot and I had some real specific ideas about functionality and aesthetics of what I wanted. I worked very closely



with Mathew Kline who does a lot of the programming for the carvings, and from an aesthetic standpoint it was about trying



to make a modern guitar that had the appeal of something that could have been made in the ‘50s and ‘60s. We started taking the sides of the body which is 14 inches as opposed to a Les Paul which is 13 and taking the idea of having a real ‘50s carve. Instead of just extrapolating that it was about doing the math. To make the dish on my guitar be the same as on a Les Paul.

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And how to keep the guitar hollow. The initial idea was to have the guitar respond more like a flat top acoustic and it did do that, although one of the unanticipated benefits of that was that it was highly resistant to unwanted feedback. What caused that to happen was the mirror image of the top and the fact that the top was arched at the top and flat at the back helped to avoid unwanted feedback. Some of the other little things are that the bridge pickup is moved about an eighth of an inch in just to get it a little fatter sounding. All the other hollow bodies join at the 19th fret and mine joins at the 18th fret. We modified the angle of the pickup switch so that it isn't straight up and down, We thought about this because I do a lot of pickup switching. The headstock taper is more like a '50s Gibson, and we thought about the binding and how it was done in the '50s. The standard version is the same with the exception of the mahogany top, nickel hardware instead of gold, it has single ply binding and a rosewood fingerboard.

TQR: How does the design affect the tone?

Well, it's a fully hollow guitar so it reacts differently than a semi hollow guitar with a center block, and it will sound different than a fully hollow guitar with a spruce top. I think it gives you the ability to get the hollow body tones and also great rock tones.

TQR: Did you consider different pickups?

No, because I've always been really happy with the Classics.

TQR: Our guitar is equipped with the Vibramate claw. Have you tried one?

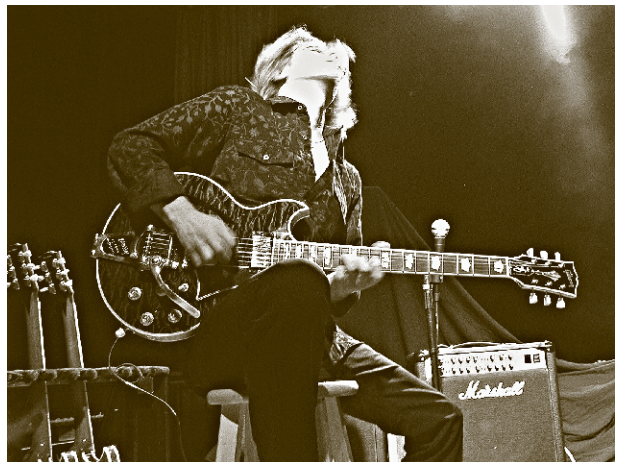
Yeah, but I'm OK with the standard Bigsby. I pre-bend all my strings so I really don't have any trouble with it.

Interview

Some guitars just feel right straight out of the case, and the Johnny A accomplishes that and more weighing just under 7 lbs. That's light for a guitar with a Bigsby.

The Johnny A is also an exceptionally playable guitar in terms of its size and overall design. The body shape is slightly larger than a Les Paul but you don't really notice the extra inch other than the Johnny being more accommodating overall. This is a guitar that seems easier to play than a Les Paul with much better access to the fret board, especially in the higher frets. The body is also better balanced than a Les Paul.

According to Johnny the neck shape was copied from a vintage Les Paul, yet this guitar seems easier to play. The neck is more forgiving than a typical Les Paul and the upper frets are



very easy to reach. Due to the longer scale length. Overall the Johnny A is just an easier guitar to play with better access to the entire fretboard.

The weight being under 7 lbs. is also welcome and very unusual for a solid body Gibson. We don't usually obsess or complain about weight too much with Les Paul guitars since Gibson got weight under control in the early 2000s, but the light weight of the Johnny A is a definite plus both in terms of feel and tone.

With its light weight, double cutaways and access to the entire fretboard, this guitar seems to be opened up and easily accessible, with a very player friendly design that just works. We honestly wouldn't change a thing on this guitar – it's that good. Johnny pretty much nailed it with the neck shape, weight, body design, and overall feel of the guitar.

Tone

There is nothing not to like about the tone of the Johnny A. The neck pickup is bold and blustery, the perfect blues tone.

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The middle is clear and perfectly voiced as an in between tone for the neck and bridge, with plenty of treble snap and a solid midrange tone. The bridge is bright and full with good treble definition and excellent sustain. All three pickups are powerful and very toneful. It is also worth noting that the weight of the Johnny A creates a unique playing experience – comfortable! We suggest you find a Johnny A, play it, and as you drive home with your new guitar give yourself a well deserved pat on the back for being wise enough to Quest forth. **To**

Chris Kroenlein

Chris Kroenlein builds custom guitars to his specifications and he is one of our favorite builders. The guitar he builds with foil humbuckers is typical of his work and we asked him to send us a guitar for review. Here is an excerpt from an earlier interview with Chris, followed by his description of the guitar and our review...

TQR: *How did you first become involved with playing, building and/or repairing guitars?*



I started playing the guitar at about age 10. Two of my uncles would clear out my father's auto body shop every weekend and have jam sessions, mostly country music. Of course I wanted to be a part of the scene. My Uncle Don loaned me his old Gibson J-45 that had such a neck bow that the strings sat about a half inch off the board, yet I was instantly hooked. I was also a kid who needed to know how things worked, so everything I owned was taken to the bench and methodically disassembled. I suppose the days spent hanging at my dad's auto body shop fostered this a bit. It is where I also learned my painting skills.

As I grew older and became more interested in playing during high school and college, I began to realize that the guitars I pulled off the wall at the local guitar shop were just not right. I could not put my finger on it at first, but I knew something could be better. As with everything I owned, I had to tear it apart. I began realizing that there was a lack of a neck angle to my "blackie." It made sense that a couple of business cards would fix the issue with tension as well as resonance. After all, a guitar is about angles. This was the beginning of my part swapping days. I would throw this neck on that body and learn from the results. Often times the result was no better, but I seemed to always get a nugget of knowledge to use the next time around. As I grew older I also had more disposable income to get pre-made bodies and necks and make a go at it. I started with mainly Fender clone stuff as the parts were readily available. So I suppose you could say that my interest came from a player who wanted it the way I wanted it.

TQR: *How did your knowledge expand and progress in terms of acquiring practical, hands-on experience?*

Most of my knowledge in repair as well as building came from the wonderful world of books, videos, and the mighty internet. Stew-Mac has many great resources to get you started in the right direction but ultimately experience teaches you to be consistent. A highly respected local tech in St. Louis named Skip Goetz was my initial go-to guy. He was extremely helpful in teaching me the finer points, to nut slot cutting, fret work, and overall setups. His instruction was instrumental in moving my knowledge forward. Of course, as with all great instruction, personal preference is involved in setting up a guitar. This has been relearned over the years as well as understanding what people want in their own set ups. The finish



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work was taught to me by my father in his auto shop.

TQR: And how did this hands-on experience unfold and develop?



Most of my early builds were an exercise in failure, and then doing a post mortem to understand what went wrong. I realized that swapping parts around would not resolve some of the inherent design issues that I was encountering. Money and time were the two things that I was short of. During college I devoted the little free time I had to playing music rather than working on guitars. After graduating I got into the pharmaceutical industry, and suddenly I had some disposable income to begin building guitars from various pre-made parts, but still I found myself not yet satisfied. Around the late '90's into around 2002, I began sketching out some design changes. I started with the basic designs but had also recognized the shortcomings of a flat neck pocket and narrow fingerboard widths. I probably went through 20 blanks until I figured out the best angle to slope the pocket that would not affect the aesthetics of the classic designs. This was my first hard lesson in wood quality as well. The first K-Line guitar was about ten pounds and it was dead as a door nail. It was obvious that I would have to share in my peers' knowledge of wood and become a student once again. These friends taught me the finer aspects of grain patterns, moisture content, and wood resonance. The end result was a guitar that nailed that sweet spot consistently, without fail. Necks were a disaster at first. From about 2002 till 2006, we worked to refine the designs and the

machining while I continued to work at a pharmaceutical sales management job that was sucking the life out of me. Finally, in 2006 the designs were done and the end results were outstanding. In 2009 I made a decision to take K-Line to a new level and left my "day" job to follow my dream. During this time and on into 2010, I was using off the shelf, licensed necks built in a factory in Japan as I made certain that I was ready to bring the K-Line necks to market. The aftermarket necks were and continue to be a quality product, but they needed a lot of TLC to get them up to my standards, and they lacked options. This buy-and-modify business model allowed me to gain a reputation as a builder while working towards the ultimate goal of launching the unique K-Line models.

TQR: When and how did the inspiration for the various guitars we see today develop?

I initially started with the single cut and double cut classics. Parts were readily available and produced great guitars. The current models include: San Bernardino – This is a hybrid that utilizes an offset body shape along with a neck angle close to that of a Les Paul, which allows the use of a TOM style bridge that sets up perfectly. Along with the 25.5" scale, the classic dual pickup platform produces a slightly different tone, feel, and playability than what most people are accustomed to. I always loved the Jazzmaster for the way it



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feels hanging on you, but I never got along with the rest of it. This model is built for comfort and was inspired by some old and new designs. On this model I use alder or ash for the body matched to the specific fret board wood to get the desired tone. Each is finished with code-specific DuPont paints based on the classic colors.

All K-Lines are finished with nitro and no poly undercoats. I believe this adds to the open, woody tone. "It just breathes" to borrow a phrase from many.



Springfield – What can I say that hasn't already been said about this style? I don't think you can re-invent the wheel – only put better tires on it. This platform follows the classic design from Leo with the exception of the neck pocket

angle. The necks are a bit wider all the way down which helps keep the strings spread out and avoid that nasty string pull off, even with a 2 7/32" trem spread. The pickups are carefully chosen to match the body and neck woods. After trying almost every pickup imaginable, I think I have found the best representation of a vintage tone. The hardware is all Gotoh for great consistency and functionality. I offer a Wilkinson steel block trem that features a push-in arm which provides presence and clarity without compromising tone. I tried trem systems at three times the cost that lack the warmth of the Wilkinson. It just works, and the push-in arm eliminates thread wobble. Oh, and a 2 1/8" spread to boot. This grabs the pole pieces on the bridge pickup much better. The Truxton is the base name for the single cut variety. One change was to find the right bridge that could produce the right balance of twang and low end. Most bridges available today are thin and made from inferior metals. I have my plates made to my specs (a bit thicker) and the saddles come from Jim at C & J Tooling in Buffalo. He makes my saddles out of rolled brass, which produces



cleaner highs without becoming brittle. Bodies are mainly made from ash and alder with an occasional pine slab. I use the same treatment with the neck pocket angle in all my guitars. The Special model is a great platform that uses a Hipshot hard-tail bridge that produces a resonance that I have not found in any other bridge. The six saddles allow perfect intonation and produce a nice warm tone. This platform can handle P90's, mini-humbuckers and Firebird pickups. Body woods are generally ash, but some alder is used as well. I have also used African mahogany from time to time.

The pickups in the guitar I sent you are Klein Foil pickups. They are based on a Firebird mini with a bit of a different wind. They are very clear, articulate, with a nice warmth. What I wished a Strat would sound like. The wiring is standard 5 way with a push pull on the tone that will engage the neck pickup when the bridge is selected. So with pot up, pos 1 is N+B, move it to pos 2 and all three are on. The Del Mar is a combination of a few current models in looks. A small offset was something that many people asked for but had limited choices. The same neck pocket design is in this model as well. Designed to aid in a proper setup and great feel. Roughly based on the size of a Strat, it is a perfect size for most players.



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Review




The K-Line guitar is very unique in terms of size and tone. The body style is compact with a full sized neck and access to the entire fretboard. Weight is moderate at 7.7 lbs.

The compact size of the K-Line makes it very easy to play with no struggle. The neck shape is substantial and of uniform thickness along the entire length of the neck. The 10" radius, medium C shape and perfectly dressed medium jumbo frets create a very playable guitar that offers an effortless

experience. The push-on tremolo bar is also an improvement over the typical Fender screw-on variety.

The K-Line plays extremely well – as well as any guitar we have played. The unique pickup selection and the pickups themselves render a playing experience like no other. The Klein pickups do mirror the tone of a Stratocaster that is more subtle than the usual Strat set. Tones range from subtle and smooth to animated and bright with lots of ranges in tone. The Klein set is entirely unique and toneful whether you play cleanly or with more attitude. They have a hi-fi quality that is very appealing.

Overall, it doesn't get any better than the K-Line. The design is solid from top to bottom, the workmanship is top notch, and the tone is all there. We like the compact body style. The ample, full sized neck and the very unique Klein pickups. This is a guitar that encourages you to do a lot in a small footprint and it is one of the most unique guitars offered by a small builder. As you would expect, the workmanship throughout is top notch, and the fretwork is exceptional. It's the playability and tone of the pickups that sets the K-Line apart from other guitars, and if you're looking for a professional-level guitar the K-Line is it. Quest forth...

FENDER

Jimi Hendrix Strat



Fender has come up with a Hendrix Strat that uses a reverse headstock and special pickups – American Vintage '65 pickups with reverse-slant single-coil bridge pickup and reverse-mounted neck and middle pickups, creating a reverse pole piece stagger for

subtly changed string-to-string volume.

As you might expect, this guitar is well built with a very good feel in hand. Weighing 7.6 lbs., fit and finish on the maple neck are flawless with medium jumbo frets. The reverse headstock is easy enough to negotiate when tuning and overall, this is a great feeling Strat.

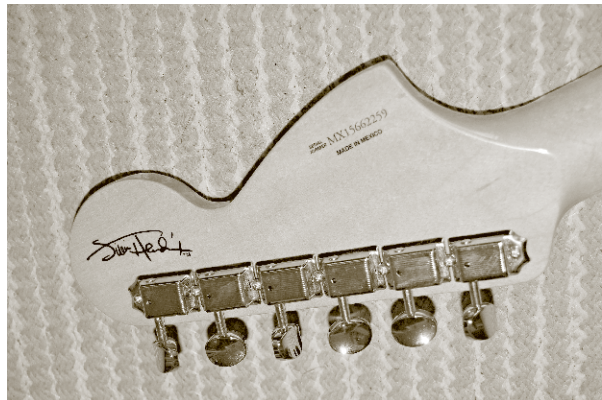
It also looks good. The gloss polyester paint is perfectly applied, contrasting nicely with the amber maple neck and headstock. This guitar is also well balanced between neck and body.

The reverse pole piece stagger gives the upper four strings equal volume. The pole pieces for the 5th and 6th strings

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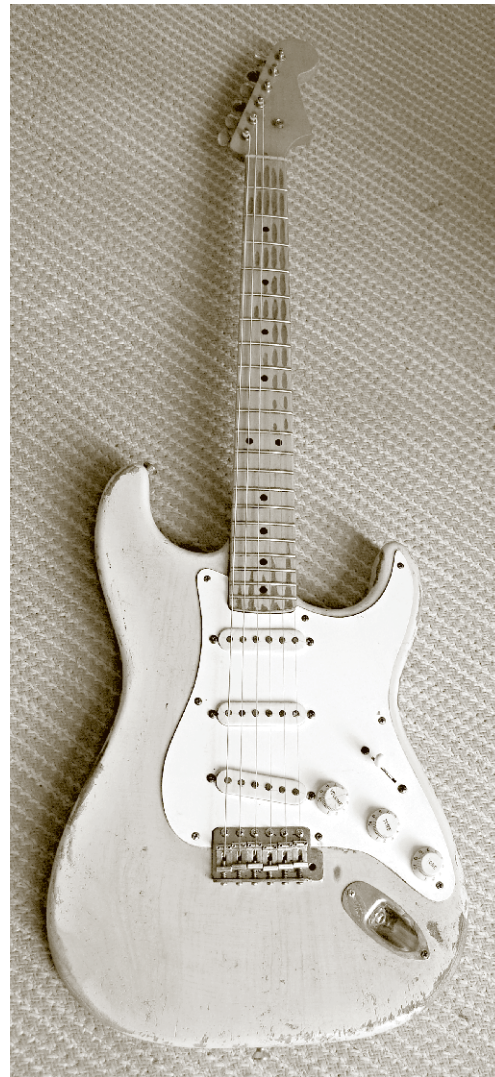
are lower, but the difference in volume is negligible at best. Basically, you get an equal response as if the pole pieces were all at the same height, which is good. Chords are even in response and lead passages are bold. The '65 set is an excellent example of a Stratocaster set with excellent low end, mids and treble. The 5-way configuration produces a very solid two and four out-of-phase position to compliment the neck, middle



and bridge positions. All in all a very agreeable and satisfying Strat sound that is strong and bold.

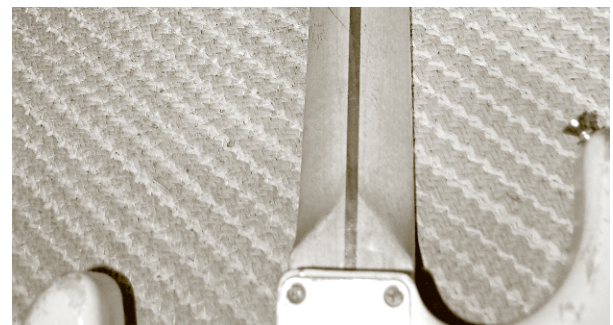
As we said, this guitar is very well balanced and it is a pleasure to play. The fretwork is outstanding, the classic C-shape neck is a joy to play, and the moderate weight of the guitar enhances the playing experience. If you are worried about the reverse headstock don't be. The tuners themselves are smooth and even, and it takes no time at all to become accustomed to the reverse headstock. In fact, this is one of the best playing Fender guitars we have owned from any era. That's saying a lot for a vintage replica that costs under \$1,000 eh? The synthetic nut works well with no binding even when using the tremolo arm for deep drops in pitch and the gloss polyester paint is as good as it gets. Fender has done a fine job with its tribute to Hendrix. Very fine indeed and bold as love. Quest forth...**To**

ToneQuest Nachocaster



Nacho sent us a Stratocaster for review and like his Teles it is an example of the best of the builder's art. In fact, if not for the missing decal and the perfect frets, Nacho's Stratocaster could easily pass for a real '61. Every aspect of the guitar conceptually is flaw-

less. The aging is entirely authentic, brilliantly executed to perfection. The wear on the maple neck is uncannily real and perfectly conceived. The plastic pickup covers and the control knobs are realistically aged to perfection. The paint is unbelievably realistic, with arm wear darkening the body in



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all the right places. As we said, if you didn't know this was a relic you would never know.

The sound of this guitar is no less believable. The pickups convey a worldly tone and a softness that speaks to their age. The neck pickup is deep and woody with no brittleness or sharp edge. The middle pickup is equally deep, bright and warm at the same time. The bridge is suitably bright but with



not a hint of sharpness, conveying age and beauty. The out-of-phase positions are mysterious and captivating - a mixture of bright woodiness and warmth. Once again, you would not know that these pickups weren't authentically aged by time alone.

And finally, the hardest part. This guitar feels old. The neck is a moderate V shape with wear on the back of neck between the first and seventh frets. The wear on the fret board extends to the 12 fret and the wear is expertly done and wholly believable. The frets maintain their full height along the entire length of the neck and are expertly, flawlessly installed. The fingerboard radius feels like a ten inch and the guitar plays effortlessly. We would change nothing about the neck and fretwork on this guitar.

This is the finest "relic" you will ever see or play. There is absolutely no difference between an authentic vintage guitar

and Nacho's creation save for the lack of a Fender logo. And of course, the excellent fretwork. It also doesn't seem likely that the value will decrease over time. The workmanship is just too over the top. None of these guitars are destined to hang around for long. If you are interested in our guitar specifically, we're going to make every effort to sell it rather than shipping it back to Spain. Quest forth...**TQ**

Larry Pogreba

Larry is one of the most inspired guitar builders we know, and if you're not familiar with his work you need to be, having built guitars for Bonnie Raitt, David Lindley and Keb Mo. Enjoy...

TQR: Larry, we always like to start talking about the beginning of your fascination with the guitar.



Well, my dad flew fighters in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, so we traveled all over. I guess it must have been about 1953-54' when we were living down in Georgia that my friends and I would sneak through the woods to see revival meetings that were held in the fields near Valdosta, Georgia. My first musical hero was probably Ray Charles, and although I had a guitar in high school, I really didn't start playing it until I went to college. My first guitar was a Hofner arch top.

TQR: How did you acquire the skills necessary to build guitars?

I went to a fine arts college and learned to work in a wide range of materials - resins, metals, ceramics, wood... everything. I also spent a lot of time growing up at my granddad's

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ranch in Willow Creek, Montana and there we made every thing. If you needed a part for the tractor, you just made it. Then I stopped building guitars during the disco period and started making knives. I studied with a Japanese master sword maker and learned to make my own steel... I made some knives out of meteorites and all kinds of stuff like that, but I was stashing wood the entire time because I knew I was going to make guitars again some day.

TQR: What kind of wood were you stashing?

I did a little loggin' too, and there was a lot of spruce in the mills in Colorado, so I'd find a couple of logs a month and cut them up, sell some guitar tops and keep a few for myself.



I also did a lot of fishing in Belize and we started salvaging stumps and tops that were left behind by loggers down there. We would bring back container loads of mahogany and a little rosewood. Then I broke by back racing motorcycles and I had to get out of all that heavy work. When I saw Danny Farrington's book whenever it was published – maybe '93 or '94, I thought, here's a guy building some pretty wild instruments that are being really well-received by many of my musical heroes. Maybe it's time to get back into building guitars. Up until then players were really conservative



about their guitars – guys with hardware on their faces, purple spiked mo-



hawks, wearin' their underwear on the outside of their pants wanted the original tuners on their guitars, you know? It was real funny.

TQR: So you got back into guitar building and...

It's not in my nature to do elaborate inlays and perfect finishes and all that stuff, but I could see there was a niche for what I liked to do. There aren't many guitar builders that can fabricate aluminum... I don't need to build for a mass market – I'm only interested in building twenty or thirty guitars a year.

TQR: Did you start with resonators?

The first one I built came from a project where I was putting a camper on an old Suburban. I cut the roof out and just welded up a guitar body out of the roof of that Suburban. It weighed about 15 lbs. But it sounded pretty cool, and that was the thing that sort of pushed me over the edge.

TQR: Into things like building reso's using vintage hub-caps?

Yeah. The first few of the resonators were built with store-bought cover plates, but it seemed as if every time the guitars got weirder the better they were received. They became a form of art deco.

TQR: How many were you building early on?

Probably ten or fifteen in the first year. Last year I built about thirty five. Then I started building electric guitars and getting into old amps – I've probably had a couple hundred old amps in the last few years. It took awhile to get a feel for the electric thing – you clean the pots and change the tubes and they're usually fine.

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TQR: The back of your resonators looked like a carved back...

Reposé is the proper term for it, but basically you just beat it until it looks the way you want it to (laughs.)

TQR: Not unlike a steel drum...



Yeah, I watched a guy make one of those and I thought about building in a tuner...

TQR: And you're salvaging old hubcaps...

Certain ones – there aren't all that many that are the right shape – '62 Rambler, '54 Packard, '54 Chevy, '55 Olds, '57 Dodge Lancer Hemi...

TQR: Do you have a stash of these laid in?

Yeah, about eighty or so. Usually the center of the hubcap is in good shape, but either way, that's part of the aesthetic. I buy the cones from John Quarterman – pretty much anybody who's serious about resonator guitars uses Quarterman cones. They're spun from aluminum.

TQR: What are the bridges (biscuit) made from?

Different materials – maple is the standard that people have used for years. If you want better fundamentals you can use rosewood. If you use mahogany or koa the tone will be a little dirtier. Usually I'm building these things with no particular person in mind, although with Bonnie Raitt I was listening to her records while I was building her guitar and just trying to

make any little changes that would suit her style. Every guitar I build is sort of an experiment.

TQR: Who are some of the other artists you've built guitars for that we might know?

Oh, David Lindley, Keb Mo, Henry Kaiser, Emmylou Harris...

TQR: Let's talk about the pickups on your electrics.



I use old Kay, Silver-tone, and Teisco pickups. Ry Cooder uses an old Teisco pickup in the bridge position on his main guitar, as does David Lindley.

Most of them came from the mid '60s and they're getting a little scarce. I believe they only made the Teisco pickups for a couple of years.

TQR: Larry, what do your guitars cost and how long is the wait?

They start at about \$1,500 and go up from there depending on how much detail you want. It'll take about a year at this point. I don't take deposits – if someone wants a guitar they can call me and when I have something close to being finished I'll call them. I don't take deposits because then you've spent someone's money and you owe them a guitar. It also gives them the right to call and bug you, and I just don't want to give away that right.

TQR: Do you have an extensive guitar and amp collection?

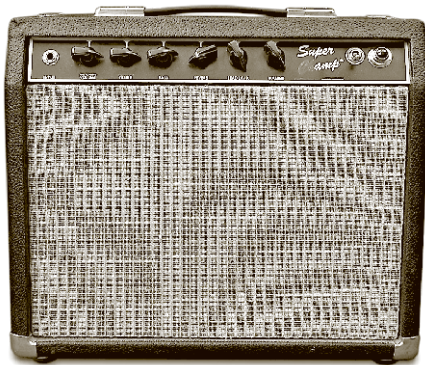
Not really – I mean, a lot of stuff has come through here, but what do I want more – a '54 Les Paul or a roof on my house?

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TQR: You do have a lot of amps...

About a dozen or so, and they're generally inexpensive amps that sound great. At one time I had about thirty old Fender



amps, but I'm building a house in Montana now and I sold them all – probably needed to lay a foundation or whatever. Plus, I don't get out and play away from the house,

and I figured they should be getting played where people can hear them.

TQR: What are some of your favorite amps that you've kept?



I think Valco made some really great stuff in the late '40s up to the late '50s before reverb – the real plain little circuits were the best – like that Gretsch amp, which is basically a tweed

Deluxe with better tone controls and tremolo. Valco also made amps for National, Supro, Gretsch and Guild.

TQR: The 6V6 powered amps, primarily?

Yeah – they're more touch-sensitive than a 6L6 and they have a real nice creamy distortion that's particularly suitable for a slide player like me. The Valco Supreme is a great little two 6V6 amp with a 6J7 preamp tube that has a wire and a



cap on top of the tube. The old Gretsch amps that have the 6973s for power tubes are pretty cool little amps, and so are some of the old PA heads and tube stereo heads. Often they are really appropriate

for guitar. One of the PA heads I have was built by Craftsman in Chicago with two different preamp tubes rigged into it – a 12AX7 and a 5879. The 5879 is a more musical tube to me with clearer lows, better headroom and nicer highs in comparison to the 12AX7. The only manufacturer I know of that used the 5879 was the Gibson Maestro series in the mid '50s. There's a real easy little mod you can do with these amps that



Terry Dobbs showed me that gives you a little extra gain and distortion with a toggle switch added. I will also run a female jack on the output transformer and a male jack on the speaker so that I can run different speaker combinations, like 2x12s. You wouldn't

believe how loud 8W can sound through bigger and better speakers. You'll be amazed.

TQR: What do you use for acoustic amplification?

I use a Highlander-style coaxial piezo in the biscuit with a little Bartolini preamp buffer that allows me to blend back and forth with a magnetic pickup at the end of the fingerboard – either one of those Teisco's or one of the little DeArmonds that came on the old Kays and Silvertones. Those Little DeArmonds are really thin – a quarter of an inch high.

TQR: Do you have any recommendations for great tone?

Try different strings – different brands and gauges. Don't be afraid to put acoustic strings on an electric – it can make pretty interesting noise, and while some of the rules make sense, others are just based on tradition and tradition can be bullshit tinker around. Ry Cooder said, "Go where it's dangerous and be willing to get weird." I'm there. **to**

Larry Progreba, 303-823-6691 MST

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